

Microelectronics and the Personal Computer

Rates of progress in microelectronics suggest that in about a decade many people will possess a notebook-size computer with the capacity of a large computer of today. What might such a system do for them?

by Alan C. Kay

The future increase in capacity and decrease in cost of microelectronic devices will not only give rise to compact and powerful hardware but also bring qualitative changes in the way human beings and computers interact. In the 1980's both adults and children will be able to have as a personal possession a computer about the size of a large notebook with the power to handle virtually all their information-related needs. Computing and storage capacity will be many times that of current microcomputers: tens of millions of basic operations per second will manipulate the equivalent of several thousand printed pages of information.

The personal computer can be regarded as the newest example of human mediums of communication. Various means of storing, retrieving and manipulating information have been in existence since human beings began to talk. External mediums serve to capture internal thoughts for communication and, through feedback processes, to form the paths that thinking follows. Although digital computers were originally designed to do arithmetic operations, their ability to simulate the details of any descriptive model means that the computer, viewed as a medium, can simulate any other medium if the methods of simulation are sufficiently well described. Moreover, unlike conventional mediums, which are passive in the sense that marks on paper, paint on canvas and television images do not change in

response to the viewer's wishes, the computer medium is active: it can respond to queries and experiments and can even engage the user in a two-way conversation.

The evolution of the personal computer has followed a path similar to that of the printed book, but in 40 years rather than 600. Like the handmade books of the Middle Ages, the massive computers built in the two decades before 1960 were scarce, expensive and available to only a few. Just as the invention of printing led to the community use of books chained in a library, the introduction of computer time-sharing in the 1960's partitioned the capacity of expensive computers in order to lower their access cost and allow community use. And just as the Industrial Revolution made possible the personal book by providing inexpensive paper and mechanized printing and binding, the microelectronic revolution of the 1970's will bring about the personal computer of the 1980's, with sufficient storage and speed to support high-level computer languages and interactive graphic displays.

Ideally the personal computer will be designed in such a way that people of all ages and walks of life can mold and channel its power to their own needs. Architects should be able to simulate three-dimensional space in order to reflect on and modify their current designs. Physicians should be able to store

and organize a large quantity of information about their patients, enabling them to perceive significant relations that would otherwise be imperceptible. Composers should be able to hear a composition as they are composing it, notably if it is too complex for them to play. Businessmen should have an active briefcase that contains a working simulation of their company. Educators should be able to implement their own version of a Socratic dialogue with dynamic simulation and graphic animation. Homemakers should be able to store and manipulate records, accounts, budgets, recipes and reminders. Children should have an active learning tool that gives them ready access to large stores of knowledge in ways that are not possible with mediums such as books.

How can communication with computers be enriched to meet the diverse needs of individuals? If the computer is to be truly "personal," adult and child users must be able to get it to perform useful activities without resorting to the services of an expert. Simple tasks must be simple, and complex ones must be possible. Although a personal computer will be supplied with already created simulations, such as a general text editor, the wide range of backgrounds and ages of its potential users will make any direct anticipation of their needs very difficult. Thus the central problem of personal computing is that nonexperts will almost certainly have to do some programming if their personal computer is to be of more than transitory help.

To gain some understanding of the problems and potential benefits of personal computing my colleagues and I at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center have designed an experimental personal computing system. We have had a number of these systems built and have studied how both adults and children make use of them. The hardware is faithful in capacity to the envisioned notebook-

COMPUTER SIMULATIONS generated on a high-resolution television display at the Evans & Sutherland Computer Corporation show the quality of the images it should eventually be possible to present on a compact personal computer. The pictures are frames from two dynamic-simulation programs that revise an image 30 times per second to represent the continuous motion of objects in projected three-dimensional space. The sequence at the top, made for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, shows a space laboratory being lifted out of the interior of the space shuttle. The sequence at the bottom, made for the U.S. Maritime Administration, shows the movement of tankers in New York harbor. Ability of the personal computer to simulate real or imagined phenomena will make it a new medium of communication.

