WRITE NOW! A Review

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Note: This review is based on a system consisting of a VIC 20 expanded with two 16K memory cartridges, a 1541 disk drive, C2N cassette, a Gemini-10 printer, and a Cardco printer interface.

Write Now! for the VIC (there is also a version for the 64) comes as a ROM cartridge which occupies Block 5 (memory locations A000-BFFF). Unlike most cartridges in this locations, it is not auto-start, but initiated with a SYS command. This allows the possibility of returning to BASIC to perform various disk drive functions such as deleting or renaming files and validating the disk, which cannot be done from within the program itself.

The cartridge comes with an impressive manual over 100 pages long, and an audio tape which is useful mainly for the beginning programmer as an introduction to word processing. Side one of my copy of this tape didn't seem to be recorded very well. It is possible to change the background color of Write Now!, usually the same color as the normal VIC. However, since the program uses printing in all the colors except white and yellow, the number of backgrounds available without conflicting with screen messages is pretty limited.

Though Write Now! is primarily a disk-drive based program it can be used with tape, even though this produces a few problems. When using an unexpanded VIC, or when attempting to load the next program by inputting only a return, there was no PRESS PLAY ON TAPE message. Under other circumstances, like when using the tape in conjunction with the disk drive, these messages not only appeared, but printed in multi-colors! Despite these problems, loads and saves were made, the latter one item after another, which requires considerable organizational skills.

Among Write Now's features is the advertised claim that it "allows up to 38k of text storage." This figure is at odds with its manual, which says "any combination of memory cartridges providing up to 27k of additional memory may be used . . . for a total of 28159 characters in memory." (It should be noted that none of the Cardco expansion boards recognize the 3K expander.) Still — this is indeed more than any other VIC-20 word processor.

One of the most positive features of Write Now! is that, unlike Quick Brown Fox, it allows full screen editing, though not in the same sense as RTC's VIC-Script. With Write Now!, the twelfth line from the top of the screen is the "cursor line" and text can be scrolled up or down to this point with the up/down cursor keys. Left and right cursor moves on this line are also possible, as is use of the INSERT/DELETE key. There are a couple of unusual features. One is the optional use of a joystick to control the cursor which I thought stupid — is a joystick easier to manipulate than the cursor keys? The other is the fact that whenever a key is pressed, a clicking noise like a typewriter is made (assuming you have the sound on), and various buzzes signal that something has been done incorrectly. This bit of feedback is a nice touch.

There are so many features available with Write Now! that it's hard to know where to begin describing them. Most of its special commands are accessed either with the VIC's function keys f1 to f8 or through use of numbers combined with either the CONTROL or COMMODORE keys. The RUN/STOP key is used as a literal "escape" key. Pushing this allows you to return to your text from virtually any situation.

The function keys are used to PRINT, SAVE, and LOAD. The first of these has an option menu with a wide variety of choices, allowing control over all four margins on the printed page, as well as the page number, number of spaces between lines and whether or not line feeds are generated by the printer or the word processor. You can also start and stop printing at any page, which is handy if some minor correction has to be made, or if there is some problem like paper jamming.

I was not too excited about the idea of having SAVE as function key f3 and LOAD as f4. It is quite possible to load in a large document, decide you don't want it, clear the text from memory, and then instead of LOADing (f4) a new file, accidentally push SAVE (f3), thus saving and replacing nothing under the old file name. Cardco could have endeavoured to make the program a bit more "idiot-proof" at this point. It is also possible to save new material under a file name which already exists, which will wipe out the old copy. The advice in the manual to back up everything extensively, not only on one, but more than one disk, should be well heeded. One positive feature of the SAVE and LOAD commands is you are allowed to merge files.

Other function keys allow you to determine how much memory space remains, and to instantaneously jump to the bottom of text. (The latter is used in conjunction with the HOME key, which jumps to the top.) Two keys are used for Dump Buffer and Clear Buffer, which the manual claims is useful for inserting text — up to 256 characters — at the beginning of long files. I found it handy for inserting short blocks of repeated text.

