Prepare yourself for the ominous talking computer

By John C. Dvorak, IW Staff

In 1843 Heinrich Heine said, "The future smells of Russian leather." If he sniffed around today, he'd smell plastic-coated microprocessors instead.

Anyone attending this year's NCC (National Computer Conference) in Houston can easily spy a few clear-cut trends that will determine the state of microcomputers in the future. Multiple processors, high-performance 8-bit machines and fancier output devices are all in the cards. But the most significant social trend, and the most ominous, might be the talking computer.

Multiple processors will be the solution to the lack-of-software problem for the new processors. With the cost of chips falling, it will be cheap and easy to add a small computer on a board (usually with dedicated mem-

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ory) to most machines, just for the purpose of using old software. AT NCC, even the elaborate minicomputer system manufacturer Four-Phase has put Z80s and 64K into its terminals so they can act as desktop personal computers when they are not being used in mainframe environments.

New kinds of printers will replace fully formed character printers. These printers will use advanced technologies, such as ink-jet and LCD Xerography, that produce typeset-quality output at a low price. At this year's NCC (see overview article in this issue), most of the new dot-matrix printers shown had the ability to produce correspondence-quality output with their use of multiple-pass techniques.

'Get to work'

Eight-bit technology will live on in the guise of high-performance systems. Just as small four-cylinder engines didn't die out with the advent of the V-8 automobile, the eight-bit machine will endure, in the role of the functional workhorse. Sporting 12 MHz Z80s and 3-inch hard disks and selling for less than $500 with extended memory capabilities, these will be the Italian sports cars of the computer business. Many will easily outperform clunky 16- and 32-bit machines.

Digitized voice synthesizers will be everywhere in the future. Many of the disk files will be nothing more than verbal messages that are waiting to be output through the computer's speaker.

The grumpy boss can have the computer blurt messages such as "Get back to work, Jenkins!"—in his actual voice. This can be done under program control, so we can expect, eventually, to see a computer fire someone on the spot for a mistake.

The digitized voice is a copy of the actual speaker's voice, which has been fed into the computer with a micro-

phone. This is the way electronic mail will be handled in the future; with it, inflections and hidden meanings can be communicated.

The talking computer will become a sexual substitute for the introverted loner. These days, a dubious trend displayed in isolated publications has sexy-voiced women selling their services over the phone—for a VISA-card fee. Apparently, the service they offer is merely to talk dirty to some bored soul. Under program control, the future computer can make lewd comments. Many future X-rated games will have sultry-voiced tempters talking to

the players through the computer.

As the technology improves, we'll have everything talking to us. Coffee pots, cars, pencil sharpeners, stoves and watches will all have voices. Eventually, programs will be written to take digitized words and translate them for the universal translation machine. We'll speak into a box and out will come French or Serbo-Croatian or Plattdeutsch.

At some point, a spy will change the chips in some diplomat's translation machine, and for every compliment that goes in, an invective will come out. Then where will we be? ■

"Everybody's talking at me," as the song says. Soon everything will begin to chime in too as voice synthesizers make cars and appliances talk.