



Something is definitely wrong with me.

For some reason, my messed-up brain attaches all my memories to physical objects. As a result of this annoying affliction I often find it difficult or impossible to throw old things away. I'm afraid that if I get rid of the things, the memories will be gone too. When I run across a childhood toy of mine (most of which I still have), I don't just see a toy; I instantly remember when and where I got it, who got it for me, and all the good times I had playing with it. My garage walls are lined with shelves, all of them sagging under the weight of toys, magazines, and books I've accumulated over the years and can't seem to part with. There is no longer enough room to park even a single a vehicle in my three-car garage. I once had a garage sale in an attempt to get rid of some of my items, but when people showed up I found it impossible to sell anything to them. A psychiatrist would no doubt have a field day with me.

I've spent the majority of my adulthood surrounding myself with the things I enjoyed as a child. My house isn't quite Pee-Wee's Playhouse

yet, but I'm getting there. My backyard has a 14' x 40' building that my wife and I converted into our own arcade. It currently has twenty full size arcade games in it, as well as a slot machine, an air hockey table, and a jukebox. Most of the arcade games I own are the same games I loved playing as a kid.



*Rob's Arcade (2006)*

So I collect old stuff, so what? I'm not a junk collector; I don't collect junk. Six Commodore 64 computers (working or not) are not junk! You can call them retro collectables, mementos, or even spares if you wish. Just don't call them junk!

This borderline compulsive hoarding behavior wouldn't be so bad if it were limited to the garage. Unfortunately, my outside game room, my upstairs game room, and our living room entertainment center are practically bursting with DVDs, CDs, videogames, books, and toys. My Star Wars collection eventually grew so large that it had to be placed into plastic tubs and moved into the garage, where it will sit until we buy a bigger house with enough room to display it all. Our current home is almost 2,500 square feet.

Despite the fact that I'm no longer a child, I find it impossible to "put away childish things". I just have too many good memories associated with my things to let them go.



In the fall of 2005 I attended a retrogaming swap meet dubbed the Chi-Town Classic, organized by members of the popular classic videogaming website Digital Press. Thirty or so videogame aficionados from across the country meet one Saturday morning each year in a videogame store owned by one of the board's forum members. While the store (Videogames, Etc.) is located near Chicago's O'Hare Airport, people came from as far away as New Jersey to attend the event. I myself drove 800 miles (each way) just to attend. Attendants brought stacks of plastic tubs full of old videogame-related paraphernalia to sell and trade. It's a neat event to attend, even if you aren't in the market to buy anything. I personally spent hours looking through each person's piles, smiling each time I found an item that reminded me of my youth. When I spied a pair of wireless Atari 2600 joysticks (still in the box), I was instantly taken back to elementary school, when my father brought home a pair of the exact same joysticks so that he and I could sit all the way across the living room from our big screen television and play River Raid on the Atari 2600.

As the day went on the storefront windows continued magnifying the afternoon sun, further raising the temperature in a room already a bit warm from too many bodies. One of the attendees came up with the idea to prop open the store's front door to allow a breeze to flow in, and once this was done the room began to cool off. A few minutes later when I walked from the back of the store up to the front, I literally gasped at what I saw. Someone had used a Commodore 64 to prop the store's front door open!

Now you must understand that whenever I see a Commodore 64 computer, I don't see an outdated hunk of computing plastic, barely powerful enough to balance one's checkbook on these days. Every time I see one I'm instantly taken back to all the great adventures I had over the years with my own Commodore system. My mind floods with memories of the people I met, the games I played, the trouble I got into and the bulletin board systems I called. This particular one had the words "UNTESTED/UNKNOWN" written on the bottom of it in typical thrift-store handwriting, next to the unit's selling price: \$2.98. But I didn't

see a 25-year-old chunk of plastic that most likely didn't even work. I saw a decade's worth of good memories, sitting out there on the sidewalk.

