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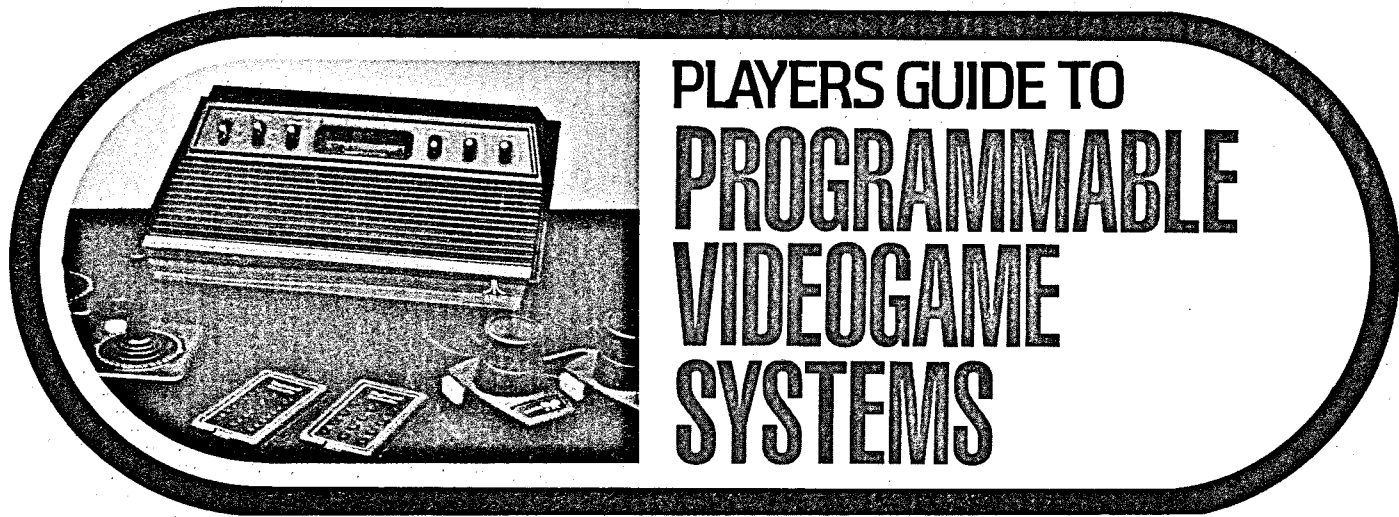
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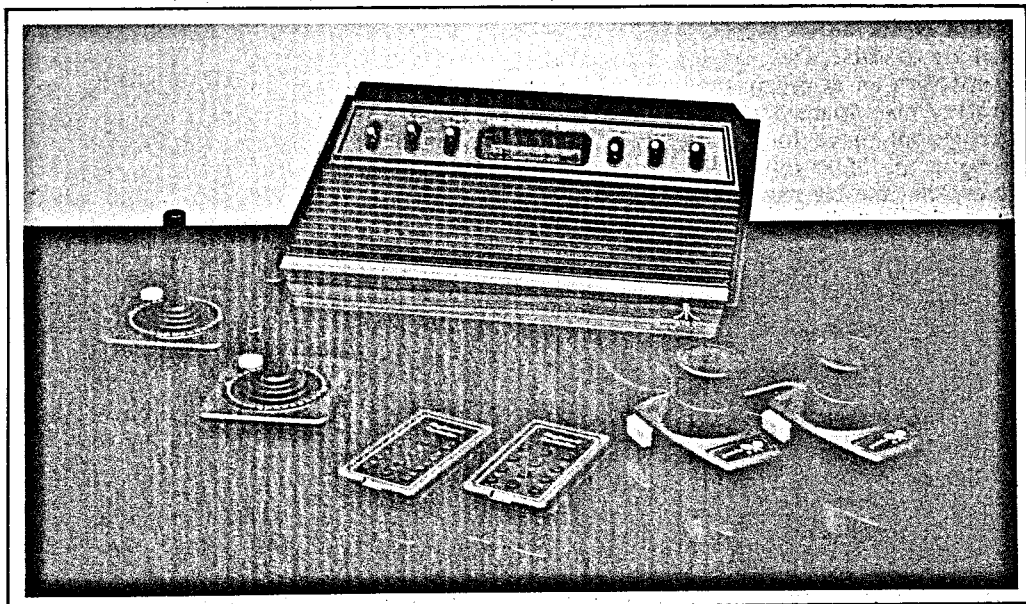
# PLAYERS GUIDE TO PROGRAMMABLE VIDEOGAME SYSTEMS

