Give me those old-tyme displays

Michael Dunn - March 25, 2014

I'm no Grampa, but I do relish old display technology. Everything today is LED, LCD, spam, eggs, LCD, LED, or LCD. Boring. Let's have a look at displays from a more interesting time.

There's no denying Nixie's coolness factor. Let's start there, as you've probably seen them before. Each digit in a Nixie display is a thin-formed wire electrode. The tube is filled with neon, and works on the same principle as a simple neon lamp. There's something hypnotic about watching a changing Nixie, as the display plane is different for each digit.
Yup, that's 2.5 digits of extreme accuracy. The "1" digit is an NE-2 neon bulb.

Similar in name and gas, the Pixie is much rarer. I'm lucky enough to have an old rack mount "Scaler" with seven Pixie digits. One day, I'll mate it to a rubidium frequency source for a very retro, very accurate clock. Have a look at Mike's display page - the Pixies are about a third of the way down, and include a cool animation.

Sticking with the neon theme, planar gas discharge displays saw use in the 1970s and 1980s. I think Heathkit may have been the biggest customer!
Planar display from a Heathkit clock-radio.

The Burroughs Panaplex II display in a 1973 calculator.

My parts stash includes some incandescent seven-segment displays; but I've never seen them used in an actual product (apparently aviation was a major use). They have a very warm look to them.
The warm, glowing warmth of an incandescent "7."

Probably the most unusual displays here are, in effect, little CRTs! These aren't scanned like a video display. My best guess is they use digit-shaped masks through which an electron flood is fired. Do you know?

Four numeric displays, manufactured by IEE.

The last interesting display technology I have for show and tell today also uses projection, but of light, through a transparency, and onto a screen. As you can see, the images don't have to be digits!
It's also a push switch.

These are older, and about twice the volume of the previous module. Also, no switch.

Do you know of any other old display technologies?

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