

Software Reviews

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JULY 13, 1987

Multimate Advantage II falls easily in the top group of professional office word processors that includes programs such as Samna IV, Word Perfect 4.2, Wordstar 2000, Microsoft Word, and Officewriter 5.

REVIEWS SCORING

InfoWorld reviews only finished, production versions of products, never beta test versions.

All products receive scores ranging from unacceptable to excellent in various categories. We then weight the scores in different categories (giving the most weight to the performance and value categories) to produce an overall numeric score for the product. Scores should be judged as follows:

10 — Excellent 9 - 10; —
Tops in its class

Very Good 7 - 8.9
Meets all essential criteria and offers significant advantages

Good 6 - 6.9
Meets essential criteria and includes some special features

Satisfactory 5 - 5.9
Meets essential criteria

Poor 3 - 4.9
Falls short in essential areas

Unacceptable 1 - 2.9
Fails to meet minimum standards

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Multimate Advantage II Word Processing Upgrade Adds Power, Features Package Has Good List Manager but Limits File Size to 128K

By John Lombardi Review Board

Multimate has finally caught up with mainstream microcomputer word processing programs with the Multimate Advantage II. Originally successful due to its cloning of the Wang system, Multimate recently lost ground to more flexible and powerful products, particularly Word Perfect, and to a lesser extent Wordstar 2000 and Microsoft Word.

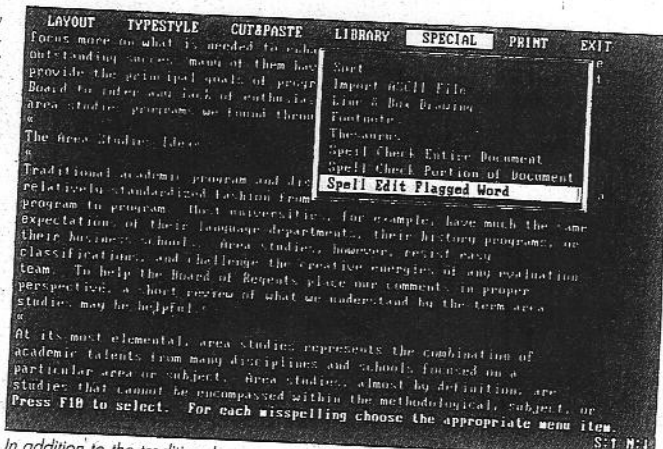
FEATURES:

Multimate is a page-oriented product; like a dedicated word processing system, it sees text as a sequence of separately treated pages, much like a typewriter deals with sheets of paper. Page breaks are fixed, and after heavy editing you use a pagination feature to reformat the document with the correct page breaks.

The alternative approach, document orientation, sees text as a continuous stream, broken by dynamic page indicators but flowing smoothly from beginning to end; during heavy editing, page break indicators adjust themselves automatically. As users have become familiar with computer editing they have tended to choose document-oriented systems. Consequently, Multimate and other programs based on dedicated systems have softened their page orientation significantly to meet this user preference.

The most immediately visible change from previous Multimate versions is the optional drop-down menu user interface, like that found in Ashton-Tate's Framework integrated product or Dbase III Plus database. Traditionalists can still use the familiar full-page menus of earlier versions of Multimate.

Functionally, one change we noticed immediately was in the use of the insert mode, where Multimate now allows push-ahead insert. This means that you simply touch the insert key and begin typing; the new text is inserted at the cursor and the following text is pushed ahead. The



In addition to the traditional menu system, Multimate Advantage II offers the option of drop-down menus like those used in Framework.

old drop-down insert mode, which opens a large blank space into which you type new words, is still available; but in this mode practically none of Multimate's editing commands are available.

Another important change implements automatic page breaks when entering text for the first time. This feature reproduces what document-oriented systems have always done: When you reach the end of a page, a page break is inserted and a new page started automatically. However, pagination is not dynamic, so when you insert text in the middle of an existing page, changing the number of lines on the page, Multimate does not automatically adjust the page break. A separate

repagination step is required to rearrange page breaks, in the manner of traditional page-oriented word processors.

