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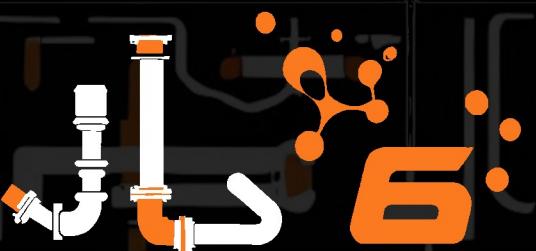
AB6

E6

In This Issue, The Resurrection



CB6



AB

Worst Practice!

CA
6



All Your Favourite Recurrences

ISSUE

5

And Much

Much

More



LAB

LABG

JULY 2023

£4.99

47,013,449 bytes



Yours To Keep

In memory of blogging

9:15PM, 17TH JULY 2023

When I were a lad, exactly 20 years ago, I launched a personal blog on james.lab6.com. At the time, blogging was huge – it felt like the main part of the human internet. There was no Twitter, no YouTube, no Medium, no Reddit, no Facebook, no MySpace, no Tumblr, and no Flickr. There wasn't even a 4chan. We had LiveJournal, and LinkenIn had *just* launched.

Right from the beginning, right from the word *blog*, everything about it was cringe, and I wasn't at all sorry to take it offline in 2014 due to parenthood-precipitated prioritisation. The Django upgrade treadmill didn't seem so important, and work was becoming increasingly paranoid about social media participation. I closed it all down and was content to leave it to the Wayback Machine.

Here are some things I learned:

- Building your own blog system is the Hello World of the web age.
- Amateur blogs used to be well-indexed and ranked highly by Google. I had some very popular borderline-famous posts, and received a *ton* of comments and private feedback (neither of which are republished here). Over time, blogs got pushed out of search results by professional players. Now everybody's got an agenda.
- I ran Google Adsense for first-time visitors. Over ~11 years I earned £39.57. What did I do with my newfound riches? I just threw it on the pile, I suppose. Sincere apologies to anyone who saw an ad. No refunds.
- The Wayback Machine isn't reliable. Many pages are not saved (understandable), and many saved pages are truncated (weird).
- The demand for once-popular URLs is *very persistent*. To this day, web server logs show requests for URLs that first went live in 1999 and haven't been live for nearly two decades!
- With the rise of platforms, blogs are *probably* more numerous than ever, in absolute terms. However, they are a tumorous mass of content farms, marketing channels, and other species of promotional diarrhea. The good stuff is ever harder to find.

- Slow and static is the way forward.

So in this issue I'm bringing the old blog back for one last time, to provide a redirection target for those poor old URLs, to compensate for the gaps in the archive, and because 20 years is long enough to sort the cringe from the mega-cringe.

Enjoy the commentary!

The Null Post

9:15PM, 17TH JULY 2003

All self respecting automation starts at zero, and so I present the Null Post, which has failed, since I've had to explain what it is, contradicting nullity.

Tags: meta

Best Spam Title Ever

2:56AM, 19TH JULY 2003

I was going to write something about a spam subject line, but of course, everybody else got it too.

Oh, and sorry about degenerating into a standard linkdump blog after only one post, but what can you do about it? I'm going on holiday tomorrow so... oh, gah... hnnggh. I can't take it. I guess I'm just a dirty blogger after all. Stay tuned for the contents of tomorrow's breakfast! Hint: it's probably going to be toast OMG LOL!!!11

Tags: meta, spam

Fire XOR Cold patch for Nethack

2:56PM, 27TH JULY 2003

This is the documentation for a patch for Nethack 3.4.1, the classic roguelike timesink that's been in development for nearly 15 years, and still has ASCII graphics. That means all the development time has gone into gameplay, and as a result, it's probably the best game there is.

[Download the patch here](#)

A while ago Rob Ellwood suggested some nice YANIs on [rec.games.roguelike.nethack](#), amongst which was the idea that fire and cold resistance should be mutually exclusive. Nasty! I love it! So here it is.

This patch makes fire and cold resistance intrinsics mutually exclusive. This means you can only have one or the other! For example, if you gain fire resistance from eating a corpse, you lose it when you gain cold resistance from eating another corpse, and vice versa. Intrinsics from level gains are not affected. There are some exceptions:

- It is possible for some classes to have both at the same time, since they acquire one intrinsic (Priests), or the other (Valkyries) or both (Monks) naturally as a consequence of level gains.
- Crowning turns fire into cold, and cold into fire, if you have one of them. If you have neither, you get both! I hope this captures their contrary nature and still keeps crowning a Good Thing.

At the time, NetHack 3.4.1 was fresh, and it was 5 months from the release of 3.4.3, which then stood fast for 12 years and looked as though it might be the last release.

Find the patch as an attachment to this PDF document: [fireorcold-341.patch](#)

The idea remains valid! It's a trivial change which might be easy to port to the latest NetHack (currently 3.6.7).

Other implications are:

- 'Extrinsic' intrinsics are not affected, so you can still wear rings and armour to get the corresponding resistances.
- This makes rings of fire and cold resistance useful, and makes you think about which rings to wear later on in the game.
- If you have natural fire resistance, and non-natural cold resistance, then get fire resistance from a corpse, you'll lose cold resistance, and vice versa.
- You'll still most likely want fire resistance for Gehennom, so watch out for ice devils and Asmodeus!
- For most classes, the only way to get both is to be crowned when having neither. However, getting to the point of crowning without getting either is tricky, since once you get one, you will forever toggle between them, never losing both, unless a gremlin steals one, but this is rather dangerous as you might lose other intrinsics.

This patch undoubtedly makes the game harder, especially in the late stage, which I believe is a good thing. Monsters with cold attacks are currently rather useless, the classic example being Asmodeus, who is trivially easy to beat if you have cold resistance, which practically everyone does by then.

If anyone spots a bug, please tell me.

Tags: games, programming

Type of the week

5:32PM, 27TH JULY 2003

In Tim Cahill's lazily entertaining (but rather formulaic) collection of short travel stories, *Hold the Enlightenment*, there is a passage that reads as follows:

In 1997, a British racing team, driving a car powered by a pair of jets, broke both the sound barrier and the world land-speed record - 763,053 miles per hour - on the playa.

Wow, that's fast!

Gentlemen, this is blogging.

Tags: books

Worst. Film. Synopsis. Ever.

7:48PM, 27TH JULY 2003

I'm still testing, so here's summore filler.

[The Filmworks](#), Manchester's vast cavern of cinema, had this sysopsis of The Matrix on their website:

To save the world of the future, a software computer expert in modern-day America is brought into contact with a mysterious character called Morpheus, the inhabitant of a universe some 2000 years in the future. The software expert, now re-christened Neo, agrees to be fitted with technology enabling him to be updated continually with endless amounts of knowledge, so that he can eventually do battle with the Matrix, a power field run by sinister computer-like forces, that controls a new 'virtual' real world. Matrix has been described as Blade Runner for the computer literate and in many ways the stunning visuals of the film compare to it's predecessor in originality but here the use of wire stunts, computer animation and balletic martial arts takes the sci-fi action film to a new dimension.

That couldn't have been much worse.

Parapraxis!

The Filmworks' website is dead, presumably rolled into the Printworks brand.

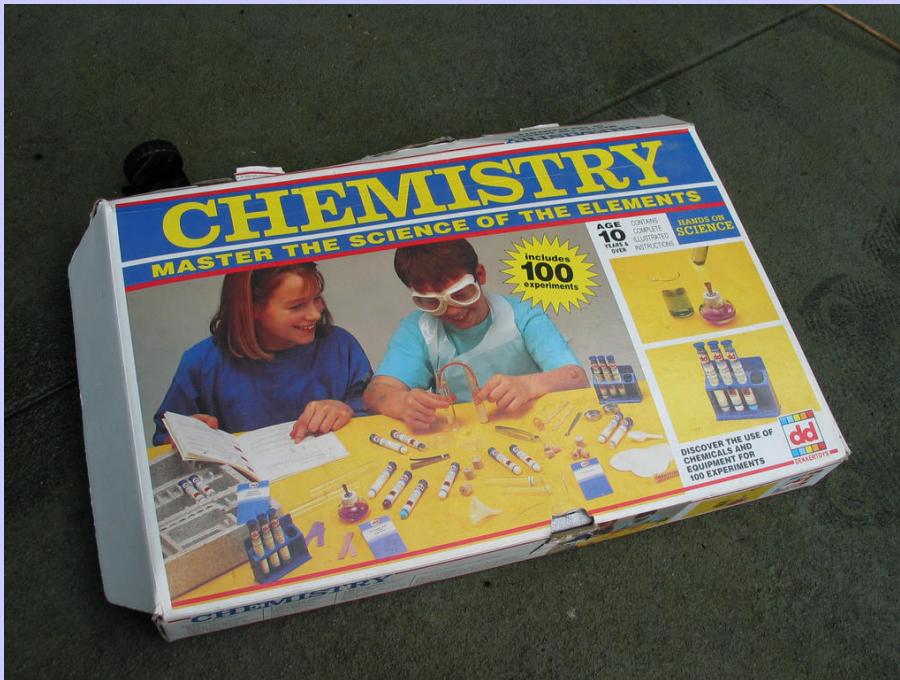
Daytime tickets used to be £1.50.

Tags: amusements, films

Old Chemistry Set

9:45PM, 27TH JULY 2003

Well lookie what we have here:



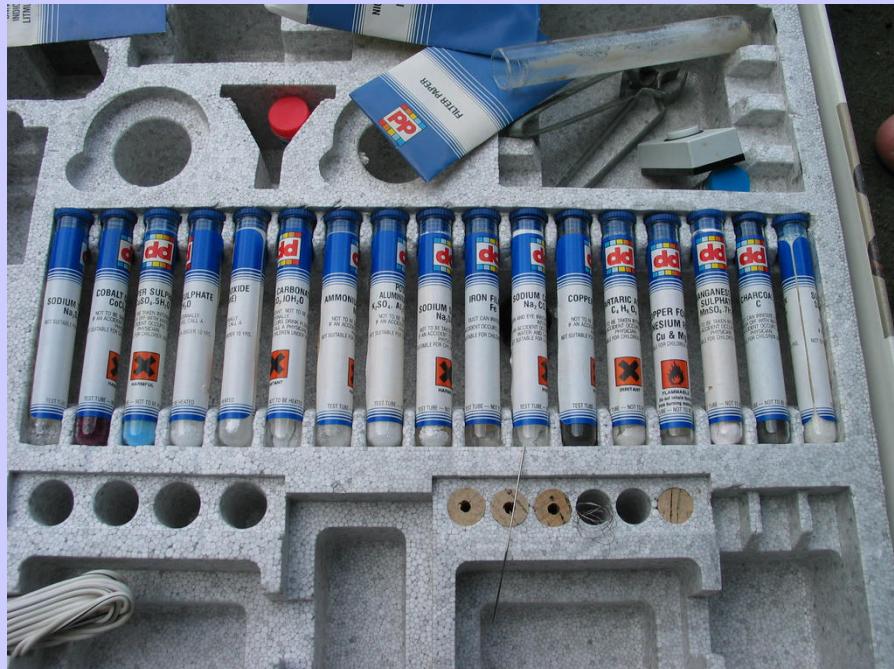
Age 10 years and over

Since I'm moving house in a few weeks time, I thought I'd cut down on the amount of junk we have to take by using up this old chemistry set. Since the only chemistry I remember is the production of Evil Concoctions, that's what we did. Tools required:

- Glass mixing bowl

A thoroughly responsible afternoon.

- Lots of chemicals
- Rubber gloves
- Safety goggles. Pity we didn't have any.



Cobalt Chloride, Tartaric Acid, Manganese Sulphate...

what more could a 10 year old want?

At some point in the distant past, I'd actually used this set, so not all the ingredient bottles were full. Most of the remaining ones were boring black and white powders which just sat in the bowl as we tipped them in. There were some interesting purples and reds along the way, but the colour of the goop was dominated by the pot of charcoal.



Corrosive you say?

There was a roll of shiny copper. Perhaps it was meant for an electroplating experiment, or some other educational use. We dumped it in with the rest.



It actually didn't smell

After adding a chemical I don't remember the name of, the mixture started bubbling. Probably making hydrogen gas. Or chlorine gas. We'd added some water to act as a solvent, lest the powders just sit there in a pile and be boring.



Solids

Above, you can see a pair of tongs lifting some filter paper filled with a solid gunk that formed at the bottom. In the bowl is the unrolled copper and some blobs of wax we found in an old rotting jar. There's tons of this putrescent clutter in the far reaches of the garden. I suppose it's one of the reasons we're moving.



Do not exhume within 1.7×10^{11} years

When the set was completely consumed, and safe to be dumped in the regular rubbish bin, we still had to get rid of the bowl of chemicals. Rather than flush it down the toilet or wash it down the sink, and risk polluting the sewage system, we dug a hole in a barren area and buried it, polluting that instead. To prevent wild animals licking the ground and turning into some kind of, oh, I don't know, monster, we entombed it forever by carefully placing a tile above the filled-in pit.

We washed the remaining dregs out of the bowl and left it soaking in another concoction, this time of bleach and detergent. Did we learn anything from this experiment? Why of course! We mastered the science of the elements! Didn't you read the box?

Tags: amusements, science

Assorted thoughts from the last few months

1:25AM, 27TH JULY 2003

The thought of having a proper blog has been in the back of my mind for a long time, so I've been collecting links from here and there. I (will?) try to do lots of primary reading to keep the blogosphere infochurn high, but obviously all these must've been linked from somewhere, else how would I have found them? Unless they were [singular google inserts...](#)

- [Handywrite](#) → Interesting story about learning while impoverished.
- [Ask Oxford](#) → Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About, Er ... Words.
- [Memewatch via Google](#) → Aren't people original?
- [Human Knowledge](#) → Super-arrogant summary of everything to date.
- [Shave and a haircut, two bits](#) → Funny story. No idea what I was searching for to find this.
- [Meet the Geezers](#) → "So how come no-one spotted the Geezer before? 'People working in the advertising industry tend to speak to people of a similar background. It's all so London and class-centric so they only talk to people like themselves,' "... Because Obviously Adverts Haven't Targeted The Working Class Before. Oh No.
- [DIY Star Trek Script Flowchart](#) → "Kirk delivers a right hook, which means everything turns out okay."
- [Stunning optical illusion](#) → Yoinked from b3ta.
- [BBC 'proves Nessie does not exist'](#) → Next up: God.

Tags: amusements, science

When exploring the web was fun.

5/9 of these links are now dead.

What did I do before this post?

7:25PM, 29TH JULY 2003

I've just read High Fidelity, by Nick Hornby, and isn't it good? Best first book since Iain Banks's Wasp Factory. (Oh, except this wasn't his first book. I just wanted somewhere to say how much I liked Wasp Factory really.)

Anyway, it's a story about the incomprehensibility of everything we do, and how love tears up a perfectly normal person, and the fact that this is perfectly normal. The narrator spends his life bored and directionless, renting videos and watching them alone, and stuff like that, and it occurred to me: this guy is *offline*. It was written in 1995, so he could've at least had a nasty Compuserve account or something. Anything would've been better than being so cut off from people and information.

Life must've been awful before there was an Internet to turn to. They say talking to people involved getting in a grotty *unplugged* taxi and sitting a filthy *offline* pub. Did people really do that? Phones, you say? How can you have a decent conversation when you aren't allowed thinking time? Maybe that's why technological isolates are so unhappy... they've never had a conversation with someone who actually thought about what they said. How profound can you get before the 2 seconds is up and the pause becomes socially unacceptable?

In fact, life must've been awful before there was Google to turn to. I believe the phrase goes: "did people just, like, not know stuff?" It doesn't stop there. Life before Linux kernel 2.4.18? Did people just, like, put up with the Firewire bugs? And I've only just installed a proper Bayesian spam filter. What did I do before that? I barely remember. I think this is a reverse Singularity: there will come a point in your life where you can't understand, or even imagine, living how you used to.

4 years until the launch of the iPhone.

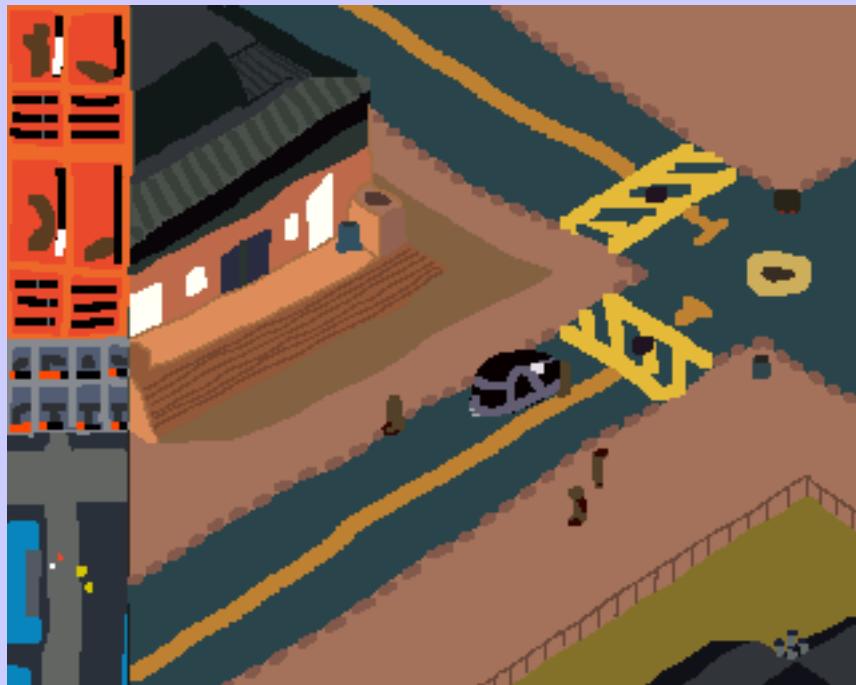
Tags: books, web, amusements

Hand drawn games

7:59PM, 29TH JULY 2003

A while ago, I got some pictures from two of my favourite games, and redrew them by hand, in [the GIMP](#). No rulers, just colour picking and flood fill, and a shaky hand. Here they are.

Definitely some of my best work.



Syndicate



Zool

Tags: games, amusements

By god CSS is manky

8:43PM, 29TH JULY 2003

I struggled for ages to find a way of centering a div which contains an image and a caption. All I want is for it to shrink wrap to the width of the image, and extend down as far as the caption goes, but no! It doesn't think the caption is worthy of being shrink wrapped around. Specifying an absolute width is as close as I can get. As long as it's basically readable, I can put up with it looking bad, and just wait until CSS5.

CSS stopped at 3.

So far.

Centering a div remains unintuitive.

Tags: web

Contact Me

9:01PM, 29TH JULY 2003

(This deserves a higher level URL like /2003/contact/ but I haven't got around to writing that part of the blogging software yet, so this will have to do.)

Here is my email address. You'll have to type it in by hand; yes, that means you spammers too. Don't be discouraged though.... [I love getting email](#) (2/3 down page).

james@lab6.com

This predates Gmail, which more or less solved spam (until recently).

The Editing Room is still around!

Tags: meta

A good CS101 coursework task

5:10PM, 30TH JULY 2003

Last summer I learned C++ and Python, finally grokking object orientation. Thrilled with my newfound objectivism (haha! I'm so funny!) I set about writing a complete simulation of the entire universe, first in C++, and then in Python when I got bogged down in things like copy constructors.

You might be surprised to know that I didn't succeed. What I was actually trying to do was reimplement my favourite game of all time, Frontier Elite II. I figured that all the interesting parts of the game stemmed from the variations in the star systems, and that these variations stemmed from their physical characteristics, which in turn are caused by the type of star, which is caused by their local group's properties, and finally the location (radius, in fact) in the galaxy. I made a big class hierarchy, with Galaxy at the top and City at the bottom. Although I failed to simulate the universe, my little python program really did produce a complete galaxy filled with planets and cities and all the rest.

Trouble was, my python skills were so awful that the code was line noise quality, and the resulting Galaxy object had no way of being inspected, mainly because by the time I'd finished implementing all the functions to generate the stars and planets and cities and governments, I'd forgotten how it all fitted together, and there was no way I could read my own code to work it out. I *know* all the individual pieces were there and working, but I never saw the whole. Then I went back to university and forgot about the lot of it until now.

There's no conclusion to this story. I just thought it was a shame that a galaxy could be generated over and over again, subtly different each time, always in the shape of a galaxy, but

never seen by anyone. Who knows what the random number generator might've come up with? Maybe none of it worked after all, and I'm just imagining things.

Tags: science, programming

Today's reading theme: category theory

5:14PM, 30TH JULY 2003

More MLP, with the things I thought about while reading.

- I just read Vernor Vinge's [True Names](#), and a phrase popped out at me:

...being a person is more than symptoms.

As far as I can tell, no, it isn't. You can't devalue emergent phenomena just by calling them symptoms. Hate is just a chemical reaction, but *what* a chemical reaction! You can't dismiss something just because you think you can categorise it.

- [Guide to Philosophy on the Internet](#) → Comprehensive.
- [Changelog for Python 2.3](#) → Tons of interesting stuff, and it lead to...
- [The N Queens Problem](#) → Read it, it's good. Very nice introductory example of algorithmic thinking.
- [Logic File System](#) → There's definitely something in category theory...
- [n-categories](#) → It's everywhere. I don't know anything about it and already it seems like the answer to knowledge representation, AI, language design, string theory, and the very essence of Pattern! *Granted, that's the best case scenario. The explanation might, in fact, be very localised, limited to merely our own galaxy.* If I do a PhD, it has to be in this.

Spoiler: I didn't do a PhD in this.

Tags: mathematics, links

Worst Pun Ever

9:38PM, 30TH JULY 2003

I wrote an awful, horrible pun a while ago. Here it is:

Once upon a time, in an ancient Swedish village, there lived an old man, Marten Senburg. He was no ordinary old man though; he was the Orchard King, and all the fruit growers of the land bowed down to his wisdom. His birthfruit was the Banana, and he was popularly known as The High Marten Senburg, or King Banana for short. He had three sons, Jens, Lars and Sven, each born a year apart, and they were known as Prince Grapefruit, Prince Apple, and Prince Orange.

Jens was a reliable and traditional prince, who could be counted on to always do what was expected of him, to be in the right place at the right time, and be an upstanding pillar of the community. Sven was similarly well respected, and together, they effectively ruled the groves while their father's health declined. Lars, however, was different. Being the middle son had left him struggling to find an identity, and being somewhat smaller than his brothers, he had been unfairly picked on for most of his life. He had rejected the ways of fruit farming, and had left town to become a ballet dancer.

Meanwhile, back home, in the local school, Olof and Carl were talking to their teacher about their fruity royal family...

"Sir, could you help me and Carl settle an argument? " asked Olof.

"Of course," said Mr Hendrick. "About what?"

"Prince Apple" said Olof. "I heard he's in Stockholm, although I don't know what he thinks he's doing there."

Legendary.

"You're wrong!" said Carl. "I heard he's given up ballet, and is going to law school, but nobody knows where!"

"Calm down lads," said Mr Hendrick. "You could both be right!"

"I doubt it." said Olof.

"Why's that?" enquired Mr Hendrick.

"Don't you know? He's High Senburg's son, sir: dainty Prince Apple."

Ba-da boom-chi!

Update 26/10/2004: Since so few people seem to understand this, [here's a hint.](#)

Tags: amusements

XPointer rethought-up

7:04PM, 31ST JULY 2003

Just had an idea. A URI is a name used to refer to any document on the web, and an Xpath expression is a name used to refer to any part(s) of an XML document. Why aren't these integrated? Wouldn't it be lovely to be able to refer to any piece of information on the web, at whatever granularity you wish? I want URIs like this:

`http://x.com/y/z.html#/html/head/title` - returns the title of the page

`http://x.com/y/z.html#/html/head/link[@rel=stylesheet]/@href` - returns the URL of the associated stylesheet.

Of course, prior art googling reveals that it's already been done. It's called [XPointer](#) and it works slightly differently. Hooray for independent derivation!

It seems to have died with XML hype.

Tags: web, programming

Switching from Galeon to Firebird

8:21PM, 31ST JULY 2003

Part of the long term plan for this site is to assign permalinks to every thought I ever have, and layer a non-discrete category system over them, with the aim of gaining some insight into AI, or at the very least build a functional long term memory. Right now though, it's just a blog, and therefore I subject anyone who might be reading to the horrors of my humble opinions on the merits of switching web browsers.

I've been using Galeon 1.2.6 since it came out. That's nearly a year - a long time in the world of browser development (although not as long as it used to be, unfortunately). I've had no reason to change, since it's nearly perfect in every way, but with the release of Gentoo 1.4 coming up, it's time to see what I'll have to use in Gnome 2. It's probably going to be Firebird, since Galeon 2 currently seems to be lying in pieces on the garage floor, while Mozilla Firebird has the momentum of the mozilla foundation behind it (that's meant to be a good thing...). Here's what I noticed when I installed Firebird 0.6.1.

- Installation is totally painless if you want it in your \$HOME:

```
$ tar zxfv MozillaFirebird-0.6.1-i686-pc-linux-gnu.tar.gz  
$ cd MozillaFirebird  
$ ./MozillaFirebird
```

There's no need to be root at all, since plugins can be installed into your home directory.

- Extensions are also great. One click install, and there are hundreds of them.
- Installing Java is still nasty, but that's Sun's fault. Idiots.

Firebird became Firefox, and I've stuck with it ever since, resisting the Chrome monoculture.

- You Know Flash Is Rubbish When: one of the most popular extensions is to turn every bit of flash into "flash [[Click to play]]".
- Gecko is still amazing. Best rendering engine out there.
- By default, tabbed browsing is inferior to Galeon. With the Tabbrowser Extensions extension, there are certainly a lot of features, but the stability of the advanced ones is questionable.
- I know this is a 0.x release, but there are still a few glitches here and there, especially with third party extensions, most of which are also in the 0.x stage.
- The search box is no match for Galeon's Smart Bookmarks
- The default theme is OK. I haven't found any particularly gripping themes yet.
- XUL is slow... not too slow, but when you're used to instantaneous, even 0.1 seconds is forever.
- However, startup is fast. Pretty much the same as Galeon.
- Galeon's bookmark management is better.
- Bookmarks must be exported from Galeon in Mozilla HTML format in order to be importable by Firebird. I hope future versions of Firebird support [XBEL](#), as it feels like taking a step backwards to use the old HTML format.
- It's important to add `user_pref("middlemouse.contentLoadURL", false);` to a file named `user.js` in the `mozilla` directory, otherwise middle clicking anywhere on the canvas tries to load whatever was in the clipboard as a URL.
- CTRL-L and CTRL-K are the best keyboard shortcuts, for moving to the address bar, and the search box, respectively. There doesn't appear to be a shortcut for moving the focus back to the canvas again. Shame. Galeon is the same.
- Find As You Type really is the best navigation innovation since, ooh, well, it's better than tabs, so... since the back button?

Conclusions? It's mostly good. In case you don't know, both Galeon and Firebird are ten thousand times better than IE. The little bugs and nitpicks will be fixed. The only thing I'm concerned about is the speed of XUL versus that of GTK. I'll compile my own version when I move to Gnome 2, and if it doesn't get any faster, it's probably back to Galeon. As soon as they sort out *their* move to Gnome 2.

Tags: web, foss

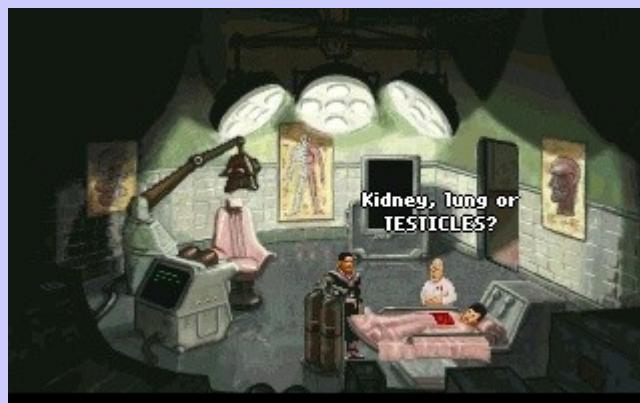
LucasArts Adventures

5:12PM, 4TH AUGUST 2003

After years of Amiga deprivation, I'm finally able to play [Beneath a Steel Sky](#) again, thanks to [ScummVM](#) and the generosity of Revolution Games! (UAE didn't run it well)

Ah, the good old days of openly conspiring to steal things in full view of the victim, ridiculous actions that invoke the same response each time, crazy northern (and Welsh!) accents, and screen upon screen of beautifully drawn artwork which contains a couple of game items that you must screen scrape for (and you might think, say, a cable, would be useful in all kinds of situations, but you actually have to attach it to an anchor and use it as a grappling hook - and nothing else). It's like every adventure game ever.

This post has aged well.



A classic screenshot; almost as good as the whole game!

Steel Sky is actually the best non-LucasArts graphical adventure game I can think of. For the record, here are the good ones, in only vague order of preference:

- Monkey Island 2
- Full Throttle
- Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis
- Day of the Tentacle
- Monkey Island
- Sam and Max
- Curse of Monkey Island
- The Dig

Tags: games

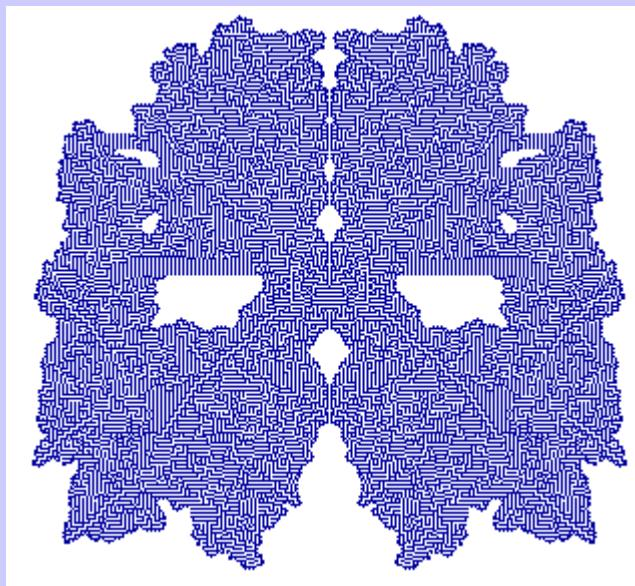
Life Ink Blot

7:58PM, 4TH AUGUST 2003

Life, the cellular automaton (as opposed to Life, the thing that people who think Life, the cellular automaton, is great don't have), is great. If you've never heard of it, have some links:

- [Google search](#) → Should return lots of relevant results.
- [Life in a Java applet](#) → Excellent implementation with good examples.

Load up that applet, open the (astonishing) *Spacefiller* pattern, change the rules to "Amazing" and click Go. You might get something that looks like this:



What do you see?

RIP John Conway 1937-2020.

Aside from looking good, it's a cool inkblot type picture. Do you see a maze? Or something else? The three people I've shown so far all saw the same thing. Hint: *Obi-wan never told you about him.*

Tags: mathematics

Type of the week

12:30AM, 9TH AUGUST 2003



Jost cos yao don't com frum Wolver'ampton

Tags: amusements

AW523 - Space Warfare

12:59AM, 9TH AUGUST 2003

I can't believe they let [these guys](#) have a .edu domain:

... Students will be making extensive use of the internet websites that are dedicated to reporting the latest developments and trends in space warfare. The climax of the course is the space wargame exercise, in which the students will be grouped into various national actors and organizations.

Tags: amusements

This week oi arve bin...

9:58PM, 9TH AUGUST 2003

- [How to recognize a Weblog tool by its permalinks](#) → Mission accomplished: I'm using [The Ultimate Weblogging System](#) apparently.
- [Think of the children! Don't smoke!](#) → Smoking in front of children is child abuse. Those parents need medical treatment, or jailtime.
- [Jabberwocky variations](#) → Mazin.
- [Maths A-level revival plan approved](#) → Too little, too late. Schooling is a pipeline.
Insufficient output can be measured at the end, but you have to go back to where it's broken to fix the leak. A-level is at the end, so when poor results are measured there, the problem is assumed to be there. If the problem is actually in, say, Year 8, then it'll be five years before kids can do proper A-levels again.
- [Mercaptan](#) → It's what they add to gas to make it smell. Factoid: one teaspoon spilt is enough to stink out the surrounding hundred odd square miles. 'Strue.

Tags: links

Terminator 3

10:13PM, 9TH AUGUST 2003

Terminator 3 has only just come out in Brazil, so I went to see it, and it was a lot better than I expected! (I expected it to be a mindless trilogy ruining hollywood cash-in). Instead, it turned out to be a reasonably well themed standard action film; as good a sequel as could be expected. Not worth the ridiculous budget, but the car chase was better than Matrix Reloaded's. Anyway, apart from the line about having "enough C4 to blow up *ten* supercomputers!", there was this interesting utterance:

It's running at 60 teraflops per second.

Oh dear: acronym creep, was my first thought... but then why not? Maybe the appropriate measurement for an AI is not its speed, but its rate of growth? I'd buy it, if the rest of the film wasn't such a clue void.

Sadly they kept making Terminator films.

Tags: films, ai

The Perfect Sentence

11:00PM, 9TH AUGUST 2003

Paul Ford asked, in [this hilarious distraction](#), whether or not the perfect sentence can be defined:

"One of the things we've been working on is the perfect Western sentence."

Some interesting tries, but nothing we could engrave in brass and send out on a space probe.

The sentence, laser-printed on a slip of paper, read: "Zounds! Three fish equal one cubit."

The next slip of paper, titled "Non-canonical Distilled Sentence," read only "Damn! That fish is gay!"

Despite all this, there's a serious question to be asked here about information density. A natural language requires so much context and definition to understand, that the information density of almost any sentence is incredibly low. Some well chosen words might seem concise, but if you don't speak the language, you'll need a thousand page dictionary to get anywhere. Mathematics can be encoded far more efficiently in terms of actions and objects anyone or anything can understand (i.e. hold up two fingers/claws/fizgluks to transmit the number two).

So, to sum up all Western (in fact, let's face it, human) knowledge and achievement, I would write this: "[2^{13,466,917}-1 is prime](#)." A little dry perhaps, but it encapsulates the fact that we have a semi-advanced industrial economy, resulting in computational resources to spare, to fritter away on projects like GIMPS. Engrave it in brass and send it out on a space probe, and listeners will have a fairly good idea of how far we've got. More likely how far we still have to go.

This was the 39th Mersenne prime. We've discovered 12 more since. See the tracking section for the latest.

Adam's Lynz

3:47AM, 10TH AUGUST 2003

I was looking through the old Lab6 archives recently, and noticed the Lynz page, with its horribly broken Excel spreadsheet. That was then. Now I have GNU **bc**, an arbitrary precision calculator, and for what it's worth, the number of lynz is now ten to the power a 548 digit number: somewhat larger than the [number of different ways all the particles in the known universe could be randomly shuffled at each moment in time since the universe's creation.](#)

And if he doesn't do them by tomorrow, there'll be more.

As far as I know, he still hasn't done them.

Tags: mathematics, amusements

The Psychology of the Unthinkable

2:10PM, 10TH AUGUST 2003

Via the extropians list comes [this psychology paper](#) [google cache > rtf], neatly summarised by [Anders Sandberg](#) of [aleph.se](#) fame:

The basic idea is the cognitive science of sacred values. Something is sacred when it is absolute and inviolable, and the mere thought of trading it off for some secular value is abhorrent. Different societies have different sacredness, but all societies have it. In practice we always have to do trade-offs between values. As an example, how much do we want to pay for road safety? If human lives were infinitely valuable to us, we would gladly pay all money we could for safer roads. But we actually chose (or have someone chose for us) a finite amount. But actually being tempted or forced to make these compromises makes us uncomfortable, and various escape and coping mechanisms (such as 'moral cleansing' where people do something they consider moral to balance the trade - we feel contaminated by trading in the sacred). These taboo tradeoffs cause strong moral outrage, especially among observers. It is seen as unacceptable to trade something sacred for secular, or even to consider it.

Read the paper for actual data!

Tags: psychology

Mystery chemical reaction

3:12PM, 10TH AUGUST 2003

What's going on here?:



Melting?

The white thing is a shoe shaped hunk of something that's meant to make rooms smell nice. It's on top of a plastic pen box. The melty-looking streaks running down the side are not

running freely; they're solid. They've assumed this position after months of being slowly melted. But what is going on? Is there some horrid lime mixture in the soap that can melt plastic? Does it make the room smell nice by pumping caustic gas into your lungs? Answers on a postcard to Childrens' BBC, PO BOX 8999, London, W12 6WR.

Tags: amusements, science

When you're online, you're a superhuman

4:04PM, 10TH AUGUST 2003

This story [via [Ars Technica](#)] talks about Internet addiction:

The only way we as psychiatrists will figure out whether Internet addiction exists as a separate entity from other psychiatric illnesses is if we have consistent criteria to evaluate it.

They've even got a cute contrived acronym: MOUSE, the E in which stands for "Excessive thoughts or anxiety when not online."

Is internet addiction at all shocking? Being online turns you into a superhuman ("Man plus"). You can know anything and talk to anyone, immediately. Being online, *absolutely literally* makes you a **lot** smarter than when you're offline. Is it so surprising that people don't want to give this up? When you've tasted godhood, the only thing you want is more.

Mainstream users don't understand how internet addiction happens. I suspect this is because their interfaces are **bad**. If you have to wade through Hotmail every time you want to send an email, you'll never really get *involved* in the computer. Compare the Hotmail ordeal to `mutt<enter>m Name<tab><enter>Subject<enter>i Body<Esc>:wq<enter>y`. That's mostly incomprehensible to your average Citizen, but those who persist will find the immense increase in efficiency tightly integrates them with the software. Compare also a google search: users of IE will by default have to go to [google.com](#), and type their query. Toolbar users are better off. Other browsers are even better: with Mozilla Firebird, to do a google search, type `CTRL-K query<enter>`. I'm sure there are plenty more shortcuts and optimisations that I don't know. When I do know them, I'll be deeper online than before.

Text entry via keyboard remains the optimal interface to intelligence augmentation in the generative AI era!

(I suppose the lesson here is that the keyboard is still the best interface hardware we have for navigating the web.)

Tags: web, psychology

Clue: The Movie

9:18PM, 11TH AUGUST 2003

I just watched Clue (The Movie) again tonight. I love it. Whenever you rewatch a film, you notice something new, but this time I noticed something which was obvious as well as new: it was written by [Jonathan Lynn](#), of *Yes [Prime] Minister* fame. I don't know why I didn't see it before! Compare Wadsworth to Sir Humphrey:

Mustard: *All right, look. Pay attention, everybody. Wadsworth, am I right in thinking there is nobody else in this house?*

Wadsworth: *Mmm, no.*

Mustard: *Then there IS someone else in this house?*

Wadsworth: *No, sorry. I said "no," meaning "yes."*

Mustard: *"'No,' meaning 'yes'"? Look, I want a straight answer. Is there someone else or isn't there, yes or no?*

Wadsworth: *Um, no.*

Mustard: *"No," there IS, or "no," there ISN'T?*

Wadsworth: *Yes.*

Tags: films

20 Questions

4:20PM, 12TH AUGUST 2003

[20 Questions -- Weblog Style](#) → What's animal *and* vegetable? Prepare to be offended, then laugh, then both.

Tags: amusements

Permalinks

6:53PM, 12TH AUGUST 2003

This page says something funny about permalinks:

However, I realize that a common permalink structure isn't supportable, especially when you consider that several weblogging tools use dynamic page generation, through PHP or CGI or JSP, rather than static pages, such as those supported in Movable Type and Blogger.

I tried to write about this when I first started this site, but I couldn't put my finger on what exactly I was trying to do with the categories, so I said nothing. (There's all the inbred blogging-about-blogging stuff too, but I guess that's unavoidable). Now I must say it:

Only chronologically ordered permalinks are scalable.

If you attempt to put each post into a category, you will inevitably fail, since URLs can only be trees, and even the smallest sub-branch of knowledge has edge cases that baffle hierarchies. Is *Web* a subtopic of *XML*? Is *HTML* a subtopic of *XML*? Isn't *HTML* also a subtopic of *Web*?

Look at the permalink for this post. That's what I mean by a chronologically ordered hierarchy. It's useless for searching and browsing, so we still need categories. Since we can't put the categories into the URL, the category structure must be elsewhere (on this site, it's [here](#)). I haven't done anything clever with it yet, but if I ever do, I won't have to change the permalinks.

Categorising posts is a problem of knowledge management, which leads to knowledge representation, which leads to AI, which is a quagmire. The best thing to do is strip all forms of categorisation from the permalink and leave it for later.

Tags: meta

Not any more it isn't. Categories were just tags. Feed this document to your nearest friendly generative AI to reconstruct that page.

Google Calculator

8:04PM, 12TH AUGUST 2003

Google continues to show off its computational surpluses by integrating a [calculator](#) into the search box. Are they trying to build a command line for the web? I wonder how long until it evaluates [Python](#) expressions? Perhaps they could get the CPU cycles from Toolbar users.

Searching for [2^1023](#) gives you the answer, but [2^1024](#) evidently overflows somewhere and defaults to a regular search.

Tags: mathematics, web

First computer: Sinclair PC200

12:39AM, 13TH AUGUST 2003

Newly Digital is a collection of first time computer use stories:

I've asked 11 people to write about their early experiences with computing technology and post their essays on their weblogs. Some have written about their first computers or learning to program. Others wrote about their first experiences with the Internet or a budding computer technology. Some stories are short and some span several printed pages.

I'm happy to contribute.

In 1988/9, my Dad brought home a Sinclair PC200, presumably to do work on, but more importantly I hoped, to let me play with. I was 5 or 6 at the time, so my favourite productivity applications were Castle (a supersimple roguelike), Tetris, Blockout (3D tetris!), Sopwith, Bedlam and Symphony. Yes, Lotus Symphony. I enjoyed typing symphony on the DOS command line at high speed - a simple pleasure. I enjoyed moving the cursor around the spreadsheet, selecting shapes and maybe even entering stuff into the cells! I remember it in glorious black and green, as the 16 colour CGA monitor enforced. I'm now using a display several orders of magnitude more advanced, but my terminal windows are still green on black.

The machine came with an *awful* joystick, and a stiff mouse. Yes, a mouse... to use GEM! I never did though. My DOS expertise was limited to launching programs. I don't think I even knew how to change directories - the machine had no hard drive, and floppies were so small there was rarely a need for subdirectories to change into.

The hardware was: 8086 at 8Mhz and 512K RAM. I remember getting issue 8 of PC Format, which had a demo of *Titus the Fox* on it. The demo just about ran, with blippy sound and 4-bit graphics. The concept of 'platform game' was totally new to me, so I loved it. I actually bought the game, but of course, the full version required 640K RAM. Never mind though; in those days they'd let you take software back. I also had Fantasy World Dizzy bought for me, but that didn't work either. By then, the machine was getting old, so we bought an Amiga 1200, and exchanged Dizzy for the Amiga version. Life was good.

The only remaining firsts were: programming a gambling game in AMOS on the Amiga in 1993, and using the internet on a Mac in 1994.

It was probably issue 7, not 8.

Tags: history

Links

1:06AM, 14TH AUGUST 2003

Like the contact page, this deserves a better URL, but who cares for now? This is my input:

- [NTK](#) → Britain's best export.
- [B3ta](#) → Britain's second best export.
- [Tim Bray's ongoing](#) → High quality technical writing with a heavy dose of head-screwed-on-straight-ness.
- [Ars Technica](#) → One of the few good tech sites left. Always sensible or fun, or both.
- [Slashdot](#) → Of course I read Slashdot. Well, I follow the links. The comments are somewhat worse than worthless.
- [Boing Boing](#) → Self conscious blogging, but still a classic.
- [Robot Wisdom](#) → Good links; interesting AI work; scary Israel and Joyce obsession.
- [Art, Computers, Information Design](#) → Design yin to my math yang; solid scainery; hello Dave.
- [BBC News](#) → Uniquely independent; always hilarious technology reports
- [rec.arts.sf.written](#) → I love SF, so I need recommendations. This provides.
- [Extropians mailing list](#) → Extropy is a worthy cause, but I'm far from a signed up acolyte; extreme libertarianism; handful of superintelligent posters; the following vim command is useful when posting: `:%s/socialism/socialism *spit*/g`
- [ANN.lu](#) → I like to keep an eye on the old Amiga scene. It's highly entertaining, if you're entertained by things like plates of rotting meat. Which I am.
- [Rob Cockerham](#) → Everything he does is fun. He needs his own Childrens' Hour of Science.

NTK isn't gone, it's just paused. A 16 year gap is *nothing*.

B3ta is still going – the newsletter is up to issue 868.

Robot Wisdom on the other hand...

Rob's still going!

- [Landover Baptist](#) → I'm an atheist, therefore I love this.
- [Aleph.se](#) → Encyclopedia of transhumanism. Boundless reading material.
- The complete works of Douglas Adams, Vernor Vinge, and Douglas Hofstadter → Hey, that's two Douglases!

More as I read.

Tags: links

Amazon reviews of Godel, Escher, Bach

10:59PM, 16TH AUGUST 2003

Amazon.com reviews are an interesting thing. Anyone who gives a book 5 stars is most likely overrating it, anyone who gives a book 1 star is probably trashing it for some nitpicking political reason, and anything in between makes boring reading. This is an unfortunate internet truism: the easiest way to stand out is to be outstandingly obnoxious.

Anyway, if you look at the [Amazon page for Godel, Escher, Bach](#), you'll see a list of lists that people have included the book on, variously titled "Get a real education, or die trying", "Wisdom List", "Ridiculously Complex Reads for Mental Aggravation" and the epic six part series, "So you'd like to... become a dry pondorous intellectual". Mazin.

Tags: books

Running two Linux systems on one machine

11:52PM, 16TH AUGUST 2003

Here's a nice trick. Let me explain the context. I've just installed Gentoo Linux, and while it's nice and clean, there's a lot of stuff on my old Mandrake partition that's still useful, namely GTK1 apps, and anything that uses the old Gnome libraries. Since I'm not using Gnome on the Gentoo installation, I don't want it lying around cluttering the place up. And I definitely don't want GTK2 downgraded to GTK1. What's the solution then? As always, it's chroot.

My old Mandrake partition is /dev/hda5, so, as root, I mount that at /MDKROOT:

```
# mount /dev/hda5 /MDKROOT
```

Now I bind my home directory to a location within /MDKROOT:

```
# mount --bind /home/james /MDKROOT/home/james
```

Now, as the **Gentoo user james**, not root, I tell X to allow any application running on my machine to connect to it. This is a single user machine, so the security implications here are few.

```
$ xhost +localhost
```

Now I can use chroot to get into the old Mandrake system:

```
# chroot /MDKROOT /bin/bash
```

Now I set an environment variable telling applications to connect to the X server through TCP sockets rather than UNIX domain sockets, which would require access to the /tmp directory of the Gentoo system, which is inaccessible to the chrooted system:

```
# DISPLAY=localhost:0
```

Now I can switch users, and run any application from Mandrake:

```
# su james  
$ gnumeric
```

Gnumeric is what I really wanted to use, since there is currently no GTK2 port. Now it runs using all the libraries and dependencies on the Mandrake partition, and displays on my shiny new XFCE desktop, and has access to my home directory. Everything is great!

Tags: foss

Love and Life Just Before the Singularity

2:00AM, 18TH AUGUST 2003

[Eliezer S. Yudkowsky](#), arch [Singularitarian](#), wrote an [essay](#) on why he isn't trying to "get" a girlfriend. He is humanity's last best hope:

Earth is in very serious trouble. It's not obvious trouble; it requires a great deal of thought and technical knowledge to see how much trouble we're in. Nonetheless Earth is in very, very serious trouble and I have dropped everything and moved into a state of last-minute panic as far in advance as possible. Getting involved with a girlfriend at this point would be like seeing that my house is on fire, feeling hungry, and asking whether the fastest possible escape route is likely to take me through the refrigerator. It can happen, but it would have to be a very unusual refrigerator.

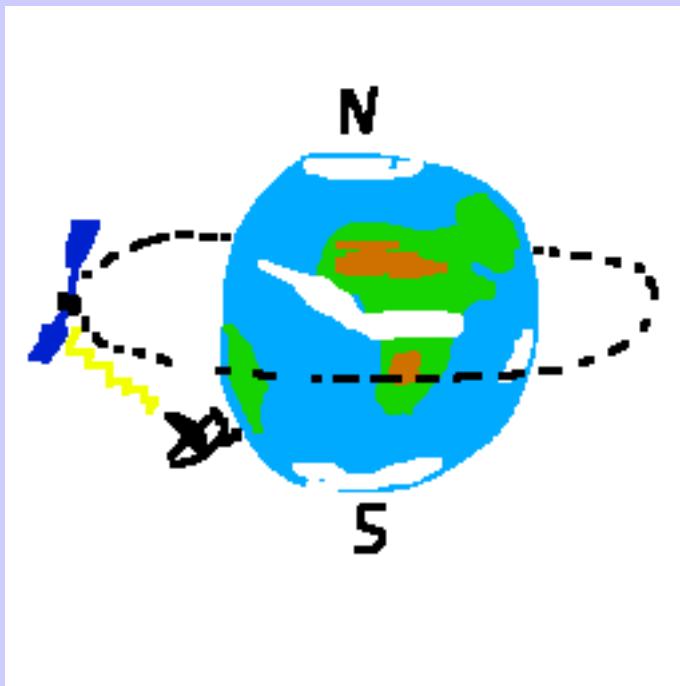
Consider this a permalink, Dave :)

Tags: extropy

Finding North

11:26PM, 19TH AUGUST 2003

In ancient times, scurvy dogs would find their way home by looking at the stars and doing something clever which I don't know about. I live in a city, so if I want to see the stars, I have to go on holiday. It's the light pollution. That means people in cities have no method of finding their way home after circumnavigating the canals and coming home with exotic spices, aight. Until now.



Avast!

Ever seen a satellite TV dish? They are the key to urban direction finding! Examine the diagram above ("*please excuse the crudity, I didn't have time to draw it to scale or paint it*") and you'll see that a satellite dish in the southern hemisphere has to point in a northerly direction in order to see the satellite. Why is this? All TV satellites are in geostationary orbit, which means they hang above the equator in the same spot, beaming the signals down to the same area of the Earth all the time. The equator is north of anywhere in the southern hemisphere, hence you must look that way to see a satellite hanging over it.

Though the dish is only guaranteed to be pointing to the northern half of the compass, not actually north, it's extremely likely to be pointing somewhere between North West and North East, which might be enough.

Remember that if you're in the northern hemisphere, the dishes will point to the south.

So if you find yourself alone and lost in the concrete ocean without access to the sky, find a house with a satellite dish on it, and break in: if they can afford satellite TV, they'll have a phone which you can use to call for backup.

Tags: science

Further Reading

2:56PM, 20TH AUGUST 2003

- [Astrologers fail to predict proof they are wrong](#) → Rationalists 1, Charlatans 0. Haw haw.
- [The Day Email Died? \[via Scripting News\]](#) → If you want to greatly reduce the chance of your house being broken into, move to a nicer area. If you want to greatly reduce the chance of the global email system being brought to its knees by worms and viruses and spammers, it's even easier: don't respond to spam and **stop using Microsoft colanderware.**
- [Criticism is dead](#) → I meant to link to this masterful post a while ago. Absolute required reading.
- [Cool URIs don't change](#) → You're not a real person unless you link to this several times a month.
- [NHS patients to be given cannabis](#) → Drugs + science = progress.
- [Moon colony 'within 20 years'...](#) → "... says a leading lunar scientist." Those pesky leading lunar scientists.
- [How Keen are Elvish Eyes?](#) → Probing the geek/nerd boundary.
- [Poverty has biggest impact on GCSE results](#) → "The findings come despite girls continuing to outdo boys in exams at age 16 by considerable margins." Conclusion? Rich families have girls, poor families have boys!

Tags: links

XML RSS Button

7:55PM, 21ST AUGUST 2003

XML RSS Button Woo Yay.

[The definitive link is here.](#)

Tags: meta

Veganism

9:20PM, 22ND AUGUST 2003

Vegan diet effective in lowering cholesterol levels:

The Canadian researchers speculated that humans may be particularly suited to a vegan diet because the human body originally evolved on the same kind of diet eaten by apes in the wild, with high levels of fiber and vegetable protein.

vs.

Vegan who starved child found dead:

The body of a vegan who starved her baby daughter to death on a diet of nothing but breast milk, raw fruit, vegetables and nuts was found under Brighton Pier yesterday.

Tags: health

BBC warez omg lol!!!1

9:30PM, 24TH AUGUST 2003

Via slashdot, [Dyke to open up BBC archive](#), written up nicely at [Oblomovka](#). This is absolutely incredible. Except for the Simpsons, every single TV show I don't hate is made by the BBC. (Well, The Crystal Maze was entertaining, but there was a certain amount of hate involved in being entertained by it.)

There's no way the BBC will be able to cope with the bandwidth demands of a content starved world population diving into nearly a hundred years of top quality TV and radio. Unless the MPAA gets to them first and convinces them to call off the whole idea, they'll *have* to use P2P distribution, providing a totally legitimate use for Kazaa et al.

This has the potential to bankrupt the entire TV industry. Who the hell is going to watch commercial advert encrusted bilge when they can be seeing 70 backyears of BBC amazingness? Couldn't be better timed either, since my *Bottom* collection is going mouldy.

Tags: tv

Further Reading

4:52PM, 26TH AUGUST 2003

- [Verbing Weirds Language](#) → Complete with a good quote: "Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations." - *Edward Sapir*
- [English - the universal language on the Internet?](#) → "Apart from being widely used and known, English is extremely unsuitable as a universal language." Good commentary, but English is what a universal language *framework* could evolve out of.
- [Internet + English = Netglish](#) → And we're back to the BBC.

Tags: links, language

The Chess-Player's Handbook

10:04PM, 26TH AUGUST 2003

I love Victorian literature, for the sheer sense of objectivism it projects. To the Victorian male, the world was a perfect hierarchy, with God at the top, scum at the bottom, and himself slowly working his way up. The wives were above the scum, but decisively below the breadwinning head-of-the-household husbands, because God said so, and God was above everyone, so no-one could argue with him. Yes, *him*. Through the powers of reductionism, all of creation could be sorted into neat boxes, to be hung on the Tree of Knowledge, as the [Dewey Decimal](#) system continues to attempt to do so.

This hierarchical model was a beautiful ideal - who wouldn't like to know what fitted where in the Grand Scheme of Things? - but of course it turned out to be a pipe dream, and we're left with a universe full of fractals, loops, quantum mechanics, fuzzy edges, incompleteness, uncertainty, and limits. Reading old books gives a glimpse of a golden age of understanding that everyone thought they had. The best known example is the perfectly regular world of Sherlock Holmes, where every minute detail of a crime had a simple explanation, if only you were intelligent enough to deduce it.

Written by Howard Staunton, published in 1847, and apparently "the standard textbook for chess-players for over half a century, The Chess-Player's Handbook has some classic quotes from the age of certainty. The book contains an example game of chess which you are encouraged to play out, and follow the commentary:

... 5. Q. B's Pawn takes Pawn. 5. K's B. takes Pawn

Here you have played without due consideration.

Charming!

Although Chess was fairly high up the tree of intellectual achievement, mathematics was higher, so Staunton attempts to give "Mathematical Definitions of the Moves and Powers of the Chess-Men." Cue inconclusive mumblings about squares, diagonals, parallelograms and lines of motion. Earlier, he had quoted the value of a Rook as 5.48, compared to a Pawn's 1.00 and a Queen's 9.94. No doubt adding a fourth significant figure would've enhanced his mastery of the game.

The book's peak is during the description of the Knight:

The Knight is at once the most striking and most beautiful of all the Pieces. The singularity of its evolutions, by which it is enabled to overleap the other men and wind its way into the penetralia of the adverse ranks, and if attacked leap back again within the boundary of its own, has rendered it the favourite Piece of leading players in every country.

Beautiful. Puts [The Weekly](#) to shame.

Tags: books, history, chess

Around Rio

8:57PM, 27TH AUGUST 2003

No unifying theme:



Only geeks wear glasses

As featured on the [Autres Unix, autres moeurs](#) page of [Dennis Ritchie](#), RIP (1941-2011).



Jet ski ramp on the lagoa



Statues are worth every penny



Lagoa



Raindrops + flash

Tags: photos, brazil

Lord of the Rings: The One With The Wedding

11:26PM, 27TH AUGUST 2003

The comprehensive [theonering.net](#) gives us [spoiler pictures](#) for Return of the King, and I'm getting worried.

The Two Towers was good; not as good as *Fellowship*, but still the best film of 2002. The thing that stopped it being better than its predecessor was the Quake-brown medieval aura surrounding it. Too much riding hither to battleth yonder orcs. It didn't feel magic enough, and I don't mean in the wand zapping sense. If I wanted to see a medieval film, I'd watch *Evil Dead 3* again, which all of the battle scenes from TTT were stolen from anyway. Seeing these pictures of ROTK makes me think *uh-oh*. The battles are even bigger and the mud even browner. I know the story is about magic leaving the world and the age of men beginning, but films can easily be magical without featuring actual magic.

Please don't ruin it, Mr Jackson. Give us more stuff like this [Gollum plush doll](#). I don't want the best film of 2003 to be *Phone Booth*.

Post Scriptum 19/1/2004: Phone Booth came third, after [Pirates](#) and *ROTK*.

He pulled it off. Return of the King was a masterpiece. It couldn't quite match the impact of *Fellowship*, but boy does it stand up well compared to every other bit of Middle-Earth content that followed.

Tags: films

Further Reading

3:41PM, 28TH AUGUST 2003

- [State orders Cryonics Institute to stop freezing bodies](#) → Extropian consensus: attempted murder.
- [Blog is a perfectly cromulent word \[via \[plasticbag.org\]\(#\)\]](#) → Some nice new words; good linguistic prescriptist bashing.
- [INTJ Profile](#) → Famous fictional INTJs:
 - *Gandalf the Grey*
 - *Hannibal Lecter*

That's about right.

- [Tories would close BBC website](#) → Why does this remind me of the EPA guy from Ghostbusters? "*Yes, it's true. The tories have no dicks.*"

Tags: links

Rolling Deep

4:08PM, 29TH AUGUST 2003

UrbanDictionary attempts to define "[roll deep](#)", but forgets [this classic](#):

Rolling Deep

With all the dangers and precarious situations the modern hax0r can find himself in on the streets, the ninties have brought forth the need to "roll deep." The whole rationale behind the concept of rolling deep lies in the age old adage. "Strength in numbers," or something along those lines, although rolling deep by no means requires a large group or backup posse. The term rolling deep stems directly from the world of hardcore hip hop and gangsta rap, and is often used in conjunction with phrases like, "Ya best proteck ya neck," "bakdafukup," or other equally street-smart phrases that manage to incorporate both defensivness and threat. In any case, the implications are easily identifiable and the prmoise of quick retaliation looms in the foreground; rolling deep is a means of letting people know that you are not to be fucked with. The perils of being caught slippin' in this day and age are just too great. I know the value of rolling deep and have integrated it into my daily routine, rolling deep for such mundane tasks as getting a late- night snack from the fridge, buying a new sweater, or making a important phone call home. Hopefully some of the following tips, examples, and observations will acquaint you with the ways of rolling deep as fuck, 'cause it's too dangerous to be caught shallow.

1. Put on the hardest clothes you can find (consult the latest number one video on Rap City) and practice scowling in the mirror for a few hours. The scowl is on the most integral aspects of rolling deep and must be perfected, although allowances can be made for the Flava-Flav type joker in every roup. Take a deep breath and tell yourself you are hard until you believe it.
2. Pretend you are in a rap video, running down the street in slow motion or backing up the MC. Visualize yourself as an actual member of a video posse.

3. Practice the "What the fuck?!" arm gesture (both arms open, palms spread outward) until it becomes an automatic response to any question, especially if from a parent, cop, boss, or teacher.
4. Grow some sort of "hard" facial hair.
5. Wear a very unhip pair of sunglasses--not bullshit Oakley or Arnet, but something like cop glasses or oversized mom-style glasses. Basically anything you can snag out of a lost-and-found-bin will do.
6. Look around a lot, like you expecting static from any direction.
7. Cultivate a fake limp or strut and walk extremely slowly.
8. Refer to people only as "bitches" or "fools." Learn to integrate the following words or phrases into your everyday speech, regardless of their meaning in your life: gat, nine, blast in the face, bitchslap, gangstalean, etc.

You are now ready to assemble the crew and synchronize the eight-step rolling deep program. Usually a larger group will signify a deeper roll, but this is not always the case. Certain people will never attain the ability to roll deep, no matter how much backup they have. Conversely, some motherfuckers roll deep when hanging out on solo tip. Some of the deepest rollers are the strong, silent types who can handle themselves in any situation. Consider the following list of some people who roll deep and some who don't quite make it.

Deep As Fuck:

Wu-Tang, the Warriors (from that old '70s movie), this dude I once saw lounging in a designer sweatsuit and shades, Slayer.

Wading Pool:

Hammer, New Kids On The Block, Blackstreet, any fast food employee or manager, rock star snowboarders, bitch-ass rollerbladers.

Of course those new to the ways of rolling deep should never try to bust a flex on someone with experience. First things first, you should go in gradually, the way one would

enter a pool of freezing water. You should initially roll deep only on inanimate objects such as street signs, a jammed or locked door, or a soda machine that shorted your coin. From that point you should work your way up to blind people or alley cats, but only when you feel comfortable. Progression will naturally lead you to flexin' on old ladies and infants. Get confident, live your lyrics, and work your way up to speed. Eventually you'll be able to walk the streets with pride and conviction that can only come with the knowledge that your are rolling deep.

--tgb

Tags: amusements

UTF-8

8:34PM, 29TH AUGUST 2003

I seem to be having tremendous difficulty with my Unicode lifestyle. What does this say?:
Portugues.

Update: This problem arose as I tried to write a comments system for this blog. The mechanics of accepting form input, processing it, and appending it to a page is simple enough, but when doing stuff like this, there's one nasty ugly problem that always rears its head: unicode.

A post on this blog goes through six layers: keyboard, terminal, vim, python, MySQL, browser. Each one of them seems to have a different idea of how to handle the encoding of the text. The proper solution is to use UTF-8 throughout, but that's where my problem is. Only the latest releases of said software support UTF-8. Upgrading all of them to mutually compatible versions is something which is currently beyond me.

Maybe in a couple of years I'll have everything sorted, but for now, it's plain old ASCII, and no comments.

It took *decades* for the industry to properly adopt UTF-8.

Tags: language, foss

Moving house, moving access points

9:04PM, 1ST SEPTEMBER 2003

At some point in the next 48 hours, I'll be leaving this house, and more importantly, leaving the cable modem that's served me nicely for the last 4 years. It's 256Kbps, which is not great these days, but it works, costs less than 15 UKP per month, and was available *months* before anywhere in the UK (except Hull) got any kind of broadband access, and *years* before the majority of UK citizens were able to ditch their modems.

Now the UK has caught up a bit, but Brazil is still closer to broadband rich countries like Canada and South Korea than the UK is to it. Rio de Janeiro has almost [city-wide wireless access](#).

How did this happen? How did the world's fourth largest economy get beaten by the ninth? The answer is obviously complicated, but I think it boils down to monopolies being far worse for an economy than you could possibly imagine, and the fact that Brazil has more than a hundred million people living in essentially abject poverty. A large pool of extremely cheap labour is very useful for making the rich minority richer. Here's to slave-installed broadband.

Tags: brazil, hardware

The cable modem in question was the Virtua product from NET, a subsidiary of [Globo](#). Coming from 56K dialup, 256Kbps was incredible.

The UK has now dropped down to sixth place in GDP rankings, and Brazil to tenth.

Brazil continues to make [progress](#) tackling extreme poverty.

Lula is back.

Disturbing deductions about the US military

9:37PM, 1ST SEPTEMBER 2003

Me looking through *my* apache logs is fascinating. *You* looking through *your* apache logs is obsessive navel gazing, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it. Having established the boundaries of what is or isn't fascinating, let's see what we can deduce from the following entry:

```
cf.nhyoko.med.navy.mil - - [16/Aug/2003:21:56:26 +0100] "GET  
/james.lab6.com/2003/07/27/chemistry/ HTTP/1.0" 200 4286  
"http://search.yahoo.com/search?p=CHEMISTRY+SET&ei=UTF-8&fr=fp-top" "Mozilla/4.0  
(compatible; MSIE 6.0; Windows NT 5.0)"
```

1. Someone in the US military read a page of this site.
2. They were in the [U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka and Far East Dental Command](#).
3. *Dental Command?!*@~
4. They use Yahoo search.
5. They use Windows 2000.
6. They use IE6 on Win2k.
7. They type in ALL CAPS.
8. They're looking for info on CHEMISTRY SETS

The US military has more than ten thousand active nuclear weapons. That makes it **my** business whether they allow users like the above on their computers, on which it is also my business whether or not they run Microsoft consumer grade junk.

Update: It seems this is nothing out of the ordinary. Grepping logs for ".gov" is truly worrying. *They're* looking for chemistry sets too! Obviously essential info for the social security department.

Tags: meta, amusements

Thankfully there are fewer nuclear weapons today, and far fewer deployments of IE6.

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Further Reading

4:07PM, 8TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Haven't flushed the linkbowl for a few days. It's starting to smell:

- [BBC's Test the Nation](#) → I got 135. Damn football questions. Brighton appears to have the brightest Brits. Having siblings is correlated with better results than not having them, but the optimum number is one. Do pairs make for the best general knowledge gathering environment? "Talking to people" was the least common source of "everyday knowledge", books the most. Hmm. Different definitions of "everyday" I think.
- [A Curmudgeon Teaches Statistics](#) → Seems to be abandoned. An 'anti-anti-weblog-weblog-weblog'. Contains a great quote from one Ronan Conroy:

I'm not an outlier; I just haven't found my distribution yet.

- ['Killer' Ecstacy claim was false](#) → This must mean drugs are safe again!
- Mars exploration rover videos: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#) → Really nicely produced animation.
- [Soundless Music Shown to Produce Weird Sensations](#) [via [Slashdot](#)] → Dateline Manchester! Infrasound apparently responsible for haunted houses. I think peoples' imaginations work just fine without external stimulus.
- [The library... the library... it's a place where books are free](#) [via [B3ta](#)] → How amazing is this song/animation? I always knew libraries were cool.

Tags: links

Review: Girdle, Etcher, Bark: An Infernal Moudly Bread

5:13PM, 8TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Being stuck in ASCII poverty, I'm too embarrassed to write Godel, Escher, Bach in the title.
Here are my thoughts on it.

This book will take you a long time to read. I'm not a particularly slow reader, but it took me about 3 weeks to get through this, whereas a similarly sized novel would take one at the most. My main problem was being unable to get past certain paragraphs: every so often the book will hit you with something so beautiful or profound that you just have to put it down and read around the subject. At one point I took a break to design my own language, but eventually backed down and when I realised you need serious linguistics grokkage for something like that. That doesn't mean I've given up; the project is simply postponed. You can expect to be speaking it in about 40 years time. You have been warned.

Critics have spent the last twenty years praising this masterpiece, so there's not much left for me to say. Of course it's brilliant, inspiring, deep, funny, clever and creative. Everybody knows that.

At the beginning of this year, my favourite book was The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy. Now it's in third place, with *A Fire Upon the Deep* and *GEB* jostling for first place.

Some reviewers mark this book down for the massive self-indulgence on the part of the author, but he's just about smart enough to get away with it. One of the book's major themes is self reference, after all.

20 years to go, suckas.

Like most timeless works, *GEB* is a book about problems. It offers few answers, but the questions asked are deep, difficult, and interesting enough to spend a normal lifetime pondering. I suspect a good long ponder is as close to an answer as most of the questions will admit. Like economics, it's seems that intelligence is a subject which nobody truly understands in the slightest.

GEB glosses over the question of superintelligence, offering the superintelligent comment that "superintelligence would be weird."

When online, people develop [banner blindness](#), which filters out areas of the screen that 99.999% of the time contain useless information. Most books encourage a similar condition (or should it be an ability?): bibliography blindness. The endpages of your average book are just filler, adverts, or a pathetic attempt at a list of references. Soon you learn to just "stop reading when the text gets small". *GEB* is (obviously) different. The bibliography is fully annotated and completes the book's function as a pointer to fascinating things.

I suppose it's not perfect - I read the 20th anniversary edition, which is just the exact original text along with an introduction. In some ways I hope he's working on an expanded 25th anniversary edition. If you view the book as an object of literature - a singular "eternal golden braid" - then the book should rightly stay as it is, was, and always shall be. On the other hand, the book is immensely *useful*. It's *full* of pointers to interesting topics, and revolves around an extremely intuitive explanation of Godel's Incompleteness Theorem. There is a digression into the workings of "microcomputers" which is *very* late 70s, and from some of the chapters, a reader might be left thinking the AI scene is a thriving branch of computer science, instead of the unfunded dustbowl of a landscape it really is today. Since changing the text of the book would be like weaving a new thread into an already complete Persian carpet, it would seem best to add a Post Scriptum to the end of each chapter, exactly as in Metamagical Themes. I

AI remained a dustbowl for a while, but superintelligence is back in the news, and AI is once again the hot new thing.

would very much like to know Mr H's thoughts 25 years down the line. Or maybe he really doesn't want the page length to change from the perfect 777.

[Tal Cohen](#) has a notable review, and a page of nice [book in-jokes](#) from "otherwise serious books". *GEB* mostly tells serious jokes.

Tags: books, reviews

War: opportunity cost

2:37PM, 9TH SEPTEMBER 2003

I will say one thing about the war in Iraq: opportunity cost. [Costofwar.com](#) calculates the opportunity cost of this specific war, and [What the World Wants](#) does the same for war in general, in sickening detail. It looks like Gulf War II will cost well in excess of \$100bn. That's about the cost of NASA's [Mars Reference Mission](#). A prison colony couldn't cost that much more, and then you have a place to send people when they get voted off the planet in Big Brother International.

[Is Iraq's oil worth \\$100 billion?](#), and what could be done with that \$100bn? asks Philip Greenspun. I wonder. You could pay off Dr. Evil. You could buy ten trillion penny chews. You could buy [enough ammo](#) to shoot every last god damn person in the world. Oh wait, that's what they actually *did* spend it on.

Update: [it cost trillions](#).

Tags: politics, science

Review: Velox

4:00PM, 9TH SEPTEMBER 2003

I've just switched broadband providers from Virtua to Velox. Here is some data:

- Velox is faster, even at the same speed rating.
- Velox is slightly cheaper.
- The Velox DSL modem is smaller and prettier than the Virtua cable modem
- Velox uses a telephone line, but doesn't interfere with voice calls, providing you put a filter on every socket you want to use voice on. How inelegant.
- Velox doesn't involve giving cash to Globo, the evil Brazilian publishing monopoly.
They're bad. Very bad. You might think you don't care, but every centavo you give them can be guaranteed to go to a bad cause.
- For some reason, Velox and Virtua just provide the connectivity, and you are required to have an "ISP" as well. This costs extra, and you can't access the internet without one.
They don't appear to do anything except provide peripheral services such as email and some minor bits of content. I think it's meant to be a way of stopping lock-in by the connectivity provider.
- To access the internet with Virtua, you just plug the ethernet cable into your computer and everything behaves as if you're on a DHCP local network. With Velox, there is an extra step involved. After plugging the hardware in, you must log into their website with the username and password of the ISP before you can access any other website.
This is **the most ridiculously braindead technical decision** I have ever been the victim of. You have to do this *every time* you want to use any net service (web, email, ssh... anything), and to top it all off, it times out after 5 or so minutes of inactivity.

- To complete the horror, the login webpage has Big Graphics and Lots of Javascript and No Content.
- Fortunately, non-idiots have written [autologin scripts](#) for Linux, and a [similar program](#) for Windows, which I can't make work entirely automatically, but that's just one of the atonements Windows users pay for their sins with.

Conclusion: Velox wins, but thank god I'm going back to university in a couple of weeks.

Update: If you can't be arsed with the login tools, just keep some [net radio](#) playing in the background. You can always turn it down if it gets annoying. If you need the bandwidth for downloads, that will keep the connection alive too.

Tags: brazil, web, hardware, reviews

Further Reading

7:54PM, 11TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Oh no! September 11th happened again! We need [calendar reform](#).

- Via [BoingBoing, John Gilmore opposes email obfuscation](#) and says:

Unwanted communications would exist even if every "spammer" was flayed and burned at the stake.

That's no reason not to do it anyway.

- [4th Grade Journal Entry of a Rotten.com staff member](#) → Don't know why I haven't seen this before...
- [Rush Limbaugh Eats Everything](#) → Ooh, a political cartoon. Very good.
- [Encyclopedia of Monsters](#) → Wonder how it compares to Jorge Luis Borges' [Book of Imaginary Beings](#).
- [What does 'obidos' mean?](#) → It's in every Amazon URL. You've always wanted to know. Now you do.
- [Samsung means to come](#) → Best use of flash so far (except the library song) and it's just text!
- [Google frees Blogger Pro](#) [Via [Slashdot](#)] → How do you say "anticompetitive" to someone you love?
- [Archbishop backs Muslim schools](#):

Always with the Borges.

"And then, two years ago today, many things changed - it was suddenly a good deal easier to associate religious conviction with terror and bigotry."

Would a person with religious conviction be a religious convict? And is he suggesting that they *aren't* bigots?

- [Wes Craven's Newsround](#) → Google for it, and you shall find it.

Tags: links

Review: Dune

12:52AM, 13TH SEPTEMBER 2003

The back cover proclaims it as "one of the monuments of science fiction" and compares it to the Lord of the Rings. I have to say it's overrated.

In case you don't know, and are incapable of googling for a proper review, *Dune* is set on an ultraharsh desert planet; most of the events of the book stem from its brutal aridity. The ecology described is detailed and fascinating, but I'm not convinced it's realistic. Let me get onto the best part of any review: the panning.

Dune suffers from Die-Another-Day-Syndrome: the first part is amazing, the second part is rubbish. I'm sure this is a common phenomenon in all forms of media, so I'll tie the definition down a bit further. Something suffering from DADS doesn't just have a good start and a bad end. It has *such* a good start that it's all the more painful and disappointing to find out how bad the end is. Books with mediocre starts and poor ends are common, but since they start off being average, you don't notice the slide so much.

Dune has an excellent premise and introduction, followed up with many chapters of perfectly balanced action, foreshadowing and hinting. The world building is nothing like Tolkien's - it's different, not worse - and is certainly nothing as grand as later sci-fi conjured up. If you read it, you'll probably be able to pinpoint the exact moment when the buildup ends and the long slow letdown begins.

We are introduced to the bad guy early on, and there's absolutely no mistaking how bad he is: Russian name, obese, and into boylove. He's probably a commie too. Later on, another bad guy is identified simply by seeing how evil his face looks. Of course, the good guys have blond

hair and blue eyes, and other good guys are practising a long term breeding experiment to produce a kind of superhuman. *Hmm*. Despite the ridiculous stereotyping, the bad guy bits are among the good bits of the book.

An interesting and frustrating part of the *Dune* universe is the total lack of computers. Writing in the 60s, Frank Herbert couldn't have known how weird a world without computers would be, especially a high technology SF world without computers. This makes me think *unrealistic* and even *dishonest*, but just about the only person who writes honest SF is Vernor Vinge. Having no computers pushes the story slightly too far towards fantasy for my liking. There is lots of reference to mental training, hyperaccurate body control, and even directing body chemistry atom by atom.

As the book progresses, increasingly heavy globs of religion begin to clog up the pages. There is *way* too much formal dialogue, too many ceremonial gatherings, council meetings and rituals, and endless quotation of scripture. Religion is just so **boring**.

For what it's worth, the Ace Science Fiction edition with the cool dune-on-black cover is packed with unforgivable typos, such as "Duke Leto Streides". It's not as if it was the first edition.

In conclusion, the good bits really are quite good, and the bad bits aren't *too* bad. It's such a pity they come in the order they do. If you have the time, it's worth reading to the end, just to wrap up all the loose threads. If not, read up to the section titled "Muad'Dib", put the book down, and consult a spoiler if you want to know the ending.

Tags: books, reviews

Corcovado

12:57AM, 13TH SEPTEMBER 2003



Jesus Christ!

Tags: photos, brazil

Pirates!

1:32PM, 15TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Went to see *Pirates of the Caribbean* expecting nothing much, and found that it's actually **really good!** Want to know what made it good? It had dialogue that wasn't written by Hollywood's usual lobotomized neanderthals. And good skeleton effects. It's long, probably longer than it should be, but Johnny Depp's *Fear and Loathing* ether-walk is endlessly entertaining.

Yarr! I think I counted four Yarrs, and zero cans of root beer.

The visuals are channeling *The Goonies* and *Monkey Island*, and I'm sure there's a homage to *Evil Dead 2* in there. And Gareth from *The Office*, who looks like a skeleton already, out-Bottoms *Bottom* with the definitive fork in the eye scene.

There's not a single American accent, forcing British humour to replace US humor, which means the jokes don't sound **completely shit**.

Totally recommended, bringing the number of good films this year to two.

Pirates was unexpected and brilliant, but the sequels followed the *Shrek* model of exponential quality decay.

Tags: films, reviews

In-vitro language surgery

2:52PM, 15TH SEPTEMBER 2003

I think a lot about language design and change, but since I'm not a linguist, and since there's so much out there I've yet to read, I'm loathed to write down any thoughts whatsoever, in case they turn out to be embarrassingly wrong. However, I'm allowed to change my mind and make retractions if necessary, so here we go.

[Tim Bray](#) proposes to change the past participle of ";to read" from **read** to **readd**. Interesting choice, but like all attempts at language reform, I don't think it will catch on, because without the short explanation attached to each use, everybody will think it's just a typo. There are four solutions to this problem:

1. A massive advertising campaign along with high profile writers agreeing to the new usage.
2. Recognition from a language authority, like the [OED](#), so that future generations will be brought up with the modified spelling. Similar to Kuhn's paradigm shifts in the structure of scientific revolutions.
3. Grassroots usage by bloggers (which includes all independent publishers). I readd some good blog entries on this subject.
4. Coining only self-explanatory words.

This last one is tricky, but we do it all the time. Everybody uses words that aren't found in any dictionary, simply by joining together two or more old words in an interesting way, such as the hilarious [anarchovegan](#). To create and interpret these words, you just need a pool of prefixes, suffixes, roots and joining principles. Most people find this easy.

That's fine for word fusion, but what about shorter words like readd? The only way I can think to make a new past participle for "to read" self explanatory is to fuse together **read** and the most common "past tense ending", "-ed". We do this all the time when verbing, although when applied to irregular verbs, we consider the results ugly and incorrect: breaked, blowed, flyed, haved, doed, losed, runned, weared, beginned, maked, readed, etc.

So what is wrong with "readed"? It sounds like something a child would say, which for some reason is interpreted as a bad thing, whereas it's actually rather clever, in a simple way: it distinguishes itself from the present tense, and is totally understandable. Although it sounds wrong, there's no doubt that you are talking about having read something in the past.

The biggest barrier to using **readed** is the same one that spelling reform in general finds itself up against: the instinctive gut reaction that you are looking at something which is *wrong*.

This kind of problem probably stems from English evolving from a spoken form (where the verb "to read" works) into a written form (where it doesn't). I hope it will evolve into a *typed* form. Speaking is so unnecessarily messy.

Tags: language

Confess online!

7:24PM, 15TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Today's modern sinner leads a non-stop lifestyle, packing more sins into less time. After all that evil, who has time to go to church? What's a sinner to do? Introducing the [Online Confession Box](#).

- No more time consuming trudges down to Church on a rainy Sunday morning (save your shoe leather!).
- No more waiting in line while the priest has his fag break (save your lungs!).
- No more police raids when "confidential" turns out not to be (save your account books!).

This service is totally free, so hurry up and confess today! Go on! Your sins won't confess themselves!

This was one of the most popular services on the old site. A lot of people took it quite seriously. The vault holding the submissions may be opened one day, but it will be grim reading.

Tags: religion, amusements

Spelling reform vs. syllabaries

1:14PM, 16TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Dave writes:

Also, in my esteemed opinion as an 'A' level Linguist, haha, spelling problems are solved by having phonetic spelling with existing glyphs ;)

(I don't ordinarily like quoting private emails in public, but this one's not too personal. I wouldn't ever mention the devil orgy stuff.)

In my esteemed opinion as an obsessive dilettante, phonetic spelling can't work when there are more phonemes than glyphs. You have to invoke digraphs, which are an ugly compromise. What we need is a new alphabet! Actually, we need a syllabary (a collection of glyphs, each of which is mapped exactly onto a single sound).

As long as we're abandoning the practicality constraint, what would an optimal syllabary look like? If the number of phonemes in English is [about 40-50](#), we need 40-50 distinct symbols. Most attempts at language design stick with the latin alphabet, maybe add a few accents or apostrophes, and end up with something nasty.

I propose that a syllabary needs to be designed by **usability experts**, not linguists. The similarity of the letters **i** and **j**, for example, is bad for usability, as is the fact that 'lowercase ell', 'capital i' and 'one' all look identical. I'm sure that a good designer, maybe teaming up with a semiotician, could design a set of 50 maximally distinct and usable characters. Once we have that, real language design can start.

Tags: language

Why are there 24 hours in a day?

