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A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology.

Featuring the Stuff You Really Need To Know

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What Are They Thinking, Part I? The *Wall Street Journal* reports BP Amoco will introduce new gas pumps early next year that have built-in Internet web browsers and are run by Microsoft Windows CE. Aside from the questionable advisability of permitting a Microsoft operating system to control the dispensing of hundreds of thousands of gallons of potentially explosive liquid, does the gasoline pump/web browser combo actually represent a true synergistic combination? Most persons I know want to get in to and out of a gasoline station ASAP. And if I own a station, the last thing I want is some yahoo tying up a pump so he can check his e-mail or his stock prices.

What Are They Thinking, Part II? Antitrust provisions of the BP Amoco merger forced the new company to divest a lot of stations. Here in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, virtually all of the local Amocos turned into Union 76s overnight. I've been using Amoco gasoline for almost 30 years and the disappearance of the brand was really disturbing. The fact that Union 76 is the official fuel of NASCAR racing is not particularly impressive- I rarely drive in circles at 200 miles per hour. Resigned to my fate, I headed to the nearest BP, where I was told they don't accept Amoco credit cards. Well, at least next year I'll be able to send the chairman of BP Amoco a nasty email from one of his fancy new pumps before I head off to the Sunoco down the road. Someone ought to remind these bozos they're in business to sell gasoline, not Internet service.

Beginning of the End? The handwriting's on the wall. Linus Torvalds, creator of the open source, supposedly Microsoft Windows-killing Linux operating system, no longer answers his phone at Transmeta Corp. A recorded message directs callers to *fax* their missives to Torvalds, who will respond to those he deigns worthy. Coming on the heels of the wildly successful initial public offering for the Red Hat Linux people, this is not a good sign. Is the Linux community caving to the pressures of Evil Capitalism? Hopefully Torvalds will not turn into Bill Gates, whom Dennis Miller observes "is a white Persian cat and a monocle away from being the villain in a James Bond movie."

Internet Abuse: Much has been made about kids buying term papers and otherwise misusing the Internet to get better grades. Parents also bend the rules, as this recent posting in the alt.quotations newsgroup shows:

"My son has a question on his homework, that reads as follows: What is the origin of the phrase 'to meet one's Waterloo' and what does it mean? We have been totally stumped and cannot find the answer, can anyone help, it's very important. Thank you." I answered, "Napoleon was defeated at the

battle of Waterloo. Also a song by ABBA. I'd go with the first one." The reply? "Thanks for the help, we went with the first one! I didn't expect an answer that fast, that was great! Thanks again."

Sigh.

I have the sinking feeling "mom" is probably someone's boss, earns six figures and was at cheerleading practice the day they covered French history at Riverdale High. Maybe fantasy author Ray Bradbury is right: "Read, read, read and put away computers. Forget the Internet, that's all crap."

Easter Egg Time: Easter Eggs are secret messages hidden in computer programs, and it turns out there's one buried in your PalmPilot. Go to Preferences, General Tab and draw a small circle, counter-clockwise, on the screen right above the Calculator silk-screen button. An Easter egg icon will appear. Exit Preferences and go into any other application. Hold down the Page Down scroll button while drawing a line from the middle of the Graffiti area to the left edge of the screen right between the applications and menu silk-screen buttons. A little taxi will appear and flit across the display, trailing tiny exhaust clouds. Go ahead, we'll wait...

Y2K-A-Rama

Survive Y2K? How About Surviving Until Y2K? At least we know what the Y2K problem is and when it will arrive. Unfortunately, unexpected crises that emphasize the infrastructure's fragility whack our technology dependent society almost daily. Some recent events that blindsided us:

Big Dunked Apple: Three inches of rain in two hours, a broken water main and the resultant flash floods paralyzed highways, shut down the subway system, disrupted commuter rail service and was responsible for a severe taxi shortage in New York City last Thursday. Hundreds of thousands of commuters were forced to return home when it became impossible to access the city, and the deluge wreaked havoc with airline schedules. Things were back to normal by the end of the day, but even if you made it to Newark, LaGuardia or JFK...

Chicago Toddles: Some loony with a canvas bag ran past the security checkpoint at O'Hare Airport last Thursday and disappeared into the crowd, forcing the evacuation of 6,000 passengers and their luggage from the terminal. Air traffic across the nation was disrupted when about 130 United flights were cancelled due to the security breach. It was the first time such an incident occurred at O'Hare; other airports have been affected by similar occurrences. By the way, they never found the guy. Our guess: he's sitting at a gate, waiting for a cancelled flight. His canvas bag contains some beef jerky and a supply of potable water. Yep, a US Airways Dividend Miles member.

