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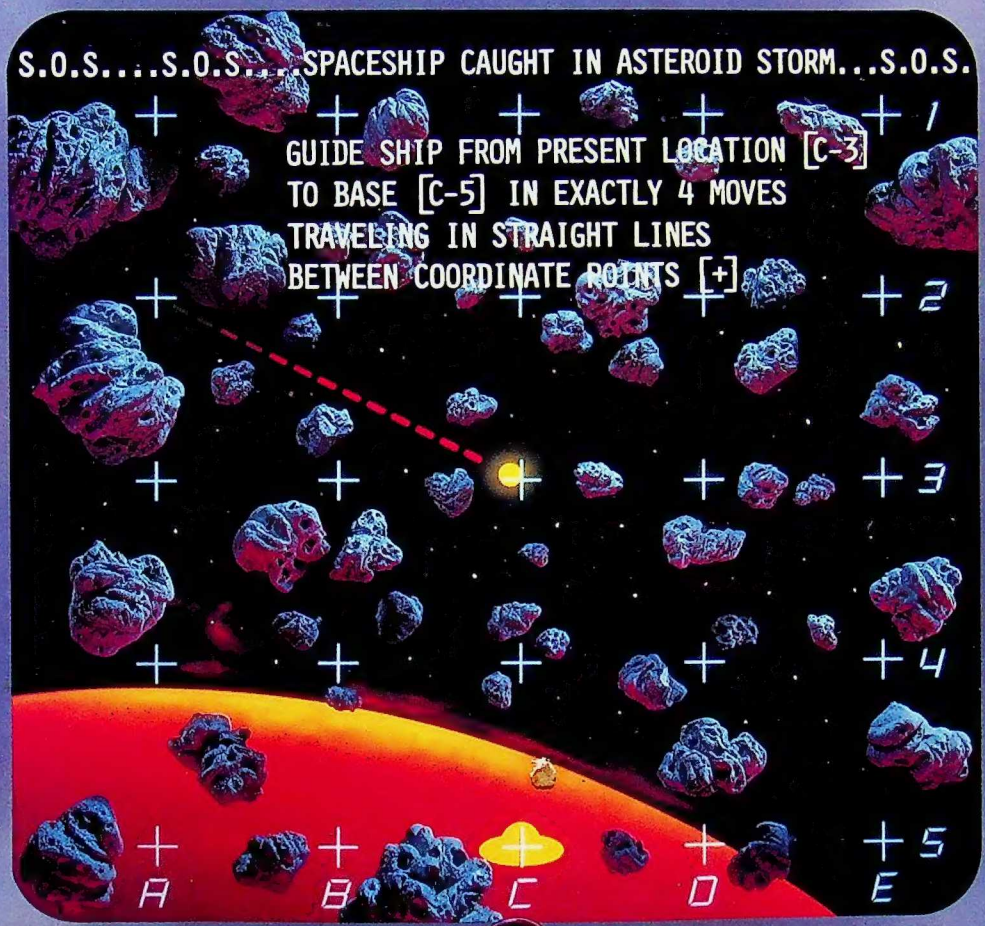

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Answer Drawer, page 72

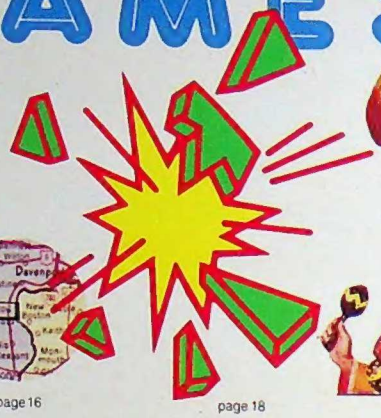
January/February
1982

GAMES

Volume 6, Number 1
Issue 27

page 22

page 16



page 18

page 24

page 27

FEATURES

FEATURE SECTIONS

CONTESTS

DEPARTMENTS

Difficulty Rating: **Smooth Sailing** ★ **Uphill Climb** ★★ **Proceed at Your Own Risk!** ★★★ **Mixed Bag** ★☆

Cover: Designed and photographed by Walter Wick **Cover Subtitle:** Steven C. Kela

