Chicago Manufacturing Show Displays New Products for Work, Play

Jon Van
744 words
16 March 1999
KRTBN Knight-Ridder Tribune Business News: Chicago Tribune - Illinois
KRTBN
English

Within a decade, little girls will download new dolls from the Internet as easily as they now printout e-mail messages, says Richard Balanson, who is president of the company that he says will make it happen.

His company, 3D Systems Corp., makes machines that churn out three-dimensional plastic renderings of just about anything a person can design on a computer screen. This is done using technology similar to ink-jet computer printers. While the machines cost about $50,000 apiece today, the price is dropping fast, and Balanson predicts they'll soon be a component in many home computer systems.

Balanson's gizmos were among a multitude of futuristic gadgets on display this week at McCormick Place where thousands of engineers are staging a gigantic version of show and tell called National Manufacturing Week.

While manufacturers may have a public image as solid, slightly stodgy guys who bend metal for a living, a quick glance around Chicago's McCormick Place soon put that sterotype to rest.

What could be the trade show's wackiest attraction is a virtual roller coaster where showgoers lined up to spend a few minutes being spun around inside a metal container while watching a full screen animation depicting a ride that can be individualized for each trip using a computer.

It is, boasted Frank McClintic, president of Lakewood, N.J.-based MaxFlight Corp., the only simulator capable of rotating a full 360 degrees in two directions.

"We've had more than a million people take rides," he said, "and no one has ever gotten sick."

This is because the module's rotation perfectly matches the visual presentation inside to avoid a disorientation that can trigger queasiness, McClintic explained.

"We design this equipment using motors, hydraulics systems and software that are on display all over this show," McClintic said. "We really rest on the shoulders of the manufacturing industry."

Two men from Michigan City, Ind., John Hooper and James Herbert, who rode in McClintic's "cybercoaster" agreed that it was a quite suggestive of a real coaster ride.

"The corkscrew turns were very realistic," said Hooper. "It's pretty neat. My only complaint is that it didn't last as long as a real coast ride."

Next to the cybercoaster at a booth sponsored by Design News magazine was a wearable computer that weighs about three pounds and can be strapped around the user's waist like a utility belt.

"The biggest market for these is in manufacturing, but it really has lots of uses," said Megan Lynch, of Logica Product Development, based in Minneapolis. "It's a lot handier to use than a laptop. Ford Motor has workers using them to help with quality control."

Insurance adjusters, fast-food vendors or just about anyone on the move who has some need to keep track of data could probably find a way to benefit from wearing a computer, Lynch said.

"If you were a biologist walking through a rain forest, you could use one to help you identify and catalog the species you encounter," she said.

But among the thousands of gadgets competing for attention, the three-dimensional product makers displayed by Balanson's Valencia, Calif. firm seemed both stunningly futuristic while still deeply rooted in traditional manufacturing.

Two versions were on display. One sprays plastic out of jets instead of ink and the other uses laser beams to solidify resin to sculpt products. Both approaches build intricate three-dimension renderings of images designed on a computer screen.

The purpose is to enable people to see for themselves what a designer has in mind. It's like when an architect constructs a scale model of a building to show how it will look.

"When you design a part using a computer, you can get a prototype within hours," said Balanson. "You show it to others and even try it out. We've made engine parts that have been tested."

Even more intriguing is Balanson's goal of eventually producing 3D production equipment so cheap it will become a consumer item as common as computer printers are today.

"When your daughter wants a new doll, she can go to the Internet and get the plans for 50 cents, modify the plans herself, perhaps by giving the doll her grandmother's face, and the produce the finished doll right at home, just like printing a file today," Balanson predicted.

Document krtbn00020010828dv3g00goe

Search Summary

Text	
Date	All Dates
Source	Newspapers: All
Author	All Authors
Company	3-D Systems Corp
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	United States
Language	English
Results Found	186
Timestamp	17 July 2018 11:15

