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Microsoft Bob

“Save all the money on the manuals and just give me this duck to always be there and tell me what to do (McCracken)” was one of the verbal responses that Karen Fries, co-designer of Microsoft Bob recalled from a focus group that took place prior to Bob’s development. During this focus group, first-time computer users were shown an “interface with an animated waterfowl as an on-screen helper. (McCracken)” It was this one man’s emotional response that galvanized the designers of Bob, Karen Fries and Barry Linnett to draft a memo explaining that they thought Microsoft Publisher, which the two had just finished designing, was still too difficult for a first-time computer user to operate. They lobbied for resources to create a new graphical user interface that would ultimately become Microsoft Bob. Under the codename, Utopia, Bill Gates gave the go-ahead. This new interface would run in place of the desktop interface that had become synonymous with Windows based computers. Melinda Gates, then Melinda French, was appointed to head the project. Clifford Nass and Byron Reeves, two Stanford professors, were brought on as consultants to the project. Their research proved to influence Bob’s creation and showed that “[People] are also good at dealing with a natural environment such as the movement of objects and people in rooms, so if an interface can interact with the user to take advantage of these human talents, then you might not need a manual. (McCracken)”

This work and research was the culmination of a patent filed on July 8th 1994. The patent describes a software platform that “adopts a real-world metaphor (Linnett)” and goes on to state

that conventional interfaces are still too difficult for first-time computer users to navigate. This platform would give the user an “animated guide (Linnett)” that would be at their side when performing tasks. The name, Bob, tested as “familiar, approachable, and friendly (McCracken).” Bob also went on to include eight programs that were specific to Bob: Bob Address Book, Bob Letter Writer, Bob Household Manager, Bob Checkbook, Bob E-mail, Bob Calendar, Bob Financial Guide, and Geosafari for Bob. The development team also believed that as the interface grew in popularity, more programs would be designed for it as well. Microsoft sent out copies of Bob in December of 1994 and put an embargo on reviews from being published until the official launch. Whether the embargo annoyed journalists at the time or not is unclear but the early, negative reviews that preceded Bob’s launch on March 31st, 1995 might have been one of the reasons that caused Bob to be a massive failure on the consumer market. By early 1996, production of Bob had ceased. Why did Microsoft Bob fail in the consumer market, how does it live on today and how could it be preserved?

At the time it was released to consumers, Bob’s system requirements were seen as a drawback. The minimum needed to run Microsoft Bob v1.00 was a CPU of 486SX, 32 MBs of disk space, 8 MBs of RAM, a Super VGA display for full 256 color-support, and an operating system of Windows 3.1 whereas Microsoft Bob v.1.00a required a minimum of 48 MBs of disk space. Windows 3.1 was released on April 6th, 1992 which means any consumer who didn’t have a Windows-based computer already, would have needed to purchase a new computer in 1995 had they been so inclined to want to use Bob. The requirement of 8MBs of RAM also proved to be a hurdle for the consumer and was twice the average amount of RAM found on household computers at the time. The \$99.00 price tag was another obstacle for the consumer who might have been indifferent to Bob.

Another issue for Bob could be found in its promotion. Microsoft promised a product so easy to use that no manual was required. This was a lie. Upon purchasing Bob, inside the box was the premier and sole edition of Bob Magazine, a twenty-nine-page booklet on how-to setup and operate the product. January 7th, 1995, marked not only the press release announcing Bob but it was the same day that Bill Gates unveiled Bob at the Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas, Nevada. Gates leaned on the fact that Bob would “never need manuals, tutorials or separate help systems. (MICROSOFT BOB COMES HOME)” This must have seemed perplexing to consumers when less than a month after Bob’s release, Microsoft Press, the publishing wing of Microsoft released *At Home with Bob: Ideas and Activities for Getting the Most from Your Home PC*. A two hundred and nineteen-page book (not including the Table of Contents or Index) that is “organized around the constant demands of the average family’s life, from correspondence and finances to education, entertainment, nutrition, and health (Rowley)”. This book is also a manual though the book never actually says that it is. Each chapter comes off as a mere suggestion, giving instructions on how to use each of the eight programs found within Bob. The places in a book where a reader would normally find the word “instructions”, the word “uses” can be found.