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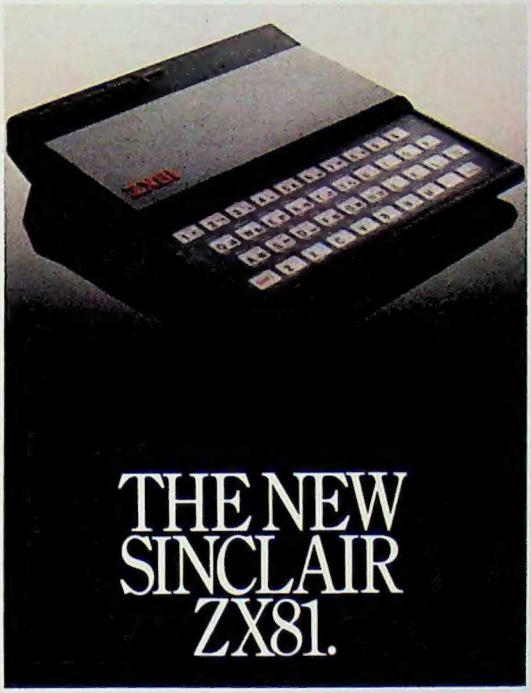

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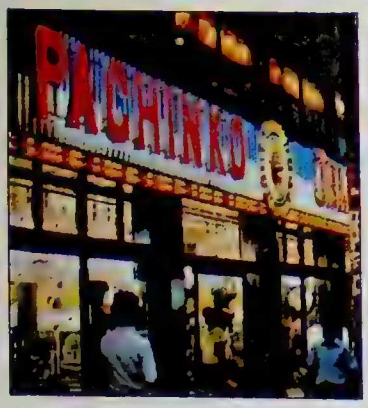
GAMEBITS

Edited by Curt Slepian

Japanese Pinball



Photographs by Etsuko Fukushima

Pachinko parlors light up Tokyo.

What pinball is to the competitive West, pachinko is to the meditative East. A kind of vertical pinball, pachinko is a game whose enjoyment is derived not from its action or outcome, but from the forgetting of the game: players can submerge their thoughts in the mesmerizing flow of hundreds of bouncing steel balls. Perhaps it's this Zen-like quality that has made pachinko one of the most popular amusements in Japan.

Nothing in America can compare to pachinko's hold on the Japanese. Every neighborhood in every major city has its own pachinko parlor—huge, brightly lit halls, sometimes several stories high, noisy with high-volume pop music and the cacophony of hundreds of machines being played simultaneously. After work the parlors are filled with everyone from school boys to businessmen winding down from the days work. In air thick with cigarette smoke, individuals have been known to play five or six hours at a sitting. And when they get bored with the game, they can watch the TV sets that have been inserted into the center of some of the newer pachinko machines.

A pachinko player goes with the flow.

To play pachinko one first purchases a desired number of small steel balls from the parlor's counters or vending machines. The player then sits in front of a machine and pours his balls into a tray that feeds into his shooting lever.

For some, the game brings inner peace.

By turning or flipping the lever (depending on the model of the machine), 25 to 30 balls per minute shoot straight up in an arc to the top of the board where they fall through the various spike formations. The aim is to drop as many balls as possible into one of the "strike zones," round holes in the face of the machine. For each ball that enters a strike zone, 15 bonus balls pour into the tray. An accurate shooter can parlay his initial hundred or so balls into thousands.

When a player runs out of balls, it's *sayonara.* Luckier shooters can exchange their remaining balls at the parlor's gift store for chocolates, cigarettes, groceries, small electrical appliances, and other modest items. Usually, these are brought home to the family as presents.

But not all players are lured into pachinko by the promise of gifts. For the workaholic Japanese businessman, pachinko is a release from the murderous pressures of a six-day-a-week job and extended family.

While his ancestors meditated on bamboo, the modern Japanese contemplates the trajectory of steel balls. On this crowded island, you find inner calm anywhere you can.

