"MADAM, I'M ADAM"

A novice's first experience with the Adam family computer

By Lois Cantwell

I AM the kind of consumer that Coleco likely had in mind when it developed Adam—someone who is ready to make a computer-system purchase if the price is modest and confusing options are eliminated. The rumors alone of an 80K computer with built-in word-processing software (no expensive WordStar or Perfect Writer to buy), game playing, and a daisy-wheel printer that all together cost about the same as a printer alone, were attractive enough for me to postpone buying a computer until Adam was on the market. And now that I've met Adam and have had several hours to get to know him well, he seems to be very easy to get along with.

Adam comes packed, unassembled, in a gigantic box along with instruction manuals on SmartWriter, SmartBasic, Buck Rogers video-game instructions, Smart-Writer Easy Reference Guide, and a set-up manual which instructs "Read Me First." Since a great part of Adam's charm lies in everything being "built-in," I panicked slightly when faced with connecting the various sections.

My fears were unfounded, though, since it took only about a half hour to get the computer to work. Not bad, I thought, for a technically disinclined person. One time I had to rearrange all the modules after I had everything all plugged because I had wires crisscrossing the keyboard, which made the computer impossible to use. Finally, after assembling Adam perfectly and turning on the separate color TV that doesn't come with the system, the computer refused to operate. A major problem, I thought. But, no, I had forgotten to turn the computer on! It's equally easy to forget to turn Adam off, which makes the printer get very hot. These problems were not, of course, Adam's fault.

A nice design touch is that all the cords have a "this side up" label and all the cord outlets are labeled. Without this touch, I might still be looking for the keyboard outlet. Assembly might have been a little easier if the manual supplied a large numbered diagram of the entire system that showed where to set things up and plug them in, instead of the small close-ups of where the various plugs should be attached. When you're nervously trying to fit all the right cords into their right slots, each section of computer shown in the close-ups resembles any other section. Since the modules and tabletop TV spread out over a large area that's at least 4' wide by 3' deep, the system isn't especially compact. This is not an unimportant consideration if Adam is being brought into a small apartment or crowded child's room, or if you are planning to use the family television as a monitor.

In many ways I fell in love with Adam. The Smart Keys were terrific! They make changing margins and tabs as simple (literally) as pressing a button until the exact numbers you want appear on the screen. I was able to change the screen color to one I liked better, or was easier on my eyes, or matched my sweater. My options were blue, green, white, black, and gray. And the type appeared in various rainbow hues. I was impressed with the actual prettiness of the type on the screen, too.

As a longtime typewriter user, it was somewhat distracting to use Adam as a word processor whose type appeared on a screen instead of a page in front of me, but that is something I could very easily get used to. Another option that Adam offered me was how much noise I wanted with my typing. If I wanted a collection of beeps and boops as I pressed keys, I could have that; a more attractive option was complete silence. I did wish I had a noise option on the Adam printer, which emitted a grinding noise when turned on and an irritating "whap-whap" when keys hit the paper. I would try placing Adam on a typewriter mat to try and muffle the noise, while keeping my eye peeled for some kind of low-cost printer cover to reduce noise further. This aside, I thought it was neat to see the printer speeding through my text unassisted, typing sentences backwards.

As Coleco claims, I found storing, filing and retrieving text on Adam to be a simple task, handled by its STORE/GET key. When I was ready to call back my text, Adam displayed a clear directory in a file-folder format. It was a simple operation to point to the file I wanted with one of the arrow keys and to ask for it. I found it was easy to clear the screen and begin a new project, too.

Not having had much hands-on experience with computers, I was a little surprised at the complexity of SmartBASIC (which I'm told is no more complex than plain BASIC). Adam is supposed to be super simple, so I was disappointed that I would have to enter intricate strings of numbers and letters, at least one time for storage, before I could do any computing. This was frustrating, even with the built-in prompts and self-corrections. I knew, therefore, that I would be combing the market for ready-to-run software very soon. Coleco's promised SmartFiler series would therefore appeal to me very much.

Now that I've had a "new owner's" exposure to Adam, I think that it lives up to the hype preceding its introduction. ◇