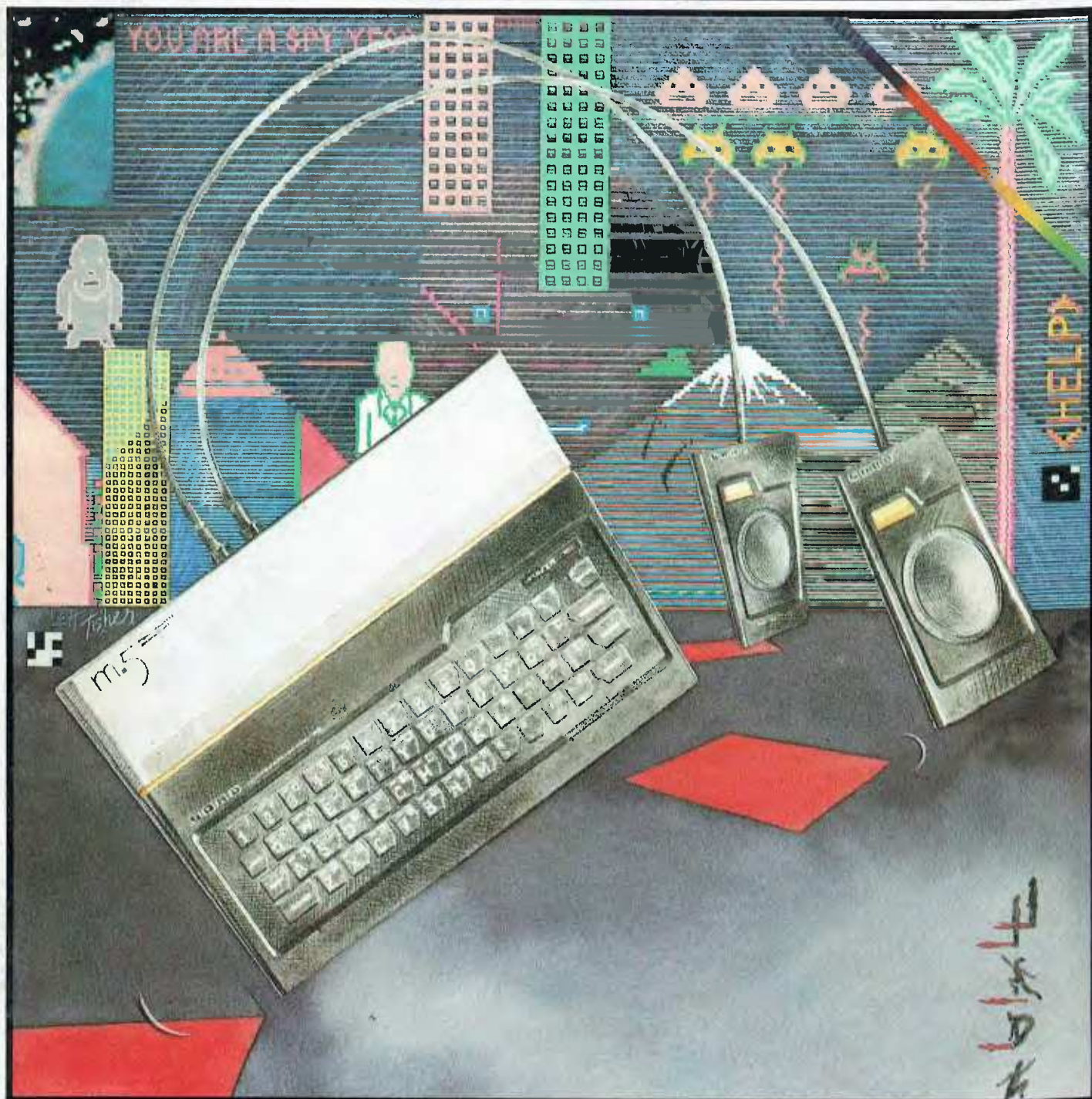


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AUSTRALIA'S TOP SELLING COMPUTER MAGAZINE



HOW MIGHTY IS THE SWORD?
We put the M5 on trial

SCREENPLAY



This month Steve and Catherine Withers review games for the TI99/4A

The Texas Instruments 99/4A is quite a nice home computer, with some powerful graphics features which give it great potential for arcade-style games. All the games we tried out were supplied as plug-in cartridges, which are very convenient but also expensive. Given the choice of (say) five LPs or one game program, we would pick the records every time.

All but one of the games are from Texas Instruments, the odd one out being Henhouse, which is a Funware product.

As a general rule joysticks are essential for the arcade games, as the pace is either too rapid for fumbling with the keyboard, or because the programmer chose less than ideal keys to control the game. Unfortunately the TI joysticks are not very pleasant to use. They have a stiff action and the edges dip into your hands making them quite sore after a few games. The 'fire' button is also very rubbery, but this is less of a problem.

Only one of the games seemed original

(Henhouse) but if everyone and his dog is selling a space invaders game it must be difficult to avoid joining the crowd. A look through a US magazine dedicated to the 99/4 revealed a number of distinctive games for this computer, including a very graphical 'surgery' game (guts and all). Putting people back together sounds far more constructive than killing them.

