

## Videomaster Star Chess



<http://www.old-computers.com/museum/computer.asp?c=1116&st=2>

What a weird system we have here! This must be one of the rarest and most original consoles ever produced. It only plays one game: Star Chess, a version of chess which takes place in space, for two players.

The system itself looks like a box with a transparent plastic cover, revealing four silver controllers stored into the plastic case. Actually, only two of the silver oblongs are real controllers, attached by extendable wires to the console for 2 players. Another silver oblong opens out into the instruction manual, and the last one cannot be moved and contains sound on/off + power on/off switches and reset button.

Star Chess is based on the well known game of chess but your chessmen are space ships engaged in Galactic Warfare. The game board is laid out as a normal chessboard with space ships instead of chess pieces. Two players take turns moving their ships (no solo play). The rules and moves are based on chess but with some additions. You can fire missiles at your opponents, you have shields, you can get a damage report, you can return to base to stock up on missiles used up, and if you are in trouble you can warp into hyperspace. But beware, you can re-appear at anytime in a random position on the board and be in a worse situation! To win the game you have to destroy or capture your opponent's "commander" (king).

An interesting fact is that this game can also be found on [Emerson Arcadia 2001](#) and compatible systems! So, some questions come to mind: is it the exact same game put in a standalone console (see the [software page](#), we can see here that the two versions are not exactly the same)? Which version came first? What are the origins of this game? If you can answer these questions, please mail us!

At various stages the company was called Voltmace or Videomaster (owned by Waddingtons, a huge boardgame company). They released a console called Voltmace Database in 1978 (?) which was [Interton VC-4000](#) "compatible", but never released an "Arcadia 2001 compatible system" able to play the famous Star Chess game. Maybe Videomaster did not want repeat the Voltmace Database experience, and decided, upon pressure from Waddingtons, to release only a standalone system playing a board game, Star Chess, using technology and software they had access to. Just a guess though...

Anyway, the system did not sell very well and is now an interesting collectors item.

We need more info about this console ! If you designed, used, or have more info about this system, please send us pictures or anything you might find useful.

## **Inventor Peter Gebler (UK):**

I invented Star Chess around July/August 1977 when I was working as Technical Editor of a trade magazine in the UK called "New Electronics". This was around the time that the first serious microprocessor battle between Intel (with its 8080) and Motorola (with its 6800) was gathering force and lots of other companies (TI, MOS Technology, National Semiconductor, RCA ...) were also fighting to get into this market and everyone was talking about the amazing new applications that microprocessors would enable. New Electronics was by far the most successful professional electronics engineering publication in the UK at the time and I was unique among the people working for these kinds of publications in that I actually understood the technology. It sounds strange today but in the mid-70's nobody expected the people writing for trade publications in areas such as electronics or chemicals or agriculture to actually know anything about the industry they were writing about. You sifted through hundreds of press releases, decided which ones to print, then edited them down to a standard format. My immediate boss at New Electronics had a background in industrial chemistry but had no idea what a transistor was.

Because I had a degree in maths and physics and a background in electronic design, I was able to carve out a bit of a niche in the electronics reporting field. The inspiration for Star Chess came while I was visiting a semiconductor company (can't remember which one - it may have been TI, which had a manufacturing site in Bedford at the time) and their marketing manager commented that with all the companies I was visiting and the inside information I had access to I was in a good position to come up with some new applications myself.

That was literally what happened. When I got home, I sat up late at the kitchen table thinking of all kinds of possible new applications for microprocessors. Music synthesisers were my main interest at the time but I rejected this route because it was clear that the performance of the available microprocessors wasn't good enough. Toys were another area I considered (I had two young children at the time) but the problem there was that microprocessors were just too expensive at the time to be used in toys. I outlined a system for automating library borrowing using smart cards (also just recently invented) but rejected this because the smart card technology at the time was also expensive and unproven.

So, finally, I decided to focus on video games: they were becoming more important commercially but they were mostly ping-pong type games that involved only hand-eye coordination. I thought there must be an opening for some kind of strategy-based game. This all happened soon after the first "Star Wars" film (July 1977), which I didn't see but knew that it was very popular. So, that night, I decided to invent a new video game, based on chess but involving "Star Wars" aspects. I kept the basic chess pieces but renamed them and introduced the ability to fire at opponents and warp into hyperspace. This was because I am not a good chess player and don't have the attention span to look beyond the next move or two. So the idea of being able to defeat an opponent's carefully executed strategy by invoking luck appealed to me.

By the time I went to bed (very late!), I had two handwritten pages that simply outlined the rules of the game.

By coincidence, a few days later I attended a press conference given by Videomaster and met their marketing director, Derek Martin. I decided to approach them as they seemed to be the only UK-based video games manufacturer. They were immediately interested and we signed a licence agreement (about a week before Christmas 1977) that gave them exclusive worldwide rights to Star Chess. The actual technical development was done by a firm called Dalton, Viewing \$ Whitsey based in Coventry. They decided to use the Motorola 6800 microprocessor and the resulting order was at the time the biggest order anywhere in the world for microprocessors\$ I remember we had a press conference to announce this. The game was launched with a massive champagne laser press breakfast with a guest TV celebrity, Magnus Pyke.

After that, everything went wrong. The game was not a commercial success, although it certainly gained a cult following. It was priced at £70 in the shops (far too high at the time) and there were rumours of high failure rates. Videomaster encountered financial problems and were acquired by Waddingtons. This was a company mainly known at the time for greetings cards and board games but it wanted to get into electronic games. Their acquisition of Videomaster was conditional upon me signing a new licence agreement transferring Videomaster's rights to Star Chess to Waddingtons. I agreed to this but the window of opportunity had already closed. Waddingtons lost a lot of money and Star Chess became history.

I didn't do badly out of it - about £70,000 over a few years for two pages of hand-written concept description that was the result of five or six hours work - but who knows what might have happened if I'd chosen a different company to commercialise it?

**Technical information:**

<b>NAME</b>	Star Chess
<b>MANUFACTURER</b>	Videomaster
<b>ORIGIN</b>	United Kingdom
<b>YEAR ?</b>	1979
<b>BUILT IN SOFTWARE / GAMES</b>	Star Chess
<b>CONTROLLERS</b>	Two detachable controllers (with direction buttons and different functions)
<b>CPU</b>	ULA Ferranti ZNA 2H072E
<b>CO-PROCESSOR</b>	Motorola SC80801P + several other Motorola chips (RAM ?)
<b>RAM</b>	Unknown
<b>GRAPHIC MODES</b>	Blocky graphics
<b>COLORS</b>	Yes (at least 6 colors)
<b>SOUND</b>	yes, built-in speaker
<b>SIZE / WEIGHT</b>	Unknown
<b>I/O PORTS</b>	Video output (TV RF), power in
<b>MEDIA</b>	None, only built-in game available
<b>NUMBER OF GAMES</b>	1
<b>POWER SUPPLY</b>	External power supply + battery cells ?
<b>PRICE</b>	£16.95 (UK, 1981)