

GAME WORKOUT:

One million A.C.*

Super Game Module: Million bit baby

Shrouded in mystery. That describes all of Coleco's new products and peripherals for its already popular ColecoVision system. We already know about Expansion Modules #1 and #2—the Atari adaptor and the Turbo Driving Module.

But what does the future hold for all you ColecoVision owners?

There are rumors of a computer keyboard, a printer and other computer devices. We don't know anything more about them.

We do know about one thing that's not a rumor. The Super Game Module.



*After ColecoVision



By William Michael Brown

Evolution is usually a pretty slow process. Biologists say it took millions of years for the apes of prehistory to develop into today's human beings. And because it took so long—and because so much got lost along the way what with Neanderthals being so careless about their fossils and all—nobody has ever been able to discover the Missing Link.

But in the microchip universe it's a short jump from big, dumb Donkey Kong to smart little Mario. In the decade since the first Odyssey unit appeared, home video game systems have steadily grown in power—grown to the point where only one small link is missing to bridge the gap between video games and home computers.

The Missing Link

For ColecoVision, that Missing Link may already be here.

It's full name is the ColecoVision Super Game Expansion Module #3—or, to make a long title short, the Super Game Module. First shown to us at the New York Toy Fair in February—and scheduled to go on sale by this fall—the plug-in module gives ColecoVision owners the most detailed, colorful, true-to-the-arcade graphics and play capabilities I've ever seen in any home game system.

Although it is called an expansion module, its enormous power justifies reviewing it as though it were a separate game system. In addition to delivering fantastic games, the Super Game Module adds one million (yes, one *million*) bits of information to the already

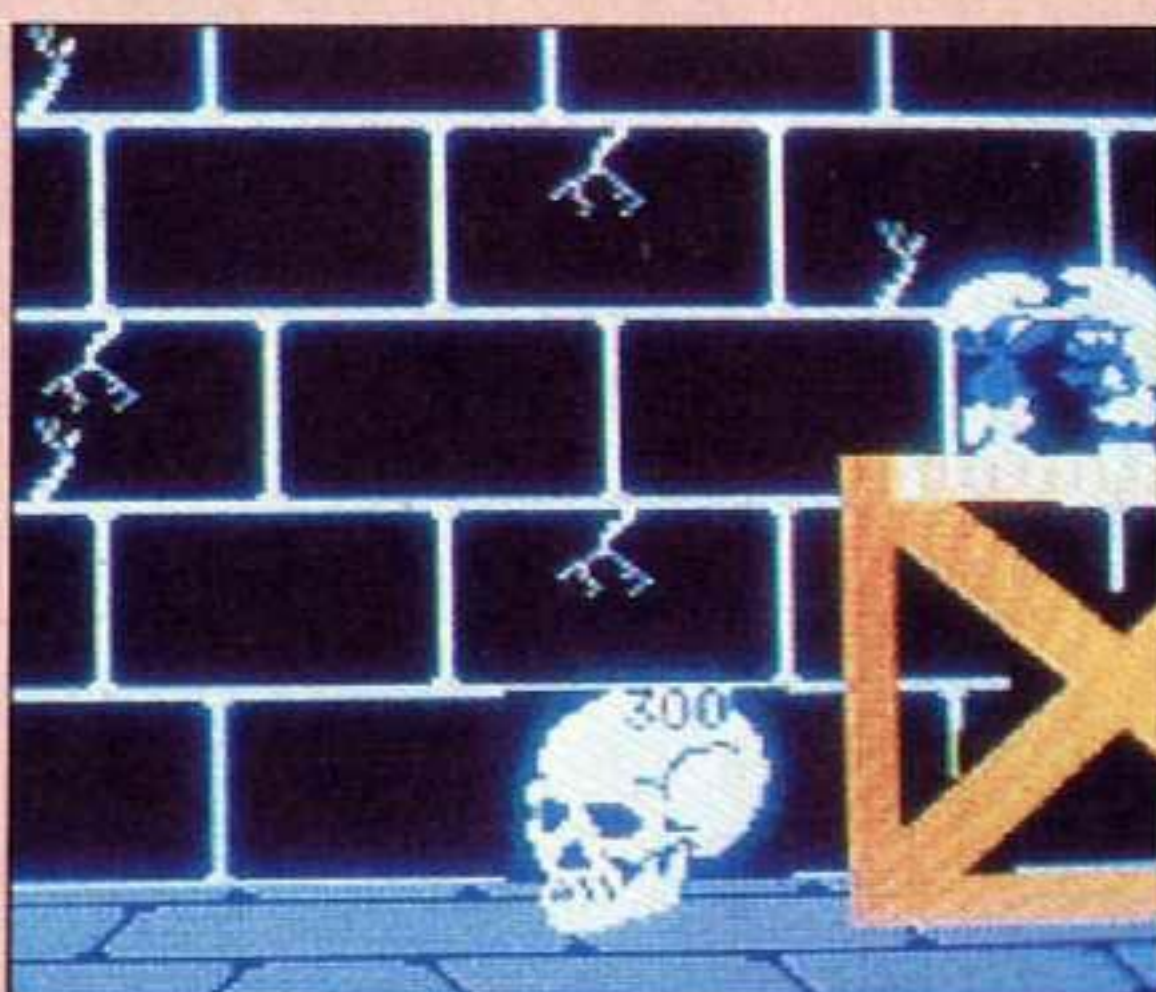
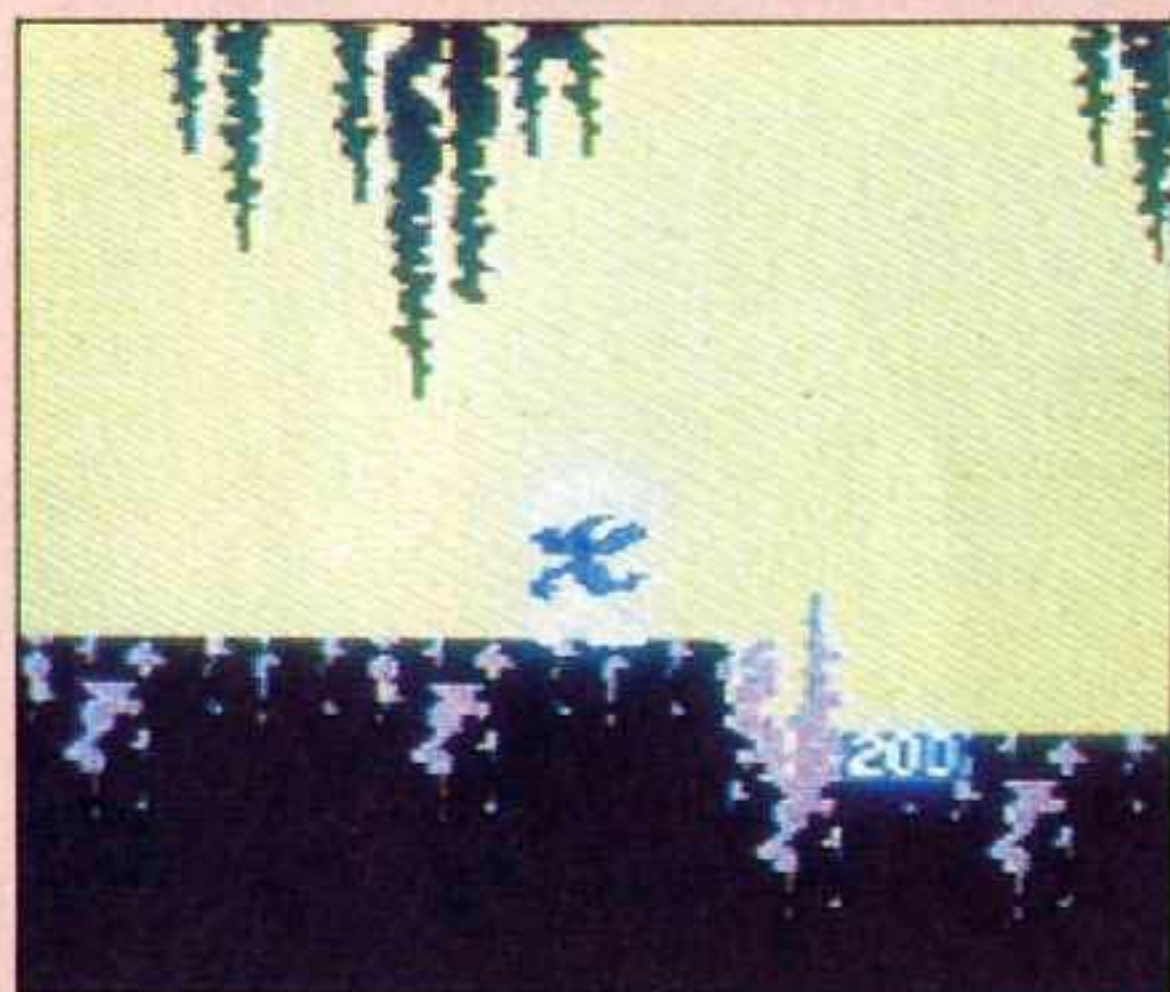
high memory of the ColecoVision game machine.

