

Hi-End VCR Update

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Video

Woody Allen:
From Comic
to Comic Genius

The #1 Magazine of Home Video

A Close-up Look at Tiny TVs
Early Warnings: VCR Problems to Watch For
The Betamax Case: Is No News Good News?

BERGER-BRAITHWAITE VIDEOTESTS

Sanyo Portable Beta Hi-Fi JVC Lowlight Camera

Quasar VHS VCR Improved Sony Watchman TV

Super Stereo VCRs Go Portable
Sanyo's
Beta Hi-Fi



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November 1983

Volume VII, Number 8



ABOUT THE COVER
The Sanyo VCR 7300 is no ordinary recorder—it's the first Beta Hi-Fi portable. We greeted its arrival by trying out the VCR's audio capabilities in the field and then subjecting it to the usual rigorous testing by Berger-Braithwaite Labs. Cover photo by Don Perdue.

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by **Roderick Woodcock**

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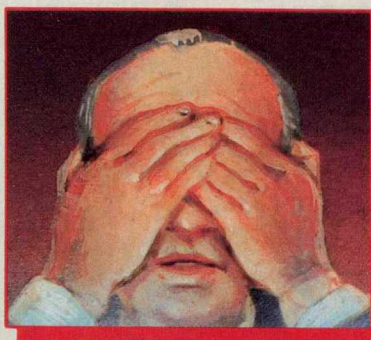
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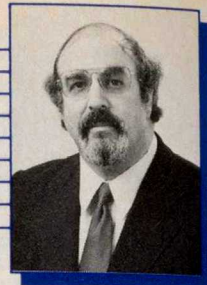
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Computer Ease

The Human Interface

by Ivan Berger



Modem to Modem



Will we send this kind of message in the future by electronic mail?

In our last thrilling episode we discussed modems, devices that let computers communicate by telephone. But a grisly question arises: what is there to communicate with? The answer, happily, is quite a lot.

There are your fellow computerists with modems. Sure, you can pick up the phone and talk to them, and chatting via computers isn't quite the same. But you can do things computer-to-computer that you can't do voice-to-voice.

For example, if your programs permit and are compatible with one another, you can transmit files from your computer's memory or disks. That speeds up ordinary communication quite a bunch since (again, software permitting) you can type out even a long message beforehand, then send it out at full computer speed. Even the more common but slower 300-baud modem speed (equivalent to a typing speed of about 30 words per minute), is faster than most people can type consistently—without a break. In addition, some systems can be set to transmit messages late at night when phone charges are lowest, and if the receiving party has an auto-answer modem, he needn't

even wait up for your transmission.

Modem-to-modem transfer of text files is especially useful when a message has to be received quickly as a printed document. It's much faster to send it this way than by mail or by dictating the story over the phone to someone who can transcribe it. And there's less risk of error with electronic text transmission than with dictation.

Text transmission is surprisingly uncommon, though. Ordinary people rarely need to zip long messages across the country, and even writers like myself search in vain for publishers who accept copy over the wire. While most dailies and many weeklies have computerized editing systems, most monthlies don't—and when the publications do have computer input, few editors know how to access it.

Home computerists seem more interested in swapping program files than texts, and rightly so. It's not just that transmission is fast, but that the program ends up where it should—in the receiving-end computer, instead of coming in the mail as a printout to be re-entered by hand or as an expensive floppy disk which can be damaged in transit. Again, not all terminal programs "download" other programs, so

look for this feature when shopping for software.

You can access organized communications too—databases (usually for a large fee), communication services (for a smaller fee), and local "bulletin board services" (BBS) run by hobbyists, clubs, and some local dealers.

Sometimes the hardest part of getting on the average BBS is finding out about it. Local computer clubs and some dealers have lists of the ones in your area, and once you're on one you'll usually find ads for more. After that it's simply a matter of dialing the BBS number when it's not busy, getting your modem and terminal program into action, and answering the prompts that appear on your screen once you've made contact.

Most BBSs ask you to identify yourself as you "log onto" the system, but the formalities end there. Once on, you can post open messages, read messages left by others, and communicate with the system operator ("Sysop"). Reading messages on a BBS is easier than on an ordinary bulletin board. You can usually ask to see all the messages or just a selection—those written after a specific date, for example (so you don't waste time reading messages you've seen before), or those on specific subjects. You can also leave private messages for the Sysop. If he's at the computer (usually the system can run without him), you can chat with him, keyboard to keyboard, screen to screen.