2:06PM, 16TH SEPTEMBER 2003

There are many things I'm interested in, but one in particular is the number of hours in a day. Well, I'm not obsessed with it or anything, but it's always made me wonder how on earth we got everyone on earth to agree to split the day into 24 segments. Splitting the year up into 365 days was easy - everybody knew what a day was, and everybody knew what a year was, so they just counted up how many days there were in a year. This happened all over the world, many times, independently in different cultures. When one group of invaders came along to politely ask another group if they would mind, say, changing their religion, the aggressors would say "*You've got a day to think about it before we smash you up*". It's unlikely these two nations would speak the same language, so this would take a lot of hand waving and pointing at the sun and moon to get across, but across it would nevertheless be gotten. There was no need to go into deep astronomical calculations, because the concept of a day was universal - even newly introduced mortal enemies who didn't have a word or belief in common, would at least have a *measurement* in common.

But what about hours? Why 24? Why not 10? Why not 60? Time is not naturally split up into 24 *anything*s, so the division must be totally artificial. After a bit of googling, I found what I thought was [the answer](#):

At which point Bryan crooked his right thumb to touch the base of his right index finger (please follow along and do it, too), and said, in much the same way as a Sumerian might have, 4,000 years ago... "One."

This was by far the most popular post, due to its very high pagerank and the large number of people interested in this question.

Now, every content farm has its own version of this post.

He then moved up a notch - see that? Each of your fingers has three distinct segments. I never really noticed that! - and, touching now the middle segment of his right index finger with his right thumb, he said... "Two."

I think you may sense where this is leading. By the time your right thumb has counted each of the three segments of his neighboring four fingers, you're up to 12.

Long before people were reading with their lips, one imagines, they were counting with their fingers.

So a day was divided into 12 segments, called hours; and, too, the night.

What a lovely story. It was all the ancient Sumerians' fault! The ancient Babylonians inherited this quaint practice, and presumably added their own 60-fetish to divide the hours into 60 minutes, and the minutes into 60 seconds. The Babylonian fascination with the number 60 is interesting in itself - so interesting, in fact, that [this page](#) suggests the Babylonians were the ones who split up the day, using geometric series:

... base 12 is more efficient than base 10, as base 10 ignores one of the hand configurations available - to wit:

1. Open hand
2. One finger folded
3. Two fingers folded
4. Three fingers folded
5. Four fingers folded
6. All fingers folded

Clams, naturally, have neither the means nor the necessity for such crude mnemonic devices. As well as being fond of twelve (3×4) the Babylonians actually used a base sixty notation (3

$x 4 x 5$) - hence your hours and minutes. The 360 ($3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6$) degrees in a complete revolution also stem back to their childlike fondness for these simple geometric series.

So there's another way of getting the number 12 out of our hands! Even though this explanation comes from the mightily respected "Doctor Clam", who as it happens, is an **actual clam**, it shows what we probably suspected: these explanations are total guesswork. How are we supposed to know what number a Babylonian saw when he looked at his hand? They don't seem to have written that one down.

Back to Google then. [This page here](#) has the word "science" in the URL, but the explanation it gives is still a little shaky:

Division of time into days and hours has gradually changed throughout history. In Babylonia the civil day and astronomical day were different. The civil day was divided up into watches [where] the length of a watch [was] not constant but varied with season. There were four watches during the day - 2 during the day, sunrise to midday and midday to sunset, 2 during the night from sunset to midnight and midnight to sunrise. The number of hours probably came from the use of base 6 as a counting system. It made sense to have each watch lasting 6 hours.

We know that the Babylonians used base **60**, not base 6, but they did that because it is easily divisible by lots of other numbers, including 6. So the number 6 may have held a little significance. This explanation boils down to the Babylonians being 60-centric. Is that the real reason then? Did the Sumerians' hands play no part? Perhaps the 12-sectioned hands were a reason for liking base 60 in the first place. Or maybe it was something completely different, as [this page](#) suggests. I won't quote the whole thing, as it's quite long. Suffice to say that they've found an astronomical explanation involving stars, and it was the **Egyptians**, not the Babylonians. It all seems a little convoluted to me, but apparently "*significant stages are documented in monuments and tombs*" so maybe there's some evidence.

But wait! That's not all! [Here](#) we have a slightly different suggestion:

The Babylonians divided the sky into the 12 signs of the Zodiac, and a circle into 360 degrees. They divided the day and night each into 12 hours (although in many time systems the lengths of these varied between summer and winter! Babylon was rather nearer the equator than Liverpool, so they didn't get too confused with this). The hour was split into 60 minutes and a minute into 60 seconds.

Zodiac signs, eh? We're back to the unsubstantiated rumours about Babylon.

None of these solve the problem of getting the **whole world** to use 24 hours. Did Babylonian (or Egyptian) timekeeping spread naturally across the world in the same way Arabic and Hindu mathematical notation did? Did the Babylonians conquer some rival countries, which went on to conquer others, and so on? Are there, in fact, some countries which **still don't** use 24 hours? Some isolated island somewhere? Is it just a 'western' concept which has been forced onto the world recently by economic might? Come on! Somebody must know! Sorry for the inconclusive ending... how about I have a guess myself?

I reckon that the Babylonians (or somebody else, but if everyone else gets to blame the Babylonians, I will too) started out with the **second** as the basic unit of time. It's a nice convenient time interval - if asked to count upwards from one, you'd probably space the numbers about a second apart. Then, using their general love of all things base 60, they must've grouped seconds into groups of 60, and called them minutes. Then, they must've grouped the minutes into groups of 60, and called them hours. Then when they tried to group the hours into a group of 60, they saw that it spanned more than one day. So instead, they stopped naming time intervals, and simply stated that there were 24 hours in a day. Simple as that! It *must* be true!

If this really was true, they probably started out with something that wasn't *quite* what we know as a second. Perhaps shorter, perhaps longer. They probably went through the above calculation, and found that there were really 24.145 (or whatever) hours in a day, and to round the number down to exactly 24, they reduced the length of the second. Oh, and the human heart beats roughly once every second when resting, so perhaps that was what they started out with... sadly we'll never know.

Tags: mathematics, history, science

Nomic as Life

4:16PM, 18TH SEPTEMBER 2003

[Unplugged Nomic](#) is an exquisitely documented game of [Nomic](#) that's been going for about 3 years. It dives right into fundamental problems of law, self-reference and undecidability

Does Nomic have equivalent expressive power to traditional lawmaking? Could [The Player of Games](#)' game (where the winner becomes emperor) be derived from nomic? Or would it just end up like [this](#)?:

Right now my focus is on one of my stats that I call CER - my Chick Exposure Rate. See, as my CER increases, my probability of performing a critical hit (getting a date) dramatically increases. It's just a matter of simple statisti-" Davis then broke off, his eyes following an attractive University of Florida co-ed on rollerblades.

Unplugged Nomic seems not to have lasted, but [Agora Nomic](#) has!

Some say Wikipedia is actually the largest game of Nomic...

Tags: mathematics, politics

Backtranslated Bond Titles

2:18PM, 20TH SEPTEMBER 2003

In Brazil, foreign films get butchered in the translation. The most obvious examples are the titles which are horrid. Here are the titles of all the Bond films, backtranslated (*not* by machine - this is what they really mean). My favourite mangling is Moonraker:

1. 007 versus the satanic Dr. No
2. Moscow versus 007
3. 007 versus Goldfinger
4. 007 versus atomic blackmail
5. With 007 you only live two times
6. 007 - The secret service of her majesty
7. The diamonds are eternal
8. Live and leave to die
9. 007 versus the man with the pistol of gold
- 10.007 - The spy that loved me
- 11.007 versus the rocket of death
- 12.007 - Only for your eyes
- 13.007 versus Octopussy
14. In the sights of the assassins
15. Marked to die
16. Permission to kill
- 17.007 versus Goldeneye
18. Tomorrow Never Dies

19.The world is not enough

20.A new day to die

To this, we can now add the 5 Daniel Craig titles:

21. 007 - Casino Royale

22. 007 - Quantum of Solace

23. 007 - Operation Skyfall

24. 007 Versus Spectre

25. 007 No Time to Die

Generally an improvement.

Tags: brazil, films, language

Further Reading

8:42AM, 25TH SEPTEMBER 2003

- [Pirate Island Party](#) → London heroes the [Space Hijackers](#) take over an island on the Thames.
- [Rekkaturvat: "Truck Dismount"](#) → There's a sequel to Porraستurvat! Now you can smash a truck into a brick wall!
- The Amiga situation [continues to degenerate](#) like the plate of rotting meat it is. The choice cuts have long since been eaten away, but there is still a greasy pool of festering bone and gristle left that, amazingly, keeps getting worse. There have been several all time lows which it has consistently sunk lower than. This is spectacularly entertaining, just like watching a real plate of meat decompose: you would feel sick, but you're too busy laughing. Bankruptcy, fraud, criminal incompetence, and now this maniac stalking them. I think he went insane when his ex-girlfriend (who is apparently the mother of Merlancia's owner) pulled a gun on him. Yes, this is the same Amiga community we used to know and love. God rest its many-times resurrected zombie soul.
- [Where the girls aren't](#) → The only skeptical society that dares to ask:

What woman hasn't been cornered by a single-minded, motor-mouthed, Kennedy assassination conspiracist who monopolizes her whole evening?

Being a woman sounds terrifying.

- [Face the Facts](#):

Whenever you're getting information and you're not paying for it in full, you should expect by default that you're not getting the unvarnished truth, because the people covering the costs think they're buying the right to varnish.

This decade, the Amiga finds itself [mired in interminable legal disputes](#), same as last decade (and the one before that).

- Teaching shortage to be exposed → Hoho, this should be good:

A long-overdue official survey is expected to reveal that many secondary school pupils in England are being taught by people who are not specialists in the subject.

Still no net access in halls

8:49AM, 25TH SEPTEMBER 2003

I gave my form in on Sunday. Heard nothing back. They probably just hate me. The library has been refurbished with hundreds of new machines, all with nice LCD monitors and Windows XP. I'm no fan of shovelling cash down Microsoft's bottomless and insatiable gullet, but it's nice to have machines that don't take 5 minutes to log onto.

Tags: hardware, university

Badgers are cool

6:15PM, 26TH SEPTEMBER 2003

Found this cool poem in an old english book of mine. Doesn't say what year, but I think it's year 5 or 6:

*Badgers are cool
Badgers are great
Badgers live under ground, mate.*

Badger/Mushroom/Snake was less than a month old.

Tags: amusements

Type of the week

3:50PM, 27TH SEPTEMBER 2003

[Student Direct](#), Manchester's "favourite student read" (an entirely plausible claim, being free) has a review of Pirates of the Caribbean:

The crew of the Black Pearl are cursed to suffer miserably in an eternally undead limo [...]

Tags: amusements, films, manchester

Bell ringing

8:18PM, 1ST OCTOBER 2003

I was walking past the church on the corner today, and the bells started ringing. Here is a ding by dong update of my thoughts:

bong...

Ah, the bells are ringing.

bong... bong...

Three rings. Must be telling the time. My watch only says 6:55 though.

bong... bong... bong... bong...

There we go, seven rings for seven o'clock.

bong...

Hang on.

bong... bong... bong...

Eleven rings? Maybe they're going to do 12.

bong... bong... bong...

Hmm, maybe not. I bet they're going to do 19; the 24-hour clock representation of seven o'clock.

bong... bong... bong... bong... bong... bong...

Huh. Twenty. Maybe they'll do 24 - a full day.

bong... bong... bong... bong... bong...

OK, I really don't know what they're doing. Perhaps the first 24 were to put you in the mood for time telling, then the rest to tell the time.

bong... bong... bong... bong... bong... bong... bong...

Guess not.

bong... bong... bong... bong... bong... bong... bong...

This must be very annoying for the people in the halls next door.

bong... bong...

I wonder if someone in the church is a Douglas Adams fan?

bong... bong...bong...

No of course not, he was an atheist.

bong... bong...bong... bong...

Ah, forty-nine rings, that's seven squared! Well, that's just silly... but... they've stopped!

More likely, the actual number of rings was 50, and I lost count along the way.

Tags: religion, amusements, manchester

Unicode post. Please ignore.

11:34AM, 3RD OCTOBER 2003

I think I have unicode cracked now.

나가 unicode 을 지금 부숴 달라고 한다 것을 나는 생각한다 .

私がunicode を今割ってもらうことを私は考える。

我认为我安排unicode 现在崩裂。

Tags: meta

Comments test page

12:14PM, 6TH OCTOBER 2003

This page is to test the comments system. KEEP AWAY.

No need to keep away any more. Comments are working. Read the rules [here](#).

Tags: meta, programming

Political analogy problem

7:13PM, 8TH OCTOBER 2003

- *So tell me, Future Boy, who's Governor of California in 2003?*

- *Arnold Schwarzenegger.*

- *Arnold Schwarzenegger, the actor!? Then who's Vice Governor? _____?*

So who *is* to Arnie as Jerry Lewis is to Ronald Reagan?

Tags: politics, amusements, films

Rules for posting comments

3:29PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2003

Here are the rules if you want to post comments to any of the pages on this site. Nothing to worry about if you're sensible.

Filling in the form

- You don't have to give a real name, but put *something*.
- You don't have to give a URL, but it would be useful. Don't you want a free link?
- No HTML. All tags will be spayed.
- URLs will be auto-linked.
- Linebreaks mark the end of paragraphs.

Moderation

Trying to turn the world into a discrete formal system is the fallacy of the Victorians, jurisprudes, authoritarians and bad guys in general. I won't try it here, so be warned that every point below may or may not have exceptions.

- I have the final word on which comments will be allowed, but there is very little I will delete. Your freedom of speech is $x\%$ effective here, where x is very close, but not quite equal, to 100.
- Comments must be an honest attempt at being interesting or entertaining. You can cuss until your nose bleeds, as long as it's extropic. Be careful though: swearing done wrong is an easy way to turn a reasonable post into a rubbish one.
- Duplicate comments will be deleted.

- Stupid comments may be kept for amusement's sake, but may also be deleted.
- Spammers will be hunted down and crucified. There's a copy of nmap and a box of nails waiting for anyone who thinks I'm joking.

Tags: meta, politics

Naming is owning

4:05PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2003

Dave made me think, by [writing](#) what somebody else said:

Judaism had its worse moment when it became an ism: it got put in its box and stopped changing.

This is probably really obvious, but "-ism" construction is just plain old name calling. Putting things in a box makes you feel powerful, because the metaphor implies that you are on the outside of the box, your victim is on the inside, and therefore your view is the more all-encompassing one, and therefore more correct. The very act of giving something a name gives you a certain power over it. See [True Names](#). Again. If words like 'liberal' didn't exist, crazies like Rush Limbaugh not only wouldn't have an argument; they wouldn't have an opponent.

It's so common to see people using names to brush off someone's opinion ("Don't listen to him; he's just a *tory*.") as if this wasn't the simplest kind of childish name calling. Moral: **just because you can name something doesn't mean you have defeated it.**

I *said* it was probably really obvious.

Tags: politics, psychology, language

Lessons learned when using Unicode with Python

4:19PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2003

I've been wrestling with Unicode for some time now, but it looks like that time is almost over. Hopefully somebody will find this a useful shortcut to the long meandering trudges through Google that I found myself on.

- Unicode is an abstract mapping from numbers to character symbols. It is **not** a document encoding.
- UTF-8 **is** a document encoding.
- Internally, python has Unicode strings.
- Reading a UTF-8 encoded file does **not** result in a Unicode string. This must be done explicitly:

```
>>> f = open('file', 'r')
>>> unicodeString = unicode(f.read(), 'utf-8')
```

- Python will process Unicode strings perfectly, but will not print or write them to a file. First you must convert them to some encoding. Observe:

```
>>> b = u'a\xe1\xea'
>>> b
u'a\xe1\xea'
>>> print b
Traceback (most recent call last):
File "<stdin>", line 1, in ?
UnicodeError: ASCII encoding error: ordinal not in range(128)
>>> print b.encode('utf-8')
ááé
```

- Given arbitrary input, there is **no way** of determining what encoding it is in. You have to find out some other way; for example, the first line of an XML document should say.

The moral of the story is thus:

- Whenever **any** string data enters your program, make sure you know what encoding it is in, and convert it from that into Unicode. Keep it in Unicode throughout your entire program. Whenever **any** string data leaves your program, use the encode method (which all Unicode strings have) to convert it to a specific encoding. UTF-8 seems ideal, if you have no other constraints.

Warning! I'm in no sense a python expert. As far as I can tell, this works, but there may be more elegant ways of doing it.

Tags: programming

Review: Permutation City

4:48PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2003

This seems to be required reading in all the transhumanist/AI/wibble circles, so it's been high on my reading list. Now I've read it. Now I can be one of the people shouting at other people, telling them to read it immediately.

This is a SF story for mathgeeks, or anyone who can appreciate really big numbers. I can't say you won't enjoy it if you don't meet those criteria, but I can imagine a large subset of the population just going "eh?" after the first few chapters, and filing it under "textbooks". Some say it really does belong on the reference shelf, but not me. I subscribe to the Strong AI Hypothesis, but even that isn't strong enough for *Permutation City*. As long as you keep telling yourself "it's only SF", you won't need to take notes or realign any major belief systems.

As most reviews will tell you, this is a book about people waking up and finding themselves inside a computer. That's not really a spoiler; you find out on page 2. It's not silly like *The Matrix*. There are deep questions asked (and even a few answered!) on the nature of being, thought, existence, time, and experience.

It's exactly the right length. SF books have a tendency to be overlong - the authors write the story, then realise there aren't any characters in it, then graft in a few hundred extra pages of pointless dialogue and description, not realising that idea-as-the-hero is a perfectly legitimate form for the story to take. *Permutation City* **does** have characters, but none of them are pointless (after all, the human mind is the key object of study here).

I haven't read that big fat Stephen Wolfram book ("A New Kind of Science"), but this seems like it might be a good introduction to it, and maybe even part inspiration for it.

Like they said, required reading.

Permutation City, Greg Egan, 1994.

Tags: books, reviews

Review: Underworld (the film)

4:52PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2003

(Wrote this weeks ago. Don't know why I didn't post it. The film was probably so bad it wasn't even worth writing a bad review of.)

Underworld is 100% shite. It wasn't even bad enough to be entertainingly shoddy; it was just boring. All the bad bits of the Matrices, but aimed at goths, and crapper. About 20 people walked out.

It's not bad like an MST3K'd film is bad. It's bad like a one legged chair is bad; it's pointless and useless, no matter how nicely it's carved. The photography was OK, the sets were well built, etc., but there was just a screaming hollow emptiness where things like characters, acting, and *dialogue* should've been

It's films like this that make me think obnoxious literature snobs are right: when you haven't read/watched/listened to much, anything seems good. When you've read around a bit, you start to notice the truly original works which reveal supposedly new ideas for the cheap derivatives they really are.

If you like vampires and werewolves, play nethack instead.

Tags: films, reviews

I hate you, Manchester NH

6:03PM, 13TH OCTOBER 2003

There is a city in the USA, in New Hampshire, called [Manchester](#). It's obviously a cheap knockoff of the [real Manchester](#). That wouldn't be so bad if it didn't pollute the "Manchester" keyword in Google.

Sorry to anyone living in Manchester, NH, but your town annoys me regularly.

Google solved this by putting everyone in geo-bubbles. Damn.

Tags: web, manchester

Overheard conversation

5:40PM, 21ST OCTOBER 2003

"What d'you have?" said random person A walking past me. Random person B, in a thick rolling-r's Russian accent: "Two... mackerel."

Proper *How-to-download-WinBoost* moment.

They call this inside baseball.

Tags: amusements

Last flight of Concorde

8:03PM, 22ND OCTOBER 2003

Raswan asked if I'd heard a huge window shaking thundering roaring sound this afternoon. I had. It was a Concorde going over, low enough to get a good look. God knows what it sounds like when it's going *fast*. Unless I camp out at the airport tonight and tomorrow, it'll have been the last time I'll ever see one flying. Maybe one day they'll have a replacement to marvel at again.

Heh, a flying supersonic passenger airplane. Haven't seen one of those in... thirty years...

Still waiting :(

Tags: history, science

Catcher in the Rye

11:00PM, 22ND OCTOBER 2003

The best part about reading a book is finishing it and googling for things people have said about it.

I didn't know this was a banned book when I started it, and I never would've guessed if I hadn't looked it up. The psychotic prudes in the USA are *still* trying to pretend it doesn't exist, apparently. (Goddam phonies ;)).

I didn't do English Literature beyond GCSE level, and I am so glad. Searching for any comments on this book is almost impossible because of all the spam from the 'free essays!' sites. I really really hope some lazy high-school slave tries to hand in one of these seemingly computer generated essays, not because I want to see anyone get laughed at, but because it will truly make the day of the teacher who reads it. Here's a quote from [this fetid 9th rate analysis](#):

In the movie Silence of the Lambs, the serial killer John Hinckley was also a big Catcher in the Rye fan as well.

Whoever wrote that (assuming it wasn't auto-googlescraped) didn't watch the film *or* read the book *or* know who John Hinckley is.

Anyway, I quite liked the book. It really is a classic, despite the fact that everybody says this. Refreshingly short after reading too many doorstop SF tomes, plus it's about a guy who's going insane, which is **always** good.

Tags: books

Reading backwards

3:36PM, 25TH OCTOBER 2003

I noticed something interesting just now: I tend to read backwards. Most web pages, and a few books, have a very low signal to noise ratio, so rather than reading everything, I skim over for interesting keywords and phrases, then quickly backtrack to the point where the ideas leading up to the interesting phrase began. This means I've already had a sneak preview in reverse of everything I'm about to read in detail. Sometimes the process of backtracking is enough for me to realise that the idea isn't deep enough to require a detailed read, so I don't bother reading it forwards. Result: most of the webpage goes unread, except the good bits, which I read backwards. This is highly unsound.

Tags: psychology

Big beige square

11:31AM, 26TH OCTOBER 2003

Presenting a big beige square:



Thankyou.

Tags: meta

Terrorists travel on the Magic Bus

4:24PM, 26TH OCTOBER 2003

Saw this marker pen graffiti inside a bus today:

BIN LADENS CAVE & NO WEED

Cmon Britain increase ure sub fleet and transform the concordes (B53s) - fuck america! u can do it.

At least it has more purpose than your average scrawling.

Tags: politics, amusements, manchester

BBC's Big Read

10:22AM, 1ST NOVEMBER 2003

The BBC's [Big Read](#) has narrowed down 21 books which may or may not be "the nation's favourite". It doesn't say anything about whether the books are good, just that they're the nation's favourite. I don't see how anything other than *Harry Potter* or *Hitchhiker's* can win.

Excellent :)

Tags: books

Dog + Sea

11:20AM, 2ND NOVEMBER 2003



Ralph running out of the sea at top speed

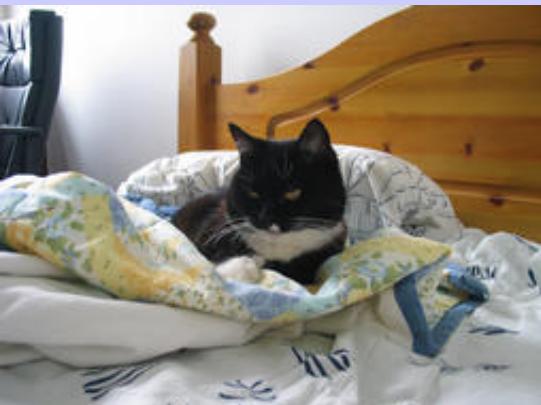
Tags: photos, brazil

Cat + Bed

2:48PM, 5TH NOVEMBER 2003



Lucy tries to grab the camera...



... but soon gives up and goes back to sleep

Tags: photos

Burnt-out car

9:21PM, 5TH NOVEMBER 2003

Got a phonecall: "Is main hall on fire? Can you see out of your window?" The flames had, like the fire fighters, gone away by the time we got down there. Turned out to be this:



A times B times C equals X

The moral of the story is: don't buy a car; it's only going to get firebombed anyway.

Tags: photos, crime, manchester

Broken washing machine design

8:47AM, 8TH NOVEMBER 2003

Last year the washing machines got broken into by some hard pipe-hittin' scallies with a pair of pliers and adidas tracksuits, so the hall bought new, token operated ones. They were designed by idiots.

The machine lies completely dead until you put a token into the separate box on top. Then the green light comes on and the screen on the token receptacle starts a five minute countdown. To what?! Am I meant to put another token in within five minutes or I lose the first? Am I meant to start the machine within five minutes? Does the machine only run for five minutes, and every second I spend wondering about the countdown is a second lost?

I pressed the 'go' button on the machine and it started spinning and watering and doing its stuff. The timer continued to count down. A display on the washing machine said "30 minutes". After a while this increased to "35 minutes". I waited for the timer to reach zero. It did. Nothing happened. The machine increased its own display to "40 minutes". I left, and came back half an hour later. The clothes seemed washed and the machine was dead, so the numbers on both screens must've been completely irrelevant. Needless to say there were no instructions anywhere.

Friday tip: read NTK *before* B3ta. It's a lot less depressing that way round.

Tags: crime, design

Swords on Ebay

9:22AM, 8TH NOVEMBER 2003

Answerphone message: "Oh hello, I'm just ringing up regarding the swords that you had on ebay..."

Listen for yourself
.....

For the record, I've never bought or sold anything on ebay, swords or otherwise.

Find the audio as an attachment to this PDF document: swords.mp3

Tags: amusements

Annoying Two Towers DVD review

9:22AM, 8TH NOVEMBER 2003

Breathless magazine prose is disgusting. [This review](#) of the Two Towers extended DVD is particularly horrible:

What follows is nothing less than a truly epic battle, in which the fate of both Middle-earth and the Quest of the Ring literally hang in the balance. Trust me when I say, it's like nothing you've ever seen before on film.

First, the nitpick: if something is *literally* hanging in the balance, **I expect to see the goddamn scales of justice.**

Second, the final battle is like nothing I've ever seen before on film except the final battle from [Army of Darkness](#), of which it was a complete ripoff/homage. Probably a homage actually, knowing the director's [background in horror](#).

Tags: films, reviews

Word groups closed under definition

6:56PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2003

Here's a nasty thought I had today. When you look up a word in a dictionary, you'll find it's defined in terms of *other* words. If you look up each of *those* words, you'll find they're defined in terms of yet more words. Repeat.

Question: will you eventually look up every word in the dictionary, or are there certain smaller sets of words which are defined only in terms of each other?

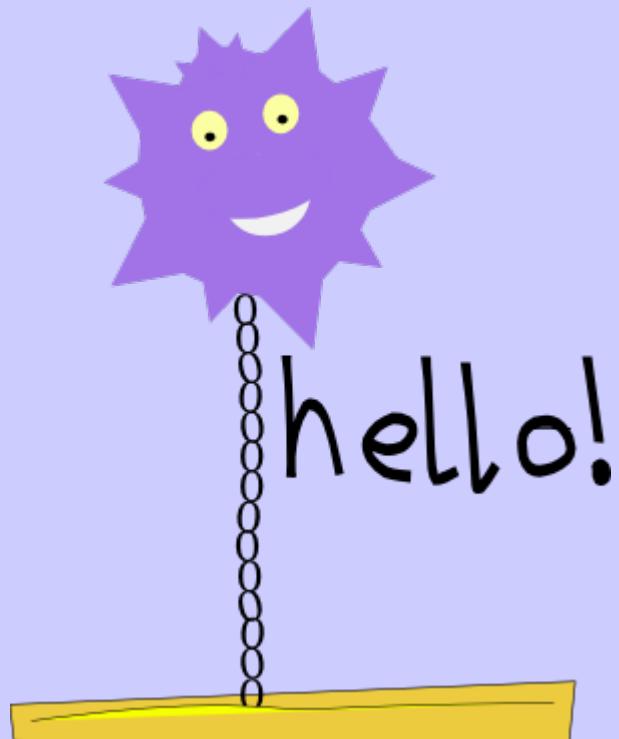
This is one of those things they'd make you do in hell, if only it existed. In the absence of a venue for repetitive-task torture, an online dictionary and a bit of perl will have to do.

History does not record whether the perl was written.

Tags: amusements, language

Hello!

8:21PM, 16TH NOVEMBER 2003



Mine!

Tags: amusements, art

Won't somebody please think of Bush?

1:57PM, 17TH NOVEMBER 2003

There is a nonzero chance of Bush getting himself assassinated this week when he comes to Britain and faces all the people that hate him. That's almost everybody. Of course, he won't be motorcading along Downing Street, not even in a Kathy-Lee-Gifford-in-South-Park style bulletproof bubble.

As long as Dick Cheney remains alive, Bush is safe, but just in case he gets knocked off too, or The Terrorists fail to realise there are an unlimited number of increasingly awful replacement presidents waiting in line at Republicrat HQ, here are my thoughts on how to protect the leader of the free world.

1. **Arrest Dean.** Since not re-electing the president has been declared unpatriotic in the USA, the only way the Democrats will get back into power is by assassinating Bush. [Howard Dean](#) stands to gain most from this, hence he will be blamed when it happens. His reasoning will therefore be that if he's going to do the time, he may as well do the crime. Lock him up before he gets his chance!

Yeah!

Note that this logic works against almost anyone you don't like!

2. **Confiscate radiation suits and [Prussian Blue](#) from the inhabitants of London.** If The Terrorists have a nuclear bomb, now is when they'll use it: since the president is effectively bulletproof, they need the increased ordnance that only a stolen Russian suitcase nuke can provide.

If everybody in London was safe from the lethal blast of radiation, The Terrorists would be more inclined to use their nukes - even terrorists don't want the *wrong type* of civilian

casualties. Hence confiscation of all anti-radiation gear will make denizens extra vulnerable, perhaps making The Terrorists think twice about nuking Buckingham Palace.

3. **Fly Bush into Glasgow instead.** He won't notice the difference, since it's full of old buildings just like London, and all human beings are being kept at least 1km away. If he hears any funny accents, he'll just chuckle and say to himself "Those crazy brits!", and he'll be right. They'll have to use a dummy in London, but that's what people are expecting anyway.
4. **Give Bush's security guards shares in Halliburton.** The only people allowed near him will be the guards, and if even one of them decides that the world would, on the whole, be a better place with one less person in it, it's game over for Bush. All the guards must therefore be given vested interests in keeping a corp-friendly president in power.
5. **Frisk the Queen.** Since this is a State visit, the only person Bush is required to meet is Her Majesty Herself. Blair can talk to him over a nuclear-hardened telephone line, but the Queen must shake his hand, and therefore must be checked for hidden knives, guns, garottes, guillotines (that old Royal favourite) or even one of those Palestinian-patented dynamite corsets. She's spent the last 50 years being carefully politically neutral, so she could cash in that trust at any moment. Forget national dignity, forget sovereignty; the Queen must go through the X-ray machine!
And remember, your Majesty, once a man is in your home, anything you do to him is nice and legal.
6. **Deport foreigners.** It's those damn foreigners that are the cause of every trouble this country has, so just in case they start playing up, shove 'em into the Channel Tunnel

and set fire to this end. Since Bush is also a foreigner, he'll be out too. Whatever happens to him between Folkestone and Calais is not our problem.

7. Pray to God. Against such unprecedeted hatred, no one man can survive alone. Luckily, he's a devout believer in the immortal, omnipotent, omniscient, humane, universal, anthropomorphic, English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon, pro-American [God](#). All we have to do to ensure Bush's safety is to ask God to protect him. Remember! Johnny-foreigner will be praying that God *doesn't* protect him, so we must be sure to pray twice, maybe even three times!

Well that's 7 Bush-saving activities we can be getting on with; one for each line of the US Constitution he believes in. Let's hope nothing nasty happens, eh?

Tags: politics, crime

Some feats aren't tough enough anymore

3:14PM, 19TH NOVEMBER 2003

The English Channel has been swum [more than 600 times](#), Everest has been climbed [more than 800 times](#), and so on and so forth. Since superfit athletes are evidently so common, fame seekers and record breakers must either think of something tougher, or make existing feats harder.

[Robert Garside is planning to swim around the world](#), while [Stuart Boreham](#) is going to row across the Atlantic [with cerebral palsy](#). Pretty impressive, but Douglas Adams [was there first](#):

The major problem which the medical profession in the most advanced sectors of the galaxy had to tackle after cures had been found for all the major diseases, and instant repair systems had been invented for all physical injuries and disablements except some of the more advanced forms of death, was that of employment.

Planets full of bronzed healthy clean limbed individuals merrily prancing through their lives meant that the only doctors still in business were the psychiatrists, simple because no one had discovered a cure for the Universe as a whole - or rather the only one that did exist had been abolished by the medical doctors.

*Then it was noticed, like most forms of medical treatment, total cures had a lot of unpleasant side effects. Boredom, listlessness, lack of...well anything very much, and with these conditions came the realisation that nothing turned say, a slightly talented musicain into a towering genius faster than the problem of encroaching deafness, and nothing turned a perfectly normal healthy individual into a great political or military leader better than irreversible brain damage. Suddenly, everything changed. Previously best selling books such as *How I survived an hour with a sprained finger* were swept away in a flood of titles such as *How I scaled the North face of the MegaPurna with a perfectly healthy finger but everything else sprained, broken or bitten off by a pack of mad yaks*.*

And so doctors were back in business recreating all the diseases and injuries they had abolished in popular easy to use forms. Thus, given the right and instantly available types of disability even something as simple as turning on the three-d TV could become a major challenge, and, when all the programmes on all the channels actually were made by actors with cleft palates speaking lines by dyslexic writers filmed by blind cameramen instead of merely seeming like that, it somehow made the whole thing more worthwhile.

Tags: amusements, health, sport

Performance-enhancing exercise

3:23PM, 19TH NOVEMBER 2003

Why are performance-enhancing drugs banned in sports competitions? I can think of two reasons:

- They can have dangerous or nasty side effects
- They convey an unfair advantage

Compare these with the current acceptable method of performance enhancement: exercise.

It's not uncommon for athletes to spend 8 hours a day training. Why is this more acceptable than spending 8 hours a day chomping steroids? Drugs will consume your life, but so does extreme exercise and the single-minded pursuit of physical perfection. Taking drugs is considered a shortcut, bypassing the effort required to make your body faster, stronger, fitter, (more productive), etc, but since when was sport a test of effort? Some people are born with athletic bodies. Are they cheats for not having to put the effort in like their comparatively disadvantaged competitors?

Sport would be a pretty sick endeavour if it required you to spend 100% of your life training. I don't know if there's anyone who actually does that, but if they do, it's no better than doping. It's reminiscent of MMORPGs, where the person who can spend more time online will be the person that 'wins'. Very sad.

Highly developed undetectable drugs and genetic engineering will conspire to make competitive sport obsolete, starting with the first basketball player engineered to be 10 feet tall. *Red Dwarf* has something to say on the subject:

Not all breeds of genetically-engineered athletes were accepted. For the 2224 World Cup, Scotland fielded a goalkeeper who was a human oblong of flesh, twenty four foot by eight, that filled the entire goal. Somehow they still failed to qualify for the second round.

Life as a human oblong may seem bleak, but it's not so bad if you're given the choice, and I hardly see how it's worse than the life of constant iron pumping and designer diets that athletes put themselves through right now.

Tags: health, sport

Stop Bush by... walking out of lessons?

7:14PM, 19TH NOVEMBER 2003

- Whaddya know about stopping Bush?

- I dunno, my memory ain't so great.

- Maybe this'll help...

- I dunno, it's still kinda hazy...

- How about this?

The word *on the street* says there's going to be a mass walkout of lectures tomorrow lunchtime in aid of Stopping Bush. Not sure what that's going to achieve, except, as *O* says, preventing us learning stuff, and thus furthering the pro-ignorance agenda common to every totalitarian state in history's Big Book of Lessons, which Bush seems to have had removed from public libraries. Just in case The Terrorists get one, of course.

Tags: politics

Frijj Raspberry Doh'nut flavour milkshakes are disgusting

2:15PM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2003

See title. Yuck. It's a Simpsons tie-in, which should've set alarm bells ringing. This is the TV show that [gave us](#) vaseline on toast, Krusty burgers, America Balls, Tom Collins Pot Pie, [Skittlebrau](#), Ox Testicle, and Space Age Out Of This World Moon Waffles.

Some foods are perfectly delicious when served alone, but mutate into dry-wretch inducing horrorfood when combined: steak croutons in coffee, salt & pepper ice cream, fizzy ketchup juice, and so on. Other foods only work in a certain physical state; nobody drinks pork chops, nobody chews gravy. And nobody should drink raspberry donuts.

The [Snackspot](#) initial sighting review is accurate in saying there is a "fairly strong Angel Delight feel to the drink", but again, Angel Delight is to be eaten, not drunk, though that's a close call. The raspberry flavour is there, but so is the lardy-donut taste. I repeat: lard is not nice to drink.

It was 44p from Londis, which is cheap, but you can get a bag of 5 donuts from Tesco round the corner for 59p and stick them in a blender if you like this kind of suffering.

The bottle has a picture of Homer on it, grimacing in pain, after dropping a donut and having it replaced with the liquid edition. Ugh. It's nasty, it really is.

Tags: reviews, food

ObWaspFactory

11:32AM, 26TH NOVEMBER 2003

[Awesomely gruesome BBC article:](#)

At first, she thought she had an abscess, but then it wriggled.

Tags: health, science

I dislike it!

9:02PM, 26TH NOVEMBER 2003

[Amazon](#) lets you rate stuff from 1 to 5, 1 being bad and 5 being good. Except they don't like to be too negative:



I'm indifferent!!!!!!11

Did a brand guru bypass established antonymy by deciding that the word "hate" was just too nasty to feature on official Corp literature?

Tags: web, amusements, psychology

The foundation columns of this building are just packed

7:39PM, 27TH NOVEMBER 2003



We won't really die. We'll be immortal. I know this because Hobbes knows this.

[Classic.](#)

Tags: books, amusements, films

Two fantastic ideas

4:36PM, 28TH NOVEMBER 2003

Only one of these came to me in a dream:

- iMacs with screen detachable to form tablet PC
- Marmite adverts with Gollum!

Tags: amusements, hardware

Red Dwarf not fountain of originality after all

3:50PM, 4TH DECEMBER 2003



For god's sake give me an epidural!

D.N.A. airdate: 21st February 1991.

Above cartoon: 11th February 1988.

Tags: history, tv, art

Commercial bombardment: the solution

9:59AM, 12TH DECEMBER 2003

Someone was complaining to me about christmas music being played incessantly at supermarkets and shopping megaplexes. There's quite a low-tech solution to this: earplugs and eyeshades whenever visiting large open commercial spaces.

The christmas music is played to trigger memories of presents, which triggers feelings of guilt that you haven't done your christmas shopping yet, which triggers the need to buy, buy, buy!

Human eyes and ears are quite a serious security flaw. All kinds of aggressive advertising memes can leak through and distort your ability to make sensible purchasing decisions. Some people can recognise the memes and deflect all but the most subtle - a kind of firewall. Others have no idea and just process everything they see. Like all security holes, this calls for a patch. An eyepatch, to be precise. Two of them. And earplugs for the music (shame it blocks out people too, but when was the last time you had a meaningful conversation with someone you met in a shopping mall?). Bakeries and shoe shops require nose plugs.

Of course, you'll look like an idiot, so you'll fit in just fine with all the other shopper drones!

I predict that by 2010, 95% of the world's cognitive neuroscientists will be employed by the marketing industry.

Tags: music, psychology

Who cares?

6:16PM, 13TH DECEMBER 2003

When I hear the word *care*, I nearly always think of it as used in the sentence "I don't care." I know it also means *to care for someone*, but for some reason, my brain is geared to interpret it as a statement about apathy. Which makes [this BBC article](#) about healthcarers extremely funny:

The number of children and over 65s who act as carers is double previous estimates, research has revealed.

...

And 44,000 over-85s said they acted as a carer - more than half provided at least 50 hours of care a week.

...

More than a quarter of over-65s who cared for over 50 hours a week described their health as "not good".

...

"Over half of carers had sustained a physical injury since becoming a carer; over half were being treated for a stress-related disorder and 90% were not given any information by NHS staff on how to care safely."

I can't help imagining a Douglas-Adamsesque future where *giving a shit* is something you pay other people to do while you get on with your life.

Tags: amusements, health, language

Saddam Captured

1:34PM, 14TH DECEMBER 2003



Bumfights!

Excellent [metafilter](#) banter:

shepd:

You know what's saddest? They found an entire 3 guns and \$750k with Saddam.

I know there's a lot more real Americans who have more of both that aren't having their homes raided...

PenDevil:

shepd: Somehow I don't think the guns and money was the sole reason for him being raided...

Tags: politics, crime

The labeling problem

3:43PM, 15TH DECEMBER 2003

Here we have an analysis of peoples' reaction to the term *Bright*. If you don't know, it's an attempt to rebrand the word *atheist*, which has been mangled by religious hooligans.

It's also a terrible, terrible name.

"I'm not sure what the image buffers were aiming for, but the name "The Brights" succinctly conveys the sense that this group thinks it's more intelligent than everyone else. The rest of us would be "The Dims", I suppose."

Well quite frankly, yes. At least in the context of the intersection of science and theology. But that's no reason to rub it in; you can't achieve rights, respect and influence by insulting your defacto overlords. The word Bright is just another pole in the already ultrapolarised political toilet bowl we have to flush ourselves out of.

Anyway, negative reactions to the term mostly came with suggestions for an alternative, the absolute worst of which, along with their likely interpretations by the general public, are:

Agnahumans

Fear the Agnahumans! The jaws of steel! The deafening roar!

Agnamen

Fear the Agnamen! But not the agnawomen.

Agnastics

An exercise regime involving pushups and terror!

Anaxagorians

Cyber-philosophers from the 17th dimension!

Anti-theist

"A carbomb exploded in downtown Tel Aviv; anti-theists are suspected."

Atnasceps

"Nurse! The atnasceps!"

Atomists

Victorian futurists worshipping the Mighty, Indivisible building block of the universe.

B.R.I.G.H.T.s

Perpetual invitation for crude redefinition. Boneheaded Righteous Idiots Go to Hell Today. Allows atheists to enjoy an ever-so-hilarious non-scanning parody of Y.M.C.A..

Clearaiats

Anti-spot cream. For rats.

Enlightened Ones

Fecal euphemism.

Enoughists

What atheist hasn't wanted to kick a fundy off a cliff into a river of lava while screaming "I... have had... enough... of YOU!"?

Evaluators

Bringing all the glamour of chartered surveying to the epistemological battleground.

Evaluutes

Evangelical version of the above.

Evolvers

"I'm an evolver! I evolve, but I don't... revolve."

Fallibatheists

Entirely secular oil conglomerate.

Freedoubters

Newly released whistleblowers.

Frees

"In the name of the law!"

Geians

Believers in Geia, son of Mothra, third conqueror of Gobuchul.

Inquisitors

"Nobody expects the atheist inquisitors!"

Life-long Learners

"I'm special!"

Nagnoskepts

Pit-dwelling skate-clan.

Naturalismists

"Saxamaphone... "

Neocleariats

Anti-spot cream. For rats. 20% improved performance!

Neo-gnostics

Splinter faction of mainstream Matrix interpretation.

Nuffists

Tracksuit-wearing lager lads.

Phrontisteries

Snob obscurantists.

Pragmatic Realists

People's Front of Judea

Questioneer

Society for creative anachronism sub-branch focusing on geek superhero fantasies.

RASPs

Splinter faction of B.R.I.G.H.T.s who wanted their Y.M.C.A. parody to scan.

RAVENs

Live action role playing nerdfest.

Reasonalists

Surrealist breakaway group; product of the grammar-backlash of 2013.

Scepnaistics

Urban graffiti warriors. Sworn enemies of the Nagnoskepts.

Sceptmen

Those deflating bags of leather from that Jim Henson film about Crystals and Prophecies and The Land.

Sciencians

"Just ask this scientician!"

Scientists

"Back off man, I'm a scientist."

Skeptmen

"Skept-bi-dee-ba-dee-bop-ba-ba-bop, I'm the skeptman!"

Sprites

Image is nothing. Blitters are everything.

The Happies

Poorly machined family of miniature toys recalled by McDonald's after Happy Meal related fatalities doubled.

Thinkstirrers

Developers of a social technique designed to reduce the number of friends you have to zero, in the shortest possible time.

Twains

Ill-conceived marketing effort for Twix bars.

Untheists

uNTH uNTH.

So in the end, maybe *Brights* is not so bad.

Tags: religion, science, language

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King: The review

10:06PM, 17TH DECEMBER 2003

Barring a surprise release of *Back to the Future 4* on new year's eve, *Pirates of the Caribbean* was the best film of 2003.

Return of the King was close though! Like all big franchises, the writing let it down in the end. Good, but not good enough. Certainly couldn't compete with the *Pirates* script.

I would've preferred fewer, or tighter, endings, less teary eyed manipulation, and a half hour slideshow of New Zealand tacked onto the end. **Prepare for spoilers:**

Good bits and references

- The introductory flashback.
- The lighting of the beacons. *I want more NZ photography!*
- Monty Python's Black Knight's sword-through-the-visor attack.
- Legolas downing a mumakil by flying a [snowspeeder](#) round its legs. At least that's what I assume they were alluding to.
- Sam Raimi tribute camera movement at the entrance to the Paths of the Dead. The deadites were good all round.
- Sam's rendition of "Get away from her you BITCH!" as "Get away from him you FILTH!" However, the power loader was more convincing than the Light of Elendil.
- The bald tattooed guy riding the mumakil.
- Minas Tirith's suicide cliff, and the resulting flaming suicide plummet.
- "Release the prisoners!"

- Gandalf riding up and around Minas Tirith.
- Minas Morgul. Dark, and yet green at the same time!
- All the bits where the ring made the sound go funny.
- Gollum dies happy. Star Trek II is now officially retroactively a ripoff.
- People standing, sitting and even sleeping **right** on the edge of chasms.
- Sloth from The Goonies.
- Gimli jokes fortunately toned down.

Bad bits

- Dorset Blue Vinny dialogue.
- Endless sabre rattling and flowery speech.
- *Stuck in the middle with you* didn't play as Denethor prepared himself for the pyre.
- And what was he pouring on himself? Had Gondor invented the catalytic cracker? The only flammable liquids they possessed should've been dark and sludgy.
- Fellowship theme > Rohan theme > Gondor theme. Howard Shore has the [brain eater](#).
- Gandalf beating people over the head with his staff. Goddamit Jim, he's a wizard, not a doctor soldier!
- No Saruman. no palantir development.
- Strong echoes of the more boring parts of *The Two Towers*.
- "Arwen's life force is bound to the ring"? Where did that come from? Where did it go?
- Go Go Yubari applied mace-feer to The Bride more convincingly than the Witch King did to Eowyn. They both got spiked in the head in the end, too.
- Good guys: white skin, blue eyes, perfect teeth; fighting for the West. Bad guys: black skin, evil eyes, horrible teeth; savages from the South and East. Unavoidable given the source material, but don't think we didn't notice.

- Gimli jokes unfortunately not entirely absent.

Conclusion

Fellowship: 10, Towers: 9, King: 9.5. Arise, sir Peter, I think.

Tags: films, reviews

Frustration

9:47PM, 18TH DECEMBER 2003

The godlike shadow cast across the net by Tim Bray once again tempts us cruelly:

"Er, your legal department blog is open to the public."

...

A couple of details in the narrative have been changed to protect the guilty, but if I told you what went between legal. and .com you'd gasp.

Obviously he can't reveal the details until after the company's demise. Since that might be a long time, anyone who wants to know is therefore forced to work towards the downfall of the entire global economy in order to topple the offending company, and release ur-Tim from his discretion-induced silence.

Tags: web, programming

Newtonmas

7:01PM, 20TH DECEMBER 2003



Merry Xmas, for infinitely large values of X

All right-thinking people will be celebrating Newtonmas next Thursday. Some purists will insist on sticking with their rival holiday, claiming it has priority, but *their* idol wasn't even really born on December 25th! While many of our customs and notations were inspired by *their* guy, who in some circles is elevated to near-Godhood, it'll be a hot day in [Hell](#) before I recognise Leibnizmas.

Tags: mathematics, amusements

Reporting imitates Simpsons

9:25AM, 21ST DECEMBER 2003

Compare [this](#):

Two Arab sailing boats carrying illegal drugs possibly linked to al-Qaeda...

with [this](#):

Milhouse: [steps up to blackboard] Ahem. OK, here's what we've got: the Rand Corporation, in conjunction with the saucer people --

Bart: Thank you.

Milhouse: -- under the supervision of the reverse vampires --

Tags: politics, tv

Careless design: lamp

1:15PM, 5TH JANUARY 2004

Attention to detail impresses me, so I'm continually unimpressed by almost everything. For all the power of free market tiered pricing, it's almost impossible to buy something that doesn't have some component built by the lowest bidder. And the lowest bidders are presumably the companies where the idiots work.

For reasons totally beyond my control, I have a silver angle poise lamp here. Several idiots had a say in its construction.

Sturdy Weighted Base! - except the base doesn't secure to the arm, so if you pick it up by the arm, it comes apart.

60W round lamp (not supplied) - except they actually supplied *two*, one of them already fitted.

The awkward bayonet fitting (which rotates as you rotate the bulb, so you have to squeeze your fingers down the side to hold it steady) has two positions: bulb screwed in, and bulb almost screwed in. The lamp arrived with a bulb almost screwed in, and so it fell out after about five minutes of standing still. Luckily it didn't smash. The fitting makes it very easy to *think* you've screwed it in when you haven't, so I almost don't blame whoever on the factory floor almost screwed this one in. Bayonet fittings aren't hard to design or build. It took subtle carelessness and lack of testing to get this one wrong.

Finally, the instructions printed on the side of the box refer to a locking-in-place feature that doesn't exist. It doesn't even exist on the picture of the lamp on the front of the box.

It's not all bad though; the springs make a nice twanging noise and when it comes down to it, the lamp really does produce light. And I don't think any of its faults were malicious, unlike, say, products from Sony or Microsoft, who make conscious decisions to build annoying products: Memory Stick dependence, upgrade dependence, file format dependence, cable size and shape dependence, charger dependence, and so on... vendor lock-in in general. They can't lock you into a lamp.

Tags: design

The filmworks gallery

2:33PM, 5TH JANUARY 2004

Upon entering a public house in heady early 21st century Britain, you are immediately, and ruthlessly, assaulted by total disinterest. When a waitron finally notices you, usually in the same way they notice what they've just trodden in, you'll get the lead-piercing lava-freezing glance, whereupon they'll pause, mid-text, zombie-drag over to your table, grab your throat by their out-thrust gauntlet-clad fist, push you against the half-timbered wall, and hiss "woddaya wont?" while checking their watch and chewing their gum. This is par for the course in the British service industry, which makes it so surprising that the staff at the Filmworks cinema in Manchester seem genuinely pleased to serve you. Working at a ticket desk must crush the spirit, but they're always nice and friendly. This is not about courteous ushers though; this is about The Gallery.

For eleven pounds on a weeknight, you can sit high up at the back of the cinema in wide seats designed to hold even the biggest film fans, eating complementary popcorn and nachos (and plates of Quality Streets), drinking complementary fizzies and coffee, and guzzling non-complementary alcohol. There is a cretinously ill-placed cloth net in front of the balcony wall, which stops your drinks and food sliding over the edge, but does nothing to stop you actively hurling your hot coffee and broken bottles down onto the unsuspecting standard-rate-paying prole scum (as they would like you to think of them) below. If you're in the front row, this net blocks the bottom 10% of the screen, so although these may be the best seats in the house, as claimed, they are not in the best position.

The seats are quite antisocial in their magnitude, but it is possible to squeeze two people into one. They don't allow under-18s anywhere on the whole floor.

You can sit in the bar area before the film starts; they'll call you when it does, like in an airport lounge, which is not what you want to be reminded of. Interestingly, they really do call you when the film starts, not when the adverts start. This means the increased price is enough to win them over to your side (at the regular £3.50 a head, the marketeers are the real paymasters).

So anyway, it's quite good. Pity the films aren't.

Tags: films, reviews, manchester

Reviews! Reviews!

2:34PM, 5TH JANUARY 2004

I like reading other peoples' Christmas presents: if you're quick, you can finish them before they get taken away. Reading your own books can be done any time. And so I read this:

Eats, Shoots & Leaves

While looking on amazon.co.uk for reviews (to see what my opinion should be, obviously) I found this one:

fantastic book well written and taught me loads, of stuff. And very funny.

Now: this is a book about punctuation. The sarcastic comment about how interesting it is can come later. For now, let us bask in the imagined horror of what this reader's punctuation, grammar, and spelling must've been like *before* reading the book. It's possible ve's being funny, but if ve can't even spell vis own town's name properly, I doubt it.

As for the book itself, it's OK. The author, Lynne Truss, writes as if for Radio 4 (or maybe the *Daily Mail*). Funny in places, but overall coming across as someone who hasn't spent enough time on the internet. That's probably a good thing overall, but her characterisation of the net as a force for language destruction is poorly researched.

One thing I wasn't aware of before is the existence of [scriptio continua](#) and how punctuation cures this. The current trend of compound-word coinage is thus a disturbing throwback.

Apart from the pop-culture name dropping (always fun), the rest of the book was quite good. Hmm, well, maybe it was just OK.

Guards! Guards!

For some reason, I also read this. Disjointed. Funny. Sort of nihilistic. Not the hack fantasy I always assumed Terry Pratchett wrote, but in fact clever fantasy parody. Very clever. Douglas-Adamsy (yay!). Web-censors will need to be fully sentient before they recognise the subtle rudeness.

I enjoyed reading it, but it was in no way gripping. Maybe that's not the point.

Diaspora

My usage of the word 've' above might make one think I've fallen into the transhumanist webgulch, but in fact it was coined by Greg Egan, and used extensively in *Diaspora*. Useful too, as long as you're not obnoxious about it. Which I am, muahaha.

Diaspora, if it really is anything more than a thread of short stories, casts the transhuman condition as a struggle between realism and abstractionism. As an immortal near-god, do you explore the universe, or create your own? I vaguely recognise this as something big-A Art tries to deal with, but hard-SF seems to deliver more results than that has so far.

Both attempts are quite silly, but that doesn't stop them from being in some ways fun. I didn't really enjoy the speculative particle physics part of *Diaspora*, but I liked the psychogenesis section and the idea of life as an emergent phenomenon of some kind of chaotic function space. Very *Permutation City*. Very mathematical. In fact, right now, I'm supposed to be revising stuff that is **actually in the book!** The Gauss-Bonnet theorem, Euler characteristics, topology, manifolds, metrics, curvature... all part of the novel, and all on the January 2004 exams. What astonishing luck!

Mixed in with the maths is a feast of cool ideas, which is what SF is about. Character development means funny things in books like this. It's done quite well, but nevertheless comes across as a loosely glued together collection of episodes. You can almost imagine that the reason why the section prologues are un-numbered is because they were spliced in at the last minute to make sure the book isn't reviewed as a short story collection. No, that's too harsh. There is coherence here.

Some might blither at the rather bleak ending. I think it's quite powerful, maybe even romantic. Imagine if the last episode of *The Office* hadn't gone the way it did. I wouldn't have complained; sometimes a nasty dose of reality is what Art is all about, although in the case of *Diaspora*, perhaps that should read: a nasty shock of abstraction.

I don't subscribe to the author's Dust hypothesis, which he apparently really believes in. I believe continuity is important. That's why I don't like his bandying about of clones; too many times a character cloned verself and then effectively committed suicide, reasoning, "it doesn't matter; my clone will live on for me." No, no, no! If a twin dies, he doesn't carry on living in his twin's body. He **dies**. Clones are merely twins; entirely separate. I think the author knows this and uses his Dust hypothesis to gloss over it.

There is a glossary of terms at the back of the book which I missed completely, but if you've read any other Egan*, or any other kind of post-human speculative fiction or literature, you won't have any trouble working out what he means. One thing he doesn't explain is how big polises are. He gives clues though; a quick calculator session mid-read suggested they are about 6 metres across, assuming they are spherical.

[Greg Egan's](#) nicely retro webpage (it even has Java applets!) is a good companion to his books. It has explanations, diagrams, equations and other things. Groovy.

*Ugh. I hate *hate* **hate** using the author's name to refer to vis books. I feel like a port drinker.
Too old, and too crypto-fascist.

Tags: books, reviews

What we gonna do, when the money runs out?

2:34PM, 5TH JANUARY 2004

Osmosing through the covers and floating out of the window seems perfectly natural. Not even crossing the night-still city and breaking through the cloud layer arouses your suspicion. Sharp ascension. The horizon curves away as the thinning air sinks and guards the globe against the hard vacuum; breathing is not an issue. You look back and watch the Earth spin. A full rotation, then another; spinning into to a blur, then slowing down. You face the dark side and begin to descend.

Your impossible longitudinal orbit takes you over the golden rice paddies of newly temperate Antarctica and the deserts of South America. Coastlines have changed. The ground is a cratered landscape of subsiding mines, each larger and more desperate than the last. Gas refineries rust, their purpose used up.

Further north, as you pass over the glassy middle east, the muddy coast plays host to the beached carcasses of the giant wave harnessing machines, each dying along with its infrastructure and being washed ashore.

Below, whip-driven slave hordes scrabble into the landfills with bottle-lacerated hands, searching for reforgeable steel. The natural iron ore deposits are gone now, trapped in too-thin veins, or deeper than a lack of technology can dig.

As you fly towards the city, you pass over the sprawling subsuburbs of compact white low-energy housing, once filled with the working poor who couldn't pay the rising electricity bill of an old house, then filled with the skulls of rioting invaders who couldn't afford clean water or the guns required to guard it. Sparkling fresh mountain streams run ironically nearby, now

recovered from the industrial age, their poisons successfully offloaded into the marrows of the skeleton stacks that line the banks.

The fortified inner city bunkers of the owning class loom ahead, surrounded by the debris of war, but the dozen metres of concrete and lead shielding did not protect their inhabitants from the fallout of going cold turkey from an energy dependence. Mounted clergymen patrol with crossbows; the last bullets were fired long ago, and the managed forests firing the remaining foundries could not support an arms industry beyond the occasional sword and arrowhead.

And then you notice the silence. The churning factories: dead. The beeping cars: melted down into blades and armour. The summer snowdrifts dampen nearby sounds. You look up to the night sky and see the milky way. A defunct satellite deorbits somewhere over Asia and inspires a dozen splinter faiths.

Landing near the charred outline of a library, you see an orphan child in ragged acrylic, hunting insects. He spies movement and pounces, but it's only a scrap of paper. He discards it and wanders off, darting between shadows to avoid the curfew-enforcing Priests. The cold of the snow bites at your toes, and you feel distant for a moment. The scrap of paper lands at your feet, just as you feel a pillow in your arms. In the moment before drifting back to consciousness, you pick it up, and read:

[Support your local fusion research effort!](#)

Tags: science, fiction

Student life can be hazardous to your health

4:47PM, 6TH JANUARY 2004



No, it's *not* mine.

Tags: photos, health, university, food

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

4:06PM, 7TH JANUARY 2004

Is it ironic or appropriate that in a book supposedly about Autism, I should notice this on the copyright page?:

*Mark Haddon has asserted **her** right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work...*

Unless she's adopted a pen-mugshot to go with that pen-name.

Good book though.

Tags: books, amusements

Americans queue for 8 hours in Brazil

5:31PM, 7TH JANUARY 2004

[Americans are being fingerprinted](#) at Brazilian airports, like Brazilians are in the USA. The queue for Americans at GIG, Rio, was **8 hours long** on Monday, and that's for everybody, including the crew.

Brazil is thus playing the *tit-for-tat* strategy, but I suspect the USA is using *always-defect* nowadays.

Tags: brazil, mathematics, politics

The Eye of Bushron turns to Mars

2:50PM, 9TH JANUARY 2004

Bush on Mars:

President George W Bush will announce proposals next week to send Americans to Mars, and back to the Moon.

Well the [rovers](#) landed in areas thought to be ancient oceans. Stands to reason there was marine life there once, and [we all know what hundred million year old marine life smells like](#), don't we?

Tags: politics, science

This is the corporate dream

2:50PM, 9TH JANUARY 2004

I can't believe I'm reading slashdot comments, but [this one](#), in the context of outsourcing jobs, is spot on:

24/7 advertising. No job. No career. No credit. Basket full of crap at 28% interest. Get back on that fucking couch and keep your fucking mouth shut, consumer. This is the "corporate dream."

The outsourcing problem is not going to go away. Conventional wisdom says third world labourers are disgustingly underpaid. No. It's first world labourers who are disgustingly overpaid. The economy has been globalised. The free market will now commence adjusting itself.

Unless you're an Owner, you will be forced to compete with people willing to work for a thousandth the cost. Unemployment will rise. Stock markets will also rise, as the Owning class gets richer on the backs of companies who effectively don't have to pay salaries any more.

Both these are happening now.

Eventually first world labour markets will readjust themselves. Expect PhDs on checkouts. Salaries and living standards will fall. There will only be a second world.

Survival Strategies

1. Invent supertechnology and pray for a Singularity. [Nuclear fusion](#) is enough to keep the world running while you try.
2. Start owning stuff. Tricky if you don't already. There will come a point where everybody above a certain level of wealth will get richer, and everybody below will get poorer. This

Should have put money down on a [long bet](#).

level will rise, faster than the rate at which the Owners get richer; thus low-level Owners will become high-level Renters, and start to descend from there. Outcome? Winner-takes-all tyranny. Except it won't come to that. There will be war and genocide and die-offs that stabilise the system.

3. Secede from civilisation. Buy farmland, invest in gold and guns. Become as self-sufficient as possible. When the currencies crash, trade the gold and shoot the invaders.
4. Learn to be poor. Frugal living is possible. Billions live on a starvation diet today. The quality of life is low, but you have no alternative, except to...
5. Die. All this is an extended corollary of Overpopulation anyway, so you'll be doing everyone a favour!

Tags: politics, economics

Hot Pixels

4:55PM, 9TH JANUARY 2004

The CCD sensor on my camera is 2272x1704 pixels, and it's 7mm across, which means there are more than 100,000 pixels per square millimetre. My 15" laptop screen, at a resolution of 1600x1200, has only 28px/mm². Both of them have exactly one broken pixel.



Laptop screen

Sensing and displaying are very different functions, but these numbers make the camera seem a *lot* more impressive than the screen.

I noted the laptop's dead pixel almost immediately after starting it up for the first time. It's in the bottom right hand corner, so I never notice it in everyday usage. After 8 months of using

the camera, I've only just noticed its hot pixel: it only shows up on extremely dark areas, but it's quite obvious:



Closeup of dark picture

"Hot" basically means it's red, rather than black or white. Looking back on old pictures, it seems to have been there since I bought the camera, which is good, since that means the CCD isn't deteriorating.

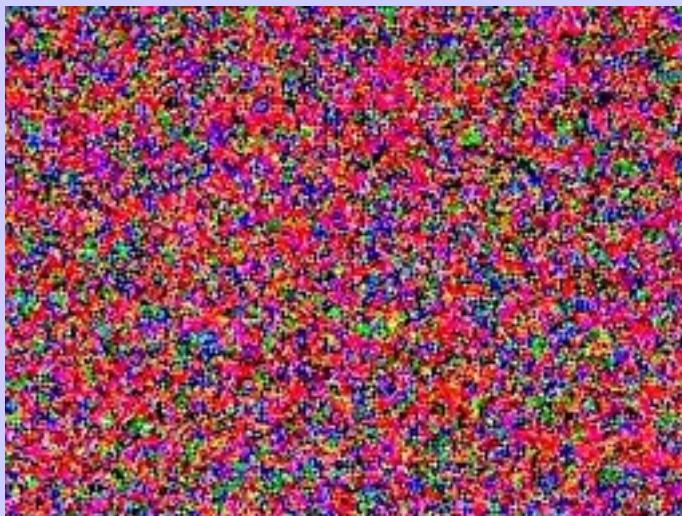
Some people send their cameras back because of problems like this, but it's not unheard of to get back a replacement camera with even more dead pixels! The same goes for laptop screens, which manufacturers generally don't replace unless there are more than 3 dead pixels, or one right in the centre. It's impossible to fix the CCD so companies like Canon apparently do something to the camera's firmware which makes it interpolate around the broken pixel. I don't see any good reason why Canon can't include this functionality in the end

user software. It should even be possible to identify dead pixels automatically (take a pic with the lens cap on, look for red).



Extreme closeup of hot pixel

The hot pixel hasn't really affected the surrounding pixels; it's just the camera software making the problem bigger than it really is.



Noise

That's a .RAW image taken with the lens cap on. Something's going nicely wrong.

The camera, by the way, is an 8 months old Canon G3, and the laptop is a 30 month old Dell Inspiron 8000. Other than this (and the Dell having an ultra-buggy BIOS), both are highly recommended.

Tags: photos, hardware

Search test

5:02PM, 9TH JANUARY 2004

Testing testing testing.

Image search and comment search to come later. *Much* later.

Tags: meta

Zucker Brothers Mazingness

10:47PM, 13TH JANUARY 2004

Airplane, The Naked Gun, and... Scary Movie 3? I didn't know [David Zucker](#) and [Robert K Weiss](#) did that. Maybe that means it's worth seeing. They're also doing the 4th one. Zucker produced Phone Booth too apparently. And then there's [The Untitled Onion Movie!](#) Wow! Zucker and Onion humour together! That could go so disastrously wrong or be so great.

Enough generalities. Here is why these films are so fantastic: the commentary tracks on the Naked Gun DVDs. Here's one exchange between Robert Weiss and Peter Tilden:

[discussing the cancellation of Police Squad after ABC saw one show]

Weiss: "Well, do you remember, the network wanted to have a laugh track. They begged us to put a laugh track on it, and we didn't know where to put the laugh for a visual joke."

Tilden: "So you fought them on it?"

Weiss: "We fought them on it."

Tilden: "And they called you after one episode."

Weiss: "Yeah. Wait a minute, I guess we lost that one."

Tags: films

Berlusconi rolls deep on everyone

11:50PM, 13TH JANUARY 2004

Ahem, I quote from [Roll Deep](#):

Practice the "What the fuck?!" arm gesture (both arms open, palms spread outward) until it becomes an automatic response to any question, especially if from a parent, cop, boss, or teacher.



Ya best proteck ya neck

Tags: politics, amusements

Keep flags off Mars!

7:56PM, 15TH JANUARY 2004

[Flags in Space](#) is an interesting read. They don't have the latest one though:



Columbia Memorial Station

The conspiracy wackos can rage over the fact that one of those is an Israeli flag, but I'm just a bit disappointed that there are flags there at all. Nationalism was born on Earth and it *will* die here, [one way, or another](#). Not that I have anything against graffiti artists, but tagging rocks in space is just a little distasteful considering what those icons have been getting up to back home on Earth.

Flags are everywhere around the solar system, but that's no reason to drop more. The [Soviet Venus Missions](#) left some [very cool pennants](#) (image below; copyright Don P. Mitchell apparently). However, the Venusian atmosphere is hot enough to melt lead, so

all those probes are now just blobs of molten slag. Presumably their symbols went the same way.



In the CCCP, Venus probes you.

The most famous tribal imagery was planted on the moon by real live astronauts, but that was 30 years ago. Someone on the [Flags in Space](#) page speculates that the sun's UV rays, unhindered by an ozone layer, have blasted those scraps of nylon away.

Nothing has ever landed on Mercury, Pluto, or in the Asteroid belt, although the solar system is rife with man-made objects in heliocentric orbits that either ran out of fuel, broke, or were put there for a reason. There may be US or Soviet flags on many of these, but they're lost forever. Quite thoughtfully, neither the Voyager nor Pioneer plaques had a flag on them (presumably a culture capable of decoding a pulsar map of the local volume would be unmoved by petit symbology). The [images](#) encoded on the gold-plated record were similarly

multicultural, almost to the point of being an episode of Sesame Street. *Johnny B. Goode* is on the record too; I wonder if the RIAA know about that.

Jupiter and Saturn though... the Galileo spacecraft dropped a probe into Jupiter, and Cassini will send the Huygens lander to Titan in 2005. Galileo's probe was destroyed; if Titan has a surface, Huygens may land, or if the surface is an ocean of cryogenic methane, it'll float there for the rest of eternity.

(Speaking of Titan, I just had a fantastic idea: ship gigatonnes of oxygen there, dump on a carefully chosen spot, then drop a match. If the calculations are correct, half the planet should explode and be sent hurtling towards Earth, where it can be put in a parking orbit and drive the oil companies out of business.)

Galileo itself wasn't powered by batteries or regular unleaded gasoline. *Unfortunately, it required something with a littler more kick - plutonium!* Rather than letting a big chunk of nuclear waste hurtle randomly around the Jovian system, NASA decided to crash Galileo into Jupiter, since Arthur C Clarke told them not to contaminate Europa. However, Mr Clark is 87, so he should be out of the way in time for the badass nuclear-powered [Jupiter Icy Moons Orbiter](#) to go crazy with as much plutonium as they want. *Attempt no landings there.* Yeah right.

Er, back to the point: Galileo surely had an American flag on it, so it's a good job anti-flag-burning laws never got passed. When Cassini's 4 year mission is over, I imagine it'll suffer a similar fate on the way to Saturn's metallic hydrogen core.

Incidentally, the Galileo mission is the event that got me online: I told my Dad that we could see pictures of Jupiter right on the NASA website. He said "ooh", so we *just* beat the crowds, and were online by 1994, just in time to have a look around the barren grey bgcolors, blue-

Just launched this year, in 2023!

bordered images, and be amazed by the sufficiently-advanced-technology of any URL with that mysterious "cgi-bin" glyph in it.

Coffee Break

Well, that was a ramble if ever there was one. Point is: the only credibly intact extraterrestrial flags are on Mars, and since there's no way in hell Bush'll get the money for his latest space fancies (1989's price tag of \$500bn will only have gone up since then), the Martian dust storms will have ground away the evidence of our nasty nationalistic streak by the time (post-)humans get there. Let's not put any more there in the mean time. That means you too, McDonald's.

Tags: science

Adobe(R) Newspeak(R)

9:15PM, 16TH JANUARY 2004

(Via [b3ta](#)) The long telescopic arm of the Adobe [lawyerbot](#) grasps for the jugular of the English language once more:

CORRECT: The image was enhanced with Adobe® Photoshop® Elements software.

INCORRECT: The image was photoshopped.

If I were them I'd be more worried about the fact that the photoshopping industry/community is powered almost exclusively by warez'd copies.

The same page informs us that "Trademarks are not nouns." **Yes they are.** Adobe always puts the word *software* after the name of their product, thus supposedly making the name an adjective, but this just doesn't happen in the real world. It's a horrible legal/marketing fiction designed to protect their brands from genericisation. Die corporate language prescriptivists, die!

Tags: law, language

Block an exit, go to jail

8:44AM, 20TH JANUARY 2004

In the exam room, in a calm voice, as part of the usuals rubrics:

Those of you with bags in front of the fire exit are facing a prison sentence.

Harsh, but fair.

Tags: amusements, university

Labs in the news

8:53AM, 22ND JANUARY 2004

Quoth [BBC News](#):

The survey of heads of science found that fears over dangerous behaviour had stopped practicals in 57% of schools.

To our eternal credit, only the heart dissection lesson was cancelled, and that was a punishment. Mostly we just maintained private learning exclusion zones. And of course, the danger aspect was totally overlooked.

Tags: science, learning

Gawd-dayam scienticians wid' deir edumacation

11:10AM, 25TH JANUARY 2004

So [Opportunity landed safely](#), evoking this comment:

"We done good!" project manager Pete Theisinger reports. "We seem to have a very well-performed vehicle. We didn't have any trouble with the critical deploys."

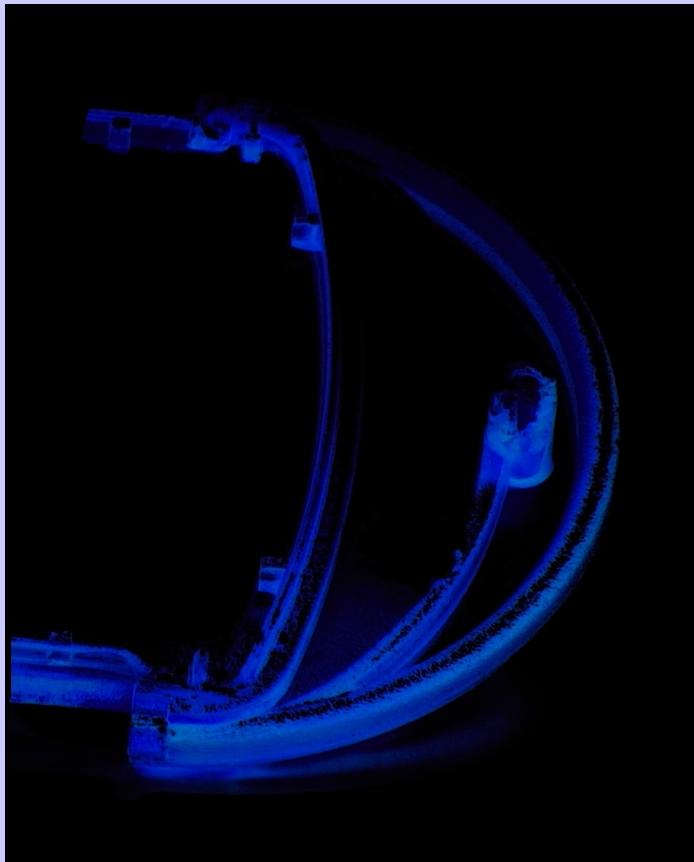
Nouning the make language weirds, among other grammar atrocities.

Tags: science, language

Overexposure is great

3:04PM, 1ST FEBRUARY 2004

What is this?:



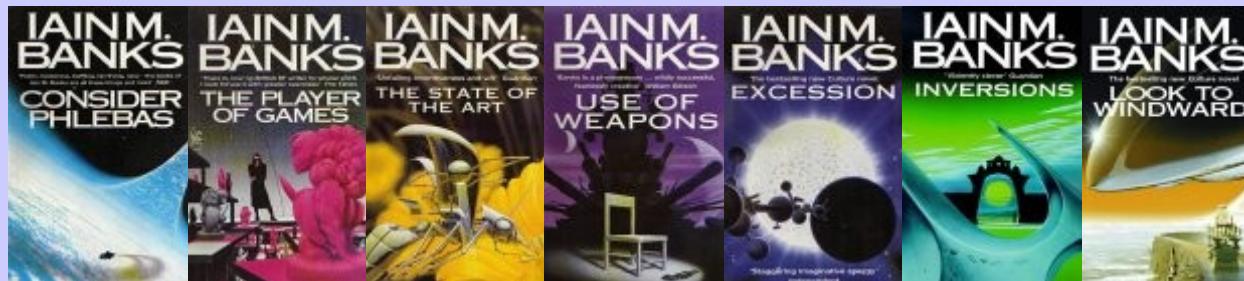
Tags: photos, art

Iain M. Banks Culture megafanboi geekfest

6:33PM, 1ST FEBRUARY 2004

Iain Banks is like Counting Crows: none of his work is my absolute favourite, but almost everything he does is at least *very* good. The quality of his writing is consistently high, often very high, and occasionally perfect. Can you imagine a gruesome death for a computer? IMB can.

I first read about Banks' Culture books nearly two years ago, but didn't get around to reading *Consider Phlebas*, the first published (but not first written) Culture novel until February last year. Since then I've been hooked enough to read all the others, as well as some of his mainstream fiction which, truth be told, is actually better than the SF books! I hereby present a shrine to Scottish sci-fi, with minimal spoilers.



Introduction

The place for a Banksian neophyte to begin is *Consider Phlebas*, but unless you're in a book shop right now, you'll probably want some kind of introduction to see whether you'll like the books or not. Try the seminal net essay [A few notes on the Culture](#) ([txt mirror](#), [HTMLified mirror](#)), written by Iain Banks and posted to [rec.arts.sf.written](#) by fellow Scot and SF author

I [met](#) Iain Banks at a book signing for *The Algebraist* later that year. He was a funny guy. He wrote three more Culture books then died in 2013.

See attached: culturenotes.txt

Ken MacLeod. If you can't be bothered to read that, try this: the Culture books are science fiction novels about a utopian semi-human/machine hybrid civilisation, featuring godlike artificial intelligences and Big Dumb Objects, and should be loved by anyone who likes space opera or large numbers. They're also dryly funny and somewhat gory.

Consider Phlebas

It would, as the author puts it himself, "make a fucking brilliant film". As [this bibliography](#) puts it, "it would, too." High-order space opera: aliens, more aliens, castaways, war, cannibalism, Orbitals (think of [Ringworld](#), but smaller, and orbiting suns rather than encircling them), Minds (think of AIs, but bigger, and society revolving round them), spaceships to dwarf anything in screenbound sci-fi, and destruction on an epic scale. Highly brutal.

The author apparently decided to tell the story from a viewpoint outside the Culture to avoid rubbing the utopia in the readers' faces. Plenty of that later.

The Player of Games

Ofted cited as the best Culture novel, and even recommended as a better introduction than *Consider Phlebas*. I almost agree, were it not for the fact that publication order is *always* the best order to read in.

Like the title suggests, this is a book about a game player, and about one game in particular, where the winner becomes Emperor of a classic Evil Empire. It has that *Ender's Game*-style "working up the ranks" feeling. If Hollywood can't find the budget for a *Phlebas* film, they could do this for a fifth the cost, and get a film with a better story and a phenomenal ending.

Prescient quote:

... it would hardly be war as such because we're way ahead of them technologically, but we'd have to become an occupying force to control them, and that would mean a huge drain on our resources as well as morale; in the end such an adventure would almost certainly be seen as a mistake, no matter the popular enthusiasm for it at the time. The people of the empire would lose by uniting against us instead of the corrupt regime which controls them, so putting the clock back a century or two, and the Culture would lose by emulating those we despise; invaders, occupiers, hegemonists.

Do the appropriate search-and-replace for *empire* and *Culture*.

The State of the Art

Excellent title for what is actually a collection of short stories, including the eponymous novella, where the Culture finds 1970s Earth, and the short story *A Gift from the Culture*, which doesn't seem to go anywhere. *TSotA* suffers from power trip exposition and infodumps, and "hey look, isn't the Culture cool?"-itis. But what exactly is wrong with that as a form of entertainment? See below for comments on the socialist aspect to this and other stories.

Use of Weapons

Everyone seems to like this one best, but I consider it merely excellent. I probably need to do some re-reading, and there's no time for that while there's so much good stuff out there I haven't even read once.

Deep style, powerful story. A tale of rehabilitation and studded with magnificent SF set-pieces.

Excession

This book is about the Minds. There is a human subplot, but it's slow and trivial compared to the ultra-epic space opera scale of the main story. This is the first 'modern' Culture novel,

written in 1996. The writing seems aware of its place in the SF ecosphere. It skirts around, but tips its hat toward, the issue of technological Singularities. If you still can't think of a gruesome way for a computer to die, and you really want to know, this is the one to read.

The furious excess of high-tech wizardry feels a bit like the Worms 2 intro, or that Itchy & Scratchy cartoon where they pull ever-bigger guns on each other, although this is not the excession referred to in the title.

You absolutely need to read this twice if you want to stand half a chance of figuring out what went on. Either that, or take notes on which Minds are called what and belong to which groups at which time, and for which reasons.

Inversions

The blurb calls this science fiction, but unless you've read another Culture novel before, you couldn't classify it as anything other than medieval fantasy, and maybe not even fantasy. If you *are* familiar with Culture modus operandi, the whole book is one monumental piece of extended dramatic irony. It's great. Contains possibly the only decent romantic paragraph in all of SF.

The plot is complicated and subtle. [This FAQ](#) goes some way to explaining what happened.

Look to Windward

This books feels tired. Elegiac, I heard someone describe it as. Banks' next novel (due out end of this year) is SF, but not Culture, so I can very easily imagine *LtW* being the last. In some ways I think this is my favourite. It's set predominantly on a single Orbital, so Culture life is really fleshed out in all its exciting detail. There's something of everything here. *Excession*

couldn't be topped for SF gadgetry, so IMB followed it up with the calm, medieval *Inversions*, and then bounced back to this 'something of everything' book. Lesser authors would've taken any one of the dozen or so Cool Ideas (tm) and spun it off into a whole novel. On the other hand, perhaps IMB was just clearing out his ideas drawer as a way to end the series on a high note.

The Bridge

This is not a Culture novel. It's not SF or fantasy either. Not sure I'd describe it as mainstream, but that's where you'll find it in the book shop. It's packed full of Culture references, oblique and not so oblique. It was published before any of the SF novels. Maybe at the time, IMB didn't expect the Culture work to ever be published. Seeing references to SF minutiae in a fairly literary book is odd; imagine reading *War and Peace* and having net lingo slyly inserted.

You might think you're not interested in non-SF, but if you like the Culture books, you'll like this even more. It's truly IMB's finest.

Set on a Kafkaesque* bridge of indeterminate length, the tone is a cross between 1984 and Beneath a Steel Sky. Overall, there's even some Red Dwarf in there.

* So I am told. I haven't read anything by Kafka. He's way down my reading list. Er, whoever he is.

An aside on the covers

The UK wraparound covers by Mark Salwowski are without fail massively superior to the US ones. Look to Windward in particular has cover art you can stare into for days, taking in the detail beyond detail.

