commodore home computing

power play

August/September 1984
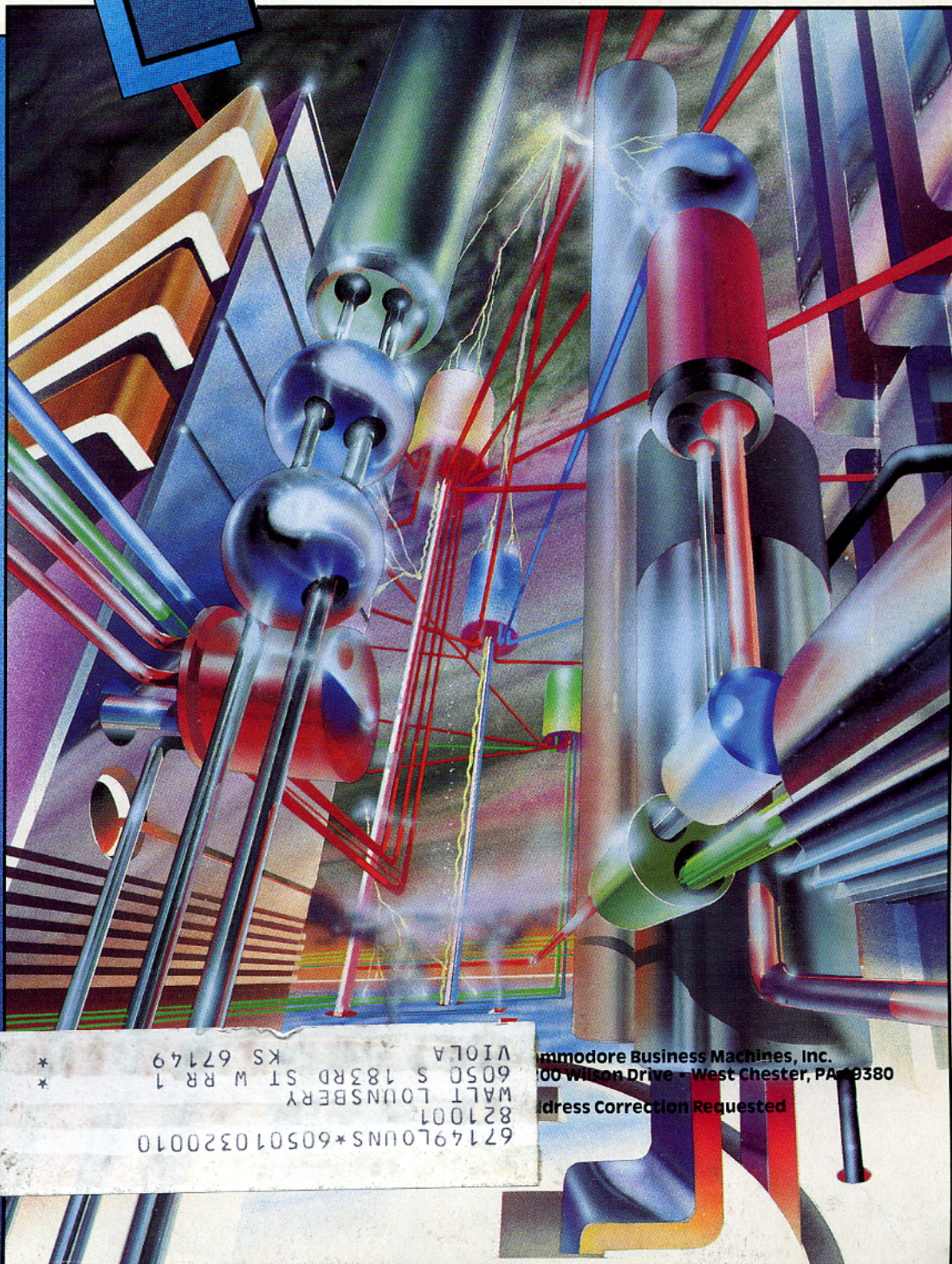U.S. $2.50
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Commodore User Groups: Who Needs Them and What Do They Do?

