KGB Report

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

www.@#*)*#!!###^!.com: Now that companies other than Network Solutions, Inc. (NSI) are registering Internet domain names, it's possible to get a name that contains naughty words. *Really* naughty words. While NSI rejects names it considers inappropriate, it doesn't screen names registered through other companies; each registrar is responsible for developing and implementing its own policies. The Associated Press notes the new policy - or lack of one - could be a boon for net pornographers, allowing them to state the nature of their "business" directly in their net addresses. An argument can be made that dirty web addresses will actually *reduce* inappropriate access to porn sites because they can be easily identified and blocked by browser filters. Currently, many porn sites use common names and phrases to accidentally direct visitors to their sites. For example, the address www.whitehouse.com isn't the White House, but a porn site that permits immediate access to scores of nude photos. Expect the requisite Congressional outrage, flurry of legislation, ACLU intervention and Supreme Court ruling.

Revenge of the COBOL programmers: It's the mid to late 90s, you're the boss of a big company, and all of a sudden the computer people start yammering at you about a "Y2K problem". Hey, you tell them, just throw all those new grads you hired with C++ and web savvy at it. Turns out that won't work. All the real critical stuff is in legacy code on the mainframe, and the one COBOL programmer you didn't throw out like a used Kleenex when the bean counters fell in love with "low-cost PCs" can't handle the load single-handedly. So you call a body shop, which charges you $150 an hour for the old COBOL vets it manages to round up. (The body shop, meanwhile, pays the COBOL folk $50 an hour with no bennies.) You work the temps into the ground, get a clean bill of Y2K health, and then discard them. You're home free, right? Not quite. The people at GartnerGroup, the self-proclaimed "world's leading authority on IT", releases an advisory that Y2K-related security failures could cost companies billions of dollars. In fact, it wouldn't be surprised if a single theft exceeding $1 billion occurs. The highest-risk scenario? "A highly skilled software engineer involved with Y2K remediation who feels unrecognized or unappreciated" leaves a trap door in your system. GartnerGroup analyst Joe Pucciarelli notes, "The irony is that the person saving the day may end up pilfering the loot." The consulting firm recommends companies "identify and assess all Y2K-related theft and fraud risk, reinforce Y2K security and quality control procedures, and review enterprise insurance coverage." Hmm... better call in a big consulting company for help, eh?

Office Efficiency: One reason your office trashcan is always overflowing is probably because you can never remember where you keep your replacement trash bags. Here's a trick I learned from the crack cleaning crew at the old Financial Press Corp. in Pittsburgh: keep extra bags in the bottom of the trash can. When you pull out the full bag, a replacement is immediately available. Think of pop-up tissue boxes. It's also a good idea to stick a note on the bottom of the can reminding you where you keep your trash bag stash. I always forget that I have another carton stuffed away on a shelf in the garage and order more. I now have enough Hefty Steel Saks to last me until the 32nd week of 2011.

Technology Marches On: The 30th anniversary of the first moon landing provides a great opportunity to compare the primitive computer technology of the 60s with today's state of the art

developments. The computer on board the lunar lander was about the size of a shoebox and had a storage capacity of only 36,864 15-bit words for its main program. (Modern PCs need a minimum of 8 million bytes in order to run Windows; much more to do anything useful.) It also had a miniscule 2,048 15-bit word erasable area in which to store variables and other temporary data. (A *blank* Microsoft Word document requires 19,000 bytes of storage space.) The lunar module computer was about as fast as a modern pocket calculator: 43,000 cycles per second. (The first IBM PC ran at 4.77 million cycles per second. Current home systems run at 300 million cycles or better.) The computer's operating system, called LUMINARY, was real-time and priority-driven. If a higher-priority task required access, the system would just throw away what it had been working on, issue an alarm, and begin work on the higher priority item. If you listen to a recording of the first lunar landing, you'll hear references to 1201 and 1202 alarms during the descent. Due to an error in the landing checklist, the spacecraft's rendezvous radar was turned on and started overloading the small computer with spurious data as the *Eagle* descended to the lunar surface. Despite the unexpected flood of faulty information, the computer -and the lunar module- didn't crash. The system repeatedly rebooted, restarted the important tasks like steering the craft's descent engine and displaying critical information, and ignored the erroneously scheduled rendezvous radar jobs. Although the problem prevented the computer from issuing a full minute's worth of guidance commands during the 11-minute descent phase, the machine nonetheless kept the lunar module under control. While writing this article and switching back and forth between this document and the NASA web page describing the landing, the Windows98 task manager crashed and my machine locked up, requiring me to hit the reset button to reboot the computer. It took three minutes and 35 seconds for the system to completely restart and required me to respond to seven prompts. When I reopened the document, the last two paragraphs I typed were gone. But I did have an animated paper clip asking me if I needed assistance. See how far we've advanced? For more info on the Apollo 11 landing, visit http://www.hq.nasa.gov/alsj/a11/a11.landing.html.

E-mail bill to Bill; Bye Bye Morse Code: The Y2K legal reform bill passed by Congress last week was sent to President Clinton by e-mail, the first piece of legislation to be transmitted electronically. The law still requires a handwritten signature on paper, so a traditional parchment copy was also delivered by hand. Clinton also received the last commercial message sent via Morse Code last week, although the transmission was actually automatically translated from code into English and sent via e-mail to the White House. The White House mail server sent an automated response. So much for historic moments. Morse Code was officially phased out as the communications method for ships in distress by the International Maritime Organization on February 1.

