

Megatheriums for Breakfast

4

It is wonderful how quickly you get used to things, even the most astonishing. Five minutes before, the children had had no more idea than you that there was such a thing as a sand-fairy in the world, and now they were talking to it as though they had known it all their lives.

It drew its eyes in and said:

'How very sunny it is - quite like old times. Where do you get your Megatheriums from now?'

A fanzine published for ANZAPA and others by none other than...

David R Grigg, 1556 Main Road,
Research, Victoria 3095, Australia.

AND WHAT DO YOU DO FOR A LIVING...?

For some people, this is a very simple question. For me, it involves a bit of a song and a dance.

I usually start by saying: "Well, the short answer is that I work with computers." And the long answer? Well, yes, you're going to get that now.

As I've mentioned before, I work for a division of David Syme and Company Limited, publishers of *The Age* newspaper (for those overseas, *The Age* is regarded as a 'quality broadsheet' paper). The division I work for is called Syme Information Technology, and it's a funny sort of beast.

Syme Information Technology (or SIT for short) started life in about 1981 as a division called Syme Media Development. At that time several 'new' technologies were on the horizon, and the powers that be at *The Age* were getting nervous about the impact that they might have on the newspaper. *The Age* makes most of its profit from selling classified advertising, and these new technologies appeared as though they held the potential of affecting that revenue by transferring classifieds to electronic presentation rather than print.

In retrospect, that concern seems to have been considerably premature, and the hot 'new' technology of most concern back then - videotex - now appears itself to be obsolete and dying. However, at the time, the concerns seemed reasonable, and so Syme Media Development was set up as a research unit and a 'think-tank' to investigate these new technologies and report on them to the management of David Syme.

At about the same time, another division (actually a wholly-owned subsidiary) called AAV Australia, was getting involved in laser videodisc¹. Indeed, AAV published Australia's first ever videodisc in about 1981, as part of a training/sales program for GMH.

Well, after a while the people at Syme Media Development started to think that they ought to try to put some of this knowledge of videotex and related technologies to good use other than writing largely disregarded reports to management. So they started to sell their services creating videotex databases for clients.

A few years afterwards, it seemed like a good idea to combine this videotex expertise with the videodisc expertise being developed at AAV (a far-sighted move at the time). So Syme Information Technology was formed to bring together these various skills. And at almost exactly that time, I left Telecom and came to work for SIT as Videotex Manager.

¹For those still unfamiliar with videodisc, I should perhaps explain that it is an LP-sized (oh come on, you must remember vinyl records!) silvery disk read by laser (CD Audio technology was derived from videodisc technology). One side can contain 36 minutes of high-quality video with stereo sound, or 54,000 still photographs. Most importantly, the player can be controlled by an external computer to play any piece of video at random, or display any still, with a random access time of less than 2 seconds.

I'd spent the previous 10 years or so working for various Government departments as a journalist, working on magazines or for publicity departments. My work at Telecom was mainly to do with explaining Telecom technology, often as much to our own staff as to people outside the organisation. But in 1985, Telecom announced its VIATEL videotex² system with much fanfare, and I began to get very excited about it. I guess I've always been a technology freak, and in particular a computer freak (there's a long tale behind this too, which I won't inflict upon you now). So I wanted to get my hands on videotex and use it. I'd also been involved a little in the journalistic aspects of the VIATEL launch - I wrote part of the first VIATEL directory, for example.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I gained some hands-on experience with videotex at Telecom and outside (I designed a couple of the early videotex games on VIATEL), and when I saw a position advertised as "Videotex Manager" at AAV, leapt at the chance to get out of what was then becoming a very frustrating job at Telecom (there was also a substantial rise in salary to be considered).

However, my first few years at AAV/SIT weren't exactly unalloyed pleasure. It transpired that my new job involved more sales and marketing than the hands-on videotex work that I had hoped to be doing. And selling is something that I have absolutely no talent for. Basically, I couldn't sell a fur coat to a naked Eskimo. So my efforts in this direction were fairly pathetic. (To be fair to myself, it was pretty hard work selling services to people who in general hadn't even heard of what the heck those services were all about. "Hello, have you heard of videotex - the VIATEL system?" "No." "Oh, well, you see videotex is this real neat system for getting your information across to the general public. Do you have any information you want to get across to the general public?" "No." "Well, if you did, we could offer you our services to put that information up on VIATEL..." "No. Go away!")

But we did create quite a number of videotex databases for fairly well-known organisations, and we had a very good reputation in the industry for the quality of our work. Apart from marketing, my job was also to supervise a small creative team of people who designed and put together these databases.

To some extent, I still do the same sort of thing - supervising a small creative team putting together 'databases' (and with the marketing side reduced almost to zero), only now I also write a fair bit of software.

A major shift in the nature of our work came in 1987, when we won the tender to supply the visitor information system for World Expo '88. This system was sponsored by Telecom Australia, and involved considerable challenges.

The idea was to provide a computerised system of information to Expo visitors, showing them information about the seventy or so pavilions, information on the multitude of entertainment events, a guide to the on-site restaurants and shops, to tourist information

²Videotex is (was?) a means of delivering a host of information stored on computers to the home by means of the telephone line and a domestic television set - closely allied to teletext, which is delivered over the broadcast television system to special TV sets.

and so on. The system had to be controlled by a touch-screen, and had to combine graphics, text and video footage. There were to be no less than 60 terminals on site, and information had to be updated daily. Most difficult of all, both audio and text had to be presented in both English and Japanese. As I said, a considerable challenge!

