

Bally, Interact and VideoBrain

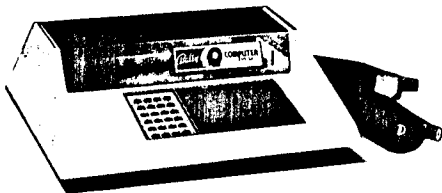
David H. Ahl

Three computers were introduced in late 1977 that were truly aimed at the consumer market, the Bally Arcade, Interact Models 1 to 4 and VideoBrain. All were capable little machines but none quite made it in the marketplace. The reasons are many — distribution, dealer training, advertising, limited software, etc.

Today, however, we continue to get letters from owners of these systems looking for documentation, software, other users and help in general. Here's what we know. It isn't everything. We'd be happy to have some of the missing pieces filled in by readers.

Bally

The Bally Arcade, renamed later the Bally Computer, was originally sold by JS&A. It was plagued at the beginning with severe delivery delays and lack of support. Eventually Bally got their act together and started delivering reliable machines.



Unfortunately, about this same time Bally was hit with some major cash requirements for construction of their casino in Atlantic City among other things. As a result, Bally decided to sell the computer division to Fidelity Electronics (makers of Chess Challenger and other high-end electronic games). Many Bally distributors and dealers were opposed because Fidelity had a reputation for dealing direct instead of using distributors

and dealers. Consequently, a group of distributors got together and made a counter offer.

The net result was that neither deal was consummated and Bally decided to re-activate the computer division themselves. At the 1980 Summer CES, Bally was showing the basic computer with several new ROM cartridges of games. The old cassette interface never worked reliably — we had three and never were able to read programs from other systems. It is to be hoped that the current model has the bugs out. Without it, of course, there is no way to exchange programs except by means of typed or handwritten listings.

A Bally club was active for about a year, but is not active now as far as we can determine.

We are glad to see Bally back in the market since they produce a very nice machine with lots of graphics and sound goodies at a very attractive price (\$299.95). For more information, contact S-W Distributors, Inc., 5300 B McDermott Drive, Berkeley, IL 60163. (312) 449-5000.

Interact

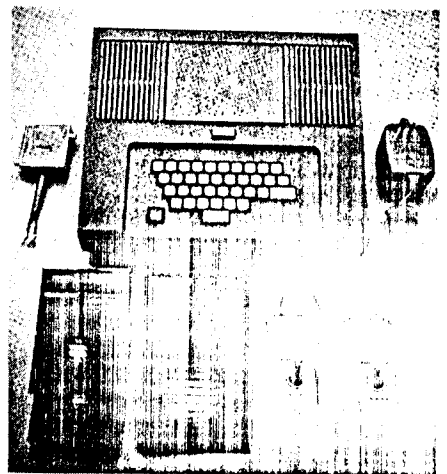
A few short months after going into production with three new models, Interact bit the dust. We found the Interact to be a capable machine with 16K memory, cassette drive, color graphics and sound built-in. We understand that many dealers are selling systems today with deep discounts from the \$549 (and up) list price.



There is an active Interact owners group with a regular newsletter. Membership is \$10.00. For a sample newsletter send a 15¢ stamp to INTERACTION, Detroit Interact Group, 15356 Prevost, Detroit, MI 48227.

VideoBrain

Perhaps the most innovative of the three machines with its APL/S language, VideoBrain failed the most decisively. VideoBrain computers are currently being remaindered at \$150 and less. For the hardware, this is a real bargain; however, virtually no technical documentation is available as far as we can determine. Nor are there any active clubs which focus on VideoBrain.



VideoBrain had perhaps the finest joysticks in the industry. These are being sold today under the name VideoStik for around \$40 a pair.

If anyone has any further information about these or other similar companies, we'd be happy to hear from you. □

Bally, Interact and Video Brain

David H. Ahl

The response is in. In the September issue I asked information on Bally, Interact and Video Brain. Here's what we got.

Video Brain

Nothing, zip, zero. People wrote to us wondering where to get cartridges, repairs, et al. But that was it. No one gave us any leads to current dealers or sources. It's almost as though the company, their dealers and most of their customers vanished to another planet.

Interact

A different story here. In the December issue we told you about David Ross of Micro Video. They are continuing to market and support the unit and are still selling computers (for \$375), an RS-232 interface and several software packages.

