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The Secrets of Archon

December 16th, 2005 by **Medarch**

A detailed look into one of the best games of all time

v1.0 – by Medarch



I would say "greatest," but that usually means influential, which *Archon* hasn't been particularly. But that only serves to solidify its uniqueness. Billed as a combination action/strategy game upon its release in 1983, *Archon* ends up being far more action-oriented, but the diversity of characters from the fantasy realm and their combat attributes the game employs should be enough to dazzle any self-respecting game geek.

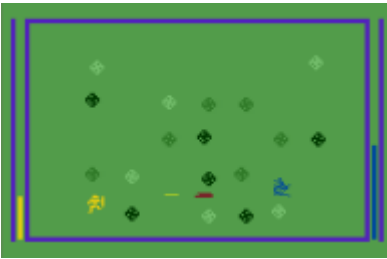
Answering the call of my own inner geek, I have exposed *Archon*'s mechanisms and hidden numbers through days of experimentation with the game's original and best version, that for the Atari 800. The description, analysis, and numbers below pertain only (as far as I know) to the Atari 8-bit computer version of *Archon*.

Recently I've been thinking about building a new *Archon*-type game for Windows. The first step, I figured, was to find a detailed FAQ on the original, but since apparently none exist, I had to make one myself. And so this report was born...



Overview / Rules

Archon is a war between the Light and the Dark: two armies of creatures and persons of myth and legend, called by the game "icons." Each side begins with a force of 18 icons, with 8 different types per side. The Light and the Dark do not share any types, yet the teams are very evenly matched. The armies alternate turns, maneuvering for position on a chessboard-like Strategy Screen. On a single turn either one spell may be cast, or one icon moved. Turns may not be passed. Whenever an icon is moved to a square already occupied by an opposing piece, a battle ensues on the Combat Screen, where each different type of piece has its own hit points, attack damage, and so on, detailed below. The winning icon keeps the square, while the loser is eliminated from the game (both icons may be destroyed in the battle, in which case both are eliminated).



Each side aims to occupy the five “Power Points” on the board or to completely eliminate the opposition. Victory can also be achieved by casting the Imprison spell on the opponent’s last remaining icon. The game can end in stalemate as well in either of two ways: the last two icons destroy each other in battle, or there is no progress for a certain number of turns. (“Progress” here means battles or Spells cast, and the number of turns is at least one full cycle of color-change (12 turns per side) but depends on the number of pieces left and has been difficult to determine in some cases.) Games usually last between 50 and 100 turns per side if the players are well-matched.



The Game Board

The strategic side of *Archon* takes place on a 9×9 grid of squares of three types: perma-light, perma-dark, and the ones that cycle through those two colors plus four more intermediate shades of green. The cycle repeats, progressing from lightest to darkest and back again, with one turn for each player at each color. I call these six colors “A” through “F”, with “A” being the lightest. The color of the square affects the hit points (more about that later) of both fighting creatures when a battle takes place there, with the Light Side benefiting from lighter squares and the Dark Side from darker.

When the Light Side moves first to open a game, the changing squares will begin at “D” and proceed darker, changing after each turn of the Dark Side. When Dark moves first, the changing squares begin at “C” and initially grow lighter. Moving first, therefore, has the disadvantage of quickly exposing your icons that begin on the changing squares.

At the edges and center of the game board are the five blinking red “Power Points”: one on a perma-light square where the Wizard starts, one on a perma-dark that the Sorceress controls, and three on squares that change color. Often, the entire game revolves around the battle for the three in the middle. Each of the five Power Points protects its square, as well as any icon on it, from being the target of a Spell. They also have healing properties (see the Hit Points and Damage section). Capturing all five wins the game.

Spells

The leader of each side is a mage (Wizard for Light, Sorceress for Dark) with a selection of seven spells. The Wizard and Sorceress have the same list of spells and may cast each once per game. If a mage is killed in combat, his/her remaining spells are gone. No spell may target a “Power Point” square or an icon on one. Thankfully, if the spell you choose has no legal targets, the game will realize it and tell you to choose another spell.

