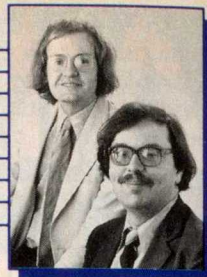


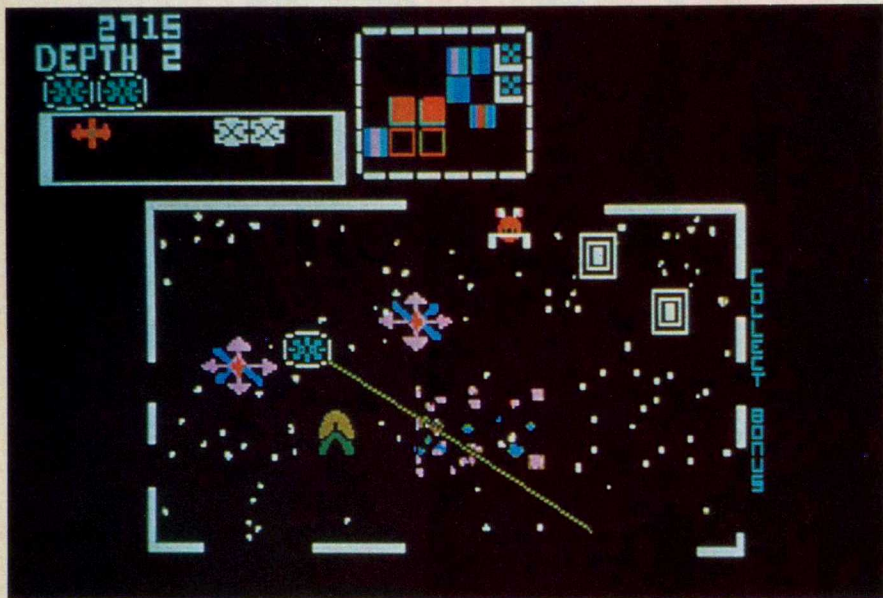
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



Wintertime Winners



Space Dungeon: a triumph, showing the Atari 5200 to best advantage.

The two systems spotlighted in this month's "Arcade Alley," the Atari 5200 and the Apple II, are often slighted by media critics who have eyes only for the bestselling machines. Many home arcaders therefore overlook and under-rate them. Though neither system is free of flaws, both present some of the finest games ever flashed on the home CRT screen.

You need evidence? Let's begin with a trio of recent releases for the Atari 5200.

The home translation of Taito's **Space Dungeon** (Atari/Atari 5200) is a fair sample of the quality 5200-compatible cartridges coming to the home screen. The graphics match arcade machines in color, sharpness, and movement, and sound effects are in harmony with the on-screen action.

The action takes place in deepest space against a scrolling firmament of stars. The player must frequently use a secondary display which divides this space sector into a series of multileveled zones (hence the "dungeon" of the title). Each level contains valuable prizes, and quite a few perils as well—just to keep things interesting.

The challenge increases as the player penetrates to the dungeon's deepest

tiers, but some elements remain constant at all levels. For example, the transport points, which serve as exits leading to other zones, are always located in the same grid position. The explorer must always bear in mind the relative positions of his ship and this exit, because beating a hasty retreat from an untenable strategic position is sometimes the only viable course.

The player manipulates a weapon that is a cross between a Jedi-like light saber and a cosmic chainsaw, using it to slice up hostile objects while passing over treasures depicted on the screen in order to claim them. The game commences with the player's on-screen representative in the lower left corner. The trick is to get the goodies visible in the sectors on the far right and return to the warpway before a roving thief can put a dent in your hoard.

"Space Dungeon" is such a triumph that not even the questionable 5200 controllers can spoil the fun. If you missed it in the amusement centers, don't make the same mistake twice.

Qix (Atari/Atari 5200) is a candidate for sleeper classic of the year. Once you get past the megahits, arcade licenses have mostly been a crapshoot for home-oriented producers of game software.

"Qix," introduced by Taito in commercial fun palaces about 18 months ago, was the right game in the wrong place. The revolutionary play mechanic and abstract theme defeated any hope Taito may have had for "Qix" becoming a longterm coin-op hit. Instead it became a cult phenomenon, loved by a few and ignored by the blasto brigade.

The inspiration for a whole genre of area-filling contests ("Amidar" and "Pepper II" are recent examples), "Qix" represents the territorial imperative in game form. The player directs a drawing cursor with the joystick in an effort to etch lines on a blank playfield and preempt large areas of the field by enclosing them in boxes. You can draw squares and rectangles at two speeds, gaining bonus points for those created at the slower pace. The gamer completes a round by boxing off a portion of the playfield equal to or larger than a preset percentage. For example, if 75-percent of the screen must be filled, the action continues until this threshold is reached. Exceeding the preset percentage earns a slew of bonus points.

