Newword — the other wordprocessor[*]

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No, not the B word, nor even the T word, but Newword, the second wordprocessor after Tasword to appear for the CPC, albeit only the 128K machines.

Newword was written by the authors of WordStar after they fell out with the company over the future direction of WordStar. WordStar was the second microcomputer wordprocessor — the Electric Pencil was the first — and, by the time I came across WordStar in 1980, it was being compared favourably with leading minicomputer wordprocessors.

These were largely used in typing pools where an IBM golfball typewriter was considered state of the art. So WordStar was written with such typists in mind as well as the limitations of early microcomputer keyboards — just a typewriter keyboard plus control, escape and line feed.

I used WordStar for over six years on an RML 380Z with two 8" double-sided disc drives — each side being treated as a separate 128K drive.

WordStar overcame the memory and disc drive limitations of the early microcomputers in several ways. It only loaded the core functions into RAM, calling the remaining ones from disc as needed, and, as soon as a document became too long to be held in RAM, it used a technique now called 'virtual RAM', saving parts of the file to disc. You could alternate saves between drives, which made it appear I was using a 256K drive, and you could chain long documents across discs.

In an attempt to break away from the limitations of classic WordStar on PCs, the company launched WordStar 2000 which sank almost without trace but caused the original authors to leave and produce Newword. They got as far as Newword 2 for CP/M and Newword 3 for 16-bit machines before being bought back to develop WordStar 4.

WordStar 4 is more Newword than WordStar 3 and when WordStar changed their file format in Version 5 to accommodate fancy fonts, they retained a facility to convert files back to WordStar 4 format. So, as long as you can convert files from other word processors into one of the WordStar formats, you can always convert it back to WordStar 4, or Newword, format. This makes Newword the only word processor for the CPC able to read files originally created on other PC (or Mac) wordprocessors without needing to resort to ASCII.

I have used this facility fairly regularly because the CPC screen and the Plus keyboard are among the best I have used. I can work with them for much longer than any of the PC screens I have used over the years. So whether I am editing someone else's text or typing in my own, the Plus is my machine of choice.

So, what are the disadvantages of Newword? Well, being disc based, it is slow unless you are using a silicon disc though you can speed things up by lowering the standard response

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times and the help level (there are four) at installation and by using typeahead to give a whole command and thus suppress the prompts.

There is a long learning curve — I took 18 months to get the hang of WordStar 2 and Newword is two to three times more sophisticated than WordStar 2. Not everything is in the manual because some facilities retained for compatibility with earlier versions are not documented.

Newword 2 can only handle fixed space fonts; it cannot handle graphics or maths and it doesn't have room for on-line spell-checking. Some of these disadvantages would probably have been remedied if Newword had lasted longer as a separate company.

It does not come installed for the CPC; you are expected to use the standard CP/M Plus programs on your system disc to set up the function and arrow keys or show foreign languages on the screen. Because so few CPC users bought it there isn't the regular exchange of comments and tips that a word processor like Protext generates.

Protext on ROM has all the core functions of WordStar and follows many more of its conventions than some of its adherents would care to admit. VDE similarly draws heavily on WordStar conventions but is RAM based and does not call any functions from disc once it is loaded. The speed and relative simplicity of these wordprocessors made them more attractive to those who did not need all the facilities of WordStar/Newword and Arnor gradually produced the spell-checker, comprehensive mail-merge facilities and printer drivers for those who wanted them. This was cheaper for those who did not want all the extra facilities but more expensive than buying Newword for those who did.

So what extra does Newword offer? Well, like VDE, it can edit ASCII files as easily as WordStar files. It can handle very long files if needed though, inevitably, this slows things down and I normally split and chain very long files I receive from others.

Like VDE, help is always at hand but is generally more comprehensive and, even if you install a lower help level to gain speed, you can still access any of the help screens without changing the help level.

Like Hewlett-Packard printers, WordStar/Newword does not throw a wobbler if it comes across an instruction it does not understand. This means you can leave most WordStar 4, 5, 6 or 7 instructions in a file and all Newword will do is put up a polite question mark and leave it at that.

It comes with printer drivers to suit virtually every available printer, including landscape (or sideways) printing on the Hewlett Packard printers, and it can access the printer's 8-bit character sets if the CPC has an 8-bit printer port. In addition it can send escape codes not included in the standard printer drivers even in the middle of a line, allowing you to change to French or German and back for a single word or use colour to highlight individual words.

It uses the standard Comma Separated Values format for mail-merge — so you can use BASIC data files as well as data files from many other programs without alteration — and it includes a small number of database management facilities so that you can create new data files from an existing one.

Chaining and nesting files (up to eight levels) can be independent of or dependent on mail-merge commands and a nested or chained document can be reformatted at printout so that all the nested or chained files match the layout of the main file. This is a great help when you need to produce several versions of the same document with minor differences to suit different groups. Newword will also produce a page image ASCII file of a merged, chained or nested document allowing you to preview the layout or create a single ASCII file for use with another wordprocessor.

Newword has an excellent spell-checker which includes a facility to mark the text so that, if it picks up an error which cannot easily be sorted with a simple change of spelling, you can mark the error and get back to it easily.

But, though the 6128 and the PCW series computers were the best CP/M computers that Newword ever ran on, they were never intended to be typists' workhorses and so a wordprocessor for typists was never likely to become the wordprocessor of choice on these machines. Protext took over on the CPC and LocoScript on the PCW. In the PC world, a wordprocessor that had started on minicomputers, WordPerfect, eventually dethroned WordStar only to be dethroned in turn by one which had had its biggest break on the Apple Macintosh, Word!

Thanks to Newword I don't have to down-grade to a PC for my day to day work though the PC serves as a useful bridge to and from my customers.