Top Tapes From Nashville

VIdeo

The # 1 Magazine of Home Video

A VCR That Doesn't Record
Super Simple Video

Rental Runaround
What's Wrong With Your Video Store

Grey Market Gamble
Is The Bargain Worth The Risk?

Supra

Berger-Braithwaite Video Tests
**Kodak 8mm Modular Video System
Canovision 8 Camcorder
Supra Videocassette Player
Canon VHS Hi-Fi VCR**

Contents

90   **96**   **100**
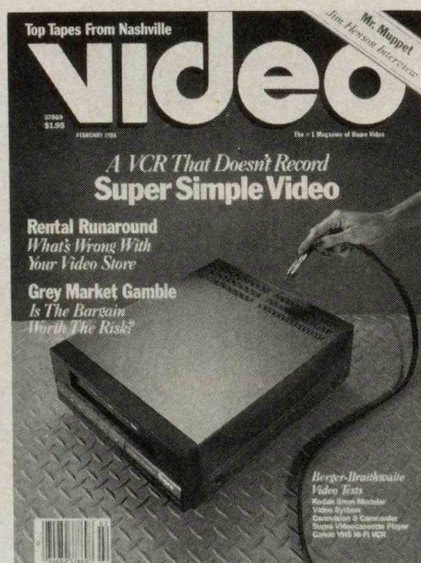
About the Cover. Is the videocassette
player the ultimate in simplicity
—or not worth the bother?
Cover photo by Dennis Kitchen.

Random Access

Personal Computers, News, and Games

Ka-Ching, Ka-Ching

Programmer Bill Budge attracted attention several years ago with a computer game that lets pinball aficionados design and play their own silver-ball masterpieces. His *Pinball Construction Set* borrowed heavily from Apple's Lisa technology. Players pick up a picture of a game part with an onscreen hand, place it on a playing field, and see what happens when the image of a rolling steel ball hits it.

Of course, the program went on to become an early classic, and, in the meantime, personal computing caught up with the idea of icons and grabbers when the Macintosh was introduced. Now Budge is back with a version of *Pinball Construction* for the Mac (Electronic Arts, $34.95).

This time, however, Budge has gone "retro" in his approach. He has eschewed the electronic noises of the first version for the digitized sounds of a mechanical pinball machine. When a ball hits a bumper, target, kicker or any of the parts in the new *Pinball Construction Set*, the Macintosh responds by playing back a precise and staggeringly realistic recording of the actual sound. (Because of the immense amount of memory required for this trick, this only works on the "fat" or 512K Mac.) A total of eight sounds—bells, relays, the ball rolling on the table, etc.—are included, not counting the overture of the coin being dropped into a slot and the "chicka-chicka-chicka" of the machine tallying up a credit. What beautiful old music.

As for the game itself, little has changed, save some fancy new graphics. What was wrong with the old *Pinball Construction Set*—the lack of a way to give the machine a gentle body check and its inability to pay off with either extra balls or free games—is still wrong here. This new version, too, seems sluggish in the flipper department. For a much more accurate, although inflexible, pinball program, see Bruce Artwick's magnificent *Night Flight.* It is so well done and detailed that it is frightening to think anyone ever understood pinball so well.

Yet *Pinball Construction Set*'s new auditory enhancement makes it especially endearing to those who appreciate classic pinball. The ironic part is that this new computer version celebrates machines long gone. Try finding the old mechanical tables amidst the proliferation of talking machines, video hybrids, and bizarre stylistic mutations. Except for a few that have been preserved in suburban basement rec rooms and dingy old-timers' pubs, they exist only in our fond memories and in the digital dream world of this cybernetic simulation.

—Timothy Onosko

Akio Matsuyoshi

Funky, Funny And Floppy

Pop music has weathered the computer onslaught with aplomb. Some performers try to surround themselves with every imaginable synthesizer. That MIDI (for Musical Instrument Digital Interface) is the new musical mode hasn't escaped the notice of lyricists either. Trendy songwriters may not compose lines on word processors, but they're sending out a digital message to the computer crowd.

Kraftwerk, the German electro-band known mostly for the disco hit "Trans-Europe Express," christened the '80s with *Computer-World,* an album of minimalist, high-tech ditties. "I program my home computer/Bring myself into the future," one entry offers. "I'm the operator of my pocket calculator/By pressing down the special key it plays a little mel-o-dee," notes another. Funk guru George Clinton plays on *Computer Games,* an album on which he asks the inevitable question, "May I invade your space?"

More recently, the British group Level 42 sang about a "Micro-kid with megathoughts," who "speaks digitalk" and generates "square waves while computing new games." In "Floppy Disk," the title track from saxophonist Kirk Whalum's latest record, we're instructed, "Never touch a floppy disk/Never touch it with a fingertip." Could this be the new wave in documentation?

Singer/songwriter Randy Goodrum (who wrote "You Needed Me" for Anne Murray and "Who's Holding Don-

Cameron Eagle
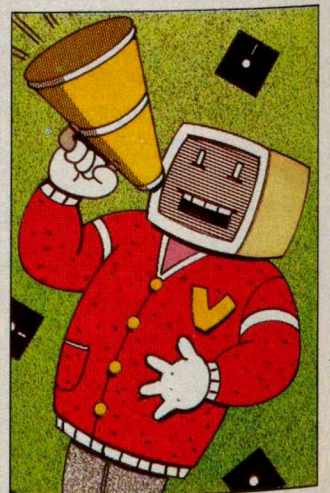
Say What?

