



SHOPPING AROUND

As new and improved machines are appearing on the market all the time, many people find themselves replacing or upgrading their computers every couple of years. Here we present some advice on buying a home computer, and give some indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the more popular models.

When buying a new machine, it is important to consider exactly what your needs are — do you want a computer that can be expanded by the addition of peripherals, extra memory, etc., or can you afford to treat it as a disposable item, to be sold off when something better comes along?

Most of the newer models boast more features than their older rivals, including bigger memories, better dialects of BASIC, higher resolution graphics and built-in software. But the older machines, particularly those that have sold in large quantities, have one major advantage — software availability. Many buyers of newer computers will have to wait for months before a large range of software is available — and in some cases, this software will never appear. A good example of this is the Oric Atmos. This improved version of the Oric-1 has been on sale for months, yet software writers have been reluctant to produce material for it. As a result, the sales figures for this machine have declined drastically.

The three micros that are best served by software houses are the Sinclair Spectrum, the Commodore 64 and the BBC Micro. The Spectrum, in particular, is a prime example of the way in which creative software writing can overcome a machine's inbuilt limitations: some of the programs for this micro can compare very favourably with those produced for considerably more sophisticated machines. However, it is unlikely that any of these three machines would sell well if they were launched today: the Spectrum has an extremely poor keyboard, the Commodore 64's BASIC lacks the commands to make the most of the computer's potential, and the BBC Micro has a small memory and is decidedly overpriced by today's standards.

Most of the newer micros have more impressive specifications, but lack the depth and breadth of software. Anyone buying one of these newer machines is gambling that it will gain popularity and hence convince software developers to generate programs for it.

The major trend with the new home computers is to provide more for your money. High quality keyboards, larger user memories (64 Kbytes or



more) and good graphics are now standard. The quality of the BASIC interpreter has been improved considerably in machines like the Commodore Plus/4, Commodore 16, Sinclair QL and the MSX micros. The Amstrad machine even includes a monochrome or colour monitor in its price.

Another interesting new trend is the provision of 'bundled', or free, software. The Sinclair QL is supplied with four such programs: a word processor, spreadsheet, database and business graphics package. The Commodore Plus/4 provides a similar range, although the programs are less sophisticated and really require a disk drive before they can be used effectively. Other micros concentrate on games. Four games are supplied with the Commodore 16, and even Sinclair has started supplying a six-pack of games with its ageing Spectrum.

Anyone buying a new micro should consider several other points. Some machines are more expandable than others, allowing disk drives, printers, modems and other peripherals to be used. Some computers will accept standard additions, while others will require 'own-brand' peripherals, which limits the user's choice. A good manual is essential — some machines are supplied with dreadful ones, which confuse more than they enlighten. The prospective buyer should also consider the type of software available for each machine — for example, the BBC Micro has a high proportion of educational software, while the Spectrum is a better bet for games.

Eight-Bit Impulse

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Shopping for computers should be just like shopping for clothes, but somehow the weight of technical information and the range of choice combine to make it more like a lucky dip. A cool matching of your needs to the machines' capabilities is an essential precursor to visiting the computer store; try to decide in advance what you're going to buy, and then let the 'feel' of the chosen machine be the last — not the first — deciding factor