High Resolution Viewdata
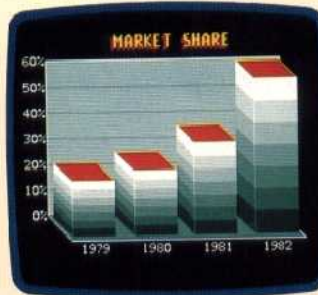

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Most viewdata systems use alpha-mosaic graphics, which are economic in terms of memory but less successful when it comes to the quality of the pictures obtained. The alternative viewdata graphics standard is called alpha-geometrics and is capable of producing much more realistic pictures.

As well as the usual letters, numbers and mosaic characters, alpha-geometric graphics let you draw lines, circles and similar shapes using simple commands — in much the same way as the BASIC high-resolution graphics commands available on most home micros.

To accommodate the higher resolution, the screen is divided up into 320 by 240 pixels, as opposed to the 40 by 24 squares used in alpha-mosaic graphics. This does have the disadvantage that a very detailed picture — for example, a facsimile of a person's face — takes a couple of minutes to be transmitted down the phone lines.

One commercial system available in the UK is the MUPID terminal, costing £850. It is a dedicated microcomputer and is capable of displaying both alpha-mosaic and alpha-geometric graphics. Its novel features include the ability to produce animation on a single page, as well as half-tone colours and shading.

The alpha-geometric system is excellent for presenting detailed pictures such as maps or facsimiles. Unfortunately, it has not really caught on in the UK, although the Canadian viewdata system has adopted this standard

step is to save it on disk or tape, give it a page number and put it on your own viewdata system. The Viewtext package can hold up to 22 pages in the BBC's memory at any time, and each page is given a number between 100 and 121. When you have created and saved sufficient pages, you can run the carousel program. This loads in all the pages and then works through them in a repeating cycle, with you deciding on the time delay between each page. On the top line of any viewdata page appears such information as the date and time, the number of the page being viewed, and the name of the viewdata service — Prestel, Jones Travel, etc. The carousel program will ask the user for this information before cycling through the pages.

More sophisticated viewdata packages enable you to transmit and receive pages from other systems, using a modem and a telephone line. They also let you set up a proper database, similar to Prestel, with menu pages and access routes between the various pages, in addition to the simple carousel method of displaying pages. These packages tend to cost several hundred pounds, and require a lot of disk storage for the many pages of information, so they may be beyond the means of most home computer owners.

As the use of viewdata becomes more widespread, the demand for information pages will also increase. Running a simple editing program on a home micro, you can create viewdata pages to rival those produced by any commercial agency, and thus take advantage of this system.