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The MCCC News

The Metroplex Commodore Computer Club

Serving Dallas/Fort Worth Since 1983

Phones and Tablets

Welcome back to this world we live in, whether we want to or not. For this month we shall again hold the meeting at Prez Mike Barclay's home. We might even try a cookout with burgers & sausages, weather permitting. If that's the case, we may ask for about five bucks to cover costs. If things don't work out with that, we'll do our typical food SIG activities elsewhere, to be determined. Hope you'll be able to make it, and We'll see you there. Duke the dog will be accessible to attendees.

In Amiga-related news, apparently the website of the UK's Guardian newspaper posted a list of the 20 greatest home computers, with the Amiga taking second place behind the X86 PC. 'Greatest' according to who, or by what criteria, is left unknown, so it's basically as valuable as any pointless web listicle, but I won't dispute the results. I can't help but wonder how this list was compiled, considering it was undoubtedly UK-biased, with the likes of Amiga, C64, and ZX Spectrum all in the top five, but also including the likes of the original Altair 8800 and Japan-exclusive systems such as the NEC PC88 and Sharp X68000.

<https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/sep/07/the-20-greatest-home-computers-ranked>

I'll conclude by Amiga news section with another new YouTube video, featuring a little overview and benchmarks for the Vampire V2 for the Amiga 1200 (by Ronnie Beck)

<https://youtu.be/1SuqM06LZcA>

Over the last couple months I've been spending much of my articles ranting about various poor fortune I've had. I'm pleased to say my luck has moderated to more of a karmic yo-yo effect now (as in — save twenty dollars when the store has the wrong price for an item in their computer system, then have the car refuse to start due to a low battery, and have to wait an hour for a jump start from AAA.) Regardless, I'll take a net flatline over a total loss any day.

I kinda went off on the subject of mobile technology as well. (the highlights being that I feel it's stupid that a 'high-tech' phone or tablet has to be light and thin, making it actually harder to use and fragile despite whatever space-age materials it's made from). Anyway, my tablet is finally back from Samsung repair, and I'm trying to be that little bit more cautious with it. Of course it came back with the storage wiped clean, presumably to prevent any unscrupulous repair employees from rummaging through my data. Thankfully, I had the foresight to back up my data before sending it out for repair. It doesn't exactly all go back on the way it came off, so there's still some minor headaches, but at least nothing is lost, and I know I have a portable hard drive with three generations of tablet drive dumps contained on it.

One thing I will praise the whole Android ecosystem for (presumably Apple too, but I don't know), it's that your Google account keeps track of the applications you got through the regular app store, so it's easy to get all your apps back for recovery, or when switching to a new device, without having to search them out and down-

load them one by one, or paying for them a second time if they cost money. All I have to do now is avoid dropping the tablet on something hard or otherwise breaking it. I am a little disappointed, both in myself and the durability of the tablet and the little leatherette case I put it in, that I only got about five months of use out of it before it had to go in for repair. Compare that to its immediate predecessor, which had a similar-yet-less-severe drop less than a week after I first got it (as I didn't get a protective case for it yet), but once that was fixed (under warranty) it served for a good three years before meeting with a much worse accident which effectively totaled it (where you know just looking that repairing would cost more money and effort than just getting a new one). Now compare THAT to that tablet's immediate predecessor, which has continued to work fine (if with the quirky slowness of an aging Windows PC) since 2012, despite several dings, scrapes, and drops — more than both its successors have endured combined. I might still be using it today if the software support didn't outrun in a 'planned obsolescence' fashion.

Maybe like MorphOS did for all the PowerPC-based hardware Apple abandoned when they switched to Intel CPUs, all these older phones and tablets need their own version of MorphOS or AROS or Amiga OS to get those older-generation ARM processors humming again.

...Eric Schwartz
From the AmiTech Gazette
Dayton, Ohio, September 2020

The Golden Age of Computer User Groups

Long before subreddits, computer enthusiasts used to get together—in-person!