As in most electronic games, the situation isn't quite that cut and dried. First, a sizzling little rover patrols the edge of the playfield and can destroy the cursor on contact. Second, the player must continue to draw once he begins, or "sparx" will appear and chase the cursor into a lethal collision. Last and most dangerous are the "stix," a bundle of lines that rolls like an ocean wave across the playfield, darting into one corner and then another in random motion. The cursor is vulnerable to extinction by their touch until the playfield is sufficiently filled and a new round begins.

After a few introductory rounds, the game becomes double "Qix"—now two stix roam the playfield. This introduces a key score-boosting option not available in the contest's opening stages. It is possible to acquire a bonus multiplier by splitting the screen so that there is a stix on each side of the line. Doing this successfully a few times makes each subsequent box count for the maximum.

"Qix" has more than enough action to

satisfy the reflex kings, while providing plenty of food for thought for strategy fans. The quickest line-scriber in the world will prove a "Qix" dud if the lines aren't laid down on the playfield with a lot of prior thought and planning. And the 5200 edition of "Qix" is a virtual duplicate of the coin-op. For a refreshing change from run-of-the-mill shootouts, you can't go wrong with this one.

Although **Kangaroo** (Atari/Atari 5200) is clearly the weakest of the 5200 cartridges we're reviewing, it is nonetheless an excellent piece of work. That it fails to bowl over the residents of "Arcade Alley" is more a testament to the tremendous quality leap 5200 software took over the last year than a negative reading on this particular game. "Kangaroo" is based on the Atari coin-op cutie and faithfully duplicates most of the elements of the original. There are a few rough spots, however, such as the animation of the coconut-throwing monkeys who skitter up and down the tree located at the right edge of all three playfields.

"Kangaroo" places the player in the role of a mama kangaroo on a rescue mission. It seems that a tribe of prank-prone chimps has 'roo-napped her bouncy baby, and mama must get it back. The player-marsupial must employ jumping, climbing, and ducking to successfully survive three scenarios. The real fun comes when the kangaroo gets close enough to the tree to reach a monkey. She's a boxing kangaroo, and when a simian comes within her range, the game looks like an animal version of *Rocky III*.

The main problem with "Kangaroo" is that it depends too heavily on animation-quality graphics to dress up rudimentary play-action. And, of course, there's no way even a 5200 cartridge can visually equal the best productions from coin-op-land. Still, when a game as fine as "Kangaroo" is unmistakably the weakest of three releases, it says something positive about the system. Overlooking quality like this is its own punishment.

Swinging our attention over to the Apple II, **Lode Runner** (Broderbund/Apple II/48K disk) stands out far ahead of the pack. Though many of the best new game designs are now created for the Atari family of computers, "Lode Runner" proves there's still plenty of juice left in the good old Apple computer system.

If climbing contests which depend on split-second timing and the hand/eye coordination of an acrobat exhaust you, you're likely to find "Lode Runner" a refreshing change. Strategy is the all-important consideration, and the best planners will naturally allow for at least a tiny bit of sloppiness in the execution. In this way "Lode Runner" is to other

climbing games what "Lady Bug" is to maze-chases.

The idea in this solitaire action game is to roam the playfield by climbing up and down ladders, going hand-over-hand along horizontal bars, running along horizontal brick platforms, and jumping off upper beams to the ones below. Chests containing gold are scattered around the playfield, and the lode runner must scoop them up while avoiding from three to five pursuing guards. If an unencumbered guard reaches a chest of gold before the hero, he can pick it up and carry it along until forced to give it up after falling into a pit.

The lode runner does not have the ability to jump upward, so movement must be carefully orchestrated. It won't do to blithely hop down stairstep bricks only to find there's no ladder or other method of getting back up. Perhaps to compensate for his lack of climbing ability, the lode runner can dig a pit either ahead of or behind his position by pressing the appropriate button. A guard who falls into a pit becomes trapped for a few seconds, earning the player 75 points and a little breathing room. The pits close up after awhile, and guards caught in the reassembled wall are killed, again earning a bonus. The guards, unfortunately, reincarnate at the top of the screen after a few seconds off the screen.

Digging ability is more than a weapon. Sometimes the lode runner must excavate through several layers of bricks to reach chests entombed in otherwise inaccessible pockets of the brickwork. In addition, it's often advantageous for the lode runner to dig all the way through a horizontal stretch of brick planking and drop through the chasm for a speedy getaway. This tactic is especially effective because any guard who tries to follow simply gets trapped in the pit!

You'll have plenty of opportunity to work out even more subtle and powerful strategies, because "Lode Runner" challenges home-arcade aces with 150 different playfields. And in the unlikely event that you triumph over this gargantuan hurdle, there is a special added attraction: an easy-to-use system for constructing your own "Lode Runner" playfields—with no programming knowledge or skill needed. Though the graphics aren't overtly flashy, they are excellent in a simple, clean-lined way. One major exception is the awesome animation of the lode runner and the guards, which is quite similar to Dan Gorlin's work in last year's "Choplifter."

No Apple gamer should be without Doug Smith's "Lode Runner"—it's that good. One warning, though: be sure to allot several hours of playing time, because only someone with a will of iron could yank this disk while the next playfield still beckons. 