The Evolution of the Personal Computer

Can anyone run a business today without a computer? Of course not. What many don't realize is that the computer has been around for over 50 years, and used to take up huge rooms, and the loud hum used to give you headaches! I remember going into the offices at Eastman Kodak Company for meetings in the 60s, and knowing that there was this huge computer room on the same floor that was emitting not only this almost static electric type energy, but this constant hum. And yes, I would leave with a headache, each and every time.

Well, the personal computer (aka PC) has been around for just over 50 years now too, as of this past November. A computer pioneer said back then, "There is no reason to suppose the average boy or girl cannot be master of a personal computer." Little did that person realize the extent to which the 'personal' computer would go to get into everyone's hands, and very portable. Now, we cannot imagine our lives without them.

So, here's an interesting trip down memory road to see how the PC evolved.

1962:

The LINC (Laboratory Instrument Computer) begins processing data in an MIT lab to assist with biomedical research. Featuring four modules with portable tapes for data storage, the 'minicomputer' paves the way for PCs. A l966 ad read, "While probing electrodialysis, a man suffered mental paralysis. His friend, the LINC-8, alarmed by his state, revived him with real-time analysis."

On the right: The LINC at about 8 sq. ft. with 1 kb of memory (1,000 bytes) that sold for $43,600.

On the left/below: The PDP-8 from 1965.
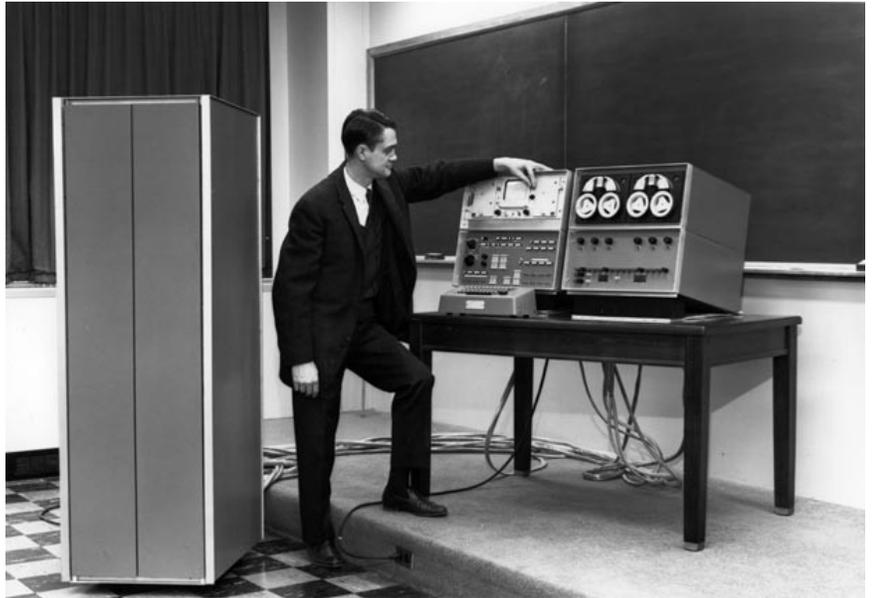
1965: The Money Maker

The PDP-8, made by Digital Equipment Corp., (shown on the left) debuts and becomes the first minicomputer commercial success. Price: $18,000. Extremely popular through the 70s, they could be found running the news display in Times Square and monitoring surgical instruments in operating rooms across the country.

1969:

The Department of Defense establishes the first computer network, called the ARPAnet—later named the Internet. The first email was transmitted in 1971.

1972:

Atari releases Pong, using two lines and a dot to kick-start the video game industry. The table-tennis arcade game craze blew the computer industry's all-work mentality wide open. World of Warcraft addicts: Thank you ATARI. (Photo on the right)

1975:
Popular Electronics puts the Altair 8800 computer kit on its January cover, and its maker, MITS, is flooded with orders. Memory was 256 bytes.

1976: First Bite of the Apple
Steve Wozniak creates the Apple I personal computer and demonstrates it at the Homebrew Computer Club in Palo Alto, CA. Sales—at $666.66 a pop—allow Wozniak and Steve Jobs to start Apple Computers.
The Apple I is shown on the right.

1977: Coming to a Home Near You
Among the first computers designed for the home consumer, the Commodore PET, Apple II and Tandy Radio Shack's TRS-80 all debut. The early edition of the PET (Personal Electronic Transactor), shown on the left below, had a built-in cassette-tape drive, an unpopu-lar miniature keyboard and a feeble 4 kilobytes of memory.

