

OldSchool

by Todd Maupin

According to calculations, the town of Babbage had a population of about 5,000 people. Some would have numerated the residents as souls, rather than people, but neither I nor the census can make that distinction. Rather than dwell on spirituality or analyze spiritual nuances, let's just say 5,000 people and a corresponding number of souls, more or less.

Babbage was not a planned community. It was not carved out of a swamp like Washington, D.C., carefully and thoughtfully designed like Seaside, Florida, or created to vex visitors and residents alike as was Columbia, Maryland, the most poorly planned community of all time. Babbage had just initiated as a single idea, then proceeded to adapt, evolve and grow over time.

The eponymous founder of Babbage is not important to this story. Largely forgotten, he had been relegated to a footnote in history or a piece of trivia, like Yuri Gagarin, or the woman who invented that thing.

The town of Babbage had existed much like any other small town throughout the 20th century. There had been old stop signs, new stop signs, upgraded traffic signals, new businesses, failed businesses, public works projects, new infrastructure, periods of population growth and stretches of population decline. There were shifts in political favor, eras of satisfaction, years of disappointment, moments of trepidation, and lulls of ennui. In general, the residents of Babbage trudged forward according to the status quo.

In the very early 1980s, however, things started to change in Babbage. This was when someone had the idea to construct the gated community of Dos. Dos was named for one of Babbage's

landmark educational figures. Ms. Dos used to operate the one room school house.

Ms. Dos' learning facility had been very plain but efficient. She was known to be commanding and terse. The schoolhouse was very drab and monotone but provided a solid baseline for the students later in life. There were no grey areas for Ms. Dos. It was all binary, either a student was right or a student was wrong. A student could not be mostly or almost correct and expect a positive response from Ms. Dos. She required exacting precision. Students were graded with a 1, if they were satisfactory, or a 0, if they were not.

The community of Dos came to be with that same inspiration. It was all rather bland but efficient. Gates at the main entrance invited everyone to enter. The houses were built according to code and the streets followed a set grid. Some complained that the community lacked any character, but they were wrong. Dos left it up to its inhabitants, prompting them to supply the characters necessary for their lives and into their homes. After a matter of months, it was evident that the community was coming into its own just as envisioned. A cursory glance, a blink of an eye, Dos was functioning according to the program.

Dos began to create its own distinction. Babbage had a mayor, a town council and municipal offices that also served Dos, as an entity within the town. The residents wanted a line of command more unique to Dos and thus was established a unit known as the directory. Each Dos resident was assigned a file to serve them more efficiently. The directory had access to the file system and it all functioned in an orderly manner. Residents only had to call up the command line and navigate the directory to satisfy their unique needs.

And this worked for a time, and the people of Dos were content. The overarching complaint by residents was the lack of commercial

infrastructure within Dos. As the community grew to 286 homes, then 386 homes, it was still necessary for them to drive to other parts of Babbage to pay bills, buy food, or seek out entertainment. The residents of Dos filed a rezoning ordinance and it was successful.

The first commercial establishment to open was an ice cream shop. Initially, it was a rather simple design with limited choices. Eventually, the operators added other flavors on the menu and updated the logo. They even assigned images to the text on the menu, but the product was the same gooey goodness as ever. They may as well have offered only a trio of flavors because people rarely strayed from those. Occasionally, there was an outlier. In any case, gallon or pint, the owners decided that advertising 3.1 Flavors on the shop's windows felt limiting.

Meanwhile in Dos, but really all over Dos, the mice arrived. This was not so much a manifestation as it was a curiosity. The occupants of each home discovered a mouse living with them. At first, they did not know how to react to this new development. The mice seemed so innocuous and not at all threatening. They fit into the palm of one's hand and could be easily guided with minimal coaxing. No one had a pointed reaction towards them. It was just a screening process: the inhabitants of Dos just came to accept the mice in their lives and homes. Some even offered a little padding for the mice, a little mat for the mice to rest upon more comfortably. For Dos, the mice were not pets. This was a symbiotic relationship and something about it just clicked.

And life continued in Dos. Not much changed for a while, but the community continued to prosper. People savored their free time and enjoyed the opportunities for them at home or in the office. Some were budding authors and always had some piece of writing in the works, others excelled at categorizing information, some focused on managing records so that all in the community could access the

desired services. More leisurely were those who painted, played solitaire, or other games as they became available.

A German immigrant who moved to Dos opened up a vacuum cleaner repair business. He called it "Meinsweeper," but the limited customer base led to failure. When it blew up in his face, he closed shop and moved back to Germany. Who he may have met on his way to Bremen, no one ever knew. His vacant shop was reopened as an arcade and renamed "Minesweeper." It became popular briefly.

