

# VIDEO GAMES

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## AMERICA'S NEWEST GAMES: Q\*BERT & JOUST

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# BLIPS

## The Astrocade Question: Sink or Swim?

**T**hough it may seem Astrocade has exhausted its nine lives, the company, like some bedeviled cat, isn't dead yet. Nitron, a Silicon Valley semiconductor manufacturer, may very well come to the ailing game company's rescue. According to Nitron spokesman Rich Forte, "There's a very good chance that we will put up the money to revive Astrocade." Astrocade, which took over rights to the Bally Professional Arcade (aka, Astrocade) in 1980,

filed a Chapter XI petition in Federal Court in Dec. '82.

At presstime, the Columbus, Ohio-based firm was seeking out other backers and exploring the possibility of marketing its seven-year-old TV-game system in Europe. In addition, Forte suggested the unit might be totally revamped and reappear on the shelves for about \$150—half the current list price. Recently, Astrocade has been selling in some locations for as low as \$89.

There was little cause for optimism at the January Consumer Electronics Show (CES), however. The Astrocade booth was deserted except for four arcade-like promotion cabinets that housed an Astrocade and an assortment of games in each one. Vice-President Ray George, the man who had predicted less than a year before that

Astrocade would be as "common and generic a name as Xerox" by 1985, was not to be found.

Tom Meeks, Astrocade's product manager, fielded questions from angry retailers and curious reporters. "It's a strange situation," he said. "The president of the company is currently a Federal judge. We can't even give out a sample cartridge without his approval."

The Astrocade story is characterized by public indifference, corporate mismanagement, early technical failures, and the dogged persistence of those who tried so desperately to keep the system alive. Originally, the Professional Arcade was Bally's grand bid to get into the consumer games business in the mid-'70s. "Bally and Atari were running neck and neck (in the arcade games

business) and were constantly looking at each other to see how the competition was doing," recalls Dave Nutting, of Dave Nutting Associates, who co-designed the Arcade with Jeff Fredricksen. When Bally found out that Atari was developing a programmable TV-game system (the Video Computer System or VCS), executives at the coin machine company decided "they had to be in it too," Nutting says.

Nutting's master plan was to "put a computer in everybody's home." Once the system, which utilized the Z-80 microprocessor (the same chip Nutting was using to design arcade games), was in enough homes, a Basic programming cartridge would be released, followed by an "add-under" keyboard in the form of a Z-Grass computer.

