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VIDEO

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VCR Games

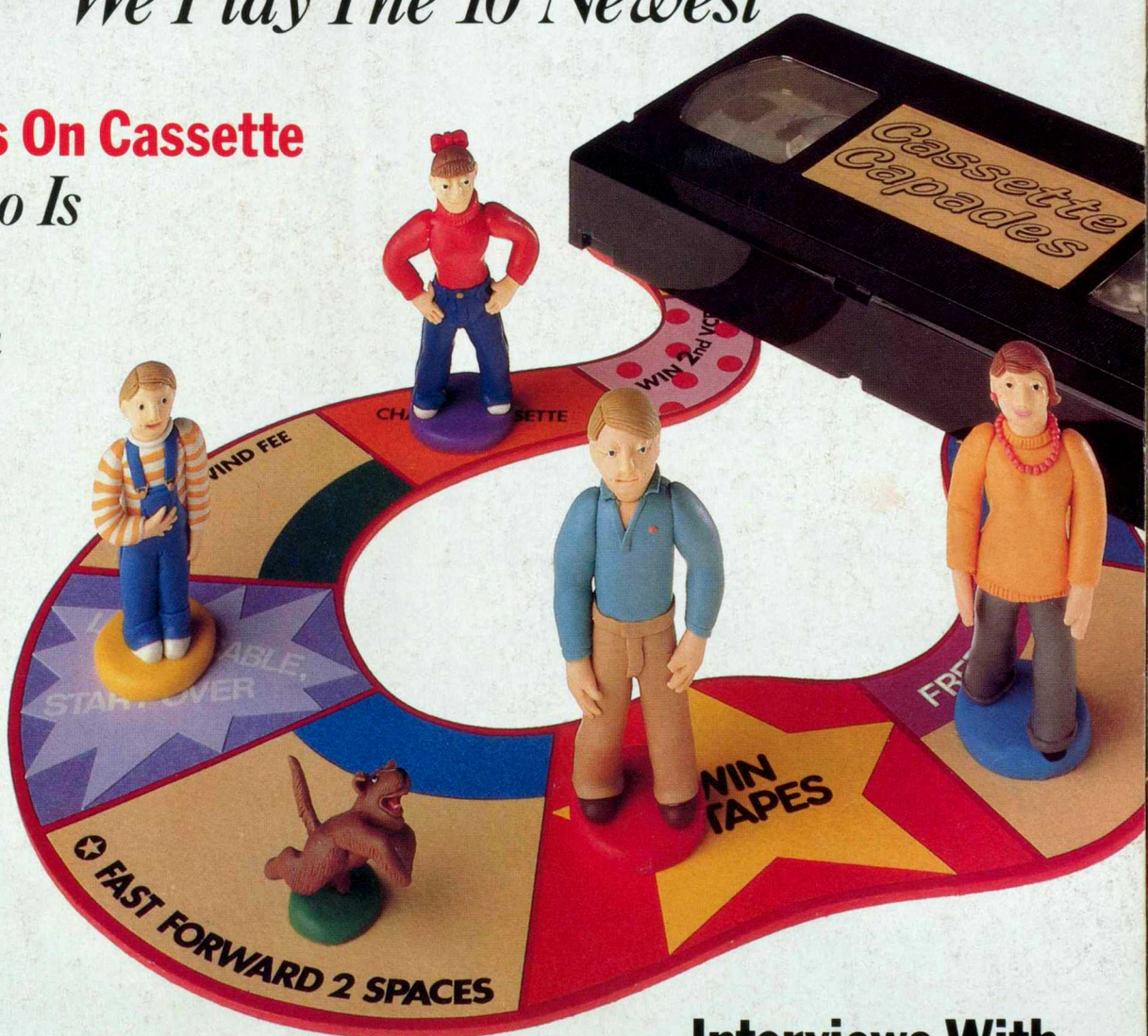
We Play The 10 Newest

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Interviews With
Tom Hanks,
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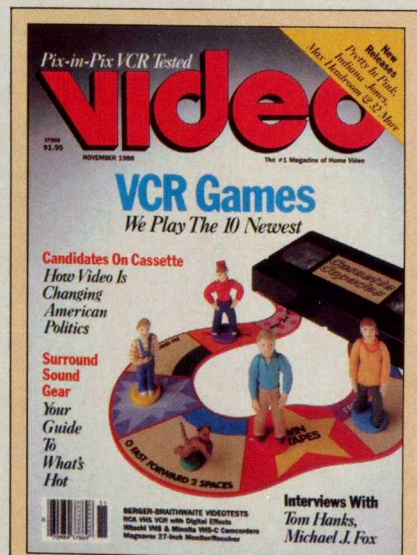
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About the Cover. VCR games may be this year's Cabbage Patch dolls. Game board by Ajin; figures by Anna V. Walker. Photographed by Les Morsillo.

