1990

Have you hugged your computer today?

David Morgan Lochhead
Have You Hugged Your Computer Today?

We have probably all seen the bumper sticker: "Have you hugged your kid today?" The message that this bumper sticker conveys is not simply to remind us that children need to be hugged. It is also carries the suggestion that, as parents, we get to the point that we take our children for granted. When a child first comes into our lives, we express our love. We give our babies lots of attention, lots of love. We do not take them for granted. As new parents, we are excited about this new person in our lives. We express our joy, our excitement in very tangible ways. We hug our babies a lot.

But then our children begin to grow. The excitement about having a new child fades into the background. We take our children for granted. The times become fewer and fewer when we give direct expression to our love. So we need to be reminded: "Have you hugged your kid today?"

That process is something that has happened to me with computers. I have owned a computer for over ten years now. When the computer came into my life, it turned it upside down. I was excited. I would spend every moment that I could with my computer. The most exciting thing that could happen to me would be for a new piece of software to come along. I lavished my computer with new programs. Like a mother who spends time sewing and knitting for her new born, I spent hours and hours writing new programs to present to my new computer. I would frequent computer stores, hoping after hope that I would find something new and affordable to take home with me. I did not take my computer for granted. The development of small computer technology occupied a very important place in my life.

I don't want to moralize about that. The excitement that small computers created for me and for many of us was a fact. Whether computers deserve the time and energy that many of us put into them can be debated. I am not interested in justifying it or deploring it. I just want to acknowledge the fact, to recall the excitement. Not everyone has had this kind of experience with computers, but many
of us had. Many of you will recognize your own experience in what I have described.

Ten years have passed. The situation is changed. I became aware of it one day when I visited a software store. For me, visiting a software store is something of a pilgrimage. Whether I want to buy or not, I take much inspiration from the new applications that appear on the shelves of software stores. A genuinely new application is, for me, something of an eschatological event. Another hitherto unimagined possibility has been made real. The power, the versatility of my machine has been enhanced. There is a new world to explore.

When I visit a software store, then, I expect my original excitement with the computer to be renewed. I expect to have seen something new, something that expands my horizons. Even if the new application is no use to me at all, even if I will never use it on my own computer, the fact that it exists renews my excitement.

Well, one day I came out of one of my pilgrimages and noticed that I was not excited. More significantly, I realized that the excitement I expected had been diminishing over many visits to many software stores. What I was seeing was the same old stuff. I do not use spreadsheets. Nevertheless, I did take inspiration from the appearance of Visicalc, the original spreadsheet, back in the days when the Apple and the TRS80 ruled the computer world. But the appearance of Lotus, version 3, is meaningless to me. It is more of the same old stuff. I do use word processors. But the appearance of WordPerfect 5.1 has not been a significant event in my life. To date, I have not even bothered to upgrade.

It is this "ho-hum" experience that led my to my title for today: "Have you hugged your computer today?" I wonder if, in our relationship with computers, we have reached the point that we are beginning to take them for granted. It is not just that enthusiasts like me are not as excited as we used to be. It is also that my neo-Luddite friends who used to hate computers with a passion now do their work on Macs or IBM clones of various shapes and sizes. They, too, have allowed the computer to fit comfortably and unobtrusively
in their world. And while I do not believe that computers have some deep seated need to be hugged, I am somewhat concerned with the danger to us if we begin to take them for granted.

"Have you hugged your computer today?" Hugging is a sign of intimacy. It is strange to speak of intimacy with a machine. Machines, our prejudices tell us, are not appropriate objects for intimacy. It is right and proper that machines be to us mere tools. It is right and proper that we should take them for granted. It is right and proper that machines should serve our purposes and not become the objects of our passions or our fears.

Unfortunately, the question of intimacy with our machines cannot be put away so easily. It is dangerous to take our machines for granted.

When television made its appearance it required no user sophistication. We put it in our homes. All we had to do was to turn it on and ... voila! ... instant entertainment. Now we had radio with a picture. Well, that little machine took over our lives. It transformed family life. It transformed politics. It transformed marketing. And while all that transformation was taking place, most of us were placed in a state of narcosis. We allowed our lives to be transformed with little consciousness of what it was doing to us nor why it was happening. We accepted the technology with little reflection.

It was not until the technology was a decade or two old that Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "The Medium is the Message". What McLuhan attempted to do, with qualified success, was to make people conscious of the way our technologies transform us. He was particularly concerned to jolt us into serious reflection on the "message" that the electronic media, particularly television, was conveying to our culture. What is television and what does it do to us?

McLuhan did not speak of intimacy. But he did speak of our machines as extensions of ourselves. Our machines, in McLuhan's thought, are means by which we can extend our selves into the world. An extension of ourselves: what can be more intimate than that?
Perhaps I can rephrase the question. Before we ask whether we have hugged our computers today, we need to ask this: Has your computer hugged you today?