## ATARI 2600: STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Of the pioneer programmable videogame systems, only Atari's 2600 remains in production. It has outlasted such competition as Bally's *Astrocade*, the *Odyssey 2*, Fairchild Channel F, the *Arcadia 2001*, and even Mattel's *Intellivision*. The overwhelming support from third-party game manufacturers is the key factor in the 2600's popularity, though its durability, availability and low price contribute heavily.

The availability of Coleco's 2600 adapter for its *ColecoVision* had a strong impact on that machine's early sales figures. Atari later marketed an add-on for the Atari 5200 in its own bid to attract a trade-up audience. Both modules are configured a bit differently from the button-and-switch arrays on the standard 2600, making a few of the system's more spectacular efforts, like Activision's *Space Shuttle*, harder to master.

The Atari 2600 set the standard in controllers, introducing the nine-pin connector plug still used on most videogames and low-end home computers. But the proposed line-up of 2600 peripherals, including several



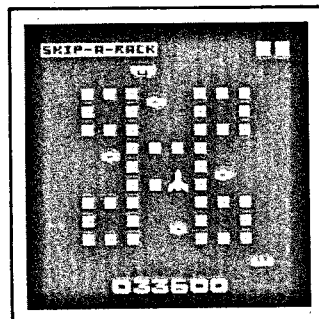
ATARI 2600 (VCS)

planned 2600 keyboards, has faded into oblivion.

### THE 2600 TODAY

When the 2600 was first introduced, many wondered what game designers could possibly find to do with so much — 4K — memory. Companies like Activision built their reputations by stretching the 2600 to its furthest possible limits. As time passed and newer, more sophisticated pro-

grammables like the *ColecoVision* and Atari 5200



SOLAR FOX (CBS)

appeared, the 2600's memory limitations became apparent.

CBS Videogames spent undisclosed amounts of time and money researching a new type of cartridge chip, which it dubbed the RAM-cram. These games contained resident memory housed within the cartridge itself, which added to memory already built into the machine to effectively double the 2600's memory. After producing just

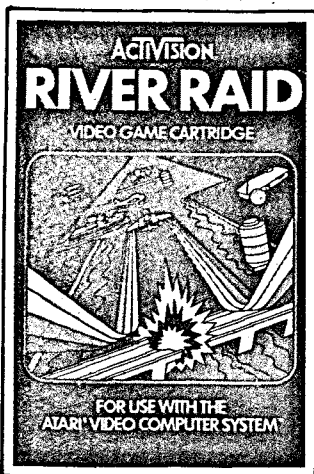
two 8K games, *Tunnel Runner* and *Solar Fox*, CBS abandoned its entire videogame department to concentrate on producing computer software.

This year, Atari itself picked up the ball, introducing its own line of 8K 2600 games. Among the releases are *StarGate*, *Crystal Castles*, *Millipede* and *Track & Field*, the latter packaged with a special controller developed by joystick giant, Wico.

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE VCS

As consumers trade up from videogames to full-fledged computer systems, they're passing their old 2600s along to siblings or children. As a result, the 2600 is now oriented towards younger players.

