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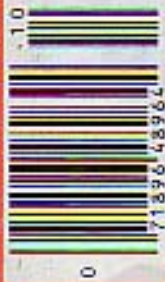
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# HARD SELL

## The \$300 Question: Astrocade or Intellivision?

By Roger Dionne

Everyone reading these pages has surely heard of Intellivision, but only a few, no doubt, know about Astrocade. This is particularly odd since Intellivision is a relative baby in the programmable TV-game arena, while Astrocade's roots trace back to 1977, the same year Atari's Video Computer System (VCS) was introduced.

Astrocade, which was originally named Bally Professional Arcade (owned by Bally Manufacturing), never took off like the less expensive VCS did. After losing \$10 million on the system in 1978-79, Bally sold it to a small Columbus, Ohio company called Astrovision. (Only recently, the name of both the system and the company was shortened to Astrocade.) Meanwhile, in 1980, Mattel, whose most famous product until that point had been the Barbie doll, released Intellivision.

Today, Astrocade and Intellivision might be considered the Lincoln and Cadillac of TV-game systems. With Astrocade retailing for \$299.95 and Intellivision for between \$250 and \$300, they are the most expensive consoles currently on the market. The quality of each system's graphics and controls games, is, in general, of the first order. What follows is a comparison of the two.

### Hardware

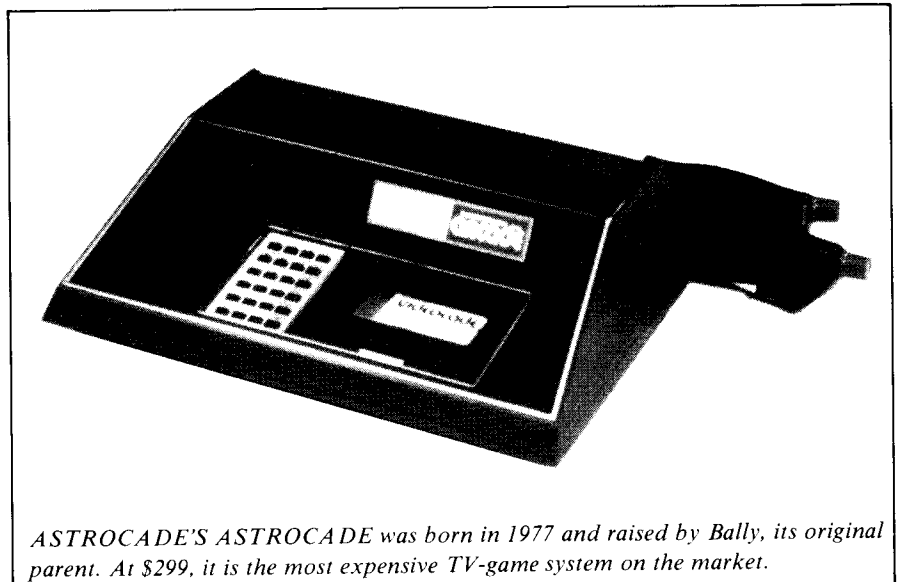
The Astrocade master component is a neat, squared-off structure with a plexiglass storage compartment, a 24-

key keypad and a slot in front for inserting the cartridges (which resemble cassettes). The Intellivision console is sleeker and more handsome with nothing interrupting its modern lines except a power button and reset button; cartridges (which resemble cartridges) plug discreetly into the side of the unit, where they cannot be seen.

Four permanent programs are contained within the system's circuitry. Two of them are games (Checkmate and Gunfight), and a third (Scribbling) allows you to doodle on the TV screen, using up to 256 different colors. The fourth program is, essentially, a pocket calculator. More significantly, a separate cartridge called Bally Basic converts Astrocade into a programmable 4K ROM computer, inviting you to create your own games, graphs,

music, video art and other programs. But, to real computer enthusiasts, this is child's play—instead, just attach Zgrass module with a full keyboard to the console and suddenly Astrocade becomes a sophisticated 32K ROM home computer. The conversion price, however, is not cheap: the Zgrass retails for \$599.

For some time now, Mattel has been promising two peripherals for the Intellivision system. One is a keyboard computer (also, \$599), which is currently available only in a few test markets. The second is Intellivoice, a voice synthesis module that plugs into the cartridge outlet of the main unit. For \$59, Intellivoice will serve as a sort of partner for the player as he makes his way through the intricacies of specially designed cartridges (B-17 Bom-



*ASTROCADE'S ASTROCADE was born in 1977 and raised by Bally, its original parent. At \$299, it is the most expensive TV-game system on the market.*

ber, Space Spartans and Bomb Squad). While concentrating on the action, Intellivoice broadcasts information about such matters as your ship's energy level and shield damage, as well as the location of attackers.