JS&A, a leading mail-order

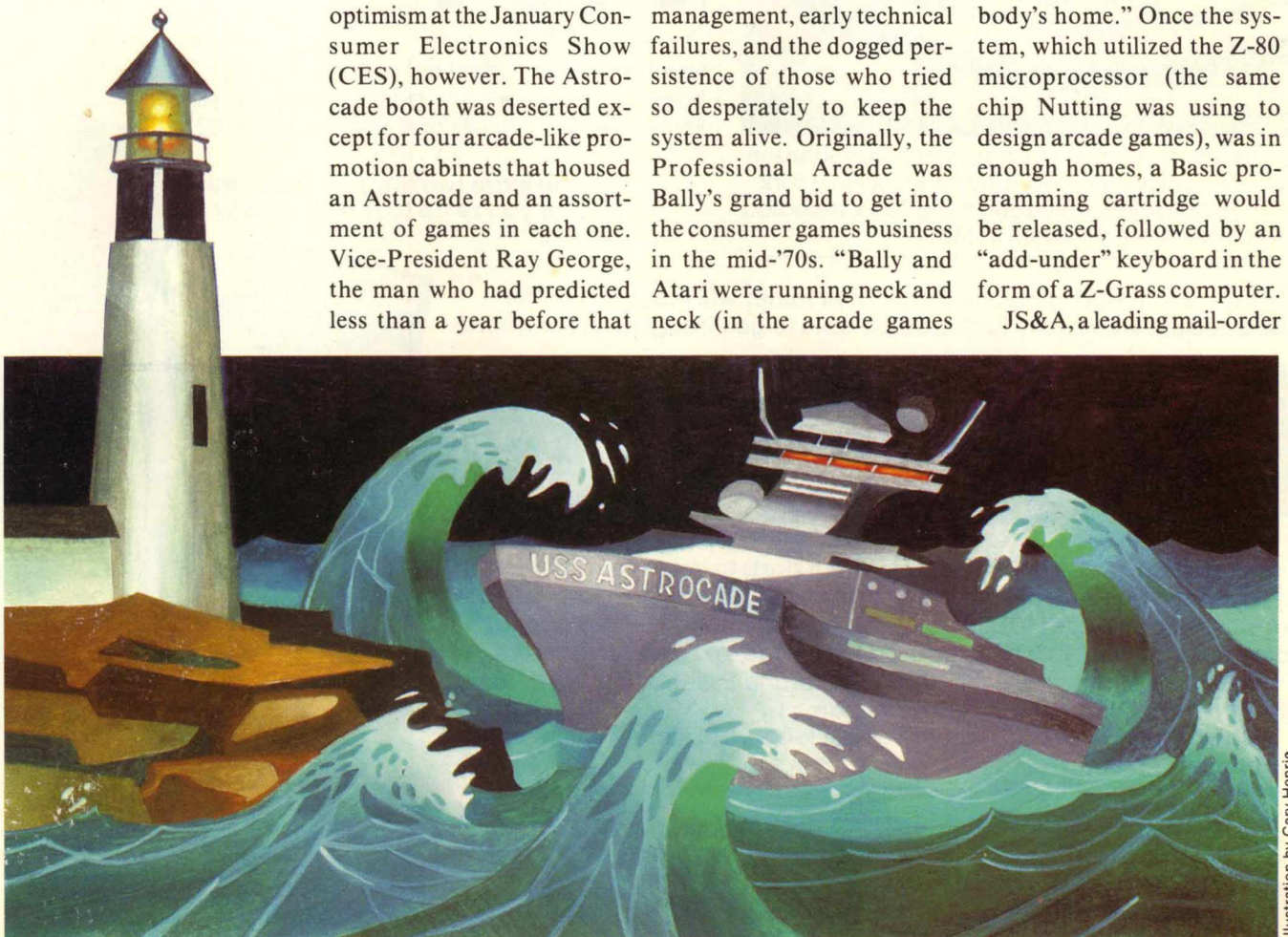


Illustration by Cary Henrie



marketer of specialty electronics, took out full-page ads in trade publications in 1977, announcing that the computer age had arrived. The Bally Professional Arcade was "the secret of the computer revolution," JS&A hyped, a device that could play games as well as be expanded into a home computer. The mail-order house went as far as to devote five pages in its catalog to the virtues of the system.

Problems began shortly after the Arcade's introduction, however. Units promised in September were not delivered until five months later, and a majority of them

reasons. "Bally is a commercial game manufacturer. They build a game, test it, ship it. The arcade owner opens the box, plugs in the game and tests it. If it doesn't work, he gets out the manual, pokes it a few times and gets it going. The consumer, on the other hand, gets the unit and plugs it in: If it doesn't work, he sends it back."

In other words, Bally was not ready for the world of consumer marketing. "They tried to market the Arcade like it was a radio or TV," Nutting explains, "not as a whole new product." As might be expected, most of Bally's energy at the time focused



Photo by Perry Greenberg

*Astrocade's no-show at CES: Hey, buddy, can you spare a quarter?*

were defective. In April 1978, Bally shipped supposedly "perfected" units that were "still not right," according to JS&A's Joseph Sugarman. By 1979, discouraged by reliability problems, limited software, and doubts about whether the add-under would ever be marketed, JS&A cancelled all orders and offered to buy back the units its customers had purchased.

"We could have sold 30,000 Arcades," says Sugarman. "Instead, we lost thousands of dollars. This could have killed a smaller company."

Why didn't Bally take better care of its customers? Dave Nutting cites several

on launching new casino operations; hence, its new consumer products took a back seat. "They got discouraged," he says, "and wished it would all go away."