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L E T T H E

Games

B E G I N

Turn Your TV Into A Toy
With Hot New
VCR Board
Games

In a 1958 issue of *Mad* magazine, television's first genius, Ernie Kovacs, described the pieces for a board game of his own design, called *Gringo*. "In each box," wrote Kovacs, players could find "27 small red squares called *Enchiladoes*; 13 blue, plastic triangles called *Blue, Plastic Triangles*; 17 perforated disks, called *Roundees*; 113 yellow darts; 113 green darts; 113 white darts; 2 orange darts; 1 deck of playing cards with pictures of former mayors of Hong Kong from the Ming Dynasty to the present era and 1

large *GRINGO* board with automatic lazy susan."

If Ernie Kovacs were alive today, he'd probably add to that list: One videocassette.

And maybe another 113 darts.

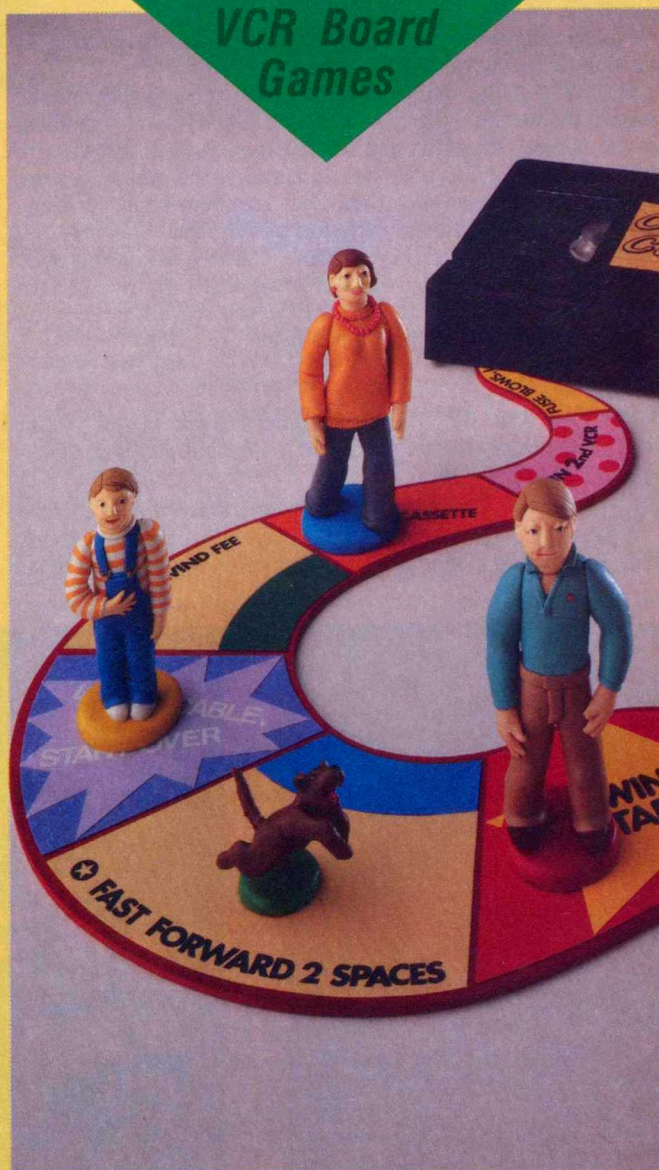
Toymakers have discovered video and are betting that VCR games—games that use specially-produced videocassettes as an important part of play—will be this year's Cabbage Patch Kids.

It's an attempt not just to sell a new kind of play experience, but to attract an audience lost, at least in part, to home video. Video has cut into all sorts of traditional at-home pastimes, and VCR games are the toy industry's attempt to update the familiar board and card games.

