The Great PC April Fool's Joke

By Peter Talbot

In a rare burst of organizational energy, I recently decided to sort through my old receipts from past computer hardware and software purchases. To my surprise, I discovered the very first PC I ever purchased was paid for and brought home on April 1st, nine years ago. In retrospect, April Fool's Day seems appropriate.

Like a tourist with a tacky shirt and dangling camera, I'm certain the salesman saw me coming a mile away. Hypnotized by magazine ads of microchips and dancing pixels, I bought one. No one told me user-friendly was a subjective term. Forget free modems, inexpensive printers and third party disk drives, the only peripherals I needed back then were an antacid and a headache tablet.

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You Mean There's A Learning Curve?

The greatest April Fool's joke ever played on me was the computer industry's sales pitch claiming these wonderful machines would actually save me time and frustration. Sure, no one can perform complex computations like a spreadsheet, sort information like a relational database, or perform search and replace routines like a word processor. But first we have to learn how to use them. The very fact that these tasks are effortless for computers doesn't mean the same thing is true for humans. Computer users worldwide have developed the greatest love–hate relationship with a machine since telephone companies first introduced the busy signal.

Those of us who have come to rely on computer technology soon realize that the time and effort computers save us are rarely ever saved; more often they are spent on learning a new program, recovering lost data, or perfecting a flaw that would have been overlooked had we been using a typewriter or drafting board. The real time spent using computers also includes the learning curve of the software, the frustrations of software incompatibility, and the irresistible quest for perfection that the machines and their programs bring out in us.

Don't Blame The Technology

This quest for perfection is indeed praiseworthy. But for mortals, achieving it is another thing. To many managers and

corporate vice presidents, word processing means never having to apologize for last minute corrections. To their secretaries it can mean trivial revisions that occupy the better part of a workday. The more sophisticated the software becomes, the greater our quest for perfection grows. Since we know the machine is incapable of mistakes, the possibility of a perfect document is always out there...somewhere. Too often we spend more time trying to find it than the document is worth.

What's truly interesting about this quest for perfection is that we are using something non-human as a role model. Historically, you'd think we would have learned by now. If you've ever seen old film footage of feather-clad inventors flapping their arms in a desperate attempt to get airborne, you know humans make rather poor (and silly looking) birds; and as far back as the 1950s time and motion studies told us that, compared to robots, human beings make very inefficient assembly line workers. There's not much chance of humans themselves taking to flight, and probably little chance of us becoming mechanized assembly units, yet we continue to judge ourselves by non-human standards. No wonder we get frustrated when the accounting package we just purchased tells us we're two dollars short.

Even acknowledged experts in a field can feel the frustration of computer competition. Until fairly recently, chess masters often declined an invitation to match wits with the machines, although many knew the early software was incapable of dealing with the classical offensive and defensive strategies of the game. Now that we've instructed some of the more sophisticated programs to watch for these moves, it's becoming a closer competition.

Traditionally, creative players could save face by using innovative strategies to stump the computer's mathematical approach to chess. But because memory has become so inexpensive, and there are only a finite number of moves available on a chessboard, it's now conceivable to envision a computer whose memory contains every possible chess game ever played, or will ever be played. Five years from now the most creative players may be forced to acknowledge defeat as well.

Again, we should have seen this coming. Even some of the first software packages available for chess contained a delay option enabling the user to suppress the computer's instantaneous response. It's ironic, but after designing the perfect electronic opponent for our entertainment pleasure, human players felt the need to make the machine wait a few seconds before making its move...just to make it appear somewhat human. Apparently no one wants to be considered a simpleton after spending an hour devising the "perfect" move.

Thinking Like A Computer

For people easily frustrated, computers themselves are to blame. But the reality is that very few critical design flaws in the electronics world go uncorrected. Today's marketplace is saturated with different brand names and overwhelmed with industry literature. Given the number of computer magazines and the level of awareness about the products, it's doubtful any unreliable computer could survive in the marketplace long enough to frustrate a large number of people. There are simply too many good systems out there to choose from. More often the frustration is due to the way we use the technology, not the way it's built.

Unfortunately this distinction is lost somewhere when financial considerations and productivity issues are involved. Impressed by the Yes/No logic of computers, many productivity specialists have begun to think as computers do—and then expect the same logical responses

from the people who must interact with the machines. Touch tone telephone menus, the computer technology that forces you to navigate through a series of choices before you're connected to the right person, are a good example. Clearly the cold logic of the computer (which is enough to enrage even the most patient caller) is more of a convenience for the company than it is for the customer. A single technical support call is sufficient to convince the novice computer user of this. The fact that you cannot figure out your new machine or software in the first place is bad enough. Having to deal with another computer before complaining about your own system is just adding insult to injury.

For those of us willing to accept the frustration and long learning curves, computers are a godsend. Once mastered, it's difficult to imagine the same level of productivity in a non-automated environment. Whether or not we emerge from the learning experience with our sanity intact depends on our approach to the technology in the first place. Those of us who view the computer as a tool, rather than an end in itself, usually survive; we accept the machines and software as something that hold the potential for achieving perfection. Those of us who see ourselves as inept at achieving perfection—even with the perfect tool—are left frustrated and alienated by the computer revolution.

Converting a system of business cards to electronic format using a relational database is enough to decide the issue for many people. The ability to cross reference the information is a powerful convenience for some, while to others the electronic options are simply too numerous to cope with. The successful often display their new database with the pride of a new parent. The frustrated reach for the antacid and vow to never again repeat the experience. A promise of time saved and user-friendliness must seem like a cruel April Fool's joke that goes on forever. These frustrated users are easy to spot: they're the ones that spell relief R-O-L-O-D-E-X. ■

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