

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: 4 (1994-1996)
Heft: 10

Artikel: EWWG computer control for models?
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855095>

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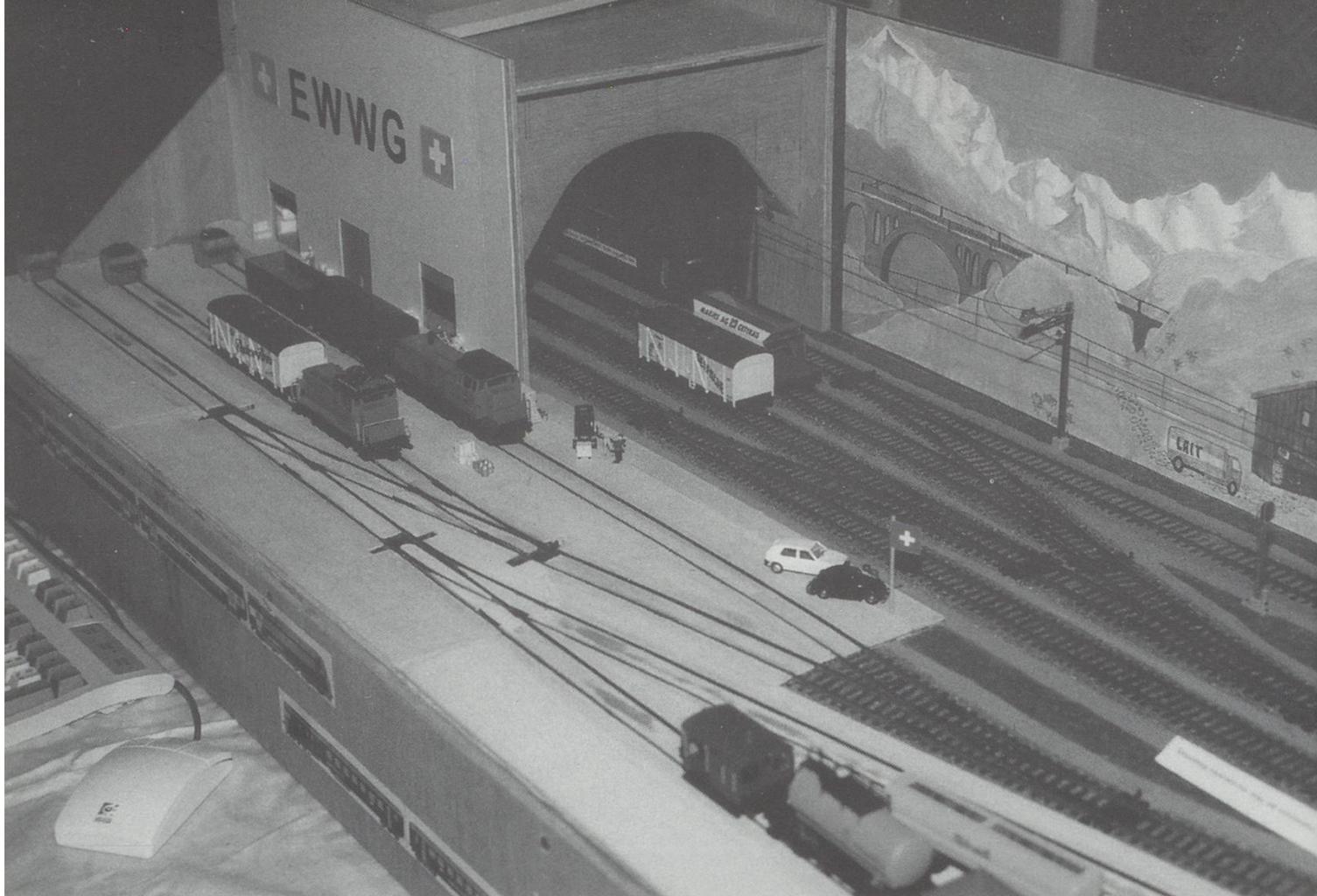
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EWWG Computer control for models?

