

# The First National Space Invaders Competition

*Matt Mihovich*

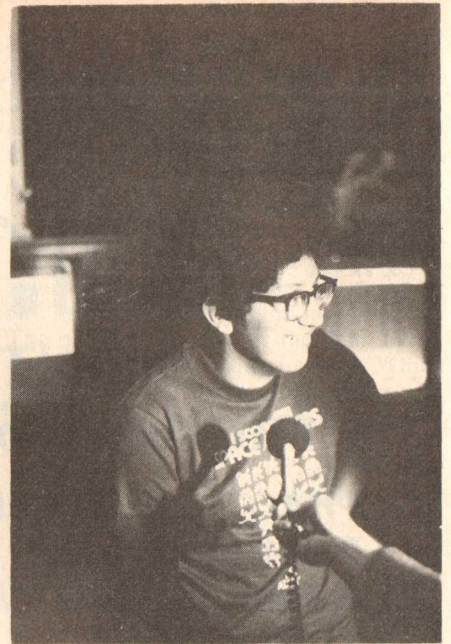
Following three months of regional competition among some 10,000 entrants, five finalists emerged to battle for the title in the First National "Space Invaders" Competition sponsored by Atari. The finals were held on November 10 at the New York headquarters of Warner Communications Inc. (Atari is a division of Warner) amidst a small audience predominantly composed of press and media people. While a spokesperson for Atari admitted that the competition was a media event designed to "help popularize the game," the finalists saw it differently. They were there to find out who was the best player in the U.S. — a search that's replayed in candy stores, arcades, and homes all across the country.

If Las Vegas had been taking bets before play began at 10 a.m., the odds-on favorite would have been fourteen-year-old Frank Tetro. A finalist from the New York area, Frank came in with the highest playoff score of 110,125 points; sixteen-year-old Bill Heineman from the Los Angeles area was a distant second with

83,475 points. The others in the finals were: Steve Marmel, 15, from Chicago with 76,220 points, Robert Marek, 16, from Dallas/Forth Worth with 72,570 points, and Hing Ng, 16, from San Francisco with 64,185 points.

Simultaneous competition was restricted to two hours of play, which necessitated speed as well as accuracy in shooting down the alien critters. Using Atari's video game version of "Space Invaders," which has 112 possible variations, they played game selection number one, "A" difficulty. This meant that each player was limited to three ships fighting squadrons of thirty-six aliens (6 x 6 configuration), and there were no obstacles, no thumping heartbeat sounds, and no sideline critters cheering for each hit. Afficionados of the game (of which this writer is one) would have noted that the last alien in the squadron did not move as fast as Bally's arcade version or Creative Computing's home computer version for the Apple computer. All the same, there were plenty of booming explosions and laser beam zaps, and the need for speed made the playing tense.

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Winner Bill Heineman meets the press.

Moving too fast got Steve Marmel zapped out at around 40,000 points; while the other finalists each broke 100,000 and lasted the full two hours.

## New Official High Score

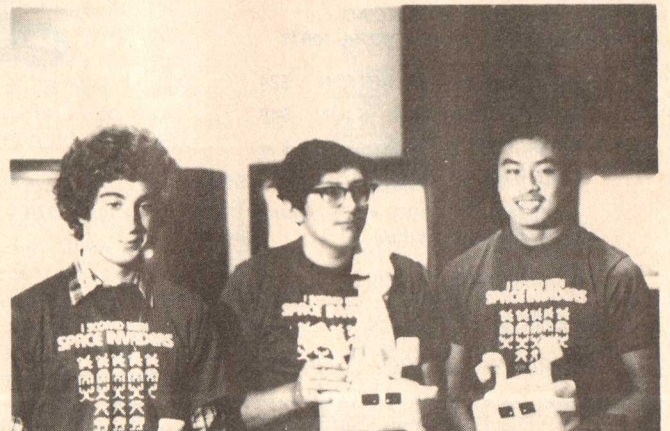
When the cosmic dust had settled, a new official high score of 165,200 points was achieved by Bill Heineman of Whittier, CA. He was awarded First Prize of an "Asteroids" Table Top Video Game. Second Prize, an Atari 800 Personal Computer, was awarded to Hing Ng of San Francisco with a score of 153,300 points. And Frank Tetro of Yorktown Heights, NY, scored 133,300 points to earn the Third Prize of a \$500 shopping spree.

After the competition, Bill Heineman felt "tired physically, great mentally!" Though he has an Atari Video Computer System (each of the finalists had one), Bill thinks Bally's arcade version of "Space Invaders" is tougher because "the aliens shoot more."

None of the finalists owned a personal computer going into the competition, but all would like to have one someday,



Bill Heineman (left) on his way to a new record — 165,200 points.



Top three finishers Frank Tetro, Bill Heineman, and Hing Ng.



## Competition, continued...

especially Bill, who "loves working with computers every chance I get." He likes to take them apart and then reassemble them, and can program in Basic and "a little in Z-80."

Young Heineman emphasized that he's not a pinball player though his first encounter with "Space Invaders" came about two years ago with the arcade version.

### A Bit of History

"Space Invaders" was developed in Japan in 1978 by Taito Inc. and quickly took the country by storm. Some 350,000 coin-operated machines supplanted pachinko (traditional Japanese pinball) as the most popular game. It even drove Howagiken Ltd., the largest pachinko manufacturer, into bankruptcy and forced other manufacturers to update their products with so-called "Invader-Pachinko."

Meanwhile, Bally Manufacturing Co. brought the arcade version to America and, in the first 23 months, placed 60,000 coin-operated "Invaders." Now they're devoting their full attention to "Galaxian," a more sophisticated follow-on entry in the video-game field.

There are several personal computer versions of "Space Invaders," including "Super Invasion" marketed by Creative

Computing Software for Apple and "Alien Invasion" by Software Innovations for TRS-80. Atari, Inc. acquired exclusive rights to market the home video game version, and has made it the #1 seller of their forty video games.

William F. Grubb, vice president of marketing and sales for Atari's Electronic

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Entertainment Division, assured everyone present at the competition that the National "Space Invaders" Competition would become an annual event. The finalists were happy to hear that, particularly Bill Heineman, who will "never give up playing [Space Invaders]."

### The Winning Strategy

Bill's winning strategy (similar to that used by the other finalists) was simply this:

At each reset, moving from extreme left to right, he zapped the entire bottom line (two lines whenever possible). He then eliminated the entire right column, moved back to the extreme left, and systematically destroyed each column as he moved back to the right. Time and time again, he wiped out the entire squadron and got the bonus ship in under sixty seconds!

He's looking forward to defending his title and to playing "Asteroids," which he says is much tougher, because when zapped, big asteroids merely break up into little ones that are equally destructive.

Bill and others who are taking to Asteroids, will be happy to know that Atari is considering a separate competition for "Asteroids." Atari, by the way, markets both the arcade and home video game versions; while Quality Software markets its own version, "Asteroids in Space," for the Apple computer.

All in all, this First National "Space Invaders" Competition was a good one with a new official high score, in two hours of regulation play, of 165,200 points. There's a score for all Invader-addicts to aim for. How long is this likely to go on as an annual competition? Before you answer, bear in mind that 20 minutes after the competition was over, all of the finalists (and a few members of the press) were playing "Asteroids" in an adjoining room! □