

KGB Report

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*A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology.
Featuring the Stuff You Really Need To Know*

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Voice: 412.854.2550 | Fax: 412.854.4707 | e-mail: kgb@kgb.com | www: http://www.kgb.com
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Written by Kevin G. Barkes

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KGB in the News: The online version of *KGB Report* was named a *USA Today Hot Site* last weekend for our "breezy writing style and a cool mix of tidbits." We were listed under the "laid-back techie category", which means the medication must finally be kicking in. Incidentally, being listed as a "hot site" really has an effect; we had nearly ten times our normal hit rate over the weekend.

Too Many Digits: The Michigan Supreme Court ordered Ameritech Michigan to halt its practice of forcing its customers to dial five or six extra digits in order to access rival long-distance services. While a victory of sorts for consumers, the ruling doesn't address the condescending programming built into the nation's phone system. Dial a long distance number without prefacing it with a "1", and a recording tells you "We're sorry. You must first dial a '1' before the area code when dialing this number." If the phone company's computer is smart enough to recognize the number I've dialed is long distance, why the heck doesn't it just put the call through without the editorial comment on my intelligence?

Effective Multi-Tasking: No, not your computer: you. Make the most of available time and brain power by matching the activity to your level of cognitive functionality. For example, outputting the envelopes into which the printed copies of this newsletter are inserted doesn't require much thought, so I run them early in the morning or while watching the news. Similarly, sealing the envelopes is even less challenging, so I save that until bedtime. Care in matching tasks to available gray matter is essential. I once three-hole punched a whole bunch of newsletters on the right-hand side. Stymied, I hit the sack. The next morning, when the ol' neurotransmitters reached optimum level, I just added a note that explained we accidentally printed them on the paper we normally use for our Hebrew edition.

Sexual Decline Continues? A few weeks ago we noted the word sex had dropped to the number two position as the most searched-for word on the Internet, behind new music format MP3. *ComputerWorld* reports that online stock-trading sites now rank second as the locations most visited by employees engaged in non-work-related net surfing. Sports is the number one time-waster; job hunting is third; and porno sites come in fourth. Further interpretation is left as an exercise for the reader.

Biometrics Breakthrough - Now undergoing field testing in Canada is NCR Corporation's Stella, a next-generation ATM machine that recognizes you via retinal scan, remembers your birthday, and can engage in rudimentary conversation. *Wired* says the device uses speech recognition and synthesis technology to listen to clients' requests for specific transactions and information, and responds in a human voice. What about existing technology, guys? Like real human tellers?

Bill Gates Whispers In My Dreams: Fear of the Internet is replacing Communists, the CIA and transmitted radio waves as a source of delusions for the actively psychotic, according to a University of South Florida study reported by the Associated Press. Doctors said every instance of Internet delusion they studied involved persons with little computer experience. We assume delusional individuals *with* computer experience are not psychotic. They're consultants.

Worth A Look: I've held onto systems I should have trashed long ago just because I dreaded migrating to a new computer. Windows' shotgun method of storing critical files across directories can make such a move an agonizing experience. You just can't copy the contents of a directory to the new system; you'll leave behind .ini files, .dlls and heaven knows what else. Miramar Systems (<http://www.miramarsys.com/products/index.htm>) has introduced Desktop DNA, which it touts as "the only system migration utility than can quickly and easily move personalized Windows settings, applications and files from PC to PC" on both local and networked systems. Take with the appropriate grain of salt, but give it a look. Beta reports were favorable, and it could be an incredible timesaver if you have to move yourself or others to new hardware.

Essential Supplies: American Science & Surplus is sort of like Archie McPhee on steroids. They feature a wide variety of hard to find (and hard to find a use for) products at eminently reasonable prices. KGB's recommendation for this month: you can get the TrueType Starfleet fonts used in the Star Trek TV and movie series for just five bucks. This is an essential purchase, since the official display typeface of KGB Consulting and KGB Report is Starfleet Bold Extended. Other hard to find items available from AS&S include: abacuses (abaci?), insect nets, medical reflex testing hammers, porcelain hands, WWII naval gun sights, parking meters, lithium pacemaker batteries, synchronous motors, hemostats, carbide burrs, synthetic fur, teddy bear eyes, yeti serum bottles and screw compressor clamps, just to name a few. Everything you need to equip yourself for an enjoyable evening. With Hannibal Lechter. Call them at 847-982-0870.

Quotes of the Week:

"Ask for cheese. It's the only food the airlines can't ruin."-Judy Balint

"You can't waste time and you can't save time; you can only choose what you do at any given moment."-James Gleick

"Whenever anyone says, 'theoretically,' they really mean, 'not really'."-Dave Parnas

"You know the great thing about TV? If something important happens anywhere at all in the world, no matter what time of the day or night, you can always change the channel."-Rev. Jim Ignatowski (*Taxi*)

"I used to be lost in the shuffle. Now I just shuffle along with the lost."-Unknown

"If we can't do this project the way we want to do it, then we'll do it some other way."-Skip Bona, spokesman, Federal Aviation Administration

"Dingoes, jackals, skunks, vipers and weasels are now illegal in New York City. Well, great. Who's going to run CBS?"-David Letterman

For more quotations, visit the KGB Random Quotations Generator at <http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi>. We're at 2,855 and climbing.

