

It's been a decade since
EXE Magazine started
back in February 1986.
With this issue we begin
the celebration of our
10th birthday.

Happy birthday



The first issue

EXE has evolved since its first issue when it was called .EXE. The staff has changed too. Apart from Kate who spent most of the past ten years with the magazine (except the first few months), EXE has seen a number of developers and journalists alike working for it along the years. Most of them spent a couple of years with EXE, the one exception bringing about the complete redesign, the initial dot disappearance and the ensuing horrified reaction (especially from those who were on Cix). To celebrate these 10 years, I asked some of the individuals who have left their mark on the magazine along these years to tell their story of 'my time at (.)EXE'. Below is a collection of anecdotes that happened during these lively 10 years. - Ed.

Instantiation

Our beginnings were singularly inauspicious. We had limited funds, not an overwhelming wealth of talent and strictly finite resources of every kind. Our strength if we had any at all, was in our conviction that there was a body of dedicated people out there, expending their energies and creative talents fashioning the complex code which in the fast-developing world of IT, would lead to providing the greatest contribution to this country's future wealth creation. And in this country, while the DIYers, the train spotters, horticulturists, lawyers and art lovers all had a wide range of journals to satisfy their interests and cravings, software developers had very little.

We didn't arrive at this conclusion all by ourselves. There were people like Ian Rangeley of Grey Matter, Peter Lindsey from System Science, Paul Bailey and Frank Iveson of Digital Research, Jim Watts of QA Training, Gary Levell and Phil Buggins of Microsoft and many others who were prepared to submit to our interrogations and all of whom shared the conviction that there existed the need in this country for a publication which, like PC Tech

Journal and Dr Dobbs in America, would satisfy the interests of the software developer. Equally important, it was felt that there were enough new development tools and related products being brought into the world to make such a publication commercially viable.

Armed with these convictions, a few thousand of our own hard earned pounds, two Apricot computers with 10 MB 'fixed' disks running a version of dBASE II unique to Apricot, and the determination to make it work, we set to in October 1985 to compile an initial distribution list approaching 30,000 names. The data emanated from a wide range of sources. Mostly from people who, with much good will, felt that they were making a contribution to a worthwhile cause. Needless to say, because the addresses came from a wide range of uncoordinated sources, we were entering an impossibly high number of duplicated names. Our overwhelming concern was to build the numbers, and the art of de-duplication was unbeknownst to us at that time.

It was only when we were fast approaching publication date and began to look at clever ways of identifying repeated names that we realised the number of records in the database, shared between two hard disks, even vaguely related to the number of names

we could use for the first mailing. Postcodes had been in use for some time but they were treated half heartedly by most people. There was not the same incentive for individuals, or even large volume mail distributors to use them. They do provide a useful means of identifying repeated addresses since, apart from a surname and initial,

the postcode is the only constantly fielded data string to use in comparisons. Company names could, it seemed, be interpreted and spelled with such a wide range of imaginative options that they proved highly unreliable for the purpose.

So not only did we spend a great deal of time entering addresses, we also spent time manually checking for duplicates on screens seemingly half the size of today's and in a phosphor green colour designed primarily to improve opticians' revenue expectations. When the database seemed as near to usable as it was likely to be in the short term, we then sought to produce the Cheshire labels required by our magazine distributors. We realised that this was not the sort of thing to be undertaken on our Epson RX-80 and that creating the routines to reliably produce four variable length addresses across a 14 inch page of 32 addresses per page for about 800 pages was also beyond our technical ability. Needless to say, dBASE II didn't provide that facility as standard.

We approached our local Apricot consultancy well ahead of the appointed day, initially to discuss the implications of the task. Did they have the hardware and associated resources to undertake the project? They recognised the potential of a once monthly overnight non-attended revenue earning opportunity and invested in a printer able to accommodate the paper width and faster than your average dot-matrix of that era. They had conducted tests on extracts from our files which had been successful, they said. We didn't actually see the printer performing until the day before the first issue was due to be printed, bound, polythene wrapped and addressed, in one highly mechanised and strictly scheduled industrial operation.

