

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

The Head of the Class Mattel's Intellivision



Arcade Alley's proprietors have judged Intellivision "the state of the art... the best unit offered so far to game players."

Mattel's recent introduction of its Intellivision computer system has turned the video game world topsy-turvy. A single session at the controls of this second generation programmable game-player will convince even hardened skeptics that home arcades will never be quite the same.

Intellivision—the name is a contraction of the phrase "intelligent television"—boosts the field's "state-of-the-art" to previously unattainable heights. Now, arcade addicts can revel in the most sophisticated games this side of the complex simulations designed for high-level computers right in their own livingrooms.

It won't be possible to fully assess Intellivision as a modular computer until the rest of the components, including a full keyboard and a cassette tape deck, become available later this year. However, the performance of Mattel's "master component," the heart of the system, leaves no doubt about Intellivision's worth as a home arcade. It may not be perfect, but it's certainly the best unit offered so far to players of electronic video games.

The machine's fine quality begins

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with the hardware. The master component, which is all that's needed to play Mattel's game cartridges, is amazingly compact. In fact, this handsome piece of equipment is actually smaller than comparable home arcades currently on the market.

Set-up and operation couldn't be easier. The necessary electrical connections are about the same as for other games. It disassembles quickly for storage between play sessions, a definite plus for owners who don't have the space to leave the machine hooked up all the time.

The only controls on the master component, an on-off slide switch and a game re-set button, are conveniently mounted on the top panel near the front for easy access. The top panel also provides a pair of special recesses that accept the game's controllers and hold them safe and snug when they are not needed.

The thin, rectangular control units are attached to the console by spiral cords similar to those used on most telephone receivers. This largely eliminates the tangle of wires around the machine that sometimes bedevils home arcade enthusiasts.

On the other hand, the controllers are permanently connected to the master

component. This could eventually pose problems for Intellivision owners when parts finally begin to wear out, as they inevitably do after prolonged use. It's a lot easier to replace a plug-in controller than one that is, in effect, part of a much larger device. Mattel promises a comprehensive service network for Intellivision, but only time will tell how faithfully the manufacturer will redeem this pledge.

The hand-held controllers themselves are a bold departure from the standard joystick. Mattel designers were forced to abandon the usual controller format because their more sophisticated games out-stripped the joystick's command capabilities. Those used to joysticks will have to endure a short period of adjustment, but even finicky players will be forced to agree that the company has developed a truly elegant solution to the controller problem.

Each command input unit is composed of three elements: a calculator-style keypad, four "action buttons" and a control disc. This configuration allows much more interaction between player and game than is possible with other home arcades.

The 12-button keypads are employed in conjunction with the pair of mylar overlays included with each Intellivision cartridge. The overlays slip into place over the keys, creating the effect of a small monoplanar keyboard expressly tailored to the needs of each individual game. For example, the overlay for Intellivision's *NBA Basketball* depicts the front court sectioned into zones. The player on offense can pass the ball to any desired location by pressing the appropriate section of the court on the overlay.

Two "action buttons" are situated on each edge of the controller. The functions of the buttons on one side duplicate those of the other pair, so righthanders have no built-in advantage over lefties.

The control disc, located directly below the keypad, generates on-screen movement in any of 16 directions. Players merely hold down the outer edge of the disc to initiate movement.

Intellivision builds on this solid hardware foundation with some of the most fascinating games ever displayed on a TV screen. This home arcade won't necessarily make rival machines obsolete, but every cartridge in the Mattel line is at least marginally superior to all other games of the same general type. At present, there's a definite lack of solitaire games, but there's already a fair selection of head-to-head contests with more to follow soon.

Las Vegas Poker and Blackjack, the cartridge Mattel packs with each master component, is a video gambler's dream-come-true. Card-sharks can choose from among four popular games: blackjack, five-card stud, seven-card stud and five-card draw. The three varieties of poker are playable against either another human opponent or the computerized dealer. In-

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explicitly, blackjack only comes in a two-player version, though there's nothing to stop players from just voiding the hands of the other player and practicing against the machine.

The animation is delightful. The dealer's eyes shift back and forth, he "talks" to human opponents via cartoon wood balloons, and the smug little man is not above a smirk at the appropriate moment. Sound effects enhance the action, and carefully worked out on-screen graphics lead players effortlessly through each hand.

More importantly, the dealer is a pretty fair card-player in the poker games. He bets, raises and even bluffs as the occasion demands, so the game must be approached the same way as a "live" card game with human participants.

Video tank games are usually pretty tame, but that's not true of *Armor Battle*. As with several Intelleivision programs, this one gives players a three-fourths perspective, showing the battlefield as it might look from a low-flying observation balloon.

And what playgrounds! The computer produces 240 different battle sites, each with a unique combination of roads, meadows, forests, waterways and buildings. The terrain isn't just for show, either, since the topography regulates the tanks' movements and turning ability. The armored vehicles zip down the highways, virtually stall fording rivers and are completely blocked from fire or movement by buildings.

Each player commands two tanks, but only one at a time. (The reserve tank is signified by a silhouette view that is quickly spotted on the playfield.) A tank can take three hits from another tank or one hit from a mine before turning into rubble.

Although tactics must be modified to fit the demands of each specific battlefield, two basic strategies cut across all lines. Players must keep their active tanks moving. This is a game of position and maneuver, and luck will often overpower skill if both players just exchange shots at close range.

Players must also be ready to switch from one tank to the other, accomplished by pushing the clearly marked spot on the overlay. Don't leave the reserve tank in an open field, or the rival commander will blast it to smithereens before wheeling to engage the active one.

In short, *Armor Battle* opens stunning strategic vistas for video wargamers. With experts at the controls, this is a fluid struggle for military supremacy that must be played to be believed.

Next month we'll continue the report on Intelleivision with an analysis of the system's group of sports simulations. **V**

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