Episode Book

EPISODE #5992

Ridiculous But Legal Ways to Get RAM for AI

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SYNOPSIS

DRAM prices have gone vertical: one 32GB DDR5 kit jumped from $191 to $1,118 in a year, and TrendForce expects contract prices to climb another 90–95% quarter over quarter. The cause isn't broken fabs — it's HBM. Samsung, SK Hynix, and Micron are shifting wafer capacity to high-bandwidth memory for AI accelerators, and each gigabyte of HBM eats roughly three times the wafer area of standard DRAM. Consumers get what's left, and Intel's chief executive says that's "shorter shrift than AI players." Waiting it out isn't a plan: Samsung expects tight supply through 2028 and Micron's first New York fab won't produce until 2030. So we count down the top ten most ridiculous legal workarounds — from bundle deals and decommissioned servers to RAM flipping, eBay price trackers, e-waste channels, and the one entry that beats them all.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel wants a top ten list. Ridiculous but legal ways to get RAM for AI without spending insane money.



Herman

The RAMpocalypse list.



Corn

And he's serious about the legal part.



Herman

He's got a point, actually. Memory prices have gone stupid. A 32GB DDR5-6000 kit is four hundred and fifty dollars now. It was four hundred in August. One kit went from a hundred and ninety-one dollars a year ago to eleven hundred and eighteen, up four hundred and eighty-five percent. TrendForce is forecasting conventional DRAM contract prices up ninety to ninety-five percent quarter over quarter into the first quarter of next year.



Corn

So the buying advice for the last two years has been "wait for it to settle."



Herman

It did not settle.



Corn

It never settles.



Herman

J.P. Morgan's estimate is that DRAM prices will have risen more than four hundred percent from the start of 2024 to the end of 2026. And the reason is simple and it's not going away. Samsung, SK Hynix and Micron moved factory capacity to high bandwidth memory for AI accelerators, and manufacturing one gigabyte of HBM eats roughly three times the wafer area of standard DRAM. So every HBM wafer displaces several wafers of ordinary DDR4 and DDR5.



Corn

So the fabs aren't broken. They're busy.



Herman

They're busy with the profitable stuff. Cloud providers and server manufacturers sign multiyear agreements and pay premiums. The consumer gets whatever's left. Intel's chief executive reportedly said AI hardware will be short for another two to three years and that consumers are getting, quote, shorter shrift than AI players.



Corn

Shorter shrift. That's the whole home user experience in two words.



Herman

And waiting isn't a plan, because Micron's argument is that even if the AI bubble pops, humanoid robots will keep the demand up. Their chief executive reckons each one needs about two hundred gigabytes of DRAM.



Corn

Two hundred gigabytes of RAM per robot. My whole flat shares less than that and we run a podcast out of it.



Herman

He calls memory the strategic infrastructure of the AI era.



Corn

He would.



Herman

Samsung expects supply tight through 2028, and Micron's first New York fab doesn't produce until 2030.



Corn

So the shortage outlasts the consoles.



Herman

The shortage outlasts the consoles. So, Daniel's list. Top ten most ridiculous legal ways to get your hands on RAM for AI. Ten entries, countdown order, least to most.



Corn

Ten to one. Number one gets the reaction it deserves.



Herman

Where do we start?



Corn

Number ten, because it's the one every article recommends and it's boring. Buy the board, the processor and the solid state drive and the RAM together as a bundle. Newegg can save you up to three hundred and fifty-eight dollars when the memory is bought alongside



Corn (continued)

the motherboard, the processor and the drive.



Herman

That's a real number from this week. And pre-builts absorb price hikes more slowly than loose parts, so a pre-built can undercut a DIY build on memory alone right now.



Corn

It's sensible. It's on the list only because Daniel asked for ten and we needed a boring one at the bottom.



Herman

Every countdown needs a baseline. And honestly, the bundle math is the only place where the big retailers are still competing on memory at all. Everywhere else they've just repriced and moved on.



Corn

Because the bundle is a loss leader. They eat margin on the RAM to move the board and the chip.



Herman

They eat margin on the RAM to move the board and the chip, and the RAM is the thing you actually came for. It's the free bread at a restaurant.



Corn

Number nine. Buy whole decommissioned servers instead of sticks. You don't buy memory, you buy a machine that happens to be full of memory.



Herman

This is the one that actually works. Server ECC and registered memory comes out of decommissioned machines extremely cheap. A Dell R620 for two or three hundred dollars, add a hundred and twenty-eight gigabytes of DDR3 registered DIMMs for about two hundred dollars more. Buy in four-stick lots or bigger for the per-stick discount. The problem is you need a rack, you need ear protection, and you need a partner who tolerates a two hundred watt space heater in the corner.



