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De Programmatica *Ipsium*

DE PROGRAMMATICA IPSUM

Issue 078: Computer Magazines

March 3rd, 2025

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Issue 078: Computer Magazines



March 3rd, 2025

Welcome to the 78th issue of *De Programmatica Ipsum*, about *Computer Magazines*.

In this edition:

- We remind ourselves of a time when newsstands were a primary source of information¹ for aspiring computer programmers.

- In the Library section², we review the work of Pastor Manul Laphroaig, T.G. S.B.³
- In our Vidéothèque section⁴, we relive the joy of copying code from magazines⁵.

Download this issue in DRM-free PDF⁶ or EPUB⁷ format, and read it on your preferred device. We invite you to check the new “Retrocomputing” category⁸!

We would like to thank our patrons who generously contribute every month (or have contributed in the past) to our work and help us run this magazine. Thank you so much! In alphabetical order: Adam Guest, Adrian Tineo Cabello, Benjamin Sheldon, Christopher Nascone, Colin Powell, Franz Lucien Moersdorf, Guillermo Ramos Álvarez, Jean-Paul de Vooght, Dr. Juande Santander-Vela, Patryk Matuszewski, Paul Hudson, Quico Moya, Roger Turner, Szymon Licau, and countless more leaving anonymous tips every month.

Enjoy this issue! Please subscribe to our free newsletter⁹ to stay updated about new releases, share the articles on social media, or contribute¹⁰ if you would like to support our work with a donation via Liberapay¹¹.

Cover photo by Rick Muigo¹² on Unsplash¹³.

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As We May Never Think Again



By Adrian Kosmaczewski

In 2010, a popular Argentine novelist, screenwriter, and blogger based in Spain called Hernán Casciari¹, got tired of dealing with publishing houses, editors, and mainstream media. He wanted to publish a magazine, but of a different kind. His idea of a magazine had very-well defined boundaries: high-quality content, no ad-

vertising, direct sales to the readers, and a luxury printed format. Against all odds, his idea worked: “Revista Orsai”², kicked off as an experiment, and then became a staple and remained a major reference in the history of Argentine publishing.

(Some of Casciari’s ideas, like high-quality content, no advertising, and direct sales to readers, were direct inspirations for the magazine you are reading right now, which only depends on the goodwill of its readership to keep going month after month. Thanks for your contribution!³)

Unbeknownst to many, Argentina has had a long story of magazine publishing, including some gems like the literary “Revista Sur”⁴, published non-stop from 1931 to 1992 (and whose contents are available⁵ on the website of the National Library⁶, albeit only through a VPN located in Argentina).

I have already mentioned on these pages⁷ my own infatuation with programming magazines, and my explorations to downtown Buenos Aires trying to find the hidden gem:

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, one of the most appropriate locations in Buenos Aires to find international magazines was the quintessential Calle Florida. In those huge newsstands next to the corner with Avenida Corrientes one could find incunabula ranging from the September issue of Vogue to the latest edition of Paris Match. Among those, every so often my programmer self would jump in joy to find some lost computer magazine; and by far the one that made me the happiest to unearth was, without any doubt, Dr. Dobb’s Journal.

As many things retrocomputing go, programming magazines are largely a thing of a past nowadays. You do not see younger generations of software engineers flocking towards those same newsstands asking for the latest release of Byte⁸, Dr. Dobb’s⁹, PCMag¹⁰, InfoWorld¹¹, 2600¹², Input¹³, 1337¹⁴, Phrack¹⁵, Apple Develop¹⁶, Whole Earth Catalog¹⁷, Tilt¹⁸, Microsoft Systems Journal¹⁹, Popular Computing²⁰, Springer’s Programming and Computer Software²¹, MITS News & Computer Notes²², Visual Studio Magazine²³, or CODE Magazine²⁴. And that is sad.

Yet, it is undeniable that computer magazine articles shaped our industry in unfathomable ways. The earliest of them all might as well be “As We May Think”²⁵, an article by Vannevar Bush²⁶ published in *The Atlantic*, which seemingly kicked off the future at the end of World War II. This piece prophesized in July 1945 many developments that have largely become a reality 80 years later. Let us begin with the cover image: the camera strapped on the forehead of the man shown on the first page of the printed article²⁷ is literally a GoPro²⁸. Also, pay attention to the concerned eyes of the wearer. Now look at yourself on the mirror. Any resemblance?

Twelve years after “As We May Think”, and simultaneous with the developments of the IBM 1401²⁹ and FORTRAN³⁰, copies of “Datamation”³¹ started popping up on selected newsstands. This magazine was the godfather of all programming magazines, and held its crown for 41 years (quite a few ages in computer time!), until being phased out as an online magazine in February 1998.