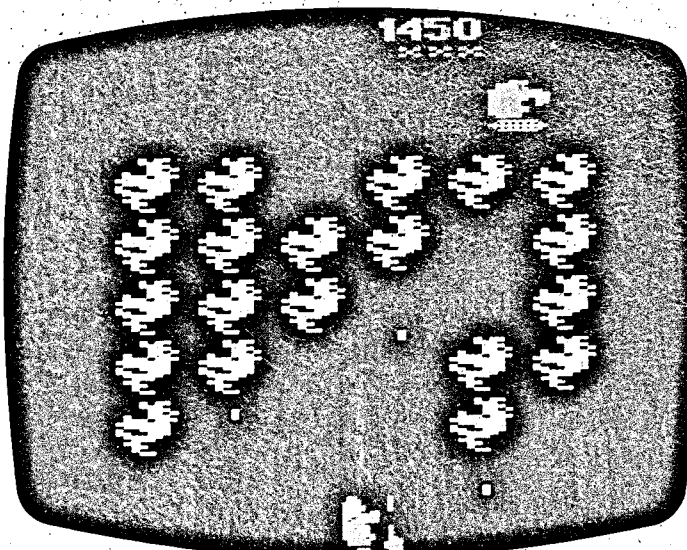
Not that many games aren't fast-paced and challenging enough for any adult: *Joust* (Atari), *River Raid* (Activision) and *Star Wars* (Parker Brothers) are just a sampling of the excellent arcade-action games that are available. Even programs with an emphasis on strategy, like *Space Shuttle* (Activision), have found a niche in the 2600 software library. But the big news on the VCS is kideogames, which



RIVER RAID (ACTIVISION)

are now coming into their prime with titles like *Pigs in Space*, *Cookie Monster Munch* and *Snoopy and the Red Baron*.

Even six-month-old babies can play *Peek-A-Boo*, Dr. Lee Salk's educational entertainment for use with the Atari Kids' Controller. The game, which stars a cute kitten who



PIGS IN SPACE (ATARI)

hides behind colorful blocks, discourages competition and is designed to avoid frustrating tiny players. If the child doesn't find the cat in a reasonable amount of time, the feline sticks out a paw or an ear to offer a helpful hint. With difficulty levels ranging widely (at the lowest level all the child has to do is touch the controller — anywhere — to earn the reward), this game accommodates the full spectrum of toddler players.

As far as third-party software support goes, last year's tidal wave of cartridges has ebbed to a comparative trickle. There are plenty of excellent games to be had, many at bargain prices, though the days of the 2600 blockbusters are quickly fading, having really peaked two

years ago with Activision's *Pitfall!*. Though there are still a number of VCS megahits, like *Pitfall II*, most third-party software developers — including even Activision — are throwing their major efforts into designing computer games — or at least, programs that are intended for multiple systems.

Because of its rock-bottom price, the 2600 is still a good choice for the economy-minded shopper. There's a veritable treasure trove of bargain cartridges, many of which are left over from the 2600 games glut of last year. But after the current stock of 2600 games are exhausted, expect far fewer new titles to take their places on the shelves—and third-party software support will fall off.

## MASTER OF MODULARITY

With its excellent graphics and sound, the ColecoVision would have been a success even without its expansion possibilities. Still, that little port at the front of the unit was what first caught the im-

aginations of visionary game lovers. The idea of a constantly-upgradeable unit that would never be completely obsolete had a definite appeal to thrift-conscious shoppers. So far, the expan-

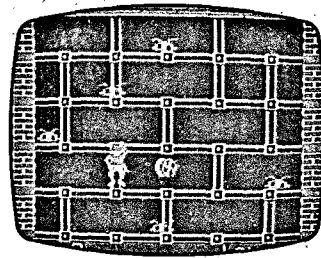


sion module interface has been used to plug in Coleco's 2600 adapter; the steering wheel for use with *Turbo* and other driving games; and the controversial computer add-on, the Adam. The port was also ready to be used to plug in the now-defunct Super-game module as well as a home laserdisc module that never quite materialized.

