

Looking Back on 10 Years of MPR

A Personal History of MicroDesign Resources



by Michael Slater

With this issue, *Microprocessor Report* is a decade old: 172 issues and nearly 4,000 pages. Elsewhere in this issue, you'll find many highlights from the past 10 years of *Microprocessor Report*. In this article, I

tell a personal tale of how the newsletter came to be, some of the people who made it possible, and the challenges and satisfactions it has brought.

It has been a very full 10 years for me—creating the newsletter, conferences, and other products; writing more than 1,100 pages for MPR and several hundred for other publications; managing the business; becoming part of Ziff-Davis; and trying to have a life at the same time.

It has also been a very full 10 years for the microprocessor industry. The PC microprocessor business has grown enormously, as has Intel's dominance. A flurry of RISC microprocessors arrived, and many fought for a share of the PC market—but nearly all have retreated to workstations, servers, and embedded applications. Embedded processors have become more complex, with 32-bit devices moving down to high-volume price points. Microprocessor technology has been the enabling technology not only for PCs but also for the Internet as a popular phenomenon, for a widening range of digital consumer electronics, and for a host of other embedded applications. Watching this technology closely for the past decade has been a fascinating occupation.

How It All Started

In 1986, I had been working for six years as a freelance hardware designer while writing a textbook, *Microprocessor-Based Design*, in my spare time. As I finished the book, I discovered to my dismay that the publisher expected it to have a “shelf life” (time before a second edition) of five years. This seemed an eternity in the fast-moving microprocessor industry, and it struck me that I might be able to build a small business by providing an update service for readers of the book. The publisher offered to put a coupon for a free trial subscription to my update service in the back of the book, and—after much hesitation—I put the coupon in, with no clear idea of what I would offer or what would be involved.

(Ironically, the book is now more than 10 years old and is still selling in its first edition, since the demands of MDR have made a second edition impossible—and the audience turned out to be quite distinct from that for the newsletter.)

This decision started me on an investigation of the newsletter business. I discovered Esther Dyson's already legendary *Release 1.0*, Dick Shaffer's *Technologic Letter*, and a host of others—and noted that none had any technical con-

tent about hardware. I met with Stewart Alsop, who was just starting *P.C. Letter*. These folks seemed to be having a good time, it looked like these newsletters made money, and no one was providing the kind of content I had in mind. So with seed capital from cash advances on my credit cards, my career as an editor and publisher was launched with issue number one of *Microprocessor Report*, September 1987.

Tools and Platforms

Having long been a PC user, I was thrilled to see Ventura Publisher come out—just as I was starting work on the newsletter—bringing desktop publishing capabilities to the IBM platform. I did all the page layout in Ventura on a PC for several years. I had begun using a Macintosh for illustrations, however, and switched to the short-lived Mac version of Ventura in 1991. For the past five years, the newsletter has been produced in Quark on a Mac (now in the capable hands of associate editor Kathy Acuff).

The Mac vs. PC debate has long been close to my heart. After a decade as a devoted PC fan and then five years as a Mac advocate, I've become biplatform. I've been outspoken against Apple's strategies throughout MPR's lifetime, and I'm sorry to say that my concerns seem to have been realized and my occasional optimism unjustified.

RISC and Microprocessor Forum Emerge

The proliferation of RISC processors provided much fodder for *Microprocessor Report*—but the newsletter was not founded to cover them. In fact, it was not until six months after the newsletter started that RISCs were covered at all. I first began paying attention to them at Comcon in early 1988, where my introduction to the subject was the keynote address from MIPS founder John Hennessy.

I soon began making the rounds of the RISC suppliers, and each had an apparently compelling story about why its approach was best—but they couldn't all be right. It occurred to me that putting them all on stage and letting each make its case would create an interesting event. The resulting event, *Microprocessors '89*, was held in the fall of 1988 but looked forward to the chips of 1989. I hoped for 100 to 150 people at the one-day event. We filled the room with 250 people, and the *Microprocessor Forum* was born. We expect more than 1,000 attendees at this year's 10th anniversary event.

Into the Public Eye

At the suggestion of a marketing consultant, I gave free newsletter subscriptions to all the leading business-press reporters covering technology. Soon I found myself spending many hours a week on the phone with reporters, explaining the significance of various chip announcements and legal

A Cast of Thousands

Without the generous efforts of many people over the years, *Microprocessor Report* would not have been possible. While I can blame only myself for our failures, there are many who have contributed to our successes.

