A new lease of life

BEFORE YOU BANISH YOUR BELOVED SYSTEM BOX TO THAT GREAT SKIP IN THE SKY, THINK: COULD SOMEONE ELSE FIND A USE FOR IT? SUSAN PEDERSON SUGGESTS WAYS TO PROLONG THE LIFE OF YOUR PC.

Computer hardware and software gets faster and cheaper every year, the consequence being that you're buying a product with built-in redundancy. Sooner rather than later, it's going to be old news. In the last year, the City of London alone discarded nearly 1,800 tons of electronic rubbish. But there are things you can do to help extend your PC's natural life and ensure it doesn't just end up in a tip somewhere.

Community spirit

You may not want your PC any more, but you can bet there are millions of people out there who'd give their eye-teeth for it. The question is, how do you get it to them? Quite a number of organisations have sprung up over the past couple of years that specialise in taking in old kit from businesses (and to a lesser extent, from individuals), cleaning it up, then passing it on to charities and schools in the UK and further afield. So if you'd like your PC to see India, or you want to give inner city kids a leg up the technology ladder, this is the place to start.

Bytes Twice can put you in touch with your closest community computer re-use project, most of which will take all working PCs with a 386 processor or higher. Many projects are only able to accept lots of donations from businesses because of the economies of scale involved, but it's always worthwhile for individuals to check. Charities, community organisations and schools can apply to Bytes Twice to receive free PCs (there will be a transport charge).

ComputerAid will send old PCs to education, health and community organisations in developing countries. The Charities Aid Foundation publishes a book called *Waste Not*, listing organisations in need of computers, printers and faxes.
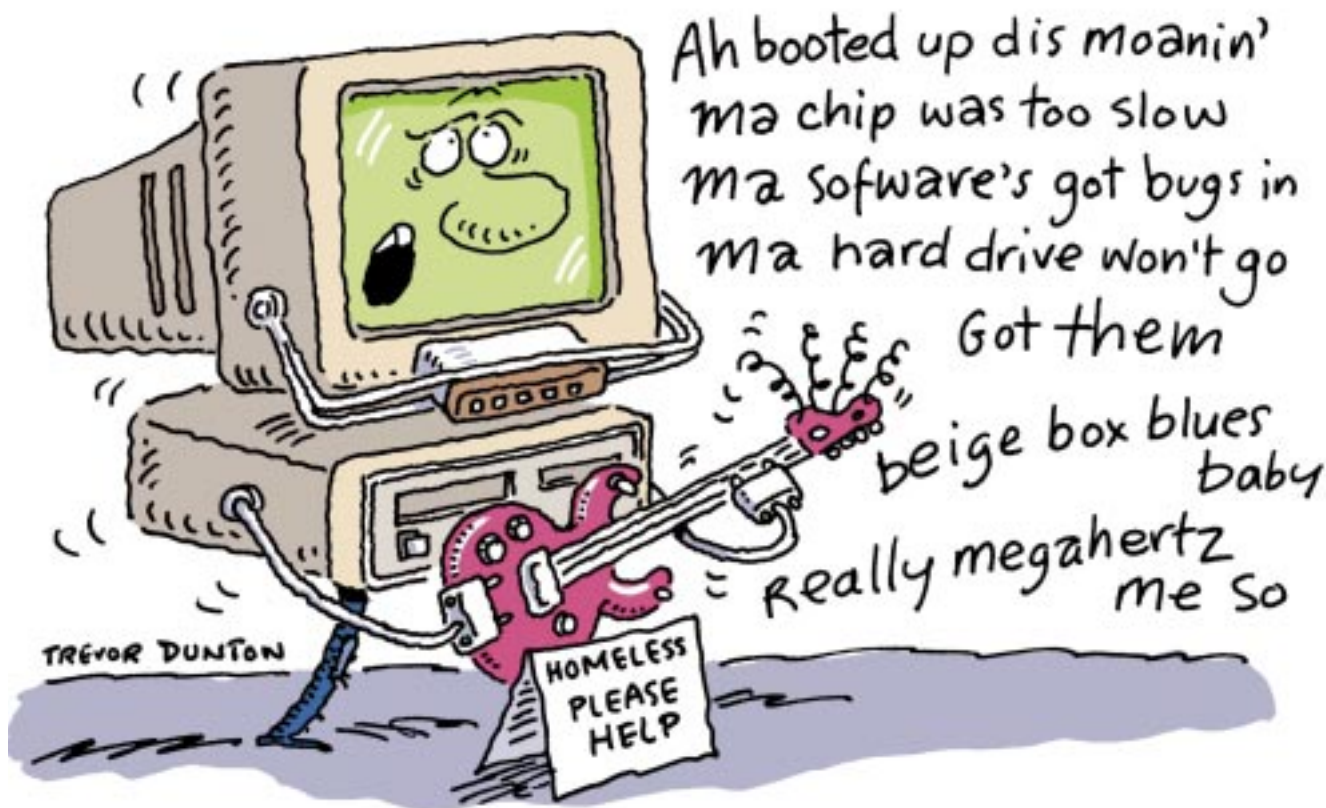
Businesses are also realising there's money to be made out of redundant PCs. Technical Asset Management (TAM) takes old PCs from businesses (50-1,000 units), reconditions them and resells them for a commission, sometimes to another part of the same company. All the PCs are thoroughly cleaned, tested, data-wiped and given new software.

