



Good morning.

Click on the door to
sign in...



EXIT



Microsoft Bob at FOSDEM 2026?!

☐ Explain this to me

☐ Proceed

HP van Braam
Godot Foundation
Prehensile Tales B.V.
Likes old computers

Try one!

- ☐ Add your own text
- ☐ Add a picture
- ☐ Change a picture, text, or something else
- ☐ See close-up of one side of card, or whole card
- ☐ Print card
- ☐ Other options



Front



Left



Right



Back



All



EXIT

Questions such as

- What?!
- Why?!
- How?!
- Follow me down the rabbit hole



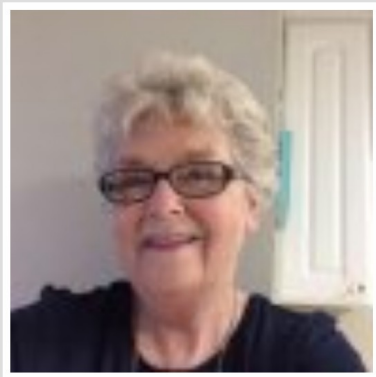
What this talk is about

- Nerding out over Old Computer Stuff
- What, if anything, can we learn from this



How did we get here

2010/12/27



larsonjean

Well-Known Member

Thread Starter

Hello,

I have a friend here who still uses his old computer running Windows 95. He said that the only thing he uses it for is to write his letters using, "Microsoft Bob (Letter Writer).

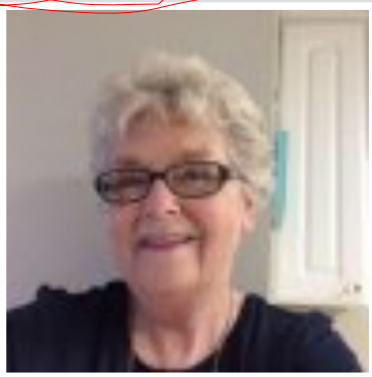
Today his computer would not boot so I went over and someone managed to get it up and running but when I opened this Microsoft



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More questions than answers

- What is Microsoft Bob
- What is Bob Letter Writer



What is Microsoft Bob

Microsoft Bob was a [Microsoft software](#) product intended to provide a more user-friendly interface for the [Windows 3.1](#), [Windows 95](#) and [Windows NT](#) operating systems, supplanting the Windows [Program Manager](#). The program was released on March 10, 1995, and discontinued in early 1996. Microsoft Bob presented screens showing a house, with rooms that the user could visit containing familiar objects corresponding to computer applications, such as a desk with pen and paper and a checkbook. Clicking on the pen and paper would open the system's [word processor](#). A cartoon dog named Rover and other cartoon characters provided guidance using [speech balloons](#).

Microsoft Bob



Developer

Microsoft

Initial release

March 10, 1995; 30 years ago^[1]

