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GUIDE TO

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# GAMES ON DISC

## What's Next for Games on Videodisc?

By LES PAUL ROBLEY and BILL KUNKEL

The dust kicked up by Don Bluth/Cinematronics' coin-op smash, **Dragon's Lair**, hasn't even begun to settle — more likely, it is continuing to rise — and it's already time to start looking at what's coming next.

*Dragon's Lair* was a curious success, right from the beginning. Certainly, heading into 1983, few industry insiders would have figured the "Next Big Arcade Game" to come from the bankrupt Cinematronics. The El Cajon coin-op company has been an invisible, if revolutionary, entity in terms of industry recognition for almost a decade.

Actually, Cinematronics introduced vector graphics to arcades with the seminal space shoot-out **Star Hawk**, and produced the cult favorite **Space Castle**. Alas, vector graphics were perceived as a "fad" among arcade taster-makers when games such as **Zaxxon** were taking the traditional rasterscan graphics to the limits.

Cinematronics was left with a lot of

vector monitors, however, and doggedly bucked the tide with a continuing trickle of largely-ignored videogames. The wind-up seemed imminent when Cinematronics went Chapter 11.

Don Bluth, a former Disney animator, was sitting around during all of this, buried in the ashes of his own major failure. Bluth and a few other Disney creative people left Uncle Walt's wing to try and fly on their own with the enchanting "The Secret of NIHM". The result, at the box office, was disastrous.

So, of course, these two forces managed to intersect long enough to make videogame history. What else?

In many ways, however, this seemingly haphazard fate is a lot more prosaic than it first appears. Who else *but* a company such as Cinematronics, on the ropes, slipping toward the canvas with Mr. T waiting above just in case it *did* get up, *dare* produce a laserdisc-technology based coin-op?

It is in the nature of laserdisc videogames that they will be "convertible", that is, the arcade owner will be able to buy a new disc, change the signs around, and, voila!, he's got a brand new machine.

Convertible coin-ops have been pretty much an anathema amongst the coin-op giants. "It's the nature of our industry," explains a spokesman for Bally-Midway, "that we *need* to make every videogame a new machine. Aesthetically, we can create each new cabinet so that it offers unique lathework and, technologically, we can make the post state-of-the-art breakthroughs in sound and graphics, only by taking in major revenue for each new coin-op. These convertible coin-ops are generic videogames, they show mediocre graphics and warmed-over game ideas. That is *not* what this field needs."

Yet *Dragon's Lair* is a whole new ballgame. In early showings, according to *Replay* magazine, arcades

Cinematronics' *Dragon's Lair* was the first of the laserdisc games, but it has strong competition.



boasting the then-hard to get *Dragon's Lair* were up an average of \$30 per night on *all* videogames. The industry has been virtually without a dominant title since **Pac-Man**. A look at the top 10 earners makes an arcader feel like he has wandered into the past — **Galaga**, **Ms. Pac-Man** and **Millipede** represent some of the younger blood on the list!

In the summer of '83, only Atari's **Star Wars** was in the same lair as our dragon, with the first animated videogame drawing attention in virtually every medium. It was an explosion a long time in detonation.

Five years earlier, a designer named Rick Dyer had his AMS crew working on a concept for telling a story using a home videogame process with players making decisions that affected the outcome of the story. AMS completed several prototype storyboards on scrolls, which they took to Bluth.

"A computer selected the correct scene on the scrolls," explains Bluth. "It was a very crude approach, and when I look at the process today it reminds me of a Rube Goldberg machine of the '80s. Nevertheless, we thought it a splendid idea in terms of marrying art with science, one which would not only help the sliding videogame market, but benefit the floundering animation industry as well."

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It worked. Utilizing an industrial Pioneer Laserdisc (which Cinematronics had to wheedle from the warehouses in which they remained, unsold) the game offered rapid search, using a laser beam in lieu of an actual needle, allowing the beam to scan the entire record in order to bring up the scene that is the logical result of the player's action commands. There is still, of course, a slight time lag, but it is not an insoluble problem, and future games may circumvent it entirely.

Ah, yes, future games.