When I casually wandered in to see how this highly significant first address print run was progressing, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The print quality was fine, every address was perfectly registered and a hundred or more pages had been printed. A factor of not inconsequential concern however, was that having printed an address line, the print head hesitated for an age waiting for the poor old Apricot to process the next line. It wasn't that the computer was not up to the



EXE
YEARS

task: after all, it had a 8086 processor and half a megabyte of RAM. The failure lay to a greater extent

at the door of the inelegant programming created to ensure that every address however long or short, fitted perfectly into its allotted position on the page without blank or truncated lines. All of these things were achieved but at what price? A quick calculation confirmed that we were not going to get it on the last Red Star train out of Paddington that night to be in Cornwall for the following morning's production run. With a heavy heart, I visualised this massive plant idly standing by awaiting our labels, with estimators eagerly calculating our penalty charges. And all this before a single *.EXE* had seen the light of day.

Our printers were extremely understanding. They were well aware of our limited experience and despite dealing with the country's major publishers for most of the time, were thankfully prepared to hold our hands during that initial period. The magazine was finally distributed a day late, but with some judicial rescheduling, we managed to avoid the penalty charges they were entitled to levy. We had reached our first real landmark, it now remained to be seen how our creation would be received.

A very few days later, we began to realise that not only is this a highly volatile industry we're in, where people move about with great rapidity, companies too came and went in quick succession, even at that time. The inevitable consequence was that we had an unbelievable number of returned magazines with the postman's comment on each one of either 'gone away' or 'no such address'. It is not unusual in high volume mailings to have a high ratio of returns. But we didn't appreciate that at the time and it was highly disconcerting to see all that hard earned cash squandered on wasted printing and postage costs, amounting to many thousands at a time when a thousand was a thousand.



Thankfully, it wasn't many days later when our rewards began to come through. Well known and highly regarded industry personalities sent us their congratulations and good wishes and, in the main, told us that this was just the magazine the industry had been waiting for. Equally as important, we were receiving real cash from the dedicated who judged *.EXE* Magazine to be worth the £35 annual subscription, and this was happening in numbers sufficient to reassure us that we had made the right decision. It took

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Thanks to Chris Duggan for all his wonderful pictures over the years.

time for the advertisers to arrive at a judgement on the success of their responses. They aren't known ever to express overwhelming enthusiasm but when it came to repeated entries, again, the outcome was encouraging. The rest, as they say...

Congratulations (.EXE on your 10th.

Ian Adams was editor of .EXE from its inception until October 1987. He then took over responsibility for the subscriptions and was fondly known by his colleagues as 'Database Dad'. He maintained the cleanest mailing list in the West.

Version control

It's *.EXE* and I get a BMW, I remember saying to Nick, my colleague at PCW magazine where I was working in late 1987. He was one of the few people in whom I'd confided about a rather strange telephone call I'd received the previous week.

I'd been contacted by Ian Adams, who asked if I'd be interested in editing a magazine and would I like to meet him for lunch. I agreed, and enjoyed a rather nice piece of calves liver in a blue-fronted restaurant in Soho. The man I met was actually Mark Adams, Ian's son and the founder of *.EXE*.

We chatted about the magazine and the state of software development. Apparently, Mark had asked Text 100 (Microsoft's UK PR agency) if they dealt with any journalists who were sufficiently anorak-endowed to edit *.EXE* and my name

had come up, probably because I was the only one who'd called and asked for a review copy of MASM 4. Thankfully they'd clearly forgotten how I had to call and ask for another copy the following day, after accidentally wiping the floppy while copying it to my hard disk.

A couple of months after the lunch, I said goodbye to PCW on Friday afternoon and arrived in Chiswick the following Monday at 8.15am. I'd allowed 2 hours for the drive, which had actually taken 45 minutes. Still, there's no harm in being punctual.

I was given two weeks to plan the second phase of *.EXE*. Phase 1, started by Mark and family, was to launch and establish the magazine. This having been done, it had apparently been decided that a proper editor was required, hence the calves liver. In those two weeks, while the existing staff finished off the issue they'd been working on, I planned the next one. And indeed the next dozen or so. It consisted of deciding what topics

needed to be covered, and then finding qualified people to cover them. Out went Vax and 68000 – I decided that we needed to concentrate on MS-DOS, 80x86 and C. That was, after all, what 75% of our readers were using as a primary development system. In the early stages, I also created some places in the magazine where I could publish my neat machine code hacks, such as the Code Page.

