My Latest Communication Love Affair

Hal R. Taylor

Time was when the greatest communication device I could imagine was a fine camera with a fast lens. You might even say I fell in love with cameras, because of the fun I had using them. Soon after, I fell for one of those electric typewriters. When I mastered it, there seemed to be no end to how much stuff I could pound out on it. I really felt productive. You also might say, in present-day jargon, I was hardware happy.

That was before I'd ever even heard of a computer or word processor. Now I've really got a love affair going. . .my wife says it's worse than golf!

How I got into my present situation isn't unique, I guess. It was simply a case of wanting to speed up my writing and also to keep some records, especially for ACE. So, before I knew it, I had taken the plunge and had bought a microcomputer.

Here's how I came to my decision to buy a microcomputer instead of a word processor: First, a so-called dedicated or single purpose word processor is basically a single purpose computer. It is easy to master because it's made to do little else than help you type or write and edit. One also costs more than I figured I could afford.

A microcomputer, on the other hand, can do word processing, if you have a program. In addition, a microcomputer will do many other things, again, if you have the programs. Important to me was the fact that I could get a start on a system for around $3500—a great deal less than I would have had to pay for a dedicated word processor.

Lest I am getting ahead of anyone, let me point out that the term microcomputer shouldn't send you into technology shock. The days of room-size computers that only the electronically trained technicians and programmers could understand are long gone. My microcomputer sits on an ordinary typing table. Once a little dot matrix printer sat there too, but I wore it out writing to you ACE members, so now I have a larger printer that occupies its own table.

My rig, an Apple II, consists of two basic parts—hardware and software. Hardware refers to the computer itself, a monitor or video screen, two disc drives, and that printer. Oh yes, so that I can send and receive messages over the telephone, I have a micromodem or telephone coupler. Software refers to the programs that tell the computer how to perform specific tasks such as word processing, accounting, running off mailing lists, sorting records, proofreading, and so on. Unquestionably, the software is the most important part of the system.

Software Makes You Look Good

Early on, I discovered that as long as I had a software program that told me what to do as I progressed through it, I really didn't need to know much more than how to type. Well, that depends. One program I have, a word processing program, requires that I insert various commands as I move along to tell the computer and my printer how to organize what I've written so it will print out on a piece of paper in a particular form. It took me some time to remember the various codes, but after all, I didn't learn how to take perfect pictures immediately either. Come to think of it, I can't yet!

The point is, you don't have to be knowledgeable in computer languages to make a microcomputer work. A good program takes care of everything for you. Then you become known as a user—another of those fancy terms that's invading our vocabularies these days because of computers.

Another program I have which helps me a great deal is one that enables me to use the ACE electronic mailbox with ease. I can type a message to anyone, then dial the main computer that handles our electronic mailbox. Once I get on the line, I tell my computer to send the message I've previously written. That way I can be on and off the electronic mailbox more quickly than if I'd type the message while I'm on the phone. My method costs less than if I compose my message while I am on line.

Keeping ACE Records Can be Easy

Probably the best program I have of benefit to ACE is one called Data Factory. I use it primarily to keep records on all members and as a means to make labels of addresses for mailing materials to members. Data Factory actually is a filing system. Computer types call that a data base. Once I get information organized and sorted on a disc managed by Data Factory, I can manipulate the data in a variety of ways to make it useful. I can sort addresses, for instance, by zip-code; alphabetically by name or by state; by type of member; by region; and by members who have paid dues and who have not. The progam also will count members, add up their payments, and give me a variety of formats for printing the different kinds of information. If you have the same kind of computer I do, you can call mine by telephone and obtain the same information by commanding my computer to give it to you through the Data Factory program.

It only takes a few seconds to get such answers. Without the computer it would take hours to do some of those things.

