

How to solve all your PC problems

Go cold turkey: sell your PC.

CONUNDRUM: HOW CAN THE FOLLOWING BE TRUE: $PC = PC$? IN HONOR OF THE LAST MONTH OF SUMMER VACATION, I'D LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS MONTH'S COLUMN TO A VERY

serious subject, albeit one with a lighthearted side. The subject concerns the very difficult problem of personal-computer ease of use. In spite of all our best efforts during the past few decades, things are not getting better, but worse. Following are several ideas for dealing with the problem in an efficient manner. These ideas are descriptions of several magazine articles I don't have time to write, but would love to read. (Note placement of tongue firmly in cheek.) The articles are:

- Why the computer will never get easier
- WYSIWYG is really WYGIN-WYS
- Real men prefer the command line interface
- Sell your copy of Windows, put your kids through college
- Networks are for nitwits
- Do what Nancy does
- Renounce graphics, sound, and video
- Forswear Microsoft products and survive
- Go cold turkey: sell your PC

Why the computer will never get easier

The computer industry has a vested interest in difficulty. If it was

easy, anybody could do it, and if anybody could do it, lots of people would lose their jobs. The sub-

terfuge then is to proclaim a goal that is the exact opposite of the real goal, and to keep shifting the focus to various pieces of the puzzle. Doing so will ensure that no one, neither customers nor competitors, will ever be able to figure out what the goal is, or even if there is one.

Approximately every five years or so, propose a new technology as

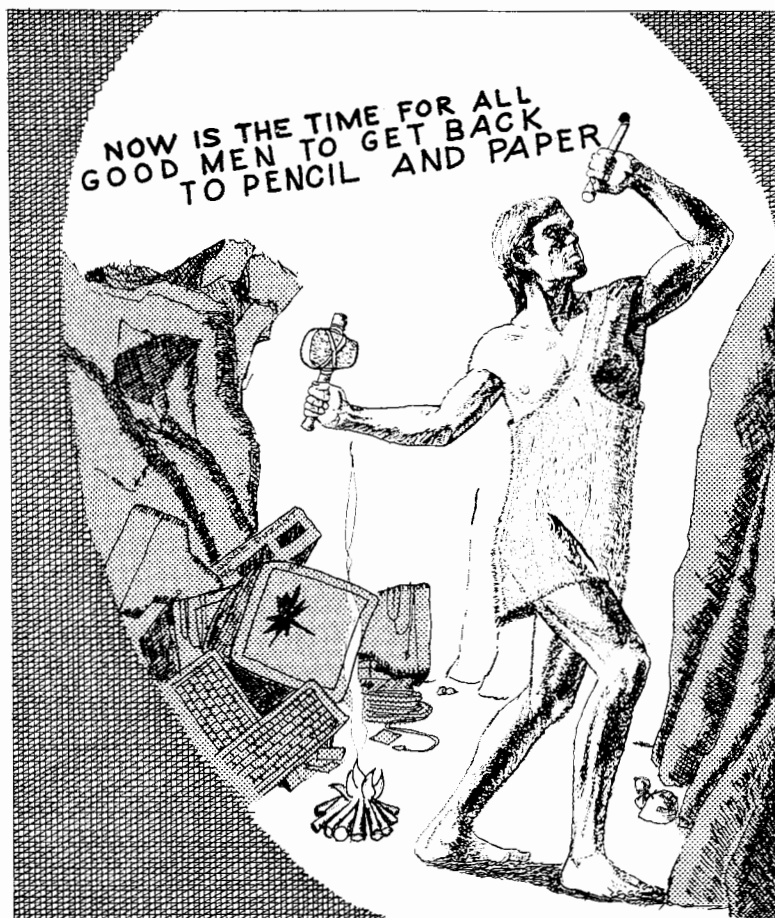


FIG. 1—RESOLVE ALL YOUR PC PROBLEMS in one fell swoop. Just say no.

the universal solution to the problems facing computers. Examples include Structured Programming, Networks, Artificial Intelligence, and Object-Oriented Programming. For the past few years, the GUI has been touted as the solution to difficulty. Yet has no one noticed that the complexity of system configuration has increased geometrically? Do you know what every line in your CONFIG.SYS does? How about your SYSTEM.INI? Do you think that is an accident?

WYSIWYG is really WYGINWYS

Pronounce that as "Whizzy Wig is really Wiggin Whiz." The theme of this article is: "What You See Is What You Get" is a lie; the truth is, "What You Get Is Never What You See."

This article will not bore us with technical descriptions of device-independent programming models, resolution differences between printers and monitors, page-description languages, markup languages, or anything of the sort. The real purpose is to expose the collusion among major manufacturers and the government. In the name of full employment, the government has worked behind the scenes with industry leaders to ensure that products from different manufacturers are fundamentally incompatible with one another.

One of the primary beneficiaries of this economic system is the government itself, which has to set up—secretly, of course—incompatibility certification labs (ICLs). The purpose of these labs is to certify products as incompatible at a fundamental level. Manufacturers are forbidden from releasing commercial products that show any significant level of compatibility with similar products from other manufacturers. Running these labs is actually the purpose of the super-secret National Security Agency (NSA), which contrary to popular opinion measures security in terms of economic stability, not military might, stealth, or sophistication.

The software industry is the major beneficiary of the activities of the ICLs. Devising, developing, and supporting complex models that abstract

common features helps ensure employment for a wide range of professionals: modelers, programmers, testers, technicians, management, third-party support organizations, and more. The bugs and inconsistencies thereby created help feed a press hungry to print bad news. It also feeds consumers' increasingly cynical views of both government and business. It also contributes to an ever-expanding spiral of bug fixes and upgrades. Full employment for everyone! A chicken in every pot! A bug in every product!