(Ah, those were the days, when reviewing an OS meant disassembling it and looking for undocumented commands and Int 21h calls).



My first editorial column was, as is traditional in such circumstances, along the lines of 'it's your magazine, so tell me what you want in it'. I never explicitly mentioned that three years before I'd been prosecuted for computer hacking, but one person was sufficiently shocked to write and complain and to cancel their subscription.

If I'm remembered for anything at *EXE*, it's probably for bringing some order to the proceedings. Editorial planning was non-existent in early 1987 – whatever happened to get sent in by readers or advertisers got published. If there wasn't enough material to fill the pages, Mark would approach his friends in the industry and words would arrive by fax, to be typed up by whoever happened to be free.

Under the Schifreen regime, we had plans. Everyone knew what articles were going to be in each issue, and the stage of the production process which each had reached. I've never been able to work in what's euphemistically called organised chaos and I certainly wasn't going to let poor planning and last-minute panics spoil my first job as an editor.

My 3 years at *EXE* was a wonderful opportunity to work on a great magazine with some great staff, and to meet some very loyal readers. The highlights? Getting to interview influential people such as Philippe Kahn, Gates, Peter Norton. And the famous *EXE* readers' meeting, when we extended an open invitation to readers to turn up one evening and, in return for free beer and sandwiches, tell me what they thought of the magazine. We had around 60, I think, which cleared out most of M&S's sarnie rations that day.

Any regrets? I'll never forget the time when the proofs for the next front cover looked awful and I was told I couldn't spend £100 to have it re-done. Never one to miss an opportunity to make a stand, I wrote out a personal cheque and the cover was re-drawn. My money was refunded shortly afterward, and no more was said.

And I never did get the BMW – something to do with problems insuring people under 25. Still, the Sierra was fine.

Robert Schifreen joined EXE in November 1987 as deputy editor, he became editor in January 1988 and remained steadfast at this post until June '90. He is more well-known for the Great Prince Philip Prestel Hack. The complete text of the judgement as handed down in the House of Lords on 21st April 1988 appeared in the June '88 issue.

Hacking

Well, I'm sure this is too late, but, hey, some things never change... [Things have changed: Dan's piece arrived long before the others – Ed panicking.]

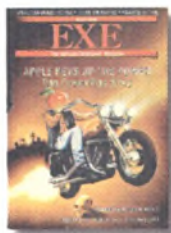
My time at *EXE*? It's hard to remember exactly what happened at *EXE*. I remember... I was a sprightly young thing, straight out of college, where I had spent three years sniggering at Stob in the 'special room' where the librarians kept the really hardcore technical magazines. I remember applying for the job. I do recall thinking 'well, this should be a cinch – knock off a few compiler reviews, make up a few stupid puns for the news, and collect the cheque'. Money for nothing, and my Cix for free, I thought. Then it goes black.

Occasionally I wake up in the middle of the night, now, with a sweaty image of leaving the three pages of a news section on the bus, and having to write it practically from memory in an afternoon. Or visions of a time, two months into some job or other, when I blew up a Unix server, merely by touching it in an unusual way ('Is that burning I smell?', somebody who looks like Robert Schifreen asks in my dream, 'Shut up', I repeatedly explain). Or else I listen to a shadowy Will Watts tell a prominent businessman that I am giving his product a bad review because it really *is* rubbish, as I, untouched and unbiased, continue to work on the article from under my desk. I have odd recollections of jemmying up on APIs whose version numbers would change as I stared at the spec notes. And I have a blurred image of the Barley Mow pub. A very unusual image, taken from a very unusual angle.

But most of all, I have this recurring image of a small team working together under huge stress, journalists who knew what they were doing spending their spare time helping a junior reporter who didn't, and a magazine that demanded a ridiculous amount of intelligence from its writers, because of the frankly preposterous intelligence of its readers. I don't remember much – but I do remember that.

