The Commodore VIC 20 Microcomputer:
A Low-Cost, High-Performance Consumer Computer

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"Why haven't you bought a personal computer yet?" This question will elicit varying responses from people interested in buying one. However, most of them fit into two categories: "They're still too expensive," or "The ones I can afford are not a good long-range investment." There are some good general-purpose microcomputers around, but they're in the $1000 price range. And some computers cost as little as $200; that's certainly the right price, but you know you're sacrificing *something* (quality of materials, expandability, etc) to get such a low price.

The Commodore VIC 20 microcomputer may change all this. It is well constructed, has color, sound, and graphics, and is easy to use. It comes with everything needed to use it (except an ordinary color television set), includes a well-written instruction manual, and is supported by a line of optional extensions, peripherals, and documentation (see figure 1). Looking at a picture of the version selling in Japan (photo 1) might cause you to think $600 would be a fair price. It is, compared to the cost of other units. But it does not cost $600—the VIC 20 retails for $299.95.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Ramon Zamora, David Cole, and the rest of the Avalanche Inc staff for their assistance during the writing of this article.

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Physical Characteristics

The VIC (which stands for Video Interface Computer) is a small unit, about the size of the main (keyboard) component of the Radio Shack TRS-80 Model I. It measures 40.3 by 20.4 by 7.2 cm (15.9 by 8 by 2.8 inches) and is small enough to easily fit on a work desk or a shelf. In fact, it is small enough to fit into a suitcase (along with its external power supply and RF (radio-frequency) modulator), making it usable as a portable personal computer.

The first thing I noticed about the VIC was its keyboard. It is the equal of any personal-computer keyboard in both appearance and performance. This is a remarkable accomplishment, almost unbelievable considering the price of the entire unit. Three of its closest competitors, the Atari 400, the Radio Shack TRS-80 Color Computer, and the Sinclair ZX80, have keyboards that are less than perfect as a result of cost cutting. In this respect, the Commodore VIC 20 stands clearly ahead of its competition.

Photo 2a shows the rear panel of the VIC 20. The long slot on the left is used to plug in memory cartridges, program cartridges, or a VIC Master Control Panel, which allows up to four cartridges to be plugged in. Immediately to the right of the cartridge slot is the TV output socket. The signal from this plug goes directly to a video monitor or through the RF modulator and a TV switch box to a standard television set. (The necessary cable, RF modulator, and switch box are supplied with the VIC.)

The middle (round) connector on the rear panel is a serial interface that drives a single 5-inch floppy disk and a printer. Up to five peripheral devices can be daisy-chained through each other to this connector. The next slot to the right (the short rectangular

