y Greg Kramer

I sit before my brand spanking new Power PC, its whirring CD ROM drive opening up a vast new world of software. I can now take for granted my ability to just pop in Marathon 2 and race through its mazes and aliens at full resolution with complete stereo ambient sound. Sigh. How did I go so long without all this power? How will I ever catch up?

It wasn't that long ago that I was saddled with an agonizingly slow Mac, virtually shut out of every new game on the market. Sure, I could entertain myself with classics, but my monthly perusal of system requirements on new games became increasingly demoralizing.

Now that I have joined the new generation I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I fear that there are still many of you out there who are being left in the electronic dust by software requiring, nay demanding, ever more burly hardware. Unless you were able to buy a souped-up speed demon machine the last time around, I bet you are now backed into a hardware corner and wondering, for instance, what all this MYST fuss is all about. Just tell yourself "games aren't that important anyway." Feel better? I didn't think so. It's true that, in the grand scheme, games are not that important. But let's not deny that they are one of the benefits of owning a computer, and for many, the primary one.

Perhaps I'm a bit oversensitive to the issue of hardware obsolescence; I've been burned a few times. In 1989, I replaced my old 512K Mac with a modest but sufficient Mac Plus. Oh the joy! Oh the rapture! Oh the pain of knowing that ONE MONTH after I bought this dream machine, Apple decided to discount the hard-drive-sporting SE to the same price I paid for my Plus. Despite this unfortunate and infuriating coincidence, I really couldn't complain. After all, I could play pretty much any game, favorites and new releases alike, with the hardware I had. I vowed, though, not to get screwed again.

Four years later, unable to play any new games, I decided that I had finally outgrown my Plus and was ready to make the leap to a color monitor and an internal hard drive. Part of the reason, I must admit, was that I was dying to play Prince of Persia. I had test driven it on a friend's Centris and could barely pull my hands away from the keyboard long enough to wipe the drool from my chin. I was a good consumer and did my research. I finally settled on the LC III, allegedly a breakthrough in power and expandability for price. Satisfied that I was

now equipped for the long haul, I was once again back in the mainstream and ready to play.

A few months later, I was casually thumbing through a magazine when what did I see but an article announcing that Apple would be replacing the LC III with the LC 475, a far faster machine. Oh, and since the LC III was on the market for such a short time, there would be no upgrade for it. Infuriated, I decided to send the messenger to Valhalla through the 8th story window only to hear it make a most unsatisfying thunk against the apparently magazine-proof glass of my office tower. Was it possible that Apple was unaware of the near instantaneous obsolescence of the LCIII when they released it? Did the new products team keep the 475 a secret from the rest of the company? I thought not, and for the first time, I began to feel personally offended. Undaunted, though, I pressed on and squeezed two more years out of my LCIII including a rather satisfying tryst with Sim City 2000.

Flash ahead to 1995. I might as well have been stuck with a 5 1/4 floppy drive and 256K of RAM. By the middle of the year, there was nothing available for a pathetic 030 processor. The frenetic pace of the software industry had made my formerly powerful computer utterly useless. Still there was plenty out there I could play, right? Over the span of four months, the available game pool went from a scant few to a crushing none.   I kid you not. I was stuck trying to enjoy and write about games while the entire software industry had marched bravely on past me. I felt like a video critic with a Betamax.

Finally, utterly ostracized from the computer gaming world due to my sagging and underpowered tool (I told you I was beginning to take this personally), I decided the time had come to buy a CD ROM drive and an accelerator. A moderately expensive investment but a worthwhile one. The CD ROM was no problem. I found out, however, that there is not a single accelerator on the market for an LC III. Ironically, there were plenty available for the LC II and even the SE!! So, had I been foolish enough to buy a slower computer, I would have been able to get away for a mere $200. Suddenly, my little long-overdue investment became a massive capital acquisition. Realizing the inevitable, I bit the bullet and wrote a painfully large check.

It wasn't long before the giddiness of buying a new computer kicked in. Back up to pace, I now wallow in my embarrassment of riches. I once again put my faith in upgradability and pray to fend off obsolescence. But the pain still lingers. Needless to say, twice bitten, I went elsewhere than Mother Apple for my new toy—to a vendor who would sing the sirens' song of upgradability and promise to allow me to keep up with the hyperkinetic software industry. I am set for a while (though probably not for as long as I think), but I can't forget what it was like to be stuck in the hardware ghetto by the unstoppable tsunami of technology.

The massive storage capability of the CD along with the awesome processing power of the Power PC/Pentium-based computers have created a game programmer's paradise. Formerly locked into the more or less cartoonish, low detail, god's-eye perspective prison of slower machines, they now find themselves free to engineer unprecedented realism and detail. They can create games of near cinematic proportions and visualize their creativity like never before. All pleasures are fleeting, though, and it won't be long before the Power PC won't be enough for these virtual artists. Even more advanced machines with entirely new architecture will be available to realize their vision, and they won't hesitate to take advantage of them. What this will require from us is, of course, more money.

What is a gamer to do? When you look at the computer gaming hobby long term, it's quite an expensive little habit. Granted, no one requires us to have the newest toy, but pushing the envelope is one of the reasons to be into gaming in the first place. It is, however, one massive and pricey game of "can-you-top-this?" and it's getting harder to stay on top. Obsolescence is nearly instantaneous; by the time a new computer hits the street, the next

model is right over the horizon with the next generation ridiculously close behind. It is hard to balance the desire to slow things down a bit, and the reality that this speed is necessary to create the eye-popping, mind bending sights and sounds we all marvel at. You can put leg irons on the game creators to slow them down, but they might just chew off their legs instead.

This is not a call to arms; mostly I'm just kvetching. The only useful thing I can say is if you're really serious about computer gaming, be realistic about the expense and equip yourself for the longest possible run. To the programmers and developers out there, keep it up, but keep us lowly consumers in mind. If I need a Cray to play Marathon 3, I may just decide that the time has come to put childish things behind and give up gaming.