

Byting broccoli

Unfortunately there was an editing error (my fault). The full quote from Nick was:

It's like one of the bacteria in our digestive tract trying to communicate with us about the 2007 broccoli we are forcing them to digest when they prefer the 2003 broccoli

Which makes a little more sense



'Byting broccoli' – a wise quotation from Nicholas Barr in relation to taking on Microsoft.

In that restless period between Christmas and the new year (when you realise that you over spent, over ate and over drank, and that January and February are looming) I was doing some unaccustomed sorting out of those things that get put in the attic just in case they might be useful one day.

In a plastic bag with the corner nibbled away by a mouse I found my first computer. The home computer revolution started in an era when Apple referred exclusively to fruit and the only PC in existence was often called Plod as he proceeded in a northerly direction.

What I held in my hand was a Sinclair ZX81. In real terms it cost, more than 30 years ago, at least as much as a sophisticated laptop, but what did it have to offer? It had no screen (you had to plug it into a television), no disc drives (a cassette tape recorder had to make do) and no keyboard to speak of – just some numbers on a flat surface that you pressed and if you were lucky they registered on the television screen.

It came with one kilobyte of memory – expandable to what was then described as an impressive 16 kilobytes by the addition of something the size of half a brick.

An average computer now will have etched onto a chip smaller than a postage stamp several billion times the memory of that 'impressive' 15 kilobyte brick. Then computers were mute, incompatible and either filled a room or were no use to anyone. Now, largely through the efforts of Microsoft, computers are universally compatible throughout the world.

The Outlook is bleak

Yet I blame Microsoft entirely for my almost terminal depression on Blue Monday – widely regarded as the most depressing day of the year. The company has evolved into being like our digestive system – not particularly pleasant but vital to our lives.

My rant concerns that friendly message that sometimes appears when I wake up in the morning: that Microsoft restarted my computer because it was installing an important update.

But on that day just as I was trying forlornly to get my tax information off to my accountant, I woke to find that Mr Bill Gates and his friends had done in my computer's brain.

I live for my emails. Every now and then I even get one from someone who has read this back page. More frequently I get an antsy email from the editor asking me where my contribution has got to. The truth these days is that I can no more live without emails than I can without a large intestine.

My computer and I have lived in relative harmony for just over two years with both of us using ancient programmes. It has been like owning a classic car. It is comfortable, well worn and I know all its foibles. In computer terms a seven-year-old programme is verging on antique. I did not want to change it as it was not broken.

So, when my computer greeted me with a message not only that Microsoft had shut down my computer but had also removed the little icon for Outlook version 2003 (I hope you are all following this. You might get some CPD points if you behave well) and replaced it with the Outlook 2007 button, a grey morning turned to black. Not only that, it told me there was a fault with Outlook 2003. I was to tick the box if I wanted to restart the programme and report the fault.

Loop the loop

I was stuck in an endless loop of shutting down, reporting the fault, starting up and shutting down again. You would have thought that if Microsoft had a soul it would have realised my suffering and immediately sent me a message to say that help was at hand. But it didn't – because it hasn't.

When Microsoft introduce a new version of its programmes it is a like coming home to find that someone has rearranged your house. Your bed is in the bathroom. There is a dog kennel where the dishwasher used to be and you find the cutlery in the garage along with your shirts. There is a washing machine where the television used to be and you cannot find the loo at all. It may be that

these changes are strictly logical, but most of us prefer familiarity and sameness.

It was therefore with considerable reservation that in desperation I let it have its way and install the 2007 version of the programme as that is clearly what it wanted to do.

I pressed the right button and Microsoft jumped for joy, filling my screen like a car salesman with the glitz of its new wares. But then it spoiled it by demanding that I enter my 25-character product key.

Now, if I ever had a 25-character product key, I certainly do not have it now. I tried typing in the space provided 'I don't have a key' but Mr Gates did not like that: 'I' is not a valid character in a product key, he told me.

Half an hour of frantic searching in my CDs of programmes and my box files of instructions failed to yield a single set of 25 characters – let alone the correct ones.

I was stymied. I felt that all my vital organs were shutting down: no emails, a programme locked in an endless cycle of being shut down, no product key. Now what?

When you have a computer problem, the solution is to not to wave your arms at the software company. You seek help from the youngest person you can think of. After pointing out that to Microsoft my position had all the importance of a single microbe kicking up a fuss about which type of broccoli to digest, my son gave me the solution.

If you are in that predicament click start, then programmes, accessories, system tools, and then system restore – and pick a date when your computer was behaving fine. And, if that puts you off, then just put up with 2007 broccoli.

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