

FROBNICATE

- Reality TV
- Fixing stuff (a how-to)
- HTML tables
 - Electronic data collection
 - Global warming
 - Movie reviews (roll your own!)
 - C's darker corners
 - The “stack overflow”
 - Notes from France

Contains sustained moderate geekery.



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[#28, 2006/11/29 21:30 CET]

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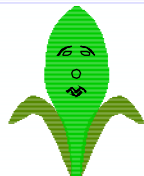
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The political bit



A little while ago I was lying in bed, in the dark, twiddling the tuning of my short wave receiver. I happened upon “*Republican Network Radio*”, with the tagline “*Because you can handle the truth*”. While the man on the radio struck me as being a little *too* white-supremist at times, he did make some interesting points: (paraphrased) never before in the history of America have so many foreigners hated it. If a foreigner looks at an American, they see George Bush, who is generally perceived as a stupid trigger-happy moron with the intellect of a cauliflower. It was certainly a revelation to hear an American broadcast these sorts of opinions, for an American to actually understand that the greatest and most amazing person *might* live in America – but what are we outsiders going to know when all we have to judge the country is a surrealistically atrocious televisual output (with *very* few exceptions), all presided over by a foreign policy that expertly combines paranoid delusion with stamping on the freedoms and liberties that America was *supposed* to stand for. But hey – don’t let a little issue like a persons rights get in the way of hunting down the “*tearists*”.

So let me ask you: *Where is the President of the United States*; for it certainly isn’t the pretender currently in office.

The President is supposed to be a great man (or perhaps woman?). The sort of person that will actually comprehend problems in other parts of the world, rather than muttering rubbish about an “*arc of extremism*”. The sort of person that understands that countries have their own interests to look after *first* (deny that America isn’t just the same) so global-reaching policies may well be a compromise, rather than saying “you didn’t do *everything* we wanted, so we aren’t interested” like some playground bully. The sort of person that realises that some countries may not support America’s largely-pointless conflicts but certainly don’t support terrorism either, unlike the infamous “if you’re not with us, *you’re with the tearists*” speech. The sort of person who is portrayed in the movies by solid actors (Harrison Ford and Morgan Freeman to name two) as a decisive, strong, dependable, and just person – quite unlike any President I have been aware of in my lifetime.

Once, a long time ago, the country was run with vision and with people that were able to lead. Now? If Mr. Trump had another series of *The Apprentice*, the recent presidents (and most of the presidential hopefuls) are the sort that wouldn’t even make it *on* the programme, never mind flunk in the first week.

As for Dubyah himself ... surely every American on the planet should be embarrassed and mortified that he is the best they have to offer.

At least the country *finally* voted for Democrat control (albeit with “interesting” voting equipment). America prides itself as being the greatest place on Earth, and these idiots are the best they have to offer to lead the country. *Where did it all go wrong?*

It almost makes you wish the allegations of a liason between Nixon and “The Greys” was true, so at least somebody with a brain (though not necessarily human) would be around.

Depressingly, this whole paranoia is rubbing off. Given that the new enemy can’t be reasoned with and can’t be seen until the last moment, it makes much more sense to suspect anybody who looks a little different. Two eastern-looking men wearing more than Bermudas and flip-flops on a plane flight home (apparently the whole thing was sparked off by a seven-year-old girl – witness the power that the media has over our minds)...

...though if the likes of *Big Brother* and *Love Island* represent the perverse voyeurism that society is becoming, maybe a good kick in the ass is what it needs. I recently read a complaint text on ITV’s teletext service stating “I spent £10 voting Ikky Nikki out and now she’s back in, I want my money back!” No dude, you want a life. If we are charitable and *assume* that vote texts are 50p (I don’t get Channel4, thank god), then that means you texted 20 times. *You sad sad moron!* Not that I care, I don’t watch the programme. I forced myself to watch an installment of *Love Island Aftersun*, just to see how bad it could be. Some woman tipped a glass of wine over some other womans head. Oh my, the amateur dramatics. The endless crying and wailing. We don’t need SMS votes, we need a plague of mosquitos on the island.

What sort of bored *I-hate-my-life* individual *chooses* to sit down and watch this rubbish, never mind coughing up the cash to vote?

