COMPUTER-RELATED HORROR STORIES, FOLKLORE, AND ANECDOTES

146-186 minutes

From: ajs@hpfcdc.HP.COM Sat Nov 10 14:40:39 1990
From: ajs@hpfcdc.HP.COM (Alan Silverstein)
Subject: Re: "The Devouring Fungus" at a bookstore near you

> ...a collection of anecdotes and stories about computer technology and
> the people who spend their time working with computers... This is the
> first time I have seen anyone collect so many of them together, and in
> such an amusing and readable way.

The following HUGE collection is probably shorter than the book, and not
so well edited, but it hasn't been posted in a long time, so here it is.
Let's see if 160Kb makes it around the Net. Enjoy.

COMPUTER-RELATED HORROR STORIES, FOLKLORE, AND ANECDOTES

Excerpts (edited) from net.rumor, March, 1986, with later
additions, including a huge number from a rec.humor posting. I
did some reformatting and a spelling check. Have at...

/ net.rumor / megaron!rogerh / Mar 7, 1986 /

The Tektronix 4051 (one of the first desk-top computers) had a
microprocessor (6800 I think) deep inside it. Although the
machine's native language was Basic, there were (undocumented)
hooks to download and run machine code. The machine also had a
synthesized bell. The result, of course, was that 4051 was one
of the favorite musical instruments in some parts of Tek.

Anybody remember how to walk an IBM 1130's disk drives? I
recall stories that the right program would start them marching
across the room.

/ hpfcla:net.rumor / mit-amt!gerber / Mar 9, 1986 /

> Anybody remember how to walk an IBM 1130's disk drives? I
> recall stories that the right program would start them marching
> across the room.

A friend of mine once told me how he used to do just that at U of Delaware. He used to do it from a terminal room where you couldn't see the machine itself, but you'd know when it happened -- the disk would pull either its power plug or its connection to the mainframe off, and the machine would crash.

The TRS-80 Model 1 used to put out so much RF interference, that one way of adding sound to ANY program was to put a small AM radio right by the machine, and listening to the electronic "music". Some programs even used this trait of the trash-80, instead of connecting up the external speaker.

/ net.rumor / gilbbs!mc68020 / Mar 21, 1986 /

In 1978, a company in my area which specialized in fruit orchard temperature alarm systems (it being necessary to awaken the farmers to start the smudge pots and ventilators (giant fans) in order to prevent damage to the fruit) decided they wanted to go into the TRS-80 I peripherals business. They hired me as an engineering technician and programmer.

There I was, working on programs to drive the peripherals, and having even the simplest programs crashing and going haywire for no apparent reason. Being brought up to never assume it's the machine's fault, I spent several weeks trying to figure out what I was doing wrong.

The one day my boss asked me to go to the company next door and assist them with a problem (they built hydraulic lift units, like the ones you see being used in construction...turned out we built the electronic control boxes for their lifts). I walk into the shop, and am confronted by 12 extra heavy duty arcwelding machines (these guys were welding steel up to 2" thick!). After solving their problem, I traced the power mains. Sure enough, we were drawing our AC feed from the same source they were, no transformers between us.

A few hours, a couple of isolation transformers and caps later, and all of a sudden my code runs perfectly.

The boss still didn't believe it, when I showed him the finally working code... he had pretty much decided I was a flop as a programmer. They decided two weeks later not to go into computers... too volatile, they said.

/ net.rumor / catnip!ben / Mar 6, 1986 /

>> I was once told that the operating system for the Burroughs
>> B1700, another computer well-supplied with lights, displayed a
>> smile in its idle loop.

> Some Honeywell computers make "bird calls" over a built-in
> speaker when idle. If the computer room sounds like a jungle,
> then you're certain to get lots of CPU for your jobs.

Back when I was an undergrad at Oberlin College, I had the pleasure of working as an operator on their Xerox Sigma 9. The best part of the job was bringing down the machine. The console displayed "Thhhhhhats all Folks!!!", while the processor treated you to a rendition of the Star Spangled Banner on the CPU alarm.

/ net.rumor / bgsuvax!drich / Mar 5, 1986 /

Speaking of doing things to power lines...I remember a story I heard from my circuits professor in Colorado. It seems that they received a computer from the government (I can't remember the make, but it wasn't anything I had heard of before). This computer was a bit of a beast. It ran off of 3-phase power, and had a disk that was between 3 and 4 feet in diameter. Well, several students were involved in setting up the disk drive one night, and when the professor left he told them that they could connect everything, but not to power it up until he checked it over.

Well, you know students...they wired it up and turned it on. For those of you who are not to familiar with 3-phase power, if you reverse any 2 out of the 3 wires, the polarity changes. Well, they managed to reverse 2 of the wires, causing the disk to spin backwards. Now, since the heads are designed to float on a cushion of air above the disk, they went down instead of up, and the disk ended up with a nice groove right down the middle. Needless to say, the prof wasn't pleased when he came in the next morning and found his nice new disk turned into so many magnetic shavings....

/ net.rumor / utzoo!henry / Mar 5, 1986 /

And then there's the old trick of manipulating an IBM 029 keypunch so that it punches cards which are all holes. Great bookmarks; I still have a few.

Ideally you want to have a roomful of keypunches on hand, because the mean time between jams when punching those things is

only a few cards. What would happen if one of them went into a high-speed card reader, I don't know. The mind boggles.

(For the benefit of the fuzzy-cheeked youngsters in the crowd, punchcards need a certain amount of mechanical strength to survive machine handling. All-holes cards are weak and tear easily. Normal punchcards are constrained to have [as I recall] at most one punch per column in rows 1-7, so that the central region of the card is mostly solid.)

/ net.rumor / utrc-2at!davidh / Mar 5, 1986 /

While working on a project at Litton Systems, I heard of this embarrassing moment.

One project (for the military) required that the military supplied technicians be taught how to service the computers they had bought. The lessons were proceeding well with the explicit instructions "Don't apply the power until we check it." Naturally, somebody jumped the gun. Immediately, 120V AC was applied across the core memory (yes, core, not silicon). The result? A pile of slag and a whopping replacement bill.

/ net.rumor / loral!jlh / Mar 5, 1986 /

I remember 4 or 5 years back when we were running all our microcode and state machine development on a PDP 11 under RSX11. Seems time for the annual preventitive maintenance came around, and one of the tests is to ensure the drive can read and write correctly to each and every block of a disk. The DEC field service tech looked at our rack of disks, saw one labeled 'Jay's scratch', and decided to use that for a disk. Well, you know engineers. A disk is a scratch disk until you put something you need on it, at which time it is the working disk. You also know engineers never re-name a disk once it has a label on it. Jay comes in the next day, mounts his disk, and reads out a bunch of E5's. Seems he lost about 3 months of work, only some of which he had listings of. I think the field service rep also caught hell for doing that to a customer's disk without asking anyone.

/ net.rumor / ucla-cs!davis / Mar 6, 1986 /

I was working in a somewhat large data center not to long ago. Seems the company thought they could save some money on maintenance costs by going self service. Well it seems that a year or two later another great cost savings idea was to hire

C.E.'s that had only 6 months training in the electronics field!!! Well the time came to install a new super minicomputer, tape cabinet, and disk cabinet. Well they put the new C.E. in charge of the whole project. He connected the cables from the disk cabinet to the CPU, then connected the cables from the tape drive to the CPU. All set!

He plugged in the tape drive and then the disk cabinet to A.C. When he went to plug in the CPU he noticed that the electrical outlet was a different kind than that of the computer. But this C.E. was smart. He thought of a way that he could remove the plug and install a plug that would fit in the outlet. (Then the company would not have to pay for an electrician). Good Idea except that he switched the HOT and the GROUND wires when installing the new plug. As we all know computers are well grounded. Well the grounding also is good in cables that connect to peripherals as well as within the peripherals themselves. Of course this bright C.E. turned on the disk cabinet, tape cabinet, and CPU before plugging in the CPU plug.

You should have seen the smoke and sparks when he plugged in the CPU. The tape drive was shot, the disk cabinet was shot and the CPU was shot!!!!! At least none of the terminals were connected at the time. It took 4 C.E.s 1 week of constant work to repair the damage. Ever see a memory board with the chips blown to kingdomcome?

/ net.rumor / terak!doug / Mar 5, 1986 /

> ...the teflon insulation reacted with the hot (molten) metal to
> form HF gas. When the fire department turned on the sprinklers
> in desperation: hydrofloric acid.

In 1970 ('71?) Fresno State's computer room was the target of a firebomb thrown by some protesting students. The fire department arrived and hosed everything down. The fire damage was negligible. But then the FD decided that since it was electrical equipment, they should be using CO2 extinguishers instead.

Either water or CO2 would have been okay alone; but when the CO2 was sprayed on top of the water, it formed carbolic acid [or is it carbonic, I don't remember]. Destroyed all of the equipment, the disks, and the tapes. Took about a year and a half to recreate their records from hardcopy.

At that time, our CDC CE told of a student demonstration in Canada where a university's CDC 3300 had been wrecked by demonstrators and sold as scrap. A CE reportedly bought the machine after observing that almost all of the damage was bent sheet metal and unplugged connectors. He supposedly set up a service bureau in his home. I'm not sure I believe this story.

/ net.rumor / bbncc5!jr / Mar 10, 1986 /

> I also remember sending a print file that contained about 1000
> logical end-of-records (and nothing else) to a remote line
> printer. It took about 5 minutes for it to transmit and print
> nothing.

When MCIMail first went on the air, they charged for hardcopy mail delivery by the character (actually, 5000-character unit). You could mail yourself or a friend a few reams of paper for $1 by sending a file of formfeeds. They fixed their charging when we pointed this out.

Also, their password-generator occasionally spits out somewhat racy words (they have the form consonant-vowel-consonant-... -vowel, 8 characters in all). The generator checks for most of the obvious bad ones, but it seems a few must slip by the censors. We suggested that they ought to charge extra for the racy ones, on the grounds that they would be so much easier to remember. This idea was rejected, though its originator got such a password for the thought.

/ net.rumor / linus!sdo / Mar 11, 1986 /

> Is it really true that someone working for a bank or a large
> company diverted megabucks into his or her personal account by
> adjusting a program that figured out people's paychecks or
> interest payments so that it always rounded *down* to the
> nearest penny, never up, and then deposited the extra parts of
> pennies (mills) into his or her own account? I heard this story
> several years ago, but now I need to know if it's really true.
> So if you know the name of the bank or the company and the
> approximate year this person was caught,

Not only is it true, it has also happened a lot more than just once. In fact, this is one of the simplest computer scams going. One of the cleverest ones I ever heard about involved someone working for a company (a fruit company, I believe) who had the computer change (just slightly) the recorded times (and prices) of the company's transactions on the commodities

exchanges. His profits came from the slight changes (say,1/16 of a point) in the contract prices that occur all the time during a normal trading day.

I have seen several books which talk about these and other schemes in detail. Unfortunately, the names and dates are often not revealed as most companies are loath to have the general public find out the ease with which these types of crimes can be carried out, as well as the difficulty of discovering them once they have occurred. One of the most revealing items is the fact that computer criminals are almost always caught only because discrepancies in their lifestyles are noted (e.g. buying a 40-foot yacht on a $20k salary). In fact, the longest running crime I heard about, which involved a programmer (I believe) in a prominent New York bank, went on for close to 10 years. The culprit escaped detection so long because he had a $30,000-a-month gambling habit and was losing his illegal income as fast as he got it. He was finally caught when his bookie was arrested as part of a police 'sting' operation, and his name was found on the books as one of the largest customers.

As for finding more out about such things, all the information I have came from browsing through the MIT engineering library for a few afternoons, so I imagine that any good college library should have at least some material on this. Good luck in finding out some actual names and dates, however!

/ net.rumor / utah-cs!peterson / Mar 13, 1986 /

My mom (a CPA) was on an audit of a large S & L several years ago where they caught somebody doing this. As I recall, the person was getting away with around $10-20K a year with the scam (not quite "megabucks", but still pretty healthy).

The roundoff error was pretty much invisible to the auditors. The tricky part for the crook was actually writing the check (or funds transfer) so he could collect the money. This was what showed up on the books someplace and resulted in him getting caught.

/ net.rumor / hpcvla!john / Mar 14, 1986 /

> One of the most revealing items is the fact that computer
> criminals are almost always caught only because discrepancies in
> their lifestyles are noted (e.g. buying a 40-foot yacht on a
> $20k salary).

There are exceptions. During the fifties a military clerk working for the NSA had a wreck in his hydroplane. Since he had access to a lot a top secret data they assigned an agent to watch over him while he was under anesthesia to ensure that he wouldn't babble anything. It wasn't until later when he disappeared and moved to Moscow that anyone thought to ask how a low paid clerk could afford to buy a hydroplane.

/ net.rumor / ucsfcca!dick / Mar 26, 1986 /

I've resisted for many days, but I give up. My friend Doug used to work in a bank, in the OLD days. Their master file was on punched cards, with FOUR accounts per card. After Doug had programmed the daily update and put it in production, the bank examiners came to him saying, "We have noticed a drop in revenues in the minimum-balance account." Doug explained his program: "...and when the average balance for the month is below the minimum, the surcharge is applied." They said, "No, no! When the current balance has EVER fallen below the minimum, the surcharge should be applied." Doug said that didn't seem very fair, but they made the rules and he would fix the program.

Months later, the examiners came round again, quite suspiciously. They told him that they had noticed another drop in revenues in the minimum balance account. Doug explained that he had fixed the program, but he would surely look into the matter right away. After examining his program again, he went into the computer room to check the actual deck of cards that the operators used. He soon discovered the problem.

He had added four patch cards to the end of the deck, one for each account on a master file card. Three of them were gone. It seems that as the deck was used day after day, the last card had gotten grubbier and grubbier. Eventually, the card reader would not feed it. But the program seemed to work fine anyway! Then the new last card died, etc.

The bank examiners were satisfied. Doug was relieved. And now we all know that patching is not the right way to go.

/ net.rumor / unisoft!tim / Mar 14, 1986 /

A fellow I worked with once told me a horror story that happened when he was working as an operator at MIT.

The system they were using had recently been converted to using a new type of coated fiberglass disk, to replace the old, heavy

metal-platter kind. No problem there. Well, the system they had this "Emergency Stop" plug on it that you would pull when an emergency occurred (they assumed it was for, say, a flood in the machine room). One late evening, a couple of the operators were sitting around being bored, and decided to see what would happen when they pulled "Emergency Stop". Immediately after pulling it, they heard a strange sound in the disk cabinet. Looking over, they saw an arm emerge from the side of the cabinet, on either side of a platter, and CLAMP down on the platter. Apparently, this wasn't made for use with fiberglass platters.

They were picking splinters out of the walls for days.

/ net.rumor / petsd!cjh / Mar 14, 1986 /

This disk drive got troublesome hardware glitches, usually just after the end of the "normal" working day. Which, for the programmers, was prime time, of course.

The glitches happened just when a very good-looking woman on the cleaning crew walked past the drive. She usually wore tight slacks, and a longish blouse... there was friction between the layers of clothes as she walked, and the static charge occasionally jumped to the disk drive.

/ net.rumor / atari!dyer / Mar 15, 1986 /

NBS was running version 6 Unix on a PDP-11/45 with four RL02 packs. It took nearly half a day to backup the system. Half a day to copy four 10 megabyte packs?

The operators (who didn't know any better -- they'd been given a canned procedure) were typing in DD commands to copy from one pack to another. They were using a buffer size of ten BYTES....

/ net.rumor / bu-cs!bzs / Mar 14, 1986 /

Ok, my two quickies...

Several years ago I was working on a portable real-time system we had custom built (using an LSI-11/1, 4KB, home-brewed O/S.) There were two of them in the universe and were working hard on two separate research studies. Filled my heart with glee when I went to lift mine and out of its guts poured several ounces of coffee...(not me, never found out who.)

A couple of years ago I was drinking coffee in my favorite coffee shop (maybe I should just stay away from the coffee!) when their phone rang, they shouted from behind the counter that it was for me, there was an alarm going in one of the machine rooms and I should get right over there.