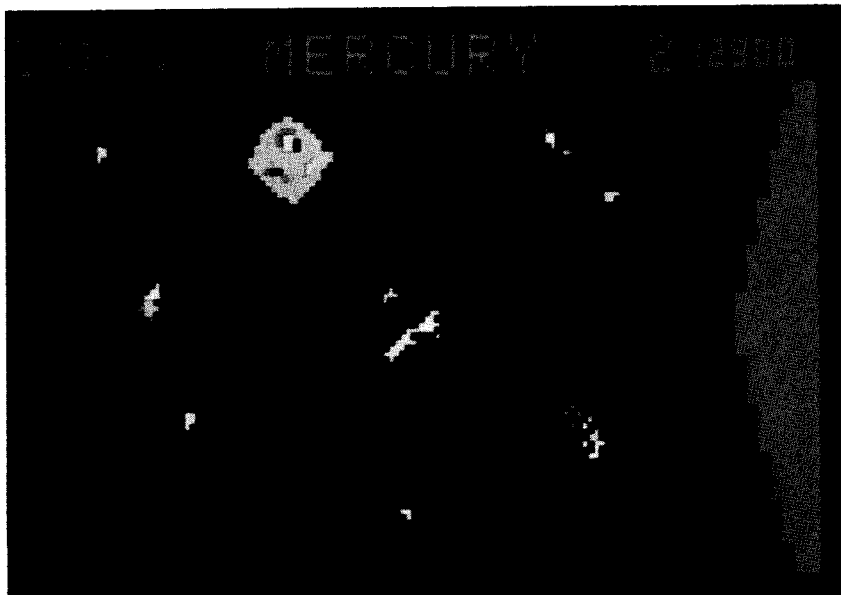
Both Astrocade and Intellivision have an interrupt mode, which enables you to stop a game in progress and return to the exact point where you left off. The two systems also automatically turn the TV screen blank whenever a game has been left on with no player input for more than five minutes. This feature prevents the possible occurrence of phosphor burns on the picture tube.

### Controls

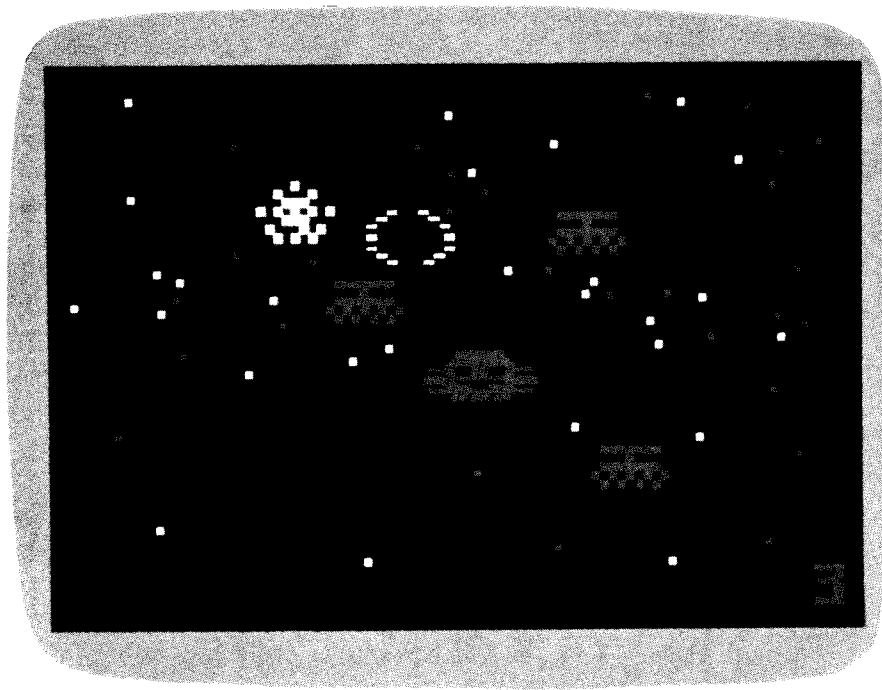
Astrocade's controls (as many as four can be connected at once) are the most comfortable, most responsive and easiest to use of any on the market. Shaped like a pistol butt, a trigger replaces the customary action button and a knob at the top of the handle works as both an eight-direction joystick and dial, depending upon the game. In only a few games (Gunfight, Handball and Red Baron) are the joystick and dial functions both utilized. The knob also doubles as a remote control game, bonus and difficulty level selector. No other system makes the routine procedures of setting up a game so convenient.

