GrafTalk

A Venerable Package That Stands Up Well

GrafTalk is a truly venerable graphics package: it's been around in virtually the same form since the days of the 8-bit micros running at 2 MHz. *GrafTalk* was great when it was all that was available, but how does it stand up in today's business graphics field—a field crowded with heavyweight newcomer competition?

The answer is, "Quite well, thank you." *GrafTalk* continues to offer impressive flexibility and performance, although it is still not particularly well suited for beginners or users unwilling to make some commitment to learning its command language.

Graftalk is both flexible and restrictive in its data-handling capabilities. Data can be typed at the keyboard or retrieved from a simple tabular ASCII disk file, but *GrafTalk* can't import or export data from DIF, or other common microcomputer data-interchange formats. Once you import your data, however, you can use *GrafTalk*'s excellent spreadsheet-like scheme for manipulating charts; you name rows and columns, perform simple arithmetic, and create and delete new rows and columns.

Once data is available, *GrafTalk*'s powerful commands can be used directly from the keyboard or from its built-in full-screen editor, called SCATE. You gain real advantages by running *GrafTalk* from SCATE. You can save the command sequences you produce with it to disk so that you can run *GrafTalk* from these files later. SCATE maintains as many workspace areas as needed, each containing separate programs for separate charts.

SCATE makes good use of control characters and two-letter sequences to trigger its functions, which include find, replace, file manipulations, and even file comparisons. SCATE has a few peculiarities, such as a separate mode just for adding blank lines, and it requires you to learn a new set of commands. But it does make a big difference in how *GrafTalk* works.

GrafTalk doesn't contain any predefined graph formats like those of many other programs. But its commands produce charts fairly easily.

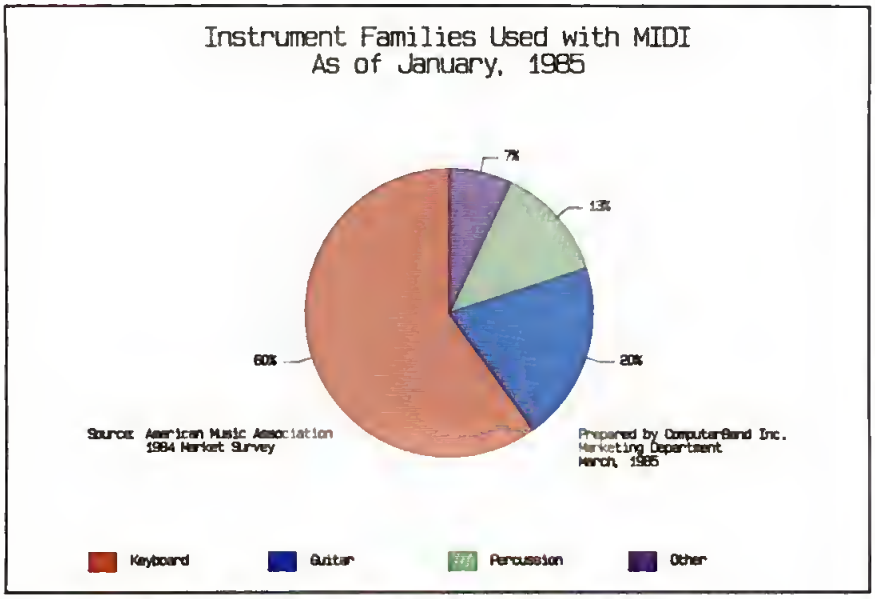
GrafTalk can produce all the standard charts: pie, bar, column, line, and scatter. The newest version (3.27) includes commands for creating bubble and surface-area charts and charts with dual *y* axes. A "slide show" feature also appears in the newest version. With this new feature, *GrafTalk* saves charts to disk in image form that can be displayed rapidly; you control the display manually or put in specified pauses between slides for an automatic slide show. Commands are included to build custom menus for special applications. These commands form a primitive PILOT-like language for adding intelligence to a simple menu system.

Giving You a Free Hand

GrafTalk includes a freehand sketching mechanism, but it's rather clumsy to use in its present form. The manufacturer claims that more-advanced chart types, such as Gantt, organization, and high-low, can be created from these available tools. The program can produce some complicated charts, but it requires fancy fingerwork.

Once you specify a standard chart, providing the information *GrafTalk* needs to produce it is usually straightforward. Various commands control such aspects of chart production as color, axis scaling, and grid display. *GrafTalk* uses sensible default values for some of these characteristics, but, in other cases, you must be specific or nothing will appear.

For instance, you must specify the names of the axes and the values for the *x*-axis tick points and pie segments since *GrafTalk* can't read labels or legends from a data file. Nor can *GrafTalk* produce any fancy text manipulations.



To produce a pie chart, you must specify the axes' names and values.

While *GrafTalk* lacks many of the capabilities built into newer graphics programs, you can work around these limitations using the program's joystick command. For example, there is no provision for adding notes or comments to a chart per se, but blocks of text can be positioned manually using JOYSTICK. This command allows you to position the cursor on the screen to indicate where the next text, legend, or similar insertion will take place. *GrafTalk* has a related command that translates the cursor's "joysticked" position into *x* and *y* coordinates. The joystick command is also available during plotting by using the pen-positioning keys found on most plotters. However, JOYSTICK is not always a replacement for automatic program-generated positioning of chart elements.