Trivia: Digital Equipment Corporation's original series of computers were called PDPs, or Programmable Data Processors. Why didn't DEC just call them computers? Former DEC engineer Joe Cunningham of Exeter, PA supplies the answer: DEC founder Ken Olsen originally did call his systems computers, but the venture capital group funding the startup felt people feared the term. So DEC marketed PDPs instead, and the rest is history. This week's trivia question: What cult favorite originally aired opposite *My Favorite Martian* and the first half of *The Ed Sullivan Show* during its freshman season?

Useless Web Site of the Week: <http://trunkster.home.mindspring.com/stuff/begin/> My son Doug and I wasted countless hours in the late 80s and early 90s playing a game called Begin, a DOS-based Star Trek tactical simulator. In his web wanderings, Doug came across version 2.0 of the game, which includes numerous enhancements but retains the command line based charm of the original. Put this on your laptop to while away the interminable hours in the terminal after Delta bumps you from your full-price confirmed seat. Pretend the opposing Klingons are inbound Delta flights, and feel those frustrations melt away.

To Hell With Y2K...What About Today?? Major computer outages and failures occur on a daily basis, and life goes on. At least Y2K is a known problem. Some recent incidents that blindsided the computer dependent:

Grading on a Curve: The California Department of Education had to delay the release of its statewide standardized test scores for primary and secondary school students because a programming error by an outside vendor totaled some students' results incorrectly.

Strike Three: Online auctioneer eBay crashed this past Saturday for the third time in a month. Sun Microsystems software is the most likely culprit, although questions are also being raised about the inherent design of the eBay site.

Down Markets: An arbitration panel of the National Association of Securities Dealers awarded a California man \$18,000 for losses he suffered due to trading problems on Internet brokerage firm E*Trade last October. Expect more of the same. Last Friday, E*Trade's trading functions went down shortly after the market opened and did not come back up until afternoon. It did better than the ironically named Suretrade, which upgraded its systems last weekend to expand capacity and spent the rest of the week trying to recover. On Thursday evening, the company announced it would waive the extra charges for phone or broker trades if its web site was still unresponsive.

Pocket Change: Some 4,500 Singapore consumers had over \$230,000 erroneously debited against their checking accounts last week when the country's cashless point-of-sale system broke down due to transaction overload. The bank resolved the problem within three days and credited affected customers with *a whole extra dollar* for lost interest. And a bug in the credit card system of buy.com caused some online purchasers' credit cards to be hit with multiple \$40 charges. The problem has been corrected, company officials claim.

Moo: Cult of the Dead Cow, an infamous hacker organization, released BackOrifice 2.0 at the Las Vegas DefCon 7.0 computer security trade show last weekend. The "tool" allows those so inclined to take control of Windows-based computers over the network. The Cult says it released the program for the altruistic purpose of revealing security flaws in Microsoft operating systems. According to ZDNet, when an Internet security firm asked for a pre-release copy to get a head start on designing defensive software, the Cult demanded "one million dollars and a monster truck." The Cult claims the original version of BackOrifice was downloaded over 300,000 times, and security experts estimate it is currently resident -and undetected- on tens of thousands of machines. The new version permits access to NT-based systems, among other "enhancements".

Rogue Modem Alert: Don't feel secure because your company has a firewall between its PCs and the Internet. Hackers are exploiting an often-overlooked access point into company systems: dial-up modems. Employed by some users to bypass access restrictions or to link to remote sites not on the Internet, these "rogue" modem connections have become the new prime targets of break-in artists. Using the demon dialer technology made famous in the film *WarGames*, wily criminals program their computers to dial a block of numbers until a modem answers. If the line comes up with a TCP/IP connection, the hacker's behind your firewall. One software vendor is selling an extremely expensive package to guard against such intrusions. Common sense solution: make certain your modem doesn't auto-answer. And don't forget the risk from cable modems. The static IP address that comes with your high-speed line makes your PC a stationary target. Reports are already surfacing of hackers accessing and distributing personal information gleaned from unprotected PCs left permanently connected to the net.

Compliantly Non-Functional: AVweb's AVflash newsletter reported that air traffic controllers in Atlanta had their hands full at the beginning of the month when the main computer system went down, forcing them to switch to their backup system. Unfortunately, the backup system wasn't

working too well either, and controllers had to resort to hand-written flight progress strips to track aircraft. A "tiger team" of tech specialists was eventually flown in to fix the problem. If it makes you feel better, the FAA announced the week before the Atlanta incident that it had met its self-imposed June 30 deadline for Y2K compliance, which apparently means it can accurately record the time and date of its system failures. AVflash also reported that sunspot activity in March, 2000 could affect global positioning satellite signals, which most airlines now use for navigation purposes. The newsletter says it's not yet clear if anything can be done to existing receivers to minimize vulnerability to sunspot activity.

