

Nibble's Mike Harvey

Apple II publishing pioneer

by Andrew Roughan

Mike Harvey was President of Verbex, a voice recognition subsidiary of Exxon Enterprises, when in 1980 founded his own programming publication. Nibble grew so quickly that, a year later, he left Verbex to become a full-time writer, editor, and publisher. So popular was Nibble that Harvey eventually added magazines for Macintosh and PC coverage. Over 16,000 pages of Nibble were published before the last issue went out the door in July 1992. The entire collection is now available for purchase at nibblemagazine.com.

Roughan: Prior to starting *Nibble* you had some experience as a sales person with IBM where you had the top sales record in the company. What were you selling and why do you think you were so successful?

Harvey: In my first year selling, I covered meatpacking and distribution industries on Chicago's South Side. I made it a point to learn everything I could about those industries and even took a mail-order course in accounting for the meatpacking industry. However the key was in my marketing strategy. I had a very large geographic area with many small companies, and I developed direct mail campaigns (before they were widely used) to identify and qualify prospects. So my personal time was spent with well-qualified prospects, and I sold roughly five times as many new accounts as other salesmen.

In my second year on quota, I was moved into a University and Medical School territory handling the full range of accounting machines and computers. I used similar techniques to cover a territory made up of dozens of departments in all the major universities in Chicago. Coincidentally, one of my customers was a large university that had recently installed a very, very large competitive computer system. I made that a prime target and developed relationships with key administrative officers and all the professors on the computing center committee. IBM had just come out with its radically new System/360 computer family and I used that to sell and justify replacing the competitive system a year after it had been installed. The net result was that in my first two years of selling I had a cumulative quota performance of 310% of quota, and

was chosen as the first President of IBM's 100% Club for Government/Education/Medical.

Roughan: You also worked at Xerox with product management responsibility for laser printing, facsimile, word processing and micrographics. Can you tell us more about your time there?

Harvey: The late '60s and early '70s were exciting but frustrating at Xerox. It had revolutionary new technology in non-impact printing and we developed the first high speed computer terminal based on Large Scale Integration (LSI) technology. At the same time however, Xerox was still enjoying the fruits of its proprietary and patented Xerography technology. So the first question we were always asked in Business Reviews was "What's our patent position?" and there was no patent protection. Xerox management had a very hard time visualizing markets that were emerging. For example, nobody could understand how there could be a market for a computer printer that only printed one page at a time, or a market for a terminal with those characteristics. We were selling facsimile devices at a time when Fax was in its infancy, and no one could understand how a fax could replace the mail on a cost justification basis.

When Xerox acquired Scientific Data Systems (SDS) in the early 70's everyone thought Xerox had "made the leap" into the new high-tech world. But it turned out to be "two ships passing in the night." Xerox thought it was entering the computer business with a sound and profitable company. SDS thought it was getting a blank check to stop worrying about sales, revenue and profit and to invest in all kinds of new products. So SDS went immediately into the red and stayed there until Xerox sold it to Honeywell in the mid-70s.

Roughan: It's widely known that the Macintosh user interface was influenced by ideas that originated at Xerox. How did you feel when the Macintosh came out?

Harvey: I used to travel to Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) on a regular basis and saw the first mouse-driven desktop computer in the early 70s—more than 10 years before Apple introduced the Macintosh. Again though, the problem with Xerox was its lack of imagination and vision in those emerging markets.

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Class Clown: The team that brought you Nibble. Front row, second from the left, is Mike Harvey—in case you couldn't tell. Photo courtesy Mike Harvey.

When the Mac was introduced, it was like seeing the birth of an old friend, and I couldn't help but chuckle that Xerox had missed the boat on that "engine" as well.

Roughan: You've said that you wrote a number of white papers for Xerox that you hoped would encourage them to pursue software development—did any of your ideas come about as you foresaw?

Harvey: In working with advanced technologies, I could see that hardware of all kinds was on a downward price/profit spiral. Simple logic led me to the conclusion that the "proprietary-ness" of new products would rest with software: the thing that uniquely defines product functionality. Nobody could understand that, since the software industry had not yet been born and computer companies were only in the early infancy of unbundling their software from their hardware.

Five years after I left Xerox, I was president of a data entry company based in Boston and I tried to convince the Chairman of the Board to try to acquire Microsoft which was really in its infancy. He, like the executives at Xerox, could not understand the value of software and so the attempt was never made.

Roughan: You've been at the forefront of technology and innovation for a good part of your career. What do you see as the next breakthrough technology and why?