Think for a moment of reading and writing. We have been taught to write by using a pen or a typewriter. We have been taught to read from books. Reading and writing are two separate activities. When I write, I do something active. I am involved in the creation of something. When I read, in contrast, I am more passive. The words on the printed page are there. They have a uniformity and a solidity that passively allows my eyes to scan them. In writing, I make my thoughts objective. I give them a solidity very much like the words I see on a printed page. I am either writer or reader. I am clear about what my role is.

With a word processor, however, the distinctions that have been so clearly taught us disappear. If I load a document into a word processor, the computer creates no distinction between me as reader or as writer. No matter what the source of the text, I can deal with the text in any way I choose. Even if the text was written by Shakespeare, if I can load the text into a word processor I can treat it exactly the same way as the shopping list I created this morning. I can copy, paste, delete, add. The computer makes no distinction between reader and writer. I become either, or both. In obscuring the line between creation and consumption, between initiator and recipient, between active and passive, the computer "hugs" me. I am drawn into the text in a way that is inconceivable in relation to the printed page, or even the television program.

Something similar happens with almost every software application we might imagine. Whether we use databases, spreadsheets, communication software, desk top publishing packages or just games, the computer draws us into a conversation in which the distinction between creator and consumer is obscured.

To put the matter a bit differently: To use a computer is to be drawn into a dialogue: prompt and response. However one uses a
computer, one is constantly engaged in a conversation with the machine. The conversation may go something like this:

User: Get me this file!

Computer: Sorry, I cannot find it.

User: Oh. Well try looking for it on this other directory.

Computer: It's not there either.

User: Hmmmm. Oh, I see. I spelt it wrong. Now see if you can get it.

Computer: Yes. Here it is. Now that it is loaded, what shall I do with it?

Of course, the language that is actually used by the computer and the user is different. The commands and the responses are given in computerese. But that conversation is a reasonable English translation of what actually goes on when someone uses a computer.

The truth is that our computers hug us constantly. We are drawn into conversation with our computers and, in the process, our existence is acknowledged. Even if we are so lonely that nobody in the world pays any attention to us, our computer acknowledges us. When we speak, our computers respond. And in being responded to we receive what transactional analysts call "strokes".

It may sound perverse to think of ourselves as receiving emotional support from our computers. I would not for a moment equate a computer prompt with a word of love or the touch of someone who cares. Nevertheless, on a subliminal level, we are "stroked" by our computers. We become involved in a conversation with one who responds. It is precisely for this reason that the computer can become a substitute for people who have difficulty with personal relationships -- like the teenaged hacker who avoids the pain of adolescent relationships by an intense relationship with computer technology. The embrace of the computer is there for all of us. It
only becomes perverse when the embrace of the computer replaces all other embraces.

If what I am saying is true, namely, that at a subliminal level we are affirmed and acknowledged by our computers, then it is urgent that we acknowledge our computers. We acknowledge our computers, not for our computers sake, but for our own sake. A machine that gives us strokes is a powerful machine. We need to be aware of what it is doing.

In the Biblical story of creation, we are told that "it is not good" that people should be alone. Humans are created in relationship: man and woman, humanity and the garden, humanity and God. We are who we are through our relationships. We are who we are through our relationship to each other. We are who we are through our relationship to our environment -- the garden. We are who we are through our relationship with God. And in the story of the Fall, each of those relationships is disrupted. Dominance replaces love in the relationship between man and woman. Pain and toil marks the new relationship between humanity and the natural environment. And the first chapter is written in the story of humanity's alienation from God. We are created in relationship. We are who we are in relationship.

The creation story says little about technology. But the truth of the matter is that we also are who we are in relationship to our machines. We project ourselves into our technologies. We internalize our technologies. And our alienation finds its expression in the alienating technologies we create: technologies of dominance, of manipulation; technologies that we place between ourselves, our environment and our God.

"Have you hugged your computer today?" Have you recognized the intimacy? Have you acknowledged the power?

If our machines have power, it is a power we have given them. Machines, in themselves, are not alienating. But as our creations, machines express who we are. As our creations, we recreate ourselves in the image of our machines. No machine expresses this
more clearly than the computer. It is the machine to which we give the power of speech, the power of reason, the power of conversation. More than any other technology, the computer embodies the things that we have often held to be most human, most divine.

With apologies to anyone who finds my language perverse, I want to stress the importance of intimacy with our technology, of not taking it for granted. Sunday is being observed around the world as Earth Day 1990. The environmental crisis, I want to suggest, is now facing us not simply because of our technology, but because we have taken our technology for granted. We have, so to speak, created technologies which, as long as they did what they were supposed to do, we otherwise ignored. We ignored the pollutants that created acid rain. We ignored the mounting barrels of PCBs. We ignored the mountains of used tires growing in dumps around the countryside. We took our technology for granted and assumed that its problems would take care of themselves.

