



Good morning.

Click on the door to  
sign in...



EXIT

# Microsoft Bob



HP van Braam  
Godot Foundation  
Prehensile Tales B.V.  
Likes old computers

Try one!

- Add your own text
- Add a picture
- Change a picture, text,  
or something else
- See close-up of one side  
of card, or whole card
- Print card
- Other options



Front

Left

Right

Back

All

EXIT

# Questions such as

- What?!
- Why?!
- How?!
- Follow me down the rabbit hole



# What this talk is about

- Nerding out over Old Computer Stuff
- What, if anything, can we learn from this



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# How did we get here



2010/12/27



**larsonjean**

Well-Known Member

Thread Starter

Hello,

I have a friend here who still uses his old computer running Windows 95. He said that the only thing he uses it for is to write his letters using, "Microsoft Bob (Letter Writer).

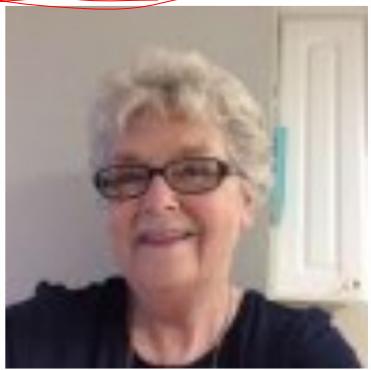
Today his computer would not boot so I went over and someone managed to get it up and running but when I opened this Microsoft



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# How did we get here

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# More questions than answers

- What is Microsoft Bob
- What is Bob Letter Writer



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# What is Microsoft Bob

**Microsoft Bob** was a [Microsoft software](#) product intended to provide a more user-friendly interface for the [Windows 3.1](#), [Windows 95](#) and [Windows NT](#) operating systems, supplanting the Windows [Program Manager](#). The program was released on March 10, 1995, and discontinued in early 1996. Microsoft Bob presented screens showing a house, with rooms that the user could visit containing familiar objects corresponding to computer applications, such as a desk with pen and paper and a checkbook. Clicking on the pen and paper would open the system's [word processor](#). A cartoon dog named Rover and other cartoon characters provided guidance using [speech balloons](#).

## Microsoft Bob



**Developer**

[Microsoft](#)