After escaping from the EXE high security prison for a crime he didn't commit, Dan O'Brien <danny@cityscape.co.uk> went on to write and perform a one-man show, Caught In The Net at the West End. Techni-

cally he's now a writer and broadcaster – just like Ned Sherrin. He still knows the DPMI API, and edits the militant geekzine Need To Know.



Memory mapped I/O

Cast your mind back, gentle reader, to the early weeks of 1991. Thatch had been toppled from the throne for but a few months, Saddam's forces were encamped in Kuwait, and Borland Germany was planning an OO Software Festival the like of which the world had never seen. In among the usual daily press releases, I got a brochure describing the occasion: a two day celebration of object orientation was to be held in Munich (said the brochure) with numerous speakers including Pascal/Modula-2 inventor Niklaus Wirth, Xerox PARC genius Alan Kay, C++ guru Bjarne Stroustrup, Joseph Weizenbaum (inventor of the Eliza program that fooled people into believing in AI with depressing ease) and legendary MIT AI expert Marvin Minsky. God, the brochure seemed to imply, had offered to put in appearance, but had been turned down on the grounds that He had insufficient coding experience. Borland President and CEO Philippe Kahn was going to be on hand as MC.

It looked good. In fact, it looked excellent. I put in some in-depth toadying. Borland's PR man 'Andrew Smith' (as I shall call him) and Borland UK's Matt Price proved pliable; and thus it was a week or two later at 8.15am I was among the half dozen assorted British technical hacks shuffling into a large theatre in Munich's main arts and leisure centre. We managed to squeeze into some decent seats at the front just as Philippe Kahn introduced the first speaker: Niklaus Wirth, who was going to talk about his Oberon operating system.

The first snag was foreseeable. Almost as soon as Prof. W started speaking we noticed something was wrong. Smith – the hardened old PR expert – was first to articulate it. 'He's speaking German!' he exclaimed. We held a hurried whispered conference. It was established that our party had an aggregate German vocabulary of nine words, this including two ('Schmels goot!') gleaned from a racist British TV commercial for decaffeinated coffee.

'Why don't we just sneak out?' suggested the ever practical Editor of PCW.

'We can't do that!' I hissed piously. 'We can't walk out on the man who devised the Pascal programming language! Besides, everybody will look at us.' But I was wrong.



Surely it can now be safely stated that Oberon the operating system, at least in its initial version, was not the hottest of Prof. Wirth's ideas. A black-and-white GUI without overlapping windows that ran only on hugely expensive workstations might have impressed a few years earlier, but this was well into the Windows 3.x period... At any rate, after about ten minutes, the Professor's audience began to desert him.

And how they went! You know how one sneaks out of the cinema or theatre or lecture in the UK: all tip-toe and whispered apology and crouching down to avoid blocking the view. Not so in Munich. The first bloke out merely banged the door as he quit, the next group started chatting to each other as they walked down the aisle, and soon the whole theatre was full of talking and banging and stamping, so that Wirth had to shout into the microphone. This seemed to go on for an incredibly long time, as if those making noisy exits were sneaking in again at the back for another go.

It seemed like no way to treat a genius, but after 20 minutes, we joined the throng, defeated not so much by the German language as proxy embarrassment for the speaker.

The next lecture was to be from Alan Kay, sage of Xerox PARC. Once again Philippe Kahn took the stand. Mysteriously, instead of getting on with the introduction, Kahn started waffling on about a forthcoming release of Quattro Pro. Five minutes passed, and then ten, and then twenty. Philippe bumbled on about some interesting new @ functions that had been implemented, and how you could now edit 3D charts. The audience became increasingly restive. Finally, a young man stood up and interrupted Kahn's cant:

'Excuse me, but I am coming here to see Mr Alan Kay. Ven will he be talking?'

