

November, 1998

Editor's View

No Computer is an Island

I've heard various people over the last few years talk about the goal of having a computer be an appliance like a television or dishwasher or car. Frankly, I'm a little baffled by this idea. Certainly, many of our appliances now *contain* computers (and it will be interesting to see how that plays out on January 1, 2000), but a computer seems to me to be far more than just another appliance.

An appliance is dedicated to one task (or even several) and "knows" how to do that thing and nothing more. A dishwasher cleans dishes. It may have various options for how to clean the dishes, like whether it should use heat or just air to dry them, or providing a special power scrub cycle for pots and pans, but that's it. It doesn't wash the floor (unless it's broken) and it doesn't provide entertainment (unless you're entertained by watching the control panel). Similarly, a photocopier makes copies. Nowadays, it may have been enhanced to provide scanning or faxing capability as well, but it doesn't do the dishes or take you to the mall.

A computer, on the other hand, can do a wide variety of tasks. More importantly, the range of tasks it can accomplish isn't fixed at the time it's built. Clever programmers can add capabilities throughout its lifetime (though I have yet to see a computer that can wash the dishes). To set the goal of a computer becoming an appliance seems to me to be a big step backward. We use computers because they're much more than appliances.

Along with the idea of computer as appliance comes the notion of taking our PCs out of isolation or, as one Microsoft executive expressed it, "No computer is an island." While I understand the sentiments of this idea, I also find it frightening.

I started using computers in the days of "big iron" when I wrote my programs on punch cards, waited in line to put them in the card reader, then waited again until someone working in the glass-enclosed computer center "burst" the output and put it in the right box so I could retrieve it. Though I have many fond memories of those times, they were not the good old days. Getting even a simple program working could take hours, most of it spent waiting to use a keypunch or run my cards through the reader or collect my output.

The introduction of video display terminals improved the situation. Now we had control over the input side of the process (not to mention that correcting a typo was a whole lot easier). We still had to wait for the computer to run the program and to pick up our output, though.

Personal computers freed us from the tyranny of the computer center. They let us do our work when we want with no one standing between us and our results. While networks and the Internet let us connect our computers to others, we're still in control of what's on our machines and what the machine can and cannot do.

Or, at least, we have been, until fairly recently. The increasing complexity and interdependence of software means that, more and more, we haven't a clue what's on our computers. More than once, I've been surprised to find an application installed on my computer that I didn't know was there, with no idea how it got there.

Not only do we have applications we don't know about on our machines, but we have all kinds of files we didn't consciously put there. Visit the Temporary Internet Files sub-directory of your Windows directory sometime. If you've spent any time at all surfing the web, you're likely to find dozens of files and no way to know which are significant and which aren't.

It would be easy to say that no software should put anything on your computer without telling you about it. However, given the types of tasks we're doing these days, that's unrealistic. We can't expect to use complex operating systems and applications without letting them have the support they need.

In addition to the issue of disappearing disk space and lack of control over what's there, it's also far too easy to foul up your computer because you don't know what all those files are. Microsoft is working on a solution for this problem. Office 2000 (and, presumably, other future Microsoft products) will go out and find a missing DLL and put it back where it's needed.

I have mixed emotions about the solution. There's little that annoys me more than an error message that says, in effect, "I have a problem. I know what's wrong and how to fix it, but I'm going to make you do it the hard way." So, software that attempts to fix itself seems like a good idea.

But somehow, at the same time, I feel like we're losing our hard-won control over our computers. If Office can go off and find a missing

.DLL, what's next? Daemons that watch what we do and download and display ads for products to do it better? Whose computer is it anyway?

What do you think about the tradeoffs between control over your computer and more help with what you're doing? What privacy price are you willing to pay for easier use?

Certification

At DevCon in May, Microsoft announced a new certification exam for Visual FoxPro 6.0. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell the certification people, and not long afterwards, they released new criteria for the Microsoft Certified Solution Developer program that didn't include Visual FoxPro at all.

The situation has been resolved. Two Visual FoxPro exams will be offered as part of the core requirements for certification. (Also added were exams for Visual J++ and Access.) One is among the choices for the Desktop Applications Development requirement, while the other is one of the options for Distributed Applications Development. Both exams will be offered as electives and will be available in 1999.

For more information on certification, check out the MSCD requirements at <http://www.microsoft.com/mcp/cert/step/mcsd.htm>.