I have a theory on this: Life in our voluptuous little world is somewhat sepulchral. Your employers can treat you like dirt. If you aren't a perfect little sycophant, it's no big – they can choose not to renew your contract and go hire an Eastern European instead (who have apparently been found to be harder working and more honest than the natives!), that is assuming you won't find the entire company is moving to India next week anyway. The television news delights in telling you how you are too fat, too ugly, too *normal*, and how half the world hates you simply because you exist. If you get ill, you're too expensive to maintain, no matter how much you've paid in NI contributions, while criminals are able to get cocaine if they need it. If there is a pandemic you are not important enough to be inoculated, but nobody will bother telling you until you've been infected. Magazines are full of rich "celebs" getting wasted (because for all their money, they probably think their lives are sucky too), chat shows are turning into challenges of seeing if any of the guests can out-weird the presenters (Pete and the aforementioned Nikki on Jonathan Ross, it'll take a while to top that), while seeing how often the presenter can swear on telly because... well, they're pathetic enough to find that sort of thing amusing. You may feel in poverty but the cost of living has only risen by 2% since Orwell's 1984. You aren't entitled to much help from the social system, that is reserved for the couple-of-thousand asylum seekers (and you really won't qualify given it's actually a couple of *hundred* thousand – the government obviously can't count, that's the only realistic explanation for the laughable "cost of living index"). You might have enjoyed walking along the tide line at the beach, but now it is polluted (even if they say it isn't) and the petrol to get there is as much as a cheap flight to the South of Spain, so you'd "do Spain" instead if your nerves could cope with the security in place at airports, only to find the holiday brochure said "Serving suggestion" beside the glamorous photos that are quite unlike the high-rise vista you see before you... As for your pension, assuming your employers don't cock it up, or embezzle it, and assuming Gordie and his successors don't strip you of everything, you might have enough of a pension to live off of budget cat food. So enter the reality show with the built-in ability to vote off people you don't like. In return for a modest sum (per call or per SMS), *you* can play God. *You* can influence who goes and who stays, either for sane reasons, pure whimsy, or perhaps even less pleasant reasons. *You*. Whatever. *You* can exert some control over something, as you probably don't feel you have much control over your own life.

That is my theory for why these awful reality shows are so popular. It may be as bleak as hell, but I've spent quite a while thinking about this – and I believe it to be a reasonable assessment of the phenomena of this derivation of reality TV. I'd be interested to hear any refutes, and the reasoning why. You know my email address.

On a Japanese underground (Tokyo?) they plan to display "happy pictures of a mother with her baby" perhaps to encourage teenagers to have babies for the right reasons. Oh, I forgot to say, it'll apparently be more-or-less nude pictures of Britney and her baby. Maybe the Japanese are more liberal about that sort of thing, but *why isn't it a Japanese girl*, instead of an popstar who has been in various celeb magazines for a variety of reasons not to mention "how not to carry a baby"?

I've seen music shows (such as the MTV Music Awards) where it seems that the wannabe-Aguilleras are trying to each wear the least possible. Then again, pick up one of those "what the 'stars' did this week" magazines and see how many pics of people such as a-girl-named-after-a-hotel you can find where she's sozzled, as opposed to sober. But not to pick on her, there are dozens of other starlets doing the exact same thing, one of whom was recently sent a letter by her studio to which her mother apparently had the audacity to complain about – she may be young and overpaid, but such behaviour is unacceptable, doubly so if you are unable to meet the demands of your contract of employment because of what you did the night before...

America, for its freedom of religion, has many so-called beliefs that are better described using all of the negative connotations of the word "cult". Britain, for its mortal fear of offending anybody, totally failed to tell immigrants how to be good British citizens, so it is quickly turning into a country with many diverse ethnic groups... who don't communicate with each other or the natives of the country, and who don't really have any interest in doing so.

Being female and being preggie on your 16th birthday is seen as a useful way to get council accommodation and a heap of benefits, so there's no need to get involved with this "work" thing. I don't think it is right to implant contraceptives in girls 12-21 (as has been suggested), but what might have a useful effect is an automatic 10 year sentence for boys engaging in underage sex, followed by a further 10 years of mandatory state employment (like building all those new houses the government wants to make) on minimum wage where 50% is docked in NI payments towards the welfare of the

child. And this should be applied to a boy of *any* age. Unfortunately it is unlikely to happen, because for some reason children are seen as being “innocent” (this may be true for some, but does it validly count for the knife-carrying underage murderers? we need a legal system that can assess on a case-by-case basis); and if all else fails and your crime is so bad as to make your punishment worse than a stay in juvie... your legal representative could always try trotting out some obscure point of the Human Rights law... *again*. Maybe you’ll not only “get off”, but will be able to get free drugs too.

