

A typewriter kind of gal struggles in a PC world

By EVE GLICKSMAN

Ogden Nash was on to something when he observed that progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on for far too long. In principle, I'm all for the wonders of modern science. Where would we be without steam engines, measles vaccines and automatic focus?

But my likeness to Thoroughly Modern Millie came to a halt five years ago when a computer entered my life. Since then, I've been caught between a disk and a hard drive. A flunk in Gary Larson's "School for the Mechanically Declined."

According to my Random House *technophobes* were classified as a species between 1960 and 1965 — a period Wonder Bread presciently dubbed my formative years. Growing up with mainframe sensibilities, I was influenced by a generation that reveled in self-reliance, simplicity and doing one's own thing.

Today, marching to the sound of a different low-tech drummer is professional blasphemy. It is no mere coincidence that PC is the term for both personal computer *and* politically correct.

In a rare moment of Republican sympathy, I felt for George Bush when the new Clinton team criticized him for promoting a technological backwater in the White House. It's as if using electronic mail is now a moral imperative. Here's an American who is not ashamed to admit he can't program his videocassette recorder. Don't ask him to do *windows*.

MS-DOS was not my first language either. If the truth be told, I would have been perfectly content to live out my days thinking a laptop was where you sit a child and that a compatible interface is what you hope for on blind dates. Moreover, there's something humiliating about spending thousands of dollars on an otherworldly contraption that rejects your commands. As Calvin Trillin once noted, what good is a spell-checker if it can't get past words like "wacko"?

Don't tell me there isn't premeditated malice in the minds of the makers. The Pentagon spent \$40 billion on computer equipment it now can't use because the Army and Navy systems don't mesh. Whoever invented the term "user-friendly" should be downloaded and purged. Note that the word "computer" comes from a Latin term meaning "to think" — which is what you should do very carefully before buying one.

Nor are disks the only things that come floppy. Nothing is good to the last bite in this business. By the time you master your hardware, count on

the company coming out with a faster, cheaper, better-than-ever model.

They don't call it Random Access Memory for nothing either. You'll discover just how random and inaccessible it is when you try to install a desktop publishing program. Then, try buying memory chips, not to be confused with Doritos. In my case, the chip specifications were apparently too obvious for inclusion in the handy reference manual. Which begs the question: If they can make computers that can store *War and Peace* in the space of a fingernail, why can't they write a decent manual given the thickness of a Russian novel?

My quest to leap tall documents in a single click plods on. Now, the prerequisite program for my new software — the one I made sure I had — is not quite right. It only says you need Wordperfect 5.0 on the box; omitted is that the program must be dated 1989 or later. I, of course, bought mine in 1988. Welcome to the Age of Information.

Still, in a have- and have-not society, it's better to have. Ask the Veterans Benefit Administration that spent \$94 million on a new computer system to speed up the claims process; it used to take 151 days per claim, now it takes 140.

Call it "the new dress requires the matching bag and shoe" phenomenon. The instruction manuals are written to obscure the fact that you'll need five more peripherals to make the thing blink. You're lured into buying one dazzle and derring-do trick ... and you end up spending twice that on required updates and accessories. It's a conspiracy worthy of Oliver Stone.

I slip into the final stages of terminal stress. I try calling some computer-literate (now there's an oxymoron) friends for advice. Maybe you should just buy a Mac, said one about my not-state-of-the-art-any-more IBM compatible. A client suggested a modem while I was at it. A second-sized disk drive might be helpful, recommended another. I should have known better than to seek sympathy from people who use the word "upgrade" with abandon.

Add-on is just another name for nothing left to lose. Sighing deeply, I think back to the good ol' days when a bad equipment day meant getting your hands all dirty from changing the typewriter ribbon. Progress is little more than the exchange of one nuisance for another, it's been said.

Go configure.

Eve Glicksman, a freelance writer in Center City, is using proceeds from this article to hire a computer consultant.

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