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Acquisitions Archaeology -- The Demise of Software as a Thing, or "It's the End of the World as we Know It" (Vol. 2 No. 4, September 1990)

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Acquisitions Archaeology — The Demise of Software as a Thing, or "It's the End of the World as we Know It" (Vol. 2 No. 4, September 1990)

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And I feel fine. I have been thinking a lot about things recently, especially information things. I should note here at the outset that I know very little about software in the technical sense. Therefore, the subject of this particular investigation is really more about things (in the general sense) than about software (in any sense). Like previous investigations, this investigation will also be, tangentially, about music.

"Thing(s)" — much like "stuff" — means more than it should and less than it might. People who are philosophers (and/or people like me who pretend occasionally to be one) really like words that fit such a description of being at once more-and-less than they are because it means that we can talk and/or write about whatever we want. Anyone who has read this far into this column will be pleased or dismayed to know that I will limit my discussion of "things" to the library or, as a philosopher might put it, The Library.

I have made a couple of forays into the discussion about things and the library on some previous occasions, both in *ATG* and elsewhere. I'm already in danger of making this topic my "thing," but as a noun that can be glossed as "any conceivable entity, tangible or otherwise," I'm unlikely to exhaust the possibilities within my lifetime, for better or worse.

So with those things in mind, I'd like to frame the rest of my discussion within the context of the September 1990 issue of *ATG*. To place that issue in context, I was starting high school just about the time that that issue was being mailed out. I had recently forsaken **Milli Vanilli** for a much more hip (and far less fraudulent) **REM**. No doubt starting both a new school and new decade were very exciting things at the time, but I don't really REMember. **Pontiac's Aztek**, **Peter Garrett's** political career,[1] and **REM's** "Shiny Happy People" were still equally improbable future things. However, the single "Stand" was still a relatively recent release, so perhaps we really should have anticipated "Shiny Happy People" after all.

All this, of course, has nothing to do with anything except, perhaps, life and how to live it.

So back to *ATG* and software and things. **Katina** ends the issue on p. 38 with the following announcement:

"Attention: Articles and replies intended for publication can be sent in IBM or Macintosh formats using a 5¼ or 3½ inch disks. WP options include almost any format, but please specify."

I can't remember the last time I sent anything in anywhere on a disk. With that distance in time, it is easy to forget that one could at one point organize their digital information universe much like a library of print things. REMember those cool plastic cases for sorting your disks? Me neither.

On page 22, my favorite full-page ad for **REMO** was run[2] featuring the small drawing of a 5¼ inch disk that represented, of all things, the future. This is complemented by a **Blackwell** ad on page 7 that offers new titles either on a disk (that is, for us, Disk) or "on line" via dial-up with "PC/modem hardware." **Blackwell** included two telling pictures with the ad. The first features an anonymous hand holding, yes, a 5¼ floppy disk. The second picture shows two people looking at a thing that appears, to contemporary eyes, to be an antique computer — the screen is about two feet deep and the CPU looks to be kind of plastic monolith, assuming something can be plastic and lithic at the same time. While the computer supposedly demonstrates being-on-line, it is clearly a computer of the Disk Age.

A similar Disk Age computer is featured again on page 33. The graphic draws your attention to **Joyce Ogburn's** "new column which will address technical issues including networking, consortia activities, electronic resources, and access." Today such topics are the preoccupation of many *ATG* articles, and it is difficult to imagine a column dedicated to all of them at once. It is somewhat of a struggle to keep in mind that that the image of the computer here and the picture in the **Blackwell** ad are symbolic of the cutting-edge future and had not yet been made quaint by the rapid advancement of hyper-technology.

I would like to finish my investigation at the beginning of the issue. **Glenda Thornton** opines on page 2 that "it would be great if all our integrated library systems electronically transmitted ordering information directly into our book vendors' computer systems." I include this only as a further reminder that computer-based information production had not yet freed information from a paradigm of physical manifestation. Those orders *not* being directly transmitted electronically were certainly being transmitted somehow, and that "somehow" likely involved something like paper.

I do not want to suggest that everything is online, because obviously that is not true. However, when we think about electronic information today, we do not think first of disks. We (probably) think first of the Web. Though some of our orders still cannot be transmitted electronically even today, most can be. All this electronic data — and the software that moves it — is not really a "thing" for us any more. The Disk Age was really the last chapter, in many ways, of a mechanical time — it was a continuation of things that made sense. A disk was a thing that a flash drive is not — a floppy disk could hold temporary information (like flash memory) but more often than not a disk was a place to save things, not a radical departure from the physical universe of things of which it was an extension.

This is not merely an academic exercise. Or, rather, this is mostly — but not entirely — an academic exercise. The thing is this: when computers appeared on the scene, we were still dealing with physical things. We could store our favorite programs and our essential data in a thing, just like we had always stored things in other things. We have gone from physical software (things) to cloud computing (access), from physical storage (things) to virtual storage (access), and are already moving *parallel to* and *away from* physical collections (things) through electronic databases, e-journals, and eBooks (access). We have made a leap from "things" to "stuff."

It is not important that we choose one direction or another. We may buy eBooks as "things," we may lease print books as "stuff." What we can learn from the disks being passed around in September 1990 is that format is now negotiable. It is not so important *what* we are thinking about in terms of format, access, and preservation because that is always conditional (e.g., what's available, what's needed, what's possible, etc.), and many of those conditions are set beyond our control. When we think "What?" we are thinking "things," and this means limitations. What is important is *how* we are thinking about format, access, and preservation. When we think "How?" we are thinking "stuff," and this means options.

And these days, I believe that's a good point for departure. 🌿

Endnotes

1. In case you didn't know that **Peter Garrett** was the lead singer of **Midnight Oil**, I'll save you the trip to **Wikipedia**.

2. See discussion in: **Jesse Holden**. "Acquisitions Archaeology — Managing Resources" *Against the Grain*, v.22#1 (Feb. 2010), p. 75, 77.