My first employee was Bay Manning, who created the *Microprocessor Report* logo and the original typographic design of the newsletter (which remained largely unchanged for eight years). My wife, Irene Stratton, joined me in the business soon after the first issue of the newsletter and was instrumental not only in preserving my sanity but also in keeping the business running.

Many other employees have played critical roles over the years. In the limited space I have here, however, I want to give particular thanks to the people who have contributed largely without monetary compensation.

Much guidance has come from our outstanding editorial board. Board members review draft copies of each issue of the newsletter and attend occasional lunch and dinner meetings to help us refine and expand our thinking. John Wakerly, a prolific author, part-time Stanford professor, and now a top engineering executive, deserves special mention as the only member of the original editorial board who has persisted for the full ten years. Bruce Koball, George Morrow, and John Wharton were original board members and served for many years. John was, for several years, one of the newsletter's most frequent contributors, and his witty columns are still missed. Other members of the original board were David Schwartz, John Figueroa, and Holden Jessup.

Before long, Brian Case, Nick Tredennick, and Dennis Allison joined the board. Brian has authored many valuable articles and provided a stabilizing perspective when the dynamics of the board occasionally became stormy. Nick, who nearly made a career out of ridiculing the RISC approach (and turned out to be right), has created and delivered the annual *Microprocessor Report* Awards at Microprocessor Forum for the past eight years. He has contributed not only a contrarian perspective but also an extraordinary sense of humor. Mike Feibus, Dean McCarron, Martin Reynolds, Morris Enfield, and John Snell each served a stint on the editorial board and provided valuable feedback. Today's board also includes John Novitsky, Jeff Deutsch, Dave Epstein, and Don Gaubatz.

Rich Belgard is not only our patent expert but was the first person to invest in the company, just when my credit cards were taxed to the limit and the third-mortgage money was running out. Roger King soon followed, and was the biggest single investor in the company.

Rich Belgard and Andy Rappaport also served as the board of directors. Their seasoned business advice was an invaluable addition to my naive enthusiasm.

Several years ago, Bernard Peuto joined the (now unofficial) board of directors, and he has been amazingly generous with his time. Bernard's acute business instinct and personal insight have immeasurably helped me and the company in many ways.

I will always be grateful to these people and many others who contributed to *Microprocessor Report's* success.

developments. Without doing anything more proactive than offering free subscriptions to reporters and being willing to answer phone calls, I soon became the most widely quoted independent source of insight into microprocessors. This helped greatly to establish the newsletter's reputation—especially with the executives who didn't read it.

Microprocessor Report filled an unmet need for an independent, technically knowledgeable observer of the industry. The only other independent observers were market and financial analysts with limited understanding of the technology—and this is still largely the case. As MDR has evolved, we have added more business analysis to our repertoire but retained our technical depth.

MPR was published monthly until 1990, when—against almost everyone's advice—I increased the frequency to every two weeks. We sustained this rate for two years, but it didn't allow for any breathing room between issues and proved too difficult to maintain. In 1992 we compromised, and this is how we ended up with our peculiar frequency of 17 issues per year, one every three weeks.

Off to the Country

In the fall of 1989, we held our second conference—the first called Microprocessor Forum—and the business seemed to be getting on its feet. We were up to five employees and more than 500 subscribers. My wife and I decided the time was ripe to move to the country, something we had long thought about doing. In May 1990, we moved ourselves and the business to the Sonoma County town of Sebastopol, two hours north of Silicon Valley. We weren't even the first technical publisher in this town of 7,000—O'Reilly & Associates, one of the town's largest employers, beat us here by several years.

Relocating to Sonoma County met our personal lifestyle goals and was a great place for hiring marketing and operations staff, but building the analyst team here proved impossible. This led us eventually to open an office in Silicon Valley, where we now have eight of our twenty employees.

Shortly after the move, we adopted our first child, Gregory. At the time, I was writing most of the newsletter, editing everything, doing all the page layout, managing the marketing, producing the Forum, and running the business. We

were on the edge of making money, but we couldn't begin to afford the management staff that would make my workload realistic. The business was successful, but it was below the critical mass for long-term survival. After many sleepless nights, I decided in early 1991 to sell it.

This, of course, was easier said than done. And as the saying goes, the light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be a train coming the other way.

