

Lifestyles

Computers touch all our lives

By SCOTT WILLIAMS

Computers are all around us. We see them in the office, in the supermarket, at the bank, at the travel agents. We also see them in many people's homes. But what is a computer? And what makes the computer the airline uses to book your vacation different from the computer you use at home to write a letter to your aunt, or to balance your cheque book? Remarkably, though there are many differences between computers, they share many similarities. One characteristic that all computers share is that they can sometimes be mysterious - or even frightening - to those who do not understand them. Over the coming weeks, we'll be shedding some light on these machines that touch our lives in more ways each day.

So what is a computer? A computer is a device that really only does three things: 1) it stores information, 2) it performs some kind of work on the information (i.e. it computes), and 3) it gets information from, and provides information to, the outside world - to and from computer users like you and I: this is called input and output.

The part of the computer that does the input and output of information is the most visible part. Computers very often get their input from a keyboard, which very often looks like the keyboard of a typewriter. Computer output



Scott Williams
COMPUTER
CHIPS

comes in two forms: visual output from a video terminal or display screen, and printed output, sometimes called hardcopy output, from some kind of printer.

The part of the computer that actually does the work - the computing - is the brain of the computer system. These can be very small, as in the case of a home system, or immensely large, as in the case of a nationwide banking network. This part of the computer is called the CPU, which stands for Central Processing Unit.

The part of the computer that stores information consists of two parts: a medium which holds the information, and a device to read and write the information to and from the medium. There is a close analogy between this and a cassette recorder, in which the information is the sound to be recorded, the medium is the

cassette tape itself, and the device to do the reading and writing is the cassette player. In the case of a computer, the medium can take many forms: floppy diskettes, cartridge tapes, and hard disks, to name a few. Usually, this information storage part of the computer will be located physically close to the CPU, and most often will actually be contained in the same box or cabinet.

In subsequent weeks we will pursue these topics in greater detail, beginning next week with some of the issues to consider when purchasing a computer for the home.

Scott Williams is a computer consultant based in Toronto. He graduated from Queen's University with a degree in Mathematics in 1982. Since then, he has worked for a number of firms in the Computer Industry, in technical, marketing and management roles. He is currently General Manager of Wilcam Computers International, a full-service computer dealer specializing in Unix Training and Computer System Support.

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