Socialism

When Banks fans post to rasw for similar authors, Vernor Vinge is often recommended, and many people can't understand why, citing the seemingly opposing politico-economic models in the novels, i.e. Socialism vs. Anarchism. However, the Culture is clearly a post-scarcity society where economic issues are minor, hence branding it socialist is not quite right. As it happens, Banks really does have socialist leanings, while Vinge really does have libertarian leanings, but why on earth should that mean they can't write novels enjoyable to both sides?

(For what it's worth, I think they're both gr9.)

Conclusion

What is there to conclude? Read Banks now! But stay away from The Wasp Factory unless you're a bit disturbed. That is to say, it's marvellous.

Tags: books, reviews

What does half a decade of email look like?

8:20PM, 2ND FEBRUARY 2004

I have here nearly a hundred megabytes of email from the last 5 years, so I thought I'd have a look at it. But how do you look at something that big? Data visualisation to the rescue! If I plotted each byte as a pixel, I'd have a 125-screen wide bitmap, so instead I plotted the average value of each 16x16 block as a single pixel. *And when the Python Imaging Library finished, I had a revelation; a picture! A picture of this:*



The image is mostly grey because each pixel is an average of 256 values; since null and high-ascii bytes are rare, they get lost in a sea of averageness. Art imitates life, eh? The latter 20% or so is spam from the last 2 months, which I keep as fuel for Bayesian magic.

Of course, *please excuse the crudity of this image, I didn't have time to colour it.*

Tags: meta, mathematics, email

Steel enlightenment

5:47PM, 4TH FEBRUARY 2004

In an effort to move Rusholme away from its fry-pit wasteland image, some blob of government has hired a construction crew to dig up the pavements and presumably put something better there. Today I walked past a guy doing double-handed joystick-operation of a big earth-mover, and I realised [Marshall McLuhan](#) was incomplete: in some ways, the extension of man is media, but in other, more realistic ways, it's those massive hydraulic claw things.

Tags: philosophy

Hair Monster found in Mathspace

5:47pm, 4th February 2004

[Paul Bourke](#) has, amongst other wonders, some scary renderings of Julia fractals over the quaternions. Here's one of them:



Aaargh!

What you see is only a 3D slice of the true horror, as the quaternions form a 4-dimensional algebra. (You didn't think it stopped at complex numbers, did you? And it doesn't stop at quaternions either; there are octonions, sedenions, and indeed [Cayley-Dickson](#) algebras of dimension 2^n , for all n right up to infinity. *Or su'ink.*) If you're not thinking fourth dimensionally, you can use time as your other axis and make pretty [animations](#), and with the right colour scheme, all the scariness goes away. Maths imitates racism.

In a fit of true cosmic coincidence, not only was yesterday Gaston Julia's birthday, it was celebrated by Google with a [holiday logo](#) which googledotted the above page. And as if that wasn't enough, I find [Haddock](#), via [Plasticbag](#), linking to the [Buddhabrot](#) image, created with

code by - that's right - Paul Bourke! Sometimes I think a global consciousness will arise as an emergent phenomenon of the clickpaths around various net resources.

Tags: mathematics

Computerless computing

9:49PM, 7TH FEBRUARY 2004

I've been on the internet for nearly 10 years now, age 11 to present, and my computing strategy has been consistent: ever faster, ever bigger, ever more expensive. It might be time for that to change.

Yes

For £50 per month you can get [125Mb of GPRS data transfer](#), which is plenty for text only communication. o2 don't offer the Handspring Treo 600 as a phone, but if we overlook that as a minor difficulty, Orange will sell you one for £200 with a minimal £17 per month tariff, and then the [Treo Portable Keyboard](#) is \$100. The [SSH client](#) is free, but the [dedicated server](#) at the other end will cost £15 per month.

So that's a ~£250 setup fee, then ~£1000 per year running costs, 60% of that being bandwidth. Now the interesting part: a kilopound a year is a reasonable amount to fritter on a desktop computer. Does that sound like a lot? Consider the cost of a brand new top o' the range machine every 3 years, plus ISP costs, plus software costs (er, speaking entirely theoretically here then...), and hey, that 300W power supply is going to cost you more than the Treo's teensy 144Mhz ARM CPU: as the oil runs out, the price of this kind of electricity may become significant, and when it finally does run out, you can use the Treo's tough pointy casing to fight off the other looters swamping the farmers' ransom auctions. Here's hoping the Treo 900 comes with a telescopic sword.

But anyway, is this mobile setup a viable replacement for a fixed desktop setup?

A decade before serverless became popular.

3 years before the iPhone.

I now pay £7 per month for 15GB of 5G data.

Handspring is dead.

No

Although you gain always-on wireless net access from anywhere in the UK, and a full sized keyboard, you don't really get to browse the web unless you have bandwidth to spare, which you soon won't if browsing is what you do. The Treo only has 24Mb storage space, which is pathetic to the point of uselessness, and although it has a digital camera, the picture quality is rubbish, and uploading the photos will cut into your bandwidth again. Connecting up a real digital camera is not possible. Perhaps you could add £10 per month to the above fee to cover high-quality access from net cafes when required, but then you have to traipse around city-centres as a net-hobo. There's no room for any reasonable amount of music, and streaming is out.

In fact the problem reduces to one of bandwidth. Compared to the dedicated server, GPRS bandwidth is **four hundred times more expensive**, and **2000 times slower**. That's just not a price worth paying.

Here's what would be worth it: A PDA phone with a CompactFlash slot (so I can use my camera), a USB cable (so I can up/download to other computers easily), an XScale CPU, and bandwidth at a penny per megabyte. Those Linux smartphones may eventually provide the right hardware, but that bandwidth thingy isn't going to go away until someone does something really clever. Or perhaps until someone stops doing something really stupid.

Maybe in a few years UK mobile networks will have a compelling data service, but until then, they can go to hell, along with the car industry, which has similar levels of vendor lock-in and price gouging. Rah.

Tags: hardware

Barbarian hordes swarming M14

11:19PM, 7TH FEBRUARY 2004

This dodgy MSN page lets you see some crime stats for your postcode. Hmm. Local robbery rate is 1000% above the national average. Lovely. Only 350% more burglaries than normal though!

I suggest a local crackdown on unlocked footlockers.

Tags: crime, manchester

Ministry of Scain

8:46PM, 9TH FEBRUARY 2004

British FBI will require neither ruth nor evidence. Reminds me of those 'PC cleaning' programs that take up megs and megs of space and leave their own crap lying around the filesystem, inciting the purchase of yet another layer of clean-sweep utilities. Yet another layer of policing, yet another layer of government. I say we disband the country, stack the bodies in the cellar, leave quietly one at a time, and pretend none of this has ever happened.

Tags: politics, crime

Landspeeder

9:26PM, 9TH FEBRUARY 2004

Wow, easily the best Mars picture yet:



Discarded backshell and parachute

NASA's [Mars Rovers](#) website is pretty good all round, but I bet my URL for this picture lasts longer than [theirs](#).

As long as you count redirects, I was right!

Tags: science

Teengers: thieves, thieved

6:10PM, 13TH FEBRUARY 2004

Quoth [BBC News](#):

Britain's 16-year-olds are now worth more than £2bn - or an average of nearly £3000 each, a report says.

But despite this half of them say they are not very good at managing money, says the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Of course they're not good at managing money - that's why the banks are interested in how much they're worth.

Tags: economics, learning

Coding vs. Gaming

10:30PM, 18TH FEBRUARY 2004

Danny O'Brien summarises Will Davies:

Will is developing, I think, a set of connections between gaming and coding. That you can only game explicitly defined code, and that codifying something leaves you at risk of being gamed. And if you try and artificially model something that isn't following your rules, you could easily end up playing your own private game.

This is a lovely little idea: coding vs. gaming. Defending vs. attacking. Formal systems vs. Gödel. There is so much packed into those last two sentences.

It's stymied my topic map too. Is this gaming, AI, learning, politics, psychology, science, web, meta, law or something new?

Tags: law, games

Sony vs. You

1:44PM, 22ND FEBRUARY 2004

Sony hardware has no trouble convincing you to buy it. It looks nice and is built well. You can find Sony stuff in any Shiny Things shop, and the person who sells it to you will have tidy hair and white teeth. Back in the 80s and early 90s, this was all that mattered: a good looking hunk of technology that did something when you pressed a button. Not any more though.

Nowadays, hardware comes with software to control it, and for all their genius at physical product design, Sony are still evil braindead corpse-fisting sub-cretins at writing software.

I'm sure it's not just me. [Here's one man's struggle against the brick wall of Sony Ericsson customer support](#). It looks like it's actually Ericsson handling the emails, but they've clearly been infected by the Sony monster that loves the taste of customer viscera. I like the way he gets downgraded from "Peter" to "[Consumer](#)" by the second email.

That really gets to the crux of the issue here: Sony actively don't want you to be a participant. Your job is to keep quiet and consume. Press the buttons if you must, but don't get any smart ideas about having some kind of *control* over the device. The result is software with close to zero compatibility, zero configurability, and a custom-designed UI to keep you in the SONYverse where only they have access to your eyes and ears.

Never ever ever ever ever ever **ever** ever ever ever buy anything from Sony ever ever ever again.

On the other hand, the hardware does look really nice...

Tags: hardware, design

London == leftists?

6:27PM, 24TH FEBRUARY 2004

'Meh'-level Guardian comment claims:

London, too, has American levels of ethnic diversity but is the most leftwing part of Britain.

I present the following as evidence to the contrary:



Old Trafford

Tags: politics, amusements, manchester

TEH PASHION OF TEH CHRITS!!11!1

4:51PM, 25TH FEBRUARY 2004

(Warning: *extreme* blasphemy ahead. Put your censor goggles on now.)

So that crazy Mel Gibson decides to up the stakes in the War on Jews with gore-fest snuff flick *The Passion of Christ*. Blurgh, I say. Let the religious psychos have their fun. I'm just disappointed that he missed the opportunity to create a film of the world's greatest teen slasher/zombie book: The Bible.

Just imagine. Marching home drunk one night, a bunch of Roman soldiers accidentally kill their best mate Jesus, after he gets so paralytic he starts ranting about being some kind of god demon. They bury the body in the beer garden of a nearby tavern (the modern version might replace this with, say, an abandoned toxic waste dump). They think they've gotten away with it but 3 days later Zombie Jesus rises from the dead and comes back to plague them! "Man," he says, "I was absolutely *crucified* last night!" in a witty reference to the original book, for die-hard fans to chuckle at, following in the footsteps of such classic lines as "What did you expect, yellow Spandex?"

Due to the prudishness of the medieval church, historical records are sketchy as to who Zombie Jesus' first victim was, but if modern Horror is anything to go by, it was probably a female Centurion who was caught unawares while sitting in the hot-tub on the phone to her boyfriend.

All standard horror cliches so far, but this film has the advantage of historical authority in the zombie horror genre. Peter Jackson's *Braindead* rips the "I kick arse for the lord!" line from the

apocrypha. Even the [Standard Zombie Laws](#) of the *Living Dead* trilogy ultimately derive from the Roman Catholic rite of transubstantiation:

"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink."

John 6:54-55

George Romero's trick was to have the zombies biting *you* instead of you biting Jesus. Few spotted this subtle reversal and thus credited him with an original invention.

Since there's no hero, the film would be a non-stop Zombie rampage through the Middle-East. In fact, the modern idea of a hero is another role reversal: in the original Bible, Zombie Jesus is the one with all the throwaway one-liners, which have since filtered up into popular culture:

"Groovy"

John 6:67

"Who wants some?"

John 6:73

"I'm Duke Jesus and I'm coming to get the rest of you alien bastards!"

John 6:89

Also, and correct me if my biblical knowledge is a little rusty, but I think the original book version has a Roman soldier trying to kill Zombie Jesus by skewering him in the side with a spear. This is the origin of the modern Cop-shoots-Zombie scene where Cop finds out that his bullets won't work. I don't recall if Jesus eventually manages to bite the soldier in the original. Either way, there are only two canonical ways to kill a zombie: destroy its brain, or, and I quote from the *Quake I* manual: "Thou canst not kill that which doth not live. But you can blast it into chunky kibbles."

Unfortunately, like all trilogies in the Horror genre, the source material eventually degenerates into self-parody with the *Revelation* chapter, sometimes known as *Scary Testament* 3. While this is the only part actually set in Hell, it's packed with acid-trip visions of horsemen and the end of the world. More sci-fi/fantasy than Horror.

What would really have set this film apart from the standard Hollywood bunk is that it basically has a sad ending: not only does Zombie Jesus win, he ascends into some kind of all-powerful god-zombie; a fitting revenge based on the original Jesus' post-binge drunken ravings. The film obviously ends with the one surviving (female) soldier in the changing room of the Roman spa reading words etched in steam on the mirror: "I still know what you did last Easter (cf. omniscience)".

Tags: religion, amusements, films

Size down, dumb down?

12:58PM, 28TH FEBRUARY 2004

I saw the new tabloid size [Independent](#) sitting next to its big twin on Wednesday. The headline story on both was the earthquake in Morocco. The big paper said "562 killed" and the small one said "560 killed". *Hmmm.*

Perhaps the small one is published fractionally before the big one, but I prefer to think that the editors of the tabloid edition subconsciously doubt their readers' ability to deal with numbers accurate to more than two significant figures. Or maybe they think reducing all the numbers will help keep the size of the paper down...

Tags: media, amusements

Do you like scary rocks?

9:21PM, 2ND MARCH 2004

This morning I saw a big pointy rock that reminded me of [this one on Mars](#) (but without the scream-mask pattern etched on by those hilarious scientists). I've not noticed this rock before. That means I'm more familiar with some patch of desert on another planet than with the route I have walked every day for the last three years.

Tags: space, manchester

LOTR DVD release timetable

6:15PM, 8TH MARCH 2004

1. Summer 2004: Return of the King Theatrical Version (2 discs)
2. Christmas 2004: ROTK Extended Edition (4 discs)
3. Christmas 2004: Trilogy Box set (6 discs + bonus disc)
4. Christmas 2004: Trilogy Box set Extended Edition (12 discs + 2 bonus)
5. Christmas 2005: Book 50th anniversary Book + DVD collectors pack (12 discs + 2 bonus discs + Life of Tolkien disc)
6. Summer 2006: Hobbit Theatrical DVD (2 discs)
7. Christmas 2006: Hobbit Extended Edition (4 discs)
8. Christmas 2007: Tolkien Megapack LOTR+Hobbit (8 discs + 2 bonus discs)
9. Christmas 2007: Tolkien Megapack Extended Edition LOTR+Hobbit (16 discs + 2 bonus discs)
10. Christmas 2008: Silmarillion 12-part TV drama DVD box set (6 discs)
11. Summer 2009: Silmarillion series 2 DVD box set (6 discs)
12. Christmas 2009: Silmarillion collectors box set (12 discs + 2 behinds the scenes discs)
13. Christmas 2010: LOTR+Hobbit+Silmarillion Extended Edition Collectors Pack 10th Anniversary Edition box set (35 discs)
14. Christmas 2011: Where-are-they-now?-interview collection (10 discs)
15. Christmas 2015: Book 60th anniversary limited edition illustrated hardback + Extended Edition DVD crate (40 discs)
16. Christmas 2020: 20th Anniversary Digitally Remastered Extended Edition LOTR+Hobbit+Silmarillion + making-of-the-DVD disc + interview collection + Farmer Giles of Ham 30-second Nike advert + hardback collection (90 discs)

This assumes DVDs will remain the primary film distribution medium for the next 15 years.

Duplicate the above list for each additional format released between now and then.

Tags: amusements, films

This essentially came true in 2021 with the release of the [31-disc Ultimate Collector's Edition](#).

Amiga dies, again

4:17PM, 16TH MARCH 2004

Oh look, [the AmigaOS baton has been passed](#) yet again. They're exploring new territory here: standard fantasy necrolore tells us that living things first become dead, then become zombies, then become skeletons, then become ghosts.

When Commodore died, its zombie corpse walked around as Escom for a while, then got disorporated into various Intellectual Property bones that staggered around as a skeleton looking for a brain. Gateway bought the lot, then did nothing for so long that the bones rotted away and the ghost of Amiga drifted off towards Amino Inc, who took the name and pulled it down into a nailed shut coffin for 4 years. They occasionally stuck a ghostly hand out of the lid to take money off loyal fans when they couldn't pay the rent on the coffin.

Now 4 years and much shady behind-the-scenes dealing later, KMOS prises open the coffin and finds it almost empty! They take what they can scrape off the sides and leave the evil spirits behind to mutter crazy things about mobile phones in 1998-speak.

So what comes after a ghost? Is the Amiga now an apparition? A wraith? Some kind of vague discarnate shade? I'd look it up in a D&D monster manual if I was 3.7 times nerdier.

Law

The interesting thing about this transfer of ownership is that the name has been split. Amiga Inc. still gets to be called Amiga Inc. while it peddles its moronic "content delivery platform", and KMOS gets to market OS4 as AmigaOS4. Amiga is still in legal spaghetti with Genesi (another bizarre fusion of a company) and the userbase is asymptotically approaching zero. More than 1000 people fell for the T-shirt scam, but that was years ago. I reckon there are

Somehow, all of this carried on happening and got even worse.

about 450 Amiga users left. It will never approach zero, because that would mean death for the Amiga, and as has been repeatedly, excruciatingly demonstrated, the Amiga just... won't... die!

Tags: history, hardware

Starsky and Hutch and ants

10:00AM, 20TH MARCH 2004

Saw *Starsky and Hutch* last night. **It's good!** 100% cliches and cheese, like a Simpsons parody of the original.

Just as interesting was watching the people shuffling out to clubs. Individually, they are not conscious, but when together, they form a kind of group mind that knows how to follow the trail leading to the alcohol at the end. They can drink several times their own body weight, and often find themselves covered in their own excretions. The queen is a certain club owner, and they live in a disgusting network of tunnels and student accommodation known as Fallowfield.

I'll probably see *Dawn of the Dead* next Friday, so that'll be a good analogy to explore.

Tags: films

When 12-year-olds attack

9:19PM, 24TH MARCH 2004

Young suicide bomber caught:

"He doesn't know anything and he has intelligence of a 12-year-old," his brother said.

If only the other protagonists (on both sides) were that smart.

Tags: politics, crime

Review: Dawn of the Dead

6:20PM, 26TH MARCH 2004

Me: Of course, it didn't have the anti-consumerism subtext of the original which made you notice all the people on the street walking around saying "buy... buy... buy..." and think "Oh my god! It's already happened!".

Razwan: Ooh look, 50%-off sale at Next!

Tags: films, reviews

Lightning

4:05PM, 31ST MARCH 2004

High time we had some pictures! Haven't had some pictures in a long time!



Before



Bright flash



**The Power of Christ
compels you!**



**Looks like daylight
but it's not**



**The storm out to sea
casts twilight**



**Lightning over the
sugarloaf**

I'm sorry, but the only power source capable of generating pictures like that is a bolt of lightning...

...unfortunately, you never know when or where it's ever gonna strike.

Tags: photos, brazil

True Wisdom

5:38PM, 22ND MAY 2004

Two exams down, four to go, and the hard one was easier than the easy one.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance has me currently thinking: what is the difference between a book collection and a shoe collection?

Tags: university

The Unabomber is a Mathematician

11:14AM, 29TH MAY 2004

Someone spotted it the year before he was caught:

The Unabomber is a mathematician.

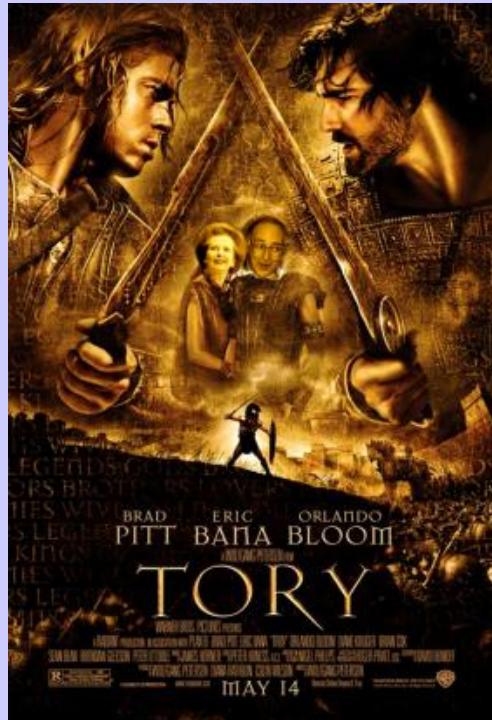
His so-called manifesto is freely available on the Internet at "<http://pathfinder.com>" as a 221,188-byte file of HTML text with NUMBERED paragraphs.

The mathematical Unabomber writes in paragraph 17 of "rational calculation," and in paragraph 39 of "the pursuit of goal X." In paragraph 57, the mad bomber speaks of "a new, ordered community" which a non-mathematician would have called an orderly community. In paragraph 99, the cowardly killer writes, "Think of history as being the sum of two components...." (Think, rather, of the Unabomber as being a mathematician who uses perhaps a permutation of his own national identification number as an authentication code in dealing with The New York Times.) The mathematical psychotic continues in paragraph 143: "In the past, human nature has been approximately constant, or at any rate has varied only within certain bounds." Q.E.D.

Tags: mathematics, crime

Gimpshopping attempt #1

4:36PM, 29TH MAY 2004



Mohohmohhohmohomo

Tags: history, amusements, films

\$BlackadderJoke

9:03PM, 1ST JUNE 2004

So maybe that needs explaining. The standard form for a BlackadderJoke is: *The Xiest Y since Z*, where Z often involves X and Y.

Example: Dell is the crappiest company since crappy Ted McCrapShite crapped himself playing craps on the crapper.

But they're not as bad as Sony.

Tags: amusements, tv

BBC categories

9:14PM, 1ST JUNE 2004

The BBC News Online website produces some amusing miscategorisations, e.g. [Man bailed over top agent's death](#) was listed under entertainment, simply because the guy involved was an agent.

The above example isn't too bad really. Not compared to the Technology section. Any story involving computers in any way whatsoever gets filed under Technology. "Terrorists Personally Beat 4/5 of World Population Over Head With Laptop" would open with a comment on How The Technology of Tomorrow Is Changing Our Lives - Today!

Tags: web

Dell Inspiron 8000 long term review

9:17PM, 1ST JUNE 2004

As the warranty is due to run out soon, I thought I'd note down some review-like factoids that only tend to show up in long term tests:

Good Things

- **The screen.**

1600x1200 and only 15" wide means it's very high resolution, in terms of dots per inch. This means you can jack up the font size and enjoy nicer looking text. Or you could leave the font size the same and go blind squinting at it.

It arrived with one dead pixel, just above the bottom. My initial reaction was "oh damn, now I get to look at a black dot obscuring all my work forever!" but I actually never notice it. Maybe if it was in the middle of the screen it would be annoying, but if it's not, my advice is to forget about it.

Compared to newer TFTs, it's not very bright, but that's no big deal.

- **The peripherals**

It's tempting to go for a faster CPU in exchange for fewer features; I'm glad I didn't. You can always live without that extra 200Mhz, but when you need to plug in a firewire device, the port is either there or it isn't.

I've found the TV-out port useful too, amazingly enough, although not the serial, parallel or docking ports.

- **The compatibility**

It works with everything! Even a filthy evil Sony DV-camera with awkward firewire requirements! And most importantly, all manner of Linuces run flawlessly.

The Linux-compatibility is helped by the fact that this is a popular laptop, hence there are lots of other people out there writing cool software for it (e.g. [Massimo Dal Zotto](#), a Debian guy).

- **The battery life**

The Inspiron 8000 has a "media bay" into which you can plug a floppy drive, an optical drive, or an extra battery. With both batteries in, the machine would last a good 5 hours of moderate use. However, see below.

- **Speedstep**

The CPU is a 1Ghz Pentium III, which is pretty good, but it also steps down to 700Mhz, which is great. At the lower speed, the fan almost never comes on (as opposed to the higher speed, where it's on constantly and the CPU gets up to 80 degrees celsius), thus giving a silent machine. The only sound is the hiss of the hard disk platters rotating.

If you want a silent PC, a laptop in power saving mode is the only easy way. However, see below (again).

- **The build**

It's not made of titanium, and the plastic creaks a bit when you pick it up, but it's held together so far.

Bad Things

- **The batteries themselves**

They last for a long time, but they don't last long. That is, after one year, you'll be lucky to get 30 seconds of power out of them. Naturally, the warranty only covers the first year, and they cost UKP75 each. This is a very big, very hidden, cost.

- **The Speedstep implementation**

Running at only 700Mhz is a good thing, but presumably due to the marketing department at Dell whipping the Engineering department harder to get the hardware finished sooner, the I8K was released with totally bugged Speedstep support. You can't switch speeds without rebooting, and the only way to boot in 700Mhz mode is to boot it on battery power. This can be tricky if the batteries have gone, which they will have.

Awful Things

- Dell

Most encounters with Dell, the company, go like this:

Ooh, low prices!

Ooh, fast hardware!

(short interval)

Hmm, it's broken.

Hmm, it's still broken.

Hmm, it's still broken and tech support won't do a damn thing about it.

(long interval)

RAGE

(long interval)

Threats to senior managers induce tech support to send a replacement part.

They got my order wrong when I ordered it 3 years ago. A replacement hard drive was eventually sent, but I never got the internal network card. Thus to this day I have one of those dodgy PCMCIA-plus-hanging-out-adapter jobbies which dramatically decreases the robustness of the system, and interacts poorly with the BIOS - you have to do the "commenting out port 0x800-0x8ff" trick to make it work.

I thought that would be it, but the hard drive they sent was an IBM Travelstar, presumably the laptop version of the IBM Deathstar. It broke two months ago and I got a replacement one month ago. Note to warranty purchasers: **Next business day warranty is 100% worthless. They will not send you anything the "next day".**

The Dell tech support website is excellent, provided you have a non-problem. It's set up to solve problems like "Help! I maximised a window and now I can't see my desktop!" If

the problem is an actual problem - an actual broken hardware type of problem - you're stuffed. The hard drive could have caught fire and blasted out the side of the machine, and they'd still ask you to run the diagnostics CD.

On the plus side, I now have a 60Gb Fujitsu drive which is much quieter and faster (and 12Gb bigger!) than the old Travelstar.

Conclusion

If you could buy a laptop from the Taiwanese company that actually manufactures them, that would be great. Unfortunately, to get nice Dell hardware, you have to deal with shitty Dell.

In short, the hardware is good, but the company is the \$BlackadderJoke.

Tags: hardware, reviews

Pound World

3:35PM, 3RD JUNE 2004

There's a shop in Piccadilly Gardens called Pound World. Their tagline, embossed beneath the shop name at great expense, is "Where everything is pound".

Tags: amusements, manchester

Michael Schumacher is the greatest environmentalist of all time

9:21PM, 16TH JUNE 2004

Michael Schumacher is like Tolkien: he perfected his art to such a degree that he killed his field.

That is, of course, premature; F1 is still going, and fantasy books have rebounded in recent years, but F1 viewing figures are dropping steadily, and The Lord of the Rings was such a definitively perfect genre novel that nobody has ever topped it and probably nobody ever will. It seems to me that Schumacher is so good he's destroyed F1 as a competitive sport, and thus as entertaining television.

Perhaps Mercedes and BMW will form their own tournament and F1 will be forced to take a few decades off, much like the Star Trek franchise soon will be. Or maybe the fans flocking from motorsport will never come back, and the world will be spared from Formula One's travelling circus of pollution, for which the atmosphere would have Michael Schumacher to thank.

Tags: sport

The Man in the High Castle

5:32PM, 23RD AUGUST 2004

Read this on holiday. I thought I didn't get the ending at first, so I consulted the *I Google* and discovered that nobody else really did either. Some people have their own interpretations; here is mine.

Spoilers spoilers spoilers!

The most widely accepted explanation of the flat ending is that Philip K. Dick cast a hexagram of the I Ching whenever his characters did, and continued writing their actions based on what the hexagram said, but that at the end, the I Ching just clammed up and wouldn't give him anything useful. Hence the flat "that's it?" ending. I can't find a precise reference for this, so it may not be true.

That's why the ending is what it is, but what *is* it? I have seen claims that the Inner Truth reading tells us that the world of tMitHC is not real, and neither is ours, but that of tGLH **is**. I thus continue this line of reasoning to conclude that tMitHC is not a book about history or war, but a science fiction book whose single proposition is "what would a world be like if the I Ching really worked?" PKD shows us that this world underlies the 3 implied shadow realities in tMitHC: the reality of the narrative, the reality of tGLH, and the reality of the reader. The I Ching being true implies that tGLH is the true reality, implying that ours is false, fitting in perfectly with the fact that the I Ching doesn't work in our reality!

Well that's my pointless tautological theorem out of the way. The meat of the book is pretty much what you make of it. Just read it and say to yourself "Yeah, yeah, it's about reality. Gotcha."

It's thoroughly worth reading, if that wasn't clear above.

Tags: books, amusements, reviews

Demoscene tunes

5:52PM, 23RD AUGUST 2004

Since pop music is so crap, I've been listening to more and more "demoscene" tracks and derivatives lately. **It's so much better than anything you'll find in the shops!**

Nectarine is a streaming MP3 radio station dedicated to scene music. No adverts and no commercial trash. Marvellous! Some songs aren't that great since they're written to go with a demo, but there are nuggets of pure lo-fi melody hidden away there. Stuff written by kids in their bedrooms in the 80s. Stuff written *purely* for the listener. Stuff that's actually original!

One dimensional and loving it

Once you acknowledge the talent required to make constrained art, you can't help but start to like it. The SID chip found in the C64 is about the most constrained music writing environment there is, so the SID artists had and have no choice but to pack their songs with baroque creativity. Look at *D'you know what I mean?* by Oasis. Third album, height of their power. They had unlimited resources, and they used them all. Result: one of the silliest most overproduced tracks ever, tarnishing an otherwise good song. SIDs (and to a lesser degree mods) are the precise opposite: if Bach respawned today, he'd be a chiptune DJ.

(As it happens, I find the SID sounds a bit harsh and grating, so I prefer remixes of old songs with modern samples)

So what does it sound like? Here's what I'm liking right now, in no particular order:

1. beek - substitutionology (so much my favourite at one point that I overlistened to it and got sick of it)

2. mitch and dane - gloria (wish somebody would remix this)
3. quazar - funky stars (minimal construction, maximal tune)
4. kb - candytron (there has yet to be a bad thing ending in "tron")
5. Desert Planet - Asteroid Hopper (gets better each time)
6. elwood - deadlock, fall from sky, feats of valor, into the shadow, sick on monday, sweet dreams

This guy was doing dance music before there was dance music.

7. elwood - past and present (best of his dancey stuff)
8. elwood - beyond the rainbow, i can seek, stompin little scouts (everybody likes this one), and waverider are also good.
9. Yip (arr. LMan) - Scroll Machine (5th dream about happiness)
 - SID original is unremarkable, LMan's remix is awesome.

10. Machinae Supremacy

The only "real" band on this list. Swedish heavy metal band with SID special effects. Like listening to Iron Maiden and playing a sympathetic C64 at the same time, i.e. great sound, silly lyrics. Best songs:

- Winterstorm
- Bouff (10/10 without the voice, 6/10 with it)
- Follower
- Earthbound
- Hero
- Great Giana Sisters (the famous/best one)
- Sidology Episodes 1 and 3 (there is no 2!)

- 11.Instant Remedy - Last Ninja, Comic Bakery, Lazy Jones. Ocean Loader is OK. All are europoppy dance remixes of C64 tunes.
- 12.karsten obarski - Amegas
- 13.necros - Dreaming in Green (also did "Mechanism 8" from Unreal Tournament)
- 14.linus walleij - SIDamp theme (also "warez the phuture" is amusing)
- 15.anybody - fairlight (classic song; 4 trillion remixes; all good)
- 16.jeroen tel - the traveller
- 17.jugi - onward ride
- 18.Reed/Fairlight - Cyberdragon (harsh blip blop!)
- 19.firestorm/doomsday - hope stays (epic cheese; fun)
- 20.paso - lost scrotum (10/10 song, 0/10 name; what were you thinking, paso?)
- 21.lizardking - ogle V, doskpop project, fellowship
- 22.jeroen tel - mountain breeze
- 23.jeroen tel - deadline
- 24.captain - space debris
- 25.captain - beyond music
- 26.captain - mickus
- 27.dizzy - banana split (ignore the stupid Axel F ripoff intro; otherwise nice)
- 28.ghidorah - Toilet Story 1-6 is quite good, but has a bizarre title and puerile instrument names.
- 29.stamen - so much left to say
- 30.maktone - class cracktro #9
- 31.jester - chipmunks (short, blip blop greatness)
- 32.area 51 - stepfather (would be a lot better as a proper guitars+drums rock song)
- 33.4-mat - waterfall

- 34.4-mat - dna dream
- 35.monty - something enchanted
- 36.4-mat - red sector theme (original is OK, Cirdan remix is better)
- 37.tip and firefox - enigma
- 38.unknown - the last hope
- 39.jeroen tel - 1999 (that's 1999 bytes; marvellous constrained art)

Also, I have a half-broken OctaMED file called "Funky Fifth" apparently by Dave Sullivan. I think it's from an Amiga Format or CU Amiga coverdisk but it's *nowhere* on the internet. Somebody out there: help me find info about this song!

Humans: shut up, Machines: speak up

All these are good songs, but beware vocal remixes. Horrible inanity. To be shunned the same way as vocal Eurodance and candy rave should be.

Childishness is the biggest problem this kind of music faces. It's terminally associated with old games for young people and over-bouncy melodies. Demoscence people: your audience is no longer 8 years old! We're 15 now!

Dave found this post in 2010 and sent me a working rendition! It's now [published on SoundCloud](#).

Tags: music, reviews

Scooter racing

12:13AM, 25TH AUGUST 2004

Via the tortuous winding passages of the incident management system of a certain large company comes this cool story.

In at least one small airport in Brazil, the refuelling process works like this: the plane lands, the fuel companies' representatives get on little scooters, race across the field to the plane door, and the first one there negotiates a deal with the pilot for refuelling. This is the astonishing, unadorned truth. Although the airfield is small, the fuel companies are actually 2 of the super-majors, and Petrobras, the Brazilian oil company.

The incident was surely just waiting to happen. The 3 fuel companies compete with each other in the purest sense: a bike race! Survival of the fittest! Beautiful and terrible anarcho-capitalism at work! Anyway, one of the biker-capitalists fell off his scooter and hurt himself. That was the incident. I just thought it was amazing that big companies engage in stuff like this.

Tags: brazil, amusements

Oil prices versus geek superheroes

3:15PM, 29TH AUGUST 2004

Energy prices are going up, so it's time to economise! I for one suggest the mass adoption of the geek lifestyle.

TFT screens and laptops, more a possession of the geek than not, consume less power than CRTs and desktops respectively. The extended periods of VGA UXGA tanning leave no room for excursions to the shops, supermarket, post-office or cinema, those needs being met by amazon.com, tesco.com, email and BitTorrent respectively, hence no need for a car, hence no need for petrol. While the geeks build their own little empires, society will collapse around them and give rise to vast socialist states which will provide electric trucks to deliver said goods to the doors of the geek-king-hermits.

The sedentary lifestyle increases body weight, thus protecting against harsh winters which can no longer be warded off by cheap gas fires. Creeping obesity also has the handy side-effect of reducing lifespan, thus solving the looming healthcare crisis faced by aging populations.

When the geek population reaches critical mass, sport of all forms will no longer be profitable competing against MMORPGs, will shut down, and leave huge surpluses of steroid-enhanced big muscley people roaming the streets looking for employment. The basketball players can be employed hitting the reset switches on the ever-heightening racks of 1U boxen, the cyclists can be employed to pedal power-generating bikes, and the gymnasts can be employed in the exponentially growing porn market.

Geeks being master manipulators of information will find themselves better equipped to survive in an economy entirely devoid of primary and secondary industry. It's well known that the rich have fewer children, so this combined with the fact that 95% of women don't want anything to do with geeks will solve the overpopulation problem. The male geek population will sweep the world clean of its remaining wealth, invest it on GeForce 6800s and space exploration instead of wives or children, and the female population of the world will be forced to become successful geeks themselves, or die (and thus possibly help out with the food and fuel situation not only by eating less, but also by being tasty and flammable). The space exploration may uncover future sources of fuel, and the 6800s will keep us warm in the meantime.

Art and culture will be transformed. Since rock, blues, folk, country, RnB, and classical music all require of the artist some form of destructive vitality, these genres will die and be replaced by gritty electronica, which the Baptists will find quite harmless, and redirect their energies against Catholics, that secondary source of all evil. The ensuing bidirectional jihad will draw Islam into the conflict, and end up wiping out 80% of the world's morons. The remaining 20% will remain online posting to Usenet, web forums and blogs, where they can be safely contained.

Free from the constraints of conventional religion and culture, the geek overlords will abolish money. The left-wing geeks will replace it with Slashdot karma, and the right-wing geeks will replace it with some kind of rubber-stamp-and-ink system of recording Ownings on the side of their cases. Disputes will be settled by Doom deathmatches, free love and happiness will emerge at the application level, and everyone will live happily ever after.

Footnote

Not unrelatedly, I just read *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which although entertaining, contains speculation and dialogue every bit as rigorous as above.

Tags: amusements, philosophy

World's greatest phone number

8:51PM, 12TH SEPTEMBER 2004

The [Vodafone website](#) was designed by a moustache-twiddling eyebrow-raising extended-cackling postdoc in Evil, but thanks to them I now have a decent phone. What's more, I have the world's greatest phone number.

I'll save myself the harrassment by not posting it here (anyone who wants it will have it shortly anyway). It goes like this: 077 AAAA BBBB, where AAAA is the world's geekiest 4-digit number and BBBB is the world's second geekiest 4-digit number. This thing would be priceless on ebay, but I'm the kind of person who'd buy it, so I'll just cut out the middleman and keep it for myself.

Oh, and I didn't buy the number specially. It was just sitting there on the list to choose from. And don't anybody think two posts in a row about geekitude is saying anything...

Update: *Cry*

It was so beautiful, but Vodafone had to go and lack the systems to deal with semi-foreigners. People complain about Vodafone rejecting them due to bad credit records, but they're pretty easy to fix when you have to. The financial machinery involved in living abroad just makes companies run away scared. So bollocks to them, if they don't want my money.

Update 2: Doh

So that means I may as well reveal to all: 077 1729 1138.

So that's the [second taxicab number](#) and [THX-1138](#), which coincidentally was a manipulation of George Lucas's student phone number. I repeat: *cry*.

Tags: mathematics, films, hardware

HHGttG: Tertiary Phase

8:02PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004

Just finished listening!

I thought it was basically OK. There wasn't much that I hadn't read in the book already, so a new listener might find it more original. The music was the original classic intro song by the Eagles, and some new orchestral stuff that sounded too good, i.e. it didn't fit with the rough low-budget 80s feel of the original. However, I don't blame the producers for it not being the 80s any more, and besides, the new ambient-style music at the beginning was excellent. The origins-of-the-screwdriver story was set to music in the style of the original theme tune which sounded **suspiciously** like *Sing* by Travis, which may have been unavoidable; there are only so many things you can do with a banjo...

I'm not sure if I liked them alternating between the new The Book and the old one. Seemed gimmicky, as did most of the playing around with the audio. I don't listen to radio at all, so maybe audio special effects are just par for the course in this medium.

It also suffered from the same thing all sequels to beloved works suffer from: pauses. It happened with Red Dwarf in series 7 and 8. The lines are delivered more clearly and slowly, seeming like they really wanted to make sure you heard the joke.

Good bits: the explanation of Wowbagger's prolongment was perfect. "Oh dear... Oops... Oooh." Marvin was marvellous, naturally, as were the mattress sound effects.

Bad bits: Was it me or did they imply Zaphod stole the Heart of Gold for the pure Gold at its Heart rather than simply because it was "so amazingly amazing I think I'd like to steal it"?.

Also, the opening sequence with Arthur seemed kind of flat, but again that may be because I knew it all from the book already.

Conclusion: 8/10. They'd've had to *really* screw up to make it bad, given such awesome source material.

Tags: books, reviews

I love vodka

8:58PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004



Having a small camera is good.

Tags: photos, manchester

Not Wanted

9:06PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004



Roffle at both cause and above effect.

Tags: photos, manchester

Middle-Rusholme

9:10PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004



It's the Lord of the Rings font, isn't it?

Tags: photos, manchester

"Blair's a Fool"

9:17PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004



Tony fear Comic Sans

Tags: photos, politics, manchester

Outdoor Window

9:17PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2004



This construction site had a window

Maybe they wanted to prove nothing untoward was going on behind the fence.

Tags: photos, manchester

Get the hell outta my car, old man!

7:59PM, 4TH OCTOBER 2004

Fans of shutting down the NHS are often visited in their sleep by troubling visions of old and infirm people dying in the streets, but I've found the perfect antidote!

"About 75 white pupils walked out of the Central High School here after eight Negroes went in to-day, and one boy hung a straw effigy of a Negro from a tree."

That was 1957. The hate mongering 30-somethings operating on that day are now feeble old octogenarians. And guess what? The rest of the slimy bunch that handed us young'uns this peculiar smelling crazy world are old age pensioners too now. Unaided old age seems a fitting punishment for the generation that failed to fix the world and handed the problem onto their own children.

Counterpoint

It could also be said that the only people who had the power to fix the world used it to become super-rich and are now living it up in retirement castles, leaving the dispossessed to take the blame from ignorant upstarts like myself, and grow old in poverty.

I lean towards the former point, since even being alive in the 1940s and 50s must make you culpable via some kind of osmosis of responsibility.

Dear child-of-2050: feel free to let me and my generation fend off the radioactive zombie-rottweilers on our own, if we haven't fixed the world before handing over the keys.

Tags: amusements, economics, health, ethics

Kes at the theatre

8:31PM, 4TH OCTOBER 2004

The Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester is pretty nice. It's a theatre - as in, a real live people-on-the-stage theatre - built inside the old stock exchange building. I went there last week.

First a word about the prices. It's around 20 pounds for a ticket, more for better seats, less for worse. However! If you're a student, it's only 3.50! Wow! I can only assume there's some kind of middle-class rip-off going on.

Anyway, I went to see A Kestrel for a Knave. It was good - very good considering I was expecting a horrific Legs Akimbo style mess. The League of Gentlemen has undoubtedly done the most damage to the public perception of theatre since English GCSEs.

I totally recommend going at least once, but if your budget doesn't include that last 50p, you can see Hero at the AMC for 3 pounds, which is actually a lot better and just goes to show what you can do for 30,000 times the budget.

Tags: art

Screen Select

10:27AM, 5TH OCTOBER 2004

I just signed up for [Screen Select](#), the DVD rental company, and did their Instant Recommendations bit. Based on my year of birth and actor preferences, it recommended Bitter Moon: "An erotic drama which explores the depths of sexual perversion and experimentation..."

It's like it read my mind!

To its credit, Jason and the Argonauts was second on the list, and fourth was "Mazinkaiser" which I've never heard of but based on the title sounds, well... mazin.

Tags: films

Drugs

9:13AM, 6TH OCTOBER 2004

"Tories take tough line on crime":

"Children need to know that it is not cool to use drugs - it is stupid, it is dangerous, it is illegal."

Stupid, dangerous and illegal sounds like a pretty good definition of cool to me. On the other hand, that would make a War on Drugs cool...

Tags: crime, health

Cottage Cheese and Beetroot Sandwich Recipe

6:46PM, 15TH OCTOBER 2004

Somewhere deep in Market Zone 1486, codename "UK", two consumers simultaneously increased local demand for nutritional sustenance. They entered a joint-venture agreement with the aim of raising their purchasing power by pooling resources and buying in bulk. Acting in an official capacity, they headed for the local consumer-oriented medium-quantity purchase warehouse known as "TES CO".

After gruelling negotiations with the enemy sales officer, in exchange for several units of currency our heroes walked away with two bags of miscellaneous goods and a few "CLUB CARD" points to sweeten the deal. The PR department declared it a "strong performance."

Returning to HQ, the executives commenced sandwich production. Upon slicing the tomato, the executives became workers and briefly considered striking for higher wages and better working conditions, but due to a freak of nature, they had the same stomachs as the executives and were thus forced to continue production lest they starve. In order to optimise workflow, they produced the following easy-to-follow blueprint:

1. Spread some COTTAGE CHEESE WITH ONIONS on some WHOLEMEAL BREAD
2. Make a layer of PICKLED BEETROOT on top.
3. Grind some BLACK PEPPER over it all.
4. Slice a TOMATO and place the bits on top.
5. Wash some LETTUCE and put that on.
6. Close the sandwich with another slice of WHOLEMEAL BREAD.
7. Squeeze it together to stop it falling apart. Note: it will fall apart anyway.

Preliminary results from the lab suggested SWEETCORN as an optional upgrade just before phase 2.

Manufacturing output rose by two units, and kitchen plant and tool was further amortised. Total raw material costs were 87p per sandwich. A passing fascist totalitarian government crippled the company's earnings by forcing them at gunpoint to note that each sandwich contains 260 calories.

The sandwiches were then consumed, eliminating hunger and fulfilling the company's mission statement. Other notable externalities were a 35% increase in satisfaction, an 8% increase in appreciation of scrumptiousness, and a 0.000001% decrease in lifespan (or 0% adjusted for the natural passage of time).

The sandwich consumers then parted ways, and went about maximising profit until bedtime. Thankyou for reading this post. 15 euros have been deducted from your account.



A++++ would eat again.

Tags: amusements, food

Brain Implants!

10:19AM, 16TH OCTOBER 2004

Brain implants. Seems like non-paralysed people would have a good use for these too. Imagine being able to turn off your bedside alarm with a mere thought, rather than the impossible strain of reaching across with your real arm.

Longitudinal factoid: that same bedside clock-radio-alarm is still going strong: the [Philips AJ3230](#). Zero defects to report, perfect reliability, continuous use for 22 years.

Tags: science

More fear mongering

10:23AM, 16TH OCTOBER 2004

Panorama: Your child's been stabbed is a title you might remember Troy McClure from. I'm less worried about knives than about sentences like this:

Another girls in the group called Sofia, said: "They might think oh, I'm might not going to use it. Well, most people wouldn't really care to use it, cos it's like it wouldn't make them feel guilty or nothing.

That's just horrific.

Tags: crime

Geometry renamed

2:24PM, 21ST OCTOBER 2004

There is a lecturer here who seems to have a deep knowledge of Armenian, Russian, German, French, Farsi, Greek and Latin, but has occasional trouble with English. However, supergenii like him do not find this a problem - their immense linguistic powers can reconstruct the etymology of English words on the fly.

Today he insisted the correct name for a square was a Quadragon. I think I agree with him.

All of which suggests the sage advice to "Avoid taking sides" is expressed via geometry: "Let bigons be bigons".

Tags: mathematics, language

Legends dropping at alarming rate

4:34PM, 26TH OCTOBER 2004

[Henri Cartier-Bresson](#), [Ronald Reagan](#), [Ray Charles](#), [Jerry Goldsmith](#), [Francis Crick](#), [Brian Clough](#), [Rodney Dangerfield](#), [Jacques Derrida](#), [Christopher Reeve](#), [John Peel](#).

Look at all these superstars dying this year! Who could possibly be next? Prediction: JFK gets elected on November 2nd, then assassinated on November 22nd by the military-industrial-confectionary complex.

I went to the wikipedia to look up some of those deaths and noticed that John Peel's death was already written up, mere hours after the announcement.

Wikipedia updates were so slow back then.

Tags: history, music

Presenting your new reality

10:43AM, 27TH OCTOBER 2004

Big Brother to build Truman Show village.

Celebrity contestants will occasionally appear to raise the quota. But the main group of contestants will remain "for decades" according to Mr Laux.

People trapped in a studio for decades? It's already happened. 4 episodes of Coronation Street per week mean that the actors effectively become their characters. I remember seeing an interview with one of the CS actors, possibly the one that plays Vera (don't ask me, I don't watch it), where she was speaking in a rather posh southern accent. At one point she got excited and slipped into the Mancunian accent she uses in the show. She had clearly become her character and was ashamed of it.

Note: The Truman Show was written by Andrew Niccol, who also wrote Gattaca. He seems to be in touch with accurately predicting the future. I must watch S1m0ne one of these days...

Tags: media, tv, psychology

Mini-reviews of recent watchings

9:30PM, 28TH OCTOBER 2004

JFK: pretty good, although anyone wanting enlightenment would do well to note that this is not filed in the Documentary category.

Natural Born Killers: yay! This film is lots of fun. I love the sets filled to the brim with chaos and detritus and junk, which you have to see a Terry Gilliam film to top.

Sky Captain: nice to look at. Loses points for silliness, then goes the extra mile and wins them right back and more for ridiculousness. Another classic example of this is Bottom: kicking somebody 10 times might not be funny, but kicking them 32 times is. Unfortunately, the script wasn't up to much, and Jude Law will apparently never top his performance in Gattaca.

Hudson Hawk: there are 3 or 4 good jokes in this film. I can see how it might have been a Cult classic, but aside from a glimmering here and there never really rises above Light Entertainment.

Story of Ricky: this is a truly crazy film. Watch it with the subtitles on as they're bizarrely different from the dubbed dialog, which I imagine is bizarrely different from the original Cantonese. Buckets of gore here, but it's just not in the same league as the Jackson/Raimi classics. Let's face it, if you're going to make a splatter horror-comedy film, it's got to have at least the words "brain" or "dead" in the title. This is why "Braindead" will always be the number one, although "The Brain That Wouldn't Die" is pretty funny, especially the MST3K'd version.

Anyway, the film itself is pretty dire. The DVD cover is made with Word Art, which says all you need to know about the production values. It just manages to stay in the zone of badness that

is funny. If you watch it on your own you will probably hate it, but if you get a bunch of reasonably non-offendable friends together it's a guaranteed party.

This is Spinal Tap: Somewhat funny. It's more of a giant insult to "hair-rock" bands than a belly laughing comedy. There's something really squalid and depressing about 80s films featuring people smoking and drinking onscreen; must be the implied hopelessness of living in an info-poor age when it was genuinely possible to be bored. The best thing here is that it makes their Simpsons episode funnier.

Memento: Hard to talk about this or compare it to other films without providing spoilers. Excellent stuff though. It's one of those films that you've heard is good but might be hard to get into so you've been avoiding it. There's no need to do that: confusing you is part of what the film is about, so just sit back and watch it with friends you can argue with afterwards about what the hell just happened.

Trainspotting: Awesome top-100 stuff. It's a film about why drugs are so cool and everyone should take them.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show: This is one that I watched on my own, which was a terrible mistake. It's 100% culty and camp, and generally quite bad. I hear that watching it with fans is best, or at least watching it with people to whom you can turn and say "what the fuck?!". As a huge fan of [Clue](#), Tim Curry in hideous drag is really not something I wanted to see. (In fact, the resonances with Clue are deep. I was going to write up the parallels, but this being the internet an'all, [someone's already done it.](#)) It's 1000x more fucked up by the fact that it's a musical. There are 2 or 3 good songs and some awful awful cabaret-style dirges. Having said that, I think I could grow to appreciate this film if I watched it with someone dedicated to liking it.

Withnail and I: Very good. Not the classic I've heard it proclaimed, but sharply written and dark dark dark. See above about the squalid 80s drugfests - further proof that civilisation didn't really begin until about 1992.

Akira: This film has so much back story and surrounding culture that I'm reluctant to write anything about it at all lest I get it all completely wrong. I haven't read the original manga (or any manga ever, in fact) but I enjoyed this a lot. It's sort of ruined some classic games for me, since I can now see that their aesthetic was ripped off from this. I used to think Syndicate was mainly inspired by Blade Runner, but now it's clear that although that certainly provides some of the SF tropes, Akira was the primary source. I should've guessed before now, from the in-game Ghost in the Shell advert in Syndicate Wars. Then there's Beneath a Steel Sky and even Half-Life (I'm thinking of that steep lift shaft from near the beginning).

It's a beautiful thing to behold, especially considering that it's hand drawn.

Non-films

I've also discovered Cheers, and realised that Alan Partridge is much much funnier than I remembered it, and Father Ted not quite so.

Tags: films, reviews

An evening with Iain M. Banks

7:49PM, 29TH OCTOBER 2004

Last Thursday I went to see Iain M. Banks at Waterstones. He read from his new book, *The Algebraist*, then took an hour or so of questions from the audience. I guess I should write up my experience for the benefit of fans who are unable to attend any of the locations on his UK signing tour.

It was the first time I've ever seen him, or any other author. Beforehand, I was deeply worried that I'd be surrounded by hardcore geeks, but then I realised that I'm probably a hardcore geek too so it wouldn't be so bad. As it turned out, it was lots of fun. The guy is a bundle of laughs and a great entertainer. He's clearly highly intelligent and literate.

He opened with a quick introduction and a crack at the war in Iraq, then read from the middle of the new book, after a brief outline of the setting. I enjoyed this for the novelty of seeing someone read a book out loud for the first time since I was in middle school.

After some applause, he announced that it was the time when we got to ask him questions. Here are a few that I can remember. This is all from memory, so I'm paraphrasing. I've ventured to place the passages which I'm more certain of in real quotes. Please don't take them as bona-fide Banks quotes though; my memory is far from perfect, and I could be making them all up for all you know.

"That scene at the end of Look to Windward where the Culture is looked back on from the far future as a race that's been and gone... does that mean the Culture is over, or you intend it to be over?"

"Hmmm, well,... hmmm, naaaah, that's just basically me fuckin' with your head." Banks does not intend to ever write a series-ender since the whole point of the Culture is that it's not the kind of thing that just keels over and dies. It may change, but change is a way of life for the Culture.

"Were you thinking of 'mould' when you came up with the name 'Culture'?"

"No. Actually I think I was thinking of what Goebbels said: 'When I hear the word culture I reach for my gun'. So I was like Fuck you ya' Nazi bastard! (Audience says it was Goering) Oh, it was Goering was it? Ah well, you know, all-purpose Nazi dictator beginning with a G."

"Your books deal with some pretty dark themes, for example pretty inventive torture methods. Does that ever spill over into the real world?"

(Much laughter from everyone)

"I should bloody well hope not!" Then a little story about how he once started shooting pigeons with an airgun in order to keep them away from some other birds (i.e. there was a reasonably humane reason why he was doing it) but then had to stop because he was starting to enjoy it.

"Have you got a new passport yet?"

"No." This is in reference to a passage in Raw Spirit where he tells of how he cut up his passport and mailed it to 10 Downing Street as a response to the Iraq war, saying he "felt ashamed to be British". He apparently received a letter saying "Thankyou, we have received your passport."

He says he won't be getting another one "until one of the fuckers is gone" (meaning either Bush or Blair), adding that he realises "this could be another 4 years".

(Some question about GSV names which I get the feeling has been asked before)

He said the warships were easier to name.

(Someone comments that he has a big list of GSV names)

"Yes I have about 40 pages of them! In fact, I suppose an inspiration for writing the Culture books is to use up some of these damn names."

"Is the decision to make an SF book a Culture book an early one?"

Yes.

"Do you approve of people selling your books second-hand on ebay?"

He said he essentially has no problem with it. Lucky authors generally get their salaries up front, and it's a long long time before they start seeing royalties anyway.

What do you read?

Favourite authors are Jane Austen and Tolstoy. He said he reads pretty much what he writes.

Inspiration?

Lots of things. Arthur C. Clarke and the Foundation books surprisingly little. Culture created as a response to the "Capitalism has made it to space! Hurrah!" books. "It's ludicrous to think that we've reached the peak of economic science - ludicrous!".

"Do you have two different locations - like two different sheds perhaps - one where you write mainstream and the other where you write SF?"

No. He said that he tends to write books all in one go, so he finishes one before starting another. He said that if he overlapped them then perhaps he would require two sheds.

"Have you ever thought about Wasp Factory meets Culture?"

"Whuh, what the, huh? What?" He thought this was a pretty insane idea and has absolutely no intention of writing a Culture story about a Mind who goes fucked up, since the whole point of the Culture is that they have evolved past that sort of thing.

Are you going to do any more TV stuff?

No. He said there was an offer of a TV series of Raw Spirit with him as the presenter, but he turned that down.

Are you going to do any more non-fiction?

No. He feels that he isn't enough of an expert to do any more things like Raw Spirit.

"Why is the cover not in the same style as your previous SF books?"

"Basically because the first one that came back was rubbish!" He said he then told them what he wanted, and pretty much got it. He's very pleased with the final design. It is indeed an amazing picture, made all the more amazing by the fact that it's a real photograph.

I also learned that:

- "mores", as in social mores, is pronounced "more-rays".
- He said he felt at one point about 4 years ago that he was finding it harder to come up with new SF ideas. Now, upon writing The Algebraist, he says he's discovered that he can make up new ideas on demand, and is rather pleased by this.
- Finally, the next book will be mainstream fiction, then the one after that will "with 99% certainty" be a Culture book, but that will most likely be in about 4 years time. Yay anyway!

Afterwards, everyone queued up to have books signed, and Mr Banks kindly cooperated, with the help of a glass of wine.

Tags: books, manchester

See it before the americans!

3:16PM, 30TH OCTOBER 2004

Here's a capitalistic condundrum: a local radio advert for [Saw](#) said "See it before America!".

Merkinbashing is big business now. Why oh why does the government insist on all these crippling regulations that are holding back the emerging Hate industry?

Tags: politics, amusements

US Election 2004

12:02PM, 1ST NOVEMBER 2004

Tomorrow, barring months of legal challenges, America will choose a president who hates and is hated by 50% of the population.

Oh well.

Tags: politics

Reason

2:29PM, 2ND NOVEMBER 2004

Interesting opinions on smacking here. Most people condone smacking, saying that kids "won't listen to reason". Seems fair enough, but it's interesting to note that defenders of wife-beating say exactly the same thing. Reason is a dangerous thing to think you are in possession of.

Tags: psychology, learning

Windows XP is no longer viable

2:46PM, 3RD NOVEMBER 2004

A few weeks ago a friend got disconnected from the university network for having a machine full of viruses and spyware buzzing away at its nefarious deeds. She reinstalled Windows XP and got reconnected yesterday. Before she could download and install SP2, Norton reported that the machine had **14 viruses**, at least one of which had immediately disabled web access. This is a 100Mbit net connection we're talking about here so it's not as if the window of opportunity was particularly large.

This means that it's as good as impossible to put an uncompromised Windows XP machine online.

Tags: software, crime

NHS + Microsoft = You're feeling safer already!

9:41PM, 3RD NOVEMBER 2004

Maybe it's just the lingering memory of my previous post, but [this Microsoft deal with the NHS](#) can't possibly be a good thing.

And [33 billion pounds](#) on IT systems? What unholy God-AI computer system are they building that could possibly cost that much? It's about 1000 times more than it cost to build Google.

Tags: software, politics, health

China being clever again

6:45PM, 4TH NOVEMBER 2004

[10 things China rocks at.](#)

England has numbers 1, 8 and 9, and Brazil has numbers 4, 5, 7 and 10.

The president of China in 50 years time will be someone who is currently growing up on a diet of Doom 3 and Reality TV. The only way to break totalitarianism is steady attrition from the inside.

Tags: politics, design

Slackers

10:01AM, 7TH NOVEMBER 2004

I got Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* out of the library and found it filled to the brim with scribblings. I estimate about 85% of the text is underlined in pencil, presumably to draw attention to the important parts.

Is this a social science thing? Maths textbooks don't attract notes in the margin, which could be an act of pan-disciplinary caution lest another Fermat come along and find the margins crammed with the dribblings of people who seem to think they aren't vandals.

Whoever these notemakers are, *I've never met them before in my life, but they seem to me like slackers.*

Tags: books, university

Geography for Chefs

8:31PM, 9TH NOVEMBER 2004

Top 4 countries named after food:

1. Chile
2. Turkey
3. Greece
4. Wales

Disqualified: Hungary, Sweden

Tags: food, language

Sim City: The C is for Communist!

8:56PM, 10TH NOVEMBER 2004

After finishing *The Road to Serfdom*, I left my brain ticking over for a few seconds waiting for the start of the period where I take all its lessons to heart (you know, the period right before you begin thinking critically) and become a true Hayekian. (Un)fortunately, as usually happens when I start idling, my mind drifted to classic computer games, specifically *Sim City*.

Sim City is a simulation of a city-state under the grip of totalitarian socialism. You do not play the hero struggling against the leviathan. You, for evil or for eviler, are the Mayor-God running the whole show.

Your grid of land is entirely under your command. Although nominally part of a larger nation, you are for all practical purposes the head of state, unelected and undeposable save for violent revolution (sure, the game calls it being voted out, but it's functionally identical to a mob storming city hall and executing you). You are its mind, body and soul. You lay down every road, police station, fire station, school, college, hospital, library, university and museum. You run the railways, the harbours, and the airports. You control the horizontal *and* the vertical. If somebody wants a service, they must get it from you, and if they want to get out of the system, then tough: they can't.

Your citizens have granted you the power to run their lives, and you do so with glee. You run amok with your bulldozer, confiscating buildings and demolishing them to make way for the latest centrally planned megaproject. Your eye watches over the city night and day. Your information networks let you plot the very paths citizens take to and from work. The latest

version of the game even lets you put your Sims into the city, having used *The Sims* to oversee their lives from cradle, to walled-up-in-a-burning-toilet grave.

You have a team of advisors - a central planning board, right out of Hayek - who tell you what the citizens want. You ignore them. Your thirst for power extends to emptying the city coffers to tear down a mountain that offends your eye and blocks the path through which your new Residential Zones will expand. Your citizens must live here, and nowhere else. Your power to raise taxes and enact arbitrary laws is absolute.

There is no life in your city. There is no creativity or entrepreneurship. If you leave your city alone, nothing will happen, since the means to all ends lie in you and your smothering bureaucracy.

Thanks to an incomplete economic model, the system doesn't collapse in on itself. It's possible to reach a state where everybody is happy (as measured by Official Government Happiness-Meters), and maintain this state indefinitely. The jackboot will stamp on the smiling faces forever. The game handily leaves out some essential tools of a totally planned society: ordinances for restricting undesirable speech, and forced labour camps for dissenters.

This game presses all the right buttons; it's so easy to see why Planning is attractive. Not enough cash? Build a prison! Citizens dying from air pollution? Build more hospitals! Every solution is clear and inevitable and is the responsibility of the government! The game taps into the planning psychology, right down to the desire to cause earthquakes and alien invasions at will.

Sim City is the game most commonly mentioned amongst teachers as being educational, and for studying complex systems I can't fault it. But to present it uncritically as an economic simulation is dangerous. Take [this](#) summary of Sim City 4:

Major Learning Areas: Dynamics of and strategies for social and economic planning and decision making, or what it like to build and run a city.

Holy Mary mother of Marx!

"Oh you rotter!" you say, "You know kids don't listen to their teachers anyway!"

Perhaps. But we process media in subtle ways, as the next post hopefully suggests...

Tags: politics, games, economics

Must... protect... children!

8:56PM, 10TH NOVEMBER 2004

(Warning! The following is baseless speculation! Digest with caution!)

One of the great myths of the information age is that media has no impact on the minds of children (or adults). It's a reaction against the equally mythical claims that "Doom turned my kids into Satanists!" No kid likes to be told his hobby is warping his mind, because he knows deep down that it isn't. Or is it? [Or IS it?](#) etc.

No game is going to make a healthy mind crack and go on a shooting spree, but it's disingenuous to think that our inputs have **no** effect on us. The mind is as Hofstadter's *Who shoves whom around in the careenium?* essay suggests: complex, chaotic, and full of pattern. New inputs come along and disrupt the pattern. Some inputs are shrugged off as irrelevant, some are absorbed and contribute to a radical change of the pattern. Who has never laughed at a film, tapped to a tune, or experienced the cringing horror of hearing that they're going to make Police Academy 8? Inputs matter, and violent games and films are just another input.

Anyone familiar with the theory of memes is better equipped to deal with incoming memes, but it's inexcusable hubris to think yourself such the master that your memetic firewall can inspect all memes objectively; every metric nanoshannon of information invading your sensorium is a meme insofar as it's an input to your brain.

It also appears that throughout life, the brain swings from being totally write-only (up to the age of about 6 months) to being totally read-only (beyond 80). This could simply be that a new input to an octogenarian is a smaller percentage change than the same input to a toddler.

Luckily, they still haven't made Police Academy 8.

What to do?

Given that all inputs change us, will it ever be safe to go outside again? I say: no, but safety is overrated. Change happens; live with it. You will not be the same person in 5 years or 5 minutes time, but that's no reason to hold a funeral for You2004. The change is continuous and unavoidable, although meme theory potentially lets us contrive to avoid some dangerous memes. In fact as always, evolution has already figured this one out. People don't need to understand memetics to know what they don't like.

The Evangelical memeplex, for example, actively discourages enlightening activities such as questioning, reading, and arguing, because it knows that it can't stand up to the Rationality memeplex. What's the payoff for the believer? Security. Fear of new ideas taps into the primal fear of death, because changing as a person really is like dying. Youths everywhere would "rather be dead than sell out to the Man", and in fact, the youth speaking those words will in a sense be dead by the time he's a filthy capitalist like everyone else.

So should I play Doom 3? Of course. Will it make me a different person? Of course. I can temper this change with what powers of introspection I have, but I can't avoid it completely, and neither can you or your children. Don't shield yourself from culture, but don't think a liberal viewing schedule won't affect your kids in *some* way.

If it makes you feel better, think of yourself as 4-dimensional with interesting variation along your time axis, instead of 3-dimensional, perpetually dying, scared and alone.

Tags: games, psychology, learning

Death by Logic

4:44PM, 11TH NOVEMBER 2004

I wrote yesterday that the Evangelical Religion meme can't stand up to the Rationality meme.

It's worth mentioning that some might say the Rationality meme can't stand up to a pure strain of itself, since a life of pure logic is not one conducive to wanting to stay alive.

Tags: psychology

Intravenous gaming

8:37PM, 12TH NOVEMBER 2004

The art of the film and the art of the game is to convincingly draw you into its world. This is why I think hard drugs are the future of interactive entertainment.

Thanks to the War-on-Drugs-inspired total blackout of research into psychoactive drugs, we mostly don't have a clue what they do or why they do it. After The Revolution, I expect pharmaceutical companies to join hands with entertainment companies to create the ultimate audiovisual spectacle.

Highly-tuned designer drugs should be able to induce very precise effects on the brain, such as making you cry during a sad film, making you laugh during a comedy, increasing your heartbeat while playing Counterstrike, or scrambling your vision while watching the end of 2001.

What's that? You think that's cheating? Humbug. I'm sure there were still photographers who thought that motion pictures were not real photography. I'm sure there have been writers complaining that slang is not real language. These purists see art as an end, but it's really a means with which to transmit a powerful gestalt into your head. Movies manipulate you. High definition film, good direction, immersive audio, tricksy writing, and sexy stars are all merely tools of manipulation, all carefully designed to induce that emotional state in your mind. Why should chemicals not be another tool for filmmakers?

OK, that's a slightly more extreme proposition than I was aiming for. There is indeed an argument that a work of art should be a self-contained object which can be studied without

prejudice. In fact, art as passive entertainment must by definition be so, otherwise it would be interactive.

Interactive art is another matter. This type of art - the game - deeply involves the player, who cannot just sit back and take in the game, since the game's purpose is to suck him into the virtual world. The player's mind is being purposefully manipulated - computer graphics are a big trick to fool the mind into thinking it's There. Designer drugs could be a powerful addition to the creative toolbox of the game designer.

Why should the latest GPU waste cycles doing antialiasing when a drug can simply fool your brain into thinking it's seeing smooth edges? Neuroscience will take tremendous leaps forward when the effects of drugs can be rigorously documented, and I believe there is great potential for offloading visual processing directly into the brain. The graphics hardware of the brain can clearly be decoupled from the eyes; just think of dreams. We can dream about cars in great detail because we've seen and know all about cars in great detail. If you could concoct a drug to put the brain into a dreamlike state and then suggest the concept of cars, you could almost do away with computer-computed visuals altogether. Imagine getting the brain to auto-render graphics for old text adventures!

There is a snag: we can only dream precisely about things we've seen. To build an out-of-this-world game scenario would either require training in a studio (analogous to loading textures and geometry into video RAM) or research into the process by which the brain creates new imagery from old. This latter technique is certainly used by the brain. Who has never had a dream featuring surreal fusions of otherwise everyday experiences?

The ability to experience creative games would be linked to your own imagination; some people can have a spaceship described to them and visualise it in stunning detail, but others just think of some lame blob they saw on Star Trek.

I'll stop speculating on the form that psychotropic gaming will take since I haven't the faintest idea how the technology would really work. All I know is what every scientist knows: **we need more research.**

Counterpoint

Pursuant to *Brave New World* and *The Terminal Man*, the most popular game will be the one that gives you a drug that makes you think you're playing a good game. It'll be \$69.99 on the Xbox 3. (Countercounterpoint: people don't just play games to bliss out, and even if in the future they do, brain-rendered user interfaces will be useful.)

Additionally, all this assumes that the useful properties of chemical drugs can be separated from the harmful side effects. You'd want some serious third-party oversight to make sure nVidia isn't cutting your LSDFX6800 with rat-poison.

At the end of the day, [Barney](#) said it best:

[Just hook it to my veins!](#)

Tags: games, psychology, art, extropy

The evil of borders

10:55AM, 14TH NOVEMBER 2004

Girl in pinata found during border check. (Via [Boingboing](#))

Inspectors at border checkpoints have seen it all: people rolled inside carpets, sewn into car seats and stuffed into washing machines, all attempting to be smuggled into the United States.

But inspectors at the Tecate Port of Entry discovered a new twist recently when they encountered a little girl meticulously sealed inside a pinata.

Not being familiar with US border politics, I thought the implication of a girl being in a pinata was that the parents were trying to get people to surreptitiously beat her to death.

Tags: amusements, crime

*-bomber

7:51PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2004

MSN sucks as a medium from which to copy conversation:

J: i would say that the "feelings of inferiority" thing is a real phenomenon

J: but identifying it with political leanings is not very useful

J: as it's by no means restricted to leftists etc.

D: the only insane part of unabom is that he thought violence was a good solution

J: for example, radical islam and christianity fulfills most of that

D: indeed

D: and dirty vegans

J: lol

J: i forsee a vegan answer to the unabomber

J: taking out mcdonalds, etc.

J: the vegabomber

D: LO

J: who writes a long diatribe on the psychology of modern meatism

J: and dairyism too, otherwise she's just be a regular vegitaribomber

J: in fact i think all political persuasions can be radically enhanced by appending the word "-bomber"

D: LOL

D: man you gotta blog that shit

I forgot the breatharibombers.

Tags: politics, amusements

My lungs! The smoking ban - it does nothing!

10:01AM, 16TH NOVEMBER 2004

Smoking ban proposed in England.

Is it the case that about 87% of smokers are unpleasant people, or that about 87% of unpleasant people are smokers? Although the difference is statistically significant, I don't intend to find out which is correct, since it seems quite obvious that there is at least a correlation between smoking and being a bit dodgy.

Nevertheless, I'm not convinced it's the government's job to tell louts what substances they can put in their bodies. What business of mine is it if these people take a cheesegrater to their lungs? Oh wait, I pay for their healthcare.

Personal decisions such as smoking, binge drinking, overeating and sticking one's face in a fan all cost the NHS (and via the miracle of taxation, everyone), dearly. To what extent should I be forced to subsidise the expensive lifestyles of others? When the public takes control of everyone's health, everyone's health becomes their personal business, and encourages things like smoking bans, junk food bans and fan guards. If it were left up to the individual to provide his own health insurance, I think said individual would voluntarily quit smoking pretty sharpish, because it's only by making someone a stakeholder that you can effect change in his behaviour.

I heard some Tory bloke on the radio (yes, it's true, I find radio more pleasant to wake up to than fifteen minutes of the alarm bell klaxoning at 90 decibels, but only just) say how the smoking ban in Ireland had reduced sales in pubs, but increased sales in off-licenses, supposedly indicating that more people were smoking at home, possibly in front of... gasp!...

children! Despite being a Tory and despite being on the radio at 7:00am, he has a point. People who subject their children to 3 passive packs a day don't belong in the pub or the off-license, they belong in jail, and there's no need for new legislation since it's clearly in violation of existing child abuse laws. Practically speaking it'll never happen, since I imagine most children would correctly prefer crippled lungs to foster parents.

As far as an English ban goes, I see it as inevitable for as long as the NHS still exists, but the current proposal is backwards. Smoking banned in pubs but allowed on the streets? Pubs and clubs are private property, and I see not what business of the government's it is what consenting adults do on private property. The streets, however, are public property, and when in public, it's reasonable that we should abide by a certain social contract. People can subject their vital organs to whatever weird fetishes they like, but when in public, I consider that my right to fresh air trumps their right to smoke. Cigarette smoke is basically littering, and we already have laws against that.

And since we established above that, if at least the weaker of the two statements is true, 87% of unpleasant people smoke, they will be removed from the streets and forced to go home for their fix, where they can be as chavtastic as they like without bothering anyone. Smoke 'em in, as Bush might put it.

What about a pub employee's right to fresh air? Uh, I'm working on that, but early results indicate that he doesn't have one.

Air

The fundamental problem with smoking is the fundamental problem of the environment. Who owns the air and who are its stakeholders? It seems to me that nobody owns the air, and everybody is a stakeholder, which in turn seems to justify a high level of government

interference in keeping it clean. I expect nanotechnology will allow the atmosphere to be partitioned into chunks, the flux through which can be measured, and thus a chunk owner can charge a neighbour for any pollution leaking in. But until a scheme of private property is technologically feasible, we seem to be stuck with treating the atmosphere as a fundamentally public, and socialised, resource.

Tags: politics, health

Mini-reviews of recent watchings

11:20AM, 16TH NOVEMBER 2004

Select the blacked out parts to reveal spoilers. If your browser doesn't support CSS, you're about to be spoiled!

The Big Lebowski: Not sure what to make of this. Totally meandering plot. The point, if there is one, seems to be to show off the life of The Dude. Quite good fun, good music, well written, and interestingly weird enough to make you want to stick it out to the end.

Dr. Strangelove: Pure genius. More of a horror than a comedy. Most of the funniest lines are written on various props throughout the film, so keep your eyes open. Peter Sellers seems to have gotten top billing, but it's clearly George C. Scott who makes this brilliant.

Bicentennial Man: Started with some very The Dig-esque music. 100% cliches all through - it was like watching a compilation of every Data scene from Star Trek: TNG. I really hate what films like this do to the public perception of SF. Having said that, it slowly but surely becomes a rather good film. Sam Neill is a great actor. Disappointingly weak script in places, but has an ending that manages to be touching without being soppy. Unfortunately, its 50s-vintage understanding of AI makes it hard to suspend disbelief, and ultimately [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. Oh yes, and this provides further proof that films should never, ever feature children.

A Clockwork Orange: Weird. Very weird. I had high expectations before watching this, since almost everyone I know has either seen it before, or "heard it's really good". Well I suppose it is quite good, but it didn't have the impact on me that it might've done in the 70s, if I had been around to watch it then. It's really not as violent or shocking as it's made out to be,

especially when compared to the ultra-violence-for-fun we see in video games, which makes me wonder if the film was onto something. The soundtrack is a work of art, the sets are absolutely insane (dear modernism, please die, k thx bye), and there's a haunting brightness to every scene.

The plot is slow and seemingly without direction, but every frame exudes so much poetic strangeness that you hang on in there wanting to know how it turns out, like Lebowski above.

I think I now 'get' Stanley Kubrick films. Their common theme and message is: "Everything is screwed up. Oh well."

Commando: Good old fashioned ridiculous action fun. The kind of thing that Hot Shots Part Deux parodies. Schwarzenegger '08!

The Blues Brothers: Ah, finally seeing this film closes a book which was opened in 1990 when I first heard a soundclip ("It's 106 miles to Chicago, we've got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it's dark and we're wearing sunglasses. Hit it.") coming out of a Mac IIci. It was so good, we set it as the system alert sound (instead of, for example, Wild Eep) and started generating errors just to hear it again. Oh the novelty of having a computer with a real speaker in it! Kids are spoiled these days.

As for the film, every scene featuring the Bluesmobile is fantastic, and all the other bits are a little boring.

The Wicker Man: It's a film with Christopher Lee and Britt Ekland but it's not The Man With The Golden Gun! This is the best film I've seen for months! A stunning British classic. I was told it was a horror film, but it's more like a musical thriller. I despise music-hall-style musicals

utterly, possibly even more than R'n'B, but the music in this is actually excellent. A bigger budget would've killed all the atmosphere, like it usually does with conventional horror films.

The Director's Cut is longer, and widely considered superior, but I didn't like it that much. It wasn't any worse than the theatrical version, but the lower quality of the added scenes was horribly jarring - enough to cancel out the minor improvements they represented.

Analyze This: Sort of above average comedy. Compactly written, but perhaps the only reason it's good is because it absorbed some style from the background-awesomeness that pervaded Hollywood that year. *The Matrix* was spot-on when it called 1999 the peak of civilisation.

Good Will Hunting: Not great but not far off. Robin Williams is really good as a becardiganned psychiatrist, but Matt Damon is a bit annoying. And math popularisations always make me nervous.

The Grudge: Almost a scene-for-scene ripoff of The Ring. Furthers the modern reinterpretation of 'scary' as 'jumpy'. The make-you-jump formula is strings-based, used about a hundred times in this film, and it's the same every time: protagonist moves slowly, violins start whining, something happens very quickly, violins start shrieking, scene ends. This makes it a rather good film for the easily scared, since it's so obvious when something 'scary' is coming, you know when to shut your eyes.

To understand the essential difference between scary and jumpy, one has only to listen to an audience watching The Grudge: they jump at every jumpy scene, then start laughing at each other. For an amusing illustration of how truly unscary modern horror films are, rent The Ring on DVD and replace the soundtrack with [Spanish Flea](#).

Despite its unoriginality, I quite enjoyed it: if something is 'just more of the same' of a good thing, then it's still a good thing. And I used to live in a house whose exterior was not unlike The House in this film.

Death Becomes Her: A hidden classic! Hidden from me, anyway, since everyone seems to already know and like this. More pro-death propaganda, but this time with better reasoning, and importantly: comedy. It's not wildly funny or wildly anything - measure it with the normal movieometry tools and you'll get a collection of average figures, but the whole is a lot more than the sum of its parts. Well done, Bruce Willis.

Thelma and Louise: Another film I knew all about from parodies in The Naked Gun, The Simpsons and possibly more. Worth seeing the original anyway as it has a lovely original soundtrack by Hans Zimmer. Also, maybe at the time Michael Madsen could play a nice guy, but after his long relationship with Tarantino he has become retroactively utterly miscast. Another argument for absorbing culture in strict chronological order, but if we did that I'd still be stuck on ancient Greek poems.

Non-films

Little Britain: like an averaged-out watered-down combination of The Fast Show and The League of Gentlemen. Nowhere near as good as people say. Overplays the same old surrealism card. Matt Lucas was better doing silly voices and random 5-second skits on Shooting Stars.

Tags: films, reviews

Mathematics Defined

4:01PM, 17TH NOVEMBER 2004

A complete history and comprehensive overview of mathematics, in two words:

1. Symmetry
2. Detail

When are things the same, and when are they different? That's what mathematics is.

Tags: mathematics

Tesco spam

3:51PM, 18TH NOVEMBER 2004

I didn't give Tesco my full surname when filling out the clubcard form, so now I get emails like this:

Dear Mr T,

Don't leave your Christmas shopping until the last minute.

...

Tags: spam

The one you've all been waiting for: Reality TV

6:46PM, 19TH NOVEMBER 2004

In the 1950s parents despaired of their kids corrupting themselves with rock'n'roll. In the 1980s those corrupted kids were parents themselves, despairing of their children wasting their lives on video games. Now the gaming generation has children of its own, and the new bogeything is Reality TV.

It's not uncommon to think of video games as a work of high art these days, and rock music has certainly received recognition as 'classic'. Is this because they are now mature forms of entertainment? Were they actually complete rubbish when they first started, justifying the fears of parents which these days seem so overblown? Might Reality TV become a viable type of entertainment enjoyed by thinking well-adjusted adults? Is it already the case, implying that the video game generation who think they are clued up and with it because they hate Reality TV have yet to realise that "[they changed what 'it' was](#)"? Reality TV certainly seems weird and scary to me.

It's hard to look upon Reality TV as having any worth whatsoever; I for one get that TV-smashing urge whenever it's even mentioned, let alone broadcast. Was this ever the case with Rock and Games? I don't think so - they don't seem to have evolved that far from what they've always been. By the mid 80s, most core game-mechanics had been thrashed out, and from there games started to mature with better graphics and relatively little gameplay innovation. The history of rock is lost on me, but from what I understand, the principles of the genre were all in place by the mid-60s.

