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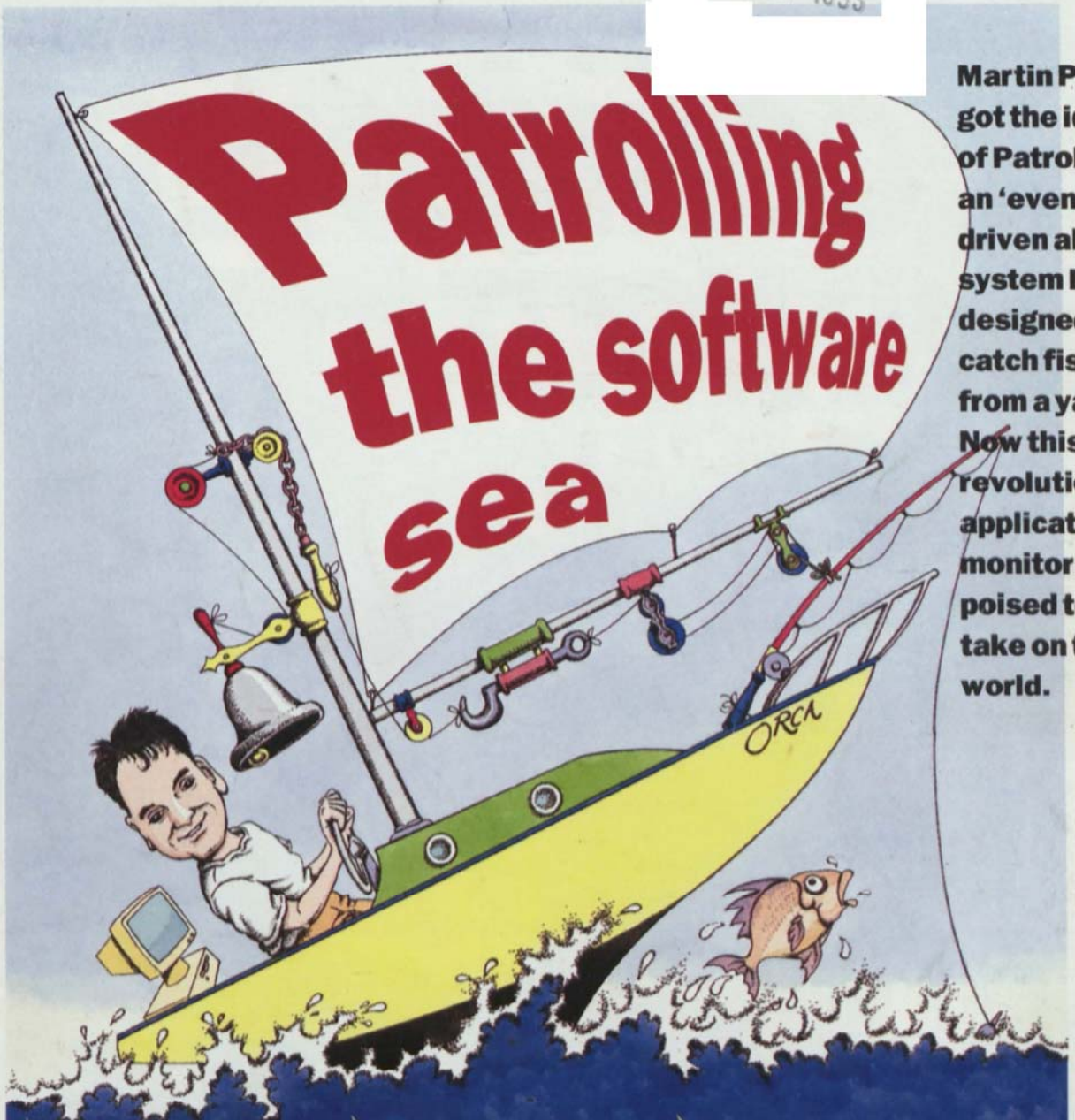
Patrolling the software sea

Martin Picard got the idea of Patrol from an 'event driven alert' system he designed to catch fish from a yacht. Now this revolutionary applications monitor is poised to take on the world.



