

Slightly Sepulchral Look

Are you ever concerned about the future of British computer engineering ? I am from time to time but all it takes to allay my fears is a visit to my local computer fair. This time, I needed a couple of printer cartridges and some spare parts such as a hard disc and a power supply and decided to pop in again after an absence of a few months. Let me paint a picture here. Its Sunday, the car park at the venue, (the local recreation centre), is full. People are scurrying in all directions carrying large boxes. On entry, you hand over a couple of quid, get your hand stamped, (if you look carefully it says "Nerd"), weave your way round the 25 stone twins blocking the aisle and discussing overclocking in frightening detail, and you're in. I'm a computer scientist by profession but believe me I know my place at these events. You are greeted by something taken straight from the bar scene in Star Wars. Here SSL has nothing to do with secure, it stands for Slightly Sepulchral Look.

Down the first aisle past a wildly gesticulating gentleman with a mobile phone on each ear selling flat screens and I suspect, his neighbour's children, and you are at the first booth. A smiling lady peers over the counter with a penetratingly intelligent look. Whilst handing over the hard disk, (120Gb. for the cost of a take-away curry), she dispenses astonishingly detailed information about the BIOS. There is something deeply moving about being called "love" whilst being told precisely how to set up a system for symmetric multi-processing. Then its off for a power supply past the Chinese guy who can put CPU cooling fans on with his fingers whilst practising Tai Chi. For mere mortals, this normally takes a screwdriver, both hands, nerves of steel and a whispered prayer. He doesn't even look. The power supply comes from the man in the corner who has the most formidable knowledge of practical interfacing I have ever come across. Want to interface your wife's hairdryer to an egg whisk with TCP/IP ? - then he will sell you the bits and tell you precisely how to do it. Not so long back, I was having trouble with a USB driver for a computer controlled telescope and sure enough, he sorted me out.

In another corner, there is a thriving business in old motherboards and bits from computers long since gone. On yet another aisle, I can buy designer lighting for my ATX tower to bathe my anorak with a sultry fluorescent blue glow.

I emerge from all of this an hour later with enough parts to build a new high performance server. Another hour later, I have SuSE Linux running on it as a spare backup server for my office network and all this cost 200 quid, (I wonder how many of you realise just how easy it is to do this ?). Not only that, but I have never come away without a solution if I had a technical problem. So if you're having difficulty, eschew the expensive support and just pop along to your local computer fair. You will be amazed at the quality of the advice you can get, so do not fear for British engineering skills - they just congregate in unusual places.

lesh@leshatton.org