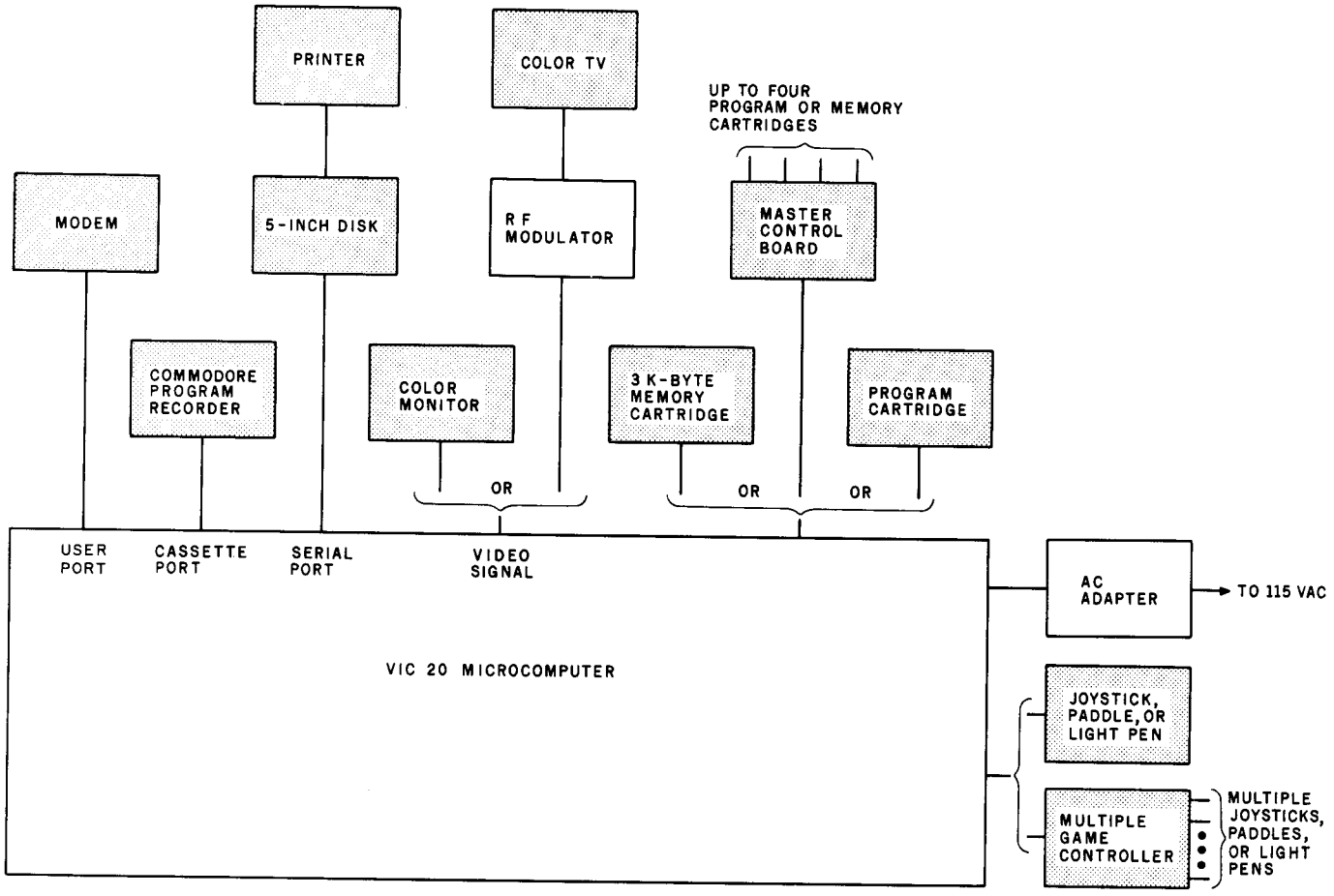


Figure 1: *A block diagram of the Commodore VIC 20 system (shaded components are available at extra cost).*

slot) goes to the VIC cassette recorder (which is available separately). The rightmost slot contains a "user port" that can be connected to a printer, a modem, or one of several other peripheral devices. With an optional RS-232C adapter card, this port can also be used with RS-232C devices.

The left-side panel (see photo 2b) contains (from left to right) a game port, a rocker-type on/off switch, and a socket to receive power from the VIC power supply. The game port, according to Commodore, can accept a joystick, a light pen, a game paddle, or a VIC Multiple Game Controller (which allows several game devices to be connected to the VIC).

When the VIC 20 is turned on, the video display (a color television tuned to channel 3 or 4) stays dark for about three seconds, then shows the display given in photo 3. The VIC display has 23 lines of 22 characters or graphics symbols per line, with cyan (greenish blue) letters on a white background. The active display area in the VIC is delineated by a border of a different color (in photo 3, a cyan border). The border crisply marks the working area of the VIC. For me, it has the psychological effect of making the screen area seem bigger; this is important, since the VIC displays fewer characters per line than any of its competitors.

Photo 1: *The Commodore VIC 20 microcomputer. This unit, a final prototype based on the Japanese version of the VIC microcomputer, differs from the American model only in the model number.*

VIC Graphics

The VIC 20 graphics character set is virtually identical to that of its predecessors, the Commodore PET and CBM (Commodore Business

Machine). The standard VIC can display over sixty graphics symbols, shown on the front faces of most of the keys (see photo 1). Since these symbols are directly available from the keyboard and can be stored in string variables and displayed by PRINT statements, it is easy for even the inexperienced BASIC user to combine these symbols into larger pictures. This character-size building-block approach is used by Atari, Commodore, Ohio Scientific, and Sinclair. It is a good way to generate graphics that are easy to understand and use without having to design a separate graphics mode. Such graphics are better than simply being able to turn on and off coarse graphics blocks (as in the TRS-80 Models I and III and the Color Computer) because character-oriented graphics allow more detailed images (although, unlike the graphics-blocks system, character graphics do not allow full control of the image).

All the graphics characters in the VIC are accessible directly from the keyboard. For characters shown on the fronts of key caps, pressing either shift key or the Commodore key (the key in the lower left corner of the keyboard) causes one of these characters to be displayed. Pressing the Commodore key with a given key causes the character on the left half of the front face to be displayed; pressing either shift key with a given key causes the character on the right half to be displayed.

All the graphics characters in the VIC are accessible directly from the keyboard.

Both uppercase and lowercase characters can be displayed, but you lose access to all the characters on the right half of the key front faces. Toggling between this uppercase/lowercase/graphics mode and the default uppercase/graphics mode is done by pressing the shift key, holding it down, pressing the Commodore key, and releasing both keys. The graphics characters on the left half of the key front faces are still available with lowercase letters. Commodore grouped what it believes are the most useful graphics characters (ones that might be used with lowercase letters in business applications) on the left half of the key front faces.