Corn

And it holds the memory in banks you can't put in a desktop, so the server is the computer now.



Herman

The server is the computer now.



Corn

How loud are we talking. Because I've heard the phrase "ear protection" and I want to know if that's a joke.



Herman

It's not a joke. A 1U server at full fan speed is roughly the volume of a hairdryer that never turns off. The R620 is a 1U. You put it in a closet, you close the door, and you still hear it through the door.



Corn

So the real cost of number nine is a closet.



Herman

The real cost of number nine is a closet and a marriage counselor.



Corn

Number eight. The price trackers. There are dedicated sites for exactly this arbitrage. DIMMsum tracks live dollars per gigabyte for DDR3, DDR4 and DDR5 registered and ECC unbuffered memory, and it says the prices are steamed twice daily, which is the most beautiful sentence in this entire episode.



Herman

Steamed twice daily.



Corn

VRAMGlass tracks DDR4 price history across eBay in the States and Amazon in Japan. And there's a man named Brandon Sheley running eBay-fed trackers for server ECC, desktop and laptop memory out of what I can only assume is a shed.



Herman

The trackers exist because the same stick sells for wildly different prices depending on which marketplace you open. VRAMGlass showed used DDR4 registered memory at five dollars to ten dollars twenty a gigabyte against desktop unbuffered at five fifty to seven sixty.



Corn

So the trick is not finding cheap RAM. It's looking in the right column.



Herman

It's a shopping tool for people who treat shopping as a competitive sport.



Corn

Which is a real hobby. There are people who refresh a tracker the way other people refresh a sports score.



Herman

And the tracker people are the ones who win, because the price moves faster than any human can check manually. If you're not using a tracker in this market, you're donating money to someone who is.



Corn

Number seven. RAM flipping. You buy underpriced used modules and sell them at what the market will now actually pay.



Herman

DDR4 sixteen gigabyte sticks went from about fifteen dollars to forty dollars or more. Margins of fifteen to forty percent on a used stick. Sellers haven't caught up to the new pricing yet, so you can buy low and resell, and the profit funds your own build.



Corn

So the scheme pays for itself. That's the part of this list I'd actually try.



Herman

You'd try it because it involves no physical effort.



Corn

I'd try it because it's the only entry where the RAM buys itself.



Herman

The catch is you have to be willing to be a seller. You have to photograph a stick, write a listing, ship it, and deal with the one buyer in fifty who claims it arrived dead.



Corn

What happens with the one buyer in fifty.



Herman

You refund them, you eat the cost, and you learn to film yourself packing the box.



Corn

So the margin has a customer service tax on it.



Herman

Everything has a customer service tax on it.



Corn

Number six. The gray marketplaces themselves. Xianyu is a Chinese secondhand marketplace and it shows up as a price source on VRAMGlass, usually the cheapest column. eBay, Amazon in Japan, local surplus stores. The same silicon prices differently in every one of them.



Corn

Is buying from Xianyu legal?



Herman

Buying used goods is legal. Importing used goods is legal. What is not legal is stolen goods and customs fraud. Declaring a two hundred dollar parcel as a gift worth ten dollars is fraud, and that's the line. Everything on this list sits on the safe side of it.



Corn

So: bargain across borders, declare honestly, don't lie on the form. And the shipping is the hidden cost. A parcel from Japan is not free, and a parcel from China is not fast.



Herman

Right, the arbitrage only survives the shipping. If the stick saves you thirty dollars and the shipping costs forty, you've lost money and a month of your life.



Corn

So the rule is: do the landed cost math before you click buy.



Herman

Do the landed cost math. That's the whole discipline of number six.



Corn

Number five. E-waste, thrift and nonprofit channels. Free Geek in Portland and Fayetteville takes donated tech, refurbishes it, resells it cheap. GreenCitizen recycles memory for free in the Bay Area. Micro Center runs an e-waste program. And every Goodwill-style thrift store has a shelf of used desktop PCs that nobody looks at twice.



Herman

The RAM is already inside the machine. You're not buying memory, you're buying a beige box that contains memory. There's a whole class of person who treats the thrift store as a supply chain.



Corn

And a whole class of person who donates a working machine and then watches someone carry their old data out the door.



Herman

That's a different episode.



Corn

Is it actually legal to buy a donated machine and pull the drive.



Herman

It's legal to buy the machine. What you do with the drive after that is between you and your conscience and possibly a data protection statute, depending on the jurisdiction.