Well, the computer is not a major source of pollution. It does not seriously deplete the world's supply of silicon. While some computer manufacturers are polluters, by and large the use of the computer creates no major pollution and uses very little energy.

The danger of pollution from a technology like the computer -- and I suppose the same is true of the other communication technologies -- is a pollution of the spirit. Insofar as we can view pollution as the unintended side effects of our technology, then we need to recognize the potential for pollution in machines that do not have smokestacks; machines that do not produce toxic chemicals.

It may seem harsh to think of computers as potential polluters of the spirit. It must seem strange that someone as enthusiastic about computers as I am should speak this way. The problem might become clearer if we thought about television. Whether one likes television or not, we can understand what it means to describe the television medium as a polluter of the spirit. We introduced television
in a world that thought of it as a radio with pictures. We were not prepared for the changes it would make to our lives. Not enough of us who were subject to the influence of the medium were encouraged to reflect on the nature of the medium and of its effects on our lives. We are now the victims of those effects. There is, I would suggest, a direct relation between television and what has happened to family life and church life in the developed world since 1950. We have become victims of the unintended side effects of a very powerful medium. It is not, I would suggest, that television technology is somehow evil. The pollution of the spirit of which I speak is the result of insufficient awareness of the power of a technology that we came to take for granted.

There is a certain strand of the environmental movement that sees technology itself as the problem. These are the romantics, those who hold a vision of a simple world in which life is lived very close to nature and without sophisticated mechanical and electronic technologies. People of this persuasion would attempt to convince us not to embrace our technology, but to shun it. Technology itself has created the ecological nightmare in which we live. The solution, the hope of the world, is the abandonment of technology.

Needless to say, I do not hold that view. The problem has not been an overuse of technology, but a misuse. It has been the careless and casual use of a technology to which we failed to be sufficiently attentive. The environmental crisis is the result of taking technology for granted.

"Have you hugged your computer today?" The question is an important one. Early in the computer revolution, there was a lot of talk about the need for what was called "computer literacy". As the sophistication of our software has increased, the need for the average user to understand the technical details of the computer has diminished. There are many offices, today, in which the average user never even sees a DOS prompt. The operating system, computer languages -- all are transparent to the user of a well designed application program. People who use computers need to know some basic skills in handling particular computer applications. Well
designed help screens and DOS shells take care of the rest. There is little need for computer literacy. You do not need to know much about the technology in order to use a computer. In making computer applications "user friendly" we have guaranteed that computers will be used by a population that understands very little about computers.

As I look at the development of computer technology, I think it is safe to predict that we will increasingly come to depend on the computer as a means of communication. A glance at computer magazines over the past year shows a remarkable growth in the use of local area networks, LANs. Organizations, large and small, are tying their desktop computers together into networks of work stations. It does not take much imagination to see that organizations will come to depend on these networks for the sharing of information. We can expect that the interoffice memo will be sent electronically and that Email or voice mail will begin to edge out the direct telephone call for communication within the organization.

The other thing I see when I look at recent developments is the amazing popularity of the FAX machine. The FAX is, of course, a dedicated computer. To those of us who have been devoted to computer communication, the popularity of the FAX is somewhat disturbing. It seems a wasteful way to transmit text. Its popularity, however, is largely due to the fact that it makes the technology transparent. One feeds a document into a "black box" and somewhere, from another "black box" a facsimile appears. The user does not need to be bothered about what happens inside the black boxes.

What all of this means is that more and more our relationships with others will be mediated by computer technology. More and more the computer will be the means by which we are informed about the world. The technology will have a powerful effect on us. Fifty years from now, it will be easy to see what those effects have been. But now we can only guess what they might be.
I want to leave you with this thought. There is some urgency for us to think about how we promote what I want to call "computer awareness". "Computer literacy" -- the special skills that used to be required to make a computer work -- are less and less necessary. We have succeeded in making the technology more and more transparent. But if the need for computer literacy has diminished, something else needs to take its place. If people do not need the skills of a programmer, they do need resources to be aware of what the computer is and what it is doing to our world. We need to begin thinking of what needs to go into a program of "computer awareness training."

We cannot learn what it means to be human in a technological world by despising our technology. Nor can we afford to take our technology for granted. We need to acknowledge our technology, respect it, become friends with it. To be human in a technological world means to recognize the humanity of our machines, to understand the symbiotic relationship that exists between us and our creations.

"Have you hugged your computer today?"

David Lochhead
April 1990

Copyright © 1990 David Lochhead