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# VIDEOGAMES

## New life for your Atari 2600

DANNY GOODMAN, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

DEDICATED ATARI 2600 ENTHUSIASTS become defensive whenever friends carry on about one of the many systems now on the market that offer arcade-like graphics. By comparison, the 2600 seems a generation or two behind. Even after some wonderfully detailed graphic executions like Parker Bros.' *Frogger*, Atari's *Defender*, and Imagic's *Demon Attack*, the 2600 still lacks the "flash" of the *Intellivision* from Mattel, and the newer systems by Atari and Coleco. That is, however, only until you plug Starpath's *Supercharger* into the cartridge slot (see Fig. 1). It's like discovering a completely new game system, and the cost is only about \$70.



FIG. 1

One of Starpath's (formerly known as Arcadia) founders, Bob Brown, is an ex-Atari engineer who had a lot to do with the design of the 2600. As such, it's not surprising that he's very knowledgeable when it comes to working miracles with that console.

Simply put, the *Supercharger* expands the part of the console's memory that creates a graphic image and sends it to the video screen. The 2600 by itself has only enough "screen memory" to handle new video information every other horizontal scanning-line (a TV picture is made up of a few hundred such scanning lines). Thus, the smallest video element is two scanning lines thick. The *Supercharger*, however, supplements the screen memory to accommodate new video information on each line, greatly improving the graphics resolution.

But the hardware—the *Supercharger*

unit itself—is only a small part of the story. First, let's clear up a misconception among many game players—and even retailers—about standard game-cartridges for any home videogame. For one reason or another, perhaps because they resemble the old 8-track tape cartridges, the videogame cartridges are often referred to as "tapes." They are nothing of the sort! I don't recommend it, but if you were to open up a game cartridge, you would see a small circuit board, one or two integrated circuits and perhaps a few other components, but no tape. The IC's are, of course, ROM's, and they store the game program. When the cartridge is plugged into the unit and the game is switched on, the contents of the ROM's are downloaded into the console's main memory and the game begins. And so it has been, until Starpath.

With the advent of the *Supercharger* comes a program-loading technique new to home games, but well known to home-computer hobbyists: downloading from a cassette tape. All you need is a cassette player into which you plug the cable coming out of the *Supercharger*. Turn on the 2600 and TV (the *Supercharger* gets all its power from the 2600) and you are prompted on the screen to rewind the tape and press PLAY. In about 30 seconds, the screen fills up with color and you're instructed to stop the tape. Presto, you're in the game.

Game play, though, is what makes or breaks a system. And, on that score, Starpath comes through with flying colors. The tape packed with the *Supercharger* is called *Phaser Patrol*. Similar to *Star Raiders* (Atari) and *Star Master* (Activision), *Phaser Patrol* puts you at the helm of a space fighter whose goal is to clear 36 galactic sectors of enemy squadrons. Your on-screen control panel makes full use of the super graphics with sharp, clear status indicators, digital readouts, and a graphically unique relative-time keeper. Flip the COLOR/B+W switch on the 2600 console, and an ultrafine sheet of dots slowly fills your viewing area, indicating that your "shields" are on.

The game play is fast, and is sure to keep your attention. If you "survive," you are rated according to your expended time and energy. I prefer this space simulation over any other for the 2600, and I place it just a notch under the version for

the Atari 400/800 computers.

More recently, Starpath has taken full advantage of its cassette-loading technique with games that require multiple loading as you master each level. It is really like getting two or three complete games on one tape.

*Dragonstomper* may become a cult classic among home-videogame addicts. It's a graphic adventure-type game in which the player fights several different kinds of enemies, and explores various buildings in search of gold and a scroll to gain access to the next level. When those have been found, you do another load and begin trading and buying provisions for the third and most dangerous part of the journey. The final phase (this is a three-load game) is a completely different screen layout with almost insurmountable hazards on your way to face the dragon. In the tradition of adventure-type games, instructions are minimal, so be prepared to spend many hours finding your way around using trial and error.

As cassette tapes are less expensive to produce than ROM cartridges, games range in price from \$14.95 to \$18.95. And when you consider that, for the most part, the games offer better displays and more involved play than the \$35 high-end cartridges, suddenly the initial \$70 investment for the *Supercharger* and *Phaser Patrol* doesn't look so bad.

