

# My Slice of the Digital Pie

By Dick Wooley

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As a preface: It's debatable to me whether or not my subject rises to the level of true philosophical importance, certainly by comparison with many other Philosophical Club talks I've heard in my short tenure as a member.

On the other hand one philosopher said of Sartre: "Each philosopher can only give the truth of his own existence. That is to say, philosophy is not a universal or impersonal science," and the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said "Philosophy is a product of each philosopher and each philosopher is a man (or women) of flesh and blood who addresses himself to other men (and women) of flesh and blood like himself, and whatever he may do, he does not philosophize with his reason alone but with his will, his feeling, his flesh and blood, with his whole soul and his whole body. It is the whole man who philosophizes in us."

We all are recipients or perhaps victims of the huge impact of digital technologies on our lives. Whether to embrace, reject or resent these developments is a personal choice not to be made too quickly or taken too lightly.

I had this decision thrust on my "whole soul and whole body" over twenty years ago.

Though even then no spring chicken I came to struggle with, learn and eventually begin to enjoy the impact and empowerment of these silicon marvels.

And so, though it may be a stretch, I'd like to address my subject based on the idea that things that happen to individuals that change their lives profoundly can, perhaps should be regarded as philosophical in nature require and deserving of philosophical review.

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My digital journey, aka "my slice of the digital pie," began when I became seriously ill in 1978 and I spent the next seven years in and out of hospitals, occasionally near death.

The condition, an idiopathic lung disease, had the effect of ending to my career as a

performing musician and composer/producer.

This time period was roughly concurrent with the first development of truly useful digital music synthesizers, somewhat consumer-friendly personal computers and the availability of relatively inexpensive high-quality multi-track sound recording equipment. There was, as a result, a huge increase in the use of these capabilities in performing and producing popular music. It soon seemed, for example, that almost every other garage in Nashville was turned into a studio cranking out demo tapes for aspiring country music hopefuls.

In my field musicians and producers of music tracks for radio and TV, advertising, industrial films and such began using these tools to cut costs.

And thus, considering my physical limitations and my hope of avoiding total obsolescence began my absorption - obsession really - with high-tech music making. Only later did I succumb to the insidious computer tentacles that drag us into other spin-off digital activities.

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I need, at this point, to disclaim that am largely self-taught, following pretty much a "search and destroy" path with lots of trial and much error accompanied by tedious reading of obtuse, confusing manuals.

I am not a digital whiz nor do I possess anything close to a broad knowledge of computers and their associated technologies. I do not understand most of the esoteric jargon of real digital techies, and I likely know little of the myriad uses that many of you have already found.

Also, I could not be so blind or unkind as to suggest that anyone should follow my long, slow and tiresome path. I'm no recruiter.

A conservative estimate is that I've spent is over 40,000 hours at the average rate of 4-6 hours a day for more than twenty years! And the cost in dollars is well in excess of \$100,000 spent and mostly gone.

All this disclaimed; I am reasonably qualified to speak of those things with which I have had a hands-on, life-altering personal experience. There are the five major areas: my music, word processing, digital photography, a modest dabble in digital graphics and use of the Internet. My wife, Nora, insists that I include a sixth: my last remaining vice;

playing a lot of computer solitaire.

They are, in reverse order though not necessarily in importance:

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1. Solitaire: I seem to require an activity that is semi-mindless, impersonal and isolated, particularly when I'm tired but not sleepy. I usually play while watching TV, also a semi-comatose exercise except for an occasional History or Discovery channel tidbit or times on PBS when Charley Rose interviews someone other than show-biz celebrities.

I confess to perhaps 50,000 games of this insanity...which at around three minutes a game comes to the equivalent of about 105 twenty-four hour days of continuous play...? Oh, my!

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2. The Internet has given me the same access to communication and information that many of you already utilize more and better than I. It's wonderful and valuable but nothing unique to my experience.

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3. Nora has persuaded me with some strong ideas of hers: She believes in an immortality that is at least in part comprised of the good and helpful memories we leave behind with those we've known and for whom we care. She thinks these memories are best served when we provide tangible evidence, pictures or other such items, even if they become memorabilia only occasionally re-discovered in the future.

Thus I've been conscripted into projects she's devised over the years; a family calendar, posters of family and friends gatherings, birthdays cards and others. She's the producer and editor. I provide some of the text, the highly sophisticated poems, the photography and graphic organization, printing and the rest of the grunt work.

None of these things would have existed or have achieved the quality they show were it not for my computers, printers and their associated software programs.

Please pass around the samples and note particularly the early, pre-digital calendar versus the current one.

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4. Like many, I went through a photography obsession phase in my forties.

Among other huge family and personal collections are a set of celebrity shots taken

from the orchestra pit at the Front Row and other local theaters, from Cher to Perry Como, Buddy Hackett, Hank Mancini and Liberace.

My enthusiasm eventually waned but resurfaced when my kids gave me my first digital camera for a Christmas present in 2001. It was love almost from the "git-go."

I've since added a scanner and gone through expensive camera upgrades but continue to enjoy shooting and, in particular, messin' around with the shots once I get them in the computer. I shape them, tweak the colors, proof and print in ways that used to be reserved for professionals.

One example I'll give is the club picture. As so often happens, one person, my dear friend Donna Belle Gordon, blinked in the shot that showed everyone else quite well. I took her lovely face from another shot and replaced it in the final version. Another sample is the river panorama, three parallel horizontal shots I stitched together digitally. This kind of magic now is available to any that, as I do, enjoy these sorts of fun visual challenges.

