

Video game serves up Marlboro ads

Teenagers flock to *Pole Position*

Pole Position, the ultimate in video car-racing games, has hit Australia. Scores of teenagers cluster around the colour screen as they watch the driver manoeuvre his electronic car around the race track.

As the formula racer roars up the speedway (yes, "roars" — dramatic sound effects are included), oil slicks, sharp curves, and other cars must be avoided . . . not to mention the Marlboro billboards. As the young driver speeds from the starting line and negotiates the hair-pin curves, he or she will encounter at least four Marlboro billboards.

What do Marlboro billboards have to do with a video race track? No one can claim that they add authenticity because no race track would place billboards so dangerously close to a roadway. The video game, marketed by Namco Ltd of Japan, is taking the opportunity to promote Marlboro with little regard for the fact that most users are teenagers or younger.

John and Fido are 15 years old and have been sitting behind the wheel of *Pole Position* for the past half-hour. John's turn is over, and Fido slides behind the wheel, dropping another 20-cent piece into the slot. The video racer safely passes the first Marlboro billboard, but then crashes into a billboard advertising Namco.

John does not smoke, but says that many

of his friends do. Does he feel that the game's billboards are trying to promote cigarettes to his generation?

"Sure the advertising affects kids — that's why it's there. But the big billboards along the streets — I think they have a much bigger effect."

Fido smokes Winfield (Rothmans Ltd), the brand that had to drop comedian Paul Hogan as its principal advertiser because his ads had a "major effect" on children, who tend to emulate their heroes. (*AMA Gazette* 1980; No. 246 (July 10): 6).

"You don't see the billboards so much when you're 'driving' because you have to concentrate on the road," Fido said.

"I guess you notice them if you crash into one. But when everyone stands around and



watches you 'drive', then they see the billboards."

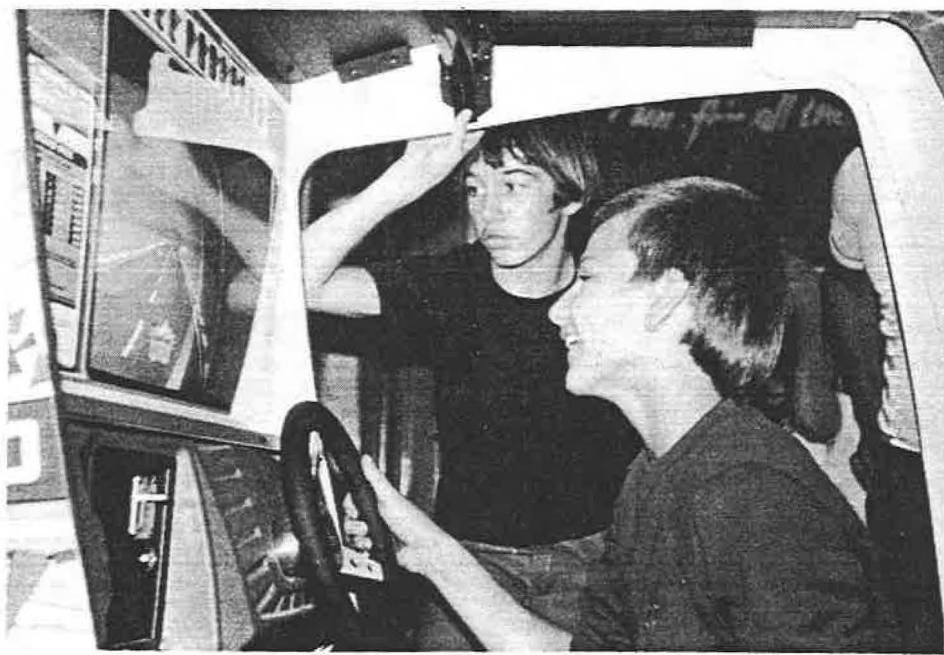
The makers of Marlboro, Philip Morris Ltd, were contacted about *Pole Position*. Considering the company's often-repeated position that its advertising is not aimed at children, Marlboro video billboards in an amusement arcade appear to contradict the company's policy.

A Marlboro executive in Sydney was aware of the video game, saying, "We have to keep up and be aware of all our promotions." However, the executive declined to comment further, and suggested that *MJA News Features* contact Mr Phil Francis at the company's head office in Melbourne. Mr Francis, national spokesman for Philip Morris and Corporate Affairs Manager, said that he was not aware of the video game's Marlboro billboards.

"No one from this end has solicited anything from Namco — definitely not. I would object to the Marlboro brand name being used," he said during a telephone interview.

He said that he would contact Namco Ltd in Japan to find out why the Marlboro name is being used. He added that he failed to see what the issue had to do with *The Medical Journal of Australia*.

Because 15-year-old Fido smokes Winfield but enjoys playing *Pole Position*, perhaps he will switch to Marlboro and justify the industry's rationale that advertising is intended to make smokers change brands.



Fido at the wheel of *Pole Position* while friend John looks on.

"Sure the advertising affects kids — that's why it's there."

— John, 15