

JX software 'serious'

By Richard Gorham

To coincide with the recent unveiling of their new JX computer, IBM NZ has also released a range of software specifically for use with the machine.

The quantity, and probably more importantly, quality of the software announced is proof of the seriousness with which IBM intends to market the machine.

Each of the more than 100 packages is presented in a large plastic box similar to an overgrown audio cassette jacket, and shrink-wrap sealed for perfect "freshness".

The package will typically contain one or more of the JX's sensible 3.5 inch diskettes encoded with the software, together with comprehensive documentation in paperback-bound A5 format.

Over 95 percent of the packages will run on the standard 128k single 3.5 inch drive JX. The exceptions require either more memory, usually 256k (although one package does require 384k), or extra peripherals specific to the application (such as a host PC-XT in the case of the cluster program).

The applications covered range from the surprisingly comprehensive education software to the inevitable spreadsheet, work-processor, and other business programs, through the program development area (with no less than seven languages supported), and into the domestic "entertainment" area.

Co-operative

Most of the packages are IBM-sourced with nine being marketed in conjunction with the original software company.

Examples of this co-operative approach are the release of Multiplan on diskette, and the stated "imminent" release of Lotus 1-2-3 on JX ROM cartridge.

A large quantity of the software is aimed at the educational market, with a variety of primary, intermediate and senior levels being addressed.

The JX machine provided for review last month was delivered with five educational packages, and four packages aimed at the general business and domestic areas.

The first of the educational programs was "Picture Play" — a word and memory development program aimed at the 3 to 6 year age range.

My two-year-old daughter and I found this to be an amusing and relatively challenging application, and it was run several times in succession before the novelty began to wear off (I don't know if

it's significant, but she tired of it before I did!)

The program allows the participant(s) to either match a word to a range of symbols, match a symbol to a range of like-symbols (eg a picture of a hammer with a picture of a screwdriver), or play a game of matching a number of hidden symbols with other hidden symbols — each turn revealing a symbol then hiding it again in the same manner as the age old "battleship" game.

Rewards

Correct replies are greeted with electronic chirps, much to the glee of the younger viewers. Completing each set of questions results in an amusing graphics interlude (even greater glee!)

There are six different quizzes to try. Each of the quizzes' 12 questions are randomly picked from a pool of 30 possible ones so the same quiz can be run more than once in succession without losing too much audience attention.

The only slightly distracting aspect is the use of a few symbols (for example a street-side fire-hydrant) that are glaringly specific to the USA. I'm sure that the programmer(s) could have used more universal symbols without sacrificing any of the value of such icons.

From the technical point of view I can say that the program has been well thought out, with a pleasing balance of simple commands and sophisticated graphics.

Whilst I am not qualified to make an assessment of the educational value of such a product I am informed by my local primary-school teacher (i.e. spouse) that it would be fairly useful in either a group classroom situation or on an individual pupil basis — providing of course that the classroom in question had access to the necessary JXs (said in a tone of some scepticism, I must report).

I would give the package 8 out of 10 for general ease of use, quality of programming and value for money.

Scientific

The other four educational packages supplied comprise the "Earth Science Series", designed to be used by high-school or college level students in either group or self-study science/geography environments.

The objectives of the series are to give the student an insight into the processes at work in the physical environment, and identify how these processes affect

people and in turn how people change the environment.

The general format of each of the programs is to describe a particular concept by means of screens combining text, diagrams, and at times moving graphics (i.e. clouds moving from the oceans across the land and raining).

Key concepts and words are reinforced by short quizzes interspersed throughout the course of the program, together with a comprehensive test after the summary.

I skimmed through two of the four programs and found them stimulating enough to maintain interest without any difficulty. I also did fairly well in the tests, which may or may not indicate that the material was well presented.

Usefulness

I would rate the programs as being technically very well presented, making good use of the relatively limited graphics facilities available together with well timed "refresher" quizzes.

However, I do feel that real usefulness of the programs would be very much a question of integrating them into other course material to extract the full potential — perhaps courses would have to be established around the programs?

This does raise a question in my mind, as to the suitability of overseas educational software to the local educational curriculum — especially if teachers are expected to devise all the support material themselves.

Nevertheless, the programs themselves would seem to achieve what they set out to do in an effective and stimulating way.

The other supplied packages were four programs from the "Assistant" series of home and small business applications software. This series, nine packages in total, is an integrated set of straight-forward programs designed to address the usual PC applications of word processing, spreadsheeting, simple database storage and retrieval, graphing, and communications.

All the programs are available for both PC senior and JX machines. To give a comprehensive review of each of the packages in this small space would not be realistic. Each would warrant a column to itself.

