

PC milestone

IBM's machine changed way many work and play

By Laura Ruane

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A quarter-century ago on Aug. 12, IBM announced the IBM PC model 5150.

It has Florida roots: The research and design was done in Boca Raton.

The machine wasn't the first personal computer: Altair, Apple's I and II and Commodore PET were among the predecessors. At 4.77 MHz, it had less processing power than a basic cell phone.

Still, Big Blue's cautious diversion from room-size mainframe and refrigerator-size mini computers ultimately changed the way many of us work and play.

What made IBM's product such a milestone? Boston-based software designer Dan Bricklin is best known for co-developing VisiCalc, the first electronic spreadsheet and a catalyst in the rapid growth of personal computers. In a phone interview with *The News-Press*, he ticked off these qualities:

- "It was from a major player, which made it acceptable to business;
- "It was a good design, and built from standard parts. Where it was lacking ... other manufacturers could make things to improve on it."
- "Because of that competition, prices kept going down, and the personal computer became very popular in homes and in businesses."

Some form of personal computer — with a viewing screen and other input devices — should be around for at least another 20 to 50 years, Bricklin figures.

"The beauty of it is, the designers of the machine have no idea what you (the consumer) will use it for," said Bricklin. He noted that, as computer users discover a new need, software makers fill it, and reap the rewards.

Next year, U.S. companies alone will spend \$125 billion on computers and related hardware, according to Forrester Research.

WHAT THEY SAID

Readers talk about the old computers in their lives:

"I have a Commodore 64 from 1983 that still works like a charm. It came back as a 'present' from Mom and Dad, after making a trip back to Canada this past Christmas (I moved down from Canada in 1998). We bought the computer for about \$200 while on a family trip to Sarasota, so you could say it's finally made a round trip.

I'm currently working in town as a software developer, and remember getting my start on the 64. Of course, it had more than its fair share of gaming too: I remember spending long summers with my friends, trying to complete games such as Bubble Bobble, Bruce Lee and Frantic Freddie.

I also remember late nights in front of the word processor, trying to pound out high school assignments the night before the due date.

I still have it partly because I'm a packrat, but also for its nostalgic value. While I can get a C64 emulator for the PC, there's no substitute for the real thing — especially when it's the same machine I've owned since I was 10 years old."

— Mike Debreceni, 33, Fort Myers

"We still have my dad's old Tandy computer. He taught my son to use the computer as a little tot. My son is now a graduate of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, and has just been hired as an air traffic control specialist in Georgia.

My daughters are students at Edison College. All three of them are very proficient in the computer.

My interest was also piqued by my dad's lead; I had a successful graphic design business for 13 years as I also home-educated the children.

Now, at 90 years old, Dad's computer days have come to a close. ... I have picked up where he left off with the family tree, and while it's not on his old Tandy, I haven't forgotten who started it all.

The Tandy is still alive and well, kind of a monument that no one has the heart to send to computer heaven just yet."

— Beverly Tiner, 42, Fort Myers

"I went out and purchased one of IBM's follow-on announcements, the IBM PCjr. ... I still have it in my attic along with an IBM AT. While the IBM PCjr is not missed, I suppose I have this inner hope that this old piece of tin may someday emerge with increased value, as did the Ford Edsel."

— Philip Lippard, 55, Sanibel, software engineer and founder of Nexus Software and Sanibel Logic companies

Personal computers with technology robust enough for business can be purchased for well under \$1,000, with systems targeting the home market coming in at even less. IBM no longer manufactures PCs: It's found a more-profitable niche developing systems that include personal computers made by others.

In 1981, the original, bare-bones PC cost about \$1,600 or about \$3,600 in today's currency. "Never in history has a technology gotten that much better and that much cheaper in 25 years," wrote USA Today columnist Kevin Maney.

The PC used a microprocessor made by Intel and an operating system made by Microsoft (led by Bill Gates). Neither component was exclusive to IBM, and within a year other companies had worked out how to make much cheaper "clones" of its PC.

Before the PC and its successors caught on, "small businesses were banging away with typewriters, word processors and file cabinets," said Carol Conway, owner of Lee County-based CRS Technology, Florida's Small Business of the Year for 1998.

Conway worked for IBM in sales and marketing from the late '70s through mid-'80s. She doesn't recall the company promoting the PC any more than it did any other of its products.

Personal computers "bridged a huge gap between who could have a computer or not," Conway said. Thanks in large part to the PC, she said, "Today, people don't care how big your business is, it's how efficiently you can deliver your product or services."

Tony Garcia, 27, the chief technical officer for MIVA, a Fort Myers-based Internet marketing company, essentially grew up in the PC age.

In fact, Garcia was still in high school when he began developing the software that would power FindWhat.com, the predecessor to MIVA.

"FindWhat came along right in that sweet spot when the Internet was just exploding," Garcia said. "If we would have come along later or the PC would have been later, it wouldn't have happened."

On the 20th anniversary of the IBM PC, Bricklin said the precursor to the personal computer was the desk, "on which you did your correspondence, writing, some reading, record-keeping and simple transactions, calculations, simple art, etc."

Over time, the personal computer has evolved, just like desks, Bricklin added:

"Everyone has a desk — or something that acts as a desk or a table. In the kitchen, it might be the counter where you put the espresso maker or the food processor.

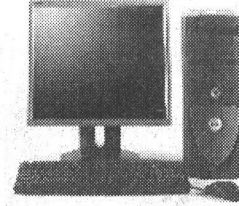
"These things come and go: But this place where you can assemble things to do your work: that stays."

— The News-Press staff writer Tim Engstrom contributed to this report.

Personal computing: Then and now



Personal computers have evolved in 25 years. The point-and-click of a mouse has largely replaced typed-in commands on a keyboard. Today's typical new business PC has about 8,000 times more memory, 500,000 times more storage capacity and processes data 23,500 times faster than the IBM PC 5150 that was announced on Aug. 12, 1981.



IBM 5150 BUSINESS SYSTEM (AUG. 1981)

DELL DIMENSION E310 PACKAGE (AUG. 2006)

Intel 8088 @ 4.77 MHz	PROCESSOR	Intel Pentium 4 @ 3 GHz (629 times faster)
64,000 bytes	MEMORY	512,000,000 bytes
Two 160 kilobyte diskette drives	STORAGE	160 gigabyte hard drive
Monochrome, 25 lines by 80 characters of text (1 font)	VIDEO	Up to 4 billion colors, thousands of fonts, high-res graphics
11.5" tube; monochrome (green)	MONITOR	17" flat panel LCD; color
Included	KEYBOARD	Included
None	MOUSE	Included
Tone generator, built-in speaker	AUDIO	Digital audio; stereo, with external speakers
One floppy disc to another	BACKUP	CD/DVD burner
Monochrome, dot matrix + printer port	PRINTER	Not included
None	MODEM	56k modem
None	NETWORKING	Ethernet port
MS-DOS	SOFTWARE	Windows XP and more
None	MULTITASKING	Can run many programs at the same time
\$4,425 (\$9,600 in 2006 dollars)	PRICE	\$635 (\$290 in 1982 dollars)

SOURCE: COMPU-DOCTOR, THE NEWS-PRESS RESEARCH

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