High tech comes home

Mention home digital technology, and most people think of the changes that will occur inside their PCs. While there's no denying that significant improvements will take place there, we believe the PC of the future will be an enabling device—not the thing with which consumers interact directly.

At the June Digital Living Room conference in Dana Point, Calif., IBM's Almaden Research Center brought us a step closer to that future, providing attendees with a glimpse—in the form of the IBM Digital Coffee Table—of how they will someday be able to access PC technology without dealing with PCs. The prototype living room media and entertainment center, in fact, looked more like something from Ethan Allen than CompUSA—we're talking furniture, not digital convergence.

According to Ted Selker, IBM Fellow and manager of user system ergonomics research at the facility, the Digital Coffee Table frees consumers from having to connect several devices with a tangled mess of wires and cables just to get a decent home-entertainment experience. Just plug in the electrical cords and phone line, and you're set.

The prototype coffee table combines a multimedia PC, projection display and high-fidelity sound system with speakers. For television viewing, the table projects a 600-lumen picture on a clear wall or projection screen. With a Digital Coffee Table, users could also sit on the couch and surf the Internet while listening to books on tape.

The research facility created the Digital Coffee Table to demonstrate technology; however, Selker says it could be licensed to a manufacturer and sold to consumers,

though IBM has no immediate plans to do so. According to Selker, the coffee table is merely part of a larger research project whose goal is to find ways for people to interact more intuitively with machines. Selker's group is also working on an office with computer-projected walls and an

IBM's Digital Coffee Table

exercise machine that acts as a personal trainer—it even dispenses soda when you do a good job.

Feel the burn

Speaking of exercise equipment, IXR Inc. of Sandy, Utah, previewed its EXERscape exercise system at Digital Living Room. EXERscape, due to ship in the first quarter of 1999, adds digital sound and video to your exercise bike workout, taking you from your home to the Tour de France—or anywhere else you'd rather be riding.

Bruce Ewert, IXR founder, chairman and CEO, says EXERscape will eventually include both the hardware needed to hook up a standard exercise bike to a Windows 98 multimedia PC and the DVD software required to provide the sound and visual experience. With EXERscape, the video

goes faster or slower (it even backs up) depending on how fast you peddle.

EXERscape's software uses a device that links your bike's speedometer to your computer to control video playback based on your performance. According to Ewert, IXR is also working on a resistance control switch that will make it harder to pedal up hills and steep roads. Riders can monitor their heart rates and speed, Ewert says, or even listen to their heartbeats via the computer speakers.

Although we find it difficult to imagine that consumers will shell out the bucks (Ewert says the commercial bike products may initially be priced at about $1,000 [the PC-TV system costs extra]) or rearrange their living rooms to accommodate this contraption, we might use it if it showed up at our local YMCA.

According to Ewert, IXR plans to license the hardware and software to fitness and sports centers as well as to fitness and electronic equipment manufacturers and other organizations. It will also license third-party producers to provide content for the EXERscape system.

Someday, when we realize that sitting in front of a PC isn't very exciting in and of itself, we'll begin to see ways that digital technology can improve many of our other activities. ∎