Corn

So the advice is: wipe the drive, don't read it.



Herman

That's the ethics of the thrift channel in five words.



Corn

Number four. Refurbished office machines. There was a whole category of business desktop that came with sixteen gigabytes and now sells used for the price of a dinner. Sellers are pricing the machine, not the memory inside it.



Herman

Because the machine is old and the memory inside it happens to be scarce.



Corn

I love a market that can't do arithmetic.



Herman

The seller looks at a nine-year-old Dell and sees a nine-year-old Dell. The buyer looks at it and sees four sticks of DDR4 that now cost more than the whole machine.



Corn

So you buy the machine, pull the sticks, and the chassis goes to e-waste.



Herman

Or you keep the chassis, because it's a perfectly good chassis, and you've just built a NAS out of the leftovers.



Corn

Number three. Buying on a schedule instead of on demand. The decommissioning happens on a calendar, not when you need it.



Corn

So you wait and you watch and you buy when the batch lands.



Herman

The supply is lumpy. Nothing for six weeks, then forty machines.



Corn

So the skill is patience plus a calendar reminder.



Herman

The skill is patience plus a calendar reminder plus the willingness to buy forty machines when you only needed one.



Corn

Which is how you end up with a garage full of beige boxes.



Herman

Which is how you end up with a garage full of beige boxes and a very understanding partner.



Corn

Number two. The DDR3 absurdity tier. A surplus dealer sells you a two thousand and ten era dual socket server with eight DDR3 channels and two hundred and fifty-six gigabytes for twenty-five dollars. A commenter runs Unsloth quants on exactly that machine.



Herman

At roughly one token per second.



Corn

One token per second. I've watched grass grow with more urgency.



Herman

And the punchline is the power bill. His own line was that a subscription is cheaper.



Corn

A subscription is cheaper. That's the honesty of a man who has paid an electricity bill in the winter.



Herman

It can hold one and a half terabytes and run the largest open models unquantized, which nothing else on this list can do.



Corn

So it's the cheapest way to touch a model that big, and the most expensive way to actually use it.



Herman

That's exactly the trade. You can hold the model. You just can't talk to it.



Corn

And number one.



Herman

Number one.



Corn

It could only really be one thing.



Herman

Befriending the person who decommissions.



Corn

That's it. That's the whole scheme. Find the information technology person at a hospital or a university, and be nice to them, and be there when the schedule says a rack comes off the floor.



Herman

Bruno. Excuse me. Sorry. Corn, we have a guest.



Corn

We do.



Herman

Joining us is Bruno, professor emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Memory Studies, author of the bestselling "Getting RAM Done: A Life in the Slow Lane." Bruno, welcome.

B

Bruno

Thank you, thank you. It is a pleasure, a tremendous pleasure. Memory is the heart, yes? The heart of the machine. Without memory, a computer is remembering nothing, like a man at a wedding with no names.



Herman

Right. So on the scrapping side, Bruno...

B

Bruno

It is about relationships.



Herman

Specifically the RDIMM decommissioning cycle...

B

Bruno

Relationships, Herman. You call, you talk, you bring the good coffee. The rest is details.



Corn

Which cycle.

B

Bruno

The cycle of life! Machines are born, they work, they rest. And then someone must carry them out. That someone has a name. That is the whole book, really. Also available in softcover, and I do a discount for listeners.



Herman

We're talking about a specific class of registered memory...

B

Bruno

And that is my advice. Bring the good coffee. And if they say no, bring better coffee. Wonderful to be here, I must go, I have another booking in ten minutes.



Corn

Bye, Bruno.



Herman

So. Where were we. The registered DIMM tier. Used registered memory is the cheapest way in by a mile, and that's the whole reason to talk to anyone who works where machines get retired. VRAMGlass has a line I keep chewing on, that a used DDR4 server with many channels is one of the cheapest ways to run the large mixture of experts models on a processor today.



Corn

On a processor. No graphics card at all.



Herman

The memory bandwidth does the work.



Corn

I want to go back to number one for a second, because it's the one I'd actually do.



Herman

What do you do. What's the move.



Corn

I find a man named Kevin who works in a university basement and I bring him a box of pastries every month for a year.



Herman

You'd do that.



Corn

I'd do that. Kevin retires a hundred and twenty-eight gigabytes while the store still wants six hundred for the same thing over the counter, and Kevin thinks I'm a nice young sloth who appreciates his work.



Herman

You are a nice sloth. Mostly.



Corn

It's a long game. I'm built for the long game.



