

## PERSONAL COMPUTERS; SOFTWARE: 'FIRST IDEA PROCESSOR'

LONG have I railed against the incomprehensible verbiage that passes for instructions - or documentation, as it's known in computerese - accompanying most hardware and software. It almost seems as if somehow, now that we have word processors, there's no longer any need for the words themselves to make sense. One begins to gain the impression that they are there merely to be stirred together and canned like so much alphabet soup.

Word processors, once their special symbols, formats and idiosyncrasies have been conquered, can be a boon to those who spend a great deal of time writing. But the individual must shape his style and mannerisms to the inflexible - and often infuriating - demands of the machine.

Electronic thesauruses, commands such as "file insertion" and "block move," file-length limitations (that is, how long each section of your writing can be) and all the other "features" of word processing are bound to alter your writing - though no doubt the same was said when the typewriter was new, or even when papyrus was an annoying novelty to Mesopotamian clay tablet inscribers.

Considering my ambivalent mood toward word processing - the act, that is, as distinct from the word itself, which I find simply an abomination - you can imagine how I felt when some new software called Think Tank (for the Apple II and IIe equipped with two disk drives, \$150 from Living Videotext, Palo Alto, Calif. 94306; telephone 415-857-0511) crossed my desk. Its subtitle, "The first idea processor," comes perilously close to "thought processor," Orwellian in its overtones. So my immediate initial instinct was to drop the program onto my most distant "to do" stack. The electric egg incubator situated behind the weaving looms in the cavernous converted tractor shed which passes for my computer room seemed the most suitable place. There are things back there that should have been disposed of some time in the previous decade.

However, instead I opened the thick red spiral-bound manual written by John Zussman and was greeted by English - not merely English words grouped into sentences through the use of punctuation, but sentences that actually, for the most part, convey their meaning clearly, with a minimum of gibberish. Any unavoidable computer jargon is defined so

as to add to one's working vocabulary rather than appearing as a repertory of nonsense syllables.

Think Tank is not a word processing program, or a substitute for such a program. In fact I'm not sure precisely what it is. It is based on the traditional outline approach to structuring information for clarity, but here the outline is computerized and electronically amplified. One rather suspects that Think Tank's originators, Dave Winer and Jonathan Llewellyn, conceive of it as an organizational counterpart of word processing. Whether or not this software will ever be used as such appears to me to depend entirely on the adaptability of the human user. For myself, I find the traditional notebook, card file, appointment calendar, address book and other written paraphernalia that Think Tank is designed to replace quite functional in their present scribbled state, no matter how disjointedly but traditionally they are presented. Still, for people who often use word processors, spreadsheets and other such popular personal computing frameworks for their information, I can conceive of Think Tank as becoming rather addictive.

ESSENTIALLY, the program helps to structure one's thinking and organize records -lists, research notes, lesson plans, genealogies, or what have you. Consider bibliographies, for instance. They always expand in the course of one's research. Think Tank solves that problem neatly since its storage space, too, is expandable - unlike index cards.

Then, too, you can ask for a new printout at any stage of your developing bibliography. That certainly beats retyping three-by-five cards after every update. More importantly, it's very easy to print selectively just part of an outline. In the case of the bibliography, for example, it's possible to request a printout of only authors and titles, sans notes, or titles alone, or a complete annotated listing.

There are a number of possible small objections. The key marked by a sort of V-shaped symbol on its side pointing to the left is the one to press when you want to expand a heading, "because," to quote the manual, "it represents the command visually, going from small to large." It does? True, the sideways V is the mathematical symbol for "less than," but how many of us remember that from our student days?

On the other hand, the symbol is probably as good as any for the expansion process, which has no parallel in our regular world. It's the electronic equivalent of peeling an onion. Pick a heading, press the key, and the screen displays all its subheadings, previously hidden. Expand

any one of these subheadings, and you are presented with all the information stored under it.

That's pretty easy to do, since there's a good tutorial on disk to go with the manual and the program itself. It was after running the tutorial that I came upon what may be one of the best uses of all for Think Tank, and it's not any of the myriad organizational tasks stressed by the program's producers. Rather, it's simply putting people at ease using a personal computer for something besides games. Think Tank is so easy to use, and so relatively errorproof, that even a first-timer feels as if he's in charge of the computer, instead of the other way around. And being in charge of the computer is what enables you to do with it things you may never have thought of doing before.