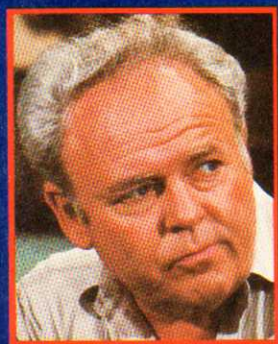


# PANORAMA

THE TELEVISION MAGAZINE

APRIL 1981

\$2.00



## TEMPER! TEMPER!

Behind Hollywood's Creative Disputes

### ALASKA DISCOVERS TV

Now It's Hunting, Fishing and 'The Six Million Dollar Man' *By Joe McGinniss*



### BOXING AND TV

*Why Viewers Are Taking It on the Chin*

*How to Beat Those Video Games*

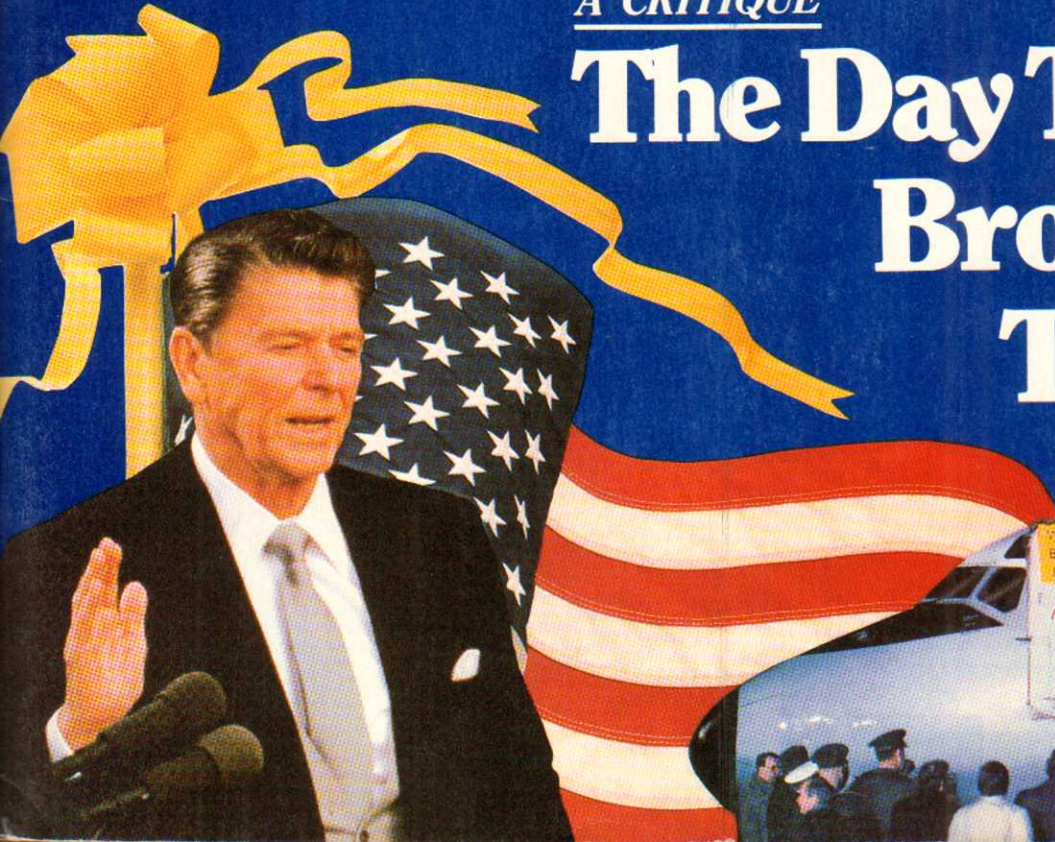
*A Complete Guide to Cable's Basic Services*

