

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## Beyond Science Fiction—A New Breed of Games

According to the "word on the street" here on "Arcade Alley," it is even possible to get too many hot-fudge sundaes. The year about to end represents the high-water mark of the five-year trend toward science-fiction game themes. By January 1, more than 50 video-game cartridges and up to twice that many computer software programs will be available to space-happy gamers.

The reliance on SF concepts is easy to understand. After all, the synergy between the movie *Star Wars* and the coin-op video game "Space Invaders" had a lot to do with launching the current boom in video-gaming. But now the more alert manufacturers realize that even this seemingly boundless enthusiasm for SF must have some limitation. Companies afraid of becoming the publisher of that profit-killing "one space shootout too many" are encouraging designers to widen their horizons.

Are science fiction games *kaput*? Hardly. There'll be plenty more during the coming year. What we expect to change is their dominance among new releases. Some producers have already introduced several games which, while full of action and excitement, couldn't be further re-

moved from the prevailing run of futuristic cartridges. Let's examine three of the newest for use with the Atari VCS (or Sears Tele-Arcade) systems.

Although **Frogger** (Parker Brothers/Atari VCS) never generated the hoopla that "Pac-Man" did in commercial amusement centers, most players have admired its hippyhopppy play-action and charming audiovisual presentation. In light of the mediocre translations that have surfaced in the VCS software market of late, it is refreshing to report that Parker Brothers' designers have conveyed "Frogger" with most of its principal elements firmly intact. The cartridge overcomes the obstacle of the VCS's 4K memory to offer the sights, sounds, and easygoing fun of the original.

The only glaring divergence from the coin-op version is that when the frog is riding a log during its journey across the river, it is possible to scroll off one edge of the screen and reappear safe and sound on the opposite side. The arcade quarter-sucker kills your acrobatic amphibian when this occurs. This makes the home version easier since the frogger can take several rides past the five landing bays at the top of the screen before at-

tempting to jump into one. In the coin-op, the bay at the extreme lefthand edge of the screen can be mighty hard to hit. Those who prefer a perfect copy of the coin-op original, minus the scrolling, need only flip the difficulty switch to the tougher setting.

In the VCS edition, one or two players use joysticks to jump an on-screen frog from lane to lane across a highway, over the center divider, and then across a river into one of the bays. Each time a gamer fills all five bays with frogs, the game automatically moves to a higher level of difficulty at which the frog must avoid denser traffic and cross the river with the aid of sparser floating debris. The six game variations, split between one- and two-player contests, embody three strata of difficulty.

"Frogger" will make fans of its commercial counterpart jump for joy.

**Towering Inferno** (U.S. Games/Atari VCS) achieves a respectable level of excitement without having a shot fired in anger. The arcader takes the role of a firefighter who has been dropping by helicopter onto the roof of a burning skyscraper. The blaze-buster must work his way through the building floor by floor, dousing flames and working against the clock to save residents from a scorching. At times the firefighter simply dodges the dancing flames, but he can also confront them directly with his water hose. Pushing the action button fires a jet of H<sub>2</sub>O toward the top or bottom of the playfield, depending on which way the on-screen figure points.

The easier difficulty settings leave flames visible on the screen even when they are raging inside the walls (where they cannot be doused, incidentally). The harder version keeps the conflagration out of sight unless it's actually flaring up in the rooms or hallways of the building. Though each floor is a little harder to clear than the last, "Towering Inferno" may be a little too patterned and repetitive for some. Of course, so are "Space Invaders" and "Pac-Man." An above-average, enjoyable cartridge, "Towering Inferno" is a refreshing change from shoot-shoot-shoot.

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New VCS games include 'Frogger,' transferred in virtually all of its glory.

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**Lost Luggage** (Games by Apollo/Atari VCS) proves that it takes more than a cute concept and a dash of humor to make a top-flight cartridge. While this close relative of Activision's "Kaboom" is moderately entertaining, its play routine is not complex enough to captivate players.

Ever watched baggage tumble off one of those airport conveyor belts? That's the premise. You're a skycap who must roam the essentially featureless screen and catch the bags as they fall. Occasionally, a terrorist satchel pops off the conveyer; if it reaches the bottom of the screen, the round ends immediately. Movement in this solitaire contest is accomplished using the joystick, which is the single biggest difference between "Lost Luggage" and "Kaboom!" There are many other smaller distinctions too, but the two cartridges are in the same genre.

The game has some incredibly cute touches. For instance, a plane taxis up to the luggage conveyor before each wave of bags descends upon the harried skycap, and bags that reach the bottom of the screen burst open to reveal various items of clothing. Yet Apollo might have been wiser to scrimp on the frills in favor of putting some obstacles and barriers on the playfield to impede the skycap's efforts to catch all the bags. This would have added an exciting—and unpredictable—strategic element to a game in need of such fortification.

This is not to say that "Lost Luggage" is bad or unplayable—far from it. It is a decent and somewhat interesting game that just fails to fulfill all of its potential. 