

PC Pioneers

Before we ventured into the world of computing at home, both my wife Carolyn and I got an introduction to personal computing at work. Her experience was with dedicated word processors (remember those?) and very early Apple gear where she created spread sheets for a major City development project. Mine was with Radio Shack's very famous (or infamous) "Trash 80s" (TRS 80s). I was working for the City of Los Angeles Personnel Department and one of our very bold



pioneers, my boss Geoff Stott, managed to convince upper management that buying some Radio Shack gear would greatly improve our productivity, and, by golly, it did. In a matter of just a few short weeks folks like me revived our high school typing skills and started doing most of our own typing, rather than handing hand-written roughs to the clerical staff for typing. All of sudden the turn-around time for documents of all sorts was radically reduced. One of the important features of our Radio Shack setup was that we provided the clerical staff with some Radio Shack daisy wheel printers so that they could do finished documents. That planted a seed that later led to lots of trouble with our home experiments in computing.



We bought our first home PC way back in 1982. It was an IBM PC that came equipped with two 5 1/4" floppy drives and 64 kilobytes of RAM. There was no hard drive because IBM didn't yet offer one. We also bought an AST memory card with another 64 KB of RAM and we were convinced that was enough memory to last forever. About the only printer you could buy at that time was a tiny Epson dot matrix that made lots of noise and printed very slowly. But it was better than no

printer at all. Our software included DOS 1.1, Lotus 123 and EasyWriter II. And we got it all for the unbelievably low price of \$5,000. Later we took the really bold step of replacing one of the floppy drives with a 10-megabyte hard disk. That was such a huge amount of storage space we couldn't imagine why anyone would ever need a bigger disk. The next big addition to our system was a Diablo daisy wheel printer. We wanted to be able to print slick-looking documents just like the clericals where I worked. However, there was a problem; at the time, IBM didn't make a daisy wheel printer for its PCs. We bought the Diablo with the assumption that somehow we could make it work. Thanks to Carolyn working on the project for literally hundreds of hours, we did eventually get the beast to work. All it required was buying all the factory repair manuals, building a custom-made serial cable and writing our own driver for the word processing software we were using.

All of that was many, many PCs ago. Today our household computer fleet consists of two relatively new desktop models and a very nice laptop. We also have two very fast, multi-function ink jet printers. All of it, of course, is connected to the internet via Verizon's super fast fiber-optic Fios service. Instead of the software based on the use of the "dot prompt" that characterized the very early machines like the Radio Shack TRS 80s (no menus, only command keys) today, for better or worse, we have the GUI-based (graphical user interface) Windows 7 gracing our wide, LCD monitor screens. I have a 23" monitor and wife Carolyn (always a little better than me) has a 28" screen.



The computer on which I'm typing this is an almost new HP with 6 gigabytes of RAM and a 650 gigabyte hard disk. To backup my data I have a one-terabyte external hard disk. Unlike our first computer, this one was only \$499. So in the space of 27 years the price of computers has been radically reduced while the performance has been hugely increased. However, those 27 years have not brought about the two things that most PC users would most like to have: simplicity and reliability. The latest version of Windows, Windows 7, might seem to be a

lot simpler to use than the old original DOS operating system, but in reality it is monumentally more complex. Just try fixing a software problem with the new system. Reliability has not improved and, in fact, has probably gotten a lot worse. Back in the pre-internet days of personal computing, there was not the constant fear of something messing up your computer. Now, every time you download an email, log onto a website or load a new program there is a chance for something to cause your computer to go haywire. The only way to avoid all that is keep your PC in a state of total virginity.

I'm very thankful for the much lowered price of computers and I wish other commodities like automobiles had followed a similar trend, but at the same time I have to marvel at how patient we PC users have been. I just spent several weeks nursing my new computer through several problems including the need to download a "hot fix" to Windows 7 to make something work. There is no way I would have been that patient dealing with problems resulting from the purchase of a new automobile. But we have come to assume that computers are going to have problems and that we need to quietly and carefully work our way through the myriad help desks, FAQs and other assistance resources until the problem is solved. Sometimes, of course, we just decide that we can live with a problem and we develop ways of working around it.

Obviously we have become highly dependent on our computers. Every once in awhile I come across someone who steadfastly refuses to get involved with computers. Further investigation usually reveals that they manage to survive by having their friends do their computer work for them. Our men's golf club where we live is a case in point. The club's only communication with its members is through the internet. If you want to play golf on men's day, you have to log onto the men's web site and fill out an

entry form. Recently I heard about one of our members, a man without a PC, who relies on a neighbor to sign him up for golf. I would suspect that we are just now going through the very last generation that even regards itself as having the option of not being computer literate.

I spent the last ten years of my employment with the City of Los Angeles doing computer systems work and particularly office automation applications. In that role I was a sort of Pied Piper for computing and sometimes found that my advocacy was a little too far ahead of the technology. However, since I retired over 12 years ago, I suspect that everything I hoped we could achieve has been accomplished and surpassed. The young folks going to work for my old employer today would find it hard to imagine doing their jobs with nothing more in the way of tools than a pencil and a yellow legal table. Yet that was the reality when my wife and I started there; we didn't even have calculators, and our telephones still had rotary dials.

There are some humorous aspects to what has happened to computing technology over the decades. Back in my Pied Piper role I can remember that folks who lacked typing skills wanted to know when they could talk to their computers. They regarded the need to use a keyboard as being an indication of immaturity on the part of the technology instead of a dig at their lack of skills. So it is indeed ironic that today a device designed for people talk into it, the cell phone, is instead often being used to keyboard (text) messages. I guess that is the natural result of teaching our children how to use keyboards, starting in kindergarten.

Most people my age remember Victor Borge's classically hilarious routine about what it would sound like if we were to read punctuation aloud. He had a lexicon of sounds for each mark of punctuation, some of which were truly weird. Whenever I remember that I also think of what it would be like to start talking to your computer using his sounds, and then I wonder what that would be like in a whole room full of people talking to their computers. That's why I'm not a big fan of speech recognition. I like the quietude that computing provides.

My wife and I live in a senior community where you would expect to find a whole bunch of Luddites when it comes to PCs, but that's not the case. Surprisingly, we have a great many computer enthusiasts and the most popular classes in our training center are those relating to computing. In fact, it is rare to come across anyone in our community who does not own a PC or a Mac, and even more rare to find someone who lacks an internet connection. Of course, there are a fair number who just barely get along and are still using a dial-up connection to get on the internet, but their numbers are dwindling.

I'm sure that when the big computer equipment retailers like Fry's and CompUSA look at our valley with its huge retired population they come to the conclusion that this would not be a rich market for the sales of computer hardware and software, but they would be mistaken.