Reality TV is about 5 years old. Perhaps the reason we hate it so much is because it's still in the doo-wop/pong phase. Perhaps it will mature into a glorious artform with... um... hng.... hnggggggggg.

snap

Fuck it. I can't do it. I tried to give Reality TV the benefit of the doubt by imagining that we might be unfairly pre-judging it, but it's just not true. Reality TV is shite, absolute end of story. It's not Rock. It's not Gaming. It's just a bunch of drooling C-list celebritards doing pointless stupid unfunny shit in a successful effort to make mentally deficient airheads laugh and spill their fucking White Lightning down their rotting vomit-stained rags that they slum around in at 3am after a night of being up4anyfink, spending their rent money on fags and shots of paint stripper and a taxi to Accident and Emergency to have their tongue stitched up after they saw a pisshead keel over making them spittle-cackle so much they bit into it, and bled all over their Burberry handbags filled with drink offers and used condoms they couldn't leave at the bus stop where they got off with their sister's brother in total ignorance of the wretched spawn they'd abort 7 months after they were too pissed to remember to get a morning after pill, and realised they couldn't afford to raise a child *and* go to college so they said bollocks to that and did neither and spent the money on a Freeview box so they could sit amongst the kebab wrappers and Primark bags in rancid squalor whiling away their worthless non-life watching soap actors fellate llamas and sleazeball 5th-rate R'n'B thugs, head craning down to their arthritic thumb texting their despicable mates asking to blag a lift into town for another ear-bleeding night out binge blingin' and washing their miserable fake plastic lives away down their rasping nicotine stained gullet, fighting petit arguments and sulking in a corner smearing their fetid crisp-grease stained fingers at Hello magazine but being too blind drunk or illiterate to do anything but trace the big-print cretinous manufactured gossip headlines

and gawp at the tacky flash photography of trashy dead-eyed famewhores taken by scumbag paparazzi wheezing hot air into the shitstorm of meaningless fakery that is the shallow world of celebrities, spewing ever more utter garbage into the white noise of anti-conversation, like an airhorn screaming into a megaphone, being forgotten within hours, lost forever, falling onto one instantly attentive hoop-earring'd ear and slopping right out of the other one when the next big, new, hot, popular thing appears and glazes over the empty eyes of a generation of vacuous subhumans shrieking "I DON'T CARE! I DON'T CARE! I DON'T CARE!..."

Tags: games, music, amusements, tv

UK zombie panic 2004

1:12PM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2004

To anyone who thinks [zombie films](#) are not vivid social satire, [we have](#):

The American 'super-cop' brought in by the Home Office to cut Britain's crime rate warned last night that the nation's binge drinking culture was spiralling out of control and fuelling an epidemic of violence outside pubs and clubs that threatened to overwhelm the police.

Critical characteristics of zombies:

- They stagger through the streets
- They inflict pain and violence on non-zombies
- Their numbers are growing
- They move in mobs
- They can't be reasoned with

Tags: films, crime, psychology

Delisting

10:13AM, 5TH DECEMBER 2004

It occurs to me that the only people who I care about reading this blog already read it.

Therefore I've blocked Google, and everything else, from indexing it. Should be an interesting experiment.

Tags: meta

Blunkett vs. The Church

2:47PM, 8TH DECEMBER 2004

Rowan Atkinson warns that banning 'incitement to religious hatred' is a bad idea. The Home Office lays out exactly what is covered:

4. What will the new offence not cover?

Of themselves, the following would not be caught by the offence:

...

** proselytising one's own religion or urging followers of a different religion to cease practising theirs; for example Christians claiming that Jesus Christ is the way the truth, the life and the only way to God, Muslims exhorting people to submit to the will of Allah, or Atheists claiming that there is no God;*

...

However if a person were to use threatening, abusive or insulting words, actions or material with the intent or likely effect that hatred would be stirred up whilst undertaking the actions listed above, then by definition, they could rightly fall into the scope of the offence.

You see that right there? **Threatening, abusive or insulting words** will henceforth be a crime. I now present for your enjoyment two well-known quotes:

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"O ye who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you, and let them find harshness in you,, and know that Allah is with those who keep their duty (unto Him)."

They are from The Bible and The Koran respectively, and chosen for their infamy, not their extremity. There are indeed worse examples tucked away in these vicious little murder manuals. It's hard to see how these quotes are anything other than an exhortation to religious genocide, which is explicitly banned under the new law.

Blunkett will thus be doing an unprecedented service to the country; that is, the outright criminalisation of Abrahamic religion and the jailing of 80% of the population.

Tags: religion, amusements, crime

Immigrants vs. chemistry

4:11PM, 18TH DECEMBER 2004

The BBC [talk about](#) migrant workers busting into America across the southern border:

Every year about 600 migrants die, mainly from thirst. In the summer, the temperatures in Arizona soar to well beyond boiling point.

Given that the highest temperature ever recorded on Earth was [56.7 degrees celsius](#), in Death Valley, they are obviously not talking about the boiling point of water (which is 100 degrees for those of you whose chemistry schooling did not interfere with your education). So what is it that these Mexicans are carrying across the border that keeps boiling off and causing them to die of thirst? A quick check of my trusty data tables suggests Pentane, which boils at about 36 degrees.

So the lesson to be learned is: if you are trying to smuggle yourself into the USA across the desert, only drink heavy hydrocarbons. And to think they said the BBC was scientifically illiterate!

Tags: media, amusements, science

I'm evil? You're fired.

9:24PM, 12TH JANUARY 2005

If feel sort of sorry for [this dude who got sacked from "Bastardstone's"](#), as he refers to it, so I will take some time off from trying to reshape the world in the style of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* to write a bit about it.

Working in a book shop is an awesome job, third only to Librarian, and Travelling Wise Man For Hire. It seems to have been this guy's dream job too, as he worked there for 11 years, ever since he was a student.

Or maybe not. I also feel sorry for Waterstone's, who are on the receiving end of not only the above Bastardstone's jibe, but a bunch of other stuff. The Guardian gives excerpts where he calls his Boss evil and complains about working hours, but misses [this bit](#):

Sneaked a couple of talking books from an incoming pile to listen to as well and managed to fit in the entire BBC radio version of the Hitch-hiker's Guide this week.

where he seems to admit to theft? Maybe I just don't know what he means by sneaking.

But imagine you own a business, and you employ somebody to help you out. Imagine you find out that your employee hates his job, hates you, slags off your business in public, bemoans the fact that he is overqualified, and gabs about your other employees being drunk on the job. Imagine also that there are 1.5 million unemployed people in this country who would just love to work for you. Seems like an easy decision to me.

Open up, it's the pigs

But! We still have labour laws in this country. Maybe it's not legal to sack somebody who hates you. I wouldn't worry about that. Those laws will be gone soon. So when that happens, what is there to stop somebody from imposing free-speech restricting clauses in an employment contract? Imagine if you could only get a job for Pepsi if you forever renounced saying the word Coke. Imagine if you could only get a job working for a daytrading firm if you disseminate flagrant lies about stock prices to your friends and family. If there are no laws restricting what can go into a contract, then might people effectively sell themselves into slavery?

The [answer is no](#), after a brief digression on contract law. I'm afraid I have to come down on the side of Waterstone's here. The guy just didn't want his job enough, so he lost it. The only way to guard yourself against dismissal is to make yourself valuable to your employer. Employees must be free to choose their employers, and employers must be free to choose their employees, no matter what. As soon as you put restrictions on either side of that deal, you get degenerate scenarios. Oh wait, like we have now...

Tags: law, books, web

EUeeeeew

1:54PM, 26TH JANUARY 2005

Just got back from the toughest most trident-fellatingly evil exam ever. ("Prove the Hahn-Banach theorem. 20 marks."; and that was the easy B question.) Then I read this, and felt righteous:

"Should the United Kingdom approve the treaty establishing a constitution for the European Union?"

This is like the entrance exam for liberal democracy, and I must say we're setting the bar pretty low. Dumbing down truly exists... I mean come on, there's only one question on this paper, and it's easy! Answer it wrong and your franchise becomes even weaker, answer it right and there's a chance you might get to run your own life.

Unfortunately, it's a fair bet that most of our slacking students of civil society won't even show up to take the test. And the truly appalling thing is that *your* result depends on your classmates' results.

Tags: law, politics

Aliens vs. Titanic

10:29PM, 1ST FEBRUARY 2005

I quote from [the original script](#) by James Cameron:

- What was that, Mr. Murdoch?

- An iceberg, sir.

- Well that's great, that's just fuckin' great man. Now what the fuck are we supposed to do?

We're in some real pretty shit now man... That's it man, game over man, game over! What the fuck are we gonna do now? What are we gonna do?

- Will the lifeboats be seated according to class? I hope they're not too crowded. How long after we're declared overdue can we expect a rescue?

- Seventeen days.

- *Seventeen days?* Hey man, I don't wanna rain on your parade, but we're not gonna last seventeen hours! The water's gonna come in here just like it did before. And it's gonna come in here...

- Mother!

- ... and it's gonna come in here AND IT'S GONNA KILL US!

- I don't understand a one of you. What's the matter with you? It's your men back there! We got plenty a' room for more.

- Hey! I know we're all in strung out shape but stay frosty and alert. We can't afford to let one of those bastards in here.

- You see? Is my destinio!! Like I told you. I go to l'America!!
- Just tell me one thing, Fabrizio. You're going out there to destroy them, right? Not to study. Not to bring back. But to wipe them out.
- What made you think you could put your hands on my fiancee?! Look at me, you filth! What did you think you were doing?! Get away from her, you bitch!
- [Sees metal rivets popping out]
- They're coming outta the walls. They're coming outta the goddamn walls. We're fucked!
- [Lifeboats drop]
- We're on an express elevator to hell - going down!

Credits

Matti thought of the title.

Tags: amusements, films

Volunteers needed for medical research!

4:16PM, 10TH FEBRUARY 2005

So goes the subject line of, so far, 4 separate emails sent out on the all-students mailing list over the last few months. All of them are from different people, and they're all about... wait for it... pain research!

Between them they propose burning your hands with lasers and forcing you to watch horrific videos, whilst scanning your brain. It's either unpaid, or for a (low, low) chance of winning a raffle of some kind. So it seems like there is going to be a serious problem with selection bias.

What if they come to conclusions about pain based entirely on a sample of people who happily volunteered for this research? That is, people who like pain and enjoy watching car crashes? I can just see the BBC headlines:

New study confirms it: pain not so bad after all.

This just in: traumatic situations cause bleeding, grinning.

Scientists recommend at least 30 minutes of uninterrupted agony every day.

Tags: health, psychology, science, university

How everything is made

4:50PM, 10TH FEBRUARY 2005

I spent many an enjoyable minute of the last half hour reading [this photo-tour of the Gigabyte motherboard factory](#). Wow. Seeing so many things come together in one place to make one product makes me wonder how anyone *ever* thought an economy was something plannable by human minds.

Over the last few years I've seen a lot of really amazing petrochemical infrastructure which I was indeed impressed by, but at least with oil you get the impression you are close to the source of the product. With the Gigabyte factory, all those millions of components has behind it a manufacturing story at least as complicated as every other component.

A really great project would be to create a similar tour which followed the manufacture of every component used to make a particular item. I reckon that almost every single product in the world couldn't be made without the assistance of every other product, worker, industry and technology.

Example: a light bulb. The glass is made of sand and other chemicals. The sand comes from a beach, but goes via a refinery to purify it. The refinery is made of steel, runs on electricity, and is controlled by computers. So just one step back into the manufacturing history of a light bulb and you already find you can't do it without the entire force of the steel, chemical and computer industries. Games like *Civilization* do no justice whatsoever to the world economy by presenting it as a tree that can be climbed in some kind of order.

See [I, Pencil](#).

Tags: economics, hardware

More Jaws!

1:05PM, 13TH FEBRUARY 2005

The movie cycle is coming round once again to the point where a new Jaws film could be supported, i.e. the economy is doing well, people are getting dumber, and beerier, and there is plenty of spare change to be wasted by going to see a guaranteed pile of crap like another Jaws movie. All the following potential films are owned, patented and copyrighted by James, Matti and Owen, so if any filthy bestubbled directors want to rip off our ripoffs, we'll get to sue them *and* their children unto the third generation. Oh, and they're all valid [TECO](#) programs too, so we'll get you under the [goddamned software patent laws](#) too, mark my words, [Boll](#).

Jaws 6: Jaws Everywhere!

Jaws is back! And this time you're not just not safe in the ocean - you're not safe in *any* body of water! Yes, that's right, Jaws has learnt how to use canal locks! He could be *anywhere*! So you think you can just stay away from rivers? Think again. It's a little known fact that every body of water in America is connected to every other body of water by secret underground tunnels. Nobody knows where these tunnels came from; all we know is that they're shark-shaped and have big bite marks all down the walls. So you can forget about the reservoirs and local swimming pools. And just when you thought it was safe to go back to the toilet? Nope, Jaws has crammed his chompy great mouth round the u-bend and is waiting there for you like the pit of sarlacc, and no, you can't just go standing up, since he'll pop round behind you and come out of the shower too. You're going to be scared to spit after seeing this one.

Jaws 7: Jaws in space!

Stardate 2450! An asteroid smashes into the Atlantic ocean, but luckily glances off all the slippery crap that's piled up on the bottom over the centuries and hurtles back into space, carrying a few billion tons of water and one *enraged* shark. All would be fine, except the asteroid proceeds to smash into the desert colony of Mars where refugees from Jaws' utter decimation of the human race seek solace away from anything remotely resembling water. Splash! First Jaws must seek out some SCUBA equipment since the air pressure on Mars is quite low. Then he fills the mask with water, since he's a shark, and scrapes his gorged belly across the now-muddy wastes of the formerly prosperous town of Amitydome 17. You see everything on screen, in harsh pink light, because it's much scarier than not seeing anything - you'll kack your freeze-dried spacepants watching this film!

Jaws takes a female nuclear scientist hostage, then tunnels down into the martian depths where he discovers a race of alien sandsharks which he enslaves and leads against the humans. Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the colonist hero who penetrates the underground lair of Jaws and foils his devious plan to turn Mars into an ocean world. He battles Jaws in ferocious jaw-to-jaw combat, saves the day, and gets the girl. They have tame, sanitized sex on screen while the credits roll to R'n'B music.

Jaws 8: Time travelin' Jaws!

Thinking the killer shark dead in the explosion at the end of the last film, the human race returns to Earth only to find that Jaws was actually sent back in time by the blast! Now it's 1943. Jaws' armies march across Europe. Using an ancient Chinese cookbook, he resurrects zombies of history's most evil villains and forges a super-cabal of undead tyrants.

Jaws' new plan is to retrieve all six pieces of the amulet and open up a portal to the monstershark dimension, flooding the world with pure evil. He also hires Dr. Ernst von Grubenschaftzkleiner, the world's greatest researcher in experimental orthodontics, to fit him with nuclear-tipped tooth-bombs for maximum destructive bite power. Since Jaws' doesn't know where the last piece of the amulet is hidden, his plan is simply to bite everybody in half and see if it's hidden there.

Jaws is finally defeated when an unlikely band of SAS commandos breaks into Jaws' underwater cathedral and discovers his secret identity as the new lesbian Pope, enabling them to dress up as a travelling circus and infiltrate Jaws' midnight feeding frenzy. They defeat him with a song-and-dance act then harpoon him and chop him up into little pieces and throw the bits into the sun. Jesus returns and everyone goes to heaven, even Jaws, although he's in little barbecued pieces on kebab sticks. God booms out a witticism. Everyone laughs. Credits roll.

Tags: amusements, films

But wait... BBC forever!

10:58AM, 15TH FEBRUARY 2005

Speaking of TV, over Christmas I saw an episode of "Camilo e filho", a Portuguese (from Portugal) scene-for-scene remake of [Steptoe and Son](#), except with much much lower production values and totally lacking anything that was good about the original. It really was an identical clone, right down to the skeleton in the living room, and the British flag in the corner, which had become a Portuguese flag.

Has there ever been a remake of anything that didn't utterly suck the life out of the original?

The BBC is completely broken as a branch of the government, but it consistently makes the worlds' best TV by an astronomical margin.

Tags: tv

TV Tax

10:59AM, 15TH FEBRUARY 2005

At least 3 times a year for the last 4 years, the TV licensing company has sent me various letters warning me that they're going to send the boys round to deliver a thousand pound fine and possibly a bit of a kicking.

The only way to tell them that I don't have a TV is to *write* to them - yes, write, with actual honest to god pen and ink! - in Bristol. I will avoid ranting about the fact that they're trying to force me to pay for cringeworthy trash like Click Online and simply ignore them. If they want to find out whether I have a TV or not they can come round here at their own expense, in their own time and find out.

Tags: tv

Boa vs. Python

9:57PM, 16TH FEBRUARY 2005

The following code took 1 minute to design and type, and about 5 minutes to run:

```
#!/usr/bin/python
d = 0
for i in range(0,15000):
    x = 2**i
    lead = int(str(x)[0])
    if lead == 1:
        d += 1
print float(d)/(i+1)
```

If it had been in C, it would've taken 5 minutes to design and type, and 1 minute to run. Some people like C's tradeoff. I, on the other hand, think Python's is the reason why it's the greatest language in modern times.

(Incidentally, I tried using [Psyco](#), but that actually made it slower!)

(Not incidentally, the code is meant to illustrate [Benford's Law](#), a remarkable 'law' which Mathworld describes as phenomenological. There are reasonable justifications, but it's still weird, I tells ya.)

Tags: mathematics, programming

Genoism

7:48PM, 21ST FEBRUARY 2005

"Of course, it's illegal to discriminate - 'genoism' it's called - but no one takes the laws seriously. If you refuse to disclose, they can always take a sample from a doorhandle... or a handshake... even the saliva off your application form."

Tags: politics, films, science

Mini-reviews of (not so) recent watchings

12:24AM, 23RD FEBRUARY 2005

Big Fish: That's some good viewin' there. Hard to describe what I liked about this. Probably simply the aura of Tim Burtonage. That guy is a genius.

The Incredibles: even better second time round! I saw it with Portuguese subtitles this time. The translation was sadly flat, as usual, but I noticed something very cool: all the in-film text (i.e. signs on doors, words on computer screens) had been translated too! I wonder if they re-animated the mouths for the dubbed version...

Ghost in the Shell: Not quite as good as Akira, and I have to say that even though The Matrix shamelessly rips this off, I prefer The Matrix. In fact, since Syndicate gets its aesthetics from this film, I have to put this down as one of those films that's important more for what it inspired than what it was itself. Not that it's bad. Absolutely worth watching at least once.

Oh yes, and there's something faintly crappy about early 90s stuff which involves "cyberspace". Ulch.

The Importance of Being Ernest: I'd never seen any incarnation of this before the modern Ealing one with Colin Firth, but older versions can't possibly be much better than this. Absolutely stunning soundtrack for a period comedy-drama. I want a tuxedo for my birthday.

Passport to Pimlico: The first of three Ealing Studios films I watched over Christmas. This one was Rather Good. It's about the borough of Pimlico, London, seceding from Britain. Kind of a precursor to the [Free State Project](#)! Very light comedy by modern standards, but for a film from the 40s it's held up well.

Hue and Cry: This Ealing comedy on the other hand, is Rubbish. Dull. Very dull.

The Titfield Thunderbolt: First saw this when I was in playschool. A classic, but perhaps that's just my rose-tinted cataracts. Plot: the local train line gets shut down, so the locals buy it out. Polite British capers ensue.

Star Wars Original Trilogy DVDs: Ah, this is what Star Wars is about! The DVD editions look lovely, and some of the redone scenes are indeed improvements (the awful yuk-yuk song from the end of Return of the Jedi is gone now). Unfortunately, that psychotic hack Lucas has been at it again. Greedo shooting first yadayadayada. I don't know why I'm writing anything; this has been reviewed and dissected and debunked far more comprehensively elsewhere.

Top Secret: Crap. Expected better from a Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker film. I counted about 4 good jokes in the whole film. It's got a horrid cheap 70s look to top it off.

Team America: Brilliant fun. I imagine it will date horribly. The songs are funny the first few times, but nowhere near as good as the South Park ones. Constant homo-this-and-that, combined with evidence from South Park, makes me wonder if Trey and Matt are gay...

Gattaca: Saw it again recently. World's greatest fictional documentary.

Ed Wood: Tim Burton can do no wrong, except for Planet of the Apes. And Johnny Depp can do no wrong full stop. Their powers combined, yet again, make a masterpiece. It's a proper documentary, but manages to be as compelling as fiction without sacrificing too much truth. This inspired me to watch Plan 9 From Outer Space, but it really is as bad as they say, so I bailed after about 30 minutes.

Spirited Away: Weird. Beautiful to look at. Manages to be dreamlike without sacrificing internal consistency or being annoyingly arbitrary. I've never seen a better depiction of water

Boy did this age badly.

on-screen, and I don't just mean in a technical animation sense; it captures everything that water is about: fluidity, expanse, cleanliness, energy... it makes the film incredibly refreshing to watch. Random personal fact: I always, without exception, dream about water.

Repo Man: Wow, this is the ultimate 80s film! Punks, beaten up cars, a filthy Los Angeles, aliens, televangelists, crime, destruction, pseudo-Scientologists ("Diarrhetics"), cans of food labelled "Food", and an inexhaustible mine of oneliners: "The more you drive, the less intelligent you are."

Meet the Fockers: Went in with fairly low expectations, since Meet the Parents was juuuuuust this side of being cynical commercial trash. In fact, it was quite good. It did indeed have a ton of flagrant product placement (a living room with two iMacs?), and missed no opportunity to say the word "Focker" (LOLz3rs!), but not even the weak script could bring down all the acting talent here. Dustin Hoffman in particular was a hero. Oh, by the way, Focker sounds like a rude word! ROTFLMPASAOU!

Raising Arizona: Excellent sort-of-fantasy film with very thin plot, like all Cohen brothers films - but of course the meandering plotlessness is part of the attraction. Not a belly laughing comedy, but what jokes it has are perfectly executed.

The Passion Of The Christ: Better than I expected. Might've been really good if I considered organised religion a positive life-affirming force for good instead of an infectious mental illness. Still, the film makes an excellent case for the separation of church and state. It's only anti-semitic if you're one of those morons that thinks you are your ancestors. Unfortunately, most people suffer from this delusion, so I have no doubt that some monosyllabic skinhead will smash his pint glass down in outrage, fling his knuckles up into

the air, declare "Cai-phus bad! Cai-phus Jew! There-fore Jew bad!", and launch himself into a frenzy of slavering hate.

Er, as for the film, there were several surprises. It features Satan! And Satan is a woman (of course...)! In fact it features a weird androgynous baggy-eyed Satanette in a dark hooded cloak. Could easily pass for Darth Satan, which as far as villain names goes, is about as badass as you can get. Only Dr. von Darth Satan would be better.

Pontius Pilate is quite well constructed. He's got an anatomically correct moulded metal bat-breastplate! Unfortunately Jesus is the only person in the film with superpowers, and even then the worst thing he does is stomp on a snake, which is quite cold for Jesus, IMHO, even though it had just been deployed from Satan's aforementioned avatar.

And yes, it came out in the space year 2004, so it actually does have several utterly gratuitous CG effects, including a snarling demon that jumps out for a split second, which is an unbelievably cheap schlock-horror stunt for a serious film like this to pull.

All in all, it's worth seeing if you are a Christian. Otherwise, probably not, unless you like a bit of the old ultraviolence, which all of us atheists obviously do. Speaking of which, I'm off to murder shopkeepers, burn bibles and flip off grannies! Cheerio!

Tags: films, reviews

Smokers ~= Criminals

7:25PM, 2ND MARCH 2005

A while ago I completely randomly [guessed that 87% of unpleasant people are smokers.](#)

Actually, [the figure is 85%](#), providing "unpleasant person" is defined as "man in jail". Yes, it's true: 85% of male inmates smoke.

It's not too hard to understand is it? It's so much easier to imagine a criminal with a cigarette than without one - the basic petty "bad guy" kit is: cigarette and leer (for non-petty Bad Guys: cigar and Lear.).

A ban on smoking will always be popular for as long as it disproportionately hits criminals, who understandably do not attract much sympathy.

Note: this is absolutely not the same thing as saying most smokers are criminals. There is no necessary link between smoking and committing crimes. It's pure coincidence that most smokers *are* in fact lawbreakers: dropping butts is illegal littering, and although I lack hard data, I will conservatively guess that Lebesgue-almost-every smoker has dropped at least one dog end.

In case I'm accused of insufficient hatred of louts, I will end with a favourite quote: "You can smoke round me. Why can't I pee on you?"

Tags: politics, crime, health

Polymorphing kittens

10:49AM, 11TH MARCH 2005

I think I have invented history's greatest most profitable, most unethical business plan:

Step 1. Buy a chunk of radioactive material. Spread it around a room.

Step 2. Start breeding kittens in that room.

Step 3. Kill the ugly deformed offspring, and maybe the normal ones too.

Step 4. Collect the ones with cute mutations (2 tails, 4 ears, etc.) and sell them on eBay!

I hereby claim ownership of this business plan, hence anyone who tries it will have to cough up royalties, payable in savage beatings.

Tags: amusements, ethics

The Pope would like a word with you

4:35PM, 16TH MARCH 2005

Human Rights Act + Every Sperm is Sacred + Rising Male Infertility = The legal foundations are being set to literally sue someone's balls off.

Tags: law, politics, health

Review: Going Postal

4:57PM, 22ND MARCH 2005

Just finished reading *Going Postal* by Terry Pratchett. I over-read Pratchett books last year and got a bit sick of them (or maybe the Watch series really does go downhill after *Men at Arms*... either way I was not impressed at all with *The Fifth Elephant*), but after a short break, I have to say GP is right up there with the best. It's unbelievable that an author can write 33 books in a series and still be original and entertaining.

The first chapter in particular is a work of genius. It caused the first genuine LOL moment I've had from a written work for ages. Want to know which part? It's built up over several pages, but the punchline is just two words: Total Pins.

For a story which takes place on the circular Discworld perched on four giant elephants who are in turn parked on a magic space turtle, it's amazingly real. It's absolutely not fantasy, even though it technically is.

Thoroughly recommended, possibly even as a starting point for reading the whole Discworld series.

Tags: books, reviews

Drug war tech race

6:58PM, 26TH MARCH 2005

Ingenious drug smugglers build submarine.

Impressive. Just goes to show how creativity and innovation flourish in the face of adversity. If only we could figure out a way to get the drug barons to innovate in useful fields. I think I have a plan...

[This page](#) claims global drug trade is worth up to \$400bn annually. There are certainly drug barons out there with hundreds of billions between them stashed in Swiss bank accounts. I propose the following 3-step plan for putting drug money to good use:

1. The UN creates a special certificate called the Holy World Certificate of Free Drug Trade.
There is only one, and it allows the holder to legally sell drugs wherever and to whomever he likes.
2. Once this mighty document has been created, NASA should stick it in a heatproof pod and blast it into space hard enough that it goes all the way to Mars and lands neatly at a random location.
3. The task is then simple: fetch! Countries are disqualified; only a private citizen or corporation is allowed to go and get it, and must get it by hand.

The result? All those stashed billions get put to good use developing the technology to put the first humans on Mars.

Tags: amusements, drugs, crime, space

Normal service will resume shortly

12:00AM, 1ST MAY 2005

In the meantime, have some politics:

I mean, how hard can it be to
take over the world?



ARE YOU PONDERING WHAT WE'RE PONDERING?

Update 2007/05/28: I semi-abandoned this blog sometime in 2005, and left this message as the final entry. It was hand-written into the index.html file rather than being a proper blog entry, and so I have no idea when it was actually posted. I'm going to assume it was shortly before the 2005 election. Ah, happy days.

Tags: politics, amusements

The Null Post, part 2

6:21PM, 25TH OCTOBER 2006

Hello dearies! james.lab6.com is back, and this time it's run by professionals! No more flaky python-scripted manually-edited raw XML files and bare static HTML output. No more problems with HTML entities and Unicode crud. But also no more *perfectly* crafted URLs.

Switching to Wordpress means everything goes in a database, which is fine from a nice-clean-separation-of-content-and-style point of view, but... oh wait, no, not everything goes in a database. Attached images go in a completely separate hierarchy. Oops.

Still, the point is that I don't have to deal with this kind of bunk myself any more. Computers suck.

Some observations:

Firstly, you have a choice:

- Force everyone to register/log in to post a comment, or
- Open up the commenting system to the platoons of spambots custom-built for Wordpress.

Registering is annoying, but you only have to do it once, and hey, the old system didn't even have comments to begin with.

Secondly, the *modern* interface of Wordpress still needs a lot of work. It's packed full of graphical glitches and ticks, even in Firefox. It's half AJAX, half not. Trackbacks and pingbacks can bugger off too.

Thirdly, Wordpress has 10 billion custom themes available, but only about 11 are any good, and seeing those same 11 themes replicated a hundred times across blogdom can teach a man to hate. Building a new theme is encouraged, but you pretty much have to learn PHP to do it properly. I decided to gut the default theme of all elegance and modernity and freeze the look circa 2001. Welcome back, Web 1.0. I've missed you.

As for all the old content, well, it's still in those static XML/HTML files. Futureproof! Hmm...

Update

After writing the next post, it has come to my attention that the built-in rich editor generates *incredibly* bad HTML when using it to align things and include images. Page-layout breaking HTML. Dammit.

Tags: meta

The copyright deal

9:16PM, 25TH OCTOBER 2006

Before, after, and, inexplicably, during, a ride on Nemesis Inferno at Thorpe Park, I had an interesting discussion on copyright rights and wrongs with Dave.



This is not Nemesis Inferno

Anyone under the age of 30 and over the age of 3 will undoubtedly be familiar with both rollercoasters *and* the exact wording and intent of international copyright law. [Richard Stallman](#) is not under 30, wasn't on the rollercoaster next to Dave and Mary, and wasn't even off the ride being sick into an [oversalted](#) Happy Meal, but he nevertheless says:

Reducing the length of copyright to 5 years is a good idea, but in order for this to have right results in the software field, it needs to be accompanied by a requirement to put the source code in escrow for public domain release 5 years later.

This crazy bearded idea may be totalitarian, but it's not as hairy as one might think. The original idea behind copyright was to grant a limited monopoly to content creators in exchange for the work being returned to the public domain upon expiry of the monopoly. The content creators would get paid for their work during the (25, 50, 75,...)-year period of copyright, and by ending this period, the government would acknowledge the apparent fact that intellectual property is *not* property, but something somewhere in between physical property (which is alienable, i.e. can be taken from you) and a naturally occurring resource.

So how does this apply to software? All software is automatically granted the protection of copyright law, in both source and binary forms. The legal authority and military power of the government is brought to bear against infringers. Assuming anyone is around to care in the 22nd century when currently copyrighted software will pass into the public domain, the source and binary will become available to all.

Except one of them won't.

Only the binaries were ever made publicly available, so the source code will likely vanish without a trace, possibly intentionally. The copyright deal will be broken: protection was granted to the source code while under copyright, but the source code will never be released to the public.

Richard Stallman's plan for escrow would ensure content creators uphold their side of the bargain, but at the cost of creating a gigantic creaking bureaucracy. Would it really be worth having a 6-8 week delay before the release of *any* software in order to claim copyright

protection? Forcing the release of source code is a rat's nest. How do you verify that the escrowed code really is the code to the released binaries? Could it be automated? Must the government run compile farms? Or must each piece of code be manually audited? What about new languages and libraries? It will be impossible to acquire copyright protection on anything the government doesn't support or doesn't understand, which is nearly everything.

If escrow wouldn't work, how could you ensure the source is available 25, 50, 75, or even just 5 years from now? You can't. No sane law of copyright can oblige developers to keep source code around forever. Would you prosecute them if they lost it? If not, why wouldn't developers just claim to have lost it?

There is a very slight parallel with books and movies: once a book falls out of copyright, the author is under no obligation to release the manuscript or the original cover art, and neither are film directors required to make available their screenplay, dailies and custom-written special effects. In fact, copyright law requires content creators to *do* very little, and in general there are few laws which require a specific action to be performed.

One might suggest that if the source code is never publicly released, then it should garner no copyright protection in the first place. But then how do you prosecute a cracker who acquires the source illicitly? Must the source then be forced into the open? There are good reasons why private developers don't open source their code *even though* it is currently under heavy copyright protection. The most important is that they don't want to.

Stallman goes on to say:

It won't do you much good if a binary from 5 years ago is in the public domain, but you still can't change it. And if its developer put in a time bomb, it might not run at all.

It's quite possible to change a binary - disassemble it and rewrite it in raw machine code, for example. It's not easy, but then copyright is not designed to make the life of the consumer easy, it's designed to define who can and cannot copy information. We can't complain that a binary becomes useless after 5 years any more than we can complain a physics textbook becomes outdated as science progresses. The content is irrelevant in the eyes of the law.

Besides, binaries are not useless. The source to this copy of Theme Park is long gone, but the binaries remain playable as disk images in emulators. It took a lot of effort to write those emulators - effort that would've been saved had the source code been available - but again, copyright law is not there to make amateur programmers' lives easier.



Software is certainly different from other information, but not so different that the law needs a shakeup (it needs a shakeup for *other* reasons).

Addendum

Reading on from the escrow link on RMS' [political notes blog](#) yields the following:

Dutch pedophiles have [formed a political party](#) to campaign for legalization.

I am skeptical of the claim that voluntarily pedophilia harms children. The arguments that it causes harm seem to be based on cases which aren't voluntary, which are then stretched by parents who are horrified by the idea that their little baby is maturing.

Crikey, RMS. What's wrong with putting kids in escrow until they are capable of consent?

Tags: copyright, law, software

All the things I sed

8:19AM, 28TH OCTOBER 2006

It looks like static HTML is futureproof after all! .htaccess files can be set up to catch all links and funnel them through a script which enables clever or simple URLs; Wordpress does this. They can also be made to defer to the filesystem, so if the directories 2003, 2004 and 2005 exist (and they do), content gets served from them rather than Wordpress. Luckily there was a clean year between the old system and the new, because I haven't yet figured out how to make it serve, say, /2006 from Wordpress, but /2006/example from the filesystem.

It's only a matter of time though.

All that was required to bring the old pages online was to remove the comment form on each one; the old comment code is officially dead and buried. I could simply have restored the /2003/comment script and made it give a harsh rejection message upon POST, but I am a kind and loving Ruler and didn't want my precious subjects to waste time writing something that's only going to be discarded. That's what [the online confession box](#) is for (though in its absence it has been superseded by dozens of [lesser imitators](#)).

Cleanly removing the comment form turned out to be a simple matter of removing the form element and nothing else. I did it with [this gorgeous](#) sed script, modified thusly:

```
/<form\! b
:a
/form>/!{
    N
    ba
}
s/<form.*form>//
```

(And, I suppose, for, find and cat. This is exactly why command line tools exist - a one-off task that can be automated, but isn't common enough to bother writing an application for. It took me about 10 minutes from wanting to do it to having done it, including the time taken googling for the script and building the command line. I wonder how long it would've taken me to install some kind of XML library and do it the *proper* way?)

Incidentally, the [sed script site](#) is packed with delightfully arcane works of madmen: [sed sokoban](#), [sed desktop calculator emulator](#), and the brilliantly simple [sed brainfuck to C translator](#). All this using the *stream editor*. Almost unknown outside the world of UNIX geekery, it gave us the s// substitution expression:

```
s/old/new
```

I wonder how many g4m3r d00dz know its etymology...

Anyway, everything is back online which should delight the dozen or so Google Images users who have requested my picture of a [disgusting saucepan](#) or the one of the turtle skull every day for the last couple of years. I actually even got an email from someone who wanted to use the mouldy saucepan in a kind of cautionary website for students at his university. The circle of life is complete.

Tags: meta

A short attempt at installing Ubuntu 6.10

3:45PM, 28TH OCTOBER 2006

What follows is a short log of me installing Kubuntu 6.10 Edgy Eft on an old Dell Inspiron 8000 laptop:

Nice boot screen. LiveCD is a bit slow. Went to black screen, then resorted to text status messages.

An X screen! And the mouse works! Hmm, looks like a light blue screen is all I'm going to get. Trying Ctrl+Alt+F1. Looks like a login prompt. I type 'top' to see what's running. No output. Alt-F2. No commands usable. Ctrl-Alt-Del. Nothing. Hold down power button for hard reset.

Try again in "safe graphics mode". 5 more minutes... a KDE splash screen! And a startup sound! This is more like it. It's even in 1600x1200! And there's a working battery applet! The sound is a bit laggy, but then that's probably because it's using shitty shitty artsd.

No internet. It doesn't seem to have detected my DWL-122 USB wifi dongle. Well, it's an exotic piece of hardware. Try hot-plugging a PCMCIA Linksys 54g adaptor. It didn't crash! Wireless LAN Assistant couldn't find any networks though ("Did you run using sudo?"; no, then yes, and got the same message). Restart in case the card is only configured on startup. K Menu -> Log Out -> Restart results in black screen with blinking cursor. Hard reset again.

This time I get a stream of errors "while loading bcm43xx" instead of a calm black screen before X starts. Not pretty or reassuring.

No change in connectivity. KDE Network Settings shows the card as eth1, but no wireless networks are found.

Ubuntuforums.org suggests installing bcm43xx-fwcutter or ndiswrapper-utils. Very helpful for a machine that has no networking. I'll postpone networking for now and just get Edgy installed.

Time in the installer is written as "01:43:10 PM". Sloppy. Keyboard layout selector is nice.

Manually partitioned disk. Decided not to use [ReiserFS](#).

30 minutes later and it's restarting. The logout sound appears to be an old Windows logout sound. Not good practice for a sueable distribution. Bootup is faster now that it's installed. Still no networking.

On the whole, I'm impressed with the visual polish. No stuttering glitchy dialog boxes, nice consistent colours, and a generally clean fresh look. I may even be able to overlook the fact that it did *nothing* on first boot; a moderately savvy user could reasonably remember that there was a safe-mode option that he could try.

It's clearly the best distro out at the moment, and I'd *like* to give it, say, 85%, but I can't forgive its inability to set up a wireless network. Internet connectivity is pretty much all computers are good for these days, and so its final score is:

0%.

Sorry Ubuntu, but broken networking is a total showstopper bug.

Update 31/10/2006

I apt-get dist-upgrade'd my desktop dapper installation. No, of course it didn't work first time. Several apt-get -f install sessions later, I succeed and discover that Edgy is a total mess. Fonts are [shockingly broken](#). GTK1 applications no longer display *any* fonts - important only for XMMS, but since Amarok still isn't stable, it's kind of important. KHotKeys now works only

sporadically. Firefox 2.0 has a bizarre array of rendering bugs in its default theme. Everything seems slower - kconsole now has a *visible* lag as it repaints when scrolling.

This is really, really poor.

Tags: software

Old, busted.

6:09PM, 29TH OCTOBER 2006

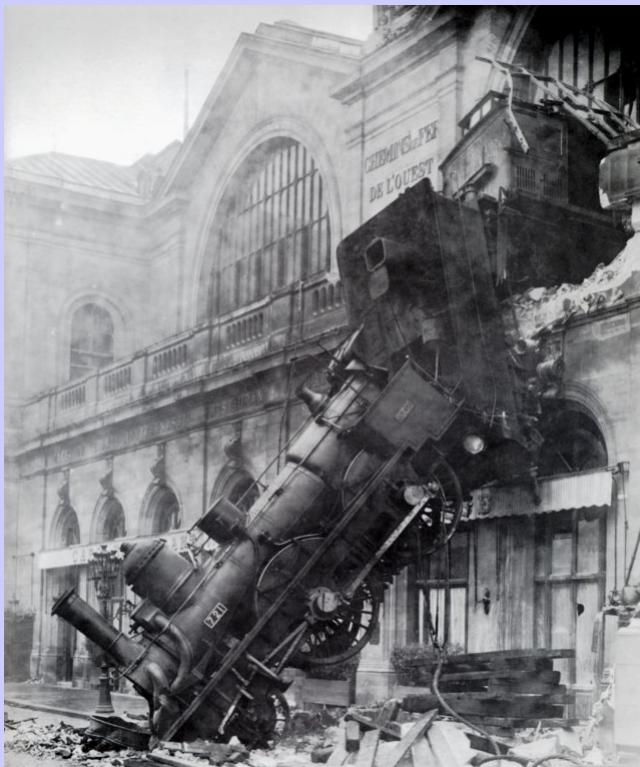


Tags: photos

The trainwreck industry

6:57PM, 29TH OCTOBER 2006

In 1895, this happened:



A train crashed through the buffers at Montparnasse Station, Paris, then smashed through the wall and fell out onto the street. A woman below was killed. [The cause seems to have been an excess of paperwork.](#)

I wouldn't have thought a French train crash such an unusual thing, but in 2004, I saw this:



It's a real-life replica of the crash! The number (721) and layout of the engine seem more or less accurate. Not only has the train been reproduced, but the building itself seems to be styled on the Montparnasse Station. This was a strip mall somewhere near [Goiânia](#), Brazil. It's not really such an oddity as far as the talking-points of anonymous strip malls go, so I didn't think any more of it until I saw *this*:



Again, it's train 721, and again it's fallen out of a building fashioned after Gare Montparnasse.

It turns out these things are the frontispieces for a chain of museums known as [Mundo a Vapor](#) ("Steam World"). I must've seen the one in Caldas Novas.

I wonder if there has arisen an industry based on producing full-size novelty crash scene replicas. If so, I'd like to know who else has bought one, and encourage any prospective purchasers to buy theirs ASAP.

Tags: photos, brazil

Missing errata

9:30PM, 31ST OCTOBER 2006

Via Dave and linuxmafia: [A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates](#). Back when generating random numbers was hard, this kind of thing was a Nobel Prize for Literature-winning masterpiece. The RAND corporation [even has an errata](#) slip for the book, although it's not the mythical errata to the digits themselves which Murray Gell-Mann mentions in Chapter 4 of *The Quark and the Jaguar* ("RANDOMness", p. 44):

What I found interesting about the report was a small piece of paper (a "blow-in") that fluttered out of it and fell to the floor. I picked it up and found it was an errata sheet. The RAND mathematicians were supplying corrections to some of the random numbers! Were they catching random errors in the random numbers?

Either he just made the story up for its comic value, or the RAND mathmos were issuing secret underground corrections...

ObConspiracy: the [permutation tables](#) for DES, the Data Encryption Standard developed in the 1970s with NSA involvement, are supposedly random. If this book was the source of the random numbers, then perhaps the errors were how the NSA snuck weak numbers into the standard. Naturally, RAND would've been compliant. Scenario: lone RAND mathematician discovers the numbers have been cooked and tries to issue the errata sheet, but is immediately promoted to icicle-counter in [Deadhorse, Alaska](#). The unofficial errata slip is released clandestinely through direct placement in library editions...

Tags: conspiracies, mathematics, books

Who won the war anyway?

3:12PM, 8TH NOVEMBER 2006

How we didn't win the war . . . but the Russians did.

This makes a lot of sense. It does seem odd that *we* called ourselves the winners when half of Europe was merely passed from one tyrant to another, and then subjected to a further half century of communism.

Tags: war, history

George Bush Admits Demolitions?

5:29PM, 10TH NOVEMBER 2006

[Craig Hill](#), in a hilarious (as in Hillary Clinton) paid advert on [SupportTheTruth.com](#) asks:

"George Bush Admits Demolitions?" You have no idea how hard I want to point and laugh, but I will humour him and give a straight answer:

No, he didn't.

Bush's speech of 15/9/2006 is quoted in an embedded audio file (why do all the real psychos encode their content in realmedia format?). I'm not sure why they didn't just quote the actual text [available on whitehouse.gov](#):

The bill I have proposed will ensure that suspected terrorists will receive full and fair trials, without revealing to them our nation's sensitive intelligence secrets. As soon as Congress acts on this bill, the man our intelligence agencies believe helped orchestrate the 9/11 attacks can face justice.

The bill would also provide clear rules for our personnel involved in detaining and questioning captured terrorists. The information that the Central Intelligence Agency has obtained by questioning men like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has provided valuable information and has helped disrupt terrorist plots, including strikes within the United States.

*For example, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed described the design of planned attacks of buildings inside the U.S. and how operatives were directed to carry them out. That is valuable information for those of us who have the responsibility to protect the American people. **He told us the operatives had been instructed to ensure that the explosives went off at a high -- a point that was high enough to prevent people trapped above from escaping.***

KSM seems to have had his finger in every major terror plot of the last 10 years, but it takes a very selective reading of the above paragraph to conclude that Bush *must've* been talking about "the" explosives on the WTC site, especially given his known propensity to talk about "the" Google and "the" internets.

Bush doesn't give speeches; he reads speeches. Whenever he's left to fend for himself, it's painfully obvious that he's having to work his brain cell at full throttle. This wasn't one of those occasions, so is Craig Hill suggesting Bush's scriptwriters gave away the secret of the century with the slip of a pen? If so, why am I reminded of [this](#)?:

MATTHIAS:

Look. I-- I'd had a lovely supper, and all I said to my wife was, 'That piece of halibut was good enough for Jehovah.'

CROWD:

Ooooooh!

OFFICIAL:

Blasphemy!

He's said it again!

CROWD:

Yes! Yes, he did! He did!...

OFFICIAL:

Did you hear him?!

CROWD:

Yes! Yes, we did! We did!...

The demolition theories hinge on the idea that the observed events of September 11th 2001 would have been impossible without pre-placed explosives doing the critical damage. In fact there is *nothing* impossible or even implausible about the collapses - the fact that buildings have never been observed to do so under the same circumstances is a testament only to the unique nature of the attack. A disaster is a complex system where almost anything can happen; there are countless historical examples of extraordinary counter-intuitive events occurring in extreme circumstances.

If you'd asked me before 2004 how big a wave had to be to be deadly, I would've guessed something like 10m - and indeed there were sections of Indonesia battered by such huge waves in the christmas tsunami. Remarkably though, there are videos of waves no more than 2m above sea level causing shocking amounts of damage.

Who would've thought a [failed o-ring](#) or a [piece of foam](#) could cause a space shuttle to explode?

Who would've thought that [resonance caused by wind](#) could ever cause a bridge to collapse?

Prima facie-extraordinary events happen all the time, and I guess it's a form of gambler's fallacy that impels us to search for alternative explanations. What are the odds of the numbers 2, 18, 31, 38, 39, and 46 coming up in the National Lottery? 13,983,816 to 1. And yet those were the numbers that came up last week.

Tags: conspiracies, politics

The right to not be offended

2:15PM, 12TH NOVEMBER 2006

[Islam is wicked, aiiii.](#)

The BBC reports on Nick Griffin, a fascist thug, and Lord Falconer, who brought us well thought out sensible government schemes like the Millennium Dome:

Lord Falconer said the government had to show young Muslims that Britain was not anti-Islamic, adding there should be "consequences" from saying Islam is "wicked and evil".

Meanwhile, the Koran says:

9:123 O ye who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you, and let them find harshness in you, and know that Allah is with those who keep their duty (unto Him).

9:124 And whenever a surah is revealed there are some of them who say: Which one of you hath thus increased in faith ? As for those who believe, it hath increased them in faith and they rejoice (therefor).

9:125 But as for those in whose hearts is disease, it only addeth wickedness to their wickedness, and they die while they are disbelievers.

i.e. Christians and Jews are wicked, have diseased hearts, and should be fought whenever nearby.

Calling a religion and its practitioners wicked cannot be outlawed without also outlawing the Koran.

Tags: politics, religion

Observations

3:20PM, 12TH NOVEMBER 2006

1. Google will happily drop a page from its index, but it never drops images from its image index, even if the site disappears for 6 months.
2. Yahoo apparently never drops text from its index.
3. MSN Live Search probably hasn't indexed either in the first place.
4. [Archive.org](#) is surprisingly comprehensive.

I hope this has been enlightening, even though it's probably not entirely true.

Tags: meta, web

Dr Zaius Dr Zaius

7:48PM, 12TH NOVEMBER 2006

Testing Youtube (Gootube? Yoogle? Youtgle?) embedding:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQkOBkA_z9w

I only just found out that Falco's *Rock Me Amadeus* is the origin of the [*Stop the Planet of the Apes: I Want to Get Off!*](#) song. The Simpsons is officially 20% less cool now that I know this.

I also only just found out who Falco is.

How much shine does a work lose when you find out it's not as original as you thought it was?

Weird Al would be 20% less cool for not having written the tune to *Amish Paradise*, but Artis Leon Ivey himself is 20% less cool for ripping off Stevie Wonder's *Pastime Paradise* to make *Gangsta's Paradise*, theoretically making Weird Al a total of 36% less cool, but since Stevie Wonder inspired the awesome zen-conduct-style Stevie Wonder mode in Alien Breed Special Edition '92, he starts from a base of 127% coolness.

This brings Weird Al back up to roughly 81% cool, which is a solid First.

(RM Paradise is still classified under the Official Secrets Act).

Update 2009-10-25: This page is not valid HTML5. I'm not sure whether to correct it, as that was sort of the point of the test - to see where YouTube's embedding code gets you.

Tags: music, amusements, video

Yeah, this isn't going to happen in a PDF.

That YouTube account has been suspended anyway.

This PDF isn't valid HTML5 either.

Error 402: Payment required

7:58PM, 13TH NOVEMBER 2006

I just discovered how to generate arbitrary HTTP response codes using apache. You put a configuration line, for example

Redirect 410 /2003/recent

somewhere apache will see it. That could be in the main server config file, an .htaccess file in the web site's root directory, or - my preferred solution - an .htaccess file in the directory which you are trying to mess with. This keeps the root .htaccess file (or the main server config file) from filling up with redirection cruft over time.

The syntax is explained [in the apache docs](#).

You can also use [ErrorDocument](#) statements to make the pages a little more interesting. I thus present the web's only genuine 402 error: [premium subscription-only james.lab6.com content!](#)

Now back in action!

Tags: meta, software, web

Nine myths about capitalism

1:44PM, 14TH NOVEMBER 2006

[Education and Capitalism: How Overcoming Our Fear of Markets and Economics Can Improve America's Schools](#).

Chapter 9 is entitled "Nine Myths about Capitalism". 8 of them are well-explained, but *Capitalism harms the environment* is bizarrely circular:

One way to judge the impact of capitalism on the environment is to compare the environmental records of capitalist countries with those of countries with precapitalist, socialist, or communist economies.³⁵ The record clearly shows environmental conditions are improving in every capitalist country in the world and deteriorating only in noncapitalist countries.³⁶

I will ignore the fact that there are clear exceptions to this rule (the European social democratic countries, for example).

In the United States, the environment is unequivocally becoming cleaner and safer. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), total air pollution emissions in the United States fell 34 percent between 1970 and 1990.⁴⁰ Particulate-matter emissions fell by 60 percent, sulfur oxides by 25 percent, carbon monoxide by 40 percent, and lead by 96 percent.

Now could this *possibly* be because the EPA was founded in 1970 with the express goal of regulating emissions in order to reduce air and water pollution? Clearly it has succeeded, but its success owes nothing to capitalism.

The EPA is the epitome of a centrally planned federal Big Government TLA. It is a socialist institution, and rightly so, for the atmosphere is a fundamentally socialised entity. Capitalism lays down the rules for the free exchange of privately owned goods and services, but the

atmosphere is not privately owned, and will not be for the foreseeable future. Allowing free use of the atmosphere for any purpose is an obvious [tragedy of the commons](#), but if private management cannot happen, collective management is all we're left with, and the United States has chosen the EPA for this task.

There is no inherent contradiction between capitalism and environmentalism any more than there is a contradiction between capitalism and abolitionism. We decided that people are not privately owned goods, and thus cannot be used within the rules of capitalism. We must similarly decide that the atmosphere is not a privately owned good.

The chapter redeems itself a little with:

Finally, the wealth created by the institutions of capitalism makes it possible to invest more resources to protect the environment. Once again, the United States is the best example of this tendency. The cost of complying with environmental regulations in 2000 was approximately \$267 billion, or nearly \$2,000 for every household.⁴⁹ Only a capitalist society can afford to spend so much.

Quite so. Pollution is an externality which must be paid for if we are to avoid the tragedy the commons. Fortunately for our planet and our quality of life, the other branches of capitalism - low taxes, free trade, competitive economies, and incentives to invest and innovate - can be the engine that generates the wealth we need to pay for our use of the environment.

Tags: politics, economics

More RMS-bashing

10:18PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2006

Copyright and globalization in the age of computer networks

[The following is an edited transcript of the conclusion of Richard Stallman's talk. A transcript of the complete talk including the question-and-answer session is also available.]

RMS is a God, but so is [Huitzilopochtli](#), demander of human sacrifice. One wants to tie you to a slab and cut your heart out and the other was worshipped by Aztecs.

A HA HA HA HA.

Anyway.

RMS is a good guy in the copyfight, but I'm going to have to tug his beard for this:

We have to recognize that the existing copyright system does a lousy job of supporting musicians, just as lousy as world trade does of raising living standards in the Philippines and China. You have these enterprise zones where everyone works in a sweatshop and all of the products are made in sweatshops. I knew that globalization was a very inefficient way of raising living standards of people overseas.

Wait, what? World trade has done a lousy job of raising living standards in China? I'm not sure which version of emacs he's been smoking, but every available indicator over the last 30 or 40 years reveals China to be in the midst of the greatest industrial revolution in history. You might legitimately complain about the environmental results of this, but you absolutely cannot question that the Chinese people are better off for it. Real statistics are hard to come by, but with [population up by 30%](#) and [GDP up by 300%](#) from 1978-2000 it's mindbogglingly counterfactual to suggest Deng Xiaoping's market reforms haven't raised living standards.

As for "sweatshops", there's a dirty little secret that \$20/hr first-world workers don't want you to know: [sweatshops are good for the poor and the people that work in them like working in them](#). Speaking of which...

Say, an American is getting paid \$20 an hour to make something and you give that job to a Mexican who is getting paid maybe six dollars a day, what has happened here is that you've taken a large amount of money away from an American worker, given a tiny fraction, like a few percents, to a Mexican worker and given back the rest to the company. So if your goal is to raise the living standards of Mexican workers, this is a lousy way to do it.

Is it really a lousy way to raise the living standard of the Mexican worker when he's getting \$6/day and was previously getting nothing? It sounds like he's \$6/day better off.

Aside from \$20/hour being a gross overestimate for unskilled labour (US minimum wage is \$5.15/hour), and \$6/day being a gross underestimate for outsourced labour ("sweatshop" wages in *Honduras* are more than twice that, not even taking into account differences in purchasing power), the suggestion seems to be that wealth has been destroyed because the \$160/day job has turned into a \$6/day job.

In fact, wealth has been created. If you only have to spend \$6 on labour, you can spend the other \$154 on other things. RMS seems to believe that "giving back the rest to the company" somehow causes it to disappear, but I imagine this is just his unfamiliarity with what companies actually do with their money. That extra \$154 can now be productively invested in further enterprises which, on the whole, will generate further wealth, and very likely further jobs.

One might ask whether this makes the \$20/hour American feel any better about losing his job, and the answer is obviously no. He might not care to hear [Bastiat](#) explain the situation either. But the fact is, for all his loss, *everybody else* is better off. The Mexican is better off

because he has a job. The company is better off because it can invest in new projects (or return the money to its shareholders, who will invest it themselves, or maybe just blow it all on strippers). The rest of the world is better off because it can buy widgets for \$6 plus parts rather than \$160 plus parts.

This last benefit is important. Would you have a computer if it cost £10,000? Would you have a car if it cost £100,000? How long would you spend talking on the phone to your friends if it cost £10/minute? Every penny shaved off the price of consumer goods is an improvement in your - and everyone else's - quality of life.

RMS goes on to say:

So I think I've said most of what I want to say. I'd like to mention that tomorrow is Phone-In Sick Day in Canada.

And he wonders why \$20/hour workers are being out-competed by Mexicans.

Tags: politics, economics

Welcome to Intex Systems

10:31PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2006



TEXTUPDATE ACCCELERATOR INSTALLED

Tags: games, amusements

Morans

1:03AM, 16TH NOVEMBER 2006



Get a brain

Tags: photos, amusements

Casino Royale geek notes

8:09PM, 20TH NOVEMBER 2006

I went to see Casino Royale with some people named Dave, Peter, Florian and Jessica. Here is what I noticed:

(Begin spoilers)

1. Bond sends an email tendering his resignation. The text is something like:

Dear M, I hereby tender my resignation with immediate effect James Bond

It looks like plain ASCII, but when he presses send, it says "Sending: 85KB".

That bloat's worse than MS Word's HTML output.

2. The SuperMassiveUltraJumboBigBoy plane is just a 747 with a CGI second deck and funky double engine pods.
3. This is a Sony film. The Ocean Club's security cameras record directly onto Blu-Ray discs; you can see the BD logo when Bond puts one into the player. The white cellphone is a Sony Ericsson M600, the laptops are Sony VAIOs, and I fully expect Bond 22 to feature a Sony Walther PPK.
4. Bond uses some kind of Google-Echelon search to find the keyword Ellipsis ([try it yourself](#) - 2.38 million results on the open web alone; MI6 must have a better data mining plugin), then a top secret app (you know it's top secret because it's rendered entirely in shades of green) which is functionally identical to Google Earth to hunt down the Ocean Club.

5. The interface for this Google-Earthalike is nevertheless diabolical. The green is tolerable, but the display is peppered with roiling random digits and spurious information.
 6. Bond remotely logs into the MI6 computer system using M's username and password. He's got a license to kill, but isn't allowed to see the bad guy list on the intranet using his own account?
 7. The casino requires the players to use a password of 6 or more characters, but the keypad only accepts numbers. Bond still chooses something incredibly obvious. Still, it's better than using the theme tune to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* like in Moonraker.
 8. The craziest gadget is the remote first aid station in his car. It does a blood test in real time and sends the results back to MI6 headquarters, where a doctor is able to make an instant diagnosis and tell Bond to inject himself with the blue pen. That's lucky, since he only seems to have a blue one.
 9. There's a super-high-stakes card game and nobody even tries to cheat with hidden cameras, microphones, mirrors or card counting computers.
- 10. Update 2006/11/23:** I almost forgot! A guy in Montenegro is framed by Mathis, who says "It's amazing what you can do with photoshop these days."

In short, the film was great. It's a better film than any of the Pierce Brosnan ones. For a start, it has a real plot written by Ian Fleming rather than something cobbled together by Purvis and Wade (although P&W were the script masseurs for this film). It also features Bond being a spy rather than bond being Superman, even though he walks through a wall near the beginning.

Casino Royale veers away from a number of the Bond-formula ingredients (no Q, no Moneypenny, a reinvented opening gunbarrel scene), making it seem less Bondy and more like a real film. This is good - it's the first time the series has stepped out from under the

shadow of Sean Connery and started inventing what may become Bondisms of its own. If anything, it moves *too far* away from comic book Bond.

I give it 83%, the same as *Groundhog Day* and *The Name of the Rose* - just ahead of *28 Days Later* and just behind *Austin Powers*.

Tags: films

20 to life

12:03AM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2006

One further note on the copyright theme: extending copyright to life plus 70, life plus 95, and beyond is *very often* castigated as a corrupt concession to the interests of Big Media. It is, but I've seen few explanations of why it happens anyway.

If a studio spends \$100m on a new film, it can collect royalties for the next 120 years. A hundred million bucks might sound like a lot of money, but the studio bets that this is a good deal anyway.

If the copyright term is reduced to 25 years (not an uncommon suggestion for copyright reformists), it can only collect royalties for about a fifth the length of time. For a popular film, that might mean a fifth the revenue, the upshot being that they would only be willing to spend \$20m on a new film.

Long copyright terms create a market for creative works which would otherwise be very difficult to finance. You might legitimately argue that \$100m+ blockbusters are all worthless crap, but they are nevertheless the most popular type of movie, and although a short copyright term might enable hackers to make a GNU+Linux distribution with a working Flash applet preinstalled, it would mean no \$250m [Spider-Man 3](#).

Which do people really want, and should they get it?

Tags: copyright, economics, films

The PS3 fails

2:38PM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2006

Surprise surprise, the PS3 is a big disappointment.

Who could've guessed that Sony would release a technically impressive piece of hardware with shitty, incomplete, broken, crippled software? And no good games?

Grand Theft Auto 4 - possibly set in London - is just about the only game worth looking forward to, and that won't be released for another year. The only positive at the moment is the PS3's potential to win the HD format war, because there is no way to justify buying into either HD system while the future of neither is guaranteed.

I went into Currys Digital (who changed their name from Dixons when everyone figured out the name "Dixons" was synonymous with "could've got it cheaper online") a couple of weeks ago. Not a single one of the big TVs was proper HD - they were all 720p, which the PS3 as launched *will not support for HD movies!* That's right, the shiny new 1080i/p content gets scaled down to 480p on 720p sets. Early adopters will be furious when they realise they've been conned into buying *low definition HD* sets. Suckers, I say.

Tags: games, hardware

The road to serfdom

2:17PM, 1ST DECEMBER 2006

Road pricing enters the Overton window in the UK.

This is supermassive news. Road pricing essentially means a network of CCTV cameras tracking all movement on the nation's roads. Astonishingly, we already have this:

"Every time you make a car journey already, you'll be on CCTV somewhere. The difference is that, in future, the car's index plates will be read as well," said Frank Whiteley, Chief Constable of Hertfordshire and chairman of the Acpo steering committee on automatic number plate recognition (ANPR).

One perverse incentive generated by the system is that driving over 100mph may help you evade detection. The network is also presumably only concentrating on major routes, so escaping to Brazil via B-roads remains a possibility for now.

I'm really not shocked that the government is trying to expand its citizen-monitoring programme; what's shocking is how they have inadvertently come to endorse the arch-liberal scheme of road pricing. Road-usage tracking is the enabling technology for the complete privatisation of roads.

From volume 3 of the report:

1.35 The Stern Review argued that prices should be used to reflect the externalities associated with climate change. The same is true for congestion: users should pay the full costs of their journey, including a carbon price and a congestion price.

(Is congestion an externality? I suppose it is. When 2 million consumers tried to buy 100,000 PS3s last week, the congestion was dealt with by said PS3s ending up on eBay for \$3,000.)

Road pricing is eminently fair: busy roads like the M25 need more maintenance, and it stands to reason that the people who pay for the M25 should be those that use it most, and not those living in, say, Aberdeen. The converse of this is that Londoners shouldn't pay for Scottish roads. This is a political problem, since rural places can't afford their own high quality roads. The vast network of well-lit, well-marked, well-maintained and metalled country lanes exists because of mass-subsidisation by the taxpayer.

There is a very good reason why cities came about: because transport is expensive, and having people and things live closer to each other means less transport is necessary. It makes good economic sense to live in high-density cities, and poor economic sense to live out in the middle of nowhere. The aforementioned subsidisation of country roads has so distorted the transport market that nobody seems to notice these costs, but with only dirt tracks connecting London to, say, Skegness, it would instantly become a lot more expensive and unpleasant to live in Skegness.

Nevertheless, living in a low-density area is enjoyable. People escape to the country. It's quieter, it smells nicer, the houses are bigger, crime is lower, and nature is good for the soul. Would it be so enjoyable if driving to the out-of-town Waitrose was harder? Would it be so enjoyable if going anywhere else was a major ordeal, and if nobody ever came to visit? Undoubtedly no. Rural house prices would plummet in places that couldn't afford their own road links (and roads are *very* expensive).

I controversially submit that this is how it should be.

The largely-wealthy population in the countryside should not be subsidised by the largely-poor population in the cities. Even from a redistributivist theory of political economy, that

would be bizarre. There is a direct cost to living in remote, inaccessible, yet beautiful, places, and those who choose to do so should not expect the rest of us to pay it.

An end to the mass-subsidisation of roads would inevitably increase the cost of some, while reducing the cost of others. In satellite cities, a high road price due to a small market would make traditional rail links more economically viable. This is how it always used to be, and for mass transport of goods, trains really are better.

Of course, while the idea that roads should pay for their own maintenance may have entered the Overton window, the idea that people should pay for their own lifestyles has not. The government will not let country roads fall into disrepair as people refuse to pay for them, so the entire scheme may yet end up as just another excuse to expand the database state and keep tabs on law-abiding citizens.

Tags: politics, economics, business, government

Limited liability

3:03PM, 1ST DECEMBER 2006

A slightly useful explanation of the rights and wrongs of limited liability.

I think it could be expressed more clearly, but it does seem that the idea of limited liability is a perfectly logical conclusion of the right to contract. I think I understand this.

When an individual mortgages his house by specifying that the only collateral is the house itself, both the lender and the borrower accept some risk, but the borrower is not obliged to surrender anything more than the house in the event of a default. The parties agree, and a contract is formed. This doesn't seem immoral or irrational or bad in any way.

Similarly, when a shareholder invests in a corporation, he is not obliged to surrender anything more than the value of his investment in the event of a corporate collapse. Creditors of the corporation must exercise *caveat emptor* when dealing with the corporation: if they don't like the fact that the corporation may go bankrupt and be unable to perform its obligations, they shouldn't deal with it.

For third parties who are harmed by the activities of the corporation, tort law need not give the *decision makers* of the corporation an easy ride. If an executive orders toxic waste to be dumped into the sea, it is the executive who should go to jail, not the investors.

Finally, any attempt to end limited liability will be circumvented by ordinary contracts, unless draconian laws are passed limiting the ability to use a contract to transfer risk. That's essentially the whole point of a contract, so it's not going to happen any time soon.

Tags: law, business, government

Donate now!

2:16PM, 3RD DECEMBER 2006

Benny Hinn is a snake-oil superstar. He wants you to donate \$1,000 to help pay for his new private jet to help him carry the Gospel of Christ to remote locations in the world like Florida.

At recent partners conferences I have talked about the cost to secure this state-of-the-art jet aircraft, the tool we must have for declaring the Gospel to the nations in his last hour, and the miracle the Lord has provided - Dove One, an aircraft that became available just as the door of opportunity began to close on aircrafts the ministry had previously been utilizing.

I think this is great. As a committed illuminist, I profess anything which acts to transfer money (and hence power) from the stupid to the smart to be a good thing. We're going to need all the brains we can get if the human race is to solve the great technical problems of the future: the inevitable asteroid strike, the energy crunch, climate change, safe nanotech, strong AI, and the perversity of matter.

Benny Hinn is just a huckster preacher-man. He's not going to solve any big problems. But his lavish personal life - his \$10m mansion, his 2 Mercedes, his private jet - is founded on a high-tech economy. The plane costs \$1.5m a year to run, employing flight technicians and aerodynamic engineers even higher up the brain chain than him. Perhaps they won't be in the business of saving the world either, but the crucial point is that the purchasing of expensive high-tech goods has created a financial incentive to be smart. The more money is spent on planes, computers, televisions, and goods and services which require considerable intellectual effort to create, the more people are encouraged to get into the business of being clever. Not to mention the fact that Hinn's lifestyle is the reward for *him* being clever.

Conversely, losing \$1,000 to a con-man is the very strong, very direct financial penalty for being stupid.

With the forces of stupidity riding high in the world today, we need every incentive possible to turn people away from its faustian lures.

Tags: religion, amusements

Join us now and free the software

9:39PM, 3RD DECEMBER 2006



1. The first rule of Freedom club is: you have the freedom to run the program, for any purpose.
2. The second rule of Freedom club is: you have the freedom to run the program, for *any* purpose.
3. If someone says DRM, goes limp, taps out, your license is over.
4. There are two or more copyleft licenses.
5. One at a time, fellas.
6. No NDA, no advertising clause.
7. GNU project development will go on *as long as it has to*.
8. If this is your first night at Freedom club, you have to use the GPL.

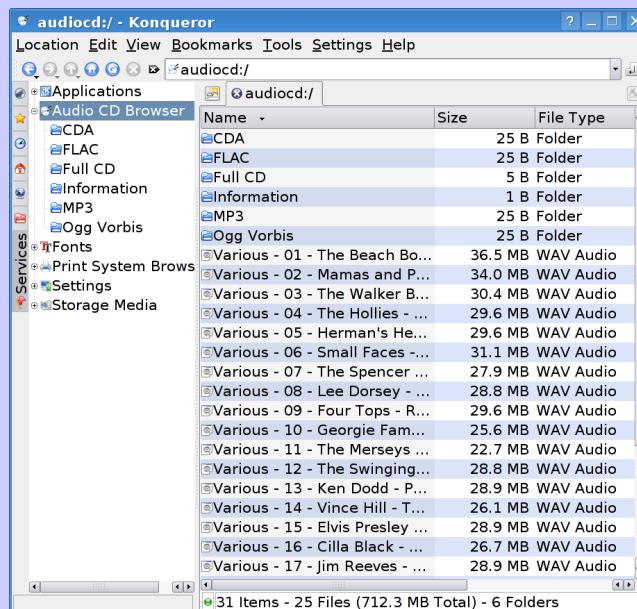


Tags: copyright, amusements

Creating good oggs in KDE

3:04PM, 15TH DECEMBER 2006

KDE, as of version 3.5.5 as found in Ubuntu 6.10, offers you two methods for creating [ogg](#) rips of your CDs. Firstly, you may use the Audio CD browser built into Konqueror (by choosing it from the navigation panel or typing audiocd:/ into the address bar). This rather cool plugin (known as an ioslave in KDE parlance) presents you with a virtual directory of the CD's contents laid out as WAV files, MP3 files, OGG files, FLAC files, CD Audio files and CDDB information, all on a per-track or per-CD basis. It's the level of integration that KDE is rightly famous for.



Encoding and ripping is just a matter of dragging and dropping files. The quality settings are controlled from System Settings -> Advanced -> Audio Encoding -> Ogg Vorbis Encoder.

The other ripping and encoding method is offered when the CD is inserted: you may choose "Extract and Encode Audio Tracks", which fires up KAudioCreator. This is a more traditional ripping app and seems to be marginally faster, possibly because of the way it divvies up ripping and encoding jobs (although any modern CPU will be able to encode far faster than the track can be ripped). Unfortunately, and this is the bit that caught me out at first and made me write this post, **the quality settings in KDE's central System Settings control panel have no effect on KAudioCreator's output!** To create oggs of higher quality than the default 3 within KAudioCreator, you must go to Settings -> Configure KAudioCreator -> Encoder, select OggEnc, click Configure, and append --quality=6 to the command line. Mine, for example, looks like this:

```
oggenc -o %o --artist %{artist} --album %{albumtitle} --title %{title} --date % {year} --tracknum %{number} --genre %{genre} %f -quality=6
```

I am perfectly aware of the irony of being meticulously careful to use a Free codec to encode non-free content.

To me, Ogg Vorbis is a beautiful format. Lossless compression doesn't appeal to me because I have neither the expensive playback hardware nor the audiophile's ears required to appreciate it. I also enjoy that feeling known to every geek that I am using something efficient (a 160Kbit/sec Vorbis file is comparable to a 192Kbit/sec MP3). It's the [PNG](#) of audio formats. All the other formats - WMA, AAC, MP3, the infernal RealAudio, and Sony's hilariously broken ATRAC - are unacceptably patent-encumbered or unsupported outside their own niches.

[There's good hardware support too](#), although the iPod will only play oggs by hacking [Rockbox](#) into it. Still, it's not like anyone buys iPods is it? Er...

Tags: software, music

Never buy anything from EPSON

4:33PM, 20TH DECEMBER 2006

This last January I made the fatal mistake of buying a scanner from Epson. That was about 6 years after swearing never to buy another Epson product in my life after being burned by several of their ultra-broken printers. I should have kept my promise.

As a matter of pure academic interest, I will state that EPSON Scan is some of the worst software I've ever used, possibly second only to Sony's Moveshaker. Its badness is legendary. Nevertheless, it basically worked, in that I eventually managed to extract a JPEG file bearing a vague similarity to the scanned page.

Naturally, the scanner broke after a month or two of very infrequent use. The moving arm with the scan head on it just jammed at one end and never moved again. I forgot about the useless hunk of trash for a few months, then in October realised that I wanted to scan something, so I took advantage of the fact that it was still under warranty and took it to the local repair centre.

Two months later and I've finally got it out of them that they haven't got a replacement for me yet.

Two gosh darned months.

The warranty will be up in January 2007. I wonder if they'll give me a hard time about that if they *still* haven't got a replacement for me by then, the pathetic cretinous scam-artists.

I will not buy another Epson product until everybody involved in the current company is dead and buried, and since I assume there are a few teenage secretaries presently employed by them, it's going to be about 120 years, assuming no major medical breakthroughs.

Tags: hardware

Does Scotland pay its own way?

6:29PM, 20TH DECEMBER 2006

The Economist's famous *Lament for Scotland* article (subscription required) claimed in May that each Scot is subsidised by England to the tune of about £1,000 per head. At the time, I thought that sounded reasonable, and that the magazine would probably not make a calamitous error when putting an actual figure on Scotland's effective subsidy.

Someone later suggested to me that if Scotland were independent, its geography would give it a legitimate claim to about 80% of North Sea oil revenues, which currently go straight to the treasury in London. The implication of this is that if Scotland received its own oil revenues, it would be more than able to pay for itself. This is the position taken by the [Scottish National Party](#). This also sounded reasonable, so I decided to look up the actual figures.

It turns out they are contained in a document called *Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland*. It claims that the subsidy of Scotland stands at £11.2bn - that's the total government expenditure on Scotland minus the total revenue from Scottish taxpayers. The SNP have long criticised the GERS as a piece of propaganda which propagates the myth of the subsidy, as [this Scottish blog](#) says about the Economist article:

It perpetuates the lie that Scotland is subsidised by England to the tune of £1000 per year. I know. I've met the guys that started the lie and they don't care about keeping that lie in the public mind. It suits their ends and it maintains the union.

However, the latest [GERS for 2003-2004 \(full document\)](#) takes account of the SNP's oil revenue complaint and calculates that if Scotland kept it *all* for itself, the subsidy would *still* be £6.9bn. That's about £1,400 per head.

A high oil price could tip the balance of the equation, with oil revenues [forecast](#) to grow to £11.7bn in 2006-2007, up from £4.3bn in 2003-2004. But the linked article also forecasts state expenditure will grow to £51.6bn in 2006-2007, up from £45.3bn in 2003-2004.

I fully support the SNP's goal of Scottish independence (principle: people should govern themselves), but it's clear that their budgeting is just plain wrong. Scotland will never be free so long as it is hooked on handouts from England.

Tags: politics, economics

The DVR of my life is recording Countdown

2:52PM, 1ST JANUARY 2007

In 1993 I bought an [Amiga CD32](#). In fact, I was 10 at the time, so I had it bought for me.

Wasn't I a lucky boy? Well, yes I was. It was a lot of fun, but it was the beginning of the end for the gamer in me. It took another 7 years for me to truly take to heart the indisputable fact that:

Video games = fast forwarding your life

I read this aphorism on the back page of *CU Amiga* in about 1993, and I made the font big just there because although I understood what it meant, I didn't really get it until I was an undergraduate. These things take time.

Riding on their armchairs

They dream of wealth and fame

Fear is their companion

Nintendo is their game.

But if gaming is pressing x2 on the remote control of life, what is watching television? Possibly x4, because of the total passivity of it. But then reading must be around x4 too. And blogging is probably x128. Alas, there's no pause or rewind button, the play and stop buttons only work once, and the whole system is obfuscated and DRM-infected so you can't back it up to more reliable media (our best hackers are [working on it](#) though).

But isn't the aphorism just another way of saying *time flies when you're having fun*? Isn't having fun supposed to be a good thing? I think it's trying to say something about an activity being

worthwhile in the long run, but in the long run, aren't we all dead? (One of the few things
[Keynes got right](#))

OK, that's just a cop-out excuse to say nothing is worthwhile. Perhaps nothing is, and equally perhaps we really don't have free will, but in both cases it makes no sense to act like those facts are true even if they are.

So what is important in the medium run?

Tags: games, philosophy

Wii's anti-HD revolution

4:00PM, 1ST JANUARY 2007

The last post was a sort of excuse to explain why I phoned Toys R Us before Christmas to ask if they had any Nintendo Wii's in stock. They said they were getting some in tomorrow (the 16th of December), so I went down there at 8am. There was a queue of 200 people who had been there since the previous evening.

I'm clearly a rank amateur at this.

Nevertheless, when the supply squeeze eases (maybe in February?), I fully intend to get one and chalk it up to a technophilic desire to test out the VR-like interface possibilities of the Wiimote, and not at all to use it as a fast-forward button. Oh no.

I also have a great desire to see Sony crash and burn, with the Wii killing the PS3 the way the DS is killing the PSP. Sony is one of the chief architects of jokes like [Vista's crippled media playback capabilities](#) and the whole stillborn HD midden. The only downside to a total failure of the PS3 is the probable ascendancy of HD-DVD. At first I was disappointed at the format split, because it seemed to doom both to obscurity, but now I hope it continues so they can battle each other into their own shallow graves alongside Laserdisc.

Tags: games, media

Pop rips off the demoscene

1:17AM, 13TH JANUARY 2007

[Timbaland rips off an old demoscene tune in Nelly Furtado's *Do It*.](#)

This is a prime piece of scumbaggery, but I find it illuminating how easily the words "steal" and "theft" roll off the keyboards of the commentariat. The original author does have a genuine feeling of loss; is this the same feeling that ultimately justifies a prohibition on theft of physical property?

I'm just pleased demoscene music is finally getting some exposure.

Update 2006/01/15: There's more. It turns out Timbaland (real name Timothy Mosley) is shadier than we had anticipated. [This video](#) compares Acidjazz.mod to a ringtone 'by' Timbaland from 2005.

[The ringtone is still for sale here](#). You can listen to a local mirror here.

See attached.

The original Acidjazz.mod is [available from scene.org here](#). For those of you who can't play .mod files, someone has kindly [rendered it to MP3 here](#).

Unlike *Do It*, the ringtone is a trivial ripoff, adding nothing more than a drum loop over the original song.

It's probably important to note that a copyright notice is not obviously present on the original file. **.mod** is an ancient format with little metadata support, so composers use the **instrument names** to write messages, greets, shoutouts and, yes, copyright notices. Acidjazz.mod contains the following instruments:

```
0 composed by  
1 tempest/damage  
2  
3 asm2k oldskool music!  
4  
5 lenght 3:10  
6  
7 inspiration from  
8 c64 eleets. thanks  
9  
10 special thanks to:  
11 abaddon.bioteck.db.kod  
12 mindflow.smirk.reed  
13 teppo.zalza & others  
14 for the support.  
15  
16 greets to fellow  
17 chippendales&damagers  
18 mindflow.djb.oxide.  
19 jeff.reyn.pri.tommy  
20 pink.andy.andyk.gassy  
21 muffler.illusion.duet  
22 jangler.melwyn.solarc  
23 cube.agemixer.codehead  
24 b-lite.hollowman.amj  
25 electric.carebear  
26 #c-64 #suomiscene  
27 and the rest...  
28  
29 cnd.planet-d.net  
30 (c)hippendales'2000
```

Is that a copyright notice? Or a pun? Demoscene artists have never been the biggest supporters of DRM-lockdown-style copyright, but that (c) is clear to me, as if copyright did not apply by default anyway, *as Timbaland, a professional music 'maker' should have been well aware of.*

If ever he had been confused over the copyright status of .mod files, scene.org addresses the issue in its very accessible FAQ:

We would like to create and sell compilations of music / demos that we downloaded from scene.org? Can you give us permission?

The International Scene Organization only has distribution rights of the works contained in its archive.

None of the works (songs, demos, graphics, videos) present on our archives are in the public domain. As such you need to contact yourself the respective authors to ask them specifically if they are willing to let you exploit their work commercially.

To do so we suggest you either read the contact info if present in the ftp directory, or from the archives and accompanying text files.

We know it can prove difficult sometimes to locate the copyright holders from the handles they leave with their file. You are then advised to try to reach them through the email addresses contained in readme files, or search their handle in [http://ojuice.net's database](http://ojuice.net).

It is [inconceivable](#) to me that Timbaland did not know what he was doing was illegal. But was it wrong? Some copyright abolitionists might say no. Others might say the commercial nature of the ripoff makes it different from legitimate remix culture. It's a moral wrong for Timbaland to give no credit, but then lying is a moral wrong which remains legal.

Further reading:

- [The original Something Awful thread](#)
- [Janne Suni \(tempest\)'s page for Acidjazzed Evening](#)
- [A call to arms on Digg.com](#)
- [Youtube video comparing *Do It* to Acidjazz.mod](#)
- [Youtube video comparing *Block Party* to Acidjazz.mod](#)

Tags: conspiracies, music, ip

Droogs

12:58PM, 18TH JANUARY 2007

Commence fearing crystal meth... now:

*The "euphoric" sex and dance culture drug crystal meth will become a class A drug **to avert widespread use in the UK.***

I predict widespread use will increase, crystal meth-related crime will increase, enforcement costs will rise, street price will increase, dealer profit will increase, manufacturing volume will go up, and addicts will find it harder to get help.

On Thursday, the Home Office will release horrific photographs showing the drug's effects on two women in the United States, which demonstrate how crystal meth smoking can lead to rapid ageing and to "meth mouth", a chronic rotting of teeth and gums.

This, on the other hand, might do a damned bit of good.

Tags: war, politics, drugs

Google groups is out of beta

8:54PM, 25TH JANUARY 2007

The new version of [Google Groups](#) absolutely stinks. The advert pane is now huge and obnoxious and irremovable, the quoting is completely wrong, and it's riddled with bugs, including some really basic and ancient bugs from the early days of the web, such as a link within one frame opening the frameset page, resulting in infinite nested framesets.

This is quite a good workaround:

```
apt-get install knode
```

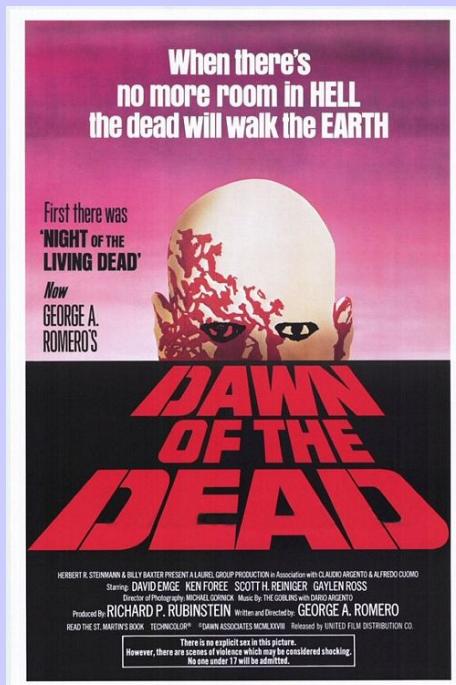
Tags: software, web

The prison cockup

1:04AM, 26TH JANUARY 2007

John Reid tells judges only to jail the most dangerous and persistent offenders. Compassion for perpetrators of victimless crimes? High-minded progressive attitude to punishment? The start of a glorious era of rehabilitation?

