

to be written to a number of times. Setting aside this obvious disadvantage, its compact 12cm diameter can be easily encoded in a 20,000-track format offering 550MB. That is an impressive specification by anyone's standards but it is still a read only media, which curbs severely its well-appreciated CD-ROM in terms of operation is exactly the same as a normal audio CD player. Then you may well ask why have they been so incredibly expensive? There is no logical answer, other than it might be a case of lower production runs, in contrast to the massive high-volume manufacturing techniques employed when producing audio CD players. Still, being so similar, no doubt the manufacturers responsible for audio CD players also produce CD-ROM components, so it is probably a case of not enough competition in the market. The discs no doubt suffer beneath a similar umbrella.

Besides stealing the limelight at the recent Comdex Show with its plans for the transputer, plans which no doubt have many competitors shaking in their boots, Atari also made known its intentions to venture into CD-ROM. With plans to sell CD-ROM at £399 it might just give the

technology the push it needs so urgently and, more important, curb the ridiculous prices until now.

It seems some lessons have been learned from Philips experience with LaserVision - namely aim the technology at computer users as well as the broader consumer appliance market - but simultaneously as opposed to consecutively. Killing two birds with one stone by launching a CD-ROM capable of playing normal audio CDs also would seem to be excellent strategy and will serve only to spread CD-ROM at a greater rate.

Potential

The computer buff interested in buying a CD player might buy Atari CD-ROM for its potential. On a more sceptical note, the capability might be a little comical if Atari genuinely wants to compete with IBM with a comprehensive CD-ROM 68000-based challenge to the PS/2.

CD-ROM, The New Papyrus, as the title of a recent book endorsed, could be the immediate way ahead; it has not gone unnoticed that almost all CD-ROM applications have been very much of the textual

kind, including a number of failures. Now several major companies, including Virgin, are taking a publishing type of interest, who knows?

Bearing in mind, however, a current book on the best-selling list need sell only a few thousand copies, the day when all our homes are equipped with CD-ROM and bookshelves become shelves seems far away. Perhaps the immediate future for CD-ROM is in archive and reference book type applications, where libraries could be equipped with CD-ROM rather than microfiche. That seems more likely and considerably less fanciful, but the floppy disc has much more work to do yet, for even if CD-ROM takes off, magnetic discs will no doubt form part of a hybrid optical/magnetic storage partnership. Doubtless this will be the case.

As for Atari ability to market and sell CD-ROM successfully, if ever there were a company capable of such a feat Atari is it. In the last three years it has already displayed the far-sightedness and courage to take leading-edge technologies by the horns and tame them into low-cost products with popular appeal. It must therefore be in with a fighting chance. □



Atari CD-ROM, £399, available mid-88.