It took us well over a year. Hardware was located and ordered (a Japanese videotex terminal, using the NAPLPS standard, but with in-built Japanese text entry), and software written to present the information and allow communications from each terminal to a central host computer. Graphics had to be created, maps designed. Video material had to be collected, edited and put on videodisc. And most difficult and exhausting of all, mountains of information had to be gathered, checked and incorporated into a system controlled by touch-screen menus.

The latter task was terrible, as we were trying to put the system together nearly 12 months before the opening, when pavilions were not yet fixed nor contracts signed. Not to mention that Expo was in Brisbane and we were in Melbourne. It nearly drove our database designer, Pat Taggart, insane when phone-calls like this occurred: "Oh Pat, you know the Saudi Arabian pavilion?" "Yes?" "Well, they're not coming any more, it's going to be the Vatican instead." "Aaaaargggghhh!"

Another major problem was that the software was being written even as we were trying to use it to assemble all of this material together. And there were frequent problems with the software (though in the end the developers did a brilliant job).

All in all, it was a mammoth undertaking, and there were frequent disasters and near-nervous breakdowns. But we made it, and delivered on time and within budget. The 'Expo Info' system, as it was called, proved to be a terrific success, recording some 46 million touches during the six months of Expo, and attracting a good deal of attention. I doubt if I'll ever again be involved in such a major project.

But Expo changed our direction, and from then on we have concentrated on interactive information systems, with or without videodisc, and almost always controlled by touch-screens.

Since Expo, we've put together systems for the Victorian Tourist Commission, for Collins Place, for the Small Business Development Corporation, for the MMBW, and for several museums.

Somewhere along the way there, I discovered my current 'ecological niche' (it having been vacated by someone else) of Resident Computer Boffin. Though everyone in the office except the Manager uses computers to do their work, I'm really the only person there who understands them.

About three years ago I decided that we should have our own in-house authoring system for such projects and set about to write it (not without some initial resistance on the part of my boss), and this software (and other programs I have written) has now been used for all of our recent projects, including four games for the 'Scienceworks' science museum which is opening in Spotswood at the end of this month.

I decided that I needed some official qualifications to justify what I was going, and so I spent two years of part-time study obtaining a Graduate Diploma of Computing.

And this led me to getting involved with my current project, for *The Age* newspaper (forgotten about *The Age*, hadn't you?).

The Age Marketing Department has for many years been trying to get going a system to manage information about our home delivery subscribers (people who get *The Age* home delivered). To date, the information on the names and addresses of our subscribers has not been directly available to *The Age*, but only to each individual newsgent. It is obviously important to be able to collect this information and manage it centrally, so as to be able to do direct mailing of special offers, and so on. However, simple as this idea is, achieving it is something else.

The Age's EDP Department is too busy handling the massive number of accounts that have to be processed each month (think about it: every classified ad represents an account that has to be created, invoiced, followed up on, etc etc), and the huge text processing requirements of a major newspaper, to worry about such a relatively minor project for the Marketing Department. So, after months (indeed, years) of the project going nowhere, SIT were brought in to act as a circuit-breaker and to get the darn thing moving. My Graduate Diploma was about to come in really useful!

What this means is that me, muggins, am now trying to be systems analyst, designer, programmer and database administrator for a system using the Oracle relational database management system. To be fair, with some help from Pat Taggart, who keeps me on the straight and narrow as regards being systematic and thorough, but who doesn't have the background to help me much on the technical side.

When the Oracle software was delivered, it came with (literally) a metre-long shelf full of manuals. That was bad enough. Then the Sun computer was delivered, and that came with two metres of manuals. I'm trying to learn the Unix operating system, Oracle (and all its various products), and the Sun hardware, simultaneously. And build the application. And I can't even do it full time! No wonder I barely have time to think, and my lunch 'hour' is just enough time to eat a sandwich at my desk.

Sometimes I feel a bit like that Sissy-whatsit fellow who had to keep pushing a huge rock up a steep hill, only to see it roll back down again once he got to the top. At least he got some exercise while he was about it...

MY BRILLIANT (ACADEMIC) CAREER

I suppose the lowest point of my 22-year long tertiary education came in 1972 when the Dean of the Faculty of Science at Melbourne University demanded to know whether I had academically rehabilitated myself.

It was like something out of an Arlo Guthrie monologue: "Son, have you aca-DEM-ick-ly re-HAB-il-

itated youself?" It emerged that this meant to ask me if I had proved by doing some further study successfully that I had overcome the stain of having once failed several subjects. Since that was precisely what I was trying to do - carry on some further study - well then I hadn't academically rehabilitated myself, and therefore I couldn't do any more study. Catch-22 and all that.

The high point of my tertiary efforts, of course, was being rung up late in 1991 by one of my fellow students from Chisholm Institute who had just been to see if the results were out. They were.

"You got two credits," said Terry, almost off-hand.

"Two?" said I, not expecting this news so soon. "You mean I passed 4GLs? You mean I'm *through*?"

He meant it. I was.

After 22 years of striving, I finally had a tertiary qualification that seemed as if it might be useful. But then I started pondering. Am I the only person in Australia whose academic qualifications consist of honours in Maths and Science at Matriculation, a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and a Graduate Diploma of Computing? Perhaps not, but there can't be many of us.

So how did I end up with such a dog's breakfast of qualifications, and why did it take me 22 years? As you can guess, I'm going to tell you at inordinate length, in the same way as I got them, in fits and starts.