The hardware hasn't changed since its introduction more than two years ago, with the ColecoVision's major drawback still its controllers. Though several recent Coleco games for the system have been unexciting at best, the library of good cartridges is large, bolstered by third-party games like Epyx's *Gateway to Apshai* and Interphase's talking *Squish 'Em*. Activision, Parker Brothers, AtariSoft and Sierra are just a few of the game developers actively pursuing the ColecoVision customer. Colecovisionaries can now enjoy arcade-to-home translations like *Centipede* (AtariSoft), *Q\*bert* (Parker Brothers), *Star Wars* (Parker Brothers) and *Front Line* (Coleco), a luxury unheard of in the days of system exclusivity.

## CONTROLLING THE COLECOVISION

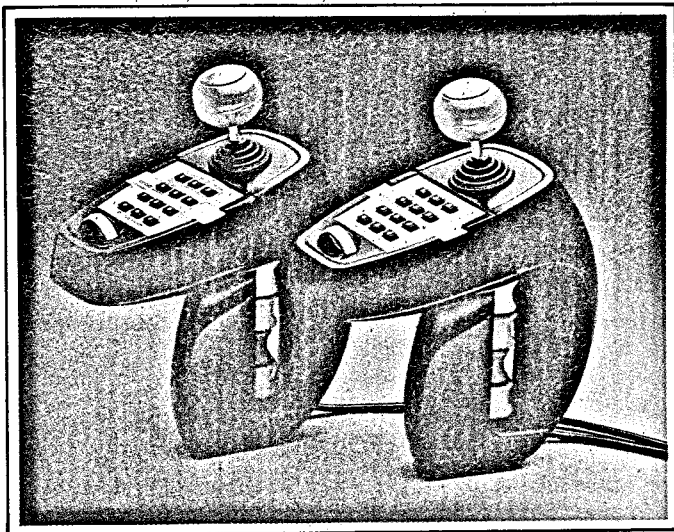
As a result of the ColecoVision's enormous popularity, there's been no shortage of controllers to replace those hand-cramping standard joysticks. Wico, High



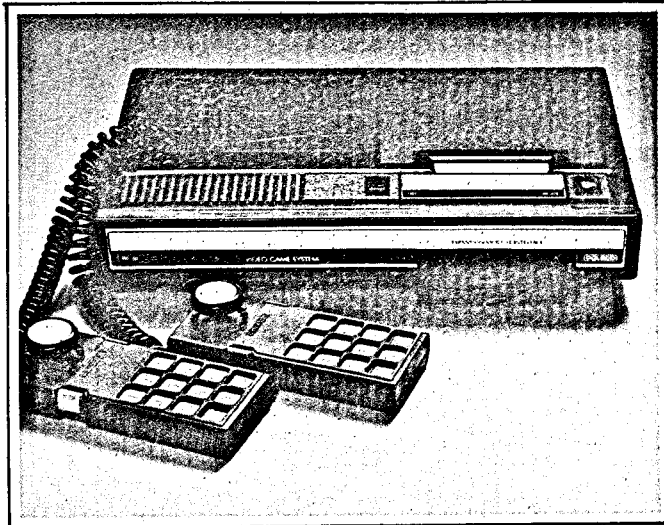
SQUISH 'EM (INTERPHASE)

Score, Suncom, Gim Electronics and Championship Electronics all produce two-button joysticks for use with the system. Championship Electronics standard nine-pin controller. For games that don't require two action buttons or a keypad, any Atari-compatible joystick will do.

Coleco itself makes a trackball that comes packaged



SUPER ACTION CONTROLLERS (COLECO)



The ColecoVision game system.

with a **Slither** cartridge, as well as the four-button Super Action Controllers, which especially appeal to sports-minded gamers. Packaged with **Baseball**, the Super Action Controllers are also necessary for playing such games as **Rocky Battles the Champ** and **Front Line**.

## OUTLOOK FOR COLECOVISION

With many first-time electronic gamers being enticed by low-priced computers, the eventual future of the ColecoVision is linked to the Adam, its add-on computer. Despite initial production and

image problems, the revamped Adam has been praised by its owners. Software support is still sketchy, consisting mostly of cartridges that are marked "ColecoVision/Adam compatible."

