Tools & Toys
The Amazing Personal Computer

Over 120 million personal computers are in use today, according to International Data Corporation. Their small size and low cost make them accessible to millions of people worldwide. But many people never go beyond word-processing or spreadsheets.

Tools & Toys: The Amazing Personal Computer, an exhibit opening June 13, goes far beyond these uses, stretching the boundaries of today's applications. Music, groupware, graphics, video production, and simulations are some of the exciting and amazing new applications.

The $1 million exhibit will feature over 35 different interactive programs for visitors to try out.

Originally known as the Computer Discovery Center, Tools & Toys was initiated by The Boston Computer Society (BCS). Now, some 40 corporations and volunteers, a blue ribbon and junior high school advisory group, and Museum staff, led by Greg Welch and David Greschler, are busy creating the exhibit.

The exhibition is being divided into seven different personal computer applications: Making Pictures, Playing Games, Making Sound, Sharing Ideas, Writing, Adding It Up, and Exploring Information.

Another application that is not widely available is being designed for the "Writing" area by American Management Systems. It is for a pen-based system enabling people to use a pen to write letters, numbers, and math symbols on a screen and then watch the computer turn their writing into print.

In the "Making Sound" area—built like a sound studio—visitors will be able to create songs using a SampleStick, a computer-based musical instrument being developed by Airtight Garage. This technology involves "sampling," rearranging recorded sounds, a technique popular with today's rap musicians.

To assure that this cutting edge software is user-friendly for people of diverse ages and cultures, the Museum enlisted the help of visitors themselves. For five months, a sparsely decorated, modest prototype area on the 5th floor, called the Exhibit Lab, became a center of activity, where visitors were asked to "road-test" the software.

The Spaceball™ (at center) is a new hand-device people can use to interact with a personal computer.

Photo: Courtesy of Spaceball Technologies, Inc.

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Director's Letter

Trip Report: January 5-9, 1992

Dateline: Paris, France

In January, I was invited to speak at a conference on museums, science and technology at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris. This was part of a process begun by Francois Mitterrand to refurbish four Paris museums by the end of 1994. It was great fun, very informative and an honor for The Computer Museum to be included. I chose to talk on "Hands on and Beyond: Computer Exhibits to Inspire the Layperson." Given the reactions of the audience of museum directors to The Computer Museum’s exhibits and Exhibit Kits Program, the clamor for science museums to enter the computer age has certainly struck in Europe.

The trip gave me the opportunity to visit those organizations with significant collections of artifacts and those that are at the cutting edge of new exhibitions the Museum is interested in developing. At Groupe Bull, for example, I saw their glorious collection of refurbished machines that go back to Bull’s founding in 1931. In contrast, my visit to IRCAM (Contemporary Institute of Musical and Acoustic Research), the premier computer music institute located beneath the Pompidou Center, reinforced my conviction that there is enormous scope for a fascinating exhibition on computers and music.

On the advice of Museum Exhibit Committee member, Brian Randell, of Newcastle, UK, I visited Claude Hennebert, Chief Engineer of the Paris Subway. The control of the suburban express line that travels at 100km per hour—with 50 second station stops and trains every two minutes, handling 50,000 people per hour, per track—was truly amazing. While the switches, signalling, and even train speed, are all computer controlled, the display of the subway system in the control room is ancient technology—a large cylindrical wall, back-illuminated with incandescent lights. This is a fascinating application of computer networks, but creativity is needed to turn it into a compelling interactive exhibit.

Getting back on the plane to return to The Computer Museum, I felt re-energized. And, I was delighted to see the Museum featured on an inflight entertainment video segment as we approached Boston.

Dr. Oliver Strimpel
Executive Director

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In a process known as formative evaluation, visitors contributed over 300 evaluations of various software interactives in the form of written comments, general suggestions, and observations. Many of these are being incorporated into modifications of the software. For example, the Making Your Own Movie program is being changed so that visitors will be able to record and edit more than one video segment of themselves.

At the end of the exhibit, the visitor is helped with the question, “Where Do I Go From Here?” Along with practical advice, digital video provides a live forum on the subject: “Do computers save people time?” This final interactive station is being designed by Fluent, Inc., Founder and Museum Board Member Dr. David Nelson. He is modifying his company’s state of the art technology to create what will be a first-of-its-kind Museum exhibit, where visitors will enter their own opinions via a digitized video image of themselves.