

PC Update Online!

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PC Alien

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For those of you who think *PC Alien* is a shoot-em-up computer game, please skip this review. This program was named before computer games took over the world.

Many years ago when I bought my first PC, i.e. IBM XT clone, I needed to bring forward most of my work in documents, databases and programs from my CP/M based Microbee twin-floppy computer. I was fortunate in having software that was transportable from one operating system to the other, but needed to physically transfer the data from 386 KB diskettes in CP/M format to DOS format - on a hard disk!

I came across an advertisement from a Canberra-based software company called FBN Software that had a program called PC Alien. The program was claimed to be able to convert diskettes from several formats to the new DOS format. (Prior to the advent of the IBM PC and the standardised DOS format, each CP/M vendor had its own diskette format). FBN Software had a local (Melbourne) distributor, operating from a private suburban address, from whom I bought a copy of the software. After I paid my money, he told me that FBN was not the initials of the proprietor, but stood for Fly By Night.

Full of confidence, I proceeded home to test run the software. I loaded PC Alien onto my XT, called up menu item number 54 - Microbee DS, put the Microbee disk into the XT floppy drive, pressed D (for Dir) and, lo and behold, up came a directory of my CP/M diskette. I then copied a file onto the XT, quit from PC Alien, and successfully listed and printed the first of many databases, documents and programs.

The program worked like a charm first time and I subsequently used PC Alien many times to convert my files and customer files during the phasing out of the CP/M era.

That version of PC Alien, V1.0G, comprised a 41 KB .COM file that could read 114 different CP/M formats.

Well, I thought the phasing out of the CP/M era had ended some time ago, but last year I had a call from a colleague who had been approached by a business person with a CP/M computer that needed to upgrade to a DOS machine.

I made contact with the business person, Anthony, to find that he had been operating a Sharp MZ-5600 dual floppy computer. He was using a DBMS by the name of Condor and had been keeping his business records on a "distributed" database, meaning, in this case, that the data was distributed over eight separate floppy diskettes. Anthony realised that his computer was running out of capacity and functionality, and he needed to upgrade to a DOS-based hard disk computer. He did not want to set up a new database and have to rekey in data for several thousand records, and he had been unable to find anyone who could transfer the data from his existing machine.

There were two challenges here: first, to physically get the data off the CP/M machine; second, to logically rearrange the data from the Condor format into something portable, like an ASCII Comma Separated Variable (CSV) file that could then be imported to any of the newer breed of PC DBMS, e.g. dBASE, Paradox, FoxPro, MS Access etc.

On further examining the situation, I found that the Condor DBMS occupied the best part of a full floppy diskette that used one disk drive, while the other drive was deployed with any one of the eight data disks, each of which was more than half full. The DBMS could only unload all records in a database table, not part thereof. This meant that, although the DBMS provided for an ASCII dump of the database to be taken, there was physically no room on any diskette for an unload of any part of the database.

Eager for a challenge, I figured I would attack the physical aspect first. If I could transfer the data from the CP/M machine, I could at least then look at it on my DOS/Windows environment and plan the next step from there. Because of its age and lack of availability of peripherals and software for the Sharp computer, options such as attaching a hard disk drive or sending data to a PC via communications software were soon ruled out.

Looking at my old PC Alien software, I could not see a menu item for the Sharp MZ-5600 format. My call to FBN Software was answered by Helen Hammond who confidently asked me to "send up the diskette, and we will have a look at it". A few days later, and for an extremely modest upgrade fee, came a new version of the software that converted the MZ-5600 disk without any problems at all.

Ten years after my first purchase of PC Alien, I had received first class service from FBN Software. Fly By Night? Definitely not!

Step one of physical media conversion had been addressed; step two proved a little harder. I asked around my network of database colleagues for any information on the Condor DBMS, but to no avail. In hindsight, the Internet could have helped, but I wasn't there yet.

There was nothing else to do but examine the physical Condor table and deduce the layout with the help of a structure listing provided by Anthony. An old Pascal program was resurrected and revamped to reformat the table into a CSV file that was then imported into a somewhat more modern DBMS.

While step one, the physical transfer from Sharp to PC, was a breeze, the logical transfer of the database was not without its problems. What happens when you have a "distributed" database across several floppy diskettes is that some layouts end up being different to others. I ended up with four versions of the conversion program - luckily it was not eight. Fortunately, at the outset, I had mapped old and new table layouts on a spreadsheet, and was able to modify and control future operations from there.

Anthony chose to bite the bullet and go for Windows and MS Office, with MS Access managing his database. He also fulfilled his requirement for mail merge facilities and now regularly follows up his clients via professionally presented mailouts.

Thanks to FBN Software and PC Alien, I was able to help a client into the current decade.

The new version of PC Alien comes in two flavours: a 52 KB program that reads 500 different CP/M formats, and a 41 KB program that reads 97 DOS formats. Some of the formats even need 8-inch floppy disk drives, something I haven't had to worry about. The following selection of computers that can have their old diskettes read by PC Alien reads like a blast from the past: Amstrad, Bondwell, Cromemco, Epson, IBM, Kaypro, Microbee, NEC, Osborne, Sharp, Superbrain, Tandy, Zenith. So, if you have any old micro-computers lurking out there, you now know how to move the data on to a more modern PC platform.

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