

The end of one of the oldest computers at Microsoft still doing useful work

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My building was scheduled for a carpet replacement—in all my years at Microsoft, I think this is the first time this has ever happened to a building I was in—so we all had to pack up our things so the carpeters could get clear access to the floor. You go through all the pain of an office move (packing all your things) but don't get the actual reward of a new office. One of the machines in my office probably ranked high on the “oldest computer at Microsoft still doing useful work” charts. It was a 50MHz 486 with 12MB of memory and 500 whole megabytes of disk space. (Mind you, it wasn't born this awesome. It started out with only 8MB of memory and 200MB of disk space, but I upgraded it after a few years.) This machine started out its life as a high-end Windows 95 test machine, then when its services were no longer needed, I rescued it from the scrap heap and turned it into my little web server where among other things, Microsoft employees could read my blog article queue months before publication. It also served as my “little computer for doing little things”. For example, the Internet Explorer test team used it for FTP testing since I installed a custom FTP server onto it. (Therefore, I could make it act like any type of server, or like a completely bizarre server if a security scenario required it.) It also housed various “total wastes of time” such as the “What's Raymond doing right now?” program, and the “Days without a pony” web page. I added a CD-ROM drive, which cost me \$200. This was back in the days when getting a CD-ROM drive meant plugging in a custom ISA card and installing a MS-DOS driver into the CONFIG.SYS file. Like an MS-DOS driver gets you anywhere any more. I had to write my own driver for it. I took it as a challenge to see how high I could get the machine's uptime. Once the hardware stabilized (which went a lot quicker once I gave up trying to get the old network card to stop wedging and just bought a new one), I put it on a UPS that had been gifted to me in exchange for debugging why the company's monitoring software wasn't working on Windows 95. Whenever I had to move offices, I found somebody who wasn't moving and relocated the computer there for a few days. The UPS kept the machine running while I carted it down the hall or into the next building. I think I got the uptime as high as three years before the building suffered a half-day power outage that drained the UPS. A few years later, the machine started rebooting for no apparent reason. Turns out the UPS battery itself was dying and generating its own mini-power outages. Ironic that a UPS ended up creating power outages instead of masking them. But on the other hand, it was free, so I can't

complain. Without a UPS, the machine became victim of building-wide power outages and office moves. Over the years, more and more parts of the machine started to wear out and had to be worked around. The CMOS battery eventually died, so restarting the computer after an outage involved lots of typing. (It always thought the date was January 1983.) The clock also drifted, so I wrote a program to re-synchronize it automatically every few days. When I packed up the computer for the recarpeting, I assumed that afterwards, it would fire back up like the trooper it was. But alas, it just sat there. After much fiddling and removal of non-critical hardware, I got it to power on. Now it complains “no boot device”. The hard drive (or perhaps the hard drive controller) had finally died. The shock of being shut off and restarted proved to be its downfall. Since it’s nearly impossible to find replacement parts for a computer this old, I’m going to have to return it to the scrap heap. Good-bye, old friend. But you won’t be forgotten. I’m going to transfer your name and IP address to another computer I rescued from the scrap heap many years ago for just this eventuality. But still no mouse.

(Alas, this was the first of a series of computers to reach retirement age within days of each other. Perhaps I’ll eulogize those other machines someday.)

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