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Dr. Ching-chih Chen of Simmons College displays a video disk

Video disks: expansive, not expensive

By Karen Markin
Day Staff Writer

NEW LONDON — Imagine you are watching a science program about archaeology. It is showing still pictures of terra-cotta figures excavated from tombs in China. You would like a closer look at a detail of one of the figures.

If you are at home watching television, you are out of luck. If you are watching Project Emperor I, you can stop the program, zoom in on the figure, and have information about the artifact displayed on the screen as well.

Project Emperor I has this capability, and many others, because it utilizes a new technology called interactive video disk. Project Director Ching-chih Chen led a workshop about the technology Monday at Connecticut College for 100 of the region's librarians. Ms. Chen is a professor and associate dean of the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

She displayed a gleaming, silver, 12-inch video disk — the crux of the technology — for the audience. She told the group that 60,000 pages' worth of information could be stored on the nearly indestructible disk, which looks like a stereo LP.

Information is burned into the disk with a laser. The disk is used with a microcomputer, and can display a program similar to a public television science show.

Project Emperor I explored the excavation of the tombs of Xian in China, the burial place of the first emperor of China. In one segment, a camera panned the Great Wall of China from the air as a narrator related historical information. Music picked up where the narrator left off.

"You feel as if you're watching a Nova program," said Ms. Chen.

But its "interactive" quality makes the program far richer than television. The microcomputer allows viewers to jump to any frame on a 108,000-frame disk in 1.5 seconds, zoom in or out on the frame, or obtain additional information about a given topic. The program includes a computer dictionary file with definitions of special terms.

The cost of pressing a video disk is $3,600, which Ms. Chen considered relatively inexpensive. Copies of the master disk cost only $20 to $25. It is the program design and production phases, which occur before the pressing, that are expensive. That is when program developers must decide what information to include on the disk and use costly video equipment to prepare it properly for recording on a disk. These efforts can cost anywhere from $5,000 to $2 million, depending on the scope of the project, Ms. Chen said.

From a librarian's viewpoint, the technology's advantages include its ability to store vast amounts of information in a tiny space, and its potential for storing archival information.

But it has many other possible uses. Interactive video disk technology already is being used in industry as a training tool. In academia, it is used primarily by those in science, technology and medical fields.

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