

review: **Sparkz**

by Karen Kaye

Type: Arcade

Publisher: Varcon Systems Inc.

Retail Price: \$49.95

Street Price:

\$29.95 (MacWherehouse - also available as part of the "Macintosh Game Pack: Diamonds, Jewelbox, Sparkz", \$38.98 from MacZone.)

Requires: MAC Plus or newer, System 6.0.5 or later (System version 6.0.7 required for background sound), System 7 compatible.

Protection: None

Varcon Systems is a distributor of such arcade games as Diamonds, Jewelbox, and Aces with Tens. I am familiar with Jewelbox from its shareware days, and felt that it was a well-designed product. I was looking forward to the newest offering. Oddly, Sparkz arrived not in a box, but in a velvet-like sack, which reminded me of the dice-bags used by Dungeons and Dragons™ enthusiasts. Further, the sack included a small, pink frisbee (about 3 inches in diameter), the connection of which to the game or the company remains nebulous. Nonetheless, my cats put the mysterious object to immediate use, batting it around the kitchen floor. Even before the game was loaded on the hard drive, its value as a source of entertainment was confirmed.

[Stars and Sparkz and Dots — Oh My!](#) The inspiration for Sparkz is not disclosed by the designer, but I suspect that Marc Dutil may have been spurred to write this game after looking at an After Dark™ module for too long. The centerpiece of the action, and the player's chief nemesis, is the Star, which bears a strong resemblance to the multi-colored spiral pattern which is invariably included with every screensaver package.

The object of the game is to capture as much of the playing area as possible, before the player's Dot — or more precisely, the line that the player's Dot is tracing — is touched by a Star or a Sparkz. Players must be careful not to attempt to reverse their course, as this will result in the loss of a life as well. Each game starts with four player lives, and a new one is awarded every 3000 points. The percentage of the playing area that must be captured is

displayed in the Percent window on the right side of the screen. Players are also shown their score, the current level, and the number of Sparkz in play. Once the required percent of the board is blocked off by the player, the game proceeds to the next higher level. With each level, the game becomes progressively tougher: more Sparkz, a faster and larger Star, and Sparkz that move faster around the perimeter than the player's Dot.

Instructions are available from within the game, and top scores can be viewed and cleared. Players can select from one of two speeds: Regular (default) and Faster. I used the latter consistently on my IIsi, but I suspect that Quadra owners may be quite satisfied with the lower setting. Both background music and incidental sounds can be toggled on or off, and volume can be set for personal comfort, or for coworker proximity. The background music is interesting, and it is best described as new age Calypso with classical overtones. I liked it...but not for very long.

he game can be controlled either by mouse or keyboard. The keyboard settings are customizable, and even with practice, I found the keyboard more precise and comfortable than the mouse. This is unfortunate, since mouse control would be ideal, yet in its current form it is too imprecise. Several features, such as pausing the movement of the Dot, are completely unavailable during mouse play.

Once players customize the control source and sound options, all that remains is to select "New Game." Colorful patterns begin to fill in the parts of the play area blocked off by the Dot. The game is very easy at first, but progress much past the 10th level will take some serious practice...or a "game cheat" program such as Victoire or Axis [see review elsewhere in this issue] which can be used to award additional lives. (I could not confirm which cheat programs currently support Sparkz.)

Fizzles. This is a game that will provide satisfying performance with a lower powered Mac. However, play on a Powerbook — even a with 4-bit greyscale — is an exercise in frustration. Due to the nature of a grayscale LCD, it is extremely difficult to see the Dot, and consequently Sparkz are much harder to keep track of as well. I was really annoyed by this, since the manual specifically mentions Powerbook compatibility. Of course, there is a big difference between compatibility and playability.

The interface is sound, and the keyboard control will satisfy most players. The game does have an eccentricity: the Dot must be paused before it can leave the edge of the play area in order to block off a part of the field. When using the keyboard, one of the two options to pause the Dot is to click the mouse! It is awkward at best to try to use the mouse when playing on the keyboard.

Despite a sound concept, this game never really grew on me. The actions are repetitive, and there are no new treasures or powers or adversaries as the game progresses. Very early on, it becomes obvious that the key to the game is to first block out the four corners of the play area, which allows players to trap Sparkz easily. The “code having been broken,” the game is reduced to doing more and more of the same things ever faster. The top levels are so difficult — in terms of the sheer size of the Star and the percent of the play area that is required to be blocked off — as to make the game virtually impossible to complete. If this serves as a source of motivation to the reader, then Sparkz may well be a game to consider.

Short Circuit. Sparkz is fairly intolerant of system extensions. I found it most amenable when I started up with the Shift key held down (disabling all extensions). On those occasions when I played the game with my normal system configuration, it was prone to produce odd results. The most common development was the simultaneous selection of both the lowest and the highest volume settings, accompanied by the music being turned up to maximum volume. The only way to correct the problem was to quit the game and restart.

I think it is foolish to attempt to analyze what makes an arcade game fun. Yet I know that I would never part with Super Tetris™ or Lunatic Fringe™. Sparkz may have been successfully marketed as a shareware game, because I know that there is an audience for it. But as a commercial product, without the ability to try before you buy, Sparkz may well face a big handicap. I recommend that those who are interested in the concept of this game, try the aforementioned “Macintosh Game Pack,” which includes Sparkz and represents a better overall value.

Pros:

- interesting concept
- relatively easy learning curve
- low RAM and hard drive requirements
- highly playable 68020/68030 Macs

Cons:

- repetitive actions
- low tolerance for system extensions
- game claims to be Powerbook compatible, but it is unplayable in grayscale