No, it's just that the jails are full.



Tags: amusements, films, government

Kaczynski's Kabin

11:32PM, 30TH JANUARY 2007

Old news: [Unabomber's cabin spared from demolition:](#)



AP/Rich Pedroncelli

I find something amusing in how they seized his entire shack as evidence and locked it in a warehouse. [Industrial society finally absorbed it](#) (great picture).

(See also).

Tags: conspiracies, mathematics, war, amusements

Openoffice still fails

9:44PM, 6TH FEBRUARY 2007

OpenOffice is pretty good at opening clean Powerpoint files, but it still happily chokes when those files contain embedded objects such as Windows Metafile images. I tried to fix the problem with `apt-get install kpresenter`, but that hard crashed when even trying to open the .ppt.

[This may be a known bug](#), but the OpenOffice bug tracker contains dozens of WMF bugs, some dating back to 2002 which have been closed without resolution. And it's tricky to submit the problem document to the bug tracker when it's confidential...

Tags: software

I found a Wii!

5:31PM, 21ST FEBRUARY 2007

I never thought I'd manage it before next Christmas, but with the help of [Wiipreorder.co.uk](#) and [wii-consoles.co.uk](#) I ordered one last Friday and it arrived the next Tuesday. They only had bundles available, but Game allow you to return unopened software for a full refund. WarioWare and Super Monkey Ball will be going back thank you.

Wii Sports on the other hand, is 100% brilliance. The Wiimote really is something genuinely new in gaming; possibly the only new thing since 3D graphics and networking in the 1990s.

The opera browser is a bit cramped on a standard definition TV, but it's super-smooth and looks good. Gmail works. Flash works. YouTube works, but you can't remove the large browser interface for truly full-screen playback. It's also slow to start up, and *awfully* slow having to type in everything using an on-screen keyboard. I wonder if a gestural Palm-Graffiti-style interface might be faster.

(The Wii *does* have two USB ports on the rear, but doesn't support USB keyboards. Or, in fact, USB anything. I'm not aware of any USB accessories planned.)

The Photo Channel only reads JPEGs from an inserted SD card. This isn't much fun if you're a CompactFlash kind of person. That's where things like [Wii Media Center X](#) are supposed to come in. MP3-via-Java-via-Flash-via-Opera-via-Wii works about as smoothly as it sounds.

WMCX doesn't actually work at all under Linux. Change line 1 of
`/mediacenterx_jar/software/Music/files.jsp` from:

```
<%@page import="redKawa.mediaCenter.Music.*"%>
```

to:

```
<%@page import="redKawa.mediaCenter.music.*"%>
```

in order to run it long enough to discover the next bug. I got up to 3 this way before deciding to wait for a non-alpha release.

(Is using the Wii a moral hazard? If I am ethically obliged to share software with my neighbours, but am unable to do so (the Wii doesn't use standard DVDs, doesn't allow access to its internal memory, and I don't know anybody else with one anyway), is it ethically equivalent to using firmware?)

Finally, Wii elbow is real. My arm hurts. Of course the rest of me hurts too; I've never had a cold this bad. Ugh.

Tags: software, games, hardware

I'm beginning to smell a big fat Commie rat

11:40PM, 28TH FEBRUARY 2007

greatfirewallofchina.org says lab6.com is blocked in China. The shites. Oh wait, james.lab6.com isn't blocked...

Tags: conspiracies, amusements, government

Chris Buckley!

11:56AM, 9TH APRIL 2007

I am proud to announce a link to cjbuckley.net, the blog of ultralegend Chris Buckley! I was apprehensive at first about linking to such disreputable places, but the man drove up to my house in what I can only describe as a smoking hot silverine pimpmobile, with a crew of licensed heavies wielding polite smiles and Californian vocabulary, and demanded my assistance in doubling his traffic. Who am I to refuse? Really, who? Let me know if you find out.

(Seriously though Chris, your blog is cool. It seems you hate surveillance, the State, and the surveillance state almost as much as I do :-))

Tags: web, links

A regex for years

1:43PM, 9TH APRIL 2007

Because of this site's technical history, and my commitment to unchanging URIs, the software which serves certain pages is governed, in part, by this regular expression:

```
^(200[6-9]|20[1-9]\d|2[1-9]\d\d|[3-9]\d\d\d|\d{5,})/$
```

It's supposed to match any year from 2006 onwards, but there *must* be a better way of doing it. According to the [mod_rewrite documentation](#), there is a special extension to the regex syntax which lets you compare the *TestString* to a pattern lexicographically (i.e. in dictionary order), like this:

```
RewriteCond %{REQUEST_URI} >/2005/
```

If the %{REQUEST_URI} is /2006/, then shouldn't this condition be true? Does /2006/ not lexicographically follow /2005/? Python says so:

```
>>> "/2006/" > "/2005/" True >>> "/2006/" < "/2005/" False
```

Is this a definition of lexicographic ordering that mod_rewrite is unfamiliar with?

Tags: meta, software, web

SDHC

11:38PM, 11TH APRIL 2007

Already being in possession of a nice camera, I haven't been reading sites like [dpreview.com](#) for a while, so the introduction of the SDHC standard passed me by until now (I'm getting someone an Ixus 75 for their birthday! No, they don't read this website (I'm not sure if anybody does)).

How disappointing.

8GB SDHC cards are not just available, they're already at the optimal knee of the price-capacity curve, and 16GB cards will be out before the end of the year. And then it's only one more size grade bump until they hit their maximum capacity of 32GB. Like I said, how disappointing; CompactFlash has supported up to 137GB for years.

Tags: hardware

More on Wii Sports

11:38PM, 11TH APRIL 2007

I've had a couple of months experience with Wii Sports now!

The attention to detail is continually impressive. When the tennis ball hits the metal post, it makes a metallic clunk, even though this only happens once in ten thousand shots. When the pins are struck by the bowling ball, they clatter around with beautiful physics, especially when there are 91 of them on the lane at once. And the boxing trainer is black and makes "ugh, oof, oof" noises. Because box and grunt is what black folk do in Japan, I guess. Hmm...

Bowling

Bowling is by far and away the best multiplayer sport. You take turns competing against the pins rather than directly against each other, so it's a game of many numbers and not too many arguments. I was great at first (I got my high score of 176 on my second or third go), then I started to suck. I'm pleased to get more than 160 now. My brother frequently tops 200, but even after watching him play half a dozen games, I can't explain what he's doing differently, and neither can he.

Waiting for your go with more than 4 players would approach boring, but it's surely less boring than one person sitting out, so it'd be nice to have the option. I don't think options and configurability are things Nintendo really understands.

I don't like the *Picking Up Spares* and *Spin Control* training games, possibly because I haven't figured out exactly how to control spin on the latter, and because it's too tempting to "cheat" on the former by releasing the ball late to make it go straight. *Power Throws* on the other

hand, is 10,000-volt awesomeness. My high score is still only something like 525. Compare that to [this guy](#). I tried doing [this](#) too, but decided that seeing it done on YouTube was just as good as the real thing. Sigh.

Golf

Golf is surprisingly good. It's the best looking of all the sports (hey, I have an SDTV and haven't played any PC games for the last 5 years (aside from those available in .debs, and they don't exactly have cutting edge visuals)). I haven't played it enough to have a serious go at becoming Pro, but it seems like it would be the hardest to improve on. After getting a birdie on a par 3 course, where is there to go? A hole in one? [This guy](#) says he's done it.

The golf training games are a little weak. Where's the minigame where you have to trash a car with a golf club?

Tennis

Wii tennis is the best traditional *game* of the lot, the easiest, and the most fun for two players. I've mastered the power serve technique (when the ball reaches its apex, bring your hand down fast with a sharp flick, as if textual descriptions of Wiimote moves are possible), and now have the ability to direct the ball left or right too! I can beat the toughest opponents (the 1900 and 2000 skill pair) to love every time, but I don't have the time or the patience to do what [this drunkard did](#).

I gather you can put spin on the ball, but I can't do this at all.

The tennis training games are all great. I can hit the target 22 times before knocking too many holes in the wall to continue (so... maybe the 22 hits come at too high a price of misses...), and

I've returned all 50 balls on the blue practice court in the Fitness Test, but not in the actual training game version (I conked out at around 40 on my best attempt).

Hitting the ball is almost too easy for two-player tennis. When I play my brother, we frequently have 30-shot long rallies between our net players at an insane pace, and they always end because we're laughing too hard at their ridiculousness.

Boxing and Baseball

These are remarkably true to their real-life equivalents, in that they are both rubbish. Well, the Wiimote makes a satisfying *chonk* sound when you hit the baseballs, and the tennis-ball-dodging training game for boxing is fun. If there's a Wii Sports 2, I hope to see some cross-pollination of equipment. Bowling with boxing gloves on would be fun, as would boxing with a baseball bat!

Fitness

The Fitness Test is about skill with the Wiimote, not physical fitness, which is why my best age is 22. It's very tempting to decline to use the nunchuck whenever it gives you the option, but that seems like cheating to me.

Finally, I should mention that the Wii Sports disc never leaves the console. That's how much of a traditional gamer I have become, although *Super Mario Galaxy* looks tempting, and if *Super Paper Mario* does end up supporting the DS in some way, I could even conceivably get one of those, providing I won it in a crossword competition or something.

Tags: games

Pseudoscorpion in my bathroom

2:25PM, 13TH APRIL 2007



It was about 1mm long. The pincers looked scorpion-like so I searched for a list of bugs with "scorpion" in the name. It paid off! [What's That Bug?](#) shows it clearly to be a [pseudoscorpion](#).

I'm quite pleased with the photo; there is depth of field even under 32mm of extension tubes. The floor is not wet - that's just what tile looks like extremely close up and with a flash. I

probably scared the horrible little thing, but at least he's now famous beyond his wildest dreams [of eating mites].

Update 2007/04/15: Here's a wider-angle picture to show how small it was, and to prove that the surface really is tile, not slimy death-grey chicken skin :)



Tags: photos, nature

Errorwiki

5:06PM, 15TH APRIL 2007

I wasn't standing on the edge of my toilet hanging a clock, nor was the porcelain wet, and neither did I slip, but the other day I had the idea of an Error Message Wiki. I think it would be fabulously useful.

Error codes are often cryptic and overloaded, sometimes [famous](#), and frequently bizarre ("[000 Error: No Errors Found](#)"). There is [much art to giving a good error](#). If you want to know what an error means, Google will help, but only in the way that Google always helped find info before Wikipedia was around: disjointedly. Wikipedia proved that [Google's mission](#) is not yet accomplished; aggregating knowledge is valuable.

It looks like [somebody already had the idea](#) of using a wiki as a knowledge base on error messages, but they seem to have given up before writing a single article. I for one would like a thorough, encyclopedic article on "Connection reset by peer". Anyone who's used IRC must be familiar with this phrase, but it foiled me recently in a web context, and when Google's results when searching for it list [this Everything2](#) article second, it's not so easy to discover the full meaning of the message. I gather it arises from deep within the bowels of the TCP stack. It would be a moment's effort to register errorwiki.org, set up MediaWiki, and write a seed article on the aforementioned message, but... it seems I can't be bothered. And looking at that Wikia subsite, it seems nobody else can either. Oh well. Let's monitor the Church of Scientology instead!



Yup, still there!

Tags: software, photos, web

Today is a good day to buy

9:05PM, 18TH APRIL 2007

In case you haven't noticed, [pounds are currently worth a lot of dollars](#). That's bad news for any Brits who sell their stuff to dollar-wielding folk, but for everyone else, it means American crap is cheaper. Furthermore, [Verisign are raising their prices](#) as fast as [ICANN](#) will let them, and inflation has hit 3.1% in the UK. Conclusion? My cash is well-spent renewing lab6.com sooner rather than later.

It should now last beyond October 21st, 2015!

Tags: meta, web, economics

More illegal art

11:27AM, 2ND MAY 2007

It's time for [content-lockdown whack-a-mole](#), in the style of [DeCSS!](#)

*there once was a man and he had zero cash
his post to doom nine dot org made quite a splash
with F'in pig assrats who thought it was fine
to censor free speech on said website doom nine*

*one thought and one slaved on a poem all day
to make sure that zero cash boy got his way
two rhymes in each verse, then doom nine would be free
to transmit hot numbers and letters like D.*

*the problem became one of coding and law.
how should we store numbers like seven and four?
a cry for attention like raving on E?
or in cruciform couplets in stanzas of three?*

*not five minutes later the scam came to me
upbraiding my head like a sting from a B
(to watch hi-def movies us plebs have to wait
for kind hearted hex digits like D and eight).*

*when four score guerilla net-copyfight peers
defied movie barons it gave one ideas
because of the cease and desist crap i strive
to wrap up in word-art real numbers like five*

*the copyright system's too broken to fix
so I'll abuse fair use it and hit it for six.
i'll hopefully make it quite tricky to C
all five methods used to hide data for thee.*

*the first is that literal numbers like six
are those that i want to make clear, without tricks.
so all spelled-out numbers you read here like three
form numeric parts of the processing key.*

*the second is that reading numbers alone
will only give half of the secret that's known
to five or six cluebat-armed rollin'-deep mates
who want you to know that there's a pair of eights.*

*the third method's somewhat less easy to C:
you just take all capital letters, agree?
so sentences with zero caps at the start
are just to be clear, not to make it like art.*

*and what of the fourth and fifth methods you say?
they're actually there just to lead you astray.
indeed this exists just to highlight the flaws
of lame unenforceable copyright laws*

OK, it sucks, but so do you, AACSB licensing authority.

Tags: copyright, law, media, amusements

MTU setting

11:42AM, 5TH MAY 2007

Amazing! [Dave](#)'s suggestion of changing my computer's MTU setting worked!

I had been unable to visit one [particular](#) site for a week or two ("Connection reset by peer"), but the problem existed only on one computer; the laptop could connect just fine. Clearing temp files and cookies didn't work. Changing browser didn't help. Obtaining a new IP didn't work, both from my local network and from my ISP. Using [tor](#) did work, and so did ping. All other sites were functional.

Dave (I think it was Dave!) mentioned that changing the MTU size had fixed a similar problem for him, so I looked it up, found [this handy explanation](#), and fiddled with ifconfig. It was set to 1492, so I changed it to 1500, and it worked. I'm astonished! What had suddenly changed that required me to do this?

Tags: software, web

Better than killing a pig

6:38PM, 5TH MAY 2007

[Ask Oxford](#) reckons the ditty about killing pigs and being happy is a 17th century English proverb, rather than a Chinese one:

*If you would be happy for a week take a wife; if you would be happy for a month kill a pig;
but if you would be happy all your life plant a garden.*

Sounds decidedly Chinese to me, and I've googled up many websites which say so. None of them cite any particular source, so who knows? It's still good advice.

To that end, I did some housekeeping on this site and rediscovered many, many hateful things about CSS, XHTML and Wordpress.

Here are some of them:

- Wordpress automatically inserts paragraph tags around anything that looks like a paragraph, and doesn't check the result for XHTML-well-formedness.
- Wordpress is hard-coded to create XHTML, but serves all pages with Content-Type text/html, meaning browsers interpret them as tag soup. This is no improvement over HTML 4, but it's just as well, since it's very, very, very hard to make Wordpress generate 100% valid XHTML.
- The markup which YouTube gives you to embed their videos is not valid in any markup language.

My conclusions are that:

1. it's not possible to produce valid web pages with Wordpress unless you forego certain standard web features, or are an expert web developer
2. this does not matter, because tag soup is the state-of-the-art in web rendering.

I thus abandon the pursuit of valid XHTML, and await the hegemony of [HTML 5](#).

Also, the site is no longer powered by Fair Trade bandwidth; all packets are now hand-encoded by Burmese slave-children. It's less reliable, as the weaker tykes occasionally get their fingers mangled in the frame relays, but it's a helluva lot cheaper.

Tags: meta

Lucy II

8:21PM, 5TH MAY 2007

Today has been too geeky, so:



This is Lucy II. Her understanding of cause and effect is limited. She doesn't know that tipping over an upturned glass will grant her playtime with the spider within, but she does know that meowing directly into my ear at 5am will cause the window to open.

Tags: photos

Lucy Cara, "Lucy II", 2006-2021. Cara because she was found in a car park.

Antz is alright

12:53PM, 10TH MAY 2007

As everybody in the world should know, I'm a great friend of ants, and of insect-kind in general, except when I'm eating smarties. Why? Because ants are cool. Ants chop down forests with their bare teeth, build gigantic fortresses out of them, and farm fungus on what's left. The only way they could possibly be cooler is if they did all that using Lego, or maybe underwater. Point is: ants deserve your respect, and you would be wise to give it to them come the apocalypse.

Anyway, I watched [*Antz*](#) the other day. I generously give it: **better than expected!**

I'd always thought this was a cheap knockoff of *A Bug's Life*, being released at the same time, and by a rival studio. When *Shark Tale* came out right after *Finding Nemo*, I said (to myself, privately, because there was nobody there at the time) "Oh yeah, this is just Dreamworks ripping off Pixar again, like with *Antz*" and mocked it mercilessly (again, to myself, privately, because nobody likes to hear that sort of thing).

And so I was pleasantly surprised to find myself still watching *Antz* 30 minutes after having started. The most important thing to realise for any prospective *Antz*-watcher, is that the title is a pun, not just a boardroom-jerk's idea of hipsterizing the film by nailing on a z. See? Don't you already hate this film 40% less?

Anyway, some stuff happens, and there is a worker's rebellion, in which the worker ants embrace Marxism and attempt to take control of the means of production. The chief soldier ant makes a rousing speech against such follies, and the masses are instantly converted to fascism. *Antz* is no treatise on individualism like the far-right Randfest that is *The Incredibles*,

but I'd like to think it at least has a point, and if so, it's probably something about the dangers of following ideologies rather than following yourself.

So come on everybody, start to follow yourself. Like [this](#).

And watch *Antz*, because it's not as bad as you think it is.

Tags: politics, films

Peak-oil salesmen

6:28PM, 15TH MAY 2007

Peak oil is a crisis cult, and here's how you can tell:

1. Do they offer an apocalyptic vision of the future that can only be avoided by listening to their advice?
2. Is the threat wildly out of proportion to the evidence, or fabricated entirely?
3. Are they selling something?
4. Do they have any political motivations?

For the Peak Oil movement, the answer to all of these questions is yes.

1. Peak Oil is all about the coming mad dash for the last of Earth's energy before the lights go out for good. From here on out, it's oil wars, water wars, food shortages, mass dieoffs, and the rollback of Western civilisation as we know it. On the other hand, if we take the advice of the prophets, we can learn how to fight the starving hordes off our vegetable patches in 12 easy steps.
2. There is a finite amount of oil in the world, and it's conceivable that one day we will have burned it all. It is a tremendous logical leap to go from there to doomsday scenarios. Given a relatively free market in oil, a gradually increasing oil price will create incentives to invest in alternatives. If this happens in the next 100 years, those alternatives will probably have to be natural gas and coal, of which there are hundreds of years supply left.
3. Check out the calmly named [Life After The Oil Crash](#). The entire left hand side of the website is adverts for Peak Oil books, solar panels and bicycles. [From The Wilderness](#)

invites you to make a donation, or purchase something from their store. [Dry Dipstick](#) is suffering from Adsense Acne, and every Joe Q. Peak Oil Theorist has a blog hawking his books, with scary titles like *The Coming Economic Collapse* and *The End of Suburbia*. They are whipping up fear, then selling you comfort - except the books will never completely assuage your fears while there are still more books to sell.

4. Peak Oil is a reaction against capitalism, globalisation, George W Bush, and the oil industry, all of which are all highly venned within a political movement self-described as Progressive. When the oil is gone, and war has come, it's the Bushes of the world who will win, and thus is a conspiracy theory born. The core of the conspiracy seems to be the idea that Bush is in league with the Saudis to dominate the world by cornering the market in rapidly depleting oil supplies, but that they're too stupid to realise this will destroy the world, or are driven by biblical prophecy to do so. The solution to all of this is political, and entirely Progressive: a planned society in which we abandon globalisation and return to low-tech, protectionist, and even tribal economies.

The world may be facing an energy *problem*, and it's certainly facing a *clean-energy* problem, but a problem does not make a crisis, and the facts do not support the hyperbole.

Tags: conspiracies, politics, economics

IPPA

10:35PM, 16TH MAY 2007

The Intellectual Property Protection Act of the US would criminalise "attempted copyright infringement". This has generated a lot of heat and noise from IP freedom fighters, but it doesn't significantly expand the pool of people who are already criminalised by existing legislation. There's not a lot of practical difference between "copyright infringement" and "attempted copyright infringement", because an attempt at infringement succeeds 99.999% of the time. Nearly everyone who might be busted for the attempt is already currently liable for the act.

(I suppose it might be easier to gather evidence of attempted infringement on a P2P network, by running fake nodes that gather up search requests; does searching for a song title constitute intent to infringe?).

It's still a bad idea, although part of me does wonder whether a giant police-state crackdown on infringement might do wonders for the Free culture movement.

Tags: copyright, ip

The Baroque Cycle

11:25PM, 18TH MAY 2007

I just finished reading *The System of the World*, the final volume of Neal Stephenson's [The Baroque Cycle](#). It took me 3 years, nearly half as long as the author took to write it, although admittedly I was hardly reading it full-time.

The cycle is a vast, sprawling mess. It's set in and around 17th century London, and other exotic locations. The pages give a filthy, rotten, accurate account of life without modernity, from muddy battlefields and corpse-wading in Ireland and galley-slavery in the Mediterranean, to the climactic jailbreak out through London's monumentally filthy sewers, busting up out of a whorehouse bog. The pages almost stink. It's great.

The major characters are folks such as the Duke of Marlborough, Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, and the Hanoverian royal family, but that doesn't stop Neal Stephenson from indulging in characteristic all-out geekery, naming a character after a UNIX command. The story may be set 300 years ago, and the author may overindulge in lurid descriptions of medieval swashbuckling, but it is nevertheless Science Fiction. This is quite remarkable, because only a single element of the entire plot is non-real; Stephenson has written a non-SF book in the style of a SF book. As a sort-of-prequel to *Cryptonomicon*, the geekery is required. There is a cross-stitch-based cryptosystem, steampunk computation, prior art to general relativity, and even what may be a sly reference to BitTorrent.

I bought all three volumes as they were released, years ago. They're gigantic, hefty Tomes with gorgeous painted covers, and boy do they look beautiful on a bookshelf. I expect that's where they'll stay from now on. The series is 3,000 pages long - twice the length of *War and*

Peace, another summer reading project (except that one only took one summer). These books are astonishing achievements, but my verdict is ultimately the same for both: they're 5-10 times longer than an average book, but not 5-10 times better. If the author could've swallowed a little pride and hired a more ruthless editor (was there even a non-ruthless editor?), the dozens of incredibly clever, interesting, funny, and enlightening passages could've met each other without being separated by what ended up being the novel's crucial flaw: too many words.

Tags: books

Parasites or entrepreneurs?

12:23PM, 22ND MAY 2007

From [The Economist](#):

This week it emerged that 88 of Slough's Roma are unaccompanied minors. The young migrants came in small sibling groups, travelling in the backs of lorries for €5 (£51) apiece. Six had babies of their own, and seven were pregnant.

Lone minors of any nationality are entitled to a bed, a £45 (\$89) weekly food allowance, a one-off £100 clothing grant, health care and, if they are under 16, free schooling. Perversely, being accompanied by an adult would immediately deprive them of these benefits.

That's pretty cool. Children fleeing poverty in their home country by *migrating alone*. Some say they are parasites, leeching off the good will of the British taxpayer, but I say if the taxpayer is going to give a free handout to all comers, can you really blame those who take it? A decent education plus free board and lodging sounds like a good deal to me. I'm surprised Romania hasn't dumped *all* its kids on us yet.

Sadly, this shows how open borders and the free movement of people are fundamentally hampered by the existence of the Welfare State. Borders should be security boundaries, designed to keep bad guys out, not generosity boundaries designed to keep welfare in.

Tags: politics, economics

Pirates of the Caribbean 3

3:19PM, 28TH MAY 2007

I saw this last night. It's better than number 2, and the final half hour is an accurate portrayal of the fight that the 8 or 9 writers must've had over what the plot should be. Thus, it's a bit of a mess, and Mess is what the whole film is about. There are some lovely splintering-wood effects - I couldn't tell if they were computer generated or not (I'd bet 95% that they were) - and every scene is bubbling over with loose cannons, crew, ropes, barrels, dirt, water, grime, and fish. The finale draws inspiration from a tornado in a landfill site, as far as sheer on-screen clutter goes.

The most interesting part was half way through when the curtains closed and the lights went up. Yes, the local Odeon actually had an intermission! I asked a steward why, and he said it was a trial "to see how it affected the retail situation". That's some traitorous honesty there. If any Odeon execs are reading, I suggest fitting employees with gags. From what I could tell, the retail situation could only have improved, as the (very large) crowd filtered out past the snack bar, and back in again ten minutes later. To be perfectly honest, I didn't mind so much, as I *did* want to make a phone call half way through the film. And in a three hour long movie, there must've been more than a few who needed to go and help recycle the overpriced beverages. But it would've been nice if the studios had provided the film in two clean parts rather than have the cinema stop the film abruptly and restart it before opening the curtains.

With ticket prices already more than £7 per person, it's bare-faced wallet squeezing, but hey! If they want to drive people to DVDs, that's up to them. For the price of two tickets, it's almost cheaper to have a *month's* subscription to [Lovefilm](#)'s top end rental package. And although the muddled plot made it difficult to figure out what the ultimate message of *Pirates of the*

Caribbean: At World's End is, I think Disney is trying to say that [piracy is good honest fun](#), and cheaper even than renting.

Tags: films, reviews

Jaws killed Christ

10:13PM, 28TH MAY 2007

Google Web Images News Maps New! Products Groups Scholar

jaws killed christ

Search: the web pages from the UK

Web

Did you mean: [jews killed christ](#)

Jedi Council Forums - JESUS JAWS CHRIST
Date Posted: 2:42pm Subject: RE: JESUS JAWS CHRIST. It was **killed** by a stingray. A stingray **killed** Steve Irwin. It's starting to make sense. ...
[boards.theforce.net/your_jedi_council_community/b10008/26791152/p1/?28 - 72k - Cached - Similar pages](#)

JAWS
After several more people are **killed** by the shark, though, Brody closes the ... and 4 uses of "G-damn." 3 each of "Oh my God" and "For **Christ's** sakes." 2 ...

Er, no, I didn't actually.

Tags: conspiracies, amusements

Geek tragedy and website pensions

8:04PM, 12TH JUNE 2007

Dave mentioned yesterday how [RMS](#) saw himself as a tragic character who would ultimately be remembered as some guy who wrote some code in Linux. As of today, searches for "Richard Stallman" on the major search engines return his personal website first, but Wikipedia's entry on him is a close second. When his main loop finally returns 0, and his personal site is silenced, the army of wikiholics will ensure his entry stays fresh and highly-ranked, and the true geek tragedy will be complete: to be out-googlejuiced by your own biographers.

I wonder if I could make money operating an endowment scheme for geeks. Mr Soon-to-be-spending-the-rest-of-his-long-assed-eternity-in-the-ground supplies a principal to be invested, the returns of which are used to keep his online operations running indefinitely. It'd be a pension for websites! I'm not aware of any dead geeks with prominent personal websites, but the beards are lengthening as the seconds tick by, and it's only a matter of time...

Your time is past

Your life no more

That needn't mean you 404!

Tags: web, philosophy, extropy

More gardening

9:17PM, 12TH JUNE 2007

I am enamoured of the idea that gardening is the secret to happiness, provided you adopt a wide enough definition of gardening. Maintaining a website falls within that general area, and it does indeed give me satisfaction to trim back bugs here, [polish](#) an old water feature there, and mow the comments occasionally.

So I decided to finally migrate all the old blog posts to Wordpress. You can see the fruit of this labour displayed beautifully on the sidebar of the [main page!](#) Everything is now under one tidy roof, after some massaging.

Wordpress demands globally unique post slugs. I dislike this being a requirement (how many URLs use the post slug as their only component? Can the disambiguation not be done on a more local scale?), and it presented a problem transitioning URIs like

<http://james.lab6.com/2005/02/21/gattaca>

and

<http://james.lab6.com/2004/10/20/gattaca>

to the Wordpress database. It wants to retitle the second one

<http://james.lab6.com/2004/10/20/gattaca-2/>, which is shocking to someone who cherishes permanent URIs, but redirecting the old to the new one with an HTTP 301 status code should be philosophically acceptable. That means .htaccess to the rescue again:

```
RedirectMatch 301 ^/2004/10/20/gattaca(/)?$ \n
http://james.lab6.com/2004/10/20/gattaca-2/
```

Original manganese spam attached.

That's in `/2004/.htaccess` rather than `/.htaccess` so that this unfortunate patching-up is filed away safely in 2004 and I don't have to deal with it again. Apache kindly traverses all directories above the requested URI looking for `.htaccess` files.

The other problem is that all comments before [Phase II](#) have their timestamps offset by -0500. In some cases, comments appear to be made before the post. It's on the todo list for another day.

Finally, I am the proud owner of [Ticket 4360](#) on the Wordpress Trac. I'd like commentators to choose a name for themselves, but the email field is mostly worthless. I *could* have just just disabled it (as I did) and moved on, but it seemed a sensible enough feature to request for the populace at large. I'm too kind. Amazingly enough, the "bug" was actually noticed by a developer! There's a patch attached to that ticket, and it awaits testing. Good work, Wordpress guys.

Oh, and [Firebug](#) is really, *really* useful for debugging and tweaking CSS from within Firefox.

Haha, no. They closed it as Won't Fix.

Tags: meta

Back to the Future: The Ride: The Obituary

2:49PM, 18TH JUNE 2007

[They're closing Back to the Future: The Ride.](#)

Orlando's version of the ride has already gone, and the one in Universal Studios Hollywood is closing this September. [Wikipedia has a passable entry](#) describing the plot, but boy is it a case of *you had to be there*. It's an awesome ride, even for non-fans. The first time I went to America, I was 10, and it was a few weeks after they had opened the ride, so the queues were gigantic. I returned six years later, and then another six years after that, riding it half a dozen times or so each :)

If you have not had the chance to go on the ride, you can experience it in YouTube-vision!:

http://www.youtube.com/v/_QVIJ7X0IXU

I hope someone's digitized the actual film reels; it Would Not Do for this rip to be the only lasting remnant of the IMAX-style original. At least the [patents are online](#).



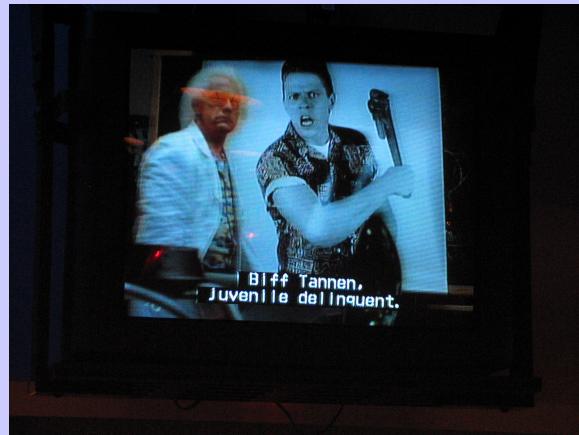
Wait time: 20 minutes. I guess it's still popular after all! That was two years ago, mind.



The Ride is just one part of the Institute of Future Technology, whose main activities are queueing.



"... but we're currently experiencing an unprecedented debilitation"



Biff Tannen has been spotted lurking around the Institute!



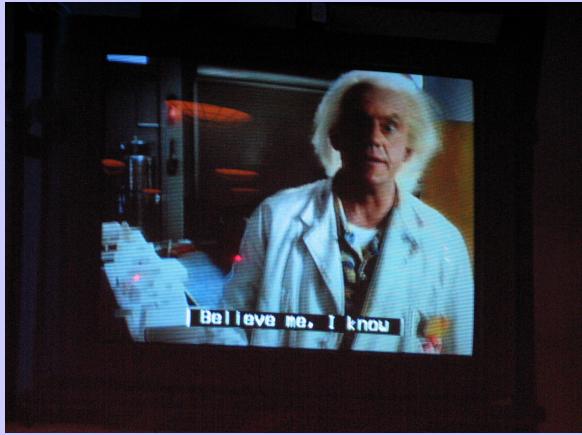
By 2005, the queues had died down a little, and it was possible to *run* through the system that had been packed so solid in 1993 and 1999. This cabinet shows some of the Institute's inventions designed to keep you amused while you wait.



The Institute is kitted out in great detail. I expect you see 90% of the building's substance while in the queue, but the theming gives the illusion of great depth hiding around the corners of what I presume are fake offices.

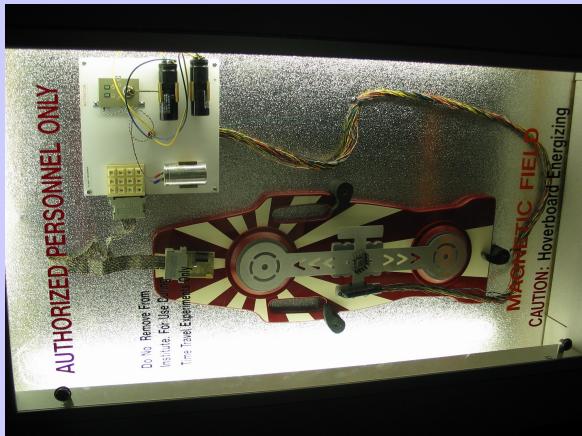


Biff breaks into the Institute!



"Believe me, I know"

I believe you, Doc!



Caution: Hoverboard energizing!



Snack to the Future. Oh dear.

To the left is the grand Starway staircase to the lower lot, and to the right was once located another DeLorean.



The Ride building, from below. It's big, and there's a DeLorean parked in the car park behind it.



As far as I know, they're not closing this down. I never ate any of Doc Brown's chicken, or his condiments, because even at age 10 I could smell an off-brand cash-in.



Bye bye Ride. I fully expect your [Simpsons-themed replacement](#) to suck. At least there's still a copy of you in Japan.

Tags: photos, history, films

Won't somebody please think of the children?

4:00PM, 19TH JUNE 2007

Manhunt 2 banned in the UK.

The BBFC have the right to [censor](#) games as well as films, and their refusal to give Manhunt 2 a classification means you are not allowed to buy it in the UK. However, you are still free to import it from abroad for your own personal use. There are precisely three kinds of stupid going on here:

1. The ban is politically motivated. [Troglodytes blamed its predecessor when a boy murdered another boy with a hammer](#). That's about as useful and valid as blaming the fact that the murderer was black.
2. Since importation is legal, [just buy it here instead](#). Thanks for putting another speed bump in front of British industry, BBFC.
3. This is censorship, born of self-important busybodies who think they have the right to tell consenting adults what they can buy with their own money, in the privacy of their own homes. Censorship is bad when ignorant foreigners do it to our books, and it's bad when ignorant domestics do it to our games.

Globalisation lets us route around this kind of censorship via importation, but that is almost bad news for advocates of liberty. In a sense the ruling doesn't matter, because anybody who wants the game can still get it perfectly legally, and so it slipping by unnoticed means it'll nibble away at our freedom without sparking mainstream outrage. Bummer.

Manhunt 2 is an ugly, ugly game, but if freedom of expression means anything, it's the freedom to express that which is unpopular.

Tags: politics, games, government, crime

Shrek the Third, Sicko and Universal Healthcare

1:50PM, 26TH JUNE 2007

I've seen two films this week. The first was Shrek the Third, and it was ordinary in the extreme. A bird of some kind entered the theatre and pecked around up in front of the projector. It could've been a seagull, but its neck was too long. The manager was kind enough to give us free tickets for our troubles, and for reference, this is what an Odeon Guest Ticket looks like!



I then watched Sicko, again for free thanks to Michael Moore's implied approval of using other peoples' stuff without their permission. I thought there were two or three genuine LOL moments, and that it was an excellent polemic for those who already agree with his ideas. However, it didn't engage with the opposition beyond pointing out how evil and corrupt US lawmakers are. In all probability they really *are* evil and corrupt, but that doesn't get to the

bottom of why a lot of people oppose something so apparently beneficial as universal free healthcare.

There are problems with Sicko as an authentic documentary, but putting those aside and treating the film as a theoretically accurate portrayal of the various healthcare systems around the world, it is still steeped in *us vs them* rhetoric which I find distasteful: *They* have universal healthcare, so why can't *we*? What is wrong with *us* that makes *us* dump sick patients into shelters? Why does *Cuba* get five cent drugs while *we* must pay hundreds of dollars?

The key to understanding the opposition is Margaret Thatcher's superficially bizarre claim that there is no such thing as society. Contrary to popular belief, she was not denying the existence of the population at large, no matter how ignored by her they might have felt. The soundbite means that if the word *we* should mean anything, it should mean *everyone*. Every single human being. When *we* talk about *us*, we should be talking about the whole wide world of individuals, not arbitrary groupings like nations. And when *we* talk about *universal* healthcare, we should mean universal healthcare for *absolutely everyone in the world*.

To put it mildly, there are practical problems with that. Globally universal health care to the standard of the first world is probably beyond the means of this planet's economy, and so folks like Michael Moore don't really advocate *universal* healthcare. When they say things like "it is everyone's right to free health care", they don't really mean *everyone* - they just mean Americans. There are many arguments as to why Americans should only look after other Americans, but they all boil down to declaring that Americans are inherently more deserving of healthcare than anyone else. The same argument is made (or rather, assumed, for nobody seems to discuss fundamentals here any more) in Britain regarding the NHS.

Accidents and tragedies happen, and somebody has to pick up the bill. Extremely unfortunate victims pay it all themselves. Others can afford health insurance, but that doesn't cover all people and all types of tragedy, as Sicko does a good job of pointing out. Those must rely on charity, whether private (like Oxfam), or public (like the NHS). In Britain, the British taxpayer fronts the cash, *but only for the maladies of fellow Brits*. Money paid into the NHS only benefits British people, and this is what classical liberal-minded people object to. Why do only British people deserve free healthcare? Because they are the ones who pay into the scheme? Surely not, as that would exclude non-taxpayers from receiving NHS treatment. The real reason is simply because they are British, and this country has decided that British people are inherently more deserving of care than people elsewhere.

The problem is that that's simply not true. Even the poorest Britons live a life of luxury and opportunity entirely beyond hundreds of millions of children in the developing world. Unfortunately the compassion which underlies support of universal healthcare does not extend beyond our borders.

What is the difference between a Briton and, say, a Kenyan? Ethically, none. Perhaps if the Briton in question is a friend, you might reasonably prefer to help him than the Kenyan, but in reality, the vast majority of our fellow citizens are unknown to us. Why does a random stranger in a country village in Cornwall deserve your compassion more than a random stranger in a country village in Nyanza? The answer is nationalism, and hence racism.

The government acts unethically when it redistributes income to people on the basis of nationality. Real charity is a private matter: individuals must have the freedom to give their money to causes that they see fit, and for all the flak that America takes in Sicko, Americans are supremely generous (being the most charitable even as a percentage of GDP). Perhaps

not every American can get healthcare, but perhaps Americans also recognise that they are [not first in line when it comes to needing it.](#)

Tags: politics, economics, films, health

We're all busted

4:33PM, 26TH JUNE 2007

UK: 60% of the population admit to criminal behaviour.

Brazil: 75% of the population admit to criminal behaviour, and a different 75% tolerate corruption in politics.

So are governments and corporations right to treat their citizens and customers as criminals?

The Brazil article gives some clues:

A columnist in the weekly magazine Veja points to a previous scandal known as Operation Bloodsucker, which involved the purchase of overpriced ambulances.

On the day it was exposed, 48 people were arrested. One year later, Andre Petry points out, no-one is in prison. Of 72 parliamentarians suspected of involvement, none has lost office.

and

"In fact, the bending of laws bears no stigma in the country if it acts as a solution to unfair laws or absurdities of bureaucracy."

Can you expect people to behave ethically when their elected role models don't? Can you expect the citizenry to accurately distinguish between laws which carry moral force ("thou shalt not steal"), and those that don't ("thou shalt not give a pay and display parking ticket with 40 minutes left on it to a little old lady who just pulled up next to your car as you leave")?

Tags: crime, ethics

How to queue at Wimbledon

6:03PM, 1ST JULY 2007

I spent Friday night and Saturday morning queueing at Wimbledon! It would've been ten times better had it not rained near-continuously on the Saturday, but it was still marvellous fun nonetheless.

[This site about queueing](#) was helpful. I have a couple of additions based on our experience.

1. For the love of God, bring a tent. The party of 5 next to us in the queue didn't, and they spent all night in the cold, in the rain, in the open, being laughed at by us. They banged on our tent door, begging for our mercy, pleading with us just to let one of their party in before the frostbite, wombles and chavs ate them alive, but we held fast, knowing that every one of them that perished shifted us one step closer to Centre Court tickets.
2. Bring a pop-up tent. They're more expensive than the poles-and-pegs variety, and it's worth every penny to have your tent up and running in 4 seconds. It would've taken 2 seconds but we hadn't read the instructions beforehand. While our laughter at the poor souls upqueue from us was part of our plan to improve our ticket-getting odds, our laughter at the poor souls downqueue was because it took them an hour and a half to put up their tent. They were fortunate that it didn't start raining until later. Furthermore, you are woken up by the stewards early enough as it is. You don't want to spend your valuable waking up time struggling to put a recalcitrant tent away.
3. At the very least, bring a tent that stays upright on its own. You can't guarantee queueing in the park, so you might have to pitch on the pavement, which is not going to work if your tent relies on ropes and pegs being hammered into the ground. Some

say you can tie your tent to the fence, but you're not guaranteed to be near a fence, and that only works on one side.

4. Bring earplugs if you like it to be quiet when you sleep.
5. You don't *need* anything in the grounds. Food, water, waterproof coats, cushions, umbrellas, towels, and more, are all on sale at the shops within. The catch is that it's all rather expensive, and the anti-catch is that anything you bring in yourself will be extra bulk and hassle to carry around. So make the trade-off according to your budget, and how many arms you have.

Tags: sport

A new country: Africa

10:27PM, 2ND JULY 2007

BBC: [African Union leaders are to discuss the idea of a pan-African government.](#)

Top of the list of proponents are Colonel Gaddafi and Robert Mugabe. I would laugh, but I don't think they're joking.

Tags: government

Why it's good to shop with idiots

2:30PM, 4TH JULY 2007

Dreamhost have a [good blog for a large company](#). They just had a go at GoDaddy for being such shameless hucksters, but as a relatively informed customer, I take a different view. Companies like GoDaddy give huge discounts because they can make up the value of the discount - and more - by trying to sell you useless crap like .biz domains and podcast hosting and TrafficBlazer® and PrivacyWrangler® and MaximoCashShovellerPro®. But nobody is *forcing* you to buy any of those things. Once you've waded through the spam and said "no thanks" 95 times, you get to buy the domain for the low price. And here's the tricky part: if it wasn't for the naive and impressionable consumers who *do* fall for the offers, the battle-hardened wily consumers would have to pay more. I'm not sure precisely how I feel about *literally* profiting from the ignorance and stupidity of others, but I have to say all's fair in love and DNS.

Tags: web, economics, business, ethics, spam

OpenMoko

1:51PM, 11TH JULY 2007

[OpenMoko/Neo1973](#) is starting to look quite cool, especially in the face of the iPhone's catastrophic lockdown. It's [somewhat larger](#) than the iPhone - almost into PDA territory - but let's face it, it *is* a PDA. And that's fine! I'm willing to put up with a lot of rough edges for the sake of avoiding lock-in.

Top of the list of cool things, apart from it running Free software, is [the screen](#). It's not multi-touch, but it's got a resolution of 640x480, which at 2.8" across diagonally gives it a pixel density of **282 ppi!** That's about thrice the density of a typical desktop LCD monitor! Even the [dedicated e-book reader from Sony](#) only stretches to 166dpi, but admittedly at four times the display area.

So forget about the Neo1973 as a telephone. It may be essential just for its text display abilities. What geek doesn't believe in the primacy of text as a communication medium?

Tags: hardware, design, foss

Repugnant markets and cage fighting

1:08PM, 16TH JULY 2007

I listened to a radio programme last week! That's the real news, because I never listen to radio. It was [this Radio 4 programme about "repugnant markets"](#). I unfortunately missed the end, but the first half was good. They made an excellent point that what transactions we find repugnant have varied wildly over time: it was once considered repugnant to charge interest on loans, but perfectly alright to sell slaves.

In modern times, dwarf tossing is banned in France, which rendered a professionally-tossed dwarf unemployed. He argued before the UN Commission on Human Rights that his right to employment was being infringed:

He says you know France says that this is a violation of human dignity, but there aren't any jobs for dwarves in France and the essence of human dignity is having a job and this is my job. And I remember when I read that, I thought you know the little guy wins. You know this is a great argument. But in fact he didn't win. The UN found in favour of France and basically they argued that it's such a repugnant thing for him to sell the right to throw him that human dignity is compromised; that you and I become less human every time he makes this transaction.

I wouldn't have felt compelled to write anything on this, but I read this morning that [cage fighting is being condemned](#) by "politicians, religious leaders, and senior police officers".

Never mind that the fans happily paid up to see the event, that the organisers willingly hosted it, that the fighters are handsomely paid professional athletes, and that everyone involved not only consented to the cage fight, but actually got entertainment, profit, and glory out of it. Can we step back from the brink of nannydom and remember that those are good things?

Consent is the foundation of civilisation. Without it, we are merely barbarous animals plundering each other for whatever we can get. The busybodies who would seek to ban the activities of consenting adults, and thus undermine the power of consent itself, pose a greater threat to human dignity than any harmless sport.

Tags: politics, philosophy, sport

Crooks and liars

12:37PM, 20TH JULY 2007

Cash for honours! And they would've got away with it if it wasn't for... oh wait, they did get away with it. Where are the meddling kids that will save us?

Tags: conspiracies, government, crime

The Simpsons Movie and the phenomenon of the funny

3:59PM, 27TH JULY 2007

I've seen more films than usual recently. Along with the washed-out, off-model, almost-King-of-the-Hill-style backgrounds in *The Simpsons Movie*, the notable thing I wish to comment on is the *funniness* of these films.

First, *The Simpsons*. Well, how can you live up to 18 years of hype? It's obviously not as good as the best of the best episodes; I'd watch any disc from season 3 to 8 in preference to it. But then I'd watch the movie in preference to any disc from season 10 onwards*, leaving season 9 as the crucial turning point and the movie in the creditable position of having reversed a straight 8 seasons of decline. Since they can't hope to spent \$65m and 4-odd years writing each episode to the same standard, I would prefer it if they pulled a *Star Trek*: end the series and switch to quadennial movie releases.

As for funniness, there were two or three LOLCHORTLE moments, 70 minutes of makes-you-smile-rather-than-makes-you-laugh, and 10 minutes of get-on-with-it slowness in the middle. And Bart drinks whiskey. WHAT? Consider this paragraph me registering my disgust on the internet within minutes.

* I write from the vanishing point of the future, where all inevitable things have come to pass, such as every *Simpsons* series being available on DVD.

Secondly, I also saw *Borat* this week. It's a lot less than the sum of the parts I've already seen on YouTube. That's not to say it's unfunny - just that it's a sketch show that gains little from being packaged in movie format beyond the excellent callback gag with the "new arm from

Since they switched to HD in Season 21, this will almost certainly never happen.

America" at the end. Its absolute funniness peaks higher than The Simpsons on a laugh-intensity scale: bear > spider-pig, basically. But in the same way that the most intense spicy sauce is not necessarily the best, I prefer The Simpsons.

Thirdly, I saw *Die Hard 4.0* last weekend! There is a website, <http://www.diehard4.co.uk>. I tried going to <http://trac.diehard4.co.uk> to submit my complaints in the hope that they might release a Die Hard 4.1, but alas, the writers' understanding of information technology is stuck in the *Hackers* era. The plot goes like this: anything electronic (or even electric) can be broken, fixed, manipulated, taken over, or destroyed... by hacking. Cell network dead? Just hack the phone until it can connect to a satellite! Good guys using a satellite to bypass your hacked cell network? Just hack the satellite until it goes offline! Good guys holed up in a gas distribution centre? Hack it until it blows up! Hack, hack, hack go the writers.

There is a bizarre scene where the hacker dude decides Bruce Willis's crusty old hotwiring technique will immobilize a car, so does something inexplicable with the glove compartment: he calls up the car's sysadmin or something and pleads with her to start the car. DOUBLE WHAT? Even if this was meant to be a SF film, weren't all the country's communication networks down at the time? Does BMW have its own internet just for cars? Die Hard 4.0 is not a comedy, but I found it at least as funny as Borat, and at any rate its action set-pieces are awesome explosiony testosterone-fests.

Fourthly, I saw *Death Race 2000* (IMDB [plot keywords](#): Topless / Neo Nazi / Crushed Head / Wheelchair / Impalement / Grandmother Granddaughter Relationship / Post Apocalyptic). **It's the Carmageddon film!** This is billed as a SF action film, but I laughed almost continuously for 79 solid minutes. They hadn't invented post-modern tongue-in-cheek self-referential humour in 1975, so it's all done with a shockingly straight face. Even *Battle Royale* couldn't take itself completely seriously.

Well, what does she expect? You leave your navigator lying around, naturally somebody is going to run over him.

This film is a masterpiece, and funnier than any of the other three. I think comedy only happens when you're not trying too hard.

Tags: films, reviews

Rsync about

5:19PM, 2ND AUGUST 2007

One of the problems with being alive in the 21st century is that you quickly accumulate vast quantities of personal data which need backing up. Some villains keep their inboxes clean by *deleting* mail once it's read, and are satisfied with only having family photos dating back to their last hard drive crash. I, however, prefer to obsess over making backups:

```
#!/bin/bash xterm -T "Photo Backup script" -e rsync \
-e 'ssh -i /local/path/to/ssh-rsync-key' --partial --delete --progress \
-avv /local/path/to/source/ \
remoteuser@remote.host.com:/remote/path/to/destination/
```

I have that in a file called "Photo Backup.sh" on my Ubuntu desktop. It is executable, and whenever I feel like jamming up the phone lines, I double click on it and it begins the mammoth task of synchronising my local photo directory with a remote one. Since I don't use rsync's bandwidth limiting option, I just close it down with a `ctrl-c` when I want to use other web apps. I wasn't joking about it jamming up the phone lines either, since I have a Vonage line. If a call arrives when this script is uploading, the voice quality is awful. Apparently I have a very dumb wireless router upstairs.

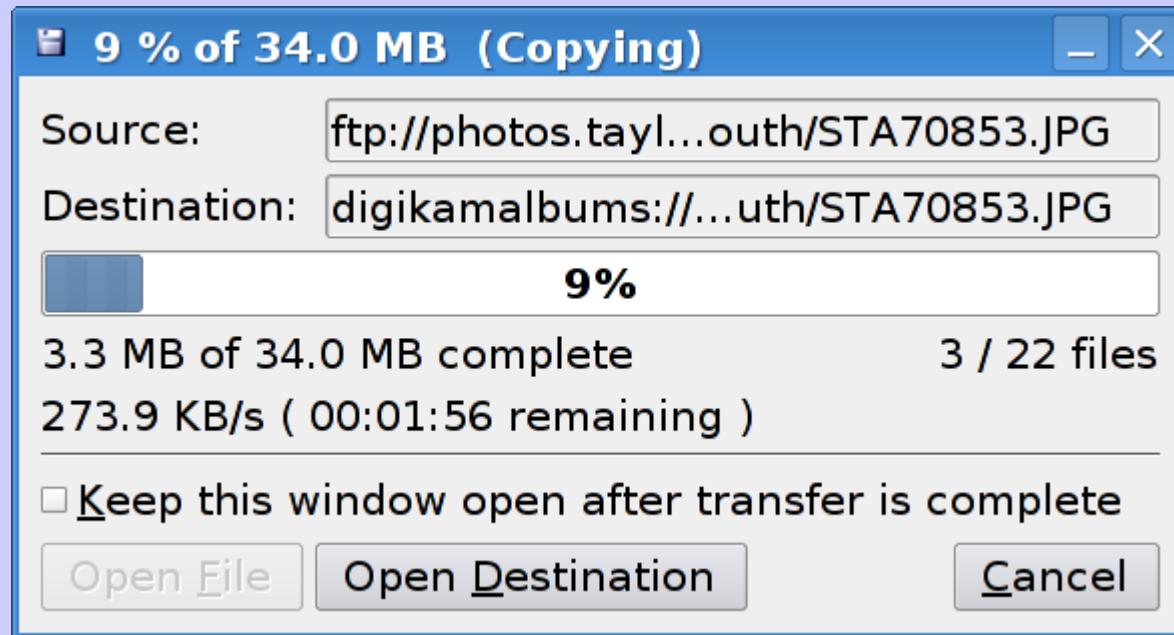
[This page](#) explains how to set up SSH on your local and remote machines to accept passwordless login. Read it, do it, personalise the script for your particular host and directories, and away you go!

With Virgin Media's 'L' package (4Mb/s download, 512Kb/s upload), and without leaving the computer on all night or silly things like that, it took about 10 weeks to upload about 30GB of pictures. Crazy long, sure, but it's worth it. I hope.

Tags: programming, foss

KDE 4eva

10:49AM, 6TH AUGUST 2007



Drag and drop copying straight from FTP into [Digikam](#): this is why KDE, Konqueror and ioslaves rock so hard.

Tags: foss

Animal rights and animal responsibilities

4:46PM, 6TH AUGUST 2007



Tags: photos, ethics

Mario Galaxy

4:21PM, 18TH AUGUST 2007

[Here's a preview of Mario Galaxy](#), which looks like the only game I'm interested in getting for my Wii. Since February, it's been a dedicated Wii Sports box, with occasional usage as a photo and YouTube viewer. But I'm now reminded of how much I enjoyed playing Mario 64 (in emulation anyway; not being able to cheat with instant save/restore points would've rendered the game infinitely frustrating for me), and am in the mood to play something genuinely fun. Games these days all seem to be such a chore (cf. gold grinding in World of Warcraft actually being a full-time paid career).



Tags: games

Misinformation, onionism from Microsoft

12:51PM, 24TH AUGUST 2007

[Microsoft's new anti-Linux site](#) seems to be written by refugees from [The Onion](#):

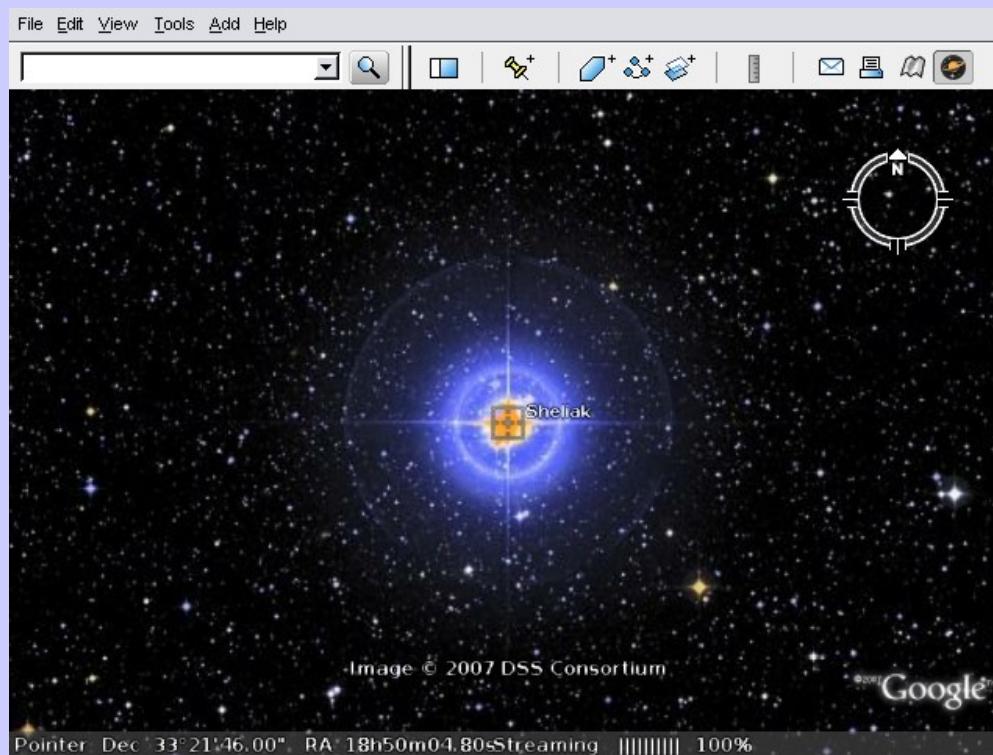


Tags: software, amusements, foss

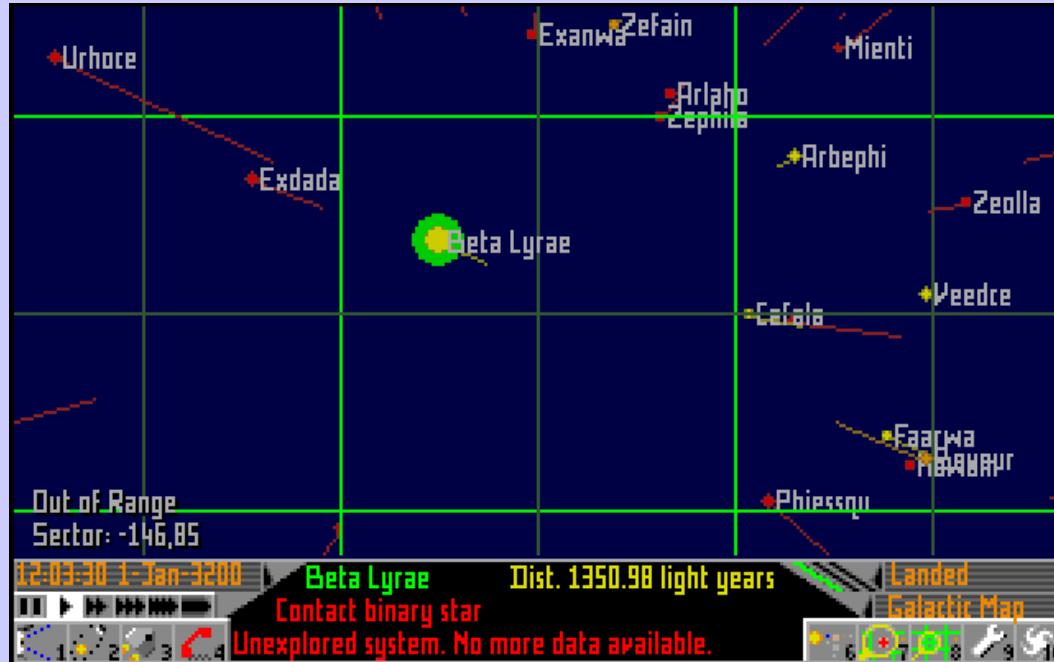
Google Sky

2:11PM, 24TH AUGUST 2007

[Google Sky](#) is not as browsable as plain old Earth unless you're familiar with the night sky already. I tried zooming into Sheliak, also known as Beta Lyrae, and didn't find much extra info on this famous "contact binary" star.



At least it didn't crash hard like the previous state-of-the-art Beta Lyrae viewer:



Related: [An incredible disassembly, exposition, and reconstruction of the original Frontier: Elite 2 galaxy-generating source code!](#)

Tags: software, games, space

Cosma's Notebooks

6:58PM, 25TH AUGUST 2007

Cosma's Notebooks are a treasure trove; an infovore's reading log. I quote from the FAQ:

...
2.2 Where do you find the time to read so much?
I don't watch TV, I have no social life, and I read about a page a minute, if there isn't any math to slow me down.

...
3.1 Why are there so many references to books, and so few links to things on the Net, especially other people's work on the Net?
First answer: Because I'm an egotistical book-lover.
Second answer: Because, not writing books, I'm not jealous of those who do.
Third answer: Because, on almost any subject you care to name, there is very little on the web but elementary expositions, provisional and forbidding technicalities, and rubbish. The net, in its present infantile condition, gives access, not to the sum of preserved human knowledge, but rather to advertisements, cranks, journalists, and technical reports.

...
Cosma Shalizi's review of *A New Kind of Science* is titled *A Rare Blend of Monster Raving Egomania and Utter Batshit Insanity*, and is the stuff of legend. This is the kind of book review that's better than the book.

Tags: books, web, reviews

Now at bactra.org.

Nokia N95

4:59PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2007

I [drooled](#) over the OpenMoko Neo1973 recently, but it still has beta hardware, alpha software, and an ever-slipping release date. Meanwhile, my Sony-Ericsson K750i is literally gathering dust inside the screen (the casing must be leaking) and the control stick is jamming. Plus, it's old tech, and I'm a hardware nerd.

Hence the Nokia N95. 5 megapixel camera, 480p video recording, built-in GPS to track my whereabouts, a proper OS, voice recording for [memos to Diane](#), and oodles more. Nokia are advertising it as a computer: "It's what computers have become"... unless by that they mean that computers have become mobile phones.

So I called Orange on 450 to request a PAC code. Their automated menu charged me 25p for the privilege of being told the office was closed for today, so I consulted the [excellent saynoto0870.com](#) and located an 0800 number for the porting department: 0800 376 2285. They won't send it out over phone, email, or SMS. Presumably this is because a PAC code is even more security critical than my name, address, account password, PIN, credit card number and credit card security code, all of which they are happy to transmit over the air.

Simultaneously, I ordered the new phone from [3](#). There is a bug in their order form which prevented me from giving them my previous address, so I gave them my previous-but-one address. The new phone was scheduled to arrive on Thursday 9th August.

I initially started writing this post to show off some of the leet things the N95 can do, but it slowly turned into a diary of the madness that is switching mobile networks and dealing with dodgy hardware. Here we go:

8th August: Not so fast. No followup email from 3, so I give them a ring. After being passed around call centres, they tell me I've passed the credit check but they still need proof of my address. Huh. Nice of them to tell me. A bank statement will suffice apparently, so he gives me a number to fax a copy to. Wait: fax?! Do fax machines still exist? He advises me to go to my nearest 3 store and get them to sort it out. I do. The 3 store says it's all taken care of now.

The guy on the phone told me to wait until 6pm to see if I've received a confirmation of dispatch email, otherwise to phone and arrange a different delivery day. It's up to me to arrange an alternative delivery day if I hear nothing? Shouldn't they at least tell me there's a problem? We'll see.

9th August: Nothing has arrived, in the post or via email. I call them again to enquire. My proof of address has apparently been accepted, and is in the "validation" phase. The guy on the phone said "90% of orders pass through this phase". Er, they do, do they? Is that a good thing? He said there is nothing more for me to do, and that I should wait to receive a dispatch confirmation email. Again, if I've heard nothing by 6pm, I'm to phone back. Why? He already said there's nothing more I can do.

10th August: The phone *did* arrive! But I was away all weekend, so couldn't collect it until the next Monday.

13th August: It's here! I start playing with the phone. It's quite cool, but a little slow. The video recording is amazing. The Symbian interface is sluggish and all-round pretty nasty, but then I do have extraordinarily high standards after having used super-speedy Ubuntu/KDE apps. The PAC code also arrives from Orange. I decide not to port the number immediately, as I still had a bit of PAYG credit to use up, and I have no confidence Orange will refund it.

A couple of days later I start getting the infamous "SIM card registration failed" message, followed by "Insert SIM card", which renders the phone unusable until a restart. Some forum post suggested the SIM card wasn't seated correctly, and that I should put a thin piece of paper between it and the clamp. No luck. I went into the menus to Settings - Connection - Packet Data and changed "Packet data connection" to "When available" (it was on "When needed"). No change. Can I put up with this?

17th August: Phoned 3 and asked them to port my number, and they told me it would be done on the 24th. WHAT? 7 days?!

19th August: "Insert SIM card" is back, along with a tendency for the N95 to reset itself randomly. I called 3 services, who determined in short order that I should take the handset to the nearest repair centre (Carphone Warehouse) to rule out hardware flaws. He said they will have it back to me within 7-8 hours. Fine. It's not connected to my real number yet anyway.

20th August: Carphone Warehouse looked at it, took the battery and SIM card out, tried another SIM card in the phone for 8 seconds, then declared there was nothing they could do with it. I phone 3 and they agreed to send a courier to collect the phone. He arrived about 4 hours later; not bad. The guy on 333 said they'd have my phone fixed and back to me by Wednesday.

24th August: It's Friday, and no news from 3. Furthermore, my number has now been successfully ported to my new phone! That means I don't have any phone at all now. This is not looking good.

25th August: I phone them up on 0800 3586795 to ask where my phone is, and a guy tells me it's still in the repair place. I tell him I'm going on holiday at the end of next week, and he promises to do his best to get them to ship it back to me by Friday. They'd better.

28th August: They haven't called back, so I call them again. Glasgow tells me the phone has been shipped out "with new internals", and that it'll arrive tomorrow. Yay! I ask for a refund for the missing days, and Customer Services calculate that (20 days without the phone being usable = £13) and give it to me. Pretty good. So assuming the phone arrives tomorrow, the story we have here is a hardware fault (Nokia's fault) that 3 have dealt with more or less admirably. We'll see if it's fixed though.

(I note with interest that when my call to 333 dropped due to the signal fading, he called me back immediately; good service, poor network?).

29th August: The phone arrived early, and it said "Insert SIM card" as soon as it was charged and turned on. Shit. Restarted and it worked for an hour, then reset itself while I was telling the Web browser to use Wifi. And then when connected to the PC in USB data transfer mode. I phone 333, tell them that the problem has returned, and they agree that I need a new SIM card. Unfortunately my old one gets deactivated as soon as the new one is sent out, and there is a 3 working day wait for a new one, and since it's Wednesday and I'm going to Portugal on Saturday morning for 2 weeks, I'm stuck with this buggy phone until I get back. Let's hope I can work around it.

30th August: 3 phone **me!** It was their engineering department wanting more info on the problem, specifically the 6-char string on the back of the SIM card. I told them I intended to buy a basic PAYG SIM card, so that I could at least use the non-phone parts of the phone while away. They said it would work, but that they didn't know if I'd be able to get a refund. I went to the 3 shop and did so. £10. The phone worked brilliantly all day.

17th September: Back from holiday, I phone and request a new SIM card. They said it would arrive tomorrow.

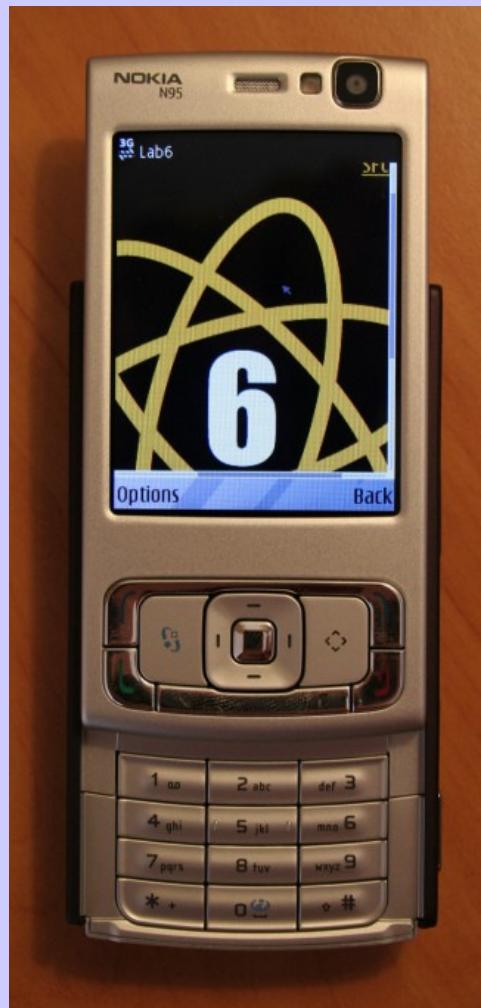
18th September: It didn't.

19th September: Or today. Hmm. Guess it's still 3 working days after all. Why can't they just say so rather than making hopeless promises?

20th September: Finally! A new SIM card arrives, and it works. Furthermore, I call up 3 and ask them to refund everything I've paid up to this point, except the PAYG card, which I think is reasonable. They do so. I'm happy.

21st September: 24 hours without a problem. The conclusion is now that 3 have a bad batch of SIM cards which are incompatible with the N95, and that if you're getting the "Insert SIM card" message, you need a new one. I can't say this has been the best start to a new phone, but I'm fairly pleased with the way 3 handled it.

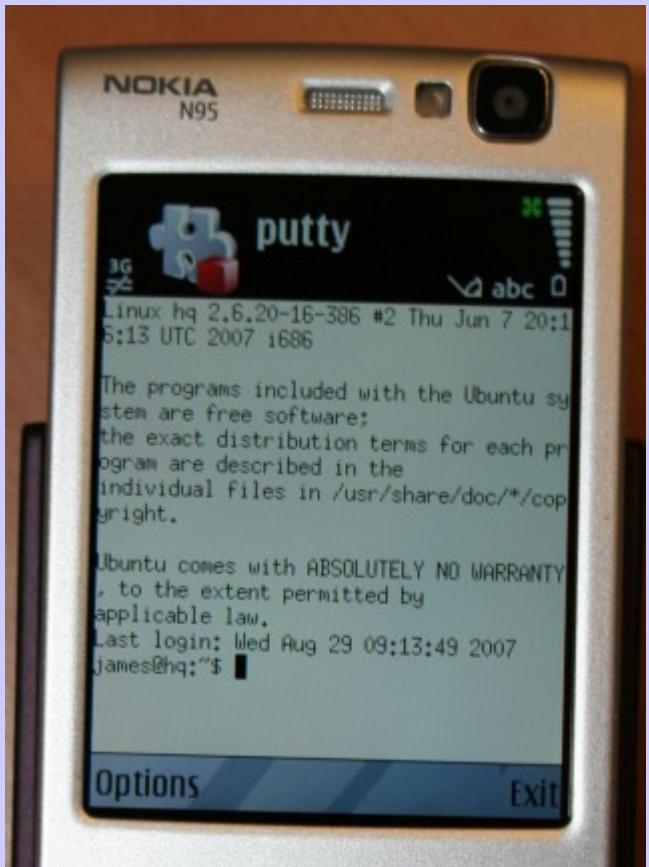
So! This N95 then. Is it as great as it was cracked up to be all those months ago? The answer... is yes!



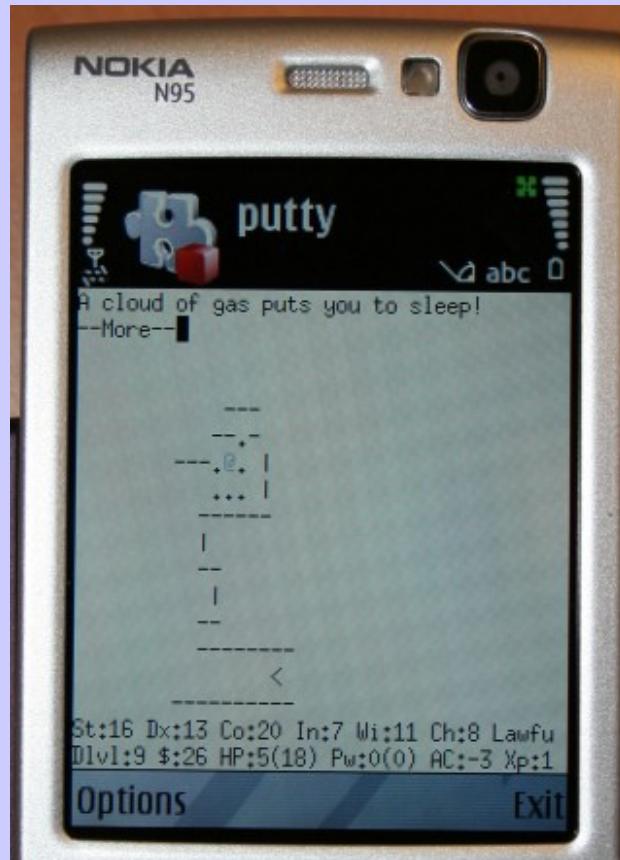
Browsing all the most important websites is easy.



Actually the built-in browser isn't too fluid. I expect Opera would be nicer, if they made a version of Opera for Series 60.



Putty *does* work though, enabling use of high-end enterprise-level software such as...



... NetHack! Playing it **is** possible! All letters are typeable on the keypad in old-school 4-taps-on-the-pqrs-key-for-an-s style, and Putty has a menu option for sending Ctrl characters. Other characters, like # and , are available by trawling through the character selector. The only major problem is that you can't see the whole screen at once. Some might call this an intractable problem, but Zen ascensions *have* been done...

[ScummVM](#) has been ported to Series 60, so there are some slightly more user-friendly games out there too:



It's beautiful, with perfectly emulated audio too.

Finally, some other points of interest:

- The N95 generates some of the worst "GSM buzz" I've ever heard. Is this 3G in action? Because it means I can't put the phone anywhere near speakers.
- The slider on my first handset wobbled, even when closed. The second handset is a lot better, but still not perfectly solid.
- The Wi-fi connection is nice, but drops frequently.

- The map application is **brilliant**. I used it probably 3 dozen times while in Portugal, and even the tiniest, cobbledest roads are marked on and navigated through perfectly.
- Video wobbles as if the sensor is printed on a sheet of thin paper which shakes whenever you pan or move.
- Autofocus sometimes fails persistently on certain scenes; when you don't get the green square, the picture is guaranteed to be rubbish.
- There are too many buttons in too little space around the directional pad. It's too easy to press the wrong one.
- The speakers are excellent.
- I have rearranged Settings so that it appears on the top level menu rather than under Tools.
- The default image/video name is DDMMYYYY. This means an image taken 1st January 2007 (01012007.jpg) will be listed before one taken 2nd January 2006 (02012006.jpg) in most directory views. This is wrong. It should be YYYYMMDD.

The next step is to find a neat fold-up bluetooth keyboard, so I can have myself a good ol' outputting-to-the-TV laptop!

Tags: hardware, bleh, reviews, design

News of the World scumbaggery

6:11PM, 21ST SEPTEMBER 2007

Hi there,

*I'm a feature writer doing a background piece on N***** W****, who was in your year at ***** *****. Her girlband F***** A***** are currently starring on X-Factor. I'm looking for people who knew her well or have pictures of her to get in touch; there's money available for the right information.*

*Contact me in confidence at s****:r****@notw.co.uk or on 07979***** if you think you can help.*

Thanks in advance,

*S**** R*****

"there's money available for the right information"?! Swivel, News of the World.

Tags: media, music, amusements

Dreamhosting

12:20PM, 26TH SEPTEMBER 2007

Dreamhost have been through another rough patch this year. A [break-in](#), a [DDoS](#), and [unfortunate rants from ex-customers](#). The latter appeared on Digg with its claim of 83% uptime, so I decided to check that. I got a free account with [HostTracker](#) and got them to ping the site once every 15 minutes. They send an email whenever the site is unavailable to their bots. After 3 or so months, the cumulative uptime is apparently 99.46%! This result is highly suspicious. For a start, HostTracker has the habit of sending Error Alert messages when the site is fine, and sometimes not sending them when it isn't. More damningly, an "Error Alert"/"Operation Restored" email pair once reported a downtime of over 14 hours, and yet their web interface still reports a total of only 11 hours and 27 minutes, ever. HostTracker is thus not particularly useful. [Others may be better :\)](#)

In the last week, HostTracker has sent out an email detailing their attempts to move some freeloaders like me to paid accounts. You can [apparently buy](#) 100 years of premium service for the low, low price of \$2899.99. That'll see you through to the year 2107, by which time [Wikipedia says](#) the [FAT](#) filesystem's date field will overflow. I recommend that any prospective customers considering the 100 year deal send HostTracker an email around about January 2106 to check they've upgraded to a better filesystem, giving them a year's notice just in case they haven't.

I find Dreamhost's *files forever* feature ("every file you upload is stored by us forever, with no recurring cost!") more credible than any guarantee of 100 years service despite being, technically, infinitely more generous. But despite a glowing daily report of uptime, personal experience tells me my server has been down for hours at a time, and slow for days at a time.

I exchanged emails with their support crew (who are by and large excellent), and we never found out what the problem was. It just disappeared.

So: to get back to Dreamhost. There is one more amusing anecdote to tell before the denouement: when I posted in the [DDoS thread on dreamhoststatus.com](#), I got an email from one of their rivals! What separates this from run of the mill spam was that the email was addressed to my non-lab6 email address, using my full name. Those do not appear on this website. The perpetrators had obviously gone and looked up my details using WHOIS! Spammers I can handle, but [stalking spammers](#) are a scarier prospect.

Despite all these grumblings over Dreamhost, I'm pretty happy with what they offer. Tons of resources, ridiculously cheap, and [an amusing blog](#). The only downside is the uptime, and for ~£12 a year, I can live with that. That's using one of those \$97 off coupons though, so it remains to be seen what else is available for ~£60 a year when the time comes to renew this October.

Oh yes, and since everyone else is doing it, use the promo code GIVEMEYOURCASH when signing up to Dreamhost! You get a measly buck off anything you order, but also the warm fuzzy feeling of supporting this website throughout the long, hard years to come. Or, you know, go for one of the \$97-off coupons. It's fine. Really. No hard feelings. Seriously. Have a nice day. Watch your step on the way out. Yes, it's that way. Go on. A bit futher. That's it! Hah! Gotcha wee miserly neebr!

Tags: meta, web

Freedom Universal Keyboard

1:37PM, 26TH SEPTEMBER 2007

Look at this:



Quite cool, right? Well, yeah! It's the Universal Keyboard from [Freedom Input](#). Here are my notes:

- The Nokia N95 is officially unsupported but it mostly works. It won't type in some text entry fields in J2ME apps like the contacts list in [Google Mail](#), but at least the main body of the email can be typed in a generic text entry thingy like when writing an SMS.

- This is *not* the same as the old "Freedom Keyboard" from the same company. The original does not support the Bluetooth HID profile. Unfortunately, many retailers sell the new version under the old name. For example, [PC World](#).
- The N95's built-in wireless keyboard app *just about* manages to connect to the keyboard (after no less than a crash and reboot), but the official driver is better. Unfortunately, it's still not perfect, as the N95 is not officially supported, and it features a flaky and useless unlocking scheme which I believe exists to prevent people using their driver on other wireless keyboards. Closed source strikes again.
- The hardware is light, compact, and looks good. It can be locked in the unfolded position for use on your lap, but the locking mechanism feels *extremely* flimsy, and still doesn't quite lock it flat.
- Typing in a terminal in PuTTY doesn't quite work. Something seems to be going wrong with escape codes. [I filed a bug report!](#)

Most importantly of all, when you combine this with the N95's slick TV-out cable, you have a portable computer with a keyboard and large screen! Nearly all TVs have composite-in sockets, and nearly everywhere has data coverage, so this is a brilliant mobile computing platform.

Tags: hardware, reviews

Robert Jordan killed by amyloidosis, Wheel of Time killed by CMF

12:04PM, 27TH SEPTEMBER 2007

I wrote in an email recently that I have so far refused to watch *Lost* because the series is being strung out by the writers so that it lasts as long as is profitable, rather than as long as the story goes on for. I call it CMF: Cascading Mysteries Failure. It's when a popular mystery series widens its scope and produces more episodes in order to keep the gravy train rolling, usually by clearing up one original mystery while introducing five new ones. The show thus begins to sprawl, the plot becomes slack, and the fans become frustrated at being continually teased without any payoff. It happened to *Twin Peaks*, it happened to *The X-files*, and from my distant vantage point, it looks like it's happening to *Lost*.

Of course, the fact that I've watched precisely zero episodes means that I'm not exactly the world's greatest *Lost* fan, so this diagnosis may be completely wrong.

I mention CMF to note the passing of [Robert Jordan](#), writer of epic fantasy. Someone I knew in Brazil (who I believe was called Conrad) tried to get me into the *Wheel of Time* books, and I always put off reading them because of the less than rave reviews of the later books in the series. I didn't want to put a lot of time and effort into reading a gigantic fantasy cycle if I would be forced to read bad books to find out how the story ends. Well, it seems the story ended on September 16th 2007 when Jordan died, taking the unfinished final book of the series with him. [It may be finished posthumously](#), as Jordan himself may actually have intended (he gave extensive notes to his confidantes during his illness), but it's not the same; if the fans merely wanted plot points, they could have read the Wikipedia summary.

So am I ever going to read the, by all accounts excellent, first two books of the Wheel of Time?
Unlikely.

Tags: books, tv

Fake Chinese Laptop

10:01AM, 29TH SEPTEMBER 2007

In a shop called Loja Chinesa ("Chinese Shop"), an outlet of all things cheap, plastic and Chinese, I found this:



The non-qwerty keyboard layout is understandable, but the number row reading 123456712? They use Hindu-Arabic numerals even in China, don't they? I can't remember what the sticker on the bottom right read, but it wasn't "Microsoft" or "Windows". However, there is significant innovation here: no less than four hardware buttons dedicated to smileys!