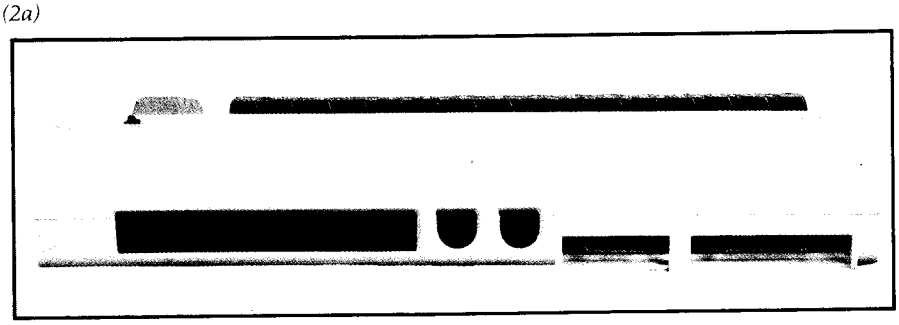
Finally, the number of graphics characters that can be displayed is doubled because *any* character can be displayed as is or in reverse (see photo 3). This can be done immediately or during program execution. Pressing the RVS ON key (the CTRL key plus the 9 key simultaneously) causes all displayed characters to appear in reverse on the screen. (If you are programming and hit the RVS ON key while defining a character string, a reverse R will appear and subsequent keystrokes will not be reversed. However, when you print that string, the reverse R will not appear but will cause all subsequent characters to be displayed in reverse.) Pressing the RVS OFF key (CTRL plus the 0 key) causes all displayed characters to appear unreversed on the screen. (When included in a character string, the RVS OFF key causes all subsequent characters to be displayed normally; its symbol appears in the character string as a reverse underline.)

VIC Color

To quote an adage from photography, "If you can't make it good, make it red." There is an element of truth in that—color *does* make things more exciting, and it's always one of the most striking features of a microcomputer video display. The VIC has an impressive color display due largely to the complete control you have over the placement and combination of colors.

The VIC allows you to display normal and reversed characters (including all graphics symbols) in eight colors: black, white, red, cyan, purple, green, dark blue, and yellow. The color of the flashing cursor and all subsequent characters displayed on the video screen is set by simultaneously pressing the CTRL key and the appropriate color key (one of the keys numbered 1 through 8). As described for the RVS ON and

(2a)



(2b)

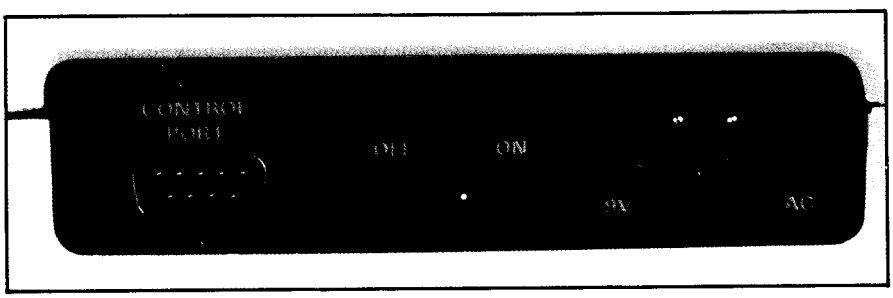


Photo 2: *Connections to the VIC 20 microcomputer. Photo 2a shows the rear panel of the VIC; from left to right are a slot for program cartridges and connections to a television or video monitor, a floppy disk, a Commodore cassette recorder, and a printer or other peripherals. Photo 2b shows a game device port, an ON/OFF rocker switch, and a connector for an external power supply.*

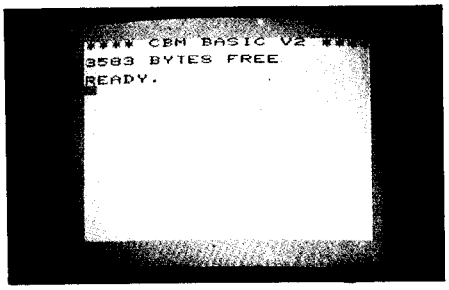


Photo 3: *The VIC 20 video display immediately after being turned on.*

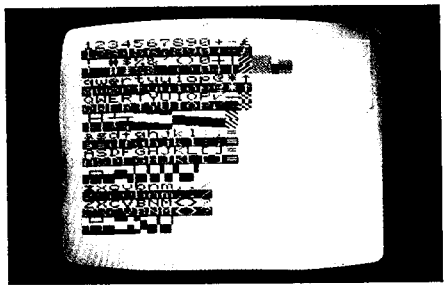


Photo 4: *The character set of the VIC 20. Any character can be displayed in reverse.*

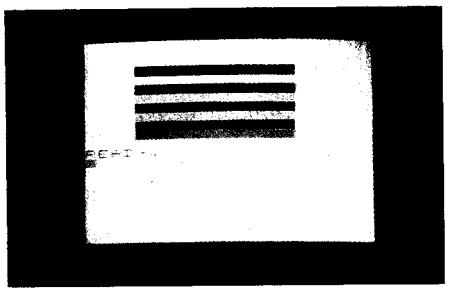


Photo 5: *The eight character colors available on the VIC 20. All characters can be displayed in any of these colors.*

RVS OFF keys, pressing a color key within a character string causes a reverse character to be placed in the string. This tells the VIC not to immediately change the display color, but to change it when that string is printed. Photo 5 shows the eight colors available, each of which is displayed by printing the corresponding color control character followed by a line of reverse spaces (which appear as solid squares of the current color). The computer displays *all* ouput in the current color. In photo 5, since the last color used was yellow, the VIC responds with its end-of-program message in yellow.