Ran over to find an operator standing there with a finger on the Halon hold button, we had a two zone alarm going so it was about to dump the tanks (I remember the operator looking very pleased at their current career choice). It didn't look like there was any fire, so I began running around pulling up floor tiles (after, of course, disabling the fire system) looking for the offending sensors, 90Db going off in my ears. Suddenly I notice this bad stinging pain in my arm, great I'm thinking, the big one, just what I need to finish a perfect day. Well, it wasn't that bad, fortunately someone else in the room noticed the bee on my shoulder...

I could go on.

/ net.rumor / proper!carl / Mar 16, 1986 /

A bulletin board service in Oakland, CA, (Sunrise Omega-80) lost a drive when an ant walked across one of the disk drive heads as it was stepping.. Smeared the disk, the drive wasn't too good either, and the board was down for several weeks..

/ net.rumor / tekchips!jackg / Mar 17, 1986 /

Speaking of 7094s, I once worked at an installation that had two of these. The "console printer" on these computers was a large machine that looked (and maybe was) a 407 accounting machine. The 7094 didn't have any kind of internal clock but the 407 did and its patch panel was wired up so every time a line was printed on it, the time was appended at the right margin. Thus elapsed time of a job could be determined by looking at the time printed when the $JOB card was printed and when the EXIT message was printed.

Someone found out, however, that the timer did not advance while printing was in progress, so the times were a little inaccurate. To get a free run on the computer, all you had to do was keep the 407 continually busy and the timer would never advance. A program could issue a print to the printer every so often (not very often due to the slowness of the printer) and never be billed for a cent. It did drive the operators crazy though because everytime a line was printed on the 407, they went over

to look to see if it was telling them something significant to the running of the job.

/ net.rumor / bbncc5!jr / Mar 19, 1986 /

> The glitches happened just when a very good-looking woman on the
> cleaning crew walked past the drive.

Reminds me of the Arpanet site that used to crash frequently right around the end of the day. Seems the cleaner plugged the floor buffer into a convenient 100AC outlet - the one inside the IMP cabinet.

/ net.rumor / mmm!mrgofor / Mar 19, 1986 /

A while back I was the tech support person for a minicomputer OEM. Our customers were located all over the SF Bay area, we were located in Sunnyvale. Since the customers were spread around, I usually tried to diagnose and fix problem over the phone.

One day a Berkeley customer called me to complain that there were sparks and bad smells coming from the computer. I assured him that that was ridiculous - computers don't generate sparks. He said that it sure did - every time he tried to plug in his modem. I told him to try it again while I was on the phone, so I could try to diagnose the problem. He laid the phone's handset on the table rather than putting me on hold (it wouldn't reach over to the computer, but it was in the same room). Things were quiet for a few seconds, and then I could hear a loud yelp that made its way across the computer room and through the phone. He came back on the line and said the computer had bit him.

Clearly, this was an on-site job - not something I could diagnose from his description - so I drove up to Berkeley. When I got there, I saw the flat ribbon cable that connected the modem to the terminal interface - the power wire was on the edge, and for the whole length of the cable the plastic insulation had melted off, leaving the bare wires. Hmmm, I thinks to myself, what could cause such a thing?

I whipped out my handy-dandy volt-o-meter and tested the outlets to which the various pieces of equipment had been connected. All were 110 volts -- looked good. It finally occurred to me to check the polarity of the sockets -- and sure enough -- they were wired wrong. It was a very old building, and whoever had

done the latest wiring in the computer room was obviously no fan of consistency. The modem and the computer tried to share a common ground, but in reality there was a whopping potential difference between them, and when they were hooked up, sure enough, the computer generated sparks and bad smells -- something computers are not generally supposed to do.

/ net.rumor / mmm!mrgofor / Mar 19, 1986 /

Okay, one more computer "horror" story -- this one's kind of cute.

We were trying to sell a $60,000 system to a family-run company whose "computer expert" was in his 60's. We had a program called "Biosum" that would calculate the biorhythms for two people and add the sine waves together and tell you how compatible the two people are.

The day of the biggest demo, the customer brings in his mother (head of the clan) to see what the company is going to be shelling out their money for. The customer wanted to show his mother something fun on the computer, so we fired up Biosum. Unfortunately, the mother had been born in the 1800's, and you know how sloppy BASIC programmers are when it comes to date conversions - especially 18 year-old programmers who think "20 years ago" qualifies as ancient history. When the program asked for her birthdate and she typed it in (she was just starting to get a thrill out of the machine), the program crashed very ungracefully. Talk about embarrassing...

They bought the system anyway, but I don't think the matriarch ever really liked it.

/ net.rumor / mmm!mrgofor / Mar 19, 1986 /

This story did not happen to me, and I disremember where I heard it, so it may not be true, but it's interesting nonetheless, so...

There was a computer system that was experiencing intermittent power failures that were proving impossible to track down. Every means of recording device and electrical filter was used, but to no avail. The power failures always seemed to happen soon after lunch time, but for no apparent reason. After months of agonizing work, the technician finally figured it out:

The room on the other side of the wall from the computer room

was the men's bathroom. The grounding for the computer room circuits went to the water pipes that serviced one of the toilets. The building was rather old, and the toilets were in some need of repair. It seems that when one sat on the toilet seat, the weight of the sittee would cause the whole construction to lean forward a bit - not much, but enough to cause the marginally attached grounding wires to separate from the water pipes as the pipes bent along with the toilet - voila - the computer re-boots.

I bet that was a hard one to track down!

/ net.rumor / mhuxt!evans / Mar 14, 1986 /

I know of a case where a spider decided to set up shop a few mm in front of a CCD array. The spider rapidly figured out that the inside of an imaging device wasn't a very good restaurant and left -- but only after depositing a few strands of spider silk. One of these strands would periodically interrupt the optical path of the CCD causing interesting images. Of course this was an intelligent machine, so no one ever looked at the raw images -- not for at least a week that is...

/ net.rumor / ti-csl!tgralewi / Mar 14, 1986 /

On the same lines as the "120 test", I once knew a repair tech that had a "perfect" system for finding the problem when a machine blew fuses. He kept putting larger and larger fuses in until something else blew.

/ net.rumor / utzoo!henry / Mar 19, 1986 /

Pat Hume, one of the very senior profs in CS at U of T, once told the story of how he broke the FERUT. FERUT was FERranti U of T, one of the first computers in Canada -- a great vacuum-tube monster. It had something like a ten-step procedure for powerdown. From time to time this machine got modified. One day Hume was the last user of the day, and the time came to shut it down. Somebody had added an extra step to the shutdown procedure, presumably as the result of some modification, but either the writing was illegible or the instructions weren't clear. He did the best he could, and smoke started coming out. He hastily finished the powerdown procedure, and called Ferranti. They naturally said "your service contract is nine to five, we'll be there tomorrow morning".

Next morning, the Ferranti technical crew showed up and spent all morning in the machine room. From Hume's description, one got the impression of technicians half-inside the computer briskly hurling parts out. Hume, a rather junior professor at the time, sat in his office all morning waiting for the word on the multi-million-dollar computer he'd broken. People walking past in the hall would look in with pitying expressions.

Towards noon, the Ferranti senior man walked into Hume's office with a double armload of parts, dumped them on his desk, and said "that's it". Machine restored to operation, junior professor not having to contemplate spending the next fifty years paying back its price... But the really cute part was that the machine's reliability was markedly better after this episode. He'd managed to apply just enough stress to blow out all the marginal parts.

/ net.rumor / decwrl!moroney / Mar 19, 1986 /

Here's another example of what steel wool in the wrong places can do to a machine:

And yet another flooring story...

(Being a hardware engineer at heart, I still shiver when I think about this one.)

Seams there was a cleaning lady that was assigned to the floor that had the computer on it (a Zerox SIGMA 5 if it really matters). Well, one day she decided that the heal marks in the raised tile floor just had to be cleaned up. After seeing that the soap and wax did not take all the marks out, she then tried steel wool!

The customer had to replace the whole machine.

Since the cooling fans draw from the bottom, all the evaporating wax was sucked up through the machine. The soft coating on the PC cards and backplane made a good home for all the small pieces of steel wool that flew by later.

/ net.rumor / decwrl!moroney / Mar 19, 1986 /

Yet another old classic war story.

It seems that there was a certain university that was doing experiments in behavior modification in response to brain

stimulation in primates. They had this monkey with a number of electrodes embedded in it's brain that were hooked up to a PDP-11. They had several programs that would stimulate different parts of the monkey's brain, and they had spent over a year training the monkey to respond to certain stimuli.

Well, eventually the PDP developed problems, and field service was called in. Due to some miscommunication, the field service representative was not informed of the delicacy of this particular setup, and the people running the experiment were not informed that field service was coming to fix the machine. The FS representative then booted up a diagnostic system I/O exerciser. After several minutes of gyrations, the monkey expired, its brain fried.

The moral, of course, is "Always mount a scratch monkey."

/ net.rumor / sdcrdcf!dem / Mar 21, 1986 /

This was told to me by a fellow co-worker who worked for another large main frame manufacture previously.

It seems they delivered a new machine to an overseas site and during installation every time they applied power to one of the memory bays they blew every circuit breaker in the computer room. After resetting the circuits they again applied power to the memory bay with the same results. Since this was a new machine they crated it up and shipped it back and got a replacement.

When they got the damaged memory bay back the started to tear it down to fine the cause of the short. Well what they found was a small hole about 3/8 in. in diameter going from top to bottom through some of the memory arrays, which cause a very effective short. After a lot of research they found the cause.

It seems that after the memory had passed test and evaluation and quality assurance the bay was crated and put in the warehouse to await delivery. At some time during its storage an electrician was hired to do some work and since it was a secure building the security guard had do go with him. The electrician at one point said that he had to go back down to his truck to get a drill and the guard asked why and the electrician said he needed to drill a hole right here (pointing to a spot on the floor). The guard then responded by pulling out his sidearm and proceeded to blow a hole at the appropriate spot which happened to be right above where the memory bay was being stored.

The last he knew the guard had been reprimanded and re-assigned
to another of the security agency's customers.

/ net.rumor / rebel!george / Mar 22, 1986 /

> I once heard about a Xerox tech who opened up a malfunctioning
> copier and found a dead mouse lying on its back, spread eagled,
> right smack dab in the middle of it.

Some time ago I worked for a large minicomputer vendor who also
had a problem installation in a warehouse. I vividly remember
the frequent soft disk errors. When the FE went to investigate
the large 3330 type drive, it didn't take too long before he
found the cause. A field mouse had gotten into its large
tread-mill style blower. Thereafter we (unofficially, to be
sure) referred to that drive model as the mouse-a-matic.

/ net.rumor / uthub!koko / Mar 21, 1986 /

> The modem and the computer tried to share a common ground, but
> in reality there was a whopping potential difference between
> them, and when they were hooked up, sure enough, the computer
> generated sparks and bad smells - something computers are not
> generally supposed to do.

This reminds me of a nasty accident I had in the Power
Electronics Laboratory. I had a terminal connected to a
6809-based microcomputer board. The board was in turn connected
through an interface, driver circuit and isolation transformer
to an SCR power module. The module was connected directly to
the 117-volt line, which was protected by a 50-amp breaker.

In the course of debugging the circuit, I had connected an
oscilloscope -- isolated, of course -- to the circuit. I
connected one channel, with its ground wire, to some point in
the power circuit. I had other channels of the scope connected
to the microcomputer interface. I understood that the
microcomputer ground now became hot, but this was okay since the
microcomputer power supply and terminal were both isolated -- or
so I thought. Then I turned on the 50-amp breaker switch to
energize the power circuit. BANG!!!

A large current, enough to pop the 15-amp breaker supplying the
computer and terminal, went from the power circuit, through one
set of scope leads, through the scope, through another set of
scope leads, through the computer ground trace, through the
ground wire in the RS-232 cable and into the terminal. The

goddamn terminal had its RS-232 signal ground strapped to the earth ground in the 117-volt line. The current blew a trace on the computer board. When it finished off that path, it proceeded to find the path of next lowest resistance -- the line driver and receiver chips in the computer board and the terminal.

All four chips, plus some TTL chips in the terminal, were burned out. But one of those chips had a hole blown right through it! I could see remains of the substrate through the hole. Fortunately, the 15-amp breaker tripped before anything else was damaged. But the 15-amp breaker was slightly damaged -- it tends to stick a little upon turning on. (I left my mark in the lab.)

All of this goes to prove that that third wire in the line cord does not always promote safety. In this case, it created a hazard. From now on, I will always use a ground cheater for terminals when working in that lab.

/ net.rumor / rlgvax!jsf / Mar 27, 1986 /

I have two quick but nasty stories. These are true so for everyone who has been defending horror stories in net.rumor by saying there all folk lore, sorry.

Back in the summer of '84 I was setting up a PC lab at my school. We were converting an old chem. lab, and of course had to make some major modifications, including installing air conditioning to handle the heat. After setting up about 50 Dec Pro 350s we had the normal break in trouble but soon everything settled down and ran fine until about mid October.

I came in one Saturday morning to open the lab and found it a little warm, but didn't think anything about it. After cramming close to 100 freshmen into the lab to work on their homework, the temperature reached close to 90 and 3/4s of the machines were down with random hardware errors. Seems that building services had decided on Friday afternoon that it was time to turn off the air conditioner, and fire up the heat for the winter. They had of course locked the door behind them, and we had riveted all the windows shut that summer to prevent theft. The whole lab was down until late Monday when we finally convinced building services that we would need our air conditioner all winter.

The cause of the second one was a little more difficult to find. Recently one of our customers was having trouble with a group of

terminals getting periodic line noise, sometimes to the point of locking up the comm processor. After finding nothing wrong in the hard or software a team of crack support people went to site. There they found a bunch of RS232 lines almost 600 ft. long that ran through an elevator shaft. Every time the elevator came by with it's big electric motor on top the RS232 line would pick up the RF noise like any good antenna and drive the comm board insane.

/ net.rumor / burl!rcj / Mar 24, 1986 /

> Is it really true that someone working for a bank or a large
> company diverted megabucks into his or her personal account by
> adjusting a program that figured out people's paychecks or
> interest payments so that it always...

The most amusing incident I've ever heard along these lines (I *think* I read it in the book _Computer_Crime_) involved a guy who modified a payroll program for his large company. The program processed an alphabetically-sorted list of employees, so he would shave a few cents from each account as he processed, then make the results into a check for the last guy in the list -- which happened to be one he had set up with his mailing address on it. The name was really flaky, started with "Zy" or something like that. Anyway, his employer decided to do a morale-boost/public-relations move by awarding a trip or something neat like that to the first and last employee in the personnel/payroll database....It didn't take them long to link the non-existent employee at the end with the programmer in question.

/ net.rumor / ajs / Mar 29, 1986 /

This is the truth as I know it, but with enough mystery to constitute rumor.

Back in college I knew a real whiz, the sort of guy who cut his computer classes because he was off consulting for Large Unnamed Companies, but passed them anyway. Well, once he showed up with a substantial bandage on his elbow, covering stitches, after being gone a couple of days. He wouldn't say much, only that he'd been standing too close to a disc drive when it exploded, and that his job was destructive testing.

Later he told me a story of how he'd purposely blown a large system, which the experts at the company said couldn't be done, as part of this testing. He said he downloaded some software to

a system in a locked room thousands of miles way, and saw the results on closed circuit TV.

The system had a CPU in the middle and a line of disc drives on each side. He claims he caused the drives to blow up, starting at the outsides and working in, at just the right times to propagate a combined shock wave into the CPU. If that wasn't enough, just as the shock wave arrived, he had the CPU power supply do something nasty which smoked the circuits.

Apparently this was all production hardware, so naturally the company (supposedly one of the three-letter-acronym giants) didn't want word to get out.

_____

I think this guy was the same one who told me a gory story about a high-speed removable-cartridge disc drive with a cover interlock. When the drive was spinning you couldn't open the cover. The story is that the interlock was broken, but an operator didn't notice the disc was still spinning when he lowered a pack removal cover on it. He was holding the cover by a center handle that immediately went to high RPMs, and you can imagine the rest.