—Barry Jacobs
and Etsuko Fukushima

Extra Credit

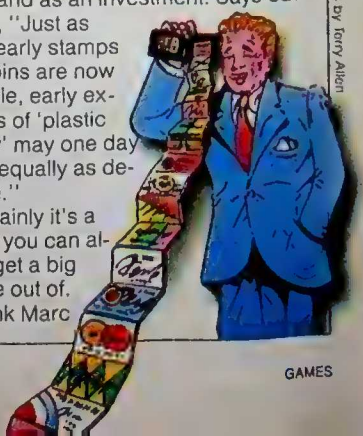
You have to give Walter Cavanagh a lot of credit. But that's only because the Santa Clara resident owns the world's largest collection of credit cards. In a 250-foot long wallet (a *Guinness* record), Cavanagh keeps 1,098 different credit cards (another *Guinness* mark). Since the cards weigh 34 pounds, Cavanagh *does* leave home without them, storing the plastic either in a safety deposit box or in the Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not Museum in San Francisco.

Cavanagh's collection began when he and a friend set out to see who could obtain more cards in a year. Now, besides the commonplace Avis, Diners Club, and 43 oil company cards, he possesses a sterling silver card from a Reno, Nevada gambling casino and another that allows him to charge a mortgage for a house.

If he had the itch, Cavanagh could go on a $1.25 million buying spree, but he uses the cards primarily for identification—and as an investment. Says Cavanagh, "Just as many early stamps and coins are now valuable, early examples of 'plastic money' may one day prove equally as desirable."

Certainly it's a hobby you can always get a big charge out of.

—Frank Marc



Illustrations by Terry Allen

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PLUGGED INTO ELECTRONIC GAMES

HOW A POKER-PLAYING WRITER LOST HIS HEART TO THE MICROCHIP

BY ROGER DIONNE

Walking to and from my Hollywood office a couple of years ago, I had to pass a sprawling, open-arched building on the corner of Orange Drive and Hollywood Boulevard. In earlier years the building had housed classic cars driven by the likes of Gable and Lombard, Fairbanks and Pickford. But as the Boulevard decayed, the classic-car museum turned into a seedy arcade: Rock City. At all hours scores of sullen teenage boys loitered outside, a pack of budding John Travoltas passing time, checking out the action. Mingling with them were, of course, the gum-chewing teenage girls in decaled T-shirts and tight jeans.

These somewhat unsettling adolescents were merely the spillover of the crowd inside the cavernous arcade, from which emanated a cacophony of whistles, sirens, blurps, bleeps, and wall-shaking explosions. The sounds were for all the world the sounds of war—apocalyptic space war—but in fact they were only the sounds of manufactured fantasy, of electronic games.

Along with electronic chess, backgammon, and card games, these noisy action games have thoroughly conquered America. They have moved from the arcades into our homes in the form of hand-held games, tabletop games, and a slew of video and computer game cartridges. Mere child's play? Perhaps, but the impact of these toys on the economy is impressively grown-up. In 1980, some 2,000 different electronic games accounted for more than half a billion dollars in retail sales, and that's only a small slice of the total electronic-games pie. By far the largest portion is generated by the U.S. coin-operated amusement industry, which brought in revenues of $5 billion in 1980, nearly equal to the take of this country's music and motion picture industries combined.

Movies themselves are partly responsible not only for the sound and fury of video and arcade games, but also for their success. The current spate of science-fiction films has creat-