*Home Video—Where We're Going from Here*

### A CRITIQUE

# The Day TV News Brought Us Together

*By Edwin Diamond*



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# PANORAMA

THE  
TELEVISION  
MAGAZINE

APRIL 1981

VOLUME 2, NUMBER 4

## DEPARTMENTS

Perspective *By Richard Reeves*  
PAGE 4

Letters PAGE 6

Impressions *By Cyra McFadden*  
PAGE 9

Cassettes in Review *By Gene Shalit*  
PAGE 11

This Month PAGE 13

Cable and Pay-TV  
*By Stanley Marcus* PAGE 18

Q&A: Hodding Carter III  
*Interview by Ron Nessen* PAGE 20

Panoramic View PAGE 26

Videocassettes and Discs  
*By David Lachenbruch* PAGE 90

Yesterdays PAGE 92

Sports *By John Schulian* PAGE 95

Rear View *By Harry Stein* PAGE 96

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## CONTENTS



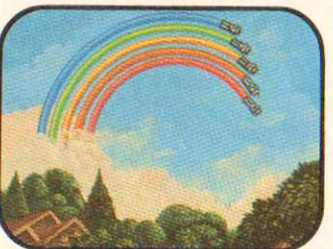
Oz and Jazz on cassette, p. 11



Candid Carter, p. 20



Salk at Sesame Place, p. 34



The suburbs get wired, p. 44



A look at Latka, p. 62

## ARTICLES

**The Day TV News Brought Us Together** Assessing network coverage of the Inauguration and the release of the hostages *By Edwin Diamond* PAGE 30

**Having a Ball** A leading child psychologist notes the learning pluses—and minuses—at a “Sesame Street” theme park *By Lee Salk, Ph.D.* PAGE 34

**Welcome to Alaska, Six Million Dollar Man** Watching television is now as vital to Alaskan villagers as skinning foxes *By Joe McGinniss* PAGE 38

**Boxing and TV: It's the Viewers Who Are Taking It on the Chin** The networks refuse to police the sport—thus creating the climate for greed and corruption *By Sam Toporoff* PAGE 42

**Cable on the Move: There's Gold in Them Thar Suburbs** Business is booming, but many towns could have gotten even better deals *By Frank Donegan* PAGE 44

**Temper! Temper!** Inside those Hollywood battles over scripts, casting and dressing rooms *By Jeff Silverman* PAGE 50

**They're Free and Clear** Our exclusive guide to TV's basic cable networks and the services they offer PAGE 54

**Secrets of the Video-Games Superstars** Here's a thinking man's approach to winning at Asteroids and Space Invaders *By Len Albin* PAGE 56

**Home Video—Where We're Going from Here** Looking 5, 10 and 20 years down the road . . . so you can make intelligent buying decisions *By David Lachenbruch* PAGE 60

**“I Think They Consider Me Nuts”** There's some suspicion that Andy Kaufman's bizarre antics and offbeat ideas scare network officials *By Tom Nolan* PAGE 62

Cover: (Upper left) Carroll O'Connor, photo courtesy of CBS; (middle left) illustration by Norman Adams; (bottom) photo collage by Aerographics. Other picture credits are on page 94.



# Secrets of the Video-Games Superstars

## Here's a thinking man's approach to winning at Asteroids and Space Invaders

By LEN ALBIN

### INSERT COIN.

DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. . . .  
*Pweeng! Pweeng! Pweeng! Pweeng!*

The sounds are unmistakable. Relentlessly advancing alien invaders are tasting hot laser blasts and getting blown up. The carnage is horrible. I've seen such battles before, but this is the first time I feel sympathy for the creepy invaders.

Now, I know full well that these aliens, horrible and vicious as they are, only exist in the computer chips of Midway's Space Invaders coin-operated arcade video game. And that the danger only exists in the mind of the reckless space cadet who slaps a quarter down the slot and picks a fight with them. But never had I seen the poor fiends *embarrassed!* Don't get me wrong—I hate those vile creatures, and their noises, and their missiles, and their reinforcements, as much as any man. My top score is a pitiful 980. But here . . . what death! What destruction! What technique!

