

Dead Trees

A PUBLICATION OF
QUESTIONABLE VALUE FROM
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COMMUNICATIONS

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Websites and e-mail: Pretty? Functional? Both?

Computers are still in the “Model T” era. People often look at me like I’ve just arrived from Pluto or the outer reaches of the galaxy when I say that. But let’s see if I can convince you.

I’ve been using personal computers since before the time that a 10 MHz processor was “blazingly fast”. We had one of the first IBM AT (advanced technology) computers with its fast processor that ran at an astonishing 8MHz. We over-clocked it to 10MHz. The Internet existed then, but was strictly limited to the military, research facilities, and colleges.

Everything’s up to date in 2002

With e-mail and the Internet being ubiquitous and “slow” computers clocking in at 1GHz, you may think that we’ve gone about as far as we can go. Remember the patent commissioner from the “mid 1800s” who is supposed to have said “Everything that can be invented has been invented.” It’s unlikely that any trademark commissioner uttered those words or even thought them. In 1843, a trademark commissioner did write “The advancement of the arts, from year to year, taxes our credulity, and seems to presage the arrival of that period when human improvement must end.”

You hear things like that today, but we know that advancements will continue. In the mid ’70s, Intel’s Gordon Moore predicted that computing power would double every couple of years. Each time “current technology” seems about to hit a dead end, an inventor develops something new and Moore’s Law holds. Can this go on forever? Logic would suggest there must be a limit, but nobody who’s familiar with technology is willing to say what that limit is or when it might be reached.


Early cars routinely broke down, became stuck, or failed in “mysterious” ways. The lack of a fuel pump meant some cars had to be driven up steep hills *in reverse*. Today’s computers? Too hard to use!

Word processor files may make several stops on the way to a website and, along the way, I have to make a lot of manual changes because one application is trying to reproduce accurately the word processor’s formatting on the Web. That would be fine if it worked, but many browsers would choke on the HTML.

The Internet is even worse. It runs on 40-year-old technology. If today’s computers are Model T’s, today’s Internet is a farm lane. We’re trying to use the equivalent of a Yugo to move a household full of furniture from Pittsburgh to Sacramento.

The Web? The inventors of the Internet never imagined anything like it.

It wasn’t a vision problem!

The color on last month’s edition of Dead Trees was horrid. The cyan toner was low and I didn’t have a replacement. Rather than delay this important publication (and the time billing statements that accompany it), I printed with what I had. This month, the cyan toner is new and the colors are much better, aren’t they! 


Tim Berners-Lee at CERN, the particle acceleration lab in Switzerland convinced his boss to let him work on project that created “hyperlinks” within text. Berners-Lee’s World Wide Web was **text only** in the late 1980s. The first Web sever outside Europe was installed at Stanford’s Linear Accelerate Center late in 1991 and the Web was still “text only”.

Students at the Illinois supercomputer center invented the first graphical browser and that technology led to Netscape, the first successful commercial browser.

The Web isn’t even a teenager yet

We are dealing with technology that’s barely a decade old. Ten years after the invention of the automobile, dreamers could see where the technology would go, but they had to deal with muddy gravel roads. We can see where the Internet and the Web are going, but we still have to deal with archaic technologies.

Fortunately, browsers are at least becoming standardized. Microsoft accepted standardization, but didn’t do it very well in version 4. Netscape 4 was wildly off the mark. Netscape 6 complies with standards, but it has a market share of about 2%. Internet Explorer 5 and 6 follow the rules.

The discrepancies mean that today’s websites can be pretty or functional – **choose any one**. They can be both only if you’re willing to create one website for Internet Explorer users, another for those who have Netscape 4, a third for those who use Opera, and yet another for those who have visual handicaps. When will this end? Check back with me in 5 years. 

What the heck is this?

Dead Trees is the William Blinn Communications newsletter. It’s published whenever I feel like it, although I generally feel like it when I’m preparing the month’s invoices. If you didn’t receive an invoice with this newsletter, kindly contact me and we’ll rectify that situation. Please note that despite the name, of the publication, I bear no particular animosity toward trees. The name is simply an acknowledgment that paper is made from, well, dead trees.

