

Home Computing WEEKLY

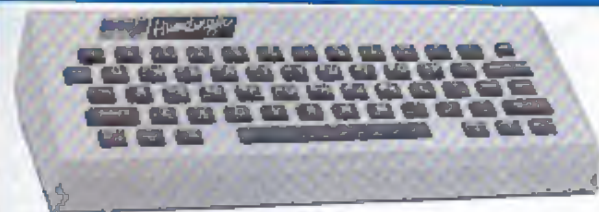
NEW

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Humdinger on the way

San Francisco

A computer was shown at the West Coast Computer Faire which, when released in Britain, could prove to be a serious rival for Sinclair's Spectrum.

The Humdinger is the brain-child of a company called Venture Micro, which was formed to design, produce and market the

computer. It will sell in America for 129.95 dollars although it had been dropped to just 99 dollars as a special introduction at the show.

The Humdinger is based around the same Z80 processor as the Spectrum and, apart from a smaller standard memory, it of-

Continued on page 5

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COURT MOVE TO KILL TAPE BUY-BACK SHOP

Software companies have acted to try to halt a program buy-back scheme — days after it started.

Quicksilver has served a writ and Imagine has demanded its tapes back from the Software Centre, trading as Buy 'n Try in London's Wigmore Street.

They are among 36 well-known software houses given as suppliers of hundreds of programs listed in four-page magazine advertisements.

Quicksilver's writ of summons alleges infringement of copyright or assisting or conspiring to help such infringement.

But Bill Cannings, Software Centre's managing director, said: "It's ludicrous to suggest that we are infringing copyright. Obviously we will be defending the action."

A letter from Imagine's solicitors asks for its cassettes to be returned in seven days and says: "We do not trade with such companies or firms which offer our tapes for hire or on a discount buy-back basis or resale to dealers who offer tapes similarly."

Mr Cannings agreed that he bought Imagine's products through another of his companies, Computer Aided Systems. However, he said: "I buy through my major company and sell through subsidiaries. This is what the big distributors do."

"It's not to deceive people, it is just more convenient for us."

Buy 'n Try officially opened for business 17 days ago — and the shop was packed.

A customer can buy a program at the usual retail price, use it for up to six months and then ex-

change it for 80 per cent off the price of another program.

The aim of the scheme is to operate mainly by post and phone, but Mr Cannings is offering dealerships.

Continued on page 3, column 1

INSIDE
West Coast
Faire report
Reviews of
software
for VIC-20,
Spectrum,
Video Genie,
BBC, ZX81
Programs
to type in
for: ZX81,
VIC-20,
Spectrum,
Atari, BBC
Articles on
ZX81
add-ons,
TI99/4A

Continued from Front Cover

fers a lot more in the basic unit than the Spectrum.

It comes with 4K of user RAM and 8K of ROM which contains the BASIC. Its keyboard is made up of the same grey rubber keys as the Spectrum but on the Humdinger they are each mounted on a click switch which gives the keyboard a better feel.

Part of the marketing strategy behind the Humdinger is to produce a vast array of peripherals to complement and enhance the basic system, at a very low cost.

These will include 16K and 64K RAM packs which will retail in the states for 39.95 dollars and 99 dollars respectively. The 16K RAM pack is also being offered with a battery backup for 49.95 dollars so, by using this, you will be able to store programs in memory after the computer has been turned off.

Other peripherals planned for the future include a speech recognition/speech synthesiser unit, a video expansion board to enhance the screen display to 80 by 24, making it compatible with CP/M, the industry standard operating system for business micros, and wordprocessing software, a disc controller for 5¼in and 8 in disc drives and a 16-bit 8088 co-processor unit.

On the graphics side the Humdinger has 12 graphic display modes and will display up to 256 by 192 pixel high resolution.

It has eight colours and a pre-defined graphic character set plus the ability to program user-defined characters. The sound takes the form of a four-voice music and sound synthesiser which ranges over five octaves.

One of the big-selling points of the Humdinger will be the plethora of interfaces which come fitted as standard to the computer.

These are a Centronics parallel printer port, a serial RS-232 for connection to modems and computer networks, a joystick port, a cartridge port and a memory expansion port.

