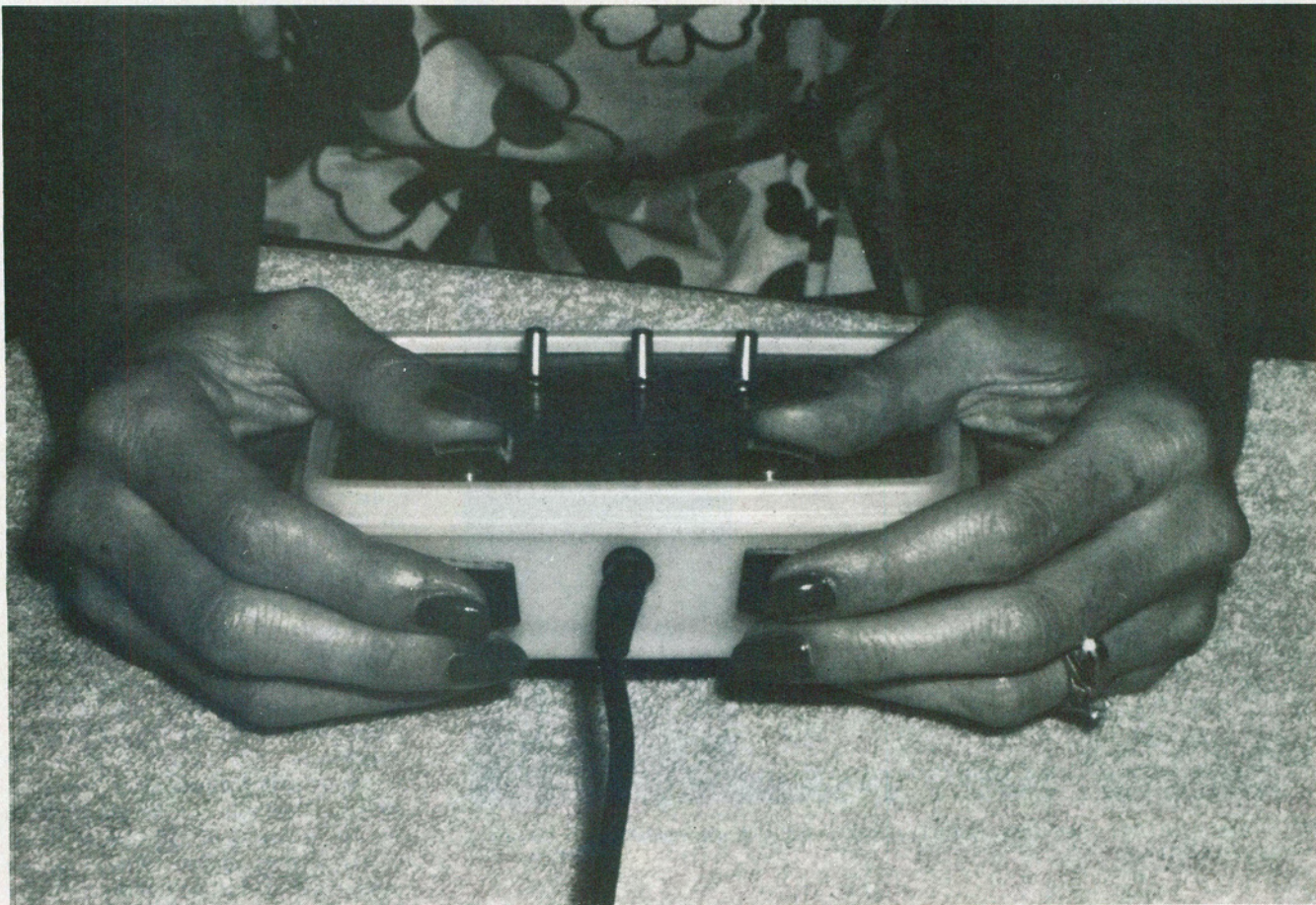


Atari Videogame Controller

Add excitement and high scores to your home videogame. This easy-to-build joystick replacement for your Atari VCS gives you improved control plus a rapid-fire option and a tilt-activated fire switch.

