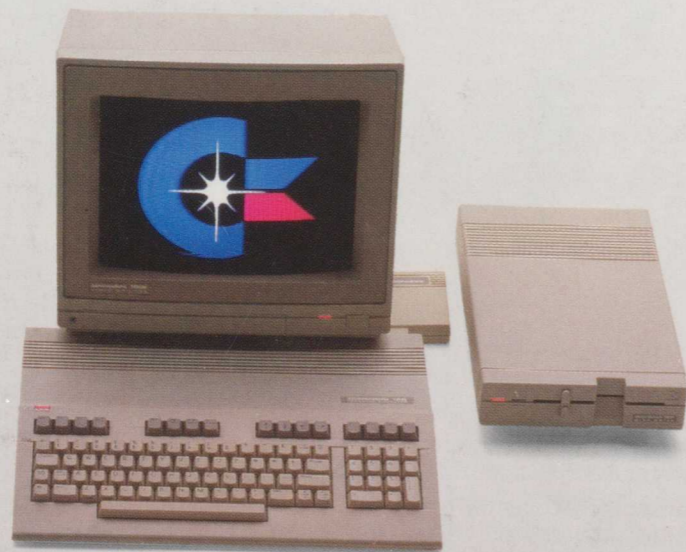




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NOVEMBER 1985

VOLUME 3
NUMBER 11

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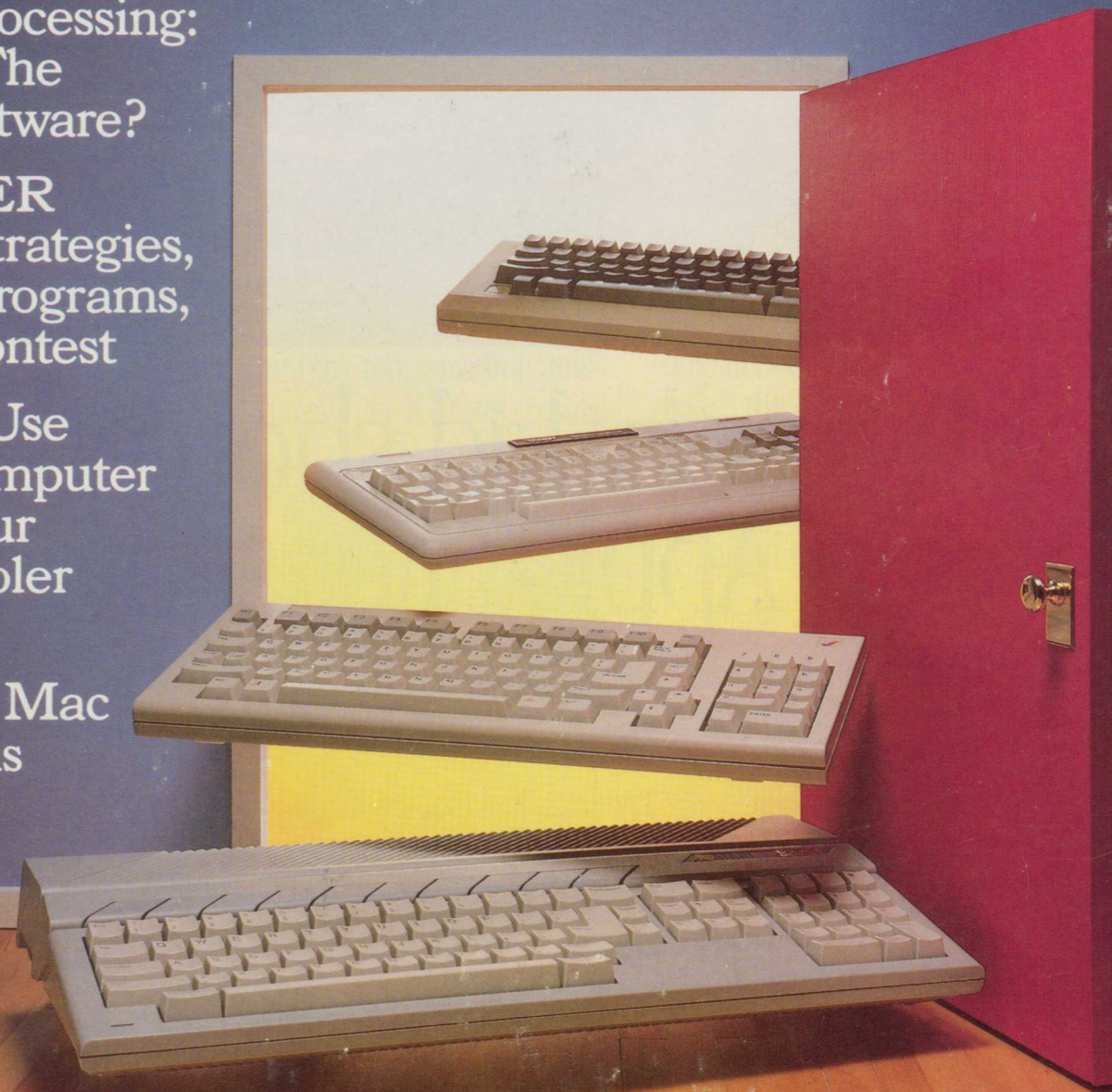
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Apple v. SightSound Technologies