Let's face it: voice synthesis on computers has been a bore. Robot-speak is no longer chic. Most talking programs sound like grinding gears. Sad to say, Hearsay, a new add-on product that "lets your home computer speak and obey for under $100" is not quite the great leap forward we're waiting for. Welwyn Currah, the company that brought us Voice Messenger, Easy Speech, and Intelligent Talking Terminal (all for the Commodore 64), has updated Voice Messenger, which converts the keyboard into a talking type writer.

With Hearsay you can tell the computer where to go without laying a finger on a key. Hearsay plugs into the C-64 cartridge port (it's also available for the C-128 and Apple II series) and, thanks to a hidden microphone, lets you use software to train the computer to recognize your voice by talking to it—from as far as 12 feet away.

What you hear is surprising—a voice that sounds more like a public address speaker than a robot, but which I found no less discomforting. Through a technology called linear predictive coding analysis, speech is digitized until it sounds almost human. Hearsay can store only about 500 words in 64K RAM. But it can respond vocally to a question.

Hearsay is an improvement over previous efforts at compuspeak. But it's also evidence that voice synthesis and speech recognition for microcomputers still have a long way to go.

—Steve Bloom

na Now?" for DeBarge) has penned "Software," which he describes as "an ode to the computer." Actually, it's a cute metaphor for sex. Warbles Goodrum, "When I look in her directions quite suddenly I'm scared/Because her technical perfection is displayed beyond compare/If we could interface for a while in some file inside my software." Then the chorus: "We're so compatible/We could write the manual/She's so expandable." This guy sure knows how to RAM a point home. —Steve Bloom
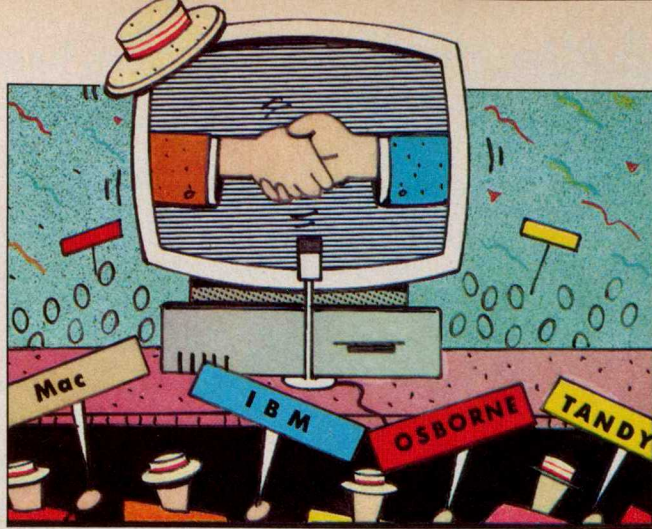
Hacker Heaven

When the underground geniuses who pioneered the home computer gathered for a convention last year they made a video documentary that jumps around its subject like a programmer debugging microcode.

Hackers tries to dispell the myth of self-educated computer jocks as "reclusive nerds and social misfits." But it only confirms our suspicions when Steve Wozniak, designer of the Apple IIe, describes hackers as outside the mainstream. "They generally don't have girlfriends. The computer is it and only it," Wozniak says.

This tight fraternity has an initiation tougher than the most exclusive Cambridge clubs. The "all-nighters" spent with mainframes at Stanford University and MIT required an obsessive curiosity and passion that went well beyond monetary goals.

The hackers did more at their conference than reminisce and play computer games. Heated debates arose over copy protection. The hacker ethic of perfection in programming pitted itself against the dream of making source code available for people to fiddle with.

The video can also be viewed as a glimpse of an almost extinct species. Wozniak notes that there are too many so-called hackers now entering the computer business. As a sign of their impending extinction, he points out that more money has been lost than made by personal computer companies.

Hackers will be broadcast on public television later this year. The half-hour tape is available in both VHS and Beta from FABCO (Box 410125, San Francisco, CA 94141) for $49.95.

—Ben Templin

A Kick For the Mac

Personal computers were supposed to clean up desks by letting you consolidate your work on a disk. In reality, having a computer on your desk just means that the mess is pushed off to one side, in a sort of heaping mound that seems to have a life of its own.

One solution is *Sidekick*, a desktop management program for the Macintosh (Borland, $84.95). *Sidekick* lets you sweep your desk clean of all those 'things-I-gotta-do' notes even when you're working with another program, like *MacWrite* or *MacPaint*.

The most useful *Sidekick* accessories are Phone Log, CalendarBook, Notepad+, Quiksheet, and MacTerm.

Grafting one or more of *Sidekick*'s nine desk accessories onto another disk is easy using the installer program. But you won't get the versatility you would have if you used the main program. Together the *Sidekick* desk accessories consume about 50K of memory. If you don't have enough space, you'll have to take out some of the Mac's original accessories or some fonts you don't need.

Sidekick is also available for the IBM PC, but it's a completely different version than the one for the Mac. The Macintosh version isn't a conversion. Quite frankly, it's better. —Gordon McComb

BEST SELLERS/HOME

BEST SELLERS/RECREATION

LEGEND: AP = Apple, APc = Apple IIc, APe = Apple IIe, AT = Atari, C64 = Commodore 64, COM = Commodore Pet/CBM, CP/M = 5¼" and 8" formats, DEC = DEC Rainbow, DG = Data General, EPS = Epson QX-10, IBM = IBM-PC, MAC = Apple Macintosh, PCjr = IBM PCjr, TIP = Texas Instruments Professional, TRS = TRS-80, VIC = Commodore Vic-20, VTR = Victor 9000, WNG = Wang Personal Computer, ZEN = Zenith 100.
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