TAM has opened a retail showroom in Welwyn Garden City where you can pick up an IBM or Compaq P100 with a 15in screen and CD-ROM for £300 ex VAT. It also sells 486s for about £100, as well as laptops, software and games. Further showrooms may be opened shortly. (*See page 132 for contact numbers.*)

Charity begins at home

So, you've just bought a new PC and your extended family and friends have been making noises about how much they'd like to give the old one a new home. In many ways, this is an ideal solution. You get rid of the old clunker, they get a free (or at least cheap!) PC, and you also get the warm glow that only comes from giving. And it's not just families with children that can benefit: older and retired people are also taking up computing in great numbers. As someone who lives 4,500 miles from her parents, it was a joyous day for me when they acquired an email address (although not so joyous for BT).

But there can be pitfalls. Your PC is likely to have 'quirks' (otherwise, why would you be getting rid of it?) and you may well find yourself acting as an unofficial and unpaid technical support hotline whenever it starts playing up. The recipient may also have support and licensing difficulties if the PC and software is registered in your name. And if they haven't any computer skills, you'll have to resign yourself to showing them how to use various programs each

Ah booted up dis moanin'
ma chip was too slow
ma sofware's got bugs in
ma hard drive won't go
Got them
beige box blues
baby
Really megahertz
me so

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HOMELESS
PLEASE
HELP

time you visit them. It may be a small price to pay, though, for reclaiming the cupboard where it's been languishing for six months.

Alternatively, you could look into DIY networking. The easiest solution will probably be to place the PCs on opposing desks and connect them directly to each other to create instant Doom marathons. If you really want to impress your friends, try wiring the PCs together throughout the house to create a unique paging system for dinner. Remember, many networking configurations will require Windows 95 on all PCs. You could also designate one as an internet terminal and place it in a communal area for easy access and supervision. An online guide to creating your own home LAN is at www.geocities.com/siliconvalley/pines/1903.

Clean-up operation

When a PC has been around the block a few times, it tends to get grubby. While you won't be able to do much about the natural yellowing of a PC's casing, you can use special computer cleaners. Kevin Heydon, who collects and restores old PCs, has a list of suggestions from other collectors for removing dirt without harming the computer, at www.heydon.org. You should also ensure the PC and its components are safe to use, especially if you're handing it on to someone else.

You could be liable if they are injured by a faulty electrical connection. If you're confident in your abilities, Morris Rosenthal's online version of *The Hand-Me-Down PC: Upgrading and Repairing Personal Computers* is at www.daileyint.com/hmdpc. If you're not, call a qualified technician.

If you want your PC to run more smoothly, you may want to consider reformatting the hard disk to get rid of random drivers and bits of uninstalled programs. But be warned — you'll have to know exactly what you're doing before you attempt this, and you'll need all the relevant operating system and application disks to hand if you ever want it to work again. You should check the disks are still in good condition. If they've been sitting in a dusty box for the last five years, they may not work. You don't want to discover this when it's too late.