**Initial release**

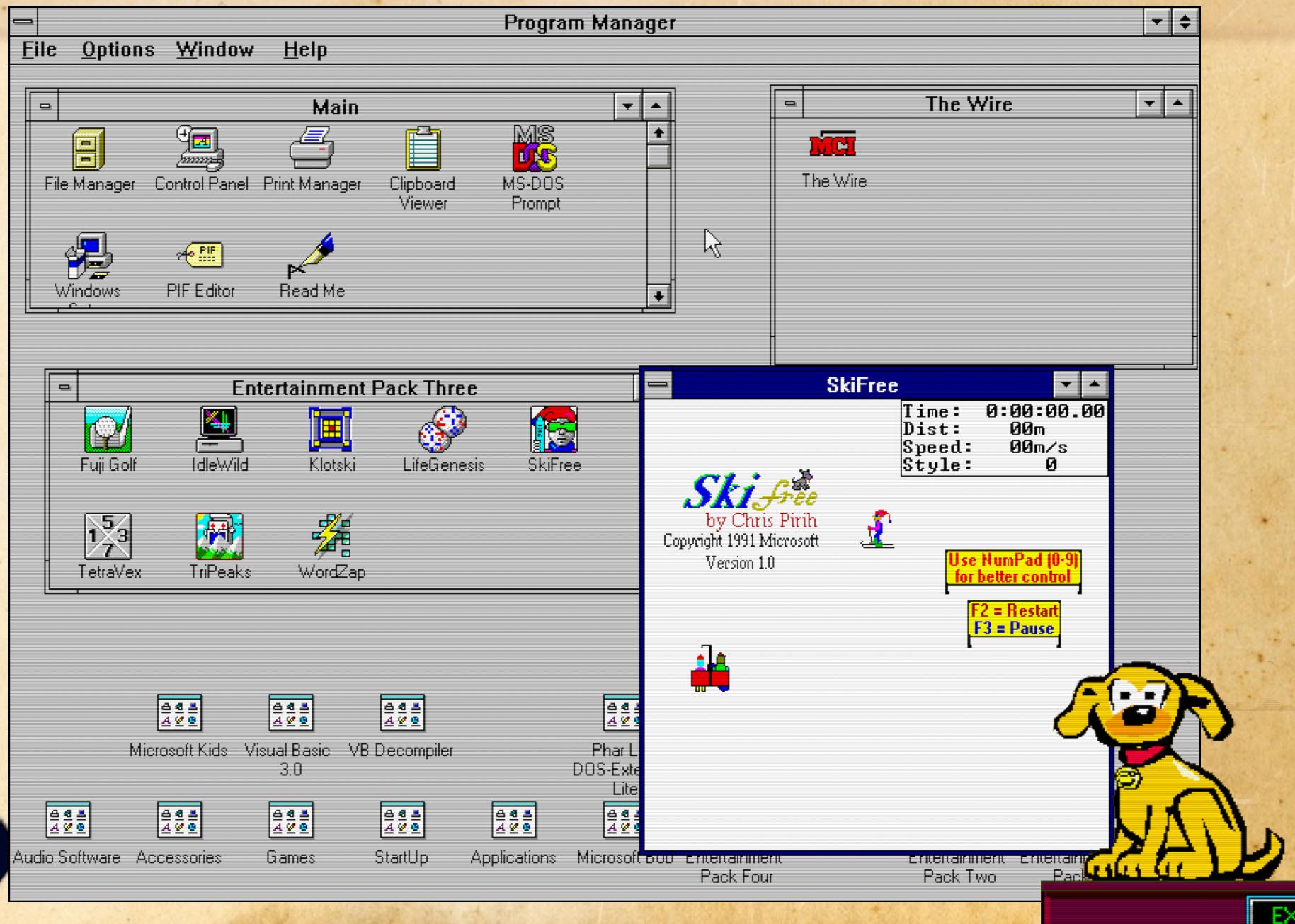
March 10, 1995; 30 years ago<sup>[1]</sup>

