

CHECKOUT

AMUSEMENT ARCADIA

Dedicated arcade player Tony Takoushi adds up the points awarded to the Vectrex System—the all-in-one games machine.

With the ever increasing demands being made on the domestic television by innumerable games centres, the arrival of the Vectrex Arcade System may help to ease the situation for those with more traditional demands of their televisions.

Hardware

The Vectrex System has been developed by General Consumers Electronics (GCE), and is distributed in the UK by Milton Bradley. It comes in the form of a nine inch monitor type screen surrounded by a robust, black, plastic casing. Unlike standard domestic televisions which use Raster Scan, the Vectrex uses Vector graphics with three-dimensional rotation and zoom. The Vectrex also boasts ultra high-resolution graphics (no 'stairstepping' of diagonal lines) with screen characters performing smooth twists, turns and several high speed manoeuvres which are comparable only to their arcade counterparts. The system uses a motorola 68A09 micro-processor chip in order to give more speed and power than most game centres. The excellent sound effects are produced by a General Instrument AY38912 chip; the chip has three tone generators (with a 12-bit range), one noise generator which can be mixed with any tone, three channels of volume control (one for each tone), an envelope generator, two input/output ports and sound effects including explosions, music and crowd cheering.

The game controllers come in the form of a detachable panel with a self-centering joystick (which allows as near 360° rotation precision as I have ever experienced) and four buttons (allowing thrust, fire, rotate left and right). There is also a two player facility but you have to buy an extra controller for this.

Choice of games

At present there are twelve games available in the form of a cartridge which is plugged into the side of the monitor.

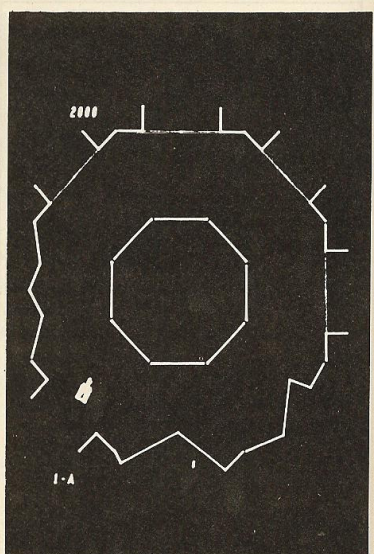
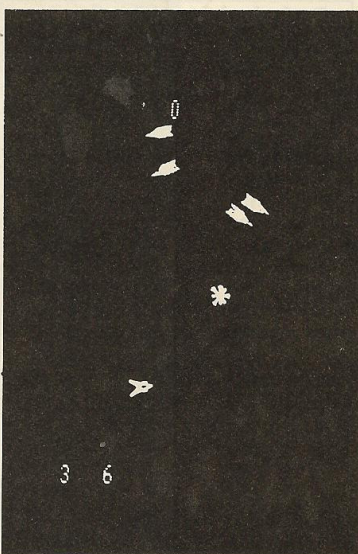
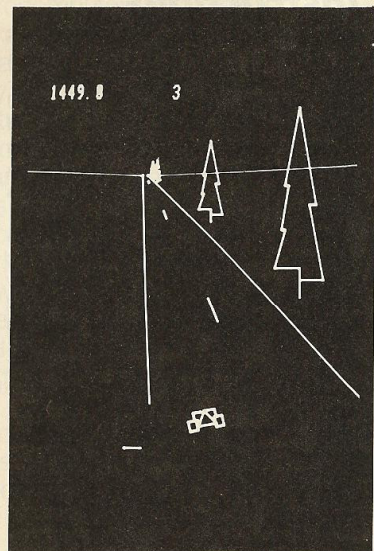
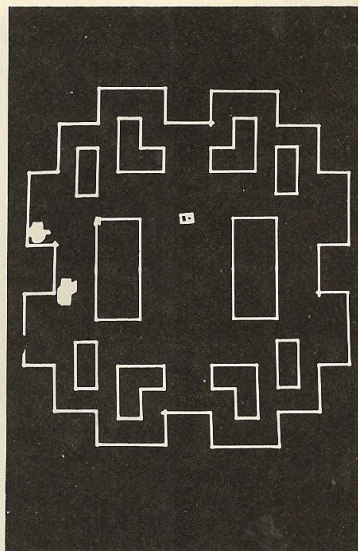
As the machine uses Vector graphics the standard screen presentation is white on black, but this can be overcome by using the plastic screen overlays, supplied with each game, to provide colour and detail.