That kind of power used to be found only in high-priced computers with disk drives. Considering that ColecoVision already has a Z-80 microprocessor (the same CPU that is found in many home computers, the TRS-80 among them), it's clear to see that what you're getting for \$125 is not only 128K bytes but home computer

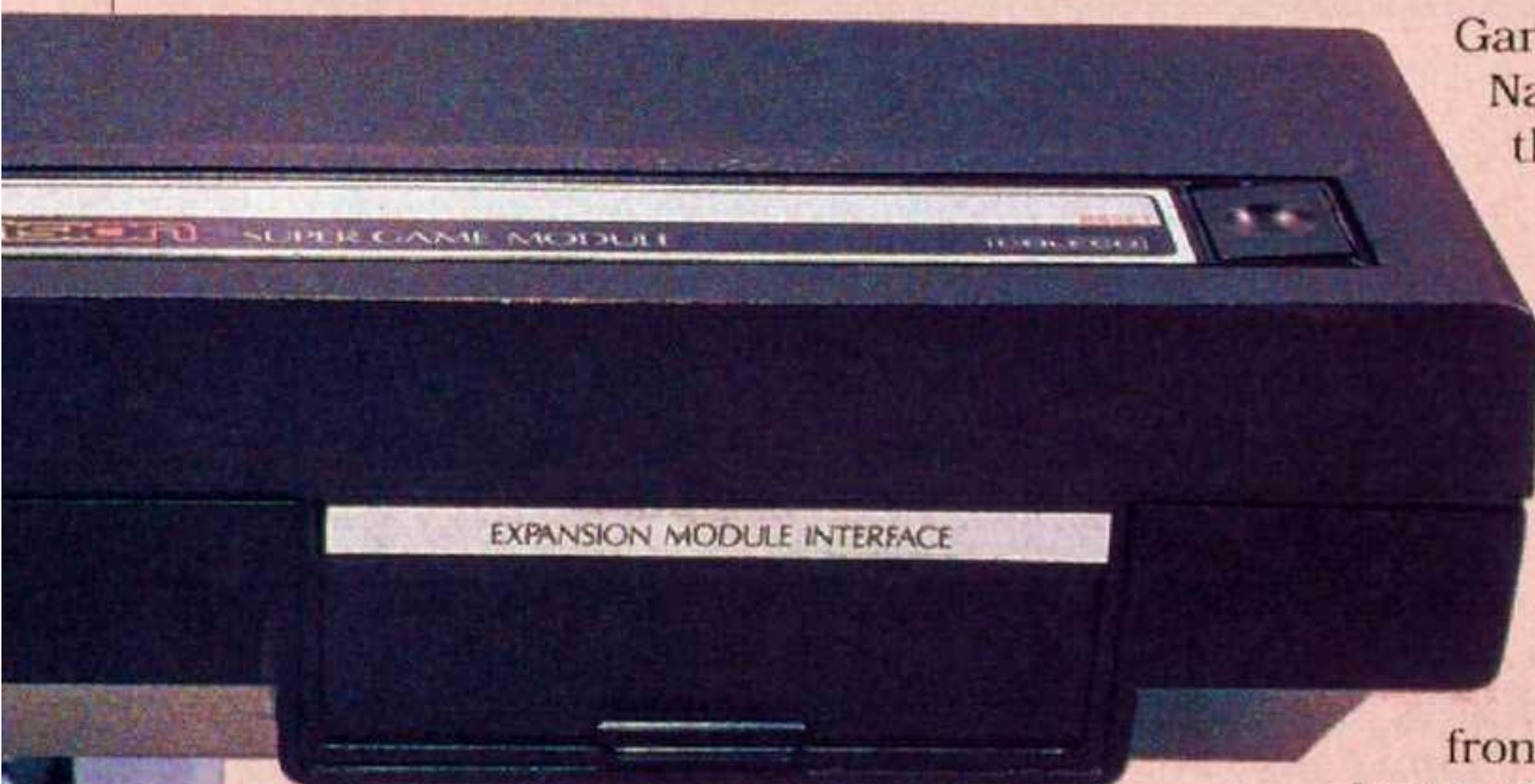
power at a reasonable home video game price.

Not only is the amount of memory new but the games have a whole new





The ColecoVision Super Game Module doesn't take cartridges. It plays wafers containing super thin audio tape, but still manages to load the games about as fast as a cartridge machine. Shown here are several screens from *SUPER SMURF RESCUE IN GARGAMEL'S CASTLE*. Also shown on this page is the Super Game Module itself, and a look at the new packaging for the game wafers—a plastic folder about the size of a 45 record.