Of the various functions accessed with the CONTROL and COMMODORE keys, the more important ones include Block Manipulation, Search, Replace, Tabs and Setting of Place Markers.

Block Manipulation, which uses seven different keys to Mark Block Start, Mark Block End, Go to Block Start, Go to Block End, Copy Block, Delete Block, and Write Block, allows you to move around amounts of text of varying size. These commands are also handy for creating and inserting large sections of text in the absence of an Insert mode such as is found on Quick Brown Fox. With QBF, you can insert any amount of text up to the total memory remaining at any point in the text with a couple of keystrokes. The only way this could be done with Write Now!

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other than with Block Manipulation is through creating large blank spaces with the INSERT key and then typing in the new text. Write Block allows you to copy a block onto the disk under another file name.

Write Now! has a global search and replace function, which is called merely "Replace." This allows either automatic replacement of one sequence of characters for another, or a Yes/No choice of replacing or not and moving to the next sequence (if any) manually. The Replace function is very literal, replacing all upper and lower combinations of a particular sequence. For example, "AB" would replace "aB", "Ab", "ab" and "AB." Thus it is not very useful for replacing individual letters. It is also unable to replace the reverse E, produced by pushing the COMMODORE-E, and used as a printer "Escape Code" (more about this later) or the reverse left arrow, which appears whenever a paragraph is terminated. This I found quite annoying. The only way to overcome this problem was to create a dummy combination like "QZ" to represent the unreplaceable character, find it with the Search key (which requires you to push CONTROL-3/RETURN after each time a particular character sequence is found) and replace each one manually.

There are three keys devoted to tabulation which allow you to Set, Clear and Display tabs. Unfortunately, there is a problem created here since tabs can be established only on the cursor line, which is 22 characters long. Making a chart with tabs at character positions 15, 30, 45, 60, 75 and 90 across the page, for example, would be possible only with a great deal of hassle. A better solution here with the Gemini printer is to establish the tabs with the sequence CHR$(68)+CHR$(TAB1)+CHR$(TAB2)... etc., terminating this with CHR$(0). These tabs are then called by CHR$(9). Since it isn't possible to put these ASCII codes directly into the text, they have to be converted to "redefinable characters", which are 17 seldom-used keys like the up arrow, shifted plus sign, and so forth. Thus CHR$(9) could become the British pound sign, which when inserted in the text, would not be reproduced by the printer. This method works fine.

The tab positions, which are moved to with the SHIFT/left arrow combination, also cause a problem with paragraph indentations. These are created by the first tab position, usually four or five units from the left margin. When copy is justified so the left and right margins are aligned (Cardco calls this "fill justify"), Write Now! can put extra space between some words to fill out the line. It can also put extra spaces at the beginning of the line in the indent, with the result that the paragraph indentations do not line up on the page. Examples of this can be seen in the Write Now! manual. A solution to this problem is to redefine the space — CHR$(32) — as a character Such as an up arrow, and put four or five of these at the beginning of each paragraph. This assures that the indent space will be "fixed" and all indents line up.

Some of the more esoteric CONTROL and COMMODORE commands are a non-destructive disk directory, a menu of options allowing you to change device numbers, a delete word key (unfortunately no delete sentence or paragraph), "up and down page" keys which move the text up and down a screen at a time, and a "Display File Position" key, which tells how many characters have been used up to that point.

In order to take advantage of many advanced features of today's printers, Write Now! has adopted a system called "dot commands" to trigger functions in the printer like expanded or condensed print, different pitches (numbers of characters per inch), and so forth. Dot commands consist of a period followed by a two-letter code and possibly other information, preceded and followed by a return. This information is not printed, nor does it cause an extra line feed. (It also makes it difficult to print machine language instructions which fall at the beginning of a line — i.e. .M,008D,008F.) There are 24 dot commands in total.

Some of these commands control various parameters established by the Print Menu, and even override those values, to the extent that the page can be up to 250 characters wide and 254 lines long! Copy can be either "fill justified", left justifed (with a ragged right margin) or centered. You are also allowed the choice of an Arabic or Roman numeral page number and locating it in any column on the page.