If you decide to pass on your computer to a school, charity, friend or relative, make sure you haven't left anything on the hard disk that might come back to haunt you. It can be difficult to be sure that you've deleted all of your financial records and private correspondence from the directories. Even reformatting the hard disk won't permanently eliminate them if the recipient knows what they're doing, because often, when something is deleted, it's only the link to the file that disappears, not the file itself. ➤

▲ **Before handing your old computer over to its new owner, it might be worth giving it a wash and brush-up. Safety is an important consideration, though (see main text, this page)**

Illustration by Trevor Dunton

JUST LIKE THE OLD DAYS

We may not have yet reached the day when a Commodore Vic-20 sells for millions at Sotheby's, but it doesn't mean they're not valuable. The computer industry has evolved with such incredible speed, there are fears that older specimens could disappear — and take a whole era of technological history with them. Some people are trying to keep these memories alive, and a search for retro computers turns up hundreds of internet sites devoted to even the most ill-fated machines. By and large, these sites are maintained by dedicated enthusiasts who receive no funding for their virtual museums. Many of these 'curators' are keen to acquire missing links in their collections, as well as working parts and software.

The Computer Conservation Society, which runs the Computer Museum at Bletchley Park, also works to conserve historic computers. The Computer Museum houses the rebuilt Colossus as well as a collection of machines showing the history of the PC from a 1975 Altair to the present. It is looking for people to help restore and maintain exhibits and write visitor information sheets. It is also looking for donations of any significant computer hardware — the older (and more British) the better — as well as appropriate software, games and documentation.

The Computer Conservation Society 01908 640404
www.cs.man.ac.uk/CCS
Virtual Museum of Computing
www.comlab.ox.ac.uk/archive/other/museums/computing.html
Kevan Heydon's Computer Collection
www.heydon.org/kevan/collection/index.html

THREE USES FOR A DEAD PC

Reached the conclusion that the old war-horse is a lost cause? Don't worry. There are still a few options…

☛ **Jewel case**
They say the future of haute couture is silver lamé suits and coats that think. Get a jump on the fashion victims and make a statement with eye-catching chip earrings or monogrammed cufflinks made out of keys.

☛ **That's smashing!**
If you've had a hard day at work, don't take it out on your loved ones. The Illustrated Guide to Breaking your Computer <http://members.aol.com/spoons1000/break/index.html> explains in hilarious detail exactly how to wreak your revenge on the machine that's been tormenting you for so long. Remember to bring your safety goggles and your hacksaw.

☛ **Fun for pets**
It's rumoured that the head honcho at Intel uses a clapped-out 286 case as a cat-litter box. But why stop there? Try fashioning a swing for your canary out of leftover cable, or carve out your monitor's insides to make an ultra-modern ant farm or fishbowl (just make sure you have some duct tape handy).

TAM offers two products to ensure that when you delete something, it stays deleted. Shredder sits on your system and permanently erases every file you delete, while Sanitizer wipes absolutely everything off the system — the OS included. These products can be pricey as a one-off purchase for an individual, but the price drops dramatically if you're buying multiple copies for your business. If you plan to donate your PC through a broker or a recycling project, make sure you find out what kind of cleansing process they use before you hand it over.

Upgrading: is it worth it?

We haven't yet discussed upgrading your old PC hardware, mainly because if your machine is old enough, it probably won't be worth it. A better monitor and an external hard drive may be good investments, however. Your PC might not be equipped with the latest and greatest processor, but with the right kind of software, you'll find its performance improves dramatically. Surprisingly, if your system is tuned properly, you may get better results sticking with the hardware you have, along with a compact operating system and software with a smaller footprint, than upgrading to a Pentium with bloatware. Sometimes, it really is best to leave well enough alone.

PCW CONTACTS

Bytes Twice *0171 248 0242*
www.wastewatch.org.uk
Charities Aid Foundation *01732 520000*
www.caf.org.uk
ComputerAid International *0831 190099*
www.cit.org.uk/computeraid
Technical Asset Management
01707 333555 **www.tam.co.uk**