Game Wafers. Naturally, they don't fit into your standard cart-slot so the module has a magnetic micro-tape drive mechanism behind a slot in the

front left panel.

look as well. Instead of being standard cartridges, the Super Games are stored on mini-cassettes (which are about the length and width of a business card) called Super

approximately 50 feet of specially formulated magnetic tape about an eighth of an inch wide. Clearly, size is not directly proportional to game play because there's more power in this tiny wafer than in any of the

other cartridges currently available.

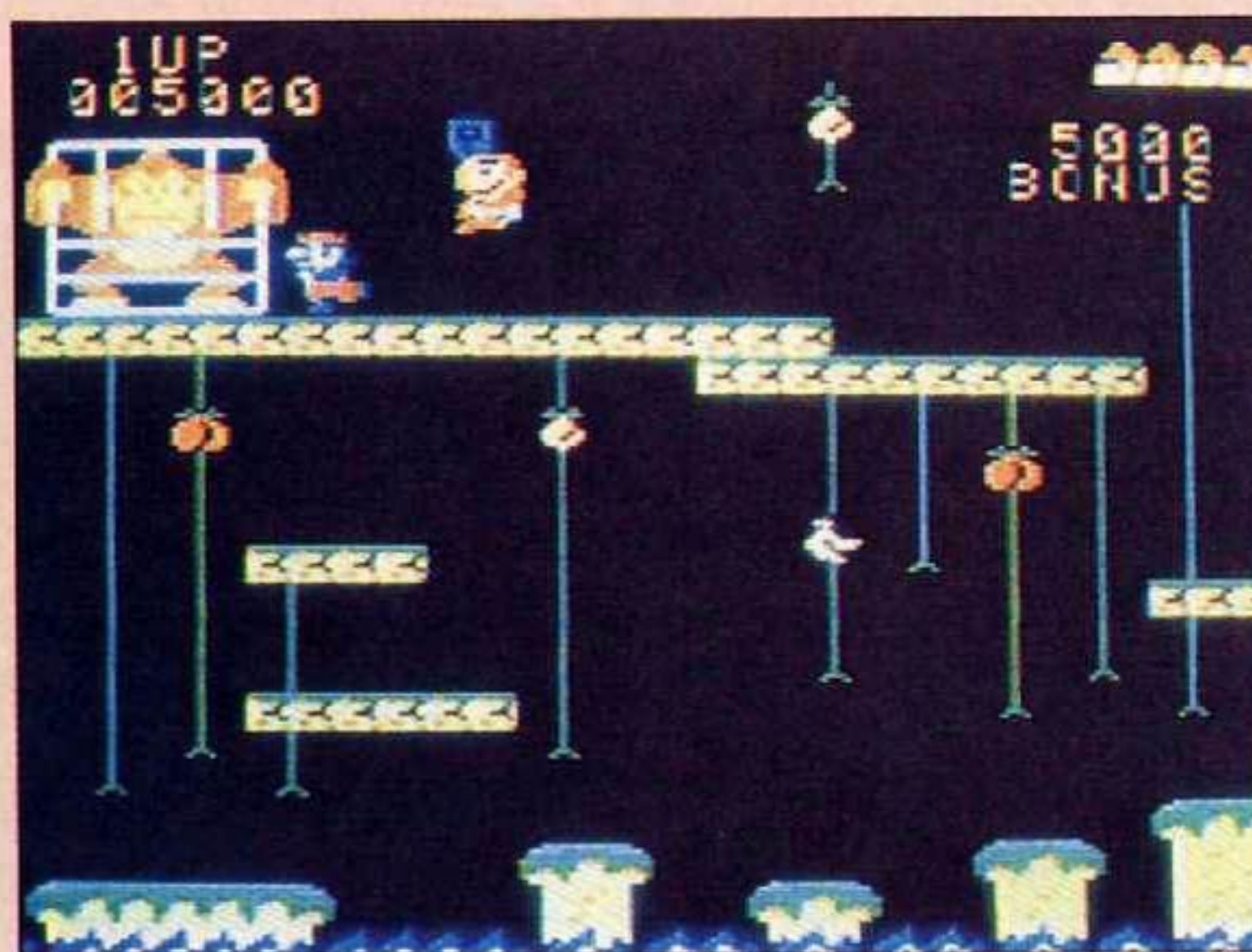
Using the Super Game Module and its wafers is less complicated than using the first module and an Atari cart. You simply plug the Super Game into the Expansion Module Interface port, push the tape wafer into the drive slot and turn the system on. You then get the usual title screen while the game is loading, followed by an extensive option menu which is selected via the keypad.

A Load Off Our Mind

Many of you who are seasoned computer users may be thinking, "But tape takes such a long time to load. Who wants to wait that long when cartridges load like that?" Well, don't worry. Although it often takes longer to load a program stored on tape than it does on, say, disk or cartridge, this problem does not occur with the wafers. Over eight hours of use on two different days, I clocked Coleco Super Donkey Kong, Super Donkey Kong Jr. and Super Smurf Rescue in Gargamel's Castle wafers at an average load time of only around 10 seconds. This experience leads me to believe that the wafer speed is so close to the speed of other storage media that it makes no real difference. What matters is that the tape wafer has given Coleco some of the best looking games in town.

I had access to three games at the time of this writing—*Super Donkey Kong*, *Super Donkey Kong Jr.* and *Super Smurf Rescue*. All display more detailed graphics, more varied and brilliant colors and more screens and game variations than their ColecoVision cartridge incarnations. Even the animation is





more sophisticated, apparently making better use of the ColecoVision unit's multiple screen/object processing abilities. And in the two cases where there is an arcade standard to refer back to, the quality made possible by the use of wafers makes it a real challenge to find very many differences whatsoever between the two variations.

Probably the most striking differences between regular Coleco and Super Coleco are evident in *Donkey Kong*. Not only is the fourth (Conveyor) screen of the arcade game included in the wafer version, but you'll also be treated to the little introductory skit wherein Donkey Kong snatches Betsey and carries her off to his lofty perch before stamping on the girders and turning them into Ramps. The post-Rivets screen intermission in which DK takes the big dive while Betsey and Mario are re-united under a pink heart is also included, and this time the fireballs *do* jump out of the oil barrel—a touch many people found missing in the other

three versions.

All of the screens feature better resolution and color drawn from a wider palette than the cartridge versions. Where the girders were simply red in the cart version, they are brick red in the wafer. The distinction may seem like a fine one but the overall impression is one of enhanced vividness, as though the game had been created for this system instead of adapted to it.