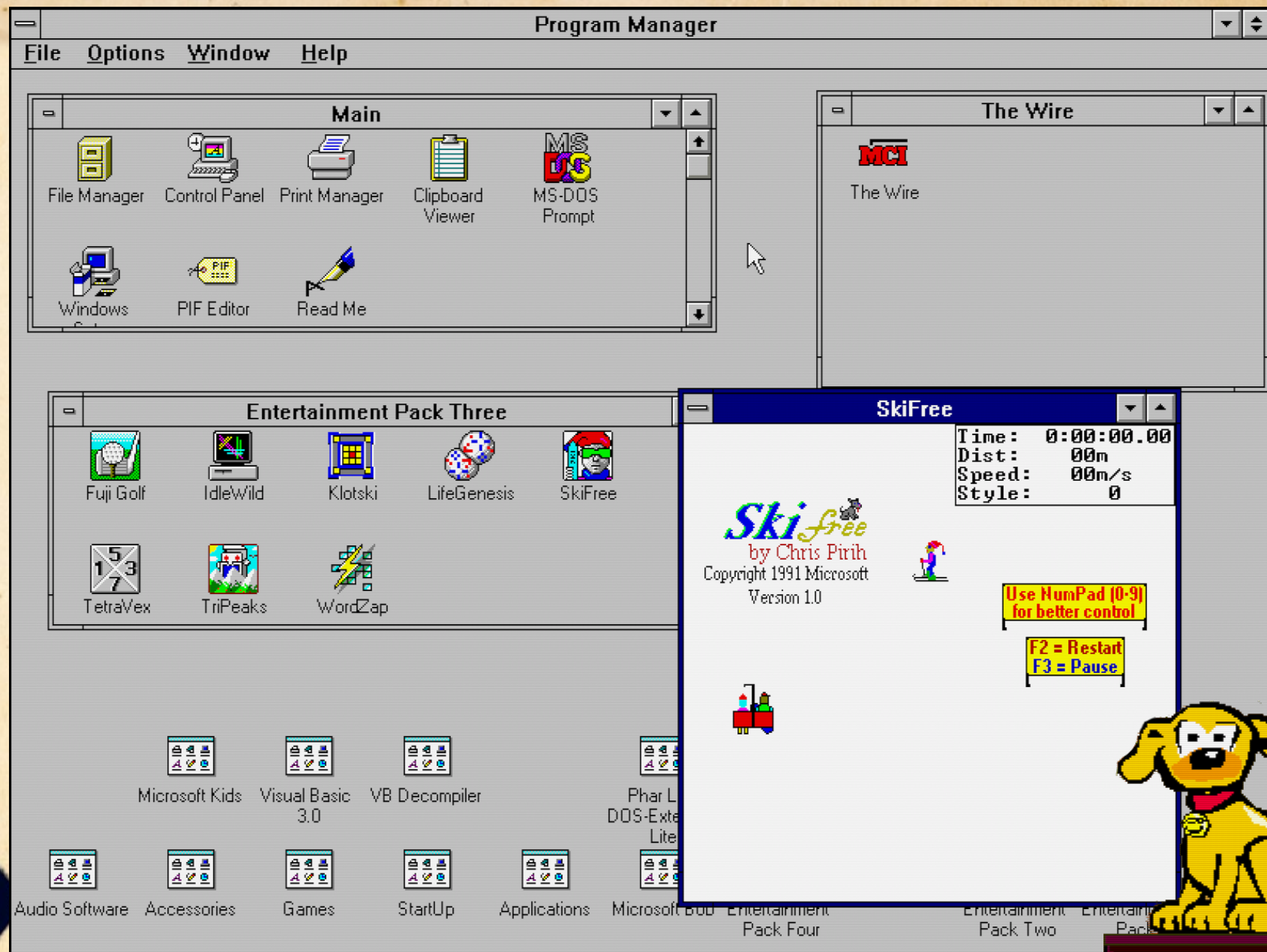
Final release

1.00a /
August 30, 1995^[1]



EXIT

What is program manager



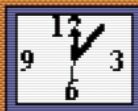
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Jan 31



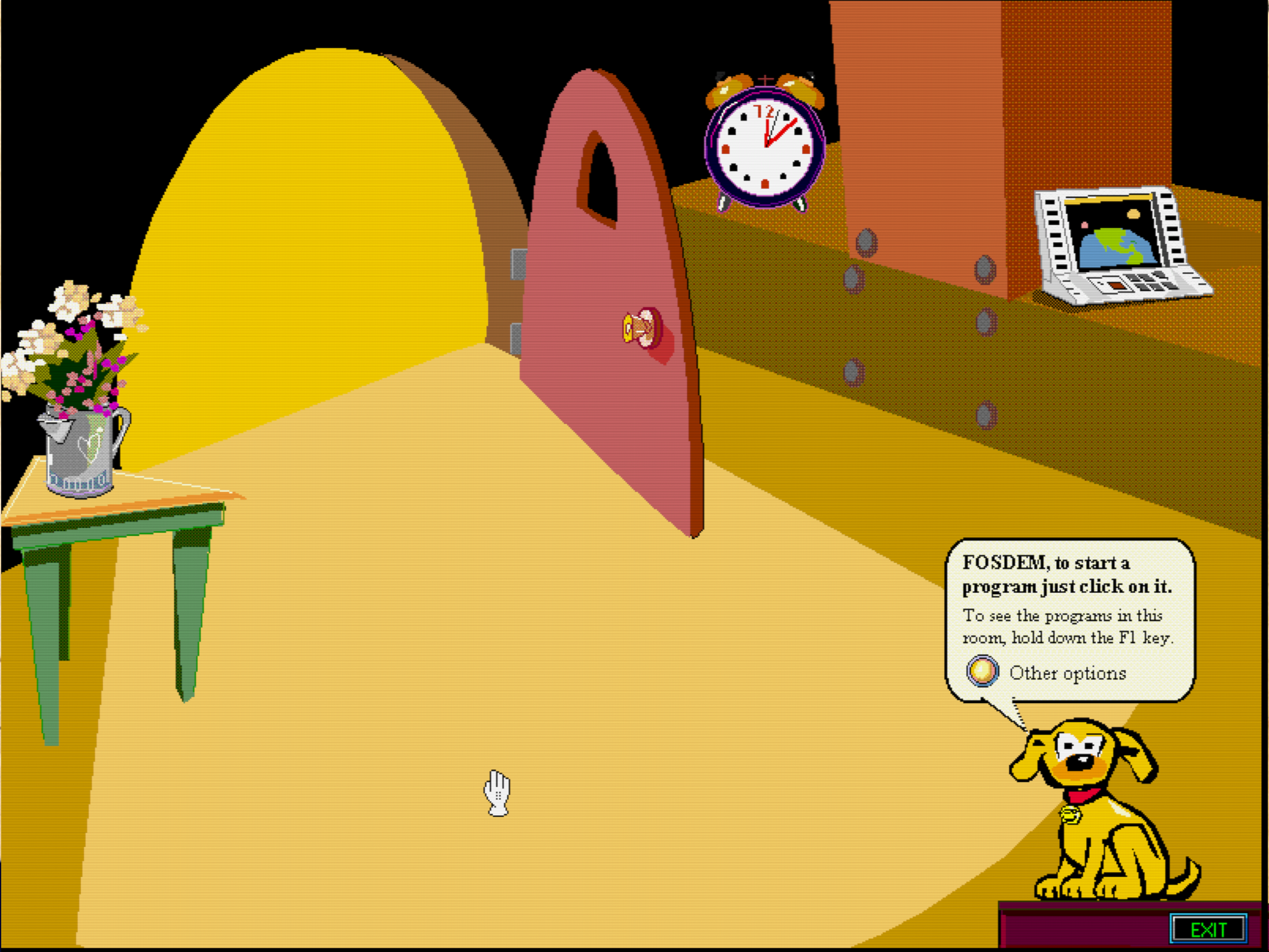
FOSDEM, to start a
program just click on it.