Protecto Enterprises markets the 16K model R for \$249. They also have a \$399 package which additionally includes Level II Basic and documentation, service manual, two joystick controllers and three tapes of software. B.J. Badger of Protecto writes that they "support the Model R to the greatest extent." Their price list shows an interface port, 16K expander,

telephone modem, service manuals and over 30 software tapes.

Manu-tronics was the actual manufacturer of the Interact computer. Today, they sell the Level II unit with two joysticks and one program tape for \$299. (They ran a special price prior to Christmas of \$269. It may or may not still be available.)

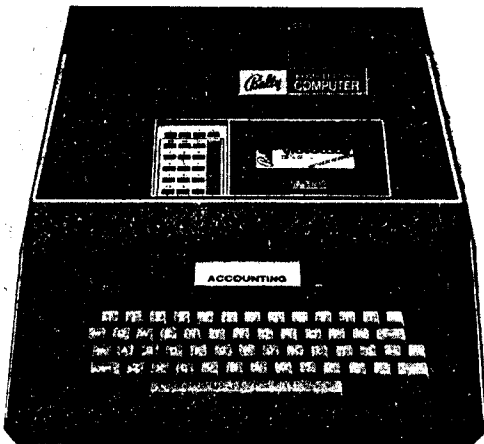
Addresses of these companies are:

Micro Video
PO Box 7357
Ann Arbor, MI 48107
(313) 996-0626

Protecto Enterprises
P.O. Box 502
Franklin Park, IL 60131
(312) 382-5244

Manu-tronics
9115 26th Avenue
Kenosha, WI 53140
(414) 694-7700

A press release photo of the Interact Model One distributed at the 1979 summer Consumer Electronics Show.



Prototype of the Bally keyboard unit which was never manufactured.

Bally

Quite a story behind this one. And most of it hasn't yet been aired.

In early 1977, Bally engineers put the finishing touches on the design of a home computer. The home computer was to come in two parts. The first part was an arcade game and the second part was a keyboard add-on module that would come later and complete the system. Bally then reached an agreement with Joseph Sugarman that his company, JS&A, would be the one to introduce and be one of the few to market the unit nationwide. JS&A had achieved an excellent and well-deserved reputation of being able to

introduce and market high-technology, high ticket items. It was JS&A that introduced countless calculators, digital watches, "Pocket CR," an electronic burglar alarm, a remote telephone answering machine and scores of other "space age" devices.

Although the Bally computer was one of the most expensive devices JS&A had ever handled, Sugarman was confident that his style of informative advertising could sell the unit. Sugarman took several months getting totally familiar with the unit and another two months writing and re-writing the ad. He confessed that it was one of the most difficult he ever wrote. Also one of the best. It ran in September 1977 as one-half page in the *Wall Street Journal* and in *Scientific American* as a two-page spread.

Bally, continued...

The orders poured in. First a trickle and then a flood—8000 in all. Prompt delivery was promised. But then Bally slipped delivery to October. JS&A notified customers. Some cancelled. Then another slip. Notify customers. More cancellations. Finally a few units were ready in January.

But by this time Bob Wiles had joined Bally as marketing vice president. He wanted to show Bally management that he could turn things around. He ignored the previous arrangements with JS&A and started to set up a dealer network. To make sure the dealers were successful, products were shipped to them first and a small percentage to JS&A even though JS&A still had thousands of back orders.

Unfortunately, most of the first production units were defective and they were returned. The problem was ironed out and a new batch shipped out two months later. Lo and behold—another problem and fifty percent of this batch came streaming back.

Around this time, Bally decided they would put off manufacture of the keyboard unit indefinitely. It had originally been promised for delivery in early 1978. When JS&A responsibly passed this piece of information along to their customers, hundreds more units were returned from people who had bought it for eventual use as a computer.

By late 1978, Bally had committed to putting up a huge casino in Atlantic City. This would require a substantial outlay of cash so they scaled back some of their less profitable operations like home computers. Sugarman was getting pretty fed up with the whole deal so finally, in November 1979, he decided to liquidate the remaining Bally computers he had in stock (some new, some returns) for a bargain basement \$49.95 each. Unfortunately the ad was rushed into print and contained a few statements that Bally didn't like. We've reproduced it here—see if you can find the two statements that caused Bally to demand Sugarman run a retraction.

Incidentally, JS&A ran a retraction and Bally got a court injunction prohibiting JS&A from running more ads. JS&A appealed and the case was reversed by the District Court of Appeals. Bally has appealed to the Illinois Supreme Court and the case is still pending.