Producing a User Group Newsletter

Running a User Group Software Library

Incorporating Your User Group
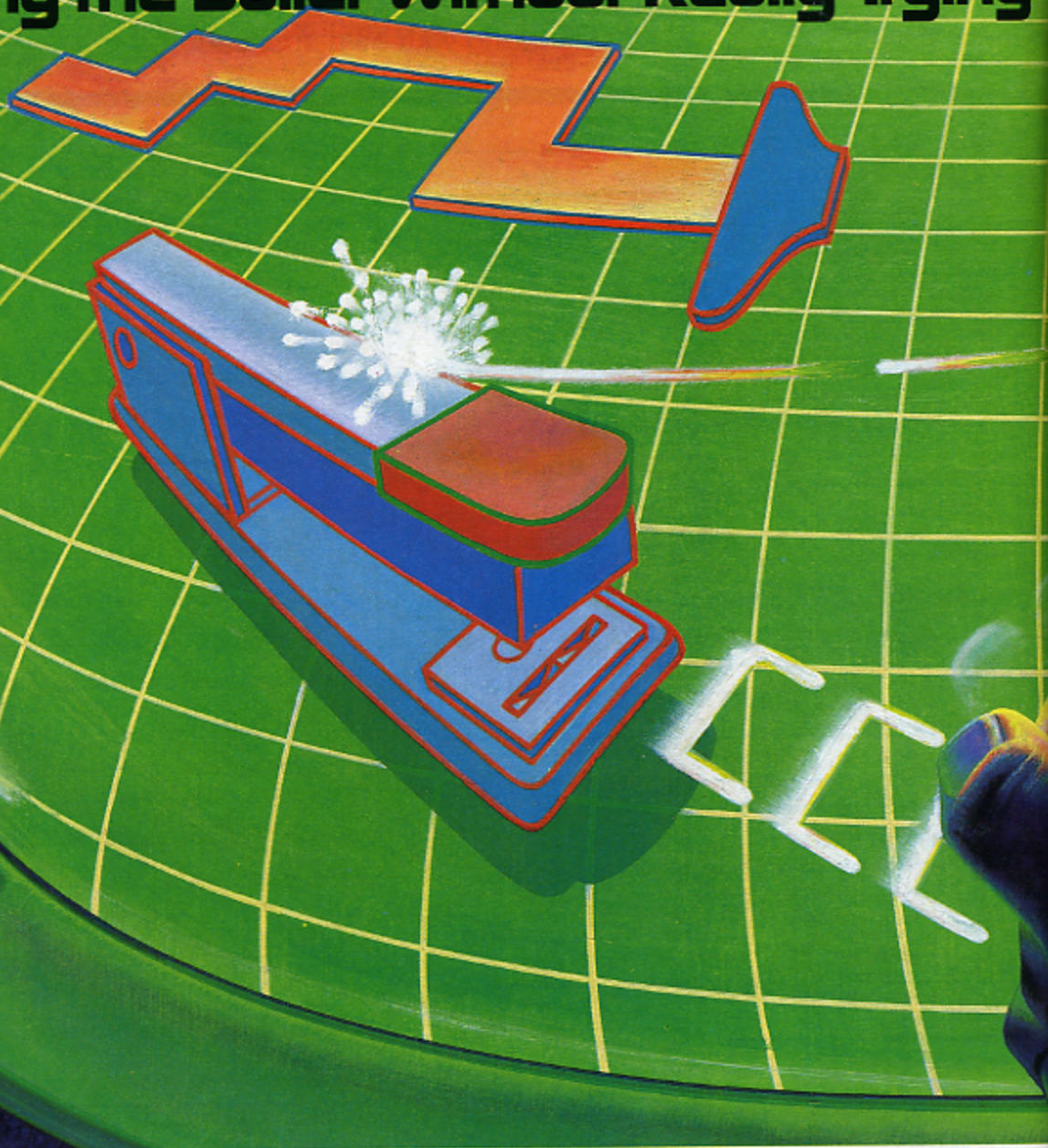
Exclusive Interview with Jim Butterfield

True Confessions of a User Group Newsletter Editor
Or
Byting the Bullet Without Really Trying

By Walt Lounsbery Wichita Commodore User Group

A newsletter can be the glue that holds a user group together. Here's how to keep the newsletter's editor from coming unglued.

