

# TV GUIDE

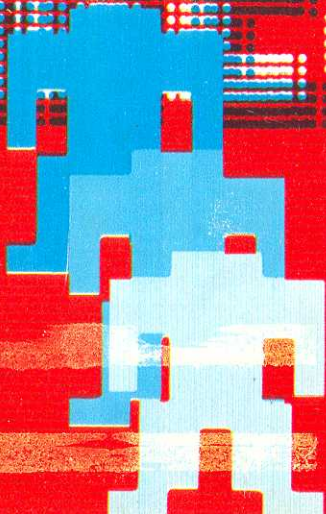
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A SHOPPER'S  
GUIDE TO  
1981'S BEST

# VIDEO

# VIDEO

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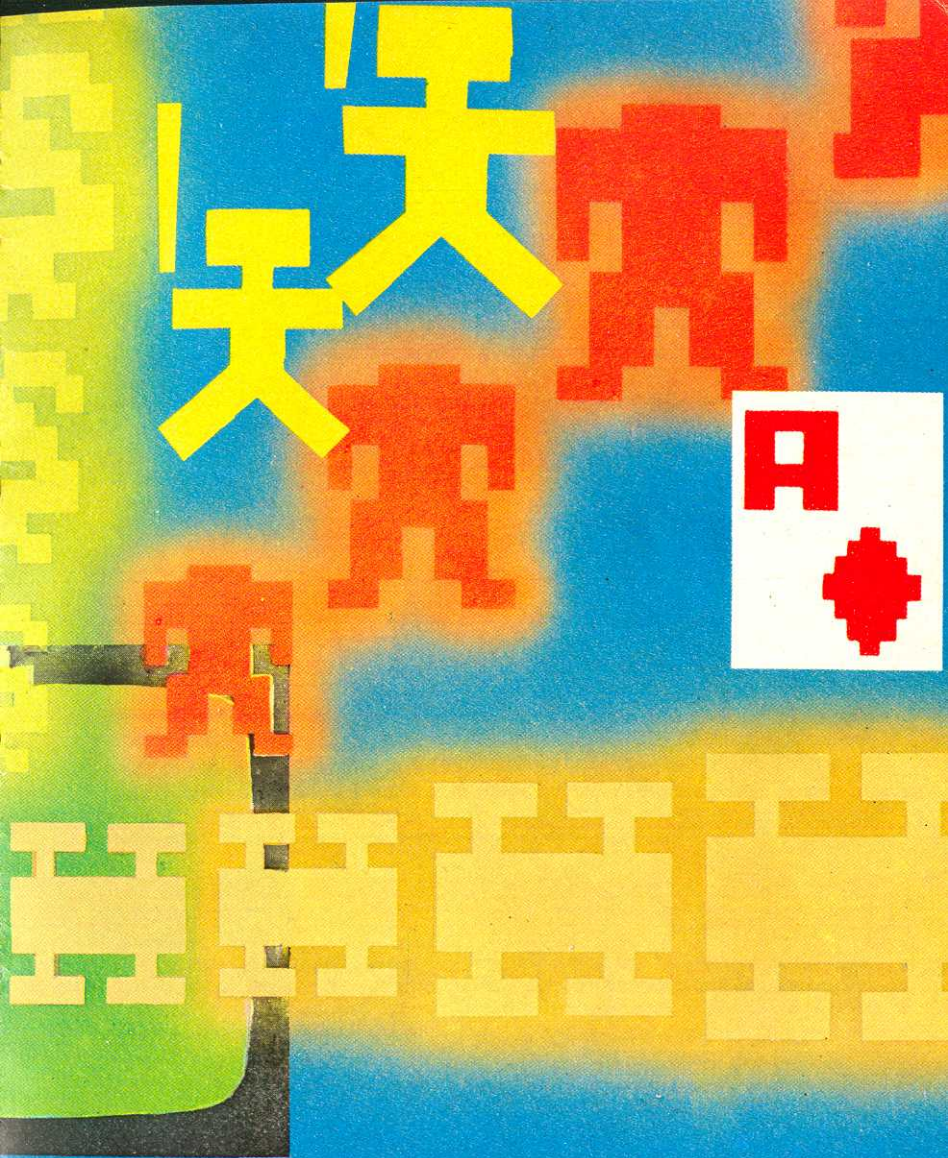


