ARTISTRY IN ELECTRONIC GAMING

The "star" system pays off

by DAVID DUBERMAN

Electronic Arts, a visionary new company in San Mateo, California, has introduced a line of software that could quite possibly change the history of computer gaming. **Archon, Murder on the Zinderneuf, Pinball Construction Set, M.U.L.E.**, and **WORMS?** are five of the most original and innovative programs that have been produced under the heading of entertainment for any home computer. Indeed, they could be the forerunners of future software that will be *more* than entertainment.

Electronic Arts is deliberately emulating the music recording industry in producing and marketing its computer software. It is building a "star" system of programmers for whom the best development tools and supporting staff will be provided. Even the packaging is similar. Each game comes in its own handsome, three-panel, cardboard jacket. Everything about these programs attests to thorough professionalism.

Archon was created by Freefall Associates, namely Anne Westfall, John Freeman, and Paul Reiche III. This highly original and tremendously exciting game of strategy *and* reflexes pits the forces of Light against the forces of Darkness. The game bears a superficial resemblance to chess, but it is very different. At the game's start, the forces of Light are lined up opposite the forces of Darkness, each taking one side of the 9 × 9 board. Each force has a primary piece, or icon; the Wizard for the Light side and the Sorceress for the Dark. Supporting these are such lesser icons as Unicorns, a Djinni, a Phoenix, a dragon, trolls and banshees. Turns alternate, each side either moving a piece or using its primary icon to cast a spell. Spells include the power to revive a captured icon or teleport icons to anyplace on the board. The object is to either occupy all of the five designated power squares, or to eliminate the opposing side. You may control either side against the computer or a friend, or you can watch the computer play a rip-roaring game against itself.

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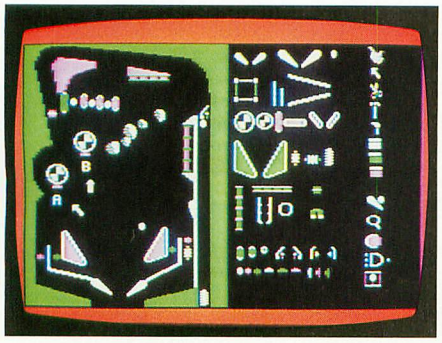
Pinball Construction Set



Murder on the Zinderneuf

Archon

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Why rip-roaring, you ask? Because to capture a square, you must do battle with the piece (if any) occupying it. When you land on a square occupied by an enemy piece, you and the enemy are instantly transported to a special battlefield, where a fight to the death determines the ultimate occupant of the square. It is entirely possibly that both combatants will die.

Each type of icon — there are seventeen types, of widely varying powers — has its own unique mode of attack on the battlefield. The different characteristics — the icon's speed, weapon used, speed of a projectile, the striking force, and interval between attacks — strongly influence the outcome of any battle, but there are additional determinants. Fifty of the squares are either white or black, and stay that way. The other thirty-one squares vary in luminosity, becoming a little darker or a little lighter after every other turn. An icon's strength and endurance bears a direct relationship to the luminance of the square being contested. Obstacles of varying densities appear and disappear in random spots about the battlefield. Depending on their apparent solidity, they may interfere with your icon or its shot.

As you can see, Archon is not a simple game. It is impossible to play Archon meaningfully without reading the instructions thoroughly. But once you become familiar with all the strange new pieces, their moves and powers, and the dynamically changing fields, you may decide, as I have, that Archon combines all the best aspects of existing strategy and arcade games into a new synthesis that is more challenging and enjoyable than any of its progenitors.

Also from Freefall Associates comes the fabulous graphic mystery adventure, **Murder on the Zinderneuf**, by Robert Leyland. Whodunit fans, drop your Agatha Christie and come running — this is your game! Set aboard the luxury dirigible Zinderneuf in 1936, the game's object, naturally, is to solve a murder. You are the detective (you can be one of eight thinly-disguised sleuths from literature), and must identify the murderer from among fifteen survivors on board the Zinderneuf. You may search the dirigible for clues and question all occupants of the liner. Your interrogation style for each suspect is up to you, from easygoing to hard and pushy. You have twelve game hours (about 36 minutes of real time) to solve the crime.

Although I am by no means a fan of the mystery genre, I find I must praise this game. First of all, input to the game is by joystick only — you never touch the keyboard. The ship's deck is portrayed on a vertically scrolling layout four screens high. The graphics, done in GTIA mode, are among the most colorful and attractive I have seen in any game. You and the suspects are portrayed by animated figures roaming the deck. To question someone, just encounter him or her, then choose an interrogation style from a short but thorough list. You may ask your suspect about any person on board. The usefulness of any answers depends on the appropriateness of your style, whom you are asking about, and whom you are asking.

You may make an accusation at any time. If you are correct and have uncovered enough proof, the killer will make a full confession. If, however, you do not have sufficient evidence, or if you accuse the wrong person, you may not question him or her for the rest of the game — a severe liability.

