

TEK THOTS

Electronic Newsletter

TEK THOTS
Volume 1, Number 6
December 10, 1996
Published irregularly by Scott C. Holstad

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News/Editorial

* Welcome to the sixth issue of Tek Thots. I'm not sure why, but the readership is growing exponentially. I originally started this to give some friends of mine some info, as well as to give me the chance to squawk a bit about things. Now, my friends certainly comprise a distinct minority of the readership; indeed, last week, we got about 75 new readers alone. Well, feel free to write in with ideas, suggestions, criticisms, etc.

* Microsoft keeps whittling away at Netscape's browser lead. Now, not only do they own the commercial onlines, but they continue to put other companies in their back pocket as well. Now, Arthur Anderson, Sprint, and

Compaq have all agreed to use IE3 as th eir default intranet browser. Frankly, no matter how much spin you hear coming from Netscape, they're already dead -- it's just a matter of time. Kind of sad too.

Do you keep up with the stats over at Browser Watch? Most recent stats -- browsers visiting their site: roughly 55% are Netscape, while IE3 is closing on 40%.

* Backbone news: Last month, Sprint unveiled the first 155MB transoceanic Internet backbone link to Europe. The connection will route TCP/IP traffic between the New Jersey Sprint NAP and a node in Stockholm, operated by Swedish ISP, Tele2. Sprint also s aid it was enhancing its SprintLink with the addition of OC3 (155MB) backbone links by the end of the year. Sheesh -- and all I want is ISDN in my home.

* AOL's new pricing plan went into effect last week. So, what happened? Try 8 MILLION hits a day! Still, people complain, and with good reason. The system is now crawling At least, AOL changed their much-criticized plan to migrate all existing custom ers to the new pricing plan (more than doubling their former fees) after a frustrated AOL user (Stephen DiLorenzo) filed a suit, claiming the automatic price increase violates New York state law.

* The Well's been trying to die a painful death recently. They bought Hooked back in the summer, a shoddy outfit if I've ever seen one. I predicted in a number of Well conferences that this would adversely affect the Well's ability to sustain its high s tandards. Was I right! When the Hooked move became final this past summer, they moved from Sausilto to San Francisco, and their servers died repeatedly in the process. Bruce Katz emailed me an apology for their lack of mail service, but that did nothi ng to improve things. Used to be, you could call up and talk to someone then and there if there were problems. No more -- you get the blessed menu.

Well, over two months ago, their Web server logs went down. I emailed a status report request twice in those two months, only to receive four increasingly nasty messages basically telling me to mind my own business, as the Access Watch program was down, and they were repairing it. Two months, folks? You evidently need to hire some more qualified people.

Last week, I got an email from someone stating that this was commonplace for dial-up customers, but business customers had full access. This person suggested a class action lawsuit. I was willing to listen. Two days later -- surprise -- we once again h ad log access!

To top it off, some geek suggested that it literally did take over two months to fix Access Watch -- that it was only coincidental re the proposed lawsuit. Uh huh. Later someone (the aptly named Earl Crab, at <http://www.river.org/~esoft/>) suggested that , as my homepage lists EarthLink as my employer, I must have a secret "agenda" for making these complaints. Uh huh. Look, kiddo, if I were engaged in industrial sabotage, or some such idiocy, do you think I would so brazenly admit the identity of my emp loyer on my homepage??? Moron!

Finally, I just heard some rumors that the Well is dumping their news server. Gee, that's certainly the way to compete! It's frustrating, because the Well has long been the coolest -- it's sad to see them slip like this.

* This is potentially cool. SGI has just launched Flook, the title character for the world's first VRML Web cartoon. (He kind of looks like

Jimminy Cricket.) Every Tuesday and Thursday, a new episode of Flook will be available to be viewed and interacted with, as long as it is seen with a VRML 2.0-compliant viewer (like Cosmo Player). Some have said the potential exists for this to be one day looked at as the "Steamboat Willie" of the Internet and new media. While I'm not necessarily convinced, it's kind of a cool idea, and I'm interested in seeing how it works out. Got check out <http://vrml.sgi.com/> and lemme know what you think.

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PC Thots

* On Saturday, Compaq issued a recall on AC adapters for its Armada 4100 notebook PCs. Compaq did this when it discovered the AC adapters could pose an electrical shock hazard to users -- gee, that's comforting! Only AC adapters with both part number 217984-001 on the bar code label and three hollow connector pins in the recessed male connector on the power adapter are affected. Staggeringly, this potentially affects some 75,000 notebooks!

