

The Strategic Scenario

By Leonard Herman

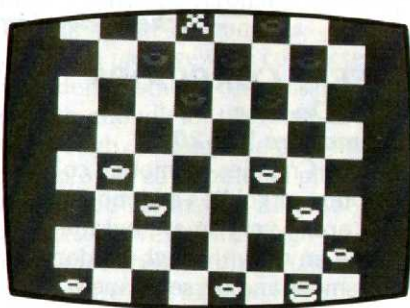
There are a wealth of games available that let your fingers do the walking . . . and your brain do most of the work!

The centuries-old notion of man v. machine has come to frivolous fruition with the introduction of videogames. Alas, the human being seems to be the loser in this interesting battle.

In the majority of videogames in which you play against the computer, the computer is ultimately and inevitably the victor. The thrill of victory is earned only when you beat a previous high score; you are only winning over another human opponent, or yourself. In the long run the omnipotent computer is always the winner.

Fortunately for owners of the Atari 2600 who want to win against their opponents but not surrender to the machine, there are games which allow you to play strategically, rather than accepting challenges which the computer serves up. These strategic games allow you and your opponents to plan your moves; the player with the more shrewd strategy will ultimately be the winner. The game doesn't end when both players have lost their final turn, with the high score determining the winner. The game ends

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Checkers from Activision.

because one competitor is out.

One should not equate strategy games with adventure games. Adventure games are those games in which a single player sets out on a quest in order to find something. Strategy is not involved; most of the time you are wandering through different screens in search of certain objects. No, to play a game strategically, you must have some kind of plan when you begin. Because 'strategy' is often associated with the military it can be assumed that there are two sides engaged against each other, and that is why some sort of strategic plan is needed. Thus, an adventure game which is played by one person cannot be considered a strategic game. You may play it strategically but it will be a one-sided affair since you aren't playing against anyone. Certainly the computer isn't playing

strategically since it is always following its programming.

Although 'strategy' is a military word, of the twenty or so military games that are available for the 2600, only one could really be considered strategic. The majority of the games, such as Atari's *Battlezone*, *Air-Sea Battle*, and *Submarine Commander*, are merely different forms of target games. Only M-Network's *Armor Ambush*, a two-player tank game, allows for strategic play.

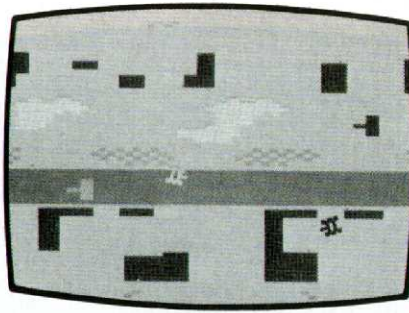
In this game, you and your opponent each have two tanks to choose from; these can be alternated throughout the game. You lose a tank when it has been shot three times by the enemy. You can plan your strategy right from the beginning. If you think it will be to your advantage to have your opponent go after your vulnerable tank while you go after his or her operating one, definitely follow this plan. You can also take into account the terrain as you plan your line of attack. Your tank will drive fast on roads, slower on grass, and slowest through water. You can plan to go after your opponent by coercing his/her tank towards the water as you travel on the roads. Because the game consists of several playfields, no two games will ever be the same. The winner of this

match will definitely be the player with the more sound strategy.

The description of *Armor Ambush* will lead 2600 owners to think of *Combat*, the antiquated war game which accompanies all 2600 consoles. Like *Armor Ambush*, *Combat* includes "Tank," another military tank game in which two players pit themselves against each other with tanks. However, this cannot be considered a strategic game since the players can not map out their battleplan. "Tank" is merely a game in which you must shoot your opponent more times than he shoots you within a specified period of time. Real war, as you probably know, is not fought within a time limit. In "Tank" you know when the game will end and nothing you do can change that.

War has been a way of life since before historical record; throughout the ages war has inspired boardgames that have since found their way into the videogame circuit. Among the oldest strategic games which began as boardgames are *Video Chess*, *Checkers*, and *Othello*. *Checkers*, which is available from both Atari & Activision for the 2600, and *Othello* are both excellent strategy games. Both games are easy to learn but very difficult to master, and both games are suitable for two player competition. Both games can also be played against the computer, but the strategy that you customarily utilize in solo games may not work. Why? Because when you play against the computer, you can't trick it into anything. Since the computer monitors every single move, you can't plan on 'sneaking' up on your opponent and making a surprise attack. A human opponent may not look many moves ahead (unless (s)he is an expert player) and you can therefore complete a surprise attack. For this reason, *Video Chess* cannot be included in a list of strategic games as this is a one-player only game.