To see the programs in this
room, hold down the F1 key.



Other options

EXIT



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EXIT

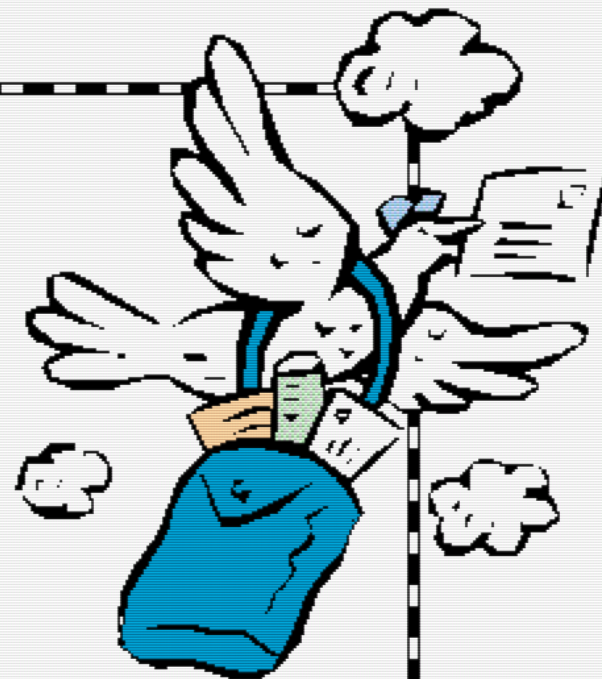


FOSDEM, to start a program just click on it.

To see the programs in this room, hold down the F1 key.

 Other options

This is Bob letter writer



Tell me what we should do, Bob!

Gill Sans Ultra...

41



Zoom out to
see whole page



Navigate within
your letter



Add an
object



Change
the border



Undo



Print or send



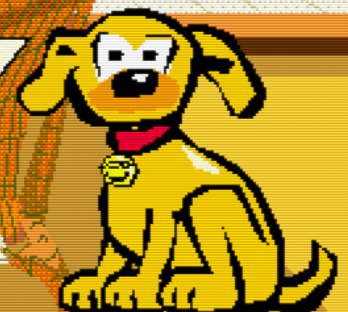
Change text or
check spelling



Change
an object



Other
options



EXIT

We're not here to poke fun

- It does kind of do all the hard work for us



EXIT

We're not here to poke fun

- It does kind of do all the hard work for us
- But there is a sort of irresistible earnestness to it