PC Magazine in June of 1995 stated that they believed that one of the problems was that “Microsoft would have adults using this thing, when it is obviously a more appropriate tool for kids aged 7 to 14. First of all, it uses cartoon characters as guides, and most adults do not respond well to cartoon characters. (McCracken)” Bob’s colorful layouts and cartoon-like assistants certainly give way to a childlike atmosphere. An argument can be made that the original goal of Microsoft Bob was to create a graphical user interface solely with children in mind. In an interview with Fonts.com, Microsoft designer Vincent Connare stated that he “designed Comic

Sans while I was working at Microsoft. I had been given a beta version of Microsoft Bob, a comic software package designed primarily for young users. (The Story Behind Comic Sans)” It can be inferred from this quote that Microsoft Bob was initially intended for children and not the much broader market of adults who had never used a computer before. Speaking from firsthand experience, the author of this paper had this to say: Bob came with my family’s first Gateway computer in 1995. I have vivid memories playing with Bob from the ages of 6-10. My parents allowed me to use our first computer but didn’t want me to use the desktop interface because they figured I could click on the wrong thing and irreversibly harm this new, very expensive computer. With Bob, users had the ability to configure their interface so it would start-up in place of the standard interface. This is how my parents configured Bob. This way, Bob was the only thing I saw. My parents imported all the games and programs they thought I would like to play and let me explore the virtual home without any reluctance of their part.

In 2009, Monica Harrington, a woman who managed communications for Microsoft’s consumer division, penned an article that discussed how various “tech intellectuals had started telling me that they were going to bury Bob. They didn’t like it, they were somehow angry that it had even been developed...And that’s exactly what happened. Bob got killed. But first, it was ridiculed and stomped (Harrington).” One might wonder if this is one of the reasons the initial reviews of Bob were so negative. Yet the most revealing moment in the article comes when Harrington mentions that her husband, Mike, who also worked at Microsoft, was the lead developer of the never-released Bob 2.0. Harrington concludes her article with a list of a few lessons learned from Bob. Two of those lessons tie in directly with Bob’s failure as a product. She states in lesson #1: “Never under deliver against expectations. Because of the initial hype around Bob, expectations were huge. The first version of Bob was a friendly product that in user

tests got good reviews from the intended audience - novice users - but in order to meet expectations, Bob was going to have to be a life-changing experience - and it wasn't." Lesson #7 reflects on the role of influentials; "the core tech people - hated it... consider the crucial role of influentials even if they're not your target audience (Harrington)." This shows that it doesn't matter how well a product works for the target audience.

Bob was marketed as a social interface. Yet, Bob was anti-social in nature. Once the user made his or her way into the home, there was no way out. Steven Johnson, author of *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate* states that "[Bob] conceptualizes the infosphere as a private home, sequestered from the outside world... There's a strange sense of agoraphobia hovering over this world (Johnson 62)" Johnson goes on to argue that "this might have been reasonable in the old days of stand-alone desktop computers. (Johnson 62)." Bob was released during the age of the Internet and it possessed a proprietary email service that like the product itself, had to be paid for. This didn't add to Bob's proclaimed social nature, it hurt it.

One of the most memorable features of Bob was the animated, personal guide the user was given in the form of Rover and was the beginning of Microsoft's use of personal assistants. Bob gives the user a choice of twelve different assistants in version 1.00 and seventeen different assistants in version 1.00a which was released on August 30th, 1995. Upon the initial startup, the user is greeted by Rover and he acts as your personal guide to help you with any questions you may have while "at home." Complete with a biography, Rover comes from Redmond, Washington, enjoys table scraps, and spending time in the backyard. The release of Microsoft Office 97 gave birth to the second generation of personal assistants, Clippy. Clippy was available as a guide and served to answer any question the user might have as they operated programs

within Microsoft Office. Rover and Clippy lived in various forms in subsequent Windows operating systems until the release of Windows Vista on January 30th, 2007. This release squashed the use or appearance of any personal assistants that had existed previously. Then at the Microsoft Research Event in 2013, Bill Gates declared that “the new generation of personal agents will be more adept at planning activities, such as finding a gift or organizing a trip in a certain way...Microsoft Bob won’t come back as a dog, but will morph into a disembodied voice from the cloud (Farber).” This came true with the release of the Windows Phone 8.1 on April 2nd, 2014. The phone possessed a personal assistant named Cortana and was marketed as an “intelligent personal assistant.”