From: mcgregor@hpccc.HP.COM (Scott McGregor)
Date: 22 Sep 86
Subject: hpf.jokes for Sep 86
Newsgroups: hpf.general

True story from my own past.

I worked for a small business dp timesharing and software development firm in Stamford, Connecticut in 1976. We were so successful in OEMing DEC PDP-11s with our business software that year that the owner decided to give himself a treat. He moved out of his nondescript office suite and moved into a penthouse suite in a professional building. In fact, he proudly announced, we'd be the highest point in Stamford and have a great view.

Well, we moved in (quite a struggle since the elevator only went to the floor below) and started processing again, and within the weak started to notice a larger than usual number of soft crashes. Then we had a hard disk crash. Naturally we suspected that things had been jarred in the move or coming up the stairs. We had a FE come in and check it out and repair the disk. The FE didn't find anything wrong. The same thing happened the next week; we lost a hard disk and suffered numerous soft crashes

which we tracked down to faulty disk reads. FE came out, and looked for the problem and couldn't find it when all of a sudden he detects a surge on our power. So, we are told we need a clean power line.

Next week we have an electrician in and get a clean line pulled up 14 stories. But still we have these hard and soft disk failures. Frustrated, we have the FE call in a specialist. The specialist comes in doesn't find anything right away, then suddenly "blip" detects a surge on our ground!? So, they tell us we need a clean ground. We get an electrician and tell him this, and he looks at us strange but puts in a new ground. Next week same thing; lots of soft disk errors and this time we lose two platters on our 11/45 (recently arrived 11/03 with only floppy disks is cruising just fine though).

We're really frustrated now, our MTBF (which we report to our customers in the monthly service level report) is in the toilet! The owner is hot about this. DEC local FE and specialist can't figure it out. Finally, they call in an engineer from Mass. He strolls through our front door walks over to where the 11/45 (including disks in same cabinet) is, right next to the window. He doesn't even look at the computer, just stares out the window for a few seconds. Finally, he turns to us and says, "Interesting, by the way, can you tell me what those antennas are for?" as he points out the window at the other side of the roof.

"I don't know, just TV antennas I guess" says my boss. The engineer asks us to call maintenance just to check. Meanwhile this engineer is showing the local FE and specialist how he can get blips on his scope from the venetian blinds, his tie clip and just about everything else. Turns out the antennas were microwave and radio paging antennas. This being the high point in Stamford made it an ideal site (in fact the antenna rented for 10X the price of the penthouse suite!). Everytime some doctor was paged in Stamford, the antennas would send out a signal that induced a current in everything around. Being only 20 feet away everything in our office was hit especially in our hard disks which used a magnet and induction coil to position the heads over the proper track! Some signals would cause the head to over or undershoot the specified track causing the soft crashes, while others cause the head to actually hit the platter. The floppies on the 11/03 weren't affected because they didn't use induction coils.

They had to move the office down to the first floor where it had a view of... the parking lot! (However, in fairness to the 11/45 and its disks I must also say that it later did a long

stint at one of our customer's sites, in a "Polyfill" factory. The fibers in the air were so thick that the filters on the air conditioner had to be cleaned daily or it would actually burn out--but the 11/45 and disks functioned smoothly (I, however got a raging sore throat and sometime will find I have some lung disease!))

From: jimd@hpcvra
Date: 24 Sep 86
Subject: Re: hpf.jokes for Sep 86
Newsgroups: hpf.general

I once got to visit the data processing shop for Frito-Lay headquarters in Dallas, Texas (there's a Dallas in Oregon, too, you know). They are a huge IBM shop...

The favorite war story at Frito-Lay was about the arrival of a new 308x (not sure of exact model) mainframe. It was one of the first that IBM shipped - possibly a beta-unit. The guts of the machine are liquid-cooled - when you look inside the machine you see what look like liquid cooled heads from a modern motorcycle. In any case, the machine literally melted down one night. Turned out that the cleaning crew decided they needed some water for window washing... The spigot for the coolant supply was mounted on the top of the cabinet and equipped with a standard looking water valve!

From: robin@hpulexa.HP.COM
Date: 25 Sep 86
Subject: hpf.jokes for Sep 86
Newsgroups: hpf.general

It seems a customer was having trouble with the floppy drive on his 9836 computer. He would write his files to disk every night before he went home to find the next morning the disks were unreadable. This went on for a few weeks so he decided to call HP. After the usual telephone interrogation the CE decided he would have to go on-site.

The CE tried to read the customer's floppy to no avail. Assuming a damaged disk, they tried a new one. To test the drive the CE initialized a new floppy, installed it into the drive, wrote a file only to read it back perfectly. Being a good CE he cleaned the heads on the disk drive, ran the diagnostics and sure enough, everything looked fine. Since both he and the customer were satisfied no problem existed, they decided the disk PM was worth the trip.

The next day the customer called the CE back because his disks were unreadable. The CE went back to the customer site and again, the disks were unreadable. He reviewed the command sequence used to create the files and all was correct. They cleaned the heads again, ran the diagnostics only to discover no problems. A new, initialized floppy worked fine. Just in case the diagnostics had gone awry, the CE, over the next couple of weeks, began to replace parts of the two drives. (Intermittent problems are always the most difficult to expose.) Finally the customer had two brand new drives only to find he could not read his disks.

The CE, becoming very frustrated, asked himself,"If I were a floppy disk why would I become unreadable?" EUREKA!!

It seems that every night, so that he would not forget to bring his files to work the next day, the customer would put them in a convenient place-right next to the door. HE HAD THEM STUCK TO THE FRIDGE WITH A MAGNET!! Of course the CE checked the immediate area of the computer for anything magnetic, but who would have thought...

From: JWH109@PSUVM.BITNET (Jack Hsu)
Date: 25 Mar 89
Subject: Computer folklore summary [revised]
Newsgroups: rec.humor

To all those people who wanted the past computer folklore tidbits that were posted to the net months ago, here is a partial list of all the computer folklore that was posted. Because this file was so huge, I removed the signatures and most of the headers. I did keep the userid of the people who submitted the article and the date of submission. There is also a brief description of what is contained in each article (I admit that some of the descriptions are rather stupid, but what do you expect from a guy who was both doing this on his spare time and often editing things at 3:00 in the morning.) I hope this will brighten everyone's day (as well as devour a large part of you disk.)

From: pt@geovision.uucp (Paul Tomblin)
Subject: IBM 3270 myths
Date: 28 Jan 89

I started there:

1) A computer kept crashing, and every time service was called, it worked fine. It turned out that one of the users would come in, sit down at the console and put his papers and stuff on the top covering the cooling vents. When it crashed, he'd pick up his stuff and leave, removing the evidence. Service people didn't figure this one out until they decided to watch him work to see why it crashed.

2) We had an IBM cluster controller controlling some 3270 terminals. We paid $5000 for an upgrade that would allow more users to be connected to the controller. The IBM service rep came in and REMOVED a board, that was put there to deliberately slow things down.

3) (This one happened to me) A Northern Telecom 3270 terminal caught fire, with flames coming out of the top. I guess I was doing some hot stuff. I was not putting stuff on top of the terminal cooling slots.

4) Somebody working on an Airline Reservation System, trying to get maximum response out of the machine, was looking at a OS listing and found a delay loop that was executed by a timer interrupt every 100th of a second. Removing it brought the performance up, but they had to replace one of the chips in the machine that wasn't fast enough.

From: jackg@tekirl.TEK.COM (Jack Gjovaag;6160;50-321;LP=A)
Subject: GE 415 and 425 stories
Date: 31 Jan 89

...the GE 415 and 425 CPUs were identical except that the 415 had an extra wire that slowed the clock down a bit. To upgrade to the 425, after paying your money, the wire was removed. Some users knew about this and one of them made up a realistic looking letter supposedly from GE saying something to the effect: "CAUTION. Do not remove the wire from pin 4AB to 7FL in the CPU enclosure. This wire is located approximately 7 inches up from the bottom of the backplane in bay 2 and should not be removed by using a GE 112-3 wire unwrapping tool, first not removing the wrapping from 4AB, then pulling the wire from under the other wiring to its bound end at 7FL, followed by not unwrapping the bound end from 7FL. Not removing this wire will result in the normal clockspeed which is 1.6 times slower than with the wire removed and will not cause corresponding increases in system throughput." Naturally most of these wires got removed.

Another interesting but kludgy fix to a problem came from a user of an IBM 7044. The 7044 had a HALT instruction that stopped the CPU clock. The user was doing some realtime processing or something of the sort and didn't like the idea of the CPU ever being able to stop itself. He asked IBM how much it would cost to disable the instruction and they gave him some large quote which contained the implicit message "We don't want to do it and this price is set high enough to make you change your mind about the request." The user didn't want to pay the money so he fixed up a photodiode over the light on the console that was on when the CPU was running and hooked it up to a solenoid that would push the RUN button whenever the light went out. The cost was a couple of dollars.

From: lm03_cif@uhura.cc.rochester.edu (Larry Moss)
Subject: Apple II and magnets
Date: 2 Feb 89

I heard one story about a guy that was using an Apple IIe at work a few years ago. He was ready to give up with computers because every disk he ever tried to use would lose all of the files on it.

It turned out that he kept little reminder notes attached to the disk drive - with magnets.

From: aem@ibiza.Miami.Edu (a.e.mossberg)
Subject: TRS-80 story
Date: 3 Feb 89

Back when TRS-80s had just come out, my friend bought one. One day we were in a Radio Shack, and one of the guys working there gave a diskette to my friend. My friend folded it up and put it in his pocket....

From: new@udel.EDU (Darren New)
Subject: Smoking Computers
Date: 3 Feb 89

Speaking of smoking computers, this is absolutely true... I was there. I was working at a high-school and the soon-to-be computer teacher had just taken one of the TRS-80 model I's home. About half an hour later we get a call:

"Darren?"
"Yeah?"

"Is the computer supposed to smoke when I turn it on?"
"NO! Of course not."
"Then should I turn it off?"

He had plugged the power supply into the video connector and fried every chip in the machine. Win some, lose some.

From: Zap@cup.portal.com (Tim Philip Cadell)
Subject: Another TRS-80 story
Date: 4 Feb 89

When I used to work at a Radio Shack store, we got a call one day from a man who was trying to load a program (Blackjack, I believe) off of tape into a TRS-80 Model I computer and run it. A friend of mine went to the phone and told him that after he loaded it, type "R U N" and press enter. He got a syntax error and after reading it back, it turned out that he had typed "Are You In?" and pressed enter.

From: peggy@ddsw1.MCS.COM (Peggy Shambo)
Subject: Stick Mac keyboards
Date: 4 Feb 89

This is a true story (honest!):

A friend was having a problem with a sticky keyboard for his Mac. He was talking to another friend who off-handedly suggested putting into the dishwasher to clean it up. So, my friend did just that! Needless to say, the keyboard didn't function any too well after that. :-)

From: peggy@ddsw1.MCS.COM (Peggy Shambo)
Subject: Shattered disks
Date: 4 Feb 89

Yet another true story:

I was at GE Consulting's Training and Education Center in Albany, NY taking a course on the PC. Well, there were some inexperienced PC users there, so we had to go through the "basics" for them (ie, the do's and don't's of disk handling)

Well, according to the instructor, there had been one student who had driven up from Bridgeport, CT (corporate offices are there). He had stayed at a nearby motel overnight, leaving his briefcase in the trunk of the car. (Oh, let me add that it was

sub-zero weather at the time of this incident). In the morning he arrived at T&E, opened up his briefcase, took out a floppy disk, inserted into a drive... then *c-r-a-c-k*!!! It shattered into little pieces.

From: robert@jive.sybase.com (Robert Garvey)
Subject: How not to label disks
Date: 4 Feb 89

Heard a story about a company whose PC software was being blamed for the consistent failure to read backup data off floppies. Unable to determine the cause, they finally sent someone to sit beside the system's user the entire work day. Nothing unusual was seen until the very end of the business day when the user took the floppy out of the drive and started to label it. A blank label was put on and the disk inserted into the carriage of an electric typewriter...

From: Michael Polymenakos
Subject: The novice salesman
Date: 5 Feb 1989

How about the young computer salesman giving some client a demonstration of the new electronic word-processor? He loads up a large document, and says: "watch this!". He hits a couple of keys, and converts every "i" in the document to an "a", making the text unreadable.

"And it you can change it all back, just like this" he proclaims, subsequently converting all "a"s back to "i", including those that had been "a"s originally.

Of course, it happened to a friend of a friend of mine.. :-)

Another one my father told me:

My dad was an electronics engineer in Greece, for a company that imported various high-tech lab equipment. One of them (A HP spectrophotometer, I think) was controlled by a special built-in computer, running optional proprietary software. Each optional package was copy protected. To enforce that, installing the package could only be done by a tech-rep; after the installation, the disks were automatically erased, and the program was kept in battery-backed RAM.

Anyway, at some point the computer lost all its programs. A call had to be made to Germany, for new disks to be sent as a

replacement. My dad could not find the reason for this, and he was really surprised when the client called again, with the same problem next week. Call Germany again, install the disks again, then next week guess what happened: The lab calls again. But there was a definite pattern: The lab always found the system down on a Wednesday morning. Obviously, whatever went wrong happened on Tuesday nights only....

After more than a month of downtime, someone realized that the cleaning lady came to the room every Tuesday night. Someone went to check her and found out that she carried a nine-year old kid with her. The kid had discovered the machine's on-off switch, with a few buttons next to it. When the machine was on, pressing those buttons made cute sounds (audible warnings!) which are supposed to alert you to the fact that holding the button down for a few seconds would completely reset the machine. I guess the kid thought of it as an oversized musical instrument. The mom turned the machine off before she left, erasing error codes etc. No-one knows how much this story cost the lab in downtime.....

From: buck@siswat.UUCP (A. Lester Buck)
Subject: Nuked punched cards
Date: 5 Feb 89

When I was a freshman in 1971, all mainframe jobs were submitted on cards. And there was a snack room with microwave oven just down the hall. Well, we were waiting for our jobs to run and were bored, so one of my friends had the idea - What does a microwave oven do to a card deck? We got a deck of blank cards and cooked them for a while. It is a simple physics problem to show that uniformly heating a sphere leads to MUCH higher temperatures at the center compared to the edge. Of course, the card deck *looked* perfectly normal, but inside it was charred, black and brittle.

No, we never submitted such a deck. We took pity on the operators and the poor card reader... (And with dozens of drawers of card decks to chose from, it would have been easy to cover our tracks.)

And then there are all the stories of "rewind and break tape" macros, (almost) all discovered accidentally. Or the FORTRAN print statement that did a line of underlines without advancing the paper, repeated that oh, 100 times, then did 100 form feeds. The operator was untangling that printer for some time...

This school did have a very well-followed honor system, and it

was considered extremely bad form to affect anyone else adversely.

From: fpu@taux01.UUCP (32764 fpu account)
Subject: Spelling mistakes
Date: 5 Feb 89

When I was a junior, I worked as a summer student in the Amsterdam branch of a multi-national computer company. The PR department there published a poster advertising the world wide quality of its products; the poster had the word "quality" written on it in 20 different languages.

The Hebrew word for quality, which contains five letters, appeared in the poster with three spelling mistakes.

From: tmca@ut-emx.UUCP (The Anarch)
Subject: The equipment next door
Date: 6 Feb 89

This tale is true, I was there.

The DEC users group here occasionally has Q+A sessions with a representative of said company which sometimes become complaint and apology sessions. I remember one particular complaint from a Physics professor who claimed that his microVax was having problems with its tk50 tape drive and he had lost a fair quantity of data when the drive allegedly mangled a tape (magnetically, not physically). Some discussion ensued and the professor griped that he also didn't like the way that the screen display "flexed" every time they turned the equipment on next door.

It turns out that the "equipment next door" is a largish Tokomak fusion reactor - the electromagnets in the thing have to be seen to be believed. (And this man is a physics professor - phew!)

From: loughry@tramp.Colorado.EDU (J. Loughry)
Subject: MBA formatting lesson
Date: 6 Feb 89

Once upon a time in the MBA factory...