These aren't video games. There are no shoot-'em-ups, no road races or hungry pac-guys. Most have traditional themes—trivia, sports, memory, and concentration—with a twist. One element of the game is introduced to players via video.

This type of game isn't that new. Five years ago, *The First National KidDisc*, an interactive videodisc crammed with games and activities for children, hit the market. Not long after, the first true game-on-a-disc, *Mysterydisc: Many Roads to Murder*, appeared.

Mysterydisc seemed like a natural. Several different whodunit scenarios challenged do-it-yourself sleuths. Players hopped around the disc looking for clues and listening to the suspects' testimony. But because of the small number of videodisc players in homes, the game went practically unnoticed. The fact that *Mysterydisc* was overly complicated, poorly written, and acted by what



BY TIMOTHY ONOSKO

appeared to be a cast of soap opera rejects didn't help much either.

Two years ago, however, Parker Brothers, which brought us *Monopoly*, adapted another of its perennials, *Clue*, to video. *Clue: The VCR Game*, was a surprise hit. Consisting of four decks of cards, a pad of worksheets, an instruction booklet, and a cassette featuring mystery scenarios, it became the model for a new game genre.

Parker Brothers has now been joined by Mattel, Pressman Toys, and a number of independent game companies and the battle is on. There are now enough games to form a miniature department in the largest toy stores, and enough themes to appeal to VCR owners and game fans. But how good are the games? How playable are they? Which are the hits? Which are the misses?

When we decided to survey the current crop of VCR games, we felt it was not enough to judge the games strictly on their video appeal. We looked also at the games' play qualities, and asked:

- How playable is the game? Is it easy or difficult to comprehend? Ideally, a game should take minutes to learn and a lifetime to master.

- Is it replayable? Or do you want to put it away after one experience?

- Is it well-designed? Can players easily find flaws or ways to improve it that the designers didn't think of?

- Is the video portion of the game relevant, or just a gimmick? Is the video effective and well-produced?

We enlisted the aid of several play-testers, unpacked the games, and turned the group loose. We asked them to comment on the games' strengths and weaknesses, to look for ways to improve them, and to have fun. In fairness, the group does not span the demographic spectrum. They are couples ranging in age from their mid-twenties to early-forties—the kind of people you might expect to entertain in your home. Children weren't involved since most VCR games are aimed at young adults who own or have access to a VCR (really the *Trivial Pursuit* crowd).

With this in mind, let the games begin.

FLASH MATCH

Mattel Toys, \$30. Will Shriner. Includes 162 photo cards, betting chips, instruction/solution book, and a one-hour videocassette.

FLASH MATCH, JR.

Mattel Toys, \$30. Includes 107 picture cards and one-hour cassette.

Flash Match is a memory game. Players match photographic images shown in a short, rapid sequence on television to those

they hold in a 12-card hand. Bets are placed on the correct order, and bluffing is allowed. Players retain their cards when they win (by displaying correct cards or bluffing) and lose them if they are wrong and are defeated in a challenge.

The *Flash Match* cassette is attractive, fast moving, and visually pleasant. Oddly, it is hosted by comedian Will Shriner, who, on this program, looks uncomfortable and is not entertaining. He introduces the game and appears between the short (less than a minute) game segments to remind players of rules and strategies.

Our play-testers immediately found a major flaw. Players are not penalized for failing to recognize the photo cards in their hand that are actually seen on the tape. This encourages conservative play. Risk-taking (in the form of bluffing), while supposedly an important part of the game, is discouraged.

Instructions are in a printed booklet that also includes the correct order of the images. The instructions, though, are too verbose and could have been easily outlined on the video. With 80 different sequences that cannot be memorized, we thought the game could be replayed often. But the length of one "complete game," in which all 162 cards change hands, is too long and repetitious—except for competitive, hard-core gamers and hyperactive teenagers.