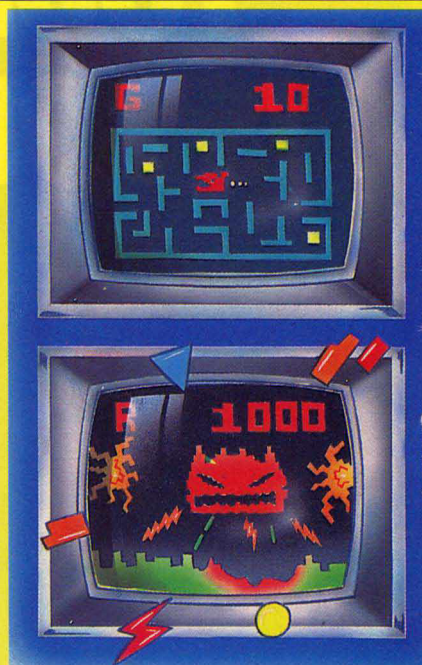
Bally got its wish by selling the Arcade to Astrovision for \$2.3 million in August 1980. The company immediately rechristened the system "Astro Professional Arcade." As part of the agreement, Bally would provide engineering support (ie, Dave Nutting and Bob Ogden, a Dave Nutting Associates alumni), plus the rights to such Bally/Midway coin-op games as Wizard of Wor, Space Zap, and Galaxian.

## Vid-Custer's Last Stand

Anti-porn and Native American activists—not to mention "adult" video game players—won't have Custer's Revenge to kick around anymore. You remember Custer's Revenge: the game from American Multiple Industries (AMI) in which General George eluded cacti and a hail of Injun arrows in order to plant his Little Big Horn into a tied-to-a-stake but apparently willing red-skin squaw. The game set off a controversy when AMI introduced it last fall.

Well, shortly after 1982 turned into 1983, Hong Kong games manufacturer JHM Ltd.—maker of Custer's as well as AMI's other "adult" cartridges, Beat 'Em & Eat 'Em and Bachelor Party—transferred all American distribution rights for the games from AMI to GameSource, a California consortium of veteran adult-video cassette distributors. Simultaneously, GameSource announced the discontinuation of Custer's Revenge, which never really went on the market.

"We got thousands of let-



ters about Custer's Revenge," explains GameSource rep Richard Lewis, formerly a spokesperson for AMI. "They were all from women's groups or Moral Majority types protesting the game. We still maintain that the game didn't really depict anything like rape or racism, but since the game already had such a stigma in the public eye due to all the protest, it just seemed senseless to keep trying to push it. We're 100 percent in favor of good sexual fun between consenting video images."

The GameSource cartridges will now be distrib-

Promising an "explosive 1,000 percent growth," Ray George began gearing up for \$10 million in sales for 1981, \$100 million for '82 and \$1 billion by '85. New distributorships were assigned and design began on an extensive new line of software. When George's bullish rhetoric was realized at the end of '81—actually, the figure was about \$9 million—and the company unveiled the Z-Grass machine at the January '82 CES, people finally

began to think that Astrovision might be for real.

Early last year, Astrovision made two major announcements: it would be changing its name to Astrocade, and Nitron, the company's chip supplier, would begin designing cartridges for the system. The contract was for a sum of \$108 million through 1983. Unfortunately for Astrocade, this was the last truly positive news to come out of its Ohio offices.

Although Astrocade in-



## No Pepsi! Coke Video Game

**T**hirsty for video games? Have a Coke! At least that's what the Coca-Cola Co. hopes you'll do when it releases a new line of video vending machines some time this year. The machines have one of two video games displayed above the coin slot. The purchaser activates the game by pressing a button after buying a soda.

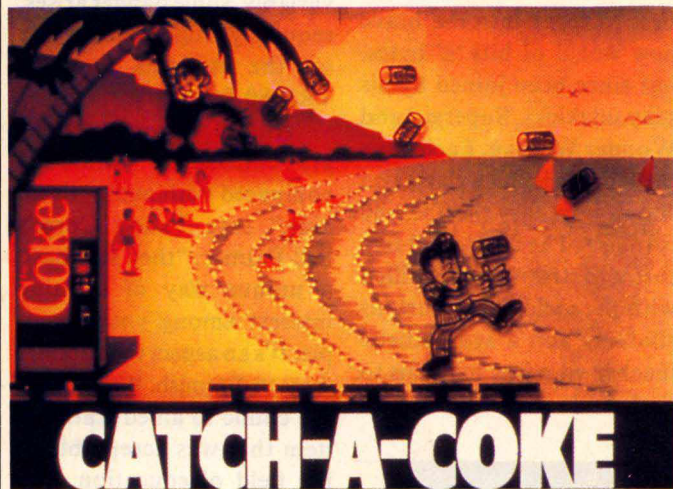
In *Catch-A-Coke*, a tree-perched monkey throws Coke cans down at a delivery man (so that's what Donkey Kong does when he isn't kidnapping blondes) whom you move with buttons across the 6 x 4-inch screen. The object is to catch as many cans as possible for points (the monkey laughs when you miss any). Like its less