The *Archon* manual mentions that each time a spell is cast, the mage becomes weaker, but this is not quite true. Casting spells, as it turns out, will reduce the hit point bonus gained for the mage’s home square: one HP per spell cast. Any creature standing on it suffers the hit point penalty, even after the mage is killed. And a mage, even after casting spells, does not suffer the penalty when away from that square.

Teleport:

Moves one of your own icons to any empty square or to one occupied by an opponent’s icon, which begins a battle.

Early in the game, the computer A.I. loves to use this spell to catch a Basilisk on its weak starting square with a Unicorn (or vice-versa). Same with Banshee/Valkyrie, and sometimes a Golem (or Troll) will be sent across the board to take out a Goblin (or Knight). Less often, the computer will use the same technique with its heavy-hitters. The only other use the computer has for this spell is to put something (usually a Golem/Troll) within striking distance of the other team's mage. All are worthy uses of this great spell, but a human player can be more creative.

Heal:

Restores full health to one of your own injured icons.

The computer usually saves this spell for the Djinn, Phoenix, or Dragon, but the Wizard and Sorceress sometimes heal themselves late in the game as well. See the Hit Points and Damage section for more information.

Revive:

Brings one of your dead icons back to life, shiny and new. The revived piece must be placed within the charmed square, i.e., one of the empty squares surrounding your mage, no matter where your mage may be.

The computer will only use this spell to bring back one of its strongest two creatures, usually whichever is the first to die.

Exchange:

Swaps the board locations of any two icons. Cast it on two enemies, two of your own icons, or one of each.

The best use of Exchange is probably to move one of your Basilisks, Trolls, or Golems into the fray quickly. Trapping an enemy ground mover is possible, but the time cost to set it up usually negates any benefit. This is the only spell the computer never uses.

Shift Time:

Reverses the direction of the color cycle for the changing squares, but the squares will still change after every move of the player who did not move first. If the squares are A or F when the spell is cast, however, they will change to the opposite color the next time they change. This is great for catching several enemy icons on the wrong color at once, but it helps if you're the second player to move so that the change is immediate after the spell; that's another advantage of not going first.

The computer prefers to use Shift Time when there's an Imprison spell in effect (see below) but will also just employ it to give itself more time to try for all the Power Points.

Summon Elemental:

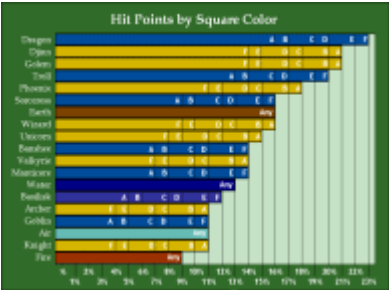
Calls forth an Earth, Water, Air, or Fire Elemental to do battle with an enemy piece. The elemental must attack immediately; it cannot be placed on an empty square and used later. You don't get to choose which Elemental appears, but the second player to cast this spell won't get the one summoned earlier by the other side.

The computer uses this spell to attack the opposing heavy-hitters caught on weak squares or when just about any enemy icon wanders suspiciously close to its mage. Moving your mage off its protective Power Point will usually trigger a Summon from the computer opponent also. Win or lose, the elemental is gone forever after its battle. The combat attributes of the elementals are given below in the Creatures section.

Imprison:

Freezes an enemy icon on its square until the changing squares become A (for an imprisoned Light Side icon) or F (for Dark). Imprisoned creatures may not move on the game board or cast spells, but can still move and defend themselves in battle if attacked.

The computer will only cast this spell in when the color cycle is $\hat{\in}\hat{\in}\hat{C}\hat{\in}$ or $\hat{\in}\hat{\in}\hat{D}\hat{\in}$ and heading toward its favored color. It also loves to extend (or reduce) a prison sentence with the Shift Time spell, but it $\hat{\in}$ TM s smart to save Imprison for the endgame, when you can freeze your opponent $\hat{\in}$ TM s last piece and win immediately.



Below is a list of all the creatures in the game, including a description and information about each.

Pawns: the Knight and the Goblin



These foot soldiers are the game's weakest and most numerous characters. Lacking a ranged attack, they must dodge bullets while trying to get close enough to do some damage. Although arrayed in the front of their armies, the Knights and Goblins really do their best work later in the game, after the opponent's pieces have been injured from other battles. If they can absorb one attack, they have a good chance of delivering a hit or two themselves, hopefully to polish off a weakened opponent.

