Digital computers

There are two fundamentally different types of computers: analog and digital. The former type solver problems by using continuously changing data such as voltage. In current usage, the term "computer" usually refers to high-speed digital computers. These computers are playing an increasing role in all branches of the economy.

Digital computers based on manipulating discrete binary digits (1s and 0s). They are generally more effective than analog computers for four principal reasons: they are faster; they are not so susceptible to signal interference; they can transfer huge data bases more accurately; and their coded binary data are easier to store and retrieve than the analog signals.

For all their apparent complexity, digital computers are considered to be simple machines. Digital computers are able to recognize only two states in each of its millions of switches, "on" or "off", or high voltage or low voltage. By assigning binary numbers to there states, 1 for "on" and 0 for "off", and linking many switches together, a computer can represent any type of data from numbers to letters and musical notes. It is this process of recognizing signals that is known as digitization. The real power of a computer depends on the speed with which it checks switches per second. The more switches a computer checks in each cycle, the more data it can recognize at one time and the faster it can operate, each switch being called a binary digit or bit.

A digital computer is a complex system of four functionally different elements: 1) the central processing unit (CPU), 2) input devices, 3) memory-storage devices called disk drives, 4) output devices. These physical parts and all their physical components are called hardware.

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The power of computers greatly on the characteristics of memory-storage devices. Most digital computers store data both internally, in what is called main memory, and externally, on auxiliary storage units. As a computer processes data and instructions, it temporarily stores information internally on special memory microchips. Auxiliary storage units supplement the main memory when programmes are too large and they also offer a more reliable method for storing data. There exist different kinds of auxiliary storage devices, removable magnetic disks being the most widely used. They can store up to 100 megabytes of data on one disk, a byte being known as the basic unit of data storage.