Indeed, that was the fate of most printed magazines back in the 1990s: to become glorified blogs, each trying to retain its fleeting audience as they moved from a world of manually typing code snippets, to one featuring one of the most convenient sequence of keystrokes: CTRL+C & CTRL+V. The epitome of which was, of course, Stack Overflow, a website that, this author argues, was the final straw for many programming magazines as we knew them.

Some of those online magazines, however, are still standing and deserve a round of applause (or at least a click): Smashing Magazine³², Codemotion Magazine³³, WeAreDevs Magazine³⁴, Developer Tech News³⁵, SD Times³⁶, Human-Computer Interaction Magazine³⁷, PoC||GTFO³⁸, and the most important of them all: The Register³⁹, “biting the hand that feeds IT” since 1998.

Online resources are very practical. Why would you spend time typing those code snippets when you could just summon a Mechanical Turk of anonymous users to solve your problem through copy-pasting? This mesh of answers, now conveniently available in the form of a Large Language Model, provides virtually instant access to ~~bullshit~~ curated knowledge at your fingertips. Why would you spend precious time thinking anymore? I am pretty sure your managers agree⁴⁰ with the previous statement.

The name “Orsai”—a Rioplatense Spanish⁴¹ twist on the term “offside” borrowed from the rules of association football⁴²—perfectly embodied the rebellious nature of the project. Hernán Casciari and his team have since consistently championed independent journalism, humor, and literature, keeping clear of market constraints and editorial (and advertising) censorship.

But I would argue that Orsai largely succeeded with its audience because *its articles made you think*. The humor was subtle; the presentation pleasant; the issues tackled therein were fundamental, relevant, important. Argentina being Argentina, there is no shortage of such problems to discuss and analyze.

But here is the twist: our world of computer programming, populated with zealots screaming the “no politics please” mantra at every street corner, needs opinion and analysis more than ever. The lines of software we write are contributing directly to the degradation of our modern world and each of its tenets: its economy, its politics, its values. Between copies and pastes, we have forgotten that we were building the new world that Vannevar Bush predicted, and arguably, we have made a much worse one.

Casciari was arguably not the only one to think that a new publishing paradigm should exist. Wayne Green⁴³, the founder of Byte, 80 Micro⁴⁴, RUN⁴⁵, and many other magazines, also stood for higher values in his journalist endeavors, as explained by David Farquhar⁴⁶:

Green’s computer publications were what journalism is supposed to be. They existed to serve its readers, not the other way around. Yes, the business model requires creating an audience to deliver to advertisers, and the combination of subscription, revenue and advertising revenue pays the bills. But when push comes to shove, an ethical publication doesn’t lie to or mislead its readers to avoid angering an advertiser.

(...)

That is the spirit of Wayne Green. He made some mistakes in life. We all do. And in his later years, he went on a big conspiracy bent, spreading beliefs I don’t condone myself.

In the same vein, we can cite Jim Warren⁴⁷, founder of Dr. Dobb's Journal, who explained its underlying spirit in a January 1991 article called "We, the People, in the Information Age"⁴⁸:

We are more productive when we freely share and cooperate than when we covetously clutch at each incremental innovation — so much more productive, that each individual, and our nation, ends up “getting” more than if we don't share.

Needless to say, we need more of that spirit, right here, right now.

There is, arguably, a subset of programmers (do we dare call that a market?) that would love to be challenged into thinking for and by themselves, again. The early issues of Orsai, almost 15 years old at this point, and published in an immaculate, and ad-free, glossy paper, stand prominently in my library, reminding me that a different publishing and distribution model is possible. Or even better, that it is sorely needed.

