

REFLECTIONS

ANOTHER TRANSITION

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This is a time of computer transition for me—a rare event, because I'm not someone who trades in his computer for a new model every year or so. Quite the contrary: I am maddeningly, preposterously, insanely retentive when it comes to computers.

I was one of the first SF writers to switch from the typewriter to the computer. I started to investigate that possibility in 1979—not for writing, because in 1979 I had vowed to stop writing fiction forever, and actually thought I meant it—but for my financial and business records.

Computers in 1979 were pretty primitive things. The Apple II was around then, and various other makes, the Altair 8800, Imsai 8080, Tandy TRS-80, etc. They had screens, and most of them, not all, had keyboards, but where they fell short was in the matter of memory, for which an achingly slow tape-deck thing was used. I visited one of the pioneering computer stores in Berkeley, explained my needs, and the clerk suggested that I wait a year or two before buying. “They’re going to put out something called a Winchester drive,” he said. “All of today’s computers will be obsolete overnight.” A “Winchester drive” was what we call a hard disk today.

So I put the computer-buying project on the back burner, even though my “permanent” retirement from writing fiction had ended with the writing of *Lord Valentine's Castle* in 1980. A long novel like that was a considerable chore, with plenty of paper wasted as I banged out two six hundred-page drafts. But a lot was going on in my life besides writing, just then, and so it was easy to sidestep the business of buying a computer for a while.

What tipped me over into modern technology was my 1982 novel—*Lord of Darkness*—half again as long as *Castle*, nine hundred manuscript pages, and then a second draft just as long, and by the time I was done with that I never wanted to use a typewriter again. So I asked my friend Jerry Pournelle, one of the earliest computer users in our field, to explain this whole computer thing to me. He did, in a letter of about eighteen pages, a splendid essay on what computers were and how to use them, and swiftly I headed out to find one.

Those of you who weren't on the scene in 1982 may be unaware that the computers manufactured then had unique operating systems; nothing was compatible with anything else, but for machines using the CP/M operating system, and the various CP/M computers tended to exist in isolated universes. Nor did they come equipped with the fabled Winchester drives; they used floppy disks—the old five-and-a-half-inch size. The most popular among writers then was a portable computer, the Osborne, with a postage-stamp-sized screen; it looked like a toy to me. But then I discovered the world of dedicated word processors made for office use. They had proprietary software that was remarkably easy to use, they were much sturdier than the flimsy machines that most of my colleagues had, and they came with hard drives—not called Winchesters any more—with enough capacity to hold several complete novels.

So I bought a Compucorp word processor, and for a huge extra amount equipped it with a gigantic ten-megabyte hard drive, the biggest available then, and in November 1982, I began with much trepidation to write a novella on that newfangled thing. I didn't really believe that yesterday's work would still be on the hard disk when I sat down to work the next day, so I printed out my new pages every day, just in case. But yesterday's work was always there the next day. And the computer proved its value in many other ways. In order to change a character's name fifty pages through the story, because it conflicted with another character's name, I simply did a search and replace, and the name-change was instantaneous, no need for me to hunt through a

bulky manuscript to find every instance of the name I wanted to scrap. And when I was done with the first draft, I did my revisions by hand on the print-out, keyed them in, pressed the “print” key, and out came a flawless final draft.

Very likely I’d be using that creaky 1982 computer even now, but for the fact that in 1991 it lost contact with my printer, and the technician who usually got me through such glitches could find no way to get me through this one. By then, though, standardized PCs using DOS operating systems had appeared, so writers could send diskettes to editors and skip the manuscript stage entirely, whereas I was still plodding along with my totally noncompatible software. It was fine software—to this day, I have not encountered an easier or more flexible word-processing program than Arrow, the one that came with my Compucorp—and after nine years of experience with it, I wanted to keep on using it. But Compucorp, by then, was out of business. Then I learned that Arrow was now available in a DOS version that could be used on any of the many makes of PCs that had come into use. I did a little comparative shopping, bought a Compaq 386 computer, installed Arrow on it, and set happily to work.

I loved using it. In fact I went on using it and using it and using it as decades went by. Computers aren’t supposed to last forever, and indeed most don’t last more than a few years; but there I was, still turning out books on my Compaq 386 in the new century, and doing my personal and business bookkeeping on it too. The demise of my Compucorp had been a blessing in disguise; now I was a DOS user like everybody else, no longer locked into a unique and non-compatible operating system, and I could back up my work on my wife’s computer, or on the second computer that I bought for my own backup purposes, or any other DOS computer I chose.

During those years the Internet happened. My computer had no modem, but that was all right, because I didn’t want the distraction of e-mail or eBay or e-anything while I worked. Around 1998, I bought a laptop for Internet use in the main house, and eventually upgraded to a Macintosh iMac; but over in my office, a separate building, I worked on and on with my ever more ancient Compaq, using my beloved Arrow software.