FIT THE FIRST - 1st YEAR APPLIED SCIENCE

I suppose some of the blame can be laid on the shoulders of Billy McMahon. Wasn't it he, who in the late 1960's, announced that Australia would shortly be enjoying a huge resources boom, led by the mining industry? Or perhaps it was Harold Holt, before he went off to play with the sharks. It hardly matters, because whoever said it, that concept was uppermost in the mind of the careers adviser I went to see towards the end of 1968, the year I completed Matriculation (as they used to call it several generations ago).

"Metallurgy, that's what you want to do," said he, glancing at my good half-year results in Physics, Chemistry and Pure and Applied Mathematics, but ignoring my equally good result in English Expression (I had wanted to do English Literature as well, but as I would have had to drop Chemistry, I had been persuaded that this was a Bad Thing To Do).

"This country's in the middle of a mining boom," he went on. "They're crying out for metallurgists at the moment." Whether they would still be crying out for them in four year's time when I would have completed my degree was something I was too naive to ask this sterling gentleman.

So I duly filled out my application papers for the various universities and colleges, heading my list with "University of Melbourne - Applied Science (Metallurgy)".

My Matriculation results were good, if not outstanding - three second-class honours. I was duly

accepted into the course. My first year at Melbourne University wasn't too bad, considering. I didn't study any metallurgy that year - it started in the second year of the course. So my subjects were just the standard science subjects - Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics.

I found myself part of a small group of friends in Applied Science. Due to some bizarre coincidence, out of a group of six or seven of us, five of us were called David. I deplore my name being shortened to "Dave", but in this group it was inevitable. Morning greetings were hilarious to outsiders: "Morning, Dave"... "G'day, Dave"... "H'llo Dave"... "Good to see you, Dave"... etc.

We seemed to spend every spare minute we weren't in lectures, including all of lunchtime and morning and afternoon teas, not in studying, not in drinking beer (which is what the engineers would have done), but in playing '500'. For the uninitiated, this is a card game vaguely similar to Bridge. We used to play it in groups of six or seven, using two packs of cards, endlessly. To this day it is still my favourite card game, though I cannot claim great skill - I tend to overbid poor hands. But oh the joy of a lay-down *misere* or a successfully completed nine no trumps!

These were also the days of the Vietnam War and conscription, and student politics and demonstrations were at their zenith. I used to get around in an old khaki army jacket and a peace symbol strung around my neck - a combination that, John Bangsund commented, seemed a little at odds.

I remember spending several hours with hundreds of others, filling in endless false conscription registration papers - the idea was to flood the public service with so many false papers they would grind to a halt. This still seems to me a good strategy, but it backfired a little for me when I received a notice from the authorities demanding that I front up for my medical - two years before I was eligible to be conscripted. Someone (I have my suspicions...) had filled in a false registration form with my name and address but with an incorrect birth date. I had to write hastily back, with copies of my genuine birth certificate, hypocritically denouncing those radicals who did such things as forge conscription papers.

I honestly don't remember much about most of the lectures I attended; certainly nothing of the content of the subjects, which probably says something about the futility of learning - either that, or something about my rotten memory. I do however remember the Organic Chemistry lectures. This is not because of the fascination of the subject. On the contrary, Organic Chemistry always seemed to me to be particularly boring because it seemed to consist mainly of memorising molecular structures and how they are described by phrases such as 2-iodo-2-methylpropane or formulas such as $(CH_3)_2CH-CH_2CHO$.

Indeed, others in the same lectures must have reacted in the same way because this boredom, and a general dislike (for no reason I can recall) of the Organic Chemistry lecturer, led to the incidents which I do remember.

Now, it is important to know that the lecture theatres we were in for these lectures were built in the early Victorian era, and were very tall inside,

with steeply raked banks of seats. Consequently, sitting right at the back of the theatre meant that you peered down at the lecturer like an opera-goer in the 'Gods' staring at Madame Butterfly. The temptation, during a boring lecture to launch a paper aeroplane was well-nigh irresistible.

Paper planes probably get launched in most classrooms, but the effect is nowhere near that of planes sent forth from the top of one of these high lecture theatres. If the plane was designed correctly and launched at the right angle, it would spiral lazily around and around and around, slowly descending.

It was curiously gripping to watch with a sort of horrified fascination as the plane came lower and lower while the lecturer's back was turned. The suspense was incredible. Finally, it would skim over the lecturer's head and come to an abrupt halt by hitting the blackboard or the demonstration desk, or even the lecturer himself. The effect on a susceptible lecturer was a fascinating and terrible sight.

This is a very childish thing to do, of course, and no doubt you are all welcome to tut-tut and tell me that you were too mature, serious, concerned and dedicated to your studies to ever contemplate doing such a thing. All I can say is, in that case, you missed out on some enormous fun.

Now, such are the delights of paper plane throwing in these vast auditoriums (don't write to tell me that this should be auditoria - we speak English, not Latin) that you could guarantee that one or two would be chucked in any lecture in one of these theatres. But Organic Chemistry - that was something else again.

The engineers were mostly to blame, of course. Engineering students (of whom I was not one - I'll kindly ask you to recall I was doing Applied Science) seem to have an amazing reputation at most tertiary institutions. They are inevitably the loudest, the most irreverent, the hardest drinkers and the foulest swearers.

At Melbourne Uni there was an annual Mr University Quest. The events making up this contest included, if I recall correctly, the following:

- Beer Guzzling - the winner was the contestant who could down the most beer in a fixed time;
- Chundering - immediately following the former, I think requiring contestants to vomit the furthest distance;
- Swearing Competition - contestants had to swear for 10 minutes continuously without repeating themselves and were judged on originality;
- ...and an event which shall remain nameless but which involved doing unmentionable things with a life-size blow-up plastic doll.