I am jealously watching the Invaders' Guadalcanal over the left shoulder of 25-year-old Steve Weidlich, a transplanted Florida good ol' boy (and Ted Turner

look-alike) from Meriden, Conn. He is a machinist for Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, but more important, a young fellow whose personal high on Space Invaders is about 95,000 points. This Saturday night, to demonstrate that his brag was fact, Steve had hopped into a yellow Pinto station wagon and headed on over to Crazy Eight's arcade in Wallingford Center, just across from the K mart.

*Pweeng! Pweeng!* DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. *Pweeeeng!*

"That's the last of 'em," he draws, as the screen refills with fresh aliens. "The first rack, I mean."

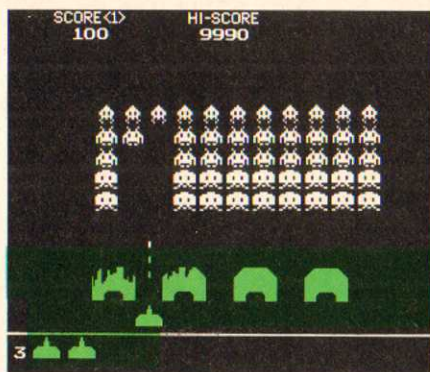
"Looked like the last one almost got you, Steve."

"Yeah, well, there's nothin' to get upset about," he says. "There's no point in gettin' nervous over somethin' you *know* is gonna happen! Honestly, when Space Invaders first came out, it was real exciting; I must admit, I dreamed about it! But now there's no excitement in it hardly, as when I first started. The heart isn't there. You don't even care if you get hit, after playing for an hour."

DOONK. DOONK. DOONK. . . .  
*Pweeng! Pweeng! Pweeng!*

Well, it sure *looks* simple enough. In Space Invaders, introduced to America in November 1978, shooting an Invader in each of the five-row, 11-column, 55-alien arrays (or "racks") is worth from 10 to 30 points, but they keep approaching—and if you don't kill them all, they overrun your laser base. If even one Invader gets through, that ends the game. However, most players usually "die" long before that, because the aliens fire missiles at your laser base; although you can slide the base from side to side, the Invaders usually manage to destroy it, plus your two spares—one after another. (For a look at a game in progress, see Diagram 1 on page 58.)

For added fun, a flying saucer (a k a "Mystery") periodically emerges above this ground action, and it's worth 50 to 300 points, depending on when you hit it. If you manage to kill all the Invaders and survive, it's a major feat. But you don't win. You just get more Invaders. What's worse, the successive racks start their advances even closer. *continued*



**Diagram 1:** *Space Invaders just after the start of the game (from top): Current player's score (100) and previous high on the machine (9990); grid of aliens; four shields (which are virtually useless) against alien fire; operative laser base; two spare laser bases.*

But Steve mows 'em down and plugs saucers with chilling ease. He doesn't lose a single laser base—not even during the dread seventh, eighth and ninth racks, when the Invaders begin their advance “on your front porch,” a mere two inches from glory. Down they go! It's as easy as bowling. Which reminds me . . . Steve's 20-year-old brother David, a boy with Evangelist-length sideburns and Southern vowels more robust than Steve's, has returned from posting an impressive 57,000+ on a nearby Midway Galaxian game. Once a student at Central Connecticut State, David has a 211 bowling average, has applied for his pro bowler's card, and works part-time in a local bowling alley. He also learned to play Space Invaders in a bowling alley, but it wasn't there but in “some bar” where he set his own all-time high of nearly 102,000. The boys begin talking Invader shop and it sounds like a promising TV pilot called *The Dukes of Hazzard in the 25th Century*.

“Steve's slightly better,” says David, settling his hands in his pockets. “But I tend to explode. We didn't decide to master it; just that hangin' 'round with our friends, ev'rybody wants t' beat th'other guy. And we don't like anybody bein' better'n us. Ev'rywhere we go now, there's at least one of us who can play for money.”

“How much have you spent learning it, though?” I ask.

“No idea,” Steve says.

