When the Computers Come Home

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Tony Saris

Learn a language, update the grocery list, do your taxes—the $500 home computer is here and you don't need a Ph.D to operate it

When the Computers Come Home

By JOAN KRON

I HAVE SEEN the future—and it's a lot of extension cords. By 1985, one electronics manufacturer predicts, most middle-income homes will have a home computer. But, alas, some home computers have to be connected to a television set with one cord and to the house current with another cord, as does each optional home computer accessory—the teleprinter, timer, video-game flippers and telephone interface. That's a lot of cords.

But none of the 30,000 tradespeople attending the 1978 Winter Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last week appeared concerned about equipment sprawl or consumers tripping over wires.

"The Home Computer—The Next 'Hot' Product," heralded a trade publication at the show. The personal, or home, computer started out not long ago as an expensive build-it-yourself item for the hobby market. But research discovered that less than half the kits that were sold ever got fully assembled. If they did, the owner then had to program the computer.

Eventually, manufacturers determined that more people wanted computers than knew how to program them. If a Ph.D. in electrical engineering isn't needed to use a telephone, why must someone be a computer programmer to run a computer?

Buyers from stores all over the country were at the electronics show comparing the merits of the four ready-made computers introduced there: Umtech's VideoBrain, Commodore's P.E.T., the Apple II and APF's Peco 1016, which ranged in price from $500 to $1,500, and one computer that wasn't at the show—Radio Shack's Tandy TRS-80, which sells for about $600.

Of the four models offered at the show, the $500 VideoBrain looks like the best bet for electronic illiterates.

No bigger than a typewriter, VideoBrain's sleekly designed electronic keyboard is ready to use when it's unpacked and plugged into a television set, a union blessed by the F.C.C.—which means this computer won't interfere with the neighbors' television reception.

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Having this computer, or any computer, for that matter, the manufacturers imply, is like having Albert Einstein for a babysitter, Bobby Fischer for a chess partner and H.&R. Block and Arthur Burns on retainer.

To summon up these geniuses (Con Ed willing), just pop into the VideoBrain various cassette programs marked "finance," "real estate analysis," "cash management," "music teacher," "math tutor," "checkers," "chess," "blackjack," and so forth. Untech is committed to producing three new VideoBrain program cassettes a month. A future cassette will feature Form 1040 for preparing income tax returns. Another, called "mailing list," will keep the Christmas card list, with addresses, in the computer's memory.

Like a video game, a home computer will provide intimate contact with a television screen—much different from the relationship with the set when watering the plants while watching the news. It's practically necessary to snuggle up to the set to work with it, an idea that sends shivers up the antennae of those who like to keep their distance from the "tube."

While people of conscience grapple with the philosophical issues of alienation, while they fret about computers having no morals, gadget lovers and games players with an esthetic bent will have to deal with the future schlock.

"The home will eventually be totally automated," said Dr. David Chung, Umtech's vice president. "We will use the computer for all our financial work. For printouts of recipes, letters, medical records, self-improvement classes, shopping at home. We'll be able to interrogate it about our stocks and brew the coffee with it."

Yes, all that has been heard before. But what the computer might do first is to tell people how to redesign their homes for computer living.

The esthetic history of home electronics equipment is not glorious. In the beginning, when the television set was an only child, it didn't need a room of its own. When the cable television box joined the family, there was some sibling rivalry. Sloping-top receivers and sets with handles on the top didn't get along with cable.

And when the video-cassette recorder was born recently, there was no room for it on the rickety television table. By the time a timer is added to the video-cassette recorder, and then an add-on unit with a four-hour recording capability and some extra monitors, stereo sound and space for the burgeoning video library—the dining table may have to be commandeered.

By that point, the space behind the video storage table will look like the telephone switchboard at the White House. And the equipment will still be coming, such as a large-screen projection television set. Advent's VideoBeam system was and still is a real challenge to homemakers. The projector, the size of a filing cabinet, must be exactly six feet from the giant screen, which stands like a blackboard on legs or hangs on the wall.

How do the wires get from the projector under the rug? Don't ask.

In an effort to overcome this hazard, Panasonic and Quasar, both subsidiaries of Matsushita, introduced at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show a large projection television set that is a one-piece unit. It looks something like a movie screen with a rumble seat. One newscaster covering the show made the mistake of climbing into the rumble seat; only to discover it was the projector, which works with mirrors. Panasonic wasn't happy.

Where will consumers put all the new appliances, manufacturers were asked at the convention. What will they do with the wires? No problem, said the exhibitors, who didn't have a wire showing.

