

# Winning Post

**Not all computer games require split-second reaction times — postal games may take six weeks per move and involve several dozen players**

Though most new purchasers of home computers declare that they intend to learn to program, there can be little doubt that the most popular application for such machines is actually playing games. As we have been at pains to point out in the HOME COMPUTER COURSE, computer-based games can be both entertaining and educational. There is no need to restrict yourself to arcade-style games such as Space Invaders, either. The computer has opened up whole new game concepts such as Adventure (see page 161) and educational simulations (see page 81), not to mention computerised versions of popular board games that offer a variety of different playing standards.

Nevertheless, there's one type of computer-based game we haven't mentioned before, which you may never have heard of. In marked contrast to arcade games, which require split-second timing and reflexes, these games proceed at a distinctly pedestrian pace, with each move taking weeks to play! And unlike most other computer games, which are for one player only, these games can involve several dozen players at a time.

We are referring to postal games — that is, games in which the players are scattered across the country (or in the case of international games, anywhere in the world), and in which each specifies his moves on paper at predetermined intervals. The moves are posted to a game co-ordinator, who feeds them into a microcomputer (most postal games don't require players to have a home computer of their own). The co-ordinator then sends a printout from the computer to each player, showing his own position and other relevant information such as the position of other players with whom he has made contact.

Such games usually continue for many months, if not indefinitely, though it is possible for players to join or leave the game at any stage. A joining fee is usually charged to cover the initial materials and rulebooks; thereafter a playing fee (typically around £1.00) is payable on each move. These games are by no means an inexpensive pastime! One move per week is considered to be an express game, while international games may involve a wait of six weeks between turns.

A typical postal game might cater for several dozen players. If more players wish to subscribe, the co-ordinator simply starts up a second game in parallel with the first, using the same programs but different data disks on his computer.

Postal games existed long before the computer.

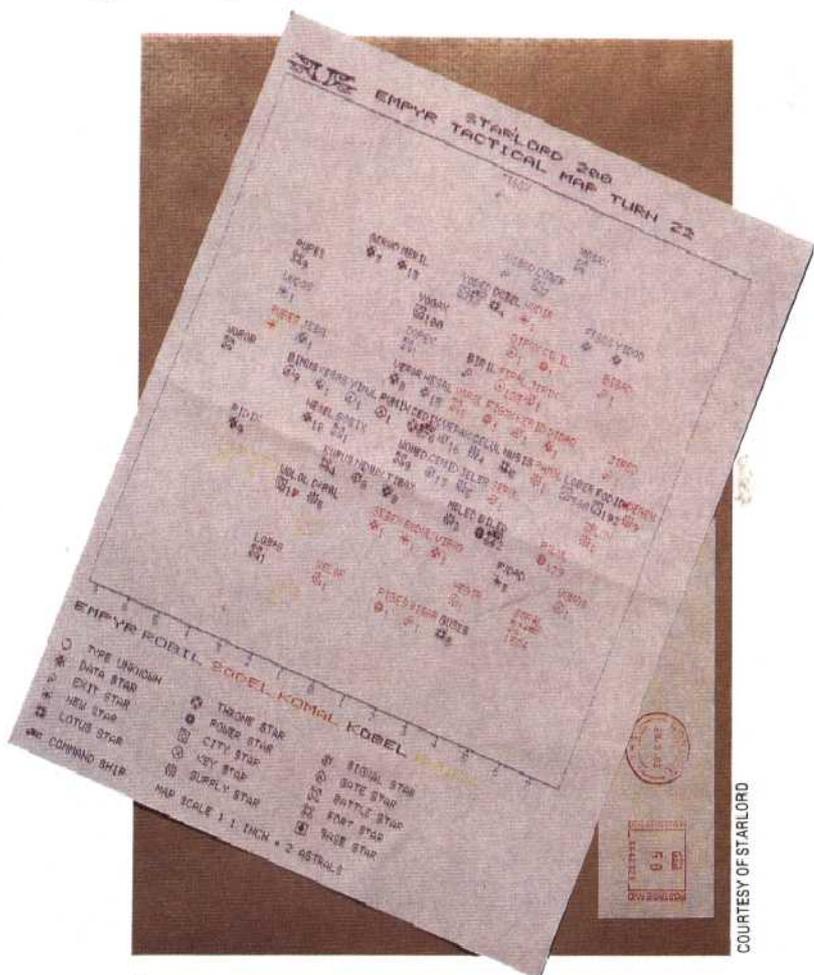
There were postal chess leagues, and the popular board game Diplomacy — in which players representing seven European nations aim to take over the continent by forming and breaking alliances with each other — can be played by post.

The introduction of the computer to do all the calculation and administration has meant that the scope of such games has increased, together with their ingenuity and sophistication. Some feature vast galaxies through which players manoeuvre their space fleets; others involve mythical lands and warring kingdoms. And there are computerised versions of Diplomacy, as well.

The unique thing about these games is that the players interact with each other — they aren't merely exploring, as with Adventure games. Alliances between ten or more players are not uncommon, which involves a lot of correspondence or telephoning each week. It is a measure of the quality of these games that the age range of subscribers is far wider than for most other types of computer game.

## Galactic Wars

'Starlord' was the first postal game to be administered by computer in Britain. It is co-ordinated by Mike Singleton, using a Commodore Pet 3032 computer, a 7.5 megabyte hard disk unit, and an Integrex colour dot matrix printer. Each player's objective is to find the Throne Star and become Emperor. On each move he receives a map showing the immediate area around his forces, and a list of who controls nearby stars. The large disk capacity is dictated by the large number of programs that between them manage the game, and the large quantity of information that must be kept for over 700 players. For more information on postal games, a dedicated magazine called 'Flagship' is available from specialist game shops



COURTESY OF STARLORD