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Does it beat the best-selling small car, the **ESCORT**?

And how do those two stack up against the **SENTRA** and another Japanese model, the redesigned **TERCEL**?

The answers start on page 7

Update: Tests of two new video games

Shoot-'em-up games with zaps and whams, bells and whistles, are only the bait in a video arcade. The hook is heroic fantasy. For a quarter a game, you can be John Wayne or Luke Skywalker, Captain Kirk or Merlin, master of your electronic fate, captain of your soul.

Attempts to bring the fantasy to the

home TV screen have been somewhat less successful. Even the best of the four home video-game units we reported on in November had drawbacks.

But late in the work on our November report, the first of a new generation of game machines appeared—the *Coleco Colecovision*. We could only check-test it

then; we've now had a chance to test it fully, along with another newcomer, the *Atari 5200*.

We enlisted a panel chosen from the children and adults who had tested our last batch of games. The panel checked out the two machines and virtually all the cartridges then available for them.

The new Atari: Old-hat games?

To set up the *Atari*, you install a switchbox on the TV set's antenna line and plug the game console's cord into it. Power comes from a transformer with two cords—one that plugs into a wall outlet, another into the switchbox.

That's a tidy arrangement; only a single cord connects console to switchbox. And, when the console is turned on, the antenna switchbox automatically switches to "game" so you don't have to fiddle around the rear of your TV set.

When you're finished playing a game, you're supposed to disconnect the power supply from your wall outlet. That provision reduces the convenience of the automatic antenna switch.

Our panelists had criticized the joystick controllers on the *Atari VCS*, which we covered in our November report. But our panelists liked the controllers on the *Atari 5200*. The new joysticks feature "continuous action"; in some games, the control lets you position objects according to how you push the joystick. However, the new stick doesn't spring back to the central, neutral position when you release it. The old one did. Some panelists criticized the new linkage, saying it had too much play.

The joystick does allow the quick positioning needed by some games, such as *Breakout* and *Missile Command*. But

players missed the spring-return joystick for *Star Raiders*, where skillful gaming depends on stopping the movement of crosshairs at just the right moment.

The 12-button keypad on the *Atari's* controller not only selects game options but can also control some game functions during play. With all its cartridges, Atari supplies plastic keypad overlays labeled with game functions.

Each side of the controller has two "action" buttons. (Some panelists found it easy to rest a finger accidentally on the buttons opposite the ones they were using, which locks out the firing action.) A "pause" button on the controllers lets you interrupt a game to answer the phone or take a break.

Here's a rundown on five *Atari* games:

Galaxian (\$40). Faithful to the arcade game of the same name, this version presents winged aliens that swoop down singly or in groups, their colors indicating rank and point value. Some panelists thought the game repetitious and not very advanced, but arcade fans will probably like it. There are 10 skill levels.

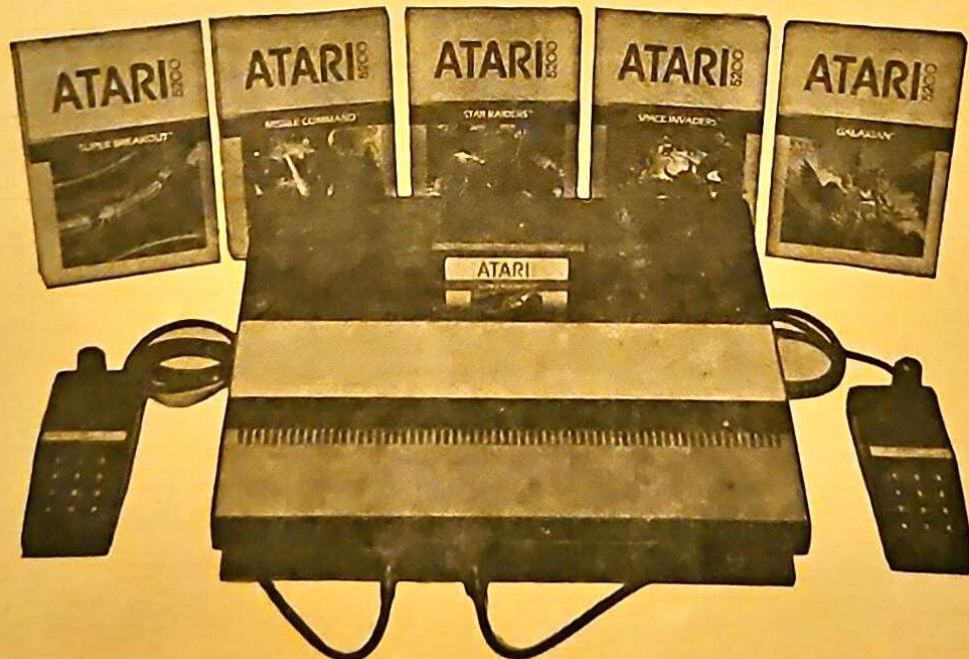
Missile Command (\$32). Another arcade favorite, this version has been borrowed intact from the one provided with Atari's home computer. It has only one missile base, rather than the arcade game's three. Otherwise, the game is much the same: You protect your cities from attack by destroying the attacker's bombs. An exciting game, well-liked by our panelists. The

5200's controller makes this version better than the one offered for the *Atari VCS*.

Space Invaders (\$32). Also available in arcades and as an *Atari VCS* cartridge. You fire up at advancing ranks of aliens, dodging behind shields to avoid the bombs that they drop. You score extra points if you hit a flying saucer that occasionally glides by. With its mutating invaders and many variations, the game is more colorful and challenging than the *VCS* version. Still, some panelists thought it old hat.