The Knight and Goblin are identical in all ways except the shapes of their bodies and weapons—differences small enough to defy analysis.

Knight

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 4.5
 Max HP: 11.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 5
 Shot Speed: N/A
 Attack Rate: Ultra Fast (3/2 atks/sec)
 Sword Width, Horizontal Attacks: 2
 Sword Width, Vertical Attacks: 4

Goblin

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 4.5
 Max HP: 11.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 5
 Shot Speed: N/A
 Attack Rate: Ultra Fast (3/2 atks/sec)
 Club Width, H: 2, V: 4

Scouts: the Archer and the Manticore



These guys flank the Pawns and usually vie early in the game for the nearest Power Points. As the game's lowliest shooters, they are often outgunned but can still be effective if played skillfully.

The Archer is basically a Knight who shoots with a bow. He can hold his own on favorable squares (A and B); however, the Archer is quite vulnerable on the medium squares (C and D), where one shot from a Basilisk, Troll, or Dragon will take him out, as will two bashes from a Goblin's club.

The Dark Side's Manticore owns the weakest attack in the game, but he makes up for it with a decent hit point total and his widely-spaced tail spikes, which are hard to dodge at close range. He will have trouble against the Wizard or Unicorn and should avoid Knights on squares A, B, or C, where he'll need 3 hits to kill them. The Manticore is excellent for trying to pull off an upset against a Djinn or Golem; those matchups can be very entertaining.

Archer

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 4.5
 Max HP: 11.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 5
 Shot Speed: Medium (70%)
 Attack Rate: Medium (3/4 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 1, V: 2

Manticore

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 7.5
 Max HP: 14.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 4
 Shot Speed: Slow (50%)
 Attack Rate: Medium (3/4 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 5, V: 10

Fliers: the Valkyrie and the Banshee



The Fliers begin the game in the four corners of the game board, whence they have no trouble escaping as they soar over other pieces and enjoy the benefits of diagonal movement. Although the Valkyrie and Banshee are very different, they're both great for attacking weaker opponents caught on a bad square, especially when it's bothersome to disturb your carefully-deployed and less flexible ground forces.

The Valkyrie improves on the Archer, having moderate hit point and damage levels. Her weakness is that her spears are both slow and narrow, so the Valkyrie must get in close for a successful attack (preferably on the diagonal). No other slow-shooter in the game has projectiles merely one pixel wide. The Valkyrie is excellent on medium squares, except against the Dragon on œDœ , where one blast of fire will roast her.

It's always fun and challenging to use the Banshee because of its unique attack form: a scream-cloud that quickly drains the life of an opponent caught within its radius. Life is drained 1 HP at a time, for a total of 8 if the cloud hits for the full duration. The Banshee can move while screaming, which is a mixed blessing—it's impossible to escape from the scream, but the Banshee is left extremely vulnerable after (and during) the attack. In light of this, the Banshee is best used for polishing off badly injured opponents, and in this task it has no equal, but it's helpless against a foe with a tall health bar. Perhaps more than any other creature, the Banshee needs to stick to its favorable squares.

Valkyrie

Move: Fly 3
 Base HP: 7.5
 Max HP: 14.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 7
 Shot Speed: Slow (50%)
 Attack Rate: Medium (3/4 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 1, V: 4

Banshee

Move: Fly 3
 Base HP: 7.5
 Max HP: 14.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 1-8
 Attack Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)
 Scream Cloud Size: 64×32

Brutes: the Golem and the Troll



The Brutes are strong, tough, and conspicuously slow. In fact, besides the Earth Elemental, there are no other creatures that walk around at less than normal speed. Even though the speed reduction is only one-quarter, the resulting disadvantage in combat is big, and the Golem and Troll have trouble evading close-range fighters like Knights and Goblins. But with their impressive firepower and health, as well as the biggest bullets in the game, they always have a chance of upsetting more powerful foes.

Golems have 1 more hit point than Trolls, but otherwise they're equivalent in ability. That extra HP does come in handy for the Golem sometimes—for example, in a head-to-head matchup on œEœ where the Troll should be favored, both need only 2 hits for victory.