Multimate's editing commands include most of the essentials. It handles foreign language characters and permits very extensive document conversions to bring material from another word processing program into Multimate. These conversions include the standard DIF, Wordstar, Lotus 1-2-3, IBM Document Content Architecture/Revisable Form Text (DCA/RFT), ASCII, Wang, and others.

The keyboard macro feature is particularly extensive, with the capability to edit and manage a significant collection of macros for playing backpro-

grammed sequences of keystrokes. A related capability permits the construction of phrase or document libraries with boilerplate paragraphs that can be inserted into a document on command.

Multimate has very good mail-merge facilities with the capability to handle forms. An improved version of an add-on product called On-File is included (formerly it was sold separately); it implements a very nifty flat-file manager for mailing-list-type data. These capabilities for managing data and producing specialized form letters, mailing lists, and similar list processing tasks are as good as those found in any word processor in the business.

The program has multiline headers and footers, footnotes, and a multilevel undo that will restore previous deletions or destructive changes. It can sort data and do math, and it can do multiple columns as newspaper-style snaking columns or as question-and-answer-style parallel columns. The thesaurus and dictionary are good.

Feature for feature, Multimate Advantage II falls easily in the top group of professional office word processors that includes programs such as Samna IV, Word Perfect 4.2, Wordstar 2000, Microsoft Word, and Officewriter 5.

PERFORMANCE:

This impressive complement of features performs well, although with some significant limitations, the most serious of which concerns document size. Multimate can only handle documents of 128K or less. This works out to from 20 to 40 single-spaced pages, depending on the document — there is a certain amount of file overhead. For long reports, Multimate is less effective than many other programs in its class. We think the limitation on file size is much too severe for a program in this class.

Along with excellent editing speed, Multi-

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REPORT CARD

SOFTWARE MULTIMATE ADVANTAGE II

	Unacceptable	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good	Excellent
6.8						
Performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Documentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ease of Learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ease of Use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Error Handling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Value	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SUMMARY

A full-function professional office word processing system with many features. Fits well in offices still oriented toward the Wang word processing system. Pros: Very good data file, form letter, mailing-list management; outstanding printer support; fine documentation. Cons: Clumsy pagination; no indexing; documents limited to 128K; no window onto second document.

PRODUCT DETAILS

List price, \$565 with 5¼-inch disks, \$595 with 5¼- and 3½-inch disks. Version tested (II) available for the IBM PC-XT, AT, or compatibles with two 5¼- or 3½-inch floppy drives, MS/PC-DOS 2.0 or later, and 384K of memory. Does not support EGA (except in CGA mode). Ashton-Tate Corp., 20101 Hamilton Ave., Torrance, CA 90502; (213) 329-8000.

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Software Reviews

have any on-line help available; on-line documentation is restricted to the word processing functions from within the program.

Taken together, the voluminous but well-indexed manuals and the effective on-line help system earn Multimate Advantage II a very good rating for documentation.

EASE OF LEARNING:

Multimate is reasonably easy to learn. The drop-down menus are a major convenience for new users and the on-line help keeps the novice fairly well-oriented. Still, this is a complicated product, and it will take all but the most expert user quite some time to be able to use all of Multimate Advantage's features.

Unless you read most of the documentation and approach this product systematically, you may have some difficulty controlling its power and flexibility. On-File is somewhat less easy to learn than the main Multimate word processor. Compared to the ease of learning champ in this class, Word Perfect, Multimate is somewhat less easy to learn, in part because of the way it is structured. We rate ease of learning as good.

EASE OF USE:

Once learned, Multimate is easy to use. Its editing is quick and effective. Its formatting and other commands can be invoked through command key sequences that are easy to use. Its menus are less important for experienced users but are always available for infrequently used functions. However, the need to repaginate for correct page breaks and the inability of some functions to cross page boundaries detract from the program's ease of use.

