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COMPUTERS AT HOME

TV SITCOMS:
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- SONY PORTABLE BETAMAX
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West Coast
Advertising Representative
BILL SLAPIN & CO.
15720 Ventura Blvd. Suite 222
Encino, CA 91436
(213) 995-0257

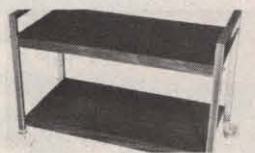
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The lush tropical setting of Hawaii is one example of just how far you can go with the new portable videocassette recorders. Pictured is Sony's portable Betamax.

video

Summer, Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Nine

Volume Two, Number Three



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COMPUTERS

THE COMPUTER REVOLUTION has begun to hit the home. You'll be reading more and more about it, here and elsewhere.

But why here, in a magazine devoted to home video? Because computers in the home (and out of it) use video screens to communicate. Home computers, in fact, communicate more via video than most professional computer systems do; both types display words and figures, but many home computers can also draw pictures for you (sometimes even animated ones) and play games.

Video games, in fact, are actually part computer—something that's become more obvious with the recent introduction of video games that can be expanded to have all the computer facilities you could ask for... not to mention computers that can emulate all but the most elaborate of video games.

Versatile as they are, though, today's computers can't do nearly as much as tomorrow's will. The standard home computer configuration now involves just two means of communication: a typewriter-style keyboard and a video display screen or "CRT" (short for "cathode ray tube"—the "picture tube" of a TV set). You type in whatever you want to tell or ask the

computer; it displays both what you've typed and its responses to you. That's enough for most information-handling tasks: math, sorting lists, playing verbal games, and so on. Practical applications would include handling your checkbook, sorting recipes, drilling your kids in arithmetic and spelling, and lots more.

But it's not enough for everything a computer can do in the home. Not by a long chalk.

For example, one extra that many computers with just keyboard input and CRT display can do is draw pictures on the screen—"graphics." This can live up the games and open new areas for instruction as well as allow for new games that couldn't be handled on a purely verbal level and draw patterns on a screen like an electronic kaleidoscope. More sophisticated versions yet to come might allow you to "design" furniture by "drawing" on the screen with a light pen and typing in the desired dimensions. The computer could then rotate a three-dimensional sketch in imaginary space (so you could see how it would look from any angle), accept changes and corrections, then perhaps even draw up plans and make a pattern that would help you cut your lumber with a minimum of waste. This sort of thing can already be done

by Ivan Berger

Things To Do

- 1- Plan Open House
- 2- Balance Checkbook
- 3- Install Home Security System
- 4- Shop For Computer!

AT HOME: BASICS FOR BEGINNERS

on large, professional computer systems—for the home, it's just a matter of time.

For a bit more money—quite a bit, alas—today's home computers can also deliver “hard copy”—paper that carries the same information or graphics you see displayed on the computer screen. With a printer (basically a typewriter run by the computer), you can not only update your checkbook and sort your recipes, but bring the results to the bank or supermarket with you. What's more, it lets you write letters, school papers, and other things on the computer, make all the changes and corrections you like, then have the computer type a letter-perfect version for you—with none of the crossing-out, erasures, or typographical errors you might make. (Berger-Braithwaite Lab's reports will probably be written just that way by our next issue, in fact.)

But the real impact of the home computer will come when it can control the various devices around your house—not only controlling your furnace or air conditioner (a thermostat does that quite nicely) but opening and closing windows, starting dinner and the air conditioner at just the right time, etc. The hardware already exists to allow your computer to turn things on and off for you, and even dim the lights. And any computer can be programmed to hold long sequences of instructions as to what gets turned on when. But fine points like adjusting the air conditioner's *setting* (not the same job as turning it all the way on or off) aren't possible yet without a drastic rebuild of the air conditioner—and of every other home device you'd like to have under the computer's thumb.

Tomorrow's air conditioners will be computer-settable. So will tomorrow's washers, dryers, and almost any other appliance you'll have in your home. As microprocessors (the integrated circuit chips with computer brains) get plentiful and cheap, it becomes more and more practical to use them instead of such other control devices as mechanical timers and electronic logic circuits. Once computers control them, appliances will be able to do more and more tricks



A computer can do many jobs around the house—from filing recipes and planning meals to controlling electrically operated appliances.

at no increase in cost (dryers, for example, might shut off when the clothes get dry enough—and vary their definition of “dry enough” according to the humidity in the outside air). Adding new features for next year's models would be as simple, in many cases, as changing the chip that held the computer's program of instructions.

