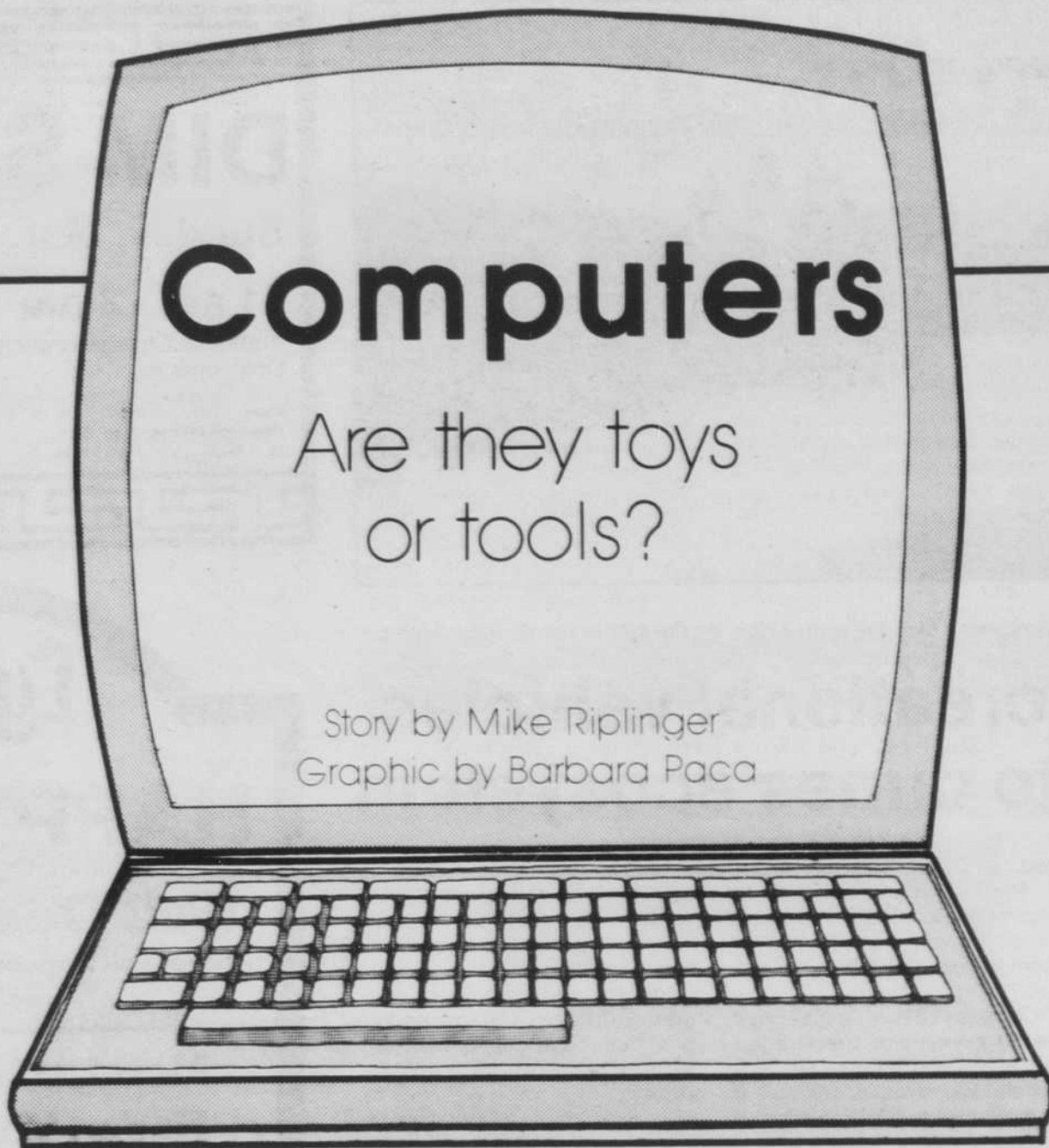


# Computers

Are they toys  
or tools?

Story by Mike Riplinger  
Graphic by Barbara Paca



**T**he student works furiously at his microcomputer, pounding mercilessly on the keyboard. Muttering "finally," the student hits a few final keys and the printer zips out a 12-page term paper. Neatly typed with even margins and no mistakes, the student grabs it and races for class.

Possible? Yes. Plausible? For the majority of college students, no.

Microcomputers may be in the future for students and other consumers, but the prices and the dependability must change before most can make the investment.

"If a person plans on owning a microcomputer, then they better know a lot about them, because if they don't, they are sure going to learn fast," says Ben Thompson, president of Datco, Inc. "Not only does it take a lot of knowledge to program them, but they are always breaking down and it is too expensive to have anyone but yourself fix them."

"Nothing justifies buying them, except for the toy aspect," says Gerald Reicher of Managerial Computer Service. He points out that although these simple computers can be used for balancing the checkbook and other simple tasks, computer work takes longer than manual computation.

But that "toy aspect" makes all the difference for many.

"They are a lot of fun," says William Kahn of Your Words' Worth, a typing, programming and word processing business for students. "You can play a lot of games on them, and as

far as toys go, they are one of the best. But they are complicated toys. If you are going to do anything besides the basic games that you plug in, you have to know what you are doing."

Kahn estimated that a person with no computer experience would need 100 hours of instruction to even design a basic program. For any further wizardry, many more hours of experience is needed.

Personal computer prices start as low as \$150 for very simple ones limited to game

playing. Programmable computers run from \$400-1,000, and computers capable of running small businesses range from \$1,000-\$5,000. People in business who want to work at home can hook up to a much larger business computer via phone lines.

A person may start out with an inexpensive computer. With time and money, the owner can construct a complex system through adding modules, similar to building a stereo system. Computers under

\$1,000 can't do word process functions, print out or store very much data on their disks. However, these extra modules are expensive; costs may run over \$2,500.

"By the time you get your system set, it costs as much as if you would have just bought a complete microcomputer," Thompson says. "Another problem with a makeshift system is that when one of the modules break down, and they all break down at some time, you have to go through all kinds of checking before you

find out what isn't working."

Finances dictate nothing but a step-by-step approach to building a personal computer system. For those who plan to go beyond playing games, the possibilities seem infinite.

In addition, the career aspects of computers are unlimited. "The field of computers is extremely open," Kahn says. It is a relatively new field with tremendous economic opportunities, he adds.

"There are all kinds of job offers down in the Silicone Valley (located in northern California) and if a person is willing to travel then it's not too difficult to get a good job," Kahn says.

America's fanatical involvement with video games familiarizes players, particularly kids, with computers. "Any experience with computers is helpful. Even playing the games helps you become proficient in the use of computers," he says.

Kahn says people "learn just from playing around on them, and it may interest them to try and to go beyond the toy stage. You've got two types of people that play the games. The one who just plays the kind that you plug in, and the one who programs his own."

"If a child starts using them from a very early age, there's no telling how far he will go."

The student's little brother wanders in and mutters about the mess his brother left. He shrugs and plugs in "Missile Command." Soon his mother orders "DO YOUR HOMEWORK!". After killing a few more enemy missiles, he regrettably calls up his algebra homework and begins figuring

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