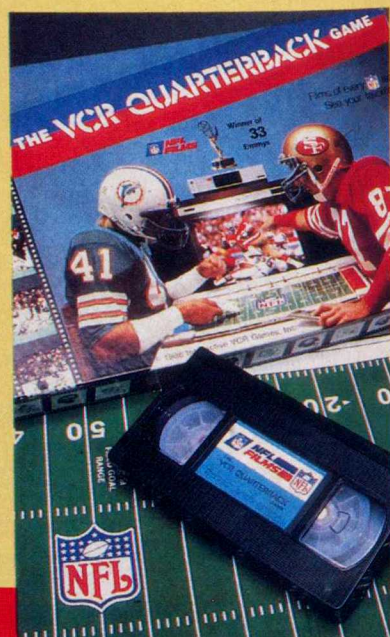
Flash Match, Jr. is a similar, much simplified game for children 6 to 12. There is no betting, bluffing, or challenging. The video is hosted by an animated "mad scientist" character, Professor Gamebrain. The images are playful and kid-oriented (bicycles, bubble gum, etc.). It may, however, be too simple for older children.

PREDICAMENTS

Mattel Toys, \$30. Joan Rivers. Includes playing board, 8 playing pieces, 108 cards, instruction booklet and a one-hour videocassette.

Predicaments is a comic soap-opera parody, but the object is to make points by playing cards during the video portion. Playing a card moves you around the board. The first player to circle it twice wins the game. Cards are played by shouting nonsensical answers printed on "who," "what," "why," "where," and "when" cards to questions posed by the actors in the video. Another type of card, marked "none of your business," is a wild card.

Predicaments should have had everything going for it. The video was obviously blessed with a big budget. Joan Rivers hosts and the comedy cast includes Arte Johnson (*Laugh-In*) and Gordon Jump (*WKRP*). Unfortunately the humor fails for the most part, save for a few well-timed comments by Johnson. Rivers is shrill, obnox-



Is video
relevant to
these games,
or just a
gimmick?

DOORWAYS TO ADVENTURE

Pressman VCR Gallery of Games

THE VCR GAME

FEATURING COLORSCAN
INCLUDES A 50 MINUTE VIDEO CASSETTE
OF FAMOUS HOLLYWOOD FILM CLIPS



ious, and serves absolutely no purpose in the game itself. The sound quality is also poor, making it difficult at times to understand.

Again, instructions for the game come via a booklet, not the video. This turns out to be a real problem. *Predicaments* doesn't know whether it's a comedy/party game, a card game, or a board game, and players don't know what's going on half the time. The instructions are long and complicated and the game itself is boring. Strategy is never clear, and the many rules provide most of the (unintentional) humor.

As for replayability, well, frankly, we couldn't determine that. Our play-testers threatened a walkout and forced us to put the game away after a single round. One suggested another kind of card in addition to the "none of your business" pasteboards: "I just don't care" cards. One asked to borrow the cassette—in order to erase it and record *The Tonight Show*. *Predicaments* is a loser and is definitely not for the kiddies, either.

DOORWAYS TO ADVENTURE

Pressman Toys, \$40. Includes "treasure" cards, "power" cards, "bid" cards, playing pieces, die, play money, and a one-hour videocassette.

DOORWAYS TO HORROR

Pressman Toys, \$40. Includes "monster identity" cards, playing cards, die, play money, chips, and a one-hour videocassette.

Both *Doorways* games are cast in the adventure/role-playing mold, though neither are as complex as, say, *Dungeons and Dragons*. In *Doorways to Adventure*, the object is to accumulate as much treasure as possible. Casting spells to win gold while maintaining your mythical "strength" is the object of *Doorways to Horror*. Game play involves drawing and exchanging cards and play money.

Both games use a randomizing technique that employs a color-coded die and segments on the videocassette. The die is rolled and the tape is scanned to a screen with the right color. This is the

only use of randomization—an important element in all gaming—that we saw in any of the game videos. The video substitutes for a deck of cards in a traditional game. That is, instead of drawing a card at random, you watch a video segment.

The cassettes themselves are assembled from clips of less than a minute each from old films and TV shows. These clips, however, are only used as a backdrop for information relevant to the games; the actual material in the clips is unimportant. We found footage from *Cyrano De Bergerac* with Jose Ferrer, *Africa Screams* with Abbott and Costello, *Algiers* with Charles Boyer, and *The Terror*, featuring Jack Nicholson in an early screen role. *Adventure* also contains some TV clips, notably Ernie Kovacs wandering through an art gallery and Richard Greene as Robin Hood. Though *Horror* tries to stick with old (and very low-budget) monster flicks, its designers had the guts to throw in a clip from a Popeye cartoon and still tie it to the theme.