“It's hard to say,” David agrees.

“But the funny thing is,” Steve adds,

“most people are disappointed at how little we've actually put in. That's the heartbreaker on most people.”

“What we did,” David confesses, “we'd watch the other guy sometimes. And when he messed up, we kinda saw what he did. What ways they'd get destroyed. Sometimes it's easier to watch and say, ‘Ya shouldn't a done that!’ than it is to do it. So, we began to discover little shortcuts.”

Obviously, the Invaders must be killed quickly—and better still, in a way that postpones the advance of the ones left. Shooting the front row, then the second row, and so on, sounds like a good battle plan, but it's actually the *worst*. That's because the Invader grid moves side to side constantly, alternating direction, and it's only when the last column on either side reaches the edge of the screen that the whole phalanx drops down a level (and reverses direction). Clearly, it's their lateral movement that's more dangerous, and so a row-by-row plan is virtual suicide. The same goes for starting your attack on the middle columns of their formation.

“But that's the way we first started,” says David. “Then Steve said, ‘There has to be a better way!’”

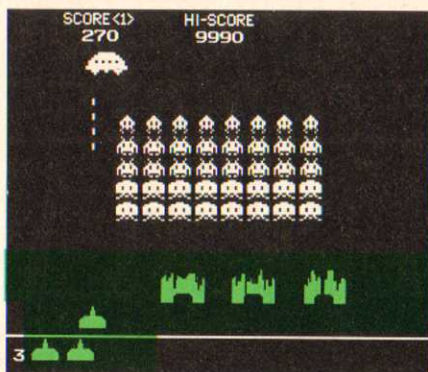
**The solution of how** to defeat an army much larger than your own turns out to be the same one Gary Cooper figured out in the classic World War I film, *Sergeant York* (1941)—namely, pick off the guys on the ends first. Tennessee-bred York slew one German at a time, starting at the end, so the rest wouldn't get wise. Space Invaders don't get wise, either, but as their grid is made more narrow, it takes them longer to

reach the screen's edge and drop down. That buys time. So Steve starts every rack by plowing the three left-side columns of aliens first.

About this time, the first Mystery swoops over the moonscape. Its point value varies, but Steve solved that mystery, too. Now he gets 300 points every time. At a country fair about two years ago, he heard a man, who knew a Space Invaders distributor, whisper to another man that “there was a pattern to it.” Unfortunately, he didn't say what the pattern was. But that was enough. Steve, who'd innocently believed that the point value was chance, first tested the theory that the Mystery's position determined the value. That didn't work. So maybe it was the timing. Soon, he found you got 300 when the saucer was hit with the 23rd and 38th laser blast of every rack, and every 15th shot thereafter. So Steve learned to waste a few shots—loading up number 23—and wait for the big payoff. With three columns erased, he had enough room to “hide” free from alien fire. (See Diagrams 2 and 3.) Eventually, he figured out which side the saucers emerged from and when, so now he can nail up to eight 300-pointers in a rack, as he trims the Invader phalanx to keep it harmlessly distant. Finally, the saucers stop appearing and the remaining aliens must be slaughtered with the destructo-beam. Next rack, please!

“The big thing for us,” Steve says, “was finding out that the racks start from the top level again on the 10th rack. We were scared for a while that the game would be over after nine racks, until we got there.”

“Yup,” says David. “After that it was a *whole new ball game!*”



**Diagram 2 (left):** *In Steve Weidlich's sure-fire technique, laser base “hides” at left, away from alien grid at right, and waits for the Mystery saucer (top). Note: Left shield has already been destroyed by the fire of the aliens and the laser base. In Diagram 3 at right, Mystery saucer, when hit at the proper time, vaporizes and yields 300 points.*

