

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



Star Wars and Space Caverns

Will software publishers develop personalities? It's an intriguing question. Many believe they detect a "house style" threading through Activision's dozen cartridges, but this is an unusual happenstance in a field generally characterized by diversity.

Yet as the number of companies producing software for the Atari VCS (and soon, other popular video game systems as well) increases, it will become important for each company to create a distinctive image in the minds of game-buyers. Marketing people call this a "niche," and the urge to find a viable one may soon lead independent video-game producers toward greater specialization. After all, a game-cartridge vendor with an image will have quite an advantage over those that are just names in the crowd.

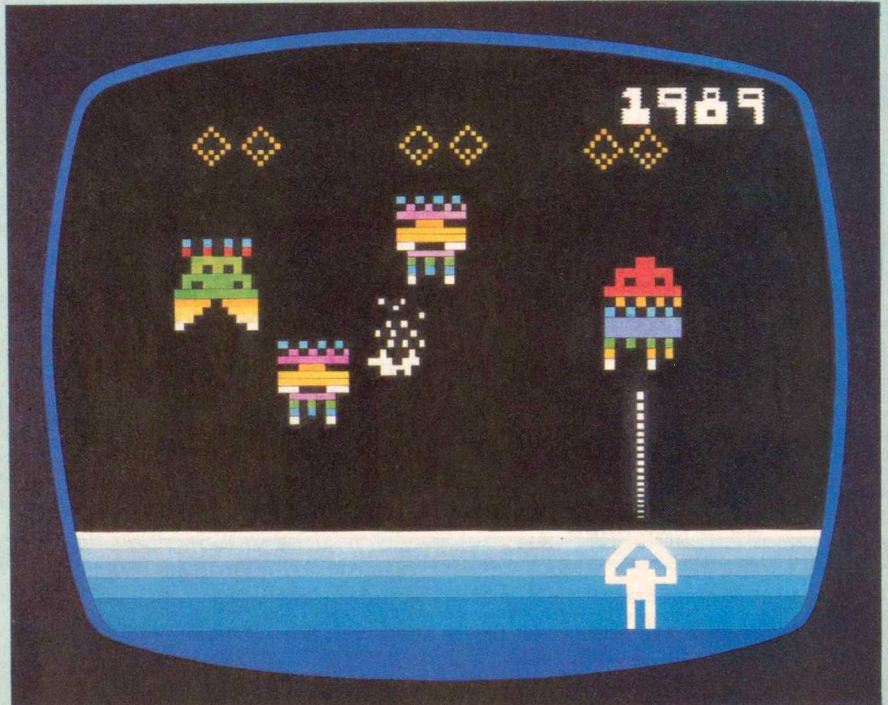
One company staking out its own territory is Games By Apollo. Aside from "Skeet Shoot," an independently conceived design purchased by the company when it first came into the video-game field, Apollo's emphasis is on games suitable for excellent players. Some home arcaders are simply too proficient for many otherwise-excellent cartridges. The typical Games By Apollo title, at least to judge by the first couple, can be enjoyed by the average gamer at its lower levels of difficulty, but continues to challenge even the best joystick-wielders over extended periods of play.

So let's begin this month's stroll down "Arcade Alley" by giving Apollo's newest creation a deep probe.

Space Cavern (Games By Apollo/Atari VCS) might be considered a sequel to this company's much-admired "Space Chase," issued earlier this year. This time the gamer is represented by a well-drawn spacesuited figure which can be moved back and forth along the bottom of the playfield using the joystick. The star man is standing on the floor of a vast natural cave located somewhere on the strange planet on which he has just landed.

He is not alone. To keep life and limb together, the arcader must skillfully direct the on-screen representative to dispatch the creatures that want to fry him for dinner. Overhead, depending on the option, two or four electrosauruses hover near the ceiling. They move in totally unpredictable patterns, each firing a steady stream of electrical bolts at the man below.

That's not all. The caves located in the lower left and right corner of the playfield



Looking for a challenging vid game? With 'Space Cavern,' there is no free win.

are the homes of the shaggy marsupods. These creatures, which look like Mr. Hyde to the "Pac-Man" gobbler's Dr. Jeckyl, periodically rush onto the screen from the sidelines and attempt to put the bite on the game's spacemans.

There's no defense against the electro-molecular blasts of the electrosauruses, nor can anything stop the jaw-snapping advance of the marsupods. The lone defender, however, is not entirely helpless. Pushing the action button on the controller permits the player to shoot a laser bolt at the flying monsters dancing in the air above his head. Pulling the joystick handle toward the gamer makes the spaceman fire a disrupter blast horizontally toward the right side of the screen, while pushing the stick away sends a shot in the opposite direction.

This control scheme is sure to make "Space Cavern" at least a little controversial in arcading circles. There's even a little divergence of opinion between the two proprietors of "Arcade Alley." Whether you view this setup as an exciting departure from the expected which makes possible the cartridge's unique play-mechanics, or as a cumbersome system that feels unnatural and is hard to learn, will be pretty much a matter of taste. Better players are apt to warm to the novel system faster than poor ones, but most of

the ones we sat down in front of our test copy got the idea after a few fumbling practice rounds.

