

## Recommendations

Overall, our panelists liked the *Astrocade* best of the four machines we tested. They preferred its hand controls over the others, and they liked the idea of the built-in games. They also thought the graphics and sounds were exciting. *Incredible Wizard* was the panelists' favorite of the eight cartridges tested for *Astrocade*, but *Bally Pin*, *Football*, *Galactic Invasion*, and *Space Fortress* were also popular.

The *Atari VCS* was a distant second choice of the panelists. Its strong point was the availability of an unusually wide selection of games from Atari and several independent manufacturers. However, the joystick controls were judged to be stiff and sloppy in their action—and they

appear to be rather fragile as well. CU's panel of at-home testers especially liked *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, *Kaboom!*, and *Defender*. Only the last of the three is made by Atari. Our staffers also liked *Demon Attack*, *Starmaster*, and *Super Breakout*.

The *Mattel Intellivision* boasts detailed graphics and amusing sounds, but the controls were criticized for their awkwardness and lack of precision. Small children especially were confused by the instructions. The panelists' top choices were *Night Stalker* and *Major League Baseball*. Our staffers also liked *Sea Battle* and *U.S. Ski Team Skiing*, as well as the *Utopia* game cartridge.

Nobody on the panel liked the *Odyssey 2* very much; all but one panelist voted it the worst of the four machines. The joystick controls were judged reasonably good, but the graphics and sounds were crude. Worst of all, the panelists found most of the *Odyssey 2* games boring. *Monkeyshines* was judged the best of a none-too-good lot. Our staffers also preferred *Quest for the Rings* and *UFO* among the other *Odyssey 2* games.

Before you choose one of the four machines tested by our panel, read the box below. The new generation of home video-game machines from Coleco and Atari may have made the older machines passé.

### Colecovision: A promising new machine

Just as we were finishing our panel testing of the four video-game machines, a new machine appeared in the stores, accompanied by an extensive advertising campaign. Coleco, known for hand-held electronic games and early video games, has produced a sophisticated home video machine, the *Colecovision* (\$200).

The machine is about the size of the four we tested. Its power and reset switches are conveniently placed near the front. The coiled cords of the hand controllers plug into the machine, and the controllers can be stored in a recess in the top. The controllers have a 12-key pad, which looks like a telephone touch-tone pad, and a stubby, mushroom-shaped joystick. Dividers between the keys help you avoid pressing the wrong key. There's a slot to accept a keypad

overlay, but none of the games we bought uses one. A button on each side of the controller triggers game functions.

A sliding door in the machine conceals a slot called an "expansion module interface," for which Coleco has promised a variety of add-on devices. The first of them is a module that accepts game cartridges made for the *Atari VCS*.

Coleco advises shutting off the power when changing cartridges. If you don't, an on-screen message reprimands you.

Coleco has been licensed to produce home adaptations of several currently popular arcade games. We looked at one, *Donkey Kong*, which is included with the machine, and at several others that sell for \$30 each.

*Donkey Kong* was so close to the arcade version that any differences we

found were judged insignificant. The story was the same with the other arcade-based cartridges we checked out: *Cosmic Avenger*, *Lady Bug*, and *Venture*. There were a few minor differences, but all the essential features of the original games were there. The detail in the images, the smoothness of motion, and the sounds were all superb, in our opinion.

Some players didn't like the way the controller is designed. You must press the trigger buttons with the same thumb and forefinger that hold the controller, unless you rest the controller on a table top; pressing the buttons can be awkward and fatiguing. The joystick was positive in its action, but some players thought that it moved a bit stiffly for very young children. A minor complaint is the 15-second wait for the opening title to disappear from the screen when you change games or press reset.

A disquieting note: Two of our four samples failed within a few hours of use. One wouldn't reset; the other stopped in the middle of play, as if someone had pressed the reset button and held it down. Be sure you can exchange the machine if a problem should occur.

Despite its problems, we think that the *Colecovision* has an edge over the four other video machines. However, Atari reportedly has a new machine scheduled for release by the time you read this. And our experience with the *Colecovision* suggests that Coleco is having the durability problems common to new products in their early stages of production. Prudent game-buyers will wait—if they can—to make direct comparisons of the new *Colecovision* and the new *Atari* before making a final decision.

*Colecovision* was the closest thing to the arcade games. In *Donkey Kong*, you "leap over tumbling barrels, dodge lethal fireballs," and climb girders to rescue a damsel in distress.

