

A (very un-mellow) melodrama in four acts.

Main character: “Just ‘Nothermacperson,” whom we shall call “JN”

Time: the present (unfortunately/fortunately)

Based on: a true story (from a source who will remain anonymous)

JN buys a new Mac, becomes a columnist for an online magazine we will call “MacCents,” spends three months researching an article on whether or not to purchase the AppleCare extended warranty plan, and writes an article we will call “To AppleCare or Not?”

JN receives a wide array of comments by loyal readers, via email, ranging from “AppleCare saved my marriage!” to “I sure was an idiot not to extend the warranty.” A dozen correspondents pointed out JN’s blatant omission of the built-in one-year additional warranty protection provided when a Mac is purchased with a “gold” Visa or MasterCard (and a few other premium credit cards).

JN is proud to have advanced the knowledge of the global Mac community, and continues to write pithy, poignant columns for MacCents.

Time: One month after the publication of JN's "AppleCare" article

N is happily working away on his Mac in his new home office in Tucson, Arizona, writing another witty, insightful column. The phone rings. The caller is his real estate agent, wanting to send an urgent fax regarding the sale of JN's previous house in Phoenix, Arizona. He turns on the fax software, prepares to receive the fax, and the pointer freezes on the screen. JN restarts the computer, receives the fax, sells the house, and gets back to his article.

The next day the pointer freezes again after startup, and when JN restarts, his Mac crashes. JN calls Roger from TMUG, the local user group, and Roger suggests a series of diagnostic procedures, none of which work. Roger says, "Your hard drive is not being recognized. Get thee to a repair shop." John passes out, and is revived by the heavy breathing of a gila monster scuttling across the open doorway.

JN calls Apple and gets through on the first ring. Toni, the Apple representative, patiently guides JN through a different comprehensive series of diagnostic procedures, including several unsuccessful attempts to zap (reset) the PRAM (the parameter random access memory, which is fundamental to the Mac's operation). Toni asks, "Do you have AppleCare?" JN gulps, and whispers, "No, unfortunately. You wouldn't believe..." before he passes out again, and is revived by the pounding footsteps of a desert tortoise waddling across the still-open doorway.

JN calls Matt, the effervescent president of TMUG, who offers to fix the Mac the following morning. At Matt's house, every known legal method of software diagnosis and repair is attempted, with the same result: "Your hard drive is not being recognized, for some inexplicable reason. It's not even spinning. I hate to say it, but you'd better take your Mac to Simutek, the best local repair facility." JN passes out a third time, and needs to be thrown into the 47-degree (Fahrenheit) water of Matt's swimming pool in order to be revived.

N takes his CPU (the computer without the monitor, mouse, or cables) to Simutek, Inc., which is an all-Macintosh service facility. Joe, the calm, young technician, says he'll call JN with a report within 24 hours.

JN: "By the way, Joe, how much does a new hard drive cost?"

Joe: "Oh, around five hundred dollars."

JN goes into a walking coma, wanders around Tucson aimlessly for the rest of the day, and finally manages to drive himself home.

N breaks the news to his wife, B. She is equally upset, but can't offer any solutions, so they both feel terrible for the remainder of the day and through the night.

The next morning, JN and B decide to take a walk, which always helps when they are feeling glum. JN barely speaks to B, because he is so lost in misery, but manages to utter:

"What if my most recent backup was defective, and I lose everything on the hard drive? What if the hard drive has to be completely replaced? Do I need to consider getting an entirely new CPU? How can we afford this disaster?"

As they approach their new home, John starts brainstorming to himself, attempting to come up with some creative solution to paying for a new hard disk, if necessary. He mentally rewinds the initial process of purchasing the Mac 14 months previously at the campus bookstore, then screams:

"HEY. I PAID FOR IT WITH OUR GOLD VISA CARD. THE GOLD VISA PEOPLE PROVIDE AN AUTOMATIC ONE-YEAR EXTENSION OF APPLE'S WARRANTY. YAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

JN calls 1-800-VISA-911, obtains a claim number after giving the warranty person some pertinent information, and begins to return to normal bodily function. "Life may go on, after all," he sighs to himself. B is relieved, but she remains a bit skeptical.

JN is unable to locate his original bookstore Visa receipt or monthly statement, but the Visa bank offers to send a duplicate statement.

The phone rings. Joe from Simutek confirms the hard drive needs to be replaced for \$500 (US), and will be ready tomorrow. JN tells Joe about the Visa warranty coverage, and Joe asks John if he can pay for the repair, and then wait for the reimbursement from Visa. JN says yes, and sets a time to pickup the Mac on the following day.

N arrives at Simutek, clutching his Gold Visa card. After Joe charges JN's card for \$508.35, Joe explains what went wrong:

"It wasn't a problem caused by your recent move to Tucson. The computer appeared to be okay physically. It wasn't a problem caused by your unheated office. The Mac can run comfortably as low as 50 degrees Fahrenheit. No. You had an entirely different problem.

"Do you know what the PRAM is? Well, there are two ways to zap the PRAM. The well-known method is to use an awkward keyboard combination, or a utility such as Tech Tool. I tried both of them, but neither worked.

"When I looked in the Apple Repair Manual for your computer, I learned that if the hard disk won't spin, the PRAM can be reset by removing the hard disk, and then pressing a tiny red button inside the computer for ten seconds, which I did. Your computer started up, and I

immediately inserted the hard drive and backed it up to save all your files. Then your Mac crashed again, which confirmed that the hard drive was really sick and needed to be replaced. Fortunately for you (and Visa), Apple gives a \$80 credit for returned IDE drives, or the bill would be nearly \$600.

JN: "Do these non-Apple IDE drives fail very often?"

Joe: "This is the first defective one I've ever seen, but it's important to remember that computers are made by people, and people aren't perfect, so computers do occasionally fail. Your hard drive was definitely defective. If I hadn't replaced it, you would have been back here sooner or later with the same problem. You're fortunate to have bought your Mac with a gold credit card."

JN: "Should I have purchased AppleCare?"

Joe: "Not necessarily, but everyone here at Simutek buys AppleCare for every piece of equipment they own. We know that computers can stop working for any reason or for no reason, and it's cheap insurance when you need it most!"

N takes the CPU home, and immediately calls MacWarehouse to order a Zip Drive with five Zip disks, which arrive the next day. JN runs Disk First Aid twice, tests and optimizes his new hard drive using Norton Utilities, and rebuilds his desktop using Tech Tool (freeware). JN then backs-up the entire hard disk. He continues to do this time-intensive but essential procedure once each week, religiously, keeping the backup Zip disks in a different building from the Macintosh.

JN sends all the necessary receipts and paperwork to Visa Extended Protection in Colorado, and receives a check for \$508.35 a few days later. JN tells everyone who will listen to apply immediately for a Gold Visa or MasterCard (the extended warranty phone number for MasterCard is 1-800-MC-ASSIST).

N is alive and well, watching the crescent moon dissolve into a gorgeous rosy-pink Tucson sunrise. Life is beautiful again. He is restored (and backed-up), and breathing normally.

[ohn Nemerovski's monthly column](#) explores the trends, psychology, and emerging culture of the "digital renaissance" and how we are all adapting to this "Brave New World." You can write to John at johnemer@aztec.asu.edu.

