

NEWS

AM'N'CH

Amstrad recently took a group of journalists to Paris to announce the launch of three new machines - the GX4000 console (which takes ROM cards only and has 64k memory), the CPC 464 Plus (which features a built-in cassette deck and has 64k memory) and the CPC 6128 Plus (which has a 3-inch disk drive and 128k of memory). Julian Rignall was there...

LOOKS GOOD

The three new machines all feature the same internal architecture, which is based around the old Amstrad computer boards. But they've been brought up to date with the addition of a 2k custom chip which gives super-smooth hardware scrolling capabilities, hardware sprites (up to 16) and, most importantly, lets you display 32 colours on-screen at the same time from a palette of 4096 - which is the same as an Amiga.

SOUNDS GHASTLY

Annoyingly, the sound is the same as the old Amstrad and Spectrum computers, but is now produced in stereo via a new sound driver chip. It's a crying shame that a better sound chip wasn't introduced, as this would have given the machines a real audio boost. As it stands, the sound chip is very limited, and the sort of noises it produces are tinny, harsh and grating.



HIPS

FREE GAME

All machines come with a free ROM cartridge called *Burnin' Rubber*, a colourful WEC Le Mans style game that was developed by Ocean especially for the new Amstrads. The 464 Plus also has BASIC on the ROM cartridge, and the 6128 Plus also comes with CPM.

PLAY THE OLDIES

A big bonus is that the 464 Plus and the 6128 Plus all run existing Amstrad software, giving them an immediate huge software library. New software is currently being developed by top software houses to make use of the machines' new hardware, some of the more notable titles being *Robocop II*, *Shadow Warriors*, *Operation Thunderbolt*, *Plotting*, *Special Criminal Investigation*, *Pang*, *Navy Seals*, *Toki* and *Battle Command*. As well as Ocean, US Gold, Domark, Loriciels, and Titus are amongst many firms developing software for the new machines. All games will be released on ROM cartridge for the GX4000 console, as well as tape and disk formats.

THE VERDICT

The two new computers are exciting machines, with tremendous graphics capabilities - but they are pricey. The 464 Plus is £229.00 with black and white monitor and £329.00 with colour

monitor, and the 6128 Plus is £329.00 with mono monitor and is a hefty £429.00 with colour monitor. Black and white monitors are fine if you want to use the machine for doing things other than playing games, but really you do need to buy a colour monitor for enjoyable gaming - and that puts them up with the cost of an ST or Amiga (admittedly without monitor, but the 16 bit machines do have TV modulators - is the monitor really that important?).

The fact that they're able to run existing Amstrad software and take ROM cartridges as well as running their own software is good, and though the machines are pricey, they're easily the best 8 bit computers around, capable in some cases of matching and even beating the specifications of the ST - which can't be bad at all!

The GX4000 is a different story, price-wise. It's a neat-looking and technically impressive console that has an awful lot of potential at the very low price of £99.00. The main criticism is that the joypads are pretty naff (finger cramp sets in very quickly), but at least the joystick sockets are standard, so you can plug in your favourite stick for long-term, ache-free gaming! Other than that, the GX4000 is a graphically superb console, is technically far better than the Nintendo and Sega Master System and has a very exciting line-up of games coming in the not-too-distant future. It's definitely well worth checking out if you're after a decent console for Christmas.

▼ *Burnin' Rubber* is a Wec Le Mans type ROM cartridge that comes free with all machines.



▲ The GX4000 console is a neat looking machine - shame about the control pads, though!