This is not just fun—it can be useful, especially if the BBS is devoted to your particular computer. Some BBSs offer free downloadable software (all in the public domain, I hope, though proprietary software has been misappropriated for the public's use on occasion). If the Sysop is on the line and knows a lot about the computer and software in question, you may be able to get quick answers to problems that are plaguing you. This can be a lifesaver if, for example, your program crashes at midnight while you're trying to print out a report due the next morning! (Similar things have happened to me.)

Then there are the commercial videotex systems: CompuServe and the Source. These cost money to join (\$39.95 and \$100 respectively), plus an hourly rate for the time you spend on them (\$5 evenings and weekends, \$22.50 during business hours for CompuServe; \$7.75 evenings and weekends, \$20.75 weekdays from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. for the Source). But the services they offer are, in the view of thousands of their devotees, well worth it.

Both offer a variety of general and specialized bulletin boards. But that's just a fraction of their appeal. Both offer "electronic mail" for their members: you can leave a message on either service for any other member if you know his identifying number. Messages are held for a set period of time, then cleaned out of the system to save storage space. CompuServe also offers access to the U.S. Postal Service's E-COM system, which sends messages to anyone accessible by mail, but is much faster than regular mail.

Other sections let you read airline schedules and schedule delays when getting ready for a trip, as well as restaurant reviews and other information about select destination cities. You can also read selections from such magazines as *Better Homes & Gardens*, get business news, order merchandise, and read government statistics. In addition, you can use your computer as a terminal hooked up to the service's computers to run powerful programs, write programs in languages you may not have for your computer, or even play computer games. In the game department you have a choice of opponents: the computer or, for some games, other subscribers. You can also communicate with other subscribers via open party-line services such as CompuServe's "CB Simulation."

Since these are pay services, you must identify yourself when you log on with both your ID number (which others may also use to contact you) and your own secret password (so the service knows who to bill for time on the line. Usually, they'll bill your credit card).

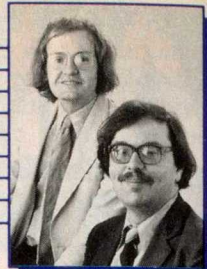
One computer screen can't possibly hold the entire menu offered by the Source or CompuServe, so there is usually a hierarchy of menus (like branches of a tree) through which you gradually narrow down your search to what interests you. This takes time, of course, and here time is money—so you can also jump directly from one branch to another if you know the address codes for the branch or twig you want. The services provide printed indices from time to time to help you find your way, but as they keep adding new features, those indices can go out of date.



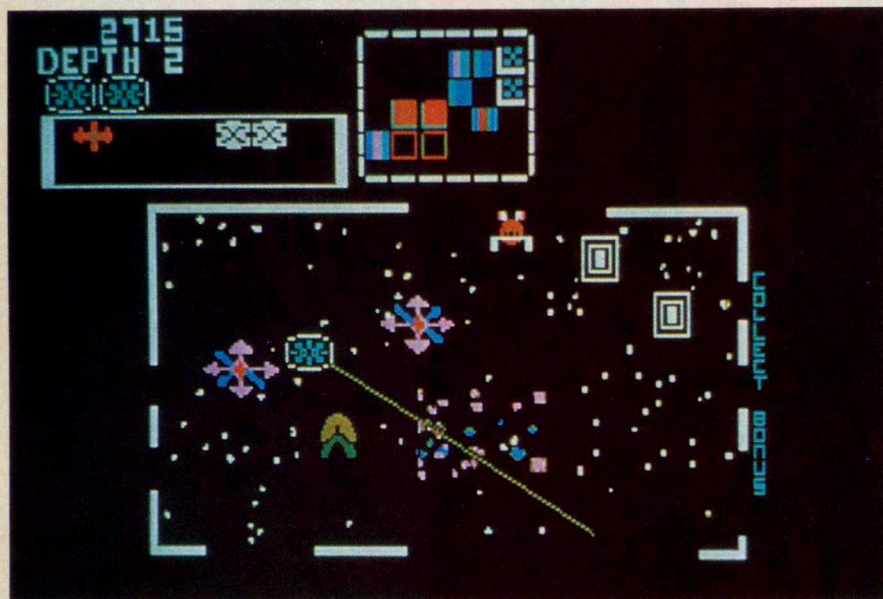
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



Wintertime Winners



Space Dungeon: a triumph, showing the Atari 5200 to best advantage.

