

SEB PATRICK

There are certain things which, if you consider yourself in any way a seasoned computer user, you're sure you'll never be stupid enough to do. Although I was fairly young - in my early teens - at the time of the following incident, I'd been using DOS for long enough that I really had no excuse. I'd claim that I don't know quite how I managed to delete Windows from my dad's work laptop - only I know exactly how I did it, and that's what makes it so embarrassing.

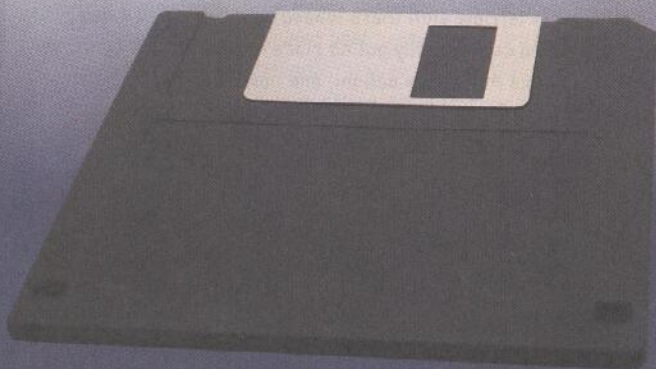
This was back in those heady pre-Windows 95 days, of course (you know, when you could actually exit Windows completely) although it was still an essential component of Dad's work at a major software firm. It all began because I was trying to find some floppy disks I could clear and use - I can't remember exactly why. I could have done this from within Windows, of course, but I preferred the familiarity of DOS. So there I sat, whipping disks in and out of the drive at a rate of knots, listing their contents with a succession of 'DIR' commands. I finally found one that could be safely wiped, and so I whacked in a trusty 'DEL *.*' without really thinking.

It took about fifteen seconds for me to register how long it seemed to be taking. Also, the floppy drive was strangely silent, not letting out its familiar clunking noise. The hard drive was busy, though; whirring away quite nicely, in fact.

And then I realised.

For some unknown reason - possibly because it made it easier to quickly swap disks - instead of sitting on the A: drive and listing its contents each time, I'd stayed on the C: drive. The 'DEL' command therefore worked on the current directory... which happened to be C:\WINDOWS. My dad, who'd rushed over upon hearing the sudden and rather sharp yelp I'd let out, made straight for the power switch. But the damage was done - about half of the directory had disappeared. I was in trouble.

Eventually, somehow - apparently through a combination of undelete software and lengthy time spent plugging away with multiple installation floppies - my dad managed to get both the OS and some of the vital data back. But the machine was never quite the same - and neither was his trust in letting me loose to play games on it...



GAJE BIRCH

Contrary to what I'd have my husband believe, I'm not infallible. I've had my share of sloppy spills on keyboards, tried to use peripherals that weren't plugged in, and experienced bouts of Attachment Disorder, referencing inclusions in my e-mails that I then forgot to include. Sometimes twice.

But the thing that makes me blush every time I come across them has to be my 'custom DVDs', made in the pearlescent early days of DVD writers and consumable discs. This was back when Sony proffered the Halleluiah Dual-format DVD Writer, the first of its kind that would save me from choosing the wrong religion ('+' or '-'), avoiding damnation in Betamax (and now HD DVD) Hades. And the cost to sidestep eternal suffering? Over £260. (Similar models now go for £20-30.)

I persuaded my husband, the one I'm so anxious to convince I don't make mistakes, that this was a prudent purchase. While simultaneously securing our seats in Chosen Format Heaven, I would save us hundreds by not replacing our VHS films with costly DVDs, but converting our tapes to glorious digital video myself.

I read every site, forum, and manual on how to do it properly and then spent even more money on conversion equipment (a USB digitising box and better VCR), and over-ordered blank discs, because everything I'd read warned to plan on lots of coasters, and, all in all, I enjoyed success. But, I didn't merely transfer tapes to discs. I made menus, some animated, with screen grabs for chapters, fancy-fonted titles and unique buttons fashioned from characters and iconic items in the films, carefully chosen and cut out to serve as navigation aids. No plain, boring arrows for me!

What I ended up with was about a dozen highly-customised, artsy discs. And what's so silly about that? Well, the fact that the important bit, the movies themselves, are still the 4:3 streaky, shaky, substandard VHS versions, tarted up, but not improved. And today poshly-boxed sets of widescreen videos with Dolby 5.1 sound or better, complete with documentaries, outtakes, trailers and other treasures taunt me. For well under £20, if you shop around. Other titles I tenderly transferred go for a puny £3.99 a pop.

Still, the effort and the expense was worth it for how hard I laugh at my well-intentioned, impatient self every time I stumble upon one of my brilliant home-made discs with its designer label. It was good practice and all would be justified for family or rare video, but I failed to foresee, or wait for, the inevitable huge price drops in DVD home equipment and studio films. As with all things in life, it's a lesson learned - not only is patience a virtue, it can save a lot of cash, and cringing, too.