Bluth already has several projects under development. **Space Ace** involves a super hero who is reduced to an infant named Dexter by the evil "Infanto Ray" (shades of *Flash Gordon*). In his child form, Dexter boards a spaceship and pursues the evil alien villain, a creature called Borf who has kidnapped his girlfriend and threatens

to reduce all of earth to screaming infants.

If the player, as Dexter, makes all the right moves, he gains points. Earn enough points and the screen will glow reddish, beeps will sound, and letters will say "energize." If the player opts to energize, he will turn back into Space Ace with only 12 seconds to use that form. Like *Pac-Man*, Space Ace can now meet even greater dangers, earning higher points. Or the player can remain as Dexter, pursuing a safer route and consequently earning fewer points.

"Unlike *Dragon's Lair*, *Space Ace* will have a branching capability whereby players decide how they want to go through the game," announced Bluth. The branching element gives them the opportunity of becoming two different personalities. Again, the new game will feature a joystick plus an action button.

"We tried to keep it simple this way," added Bluth. "If you make controls too complicated, the game loses its fun. Players should concentrate mainly on what they see on the screen."

New techniques will also be employed in the animation process. More multiplanes will be used (trucking shots present no problems with laser-disc), as well as actual miniatures for backgrounds a la Max and Dave Fleis-

Cinematronics' next laserdisc offering will be *Space Ace*, starring Dexter as the hero.



cher. Using a periscope camera in front of the model and dollying laterally will impart an added 3-dimensional realism to the backgrounds.

"We found we needed that kind of look to help players know when to react and size up what the danger is," added Gary Goldman, Don Bluth's animation director (Bluth's own studio is manufacturing the models.)

Bluth foresees future breakthroughs with laserdisc interactives, some of which should appear in two year's time. One will be the ability to place the animation on any background desired, not unlike the travelling matte processes used on motion pictures. The backgrounds might be on a separate laserdisc and put together via computer, without the need for expensive matting. We may even come across games whereby a move to the right would invite a totally different

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upfront for the license, with plans to couple their ColecoVision game console to a home laserdisc player. Coleco is supposedly on the brink of developing a disc player attachment that will hook into their unit for approximately \$150 or less. It should utilize the same digital joystick controller and action buttons featured on the keypad.

According to Goldman, the home version will contain the same animation graphics used in the present arcade format, since no picture information or memory losses occur in disc translation. The actual disc player, though, may be stylus rather than laser to reduce cost. The game won't be available until next year — the main reason — so it doesn't compete with arcade owners trying to recoup investments made on the coin-op. Coleco has also purchased first right of refusal for future Bluth games produced

CONGRATULATIONS  
YOU HAVE REPULSED THE  
ENEMY BUT OTHERS  
ARE ON THEIR WAY TO  
CONQUER THE EARTH!  
PREPARE FOR THE NEXT  
CHALLENGE.  
GOOD LUCK TO YOU.



adventure. Or, the ability will exist to move the figure regardless of the action or threat. This would obviously increase the illusion that the player has total control of the animated character.

"There can never be total control with laserdisc," cautioned Goldman, "or any videogame that's out there now. It's only the illusion of total control which we hope to increase in the future over the present game. In *Dragon's Lair*, our basic approach was to entertain, to capture an audience's imagination. By being the first one out there and possessing the quality of graphics it has, I think *Dragon's Lair* has excited that audience. It's also forced game manufacturers to look a little differently at the future of electronic gaming.

"What we offer is a 'window of the future', a means by which gamers can

In Bally Midway's *Astron Belt*, gamers will find an interesting blend of videogame graphics and film footage.

play movies. Down the road, I think we'll see more film companies approach videogames via their own film productions. Rather than take the character from a film and create a game around it, they will take the movie and at the same time produce a game based on the actual live-action or animation from the film."

A home version of the current *Dragon's Lair* is underway at Coleco Industries. The top selling game manufacturer paid an incredible \$2 million

under the Starcom banner. Success in the homes once again depends on the consumer's investment in videodisc hardware.

