



PC battle for straitened school market

By CHRIS PETERS

SO 1987 is just about upon us, and like a Real Computer Writer who seems to have more bravery than sense I ought to make some new-year predictions about the personal-computer industry.

It is, I suppose, best to start with something that seems most likely to eventuate and keep the more speculative predictions to last... so I predict that next year will see an upsurge in the use of personal computers both in the home and in schools.

On the Australian home front, Commodore 64 family packs have been selling like hot cakes this Christmas (about 11,000 units, Commodore says). In the classroom, there is noticeably increased activity already among computer manufacturers in the push to place their machines in schools.

Apple has just completed a mammoth mailing of its excellent Australian Educational Software Directory to every school in Australia. A sign of the penetration of Macintoshes into schools is the 11-page section on Mac software at the back of the directory.

IBM has been visiting education offices throughout the country, including the O'Connell Education Centre at Griffith, in a hopeful attempt to place more IBM JXs in schools.

IBM sees itself ousting Barson Computers, distributors of the BBC computer, and taking over second place (to Apple) with the IBM JX.

However, 1987 won't see a return to the heady days of 1983-84 when everyone rushed to buy a computer. The hardware companies had convinced people that they could do anything with a computer — even mend a broken leg — and that parents who didn't buy one to help their kid's schooling were neglecting their children. Now they are more reasonable.

The prediction of which I am most certain, and unfortunately it's not good news for ACT schools, is that there will be a drop in the standard of consultant-backed servicing of Canberra schools from the O'Connell Education Centre. The curriculum department has had to reduce the number of computer consultants from six to two because of funding cuts.

I hope I am not a Cassandra when I predict that, unless the Government — which initiated computer education in the ACT — is able to renew at least some of its funding, there is going to be a real hardware problem toward the end of 1986 when some of the schools which were first to begin computer education three or four years ago need to replace their worn out machines.

Now a look at the PC scene in general.

Commodore will bring a more powerful Amiga into Australia next year, complete with a built-in Sidecar (the Amiga's IBM emulator) and at least one megabyte of RAM.

I also predict that there will be a big push by Commodore into the desktop

publishing and computer-aided design (CAD) fields, with several third-party desktop publishing and design software packages being offered for the Amiga at prices set to make competitors wince.

I predict (not quite so fearlessly) that many developers of business software, particularly the larger companies, will follow Microsoft's lead and begin selling unprotected programs. Those that don't, will, I predict, lose quite a lot of business to the companies that do.

Apple will introduce a brand-new Macintosh with open architecture, colour, a card developed at MIT with myriad slots (well, about six), a Motorola 68881 co-processor in tandem with the Motorola 68020 processor.

The new Macintosh won't be called the Milwaukee (as was intended) but the Paris. After all, if a company employs a French computer genius — Jean-Louis Gasse — to work on the development of a machine it's not going to be so crass as to name it after a beer town. A further prediction is that the Paris will be launched in March and not, as is usual with Apple launches, at the shareholders' meeting in January.

It is likely that 1987 will be the year of CD (compact disc) ROM as more and more software houses and hardware manufacturers climb on to the compact disc technological bandwagon.

Already there are quite a few programs being written for Compact Disc ROM, and companies such as Electronic Arts have spent a great amount of money and more than a little time researching the use of CD ROM and CDI.

Desktop publishing will be commonplace in 1987, which will also see the spread of text and graphic scanning devices which digitise printed matter and feed it into computers before it is saved to disc, word-processed and then reprinted and published.

The price of good scanning equipment is already falling in the United States. The Omni-Reader, for instance, which will scan text and read it into most word processors, has recently had a price drop from \$US799 to \$US199. It seems very likely that it won't be long before the price is within easy reach of Australian classrooms and homes as well as offices.

The next prediction is the really dodgy one.

I predict that IBM will either change the operating system of its PCs and move away from PC (MS) DOS to something entirely different, leaving MS DOS to the IBM clones. Or it will move out of the PC market altogether. Or it will declare war on the clones and try to drive them from the market. Or it will do absolutely nothing at all and try to maintain the status quo.

One thing is absolutely certain: no-one at IBM is going to say a word to anyone about anything. As usual.