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5. Those who have spent much time talking to me will likely be surprised know that I did the almost unthinkable for a music student and a cool jazz player at Ohio Wesleyan many years ago: I minored in English.

This said, there is just no way that I, having gained some appreciation for good writing, would have been bold enough to write at all were it not for the chance to assemble my thoughts on the computer rather quickly then write and correct, cut and paste, write and correct, then edit and edit some more.

I "word processed" this talk and many, many other pieces that quite, sans computers, simply would never have existed. My love of written words and language, particularly my written words and language, would have been unrequited from a creative standpoint.

The results, including my little verses and song lyrics, while hardly Pulitzer material, have on occasion been published. Please pass these samples. (Pass the magazines) Whether the world is a better place for all this output is questionable...but I have had the chance to speak, make that "word process," my piece.

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6. Lastly; few of you or the general public or even few musicians are fully aware of the extent to which virtually all entertainment music you hear now utilizes computer resources. From that ghastly noise that now is considered popular music to teenagers' garage bands, disk jockeys, Broadway musicals, television and even to major motion picture scoring, it's virtually impossible to tell the difference between "live" musicians' recorded performances and those that are either produced and/or enhanced digitally. My start in digital music making came during my illness with the purchase of a barely used eight-track analog tape recording system from a financially strapped Nashville garage studio producer. My first sound machine was a Korg synthesizer soon followed by a Memorymoog, an advanced version of Robert Moog's invention, the first truly useful synthesizer that started it all. Thereafter came the first all-digital synthesizer, the Yamaha DX-7, followed by an extensive, very expensive succession of synthesizers, Apple computers, software and assorted hardware that continues today.

My first musical efforts were made playing on the keyboards of synthesizers and recording, one track at a time, on the eight-track recorder, a 1/2-inch reel-to-reel tape master machine (not to be confused with those thankfully short-lived 8 track car players). This was very slow and limiting because I'm digitally impaired as a pianist. I was excited, then, when computer components were added to synthesizers to control their sounds and also provide linear time control with what were called sequencers. This meant that one could record, or actually program and then play back digitally stored sounds in precise rhythmic sequence. I could slow the tempo down and enter the notes without trying to force my fingers to work in correct rhythms.

Soon the functions of these small synthesizer sequencers were taken over by music software for the early PC's, largely and most successfully the Apple Macintoshes. Macs were preferred by the early music software providers and have remained pretty much the computers of choice as the technologies have grown, become more capable and complex.

I could now enter musical information, or if you prefer, compose music scores directly into the Mac using its computer keyboard. These thus created could then be dictated to the synthesizers via a universal interface language called MIDI, Music Instrument Digital Interface.

My path has taken me through, as I've suggested, a long and tedious period of learning and upgrading both in the hardware and software required. I now accomplish, at least in a modest way, what I'd forecast and hoped for. I've been able to perform and record a few things that rise to a respectable level of musical craftsmanship, perhaps, on occasion, even to a measure of artistry.

While these developments have made it possible for almost anyone to create and perform music, some of it quite successfully, it remains a considerable challenge to obtain really fine, musically fulfilling results. The talents, techniques and expressiveness of gifted performers involve many aspects of musical information that one cannot easily program into even the most capable computers. This is particularly true for us older professionals who have spent years tuning our ears to the subtle nuance of musical sounds and performances from good players.

I admit to the Quixotic aspects of this but my quest remains one of trying to achieve a consistent level of musically rewarding performance while struggling with but also enjoying my digital toys. As I've suggested, my studio has gone through countless changes. Where it once began as I described it, a simple two synthesizer and tape recording system, it has gone through a huge comings-and-goings of synths and other hardware to what it is now slimmed down to two Macs and a studio-quality playback system. All the sounds I now use emanate from sampler programs stored in the Macs and, where live recording is involved, hard disk recording, also directly into the Macs via analog-to-digital interfaces.

I'd like to present and try to explain some short samples of the mile-markers of my journey: My version of DeBussy's "Afternoon of a Fawn," and "Wolfie, Jammin' at the Y2K".

No one gave me a symphony orchestra so I invented my own!

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To summarize: it's been and continues to be life-altering and exciting to have had access to some of the personal empowerment provided by this digital revolution.

I have been allowed to make progress on overcoming two life-long major limitations:

1. For as long as I can remember my mind, awake and even asleep, has been filled with musical notes and ideas swirling about without apparent purpose, organization or, with

my lack of keyboard skills, the opportunity for performance and realization.

I now can, albeit with considerable effort, work with these ideas and hear them played.

2. As a child of the Great Depression I have what I call a "lunch-box" professional mentality. Though my talents have taken me into the art of music I have always been limited by my need to get paid.

Whatever the assignment asked of me, from teaching to creating and playing or conducting, I've picked up my "lunch-box" and gone to work, almost never to make music just for fun, for my own personal enjoyment! Now I can and do.

These are some samples of my music just for kicks!

(Play some stuff: parts of "King Arty," "Tasty" cuts, "Always Philosophical.")

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For all its evolution and sophistication personal computing is still an infant development, one which I consider to be somewhat analogous to the stage of the early history of the American automobile when electric starters first replaced the hand crank.

There is so much more to come that I don't want to miss. I surely, to use another auto metaphor, don't intend to stand on the sidelines like the sad blacksmiths who refused to adapt as the noisy, smelly and frightening early cars began to make them obsolete.

Whether you choose to be the "village smithy" or get your hands a little greasy is your call.