Good Things – Scaleable graphics



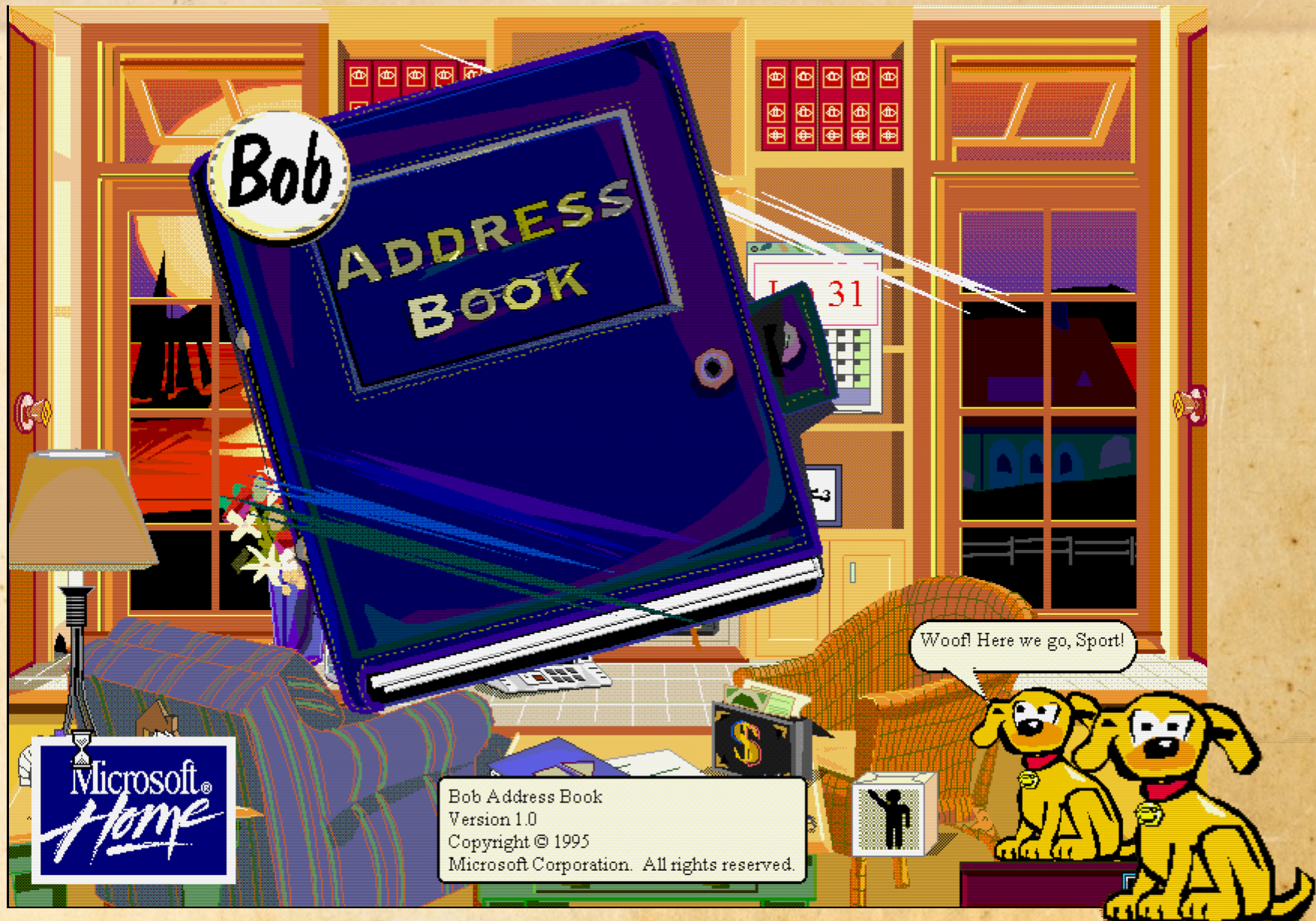
Good Things – Scaleable graphics



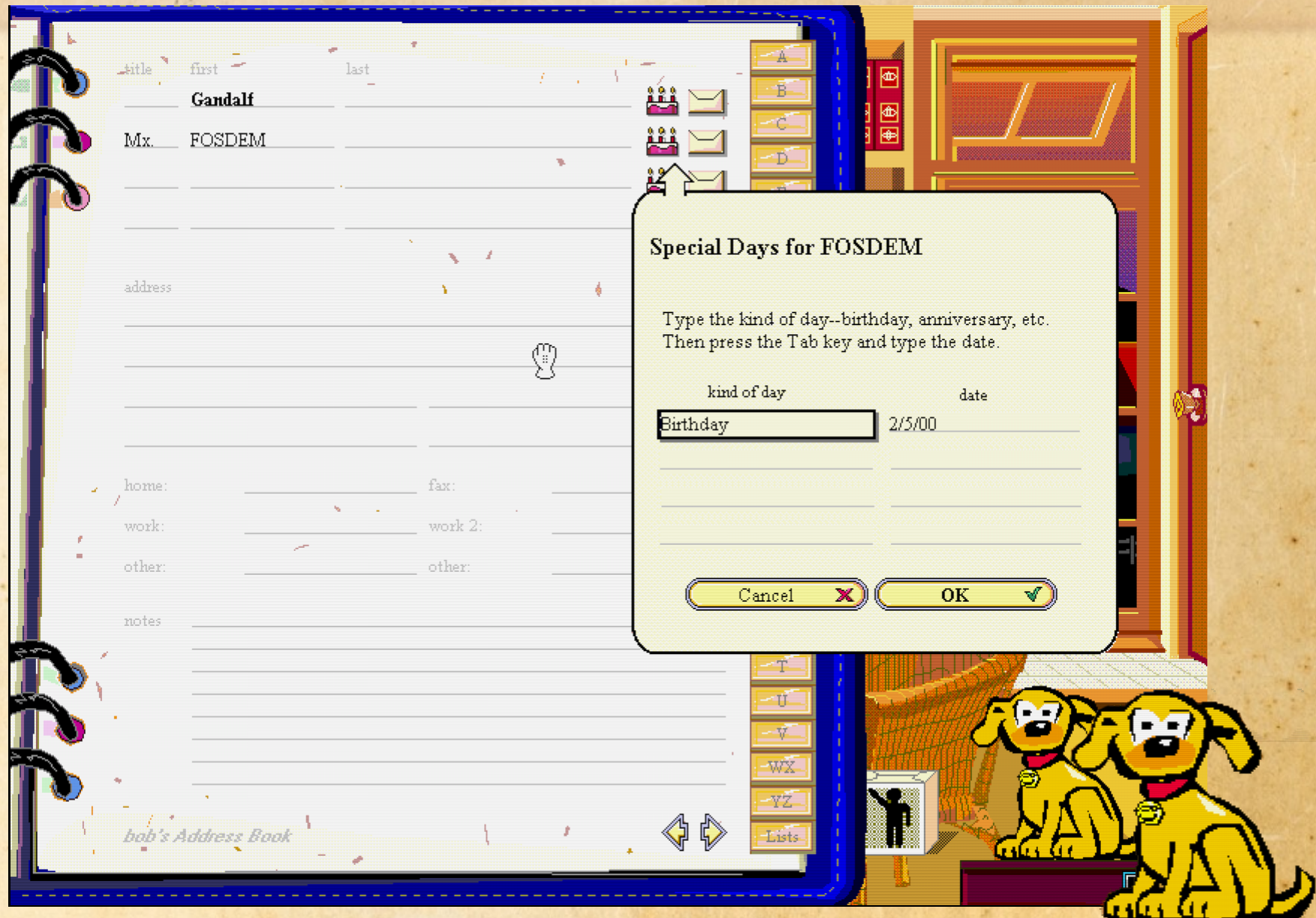
Good Things – Scaleable graphics



Good Things – Integration



Good Things – Integration



Good Things – Integration

February

bob's Calendar 2026

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3				
8	9	10				
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

9:00 AM Event from Bob Address Book
Hey! Camper! Type a description of the event here.
Birthday Mx. FOSDEM

Recurs once a year

Remind you?
Do you want me to remind you of this event?

☐ No
☐ Yes, on time
☐ 15 min. before
☐ 1 hr. before
☐ 1 day before
☐ 2 days before
☒ 1 week before

Special options
A-OK ✓

Day Week Month To Do

EXIT

Good Things – Integration



Good Things – Super woke



Good Things – Secure?



Good Things – A bit of fun



Good Things – A bit of fun



Bad things – NO UNDO!