1981:
IBM calls its minicomputer the PC, turning the description into a brand. Sales soar.

1982: The Flip Is No Flop
GRiD Systems releases Compass, the first laptop. NASA sent several aboard early space-shuttle missions to handle basic navigation and to schedule tasks for the crew. The flip-open clamshell design of the Compass would become ubiquitous in laptops and, later, cell phones.
The Compass is shown below to the right.

1982: Machine Wins Over Man
Time magazine suspends its "Man of the Year" tradition and names the computer "Machine of the Year." "The enduring American love affairs with the automobile and the television set are now being transformed into a giddy passion for the personal computer," gushed the story—written on a typewriter—in the January 3, 1983, issue, a year and a half after IBM called its new minicomputer the PC.

1983:
Compaq Computer Corp. makes the first PC clone, 100% compatible with IBM's PC. First year sales were $111 million.
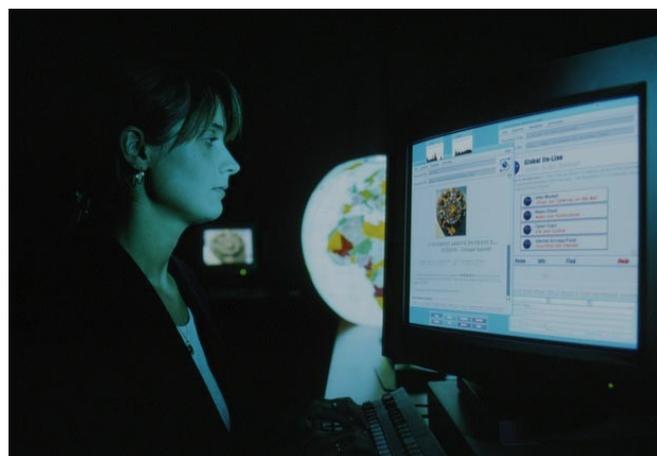
1990: We're All Connected
The World Wide Web is invented to link disparate Internet sites. The first successful version of Microsoft's Windows 3.0 launches. The Web would go live to the public the following summer, giving everyone with a computer and a modem free access to the online world.
To the left shows a gal connected to the WWW.
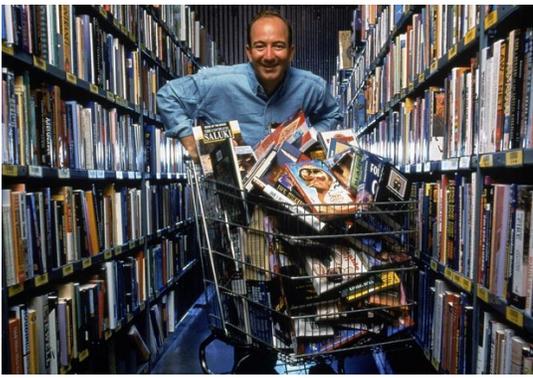
1995: Open For Business

Amazon and eBay both hit the scene, revolutionizing the way we shop. How many times do you think Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, shown on the left, has in his shopping cart?

1998: Browse and Pay Up

The debuts of Google and PayPal deliver a Web browser to find everything and a secure server to pay for everything. In the photo below, Google cofounders Larry Page, left, and Sergey Brin pose inside the server room at the company's headquarters in Mountain View, CA. And in the same year, Apple's successful iMac becomes the first in its line of iProducts.

2007:

Apple's iPhone goes on sale, boasting up to 8 gigabytes of memory in a pocket-size phone.

2008-2010: For Your Pocket or Purse

Apple launches the iPad, selling more than 300,000 on the tablet's debut day. At a San Francisco news conference, below on the left, Apple unveils its iPad. The tablet is the latest of the company's mobile gadgets that began with the iPhone in 2007.

2012:

iPhone 5 debuts. Smaller, sleeker, smarter.

And, so the computer has evolved from a huge room full of equipment larger than a house and a huge, loud hum, to fitting in the palm of your hand.

Where is it headed next? Perhaps a brain chip, where you can think something and then you can see it in your mind's eye. And you can say someone's name, and can talk with them from brain to brain. Sound like science fiction? We are LIVING science fiction, if you think back to when all of this 'computer thing' began.

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