The two systems spotlighted in this month's "Arcade Alley," the Atari 5200 and the Apple II, are often slighted by media critics who have eyes only for the bestselling machines. Many home arcaders therefore overlook and under-rate them. Though neither system is free of flaws, both present some of the finest games ever flashed on the home CRT screen.

You need evidence? Let's begin with a trio of recent releases for the Atari 5200.

The home translation of Taito's **Space Dungeon** (Atari/Atari 5200) is a fair sample of the quality 5200-compatible cartridges coming to the home screen. The graphics match arcade machines in color, sharpness, and movement, and sound effects are in harmony with the on-screen action.

The action takes place in deepest space against a scrolling firmament of stars. The player must frequently use a secondary display which divides this space sector into a series of multileveled zones (hence the "dungeon" of the title). Each level contains valuable prizes, and quite a few perils as well—just to keep things interesting.

The challenge increases as the player penetrates to the dungeon's deepest

tiers, but some elements remain constant at all levels. For example, the transport points, which serve as exits leading to other zones, are always located in the same grid position. The explorer must always bear in mind the relative positions of his ship and this exit, because beating a hasty retreat from an untenable strategic position is sometimes the only viable course.

The player manipulates a weapon that is a cross between a Jedi-like light saber and a cosmic chainsaw, using it to slice up hostile objects while passing over treasures depicted on the screen in order to claim them. The game commences with the player's on-screen representative in the lower left corner. The trick is to get the goodies visible in the sectors on the far right and return to the warpath before a roving thief can put a dent in your hoard.

"Space Dungeon" is such a triumph that not even the questionable 5200 controllers can spoil the fun. If you missed it in the amusement centers, don't make the same mistake twice.

Qix (Atari/Atari 5200) is a candidate for sleeper classic of the year. Once you get past the megahits, arcade licenses have mostly been a crapshoot for home-oriented producers of game software.

"Qix," introduced by Taito in commercial fun palaces about 18 months ago, was the right game in the wrong place. The revolutionary play mechanic and abstract theme defeated any hope Taito may have had for "Qix" becoming a longterm coin-op hit. Instead it became a cult phenomenon, loved by a few and ignored by the blasto brigade.

The inspiration for a whole genre of area-filling contests ("Amidar" and "Pepper II" are recent examples), "Qix" represents the territorial imperative in game form. The player directs a drawing cursor with the joystick in an effort to etch lines on a blank playfield and preempt large areas of the field by enclosing them in boxes. You can draw squares and rectangles at two speeds, gaining bonus points for those created at the slower pace. The gamer completes a round by boxing off a portion of the playfield equal to or larger than a preset percentage. For example, if 75-percent of the screen must be filled, the action continues until this threshold is reached. Exceeding the preset percentage earns a slew of bonus points.

As in most electronic games, the situation isn't quite that cut and dried. First, a sizzling little rover patrols the edge of the playfield and can destroy the cursor on contact. Second, the player must continue to draw once he begins, or "sparx" will appear and chase the cursor into a lethal collision. Last and most dangerous are the "stix," a bundle of lines that rolls like an ocean wave across the playfield, darting into one corner and then another in random motion. The cursor is vulnerable to extinction by their touch until the playfield is sufficiently filled and a new round begins.

After a few introductory rounds, the game becomes double "Qix"—now two stix roam the playfield. This introduces a key score-boosting option not available in the contest's opening stages. It is possible to acquire a bonus multiplier by splitting the screen so that there is a stix on each side of the line. Doing this successfully a few times makes each subsequent box count for the maximum.

"Qix" has more than enough action to

satisfy the reflex kings, while providing plenty of food for thought for strategy fans. The quickest line-scriber in the world will prove a "Qix" dud if the lines aren't laid down on the playfield with a lot of prior thought and planning. And the 5200 edition of "Qix" is a virtual duplicate of the coin-op. For a refreshing change from run-of-the-mill shootouts, you can't go wrong with this one.

