NEWS EXTRA

MOUSE MAKES MICROSE MANAGEABLE

Jane Bird reports on the latest way to interact with your computer.

In January, APC was invited to two previews of new products based on the latest gimmick — the graphics mouse.

If you think this sounds like some freak creature escaped from a video game and running wild on the screen then you are some way off the truth. The graphics mouse does not run wild: it is under the strict control of the user. In fact, the mouse is the user-friendly creature that enables the user to feel in control of the total system.

Two new products incorporating Graphics Mouse Technology (GMT) are a dedicated micro from Apple, called Lisa (Locally Integrated Software Architecture) and a portable software system VisiOn (Operating Environment) from VisiCorp.

Broadly speaking, Lisa is polished and expensive while VisiOn is clever and cheap.

Now the whole point of the mouse is that he will be the friendly vehicle that smoothly ushers in the next generation of computer users. These are the executives who, as we are always being told, have a phobia about keyboards.

But how can a mouse replace a keyboard? Answer — it can't. A keyboard is still essential for the text input. But so long as a secretary is on hand for the text-inputting bit it really is amazing what you can do with a mouse.

You skate the mouse around on your desk and a pointer moves correspondingly on the screen. The Lisa screen displays a set of 'icons' or visual representations of system facilities. For example, a wastepaper basket, a clipboard for temporary information, and a filing cabinet. If you use the mouse to locate the pointer on the filing cabinet and then press the button on the top of the mouse this opens the cabinet and lets you get at what is inside. On screen you then see a set of visual representations of what is inside — clock, calculator, folders and empty folders, and tools to cut, copy and paste. You locate the pointer in turn on whichever facilities you wish to use and press the button on the mouse to open the window on the item you want. It all functions rather like a graphic representation of a menu-driven system.

Both Lisa and VisiOn allow you to view multiple windows at a time and to integrate information in them into a new window.

Lisa offers graphics, decision-making tools for spreadsheet and calculation applications, word processing, communications and file-management.

But the most spectacular facility on Lisa is the free format graphics. This allows you to draw smoothly in lines or circles, to stretch these drawings big or small — you can stretch them so big that only a tiny part of the whole is visible on screen — and you can shade them in a variety of different shading patterns.

Graphs and pie-charts can easily be generated from data. There are 720 by 364 pixels on a screen and the picture is clear and still. But it is unfortunate that Apple shows no interest in supplying a colour monitor on Lisa — especially considering the price which is $12,000 for a system including printer.

Lisa has 1 Mbyte of random access memory (RAM) and two dual 860 kbyte disk drives. It contains three 8-bit processors and a Motorola 68000 processor. The operating system is completely new and incompatible with the Apple II or Apple III, so you cannot run your existing applications programs on it. But there has already been developed a standard Cobol compiler which Apple will be making available on the system. A Unix look-alike, UniPhs, has also been developed for Lisa. A Pascal development environment is being made available to software houses so that they can add their own applications software.

One nice feature of the system is that the software prevents you from removing disks until files are closed. Similarly, if you try to switch off in the middle of open files then the system closes them for you before closing down.

My gut reaction to Lisa is that this is a very expensive executive toy. It seems like a lot of money to spend to get an electronic version of your desk without even the facility to run VisiCalc.

Apple is optimistic. Let's face it, with the very-vaulted 300 man-years of development that's gone into the system it has to be. This compares with two man-years of development that had gone into the Apple II at its time of launch, and 25 man-years on the Apple III at its launch.

The price doesn't look quite so outrageous when you stand Lisa up against its closest contender, the Star from Raxon Xerox. With a Star you are talking about a minimum of $25,000 for the system plus $80,000 for Ethernet which you need to use the Star, said Apple's marketing manager.

Both Apple and VisiCorp acknowledge their debt to the Star. 'We have borrowed very heavily from the Xerox Park work but they have built a dedicated machine which is very expensive, and for the average user we wanted only to provide the software for his existing micro,' said Gerald Diamond, vice president of VisiCorp.

Certainly, if price is critical then it's VisiOn that you want. And VisiOn will have the great advantage of combining with standard operating systems and existing applications software. Vendors will be supplied with interface specifications so that they can adapt their own hardware or software to run in conjunction with VisiOn.

Both Apple and VisiCorp believe they have come up with products that will win over the next generation of computer users — the office professionals. This is a vast potential market with lots of money to spend. Apple admitted rather ruefully that it is investing large sums in general market preparation, the benefits of which might be reaped by other companies. 'There is lots of market education to be done,' said Hall.

Then it's over to you, mouse.

For details of VisiOn, refer to a full review elsewhere in this issue.