Throughout the day I made it a point to keep an eye on that little computer. For a while I looked for something to replace it with, but I was forced to eventually accept the fact that the machine's slightly sloped shape did indeed make for a perfectly ergonomic doorstep. I constantly worried that someone might steal it off the open sidewalk. (Keep in mind that we're talking about a potentially broken \$3 computer here.) Later in the day I began to secretly hope that someone actually *would* steal it in an attempt to liberate the machine from door-propping slavery.

Soon it was night, and attendees of the swap fest began to pack up their items and leave. One by one people carried mountains of archaic plastic and circuit boards out of the store, stuffing them into awaiting vehicles. No one stopped to rescue that poor Commodore 64 computer. After almost everyone had left, I began asking around. "Hey, do you know whose Commodore 64 that is? I think someone forgot to pick it up!" But the more I asked, the more I realized that no one else was particularly concerned about the machine or its well being. Maybe they had never owned one, or if they did maybe they just saw the battered piece of junk sitting on the sidewalk for what it really was: old, abused, and most likely lifeless.

But not me.

With but a few people remaining in the store, I announced my departure. On the way out of the store I bent over and picked the little feller up off the sidewalk.

"I'M TAKING THIS HOME!" I announced. No one objected; a few people even laughed. With that declaration I tucked the machine under my arm and walked out of the store. The door, finally admitting defeat, swung shut behind me.

When I arrived home a few days later from my Chicago adventure, I snuck my newly acquired Commodore into the house. While I thought my wife was distracted I pulled the beige machine out from deep within my suitcase and crept out to the garage to store it. My wife, suspecting I was up to something, quietly followed me out to the garage where she caught me red handed.

"Dear God, not another one," she said, only half joking.

On one set of shelves in my garage sit stacks of old computers, partial computers, and computer parts. One shelf is completely dedicated

to Commodore computers. Half a dozen spare Commodore disk drives are stacked on one end of the shelf, while just as many actual Commodore computers sit at the other end. Why I continue to buy them, I'm not sure. Sometimes I tell people that I buy them as spares in case the one I currently use breaks down. "You can't just go into a store and buy one of these things new anymore you know," I'll tell them. The statement itself has little to no merit; the Commodore 64 I used extensively throughout the 1980s still works fine. I'm not sure what the life expectancy of one of these computers is or if they even have one. And even if they *do* have one the machine I'm currently using has been working for 25 years now – at that rate I have enough spare Commodore computers to get me through at least the next two centuries.

The real reason I buy them is because when I run across them in the wild, whether it's in the bottom of a thrift store bin or on the sidewalk being used as a doorstop, they look sad to me. I think of all the great times I had on those machines and I think someone else could use one and possibly have fun with it as well. I also always think what a good bargain they are, comparing their current selling price to the price they originally sold for twenty years ago. The problem is, I can never seem to find anyone to give all these adopted machines to, and when I do find someone I typically find a reason not to part with them. So, out in the garage they sit.

See? I told you something was definitely wrong with me.



Of all the arcade cabinets, videogame systems, retro computer systems and mountains of games I own, my original Commodore 64 computer is still probably my most prized possession. Purchased back in 1985 and still kicking, it's currently hooked up in my computer room next to machines twenty years newer. Every now and then I'll break out my huge green milk crate full of old floppy disks and thumb through them. The milk crate is filled to the top with close to a thousand 5 1/4" floppies, each one numbered and labeled by my own hands many years ago. Some of them are over two decades old now. Even though it's been a long time, just by looking at the labels I can often remember where I got a particular game from, or with whom I used to play it. The disk with "Bard's Tale" handwritten in black marker on its browning, peeling label sits on top of the stack. As I run my finger across the label, I think of the summer my friend Charon and I spent playing the game. The two of us

spent much of the summer of '86 huddled in front of his computer, eating cold pizza and cheese puffs and each drinking Dr. Pepper straight out of three-liter bottles. Each weekend we'd huddle in front of his monitor, playing deep into the night until I would begin to fall asleep around two or three in the morning. When I would wake up around eight or nine in the morning, Charon would still be playing. From the bed I could see images of the game reflected in his glasses. Then a changing of the guard would take place – after a quick debriefing of the night's discoveries, he would go to sleep and I would take over our party's destiny. By the end of that summer I knew the streets and back alleys of Skara Brae (the mythical town Bard's Tale takes place in) better than I knew my own neighborhood.