The VIC also allows you to change the background color of the working area in the center and the border that surrounds it. Choose from sixteen background colors and eight border colors (ie: 128 background/border combinations). The two are changed by executing (either directly or from a program) the statement:

POKE 36879,X

where X is a value as given in table 1. The background colors can be any of the eight character colors or orange, light orange, pink, light cyan, light purple, light green, light blue, or light yellow. The border colors can be any of the eight character colors.

An unusual thing about the VIC is that the background color can change independently of the character color (other color microcomputers can't do this). Combined with the color and reverse keys, this allows a tremendous amount of control over the video display. Photos 6a and 6b show a run of a program differing only in the value poked to memory location 36,879. Photo 6a shows a light green background and a cyan border; this was accomplished by poking the value 219 to that location. Photo 6b shows a light cyan background and a red border; this was accomplished by poking the value 186 to that location.

Background	Border							
	Black	White	Red	Cyan	Purple	Green	Blue	Yellow
Black	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
White	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Red	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47
Cyan	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63
Purple	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79
Green	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
Blue	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111
Yellow	120	121	122	123	124	125	126	127
Orange	136	137	138	139	140	141	142	143
Light orange	152	153	154	155	156	157	158	159
Pink	168	169	170	171	172	173	174	175
Light cyan	184	185	186	187	188	189	190	191
Light purple	200	201	202	203	204	205	206	207
Light green	216	217	218	219	220	221	222	223
Light blue	232	233	234	235	236	237	238	239
Light yellow	248	249	250	251	252	253	254	255

Table 1: *Background and border color combinations in the VIC 20 microcomputer. Poking decimal location 36,879 with the values given in this table gives a video display with the colors shown.*

In addition, notice the two sets of angle brackets on each line. The first set contains an X symbol, a space, and a small square. The second set contains the *reverse* of each of these characters. Notice the role of the background and character colors in these reversed and nonreversed characters. If the background color were changed with those characters on the screen, the characters would assume the new background color but retain the old character color.

Photo 7 contains a listing of the program that produced photo 6b. Several control characters appear in this listing as seemingly arbitrary reverse characters. These are screen-manipulation characters stored for later use because they appear within a character string; if a quote mark had not been previously typed on the same line, the character would have been executed immediately and would not have appeared on the screen. The reverse heart in line 100 is the VIC symbol to clear the screen and put the cursor in the upper left corner. The reverse R and reverse underline in line 110 correspond to the RVS ON and RVS OFF keys, respectively. They cause the three characters between them to be displayed in reverse. The reverse characters in lines 120 through 180 are the result of pressing the corresponding color keys (CTRL plus the keys 1 through 8, respectively). They cause all printed characters to be displayed in the given color, as shown in photo 6b.

The VIC video display is memory-mapped (ie: the contents of the screen are determined by the contents of a given range of memory locations inside the VIC). Because of this, the

screen can be directly manipulated by poking values into certain memory locations. Memory locations 7680 through 8185 (decimal) contain the code for a given character; memory locations 38,400 through 38,905 contain the code for the *color* of the respective character. Locations 7600 and 38,400 determine the character in the upper left corner. Locations 7601 and 38,401 determine the character to its right, and so on down to the character in the lower right corner.

VIC Sound and BASIC

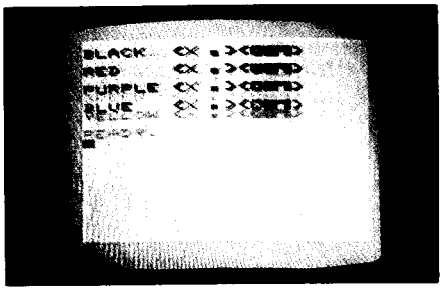
The VIC 20 can produce three independent "voices" of music and one voice of noise through the speaker of the attached television set. Each voice, covering a three-octave range, covers a different part of the audio spectrum. The voices are labeled "tenor," "alto," and "soprano"; they are activated by poking a number between 128 and 254 into locations 36,874 through 36,876. The noise generator is similarly activated at location 36,877, and an overall volume control (which takes values between 0 and 15) is located at 36,878. Table 2 lists important memory locations in the VIC 20. Table 3 lists the values to be poked into the music-voice locations to give a certain musical pitch within the three-octave range of that voice.

VIC BASIC is a version of Microsoft BASIC modified by Commodore. It is a full-blown BASIC with the features found on most microcomputers, allowing the VIC to accept other BASIC programs with little or no modification. A list of BASIC keywords accepted by the VIC is given in table 4. The keywords listed have the standard definitions given by Microsoft BASIC.

