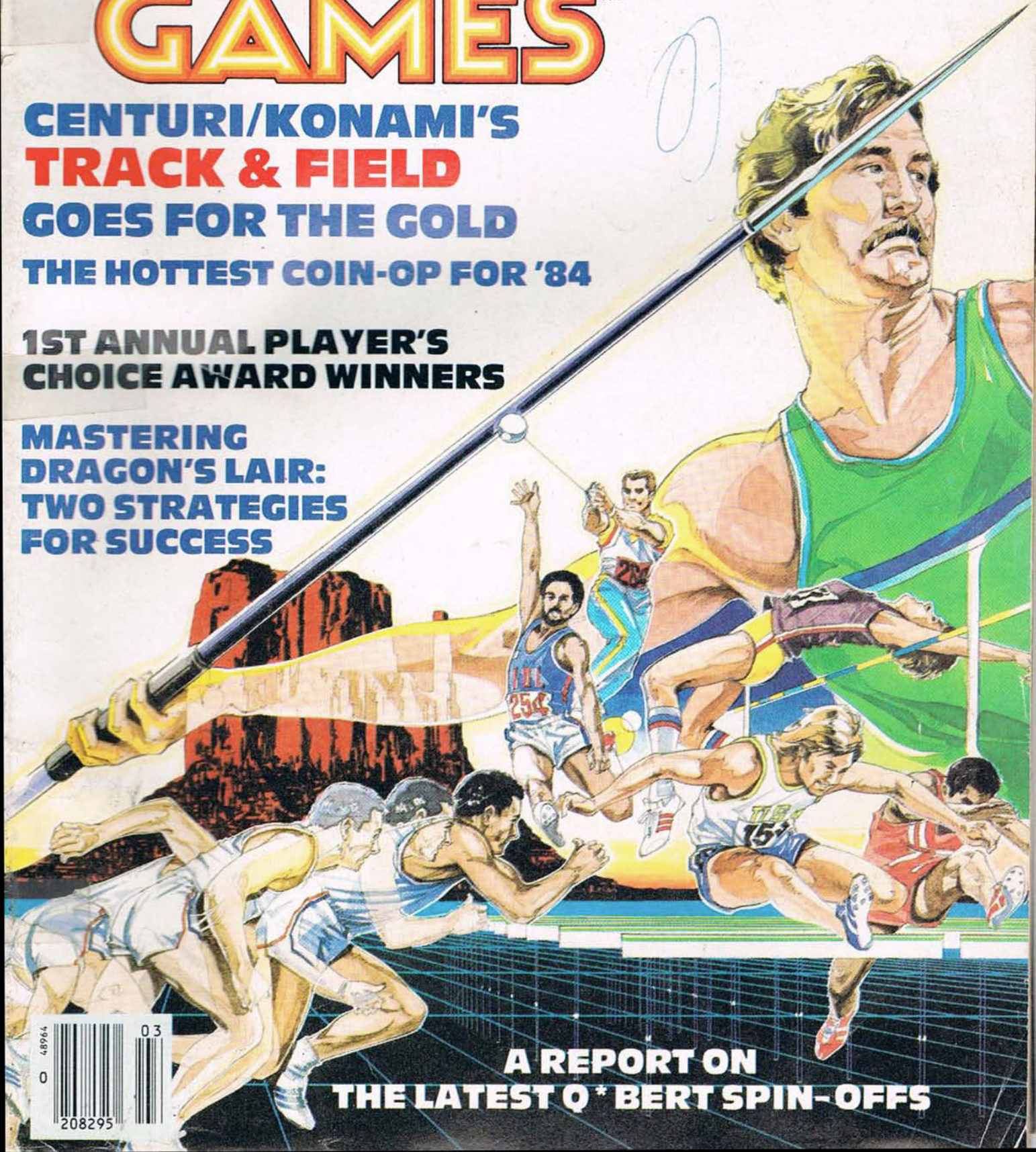# VIDEO GAMES™

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Astrocade's Extended Play

By Mark Brownstein

Over the last year we've reported quite a bit on Astrocade, this in spite of the fact that the firm went belly up more than a year ago. In a recent issue, we presented reviews of Astrocade games—some of which were available before Astrocade's bankruptcy, and others which became available after the system's most recent demise.

That article prompted a great deal of interest from *Video Games* readers. So first, in response to your letters, the attached sidebar lists many of the major manufacturers of Astrocade software. Since we last reported, L & M Software has come out with a new cartridge game—Ms. Candyman. Mercifully, the game is a lot like Candyman, with enough features to fully stand on its own.

Although the title (and advertising graphic) makes one expect an Astrocade version of Ms. Pac-Man, the expectation is misleading. In Ms. Candyman, your heroine must travel through a "candy factory" gridwork, which is littered with Life Savers. Along the way, she must avoid the gremlins who are always after her. Ms. Candyman is a good game, well-worth the $29.95 (plus two dollars postage and handling) to an Astrocade junkie. The game has more than 20 progressively difficult game screens, three levels of difficulty, one or two player mode, a radar screen and a pause option.

As an L & M Software spokesman said: "We've got a great deal of money invested in this game. If it doesn't make it, we'll quit the business." Ms. Candyman would be a fine addition to any Astrocade library.