About fifty prospective MBAs were learning how to run an IBM PC. The computer lab had a bunch of nice hard-disk equipped machines, with 1-2-3 and dBase and Word, etc, all lined up in

front of a video projector.

"Today we're going to learn how to use DOS to format a disk. Everybody have their floppy disk ready? Good. Put it into the disk drive. (No no, it goes in the *other* way...that's right....)

"Okay, now to format a disk, you use the command FORMAT C:"

...and they all typed it in.

From: mercer@ncrcce.StPaul.NCR.COM (Dan Mercer)
Subject: Faulty satellite link
Date: 6 Feb 89

My favorite story is about a satellite link that went haywire every Friday at 3:00 PM. The company that owned the link immediately blamed the software in their communications controllers. Systems analysts were dispatched on site, and try as they did, they couldn't find a software bug that could be responsible. Finally, by dumb luck they found it. A bunch of factory workers let off at 3:00 started their weekend with a parking lot beer party and threw their empty cans in the satellite uplink. A shift of security guards fixed that.

From: cyosta@taux01.UUCP (Yossie Silverman)
Subject: Listening to memory
Date: 6 Feb 89

I have two stories to relate. Both have to do with IBM machines (the large variety):

1) Back when core memory was in use one could "listen" to the memory with a transistor radio. A game among system programmers was to access memory in such a manner as to produce recognizable tunes on the radio.

2) Printers produce a buzzing with varying frequency depending on the text being printed (this is because of the rate at which the hammers strike the slugs in the print chain). The same system programmers would also compete to see who could print a job that played specific (and known) tunes.

One further story that comes to mind. It is said that specific models of IBM mainframes had a bug whereby "branching backwards over a page boundary to a paged out page would leave the supervisor bit turned on in the PSW in the stored PSW". I never

was able to verify this but it makes some sort of sense when you look at the hardware that IBM uses.

From: hollen@spot.megatek.uucp (Dion Hollenbeck)
Subject: Stars and Stripes
Date: 6 Feb 89

While a student at UCSD in the middle 60's I had the opportunity to work many late nights in the computer punch card room on my physical chemistry lab calculations. One late night when the computer operator was obviously bored, he invited me into the sanctum sanctorum - the computer room. The computer was a CDC 3600 and had a curving console about 8 feet long with several hundred lights and switches (in those days, there was no such thing as terminal input). On the far wall was a bank of a dozen 1/2" tape drives with vacuum column tape tension control.

He loaded up a deck into the card reader (the only command input device) and started it. For the next 1/2 hour the computer PLAYED the Stars and Stripes Forever and assorted Sousa marches, using the tones on the console (every light had its own tone) for the high low notes and the tape drives for the low notes. At the same time, all the lights on the console were blinking on and off. Since I am now a full-time programmer, I finally appreciate the work it must have taken a system level programmer to do that. Talk about primitive audio devices!

From: vail@tegra.UUCP (Johnathan Vail)
Subject: Faulty IC's
Date: 6 Feb 89

A friend worked for a company that made IC's. It seemed that every few months their yields would go down to about zero. Analysis of the failures showed all sorts of organic material was introduced into the process somewhere but they couldn't figure out where. One evening someone was working late and came into the lab. There he found the maintenance crew cooking pizza in the chip curing ovens!

From: hinojosa@hp-sdd.hp.com (Daniel Hinojosa)
Subject: Printer chain problems
Date: 6 Feb 89

A friend of mine told a story of one of these printers he and another friend destroyed in a most interesting manner. These printers had, it would seem, a sort of chain that held all of

the characters. I guess they held about three complete sets of the alphabet plus special characters.

These chaps read the chain and created a file in their system that had all of the characters of one pass in it. They gave the command to print the file. Upon doing so the printer starts to spin the chain, then SMACK! Trying to print all of those characters at once while the chain was moving, didn't quite work. The fellow said they found the print characters in various parts of their office for years thereafter.

From: BVAUGHAN@pucc.Princeton.EDU (Barbara Vaughan)
Subject: The MBA interface
Date: 8 Feb 89

In 1972, I was assigned the task of writing an interactive user interface for a statistical analysis program written in FORTRAN IV. I was told that the users were "MBA types; not very quantitative and with little background in statistics." (I hope this is no longer true of MBA's.)

Anyway, writing such an interface in FORTRAN IV was no picnic, but I tried to make it very friendly. Plain English questions, examples of correct answers, range checks to determine validity of responses, helpful error messages.

One of the first users to test the program said that it kept bombing out on question 3. "Enter number of thingamabobs (Valid responses 1 to 5):". I asked what her response had been and she said "Five". Puzzled, I asked if I could watch her run the program. This is what I saw: ....(Valid responses 1 to 5): FIVE

That's when I realized what nonquantitative really meant. Even though FORTRAN IV had no character string handling capability (you had to declare your characters as INTEGER or REAL), I had to write a routine to read all keyboard input as characters, convert to numbers, and add a friendly message to explain what a number was.

From: jbs@rti.UUCP (Joe Simpson)
Subject: Fried circuit boards and other stories
Date: 8 Feb 89

A friend of mine used to work for Northern Telecom, and said this story circulated there:

A team of installers was installing a DMS-10 digital telephone switch somewhere in Tennessee. They had it set up and had been testing it all day; everything seemed to work okay, so they left early in the evening to go barhopping and rabble-rousing, as NT installers are said to be wont to do.

Next morning they came in only to find that the switch had failed during the night, and a couple of circuit boards were fried to boot. They replaced the boards, tested it all day, and left again that evening. Next morning, same result. This went on for a couple of days, and finally one of the installers bunked down next to the DMS-10. Along about midnight, in came the cleaning lady with a feather duster, and proceeded to dust everything in the room, including the exposed circuit boards.

UNRELATED STORY:

When I was an undergrad at UNC, I spent a little time in the graduate department's graphics lab. When one of the grads was showing us the hardware, he pointed out a large rubber mallet sitting beside one of the cabinets. He said that the connection between the chips' prongs and their sockets sometimes became poor, and often when the system acted up the cure was to bang on the cabinet with the mallet to reseat the chips. He also said anytime they had a photo of the lab taken, they made sure the mallet was visible in the picture, and sent a copy to DEC, who apparently knew exactly what the mallet was for.

From: johnl@ima.ima.isc.com (John R. Levine)
Subject: Printing a line
Date: 8 Feb 89

...The letters on the print chain are all scrambled up. Each time the chain moves, some fraction of the letters on the chain will be in front of the place where those particular letters are supposed to print, so the printer fires just those hammers. Then the chain moves, some more hammers fire, etc.

The particular hack that Mr. Hinojosa and I described reprogrammed the printer so it would think that every letter on the line was correctly placed and so fire all the hammers at once. That makes quite a lot of noise (normally, only 10 or so of the 120 or 132 hammers go off at once) and moreover turned out to use more power than the printer was prepared to supply thus blowing the fuse and causing other problems.

From: jbs@rti.UUCP (Joe Simpson)

Subject: Where's the off switch?
Date: 8 Feb 89

I worked one summer in a COBOL shop (no, that's not supposed to be the funny part) that had a Sperry/Univac mainframe. The operator's terminal was on a desk that was backed up against the CPU cabinet. One day the system went down hard, and I walked down to the machine room to see what was up (or down).

The operator (fortunately for his job security, the son of the company's vice-president), said he had no idea what had happened, that it seemed the power had gone off. We checked all the circuit breakers to no avail. Finally, he said the last thing he remembered before the power went was crossing his legs; I looked under his desk and saw, completely unprotected, set into the cabinet at just above ankle height, a power switch. It was "OFF". Some brilliant engineering, that.

From: ljc@otter.hpl.hp.com (Lee Carter)
Subject: Backup your disks
Date: 8 Feb 89

Various stories that customer engineers have told us:

1.) An office secretary was presented with her first PC and given large amounts of instruction on how to operate it. Just before he left, the C.E. asked the secretary, "What must you do every Friday?" to which the secretary replied "Copy my data disks so I don't lose any information." Satisfied, the C.E. departed. One week later there was a phone call; "I can't read my disks!" so the C.E. went back to the secretary. Sure enough the data disks were corrupt and unreadable. "Have you got copies of these disks?" -- "Yes" -- "Can I see them please?"

    The secretary opened her desk drawer and removed several sheets of paper. Curiously the C.E. examined them to see each was a perfect photocopy of the data disks....

2.) A site had an HP3000 installation with a number of large 300Mb disk disk drives. One week, two of the drives crashed, so they called an engineer. The engineer examined the drives, and noticed a little pile of sawdust on the floor by the side of them. Needless to say, there is no wood in the construction of these drives and the floor was concrete.

    The engineer repairs the drives and leaves, sorely vexed.

> The same thing happens a couple of days later - same two drives crash, engineer calls, sawdust, etc. This pattern repeats until one day they notice a maintenance man, who has a long plank of wood, walk into the computer room, wedge the wood between the two drives (the gap between them was juuust riiight!) and then proceed to saw the plank in half with an enormous rip-saw....

From: prabhu@mitisft.Convergent.COM (Prabhu Venkatesh)
Subject: Need a 10 ns delay
Date: 8 Feb 89

Real, real, true, swear-by-God story:

A friend of mine was repairing a Russian EC-20 computer in Bangalore, India. He found an insulated wire soldered to a pin of a chip. Looking for the other end, he traced and he traced and he traced -- 10 feet of wire, and the other end was soldered to an adjacent chip!

As it turned out, they needed a 10 ns delay between the two pins.

From: XT.A12@forsythe.stanford.edu (the Mitchell)
Subject: What does a floppy disk look like?
Date: 8 Feb 89

I was in a PASCAL class a long time ago (please, no flames about PASCAL). This was in the days of double density drives for the new kid on the block, the IBM PC. Anyway, we were all supposed to have a work disk for saving our files. When the prof asked everyone to get their disks out, someone stood up and said that their disk didn't look like what anyone else had. This persons disk looked like a disk, and not a square. Which is exactly what you get when you rip off the packaging off a diskette - you get the disk.....

From: cetron@wasatch.UUCP (Edward J Cetron)
Subject: Walking computers, another story
Date: 8 Feb 89

...Seems I was a young hotshot programmer-type and was working in the corporate research unit of a big company (lets see, it makes LOTS of bandaids). Well, it was the first time I ever used a machine with a disk drive in a room that I could find (much less have permission to enter). Never having had a

computer with version numbers before (this was RSX-11M 3.0 -- dating myself huh?) I never purged my directory. Also given that I was hacking an immense Data-entry and retrieval system in Fortran-IV (more dating (-:), TKB would do intense things to the drive, which was fragmented beyond belief.

This tended to upset the system manager, one Mark Googleman, no end, since he'd have to move the beast back into position. Since two hackers on one machine naturally tend to competition (could you crack into the machine, get priv'ed, and log the other off BEFORE they noticed and logged you off?) and I was embarrassed when confronted with the proof that this was my fault, I naturally bluffed my way out explaining that I was doing on purpose.

Well, one thing led to another, and it became a ritual to leave taped papers to the floor with one's name on it in the computer room. The object was to spend as much time from 9:00pm until 7:00am WITHOUT ENTERING THE COMPUTER ROOM, running programs, doing TKB's etc, in order to move the RP's in a fixed manner. In the morning, the person with the disk drive closest to their name won the pool of money.

I had slowly become the "hardware champion" until one day Mark managed to program the tape drive for Christmas carols... sigh, I was so devastated that I didn't even take up his challenge to make the RP's perform accompaniment......

From: dlm@cuuxb.ATT.COM (Dennis L. Mumaugh)
Subject: UNIX vs. IBM
Date: 7 Feb 89

The headline would be: UNIX crashes IBM system.

It seems that we had obtained an UNIX system and were using it for the first time. In those days UNIX was brand new and the rest of the world had never heard of it.

Any rate, we had attached our PDP-11/45 to an IBM 370-155 system running JESS-2. This meant the PDP-11 pretended to be a RJE card-reader/printer/punch station. Things were going quite well and the Bell Labs software worked great.

Then one day we found that our RJE line was disconnected and the IBM people refused to allow us to talk with the IBM machines. The reason, they claimed, was that most of the time that UNIX submitted an RJE job the IBM would promptly crash with no error report.

Finally it was determined that when the IBM people had sysgen'd the line they claimed it was a 2780 with a 80 character line and we were a 2770 with a 132 character line. This didn't cause problems unless our line and the next adjacent line both submitted jobs at once.

But I thought it amusing that DEC equipment could crash an IBM system at will.

From: smadi@rlgvax.UUCP (Smadi Paradise)
Subject: How does a computer work?
Date: 7 Feb 89

I have not witnessed this one, but some of my friends did.

Some computer-illiterate visitors were shown the CDC6400 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. One of them asked, how does the machine do all these wonderful things? Their guide joked that it has a small man inside.

While he was speaking, a CDC technician (the late Rachmim Moreno, a small man indeed) had just finished some routine maintenance and stepped out of the machine.

Another story, which took place on April 1st 1984:

I was requested to present Unix software tools to the Software Workbench undergraduate course. After talking about grep, SCCS, lex and what not, I described an experimental expert system that creates applications by combining UNIX tools. Given an English description of an application, the system produces user manuals. Given an ``O.K.'', it would go on and produce the actual software.

The system was a success: it kept some of the students busy for a long time. Here it is, reconstructed from memory:

```
#!/bin/csh -f
echo "What should your application do?"
echo "Type a short description followed by a control-D"
cat > /dev/null
echo "Working... here is the user's manual:".
/usr/games/festoon | some sed | nroff -man | more
echo "Is that O.K? If not, please describe what's wrong."
exec /usr/games/doctor
```

From: oppenhei@aecom2.AECOM.YU.EDU (Michael Oppenheim)
Subject: Computer illiterates
Date: 7 Feb 89

I have an XT compatible with a hard drive but no printer, so people often use my machine, save their work on floppies, and go to the library or computer room to print.

One fellow, a non-computer literate, wanted to do a paper on my computer. I showed him how to use the word processor and how to save it on a floppy. Later, I went with him to help him print it. As we were leaving the dorm, I noticed he was empty-handed.

"Where's the disk?" I asked.

"Why? Do we need it?"

From: davida@umd5.umd.edu (David Arnold)
Subject: Showering with a keyboard
Date: 7 Feb 89

...Sounds like an old hall-mate of mine from college, who would clean his keyboard by taking it into the shower with him. Either that, or just tear it down and clean it with Bacardi 80 proof. That poor computer managed to struggle on for several years!

From: dplatt@coherent.com (Dave Platt)
Subject: Altering the memory test
Date: 7 Feb 89

There's another great story involving computers-that-have-lights. This one involves Ivan Sutherland, co-founder of Evans & Sutherland (the pioneering computer-graphics firm), developer of Sketchpad (the very first computer-graphics tablet device, I believe), and winner of the "Father of Computer Graphics" aware some years ago.

While in college, Sutherland worked with one of the very earliest Von Neumann architecture (stored-program) computers... I've heard this specific machine referred to as "THE Von Neumann machine". This computer had a very limited amount of memory storage. Rather than using ferrite cores, RAM memory, or such modern devices, it used "storage tubes"... tiny little CRTs similar in operation to the tubes used in some "storage screen" graphics terminals (anybody used a Tektronix 4010 lately?). These little devices would store a rectangular array of bits in

each tube. It was actually possible to SEE the bits by looking at the phosphor-coated target area in each screen.

One of the disadvantages of this storage technology (aside from low capacity) is that the tubes have a limited lifetime. "Burn-in" eventually occurs (as owners of Tektronix storage scopes can attest) as the phosphor structure ages and breaks down, and eventually the tubes must be replaced.

The engineers who maintained this computer had some special-purpose diagnostic programs, which would run "ripple patterns" through memory and would look for bit-patterns that weren't stored properly (a similar test is done when diagnosing memory problems in most computers). With the Von Neumann machine, though, it was often possible to identify tubes that were on the way downhill, simply by looking at the array of tubes in the cabinet and seeing which ones had a dim or uneven appearance during the ripple test.

One day, Sutherland [and a cohort, I believe] substituted a program deck of their own devising for the memory-test deck that the engineers used. This substitute deck did not run the usual memory test; instead, it loaded a certain specific bit-pattern into memory and then halted the machine.