Some of the animation is still not the equal of the arcade, but the quirks in the cartridge versions at least seem to have been worked out. Mario doesn't spin and drop when bonked by a barrel as he does in the arcade game but neither can he leap off the end of a girder and bounce back unharmed, as he can in at least one of the cartridge versions I've seen.

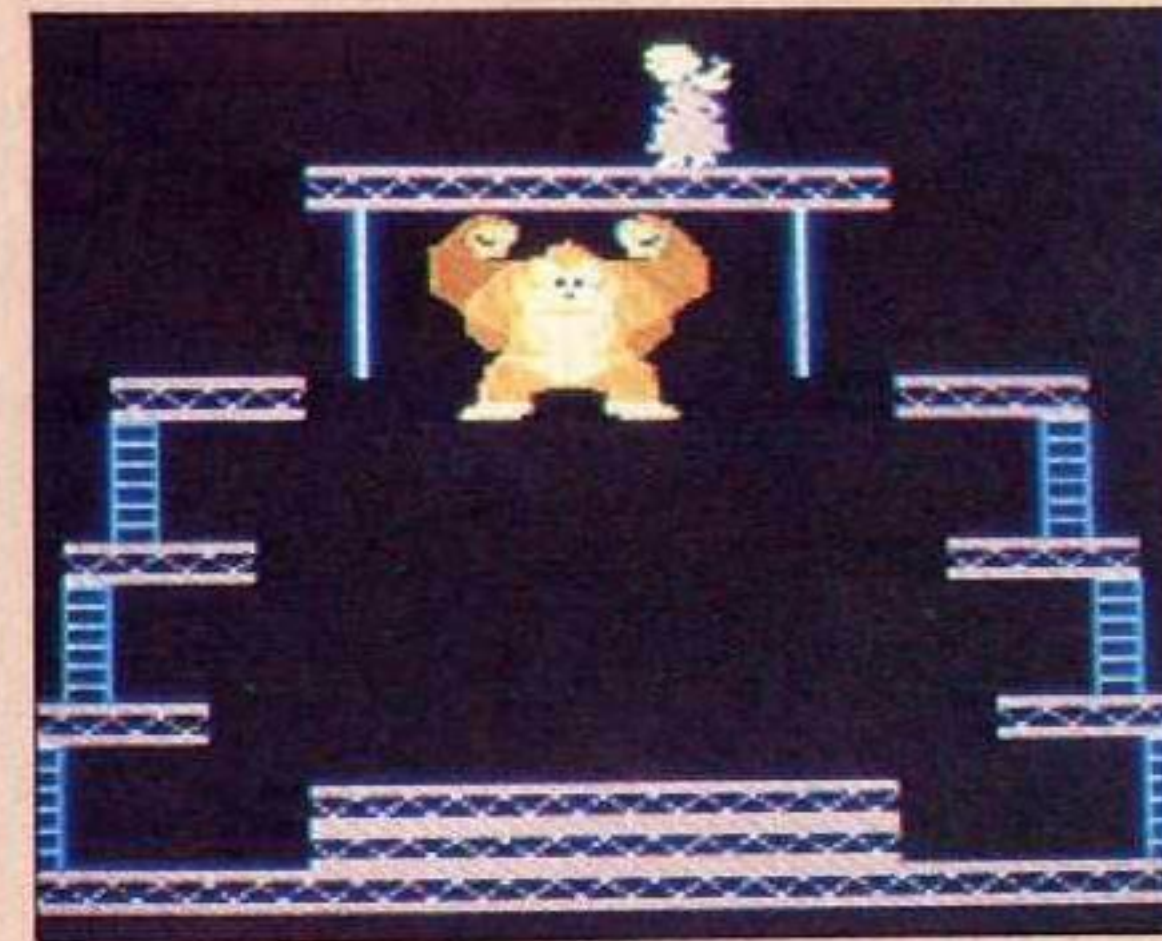
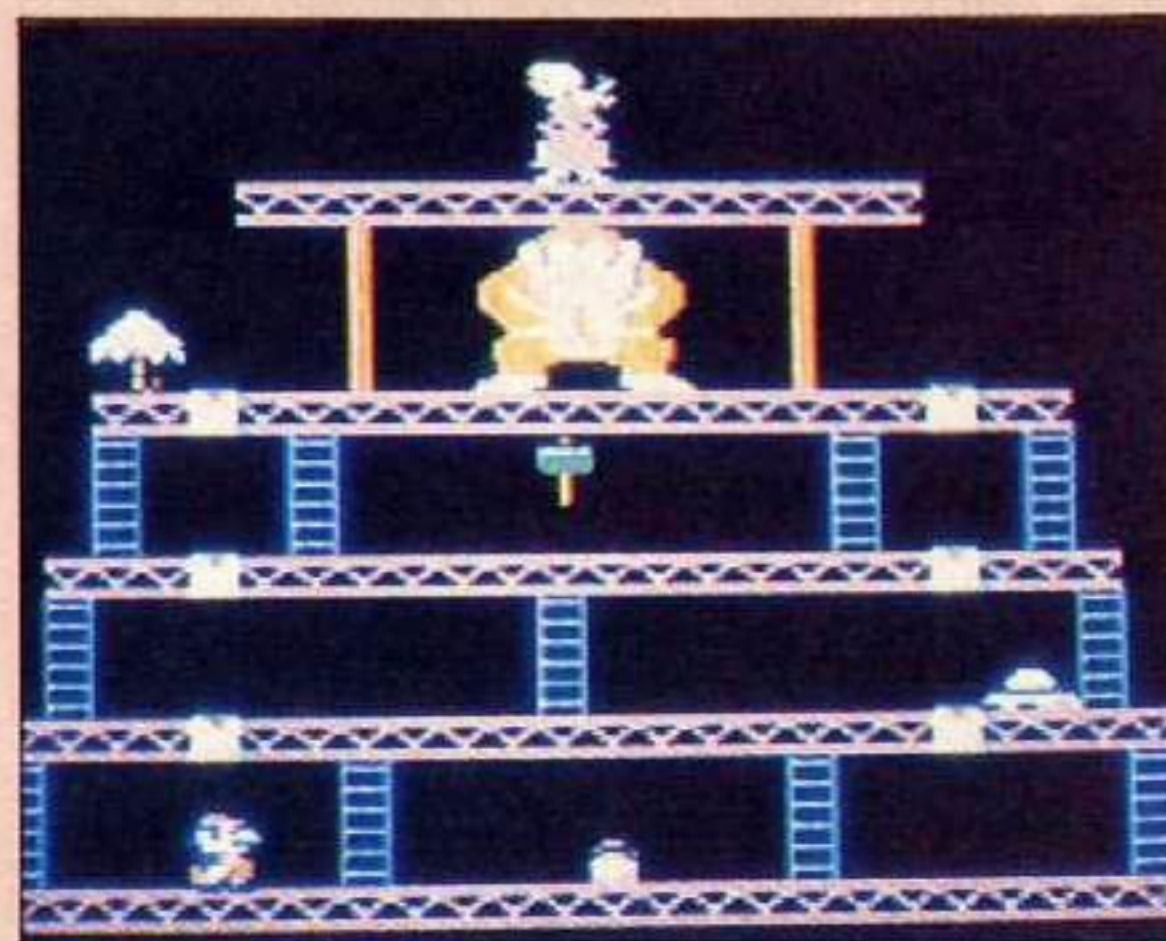
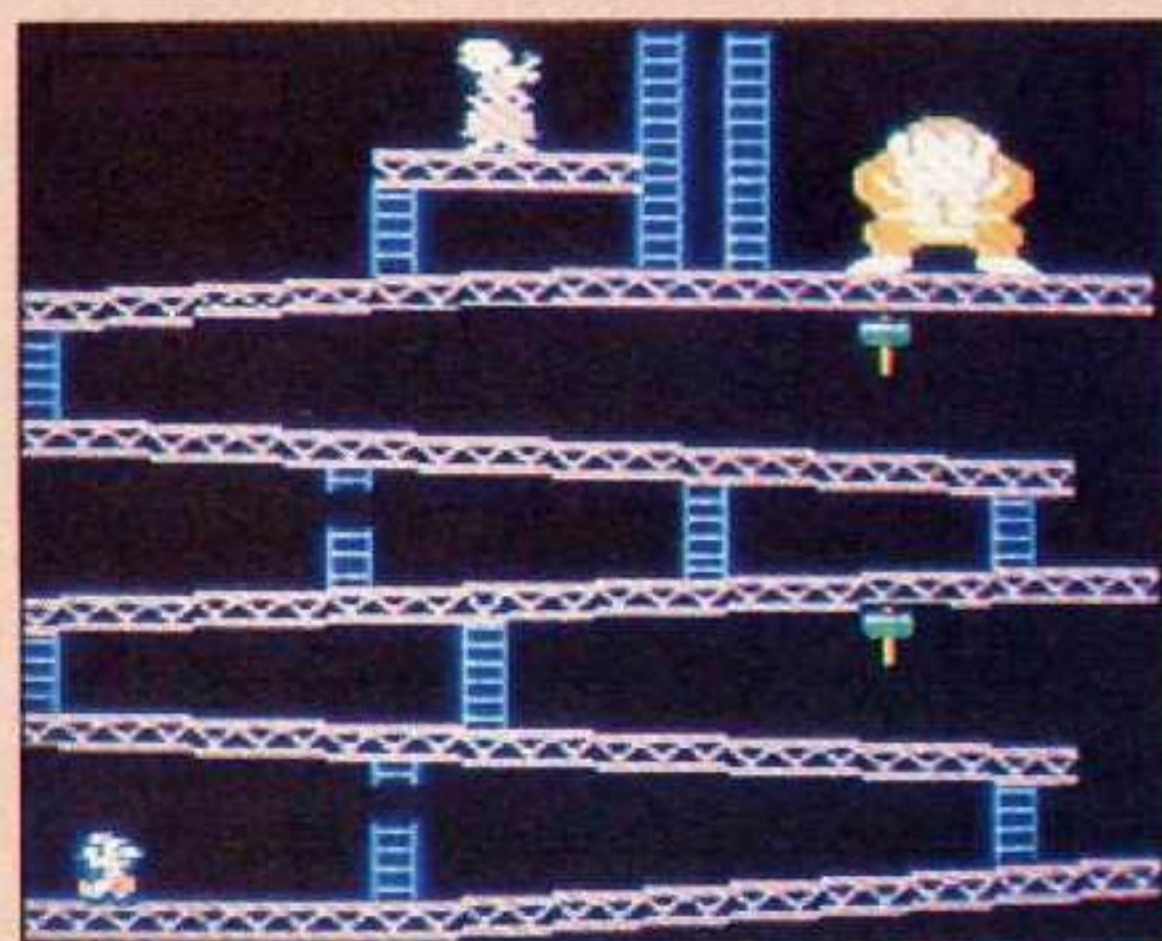
The same comments apply equally to *Super Donkey Kong Jr.* and *Super Smurf*. The Mario's Hideout intermission in the former (which was missing in the cart) is included, and it's smoothly animated

