FOUR-MINUTE WARNING

Perhaps one of the most bloodthirsty (some would say tasteless) games yet designed, Missile Command is guaranteed to send shivers down the spines of anti-nuclear campaigners. The game consists of defending civilisation against waves of multiple-warhead nuclear missiles.

The success of a game designed for an amusement arcade oftens depends on the persuasiveness of its 'attract' mode (the display that appears on the screen while the game is not being played). The game must also be instantly addictive. A game that fails on either count will soon be removed by the arcade owner in favour of a more profitable machine. Although Missile Command is now past its peak in the arcade, for a time it was highly successful. The version available for the Atari machines bears witness to its former glory.

The scenario of the game is both simple and subtle. The player is put in the position of the commander of an anti-missile station during a nuclear war and must protect six cities from destruction by exploding nuclear anti-missiles in the path of the incoming warheads. This is designed to appeal to both the megalomania and gallantry latent in a 'shoot-em-up' games addict — whether in an arcade or at home.

In play, the screen shows a cross-section view of the action, depicting the six cities and a pyramid structure in the centre with the anti-missiles ready for launch. The tracks of the incoming missiles then appear from the top of the screen. The player moves a cross around the screen with the joystick. The cross is positioned in the path of the incoming missiles and, by pressing the fire button, an anti-missile is launched from the player's missile base. This explodes at the co-ordinates of the cross, destroying all of the incoming missiles within range of the explosion.

However, a number of the enemy missiles have multiple warheads that split into several tracks, each of which can destroy a whole city. The game is further complicated by the appearance of low-flying enemy aircraft and satellites, all capable of releasing waves of missiles. Points are awarded for the destruction of enemy aircraft and missiles. At the end of an attack wave, a pictogram shows the number of cities you have successfully defended from annihilation and the number of anti-missiles that you have left.

As the player progresses through the various levels of the game, the attacking missiles begin to move faster and the number of warheads they split into increases. At this point it is necessary to develop an overall strategy, rather than simply picking off each missile separately. The player may choose, for example, to lay down a 'barrage' of anti-missiles, which will explode in a line and with luck destroy the wave in one swoop.

The game is further complicated at the higher levels by the appearance of parachute-borne warheads. These are extremely difficult to destroy: if your missile explodes slightly off-target, it is likely to be 'blown' out of the way (presumably on the updraught), and therefore a successful missile needs to be exploded directly on top of one of these.

Throughout the game, you must remember that you have only a limited number of anti-missiles (30 for the first level) and if these are squandered you have to look on helplessly as the enemy rockets annihilate the missile base and the cities.

Each level consists of two separate attack waves, after which the score is computed. Like other Atari games, it is possible to 'skip' to a higher level of the game. Each level is distinguished by different foreground and background colours. The game ends when all six cities are destroyed, and this intrinsically pessimistic conclusion is reinforced by a final screen displaying a suitably apocalyptic explosion and the words 'THE END'.

For the Atari computers, the game is available on cartridge, and comes with a large colour brochure that easily outclasses the documentation supplied with most other games software. The booklet gives detailed descriptions on how to set up the game, point-scoring and hints on methods of play, as well as colour illustrations.

Missile Command: For all Atari computers, £9.99
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