24 CBM2013-0023
AT-A-GLANCE
SOFTWARE
REVIEWS

Page 00001

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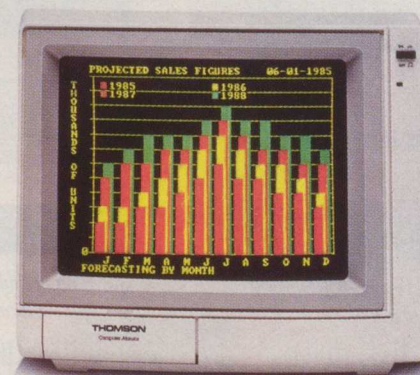
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NOVEMBER
1985

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VOLUME 3
NUMBER 11

FAMILY COMPUTING™

FEATURES

35 BUYER'S GUIDE TO GENERAL-PURPOSE COMPUTERS

by Joe Gelman and Nick Sullivan

Our roundup of new and proven computers can help you choose the best machine for your education, entertainment, and business needs.

41 HOLIDAY HELPER

by Marlene Anne Bumgarner

Sit back and relax while your computer plans the menu, decks the halls, and spreads good cheer.

44 WORD PROCESSORS

by Robin Raskin

New tools for the age-old task of writing. PLUS: A SAMPLER OF WORD-PROCESSING PROGRAMS FOR THE NOVICE AND THE PRO

49 THE NEW AMIGA

by John Jainschigg

A look at Commodore's newest arrival. Graphics, sound, and multi-tasking give this mouse-based powerhouse a special personality. PLUS: A ROUNDUP OF AMIGA SOFTWARE

Page 44



K-POWER

83 Attention Gamers: Here Comes Accolade!

An interview with the founders of a hot, new game-design company.

84 Game Strategy

Tips, tricks, and hints.

86 Microtones

"The Nutcracker's" popular *Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy* goes hi-tech.

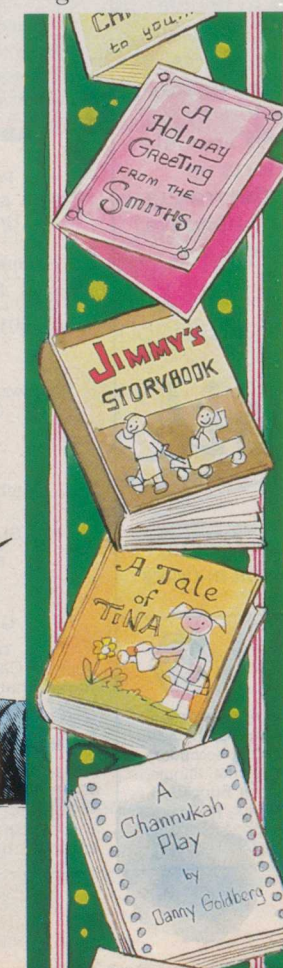
90 Compucopia

A little program for the big task of saving to disk.