The Homebrew Computer Club where the Apple I got its start is deservedly famous—but it's far from tech history's only community gathering centered on CPUs. Throughout the 70s and into the 90s, groups around the world helped hapless users figure out their computer systems, learn about technology trends, and discover the latest whiz-bang applications. And these groups didn't stick to Slacks, email threads, or forums; the meetings often happened IRL.

But to my dismay, many young technically-inclined whippersnappers are completely unaware of computer user groups' existence and their importance in the personal computer's development. That's a damned shame. Our current reality may largely be isolated to screens, but these organizations helped countless enthusiasts find community because of them. Computer groups celebrated the industry's fundamental values: a delight in technology's capabilities, a willingness to share knowledge, and a tacit understanding that we're all here to help one another.

And gosh, they were fun.

For example, David Intersimone began attending the Southern California Computer Society in 1975. At one meeting, he bought an early IMSAI 8080 kit and soldered it together at home. "The lights lit but the processor would not reset and stop," Intersimone recalls.

So at the next meeting, he introduced himself to "the computer doctor," who was recommended as someone willing to help kit newbies. The "doctor" was able to fix Intersimone's soldering errors, and he also suggested

that Intersimone buy a Godbout Electronics S-100 bus terminator card to quiet the non-solder-masked motherboard. "Finally, my IMSAI 8080 was working," Intersimone says, "and it still works today!"

Old-school programmers may recall Intersimone's long career at Borland; these days, he is VP of Developer Communities at Evans Data Corporation. And the computer doctor? He was George Tate—of Ashton Tate and dBase fame.

This collegial experience, often leading to careers in the growing PC industry, was typical during the heyday of computer user groups. So take a wander into the wayback machine with me to revisit what made them so special.

So what was a user group?

Once upon a time, using a computer was difficult. The documentation was obscure (if any existed), nothing was pre-assembled, and if you had a problem you were on your own. You might find some answers by dialing into an early electronic bulletin board system (BBS), but nothing beats having someone look over your shoulder and say, "You plugged it in upside down!"

Computer user groups were (and to some tiny degree still are) all-volunteer organizations, usually non-profits. They were organized in small towns and in big cities, with 25 members or 2,500. Services varied, but early user groups largely had two essential elements: a monthly general meeting and a printed newsletter.

For small groups, the meeting presentation might be a member's show-and-tell. Larger and better-connected user groups attracted vendors, who (rightly) saw them as early adopters worth courting. For example, a typical Phoenix PC User Group meeting in the early 90s had 300 people in a hotel conference room. A vendor might spend an hour showing the latest version of their software, such as WordPerfect or Photoshop. The demonstrations were more well-

crafted tutorials than sales pitches; in every case, I learned how to do something new. The demos were followed with a product raffle, a meaningful prize when commercial software sold for \$495 per copy.

Newsletter quality varied by user group. Some newsletters were barely more than "come to the next meeting!" reminders; others (ahem, including mine) were glossy magazines that justified user group membership just for the subscription.

Beyond this, there were all sorts of benefits that varied by group. Some groups also special interest groups (SIGs), a BBS, or shareware libraries. And a few groups sponsored conferences, swap meets, or other events, such as the Trenton, New Jersey group's annual "computer faire." The biggest user groups even had resource centers with training and other benefits. But mostly, the groups brought people together—and introduced them to new tech.

The latest whiz-bang technology

Back when the microcomputer industry was smaller, it was easy to get access to the movers-and-shakers—often before they moved or shook anything. User groups gave everyone the opportunity to learn about technology, often from the people who invented it.

Harry McCracken attended Boston Computer Society meetings beginning in 1979, and he recalls its Q&A sessions with fondness. "The questions were so tough," the longtime tech journalist reminisces. "There was no hero worship, just smart computer users asking sensible questions."