This design concept of being at home with your faithful dog at your side is a form of skeuomorphism. The Oxford dictionary defines a skeuomorph as “an object or feature which imitates the design of a similar artefact made from another material” and goes on to further state that within computing it is “an element of a graphical user interface that mimics a physical object”. The concept of skeuomorphism has appeared in architecture for thousands of years. The first example of skeuomorphism can be found in Greek architecture. “Early Greek buildings were wood structures and the ceiling rafters would protrude at the top of the building exterior. When they later switched to building with stone, the Greeks carved out details in the stone to mimic these protruding rafters. They served no functional purpose other than to look familiar. (Why Designers Use)” This is now known as skeuomorphism. Another example of skeuomorphism appears in the faux wood paneling of stations wagons from the 1970s and 1980s. The faux wood paneling is a skeuomorph of the wood paneling found on cars of the 1940s and that paneling was a skeuomorph of the wooden sides of a horse carriage. A skeuomorph of a skeuomorph. There are varying degrees of skeuomorphism from subtle to overwhelming, Bob

being the latter. Apple's Lisa computer introduced the concept into computing with their first graphical interface in 1983 in the form of the first "desktop" interface. This was done to make computers more user-friendly.

In terms of preservation, the Internet Archive offers a solution for those who might be interested in emulating Bob in the future. There you can find an ISO Image of version 1.00 as well as an ISO image of a "Microsoft Autodemo". It is unclear what the latter may be but each of them is downloadable from the Internet Archive. For this paper, one of the goals was to emulate Bob but due to time constraints it was impossible. However, an original installation disc of Bob was found. The Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program collects old media and possesses an IBM Think Pad that ran Windows '98, a laptop and operating system that were both compatible and age-appropriate with Bob. Bob was installed with little to no difficulty but was unable to run due to a missing file, UTOPIA.DLL. A Google search led to the correction of that problem. In an official Microsoft Community forum in 2012, someone attempted to install Bob and ran into the same problem. Another user responded with this: "Move everything out of C:\MSBOB\HOME, and put it all into the C:\MSBOB folder (Trying to Install Microsoft Bob)." Once the "HOME" folder was moved one directory up, Bob could start-up. Once a profile was created, an attempt was made to run the applications within Bob. All eight applications that are specific to Bob failed to function except for one, Bob Checkbook. The rest of the applications also required a .DLL file that was nowhere to be found. A Google search did not yield an answer to this problem despite other people raising the question in the past.

It should also be noted that even if a successful emulation was to occur, one must figure out the problem of the missing .DLL files. Also, Bob will never be able to function at full capacity since the email service that was available at the time of Bob's release no longer

exists. In a review from the New York Times, Bob was described as “a bad neighbor. It stores its data in formats that better programs cannot easily import. (Manes)” At the time of Bob’s release to the public, exporting the documents that were created in its applications was difficult. This raises the question that if a digital archivist was to survey a laptop that was found in a newly acquired collection and that laptop contained files that were created in Bob, how could those files be found? An attempt was made to answer this question during the research process for this paper. Bob was installed on a laptop that ran Windows XP as well as the laptop that was previously mentioned. Bob Checkbook was one of the only programs besides, Bob Calendar and Bob Address Book that was able to function. A file was created within Bob Checkbook and saved to the hard drive. Bob was then shut down and an attempt was made to find that file by searching the hard drive. The file couldn’t be found. It is unclear if the files that were created within Bob could be used in programs outside of it. The earliest Windows operating system that Bob was designed for was Windows 3.1 and up to but not including Windows XP. More research needs to be done to figure out the ideal conditions for emulation as well as solve the mystery of the missing .DLL files. Theoretically, an installation disc should have everything that is necessary to run Bob.

Microsoft Bob failed in the consumer market for several reasons which have been stated above: high cost, the anti-social nature of the program, negative reviews that appeared prior to Bob’s release, the cartoon like design, the massive effort made to market the product to adults and not to children. One could theorize that if the Bob’s price had been lower, marketed to children and young teens, and copies of the program had not been handed out to tech journalists prior to Bob’s release then Bob might have been more a success. Instead, Microsoft ended up with a virtual “spruce goose.” A creation that barely got off the ground once it was finished. Bob

has now been harshly criticized for decades yet every time Bob celebrates a major birthday, someone gets the idea to write a retrospective on it. Some have been more enlightening than others but none of them ever attempt to offer a solution to what could have made Bob better or praise the Bob's development team for taking such a bold leap in creating it. Microsoft Bob has become the one thing that creators of new software seek to never be compared to. Today, comparing a newly released product to Microsoft Bob could result in an immediate dismissal by many. Bill Gates and Bob's original team deserve respect for taking such a risk.

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