— By Lloyd R. Borrett —

WOW, there have been some exciting hardware products coming my way lately. The IBM Portable PC (XT), the Data General/One, the Hewlett-Packard 110, the Sigma Design Streaming Tape unit, and the IBM PC-AT are but a few. Then there are all the rather interesting new rumours.

I don't know whether it's because I've been so swamped with new hardware, or if it's just that not much is happening, but there seems to be a lack of exciting software releases in recent months. Perhaps the barrage of software announcements by IBM in the US has caused software manufacturers to stop and rethink their position. I only wish IBM Australia would get its act together and release some of them here.

Let's not forget the world of user groups, bulletin boards, and public domain software. As I plod through the vast collection of public domain software that's accumulating I always seem to find a few pleasant surprises.

With so much happening centre stage *and* behind the scenes it can be quite difficult choosing what to report on, and how to link it all together. Since there is so much to talk about I'll have to cover half this month, and leave the Data General/One (an exciting new portable), the tape back-up for hard disks, and the IBM PC-AT for February.

More Bulletin Boards
As of November '84, there are four bulletin board systems on line using the same software as my IBM PC-based bulletin board (03) 528 3750.

Computers Galore, in Melbourne, has a BBS running on an IBM compatible (03) 561 8497. Apple, CP/M, and PC/MS-DOS users will all find something useful on this system. The sysops are Bob Cooban and Martin Scerri.

Dick Smith Electronics, in Sydney, has set up a BBS using a Dick Smith Challenger (02) 887 2276. This system has information of special use to owners of the various computers sold in Dick Smith Electronics stores.

HiSoft, in Melbourne, has an IBM PC with Sysgen hard disk unit, accessible on (03) 799 2001. The sysop is Richard Tolhurst. HiSoft occasionally announces special hardware and software offers via this BBS.

All these systems have hard disks, which means lots of files for downloading, and fast access. If you haven't ventured into the world of bulletin boards yet, then you are really missing out on access to helpful information and valuable software.

Kitchen Sink Programs
There are now about ten new 'super integrated' programs on the market. I've had the opportunity to look at a number of them and I'm amazed at what the program developers have achieved. Somehow these guys have got everything but the kitchen sink to fit into one program. I can't wait for some smart marketing type to realise this. Can you imagine the impact of a program called 'Kitchen Sink', packaged to look like a kitchen sink, and advertised as having everything *including* the kitchen sink?

But do we need these 'super integrated' programs?

I've all but written off Symphony. Boy did Lotus blow it. 1-2-3 is easy to use, integrates a few key functions, and comes with an excellent tutorial. Symphony is big, cumbersome, complicated and difficult to learn. Many worksheets are too large for Symphony, and the program's advanced features can only be used on small worksheets. As one user put it, "This runs against the nature of things, for it ignores the tendency for larger models to require more sophisticated approaches, and for larger applications to be modelled as more sophisticated packages appear capable of describing the problem." I don't intend to 'downgrade' from 1-2-3 to Symphony.

Ashton Tate's Framework looks the best of those I've seen, but I just can't see why existing PC users would want to change over to these new programs. Most newcomers quickly become lost amongst the multitude of options. If these programs catch on, the ones who will really benefit will be training centres and user groups.

There is no such thing as a free lunch. You can't buy one program and expect it to replace a string of programs dedicated to specific tasks. The program developers need to step back and take a second look at the way people work. A series of programs with effective links and a common interface would be far better than one 'super' program. Recent announcements by IBM and others in the US would seem to highlight this.

IBM has been showing off Topview, a windowing environment for PC applications. It has also announced enhanced versions of PFS File, Report, Write and so on, under the title of the Assistant Series, as well as another set of programs that will run under Topview. The new wave of 'super integrated' programs has all but crashed on the shore. This year will see Topview become an industry standard, and the software developers will either be writing programs to run with Topview, or to emulate those that do.

Absolute Reference
Those of you who use 1-2-3 and/or Symphony should consider a subscription to *Absolute Reference – The Journal For 1-2-3 and Symphony Users*, published by Que Corporation. A year's subscription to this monthly magazine costs US$80, and is available from:

Absolute Reference
PO Box 50507,
Indianapolis, IN, 46250.

