It is the one of the fundamental properties of the universe that its entropy is increasing – in other words, it tends to become ever more disordered or chaotic. I sometimes wonder whether the same principle applies to computers, too.

Go back just over twenty years and we find computers like the Sinclair Spectrum and the BBC Micro – simple, chunky machines that plugged into a TV set. Load a program into them from a tape and off you go! Well, that was the theory at least. In practice you'd probably sit there gnashing your teeth for half an hour or so while you made repeated attempts to load the *$@&&***!! thing.

But that aside, my point is that they were simple. It wasn't rocket science to figure out how to use them or even how to program them.

A little later came along a new generation of machines, of which the best, in my humble opinion, was the Commodore Amiga. This was a more sophisticated beast, capable of multitasking several programs at once, which opened in their own windows (no capital initial, note!) on the screen. It had a reliable floppy disc drive, later versions had hard drives – and it still plugged into your telly! No separate monitor required.

It's doubtful that too many Amiga users ever learned to program the thing in BASIC or whatever, but file management was a doddle. Every file in the operating system had a clear purpose and a place where it was supposed to be. You wanted to install a new piece of software on it? Easy – just pop in the disc. If you had a hard drive, you could just copy the files to it. No mucking about with registries or installer programs.

And get this – you could switch it off. You could *switch it off*! I mean, with an 'off' switch. Or just by pulling the plug. Unbelievable, isn't it? No waiting for the operating system to shut down first. No having to go through Scandisk or Safe Mode when switching it on again after pulling the plug. And we took this for granted!

The Amiga is now long gone – victim, I've always felt, of its unjustified reputation as a 'games machine'. True, it *was* a great computer for games playing, but it also had a mean range of applications software available for it. Admittedly, there was nothing to match the power of today's *Word* and *Photoshop* – but those applications weren't around for PCs back then either, and I reckon if Amiga programs like *Wordworth* and the superb *Deluxe Paint* had continued to be developed, they could have rivalled anything available today. As could the Amiga platform itself, which was far superior to the versions of Windows we had then.

Maybe you think I'm nostalging through rose-coloured glasses, but look at what we have now. The 'WINNT' folder on my PC's hard drive, containing the system files for Windows, occupies over a gigabyte and includes 269 sub-folders in which are a whopping 8,434 separate files! For Murphy's sake! 8,434?? What do they all *do*? What are they all *for*? And look anywhere on a PC hard drive and you'll find the same picture. Hundreds ... thousands ... of anonymous files with meaningless names. And more appear all the time. Why? Where do they all come from? Are they even really necessary?

With old-time computers it was possible to teach children some *real* computing. Programming skills. How the operating system actually *worked*. It was easy, because even as the computers got more sophisticated, it was all still relatively simple. You could point to a file and say "This is what this is for..."

I don't know how the PC's operating system works. I don't know why you can't just switch it off. I don't know what the point is of making even the simplest of programs install into the registry. And I don't know what more than a handful of those 8,434 files are for. I probably never will. Furthermore, I wouldn't even contemplate trying to explain it all to a class full of kids.

But as an example of order tending towards chaos it can't be bettered!

■ **Alan Baker**

Chaos theory