GCE has obtained the licensing rights for, and produced versions of, the following arcade games: Konami Industries' Scramble, Stern Electronics' Bezerk,

Cinemotronics' Armor Attack, Space Wars, Star Hawk, Rip-Off and Solar Quest.

The above-mentioned seven titles are faithful 'reproductions' of the original arcade games, but only four of the titles—described below—are both absorbing and challenging.

I had reservations whether a game such as Scramble could be converted from the original Raster Scan type format (using many varied and bright colours) to Vector format. It did rather lose its edge in graphical presentation, but for arcade 'feel' and speed it is almost identical and as



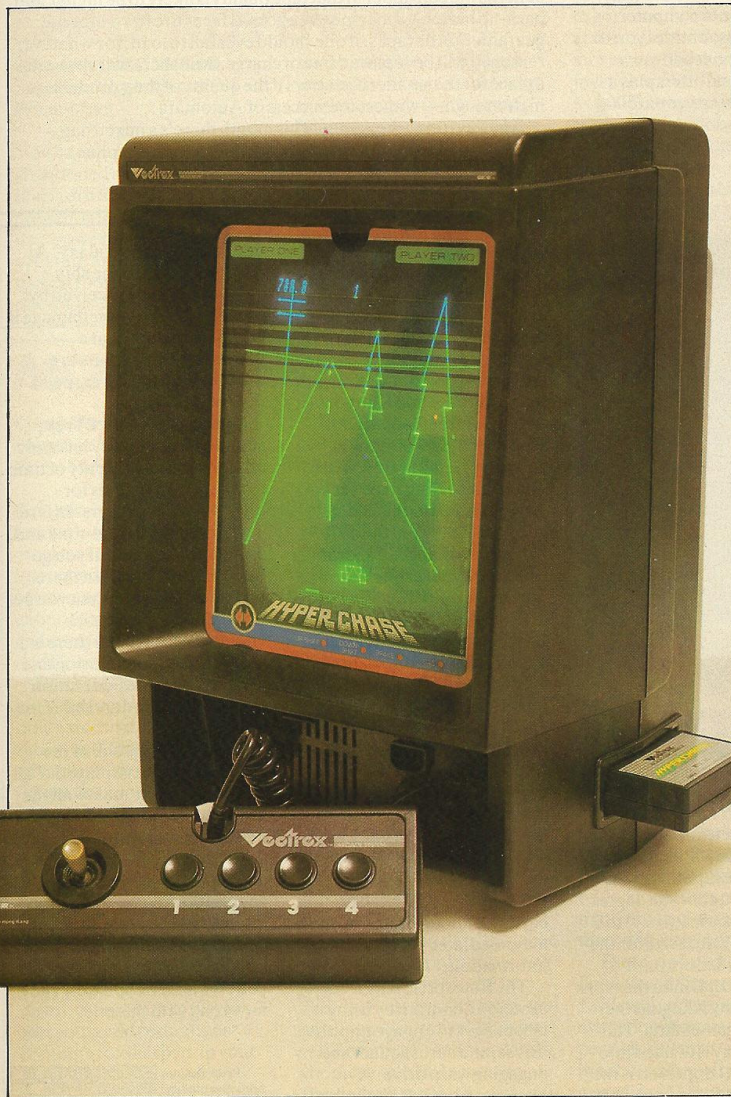
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Index		Game Type	Format	Price £	Supplier	Rating
No	Title					
1	Mine Storm	Asteroids	—	—		9
2	Star Hawk	Star Wars	Cartridge	20		8
3	Armor Attack	Tank/Chopper Battle	Cartridge	20		9
4	Star Trek	Star Wars	Cartridge	20	Argos,	8
5	Bezerk	Human v Robot	Cartridge	20	Greens,	8
6	Hyper Chase	Motor Race	Cartridge	20	Hamleys	9
7	Scramble	Defender/Bomber	Cartridge	20	and most	9
8	Blitz	American Football	Cartridge	20	good toy	7
9	Clean Sweep	Pacman	Cartridge	20	shops	8
10	Cosmic Chasm	Adventure/Maze	Cartridge	20		9
11	Space Wars	Two Player Asteroids	Cartridge	20		9
12	Solar Quest	Two Player Asteroids	Cartridge	20		9
13	Rip Off	Space Pirate	Cartridge	20		8

