

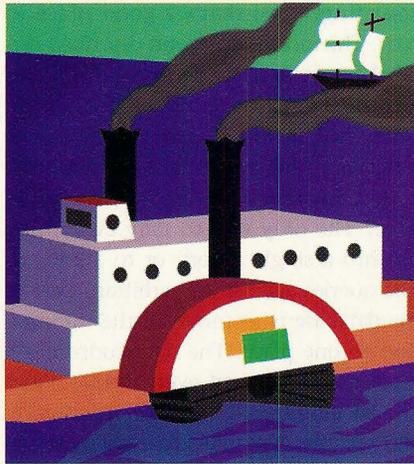
Windows NT

BY DOUGLAS A. HAMILTON

Full Steam Ahead Into the Future

JUST OVER 10 YEARS ago, the IBM PC was created, and with it came a massive change in all our lives. For many, the PC was just a toy, good for games of Raster Blaster but little else. At the time, I had just left IBM and joined one of the mini-computer companies, and I vividly recall trying—and failing—to get anyone there to take PCs seriously.

I still chuckle over one manager grudgingly suggesting we might add some PC flavor (whatever that meant) to the dumb terminal his group was building. And when I get together with other veterans of those days, before long someone will bring up, amid hoots and laughter, the infamous PC Option that finally emerged: a hideous, enormously expensive add-on box connected by a cable the size of garden hose that, with the press of a hotkey, turned the terminal into a very bad PC. It was so bad that one key was both an up arrow and down arrow cursor key, depending on whether it was a



terminal or a PC at the moment.

In retrospect, it is easy to see how so many in the industry could have totally misjudged the change that was under way. That original PC was a worthless piece of junk. How could anyone expect to do real work with only 64KB memory and, if you were lucky, a couple of low-capacity floppies? Or, even worse, with 16KB and a cassette?

Academics who study change refer to something they call the sailing ship phenomenon.

When steamships first appeared, they were expensive, they weren't very good, they weren't very fast and they weren't very reliable. But they were a new source of competition, to which the sailing ship builders responded by redoubling their efforts, all in the same wrong direction. All kinds of exotic, tall sailing ships emerged and, for a while, they were able to keep up.

The sailing ship phenomenon happens over and over. Remember Nuvistors? When transistors arrived, all the vacuum tube manufacturers scrambled to make smaller and smaller tubes. The ultimate was RCA's Nuvistor, a tiny tube in a little metal can smaller than a thimble.

When something new comes along, it suddenly devalues everything we've ever invested in that which came before: We identify ourselves with all the skills and expertise we've accumulated with that prior technology, so these new arrivals make us feel less valuable as individuals. We deny change and, as long as we can get away with the denial, we can feel better. But sooner or later, we all need to acknowledge change, or risk being totally buried by it.

I was struck with these thoughts as I listened to a colleague describe how his

