

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



The First Portable Video Game System

The urge to play video games is no respecter of time and place. The desire to measure one's abilities against the challenge of a rousing electronic game can strike anyone anywhere—and at any hour of the day or night. Think of it as a high-tech Big Mac Attack.

If you're anything like the pair of game-lovers who write this column each month, chances are that you've had a yen to wield a live joystick on some occasion when it was completely impractical to do so. You probably settled for a bit of mental strategizing and, perhaps, a few fond memories of the time you rolled the "Space Invaders" score.

General Consumer Electronics (GCE) has a video-game system for you. For the first time in the short history of the hobby, the video-game machine has been unshackled from its traditional dependence on the family TV set. The same company that has already given us the "Game Time," "Arcade Time," and "Sports Time" fun watches has created an entirely new category of game machine with its introduction of the Vectrex.

In the past, many video-game buffs have looked down their noses at stand-alone electronic games. The relatively primitive hand-held baseball and football games that choked stores a couple of Christmases ago fostered a poor image for stand-alones that is only now evaporating. After one play session at the controls of the Vectrex, most home arcaders will be forced to agree that the gap in quality between the usual hook-to-the-TV video game and GCE's new pride and joy is surprisingly small.

Vectrex is constructed around a nine-inch black-and-white monitor, but this machine is a lot more than just an ordinary B&W portable TV with a built-in cartridge slot. GCE has equipped Vectrex with a genuine vector graphics monitor that produces coin-op-quality visuals (albeit in monochrome) quite similar to those found on commercial arcade games like "Asteroids" and "Star Hawk."

For those who don't haunt the play-for-pay game parlors, on-screen pictures are composed on very thin, very bright white lines. Vector graphics technology

permits designers of the games to endow most of them with some remarkably convincing three-dimensional effects that greatly enhance the players' enjoyment, especially in cartridges with an outer-space theme. Don't cringe at the thought of games without the rainbow of colors found in software for the leading home video games and microcomputers. With the possible exception of **Clean Sweep**, a maze-chase game, the high resolution and delicacy of the line work take much of the curse out of the lack of a full palate of hues.

Helping even more is GCE's clever use of multicolored overlays. Made of heavy-gauge flexible plastic, they easily slip into place over the screen, held securely during the action by pairs of tabs at the top and bottom of the display. Each cartridge comes with its own overlay. The overlays are so well-done that when you're really involved with a Vectrex game like "Scramble," it's almost possible to forget that the program is in black-and-white.

The Vectrex control panel is a delight. It

continued on page 118



The Vectrex Arcade System from General Consumer Electronics uses a nine-inch black-and-white monitor to offer high-quality visuals.



"Mine Storm"—built into the machine—is an 'Asteroids'-like game that moves quickly, furnishing four kinds of mines.

several years before they decided what to do with it, and the studio was as surprised at its success as anybody.) There are more revues on Broadway—they don't really translate well into movies—and there are more revivals. What are you going to do, remake *Hello, Dolly!*?

Well, yes. (Carol Channing will be taped live onstage.) The lucrative cable market has become attracted to Broadway theater just as the movies did 30 years ago. But the relative ease of shooting for cable—while some musical is playing in some theater—makes it different. The format has already become standard: An expectant audience files into a large,

bland theater. The lights dim, the overture starts, we're about to see a Broadway musical. Not an adaptation, no. The real McCoy. Wrinkles and all.


And there are wrinkles. So far on the market are *Eubie!*, *Pippin*, and *Purlie*—a revue of Eubie Blake's music and two lesser musicals that, in rosier times, would have been picked up by a Hollywood production company. It's not exactly an occasion for backflips. *Purlie* gives us a delightful performance by Melba Moore and a few interesting songs—most of them hers—but at 140-some minutes, it just isn't good enough or varied enough. With *South Pacific* at least you got waves and

scenery. With these Broadway-on-stage selections, you must content yourself with a fixed gaze at a theater proscenium, and something has to be pretty damned entertaining to hold that gaze.

Sweeney Todd is said to be exactly that: the best production so far mounted expressly for cable, and about to be marketed this fall for home-video consumers. Angela Lansbury repeats her Tony-award-winning role in the brilliant Stephen Sondheim musical, and the Victorian tale of revenge and murder (practically an opera) is much too risky a project for any major studio. Advance word on the RKO-Niederlander tape production is spectacular; maybe we're making progress. But if the cheapness and ready cable market of taped theater begin to look too appetizing to video producers, the Broadway musical may not make it all the way to Hollywood anymore.