Harvey: I'd love to see the next big breakthrough in alternative sources of energy. Brazil, for example, runs its cars on ethanol that is produced with high-yield sugar beets. It's one of the few, perhaps the only, countries that doesn't depend on Arab oil for energy. There are all kinds of promising technologies and it distresses me that the government and lobbies seem to be impeding rather than promoting this development

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arena.

Roughan: How did you come up with the idea to create a magazine to publish computer programs?

Harvey: I had always been a "closet programmer" at heart. I bought one of the first TRS-80s when it came out and followed it shortly with an Apple II. Since there was essentially NO software, I wrote a word processor, a database management system, a personal finance system, a number of games, and so on and I had begun selling the programs with accompanying articles to magazines like *Kilobaud Microcomputing*. Late in 1979, the company I was with declared bankruptcy and I was on the street. I decided to use the time between jobs to try to start a magazine. I bought back the programs I'd sold to others and sat down to write the first issues of *Nibble*. The first four issues had my key programs that I'd written in the previous several years—TRAC for Personal Finance, TOUGH Word Processor, etc. We published the first issue 90 days from the birth of the idea with a grand total of 5,000 copies which I sent to computer stores as a promotion, while advertising for subscribers.

Roughan: What was it like getting those first few issues out the door? How did your family cope with this?

Harvey: Shortly after starting the *Nibble* venture—recall that it was a "between-jobs" project—I got a job as an Executive at a subsidiary of Exxon Enterprises. So I'd get up at 3 AM to work on *Nibble*, work a full day, and then work into the evening on *Nibble*. My wife was an incredible help and we couldn't have made it without her. And when the first issue was published, we all sat around on the living room floor stuffing sample issues into envelopes to go to computer stores. We very quickly hired some part-time secretarial help, which became full-time and then expanded as the needs arose.

We operated that way for nearly 18 months before I left Exxon Enterprises to run *Nibble* full time. Through that time, we had grown to 20,000+ circulation and had 8–10 people working in a rented store front in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Eventually, we grew to approximately 35 people publishing three magazines, many books, and monthly software disks. At our peak we were booking approximately \$5 million of annual revenue.

Roughan: How were the featured programs determined? Did you just take submissions and design issues around them or did you determine ahead of time

what programs you'd like to see, and then have a programmer do the work?

Harvey: We purchased programs as we received them, so authors did not have to wait until publication to be paid. Each month, we'd have an editorial review meeting to select the several lead features for an issue from the best ones in our inventory. Very often, we worked with authors who were talented in a particular field, like utilities, to ask them to work on a specific project, and the results were uniformly outstanding.

Roughan: Did any of the programs that you published have a big impact?

Harvey: Honestly, I don't think that what we published was intended to be "ground breaking". BUT our pride was in publishing programs of commercial quality in a magazine that sold for \$2.95/copy. We published very, very good applications, games, and utilities, and we used them to run our own business.

Roughan: You've been building a subscriber base and the magazine is well received. So well received in fact that the entering of the source code by hand becomes a chore for some people and they seek out the services of Amtype who are advertising that they'll provide a copy of the source code on disk. How did you feel about this?

Harvey: I was horrified when my editor brought me the Amtype ad. We were doing all the work and Amtype, which claimed to be a "typing service" was trying to siphon off our main source of profit. We decided to sue Amtype in Federal Court and we won.

Roughan: Today, the idea of copyright in computer software is well understood and accepted, but back in 1984 it was not. Tell us more about the case.

Harvey: The challenge was helping the Judge to understand that a program existing in computer memory was a tangible, copyrightable entity that could be stolen. I brought a full Apple II system into the courtroom during the hearing and demonstrated how software was created, stored, and used in a computer. Fortunately, Judge Garrity had a very bright young clerk who advised him and understood perfectly what we were trying to protect. His ruling established a precedent which is still on the books.

Roughan: I understand that you used Apple computers in your office network. Can you describe the network setup?

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Harvey: When I first started *Nibble*, there were no hard disks for the Apple II. So I designed a system that spanned multiple floppy disks and I had 12 floppy disk drives stacked up on an Apple for doing the subscriber sorting and labelling. Our subscriber base spanned 36 floppy disks so I'd process in batches of 12 over a 24 hour period to print our subscriber labels.

When Corvus came out with its hard disk, it was a godsend. Corvus provided a way to hook multiple computers into a common pool of disk drives over cable with an interface card in each Apple II. So we actually had more than 25 Apple IIs banging away at the database, adding subscribers, booking software orders, doing accounting, etc.

