



By HENRY B. COHEN

## "Third Wave" Videogaming Comes to Market

❶ f all the many new products that have crossed our desks this year, none has ever held as much promise as the magnificent ColecoVision videogame system. In many respects it makes all other systems technologically passe.

ColecoVision is not perfect, but it is closer to what every gamer dreams of owning (their very own arcade) than any other system has ever been.

console can stand alone, unencumbered by overly long connecting cables which is a big plus if the unit is to be placed on or near the connected TV set. RFI (radio frequency interference), the bane of all computers, is reduced by using the shortest possible cable runs from the output of the computer to the input of the television. Coleco, although it is not mentioned in the instruction manual, has made it possible

to use shorter runs of cable than are supplied with the system, making for a cleaner and neater installation. These cables, by the way, are available in many lengths from most video supply stores and, of course, from Radio Shack throughout the country. If you only need a 5-ft. run, by all means buy a 5-ft. cable. You may need a small adapter to facilitate the installation when connecting the cable to the ColecoVision console. The cost for these parts is nominal, especially in view of the aesthetic and practical

benefits that may be derived from their usage.

The power supply also plugs into the console, which means that, if in the future, Coleco decides to market add-on devices that require extra power, they may do so without having to rely on an additional power supply. The manufacturer can simply market an even stronger power supply to handle any contingency. With some systems peripherals may require their own power sources, but not so with Coleco.

The controllers are also plug-in types using an Atari-compatible jack. This means that any Atari-configured joy-



TURBO



AIR TURTLE

The seriousness of Coleco's effort is immediately apparent as soon as the box is opened and the components removed.

It is then that the enormous (by videogame standards) power supply makes its presence felt. As with all computational devices, the size and capacity of the power supply is a strong indication of the speed and power built into the system. Bigger is better and Coleco's is huge. Large capacity also means the ability to handle optional components without the need to resort to supplemental powering apparatus.

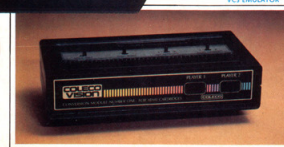
Coleco has also opted to use plug-in cables for all inputs and outputs to and from the console. This means that the



COLECOVISION

(Left) the ColecoVision offers 32K memory capacity, VCS-adapted joystick and a front-slot for a number of peripherals including (below) the VCS adapter which plays all 2400 games

VCS EMULATOR

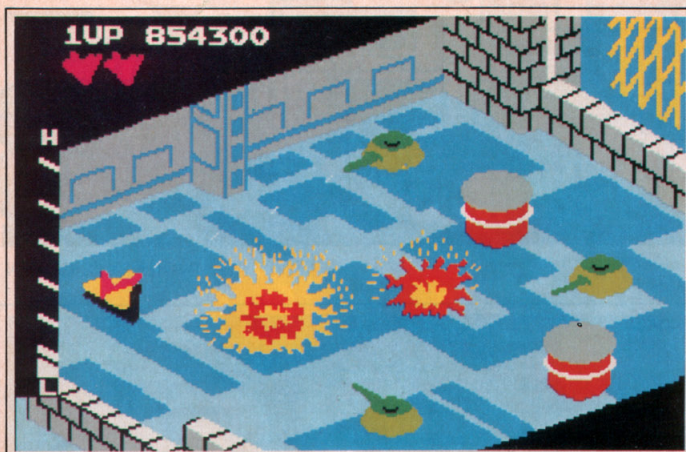


stick will operate normally with those games that require a single firing button. Those that utilize two firing buttons, for example *Cosmic Avenger*, will not work perfectly with an Atari joystick unless you're prepared to give up bombing runs for strafing attacks.

The console also features two I/O (input/output) ports, one (top-mounted) for the ROM carts, the other front-mounted for expansion modules. This configuration enables the ColecoVision console to function as a master component in an advanced computer system or remain as the world's best videogame system without the look of a hungry mother board showing its exposed terminals.

Styling is contemporary, all black save for the front panel, and very low and sleek. While admittedly, styling is a matter of taste, we have not found a soul who didn't like the look of the unit and we commend Coleco for a job well done. Of course looks sometimes have their price in terms of performance, a point we will address shortly.

ColecoVision is also the only videogame system we know of that can



ZAXXON

be safely operated on a carpet or bed without fear of overheating. Coleco engineering must have spent much time to design a convection-cooled unit that draws its cooling air from the back panel, rather than from underneath. Venting of hot air is through the top, so nothing should ever be placed on or behind the unit that impedes the flow of air through the console. This is

a most useful and thoughtful feature, one not heralded in Coleco's advertising or promotional materials. Usually we are compelled to warn potential users about the dangers of overheating—not so with ColecoVision.

Continuing with the physical appraisal, there are some changes we would like to see made in construction

of the console. All are inexpensive, and all would improve it significantly.

The unit needs an LED on/off indicator light. ColecoVision completely blanks the screen very shortly after a game is completed. If you leave the room you may easily forget that the unit and the TV are on. As ColecoVision's power supply gets quite warm when operational (and even Coleco warns you to unplug it when not in use) and your television may be cooking along with it, and LED would most likely prevent owners from inadvertently leaving the units on for prolonged periods of time.

