

Introduction

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The explosive growth of the home computer market has been one of the most remarkable phenomena of recent years. The United Kingdom now leads the world in the sheer numbers of home computers owned in proportion to the population, as the dozens of magazines aimed at users testify. A satisfying feature of this new market is the major share taken by products of British origin, such as the BBC Microcomputer and the Sinclair ZX81 and Spectrum.

Many home computer users are interested mainly or exclusively in computer games, and the provision of games programs, or 'software', is another lucrative industry that has sprung up to meet their needs. It is understandable that, among those who are not attracted to playing computer games, a certain amount of scepticism should arise as to whether the computer can serve any real purpose in the home. Some of the uses suggested by enterprising salesmen — such as generating dinner menus or improving your ability to win at horse racing — might seem to justify such suspicions. Is home computing no more than a passing craze, destined to go the way of skateboarding and the Rubik cube? I shall suggest some reasons why this is not so: why home computers should be regarded as much more than just games-playing machines and why some familiarity with their capabilities, their internal workings and their probable future evolution is enormously important.

Many home computer owners value their machines simply for the enjoyment and fascination that they offer. Questions of their cost-effectiveness and usefulness are as irrelevant to such enthusiasts as they would be to any other hobbyist. These users do not need to be persuaded of the benefits of systematic knowledge such as The Home Computer Course can offer; they know that learning more about both hardware and software will help them to enhance their computers, to link their machines to a growing range of peripheral equipment and to help them in creating their own new or improved software.

But for the many owners, actual and potential, of home computers who do not feel attracted to computing as an interesting hobby, there are also compelling reasons for acquiring an understanding of the principles of the computer.

Developments in microelectronic technology follow each other at an unprecedented rate. They are leading inevitably to the spread of microchip-based products and computer techniques into all aspects of our lives. Our society is becoming increasingly dependent on computers and their software for its prosperity, health and defence. Short of a natural or man-made catastrophe, information technology will not go away. Understanding of computers is therefore directly relevant to general as