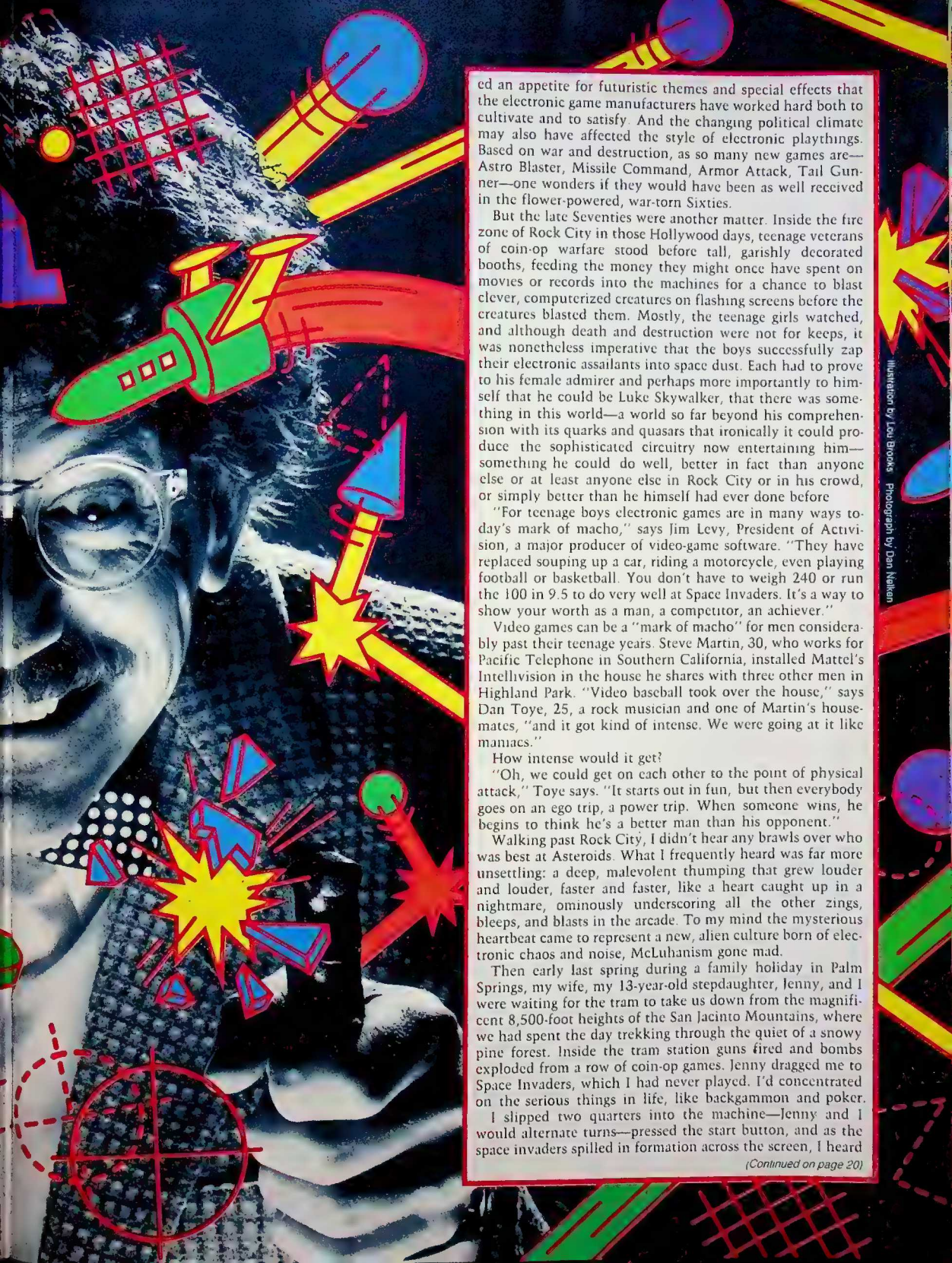


Illustration by Lou Brooks Photograph by Dan Nelken

ed an appetite for futuristic themes and special effects that the electronic game manufacturers have worked hard both to cultivate and to satisfy. And the changing political climate may also have affected the style of electronic playthings. Based on war and destruction, as so many new games are—Astro Blaster, Missile Command, Armor Attack, Tail Gunner—one wonders if they would have been as well received in the flower-powered, war-torn Sixties.

But the late Seventies were another matter. Inside the fire zone of Rock City in those Hollywood days, teenage veterans of coin-op warfare stood before tall, garishly decorated booths, feeding the money they might once have spent on movies or records into the machines for a chance to blast clever, computerized creatures on flashing screens before the creatures blasted them. Mostly, the teenage girls watched, and although death and destruction were not for keeps, it was nonetheless imperative that the boys successfully zap their electronic assailants into space dust. Each had to prove to his female admirer and perhaps more importantly to himself that he could be Luke Skywalker, that there was something in this world—a world so far beyond his comprehension with its quarks and quasars that ironically it could produce the sophisticated circuitry now entertaining him—something he could do well, better in fact than anyone else or at least anyone else in Rock City or in his crowd, or simply better than he himself had ever done before

"For teenage boys electronic games are in many ways today's mark of macho," says Jim Levy, President of Activision, a major producer of video-game software. "They have replaced souping up a car, riding a motorcycle, even playing football or basketball. You don't have to weigh 240 or run the 100 in 9.5 to do very well at Space Invaders. It's a way to show your worth as a man, a competitor, an achiever."

