Microware Review

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FINGERPRINT PLUS Parallel/Serial Printer Interface with Print Screen Key

Available From: Thirdware Computer Products, 4747 N.W. 72nd Ave., Miami, FL 33166. Cost: $100 to $150 (US).

How many times have you been using your favorite Apple II computer to generate tutorial material and said "gee whiz, I wish that I could print that screen on paper to show my students exactly how this part of the program should look"! In a nutshell, the Finger-Print Plus printer-interface card gives the Apple II computer the much needed screen print function. The user needs only to press one "activator" button and the program (copy protected or otherwise) will freeze. Then, whatever is on the monitor, picture or text, can be printed on paper or dumped to disk. Once the printer or disk operation has been completed, pressing escape returns the program to operating status without the program having to retrace its steps to the point at which it was frozen.

The FingerPrint Plus card contains both parallel and serial interface capabilities. The parallel configuration emulates a Grappler Plus interface card and the serial configuration emulates the Apple Super Serial card. By maintaining this type of popular card emulation, Thirdware Computer Products has made it difficult to find a pieci of software that will not run with this equipment. While the cable for only one type of interface is normally supplied with the card, the alternate form of the cable can be purchased at any time. Hence it is also difficult to find a printer that cannot be used with the FingerPrint Plus interface card.

As is illustrated in this sample screen dump (Figure 1 on next page), in addition to its "print and save" function, FingerPrint Plus also provides more that 30 different yes/no command options on the main menu screen. These options permit the user to format the printed output, examine the program code and/or manipulate the graphics screen images. Access to these options is gained by pressing the space bar to toggle between the main functions listed at the top line and the enhancement options listed in the menu. The arrow keys enable movement among the options and when the desired choices have been made, pressing the return key activates the desired printing function.

In the top line functions are the global functions. *Display,* allows the user to preview text, graphics or mixed text and graphics screens. *Print,* sends the output to the printer. *Type,* turns the computer into a typewriter by sending the output directly to the printer upon every keystroke. Commands to the card itself can also be issued from this function.

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FIGURE 1.
Functions in Fingerprint Plus.

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FUNCTIONS:DISPLAY PRINT TYPE DISK/JUMP
######################################### 000
OPTIONS:

APPLE TEXT        Y       GRAPH PAGE 1        N
VIDEX             N       GRAPH PAGE 2        N
STATUS SCREEN     N       DOUBLE HIRES        N
LINEFEED          Y       LOW RES             N
LEFT MARGIN   000 N       MIXED MODE          N
LINE WIDTH    080 N       INVERSE             N
PAGE LENGTH   000 N       DOUBLE WIDTH        N
PAGE NUMBER   000 N       ROTATE 90           N
PAGE HEADING      N       X AXIS  FOOOTOOO    N
SERIAL PORT       Y       Y AXIS  FOOOTOOO    N
PARALLEL PORT     Y       COLOR               N
DEFAULT SET       Y       BACKGROUND   0      N
JUMP TO MONITOR   N       FOREGROUND   0      N
JUMP TO FP RAM    N       8TH BIT             N
LOCK              N       SWITCH:12345678     N


ESCAPE "ESC" TO RESUME
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Disk/jump, provides the user with the ability to jump to the monitor or to the FingerPrint Plus RAM. If these functions are not invoked from the menu, then the screen image can be saved to disk.

Finally, the support materials deserve some comment. For example, a test disk is supplied with the card. The program on this disk verifies the proper functioning of the card. In the event of the user experiencing difficulties during the installation process, which only requires inserting the card into the motherboard and setting the dip switches, this feature can be helpful in demonstrating to the user that the problem lies somewhere outside the computer and is not the result of a malfunctioning interface card.

Two weaknesses have been identified thus far in the six months of use that this card has seen. These are in the owner's manual and the binary image storage system. In the manual, all the necessary information seems to be there, but the treatment of the topics is rather sketchy. For example, in the explanation of how suffixes are used to determine the type of screen being saved, the last line states that "further information is available from Thirdware Computer Products." This is nice, but why not be a little more detailed in the manual and save the user what could be an unnecessary delay. In the second case, the storage system used to store the screen image on disk does not use a standard DOS 3.3 binary format. Thus, it is a bit difficult to access this image with a standard word processor to incorporate it into the desired place in the text of a document. Fortunately, to rectify this deficiency, the magazine InCider came to the rescue and published a program called "Screen Saver" earlier this year.

On a more positive note, it is only fair to say that the Thirdware technical support staff deserves a pat-on-the-back. In the two times that I have had to call for assistance, they have been both knowledgeable and willing to provide the assistance desired. It is indeed reassuring to find a third party product that has quality, utility and has technical support available when it is needed.