If you're brand new to computers and need to become minimally productive in a very short period, *Instant Business Software* will help. Further, if you can live with the system limitations imposed by these programs and don't want to puzzle out the method for invoking the features found here with full featured word processing, graphics, and database programs, give the *Instant Business Software* family a try. However, if you are reasonably proficient in a more complicated software application or two (or plan to be), the limited functionality and heavy-handed implementations in these products should keep you away.

Act 1 Plus Accounting
Cougar Mountain Software

The accounting software market is a collection of products of various heritage, means, and prices. You can spend next to nothing on an integrated program such as M-USA's *Pacioli 2000* (see review, this issue), and your satisfaction level will differ depending on your needs and sophistication level. Then again, you can spend many thousands of dollars on a modular system such as those offered by MACOLA Software or IBM, and your satisfaction level will still differ depending on your needs and sophistication level. Umm . . . so what's the difference?

Too often, there isn't one; at least, not one that the typical buyer of shrink-wrapped software will notice either at installation or in use. For those who take this statement to mean "go buy what's cheap", we offer this modifier: buy what will serve your needs. A program that applies artificially low limits over the number of customers that it can handle will one day make you understand what it feels like to run up against a brick wall. OOPS! Nowhere to go.

Act 1 Plus should do nicely for many users. Priced similarly to Peachtree Software's venerable *Complete Accounting*, It's faster, every bit as powerful, and in spite of a primitive interface (or perhaps because of it), is easier to use.

This statement formed after we started with a not particularly high opinion. *Act 1 Plus* is packaged in a box containing two sturdy binders that must be assembled from shrink wrapped contents. This is acceptable and in fact a standard compromise in software that uses such binders rather than bound books. However, the contents of one package are much larger then that of the other, the tabs to separate sections are packed in the wrong order, and without directions for assembly (admittedly, rare), a sense of confusion exists before you even install *Act 1 Plus* on your hard disk. Furthermore, an installation process that takes all decision making out of the hands of the user save for drive and directory designation and the option of installing sample data files modifies the "FILES=" statement in your CONFIG.SYS file, neither asking permission nor first making a backup. The setup routine that installs an incremental upgrade shipped to us several weeks after the release of the latest version (8.0) of *Act 1 Plus* repeated the offense.

Exclusive of the demo files, *Act 1 Plus* occupies nearly 4.5 megabytes of disk space for the many small overlays that make up the bulk of the program and account for its extraordinary speed and low RAM overhead - the 180 kilobytes of memory required includes a 64K data area! The low overhead is possible, in part, because *Act 1 Plus* displays in simple text mode with no effects such as exploding or drop-down menus to clutter RAM or be addressed every time the program is looking for a particular piece of information. You can choose the colors used by *Act 1 Plus*, but even the code that accomplishes such a change is external to the main program, in a utility that also allows you to change the default mapping of functions keys and network and terminal operations, plus further enhance program operation speed by controlling the update of files (batch or real time) and the use of a RAM disk for faster sorting.

In spite of its length (well over one thousand pages) and meticulous attention to just about every detail of *Act 1 Plus* operation, the documentation is frustrating. Some introductory chapters are located near the back of the second manual, without a tab to point them out, and besides general operations instructions and interface explanation, instructions for placement of the included function key stickers for such actions as "save", "cancel", and the like are located here. Since directions for using the aforementioned mapping utility are also in these chapters, you're likely to spend some time swearing at your keyboard.

Other instructions lead you to believe that a partial installation of the system is possible. This can in fact be affected by removing the overlay files that are used for the modules you won't use, as they are prefixed with the same two letter combinations that identify the modules internally, but only the extremely competent (or brave) should attempt this. The "partial installation" references appear to allude to the fact that to use a module with any of the 250 companies *Act 1 Plus* allows simultaneously, it must specifically be set up. Finally, the tutorial is severely lacking in real world examples. It consists of about twenty pages of "this is accounting", a ten page "case study", and a section that shows of two or three features of each module, all in fifty pages. There is no on-line help, but each screen provides some guidance as to its own use. In its defense, the documentation makes specific warnings about and highlights instructions whose correct first time execution is critical.

One of the noteworthy features of *Act 1 Plus* is optional, dual level password protection for each of its modules (General Ledger, Check Reconciliation, Accounts Receivable, Order Entry/Invoicing, Inventory, Purchase Order, Accounts Payable, and Payroll), plus the *Lynx* ASCII file data exchange facility (a full featured program in

its own right that is recommended primarily for those with some programming background). Others include built in monthly budgeting facilities in General Ledger, the ability to retain account totals for as long as one hundred years, and flexibility in the