The Mr University award was won year after year by engineering students.

So in the Organic Chemistry lectures, it was no surprise that the engineering cabal, seated the furthest back and the highest up, were the instigators or the paper plane equivalent of the Battle of Britain - though I do not deny that the rest of us often joined in.

As the term progressed, so the lecturer became more and more boring and more and more irritated with the paper planes, and so their number grew. Towards the end, veritable squadrons of paper planes filled the air, so thickly that it was often hard to see the blackboard.

The culmination of this absurdity came when the engineers somehow managed to smuggle into the lecture, and to release at the psychologically ideal moment - a live chicken!! It brought the house down, as they say - and it sent the lecturer storming out.

The next Organic Chemistry lecture, the lecturer strode in. The first plane skimmed instantly at his feet. He strode out again.

It was all over. We had destroyed the enemy, and in so doing, almost destroyed ourselves. At any rate, I and many others received a note after the exams, telling us that although we had passed Chemistry as a whole, we had failed the Organic Chemistry unit, and that we would have to work hard to prove ourselves good little boys and girls if we intended to pursue chemistry any further. -- With stories like this, is it any wonder it took me 22 years to complete tertiary education?

RECENT READING

A rather low-brow (and low-reading) couple of months. This is what I read:

Tom Clancy: *The Sun of All Fears*
Terry Pratchett: *Reaper Man*
Ellis Peters: *Monk's Hood*
Wilkie Collins: *The Yellow Mask and Other Stories*

I enjoy Tom Clancy's books a lot; I've read all of them so far, starting with *The Hunt for Red October*. I guess Clancy is a rather right-wing individual whose philosophies of life I probably would strongly disagree with, but he certainly knows how to write thrillers based on the most recent international developments.

This latest book is set in the post-Cold War era. You have to allow Clancy a little poetic license to avoid him libelling current political leaders - the Presidents of the USA and of the USSR (well, he's not quite that up to date!) are fictional characters - so you have to imagine the events taking place in a sort of nearby alternate universe.

The thrust of this book is about a terrorist group in the Middle East getting their hands on weapons-grade plutonium and building their own H-bomb. That's right, not just an atom bomb, but a thermonuclear bomb. And detonating it inside the United States. Clancy describes the process of building the bomb in some detail, and points out in an afterword just how frighteningly easy it is for anyone to obtain this information.

I find Clancy's characterisation quite good, certainly above the average for thriller writers. Though perhaps his protagonist Jack Ryan is a little too goody-goody to be believable.

The only one of Clancy's books I haven't thoroughly enjoyed was *Patriot Games* because of the rather twee inclusion of Prince Charles as a character; perhaps

an indication of the rather odd way that Americans seem to approach the British Royalty.

I think I mentioned last issue seeing a paperback of Terry Pratchett's latest Discworld novel and being reluctant to buy it because it seemed so slim. I suspect that this was *Reaper Man*, which I borrowed from the local library. I must say it was well up to the standard. Death (or should it be DEATH?) is told that his own time is running out; he is going to die. So he decides to try and live a little first. As usual, the consequences are hilarious, and we meet up with a wonderful selection of wacky characters, including the Dead Rights Society. ("Do you know people can say what they like about you and take away your property, just because you're dead?").

Pratchett seems to have regained the lightness of touch which I reckon he lost for a bit in *Guards, Guards!*

The Ellis Peters book was of course one of the marvellous Brother Cadfael series (rather crassly labelled on the cover "A Mediaeval Whodunnit"). There is crime and detection of course, as ever, but this series is a fascinating way to get a idea of what everyday life might have been like in England in the early 12th Century. One day I am going to sit down and read the whole series in chronological order (so far I've read them completely out of sequence - this is book 3).

Ellis Peters (Edith Pargetter) is an amazingly prolific writer. There are now 18 novels in the Cadfael series alone, and she has written another good dozen other titles under the Ellis Peters name; but then you look at the huge number of books she has published as Edith Pargetter, and you fall out of your chair. How can anyone write so much and so well? It's enough to make someone like myself, a one-time amateur scribbler who found it took months even to write a short story, completely despair. Anyway, more power to her.

I'm still having Booksearch locate me the occasional Wilkie Collins book. A company called Allan Sutton Publishing in the UK seems to be publishing a number of Collin's lesser-known works in paperback, which is a real bonanza for me. *The Yellow Mask etc.* includes three stories, which don't quite compare in quality to the better novels, but a good read anyway. The title story in this collection takes in my view rather too long to reach the dramatic highpoint - the appearance at a ball of a mysterious masked woman dressed all in yellow, who when unmasked at last by the man whose heels she keeps dogging, turns out to bear the exact image of the man's dead wife. But entertaining, anyway. Rather better was the second story, 'Sister Rose', which is centred on the French Revolution. As this story was published in *Household Words* only four years before Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, it is interesting to consider what influence Collins' tale had on Dickens deciding to write about the same period.

Oh by the way, it wasn't Jean Kitson (the comedienne) who referred me to *Gate of Angels* as I mentioned last month, it was of course JILL Kitson of the radio program *First Edition*. Silly me.

RECENT COMPUTING

Well, I did it, not without a pang of guilt at the expense. I bought *Dance of the Planets*. I may possibly include a copy of the promotional brochure for this program in the mailing. It's a beautiful piece of work.

