

/dev/random

(Parenthetically Speaking)

ROBERT G. FERRELL



Robert G. Ferrell is an information security geek biding his time until that genius grant finally comes

through.

rgferrell@gmail.com

It's sobering (presuming the only time you think about these things is when you're intoxicated) to contemplate that computers rule virtually every aspect of our modern lives, yet all they really do is add or subtract ones and zeroes. That's it. The most sophisticated massively parallel six jillion-CPU supercomputer is really nothing more than a silicon-based incarnation of Clever Hans the Math Horse. You can dress it up with all the fancy-schmancy terminology and protocols and standards and engineering specs that you want, it's still just an abacus with two beads. One and zero. Up and down. On and off. Plus and minus. Yin and yang.

Imagine, then, if you will, (sorry, my comma key keeps getting in the way) the awesome power of a computer that could use three or even *four* beads. There's no reason to stop with only two, is there? Maybe a quark-based processor or something. Never again will we have to go get a cup of coffee while we wait for our ancient binary-generation PCs laboriously churning out their meager ones and zeroes. With quaternary processors the answer will be available before we finish asking for it.

Take this even one step further now and imagine *quantum* quaternary computers (Q2-puters)! These processors will be so powerful they will come up with the questions *for* you, even before you're *born*. There will be a new family ritual in which mom and dad will take you aside one day when you're old enough to understand and ceremonially present you with the storage device (probably too small to see with the naked eye by then) containing every digital inquiry you will make in your entire life, along with the answers, all thanks to your household Q2-puter (now available in mauve and tangerine).

Once all intellectual inquiry is moot, we as a species can move on to more engaging pastimes. We've already got killing each other down to a fine art, although I have no doubt we will continue to refine that process, but I'm thinking of something a little less extinction-oriented, like a global MMORPG that uses real currency, motion controllers, ultra-broadband video teleconferencing, and touch-sensitive mittens to allow absolutely everyone on the planet to interact in some fantasy world with unicorns and dragons. (A bit like the Olympics, but more inclusive and grounded in reality, with fewer anabolic steroids involved.) Of course, all of the hardware would be miniaturized and wireless, so you could play anytime, anywhere. You could even be sowing your crops or farming your gold at 35,000 feet on the way from Boise to St. Petersburg. A plane full of squirming, swinging, hacking passengers (and, if past experience is any indicator, pilots) in tiny aircraft seats.

Why blur the line between fantasy and reality when you can rub it out altogether? (Definitely a staple practice for talk show hosts.)

What else can we do in a world with no need for Google? Devote even more time and effort to being rude to one another, I suppose. We never seem to run out of energy or innovation in that field of endeavor. Since I'm just full of radical ideas today, here's another one that came to me late last night when I was counting voters...er...sheep.

You know how in some families there's a jar where you have to deposit a certain amount of money whenever you utter a word not approved for use in the household—"cuss words," as my granddad called them? I think we need one of those in both houses of Congress. Every time some Distinguished Senator or Representative poops out a gratuitous crude pejorative aimed at one of his or her colleagues, 10 dollars needs to be dropped in the jar. We could make a substantial dent in the national debt with this income, methinks. It might also encourage the return of witty repartee in politics, a phenomenon that has not graced this hapless nation in many years. In fact, I would go so far as to posit that wit and political acumen (and by that I mean a talent for climbing over the bloated bodies of your butchered opponents to reach the pinnacle of the dung heap) are seen by this past brace of generations as polar opposites. As an example, take this exchange from the British House of Commons:

Bessie Braddock: "Winston, you are drunk!"

Winston Churchill: "Bessie, you're ugly. And tomorrow morning *I* will be sober."

If this had happened in our current House of Representatives, it would have gone something like this:

Rep 1: "Sounds like you've done had too much corn-squeezins' again, conservative know-nothing."

Rep 2: "Yeah, why don't you just tax me into oblivion, liberal elitist tool?"

Except that I can't print the actual epithets here, this being more or less a family publication ('cause we all know that 10-year-olds constitute the lion's share of Linux installs these days).

OK, I'm over it.

Moving on, I'd like to address the infinitely depressing and intensely aggravating policy of a certain well-known IT company (the enlightened rightly refer to it as more of a cult) of charging developers for the privilege of writing application code for their platform. Let's translate this heinous practice into a more sanguine context.

Let's say, hypothetically, that I buy a new truck (I'm a Texan, and that's what we drive here) from the local Ford lot. It comes with the usual accoutrements: cab, bed, engine, four wheels (all the cool kids actually drive dualies, but so far I've resisted the temptation to drop more on a vehicle than I did on my first house). I decide, being the innovative take-charge sort that I am, that I want to add a killer sound system so I can listen to my George Strait mp3s in surround-sound (this being San Antonio, there's like a city ordinance that you have to own at least one George Strait recording). Turns out, though, that I can't make any changes at all to my vehicle unless I pay an additional "modifier's" fee to Ford. That would fly like a

paper airplane folded from an X-ray apron here in the Lone Star State (that means not well at all, for the simile-challenged).

So, to all greedy corporate behemoths who want to charge me for beta-testing their software or increasing their product's popularity and sales by developing applications for it, let me answer you in the colloquial tongue of my people:

That dog won't hunt.