At least for the time being, the ColecoVision has plenty

of thunder left. With its existing library of outstanding games — many of which are finally being marked down after selling for two years at list price — the ColecoVision offers a vast selection of choice games that appeal to home arcaders of every taste and gaming persuasion.

# THE SUPERSYSTEM BOWS OUT

Until the introduction of Atari's 7800, this sleek, high-tech unit was Atari's top-of-the-line game player. Production of the 5200 was officially discontinued last spring, though Atari announced plans to provide software support for the 5200, at least for the foreseeable future. An adapter that plugs into the 7800 and allows it to play 5200 cartridges is soon to be available. In spite of these optimistic signs from Atari, 5200 owners have written in to EG to express feelings of abandonment.

The 5200's controllers made at least some contribution to the game system's eventual demise. While Atari's original intention was to set a new state of the art by providing an analog joystick complete with remote start, pause and reset functions, the non-centering joysticks proved frustratingly difficult

to use — especially in light of the 5200's strong game base of action-oriented arcade translations like **Pac-Man**, **Centipede**, **Qix** and **Robotron**. Some joystick manufacturers, like Wico, High Score and Coin Controls, designed good, self-centering 5200 replacement controllers,

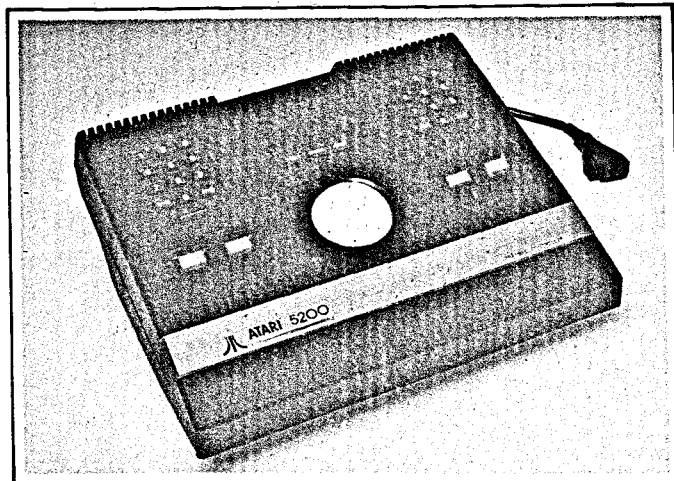
but the effort was too little, too late.

The 5200 had overtaken the ColecoVision in sales when Atari made the decision to stop production in favor of the 7800's new graphics technology. Since the 7800 won't list for much more than the 5200, the choice for Atari was

one of simple economics. But for game players, a new choice is required: to enjoy the 5200 and its complete games library now, knowing that it's effectively closed-ended; or to wait for the next step up, to either a computer or the 7800.