The years continued to accumulate in Dos. People in the community became ever more involved in the infrastructure and design of new projects. A new development in 1995 made a splash and met with some fanfare. Then again, in 1998, was another great leap forward. Everyone agreed that the inner workings of Dos were much more intuitive and welcoming to those who joined the continually growing community.

Not all was overwhelmingly successful for Dos. Some of the more serious inhabitants favored a new work station that was built for more complicated projects. This construction was called NT. It was essentially a stable that someone had built for people to go and tinker and network with likeminded others. And it was as stable as it was intimidating, and as stubborn as stabled animals can be. The masses essentially shunned this part of Dos until it was absorbed into a new public works project in the year 2000.

The first 2000 project was envisioned for the new millennium and it became a colossal failure. In the community, the millennium project was met with universal disgust and disappointment. Between you and me, the millennium venture was clunky, poorly managed and something to be forgotten. "Y tu, que?" someone asked in Spanish. Much better was the second 2000 project which streamlined the rigorous NT framework and made it more inviting. At the grand

opening, residents enjoyed the complimentary bells and whistles that were part of the new format.

Several months later, there was follow-up project that was very nearly was a parking garage. Instead of a giant P and an unassuming garage, the residents of the community opted for open space and the blissful view of a rolling green hill. Even on a slightly cloudy day, the grassy meadow was accentuated by a blue sky. The community looked fondly to this new development and took to calling it the ex-parking garage, or XP for short. Life was good. The 2000 project and XP had installed in the community all that its inhabitants wanted and needed.

The possibilities were endless. The cloudy blue sky was the limit. Where do you want to go today?

Office buildings that had sprung up in the mid-90s continued to offer advancements every few years. Your potential. Our passion. This was the community motto that everyone was embarrassed to say out loud. There were occasional complaints that the newer amenities were not compatible to the old used by those reluctant to change. Usually a workaround could be reached, and there was a way forward. These bumps in the road were overcome or the potholes patched ahead of the next revitalizing repaving of the road forward.

To provide transportation around the community, there was also a shuttle service in Dos. The fleet of chartered passenger vans came with drivers. The vans were reliable and in fine condition. The hardware on the vans tended to be augmented arbitrarily and when this happened, inexplicably the drivers had to be replaced as well. Sometimes, the drivers just disappeared and had to be updated. The community maintained a database of drivers to fulfill this need, but often, the search required an inquiry to the manufacturer of the vans' hardware.

As the years passed, people in the community started to forget why it had ever been named Dos. After another revamping of the infrastructure, some people wanted to call it Vista, but this campaign quickly lost steam. Someone sarcastically suggested that if they change the name of the community now, they may as well change it year after year. The community was always growing. As more houses were built, new streets were needed. To the existing numbers were added a 7, 8, and a 10. Why not a 9? No one knows. Be what's next.

Dos was only one part of Babbage. Another neighborhood was becoming more of a factor on the other side of town. "The Orchard" was what everyone called it. The neighborhood for the rest of us. Originally, few people lived there and initially the few houses built were black and white, or occasionally an obnoxious green. It started mainly as a sanctuary for artists. People used to go there to draw, paint or concentrate on improving their photography. The power to be your best. Gradually, it became more of a music venue, and The Orchard became the place to go for music.

As the neighborhood became less artistic and more corporately mainstream, things started to change. Think different. The Orchard's existing residents were not left to their own devices. Jobs became ever more prominent as everyone wanted to become involved in what The Orchard had to offer. I's popped up everywhere: On every street corner, a giant I on a post promised instant access to a provided information box. These were so popular that portable I's were sold and residents became inseparable from these. Switch.

The residents of Dos were equal parts nervous and curious about the rise of The Orchard. Each community had a little league team. Long dominant, the team from Dos started to lose to the team from The Orchard. The names of the teams are not important but, in the case of The Orchard, there was an I in the team's name. It was the worst

kept secret that the leaders of Dos had been emulating operations in The Orchard for years, simplifying its systematic approach to frustrating effect for those who appreciated the old ways.

The hierarchy of desirable neighborhoods in Babbage had changed. Dos started to look a little cumbersome by comparison to The Orchard. There were rumblings that Dos should just succumb rather than hinder The Orchard's growth. Some felt that Dos was better as a door than windows, and it was time for it to get out of the way. Those who wanted to relocate to The Orchard sought out moving trucks. "Get a Mack," someone suggested.

It was the dawning of a new era. The forecast for the future was mostly cloudy. People were searching for answers, and they finally came. The answers were more in the form of prompts or suggestions and not carved into stone tablets as they may once have been. However, there were tablets, and they did descend from the mountaintop in a certain sense. To be fair, it was more of a Mountain View, but the Alphabet was still the same. For better or worse.

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