Meanwhile, Back In New York: Nature seems to be getting Old Testament Biblical with the City That Never Sleeps. First the heat wave, then the drought, then the flood, and now what? Locusts? Would you believe Asian Long-Horned Beetles? City officials have been felling, chipping and burning infested trees on the upper East Side in an effort to keep the pests from reaching the verdant Central Park, which is only about a half mile away.

Some Fun House: Five persons were killed and over a dozen injured during a rash of unrelated amusement park accidents across the US last week. Two fatalities were due to a ride failure, but most of the incidents seem to be due to rider misconduct. Industry spokesmen blame 80% of mishaps on misbehaving patrons. While a total of eight persons have died in park accidents this year, it's important to remember that there's one traffic fatality in the US *every 13 minutes*, according to 1997 statistics compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That's about 110 deaths per day. No mortality statistics are available for amusement park food, however. Those French fries and funnel cakes are slower than roller coasters, but just as deadly.

A Security Flaw: Netscape has released patches for a bug that can permit hackers to gain access to its Enterprise Server and FastTrack Server packages. The flaw, announced by Internet Security Systems Inc.'s X-Force team, uses the ubiquitous buffer overflow method to break into target systems.

Another Security Flaw: A design flaw in Internet Explorer 5.0 allows anyone with a web page to take over your PC. You don't even have to be running IE for this to happen. Many email programs and newsgroup readers call IE invisibly in order to display mail that contains HTML code, even if your default browser is Netscape or Opera. Windows 95, Windows 98 and Windows NT systems are all susceptible. ZDNet says the only way around the bug is to change the default security setting for the Active Desktop's Internet Zone from medium to high; disable the option Script ActiveX controls marked safe for scripting; disable IE's Active Scripting feature; and disable all ActiveX controls and plug-ins. Or buy a Macintosh.

How About A Dozen Security Flaws? Richard Smith, president of Phar Lap Software and the person who identified the author of the Melissa virus, told attendees at the eighth Usenix Security Symposium that there are over a dozen bugs in Microsoft Outlook and Windows 98. These weaknesses permit hackers to view or erase any file on a system's hard drives. Most involve executables transmitted by email software. Suggested protection methods include switching to a non-Microsoft operating system or the more practical approach of disabling features that permit the automatic execution of attached programs (see above).

I Know You Are, But What Am I? Fuji Bank Ltd, one of Japan's largest financial institutions, accidentally e-mailed a computer virus to some of its global investment customers last week. Reuters said the virus causes the recipient's computer to display a message calling the viewer a "big stupid jerk" on the 14th of each month. Gee, I get that message daily.

GPS Glitch: Aside from owners of some older Garmin units, users of the orbital satellite-based Global Positioning System in the United States had no problems when the GPS clock rolled over on August 21. Japanese users weren't as lucky. Only about 170,000 of the quarter million GPS systems sold in Japan since 1996 were updated before the deadline. Japanese drivers depend on their cars' GPS-based navigation aids because most streets in the country's major cities are unnamed. Thousands found themselves looking at blank or frozen displays. Bear in mind that for the most part the affected units were non-critical consumer devices. There were no reports of problems with airlines or maritime users. This could be a glimpse of Y2Kday: minor inconveniences, but no major catastrophes. Still, if I find myself stuck in an elevator on 1/1/00 and, while killing time, a fellow passenger asks my occupation, you can be certain the answer isn't going to be "computer consultant."

They'll Never Learn: Sloppy, lazy programmers are responsible for Y2K problems says specialist Jocelyn Amon, and about a third of them are still creating bad code despite all the hoopla and the fact Y2Kday is just four months away. *ComputerWorld* says Amon spent six hours searching Internet web pages and was able to find over 300 Y2K-related errors. The most common excuses, that two digit years were used to save memory or that the authors felt the code wouldn't still be in use in the year 2000, are obviously no longer valid. Still, of the erroneous web pages Amon identified, 37% were created or modified last year and 33% were created this year.

Beware 9/9/99? Expect lots of Y2K-style media hype in the coming weeks as September 9 approaches. Legend has it some computers will keel over because ancient programmers used nines to do all sorts of magical stuff in their software, from destroying file systems to rolling back their calendars to 1900. Many consider the nines problem to be a myth, but find it interesting that the International Y2K Cooperation Center and the North American Electric Reliability Council have scheduled major exercises for September 9. Cynics suggest the date was selected so the nasty nines can be blamed if something goes wrong.

Small Business Apathy: Despite concerted efforts by trade groups and government, most small businesses are dealing with the Y2K problem by ignoring it, according to the Small Business Administration. The general attitude of small businesspersons seems to be that western civilization won't end if their systems aren't Y2K compliant, and if it does, at least they didn't waste money trying to fix things in advance.