During the next routine-maintenance period, the engineer reset the machine, booted the deck, and the program immediately halted. Puzzled, the engineer reset and rebooted again, and the same thing occurred. Suspecting that some portion of memory had failed so completely that the program could not run, the engineer opened the panel to the storage-tube rack.

There, shining out at him in carefully-lit bits, was a four-letter word.

A sign soon appeared in the computer room... "Programmers will NOT mess around with the hardware-diagnostic program decks!"

[Disclaimers: it has been 15 years since I heard this story, so I've probably forgotten some of the details and have gotten others wrong.]

From: frk@frksyv.UUCP (Frank Korzeniewski)
Subject: Upper/Lower case mix up
Date: 6 Feb 89

Several years back I was working at a HMO and we had a lot of 8080 micros using ADM3A dumb terminals. These terminals were so

dumb that all they had were upper case character sets. Eventually, upper managment was talked into upgrading them to the ROM's with upper and lower case characters.

Well, one day we received this big three foot square box from the terminal manufacturer. Everyone was puzzled as to what they could be sending us. The person with the order said he had asked for 30 lower case options. The ADM3A terminal has an upper and lower clamshell like case. When the box was opened we found they had sent us 30 lower halfs to the terminal case.

From: clw@hprnd.HP.COM (Carl Wuebker)
Subject: Revenge of the Whiz Kid
Date: 6 Feb 89

One time, in a college library, I ran across a book of computer folklore. It had a story about a young whiz kid hired as a computer programmer, who didn't like the way that computer operators were ordered to blindly follow directions. So he took a scratch removable disk pack apart, replaced the platters with phonograph records, and put it back together. Then, from his terminal, he called for it to be mounted. The operator could tell that the disk pack was different (plastic is lighter than a disk platter) but mounted it anyway, destroying a disk drive.

In the late '60s, Georgia Tech went to a computer registration system. In Spring, 1969, George P. Burdell (the mythical Georgia Tech student created during the war years) was registered for every class on campus. I've heard that he aced them all, too.

Finally, in the early '70s, Georgia Tech installed a Univac 1108, so we heard all the Univac stories. One of the stories revolved around an operator, sitting sleepily at his computer console about 2am, watching the backups. The status messages disappear from his screen, a large (CBS-style) eye appears on the screen, it winks, and then the screen pops back to normal. Those were the days of fast memory and memory mapped screens, so its possible...

Just one more. On that same Univac, a friend discovered a security hole. It seems you could checkpoint (stop and save) a job to tape to, say, shut the machine down for maintenance. You could later restart the job from the tape at the exact point you stopped it. My friend discovered that you could checkpoint the job, change the privileged mode bit (guard mode, supervisor mode etc. -- the thing that prevented students from breaking into the machine) to 1, and restart it -- as a privileged job. He

was found out, though -- operators became suspicious when they went from 0 checkpoints per month to several check-point tapes per day.

From: eal@tut.fi (Lehtim{ki Erkki)
Subject: Wrong instruction
Date: 6 Feb 89

Our company bought a text processing package and a salesman came to us to install it. He had some difficulties in the first time to install it, so he decided to delete all his files and start over. But alas, instead of typing "DELETE [...]*.*.*" (Yes, it's in VAX/VBMS), he typed

DELETE/NOLOG [*...]*.*.*

A few moments later I noticed that I had much more disk quota left than i should have and noticed that all my files with DELETE privilege for same user group had gone. And for everybody else too.

From: johnl@ima.ima.isc.com (John R. Levine)
Subject: Computer antics
Date: 7 Feb 89

...Aw shucks, we did this with a PDP-8. The accumulator was displayed in fairly large incandescent bulbs on the front panel, which needed high powered drivers. Turning the bits on and off made plenty of radio noise. I've heard legends of PDP-9 programmers who would routinely leave a radio on the console as a debugging aid.

...There was a legendary card deck that, when run through an old electromechanical accounting machine, would print out an American flag while playing the Star Spangled Banner.

Speaking of printers, here are two silly stories from about 1969. At that time they used 360/20s as RJE terminals to the 360/91 mainframe. The '91 crashed all the time, so while waiting for the '91 to come back up we would toggle in little programs from the console, or laboriously punch an up to 80 byte program on a card, then use the "load" button to read and start the program. There was constant competition for the most interesting single-card program. My best was an expensive mimeo machine that read in a deck of cards and listed it over and over.

In one case, we experimented with the Universal Character Set buffer in the printer. The 1403 printer had interchangeable print trains, but different trains would have different character layouts. The UCS buffer told what character was at what position on the train. When it printed a line, it would see what characters were at the right position, fire the appropriate hammers, move the train ahead one position, fire the appropriate hammers, and so on until the entire line was printed. So as an experiment, we filled the entire UCS buffer with the same character, then printed lines of that character. It printed about a page and a half real fast, then the cover opened about half way (it automatically opened whenever the printer ran out of paper, to warn the operator and dump ever-present coffee cups on the floor) and then blew a fuse. We cleared out. It hadn't occurred to us we could blow fuses with software.

In another case, we experimented with the carriage control tape. Things like "skip to new page" or "vertical tab" were implemented with a loop of paper tape that had 66 rows, one for each line on a page, and 12 columns. You could do a skip to channel 1, and it would advance the paper and the tape until it found a hole in column 1. By convention, column 1 was top of page, column 2 top and middle of page, but you could program it any way you want. We tried various combinations and everything worked just fine until we tried a skip to channel 12. Unfortunately, there weren't any punches in column 12, so the paper just whizzed through the printer at full speed. We pushed the printer stop button. Nothing. We pushed the CPU stop button. Still nothing. Finally the CPU System Reset button stopped the printer. Being good ecologists, we fed the paper back into the feed box, then ran.

From: merlyn@intelob.intel.com (Randal L. Schwartz @ Stonehenge)
Subject: Party line problems
Date: 9 Feb 89

Back in the early days, I was using an ADM-3 from a friend's house (hi Greg Jorgenson!) with an old acoustical-coupled modem. The modem was attached used on the house phone... a party line (!). We were accustomed to getting bumped with funny little noise characters when the party-liners would try to pickup the phone for a call, but otherwise tied up the line for the usual hours-on-end we hackers are known for.

One day, we picked up the phone to make a call, and found that the party-liners were on it (two female voices). Since we had nothing better to do, we decided to listen in. The conversation

went something like:

Voice 1: Did you just hear that?
Voice 2: Yeah, it was a click. Must be our party line.
Voice 1: A party line? Does that mean they are listening to us?
Voice 2: I don't think they can. All I can hear when they are
          talking is some beeps.

We scrambled to hang up the phone to cover our instant
hysterical laughter. Little did they know... :-)

From: msmith@topaz.rutgers.edu (Mark Robert Smith)
Subject: How to fix an IBM
Date: 9 Feb 89

Yet another true IBM story:

My girlfriend's father is a service tech for IBM. He had one
computer that would periodically lock up for no apparent reason.
He tried replacing all sorts of boards, drives, and other
hardware to no avail. Finally, he called in the specialists.

The specialists arrived with many special tools, and in one case
a very special tool. In an old style case, in a custom-molded
velour covered interior, sat the Vibra-matic -- a rubber mallet.
They had brought this as a joke, but....

It turned out that the power supply wasn't completely welded to
the ground, and the vibration of the machine caused intermittent
power failures of extremely short duration. This was fixed, and
tested with the specialists banging on the chassis with the
Vibra-matic while my girlfriend's father stuck his head inside
to look for vibration. Luckily the owners of the machine never
saw them.

From: bass@utkcs2.cs.utk.edu (Vance Bass)
Subject: The customer is always right
Date: 9 Feb 89

Heard recently from an IBM field service manager:

A huge travel agency in Florida (a major booker of Caribbean
cruises for blue-haired retired ladies) recently bought an IBM
3090 to handle the reservation database. When the deal was
consummated, the proud new owner asked IBM to install it in a
big glass room right behind the receptionist's area so all the
customers could see the flashing lights and spinning tape reels

as they walked in -- a testimony to the modernity of the agency.

Good idea, except there are no blinking lights on a 3090. So the service manager offered to build some. They hired a theatrical designer to come up with a suitably futuristic "set", got curved glass walls to minimize reflections, and installed the mainframe behind the "real-looking" facade. The customer declared that it was exactly what he had in mind, regardless of what the actual computer looks like.

Moral: the customer is always right.

From: loughry@tramp.Colorado.EDU (J. Loughry)
Subject: Foiling benchmarks
Date: 10 Feb 89

(This is just a rumor, but it's a *neat* rumor....)

It seems (allegedly) that certain Microsoft compilers are smart enough to figure out when they are being benchmarked. Any time the parser sees the "standard" 10,000-prime-numbers algorithm, it dumps that section of code and substitutes a set of hand-tuned, gut-level machine code designed to do that one thing as fast as possible! I don't think it actually just printed them out from a table, but you get the idea....

Also: (this is true)

One has to be careful when trying to benchmark optimizing compilers. These things *are* smart enough to notice that while you're doing all those expensive floating point calculations, you're never actually doing anything with the answer... so the compiler just figures it all out once, and replaces all the calculations with a simple assignment.

Prime Computer once had a compiler optimize their competitor's benchmark down to a single NOP -- and for several years they gleefully used this "performance" figure in their ads.

From: curtc@pogo.GPID.TEK.COM (Curtis Charles)
Subject: Looking for passwords
Date: 9 Feb 89

Back in the good ol' days of card readers, a game we discussed was how to obtain passwords. Jobs were submitted by setting your deck of cards on a counter. An operator would grab all the jobs on the counter, run them through the reader, and return

them with their output later.

We're talking CDC hardware here, so various combinations of 6-7-8-9 or 7-8-9 punches indicated End of Job, or End of Record. Well, there was a magic combination (6-8-9?) that was interpreted as "read binary, and ignore other control punches except the magic combination."

So, the devious programmer submits two jobs, the first has a program to read binary data, followed by a 6-8-9 and (for the operator's consumption only) a 6-7-8-9. The second job just has a 6-8-9 to switch the system out of binary mode. The two jobs are placed on the counter is such a way that the first job will be the first one through the card reader and the second job will be the last one through the card reader, with other students jobs in between. Viola', you've got a whole list of accounts and passwords.

Of course, the operator might become suspicious when 10 jobs go in and only one comes out. Or, he might scramble the order of the jobs left on the counter defeating the plan. I'm not sure anybody actually did this, but it strikes me as an easy way to breach security.

From: dplatt@coherent.com (Dave Platt)
Subject: Operating system comments
Date: 9 Feb 89

Another subclass of computer folklore is the occasional barbed comment that one can find when reading through source code. Operating-system programmers seem particularly prone to witty, shamefaced, or other slightly-off-center comments in their code.

Some examples come to mind (some of the details may be incorrect; it's been a long time since I read any of this code):

1) DEC RSX-11M (???) operating system. System fault handler module. If a bus-check fault occurs (indicating possible hardware problems with some device on the bus), the O/S traps to a fault-handler routine that tries to identify the offending hardware and reset it. If, while attempting to recover from a bus-check fault, a second such fault occurs, the system traps again... this time to a routine which simply masks off all processor interrupts and hangs in a tight loop. It's necessary to manually reset the machine to unhang it.

   The comment on the loop reads, "The death of God left the

angels in a strange position."

2) There are a couple of comments in the output-symbiont (print spooler) code in the old Xerox CP-V operating system. At the top of a long block of convoluted and otherwise undocumented code, there appears a taunting:

"See if you can figure out what I'm doing here."

Somewhat further on, there's a really dubious code-construct (I don't recall just what was being done), adorned with the comment:

"I'm ashamed of this"

3) In the synchronous-terminal (BISYNC) module in the CP-6 operating system's communications software, there's a routine that constructs synchronous data blocks (the ones that start out with the characters "syn, syn, dle", and so forth). The code comment reads

"With a SYNC SYNC here...
and a SYNC SYNC there..."

The module is labeled "EIE_IO".

4) A related module, which was responsible for driving the Unit Record Peripheral printer, was labeled "Y@URP".

From: werme@Alliant.COM (Ric Werme)
Subject: Printer music
Date: 8 Feb 89

At Carnegie-Mellon, the standard carriage tape had an empty channel. An easy way to get on the bad side of the operators was to use the right character as a FORTRAN print control character. (The tape was designed so that the printer implemented nearly all of the FORTRAN carriage control features.) It was never a problem until someone wrote a SNOBOL program and forgot to print a space at the beginning of each line. The operator wasn't near the machine at the time and 1403 fed the paper faster than it could stack!

...I hereby claim the best sound of any printer music. At Sanders Technology, a defunct company that pioneered the letter quality dot matrix printer, I decided to come up with some real music.

After a disappointing start, I designed some fonts that were variable numbers of vertical bars in 1/2 inch wide characters. The printer's horizontal resolution was 0.001", better than laser printers, but not good enough for decent music. I had to compute line spacings in 0.0001" units and round to the nearest 0.001". About an octave and a half would fit in a 2Kb PROM (this was before 16K ram chips made down-loaded fonts practical).

Next I arranged "A Bicycle Built for Two", since that was the first song a computer ever played (you've heard it in the movie 2001). It also was a hack on Daisywheel terminals, our main competition. It was impressive. And attracted a fair amount of attention at the trade shows.

I later did three Christmas carols, and even a version of Le Marseilles (sp?) for a potential French customer.

Since the only real language we had was Fortran, I wrote TECO programs to generate the font from a source file of frequency and character bindings, and another TECO program that read a simple music language and generated the lines of text needed to play the song. Not only could I set the meter, the program had to reverse the order of the characters for the right-left passes.

I still have two of those printers. NH Mensa prints its newsletters on one. Unfortunately, I'm running out of ribbons and the pins are beginning to crack. Smart printer. Does its own justification, handles proportional fonts, mixed fonts, all sorts of stuff. Its control language is readable, inspired by runoff. Between the printer, a CP/M system and a screen editor (written as a macro for a TECO variant), who needs an IBM PC?

From: REBILL02@ULKYVX.BITNET
Subject: Broken off switch
Date: 9 Feb 89

...It seems that, with an empty disk pack, a properly written program would cause the read/write head/arm to reach out of the machine into the open air. One programmer decided to see if he could get the machine to turn itself off that way. The next morning, maintenance was called to fix a broken on/off switch.

From: brent@uwovax.uwo.ca (Brent Sterner)
Subject: 8 in octal
Date: 9 Feb 89

Back in my undergrad years, a fellow student had access to the departmental PDP-8. He also had access to the academic center's machine room, and somehow acquired the PDP-10 sign from that system. The PDP-10 sign was hung proudly on the PDP-8, particularly when a tour was being given. When asked about the sign, his reply was: "Octal".

From: arensb@cvl.umd.edu (Andrew Arensburger)
Subject: Scheduling algorithms
Date: 9 Feb 89

Peterson and Silberschatz (_Operating_System_Concepts_, Addison-Wesley, 2nd edition, p.121) point out the importance of good scheduling algorithms when one is designing an operating system:

"Rumor has it that when they closed down the 7094 at MIT in 1973, they found a low-priority job that had been submitted in 1967 and had not yet been run."

From: haynes@ucscc.UCSC.EDU (Jim Haynes)
Subject: Design check
Date: 9 Feb 89

One of the design engineers at G.E. kept an electric vibrator in his desk. I think it was originally an engraver, not a massager or sexual vibrator. Anyway, when we seemed to have intermittent problems in a machine he would plug in the vibrator and touch it to each circuit board in the suspect area while running a diagnostic program.

At that time G.E. had a small enough number of machines in the field such that when a customer's machine was in bad trouble and the regular field engineers couldn't fix it, the company would pull together a small group of engineers and programmers who had participated in the design of the hardware and software and send them to camp out at the site until the problem was solved. So that's where the vibrator probably found the most use.

From: haynes@ucscc.UCSC.EDU (Jim Haynes)
Subject: Accountant problems
Date: 9 Feb 89

...That reminded me of a story in Norbert Wiener's autobiography. During World War II he was in charge of a group of people who ran desk calculators to solve ballistics problems.

The people were called "computers".