Bad Things – WTF is this



EXIT

Bad Things – WTF is this



EXIT

Bad Things – WTF is this



Bad Things – WTF is this

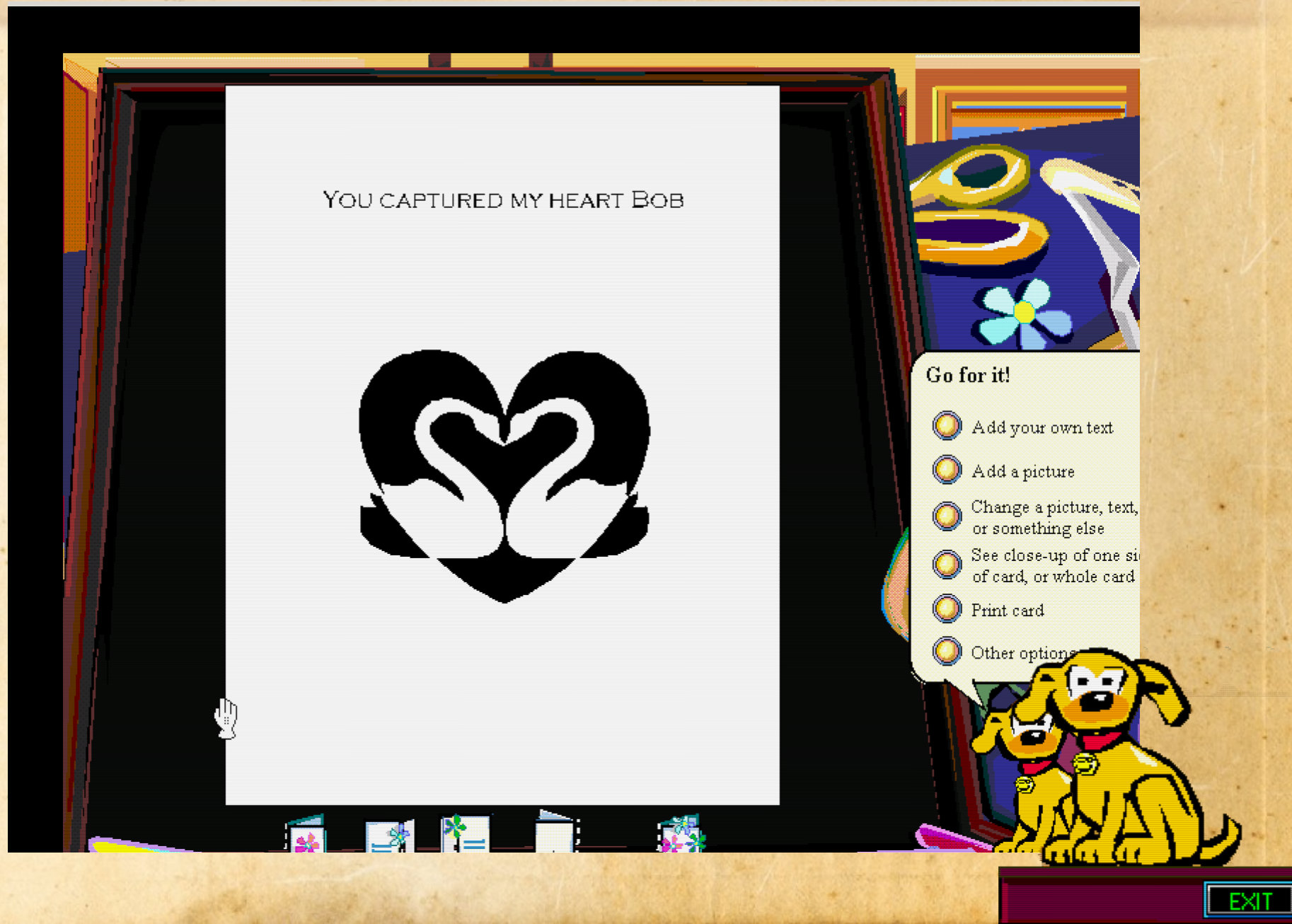


EXIT

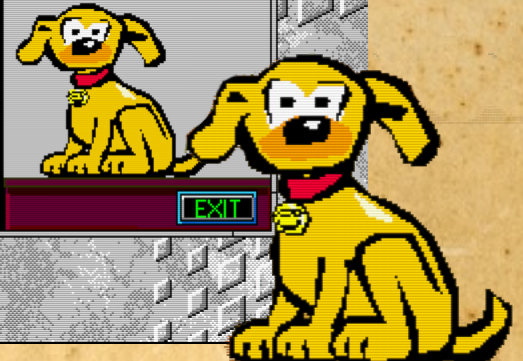
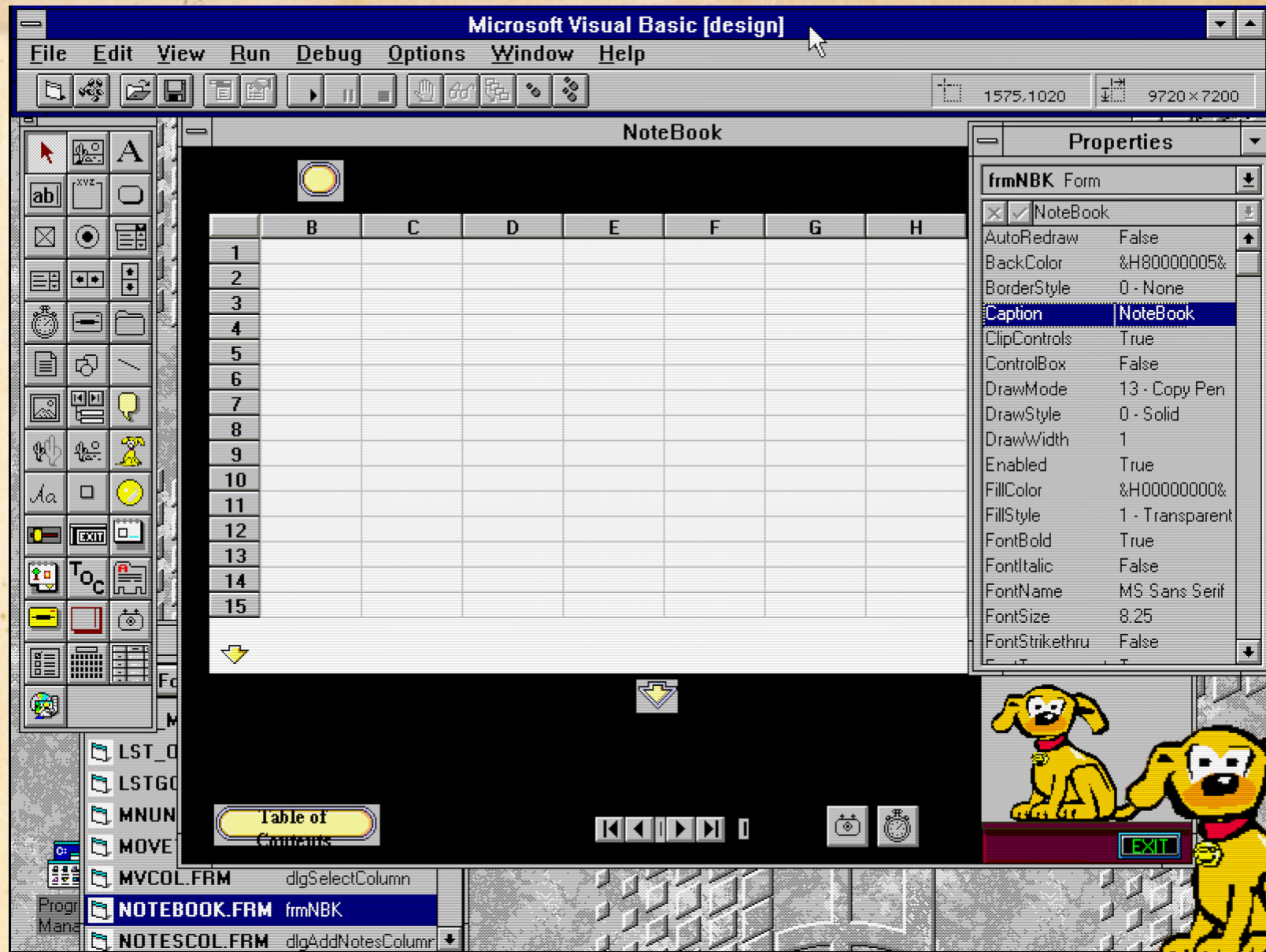
Bad Things – “blue” screens



I can't help but love it



Software development



EXIT

Software development

- Almost all applications are made with Visual Basic 3
- Except for the calendar, and checkbook applications



Software development

- Almost all applications are made with Visual Basic 3
- Except for the calendar, and checkbook applications
- Yeah, that includes the whole word processor!