I worked on and on, yes, but not without a certain tension as the years went by, because I knew that my office computer had lasted well beyond its plausible life span, and every morning as I headed for the office to begin the day’s work I wondered whether this might be the morning when it would no longer respond. I had it all backed up on a laptop computer but, even so, I knew it would be tremendously traumatic when the day came that my good old Compaq suddenly could not be made to work.

That day came a couple of months ago. I had just written a new column for *Asimov’s*, and I was backing it up onto a diskette so I could turn it into an ASCII file, take it over to the main house, convert it to a Word document, and e-mail it to the magazine, when suddenly my computer abruptly announced that its C drive—that is, the primary one—could not be found. I went into the DOS directory and saw that all the C drive files were still there—long lists of them with cryptic DOS names, stories, novels, essays, business records, everything that I had put on that computer since 1991. But I had no access to anything.

Trauma, all right. I called in a local computer expert old enough to remember DOS-based computers, C drives, floppy disks, all that ancient stuff, and for a couple of mornings he tinkered with my venerable machine. Without success, though, for the problem was within the Arrow software, not in the computer itself, and Arrow had been a thing of the past for so long that no one now working with computers had any idea how to fix a chunk of corrupted code. This, I knew, was The End, Goetter-daemmerung for my dear old Compaq at last.

The disaster wasn’t total, though. I still had the entire contents of the Compaq backed up on the laptop, and I also had access to the A drive, the diskette drive, of the old computer. I wasn’t able to print anything from the laptop—that’s a different and

very complicated story—but I could transfer any document I wanted from the laptop to a diskette, put it on the Compaq using the A drive, work with it there, and print the result. Writing to the A drive is slower than using the hard drive, of course, because I type quickly and the A drive, unable to keep up with the input at the speed with which I put it in, pauses every couple of minutes to catch up, and I have to wait while that is going on. But that's not a serious problem—certainly not while making bookkeeping entries, since those are made at a rather slower pace than the one with which I compose sentences, and even while writing essays I could easily deal with having to wait a moment for the computer before going on to the next word. Scrolling through something I've already written is slower, too, because a diskette doesn't have much memory; but I tell myself that waiting for the next line to show up is a Zen exercise for me, a belated education in learning a little patience.

The delays that the diskette drive enforces might be irritating if I were writing fiction, because sometimes fiction is written (at least in the first draft) in a white heat, and waiting for the computer might prove maddening. But I don't write much fiction any more. My last novel was published in 2002, and the encroachment of age leaves me without much desire to embark on any project that big again. Even short stories have become few and far between; I haven't written one since the early months of 2011, and at least for now I have no plans for doing any, though that could change quickly if some editor were to make me an offer I couldn't refuse.

I still do write the regular column for *Asimov's*, though, and various other essays from time to time, introductions to other people's books, and the like, and, because I still prefer to work with my familiar keyboard and the familiar white-on-black screen and the fine Arrow software of yesteryear, I've learned to do all that on the diskette drive, backing it up for safety's sake to the laptop, and then taking my diskette over to the iMac to convert the new piece into a Word document and e-mail it off to its publisher. Doing business or financial bookkeeping that way plainly makes no sense, though. Some day the rest of the Compaq will die and I'll lose whatever documents may be stranded on it; and the Arrow software that does my arithmetical computations is incompatible with anything now in use, so I can't simply take backups of my business records over to the iMac and feed them into Excel or Word. Therefore I've been busy converting everything that involves mathematical computation into new Excel files—personal and professional tax files, investment data, earnings records, and so on.

It's been a long and wearisome job, and after two months I'm not done with it yet; but once again, as was the case when I had to make the switch from the CompuCorp to the Compaq nearly a quarter of a century ago, I recognize it as a blessing in disguise. Instead of keeping those records on a computer almost a quarter of a century old, using software that no one else knows how to use, I have them on my shiny modern iMac, backed up onto a second in-house iMac and also onto an external hard drive. And all the stories and novels that I wrote on the Compaq were long ago backed up and converted to Word files on the iMac, along with much of my pre-computer fiction, which various publishers have scanned and converted for me. So I no longer wonder, at the beginning of each day, whether this is the day that the computer catastrophe arrives at last. Other catastrophes, yes: there are always plenty of those to worry about, a 9.3 earthquake, a home-invasion robbery, a replay of the terrible firestorm of 1989 that destroyed three thousand homes less than a mile from where I live. But I'm not going to turn on my computer some morning and discover that I have lost access to everything I've written in the last couple of decades. There's comfort in knowing that I have successfully lived on into the post-Compaq age, or, more accurately, have been dragged into it, after at least a decade of worrying about what would happen when the old machine finally gave out.