Video games can be a "mark of macho" for men considerably past their teenage years. Steve Martin, 30, who works for Pacific Telephone in Southern California, installed Mattel's Intellivision in the house he shares with three other men in Highland Park. "Video baseball took over the house," says Dan Toye, 25, a rock musician and one of Martin's housemates, "and it got kind of intense. We were going at it like maniacs."

How intense would it get?

"Oh, we could get on each other to the point of physical attack," Toye says. "It starts out in fun, but then everybody goes on an ego trip, a power trip. When someone wins, he begins to think he's a better man than his opponent."

Walking past Rock City, I didn't hear any brawls over who was best at Asteroids. What I frequently heard was far more unsettling: a deep, malevolent thumping that grew louder and louder, faster and faster, like a heart caught up in a nightmare, ominously underscoring all the other zings, bleeps, and blasts in the arcade. To my mind the mysterious heartbeat came to represent a new, alien culture born of electronic chaos and noise, McLuhanism gone mad.

Then early last spring during a family holiday in Palm Springs, my wife, my 13-year-old stepdaughter, Jenny, and I were waiting for the tram to take us down from the magnificent 8,500-foot heights of the San Jacinto Mountains, where we had spent the day trekking through the quiet of a snowy pine forest. Inside the tram station guns fired and bombs exploded from a row of coin-op games. Jenny dragged me to Space Invaders, which I had never played. I'd concentrated on the serious things in life, like backgammon and poker.

I slipped two quarters into the machine—Jenny and I would alternate turns—pressed the start button, and as the space invaders spilled in formation across the screen, I heard

(Continued on page 20)

the tell-tale heartbeat, the same heartbeat I'd heard in Rock City Before I knew it, the vicious, crab-like invaders were inching down the screen toward me, their collective heart beating louder. Moving my firebase from side to side, I shot frantically at them, but inexorably, pitilessly, they kept coming. I wasn't destroying them fast enough; my hands started sweating; the thumping grew louder, faster; and my own heart began to pound as loudly, it seemed, as the machine's Then I was hit, kaput, and it was Jenny's turn. On my second try the invaders started even closer, their heart beating more loudly, and they didn't take long to annihilate me again. And then a third time. Yet for those few seconds of battle, neither the San Jacinto Mountains, the tram, Jenny, my wife—nothing mattered except those terrible creatures coming to get me.

I reached into my pocket for two more quarters. Those devils wouldn't get the best of me, damn it. But my wife alerted us that the tram was arriving. Walking away disappointedly, I was amazed at the energy and hostility the machine had aroused in me. I was actually trembling

Games this exciting are seductive to most people, and no doubt even more so to children. Communities across the country are beginning to fear the pied-piperish sway of arcade games over their children's time and money—as they once feared comic books and television. Irvington, New York, recently passed an ordinance that discourages the installation of video arcades there And in the case of *Mesquite, Texas v. Aladdin's Castle* (an arcade firm), the Supreme Court will soon decide whether or not a community can regulate video arcades.

But video and arcade games continue to attract larger and larger segments of the population. Though women, particularly middle-class women, play electronic games at home, they generally shy away from grungy arcades. To win them over, smart entrepreneurs are installing video games everywhere from supermarkets, shopping malls, and movie theaters to national pizza parlor chains. Although the emphasis is still on violence, there is a new breed of machine on the market for those who don't have the urge to kill, even in a fantasy world.

Among those who have fallen under the spell of electronic games are master game players. Former world backgammon champion Paul Magriel actually prefers the challenge of action-oriented computer games to electronic strategy games. Boasts Magriel, " I can say quite confidently they will not have a backgammon computer that'll come close to beating me in a match this century." But he admits with a touch of embarrassment, "I sort of like those arcade-type games. I just keep on playing and I keep on trying to better my score."