Once all of these appliances are run by internal computers, it will be child's play to add interfaces for their control by external ones. In other words, the time is in sight when you'll be able to phone your computer

and tell it (probably by punching in a number code on a pushbutton phone, though possibly by voice) to turn on the air conditioner early because you'll be home sooner than expected. The computer will be able to interpret your commands a bit, too: by checking the data it's stored on the rate at which the temperature is rising or falling both inside and outside the house plus data on the power rates at different times of day and on the air conditioner's current draw at different rates of cooling, it will decide whether it's best to start cooling the house gradually at once or to wait awhile and then cool it down in one big rush, whichever will cost you less on your electric bill.

Getting back to video, a computer can accept input from a camera as well as show its output on a CRT, with a variety of interesting results. By now, you've probably seen the computers that print your televised picture onto T-shirts; the computer behind that is usually at least somewhat similar to the one sitting in the room next to me right now. More fancifully, a camera at your front door hooked up to a computer inside could check the voice and image of a caller and decide whether to open the door or not; to deny someone access, you'd only have to erase them from the program. It could even adjust its images for your children as they grow, or for you as you get balder. A computer burglar alarm could flash an image on your bedside screen from whichever camera sensed movement in its field of view.

No flights of fancy, the possibilities are both endless and imminent, really conservative

(continued on page 63)

ARCADE ALLEY

A Critical Look At Video Cartridge Games & Programs



ATARI VIDEO COMPUTER SYSTEM

- Video Olympics
- Surround
- Home Run
- Basketball
- Breakout
- Air-Sea Battle

Once only the super-rich could hope to own a private electronic playground. Now arcade addicts everywhere can make this golden dream come true with programmable video games marketed by Atari, Magnavox, Fairchild, Bally, and others.

This column will attempt to treat these games from a fresh viewpoint, one that stresses playability rather than technology. Design superiority will be noted when it is present, since the complexity of the unit strongly affects game quality, but emphasis will be on the game cartridges themselves. We'll also try to point out which games are best for head-to-head competition, which are suitable for solitaire play, and which are apt to be of less interest to the devoted arcade game player.

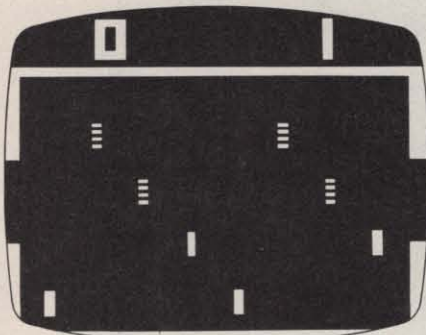
We decided to begin with Atari for two main reasons. First, Atari helped start it all by introducing Pong to the arcades, and second, the unit has been available in its present form longer than most of its competitors.

The Atari console is an attractive unit with simple slide switches to turn the machine on and off, select the desired program from the cartridge in use, start play, and adjust difficulty. A two-position difficulty switch allows for "expert" level play and handicapping to even competition.

The game comes with one pair each of joystick and paddle-type controllers. Some of Atari's newer car-

tridge offerings require keyboard controllers, available separately, and the Indy 500 game cartridge employs special steering controllers packed with the cartridge itself.

The game, including the two sets of controllers and the Combat game cartridge, lists for \$199.95. Cartridges carry a list price of \$19.95, except for Indy 500, which retails for \$39.95.



Video Olympics

With that out of the way, let's get to some of the more interesting cartridges:

VIDEO OLYMPICS (CX2621) takes Atari's Pong concept and explores it to the limit. There's **Robot Pong**, an astonishingly good solitaire version; **Super Pong**, which gives each player two paddles; and **Foozpong**, which has players guiding a vertical three-paddle column. All, of course, are in addition to the venerable father of video ball games, **Pong** itself.