Kahn then admitted that Kay, afraid that agents of Saddam Hussein would blow up his plane mid-Atlantic, had stayed at home in the US. We'd been waiting for Godot. This went down a storm with the audience, who promptly swept out *en masse*. We allowed ourselves to be swept with them, one of my journo colleagues improvising a rather good Alan Kay song, based on the 'Brave, brave, brave, brave Sir Robin' ditty from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

And so on all day. Every one lecture went wrong or was strange or embarrassing. Marvin Minsky came on like Norman Wisdom on bad day – artificial intelligence as a second bill variety act. First he dropped his notes on the floor and had to pick them up, then he pretended to trip over the micro-

phone lead, then he dropped his notes and tripped over the microphone and spilled his water. My recollections of Weizenbaum's lecture are so bizarre that I don't trust my memory: if you want to find out what I think happened you will have to buy me a pint. One exception: Stroustrup's talk was apparently straightforward – his standard introduction to C++ – but I couldn't get in because it was too full, so I only have this second hand.

The attendees. Although some of them looked normal enough, a fair proportion – say a third – were got up like Sex Pistol fans: mohican hair cuts, studded leather gear, fearsome tattoos portraying politically incorrect subjects, lots of flesh piercings, permanent scowls. It was as though the Chaos Computer Club, the Data Processing Division of the Anarchists and the Computing Science Department of Baader Meinhof had all decided to take a day off to attend Borland's show.

'Gosh, I wouldn't like to be stuck behind him in the metal detector queue at passport control', said Smith, indicating a particularly fierce-looking individual with metal through his ears, chin, left eyebrow and tongue. 'I bet he's got rings in parts that we can't see.'

'You ask him.'

And so to the evening press conference. It was held in a much smaller theatre in the same complex, and it was *packed*. Word had got round the less ruly attendees of the show that free booze was available to anyone with the wit to scribble 'Press' on his name badge. Consequently the crush was unbearable.

Eventually all the conference speakers had sat down in a line behind a table on the stage. They only had one microphone, which they had to pass between them. 'Wow, I didn't know there were so many journalists interested into C++ in Germany!' exclaimed Philippe Kahn, on the beam as ever. 'Can I have the first question, please?'

They may not have been journalists, but they had seen plenty of press conferences on telly, and they knew what to do. A spiky haired youth with a playful swastika tattooed on his left cheek called out: 'What is the panel's opinion of the Gulf War? Can America's cultural imperialism be tolerated in the 1990s?'

'Errm, I don't think...' began Kahn, at which point Minsky grabbed the mike. 'An excellent question. I'd just like to say...'

At this point, accounts differ. Both

Andrew Smith and I recall Minsky going into a long rambling speech, but I remember him ending up by saying 'Sport is worse than war. We must at all costs ban football, not war.'

Andrew claims he concluded by harking back to WWII in a manner less tactful than Jon Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*. Maybe he did both; in any event we are unanimous as to the effect: the atmosphere changed from reasonably amiable booziness to near-riot fury.

Apparently oblivious to the buzzing and growling, Minsky passed the microphone to Stroustrup. 'What do you think Dr Stroustrup?' Bjarne eyed the angry crowd with the thoughtfulness of one who has a wife, child and young compiler to support. He chose the direct approach. 'I'm sorry, but I do not understand what this question has to do with object-oriented programming.' There was a tense pause, then laughter. The storm had passed.

This set the pattern for the rest of the press conference, which lasted over an hour. When the microphone passed to Minsky he worked the crowd: accepting ludicrous questions and delivering outrageous answers; when it passed elsewhere, panellists tried to calm things down. This game was less fun than it sounds: after a few minutes Wirth decided he had had enough and walked out. Others began to show the strain too: 'Why do you think Alan Kay didn't come?' 'Because he is a coward', snapped Stroustrup.

Finally Kahn grabbed the mike, and announced that he was playing his flute with the Borland band at a nearby bar in a few minutes, and everyone was welcome to come along. Sensing the possibility of more free beer, the crowd evaporated, leaving behind a small huddle of dazed Brits.

Thus ended my first press trip, over five years ago. If you are wondering why you didn't read this at the time – well, it didn't really fit an ordinary issue of *EXE Magazine*. Sorry I'm late.

Will Watts worked as a programmer for various companies before being recruited by EXE Magazine. He joined as a Staff Writer in 1988, became Editor in 1990 and resigned in a huff in 1993. However, he was persuaded to return to the now dotless EXE part time for six months in 1995, and was pleased to make friends again. He supports Newcastle Brown Ale and Patrick Troughton's interpretation of the role of Doctor Who.