Intellivision has two permanently attached controls, which fit snugly into the top of the master unit when not in use. By pressing the edge of the disc with your fingertips, you can shift one figure on the screen (such as a basketball player) in any of 16 directions. Theoretically, the direction disc gives you more control than a joystick, but using it with precision takes a good deal of practice. And the action buttons that are found on either side of the control are guaranteed to produce sore thumbs for a long while.

What distinguishes the Intellivision control though, is the 12-key keypad section located just above the disc. A keypad overlay, which accompanies all Intellivision cartridges, acts as the player's guide to the keys' functions for that particular game. For example, in Major League Baseball, nine keys control the nine defensive players on the field. After a ball has been hit, tap a specific player's key to activate him



(Above) Astrocade's *Solar Conqueror*, (below) Intellivision's *Space Battle*.



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*With competition heating up, no one is releasing any new game unless the graphics and sounds are as good as the state of the art allows.*

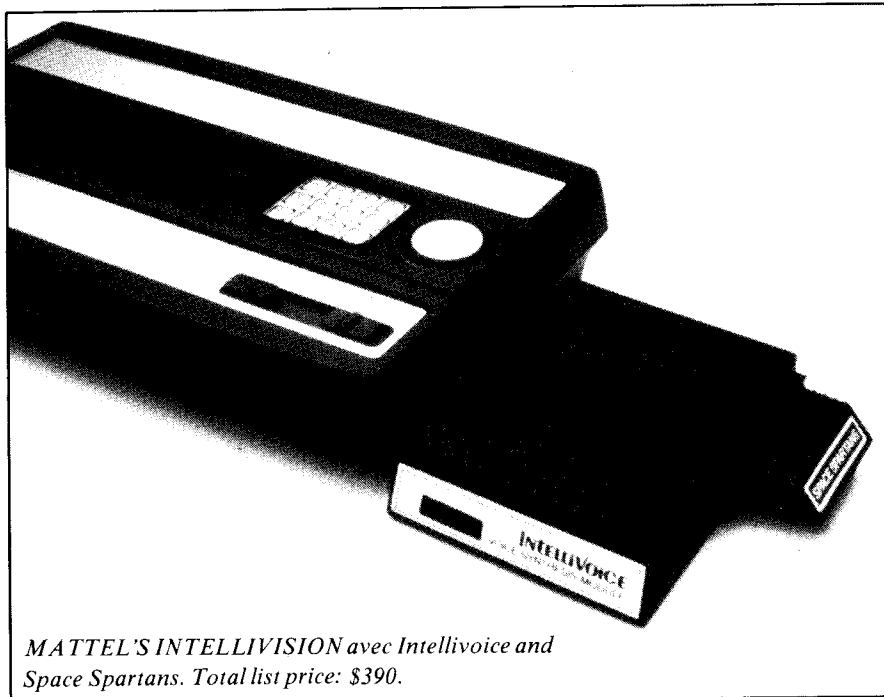
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and then use the disc to send him after the ball; press a specific player's key and the ball will be thrown to him. By combining keypad action with the direction disc, you can, among other things, steal and hit-and-run, execute pick-offs, double plays and rundowns—features no other video baseball cartridge comes anywhere near duplicating.

### Software

Both in terms of audio-visual quality and player control, Intellivision's

numerous sports cartridges have come to be the model against which other sports cartridges are measured. Another hallmark of Intellivision games is their complexity. Whereas the tank games made for the VCS and N.A.P.'s *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> are straightforward, one-on-one shoot-'em-ups, Intellivision's *Armor Battle* involves two tanks per side that recoil and change position when they fire and that must be maneuvered over a variegated battlefield of trees, water, grass, roads and buildings, whose arrangement changes



MATTEL'S INTELLIVISION avec Intellivoice and Space Spartans. Total list price: \$390.

each time the game is played.

On the other hand, Astrocade's Panzer Attack is the only tank game where as many as four players can do battle at the same time over a barrier-filled field. But what makes Astrocade's best games appealing is their playability

and excellent visual and audio effects. The sound, fury and artful dodging involved in Galactic Invasion, Astrocade's interpretation of Namco's Galaxian, actually produces the feeling of a first-rate arcade game. And, in the fast-action Space Fortress, a hit on

your fortress sets off a wildly-colorful explosion that spreads spectacularly over the screen for several seconds; simultaneously, a thunderous roar resonates throughout the room, the house, the neighborhood.

In all, 27 cartridges are—or soon will be—available for Astrocade and 35 for Intellivision. The average cartridge price for both systems is \$30.