by Andy Micklethwaite

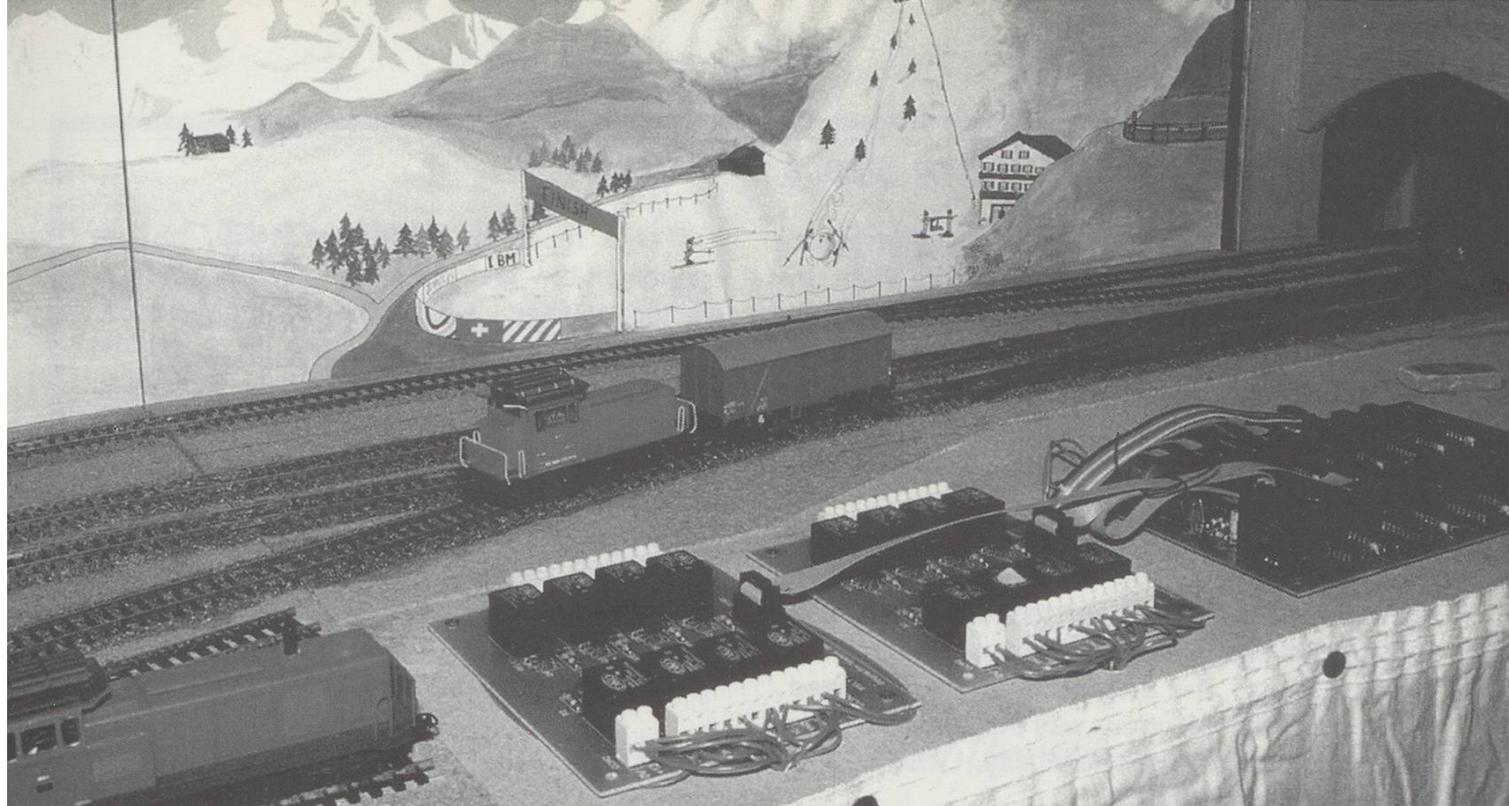
My interest in Swiss railways and their models goes back many years. My first HAG loco cost 80 Swiss Francs in those long-gone days you got 10 SFrs for £1! My interest in computers is not quite that old, but I'm on my fourth home computer! However it is only recently that I have been able to achieve a long held ambition, namely combining the 2 interests, and the drastic event that enabled this was redundancy!