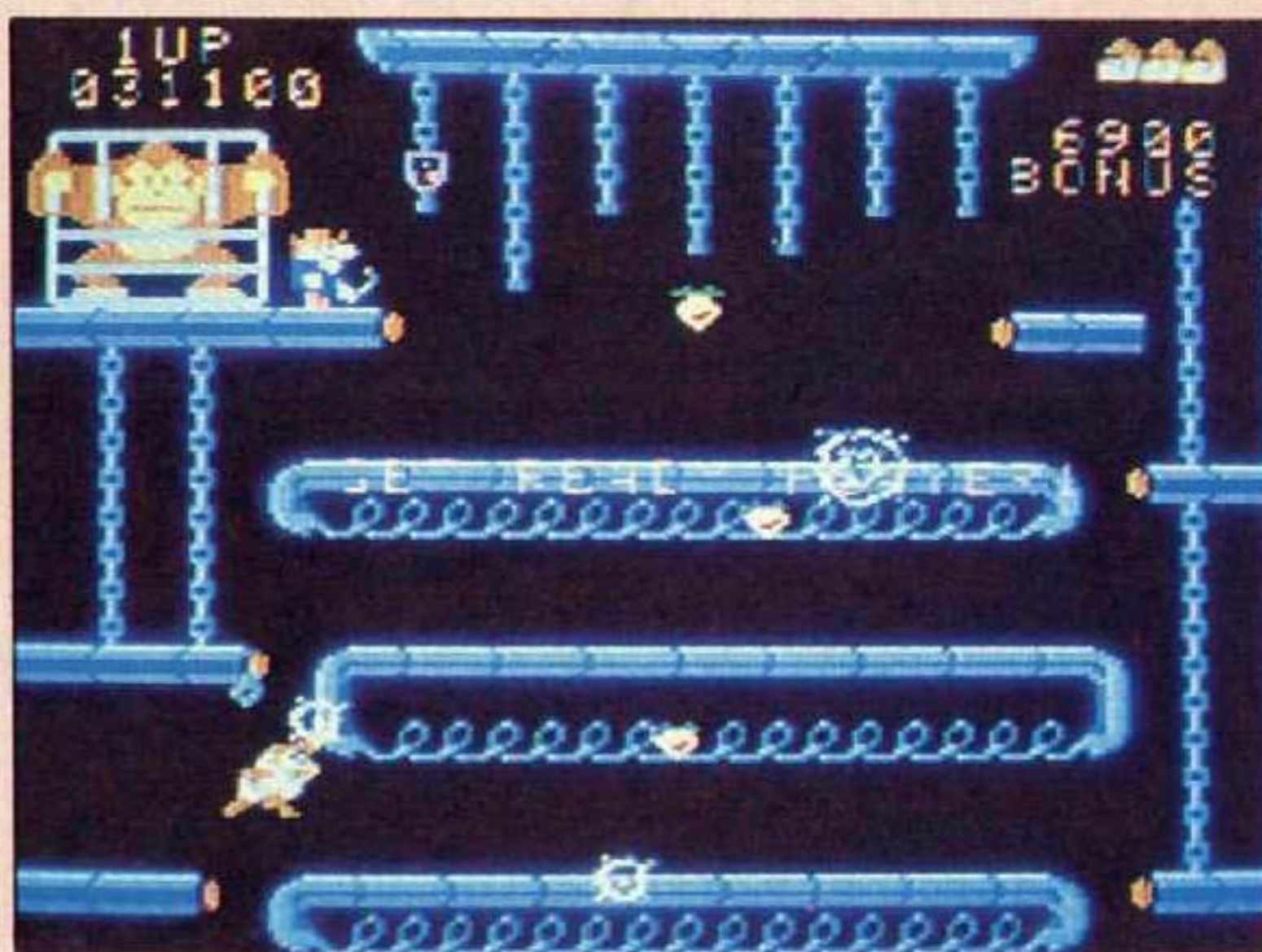
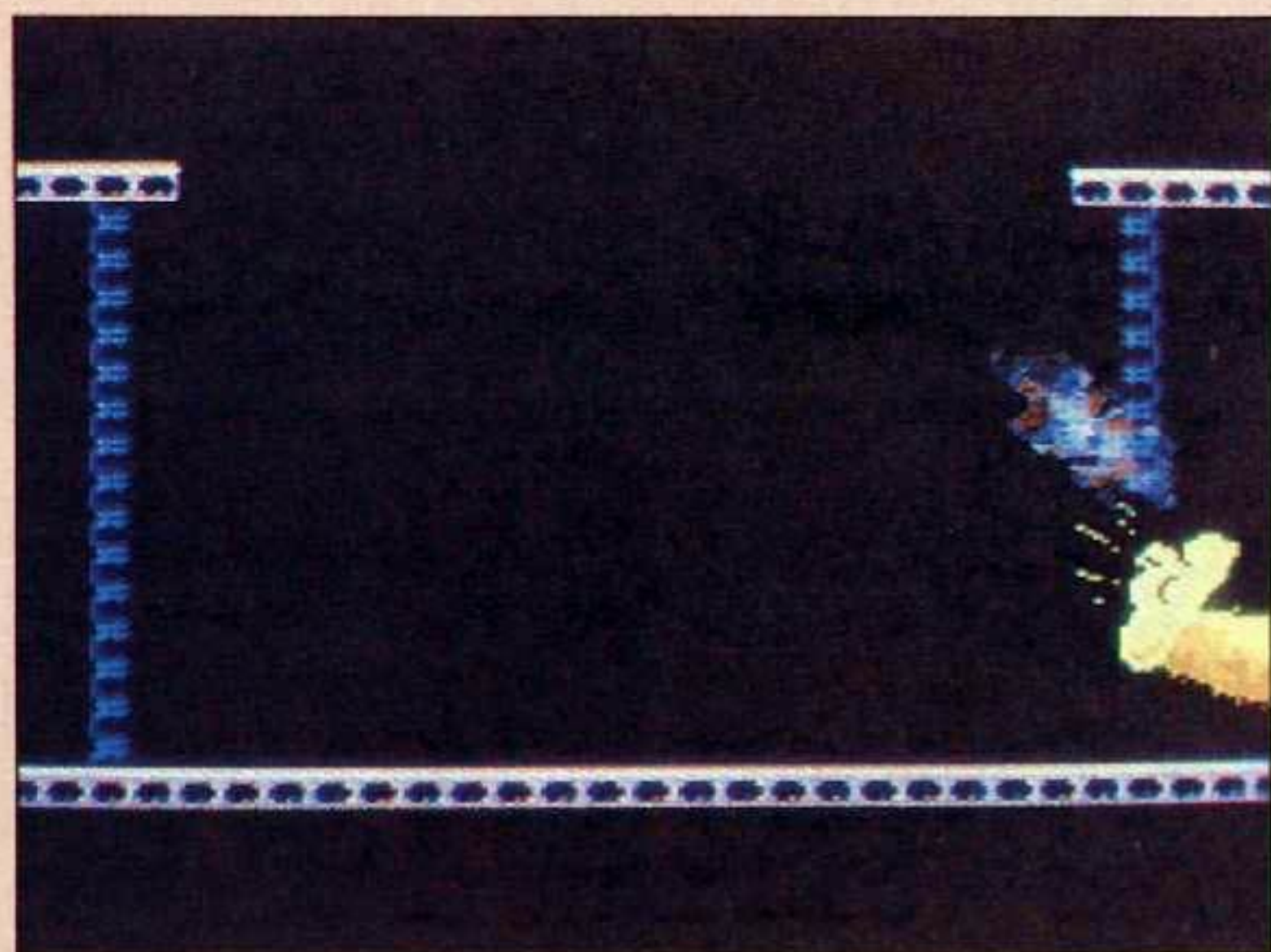
right down to Mario's spinning (why he can do it in *Junior* and not in *DK* is beyond me). The greens and yellows of the first play screen are also more vivid and the Keys are not lost in a blur of blue anymore.