**Final release**

1.00a /  
August 30, 1995<sup>[1]</sup>

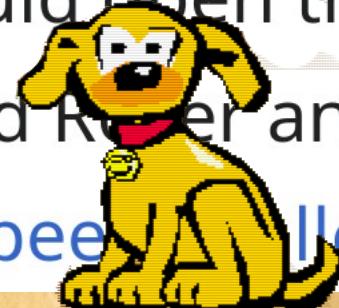


# What is program manager



## What is Microsoft Bob

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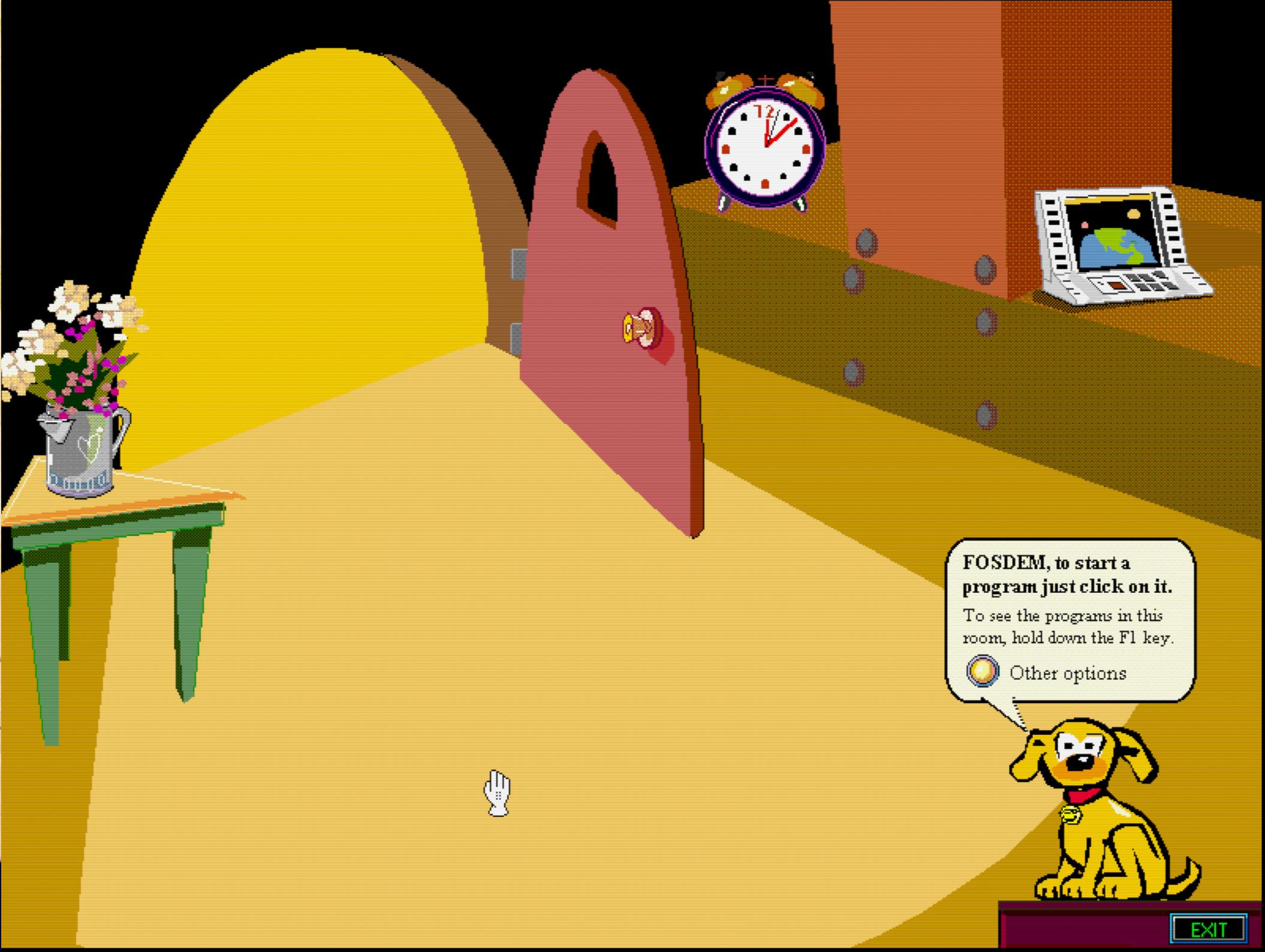


FOSDEM, to start a program just click on it.

To see the programs in this room, hold down the F1 key.

 Other options

EXIT



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EXIT



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EXIT

# This is Bob letter writer



Tell me what we should do, Bob!

Gill Sans Ultra...



41



Zoom out to  
see whole page

Print or send

Navigate within  
your letter

Change text or  
check spelling

Add an  
object

Change  
an object

Change  
the border

Other  
options



EXIT

# We're not here to poke fun

- It does kind of do all the hard work for us



EXIT

# We're not here to poke fun

- It does kind of do all the hard work for us
- But there is a sort of irresistible earnestness to it



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# Good Things – Scaleable graphics



# Good Things – Scaleable graphics



EXIT

# Good Things – Scaleable graphics



# Good Things – Integration



# Good Things – Integration



# Good Things – Integration

bob's Calendar 2026

February

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3				
8	9	10				
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

9:00 AM Event from Bob Address Book

Hey! Camper! Type a description of the event here.

Birthday Mx. FOSDEM.

Recur once a year

Remind you?

Do you want me to remind you of this event?