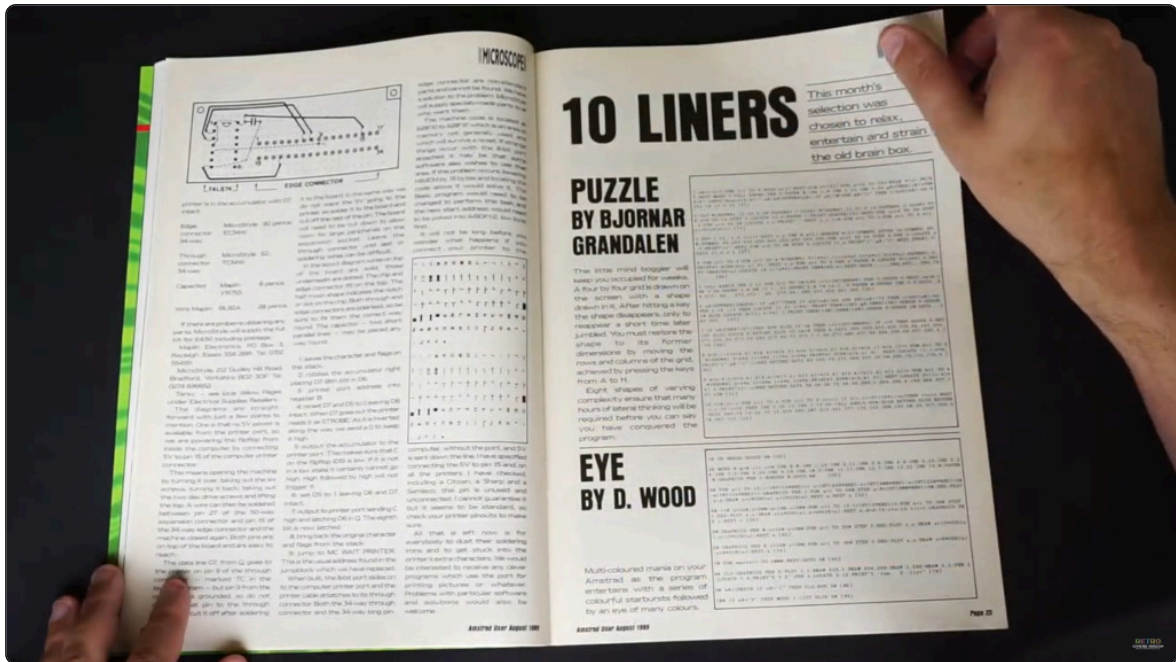
Cover photo by The New York Public Library⁴⁹ on Unsplash⁵⁰.

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Retro Gaming Museum



By Adrian Kosmaczewski

Reviewing old computers magazines of yore is a pastime most often associated to retrocomputing enthusiasts. It is part of that feeling of bliss that comes with the realization that there used to be a different world, when software was simpler, when corporations did not have that much power, and when programming languages were more approachable; in short, a more innocent¹ time.

Old computer magazines, many of which are available for free on websites such as the Internet Archive, have various uses these days. Some video content producers use those PDF files to compare prices of old equipment; this is the case of “This Does Not Compute”², a favorite YouTube channel of mine, where the author repairs old hardware, trying to make it work again. Reviewing the cost of old hardware, particularly when taking into account inflation rates, can quickly show how expensive computers used to be forty or even thirty years ago.

For others, the exploration of old computer magazines brings the possibility of running old software. Many computer magazines, and not only the programming kind, used to bundle reams of source code listings across their pages, and many an enthusiast would painstakingly type those code bits by hand, in order to have a new utility, to learn a new programming language, or to enjoy a new game.

This is the case of today's Vidéothèque video: "Remember typing code from old gaming magazines?"³, by the Retro Gaming Museum channel from Iceland.

The description of the channel states its purpose:

The Retro Gaming Museum is going to be a small museum located in Iceland, and it's the first of its kind here. It is going to include everything related to computer gaming from the start of the gaming industry to current date. The idea is that people can visit and have a hands-on experience with different consoles and machines at the museum.

Sadly, however, the last video on the channel is dated March 2020, and the "retrogamingmuseum.com"⁴ domain does not appear to be active. You know that we love computer museums⁵, and we find it terribly sad to learn that this one in particular might not be active anymore.

Despite this news, we particularly enjoyed this month's Vidéothèque video, which reviews the August 1989 edition of the Amstrad Computer User⁶ Magazine, also known as "ACU", and featuring content related to the Amstrad CPC⁷ 8-bit personal computer of the 1980s. For the curious among you, many issues of this magazine are available on the Internet Archive⁸, including the very edition⁹ reviewed on this video.

The core question asked by the author of the video is "are these codes any good"? The author literally types a few code snippets on a computer; or is it on the WinAPE¹⁰ or the CrocoDS¹¹ emulator? We will never know, and it most probably does not matter at all.

The interesting part in all this is the work required to get from A to Z; copying those bits and pieces of code, in particular the last one shown starting minute

3:52¹², where he tries to enter a rather long game, involving quite a bit of seemingly random numeric data to represent sprites on screen.

In the words¹³ of the author,

Typing in this game took a very long time, but it was an interesting process. And somehow, in the middle of coding this, I was actually beginning to understand the logic behind it. I also understood that in the last section of the code where I just typed in some random numbers and characters that I was actually typing in the graphics of the game. So now I was pretty curious what the game would actually look like.

