HomePak, a Multi-use Program from Batteries Included

by P.R. Adler

When Batteries Included made HomePak, the new word processing-data base-telecommunications program for Atari users, they took not just a user-friendly, but a user-intimate approach. They bundled three popular applications on one disk, wrote a good manual with some clever gimmicks (described below) and didn't copy protect the programs.

The $49.95 price is perhaps the friendliest we've seen so far for this computing power. The programs are not unlimited in features, but there are definitely enough for all home uses. Best of all, a great deal of thought has been devoted to structuring the programs along the thought patterns of the user.

The programs are all menu driven. The HomePak disk boots up to a screen that displays the titles of the three programs. When you choose HomeText, the word processor, you work with menus that control formatting, text moving, and file handling. In Home-Find, the database, there is one menu for creating merge files and another for file handling. In the telecommunications program, HomeTerm, there are separate menus for transmission and file handling. The three component programs are reviewed more thoroughly below.

HomeText

The HomeText program is Home-Pak's word processor. It offers all the usual features—automatic margins, block moving capability, search and replace, a choice of insert/replace modes and formatting commands such as right justification, headers and footers, and the ability to link files together for printout. This last feature is important since the maxium length of a HomeText file is quite short—6620 characters, which works out to only 3 single-spaced pages. This is enough for home use, but other competitive programs exist that offer more capacity. Atari-Writer, for example, holds about 10 double-spaced pages.

HomeText's menus are accessed by pressing console keys on the Atari. Two of the menus just roll down over the text you are working on, which is disconcerting, but easily remedied by pressing RETURN. The HomeText commands are easy to use since most just require an input of Y or N. A carriage return will return you to your text from anywhere in the menus.

A particularly nice feature of Home-Text is the way you can use it with information stored in HomeFind, the data base. You can merge one record at a time into your text from the data base file, which makes mass mailings easy. To merge data you use the Functions menu to name the HomeFind file you want to access, then use the Format menu to plant a HomeFind "token." The token reserves a blank space in your text for words that are inserted from the data base.

By planting tokens you can read one record after another into your document while printing.

HomeFind

HomeFind is HomePak's data base manager. It is the successor to Whatsit, one of the first personal computer data base programs. HomeFind is a relational database, which is very different from record-oriented data bases.

In record-oriented data bases a set of electronic file cards is stored on disk. The program formats, opens for data entry, and closes these records. For ex-ample, there might be a file called "customers," with names, addresses, salesmen and their commissions, and phone numbers in it. This data can be printed and sorted a variety of ways: by salesmen, by state, ZIP code, or whatever. However, the data in another file cannot be accessed without closing the current file and opening a new one.

HomeFind does not maintain any files or records. It works on the Subject-Tag-Object system. This can be thought of as the person, his desire, and the object of his desire. Since there are no structured files, there are no restrictions on the way data can be accessed, and there are only two restrictions on the way data is entered. All entries must have a subject, a tag, and an object or list of objects, and the subject and tag must include apostrophes. For example, when drawing up a Christmas list, you only have to type in "Susan's present's a scarf," "Nancy's present's a shirt," "Gwendolyn's present's a scarf," and so on. Then, you can type in any of the girls' names and find out what they're getting, or the word "scarf" to see whose getting a scarf, or the word "present," for the whole list.

This format makes organized data entry unnecessary. You can enter a Christmas list, accounts payable, or addresses of your friends at the same sitting, as the ideas occur to you. If you enter different types of data on the same person, you can access all the relevant information just by typing their name. If you repeat tags, the program prompts you with cheerful, conversational comments. You can make changes easily, and lists of objects are no problem. "Objects" refers to object of the subject and "tag" is the entry in HomeFind. Anything at all can be an