Anatomy – podium



Anatomy – guide



Anatomy – That's all, really



Software development

- In the background Bob uses state of the art features!
- All databases are in MS JET format (Access!)
- Services are exposed via COM (address book, calendar, etc)
- Shared components via VBX
- The mail store is PST
- The mail client interface is MAPI



Software development

- Some real effort was put into making Bob a solid technological foundation
- But very firmly stuck in 16bit windows land



Questionable choices

- While it looks like each app “runs in the room”
 - In actual fact they are all full-screen apps
- The podium manages the guide
 - But they are distinct objects
- Lot of boilerplate stuff as was the fashion of the time
 - People really loved their code generators back then



Software development - C++

- C++ apps are possible
- The podium and guide are VBX controls
- C++ apps MUST be MFC because of this
- Everything is COM



Software development - C++

```
m_pPodiumCtrl = new CVBControl();
// Create the podium control
if (m_pPodiumCtrl == NULL) {
    OutputDebugString("new CVBControl failed!\n");
    return -1;
}

OutputDebugString("Created CVBControl\n");

if (!m_pPodiumCtrl->Create("UTOPIA.DLL;Podium;Exit",
    WS_VISIBLE | WS_CHILD | WS_TABSTOP | BS_OWNERDRAW,
    rectPodium,
    this,
    101,
    NULL,
    TRUE))
{
    OutputDebugString("m_pPodiumCtrl->Create failed!\n");
    delete m_pPodiumCtrl;
    m_pPodiumCtrl = NULL;
    return -1;
}

OutputDebugString("Created Podium\n");

// Make sure the podium is visible and behind the actor
m_pPodiumCtrl->ShowWindow(SW_SHOW);
```



Software development - C++

```
BOOL CTheApp::InitInstance() {
    EnableVBX();
    HRESULT hr = UtopiaInitialize(&gpTask);
    UERR err;
    if (hr) {
        err = UWarnFromResult(hr);
        GetDfltStringForUErr(err, error, 255);
        MessageBox(NULL, error, "Error", MB_OK | MB_ICONSTOP);
        UtopiaUninitialize();
        OutputDebugString("UtopiaInitialize() failed\n");
        return FALSE;
    }
    gUtopiaInitialized = TRUE;
    OpenPictureServer(&pPicServer);
    CreateImageFromFile("FOUNTAIN.WMF", 0, 800, 600, &img);
    UShowStartupScreen("Bob Hello World", "TMM.CX INTERNET WID
    img->Release();

    ghcurHot = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_UPARROW);
    ghcurNormal = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_ARROW);
    ghcurKnock = LoadUtopiaCursor(IDC_KNOCK);
    gdxScreen = GetSystemMetrics(SM_CXSCREEN);
    gdyScreen = GetSystemMetrics(SM_CYSCREEN);

    if (!GetSystem(&gpSystem)) {
        OutputDebugString("GetSystem() failed\n");
        return FALSE;
    }
}
```



Figuring it out

- Originally Ghidra on checkbook.exe
- After working on this for a couple of months someone leaked the real SDK!
- Still a lot of missing pieces...
- First demo “hello world” is a combination of guesswork based on Ghidra, VB decompilation, and guesswork based on headers.



Very quick demo

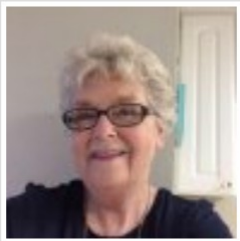
- Very quick because the app does almost nothing :)



EXIT

Getting back to Jean

2010/12/30



larsonjean

Well-Known Member

Thread Starter

Hi everyone,

I did find a computer that was running Works and I opened Works, then opened one of the files from the floppy drive A and it did indeed open the document. There was some garbage in the beginning but all the text seemed to be in place.

I left all the floppy disks with my friend and told him that he will have to open each document one at a time to see if he still needs the file. I didn't offer to do this for him as he had hundreds of numbered files on those floppy disks dating back to the year 2000.

It is terrible that Microsoft Bob made the person give the file a name when they wanted to save a letter but the program just saved it as a number.



EXIT

One more quick detour



One more quick detour

Rrruff! Which letter shall I open or delete for you?