Let us not forget that Human Rights forbids the expulsion of violent criminal immigrants to countries where they may be subjected to the same sort of treatment that they dispense in the UK, but it does nothing to protect you if you fail to recycle correctly. Soon your dustbins will be bugged and your neighbours will be keen to off-load heavy stuff into each other’s bins – so somebody else (possibly you) will pick up the tab.

The legacy of a Labour government, tax everything and when you’ve done that, invent things to tax – for surely rubbish collection and disposal is factored into council tax? Of course it is! But hey, if you’re stupid enough to pay council tax *and* pay for rubbish collection – why not? Next you’ll pay two lots of tax for your electricity – it comes in on two wires, right?

But don’t worry – a super-casino or two will provide you with a job and a place to lose all your hard-earned cash. It’ll bring crazy dreams to thousands of people, most of whom will probably leave a lot worse-off than they went in – and before any pro-gambling people email me, remember that like the so-called friendly banks, they are a business, their mission statement is not to make dreams come true, it is to make themselves money. According to a news article, the majority of the staff of these super-casinos will be largely imported, and thanks to tax incentives to set up in the UK in the first place, a lot of the profits will be sent back to the home country (the US). So please explain how a super-casino in the UK will actually *benefit* the British?

Why do I mention all of these things? Because most of it will be very alien to the Arab way of doing things. Much of it (gambling, nudity, etc) may well be highly offensive to their beliefs. Why is this important? It is important because most if it is part of what comes along with the shining beacon called democracy. Democracy might *want* to be the freedom to hold elections and the like, but a lot of less desirable baggage comes along for the ride.

So in our blind march to “liberate” these “oppressed” people, did we ever stop to think that maybe the way they live is the way they’ve lived for many *many* generations, and that perhaps they actually *prefer* it that way?

Some in the West may regard Muslim culture with abhorrence, but I’m afraid every time I turn on the TV and watch the news proudly pandering to the latest round of scares and dead people (Bird Flu killing us all after SARS killed us all, not content with ruining Iraq Dubyah wants to menace Iran and Syria, Israeli helicopter gunships, et al)... **I** think a lot of stuff in the West is becoming abhorrent, so if the entire Arab world happens to feel likewise then I can’t say that I am at all surprised.

Who are *we* to say our way is right, especially when our way is spiralling out of control like a group of crazed zombie rats rampaging in the sewers of Paris?

In the balance of maintaining law and order in the UK, we have the following news article from BBCi, 2nd September 2006:

Police in the UK are keeping watch on "thousands of people" who may be involved in terrorism, Scotland Yard's head of counter-terrorism says.

Peter Clarke told a BBC Two documentary *Al-Qaeda: Time To Talk?* that his officers had to be focused on a "whole range of people". "Not just terrorists not just attackers but the people who might be tempted to support or encourage," he said.

He recently described the intelligence picture in the UK as "very disturbing".

I do not believe that there is any excuse for terrorism, it is completely invidious when it is aimed towards civilians who may have had no say whatsoever in whatever the grievances of the terrorists may be, or the actions of their government. Nevertheless, so long as the government and the officials fail to realise the full implications of what their armed forces have done in Iraq (etc), so long as they hide behind the false banner of liberty and democracy, so long as they continue without understanding that in Dubyah’s mind the Arabs are the new “Comms”, the situation will never get better. Terrorism is never right. But Dubyah & Co. in their efforts to bring down Saddam Hussein effectively terrorised the Iraqi people (not forgetting Afghanistan while attempting to find Osama, a convenient excuse to try to quash the Taliban).

Mr. Clarke has got one thing right. The picture in the UK is indeed disturbing. But, so is the illegal and mostly unnecessary conflict that has made Iraq what it is today.

Mr. George W. Bush, Mr. Tony Blair, and other suck-ups... **thank you so much** for making the world a nicer, safer, saner place in which to live.

Rick Murray
2006/09/11 & 2006/11/26

From the ground up

I received the following in an email:

Maybe you could write an article for the wannabe-geek of today? I feel that growing up with the modern desktop environments of today leaves even many of us twenty-somethings ignorant in terms of how things work “under the hood”. Some of us might install Linux, learn to program in Python and write a couple of scripts. Only to feel pretty much totally underwhelmed. [...]

