

And Here's a Game Without a Screen

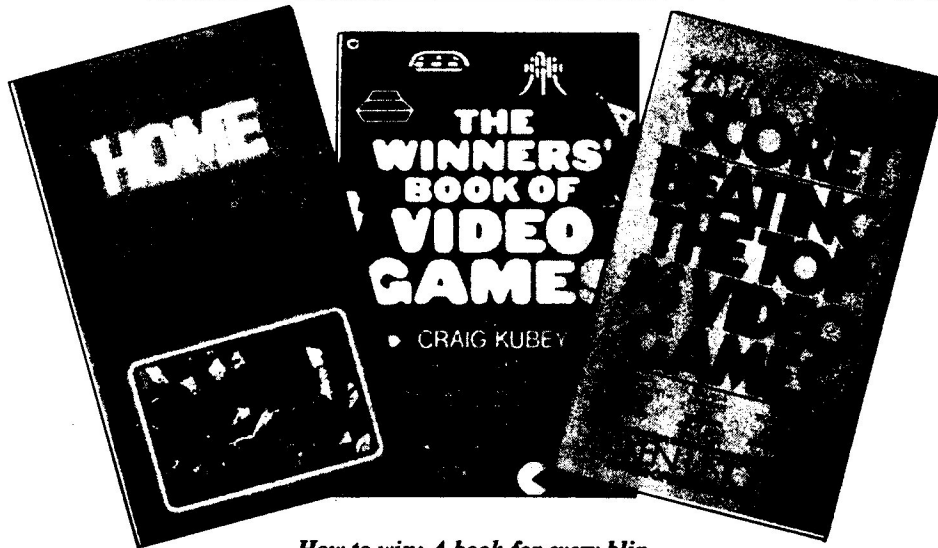
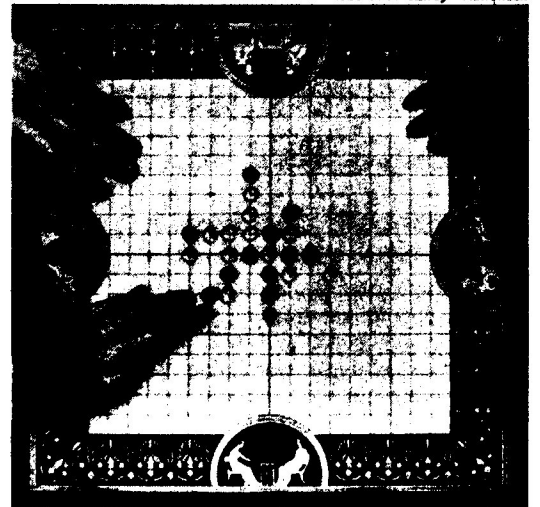
Not every new game blasts or booms or gobbles. Take Pente (pronounced pen-tay), which is spreading across the nation from trendy haunts in the Sun Belt and Middle West. Adapted by a college student from the ancient Japanese board game of Go, the quiet pastime may not capture many video champs, but it is clicking among the backgammon set. At Houston's flossy Elan Club, for example, Pente playing has become a fixture of "happy hour." "You get your violent players playing blood-bath backgammon," says Elan regular Phyllis Warrington, "but you get your nondrinkers playing Pente."

Pente started eight years ago in Stillwater, Okla., where inventor Gary Gabrel was studying sociology and managing a pizza restaurant. Fascinated by Go, Gabrel decided to synthesize a simpler, American version. In 1977 he introduced the result: a grid on which two players place glass "stones" one at a time: the winner is the first either to line up five stones in a row or to capture five pairs of opposition pieces by surrounding them. Gabrel dubbed the game "Pente," after the Greek word for five, and began peddling it from his pizza truck. By 1981 sales were running at the rate of 300,000 sets a year. Gabrel expects to triple that now that Pente is being introduced at such upscale outlets as Bloomingdale's in New York and I. Magnin in San Francisco.

"Sequential Logic": Pente's appeal is mainly cerebral. At Gambit Games in San Francisco, a salesclerk reports that Pente sets—priced anywhere from \$15 for a portable beach version to \$90 for a handsome, inlaid wooden board—sell primarily to folks who "like to employ sequential logic." Not everyone can handle the challenge. At the Elan Club recently, a man wandered over to the Pente board and began munching on the yellow stones, convinced that they were cheese crackers.

Playing Pente: A hit for the backgammon-bored

Robert R. McElroy—Newsweek



How to win: A book for every blip

Attack of the Video Volumes

The good news is that, contrary to the fears of many parents and teachers, video-game addicts do read. The bad news is that what they read are books about... you guessed it, video games. Hoping for a replay of the Rubik's Cube phenomenon—four how-to-beat-the-cube books became best sellers—the nation's publishers have been firing off video volumes with nearly the speed of Space Invaders. Two of the first paperbacks—"How to Master Home Video Games" by Harvard junior Tom Hirschfeld (Bantam, \$2.95) and "Mastering Pac-Man" by blackjack ace Ken Uston (Signet, \$1.95)—are already scaling the best-seller lists, and at least fifteen more are on the way.

The video books fall into two basic categories: detailed strategy manuals, sometimes devoted to a single arcade game, and catalogs that provide game histories, interviews with champions as well as tips on which home games are best. The advice that they offer is generally sound enough; the problem, aficionados point out, is that video-game strategy can become obsolete virtually overnight. Soon after the first Pac-Man manuals appeared, tipping off readers on certain patterns they could follow to steer safely through the game's monster-infested maze, some arcade owners changed the programming of their units to outwit them. To make matters worse, blurry charts mar several of the quickie books, and some have been larded with trivia. But at least three early-bird books get good reviews from expert players: Uston's "Pac-Man" (which has sold 1.5 million copies since January), "Score! Beating the Top 16 Video Games" (Signet, \$2.50) and "The Winners' Book of Video Games" by former Nader raider Craig Kubey (Warner Books, \$5.95).

As new games begin to blip on the hori-

zon, new books will appear to explain them. No sooner did Pac-Man beget a new game called Ms. Pac-Man (it features a devious pink character with a bow in her hair) than a new book called "Playing Ms. Pac-Man to Win" rolled off the presses (Video Game Books, \$2.25).

Those sharpies who want to save their coins for gaming, meanwhile, have caught on to a weekly newspaper column by Michael Blanchet, 22, author of "How To Beat the Video Games" (Fireside, \$3.95). Blanchet's column, distributed by the Tribune Company Syndicate, Inc., of Chicago, runs in more than 100 papers—and some arcade operators complain that vidkids come in armed with strategy-packed clippings.

Cat Fanciers: There will be books, too, for those who regard the video-game boom as just another step in the decline of the West. Like joggers and cat fanciers before them, videologues are about to become the butt of a series of book-length jokes. Next month Pocket Books plans to publish "The Official I Hate Video Games Handbook" by former National Lampoon staffer Emily Prager; among the games it describes are "Spacey Invader" (the object of which "is to allow as many drugs as possible to penetrate the cerebral cortex until no player knows who he is") and "Anorexian" (a variation of Pac-Man in which the player must gobble up everything on the screen, but then regurgitate it). Simon and Schuster will be publishing an even more sweeping indictment of current obsessions. The work of cartoonist Philip Lief, it is called, simply enough, "I Hate Cubes, Cats, Pac-Man, and You Too."

LYNN LANGWAY with LINDA R. PROUT
in New York