Every now and then, since assuming the duty of editor for the Commodore Users Group of Wichita's newsletter, I have reflected on the role that the newsletter plays in our club. I think about it late at night, usually, when the newsletter is not coming together on schedule, and a
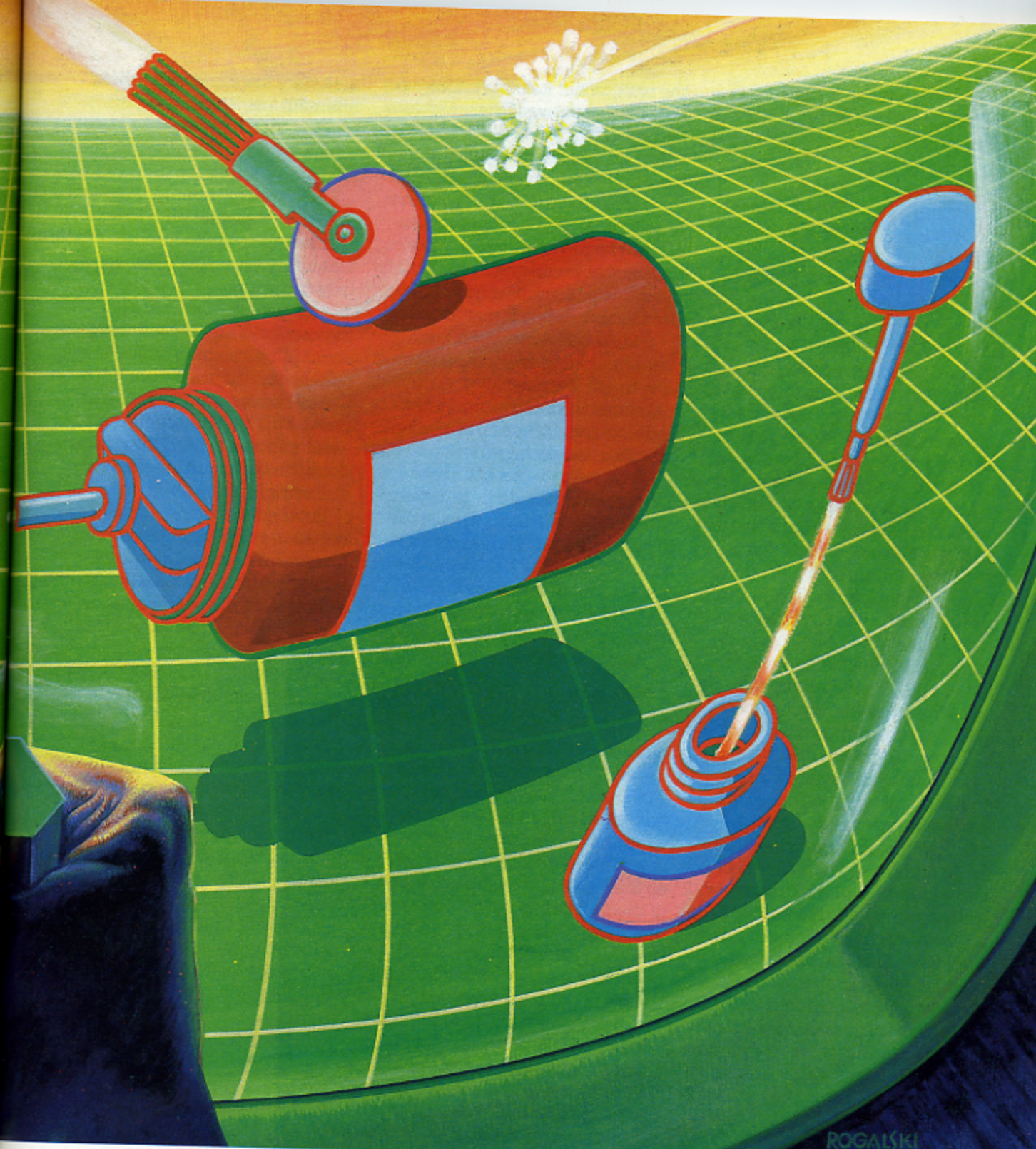
few more hours of work could make all the difference.

