Lessons Relearned

By Dennis Thorp

The longer I work with computers, the more convinced I become that the problems that confound and cause users the most problems are the simple and ordinary beginning steps rather than the obscure and esoteric advanced ones. This has been re-emphasized to me several times in the last few weeks and perhaps reading about my misadventures will help some of you avoid similar pitfalls.

In the first instance, I moved my computer from one building to another and after setting the machine up again, I noticed a gradual deterioration in the quality of the display on the monitor. It gradually got fuzzier and fuzzier. My first thought was that my glasses needed to be changed. Old age! Mine, not the computer's. When the picture started to roll like a television set with a bad vertical hold, I knew the fault was in the machine and not in my head. My first step was to get a screwdriver and attempt to adjust the vertical hold for the screen. No luck.

The next step was to switch monitors. I have the luxury that very few of you will have, in that computer hardware is my hobby and I build these machines from the motherboard up, so consequently at any time I've got the components for more than one complete system sitting around the house. The monitor I was using was an inexpensive Korean model and I hoped the more expensive Japanese model would cure the problem.

No luck there, either, so I "jumped" to the conclusion that the video card had failed, and as luck would have it, I didn't have a spare one of those laying around. But, I still had that screwdriver handy so I opened the case to see if perhaps some connection had come loose because of the move.

The "experts" will all tell you that the covers should never be removed from the machine with it plugged in and running, but I've never had any trouble by doing it my way and saved a lot of time. Having said that, I'm sure that the next time I try it, with somebody watching, I'll melt a chip or something. I did see a technician drop a screw onto a motherboard when he was changing a card with the machine turned on, and he shorted out something, effectively destroying the motherboard.

This isn't for the faint-of-heart or shaky-of-hand. Anyway, I started pushing and wiggling things, while watching the monitor, to see if the move had loosened something. Let me note here that being moved isn't something new for my machine. This year alone it has been moved over a dozen times and traveled over 3,000 miles, some of that in the back of an Army truck. Most machines are set up in one place and never moved again. Not mine! When I pushed in the video card, the rolling on the screen stopped and the distortion disappeared, even though all mounting screws were tight and nothing appeared to be loose.

Then I remembered a lesson I "learned" several years ago on my first computer, an Apple II+. Oxidation will set in after a period of time, and break electrical connections. I felt really stupid the time I rushed to the computer store with my machine under my arm and the technician fixed it in 30 seconds flat by unplugging one connnection and plugging it in again. That got rid of the oxidation.

A longer term fix is to use a pencil eraser on the contacts and to rub off any oxide coating. Even though the contacts on expansion cards are gold plated to reduce oxidation to the absolute minimum, a little preventative maintenance never hurts. Maybe once every two years under most conditions. Keep the eraser crumbs out of the machine, too.

Just to be on the safe side, I took all of my cards out of my machine and cleaned the contacts. I also used a vacuum cleaner to remove some dust from the inside of the machine. Compressed air works just as well. The cooling fan on the machine is constantly moving room air through these machines, so if the environment where your machine is kept is particularly dusty, this might be a point of extra care.

One time I answered a service call on a printer that was malfunctioning and fixed it with some WD-40 to lubricate the roller gears and a vacuuming of the print mechanism.

Those of you who have your computers at work behind locked doors will not run into this next problem. My computer is at home, my wife is a profes-

sional interior decorator and she periodically likes to move the furniture and/or put up new wallpaper. I'm the only guy I know that ever had purple walls.

I am also of the philosophy that "creative minds are rarely tidy.". Anyway, one day I came home from work and the room where the computer is kept had been totally rearranged. Not only that, but all the papers that I had "neatly" stacked on the desk had disappeared. I knew where to find things, even if nobody else could. Naturally, she wasn't home when I got there, and it is probably lucky that I don't own a cat or dog because the SPCA would definitely be looking for me.

But the moving wasn't the worst part. She didn't know where the wires plugged in, so she just stuffed them behind the cabinets, out of sight, out of mind. It was several days before I sat down to work at the computer again and imagine my surprise when nothing worked when I turned on the switches. *#@*!!

If someone touches your computer, strange things can happen, even with the best of intentions. One time I answered an urgent call because a spreadsheet I had designed had mysteriously stopped working and the backup copy wouldn't work either. The first commandment of computer use is "THOU SHALT HAVE A BACKUP" but when that fails, go to the second one: "IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IS WRONG, CALL SOMEONE WHO DOES."

When I got there with an extra copy that I "knew" worked, I also got an error message. It dawned on me that the problem might not be in the software, but could be hardware-related. When I opened the case, I discovered that one row of memory chips had been removed. Whoever did it knew what he was doing, because some switches had to be reset inside the machine to tell the machine that amount of mem-

ory installed corresponded with the switch settings, or an error message would flash on the screen whenever the machine was started up.

It was a simple fix, because I had my machine in the car and I just removed some memory chips from my machine and installed them in the other one. After I reset the switches, the software worked fine. I asked some questions and found out that a former employee had often been working on the machine, late at night, to learn the software. Nothing could ever be proven, of course, and the price of memory chips had dropped drastically since the machine was purchased, so the fix was inexpensive, but this is an example of where caution needs to be used when letting people have access to your machine.

The following tips on keeping your computer healthy are courtesy of PerfectData Computer Care Products and LABB Systems/Software.

Can you afford to lose your important business records? Most people can't. Yet, important information is lost all the time. This can be caused by something as simple as a dirty computer. So, for the safety of your computer, review the following computer health tips:

Location Tips. . .Even before you purchase your computer, decide where it will function at its best. Locate the equipment away from excessive foot traffic and avoid moving it.

Keyboard Tips. . .Never place beverages on top of your computer or next to your keyboard. Avoid eating near the computer equipment. Crumbs, soups, oils, etc. can fall into your equipment and cause serious problems.

Disk Drive Tips. . .It takes only 30 seconds to clean the read/write heads in your disk drive. Consider for a moment that your computer's cooling fan is constantly cycling air through the system. All the dust, lint and smoke in your office air is eventually processed through your computer. Once depos-

its begin to build up on your read/write heads, the danger of lost data grows. A wet/dry disk drive cleaner can correct this problem if it is used once a week.

Screen Tips. . .Use a spray and wipe method or a moist towelette with antistatic spray to clean your glare filter and CRT screen. Static charges produced by your monitor attract dust particles. The accumulation of dust and fingerprints can cause headaches and discomfort as your eyes strain to read the monitor.

Printer Tips. . .The printhead and the platen (roller) on your printer accumulate ink residue and paper lint. They must be cleaned to avoid ink and paper dust build-up. Paper dust on the platen will cause many sheetfeeders to misfeed.

An effective cleaning system uses special materials that will not leave film residues and crack rubber components. Only use cleaning products that are specifically designed for computer care.

A final note on care: There has been a great deal of concern in the computer community since the incidence of a so-called "virus" attacking systems across the country. The only way one could get into your system was if you were hooked into the phone lines and your system was set up for remote access. The changes of a golf course being set up like this are one in a zillion.

A note for those of you going to the GCSAA conference in Anaheim. There will be a computer special interest group meeting on Sunday, February 12, at 1:00 p.m. facilitated by Duane Patton, intended for superintendents who currently have computers and want to expand their usefulness and for superintendents considering purchasing a system. Persons familiar with Turfbyte, TGIF and various bulletin boards will be in attendance. Come to this unique meeting and share your expertise.

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