You can view the solar system from any angle, either from out in space, or from the surface of the Earth, at a range of magnifications from so far out that the orbit of Pluto is a small ellipse at the centre of the screen, to so far in that you can see detailed images of the planets such as Saturn as large as a 50c piece on the screen, with rings, planet shadow and all known satellites *moving* in their correct orbits at a pace ranging from true time to 240,000 normal pace. You can select any date from about 4000BC to 9999AD and see the planets in their correct positions. You can turn the clock backwards or forwards.

From the surface of the Earth, you can see the sun, moon and planets dance across the stars, all accurately depicted down to magnitude 6.5 (better than the naked eye can do in the real sky). You can examine eclipses, work out when conjunctions will happen, watch comets or asteroids in their orbits, or invent your own asteroid and watch what happens to it when it comes too near a planet.

On the simplest level, it is great to be able to see a sky map of the stars and planets in your local sky at the current time. Somehow it is kind of wierd to be able to walk outside and check the real sky, and see it exactly as depicted on the computer screen.

Wonderful stuff for any space/sf buff. And a tremendous educational aid to teach either adults or children about astronomy.

I was also interested to see from the program that official names have now been given to all of the new moons of the outer planets which were discovered by the Voyager probes, and that Uranus' moons have all been given names from Shakespeare, to be consistent with the already known Oberon and Titania (the next biggest is now called Puck).

Apart from *Dance*, all else pales into insignificance. I've grown a little tired of *Lemmings*, after getting half-way through the 'Taxing' screens. I still reckon that level 26 of 'Tricky' is plain impossible. Any comments?

I'm happy to report that my shareware program *Autoread* still brings in cheques every week or so. I reckon I've made about \$2,500 out of it so far, which includes one site license for a U.S. chemical company, which is using it as a help system. I'm currently negotiating with a software developer in the States about another major site license (could be up to 500 users). And just the other day I was enormously amused to receive a cheque from... well, if I have space I'll include a copy of the official order form.

But I have to say that my experience has been that the ratio of people who pay a registration fee to those who use the program and who don't register it is around 1:1000. This is very depressing stuff for shareware enthusiasts. You have to be incredibly lucky to become a shareware millionaire, I think!

You have to develop a program that most people are going to use every day, and you have to structure it so that unless people register, they are missing out on some important functionality.

Also on the computing front, I must heartily recommend the CompuServe Information Service. You can now use CompuServe from Australia for 'only' \$36.00 an hour. This is still pretty expensive, but if you ration yourself and use a navigation program like TAPCIS or CIM, you can keep the costs down to a manageable level.

CompuServe has been invaluable on a number of counts. For example, almost all the major commercial software vendors maintain 'forums' on CompuServe where you can ask questions about the product and get speedy answers from both the vendor and many users. I've used the Borland forums extensively for help with programming in Turbo Pascal and C++. You can put up a message one day, and log back on the next day to read a harvest of often up to a dozen replies giving you free help and advice. And the electronic mail facility has been very helpful indeed with my shareware program, negotiating site licenses and so on. It's also a little wierd, communicating almost instantly with people in the U.S.A. or Europe (I've even had discussions with someone in Norway). The Global Village indeed...

There is also a huge amount of shareware and free-ware software available through the forums. It might cost you \$10 or \$15 to download a major software package, but that can still be worthwhile if the package is not readily available in Australia. CompuServe is where I found the latest version of *Fractint*, for example (there's a whole section of the Computer Art forum dedicated to *Fractint*).

There are also vast databases of articles and reviews available. For example, I located and downloaded three reviews of *Dance of the Planets* before I bought it, all culled from various publications I would not ordinarily see.

Also for space/astronomy buffs, NASA maintains an extensive database on CompuServe. I recently pulled down a series of the latest press releases about the Galileo, Ulysses and Magellan probes (the main antenna on Galileo is still stuck, alas).

If you are so inclined, you can set up your own specialist electronic press clipping service, filing articles from AAP, Reuters, etc, which meet criteria you have set, and storing them in your electronic mailbox.

If you've read David Brin's novel *Earth*, you'll find his depiction of The Net as being not too far removed from what you can already do on CompuServe.

RECENT LISTENING

I've been listening at work (courtesy of the CD-ROM/CD-Audio player built into the Sun computer!) to CDs of Vivaldi's Oboe Concertos and Bach Violin Concertos. Nice stuff.

On the basis of hearing an extremely evocative rendition of 'Silent Night' in Gaelic by Enya, I bought a CD of her work. Not quite to my taste, too 'New Age' in style, but interesting nonetheless.

AT LAST, THE MAILING COMMENTS SHOW...!

You Really Know You're Home
When You Find a Wombat Under
Your Bed #19
CATH ORTLIEB

Cath! You an Italian and a teacher too! Don't you recognise Dante when you see it? That quote was of course the inscription above the entrance to Hell in *The Inferno*. Which is of course why I was using it to describe the road to running Worldcons...

Boy, you Italians really know how to encourage *les autres*, don't you (or whatever the equivalent is in Italian). I can just imagine sitting here at the computer, calmly contemplating an interesting fractal, when there's a knock on the door. I open it to find a couple of swarthy guys in dark glasses, bad suits and carrying what appear to be violin cases.

"Hello," I say desperately, "I think you must have made the wrong house. Parents For Music' is meeting next door."

"Eh! You David Grigg?" says the smaller of the two.

"Er... yes, but..."

"You in dis Anzapa ting?" says the bigger, fingering the catch on his violin case.

"Yes, but..." I stammer out.

"We been sent from da Prez. You know, the President. She says we gotta encourage youse. And when we encourage somebody, dey stay encourageder, you know?"

"But, but..."