DAVID J. SWEENEY

IF YOU ARE THE PROUD OWNER OF AN Atari VCS home videogame, you've probably spent more than a few evenings at home nursing a pair of rather sore hands. The reason why is that the Atari joysticks, which despite their shortcomings are still considered to be among the best available, are built to endure the excitement and pressure generated while shooting down those Space Invaders, or what have you, but your hands most certainly are not. Partially because of that, and partially because videogame players are always on the lookout for anything that might help improve their score, a whole industry (although, granted, a small one) devoted to supplying aftermarket game controllers has sprung up. Most of those, however, are simply better (we hope!) joysticks. What about a different approach? The joystick replacement described here, which, incidently, does not resemble a joystick in any way, will add a new dimension to your home videogame action. Among its advantages are that it is easily built, comfortable to use, and adds a couple of features not found in the standard Atari units—those are repeat-fire action and a tilt-controlled switch. What's more, the project is very economical to build and operate.



A SANDWICH BOX covered with wood-grained paper makes an inexpensive case.

Comparing the controllers.

The controller that is supplied with the Atari videogame system (see Fig. 1-a) uses five compression switches to control the game action. Four of those switches are operated by the joystick; the fifth is controlled by the red FIRE button; for simplicity's sake, we'll call those five switches UP, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT, and FIRE (see Fig. 1-b). All of the switches are momentary, normally open, SPST types. Game software is designed so that the action on the screen is controlled by the opening and closing of those switches, which, in turn, is controlled by the movement of the joystick. In other words, if you move the joystick to the left, it will close the LEFT compression switch (more on that shortly), and the software will move the appropriate object (gun, ship, Pac-Man, etc.) to the left; moving the joystick up will move the object on the screen up, etc. Moving the joystick diagonally closes two switches at once, moving the object diagonally.

Any joystick substitute must also provide an arrangement of five switches. This device uses four pushbutton momentary SPST switches and one internal tilt-controlled mercury switch. Figure 1-c shows the location and function of those

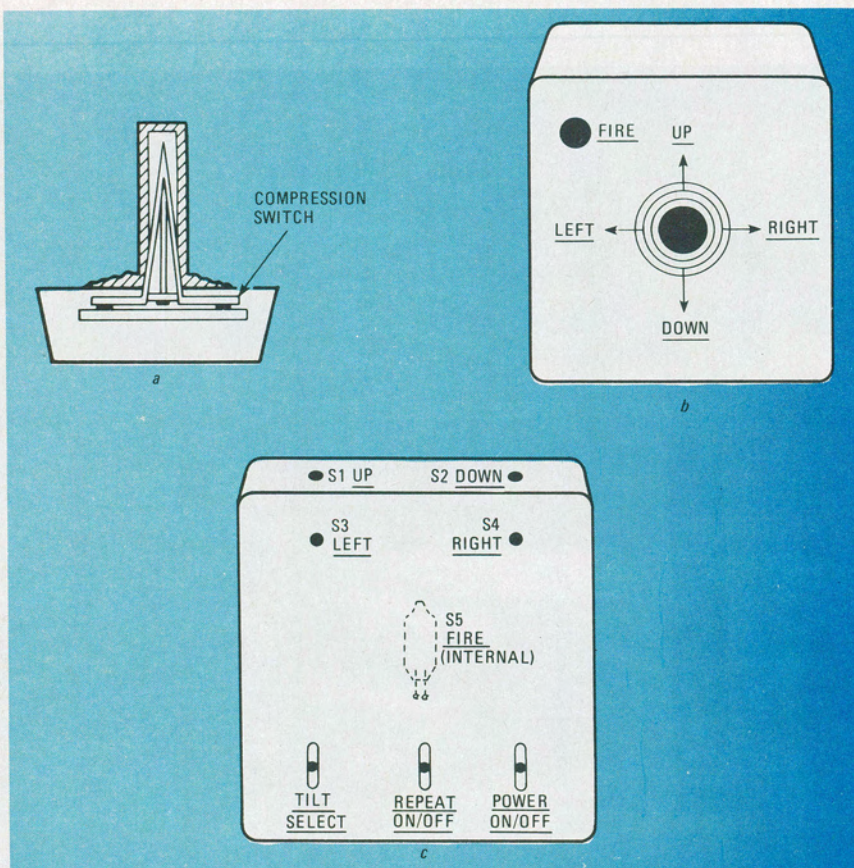


FIG. 1—ONCE YOU GET USED to the switch positions on the controller you're likely to throw your original joysticks away!