What About Us Guys? A perfect companion to the KGB Y2K Beanie, a Japanese company is now marketing the Armageddon Brassiere. The undergarment contains an electronic sensor that warns

wearers of objects falling from the sky due to Y2K-related failures. The news release did not detail the alert mechanism used. We're thinking rotating tassels.

Miscellany: Headline in *The Industry Standard's Media Grok* regarding the court ruling against America On-Line's effort to trademark the "You Have Mail" tagline: "Court to AOL: You've Got Squat"... Lew Urry of the Eveready Division of Union Carbide invented the alkaline battery 40 years ago, paving the way for the explosion of portable electronic equipment. An AP story says the average American home contains 18 battery-powered devices. AA cells represented almost half of the four billion batteries sold in 1998, and the trend is toward even smaller units. Today's alkaline cell lasts 40 times longer than the 1959 prototype... The last of the 50-year-old Presidents Conference Committee streetcars in service in Pittsburgh will be retired on September 4. For the first time in more than a century, the city will be trolleyless.

Trivia: Alan Fisher of CIGNA in Franklin, TN correctly answered our last question: canola oil is actually rapeseed oil, renamed to be a bit more politically correct. This week's question: what major city in the continental US averages 156 *heating* (not cooling) degree-days in August?

Quotes of the Week:

"We have a heated battle with Palm in hand-helds, but we're winning in gas pumps and chicken terminals."-Jonathan Roberts, Microsoft Windows CE marketing manager

"Golf is an exercise in Scottish pointlessness for people who are no longer able to throw telephone poles at each other."-Florence King

"I'm originally from Pittsburgh. It took a long time for me to realize we were free to go."-Unknown

"In my youth... there were certain words you couldn't say in front of a girl. Now you can say them, but you can't say 'girl'."-Tom Lehrer

The *KGB Random Quotations Generator* has over 3,250 entries and is frequently updated. Visit it online at <http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi>, and be sure to try the online search. Many of the quotes are also available on our Curmudgeon Tees... check out <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>.

Useless Web Sites of the Week: <http://www.midcoast.com/lobcam/> is the home of the "Lobstah Cam", located in a lobster trap at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean off Spruce Head, Maine. Updated every two minutes, you can sometimes spot an antenna, leg, or other crustacean body part. The site helpfully notes the image "will be dark at night and muddy when the ocean is really rough."

<http://www.wheresgeorge.com/> If you have a lot of spare time on your hands or want to practice your data entry technique, enter the serial numbers from your US currency at this site and see how far your money really goes.

<http://www.detroitedison.com/home/emergency/stormdemo.html> This site by Detroit Edison goes live when a "catastrophic" storm disrupts electrical service to more than 100,000 of its customers. The company suggests you log in here for vital information should disaster strike. Right. Hey guys, no power, remember?

KGB In The News. Well, to be accurate, KGB *on* the news. About two weeks ago I appeared on ABC's *World News Now* (WNN), the network's overnight newscast which airs locally on WTAE-TV from about 2 to 5 am Monday through Friday. WNN is a unique show. As the Rutgers Review said, the broadcast is "possibly the greatest program ever made that is not a *Star Trek* series." They aired a tape I sent in for their Viewer Feedback segment, and since I happened to be in New York on business, they invited me to stop by. Personable co-anchors Juju Chang and Anderson Cooper asked me to stick around after the tape segment, let me deliver the weather forecast, and for the rest of the show played with the pop-up calendars I gave them. Talk about your product placement! The WNN gang comprise a friendly and professional crew and, Rutgers Review notwithstanding, WNN is actually *better* than some *Star Trek* series. Not the original series or *The Next Generation*, but better than *Voyager*, certainly. Maybe even better than *Deep Space Nine*. Definitely better than the movie Shatner directed. Thanks to senior producer Sharon Newman, who let me sit in the control room; broadcast producer Jonathan Larsen, who extended the invitation; and Ms. Chang and Mr. Cooper,

who are the primary reasons I record the show when I'm not awake at 4 am. How many news shows are worth saving for later viewing? When's the last time you taped Dan Rather? See what I mean? Special thanks to the lovely hair stylist and the charming make-up artist from Weirton, WV whose names I can't remember but whose affable conversation and encouragement allowed a hick from Homestead, PA to weather the experience without too much embarrassment. They even managed to conceal my Albert Brooksonian *Broadcast News* flop sweat. (Okay Sharon, here's your plug. And I've destroyed all the copies of my solution to the WNN National Temperature Index. Really. Please return my wife at your earliest possible convenience, and don't forget to punch holes in the box.)

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They're Here! As seen on *ABC World News Now* (sorry, couldn't resist), the KGB Consulting Y2K Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar is now available! Check out our *Desperate Sideline Enterprises* web page at <http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html>, which also features our Curmudgeon Tees, now with new lower prices.

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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