The play-testers liked the so-called "Colorscan" randomizing technique, although the slow speed of the visual search feature on my VCR meant more waiting time than we would have liked. The colors on the TV screen and the die are, fortunately, also identified by initials—P for purple, B for blue, Y for yellow and so on. Not only does this mean the game can be played on a black & white TV, but it came in handy when we discovered one of our play-testers was colorblind!

The testers also liked that the time limit on a complete game was dictated by the length of the tape. Complete games can last less than an hour. What we found unusual was the resemblance to a TV game show the playing atmosphere took on. The segments in both videos seem like those "what's behind door number three, Johnny?" bits on morning TV.

Without a scan or a visual search feature on your VCR, you really can't comfortably play either *Doorways* game. Although Pressman says that you can make note of counter numbers where the segments start, this is more of a bother than it's worth. There isn't any obstacle to repeated playing.

EYEWITNESS NEWSREEL CHALLENGE

Parker Brothers, \$40. Includes a cribbage-style playing board, 3 game pieces, 2 writing pads, instructions, and a two-hour videocassette.

Eyewitness is an observation and memory game based on old newsreel footage. While watching a segment, two players or two teams think up questions based on the details in the newsreel clips. They ask these to one another after the segment finishes. Answers can be challenged, and disputes are settled by reviewing the tape. The object is to move a marker down a cribbage-like playing board. Scoring is simple.

The *Eyewitness* newsreel cassette has been assembled from black & white footage of various ages, most of it from the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to newsreels, there is a liberal sprinkling of silent movie footage, as well. There is no host but the 106 clips are narrated. The cassette, by itself, has some entertainment and information value.

There is nothing outstandingly wrong with *Eyewitness*, yet one play-tester cried "Ripoff!" "I can do the same thing by recording the evening news if I wanted to," he said, and he was right. *Eyewitness* proves that you can make a game out of anything, like counting red cars on the freeway.

Thankfully, though, the instructions (few as they may be) are given to the players right on the cassette. As for replays, the narrator stresses that the game can be played again and again. This depends, naturally, on how familiar you become with the material.

CLUE: THE VCR GAME

Parker Brothers, \$40. Includes detective notepads, 112 cards, an instruction/solution booklet, a solution decoder, and a one-hour videocassette.

Clue: The VCR Game is not the same game as the *Clue* board game, though Parker Brothers likes to say it retains the spirit and flavor of the original. In this version, players watch a scenario, looking for visual clues. From these, as well as clues printed on the cards, they determine a number (one to five) of murderers, victims, rooms, and weapons. There is also an added element in the game—discovering the secret identities each player assumes.

In addition to the original *Clue* characters—Miss Scarlet, Colonel Mustard, Professor Plum, Mrs. White, Mr. Green, and Mrs. Peacock—there are several new cast members: Sgt. Gray, the police inspector, Miss Peach (an obvious play on the comic strip character), Madame Rose, the supposed sister of Mr. Boddy (the victim in the original board game), and Monsieur Brunette, her



French lawyer. A butler, Didit, is the host of the game. He is never either a murderer or a victim.

The production values are low, but adequate. Ham acting is kept to a minimum, though all of it is of "little theater" quality. There are three scenarios consisting of five short sequences. The three card decks have six individual sets of facts on them, so a total of eighteen different games can cleverly be squeezed out of the limited video material. Nonetheless, we questioned how fresh the material would be after, say, six games. Previous players, of course, have an unfair advantage.

Still, this game kept our play-testers interested the longest. In fact, Parker Brothers is right. It is enough like the *Clue* board game to satisfy amateur sleuths. "I'd buy this game for my mother," said one of the testers, "she reads six mysteries a week. Unfortunately, she doesn't own a VCR or watch television, either." Another invited herself back the next night for a second round.

If VCR games need a model, it should be *Clue*. It is well thought-out and challenging, yet it remains accessible and never seems impossible. The video is straightforward, with enough humor to keep the game light. Still, there are a few too many groaners among the jokes. While the game is slightly complex, the instructions are outlined on both the cassette and in print. Best of all is a short introductory game and a walkthrough by the butler.

