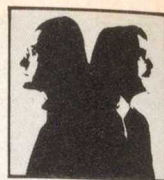


Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney, Jr.



Atari's 'Star Raiders' Scores a Direct Hit

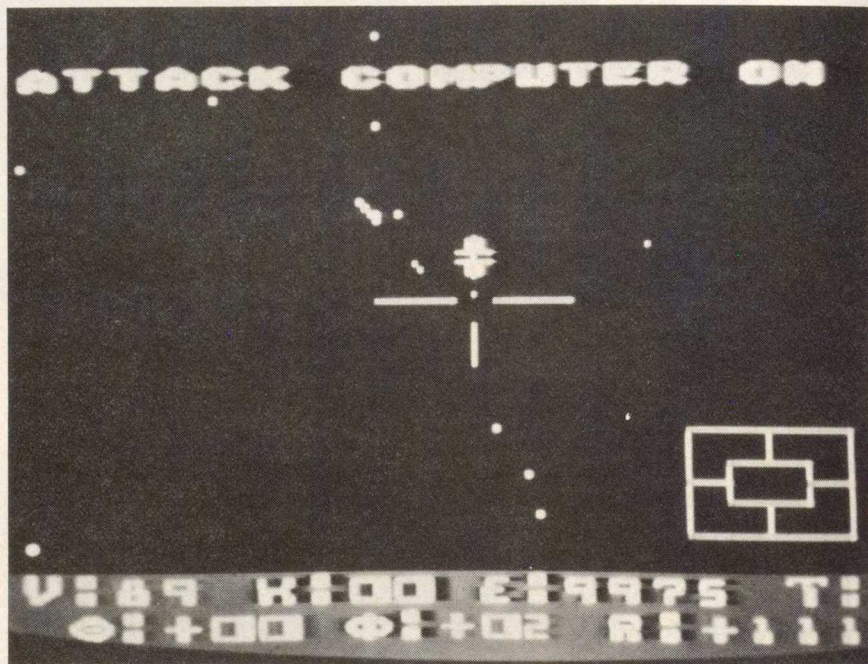
Ever since the idea of personal computers took hold in this country, crystal-ball gazers have predicted that everyone would soon own one of these miracle machines. Who, goes the oft-reiterated reasoning, could possibly resist a device capable of accurately figuring income taxes, generating and printing a mailing list, and even analyzing stock-price trends?

The question looks a lot different from our vantage point here in "Arcade Alley." As Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, "The play's the thing." What will really sell the home computer is its potential as a sophisticated home entertainment center. Sure, estimating the gas bill and figuring mortgage payments are worthy tasks, but only superior electronic-game cartridges are likely to induce the typical wage-earner to loosen the purse-strings.

In that light, the introduction of "Star Raiders" for the Atari 400/800 microcomputers is a home-arcade event of the first magnitude. It ranks behind only the invention of "Pong" and the introduction of the first programmable video-game system in importance to our fast-growing hobby. "Star Raiders" (CXL 4011) is the greatest game ever put on a ROM cartridge. For many, this outstanding game will justify the purchase of the Atari 400—and that's why we're departing from our usual format to feature it at length this month.

Imagine striding across the command bridge of your very own starship. As the computer begins churning out data, you engage the protective shields and, using the galaxy-spanning display grid, chart a destination. After a perilous journey through the crazyquilt anti-universe of hyperspace, your ship arrives at the designated sector to battle Zylon invaders, or perhaps dock at a starbase to repair damage and take on a load of fuel. If this sounds like your favorite science-fiction story come true, it's high time you gave up your civilian status and enlisted with the growing legion of arcade addicts devoted to this landmark cartridge.

"Star Raiders" is hardly the usual head-to-head shooting-gallery-in-space. It is as stunning an advance over all previous interstellar electronic war games as "Progressive Breakout" (see last month's



'Spock! Activate the attack computer!' 'Roger.' 'My name isn't Roger.' 'Shut up, Captain.'

"Arcade Alley") was compared to good old "Pong." Atari has created a breathtaking adventure calculated to tax the strategic and tactical skills of even the most accomplished arcader. Although intended for solitaire play, it beautifully combines so many fascinating play elements that it can be enjoyed by teams of up to three gamers, each taking responsibility for one aspect of the mighty cruiser's operation in classic *Star Trek* fashion.