It seems obvious that the members can and will trade programs and ideas on their own, regardless of the club. (For example, how many fellow Commodore owners do you know at work or in your neighborhood? Are many of them in a club?) And despite all the effort of those trying to save money by buying things in quantity, they often end up getting much better service and value through the local dealers or even by regular mail order. Like most organizations, only one-fourth of the members really make it to the meetings, and the ones that want to attend a workshop always seem to miss it.

As a result, it seems as if the newsletter is the glue that binds the whole organization together. It is where the members really find out what is going on. The newsletter provides entertain-

ment, education and communication. Certainly it is worth that extra ounce of effort to produce a newsletter that hundreds of people have been impatiently waiting for?

Nowadays, I ponder all these things for a few seconds, roll over and fall into a deep and restful slumber.

Newsletter Phobia

Having made my cruel point, perhaps it would be best to state it another way before my club arranges a lynching party! (These are quite popular in Kansas, even more than Tupperware parties.) Although a newsletter can be an essential part of any club's activities, there is an almost universal fear of writing and publishing something so simple. The job is seemingly so awesome that many clubs don't have newsletters, although they would dearly like to put out one. I have seen people that worked on high school newspapers cringe at the very idea of writing for the club newsletter, much less trying to produce one. But sadly, the lack of a newsletter often means the death of a fledgling club. This is hard for me to understand because a computer club should be fun and working on computer club projects should be even more fun and rewarding. It is a matter of attitude, of philosophy, if you will. Every computer club officer should keep in mind Lynd's Law: Life is worth living, but only if we avoid the amusements of grownup people.

You Must Put In What You Put Out

Perhaps the best way to start a newsletter for a computer club is simply to start one. Make it a single page to begin with. Add pages as people start to contribute and before long there will be plenty of food for thought in every issue. Keep in mind that every club is unique and the newsletter should reflect the nature of

the club, not of its editor. This is how the best newsletters start and grow.

But if the editor does not shape the newsletter, what the heck does the editor do? What we have here is a chicken-or-the-egg situation. The newsletter obviously does not assemble itself out of everyone's ideas. The editor must decide how to put the articles together, what news might be worth including in an issue and how to get the newsletter to the members. In the beginning, the dedicated editor may even have to write most of the articles.

I am going to offer some suggestions that should help in publishing a newsletter. It is possible to put out an interesting gazette without a lot of effort. On the other hand, the most difficult part is really what to put into those issues from all the material at your disposal.

A Newsletter Is Like A Salad: All Tossed Together At The Last Minute!

Even though starting a newsletter can be nervewracking, the first issue can be incredibly easy to assemble. It should have the bare minimum club news, such as the meeting schedule, a map of the meeting location, minutes of the previous meeting and the names of the club officers and how they may be contacted. Now that the contents of the first page are determined, the second page should include any pleas for newsletter articles and participation in future club activities. This will take about one sheet of paper if printed on both sides of the sheet. There should only be one more sheet of paper as a cover sheet, with a return address printed at the appropriate spot. The third and last sheet is the most important for you, it should be a stamped, self-addressed questionnaire for the club members. Although this costs a bit of money, it is well worth finding out what kinds of computers the

members have and what their interests are. With this information in hand, it is possible to determine the best content for the following newsletters.

OK, so once you have achieved one issue's respite with the old membership questionnaire trick, what do you do now? It is necessary to start on the next issue just as the last goes out, and editing that next newsletter really shouldn't be a chore. After the first issue, you, the editor, must use all the cunning at your disposal. You have to remember Peter's Proposal: Anything worth doing is worth getting someone else to do.