He always had trouble getting enough computers to handle the workload, what with the military manpower situation. Once when the Army couldn't get scientific computers they sent him a bunch of accountants. He said these would carry out every calculation to two decimal places and no more! (They thought only in dollars and cents.)

From: rn10+@andrew.cmu.edu (Ronald J. Notarius)
Subject: Problems with security
Date: 9 Feb 89

I used to work in the Computer Lab at the Community College of Allegheny County, Allegheny Campus. CCAC-A has a 3 file server Novell Network in place. For most of the Fall, they were constantly losing the hard drives in the Network during holiday breaks -- you could be assured that one or more of the file servers went down during a 3-day weekend, for example.

The first thought was that power to the lab was being turned off on the long weekends, so the power to the file servers was wired such that power stayed on and could not be turned off except at the circuit breaker. Didn't help; turned out that the problem was a well-meaning security guard who thought that the servers were accidentally left on, so he turned them off. Next solution? Hot-wire the power supply switches...

So now they discovered that the guard was pulling out the power plugs!

He no longer works in that building...

From: peggy@ddsw1.MCS.COM (Peggy Shambo)
Subject: Operator problems
Date: 9 Feb 89

'Way back when I used-to-wuz a computer operator, we had a BIG RED button on the operator's console for an emergency powerdown. Well, one night one of the operators accidentally dropped something onto it, and *vooom*... no system. The next day he was explaining how he did it... and *vooom* hit the button... no system. So they built a little arch-shaped Lucite cover over the button. So what happens then? The one and the same operator was showing how it could be hit anyway... and *vooom*... no system!!!!

Last I knew, he still worked there... but in customer support..
no longer on the console... I wonder why? :-)

From: dougf@dougf.Caltech.Edu (Doug Freyburger)
Subject: Computer dates and other stories
Date: 8 Feb 89

My office-mate years ago at JPL lived through this:

When the Viking Mars probes where launched, no one thought they'd last very long in Mars oribt, so the programs saved a few bytes by ignoring leap years and hardwiring 366 in (1976 was leap). The next year everyone was called in to rewrite their systems for downloading to Mars with a 365 day year.

Better yet, both spacecraft were still going strong in 1980 and most of the crew were long gone to other projects. Everyone had to be called back for another download to Mars. It pays to include leap year in your code.

From personal experience:

I remember a Lunar-Lander game written in PDP-11 TECO that used VT100 cursor keys. The entire program looked like your terminal was at the wrong baud rate (standard TECO programming form). It ran without change on the old PDP-10 still surviving at college and later on the brand-new VAX, as well as 3 different O/S versions of PDP-11 without change.

From rumors of ancient DEC history:

The system programmer group writing TOPS-10 used to love fancy TECO programs and had a weekly contest for them. One guru working on FORTRAN compilers would read them carefully but never enter one. They thought he was just concentrating on compilers. Then one week he submitted a macro that did FORTRAN compilation, complete with optimization. The TECO program took days to run, but it worked. Apparently he had written a PDP-10 instruction set emulator in TECO and feed the compiler to it!

From: usenet@mailrus.cc.umich.edu (usenet news)
Subject: More code documentation
Date: 10 Feb 89

One day I was scanning through some code for MYS (the Michigan Terminal System) (don't remember what I was looking for), and I saw my all time favorite comment.

There was a kludge to get around something or other which was used by IBM. The two word comment next to it was: DAMN IBM

And I just saw it related to a change IBM made which it never notified anybody of. ("Well, just because we told you the bit would always be zero doesn't mean it will be.")

From: abhijit@pyr.gatech.EDU (Abhijit Chaudhari)
Subject: Why you should back up your disks
Date: 10 Feb 89

A friend of mine was very excited after finishing a really hard Pascal assignment. To show off his joy, he started waving his 5-1/4" floppy disk (we were using IBM PC's) for all the world to see. Not being satisfied with showing us the floppy in the jacket, he removed the jacket and now had a floppy in one hand and the jacket in the other. The next instant a pigeon flying overhead decided to relieve itself; and the excreta fell straight through the ovular slot (on the envelope) and landed onto the mylar. Needless to say, that was the only copy of his program.

From: haynes@ucscc.UCSC.EDU (Jim Haynes)
Subject: Interesting OS commands
Date: 10 Feb 89

The Burroughs B5500 operating system had two-letter console commands for everything. One of them was EI, documented in the operator's manual as: EI

The system replies with EIO and performs no other function.

or words to that effect. This was taken out late in the life of the system, and the EI command was eventually used for something useful. Also, on a system crash the console TTY would type out

```
P
 L
  O
   P...
```

(I've ported this feature to all our Unix systems, in loving memory of the B5500.)

In the GE635 operating system, there was a section of code dealing with allocation of the multiple processors. The

comments read

; ARE ALL PROCESSORS RUNNING?
; YES, BRANCH
; NO. HEAD 'EM UP
; MOVE 'EM OUT

Which reminds me - once I tried commenting an assembly language program in the usual style, one comment per instruction, with the comments being in iambic pentameter. I gave it up pretty quickly, as I'm not a poet. Has anybody ever done something like this and done it well?

From: meo@stiatl.UUCP (Miles O'Neal)
Subject: Random messages
Date: 10 Feb 89

I had gotten a program from a friend that delivered a random message from a file. These messages tended to be ridiculous or to make fun of computers we were using. The Gould S.E.L we had just gotten in had a (deservedly, IMO) reputation for being all screwed up. So I put messages in the file such as:

MPX/32 NOT FOUND. ENTER OPERATING SYSTEM IN HEX ON CONSOLE.

and set up the system-wide login procedure to execute the "fortunes" program when anyone logged in. Unfortunately, I was late the next morning, and it seems a new guy (who had always been protected from "this JCL stuff" before) had logged in, gotten the above message, and spent 1/2 hour looking through the documentation for the hex code for the O.S.

When I got in, each time I tried to login (on 4 separate systems), the following appeared on my terminal:

Miles, you're FIRED!!!

and I was then unceremoniously logged out. (I wasn't fired...)

From: master@uop.edu (Nasser Al-Ismaily)
Subject: Interesting program documentation
Date: 10 Feb 89

Told to me by my girlfriend:

On her second year in college a professor came to their class and was telling them about his new students (freshmen). When he

asked them to comment all their programs, this is what he got:

- "This program is very nice"
- "This program is very difficult"
- "This program is very interesting"...

From: rn10+@andrew.cmu.edu (Ronald J. Notarius)
Subject: Blowing up a power supply
Date: 10 Feb 89

In the process of trying to hook up a hard drive a few weeks ago (minus documentation, of course), I was given some incorrect instructions over the telephone, resulting in a loud "crack!" from the IBM-PC's power supply. My "assistant" panicked, "omigod we just blew up a power supply!" I assured him not to worry, I had insurance.

Two hours later, after finally managing to open up the power supply, I discovered (to my immense lack of astonishment) that the fuse had blown.

Of course, IBM has soldered the fuse in place. How often to you blow a fuse in a power supply?

The insurance company is insisting on buying me a new PS. I won't argue with them...

From: darin@nova.laic.uucp (Darin Johnson)
Subject: Problematic printouts
Date: 9 Feb 89

Actually, the print chains are not in alphabetical order. They are magically ordered by some arcane formula. Some of the printers are designed so that the hammer will strike the character just as the correct character is at the correct place in the line (the chain rotates at very fast speeds). Often, many characters will get printed at the same time, and no more than 2 rotations of the chain are ever needed to print a line (which is why they are fast). Presumably, the right set of characters on a line will cause all the hammers (132) to strike at the same time (while the chain is rotating).

I had related a story like this to a friend in college and (unknown to me) had decided to try it. He spent a night carefully going over the chain and determining the proper sequence to send. The next evening, he decided to print his file, and had me watch (only one line was printed). The job

printed and we ran downstairs. The printer was still rocking slightly. Opening up the cover, the chain was still intact, but had come completely off the drive that held it. We tore out the offending sheet of paper with the incriminating line (smudged and garbled) and complained to the operator on duty that the printer was broken again. I don't think my friend ever tried it again.

From: billd@celerity.UUCP (Bill Davidson)
Subject: Hidden program responses
Date: 9 Feb 89

...A few years ago I worked for a *VERY* small company called Metalsoft which made software for sheet-metal punch machines. Prior to my joining the company, the software department consisted of one person (my boss), Voldi Way, who was 15 years old. The only product we had then was a NC program editor which Voldi wrote in BASIC to run on an IBM PC (it actually was pretty nice for the price in spite of all this).

I was there to help design a full CAD/CAM system to automatically write NC programs, but I still had to help support the old program. Voldi put a few "undocumented features" in this program which he never told anyone about, including the president of the company (well... I knew, but *I* wasn't going to say anything).

In any case, one morning someone at a sheet metal shop far away (I think Atlanta), called a file f*ckoff or some such thing and the editor responded with, "My, are we having a bad day? You really should try to relax more," or something like that. The NC-programmer then called the president of our company (Carl) and said he had cussed at the computer and it had *answered* him! Carl said, "No it didn't," and claimed over and over again that it couldn't do that.

After he got off the phone he came into our office and started asking questions at which time Voldi and I both began laughing hysterically. It took dozens of users about 8 months to notice this "feature", which had around 100 words that it recognized, and a few dozen responses including some that made the computer unusable for 10 to 15 minutes (like telling the user that it was formatting the hard disk). Needless to say, the feature disappeared in the next release.

From: peggy@ddsw1.MCS.COM (Peggy Shambo)
Subject: The eccentric genius

Date: 11 Feb 89

I used to work at a Honeywell installation, where we had a super-genius of a systems engineer, affectionately known as "Gentle Ben". This man could read system dump the way most people would read the funny papers (or the net?). He was the core of systems intelligence.

But as super-genius people are sometimes labeled "eccentric", Gentle Ben was not an exception:

Smoking in the computer room was verboten, and he knew it. But he would light up right at the operator's console, take a few drags, then suddenly remember something and dash off, stuffing his *lit* cigarette into his coat pocket... then wonder where the burning smell was coming from.

Drinking was also a no-no in the computer room, but Ben would stop by the coffee machine on his way into the computer room and walk in with his cup in one hand, his cigarette in the other. On several occasions he was observed to place his cigarette *into* the coffee cup (still with coffee in it) and a few minutes later, while engrossed in problem solving, take a sip of the coffee... cigarette and all... and not even notice!

From: hermann@cpsc.ucalgary.ca (Michael Hermann)
Subject: Programmming awards
Date: 10 Feb 89

At Calgary, the computer science department has an award called the Williams Cup (as in old stained coffee cup), which is given yearly to the student who hands in the most imaginative rendition of a regular programming assignment. Anyway, as the story goes, the cup was awarded to a student who'd done a desk calculator assignment. Seems that the prof hadn't specified that you had to do it in decimal, so his/her program did math with _roman_numerals_.

The clincher for the award must have been his/her programming style, since of course, the documentation was in _latin_.

From: larryh@tekcae.CAX.TEK.COM (Larry Hedges)
Subject: Problems with PC's
Date: 10 Feb 89

A women (I heard it was a women) bought a PC from a computer store, and after a week or so the computer store received a

call. She complained that every time she tried to boot up the computer, the boot up procedure would fail with error messages. The computer salesman came over to her house to fix the computer. He said, "OK, give me your system disc and we'll try to boot this turkey up. She walk over to the refrigerator where the floppy disc was positioned with a magnet and handed the disc to the salesman.

From: daemon@felix.UUCP (The devil himself)
Subject: How many floppies can you put in a drive?
Date: 10 Feb 89

I once worked at a company that released a version of UNIX on a series of seven floppies for installation on micros. These micros tended to be sold into doctor's and lawyer's offices where there were never any computer literate folk (and the vendors were always scarce when the end users needed them). Hence we had many amusing phone calls on our 800 line placed by secretaries trying to load UNIX.

One afternoon the following awaited us on our return to lunch:

"I'm following your instructions exactly, and I am still having a problem. I have placed floppies 1 through 6 into the floppy drive, but I can't stuff floppy 7 in no matter how hard I try!"

Our directions said "Insert next floppy". We forgot to say "Remove floppy and insert the next".

We spent the rest of the afternoon seeing how many floppies we could stuff into a floppy drive.

From: tmv@mruxb.UUCP (Thomas M VandeWater)
Subject: Resourceful secretaries
Date: 10 Feb 89

While I was a grad student at UC Berkeley, the following happened:

The airconditioner where a few of the mainframes were kept was being repaired, hence some of our UNIX systems were unavailable. A secretary asked a friend of mine the reason she could not print out her thesis. "The airconditioner is broken," she replied.

Anyway, the next day while I was at the printer, a HUGE fan was blowing on the printer and a note said "KEEP THE FAN ON, THE

PRINTER MUST STAY COOL TO WORK PROPERLY".

Can't blame the secretary for her ingenuity!

From: berman-andrew@CS.YALE.EDU (Andrew P. Berman)
Subject: Rogue maniacs
Date: 10 Feb 89

This supposedly occurred at Princeton to a grad student who later became an assistant professor....

Some grad students were annoyed with this particular grad. He was known for being a rogue-maniac. They were using a UNIX system. The other guys used a security hole in Mail to obtain privileged status. They altered rogue a bit to check if this person was playing the game, and to make the game much easier if it was him. The next time the poor guy played it, he won. But his name didn't appear on the high score list.

I think they also screwed up vi to check if he was using it and to reverse all the commands if he was...

From: ncb@execu.UUCP (Nelson C. Bishop)
Subject: How not to edit programs
Date: 10 Feb 89

After the first the first relase of IFPS/Personal a call came in to our hotline.

"IFPS suddenly stopped working!"
"Well what was the sequence of events?"
"I was trying to load a large model and ran out of space, so I edited ifps.exe (the executable) and cut out half of it so my model would fit."
"!"

From: flynn@pixel.cps.msu.edu (Patrick J. Flynn)
Subject: Computers and the navy
Date: 14 Feb 89

...There is a related story about the first naval vessels to use computers. The storage medium was drum memory, and some officers underestimated the gyroscopic properties of large, massive, rapidly rotating cylinders when they executed course changes.

Officer: Hard to Port!
Helmsman: Aye aye, sir!
Drum: *SMASH!!!*

From: mlloyd@maths.tcd.ie (Michael Lloyd)
Subject: Slip ups at quality control
Date: 13 Feb 89

Anyone remember the Act Sirius 1 machine? It was expensive, powerful, and pre-PC, and totally failed to take off (despite impressive graphics).

Anyway, the story was reported that many users complained of inability to boot off the supplied system disks. The response was always the same -- the user must have caused magnetic damage. Apparently, they claimed that a common source of this was to leave the disks next to an old (mechanical bell) telephone for more than six rings!

Eventually the truth came out - they were indeed shipping blank system disks! Someone in Quality Control went quite red!

From: donb@hpcuhb.HP.COM (Donald Benson)
Subject: How to dry a floppy
Date: 14 Feb 89

Someone I know well got his floppies wet in a leaking car trunk. Since they were drying slowly, he tried spinning them up in the drive (the reasoning being that the shell would puff out slightly and let air circulate.) The drive squeaked a while, then became silent. But it still wouldn't read. The tech said he had never seen the drive belt fall off before...

8" floppies take a week to dry.

From: lane@jespy.dec.com
Subject: Fixing a tape drive

This may not be overly funny but I get a major kick out of it. A long time ago, I was a computer maintenance tech in NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain Complex working on the long gone Philco 1000 and 2000 systems. For those who have never owned one of these cuties, they were designed in 1959 (I think) and were constructed of discrete transistors, as ICs hadn't been invented yet. We're talking room size machines.

The tape drives were a mix of transistors and vacuum tubes (6AU6's, 12AU7's on the picker cleat driver, 807's in the servo amps, I think). Since the tubes needed a warm up period and the transistors didn't, the tape drive power supplies had a complicated startup sequence using some largish relays.