Thanks to Gametronics of South Yarra for the loan of the equipment and cartridges used for this review.

GAME : Tombstone City: 21st Century
PRICE : \$39.95

The dubious scenario of this game is that a Wild West ghost town is being attacked by Morgs — green nasties that eat people and tumbleweeds, reproducing with the aid of cacti! Your mission (should you decide to accept it) is to destroy the Morgs with the aid of your trusty prairie schooner. You get ten lives, which is a lot compared with most games, but you need them, believe me.

Unless you are particularly dexterous, forget about playing this game with the keyboard. Even on the 'novice' skill level the action is fast and furious. The instruction leaflet says that Tombstone City is "an exciting new way to test your game-playing skills" and it isn't joking. Even with joysticks it is a difficult game because of the speed at which the Morgs move.

You steer your schooner around the town, zapping tumbleweeds and Morgs to score points. When you kill a Morg it turns into a cactus, and two adjacent cacti are likely to spawn a new Morg at some future point in the game, but the only way to destroy a cactus is to shoot a Morg standing next to it (don't ask me why that should work). One thing in your favour is that by pressing the space bar you can instantly retreat to a cemetery, a safe area that the Morgs



won't enter. To make life difficult the entrances to the cemetery are likely to become blocked by cacti if you try to kill the Morgs from within. There is also a penalty of 1000 points for such a retreat — a bit harsh when you only get 150 for killing a Morg.

Within each skill level the game gets harder as the score mounts. Each time you clear the city of Morgs and pairs of cacti a New Day starts with more pairs of cacti than before. The skill levels control the speed of the Morgs

relative to your schooner, and at the 'insane' level the Morgs regenerate at an even greater rate. I would be surprised if many people could master Tombstone City, and its difficulty could be disheartening for players of modest ability.

USE OF GRAPHICS : **
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : **
VALUE FOR MONEY : **

GAME : Parsec
PRICE : \$49.95

Yet another variation on the space war theme, this time of the 'Defender' genre. Parsec's main feature is that it is able to drive the TI speech synthesiser, giving you a talking shipboard computer which warns of approaching enemy ships and occasionally compliments your shooting.

The plot of the game is that you control a spaceship which has been given the task of destroying marauding fleets of alien craft. While you can control your altitude and (to a limited extent) speed, you cannot change direction and your only weapon points forward. As well as dealing with the attackers you must avoid crashing into the ground. This is a particular problem during refueling as this process involves flying through a narrow tunnel on the planet's surface. In a couple of hours play only one of my ships lasted long enough to need refueling.

The first few waves of ships attack



head on and they can be dealt with fairly easily once the pattern of their behaviour has been identified. The flying saucers are a bigger problem as

they pop up behind you, often crashing straight into your ship. Your only chance is to shoot them after they have flown past, but I (Steve) only managed

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to destroy the saucer fleet once.

The graphics are fast and smooth, and the speech synthesiser adds to the fun. The game does have its weaknesses, especially when using the keyboard. The choice of the E-S-D-X diamond to control movement with the full stop acting as the 'fire' button is acceptable to lefthanded players, but it

causes problems for the rest of the population. It's much more fun with a joystick, and my scores doubled when I switched to using one. Another annoying point is that collisions are sometimes registered even though the screen shows a near-miss. Despite these criticisms, I found Parsec to be a challenging game that I could play for

hours, and certainly my favourite out of those we tested.

USE OF GRAPHICS : *****
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : *****
VALUE FOR MONEY : ***

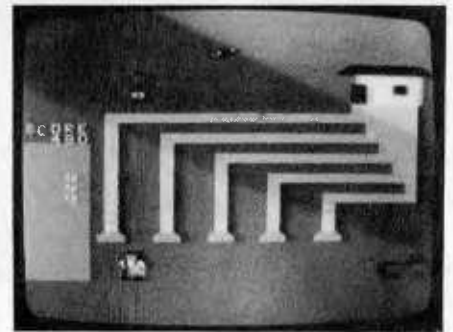
GAME : Henhouse
PRICE : \$64.00

A solo game where the player takes on the role of a farmer collecting eggs and defending his hen house. Points are scored by gathering eggs from full chutes and carrying them to a truck. Additional points can be gained by shooting birds and poachers, and the rarely appearing wolf must be killed at all costs or the game is lost. The farmer cannot collect eggs while he is carrying his gun, so decisions on priority have to be continually made. The game ends after six eggs have been broken or stolen, or when the wolf gets into the hen house.

This is a friendly game with good clear cartoon-like graphics, although

the sound effects are rather unimaginative. It is easy to build up a good score and to go on to better it. Henhouse is a test of concentration rather than reflexes as there is plenty of time to carry out your tasks (but the game does speed up as the score mounts), and it will appeal to those who do not enjoy the constant threat of being under attack. It is also a particularly easy game to play using the keyboard as the farmer can only move across the screen, however the choice of 'Q' as the firing key could be improved as it is too close to the 'S' and 'D' keys used to control the farmer.