But the mere fact that there's another game for the Astrocade isn't the whole story. Jim Curran of Esoterica, Ltd., longtime Astrocade software house and distributor finally announced that (if you can believe this) the Z-Grass computer is available for the Astrocade. The computer will be pretty much as specified in earlier articles—a total of 100K memory, built-in speech, the Z-Grass language resident in ROM, and a full line of features to keep it right up there with the competition. Z-Grass is a special graphic programming language which makes it easy to develop exceptional video games.

In fact, special courses in the language have been held for video game designers, and Bally has most likely used the language to design many of its earlier arcade titles.

Since the Z-Grass unit was designed for the Astrocade, the unit is restricted to a low-resolution programming. The scheduled price for the computer addition should be around $600-700. Realistically, Esoterica doesn't expect to set any sales records with this product, partly because of its price, and partly because of the low-resolution (relative to other computers) that the Astrocade component limits it to. However, there is still a lot of interest in getting good games for the Astrocade. Perhaps buying the Z-Grass computer will pay for itself with the first game you sell. Who knows?

Esoterica will also be marketing a high-resolution, state-of-the-art Z-Grass computer. This computer will presumably be capable of designing high-resolution games for other systems. Lest you get the wrong impression of what the computer will do, let us say that the computer will be CP/M compatible, making it capable of performing business and entertainment computing, will have the interfaces necessary for connection to other computers and peripherals, and will also be able to perform just about any function of other computers. According to Esoterica, the computers are expensive but worth every penny.

Finally, we get to look at Astrocade itself. At the time of this writing, the rumors were running pretty fast and furious. True to form, Ray George, Astrocade's vice president and invisible man, was not available for a telephone interview. Without an Astrocade confirmation or denial, we present the following for what they are—just hearsay (we have them on good authority, but so far nothing has been confirmed).

Rumor 1: Astrocade is about to go out of Chapter 11 (bankruptcy) and get back into business.

Rumor 2: A new company is about to invest a sizable amount into the company.

Rumor 3: Some of the major Astrocade software developers have been approached by interested parties to develop software for the now rejuvenated Astrocade.

This is what I guess *may* happen: Some third party (possibly a major creditor or two) will pay off Astrocade's other creditors at a bargain rate (nickels on the dollar for actual debts). This new company will take over some percentage of control of the company.

The thousands of units that were either not shipped or returned to Astrocade (and were, in effect bought back by Astrocade or the third party) can now be sold at a rock bottom price (probably less than $50-60). This should reduce all existing stock (Astrocade fans around the country will probably welcome the opportunity to get a discount spare unit and sales will be brisk). The system will be marketed as a bargain super system (aside from the low-res graphics, it really was years ahead of its time).

Meantime, with the sudden rush of money from sales of the sold units, Astrocade will be able to manufacture the already redesigned Astrocade unit, which is much less costly to manufacture; or may develop a high-resolution unit of their own at a price comparable to the Atari VCS. This new unit may provide the option of play in either a high or low-resolution mode—a feature which none of the other dedicated units will have. A keyboard may also be added (not the Z-Grass), allowing easier game programming, and true computing capabilities.

At the same time, Astrocade may possibly break into Europe with relatively inexpensive European units. The sales of bargain hardware will generate the interest in software. Astrocade will liquidate its existing software at similar bargain rates, while encouraging third parties to continue to develop new games for the system. Astrocade will also exercise its options on a number of Bally/Midway arcade titles.

Although it's only speculation (many people have been burnt by poor support of the units, many dealers have been burnt by poor sales or slowly moving stock), some or all of the above may occur. The Astrocade is still a good system with an unbelievably strong following. And it may stay around for some time to come.

Bally Professional Arcade (Astrocade) Software and Information Sources

The companies listed below are primary sources of information, or manufacturers of cassette-loaded (and a few ROM cartridge) games and activities for the Bally Professional Arcade (Astrocade). This information carries no endorsement from *Video Games Magazine.*

Documentation:

The Arcadian published since 1978, provides tutorials, programs, news of hardware/software developments for the Arcade; reviews of current software and special exclusive offers. Published 11 times a year, subscription rate is $12.50/year. To order write: Robert Fabris, 3636 Morrie Dr., San Jose, CA 95127.

Astrocade Sourcebook published twice yearly, provides listings of available programs, descriptions of products available for Arcade, catalog pages for hardware/software manufacturers, and other valuable information for Arcade users. $8.00 per issue. Order from RMH Enterprises, 635 Los Alamos Ave., Livermore, CA 94550.

Software:

Esoterica Ltd.
P.O. Box 614
Warren, OH 44485

Anderson Research and Design
2206 West 21st Street
Minneapolis, MN 55118

George Moses, Co.
P.O. Box 686
Brighton, MI 48116

L & M Software
8599 Framewood Dr.
Newburgh, IN 47630

New Image
59420 Nine Mile Road
South Lyon, MI 48178

Super Software
Box 702
Plainfield, NJ 07061

The Tiny Arcade
Box 1043
Cuyahoga Falls, OH 44223

Wavemakers
Box 94801
Schaumburg, IL 60192

—*Mark Brownstein*