such must be rated one of the better cartridges available.

Armor Attack is a tank versus tank scenario (in a maze) with a helicopter thrown in for good measure. It is very addictive and has that essential (and expensive) arcade quality of 'just one more game'.

Space Wars is a battle between two opposing space ships in a hostile space field. Each player has the ability to thrust, rotate and fire at his opponent; the game being won when one ship has scored ten points. This game is particularly exciting as the higher the level (seven in all), the faster the action.



The Vectrex uses Vector graphics with three dimensional rotation and zoom.

Finally, Solar Quest is 'Asteroids' with a difference. You control a ship and must destroy up to seven different types of alien, and rescue or destroy the survivors from the alien craft, while avoiding the gravitational force of the sun in the centre of the screen. This game is particularly skilful and demands great concentration, awareness and reflex if high scores are to be attained.

GCE has also produced its own in-house games; these being, Mine Storm (this game is inbuilt to the 64k ROM of the Vectrex unit), Cosmic Chasm, Star Trek, Blitz, Clean Sweep and Hyper Chase.

Of the in-house titles there are only three truly outstanding games. 'Mine Storm' is the game supplied in ROM when a Vectrex is bought. It is a full feature (ie, rotate, thrust, fire, hyperspace, spaceship) Asteroids emulation with a little 'fine tuning' as regards the break up of the Asteroids. It is just as challenging as the original, also bearing in mind the limitations of the original as against the new deluxe Asteroids currently in the arcades.

Hyper Chase is a car race game. I originally found this game graphically crude and lacking 'playability', but after a little dedicated play (just over 1½ hours!) I was well and truly addicted. You control a car (with four gears) on a race course and attempt to pass other cars on a tenuous and winding road. There is a changing backdrop that gives a great 'feel' of depth and acceleration. This is one of the better cartridges that requires a little application to be fully appreciated.

The last game worthy of mention is Cosmic Chasm. The aim is to penetrate an alien planet, travel through its underground maze of caverns via passageways and place a bomb by the planet's power structure in the central cavern. In the outer caverns there are 'protectors' trying to ram you. To fend them off you have a force field and dual lasers at your disposal, but you must be quick and accurate as the centre of the cavern expands and will crush you if you delay in drilling to the next segment of maze. This game is unique in concept and plays well; it requires a fair degree of dexterity and 'coolness' of mind that is not found in the standard alien zapping arcade game.

Conclusions

The Vectrex is a truly excellent machine and represents 'state of the art' technology which both game enthusiasts and eager arcade players (like myself) will readily appreciate. At £130 for the monitor, one controller and an on-board game (Mine Storm), it represents very good value for money.

It is a dedicated games machine with a 64k ROM and no RAM. Milton Bradley released a conversion module to make the machine programmable at June's Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago, but a UK release date has not yet been decided. There are six new titles planned for launch at Christmas. They are Soccer, Pinball, Fortress of Norzod, Bedlam, Web Wars and Spike (Spike is the first cartridge to use the voice synthesis capability of the Vectrex unit).