No  
Yes, on time  
15 min. before  
1 hr. before  
1 day before  
2 days before  
 1 week before

Special options

A-OK ✓

Day Week Month To Do

# Good Things – Integration



# Good Things – Super woke



# Good Things – Secure?



# Good Things – A bit of fun



EXIT

# Good Things – A bit of fun



EXIT

# Bad things – NO UNDO!



EXIT

# Bad Things – WTF is this



EXIT

# Bad Things – WTF is this



EXIT

# Bad Things – WTF is this



EXIT

# Bad Things – WTF is this

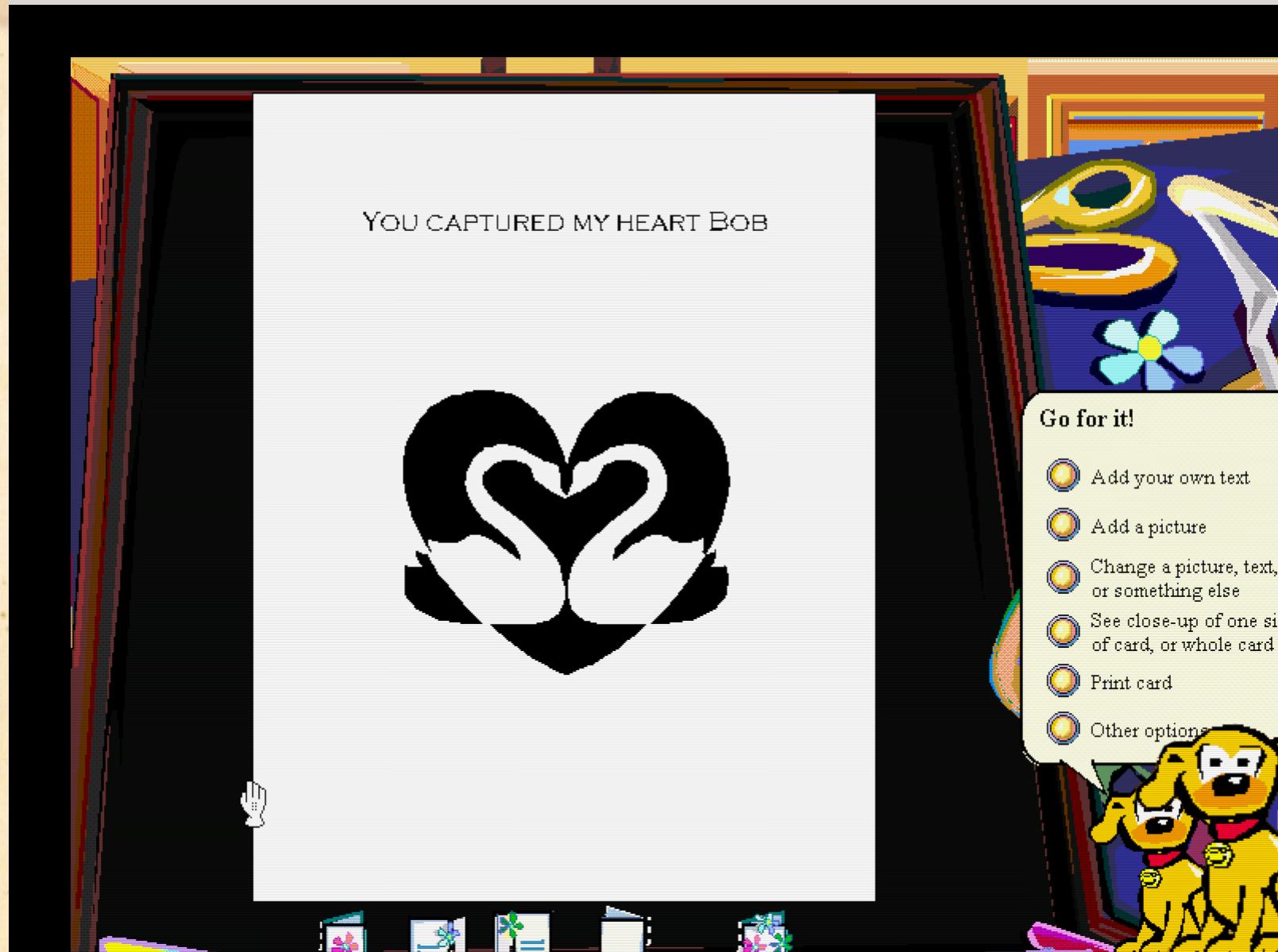


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# Bad Things – “blue” screens



# I can't help but love it



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# Software development



# Software development

- Almost all applications are made with Visual Basic 3
- Except for the calendar, and checkbook applications



EXIT

# Software development

- Almost all applications are made with Visual Basic 3
- Except for the calendar, and checkbook applications
- Yeah, that includes the whole word processor!