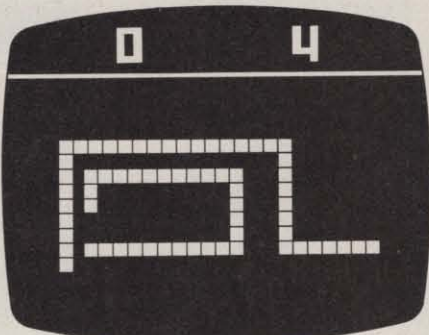
All two-player games have four-player versions when a second pair of

paddle controllers, which must be purchased separately, are added. Options include player-controlled speed and "whammy," which sharpens the angle on returns. **Hockey III** adds yet another dimension to play, the "catch" feature, which allows players to hold the puck before passing.

Volleyball literally turns Pong on its side. Paddles move horizontally across the bottom of the playfield, which is divided at its center by a net. Like the real sport, video Volleyball is even more fun with four players than with two. The game even permits "spiking," always a good move when your opponent is returning a volley from near the backline.

In **Handball**, the inactive player is, unhappily, indicated by a blinking paddle. We found this less satisfactory than just having the paddle disappear when it is not used. Atari's method adds lots of penalty points for interference, but little else.

There is also a **Basketball** game on Video Olympics, but it's primitive



Surround

compared to Atari's own CX2624 cartridge. Finally, if all these variations still aren't enough, the cartridge includes **Quadrapong**. This ultimate permutation of the Pong idea boasts a four-player, four-wall format that is superb for group play.

Players of **SURROUND** (CX2641) use the joystick to steer a small square across an otherwise blank field. The square generates a line in its wake, and the object is to keep your line growing. This is accomplished by avoiding any intersection with the playfield boundary, your

Bill Kunkel is a N.Y.-based writer and veteran video game hustler. Frank T. Laney II is a freelance writer specializing in pseudonyms.

opponent's line, or your own. The "head" of each line moves constantly, picking up speed during the course of a round.

The game can be enjoyed solitaire (variation #4 is best), but this does more to develop steering proficiency than overall strategy; the computer just tries to avoid mistakes and doesn't play as aggressively as a "live" foe. Variation #6, which includes diagonal movement, makes the best tournament game and has an elegance of design that promotes frequent replay.

Despite the name "Surround," an encircling strategy may not be the most effective approach. Good players pre-empt as much of the playfield area as possible, forcing rivals to make more, and tighter, turns. At frenetic late-round speeds, those hairpin curves become nearly impossible to negotiate.

HOME RUN (CX2623) presents the National Pastime in one- and two-

either pitching or fielding and leave development of a good all-around game for later. It always takes players a split second to regain control of fielders after carefully guiding in a pitch, so it's hard to get a good jump on the ball if you're bearing down on the hurling.

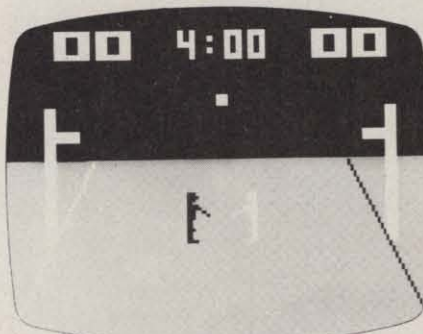
Since the program for Home Run isn't quite as complicated as some other game programs offered by other companies, the computer can give you a real run for your money

of one-on-one hoop action we've seen so far. An unusual graphic design produces a fan's-eye perspective of the court, greatly enhancing visual appeal.

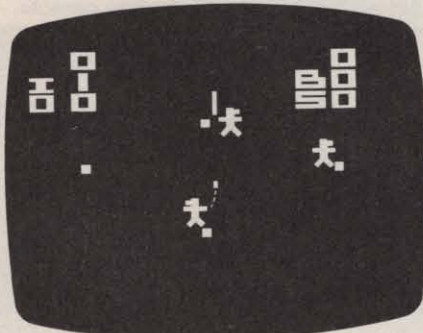
The game definitely captures the flavor of basketball. The shooting procedure permits a choice among three ball trajectories, and the program also includes such niceties as stealing the ball, rebounding, and blocking shots.

Basketball is that rare game that plays well solitaire or with a human opponent. Although the computer sloughs off on defense when it's in the lead, it becomes a tenacious ballhawk and deadly shooter in close tilts. Beginners are advised to handicap the robot player using the difficulty switch or risk getting pounded into the hardwood.

