

Extract from **THE GUARDIAN** — 30 September, 1981

# The Thing has arrived, and guess what — it's British Teleputer

"WE SHALL soon need to name a new Thing. Those with Orwellian fears of the future might call it Comcene (communications centre out of Newspeak). Optimists might call it the Servant. By 1995, at least, many of us will be using it . . ."

Thus a Guardian Special Report on personal computers three weeks ago. Yesterday the Thing arrived, and it's British, and it's got a name: the Teleputer.

This first omnibus communicator meets most of the requirements of the universal Thing. It's a colour TV, a video recorder, a typewriter, a games player, a teacher, a personal computer — and as a telecommunications tool it can bring to the home screen the variety of electronic services now emerging. Therefore, it can also become a letter-box, a newspaper, an advice centre, an encyclopaedia, a library (textual and visual), a filing cabinet, an accountant, a secretary, a bank, or a travel agent.

The basic Teleputer consists of just a 14-inch colour TV set, a slim box beneath it (the microcomputer itself), and a remote keyboard. It costs £700 basic, going up to £4,000, depending on what titbits are required.

The driving force behind its development is Mike Aldrich, the 40-year-old managing director of Rediffusion Computers at Crawley, Sussex. Mr Aldrich is in the Cabinet's new six-man advisory panel on information technology. He is not one of the slim smoothies of the computer business, nor one of those soulless technocrats — his

down-to-earth enthusiasm is more Falstaff than Strangelove.

Mr Aldrich says the Teleputer is aimed ultimately at becoming "the heart of the home information systems that will develop over the next decade." But at first it will be aimed totally at the business market. "No one is sure when the domestic market will be there. The timing is incredibly difficult."

Mr Aldrich claims that in combining several technologies in one box — providing sound, vision, and data, then adding computing power, storage, and communications versatility — Rediffusion is a step ahead of the many American and Japanese companies working in this area.

He says he is so confident of mass demand that Rediffusion is gearing up for production in TV volumes of thousands rather than the hundreds normally associated with the manufacture of computer terminals.

Mr Aldrich says they toyed with other additions to the Teleputer — like building the phone directly into the unit and supplying the ability to instruct the machine by voice — but decided that such things don't as yet "do a lot for you."

He points out that the ability of computers to understand the human voice is so far restricted and unreliable but adds longingly: "You end up shouting at the thing. It gives you a power complex if you're in that mood."

The key technology behind the Teleputer is videotex — the lifeless label that has now become internationally accepted for the British invention which uses the phone line to marry the home or

office TV set to central computer databanks.

That not only supplies huge stores of instantly updated news, information, and advice but also introduces electronic transaction services, like home banking, buying, and booking. The Teleputer will, of course, juggle with all that and also eventually use the coming storage potential of the video disc.

Rediffusion, in following the lead of British Telecom's pioneering public videotex service Prestel, has become the front-runner in providing private videotex systems for office automation. And the Teleputer is, above all, a videotex terminal.

Although videotex has so far failed to establish a mass market in the home — more than 85 per cent of Prestel's 12,000 customers are businesses — Mr Aldrich says that the experience of the five pioneering years means that videotex is "now ready to become an overnight success," — it's set for "explosive world growth."

His argument runs like this: The first Prestel sets were merely modified domestic TVs, relying on comparatively simple microchips within, and aimed at the consumer market. The second generation has better microelectronics — "a dedicated videotex module." That second generation has set the stage for "explosive growth" and the third generation, like the Teleputer, will shape the videotex industry for the future.

During the life of that second generation a consensus has formed that the real market for videotex

until the mid-80s will be in business use. That consensus marks a watershed.

Meanwhile, the world was moving fast towards international videotex standards, which were always prerequisites for the development of a world market. Many national telecommunications authorities set up public videotex services, often based on Prestel. "Perhaps most significantly, many leading computer companies announced videotex connectivity for their computers."

Although that history has set the scene for "explosive" world growth, Mr Aldrich adds that in some ways Britain is not well positioned to exploit the potential of its own invention.

"The UK videotex industry is highly fragmented and constructed largely to support public-service Prestel . . . It is virtually impossible to get any cohesive marketing."

His point here is that the wide spread of interests involved — British Telecom running the national service, companies like Rediffusion producing private business systems linked to that service, organisations from all directions providing the information on that service, manufacturers making the TV terminals, microelectronics companies making the chips to go into those terminals — all have "a narrow-band view." There is no "broad band of realisation of the potential," he claims.

That realisation is now spreading, in the huge semi-virgin territory of the United States.

Peter Large

Extract from **FINANCIAL TIMES** — 2 October, 1981

## Enter the teleputer, all purpose information tool

EARLY LAST year, Rediffusion Computers (then still called Redifon Computers), with the muscle and market base of the television rental business behind it, launched its office revolution.

It was a system that used the company's R5000 computer and large-screen colour television sets with on-board data chips, built-in modem and autodialler. The result was one of the first private videotex systems, later emulated by others. Rediffusion has sold some 50 systems worth over £4m.

Now the company has moved the concept a little further on with the announcement of its Systems Alpha, which it describes as "the closest approach yet to the truly all-purpose information tool." It offers viewdata, videotex (the generic description of viewdata-like systems, public or private), personal computing, data interchange with cassette recorders and, in due course, with video discs. If desired, the terminal can also be used simply to watch television. It can also communicate in various formats.

Some or all of these facilities are offered by System Alpha, in five models ranging in price from £750 to over £4,000. The company has even

coined a new name for the systems: it calls them "teleputers."

The domestic market for viewdata (that is, UK videotex, otherwise known as Prestel) was, to quote managing director Mike Aldrich, an "edifice that started to crumble" when it was realised that the market projections were "wildly inaccurate." So for the last year the industry has been turning its attention to the business market, and Rediffusion has been joined by such companies as Honeywell and GEC, both offering private viewdata systems.

Each new announced system is more "convergent" than the last in the sense that it offers facilities that so far have been obtained with separate equipments — personal computing and word processing for example.

Recently the European PTTs have agreed on alphamosaic (words and pictures) standards for videotex. At the same time a number of leading computer companies have announced videotex connectivity for their computers. And so, according to Aldrich, "the scene has now been set for an explosive growth," in these systems.

The basic unit from Rediffusion is Alpha

Model 1. It uses a 14-inch colour screen and can be connected by phone line into any Prestel or Prestel-compatible private viewdata/videotex system.

Model 1 can use the normal dial-up telephone network, private leased lines, or it can be connected via the switched telephone network into British Telecom's packet switched network. It can also operate with the Prestel Gateway service.

Model 1 has a local page store, a telephone directory that can be updated by the user, an optional printer, choice of keyboards, automatic dialling and an integral modem.

In Model 2, off-line local editing has been added for the preparation of pages within private or public systems.

A 64,000 byte personal computing facility is present in the Model 3 with local diskette storage, plus unattended automatic access to any number of videotex computers. Two micros are used — an Intel 8035 for videotex telecoms and a Z80 for local processing.

Model 4 has in addition computer controlled video cassette recording for interworking sound, vision and computing as a single system.

The company sees important future uses for such systems, which will allow interactive vision, sound and computing for training applications in many fields.

Geoffrey Charlish