### **Astrocade's The Incredible Wizard for Astrocade**

LIFE FOR THE ASTROCADE (FORMERLY Bally Arcade) console and its owners has not been too easy of late. For one thing, there have always been pretty slim pickings when it came to cartridges. For another, the manufacturer's (Astrocade, Inc.'s) precarious financial situation, which has become common knowledge in these past few months, has put the future of the machine in doubt. However, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of its death may have been greatly exaggerated. The company, at press time, was undergoing reorganization and is hopeful that it can continue producing the console and even introduce some new cartridges in the near future.

In any event, most of the cartridges that  
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# VIDEOGAMES

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CIRCLE 101 ON FREE INFORMATION CARD

The Incredible Wizard	Astrocade
GRAPHICS	██████████
SOUND	██████████
EASE OF LEARNING	██████████
CHALLENGE	██████████
VALUE	██████████
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Poor Fair Good Excellent

do exist are of high quality, owing largely to the vast graphics and sound resources of the *Astrocade* console electronics. One such cartridge is *The Incredible Wizard*, Astrocade's home version of the mildly successful Midway arcade game, *The Wizard of Wor*.

The game can be played by either one or two persons.

In the game, your warrior descends through many different mazes, battling three different kinds of creatures. The farther you get in the game, the faster and more numerous the creatures become. Some of the creatures are invisible unless you're in their line of sight (when it may be too late), so a radar screen without maze walls indicates the approximate locations of the unseen menaces. When all the creatures have been blasted by your "concentrated unified-field-disturbance rifle" the flying Worluk appears. You've got to shoot him before he either runs you down or escapes through one of the side escape doors. If you get him, the next maze scores double point-values. At random maze levels, the hooded Wizard will appear, racing about like crazy, hurling lightning bolts. If you are good enough to shoot him, you'll experience a fantastic

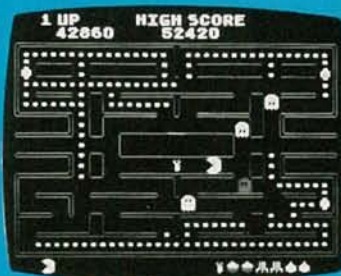
light and sound show as the dungeon trembles, and your next maze will be worth quadruple points. At higher levels, mazes show up that have no visible walls. As in the arcade game, those are called Pits.

Graphic detail is fine enough to see that your warrior is suited up in a helmeted space suit with a back pack. When he shoots, the kick from the rifle blast sets him back on his heels for a half second.

A diverse sound package adds to the appeal of the cartridge. The chirp-like sound of some of the creatures, the rifle blasts hitting a target, the disorienting sound of the trembling dungeon, and musical interludes all help to keep things interesting.

In many respects, including *Astrocade's* rather nice hand controller, *The Incredible Wizard* is much more enjoyable than its arcade ancestor.

## Atari's Pac Man for Atari 5200



CIRCLE 102 ON FREE INFORMATION CARD

Pac Man	Atari
GRAPHICS	██████████
SOUND	██████████
EASE OF LEARNING	██████████
CHALLENGE	██████████
VALUE	██████████
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Poor Fair Good Excellent

ATARI'S NEW 5200 GAME SYSTEM has the advantage of having some of the

best home versions of arcade classics in its cartridge library, and *Pac-Man* is no exception. Arcade addicts who were disappointed with Atari's version for the 2600 will have little to complain about in this rendition. The game designers took great care in copying arcade features such as board-level indicator (standard fruit symbols until you get near the top range—where an Atari logo is the symbol—and keys at highest range); bonus point symbols appear under the monster pen twice during each board; monster "blue time" varies as difficulty levels increase (including some where there is no blue time); 1UP, 2UP, and HIGH scores are shown; maze walls flash between levels; etc. Even intermissions appear between some levels (something even the Atari home computer *Pac-Man* cartridge doesn't do).

The basic difference between the home and arcade versions is that some of the arcade sounds are missing, like the "wocka-wocka-wocka" of *Pac-Man* eating dots and the sound of a deflating *Pac-Man* that's been captured by a monster. Another minor difference is that the monitors used in the arcade version were oriented vertically, while your home color-TV display is horizontal (because your TV is wider than it is tall). But, while the maze is slightly different, it's just as challenging as the original.

A tendency you'll have to overcome is working the joystick too hard. It's not easy when all four monsters are after you and you're a long way from an energy pill, but the controllers on the 5200 need only a very light touch to get *Pac-Man* moving in the right direction. But for about \$40 on the \$250 console, you've got the closest thing to the \$2500 arcade game you can get. **R-E**



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