The VIC Product Line

Although prices and availability of VIC peripheral devices were not

(6a)



(6b)

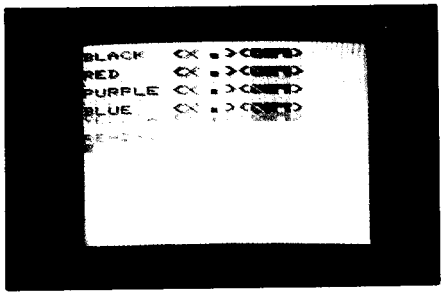


Photo 6: *Variations in character, background, and border colors on the VIC 20. Photos 6a and 6b differ only in the value stored in location 32,879, which determines the background color (from sixteen choices) and the border color (from eight choices).*

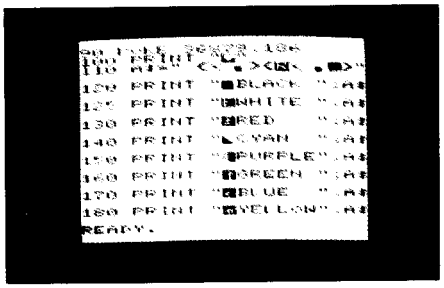


Photo 7: *A VIC BASIC program utilizing color, graphics, and reverse video. This program produces the video display shown in photo 6b. The reverse character before each color word in the PRINT statements is a control character determining the color of everything displayed after it. See the text for details.*

Memory Location (in Decimal)	Use
7680 to 8185	contains character contents of VIC video display; characters are mapped by row, with location 7680 corresponding to the upper left corner of the display
36,874	corresponds to tenor music "voice"; should contain either 0 (for silence) or 128 through 254 (for note; see table 3)
36,875	corresponds to alto music "voice"
36,876	corresponds to soprano music "voice"
36,877	corresponds to a noise-producing "voice"; accepts values of 0 and 128 through 254; higher values give higher-pitched white-noise sounds
36,878	volume control for all music and noise "voices"; effective values are 0 through 15
36,879	control byte for background and border colors; see table 1
38,400 to 38,905	contains character color contents of VIC video display; mapped to video display in the same way as the character contents (see above)

Table 2: *Some important memory locations in the VIC 20 microcomputer.*

Note	Value	Note	Value
C	135	G	215
C#	143	G#	217
D	147	A	219
D#	151	A#	221
E	159	B	223
F	163	C	225
F#	167	C#	227
G	175	D	228
G#	179	D#	229
A	183	E	231
A#	187	F	232
B	191	F#	233
C	195	G	235
C#	199	G#	236
D	201	A	237
D#	203	A#	238
E	207	B	239
F	209	C	240
F#	212	C#	241

Table 3: *Values used in the generation of music on the VIC 20 microcomputer. On the VIC, these values are stored in memory locations 36,874 through 36,876 to generate the appropriate note within the three-octave range of a given music voice.*

definite at press time, Commodore has announced an extensive line of products to be "introduced during and throughout 1981." (By the time you read this, Commodore expects to have the VIC computer itself available through Commodore dealers.) This list of peripheral devices and accessories includes:

•*Memory-expansion products*—Commodore will sell a line of cartridges that add programmable memory to the VIC, increasing the size and complexity of programs that can be run. A 3 K-byte cartridge can be plugged directly into the VIC, and 8 and 16 K-byte cartridges can be plugged in through a Master Control Panel that plugs into the VIC cartridge slot and accepts up to four cartridges. The maximum amount of programmable memory is 32 K bytes.

•*Storage peripherals*—Commodore will sell both a low-cost cassette recorder (although existing Commodore recorders work with the VIC) and a low-cost single 5-inch floppy-disk drive. The disk drive will hold up to 170 K bytes of data.

•*Other peripherals*—These include a dot-matrix printer, joysticks, light pens, game paddles, and a Multiple Game Controller (discussed earlier).

•*Interfaces*—Commodore plans two interfaces for the VIC, a modem and an IEEE-488 bus interface. The modem allows communication with other computers over telephone lines. The IEEE-488 interface allows the VIC (like the PET and CBM machines) to interface with PET peripherals and a wide variety of test instruments and devices that use this standard bus.

•*Firmware*—A wide range of software will be distributed in cartridge form; three firmware cartridges have already been announced. The first, the RS-232C Interface Cartridge, allows you to use the VIC and a modem to communicate with other computers and access information utilities like MicroNet and The Source. The second, the VIC Programming Cartridge, will include a machine-language monitor and a number of utility functions useful during programming; it will also use the four function keys (on the right-hand side of the keyboard) to execute predetermined functions. The third, the VIC Super Expander Cartridge, will add 3 K bytes of programmable memory, a new level of high-resolution graphics, and additional music-related capabilities. The high-resolution graphics (which I have not seen) are said to be excellent (176 rows by 176 columns of graphics dots, also called *pixels*).

•*Documentation*—In addition to the *VIC User's Manual*, supplied with the VIC, Commodore plans a series of book-plus-cartridge packages explaining several aspects of using and programming the VIC. (Documentation is discussed in greater detail later in this article.)