On the other hand, from your articles it’s surprising to notice how it’s possible to create something concrete from old hardware and a piece of code. [...]

Perhaps you could share more of your own story. Not all of your readers are badge carrying geeks.

Some of us have been living somewhat non-technical lives but find ourselves interested in learning, creating.

So, in this series of articles, I will *attempt* to explain some geekisms in a non-geek way.

We shall begin with a little snippet of my own story. Ask my mom about when I was little and I took the phone apart (it was a rotary-dial style telephone). Ask her about when I took my bedroom door off its hinges to see how *it* worked, but wasn’t big enough to put it back again. Almost all of my “knowledge” is self-taught. This helped me to fix a friend’s washing machine when the motor decided it didn’t want to turn any more. The motor starter capacitor had given up the ghost. This, capacitor, is essentially a device that stores a bit of electricity so when the motor needs that extra little bit of “oomph”, the capacitor can let out all that electricity to kick the motor. The diagnosis? Top comes off the washing machine, that’s a given. Start a cycle and observe it trying to turn the drum. Now you must understand a kilo or two of washing is now soaking wet, along with a third of a drum full of water. The washing machine motor *has* to be capable, and it will need a kick to get it going, and it may need a *hundred* such kicks in the course of a normal cycle of washing. I saw the big wheel at the back of the drum (the motor is connected by a belt) wobble slightly. So I put my hands in, grabbed the wheel, and turned it. The motor took over. I was able to go through an entire rinse cycle like that. The diagnosis? The machine is fine. The motor is fine. The fault is the big lumpy capacitor that kicks the motor. I reported this fault back to my friend and he bought a new capacitor for

something like £10. Once that was fitted, the machine has a new lease of life – it even seemed to do its washing cycles more enthusiastically!

I am not writing this to brag, but rather to illustrate some of my “knowledge” in action. I put that word in quotes as it seems more like a rudimentary observe-effect-and-postulate-cause cycle. Sort of a “cause and effect” loop seen from the outside in.

You might be thinking my advice would be to take stuff apart. Well, it was true for me. These days you’ll be sadly disappointed. Trust me – if you have a newish video recorder and you open it up, you’ll see the drive mechanism sitting on a mostly-barren circuit board with a few big chips and a couple of little metal boxes. If you open up any DVD player, you’ll see pretty much the same thing except there will be slightly more chips and fewer metal boxes. I’ve rescued Betamax decks from the dump and coaxed them back to life. I don’t think any kid these days has ever *seen* a Betamax!

This is where the problem arises. How can you be expected to ‘poke’ around to tune up an electronic device when it misbehaves? You can’t. We live in a society where increased miniaturisation brings increased reliability, but when it fails you should just chuck it away and buy a new one.

My MP3 player stopped working. Its battery detector is failing, thinking the battery is always ‘flat’, so it shuts down while it is turning on. Thankfully it works fine as a memory key when powered from the USB port, but as an MP3 player it is useless. I very much doubt it is repairable, the hardware for that will be part of the Sigmatel chip. And as is depressingly typical nowadays, Sigmatel didn’t even bother to reply to my email asking for information on this device, and there is no datasheet floating around cyberspace so... I can do nothing. Except use it to stash photos and stuff.

I think the most important thing to know is when to give up. Poking around in a washing machine (taking care for mains voltages and moving parts) is

one thing, but some things – like a fridge or DVD player – are all but impossible to repair.

Another example. Our car, a Renault 5, is misfiring when it is damp. It has injection, but it is most likely to be a spark plug. The four-stroke internal combustion engine, petrol version, works on a very simple theory. There is a big empty cylinder. In the cylinder is a piston. A tight-fitting lump of metal that can go up and down. The piston starts off all the way at the top of the cylinder and moves down. A valve in the top of the cylinder lets a mixture of fuel and air be sucked into the cylinder (actually, in an injection engine a more precise mixture is ‘injected’ into the cylinder, thus leads to better efficiency, but essentially the process is identical). The valve then closes and the piston starts to move back up the cylinder, compressing the fuel/air mixture. As the piston reaches the top, the spark plug in the top of the cylinder sparks which causes the mixture to explode, which rams the piston down with great force. The exhaust valve opens so as the piston comes up again, the burnt gasses may be expelled. The piston will be at the top for the exhaust valve to close and the inlet valve to open. The cycle will repeat, thousands of times per minute. It is called a four-stroke engine as the piston makes four ‘strokes’ for every bang. The bang must be powerful enough to provide sufficient inertia to not only keep the engine running, but to power whatever the engine is attached to. Light loads, such as generators and lawn mowers, can get by with one cylinder. Cars typically have four cylinders, though V6 and V8 are terms used by posh cars to describe six or eight cylinders in a ‘V’ formation (instead of in a line like most 4-cylinder engines).