First Y2K Casualty? The Associated Press reports a Japanese widow has filed a claim against her government, claiming Y2K-related overwork forced her husband to commit suicide by leaping from their apartment building. He had been given the responsibility of insuring the 600 pieces of software used by his steel sales company were ready for the millennium. "The work did not go well," the AP said.

The Best Solution? *Wired* reports that 100 members of a religious cult were missing in Columbia after they went to meet with a UFO that was supposed save them from an upcoming unspecified world cataclysm.

Negative Image. Polaroid pulled its Y2K-themed commercial which featured a fellow taking a before and hysterically funny after picture of an ATM display of his bank balance. The American Bankers Association was not amused. Look for other "voluntary" clampdowns on Y2K humor, as business and government leaders try to minimize public panic, which most agree is the biggest Y2K threat. Now would be a great time for restaurants, theaters and gambling venues to beginning planning January 1 extravaganzas. There's going to be an awful lot of excess cash floating around that weekend.

Big Money. The compromise Y2K bill making its way through Congress has a few loopholes. GTE Corp. is suing five of its insurance companies to recover some of its \$400 million in Y2K remediation expenses. GTE claims the costs should be covered by policies it purchased from the firms in 1996; it says the coverage it purchased included reimbursement for funds spent to avoid losses caused by computer malfunctions. This could be a big test case; *InformationWeek* quoted industry experts who estimated potential Y2K claims will hit \$35 billion, and that was before the GTE action.

The Show Will Go On. Overruling the recommendation of his own police officials, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said Broadway shows can stay open on December 31. Police suggested the theater district shut down on New Year's Eve based on estimates that 2 million people will jam Times Square for the festivities. The Mayor said a more sensible plan would be to limit the number of partygoers allowed into Manhattan, although he offered no suggestions how to handle the ugly mobs that will roam the streets like mad dogs when they're denied access to Times Square. Maybe free tickets to a Broadway show?

Reassuring. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission reports that the nation's nuclear power plants are, for the most part, ready for the arrival of Y2K day. About three dozen still require some non-critical remediative action, including: Three Mile Island. There, don't you feel better?

Shameless Self-Promotion: Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Also, properly attributed *KGB Report* items make handy and entertaining column fillers and broadcast media spots (hint, hint).

PERSONAL RAMBLINGS

Fear of the Internet isn't the only computer-related source of psychological stress. I've developed a full-blown case of depression-tinged paranoia thanks to a top-of-the-line laptop I recently purchased in order to do some heavy-duty NT-based development work.

First, the power switch suffered a mechanical malfunction. Then the SDRAM module went psychotic, preventing the machine from booting. With a replacement chip, the machine boots but hangs midway into loading NT. The manufacturer suspects the BIOS chip was fried when the SDRAM went south,

and promises to send a replacement post-haste... as soon as they arrive from some God-forsaken outpost in the far east.

In desperation, I moved the application to the NT server that hosts our web site. That machine's been running fine for three months, so I figure I had it made. Wrong. The application software uses a hardware dongle connected to the parallel port as an anti-piracy measure. The server doesn't have a parallel port, and there were none to be found locally over the weekend.

Stressed and distressed, I decided to follow the advice in all those self-help articles: do something physical to clear my mind. So, for the first time in a decade, I cut the grass.

What the hell was I thinking?

In addition to a dead laptop, an autistic server and a useless dongle, I now have a red prickly rash on my arms, sinuses the consistency of stale tapioca pudding, and eyeballs resembling Homer Simpson's after a night of intense bingeing.

Psychopharmacology, don't fail me now...

The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ Now Available! Nobody knows what the dickens is really going to occur on Y2KDay, but the odds are about a million to one that anything bad will happen to you personally. You say that's not good enough, bunkie? Step right up, here's the answer to your problem! Through the miracle of modern mathematics, you can virtually eliminate the chance of any Y2K calamity visiting upon your person by purchasing and wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™. It works by exploiting the elegant if little understood concept of statistical probability. Now here's the deal... The odds of getting personally zapped by a Y2K bug, according to various generally reputable mass media sources, are, as we previously noted, about a million to one. But the odds of getting zapped... *while wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™*... are virtually incalculable! Do the math yourself! See what we mean? In order for The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ to maintain its statistical validity, it's necessary to restrict the seeded universe (the number we sell) to... wait a minute... carry the two... say, 100,000. At a mere 20 bucks, it's the best insurance you can buy! Each beanie is unique, hand-modified to further increase the odds against personal catastrophic happenstance! No two are alike! Beware of inferior, mass-produced Y2K Remediation Headgear™... those duplicate beanies may save you a few bucks, but do you dare tamper with the delicate mathematical balance of our pristine calculations? Don't muck around with celestial mechanics, my friends! Accept only The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™! Plus, it'll be a great way to break the ice at that New Year's Party! The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ is more attractive than a lampshade, not to mention far more functional! Order The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ now, save your butt, beat the odds, and make a timely fashion statement! Call KGB Consulting at 412-854-2550, fax us at 412-854-4707, or e-mail us at kgb@kgb.com. Act now! Visa and MasterCard accepted! Quantities will be strictly limited to the number we can sell, so hurry!

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