## Advanced Invader Strategy

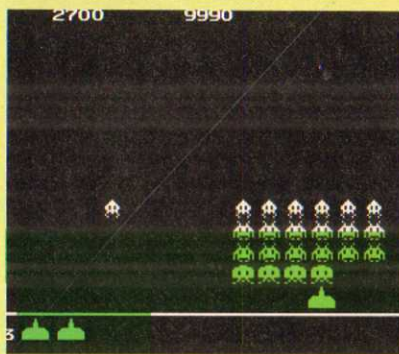
The most fascinating quirk in the Space Invaders computer program—and one that has boomeranged on the aliens—is that when they drop to the last notch before overrunning you, their front line does *not* fire missiles. So one astute Japanese player devised the strategy of mowing down all but the top Invader in the far left column, clearing out the next four columns, and leaving the right six columns intact. That's right—they advance into your front porch unscathed! But that's good. The player passes the time in the "hole" under the emptied columns, counting shots and snaring 300-pointers. (See Diagram 4.) When the six columns finally drop into the last level, he speeds his laser base to the extreme right and heartlessly picks off the helpless front line, one by



one, going right to left. (See Diagram 5.) Then it's back into the foxhole. And so on. Finally, he plugs the lone Invader he purposely left straggling in column one.

All told, this tactic—though very cute—is coolly reckless, because if a player misses just one front-liner in the final row, he gets overrun almost instantly. This ploy was long ago dubbed "The Nagoya Technique" in honor of the Japanese town where it was invented. But the Weidlich brothers scoff at this martial space art as if it were a shoddy Japanese import. "That's a last-resort thing," said Steve. "Only an extreme measure if you've messed up earlier."

"Well, I do it ev'ry once inna while when I wanna just play around," David observed.—L.A.



**The Nagoya Technique:** In Diagram 4 (left), laser base lies in wait under the emptied columns for Mystery saucer, until the alien grid gets into close range, where the Invaders can't shoot at the base. Diagram 5 (right) shows the coup de grâce: The Invaders have descended all the way into the "telltale" green area, and the laser base picks off the helpless bottom row, moving right to left.

"The basic thing is to learn to move," Steve adds. "If you move too much, it's a waste of time. And you *don't* move under 'em unless you're ready to fire! Also, people are too heavy with their fingers, and they got too much overlappin' on their movin'."

Meanwhile, David starts lecturing me on post-doctoral nuances in the game: how the score resets to zero after 10,000; about 500- and 1000-point bonuses that aren't even mentioned in the instructions. David leans over, sees that Steve is up to 25,000 points, then turns to me and says, "It's awful boring, is what it is."

At Steve's pace, it still takes an hour to reach 60,000 points, and this means

trouble in saloons, where custom says that players may reserve the next game by placing a quarter on the machine. "After 15 minutes," David says, "they'll see I haven't lost any bases and get mad and take their quarters. At college, I'd take bets on how many quarters would come up and down before I was done. Now, I've played a lot of guys that are drunk, and I can lay down a little and really sucker 'em in!"

"I don't hustle," Steve interrupts. "I don't think it's fair."

"But I do!" David insists. "When Space Invaders first was in bars around here, I was averaging 35,000. They ask me what I average, and I say about 30, maybe 40.

## Earth Invaded

Japan was the first country to try Space Invaders, and, judging from that nation's love of electronic gadgets and science-fiction monster movies, it seemed that the game had a decent chance to catch on. The chemistry seemed right. But, in retrospect, it was *perfect*. Space Invaders quickly became a national mania, even surpassing photography.

Within a year of the game's world debut in June 1978 (compliments of Tokyo's Taito Corporation), more than 350,000 units were operating in Japan. Soon, many of Nippon's 300,000 tearooms were converted into "Invader Houses" and up to 60 cocktail-table models appeared in some Tokyo locations. These sites were constantly jammed, but, to attract even *more* zombie-like habitués, the machines' sounds were piped over loudspeakers into the street. By summer 1979, Space Invaders had created a shortage of the 100-yen coin (then worth 43 cents) and the Japanese mint was forced to strike more.