Golem

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 14.5
 Max HP: 21.5
 Speed: Slow (75%)
 Attack Power: 10
 Shot Speed: Slow (50%)

Troll

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 13.5
 Max HP: 20.5
 Speed: Slow (75%)
 Attack Power: 10
 Shot Speed: Slow (50%)

Attack Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 8, V: 12

Attack Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 8, V: 12

Assassins: the Unicorn and the Basilisk



These two quick and deadly creatures are more than a step up from the others weâ€™ve looked at so far. What makes them so dangerous is not only how fast they can shoot (the best shot speed in the game), but also how often they can shoot. At 1 per second, the Unicorn and Basilisk can attack more frequently than anything but the short-ranged Knight or Goblin. Since the Assassins begin on wrong-color squares and are so important to their respective sides, an early Teleport attack involving these creatures is always a wise decision.

The Unicorn is the real workhorse of the Light Side; its unique movement range of Ground 4 makes it the most annoying enemy of Dark as it gallops around blockades and picks off anything left too long on a color-changing square. Itâ€™s also excellent against the Dragon on middle-color squares and is Lightâ€™s best hope against the Sorceress on her home turf, where the Unicorn can absorb a hit and still fight on! and may only need 2 hits for the kill if the Sorceress has already cast three spells. In this case, the Unicornâ€™s supremely fast laser beams actually make it favored, which is one of Lightâ€™s most important advantages. The Unicorn does well on æœDœ but should beware of darker squares, where it can be taken out by 1 shot from a Dragon, Troll, or Basilisk (on æœFœ).

Taking into account damage, attack rate, shot speed, and projectile width, the Basilisk is unquestionably the most potent attacker in *Archon*. Long-range foes have trouble dodging the Basiliskâ€™s super-fast petrifying gaze, and its 10-pixel-wide vertical shots make it nearly invincible against anything that likes to get in close for an attack. The Basilisk often wins games for the Dark Side, either by dethroning the Wizard or by destroying half a dozen Light pieces in a row. Its one glaring weakness is hit points, so the Basilisk must be careful, especially avoiding Unicorns on lighter squares if possible.

Unicorn

Move: Ground 4
 Base HP: 8.5
 Max HP: 15.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 7
 Shot Speed: Very Fast (100%)
 Attack Rate: Very Fast (1 atk/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 1, V: 2

Basilisk

Move: Ground 3
 Base HP: 5.5
 Max HP: 12.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 9
 Shot Speed: Very Fast (100%)
 Attack Rate: Very Fast (1 atk/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 3, V: 10

Hunters: the Phoenix and the Shapeshifter



These fliers are the most mobile icons in the game. Their movement range of 5 is huge on the 9×9 board, and nothing is ever safe from their attack. The Phoenix and Shapeshifter are also *Archon*â€™s most unusual creatures, having peculiar strenghts and weaknesses.

The Phoenix has a short-range attack similar to the Bansheeâ€™s, but it defends the Phoneix even as it harms enemies. While its flame is on, the Phoenix is impervious to attackâ€™but immobile. This is a terrible weakness, since it can almost always be hit just as the flame expires, making this bird worthless against players who know what to do. (This flaw was corrected in *Archon II*â€™s Firebird, who can cut short its flame attack.) Creatures with slower attack rates have more trouble taking advantage of this trick, so the best

job for the Phoenix is to slay Dark's 2-seconds-per-shot Dragon. A computer opponent will not use the trick at all, so in that case the Phoenix can have great success against Goblins, Banshees, and Trolls as well. A Phoenix-Shapeshifter battle is often a long, boring affair (each flame protecting against the other) in which the one with the most hit points coming in almost always wins. This is never good for the Phoenix, though, who is sure to suffer severe injury if victorious.