At last I had time, thought no longer the money, to control a model railway from a computer. For many years I had toiled away in my limited spare time trying to get this to work on a BBC microcomputer. Now, after considerable time and effort, I got it to work in a limited manner, controlling a 3-road fiddle yard for the HO layout that has been under construction for many years (and still is!). However the BBC computer was virtually obsolete and inhibited a user-friendly interface. The decision was made to move to an IBM-compatible Windows-based PC, and so the Interlocker system was born. A 1 day exhibition with Charlie Hulme's Austrian layout 'Umgau'

showed that the concept worked, there was some interest in the idea, and the prototype system worked (mostly). So as prototypes moved into production, I felt the need for a layout I could run and develop at home to isolate and fix problems.

I obviously needed a layout small enough to be easily transportable by car, and to be moved by 2 people. HO was the logical choice as not only had I already got some HO stock, but it was cheaper and easier to use than smaller scales. I needed it to demonstrate computer operation obviously, but I still wanted it to satisfy my own criteria for an exhibition layout - there should always be something going on to interest the viewer, there should be sufficient scope to interest the operators, and it should be reasonably realistic.

Now the Interlocker system came into its own, for having made the initial design I could try operating the layout using the simulation facilities of the system. The basic concept of a warehouse linked to a branch line seemed to fulfil all the requirements, however the simulation showed up some improvements that could be made to assist



operation, thus proving that the sales talk I'd dreamed up for the system was actually right.

Meanwhile Richard Combs spent his half-term holiday building 2 superb baseboards. Dave Howsam came to show me how track-laying and ballasting should be done, and I then tried to follow his instructions (not, I fear, reaching his high standards!). Ian Haire at Subtec had converted my circuit board designs into working units and eventually, just a couple of weeks before the 1995 AGM at Derby, we put it all together, connected the computer, and, to everyone's surprise, it all worked. Janet Singleton provided a backscene and we put it all in Phil Donbavand's Astra to go to Derby - as it was designed to fit in a Golf, the 1/2 inch spare was a bonus!

So to Derby and the 1995 SRS AGM and disaster! The computer and the electronics on the layout refused to talk to each other. Eventually I decided that one of the electronic modules was faulty and Richard and Phil dashed off to Nottingham to buy a replacement. Thankfully it worked and we operated trains under computer control, although by this time, most people had gone for lunch or into the AGM. Shortly after the AGM finished, the computer monitor expired - not the best of days!

Next stop: Macclesfield MRG exhibition in April, a 3 day event. The worry of course was whether the problems encountered at Derby would recur. Some scenic effects had been added over the Easter holiday, as well as catenary. With support from the Combs and Howsams, the show went

well, attracting a lot of interest in the concept of computer control as well as a little interest in the SRS. It also attracted families, as wives, sons and daughters found the computer interface easy to use - much more so than an impressive array of unlabelled switches and dials. By now, the system was being sold commercially, but hardly any visitors showed interest in actually parting with money. I feel there is a reluctance in this country for model railway enthusiasts to get involved with computers, more so than on the continent, where similar systems for Märklin Digital are quite popular. Maybe I need to show the modelling community that it really is easy to do. If you have views on this I'd be delighted to hear from you, directly or through the letters column.

Further "experiences" were Leicester, Wakefield and Mirfield last autumn, and of course, the 1996 SRS AGM in Altrincham. Now the layout works much better with the addition of feedback to the computer from track circuits and infra-red switches, and extra scenic effects make it look better too. The software can now do better representations of Swiss signals (although there's only one real one on the layout!).

What next? Macclesfield and Wakefield are due for repeat visits, and further developments continue - computer controlled train power and digital control are next (FMZ is already in testing).

Oh, yes, I'm not sure you'll be glad you asked - EWWG is short for Eidgenössische Wagen Wechslen Gesellschaft - the Swiss Shunting Company!