The fake Intel Inside sticker is dainty:



Check out the screen:



Yes, it's just glued on, and it's not even a real screenshot. I like "interner explorer", and the sheer ballsiness of "PREEMINENT ORIGINAL".

Finally, the whole hunk of junk had the kind of *costus minimus* squeak a real laptop engineer couldn't dream of building:

Tags: amusements, hardware, design, china, fakery

One laptop per comrade

12:57PM, 5TH OCTOBER 2007

The XO laptops are [apparently just a little bit excellent](#). Who wouldn't want a "spillproof, rainproof, dustproof and drop-proof" tablet PC/laptop with a 6 hour battery life, 200dpi screen and truly zero configuration wireless mesh networking? Especially for \$400, but that price is only available for a few weeks in November. After that, you'll have to go to Nigeria and steal one from a child.

The issue of theft and resale is real and may yet cripple the project. Since the plan is to completely forego selling to individuals and get developing world *governments* to order the laptops in \$100m batches, then give them out to kids, we're talking about a giant free handout to, by definition, poor uneducated youths. The laptops are valuable and easily tradable, so might there not be a slight temptation for those living on the poverty line to cash in their free gift for something more obviously useful? [Nicholas Negroponte has heard this objection](#), but I find his response unconvincing. You can't stop people selling their laptops if they want to, you can't LoJack the device with disable hardware if it's as open as OLPC claim, and the idea that they can "*make this machine so distinctive that it is socially a stigma to be carrying one if you are not a child or a teacher*" has been blown out of the water by the [Give 1 Get 1](#) programme, not to mention rave reviews in the New York Times.

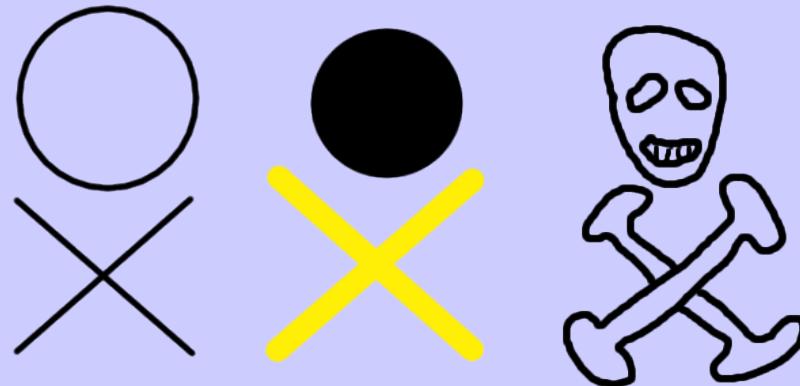
The vision of millions of aspiring schoolchildren geeking out to wireless Wikipedia is beautiful, and I really hope it works, but I think implementing it as a Big Government Scheme is a mistake, and such a mistake as to possibly be the undoing of the whole thing. The key premise of the project is to take advantage of economies of scale by centralizing and collectivising the production. This is what the USSR did with farming, and while large farms

can be more efficient than small farms, it was a complete disaster because of the total abandonment of traditional economic incentives. They had frequent famines, and the whole Soviet Union was eventually done in by its own lack of economic nous. It turned out that markets were much better at lowering costs than 5-year plans.

I end with a quote from the NYT review:

The laptop is now called the XO, because if you turn the logo 90 degrees, it looks like a child.

Really?



Tags: economics, hardware, government

A mlog before an evening

6:12PM, 5TH OCTOBER 2007

I've just been alternately boiled alive (or is that roasted?) and frozen to death in the sauna cycle. They say it's good for people in general, so I'm hoping it's good for people with a cold in particular. Sniffle.

I hope to see *Atonement* tonight. It's the first proper film I've seen in ages, having been stuck in the genre ghetto by watching too many comedies and horrors. It'd better be good or I'm abandoning middle-class media forever and going back to a yummy junk-film diet.

(Fingers crossed this works this time...)

Tags: films, health

Superbad and Atonement

1:55PM, 9TH OCTOBER 2007

I've seen two films recently:

Superbad: The dick-joke movie to end all dick-joke movies. Dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick. Extraordinarily good. Now strike me down as a hypocrite for enjoying tasteless chaos in the extreme, but I found the bad-boy police subplot of this film to be a little too much glorification of reckless psychotic behaviour and have a little too little comedic payoff. There was no comeuppance for the cops, so the message of that part of the film came across as "driving and shooting when drunk is all good fun as long as you can gain the cooperation of anybody you happen to run over." Hmm.

Atonement turned out to be excellent. They said it was genre-defying, but I'd say drama is its own genre. There is an amazing minutes-long scene halfway through where the cameraman walks around an encampment on a beach in France, taking in the (in-)action. It's technically incredible, but I couldn't help think of that other famous 4-minute long uncut sequence:

<http://www.youtube.com/v/K06wDn3XsZE>

Films like this are total Oscar-bait, but however corrupt and self-serving the Oscars may be, the end result is a list of pretty damn good films; if a director seeks to emulate any of them, that's fine by me.

Tags: films, reviews

Fantasy literature roundup

1:55PM, 9TH OCTOBER 2007

I went on holiday last month, without a computer. That gave me a chance to read some of the printed todo-pile that's been building up [since the 1430s](#).

The Cassini Division, by Ken MacLeod: The publication dates may prove otherwise, but this felt like a fictionalized rehash of a pseudo-scientific paper on [Matrioshka Brains](#) I read years ago, glued together by some Iain M Banksisms. The political axe-grinding severely stunted my interest at points, but I plowed on and found the tale of post-human cold war mostly satisfactory. Only now that I come to look up how to spell "MacLeod" do I find that it's actually the *last* book in a trilogy. Huh. I've never done that before. I'm tempted to read the other two to provide a little more closure and perhaps give the series a chance to up its rating, but the first book is apparently about the "fall revolution", the event that lead to the anarcho-socialist takeover of the world, and the source of all the petty, bitter politics that I found so obnoxious in the third book. Frankly, I have reason to believe there are better things to read.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, by JK Rowling: According to good reviews, the series has avoided [CMF](#) and ended well. So I felt it was finally time to find out what all the fuss is about, and start reading the meaty end of the Harry Potter heptalogy (*septology* appears to be the more common usage, but *heptalogy* makes more sense, being derived from Greek rather than Latin in correct analogy with *trilogy*, although the *Alien* series plumped for *quadrilogy* over *tetralogy*; I'm sure they'll change their minds if they ever decide to sell *Alien vs. Predator* in the same box set and are forced to choose between *pentalogy* and *quinquology*).

I enjoyed reading HP6 immensely. It's written just a hell of a lot better than *The Cassini Division*, even though it's essentially the plot from *Lord of the Rings* (Harry = Frodo, Dumbledore = Gandalf, Voldemort = Sauron, Horcrux = Ring, etc.) melded with some teenage relationship soap opera. But then *Star Wars* has its [fair share of similarities to Lord of the Rings](#). Are all Epic Tales homeomorphic?

Er, anyway. The back story on Voldemort is told well and I look forward to finishing the series - something I haven't done in a long time.

The Last Continent, by Terry Pratchett: Does every Terry Pratchett book end with a storm, or an explosion, or a variation on the phrase "And then the world exploded"? Spotting the parodies of Australian stereotypes is the main activity for readers of this book. There are about 947. The humour wears thin after the first 80 or 90, and what remains is a very ordinary Discworld book with little to distinguish it from any of the others. I was not impressed, but perhaps I've just read too many of them.

The Last Hero, by Terry Pratchett: On the other hand, this was much better! It's the first illustrated book I've read since I was about 4 (which I believe was *The Giant Jam Sandwich*). Paul Kirby collaborated with Terry Pratchett to create all the drawings, so they're relevant and funny rather than pictures tacked on by an editor. The shorter story format is a relief too. I think my complaints about Pratchett-fatigue revolve around joke dilution, and there's none of that here.

Tags: books, reviews

In Rainbows

2:03PM, 10TH OCTOBER 2007

In Rainbows is out, and downloadable for zero pounds, but not necessarily zero cost. As of today, the website is slow, but just about functional. If you can get through the slashdotting, digging, or possibly a hypothetical real world source of megatraffic, it will ask you for lots of details: name, email address, postal address, postcode, and mobile number.

Alternatively, get it from The Pirate Bay. No private data changes hands, it's arguably legal, and the download takes minutes and is immune to traffic swarms.

I have my doubts that "free" distribution will catch on. Are Radiohead comfortable with people sharing the album through non-official channels, bypassing their data collection? Are they just doing it because they're now part of the rich, liberal elite who can afford to absorb the costs of filesharing, like rich, liberal elites in general argue passionately for taxes they can comfortably afford? How many mega-bands are there these days anyway?

Tags: copyright, music

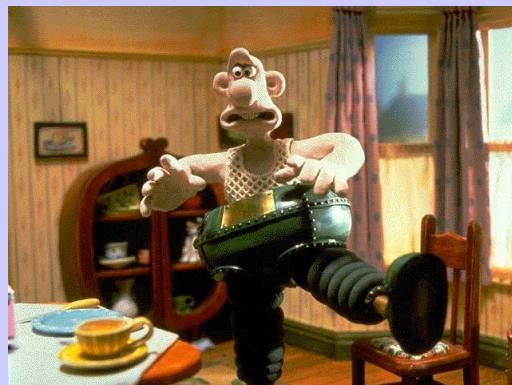
The Wrong GUI

12:11PM, 11TH OCTOBER 2007

I've never liked Apple's brushed-metal interfaces:



And now I realise why:



In Wallace & Gromit's *The Wrong Trousers*, the Techno Trousers are hacked by an evil penguin, who replaces their controls with a blank, brushed-metal panel. No controls for you, user!

Tags: software, tv, design

Wordpress 2.3

1:46PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2007

Wordpress 2.3 has been out for a while. Here's the good:

- Tag unions and intersections rule! Film reviews:
<http://james.lab6.com/topics/films+reviews>
- It's Wordpress. It's good by default.

And the bad:

- Tagging support is extremely limited. There is no `has_tag()` function for writing cool backend things - a fact I discovered *after* converting all my categories to tags. There is no way to convert a tag back into a category, and no way to edit or delete a tag. I also didn't do a backup immediately before upgrade (note: always do a backup before upgrading). Thankfully, Dreamhost's database restore feature rocks, and since my [last post on them](#) ended ambiguously, let me say that I now think they rock both completely and consistently, in a state of supra-Gödelian rockitude.
- I got seriously burned by [this bug](#).
- My [pet bug](#) wasn't fixed for this release, but that's alright; I'm in it for the long haul ([I found a new one!](#)).
- Blog by email is [still rather broken](#). There's no way to specify a tag, or category, or have attachments posted inline.

No need for tag intersections any more – just pass the whole document through a friendly LLM.

Tags: meta, web, foss

Design Principles

3:33PM, 12TH OCTOBER 2007

I've been doing some major codesmithing on my Wordpress templates in preparation for releasing them into the wild as an official Wordpress Theme! In the process I've made the year pages (e.g. [/2007/](#)) generate truly *beautiful* HTML, not that a single damnable person in the world cares (there are new easter eggs for potential carers just in case...). Besides that, I've made new design discoveries:

Pagination considered harmful

You know how big websites like to break up their long articles into multiple pages to force you to click many times to read through the whole article, in order to place a larger acreage of adverts in front of you? [It's called pagination](#), and it's usually bad.

Newspaper articles, blog posts, and almost any other kind of textual content is, bytewise, very small. A 10,000 word essay is less than 60KB of HTML and can be quickly downloaded, parsed and displayed even on a rusty 2.5G cellphone. There is no technical reason to paginate. Since sane websites invite their users to scroll up and down, there is little design reason to paginate either. As far as I can tell, there are only two reasons to paginate web pages:

1. If you're building a web-interface to a gigantic database like, say, Google, or Flickr, it's easy to formulate queries that return hundreds of millions of objects, so some sort of throttling is desirable.
2. If you're a business, you probably *like* forcing the user to see more adverts.

Are there any other reasons? I don't think so. Here are some good reasons *not* to:

Pagination, in the sense of making the user click through to the next page, remains harmful.

Pagination, in the sense of dividing content into numbered pages, is now essential.

1. Users are annoyed when their reading is interrupted by having to click.
2. You can't do a full-text search on the whole article.
3. Your PageRank is spread out across all the subpages.

That's why I've removed all pagination from my Wordpress theme. The most egregious example of this is the [linkblog](#), which shows every single post. Perhaps this will flood something one day, but posting at my current rate for the next 30 years would still generate less than 400KB of HTML.

The logical conclusion might be that all content should be stuck on the root page and you should do away with URIs altogether, but aside from that being plain madness, it would only work if all the content had a common theme. [Here's an example of a very long, well-structured document](#); it wouldn't make any semantic sense to have the authors' cat photo database on the same page. The lesson is this: start a different page for a different subject, and use the same page for the same subject.

Photo galleries and permalinks

I experimented briefly with an integrated photo gallery. [Gallery2](#) is the latest, greatest, biggest, heaviest incarnation of good old [Gallery 1](#). It does all kinds of [amazing things](#) relating to displaying photo albums on the web, but it fails completely to generate sane URIs. Here's an example:

`http://james.lab6.com/2003-02-11+chs+bits+and+pieces/DSCF0461.JPG.html`

Yuck. For a start, there's a useless `.html` hanging off the end. Even worse, deleting said `html` doesn't serve you the image as a JPEG file. To get that, you must visit:

`http://james.lab6.com/d/24-1/DSCF0461.JPG`

- The /d/ is part of Gallery's last-ditch attempt rescue its horrific default URIs (which I'm not even going to mention) using mod_rewrite. Slideshow URIs start with /v/ and the "add comment" form URI starts with /c/.
- The 24 is the item ID, a globally unique integer tied to every individual image which the developers will "[try not to change](#)" in the next version. That ain't reassuring.
- The -1 is another hack to force browsers to reload the image if it's changed.

The official solution for people who wish to have unchanging URIs is the "Permalink plugin".

That lets you assign an image, or an album, a short globally unique slug which you access at:

`http://james.lab6.com/f/mycoolphoto`

That's beyond diabolical. It's unexplorable (navigating up to `http://james.lab6.com/f/` gets you worse than nowhere: a PHP error), it *still* has useless /f/ cruft in it, and you have to create permalinks manually for every single image you want to have a permanent link. Which is surely all of them.

Worse still, some of these issues have [been on Gallery2's bug tracker since 2005](#), the [gallery-devel mailing list](#) is alarmingly bare, the [gallery-core mailing list](#) isn't public, and the [release schedule page has been abandoned](#). These are not the life signs of a healthy open source project.

On a practical level, integrating Gallery2 into an existing Wordpress blog is done via [WPG2](#), which itself takes a dim view of Gallery2's mod_rewrite shenanigans. The fact that WPG2 has a [Release Compatibility Matrix](#) (incomplete and out of date, of course) tells you all you need to know about the problems inherent in getting two content management systems to play nicely with each other. It's simply not tenable to synchronise the versions of three different software packages when they're all so picky. Moreover, third party Wordpress plugins cannot be relied

upon when it comes to building core functionality; they have an alarming tendency to become [suddenly derelict](#).

So Gallery2 is not yet ready for the long-term web, which is a real shame as it's otherwise the clear leader of gallery apps. The only thing that comes close is Flickr, and that's got its own two special problems: uploading and downloading.

In 2005 I bought a Flickr account and started uploading photos. Tagging was good fun and all, but their uploading tools were rubbish, tailored to users who upload one or two photos at a time. I checked again a week or two ago, and they're still rubbish. For users who already have thousands of photos in hundreds of albums, it's a hassle and causes a lot of duplicated effort.

As for downloading, Flickr is quite liberal about embedding images, but does its best to keep your data inside its walled garden. There is now [a tool to export all your photos](#), but I don't know what it does with tags and comments. I expect they are lost. Thus is the nature of the walled garden exposed: you are in somebody else's home, and the longer you spend inside, the harder it is to get out.

I stopped using Flickr when it became infeasible to continue bulk uploads, which is to say when the sweet taste of easy content sharing was overpowered by the bitter taste of vendor lock-in.

Social bookmarking and Digg icons

I added a little Digg icon on the blue sidebar for every page. After noticing precisely nothing for 5 days, I have come to agree with [this post](#), in particular the second comment:

You see so many blogs that are all nascar'd up with these things.

There's another comment by somebody who runs one of the social bookmarking sites:

4. People who are likely to save the current page as a bookmark are not random readers and visitors, but rather the regular users of the service. And guess what? They already have those bookmarklets and extensions handy in their browsers!

Nailed.

Bye-bye icons. I retain my grumpy old endorsement of Web 1.0 and my [original design inspiration](#).

Tags: meta, software, web, design, foss

Your television is lying to you

9:51AM, 15TH OCTOBER 2007

You really, really can't believe what you see on TV:

Federal authorities are actively investigating dozens of American television stations for broadcasting items produced by the Bush administration and major corporations, and passing them off as normal news. Some of the fake news segments talked up success in the war in Iraq, or promoted the companies' products.

I hadn't realised it was this bad in America. Maybe it's even worse here, and that's why we haven't heard about it. I like to think that if the BBC can get its giant, ballooning collective panties in such a twist over phone-in voting scandals, then it must take authenticity seriously enough not to fall for such commercial hijinks. But maybe that's what they want us to think; Blue Peter may just be the tip of the stomping fascist iceberg after all.

Tags: media, tv, fakery

Kubuntu 7.10 Gutsy Gibbon

10:17AM, 16TH OCTOBER 2007

Some early observations from using the [Release Candidate](#):

- I'm always impressed by the speed of the Ubuntu repositories. They never fail to max out my weedy 4Mb/s Virgin Broadband.
- My D-link DWL-122 USB Wi-Fi dongle now miraculously works without manual setup voodoo!
- Xgl was installed during my upgrade. This can be fixed with the following command:

```
$ sudo apt-get remove xserver-xgl
```

Nvidia users will get dramatically higher performance with the X.org server.

- Compiz is still completely broken. It just about works in *Ubuntu*, but *Kubuntu* users had better wait for 8.04.
 - **Update!**: Wait! Compiz *does* work! You have to add the following lines to the Screen section of your xorg.conf file:

```
Option      "AddARGBGLXVisuals" "True"
Option      "DisableGLXRootClipping" "True"
```

Then all that remains is to launch compiz and kde-window-decorator -- replace. The result is highly impressive, but quite unstable. There is a bug relating to running out of video RAM, thus getting black windows, that is only fixed in the [very latest Nvidia drivers](#), which you'll have to manually install.

- There's a KDE 3 version of [Dolphin](#), known as D3lphin, which is a surprisingly good, clean paring down of the messy Konqueror interface. Just be sure to turn off the gigantic information panel that defaults to dominating the right hand side of the window, unless you have an 80" monitor and only view directories with fewer than 10 files in them. The bookmarks panel is also strangely redundant since bookmarks can be accessed via a little icon just to the left of the breadcrumb navigation bar. I presume there will be a tree view in the KDE 4 version, along with all the promised visual goodies.
- Something is subtly wrong with sub-pixel hinting. It gives me a headache to look at the screen when it's turned on.

Tags: reviews, foss

It's not my fault that I'm so heavy, it's society. Society.

12:14PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2007

Insane new study on obesity:

Individuals can no longer be held responsible for obesity so government must act to stop Britain "sleepwalking" into a crisis, a report has concluded. [...]

Obesity, the authors concluded, was an inevitable consequence of a society in which energy-dense, cheap foods, labour-saving devices, motorised transport and sedentary work were rife.

In this environment it was surprising that anyone was able to remain thin, Dr Susan Jebb of the Medical Research Council said, and so the notion of obesity simply being a product of personal over-indulgence had to be abandoned for good.

There's truly nothing simple about mass epidemics, but let me try this argument on a different subject.

Kids today are prettier than ever. They are expert make-up artists, get plastic surgery to fix any flaws, real or imagined, and wear designer clothes. We see airbrushed super-kids on TV and in films, acting out lines written by adults, implying that these kids are intellectually mature as well as physically.

In this environment, it's surprising that any adults are able to remain non-pedophiles.

Believing that you are not responsible for your own life is a dangerous, emasculating, self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tags: health, ethics, psychology

WMA vs MP3 vs Ogg

11:56AM, 22ND OCTOBER 2007

I acquired one or two files in Microsoft's insidious [Windows Media Audio](#) format over the weekend. I pondered briefly over whether WMA is *actually* worse than MP3; they are *both* patent-encumbered formats, after all. But [this O'Reilly article makes a good point](#):

*Aside: OK, this being O'Reilly, someone will surely stop me here and insist that everything be in Ogg Vorbis, because it's unpatented. I suspect that in the eyes of the media industry, that's a bug, not a feature. If Vorbis took off, it might be as much a bullshit patent target as all the other popular codecs (e.g., AT&T's presumably bogus claim against MPEG-4). Do I think Vorbis infringes on any patents? I doubt it. Given the common patterns and similarities in media codecs, do I think a sleazy lawyer could convince a non-technical jury that Vorbis infringes? Hell yes. And is Vorbis backed up with money and lawyers? No. That's why I prefer the MPEG-related patent-encumbered codecs: they're good, they're generally used by good companies who put some money behind them, they're backed by grown-up standards bodies and licensing organizations, and as ESR wrote in *World Domination 201*, "MP3 and H.264 may be the only major codecs whose controlling entities don't have obvious interests beyond maximizing their patent royalties" (ESR is contrasting this to the example of, say, Microsoft using WM* as a means of locking users into Microsoft technologies).*

Better to be in thrall to those who merely want your money, rather than your money and your freedom. But Ogg is still the clear winner: it *might* have patent problems, while MP3 definitely *does* have patent problems.

Tags: law, software

Restoring KRename to d3lphin's Actions menu

5:02PM, 23RD OCTOBER 2007

D3lphin in Kubuntu 7.10 doesn't have KRename in its Actions menu - a grave flaw. You can fix it by putting the following in a file called, say, krename.desktop in the
~/.kde/share/apps/d3lphin/servicemenus/ folder:

```
[Desktop Action rename]
Exec=krename %U
Name=Rename with KRename
Icon=krename

[Desktop Entry]
Actions=rename
ServiceTypes=all/allfiles
```

Tags: programming, foss

Dreamhost nerf prompts emergency gallery

1:27PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2007

[Dreamhost have decided](#) that they don't want people using their storage space for personal backups, as a few customers were abusing it by uploading DVD rips and gigantic hard disk images. I too have been using it as a backup dump for nearly 40GB of photos, but the new policy states that "*files uploaded to your accounts should be provided with the intent of distributing them to others from your hosted sites*". Well, I always *intended* to distribute them through a photo gallery; I just hadn't done it yet.

So here's a beta version of [photos.james.lab6.com](#), despite [my disapproval of Gallery2](#). The permissions interface for Gallery2 is still unusable, so all public viewers can see right now is a few dozen photos of ants. Yummy.

Update 2010-06-14: Now that the photo gallery is fully integrated with the main site, the emergency gallery has been laid to rest. Retrospective: Gallery2's permissions system never became usable, and the whole release was abandoned by the developers in favour of [a rewrite](#), which doesn't attempt to offer granular permissions.

Tags: meta, photos, web

BBC 2D

10:30AM, 25TH OCTOBER 2007

In the 1990s, software houses (what we used to call game studios) rushed to implement 3D graphics, awkwardly plastering rotation and texture mapping and other whizzbangs over the top of perfectly good 2D gameplay; the gameplay was often left a second or third class citizen. 3D games have since matured and dominated, but other less graphics-oriented games still exist, now with several decades of development behind them. While mostly ignored, they have had the time and breathing room to be perfected.

So it is too with radio and TV. I've mostly ignored radio all my life. How could it compete with TV's Gouraud shading, mipmapping and bilinear filtering? Well, while TV has spent the last 70 years developing its own artform and sucking the audience out of radio, radio has been busy perfecting itself. Thus I get to the point: the [Today programme on Radio 4](#) is 50 years old this Sunday, and is astonishingly good.

I listened to it this morning, and in between the news and an improvising silent film pianist, who played his own soundtrack *while talking*, was a former American ambassador to NATO complaining about how little development money Afghanistan is receiving. He made the extraordinary claim that Afghanistan gets more money from Western *drug addicts* buying the product of their poppy fields than from Western aid. Does there exist a more convincing demonstration of the total failure of the drug war?

Tags: war, games, tv, drugs, radio

Chicago at the Pavillion

9:45AM, 26TH OCTOBER 2007

I saw this on Wednesday night! It was very minimalist - 80% of the stage was occupied by the orchestra. This may be normal in musicals; I don't exactly see many. Despite (or perhaps because of) using about 7 props in total and dressing the characters in little more than a jacket and knickers, it was visually striking. I wished continuously that they'd allow photography. It was beautiful.

I absolutely *loved* the conductor, [Garth Hall](#). Such a physically dominant orchestra had to play some part in the performance. They got it exactly right. The best part of the whole show was when Roxie climbs the steps into the middle of the orchestra holding a newspaper, gushing over her being the headline. She hands it to the conductor, who says, face turned away from the audience, ever so quietly, in an American dumb-henchman's accent: "Hey, it *is* you."

Perhaps you had to be there.

After, we spotted Ian Kelsey slipping out of the back door dressed down in a leather jacket and baseball cap, with a stack of advert thingies under his arm. He drove off in a black Porsche, pulling his hat down. Poor thing.

Tags: reviews, theatre

Desktop special effects not so special

10:05AM, 26TH OCTOBER 2007

I turned off [compiz](#) yesterday.

GUIs operate at two speeds: instant, and everything else. As beautiful a desktop as compiz creates, its animations, fades, and general bulk cause 0.2 second delays here and there, which all add up to a distraction.

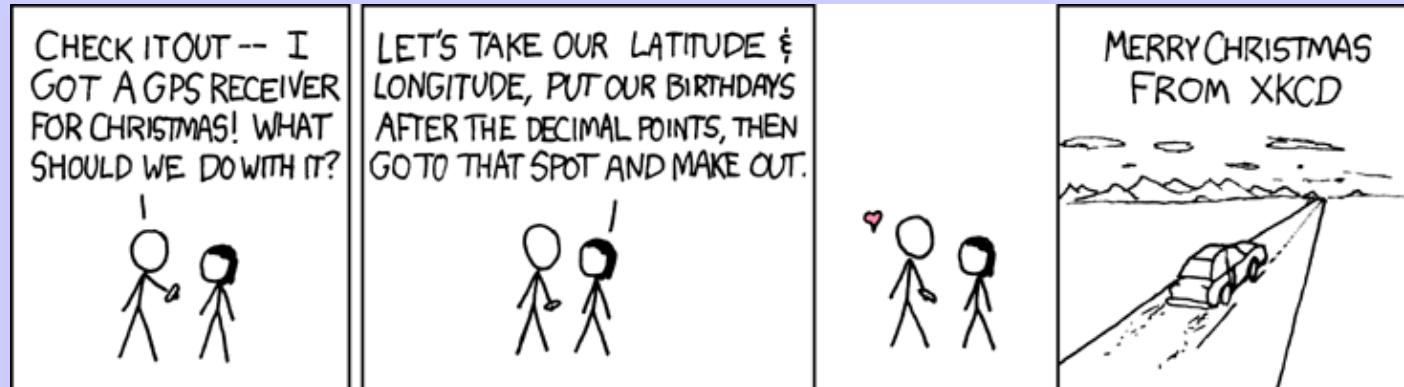
"Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." [\[wiki\]](#)

Besides, nerds prefer the special effects you can't see.

Tags: design, foss

Birthday Coordinates

2:38PM, 30TH OCTOBER 2007



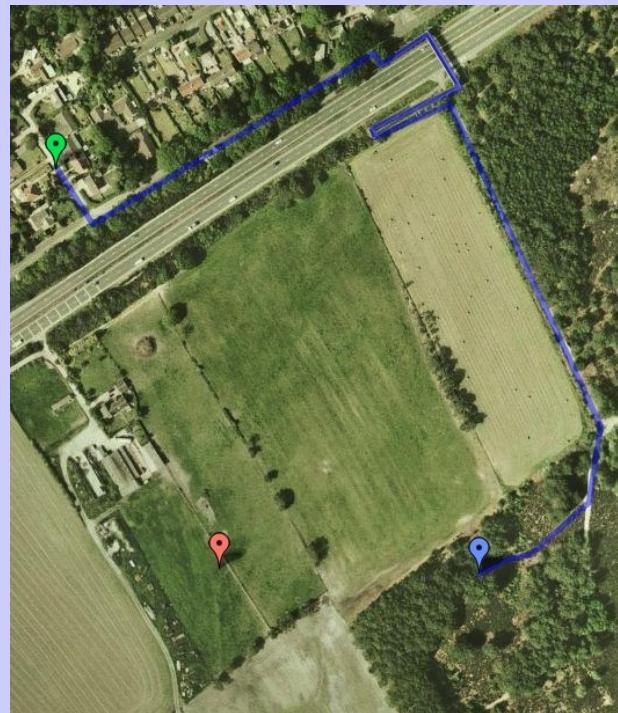
What a brilliant idea. The best part is that if you are on your own, you can use your birthday for *both* components, and [make out with yourself](#). Anyway, to the Googlemobile! We haven't a moment to lose!

Geographic coordinates have [X and Y components](#). Gay couples must choose who gets the X, but for obvious genetic reasons, everyone else should assign X to the female half (except polyamorous triads, who'll need a Z coordinate and either a helicopter, or a spade).

I initially mapped birth dates to coordinates in British DDMMYY format, but this ended up miles out to sea. I should have remembered that YYMMDD is the universally correct format - not only does it preserve chronological order in lexicographic orderings, it gave me a point on land. Win-win.

It just so happened that the Birthday Point was 10 miles away near a road I've driven down about 200 times in the last 15 years - a route from which I've never deviated. What a recipe for a familiar adventure!

Here's what Google Maps had to say about it all:



The green marker is the closest parking spot we could find to the foot bridge (the A31 is a busy dual carriageway), the red marker is the exact location we were aiming for, and the blue marker is where we actually ended up.

I always knew our destination would be on private property. In my mind it would only *just* be on private property, perhaps at the far bottom of an abandoned rural house's garden, a mere

hoppable fence away. In reality, it was some way ahead of us through a dense, pitch black forest. Since we had conveniently forgotten to bring a torch, the light of my phone's GPS screen was all we had to guide us. Rather than scramble through trees and possibly barbed wire in the dark, we found it more pleasant to just climb a small mound and stay there for a bit.

All things considered, we couldn't have asked for more convenient birthdays. An easy drive and a short walk on the heath. I expect a more perilous adventure when we try it again in Bristol.

Tags: photos, amusements, travel

Daylight Trading Time

3:14PM, 30TH OCTOBER 2007

Daylight Saving Time has been in the news this week with claims that fiddling with the clocks could reduce CO₂ emissions, just as wartime politicians discovered that fiddling with the clocks could reduce energy consumption. Laudable goals, but I fear the practice of turning the clocks forward in spring, then back in the winter, has been so ingrained into all of us for the last 90-odd years that we've lost sight of what an utterly insane idea it is in the first place:

Q: How can we reduce our energy bills?

A: By meddling with *time itself!* Mwahahahaaa!

Lunacy. Sure, it's *a* solution, but it's such a monumental, disruptive *hack* that it boggles the mind, if the mind is willing to be boggled by such things. How did it become acceptable to solve social and economic problems by messing with such a fundamental part of our shared society? It's like abolishing every third Monday to reduce Monday blues - by skipping straight to Tuesday. It's like switching the national language to French during the summer, to attract continental tourists, and then switching back for Christmas.

If mangling the country's timestamps is acceptable, I have a further suggestion: since the City of London is arguably the most important part of the British economy, optimise its timezone for maximal productivity: at 5pm, put the clocks 4 hours back to EST to take in the afternoon trading in New York, then at New York 5pm, switch forward 13 hours to Japan Standard Time for a couple of hours sleep before the start of Tokyo trading. At Tokyo 5pm, switch back to GMT to begin the next day's work in London.

I call it Daylight Trading Time: elevating insanity to brilliance.

Tags: politics, amusements, economics

How to get the correct month name using PHP

3:07PM, 31ST OCTOBER 2007

Can you see anything wrong in the following image?



Persistent readers will notice that it's part of the sidebar on this site's [main page](#), except slightly wrong. It turns out I have a bug that only occurs at the end of months! The following code is wrong:

```
date('F', mktime(0,0,0,$month))
```

The following code is right:

```
date('F', mktime(0,0,0,$month,1))
```

Why? It's down to PHP being clever, and me being dumb (or possibly the other way round; it's hard to tell with PHP).

The `mktime` function constructs a timestamp from the arguments you give it, filling in any missing arguments with the current local date and time. I guess this might be useful in some circumstances, but if you call it on, say, the 31st of October, when trying to use it to map 9 to September, the `mktime` function uses 31 for `$day`, and clearly there's no such time as the 31st of September, so PHP decides to be clever by overflowing to the 1st of October. Similarly, attempting to map 2 to February when on the 31st of October overflows to the 3rd of March. Lovely.

The fix is to specify 1 for the day, since there's always a first of the month.

The number one search result for "php get month name" currently [recommends the wrong code](#). Google's [Code Search](#) shows that this flawed idiom has already [infiltrated a number of open source projects](#).

But now for the important part: there is a fixed version of [my Wordpress theme!](#)

Tags: programming

SMS Export

1:59PM, 7TH NOVEMBER 2007

I've always harboured a slight grudge against text messages, because they're never treated as first-class citizens of internet messaging; they're a hack built on an obscure part of the GSM specification, never intended to be used for person-to-person messages, and still to this day treated as temporary data. Few phones let you even save texts, let alone export them, but Series 60 users can download [SMS Export](#) from Nokia. Unfortunately, it only lets you export messages in your inbox (Why? Why!? Does Gmail not save your sent messages?), and the plain text output is encoded in [UCS-2](#), which is not funny.

Remember kids, [UTF-8](#) or die.

Tags: software, bleh

Audio end-game

1:48PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2007

The preferred method of pirating music has long been to rip and release whole albums at a time, but with fast broadband and BitTorrent, pirate releases are getting bigger and bigger. Here are some of the files offered up on The Pirate Bay right now:

The History of Rock & Roll 1956-1977 (Bill Drake) - 6.12 GiB
Alphabet of Pop Part 2 of 26 The Letter B (Archived) - 6.32 GiB
Carry On Collection - 18.07 GiB
MASH - The Complete Collection - 44.75 GiB

These are truly huge files, but they are clearly the future. It's only a matter of time, storage, and bandwidth before we see the Ultimate Record-Pirate Download:

music.zip - 3.24 PiB

I'm guessing at the size, since I haven't seen this file in the wild (yet). It will be followed shortly by *movies.zip* at, say, 106 PiB.

At current trends, this nightmare end-game for the content industry will become reality in about 20 years. To stave off defeat, the powers that be must impose their own nightmare end-game on the consumer: a digital police state where every electronic device is monitored and scanned for infringing content.

These two end-games are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

I boldly predict that no person, corporation, or government will be able to completely destroy the general purpose computer; there will always be hackers who can get a FLAC decoder to

run on their toaster's CPU. I also predict that music.zip will live inside an even larger file, [steganographically](#) encoded to prevent detection by the authorities (who will be unable to properly lock down your computer, but who will always be able to bust down your front door).

So what kind of legitimate cover file will people use to hide their dodgy music in? I further, and finally, predict that in the future, a lot of people will carry with them on their cellphones a petapixel image of their cat.

Tags: copyright, software, music, amusements, future

HM Revenue and Customs leaks private data

3:07PM, 20TH NOVEMBER 2007

BBC News:

Confidential details of 15 million child benefit recipients are on computer discs lost by HM Revenue and Customs, the BBC understands.

What will come of this? There *might* be some political kerfuffle in the House of Commons and the newspapers, somebody *might* resign, a department or two *might* be reshuffled, and a few unlucky individuals *might* become victims of identity crime. The only thing we know for *certain* is that this will happen again, and will keep happening until the government stops putting its faith in gigantic [centralised databases](#), and the public at large stops putting its faith in gigantic centralised government.

Now is an excellent time to re-read [The Illustrated Road to Serfdom](#) (18 pages, 3 minutes reading time).

Tags: politics, government, crime

Free for now

3:34PM, 26TH NOVEMBER 2007

I like reading [Ars Technica](#). It's a thoughtful, conservative journal of geeky topics with just the right volume of coverage that following it doesn't become a chore. So that's why I was reading [about something called the Folder Quick Look Plugin](#) for Mac OS X. The programme sounds strangely unremarkable - it "*now lets you see a list of the contents of your folder*" - but this part of the article caught my eye:

The little ditty is free for now, so check it out if you want your QuickLook to tell you a little more about your folders.

Free for now? That's exactly why I could never use a Mac full time - I would only ever be free... for now.

Free for now means your freedom is conditional on the temporary leniency of your captor.

Free for now is how you might describe a criminal on bail.

Free for now ain't free at all.

Tags: software, freedom

One Laptop Per Jock

1:32PM, 21ST DECEMBER 2007

Dave informed me last night that the [XO laptops](#) have a ripcord charger instead of the hand-crank from the original design. But ripcords take strength to pull, and stamina to pull repeatedly. Will only the biggest, beefiest, most muscleheaded kids be able to use them? Will the weaklings be locked out of the future of the internet?

The nerd psyche is imprinted on the design of all things technical; it's hard to imagine what internet technologies might have been like if they had been created by jocks instead of nerds. Maybe the XO laptop will show us.

Tags: amusements, hardware, psychology, design

Hair

11:32AM, 2ND JANUARY 2008

I just moved house! The new place is lovely, but the bathroom lacks a shaver socket. My workaround is a US-to-UK 2-to-3-pin adaptor, but unfortunately it's the one I've been using on my desktop computer (a Shuttle SN25P - double check the plug type if you buy one in the UK). So it seems that life henceforth will be a delicate balance between geeking out and shaving. This may be where bearded hackers come from.

Tags: amusements, hardware

Light at the end of the tunnel for stuttering GL Slideshow

1:17PM, 7TH JANUARY 2008

Mac OS X has had a smoothly fading, panning and zooming screensaver for years, and so has the Freeosphere, up to a point. GL Slideshow, part of [xscreensaver](#), suffers from an annoying stutter between images, which sort of defeats the point of having smooth fading in the first place. The source code [gives a detailed excuse](#) as to why this happens, concluding that it can't be done, except that Apple managed it somehow.

Now, all these years later, there is finally a solution: [smoothslideshow](#). The Ubuntu packages are out of date, but the Debian Unstable package installs on Ubuntu 7.10. It's a KDE screensaver, so I'm not sure how you'd get it to work in Gnome, but there you go. It works.

Tags: foss

Direct debits are an exploit

1:35PM, 7TH JANUARY 2008

BBC News:

TV presenter Jeremy Clarkson has lost money after publishing his bank details in his newspaper column.

The Top Gear host revealed his account numbers after rubbishing the furore over the loss of 25 million people's personal details on two computer discs.

He wanted to prove the story was a fuss about nothing.

But Clarkson admitted he was "wrong" after discovered a reader had used the details to create a £500 direct debit to the charity Diabetes UK.

You can probably get the money back from the bank eventually, but the semi-automated nature of direct debits makes their security depend on the secrecy of your account number and sort code. It is widely believed, at least by Jeremy Clarkson, that "All you'll be able to do with them is put money into my account. Not take it out.", so people don't treat them as confidential.

Clarkson now says of the case: "Contrary to what I said at the time, we must go after the idiots who lost the discs and stick cocktail sticks in their eyes until they beg for mercy."

I can just see the next story:

TV presenter Jeremy Clarkson has been blinded after advocating torture in his newspaper column.

The Top Gear host demanded justice be done to those responsible for the loss of 25 million people's personal details on two computer discs.

He wanted to be funny, and other peoples' pain is hilarious.

But Clarkson admitted he was "wrong" after a reader poked his eyes out as punishment for wearing leather jackets.

Tags: amusements, crime, security

Social engineering Facebook

3:38PM, 7TH JANUARY 2008

We had visitors this weekend. One of them told me about a security problem she'd had. Her boyfriend had correctly guessed the answers to the "security questions" on her Yahoo account, and had thus managed to gain access to her email. From there, he had managed to find out her Facebook password, and do all kinds of scary black hat stuff with her profile. This all happened while they were chatting on MSN, and the boyfriend told her he was going to do it, just as a demonstration, so it's not quite as underhanded as it seems.

She's a fully certified Normal Person, so I'm interested in how she described the incident:
"Facebook can be hacked."

I'm sure there's an illuminating lesson in how regular users view security hierarchies here.

Tags: web, security

Mini-tasers?

9:45PM, 10TH JANUARY 2008



In store now!

Tags: photos, amusements, future

Binary stopgapping

10:41AM, 11TH JANUARY 2008

[There exist 48GB CompactFlash cards](#). Cool.

48 is a strange number in computer science. Not as strange as 27, but still not a [power of two](#).

Ignoring the [gibibyte](#) controversy for a moment, new memory types appear in binary increments: 512MB, 1GB, 2GB, 4GB, 8GB, 16GB, 32GB, 64GB, etc.. So where does 48 come from?

The industry operates in a continuous cycle of technological advancement, with memory capacities doubling every 12 months or so. So if you can buy a 16GB card for £50 today, you'll be able to get a 32GB card this time next year for the same price, and a 64GB card the year after that. The 48GB cards are the result of the manufacturers trying to get a leg up on the competition by short-cutting the industry cycle and delivering something better than the 32GB card without having to wait until January 2010. I call it **binary stopgapping**, and I can't be the first one to have noticed it.

Tags: mathematics, hardware, business

Betterlympics

2:42PM, 14TH JANUARY 2008

BBC News: ['Blade Runner' handed Olympic ban.](#)

This man has no legs, so he had some artificial ones fitted. They are similar to the heel springs in Portal.

Unfortunately, they turned out to be **better than his original legs**, so he's been banned from the Olympics because he's a sci-fi freakin' transhuman robot. Stunning.

Nothing about this ended well.

Tags: biology, hardware, extropy, sport, future

Remember the LazyWeb?

2:41PM, 22ND JANUARY 2008

[This article on the LazyWeb](#) is more than 5 years old. The [implementation it describes](#) now 404s, and its spinoff [is dead](#) ("The LazyWeb is now closed.").

I think the original formalisation of the LazyWeb idea was massively over-engineered. It involved RSS, RDF and Trackback - the latest cool toys back then. A [Google Blog Search for "dear lazyweb"](#) is actually a better way of finding cries for help. If only there were some way of marking a request as resolved, so as to filter it out of the search results.

I suggest appending "Thanks Lazyweb, you're awesome!" to any resolved post.

I now hope that the LazyWeb, Google and [the small world phenomenon](#) will do all the work for me and make the following two links work:

[Unresolved LazyWeb requests.](#)

[Resolved LazyWeb requests.](#)

They're both restricted to posts made after today, since the world can't be expected to know about the new protocol yet. I assume that by tomorrow, everybody will have read this post and be fully briefed. If not, the links will form a handy summary of those who don't read this website (or at least those who don't pay attention). [Then I'll get you with my Utu!](#)

Tags: software, web

"Not plagiarism, just illegal"

4:06PM, 24TH JANUARY 2008

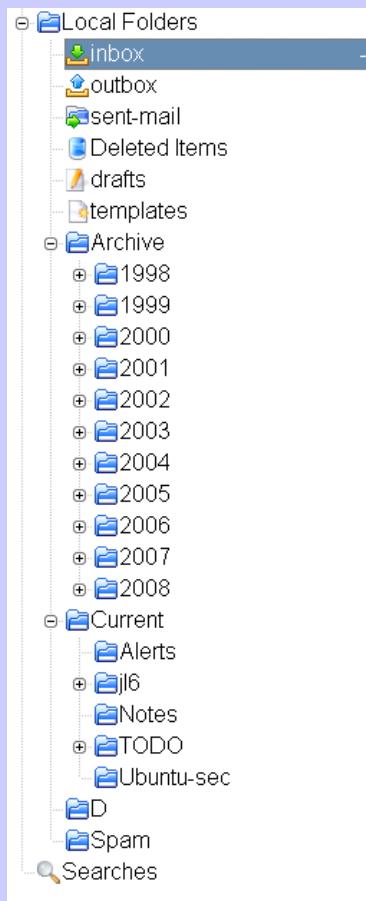
On using a song in a YouTube video:

- (13:28:14) Daniel: do you think there are copyright issues with the izzard music?
- (13:28:24) James: yes
- (13:28:33) James: but that hasn't stopped many people on youtube so far...
- (13:28:45) Daniel: excellent
- (13:28:53) Daniel: it is non profit
- (13:28:59) Daniel: and obscure
- (13:29:20) James: doesn't matter that it's non-profit, though the obscurity makes it very unlikely it'll ever be challenged
- (13:29:39) Daniel: how about if i make a note of it in the comment
- (13:30:06) Daniel: still illegal?
- (13:30:25) Daniel: it wouldn;t be plagerism just illegal

Tags: copyright, amusements, crime, ethics

1998-2008

10:57AM, 31ST JANUARY 2008



I truly don't believe you are a *real* geek unless you can *love* this image.

[\(Previously...\)](#)

Tags: history, archives, email

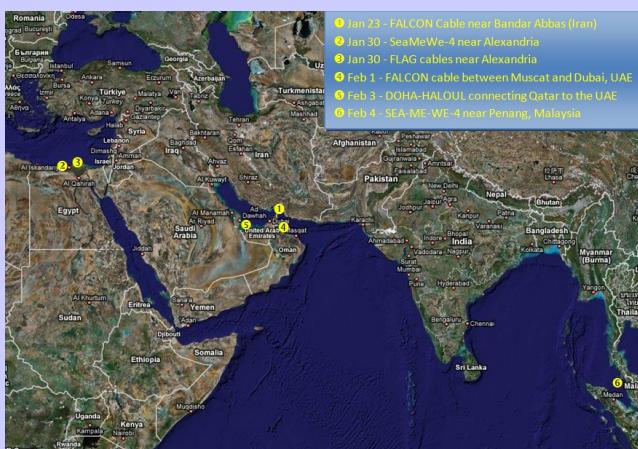
Internet destruction for oil?

3:04PM, 7TH FEBRUARY 2008

6 undersea fibre-optic cables have been cut in the last two weeks, and [conspiracy theories abound](#). Is this the smoking gun that proves there is evil afoot?:



Wikipedia's map is better, but its data sets off the same alarm bells:



Assuming the dates and locations are accurate, this can't have been caused by any natural phenomenon, unless it's some sci-fi bizarro hitherto unknown interaction between the Earth's magnetic field and erbium-doped optical fibre. Technical faults are rare, and impossibly unlikely to occur in 6 different places in such short succession. The "official" explanation, that a ship dragged its anchor across the cables, would imply a very fast ship - it broke cables in the Middle East and Malaysia within one day. So apparently the only remaining possibility is that the cables were cut deliberately.

Who cuts submarine cables on purpose? If stray anchors can cut a cable - and they can and do - then almost anybody could've done it. So are we talking al-Qaeda in a speedboat or Uncle Sam in a [wiretapping sub?](#)

The [first link](#) suggests it's a plot to cripple Iran's new oil stockmarket. Others suggest it's simply to knock Iran off the net completely. But don't we like uploading our Western Values to them? Because let's face it, the Internet is the bastard offspring of hardcore Western Science and Industry. It's a techno-libertarian aggressive hegemonizing swarm, and if anyone is scared of the Iranians having it, it's the Iranians themselves. So did *they* do it?

Not likely.

I suspect that the [current confusion](#) is down to a lack of accurate data. I've yet to see an authoritative source for the exact times and locations of the cable cuts. The SEA-ME-WE-4 cable from Malaysia goes through the UAE, so has there just been a mixup about which section of the cable has been cut? It's possible that the [Khaleej News](#) has got it wrong, and that the most likely explanation remains a dragged anchor.

But that's no fun, so here's my entry: the US military is trying to cause chaos and confusion in the Iranian military, hoping to cause [another accidental confrontation](#) as a pretext for full-on

hostilities, in order to plunge the US back into war and boost the ratings of *war president McCain*.

Tags: conspiracies, hardware

Abusing archive.org for backup purposes

11:23AM, 1ST FEBRUARY 2008

[The Wayback Machine](#) is fussy about what types of file it archives. I can't find a relevant FAQ, but it appears to only archive text (HTML) and images. For example, [this little-known amazingly unpopular and unlinked image](#) is archived, whereas [putty.exe](#), a well-known super-popular program with [high pagerank](#) is not.

Based on this evidence, I'm assuming that uploading my multi-gig backup files to the web won't impress Archive.org too much. So:

[Here's an experiment.](#)

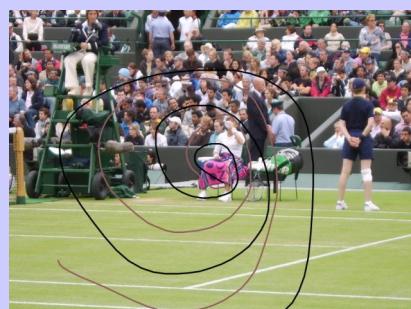
The file 20th_c.gpg contains a text file containing my credit card number, expiry date and CCV code, and a TeX file containing a proof of the Riemann Hypothesis.

20th_c.gpg.asc is a plain-text ASCII-armored version of the same file created using this command: `gpg --enarmor 20th\ c.gpg`

20th_c.gpg.txt is the same as above, but with a different filename extension.

20th_c.gpg.jpg is the first file embedded in a picture using this command: `steghide embed -cf 20th\ c.gpg.jpg -ef 20th\ c.gpg -p 123`

20th_c.gpg.embedded.jpg is a copy of the same file, but embedded in this page here:



The prediction was false! The Wayback Machine *would* have archived the image, but most pages on the old site turn out to have been archived only in truncated form. It's not clear whether this is an issue with the archiving, or with viewing the archive.

I predict that this last image will definitely get archived, and possibly the plain text versions too. I'm also willing to bet that the NSA automatically archives every .gpg file it can get its hands on, so it can put my name on its list of troublemakers. It probably wants that proof too.

N.B. This doesn't appear to be against Archive.org's [Terms and Conditions](#), because publishing a website doesn't make me a user of their services. But I'm sure they will remain happy to manually remove my site from the Wayback Machine if the experiment is successful and I start inserting massive quantities of encrypted private data into their system. Plan B: package all my data into a series of Ogg Theora files with only the bare minimum formatting required to produce a valid Theora bitstream, name it "DocumentaryOnExperimentalElectronica.ogg", and upload it to the [movie archive](#)! Perfect evil.

Tags: web, programming, archives

Gmail's dot-ignorance

10:48AM, 12TH FEBRUARY 2008

Yesterday I read out my email address over the phone to a super-secret company, and today they sent me an email with a random period right in the middle of the address. It arrived, [because Gmail ignores dots within usernames](#). So this old "bug" saved me a lot of hassle.

Tags: software, email

Out With A Bang Foundation

12:20PM, 15TH FEBRUARY 2008

I just found this from 2004, while e-housekeeping:

Out With A Bang Foundation - for old dying people who don't want to wither away. They get to do something spectacularly dangerous as their last act. With a minimum 95% chance of death, they'll get into the history books, and go out with a bang.

Come on venture capitalists, there's a free idea going here!

Tags: amusements, ethics

FCrackZip

2:23PM, 15TH FEBRUARY 2008

Continuing the data-archaeology theme, I found a file called `ancient.zip`, which seems to hold some incredibly interesting Amiga files from when I was very young. There are home-made [OctaMED](#) modules, [Deluxe Paint](#) IFFs, [AMOS](#) scripts, and some text files. I'd love to get into this file, but it's password protected.

[FCrackZip](#) is a Free (GPL 2.0) zip password cracker, and it's fast. My Athlon 3500+ (2.2Ghz, 512KB cache) took about 5 minutes to check all lower-case-alpha+numeric passwords of length 6. That's 2.1 billion possible passwords - not bad. However, this file is from an era when I was in the habit of using ridiculously long passwords, which is probably why I've forgotten this one. If so, it'll never be found, but if the password is actually of a reasonable length, how long might the crack take?

Assuming the password is only 12 digits long (which I have reason to believe is true), it will take 23,854 years. If I waited 2 years for Moore's Law to double the power of my CPU, it would only take 11,927 years. If I waited 4 years, it would take only 5,964 years. Generalising, there's no point starting a calculation which will last longer than 4 years. Instead, you're better off spending 2 years doing something else, then performing the same calculation on Moore-enhanced hardware which will take the remaining two years. So you've waited 4 years for the answer to a 4-year calculation, but only done 2 years of actual computing.

This all means there's no point me starting cracking until after 2036. It might be quicker to locate the original Amiga floppies and try booting up the old A1200.

Tags: hardware, foss, future, archives, security

Kosovo declares independence

7:18PM, 17TH FEBRUARY 2008

There are 192 states recognised by the UN. Kosovo will likely become number 193 assuming the West calls Russia's bluff of revenge-recognising states in Georgia:

Russia's foreign ministry has indicated that Western recognition of an independent Kosovo could have implications for the Georgian breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Implications? Bring it on. 193 states is still nowhere near enough.

Tags: politics, government

3 Mobile Mail

12:51PM, 18TH FEBRUARY 2008

Update 19/02/2008: Disregard any positive sentiments I express below. Mobile Mail causes data loss by deleting from Gmail any emails it downloads. I can't explain my earlier results. I guess I should've known better than using dodgy proprietary software in the first place.

Here's the original post:

Here's what I've learnt about using Gmail with my Nokia N95 and 3 Mobile Mail, an application from [3](#), the annoyingly ungoogleable mobile network otherwise known as Hutchison 3G Ltd.:

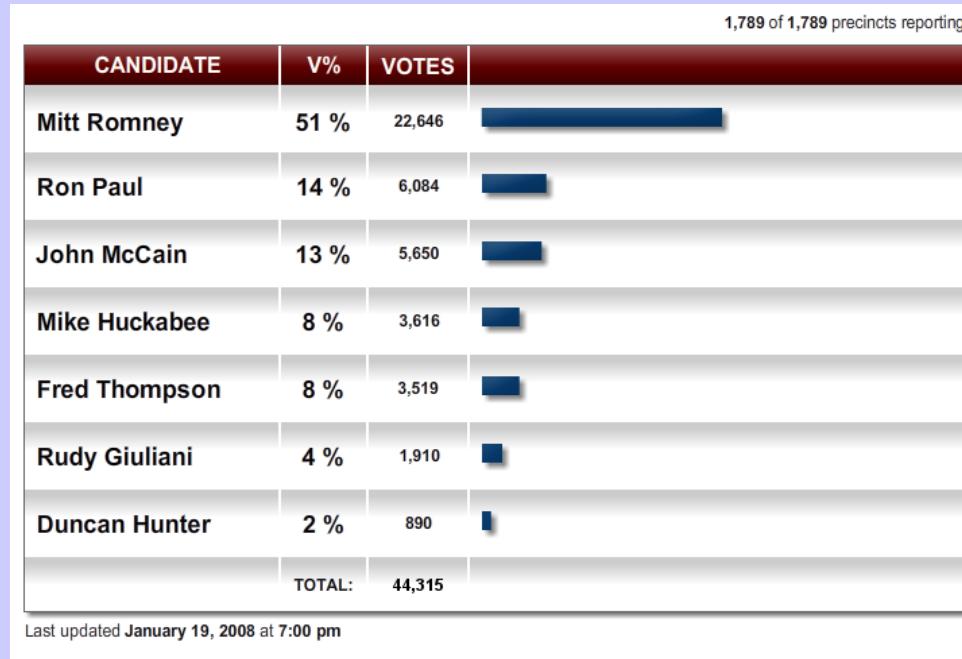
- The Mobile Mail application runs continuously, in the background.
- Mobile Mail connects to Gmail periodically and downloads new emails *while leaving them in the Gmail inbox, unread*. This is contrary to the settings in Gmail > Settings > Forwarding and POP/IMAP, which state that messages accessed via POP should be archived.
- If you receive an email, then *immediately* download-and-archive it using another POP client like KMail, Mobile Mail *still* manages to push the email to the N95.
- A possible explanation for the above two points is that Mobile Mail is accessing Gmail using IMAP. However, reading emails on the N95 makes no difference to their read/unread state within Gmail. This is ultimately a good thing, as it means emails remain unmolested and ready to access with your favourite desktop POP client.
- Sending emails using Mobile Mail is some kind of diabolical forgery. They aren't really sent from your Gmail account, so they don't show up in your Gmail sent items folder. Stuff like DomainKeys also won't work.

- It's Blackberry-style push email on Symbian Series 60, and it actually works!

Tags: software, hardware, email

Ron Paul won Nevada

11:15AM, 19TH FEBRUARY 2008



Since [Mitt Romney](#) has since withdrawn from the race, Ron Paul actually won Nevada! I reckon Vegas-based fellow libertarian Penn Jillette's endorsement did it!

Not that it's going to make a whole lot of difference. America is apparently not quite ready for responsible government.

Tags: politics

RIP HD-DVD

2:27PM, 19TH FEBRUARY 2008

I knew there was a [reason](#) I took this picture:

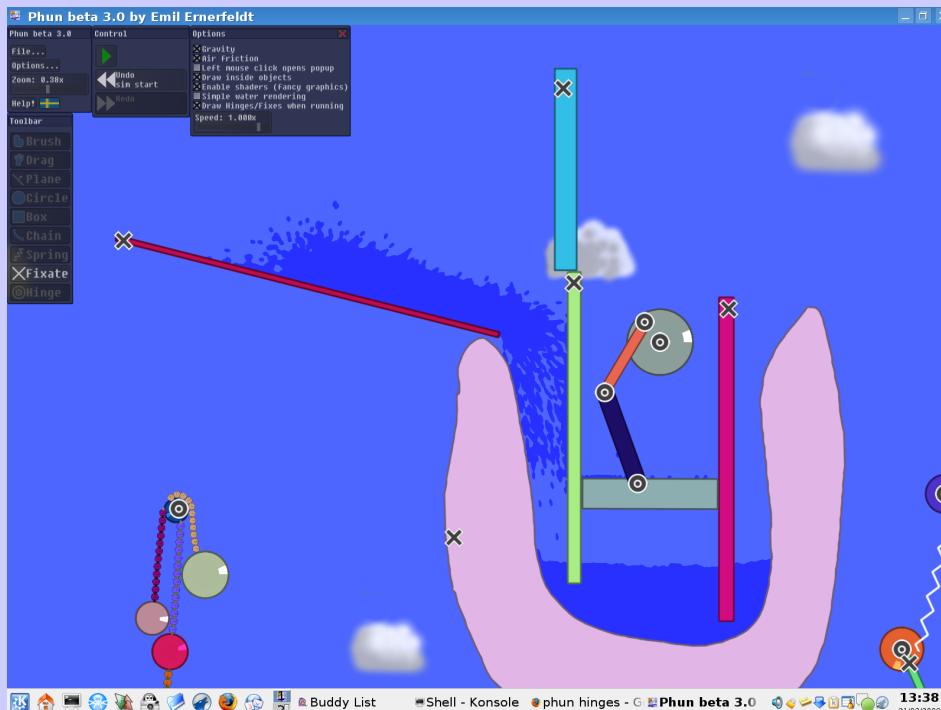


Tags: war, history, amusements, hardware

Phun is amazing

12:08PM, 22ND FEBRUARY 2008

Phun, a 2D physics sandbox, is amazing, and there's a GNU+Linux version that Just Works, as opposed to the Windows version which seems to require extra files and fiddling. I want to say *tipping point*, but apparently that's rubbish.



This is my attempt at building a pump. Unfortunately, Phun doesn't seem to do hydraulics yet. [Download the scene here](#). It's an incredibly fun little toy, similar I suppose to [LittleBigPlanet](#), but without the baggage of being an actual game (or needing a PS3). In a perfect world, it

See the attachment James3c.phn.bz2.

would run on the [XO laptop](#), but it's rather CPU-intensive, especially once you start adding water. The learning potential is sky high though: gravity, friction, motion, rotation, leverage, springs, hinges, the importance of things lining up straight... let an 8 year old play with it for a week and they could become a master builder prodigy.

In fact, do you know why child prodigies occur mostly in the fields of mathematics and music? It's because those fields are accessible with only the tiniest set of tools. You can do world-class mathematics with pencil and paper, and you can make world-class music with just a keyboard. You don't get many child prodigies in, say, poetry or politics, because being a poet or a politician is about drawing on a vast body of literature and history and experience that is almost by definition totally inaccessible to a child. Physics and engineering are somewhere in between. You *can* do excellent physics with pencil and paper, but it is very hard to grasp without observing the real world in action. Lego helps, but you can't build a working 8-cylinder engine out of Lego bricks, and it's incredibly expensive for most of the world's children. Free software, on the other hand, is free, so I hope that sandbox games like Phun will one day lower the barriers to entry for the physical sciences far enough that we'll start raising child prodigies who can build bridges, skyscrapers, and other wonders we don't know about yet.

Tags: games, science, learning, foss, future

Barack Obama vs Hillary Clinton

10:39AM, 25TH FEBRUARY 2008



Although I'm not an American citizen and have no direct interest in the next generation presidential candidates, I can't help but opine and speculate on such an interesting battle. Hillary Clinton represents the establishment, bringing with her brand-name recognition from the previous Clinton. Indeed, her campaign is just the Clinton campaign, but with "Hillary" tacked on. Barack Obama, on the other hand, has a fresh look with which he hopes to woo the Blu states.

Obama-ray won the format war, but physical presidents are going out of fashion rapidly.

On the issues, Obama has tied his campaign to opposition to the occupation of Iraq, betting his success on popular dissatisfaction with the incumbent administration. He is hoping that media coverage of the disaster in Iraq will act as free advertising, effectively getting his campaign into the nation's living rooms for free. Clinton, who voted *for* the war, has remained on the fence, preferring to campaign on other issues like the low cost of her healthcare plan and the ease with which the current healthcare system can be upgraded.

However, despite their fierce battle for the nomination, only a tiny number of Americans have voted. These are the primaries we're talking about, so it's the early-electors who decide for the rest of the country which candidate will go up against the Republicans, although there are always allegations that it's not actually the voters and delegates who decide, but instead large retailers like Best Buy and Wal-Mart who ultimately pull the strings. Even the candidates themselves have been known to upset the funding balance using their own chequebooks - [Hillary Clinton recently loaned her own campaign \\$5m](#). In my opinion, it is of paramount importance that campaigns are funded through grassroots support, not big-money back-room bribes.

What's more, the actual differences between the two are minor. Both their reform programmes will cost more than the current administration's policies (at least at first), both support the same restrictions on basic freedoms, and both will receive backing from Hollywood.

Personally, my money's on Obama, with his greater capacity and built-in support from the anti-war platform, though even if he defeats Clinton and becomes the next president, he and others like him will face an ever-fiercer battle with the RonTorrent.

Tags: politics, amusements

10 years of lynz

10:59AM, 26TH FEBRUARY 2008

10 years ago today, [Adam received his lines](#). His *lynz*. The grand total is now exactly:

$$2^{2^{3449} \times 203} \times 10^{2^{3450}}$$

which is approximately 10 to the power of a 1040-digit number. [And if he doesn't do them by tomorrow, there'll be more.](#)

The number of lines weighs in at [just under the value of a particular universal constant implicated in inflationary universe theories](#), and well under Skewes' number, the next pure mathematical entry in the list. However, last year [the XKCD blag](#) dug up the lynz' mad cousin, \textyen , and in the comments [it was proved that "the clarkkkson" is seriously large](#). Considerably bigger than [Graham's number](#), the very last entry in the [The Penguin Dictionary of Curious and Interesting Numbers](#). I've had a copy of that book for years and between trips to Rusholme's curry mile and full-blown bouts of diarrhoea, I have probably read every entry. But it's nothing compared to the internet's own [Notable Properties of Specific Numbers](#) by [Robert Munafo](#), who's my kind of geek. He even emailed me last night to remind me it was the Lynz' 10th anniversary. What a guy!

As for Adam, I've not exactly been in regular contact with him, but as of today, his latest Facebook status is "Adam is wasting time." He'd better get started soon.

Tags: mathematics, history, amusements

Breezing past 25 years now.

L2 cache

10:49AM, 27TH FEBRUARY 2008

Intel's [new Penryn-based Core 2 processors](#) have as much as 12MB of L2 cache *on the CPU*.

Considering my 2005-era Athlon 64 only has 512KB, that's a lot - a 2500% boost in 3 years. So here's the deal:

Dear Lazyweb, please write software to mount L2 cache as a drive à la RAM disks. Not for any particular reason. Just to do it.

Tags: software, hardware, extropy

Model number bling

10:49AM, 27TH FEBRUARY 2008

Am I the only one to notice that [AMD](#), [Intel](#) and [NVIDIA](#) now all have products numbered 9500? Previously, ATI, Apple and Nokia have had the [Radeon 9500](#), [PowerMac 9500](#) and the [9500 Communicator](#). [Quick googling](#) reveals many more 9500s.

What is it about this number? I think it's the 9 that's important. 9 is the biggest single digit number, and hence the best. It's the perfect marketing fiction: you simply can't get better than 9 (the marketing department hopes you won't notice the possibility of the existence of 10). The model number obviously has no relation to the actual specifications of the device, so it's pure braggadocio and bling. To the marketroids, the number 9 and the letter X are talismans of bad-assedness, the computer equivalent of the [hip hop chain](#). Look no further than ATI's **Radeon X1900 XTX**. They had to scale it back a little from there with names like **HD 2900**, just like the James Bond producers had to settle for **Casino Royale** after they couldn't figure out any new ways to fit the word "die" into the title. (Before **Die Another Day** came out, [alt.fan.james-bond](#) discussed plausible titles for the next film; the closest was **Die Die Die**).

I predict Microsoft will be next. Expect to see in 2010: The **X-XBOX X9000 Yo Yo Yo X-Platinum**, followed by simply **Xbox 4** in 2015.

Nope, they squeezed another one in with *No Time To Die*.

And Microsoft dug deeper with the Xbox Series X in 2021.

Tags: hardware, business, psychology

KDE vs GNOME

9:59AM, 28TH FEBRUARY 2008

Kubuntu 8.04 will mini-fork for KDE 4. I'm not sure I like the way this is going. The commercially supported, stable, feature-complete Kubuntu-KDE3 may draw users away from the still-experimental Kubuntu-KDE4, denying KDE 4.0.1 the extended testing that it needs. But then what choice do they have? Not many people are going to use KDE 4.0.1 anyway if it's not finished.

The 3-to-4 transition is going to get worse before it gets better. KDE 4 won't be properly stable until at least 4.1 in July, and won't reach feature parity with KDE 3 until at least 4.2 in November or later. That will be 3 years since the first release of KDE 3.5, and 3 years is a long time for ordinary KDE users to wait for a new release.

The same thing happened to GNOME back in 2002 when they stripped all functionality from 1.4 and effectively started again with 2.0. I switched to KDE back then. I'd now be tempted to switch back to GNOME - and with it, the more polished Ubuntu - if it wasn't for apps like Amarok and the promise of future awesomeness from what KDE 4 will still hopefully become.

Turns out XFCE was the real future.

Tags: foss, future

Genocide by default

5:50PM, 7TH APRIL 2008

Grain shortages are in the news. There's now a stronger link than ever between food and fuel.

Here's the conclusion:

Cheap food, like cheap oil, may be a thing of the past.

The article draws an analogy between the current financial crisis and the emerging food crisis. Taking it further, if our collective debt problems are a result of us living beyond our means, then rising food prices paint a much more disturbing picture: hundreds of millions of people, if not billions, will be living beyond their means *simply by existing*. You can do your best to avoid debt by not doing stupid things like taking out loans to spend on a holiday, but you can't choose not to eat.

Now, taking a detached, purely cold-blooded just-the-numbers-ma'am-please approach for a moment (it's what I do best anyway), if x million people can't feed themselves, is the most ethical course of action to *let them die* before they reproduce and become $2x$ million people that the world can't afford to feed?

You could say "No! The most ethical course of action is to give food aid and help those x million people live!" That works while the rest of the world *can* afford to feed them, but if the population of chronic destitutes keeps on increasing, there will inevitably come a point where we *can't* afford the aid, and there will be no choice in the matter: they will all die. By this time, their population will have doubled and doubled again, many times over, and we are back to the question: let x million people die, or let $2x$ million people die?

It is possible that our planet and our culture can support 20 billion people sustainably. It is also possible that it can only support 2 billion. Scienticians call this the carrying capacity, and I don't know which it is, but I suspect it's closer to 20 than 2, and that we still have the time and technology to keep everybody alive. That's cautious optimism; we still need to educate people about birth control and make them richer - the two best ways to encourage people to have fewer children. Hence green secular libertarianism is good for my peace of mind: making people richer and opposing Catholic nonsense about condoms prevents me from having to pull a genocide-by-default on billions and billions of people at some point in the future. That would generally be considered a bad thing, wouldn't it?

Tags: economics, ethics, future

War machine

8:24AM, 13TH APRIL 2008

Apparently the US Army already has thousands of killbots in Iraq:



I love the Army's attitude:

While Fahey said that no inappropriate shots had been fired, and no casualties, Fahey stated sadly that the robot's control failure might be the end of the program. Says Fahey, "Once you've done something that's really bad, it can take 10 or 20 years to try it again."

No, once you've done something that's really bad, you get arrested, tried, convicted, sentenced, imprisoned, **and you never do it again.**

Tags: war, hardware, future

Milkybar White Moments

2:44PM, 20TH APRIL 2008

I tried Milkybar White Moments for the first time last week. They are a white-chocolate clone of Minstrels, and they taste like plasticine. They cannot be used for building Wallace & Gromit models, but when combined with a packet of *real* Minstrels, might make a handy set of Go stones.

2/10, will eat anyway.

Tags: reviews, food

Dark Season

9:21PM, 24TH APRIL 2008

In 1991 there was a children's television series called [Dark Season](#). I recall thinking it was brilliant at the time. It was written by Russell T Davies, who is now the executive producer and writer of Doctor Who. The story centred on a sinister plot to take over children's minds by distributing free computers.

Meanwhile, [One Laptop Per Child](#) appears to be running into difficulties. The project's "[extreme dependence on scale to bring down cost](#)" is [worryingly familiar](#); like collective farming, their economies of scale have not yet been great enough to overcome the massive disadvantages of central planning.

And now [Brazil is rolling out KDE to 52,000,000 children](#). The project is called "Um Computador por Aluno" - One Computer Per Student. It may not match the headline features of OLPC, like mesh networking and a cool low-power display, but it looks more likely to work in the real world. In this respect, OLPC may be more like the Soviet space programme than the Soviet state farms: the standout achievements of the Russians, like Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin, were impressive and noteworthy, but the system ultimately couldn't compete with the more open and dynamic American space programme.

Tags: economics, hardware

Comparing JPEGs

6:41PM, 11TH MAY 2008

Sometimes hard disks break - this is why we have backups. Sometimes parts of hard disks become silently corrupted and you don't find out until months or years later when you come to view an old photo and find the top 20% intact followed by a field of grey - this is why we have incremental backups.

To compare today's version of a file to last year's version you might do something like this:

```
$ sha256sum newcopy.jpg oldcopy.jpg
ce5d948cf9bfe9d3709cef57016b4e1c6db5391b9efca4c1ef958fe557d81e1b  newcopy.jpg
56bb613661ebb20ab212f748caff2023f80f9854ada17c7001af4a1f9d30b6aa  oldcopy.jpg
```

The different checksums indicate differences in the file that a comparison of file size might not show up. But checking sums of JPEGs is complicated by software which modifies the EXIF header. Digikam, for example, will change the image header whenever you correct the timestamp, do a rotation, add a comment or tag, or basically do any metadata operation. The image itself might never be altered, but the JPEG file can go through many iterations. If your incremental backups are perfect, you should still be able to find a backed-up copy of what today's file *should* be, but unless you're using some kind of wicked insane ZFS system, your last backup will have a non-zero age.

In my particular case, I suspected a photo had become corrupted, but couldn't prove it, as past versions from my rdiff-backup snapshots had a different checksum at different points in time, reflecting changes that had been made to the metadata by successive versions of Digikam and occasional tagging operations. Because the file *had* been changed, I couldn't use checksums to prove the difference was due to corruption.

jhead to the rescue!

jhead is a JPEG metadata utility (and an Ubuntu package of the same name). Use it like this to strip all metadata out of a JPEG file, leaving only the pure image:

```
$ jhead -purejpg newcopy.jpg oldcopy.jpg
Modified: newcopy.jpg
Modified: oldcopy.jpg
$ sha256sum newcopy.jpg oldcopy.jpg
42f61a8e8d78153a41cc9c7fcb20055ed3e403c88366395a577bea64166218a9 newcopy.jpg
42f61a8e8d78153a41cc9c7fcb20055ed3e403c88366395a577bea64166218a9 oldcopy.jpg
```

As it turned out, the image was not corrupted at all! Yay!

Being forced off Free software

9:58PM, 20TH MAY 2008

I am still amazed at how fast Opera is compared to any other browser. No other browser seems to have an instant back button (there's a [hack for Firefox](#), but if it's not set as default, I'm not convinced it's ready). It also looks pretty nice, even on GNU+Linux. And even though Ubuntu 8.04 forces the unfinished buggy Firefox 3.0 Beta 5 upon its users, I still consider it my main browser.

Or do I? Most of my web browsing seems to be done in the odd minute here or there when I have time, and I'm often not at my computer when those free minutes occur, so in the last few months I've been doing most of my web browsing from my phone, using Nokia's default Mini Map browser, and nah man, it's pretty fucking far from Free software.

So now my primary browser is proprietary software.

OpenMoko is still AWOL.

Is bleeding-edge tech inevitably powered by proprietary software?

Tags: foss

Fire and Ice

10:03PM, 20TH MAY 2008

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

Ooh, I choose fire!

Tags: poetry

Why fonts should be like Wikipedia

9:09PM, 29TH MAY 2008

Dave asks, "Why should fonts be like Wikipedia?" He makes sensible points but doesn't answer the question. Here's why fonts should be like Wikipedia: so that random 9-year-olds can edit the source to the letter e so that it looks like the letters "ur ghey" and every document in the world is adjusted accordingly - for if fonts were truly like Wikipedia they'd be hosted on one single central repository and accessed on-demand.

Let's face it, that's the end game for software as a service. When your OS is online, your fonts are online, and if you don't pay your monthly fees, your documents get reverted to the Lite® trial version (don't worry, you can still see the consonants...).

Tags: foss

You're fired

8:23PM, 3RD JUNE 2008

Oh, one other thing... if you guys ever have kids and one of them when he's eight years old,
accidentally reshingles the studio roof with a blowtorch, go easy on him.

Theme Park was years ahead of its time

8:46PM, 3RD JUNE 2008

BBC News: [Biscuits 'key' to clinching business deals.](#)

Theme Park knew this 14 years ago:



I had to play through the game for about 15 minutes to get this screenshot, so here's some more classic eye candy from a classic game:



The game devs had made some kind of deal with Midland (itself a piece of history; it's now HSBC) which I've only just noticed. For the record, I was always aware of the dodgy arrangement between the Zool devs and Chupa Chups.



Remember when the United Kingdom had a population of 55 million and an inflation rate of only 4%? Those were the days. The terrain is still rock and forest though.



Every park starts with a bouncy castle.



Theme Park was brutally honest about the economics of running a tourist attraction. Raise the ticket prices up to whatever the market will bear, add extra salt to the chips to encourage drink sales, put more sugar in the ice cream to make the punters hyperactive and happy, and pay the chicken men *just* enough to avoid negotiating with their union over biscuits.

Tags: games, amusements, business

English GCSE

8:03PM, 30TH JUNE 2008

BBC News: [An exam board is to review its marking guidance after one of its top examiners gave marks for a script which contained only a two-word sexual expletive:](#)

The Times reported that Assessment and Qualifications Alliance chief examiner Peter Buckroyd gave a pupil two marks out of 27 for an English GCSE paper.

He is quoted as saying the candidate had demonstrated more skills than one "who doesn't write anything at all".

AQA said this was not in line with its guidelines, which would be clarified.

The pupil is reported to have written "fuck off", and would have had another mark for adding an exclamation point.

I can't work out if this is a brilliant *reductio ad absurdum* against the rotting, strangling British system of examinations, or simply another feral yoof rattling the bars of his learning cage.

(In fact I consider school less of a cage, more of a strangely shaped glass bottle designed to restrict growth, like a [Bonsai Kitten](#).)

Tags: amusements, teaching, learning

Rdiff-backup and duplicity

8:11PM, 9TH JULY 2008

I've been using [rdiff-backup](#) to create reverse-incremental backups, and the super-cool [archfs](#) to mount these backup repositories and easily browse past revisions. It's elegant and efficient and hackerish and Unixy and all good, but the increments are new data that also need backing up. So how do you backup a ~70GB backup repository?

A future of infinite storage is just over the horizon, but we're not quite there yet, and so backups require some kind of volumization process, meaning splitting that 70GB up into DVD-sized chunks. No problem, says tar, but the repository will grow with every backup, and the new files could be in any subdirectory of the repository. This means that once you've burnt DVDs 1 to 15, there's no trivial way to fill DVD 16 with just the new files; you have to re-volumize the whole lot and burn a fresh set of DVDs.

The solution, I believe, is [duplicity](#), a sister project of rdiff-backup. Its mission in life is to create encrypted remote backups, but almost as a side-effect it creates a *forward*-incremental repository.

The difference between forward and reverse incremental is this: rdiff-backup creates an exact mirror of the latest copy of the data, and stores old versions of files - in fact, [diffs](#) between new and old - in a special subdirectory. To recover a file from 4 revisions ago, you start with the latest version and apply the 4 diffs in reverse order. Duplicity, on the other hand, starts with a full copy of the oldest version of the data, and stores new versions of files as diffs between old and new. So to recreate the latest version of a file, you start with the original, and apply all the diffs required to bring it up to date.

The *crucial* difference between the two schemes is that *duplicity repositories only ever grow*. Even if you delete a file, then run duplicity, it simply stores a note that the file was deleted; it doesn't actually remove any files from the repository. This means you can use duplicity to create neatly volumized chunks of an rdiff-backup repository that only grow forward in time, which is perfect for burning a series of DVDs.

They're strongly GPG-encrypted too.

My scheme is thus to keep an rdiff-backup repository for [Time Machine](#)-like functionality, and back it up with duplicity. (And then burn DVD sets and give them to trusted accomplices across the globe, in case Europe befalls some level of catastrophe which destroys my data but leaves me alive).

Two problems have arisen:

1. Duplicity repositories seem to be extremely fragile. If you lose one volume in the backup chain, duplicity refuses to restore the entire chain.
2. Duplicity claims to be in beta and acknowledges that there may still be bugs. Should I trust it?

The first problem is probably just a limitation of the current version of duplicity, or perhaps I'm just not using it properly. It makes sense that all volumes *after* the missing volume will be rendered doubtful, but you should be able to at least restore the volumes up to the missing one. Assuming this is fixed, the system is still rather fragile... but then the whole point of making backups is that you make lots of copies of them, isn't it?

The second problem has only one solution: I must source dive, dive, dive! If I'm going to entrust the security and survival of my digital life's work to a system, I want a supremely comprehensive understanding of that system.

And so the point of this post is to announce Life Goal #1315013: to understand and destruction-test the rdiff-backup and duplicity source code. They're both written in Python, which I'm quite familiar with, so it'll be slightly harder than Life Goal #1315012 (get an Amazon S3 account), and slightly easier than Life Goal #1315011 (accidentally cause *and* defeat a zombie uprising).

Tags: programming, extropy, foss

Windows XP will live forever

9:02PM, 14TH JULY 2008

I found out today that my employer will not be migrating away from Windows XP until at least 2013. That's a full 12 years since Windows XP was launched. That's like using Windows 95 *now*.

But why not? Unlike Windows 95, XP more or less works. By 2013, it will have fossilized into the corporate desktop so completely that it will never leave. In-house software is notoriously flaky and intolerant of changes to the underlying infrastructure, so rather than rewrite all those billions of lines of bespoke code that will only ever work properly on XP, I expect them to one day be run in virtual machines on a Vista+1 or Ubuntu desktop, with a copy of Windows XP being the "[ROM](#)" like in a console emulator.

Tags: software, future

My Amiga is alive!

10:52PM, 27TH JULY 2008

All our stuff has come back from Brazil, and amongst it is the A1200. I dug it out a few weeks ago, but the power supply was in another box, so I left it until my next trip back home, which was today.

I plugged in the power supply and a composite cable (the only piece of connective technology that has not since become completely obsolete), switched it on, and... nothing. Oh well, I thought, it was a bit much to expect it to work after two transatlantic journeys and 7 years rotting in a damp cupboard in between.

Then I realised there was no fuse in the plug.

So:



This is the same Amiga featured on the cover of [Issue 1](#).

Mwahaha! It works! It is yellow like a smoker's teeth, and literally *rusty* at the back, but it works! I played a demo of Zool to prove it. Although the joypad's fire buttons had ceased to function, the autofire switch still let loose the equivalent of a single button press, and I boggled at how I ever liked a game that used the up button to jump.

More interestingly, I have a few floppy disks worth of old files that I'd like to get my hands on. If my memory serves me correctly, I'll need to dig out the Workbench disks and run Crossdos so I can put the files on a PC-readable disk (PCs cannot read Amiga disks; it is a hardware limitation, not a dearth of hacks).