ET Phone Bad: If cellular telephones continue to proliferate, you can forget about Project SETI, the Berkeley-based group using data collected from radio telescopes to search for intelligent extra-terrestrial life. The electromagnetic pollution from cell phones here on earth is making it extremely difficult to search for signals coming from outer space. Professor Derek McNally of the University of London notes that if you took a single standard cellular telephone and placed it on the moon, it would be among the top three sources of all radio astronomy signals. KGB recommends relocating all cell phones and their users to the moon. The loss of radio astronomy is a small price to pay for peace in the earth's restaurants and movie theaters.

Quotes of the Week:

"A new gadget that lasts only five minutes is worth more than an immortal work that bores everyone."-Francis Picabia

"You can't outrun a Motorola."-Elwood Blues

"Specialization is for insects."-Robert Heinlein

"PCMCIA stands for either Personal Computer Memory Card International Association or People Can't Memorize Computer Industry Acronyms. I can't remember."-Unknown

"Programming is like sex. One mistake, a lifetime of support."-Unknown

Trivia: *The Outer Limits* was the television show ABC aired opposite CBS' *My Favorite Martian* and the first half of *The Ed Sullivan Show.* This week's question: what is the significance of the following quote: "ACA out of detent. Mode control, both auto."

Useless Web Sites of the Week: If you don't buy into this lunar landing bunk and think the whole thing was a government hoax, look at http://www.neosoft.com/~cshramek/nasafake.htm. On a positive space-related note, Quaker Oats is selling the "Quazy Energy Cereal" Quisp (http://www.quisp.com/) in a couple test markets. Originally introduced in 1965, the cereal virtually disappeared in the 70s during the health food craze. The website claims the lack of the cereal led to a "depressing grunge rock proliferation" in 1990. Reintroduced in western New York in 1996, Quisp is also available in Chicago and Milwaukee. Downloadable letters are available at the site for petitioning supermarket managers to stock the sugar-packed, saucer-shaped breakfast treat. If you can't wait, you can order a box for a mere $14 (shipping included) from http://www.flake.com/, aka "Flake World", a site highlighting all sorts of cereal-related collectibles.

Y2K-A-Rama

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:

The number you have reached: An explosion and fire at a Bell Canada facility in Toronto last Friday knocked out over 100,000 phone lines, Internet service, credit card servers and ATM links throughout the city and affected some locations as far away as Vancouver. The problem began about four hours after the actual explosion, when the backup battery systems failed. The Associated Press reported that emergency generators that would have normally kicked in were rendered inoperative by the sprinkler system that doused water on the fire. The problem began when a worker dropped a tool in an electrical room, sparking the initial blast.

Do as we say, not as we do: Type in a nonexistent URL at a Microsoft Network site, and odds are you'll get an error message generated by a Unix machine running the free Apache web server. Hey, Microsoft: glad to see you have so much faith in NT.

Thank God it wasn't a belch: Web giant amazon.com was down for 36 minutes last Thursday due to a "hiccup", according to a company spokesperson.

Digital delay: Don't be surprised if the television broadcast industry doesn't meet the government-mandated 2006 deadline for conversion to the new digital television standard. Industry studies reveal that a third of the population isn't even aware that digital TV exists, and only 25,000 receivers have been sold so far. There's dissension among broadcasters, too. Sinclair Broadcast Group is challenging the technical standard officially adopted for digital TV in the US, claiming the signal multipath problem that exists in cities which causes "ghosts" on standard sets causes digital TVs to shut down.

Panic in the skies: The AVweb AVflash newsletter reports a British Airways 747 with 400 passengers nearly collided with a Korean Air 747 freighter on June 28. The two jets came within 600 feet of each other 31,000 over the English countryside before the BA pilot took evasive action. AVflash says it's possibly the closest near miss on record. In an unrelated incident, they also reported Air Force Two carrying VP Al Gore was ordered to take evasive action by air traffic controllers after a mysterious blip suddenly appeared on their radar screens. The event occurred on July 9 near Chicago. The radar target inexplicably disappeared about a minute after it appeared. The FAA called the unknown blip "an electronic anomaly." And speaking of electronic anomalies, remember to mark August 22 on your calendar as a day to potentially avoid traveling. That's when the calendar in a lot of older Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) receivers rolls over and starts doing bizarre and interesting things, like possibly reporting negative time values. Since time calculations are criticial to GPS accuracy, bad time values can have unpredictable effects. One second you're in Newark, the next you're in orbit around Epsilon Eridani II. Look at http://www.navcen.uscg.mil/gps/geninfo/y2k/default.htm for additional information.

What, Us Worry? Not everyone is worried about Y2K. A poll conducted by the CBS News program *Sunday Morning* revealed 56% of the population is not planning on doing anything to prepare for possible disruptions due to Y2K problems. A mere 18% is planning on stocking up on food, water and cash.

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).

Thanks, Mike: Reader Mike McDonald prompted us to fix two problems with our online site of which we had been unaware. The text of the report no longer runs into the left side blue border and the hypertext links mentioned in the report now work and will take you to the referenced URLs. Our Adobe PDF-formatted newsletter also contains live links.

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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