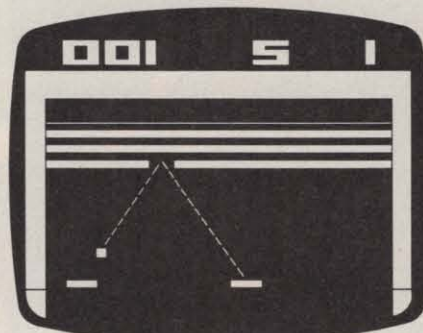
Stealing the ball is the most important aspect of the two-player version. Shot blocking, though effective at times, takes the defender out of the play when it doesn't work. Use it



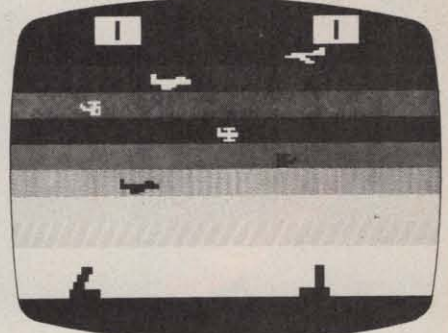
Basketball



Home Run



Breakout



Air-Sea Battle

player versions. Unlike other video baseball programs, action is almost exclusively confined to the infield. The basic game features a stationary batter, a catcher, and a pitcher (who becomes a fielder once the batter connects), and variations add one or two more fielders.

As in real baseball, pitching is 90 percent of the contest. Home Run can turn you into a regular Sandy Koufax, complete with singing curve, blazing fastball, and deceptive change-up. You can even hurl an authentic screwball if the spirit moves you.

Beginners should concentrate on

when you play solitaire. The robot fielders always concede first base to the batter, even when there is no one on, and this can prove a bit disconcerting. Since the machine is only interested in making a force out at second, the sacrifice is a useless tactic. The machine handles anything hit up the middle like a golden glove, so the home run—a liner over second that leaves the playfield—is something of a rarity.

BASKETBALL (CX2624) is sure to delight electronic sports game fans. It offers the most exciting four minutes

sparingly.

BREAKOUT (CX2622) is reputedly the second-highest dollar grosser in commercial arcades, and the home cartridge is a must. It's greatly enlivened by full-color graphics and a slew of speed and angle changes.

All variations share the same principle—the player hits a ball against a seven-tiered wall with his horizontally moving paddle. The ball removes one brick at a time in **Breakout**; in **Breakthru** it clears a path through the whole wall, bounces off

(continued on page 66)

video camera. Of course, there's nothing to stop you from putting a new lip-synch soundtrack on an old Errol Flynn movie taped off the air, or from substituting insulting words on the soundtrack of a commercial.

When making an audio dub with a microphone, be sure to reduce the TV volume; otherwise you'll get whistling or howling feedback. The soundtrack will record even if you can't hear it from the TV speaker.

The best way to make an audio dub: First, play the recorded tape back and locate the point from which you wish to start dubbing the sound. Next, press the Pause key. Now push Audio Dub and release the Pause key. At the point where you wish to stop dubbing, press the Pause again and release Audio Dub. As long as the Audio Dub key is depressed and the tape is running, the audio portion of the tape is being erased, whether or not any sound is being fed to the mic or audio in jack.

Computers at Home

continued from page 17

predictions based on equipment that's available, if not affordable, right now. And affordability is just around the corner.

You Don't Have to be a Genius

Using a computer requires little knowledge, genius, or experience—if it's been programmed right. Take the terminal at your neighborhood bank . . . It leads you by the hand through all the responses you must make to identify yourself, request the balance in your savings or checking account, transfer money from one account to another, make deposits, pay loan installments, even get cash—all with clear, simple instructions that almost no one seems to have any difficulty understanding the first time, and which everyone feels at home with by the second or third time. All you need to do to use it is to memorize your identification number and be able to read English (or Spanish, in some neighborhoods). Even video games require learning a little more than that!

What makes a computer act so smart is its program of instructions, called "software" as opposed to "hardware," which is the computer itself. The more thought, effort, and intelligence that go into writing a computer's program, the less of each is needed to run it—at least, if that was part of the programmer's goal. Helpful, sophisticated programs make it possible for computers to be operated easily by people who haven't the faintest notion of how to program them.