* It looks like everyone is trying to get in on the Windows CE craze. Casio, NEC, Philips, and others are all putting out CE-based PDAs. Casio's Cassiopeia is going for around \$600, NEC MobilePro is \$500-\$700, and Philips' Velo around \$600-\$750. It's going to be very interesting to see where CE goes. I tend to think it's a keeper.

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Mac Thots

* It took a long time coming, but Pointcast (<http://www.pointcast.com/>) finally has a Mac version. You can download a beta and try it out yourself. While I'm glad to finally see one out, I can't help but wonder if it's too late. Many corporate intranets ban things like Pointcast because of bandwidth strain. Moreover, you can go online now and get the same type of personalized info (like from Excite Live and My Yahoo!).

* The first Mac-only ISP opened shop last month. MacConnect can be found at <http://www.macconnect.com/>. They're going out of their way to provide Mac-specific links and software, and they're flouting it in the process. It'll be interesting to see if this goes anywhere.

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Web Development Thots

* Last month, two bugs were found in Sun's Java Developers Kit. The bugs made it impossible for a Java-based Web site (being developed by Presence Information Design) to handle the load from thousands of customers simultaneously accessing the site. The bugs are in the current version 1.0.2 of the Java VM, and they include thread-scheduling flaws and memory management problems during high load periods. The bugs were discovered during the construction of Pac Bell's AtHand site, which maintains the company's online directory service, merchant listings, editorial

services, and a variety of other services. Frankly, I'm a little surprised this hasn't happened sooner. I've been saying for some time that Java -- at this stage in its incarnation -- remains little more than hype. It's not yet stable, is overrated in its uses, and I remain somewhat skeptical of the billions being invested in it. However, I'm willing to be proven wrong, for the time being. I do believe that, in one or two years, Java might start actually coming close to the meeting the hyped expectations....

* Marimba and Macromedia just announced that Shockwave will be integrated with the Marimba Castanet Tuner, and that developers currently using Director will now be able to deliver content to Castanet Internet and Intranet subscribers.

* Brazil's Tabuleiro da Baiana Multimedia announced a new product called WebXtra. It enables developers to create customized Internet browsers, allowing users to navigate the Web from Director movies. WebXtra relies upon IE to display Web pages, and it also has an ActiveX container to handle ActiveX controls. While this sounds potentially cool, it's a Win95, IE-based dev tool, and there are reports out there that over half the developers around are Mac-based. Seems they'd want to cater to the Mac developers as well....

* Wow! Mark Pesce, the VRML king, announced his resignation from the Virtual Architecture Group (VAG) and the Consortium. Evidently, one reason for his resignation is "the undue influence various corporate development partners allegedly have within those organizations."

Pesce told PC World this week: "The future of the spec belongs to the Consortium. But the Consortium must not become the plutocratic playground of big business. This is an abortion, a gross miscarriage of my original intent and I will fight it with every fiber of my own being - from outside the system - until we have a new configuration which actually represents the communities from which it was created."

Of course, VRML has grown beyond Pesce, but this is like Phil Zimmermann turning his back on PGP -- perhaps even more astounding!

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This Issue's Plug-in

* Pixound (<http://www.pixound.com/pixound/download.htm>) is an interesting new plug-in (for both Macs and PCs). Check this out: when you run your mouse over an image with a corresponding Pixound (.pxd) file, the colors are translated into specific sounds. You can go to the Pixound site yourself to check out samples.

The plug-in works with MIDI files, but it actually deals with a Pixound-created MIME type with a .pxd suffix. Using Pixound's composition environment, developers save each "interactive musical experience" as a .pxd file (for Web-based use) or as a Pixound applet (a standalone player for offline usage). The .pxd file is text-based and pretty small (1 kb!).

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This Issue's ActiveX Control

* Well, VB5CCE (Control Creation Edition) is finally out! I downloaded a copy this week, but I haven't had time to play with it yet. You can get it at <http://www.microsoft.com/vbasic/controls/>. In addition to VB5CCE you'll find the VBVM (the Visual Basic Virtual Machine). It replaces the MFC files that had to be packaged with VB-built apps to assure that they could be run remotely. The VBVM automatically gets downloaded when a user tries to snag a control which isn't already installed. More significantly, it doesn't download if the user already has it!

If the VBVM goes cross-platform (via the browser), writing controls in C++ won't make much sense, because you would then have to rewrite and recompile them for each platform. Writing controls to the Microsoft Java VM or the VBVM makes more sense, simply because of IE.

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Stock Thots

* Tandy announced it'll take a \$20 million fourth quarter charge due to the closing of 53 McDuff stores in Texas. Tandy expects cash flow to improve by \$20 million as a result of the closures, which happened because the stores were deemed to be no longer compatible with the company's plan.