"Microsoft, WordPerfect, and Adobe were the headliners," recalls a 1980s member of the Oklahoma City PC User Group. "They gave presentations that drew hundreds and provided wonderful giveaways of full versions of their software. You could always expect that the introduction of new versions of their products would be a big event, much like the way

Samsung and Apple launch new hardware today."

Forum on the Future of Personal Computers. Recorded: October 15, 1981

This forum was unlike anything the BCS-or any personal computer user group-had ever attempted. It brought together the CEOs of the six largest personal computer companies of 1981 and the largest software company of the day.

Duration: 2:23:28

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4OgJluTPwU&feature=emb_logo

For most members, user groups were also a source of technical information. Someone knowledgeable (or at least more knowledgeable than you) could explain how modems worked, show a nifty feature in Corel Draw, or recommend a dot-matrix printer.

"Back when running Linux on the desktop was a full-time job," remembers one member of the Triangle Linux User Group, "it was really cool to have an in-person network to talk to when your latest kernel compilation bricked your system."

General meetings offered serendipitous knowledge, with ongoing introductions to different kinds of technology. You might not know what CAD software was until someone demonstrated what it could accomplish. The user group presentation might be a graphics application one month (Arts & Letters); a software utility the next (Norton Backup); and a third meeting in which a member explained hard disk partitioning.

In contrast, special interest groups were devoted to a single topic or product. For instance, the Phoenix PC User Group had about a dozen active SIGs, which met monthly. A downtown computer store gave the group a free place to meet, where a few dozen people might show up to share experiences and tips about Corel Draw, Lotus 1-2-3, or webmaster tools. The

OS/2 SIG scheduled Install Days, during which user group members helped anyone in the community find device drivers and troubleshoot the operating system installation. Several members volunteered at CompUSA stores to show off their favorite operating system.

Some SIGs eventually became stand-alone user groups. In the 90s, Robert, who now runs the YouTube channel RetroCAD, was co-chair of the Southeastern Wisconsin AutoCAD user's group (CADDIES), which had 500 members, 50 regular meeting attendees, and a physical newsletter.

"The meetings were pretty structured," he recalls. "There would be an intro and update regarding happenings in the CAD world (keep in mind that there was no Internet so this was how most of our members found out this info). We would often demo tools, hardware (such as digitizers, video cards, and modems), or drawing techniques. A few times a year we would have guests from different companies such as Autodesk."

Launching careers

In the early days of personal computing, user groups were the best place to learn new skills. If you cared about computing, all you had to do was show up and listen. Many people got experience doing things that influenced them professionally.

"I enjoyed the social aspects of each group, but they also had a huge impact on my career," says Gerald Combs. "This is particularly true for the Kansas City UNIX User's Group, where I served for a short time as president." After Combs spoke at a meeting about managing NNTP servers, an attendee asked him to consult at a local Internet service provider. "They ended up hiring me but couldn't afford a Sniffer, which led me to start writing a protocol analyzer for Solaris and Linux. That analyzer (Wireshark) now has its own active online community."

The "everyone is welcome" attitude created personal networking opportu-

nities well-suited for introverts.

"These groups were an essential way to keep my skill levels up," says Tony Allan, who joined a capacity planning user group in the 1990s. He stayed in touch with IT professionals he met through the user group who worked across mainframe, mid-range, and now cloud environments. "Presenting at user conferences was a great way to share experiences and maintain a profile in the industry," he adds.

I'm a success story, too. I wrote regularly for my small-town user group newsletter, which helped me discover my talent for explaining technical topics in English. See where that led?

Vendors got access to real users

The computer industry recognized the power of user group endorsements. Vendors were generous with review hardware and software; the volunteer-written newsletter articles were the precursor to Amazon reviews. Vendors knew that a scruffy-looking meeting attendee might be the tech buyer at a large local firm—and that she might recommend a bulk purchase.

In the 90s, Brenda Christensen was responsible for User Group Relations at GoldMine Software. "The best part was the genuine enthusiasm and incredible honest feedback," she says. "They were honest and had no agenda. The feedback we got from them was much like an unbiased customer focus group—but a well-informed and technical one. And they were so friendly!"