Peter's Proposal operates in this manner. Every club should have several officers, each of whom may have something to say in each and every issue of the newsletter. The president is always wanting more help with meeting programs, tutorials and workshops. The secretary has to publish the minutes. The librarians are always pleading for more programs. The membership chairperson has to flaunt a long list of the people that joined the club last month. The treasurer is obligated to point out that the club is losing money. In fact, as editor you may have difficulty getting them to shut up!
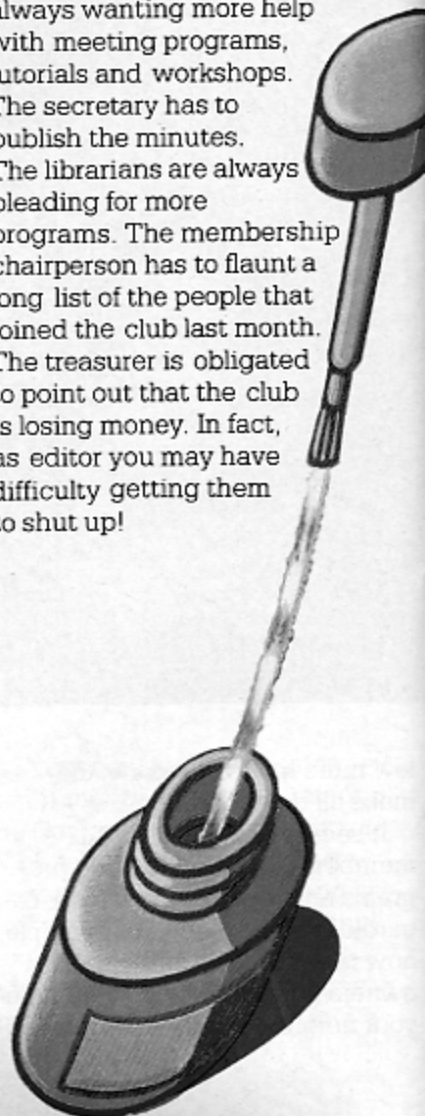
There is also the small matter of the club membership and that survey you sent out. Even though the officers were elected by the majority of the club, they are just a small minority taking up lots of expensive paper in a newsletter. An editor must try to defy the precepts of Kitman's Law: Pure drivel tends to drive ordinary drivel off the TV screen.

Until the members get over an initial reluctance to write for the newsletter, it is usually necessary to provide good examples. This also helps prove to the other officers that they aren't writing all the newsletter! Before I discuss sources of material, consider Table 1, a typical list of items in a newsletter. Certainly there is no minimum number of these in a good newsletter, just as there are many more possibilities not listed here.

Table 1
Computer Club Newsletter Items

Club Officer Names and
    Telephone Numbers
Table of Contents
Club Officer's Messages:
    President's Page
    Librarian's Letter
    New Members
    Treasurer's Report
    Minutes of the Last Meeting
Meeting Schedule
Meeting Map
Program Library Access
News and Rumors
New Products
Club Classified
Product Reviews
How To Do It (Tutorial)
Program of the Month
Hardware Construction
Modem Talk
Cartoons

The Great Paper Chase

I have always believed that a club newsletter should consist of articles written by the members. Sometimes, though, all those articles that were supposed to arrive before the deadline, don't. Every now and then a new development just has to be in the next newsletter. The first few issues, of course, should contain some articles of interest until the local articles are written. Where does this material come from?

One of the best places to start looking for newsletter material is the magazine you are reading right now. Try contacting some of the other user groups around the country, listed elsewhere, and you can get examples of some of the best newsletters. Generally, it is good manners to return the favor and place those clubs on your mailing list. Besides providing articles and gossip, they will show many creative formats for a club newsletter. Computer bulletin boards and teletext services also provide a good source for up-to-date material. The magazine itself, of course, will have some of the latest news that may bear repeating. If you are industrious, it is worthwhile to scan several magazines and trade journals for that interesting tidbit. I regularly look at about thirty publications a month, which is just a fraction of what is available.

Don't forget to send Commodore your club's name and address! This will be published in *Power/Play* and *Commodore Microcomputers*, showing the world that a new active users group has been formed. Several third party manufacturers mail to this list, so your club will also eventually be sent a lot of new product announcement literature.

One of the astounding things about editing a computer club newsletter is how easy it is to get review material. New programs and hardware are being produced so fast that many dealers cannot possibly keep up. Most dealers will appreciate the opportunity to work with the local user group and to hear exactly what their customers think of a product, so it should be fairly easy to borrow evaluation samples. Make sure to give proper credit to the dealers in your newsletter; this is one way they are supporting your club. And, naturally, some care is required in recruiting people to do the reviews!