Arithmetic Operators:
ABS, ATN, LET, SGN, INT, SQR, RND, LOG (to base *e*), EXP (to base *e*), COS, SIN, TAN, +, −, *, /, ↑(exponentiation), <, >, =

Character Operators:
CHR$, ASC, SPC, TAB, LEN, STR$, VAL, LEFT$, RIGHT$, MID$, + (to concatenate strings)

Control Words:
FOR, TO, STEP, NEXT, GOTO, IF, THEN, GOSUB, RETURN, ON (used with GOTO and GOSUB), WAIT, END, USR

File and I/O Words:
OPEN, CLOSE, INPUT, INPUT#n, PRINT, PRINT#n, GET, READ, DATA, DIM, RESTORE

Command Words:
RUN, STOP, LOAD, SAVE, VERIFY, CONT, LIST, NEW, CLR

Miscellaneous Words:
AND, OR, REM, DEF FNx, FNx, POKE, NOT, FRE, PEEK

Table 4: *A list of VIC BASIC keywords.*

Human Engineering on the VIC

When the microcomputer industry was smaller, hobbyists put up with about anything in a computer as long as it worked. But now that major corporations are marketing microcomputers for the general public, *human engineering*—the design of systems to make them easy and efficient to use—has become the most important factor in the usability of computer systems. The VIC deserves high marks in human engineering because it is easy to understand and use.

The VIC keyboard is one of the best I've seen. It is well constructed and has a good feel during typing. The key names on the top and front faces of the keys are highly visible and easy to read. In most cases, key functions have been wisely chosen and named. For example, the key used to stop a program from executing is labeled as the RUN/STOP key. Pressing it (instead of the arbitrary control-C combination used by many computers) causes the VIC to stop executing the program and print out the line number where the program was stopped. Use of the CLR/HOME (clear-screen-and-home-cursor-to-upper-left-corner/home-cursor) and INST/DEL (insert/delete

Name of Computer	Atari 400	Commodore VIC 20	Ohio Scientific Challenger 1P	Radio Shack TRS-80 Color	Sinclair ZX80
Microprocessor used	6502	6502A	6502	6809E	Z80A
System clock frequency	1.8 MHz	slightly more than 1 MHz	1 MHz	slightly less than 1 MHz	3.25 MHz
List price	$499/$630 (two models, 8 K or 16 K)	$399.95	$479	$399	$199.95
Type of keyboard	touch-sensitive flat panel; slightly smaller than normal keyboard	full-size normal keyboard; very good feel	full-size normal keyboard	full-size normal keyboard; keys have feel of calculator buttons (not good)	touch-sensitive flat panel; much smaller than normal keyboard
Amount of programmable memory supplied	8 K or 16 K bytes (see above)	5 K bytes	8 K bytes	4 K bytes	1 K bytes
Maximum programmable memory possible	16 K bytes	32 K bytes	32 K bytes	16 K bytes	16 K bytes
Type of BASIC	full BASIC	full BASIC	full BASIC	limited BASIC (extended BASIC for more sophisticated music and graphics at extra cost)	limited BASIC (extended BASIC available at extra cost)
Video screen size (in characters)	16 rows by 32 columns	23 rows by 22 columns	24 rows by 24 columns or 12 rows by 48 columns	16 rows by 32 columns	24 rows by 32 columns
Lowercase letters available?	yes	yes	yes	accepts lowercase letters but displays uppercase as inverse capitals	no
Color available?	yes	yes	yes, at extra cost ($229 extra)	yes	no
Graphics characters available?	yes; characters available from keyboard	yes; characters available from keyboard	yes; graphics available only through POKE and CHR$ statements	no, but unit color block is ¼ normal character size	yes; characters available from keyboard
High-resolution graphics available?	yes, included (320 by 192 pixels)	yes, at extra cost (176 by 176 pixels)	no	yes, at extra cost (256 by 192 pixels)	no
Music available?	yes, three voices of music; can mix noise with each voice	yes, three voices of music, one of noise	yes, one voice of music (needs external speaker and amplifier)	yes, one voice of music	no
Extensions to BASIC for color, low-resolution graphics, and music?	yes, uses BASIC commands to manipulate all three	no, uses control characters and pokes to manipulate all three	no, uses pokes to manipulate all three	yes, uses BASIC commands to manipulate all three	low-resolution graphics available from keyboard
Uses program cartridges?	yes	yes	no	yes	no
Machine-language monitor included?	no	no	yes	yes	no
Assembly-language assembler available (at extra cost)?	yes	yes	yes	no	no

Table 5: *A comparison of five low-cost microcomputers, including the Commodore VIC20.*

text) keys is obvious when they have been used a few times.

The RESTORE key performs a valuable function in a computer where so many changes in character, background, and border color are possible. It resets the VIC to its state when it was turned on, except that it leaves the current program in memory (unlike some reset keys). Finally, the four large keys marked "f1/f2" through "f7/f8" have no predefined use but can be used by a programmer (through use of the GET statement) to produce a specific function within the program. By using the shift key, these four keys can trigger up to eight user-defined functions. These keys are also used in some application cartridges to execute predefined functions.

