

O B L I Q U E P E R S P E C T I V E

The PCs of the Magi

By John Wharton, Applications Research
(With humble apologies to O. Henry)

640 Kilobytes. That was all. And the top 96K was in fragments. Fragments created one by one, by myriad TSRs, device drivers, and hot-key routines collected through the years, piled up until Della was afraid even to look at her CONFIG.SYS file, much less change it, lest the whole system collapse like a house of cards. And the next day would be Christmas Eve.

Three times Della invoked the DOS command to run the household finances spreadsheet, but the results came out the same. No mistake: there'd be no money in the budget to buy Jim a present this year. Graduate student stipends don't go far, Della thought, as she looked up from the PC sitting on the corner of the kitchen table.

The old PC had served Della well when it was new, back when a megabyte meant something. That was in her undergraduate days, before she was married, back before she'd even met Jim. But now you needed nearly a meg just to boot the OS. No way could she run Windows, much less any useful applications, on the DRAM she had. No way could this PC support a clean, GUI-like OS, like the one Jim used on his Mac at the lab.

And Oh! How Jim did love his Macintosh! A gift from his late dad it had been, on the occasion of Jim's acceptance into grad school. And how Jim loved to show off its graphics whenever Della visited his lab! Its windows and folders, opened and closed with the click of a mouse, its mixed-case file names, with so many characters each! How Jim loved to play with his Mac, and gloat over its features whenever DOS users strayed within range. But lately he'd seemed sad that the OS it came with didn't support the latest software features. If only there was some way to give Jim's Mac a face lift.

Suddenly she knew what to do. Della packed away her PC into a box with its monitor, keyboard, and cables, quickly, before she lost her nerve. As she lugged the old workhorse to the bus stop, she recalled the quaint little store front on El Camino. "Recycled Office Equipment," the sign in its window read. "Used PCs Bought and Sold."

"I can't give you much for her," the storekeeper lamented. "She's a pretty old model. Not even an OverDrive socket. Two hundred dollars, tops."

"Sold!" Della said. "Give it to me quick!"

And my, how the next two hours at ComputerWare tripped by! Della managed her purse well, settling finally on copies of System 7.1 and a few new DAs. The total came to \$198.13, including blank backup floppies.

Back home Della wrapped her prizes and waited for

Jim to return. It was Wednesday, and he was never late. But when the door opened and Jim came in, his eyes shot immediately to the empty space on the kitchen table.

"Where's your PC?" Jim asked, eyebrows pinched.

"I sold it, Jim, to get money to buy you presents, but that's okay. It was old, and wasn't good for much."

"You sold...your PC?" he repeated, seemingly deaf.

"Yes, Jim, but don't worry. It was worthless, and its software sucked, not like your Mac's. You said so yourself, many times. But why are you looking at me like that? It's Christmas! Don't you love me without my PC?"

"Of course I still love you, Della," Jim said after a pause, as he tossed a small box on the table. "But open your gift and you'll see why you had me going at first."

And with that Della opened the box. And inside were The SIMMs! The beautiful, one-megabyte SIMMs Della had coveted at Fry's for so long — memories she'd known she could never afford. Emerald-green epoxy boards, bejewelled with ebony-black chips, tin leads sparkling like silver on the sides, and real gold contacts. Eight megabytes total — enough to run DOS, and Windows, and Word Perfect, and even spool printouts in the background! But now Della had no PC to hold them.

"Oh, Jim, they're so beautiful! But we'll get another PC someday, dear, you'll see. They're getting cheaper, and prices will really drop after Pentium ships."

And then Della leaped up like a startled cat and cried, "Oh, oh! Come look at what I got you! See, here's an official copy of System 7, so now you can Publish and Subscribe, and expand subdirectories in the same window! And here's the whole After Dark screen saver package, with Flying Toasters, and Fish. And here, look! Lunatic Fringe, and extra Fish! And Talking Moose!"

But Jim just picked up the software, shook his head, and smiled. "Della, let's put our presents away and keep 'em for a while. They're just too nice to use for now. You see, Della, I've been a little low on cash myself this year. I sold my father's Macintosh to get money to buy your SIMMs. And suppose now we turn on the tube?"

The magi, as you know, were wise men — wonderfully wise men — who brought gifts for the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas gifts. But for all their wisdom, even the magi would have had trouble reconciling DOS with the Mac.

And here I have related the chronicle of two foolish children, who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the only platforms they each knew. But in a last word let it be said that of all those who give gifts, and of all who receive, these two were the wisest. Everywhere they're the wisest. They are the magi. ♦