The Last Word: A Bit of Advice

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It has become clear to me that there are many people who do not know what to do about computers. I would like to help shed some light on the issue by employing a writer's device called the "strained simile," which is like an overdone comparison, only more fun to say. My premise is that computers are like cars. The aptness of the comparison is evident in the fact that countless people have adopted an attitude toward computers that turn-of-the-century Americans must have had toward the automobile. "Gee whiz, I don't know what that is, Harriet but I bet I need one." But do you?

I find it comforting to know that there once was only one computer, just as there was a first car. Each clanked, buzzed and rattled and made liberal use of what now would seem quaint technologies. Now, of course, the variety of computers is well beyond catalog level. Smaller computers range in size, sophistication and storage capacity from hand-held and briefcase sized to desk-top "micros." Like small cars, they usually cost less and can do less. But as with cars, size does not tell the whole story. You can buy a small Volkswagen, or a small Ferrari. This explains the oft-heard exclamation from new shoppers for computers, "That little thing costs HOW MUCH?"

Larger computers are the full-sized sedans and light trucks of the industry. They can do more, store more, and usually cost more. And the largest computers, called "main-frames" are the heavy-duty eighteen wheelers and earth movers.

As to the question of whether you need a computer, let us begin with the assumption that if you need a thirty-eight ton earth mover, you already know it. Your own situation probably presents a closer call. To avoid running the risk of jumping in big (when you should have looked on laughing) or missing out on the many bennies of computing, here are some of the instructive lessons of the automotive past.

My uncle bought a Packard which he is reported to have polished daily, even cleaning the engine with a gas-soaked rag on the rare occasions when he used the car. He took occasional trips to the store (when the weather permitted) and made ceremonial "arrivals" at family events. While I cannot categorically state that uncle George should not have bought his Packard, it most assuredly was not used in the way its engineers intended. It lived a life more akin to "artness" than "carness."

I am not surprised, therefore, to know computer owners who, while using their new acquisitions minimally, maintain an appreciation of their mysterious capacities not unlike that of stone-age peoples for the Oldsmobile Starfire. Home computers make excellent objects of worship. With a little practice, they can also be used to store recipes (almost as handily as on the now-outdated three-by-five card), play games (with the attendant advantage of developing in the owner spectacular wrist and finger dexterity), and write letters to friends (think of the advantages at Christmas of fooling friends into thinking they have received genuinely personalized holiday greetings).

Another, less romantic category of computer owners, use their machines more in the way most people use Volkswagons. They drive them 120,000 miles fully expecting the car to do, without complaint, exactly what it was designed for. Rabbits are meant to go from here to there.

In fact, this article is being written on the computer equivalent of a Chevy Chevette. Only four cylinders, an AM radio and no carpeting. While it can play games, they are mean-spirited things, with featureless little letter "qs" being pursued by wholly unmenacing letter "os." To limit oneself to such prosaic equipment (and uses) when others are wallowing in the seas of limitless RAM, ROM and bubble memory requires tremendous self control, or a severely limited budget.

If none of this has helped you, I have available one alternative response. My grandmother's aunt Hedda, upon seeing her first automobile, expressed immediate disapproval and remained firmly opposed for forty-five years. You will find that such a position on the home computer will save not only money, but the countless brain cells that might otherwise be devoted to the storage of unappealing words like "baud," "configuration" and "modem." One warning, though. To adopt such a position in the face of the predicted onslaught of the "computer age" is sure to be as futile as early opposition to the automobile. Then again, Hedda survived.