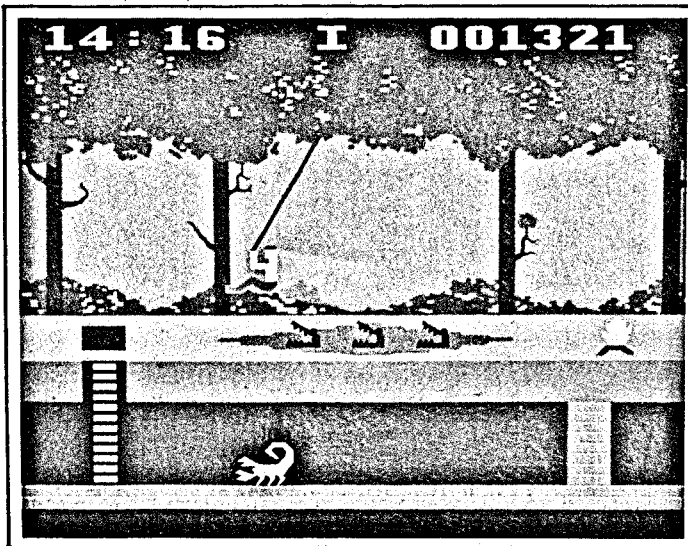
## 5200: THE COMPLETE HOME ARCADE

Atari's own lineup of 5200 titles is downright boggling. **Defender**, **Pac-Man**, **Joust**, **Space Dungeon**, **Star Raiders**, **Pole Position**, **Pengo** and **Robotron** are just a few of the solid wall of hits. **Gremlins**, Atari's cartridge rendition of Steven Spielberg's hit film, is a brand-new action/strategy contest with outstanding graphics, sound and playability, while Lucasfilm's **Ballblazer** and **Rescue on Fractalus** set new standards in their



ATARI 5200





PITFALL! (ACTIVISION)

respective ways. These and other great games first appeared on the 5200. Add classic computer game titles like Dan Gorlin's *Choplifter!*, complete with full two-button control, and it's clear that the Atari software folks have put in more than a little overtime in the think tanks.

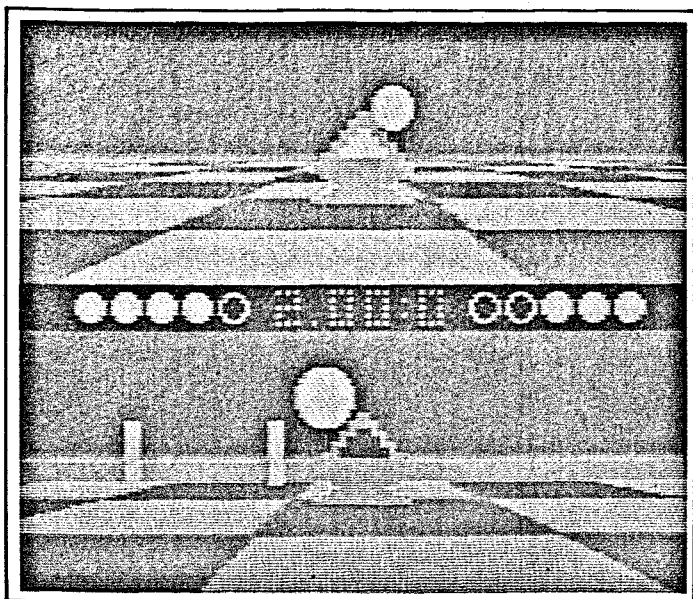
But the story from third-party game developers isn't quite as rosy. Many companies who design for the ColecoVision never even glanced at the 5200, despite its proven capabilities. There are a few bright spots among the clouds, though: Parker Brothers has its full line of games, including the whimsical *Frogger II: Threedeeep*, *Star Wars* and *Montezuma's Revenge*, on cartridge for the 5200. Activision has *Beamrider*, *Pitfall* and a host of other titles, and Big Five has *Miner 2049er*. The 5200 has never

enjoyed the third-party support evidenced for other programmable videogames.

Even without these independently-produced games, as of now the Atari 5200 already sports what is probably the strongest selection of good games.

Now that Atari pulled the plug on its razzle-dazzle game player, the 5200's future is bleak. Gamers shouldn't expect many third-party cartridges coming down the pike, but rather should try to enjoy what's out there now. While Atari will keep releasing new titles in 5200 format, the system will eventually be replaced by the 7800.

Still, the 5200—like GCE's now-extinct Vectrex—will be remembered fondly, especially by those who own or have owned it, as one of the red-hot home arcades.



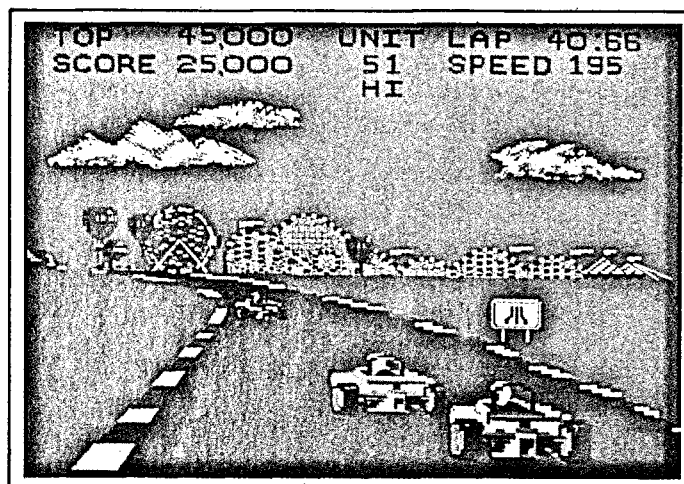
BALLBLAZER (ATARI/LUCASFILM)