90 Contest

Stump Dr. Cursor with a problem.

Page 41



PROGRAMMING

55 THE PROGRAMMER

56 TIPS TO THE TYPIST

57 FUN/LEARNING PROGRAM

Test your vocabulary against a friend's and learn about computer logic with *Word Wars*. For ADAM, Apple & Macintosh, Atari, Commodore & VIC-20, IBM PC & compatibles, TI-99/4A, and TRS-80 CoCo & Models III & 4.

65 ARCADE GAME

You'll need fast reflexes and nerves of steel to beat *Get 'Em*. For ADAM, Apple & Macintosh, Atari, Commodore, IBM PC & compatibles, and TRS-80 CoCo & Models III and 4.

70 FEATURE PROGRAM

Put your files on a disk with *Home Information Manager*, a mini-data-base program for the Apple.

NEW PRODUCTS

93 SOFTWARE GUIDE AND REVIEWS

Twenty-four at-a-glance reviews.



DEPARTMENTS

4 EDITOR'S NOTE

9 LETTERS

10 HOME/MONEY MANAGEMENT

by Robin Raskin

Computerize your family's medical records.

16

TELECOMPUTING

by Robin Raskin

Shopping online: Let your computer do the walking.

25 HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION

by Christine Z. Cataldo

The computer and your preschooler.

PLUS: TRIED-AND-TRUE SOFTWARE

28 GAMES

by James Delson

Pretzels and popcorn fun.

32 COMPUTING CLINIC

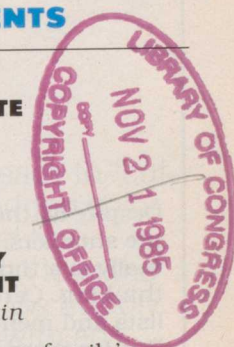
106 CLASSIFIED

108 ADVERTISERS' INDEX

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Page 49



EDITOR'S NOTE

THE THINKING SEASON

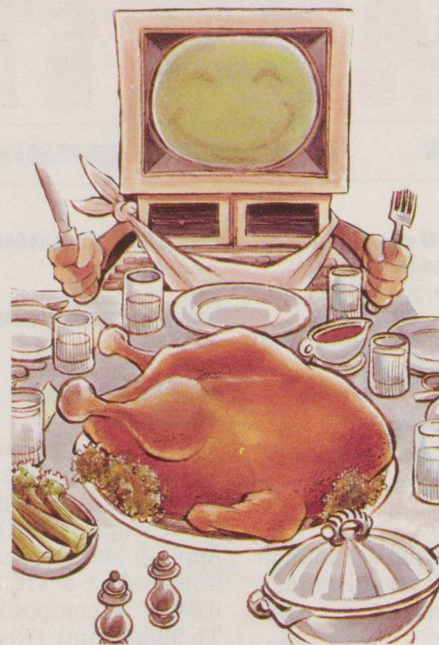
Despite all the fuss about last-minute shoppers, this holiday season actually is a time of planning and thinking. Card lists. Gift lists. Guest lists and menus. It seems endless. But for these special once-a-year festivities, it's important to get things right.

In recent years, the computer has become one of the most popular new gifts of the season. And, of all the gifts I can think of, it's the one that requires the most thought and planning. A computer is not a good impulse buy. There's probably even a direct correlation between pre-purchase planning and post-purchase satisfaction.

That's why we're running our "Buyer's Guide to Computers" (page 35) this issue: to give you more time to think and plan, and a greater chance that you'll be satisfied with your purchase. The choices before consumers this year represent a departure from the past. New computer models boasting more power at reasonable prices complicate decision-making and raise a bevy of new questions to consider before taking out your checkbook or credit card.