In the West, after Taito licensed the game to Midway, Space Invaders was not only a hit, but the inspiration for a hit 45-rpm rock-'n'-roll single (*Space Invader*) by The Pretenders, which reached the Top Five in Cash Box (with a bullet) last March. About that time, Walter Cronkite told the San Francisco Chronicle: "When I *really* retire, I'm going to fill one room with nothing but pinball machines and electronic games, and just sit there in the dark, playing Space Invaders."—L.A.

And they'll think 3000 or 4000, 'cause they never seen the score turned over. They assume that's what you meant. I played about five guys like that, and afterwards, they'd say, 'I thought you meant . . . I never thought. . . .' And I'd say, 'Well, I told you!'

No, David's victims won't forget that moment—very spooky!—when a normal-looking boy achieved ruthless control over a sophisticated computer program that baffles the average person. They realized, like the citizens who watched the pod people spring up in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, that something was *wrong* here. This kid was *different*. And this eerie feeling is quite common where-

*continued on page 70*

## VIDEO GAMES *continued from page 59*

ever a video game, surrounded by fascinated witnesses, is broken like a stallion by a kid—invariably male—with more pimples on his face than there are blips on the screen. Yes, I *told* you! They're *here*! They are among us! A vast army of Captain Video's descendants—video rangers—who were nurtured by Pong, weaned on Tank, later hooked on Space Wars, and, after honing their hand-eye coordination and button technique, graduated with Space Invaders and Asteroids (1979), currently America's most popular arcade video game.

**The average human** struggles to score 10,000 on Asteroids. But in the city of Chicago *alone*, reports North Clark Street arcade owner Steve Kirk, "There are at least a dozen players who regularly shoot in the *millions* on Asteroids." Who

are these players? "They tend to be very, uh, obscure people, who are obsessed by a game and do nothing but play that game for a solid year."

They appear to have their own language, too; in the San Francisco Bay Area, Asteroids is known as "Stroids" and the object of the game is to shoot the "stroids." They overwhelmingly favor all games with a science-fiction motif, such as Galaxian, Lunar Lander, Astro Invader, Moon Cresta, Space Zap and Ripoff (in which cosmic bandits try to rip off the fuel canisters in your space depot). They also are united in their general disdain for pinball; video games seem more "alive," especially Space Invaders, whose bass "DOONK-DOONK" sound speeds up as the action gets fiercer, so that its rhythm often coincides with the player's heartbeat.

"A player gets so intense," observes Frank Ballouz, a marketing director at Atari, which manufactures Asteroids, "that he has put himself *inside* that rocket ship. He'll jump back off the machine when his ship gets blown up. That is the realism of the fantasy of playing the game."

But the video rangers shun games with built-in time limits, even though they may *never* get blown up. "One thing we've noticed is that on most successful games, eventually you die," says Lyle Rains, the man who invented Asteroids. "But the question is, how well did you do until that time? Did you do better than other people? If you did, you won. It's like life. Everybody dies, but it's what you do in between."

Some space soldiers never die—they just get bored and walk away. But most

## The Empire Strikes Back

The fiercest struggle in the video-game wars is not the one between players and blips, but the struggle of the games' manufacturers to keep one step ahead of the public's improving skill. Atari, at first, was confident that no one would ever top 100,000 points in Asteroids. "The highest score we ever had in engineering," says Atari's Ballouz, "was in the high 80,000's." But, in April 1980, just five months after the unit was in the field, Atari was shaken by the first report of an Asteroids score in the millions. "First one locally, then one in New York," Ballouz recalls. "Then it was like cancer."

How could this happen? they asked Atari Engineering. The men there are not just scientists, but ardent video rangers themselves, who often play space games for up to five hours after quitting time. This is a crew who calls Asteroids' big saucer "Sluggo" and the little one "Mr. Bill." Yet they had blundered.

"We had that game in the lab for months, but it didn't occur to us to try for the small saucer," says inventor Rains, sadly. "And now, even though I know the technique, I *still* can't make it work."

