

The computing habit

Using computers becomes a habit, and after a while people forget how they, their organization, or their discipline ever did without them. Computers are habit-forming and lead to electronic dependence. Habit-forming is, of course, only a euphemism for addictive, and, indeed, computers are addictive in the most alarming sense of the word; the first stage, in which it is no longer possible to function properly without them, is followed by the second stage in which the proper functioning becomes more and more threatened by the dependence. Think, for instance, of the large organizations, totally dependent on hundreds and hundreds of ill-documented "existing programs" no one understands, dares to touch or to replace: the very fabric of which the organization has been built has become very fragile indeed. (So much for the competence of the MBAs who have allowed this situation to develop.)

How should we react to this computer addiction? Should we fight it or should we exploit it? Fighting addiction is always a thankless task. In this case, it would evoke opposition in the Department itself --faculty and staff feeling that their employment was in jeopardy-- , it would evoke violent opposition in all other departments --which thought they did something smart by making computers an integral part of their research and their teaching-- and it would not endear us to the computer industry --that these days is supposed to finance us-- .

It is much less risky --and almost certain to evoke universal applause and support-- if we aim at adding revolutionary new dimensions to the addiction. We could, for instance, head for some sort of electronic LSD. If we really wish to do a spectacular job, we should not confine our system to just a mainstream multimedia extravaganza, for our clients should see colours never seen before, should smell odours never smelled before, should hear noises never heard before, should experience orgasms of demoniac fear and spiritual power never experienced before: on order to communicate with the client's inner self in a bandwidth truly without precedent, we should bypass the old-fashioned senses and the constraints of language in a direct interaction with the client's nervous system. Besides the above outstanding technical merits, this research proposal has the political advantage that, because of its obvious interdisciplinarity, it will position the CS Department at the very center of the UT Campus.

Needless to say, the project would be of enormous educational value for the Department itself: it would drive home the message that, if you really give your mind to it, anything can be considered Computer Science.

Austin, 4 April 1991

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