

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

What's wrong with this @%#!! computer?

I suspect that computers have increased both the quantity and the quality of swearing throughout the world. When something goes wrong with a computer, the explanation is often somewhat unintelligible, particularly if you're not a computer geek. And maybe even if you are.

We've progressed beyond error messages like "00110101" or "Bad!" Yes, at least one application had an error message that consisted of the single word "Bad!" Now we're treated to "This program has unexpectedly quit. Close," (Mac) or "Unable to continue. OK?" (Windows).

I started thinking about computers, how they interact with us carbon-based life forms, and what we expect of our logical devices after an acquaintance, annoyed by all the steps necessary to ensure a reasonably safe upgrade to Windows XP service pack 2 wrote, "We're not being served at all well by the software industry if it has come to this. Why should we have to reload antivirus software? Why should we have to check in with motherboard sites? Why should we have to worry about the BIOS? How can anyone think that this is acceptable?"

The easy, smart-ass answer is that you don't have to do any of those things any more than you have to buy fire insurance for your home, take an umbrella along when there's a 90% chance of rain, or look both ways before crossing the street. It's just that doing those things increase your chance of having a successful experience.

When I hear or read comments like these, I invariably begin to wonder how the speaker or writer would have dealt with life in a covered wagon crossing the prairie. "We shouldn't have to float our wagons across these rivers! Where's the bridge?"

And what about the motorists who drove early model automobiles? You may feel it's a stretch, but I see similarities between early automobiles and today's computers.

I imagine there were people in 1910 who complained about the need to be a mechanic if you wanted to drive more than a mile or two, that cranking an engine the wrong way could

result in a broken arm, that some cars had to be driven in reverse up hills because the gas tank was in the back and the gas line was a gravity-feed arrangement that failed if the gas tank was lower than the engine, or that the motorist had to replace tires at the side of a muddy road after running over a twig that punctured the inner tube. And the roads! "Good" roads were paved with gravel. Most roads were dirt.

Today's cars are easier to use.

How does this relate to the PC?

The personal computer is about 20 years old and these devices are a pain in the (choose your body part). Computer technology is moving a lot faster than automobile technology, but it's still no further along than cars were in the 1930s. Back then, motorists had to have their cars lubricated after every rain storm. A careful driver might be able to eke 50,000 miles out of a car before having to replace it. Any head-on collision was almost certainly fatal because the steering column tended to impale the driver.

But 1930s motorists continued to buy cars and, over time, manufacturers found ways to improve them. Brake systems were converted from mechanical to hydraulic and then the hydraulic systems were doubled so that a single failure wouldn't leave the motorist without a way to stop the car. Advancing technology made it possible for an engine in one of today's cars to run with little trouble for 150,000 miles or more. Collapsible steering columns, air bags, ABS brakes, and hundreds of other components make today's cars safer.

But none of this happened overnight. Look at a car from the 1920s and you'll consider it primitive. Now look back at a computer from 1983. Primitive? You bet!

My first computer required me to swap cartridges to run various programs. DOS was a big advancement; I could close a word processor and open a spreadsheet without having to reboot the computer. But I couldn't use both programs at the same time.



Microsoft and Apple developed graphical operating systems based on work done by Xerox in Palo Alto. OS/2 was a stronger version of DOS. Unix (and eventually Linux) came on the scene. Microsoft developed a true multi-tasking operating system with NT and then expanded it with XP. Apple's OS X is powerful, but it's still too hard to use. Microsoft's next generation operating system is in development now and we'll see it by 2007 if the development doesn't get bogged down.

Give hardware and software manufacturers another 20 years and computers will be capable of diagnosing and fixing some of their own problems, just as your automobile's engine can today adjust itself. Until the hardware and software reach that level of complexity, you can choose to take advantage of the benefits a computer brings to your life and live with the annoyances or you can choose to forego the advantages a computer might provide because you prefer not to deal with the distractions.

Making sense of computers

Most of the information people need to operate a computer these days is reasonably approachable by any intelligent person who doesn't choose in advance to be unable to understand what's being said and actively tries to understand. I say that with no intent to offend. I can't tune up a lawnmower engine and I like to tell myself that I just don't "get" engines. But a lawnmower engine isn't a particularly complex device. I could undoubtedly learn to service mine, but I haven't.

A lower price for Windows

Microsoft is lowering the price that manufacturers pay for OEM copies of Windows, but only for a new version of the OS (Windows XP Starter Edition). Oh ... and the "Starter Edition" is sold only in non-English versions.

So we're beginning to see a prescription-drug market effect under which those in the United States will pay more than anybody else for the same product.

Windows XP Home Edition costs users about \$100 to buy if they want to upgrade an earlier version of the OS. PC manufacturers won't say what they pay. Neither will Microsoft, but most experts guess \$50 to \$75. Currently every machine sold with Windows has that cost built in.

Microsoft is trying to address the needs of small vendors in 3rd-world countries and the reasons are obvious: Linux, the open-source operating system, is being adopted widely in Europe and particularly in Asia. Microsoft's crystal ball shows huge areas of the global landscape not under its control unless it does something and does it fast.


Hence the new edition.

Last year, when Thailand's government started distributing Linux, Microsoft came up with some price concessions. If you live in, say, Sumatra and you want a copy of the Starter Edition, how much will you pay? Sorry, I don't know. But you won't be able to buy it anyway. Starter Edition will be sold only to PC manufacturers. People closer to Microsoft than I am suggest that the price will be around \$20 per license.

It'll start shipping in October.. 

It's the same for those who have decided they can't learn how computers work. You don't have to understand the technical manuals; all that's required is a willingness to spend some time with some of the popular computer magazines, books such as Osborne's "Quick Steps" series, or any of the hundreds of websites that explain concepts in plain English.

You won't be a computer expert, at least not right away, but you will gain the knowledge you need to fix many things when they break and to understand what a technician is telling you when you encounter a problem that you can't fix. Or you can choose to hire a technician to take care of even the smallest problem.


You may be surprised to learn that I have no technical background, but I've read a lot of books, I've taken classes, I've attended conferences, I've asked questions, and the pay-off is that I'm able to take care of the computers I have to deal with every day. You can, too. Honest. 

Backup! Please ...?

An acquaintance recently had a near-death experience with her computer's disk drive. Fortunately, the data was recoverable. The problem generated a question ("What kind of backup do you use?") that's worth talking about. I have an external FireWire hard drive that lives at the office.

Once a week, I take it home and do a differential backup (all files that have changed since the previous full backup). Once a quarter, I do a full backup. The full backup omits things that can easily be restored from the original media. Even though I back up all applications, my primary goal is to ensure that I have all the settings files – some programs store modified UI settings in the Registry, some in the Windows directory, and some in the application's directory. A full backup (around 50GB) takes a couple of hours; differential backups (3 to 10GB) are usually under 30 minutes.

When the backup is complete, I return the external drive to the office because the device being backed up and the backup should not be in the same location. Thursday is backup night. From Friday through the following Thursday, there is the opportunity to lose all new work, but much of what I do for websites is posted immediately to the site; I usually store development files on the server; if I'm working on something critical, it also lives temporarily on my 512MB Crucial "Gizmo".

Backup devices and media may be expensive and the time required to conduct a backup may be substantial, but they are nothing compared to the value of the data. 

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"Effective managing has a rhythm, a cadence that engenders loyalty and satisfies the human spirit, possibly rooted in the actions of prehistoric hunting-party leaders."