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COMPUTER VIDEO GAMES

Hands-on Reviews of the latest Computer Game Software

USING a "home" computer, you've likely already come to grips with the mass storage options. This generally means a choice or mix of tape cassette, mini-floppy disk, solid-state board, or even a hard disk. The cassette method has the virtue of being very affordable, of course, and is often employed with low-cost "starter" computers. Floppies, on the other hand, come higher, with disk drives costing as much or even double the price of the computer itself.

Audio cassettes are cheap, but awfully slow. Typically, they take four or five minutes to load 32K of program material—if you're lucky and no error messages pop up on line 895 or wherever. When error messages do appear, you have to rewind and start the loading process all over again. So they're a real turnoff. In contrast, diskettes can load 32K in a matter of six to eight seconds, and with a high degree of reliability and accuracy. But, oh, that first hardware cost if the computer itself is a cheapy.

The news now is that you will soon have an alternative. The new format is called a "wafer," and it's a very distant cousin of the microcassette. The difference is that it has been designed specifically for use with home computers and,

as such, has a lot of very special features.

The medium is an endless-loop tape $\frac{1}{16}$ " wide and housed in a minuscule cassette case that's a little smaller than a credit-card calculator (see photo below). The tape currently being used, according to Entrepo, Inc., the manufacturer, is high-grade video tape slit to less-than-shoestring width. The oxide formulation may change in the future, but the size and convenience won't.

Tape is available in lengths from 5 to 50 ft., in 5-ft. increments, and it's all certified. It whizzes past the record/playback head at 10 ips, and a 50-footer can hold up to 128K, says the manufacturer. Here's the best part: suggested retail price for a data recorder for these wafers will be about \$100—only slightly more than the \$75 or so that companies are asking for their house-branded data-cassette machines.

Entrepo calls the hardware "Microdrive," and the tapes are "Microwafers." They will retail in the \$3-to-\$5 range for blanks, and the hope is that a lot of software houses will adopt the Microwafer as another storage medium for their products so that the format has a chance to catch on. That 32K program mentioned will load in about 15 seconds from a Microwafer—pretty impressive when compared with the 6-to-8-second loading time for a floppy disk.

Companies already committed to the wafer concept are Texas Instruments and Coleco. TI will be hitting the market soon with an add-on Microdrive as a companion piece for its Compact Computer 40 (possibly under a different

name). Coleco recently introduced its "Super Game Expansion Module #3" with Microdrive built-in and two free games on wafers—*Super Donkey Kong* and *Super Gorf*. The advertising claims that this module will provide "realistic arcade game play." Maybe it will, working with the ColecoVision's basic 32K of RAM, which admittedly is a lot for a dedicated game-playing machine.

Should you run out and buy one right now? Chances are, you can't! But be patient. The drives will soon appear on dealer shelves.

CHOPLIFTER!

Diskette for Atari 400/800.

Broderbund Software, Inc., 1938 Fourth St., San Rafael, CA 94901 (415-456-6424). \$34.95.

Graphics ★★★

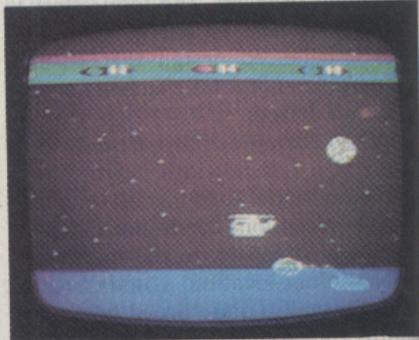
Gameplay ★★

Sustained Interest ★★

Type: Joystick action game.

Memory required: 48K

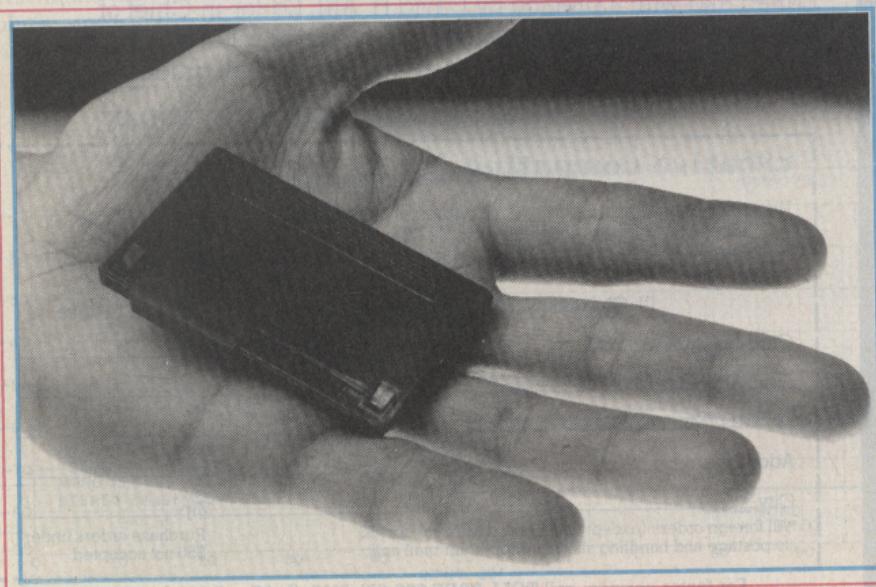
You're a helicopter pilot and have to rescue a number of hostages (or prisoners, if you will) being held in various barracks buildings behind enemy lines. Take off in your trusty, heavily armed



helicopter and try to save these men. The ones who can get out of their blast-open barracks run to the chopper and climb on board with little urging when you land.