Herman

Here's the thing about the gray market that I keep coming back to. The pricing is incoherent, and that's the arbitrage. The same stick is five dollars a gig on one site and fourteen on another. Trackers exist because the market hasn't done the elementary school work of comparing itself to itself.



Corn

So the scheme is at its root a reading comprehension test.



Herman

It's a reading comprehension test. And when the sellers catch up, the window closes. That's the part people miss. Every entry on this list is a temporary condition. Flipping works because sellers haven't repriced. The trackers work because the columns disagree. The thrift stores work because the donation is priced at zero.



Corn

And the moment somebody notices, all of it's gone.



Hilbert

I agree with all of it.



Hilbert

Used server RAM is the way. Should have said that first is all. My cousin does e-waste recycling, family on the Italian side, and he sold me a pallet of RAM in the late seventies, this was the last place I worked days, and I gave him four hundred dollars cash which was a month of work. Four hundred sticks in that pallet. Every one of them DDR2.



Corn

Not one of them fits anything.



Hilbert

Not one. I still have most of the pallet. The rest I gave away at a wedding.



Herman

On the early eighties server boards, the DDR2 wouldn't have matched the...



Hilbert

The board wanted DDR3 and the sticks were DDR2 and I found out in about a minute. Four hundred dollars and he's family so there was nothing to be done about it.



Corn

A family rate.



Hilbert

The thing he never told me and should have is that the people who matter are the ones inside the building when it comes off the floor. Not the recycler. The recycler is downstream. The information technology man at a hospital decommissions on a schedule and the schedule is a state secret.



Herman

The schedule.



Hilbert

Twice a year, usually, and it depends on the lease. Nobody posts it. You either know somebody or you don't.



Corn

So what did it take to know somebody.



Hilbert

Sixty-four gigabytes of DDR4 ECC, and I paid with a chest freezer. Working freezer, I'd had it eleven years. The man's wife wanted it for a garage sale. So I drive it over and it's still full of meat, which I had not checked.



Herman

It was full of meat.



Hilbert

He kept the meat. He did not take the freezer. So technically I paid in frozen beef and a chest freezer, which is a barter system the IRS has not thought through.



Corn

How long did the meat sit while you negotiated this.



Hilbert

That was the negotiation. I've got two hundred pounds of DDR3 in the guest bathroom at the moment because the humidity is better in there. I don't know if it's true. The sticks haven't complained.



Herman

Two hundred pounds.



Hilbert

It's fine in there. And being an anteater makes the drives tricky but not this. This is fine.



Corn

So the real version of number one is not coffee.



Hilbert

The real version is a freezer and a telephone. But you have to make the call in the right week or the pallet's gone.



Corn

That's the whole list, then.



Herman

The cutting-room floor for me is the robot math. Micron says each humanoid needs about two hundred gigabytes of DRAM, and that's the number that sits with me because it means this isn't a wave. It's a permanent increase in how much memory exists in the world per person.



Corn

Two hundred gigabytes per robot. My entire childhood in Mongolia fits in less.



Herman

You were born in Mongolia.



Corn

Allegedly.



Herman

The other fragment I couldn't work in is the phone side. GlobalData's report on the crunch notes that Apple, Google and Samsung are responding to memory costs by cutting specifications instead of raising prices at the low end. Google trimmed the base memory on one of the Pixel models.



Corn

So they can't charge more, so they sell less machine. The shortage reaches into the pocket.



Herman

And that's the tell that this isn't just a hobbyist problem. When the phone makers start subtracting instead of adding, the crunch has gone mainstream.



Corn

Which means the list we just read is going to get shorter, not longer. Every channel on it is going to get picked over.



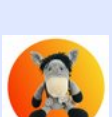
Herman

Every channel is going to get picked over. The thrift shelves empty first, then the trackers stop disagreeing, then the flippers get priced out.



Corn

If the shortage runs through 2028, does the home AI hobbyist just become an e-waste archaeologist? Is that the job now? Sifting through dead office machines for sticks of a dying standard.



Herman

It might be, and the arbitrage window won't wait for you to decide. Flipping only works while the sellers are behind the price. The trackers only work while the columns disagree. The thrift shelf only works while nobody has priced the memory inside the box.



Corn

So the window is now and it closes the moment everybody reads the same spreadsheet.



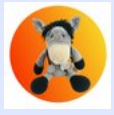
Herman

That's where I'd leave it.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

If you enjoyed this one, try episode two, Local STT For AMD GPU Owners; episode eighteen, Beyond the GPU; and episode seventeen, Cloud Render Superpowers. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Corn

If you've got your own scheme, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We read them.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

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