Color really comes to the fore in *Super Smurf*: The interior of Gargamel's Castle is done up in ominous purples, blacks and scarlets that, while similar to the colors of the Forest screen, really seem to be different color mixes entirely. The backgrounds are more detailed right down to the thatched roof and window of the opening screen's house, and the attacking birds in later—and more difficult—levels swoop with a viciousness that's truly frightening.

In keeping with a policy to only market games that have licensed figures or well-known names attached to them (such as Ken Uston's *Blackjack*), Coleco is planning to release some of the hottest

SUPER DONKEY KONG, JR. plays about as close to the arcade version as anything you can bring into your home. The missing sequences from the arcade game are restored, even though the animation isn't quite as good.





arcade titles ever for the Super Game Module. Some of the arcade games from which they will be adapted represent such sophisticated technology that reproducing them for the standard video game unit would probably have meant really compromising on both graphics and playability. With the increased capabilities of the Super Game Module, these games promise to be as exciting, complex and as brilliantly portrayed as they are in the arcades.

Five titles are planned for release on wafer so far. They are: *Zaxxon*, *Buck Rogers Planet of Zoom*, *Time Pilot*, *Turbo* and *Sub-Roc*. How Coleco will improve upon the already outstanding *Zaxxon* and *Turbo* remains to be seen but you can be sure that if improvements are possible, the Super Game Module has the power to make them.