If you *Google* or *Wikipædia*, you should find a more detailed explanation, perhaps with an animation.

Anyway, one of the most common engine problems (once you eliminate the obvious, like running out of petrol) is crud interfering with the high voltage electrics. The spark system and dampness don’t get on with each other. So if there is a problem with the engine “missing” (it sounds as if it is hiccuping), especially when the engine is ‘cold’, checking the connections to the spark plugs should be your first point of call. Failing that, the distributor connections, and then the rotor arm inside the

distributor. As it happens, one of the spark plugs has a yucky white power all around the top and inside the lead connector. The white powder is often symbolic of aluminium corrosion (in much the same way that iron ‘rusts’). I’m not sure why this happened to this one lead, perhaps the rubber boot is defective? Some care and attention with a piece of emery cloth (that’s like a fine, decent type of sandpaper) to restore gleaming metal connections will cure this fault. What is likely that as the engine was cold and damp, the spark probably found it easier to ‘track’ through damp corroded muck to some sort of ‘earth’ than to make a spark inside the engine. As the engine warmed up, the water evaporated and the spark was restored; because electricity will always take the easiest route¹. That’s what they teach you in Physics, at any rate!

1 – This brings us to a problem of theology. Without some sort of intelligence, or examining every route and backtracking, *how* does electricity *know* which route is the easiest?

The car example shows another practical application of electronics theory. It’s not all about programming or thinking of building a computer, there are so many real-world examples that are much more useful and don’t require a keyboard. All you need is a technical mind (the ability to break something down into blocks and work out how they interact so you can notice what doesn’t appear to be behaving as it should), a little bit of savvy, and some time.

What sort of savvy? Knowing what *not* to poke is vastly more important than knowing what *to* poke. Another example. The 21” telly in the dining room at (boarding) school was naff. The picture was a bright dot in the centre of the screen. Knowing I had my Geek Card back then, I was asked if I could poke around, see what had come unplugged. I’d not looked inside a TV yet (I was 13), but I agreed as a loose plug would probably be pretty obvious to spot. The felt-cardboard back unclipped easily, and the inside was absolutely covered in dust. There was a stupid thick cable in the way, so I thought I’d push it aside for a better look. The TV was so old the cable insulation had cracked in numerous places. I don’t really remember what happened next, apparently I leapt into the air with such force I cleared one table

and crashed down on (and broke) the table behind. My so-called friends thought it was amazingly funny. I thought it was amazingly painful. Indeed, it could have killed me. Lesson learned – when there is a faded sticker that says “48kV DANGER”, *it means it!* I crawled, every muscle aching, back to the TV and noticed immediately that a push-fit connector had come undone. Apparently a prefect ‘borrowed’ the TV to watch some sort of soft-porn movie, and dropped it on the way up the stairs. The stupid flimsy connection restored, the TV worked. I went back to my dormitory to feel sorry for myself.

I’m sure if mom was reading this, she’d also want me to point out the time I arced the mains electrics with a teaspoon to see what happened – a huge bang and, like, half the fuseboard exploded all over the meter cupboard. She’s *finally* stopped telling that story, as she often “oops” omitted to mention that I was *eight* at the time, and hadn’t done that last week (ooh, no, I’ve got three-phase to play with now!). These stories are certainly not meant to be suggestions, they are more examples of dumb-ass things I’ve done, and lessons learned. Big cable in TV = ouch much, and the mains doesn’t like to be shorted. In retrospect, the word “*Duh!*” comes to mind.

Next time we’re going to get a little bit geekier, to help demystify what your computer is actually doing inside. The lesson *this time* is that there is much you can do, practically, without touching a keyboard.