In this issue, we're delivering on our promise to readers of increased coverage of the Macintosh, the first of those new computers. You'll find both original programs for the Mac (page 55) and more Mac software reviews than usual (page 93). Although Apple continues to direct the Mac to the business community, our mail and our sources indicate that a large number of Macs sold are making their way into the home.

For computer owners with the



wherewithal to start planning now for the weeks ahead, I recommend our Telecomputing article about online shopping (page 16) and "Holiday Helper," our piece on preparing for the holidays—computer-style (page 41).

My own mission for the holidays is to find the most personal, original ways to express and demonstrate my feelings and appreciation to people who mean the most to me. A lot of them are my fellow staff members on FAMILY COMPUTING. They've been planning, for what seems like forever, ways to make your holidays special. We hope you enjoy our efforts as much as we did creating the results.

Most of all, we hope your holidays start with a lot to be thankful for. May you have the happiest of Thanksgivings.

Claudia Cohl

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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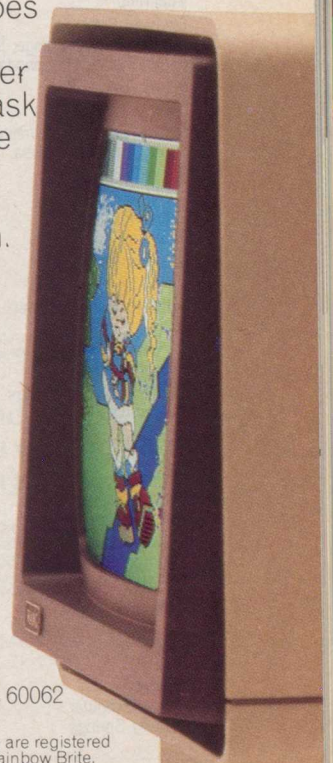
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TELECOMPUTING

SHOPPING IN ELECTRONIC STORES

Sick of Crowds? Tied Up at Work?
Want to Compare Prices? Go Online and Browse.

BY ROBIN RASKIN

Online shopping lets your fingers do the walking—at the computer keyboard instead of in the Yellow Pages. Stereos, best-selling books, vacations, gourmet chocolates, appliances, drugs and cosmetics, even satellite dishes can be investigated and ordered using your personal computer.

For those with little patience for salespeople, miles of aisles, and a commute to the local store, shopping via computer is a blessing. For others, it's an expensive gimmick, partly because you can't view the goods before purchasing, and partly because of the intricacies and costs of using online services.

SHOPPING GEAR

Online shopping services are generally accessible through information networks, though some can be accessed directly. You need a computer, a modem, telecommunications software, and membership with a shopping or information service (see listings).

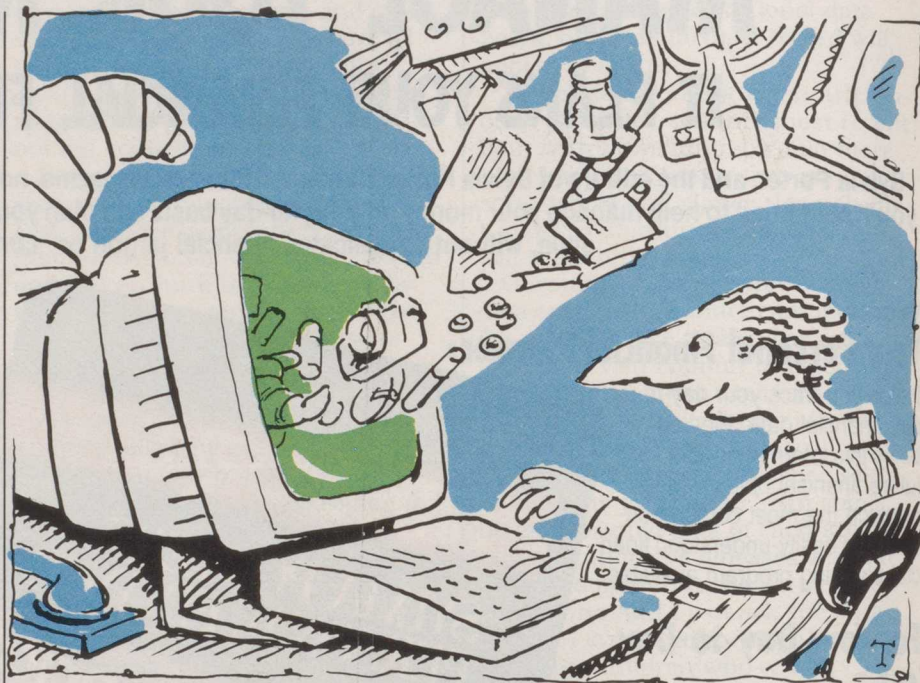
Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, these "electronic stores" display their inventory of goods. You can browse and buy through a series of choices from simple menus.

