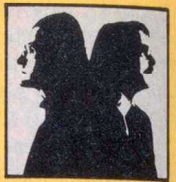# Arcade Alley
A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz

Astrovision's Rising Star

Astrovision has revived Bally's Professional Arcade, to the relief of system owners.

If common sense had anything to do with it, the Bally Professional Arcade might have become the most popular home programmable game-playing system. The business world, however, seldom functions that way.

When the Bally Manufacturing Company introduced its premium-priced system, it was clearly the most sophisticated electronic fun machine available. The console had more memory and better graphics than the competition, the machine was upgradable to small-computer status, and the cartridge library was satisfyingly extensive.

So what happened? Bally executives saw Atari and Odyssey moving aggressively to capture the market with lower-priced systems and got cold feet. Afraid that consumers would not pay $200 to

$300 for a "mere game," Bally withdrew from the home-arcade sweepstakes and concentrated on arcade machines, its traditional line of business.

Although several groups of Professional Arcade fans valiantly carried the torch by privately circulating information and even prepared software programs, the system became little more than a curiosity. Less than a year ago, some big-city retailers were dumping the Pro Arcade for as little as $60.

Then came Astrovision. The Columbus, Ohio-based concern purchased complete rights to the system from Bally and immediately started gearing up for a re-introduction. One of the first things it did was to release a pair of new game cartridges that Bally never got around to distributing. In this month's "Arcade

Alley," we'll examine these new entries and see where this potentially outstanding revived system might be headed.

Bally Pin (Astrovision/3005) waited in limbo for some time before seeing the light of day. Its year or more of obscurity proved undeserved. This is absolutely the best video-game pinball simulation ever offered for any programmable home system. It clearly shows Bally's expertise in the pinball area. It had to be first class all the way to maintain Bally's reputation, and is.

Designer Bob Ogdon responded to the challenge with a dual-playfield masterpiece that captures all the sights, sounds, and spirit of genuine flipper-game play. Using a pair of the Professional Arcade's excellent pistol-grip command units, players can effectively control left- and right-side flippers individually. Both of the electronic tables use the same flipper arrangement. Each has a pair of bats at the center of the bottom of the screen, with single flippers guarding two extra drains located along the lower edge of the field to the left and right of the central pair.

The trimmings should be familiar to those who occasionally forsake the delights of **Pac-Man** and **Defender** for coin-op pinball machines. The highlights include back bumpers, thumper bumpers, drop targets, a spinner, and virtually everything else you'd expect except a flashing back-plate.

Orchestrating ball movement is perhaps the hardest part of pinball to translate to the video screen. Bill Budge, who created the best-selling Apple II program **Raster Blaster**, worked out the ball dynamics mathematically, determining the effect of gravity and other physical laws on the trajectory of a wildly bouncing metal sphere. Bob Ogdon has done virtually as well here, infusing his creation with a feeling of realism that is generally absent in video pin contests.

Field number one in "Bally Pin" is a colorful explosion of white, red, and yellow. The second table is equally vibrant, though many will find its more soothing dark field easier on the eyes. Drop targets and bumpers are placed a little differently in each version, though they are the same overall.

Standard pinball strategy definitely applies, so gaining optimal control over flipper movement is the top priority. The flippers can be held in the up position

indefinitely, permitting the arcader to trap the ball for a few seconds while deciding which part of the field should be its next destination. Having the player hold one controller in each hand is this game's most significant innovation. It provides a sensation unlike anything else in video-gaming while faithfully reproducing the necessary pinball ambience.

Galactic Invasion (Astrovision/2011) brings the thrills of **Galaxian** to the Professional Arcade. In fact, the first edition of this cartridge actually read "Galaxian" when booted on the system.

Players man the now-familiar horizontally mobile laser cannon and fire at flotillas of alien invaders. These space nasties, however, hardly qualify as sitting ducks. They peel off from the main attack force in groups of three and swoop down-screen, laying a carpet of bombs in their wake. Scoring is simple: each alien is assigned a specific point value which is doubled if it is hit while in the midst of a dive-bombing run.

The best strategy depends on which of the nine possible difficulty levels is selected. At the easier settings, cagey players will want to wait for aliens to begin a bombing run before shooting them so as to scoop up more of those bonus points. Unfortunately for those who live to accumulate astronomical point totals, "Galactic Invasion"'s most difficult variants force the adoption of the opposite approach. At level nine, the aliens not only attack in greater numbers but also sweep much farther across the screen to get the player's cannon and drop a lot more bombs along the way.

Gunners should attempt to eliminate the aliens as soon as possible when trying the most difficult settings. As soon as a squadron breaks out of formation, obliterate it immediately—if not sooner. Once an attack group begins a dive toward the bottom of the field, all but the most agile players will soon be saying goodbye to their current weapons. If only one alien gets past your barrage and enters a bombing dive, be sure to move the cannon immediately after blasting it. Dying invaders frequently drop a bomb or two as they expire.

The graphics, though acceptable, aren't quite as good as the coin-op version or several of the "Galaxian"-type computer programs. The play-action, on the other hand, is magnificent. Movement is smooth and remarkably free of the flickering that occasionally mars home versions of coin-op hits.

These cartridges can stand up against any of the titles produced for rival video games. They serve notice to the electronic-arcading world that we will shortly have to enlarge the present "big three"—Atari VCS, Odyssey², and Intellivision—to a "big four" that includes the rechristened Astro Professional Arcade.

V