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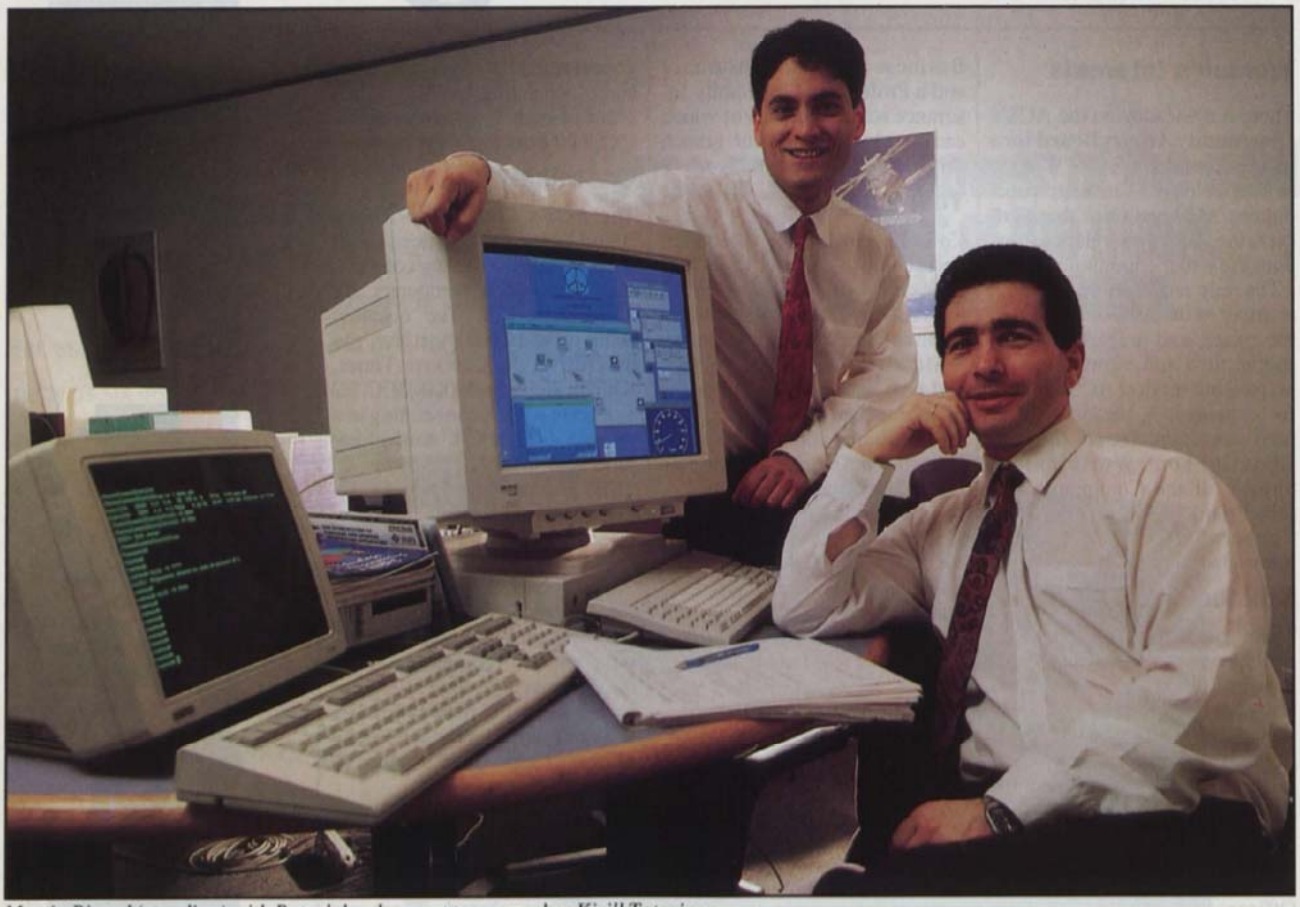

Martin Picard (standing) with Patrol development team member Kirill Tatarinov.

Patrolling the software sea

A revolutionary new software system developed in Sydney means that applications management on distributed systems will never be the same again. **Graeme Philipson** talks to the man behind Patrol, and looks at the product.

Patrol is coming. A small Sydney-based software company has begun to attract a lot of interest worldwide for a revolutionary knowledge-based graphical front end that has the potential to revolutionise applications management in distributed systems.

The product is called Patrol, from a company with the same name. It has been developed with the backing of Oracle Australia, which distributes the product in this region. Negotiations are also under way with a number of major vendors, which could well see the product emerge as something of a standard for distributed applications management.

For a long time, sophisticated systems management tools have been the preserve of mainframe-based computer systems. Products like IBM's NetView and SDI's Australian-developed Net/Master have been a feature of SNA-based networks for many years, and are now being extended down to incorporate the management of LAN and other components of enterprise-wide wide area networks.