Rule 1: Don't Panic

Hitchhiker's

Guide to the Galaxy, the delightful book by the late Douglas Adams, wasn't exactly at the top of my mind one Thursday this month when Windows XP presented me with "**STOP C0000218 {REGISTRY FILE FAILURE}**" during a routine restart following a routine Windows Update session. The ominous message appeared on Microsoft's attractive blue screen and it was clear that the computer would not boot.

The Windows Update session was supposed to be brief – no more than 5 minutes – because I had a lot of work to get done that day. Re-installing Windows wasn't on my list of things to do and the installation would involve formatting the disk drive, reinstalling software, and configuring the applications. It would be a 2-day process. **I didn't have 2 days to spare.**

Seeking out help

Fortunately, another computer was available, so I had access to Microsoft's Knowledgebase. Regardless of what I may sometimes think about Microsoft, I have to admit that the company's Knowledgebase is a marvelous tool.

I plugged in the error code (*STOP C0000218*) and was referred to a 6-page document entitled "How to recover from a corrupted registry that prevents Windows XP from starting." The process was described in 4 main steps:

- Boot from the CD to the Recovery Console, copy the existing registry files to a new directory and then delete them from their original location, restore the machine's original registry files from the "repair" directory.
- Start the machine. Microsoft doesn't mention this and it would surprise someone who isn't expecting it: Applications that start when you start Windows may not run properly because their registry entries will now be gone. The working registry could be months old. Instructions explain how to find and copy some "restore point" Registry files. These files are in a "doubly hidden" directory and gaining access to it involves logging on as the administrator and changing the directory's security properties.
- In the third step, you boot from the CD and start the Recovery Console again. You're told how to copy the Registry files you recovered over the original registry files. ***This will produce a semi-functional computer.*** When you restart, Windows will look a lot like it did before you had the problem and you might be tempted to skip the final step. Don't!
- The final step has you restore Windows' settings to a previous point. This is a quick, easy process that restores tens, dozens, or hundreds of program settings. If you skip this step, the computer will behave strangely because the Registry doesn't actually match the computer's operating state. I ran the computer that way for about half an hour to take care of a few critical tasks before finishing the recovery process.

During the recovery process, I had to read several other Knowledgebase entries. In most cases, the original file directed me to them.

Nothing warned me that I would have to "activate" Windows XP twice during the process, so that was a surprise. The first

What a strange week (TW3?)

Besides the near disaster described at the left, this has been a week that computers seemed to be out to get me.


I installed Roxio's Easy CD Creator on a Windows 2000 machine and that caused a problem that kept the machine from booting.

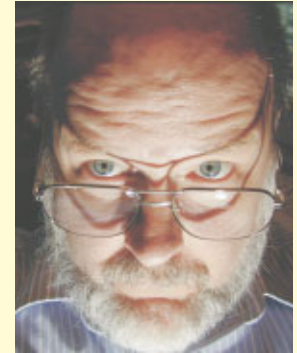
Reinstalling Windows let the machine boot and kept all the Registry entries that allowed programs to work, but Norton Antivirus got lost in the shuffle. When I tried to reinstall it, the program told me it couldn't be installed because it was already on the machine. And I couldn't uninstall it because it wasn't on the machine.

Suggestions from Symantec about uninstalling the program manually didn't exactly work: The machine would boot and then immediately shut down. I reinstalled Windows again and backed up the important files to another machine on the network. The machine with a problem was new, so the files I needed were also on the recently retired machine, but that machine was no longer on the network.

The next step was to install Windows one more time, this time formatting the disk first. That, of course, meant reinstalling all the applications.

Then, late in the week, my e-mail program imploded and lost several thousand stored messages. Most were easily retrieved from backup, except for those that arrived earlier this week and hadn't made it onto a backup set yet. So I had to ask for several repeats.

Why do we use computers? People keep telling me the computer will save time time for me. Yeah, right. 



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activation took less than 5 seconds on-line. But during a later start-up, Windows was unable to reach the Internet (probably because the Zone Alarm firewall was running, but not fully configured) and I had to do the activation process by phone. It's an automated process that takes about 5 minutes.

Recovering from the corrupted Registry required about 2 hours. While that's time I consider "wasted", it's still a lot better than two days of formatting the disk, installing the operating system, installing all the applications, configuring the applications, and restoring the data from backup.

So keep Douglas Adams in mind when your computer starts acting up and "Don't Panic!"

Also keep in mind that the answer is "42". 