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Top Players' Secrets

You Too Can Conquer Those Video Games

Page 6

Anchor Battle
**Enter Tom
Brokaw—
Vowing to Beat
Dan Rather**

Page 26





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Dolly's Sister/page 14



Miller's Ads/page 20



Vanessa's Movie/page 37



Local Programs

Week of April 10-16 Following 24

TV Teletype

New York/Hollywood..... 46

Articles

How to Win at Video Games

by Len Albin 6

Rachel Dennison of 9 to 5

by Elaine Warren 14

Backstage at the Miller Lite Commercials

by Don Kowet 20

Tom Brokaw: Anchorman on the Go

by Sally Bedell 26

Behind-the-Scenes Controversy at "My Body, My Child"

by Franklin Ashley 37

Reviews, Columns

Solid Gold
reviewed by Robert MacKenzie 48

As We See It
TV Update
Letters
Screening Room (except
Judith Crist (in Hawaii) } Program Section

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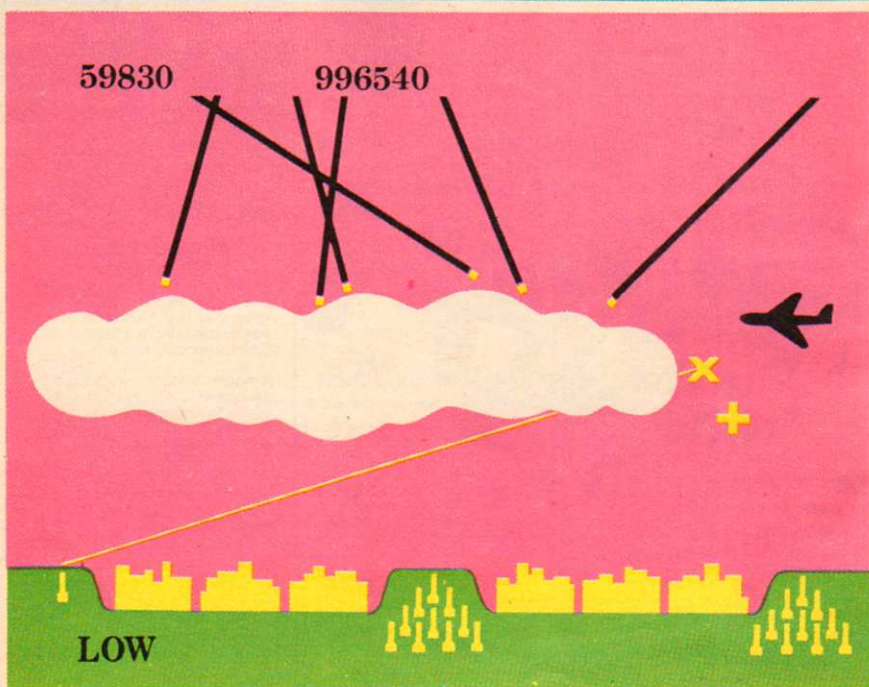
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TOP PLAYERS' SECRETS...

HOW TO WIN AT VIDEO GAMES

Valuable tips to boost your scores in
Missile Command, Pac-Man,
Centipede and Space Invaders

By Len Albin



"There's a little flying saucer that comes out," 16-year-old Matthew Laborteaux was telling me. "It goes sideways, and then it'll stop and go *NRREEEEEEM*—and once it builds to its critical mass, it lets out all these lasers and goes, *DOO DOO DOO DOO DOO!* It's just, like, *totally weird!*"

That's for sure. Just 10 years ago, this sort of conversation could be overheard only in secluded psychiatric wards. But today, that's what young teen-aged video-game players like Matthew are talking about in arcades and pizza joints throughout the country. Four years ago they discovered Space Invaders, and since then, these kids have devoted many lifetimes' worth of deep study to arcade computer games. They know their blips *cold*. Want to know where the black hole is located in the Gorfian empire? They'll tell you.

Now, after many voyages, some of these young space cadets are being debriefed, and they are revealing the games' secrets. These experts also tell of multimillion-point games where they played nonstop for six, 12, even 50 hours on a single quarter. Matthew's favorite game is Atari's Missile Command and his high score to date is 8,003,000.

In Missile Command, exploding missiles form a cloud (center) that protects six cities (below) from enemy ICBMs (top). The + is used for aiming missiles that explode at X.

accomplished in roughly six hours. To reach this level of proficiency, he spent hundreds of dollars in quarters, and then thousands more to purchase his own machine. But Matthew can afford it. He plays the role of Albert Ingalls on NBC's *Little House on the Prairie*. "You can't make any money at Missile Command," he concedes. "But it's really neat!"

Missile Command is a game based on nuclear war. Your task is to defend six cities against a fast and furious deluge of ICBMs and smart bombs, and against the bombers and killer satellites that drop even *more* weapons. The defenses consist of three 10-missile silos located at left, right and center, and these are aimed with a "trak-ball" that positions your cross hairs anywhere in the sky. The enemy's attack comes in waves, with a brief pause between them to tally your points for "saved" cities and unused missiles. Then it's red-alert time again. More points are earned for anything shot down, and every 10,000 points, a bonus city is awarded to replace smoking rubble. The war continues as long as one city remains standing.