Instead, I will give a brief overview of their function and make comment on their general suitability for their intended market (typically this would be first-time PC users, small businesses, or experi-

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enced users requiring only infrequent access to PC applications software).

Assistants

The four programs evaluated were: Filing Assistant (a simple data storage and retrieval package), Reporting Assistant (companion to Filing Assistant, providing hardcopy reports from the stored data), Graphing Assistant (giving business graphics such as bar-charts, and line graphs), and Writing Assistant (a simple word-processing program).

Each of the programs follows a similar format, being menu-driven, with options selected by entering the appropriate choice by means of an option number, and with a consistent screen layout and sequence of operation.

There are no "windows", fancy graphics, or provision for electric rodents. In short, no frills.

This style of application design, simple as it is, goes somewhat against the current trends in PC application software. Most of the recent PC packages released seem to be trying to fit more and more features into what are basically simple applications, presumably as a one-up-man-ship, window dressing attempt to outsell their competitors.

No wonder then that the average first-time PC purchaser/user can become rather bewildered when it comes to buying software. It can be very difficult to separate essential from non-essential ingredients in a software package without in-depth experience of utilising such products.

One statistic may highlight my concern more dramatically. Two years ago I did a mini-survey of word-processing packages available for the IBM PC and clones. The staggering thing was that there were 80 different packages available on the NZ market alone (I wonder how many now?). How on earth should you choose one?

Bare essentials

This is where the Assistant series' "bare-essentials-only" approach could score well in the market.

My experience of assisting first-time users is that they want simple applications packages which may be limited in facilities but which can be used without a long training and familiarisation period. If the package is going to be used infrequently then this will also be a factor.

One other point is that the easier it is for users to become totally familiar with a package then the more confident they will be when it comes to solving those awkward real-life type problems that never seem to be examples in the training manual.

With complex packages the user may well give up trying to solve this type of problem — the solution may take more time to research and craft than resorting to manual methods, and given that choice most users will opt for the method they feel most comfortable with.

Word-processor

Writing Assistant is a very simple word-processing package giving full-screen editing of text files.

All of the text formatting commands are either menu-driven or by extensive on-screen prompting.

The program is of the "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" variety. If you tell the program to underline characters, it will show them underlined on the screen (as well as in printout), if you emphasize characters then they will be highlighted on screen.

This is in contrast to some other well known word processing packages, where formatting commands have to be embedded in the text for subsequent printing operations to unscramble.

In line with the integrated approach of the rest of the Assistant series, Writing Assistant provides some powerful facilities for interchanging data with the other packages.

Form letters can easily be produced using Filing Assistant files. For example the same letter could be produced for all the names and addresses in a file disk, substituting the correct name and address in the appropriate places on the letter.

The package even has a rather handy facility for labelling envelopes (something I still have problems doing with my

old favourite — Wordstar).

Files

Filing Assistant (as its name suggests) allows the user to set up simple files of data for subsequent retrieval or update.

The method of defining the file to be stored is by creating an input/output "form" on screen by simply typing in a field-name (terminated by a colon) anywhere on the screen.

Data can then be entered into the file by calling up the "form" in insert mode, and typing in the relevant field data.

Various records in the file can be retrieved by means of field selection criteria. For example, any record having a name-field containing "Smith" could be retrieved for viewing or printing.

Selection criteria can be quite complex if desired, with combinations of fields being selected. Exclusion of certain records can also be achieved.

The program teams up with all the other Assistant programs to provide the means of storing data for use in Graphing Assistant, Writing Assistant, or Reporting Assistant.

Report sort

Reporting Assistant is the natural companion (sic) to Filing Assistant in that it provides the means of producing reasonably complex hard-copy reports with simple formatting commands.

Reports can be sorted on up to four different key-fields, with automatic sub-totalling and grand-totalling on change of key-fields.

Edit masks can be provided for fields to be printed (i.e. to insert decimal points, dollar signs etc).

Graphing Assistant allows the user to produce on-screen or printed graphs of data input directly through the keyboard or via Filing Assistant files previously established. Data can also be utilised from some other (non-Assistant) packages.

Graphs can be produced in either line or bar format. Pie-charts cannot be produced, but I can't say I miss them.

Graphs can be stored on disk for subsequent incorporation into Writing Assistant document files, thus a report on sales this year might include a bar chart of the sales by month.

All in all I found the Assistant programs to be straight-forward and easy to use.

Limitations in each of the programs may cause some of the more experienced users to search for more sophisticated packages to meet their needs, but they would probably be surprised at what an enterprising "novice" could achieve with the facilities provided here.