Although **Kangaroo** (Atari/Atari 5200) is clearly the weakest of the 5200 cartridges we're reviewing, it is nonetheless an excellent piece of work. That it fails to bowl over the residents of "Arcade Alley" is more a testament to the tremendous quality leap 5200 software took over the last year than a negative reading on this particular game. "Kangaroo" is based on the Atari coin-op cutie and faithfully duplicates most of the elements of the original. There are a few rough spots, however, such as the animation of the coconut-throwing monkeys who skitter up and down the tree located at the right edge of all three playfields.

"Kangaroo" places the player in the role of a mama kangaroo on a rescue mission. It seems that a tribe of prank-prone chimps has 'roo-napped her bouncy baby, and mama must get it back. The player-marsupial must employ jumping, climbing, and ducking to successfully survive three scenarios. The real fun comes when the kangaroo gets close enough to the tree to reach a monkey. She's a boxing kangaroo, and when a simian comes within her range, the game looks like an animal version of *Rocky III*.

The main problem with "Kangaroo" is that it depends too heavily on animation-quality graphics to dress up rudimentary play-action. And, of course, there's no way even a 5200 cartridge can visually equal the best productions from coin-op-land. Still, when a game as fine as "Kangaroo" is unmistakably the weakest of three releases, it says something positive about the system. Overlooking quality like this is its own punishment.

Swinging our attention over to the Apple II, **Lode Runner** (Broderbund/Apple II/48K disk) stands out far ahead of the pack. Though many of the best new game designs are now created for the Atari family of computers, "Lode Runner" proves there's still plenty of juice left in the good old Apple computer system.

If climbing contests which depend on split-second timing and the hand/eye coordination of an acrobat exhaust you, you're likely to find "Lode Runner" a refreshing change. Strategy is the all-important consideration, and the best planners will naturally allow for at least a tiny bit of sloppiness in the execution. In this way "Lode Runner" is to other

climbing games what "Lady Bug" is to maze-chases.

The idea in this solitaire action game is to roam the playfield by climbing up and down ladders, going hand-over-hand along horizontal bars, running along horizontal brick platforms, and jumping off upper beams to the ones below. Chests containing gold are scattered around the playfield, and the lode runner must scoop them up while avoiding from three to five pursuing guards. If an unencumbered guard reaches a chest of gold before the hero, he can pick it up and carry it along until forced to give it up after falling into a pit.

The lode runner does not have the ability to jump upward, so movement must be carefully orchestrated. It won't do to blithely hop down stairstep bricks only to find there's no ladder or other method of getting back up. Perhaps to compensate for his lack of climbing ability, the lode runner can dig a pit either ahead of or behind his position by pressing the appropriate button. A guard who falls into a pit becomes trapped for a few seconds, earning the player 75 points and a little breathing room. The pits close up after awhile, and guards caught in the reassembled wall are killed, again earning a bonus. The guards, unfortunately, reincarnate at the top of the screen after a few seconds off the screen.

Digging ability is more than a weapon. Sometimes the lode runner must excavate through several layers of bricks to reach chests entombed in otherwise inaccessible pockets of the brickwork. In addition, it's often advantageous for the lode runner to dig all the way through a horizontal stretch of brick planking and drop through the chasm for a speedy getaway. This tactic is especially effective because any guard who tries to follow simply gets trapped in the pit!

You'll have plenty of opportunity to work out even more subtle and powerful strategies, because "Lode Runner" challenges home-arcade aces with 150 different playfields. And in the unlikely event that you triumph over this gargantuan hurdle, there is a special added attraction: an easy-to-use system for constructing your own "Lode Runner" playfields—with no programming knowledge or skill needed. Though the graphics aren't overtly flashy, they are excellent in a simple, clean-lined way. One major exception is the awesome animation of the lode runner and the guards, which is quite similar to Dan Gorlin's work in last year's "Choplifter."

No Apple gamer should be without Doug Smith's "Lode Runner"—it's that good. One warning, though: be sure to allot several hours of playing time, because only someone with a will of iron could yank this disk while the next playfield still beckons.