Real men prefer the command line interface

(Women aren't really interested in technology, so don't worry about the implicit sexism in the title of this article.)

Whereas early articles showed that WYSIWYG is not all it's cracked up to be, this article begins laying the groundwork for an anti-WYSIWYG backlash. The upshot is this: Anything GU(I) can do, CLI can do better; CLI can do anything better than GU(I).

Using examples such as vi, TROFF and T_EX, this article will prove that CL-based edit/format duos can do anything that GUI-based word processors and desktop publishers can do, but at significantly less cost, with greater reliability, and with greater understanding on the part of the user.

A related topic is: "Who needs spreadsheets when you've got COBOL and FORTRAN?"

Sell your copy of Windows, put your kids through college

After proving the higher innate efficiency and accuracy of the CLI, the next step is to divest yourself of your GUI, most likely Windows. Right away you'll recover a good 40 MB of disk space. You'll also start sleeping better because you'll be able to start focusing on content once again, leaving appearance to someone else. You'll thrill to monospaced printouts in Courier. You'll revel in tools simple enough to operate without thought—like riding a bike. Productivity will zoom at least 400% within days!

Of course, without Windows, you'll have no need for Windows applications. Depending on the degree to which you had been led down the path, you should be able to recoup another 100 MB of disk space, or even more. In the return to CLI computing, this essentially means that you'll never have to buy a computer again. So instead of perpetually buying products with 4 to 5 year obsolescence cycles, you can buy a computer once and bank the rest. Potential lifetime savings could easily amount to \$100,000 or more.

Networks are for nitwits

People who really want to share files trade floppies, temporarily connect using LapLink, or use an on-line service. Corporate networks are simply a way to usurp individual power. The primary beneficiaries are the network dweebs, not the users, and certainly not the corporation.

Even within the computer industry, network dweebs occupy an exalted position. They have their own jargon, incomprehensible even to dweebs in related specialties. They're responsible to no one, come and go as they please, and use any flimsy excuse to bring the network down at the most inopportune moment for users. Within a PC, nothing—not even multimedia—causes more trouble than networking hardware and software.

So to regain control over your life and simplify your existence, forego networking.

Do what Nancy does

Is it an accident that every 18 months or so a whole new generation of computer hardware is released that makes everyone want to dispose of their current inventory and upgrade? No, it is no accident. But that doesn't mean we have to respond like trained rats to some Skinnerian buzzer.

When it comes to hardware (and software) upgrades, take a tip from Nancy Reagan: Just say no.

Renounce graphics, sound, and video

Multimedia has already shown itself to be more concerned with sur-

face presentation than deep content. So giving up the CD-ROM and sound card should not be difficult. Doing so will result in further gains in hard disk space. A side effect will be a two order of magnitude reduction in system complexity, and a corresponding increase in robustness and reliability. No more unexplained crashes! No more frozen mouse pointers just before your file is actually saved.

Forewear Microsoft products and survive

Yes, this is a capitalist society, but enough is enough. The next step on the way back to a simpler, more self-determined way of life is to forewear use of all products made by Microsoft. We started by giving up Windows; now let's throw in DOS, networking, applications, programming tools, games, utilities, and anything else that may be lurking around. (We're considering offering a one time per user exception for one copy of a crucial Microsoft program, such as QBasic or Flight Simulator.) Conservative estimates are that system stability will increase at least as much as by giving up multimedia. We also expect significant disk and memory savings as well.

Go cold turkey: sell your PC

I think my high school class was among the last to learn how to use a slide rule. You probably don't even know what one is. (If not: A slide rule is a self-powered low maintenance analog device for multiplying and dividing by adding and subtracting logarithms.) It was easy to get three places of decimal accuracy from a slide rule; whereas today's CPUs (e.g., Pentium) and applications (e.g., Windows calculators) can't even guarantee that. So you don't need a PC to do accurate number crunching.

Nor do you need one to do word processing. Used equipment stores are filled with typewriters rendered obsolete by the computer revolution; they can be had for a song. However, a typewriter can be a high maintenance item just like a PC; you may want to simplify even further to what

Dye magazine long ago referred to as the "Generic Word Processor": the standard wood barreled #2 pencil. An electric pencil sharpener is a politically correct peripheral, although favor will shine on those who opt for manual devices.

Ask yourself: Did Newton need a PC to invent calculus? Did Einstein need one to invent the theory of relativity?

Conundrum resolved

Politically correct equals -- personal computer.

F-mail

Someone sent me a huge unencoded file via internet mail. The file contained a demo of something the sender thought I (and you) might be interested in. I'll never know because I aborted the download as soon as I realized what was going on. Sending large unsolicited files via email is *very* bad etiquette. Feel free to send a short, concise summary of your product -- but not the product itself -- via email. If I'm interested, I'll get back to you.

Someone else suggested doing a column on Linux, a UNIX clone for Intel based CPUs. In essence, Linux is a shareware product developed and supported by programmers all over the world. I have heard and read good things about Linux, but to date have no hands on experience with it. Frankly, the thought of installing it and learning enough about it to say something intelligent is not terribly appealing, based primarily on years of difficult experiences installing and testing commercial operating systems, such as DOS, Windows, OS/2, and other Intel UNIX clones. On the other hand, I'm not totally against it, either. If there's a lot of interest, I'll give it a second thought. Let me know.

Also, I enjoyed hearing from 14-year old Billy K., from Des Moines. Billy is interested in everything to do with computers and electronics, and I bet someday he'll turn out to be a crack engineer.

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