"It's a cheaper and a more convenient way to shop for me," says Allison Davis, a writer/producer on NBC's "Today" show. "I'm a catalog shopper anyway; I don't like stores much," she says, adding, "The computer has taken away all the worry."

Davis, who also banks by computer, says she sits down once a month to do that and her shopping. She bought her mother a VCR last Christmas that way, sent gifts to friends and relatives, and saved \$40 on a television for her father-in-law.

James West, a 26-year-old engineer from Stamford, Connecticut, is another online shopping fan. "I love it," he says. "I've bought software, tools, and researched television prices online. I compare prices with local discount stores."

Contributing editor ROBIN RASKIN's last article was "Upgrading" in the June 1985 FAMILY COMPUTING.



West says he only regrets not being able to view or get very detailed product specifications of the item offered online. Davis, who recently moved into a new house, adds that she is scared to buy silverware online because she's not sure how it will look in her dining room.

TECHNIQUES

Online shopping requires the cultivation of new skills—much the same as those used for searching through any large data base. You proceed through screen menus to find a specific store or item—to return to the same spot at a later visit, you'll need to remember where it was in the menu system. It's initially as confusing as a visit to a large department store, but electronic shopping gets easier once you learn the floor plan.

Typically, after logging onto the system, you see a main menu that lists goods by product category or retailer. In either case, you can browse through the selections. For instance, the main menu on Comp-u-store On-Line, which you can access through various information services, lets you choose from such cat-

egories as appliances, cameras and accessories, sporting goods, etc. At that point you can comparison shop among name brands.

Other services (such as Compu-Serve's Electronic Mall) list individual retailers, such as Waldenbooks or Record World, and their offerings. To place an order, you select an item and then complete an online order form detailing payment (usually credit card, sometimes check) and shipping information.

CONSUMER EDUCATION

Online shopping can provide a good education in consumer goods. Using Comp-u-store, I got a sense of the price spectrum for new ovens much more easily than I could have by studying newspapers. I also learned about the benefits and disadvantages of convection ovens on Comp-u-store's hotline, an online consumer report that looks at specific products.

Probably the main advantage of online shopping is the ability to research a product category you're interested in. As with any large data base, you can access the product information you want when you need

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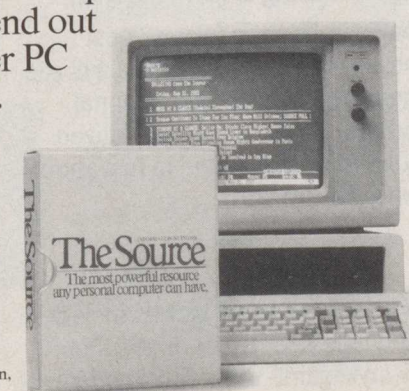
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in our system. That's because it's "menu-driven," so beginners can simply read the menus (lists of options) that appear on their screens and then type in their selections.

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TELECOMPUTING

it. For instance, you can check prices on new cars, or ask for a listing of all 19-inch color televisions with remote control and stereo broadcast capabilities that sell for less than \$500. That's information you couldn't get by walking into most stores.