I had designed and programmed our applications so when we did a subscriber closing, I could activate 10–12 computers to do things like sorting the subscriber zipcode index and print labels. The final label printing was a 32-way merge of separate indexed files to produce the labels in zipcode sequence.

I was really proud of that system. We also did all our software orders through a multi-terminal order processing system that I designed, and we were typically processing 5–8,000 orders per month. So it was a very robust system.

Roughan: What were your thoughts on the Apple IIGS when it was released?

Harvey: We were ecstatic when the IIGS was announced because we hoped it was a new lease on life for the Apple II. John Sculley was running Apple at the time, and he disavowed Apple's classic education and home markets in favor of the business market. We gave the IIGS good coverage in the magazine but by then, the PC was making dramatic inroads into Apple's markets and the IIGS never had a chance to get critical mass market momentum.

Roughan: How did *Nibble* compare to other magazines of the era?

Harvey: At our peak, we were the #2 Apple magazine in the market by circulation. But in the late 80's the mega-publishers had entered the market and were hurting us badly on advertising sales. Our big competitors were *InCider* (IDG) and *A+* (Ziff-Davis). Both of them had tried to acquire *Nibble* a year or two earlier but I declined because I was having too much fun running the company.

Roughan: How did you try to understand what

content your readers were seeking? Where these attempts successful?

Harvey: We made strong and repeated efforts to listen to our readers and ask them what they wanted. We ran a reader survey every six months or so, and usually had an outstanding response. I think it's a strong testament to our success that we were the last surviving independent Apple magazine in the business, and we were the longest-running magazine during the 12½ years that we published the magazine.

Roughan: Looking back is there something that you could have done differently that may have changed the way things turned out?

Harvey: In hindsight, I have no regrets. I've sometimes thought I could have aligned myself with a big publisher and metamorphosed into a different form and content and extended the life of *Nibble*. Closing *Nibble* was very much like the death of a family member.

But changing *Nibble* purely to survive wouldn't have been the same, and my professional and personal life since *Nibble* has been tremendously rewarding.

Roughan: *Nibble* has published programs written by industry luminaries including John Romero (who went on to work for Softdisk, then ID Software to create *Doom* and *Quake*) and William (Bill) Tudor (prolific programmer of Apple IIGS programs). How do you feel knowing that you've contributed to thousands of people learning about a machine and how to program?

Harvey: I'm deeply touched by having had the opportunity to be at the leading edge of the industry and by working with the people you mentioned and many more like them. The thing that has been astounding to me is the residual effect that *Nibble* has had on so many people after so long a time. About once a month, I'll receive an email from a former subscriber or author who says *his* life and profession were influenced strongly by the *Nibble* experience. To me, that's incredible and profoundly gratifying.

Roughan: *Nibble* existed during the transition of the computer from a device that users wanted to know how to program, to a device that ran software that was just used without the necessity to understand. Could you see that happening at the time?

Harvey: Yes, I could see that happening on a broad scale, but I could see a sub-market of enthusiasts who just enjoyed the heck out of creating new programs and

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making the Apple do neat things. I hoped it would develop into a niche market that would enable *Nibble* to keep going, but it didn't.

Roughan: Earlier this year, you completed scanning of the entire *Nibble* magazine collection. Before Bill Martens approached you to scan the magazines, did you think that there would still be an audience for *Nibble*?

Harvey: When I started the project of scanning all 16,000+ pages of the books and magazines to CD/DVD it was primarily to build an archive that I could pass on to my two sons. I had no concept that anybody else would be interested.

When Bill initially approached me, I was ecstatic about the project. However, as Bill got into it, he discovered what I learned later, that it was a massive undertaking. It took me nearly eight months of working several hours a day to get it done. I thought there might be a few interested people, and at the very least I wanted to provide an archival library to some of the folks who helped build and grow *Nibble*. These are people like David Szetela, who was our first editor;

David Krathwohl who succeeded David Szetela when he went to Apple; Kevin Rushalko and Sally Abu-Moustafa who were successive advertising managers; and a number of others. I really wanted an archival library to pass on to my two sons so they'd be able to tell their grandchildren what their dad did "way back when."

Roughan: What response have you had to the collection and did you expect it?

Harvey: The response to the *Nibble* collection has been phenomenal. I wouldn't call it a commercial success, but it wasn't intended to be.

What has been amazing to me is the discovery that there is still a community of active enthusiasts. The response to the *Nibble* website has made me aware of the lively interest that still exists in the Apple II. It's awesome in the truest sense of the word.

Launching the *Nibble* CD/DVD products has opened many new (and old) relationships. I'm continually touched by emails from former subscribers and authors. It really is nice to be remembered.

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