

The Digital Migrant

Introduction

I was lucky. I grew up with computers.

I have my Granddad to thank for this. He cannot resist fiddling with things, pulling them apart to see how they work and putting them together again in different ways. This did not always please my mother who as a little girl lost many cherished toys to Granddad's hands-on curiosity, but to me it was fascinating, and as the only child of an only child I was the recipient of many interesting gadgets once Granddad became bored with them.

In the late eighties Granddad bought a personal computer. It was an Amstrad, with two giant 5.25 inch floppy drives and a black and white monitor. Among other things it ran a game called Digger in which you controlled a little bulldozer who ran around the screen collecting gems and avoiding nobbins, who followed the tracks you had dug, and so-called hobbins, who could chew through walls and were therefore much scarier.

It also had a game called Rogue, in which you moved a character through different levels of a dungeon collecting items and fighting creatures such as hobgoblins, represented on-screen in the terrifying form of a capital H. I always enjoyed trips to my grandparents' house so I could lock myself away for hours and play these games, occasionally calling out for mum

to help when I encountered a particularly dangerous looking consonant. I was 5 years old.

A couple of years later Granddad bought a new computer. This one had a colour screen and an incredible 40 megabyte hard drive. I wasn't sure what to be more excited about - the new computer or the fact Granddad was giving me his old one! It soon turned out I was equally excited by both. And so the process continued, every couple of years Granddad would get a new computer with all the latest additions and I would inherit the old one. This is how I grew up. In the late eighties and early nineties this was fairly rare.

Fast forward to age 15. I'm in high school, waiting 20 minutes for my English lesson to start because my teacher can't work out how to print an email. I remember feeling frustrated by what seemed to me to be an obvious problem with a simple solution.

Computers and the technology that associated with it were obviously becoming a big part of the future. School was supposed to be preparing us for the future but the people teaching us weren't prepared for the future themselves.

The teachers needed an education. I decided to run a series of after-school classes for teachers who wanted to better understand computers. My approach was to start right at the beginning and explain the binary number system and how all computers operated using only a glorified series of ones and zeroes. Several of my teachers, now my students, complained that this had little to do with how to use 'the email' and they didn't have time to learn the basics. My response was to quote the old adage:

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'Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.'

Ten years or more later, the technology has moved on dramatically but for many people, the understanding of it has not. I still teach people about ones and zeroes and indeed I have devoted an entire chapter to it in this book.

As computers have become more advanced, technology more sophisticated and the internet so pervasive, I am more convinced than ever that to survive in a world of computers, like surviving in another country, you must take the time to understand the customs, the culture and the language.

This book is called *The Digital Migrant* because that's who it's for - people who are migrating to a digital way of life.

The Digital Migrant is written like a novel so you can read it from cover to cover. It isn't about how to write email or edit photos - there is a wealth of 'how-to' books already available for just about anything you may want to do with technology - this book is about *understanding* how the technology works in the first place.

This is the book I've always wanted to recommend to family, friends and hundreds of clients who struggle with their digital devices. Calling on my years of teaching people computers and my knack for explaining complex concepts in simple terms, I've decided to write it myself.

The Digital Migrant is not a book 'for dummies'. Why do we call people dumb just because they don't know something?

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How is someone even supposed to know the right questions to ask if they don't know what they don't know?

This book attempts to explain the things people don't know about computers. Where they came from. How they think. Why they don't work sometimes. What they're capable of and what we are capable of with their help.

I don't shy away from getting technical, but this is not a technical book. I wanted to give real, accurate explanations of how things work - not the magical fairies version - but I also wanted to make it easy to understand and to assume my reader knows nothing about the subject.

Any hardcore geeks reading this should note that while I have done my best to give the most accurate technical explanations possible - in places where I had to choose between simplicity and total accuracy, I chose simplicity.

Computers can be an incredibly dry subject, but I hope I've made it interesting. There should be plenty of 'aaaahhh!' moments where things that never made sense before suddenly click into place. There's also plenty of trivia tidbits that may surprise even the seasoned IT professional.

Finally, don't be worried if the technical stuff doesn't sink in. You don't have to remember the technical details, it just helps to know where they fit in the bigger picture. In my experience of teaching, seeing the bigger picture is what matters most.

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If I accomplish nothing else with this book, I hope it will be to take the fear out of using computers. It's cliché I know, but they're not scary, they're just misunderstood.

My real hope of course is that you will come to find the same sense of discovery and possibility surrounding technology that I have. That I will turn you from a digital migrant into a digital native, empowered with the confidence to use technology to enrich your daily life and strengthen your connections with others.

Let's begin.