Older generations, thanks to the requirement of actually having to type the code of a game or a utility from the printed page into the computer, performed a (nowadays) rare feat: as the information flowed from the eyes of the programmer, towards their fingers, the code would imprint itself into the memory of the programmer, and as such, it would generate a blueprint which would, in time, yield more creativity and more knowledge.

Repeat this process once and again, and what happened during the 20 years between 1975 and 1995 was an outstanding thing: generations of programmers learning, page after page, how to create software, and getting that information solidly stored in their brains.

In the age of LLMs and copy-paste, we can only imagine what those mechanisms looked like—or watch videos like this. Of course, there was a lot of GOTO statements on the mix, and Dijkstra might have objected to their existence, but hey! I still believe it was a good exercise for our neurons, and a whole generation of programmers followed this path.

But such times are no more, and we still ask ourselves¹⁴ how to best teach programming to younger generations.

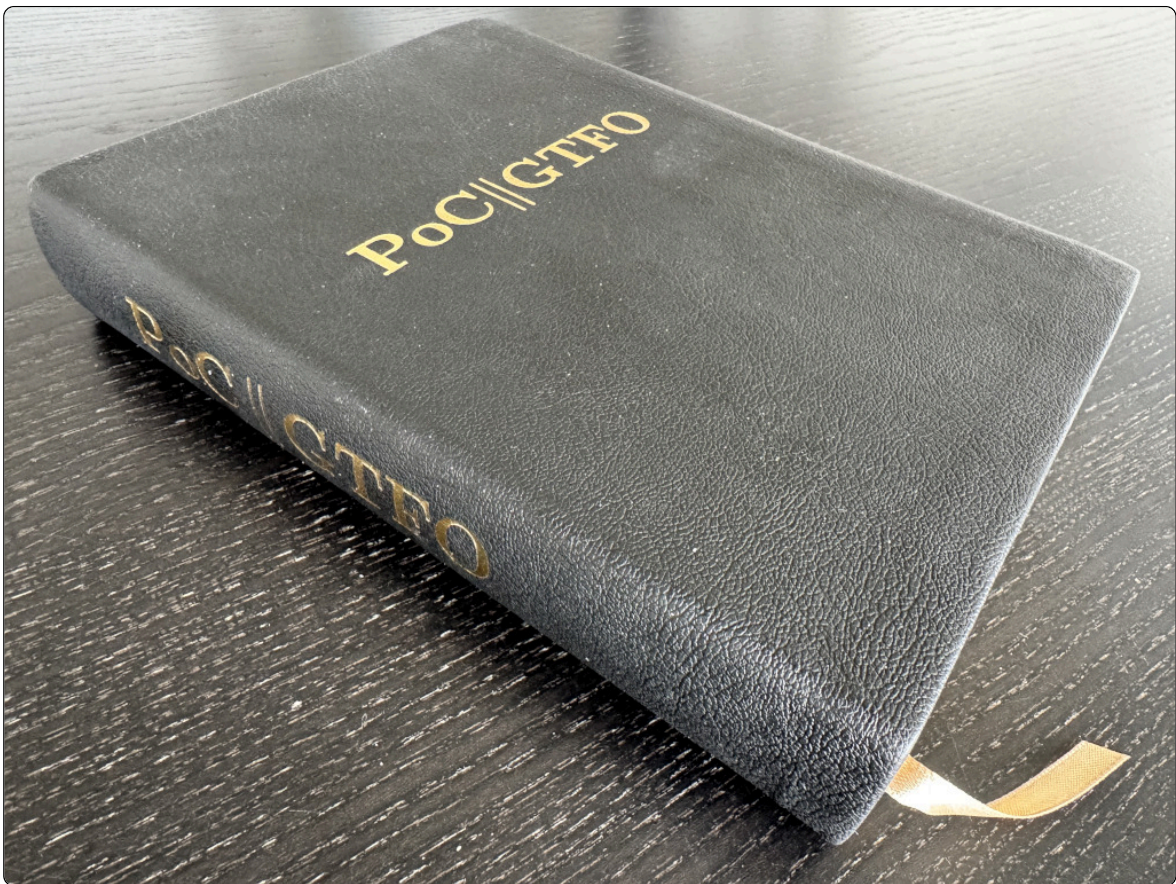
Today's Vidéothèque video is titled “Remember typing code from old gaming magazines?” and it is available on YouTube¹⁵ for your watching pleasure.

Cover snapshot from the video chosen by the author.

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Pastor Manul Laphroaig, T.G. S.B.