Where to start? A book with a title such as “How to repair household appliances” or “How to repair video recorders”. You ought to find something like that in the electronics section of your local library. For sure, *do not* pick up the biggest heaviest tome of electronics theory. You’ll be bored rigid. If you have around £20-£40 spare, you might like to see about getting one of those “learn electronics” kits. These kits may be pricey, but learning-by-doing is a lot more beneficial for you than reading about it in a book. Your silly little radio transmitter might broadcast to the other side of the room. But, then, it might whet your appetite for knowing how to responsibly broadcast to the world, and before you know it *you* could be a card-carrying member of the RSGB! Who knows?

Rick, 2006/10/25

The Frobnicate Quiz

The correct answer to issue 27’s quiz is Juliette Binoche (who you may have seen in “Chocolat”, or a film recently released), as pictured on the front of the “trois couleurs bleu” album.



Photographed from CD album jacket.

Here is a composite picture that I created, the question for this issue...



Who is this?

As always, answers in the next issue.

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® /ricksworld/digibox/film4review.html

As with my various cheesy-horror-flick reviews (now over 100 of them!), you can read my thoughts on a variety of films broadcast free-to-air on Film4. This ex-subscription channel is available across Europe on satellite; or in the UK by satellite, various cable networks, and digital terrestrial. Details on the page itself. It is, without a doubt, my most-watched channel now and while some films are not to my taste, others are. There are over 30 reviews already, so I’ll let you see for yourself what stuff I like!

On the technical front, this web document is quite an advance over the original (used in Zone Horror’s reviews). It makes extensive use of embedded styles and JavaScript to result in a more pleasing document to read; including automatically hidden “additional comments” that you must choose to read (as they often contain “spoilers”). It is designed so that it should all revert fairly sanely on less capable browsers. Certainly it works with MSIE 6 and Firefox 1.0, marginally less so with Opera 8 (but that tends to freeze my computer upon quitting anyway). As for the RISC OS demographic... er... :-) If you have a fast computer and *oodles* of memory, there is actually a version of *Firefox* for RISC OS that is newer than the ones you’ll probably find offered on current Windows CD-ROMs!

PocketBook 2

® /software/pb2/

My examination of the *Acorn PocketBook II* (or *Psion 3a organiser*) has been updated. More details, better photos...

...and, of course, more software. Now your organiser can tell you your *biorhythm* (if you’re into that sort of thing, for me it was a challenge in drawing a sine wave) and also keep an accurate check on your bank *account* – with “plug-ins” (I call the “extensions”) so the main program isn’t weighed down by lesser-used functions. There’s a bit about turning the start-up password on and off (*PocketBook II only*) as well as a *command shell*. On the Windows side of things,

there is an icon editor for the Psion *.pic* format (it seems *PsiWin 2*) no longer offers a translation to/from BMP.

Veroboard design

Staying with *Windows*, if you rummage around you may uncover an *early* version of my veroboard (strip-board circuit) editor. It isn’t yet to release quality, however much of what is currently implemented works correctly. It also auto-saves to safeguard against errors causing data loss. I would use it more, myself, but my ideas are destined to stay in my head until I have enough disposable cash to think of putting chips onto a piece of board!

Ovation <=> HTML

For those using *OvHTML* on the RISC OS platform, I have made available the source code. You will find *OvHTML*, plus my DeskLib (v2.30) patches at:

® /binaries/ovhsrbig.zip 821Kb

or:

® /binaries/ovhsrscml.zip 321Kb

The difference is that the larger archive contains a pre-built 26/32bit object of the entire v2.30 DeskLib library, which will *greatly* simplify things if you wish to actually build the software. You need only track down the standard headers (remember, v2.30 not the various later versions) and merge in my changes.

The source code for the later, better, DOS (Windows) build of *OvHTML* will probably *never* be publically released, though if you are interested you can ask me directly. The reason for this is that the conversion was originally a disgustingly hacky “let’s make this work” port. I had, once, planned to go back and tidy up the code and see about fixing the exporter, maybe making it work properly. But, you know what? I can’t be bothered. It does *exactly* what I wrote it to do, and the only web documents I write in *OvationPro* are output as PDFs. I *still* write most of my HTML by hand. So the PC port may be messy code, *but it works*. There are many other things that should turn my attention to before fixing a working program. Anyway, if you’d like a go, sources are available.

