Early Days

The internet websites where I catch up on news and current affairs have all made mention of a special anniversary this week - the Macintosh computer line has been around for thirty years. That's a nice achievement, but my own computer history actually goes back quite a bit farther, although nobody (but me) is writing stories about it!

My first computer purchase was on behalf of the school music supply shop where I was working; I had become certain that our business practices could benefit from computerization, as we had huge inventories of sheet music and instruments to manage. But this was 1979, and to speak of computers at that point involved large machines in specialized rooms tended by men in white coats. When I approached a computer company about putting a system in, their quotation had been something near a quarter million dollars.

So is this going to be a story about how we got an Apple computer to save the day? Nope; Steve Jobs and Co. weren't ready for us. Their Apple][was on the market by then, but when I studied the specifications came to the conclusion that it was simply not capable of doing our job. They weren't the only game in town though; a company known as Commodore Computer had also entered the new 'micro-computer' market, and they had a machine with very impressive specifications.

It had 32Kilobytes of memory, a screen that would display 80 x 24 characters, a parallel output port, and most importantly, an external dual floppy drive with over 500K of storage on each disc. 500K seemed massive to me, and the fact that there were two drives meant that a backup regimen could be implemented easily.

I prepared a proposal for the owner of the business, describing how I thought that we could use this system (together with a dot-matrix printer), to computerize our system of band instrument rentals. Managing that had been a chronic problem for us; we kept the customer data on index cards, with invoices for the rental payments being created by hand each time, and it was a nightmare. Hundreds of the customers were frequently delinquent, and the only way to obtain any data from the system was to flip through the stacks of thousands of cards manually.

This was very low-hanging fruit for a computer, but although the Commodore hardware seemed capable of handling that much data, it came with no software. I would have to write that myself. Looking back on the meeting with the owner from where I sit now, it seems incredible to me that we actually agreed to go ahead with the project. Although I said to him, "I can do it", I must have been thinking ... "Can I really pull this off?" And although he said to me, "OK, let's go!", he must have been thinking ... "Can he really pull this off?"

We ordered the system and had it delivered to my home, and I then got to work planning and writing the software. Next to my ten-year Hyakunin Isshu print series, it is the biggest thing I have ever done, requiring many hundreds of pages of complex source code - much of it in assembly language - all of which had to work together perfectly. The whole thing was a kind of massive puzzle which had to be meticulously planned and then put together. I had an absolutely glorious time with it.

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Once it was done and tested as well as could be with sample data, we moved it over to the office and pre-pared to go 'live'. The clerks worked in shifts entering data on thousands of customers from the index cards into the machine. And then finally, 'changeover' day arrived, and the system came to life.

Watching reams of invoices on fan-fold printed forms pouring through the system printer is not something that I will ever forget. If I were to say that my programming work 'saved the company' it might be claiming too much, but that it had a dramatic impact on cash flow and financial stability is beyond doubt. That little microcomputer performed wonderfully, and controlled millions of dollars in business over the next five years or so, until I replaced it with a newer model.

And Apple? They never played a role at our shop, as they were clearly ignoring the requirements of business users. I wonder where they would be now, if they had decided to build a machine that could have done our job?

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