Star Raiders (\$40). Another one borrowed from Atari's home computer, this is one of the most complex video games we have seen. Your mission is to protect your starbases from attack by enemy craft in surrounding sectors, to which you can "hyperwarp." Depending on the rank you have chosen for yourself, the challenge varies from reasonable to suicidal. You pilot a craft, seeing the action as from a cockpit window; you can also see aft, dock for repairs and refueling, and put up defensive shields. Our space-game fans loved the complexity, but it could be a bit too much for less devoted gamers.

Super Breakout (included with *Atari 5200* machine). A remake of the same game for the *Atari VCS*. The idea is to knock bricks from a wall with a bouncing ball. Though prettied up graphically, it offers nothing more than its predecessor, save the option of adding five extra balls to a game. Some panelists preferred the older game for its more precise rotary controllers and more interesting sound effects. Overall, though, a well-liked game.





The Coleco contender: Better software

The *Colecovision's* controllers weren't as versatile or convenient as the *Atari's*, said our panelists. But the panel thought that the *Colecovision* had better games.

The unit's antenna switchbox perches behind your TV set, where you must reach to switch between gaming and TV viewing. You must also plug its bulky transformer directly into a wall outlet, run a cord from the transformer to the console, and another cord from console to switchbox.

Each controller has a spring-centered joystick, but the handle is an awkward, mushroom-shaped stub that doesn't give the really firm grip allowed by arcade machines. The spring tension seemed too high to some of our panelists. It's very important that you judge this for yourself. (The *Colecovision* will work with any joystick made for the older *Atari VCS*, though one of the two *Colecovision* controllers must still be connected to let players select game options.)

The *Colecovision's* action buttons are set one on either side of the controller. That setup is awkward when both buttons must be used, and may cause players to lose their grip on the controller.

We looked at these cartridges:

Cosmic Avenger (\$30). In this *Defender*-style game, you pilot your plane over terrain filled with enemy artillery. You get points for shooting down flying craft or dropping bombs on ground targets. All told, there are at least

15 types of target in three different scenes. Some panelists liked the arcade feel and graphics, others thought it too difficult and a typical "shoot-and-kill" game.

Donkey Kong (included with *Colecovision* machine). This game was thoroughly enjoyed by our panelists for its clever theme, challenging play, and tuneful sound effects. It's faithful to the arcade original, save for minor variations and the absence of the "conveyor-belt" screen (which some expert players missed). The plot: Mario's girlfriend has been captured by the ape Donkey Kong, who takes her to the highest point in three different obstacle courses. Mario must rescue her while dodging rolling barrels and moving fireballs, and negotiating treacherous ladders, girders, and elevators. Points are added if he can also retrieve her hat, umbrella, and handbag en route.

Lady Bug (\$30). Some testers thought this was better than the most popular game of its ilk, *Pac-Man*. You control a ladybug that munches dots in a maze while avoiding four predator insects. The maze is peppered with gates that only the ladybug can go through, leaving them open or closed as she desires. That offers the chance to block off a predator's path, and adds greatly to the strategy. When all the dots, hearts, and letters are eaten, the scene shifts to a more difficult level. Some panelists said the controller didn't provide the precise action and timing required.

Smurf—Rescue in Gargamel's Castle (\$30). Our panel didn't formally evaluate this unique game, but some staffers' children (and even some staffers) thoroughly enjoyed it. You control the Smurf cartoon character as he jour-

neys through fields, hills, and caverns on his way to rescue Smurfette from the castle of the evil Gargamel. On the way, there may be bats and spiders to avoid, depending on the skill level chosen. One of the few nonaggressive video games we've seen.

Venture (\$30). This is a treasure hunt set in a dungeon of many rooms, most of which have a different group of monsters on guard. The screen first shows a floor plan of the dungeon level you're on. When you enter one of the rooms, the scene shifts to a close-up of the room and its contents. After you've combed three levels in the dungeon, the game goes back to the original level—but with faster-moving monsters. Your smiling character, called Winky, is armed with a bow and arrow. If he touches any monster, alive or dead, it's all over for Winky. A dreaded Hall-monster, impervious to arrows, appears if Winky stays in a room too long. Panelists called the game "interesting," "fun," and "challenging."

Zaxxon (about \$45). This one gets the prize for sophisticated graphics: Its action occurs in obliquely viewed, three-dimensional scenes. You control a jet plane that can dive, climb, or bank left or right, shooting at targets. You keep track of your movements with an altimeter on the far left of the screen and by the position of the plane's shadow on the surface. Among the targets and hazards are missiles shot from silos, fuel tanks, other planes, and robots (including the dreaded Zaxxon). The panelists were more enthusiastic about the graphics (only slightly coarser and jumpier than the arcade original's) than they were about the play. The novel display may not justify the premium price of the cartridge.

Recommendations

Our panelists unanimously preferred the *Colecovision's* games, and a majority said that *Colecovision* was the machine they would prefer to receive as a gift. But that choice was largely based on the selection of games currently available. *Colecovision's* games are new, fresh ones; most of the *Atari's* have been played to death in arcades. The panelists liked the *Atari's* controllers more than the *Coleco's*, and the features of the *Atari* may

outweigh its game selection, if future games prove more appealing.

Most panelists found these two units clearly superior to those we tested for November. But interestingly, two panelists preferred the *Astrocade* (the top choice in the previous group) and one favored the *Mattel Intellivision*.

Both *Coleco* and *Atari* plan to introduce adapters to accept *Atari VCS* cartridges, so if you have a *VCS* now, you

won't have to discard your old games if you opt for the latest machine.

We found signs of early production problems: Three of our five *Colecovisions* malfunctioned and one of two *Atari* samples blew an internal fuse. But both carry a 90-day parts-and-labor warranty. If you buy one, don't forget to price-shop. We've seen *Colecovisions* at about \$180, *Atari 5200's* at about \$200—and both at prices considerably higher.

