

Old Friends

maddog says good-bye to some old friends and envisions new relationships.

By Jon "maddog" Hall

I said good-bye to several friends over the weekend, some of with whom I had spent a lot of time; others, I had known only casually. One friend in particular I had spent time with every day, mostly at work, but occasionally watching a movie together. Sometimes when you get new friends, you spend time with them and you forget a bit about the old friends. And sometimes the old friends start to distract you and get in the way.

So, yesterday I gathered up all those old friends and took them to a recycling event. I carted off some gigantic pen plotters and an old stereo system that no longer worked, but, most of all, I got rid of a very fine 21-inch CRT screen that had sat in the corner of my desk for almost 20 years.

This screen was a monster. It must have weighed 50 pounds, and it easily took up a square meter of space on my desk. When I turned it on, the lights in the room would dim, and when I hit the "degauss" button, I could hear the mechanism strain. It did have a good screen, a sharp picture, and it worked well for the 20 years I had it – connected through a KVM switch that allowed it to be hooked "directly" to the four machines in my office that I use from time to time.

I must admit, however, that I have used this particular friend less and less in the past five years. My attentions have been turned to laptop notebooks as I travel around the world, and even those tend to get smaller and smaller, or else more powerful for the same size.

I am, however, a pack rat. I have a fair amount of old computer equipment in my house that I should probably find a good home for, or otherwise jettison in a responsible way. This state of affairs is particularly true as I start to change the way I do computing. I want to leave my computers on all the time, so they become a more integrated part of my life without being intrusive. But, as an environmentally conscious person, I am aware of how much electricity these devices use, as well as other issues, such as how much noise and heat and solid waste are generated when I do want to get rid of them. I can vouch for the fact that the pen plotters and the CRT were "solidly" made!

For a long time, computers became obsolete because the memory capacity was too small or the CPUs were too slow. I hope that 64-bit systems and multicore CPUs that run in the gigahertz range will slow the pace of obsolescence and that we can concentrate on lowering power consumption and lengthening the life of the systems we buy.

The computing environment I am moving toward is a thin client that attaches to the back of an energy-efficient, LED-backlit LCD panel. That thin client will handle not only my day-to-day computing needs but also act as an IPv6-based wireless mesh repeater to replace the ancient IPv4-based appliance that I use today (more iron to recycle). That thin client will also be my VoIP video phone and power my display for IPTV and IP radio. Eventually, it will be the center of my home automation system, including my security system.

The whole package will use less than 40 watts of power with the 22-inch LCD panel illuminated, and less than 20 watts of power with the LCD panel in standby mode. That means my UPS will be able to keep the system running much longer when the electricity goes out (as it does once or twice a year where I live) – perhaps as long as a day or two.

I will not be getting rid of my more powerful systems. I have no illusions that my thin client will do everything I want, but I will reposition these systems to be "on demand" servers that I turn on only when needed. And, I will probably move other heavy computing out to virtual servers in the cloud.

Part of this rearrangement is a result of downsizing. I spent 40 years accumulating things, and I now have to spend the next 40 getting rid of them. Not everything, however, will be dismantled, crushed, and recycled. Things I deem of historical importance I'll try to find a good home for, and other "good friends" may be with me to the day I die, such as my:

- Osborne I "luggable" computer,
- an RCA Cosmac Elf computer I built myself,
- my collection of "Tux" penguins, ... and my Arduino. A person has to have some toys. ■■■