Similarly, the highly structured and modularized menu systems make navigating around the program less easy than Wordstar 2000, for example. Overall, Multimate's ease of use earns a very good rating.

ERROR HANDLING:

Multimate supports two kinds of error corrections. Its Undo command is multi-level, storing deletes in a buffer one after another and spooling to disk when memory is full. You can undo deletions of anything from a character to a block, the number of deletes that can be undone being limited only by the disk space available. Our test lab was able to restore 20 pages of deletions. In exercising the Undo command heavily, however, we several times ran into a bug involving an erroneous printer error message; this sometimes resulted in garbage characters on-screen, and sometimes in the loss of a few characters to three paragraphs of the text we were deleting.

Multimate has a recovery function that will recover a lost page or a corrupted file. However, the recovery feature is not entirely reliable (as the manual explains) and may not always recover lost pages. Nonetheless, it is reasonably effective in helping recover from unanticipated power losses and the like. On many occasions, our lab was able to recover documents without even using the recovery feature.

Normal errors such as open drive doors and wrong file names are handled gracefully. However, Multimate is not entirely protected against user error. We did a sort in what was apparently an inappropriate fashion (attempting to sort across a page boundary under certain conditions); instead of stopping us, the program froze; the result was a lost page and a file unable to be reloaded or recovered. While we had used the sort

function in a non-standard way, the program should have protected itself against data loss. On another occasion, Multimate gave an error message that a five-line page was too long when the real problem was insufficient memory.

Multimate's error handling is very good on some levels but unreliable in certain situations; those situations are not common, however, and the data loss was relatively minor. As a result, we rate error handling satisfactory.

SUPPORT:

Multimate provides a multilayered support system. For the first 90 days you get free telephone support, provided you sent in the registration card. For convenience, you get one free call before the card arrives. After the 90 days you can continue to get limited support by subscribing to an Extended or a Professional Support plan. The fee schedule has four levels from \$50 to \$100 per year for a variety of services, including 10 to 20 support calls per year. None of this is on a toll-free number. There is also the normal 90-day warranty on the disks themselves and the manuals. Ashton-Tate does, however, guarantee that it will fix "significant errors in the software that make it unusable."

While Ashton-Tate does not copy-protect Multimate Advantage II, it does legally restrict use of the package to one personal computer, rather than the more common licensing language that lets you put the software on many machines as long as only one is being used at any one time. If you install this package on a machine in the office and then want to use it on the machine at home, you purchase a Personal Use Extension for \$25 that allows you to use the same software on another machine at different times. Thus you will be paying an extra \$25 for rights that other publishers give away for free.

We called Ashton-Tate's support line and asked about the sorting difficulty. The technical person we reached was pleasant and gave mostly correct information. She identified the error as being the result of our using the sort in a non-standard way. However, she incorrectly described some conditions under which the sort would not work, and she also failed to note that sort works differently on lines with hard returns from those with soft returns.

Overall, balancing the limited free support period against the availability of extended support, we rate Ashton-Tate's support service as satisfactory.

VALUE:

Multimate Advantage II costs \$565 (with 5¼-inch disks; for \$595 you get both 5¼- and 3½-inch disks). This makes it a bit more expensive than its competitors, which cluster around \$495.

Multimate Advantage II benefits from solid, wide-ranging functionality, a much-improved user interface with drop-down menus, and the inclusion of the On-File system. However, the limitations on file size and still-clumsy pagination detract from the product's overall effectiveness. Nevertheless, it's a very good product, and much improved over its earlier versions.

We place Multimate in capabilities somewhere in the middle of its main competitors: below Word Perfect (\$495), about equal to Samna IV (\$550), and higher than Officewriter 5. We rate Multimate Advantage II a good value.

John Lombardi is a professor of history and author of five books. He has been working with computers since 1967.

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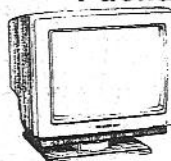
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Memory Components

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