The Computer as God?

A high-tech replay of the Protestant Reformation

We technical people pride ourselves on being scientific and coolly rational about our profession. But it seems to me that, in the field of computers, we've just re-enacted a religious drama: the Protestant Reformation. What's more, some of us have participated with the fervor of religious fanatics!
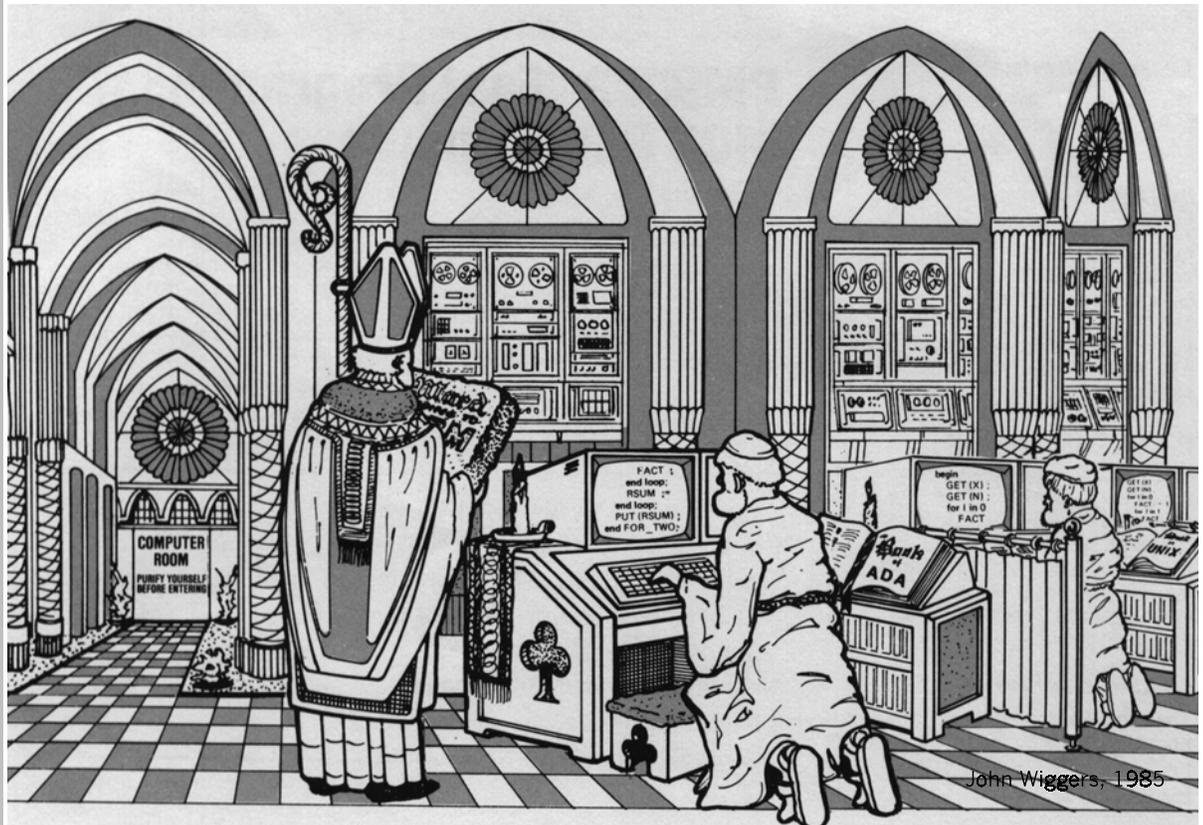
In our technical replay of this religious drama, the computer is God and we want this god to take care of us. Until the late 1970's, we performed a fairly standard ritual to persuade the computer to satisfy our needs. It was the business version of "*pray, pay, and obey*." We implored programmers (priests) to intercede for us with the computer to solve our accounting, bookkeeping, or other such problems. When our programmer flawlessly recited a litany of prayers (programming) in a liturgically correct dead language (ALGOL, COBOL, FORTRAN, etc.), when we tithed to the programmer and to the computer's manufacturer for the rest of our lives, and when we obeyed the 1010 commandments of the computer as we entered our data (a mistake got us the response: *Syntax error*), then *sometimes* the computer came through for us.

IBM played the role of the Roman Catholic church. With its mainframe theology, it benevolently defined god and the essential role of his one true church. IBM set liturgical standards for praying to god. It trained our data processing managers (local bishops) to insure that the faithful were properly serviced and adequately submissive. For a 10% annual fee (indulgence), it kept god operating.

In the late 1970s a daring reformer emerged: Steve (Martin Luther) Jobs. He staked a thesis on the pink slip of his Volkswagen that every man should talk directly to his own computer. He formed the church of Apple to promote his unorthodox ideas and to design a god that was directly approachable by common people.

At first his thesis was dismissed as untenable

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John Wiggers, 1985

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by the true church. Apple would fall (a belief that preceded Apple's Newton!). After all, how could respectable businesses maintain the purity of their data bases if the unwashed masses were allowed direct access to their own computers? But business people, technologists, and consumers tasted the forbidden fruit and flocked to the new theology.

By and by, IBM's Pope John O'Paul (Chairman, John Opel) became sufficiently worried to call his Council of Trent. The Jesuits were formed (the IBM PC division) and charged with producing a counter-reformation.

The Jesuits saw that they had to move quickly, so they put expediency ahead of orthodoxy. They adopted the unorthodox principles of open systems and third-party software to attract both customers and reformers back to the one true fold. Low, they humbly bought their most fundamental prayer, their operating system, from a heathen company. They even smiled benevolently on those who imitated their hardware and software without tithing to the one true church. This uncharacteristic act of charity begat a host of Jesuit clones.

Meanwhile, Apple's hierarchy had become prideful and arrogant because of their incredible successes at converting both pagan and orthodox. They scoffed at the Jesuits, and gave them a mock *welcome to market* on national TV. They zealously protected their proprietary designs in the name of Apple's orthodoxy by dealing harshly with their imitators, their third party software suppliers, and their distributors. They used the power of civil government and blacked robed lawyers to persecute those who tried to use their teachings without appropriate homage and tithing. They even

employed these secular forces to attack the followers of the true church by claiming they were stealing proprietary icons and prayers.

Apple's theologians didn't understand that it wasn't Apple's colorful icons and simpler prayers that attracted the faithful's dollars; it was *open systems* and public-domain standards supported by many humble, vigorously competing suppliers. These things transformed computer users from obedient children to consenting adults!

Soon the Jesuits, their clones, and a host of third party suppliers of hardware and software became the dominant faith. They offered a choice of interchangeable products and prayers and continued to make it easier and cheaper for people and businesses to configure and speak to gods of their own choosing.

The Pope and his college of Cardinals beheld the success of their Jesuits and worried lest they become too powerful and a threat to IBM's orthodoxy. So they suppressed the IBM PC division and folded it back into the bosom of the mother company, subordinating its best interests to those of the mainframe mentality. Then they attempted to recapture their customary, proprietary control of the faithful with the technical miracles of Micro-channel, VGA graphics, and OS/2. In short, they acted like Apple and blew their leading share of the PC market.

But the Jesuit clones and third party suppliers quickly responded with equivalent miracles using non-proprietary standards and firmly entrenched their customers' Liberation Theology of *open systems* in our culture.

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