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# Anatomy – podium



# Anatomy – guide



# Anatomy – That's all, really



# Software development

- In the background Bob uses state of the art features!
- All databases are in MS JET format (Access!)
- Services are exposed via COM (address book, calendar, etc)
- Shared components via VBX
- The mail store is PST
- The mail client interface is MAPI



# Software development

- Some real effort was put into making Bob a solid technological foundation
- But very firmly stuck in 16bit windows land



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# Questionable choices

- While it looks like each app “runs in the room”
  - In actual fact they are all full-screen apps
- The podium manages the guide
  - But they are distinct objects
- Lot of boilerplate stuff as was the fashion of the time
  - People really loved their code generators back then



# Software development - C++

- C++ apps are possible
- The podium and guide are VBX controls
- C++ apps MUST be MFC because of this
- Everything is COM



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# Software development - C++

```
m_pPodiumCtrl = new CVBControl();
// Create the podium control
if (m_pPodiumCtrl == NULL) {
    OutputDebugString("new CVBControl failed!\n");
    return -1;
}

OutputDebugString("Created CVBControl\n");

if (!m_pPodiumCtrl->Create("UTOPIA.DLL;Podium;Exit",
    WS_VISIBLE | WS_CHILD | WS_TABSTOP | BS_OWNERDRAW,
    rectPodium,
    this,
    101,
    NULL,
    TRUE))
{
    OutputDebugString("m_pPodiumCtrl->Create failed!\n");
    delete m_pPodiumCtrl;
    m_pPodiumCtrl = NULL;
    return -1;
}
OutputDebugString("Created Podium\n");

// Make sure the podium is visible and behind the actor
m_pPodiumCtrl->>ShowWindow(SW_SHOW);
```



EXIT

# Software development - C++

```
BOOL CTheApp::InitInstance() {
    EnableVBX();
    HRESULT hr = UtopiaInitialize(&gpTask);
    UERR err;
    if (hr) {
        err = UWarnFromResult(hr);
        GetDfltStringForUErr(err, error, 255);
        MessageBox(NULL, error, "Error", MB_OK | MB_ICONSTOP);
        UtopiaUninitialize();
        OutputDebugString("UtopiaInitialize() failed\n");
        return FALSE;
    }
    gUtopiaInitialized = TRUE;
    OpenPictureServer(&pPicServer);
    CreateImageFromFile("FOUNTAIN.WMF", 0, 800, 600, &img);
    UShowStartupScreen("Bob Hello World", "TMM.CX INTERNET WID
    img->Release();

    ghcurHot = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_UPARROW);
    ghcurNormal = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_ARROW);
    ghcurKnock = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_KNOCK);
    gdxScreen = GetSystemMetrics(SM_CXSCREEN);
    gdyScreen = GetSystemMetrics(SM_CYSCREEN);

    if (!GetSystem(&gpSystem)) {
        OutputDebugString("GetSystem() failed\n");
        return FALSE;
    }
```



# Figuring it out

- Originally Ghidra on checkbook.exe
- After working on this for a couple of months someone leaked the real SDK!
- Still a lot of missing pieces...
- First demo “hello world” is a combination of guesswork based on Ghidra, VB decompilation, and guesswork based on headers.



# Very quick demo

- Very quick because the app does almost nothing :)



EXIT

# Getting back to Jean



2010/12/30



**larsonjean**  
Well-Known Member  
Thread Starter

Hi everyone,

I did find a computer that was running Works and I opened Works, then opened one of the files from the floppy drive A and it did indeed open the document. There was some garbage in the beginning but all the text seemed to be in place.