The Nitty Gritty Newsletter Band

Once the sources of material have been located and tapped, the newsletter editor must face up to the really difficult decisions. It is necessary to collect the articles, lay out the newsletter format, perhaps make up a mailing list, get the newsletter printed and send it out. After the first few issues it is easy to see that the writing and article solicitation is the fun part; getting the issues out can easily become a chore. But it is possible to nearly eliminate that tedium and still produce something your club can be proud of.

Format, Printing and All That Jazz

When it comes time to put together a publication and send it out, no matter what it is, there is one thing that should be foremost in the editor's mind. MONEY!!! Yes, it sounds petty, even cheap. Certainly the editor should be concerned about quality, good layout and content. But think about this: the newsletter can be the single greatest expense for a club. Finding some way to save a penny here or there means both lower dues and more funds to purchase needed equipment and supplies or maintain a club computerized bulletin board. In the case of our user group, the dues are set entirely on the cost of producing a newsletter, estimated at $1.25 per member per issue, or $15 per year if we can produce 12 issues. Of course the actual cost can vary a lot, as we shall see.

There are several ways a newsletter can be laid out. The simplest format is very easy. Simply set the margins to three-fourths inch (7 characters at 10 cpi) on the left and one-half inch

on the right (5 characters), and provide enough margin at top and bottom to allow for misalignment during the copy process (one-half inch). A standard 8½ by 11 inch sheet of paper should be used. To make the process easier, the items should be typed or printed out separately, and then pasted up on the final sheet. "Paste" is a generic term. The articles can be attached to the final page with "magic" transparent tape, rubber cement, special layout glue sticks or wax, if you have access to a waxing machine. (Those of you with access to professional typesetting services that provide camera-ready copy on an adhesive backing may not need the advice in this article anyway!)

The easiest method for an editor is wax, which the printer despises. Rubber cement is unhealthy and your thinking tends to get distorted just when you need it the most. Tape is a one-time operation that requires a sharp knife if you make a mistake. It is best to try all the methods to find what you can get along with. After paste-up, it is essential to apply page numbers for easy reference during printing and collation.

Now isn't that simple? Not if you are a penny-pincher! First, it is wasteful of paper. Second, if you are concerned with providing copy that is easy to read, the long line lengths just won't do. The first improvement is to print on both sides of the paper. This requires laying out pages so that one edge can be punched for notebooks (the wide margin). Half the layout pages will have the wide margin on the left side, the rest will have it on the right side. Since the printer will copy both sides, you should use a separate layout sheet for each page in case of mistakes. Carrying things to great extremes, it is possible to use a size-reduction step before the final copy. This allows putting four pages of full-sized printing on a single sheet of 8½ by 11 inch

paper, with the lines aligned along the length of the paper and two printed pages side-by-side. However, this process requires at least letter-quality printing with a good quality copying process. It also makes your job a lot more difficult, since pages and sheets of paper no longer coincide. Numbering the pages isn't easy, and the printer will really get a headache collating and stapling the thing. However, this is exactly how many magazines (including the old *Power/Play*) are assembled. With the reduction step, it is possible to actually put the equivalent of five pages on a single sheet of paper, since the layout page can be thirteen inches long.

Photo-reduction is great if paper is expensive, or you send all your newsletters airmail, but what if your main concern is legible issues? In our group, we found that far too many people simply couldn't see that kind of print. (I won't say that this had anything to do with age. They might club me to death with their canes.) Also, program listings cannot be reduced well at all.

If you are mainly concerned with legible copy, line length must be dealt with. The reason that newspapers are printed in narrow little columns is that narrow columns make it easier to read that tiny print and it is easier to lay out the pages. We can take the same principles to heart and put multiple columns on a page. If the standard page size is used, two columns are practical. If the

page is laid out sideways or on larger paper, then three columns may be used. In any case, make sure about three-eighths inch separates the columns. One drawback to columns is the use of right-justification with word processors. Unless you use a word processor with a very sophisticated word-split capability, the columns will end up with large gaps as the word processor tries to align the words.

