

# Straight Facts

**Which computer do you buy, and how do you improve its performance with accessories and peripherals? Here's an unbiased assessment of the available hardware**

## Peripherals

When a new computer is announced, the brochure frequently describes a range of peripherals, which may not even be at the design stage. It is therefore important to distinguish between what is currently available and what is merely planned. A machine that has both disk drive and printers available from the manufacturer is one for which useful business software will be developed. For entertainment uses, a well-planned machine will have joysticks, game paddles and light pens available, though in these cases, better value can often be obtained from independent suppliers

- >>> Spectrum, BBC Model B, Tandy Color, TI99/4A
- >> Atari 400 & 800, Vic-20, Commodore 64, Dragon-32
- > Oric-1, Sord M5

## Keyboard

Unless you intend only to play games using a joystick, you will be using your keyboard very often. It is therefore important that you are happy with it. Two factors dictate the quality of a keyboard. Firstly there is the physical design or 'feel'. A touch-typist, for example, would probably prefer one of the better quality keyboards as some of the cheaper computers are fitted with solid-state keys, which do not offer 'tactile feedback'. Secondly there is the keyboard layout. A keyboard with a separate key for each function is ideal, as it can be confusing when a key has a number of different possible applications. Programmable function keys are worth having, because they can be used within a program to perform dedicated functions like FIRE or START AGAIN

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- >> Dragon-32, Tandy Color, TI99/4A
- > Spectrum, Atari 400, Oric-1, Sord M5

## Screen

Much attention is given to a computer's graphics, when in fact most of the time you may be viewing text, or program listings. Two factors are important: the number of characters that can be displayed at once (25 rows of 40 characters is an average figure) and the legibility of the characters themselves. Also important are the screen editing facilities. Can alterations be made to a program simply by moving the cursor to the position and typing, or must special commands be used?

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- > Spectrum, Vic-20, Dragon-32, Tandy Color

## Business Software

If your main reason for buying a microcomputer is for running a small business, then you should consider a purpose-designed computer. However, the more expensive home computers can also double-up as business machines provided you are prepared to invest in a disk drive and printer. Applications then include word processing, accounts, databases and spreadsheets. As with games, some machines have a lot of business software available, some none

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## Interfaces

A computer with a large range of interfaces on the back is one that has been designed with future expansion in mind, and this feature is a very good pointer to good design in general. Having standard ports like RS232 and Centronics means that you have a wide choice of devices to hook up to the computer, other than the units supplied by the manufacturer

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