Every diskette in the stack has a unique number and a unique memory associated with it.

When I see my old Newsroom diskettes I remember the time a buddy of mine and I were going to start our own school newspaper. My old C-Net BBS disks remind me of the hundreds of hours Arcane and I spent talking on the phone late at night, modifying our boards' code and pushing our poor computers to the breaking point.

In 1993 I retired my Commodore computer (for the first time) and purchased an IBM 386 DX/40, using money my future mother-in-law gave my then girlfriend (now wife) to pay for her college tuition. By then the Commodore 64 was all but obsolete, surpassed in speed and power by 16-bit gaming consoles such as the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis. Without an affordable hard drive or any real upgrade options, the C64 was bypassed in the business world as well by the new generation of powerful (and upgradeable) IBM PCs and Macintoshes.

Most of the memories I associate with my old computer collection go back to my old local modem scene. It both surprises and amazes me that more effort has not gone into documenting the BBS era. During the golden age of bulletin boards (from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s), the modem world *was* our Internet. It was the way we talked to other computer users, traded programs and met people. The technology behind bulletin boards may seem archaic today – computers talking to each other one at a time at painfully slow speeds over dial up phone lines – but to those of us who lived it, it was an incredible, magical time. It was cutting edge technology that we got to play with every day. For many years the modem world *was* my world, and a major part of my reality.

I quite literally grew up behind a keyboard. I met my first girlfriend online. I drank my first beer at a modem party. Most of my best friends in real life have been people I first encountered online virtually. Beginning at age ten, my primary entertainment, conversation and socialization was delivered to me through a phone line connected to a computer.



*A few of my old Commodore diskettes (2006)*

My Commodore diskettes have been through a lot.

Recently, I've noticed that some of my old floppy disks have begun to fade from existence. Some have started losing their labels, retaining only a small patch of sticky-goo where the disk's label was once affixed. Some may have had their data cooked by being stored in my garage during one too many scorching Oklahoma summers. Most of them are simply reaching the end of their life expectancy. I'm not sure anyone intended for these floppies to last into the new millennium. The disks are deteriorating both physically and electronically. The most upsetting part of their decline is that I've noticed as the disks have begun fade, so have my memories. Sometimes I'll start telling one of my old computer tales only to realize I don't remember how it ended. Occasionally I'll get halfway through a story and start questioning whether I've included the right people or places in the tale. I recently ran across an old spiral notebook of mine filled with computer-related notes written in my own handwriting that made absolutely no sense to me at all. None of the notes, names, numbers or passwords looked even

remotely familiar. Without these disks around to jog my brain, I know that when they are gone the stories and history of that era will disappear as well.



It would be impossible to document the entire BBS experience (although Jason Scott has done an admirable job trying with his BBS Documentary DVDs). Every single bulletin board that existed was a unique identity. Unlike the Internet, for the most part bulletin boards were not networked together. Each and every BBS was its own independent island of information, complete with its own users and conversations. Since users tended to call bulletin boards inside their own local area code (to avoid long distance phone charges), each area code had its own pocket of boards and users who existed only within their own little microcosm.

Along with its own user base, every BBS had its own unique set up, configuration, graphics, look, feel, and content. Like teenagers with their first car, sysops (system operators, the people who ran bulletin boards) spent many hours modifying and customizing their systems, making each one unique. And when these bulletin boards were finally powered off for the last time, the historical records of everything that took place throughout the years on them vanished from existence. Very little of the data was backed up or archived. Most of the stories and adventures that took place during that time were not documented. Even more frustrating was the fact that you rarely got notice that a BBS was about to go offline. One day a board would be there, and the next time you called instead of hearing a modem you might instead get three loud tones blasting through your speaker followed by a familiar and disappointing message: “We’re sorry, but the number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service ...”