# INTRODUCING THE 7800

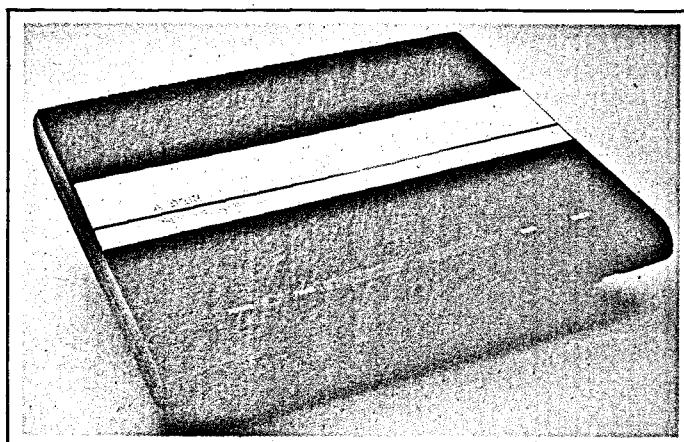
This fall, Atari stunned the electronic gaming industry by introducing its brand-new, state of the art programmable videogame machine, the 7800—a step in the wrong direction, according to the market analysts, who forecast the future of electro-gaming as founded firmly in the computer era. Can a dedicated videogame, no matter how spectacular, hope to compete against low-end game-playing computers like the Atari 800XL and the Commodore 64? Atari, for one,

hopes so.

The 7800 looks like a miniature replica of Atari's sleek, modern-looking 5200. The latter's bulky, uncontrollable joystick/keyboards have been replaced by attractive, easy-to-use two-button joystick, comparable with standard nine-pin controllers. Theoretically, any two-button joystick that works on a ColecoVision should work on the 7800, though there is no more need for a keypad, start, reset or pause key. These extra frills have been eliminated

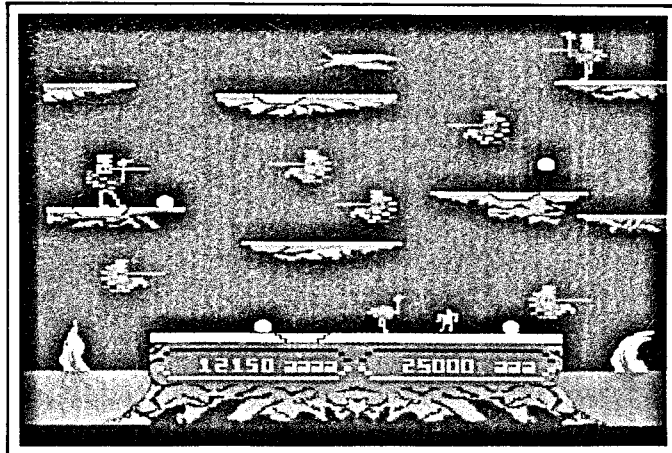


7800 POLE POSITION (ATARI)



7800 PRO SYSTEM (ATARI)





7800 JOUST (ATARI)

in an effort to keep the controllers lightweight, desirable and accurate. From EG's early testing, all three seem to be characteristics of the 7800 joysticks, which are shaped like slim cylinders to fit easily in most palms.

The Atari 7800 is compatible with Atari computer peripherals, though Atari disks will not work with the new system. Due to its brand-new "Marie" graphics chip, the 7800 speaks a different computer language. Atari plans to introduce a 7800 computer keyboard if there's enough demand for it, so that peripheral-compatibility could come in handy in a year or so.