One day, I got a call about a tape drive (transport in those days) that was acting very bizarre. As soon as they hit the on switch, the tape reels would take off in opposite directions and stretch the 1" tape down to a little thread about 1/16" in diameter before it broke. (The motors were slightly larger than a car's starter - no joke)

As I entered the computer room, I was met with several high ranking types scratching heads. I listened to the complaints, watched the transport go crazy for a bit, and went to work. Without saying a single word, I shut the machine off and hit the left side of the power control panel (directly over the power-on sequence relay) with my fist. I re-loaded a tape, turned on the power and watched everything come up OK. I turned and left, still without a word.

I later heard the comments about what was said... Still later, I got a letter of commendation for the whole performance, believe it or not.

I think I am prouder of that one moment than anything else that comes to mind.

From: tcsc@tcsc3b2.UUCP (The Computer Solution Co.)
Subject: Offensive mailing labels
Date: 10 Feb 89

In 1968, while attending a large, midwestern University, I worked in the Department for Administrative Research. While providing design and programming assistance to the Alumni Records department, we ran into an interesting problem.

The Alumni Records office desired to embed all kinds of information into the key value used to identify each of the school's alumni. This led to a very long, unwieldy key value. When mailing labels were printed, both the key value and a special code used by the mailing machines was required on the top line of the label. We ran out of space on the label.

Not to worry! This fancy computer (a "brand new" IBM 360/50 running OS/PCP) could transform a numeric key value into an alphanumeric value by converting the alumni-record key from the

too long base-10 number to a shorter base-36 number. Just use all of the letters and digits!

Just as we sat back to congratulate ourselves on serving the user's needs with the clever application of technology, we got a call from the mailing house...

"Our delivery man just returned from the Post Office. They won't take your mailing. It looks like somebody tampered with your list. You better get down here right away!"

There, on top of one of the trays of mail was a label with the converted alumni record identifier. It read something like ...

```
 -------------------------------
| 123FUCK69A4       MM  43210** |
| MISS INGRID BEASLEY  EDU. 29  |
|   ...                         |
```

The mailing was instructing Miss Beasley to mark all further correspondence to the office of Alumni Records with her "new computer identifier code" shown on the label. Needless to say, the Office of Alumni Records failed to see the humor in it all. We thought that at her age, Miss Beasley (Edu. 29) might actually take the "computer's mistake" as a complement!

Thereafter, we were instructed to add the "DIRTY-WORD-ROUTINE" which performed a table lookup of every word which a committee of about a dozen of the raunchiest people in the department could come up with. But what about short phrases? And how about maintenance of the table? Whose budget does this come out of?

A student programmer, invited to a meeting to "see design in the real world" made an unwanted suggestion. Just convert to base-31 and don't use vowels. It worked. The next year, they changed the alumni records identifier again. I graduated.

From: res@ihlpb.ATT.COM (Rich Strebendt)
Subject: SDS 920 stories
Date: 13 Feb 89

...This posting brought back to mind my experiences with an SDS machine one summer at a NASA base I worked at. I believe the machine was an SDS 930, but I may be mistaken.

It did not like to have its main memory cabinet door closed (crashing after a few moments if anyone had the timerity to

close it!), so it always sat there with one door partly open.

It had a card reader that was interesting. It read the cards length-wise (column 1->80) rather than width-wise (row 9->12). So, if the cards were a little out of spec (low bidder on a government contract), it would either read two cards at a time, or eat one card at a time. When one was eaten you could recover it from inside the reader -- neatly folded into a many-creased accordian that was cute to look at but impossible to read.

The previous poster also mentioned that their machine did not like to awaken in the morning. Here at the Indian Hill location of Bell Labs we had one machine that did not mind awakening, as long as it was not Monday. It hated Monday mornings. It was one half of a duplex pair of IBM 360/67's. Each Monday the machines would be IPLed and each Monday the Left Half would come up all ready to work, while the Right Half balked and struggled and refused to come up for at least another hour. The Comp Center staff tried all kinds of things to try to cure or get around the problem (let it run all weekend, lie to it and tell it that Monday was Tuesday, etc.), but it had that habit as long as I can remember working on it.

From: haynes@ucscc.UCSC.EDU (Jim Haynes)
Subject: Mount St. Helens
Date: 14 Feb 89

...Randy Rorden told me about another happening of this kind at the same company, when Greg was not there. They got a disk drive in for repair and the filter was clogged with fine gray abrasive dust. He asked where it had been, and found it had come from an office in Yakima, Wash. At the time of the Mt. St. Helens eruption!

From: bobc@killer.DALLAS.TX.US (Bob Calbridge)
Subject: Reading Colecovision cartridges
Date: 13 Feb 89

On another level of computing, a couple of years ago I designed and built a board for my S-100 system that would treat Colecovision game cartridges as if they were mapped input devices. This way I was able to read the object code onto disk and eventually into memory. I would then dis-assemble the program to find out how they worked. I don't recall which game it was, but near the end of the code was the text reading something to the effect of:

"If someone at Atari is reading this, please say hello to Jim Pym."

The name is made up, but you get the point. Similarly, you could find some names scattered in the code that never showed up in the game itself, and I seem to recall (though I'd have to go back and check) someone actually including a love note in the code as a dedication.

From: wwp@homxb.ATT.COM (W.PATTERSON)
Subject: School pranks
Date: 13 Feb 89

The following story is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

A computer repairman was one day called to a grade school to repair their no longer working computer. When he opened up the processor, he found a thick coating of white dust covering every component within, i.e. backplane, mother board and all other PC boards, housing walls, etc. He had never seen any coating like this in any other computer. The repair of the processor involved simply blowing out the dust.

A few days later he was on another service call within the school for another computer. Walking by the room that contained the unit he had previously fixed, he decided to peek into the room to see how it was doing. What he saw explained the white dust. He saw several boys beating the chalk board erasers next to the fan in the unit, and watching the unit suck the dust inside.

From: sukenick@ccnysci.UUCP (SYG)
Subject: PDP-10 mistakes
Date: 13 Feb 89

The science division in CCNY had a PDP-10 ("DEC System 10", that is) for general use. One problem was that people were complaining that they were logging in and all their files were gone! The problem was simple: what happened when they logged out previously.

To logout, the command is KILL or K and an option. K/I would log you out after querying you about what to do with each of your files. K/F would happily log you out fast and keep all your files. K/D would happily log you out and delete all your files... the D key is right next to the F key...

From: ddb@ns.UUCP (David Dyer-Bennet)
Subject: More PDP-10 stories
Date: 13 Feb 89

...Here's a folk tale. The person who told me says he was there, and I believe him.

Several/many years ago, when Tops-10 was the most exciting operating system at DEC (that is, before Tops-20), and when ANF-10 was considered networking (hmmm... I guess it still would be), some interesting hacks were perpetrated. My favorite two stories:

The ANF-10 nodes were PDP-11's, some serving as terminal concentrators, some as front-ends to the 10's. A person made some modifications to the code to run in the terminal concentrator version so that, if you asked to be connected to a node that wasn't currently available, it would respond "That node is not available. Would you care to play Adventure while you wait?", and was in fact prepared to play adventure if requested.

The "reverse video" hack: this was done "to" a particular person that people didn't much like. The terminal concentrator code was changed to make his terminal work backwards. "Home" was the bottom right corner. Carriage return returned you to the rightmost column. Line feed moved you up a line. And so forth. The terminal escape sequences were parsed, interpreted, and reissued suitably modified.

I probably once knew who the perpetrators (and victims) were, but it's all lost in the mists of time for me now. Sorry for not giving proper credit.

From: ajz@mentor.cc.purdue.edu (T. Tim Hsu)
Subject: Definition of double capacity
Date: 12 Feb 89

A friend of mine from Akron University once told me this story...

While working as a lab consultant, he was approached by a woman (a business major) who was having problems with an IBM PC drive. So he goes over to the machine to examine it. It seems that the drive performed correctly, but took ten times longer than usual to retrieve the proper information. Upon examination of the

drive itself, he noticed TWO diskettes had been shoved into the drive (which happens to be a difficult feat). Her explanation? "I thought it would double the capacity."

He also told me about the time someone put a 3.5" disk into a 5.25" drive... They had to take the machine apart to retrieve the broken pieces.

From: meissner@tiktok.dg.com (Michael Meissner)
Subject: Copying tapes
Date: 11 Feb 89

One day about 3 years back, a problem was reported with one of the AOS/VS system programs, which is fairly routine. The person in development asked the customer support person (in a different city) for a copy of the tape that demonstrated the problem. Evidently, the customer support person was still learning the ropes, because he/she put the tape on an office copier, and sent up a photocopy of the tape (rather than a magnetic copy).

We all got a laugh out of it. To make things even better, the OS person was able to tell from the paper label on the tape that not enough information was supplied, and that we would have to ask the customer for the requisite info.

From: larry@kitty.UUCP (Larry Lippman)
Subject: Fun with paper tape
Date: 12 Feb 89

During the 1970's my organization used quite a bit of punched tape. In fact, in a storeroom there are still about a dozen VERY expensive rolls of unused metallized mylar punched tape which we used for creation of, ahem, archive tape records. The definition of "archive" media sure has changed, huh?

We still have a thermal punched tape splicer, along with a rack that has a high-speed Remex tape reader and punch. None of this stuff has seen use in at least five years, but I have not had the heart to order its disposal.

I did, however, concede to changing times, and junked our Decision Data 8020 interpreting card reader/punch about 4 years ago when we axed an PDP-11/44. I remember when that card reader-punch was ordered in 1974 at a cost of around $8K. It was our only card device which was shared among development systems when necessary. We even designed a custom interface using an 8080 with software driver so that it could run on

either an 11/03 QBUS or on UNIBUS. We wanted interpreting capability, in addition to having a standalone keypunch (which the 8020 would also do), so we never bought any native DEC card equipment.

In one lab where we had two ASR-33's, which have now been gone for several years, a piece of oiled punched paper chad will STILL worm its way out of the baseboard moulding every once and a while. Unfortunately, more than one chad box was accidentally dumped -- so the floor has been well "seeded" over the years.

From: aberg@math.rutgers.edu (Hans Aberg)
Subject: Troubles with computer music
Date: 12 Feb 89

A computer musician who lives up in Ithaca, NY, told the following story:

He tried out his Macintosh MIDI equipment, and everything worked perfectly. In those days, in the early mid-eighties, one had to rely on 512K, and an external disk drive (no hard drive).

Then he went up to Chicago (?) for a performance for an audience. He picked up all the equipment on the stage -- it didn't work at all.

So the next couple of hours he tried to figure out what is wrong, and the audience started to show up...

But then, Aha!, somebody discovered that the external disk drive was placed on the left side of the Macintosh -- not on the right side, as it should according to the manual. The Mac has its transformers on the left side, and their magnetic field interfered with the drive.

So they moved the drive over to the right side, everything all of a sudden working perfectly, and the performance was carried in land.

From: jackson@adobe.COM (Curtis Jackson)
Subject: Misc computer stories
Date: 11 Feb 89

...A disgruntled employee at NavOCEANO (Naval Ocean Office, I believe) across the street from me when I worked at NORDA (Naval Ocean R&D Activity) decided to get even with the locals.

There was a large Univac installation there, and some ultra-high-speed card readers. He hollowed out an entire box of punch cards (about 2.5 feet of cards, for all you youngsters) and filled them with old old old bananas. He then submitted this deck as a job. The operators were used to multi-box jobs, so they usually just picked up the entire box of cards and dumped them in the high-speed readers. It took over 3 weeks of maintenance before the reader was working reliably again, and the control room reeked of banana for weeks afterwards...

When crucial data on tape was lost at my university, the gurus in the computer room would retrieve as much data as possible, then fill in the gaps by soaking the tapes in a solution that made the individual bits show up as 1 or 0 (dark or light) under a magnifier. They'd then hand-assemble the missing sections from the visual inspection.

I once spent an entire night (over 12 hours) trying to get my compiler (working up to that point) to work again so I could work on it some more for my compilers course. At the end, I had reduced the problem down to a program (C code) that basically declared an integer "i", said "i=5", then printed "i". The program printed a floating-point number... I was so angry I got the idiot who had been mucking around with the C compiler from Bell Labs in the lab at 7am on Sunday morning to fix the damned thing.

Our aged PDP-10 finally died one weekend when we had an unusually hot Sunday (there was no operator support on Sundays until 6pm) and it turned out the fall leaves had never been cleared from the AC vents by the university physical plant. The temperature got over 100 degrees F in the computer room, and the old CPU on the 10 wouldn't even whimper afterwards.

It's amazing how many of us remember the "Good Ole Days" -- didn't you hate patching paper tape? Yeecchhh.

From: sfisher@abingdon.SGI.COM (Scott Fisher)
Subject: Various office stories
Date: 11 Feb 89

No joke. I have seen at least one letter sent to the software support group of a DBMS company that said, "I have included a copy of my disk as per your request," only to find a photocopy attached to the letter. They did copy both sides, at least.

This is the same company (my wife worked there) where an irate customer couldn't save his records to disk. The error message

he reported would only have appeared on a full disk, but he claimed that he checked the space remaining and it was "okay". Turns out that the program he ran to check remaining space on a disk drive returned the amount of free space, expressed in Kbytes. A full disk, therefore, returned the string 0k (where 0 = zero).

Then there was the customer who complained because the new software release wouldn't print. This customer just *knew* he'd caught the software company in a bug and he was demanding his money back. My wife stepped through the whole process, set up a duplicate system on her end of the phone, and spent a fair amount of time duplicating his situation. At last she determined that the only possible failure was that his printer wasn't on line.

"I've managed to duplicate your error message," she finally told him after about three days of this.

"Aha! It *is* a bug, and you'll finally admit it! Are you going to refund my money?"

"Well, we'll see," she said. "First, look on your printer and see if the little green light marked 'on line' is lit."

"No, it isn't. What does it mean if it's not on line?"

"Well, it's like the lights are on but nobody's home..."

He never asked for his money back again.

From: dlm@cuuxb.ATT.COM (Auntie Dion)
Subject: Alfred E. Newman
Date: 11 Feb 89

I was at UoM from 1967-1975...

The operating system was derived from the University of Michigan and had the peculiarity that every job required output, both printer and punch. This was even if the job bombed completely. An ABEND was okay as it gave a core dump, but a bad set of cards wouldn't result in anything, so... The systems people arranged in this circumstance to insert a computer picture of Alfred E. Neumann, with the caption, "What me worry", into the output stream. Also, each compilation that didn't succeed resulted in a card placed in the punch stream with "FAILED" in block letters.

The day came when the Board of Regents toured the computer center with its several million dollar computer. As a Regent was looking at the printer it just so happened that a bunch of jobs in a row all failed, leaving the line printer printer about 20 pictures of Alfred for the Regents to view.

The FAILED cards we'd collect and paper our offices with.

From: dlm@cuuxb.ATT.COM (Auntie Dion)
Subject: More code comments
Date: 11 Feb 89

The Version 6 UNIX kernel source had two very wonderful comments (realize UNIX has extremely few comments):

In the first it is discussing the mechanics of what in retrospect is the point where, in C, the CPU switches kernel stacks and resumes executing a previous process. The comment is about 8 lines long and ends, "you are not expected to understand this."

Then there is the comment, "The return value of this function has special significance," and it returns either 0 or 1, not very special.

From: dlm@cuuxb.ATT.COM (Auntie Dion)
Subject: Starting up computers
Date: 11 Feb 89

Long before there was DEC we had an SDS 920 computer. These had printed circuit cards with gold plated contacts and gas tight connectors. They were a bitch to reseat. You had to pound them into the socket with a mallet. One day, as were were reseating the card a senior executive wandered by and saw what was happening and said, "I've heard of kicking coke machines but this is ridiculous!"

The same computer also must have been pregnant as it had "morning sickness". In the morning when we turned it one, it wouldn't work until we let it warm up for a half an hour.

Then there was the time it broke. Most of it still worked but the shift instructions wouldn't work, we called it a shiftless computer.

Then there was the Army tech that was lazy and dropped a screw driver [so he says] from the Supply bus to the AC line and fried

every transistor in the computer. In shipping it back to the US of A for repair, it was accidentally pushed off of a loading dock. We learned about how to do auto body work on a computer.

Poor SDS 920, last I heard it was still serving our country in a nameless rural area and the technicians go out to Radio Shack to buy transistors to repair it.