Buck Rogers Planet of Zoom was a game that I thought would never

translate to the home game format without sacrificing most of its sensational effects. If you've seen it, you'll understand why. The 3-D effects are astounding—you speed down a three-walled tunnel floating somewhere in one galaxy or another while all sorts of menacing alien ships come at you from the other direction. Once again, if any unit has the capability to reproduce something this sophisticated, the Super Game does. Its million bits should enable designers not only to faithfully replicate the graphics but to keep most of the game play intact as well.

Another arcade license is *Time Pilot*—analyzed by Michael Blanchet in last month's issue. This game turns you into a fighter pilot who travels through time from 1910 through 2001 battling with planes that become progressively more futuristic. As this game is a great favorite of mine, I'm very anxious to see what Coleco does with it in the home format.

Last, there's *Sub-Roc*, a game in which you are the pilot of a combination spaceship/submarine and you've got to fight enemy spaceships, seagoing ships and other

nasties that rush at you from the distance. In the arcades this game requires an elaborate set of goggles that house shutters which close and open rapidly, blocking the vision first of one eye and then the other. This produces the 3-D effect. How Coleco plans to replicate this at home is still a mystery.

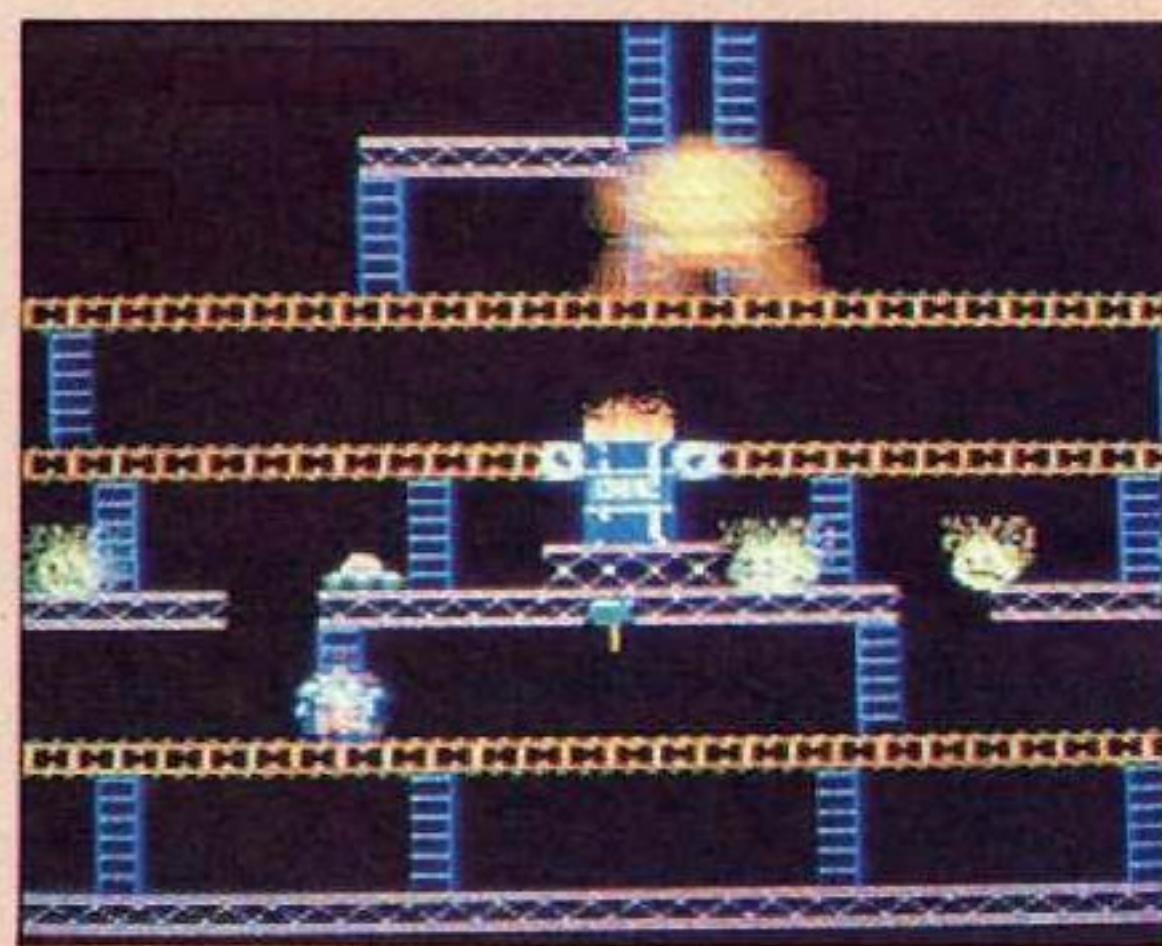
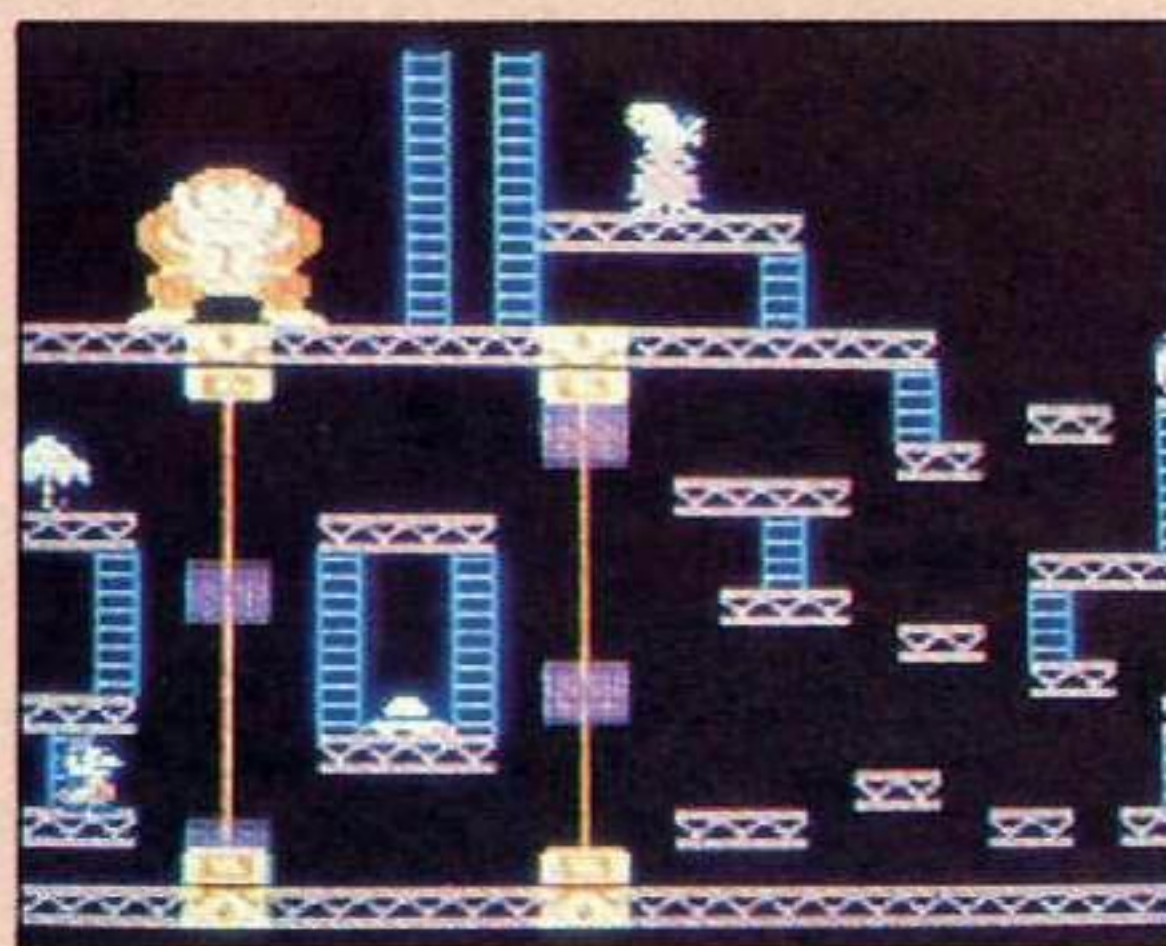
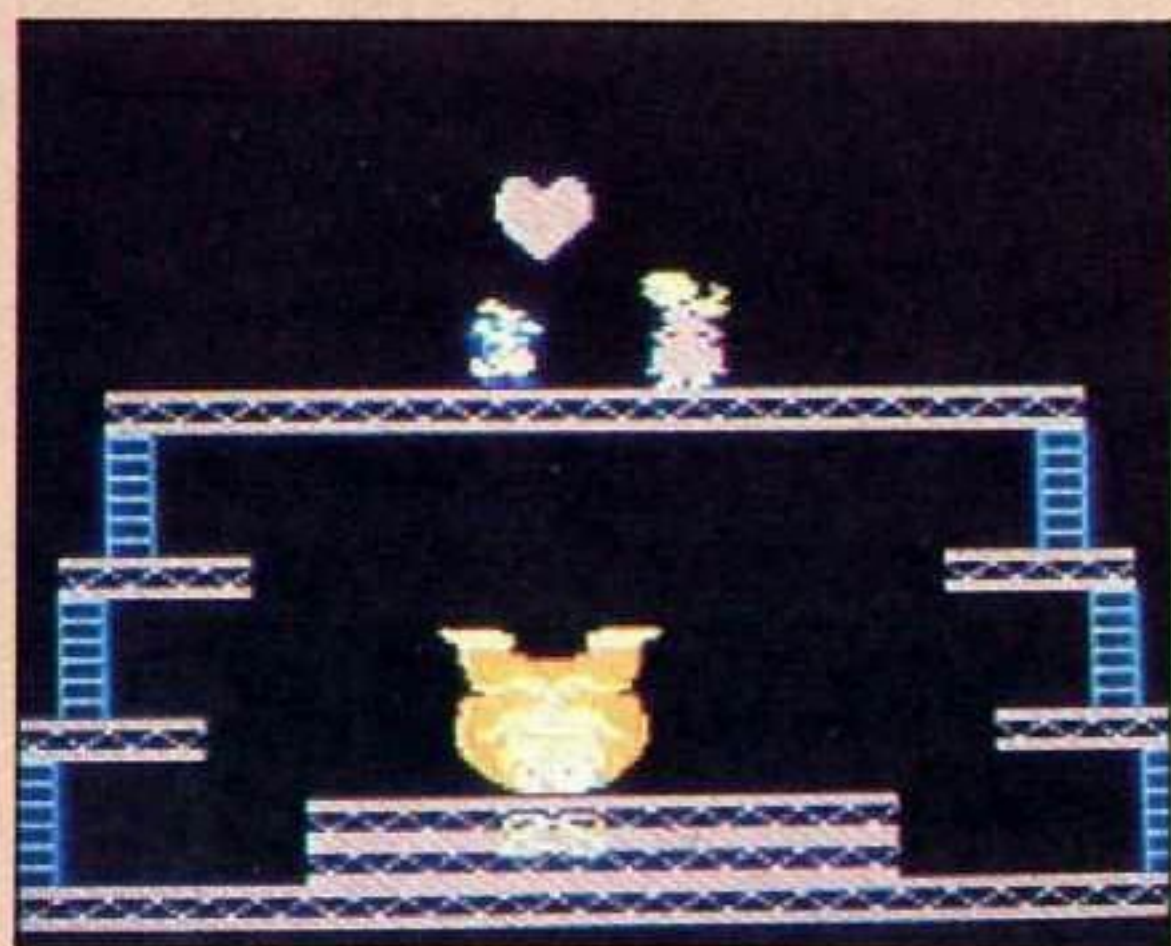
The END