Proofing Automatically

Back to word processing. . .when I write our newsletter and much of the copy for the quarterly, my typing often isn't letter perfect, and you know how much time it takes to proof copy. With another program that has a dictionary of 37,000 words, I can proof the copy automatically, make corrections, develop a new dictionary of our own particular vocabulary, and even see how often I've used certain words. So far I've not tried it, but I'd be willing to bet that I could even do a readability measure of the copy if I worked at it. No, the program won't correct my English usage. That takes some of you prescriptive grammarian readers—yet even you can't make me change sometimes.

Oh yes, occasionally I have to write the same letter to several people, particularly officers in ACE. My word processing program allows me to set up a list of addresses, then print out the same letter to each but with a personal salutation. I can even insert special paragraphs to individuals with a little more manipulation. Makes you wonder about those personal letters you get in direct mail campaigns, doesn't it? But it sure saves my time.

Not long ago, I invested in still another program called The

Accountant. Bookkeeping has never been a skill I could brag about. In fact, I even hated to balance my own checking account. Now, I've become a real expert at double entry accounting. And by building my own financial data base system, at the end of the year Uncle Sam and I should be able to get along better when I report my income for tax purposes. I've also put ACE accounts on the system—we don't pay taxes, but we do have to make a complex report to IRS each year. (Sure, IRS also allows me to depreciate all my equipment and programs.)

Reading and Buying From Computer Services

Finally, although ACE has a Dialcom electronic mail box, I decided there were some personal uses I needed from another system. So I invested in The Source. Now I can check on the market immediately after trading closes, get travel schedules anywhere in the world and make my own reservations with airlines, hotels and even with some eating establishments. I can access news services, get briefs from a number of magazines, and learn the latest developments in all kinds of business enterprises. Additionally, if I want to buy a camera or almost anything else, I can look over a catalog, make my selection, order what I want and pay for it by leaving a credit card number with the computer! Needless to say, I have to watch what I'm doing then. . .it's easy to get carried away and overspend!

Games are another addiction I think I could easily develop. So far, I have a couple but I try to use them only when someone wants a demonstration of the fun possible with a computer. To me, running almost any program is a game.

Sharing Ideas With Others

One of the most interesting aspects of owning a microcomputer is the way other owners and users learn together. In the Washington, D.C., area are a couple of user clubs. I belong to one called Washington Apple Pie. There are about 1000 of us, including Eldon Fredericks of Purdue. We pay an annual membership fee and can attend monthly meetings. Even spouses and kids take an interest—the kids have their own organization called Apple Core. The most amazing thing to me is the way members volunteer to take on club tasks. . .all the way from writing special programs, articles, and software reviews to helping edit the monthly

publication and offering to take telephone calls from members who are having problems. The club also has a system for selling software programs written by members. These kinds of clubs are everywhere—I even ran into one in Kathmandu, Nepal! Most members there were from the U.S. Embassy and were as avid as the group I belong to in D.C.

There May be One in Your Future, Too

While I own an Apple, there are many other brands said to be equally as good, including Commodore, Nec, Vector Graphics, Atari, several models made by Texas Instruments, and more. No doubt you've read that IBM also has moved into the microcomputer field. Some experts say the way to choose your machine is to determine which software you want and like before you invest in the hardware. That may be a good idea, for your choice of hardware will be limited to the various programs available to it. In the future, we may see some compatibility in programs, computer to computer, but now we must invest in certain electronic boards and chips in order to use programs developed for specific computers other than what we may own. Personally, I preferred to pick the hardware that had the most programs already rather than buy additional hardware to make it work with programs written for other kinds of computers. Confused? Me too. That's what makes microcomputing such a challenge. . .you get to learn or worry about all sorts of ideas and problems you may never have thought of before.

What else does the future hold? Well, already there are devices that enable a computer to talk to you and to type out your words as you say them. In ACE, we're trying to develop an electronic mail system all our own. ACE will stand the cost of the system itself and bill any member who wants to use the system. Such an approach appears cheaper than telephone and obviously is faster than regular mail. Someday we might distribute many of our newsletters electronically, for already we can contact almost every state information office via computer. So the future probably will bring whatever our imaginations can dream up, providing we're willing to make some investment in it ourselves. That's why I got into computering. Nope—no regrets yet.