Change of Address

☐ This is not a... 1/31/126 2:50p

☒ Open a letter stored on a floppy disk

☒ Open a letter not created with the Letter Writer

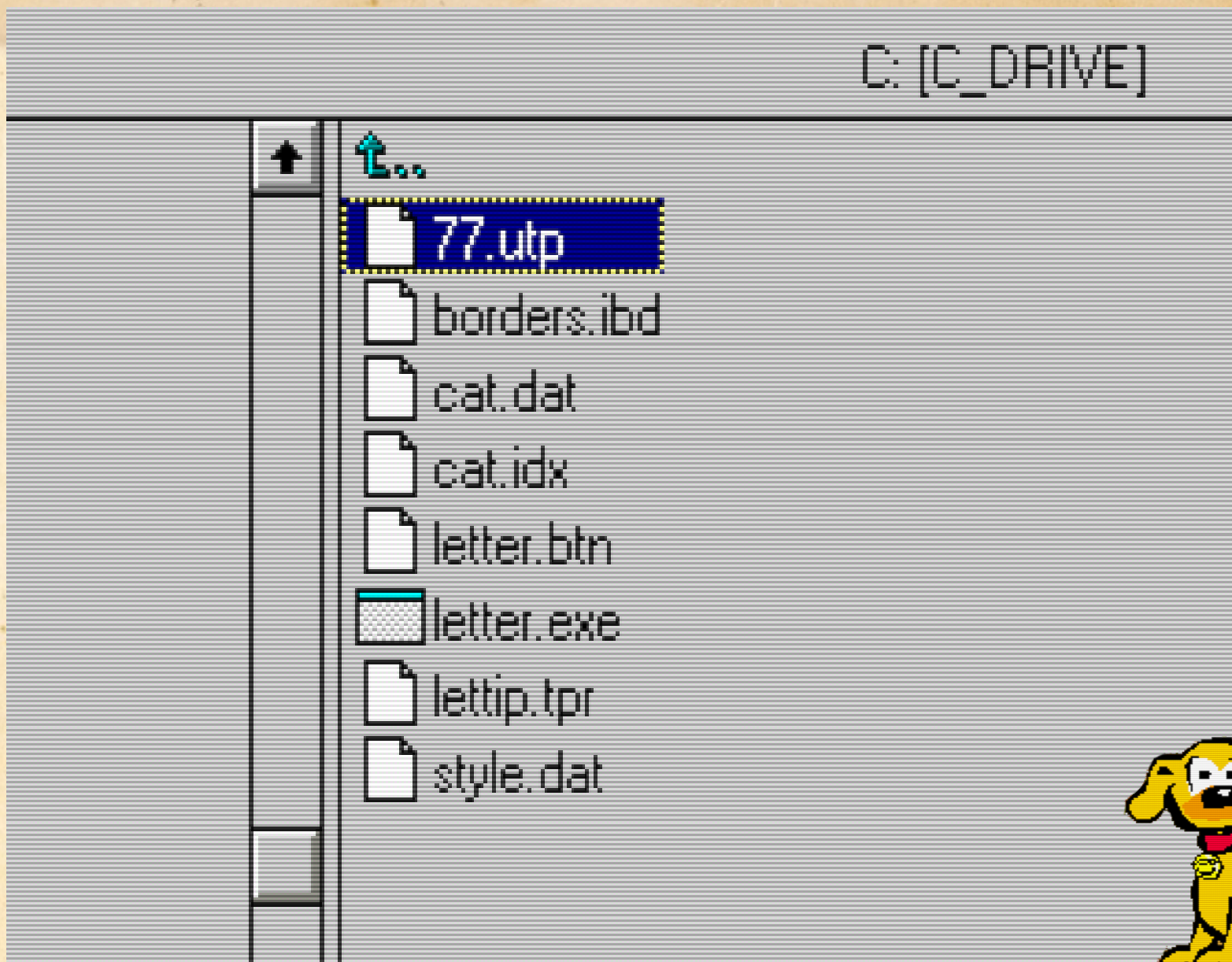
Tip: When you want to create a new version of a letter without changing the original, open a copy.

☒ Show letters alphabetically
☐ Show letters by date

Cancel X OK ✓



One more quick detour



EXIT

One more quick detour

- Bob stores the “Bob filenames” in a database
- The user never sees the real files



Jean was not able to figure it out

- Would you be able to figure out where the metadata of your friends and families is?
- I believe that Bob was not designed to be “captive” in the way that modern software is.
- Yet even accidentally it managed to be.
- Modern SAAS seems to do this on purpose.
- Preaching to the choir; Open data formats for (meta) data matter to regular people too!



Thank you – and Questions

- Want to play with Bob?
 - <https://bob.estate>
- Want to see more of my retro nonsense?
 - https://patreon.com/Retro_Rabbit_Hole
- Want to hire me for to do tech stuff?
 - <https://prehensile-tales.com>
- Want to learn more about MCI/Bob Mail stuff?
 - Watch my talk tomorrow at 14:00 in H.1302 (Depage)
- Follow me on Mastodon!
 - [@hp@tmm.cx](https://tmm.cx/@hp)