### Astro Battle vs. Space Armada

Characteristics typical of Astrocade and Intellivision games are reflected in their renditions of the classic Space Invaders. Audio and visually, Astrocade's Astro Battle is the better of the two. Brightly colored, crustacean-looking invaders march down the screen to a squishy beat; and, at random intervals, their command ship, a spiffy, red flying saucer, complete with clearly defined portholes, beeps noisily across the top of the playfield. As in Space Invaders, each new army begins closer to your laser base, though unlike in Space Invaders, the game inexplicably ends after the sixth attack (your base is overrun). With four difficulty levels (which are determined by the intensity of the invaders' bombs), the game is challenging and visually exciting, though not significantly different from basic Space Invaders.

In contrast, Intellivision's Space Armada adds numerous twists and complexities to Space Invaders. For instance, damages to your protective shields remain from one wave of invaders to the next and may be repaired only when you hit one of the command ships that zoom across the top of the playfield at breakneck speed. Another departure is the aliens' choice of weapons and guises: During attacks, they drop white corkscrew bombs that can destroy a base only with a direct hit; in the third and fourth, they add yellow corkscrews, which are capable of quashing any base in their vicinity, to the arsenal; fifth and subsequent armadas fluctuate between visibility and invisibility, and the seventh and eighth are equipped with deadly guided missiles that sadistically stalk your base. (By the way, Atari's Space Invaders allows you to choose many of these same variations. Space Armada doesn't give you that choice.)

Whether these innovations make  
(Continued on page 80)

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themselves. Intellivision requires a commitment—in other words, plenty of study and practice. But Intellivision's worth it—even if you master it.

### **Graphics and Sound Effects**

The graphics and sound effects of certain Intellivision carts, like PBA Bowling, NHL Hockey and Sea Battle, are among the very best available for TV play. No other game matches the authentic close-up of your ball toppling the pins in Bowling, and even in their less impressive cartridges, like Star Strike and Las Vegas Poker & Blackjack, Intellivision's designers never stint on effects.

Perhaps because the company dates back to the earliest days of programmable video systems, Astrocade's cartridges are considerably more uneven in this regard. But, the sights and sounds of recent games, like Space Fortress, Star Battle and the yet-to-be-released Munchie, are of superior quality, especially compared to the rather ordinary Grand Prix, Sea Wolf or Dodgem.

One thing is clear: With competition heating up and with new companies like Activision, Apollo and Imagic challenging the status quo, no one, including Astrocade and Intellivision, is releasing any new game unless the graphics and sound effects are as good as the state of the art allows them to be.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas Astrocade is a better piece of hardware than Intellivision, its games are generally inferior, requiring little more than quick reflexes and eye-hand coordination—like most video games. Intellivision, however, is different. You don't sit down and immediately play one of its games. Give yourself a good 45 minutes to an hour to learn the rules, *then* figure out strategies. Intellivision proves that there's more to video games than pressing a fire button.

Though the libraries for both systems are modest compared to all that is becoming available for the VCS (Coleco and Activision will soon be making cartridges for Intellivision), Astrocade and Mattel do provide a varied enough selection of games to keep their customers satisfied for a good long time—or, at least, for as long as their wallets hold out. ▲

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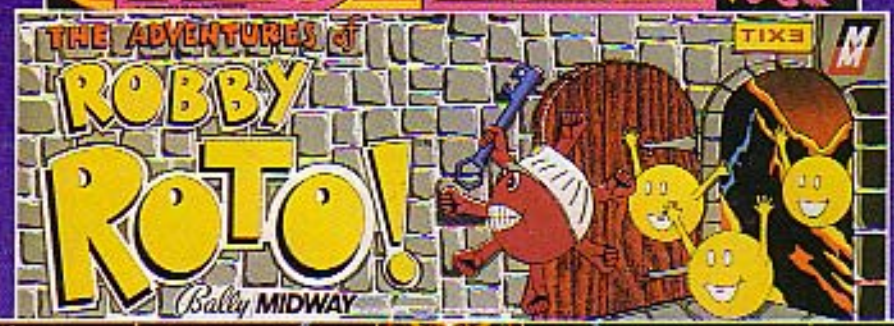
## **Hard Sell**

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*(Continued from page 66)*

Space Armada a more interesting game than Space Invaders or Astro Battle is debatable, but they definitely make it a more varied and difficult task. And that's the point. Mattel's designers appear not to be satisfied creating simply another tank game, another auto racing game, another space game; instead, they embellish their creations with operational variables and strategic complexities that, for better or worse, put the games in a class by





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