

I found her yesterday in a corner of my company's attic, during the general clean-up which was being postponed month after month, as every potentially annoying task usually is.

The day I brought her back

She just laid there at the top shelf, her small monitor terribly burnt out and her keyboard covered with dust. I was delighted to discover her, but at the same moment rather tired after just tearing down and moving outside all of the garbage. I only took a look at her, especially at the magnificent



keyboard of the classic design – with Return instead of Enter, arrows in one row and lots of function and otherwise interestingly named keys which purpose I could only suspect.

But after a while, I came back. It was Friday afternoon and I couldn't just leave her alone for the whole weekend. I took her down to my room and plugged her into the main.

To be honest, I didn't expect her to be still alive. I was even a little bit hesitant as to whether to turn her on, because she could easily fry power network on half of the floor. And

yet I did it. After moving one of those giant switches you don't see anymore these days, at first it seemed nothing happened, as there was absolutely no noise one expects when powering on a computer. But after a while – to my great surprise, as I was about to give up – a small, amber (what else!) rectangle of pixels appeared in the upper left corner of the screen. A cursor. A live, blinking cursor.

This was still the only sign of life she gave me, but I understood then – she was, after all, just a terminal. She had no fan, she had no hard drive, she booted up in a second and was just quietly, for the first time in several years, waiting to receive and transmit data. But I had no data for her. I didn't know what plugs to put in her only two identical sockets and at first I thought she won't ever come to life without a mainframe on the other end, supplying her with bytes of information she must have been so longing for.

But then once again, just when I was about to leave my work, I thought that I couldn't leave her like that. I turned her on again. After

a lengthy while of reexamining the keyboard I pressed one of the buttons which seemed familiar and, lo and behold, amber (what else!) word “CAPS” started glowing on the screen.

That was a sign that she wasn't that much damaged, and maybe wasn't damaged at all. And a couple of minutes later I discovered another button, which pressed while holding Shift revealed a small, crude, yet working configuration menu at the bottom of the screen. I couldn't remember being that excited in weeks. I quickly found a way to change a size of a cursor, screen's width or – what was most important – turn on “local echo,” so I could start writing. And even knowing that there's no chance to store the text and anything I'd write would eventually disappear, I'd still continue, the fatigued keyboard only adding to the experience. And after a while, some of the long forgotten facts came back to me – much to my amazement, I could make her beep at me, or turn on semigraphics and start drawing some boxes, having the same fun as with my first computer ever, back in the 1980s.

Why am I writing such a long passage on a computer which has less processing power than an average modern cellular phone and which I have no personal connection with whatsoever? And why am I so strangely addressing her as if she wasn't just a piece of hardware?

The answer is simple. She's almost my age. She's from the times I only vaguely remember – and even that because I joined the whole game rather early. The times when speed was given in single-digit megahertz and storage space in kilobytes. The times when words such as “antialiasing” or “Internet” meant nothing. The times when computers – then called microcomputers – weren't just boring, similar boxes becoming obsolete the moment they were bought, and getting replaced every couple of months. The

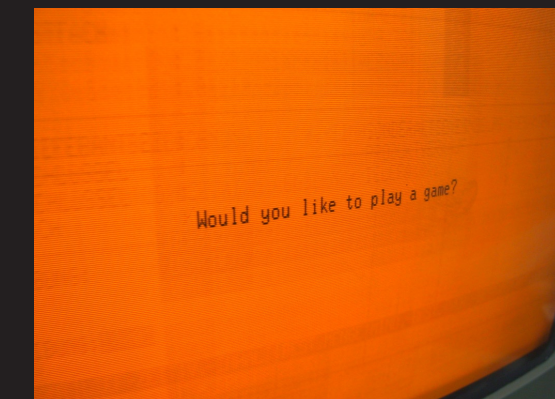
times when there was less business and more... magic, simply magic.

I miss the magic. And I miss those times. Even if I'm still rather young, I miss my old 8-bit Atari and the PC/XT clone – and at the same time the last computer in my house with a personality, and the last computer I was genuinely excited about first getting, and later using.

This is not only in retrospect, because right now I'm reliving that feeling again, thanks to her. Maybe being a computer scientist for so long allowed me to develop appreciation for every little shred of life in such a lifeless environment, or maybe I've always looked at the computers a little bit different, as if they were something more than just silicon-based, artificial machines.

But even if I suppose her days will be over rather sooner than later, I won't let her die useless, collecting dust at the attic. She was there for more than five years and she certainly deserves more than that. And I'll find a way to get her some data and make her useful again – not only for her, not only for me, but for old times' sake. Because it's a one way street – in twenty years the familiar smell of cathode ray tubes and wires will be as obsolete, as 8” disks and terminal typewriters are now.

It's just scary to imagine how I'll be missing these times then.



by Marcin Wichary