



Dedicated Games Console

For about £70 Atari's Video Computer System comes complete with two joysticks, mains adaptor and a PacMan cartridge. Being 'dedicated' to game playing, the VCS cannot be used as a general-applications computer, and all games are cartridge-based



communicate, via telephone lines, with a database of games software. In addition it was also an EPROM burner with slots to accept the edge connectors of the major cartridges. The significance of this was that it was now possible to go to a local dealer, get an instant readout of the Top Twenty best selling games, and select one for immediate burning-in on a Romox blank cartridge.

An alternative to this method of distribution was Gameline, the 'pay-as-you-play' system set up in the US by Bill van Meister. Gameline markets a plug-in modem for Atari VCS machines that attaches the home computer to the telephone system. Games on this system originally cost one dollar for 45 minutes of playing time.

Major Havoc

During most of the 1970s Atari rode high on the profits generated by arcade machines like this, one of the many 'zapping' games. The advent of the home computer required a completely new marketing strategy



Two of the biggest personal computing networks in the US, CompuServe and The Source, offer games software as part of their regular service to suppliers who likewise plug personal computers into a remote database via a modem and the telephone network. Coleco, a manufacturer of home video games, has linked with AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph) to supply an interactive entertainment service. Atari sees this as the way forward and has linked with Activision to send games programs over the telephone network in its secret Ataritel project. So long as Atari are in league with Warner Communications, this is a good idea, but if Atari is sold off then it loses access to Warner Amex Cable Communications, on which the scheme depends.

Atari has had its problems, caused partly in the past by strife between the fading videogame division and the rising home computer division of the company, and now resolved by their integration. But it still has a good range of home machines that have long led the way in home computer graphics and easy-to-use software. The newest home machines are similar in design to the old ones, which were notably in advance of their time. These machines feature three custom chips: Pokey, Antic and GTIA, controlling respectively the Input/Output ports, graphics and colour.

All the machines are based on the 6502 processor and a useful variety of utility programs are now available. These include: VisiCalc, Atariwriter (a word processing package) and a home management program. The Z80 softcard is now a reality, and this makes the Atari computers suitable for equipping with Digital Research's Personal CP/M.

The company is also turning its attentions to software. Its UK division has appointed a software troubleshooter to handle all software problems, to market its best software suitably adapted for other micros (notably the Commodore machines) and, most significantly, to watch the British scene closely for rising young games programmers. After a couple of years in the doldrums, Atari has the potential for a resurgence to its great days.