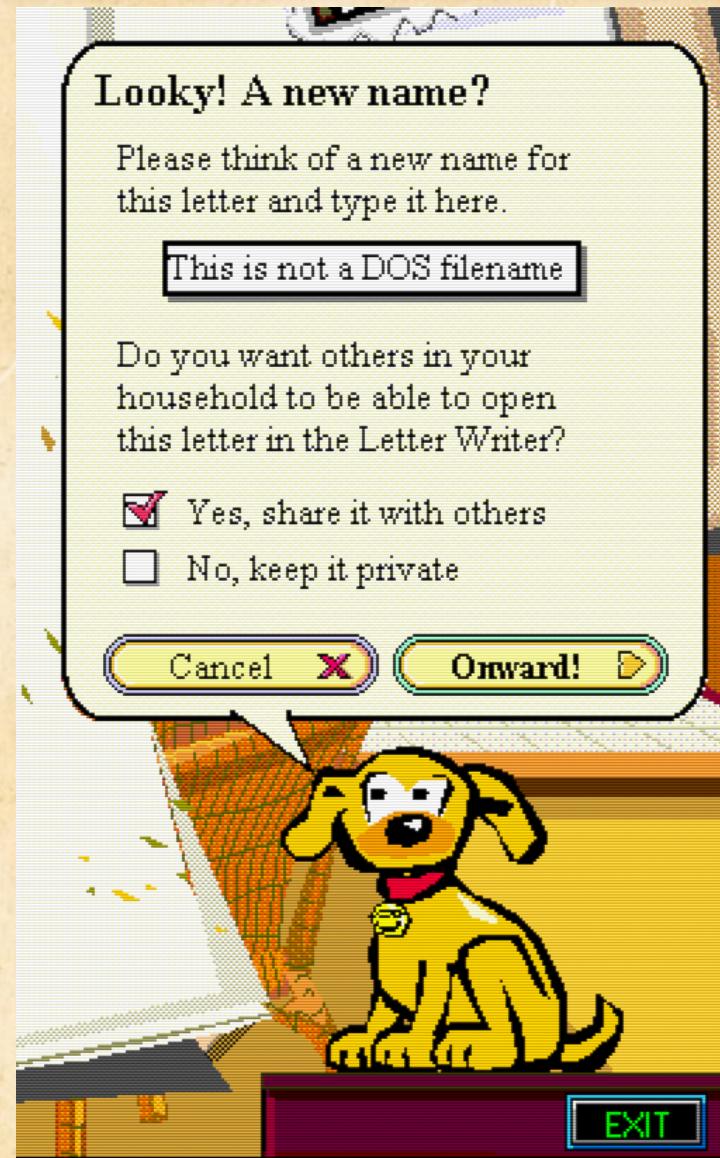
I left all the floppy disks with my friend and told him that he will have to open each document one at a time to see if he still needs the file. I didn't offer to do this for him as he had hundreds of numbered files on those floppy disks dating back to the year 2000.

It is terrible that Microsoft Bob made the person give the file a name when they wanted to save a letter but the program just saved it as a number.



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# One more quick detour



# One more quick detour

Rrruff! Which letter shall I open or delete for you?



## Change of Address



This is not a...