So the Atari empire decided to strike back. Operators may now order a change in the computer program

that makes the small saucer start firing as soon as it appears, gives its bullets greater range, and now gives those shots the ability to reappear on the other side of the screen. Midway has also counterattacked, with Deluxe Space Invaders, where some of the varmints don't vaporize when hit, but split into *two* invaders! Well, that's aliens for you.

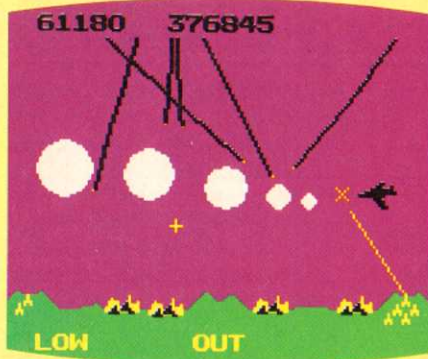
However, the Taito America Corporation is trying détente. They recently published *How to Play Space Invaders: Secrets from an Expert* (\$1.95 from Taito, 1256 Estes, Elk Grove Village, Ill. 60007), with diagrams and chapters with titles like "Attack Is the Best Defense." "But some techniques have not been divulged," says Taito's Keith Egging. "There's going to be an

element of surprise in that game that will last for centuries."

The next offensive from Atari was Missile Command, introduced last August. In this game, modeled after nuclear war, you must defend cities and your missile bases against wave after wave of enemy missiles that fall from the sky. It's easily the most difficult video game extant and its score meter goes up to a stratospheric 999,995. "And we believe nobody will get up there," says Ballouz, smugly.

There are no shortcuts in Missile Command. Each wave is different, even from replay to replay, and there's no telling when or how the enemy will come at you. The action is so complex that some spectators never even bother to try the game, shown at left. And if they do try it, it's a long time before they play it again. But once a player gets mildly proficient (50,000 points), there's no game as addicting. That's all Atari wanted, anyway.

Since any score over 300,000 is truly astonishing, Ballouz may be right. But he has never seen tall, long-haired George Chan play. George is a 17-year-old senior at New York's Brooklyn Tech. Within five months, George had topped one million in Missile Command. "Aaah, it kills time," he says. "There's nothing *else* to do at night."—L.A.



A typical Missile Command battle scene.

grab the opportunity to punch their initials into a machine when they're finished, to register their high scores. When unoccupied, an Asteroids screen looks like this:

#### HIGH SCORES

1. 99990 JIM
2. 99980 JLA
3. 99970 XAB
4. 99900 SID
5. 84790 SID
6. 79750 AAA
7. 53060 J
8. 52620 KKK
9. 46430 J
10. 46170 ACE

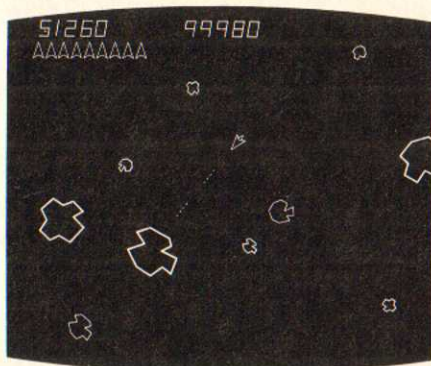
#### ONE COIN ONE PLAY

This hieroglyphic, in fact, turned up at the enormous Broadway Arcade Amusement Center ("Ladies Welcome!") near Times Square. Any video archaeologist could plainly see that some very intelligent life forms had been by here recently. Since Asteroids' score meters "turn over" at 100,000, chances were that JIM was not only capable of much higher scores, but that he played one game and intentionally stopped at 99,990 (the highest number recordable), just to nose out JLA. And JLA had done the same to XAB. It's the American way.

Dominican-born Ricardo Rojas, a 14-year-old seventh-grader roughly 4 feet 10 and 85 pounds, is one of the Asteroids regulars here. When I show up, he already has 250,000 points on his game and has turned the machine over twice. Since Asteroids awards a bonus ship for every 10,000 points, Ricardo also has managed to expand his original supply of four ships to 18.

