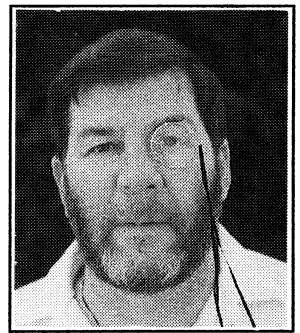


Moffat's Madhouse...

by TOM MOFFAT



A high-tech fairy story

Once upon a time there was a man who owned a thing called a computer, which was a rather remarkable instrument. The man used his computer as an electric typewriter, upon which he tapped the keys night and day to write stories — so that the people of the land might be entertained and enlightened.

To do this the man used a software package called WordScribble. He was very happy with WordScribble, and he rejoiced, saying, "I am going to use WordScribble forever and ever". And this he proceeded to do.

Back in ancient times, around 1985, the man used WordScribble on a computer known as the 'CP/M' kind. He was immensely happy until his old CP/M machine broke down, after which he was forced to replace it. But they had stopped making CP/M computers by then, so he had to get a newer model, a 'PC with MS-DOS'.

The CP/M version of WordScribble would not work on the man's new MS-DOS machine, so he had to buy a new program as well: WordScribble for MS-DOS.

With great feelings of terror, the man placed the new WordScribble into his MS-DOS machine and turned it on. "I won't know how to use it", he cried.

But the man was needlessly concerned. The new WordScribble worked exactly like his old CP/M version in every way; the same screen appearance, the same keyboard commands, everything. Mind you, the new one wasn't quite as fast as the old one — but that's progress for you.

The man resumed using WordScribble forever and ever, and all was write with the world. New computers came along, with newer versions of MS-DOS, and their makers told the man he needed one. "What for?", he said. "There's nothing wrong with my old one." And, boys and girls, there wasn't anything wrong with the man's old computer. Nothing at all.

The man continued using his old computer, and WordScribble, forever and ever. And the software makers gnashed their teeth. And the computer makers spat chips. They just couldn't make

the man buy a new computer, or even new software.

Actually the man *was* forced to buy a new computer from time to time, but not through the efforts of the computer makers. His old computers simply wore out after so much daily typing, and that was fair enough. But the man steadfastly refused to replace his much-loved WordScribble program, since it didn't wear out. It was only software, after all.

While the man was busy typing stories every day, computer and software makers were 'addressing the problem', as they say in computer new-speak, of how to make the man part with his money when in fact his computer and his WordScribble program were both working perfectly. "Let's try to make him dissatisfied with it!", they said, and a plan was hatched.

At around this time a new kind of computer came along, probably named after Mr McGregor who got Peter Rabbit into so much trouble. This new machine became known as a Mac. It didn't use text and words so much on the screen; instead there were little symbols. And there was this scooty thing you could push around on the desk to select one of the symbols on the screen. It was called a 'mouse' and it was really cute, and everyone would want one.

Mr McGregor blew his trumpet and yelled, "Keyboards are dead! Long live the mouse!" And many people agreed with him, and threw out their old computers and bought new ones with little symbols on the screen, and mice. These computers were said to be 'user friendly'.

The makers of PC-type computers were very distressed to see that Mr McGregor had finally found a way to make people throw away their old computers, because the new ones they were buying were *his* Macs, not PC's. So PC makers put their noses to the grindstone and came up with a way to make their PC's look just like Macs, complete with mice. How nice! This new system was called 'Curtains'.

Advertisements thundered from the pages of computer magazines: "DOS is

dead! Long live Curtains!" Articles pointed out that computers could no longer do useful work unless they were using the new Curtains. They also made it perfectly clear that people who remained happy with their old DOS computers and programs were living in the past.

Still, many resisted moving to Curtains, because their older systems were working so well. The man in this story even had the temerity to question, in this very column, the wisdom of the great stampede to Curtains. That story brought heaps of scorn from those who had been converted, and praise from people who were sick of being told they were silly because they resisted switching to Curtains.

Switching to Curtains, of course, meant that you had to get new software which was especially written for the Curtains environment. WordScribble for Curtains quickly hit the market, and many perfectly good copies of WordScribble for DOS hit the scrapheap. Mr Scribble was ecstatic! People were buying his programs again, even though there was nothing at all wrong with the ones they already had.

The Curtains system had some interesting characteristics, as well as its icons on the screen and its mouse. It would let you do two things at once, for one thing. You could write seditious magazine articles, while at the same time using a drawing package to make impertinent pictures to go with them. The results could then be merged into one stunning creation.

These activities, of course, required enormous amounts of memory and a lot of effort on the part of the computer. So the older computers were no longer up to it, and the person who had switched to WordScribble for Curtains now found he was up for a new 'computer for Curtains'. Mr Computer-maker was ecstatic! People were buying his computers again, even though there was nothing at all wrong with the ones they already had.

The man continued to write his stories,

with his much-loved WordScribble, on his faithful MS-DOS computer. As computers wore out he replaced them, eventually discovering the joys of sitting on the beach, writing his stories on a portable laptop computer, with WordScribble. But even that computer eventually died, so the man who was by then incurably hooked on portables, got the latest you-beauty notebook computer. With Curtains.

With CURTAINS? What did he say, boys and girls — WITH CURTAINS?

