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prove that they purchased the gas." Until present laws are changed, oil companies will likely resist the idea of credit-card terminals.

The second problem also involves the stricter laws in this country. Foote points out that "we have a set of fire laws here in the U.S. that says all service stations must have an attendant present when fuel is being dispensed so that that person can call the fire department in case of an accident. They don't have that law in Europe. What they've done is put in those cash terminals and credit-card terminals that allow the stations to be kept open 24 hours a day without an attendant. That was the justification for putting them in. The U.S. laws defeat the whole justification of the product."

This second problem will soon be resolved as oil companies move to the concept of "super pumpers"—larger gas stations with a dozen or more pumps, self-service, and one

attendant running a small kiosk where a few items like candy, tobacco, and potato chips are sold. Because this setup satisfies the requirements of U.S. fire laws, the influx of transaction and customer terminals can't be far behind. "In 10 years," Foote reports assuredly, "any facility pumping more than 50,000 gallons a month is going to have some kind of terminal."

Autotank now has an order for several hundred terminals from Conna, a convenience-market chain headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky. The company hopes to have the terminals installed alongside the gasoline pumps in front of its stores by the time you read this.

Using the credit-card terminals is a simple procedure similar to using a bank's automatic teller. The terminal has a display unit and a 12-key pad. First, it instructs you to insert your card in the slot, then you enter your PIN

(Personal Identification Number) and the gas-pump number. The terminal then returns your card, and you pump your gas and drive away. However, to cover the legal point mentioned earlier, you can go back to the terminal, reinsert your card, and receive a printed receipt.

The Autotank terminals can be linked to just about any host computer the dealer cares to use. "If you want processing done on premises, you can get what we call the station controller," says Foote. "The terminal at the gas-pump island sends data to the station controller, a computer located next to the vendor in the kiosk. This controller has two Intel 8085 processors in it, each with 64K bytes of random-access memory (expandable to 256K bytes). The guy who's in there bagging up your coffee and potato chips can then check the computer to see if you're overdue on your credit-card payments." □

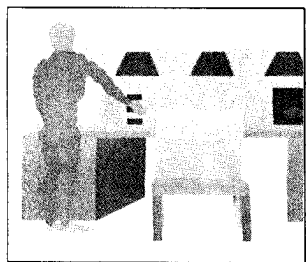
## The Vid Kid

For the year just ended, 11-year-old Rawson Stovall was perhaps one of the 10 highest-paid computer journalists in America. Under the banner of "The Vid Kid," Stovall writes a syndicated column that appears in 35 newspapers. The columns—plus several splashy articles in *Omni* and *Woman's Day* magazines—paved the way for Rawson's appearances on the morning talk shows *Good Morning America* and *CBS Morning News*. Crowning these successes, Doubleday Books gave Stovall \$20,000 for a new book to be published this spring.

Stovall's hot streak began 18 months ago in his hometown of Abilene, Texas. A mere fifth-grader at the time, he began writing video-game reviews for the *Abilene Reporter News*. In the summer of 1982, the paper sent its ardent young columnist to a computer show in Chicago, and Stovall came back with a piece on *Rocky III* star Mr. T (now the mainstay of the hit TV series *The A-Team*). The *Tucson Star* and *Albany Eagle* liked what they saw, and Stovall's syndicated column was off and running.

Sagging sales in the video-game industry have meant that Rawson's column has slowly shifted its emphasis to computer software. Still, Stovall maintains he's not burned out on video games. "I own more than 300 video games," he says, "but I'd be the first to admit that the industry is in a real slump. There are too many game systems on the market now. [Stovall owns eight.] I think we'll see many companies in this field file Chapter 11 in the next year, and only the best, like Atari, will be left. Even the ones that survive will be really hurt. But the good news is that the product will improve. There will be fewer games released, but they'll be of higher quality." □

This month's Update contributors are Bruce Foster, James Samuel, and Dan Sheridan.



## The Bubble Family

Thanks to a computer-graphics couple known as Bubbleman and Bubblewoman, NASA's 110 astronauts don't have to worry about getting wedged between the space shuttle and one of its payloads. That's because Mr. and Ms. Bubble are put through all sorts of spatial simulations in the computer-science labs at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Norman Badler wrote the Pascal program that brings Bubbleman and Bubblewoman to life. His original

intent back in 1977 was to write a program to simulate ballet dancers' movements in various environments. But even the Joffrey Ballet would be hard pressed to raise a sum like \$200,000, which is precisely what NASA paid Badler and his colleagues in June 1982 to start putting the Bubble clan through its paces. Now the simulated astronauts are reaching for tools, floating through space-cabin corridors, and so on.

The Bubble people are complex creations based on a simple computer-graphics primitive—the sphere. ("Primitive" is graphics jargon for the fundamental building blocks such as sphere, polygon, and ellipse.) The task of turning Bubbleman into Bubblewoman was relatively easy for Badler—certainly no tougher than using Adam to create Eve back in the pre-micro days. "We can sculpt people any way we want," says Badler.

"The primary advantage of the Bubble people," explains Badler, "is the money NASA saves in training. You didn't need simulations 20 years ago, when the seven Mercury astronauts were taken through a host of tests such as simulated weightlessness. But it gets extremely expensive when you've got 110 astronauts in training, and furthermore, today's astronauts are being trained to handle and maintain payloads that were still on the drawing boards in the John Glenn era. In short, there are many more environments for them to move through."

Badler's research has its lighter moments too. Consideration is being given to producing a Bubblewoman exercise videotape to help people slim down. And that might signal a new round of albums and cassettes with titles like *Weightless Jane Works Out* and *Richard Simmons in Orbit*. □