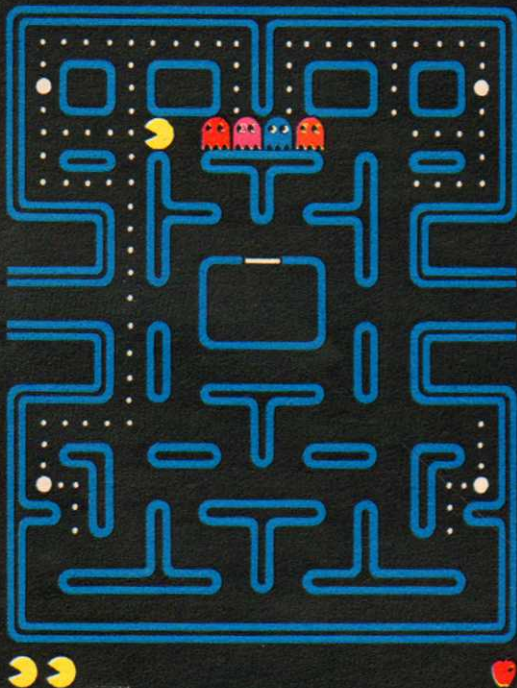
"I just hit the planes and satellites as soon as they come out, with my center-base," Matthew says. "And then I do my spray." This "spray," of course, hasn't been tested by the Joint Chiefs, but it's an effective

tactic, especially after the ninth wave. In a "spray," you launch all 10 missiles from your left silo in a horizontal line across the sky. The resulting cloud barrier absorbs the first volley of enemy ICBMs. Then, for the second volley, you do the same with your right-side missiles. Finally, your center-silo missiles—which move faster than the others—are used for last-ditch defense against the tricky smart bombs. "Other than that," Matthew says, "it's all ball control." The other trick is making sure that when a "wave" ends, your score will end up just *under* the next bonus milestone. "So even if you mess up," he says, "you'll still get a bonus city early in the next wave."

Starting with the 11th wave (white sky), good players usually get 10,000 points a wave, so the "just-under" technique can be used repeatedly for at least a half hour. There'll always be a city to defend. But at 810,000 points, arcade generals reach the bizarre defect in the standard Missile Command computer program. The machine awards them about 120 free bonus cities at one time. After this windfall, players can rest, because the machine will play itself, unattended, for 125,000 points or so. Then the urban-renewal scam ends and you must play the game again the old-fashioned way. →

Len Albin is the author of the forthcoming book, "Secrets of the Video Game Superstars."

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The yellow Pac-Man (top) can eat the monsters chasing him once he reaches the big "energizer" dot (upper left).

In Columbia, S.C., 18-year-old Steve Hair, a Pac-Man phenom, also measures his success in the millions. "I've hit 3,180,000," Steve admits. "That took five hours. But that's as high as you can go. When you get that far, the machine'll overheat, the screen'll go black, and you start smelling the wires meltin' together. I don't know if it messes up the machine, but I never stuck around to find out."

Compared with Missile Command, Pac-Man is positively peaceful. The idea here is to manipulate your "man" through a maze lined with "edible" dots, which are worth 10 points apiece. Meanwhile, four monsters (red, pink, blue and orange) emerge from their "pen" at the screen's center and pursue you. They can eat you, too, unless you've eaten one of the four big "energizer" dots in the maze. In

that case, the monsters become edible for a brief time and flee from you. Once all the maze dots are eaten, a fresh "screen" of dots appears, and you begin anew.

Like all Pac-Man wizards, Steve doesn't really chase or flee anything. Instead, he moves his man through the maze according to a specific, memorized route every time. He has a repertoire of six of these "patterns," and he uses different ones for different screens as the game progresses. With patterns, Steve not only avoids the monsters completely, but he can often lure them near him just when he gets "energized." That allows him to gulp all four monsters quickly, and earn 3000 points, before the fiends become inedible again.

The trouble with patterns, however, is that if you make one wrong turn, you're on your own. So, for the amateur and for the absent-minded, Steve suggests the "pen" trick. "There's a safe spot over the monsters' pen," he notes. "So if all four monsters are outside the pen, you can stop there and let the red monster get behind you. His nickname is Shadow. He'll follow you wherever you go. Then, slowly, the other three will fall in behind him. If you time it right, you can set all four of 'em up for an energizer." Another key ploy for the novice is remembering to duck out the "tunnels" on the sides →

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of the screen. "Your speed doesn't change through the alleys," Steve says, "but the monsters slow down a lot."

