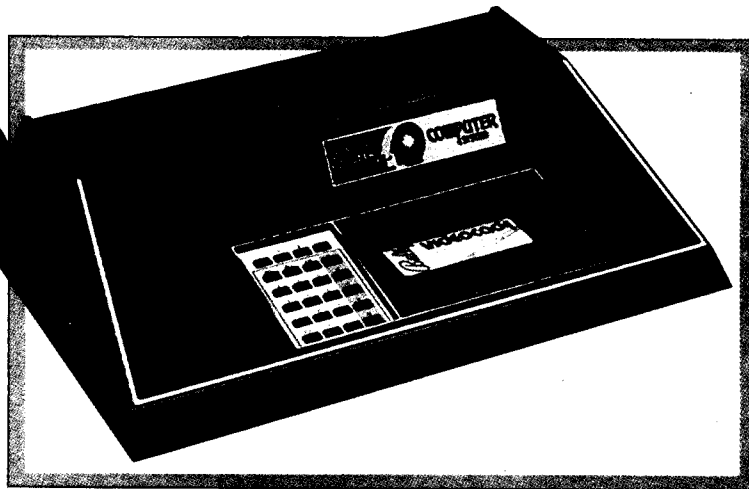


By Henry B. Cohen

Astrovision's Astro Professional Arcade, originally introduced by Bally in 1976, was the first of the current breed of home video computer systems. The product, a bit ahead of its time, was forced off the market by competition from Atari (priced considerably lower), reliability problems (which have since been corrected) and a lack of clear identity in the mind of the consumer.

Was it a computer that played games or a game that could function as a computer? Back in 1976 this point was far more worrisome than it is today. In a world of Atari 400s and 800s, TRS-80 Color Computers and TI 99/4As, being a crossbreed is an advantage, not a source of puzzlement or confusion.

Of all the video game systems on the market, the closest competitor to the Astro Arcade is Mattel's Intellivision.



ASTRO CONSOLE

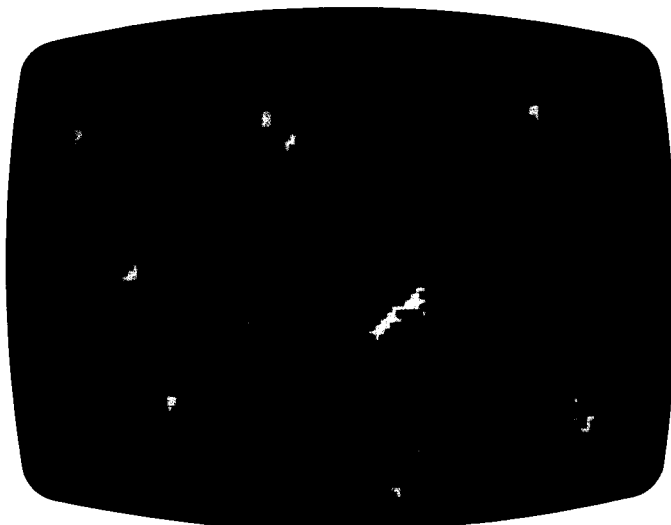
But the comparison ends abruptly when Bally Basic is mentioned. Without any additions, the Professional Arcade is a 4K color computer and therefore leaves all competition behind.

Astro Professional Arcade: Has Its Time Come?

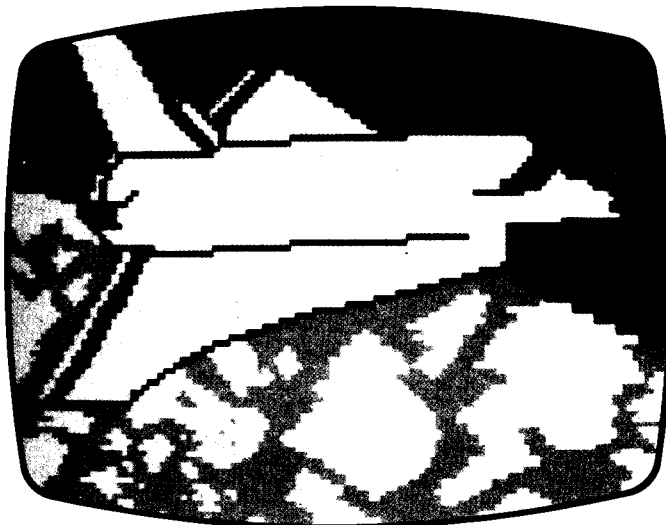
As a pure game playing machine, the Astro is almost without peer. It is simply superb. Graphics are on a par with the best of Intellivision, particularly in the area of sports simulations. Needless to say, they are superior to Atari and Odyssey² in just about all cases. Unlike Intellivision, speed does not ap-

pear to be sacrificed for graphics or complexity. Nevertheless, game playing variations are few (unlike Atari) and solo games (those pitting you against the computer) are currently limited. On the plus side the controllers are the best we've seen. They combine paddle, joystick and trigger into a single, compact and comfortable unit. This results in eight-way control and makes mastering a game function almost instantaneous.

