

THIS & THAT

by
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Just where does the computer fit into life on planet earth? After spending the majority of my adult life in and around computers, I can't imagine why anyone would ask a question like that. But then, after helping seniors learn to use the computer for well over ten years, I see how that question is alive and really well among us. So, just in case you are asking that question with all the legitimate naivety of a computer user wannabe, I will attempt an answer...it will be one you may not be expecting.

The human mind rarely asks a question out of context. So when I ask the question, "What's for dinner," I'm usually hungry. My hunger instigates the question. And, I have preconceived notions as to what the answer will be when I ask it. I expect to be familiar with the answer I hear. The first time I heard *escargot* it wasn't what I expected, and I had no idea of what kind of food that was. I was surprised and somewhat appalled to learn that *escargot* was the French word for snail. I didn't expect that. It was outside my context for the question. Incidentally, I didn't eat any then, nor have I ever since then.

Seniors who approach the computer these days have much around them to build context out of. Not all of it is helpful for the answer

they hear. Let me explain.

Have you ever heard the saying, "If it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, and looks like a duck, it's probably a duck?" What happens when you are looking at a goose? Not knowing the subtle, but real, differences between these animals, like say a three year old's experience may be, might make the answer very surprising.

I'm about to bend that duck saying a bit. See if you can get my drift. "If it makes sounds like a TV, pictures like a TV, and you use a remote keypad to operate it like a TV, it's probably a TV." Sounds good doesn't it? Well then, what if you are looking at a computer? See what I mean? A computer, at first glance, has all the characteristics of a TV, but a computer is also profoundly different.

TV's are more or less passive devices. They do for us, with very little effort on our part. With a few basic actions using the keypad (remote control), they entertain, inform, enlighten, and bore us. Compare the effort you put in to watching your favorite TV show, to that of the people it took to make the show happen. The latter's efforts far way outweigh the former's.

A computer has more in common with a hammer than a TV in many ways, especially when we realize they are both tools. I don't think of the TV as a tool, but I believe a computer is one.

I can sit and watch a hammer. It makes noise when in use, and it requires a hand to make it go, but after that they lose a lot of commonality with a TV. When was the last time you watched a hammer build something on its own without constant human involvement? Hammer's have little value

unless they are used by skilled hands for meaningful purposes. The same applies to a computer.

Before spending your time and treasure for a computer, consider this:

1. A computer is more like a tool than an entertainment device.
2. You must learn how to use it before you gain rewards from it.
3. The more you know what the tool can do for you, the more pleasure you can get from it.
4. For greatest payback you will have to put a lot more of yourself (effort, time, and leaning) into using the computer than it will ever, on its own, provide in return. It's like the craftsman when he or she takes more pride in their ability to use the hammer to produce results than in owning the best, most expensive hammer itself.

So, what can the computer (tool) do for me when I learn to how use it? That's a fair question. Here are a few things to consider:

1. It will record, print/show, and store your words.
2. It will record, print/show, and store your pictures.
3. It will record, play, and store your sounds.
4. It will facilitate typed, voice, and picture communications between two or more computers.
5. It will give you access to a plethora of information on almost any subject you are interested in (via the internet).
6. It will provide you with all sorts of games to play on your own, and with others.
7. It will let you sell, shop, bank, and invest from your home.
8. It will play your collection of music CDs

and movie DVDs for you (in this it is just like the TV).

It will do all these things and more, but stop for a moment and think. Of the eight considerations I made, only one, number eight, is a passive use of the computer. All the others require considerable effort on your part to make them happen.

And that brings us back to our first question, "Just where does the computer fit into life on planet earth?"

My answer is, "It is a tool that requires much learning and experience to use, but can produce rewarding results if we are willing to put considerable time and effort into developing the skills needed to produce those results." The computer is not a passive entertainer.