But there are games available for the 2600 with non-war themes which still make excellent use of strategic situations. In *Surround*, one of the oldest games available for the system, you and your opponent each control a constantly moving on-screen cursor. As the cursor is moved, it leaves a solid line in its



Armor Ambush: not just combat.

wake which neither player can run into without losing a turn. The object is to contain your constantly moving opponent, to force him/her to crash into one of the walls. You score a point whenever you stop your opponent; the first player to score ten points is the winner. You must plan the moves you are about to take, and you must do so quickly. Remember, you want to close your enemy in without getting closed in yourself.

Flag Capture is a video version of the old boardgame classic, *Stratego*. In the boardgame (which is also available in an electronic edition) you must set up a plan to find the flag through trial and error while avoiding bombs. In a way it resembles chess in that each piece has its own function and some pieces outrank others. The unique facet of *Stratego* is that each player only knows what his/her pieces are. Although you can see what each of your pieces are worth, you can only see the back of your opponent's pieces and therefore can't see what their value is. The object of the game is to strategically set up your pieces and then break through your opponent's setup and capture his or her flag before (s)he can get to yours.

Flag Capture, in which you must also capture a flag, is *Stratego minimo*. Confrontations between players are eliminated in this stripped-down version: each player controls only one piece and the object is to find the single flag first. The flag is hidden somewhere within a grid of sixty-four squares. Every time you land on a square, a clue is revealed which gives the direction in which the flag can be found. You may also land on a bomb which will send you hurtling back to your original position.

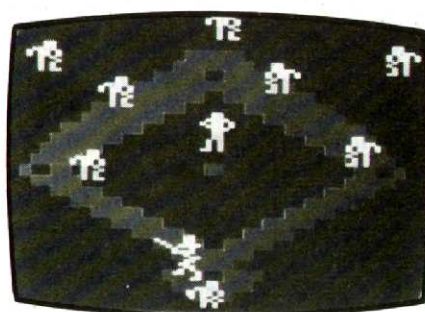
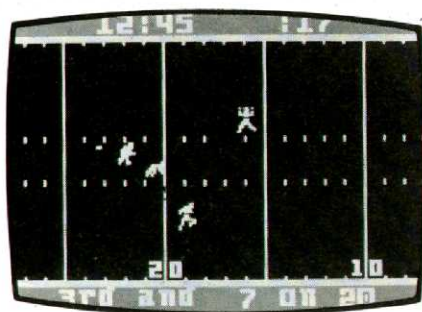
Flag Capture may be played head-

to-head in two different ways, each offering its own type of strategy. In one variation, both you and your opponent move your pieces through the board at the same time. In addition to paying attention to your own clues, you must watch for your opponent's as they will also lead you to the flag. Time is an important factor here since both players move at the same time. In the second variation the two players alternate turns in the search for the flag. Again, the person who discovers the flag will score the point. Although *Flag Capture* doesn't involve as much strategic skills as the previously mentioned games, its resemblance to *Stratego* makes it worth mentioning.

U.S. Games' *Entombed* is the only game that is as much fun for one person to play solo as it is when two people compete head-to-head. The two-player version, however, is much more challenging and involves strategy.

The action in this game takes place in a maze which continuously scrolls upwards. Each player controls an on-screen explorer who must go into the maze and head towards the bottom of the screen. Unfortunately some trails lead to dead-ends which cannot be seen until that portion of the playfield scrolls onto the screen. By this time it may be too late to back-track because the entrance to the passage may have already scrolled off the screen. If your character stops moving it will be dragged towards the top of the screen as the maze scrolls upwards. Players lose a turn whenever their on-screen character scrolls off the top. Each player begins with three turns and the first player to lose all three lives is the loser.

Entombed strategy involves interfering with your opponent's ability to move through the maze. Initially each player begins with one 'make-break' which allows you to blast a hole in a wall if you run into a dead-end. However you can also use 'make-breaks' to build walls. Occasionally you'll run into blinking blocks which will award you additional 'make-breaks.' By using your 'make-breaks' to build walls, you can strategically plan to trap your opponent behind some walls after (s)he runs out of his or her own



Sports illustrated: Super Challenge Baseball, RealSports Football, and RealSports Baseball.