Former world bridge and backgammon champion Billy Eisenberg calls electronic game-playing "occupational therapy." "I'm getting involved in something external," Eisenberg says, "and I'm not thinking about anything else that's unpleasant."

Blackjack expert Ken Uston became so addicted to Space Invaders when it appeared on the scene four years ago that he and his friends spent $2,500 to buy the arcade game for their Newport Beach home. Then Uston became addicted to Asteroids. Now he's hooked on Pac-Man, a game that's currently more popular in the United States than either of the other two.

"I think the addiction lies in the fact that you eventually will become destroyed and lose," Uston says. "You must always lose It's like death and taxes. But of course you try to gain more skill and get a higher score, and it's a hell of a challenge You're playing against yourself usually, and you're always shooting to better your last score."

THE MYSTERIOUS HEARTBEAT CAME TO REPRESENT AN ALIEN CULTURE BORN OF ELECTRONIC CHAOS AND NOISE, MCLUHANISM GONE MAD.

It was a friend of mine, Ed Dwyer, who introduced me to Pac-Man over drinks at Barney's Beanery in West Hollywood. In Pac-Man, the player guides through a maze an omniverous yellow dot that gobbles up as many little beads and pieces of fruit as possible. At the same time, the dot is pursued by four muppet-like creatures bent on gobbling *him* up Theoretically, a player can rack up a limitless number of points—when the yellow dot swallows all the beads, the whole process begins again. I have seen Pac-Man scores well over 150,000. However, in those first games I played with Ed Dwyer, I never managed better than a meager 5,600. Later I secretly returned to Barney's and stuffed $5 worth of quarters into Pac-Man. But my best score was only 7,560, while the high score registered on the machine was a seemingly unreachable 88,690.

In many arcade games, though not in Pac-Man, the player who breaks the machine's record has the satisfaction of punching his initials (sometimes his whole name) onto the display, and so gains his moment of public glory. "We've observed guys spend five or six dollars each day in an arcade," says Mike Katz of Coleco. "Their whole objective is to beat the previous record, to become the guy who has the record, who's established the standard, who is the man to beat "

Yet surely machismo and ego gratification are not the only reasons electronic games have become the single most popular recreational activity to hit America since television Indeed, one prime reason is our addiction to TV watching. But what makes Space Invaders more compelling to some than *Star Trek* is the element of active involvement. Video games allow players to control the action on the screen, a process somewhere between spectating and participating Though you won't strain any muscles playing video basketball, you probably will work up a sweat manipulating the controls and outthinking your human or computer opponent. Certainly your heart will beat faster than it does watching Captain Kirk in yet another impossible predicament.

If video games add a new dimension to TV, they add extraordinary sophistication to game-simulation. Says Mike Katz, "In the old games like electro-magnetic football, it was dice or spinners or magners that made things happen. Now you have control over the characters and features of the game, and it's you that make things happen."

Electronics makes possible realistic touches, too. With Mattel's baseball cartridge, the computer umpire yells in an

appropriately decisive growl, "Yer out!" A video football game begins with the final bars of "The Star Spangled Banner" followed by the roar of the crowd. In video hockey you can trip an opponent, and the machine calls the penalty.

In his beautiful book on baseball, *The Summer Game*, Roger Angell wrote that, above all, what keeps older fans nailed to their seats is "the knowledge that . . . we would never be part of that golden company on the field, which each of us, certainly for one moment of his life, had wanted more than anything else in the world to join." Perhaps electronic games have a similar lure. Jim Levy of Activision says, "I have a feeling that for males over 30 or 35 video games in a lot of ways allow them to recapture their lost athletic prowess." A case in point is a 34-year-old amateur softball league veteran who complained to Levy last summer, "Jimmy, I'm down to designated hitter. I can't turn the double play anymore. I don't have the arm. All I can do is poke the ball through the infield every now and then." Perhaps not so coincidentally, Levy's friend has become a video-game fanatic—on the screen he can turn the d.p. and hit the ball out of the park as well as the next guy.