Well, er, yes. The man didn't have any choice by then, you see. Because you couldn't buy any computer without Curtains. Just to make sure users didn't deviate from the correct course, all new computers in the land were supplied with Curtains. In most cases computers were arranged so that Curtains appeared on the screen immediately the power was switched on. The owner was given no choice of using MS-DOS.

The man really tried to resist. "Won't you let me buy a computer without Curtains?"

"No. We don't do that."

"Well, how about un-installing it, so the computer at least starts life as an MS-DOS machine?" This was done, by the simple expedient of disabling the part of the automatic-starting procedure which energized Curtains. Curtains itself was left intact. So the man installed an old copy of MS-DOS WordScribble on his brand new computer, and proceeded to use it forever and ever to write stories so that the people of the land might be entertained and enlightened. All was well again — for the time being.

From time to time, as the man was fiddling around within MS-DOS, he noticed this command called 'WIN'. He knew what the command would do if he used it, and he said, "Nooo, that's not for me..."

But then curiosity got the best of him and he said, "Lets WIN! There's nothing to LOSE!" So he invoked the magic word, and lo and behold the genie came out of the bottle and squirted little icons and symbols all over his screen.

The man grabbed the mouse and moved it, and clicked it, and observed things dragging and opening and closing, and he said, "Hey, this isn't so bad". He played around with some of the supplied programs and then he remembered that his friends had told him how good Curtains games were.

A call to the local computer bulletin board provided him with a few games to try, and they *were* very entertaining and enjoyable. Except for the occasional game that produced a message saying

'THIS COMPUTER HAS BECOME UNSTABLE. RESTART IT NOW!' So much for the game in progress. What if he had been using a word processor, and was two thousand words into a story...

Well, what about a word processor? The man didn't have a wordprocessor for Curtains, because they were not to be found on bulletin boards and were very expensive to buy. But he did note that Curtains allowed such things as 'DOS applications', which were your old programs used within the Curtains environment. What would happen if he ran WordScribble as a DOS application? Then he would be seen to be 'modern', using Curtains — while actually using his good ol' DOS-based WordScribble.

To cut a long story short, this attempt brought howls of rage from Curtains: 'STOP! THIS APPLICATION HAS VIOLATED SYSTEM INTEGRITY DUE TO AN INVALID GENERAL PROTECTION FAULT AND WILL BE TERMINATED.' (With extreme prejudice?) 'QUIT ALL APPLICATIONS, QUIT CURTAINS, AND THEN RESTART YOUR COMPUTER.' (If that's what Curtains calls user-friendly, I'd hate to see it when it's really angry...)

The man eventually discovered he had a Curtains wordprocessor after all, a thing called 'Write' that came as part of the Curtains package. This little gem could produce words on the screen in all sorts of interesting type faces and sizes, and print them out on the printer exactly as they looked on the screen. He thought Write would be useful to enhance a for-sale poster he was making for a boat.

The man typed a couple of paragraphs of text extolling the virtues of said boat, and then printed them on a piece of paper below the boat's photograph. It all looked very nice indeed, and was duly posted upon the notice board at the yacht club.

The next day the man discovered that Write, or Curtains, or both, had delivered some collateral damage, as they say in the military. It had shot one of its own troops. The for-sale notice generated by Write had shared a disk area with some weather map images from the DOS-based Listening Post II program. When the man tried to look at the weather pictures, one of them caused the computer to say 'Data Reading Error'.

The man got suspicious, and used a DOS program called DEBUG to investigate the weather picture file. This is like taking an X-ray of a broken leg. And buried inside the weather picture, guess what the man found! A copy of his for-sale notice! Stored there, in error, by you-know-what.

The man became worried. He was

trying to give Curtains a fair chance, but he wasn't getting very far. The man decided it was time to formulate a new attitude toward Curtains, given his recent adventures. So he climbed high up onto Mt Wellington as he does every morning, to a place where he could look out over Hobart and much of the civilized world. He sat down on his thinking-rock, where many of his writings had germinated in the past. And this is the new Curtains-policy he came up with:

1. He remembered the earlier message from Curtains about his computer becoming unstable, and decided maybe it wasn't the computer at all, but Curtains itself that was unstable. This was backed up by writings in computer magazines that sung the virtues of Curtains on one page and gave cures for instability on the next.
2. The man makes much of his living writing stories so that the people of the land might be entertained and enlightened. Perhaps, given the state-of-the-art, it would be safest to stick with MS-DOS for the time being. Furthermore he would never again let Curtains files share disk space with his valuable DOS files, lest his story files go kerflooie. This was confirmed by advice from a friend, an author, who won't even let Curtains and DOS files share the same physical disk drive. He has suffered collateral damage to *his* DOS files, too.
3. The man understands that the programs one gets from bulletin boards may not be up to the quality of 'professional applications' bought from computer retailers. Maybe 'professional applications' are more stable. But the man is certainly not going to spend heaps of money for something he doesn't really need, just to find out.
4. The man has noticed that DOS spelled backwards is SOD, and he recognizes that other people's thinking may sometimes be valid, even if it doesn't agree with his. He also notes that a new version of Curtains, claimed to be 'more stable', is coming out in late 1994. He is prepared to look at it with an open mind.
5. The man sees the writing on the wall. He knows that today he can blast out the words for stories and let someone else (the Editor) do the production. But someday, as magazines economize, his stories may have to be submitted complete as 'camera-ready copy'. This is known as 'desktop publishing' and can only be done successfully using Curtains. So the man is going to teach himself to love Curtains, whether he likes it or not... ❖