In some cases, you can even leave electronic mail for store or product representatives and ask for more details.

GOOD DISCOUNT PRICES

Another advantage of online shopping is low prices. Manufacturers have no advertising costs, sales staffs to pay, or storefront rent. Electronic "stores" don't need to stock

inventory, since the products are usually available directly from the manufacturer. All this can translate into lower costs for customers.

The online shopping services boast anywhere from 25 to 60 percent savings over conventional retailers. I found the online prices similar to those in most mail-order catalogs and discount houses, but occasionally they were higher. However, even if you don't have time to bargain hunt around town, you can still be reasonably sure you're getting close to rock-bottom prices on most goods you buy electronically.

Unfortunately, you can't judge the cost of online shopping by the price of the item alone. Depending on

your communications skills and the speed of your modem, "foraging" costs can add up. First, you need to subscribe to an information service (though it's probably not worth joining for the shopping feature alone) and sometimes you'll have to pay an additional membership fee. Then you pay "connect time" (i.e., the time you spend online).

Many people, depending on where they live, must also either make long-distance calls or use a computer-communications network like Teletnet or Tymnet, which charge \$10 an hour daytime, \$2 an hour nights and weekends, to get online.

If you shop at 300 baud, as I did, you can get frustrated waiting for the menus to unfold. You slow down further if you enter the wrong "shopping aisle" and then must backtrack to a previous menu. Searching for product information online can take hours, when often a phone call or a store visit would be cheaper, faster, and more productive.

In a "real" store, browsing and ordering don't cost anything. Online expenses are also likely to be higher than car or bus fares and parking.

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Cost & Access: Available only to American Express cardholders. No fee for use. Access via CompuServe (address below) and Dow Jones/News Retrieval (P.O. Box 300, Princeton, NJ 08540; [800] 257-5114; [609] 452-1511). Payment by American Express card.

Comp-u-store On-Line. 707 Summer St., Stamford, CT 06901; (800) 843-7777.

Founded in 1982 as a division of Comp-U-Card, the nation's largest electronic merchandising service, Comp-u-store has over 31,000 members who choose from 60,000 items listed by product category or feature.

Comp-u-mall, from the same company, lists those goods by retailer, including Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman-Marcus, Hickory Farms, and Omaha Steaks.

Cost & Access: \$25 annual fee for purchasing members, but anyone with a subscription to CompuServe, Dow Jones/News Retrieval or The Source can browse without buying. There is no membership fee for the first year through Dow Jones/News Retrieval. Direct access (without going through an information service) costs \$18 an hour weekdays, and \$5 an hour nights and weekends. Payment by credit card or check.

The Electronic Mall. CompuServe, 5000 Arlington Centre Blvd.,

P.O. Box 20212, Columbus, OH 43220; (614) 457-8650; (800) 848-8990.

The Electronic Mall, a joint venture of CompuServe and L.M. Berry, publisher of the Yellow Pages, lists about 80 merchants, including Sears Roebuck, Waldenbooks, and Record World.

Cost & Access: No fee for service. Available through CompuServe, the start-up kit costs \$39.95. Access charges are 10-21 cents a minute nights and weekends for 300/1200 baud, and 20-25 cents a minute primetime for 300/1200 baud. Payment by credit card.

OTHER NETWORK OFFERINGS

CompuServe (see address above). Includes Fifth Avenue Shopper (features goods from leading shops and boutiques); MicroShopper (microcomputer supplies and accessories); New Car Showroom (new car prices); Prime Time Radio Classics (old radio programs on cassettes); Savings Scan (30 percent to 70 percent savings on selected items); and Travelshopper (offers information on airline routes and prices, and lets you buy tickets).

Delphi. 3 Blackstone St., Cambridge, MA 02139; (617) 491-3393.

Grapha Com On-line sells computer hardware, software, copiers, and office furniture at discount prices; Wine On-Line sells wine, books, and accessories.