Every camouflage trick possible was used to hide the cords of the floor samples. At the Panasonic display, all the television sets were sitting on custom-made cabinets with holes drilled in the tops for the cords. At Atari, the video game company, a structure of chrome tubing carried the cords to oblivion. VideoBrain hid its cords in plywood pedestals. Commodore built its Pet computers into a wall. And when someone wanted to photograph the Bally electronic arcade, with its sea of spaghetti cords, the salesman very carefully tied up all the cords before permitting it.

There is a small movement afoot to stop the proliferation of appliances by combining functions. This is a marketing move, however, not intended to end clutter, but to add to it. The latest marketing approach is to have a radio in a calculator, a calculator in a radio, a clock in a calculator, a television set in a clock, a calculator in a television set and a telephone in a telephone answering machine.

But what about meaningful elimination of cords? A company called Mountain Hardware has a device that allows a computer to talk to appliances in other rooms through the house current.

However, best of all may be a satellite computer that will be a cordless deputy of the main computer. Right now it's just a gleam in the eye of the VideoBrain people, but then, that's how stars are born.

None of this, of course, deals with the real problem of electronic data processing, teaching machines and entertainment centers in the home. The 19th-century drawing room was based on the fireplace, the bookcase and conversation. Traditional furniture arrangements won't accommodate the movie-theater-cum-operational-computer-center that is going to take over the home. And even if they could, will mom and dad want to share time on the computer with the children?

While we search for the answers and wait for department stores to sell furniture that will turn every home into a copy of the control room at Newscenter Four, I think I'll build in all the components next to the built-in oven.