TABLE 1

	Switch	Location/Function	Joystick equivalent
Game switches	S1	Left forefinger	Up or Fire*
	S2	Right forefinger	Down
	S3	Right thumb	Left
	S4	Left thumb	Right
	S5	Internal	Up or Fire*
Setup switches	S6	Power on/off	—
	S7	Repeat on/off	—
	S8	Tilt select	—

*Selected by S8

switches, as well as the unit's three others—POWER ON/OFF, TILT SELECT, and REPEAT ON/OFF. Note that the Atari joystick's UP, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT, and FIRE switches are replaced in our new controller by S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 respectively. However, the function of two of those switches (S1 and S5) can be interchanged by using the TILT SELECT switch. That lets you choose whether you want to use the tilt switch (S5) to control firing or the upward movement of the object on the screen. Needless to say, whichever function is not controlled by the tilt switch will be controlled by S1. The switch functions/locations of our substitute controller, and their corresponding joystick functions, are summarized in Table 1.

As you can see in Fig. 1-c and the photos, S1-S4 are located so that they can be easily pushed by your forefingers and thumbs when the controller box is held. You're sure to find that this setup will make playing almost any game less tiring, and more enjoyable.

The circuit

The schematic diagram of the replacement controller is shown in Fig. 2. Aside from the switches we've already discussed, the bulk of the circuitry involves the repeat mode. Switch S7 is used to select either that or the single-shot mode.

In the repeat mode, you no longer need to push a button each time you want to fire a shot. Instead, each time you press the FIRE button or tilt the controller, depend-

ing on how the TILT SELECT switch is set, shots are fired at a rate of about 10-per-second for as long as the fire switch is pressed or the unit is tilted. The circuit used to do that is relatively simple, involving mainly a 555 IC oscillator and a reed relay. Basically, the oscillator is configured to open and close the relay at a rate of 10 Hz which, is about the fastest rate that you achieve manually. There is one other thing we should point out here: some games limit the number of shots you can take at a time—in Space Invaders, for instance, you can not take a second shot until the first has completely cleared the screen. Our controller can not override the software and change that.

Construction

Building our videogame controller is almost easier than describing it; it involves little more than installing the switches and repeat-mode circuitry into a suitable case. Let's turn our attention to that case for a moment. Considering the simplicity and low cost of our controller, it would seem a waste to house it in something that would cost more than the device itself. But, on the other hand, some sort of attractive case would be desirable. We decided upon a rather nice, if unlikely, compromise. The case you see in the photographs is nothing more than a refrigerator sandwich box, the kind that you can get in any discount store or supermarket; we dressed it up a little by putting some wood-grained self-adhesive paper on the lid. In use, we found that the case is easy on the hands and that it stands up well to the stress and perspiration sure to be generated when playing any videogame. In fact, the case has withstood eight months of hard use by a variety of players with no visible bad effects.

One problem did develop concerning the switches. First of all, they are rather small and easy to miss in the heat of "battle." Also, use over extended periods of time resulted in quite a bit of wear and tear on the fingers. The solution to both those problems was rather simple—an old belt was cut into strips that were used as switch covers. The strips (which measure $1 \times \frac{1}{2}$ inch) are installed simply by punching a hole in one end and screwing them down next to the pushbuttons so that they lie over them.

The repeat-mode oscillator can be built using any construction technique and parts placement is not critical. The oscillator used in the prototype was built on perforated construction board and point-to-point wiring was used. The mercury TILT SELECT switch is mounted on the oscillator circuit board using a Velcro fastener as shown in Fig. 3. That mounting technique was used to allow for easy switch replacement in the event that it ever becomes necessary. The battery holder was made from a strip of aluminum that was shaped to fit the battery and secured as shown.

