SOFTWARE

Playing Games— With a Difference

A new generation of entertainment software

You're in what looks like a reception room or secretary's office. You detect the odor of cheap perfume still lingering in the air.

STEVE LEONARD

You slowly awaken to find yourself in a grimy toilet stall. You have no idea how you got there, or even what your name is—all you know is that your arm stings because someone (who? you? who *are* you?) drugged you with a hypodermic. But, more important, there's a dead guy upstairs bleeding all over his desk, and if you don't move quickly—wait, there's the wail of sirens— you'll be arrested for murder.

It's only a game, but what a game. Raymond Chandler himself might have admired Deja Vu: A Nightmare Comes True! in which you must solve the murder to save your skin. Deja Vu *(Mindscape, Inc. $49.95)* is part of a new generation of entertainment software that combines running commentary with strikingly rich pictures— from grisly murder scenes to airy mansions—and vivid sound effects, like screaming sirens or the smack of fist against jaw. And, best of all, you don't have to be a computer wizard to play—operating these games is so easy that the computer seems to disappear. From the moment you load a disc into the drive, the best of today's games are ready to do your bidding, whether tapped on a keyboard or clicked with a "mouse." That is, until you make a mistake that ends your gaming session with a summary ***YOU HAVE DIED***.

Many believe that, as programming becomes more sophisticated and prices drop, software will challenge VCR's for home-entertainment time. "A VCR is a great one-way medium," says Mindscape, Inc., president and CEO Roger Buoy. But many people want to participate, he adds. "They don't want a one-way, kind of comatose way of being entertained or educated."

Entertainment software began with arcade games like Pong, which captured a generation of glassy-eyed gamesters. But as mindless thrills wore thin, gamers demanded more advanced fare to play on their own computers. They moved on to the broad range of simulators—perhaps facing down the Soviet Union in Balance of Power, a diplomatic recreation that provides encyclopedic profiles of 62 countries to help you make superpowered decisions.

Today's best games make the brain hurt,

creating problems that push you to the edge of sanity before an epiphany occurs. For most buyers, this means the ever-challenging offerings from Infocom (among them the Zork trilogy and A Mind Forever Voyaging). Infocom specializes in "interactive fiction"—richly textured text games that combine brainteasing and artful prose. Some interactive fiction drops you into the plot: you can thumb a ride with a game version of "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," beam into "Star Trek" (The Kobayashi Alternative) or enter Stephen King's novella "The Mist."

Going beyond words, many adventures, like Deja Vu, blend pictures with text. Winners in this group include Activision's Hacker *(Activision, Inc. $30-$50)*, which puts the player in contact with an unknown computer à la the movie "War-Games." The time is now; the setting a multinational's futuristic computer; the player must figure out how to hack his way in to save the world from Machiavellian
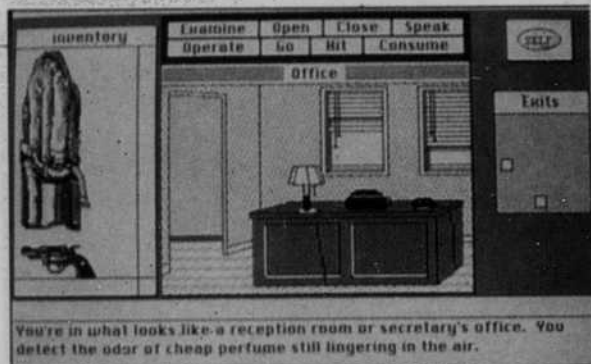
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Silicon sleuthing: *Two views of Deja Vu*

captains of industry who seem willing to wreck the planet in order to contol it.

Then there is Alter Ego *(Activision, Inc. $50-$60)* which dares you to describe it. In some ways it resembles fantasy role-playing games like Wizardry, in which the player constructs a character from a list of attributes and then goes off to seek dungeon-and-dragonish thrills. But in Alter Ego that character in the making is plain

Microchips, macro fun: *Programs that please without being 'one way' or 'comatose'*

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