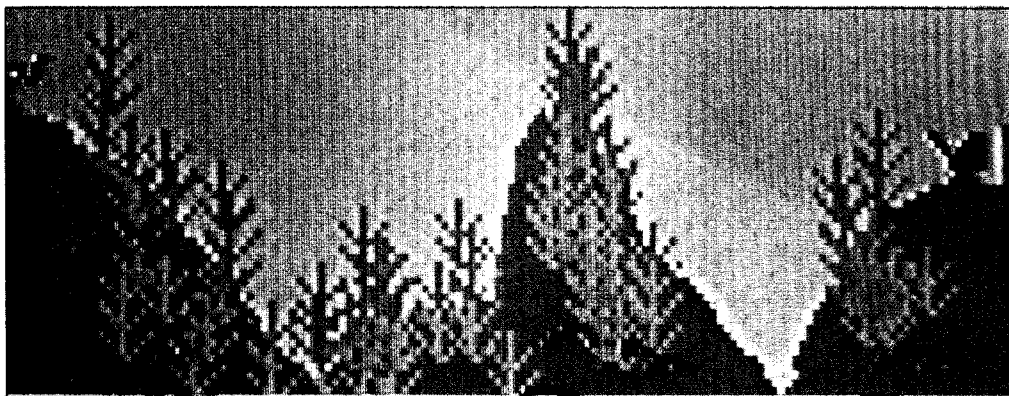


Game Workout

ASTRO CADE

By Michael Blanchet



While you spend countless hours blowing away mutants, another David-and-Goliath struggle is being waged by the game companies themselves. Even though the war has just begun, we already have our heroes (Atari) and an Unknown Soldier. One guess who that might be.

Here's a hint. It started as the Bally Home Computer. Then there was a change in command, and the system was renamed Astrovision. Six months later — Astrocade.

Feature for feature and dollar for dollar, Astrocade stacks up well against the current runner-up in the games race, Intellivision. The logical question is "What's the catch?" Well, there is none. The Astrocade system is quite good. Now that Astrocade has found a name that it can live with, let's go

over the system with a fine-tooth comb.

The exterior is characterized by sleek lines and a low profile. The cartridge receptacle is on the "dashboard" of the console, next to a 24 button keypad. Game cartridges are inserted in the same manner as audio cassettes are loaded into a player. Since the cartridge is virtually locked in, players won't jar it loose in the heat of battle, a mishap that could cause distortion on the screen.



The on/off switch and the channel selector are located on the back left and right sides of the console, respectively. Running along the rear edge of the mainframe are two banks of controller jacks. A pair of hand controls is packaged with each Astrocade. One feature that I found thoughtful was the cartridge storage area built right into the console. By lifting the plexiglass cowl, there is space to stow 15 Astrocade carts. Maybe this is not a big deal to kids, but I'm sure Mom appreciates it.

I'm sure that I am not alone when I say that, for the most part, home

game controllers stink. They are cumbersome and every brand has its own quirks. The Astrocade controllers are the only ones on the market that can actually claim to be truly "handheld." The unit is shaped like the butt of a pistol. For comfort, even during a marathon game session, these rank as the best going. The fire button is actually a trigger, which is easily and comfortably depressed by the index finger.

But the joystick, which rests atop of the controller, is hardly a joy. Oh, it works all right, but at best it's somewhat inaccurate. Movement in

eight directions is possible, but using it to find the fine line between upper and lower right on the screen can be a frustrating experience.

