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Silicon Soul

by Jeffrey Frankel, CAMP News *Editor*

This following piece originally appeared in the July-August 1993 issue of II Alive, *a national computer magazine that covered the Apple II family.* II Alive *was published by Quality Computers, the top third-party seller of Apple II software and peripherals at the time. The IIc, IIe and IIGS were rapidly losing out to the Macintosh and PCs. Despite its vested commercial interest in the platform it covered,* II Alive *was a credible effort that helped keep the flame burning a little while longer.*

This is also the only piece of writing I ever sold.

Pet Windows Peeve #647

Have you ever stopped to think about alias updating on the Mac? Probably not, because it just works. After you update an application, any existing aliases to that application that you previously created, whether on the desktop or in the dock, will also launch the new, updated application. This may not always have been true, but seems to be the case today.

Not so in the Windows world, or at least, not all the time. Both my office and my wife's office use custom application software that is frequently updated. In Carol's case, the software is electronic medical records. This is a new inititiative. Enabling Carol to connect to the secured database from home required many calls to her employer's tech support. Finally, they got it working right. But the next time Carol tried to connect on her own, no go. The problem? the application shortcut that the techie remotely created on the desktop of her IBM Thinkpad no longer worked once the host application was revised. So, no more one-click database launching.

My office situation is not complicated by remote login, as the database server is on the LAN. When we are prompted to update the database client application at our workstations, the update creates a shortcut on our desktops to the new version and deletes the shortcut to the old one. But I also put a shortcut in my taskbar (the Windows equivalent of the dock) for easy access when the desktop is covered. Unfortunately, the shortcut in the taskbar is not updated with each revision, and I must manually delete the old shortcut and create a new one after every update.

It's the simple things in Mac life that we take for granted. ☼

The pseudonymous Mr. Tech cautions us not to anthropomorphize our computer. "The letters, numerals, and punctuation that form the verbal communications of any particular program," he flatly states in the March/April 1993 issue of II Alive, "are nothing more than strings of numbers arranged in a pattern by the computer."

I'm not about to tangle with technological truth. But the world reveals its mysteries in different ways to different folks. Common experience lends itself to any number of analytical perspectives, each of which may be legitimate in its own right. Truth is not only where one finds it, as the saying goes; it also depends on where one looks for it. The relationship between computer and user is far more complex than a stream of binary digits can encode.

What reader of this column has not glazed his eyeballs staring at a monitor for hours on end, oblivious to the passage of time and just about everything else, trying to get some program to work the way it's supposed to? Personal computers are notorious for bedeviling their owners, and, in fact, the challenge of bending the machine's will to your own represents much of the computer's allure. Let's face it: if using a computer was as easy and predictable as using a toaster, most of us would be doing something else with our time.

In accepting the myth of technological sophistication, we fall victims to our own vanity. In reality, we're merely a later incarnation of the first motorists, who planned each drive for the adventure it really was and counted on changing a tire every seventy-five miles or so. The behavior of the "flivver" was heavily dependent on the care and nurture bestowed upon it by its owner.

My IIGS is no less quirky in its own endearing way. Not all supposedly identical machines behave alike. I recently tore my hair out trying to figure out why the RamFAST SCSI card I purchased worked fine in every ROM 03 IIGS I put it in—except, of course, my own. After that hurdle was finally overcome, I attempted to donate my old hard drive and interface card to the local elementary school. This time, the weirdness recurred in reverse: the hardware would not function in any of the four ROM 03 IIGS computers I installed it in. I finally found a home for the drive on a neighboring school's IIGS, but never did find out exactly why the first four wouldn't accept it.

Swapping peripherals wasn't meant to be as complex as an organ transplant. You shouldn't need to worry about "donor rejection." Of course, the technician's response to inexplicable hardware incompatibility is to replace the motherboard. But if my IIGS is pining for its old hard drive, why should I lobotomize the machine to solve the problem?

One friend of mine has a particularly symbiotic relationship with her IIGS. As she works at her computer, she talks to it. When describing its recalcitrance to me, she casts reproving glances over her shoulder at the machine, as if to shame it into proper behavior. Every so often she flits a hand over the monitor the way a mother pats a child on the head. An avid card-game player, she has only one complaint about her IIGS: "It cheats at solitaire."

The two of them, woman and machine, form a remarkable dyad. Seeing them together, one realizes that there is lots more to the "human interface" than even Apple has captured in its Desktop user interface. Although the cynics among you may regard all this as meaningless right-brain baloney, I beg to differ. My friend's unique relationship with her machine helps her use it more effectively—and that's what really matters.

I don't talk to my computer except to swear at it, and I'd no more caress its monitor than pat my toaster. But each of us works out these complexities in our own way, and I bumble my way through them as best I can. And if I anthropomorphize my computer along the way, what deity have I sinned against? C'mon, Mr. Tech—stop and smell the silicone. If you look in the right places, you too may find that your computer has a soul. ☼

Capture NX on Tap for September

CAMP regroups for the 2007-08 school year with our regular monthly meeting at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday, September 12 in Room 117 at Gardiner Area High School, Gardiner, Maine. Jeff Frankel will demonstrate Capture NX, Nikon's raw converter and photo image editor.

The capture audience for Capture NX is owners of Nikon DSLRs (or any other Nikon digicam that takes pictures in Nikon raw format). The software allows the user to manipulate at the computer after the shoot many image parameters, such as white balance, exposure compensation and tone compensation, that are ordinarily set at the time of the shoot. From there, Capture NX offers unique approaches to tonal correction, color correction, sharpening, resizing and other post-processing tasks.

For an introduction to Capture NX, please see *Shooting Raw: What's the Fuss All About?"* by Jeffrey Frankel in the May 2007 *CAMP News.* ☼