But learning how to program them isn't necessarily beyond the average

reader of this magazine. It may take years of study and experience to learn to write huge programs for huge computers, especially if you write them in the "machine code" that the computer understands directly. But there are easier ways to write programs, and easier computers to run them on.

Most home computers can be programmed in BASIC, a computer language with strong similarities to English. A program to find the square root of 5 could be as simple, in BASIC, as:

```
PRINT SQR (5)
```

Simply saying "SQR (5)" would make the computer calculate that value—but never tell you what it was. (Com-

puters will do anything you ask them, if it's in their power, and they'll do it tirelessly and accurately—but they're not smart enough to figure out what you want unless you tell them specifically.)

Yes, printing the square root of 5 can be done quicker and easier on a calculator. But computers can be programmed to do much more. For example, we can make our square root program more powerful by running it through a loop:

```
10 FOR X= 1 TO 999
20 PRINT X, SQR (X)
30 NEXT X
```

That program will print the numbers 1 to 999 in one column, the square roots of all those numbers in the next. If we



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wanted to fancy it up a little, we could
change the second line to read:

20 PRINT "The square root of X is
SQR (X).

With that change, the program's out-
put would change from lines like:

1 1
2 1.414

and so on, to more instructive lines
like:

The square root of 1 is 1

The square root of 2 is 1.414

And computers can not only parrot
words but recognize and manipulate
them. You could, for example, easily
write a program that would ask "Who
goes there?" and react differently to
the names typed in. It could, for in-
stance, answer every name but yours
with "Go away, I'm busy," but res-
pond to your name with an endear-
ment.

Simple programming is easy and
fun to learn. And even a beginning
programmer can quickly learn to
write some programs with real value.
Two of my earliest, for example,
balanced my checkbook and com-
pared my car's gas mileage, tankful
by tankful, to its previous average.

But though you can teach yourself
programming, you needn't. A host of
programs are on sale for all popular
computers. For Radio Shack's TRS-
80, for instance, the following are
among the many programs now
available—not even counting those
sold by Radio Shack itself—many at
prices comparable to those of video
game cartridges: Personal Ledger
(\$20), Barricade video game (\$15), Air
Raid video game (\$15), Microchess
(\$20), Biorhythm (\$8.50), General
Ledger (\$345), Horoscope casting
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D Tic-Tac-Toe with graphics (\$4).

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on a color TV screen, for checking the



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extra long thumb to out play 'em all

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Arcade Alley

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the rear of the playfield, and plows into the bricks again on the return.

Breakout success hinges on learning to anticipate the speed and the carom of the ball. Novices often try to dismantle a Breakout wall one brick at a time, but forging a tunnel through the entire wall works better. Once a ball passes through this "breakout" it will hit bricks from behind and ricochet to the back wall instead of toward the paddle. This removes the high-scoring rear rows with little additional effort. A breakthrough at an edge is better than one near the center, because it increases the chance that a ball will rattle around back there for a longer time.

Breakthru, though a little less challenging, is an addiction (grumps in seventeen states want to make it a felony). It's great for tournaments, since a three-out-of-five series takes only minutes, but it's first-rate played solitaire as well. A good feature is that a second wall appears once the player demolishes the first one.

AIR-SEA BATTLE (CX2602) is the ultimate game for people who enjoy blowing things up. **Anti-aircraft** lets players fire stationary ack-ack guns with variable gun angle, while **Torpedo** allows combatants to move their vertically firing submarines back and forth across the bottom of the playfield. **Shooting Gallery** combines both variables in one game featuring appropriate targets.

These games, as well as **Bomber** (planes firing at subs) and **Polaris** (subs shooting at planes), give a choice of straight or guided missiles. It may take a little practice, but the steerable missiles yield a more exciting, fast-paced game. Game #11, **Torpedo**, with guided missiles and blocking airborne objects, is our personal favorite. Addiction to this one is common and may produce an irresistible urge to superimpose the playfield over *The Tonight Show* and commence firing at Zsa Zsa Gabor.

The only real problem with this cartridge is the computer's inability to handle the guided missile option during solitaire play. We recommend **Torpedo** (#11), normally a two-player game, if you're all alone and just have to steer some missiles.

Obviously, these are only a half-dozen of the score of cartridges currently available from Atari. This column will eventually give some of these cartridges their deferred justice once products of other manufacturers have had their innings.

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