JS&A's retraction advertisement raised yet another controversy. In it they offered to sell 60 defective Bally units for 2 cents each. The ad mentioned that these could be sent to Bally and repaired for the flat fee of \$25 and the repair job came with a 90-day limited warranty. Well Bally didn't like this at all and said, in court again, that they never quoted \$25 for repair. Unfortunately for Bally, JS&A had tape recorded a conversation with Bally's service manager in which he cited this \$25 fee several times.

That's kind of a long-winded story of

Liquidation Sale !!!

Bally Arcade Game or Home Library Computer. Originally \$300, now only \$49.95 while supplies last.

We are liquidating our entire inventory of Bally Arcade programmable TV games at practically give-away prices. Some units have slight scratches but all are fully operational. Some are new units, some were returned by customers during our 30-day trial period.

CLOSE OUT

Product comes with one-year limited warranty backed by Bally Corporation and four pistol grips. This is an incredible value. Order early. Checks or money orders only. Add \$5.00 for postage, handling and insurance and Illinois residents please add 6% sales tax. You

3,256 CARTRIDGES AVAILABLE

may also select from four cartridges regularly \$20 to \$25 each—but offered here at half price. They include such games as Sea Wolf, 280 Zzap and Math Bingo at \$10 each. Baseball for only \$2.50. There are many other cartridges offered by Bally and we will supply you with

Bally. \$49.95. 80% OFF

Bally's address for future orders. We have over 3,256 cartridges so dealers are invited to buy them directly from us at less than wholesale. This is one of the most spectacular offers of the year.

JS&A PRODUCTS THAT THINK

© JS&A Group, Inc. 1979

Can you find the statements in this ad that caused Bally's lawyers to demand that JS&A run a retraction?

Bally and JS&A. But wait. There's more.

In 1980, Bally finally got fed up with their entire Consumer Products Division (casinos and coin-op games were more profitable) and sold it to Astrovision. They reactivated the keyboard project and showed several prototype units with a Zgrass graphics package at the winter CES. August 1981 availability is promised. The current price for the "Bally Professional Arcade" alone is \$299.

Dick Konopa of Bally's (former) Consumer Products Division stated that "Bally Manufacturing Corp will continue to honor warranty and service obligations on those units purchased from Bally Consumer Products Division." This is being handled by Rex Television Service Co.

Several other companies are producing software for the Bally such as George Moses Co. (all 15 of Bach's 2-part Inventions on one tape), Wavemakers (mostly games) and Anderson R&D (speech recognition system and games). Perkins Engineering is producing a device called a Blue Ram which facilitates adding a keyboard or more memory.

Many users told us about two Bally owner clubs, both of which publish newsletters, the Arcadians and Cursor. The Arcadian newsletter is entering its third year, price is \$12.50 per year. Cursor

started publishing in January 1980; price is \$19.50 per year (12 issues) or \$9.75 for six issues.

Fred Cornett, President of Cursor, wrote me a long letter on October 3 describing Cursor and sending me three back issues. I planned to give them prominent mention in this follow-up. But then, a week and a half later, before I even had chance to respond to Fred's letter, he shot a three-page letter to *InfoWorld* accusing me of doing a "hatchet job" on Bally (in the September issue in which I was soliciting additional information for this follow up). In his letter he stated, "obviously Mr. Ahl feels he has so much credibility he doesn't need to check the facts anymore. He merely prints conjecture and readers accept it as fact. What compounds this problem is articles such as Mr. Osborne's which heap even more credibility on the undeserving Mr. Ahl." It goes on. *InfoWorld* had the letter in type but apparently had second thoughts about running it. I would have too.

I could respond further to Fred, but it hardly seems necessary and I've probably rambled too long anyway. Here are the addresses of companies mentioned in the Bally section:

Anderson Research and Design
1611 Lacota Lane
Burnsville, MN 55337

Arcadian
c/o Robert Febris
3626 Morrie Drive
San Jose, CA 95127

Astrovision
6460 Busch Blvd., Suite 225
Columbus, OH 43229
(800) 848-4377

Cursor
PO Box 266
North Hollywood, CA 91603

George Moses Co.
110 E. North St.
Brighton, MI 48116

JS&A
One JS&A Plaza
Northbrook, IL 60062

Rex Television Service Co.
6011 South Pulaski Rd
Chicago, IL 60629

Wavemakers
Box 94801
Schaumburg, IL 60193