The magazine has been expanded from its original 16 pages to 24 pages, to include an eight-page section devoted entirely to Symphony. Absolute Reference carries no advertising and is packed with useful tips.

Que Corporation publishes a number of excellent books on the IBM PC and Lotus 1-2-3. One I've used a lot is *1-2-3 For Business* by Douglas Cobb and Leith Anderson, which is a book of sample applications rather than the usual tutorial/reference publication. I'm told *Using 1-2-3* by Douglas Cobb and Geoffrey LeBlond, and *1-2-3 Tips, Tricks, and Traps* by Dick Anderson are also quite helpful.

Public Domain Software

The collection of public domain software now held by the Melbourne PC User Group is growing fast. Recent editions are Volumes 41 to 71 of the PC/Blue Library collection, and volumes 1 to 54 of the Boston Computer Society IBM Special Interest Group library.

PC/Blue volumes 1 to 42 are now distributed on doubled-sided diskettes, with two consecutive volumes per disk. Volumes 43 to 71 are double sided, and have one volume per disk. The Boston disks are a mixture of one and two volumes per double-sided diskette.

The most difficult job the user group has is cataloguing and evaluating the programs. A catalogue of the PC/Blue Library and some other volumes is now available on diskette. Some of the important discoveries made recently are:

PC-FILE III An improved version of this excellent data management program.

LETUS A set of PC-FILE database files that allow the use of keyword searches to find PC articles from *BYTE*, *PC Magazine*, *PC World*, *Softalk*, *PC Age*, and *PC Tech Journal*.

PC-WRITE A good word processing program.

PC-CODE A file enciphering system.

123PREP Prepares ASCII files for 1-2-3 import.

EPISTAT 3.0 A statistical package.

Utility 1-2-3 A programming tool for users of 1-2-3.

FIG-Forth A rather different programming language.

FreeCalc A simple spreadsheet program.

I seem to find some great new program every time I start looking through the collection. The latest was Utility 1-2-3, a collection of 1-2-3 worksheets that make up a great tutorial on how to use ASCII text and graphics, the printer, Prokey macros, and 1-2-3 macros to improve your use of 1-2-3. You've got to see this one to believe it.

MELB-PC now has over 100 double-sided diskettes full of software, with still more on the way. The Sydney and Perth PC user groups are getting together with MELB-PC to share the 50-page newsletter and the software collection. Can you afford not to join your local user group and gain access to this software?

IBM Portable PC (XT)

In my last column I mentioned some problems with the IBM Portable PC running Lotus 1-2-3. I stand corrected. We took delivery of a portable recently and I had a chance to experiment with setting up 1-2-3 on it. If the colour drivers are installed, the problems I experienced with an evaluation unit are duplicated, however, if the black-and-white drivers are installed it runs just fine. Unfortunately, some other software packages are not as well thought out as Lotus 1-2-3. Their screens are unreadable on the Portable PC, and no alternative is offered.

From what I've been able to gather, installing a 10Mb hard disk with the IBM Portable has become quite popular. The set-up we have uses a Sigma Design 10Mb half-height hard disk and full-length controller card. Sigma Design also has a 20Mb half-height drive available which could be used.

With the hard disk controller card taking up one of the two full-length slots available in the Portable and the IBM colour graphics card taking up the other, at first it looked impossible to get in extra memory, serial ports, and a clock. Fortunately, Hercules recently released a short colour graphics board which is fully compatible with the IBM colour graphics card. It also has a parallel port – out goes the IBM card and in goes the Hercules card.

Now a full-length slot is available to take a multi-function card. We used the Sigma Design Maximiser because it allows full memory expansion, two serial ports, one parallel port and a calendar clock. It's a tight squeeze, and a few pieces of cardboard were required to stop cables rubbing on circuit boards, but the result is well worth it.

We now have an IBM Portable PC with one half-height 360K floppy disk drive, 640K of memory, two serial ports, two parallel ports, a calendar clock, *and* a 10Mb hard disk. In other words, it's a Portable PC XT.

I know I said in my last column that I wouldn't buy a Portable. Well I didn't, my employers did. ❏