The gamer starts the action with a crew of four men, available one at a time. Another spaceman is earned when you score 20,000 points, but most players will not attain this lofty milestone very soon after beginning their study of "Space Cavern." This is one tough contest with no "easy win" tricks to diminish the impact of pure skill.

The Empire Strikes Back (Parker Brothers/Atari VCS) is cut from different cloth. It's not much easier to play well, but the scrolling shootout features the breed of zingy graphics that has helped first Activision, and more recently Imagic, earn places in the hearts of electronic gamers. Based on the snowbound battle on the planet Hoth in George Lucas' film of the same name, "The Empire Strikes Back" is a battle between the small, swift snow speeders and the lumbering At-Ats (Imperial Walkers).

The player has a fleet of three-speeders which come into play one at a time as needed. The speeder can survive two blasts from the At-Ats' weapon before fluttering down into the drifts. The speeders are harder to kill than that might suggest, since a player can land a partially

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Products

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display, center fine-tuning and signal-strength meters, channel scan, and optional remote control. Motorized models use a remote-control system called SATSCAN, featuring simple up/down pushbuttons to aim the antenna; a continuous three-digit LED indicates antenna position within a third of a degree.

Prices range from \$4495 to \$5955.

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Sony Video Cart Rolls, Stands, Collapses

The Sony CAT-220 video cart is designed for the SL-2000 Betamax, HVC-2200 or HVC-2400 color video cameras,



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tripod, and other accessories. It rolls like a golfcart, unfolds to stand independently, and collapses for carrying like a backpack.

Price: \$170.

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Superex Processor Alters VCR Sound

The VAP-3 Video/Audio Processor from Superex is designed to interface and manipulate mono VCR sound with a hifi stereo system. Its two most prominent features are a four-band equalizer, for tailoring the frequency range of your VCR's audio to your own taste, and a time-delay circuit that sends the audio signal to one channel a few microseconds after the other gets it for a concert-hall



effect (the technical term is "reverberation").

Full audio-mixing control is provided for VCR, Tape, Mike, and Auxiliary. A master audio-level control varies the volume of the mix.

Price: \$270.

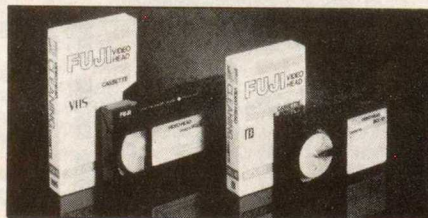
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Fuji Head Cleaners Clean by 80 Percent

Fuji has come out with head-cleaning cassettes for both Beta and VHS VCRs.

The cassettes—VCL-10 for VHS and BCL-10 for Beta—fit into recorders like ordinary tapes. One 10-second pass cleans most video heads. The maker says its tests showed that the cassettes cleaned heads by 80 percent in one pass; additional passes are recommended for exceptionally dirty heads. The VHS unit provides up to 900 cleanings, and the Beta unit up to 450.

Price: \$34.40.



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disabled craft (which turns white to indicate this status) in one of the valleys and blast off again with a repaired sky car.

The At-Ats don't exactly fall over in the first strong gust of wind either. It takes 40—count 'em!—hits to vaporize one of these mighty war machines. The At-Ats shift colors every time the player scores 10 hits against it, providing an immediately understandable reading of the enemy's deteriorating condition. The more hits an Imperial Walker gets, the more slowly it moves and fires. Once it is weakened enough, a blinking square symbolizing a weakness in its shields appears somewhere on the surface of the metal monster. A well-aimed shot to the point immediately disintegrates the At-At regardless of how much damage it has absorbed up to that point.

The At-Ats march across the screen from left to right. Their goal is the generating station located at the extreme right of the multi-screen playfield. The game ends if even one imperial walker gets all the way through. Thus players will generally want to disable the lead At-At to slow down the ones behind and give the speeders more time to do their deadly work.

Reflecting one of the central themes of the "Star Wars" saga, the gamer is not alone in the battle against Darth Vader's forces on Hoth—the Force is with you! When the familiar notes of the "Star Wars" theme blare forth (after the player has kept the same speeder in action for a couple of minutes), the Force will protect the defenders of goodness from harm no matter how many times the At-Ats shoot them.

The audio-visual effects are absolutely first-rate. Typical of the care lavished on this design is that areas toward the top of the screen scroll more slowly than does the ground. This heightens the illusion of depth, enhancing the realism of the cartridge.

Parker Brothers is to be commended for producing such a solid game its first time into the market. It would have been so easy to churn out a mediocre piece of fluff, knowing that the title alone would probably sell the game by itself. Instead, the company has given us an entertaining, fast-paced contest that belongs in the cartridge libraries of most VCS owners.

