SCIENCE

Personal computers

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Magic Voice has little to say

New products — computers, peripherals, software — come into my office from time to time. But it's unusual for one of them to introduce itself.

With a little programming help, though, the Commodore Magic Voice module could do that. Attached to a Commodore 64 computer, the Magic Voice allows the machine to talk. It has a vocabulary of 235 words and syllables, some of which can be combined in a variety of ways to produce different words.

The Magic Voice is a simple device and easily installed. Measuring about 5 ½ by 4 by 2 inches, it plugs into the cartridge slot on the back of the 64. A short patchcord also connects it to the computer's audio input, or, the manual says (I didn't try this) it can be plugged into your own sound system.

You plug the module into the computer before turning it on, just like a read-only memory (ROM) cartridge. Then you start up the computer in the usual way and the computer-generated voice is fed through the speaker of your TV set or Commodore monitor. The module is controlled through a handful of additional BASIC language commands.

The commands are simple, and the Magic Voice module has to get high marks for ease of use. To make the computer say the word Commodore, for instance, you simply type SAY "COMMODORE." Press the Return key, and a somewhat artificial but understandable female voice says "Commodore."

The rate at which the voice speaks can also be controlled through commands like RATE(1) and RATE(10), where 1 is the fastest rate and 10 the slowest, with eight other possibilities in between.

List in back of manual

I had to look at the manual only briefly, to find out what command to use to make the thing say something. Having done that, I could start fooling around with it, referring only to a list of the available words in the back of the manual.

The list, however, is limited. This is the major drawback of the Magic Voice: with only 235 words and syllables available (and most of these are complete words that don't combine readily to form others) you soon run out of power. Magic Voice can count as high as you're likely to want it to — it knows how to say thousand and million — and recite the alphabet. It can say a lot of common mathematical words, and it can say computer and Commodore (it can't say Atari or Apple, incidentally). But the preprogrammed vocabulary is likely to wear thin very quickly.

If you, or your children, have visions of carrying on a conversation with your Commodore computer using Magic Voice, think again — unless you have the skills to program your own extended vocabulary.

The manual for Magic Voice is quite good, as far as it goes. It explains the essential commands, and lists the available vocabulary. It even gives some tips on BASIC programming, which may be out of place as they will be unnecessary to an experienced programmer and probably insufficient for a novice. It lists and describes assembly-language commands for use with the module, too. On the question of programming your own sounds and voices, however, it falls down.

All the documentation does is to tantalize the reader with the assurance that it is possible to program more words into the system than Magic Voice already knows. It doesn't tell you how it's done, and this is a serious deficiency.

Some games available

Commodore does promise to provide some games that take advantage of Magic Voice, and a cartridge slot is provided in the module so that a game cartridge can be plugged into it. This may give it additional appeal.

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