The second criticism involves the ROM port (game slot). A spring-loaded aluminum door protects the innards of the console when there is no cartridge in place in the machine. It is displaced by the insertion of a game cartridge. It may also be displaced by the lightest of finger pressure. In that event, some of the guts of the machines are exposed to prying eyes and little fingers. To prevent damage to the machine, a simple plastic sleeve could be placed within the console so that at no time is any part of the machine accessible except for the cartridge connector. This would also help

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protect against the insertion of a slightly misaligned cartridge, something that can occur during exuberant play. Similarly, the door to the expansion port slides up and down too easily and might be sprung to keep it closed except when entry to the connector must be made. If left in the "up" position, little fingers as well as dust and dirt may enter the machine.

As mentioned, these corrections are inexpensive to make at the manufacturing level and we consider them important although they won't affect game play whatsoever. They will however, lengthen the life of this finely engineered machine.

Reverting to the plus side, we believe that this system is the closest yet in terms of providing arcade quality graphics, sound effects, play-action and overall performance.

We have found the quality of the television signal produced to be second to none. Color saturation is excellent and the sound effects must be heard to be fully appreciated. The machine plays tunes with the quality and clarity of a true musical synthesizer—it's that good.

Currently the machine is limited to handling 32K programs. The expansion port could allow ColecoVision to be upgraded to play games identical to those in the arcades when the price of memory chips comes down a little more. For the moment, each cartridge makes a few small compromises versus the arcade original but rarely do these deletions intrude upon game-playing action. Coleco has wisely opted to delete things like attract modes and has left most, if not all, of the primary game playing elements intact.

The discussion so far has covered the console and the games, but not the controllers. Here the engineers have apparently taken a backseat to the stylists. While the controllers work about as well as the average factory offerings, they are not as close to the state-of-the-art as is the rest of the ColecoVision system.

ColecoVision controllers have a short, stubby and fairly imprecise joystick. In fact, it's the same design as used in the company's tabletop arcade units only somewhat larger. Two firing buttons are situated alongside the joystick. The remainder of the unit features a superior 12 button touch panel. Overlays have been announced for some games but EG has not received any games that require their use so far.

Because the controllers are so big they are easy to drop during strenuous action. They may also be too large to fit the hands of children very well at all.

A more elegant solution would be to make the touch panel portion of the controller removable as it isn't often needed during play. Another improvement we would like to see is the use of leaf switches rather than cheap clicker switches. This would make for a more precise and vastly more durable joystick than that which is currently included with ColecoVision.

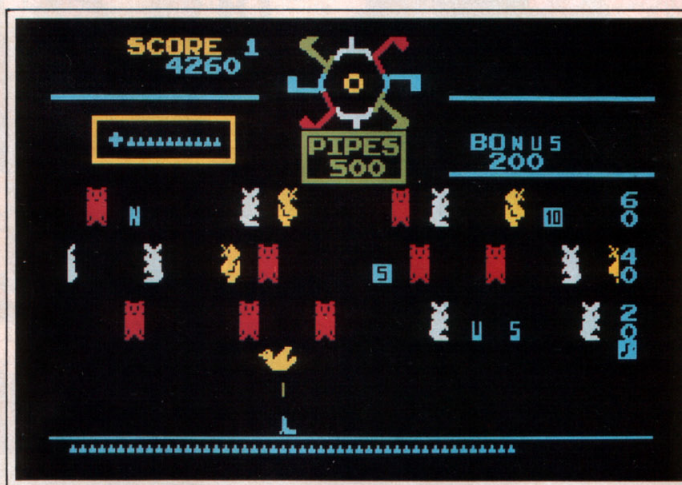
All of this costs, but the current controller leaves one with the feeling Coleco has spent some money but that they didn't spend it all that wisely.

One of the strongest features of the system is its ability to accept a variety of add-ons through the expansion and controller ports. For the soon-to-be-released **Turbo**, a special module will

game cart. We also suspect that the brilliant games of the Arcadia Supercrusher will also be playable through the system. An Intellivision emulator is also a possibility and Coleco is working on a keyboard and "Ram Cram" for ColecoVision which should turn the system into a full-scale, high-powered home computer system.

This totally modular approach must be commended, especially when mitigated by the fact that the console need never be modified in any way to still remain the most advanced videogame system around.

The games—and we have had five to play with: **Cosmic Avenger**, **Venture**, **Donkey Kong**, **Lady Bug** and **SMURF**—all look great on the screen, sound terrific and, with WICO joysticks play beautifully. Even with Coleco's own controller, they are delightful cartridges.



CARNIVAL

be supplied with the game cart (usable with other yet-to-be-announced cartridges) that houses a steering wheel of some proportions and a gas pedal. In use, the pedal's removed and placed on the floor and a single controller is placed next to the steering wheel. The joystick acts as a gear shift in this driving configuration. With its steering wheel, gear shift and gas pedal residing on the floor the system will provide the gamer with all the primary controls of a real automobile. Now that's the height of arcade realism!

The expansion port also allows for the use of an Atari VCS emulator which will be released shortly. This will permit ColecoVision to play any Atari VCS

Coleco has promised arcade-quality games and play for its system. It has come close, closer by a wide margin than any other company. Only the cost of the hardware to power the software stands in the way of ColecoVision totally duplicating the coin-op experience in the home.

On balance, ColecoVision is the finest system we have ever seen for the home. (Remember the Atari 5200 is still in prototype stage as we go to press.)

Given the manufacturer's willingness to cater to the needs and requests of gamers, Coleco may be able to make it even better as time goes by.

