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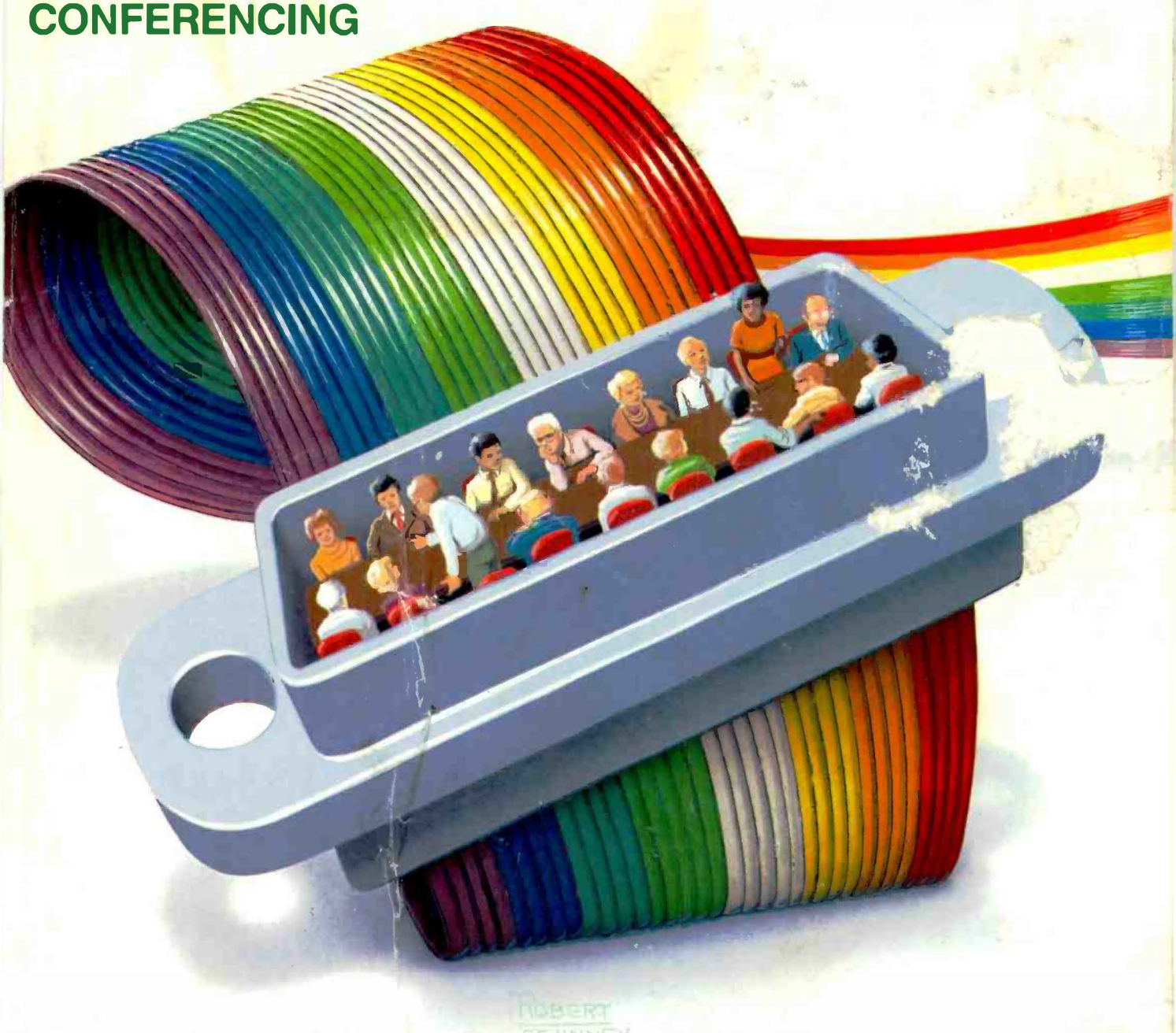

Excerpt from
An Overview of Conferencing Systems
Brock N. Meeks
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GENIE: Quill and Ink It Ain't

Stephen Heitmann, developer of the GENIE conferencing system, must have been a medieval monk in his past life past life. There is no other explanation for GENIE's highly flexible text processing capabilities. Only a monk who had spent his entire life hand lettering with quill and ink could have turned all his frustrations into fantasies by creating a computer conferencing system with the capabilities of GENIE, which must have taken hard work. late hours. and a natural creative ability. The first thing that hits you about GENIE is the many ways it handles text. Entering comments into a conference is handled in a standard way. You enter the comments into a scratchpad. and then the contents of your scratchpad are entered into the conference. That's where the standard procedure ends.

While participating in an on-line conference. you will sooner or later enter a message you wish you could take back, such as one written while you were mad or half asleep. Most conferencing systems allow you, as author, to delete a message if you choose. Revising the message might be preferable, but on most systems your options are to delete or suffer the consequences (usually an electronic mailbox stuffed with comments that don't exactly resemble fan mail). GENIE solves this all-or-nothing problem by letting you revise messages. You can even authorize "editing rights" to other members of the conference.

An example of this "many editors" function would be when issuing a general request for information. Instead of having everyone who replies to your message create separate entries in the conference, each person could append his or her information onto your first request. In the end. you have a single message that amounts to a minidatabase of responses.

GENIE allows the author of a message to place certain locks on the text. You can stop anyone from copying a note you wrote and placing it somewhere else in the system. This hinders the "leaking" or mass distribution of critical information. (Of course. if someone downloaded the message to disk. he could upload it anywhere he desired.)

Who uses GENIE? I don't know since its user base is proprietary. (I am sworn by a phosphor oath not to reveal the system I used to review GENIE.) I was told that the target market for GENIE is the scientific/engineering (read "research and development") community. That didn't make sense when I first heard it, but after using GENIE I see why. The science and engineering fields create an enormous amount of papers that need constant revision.

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NOTE: This was originally published in 1986 and is now being updated and re-written. As such many of the “date-sensitive" references may not be relevant now, however, many of the fundamental communications concepts are as relevant today as they were more than twenty years ago.

Genie

Genie (for GENeral Information Environment) was designed by Steve Heitman and is being marketed specifically for scientific and engineering applications by Data Dynamics, Inc., of Portland, Oregon; it is used by more than 300 users at a large Portland area electronics company. Referred to by Heitman as a "value added data base management system" that integrates text and data, the heart of the system is a relational data base in which users may read and write.

Genie incorporates the following functions: (1) communications, (2) word and graphics processing, (3) calendar and scheduling functions, and (3) a "personal information management" system. It has an on-line "help" system that may be tailored to a user's level of expertise. The full text of Genie files is searchable, and Data Dynamics also plans to add a bulletin board function with a controlled vocabulary that may be searched by keywords. Additionally, its communications software enables the routing of memos and questionnaire functions as well as electronic mail and teleconferencing. An administrator who has general editing functions organizes the "repositories" or teleconferences of the Genie system. Genie also offers sophisticated directory management and multiple user interfaces.

Written in Pascal, the system operates on Cyber 175. Its designer points out, however, that it is portable and will run on the Unix operating system. It requires 256K of a main memory. It is compatible with X.25, DECNET, and Hyperchannel communications protocols, as well as telephone packet switched networks.

The mainframe version is sold by Data Dynamics for $65,000, and the smaller version that is designed for a DEC VAX 11/70 is sold for $35,000. The reason for the price differential, the designer notes, is that the VAX version supports fewer users. The system may be tested by new users on a Data Dynamics host for $5,000/month over a three-month period.[22]