Naturally, a sequel to *Lair* is already in the works, this one using a reverse motif, in which the player battles the knight, Dirk the Daring, by manipulating the various menaces he confronts.

Bluth and Cinematronics aren't the only ones involved in laserdisc coin-ops, and the home rights to same. Bally/Midway recently jumped into the fray by acquiring Sega Enterprises and their laserdisc game — **Astron Belt**. After many changes, *Astron Belt*, a multiple-scenario shoot-'em-up, features actual miniature film footage. In this fast-paced game, the arcader's spaceship battles the bad guys in outer space, within space station tunnels, and between canyon walls, as well as strafes ground targets.

According to Jim Jarocki, of Bally, there are some basic differences between *Astron Belt* and *Dragon's Lair*. For one thing, the gamer will have complete control of the ship throughout the game. Because the computer doesn't branch to other scenarios every few seconds, there aren't any blackout screens.

Another difference has to do with the first seconds of play. "In *Dragon's Lair*, you can get wiped out in a couple of seconds," Jarocki says. "In *Astron Belt*, we added a timer — you can think of it as a 'protect-your-life' feature. For the first 40 to 60 seconds, the gamer's spaceship is automatically replaced if it's destroyed. It's sort of like playing with an infinite amount of ships."

The ultimate evolution of laserdisc games, as alluded to earlier, may well be in the home. With the restrictions of coin-op games being so great, especially in terms of maximum time, think how much more freedom the home medium would provide.

The average filmmaker shoots much more actual footage than is ever seen on the screen. How easy it would be to shoot alternate plot developments as a film is in process — players could actually *be* Luke Skywalker or Indiana Jones, and film companies will have yet *another* format in which to sell their wares.

Whatever may lie ahead for the interactive videodisc game, it is certainly all smiles right now. *Dragon's Lair* has the interesting distinction of being the only coin-op ever to be set, standard, at 50 cents per play, and still hit big.

With arcades alive again with the sound of tokens, tinkling merrily into coin boxes, gamers can get ready for a

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Among the over 40 laserdisc screens in *Bega's Battle* is this cityscape. Note the superimposed graphics.

deluge of videodisc coin-ops from some of the smaller companies.

Obviously working on the philosophy that "when you ain't got nothin', you ain't got nothin' to lose", Exidy has jumped back into the videogame business with *Crossbow*, a less cartoonish adventure utilizing a mass solid state memory system with no moving parts.

*Crossbow* utilizes greater player-game interaction, according to Exidy's promotional releases, than a game such as *Dragon's Lair* which offers joystick directed movement and a single button to inaugurate particular

action — such as letting fly with a salvo of arrows.

