NOTES FROM THE FIELD ■ BY ROBERT X. CRINGELY

IBM Plans to Call EISA's Bluff With MCA2, MCA3

LAS VEGAS — It was near dawn in the desert, that interface between night and day when nocturnal mammals look for sleep, and reptiles — cold-blooded animals that hunt in daylight — prepare for another eight hours in their Comdex booths. Neither a diamondback rattler nor a kangaroo rat, I leaned precariously against the blackjack table, fuzzily trying to remember what my role was in this microcomputer food chain.

"Honey, do you want to place a bet?" Looking up, I found myself facing a new dealer, herself facing a new shift. In her mid-50s, she had the tatters of an extraordinary beauty, with hair dyed dark auburn and a smile that unfurled like a red flag caught in a sudden breeze.

BETTING ON BLACK AND BLUE. Searching my pockets for money, I realized the biggest bets at Comdex were being placed on one side or another of the EISA-MCA battle. From my foggy view, it comes down to Big Blue vs. Compaq, with most of the other players trying to find some way to hedge their bets. And while Compaq struggles to keep its gang members in line and quiet, IBM is starting to talk about its secret weapons: MCA2 and MCA3.

These follow-on Micro Channels make use of the so-called reserved lines on the current MCA bus, and it's Big Blue's intention that MCA cards be upwardly compatible; MCA1 cards will work just fine in MCA2 and MCA3 computers, no matter what EISA says.

READ IT AND WEEP, BILLY. Blackjack is my game in Vegas, mainly because it's the slowest way I've found to lose my entire year's savings. Slower still would be not going to Comdex at all, but Sacks, my editor, likes me there in case he needs someone to carry him home.

IBM likes to take minimum risks, too, like its back-room showing of a portable Model 70 that turned out to be carved out in wood — no inadvertent crashes. And what were the chances its raffle giveaway of a working Model 70 would go to Mike Maples — formerly IBM's director of software strategy who now works at Microsoft — at the laser-permeated IBM breakfast meeting?

There are other IBM secret weapons, of course, like the cooperation taking place even as we speak between IBM and Next (we knew about that one), IBM and Metaphor (we knew about that one, too), and Next and Metaphor. Look for a merging of Presentation Manager and Next Step earlier, rather than later.

FLASH! ESBER CAN'T WRITE. Fishing a fiver out of my pocket, I stared at the cards in front of me, which apparently added up to 15. To take a card or stand pat, that was the question. I took the card. It was a king and I lost.
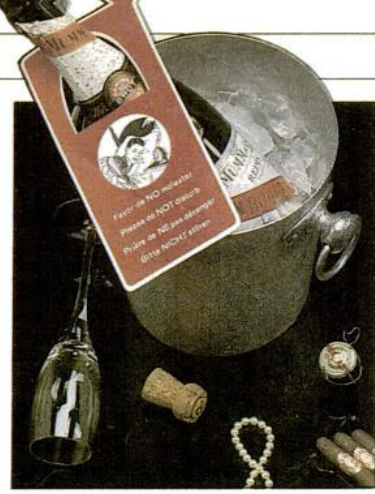
There were other losers, too, like the Dbase IV pens handed out by Ashton-Tate; most of them didn't work. And there was the man who passed out in the Atari booth after walking into a wall. And maybe the authors of Spectre 128, a Mac emulator for the Atari ST that not only runs Hypercard, Appletalk, and you name it, but also attracted a video crew representing the Apple legal department.

FLATTENED, NOT CRUSHED. Look for lots of losers and few winners in this week's reorganization of Apple's business marketing group. What used to be 12 layers of management will be six, with a lot of bosses turning into associates, and dozens of them heading for the door, rather than accepting de facto demotions. Blame the failure of Appleshare and the alliance with DEC, for one thing. Also blame Allan Loren, new president of Apple U.S.A., who wants his troops to know who's boss.

Aside from a couple of quarters, I had no money left. Struggling to my feet, I threw one quarter to the dealer and slipped the other into a progressive slot machine, promptly winning $12,793.

"Buy me a drink, honey?" the dealer called to me across the room. We went dancing, instead.

This boy is on a roll and you can be part of it! Call your industry secrets to me at (415) 328-4602, or send them to MCI:CRINGE.