It worked both ways. Members appreciated the opportunity to tell vendors what they wanted. Nearly every company exec was accessible, with few PR filters. Want to ask Peter Norton what he thought about the future of computing? Have a complaint about a Quicken feature? Raise your hand during the Q&A session to ask the company CEO.

Think global, geek local

The communities were open to anyone who showed up. They created lasting friendships, business alliances, job opportunities, and an occasional wedding.

For example, when Dori Smith moved to Los Angeles in the early 90s, she knew almost no one. "I figured a good way to meet friend-candidates was to volunteer for the local Mac user group," she says. "I joined the group, got on their BBS, found some interesting events, and started attending."

At the first meeting, Smith gave her contact info to Suzy, the executive director, and said she wanted to volunteer. But by the second meeting, she hadn't heard back.

"At the third meeting, I griped to Suzy that I still hadn't heard about volunteering. She replied that LAMG was currently without a volunteer coordinator and did I want the job? That's how, within a few weeks of joining, knowing almost nobody, being a noodge suddenly got one of their biggest responsibilities dumped in my lap," Smith says.

Most user groups encouraged new people to participate. It was far from a tech intelligentsia; the officers in my first user group were a silversmith, a postal mail carrier, and a retired newspaperman. Women were welcome. Introverts reigned. Nobody cared what age you were; enthusiasm was the only thing that mattered.

For the youngsters, the experience often inspired a lifelong love of technology. For example, one 13-year-old old began attending meetings with his father in an Atari ST group in London, Ontario. "It really

planted a seed," says the then-13-year-old. "Between that and the concept of the BBS—the latter really blew my mind—to explore that world was total magic for me."

Another reminisces about the time spent in the Tulsa Tandy User Group, saying "I did some presentations and even taught a class in Z-80 assembly language to some old dudes who were interested. I was 16."

So what happened?

Two things primarily made user groups disappear: first was the Internet—and the BBSes that preceded them. If you could articulate a question, you could find a website with the answer.

But computers also became easier to use. Once personal computers went mainstream, troubleshooting them stopped being an esoteric endeavor.

The typical computer user group is gone now. For the exceptions, you can find an incomplete and mostly out-of-date list via the Association of PC User Groups, though online exploration may lead you to more options. For example, the Toronto PET Users Group (TPUG) is the longest continually operating Commodore user group. Washington Apple Pi is still going strong, as is the Triangle Linux Users Group. IBM's user group, SHARE, began in the 1950s and continues to support enterprise users, though it's primarily a conference these days.

If you want the experience of a community organization, you can still find something akin to a user group (or, you could in the pre-quarantine times). Hopefully tech

will continue to inspire ways to get together with other people who share your enthusiasm, whether it's Raspberry Pi meetups, Maker days, or open source conferences such as Drupalcon or PyCon.

You also continue the computer user group ethos by finding ways to help other tech enthusiasts locally. For example, Hack Club aims to teach skills to high school students. Hack Clubs are already in two percent of US high schools across 35 states and 17 countries, with about 10,000 students attending clubs and hackathons each year.

So even if computer user groups largely are a thing of the past, their benefits live on. User groups were the precursor to the open source community, based on the values of sharing knowledge and helping one another. And who knows, without user groups promoting a cooperative viewpoint, the open source community might never have taken off like it did.

...by Esther Schindler
Ars Technica 8/19/2020
<https://tinyurl.com/yxef6yby>

[Esther Schindler has been writing about technology since 1992, and her entire career can be traced to her user group activism. She was an officer in a tiny user group in Maine in the late 80s; became vice president of the Phoenix PC User Group, one of the country's biggest; and was a founder of the Phoenix OS/2 Society, the world's largest user group devoted to IBM's operating system. If that wasn't enough obsession, she also served on the board of user group advisors for the Association of PC User Groups.]

October Meeting — Canceled

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