Which would be a shame. For no matter how successful or unsuccessful *Annie* or *Whorehouse* may turn out to be, they are part of one of the movies' finest traditions. Home-video collectors gravitate toward musicals—how else to explain the manufacture of such minor films as *Kismet*? If, in the rush for product, cable companies grab up all the subsidiary rights and make quickie in-house recordings of any old production, we may never see an *Annie* again.

Had the technology existed 15 years ago, I wonder if *Cabaret*—a musical with a fair success on Broadway but no real attraction for '60s movie audiences—wouldn't have been shot on a stage somewhere for a quick buck. I wonder if Bob Fosse would've ever had a chance to do with it what he did. It would've been easier, and faster, and cheaper to shoot it onstage.

But it just wouldn't have been as good. And no matter how you look at it, I'm going to watch *Cabaret* a lot more often than *Pippin* with its stage lighting, actors projecting to the back of the house, and the inevitable distancing of the video camera. It may be theater, but it isn't movies. It's *Animal Crackers*. And progress is putting us right back where we began. 

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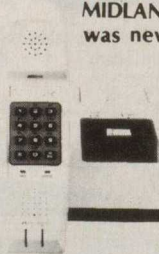
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continued from page 32

consists of a small metal joystick and a row of four numbered buttons. The stick's response, heightened as it is by the vector graphics monitor, is on a par with the command devices used with TV-connected machines. Each cartridge uses a different combination of the stick and buttons to give players a decent range

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of options and inputs during the game. As a handy reminder, each overlay summarizes the function of each control used in the game.

The control panel stores in a special niche in the game situated just below the monitor. When in use, it plugs into a socket located on the front of the device. A second panel (which must be purchased separately) for use in two-player games can also be connected in similar fashion.

GCS hasn't overlooked the importance of good game sound. The on/off switch has an adjustable volume control. When it's turned up fairly high, the Vectrex can produce excellent audio to accompany

the action. And should you want to play at a time when silence is golden, you can cut the beeps and boops to a whisper or eliminate them altogether.

Mind Storm, a space shoot-'em-up, is resident in the machine, which comes packed with the appropriate overlay. It's a fast-moving contest, more than slightly similar to "Asteroids," in which the player must attempt to blast lethal space mines which an alien spaceship has seeded in our little corner of the galaxy. Four kinds of mines—floating, fireball, magnetic, and fireball/magnetic combination—threaten the player's craft.

The joystick rotates the ship in either

direction and buttons apply thrust, move it to a different location on the screen instantly via hyperspace jump, and fire the front-mounted laser.


Hyperchase, despite the inappropriate moniker, is a driving game that sends the player motoring through a variety of terrain. Using the joystick as the steering wheel, the arcader can motor along crowded highways, nearly deserted interstate thoroughfares, and even drive through a long mountain tunnel. The best thing about this cartridge is that, unlike all too many racing and steering games, "Hyperchase" requires the player to use the accelerator, brake, and gearshift. Though a few drivers will be able to negotiate the twists and turns while avoiding collisions with other vehicles, most gamers will have to up- and down-shift using buttons one and two respectively to tally a satisfyingly high score.

"Hyperchase" has two game variations. The first is intended for practice; the second is the competition mode for one or two players. In the latter version, each driver has a fleet of five cars, available one at a time. The idea is to get as far down the road as possible, as indicated by the on-screen mileage counter, before all five autos are wrecked.

Our favorite among the games we tested is the Vectrex edition of **Scramble**. If you enjoyed Stern's scrolling shoot-out in the commercial arcade, chances are excellent that you'll like this home version nearly as much. It features the same multiple playfields and variety of action that has made the original such an effective quarter-snatcher.

Science-fiction buffs will probably be interested in Vectrex's **Star Trek — The Game**. This is the standard defend-the-universe scenario with the emphasis purely on tactical ship-to-ship space combat. The game is organized in sectors, beginning with the easiest and progressing by measured stages to a final all-out confrontation with the aliens' mother-ship. Those with little patience for battling from sector to sector can leapfrog to the final showdown by maneuvering their ship through the hyperspace tunnel that periodically appears on-screen.

These are only a few of the cartridges in the Vectrex game library—there may be as many as 16 by the time you read this. Although science-fiction games dominate the catalog now (they tend to look best on a black-and-white vector monitor) there are at least a few games for those who don't adore that crazy Buck Rogers stuff.

With its list price of almost \$200, Vectrex is a luxury item that may not be for everybody. It does, however, make an excellent second home-arcade system for real fans and a convenient take-along for those who don't have steady access to the video-game systems that rely on TV-set output. 

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