A HOLIDAY  
SHOPPING GUIDE

# THE BEST VIDEO GAMES OF 1981

By Len Albin

Our expert reports that this year's top models will smash your asteroids, divebomb aliens and maybe even send 'bogies' to gobble you up



Chestnuts roasting on an open fire; Jack Frost nipping at your nose; atomic warheads vaporizing alien invaders into glistening clouds of radioactive dust. Yes, these are some of the familiar sights and sounds of the Christmas

season—now that video games are turning up frequently in fireplace stockings. Nowadays, it's not the vision of jolly Santa but the sight of exploding spaceships that produces "tiny tots with their eyes all aglow"—even when the tot →

is a 46-year-old insurance underwriter who smokes smelly cigars.

But how can one tell the good games from the bad ones? Well, in my case, it required braving the crowds at several toy departments, muscling some hyperactive 8-year-olds out of the way and then trying out the new games for this season. None showed the sophistication of AWACS software. But many of the new cartridges for the familiar "TV-hookup" models and many of the new "self-contained" games (also known as "handhelds" or "table models," depending on size) kept me fascinated long enough to get suspicious stares from the sales clerks. All told, most of the new games should take their rightful place alongside the best video games from Christmases past, such as Atari's classic "Space Invaders" cartridge (\$32); Parker Brothers' "Split Second" (\$42), a handheld with eight target, maze and chase games; and Mego's pocket-sized game "The Exterminator" (\$40)—in which you match wits with electronic rats.

So, with batteries all charged up, here's a report on the cream of the 1981 crop. All prices are approximate.

**Mattel's "Intellivision"** (\$300 for basic hardware): George Plimpton isn't lying in those TV ads. This unit, which hooks up to your color TV, in the past has introduced some sophisticated and elegantly designed sports games among its 25 interchangeable cartridges—most notably "NFL Football" and "Major League Baseball." In fact, many of the sports games are so intricate that it might be hard to find another player in the neighborhood with enough skill so that a decent game can be arranged.

But with its six new 1981 cartridges (\$30 each, bought separately), Mattel, at last, is injecting its cartridge catalogue with some games that one player can play all by himself, if necessary. The best of the lot is "PBA Bowling," in which you command a humanoid bowler after selecting ball weight and alley slickness. The game, which can be played by up to four people, also provides the sound of a ball rolling down the lane and keeps

score for you, frame by frame. You supply the beer. In "Boxing," a two-player game, you take control of an on-screen pugilist and, with some practice, he'll feint, punch and move like a genuine super-bantamweight (WBC).

There are also a pair of one-player outer-space shoot-'em-ups new for this season: "Space Armada," a clone-like variation of the coin-operated "Space Invaders"; and "Astrosmash," where the player must vaporize all sorts of debris raining down from the night sky. But the sleeper of the year might be "Triple Action," a two-player, three-mode cartridge that includes tank warfare, air combat and auto racing (which also can be played alone). In the air-combat mode, the World War I biplanes move around like authentic heaps of junk and require considerable skill to fly. If you get carried away shooting at the enemy while you're in a barrel roll, chances are you'll spin out to flaming death somewhere in microchip Belgium. But that's how it should be, Red Baron. A WWI flying ace must first learn how to fly!

**Atari's "Video Computer System"** (\$200 for basic hardware): Now in its fifth season, the VCS TV-hookup unit introduces three superb cartridges for 1981, bringing its catalogue up to 43. "Asteroids" (\$38) and "Missile Command" (\$32) are direct descendants of Atari's popular coin-operated arcade games and have not lost much in the transition to the home screen. The other entry, "Warlords" (\$32), is a one-to-four-player version of the old "Breakout" cartridge, but with *four* areas to chip away with the racing blip rather than one. The action often gets as fast and furious as high-stakes racquetball, and it's perfect for parties—especially the ones that get out of control.