The little guy spits and hefts his violin case. "Listen, buddy, you get back to dat keyboard, and get working hard on da next mailing, or next time, we gonna play you some music, get it?" "Yes, yes! I will, right now. Yes sir."

Whew! And I thought my Muse was bad when she got annoyed!

Your horror stories of driving were interesting and fairly familiar. I think I must have been breath-tested about half-a-dozen times by now (maybe it's something about the way I drive?). Never been caught driving under the influence, of course, because I don't. I must say that I think there has been a huge shift in public opinion about driving while under the influence. It is now regarded (rightly) as about on a par with molesting children.

When I was young and foolish (sometime during the Crimean War, I think), it was regarded as pretty well normal to get plastered and then drive

home. There were a few times when I don't know how I and my motorcycle managed to make it. However, when riding in such a condition my instinct was to slow down to an absolute crawl: still unforgivable, but perhaps at least less of a danger to others.

brg
BRUCE GILLESPIE

Well, if my return to Anzapa has prompted you to return to doing mailing comments, I'm glad I came back. Your mailing comments were always the best in Anzapa, and were eagerly awaited by me at least.

I might think about FAPA in the future. I always thought that was where old fans went to die...

I must say that your sense of style and layout as demonstrated by your contribution made me full of admiration, and also made me decide to try using a smaller font for this (readers who are going blind trying to read this now know who to blame).

"I overspent my CD budget by several thousand dollars last year..."

MiGhod, what a mind-boggling comment that is! I might buy one CD a month or perhaps a couple of books, if I'm lucky! When do you get time to listen to all those CDs? And where do you put them? And you have the gall to complain about having to work to support your habit! I have to work in what is often a pretty stressful job just so we can eat and not have the bank come and take away the house! And you overspent...! ...by several thousand...! ...on CDs...! Mutter, mutter, mutter. (You are perfectly at liberty to riposte with snide comments about how much I spend on computing!)

And anyway, I don't agree with you about women sopranos. They sing beautifully, I agree (I'm a great fan of Dame Kiri, and I like Emma Kirby singing Purcell's songs and airs), but it's not the same as boy sopranos. I have a CD of Faure's Requiem, but with women instead of boys, and it just isn't a patch on the original version I heard at Harding's. There's something about the purity of tone in a boy's voice which just can't be reproduced by a woman's (which is generally much richer). Ah well, *de gustibus*, etc.

Neither of us has mentioned the supreme Bach, who fills me with delight. I'm especially fond of some of the fugues. Must buy *The Art of the Fugue* one day if I can afford it.

I haven't yet really explored Mozart, but I liked a comment someone made: "In Heaven it is Bach that they play, but between themselves, the angels prefer Mozart." (Doubtless Bangsund would know the source of this comment.)

Tisellation
JANE TISELL

Like the title, and enjoyed your description of your room. I manage to have an office which could well be described in similar terms. My mother used to say to me (about my room at home): "David! How can you manage to create such a mess?" And I used to reply diffidently, "It's a talent."

The emotional situation you describe at the end sounds fairly common, and I think cutting off all contact is about the only (though very difficult) answer.

Illegitimi Non Caborundum
LINNETTE HORNE

Aaarrrgggh, not another emotionally fraught situation! Life is never simple, is it?

Your video production course sounded very interesting. When Katie was younger I frequently borrowed a video camera from Ron, the guy next door, and so we have some good footage of her as a toddler up to going to school age. However, the people next door then split up and Ron left, selfishly taking his video camera with him! (Gadzooks!) So we don't have much coverage of Katie's later years. Cameras are getting so cheap, though that I guess eventually we will buy one. A course would probably be very useful - one time with Ron's camera I managed to leave the rear microphone on and so the entire ten-minute episode is full of heavy breathing...

A Year to Forget
GERALD SMITH & WOMBLE

Sorry to hear about your father, and various other troubles in your lives.

Yes, you have a good memory. I spent 7 years in total with Telecom. It wasn't a bad job, but ultimately very frustrating (unfortunately I could probably say much the same about my present job - at least it pays better).

RYCT me RMCTY and DNQ on the QT: Not Latin, but Italian. See my comment to Cath. I suppose it was pretentious to give the original Italian

rather than the English translation, but I thought it sounded better. Nevertheless, here is the English (courtesy of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations):

*This way for the sorrowful city.
This way for eternal suffering.
This way to join the lost people...
Abandon all hope, ye who enter!*

Rather apt, I thought.

"Maybe if Sydney ever does get a successful bid together we can call on your expertise in the area?" Hah! This is like asking a man who has had both legs ripped off underneath a train if he'd mind doing it again for the cameras...

Bury My Soul At Exit 63
WELLER

So many ANZAPAns seem to have stultifying, dead-end or otherwise unsatisfactory jobs! Is this just normal for the world at large ("The majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation" - H.D.Thoreau) or is it largely confined to fans, do you think?

My job is a long way less than perfect, largely because the division in which I work has a very uncertain future, but the actual work I do is both responsible and satisfying. I guess this is because I managed to alter my duties/activities so that I ended up doing something I could do fairly well and which I enjoyed. I often say that I found myself an 'ecological niche' at work. But being well-adapted to your ecological niche doesn't much help when the forest gets cut down around you...

Your devotion to VCR fandom makes me ask whether movies on videodisc are making much of an impact over there? Multi-standard (CD, CD-Rom, Videodisc) players are now apparently available for around \$500, I understand.

No, I have no interest in Gridiron football, despite being 10,000 miles away from it. I decline to stow away on the first ship to Mars in order to find out if I can get far enough away for it to become interesting.