The Arcade console, a contempor-



SOLAR CONQUEROR



COLORING BOOK

TEST LAB

any mixture of woodgrain, black and smoke glass styling, includes three microprocessor units: a Z-80 CPU, a custom designed video processor and I/O. In addition three separate synthesizers produce outrageous and realistic sound effects. A game cartridge port and calculator-type keypad complete the Astro Arcade save for reset and eject buttons.

The console features two built-in games — **Gunfight** and **Checkmate**, a line-building game, as well as an on-screen calculator and a video scribbling program. The latter lets you draw anything you like on-screen or allows the computer to scribe its random patterns if you're feeling a bit lazy. The patterns could also be used as title backgrounds for a home video production.

As if all this self-containment wasn't enough, the unit also stores up to fifteen game programs without the need of accessory lids or the like.

There is not much to criticize about the Astro Arcade. The on/off switch hidden below and behind the console is a continuing source of problems. Women with long fingernails will find it all but impossible to turn the unit on or off without breaking them. Because all inputs and outputs except for the cartridge slot are located on the back panel almost at the bottom of the machine, connecting any controllers and/or peripherals may become troublesome. A lesson could be learned from Atari which has moved its connectors to the more accessible upper lip of the rear of their newer machines. These are small points, however, and should not be a determining factor in the decision to purchase this machine. While we're nitpicking, two other points are worth mentioning. Because the game cartridges fit so neatly into the storage compartment of the console it would be more convenient to have them labeled on

their spines for quick identification. In addition, because so many people now own TVs with 75 Ohm inputs, why not produce a game switch with a 75 Ohm output instead of the 300 Ohm twin-lead supplied as standard in the industry.

Which brings us to Bally BASIC. This is a must cartridge for the system. Even if you have absolutely no interest in computers or programming, the BASIC cart allows you to key in any of the many games already written for the Professional Arcade. Better yet, if you can find a friend with, or source of, the



CONTROLLERS & BASIC

Astro game programs on cassette tape, the built-in interface will allow you to program your Arcade using just five simple keystrokes. Some of the games are presented in the instruction book that comes with the BASIC cartridge. Others are available through computer magazines or from the *Arcadian*, the Pro Arcade users publication that has been one of the best kept electronics games secrets of the past few years. A membership/order form comes with every new Arcade console for those who are interested in receiving the publication or their programmed tape cassettes.

Without going into much detail, to program the Astro Arcade through its calculator type keypad requires great patience. An overlay, supplied with the BASIC cartridge, provides identifica-

tion of the keys, but because many of them are multi-function, two keystrokes must be used before inputting almost any character to the machine. It takes time and practice but eventually you will be able to program fairly quickly.

Editing can be somewhat frustrating, because once you enter a line the cursor can only move forward without erasing. So plan to make very few mistakes as correcting them can take as long as entering the original program. This is, nevertheless, a major improvement over the original Bally BASIC program which did not contain an editing feature and required complete re-entry of each line containing an error.

The instruction manual, rewritten from the original Bally version, is unclear on many points. It is being rewritten again, but will have to suffice for now. Read it thoroughly several times before you begin to program, or you may think that something is amiss when it is not. Of utmost importance; when using the cassette interface the instructions tell you to type in a command. They fail to mention that you must precede this command with a colon (:) and then key in the word. Do not type it in letter by letter. Also, if you have trouble loading a program be sure that the tone or treble control of the recorder is set to its midpoint. Too much audio "noise" caused by a "hot" tape or highly set treble control will confound the computer's input. As the built-in interface does not have an automatic volume control, you must first calibrate the volume control of your recorder to the Astro's input level requirements. To help do this, the cartridge contains an LED indicator. Once it glows steadily, the volume control level is properly set — a handy feature. And once things are set correctly, loading programs is a pleasure as the unit works perfectly and consistently.