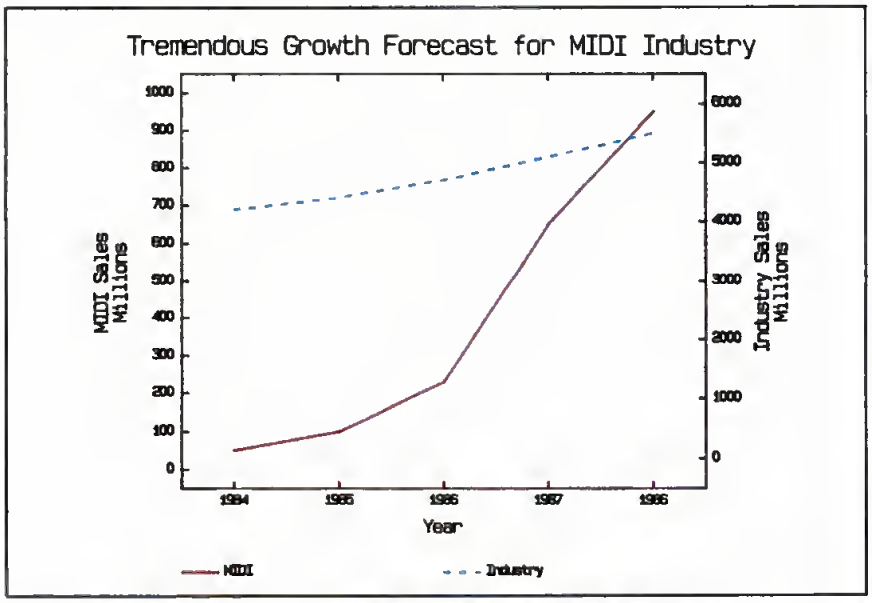
GrafTalk can route its graphic output to the display screen, suitable printers or plotters, or to disk images. Unfortunately, the screen representation doesn't look very much like plotted hard copy. A few slow replottings are usually required to get everything just so. But what *GrafTalk* does do, it does well. Its plotting speed is good, and the shading, precision, and other stylistic treatments of the charts are well done.

GrafTalk's manual includes a tutorial that is essentially unchanged from the one released years ago: It still doesn't go far enough in demonstrating the advanced features of the program. The program also offers a menu system for novices.

GrafTalk's documentation is weak and disorganized and doesn't provide any examples of how to create charts other than the rudimentary ones in the beginner's tutorial. While the manual does have an index, the book's basic organization is poor. However, a rather primitive on-line help system is included with the program.

A more serious problem with *GrafTalk* is that the manual does not always reflect the version of the software. For example, *GrafTalk* requires a special pin connection in the cable to the Hewlett-Packard 7475 plotter, but my manual didn't even discuss this problem.

For all of this, *GrafTalk* is fun to use if you're inclined toward programming. Command response is very quick, and the finished output is of good quality. Redding markets *GrafTalk* as "an interactive language for business graphics." And *GrafTalk* is interactive in the sense that a BASIC interpreter is more interactive than a compiler. But it is less interactive than programs that allow on-screen manipulation of chart elements. A lot of people like *GrafTalk* very much, and its following would be even wider if some of the rough edges were smoothed out. ■



The program can produce some complicated charts, but it requires fancy footwork.

GrafTalk 3.27
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CIRCLE 697 ON READER SERVICE CARD

LIST PRICE: $450
REQUIRES: 128K RAM, one disk drive

SUPPORTS:
Video boards–IBM Color/Graphics, Tecmar, Plantronics
Printers–Diablo 1650, 1640, 630; Tektronix 4695; Anadex 9500; Dataproducts P80, P132, SPG-8050; 460 Paper Tiger; DEC LA50, LA100; Epson MX, FX; Fujitsu DMP9, DMP24; IBM Graphics; Okidata Microline; MPI PrintMate 99G, 150
Plotters–Houston Instruments DMP29; Calcomp 81, 84; Panasonic VP6861; Hewlett Packard 7470A, 7550; Goertz 281, 184; Amdek II; IBM XY/749, XY/750; Mannesmann Tally Pixy 3
DOS versions–1.0–3.0
Other operating systems–CP/M

DOCUMENTATION:
Tutorial–ptu
Manual–idx, tcs

COPY PROTECTION: ncp

GENERAL GRAPHICS FACILITIES: none

SCREEN GRAPHICS FACILITIES: ssh, asd, msd

SCREEN/PRINTER/PLOTTER FACILITIES:
Hatching–aht, mht
Color choice–acc, mcc
Legends–mcl, vlp
Header lines–80 chars max
Comment lines–unlimited
Note lines–unlimited
Comment position–vcp
Type fonts–1
Type font sizes–unlimited
Chart overlays–unlimited
Axis scaling–aas, mas
Grid display–mgd
Tick precision–atp, mtp
Page adjustment–ppa, hva, psa

INPUTS:
Sources–ikb
Graphics formats–none
Standard formats–ASCII

CHART TYPES:
Column charts–4096 cls, cgs unlimited, cpg unlimited, ssc unlimited, noc
Bar charts–4096 brs, bgs unlimited, bpg unlimited, ssb unlimited, nob
Line charts–lns unlimited, ppl unlimited, 8 tpl, 128, utl, usm, spl
Regression types–none
Pie charts–psl unlimited, eps unlimited, ppv
Text/word charts–1 fpc
Gantt charts–itg unlimited, rog unlimited, utg, 1 smg
Organization charts–smo unlimited, clo unlimited, tlo unlimited
Bubble charts–bbs unlimited, cpb unlimited, lib, lob, llb
High-low charts–ihl unlimited, shl unlimited
Surface-area charts–lns unlimited, pls unlimited