POT BLACK

With the introduction of colour television in the late 1960s, the game of snooker became a mass-appeal spectator sport. At first sight it may appear an unlikely candidate for computer simulation, but a simplified version of the game is now available for three popular home computers.

To anyone who has ever played it, the idea of computerising the game of snooker is anathema. To a professional player it is sacrilege. How, they ask, could every subtle curve of a ball's flight, or every variation in the table's character, be quantified and programmed? And certainly not within the confines of a 16 Kbyte Spectrum! However, the game of snooker can be thought of as a fairly simple application of the principle of conservation of momentum, and the mathematics of this are easily handled by a computer.

When you begin playing Visions' Snooker, you are presented with a plan view of the table, with the balls represented by different coloured circles. You aim the white ball by moving a cross on the screen to a target position, thus defining the path in which the ball will travel. The white ball is then fired towards its target with a strength that is determined by the length of time that the key is held down.

After playing a few shots, a seasoned player would be aware of two significant problems. The first is that the computer — whether Spectrum, BBC or Commodore — cannot calculate the angles of play or the friction drag well enough to give convincing results on a television screen. This means that many shots give quite unpredictable results (although this can be true in a real game, too). Some shots you may want to play are impossible on the computer. To compensate for this, the pockets are proportionally larger than they should be.

The other problem, which in practice is more profound, is that you are looking at a plan view of the table. This means that when you come to play a shot, you lack the advantage of sighting along the cue. And because a television screen is slightly curved, judging angles is made doubly difficult. Your initial attempts at this game are, therefore, likely to be highly frustrating.

Nevertheless, once you've accepted that the game bears little relation to real snooker, and after you've begun to master a few of its eccentricities, it becomes a quite fascinating game of strategy in its own right. You begin to notice some subtle features of the programming — in particular, it is possible to add spin to the ball, although the results

of this are once again unpredictable.

The three versions of the game differ in ways that reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the machines that they're played on. The game uses surprisingly little memory and therefore loads quickly on all three machines — even on the Commodore, which is notorious for its slow loading speed. Consequently, the quality of each version reflects the graphics capabilities of each machine, and not its memory capacity.

The Spectrum is weakest in this respect. The table is small, and the balls are not all displayed in their true colours. The Commodore version is better, with a larger table, realistic colours and balls that are more accurately scaled. The score is more strikingly illustrated on this version, and there is a demonstration option at the beginning of the game — although you have to complete a game before you are handed back control. The BBC version is the best of the bunch, with a table that covers virtually the full width of the screen, and is strengthened by a much finer control of the cue.

The game has a facility for one or two players, although the one-player option is really only for practice. As so many computer games are extremely anti-social, the two-player game scores points in this respect. Unfortunately, Visions have not seen fit to provide smoking jackets with the software. The over-riding impression given by the game is that it is worthy, but you suspect that a lot of its potential — especially with so much unused memory — has been largely undeveloped.

Snooker: For Commodore 64, £8.95
For 16K Spectrum, £8.95
For BBC Micro, £8.95
Publishers: Visions (Software Factory) Ltd, 1 Felgate Mews, Studland Street, London W6 9JT
Author: Tim Bell (BBC Translation by Andy Williams)
Joysticks: Optional
Format: Cassette

The essence of snooker is accurate aiming and precise weighting of the shots. In Visions' snooker game, an aiming cursor must be positioned on the table while strength of shot is controlled by holding and releasing the fire button

Corner to Corner

BBC Micro

Commodore 64

Spectrum

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