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A Gallery of Games from Electronic Arts (1983)

This article from *A.N.A.L.O.G. Computing* (Issue 13, September 1983) is believed by editor Lee Pappas to contain the first reviews of Electronic Arts games ever published.

It seems I was dubious about "games as art" at a rather tender age.

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ARCHON (The Light and the Dark)
by Freefall Associates
32K Disk $40.00

M.U.L.E.
by Ozark Softscape
48K Disk $40.00

PINBALL CONSTRUCTION SET
by Bill Budge
48K Disk $40.00

WORMS?
by David S. Maynard
32K Disk $35.00

ELECTRONIC ARTS
2755 Campus Drive
San Mateo, California 94403

Electronic Arts (EA) is a San Mateo-based game company that manages its programmers like pop stars and packages its software like record albums. The corporate ads present a self-conscious grouping of "computer artists," identically clad in dark, Bohemian jerseys, blue jeans and a touch of leather; the slick copy confidently assures us that video game software will soon hold a respectable position in the hierarchy of Fine Arts. All of which strokes the egos of computer game authors (read: potential customers), who enjoy viewing themselves as unsung cultural heroes and like nothing better than reading about the significance of their work.

Frankly, the whole idea sounds suspiciously Californian to us Yankee fahmahs up hee-yah in Massachusetts. But we decided to reserve judgment on Electronic Arts until we got a chance to play with their initial lineup of four Atari programs.

The light and the dark.

Archon is a simplified, speeded-up and extremely violent variation on the classic game of chess. Created by Jon Freeman (who wrote *Temple of Apshai* and *Star Warrior* for Epyx), Anne Westfall and Paul Reiche, *Archon* turns your TV set into a non-stop battlefield where only the quick and cunning will survive.

The object of *Archon* is to occupy five "power points" located on a 9x9 grid of squares. Two-thirds of the grid are composed of white and black squares which retain their color throughout the game. The other squares cycle back and forth through the gray scale during the course of play. It's a good idea to keep your players on squares with a matching color (white on light squares, black on dark), because your forces are strongest on favorable squares.

Although the powers of Light and Dark are evenly matched, their individual playing pieces are quite different. The Light Side boasts a pair of lightning-fast Unicorns, an explosive Phoenix and assorted Archers,

Golems, Valkyries and Knights, all under the command of a spell-casting Wizard. The Dark Side is presided over by an evil Sorceress, who wields a powerful fire-breathing Dragon, Basilisks, Manticores. Banshees and a terrifying Shapeshifter which can instantly assume the attributes of its foe. Each piece is endowed with specific capabilities which determine its effectiveness against the enemy.

If all of this sounds like more memory work than fun, be assured that it is not. *Archon* is engineered to play like an arcade slugfest, not an adventure; it requires no charts, dice or dungeon-master, and no more strategy than a game of checkers. All you need are a couple of joysticks and a thirst for revenge!

Whenever you invade an opponent's square, the main grid is replaced by a widescreen battlefield filled with obstacles that fade and reappear without warning. You must confront the enemy directly with whatever weapons your player can muster, and earn the right to occupy the new square with your own blood. Definitely not for the faint of heart.

You can play *Archon* against the computer, or you can fight it out with a human opponent. It turns out that the computer isn't a particularly smart player. After two weeks of practice, I can beat the machine almost every time. Nevertheless, the single-player mode is useful for learning the strengths and weaknesses of each piece.

It's when you pit your skills against a good human player that *Archon* comes into its own. At lunchtime and after-hours, the offices of *A.N.A.L.O.G.* echo with the searing roar of dragon-fire and shouted obscenities from angry players. *Archon* turns friend against friend, and inspires grudges that can last for days. What better compliment can you give to a computer program?

Archon is one of the most addicting two-player games ever created for the Atari. I unconditionally recommend it to anyone with a good supply of patient, forgiving friends to play against.

The politics of *M.U.L.E.*

If I told you this game was a cross between *Kingdom* and *Monopoly,* you might not get too excited. Yet *M.U.L.E.* imaginatively blends the basic elements of these otherwise sedate games into a fast-moving experience that's even more fun than collecting rent on Boardwalk.

M.U.L.E. puts you and up to three other players on an

unsettled alien planet. Your job is to develop and hopefully monopolize the planet's natural resources. To win, you must buy, sell, trade and/or connive your way up to the position of First Founder, aided by a mischievous herd of mechanical quadrupeds known as MULEs (Multiple Use Labor Elements).

Ozark Softscape, the creators of *M.U.L.E.*, have loaded the game with interesting twists and detail. Each player is represented by a different alien species with a wide range of skills and exploitative abilities. Random events such as planetquakes, plagues, acid rains and runaway MULEs will hamper your best efforts. There's even a Wampus running loose in the mountains, and a pirate lurking around to swipe your goods.

The audio/visual design of *M.U.L.E.* is exceptionally well executed. Its graphics display features a number of imaginative special effects and lots of colorful animation. Best of all is the toe-tapping introductory theme: one of the niftiest examples of original computer music I've ever heard.

If a four-way game of *Monopoly* is your idea of a great Friday night, then *M.U.L.E.* is definitely for you. Its ingenious, professional design puts it far ahead of any other economic simulation game on the market. You may even find yourself learning a thing or two!

Quarters not included.