* The Cyrix CEO, Jerry Rogers, followed a bunch of his execs out the door yesterday. His resignation is the latest in a line of 'em, most due to the company's virtual disappearance from the microprocessor market in under a year. Cyrix did a good job getting decent chips out to lower-tier computer manufacturers, but despite decent test results on recent Cyrix chips, the company's been slow getting them out the door, and sales have simply plummeted. Now it looks like AMD may be ready to step into the Cyrix hole.

* Check this out: Cisco Connection Online (CCO), the company's business-to-business Web site, has racked up \$75 million in sales since it was launched (which was only about five months ago). In fact, things are going so well for them, they're predicting online orders will exceed \$1 billion by the end of its fiscal year!!!

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Game Thots

* Eugene Ridenour, EarthLink's Gamemaster, gives us his scoop.

PC Game of the Week: Master Of Orion II

Imagine a world where population growth is outstripping planetary resources, where the need for galactic expansion is critical, and where as the ruler, you must defend your empire while guiding a team of pioneers on a search for life-sustaining resources. Find the Moo2 demo at: <http://www.holobyte.com/gamesdesign/moo2/moo2.html>.

Mac Game of the Week: GUNDAM 0079: THE WAR FOR EARTH

The Side 7 space colony is under siege by the relentless Zeon armada. Without a skilled mobile suit pilot, the Federation is doomed. Find the Gundam 0079 demo at: <http://www.prestostudios.com/gundam.html>.

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Newbie Thot

* Imagine walking through a medieval castle, inspecting the armor lining the musty halls and climbing the cobbled tower stairs so you can view the moat through the tower windows; or flying through the solar system, exploring planetary surfaces; or designing your dream home and all of its components, developing each piece from the ground up, placing and re-placing each item in every conceivable combination. Imagine, if you will, entering a virtual Alice-in-Wonderland world in which you are able to interact with every object, to pick up anything you want; to go to virtual clubs and engage real people in scintillating chatter. Soon -- very soon -- you'll be able to do these types of things, and more, and VRML may well be the magic wand that makes it all possible.

VRML is an acronym for Virtual Reality Modeling Language. It's typically pronounced as is (V-R-M-L), but some people use "vermel" instead. It is a type of programming language (such as HTML or Java) designed to allow 3-D (three dimensional) objects and worlds to be displayed and experienced via the World Wide Web.

You can read my article, "Reality Check," (from which this text is excerpted) at <http://www.earthlink.net/daily/friday/vrml.html> to learn more about VRML.

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Privacy/Security Thots

* Sick of spam? Yeah, me too. Well, one Ray Jones (ray@celestial.com) has started filing small claims suits against spammers, his theory being that if enough people do this, maybe the spammers will slow it down. Even if you don't walk away with tons of cash, if you win and the spammers don't pay up, they'll have v
out.

Nonetheless, Jones is making an effort, of sorts. He recently filed a \$2500 case against earthstar.com, which was kind enough to spam him five times. Info on the case can presumably be found by contacting the King County District Court, State of Washington, Northeast Div., Small Claim No. 9603591. The court's phone number is 206-296-3667. The trial is to be Jan. 17, 1997.

What do the Tek Thots readers think?

* Sick of SYN flooding? Berkeley, of course, has a patch out. If you're using something else, you might want to modify the way in which your kernel deals with half-open connectivity, and you might want to reduce the timeout interval.

* An interesting new book was recently published in New Zealand which provides a fascinating insight into the international network by which

Western governments intercept electronic communications.

Secret Power: New Zealand's Role in the International Spy Network, by one Nicky Hager, describes the communications monitoring system known as ECHELON, jointly operated by the U.S., Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It's supposed to be comprised of intercept stations located around the world which automatically search thru millions of intercepted messages for ones containing pre-specified keywords or email addresses.

Hager writes, "The ECHELON system has created an awesome spying capacity for the United States, allowing it to monitor continuously most of the world's communications.... The capabilities of the ECHELON system are so great, and the secrecy surrounding it makes it so impervious to democratic oversight, that the temptation to use it for questionable projects seems irresistible."

FAS has posted the first couple of chapters at
<http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/> -- you might want to check it out.

* I'm posting something I snagged from Infowar.com
(http://www.infowar.com/CIVIL_DE/civil_1.html-ssi), because I think it's fairly interesting. (Don't sue me Winn -- I'm not making a dime off of this.)

