Amsoft
The software division of Amstrad, Amsoft, deserves credit for producing several dozen programs for the Amstrad in time for the machine's launch. These are mostly games that have been converted from versions originally written for other machines. However, many software houses are currently developing software specifically for the machine so this situation is set to change. Shown in the photograph are Roland On The Ropes (left), Roland In The Caves (centre), from Indescomp and Oh Mummy from Gem Software (right)

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for BASIC programs and data.

The Amstrad BASIC is one of the most sophisticated versions of the language available. Extensive support is given for the excellent graphics hardware. There are several useful features to make the plotting of pictures onto the screen easier. The graphics origin may be redefined from the bottom left-hand corner of the screen to any point in or out of view. A graphics window can be set up to restrict graphics operations to a small part of the screen. As many as eight text windows may be defined on the screen at once, and text may be directed to whichever one is needed at the time. Prompts could be sent to one window, for example, and typed answers to another.

The BASIC graphics also lack a method of filling an area of the screen with a colour. There is no command to draw solid shapes on the screen and no command to fill in an outline already present — only lines and points may be drawn. The only way to produce a block of colour is to draw many lines close together, which is hardly an efficient method. However, there is a possibility that this omission will be rectified in the near future. Just as the BASIC ROM is switched in and out of the memory map to make room for the screen memory, so any other ROM may be added on to occupy the same space. The features missing from the current Amstrad BASIC could well appear on an add-on ROM and the new functions would then merge into the old BASIC. Complete new languages, such as PASCAL, FORTH and LOGO can be added in the same way. These 'sideways' ROMs would take up no more memory space than the current BASIC does, so 42 Kbytes of RAM would be available for their use as well. In fact, extra memory can be paged into the memory map in a similar way, so the standard 64 Kbytes of RAM can be expanded.

The most original aspect of Amstrad BASIC is its treatment of 'interrupts'. Many micros allow machine code programmers to use the interrupt system built into a machine's operating system to drive their own machine code routines. Amstrad BASIC takes this idea one stage further by allowing interrupts to be used from BASIC. The BASIC command AFTER will send a program to a specified subroutine after a certain period has elapsed. EVERY will do the same thing repeatedly. This advanced feature makes writing any kind of time-dependent program, from a laboratory data-gathering program to an arcade game, easier and more effective.

The Amstrad is unique among home computers in that it is supplied with a monitor instead of the television display used by its competitors. Monitors give better quality, so this is a definite advantage. However, users who have purchased the monochrome version may well find a need for a colour display occasionally. As it stands, there is no way to use a colour television set with the Amstrad, although an adaptor is available as an extra. It is possible to use a separate colour monitor with the Amstrad without the aid of the adaptor but, because the micro draws its power through the monochrome monitor, both monitors would need to be on at the same time.

With superb graphics and reliable hardware, an advanced BASIC and expansion potential, the Amstrad CPC 464 is one of the most sophisticated home computers now available. It is also excellent value for money.