

Grepping Pentium Daemons

"He invades authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him."

— John Dryden (1631-1700), writing on plagiarism.

"My blood runs cold.

My memory has just been sold."

— J. Geils Band, "Centerfold," 1982

While everyone has heard about the math bug in Intel's Pentium and how a professor's postings on the Internet pushed Intel to a recall, an interesting rumor in Silicon Valley explains how the bug occurred. It seems, rumor has it, that another company's microprocessor had the exact math error the Pentium stumbled on. It's known that both chips were designed in Israel, but the rumor goes further, claiming that the same engineer worked on both chips' floating-point segments. If accurate, this would be clear proof that Intel's Pentium has microcode directly copied from a competitor. It is extremely difficult to prove that complex microcode is copied—if it works. But when a reproducible error occurs, that provides definitive evidence. However, this proof created an interesting dilemma for the victimized company. If they went public, that would amount to vast publicity for a bug in their own product. Suing for damages would be difficult, as well. The flawed floating-point microcode caused Intel a \$200 million recall, and the victimized company didn't lose any sales. Thus it is unlikely that this story will surface for years ... **Apple's Demise.** Recent stories about Apple Computer read like eulogies. The first Mac I used was a prototype with a 5.25-inch drive, because Sony hadn't started building 3.5-inch microfloppy drives yet. My prototype Mac had annoying dialog boxes of Steve Jobs with cartoon balloons saying, "Dragging between windows isn't supported yet." But it was wonderful. Jobs and Aldus founder Paul Brainerd demonstrated PageMaker for me. PageMaker was one of the few PC products of the thousands I've seen that really amazed me. That Apple could have a definitive product lead lasting more than a decade, and have market share decrease, is the most damning statement ever for the management of any significant computer company ... **Turnaround?** No, new CEO Gilbert Amelio is touted as Apple's savior, based on his record as a turnaround artist for National Semiconductor. There he basically slashed and burned his way through staff and product lines to create a smaller company that lags in fundamental process technology and has shrinking market share in a boom market. Sounds like a dose of Mike Spindler didn't fix Apple, so they'll try two doses and see if the patient survives ... **Customer Dis-service.** Microsoft seems doomed not to learn from customer-service fiascoes. Last December, the e-mail services on the Microsoft Network were being revved, causing Internet e-mail to be delivered damaged, or to simply disappear. Although Microsoft was aware of the problem, the company didn't inform customers until after the fact, letting tens of thousands of customers continue sending messages blissfully into the void, assuming they were delivered. Then Microsoft understated the period during which problems occurred by a factor of two to three. Later, Microsoft decided to pull its Blackbird product, aka Internet Studio, back for redesign. Instead of informing the hundreds of developers it had convinced to bet their products and probably millions of dollars of development effort on Blackbird that the product would be indefinitely postponed, Microsoft just pulled information on the product from its Web site. This caused rumors to spread quickly, so Microsoft then offered a press statement. But there's never been an apology to the developers that had put their faith in Microsoft, just the statement that this isn't a fundamental change in strategy ... **Caffeine Overdose.** The steady stream of Java-related products is exciting, although the names are getting tedious. Because Java is a bare-bones language, developers need an IDE. Borland is pasting elements of its excellent Delphi interface atop Java, creating the interesting contradiction that the IDE, written in Delphi, will be rewritten in C. Symantec answered with its Espresso. Rumor has it that Microsoft will extend its VC++ environment to enable creation of Java applications. Latest rumor: Sun will create a silicon Java engine to optimize execution. Java may be hot, but this sounds like a hole to sink a billion dollars in, given the cost of fab lines these days. ☒



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