Video games are great levelers. Young and old, male and female are equal when they step on the electronic playing field for the first time. Larry Edelman, a video-game fan from Encino, California, lost so badly to his nephew in hand-held football he dubbed him "Magic Fingers"; my step-daughter used to whip me regularly at the same game before I decided to hang up my cleats.

"Physically we're not as good as a lot of men," admits Adelle Javier, a 31-year-old divorcee from Eagle Rock, California. "That's why I like these games as much as I do. I'm a competitor. In electronic games I'm at least starting off on an even footing."

Jim Levy's wife loves electronic boxing because of its action and aggressiveness. "She can compete with me in something she wouldn't be able to do in real life," says Levy. "And she's pretty wily."

Others see electronic games as a relaxant, a kind of microchip Valium. Paul Goddard, a junior executive at Litton Industries, believes they dissipate nervous energy. To Magnavox's Ed Williams, they are a release mechanism. "A lot of people take out on the machines whatever hostility they've built up during the day."

On the other hand, Larry Gertz, owner of Chess and Games, one of the largest game retailers on the West Coast, finds that the best, most challenging electronic games have the opposite effect: "Many people buy electronic games because they want to relax. That's my intention. But the games are actually sort of stress-related. I find myself wasted when I'm competing with Entex Football Four. I'm exhausted mentally and physically. I can feel the muscles in my body all tense."

One thing the games are not is boring—the manufacturers don't permit ennui to set in. Even before one game has lost its luster, a newer, more spectacular one pops up in toy stores or in the arcades. One day last May, while in Las Vegas with Jenny on a trip I had long promised her, we were tackling Space Invaders in the arcade at the Union Plaza Hotel. After a couple of months and countless quarters, we'd become pretty pleased with our game. However, a teenager at the machine next to us was adroitly working the controls of Galaxians, a game similar to Space Invaders except that now and again a few invaders would suddenly peel off and divebomb the firebase. So here was a new complexity with which the coin-op industry was enticing us to invest our bankroll.

And a little farther away, one of the Union Plaza's blackjack dealers, his shift over, was playing yet another new game. A flashy redhead was watching him, and the symphony of whines and blasts also drew Jenny and me to view a master in action. The game is called Gorf, and to me it is, for the moment at least, the *non plus ultra* of electronic games. Actually, it's a series of five space battles—five, that is, if you survive the first four—each more complex than the previous one, requiring quicker reactions and cleverer tactics. The blackjack dealer handled the enemies in "Astro Battle" with ease. He went on to destroy everything in sight in his second battle, "Laser Attack."

"Fearless," the redhead said. "He's fearless."

Now "Galaxians" flashed on the screen. He dispatched these nasties in fairly short order and moved on to the fourth and penultimate battle, "Space Warp." Finally he confronted "Flagship." When the dealer punctured its defenses and scored a direct hit, Gorf's mothership exploded over the screen in a psychedelic fireball of color and sound to rival the Fourth of July display at Disneyland.

"Hot stuff!" the redhead said as the flagship disintegrated slowly into thousands of colored dots.

"When you're good, you're good," the dealer said.

"Charlie, you're great," the redhead beamed, and snuggled closer to him.

"I'm never even going to try that game," Jenny said.

"I'm not either," I agreed. Yeah sure. I've since played it several times, never getting past "Laser Attack." And each time I'm destroyed, a gloating, chuckling Gorf rubs salt in my wounds.

