Bonanza for home computers?

By JOHN SERGEANT
I-G Correspondent

BERKELEY — Some local computer experts have come up with a plan they believe will hasten the revolution in home computers.

The system, known as CommuniTree, enables anyone with access to a computer terminal to leave and retrieve messages, tips, articles, information, gossip, and even jokes at any time of the day or night using established phone lines.

The beauty of the system, say its creators, is its easy-to-understand instructions, its vast potential for growth, and its low cost. (Home computers start at around $400).

In linking his or her computer to the system by telephone, the caller gains free access to an ever-growing pool of information known as a database. What makes the system so unique, says its creator John James, is how that database is organized.

The information is ordered into a simple tree structure. That is, it begins with a trunk, similar to a contents page, where all the message categories are listed and then branches out into further categories and subcategories.

By calling up one category — 'Peace' for example — the user will find a message from a San Francisco computer buff wanting to establish a World Peace Center. Attached to his proposal will be a series of 'submessages' from other interested users. By calling up each of these, the user will find his comments and suggestions, and might even decide to add something himself.

CommuniTree is the newest venture of Berkeley Microworks, a word processing firm run jointly by James, Dean Gengle, and Jim Robeson, a former member of Research Asssociates.

The company is merchandising a $95 software package which includes an all-purpose manual for new and experienced computer users as well as a copy of the CommuniTree program disc enabling a user to plant his or her own 'tree'.

"I started it as a hobby," said James, a program designer for 20 years. "And my original rationale remains the same. It's not so much the money, or even the excitement of it; it's the idea of people developing their own networks without having to belong to an institution. Now ordinary people can start directing what's happening in their own lives instead."

And James disputes the argument that computers might alienate people from each other.

"Individual users can plan things together with this system, even write books together," he said. "But whatever they do they can put forth their areas of interest and meet others interested in the same subject."

At this early stage many of those areas reflect a fascination for technology peculiar to computer enthusiasts. One category, for example, is a software mart where second-hand equipment is bought and sold. Another deals specifically with the latest developments in Forth, the same highly versatile computer language which made this system possible for home-users.

But CommuniTree backers like Dean Gengle, who has 'planted' a trunk of his own in San Francisco, envision a time when a huge range of human interests are represented in the various branches of various 'trees'.

Though James' tree, because it was the first, is concerned mainly with applications for the system, Gengle's tree includes categories on space technology, lasers, civil liberties, and languages. Even so, one can stumble upon poems, aphorisms, and sometimes even graffiti scattered among the messages on both.

Because each tree has a maximum capacity of 321 messages both Gengle and James have been forced to edit or 'prune' parts of the data. Most of the minor messages they excised as either redundant or irrelevant, but in at least one instance they have had to consider censorship.

A caller left a message requesting information on how to broach other systems without their owners knowing. James decided he couldn't allow CommuniTree to be party to pirating so he pruned that particular branch.

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As a result of this and similar incidents he and Gengle developed the concept of the 'fairwitness', a kind of ombudsman who would moderate between arguing users and guide particular categories from their inception as ideas to thriving forums of information. Both say that this measure solves, at least temporarily, the thorny and perennial problem of who controls the data, and how it is controlled.

The whole concept of storing and exchanging messages on commercial and domestic networks is not a new one. Teleconferencing, as it has been dubbed, has existed in different forms since the early '70s. But only in recent years has the idea become freely available to home-users in the form of computer bulletin boards.

At present there are more than two hundred separate electronic bulletin boards operating across the United States. The advantage CommuniTree claims over these systems is once again in the way its information is organized for the easiest possible access.

Existing bulletin boards are ordered in a linear fashion. That is, when the contents page is summoned to the screen (or printer) every one of as many as five hundred message titles will pass steadily by until they are halted. Only by lengthy scanning for particular words, or by hunting the entire list will the user find his subject, and even then related messages would probably be located elsewhere.

By utilizing a tree rather than a linear structure, Gengle says teleconferencing would grow dramatically. Already there are bulletin boards for genealogy, medical care, astronomy and gays. By extending and facilitating the concept Gengle foresees applications for business, politics, and art.

In business, organizations could establish on-going conferences between corporate outposts across the country, says Gengle. There is already one retired executive in the Bay Area staying abreast of developments at his old firm through a teleconferencing system.

In politics, Gengle sees links being used to mobilize groups around vital common issues such as civil rights. Eventually, he says, such a system could extend, at little cost to the country's "estranged minorities" the power now wielded by the mass-mailers of the established parties.

Artists, Gengle says, will eventually stop chronicling and lamenting the collapse of industrial culture, begin to appreciate the potential of the emerging information economy and become more eclectic and more collaborative.

CommuniTree is currently on display at Berkeley Microworks, 2490 Channing Way, Suite 419.