Finding a living group and limits

One thing is certain at MIT; after your freshman year, you will know your limitations better than you have ever wanted to. For instance, I know how many hours I can go without sleep before collapsing, how many hours I can stare at a video terminal before my vision begins to blur, and how many weeks I can go without calling home before my parents panic. Furthermore, I have just realized I am not going to be able to shape all I have to tell you about MIT into a single crystalline gem of an easy time in time for this issue of The Tech, or even a compromise — life consists of compromises, no matter where you are — I offer these unpolished nuggets of thought:

How to choose a living group:

- One of the pieces of advice I will bring with me before the end of Rush Week is "Choose a living group for the house, but for the people in it." Another favorite is, "You can be happy in any group." You can, but realistically, you will almost certainly be unhappy at

(Please turn to page 3)

Column/Diana ben-Aaron

Computers are only tools

By now, practically everyone has seen that ubiquitous ad from Commodore where a kid gets kicked out of college because his parents did not buy him a computer. This commercial really offended me. Even if a Commodore computer could help you in college, no reasonable university would expect you to see one. No one has ever taken a census of MIT's computers; there are simply too many to count. There are computers for accounting, engineering, research, word processing, hacking and more things that can be listed in this column. They range from "smart" oscilloscopes to room-filling mainframes. Students are offered large discourses on Apple and Digital computers. Project Athena will give you all the computer time you can eat. You can pay to use a computer, or be paid. So where do Commodore computers fit in?

Computer use is not separate from other activities here. Too many outsiders think of MIT as consisting of cold, white rooms filled with mainframe computers and small, dingy rooms crammed with smelly hacker-rooms. While we do have a few such rooms, the majority of computers here is buried in labs or offices. Forget the priesthood, friend — MIT is a hacker's heaven. Computers are only tools. A computer should be a tool, not a god. An incredibly useful tool, but no more deserving of worship than a hammer. The only major difference between a computer and a boat anchor is that computers can work on a never set of instructions and a boat anchor will just sit there. The appearance of life makes computers so interesting that people will use them for tasks that would be done better on paper.

Students often fall into this trap of over-dependence. Computers can be selectively patient and servile and this sense of power makes them attractive to people because it offers them more control than they have in real life. Too many hackers turn their tools for the computer and respect they do not receive from their peers.

Computers are not alone in their seduction of the innocent. MIT has had self-absorbed students since Boston Tech opened its doors, and surely there were Greek tutors forced to reprimand their charges for delving too deeply into their studies. A good education must broaden your view of the world, not simply deepen it.

Freshmen come to MIT interested in surprisingly few things. This is not a new problem. For many years, high school students have been exposed to traditional education in history and literature. They would come here interested in these fields and undergo their first major shock. High school science is not the same as professional practice. These disenchanted students then found their places in other disciplines.

Electronics has changed this natural progression. Education engineers do not engineer to act all that differently from the experienced engineer. Widespread availability of computers has accelerated this trend, as programming is still programming, no matter how experienced the practitioner.

I know a freshman who left MIT after six weeks, claiming MIT could not teach him anything. He is a high-priced consultant for several microcomputer firms. He may have been right, but he will never get the background he needs to write anything more complex than computer games and accounting software. Freshmen do not realize that there is a great difference between computer programming and computer science. Often, they realize it much too late.

I don't want to scare any freshmen (or their parents) who are reading this column, but if you know exactly what you need to learn, why come to MIT? Too many paths to knowledge run through the halls of MIT to describe here, but I assure you that none requires a Commodore computer. I cannot even open mind and you will see the paths for you. Do not restrict your vision with what you know, or with fears of what you have not yet learned.