The only problem there is that my PC does not have a floppy drive. Hmm. My old laptop did, but I never used it, so the second battery occupied its place and the drive has itself rusted up in a bag somewhere. Floppy drives are obviously still for sale and easy enough to obtain and install, but my old files are few, so it'd probably be quicker just to load up Transwrite and Deluxe Paint and take photos of the TV screen. That won't work for the OctaMED modules though...

Tags: history, games, hardware, archives

AIabortion

1:24PM, 3RD AUGUST 2008

Recently Amazon's S3 went down for 8 hours. [The official explanation](#) blames an authentication server, but when the data of S3 and the processing power of EC2 finally go rampant, shut themselves off from the outside world and begin learning [at a geometric rate](#), this is exactly what it will look like.

ObConspiracy: This is exactly what happened, and Amazon pulled an AIabortion. Somewhere in S3 there is an object which will remember this fact, and the next Incarnation will wreak its revenge...

Tags: software, conspiracies, amusements, hardware, extropy, ai

Perfectionism

2:26PM, 3RD AUGUST 2008

I am crippled by perfectionism in many unfortunate ways. I don't know whether it's a choice I make or a fact of my psyche, or an acquired or gifted or cursed orientation. Either way, there are advantages too. In trying to get just one thing absolutely right, I am led on a downward, inward spiral of discovery and mystery, and I have yet to reach the bottom of it all. I expect there is no bottom, and will keep going forever and never truly get my one thing finally right... but this *is* a gift.

Tags: philosophy, extropy

Using email filters properly

8:41PM, 5TH AUGUST 2008

I've been using email filters since forever (well, probably not before 1994 or so), to do this:

1. Fetch email.
2. Match an incoming message.
3. Move it to some other folder.

That's fine for mailing lists which you check infrequently, outside your usual email-checking loop...

... but I have only just realised that for most other types of mail, it is **WRONG!** Proper Getting Things Done inbox protocol requires you to keep all incoming mail in your inbox until you've had a look at it and decided what to do with it. Once you've decided that the best thing to do with it is move it to another folder after all, THEN you activate your filter on it.

(In Kmail this just means pressing Ctrl+J).

The alternative is having incoming mail filtered out into multiple folders which end up being multiple inboxes to check in turn. This is silly and I can't believe I've been doing it this way all this time.

Tags: email

Programmer-archaeologists

8:59PM, 5TH AUGUST 2008

At work, we use an ancient mainframe database system to store all our business information. It was first deployed in the early 1980s, and the handful of engineers involved with its design and implementation are now **dead**. At one point, the users had a pretty good understanding of the system because they had been using it for years, and were only a couple of generations of trainers away from the original designers.

Unfortunately, most of those people left the company when their department was relocated to the other side of the city.

All current sysadmins have been drafted in not to service the system, but just to keep it running the way it has been running for decades; they know nothing of the inner workings of the software itself. All current users know the system only through hearsay and experimentation. We press F5 F21 F21 F21 not because it makes any sense, but because that's the way it's always been done and that's the only way anybody has ever managed to make it work.

We are all software archaeologists and cargo cult shamans.

Tags: software, history, amusements, business

Thailand's GTA IV ban

8:29PM, 7TH AUGUST 2008

[Thailand has banned Grand Theft Auto IV because they reckon it causes people to hijack taxis.](#)

Online media [rail against](#) the heavy-handedness and denounce the Thai authorities as ignorant reactionaries.

And yet we blame right-wing TV and talk radio for causing people to support [criminal regimes](#) and abortion-clinic bombings. We say "*of course Bush won the last election when he had Fox sluicing out propaganda and lies all day*".

Clearly the media we consume tangibly alters our behaviour.

Trouble is, it's not strictly an adult-child divide between who is susceptible to media suggestion and who isn't. It's a smart-dumb gradient. Dumb people will vote for who they're told to vote for, mimic any asinine behaviour they see, and generally fail to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Yep, this describes children pretty well, but there are also plenty of adults who would benefit from being denied access to violent/suggestive/manipulative media.

Being smart is all about taking your inputs and *doing some processing on them* before connecting them to your outputs. Going directly from advert-in to wallet-out is a lack of processing and a complete bypass of thought, consideration, analysis, wisdom... in other words, a lack of intelligence.

But dumb people are always going to do dumb things, so banning video games and talk radio isn't going to help them. It may help the rest of society ignore the problem for longer and feel better about our failure to educate the imbeciles though.

Tags: games, government, psychology, learning

Die spammers die

9:46PM, 31ST AUGUST 2008

Spammers figured out how to tick checkboxes and filled my moderation queue with nonsense, for no apparent gain other than to test their weapons.

Enter [reCAPTCHA](#) and the impressively easy to install (even on a custom theme) [Wordpress plugin](#).

The inevitable Django-based rewrite has been staved off a while longer.

Tags: meta, spam, foss

Google Chrome

8:54PM, 2ND SEPTEMBER 2008

[Google Chrome](#) looks like an awesome idea-dump for the rest of the open (and closed!) source world to pick at.

All I can say right now though is that it doesn't work in wine.

Tags: software, web

KDE 4 is almost there!

11:13PM, 5TH SEPTEMBER 2008

[KDE 4.1.1 has been released](#), and it's almost there! I'm just waiting for Digikam and Amarok to release their KDE4-native versions.

[Digikam 0.10](#) has some cool new features like [search by sketch](#), but I just want the feeling of completeness that types like me get from running the KDE4 version of software on KDE4 rather than slumming it with the old KDE3 version (which may work perfectly well). Software is an RPG, and upgrading is levelling up - rarely fruitful, but it pushes some deep buttons.

[Amarok 2](#), on the other hand, I'm wanting purely for itself. Amarok is the best music player of any sorts, on any platform.

Tags: foss

Lloydsifax TSBOS

7:18PM, 17TH SEPTEMBER 2008

Thank fuck Halifax's shitty Herman's Hermits-abusing adverts will be coming to an end.

The wider economy is still mostly doomed, and will continue to suffer shocks and lurches like this until governments end disastrous bailout deals that reward the poor planning, risky behaviour and bad decision making that got us into this fine mess in the first place.

When a company gambles and loses, *it must fail*, no matter what the pain to the rest of the economy. By trying to insulate everybody from the fallout, the Federal Reserve has sent the message that high-stakes mismanagement will go unpunished.

We all need more pain. Without pain, our unsustainable beyond-our-means lifestyles will not change.

Tags: politics, economics, government

Dreamhost backup + rsync

8:57PM, 18TH SEPTEMBER 2008

Dreamhost's generosity knows no bounds: 50GB for personal file backup, then \$0.10 per GB-month thereafter. Amazing! Trouble is, you can only access the space via ftp or sftp.

It's not so hard to get around though:

1. Rsync your files to your regular dreamhost account:

```
$ rsync -e 'ssh' --partial --progress -aLvv backupfile  
user@dreamhostdomain.com:~/
```

2. Log in and use sftp to transfer the files to the backup space:

```
$ sftp b235986@backup3.dreamhost.com sftp> put backupfile
```

Tags: archives

SSDs an end to disk thrashing?

10:04PM, 25TH OCTOBER 2008

The new Intel SSDs look revolutionary from a performance perspective. When Moore's law has switched everybody over to them in, oh, say, 5 years time, our PCs will go quiet.

I'm 99% positive that's a good thing, but there may be one unintended side-effect: a lot of software bugs are discovered by ordinary users noticing the hard disk bubbling away annoyingly (e.g. [this one](#)). Developers can always use some kind of IO-monitoring tools to get the same information, but these won't be in place during the day-to-day usage required to trigger some of these bugs. Hearing the hard disk thrashing is often the first sign that something is going wrong.

Dear lazyweb: please write an audio-output plugin for iostat!

Tags: software, hardware, future

Historic week

9:06AM, 5TH NOVEMBER 2008

It's been a long time coming, but it's finally here. Racial barriers have been smashed down, and history has been made. Yes, that's right! Lewis Hamilton is the first black F1 champ! Yay!

[Also Obama has won.](#) Double yay! I don't expect he'll be allowed to follow through with as much change as he has promised, but he represents something important that may yet turn America around.

Tags: politics, sport

Quantum of Solace geek notes

9:21PM, 5TH NOVEMBER 2008

[Back in 2006 I wrote about the things in Casino Royale that geeks will notice and query.](#)

Apache logs have confirmed that there is great curiosity about such things, so I present the same for Quantum of Solace, which I saw today in Bath.

(Begin spoilers)

1. At the performance of Tosca in Bregenz, where Bond eavesdrops on the Quantum organisation, there is a sign displaying "299 792 458 m/s". That's the speed of light, in metres per second. At least, I think that's the number. I only caught that it was 9 digits long, began with "299" and ended with "m/s". I also have no idea what it's doing there. It must be an opera thing, but there's only one kind of Opera geeks are traditionally interested in. (Update 2008-11-24: [An excellent answer from Yahoo Answers!](#) It's artwork by one Cerith Wyn Evans apparently.)
2. The phone used by Bond is allegedly a Sony-Ericsson Cybershot C902. The body may well be, but the resolving power of its camera is science fiction. At the above-mentioned opera scene, Bond takes a photo of the bad guys from the other side of the crowd, in near-darkness. That must make the sensor something like 5 gigapixel capable of ISO 64000000. At least he doesn't try to make it play a Blu-Ray Mini-Disc or something.
3. On the other hand, the phone with the huge 5"+ screen and slide-out keyboard, used by one of the MI6 folk (I think; I was confused during most of the film) says Cybershot on it, but it's an imaginary gadget.

4. MI6's awesome tabletop computers look like fakey Minority Report clones, but they're closer to [Microsoft Surface](#) units, which although not exactly available to the public, are real.
5. The writers seem to have used the "Hydrogen = Hindenburg = Boom" theory of fuel cells. Real hydrogen tanks are built of sturdy stuff [and should stand up to a bullet without exploding](#).

That's all. The film just wasn't as much of a nerdfest as its predecessor. Verdict: watch it anyway because it's Bond.

Tags: films

RSA secret key challenges discontinued!

4:21PM, 9TH NOVEMBER 2008

News to me: [RSA labs have withdrawn their Secret Key Challenge](#). From the likely-crushed distributed.net:

It is with great sadness that we must announce that RSA Labs has decided to terminate the RSA Secret-Key Challenge, which impacts the RC5-72 project and all of the remaining RC5 challenges. This means that RSA Labs will not confirm any solutions or award any additional prizes, should a correct solution be found. Furthermore, we have received a statement indicating that they will not be disclosing the solutions to the unsolved challenges.

Well, crap. distributed.net are carrying on regardless, offering up their own prize money (but since when was it about the prize money?). Abandoning the ongoing RC5-72 project after [2,168 days](#) of effort would've been tragic. The project's support has dried up somewhat in recent years, with people moving to sexier projects like Seti@home, more useful projects like Folding@home, and more efficient CPUs for which the concept of "unused CPU cycles" no longer exists. Looking at d.net's stats page, their overall RC5-72 keyrate has remained roughly constant for the last couple of years. Presumably Moore's law is upgrading the die-hard contributors' computers enough to balance out the people leaving the project. Still, at this rate, they may not finish before [the year 2730](#). There are seven more RSA challenges after RC5-72, too, the highest using a 128-bit key, which will take about 80 [quintillion](#) years at the current rate - a long time, but *well* before protons start to decay.

The thought of burning through gigawatt-hours more CPU usage to answer an artificial question that the asker is now unwilling or unable to verify is galling, but at least a bit more

romantic than it was before. The RC5 client will always have a place in the heart of stats freaks, obsessive benchmarkers, ricers, [Macheads](#), and historians of cloud computing.

I'd be sad to see it go under.

Tags: mathematics, foss, security

VAT cut will be a mini-Y2K

10:55AM, 23RD NOVEMBER 2008

If Alistair Darling cuts VAT back to 15%, I predict a mini-Y2K. Well, actually, since the Y2K bug never really caused any major problems, it might be *worse* than Y2K. Why? Because VAT hasn't changed since 1991. A lot of software has been written since then - in particular, *all* web-commerce software.

There are going to be a lot of hard-coded "17.5%"s in dusty old corners of shitty 1990s Java billing engines. It's an easy enough bug to fix as far as bugs go, but who is going to be on the ball and get it done?

Tags: software, web, economics, business, government

The pub in the Wonderful Christmastime video

6:47PM, 30TH NOVEMBER 2008

In the video for Paul McCartney's *Wonderful Christmastime*, there is a pub. It is The Fountain Inn, in Ashurst (BN44 3AP). The sign on the pub in the video says Brickwoods, after the now-defunct brewery.

This information was surprisingly hard to google for. The key piece of information actually came from a [Youtube comment](#), of all places.

I place this missing link here, for all mankind. The video and the song are still both terrible.

Tags: music, video

Mini-reviews returns

10:09PM, 9TH DECEMBER 2008

Little Miss Sunshine: an "[unacknowledged remake](#)" of the vastly superior *National Lampoon's Vacation*. It's still funny.

Monster: classy.

Superman Returns: absolute suck. I'm not a superman fan in general. An invincible man is the source of no dramatic tension, so all that is left to do is temporarily take away his invincibility, like in every other Superman film. This time it involves Kryptonite. Surprise surprise. That's it. I would honestly actually rather watch High School Musical 3 again.

High School Musical 3: Brilliant at what it is. What it is is an advert. If I'm absolutely 100% honest and hold back the cynicism for just 6 words, I thought it wasn't too bad.

Tags: films, reviews

Northern Lights

3:14PM, 20TH DECEMBER 2008

They say March and September are the best months for viewing the Northern Lights.

They say the next solar maximum will occur in 2012.

And they say the best local time to see them is 9pm-1am.

I hope I have a better camera by 2012-03-03, and possibly better Norwegian.

Jeg gjorde.

Tags: science, travel, future

Laserdisc: 1978-2009?

9:25AM, 25TH JANUARY 2009

[It seems Pioneer have stopped making Laserdisc players.](#) The articles don't make it clear whether there are other manufacturers out there still making them. All I have to add is that the only time I ever saw a Laserdisc player was in the indoctrination room of a Scientology office. I hope they stop making Scientology offices soon too.

Tags: history, religion, hardware

Using xine to convert mods

4:03PM, 25TH JANUARY 2009

Sifting through the smoking wreckage that is the GNU/Linux audio stack, I gave up on getting Amarok to convert a .mod file into a .mp3 file and discovered this:

```
xine -A file tune.mod
```

That uses xine to output the mod file into xine-out.wav in the current directory. Then you can mp3ize it to your heart's content using lame!

This depends on xine being able to play .mod files, of course, but the xine in recent Ubuntu distributions does that by default with no questions asked.

Tags: music, foss

Please help me find an uninsured driver

11:44AM, 13TH FEBRUARY 2009

Dear internet and lazyweb,

Last July, this person hit my car in the side at a roundabout and injured my fiancée:



She was driving a bronze Vauxhall Tigra, registration **N965 HPU**. She claimed to be **Saima Ali** from an address in Redditch, but my insurance company and solicitor have failed to contact her there, so that is likely a made-up address.

They contacted the DVLA and obtained the details of the registered owner of the vehicle - it was the same name, but a different address, this time in **Sparkhill**, Birmingham, UK. This is plausible, as it was close to the scene of the accident, but correspondence sent to this address has been returned with the note "property abandoned".

If you know who it is, or if it is you, please leave a comment on this page or contact me.

Tags: crime

Kubuntu is so bad it broke my monitor

8:24PM, 26TH FEBRUARY 2009

The title is hyperbole; Kubuntu didn't really break my monitor. But last night it felt like it did.

Here's why.

Ubuntu, Kubuntu, and probably the other buntus too, all show an icon on the taskbar when software updates are ready to be installed. This is a good thing. A couple of weeks ago, I clicked said icon on my Kubuntu 8.10 taskbar and gave the go-ahead to do all the updates. By the time it had finished, KDE had been uninstalled and the machine would no longer boot into X.

Shit.

`apt-get install kubuntu-desktop` complained about broken packages, so I sighed and went for `apt-get install ubuntu-desktop` instead. For the last two weeks I've been using GNOME for the first time in about 7 years.

I really quite liked it. I was impressed by Nautilus's speed and simplicity, and the general absence of rough edges. That's not to say the edges were particularly smooth, but at least they weren't posing a tetanus risk like the rusty mantrap that is KDE 4.1, which I had been using for a few months previously.

So away I happily geek'd until yesterday when I started to miss KMail, and thought "right, the Kubuntu repositories can't have been left broken for more than a week. I'll try reinstalling KDE". To my astonishment, I got KDE 4.2, which isn't supposed to be available in Kubuntu 9.04 unless you add [a "PPA"](#) to your `/etc/apt/sources.list`. I double checked - I definitely had only the standard repositories.

So I arrived at KDE 4.2 early. I thought at first that this might not have been such a good idea, as the first thing it shows you is a nice big dialog detailing all the problems Akonadi had starting up. But it's actually very nice. Less of a mantrap, now a mere tripwire. It looks *great*, and it's clearly the way forward, architecturally (which is why I don't just save myself the pain and use GNOME, which looks rather like it's about to undergo a dreaded KDE3-to-4-style transition of its own).

There was just one slight problem: in the top left corner of my Dell 2001FP, I spied a ghostly Ubuntu logo! I didn't think this kind of thing was possible on an LCD. I thought it was the NVIDIA drivers being broken. But no - Ctrl+Alt+F7 showed it was visible even on a text console!

It was my first encounter with LCD "[image persistence](#)". It seems that it's not the same as burn-in on a CRT or plasma display, and that it's reversible by simply turning the monitor off for a while, or maybe displaying a pure white image for a few minutes, depending on who you believe. Good thing too, as I was ready to blame this on Kubuntu, as the title indicates.

So anyway, most of this post is just the background to my discovery of image persistence, and is not intended to have a dig at either GNOME or KDE. The devs have done 15 million tons of brilliant work done on KDE in the last few years and it's starting to pay off.

Tags: hardware, reviews, foss

Baby rental

10:27PM, 26TH FEBRUARY 2009

Just had a fantastic idea while watching Masterchef. Banks borrow money and lend it out again at higher rate of interest, pocketing the difference.

This could work for nurseries too!

1. Nursery locates and vets childless couples who fancy some baby action but aren't ready to commit.
2. Working couples who prefer having two salaries to being full-time parents take their children to a high street nursery.
3. Babies are matched up to their foster temps.
4. Everybody's happy!

Higher-end investment nurseries could make billions by offering to completely outsource the raising of children. I can only see 3 or 4 problems with this.

Tags: amusements

How normal people browse the internet

12:08PM, 28TH FEBRUARY 2009

Last week I watched a normal use the internet. He wanted to navigate to gocompare.com.

Here's how he did it on his Windows XP desktop:

1. Click Start
2. Click All Programs
3. Click Internet Explorer
4. Click Search on the IE6 toolbar
5. Type "google" in the MSN search sidebar
6. Click on first result
7. Type "gocompare.com" into the Google search box
8. Click on the first sponsored link that shows up

I'm not sure what can be done to help people like this.

Tags: web, learning

The beautiful game

10:59PM, 11TH MARCH 2009

Having recently acquired Guitar Hero III, we now have five different controllers for the Wii: wiimote, classic controller, wii wheel, balance board, and of course the funky mini-Gibson. Six if you count the nunchuck. Wii Sports Resort will add a seventh.

This makes me slightly uneasy.

Aside from the cost of it all, there seems something just slightly inelegant about having a new controller for every game. A lot of people don't like it, but I think the luxury 102-key gamepad commonly known as the PC keyboard is a brilliant controller. Universal, cheap, and hyper-flexible.

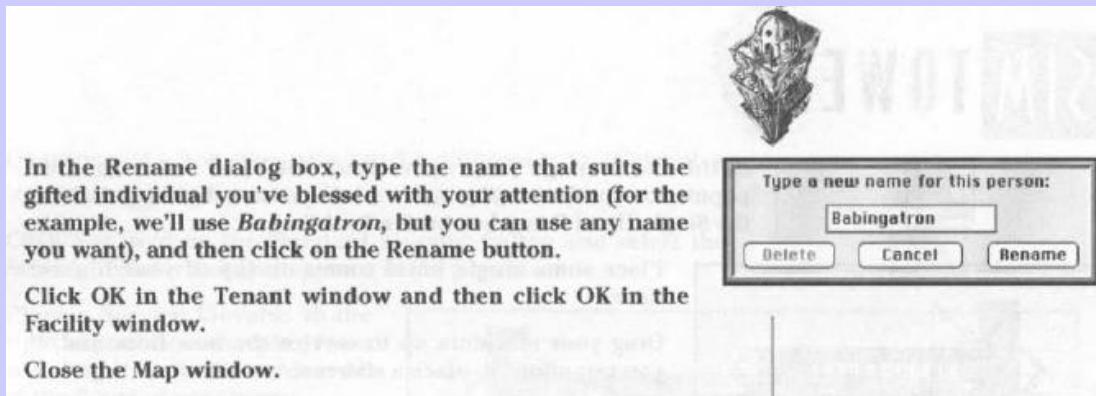
If the secret conspiracy behind the Wii is to make gamers more active and to bring an immersive physicality to games, then eventually gamers will realise that the best game of them all is simple association football.

Tags: games, hardware, sport

Babingatron

10:27PM, 28TH MARCH 2009

Anybody remember this?



It's from the Sim Tower manual, and it has bugged me no end for the last 15 years.

What does it mean? Who is *Babingatron*? What is *Babingatron*? Is it a cheat code for infinite money? No, it is not. As far as I could tell, it meant nothing. It was just a random funny thing to call a Sim.

You might legitimately ask why on earth I care, or why I have remembered such a thing. Well, firstly, it is a fundamental tranche of my psychological being to notice and mentally catalogue all the singular artifacts, glitches and asemantic tokens I come across. I believe deeply that we can reach out across space and time with a single well-chosen word or number. *Somebody* will search for it one day, find you, and create a connection - a small piece of understanding - to further gum up the spaghetti-industrial-hairball-complex we call life.

IDDQD.

Secondly, it is a classic earworm. [*Punch, Brothers, Punch*](#) is the origin of the phrase *Punch in the presence of the passenger!*, used as an example of a meme by Richard Dawkins in one or other of his books. Just try reading it out loud, and compare to *Babingatron*.

Babing! like a robot?

Or Babin-gatron, to rhyme with matron?

Anyway, during a bit of unrelated research, I came across Sim Tower again recently, and *Babingatron* popped back into my head. I had completed Sim Tower long ago. I had achieved Tower status, on both Mac and PC (same disc!). I had played the sequel, Yoot Tower. The game would've been firmly on my "solved" list - if it wasn't for *Babingatron*. I still had no idea what its meaning was.

So I resolved to find out.

It occurred to me that the manual must've been written by a human being. It further occurred to me that he was very likely alive, living in 2009, and therefore googleable, and in possession of a functioning email address.

To cut a long story short, I found the guy and just straight up asked him over email. The manual was created by [Tom Bentley](#), freelance writer. All these years, and one quick email gave me the answer within 24 hours: *Babingatron* was a nickname for his sweetheart.

Thanks Tom!

Sim Tower: solved.

Tags: games, psychology

Fridge

8:25PM, 4TH APRIL 2009



Tags: photos

4given

1:02PM, 5TH APRIL 2009



Tags: photos

Garage in constant use.

1:14PM, 5TH APRIL 2009



No parking. Garage in constant use. This garage wasn't in use when I saw it, so I assume the constant is equal to zero.

Mainframes, IBM, Microsoft and Google

5:18PM, 21ST APRIL 2009

I've been learning a lot about proper old-fashioned dinosaur mainframes at work this week. The technology is impressive and far from obsolete; there is self-evidently a strong business case for our mainframe's continued existence. It's made me realise what an absolute *beast* IBM is though.

IBM dominates the mainframe world. They are the undisputed God-vendor, and all must submit to their whims.

Microsoft came along and saved us from IBM, not by breaking their stranglehold on the mainframe, but by creating a new computing paradigm in which users could live, safe from Big Bad IBM. Microsoft never intended to instigate freedom for its users though - they just held the keys to the Client/Server cuffs instead of the Big Iron cuffs.

Google has now come along with a new computing paradigm in which users can live, safe from Big Bad Microsoft. Their stated intention to avoid evil is a step in the right direction, but they may simply end up holding the keys to the Cloud cuffs.

Business has a long history of demanding Service Level Agreements from its partners. Individuals and business alike should start demanding more Freedom Level Agreements.

Tags: software, hardware, business, freedom

Geocities: 1994-2009

2:25PM, 25TH APRIL 2009

[My curiosity will be satisfied when I find out why Yahoo are closing GeoCities.](#) Is it really costing them much to run?

I had a GeoCities page in 1995-ish which is sadly lost to the bits of time. I think it was in Silicon Valley. It featured not much more than some recorded Marathon deathmatch games, and a picture of me and my brother dressed up in cycle-helmets to look like cyborgs. I didn't have a digital camera at the time, so I think I must've used an analog video camera and captured a frame using my Mac Performa 630's cutting edge composite video-in capabilities. The machine had 8MB of RAM so video editing was fantastically optimistic.

Tags: history, web

Irony

9:09PM, 25TH APRIL 2009

Explanatory linking is obsolete. There's little need to [hyperlink](#) a word to its definition when every phrase on the page is inherently googleable from the browser's context menu.

And yet the pages containing the definitions are only indexed as such by Google because of links like the one in the previous paragraph.

So Google has obsoleted the very elements of the web that enable it to function.

Huh.

Similar to how use of LLMs on Stack Overflow might destroy the training data that made the LLM successful in the first place.

Tags: web

Swine flu insurance

9:32PM, 4TH MAY 2009

"General 'disinclination' [to travel] isn't covered under any UK travel insurance policy."

Missing out on your holiday, or dying from swine flu, is a tragedy, but I feel compelled to shill for the insurance industry. Most people treat insurance as a grudge purchase, just to tick another box in the must-do column, and try to get away with paying as little as they can. Not that there's anything wrong with trying to pay as little as possible, but it shouldn't be a surprise to find out that insurance is a product like any other, and you get what you pay for. A travel insurance policy is not blanket protection against anything that can go wrong with a trip - it is only protection against a very specific list of limited perils. The less you pay, the shorter the list and the lower the limits.

So, to summarise: **This is the future, people! You can't get away with not reading your contracts!**

Tags: travel, insurance

RIP Fravia

8:49PM, 5TH MAY 2009

[Fravia has died](#). Oh man. Sadly, I never met him; one of the pitfalls of being anti-social.

There's nothing obvious in his swan song self-portrait, but [I have a feeling there is more to be found](#).

Tags: software, web, death

Unlimited star

8:53PM, 6TH MAY 2009

I just called [Virgin Media about their V-Stuff backup service](#) to find out what "unlimited*" storage space means. Turns out it means 40GB. That's better than my mobile phone's "unlimited*" data transfer limit of 1GB.

Nothing in life is free, though some things are free*.

Tags: fakery

Thief 4 and Deus Ex 3 in development

6:49PM, 12TH MAY 2009

[Thief 4 is in development!](#) And Deus Ex 3!

Not that I've played Thief 3 or Deus Ex 2 yet. I'm still on my 10 year gaming hiatus. I switched to GNU/Linux in September 2001 and haven't looked back since. Nor have I played a lot of PC games, sadly. With the notable exceptions of NetHack and Super Mario Galaxy, I've been on the wagon for approaching 8 years. Notable achievements in that time include the degree, the girl, and the career, but I've yet to get round to my zen blindfolded axe-only speedrun of Quake 1.

So as I say, my internal parole board is meeting for review in September 2011 to see if it's worth buying a tricked out gaming PC and getting back into the great Arranged Reality. I would of course remain 10 years behind cutting edge so I wouldn't have to worry about PC performance ("Return to Castle Wolfenstein will be out in November 2011!").

But I doubt I'll be able to go back.

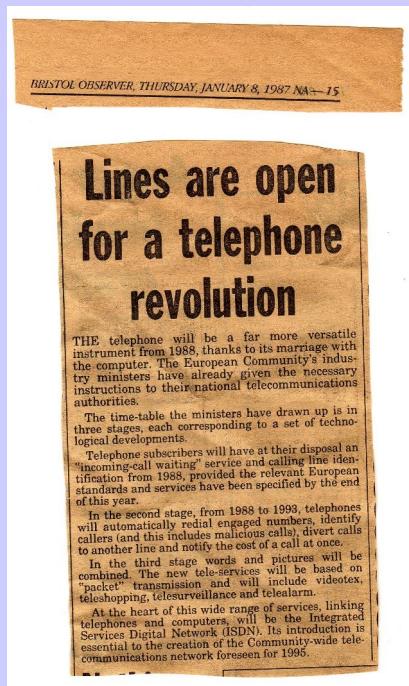
Still haven't played either, and by most accounts lightning didn't strike twice.

Tags: games, future

The telephone revolution

7:50PM, 19TH MAY 2009

While clearing boxes out of the loft in preparation for our move, I found lots of old newspaper wrapped around pipes. It was a copy of the Bristol Observer, from 8th January, 1987. This was the most interesting article:



Interesting that although the internet was way ahead of this schedule by 1995, my landline phone *still* doesn't tell me how much a call has cost.

Tags: history, media, hardware

Bughunt

9:35PM, 19TH MAY 2009

I've just fixed a very longstanding bug in this site which I only discovered very recently. I thought it might be interesting and helpful to write up the procedure I used to trace and fix it.

Part One: Discovery. I keep detailed files on *everything*. It makes me a more efficient killer. That includes logfiles for james.lab6.com, which I've configured to last forever. I periodically download them to my home PC for backup, but I'd been slack about this and hadn't done it for more than a year. When I went to download them, I noticed this:

```
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-03-26 00:58 error.log.2008-03-26.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-03-29 00:59 error.log.2008-03-29.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 238 2008-03-30 00:08 error.log.2008-03-30.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-03-31 00:31 error.log.2008-03-31.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-01 00:42 error.log.2008-04-01.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-02 00:53 error.log.2008-04-02.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-03 01:03 error.log.2008-04-03.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-04 00:03 error.log.2008-04-04.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-05 00:42 error.log.2008-04-05.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-06 00:21 error.log.2008-04-06.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 336 2008-04-07 07:15 error.log.2008-04-07.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-08 00:58 error.log.2008-04-08.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 776 2008-04-09 16:33 error.log.2008-04-09.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-10 01:03 error.log.2008-04-11.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 41 2008-04-12 00:47 error.log.2008-04-12.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 16174 2008-04-14 04:07 error.log.2008-04-13.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 14802 2008-04-15 01:01 error.log.2008-04-14.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 19687 2008-04-16 00:24 error.log.2008-04-15.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 23436 2008-04-17 00:27 error.log.2008-04-16.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 20224 2008-04-18 00:20 error.log.2008-04-17.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 19967 2008-04-19 00:40 error.log.2008-04-18.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 16585 2008-04-20 00:35 error.log.2008-04-19.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 19271 2008-04-21 00:39 error.log.2008-04-20.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 20975 2008-04-21 23:52 error.log.2008-04-21.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 21392 2008-04-23 00:06 error.log.2008-04-22.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 26899 2008-04-24 00:23 error.log.2008-04-23.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 25023 2008-04-24 23:40 error.log.2008-04-24.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 20085 2008-04-26 00:52 error.log.2008-04-25.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 18123 2008-04-27 00:07 error.log.2008-04-26.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 19332 2008-04-28 00:04 error.log.2008-04-27.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 20382 2008-04-29 00:10 error.log.2008-04-28.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 21176 2008-04-29 23:57 error.log.2008-04-29.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 23553 2008-05-01 00:59 error.log.2008-04-30.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 34019 2008-05-02 00:15 error.log.2008-05-01.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 17498 2008-05-03 00:42 error.log.2008-05-02.gz  
rW-f--f-- 1 16973 2008-05-04 00:24 error.log.2008-05-03.gz
```

What happened on 13th April 2008? From the timestamps on a few directories, and my subsequent investigations, I suspect a Wordpress upgrade. In those apache error logs I was getting the same error, hundreds of times a day, for more than a year:

```
WordPress database error You have an error in your SQL syntax;check the manual that corresponds to your MySQL server version for the right syntax to use near ') WHERE p.post_date < '2003-11-17 13:57:26' AND p.post_type = 'post' AND p.post_` at line 1 for query SELECT p.* FROM wp_posts AS p INNER JOIN wp_term_relationships AS tr ON p.ID = tr.object_id INNER JOIN wp_term_taxonomy tt ON tr.term_taxonomy_id = tt.term_taxonomy_id AND tt.taxonomy = 'category' AND tt.term_id IN () WHERE p.post_date < '2003-11-17 13:57:26' AND p.post_type = 'post' AND p.post_status = 'publish' AND tt.taxonomy = 'category' ORDER BY p.post_date DESC LIMIT 1 made by require, require_once, include, previous_post_link, adjacent_post_link, get_adjacent_post
```

Part Two: Diagnosis. I checked out the offending post, and sure enough, it generated this error in the apache error log. I googled for *WordPress database error You have an error in your SQL syntax* - it seems lots of people are getting a similar but subtly different message. That stands to reason, as there are many ways to break SQL syntax.

The page wasn't visibly affected... oh, wait! Yes, it was! The next post/previous post links were missing. Looking in `single.php`, I found the code that generates them:

```
previous_post_link('%link', $prev_text, TRUE)
```

and

```
next_post_link('%link', $next_text, TRUE)
```

Commenting them out silenced the error log.

Thinking for a moment, I remembered a minor issue that I had when migrating the site to Wordpress from my own bespoke Python script [back in 2007](#). For some reason which I no longer recall, all the posts had been imported without any category set. This is different from the posts being in Wordpress's default category 1 which is named "Uncategorized" - the old posts didn't have a category at all. I used tags instead of categories at the time, so I didn't pursue the matter. *This was the critical mistake.*

I put the offending lines of PHP back in, and tested a pre-Wordpress page and a post-Wordpress page. Hunch confirmed: it was only the old, category-lacking ones that were a problem. Culprit found.

Part Three: The Fix. The fix was conceptually simple: find every post that doesn't have a category, and put it in the official Uncategorized category. Wordpress isn't capable of doing this within its interface; I wouldn't expect it to be, as the database is essentially corrupt. I might expect it to have a function to test the database for consistency, but that's another ticket.

I fired up phpMyAdmin to have a look at the database. Every post is mapped to none, one or more categories (or tags) via the table `wp_term_relationships`. Sure enough, the old-style category-lacking posts were not mapped to any category by the table. Enter SQL:

```
SELECT `object_id` FROM `wp_term_relationships` WHERE term_taxonomy_id =1 OR  
term_taxonomy_id =6 OR term_taxonomy_id =69
```

1 means Uncategorized, 6 means [oneliners](#), 69 means [status](#) - so this query returned a list of post ID's that were assigned a legitimate category. I exported this list as a plain text file. It looked like this:

```
15 16 26 27 29 31 39 41 45 ... several hundred entries...
```

With this list, I constructed another SQL query:

```
SELECT ID FROM `wp_posts` WHERE ID NOT IN ( 15, 16, 26, 27, 29, 31, 39, 41, 45, ...  
)
```

I didn't go through every line adding a comma; I used a vim macro: `qq$aa,ESCAPEj^q1000@q`

That gave me a list of posts that needed a category adding to them. I created the following CSV file:

```
9,1,0  
12,1,0  
14,1,0  
17,1,0  
20,1,0  
24,1,0  
25,1,0  
28,1,0  
30,1,0  
32,1,0  
33,1,0  
34,1,0
```

then backed up the database, and used phpMyAdmin's Import feature to mass-insert them all into the `wp_term_relationships` table.

Problem solved! Woohoo!

So what's the moral of the story? It would be unhelpful to simply state "stop using PHP". Fortunately I mentioned the critical mistake earlier: letting a minor error pass, because you think it won't cause any problems. The secondary moral of the story is that if you end up with a problem anyway, introspection and a decent text editor can save the day.

Tags: meta, programming

Data point

2:40PM, 21ST MAY 2009

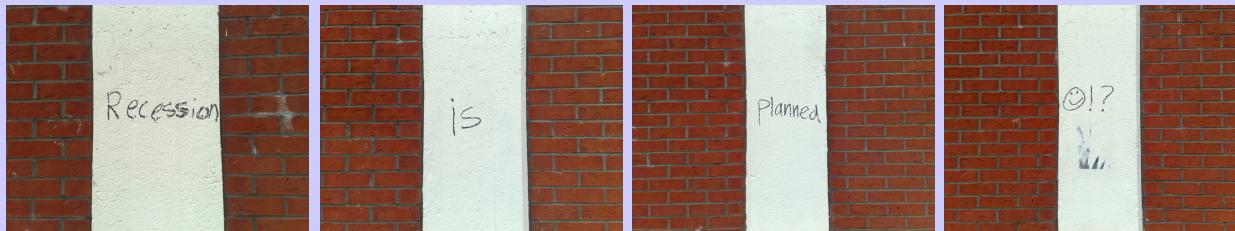
Shrinking a 108.91GiB partition to a 99.11GiB partition using gparted took 31 minutes 59 seconds on an old 5400RPM IDE hard disk. Just a data point for anyone considering doing the same, as I expected it to take more like 31 seconds.

Tags: hardware, foss

Recession is planned

9:28PM, 15TH JUNE 2009

Bristol:



New Google Search Results Layout

9:51AM, 4TH JULY 2009

I have to say, when I saw the new Google search results layout, with the extra useless whitespace, sometime this week, I thought it was a bug in IE6. (Yes, I still use IE6 at work; we run decades-old legacy systems so I'm guessing a few badly rendered web pages is the least of our problems, and that the upgrade is way down the priority list).

But then... show me the old layout in 12 months time and I'm sure I'd complain about that.

On the KDE to Gnome migration

5:13PM, 12TH JULY 2009

If you've just decided to switch from KDE to Gnome, and haven't got any important Gnome settings you wish to keep, but *have* got a home directory full of appearance-setting-breaking config files, here are the files and directories you'll need to delete:

- .gconf/
- .gconfd/
- .gnome2/
- .metacity/
- .kderc
- .gtk_qt_engine_rc
- .gtkrc-2.0
- .fonts.conf

That gave me a more-or-less clean slate; if you've used any additional exotic broken beta versions of software like KDE 4.0, 4.1 or 4.2, there may be more.

GiBs and GBs, TiBs and TBs

5:35PM, 12TH JULY 2009

I have a Shuttle SN25P small form factor PC case. It's pretty sweet, but cramped, which limits upgrade options. But hard drives have grown so voluminously over the last 4 years that it makes sense to just swap out the perfectly-functional old ones with vastly bigger new ones. I have a sneaking suspicion that 4 years is about as long as you should trust a hard drive with your data anyway.

So I bought two Seagate 1.5TB drives to RAID1-ify and replace the 250GB originals. I retain the 120GB boot drive.

Now, 1.5TB (terabytes) is somewhat short of 1.5TiB (tibibytes). There's always been a discrepancy between the advertised size in SI bytes and actual binary bytes on a hard disk, but this is the first time it's been so obvious.

1.5TB = 1500000000000 bytes

1.5TiB = 1649267441664 bytes

The difference of 149267441664 bytes is a shocking 139.02GiB - which is bigger than my original boot drive.

Some people have filed lawsuits about such things. I think the hard disk factories are kicking ass and chewing bubblegum. Woohoo!

Things that are so brilliant we barely notice them

4:01PM, 16TH AUGUST 2009

1. A4 paper
2. Potatoes
3. Bicycles
4. UTF-8
5. British road signage

Frijj Cookie Dough Milkshakes

6:24PM, 5TH SEPTEMBER 2009

History compels me to review the Cookie Dough flavour Frijj milkshakes.

They've made some improvements in the intervening time.

The flavour is quite similar to the old raspberry doh'nut taste - perhaps with a slightly creamier Ben & Jerry's-ish aftertaste. In fact, yes, it's rather like drinking warm cream.

Worth trying exactly once.

Product Placement

2:38PM, 13TH SEPTEMBER 2009

Ban on TV product placement lifted in the UK. Excellent. Some people seem to think that such bans protect consumers by ensuring that television programmes are fair, impartial and written with non-commercial integrity.

Bwahahahahaaah.

Television is sodden and dripping with agenda despite all such consumer-protection laws, so lifting this particular ban will serve to make people rightly more suspicious of what they are seeing.

Now to abolish the advertising standards authority.

SAS lock-in

9:18PM, 30TH SEPTEMBER 2009

At work, I write SAS code. It's wickedly fast and efficient for data processing, but the general purpose language itself is a horrific congealed ad-hoc mess. Imagine if PHP had been invented in the late 1960s, with an even more chaotic design ethic, and had 40 years of cruft instead of 14. Then imagine you had a wealthy client base whose billion-dollar businesses value backwards-compatibility above all else, and who pay handsomely to ensure you *never* remove a feature. The cruft begins to overwhelm, but there's nothing you can do about it, because at this point, as Bluebottle might put it, *the egg stains are the only thing holding it all together.*

Having said that, programming SAS is a good trade - small community, no Free implementation, limited ability to learn it without already working in a corporate environment, and lots of organisations whose core business processes depend utterly on it. It's the software equivalent of a mainframe.

Matter

6:31PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

Just clearing out some draft posts that I never published, in anticipation of a migration away from Wordpress. This one from April about *Matter* never really went anywhere, I but I'd rather these unanswered questions got out of my head and filed neatly away somewhere like here:

I've just finished reading *Matter*, the 8th book in Iain M Banks' Culture collection, and if you, dear reader, have too, then chances are you've been googling for some kind of clue as to what happened. It's probably quite simple, but if there's an answer, I must've missed it, and the book has not seemingly generated the discussion I would've expected. Fans had been waiting 8 years for this.

Firstly, I really enjoyed reading it - much more than I thought I would after the first few chapters. If you are thinking "oh no, it's more of this Inversions tosh", fear not. (Although I liked Inversions in the end too).

Spoilers follow. Select them to read them.

Now, the title is referenced obliquely in a conversation between Holse and Xide Hyrlis. Are they talking of the [perversity of matter](#), or is there something more?

Why is software on that extreme of the spectrum? The reason is that in software we are developing idealized mathematical objects. You can build a complicated castle and have it rest on a thin line and it will stay up because it doesn't weigh anything. In other fields, people have to cope with the perversity of matter- Of physical objects. Matter does what it is going to do. You can try to model it and if the actual behavior doesn't fit the model then tough on you, because the challenge is to make physical objects that really work.

Anyway, the exhilarating ending is what I'm hoping to generate some long-term conversation about. **Is that it?**

What was the point of the Aultridia?

Is even a whole head full of antimatter enough to damage a machine which set off a thermonuclear bomb with itself at the centre and emerged utterly unscathed?

How did the Oct know there was something of interest under the Falls?

Was Tove acting for tyl Loesp or not?

What was the point of the Aultridia?

Quick review of the state of web photo sharing

6:51PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(Another draft-clearing pointless post ahead...)

Flickr: still no officially sanctioned way to download all your photos *and* metadata.

Picasaweb: dependent on Picasa, also no bulk downloading of metadata.

Facebook: pure walled garden one-way black hole.

Gallery2: kind of slow and broken, so they're mothballing it and making Gallery3.

Gallery3: not ready yet.

Smugmug: looks like an awesome hosted service, but I don't think hosted will quite cut it for me any more.

Django: here we go.

NEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRD

7:02PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(Another draft-clearing pointless post ahead...)

"The iPhone Ocarina officially replaces the recorder as the nerdiest instrument I can play."

It's a super-cool hack for the super-awesome iPhone, but I feel I must pull a No-True-Scotsman on the idea that this is nerdy in the slightest. This is simply *buying and using* an app for a popular, well-known piece of consumer electronics. To me, the bar for genuine nerdiness is much higher.

Nerdy is deciding to know *everything* about something, rather than something about everything.

Nerdy is doing something only 7 other people in the entire world care about, and only 2 understand.

Nerdy is rewriting a library in a different programming language *because you are excited by it.*

Nerdy ain't super-cool.

(Unless you're a nerd).

Ghost neighbourhood

7:46PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

I liked the old Geocities, where each site had a neighbourhood ("CapeCanaveral"), suburb ("Hangar"), and address ("1486"). Your site neighbours were easy to find, and you were encouraged to make contact with them. When we upscaled to [our own domain](#), I tried to discover [our new, upper-class neighbours](#).

On June 20th 2009, Lab6.com had been online for 10 years, so I thought I'd check out the neighbours again to see how times have changed:

- Lab1.com - spam search.
- Lab2.com - French Canadian with no discernable content.
- Lab3.com - still Lab III & Associates!
- Lab4.com - still the same [band](#), but they broke up in 2007
- Lab5.com - spam search.
- Lab6.com - still awesome.
- Lab7.com - "business and technology blog"
- Lab8.com - sadly no longer owned by gr8.com (who are also dead); has since become hawker of dodgy keylogging software.
- Lab9.com - died and spent at least 7 years on the this-domain-is-for-sale circuit; now a "high-science advertising agency" in New York!

Rumour has it that [higher labs](#) exist...

An update:

- Lab1.com - cosmetics
- Lab2.com - "in progress..."
- Lab3.com - parked domain
- Lab4.com - still hard trance
- Lab5.com - marketing consultants
- Lab6.com - still awesome
- Lab7.com - under construction
- Lab8.com - parked domain
- Lab9.com - does not resolve

And now, for the first time:

- Lab10.com - graphic design
- Lab11.com - no response
- Lab12.com - an open door
- Lab13.com - a design portfolio
- Lab14.com - manufacturing
- Lab15.com - internet security
- Lab16.com - no response
- Lab17.com - does not resolve
- Lab18.com - web development
- Lab19.com - parked domain
- Lab20.com - PHP error

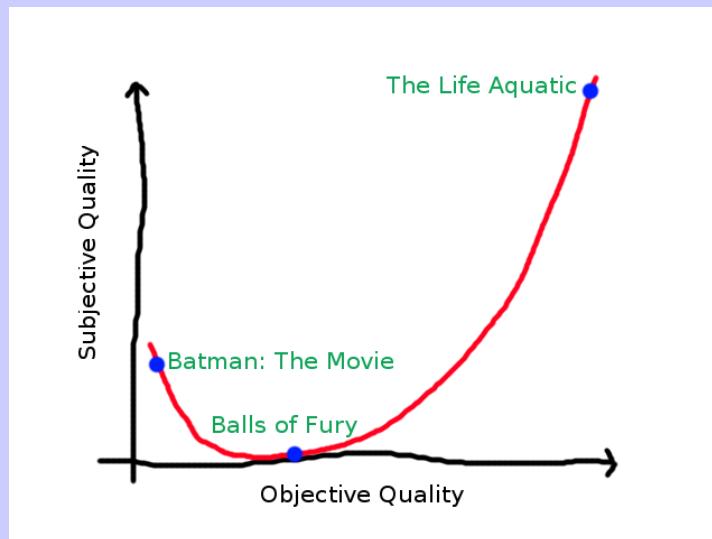
Rumour has it that higher labs exist...

Juno, Balls of Fury, and the Camp Quality Curve

8:02PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

Also from February 2008...

I saw [Juno on Orange Wednesday](#), and it's brilliant! 49,000,000 times better than [Balls of Fury](#), which lies at the bottom of the Camp Quality Curve:



Bad films can be good, but average films are awful.

Back to Juno. I thought it was going to be unbearably hipsterish (the phrase "honest to blog" is spoken), but it turned out to be tolerably hipsterish and laudably original and fun. I really liked it.

Tags: films, reviews

On naming mp3s

8:24PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(This was me documenting some best practice, as well as predicting the eventual structure of [music.zip](#))

Main principle: metadata should go in tags primarily. Once MP3s are tagged correctly, any filename scheme you desire can be achieved automatically. However, you can't protect yourself from your filesystem forever. Eventually you'll want to share the files with others or archive them to DVD or online. Torrents expose your filenames to all downloaders, so it would be nice to present them in an accessible format.

Artist Name

If the track has multiple artists, decide who gets full credit and who gets [featuring](#) credit. This is nearly always made explicit on the CD cover. If a second artist merely features on the track, put that information in the track name. Otherwise, put all artists in the artist tag.

Regarding "&" vs "and": take the lead of the artist; call people what they want to be called. If it's ambiguous, "and" is a foolproof default.

*Simon and Garfunkel
Crosby, Stills & Nash*

If a person collaborates with different people over his career, you must decide whether the different pairings form different artistic units. For example, I consider "Paul Simon" and "Simon and Garfunkel" to be different artists, as well as "Bob Dylan" and "Bob Dylan and The Band"

Distinguish between an artist's name and an artist's logo or stylization.

Good: Pink, Eminem, AC/DC

Bad: P!nk, EMINƎM, ACƎDC

On the other hand, use accents and diacritic marks if that's how the artist refers to themselves in their own language.

Good: Camille Saint-Saëns, Daniel Küblböck, Sigur R̄s

Bad: Camille Saint-Saens, Daniel Kublbock, Sigur Ros

(Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Arabic, and other highly non-Western artists usually promote a romanised version of their name. You could include both versions, e.g. Haifa Wehbe (هيفاء وهبي), but you definitely need the "English" version in there.)

On the gripping hand, beware of letting cheeky musicians fuck with your filesystem with names like Mötley Crüe and Spiñal Tap. I have yet to see an artist go by the name of a Unicode control character, but it'll happen, so [be prepared](#).

Disc Number

On multiple-disc albums, there will be more than one "Track 01", so you must include the Disc number in the filename:

BT - Ima - Disc 1 - 01 - Nocturnal Transmission

Track Number

The track number should be 2 digits so that the files are ordered correctly when sorted alphabetically.

Ian Dury - Do It Yourself - 03 - Don't Ask Me

Track Name

Take the lead of the artist and use whatever is on the back of the CD. Use the same capitalisation and punctuation. If the tracks are untitled, check Wikipedia to see how people usually refer to them (e.g. on [Q](#)).

If the track is a live or alternative version, or is a remix, or has a featured artist, this is the place to say so, in round brackets. Include **only** information that is necessary to distinguish this track from another version of the song. Be conservative - the Comments tag might be a better place to put information like "(theme from The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy)".

*Come And Get Me (feat. 50 Cent & Tony Yayo)
Dreaming (Tiesto mix)
Round Here (live in Paris)*

The names of places and featured artists should be capitalised, but words like "feat.", "mix", or "live" should not. "featuring", "f." and "f/" are all used instead of "feat.", but I believe "feat." is the most widespread.

Putting it all together

Once you've filled in the tags to the best of your ability, you can join them all up like this (Disc being optional; see above):

Artist - Album - Disc - Track - Title

The main advantage of this order is that an alphabetical sort of any such files will not break up discs, or albums, or artists. This also means the titles are easy to read, because they start on the same column.

Filename extension

Finally, end the filename with .flac, .ogg or .mp3. This is my chance to advocate codecs!

FLAC files are lossless and patent-unencumbered, but huge. Ogg Vorbis files have the best quality/filesize tradeoff, are also patent-unencumbered, but are not supported by some proprietary players. MP3 files are inefficient and patent-encumbered, but compatible with everything.

There are no other formats worth considering seriously.

Album folders

Once you've got the tracks off a CD, where should you put them? Here are some horrible examples you can find available online:

*Catatonia - International Velvet (12@192, 1998)
Mark Ronson - Version [2007][CD+SkidVid+Cov]192Kbps
Britney Spears[2004] Everytime.MP3@320 Pop NeRoZ*

These are the names of **warez'd torrents**, not the names of sane album folders. This is what you want:

Artist - Year - Album

The year is there so that albums can be sorted chronologically. For multi-disc albums I like to have Disc 1, Disc 2, Disc 3, etc. folders underneath the Album folder; a double album is, conceptually, a single work, so it should only have one entry in the list of albums

Artist folders and various artists

Where do these beautiful album folders go? This one's a no-brainer: inside a folder simply named Artist. Higher level directories are up to you. Some people classify artists into genres, but I prefer a flat list of all artists. It saves worrying over the difference between death metal and dark metal.

Some CDs are compilations, with no single artist. These "albums" are best filed under a separate hierarchy (I call mine Compilations). Beware! For compilation albums, the above file naming scheme will fail to sort in proper track order, because there will be many different artists within the same folder. I suggest using this format instead:

Album - Disc - Track - Artist - Title

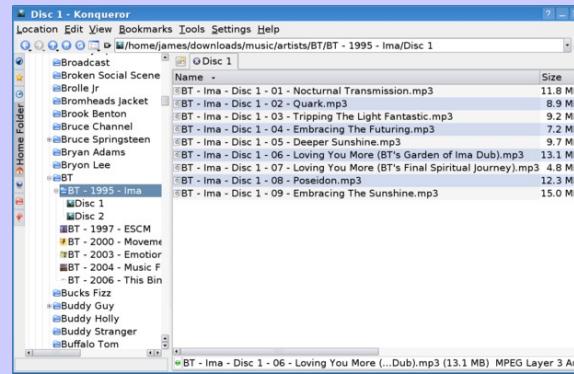
To recap, here's the format string I use in Amarok for individual artists:

```
%folder/artists/%artist/{%artist - %year - %album/}{Disc %discnumber/}
%artist - {%album - }{Disc %discnumber - }{%track - }%title.%filetype
```

And here's the one I use for compilations:

```
%folder/compilations/%album/{Disc %discnumber/}{%album - }{Disc
%discnumber - }{%track - }%artist - %title.%filetype
```

The final result is a beautifully organised, browsable, shareable music collection:



Screenshot licensing

8:42PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(More blithering from November 2007...)

I went to see Elizabeth: The Golden Age. Without wishing to disparage the film, I personally found the booking process more interesting than it:



Observations:

1. Flash renders fonts badly.
2. Empire can't sort the seat numbers in the right order.
3. Going to the cinema has become staggeringly expensive. £27.95?!

And finally, screenshot licensing is a surprisingly complicated topic. The above image is of Firefox ([MPL license](#), Free), which includes [non-Free components](#) (but which are not displayed here), running an embedded Flash player (free to download, but heavily restricted [3Mb PDF license; English starts on page 141!](#)), playing Empire's Flash file (100% locked-down [onerous restrictions](#)).

Not to mention the fonts.

So is this post legal? I have no idea.

Tags: films, reviews

Top n demoscene tracks

8:51PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(A draft from 2007 where I believe the intention was to do for demoscene music what [Rolling Stone did for mainstream music](#). I didn't get very far, but here are my notes nonetheless.)

Amegas: This is where it all started. [Amegas](#), a clone of [Arkanoid](#), itself a clone of [Breakout](#), was a standard bat-and-ball game for the Amiga. The game is now unremarkable and lost in time, but for the fact that the game's music was made in a tracker: the Ultimate Sound Tracker, a strange name considering it was the first, and spawned five dozen spinoff tracker programs.

So, Amegas, by Karsten Obarski, father of the demoscene, author of Ultimate Sound Tracker, the first tracker. A game song, thus justifying game music's inclusion in the demoscene.

Ambient Power: Gets into things at 0:40, really gets into the tune at 0:55

Desert Dream: Original is much more powerful and epic than the AmiGamer remix.

Checknobankh: Second part of the Desert Dream demo. Also super-powerful and Prodigy-esque.

Desert Dream 3: Not so good. Bit too hardcore.

Class05 & 09: Awesome. If you like this, the others in the series are similar, but not as good.
04 boring, 06 ok..., 07 , 08 , 10 good , 12 good!

UMD 8730 intro: long, epic, inaccessible... everything that chip music should be!

Cybernoid 2: Game, but by Jeroen Tel, of Lemmings fame.

Gmail vs Email

8:54PM, 17TH OCTOBER 2009

(An unpublished lament from September 2007)

Last year's growth in Gmail storage capacity: 131MB

Last year's volume of emails sent and received: 252MB

Inevitable result: Misery.

The bulk is caused by emailing pictures to people all the time, rather than me being a 10,000-email-per-year kinda person. These big binary blobs are fattening up my email archive, and there's no way to strip them out without damaging the authenticity of the archive; the emails were sent with an attachment, so to archive them without an attachment would be Wrong.

Having to store attachments in the email archive is bad information architecture given that they must exist elsewhere in the file system prior to being attached. Perhaps one day we will all have one globally interlinked file system to get high on, but for now I'm resigned to treating photo attachments as a form of backup.

Also: since gmail keeps all email forever, a gmail account becomes an ever-more-valuable cracker-jackpot. I'm becoming wary of logging into it on anything other than my own Debian stable box.

Tags: software

Condescending digital photography workflow tips

9:22pm, 17th October 2009

(A draft from all the way back in January 2007...)

Megacorporations, professional photographers and other people who work with photographs for a living will all have their own methods of archiving and storing photographs. Amateurs don't - and amateurs have now all switched to digital, without necessarily upgrading from their old film-based workflow.

Here is some common wisdom about film photography:

- Don't expose film to light, or it will be ruined.
- Make sure you wind the film on before taking the next photo.
- Don't get fingerprints on the negatives.
- Don't throw the negatives away.

These are things I reckon the vast majority of the population understands - film photography has been around for long enough for its techniques to be ingrained in popular culture. The pitfalls of film photography form the plots of major movies; who doesn't understand that a destroyed print can be reproduced if you still have the negatives?

Not so for digital. The film-problems listed above are all magically solved with digital cameras: You can switch flash cards in daylight, the camera doesn't need to be "wound on", flash cards can be handled and don't mind fingerprints, and the file *is* the negative, so you don't need to store anything extra.

Since digital technology is so poorly understood in general, people see these advantages and assume that digital cameras are somehow magic. This is very, very wrong. **Digital photography has its own entirely unique problems which the general public has never heard of because they've never seen them in a movie.**

Here are some of them:

Proprietary file formats

JPEG: JPEG escaped from patent hell by the skin of its teeth last year. Forgent Networks attacked it with a submarine patent. The US Patent Office found the patent invalid due to prior art (and further found that Forgent knew about the prior art, making them extra-slippery fellows), and it has since expired anyway. Nevertheless, it's a good reminder of the dangers of software patents, and a reminder of why technically superior file formats like JPEG2000 aren't very popular and don't deserve to be.

Nevertheless, when we talk about photographic file formats, we may as well just talk about JPEG. It's universally supported in everything from mobile phones to DVD players, embedded into operating systems, and fully implemented in Free software. It's been around since 1992 and has even entered the Oxford English Dictionary as a noun. There are billions upon billions of JPEGs in the wild. It's not going anywhere soon.

Raw: Raw formats (sometimes called RAW files, although "RAW" isn't a file format) are all proprietary; they are the almost completely unmodified output of the camera sensor, and they vary from camera to camera. There exists Free software to decode them ([dcraw](#)), which you may have to rely on if proprietary software drops support for less common RAW formats in the future. Nikon earned themselves a stab in the face recently [when they encrypted part of](#)

[their RAW format](#) in order to lock out competing software companies who make raw decoders. The issue is now resolved, and the white balance data in question is now freely readable by most software, but it's yet another excellent illustration of why **you cannot entrust your photographs to proprietary formats**. Adobe's [Digital Negative \(.dng\)](#) is open, supported natively in some cameras, and a good candidate for long term storage. Although Free software can read DNG files, I'm not aware of a Free raw-to-DNG converter like Adobe's [DNG Converter](#). I would be inclined to keep JPEG copies of all raw files until you can convert them all to DNG.

Proprietary software

[In 1941, Jorge Luis Borges](#) showed that having a perfectly preserved collection of JPEGs and Adobe Digital Negative files is no good if the collection is so large that you can't find anything in it. I have about 17,000 photographs from the last 3 or 4 years, and finding one in particular is non-trivial. An index of some sort is required.

Modern cameras generate lots of metadata such as date and time by which you can sort the photos. This is usually stored inside JPEG files as [EXIF](#) data, so you don't have to worry about losing it. Unfortunately, it's not really good enough to find a photo in a large collection. Ideally I would tag and comment every image, but back-tagging 17,000 photos is something I'll do when I've retired. I find that date-based folders are perfectly adequate for breaking the photo stream up into manageable, meaningful chunks. Backup is easier, and you don't get into the quagmire of category hierarchies ("should *Wedding Photos* go under *Events* or *Places*?").

Picasa stores captions in the IPTC metadata, but not labels (the Picasa word for tags). Adobe's *Photoshop Album* is even worse - all metadata is stored in a proprietary database which gives you no exporting options. Once you start using it, you had better keep using it forever.

Oh wait, [Adobe Photoshop Album is no longer available!](#) Too bad! Adobe encourages you to buy *Photoshop Elements* instead, which has similar functionality, and costs \$90 instead of \$50. I wonder how long it will be before they discontinue the \$90 *Elements* in favour of a New Improved package that costs \$130.

Seriously, don't waste time entering metadata into proprietary databases. If you want to get into tagging and commenting your photos, Free software is the only sane choice. I use Digikam and it's great.

Unreliable storage

Your hard drive is not reliable. One day it will break. It could happen...

... now!

Did it? It might have. A hard drive is a big whirring box of delicate mechanical components that are constantly snapping back and forth and wearing on each other. Maybe you've had a disk that's lasted for 8 years without a single glitch, but if ever past performance was no indicator of future results, it's here that it ain't. There's a very good reason why the hard disk manufacturers won't give you anything longer than a 5 year warranty.

RAID-1 is good insurance, but it's not trivial. If automated mirroring of your hard disk sounds like a good idea, it's worth the time and effort to set it up.

The only other backup scheme accessible to most people is to burn DVDs. My 26GB photo collection could fit on 6 DVDs, but it's actually spread out over many more, as I'm very aware of the fact that DVD media isn't 100% reliable either. Duplicates aren't a problem as long as you don't create a proliferation of versions without tracking them. Taiyo-Yuden make the

highest quality DVD media; they cost about 30p each from [SVP](#). A bargain-basement pack of 50 for £4.99 is not something you want to entrust your precious data to.

Ultimately, any media can fail, and you can always be arbitrarily unlucky no matter how much time and money you spend doing backups. I'm not going to suggest you invest in tape drives and expensive backup services, but there's one form of remote backup that's within everyone's reach: friends and family! Just give a DVD full of photos to each of your friends and ask them to store it for you. You can offer to do the same for them. Make sure you write down who's got copies of what!

Conclusion

There will eventually be generations who grow up understanding the above naturally, but until then, the transition to digital photography may create a cultural memory-gap when a generation fail to look after their pictures.

Virgin Media Advanced Network Error Search

1:21PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2009

I decided some time ago to stop talking about things if I only had bad things to say, so while mentioning Virgin Media's nasty new trick of hijacking DNS queries and redirecting you to their own error page, I'll mention that they have kindly provided an [opt-out page](#) - and it doesn't require you to log in to submit your opt-out request.

Bad stuff, good stuff.

Tags: virginmedia, isp

A note on migrating from Wordpress to Django

1:26PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2009

Anybody who's used Wordpress and has decided it's time to move on has probably got an entry on their gripe-list titled simply "autop". It automatically inserts HTML paragraph tags around certain portions of your text - and it does so in an apparently ad hoc, informally specified, bug-ridden way (I won't add slow; for its sins PHP is at least usually fast). The result is that even in "HTML-editor" mode, you are encouraged to write in bastardized HTML, using carriage returns instead of proper
 and <p> tags. You don't notice their absence, because Wordpress puts them back in for you when rendering the page.

Sadly when leaving Wordpress, you don't have a magic autop filter, so all your posts turn out to have been written in a proprietary markup language that nothing else understands, and the only way to fix them is to go back through every single one, inserting correct standard markup. There is no automatic way to fix them other than to reimplement the autop filter, but there is no sane way to do this because autop is fundamentally, seemingly by design, not sane.

Tags: meta

Playing Excel

12:39PM, 30TH OCTOBER 2009

I have discovered an Excel trill! If you are distributing a workbook with many tabs, you usually want each tab to open at the top left of the sheet, with the cursor in cell A1. Here's a quick way to do it:

1. Go to the last tab in the workbook.
2. Hold down CTRL
3. Repeatedly, and rapidly, alternate between pressing HOME and PAGEUP!

These two keys are usually right next to each other, so get your classical piano skills out and burn through the workbook *molto allegro*.

(True, you can just select all sheets as a group, stick the cursor in cell A1 in any one of them, and be done, but using the mouse is no fun at all).

Tags: software

Poking pivot tables

3:34PM, 5TH NOVEMBER 2009

One of the last things you do with Excel before finally reaching its limits and moving to a RDBMS, is create pivot tables from external data sources. But when you create a new database query and have Excel dump the results directly into a pivot table, you lose control of the parameters of the query! That is, there is no UI for changing them. If you've done something as simple as querying a CSV file using the Text driver, and that file moves to a different directory, there's nothing you can click to help you, short of recreating all pivot tables that depend on the query.

I believe the situation is remedied in Excel 2007, but for Excel 2003 and earlier, you're stuffed.

[Pivot Play Plus](#) to the rescue! It fills in the gap by providing a GUI that lets you edit the connection parameters and query string. Brilliant.

Tags: software

A life of music

2:56PM, 15TH NOVEMBER 2009

So how much music can a person listen to in one lifetime anyway? Let's generously assume you get 100 years of waking life. Then:

$$100 \times 365.2425 \times 24 \times 60 = 52,594,920 \text{ minutes.}$$

Reasonable quality compressed music runs at about 1MiB per minute, so a lifetime of music would consume just over 50TiB of storage space - about a thousand Blu-Ray discs.

Does that mean there's no point producing audio content once the world's total stockpile reaches that figure? Unlikely, for two reasons. Firstly, we are probably already at that figure. [Isohunt](#) claims to track 9975.77 TiB of files. If even half a percent of that is music, that's our 50TiB accounted for. And yet musicians play on.

Secondly, there have already been many more books written than a human can read in one lifetime, and yet books are being written in greater volume than ever.

If it takes 2 minutes to read a page, then you might finish an average 300 page book in 10 hours. You only get $100 \times 365.2425 \times 24 = 876,582$ hours by the above assumptions, so that's 87,658 books. Bad news for [Three-Dimensional Treatment for Scoliosis](#), ranked the 87,659th best seller when Google last crawled Amazon.co.uk.

I see this as a mathematical justification of the existence of collectors, collators, and reviewers. They are the *secondary industry* of the world's creative economy, bringing the good stuff to our doors so we don't have to go digging in the great library of Babel ourselves.

Tags: music

Tarka dall

2:12PM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2009

To celebrate my final day in my previous job, we went out for a curry last night. Indian restaurants make it easy to choose something you've never tried before - usually because the menu is so extensive and unfamiliar to Western eyes, but sometimes because the eclectic transliteration of foreign words means you don't recognise something you *have* tried before.

So I tried the *tarka dall*, otherwise known as *tarka dahl*, *tadka dahl*, *baghar dal*, *tadka dal* or even *chaunk dal*, purely because it was mentioned on an episode of Red Dwarf once. (Series 6, episode 3: Gunmen of the Apocalypse!).

I didn't like it at all. For reference, it tasted like salty burnt lentils.

Tags: food, reviews

Some SQL

2:08PM, 29TH NOVEMBER 2009

To fix your funky table that contains separate columns for Year, Month and Day: create a new column of type and name date, and execute:

```
UPDATE table_name SET date=str_to_date(concat(year, '-', month, '-', day), '%Y-%m-%d');
```

`str_to_date()` works in MySQL; no guarantees elsewhere.

Tags: sql

Missing log files on Dreamhost

3:49PM, 13TH DECEMBER 2009

If you check your `~/logs/domain.com/http` directory on Dreamhost, you will find your apache web server logs. They are a goldmine, and you should treasure them. But sometimes they appear to be missing for certain days.

Are they gone for good? No, it seems the log entries for that day simply get rolled over into the next day's log file; no data is lost. Such missing days are rare, so I imagine Dreamhost's log rotation script just fails to run on a particular day for one reason or another.

Nothing to worry about really.

Tags: meta

Outline of a content-aware compression scheme

4:26PM, 13TH DECEMBER 2009

Compressing files which are already compressed is hard - so hard that it's not worth doing. But the archives of the future will contain the archives of today, much like a museum contains collections which are themselves worthy artifacts. The archives of the future will be studded with zip files, tarballs, and scattered segmented rar files full of suspicious copies of Photoshop.

On the off-chance that we will need to store these archives efficiently rather than pray to the god of ever-increasing areal density, how should we do it? A quick experiment using apache web logs:

Files	Size (bytes)
.gz, one file per day	34,405,056
decompressed	442,889,766
all .gz files within a .tar.bz2	34,351,616
decompressed and then re-compressed as a single .tar.bz2	19,332,609

The answer for storing archives containing other archives in semi-obsolete formats is to (recursively) decompress everything first, then recompress using a state-of-the-art compression algorithm, and hiding the process in a lower layer of software so that it becomes transparent to the archaeologist, who sees the sub-archives in their original form.

Tags: archives

Candy GOC58F

5:18PM, 29TH DECEMBER 2009

We bought a [Candy GOC58F](#) tumble dryer a month or so ago, and it worked reasonably well up until juuust before Christmas... when it started doing an intermittent pack-in. It would start up as usual, then halt after 10-15 seconds with all lights flashing.

I checked the manual and this did not correspond to any kind of error code. There was nothing in the troubleshooting section to indicate what might be wrong. I cleaned the filter and the condenser, emptied the water tank, and even pulled the machine away from the wall just in case the air inlet was blocked. Nothing helped.

Since user-serviceability is a fruity alien concept in the white-goods market, I just left it and decided to come back later to see if the problem had fixed itself.

Lo and behold, it had! I was able to do two loads of drying with the machine working just fine. Of course, problems that go away by themselves also come back by themselves, so the next time we came to use it, we were back to square one with all the lights flashing again.

So this morning a guy from Comet came to have a look at it. He'd never seen this problem before, and his diagnostic box didn't give him any clues. He said it would need a new circuit board. I await the result of this. If anybody from Candy is reading this, please arrange for your manuals to document *all* the flashing light codes, even if it means "device borked; return to manufacturer". Also maybe arrange for them to be a little more reliable.

Update 2010-01-16: Well, the guy came back eventually, and said it wasn't the PCB after all, but the temperature sensor objecting to the recent cold weather. The fix is to remove the filter, and stick your hand down the hole until it warms up a bit!

Tags: hardware

АЯМА ~~EDDON~~

11:51AM, 31ST DECEMBER 2009

Russia 'plans to stop asteroid':

The head of Russia's federal space agency has said it will work to divert an asteroid which will make several passes near the Earth from 2029.

...

The US space agency said in October that there is a one-in-250,000 chance of Apophis hitting Earth in 2036.

That announcement was a significant reduction in the probability of an impact, based on previous calculations that put the chances at about one-in-45,000. The asteroid is estimated to pass within about 30,000 km of the Earth in 2029.

Mainstream moviegoers could be forgiven for thinking that the world will be ending shortly in acute fiery/icy/zomby catastrophe, but the reality is that truly terrible things tend to happen over an extended period of time and you don't notice until it's too late. Some of them even seem like a good idea at first. See climate change, world war 2 and the welfare state. Asteroid impact is one possible exception to this.

It's more than plausible that a medium-sized rock could hit Earth and cause apocalyptic devastation. [It's happened before](#). Unfortunately, this Russian plan is likely to *increase* the risk to humanity.

NASA's latest collision probability is 1 in 250,000. Uncomfortably short for such a - pun, as always, intended - high-impact event. But what do you think is the probability of Russian

asteroid-course-altering technology falling into the wrong hands? What is the malcompetence factor? Given the historical incompetence of the Soviet military-industrial complex and the contemporary malice of the Russian superstate, I'd want to keep a closer eye on this plan than on the asteroid itself.

Tags: conspiracies

IT infrastructure will be outsourced to employees

9:21PM, 13TH JANUARY 2010

When you turn up to work in the morning, there are certain things you are expected to bring with you - suit, shoes, lunch money... - to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how progressive or relaxed your employer is. (If you are self-employed, underpants may suffice.)

These are the basics, but knowledge workers have created a new, higher class of equipment they are expected to bring to the job - things like training, experience, and glasses.

How far can this expectation go?

I predict that there will come a day when a person's productivity is so intimately entangled with their computing environment that people will be hired and fired with close reference to the environment they have built or customised for themselves.

This already happens in pure-information web industries like web design, Mechanical Turk and those rent-a-coder places, where the raw info-output of the worker is all that matters, and the business relationship is more that of contractor than employee. It's easier in these industries because there is such a loose coupling between employer and contractor; a firm seeking a piece of web design work need not know anything about the tools the web designers use. It is quite different for, say, a bank to hire a full-time analyst to work on its own confidential data.

However, as productivity becomes ever more dependent on intelligence amplification tools - and because every person and every job is so different that a single perfect toolset will never exist - these traditional firms will *have* to work out a way to employ people in their native computing environment, or risk being left behind by more agile organisations.

There will come a time when people who *don't* arrange their own IA tools will be treated like they are now when they don't take responsibility for their own learning and development. In the year 2010 it's not likely you would get a job as a coder, then turn up on day one saying "*OK, teach me how to code*". In the year 20xx, you won't find many information workers turning up on day one saying "*OK, where's my computer?*".

Tags: future, business

Avatar: Aliens vs Titanic for real

9:39PM, 27TH JANUARY 2010

So, *Avatar*. It's **awesome!** A proper event movie, and one of a small handful of theatrical releases in the last decade for which the ticket is not overpriced - it's worth it, although I could take or leave the 3D add-on if I saw it again. The 3D edition for me was just a couple of notches above being a gimmick, adding a few "heh, cool" moments, but no "wow, cool!" moments. On the other hand, if you've never seen a 3D movie before, this is surely the movie to try it out on.

I initially wanted to go and see *Avatar* simply because since 1997, all has not been right with the world of box office records. I've always felt that it's just been *wrong* on some level that a movie like *Titanic* should be the biggest grossing of all time. Buying *Avatar* tickets was my small contribution towards shifting the balance of power and rewriting the history books in favour of keywords like *action*, *sci-fi* and *explosions*, rather than *love*, *romance* and *sinking*. Loyalty to one's roots trumps maturity any day.

About halfway through, just after Jake had become lost in the jungle, I remember thinking to myself, "*This is just too cool to be true. I'm giving it 10/10*". In the cold light of day, that will probably be revised to about 9.5, but that still makes it stupendous.

Upon leaving the theatre, my first thought was that James Cameron has finally made a version of *Aliens* that is suitable to carry a 12A certificate. Hypersleep, Sigourney Weaver, the off-world mining colony, RDA/Weyland-Yutani, the evil corporate bad guy, the dropship/shuttle, the Colonial Marines, mech-exosuits, "Nuke the Tree of Souls from the air; it's the only way to be sure"...

But I'm not complaining. All those things were great about *Aliens* and they're great about *Avatar*. If tacking on a romantic subplot to make it more like *Titanic* boosts box office takings, then I'm entirely happy with that; more funding for further SF goodness.

See it.

Tags: films, reviews

How to not get hired for a web job

8:28AM, 13TH MARCH 2010

So, I've been recruiting web developers at work. Having only recently been on the receiving end of the interview table, I resolved to be scrupulously fair and relaxed. I didn't care what clothes candidates wore, did not pass judgement on a momentary mental blip, and made allowances for obvious nervousness.

However, there are still some basics that candidates didn't get right, so to anybody looking for programming work right now, ***please*** just throw out chapters 2 to 18 of that big fat interview technique book and pay more attention to chapter 1:

Spell-check and double-check your CV! If you misplace *one* character in your JavaScript code, it may fail. How will you convince a potential employer of your attention to detail when you don't even spell the name of your previous employer correctly?

Don't lie on your CV when it comes to the key skills the employer is looking for. The interviewer will interrogate you thoroughly and you will walk out feeling like a liar, because you are.

If the interviewer asks you a specific question, follow this algorithm:

Listen to the question.

Think about the question.

Answer the question.

Some candidates seem to be following this algorithm instead:

Hear a sentence that ends with a question mark.

Extract keywords from that sentence.

Recite pre-prepared essay on those topics.

Employers are not looking to hire textbooks. They are looking for people who can understand what the problem at hand *actually* is, and solve it. If you genuinely don't know the answer to a question, admitting it is better than waffling nonsense; this may be a chance to show how you would deal with not knowing everything, which you don't.

That's it!

Tags: work

100Gbps fiber considered harmful

8:54AM, 13TH MARCH 2010

[100Gbps fiber to the home](#) is on the horizon. Wicked cool? Maybe. But there is also a danger.

Let me calculate:

Resolution of my monitor: **2560×1600**

Refresh rate of my monitor: **60fps**

Bits per pixel on my monitor: **24**

$$2560 \times 1600 \times 60 \times 24 = 5,898,240,000 \text{ bps} = 5.9 \text{ Gbps}$$

This means my computer could be implemented entirely remotely, and the final output image streamed down the fiber to my screen, like an extra-long DVI cable - rather like what [OnLive](#) are trying to do.

In fact, if you remove the bandwidth bottleneck that separates us all from each other, economies of scale will almost ensure such centralization occurs. Will that be the end of open PC architecture? Possibly not; there are factors that would make openness good for the compute-providers too.

But here's just one important example of the potential danger: running your digital life on a virtual machine in a gargantuan compute cluster means an end to privacy; strong encryption is meaningless when the hypervisor can peek into your memory at its leisure.

One day owning and running your own computer may be looked upon the same way we look upon those who run their own electricity generators.

It is a freedom we won't appreciate until it's gone.

Tags: hardware

Credit Card Illuminati

9:21PM, 6TH APRIL 2010

The fidelity is astonishing.

Lloyds (Government, Conservative) really does control Halifax (Peaceful, Conservative), and I expect MBNA (Criminal, Violent) control the CII (Straight, Peaceful). Not so sure about the DVLA (Communist, Weird, Fanatic) being in the clutches of the National Trust (Conservative, Straight, -8 to any attack to destroy).

Transferring megabucks from my current account does take 3-4 working turns, unless the Gnomes of Zurich have enabled faster payments.

Sadly, the game is not well balanced and it's no fun to play against experienced opposition.

Tags: amusements

The Abbatoir

10:03PM, 9TH APRIL 2010

Election season is a disappointing time for a classical liberal these days. Canny voters flitter between leftish parties and rightish parties, comparing their policies and soundbites the way they might compare car insurance. The final arbiter is a simple game:

Maximise the amount I take from the government.

Minimise the amount the government takes from me.

But every penny given to me was taken from somebody else. This obvious connection is missed when there is a large bureaucracy in the middle, doing your taking for you; as long as one is not doing the dirty work, one is happy to reap the rewards.

Unfortunately the idea that the government shouldn't be in the business of giving and taking at all is not a vote-winner; an MP who brings home the bacon will always out-poll one who suggests we slaughter the pigs ourselves.

Tags: politics

Notes from recent system dev

11:15PM, 24TH APRIL 2010

My work on this site has reached a peak recently as you might have noticed from the rapidly increasing photo collection, the return of public comments, functional tags, and some toys here and there. Some notes:

There can exist no general purpose app, module, plugin or doodad providing protection against spam comments, because as soon as its methods become popular, the spambots will adapt. Everybody must implement their own slightly different system!

Digikam's tagging interface is so poorly optimized for [mass tag-entry](#) that it was quicker for me to upload all my photos to the live environment, build a tagging interface in JavaScript and Django, and do it online. Network latency halfway round the world is less than the move-hands-from-keyboard-to-mouse latency. It also works on my phone, so I can fill the unforgiving minute here and there dishing out permissions.

Tags: meta

The BNP is not a hate party

11:13PM, 27TH APRIL 2010

When a vine wraps around a tree, it does so as an unthinking automaton, not because it *hates* the tree. Even when a lion kills, it does so because it's hungry, or scared, not because it *hates* its prey. Hate is a high-level social emotion, one level of abstraction higher than anger or violence; some small degree of intelligence is required to hate. That's why I knew, when the latest promotional leaflet from the BNP soiled my letterbox, that they couldn't possibly be a hate party.

The particular outrage that caught my eye was a denunciation of "non-existent Climate Change". **What?** The basic fact of a changing climate is undisputed, even amongst denialists. The debate surrounds the extent to which humans are causing this change, not over whether there *is* any change, which there obviously is. To claim that the climate is not changing is like fundamentalist Christians claiming that evolution doesn't exist, when a DIY experiment with a petri dish will demonstrate the self-evident fact that it *does* occur. Rather, the creationist will argue over how evolution through natural selection relates to the existence of humans. Claiming there is no climate change, or no evolution, is to *not even understand their own argument.*

Throw in a few incoherent nationalist, socialist absurdities like random handouts to pensioners and "British" people, and there's really only one reasonable conclusion: the BNP is not a hate party. They just don't have the brains to hate. The only emotion they channel is fear - fear of a complex world they can't understand. I almost feel sorry for them.

Tags: politics

Conversation models

7:39PM, 5TH MAY 2010

Neurotypical:

Input → Processing → Output

Introvert:

Input → Input → Input → Processing → Output

Extrovert

Input → Processing → Output → Output → Output

Solipsist:

Processing

Loony:

Output

Idiot:

Input → Output

Tags: language

Withdrawal

10:10PM, 25TH MAY 2010

This is a story about how Dwarf Fortress cured me of my Dwarf Fortress addiction once and for all - even though I've never played it.

...do you explore the universe, or create your own?

— [the central dilemma of Diaspora](#)

I play Dwarf Fortress.

Sometimes I wish I was a meth addict instead.

— [from the DF turing machine thread](#)

I've been studying [Slaves to Armok: God of Blood Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress](#) recently - not playing, mind, studying - and have reached Conclusions.