The Shapeshifter may be the Dark Side's greatest advantage. As its name suggests, it takes on the form and abilities of its opponent in combat. The opponent's base HP are also used, but the Shapeshifter of course gets the Dark Side's HP bonuses for square color. This means that on E and especially F, it will have a big advantage. Unless you're confident, though, you shouldn't start attacking early in the game on squares C and D because the Shapeshifter is evenly matched against just about any opponent before they've sustained injuries. The Shapeshifter's best feature is that, unlike any other piece, it never suffers permanent damage—it's always completely healed after every battle. Plus, the computer A.I. has a bad bug where it attacks the Shapeshifter, even on dark squares, as if it did not heal after being damaged! The Shapeshifter's hit points work a little differently against Elementals, when it gets a base HP of 9.5—not all that much—plus the usual color-bonus, regardless of which Elemental it faces. This is the Shifter's biggest weakness, as it's an even fight with a Fire or Earth Elemental, even on the darkest of squares—something a smart Light Side player will use to his advantage.

Phoenix

Move: Fly 5

Base HP: 11.5

Max HP: 18.5

Speed: Normal

Attack Power: 2-10

Shot Speed: N/A

Attack Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)

Flame Cloud Max. Size: 64×32

Shapeshifter

Move: Fly 5

Champions: the Djinn and the Dragon



As the game's best two fighters, these characters are the most important to their respective sides other than the Mages. Should the Djinn or Dragon go down in combat, they're the ones you want to bring back with your Revive spell. Both can fly with a range of 4, so they can always keep an eye on multiple Power Points at once. In fact, from the center square, they can reach any other spot on the game board.

The Djinn has as many hit points as a Golem but significantly less attack power, delivering a relatively low 6 damage per shot. His shots are large and swift, though, giving Goblins and Banshees little chance for survival and Trolls not much more. He should avoid the Dragon and Basilisks on medium-color squares, but, if healthy, the Djinn is the only Light Side icon to have an advantage in shots-to-kill over the Shapeshifter on C. The Djinn is fairly vulnerable to Elementals, especially Fire, on the three darker square colors, so he needs to be moved to safety as early as possible. When Light needs to take out the Sorceress on her home square to win the game, the Djinn is an excellent choice for the attack.

The Dragon is the strongest and most intimidating creature in the game. No opponent, on any color square, can withstand two blasts of his fire, and many are roasted with just one. The Dragon's health bar, too, towers over all others with an incredible maximum of 23.5 hit points; some foes will need five hits to bring him down. He pays for these gaudy numbers, however, with a miserable attack rate of one shot every two seconds, the worst in the game. Consequently, the Dragon can really struggle against the Phoenix and against the swift-shooting Unicorn on medium squares. In most cases, though, the Dragon will have the upper hand, notably against any Elemental, no matter what color square. Light should save his Elemental attack for the Shapeshifter instead. Dark should make sure to Heal the Dragon if his health gets low.

Djinn

Move: Fly 4
 Base HP: 14.5
 Max HP: 21.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 6
 Shot Speed: Medium Fast (80%)
 Attack Rate: Med. Slow (2/3 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 5-7, V: 8

Dragon

Move: Fly 4
 Base HP: 16.5
 Max HP: 23.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 11
 Shot Speed: Medium (70%)
 Attack Rate: Very Slow (1/2 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 4, V: 6

Mages: the Wizard and the Sorceress



As the leaders of their teams, each Mage starts on a Power Point and usually spends most of the game defending it. Although weaker than the very best fighters in combat, they are strong enough to be favored in any fight on their home squares, as long as they haven't cast too many spells; the HP bonus for their home squares goes down by 1 for each spell cast. Later in the game, the Mages may venture away from their Power Point and into the battlefield, where they're both superb combatants on middle-color squares. A battle between the two of them, which is rare, would be even chances on any square but A.

If you're playing the Light Side, your favorite piece will be the Wizard. He's an awesome, intimidating fighter who shoots fireballs that are large, powerful, and swift. Dark shouldn't bother attacking him with anything less than its best creatures. The Wizard is very rarely the underdog; if he does need to go wandering away from his home square, he should avoid the Dragon on D, Basilisk on E, and Shapeshifter or Troll on F.

Dark's spellcaster is the Sorceress, whose lightning bolts are faster than her rival's fireballs, but are smaller and less powerful. She's not quite as good as the Wizard in combat, but is still more than a match for any Light piece on a medium square. Dark players may enjoy using the Sorceress as an attacker and handing off Power Point guard duty to a Dragon or Troll.

