

Sunset Days For The VIC 20?

by Malcolm O'Brien

"The one to grow on". That's what the ads said. A lot of us believed it, too - maybe a million of us, or so. If you couldn't trust Captain Kirk, who could you trust? For many of us, it became "the one to grow tired of"; or "the one to grow out of". Only a very few of us decided that it was "the one to grow old with".

Those with long memories (about three years - a long time in the computer world) will perhaps remember that the VIC 20 came onto the market with a bang. Wonderful features, at a wonderful price. Real keys, not a flat membrane keyboard like the Sinclair or the Atari 400! Colour and hi-res graphics! Sound, a disk drive, game cartridges and a cheap modem! This computer had everything, and at a fraction of the price of an Apple II or Atari 800!

I always wanted an Atari 800, but couldn't afford one. A friend bought one, though. It cost him almost a thousand dollars. At least by then they were including the BASIC ROM with the machine, instead of selling it separately! About six months later, I bought a VIC 20: a steal at 250 dollars (second-hand, with no storage device). Another 100 dollars got me a Datasette, and I already had a black-and-white TV that I'd been using with my Sinclair ZX81.

I read the *Programmer's Reference Manual*, started buying *Compute!* (there was no *Gazette* at that point) and attended a TPUG VIC meeting (VIC meetings were bigger then - even when Jim Butterfield *wasn't* there). I learned Commodore BASIC and 6502 machine language. And today, although I compute on a daily basis, my VIC 20 sits ignored - forlorn and rejected. But why?

Grim reality set in. The hi-res graphics amounted to a sine wave at the upper left corner of the screen. The absence of graphic and sound commands in BASIC meant memorizing an array of five-digit numbers, along with the purposes of the various values that could be POKEd into them. The 3583 bytes were insufficient to accommodate much of a program in BASIC, unless you chained three of them together and didn't mind the wait while the Datasette loaded them in. The worst part, for me, was the 22-column screen. The kindest word I can think of to

describe the VIC 20 screen is "goofy". It drove me nuts! I wanted to continue computing, but I couldn't stand the thought of looking at that screen again. For a time, I went back to the Sinclair!

To be fair, I still love the keyboard. The VIC 20 does have the 6502, the VIC chip, the interface adapters; it can take extra RAM, can be interfaced to a hard drive or a BSR module, can be the brains of a robot; best of all, there are 80-column boards!

The problem is: everybody 'grew on' their VIC 20s in different ways. Maybe you've encountered the same problem that I heard about at that first VIC meeting. A man there had bought a motherboard, 8K cartridge and a 16K cartridge. When he put them all together, he only had 16K. His 8K occupied the same memory addresses as his 16K. Right away, as a new user, he had spent a significant sum of money on something that was useless to him.



If Commodore had offered a cartridge that added the full complement of RAM and extra columns on the screen, the VIC 20 would be alive today. But the code for the extra columns would have been located at \$A000, where everything else was located. That's why you can't use the SuperExpander and Programmer's Aid at the same time, even though you might have bought a motherboard just to do that very thing. Software developers couldn't be sure of the configuration of the machines, and so it was difficult, perhaps, to cater to the VIC 20 market.

Problems. Confusion. I used the terminal program that came with the 1650 Automodem. It runs on the unexpanded

VIC 20. Was I surprised when it ceased to run after I'd plugged in 16K! The machine language is loaded along with the BASIC, and loads into a different address when the 16K is in. The BASIC includes the statement SYS 4300, but the ML isn't there any more! The program

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should really PEEK the start of BASIC and add an offset. But it doesn't, so the hapless user has to unplug the cartridge, and load again.

It behooved the VIC 20 owner to know the basic machine very well and to eye the market very carefully before buying anything! This was hardly the 'user friendliness' that people were looking for when they bought the machine. Many owners made costly errors because they were ill-informed; moreover, this situation continues to this day. It is comforting to think that it now costs only 79 dollars to put yourself into this situation.

Somewhere, there is a VIC 20 owner who learned everything about the machine, made informed and prudent purchasing decisions in expanding his machine, and created for himself a viable, valuable and powerful computer system that he is using every day. And that user now sits ignored - forlorn and rejected.

But there may be light at the end of the tunnel (instead of a train). Something may happen to give new life to the VIC 20 and its user. My crystal ball is cloudy, but I perceive a good, cheap hardware modification coupled with software support from the usual sources (user groups and magazines). Some changes can have a dramatic effect. The implementation of OS/9 for the SuperPET is a case in point. As I typed the press release for TPUG's announcement of this development, I had the feeling that microcomputer history was being made. And I have no doubt that this will change the face of computing in the world of Commodore.

All that's needed to revive the VIC 20 is ideas. Maybe they will be your ideas. Give it some thought. In the meantime, remember: it's not how much you get, it's how little it costs. *Caveat emptor.* O