Volkswriter, word processing for the IBM PC

By John Lombardi

Word processors are a bit like shoes: They pinch uncomfortably when new, but after constant use, they become comfortably adjusted to their wearer's habits. After testing a dozen word-processing programs, I've developed a high tolerance for the sore spots each of them produces.

The perfect word-processing program has yet to be developed, although there are many contenders. Indeed, I've come to the conclusion that there never will be a perfect program of this genre, because people have such widely varying needs.

Each word processor has a logic

FEATURES: Volkswriter's design features a flexible and fast full-screen editor and a separate Print module to handle advanced formatting tasks.

The editor permits fast full-screen text manipulation with all the standard editing features, such as block moves, line-word-character deletes, insert or type-over modes, adjustable margins and tabs, automatic word wrap and paragraphing that you can reformat to match new margins.

The editor has a Find and Replace facility, centering ability, block-reads and -writes to disk, hanging indents and fast and easy cursor controls.

On a 128K machine Volkswriter can

use no more than 128K RAM, the maximum file size is about 50K when saved on disk.

Volkswriter holds all edited files in memory, and there is no paging of files on and off the disk. Although this limits the file length, it keeps the editor's operations fast and convenient. Many writers prefer to work on their longer pieces in chapter-length sections anyway, so this may not be a disadvantage.

The editor also includes a useful on-line Help facility that displays a block with the 20 function keys, which are identified at the top of the screen when you call the program. You can

turn the display on and off. The Help facility does not, however, include any of the formatting commands or print commands supported by this program.

With the help of the instruction manual, you can redefine the keyboard to generate any displayable characters with any keys. This allows Volkswriter to display scientific or foreign-language symbols or to implement an alternative keyboard layout. The procedure for redefining the keyboard is not trivial, but the instructions are reasonably clear.

Volkswriter accomplishes printing

that, once discovered, helps you learn to adapt to its style. Satisfaction is a function of a reasonably close match between your style and the program's logic, as well as the presence or absence of specific features. Often, we place too much emphasis on the multiplicity of features rather than on the appropriateness of a given program to the task at hand.

Of course, when these programs are in the $200-and-up range, it's likely we'll want to have only one program that can serve several purposes, from program editing to letter writing to manuscript preparation—hence the difficulty of reviewing word-processing software.

With these caveats in mind, let me turn to Volkswriter, one of the first of the IBM Personal Computer word-processing programs, now in a third revision (Version 1.3). This program belongs primarily in the category of editor-formatter programs, although it does provide a considerable amount of on-screen formatting before you invoke the Print module.

It features a fast and convenient editor, a less satisfactory print formatter and several interesting and useful features.

Volkswriter

from within a Print module that allows you to recall any special-print formats from disk. These formats identify the printer and its setup specifications, and you can have special formats automatically associated with specific documents. Volkswriter supports the special features of various printers to some extent:

In addition to the print specifications, set from within the Print module, each document can have a range of print features activated through embedded commands in the text itself. These allow changes in page numbers, multiline headers and footers, page endings and similar features, through lines that begin with two dots and contain special codes.

In addition, you can send printer-control codes from within the text to access printer-specific features not supported by Volkswriter. The result is a flexible formatting program.

You access both the editor and the Print module via a master menu that has clear prompts. The system is carefully set up so that errors and mistakes rarely result in catastrophic loss of data.

Volkswriter's files are designed to be completely compatible with PC-DOS files. Any program that expects standard DOS files can read Volkswriter files.

Although the editor is full-screen and you can move the cursor anywhere on the screen, the program treats all text on a line-oriented basis. Each line of a Volkswriter file is terminated with the standard carriage return-line-feed sequence, with the exception of end-of-paragraph markers that you use when you anticipate reformatting. You can even eliminate this easily by setting the appropriate switch at the beginning of the edit. Word wrap does not affect this standard line termination, and Volkswriter does not use the eighth bit of each character for formatting purposes.

One of the desirable consequences of this plan is that all 256 characters are available from within the editor. You can have anything available in the IBM character ROM displayed on the screen with simple keystrokes. Volkswriter accepts any ASCII code when you use the Alternate key in conjunction with the numeric keypad.

In addition to the alternate mapping of the keyboard that is possible with this editor, the Print module has a provision for alternate printer tables. Using this feature, you can define your screen to display a special symbol and then tell your printer how to generate that symbol.

The result is that the screen text and the printed text are an exact match. That is especially useful for those who write in European or other languages. The IBM character ROM contains symbols for the special characters used in foreign languages.