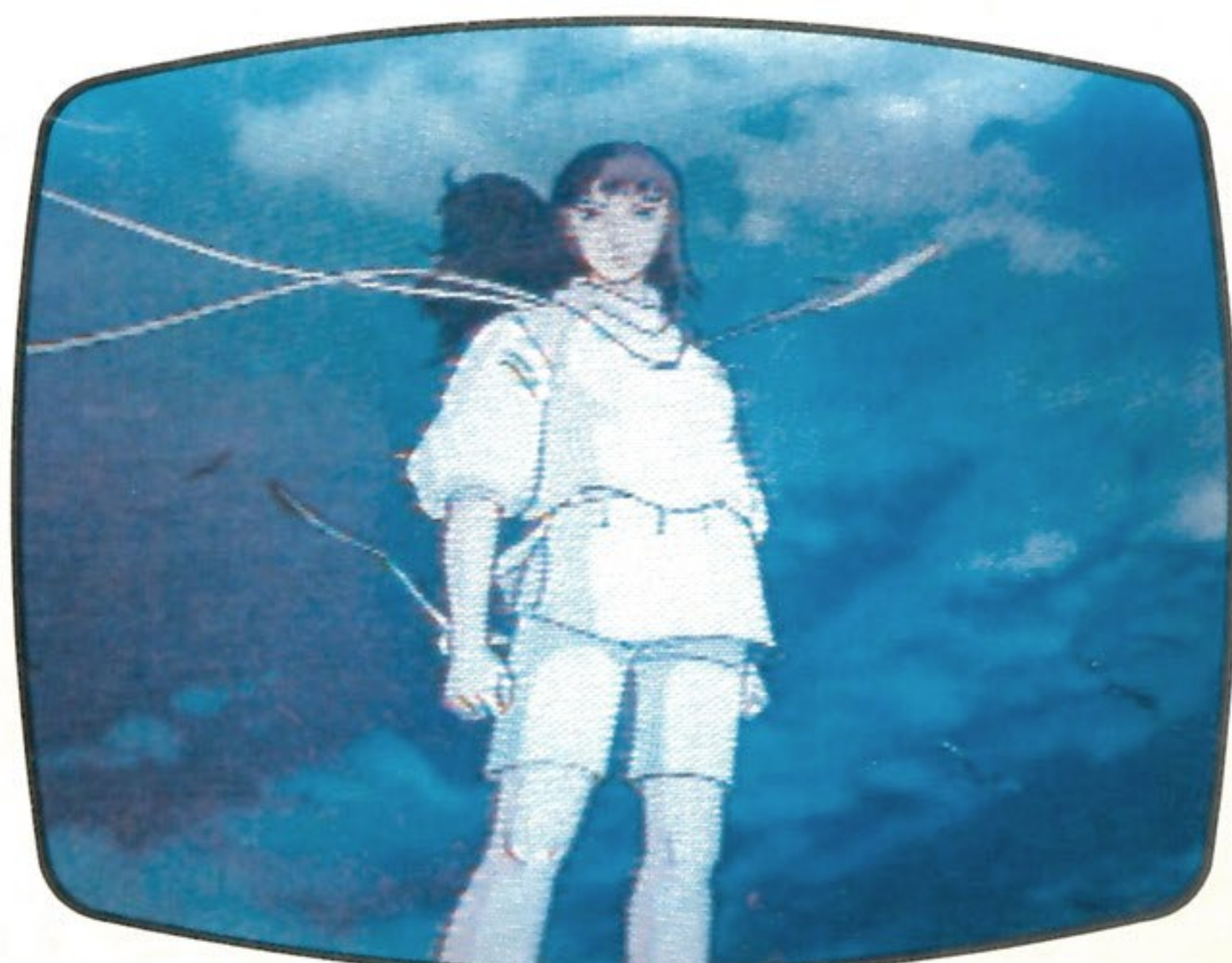
Exidy promises eight scenarios for *Crossbow*, with no "dead spots" while the laser searches for the correct position.

Data East, meanwhile, kings of the generic videogame and the creators of both *BurgerTime* and *Bump 'N' Jump*, are also entering the laserdisc sweepstakes with a new coin-op dubbed *Bega's Battle*. Utilizing over 40 interactive, disc-generated screens for background and P.C.-created characters as foreground player/object surrogates, this title pits the arcader, as the powerful Bega, in a battle against those ever-popular "dark forces" intent upon ravaging and subduing mankind.

The future for videodisc games is, obviously, now. A major battle is being waged on the arcade floors, and neither side can be called "dark forces". Will the laserdisc prove a fad, a flash-in-the-pan, yesterday's papers tomorrow? Or might they, instead, overwhelm and dominate the coin-op universe with their breadth of potential subjects, forever toppling the computer-generated image from its perch at the top of the hill.

More likely, however, is the fact that laserdisc-technology will become part of the overall videogame matrix. Already, in the home market, laserdisc's such as "Murder, Anyone?" and "Many Roads to Murder" can be played simply through digitized access to numerous scenarios, sans computer.

More than any other industry, videogames have displayed a tremendous willingness to evolve with the introduction of new, augmented technology. G



*Bega's Battle*, by Data East, pits the gamer (as the powerful Bega) against the evil powers intent on destroying mankind.

gods according to legend. The gamer controls the Sovalou, a sophisticated jet fighter that can blast away at land or sea targets with equal ease. The mission — you knew this already didn't you? — is to push the Xevious forces back into space and save the planet.