And eventually, the entire modem community ceased to exist. In the mid 1990s the arrival of the Internet crushed the modem world into oblivion, making BBSes obsolete almost overnight.

If each area code had its own modem scene, I’ll bet you are wondering why on earth you should care about mine. The fact is that while the details of all of our computer backgrounds may be different, I guarantee you will find things within this book you can relate to. Regardless of the specific type of computer you may have owned, all of us who were there have similar memories of “those days.” Simply being a

computer owner back in the 1980s is enough to induct you into an honorary timeless club. Even if the details are different we all have common stories, memories and milestones. We all remember the first time we saw a personal computer, and what got us hooked. We all remember typing in our first program, the first time we were able to make a computer do something we instructed it to do. We all remember playing our favorite games. We all remember the thrill of connecting a phone line to our computer and calling someone else's computer for the first time. And, for those of us who were sysops, we all remember the thrill of someone else calling *our* computer for the first time. We all remember how big our first hard drives were and how much we paid for them. So even though the stories within this book come from my own personal experiences, I am sure you will find familiar themes that you will be able to relate with and enjoy

I also think those who were not around during this exciting era will get a kick out of the adventures retold here. As I was explaining the focus of this book to a co-worker (a much younger computer tech), he informed me that he had never called a BBS and had only "heard about them" as if they were some long lost, mystical thing. Believe it or not, there *was* life before the Internet! Most of these stories don't even seem very old to me! And yet, those same memories and stories that took place only a few years ago seem to be quickly fading. I hope that by telling the small story of one area code, it will somehow relate to the bigger story of BBSes in every area code.

That is my motivation here: to share classic stories to those who were there, to entertain and educate those who were not, and most importantly to preserve the stories, experiences and great memories I have of some of the best years of my life, growing up online.



The stories contained within this book are, to the best of my knowledge and memory, 100% true. Every tale contained within this tome is an experience that I myself witnessed firsthand. However, everything contained within has also been stored in my cluttered brain for some time now before being regurgitated here. Hopefully, I've remembered the majority of the details correctly. As I previously stated, there are few (if any) written accounts existing that document the majority of these events. Therefore, most of the dates found within this book should be considered little more than educated guesses. Likewise,

every story printed between these covers is told from my personal point of view. I've tried to be as impartial and factual as possible, but keep in mind that some of the memories are beginning to fade along with those old diskettes. When possible I've consulted old friends to confirm dates and facts, but the more I did this the more I realized that often two faulty memories aren't much better than one.

One decision I made early on during the writing of this book was to refer to the people mentioned within by their online aliases instead of their real names. I hope that by doing so you'll understand just how closely my online and real lives were interwoven. My friends and I often referred to one another by our handles on a regular basis. Many people I met over the years thought that "Jack Flack" was my given name, and in certain circles I was addressed as "Jack" or "Flack" more so than by my real name. It was not uncommon for my mother to answer the phone, cover the mouthpiece and shout, "phone call for Jack Flack!"

A final caveat before beginning our adventure: piracy is bad. We know that now. In the early days, we didn't know, and when we found out, we didn't care. Our parents didn't care and the police didn't care either. In fact the only people who actually cared about piracy were the people writing and/or selling software, and nobody cared that *they* cared. Back then we didn't have the World Wide Web; we had the Wild Wild West.

Today life is different. I pay for the software I need, the music I listen to and the services I use. But this book isn't about now. It's about a time where pirated software ruled the land. Those with the most, newest, and best programs had the power; those who didn't groveled at their feet. It's about good friends, good times, good memories, and good warez.

And to think, it all started with two blocky paddles hitting a blocky square back and forth across our television screen.