I believe your Bell story. It almost makes sense for Bell to have carried out that kind of experiment.

An Island of Dubious Sanity
TERRY FROST

Well, I agree with your attitude to drugs to the extent that the biggest

danger is misinformation and lies told about them. Our approach to telling Katie about drugs is to be as honest as we can but to convey *our* view that people who abuse drugs are basically stupid. Not criminal, dangerous, deviate. But stupid. And of course, we feel the same way about cigarettes and alcohol as we do about illegal drugs. (None of this is to say that I think that you are stupid - you'll note I carefully used the word 'abuse' above).

I still think the only way to stop the drug 'problem' is to make all drugs legal and if necessary, to provide them at low cost to those who want/need them. Hey, if you want to burn out your brain or destroy your nasal passages, that's your problem. Why should we waste valuable police time on trying to stop you?

Fanatic 26
LYN MCCONCHIE

A ten-day re-write of a novel! That's really heroic stuff, forget about the guys with the swords and the girls with the dragons, enter Lyn the Aolist, She of the Blazing Typewriter! Hope it does well for you.

Alas, I read little or no fantasy (Terry Pratchett is about the closest I come to it). Which probably explains why I read so little 'science fiction' these days - what is published is mostly fantasy with spaceships on the cover. But I still wish you well with any kind of writing. For me, it is too much like hard work.

Exhyst.Ntialism
ROGER WEDDALL

Your mailing comments, like Bruce's, are a model of interest and good writing. It's a real art, I think, to make comments so interesting that it doesn't matter to whom they are directed, everyone finds them worthwhile.

And while we're in back-patting mode, thanks for your welcome and your comments about my fiction. Alas, I now think it unlikely that I will ever write fiction again, but you never know.

Well, yes, I really do remember the man coming along and lighting the gas lamps. Apparently there was gas street lighting in a number of places in England until late in the 1950s. What's more, I know how to use a *slide rule*, too! Yes, you can call me Grandad if you like. (By the way, I find re-reading Robert Heinlein's juveniles enormous fun these days,

particularly as he has all these people calculating orbits in their space-ships, using slide rules! Talk about lack of vision...)

You will be pleased to know that I have no intention of rabbiting on about the horrors of Aussiecon II here in ANZAPA. The occasional passing reference is all you are likely to get. And as for getting me into a corner so that I can pour my heart out... well, not while the libel laws are the way they are in this country. Besides, I'm still not sure just how I did end up as Chairman, anyway. There's some similarity, however, to the old story about the cabin boy promoted to captain just as the ship is going down...

Ytterbium 19
ALAN STEWART

Well, thanks for standing for OBE (whew! saved!).

You seem to watch a great deal of television. I must say that I find myself watching less and less television as time goes by. Partly this is because I find using the computer immensely more entertaining most of the time, and partly it's because I cannot bear commercial television ("We interrupt this advertisement to bring you a brief section of program."). I've never really fallen into the habit of watching SBS much, which leaves the ABC, which only rarely has anything of interest these days. Television is most definitely not an essential part of my life.

Ah! 500! As you will see from the article about my first year of university, which should be somewhere in this issue, 500 was a great obsession with us students then. (Of course, shuffling the stone cards was a lot harder in those days than it is with these newfangled pasteboard things). I much enjoyed your description of 'van gemerting' and the 'Ilija option', both clearly more recent innovations.

However, the Joker you included as an illustration is a real joker, as it clearly comes not from a 500 pack, but from a Canasta pack. Do you play Canasta as well? I've only played once or twice, but liked it a lot.

You may well have heard of me in fannish circles (after all, people have to have *some* words to swear with), but you certainly didn't see me on the Krypton Factor. That, I recall, was an interloper by the name of David Greagg, who I think was some kind of Tolkien fan at Monash University.

Charles Taylor once told me about a long conversation he had had with someone from Monash, about me, because it appeared they both knew me. Or at least, Charles Taylor was talking about me; the other guy was talking about this Greagg bloke. It took them about half an hour to work it out, as there were sufficient points of similarity to keep the comparison going, but enough points of difference to make it puzzling to both sides.

Janice Kicked and Clawed her Way to the Top
JAN MACNALLY

Welcome to ANZAPA. Glad to know I was a help in the previous mailing. I don't think there are any rules here, or at least not serious ones (including smoke-bombs in the mailing is definitely *out*, though I don't think anyone has told Singular Productions about it). So feel free to say whatever you like here. We'll all be sure to read it with interest.

Now when I first joined ANZAPA, back in the good old days of single-digit mailings...

("Oh Ghod, here he goes again! He's taking this Boring Old Fart business seriously! Can't we do *anything*?")

...I really felt like a rank outsider. I didn't even know what a stencil was, had never before seen a duplicator, enchanted or otherwise. And since my first contribution was thoroughly unreadable in both senses of the word, I can't say as I was exactly encouraged by the mailing comments in the following mailing. But as you see, that didn't stop me.

("If only something would...")

It's interesting that you teach at MLC. That is one of the two possible schools we are thinking of sending our daughter Katie to for her secondary education (in less than two years time - now that *does* make me feel old!). I'd be interested in your comments about the school.

You mention collecting elephants, and I wonder where you keep them... ("groan!") I was also interested that your collect etymological dictionaries. I too find word origins fascinating. One of my favourite books is the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, which I bought with a book voucher kindly presented to me as a going away present from the Department of Trading and Resources.