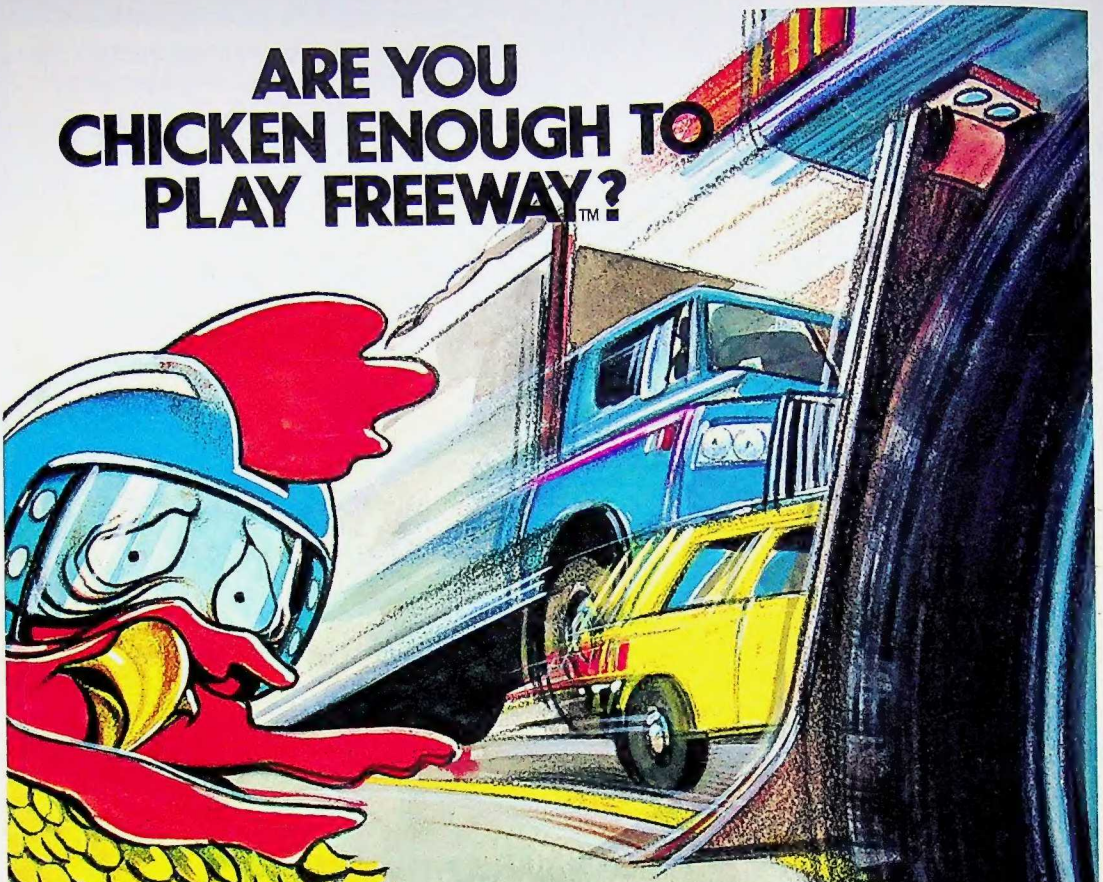
Still, there's always Pac-Man. In a casino, a restaurant, a shopping mall—wherever I happen to be—I cannot pass the game without stuffing a quarter or two or eight into the machine. I'm reaching 20,000 points with ease now. I've surpassed 30,000 frequently, 40,000 a couple of times. I'm learning the patterns, developing a strategy. Soon I'll break 50,000, 75,000, 100,000. I'll be another Charlie.

SOME PEOPLE SEE THE GAMES AS A KIND OF MICROCHIP VALIUM, BUT MANY PLAYERS WALK AWAY TREMBLING WITH HOSTILITY.

Yes, as I skillfully maneuver my yellow dot, all the disappointments in life fade from my mind. Of course, however good I get, sooner or later, as inevitably as death and taxes, my last quarter is played, my yellow dot is destroyed again, and reluctantly I have to return from that world of ephemeral victories to the more terrifying real world, where the competition is for keeps.

Contributing editor Roger Dionne last wrote for Games *on The World Series of Poker. He also writes for* Sports Illustrated, *and other publications*

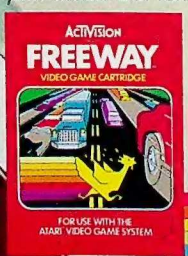
ARE YOU CHICKEN ENOUGH TO PLAY FREEWAY™?



FREEWAY by Activision, for use with your Atari* or Sears video game system. It's the ultimate 10-lane test for any chicken. Careening cars and roaring rigs stand between you and freedom. And all you have to fight back with is skill.

Start your daredevil dash against Sunday drivers. Then, work up to a head-on confrontation with Friday rush hour traffic. Look both ways and make your break. But remember, one false move can really fowl you up.

Conquer FREEWAY by Activision and put a feather in your cap. You'll love it. Unless, of course, you're just a little chicken.



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