You may quit at any time, whereupon you learn the murderer's identity and motive. Because each game does not use all sixteen characters, and because of the variety of detective's identities (which determines available interrogation styles), every game is quite different.

In **Pinball Construction Set**, Bill Budge has created a totally unique program that is sure to set many precedents. He might alternatively have called it The Ultimate Pinball Editor or Zen and the Art of Pinball Design. It provides a means for you to build the customized pinball machine of your dreams. You start with the blank shape of a pinball machine on the left half of the video screen, and on the right are your materials: a blinking cursor in the form of a pointing hand; a toolkit; and a variety of parts. You pick up parts and position them on the board by moving the cursor with the joystick.

Among the parts used to actually construct the game are flippers, bumpers, kickers, a "black-hole" ball eater, a magnet that imparts a twist to the ball's movement, and a nifty three-ball hopper that can set three balls in play at once. Also, you can place spinners, rollovers, lanes, and targets wherever you like on the board. Assorted polygons are available, and once you've placed them, you can use certain tools to change their shape any way you like. You have a paintbrush, paintpots, and a magnifier with which to detail your board's appearance to the nth degree.

Once you've built your board, you may assign bonus and sound values to various combinations of targets — that is, they must all be hit to score the bonus — or set scoring for any individual target.

You control the ball's apparent weight, how bouncy the sides are, how much kick the bumpers give, and how fast the ball travels. You needn't play with only one ball — you may use as many as you like. You may also use as many flippers as you like. However, the more you add, the slower the final game.

Another handy feature lets you play a sample ball any time during a construction session. For a full-length game, activate the disk. You can save the parameters of your game to disk for future recall and modification. The Make Game option writes your entire game to disk as a binary load file so your friends with ATARI computers (but without the Construction Set) can play it.

The disk comes with five prefabricated games which you can load, play and examine for construction and wiring. These are cleverly designed to inspire you to create even better games. Pinball Construction Set is a marvelous feat of programming, not to mention a potential source of an endless supply of great pinball games for you and your friends.

M.U.L.E. is a game designed by the team at Ozark Softscape — Dan Bunten, Bill Bunten, Alan Watson, and Jim Rushing. From one to four players at-

continued on next page

tempt to colonize a remote planet with the help of a strange robot called a Multiple Use Labor Element, or M.U.L.E. If fewer than four people play, the computer assumes the remaining roles. The M.U.L.E. assists you in settling a plot of land to grow food, produce energy, or mine for Smithore, the mineral used for building M.U.L.E.s.

During each turn, each player, human or computer, has a chance to select a plot of land, then develop it by installing a M.U.L.E. Once all players have done so, a period of production occurs, during which everyone's assets increase or decrease depending on conditions. Then comes the Auction period. The Auction is fairly complicated, but ingeniously implemented with the use of joysticks and graphic charts on the screen. The laws of supply and demand take dramatic effect, careful planning pays off, and lack of planning incurs disaster.

The Beginner's game of M.U.L.E. lasts six rounds. At the end, whoever has the highest net worth will be the winner, or "First Founder" of the colony. You can also play a Standard version or a Tournament version.

I recommend this game highly to parents as a way to teach the principles of economics to their children, while having a lot of fun. Of course, advanced versions are eminently suitable for adults.

WORMS?, by David S. Maynard, takes place in an imaginary world of pure mathematics, with music and geometry. From one to four "worms", each with its own distinctive color, traverse a grid of dots. The "liner notes" inside the game's package urge that you *not* read the instructions — you should play the game and learn its rules by osmosis. I had little luck with this technique, but if you intend to purchase the game and to follow its maker's instructions, read no further. The WORMS? playfield is covered with dots, each constituting the center of a territory. Worms start in the center and can move in one of six directions, leaving a trail behind as they move from center to center. You "train" your worm each time you make a move. Once it recognizes a movement pattern, it will continue to move automatically in that pattern until it is blocked. Then you must give it a new movement instruction. Your worm scores points by occupying a territory, that is, by laying the last (sixth) trail in a territory. Your worm wins points by occupying the most territories before dying, which is what happens when it is blocked in all directions.

A game of WORMS? can be breathtakingly beautiful and agonizingly frustrating all at once. It's a very abstract sort of game whose concept is unusual and original. Electronic Arts is to be congratulated for its confidence in the intelligence of the software-buying public. I hope that this confidence will be borne out, so that the company can bring us even more programs to challenge our intellects and tickle our imagination.

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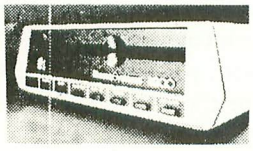

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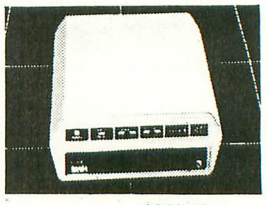

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