

Simon says: electronic toys are 'in'

By MIKE LEE
Of the Emerald

Linda Kilgore believes it pays to have popular friends.

Because of her relationship with Simon, she finds herself invited to parties. "Simon is the dinner guest and I tag along," she says.

Simon is a toy, a deceptively simple-looking game shaped like a flying saucer, with four colored areas on it. Kilgore is part-owner of Endgames, a downtown game store.

Simon is riding a wave of electronic toy popularity that began two years ago. Since the

introduction of the electronic game, the little noisemakers have made a big impact on the toy industry.

The leaders in the market last Christmas were Milton Bradley's "Simon," Parker Brothers' "Merlin" and the Mattel sports simulators (such as "Electronic Football").

Simon beeps and lights up a sequence of colors, starting with one and increasing to 31, that the player must repeat. If the player guesses incorrectly, Simon emits an electronic sound.

Merlin, which looks like a red Slim-line telephone, is actually a



Photo by Jimmi Harris

Simon, one of the latest fads in the electronic games industry, is a small portable game that challenges the memory and mental quickness of

game enthusiasts. Designed for all ages, it is just one of a myriad of new video games being introduced into the mainstream of American life.

collection of nine different games (one of which is similar to Simon). Together, the two represent the largest fad to hit the toy industry since the hula hoop and frisbee, says Paul Agerter, owner of Eugene's Toy and Hobby store. There is no end in sight, he adds, asking rhetorically "Are computers a fad?"

It all began with the invention of computer "chips." The micro-processor silicon chip, wafer-thin, serves as a mini-computer and was developed through space-age computer technology in the early 1970s. Introduced to the public via digital watches and pocket calculators, the chips were expensive because the technology was new and only a few could be manufactured at a time. As manufacturing capabilities increased, calculators plummeted in cost, to the point where they are now given away as dividends for automobile oil changes.

The technology spread to pool halls and arcades with the now simplistic "Pong" video tennis game. Video games grew more sophisticated and their makers saw a lucrative home video game market waiting to be exploited. Amid splashy fanfare, they invaded — and lost.

The fight was between newcomers to the home game mar-

ket, like Atari and Magnavox, and toy-industry veterans, such as Mattel and Milton Bradley. The introduction of Mattel's "Electronic Football" and other hand-held sports simulators beeped a death knell for the video games.

"TV games are dead," says Ed Linden, owner of The Toy Shoppe. He believes their demise was a result of reports citing their possible damage to the picture tube and prohibitive costs — up to \$200 for a basic unit and \$25 for each programmed cartridge to operate it. In Agerter's opinion, video games and hand-held games were competing for the same market. The hand-helds won, he says, because they didn't tie up the television when they were played.

The popularity of the new hand-held games was a mixed blessing. Their small size and price — around \$20 — made them a prime target for shoplifters. And they caused the already strained chip supplies to stretch to the breaking point. Then along came Simon.

Simon threw the chip makers into convulsions. According to Linden, only three American manufacturers are involved with chip production. They send materials to Japan and Taiwan to be assembled, then ship them

back. Just as they reached capacity to handle the calculators and watches, the electronic games were introduced. Because of this, says Agerter, "I can't keep enough stock. If I order 144 (Simons), I'm lucky to get 72."

To handle the demand, Agerter has a waiting list of Simon buyers, while Linden and Kilgore sell the toys as they arrive. Kilgore says "customers call ahead" to check on whether Simon is in stock before they decide to come in.

"Toys, Hobbies & Crafts," the industry trade magazine, says the chip shortage will get worse before it gets better. Shortages of the most popular electronic games prompt some stores to order up to 10 times what they want, says Kilgore. The toy companies often allocate games to retailers and the scarcity keeps prices up. All three owners predict that prices will lower as availability increases — whenever that is.

When they are available, "Everybody buys them," observes Agerter, though Mattel cites the average age of users at 13. Linden says that parents mostly buy them because of their cost, while Kilgore reports that the bulk of her sales are to teen and college-age persons.

The games have opened up a new "sophisticated market" of buyers, according to Agerter. They don't compete with non-electronic toys and games for sales. Kilgore agrees and believes she could open up a special department in her store

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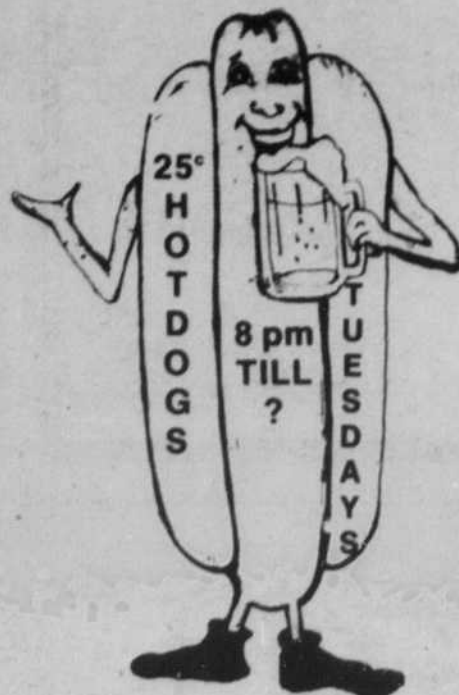
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