Executive Order #12923

Date: Fri, 15 Nov 1996 17:23:24 -0800
From: Hal Finney
To: cypherpunks@toad.com
Subject: National Emergency

Michael Froomkin posted to the cyberia list a pointer to the Clinton administration's new export policy. He has a copy on his web site at: <http://www.law.miami.edu/~froomkin/nov96-regs.htm>. The thing I found interesting is that it refers to the fact that we are currently living under a state of national emergency! I searched on the whitehouse web site and couldn't find the executive order referred to (maybe it was classified) but did find this one:

For Immediate Release

June 30, 1994

Executive Order
#12923

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Continuation Of Export Control Regulations

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, I find that the unrestricted access of foreign parties to U.S. goods, technology, and technical data and the existence of certain boycott practices of foreign nations, in light of the expiration of the Export Administration Act of 1979, as amended (50 U.S.C. App. 2401 et seq.), constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States and hereby declare a national emergency with respect to that threat.

Apparently this state of emergency is still in effect. This is what gives the President the power to unilaterally make changes in the export policy. It would be nice if our congresspeople would take some responsibility in this matter.

Hal

* Mikko Hypponen, over at Data Fellows sent a note to CUD, stating that any message sent out claiming to be from him, warning of a Microsoft Web page virus is a hoax. If you have questions, or if you've seen something about this, write him at Mikko.Hyppo nen@datafellows.com.

* Will the madness never end?!? Virus hoaxes are becoming more dangerous than viruses themselves. Check today's latest:

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>----- Forwarded message ----- >Date: Tue, 10 Dec 1996 09:38:48
-0500 >From: XXXXX >To: sch@well.com >Subject:
(Fwd) Virus Alert > >Hello. Wanted you to be aware of the following. >
>Importance: High > >If anyone receives mail entitled: PENPAL GREETINGS!
please delete it WITHOUT >reading it. Below is a little explanation of
the message, and what it would >do to your PC if you were to read the
message. If you have any questions or >concerns please contact SAF-IA
Info Office on 697-5059. > >This is a warning for all internet users -
there is a dangerous virus >propogating across the internet through an
e-mail message entitled "PENPAL >GREETINGS!". DO NOT DOWNLOAD ANY MESSAGE
ENTITLED "PENPAL GREETINGS!" > >This message appears to be a friendly
letter asking you if you are >interested in a penpal, but by the time you
read this letter, it is too >late. The "trojan horse" virus will have
already infected the boot sector >of your hard drive, destroying all of
the data present. It is a >self-replicating virus, and once the message
is read, it will AUTOMATICALLY >forward itself to anyone who's e-mail
address is present in YOUR mailbox! > >This virus will DESTROY your hard
drive, and holds the potential to DESTROY >the hard drive of anyone whose
mail is in your inbox, and who's mail is in >their inbox, and so on. If
this virus remains unchecked, it has the >potential to do a great deal of
DAMAGE to computer networks worldwide!!!! > >Please, delete the message
entitled "PENPAL GREETINGS!" as soon as you see >it! And pass this
message along to all of your friends and relatives, and >the other readers
of the newsgroups and mailing lists which you are on, so >that they are
not hurt by this dangerous virus!!!!
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> > >Carrick T. Troutman, Jr.
>Director, Military Systems Division >Subsystem Technologies, Inc. >102
Brookstone Court >Yorktown, VA 23693-5515
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My response:

Thanks for the info. Ironically enough, I received it on the same day that a virus hoax piece I wrote appeared (at <http://www.earthlink.net/daily/tuesday/hoax/>).

This virus is a hoax. The message contains similarities to the Good Times and Deeyenda virus hoax messages. More importantly, you can find info validating the fact that it's a hoax (such as at <http://www.datafellows.com/v-descs/penpal.htm>).

I looked up this Carrick Troutman fellow and gave him a call. Turns out

that he'd just found out it's a hoax, but too late -- he's passed on this info to tons of people. I gave him the URLs of some places he can check with for virus info before passing said info on.

FYI, it's practically impossible for a virus to destroy your computer by reading an email message. Viruses are programs, which means they must be executed. Typically, then, they'll be in email attachments, not the actual email messages.

You might want to pass this info on.

I know, believe me, I know about Macro viruses -- no need to write in correcting me on the email thing. Notice I qualify my statements ("practically," "typically,")....

* Well, I'm continuing the AV testing process. I'm continuing to procure AV evals, as well as viruses. Here are the results.

PRODUCT	Number Caught (out of 200)	%
Anywhere	199	99.5%
Dr. Solomon's FindVi ru	198	99%
F-PROT	197	97.5%
IBM Antivirus	195	97.5%
Sophos Sweep	195	97.5%
Invircible	195	97.5%
McAfee VirusScan	195	97.5%
Leprechaun	193	96.5%
Norton AntiVirus	192	96%

Notes:

* I planned on testing EliaShim's ViruSafe95, but it crashed every PC we put it on.

