



Atari 400 & 800

Game-playing is the special strength of the Atari range of computers



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The fortunes of Atari, now with headquarters in Sunnyvale, in California's Silicon Valley, rest on the phenomenal success of their arcade games. The first of these was 'Pong', played in black-and-white on the television screen.

From this humble beginning, Atari grew, and eventually became part of the vast Warner Communications Group, and now, some six years later, are among the largest manufacturers of home computers, as well as having a very large slice of the arcade market.

With its excellent standard of construction, and reassuringly heavy feel, the Atari range of home computers, comprising the 800 and 400 models, has set standards which others seek to emulate. Superb graphics, well-developed software and — until recently — a very high price tag all contribute to this quality image.

Selling for around £150, the 400 differs from the larger model in price (the 800 costs £280), in maximum memory size (fixed at 16 Kbytes in the 400, expandable to 48 Kbytes in the larger model), in having one instead of two cartridge ports, and, perhaps of less immediate importance, being restricted to use via a domestic television, where the 800 has the option of display via a monitor. Most obvious, and perhaps most critical, amongst the differences, however, is in the keyboard.

In order to overcome the problem of inconsistent signal levels, Atari home computers do not use domestic cassette recorders, but rather require Atari's own model. A large proportion of users however, have at least one disk drive, in order to take advantage of the wide range of software packages available on disk.

Atari Keyboards

The striking difference between these two Atari models lies in their keyboards. While the larger 800 model is equipped with a full typewriter-style keyboard the smaller model has a membrane type which, while better than some, still suffers from the in-built faults of other similar units — notably a lack of 'feel', and sometimes unpredictable response. It is as well to bear in mind, however, that very expensive 'ruggedised' machines, produced for industrial and military applications, use this method to secure against dust and the occasional spilled cup of coffee!