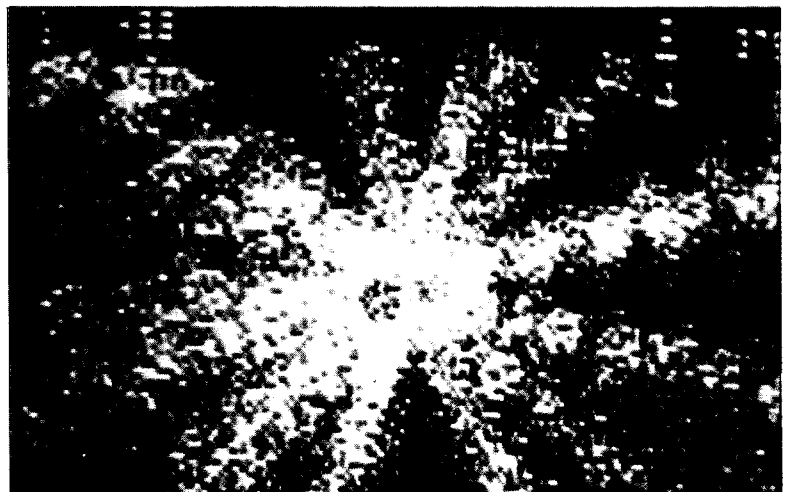
These controllers also serve as remote game selectors. At the end of any game, a tug of the number one controller trigger will call the main game menu up on the screen. Once this is done, a second tug puts a number up on the display. Turn the knob until the

figure corresponding with your selection appears. Pulling the trigger a third time locks in your choice. The same procedure is used to select game options, difficulty settings and the number of players.

By far the biggest expense to the home gamer is not the initial investment in the game system, but the cost of starting and updating a game library. At \$30 a pop, even a meager cart collection represents an investment equal to or surpassing the price of the mainframe. A lot of bread for a little fun. The folks at Astrocade have obviously been informed of this predicament. So, to sweeten the pot, they have programmed four resident games into the Astrocade system, instead of giving away a free cart (which is usually a game no one would go out and buy separately anyway).

Two of these resident games aren't really games at all—one is a calculator function and the other is called *Scribbling*. The calculator function makes Astrocade the only home video game that can help you with your homework. Using the keypad, computations can be made using the five supplied functions (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and percentages).

Of the resident programs, *Scribbling* is by far the best. The TV screen is turned into an electronic canvas and, by manipulating the



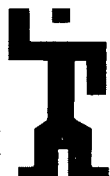


controls and the keypad, you are able to draw virtually anything. There are no winners or losers in *Scribbling*, no aliens, explosions, bonus points, or extra game lives. But like the calculator function, *Scribbling* is one diversion that actually has a practical application and is fun to boot.

The cursor, or brush, is controlled by the joystick. The size of the cursor, which alters the width of the line to be drawn, is adjusted by turning the knob. Once the cursor has been placed in the desired position on the screen, a line can be drawn by moving the joystick and pressing the trigger simultaneously.

Initially, the color scheme appears rather simple, but it can be altered. By depressing the appropriate button on the keypad, color intensities can be heightened or dulled. A total of 256 colors is obtainable.

According to the instruction booklet, *Gunfight*, one of the remaining resident games, "is a very popular arcade game for two players." That may have been true back when the system was intro-

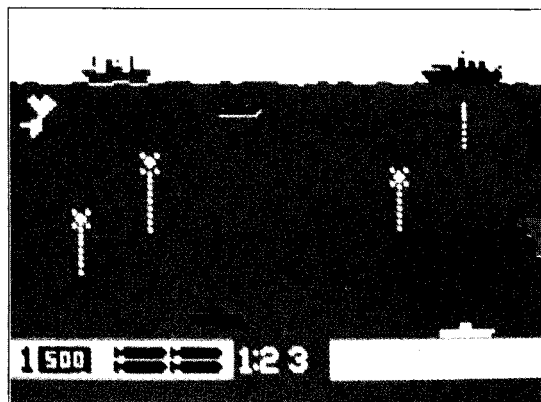


duced, but at the present time that's debatable. Fashioned after *Boot Hill*, one of the earliest Midway coin-ops, *Gunfight* is just that—a gunfight between two players.

Using the joystick to select field position, the knob to adjust gun trajectory and the trigger to fire, the object of *Gunfight* is to shoot the other guy before he shoots you. To make the action a little more interesting, a series of obstacles, including cacti, trees and a covered

wagon, occupy the strip running down the center of the screen. These cannot be penetrated by bullets. Since anything is possible on the video screen, Astrocade blessed these bullets with the ability to bounce. Now players must be mindful not only of head-on shots, but ricocheting slugs as well. Honestly, a game like this is only fun when you are playing against your little brother.

The final resident game, *Checkmate*, is an Astrocade rendition of Atari's *Surround*.