As I mentioned earlier, the VIC video display is well designed. The large letters are easy to read, even on an inexpensive color television, and the border around the active area of the display is restful to the eye. The narrow screen width (22 characters) will be a problem for some users, especially people using programs that need to display large amounts of data. Still, the screen width was a design decision reflecting the intended market, and I think that Commodore made a good decision under the circumstances.

Probably the most unexpected feature of the VIC is that it will be able to exchange both tape and disk files with the Commodore PET and CBM machines. Whether or not the program runs correctly on the other machines depends on whether it contains system-dependent code. For example, a CBM program using the full 80 columns of the CBM video display will not run correctly on the VIC, nor will a program larger than 32 K bytes. The ability to exchange data and programs among machines from the same manufacturer is almost unheard of. One good example of its usefulness is a situation where someone buys several VIC 20s to be used for data entry and feeds the results into a Commodore CBM computer.

I also found the screen-manipulation characters and POKE statements for music easy to use. By manipulating color, graphics, and sound without using any new BASIC keywords, Commodore has achieved two advantages. First, VIC programs are syntactically equivalent to PET programs. Programs can be transferred between machines without syntax errors due to unrecognized keywords; also, Commodore probably developed VIC BASIC faster and at less cost because of its similarity to PET BASIC. Second, VIC BASIC is easier to learn for people who know PET BASIC or another version of Microsoft BASIC.

An interesting thing about the VIC not apparent at first is the lightness of the unit. It literally has fewer components inside than you would expect. This is possible because it is built around a custom "video interface chip" built by MOS Technology for its parent company, Commodore. This integrated circuit handles all the interaction between the 6502 microprocessor (also manufactured by MOS Technology) and the color television (this function is done by a handful of integrated circuits in many other microcomputers). The low component count plus Commodore's ability to manufacture and assemble almost all of the VIC within its own factory account for the lighter weight and extremely low cost of the unit.

One final human-engineering feature of the VIC that will be appreciated by machine-language users and software developers shows Commodore's willingness to learn from hard-earned experience. The developers of VIC BASIC separated a kernel of I/O (input/output) subroutines from the rest of BASIC. They have written these routines as true subroutines and have devised a method for passing parameters to them so they can be used by anyone who wants to develop software for

At a Glance

Name
VIC 20

Manufacturer
Commodore Business Machines
950 Rittenhouse Rd
Norristown PA 19401
(215) 666-7950

Price
$299.95

Dimensions
40.3 by 20.4 by 7.2 cm (15.9 by 8 by 2.8 inches)

Processor name and type
6502, 8-bit

System clock frequency
slightly over 1 MHz

Memory
5 K bytes

Mass storage
cassette recorder or floppy disk optional

Other hardware features
character-size graphics symbols, keyboard, uppercase and lowercase letters, eight-color foreground and sixteen-color background video display, three-part music generator, external RF (radio-frequency) modulator and power supply, built-in serial port

Software included
16 K-byte VIC BASIC in ROM (read-only memory)

Hardware options
cassette recorder, floppy disk, dot-matrix printer, modem, IEEE-488 interface, joystick, light pen, game paddle, extra memory cartridges (up to a total of 32 K bytes), RS-232C adapter

Software options
VIC Programming Cartridge (includes programming utilities and machine-language monitor), VIC Super Expander Cartridge (adds 3 K bytes more memory, high-resolution graphics capability)

the VIC. In addition, all I/O routines called by BASIC are called indirectly through programmable-memory pointers holding the addresses of the true I/O routines; in this way, users can substitute their own I/O routines to be executed in place of those provided within the VIC.

These design decisions (which will be documented to interested parties by Commodore) do two things. First, they encourage the potential software developer to write software for the VIC by eliminating the need to write custom I/O routines. Second, they help isolate the structure of VIC BASIC from some machine-language code that may need to be changed; in this way, Commodore can prevent having several versions of VIC BASIC at some time in the future (a problem that plagued the PET and CBM machines).

Problems and Limitations

The VIC 20 is a very good machine, but it is not without some problems; fortunately, none of them are major.

The juxtaposition of several key pairs on the keyboard is unfortunate. First, the CLR/HOME key is next to the INST/DEL key; while inserting or deleting characters in a BASIC line, you may inadvertently clear the screen or return the cursor to the upper left corner of the screen. More annoying are the reversals of the colon and semicolon keys and the RETURN and RESTORE keys (see photo 1). Touch typists and keyboard users are used to finding these key pairs in different positions (eg: the RETURN key in the same row as the top row of letters). Since the VIC keyboard does not have the layout of previous Commodore machines, it is unfortunate that the keyboard was not laid out in a slightly different way.