The Humdinger certainly generated a lot of interest and excitement at the show. It remains to be seen how well it will be received in England.

Roger Pitkin, Venture Micro's president, hopes to be at the Personal Computer World show in September with the rest of the team and the Humdinger. You will be able to make up your own mind.



Roger Pitkin, Venture Micro's president, shows off his new Humdinger computer.

Read Chris Palmer's full show report on pages 7 and 9.

Venture Micro Inc, 10090 N. Blaney Avenue, Suite 6, Cupertino, California 95014, USA.

More want Commodore

More than 30,000 back orders have been clocked up for the new Commodore 64 — now being turned out at 5,000 a week in West Germany.

A spokesman said: "In a situation where demand far exceeds supply, it would be impossible to consider any price reduction on the part of the manufacturer."

By the end of the year, 300 people will be making VIC-20s and Commodore 64s at the company's new £20m factory in Corby, Northants.

Commodore Business Machines (UK), 675 Ajax Avenue, Trading Estate, Slough, Berks SL1 4BG

Let us know

If you are in the home computer business, please keep us in touch with what your company is doing. News items and review samples of your products — software and hardware — should be sent to: Paul Liptrot, Home Computing Weekly, 145 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0EE. Phone 01-437 1002.

Don't rush to replace your micro

Anyone who has been interested in micros for a few years must be pretty frustrated by now. No sooner has a machine been purchased than a "new generation" of computers comes onto the market.

High resolution, sound effects, colour graphics, extra memory — these are the attractions of the latest micros. The old PET and Tandy machines seem almost prehistoric by comparison with the latest computers. The new machines are half the price of the old ones, yet they seem to have twice their performance.

A survey published in the UK monthly The War Machine indicated that between half and two-thirds of readers owned more than one micro. Even allowing for a smattering of ex-ZX81 users many of those surveyed had augmented early personal machines such as the PET and TRS-80 with Ataris, Spectrums or BBC Micros.

To some extent this finding explains the extraordinary "growth" of the micro market. In fact the experienced microholic may be even more susceptible to the new marketing than the beginner. When many of the old stagers entered the hobby, micro marketing was a pretty rudimentary process. Nowadays the advertising has become much more persuasive (take a bow, Clive Sinclair) — but the product may not be as different as it seems.

After three years computing with an unreliable Apple II and a rather dull but practical TRS-80/Genie system, I decided the time had come for an upgrade. I came across a BBC Micro in a local TV shop, and the prospect of micros by retail was too much for me. I bought a Model B on the spot. (Oh, the joys of bachelor life!).

Within a few weeks I came to treat the BBC Micro specification as rather a cheat. I built a cassette lead for the computer (the BBC didn't bother to supply one) and then found that the tape interface was rather unreliable — worse, in fact, than on any of my previous machines. A new recorder did not cure the problem. Eventually I found out that there were two bugs in the BBC ROM.

Without wishing to seem overly critical of one machine, other features of the BBC computer were not as I'd been led to expect by the glossy advertisements. The provisional BBC Micro manual contained a detailed index — but roughly half the entries had the page number 0 next to them. Those parts of the manual hadn't been written.

To the maker's credit, free copies of the full manual were sent out to users after a few months. The new manual was an eye-opener.

These may sound like minor criticisms, but they are just a sample of the problems I encountered. They all add up to the fact that I'm typing this on my thrifty Video Genie (at least the keys don't bounce). I parted company with my much-vaunted BBC Micro a frustrating six months after I bought it.

The fact of the matter is that, however the makers may tell you, there is not much difference between one micro and the next.

This problem is not confined to BBC Micro users. As a member of four computer clubs I have seen the same disillusionment in those who "upgrade" with Spectrums, DAIs or Ataris. Work with a Colour Genie and a Spectrum has confirmed my impression.

The quantum jump comes between not having a computer and having one. Once you have passed this stage all of the "features" add up to little more than bugs by another name.

Simon Goodwin
Computer-aided design programmer

◆ What makes you pleased or annoyed about the micro scene, hardware or software? We welcome contributions for this column. Send them to: Paul Liptrot, Opinion, Home Computing Weekly, 145 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0EE. Please include your occupation and your interest in computing.