'make-breaks.' The game becomes especially agonizing when both players have the same number of 'make-breaks' and are both on their last turn. Any false move to try and hold back your opponent may end disastrously for yourself!

Atari's *Slot Racers* is a head-to-head racing game in which you must blow your opponent off the road with a cannon that is mounted upon the hood of your car. Each player's car travels in opposite directions within the maze and must avoid the bombs that are fired from the opposing car. If you run into a bomb, your opponent will score a point. You can control the speed of your car as well as the routes that it takes. The bombs that you fire can be programmed to move in a straight line or turn at every curve. *Slot Racers* is a fast-paced game and may seem confusing if you just move around and fire at will. The best way to play is to take command of the situation and plan your moves.

Even sports games, which can be considered as modern 'civilized' forms of warfare, can be played strategically. Although some video sports for the 2600 such as Atari's *Basketball* and the three versions of *Soccer* involve certain types of strategic moves, it is the three football games which make the best use of strategy. Atari's *Football*, *Realsports Football*, and M-Network's *Super Challenge Football* all allow you to input plays which your on-screen characters will perform. Of course, once the play is selected, the game will depend upon your finger-skill. However you can play strategically by inputting certain plays and trying to guess how your opponent will respond.

Baseball for the 2600 is a different story. Atari's *Home Run* and M-Network's *Super Challenge Baseball*

offer simplified versions of the game in which you merely decide upon your pitch when you are in the outfield, and try to hit the pitch when you are at bat. No strategy is required. *Super Challenge Baseball* goes a little beyond *Home Run*: you are given the option of whether you want your lead runner to steal a base or not.

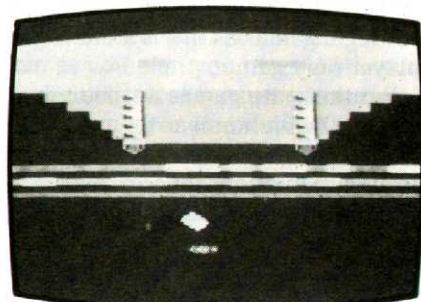
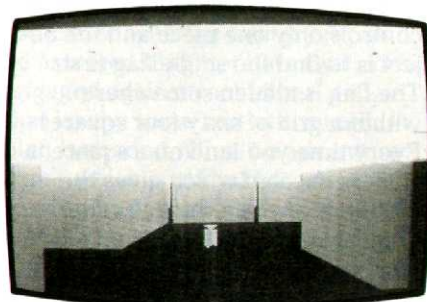
Atari's *Realsports Baseball*, on the other hand, gives you the opportunity to play strategically. As in the football games, you must first input information on what you plan to do. If you are playing the field, you must decide whether you want to pitch a ball or strike. If you are at bat you must either bunt, hit a grounder, or a home run. The results depend on the combination of what you and your opponent program. As with the football games, it finally comes down to trying to outguess your opponent.

Even with the lack of a multitude of strategic games for the 2600, the future still doesn't look bright for fans of this type of game. Most companies are releasing games for solo players and, as noted in the beginning of this article, strategic situations only work when players compete head to head. Still, it isn't as bad as it could be. One company, Avalon-Hill, which is best known for its long line of strategic board games (*Diplomacy*, *Blitzkrieg*) is now producing high-calibre video

games for the VCS. Although its initial games, *Death Trap*, *London Blitz*, and *Wall Ball*, are solid, playable games, they are all single-player games and don't lend themselves to strategy, as we have defined the word here. However, using the company's background as a guide, it is safe to say that if any company will make strategic games for the VCS, it will be Avalon Hill.

Parker Brothers is another company with a background of strategic boardgames that is producing games for the 2600. As with Avalon Hill, no strategic games have been released yet. However the company has translated one of its best strategic board games, *Risk*, into a video version for the Atari computers. In the works are other strategic games such as *Monopoly* and *Clue*. It is just possible that adaptations for the low-memory 2600 might also be in the works if they are feasible.

Unfortunately, the current trend in home videogames calls for single player arcade adaptations. The major selling point in games is graphics flash. Not much programming remains to allow for strategic, head-to-head play. This is all well and good, but we can't help but yearn for the day when the player's intelligence becomes equally important as his/her reflexes, and interaction is created between *people*, rather than between man and machine. □



London Blitz and Death Trap, from strategy-game king Avalon Hill.