Atari's Centipede game has also made many people pattern-happy. Eric Ginner of Mountain View,

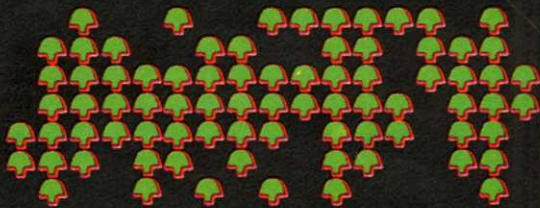
Valley about 2 miles from Atari," says the 19-year-old junior-college student. "So we get the games before most people do. Actually, I could play Centipede forever, but I really don't wanna do that. I'd get tired after a while."

ders and scorpions to kill, too, but the key to Centipede is understanding *how mushrooms work*. As the game begins, mushrooms are scattered across the screen. Whenever one blocks the path of a centipede, the bug reverses direction, drops a level lower, and generally gets to you faster. That's bad. And what's worse, the strategy of destroying these mushrooms doesn't help much. You see, when a centipede segment is shot, it becomes a mushroom *itself!* And, from time to time, "parachuting" fleas will come out and drop several vertical rows of fresh mushrooms. That's terrible. "But a friend of mine figured out that if you leave just enough mushrooms in the bottom half of the screen," Ginner says, "the fleas won't come out at all."

So, without fleas to bother you, the general strategy is to clear the top-half mushrooms, and get the bottom-half mushrooms into a pattern that will make centipede-killing easy. The ideal pattern is a horizontal block, about seven mushrooms high, which extends like a belt across the screen—except for a mushroom-free "hole," 1-inch wide, at one side. "The hard part is getting the block built," Ginner says. "You have to hit all the mushrooms on the bottom during the first centipede, but you have to hit the first centipede so it leaves mushrooms at the bottom. And it takes →

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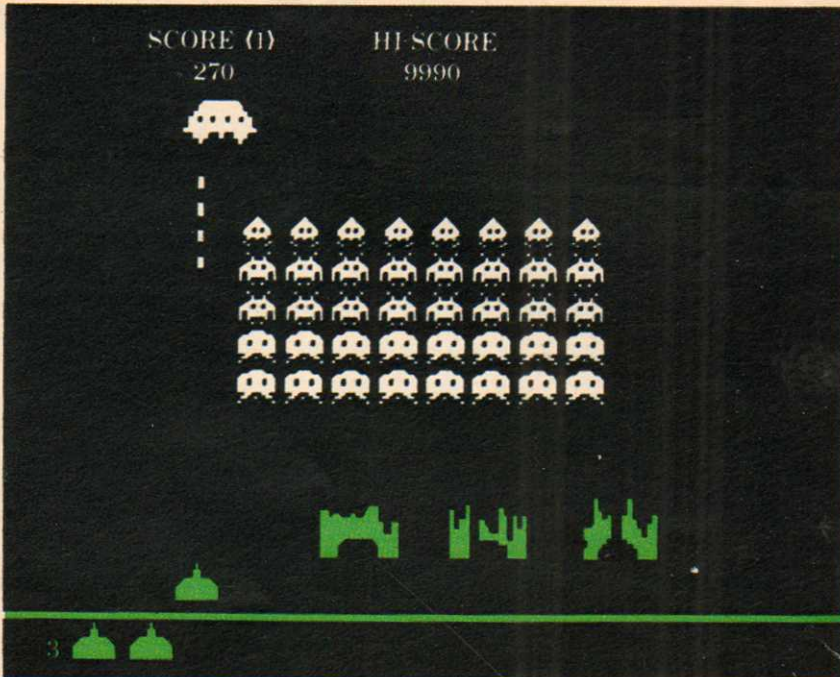
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The Centipede (top) is an easy target for the player's gun (bottom), when a block of mushrooms is built (center).

Cal., who won a \$12,000 first prize and a Winged-Victory trophy in the Atari World Championship last November, boasts a personal high score of 1,719,000. "I live in Silicon

In this game, your task is to shoot a 12-segment centipede as it zigzags its way down the screen, before it hits your maneuverable gun turret at the bottom. There are spi-



three centipedes before you can clear the whole top. Then you hit centipedes so it leaves the mushrooms where you want them. On the bottom."

Around 300,000 points, your block is about perfect. Then you leisurely hit centipedes through the "hole," and clean up the new mushrooms after them. Next centipede, please!

However, for Eric Ginner there won't be any more centipedes to kill. He's given up the game for a new challenge, Atari's *Tempest*. As for the original *Space Invaders*, he won't go near one. Measured in video-game years,

Space Invaders is a virtual antique.

But there are still some old-timers around who recall the thrill of mowing down those repulsive aliens. One of them is a 110,000-point-caliber player named Sue England, a 34-year-old mom who owns Silver Sue's arcade in Chicago. Before she established it in 1978, Sue was a social worker for local teen-agers.

"First, you shoot the last two columns of invaders on the right, and the first three columns on the left," she says. "And then some more columns on the right. On the way over, if I was in the mood, I'd shoot a horizontal row, but it's more

Once a few columns of Space Invaders (center) are erased, the laser base (left) ambushes the mystery ship (top).

important to shoot the columns." That stalls the invaders' advance. "Then you can count shots to get 300 points on the mystery ships every time, but that gets dull. *Then* we found that once the invaders got down to the bottom level, the bottom guys don't drop bombs on you, so then you could cut underneath 'em and blow away the bottom row. It worked *all* the time."

There's just one other secret. "I'd tell my husband I was fixing games at the store," says Sue. "But I'd really be there *playing* all night!" **END**