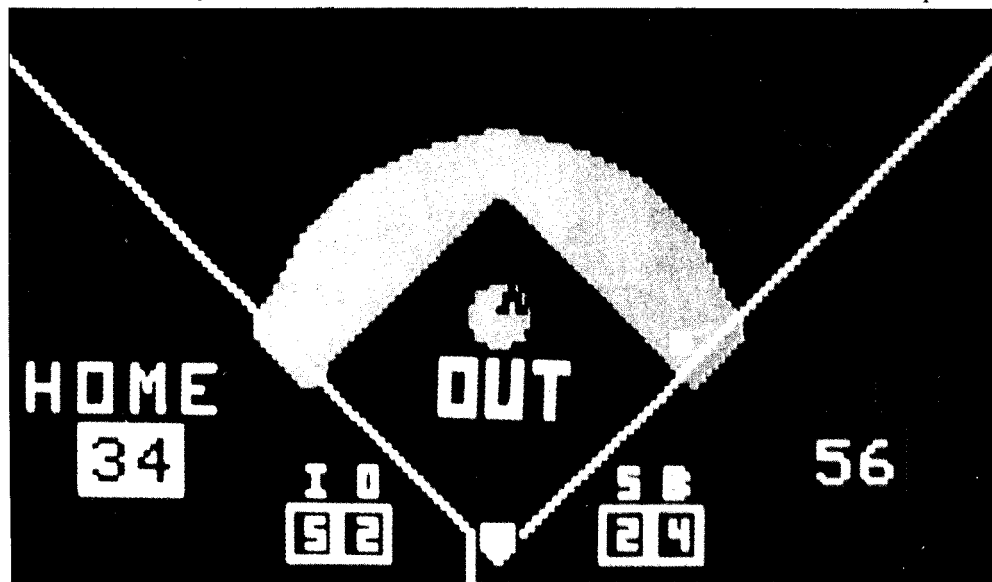
Wipe out enemy ships in SEAWOLF. Below, the realistic graphics of BASEBALL.

By piloting a symbol around the playfield, the object of the game is to cause the three other participants to collide with a portion of their own tails, your tail, or one of the playfield walls. Let me elaborate on the word tail as it applies here. Each player is assigned a certain symbol at the beginning of the game. As he moves around the playfield, a tail, or chain, comprised of this symbol, is left behind. You biology buffs may liken it to a tapeworm. Anyway, what you do is rope off as much turf as possible so

that the remaining players have a limited space in which to move. When there is nowhere left to run, the lead symbol will crash into a tail or a wall, knocking him out of the competition. *Checkmate* is a simple game, but an absorbing one. No luck involved here, unless of course, one of your opponents screws up.

Eventually, you'll reach an impasse with *Checkmate* and the kick will be gone from *Gunfight*. It's time to spring for some new games.

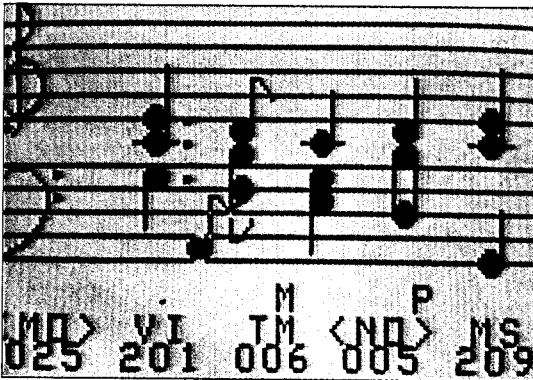
At presstime, approx-



imately two dozen cartridges were available for use with the Astrocade system. Even though the bulk of the current library is old hat, there are a few bright spots in it.

Since Astrocade was originally affiliated with Bally, the coin-op arm of the firm, Midway, was the original birthplace of many Astrocade cartridges—such as *Galactic Invasion* (which for all practical purposes is *Galaxians*), *Space Fortress* (dead ringer for *Space Zap*), and *Star Battle*. More recently, Astrocade introduced *The Incredible Wizard*, a clone of Midway's *Wizard of Wor*.