Unix-based networks have not been so well served by systems and network management products. Unix provides a rich programming environment, but network and systems management have never been its strong points. One problem has been that Unix-based systems, which typically comprise a number of networked peers, are inherently different to hierarchical mainframe-based systems.

Patrol is not a true network management tool, at least not in the sense that the concept is understood in the traditional SNA world. It is a knowledge-based graphical front end, which uses software agents to track the performance of hardware and software throughout a network (see following story).

The product's initial acceptance by many significant users indicates its wide appeal. Patrol has the potential to be a major com-

ponent of the next generation of network management systems, those which will need to handle large and heterogeneous networks comprising an amorphous mix of applications, from databases to transaction processing monitors, and from financial applications to the operating system itself.

What is it?

What is Patrol, and where has it come from? The product's brief history is one of the more interesting tales in the long and chequered record of software development in this country.

To understand Patrol it is necessary to know the story of one man. His name is Martin Picard.

Picard was born in Italy in 1963, of French and Austrian parents. After high school he moved to the USA, where he did a combined electrical engineering and computer science course at Harvard and MIT.

In 1986 he graduated and joined satellite design contractor Ma-Com, where he worked on satellite networking. Soon after that he moved to Oracle, where he became product manager for the SQL*Net product, and later director of networking products.

Picard took SQL*Net from nothing to a $US23 million a year product in four years. How? "It was the first example of a true client-server utility and of a true distributed database," says Picard. "Oracle was growing quickly through that period, and I guess I was just in the right place at the right time."

Picard says that that experience got him thinking about the concept of using software to manage software. "But probably more important was my sailing experience."

While working at Oracle, Picard decided he wanted to sail. Though he had never messed around in boats, talking to friends who sailed got him liking the idea. He bought a 34-foot (10m) boat called Orca, "which sounds a bit like Oracle", and jumped straight into sailing without the usual apprenticeship.

Typically, he decided that his first solo sailing trip would be a little jaunt down the North American west coast, through the Panama canal, and back home to Italy. He wanted a change after his time with Oracle, and knew that there would be opportunities in Europe for someone with his skills.

Canal therapy

But fate stepped in, as it often does. "I got to the Panama canal, and it was closed because of all the fuss about Noriega. So I decided to turn around and go through the Suez canal, via Tahiti and Australia.

"By the time I got to Sydney, the Gulf War had broken out and the Suez canal didn't look too healthy either. And Sydney was such a great place I decided to stay a while."

The trip had more significance. Being alone on a boat for weeks on end provides an unequalled opportunity for extended contemplation. It was on the trip from San Francisco to Sydney that the idea of Patrol was really born. "When you are sailing, catching fish becomes an important event. I rigged up a fishing line attached to a bell, which you might call an event-driven alert. That ship's bell was Patrol 1.0."

The key to any great software product, as with most other inventions, is the idea rather than the execution. "With Patrol, the concept was the difficult thing," says Picard. "By comparison, the coding and the rest of the product development has been relatively straightforward."

When he arrived in Australia, Picard and Orca were put into quarantine at Neutral Bay. Ken Jacobs, an old Oracle colleague and the company's director of database marketing, was in Sydney for an Oracle conference (the 1990 users' conference in Adelaide). He saw the Orca and suggested Picard attend the conference. "It was like I had never been away," says Picard. "I was straight back into the Oracle scene." But he didn't want to rejoin the company after the freedom of the high seas, and he set himself up as an independent Oracle consultant, specialising in distributed systems. He called his company Distributed Data Systems. And all the time he was thinking a lot about the fish and the bell and the concept that became Patrol.

Why Australia?

Although he arrived almost by accident, Picard says he is committed to Australia. "The lifestyle here is fantastic, and the country has very good software developers. The world is a small place nowadays, and a software company can really be based anywhere.

"We're not really an Australian company, just as we are not really an American company. The location of the development team is irrelevant. We are simply a software company."

It was on the trip from San Francisco to Sydney that the idea of Patrol was really born. "I rigged up a fishing line attached to a bell, which you might call an event-driven alert."

Picard says that his big strength is that he understands both networking and applications. "That's important, because not many people do. And my long time with Oracle meant that I had some important contacts."

It was one of those contacts that saw him in January 1991 in Italy with the large bank Banco di Bergamo, an organisation renowned for its R&D. The bank wanted a network authentication server, which was the genesis of Patrol. Picard's contract with the bank allowed him to retain the development rights to any systems he was working on.

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