One other arcade-type feature unique to the game wafers is the ability to enter your initials next to your score as a permanent record on the tape. The high-score chart pops up right after your last screen, along with an alphabet menu that allows you to select the letters with keypad and controller movements. You can even skip this if you want by centering your cursor on END and pressing the appropriate key three times.

One complaint: Alas, there is still no 5200-type "pause" control that allows you to pick up the game exactly where you were killed and, in this way, go through to see what all the screens look like.

At Toy Fair, Coleco did have a few wafers programmed in a

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Continued from page 43

special Demonstration Mode which allowed non-playing visitors to view all the screens, but there's no way for a player to get through all the screens unless he or she conquers them first. Coleco should give this some thought. It seems long overdue for a system so advanced.

Is the Super Game Module the first product in a line of peripherals designed to turn the ColecoVision into a home computer?

The full capacity of a game wafer is something on the order of 120 full screen pages of information. Since most games consist of 20 screens or less—especially most arcade games, which Coleco has been diligent about licensing and translating for its home system—it seems unlikely that the unused capacity of the tape drive of the Super Game Module will simply be

left to lie dormant. Games with 120 screens would certainly be interesting, but why stop at games? One hundred and twenty screen pages means 120 pages of *anything*.

There's another clue: The Expansion Module #3 is itself expandable, via an interface port on its front right-hand panel. What goes here is anybody's guess at the moment, but it's probable Coleco doesn't intend you to keep your pet mouse in it. My guess is that it is to be used either as a way of ganging together several Super Game Modules, in the same way computer users can attach multiple disk drives in serial order, or as a bypass that will allow direct access to the ColecoVision central processor by some other peripheral.

All these mysteries should be cleared up soon. But for now, the Super Game Module's only parallel is computer games. □

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