To reach this proficiency, Ricardo had been spending 50 cents a day for months on an Asteroids in a Hell's Kitchen pizza joint near his home. He doesn't play there any more; he was kicked out for hogging the machine. But playing the game is now free, since Ricardo often sells his swollen ship supply to a waiting player and gets his 25-cent investment back. When he grows up, Ricardo would like to be a baseball player.

**In Asteroids, your mission** is to shoot down randomly floating asteroids with your 360-degree-rotating spaceship in the screen's center, before the "rocks" hit you. It's challenging because the big rocks you start with (20 points) split into smaller ones (50) and, in turn, into the smallest ones (100). The catch



**Diagram 6 shows Asteroids in progress.** From top: Current player's score (51260) and previous high on the machine (99980); expanded ship inventory. Big rock is at left, medium-sized rock at lower left, player's rocket ship (firing away) near center, and small rock at bottom right. Note: Small rocks do not split, but instead vaporize completely.

is that outer space here is "cylindrical"—so that rocks floating off the screen appear on the opposite side! To dodge them, you may hit the Thrust button (to move your ship to any spot) or, in an emergency, the Hyperspace button—which makes your ship disappear for a second and reenter space at some other point. If you get destroyed, a new ship is taken from your inventory and the battle begins anew. Novices leave their ship in the center and try to "defend the Alamo," but Ricardo maneuvers—and frighteningly well. (For a look at an Asteroids game in progress, see Diagram 6.)

"I need Thrust to be comfortable," he says in a Latin voice reminiscent of Topo Gigio. "And now, I show you the sandwich!" He slips his ship between two large rocks. "I show you another trick later," he beams. "The rocks, I just shoot any of them. Sometimes, your mind tells you which ones to hit. I have to get the fast ones. . . ."

WHAM! Ricardo's right hand flashes to hit the Hyperspace button. While in limbo, he cunningly keeps shooting—so he can find his ship again quickly when he reenters, from the bullet trail.

"That was a close one," he says. "That almost got me."

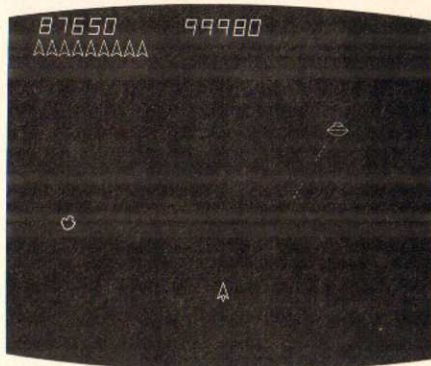
"Maybe you could hide the whole game in Hyperspace," I kid him.

"I tried that. It doesn't work."

Suddenly, the Big Saucer, which Ricardo calls "Fat Man," appears on the screen's right edge. Fat Man only shows

up when space has been almost emptied of rocks. He fires bullets at the player's ship, but his aim is always terrible and even a beginner can dispatch this slow, big target. Now Ricardo has one small rock left. After it's blazed, the screen will refill with fresh asteroids. But, strangely, Ricardo does not shoot at it. I warn him that, with one rock left, the dread Small Saucer will appear—a fast, deadly accurate shooter. Ricardo thinks I'm nuts. "I am not afraid of Little Man," he says. "And, right here, I fly!"

Ricardo hits Thrust full and sends his ship on a vertical path, off the top of the screen and up the bottom. He's going so fast, the odds of colliding with the last rock are nil. Little Man, as expected, appears—emerging from the right on a horizontal track, firing away. (See Diagram 7.) But Ricardo's ship is too fast to be hit. When their paths are about to cross, he rotates his ship right and fires four bullets in what seems a microsecond. Little Man is dead. The



**How Ricardo Rojas mows 'em down:** In Diagram 7 (above), small saucer enters from right, firing; Ricardo's ship is ascending from the bottom of the screen at high speed. In Diagram 8 (below), Ricardo's ship rotates right and fires; small saucer is destroyed.