Bally's $300 game arcade—six wires for four players

The New York Times/R. Scott Hooper
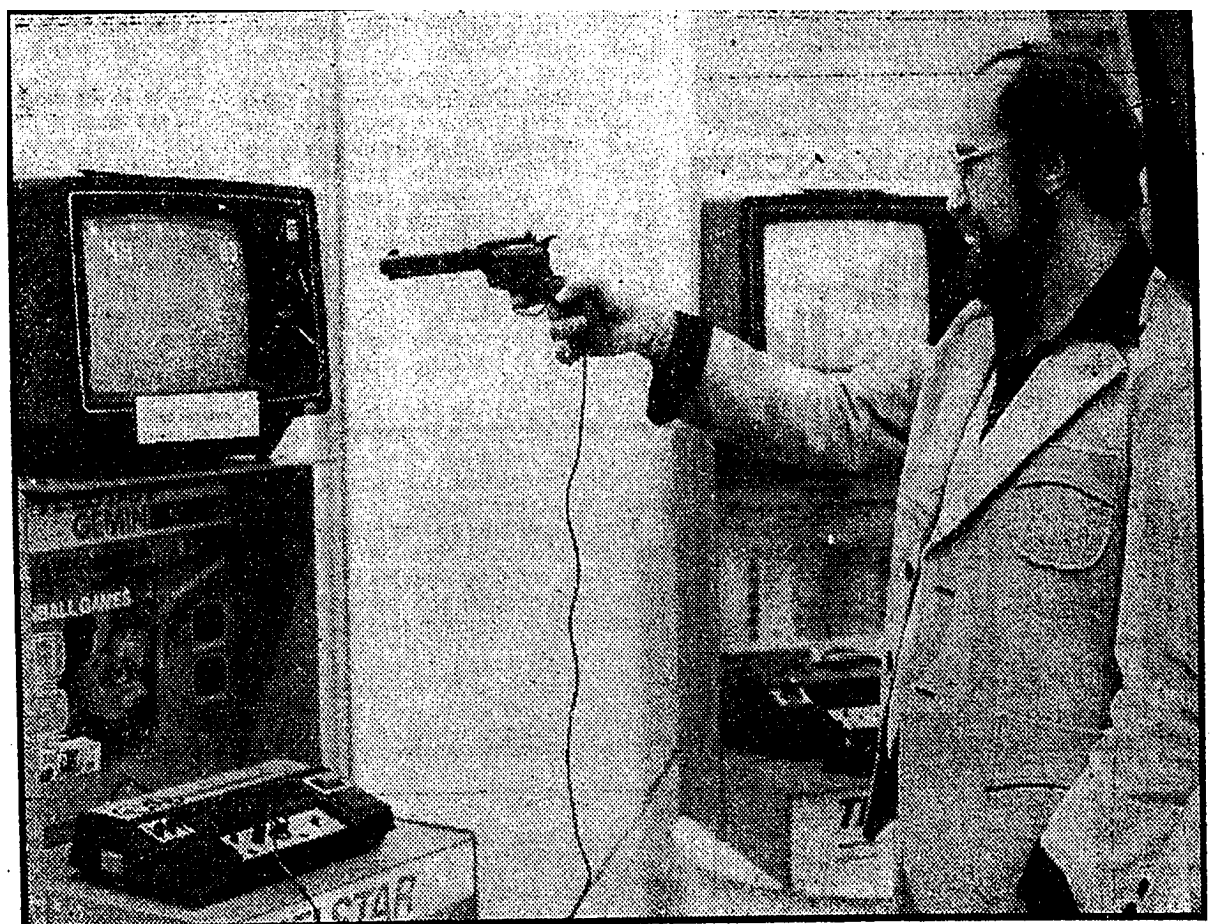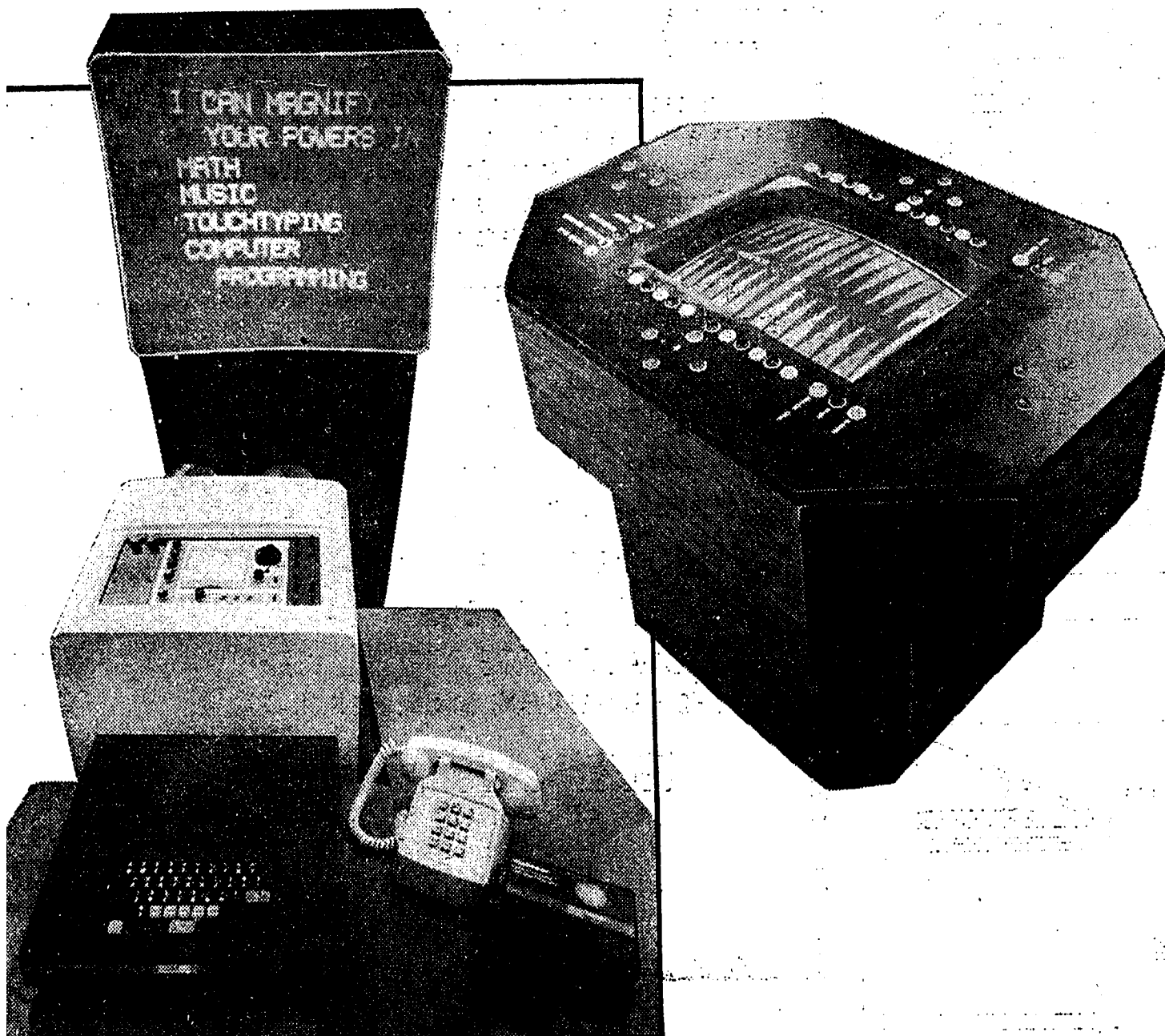
At the electronics show, from left: VideoBrain computer, $500, Bloomingdale's in February; computer solitaire backgammon table, $1,500 by Tryom Marketing, Inc.; a visitor tries VideoBrain; Coleco's Telstar Gemini game with "gun," $79.95, at Two Guys