**Entex's "Galaxian 2"** (\$50): Here is the pint-sized version of the original coin-operated "Galaxian" game from Bally, and it does the best job of any handheld unit in reproducing the action of an arcade model. "Galaxian" is a game like "Space Invaders," except that its aliens divebomb your gun turret in addition to firing from afar. Entex's model has a →

three-color display plus the exciting nuance of a two-layer mode that lets a friend play commander in chief of the aliens' attack—just in case the aliens weren't vicious enough for you already.

**Bandai's "Air Traffic Controller" (\$45):** Though video-game nuts have long been encouraged to blast aircraft out of the sky, here's an ingenious table-model game that challenges you to keep 'em flying. Once you've mastered the complex instructions, you control the altitude and speed of planes arriving and departing at your landing strip so that no two aircraft appear on the runway at the same time. If this does happen, the game's chips spew forth some chilling crash sounds. The screen is a tasteful facsimile of a real control-tower radar screen, and the only thing missing is a button to send PATCO out on strike.

**Milton Bradley's "Microvision" (\$50):** This handheld is one of the few that feature interchangeable cartridges, and its "Mindbuster" pattern game (one of 11 cartridges available at \$15 each) is a favorite among adult blipmeisters. This season brings us the "Alien Raiders" and "Cosmic Hunter" cartridges, which will satiate video-game players who feel they need another universe to conquer. In both games, quick thinking is more valuable than just a quick trigger finger, so 46-year-old children will be delighted and might start bragging about their "kills" at the office.

**Entex's "Escape 1000 Mazes" (\$50):** The playing field is not a bird's-eye view of a maze, but a maze as seen by someone trapped in it. Your task is to find the way out (against a strict time limit); and each time you move, a different vista of corridors and walls appears—something like the opening scenes of the TV show *Get Smart*. If the game ever seems too easy, there's a mode in which you can do extra duty by retrieving objects hidden in the maze. But if you get frustrated—which is more likely—press the "Panic Button" and the microchips will lead you to the handheld's exit immediately.

**Mattel's "World Championship Baseball" (\$65):** This one-or-two-player table

model is easily the best self-contained baseball game in videoland, and its computer chip is even smarter than that of Intellivision's "Major League Baseball" cartridge. It not only performs double plays and pickoffs routinely but it also reflects "lefty-versus-righty" percentages and makes pitchers tire in the middle of the game. Aspiring Billy Martins will also like the fact that each player gets a roster of 15 "men" before the game starts, and only after weighing their hitting and fielding stats does he select his nine-man lineup. Aspiring George Steinbrenners will appreciate the absence of inflated player salaries.

**Entex's "3-D Grand Prix" (\$50):** A delightful liquid-crystal-display road-race game, this table-model unit includes an accelerator, brakes and a tiny steering wheel, and it gives you a "first-person" view of the racing course—the sort of panorama that a Mario Andretti would see. On your dashboard (such as it is) are a lap counter and a timer, so that you can compare successive time trials. There's also a full helping of genuine Formula 1 racing-car sound effects, such as "Vrrroooooom!"

**Bandai's "Packri Monster" (\$45):** This large table model contains a computer program similar to the Bally arcade game "Pac-Man," though on a smaller screen. It's a hilarious chase game and, happily for video-game novices, there's just one control—a direction joy stick that manipulates your "man." *Packri* means "gobble" in Japanese, and that's the object of the game. You must steer your "man" through a maze quickly in order to gobble as much of the "blue food" lying on the maze floor as you can. Meanwhile, you must avoid being eaten yourself by the "bogies"—unless, of course, your "man" has stumbled across and eaten some "red food," which makes him temporarily unappetizing to "bogies" and, in fact, gives him both the desire and the ability to eat "bogies" himself!

Does this sound farfetched? Well, if you can be persuaded that there is such a thing as "blue food," then all things are possible. (END)