The play-mechanic is a throwback to the space shoots that dominated the arcades during 1981 and 1982, but *Xevious* is anything but dated. It challenges players with an unusually wide range of alien targets and varied tactical situations, each one requiring near-instantaneous response from the arcader at the controls.

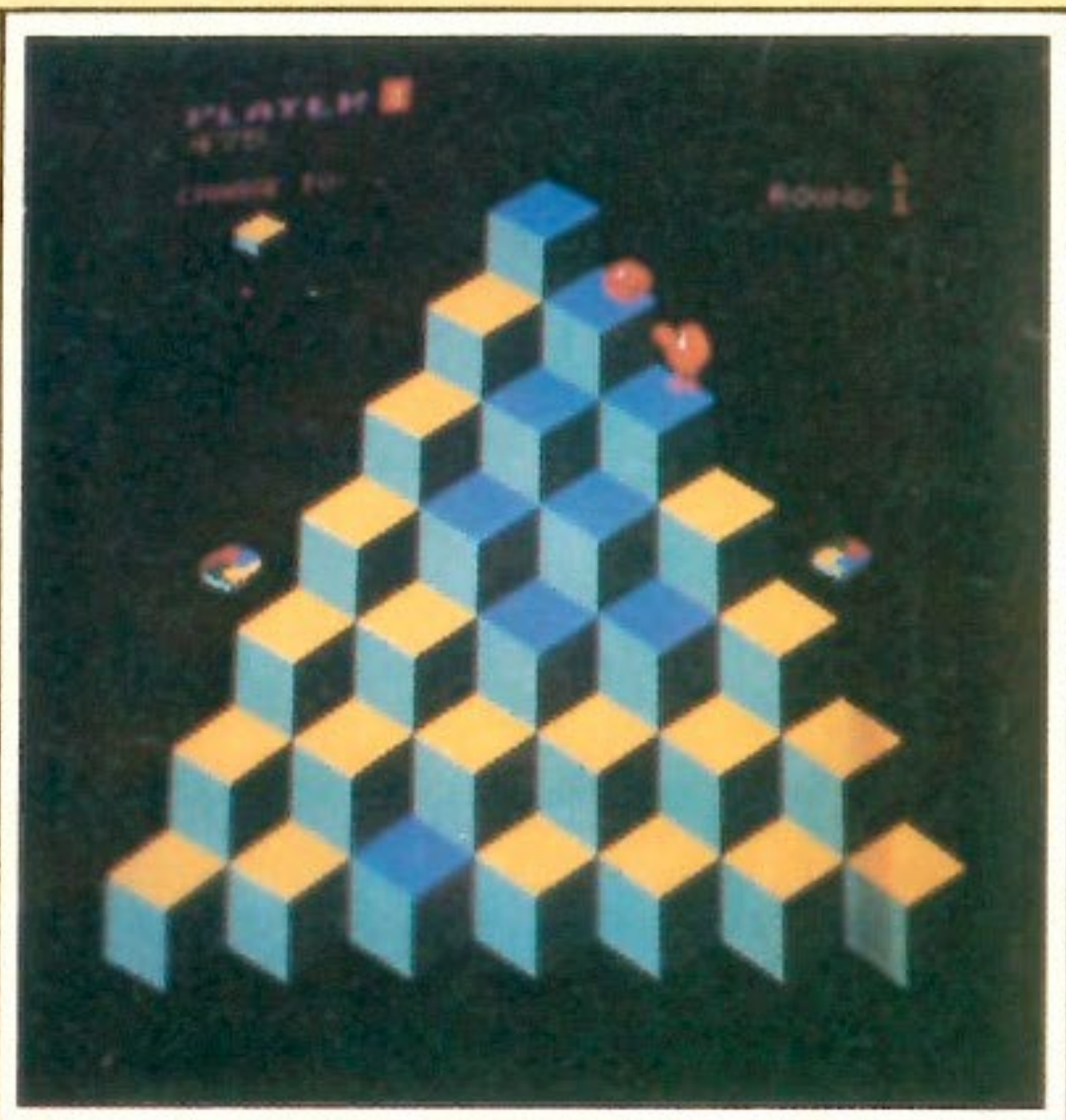
**Certificate of Merit:** *Jungle Hunt* (Taito). This multi-part action-adventure got off to a rocky start when the Edgar Rice Burroughs estate forced Taito to change the design's original name, but *Jungle Hunt* still managed to become a well-loved coin-op despite this obstacle.