The only real drawback is that you have to note the VCR's counter numbers when sequences start and end so that a scene can be reviewed. This is a hassle that wouldn't exist if this were a videodisc. More than any other VCR game, though, *Clue* works both as a game and a video.

COMMERCIAL CRAZIES

Mattel Toys, \$30. Includes game board, 212 cards, 16 playing pieces and an approximately 45-minute videocassette.

Commercial Crazies is a memory and observation game in which players ask each other trivia questions about commercials—that's right, TV ads. Points are scored by answering the questions correctly and by bluffing other players into a wrong answer. Points correspond to the number of moves allowed on a small, nine square playing board. The object of the board game is to capture a playing piece of each color, and contestants can steal these from one another.

The idea of watching commercials sounds, admittedly, stupid and boring. But the forty 30-second spots are the work of Chica-

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LET THE GAMES BEGIN

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goan Joe Sedelmaier, television's reigning king of comedy ads. You'll remember Sedelmaier's work from spots for Wendy's ("Where's the Beef?") and Federal Express. You're probably less familiar with some regional spots like those for Alaska Airlines and Fiberglas Canada, however, and there's some pretty funny stuff. Sedelmaier's hallmark is his repertory cast of mutt actors—ordinary, but pained, human beings. The effect is like looking at a

Norman Rockwell painting in which everyone has gas.

We've complained about most of these games not using the video to offer playing instructions. This one does, but it doesn't do much good when they're delivered by none other than John Moscitta, the notorious "fast talker" from the Federal Express commercial. No fair!

The play-testers' consensus was that the game elements are fairly ordinary, though aided by a time limit (paced by the video) of 30 seconds per move. It's sort of a twist on the movements of *Trivial Pursuit*, with capturing the pawns substituted for collecting pie pieces.

The play-testers were bored by the board portion of the game, and stopped playing early on. Unlike the rest of the VCR games, though, everyone wanted to see the remainder of the cassette. By fast-forwarding through the 30-second spaces between them, we quickly knocked off the rest of the commercials on the reel.

You can play ten different games by using the additional question cards, so replay value is limited. But then so is *Trivial Pursuit*, right? *Commercial Craziest* may be no bargain as a game, but the collection of Sedelmaier's work is terrific and, if it were a littler longer, the cassette alone would be worth the price.

NFL VCR QUARTERBACK

VCR Enterprises, Inc. \$38. Includes 144 cards, playing pieces, dice, a large game board, instruction sheet, and two-hour videocassette.


VCR Quarterback not only comes as the officially-sanctioned VCR game of the National Football League, but advertises "Winner of 33 Emmys" on the package. The latter refers, not to the game, but to NFL Films, the producer of the footage.

This football game is played by rolling dice and selecting cards for kickoff positions, penalties, passing and running plays, and occasionally consulting real NFL footage on the cassette. Video plays a minimal role in this otherwise traditional football simulation. Only half of the 98 play cards are marked "VCR," meaning you start the tape and look at the next play. Moreover, since there are two kinds of plays—ground-hugging and airborne, just as in real football—but only one videocassette, confusion sometimes erupts. You might pick a pass-play card that tells you to go to the tape, yet see a running play, instead. The explanation in the instruction sheet: "Your quarterback was forced to do something other than originally intended." Some excuse.

Our play-testers divided naturally on this one. The women had little or no interest. The men, on the other hand, played a game but, curiously, began skipping turns at the VCR, continuing to choose cards until they got one that didn't require the video. They agreed that, as a board/card game, it was fun but flawed, since you can neither select strategies nor defend your goal.

The footage on the video offers hundreds of playing situations, but because this is a linear program, the sequence never varies. Even though the instructions don't mention it, the play-testers thought that playing "video roulette"—randomly fast-forwarding or rewinding to a play—was a better idea than just starting and stopping the tape.

We also noticed one odd thing about the videocassette. It is a short tape (that is, a "big hub") cassette recorded at the six-hour SLP VHS speed. We concede that the vast majority of VCRs in homes today play slow-speeds but some older machines



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can't. As a result, too, the quality of the recording is relatively low.