After a year and a half of discussions with a variety of companies, MDR was acquired by Ziff-Davis in August 1992. Part of the deal, of course, was that I would stay with the company, though the goal was that I would be able to step out of an operating role. The reality, however, was that it took a long time to build a management team that could take over this task. It was not until Peter Christy joined us as president in May 1996 that I was able to relinquish overall responsibility for the operation of the business.

Encouraged by the "do whatever it takes, grow as fast as you can" attitude prevalent at Ziff-Davis in those days—this was in the final year of the Bill Ziff era—we ambitiously set out to launch a second newsletter and conference, and we doubled our staff. As it turned out, we were in over our heads and didn't have the depth of management support we needed to pull it off. In meetings with Ziff-Davis executives at Fall Comdex 1993, it was decided that we had to drop the new products and cut back our staff—a painful move, especially the loss of Mike Feibus and Dean McCarron.

At the same time that I was looking for a buyer for the company, I was recruiting a new editor for the newsletter. Linley Gwennap joined us from Hewlett-Packard—coincidentally, at the same time as the sale to Ziff-Davis was completed. Linley gradually took on more and more of the responsibility for *Microprocessor Report*, becoming editor in chief in 1993 and publisher in 1997. As my focus evolved more to microprocessor industry business and strategic issues, Linley deepened the newsletter's technical content. He built our outstanding analyst team, which now includes Jim Turley, Peter Glaskowsky, and Peter Song, and manages the content production for all our print products.

The Perils of Having Opinions

Part of what makes *Microprocessor Report* work is our delicate relationships with microprocessor suppliers. Because we delve deeper into their new products than any other publication and have the background to engage in an intelligent dialog, technical leaders at these companies generally like to work with us. But we also strive to maintain a critical edge, and this has sometimes strained these relationships.

Given Intel's dominance in the microprocessor world, our relationship with that company has naturally been one of the most important—and, at times, the most difficult. We were enthusiastic—overly so, as it turned out—about the advantages of RISC microprocessors over x86 chips, and we spoke out against Intel's litigious approach to its competitors. This didn't sit well with Intel executives.

Our relationship with Intel reached its nadir in 1991, when a now-departed Intel executive complained bitterly to me about how I was giving the RISCs too much of the benefit of the doubt and not treating Intel fairly. The executive proceeded to explain that, while this was entirely unrelated, Intel wouldn't be making any presentations at Microprocessor Forum or sending as many attendees. Our views, of course, didn't change—though we gained new insight into the behavior of one Intel executive. Indeed, Intel attendees at the Forum that year went from more than 70 to fewer than 10.

Fortunately, a year or two later, Intel's head of public relations recognized the dysfunctional nature of the relationship and helped us build a better one by opening up the dialog and providing more access to people and information. And as the RISC assault collapsed, Intel's position strengthened, and Intel became less litigious and more understanding of the needs of its direct and indirect customers, Intel has naturally become happier with our analysis.

One of the painful lessons I have had to learn is that any publicly stated opinion will trigger complaints from one quarter or another. For years, Intel's advocates accused us of engaging in a vendetta against Intel. Now, some of Intel's critics think we are too soft on the company. While some people have a curious desire to ascribe ill motives to our opinions, the simple fact is that we call the shots as we see them—no matter whose feathers are ruffled.

Balance, Technical Depth, and Business Insight

The most gratifying—and, at times, the most difficult—part of creating and building this business has been the opportunity to work with many creative, insightful, and knowledgeable people—at microprocessor companies, in the press, among our readers, and on our own staff. It has often seemed that the hard part of the business is not analyzing microprocessors and writing about them, but guiding a team of people to work together, toward both common and individual goals, while keeping the revenue ahead of the expenses.

With MDR now in the capable hands of Peter Christy as president, Joseph McIntyre running events, marketing, and customer service, and Linley Gwennap leading the newsletter and new product development, I'm settling into my role as editorial director and principal analyst. I'll continue to be deeply involved in all of our content, with a focus on microprocessors for PCs. I'm particularly excited about the opportunities for expanding our offerings on the Web, and you'll see some major developments there this fall.

From the start, my goal for *Microprocessor Report* has been to provide an informed, balanced perspective. We work hard to understand the technical and business issues deeply enough to make our own judgments about a product's strengths and weaknesses. We strive always to be fair, not to have an axe to grind, and to give both sides of the story—but also to state our honest opinions. It is a formula that has served us well in the past, and that I trust will continue to serve us—and you—in the future. ▣