**Certificate of Merit:** *Star Trek* (Sega). Like *Zaxxon*, *Star Trek* has had to carry the stigma of being too hard for novices while being beautiful to look at. Evidently, most gamers have learned how to meet its challenge with at least some success, because it has proven a popular favorite and solid money-earner.

## MOST INNOVATIVE COIN-OP GAME

**Q\*BERT**  
(Mylstar)

All innovations aren't necessarily based on technological breakthroughs. When a designer comes up with a totally fresh play-mechanic, that should certainly qualify as an innovation, too. It's that kind of inspired thinking that has landed *Q\*bert* at the top of the Arcade Award pyramid. The color-changing concept has made *Q\*bert* an arcade mainstay, and the idea is sure to



Q\*BERT (MYLSTAR)

find its way into dozens of coin-op and home arcade programs this year and next.

The block-hopper has, indeed, become a celebrity virtually overnight, with television appearances and other licensed spin-offs. The excitement shouldn't overshadow the stir the game itself has created, however, with its easy-to-learn mechanics and tantalizing elusive goal of re-coloring the blocks of the pyramid by having the little birdie jump on them one or more times each.

**Certificate of Merit:** *Baby Pac-Man* (Bally/Midway). Here's another successful switcheroo on the basic *Pac-Man* theme. What makes this sequel so innovative? It's the best blend of videogame and coin-op play elements any manufacturer has yet produced.

## BEST COIN-OP GAME AUDIO-VISUAL EFFECTS

### DRAGON'S LAIR

(Cinematronics)

The world's first videodisc coin-op won the popular voting in this category by the



DRAGON'S LAIR (CINEMATRONICS)

biggest margin of any Arcade Award recipient. Not exactly a surprise, eh? Playing this adventure contest is more like assuming the role of the star in a really well-animated cartoon movie. You, as the valiant knight, must think and fight your way past more than 30 different challenges, all rendered in luminous, intricate and colorful detail.

Clearly, *Dragon's Lair* is but the first of a long line of games that combine the powers of the computer with those of the videodisc. Yet it is an impressive starting point, and the overwhelming public acceptance of the game, which set weekly sales records of more than \$1,000 per machine, testifies to Don Bluth's magnificent design achievement.

**Certificate of Merit:** *Burgertime* (Data East/Bally). Working at the hamburger stand was never so hazardous as it is in this "cute" game. The cartoony graphics provide just the proper ambience for this race to assemble a tasty fast food sandwich.

**Certificate of Merit:** *Popeye*

(Nintendo). Top-quality animation and bell-clear sound earned this climbing game its coveted Certificate of Merit. All the E.C. Segar characters are included in the game and are instantly recognizable to spinach-stuffers everywhere.

## STAND-ALONE GAMES DIVISION

## STAND-ALONE GAME OF THE YEAR

**Q\*BERT**  
(Parker Brothers)

This cube-climber cops another honor thanks to the Parker Brothers table-top unit that bears its famous name. This is a well-constructed device which features a large, centrally mounted joystick that's more than sufficient for guiding the bouncy bird around the block pyramid that forms the playfield.

Like the coin-op and home arcade editions, this one starts the fun at a level that even a fumble fingered novice should be able to master. Once the first round's four phases are finished, however, the going gets much tougher. Changing each block's color two or three times calls for some smart hoppin' if you're to avoid creatures such as Curley the Snake, who want nothing more than to stop Q\*bert's fun.



Q\*BERT (PARKER BROTHERS)

**Certificate of Merit:** *Donkey Kong Jr.* (Coleco). The shape of the housing may be unfamiliar to fans of Coleco's mini-arcades, but the quality should ring some bells. This is a surprisingly faithful version of the game which wowed 'em in the game parlors under the Nintendo banner.

**Certificate of Merit:** *Ms. Pac-*