

Designing an exhibition about the history of personal computing

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Abstract

The Museum of Computing Tools at the University of Pisa has a rich collection focused on digital machines. It boasts many XIX century mechanical calculators, the early Italian computers from the Sixties, several iconic supercomputers of the Eighties, as well as the milestones of contemporary commercial computing.

Unfortunately the Museum lacks of suitable display spaces. The Museum is therefore undergoing a large reorganization and, in the new layout, a room will be devoted to personal computing.

The paper describes how two objectives drove the design of that exhibition, both of them critical given the little space available: showing an outstanding collection and, most importantly, telling in an appropriate way a long history of scientific and technological development.

The latter goal is indeed the most relevant, since it runs against common expectations: the public is conditioned to believe that personal computing dates back and coincides with the entrepreneurial successes of Jobs/Gates.

Our design aimed at leading the visitor to the discovery of centuries of advances in science and technology, a history made of continuous evolutionary steps and of the work of many researchers. Presenting few more details, the exhibition is divided into three stages:

- The mechanical calculators, which since the XIX century were (portable) companions of scientist and engineers, then spreading onto the accounting desks;
- The electronic programmable computers, with Olivetti “Programma 101” (1965) that marks, in the technology and in the exhibition, the turning point between calculators and personal computers;
- The models making the history of PCs, which include those “home computers” that in the Eighties, raised hopes for computing to become widespread knowledge, before being supplanted by specialized products like smart TVs and game consoles.