Another problem has to do with the music voices. Once a music voice is turned on by the appropriate POKE statement, only poking that location to zero, turning off the sound on the television set, or turning off the computer will shut off the sound. Neither stopping the program that turned on the sound nor typing the keyword

END will stop it. (The Atari 400 has a similar problem, but typing END causes it to silence all sound generators.)

Another problem is shielding against RFI (radio-frequency interference). Although the Federal Communications Commission has passed a set of rules to eventually keep personal computers and similar devices from interfering with television and radio reception, most manufacturers have received extra time to modify their products. In the case of Commodore, only units manufactured after March 1981 must meet the new requirements. I have been told by Commodore that unshielded units will be marked as such. If you live in close proximity to other people, I recommend that you wait for a shielded unit. If you use an unshielded VIC, people nearby may not be able to use radios and televisions while the computer is on.

The most serious problem I found can be avoided with some forethought. The VIC tape recorder, once put into play or record mode, can be started and stopped by the computer. A potential problem occurs when you have just done a LOAD and are about to do a SAVE (to save, for example, a revised version of the program just loaded). When you did the LOAD, the VIC instructed you to press the play button to begin the loading process. When it finished loading the program, it stopped the tape-transport motor but left the play button depressed. If you then give the SAVE command, the VIC initiates the process, even though the record button has not been pressed. (If no recorder buttons are pressed when the SAVE command is given, the VIC instructs you to press both the play and record button, and the recording process occurs without error.) The RUN/STOP key will not abort the loading process, although pressing the RUN/STOP and RESTORE keys will. Still, there are two chances to lose the program: one, not realizing that the program is not being recorded; two, realizing it but turning the VIC off from not knowing that the SAVE command can be aborted and restarted.

One of the most important components of a consumer-oriented microcomputer is its documentation.

Documentation

One of the most important components of a consumer-oriented microcomputer is its documentation. Microcomputer documentation was neglected in the past because it was seen as being too expensive and time-consuming to justify the perceived benefits. Now, however, good documentation can make the difference between the average consumer using or ignoring the same machine. Microcomputer documentation has a heavy burden to carry because of the multiple functions it needs to perform. First, it must tell the user how to unpack the computer, get it running, and use it with prepackaged software. Second, it must guide the user carefully through the first sessions with the computer (because many people still have some uneasiness or fear of computers). Third, it must educate the user about microcomputers in general so its potential for use can be seen. Fourth, it must document the features of the microcomputer in a way that is both complete and easy to understand.

Commodore recognized the need for good documentation. Avalanche Inc (of Palo Alto, California) has been commissioned to produce several books about the VIC. The first, the *VIC User's Manual*, is supplied with the VIC and is a good introduction to the VIC and its features. Its style is informal, friendly, and respectful of the reader's intelligence, but it assumes no previous knowledge of computers. There are illustrated chapters on setting the VIC up and on using its graphics, color, and music. Each feature of the VIC is illustrated with several short programs (5 to 25 lines each), making it

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easy to begin learning about the computer. Most of the chapters do not rely on material from previous chapters, meaning that the reader can learn about the features in any order.

Avalanche has produced two more books, *Introduction to Computing ...On the VIC* and *Introduction to BASIC Programming...On the VIC*. Both books, part of the Commodore Learning Series, are available at extra cost. They are written in the same friendly style and cover the use of the VIC in greater depth. What makes these books so innovative is that each book is sold with a program cartridge containing longer example programs that are used in the book. This allows the reader to learn from longer programs without the drudgery of having to type them in.

Comparison to Other Computers

Table 5 gives a comparison of five low-cost, consumer-oriented microcomputers: the Atari 400, the Commodore VIC 20, the Ohio Scientific Challenger 1P, the Radio Shack TRS-80 Color, and the Sinclair ZX80. Although the VIC is a very good machine, some of the others have features that may make them the best choice for you. The Atari 400 has the most sophisticated design; it allows detailed video graphics (although they are more difficult to program) and is the logical choice of anyone wanting access to sophisticated arcade-like games. The TRS-80 Color Computer might be the best choice if you want the convenience of getting service and repairs from a Radio Shack store. In any case, the best computer for you depends on your needs and your budget.

Conclusions

- The final verdict on the Commodore VIC 20 is not in yet because of the large amount of hardware and software not yet commercially released. But if the rest of the product line is as good as the VIC 20 microcomputer is, the VIC computer system will be one of the strongest on the market.
- The VIC 20 computer unit is unexcelled as a low-cost, consumer-oriented computer. Even with some of its limitations (eg: screen size of 23 rows by 22 columns, maximum programmable memory of 32 K bytes), it makes an impressive showing against more expensive microcomputers like the Apple II, the Radio Shack TRS-80, and the Atari 800.
- The low cost of the VIC ($299.95) is made possible by a custom computer-to-video interface circuit that replaces several other integrated circuits and by Commodore's manufacturing most of the VIC at in-house factories in Japan.
- The VIC is well designed and easy for the novice to use. A large part of its suitability for first-time users is due to its excellent documentation and attention to human-engineering factors. The unit has some small design flaws, but they are minor. ■