1/31/126 2:50p



Open a letter stored on  
a floppy disk



Open a letter not created  
with the Letter Writer

- Show letters alphabetically
- Show letters by date

Cancel



OK

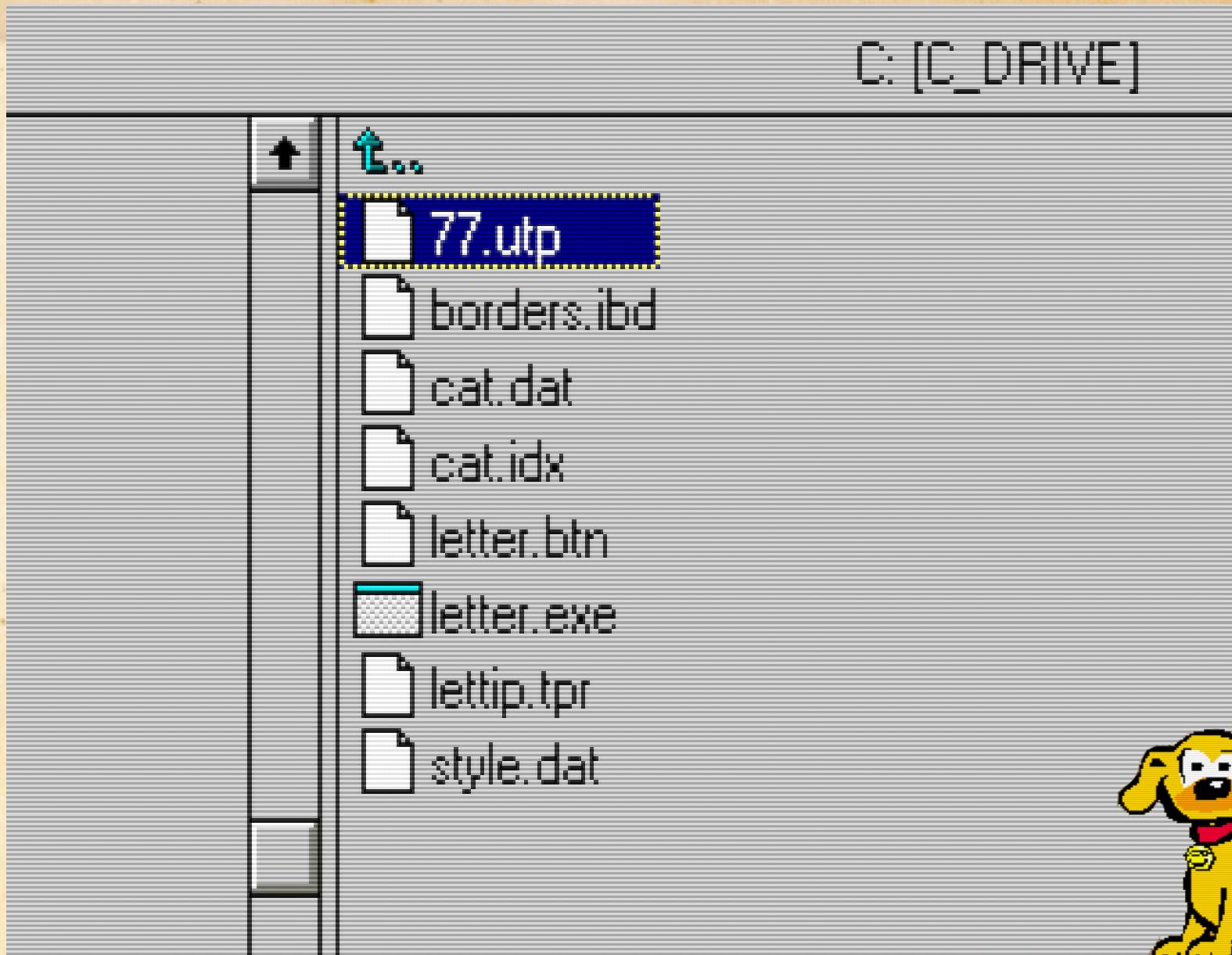


Tip: When you want to create a new  
version of a letter without changin  
the original, open a copy.



EXIT

# One more quick detour



EXIT

# One more quick detour

- Bob stores the “Bob filenames” in a database
- The user never sees the real files



EXIT

# Jean was not able to figure it out

- Would you be able to figure out where the metadata of your friends and families is?
- I believe that Bob was not designed to be “captive” in the way that modern software is.
- Yet even accidentally it managed to be.
- Modern SAAS seems to do this on purpose.
- Preaching to the choir; Open data formats for (meta) data matter to regular people too!



# Thank you – and Questions

- Want to play with Bob?
  - <https://bob.estate>
- Want to see more of my retro nonsense?
  - [https://patreon.com/Retro\\_Rabbit\\_Hole](https://patreon.com/Retro_Rabbit_Hole)
- Want to hire me for to do tech stuff?
  - <https://prehensile-tales.com>
- Want to learn more about MCI/Bob Mail stuff?
  - Watch my talk tomorrow at 14:00 in H.1302 (Depage)
- Follow me on Mastodon!
  - [@hp@tmm.cx](mailto:@hp@tmm.cx)