By the way, VCR Enterprises, manufacturer of *VCR Quarterback*, claims to have invented the genre and independently marketed a game/cassette package before the success of Parker Brothers' *Clue*.

THE HONEYMOONERS VCR GAME

Mattel Toys, \$30. Includes 6 cards, 6 quiz booklets, 1 answer/score booklet, and 45-minute videocassette.

The Honeymooners VCR Game is a memory/observation game built around trivia questions about short scenes from the so-called "lost" episodes. Players view a scene, then answer two questions, and unscramble a jumbled word phrase based on dialogue in the scene. Bonus points are awarded for speed. A complete game consists of five rounds of viewing and quizzes.

Because these episodes, recently put back in circulation by star and producer Jackie Gleason, have had relatively limited exposure via Showtime pay-TV and videocassette release, they will probably be fresh to most viewers. Still, if you're a *Honeymooners* fanatic, there's nothing you haven't seen here.

It is difficult to take notes as you watch many of these clips. You're either trying to figure out the context of the scene (which is unimportant to game play) or laughing at the antics of Kramden, Norton, Alice, and Trixie.

GAME THEORIES

- Play on the floor so you can spread out. Some games, like *Flash Match*, just aren't appropriate for playing at a table. In any case, you're always going to have to accommodate the TV and VCR—which are probably in a fixed location—when playing one of these games.
- It is much—repeat, much—simpler to play any VCR game with a remote control. You'll just wear yourself out racing to the recorder without one because, except for *Commercial Crazies*, all the games we've seen require starting and stopping the tape. The "visual scan" feature of a VCR is almost a necessity with some games, as well. Remember that game designers are still trying to figure out just how to use video. Some of the VCR features are still somewhat awkward.
- Set your VCR's line/tuner (also known as TV/camera) to line (or camera). This way every time you stop the tape, the screen goes to black and silence. This eliminates the annoyance of another program suddenly appearing, and maintains interest in and concentration on the game itself.
- Don't wear out the fun you may be having by playing a game to death. Since VCR games are, for the most part, limited in their replayability, they lose value if you play them out in an evening or two.

Our play-testers who liked trivia games enjoyed this one, but found the questions, particularly the scrambled word puzzles, too easy. Sample: "THAW do you XEEPCT me to VIEG the boss when he gets here?" You don't have to know anagrams or palindromes to figure these out.

This lack of challenge didn't seem to stand in the way of the fun, however. While playing, a side game broke out where people asked each other their own *Honeymooners* trivia questions.

The replay value is limited. There are forty scenes, five per game, and three questions per scene. To get forty complete games from the set, you'll see each scene five times. (As with *Clue*, experienced players have an advantage over novices.) These are fast games, too, since each scene lasts about a minute.


Finally, *The Honeymooners VCR Game* is expendable. Since you write the answers in the quiz books, you can't even pass the game along to friends. This would have worked better if the questions had been furnished on cards, instead. No information is offered as to how additional quiz books can be obtained.

GAME SOURCES

Mattel Toys, 5150 Rosecrans Ave., Hawthorne, Calif. (213-978-6635).

Parker Brothers, 50 Durham Rd., Beverly, Mass. 01915 (617-927-7600).

Pressman Toys, 200 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10010 (212-675-7910).

VCR Enterprises, Box 1548, Clarksdale, Miss. 38614 (601-627-4111). 

FOURTH DIMENSION

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tening environment. It also comes with a remote control, a 100-watt amplifier, a center front channel, and a subwoofer output.

The 3601 also carries an unusual pedigree since its surround circuitry was designed by the father of quad, Peter Scheiber, who, as a bassoonist for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, first realized that providing stereo with only two channels of sound was "a waste." He saw that those two channels could actually carry information that would greatly expand the sound field and bring out the ambience of the original performance. This was accomplished via a matrix design Scheiber patented in 1971.

When quad hit the scene Scheiber and CBS became embroiled in a lawsuit over who indeed came up with the matrix idea first. Scheiber eventually triumphed and CBS became a licensee of Scheiber's design. But Scheiber wasn't impressed by CBS' use of his technology. Today, he blames the failure of quad on the simple fact that "the machines didn't work."

He even set out to prove that an audio matrix could be done correctly, though by the time his own device was marketed in the late 1970s, quad was little more than a