The Source. 1616 Anderson Road, McLean, VA 22102, (800) 336-3366; (703) 734-7500.

Music Source sells records and tapes from K-Tel.

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Online shopping services are entirely text-based. They rely on words to describe products, which is not how most people are used to shopping. You don't see the products live or with photos. (Comp-u-store, however, does send brochures to customers, much like a direct-mail house.) And when you shop for an item such as a television, you want to see what the picture looks like, not just read a measurement giving screen size.

"Simply put, electronic shopping requires trust," says David Rothman, author of *Silicon Jungle* (Ballantine Books, 1985). "And you can't trust characters on a green screen the way you can a human voice" or picture, he adds.

Unless you're already familiar with a specific product or category, online shopping is a good way to do research—but not necessarily to buy. "I even thought about ordering a car online," says Davis, "but that was too much!"

And when you do order the goods, there's no guarantee you'll get them quickly. In this sense, you have no electronic advantage over foot-weary mall-goers. Even though your order is theoretically placed with the man-



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TELECOMPUTING

ufacturer immediately, your purchase will arrive anywhere from one to four weeks later. The products I ordered took even longer. So shopping in advance for special occasions is still necessary.

Finally, you may encounter petty annoyances or feel you've been led astray. In CompuServe's Electronic Mall, for example, you can make a menu choice to "enter" Bloomingdale's, a potential treat if you don't live near an outlet. But, once there, all you can do is order a catalog.

A COMPELLING WAY TO SHOP

Despite all these drawbacks, shopping online is still compelling. Hours

fly by like minutes when I explore the many electronic stores.

After I learned my way around and saw what was available, I saved money, time, and untold aggravation by shopping online. I also gained access to important price-comparison information. In an hour on CompuServe, I ordered a best-selling book, hard-to-find children's records, and some fancy croissants for my parents' anniversary. This would have taken a full day using traditional shopping avenues.

Computer shopping has started to catch on, but not as quickly as many thought it would. It's still in its infancy as a valid consumer service. As modems transmit informa-

tion faster, and videotex services begin to merge graphics with text, computer shopping will probably blossom. Until then, the shopping "pioneers" are forging the way. **FC**

APPLE EXECUTIVE LIVE IN CONFERENCE

Dave Coté, consumer marketing manager at Apple, will be the guest at a live conference in the FAMILY COMPUTING Forum on Sunday, Nov. 24 to answer questions about Apple's NEWS products (see "Buyer's Guide" in this issue).

FAMILY COMPUTING's Forum on CompuServe (GO FAM 200) is operated via modems supplied by Hayes Micro-computer Products, Inc.

You can leave messages for FAMILY COMPUTING there or on The Source (TI5483).

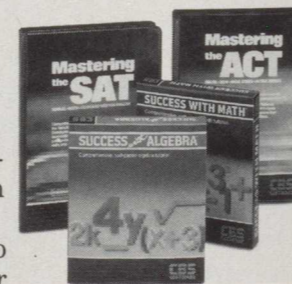
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RANDOM HOUSE

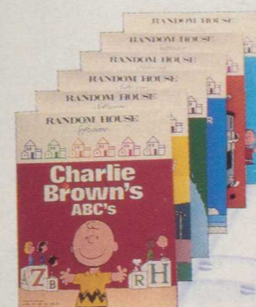
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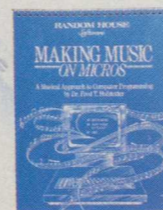
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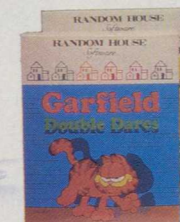
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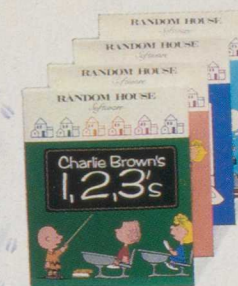
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CIRCLE READER SERVICE 36

Page 00007