Steve Wozniak, inventor of the Apple computer, has called *Pinball Construction Set* "the best program ever written for an 8-bit machine." I can't agree with such a sweeping endorsement, but it's hard not to admire the skill and ingenuity that went into Bill Budge's most ambitious project to date.

The *Construction Set* is a fully integrated, graphics-oriented design tool that lets you create your own video pinball games. Virtually every important game parameter can be edited at will, including the placement and number of flippers, bumpers, gates and targets, the shape of lanes and corners, sound effects, ball speed, gravity, elasticity — you name it! Previous designs can be stored and reloaded into the editor for further revision, or saved out as a completely independent, self-booting game disk that you can give to your friends. Five complete sample games are also included on the master disk. Not a bad deal for forty bucks.

The most advanced feature of *Pinball Construction Set* is its user interface. A hand-shaped cursor is used to point at little pictures — "icons" — that suggest your different options. Touch a flipper icon with the hand and you can drag it around the playing field, dropping it wherever you like. Touch the paintbrush, dip it into a paint bucket, and you can change the color of borders and obstacles. The magnifying glass is useful for fine detail (game titles, decorations, etc); the scissors, hammer and arrow let you move corners and borders to your heart's content.

Like many Apple conversions, *Pinball Construction Set* uses mode 8 bit-mapping and artifact colors to make the translation as simple and direct as possible. As such, it doesn't exploit the Atari's special hardware features as fully as the other new releases from Electronic Arts. Nevertheless, the power and flexibility of the program are undeniably impressive. This package is required study for all serious software authors — and an unbeatable value if you're into video pinball.

Tomorrow's toy.

David Maynard's *Worms?* is the prettiest and most enigmatic of the Electronic Arts offerings. Inspired by the whimsical mathematics of Martin Gardner in *Scientific American,* it may be the first original software release that can legitimately be called a toy.

Upon booting the disk, the player is greeted with a pattern of dots covering the upper two-thirds of the screen. Your paddle controls a series of four cursors (the worms), which may be "taught" to move in different patterns across the matrix of dots. Once set in motion, the worms repeat their programmed patterns according to strict mathematical rules, leaving a trail of color as they pass and "singing" in harmonically related tones whenever they change direction. You can independently program each worm yourself, or you can ask the computer to generate its own random (but mathematically correct) pattern for any one of the worms.

Not into mathematics? Then put all four cursors on automatic pilot, shut off the room lights and enjoy as *Worms?* explodes across your screen in a brilliant display of music and light. Study *Worms?* as it demonstrates basic principles of geometry, harmony and probability. Or put the disk away and boot your favorite "shoot the alien" game instead — for alas, *Worms?* is not for everybody.

I suggest that you preview *Worms?* at your local computer store before you buy it. People who are fascinated by Rubik's cubes, abstract math and Christmas knick-knacks

that "snow" when you shake them will probably like it a lot. Others will consider it a pointless waste of money. Congratulations to Electronic Arts for daring to support this unusual and, to my mind, beautiful product.

A warning to Omnimon! users.

It's a shame to taint this otherwise favorable review with the following paragraphs. But few things get my goat more than inconsideration on the part of software publishers.

Those of you who read my review of Omnimon! in Issue #12 know what a godsend it is for serious programmers. This ROM-resident monitor has saved me many hours of program development and debugging time, and recently made it possible for me to recover several otherwise unsalvageable text files that were lost when my word processor accidently destroyed a disk directory. Ironically, the review you are reading is one of those salvaged files!

Three of the Ataris in our offices are now equipped with Omnimon! boards, and more are on the way. Staff programmers Tom Hudson and Charlie Bachand both swear by Omnimon! So imagine our collective dismay when, upon booting *Archon* for the first time, we received a curt message on the monitor: REMOVE ROM AT $C000.

I don't mind if software manufacturers copyguard their products. As long as an extra backup copy is provided, or a reasonable backup policy is clearly stated in the

documentation (as is the case with Electronic Arts), I see no reason why companies shouldn't try to protect themselves against piracy. But there is such a thing as too much protection. Electronic Arts is clearly going way out of line when they start checking for the presence of an Omnimon! board. Granted, Omnimon! could potentially be used as a tool to "unlock" EA's elaborate disk-protection scheme. But it stands to reason that anybody smart enough to use Omnimon! for this purpose could use a common sector editor to accomplish the same result.

As a programmer and professional Atari user, Omnimon! is far more important to me than any of EA's otherwise delightful products. Until Electronic Arts stops using this arrogant and misguided form of "protection," I cannot recommend their software to anyone who owns an Omnimon! board or may be considering the purchase of one. If and when EA informs me of their intention to eliminate the ROM check, I will gladly announce it in a future issue.

The verdict.

Does Electronic Arts live up to its lofty marketing? *Archon* and *M.U.L.E.* are vastly entertaining but fairly conventional games that should insure EA the income they will need to grow. *Pinball Construction Set* is a sophisticated, recognizable "name" product that may appeal more to tinkerers and hackers than the general consumer. *Worms?* is EA's answer to Disney's *Fantasia:* an artsy, introspective

loss leader that shows a commitment to fresh ideas and talent, and which may in time be recognized as EA's first truly significant contribution to the world of computer entertainment. All in all, a strong opening salvo from this young and distinctly Californian company.

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