hospitable arcade counterparts, the screen displays your score and the day's high score.

A game lasts from 10 to 20 seconds, depending on the time limit set by the lessee of the machine. Skill levels—amateur, average, expert—can also be preset.

While Coca-Cola's new gimmick won't have people lining up quarters on Coke machines, the company feels video games' "tremendous attraction" can be used as a "sales tool" according to spokesperson Dolores Sanchez. After all, even the most fanatical gamers have to eat and drink like the rest of us, and now they barely have to stop playing to do the latter.

—Michael Fine



so they'll stay interested once they get past the 'dirty joke' aspect of the games."

GameSource plans to market its games in "child-resistant" packages: Each box will come complete with a warning as well as locks and keys to keep the cartridges out of the hands of the little ones. Another video game first—"two-in-one" cartridges with openings at both ends for two different games—will also be marketed by GameSource. This should help guarantee some sort of value for the rather high priced (\$50-\$60) PlayAround cartridges.

AMI President Stuart Kesten has maintained a financial share—but no controlling interest—in GameSource. Meanwhile, AMI's First Amendment suit against New York's Suffolk County legislature—which last November passed an ordinance banning the sale or use of *Custer's Revenge* and *Firebug* (MUSE's maze game) because they "promoted and made acceptable the pursuit of destructive, anti-social activities"—has been dropped, now that *Custer's Revenge* is gone and *Firebug* has been altered to seem less like an invitation to arson. —Michael Shore

uted under the name "Play-Around." Joining *Beat 'Em & Eat 'Em* and *Bachelor Party* will be 10 other new games, including *Bachelorette Party* (the distaff version of *Bachelor Party*) and *Philly Flasher* (which Lewis—perhaps fearing more protests—refused to describe). Lewis did say that the new games will have "much better graphics, and will be more challenging and intricate. We're designing them more for real video game players,

sisted that two cartridges a month would be released starting in July and that the computer would be available in the fall, only two games, *Pirate's Chase* and *Artillery Duel*, were offered for the remainder of '82. The much-ballyhooed *Conan the Barbarian* game never saw the light of day, nor did the *Z-Grass*. *Astrocade's* '82 sales have been estimated at \$20 million, its profits at \$250,000.

Says *Astrocade* spokesperson Elena Quintana: "It

cost us \$120 to manufacture the motherboard (electronic circuitry) alone. How could we compete with Atari (the VCS) selling for \$129 or Mattel's \$50 rebate? . . . When *Astrocade* was formed in 1980, Atari was around \$200 and Intellivision was up around \$299. Back then, at least we had a chance."

Tom Meeks still thinks *Astrocade* has a chance. "We realize that the key (to *Astrocade's* survival) is software," observes the product man-

ager, "and we have the best game designers in the business. We shipped 20,000 copies of our latest cartridge, *Artillery Duel*, and they were sold out in two days." There are some 100,000 *Astrocades* currently in American homes.

If the company is resurrected, expect to see several more Bally/Midway licensed titles. In the past, *Astrocade's* interpretations of arcade games have been extremely good. The *Incredible Wizard* is one of the best conver-

sions ever of a coin-op game; *Galactic Invasion* is an excellent *Galaxian*; and *Space Fortress* even surpassed the original, *Space Zap*. If *Astrocade's* track record holds up, then it's probably fair to assume that *Solar Fox*, *Omega Race*, and *The Adventures of Robby Roto* would all be winners. Whether *Astrocade* ever gets the chance to prove this is now in the hands of investors and a Federal judge.

—Mark Brownstein

Illustration by Dana Ventura

*Though Custer's has been discontinued, the X-rated game trend will go on.*