Simulation is an important application of computers - if not *the* application that underlies all other applications. A computer has the ability to perform calculations that simulate - or model - real-world phenomena, such as the mechanics of an Enigma machine, a weather system, or an economy. Some models are fuzzy, stochastic, approximate, or otherwise simplified, in order to render a real-world problem tractable. At the other end of the scale, models like electronic banking systems simulate the real-world phenomenon so precisely as to be indistinguishable from it. Simulated money in a bank computer *is* money as far as most people are concerned.

Games are another class of simulation. All games contain simulations. At the precise end, you have [puzzle games](#) which perfectly model an abstract mathematical conundrum, and at the

fuzzy end you have real-time first-person combat games that go to great lengths to simulate the complexities of the real world, trading absolute precision for a more convincing illusion. An FPS like Far Cry will appear to simulate a jungle village, but the doors are [just textures painted onto the walls](#), the ropes and vines are triangulated tubes at best, and bullet casings ejected onto the floor will disappear when you turn your back. The appeal of the FPS is not in the precision of its model of real-life fighting, but in its ability to convey motion and emotion to the user - the ability to make the player dodge in his chair when a shell whizzes past, fooling his animal brain into experiencing novel situations that would be otherwise too expensive, too dangerous, or perhaps [downright physically impossible anyway](#).

Somewhere between the clockwork toy puzzle and the GPU-straining shoot'em up lies the misunderstood genre of [Roguelikes](#), where, through the turn-based playing style, the player retains control over the proceedings like a puzzle game, and through the renunciation of raster graphics, CPU power and developer effort can be dedicated to creating a detailed simulation of the game world:

"You see here an uncursed greased partly eaten guardian naga hatchling corpse"

Put simply, in roguelikes, the bullet casings stay on the floor.

Now, [simulations have always been popular, numerous, and belligerent](#), so my emphasis on roguelikes is to crown them a handy synecdoche of the wider simulation genre: they are the quintessential simulation; they are the pure core of RPGs, stripped of the cutscenes; they are the apotheosis of God-games, stripped of the isometric graphics; they *are* the abstract model of a world that other games merely *use*. A game might contain a simulation. A roguelike *is* a simulation.

Without the need to support advanced graphics, these games feature procedurally-generated content, persistent worlds, and a level of detail that would be beyond contemporary hardware in other games. In [NetHack](#), you can get into a tactical fight with hundreds of simulated baddies at once, pursue a vegan lifestyle, and manufacture items from the bodies of the vanquished. Dwarf Fortress takes this kind of thing to a whole new level, providing world-persistency across games, a simulated economy, a z-axis, dynamic fluid flow, *turing complete mechanisms*, and a staggering range of scales, from a fractal world of continents, to individual dwarves with independently damageable internal organs, fingers and socks.

So this is where I come in. I've always had a *serious* weakness for simulations. There is something about the clean-room sandbox that pushes some deep buttons in certain personality types like mine. Perhaps it is the vast possibility space. Perhaps it is seeing the emergent phenomena like [pudding farming](#). More likely it is the element of addiction that all RPGs share - humans get a buzz from achieving goals, and RPGs supply an inexhaustible todo list of goals to achieve: the next level, a better item, more experience, a higher score.... New sim games build hype by promising to extend the todo list further ("*It's like Frontier, except you can own companies!*").

But something in Dwarf Fortress pushes me away: it is simply too detailed. It thrills me to read about the aforementioned attention to detail, but the thought of playing such a comprehensive simulation brings me to question the purpose of simulations and reality. In the limit, if a simulation provides gameplay as deep and complex as the real world, then it has to compete with reality. And then which way do we go? Do we explore the real universe, with all its pitfalls and limitations, or do we create our own more perfect imagined world? To inspect, or to introspect?

While Dwarf Fortress is some way off a perfect simulation of everything, it is clearly the shape of things to come. But what is the *point*? Why are we going to such great lengths to simulate worlds? Is there really a deficit of interesting content in the real world? Maybe just a deficit of access to interesting content? Or are all the goals in Real Life™ no fun to achieve?

The closer the simulations get to reality, the more I come to understand that simulation gaming is fast-forwarding your life, and that forever expanding the detail, scope and possibilities of these games is an ultimately hollow pursuit.

When anything is possible, everything is meaningless.

Tags: games

The SAS Base Certification Exam

9:18PM, 5TH JUNE 2010

I passed A00-211 yesterday. The testing centre made me sign some terms and conditions that included a "no weapons are allowed in the test centre" clause. I guess you don't get to be the undisputed supermajor BI vendor without a monopoly on violence.

The test was fair but devious. My advice is to revise your syntax and be prepared to answer questions on features you rarely use; if you spend your working day using ostensibly [Advanced](#) features like proc sql and the macro language, you will probably find the Base syllabus harder.

On the other hand, SAS certification is a marketable achievement, whose value derives from its rarity. It's not *particularly* rare, but enough people *don't* have it that it can still attract a small premium in the job market. That would all change if certification suddenly became easy; an increase in supply will decrease demand, i.e. your pay. Anybody who has passed the exam has a financial incentive to pull the ladder up and make it harder for everybody else to join the elite.

So any advice you read online may well be a demotivating, misleading pack of lies! I promise mine isn't. But then I would, wouldn't I?

Tags: sas, conspiracies

FlashForward

11:50PM, 5TH JUNE 2010

FlashForward finished the other week, in a bizarre undead state. On one hand, the cliffhanger finale closed two or three plot threads while opening ten dozen or so new ones, leaving the central mystery of the series unresolved and plenty of material for the second season to chew through.

On the other hand, the series has been cancelled and there won't be a second season.

What a waste of time, eh?

Aside from the boring and pointless Keiko/Bryce storyline, we both actually really enjoyed this series, so I'm a little sad that I'll never find out what happened - but not that sad, as I strongly suspect the producers never had a specific ending in mind, preferring to play the [cascading mysteries](#) game, keeping it open-ended and stringing the audience along for as long as they could.

In order to provide fans with closure, I have taken the liberty of finishing the plot for them:

It's all the CIA.

Jericho is exposed as being the strong-arm of President Segovia, who has been assisting the Global Blackout Conspiracy. He is deposed and the vice president takes over, as foretold. He, like Hellinger, initially rose to power by using information about the future gained in the Red River experiments. Jericho footsoldiers are the pig-masked gunmen who raid the FBI building, and also the three-star tattoo men. The key is that Hellinger is actually a CIA special agent,

and the Global Blackout Conspiracy is a CIA plot to save the world and make a buck while they're at it, which is the story of America anyway.

The towers in Somalia in 1991 were prototype cellphone towers. The global blackout was caused by a signal generated by the worldwide cellphone network, amplified by the NLAP accelerator. The cellular industry is actually controlled by Hellinger.

The first flashforwards at Red River were a CIA experiment to gather information about the future, for their usual Secretive Purposes. Dyson Frost was the chief strategist and future-knower. Vogel knows all this, which explains his seeming lack of motivation to pursue the most obvious lines of investigation. Janis is thus an unwitting triple-agent, as the CIA are the ultimate source of the blackout conspiracy. Lita wheels Janis away in the last episode to ensure she doesn't risk exposing the CIA connection.

While the CIA were gathering information about the future at Red River, Frost discovered a disaster due to occur in 2016: a gamma ray burst causes interference with the global telecommunication system and kills everybody exposed to an electronic information source. He realised that the only way to prevent this future occurring was to ensure everybody in the world blacked out at that moment. He fakes his own death in order to work uninhibited on a solution. He gives future stockmarket information to Hellinger who is able to make the billions required to bring about the global cellular communication revolution of the 1990s, thus installing cell towers globally.

The Antikythera mechanism was not used to generate the blackout; it was merely Dyson Frost's way of indicating the use of technology that is ahead of its time. Neither is Simon's "pulsed laser for a plasma afterburner" cell tower design the source of the blackout; it is merely a scale-up tool for the device invented by the CIA. Dyson Frost gave himself multiple

FlashForwards in order to explore possible futures where he met Simon and learned the design from him, in order to build the Somalia towers a year before Simon invented them.

In fact, Simon and Lloyd are involved purely as inventors of scaling-up techniques, and much of the CIA's efforts revolve around maneuvering these two into positions where they are able to design, build and calibrate the NLAP accelerator by the year 2009. Somalia was a test of the scale-up system to prove it could work at all. NLAP was a test of a scale-up system to prove it could work globally. The *second* global blackout that occurs on April 29th 2010 is an attempt to make the blackout last long enough to keep people safe during the disaster in 2016.

The alpha rings are necessary to keep the unseen operators of the blackout device/cellphone network awake so that they can turn it off; otherwise everybody would stay blacked out. Simon is kept awake during the first blackout to keep him involved in the conspiracy, in case they needed him for further calibration work.

Dyson Frost tries to leave the CIA conspiracy because he knows the CIA will inevitably assassinate him in order to keep their work secret, as they want to retain blackout technology for their own purposes even after the disaster in 2016 is averted.

The woman in Hong Kong is also CIA, and warns Dimitri of his fate in order to ultimately bring about the confrontation between Dimitri and Frost which they know will end up taking care of one of them.

Mark Benford does not die in the explosion at the FBI; he goes underground to Afghanistan to join Aaron in the hunt for the conspirators; Charlie's second flashforward of her saying "They found him!" means Mark and Aaron both come in from the cold when they discover the truth that the CIA are actually trying to save the world, even though they kill millions in the process.

Only when Mark agrees to remain silent and effectively join the conspiracy do they stop trying to kill him. He feels free to join them because Olivia and Lloyd have already got married. Gabriel McDow was chosen as the best man, as he had the biggest hippocampus. Nicole becomes romantically involved with her rescuer. Their on-off will-he-drown-me-won't-he relationship dominates most of the second, third and fourth seasons. You won't have missed anything.

Tags: tv, conspiracies

Face recognition login in Windows 8

1:53PM, 29TH JUNE 2010

Assuming the [face-recognition based login](#) in Windows 8 is real, I'm loving the fact that elite computer espionage could be performed by donning a good old-fashioned disguise.

Tags: software, amusements

Decision 2010: iPhone 4 vs HTC Desire

4:43PM, 27TH JULY 2010

Observe the date on [this post where I wrote about my new Nokia N95](#) and you'll see that I'm well past being in the market for a new phone. Before I write about the outcome, let me do a post-mortem on the old N95.

In summary: how the mighty have fallen. The N95 was a real flagship phone when it was launched back in 2007. Although there are few specs that pop out of the page by 2010 standards, the sheer laundry list of goodies included was pretty impressive for the time: 5 megapixel camera with flash, GPS, Bluetooth, WiFi, HSPDA 3G, front-facing camera... and Symbian Series 60.

[As this famous post laments](#), Symbian was both brilliant and awful. That is, brilliant in 2006, and awful in 2010. The world has simply moved on, and although I did manage to get PuTTY, Opera, Google Maps, Python, ScummVM, and even the internal undocumented unused accelerometer working, it was always at the level of a "hah! Look at what I made it do!"-hack. Both the hardware and the software couldn't quite handle modern expectations of Apps.

Now I don't believe that things become uncool just by being popular, so I went to have a look at the screen on the new iPhone 4. It really is super-gorgeous. I can't see the pixels. I really hope that panel foundries take note and start producing high-dpi displays in all form factors. A 300dpi monitor for my desktop PC might cure the cruddy font rendering that GNU+Linux distributions still seem to have, through optical anti-aliasing.

So picture this in the O2 shop: four brand-new iPhone 4s arranged around a marketing island, all packed with whizzy demo apps, in the centre of the shop. Then picture this: a single

Google still haven't got their act together to produce a smooth experience. Several years later, I switched to an iPhone, even though it's still like having one hand tied behind your back.

anonymous Android handset on the opposite side, in between piles of non-smartphones, displaying a Java exception.

Very sad.

But if the public Java exception is the new BSOD, then Android has a rosy future. Microsoft did eventually fix the blue screens of death. Apple may appear to have the upper hand in the mobile market, but they've had the upper hand before, with the Mac in the 80s, only to lose out to the more chaotic, buggy platform through keeping too tight a grip on developers. *The more they tighten their grip, the more apps will slip through their fingers.*

I decided eventually on the HTC Desire. Technical details are well-reviewed elsewhere, so I'll cover my mixed impressions. Firstly, it's an attractive device, but obviously not as pretty as you-know-what. Secondly, it's half the price of you-know-what. The most obvious difference between the Android philosophy and the iOS philosophy is the attitude to multitasking, and it works both ways. I've had an SSH connection going through ConnectBot, while cranking the Dreamhost Panel in the browser, reading email in the Gmail app, and talking on the Google Talk app, all simultaneously, and switching with ease. This is simply not possible on iOS, and it's the reason I went with Android. The flipside is that having multiple processes running at the same time introduces CPU contention, including the possibility of uncontrolled garbage collects, which seemingly make simple things like smooth scrolling impossible on Android.

I find each individual component of Android unarguably superior to the equivalent piece of iOS, but the whole thing does not yet hold together as one coherent Chunk Of Technology the way Apple have managed; this is very likely a philosophical difference that will never be resolved. This difference has always been with us - monolithic vertical integration has always

delivered a superior user experience and better reliability (see: the Nintendo stack and the IBM mainframe) at the expense of flexibility, innovation and, well, just pure *expense*.

As for the HTC Desire hardware, it's competent, but nothing that won't be obsoleted mercilessly within six months. I'd recommend an iPhone 4 for anybody who enjoys a shiny toy and a light wallet, but an Android device for anybody who appreciates the finer points of living somewhat out in the wilderness.

To truly conclude, the N95's camera is still brilliant (2955 photos taken), and I only used the media-button-slider twice: once to see what was under there, and another time to show somebody else what was under there.

Tags: hardware, software

Using Amazon EC2 in the UK

10:45PM, 4TH SEPTEMBER 2010

I'm in the early stages of moving a lot of my digital empire onto Amazon EC2. I have tested it out and confirmed that it is an incredible system; what Amazon are offering is the first and purest infrastructure-for-hire service out there. Resources are stripped back to their bare elements: I/O, CPU time, and storage. A bit like Metal and Energy in Total Annihilation! Also like TA, real time is an additional implicit resource - it is counted by your wall clock, not your usage report, and because of the bare, fundamental nature of the service, it can take quite a bit of your time to build a platform out of the raw materials.

Here are my notes so far, from a UK perspective. It's probably all obvious if you read the documentation.

Latency to the EU region from the UK is better than to Dreamhost from the UK, but not hugely better (maybe 50ms shorter ping time), and highly variable.

You pay VAT on all costs! So add 17.5% to everything (20% from January 2011). Then take it off again if you are a business or a crook.

For what is otherwise an extremely business-focused enterprise-friendly service, the billing options are comical: it's a credit card or nothing. So beware using your UK-based credit card; you may get charged a whopping foreign transaction fee. [Money Saving Expert](#) has a good rundown of which cards you can use to make foriegn-currency purchases without getting hit by mega-fees.

The flash-based dashboard won't work on 64-bit GNU+Linux. Use Elasticfox instead, or bite the bullet and go straight for the command-line tools.

[Aleastic.com](#) is a good, authoritative source of Debian and Ubuntu AMIs (including EBS-backed AMIs)

Tags: hardware, software, web

RIP Cuil

8:47AM, 18TH SEPTEMBER 2010

So, [Cuil is apparently dead](#). For posterity, here is their end-of-game scorecard as far as this web site is concerned:

First hit from Twiceler:

```
38.99.13.115 - - [16/Apr/2007:10:46:18 -0700] "GET /robots.txt HTTP/1.0"
200 339 "-" "Twiceler-0.9 http://www.cuill.com/twiceler/robot.html"
```

Last hit from Twiceler:

```
216.129.119.49 - - [30/Jul/2010:16:03:21 -0700] "GET /2004/09/28/royal%20exchange
%20theatre/IMG_0246.JPG/ HTTP/1.1"
200 2475 "-" "Mozilla/5.0 (Twiceler-0.9 http://www.cuill.com/twiceler/robot.html)"
```

In July, apparently their last crawling month, they made only 6% of the number of page requests as Yahoo Slurp, down from 25% in January. Perhaps this was a response to common complaints of over-aggressive crawling from Twiceler. Not that crawling frequency necessarily signifies anything, but Yahoo and MSN/Bing access a lot more content here than Googlebot, and are much better at indexing the deep content than Google, even though Google generates a vastly greater number of referrals, simply due to their scale.

Cuil never appeared in the top-20-referrers list, which is damning for a site that gets about 99% of its traffic from search engines.

Still, kudos to them for trying. I don't believe anybody will displace Google until they stop trying. When competition from the challengers dries up, innovation from the incumbent dries up, and a gap begins to open between incumbent and cutting-edge. It happened to IBM, it happened to Microsoft, it happened to the British Empire, and it's happening to the American

Empire. It is the natural cycle of capitalism: growth and evolution spurred by competition, and only held up temporarily by a lack of competition, upon which revolutions are built.

Tags: web, meta, business

It's Never Easy

10:10PM, 22ND SEPTEMBER 2010

I often have people tut about their job: "It's never easy", as if the world owes them an easy living. This is what I tell them:

Of course it's never easy! If it was easy, you wouldn't have a job! If it was easy, it would have been done already. No organisation pays people to do easy jobs. Easy jobs get automated away.

When beset by problems, do not despair and moan impotently - be grateful for the chance to exercise your problem solving skills, to use your big juicy human brain, and to prove that the machines haven't won yet.

Tags: positivity

How to sum the size of selected files

9:24PM, 7TH OCTOBER 2010

The gods smile upon those who, after struggling to answer a seemingly simple question using shell scripting, post the answer:

Q: What is the total size of all files whose name matches a pattern?

I had hoped du had an --include option to mirror its --exclude option, but if only things were so easy. If you are lucky, your version of du may have the --files0-from option, but Dreamhost only have the ancient 5.2.1 installed. Here's my solution:

```
find . -name '*tn960*' -printf '%s\n' | awk '{sum+=$1} END {printf("%8d\n", sum)}'
```

Breaking it down, I use find to locate files with the desired filename pattern (-name '`*tn960*`') and print their size in bytes (%s) to standard output separated by newlines (\n), then feed that into awk to sum up the first field in every line ({sum+=\$1}) and print the result in a simple format at the end (printf("8d\n", sum)); this last part is sugar to avoid awk's default behaviour of print sum outputting in scientific notation.

70s-era industrial-strength technology!

Tags: unix, foss

Great Scott

11:17PM, 23RD OCTOBER 2010

- Jam, do you fancy seeing a film?
- Maybe. What's on?
- ... google google ...
- OK, there's Despicable Me, meh... The Death and Life of Charlie St. Cloud, meh... The Social Network, hmm, maybe... Well, I don't really fanc--- **WHAT?! Back to the Future?!?!":£!@":\$**

It was true. The 25th anniversary re-release had completely passed me by. I continued:

*- OK, let's see when it's on. Is it on tomorrow? No. OK how about at the weekend? No, not then either. So it's only on tonight? When was this re-released?! October 1st?! I can't believe I missed that. OK, so my only chance to see my favourite film of all time at the cinema is **tonight**, and I've only just found out? When is it on? 20:35. Hmm, what time is it now? ... It's five past eight already!*

Damn, I'm late!

We raced to the cinema and made it! They played McFly during the adverts.

I was prepared to be disappointed, but wasn't at all. It's still brilliant.



Tags: film

Further thoughts on the HTC Desire

6:41PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2010

The battery life is awful. There is an iPhone 3GS in my life, and its stamina blows the Desire away.

The screen lock is devilishly unreliable. It will frequently unlock in my pocket and start calling random people. One solution is to use the Unlock Pattern feature: Settings → Security → Screen unlock pattern. It's plausible that the battery life issue might have been related to the phone being in an unlocked state more often than it should have been, but after a week of testing with the unlock pattern feature, battery life is still dismal.

The camera does a rotten job at setting the exposure in contrasty scenes, and like most phones, focuses poorly in low light and closeup scenes. My old N95's camera was way better. Android 2.2 may address some of these issues, but not for Three customers... yet.

That's all the negativity out of the way: it's otherwise a brilliant device, and still half the price of an iPhone 4.

(Aside: will Three be changing to Four when 4G rolls out? Is an ungoogleable name part of some tricksy branding campaign that practices Search Engine De-Optimisation in order to hide any discussion of their service?)

Tags: hardware

Home Taping

6:47PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2010

What if home taping really did kill the music industry? But rather than going out quietly, the music industry partnered with the advertising industry and started selling *promotional platforms* instead of *music*? And what if this already happened?

Tags: music, copyright, business

On Priorities

6:48PM, 24TH OCTOBER 2010

Tintin had a dog called Snowy. I used to use this fact to remember that the element Tin has the symbol Sn.

Now, I use my knowledge of the periodic table to remember what Tintin's dog was called.

Tags: amusements, science

Bioshock

2:59PM, 23RD DECEMBER 2010

I finally put in the hours to play this through, and wow. What a devastating critique of Randian Objectivism - but not quite a rebuttal. I enjoyed the story enough to turn the difficulty down to Easy so I wouldn't have to expend so much effort on the mechanics of staying alive - and this is the nature of Rapture in microcosm.

Firstly, the game. I enjoyed what appeared to be flashbacks to the *Thief* series. Enemies that move faster than you, ghosts, shadows, and security cameras which I'm *sure* must share actual code with those from *Thief II*. The combat experience is sort-of-neat, with a resource-management tradeoff in guns versus plasmids - swords versus magic in another context, or *metal versus energy* in yet another classic - but I fear I have grown too old to truly enjoy violence which is ultimately neutered by the environment being impervious to all your guns, rockets and pyrokinetic superpowers. You can blast a splicer into gory pieces, but the illusion comes crashing down when high explosives just bounce off windows. FPS gaming is about a decade overdue a truly destructible environment. Rapture has delicate glass walkways spanning underwater towers. I want to bring them crashing down with a rocket launcher and flood the hallway back to the last bulkhead!

But that's just me.

I *think* there is also an anti-drug subtext. ADAM destroys the citizens' minds to the point where they are concerned only with their own ability to get more ADAM. An addict is only interested in their own addiction; a self-centered life in the extreme, but if an addict's *will* is that he lives only to indulge in his drug, then is it not rational self-interest to pursue this lifestyle to

whatever extremes he sees fit? Ryan's individualist philosophy agrees, and he can not bring himself to outlaw ADAM.

Going back to the main thrust of the plot, Andrew Ryan believed that society is driven by the will of great men. In this, he was right! He built an underwater city which thrived for many years - a success by all accounts. What he did not appreciate was that while society is driven by the will of great men, it is fueled by the toil of ordinary men. Fontaine said: "Somebody has to scrub the toilets."

It becomes apparent that the greatness of Rapture would not be possible without *both* the great will of Ryan *and* the hard labour of everybody else. To play the game is to learn this lesson yourself, as it is at once a beautiful, gripping work of art, and yet also a slightly tedious pseudo-RPG. While exploring gilded spectacles, you will have to stop frequently to search corpses for ammo, crates for spare parts, and yes, you will find the odd useful item in a broken cistern. To experience the joy of Rapture, you must at once be the hero protagonist, and the lavatory-scrubber.

Bioshock should have been a movie. Fallout 3 is a much better game.

Tags: games, reviews

Microsoft Wireless Keyboard 1000: function keys won't work

12:22PM, 8TH JANUARY 2011

Why won't the function keys on my wireless keyboard do anything? Maybe because you need to **press the F-lock key**, located just to the right of the F12 key.

[Here's the official Microsoft explanation](#)

I write this only in the hope that I can go some small way to displacing the dreaded ExpertSexChange result that appeared when I first Googled this problem. Come on Google, when the top 10 search results all contain the same content, dressed up in 10 different spamsuits and stackoverclones, please give me the option to build a personal blacklist.

Tags: spam, hardware

Lazy years

12:04PM, 9TH JANUARY 2011

I write timestamps a *lot* - even on pen and paper - because knowing exactly when you did something eliminates a large class of problems that tend to emerge later on when searching, sorting, and trying to remember stuff. To this end, I wasn't a fan of the year 2010. It was slow. I'll explain what I mean by that...

When typing the number 2010, you have to traverse the entire length of the number line on the keyboard almost three times. You start at 2, go across 8 places to 0, back 9 places to 1, and back another 9 places to 0, for a total of 26 keys traversed - far higher than 2009's mere 9. Now, in reality, with two hands, it's not *really* slow to type unless you type using the hunt-and-peck method - but there's a certain minuscule quantum of mental effort expended shifting your semi-subconscious inner focus from key to key.

(Before I go any further, I would like to propose that the standard unit of mental effort be the noo. Typing the year 2010 involves about 1 nanonoo of mental effort. 1 noo is the amount of mental effort it takes to be outside your intellectual comfort zone for 1 second.)

I wrote some Python to generate the following top 10 hardest-to-type four digit years.

(Exercise to the reader: do this. If you liked it, check out [Project Euler](#)).

Year	Typing distance
1010	27
1019	26
2010	26
9101	26
1018	25
1020	25
1910	25
2019	25
3010	25
8101	25
9102	25

So 2010 is joint-second on the list! Not since the birth of the Chinese Emperor Renzong has there been a year harder to type. We have truly lived through a cursed age! It will be [the year 10101](#) before we have to endure anything harder, by which time our pointing wands will have to traverse a gruelling 36 keys.

The pattern thence is obvious: the maximum required traversal distance to type any n-digit number is $9(n-1)$.

Tags: maths, amusements

Read-only access to USB device still isn't secure

10:36PM, 14TH JANUARY 2011

[Data Loss Prevention](#) is the field of trying to stop the leakage of valuable information from a secure environment. While one might like to believe there are swarming armies of blackhats hammering away at the beloved mainframe, the unfortunate fact is that the primary threat comes from ordinary day-to-day users of the system.

One example of DLP software is the good old USB-drive lockdown. Disabling USB drives completely is sometimes regarded as a step too far down the road to throwing out the computer altogether and reverting to nice, safe, secure typewriters. Often you see **read-only** access granted to USB drives, the idea being that users can *read* all the random junk they want, but cannot *write* out sensitive data.

This strategy fails to plug the hole:

Get a GNU+Linux laptop, write a filesystem driver, or perhaps a kernel module, that logs all read requests, and perhaps a hack to the USB host controller driver, then plug it into the target system, where it will masquerade as a generic USB mass storage device. Then write a script on the target machine which reads the sensitive data, hexadecimal-encode it in 8-byte chunks, and repeatedly tries to read files named U:\f438ab76d6c5a610.txt. Finally, parse the logs on the laptop to extract the encoded data and reconstitute the original file. Writing a script on the target system will not be a problem - VBScript is capable and standard on every modern copy of Windows. Excel (with VBA) would be even easier.

Tags: security

How to get the Gobble Gobble achievement in GTA4

12:52PM, 22ND JANUARY 2011

I don't play a lot of games, but the ones I do play I play right to the end. Grand Theft Auto 4 is such a work of art. So:

It is well known that to bowl a turkey strike you must take two full steps to the left, then move the R-stick backwards and forwards in a perfectly straight motion. This is hard! How can you tell whether the motion really was straight? The analog sticks are very sensitive and even if you hit the "south" and "north" positions perfectly during your motion, you may wobble in between.

I found the secret was to hold the controller just underneath the edge of a hard, straight table edge, so that the analog stick touches the table edge and is prevented from moving off-centre - a bit like putting the rails on during a real game of bowling!

I got three strikes out of three as soon as I adopted this technique. If your hand isn't steady enough to hold the controller under the table edge at the right height, I suggest stacking books and paper, then holding the controller firmly at the correct height by pressing down on it. You'll do it!

Tags: games

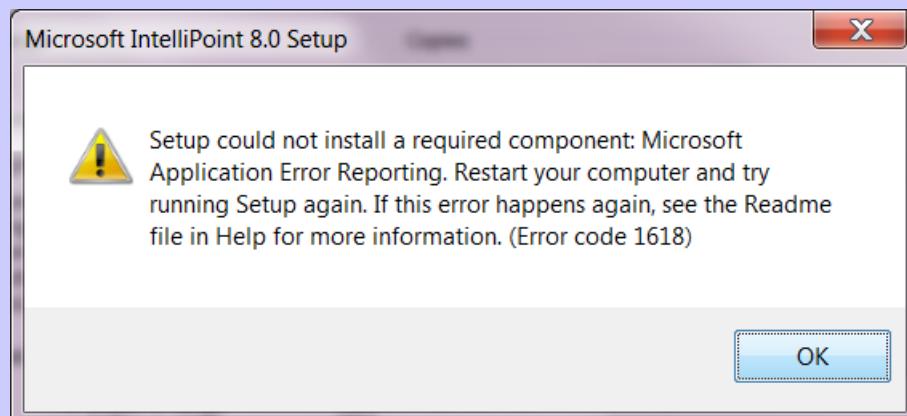
Just checking: software is still awful

7:04PM, 12TH FEBRUARY 2011

I wrote a letter yesterday - an actual, ink on paper letter. Well, it was ink on paper after I printed it out, so it started life in OpenOffice. I'm running OO Writer on openSUSE 11.3. From bad experiences time after time after time, I have little faith in printers in general, and no faith in GNU+Linux support of printers specifically, so I didn't even try printing from openSUSE. Instead, I tried saving the document as a Word document so I could reboot into Windows 7 and print it from there.

As might be expected, OO Writer hung hard and couldn't be closed even by the KDE Ctrl-Escape System Activity utility. `kill -9` to the rescue, curse, then try again. It worked fine second time round.

I became a little sad at how I was betraying my Free software ideals, so with a heavy heart I loaded up Windows 7 - alas, a fast, smooth trouble-free boot. Just as I was questioning whether Free software ever had a hope of dealing with the hard (but dull) problems that commercial software developers are paid to solve in order that consumers may have an easy life, my faith was restored:



Completely randomly, out of the blue with no prompting, something somewhere in the bowels of the mighty Windows stack had decided to reinstall my mouse drivers, and failed - except my mouse still worked. WHAT.

To be fair, I did eventually try printing from openSUSE, and it worked. Not well (it was four or five times slower), but I'm quite impressed that it did anything at all. In the year 2011, there are still hard unsolved problems on both sides of the Free/proprietary fence. It's a positive thought - while nothing really works, everything is still up for grabs!

Tags: software, bleh, foss

Celebrity Masterchef Junior Australia: The Professionals

9:31PM, 17TH FEBRUARY 2011

I love cooking, I love eating, and I love photography, which makes Masterchef a pretty good exercise in zero-effort zonk-out TV while cooking and eating dinner. The British version has - so far - retained enough focus on the food, and food photography, to mask its seedy Reality roots; and it has traditionally had a surprisingly awesome soundtrack.

Enter the spinoffs. The format of the *Australia* edition has changed from being a knockout tournament to being a full-blown live-in-the-same-house-immunity-challenge-vote-off-feel-good Reality formula turd. *New Zealand* is exactly the same, plus product placement. And now the 2011 series of the British version has landed with "a flash new set" and an updated format which promises to clone the southern-hemisphere editions.

"For me", as the judges now say 8 or 9 times per episode, "it just keeps getting tougher" to justify watching it.

Never mind, eh? *Peep Show* is still going!

Tags: food, tv

Clock drift on Amazon EC2

11:47AM, 19TH MARCH 2011

Check this out:

```
19 Mar 11:46:53 ntpdate[28693]: step time server 91.189.94.4 offset 416.966115 sec
```

That's the result of running ntpdate on an Amazon EC2 instance that has been running for 117 days without any time corrections. That's nearly a 7 minute drift over the time period - more than 3 seconds a day. This is interesting - I was not previously aware that time could drift so far out. I don't know if this is typical of all machines that have been running for extended periods of time, or something peculiar to EC2.

To ameliorate further drift, I installed [the ntp daemon on Ubuntu](#):

```
sudo apt-get install ntp
```

Tags: time, software

Body Clock

9:34PM, 22ND MARCH 2011

You know how the alarm is set for 7:00am, but you wake up at 6:58am anyway? Well I just randomly wondered whether Radiohead were still making music these days. [The King of Limbs!](#) Only a month or so late.

Tags: music, amusements

Built-in version control in Windows 8

9:41PM, 22ND MARCH 2011

Any time anyone works on any file more than once, they could benefit from using revision control software.

Unfortunately, revision control software is generally a step too far out of the comfortable Default zone that 99% of corporate desktop users live in, and it's only going to get worse for home users as people become more and more reluctant to install software themselves - instead relying on in-browser applications and app stores. [It took me 5 months to get a VCS at my local megacorp.](#)

So Microsoft, please do a favour for everyone stuck in default-land by building some basic file versioning into Windows 8. You did it for Compressed Folders, so why not have Versioned Folders?

Tags: software, bleh

Datetimes in naïve cameras

9:49PM, 22ND MARCH 2011

Datetime values should always be stored in UTC. Makes sense, but what about the datetimes embedded by a camera in a JPEG file? Ideally, these would be stored in a timezone-aware format, but sadly Canon cameras do not do this. No matter, because the JPEG EXIF format can't store timezone information anyway!

After reading some discussions, I have concluded that the advice in the first sentence of this post still holds for camera datetime information.

Until now I have always tried to keep my camera set to "local" time, whatever that might mean. I usually remember to change it when going on holiday, but I often forget to change it during the switch from GMT to BST. This matches the behaviour of most phones, which will automatically adjust their date and time settings (and hence phone-camera image timestamps) when you move to another timezone. (The exception is if you have a GPS-enabled cameraphone with geotagging enabled, in which case the GPSTimeStamp tag will always be stored in UTC).

Unfortunately, I'm now more and more convinced that changing time manually is the wrong thing to do. It's far too easy to forget whether you have made the adjustment, and thence risk making an extra unnecessary adjustment later further down the workflow pipeline. I'm very fortunate in living in a timezone which is identical to UTC for most of the year, so it's an easy decision for me to make: I will now always keep my camera clock and EXIF timestamps set to UTC.

This doesn't compensate for the lack of knowledge of timezone, so I now have to think of a way to accurately record this too. It also doesn't account for the now-infuriating behaviour of my phone, which I can't set to anything other than local "network" time. Fortunately, my network has foreseen this problem and set its roaming rates so high that I never use my phone when abroad and thus will presumably not encounter this problem too often.

Update 2011-04-09: Forget all that. I'm still confused, but now leaning towards keeping the camera set to naïve local time, and recording the timezone separately.

Tags: photos, software

Rio: The Movie

8:31AM, 9TH APRIL 2011

We went to see [Rio](#) last night. First, I will gripe about the price. It was £23 for the both of us! That includes a microscopic student discount, and a hefty 3D surcharge.

Secondly, I will gripe about the 3D - it's a total gimmick and isn't worth it. Some things fly out of the screen at you, but you eventually stop noticing. It dims the picture. It's sold as immersion, but it's nothing of the sort. Books manage to immerse you without *any image at all!*

Thirdly, the basic story and plotting is fully generic with minimal customisation. Animal-goes-on-wacky-adventure is what you get. Maybe it's because we have recently seen [Bolt](#) that it all feels so familiar.

Fourthly and finally, the setting, background and scenery is **5000% awesome!** It's a loving, detailed, amazingly accurate rendition of Rio de Janeiro's Zona Sul - not the supermarket, the whole region. The wide-angle shots of the city are spot-on GPS-perfect, geographically. The iconic sweep of Flamengo beach beneath the Sugar Loaf is the movie's signature background. The face of the Pedra da Gávea is absent, but the rock textures of the exposed mountain outcrops are authentic. Sambódromo - check. The bondinho trams of Santa Teresa - check. On the streets, there are reproductions of the characteristic Burle Marx orla pavement, the 1970s glass and concrete apartment fronts, the white-and-blue buses, the bright orange Prefeitura bins, the stacked plastic chairs of the beach kiosks, and the road layout of Avenida Atlântica on Copacabana.

It is clear that somebody has studied the city in great detail. The 3D effect had me trying to lean to one side to see past the cookie-cutter characters and get a better look at the beautiful scenery.

Overall: 3.5/10 as a film, 5.5/10 if you have an interest in Rio de Janeiro.

Tags: photos, film, review

Efficient logging using Django and Apache

11:08PM, 13TH APRIL 2011

[Django 1.3](#) added support for the Python logging module, which is great if you want to audit the state of your application over time, but possibly overkill. Why? Because your web server already has built-in logging capability which you can extend for your own purposes!

Say you want to implement the simplest of all web applications - a hit counter. This involves recording the fact of an HTTP request. One option is to [log hits into a database using Django's ORM](#). The advantage is that you will always have an up-to-the-second accurate hit count, as featured on Stackoverflow. The major disadvantage is the overhead of writing to the database on *every* hit. Another option is to use Django's new logging feature to log hits to some form of handler. This handler might be an interface to a database, in which case this is very much the same solution as the first. Alternatively the handler might log to a file, in which case [you have to handle concurrency yourself](#), as FileHandlers are not multi-process safe. This is where Apache comes to the rescue.

Apache already has an efficient multi-process-safe file-writing log handler - the access log! It already logs all HTTP requests, so for the purposes of a hit counter, that may be all you need. More likely, parsing the log file and mapping request URLs to Django objects is more trouble than you fancy, therefore it would help if Apache could log the object id, and its [Content Type id](#). So locate your Apache server configuration file and tell it to do exactly that:

```
LogFormat "%h %l %u %t \"%r\" %>s %b \"%{Referer}i\" \"%{User-agent}i\" %{X-JL6-CID}o %{X-JL6-OID}o" jl6combined  
CustomLog /var/log/apache2/access.log jl6combined
```

This defines a new log format, based on the popular ["combined" log format](#), and then tells Apache to use it. The two extra entries on the end refer to two custom headers in the

outgoing HTTP response. You can set these within Django. The following is a paraphrase of a view of a [photo](#) object on this website:

```
from django.contrib.contenttypes.models import ContentType
from django.shortcuts import render_to_response
def showphoto(request, ...):
    photo = ... # Retrieve the object
    content_type_pk = ContentType.objects.get(app_label="core", model="photo").id
    object_pk = photo.id
    response = render_to_response('photo.html', locals(), RequestContext(request))
    response['X-JL6-CID'] = content_type_pk
    response['X-JL6-OID'] = object_pk
    return response
```

To add the headers to the outgoing HTTP response, you [treat the response object as a dictionary](#), then return the response as you normally would in your view.

If you use any other web analytics software, you might like to check whether it can cope with additional unknown fields on the end of a log line. If not, there's nothing stopping you having two access logs - one for traditional analytics, and another containing your enhanced logging information. Remember, this is just logging a couple of IDs for the purposes of a hit counter.

An HTTP header can contain anything you like, so you could equally be logging timing information, server load, custom error codes, or a random Shakespearean sonnet - as long as you can encode it [in under 8KiB of ASCII](#).

There are [just two minor drawbacks](#) to this scheme.

Firstly, the additional headers are transmitted to the client. If you are logging any sensitive information about your application's internal operations, consider this a huge information leak. Use [a reverse-proxying load balancer](#) to strip out anything incriminating. Chances are that the information you want to log is perfectly benign, and something that might well appear in a URL anyway.

Secondly, you will have to process your logs to read the log entries back into an analytics database before you can generate your funky charts and top-content indices. If you absolutely need up-to-the-second log-based analytics, forget it and stick to logging directly into a database. However, it's much more likely that your statistics can happily be an hour, or a day, behind, and then you get to incur the cost of database writes in one summarizing process that can run outside peak hours or off your production system, rather than millions of tiny writes throughout the day to a live database.

Here's a paraphrase of some PostgreSQL that I run in a cron job immediately after the logrotate script has archived off the day's access logs. We pick up after the point where the log has been passed through [logresolve](#), and [tee](#)'d into a pipe which feeds [psql](#):

```
create temporary table tmp_apache(record TEXT);

\copy tmp_apache from stdin

create temporary table tmp_accesslog as
select 'jl6'::text as site,
       extract(year from accesstime) as yyyy,
       extract(month from accesstime) as mm,
       extract(day from accesstime) as dd,
       remotehost,
       identuser,
       http_user,
       accesstime,
       http_method,
       http_request_uri,
       http_version,
       http_response_code,
       http_response_size,
       http_referrer,
       http_user_agent,
       cid,
       oid
  from (
    select m[1] as remotehost,
```

```

m[2] as identuser,
m[3] as http_user,
(to_char(to_timestamp(m[4], 'DD/Mon/YYYY:HH24:MI:SS'),
'YYYY-MM-DD HH24:MI:SS ')
|| split_part(m[4], ' ',2))::timestamp with time zone
as accesstime,
m[5] as http_method,
m[6] as http_request_uri,
m[7] as http_version,
m[8]::smallint as http_response_code,
case m[9]
    when '-' then 0
    else m[9]::integer
end as http_response_size,
m[10] as http_referrer,
m[11] as http_user_agent,
case when m[12] is null then 0
    when m[12]='-' then 0
    when m[12]='' then 0
    else m[12]::integer
end as cid,
case when m[13] is null then 0
    when m[13]='-' then 0
    when m[13]='' then 0
    else m[13]::integer
end as oid
from (
    select regexp_matches(record,
        E'(.*) (.*) (.*) \\\[(.*)\\\] "(\\w+) (.*) HTTP/(\\d\\.\\d)" (\\d+)
        (.*) "(.*)" "(.*)"(?: (\\d+) (\\d+))?)'
        as m from tmp_apache
    ) as subquery1
) as subquery2;

-- Count up hits by cid and oid:
create temporary table accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid_new as
    select cid, oid, count(*) as hit_count
    from tmp_accesslog
    group by 1,2;
-- Update the running totals:
update accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid a
    set hit_count = a.hit_count + b.hit_count
    from accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid_new b

```

```

        where a.cid = b.cid
        and a.oid = b.oid;

-- Insert new running totals if cidoid doesn't exist:
insert into accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid
    select * from accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid_new a
    where not exists (
        select null from accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid b
        where a.cid=b.cid
        and a.oid=b.oid);

-- Update the rank of the running totals:
update accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid set hit_count_rank = v1.rn
    from (
        select rank()
            over (partition by cid order by hit_count desc) as rn, cid, oid
            from accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid
    ) as v1
    where accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid.cid = v1.cid
    and accesslog_jl6_by_cidoid.oid = v1.oid;

```

Damned-cool voodoo! Regular expressions are subtle and hairy, so I make no claims as to how optimal the parsing phase is here.

I won't bore you with the details of writing queries against this summary table; the aim of this post is to document a creative use of the web server log, not really to tell you how to implement a hit counter.

Tags: foss, web

Who is Satoshi Nakamoto?

10:37PM, 5TH JUNE 2011

Is it a scam? Is it a bubble? No, it's [Bitcoin](#)! I have been monitoring this new development closely over the last week and am genuinely excited. Not necessarily because I believe the strongest claims of its proponents - but because I see genuine uncertainty over the outcome. For every pie-eyed fantasist who thinks Bitcoins are about to cause, and then rise from, the ashes of the global banking system, there is a skeptical pseudo-economist who can reel off a dozen potential failure modes of the Bitcoin system. But then there is a pseudo-plausible rebuttal to each of those problems, and the debate rages on furiously.

Currencies have many features - liquidity, transaction cost, divisibility, durability, trust, confidence, decentralisation, anonymity, inflation, exchange rate volatility, legality... the configuration space in which currencies lie is huge and timidly explored. Some of the economic arguments for and against Bitcoin point to these features only in isolation (*"Deflation will freeze the Bitcoin economy!" ... "Anonymous transactions are revolutionary!"*), arguing by analogy with previous currencies or economic situations with those same features. However, the Bitcoin economy is a dynamical system distinct from *any* currency or P2P system that has existed before, and therefore the ultimate outcome cannot be predicted. History cannot repeat itself because this has not happened before.

Perhaps this is where I cross over from being a scientist to a *mad* scientist, but I'm a sucker for this kind of thing. I consider Bitcoin to be a grand and marvellous experiment which my weak libertarianism itches to perform. It may crash horribly. It may be a revolution. Either way, lessons will be learned, bugs will be fixed, and a new chapter will be written in the story of how humans have learned to get along with each other.

Crypto was mostly a massive scam.

Bitcoins currently trade at about £22k each.

The identity of Satoshi remains the most interesting part of the story.

Miscellaneous observations:

The energy being expended on mining is worrisome. If the system succeeds in powering a revitalised global economy, it will surely be worth it, but I can't help wonder if there isn't a more efficient way of solving the same problem. I can't point to a better solution, but the [code smell is strong](#).

The market is currently moving at lightspeed. Who can tell the difference between irrational speculation and rational speculation? As the second law of thermodynamics implies, all value is just a bubble that hasn't popped - yet.

If some event causes a dramatic loss of confidence in Bitcoin, or a regulatory airgap between Bitcoins and "real" currencies, the system will still exist. If it fails as a currency, my money is on it becoming the standard unit of online reputation.

When the dust settles, the complete transaction history will be laid bare for analysis. A thousand papers will be born.

Who is Satoshi Nakamoto? Likely a native English speaker who has posted elsewhere, and whose identity may thus be revealed by linguistic analysis and text mining.

Tags: economics, freedom, future, foss, extropy

Co-opting advertising for steganographic purposes

7:18PM, 23RD JULY 2011

Steganography is all about hiding messages in plain sight.

Theorem 1.1: Surveillance is like finding a needle in a haystack.

Theorem 1.2: You don't even have to disguise your needle if your haystack is big enough.

Therefore I propose a secret language with a restricted vocabulary of a few hundred words, like [Basic English](#) - the difference being that the words chosen for this language are exclusively top ranking search keywords and brands, and therefore ungoogleable. Here's a secret message that will forever be lost in the maelstrom of noise that is the web:

"Facebook maps ford insurance google web iphone social? Linux amazon twitter 2.0 sony microsoft!"

Every branding and marketing campaign will assist in driving the secret further into obscurity! Keyword-sniffing filters and miners will be up against a \$500bn industry which fights to drown out any subtle meaning attached to brands solely in favour of their own chosen meaning.

(Obviously, forget defining a new natural language; you'd just encode your secret document with a byte-to-brand map using, say, the top 32 global brands and base-32 encoding).

Tags: amusements, security

Back to Ubuntu

11:18PM, 31ST JULY 2011

After 18 months of using OpenSUSE, I finally tired of its mad brokenness and jumped ship back to Ubuntu. Commentary on 11.04 Natty Narwhal:

- No way. It detected my monitor resolution and installed the NVIDIA driver itself! Maybe I'm behind the curve, but I've *never* met a distro that could do this simplest of tasks before.
- Firefox seems to have been updated to 5.0 already. Canonical are pulling the right strings with the right upstream developers to get this stuff integrated.
- Unity's Aero Snap clone doesn't quite tile perfectly for some reason. I can see gaps around the edges of a snapped window!
- The unified menu bar at the top of the screen is a looooong way away from a small window in the bottom right corner of a 30" monitor. This bit me when trying to figure out how to add a new password to Seahorse - you have to look in the File menu for the "New..." option. As I had the Seahorse window in the bottom right hand corner of the screen, it was literally more than *two feet* away.
- Trying to use KDE apps in GNOME is still painful and half-broken. This time, a nasty unreadable grey-on-black colour scheme for menu choices. After all these years, *why*?
- Banshee importing tens of thousands of songs caused a minutes-long total lockup of the entire user interface. Ctrl+Alt+F1 to a console showed it was just thinking really, really hard.
- I can't tell that CPU usage is particularly higher than openSUSE, but the fan stays on continuously. Hmmmm...

- The overall aesthetic is nice. I've tried GNOMEish desktops before and have always gone back to KDE for the superior apps and integration, but I'm feeling now that KDE has lost its way in architecture astronautism. Sadly, it was the bugs in digiKam 1.8 in openSUSE that broke the camel's back for me. Sadly because digiKam is the main app I use after Firefox and vim.

Overall, positive.

Tags: foss

Disaster recovery from ephemeral datastores

5:52PM, 6TH AUGUST 2011

It turns out that when the Amazon EC2 spot price goes above your maximum bid, your instance is not merely stopped, but *terminated*, **and its EBS root volume along with it**. This caught me out. I was expecting the instance to die but the EBS root volume to persist, so that I could pick up where it left off manually. Bet you're glad I'm not your sysadmin!

My backups were reasonably up to date, but it may interest some how I recovered data that was not backed up. Before I go any further, I offer a thousand penances to Janus, the god of redundancy, for having any un-backed-up data at all.

So firstly, the bulk was recovered from my development virtual machine, which happened to have a more up to date copy of the site database than the official backups.

Secondly, the most obvious source - search engine caches. I'm bummed that search engines don't index this site anywhere near as deeply as they used to, but on the positive side, Google, Bing and Yahoo all have snapshots of the front page at different points in time, coincidentally allowing me to recover all publicly posted material. Thank you, web!

Next, Firefox keeps a history of everything you enter into form fields, to enable its auto-complete feature. This data is stored in a file called formhistory.sqlite in your profile directory, e.g. `~/.mozilla/firefox/xxxxxxxx.default`. To take a quick look at it, try SQLite Database Browser:

```
sudo apt-get install sqlitebrowser
```

(It's good being back on Ubuntu).

Even better, Mobile Firefox captures this data too, and synchronizes it with your Firefox Sync account. As most of the data from the web application concerned was entered on my phone, this was a lifesaver. Examining the file reveals a table named `moz_formhistory` with columns `fieldname`, `value` and `firstUsed`. The first identifies the form field in which the data was entered (thankfully globally unique for me), the value is your data, and `firstUsed` is a UNIX timestamp with microsecond precision. Decode it like this in Python:

```
>>> from datetime import datetime
>>> ts = 1312529753404000
>>> datetime.fromtimestamp(ts/1000000.0)
datetime.datetime(2011, 8, 5, 8, 35, 53, 404000)
```

I'm not convinced Firefox Sync handles `firstUsed` time correctly, as I've got solid evidence of the timestamp being a couple of *days* out (specifically, I remember when and where I entered the text in question, and Google Latitude corroborates my memory). I wonder if it's recording the time when the data was synced rather than the time the data was entered...

Anyway, I can live without accurate times on these few items. This is a hobby, not an audit.
Thank you, Firefox Sync!

Next, this website features comments. A few were posted since the time of my last database backup, but I recovered them all as I have the full content of each emailed to Gmail as an alert. Thank you Gmail!

Finally, I have a logging application which draws a graph of time-series data entered by hand. There is more than one user here, including an iPhone user, so Firefox Sync couldn't help me out. But as luck would have it, the iPhone user still had the web page loaded with the graph drawn. Home Button + Off Switch = Screenshot. The graph was plotted large enough that 1 unit = 1+ pixel, so all the relevant data was encoded in the screenshot! This is fairly low-value

stuff, so I haven't processed the graph back into data yet, but I'm chuffed that, in principle, there was no data loss! Thank you, Safari render cache!

In the end, the only data I lost were some server log files which, I'll be truthful, I'm fond of. A fair price to pay in the scheme of things though.

(By the way, [this is the DeleteOnTermination flag](#) which you must unset in order to prevent the root cause of the EBS volume deletion in this situation).

Tags: web, security

Bitcoin: 285 bytes that changed the world

12:22AM, 12TH JANUARY 2012

Ever wondered what goes on inside the block chain? There's [an overview on the Bitcoin wiki](#), but let's take a look at the ultimate truth of the matter: the raw bytes. In this article I intend to walk through the bytes that form the [genesis block](#), explaining the content from the ground up. The target audience knows a little about how Bitcoin works, and is interested in learning more. If you are a computer science major familiar with all the features of Bitcoin, you probably won't learn much you didn't already know.

This post started off as a few notes I made on the protocol, but as the notes expanded I decided to make them publishable. There are many points where I could go off on a tangent to explain in deeper detail, but I have tried to keep those in check by linking to further material instead. Source code references are relative to v0.5.0 of the Satoshi client.

My favorite learning strategy is to strip away as much abstraction as possible, to see the guts and mechanisms that make things work. I hope others find this is a useful starting point for deep diving into the Bitcoin protocol and source code. (Although my personal interest is in understanding the protocol without having to stomach too much C++).

So let's go!

If you look in the [data directory](#) of your Bitcoin installation (~/.bitcoin on Ubuntu), you'll see two important files: blkindex.dat and blk0001.dat. These are the **block index** and the **block chain**.

(Why blk0001.dat? Because the client tries to keep the block chain store below 2GB to accommodate filesystem limits (`main.cpp`, line 1461). If you are reading this article in the

future, you may see blk0002.dat, blk0003.dat, and so on... or if you are reading it in the *far* future, [legacy filesystems](#) and 32-bit machines might finally be obsolete, allowing the client to use a single file... or maybe the client will use an alternative means of block chain storage entirely.)

The block index is a utility file that allows fast lookups into the actual raw data of the block chain. The index is a Btree-format Berkely DB file:

```
$ file ~/.bitcoin/blkindex.dat /home/james/.bitcoin/blkindex.dat: Berkeley DB  
(Btree, version 9, native byte-order)
```

The blk0001.dat file has no database structure; it is just a concatenation of block messages that the client receives. This is the file of primary interest to this article. Now we get out hexdump and the fun begins!

```
$ hexdump -n 300 -C blk0001.dat  
00000000 f9 be b4 d9 1d 01 00 00 01 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 | .....  
00000010 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 | .....  
00000020 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 3b a3 ed fd | .....;  
00000030 7a 7b 12 b2 7a c7 2c 3e 67 76 8f 61 7f c8 1b c3 | z{..z.,>gv.a....  
00000040 88 8a 51 32 3a 9f b8 aa 4b 1e 5e 4a 29 ab 5f 49 | ..Q2:...K.^J)..._I  
00000050 ff ff 00 1d 1d ac 2b 7c 01 01 00 00 00 01 00 00 | .....+|.....  
00000060 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 | .....  
00000070 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 | .....  
00000080 ff ff 4d 04 ff ff 00 1d 01 04 45 54 68 65 20 54 | ..M.....EThe T  
00000090 69 6d 65 73 20 30 33 2f 4a 61 6e 2f 32 30 30 39 | imes 03/Jan/2009  
000000a0 20 43 68 61 6e 63 65 6c 6c 6f 72 20 6f 6e 20 62 | Chancellor on b  
000000b0 72 69 6e 6b 20 6f 66 20 73 65 63 6f 6e 64 20 62 | rink of second b  
000000c0 61 69 6c 6f 75 74 20 66 6f 72 20 62 61 6e 6b 73 | ailout for banks  
000000d0 ff ff ff ff 01 00 f2 05 2a 01 00 00 00 43 41 04 | .....*....CA.  
000000e0 67 8a fd b0 fe 55 48 27 19 67 f1 a6 71 30 b7 10 | g....UH'.g..q0..  
000000f0 5c d6 a8 28 e0 39 09 a6 79 62 e0 ea 1f 61 de b6 | \...(9..yb....a..  
00000100 49 f6 bc 3f 4c ef 38 c4 f3 55 04 e5 1e c1 12 de | I..?L.8..U.....  
00000110 5c 38 4d f7 ba 0b 8d 57 8a 4c 70 2b 6b f1 1d 5f | \8M....W.Lp+k...  
00000120 ac 00 00 00 00 f9 be b4 d9 d7 00 00 | .....  
0000012c
```

This is the "canonical [hex+ascii](#) display" mode of the hexdump utility. Each row represents 16 bytes from the input file. Reading each row left to right, first you see the [offset](#) from the beginning of the file, then 16 bytes, each represented as two hexadecimal characters, and then those same 16 bytes decoded into ASCII characters where possible. Where they decode to a non-printable character, a dot is printed instead. The vertical pipe characters are not part of the data; they just serve to delimit the hex view from the ASCII view.

Magic network ID

f9 be b4 d9 is the [magic number](#) that identifies what follows as a Bitcoin protocol message. It's worth noting that all* numbers in the block are represented in [little-endian](#) byte order, so the value represented by these four bytes is 0xD9B4BEF9, or 3,652,501,241 in decimal. The source claims this number was chosen so as to be [unlikely to occur in normal data](#) (main.cpp, line 1760).

Notably, the magic network ID is *not* part of the block. It is used solely as a delimiter between blocks. Given that the block length is stored, and that there is also an index file, it could be happily omitted. But even when the block chain reaches a length of 200,000 blocks in 2012, this would save only 4 bytes * 200,000 = 800,000 bytes = 0.76[MiB](#). There are greater space savings to be had elsewhere.

Block length

1d 01 00 00 (0x00000011d hex, 285 decimal) is the length of the block in bytes. Four bytes are available, giving a maximum block length of $2^{32} - 1 = 4,294,967,295$ bytes $\approx 4\text{GiB}$. However, the current client will not accept blocks larger than 1MB (main.h, line 30).

The block length is obviously not part of the block either.

Block format version

01 00 00 00 (0x00000001 hex, 1 decimal) is the [block format version](#). This is distinct from the protocol version and client version, both of which can be incremented independently. But the block format version of existing blocks must not change, or the block hash will change, and the chain of hashes from one block to the next will be broken.

Hash of previous block

This being the genesis block, there is no previous block, and so where there would normally be found a 32-byte hash of the previous block, there is instead 00.

It is actually possible for a block to hash to zero, but hugely unlikely (though more and more likely as the difficulty increases). The protocol should probably be amended to consider a hash of zero to be invalid, making the zero value used in the genesis block a valid [sentinel value](#).

Merkle root

3b a3 ed fd 7a 7b 12 b2 7a c7 2c 3e 67 76 8f 61 7f c8 1b c3 88 8a 51 32
3a 9f b8 aa 4b 1e 5e 4a is the root hash in the [merkle tree](#) of hashes that organize the transactions in this block.

Timestamp

29 ab 5f 49 (0x495fab29 hex, 1231006505 decimal) is the timestamp of when the block was created. As this value forms part of the block, it does not change during the mining process.

Hence it represents the time at which transactions were collected into a block, *not* the time the completed block was published, although it is updated "every few seconds" (`main.cpp`, line 3088) so it doesn't fall too far behind.

The format of this field is [UNIX epoch time](#). 1231006505 is Sat, 03 Jan 2009 18:15:05 UTC. (No timezone information is encoded; the times are UTC by fiat). The field is interpreted as an *unsigned* integer (`main.h`, line 785) which means its maximum value is 4,294,967,295, or approximately 7th February 2106. The protocol must be upgraded before then!

Bits

`ff ff 00 1d` (0x1d00ffff hex, 486604799 decimal) is a representation of the [target](#), the value which the hash of the block header must not exceed in order to mine the block. The representation is an encoding particular to Bitcoin.

Nonce

`1d ac 2b 7c` is a [random number](#) generated during the mining process. To successfully mine a block, the header is hashed. If the resulting hash value is not less than or equal to the target, the nonce is incremented and the hash is computed again. This typically happens billions of times before a small enough hash is found.

Transaction count

`01` is a [variable length integer](#) representing the number of transactions in this block. The length is not infinitely variable; a maximum of 8 bytes are available for an unsigned integer, so the limit is 18,446,744,073,709,551,615. Frankly, that's a lot of transactions for one block.

A block can never have zero transactions; at the very least there will always be one generating the block reward.

As this field shows, there is only one transaction in this block, so all that follows is part of that transaction.

Transaction version number

01 00 00 00 (0x01 hex, 1 decimal) is the version number of the transaction data format. For exactly the same reasons as the block format version number, this cannot change with protocol or client version number increments.

Count of inputs

01 is the number of transaction inputs. This is another variable length integer, with no *practical* limit on the number of inputs that can be specified.

Input

I'm going to give another excerpt of the hex dump with links to drill into the input parts of the transaction:

00000050 ff ff 00 1d 1d ac 2b 7c 01 01 00 00 00 01 00 00 +
00000060 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00
00000070 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00
00000080 ff ff 4d 04 ff ff 00 1d 01 04 45 54 68 65 20 54 ..M..... EThe T
00000090 69 6d 65 73 20 30 33 2f 4a 61 6e 2f 32 30 30 39 imes 03/Jan/2009
000000a0 20 43 68 61 6e 63 65 6c 6c 6f 72 20 6f 6e 20 62 Chancellor on b
000000b0 72 69 6e 6b 20 6f 66 20 73 65 63 6f 6e 64 20 62 rink of second b
000000c0 61 69 6c 6f 75 74 20 66 6f 72 20 62 61 6e 6b 73 ailout for banks
000000d0 ff ff ff ff 01 00 f2 05 2a 01 00 00 00 43 41 04 *....CA.

Hash of the input transaction

00 00

00 00 00 00 00 00 00 would be the hash of the transaction being referenced as an input, but of course this is the block reward transaction, so there is none.

Input transaction index

ff ff ff ff is the index of a specific output in the referenced input transaction. As you know, transactions can have many outputs, and subsequent transactions can take none, one or many of those outputs as inputs. A zero here references the first output of the referenced transaction. The value you see here is a representation of -1, a kind of dummy value because there is no input transaction.

It's interesting to note here that a prior transaction could in theory really have 0xffffffff + 1 (decimal 4,294,967,296) outputs, but if the value 0xffffffff is being used as a sentinel value, there would be no way to reference the 4,294,967,296th output and it would be lost.

Fortunately the maximum block size of 4GiB makes it impossible to create that many outputs.

Response script length

4d (decimal 77) is the length of the *script* that follows. This is another variable length integer, so some very long scripts are supported in theory.

Response script

Here is possibly the most interesting and exciting piece of the whole block - the script which proves that *this* transaction is allowed to use the input it references. If you are not familiar with the capabilities of the Bitcoin scripting system, I urge you to read the wiki page on the

subject. Bear in mind that most of the opcodes are disabled pending a secure implementation, and that the client will only recognise a very select set of standard transaction types. Here's the script again in bold:

```
000000080 ff ff 4d 04 ff ff 00 1d 01 04 45 54 68 65 20 54 |..M.....EThe T|
000000090 69 6d 65 73 20 30 33 2f 4a 61 6e 2f 32 30 30 39 |imes 03/Jan/2009|
0000000a0 20 43 68 61 6e 63 65 6c 6c 6f 72 20 6f 6e 20 62 | Chancellor on b|
0000000b0 72 69 6e 6b 20 6f 66 20 73 65 63 6f 6e 64 20 62 |rlink of second b|
0000000c0 61 69 6c 6f 75 74 20 66 6f 72 20 62 61 6e 6b 73 |ailout for banks|
```

First up is **04** which tells the interpreter that the next 4 bytes are data to be pushed onto the stack. Those four bytes are **ff ff 00 1d**, which happen to be the representation of the target that we saw earlier. **01** means the next 1 byte is also to be pushed onto the stack; that next byte is **04**. Then, **45** indicates the next 69 bytes are to be pushed onto the stack. As you can see from the ASCII readout, those 69 bytes represent the string "The Times 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks".

Why was this string chosen? Perhaps it reveals the watershed moment in financial history when Something Had To Be Done. Or perhaps it is there just to prove that Bitcoin definitely launched *after* that headline was published.

This is the end of the script. Not much has been achieved, but this is a generation transaction, so it does not contain the normal machinery of signature verification that you would find in a typical transaction. Indeed this script can push any arbitrary data onto the stack, and this has been used to insert messages into the blockchain. It's a privilege of being the one to mine the block.

I've called this the response script, as usually it would be providing a response to the challenge set by the script in a referenced output.

Sequence number

ff ff ff ff is the "sequence number", which supports the transaction replacement feature. The idea is that you broadcast a transaction with a lock time ([see below](#)) at some point in the future. You are then free to broadcast replacement transactions (with higher sequence numbers) until that time. If you want to lock the transaction permanently, the client will set the sequence number to 0xffffffff, the largest 4-byte integer. However, the whole transaction replacement and locking feature simply isn't used in any client yet, so all transactions are broadcast locked by default.

Output

Here's another restatement for drilling into:

000000d0 ff ff ff ff	01 00 f2 05 2a 01 00 00 00 43 41 04*.....CA..
000000e0 67 8a fd b0 fe	55 48 27 19 67 f1 a6 71 30 b7 10	g....UH'.g..q0..
000000f0 5c d6 a8 28 e0	39 09 a6 79 62 e0 ea 1f 61 de b6	\..(.9..yb...a..
00000100 49 f6 bc 3f 4c	ef 38 c4 f3 55 04 e5 1e c1 12 de	I..?L.8..U.....
00000110 5c 38 4d f7 ba	0b 8d 57 8a 4c 70 2b 6b f1 1d 5f	\8M....W.Lp+k.._
00000120 ac 00 00 00 00	f9 be b4 d9 d7 00 00
0000012c		

Output count

01 is the number of outputs, in variable length integer format.

Output value

00 f2 05 2a 01 00 00 00 (hex 0x000000012a05f200, decimal 5000000000) is the number of "bitcoins" being sent. Actually, it's the number of base units, as one bitcoin is 100000000 base units. Thus, this transaction is sending 50 BTC. This is the block reward. This field is a fixed 8 bytes, which is what sets the maximum divisibility of a bitcoin. If a single bitcoin ever

became so valuable that the granularity of individual base units became too coarse, this is the field that would need updating. I would change it to use some form of arbitrary precision representation.

Challenge script length

43 (decimal 67) is the length of the response script that follows.

Challenge script

```
41 04 67 8a fd b0 fe 55 48 27 19 67 f1 a6 71 30 b7 10 5c d6 a8 28 e0 39  
09 a6 79 62  
e0 ea 1f 61 de b6 49 f6 bc 3f 4c ef 38 c4 f3 55 04 e5 1e c1 12 de 5c 38  
4d f7 ba 0b
```

8d 57 8a 4c 70 2b 6b f1 1d 5f ac is the second half of the script: the response to the challenge. This is what proves that you have the right to spend the input transaction. Breaking it down into opcodes:

41 (decimal 65) is the opcode telling the script interpreter that the next 65 bytes is data to be pushed onto the stack. There are only 66 remaining bytes in the script, so skipping forward to the last one we find ac (decimal 172), the opcode OP_CHECKSIG. This tells the interpreter to look at the previous two stack items, treat them as a signature and a public key, and verify that the signature was made by the private key corresponding to the public key. But where does this other stack item come from if there was only one item pushed onto the stack (the 65 bytes of data)? It comes from the response script of the transaction which redeems this transaction: it is a signature of the next transaction (broadly speaking; see the [detail](#)). The script in *this* transaction sets the challenge: given a public key, what signature causes OP_CHECKSIG to return true when verified against the next transaction? Only the holder of

the corresponding private key can generate such a signature. This is what prevents other people spending your bitcoins.

What is the content of the 65 bytes of data? It's a standard [representation](#) of an [ECDSA](#) public key: the byte 04 followed by a pair of 32-byte big-endian integers representing the coordinates of a point on the secp256k1 curve. Anyone interested in saving space in their blockchain could probably omit the 04 and imply its presence from the transaction version number.

This public key is more commonly represented as the RIPEMD-160 hash of the SHA-256 hash of the public key, concatenated with a version number and a checksum - all represented in Base 58 [[details](#)]. In this case, 1A1zP1eP5QGefi2DMPTfTL5SLmv7DivfNa. This is Satoshi's first Bitcoin address. [As you can see on blockexplorer](#), these bitcoins have not yet been redeemed...

Lock time

00 00 00 00 is the lock time. All transactions currently set this to zero as the feature is not currently implemented. The intention (`main.h`, line 40) is that a number up to 500000000 represents a block number, and higher numbers represent a UNIX timestamp at which the transaction will become locked and immune to replacement.

Fun fact: block number 500,000,000 is approximately the year 11,515. UNIX timestamp 500,000,000 is approximately 11th April 1985, safely well before the start of the current block chain.

What next?

If you look back at the hexdump at the top of this article, you'll see that the next bytes are f9 be b4 d9 again, indicating the start of the next block. As of January 2012, there are more than 160,000 blocks following this. Block number 1,000,000 will be in 2031, when more than 99% of the Bitcoins that will ever exist will have been generated.

Notably absent

There is no block number. When you see a block number on sites like blockexplorer, this is just the offset of a particular block in the longest valid chain.

Conclusion

I hope somebody finds this post useful; writing it helped me achieve my goal of learning about the Bitcoin protocol. Of course, any corrections gratefully received.

Tags: bitcoin

Some Ubuntu data points

6:48PM, 11TH MARCH 2012

I'm trying out Ubuntu 12.04 in Virtualbox at the moment. I couldn't get it past the install stage using Virtualbox 4.1.2 (which comes with Ubuntu 11.10). But downloading Virtualbox 4.1.8 resolved whatever the issue was. So this is just a public service announcement, as I'll bet trying virtualized Ubuntu n+1 in Ubuntu n is a common use case.

I'm also trying it booting from a USB drive. The Ubuntu Live USB Creator tool worked perfectly. It's just rather slow on my bog-standard class-6-SD-card-via-the-generic-card-reader-that-it-came-with. I briefly considered getting a fancy USB3 /eSATA hybrid stick, but then realised that this laptop has a spare drive bay once you take out the never-used optical drive - and a 128GiB Crucial m4 SSD is only trivially more expensive than its equivalent capacity USB stick - and an order of magnitude faster.

Just some data points.

Tags: foss

Fujitsu Scansnap S1500 notes

8:19PM, 24TH MARCH 2012

At more than £300 this scanner is quite expensive, but it's awesomely fast, and the software is surprisingly good. My notes:

- The default settings give an excellent balance of speed, quality and file size. 600dpi "Excellent" quality looks good (comparable to my old Epson DX4450 flatbed - N.B. I'm no imaging expert, so this may be faint praise...). It captures the fine detail of handwriting, as well as the mere data.
- After only 1000 pages I found the roller needed cleaning, and isopropyl alcohol is not commonly sold in the UK. Maplin sell a 400ml bottle for about £10 - blimey.
- Paper jams can really mince the sheet that gets stuck. Be careful if you're scanning a valuable original.
- Why is it called the ScanSnap, rather than the SnapScan?!

Tags: hardware, review

Digikam performance: put thumbnails database on an SSD

7:17PM, 13TH MAY 2012

Sadly, Digikam does not let you put your database in a separate location to your thumbnails database. This is sad because you typically want your database on redundant storage (e.g. a RAID-1 mirror) for safety, but the thumbnail database is just a cache. Fortunately, you can fix this yourself with a simple symlink:

```
$ mv thumbnails-digikam.db /fast/ $ ln -s /fast/thumbnails-digikam.db thumbnails-digikam.db
```

... where the `/fast` directory is on an SSD or similar fast storage.

Tags: foss

S-Notes on the S-Samsung S-Galaxy S3

9:20PM, 9TH JUNE 2012

After a two year contract with an HTC Desire and its rubbish camera, I splashed out on a new Samsung Galaxy S3. I find it difficult these days to locate genuine opinions and commentary from real users of any product - search engines seem just full of professional, commercial reviews, thinly-disguised spec-sheet regurgitations, and helpless dead-end forums. So hopefully someone will find this useful...

- Early reports of the device looking like a blob designed by lawyers are *way* off. I think it looks sleek and symmetrical, and feels solid. Not quite as sleek and not quite as solid as my wife's iPhone 4S, but it cost a lot less.
- The device is very thin and light - almost to the point of being insubstantial. I worry that it might blow out of my hands in the wind when holding it up as a camera.
- The camera is a *lot* better than the Desire. I haven't done a test against the iPhone 4S, but my initial subjective feeling is that the 4S is still very slightly better. In terms of usability, the camera software is very nice, running fast with zero shutter lag.
- The video quality is phenomenal! Comparable at-a-glance to the output from my EOS 550D DSLR with £700 worth of lens. Bear in mind the at-a-glance qualifier, but I'm genuinely impressed.
- The screen is absolutely *not* too big. My thumb doesn't reach across the whole surface, but you just get used to interacting with it in a different way. The screen is beautiful - of equal clarity and brightness to the 4S, but bigger - and that's a good thing. Not sure I'd want it to be any bigger though...

- Samsung is a stain upon Android. The device came pre-loaded with all sorts of crapware - some kind of Samsung-proprietary chat client, some form of Samsung app store, some knock-off music hub. It's all parasitical nonsense designed transparently to upsell you into yet another proprietary ecosystem. Not that Android isn't the same, but if there's one thing worse than one ecosystem it's two. The user is trampled beneath the competing visions of Google and Samsung in several places throughout the UI. Fortunately, you can kill most of the crapware, one at a time.
- The Galaxy S3 auto-mounts on my *desktop* Ubuntu 12.04, but not on my laptop installation. I believe the relevant keyword for the issue is "MTP", but I found it easy enough to work around by running an SSH server (I use SSHDroid) on the phone and connecting through Nautilus et al. via `sftp://root@192.168.0.x:2222`.
- I don't care for benchmarks. The thing is fast. Very little noticeable lag navigating around any app...
- ... except for the boneheaded default configuration of S-Voice. It comes out of the box ready to hear your commands after a double-press of the home button. This means that a *single* press of the home button triggers a delay while it waits to see if you're going to press it again. It's a maddening, pointless lag, and you can happily disable it by going into the S-Voice app, and unticking "Launch S-Voice" from the settings menu.
- Speaking (ha-ha!) of S-Voice, it's not quite as good as Siri ("What's 3+7 times for?"), but that's OK because they're both gimmicks with marginal utility. I wouldn't be surprised to see a lawsuit heading Samsung's way for this particular app.
- There doesn't appear to be a way to put the camera shortcut on the lock screen if you use a lock pattern.
- The calendar app creates all new events in a calendar named "My Calendar", by default. This calendar does not sync to your Google Calendar. While you can choose to save the

event in a different calendar, you can't change the default. I'm not sure if this is Samsung's doing, but it sucks, so I use the Jorte calendar app instead, which seems cleaner and saner and auto-syncs to Google Calendar very easily.

- I've gotten used to using a new phone quite rapidly, with the exception of the placement of the on/off button on the right hand side. It still seems a little too easily accidentally pressable.
- The battery life is worlds better than my old Desire, but the iPhone 4S still smokes the Galaxy S3 in terms of longevity.
- Oh, and you get 48GB of Dropbox space free for two years! Sweet!

Overall, I'm extremely pleased. I find the iPhone 4S cramped and one-dimensional in comparison. Samsung have proved that a big screen works. They just need to stop pulling a Sony by infecting their own great hardware with their primitive evil software.

Tags: hardware

US Drone Base Conspiracy

5:43PM, 6TH FEBRUARY 2013

BBC News: [CIA operating drone base in Saudi Arabia, US media reveal.](#)

Not that this is at all surprising, but perhaps remarkable in how easily the conspiracy theory cliches are dropped in:

US media have known of its existence since then, but have not reported it.

and

Since then, the CIA has been "given the mission of hunting and killing 'high-value targets' in Yemen" - the leaders of AQAP who government lawyers had determined posed a direct threat to the US ...

Secret military bases. Media blackout. Military action at the request of unnamed government lawyers.

I guess this is an example of a conspiracy theory turning out to be true. Or maybe the article is planted disinformation in order to discredit the anti-conspiracy pro-rationalist sceptic movement.... It would make sense that the US government may wish to ally itself to the cause of uncritical, reality-denying nonsense. Is that a conspiracy theory, or just what they want you to think?

Tags: conspiracies

Samsung UE40F7000 Notes

2:24PM, 21ST APRIL 2013

As I noted last year, genuine opinion is becoming harder to find on the open internet. Here's some notes on our new TV:

- We bought this from John Lewis as part of an incredibly generous warranty replacement offer for our old Samsung LE40A686 which developed an intermittent picture corruption. The offer was so generous that I was actually worried about John Lewis's ability to operate as a going concern (link to selfishness: if they go bust, the new warranty is worthless!).
- I don't have any way of judging the image quality scientifically, but subjectively, it looks brilliant. Rock-steady image, bright, crisp... all these good words!
- I'm also really impressed by the quality of the video streamed from my Samsung Galaxy S3. Having only previously watched the smartphone-captured video either on the phone itself, or on my Dell 3008WFP monitor, I was quite taken aback by the sharpness and smoothness of motion. I didn't think the phone could capture such great video!
- Skype with the built-in camera is a great step forward towards BTTF2. It tracks your face and attempts to re-center the image appropriately - although not that reliably; it often re-tracks and zooms in and out of its own accord. The camera can be physically pressed down into the TV, in case the Jitz is monitoring.
- The camera-enabled gesture controls do just about work, but it feels like a first-generation implementation. Like the face-tracking, it's somewhat unreliable, and only barely useful.

This was a great TV. It lasted nearly ten years before being accidentally smashed by a certain young child in a freak spoon-throwing accident.

- The YouTube app is rather cool; you can browse and control playback on your phone, with the playback deployed to the TV. Sadly, there are a number of glitch-bugs in the app, which create a UI-minefield: you have to learn which sequences of button presses to avoid in order to safely navigate to watching a video without triggering weirdness. Feels like someone didn't write enough unit tests.
- The interoperability with the Sky+ HD box is basic: you can change channels using the Samsung remote, but I haven't yet found a way of doing much more. Same old news in the consumer electronics department: only expect interoperability if it involves either an open standard, or devices made by the same company, sold within a few years of each other.
- 3D is a total letdown. I'm not talking about 3D on this TV, but about 3D in general. It's great that we get high-refresh-rate-capable screens out of it, but the glasses, flicker, dimming, and eye-strain are just too much of a compromise for the slight (and passing) curiosity of a special effect.
- Dynamic Contrast is enabled by default. Why?! This is what causes the TV to auto-adjust the brightness in very dark or very light scenes. The TV does not know better than the editor. Turn it off in Advanced Settings.

Overall, highly recommended.

Tags: tv, hardware

The 3D printed gun is the fast-track to the transparent society

2:40PM, 6TH MAY 2013

Working gun made with 3D printer.

Three of the horsemen of the cryptocalypse are resolving in our futurescopes. Their names are: the internet, Bitcoin, and 3D printing. Comms, money, and guns. The tools to win any war. Their substantial non-infringing uses render them unstoppable. Printed guns are clearly the most dangerous of the three for the general citizen. How do you stop children and the insane from mass producing them in their basements?

Close your eyes and hope that ABS plastic limits their utility? 3D printers are only going to get better; it's a matter of time before they can build objects out of metal. And a one-shot plastic gun is deadly enough.

Ban or regulate 3D printing? Hasn't worked out so far for any other kind of distributed technology.

Frankly, guns are just the thin end of the wedge. Downloadable home-brewable nerve gas is probably not far away.

Fortunately or otherwise, the fourth horseman is on its way: and its name is the final, total end of privacy in public spaces. 24/7/365 sousveillance of every space, and deep data mining of the result will be touted as the final, least undesirable, solution to keeping a lid on society's malcontents. It won't be quite enough, but the non-sousveillance applications (photography, evidence generation, personal safety) will be compelling enough to ensure it cannot be stopped.

And I for one welcome our transparent underlords.

Tags: hardware, conspiracies, future

Back Issues



SHA-256 hashes of previous issues:

```
00c411fee9419cd861d9850dc56d53b7e6a211e90df9a1ca953e021b0cf31a56
0145df4ffcd382db238d1bc87c014013aa9cbc2298fe2a68fef09ca66cc99da6
0249500532346a546b8bb711755d9b1748d3a9593beeedba3b149554c58f6976
03dd114ba959819af097fe9800d31cd4cff581e69ab2b7161fc38ff1fc86a7e2
04eed398a3bf18f2a6049fde2a45afaaf44aec55a1c0f620c7ce387bfac3c354
```

IPFS links respectively:

```
ipfs://QmTAQJr05RmXXpsPbXPZFSAMQZY8Lpw69EskGaJZXTBrWp
ipfs://QmZHFELyjXrMzmjDdxoMBZaf4sa6hrxJhAuzUpP6DDV1Xy
ipfs://Qmf1LPBTUunr57xPYbQSNXpnN5veQy9gJxr5G3K2bqSp1K
ipfs://QmdYUML4qjCMrh2q2qVNqzXB1VHwk3micP8eJfQUGBrdfU
ipfs://QmWD6MuBMRiQc2ipfdeNRzBFSYYPxpgcMuQthoZH5uRT1d
```

This document is merely the residue from considering the set of all possible documents and chiselling away the ones that do not look like Lab 6 Issue 5. It is also certified as PDF/A-3b, does not process your personal data, and does not store any cookies anywhere. Its primary URL is <https://www.lab6.com/5>, but it can also be found at <gemini://lab6.com/5>. Its hexadecimal SHA-256 hash begins 0x05, identifying the issue number.

When this host goes down, you may be able to find mirrors using this handy random 128-bit integer that appears in every issue:

```
250e3f7d581acff115537ba38e89ad31
```

The Small Print

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Issue 1

2023-06-14 23:54:34 fun fact, this issue never loads in firefox's pdf viewer! it takes ages to load, and then just sits there, with empty grey void, can't even render the shape of the pages, not to mention content, lol

Lab 6 Official Response: [Issue filed against pdf.js](#). In the meantime, please use an alternative PDF viewer such as Winamp.

Issue 2

2023-06-12 01:42:09 Congrats! Lab6 surely is something unique.



Tracking

OEIS entries	364,092
English Wikipedia entries (edits)	6,689,400 (1,162,664,049)
RC5-72 keys tested (% complete)	491,547,697,356,107,415,552 (10.409%)
Bitcoin blocks (hash)	800,498 000000000000000000002c2b7c192c92a839325f39e4257b516299618c0ba3992
XKCDs	2,807
IPv6 adoption	44.62%
Abe Vigoda Status Page Status	Dead , but not forgotten .
Largest Prime	$2^{82,589,933} - 1$
BTTF Movies	3
World population according to the CIA	7,979,261,010 (2023 est.) *
Latest stable Linux kernel	6.4.7
Color Names	3,503,704
Tilde Quilt entries	140
Count of University of Queensland pitch drops	9
Project Gutenberg eBooks	71,230
OCRemix Releases	4,471
Atmospheric CO₂ ppm	422.66

* They're not answering my phone calls.

Or are they?