All in all this is an absorbing game well suited to those without lightning reflexes but who still enjoy a challenge. Being in that category itself, I



(Catherine) enjoyed this game more than the others in this article.

USE OF GRAPHICS : *****
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : *****
VALUE FOR MONEY : **

GAME : Tunnels of Doom
PRICE : \$59.95

Tunnels of Doom is a "Dungeons and Dragons" style game for one to four players. Up to four characters (who may be fighters, wizards, rogues or heroes) explore a dungeon on a quest, the nature of which is determined by a data file on tape or disk. Tunnels of Doom comes with two files: Pennies and Prizes, and Quest of the King.

"Pennies is a very simple game intended for children or new players who wish to become familiar with the mechanics of moving around the dungeon without having to worry about the hazards that appear in more advanced games. "Quest" is more complex, requiring careful selection of goods from the store, searching for secret doors, engaging weird creatures in combat, and wielding magical artefacts. There is also a time limit, as

you must rescue the King before he is put to death by the monsters that are holding him prisoner.

It isn't easy to describe such a sophisticated game in a few words. The dungeon consists of up to ten levels, each comprising a number of rooms linked by corridors. The party of characters move around in response to commands entered from the keyboard, while the screen shows a perspective view of what lies ahead. When the

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party enters a room the display changes to a plan view with small figures representing the characters and any monsters and treasures that may be present. The party may offer to negotiate with the monsters as an alternative to fighting, but a battle may result anyway. During combat each character is controlled separately and can fight with whatever weapons he or she is carrying, and may be able to make use of magical items as well. A large dungeon could take many hours

to explore, and for this reason it is possible to save a game on disk or tape and continue later. That assumes you can tear yourself away — I kept telling myself "just one more room".

The manual indicates that other games for use with Tunnels of Doom will appear in the future, although the systematic and random variations that are possible with "Quest" should give many hours of entertainment.

The corridor graphics are superficially attractive, while the combat

mode gives a degree of control that would be difficult to achieve in any other way. If you are intrigued by the idea of "Dungeons and Dragons" but don't have anyone to play with, Tunnels of Doom is a pretty good substitute.

USE OF GRAPHICS : ****
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : *****
VALUE FOR MONEY : ***

GAME : TI Invaders

PRICE : \$39.95

What can you say about yet another version of Space Invaders? This one is fairly standard, giving you three missile launchers to shoot as many invaders as possible. There are three varieties of attacker with the least valuable in the front ranks, and there are four shields for you to hide behind in order to avoid the invaders' fire. A yellow saucer periodically crosses the top of the screen giving you an opportunity to score additional points, but the value of a hit depends on your accuracy (maximum value comes from hitting it dead centre). When all the invaders are destroyed a red spaceship flies across the screen, and it is in your interest to keep it on the screen by hitting it — each time you do it changes direction, boosts your score, and delays the arrival of the next wave of invaders.

The game ends when all your launchers have been destroyed or when an invader reaches the surface.

Two sets of keys may be used to play the game, suiting left or right handers, but in common with similar games it is better played with a joystick.

There appear to be major problems with this game in that the scoring system does not seem to work properly: the score shown bears little relationship to the number of invaders left on the screen (we never got past the first wave), and no relationship to the scoring system in the instructions (i.e. the values of all targets are a multiple of 5, yet all sorts of scores were seen). There also seemed to be no difference between the two levels of difficulty offered at the start of the game.

This is a very ordinary game which does not seem to work to its own rules. It's addictive only in the sense that you



go on playing even though you are not enjoying the game, and will only be of interest to confirmed space invader junkies and those who enjoy being aggravated.

USE OF GRAPHICS : **
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : **** (or none)
VALUE FOR MONEY : *

GAME : Video Chess

PRICE : \$69.95

This is a very complex chess playing cartridge which offers a multiplicity of options. You have the choice of playing against a human opponent or the computer at beginner's or more advanced levels, storing an unfinished game on cassette, or playing from a special position. The program can play nine separate games at once.

The chess board and pieces are very clear and they take up about half of the screen, the remainder being used to show the last move by each side and the clocks. The keyboard is used to enter moves, with columns identified by letters and rows by numbers. Other commands are entered by single keystrokes, but what might be the most useful did not seem to work on the test cartridge. This was the HELP mode,

where the program will either suggest your next move or evaluate the move you enter. If this cartridge is intended to help you play better chess then the absence of this function is laughable. Other useful options that are available are time out, replay, save game, back up (allowing you to cancel your last move) and mode change (to change the style of play during a game).

In addition to all these functions there are a number of game options such as three levels of play (from beginner to intermediate), 'thinking time' allowed for the computer (between 30 and 200 seconds per move, but only at the higher levels of play), and the style of play to be adopted by the computer (normal, aggressive, defensive, or losing).

It takes a little time to get used to all the facilities on this cartridge but for those who take the game seriously and



wish to improve their chess it could be an excellent alternative to some of the higher priced chess machines that are on the market.

USE OF GRAPHICS : ****
ADDICTIVE QUALITY : ****
VALUE FOR MONEY : ***