Home Computers: Expensive toys are catching on

by Nancy Floeck
Battalion Staff

John Marion, a freshman at Texas A&M, demonstrates some Apple II math functions. Marion said he has a home computer system, which makes him popular, especially when he brings out video games.

In an age when everything from CIA files to jars of peanut butter at Safeway are computerized, it's only natural to want to bring home a slice of technology.

And people are doing just that. Advanced technology has made micro-computers economically feasible as well as tempting and functionally diverse. Professors, students, housewives and businessmen are letting computers do their work, or at least assist them, while working in the comfort and privacy of their home.

Micro-computers available for home use range from large, multi-accessory systems to hand-held pocket computers barely a foot long and little more than half as high.

Their processing abilities follow an equally diverse path — with the right software, sets of programs and instructions for the computer system to follow, they can spit out letter-perfect term papers or display full-color three-dimensional illustrations of molecules.

In the Bryan-College Station area, harried students and professors are among the ones benefitting from having a computer system listed among the comforts of home.

Most home computers used by students and professors are stand-alones, and have memory, computing, processing and printing abilities independent of a master system.

But, although these are capable of mass storage and processing, they don't have the information many need to complete their work. This information is in WYLBUR, the University computer system used by students.

Solution? Students can buy a small accessory called a modem. Hook the modem to the home computer, hook the modem to a telephone and dial. Now the home system can communicate with WYLBUR, and the student has control of the situation without battling the teeming masses of computer science, BAna and engineering-types in the Remote Computing Center.

Actually, Patty Young, owner of Young Electronics, said these home systems can do about anything their owners wants; it's all in the software.

"One buys basically a shell," she said, "and makes it into what he wants it to be."

Young and Kyle McDonald, a programmer at American Computer Development Inc., said the most popular home computer is the Apple II because of the variety of available programs for the system.

"It'll do anything a big computer will do," McDonald said, "but not as fast."

Maybe the big decision isn't whether to use a computer system at home; it could be whether to buy a personal micro-computer or rent a terminal.

The lowest price for an Apple II was cited at about $1,100. Add a modem and the price rises by at least $100. And a printer, which transfers work from the computer to paper, will increase that price tag by a minimum of $400.

Now, if a terminal, or screen that displays the work being typed in, is all a student needs for his computer homework and he wants to escape with a little less financial pain, he can rent a terminal for $45 or $65 a month, depending on the size of the screen.

But these are dummy terminals; they can't process information without being hooked to another system, such as WYLBUR. They also have no memory, so when the student is finished, he won't have a stored copy of his work.

Young said most students opt to buy their own computers.

But Apple II isn't the only computer students find attractive.

Radio Shack sells a small hand-held computer that processes, stores and prints, all for less than $300. By October, computer marketing representative Tom Cahill said, a hook-up with WYLBUR also will be available for this mini TRS-80.

"What it is doing is replacing programmable calculators," he said. "It's a true technical breakthrough. The pocket computer, to me, is a symbol of the degree to which micro-computers have permeated our society."

Pocket computers also seemed to have permeated the minds of many professors; Cahill said they buy micro-computers to plan and figure homework problems and test questions.

Cahill said the average student buys a computer with about 16,000 characters of cassette memory. The Radio Shack model he cited costs $999, with an additional $40 for software.

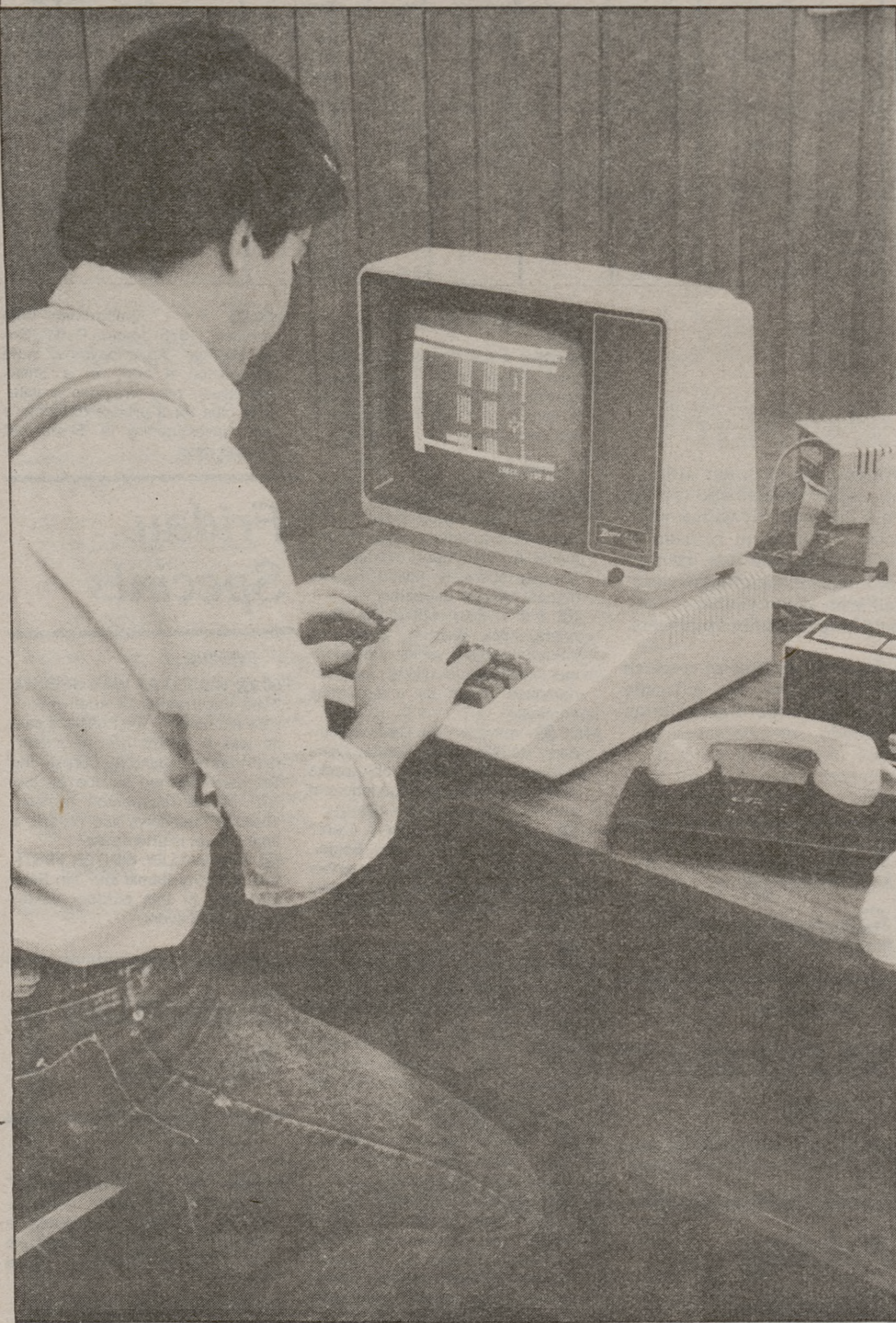Home micro-computers are most popular with graduate stu-