

M-Disk offers ease and convenience

Howard Oakley fits out the Atari ST with something new from MicroDeal

Not only does the Atari ST series offer superb graphics, sound, and the fast and powerful 68000 processor, but it must also provide the most memory for such a cheap machine. However, even the 1040 STF, with a built-in floppy disc drive, could be criticised as being cumbersome to operate without a second disc drive, and that costs money.

If you only have one drive, copying a disc file by file takes endless changes of the disc – particularly troublesome if you wish to copy a single-sided program disc onto a double-sided one when Gem will not allow you to do a straight disk copy).

However, the abundance of memory can be turned into a Ram-based disc with relative ease, and at less than a tenth of the cost.

There are several excellent programs available which provide Ram discs! *M-Disk* (supplied by MicroDeal, at £13 or so, and £20 inclusive of a print spooler); one provided free with the Modula-2 language compiler (£100 complete from Modula-2 Software), and the third supplied as part of the *BackPack* desk accessory cartridge (£45 from Computer Concepts).

Each of these provides a small memory-resident program which sets aside a chosen portion of memory to act

as a rapid-access disc drive, which can be assigned any drive letter from C onwards. You should be a little cautious of letting it be C, because an installed drive of that letter is assumed to be the hard disc, and to contain the desktop files and accessories (which should be copied over to it).

The Ram disc program is placed in a folder named AUTO in your boot disc, so that when you switch the machine on, the operating system automatically installs the Ram disc. The first two versions, and most other Ram discs available, then prompt you for a size in Kbytes K (if you ask for OK or less than 16K, the program aborts and no disc is installed). Before you can access the disc, you must install it as the correctly labelled drive. You can make a selection of boot discs with different combinations of Ram disc drivers, desk accessories, etc., with the desktop already saved with the additional drives installed. However, sometimes changing screen resolution can lead to apparent loss of the disc – all you have to do is re-install, using the correct letter (the Ram disc is not wiped clean).

Before trying to install a Ram disc, you should check that you are going to be left with enough memory to run programs. My 1040STF reports about 1028K free after booting up, desk accessories can

take a further 30K free or more, *BackPack* itself takes an additional 75K, and the Ram disc program will need some more space. The MicroDeal version has an overhead of about 15K, including the program, the Ram disc's directories and boot records, whereas *BackPack's* takes about 27K.

So, on a 1040ST, a MicroDeal Ram disc of 500K actually takes 515K, and leaves about 300K after accessories and *BackPack* are loaded, too. *BackPack* only allows certain sizes to be installed, whereas the MicroDeal version offers any in the range 16 to 709K.

The only problems I have experienced with Ram discs occurs when doing a reset without turning the machine off. Sometimes, with the *BackPack* version, you cannot recover the memory used by the Ram disc, or the machine crashes when trying to reboot. The MicroDeal version appears more robust, and does return the memory correctly, but may let the machine think that there is a real drive C, a hard disc. In general, it is wisest to turn the machine off to change the size of the Ram disc.

Finally, does a Ram disc suffice as a second drive? In many situations it is much better, as disc access times are very much shorter. For example, compilation of Modula-2 programs is fairly slow if all the libraries are held on disc, but amazingly quick if they are placed in a 650K Ram disc created by MicroDeal's *M-Disk*. I usually use the *BackPack* Ram disc when I am using word processors like *1st Word*, as a 384K of space is fine for them.

If I want to copy a complete double-sided disc, I can always boot the machine without desk accessories, and use 760K or more to store the files temporarily. However, there are times when a real second disc drive is useful.

Even so, most users should find the few pounds spent on a Ram disc make a one-drive machine much easier to use.