By Adrian Kosmaczewski

Paraphrasing a well-known software mogul who shall remain nameless in the pages of this magazine, insecure software is eating the world. The reasons of such sad state of things are varied and range from social¹ to economic²; the technological aspect is usually the one that concerns³ me the least. In this sea of unusable things⁴ and insecure networks, there is a “subculture” (a horrible word, but bear with me)

of highly skilled individuals who teach each other how broken those things are. And yes, they have their own magazines to spread the word.

Some of those magazines have been around for ages: come to mind the venerable 2600⁵, Phrack Magazine⁶ (which is celebrating its 40th anniversary as this entry hits the web), or the more corporate-friendly Hakin9⁷.

In the pages of Phrack Magazine, for example, this author learned at the end of the 1990s the subtle art of smashing the stack⁸, an exploit that would become the starting point of many a computer security book in the years that followed, including those from Microsoft⁹ a few years later.

There is one magazine, however, which has been around for a decade and which we are celebrating in this issue: the “International Journal of Proof-of-Concept or Get The Fuck Out”¹⁰, also known by its shorter handle: “PoC||GTFO”.

(I should have probably warned the user about the profanity on the title, but nah, I assume my readership to consist of adults at this point. Also, this is not the first time¹¹ this has happened.)

What kind of things can you learn on the pages of this classic? Very many wonderful ones.

So you could make a valid WAV file that, when encrypted with AES, gives you a valid PDF. That same file, when encrypted with Triple-DES, gives you a JPEG. Furthermore, when decrypted with ThreeFish, that file would give you a PE.

(From “A Binary Magic Trick, Angecryption” by Ange Albertini and Jean-Philippe Aumasson.)

Useless you say? Speak for yourself. The real art in programming¹² consists in finding those dorky moments in which seemingly random sequences of bytes all of a sudden line up on the night sky, filled with semantic goodness. Some of those anecdotes might even hold deep emotional value, such as the portrait of Len Sassaman embedded¹³ on the Bitcoin blockchain.

The pages of “PoC||GTFO”, some of whose downloadable PDFs¹⁴ can be reinterpreted as PNG images or some executable format, are filled with philosophical

advice of the utmost importance, usually penned by the Most Holy Reverend Pastor Manul Laphroaig himself.

Verily I say to you that when they keep uttering some words in such a way that you hear Capital Letters, look 'em in the eye and ask 'em, "how does this work?" Also remember that "I don't really know" is an acceptable answer, and the one who gives it is your potential ally.

(From "Greybeard's Luck", a sermon by the Rt. Revd. Dr. Pastor Manul Laphroaig.)

What do you say? Laconic and repetitive, inapplicable or stupid? I say bullshit to you, and I stick by these sage words. Let us talk again after you will have grown a beard. (Because, let us be honest, those arguing on Hacker News about the uselessness of such texts are always young white males.)

Finally, given the popularity of the latest adaptations of Frank Herbert's Dune on the big screen, we might as well remind everyone some of the core tenets of this visionary universe.

The Orange Catholic Bible commands: "Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man's mind."

Instead of general purpose computers, Herbert's society has application-specific machines for various tasks. Few would argue that a typewriter or a cat picture is dangerous, but your iPhone is a heresy.

(“Weird Machines from Serena Butler’s TV Typewriter”, by Travis Goodspeed.)

As far as I am concerned, I plan to convert to Herbert's church very soon. Every day that passes I am more and more convinced the man came from the future to warn us. But I digress, as I usually do.

The printed version of "PoC||GTFO" looks like a Bible. Why yes, of course it does; with golden gilt edges, a page marker, and beautiful paper featuring perfectly typeset text, made with TeX¹⁵, of course, and with the occasional advertising borrowed from old 1970s or 1980s magazines, sprinkled all over the place.

Currently, three volumes¹⁶ of “PoC||GTFO” are available for purchase (as expected, as DRM-free PDF or EPUB files) from No Starch Press¹⁷, and we cannot *not* recommend its lecture. Not only are the articles fascinating (and/or worrying, your mileage may vary) but they are also fun and extremely well put together.

And, needless to say, the presentation of the printed volumes is immaculate. As Brian Benchoff said¹⁸,

So, should you buy the good word of Pastor Laphroaig? Sure, if you like dead trees. At least one couple has already been married using PoC||GTFO as a bible. It looks great on a shelf, and if you read PoC||GTFO on public transportation, people stay away from you.

We end this article with some words of wisdom borrowed from the first volume, shown on the cover photo of this article:

Go now in peace and pwnage, and may the Manul always be with you.

Cover photo by the author.

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