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Business Page 1E

**The Ultimate 'Geek Show'
Gates unveils Windows 2000**

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With hoopla and fanfare normally associated with a national political convention or, at the very least, a Beatles reunion, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates rolled out **Windows 2000**, the newest version of the company's computer software. The overflow crowd of 1,500 computer technicians eagerly filled a ballroom at the Convention Center here, one of 100 locations across the world where Gates, via satellite from San Francisco, officially launched the new product Thursday.

Laser lights bounced off walls. Microsoft workers gave away free stuff. Actor Patrick Stewart, who played Capt. Jean Luc Picard on "Star Trek: The Next Generation," served as master of ceremonies from San Francisco with Gates and told bad "Star Trek" jokes for segues.

And at the end, rock legend Carlos Santana and his band emerged from underneath a large, Godzilla-sized laptop computer prop on the San Francisco stage and performed his comeback hit "Smooth."

For the technicians in attendance here, most of whom operate computer networks around Texas, this was Christmas, Easter, Elvis' birthday and payday rolled into one.

"It's a geek show," joked Randy Cohen, a USAA technician who came here on his day off for the show.

"It is really exciting," said **Jay Leal**, a computer consultant from McAllen.

"**Windows 2000** is an exciting new product, and I'm excited to be here."

Windows 2000 is an operating system like Windows 95 and Windows 98, which means it's the foundation on which other computer programs - Netscape, Quicken and Word, to name a few - are stacked.

This product, Gates told his national audience, is geared toward business users who must maintain big systems or high-traffic Web sites. It lets technicians do things they've never been able to do before, and it makes many routine but cumbersome activities go much faster.

"I think it's fair to say it was the most ambitious software project ever done," said Gates, wearing a brown suit and open-neck tan shirt, adding that the project took 5,000 people and \$2 billion to produce.

But it's not for everyone, company officials are quick to admit.

John Bunn, Austin-area Microsoft sales manager, said most home users would be better off by continuing to use Windows 98.

But those in attendance said end users - customers of businesses employing the software - will see some of the benefits.

"There will be new e-commerce possibilities because of this, and new Web sites and services can get online much faster and more reliably," Leal said.

And workers in offices where the program is deployed, Cohen said, will have a much more user-friendly computer experience.

Besides Stewart and Santana, character actor John O'Hurley, famously cast as eccentric catalogue clothier J. Peterman on the "Seinfeld" television show, played eccentric venture capitalist William Wendell Wentworth in a series of skits with Microsoft employees to show the new features of **Windows 2000**.

To pass the time before the closed-circuit broadcast began, Microsoft workers milled around the ballroom handing out Microsoft-embossed freebies.

"Tech people are such (suckers) for free stuff," Leal joked.

Matt Fangman, a Microsoft representative from San Antonio, stood on a chair in front of a section of the ballroom, asking technical questions and tossing pens to audience members who answered correctly.

There were a lot of laughs, but many of them were in the strange tongue of the IT, or information technology worker.

"Why is **Windows 2000** Professional perfect for mobile users?" Fangman asked the crowd.

"Plug and Play!" USAA's Cohen answered.

"Plug and Play' that works," Fangman said, tossing a pen to Cohen as the ITs chuckled among themselves.

As the question-and-answer session continued, one crowd member sat in the crowd chanting: "Give me a pen. Give me a pen. Give me a pen."

"No," Fangman said. "You've got to earn it." He ultimately relented and ponied up a pen for the chanting techie.

Cohen ended up with a fistful of pens for his efforts.

Said Cohen: "I've got 18 people on my staff, so I have to take care of them."

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