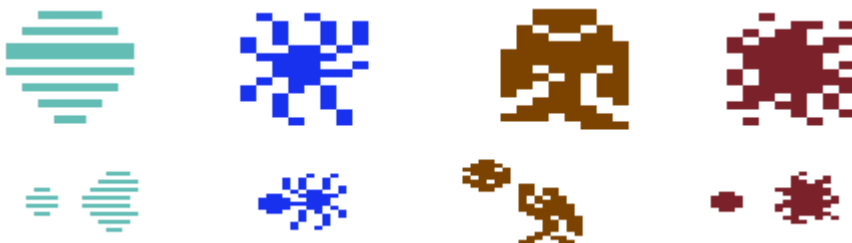
Wizard

Move: Teleport 3
 Base HP: 9.5
 Max HP: 16.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 10
 Shot Speed: Medium Fast (80%)
 Attack Rate: Medium (3/4 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 6, V: 8-12

Sorceress

Move: Teleport 3
 Base HP: 9.5
 Max HP: 16.5
 Speed: Normal
 Attack Power: 8
 Shot Speed: Fast (90%)
 Attack Rate: Medium (3/4 atks/sec)
 Projectile Width, H: 2, V: 4

Elementals: Air, Water, Earth, and Fire



The four Elementals do not fight exclusively for either side, they just fight when called upon by the spell Summon Elemental. They disappear after their one battle. Generally, they're mediocre warriors, each worth about a Valkyrie except Fire, which is a little better. Unfortunately, the spellcaster has no control over which

Elemental shows up. Elementals do not receive an HP bonus for square color, so they have the same number on any square, and it's a fairly good amount.

Overall, the weakest of the bunch is probably the Air Elemental, whose projectiles look like the Djinn's but are a bit slower and weaker. It is similar to the Archer, but better due to its larger bullets and unique attack rate of 6 shots every 7 seconds. The Air Elemental is also the only icon with physical gaps in its body, allowing the horizontal attacks of some creatures (Djinn, Unicorn, Valkyrie, Archer, Shapeshifter, Basilisk, and Manticore) to pass right through, if it's lucky. It's probably best used against a Unicorn or Shapeshifter.

Marginally better than Air is the Water Elemental. It has more HP and does more damage than Air, but cannot shoot as often. Practical results with Water will be similar to Air, but Water can take out a Basilisk on a square with one shot and will have at least an even fight against a Shapeshifter on any square.

The Earth Elemental is a poor man's Troll, having the same lumbering pace but fewer HP and dealing not quite as much damage. At 9 per shot, though, Earth still packs a punch. You might use it to take out some weaker foes with 1 shot, and it probably is the best Elemental against the Dragon.

Fire is, without a doubt, the best Elemental the spell can buy. Similar to a Basilisk, Fire can do damage in a hurry, mimicking the Basilisk's attack power and attack rate. Its bullets aren't quite as fast, but they're still swift enough to get the job done. Fire is great against just about anybody, but especially against a Djinn, Unicorn, or Basilisk. It has very few hit points, though, and can be taken out by 1 shot of a Dragon, Golem, or Troll.

Air

HP: 11.5
Speed: Normal
Attack Power: 5
Shot Speed: Medium (70%)
Shot Rate: Medium Fast (6/7 atks/sec)
Projectile Width, H: 5-7, V: 8

Water

HP: 13.5
Speed: Normal
Attack Power: 6
Shot Speed: Slow (50%)
Attack Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)
Projectile Width, H: 3-6, V: 4-10

Earth

HP: 16.5
Speed: Slow (75%)
Attack Power: 9
Shot Speed: Slow (50%)
Shot Rate: Slow (3/5 atks/sec)
Projectile Width, H: 8, V: 12

Fire

HP: 9.5
Speed: Normal
Attack Power: 9
Shot Speed: Medium Fast (80%)
Attack Rate: Very Fast (1 atk/sec)
Projectile Width, H: 3-6, V: 4-10

Get the Game

If you'd like to play *Archon* and you don't have access to the original Atari hardware or software, I recommend using an emulator like [Atari800Win PLus](#) with an [Archon disk image](#). For the best play experience, you'll need a good joystick as well. Have fun!

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1. *medarch* Says:

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