

Plus/4 and C-16: Disappointingly Mediocre

by Terry Traub

After reading Elizabeth Deal's article about the new Plus/4 and 16 computers in the November issue, I feel compelled to raise a few issues that she did not address. While the powerful Basic 3.5 implemented in both computers is admittedly an improvement over the VIC 20 and C-64, I see very little else to commend them.

To begin with, the C-16 is obviously not a serious contender in the home market: it is not expandable and has no port for a modem. As a result, it fails to 'replace' the VIC, which is after all an expandable and versatile machine. Most people who buy low-end computers take comfort in the knowledge that their computers can grow with them. A VIC owner, when asked that dread question, "So, you got a computer? What're you gonna do with it?" can confidently reply: "Telecommunicate. Expand the memory and word process."

Unfortunately, the marketing 'experts' at Commodore failed to understand that the reason the VIC was so successful is that once the home user has worked through the 'toy/learning tool' phase of computing, he or she is ready for more sophisticated applications requiring a versatile machine. I suspect that there are

going to be an awful lot of dusty C-16's lying around in closets six months after Christmas.

The Plus/4, on the other hand, is touted by Commodore as a 'productivity machine', implying that it is somehow more useful than the C-64 or the Atari 800XL, the other logical choices in its price range. Since the 'productivity' of any computer must inevitably be measured by its software, the critical spotlight is eventually brought to bear on the bundled software that comes with the Plus/4. The word processor is the most important non-recreational software used in the home, but the one that comes with the Plus/4 is disappointing even as inexpensive word processors go. Only 37 columns per line are visible, and you can only get full (77 character) lines by horizontal scrolling. I hate horizontal scrolling; I like to see what I'm writing, not 'seek' it. Horizontal scrolling is the kind of drudgery that should have disappeared with the invention of cars and washing machines. The Plus/4's small spreadsheet is inadequate for all but the most rudimentary uses, such as graphing one's ice-cream consumption over a three month period. The database looks okay, but on balance I would say that those who truly wish to use their computers as 'pro-

ductivity' machines would be well advised to get better software. Again, Commodore's mistake is in failing to understand that most people will quickly outgrow the built-in software.

As for the Plus/4 as a programming computer, its main innovation, aside from the built-in machine language monitor and the nice Basic, is the bank-switching method which provides about 60K of Basic workspace. That's all very well, but the longest program I have in Basic is about 23K, and that's loooooong; it takes up ninety blocks of disk space, or ten minutes on cassette. Those who write programs in Basic longer than that might benefit from the Plus/4, certainly; for the rest of us there is no particular advantage. I need hardly mention the loss of the 64's sprite graphics and excellent three voice synthesizer, replaced in the Plus/4 and 16 alike by a paltry two voice tone generator.

I see the Plus/4 as an insult and a disappointment, as well as a major marketing error. One would hope that Commodore will soon come to their senses and put out a '64/Plus' with such selling features as 128K of memory, 80 column display option, a better disk drive, and most importantly, complete compatibility with C-64 software and hardware.