There are commands to advance the printer to the next page, to stop at the end of a page to insert a new sheet of paper and to stop the printer and change a daisy wheel or adjust switches. The last I found had a problem in that it did not reproduce the last line of a paragraph before stopping unless the secondary command was changed to 8 in the Option Menu from its usual 7 and the Print Menu line feeds option was turned on.

This business of stopping the printer with a dot command is similar to another feature, the COMMODORE K, which stops the printer and allows you to type up to 18 characters, which are then inserted into the text, and the printer resumes following this insert. This is used in form letters where only things like the name, address, amount of money owed, etc., are different. However, there is no way the printer can stop in the middle of a line, so it stops at the end of a line above. Also, if you have two or more COMMODORE Ks in a line, you will have to remember what they are. You cannot see the screen when they stop the printer.

One of the more interesting dot commands is the Building Block. Using this allows you to call up a chunk of text stored on disk under a separate file name. This is then inserted and printed, and the original text resumes from the point following the Building Block command. In this way Cardco claims even the unexpanded VIC-20 could construct a very long file, though I doubt many VIC users with a disk drive are using an unexpanded computer. The Building Blocks could not presumably be used with tape, since there is no way of returning to the original text.

One dot command I didn't like was the Conditional Page. The idea with this is similar to Quick Brown Fox's "AP Style." This means that if there are 15 lines left on the page, and your next paragraph to be inserted there is 18 lines long, it will be placed, unbroken, on the next page. With Write

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Now! I couldn't see how the number of lines per paragraph could be determined ahead of time, since there is no way you can see where pages begin and end without printing them out.

Another matter which is not handled very well is Headers, lines of text which can be placed on any line of the page, but are usually used as titles. Write Now! allows the use of up to 8 headers, but they are all flush left, with no options for putting them in the center or flush right. Thus, if I wanted to make a centered head like "WRITE NOW! REVIEW" over a text width of 65 characters, I would have to define this header as 24 spaces followed by the title, or else re-establish the left margin.

Using double-strike, emphasized and italic printing on the Gemini-10 posed no problem, and neither did super- and sub-scripts, though it should be noted that the commands in the manual to get out of super- and sub-script commands are incorrect. Not only do these modes have to be turned off, but double-strike print must be turned off as well.

Most special printer features are accessed with the COMMODORE E, which takes the value of CHR$(27), referred to as an "Escape Key". Use of the COMMODORE E insures that the "redefined" ASCII characters following it won't be printed. For example, to do underlining on the Gemini, you could convert the 1 to the British pound sign and the 0 to the up arrow. The sequence to underline is then COMMODORE E followed by dash (equivalent to ASCII CHR$(45)) plus pound sign, and to stop underlining, COMMODORE E, dash, and up arrow. (This example in the manual — Figure 21 on page A27 — of how to underline is incorrect.)

It was with underlining that I found some problems with print-out when doing justified copy. Sometimes the right margin would not be lined up correctly. This anomaly can be seen on the first pages of the Write Now! manual, which was created with the cartridge and Cardco's own letter quality printer. There were also peculiarities with the margin when redefined non-printing characters such as CHR$(145), used to switch to Upper Case, were inserted in a line. In short, if you want to get really fancy with Write Now!, be prepared to do a bit of experimentation with your printer.

After all this, the question is: Is Write Now! the ultimate VIC-20 word processor? It lacks certain things like Quick Brown Fox's Send and Receive, to be used with modems, and one of my favorites, dotted tabs, which allow you to make the following easily:

Item . . . . . Price

Still, despite these deficiencies and the few bugs I found, Write Now! contains many features, some of them NOT found with QBF (especially the "full-screen" editor), which will please even the most creative programmers. One of these, which I've saved for last, is the ability to print files from other word processors, among them Vic Typewriter (Commodore), VIC-Script (RTC) and Word Pro, after a bit of editing to remove unusual commands.

As far as I am concerned, this alone makes Write Now! worth obtaining. *TPUG*