* Leprechaun crashed my system twice.

* Have you heard about the new PGPcookie.cutter? It's a \$20 plug-in that is supposed to provide some anonymity while browsing the Web (what a concept!) by selectively blocking cookies. PGPcookie.cutter includes a feature which indicates the number of cookies that Web sites have attempted to set and provides access to user preferences, which allow users to conveniently indicate which cookies -- identified by domain name -- they wish to allow or block. Additional features are supposed to include a cookie warning that alerts users when a Web server is setting a cookie on the browser, and a cookie ID, which displays all sites that have placed cookies on one's browser. It won't be available until next month, but I'm anxious to try it out.

* Emmett Paige Jr., the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence (C3I), has been spilling a few interesting tidbits recently. While speaking at the Armed Forces Staff College, he talked about the need to maintain the leading edge in technology, citing the joint efforts of the DISA, ARPA, DARO, NRO, NSA, and CIO in Bosnia, where they are "bringing real-time fused intelligence imagery to the deployed warfighters, including wide-band direct broadcast support." One of the results of this effort is the dissemination of live Predator unmanned aerial vehicle imagery to key Bosnia-based nodes.

In fact, Paige has said a lot of interesting things recently. At the same

time as the above statements, he discussed DOD IS trends, including the acquisition of "dominant battlespace knowledge," the need for precision force (selective target destruction with minimal collateral damage), and enhanced combat identification. Paige also suggested that info warfare is "the Achilles heel" of the 21st Century battlefield. He later advocated the use of COTS software for development, and asserted that the DOD will rely upon said software unless a need arises in which "no COTS solution exists," in which case DOD will write ADA-based programs. Interesting.

In another speech to the 311th Theater Signal Command at Ft. Meade, he discussed the Year 2000 dilemma, admitting that weapon systems will be affected. In fact, he estimated that about 5% of DOD code will be affected. I'm personally curious about that figure; I'd love to know who's feeding him this info.

* I came across an interesting program recently called PC-Track. It tracks satellites (including satellite orbits and ground station info), and it comes pre-loaded with orbit data. Think about it. You can migrate TLE (two line element) sets of orbit data into the PC-Track database. Classified satellite info. Detection avoidance. In certain types of hands, this could prove ... worrisome.

* Taken from the Infopro-list (and edited by yours truly, primarily for brevity):

Puzzle Palace coauthor Wayne Madsen, in an article written for the June 1995 issue of Computer Fraud & Security Bulletin, wrote that "according to well-placed sources within the Federal Government and the Internet service provider industry, the National Security Agency (NSA) is actively sniffing several key Internet router and gateway hosts."

Madsen says the NSA concentrates its surveillance on destination and origination hosts, as well as "sniffing" for specific key words and phrases. He claims his sources have confirmed that the NSA has contracted with an unnamed private company to develop the software needed to capture Internet data of interest to the agency.

According to Madsen, the NSA monitors traffic primarily at two Internet routers controlled by NASA, one in College Park, MD (dubbed "Fix East") and another at NASA Ames Research Center in Sunnyvale, CA ("Fix West").

Other NSA Internet sniffers, he said, operate at busy routers known as Mae East and Mae West, CIX (based in San Jose), and SWAB (a northern Virginia router operated by Bell Atlantic).

Madsen says the NSA may also be monitoring traffic at various NAPs, the large Internet gateways operated by regional and long-distance service providers. The NAPs allegedly under surveillance are in Pennsauken, NJ (operated by Sprint), Chicago (run by AmeriTech and Bell Communications Research), and San Francisco (Pac Bell).

Madsen claims the NSA has deals with Microsoft, Lotus, and Netscape to prevent anonymous email. One senior Federal Government source has reported that NSA has been particularly successful in convincing key members of the US software industry to cooperate

with it in producing software that makes Internet messages easier for NSA to intercept, and if the NSA is to permit the introduction of the means to prevent the anonymity of Internet electronic mail, then

Is the NSA really snooping on the Net? And if they are, would that violate the agency's charter, which specifically prohibits it from spying within the US? "Well, Net traffic is routed from God knows where to God

knows where around the world," says George Washington University Professor Lance Hoffman, a professor of Communications and Telecommunications Systems Policy at George Washington University. "So if the NSA is doing this, they could say they are not violating their charter not to spy in the US. That's the thing. Intelligent routers send stuff any which way."

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Online versions of this electronic newsletter will be archived at:
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