
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

From the Mailbag

Time Out for Questions

Just like the old *Perry Como Show*, we get letters here at "Arcade Alley." So the communication doesn't go only in one direction, we thought this would be a good month to sift through the correspondence and answer some of the most frequently asked questions about video games.

Q.: There are so many video games available, how do I select the one that would best suit me?

A.: First and foremost, decide how much you can afford to spend. Programmable systems start at about \$150, although stores discount them as low as \$100 in special sales. On the other hand, the basic cost of a home computer that also plays video games is considerably higher, from \$500 to \$2000.

Another consideration is whether you'll be playing head-to-head or solitaire. For example, Mattel's Intellivision is excellent, but most of the cartridges can't be used without a flesh-and-blood opponent. Atari, on the other hand, offers the "play alone" option on just about every game.

Finally, you've got to decide what type of games you enjoy most. Some systems, like Odyssey² and Intellivision, excel at sports simulations; others, like Atari, concentrate on arcade-style contests; and still others, such as Bally, offer a bit of both.

Q.: I'd love to own a video game, but my finances are very limited. Is anything available for under \$100?

A.: Yes, Virginia, there are video game bargains—if you shop carefully. Not only are many "hardwired," paddle-oriented games priced well under \$100, but programmable units can sometimes be bought for a song, too. When a company withdraws a particular unit from sale or quits the video game field entirely, it often will "dump" existing games on the retail market at a very low price to cut its losses.

There are disadvantages, of course. Broken components are virtually irreplaceable, and the range of available game cartridges is often quite narrow. Such a

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system will, however, provide many hours of gaming pleasure while you're saving up for the programmable system of your dreams.

Q.: If my game breaks, how do I get replacement parts?

A.: That's a good question, one every buyer should ask before settling on a system. We've found that service varies greatly among the various manufacturers. Atari and Magnavox use basically similar controllers, but Magnavox joysticks cost at least twice as much to replace. Moreover, Atari spare parts are readily available at many discount, department, and electronics stores, while all Odyssey² repairs and spare parts are sold from widely spaced service centers.

Q.: When I'm in the middle of a game, the picture sometimes goes snowy and streaky. What causes this?

A.: This problem could have many different causes, but experience dictates checking the adapter unit that connects the game console to the electricity. We've noticed a tendency for these boxes to wear poorly, especially in cases in which the game is frequently disassembled between play sessions.

Q.: Lately, when I turn on my Bally video game, the field seems to drift to the left. What can I do about this?

A.: You may be heading for a new set of controllers. Videogame components are generally well made, but regular use of the controllers will sometimes cause them to get a little out of alignment. In other words, when the stick is in the neutral position, the controller is actually sending a slight movement signal to the console. You can try moving the joystick in the direction that would ordinarily counter the drift and holding it there to try to even it up mechanically, but, realistically, new controllers may prove to be the best solution.

We're always glad to hear from readers, so feel free to write to us, in care of VIDEO magazine, with any of your questions, comments, or suggestions. 