The executive or science officer, for example, takes charge of the Atari 400's keyboard, which functions as the craft's control console. A group of one-letter commands provide front or aft screen views; activate the shields, attack computer, tracking computer, or manual target selector; engage the hyperwarp engines; or fill the screen with the galactic chart or the long-range sector scan. The same team member could also regulate the twin-ion drive, which enables the ship to move within a sector, by using the control panel's 10 numeric keys. A second person could assume the role of pilot, wielding the joystick. This steers the ship and fires photon torpedoes at the Zylon marauders. Finally, a third gamer can be-

come Captain Kirk himself, barking orders from the command chair with cool efficiency and generally coordinating the actions of the entire team.

The "Star Raiders" program offers four graduated skill levels: Novice, Pilot, Warrior, and Commander. The first provides a painless introduction to the intricacies of "Star Raiders." It doesn't require the player to navigate through hyperspace and restrains the Zylons from returning fire during a battle. Once players achieve familiarity, it's time to progress to one of the three tougher versions. Warning: don't try the Commander-level game until you've acquired lots of skill and experience. A tenderfoot quickly ends up captaining a lifeless hulk drifting aimlessly through the void in the most challenging variant.

The control-panel read-outs, flashed on screen with front and aft screen views, furnish a wealth of information. They tell at a glance the ship's velocity, the number of kills, the amount of energy remaining, and the range and coordinates of any enemy target in same same sector. The attack computer (when operational) pro-

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vides cross-hairs and lock-on for combat situations, while the tracking computer automatically switches between the front and aft screens, depending on the Zylons' attack route.

The galactic chart is another valuable resource. As long as the sub-space radio functions, it shows the positions of both friendly starbases and the Zylon forces seeking to encircle and destroy them. And by moving the chart's cursor to the desired sector, the ship's captain picks hyperspace destinations. In addition, the galactic display indicates total elapsed time, the energy cost of any plotted hyper-jump, ship damage, and the exact number of Zylon craft in any given sector. The long-range sector scan is yet another useful display. It consists of an overview of the sector in which the player's ship is located. After completion of the hyperspace jaunt, it makes finding the enemy within the sector much easier.

The Zylons have three kinds of war vessels: fighters, cruisers, and basestars. The last have shields and torpedoes and can only be destroyed with a close-range attack. Once the Zylons surround a friendly starbase, the player has approximately one minute to save it by eliminating one of the besieging squadrons.

The old saw about a good offense being the best defense certainly applies to tactical (ship-to-ship) combat. Sectors are vast, and the arcader can waste time and fuel waiting around for the Zylons to attack. Once the attack computer pinpoints a target's coordinates, check the range. If it's more than 100 centrons, gun those twin-ion engines and chase down the quarry! Destroy the foe from as great a


distance as possible, because your defensive shields are more fragile at close range. And keep the ship moving; nothing is easier for those pesky Zylons to hit than a stationary target.

The documentation, a glossy 12-page booklet with profuse illustrations, is excellent. It's full of detailed information about everything except the crucial docking maneuver, about which the instructions are unsettlingly vague.

To clear up any ambiguities—and perhaps save buyers a week or two of frustration—here's a step-by-step drill for successfully linking up with a starbase: After arriving in the proper sector, steer the ship so that horizontal and vertical coordinates are at zero and the starbase is

directly ahead. Employ the ion engines to approach within a range of one centron; then immediately hit the "O" key to cut velocity to zero. (Pushing "1" or "2," which also reduce speed to zero, has no effect.) When the starbase is lined up in the cross-hairs of the forward screen, the message "Orbit Established" appears. At this point a tiny shuttle-craft, complete with fuel and robot-repair crew, moves out to your craft from the station. A "Transfer Complete" message signals that it's all right for your ship to return to its mission of stalking Zylons and protecting starbases from alien wrath.

It is impossible to praise "Star Raiders" too highly. The graphics are breathtaking, the space combat has a realistic feel, and

each game is refreshingly different from every other. The computer even grades players on their work as defenders of the civilized universe after completion of each game. More than any computer game we've seen so far, "Star Raiders" fulfills the potential of mechanical brains to entertain us puny humans. Its debut marks the beginning of a new era in electronic gaming. 

TV Den

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from Radio Shack (part no. 275-1548). This switch leaves the circuit closed for