The 7800 comes packaged with a high-quality Centipede cartridge, which gives gamers a hint of goodies to come. The game's graphics are even better than the 5200 version's showing off the 7800's graphics capability. The new game machine lists at \$120, just about what the 5200 sold for last year. It accepts 2600 cartridges without the added expense of a plug-in module, making it the perfect trade-up for 2600 owners with large game libraries. A 5200 adapter is due soon as well.

## THE FIRST 7800 GAMES

Atari premiered a host of arcade hits for its new top-of-the-line videogame, including souped-up versions of *Joust*, *Centipede*, *Pole Position II*, *Asteroids*, *Ms. Pac Man*, *Robotron* and *Food Fight*. *Desert Falcon*, formerly titled *Nile Flier*, is the first game produced especially for the

7800. This high-resolution action/strategy game features *Zaxxon*'s three-quarters perspective and adds the ability to land, plus the chance to find and use mystical powers.

*Ballblazer* and *Rescue on Fractalus* are also due out for the 7800, with *Gremlins* being translated as of this writing.

Third-party software support is uncertain at best, with companies adopting a wait-and-see attitude about Atari's newest addition. In the meanwhile, Atari is trying to take up the slack by keeping those megahits flowing to gamers.

## CAN ATARI DO IT?

The 7800 was launched at a time when game manufacturers, designers, and some industry analysts were predicting a wholesale swing towards computers and their more sophisticated disk-based software. There are a lot of home arcaders out there who don't feel ready to take on the expense of a full computer set-up. Whether they'll succumb to computermania or choose the best videogame ever put on the market is a question to be answered with this holiday season.

One thing is certain — if a programmable videogame player is still going to sell, Atari's 7800 is the top-of-the-line system. With its built-in 2600 compatibility and graphics resolution surpassing even the high priced personal computers, the 7800 is the best videogame there is.

The Atari takeover by Commodore founder Jack Tramiel has made the status of the 7800 uncertain as of now.



7800 DESERT FALCON (ATARI)

# VIDEOGAMING OUTLOOK

## VIDEOGAMES VS. COMPUTERS

The rise of the home computer — more than 15% of American families now own one — raises the question of whether there's any sense buying a videogame system. One persuasive argument is that a computer is a much more versatile tool than a videogame machine, thanks largely to its keyboard, and also plays excellent games.

The fact that computers are more sophisticated and powerful need not mean, however, that videogames have come to the end of their usefulness. It's hard to name a toy priced comparably to the 2600, for instance, that affords the variety of play and mental stimulation to be found in this mini-player. Even if the household already has a microcomputer, there's no reason why one or more family members couldn't also own personal home game machines.

Another point to consider is that many of the videogame systems are equal to — or even superior to — many low-end computers in sound, graphics and memory. You'd have to spend a bundle to get a computer capable of rivaling the 7800's game graphics. The ColecoVision's library of games includes numerous titles which offer just as much excitement as anything on cartridge for computer.

Then, too, the surviving videogame systems are all supported with extensive libraries of cartridge software. If you buy a videogame unit, you'll never have to worry about finding enough good games. There are dozens for every system. Another way to look at this aspect is that once you purchase a system and some software, you've got a self-sufficient entertainment device that can provide many hours of pleasure even if the manufacturer decides to slow or stop new product introductions a year or so from now.

Some people are simply not ready, for one of a host of reasons, to get into home computing. For these folks, the videogame system can be a pleasant and easy way to make first contact with the world of interactive electronic entertainment.

And, of course, highly transportable videogame systems are excellent take-alongs on trips and vacations. They connect to any TV set in a jiffy with no esoteric hardware (beyond the RF box).

Are these reasons compelling enough to get you to buy a videogame system? That, of course, is an individual choice. What can be said with some certainty, is that videogame systems have many attractive points and are not going to disappear overnight as a result of the popularity of computers.

