

Christmas wishes

1. A PC that works properly
I am sick and tired of PCs that don't work as they should. I love my Compaq Concerto notebook, but every time I use the PCMCIA fax modem for faxing, my internet dialler has a fit and I have to slide the modem out to reset it. I like my wife's Macintosh PowerPC, but we still can't get TCP/IP running. I've debugged scores of computers since the three days I spent in January 1983 figuring out how to get a Kaypro to boot up and print.

2. More bandwidth

Communication continues to be the most exciting part of computing and today's V.34 modems are a quantum leap over the first 300-baud unit I plugged into that Kaypro. But even at 28.8Kb/sec the web fails the teen test (that's when you tell your teenager to come and see a cool web site and the pages load too slowly to keep her attention).

3. A really good operating system

You know, one that doesn't gobble up your RAM and devour your hard disk. One that installs and upgrades easily. One that doesn't use confusing commands and inconsistent function key shortcuts.

4. More bandwidth

At 28.8Kb/sec it still takes far too long to download software. Of course, these days downloading software means 2Mb



demo versions of web browsers.

5. Agreed standards for secure online transactions
Wouldn't it be great if Microsoft and Visa and Netscape and MasterCard and all the others would just agree on a standard and we could all get on with cyber-

6. More bandwidth

Imagine a world where everyone had ISDN. We could video-visit and telecommute and reduce pollution and improve productivity and regenerate our communities.

7. Software that doesn't crash

Is it just me or are we all losing too much work because the software crashed?

8. More bandwidth

What if we could run the internet on the co-axial cable TV line? We could get megabytes per second instead of kilobytes. The world would be a better, faster place.

9. Fresh air

I could do with more time away from the computer. It's getting bad when you come home and say "I'm ready to download", instead of "Let me tell you about my day".

10. Peace on earth

And goodwill to all creatures great and small (this should really be top of the list).

uses a Compaq Presario CDS774, which generally works quite well. But for the first month she struggled to diagnose a vexing problem with the built-in modem, which insisted on operating in silent mode. Eventually she fixed it after opening the case for a peek at the Pentium processor (to make sure it wasn't one of those flawed chips). Next to a "Made in China" sticker was a modem card improperly seated in the bus slot, looking as though it had been assembled that way.

Or take the slender, Pentium-powered Venturis 590 desktop machine that I have on loan from Digital — a lovely machine, but I have not been able to access the floppy disk drive ever since I installed Windows 95. Since I had to take the network card out to get past a hiccup in the Win95 install routine, the serial ports are currently the only way in or out. Microsoft support, after a one-hour call on my bill and a 90 minute call-back on theirs, decided to "kick it upstairs" for further research. The last word from Digital was to "load the latest

version of the flash BIOS", which suggests that hardware, like software, has entered a never-quite-finished state of being.

It is 13 years since I ordered my first personal computer, a KayPro II, with twin 360K floppy drives and 64K of RAM, for approximately £1,795. A 15-character-per-second Brother daisywheel printer cost another £1,000. Today, the same cash outlay gets you a powerful multi-media system with a 600dpi laser printer. Perhaps we should be prepared to shell out a bit for our computers. That way, vendors could afford to fix problems, either in product development or by employing service people who arrive immediately and don't leave until everything is working.

If a KayPro II, which came with a suite of software, including spreadsheet, database and word processor, was the standard personal computer of 1982, today's standard, a multimedia PC, should cost at least £4,500 (£1,795 converted from 1982 values to allow for inflation). ➤

Whence the NC?

"Fast, cheap, networks mean (powerful multimedia) computers will cost \$500, not \$5,000," according to Oracle CEO, Larry Ellison, who calls the new devices network computers, or NCs. He sees the network computer as a basic input/output system that downloads a complete operating system when switched on; a process that will only take a few seconds. The advantages of NCs are many, says Ellison. For example: "If there is a new operating system you don't go down to the store — you turn the NC on the next day and it's there. It's not a major cultural event." Ellison believes that such machines can be sold profitably for a fraction of the price while achieving higher performance than PCs. "The reason you need 16Mb of memory is that

Windows 95 needs 8Mb — that's half for them, half for you," he says. On the other hand NCs will require only between 4Mb and 8Mb of memory, even to accomplish multimedia tasks. With a dig at Intel, Ellison notes that NCs will not have to wait for new technology. "For \$20 we can buy a faster microprocessor than an Intel Pentium at \$460 — sounds like a good deal to me." In another wry prediction, Ellison observes: "Network computers will not replace PCs; after all the PC didn't replace the mainframe. PCs have hundreds of thousands of uses. The NC has just four: internet browsing, electronic mail, word processing, and videoconferencing." He adds: "By the way, that's all I ever do with my PC, and that's all my friends ever do with theirs"

A Happy New Year?

Hardware has to be less complicated and software has to become leaner and smarter so that users can spend more time being productive and less time trying to become computer consultants and upgrade experts.

Consider what happens when you use a sophisticated comms program like WorldGroup. When you log on, the server checks to make sure your client software is current. If not, it upgrades you automatically and in the background. Now suppose you replace your modem with a network card attached to the coaxial line from the cable TV company, running at 10Mb/sec. Finally, replace your hard disk with a ROM that boots the operating system from the network. That is where we are headed, according to Larry Ellison,

chairman and CEO of Oracle.

Speaking at the Telecom 95 expo in Geneva, Ellison predicted: "Personal computers will be replaced by new devices that rely almost exclusively on fast networks and have very little intelligence inside." He cited Oracle's interactive television set-top box, now being used in trials in the UK and the US, as the first example of such a next-generation device. He went on to describe the network computer, or NC, as another such device (see *Whence the NC*, above). This has seismic implications for the traditional structure of the computer industry. For example, software and data storage might become a subscription service. Software and hardware conflicts could be banished, eliminating end-user frustration and slashing support costs for vendors.

Now it is beleaguered network managers who wrestle with access control, backups, anti-virus protection and fault tolerance. All this could be shifted to a central service, with huge economies of scale. There would need to be adequate protection of privacy. Access would have to be tightly controlled. But the technology to achieve this already exists. Users could be issued with smart cards to control access to the network, which would incidentally eliminate "laptop-lugging" as an executive health risk. The card would give you personalised access from any NC, such as the ones installed in hotel rooms or the backs of airline seats. You insert the card and instantly begin work, as if you were at home using your own NC.



The browser, I presume

Can anyone explain why Microsoft chose to name its internet browser the Microsoft Internet Explorer, right after launching the File Manager in Microsoft Windows 95 as the Microsoft Windows Explorer. Not confused yet? Well, try troubleshooting a Microsoft internet Explorer problem with a Microsoft Support Engineer, using Microsoft Windows Explorer.

This choice of product name is not the only evidence of verbal fixation in the Microsoft web browser. The darn thing insists on referring to hypertext links embedded in web pages as Shortcuts, as though Microsoft had invented the entire notion (Windows 95 users can create desktop icons that launch applications with a feature called Shortcuts). Before we know it the word will be trademarked and cash registers will ring every time someone says "Turn right at the roundabout, I know a Shortcut."

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