You get those special characters displayed on the screen. Then, you build a table that tells Volkswriter's Print module what to do when it encounters the screen code in order to produce the printed character. Often, this requires that the printer type two or three characters for some of the single-screen codes (for example, a character,

a backspace and a diacritical mark).

PERFORMANCE: As should be clear from the description of features, this is a good program. Its editor performs well. It is fast, accurate and virtually uncrashable.

When you confront Volkswriter with an overlong file, it requires you to save it, but it does not crash. If you fill Volkswriter completely, save the file and then try to retrieve it again, however, you won't get all of it. There is a way to split a file into two parts, however.

This is not a "what you see is what you get" word-processing program. The paragraphing and line lengths are the same on the screen as on the printed page, but the page breaks do not show, and right-hand justification may not show, depending on how you choose to implement it.

If you justify on the screen, Volkswriter inserts real spaces to fill out the line. Then, you are stuck with justified text because you can't reformat it back and take those blanks out unless you do it by hand, one space at a time. As a result, the manual recommends that you do all justification from within the Print module.

The program can also produce underlining and overstriking, but only in a most inelegant way. You type the line, ending it with a special character. You type another line under the first, with the underline characters or the strikeover characters. You end this line normally. Then, when the line is printed, the first line is printed with-

out a linefeed, and the second line is printed on top of the first. Well, it works, but elegant it is not.

The program has no provision for automatic hyphenation, does not show page breaks on the screen and does not permit multiple windows or split screens. It does nothing special with columns.

The Print Formatting routines appear to be better suited to some printers than others. Although there is a reasonably complete list of printers supported, I found it difficult to get my Diablo 630 to do what the program said it should do. It may be that Diablos are hard, or it may be that mine is a bit older than some others, but the program didn't do justice to the sophistication of the printer.

SOFTWARE to go

Volkswriter would not implement boldfacing and would not print bidirectionally, and the installation procedure did not get the Diablo to work without some extra effort outside the Volkswriter program.

The Print module does not allow you to print selective pages except through a relatively ad hoc procedure, from within the editor that is not satisfactory.

Thus, the performance of this program is mixed.

Volkswriter has an excellent editor with a range of useful print options but a not altogether reliable set of print drivers.

EASE OF USE: Volkswriter's editor is a joy to use. It does what it is supposed to do without any fuss or muss. The various functions work well, the editor is predictable, the function keys seem appropriately assigned and the file-management routines are reliable. The editor probably deserves an "excellent" rating, and its ability to create arbitrary screen-to-keyboard arrangements is a definite plus.

The print section, however, is much harder to use. The selection of print-time options is clumsy and often confusing. The print formatter did not behave as described.

The embedded commands work well, and the potential of the print section seems good, but the print section of the program is much less satisfactory than that of most other word-processing programs I have used.

ERROR HANDLING: I tried lots of things to mess up the editor, but it resisted most of my efforts. The file-handling section of the program is also solid.

For seasoned users, however, the constant beeps to ask if you really want to do this or that can become annoying. It would be nice to be able to turn them off.

The printing section is not as fool-proof. It is possible to do lots of things that will keep your printer from doing what you think it should. Most of this problem relates to my difficulties with the Diablo 630 and may be relevant only to this printer.

DOCUMENTATION: The Volkswriter manual is elegantly prepared, reads well and, despite a few typos, is good. It is a bit short for the complexity of some of the features, however, and its explanations of the printer-driver sections are not adequate.

Moreover, the manual is not clear about exactly what files are necessary to run this program on a hard disk or a RAM disk. It turns out that it is easy to run Volkswriter on a hard disk. Furthermore, this greatly speeds the program's many calls to the disk for Help screens and the like, but trial and error is the only way to figure out what subset of the files you need to run the system.

SUPPORT: To the credit of Lifetree Software, this program is delivered on an unprotected diskette. When you send in your warranty card, you get a second diskette. The first one has a 64K version of the program with the Print module as a separate program, and the second disk is for 128K machines and has both the editor and the Print module in memory at the same time.

My version of the program is called the International version and has its screen and print tables appropriate for major European languages.

I had occasion to call the customer-assistance number for help in configuring the program to my Diablo 630. The people there were courteous and friendly but had no solution that worked.

SUMMARY: Volkswriter is a good product. Its editor is fine and its print formatter is good, but be sure you see it work on your type of printer before you buy this product. You can define the screen, keyboard and printer through tables, which is a major advantage. This program will not replace WordStar or other advanced word-processing packages, but it comes close. ∎