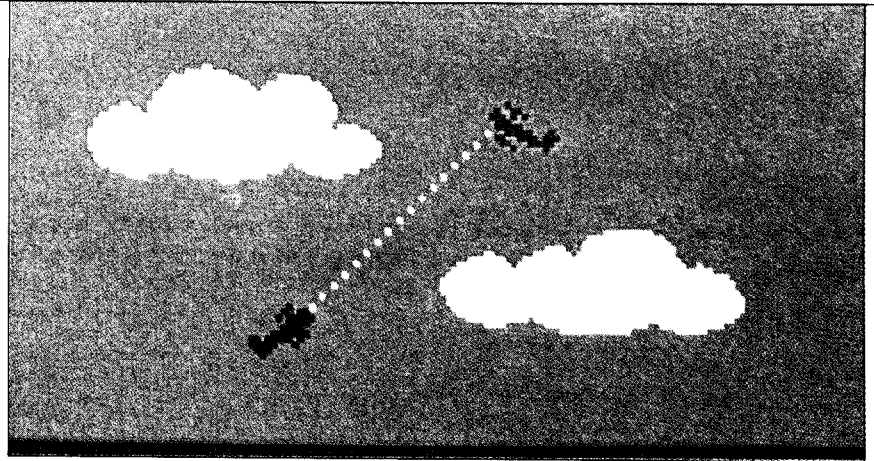
When Bally sold out to Astrovi-



MUSIC MAKER lets you write songs.

sion, a lucrative means of turning arcade games into home cartridges was lost. What puzzles me are the generic titles given to the carts that are clearly home renditions of Midway properties. Gamers are a name-conscious lot, and the association with an established success is rule number one in this business.

What I did find encouraging about Astrocade is that they realize a game system can be more than just a source of amusement—it can also serve as an educational tool, and more importantly, a true computer. Proposed cartridge releases clearly reflect this. *Creative Crayon* is a deluxe version of *Scribbling*, with a couple of neat tricks up its



RED BARON—No Snoopy, but great dogfight.

sleeve. The game can snapshot any one image or series of lines and “rubber stamp” it anywhere else on the screen. With the “life program,” a kaleidoscope effect can be realistically generated. For an additional cost, a light pen can be purchased. With it, the Astrocade owner can write directly on the TV screen.

Another cart that breaks new ground is *Music Maker*, which does just what the name implies. Using the laws of harmony, pitch, decay, etc., computer Bachs can compose original tunes.

Touted as the first adventure game played in real time, Astrocade's *Conan* cartridge sends you back to the days of swords and sorcerers. According to its maker, Conan is a fast, kinetic game, as far as fantasy/role-playing carts go. The action unfolds quickly and is not dependent on or hampered by breaks to punch in complicated, esoteric codes—a necessity with games of this nature offered by other manufacturers. Hence, the game is staged in “real time.”

For those of you who feel that the action in video games is a little too fast, Astrocade offers the sedate alternative—*Artillery Duel*. This is the kind of game that can be played with your feet up and your head back. Using formulas for projectile trajectory that are actually taught at West Point, your mission is to lock in on your opponent's gun placement and hopefully flatten it before he does the same to yours.

And who said video games don't breed violent and aggressive behavior?

Each Astrocade game, including the older titles, is pleasing to the eye. For the sake of comparison, the graphics are about as good as those generated by Mattel's Intellivision, long regarded as some of the best in

the industry. At times, the colors and effects are downright awesome. One example is the dramatic demise of the player's base in *Space Fortress*.

When an enemy shell reaches the core of the ship, the resulting explosion, though overdone, is quite breathtaking. Multi-colored pillars of rubble fly out from the crumbling base to every corner of the screen. The first time I witnessed this, I honestly thought my television was going to explode. In *The Incredible Wizard*, players quick enough to beat the Wizard at his own game are rewarded with a most eerie barrage of shimmering lights.

This sure looks and sounds a heck of a lot better than “puff” and “blink”. Astrocade, though not a tremendous seller, is a very good system.

Actually, the biggest problem with the Astrocade is not the system and it's not the games either. The biggest problem is finding the system and games in the stores. If you have the same problem write to: *Astrocade; 6460 Busch Blvd., Suite 215; Columbus, Ohio 43229.* □