But watch out! There are enemy tanks shooting at the chopper and at your hostages. Take off and turn through 90 degrees so you can drop bombs. You have to be low enough for the bombs to have any effect—but at this low altitude, the tank's fire can get you, too. It's an aggravating scenario and those tanks are awfully hard to hit.

The enemy fire does come in handy at one point. Explosions from enemy tank shellfire rip open other barracks buildings, allowing the prisoners to escape and run for your chopper. Other enemies to be contended with are jet fight



ers, which you can shoot back at, and next are drone air mines which home in on your chopper. They can also follow you back to your home base.

This game is strictly joystick controlled with eye-hand coordination an important part of gameplay. If you hit the "BREAK" key, the game will pause so you can answer the telephone or nature's call, or just go get a cup of coffee. This is a feature that more and more computer games provide—but unfortunately, not all of them do. It's very disconcerting to be deeply involved in a game—especially when you're racking up a good score—and have to abort it to answer the telephone.

The difficulty level is quite high, and it will take a fair amount of practice to get through the tank and jet fighter waves to the point where you have to be concerned about the air-drone mines. Perhaps it also takes a certain amount of patience, because like all games, practice is needed to get you into the expert category. Gameplay is interesting and frustrating. Just when you have a dozen or so hostages safely loaded on your helicopter, you take an unlucky hit from a tank cannon and crash, losing all on board.

DEMON ATTACK

ROM Cartridge for Atari 400/800.

Imagic, 981 University Ave., Los Gatos, CA 95030 (408-399-2200). \$39.95.

Graphics ★★★

Gameplay ★★★★

Sustained Interest ★★★★

Type: Joystick action game.

Memory required: 16K resident memory.

This game won all kinds of awards last year in its Atari VCS game machine version, and it has lost none of the inter-



est and excitement in its translation into Atari computer format. What is missing, however, is any kind of improvement in graphics or addition of special features. After all, this is a *computer*, not a dumb game machine that has no

built-in RAM or graphics capabilities to speak of.

Yet it is part of the genius of the designers that the game graphics and gameplay were so good in the VCS version that unless you had already played that one extensively, you'd be enthralled by what this game has to offer in the way of visuals and excitement. It can be played by one or two people—each with his own cannons and reserve supply of spare shooters. The attacking waves of demons get progressively more difficult to destroy, and you get an extra cannon for each wave that you eliminate. Earn as many as you can; you'll need them later on as the demons get more demoniacal.

Demon Attack has the ability to captivate and hold interest for hours. There's even a version—like the classic Space Invaders—that lets you and your second player team up to destroy the attacking demons. You busily dodge demon bombs, and in later waves, laser blasts, as these super-stealthy creatures fly back and forth in random patterns that seem to defy your ability to lead them with your cannon fire and shoot them down. After a little practice, you'll find yourself starting to get their range, but just when you least expect, you'll get clobbered by a lucky demon hit.

And with all this going on, there's also an electronic musical beat that keeps time to the demon wing-flapping—with a tempo that gets increasingly intense as the action heats up. Beware! This game is habit-forming.

SOCER

ROM cartridge for Atari 400/800.

Thorn EMI, 1370 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10019 (212-977-8990). \$49.95.

Graphics ★★★

Gameplay ★★★

Sustained Interest ★★★

Type: Joystick strategy/action game

Memory Required: Minimum resident (16K)

Our British cousins have brought us a typically European game that is currently enjoying a vogue on this side of the Atlantic as well. It's one of those realistic sports games that can be very fast and a lot of fun. It can be played by zero, one, two, three, or four players.

If one person plays, you try to beat the computer (it's invariably better than you are). Two people can play against each other, and if you feel really lazy, you can set it so the computer plays against itself. I imagine that this last choice would be very good for parties and betting pools—not just betting on

the first team to score, but also betting on how long it takes either team to make a goal. There are also nine difficulty levels available, but even the easiest one is darned tough!

The game consists of two standard soccer teams of 11 players each. The screen is shown with a slight tilt toward the far side of the playing field to add a three-dimensional quality to the graphics. You play until the final buzzer sounds at the end of the time period that



you select in advance: 10, 45, or 90 minutes. We haven't graduated beyond the 10-minute game length yet; maybe this tells you something about the frustration level of the game.

The playing field is too wide for the TV screen, so just one-third of it appears at any one time. The screen field scrolls horizontally to follow the action—much the same way a TV camera pans on a real playing field. This provides a nice, realistic touch to the gameplay.

At first, it's hellishly difficult to learn how to keep your players from overrunning the soccer ball and how to kick it. Your joystick can control only one player at any one time, and when you press the "fire" button, control passes to the player nearest to the ball (in the computer's judgment). You may not always agree, and you may want to run some other player, but you have no choice in making this selection—a feature that I consider a definite drawback in the game program.

Sound effects consist of just two things: the sound of the ball being kicked and the referee's whistle when a goal is scored or the ball goes out of bounds. Selection of the various game options is from a computer-like menu that appears at the start of the game. The cursor on the menu is joystick controlled, making selections easy and straightforward.

For the uninitiated, the instruction booklet even includes a special section that explains the rules of soccer, the most popular sport on a worldwide basis. Overall, this appears to be one of the better sports-type computer games on the market. It's incredibly realistic, and is just difficult enough to be a challenge. ◇