I love finding out the ancient meanings of some words and phrases we

take for granted today, e.g. the opposing meanings of *gauche* and *dextrous*. Do you also have *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*? I wouldn't be without it.

Good Grief! Tiny type, smaller margins, and I am still overflowing the 8-page limit I set myself for this contribution! Consider me thoroughly encouraged. Cath!

At the same time, I find (according to Word for Windows' Print Preview function) that I still have a column and a half to fill up. What a dilemma! Empty space is to a fanzine what silence is to a radio program.

Let me see. Despite my lengthy description last issue of my cycling exploits, I have hardly lived up to them this year. The last time I got on the bike was to do admittedly a fairly lengthy ride, from home to MLC in Kew, where Sue and Kate were attending the Suzuki Summer School. It took me about two hours, and was a lot harder work than I had anticipated. But since then, zilch. I'm starting to feel flabby and out of sorts.

Still, autumn stretches before me, and that is usually a perfect season for cycling. Perhaps I'll get back out there yet. Part of the problem is that my new car has no tow-bar, and so I have no ready means for transporting the bike to and from the start of interesting bike paths, but have to set out from home each time, which rather cramps my style.

On the other hand, I've been doing a lot of cooking lately. Cooking is now about my favourite hobby. Perhaps next issue I may write at length on the topic.

At the moment, I'm trying to use up some of the bountiful produce from our garden. We have (like most home gardeners at this time of the year) a super-abundance of tomatoes and such fruit as apples, plums, pears and quinces. So I'm busily making tomato sauce, chutney, apple pies, fruit flans, and jams. The quinces aren't quite ripe yet, but I'm looking forward to whipping up a few batches of quince cheese: a sheer delight to the palate.

Sue, on the other hand, has started to take more of an interest in the garden (which I'm basically too lazy to struggle with except intermittently), and this weekend

has been digging up the veggie patch (or rather unconvincing it from beneath a heavy burden of weeds), switching over the compost bins, and all that good stuff.

She still seems fairly happy with her job as the Sister at a local medical clinic, taking blood, giving injections, dispensing calm and good advice. At least her job seems secure and well-assured for the time being.

Our daughter Katie is now 10, and in Grade 5 at primary school. She still seems to enjoy it, and I'm pleased that her maths, which last year I was concerned about, has picked up enormously under the new teacher she has for this grade. Her reading and comprehension have never been a worry - she's as much a compulsive reader as either of her parents ever were (she could hardly help it, growing up in a house full of books, but being an only child has also influenced her towards reading, I think). Her violin playing is moving along steadily, and she is becoming a little easier to get to practice. She's now in a group called 'Eltham Junior Strings', which meets on Mondays, so that is helping her to practice regularly.

Is that enough? Can I stop now? I better do so, so that I can take this to work to run through the laser printer (no, Leigh, I don't own my own) and run it surreptitiously through the photocopier. Ciao!

This was *Megatheriums* for Breakfast

I've spent 605 minutes working on this issue, it comprises 52810 characters and 9260 words, I started work on it on 16/02/92 and printed it out on 10/03/92. Such trivia is food and drink to the pettifoggling mind...

From David R Grigg, 1556 Main Road, Research, Victoria 3095, Australia.



NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION

HEADQUARTERS OF THE
SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER ATLANTIC
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA 23511 U.S.A.

PURCHASE ORDER

PLEASE ENTER OUR ORDER FOR THE
FOLLOWING AND SHIP TO THE BILLING ADDRESS.
VIRGINIA SALES AND USE TAX CERTIFICATE
OF EXEMPTION FORM ST-12 APPLIES

SUBMIT BILLS IN TRIPLICATE TO: FINANCIAL CONTROLLER HQ SACLANT (C-6) NORFOLK, VIRGINIA 23511 U.S.A. TELEPHONE: (804) 445-3610/3611
THIS NUMBER MUST APPEAR ON BILLS, INVOICES, PACKAGES, PACKING LISTS, FREIGHT DOCUMENTS AND CORRESPONDENCE P5995 -92 REFERENCE NO:

VENDOR: DAVID R. GRIGG
1556 MAIN ROAD
RESEARCH, VIC 3095
AUSTRALIA

TERMS:

PREPAID

DELIVERY FOB
 DEST.
 OTHER
(SEE SCHEDULE)

DATE: PHONE:

EXT:

DELIVER TO FOB POINT BY

DATE

07 FEB 92

REFERENCE YOUR QUOTATION OF

TO FURNISH THE FOLLOWING ON TERMS SPECIFIED HEREIN.

INCLUDING SACLANT GENERAL PROVISIONS OF PURCHASE ORDER, AND DELIVERY AS INDICATED.

IF CHECKED, SUPPLIER SHALL SIGN ACCEPTANCE AND RETURN 2 COPIES.

ITEM NO.	QUANTITY	U/I	SUPPLIES OR SERVICES	UNIT PRICE	TOTAL COST
1	1.00	EA	ONE COPY OF SHAREWARE PROGRAM. (AUTO READ).	\$20.00	\$20.00
ACCEPTED FOR					
BY _____					
SIGNATURE					
TYPED NAME AND TITLE					
				page total	\$20.00
				grand total	\$20.00

PAGE: REQUESTOR CODE: C-RC4101

ACCOUNT NOS: 276 2121 05

REQUISITION NOS:
D.L. Curran
D.L. CURRAN SKC, USN
PURCHASING & CONTRACTING OFFICER

FINANCIAL CONTROLLER

INSPECTED & ACCEPTED BY

DATE REC'D

SACLANT FORM 6-124/84

(IF OVER

8000.00 \$)

ORIGINAL