PowerPoint co-creator Dennis Austin is dead at 76

Dennis Austin, who co-created PowerPoint, passed away at his home in Los Altos, California, on September 1st, reports *The Washington Post*. His son, Michael Austin, said he'd had lung cancer that had metastasized to his brain, according to the *Post*. He was 76 years old.

Austin studied engineering at several universities, including MIT and UC Santa Barbara, before going to work as a software developer, eventually joining the software company Forethought and co-developing PowerPoint. The company released the software in 1987, and Microsoft bought the company just a few months later. Austin served as PowerPoint's primary developer from 1985 to 1996 when he retired.

The Washington Post notes that Robert Gaskins, PowerPoint's other co-creator, wrote in his book *Sweating Bullets: Notes about Inventing PowerPoint* that Austin "came up with at least half of the major design ideas" and added that if he hadn't been designing the software, "no one would ever have heard of it."

Despite its 36-year history as the most ubiquitous software for presentations, PowerPoint has its detractors; Jeff Bezos once said that "we outlawed PowerPoint presentations at Amazon," calling the move "probably the smartest thing we ever did." Steve Jobs was quoted in Walter Isaacson's *Jobs* biography as saying, "People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint."

The Atlantic in August published a story about "The Great PowerPoint Panic of 2003," saying that 20 years ago, people

thought it would “corrode our minds, degrade communication, and waste our time.” Still, PowerPoint has had its fans, too, including *The Talking Heads* lead singer David Byrne, though he loved it not for its intended purpose but for its potential as an artistic tool.

The software remains a key part of Microsoft’s suite of office tools to this day. Recently, the company has begun adding AI tooling to PowerPoint using Copilot, a sort of modern-day Clippy AI assistant for Microsoft 365. It can be prompted to create presentations or to generate images and adjust the tone or format of text within a presentation.

Correction September 9th, 2023, 6:13PM ET: *This article originally wrote that Robert Gaskins is named Michael Gaskins, which is incorrect, and has been fixed. We regret the error.*

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