Before we move on I should mention printing costs. This varies a lot from area to area. Some clubs even have sponsors willing to donate printing. If you must go to a printer, be sure and send out a request for bids to several printers to obtain the best rate. The request should tell how many issues you will be printing, how many pages per issue, what type of printing process and if you anticipate much growth in circulation. Don't forget any stapling or collating requirements.

Old Artists Never Die, They Just Paint Themselves Into A Corner!

Of course, this is a fate that an editor avoids each and every issue. A good part of this is because the editor adapts the artist's tools for the sake of good text presentation, entertainment, but above all, to get rid of those unsightly gaps between the articles. Sometimes the filler material can overwhelm a newsletter, but it is essential for a pleasing appearance. I cannot really do justice

here to all the many ways to apply graphics to newsletters. Instead, I suggest looking at magazines and other newsletters to get some ideas.

Probably the best source for graphic material is the transfer sheets available in office supply stores. These dry transfer sheets have interesting letter styles for titles, short items and page numbers. Some have oddball items like mathematical symbols, pointing hands or border graphics. If you have a hard time drawing uniform lines where needed and you don't feel like purchasing an expensive drafting pen set, adhesive pin striping may be applied. If your newsletter circulation is sizable, it is possible to purchase computer cartoons for use. Many cartoonists will send sample material out to clubs listed in this magazine.

Roundup At The OK Post Office

Everyone knows how to mail things, but how many mail bulk? Among the many ways an editor can save money, the main consideration is always postage costs. Say your issue is firming out to sixteen pages or eight sheets of paper copied both sides. This will weigh about an ounce. Current first-class postal rates dictate that each newsletter must have a 20-cent stamp. You may need an additional 17-cent stamp to take care of the extra weight of staples. So the postage costs are often greater than the print-

ing costs. And soon the primary ounce rate may increase to 25 cents, making the disparity worse.

This kind of postage might be called a "small tax". It is obviously prohibitive to publish a newsletter containing more than seven sheets of paper. Also, the cheaper bulk rates (presently 11¢ for up to about 3½ ounces) are available only if your circulation is 200 or more. This is one of the advantages of having a large club, you see!

Once a newsletter's circulation approaches 100 per issue, it is necessary to consider bulk mail. Even if you have to mail free copies to dealers and extra copies to yourself, the breaks may be in your favor. With bulk mail the rate structure becomes much better. The basic piece rate of 11¢ per 3½ ounces is totally adequate for even the largest newsletters. All the muss and fuss of pasting postage stamps is traded for the fun of zip sorting your mail. This is really no chore if your mailing list is computerized, and we know there is no excuse for that, right? The post office will supply a permit number for forty dollars a year, one of the true bargains they offer. By the way, if you can prove your club is a nonprofit group (no small job), your bulk mail cost is half the going rate, which, for a large group may make the cost of incorporating as a nonprofit corporation worth the investment.

Any Sufficiently Advanced Technology Is Indistinguishable From Magic

Oh yes, all of this article collecting, editing, printing and mailing is supposed to be easy. Almost like magic (ahem!). A computer club can turn on the magic like no other, for computers are the name of the game. With a reasonable collection of word processors at your disposal, it is easy for a member to write an article to go directly into your newsletter format. Spelling checkers and

utilities can help find errors and perform the newsletter layout. Items can go directly from a computerized bulletin board into the next issue. Mailing list programs can help keep a current list of members and subscribers, sorting and printing mail labels and reports.

As I mentioned before, there is only one tough job a newsletter editor has: deciding the organization of an issue. Sometimes the content must also be judged. There will be some demand for commercial advertising, so rates will have to be set (I recommend adding 30% to your cost of publishing a newsletter in six months. This prevents subsidizing the ads). How many reviews are too many? Is quantity better than quality? Should each issue have a program listing or two? Whose article gets put on page one? Should circulation be promoted, even if it means stepping on the membership chairperson's toes?

In this case, there is one good lesson we can learn from video games. It's not fun unless it is a challenge. Editing a newsletter is fun. It's a service to the club and to the computer community. It raises the low and entertains the mighty. Progress marches on. Newsletters instill confidence and good manners. Above all, like this article right here, they totally conform to Feuchtwanger's Law: There's only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, but there's no road leading back from the ridiculous to the sublime. AMEN. **C**

Walt Lounsbery