From: cramer@optilink.UUCP (Clayton Cramer)
Subject: Excessive Use Of Computers?
Date: 22 Feb 89

A recent sign of the extensive use of computers in areas heretofore not considered as needing a computer:

> One of the EEs that works here asked me for some help figuring out how to read a 3.5" floppy disk. "I tried it in a Mac, but it couldn't read it." "What sort of computer did it come out of?", I innocently asked. "A Brother knitting machine."

Knit one, pearl two, write FAT to disk, service mouse interrupts, knit one, pearl two...

From: clw@hprnd.HP.COM (Carl Wuebker)
Subject: How to bug an operator
Date: 19 Feb 89

In the early 1970's at Georgia Tech there lived a Univac 1108 running under the Exec 8 operating system. The 1108 had commands that began with an @, and they would hang up the terminal until you were done. So, for example, an:

```
@MSG,W Operator, please mount tape 1234...
```

would send a message to the operator, but wouldn't return control to your terminal until the operator replied. Anyway, some fellow at Univac got the idea of double-@ commands, which would allow you to play through while the single @ commands were working -- kind of like the & feature of Unix.

```
@@MSG,W Operator...
```

would allow you to go on, but required the operator to answer a console question. After our "new" OS was installed, the Rich Electronic Computer Center published a bulletin about how to use

this new feature. Soon afterwards, a student filled a file with 4K of these operator reply statements and started it...

Results -- the operator's console was flooded with messages, all of which required a reply. He had to bring the machine down, dump the memory, and reboot. The next morning, the system staff went through the dump and removed the student's login from the system.

From: jtw@wuee1.wustl.edu (Trent Wohlschlaeger)
Subject: Fixing a keyboard
Date: 21 Feb 89

True Story:

I worked as a student "computer consultant" for Austin College (no, not UT) during my undergrad years. One Saturday the entire Organic Chem class was in trying to do some simulated analysis of compounds. A (minor) friend and (major) crush of mine walked in to find all the terminals in use, so I took her down to the machine room to allow her to use one of the terminals there.

I think the terminal was an ADM-something with a detached keyboard. At any rate, the keyboard started acting up, causing the program to simulate all sorts of tests she didn't want. After jiggling the cord several times, which fixed the problem for about 1.5 minutes each, I finally stated that it needed "manual adjustment", picked the keyboard up, lowered it a carefully eyed 2 inches, and dropped it to the desktop.

It worked fine for the next 4 hours until I left. She looked at me as if I was some sort of computer god. Of course, she still wouldn't go out with me!

From: lan@bucsb.UUCP (Larry Nathanson)
Subject: Excessive computerphobes
Date: 21 Feb 89

While a counselor at a computer/circus camp (I won't get into elaborating on it, or I'll forget the funny story - inquiries taken by mail) a few years ago, there were a few campers that would choose only one program. One girl "Natasha" was extremely interested in the high wire, and deathly afraid of the computer rooms. Room 1 was around 25 PC's, Room 2 was //e's, and Room 3 was a bunch of Mac 128's... (That was HIGH tech then....)

Anyway, on the last day of the two week session, it's the

nastiest thunderstorm Inland Conn had seen, which means the kiddies are all indoors for the day... The highwire is swinging like the surface of the pool, and the trapeze is spewing debris all over the fields... Most of the campers are rather content to be indoors, and after MUCH coaxing, we get Natasha to draw a picture on the "cute little harmless computer"...

Wouldn't you know it -- Natasha has just finished her cute little doggie picture and she gets daring, and figures out that the "A" symbol means letters, and she's going to title her creation... All of a sudden there is a HUGE CRASH -- lightening strikes the transformers outside... As she touches it, the keyboard starts smoking, and the image of her picture melts down the screen, with black smoke pouring out of the vents on top. This poor girl was so traumatized that she'll NEVER touch a Mac so long as she lives!

By the way, the lightbulbs overhead exploded, the //e motherboards were OK, but their power supplys were black inside, and smelled like a campfire... they all had to be replaced. Half/2 the Macs were wrecked violently -- smoking keyboards, etc... the other half just needed new fuses... And the grand finale -- the IBM's were a total loss, and some of the IBM color monitors had flames coming out of the top...

I was told Natasha ran so far it took a half hour to catch her... As I remember it, I got a fire extinguisher, and was having a blast dousing the IBM's... However, knowing "selective" memory being what it is, I was probably crouching under a bench somewhere...

From: lauri@svax.cs.cornell.edu (Georges Lauri)
Subject: Abusive users
Date: 20 Feb 89

...I used to work in a company doing workstations for stock and commodity brokers. These things are their bread and butter: if they don't work, they can't do *a thing*. They thus tend to get frustrated easily.

One of them calls, and says, "No matter what I type, it doesn't work". Get the machine exchanged, the keyboard is hopelessly damaged. A couple of days later, the same thing happens. We discovered that the guy used his *telephone handset* to bang on the keyboard to flip pages.

The competition -- obviously from similar experiences -- had keyboards encased in sheetmetal, with very tough springs; these

people only hit one key at a time anyway, and didn't touch type, so that was OK...

In a similar vein, a frustrated customer had, on a bad trade, *ripped* his console from the data feed -- the back panel was still hanging to the wall outlet. We got bit by this again when we introduced mice on our systems: now *they* were getting banged up by people using them do dial the phone!!

To solve all these problems, we had to install routines to detect keyboard banging (lots of keys pressed too quickly in succession) and mouse banging (that took some work) and beep *real loud* -- they'd get embarrassed and not do it anymore. Abuse management -- a whole new area in user interfaces!

From: lord@se-sd.sandiego.ncr.com (Dave Lord)
Subject: Orientation dependent systems
Date: 20 Feb 89

One of the guys who used to work here had been a field engineer for many years. (That means he used to repair computers.) One of the machines he used to work on was one of those large beasties, about 5 feet high and six or seven feet long. To get at the innards you opened up the hinged doors on the sides. The "memory unit" was also hinged and to work on it you had to open it out so it was at a 90 degree angle to its normal position.

Anyway, there was this particular machine that was getting _lots_ of memory errors. But of course when they opened it up to test it, it worked fine. They tried various things like cleaning the vents, cleaning the connectors and replacing various parts, but to no avail. When the memory unit was folded out at a 90 degree angle it worked fine, when it was closed it got memory errors. Finally, in desperation, they closed it up and turned the whole processor so that it was at a ninety degree angle to its original position. Supposedly it never had a problem again.

They explained to the customer that the machine had "East-West Memory".

From: gmw1@CUNIXD.CC.COLUMBIA.EDU (Gabe M Wiener)
Subject: Novice engineering students
Date: 20 Feb 89

Several years ago I was working as an instructor at a computer camp. I was assigned to teach the introductory class in TTL

logic and peripheral design. So there I was, explaining the TTL high and low states. "Five volts represents the 'high' state or a binary 1, and zero volts represents the 'low' state, or a binary 0." And I went on and on explaining the various TTL Gates (AND, NOR, NAND, etc). Finally, I got to the Inverter (or NOT gate). I explained that if you put 5 volts into it, you'll get 0 volts out, and if you put 0 volts into it you'll get 5 volts out. To this, one person replied:

"Wouldn't that thing be awfully useful during a power failure?"

From: dmt@ptsfa.PacBell.COM (Dave Turner)
Subject: Operator mistakes
Date: 18 Feb 89

Whenever we used to make major changes to our operating system or transaction processing system we were required to repeat a prior day's business to prove the the system was ready for production.

Until about 10 years ago, we would do this by copying all the databases and tapes for a day and run a series of tests on Saturdays. All the production terminal operators would be at their terminals typing exactly the same things that they had typed on the day being repeated.

All this was very expensive and error prone. Usually the tests would cause a crash a few minutes after they started.

On one memorable day in 1976 the test was running very smoothly. The computer room was filled with onlookers: operations people, systems programmers, bigshots, vendor representatives, etc.

The console operator was continuously displaying the status of the system. One common command was to display all the jobs in the system:

```
$dj 1-999
```

Everyone was pleased that the test was going so well until around 4 PM when all the jobs suddenly stopped running.

Concern turned to elation when the console operator confessed that he had mistakenly typed:

```
$cj 1-999
```

Which *cancelled* all the jobs in the system!

From: ferguson@x102c.harris-atd.com (ferguson ct 71078)
Subject: Computer welding
Date: 18 Feb 89

...The 4th-hand version of this story I heard regarded the first mounting of a large capacity disk drive on a ship. The teller (known to occasionally exaggerate) claimed that the disk was a particularly high volume model for its era and was about three feet in diameter (I have difficulty believing this). He claimed that the gyroscopic forces for such a large rotating mass were sufficient to warp the ship's decks as the ship rocked and heaved while underway.

A first-hand story: this one actually happened to me. When I was a student at the University of Texas, I was employed at a computer lab programming one of the early generation desktop computers. The machine was an 8080 (later Z80) CP/M machine with an S-100 bus in an IMSIA (sp?) cabinet. The IMSIA cabinet was about the size of a modern IBM-PC but about twice as high. The chassis was aluminum with a steel cover. The power cord for the system entered the cabinet through the rear and was connected directly to a terminal strip (two parallel rows of screws in a heavy piece of bakelite). The terminal strip was mounted on the backplane of the cabinet which was a sheet of aluminum about 1/8" thick.

Well one day I was merrily typing away on a terminal when an hair-raising event occurred. A jet of fire and sparks spewed out of the rear of the computer cabinet accompanied by brilliant ultraviolet light. It was as though someone had started up an arc welder inside the computer. The lab filled with ozone and smoke. The welding continued for about a two full seconds before it ceased of its own accord. It took a couple of minutes to get my heart out of my throat and get up the nerve to unplug the machine. When I examined the computer I found a 3/8" hole in the aluminum backplane of the computer which had obviously been torched out. The desk was covered with molten globules of aluminum which hardened into little pills.

The computer lab was in a building filled with engineering labs which contained all kinds of heavy equipment. Apparently one or more large machines had been switched on or off and a hell of a big power spike had come down the line. Evidently one of the screws in the computer's terminal strip was just a little bit too long and the tip of the screw was just a little bit too close to the aluminum backplane of the cabinet which was grounded of course. This closeness allowed the power spike to

arc between the tip of the screw and the backplane. The arc continued until the hole it was melting in the backplane grew too large to sustain the arc.

The amazing part of this story was that the computer was completely unharmed save some cosmetic damage. Even the fuses were intact (they were "downstream" from the terminal strip). Furthermore, the building fuse hadn't blown. Basically, after about ten minutes to get my nerve back, I plugged the computer back in, cleaned the aluminum pills off my desk, and went back to work like nothing had happened. Try that with your Taiwan clone! (Later on I trimmed down all the screws in the power strip.)

From: kfir@bimacs.BITNET (Yuval Kfir)
Subject: What is the definition of "crash"
Date: 17 Feb 89

I was told the following story by a friend, but the details are probably mixed up -- if someone remembers them correctly they are welcome to put me right. It happened at an ILA conference (those are the Hebrew initials of called in English), two or three years ago: Some time after the conference began, a man came up hysterically to the DEC representatives (where DEC's display was on), and told them that the computer had crashed. Without even thinking, they told him, "Just reboot it then, what's the problem?".

"No, you don't get it -- I was just unloading it from the van here, and..." (I think it was a VAXstation, God rest its soul).

From: jml@holin.ATT.COM (John Lynch)
Subject: Getting free credit
Date: 17 Feb 89

I recall a story from the 1970's, told by a friend at the time, about a phone bill.

The local phone company, NJ Bell, would include a keypunch card with your bill. The card included the standard information about the customer and the bill amount. This friend of mine took the phone bill card to keypunch and added an overpunch to the the bill amount making it a negative number. He sent in a check for the regular amount with the altered card. When he received his next month's bill there was a credit for his payment and a credit from his previous balance due.

He never told me if the phone company ever caught on or not.

From: tom@iconsys.UUCP (Tom Kimpton)
Subject: Why you don't say yes automatically
Date: 17 Feb 89

When we were first porting UN*X to our hardware we often had crashes that would leave the file system in a state of disarray. Going through the fsck routine of being asked if we wanted to clear the file, etc., got to be a hassle. So one of the programmers added a "-y" option to fsck that would print out yes to the question (so you could see what was going on), automatically clear the file in question and continue.

It was very handy. It cut reboot times down dramatically. Until the first time "/" was corrupted: Directory "/" corrupted, do you wish to remove? YES Directory "/" removed. "-y" was removed forthwith.

From: meo@stiatl.UUCP (Miles O'Neal)
Subject: A good way to waste a programmer's time
Date: 17 Feb 89

The *old* Compucolor (or whoever Intecolor used to be) computers were pretty nice for writing neat games in; their BASIC was very flexible and graphics-oriented. A friend (hi, Nick) at Tech and I were playing around, getting the computer to do all kinds of neat (to us, then) stuff, and Nick found a very obscure feature: ANY character could be placed in a comment. So we wrote a program that did all kinds of neat stuff on the screen, and then stopped for a moment (with keyboard locked) displaying, "Read the code and see if you can figure this one out!"

The memory mapped display was fast. The code was as compact (i.e., spaghetti code) as we could make it, crammed onto 1 LONG line, followed by a comment that had as its first characters the ones to return to beginning of line and clear to eol, and then the following:

10 REM Read the code and see if you can figure this one out!

When you tried to print the source to the screen, it happened so fast the eye registered nothing but the final comment. A lot of grad students (not to mention undergrads) wasted a LOT of time trying to figure this one out!

From: Tim_CDC_Roberts@cup.portal.com
Subject: How to damage a keyboard
Date: 17 Feb 89

There was a letter to the editor of BYTE in its early days that went something like this:

"You said in your beginners column of
that nothing I could enter at the keyboard would harm my computer at all.

"Well, I entered a Coke at the keyboard, and believe me it did some kind of damage."

From: kevinf@cognos.uucp (Kevin Ferguson)
Subject: Why you don't put program developers in PR
Date: 15 Feb 89

DISCLAIMER: So help me God, this is the absolute truth. I should know, because I was there.

Many moons ago (1982), I was on contract as a P/A to one of those credit card companies that shall remain nameless. I was attached to the project that was completely rewriting the billing process. The approved implementation included a massive number of database tables that the Credit Department would maintain to control their billing cycles, appearance of the statement for different types of customers, interest charge calculation, and so on, ad nauseum.

Well, as the project trundled on toward completion, the end user became aware of the manpower effort that would be required to initialize all of these tables. (In retrospect, their reaction was really quite excessive.) Our illustrious Project Manager said at the time, "No problem. We'll just promote the TestBed environment." I'm sure that you can imagine our reaction, as the mischievous minds of programmers tend to generate humorous testing environments.

Sure enough, despite all of the programmers's and testers's objections, the TestBed environment was promoted to Production "...with those changes that are deemed necessary by the Credit Department." Apparently, they did not catch all of the "necessary changes" because in the first week, the Credit Department mailed 1,500 statements to delinquent customers with the Reminder Notice: "Pay up, or we'll rape your wife."

Judging by the memo that was distributed to the MIS Department

following this debacle, the rest of the organization failed to see the humor in this.

From: emoffatt@cognos.uucp (Eric Moffatt)
Subject: Student pranks
Date: 13 Feb 89

This reminds me of a particularly nasty trick we (myself and a fellow named Mike something) played in High School (1972?). In our FORTRAN course all of the students's card decks were packed in boxes and shipped out to run at some magic computer elsewhere in the city; turnaround was about 2 days. Well, Mike was somewhat of a system hack and had "discovered" that there was a way to read all other JCL (yep, IBM) in a deck as data. We just had to try it out.

I wrote a super simple parser (scan a line for READ, WRITE, DO...) and an output formatter which did a fair job of duplicating the real compiler's output. We just slipped the "special" JCL in at the start of the deck and viola... the students received realistic looking compiles but with fake error messages like, "READ statement in wrong place" or, "You cannot WRITE here". Well, the instructor just didn't know what to make of this (he was new to this stuff too) and we finally had to 'fess up. As I remember it I got one of my very few detentions for costing the class a whole computer run but it was worth it to see the teacher's face.

.