The Worm in the Apple

Well, I was right the other day, when I wrote about the enthusiasts. They really are wild, these computer hobbyists. And I can easily watch the enthusiasm grow; my own wife has caught the bug!

We went off to our first meeting, the Homebrew group. There were over two hundred attendees; no formal registration; very little organization; copies of the newsletter available, with the suggestion of a donation; no formal presentations.

There were frequent references to the equivalent Los Angeles operation, the Southern California Computer Club. Already there is informal interchange of news, expertise, and even software, between the northern and southern activities. I was reminded of the formation of chapter-level Special Interest Committees in ACM, but of course the hobbyists are free of the shadow of a central or incorporated (or, to be blunt, experienced) group. The session verged on incoherence many times, and could have come apart at the seams, or turned into a raucous flea market, except for the fundamentally intellectual bent of the men — and the few women — present.

The focus is on LSI: on the power and beauty of microprocessors and micromemories. And on their cheapness, needless to say. CPU and RAM (read-only memory) and PROM (programmable read-only memory) chips were described, displayed and sold — often with only the barest description of function — for a few dollars each.

The Stanford Linear Accelerator Center has a policy of offering meeting facilities to groups of interest to its employees, and had furnished Homebrew with a fine small auditorium. But SLAC insists that no money actually change hands, at least openly. The chaffering proceeds so loudly that you can be sure sales and swaps are going on just outside the doors, and in the parking lot. And there are highly informal exhibits, hampered by the lack of easily accessible electrical power; these also point toward,

-ah, consummation. But not in the lobby!

Inputs range from the recital of the serial number and label on a single fortuitous chip, and requests for dope about what it might be, and be good for, to highly sophisticated description of hardware — tape drives, even! — salvaged from abandoned systems or purchased from employers.

To revert to the metaphor in my title, one can see the fruit ripening. A lovely Delicious, handsome in size, rewarding to bite into, nourishing. But alas! there is an ugly worm. It is, to use the kindest possible word, dishonesty. Clearly a great many of the items being traded are hot: stolen goods. And remember, especially here in Semiconductor Gulch there are unexampled opportunities for casual pilferage and planned theft. Trade papers report the appearance of great quantities of stolen chips, often substandard. Somewhere between Singapore and Sunnyvale, several *million* dollars worth of easily transportable goodies have already been ripped off.

Mind 'you, SCCC and Homebrew are not major outlets. Professional thieves want to unload their loot in much larger quantities. But attendees are customers at retail and surplus shops, which in turn are hungry for new and cheap merchandise. There will be customs searches, and police raids, and the rest of the apparatus of enforcement. Hopefully, not too many of Us will be involved — only Them!
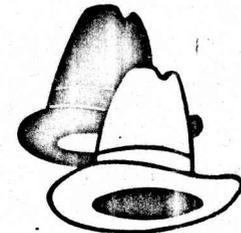
But there is a much uglier worm in this great new apple, one much more dangerous in the long run than the maggots of petty pilferage. It was obvious from the first mentions of software, at both COMPCON and SLAC, that a stunningly large percentage — perhaps a majority — of the enthusiasts regard systems and applications programs as fair game: at best, common property; at worst, subject to undetectable rip-off.

Quite a bit of this is just plain stealing: "Loan me that [paper] tape for a couple of days and

I'll make a few dozen copies." And at the other extreme, there are people *anxious* to share their home-written software; people who want it tried out, and used, and who want only feedback on the bugs as compensation. What disturbs me most is the middle range, the counterculture attitude: private property is an obsolete idea. "Steal this book," say the Hoffmans and the Rubins. It sounds good. The government, the insurance companies, IBM and DEC look like fair game. But from there to Intel and Data General is an easy step, and downward to the struggling software house of the individual consultant even easier.

I hope some small fraction of the hobbyists and home computer enthusiasts read this column: those who are already in the business professionally, or who are students with library habits. Please, those of you who do, spread the word: "Play clean!" Don't copy copyrighted software. Don't steal program products from Altair. Don't abuse your company or college access to expensive systems and games, and to technical data, which you would not be welcome to as an individual.

It is as immoral to steal software, or to buy hot chips for a hobby computer, as it is to swipe fancy goodies in a supermarket or department store. I'd like Big Business and Big Government to be ethical, and so would almost every hobbyist. Let's set them an example!

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