While you’re there – why not take a look around at some of my other stuff? <http://www.heyrick.co.uk/>

How to make an HTML quilt

part 2

It is strange to think that a community that began in serious acadæmia and creates more data than anybody knows how to handle would devise an HTML specification that didn't have any support for the tabular representation of data! Oh, sure, the Important People suggested the use of `<pre>` tags, and lay out in tabular form; however this is akin to saying there is no need to use a computer, as an abacus will suffice. These were the days of the Big Browser Battles, so MSIE and NetScape both implemented tables – and for possibly the only time in that entire sorry saga they took the planned HTML 3.0 specification and not only implemented the `<table>` tag, but added so many extra possibilities, all largely compatible, that the web authors took to it overnight. In fact, the earlier Acorn browsers could do tables before frames and stuff was implemented.

Why? Because tables are actually useful. Hell, *Lynx* makes an attempt to support tables!

So, what can you do with tables? You can represent tabular data, of course. You can have a links bar going down the side of the display with the content beside it (you can see this at <http://www.imdb.com/>), you can – as demonstrated on my *Film4* reviews page – place a caption underneath pictures, flexibly and easily.

In case you have not realised yet, this time we shall be talking about tables.

The table *model* is quite simple...

There is a table, defined by the tag `<table>`.

Each table has one or more *rows*, defined by the tag `<tr>` and closed by the tag `</tr>`.

Each row has one or more *columns*, defined between `<td>` and `</td>`. The “td”, I presume, stands for *table data*, as it is here that you finally get to typing in data.

Now, before we go for an example, I shall point out some limitations. Firstly, the borders are rather all-or-nothing. You cannot, as far as I'm aware, put borders around individual ‘cells’ in the table, neither can you put a border around the table while not having borders between cells (there is a work-around, keep reading). In addition, there is no “decimal alignment”. The best you can do is set a monospaced font, right aligned, with the same number of digits after the decimal point.

Or, in other words, *this* is not possible:

```
123.45
12345.67
12.345
1.2345
12345.6
```

It could probably be ‘faked’, but I'm not sure in a browser-inspecific way (without using a mono font).



This is *Gwen Cooper* (Eve Myles) in BBC's new drama *Torchwood*.

Some text about the programme can be put here on the right hand side of the picture. As you can see, it can even wrap around the picture *and* its caption!

Some text about the programme can be put here on the right hand side of the picture. As you can see, it can even wrap around the picture *and* its caption!

The example above is performed, quite simply, by inserting a two-row table into the flow of the text. This, actually, isn't that much more complicated than inserting the picture.

```
<table width=360 border=0 align=left cellpadding=0
cellspacing=0>
<tr><td></td></tr>
<tr><td bgcolor="#ffffff" align="center"><font
size="-1">This is <i>Gwen Cooper</i> (Eve Myles)<br>
in BBC's new drama <i>Torchwood</i>.</font></td>
</tr></table>
<div align="justify">Some text about the programme
can be put here on the right hand side of [etc...]
```

The example above is slightly more complicated than an `` tag, certainly. Let's work through it and you'll see it isn't so bad.

The `<table>` tag takes a number of parameters. The first is the “width”, which may be expressed in pixels (as shown) or as a percentage of the screen width. In the latter case, the syntax is `width="xx%"` where the ‘xx’ is the desired percentage. Percentage values *must* be quoted in legal HTML.

This is followed by the parameter to set the width of

the cell “border”, in pixels. Zero means “none”.

The “align” says whether the entire table is to be left aligned (text flows down the right), or right aligned (text flows down the left). You can wrap the table in <div> tags if you would like it in the centre...

The final two tags specify the space, in pixels, that the cell contents are offset from the edge of the cell (the padding), and the distance in pixels that the cells are offset from each other (the spacing). Here we wish the light yellow caption to run into the bottom of the picture, so both gaps are set to zero. *This is important as, by default, the spacings are about 2 pixels.*

That’s the table itself defined.

Next, the first row. If you take this apart, you’ll see it is simply: <tr><td> insert image </td></tr>

If you think that’s all it is, you’re exactly right!

The final row is slightly more complex. We define the cell contents to have a background colour and a text alignment. Additionally, inside the cell we set the text size one smaller than the surrounding text.

The final thing to provide is the closing </table>, and then it is swiftly on to the text that wraps around the table itself.

Here are the tags and parameters:

- <table>** Define a table
 - align Table alignment
 - bgcolor Table background
 - border Table/cell border width
 - cellpadding Cell internal spacing
 - cellspacing Spacing between cells
 - width Width of table
- <tr>** Define a row
 - align Align cells in row
 - bgcolor Row background
- <td>** Define a cell
 - align Align cell contents
 - bgcolor Cell background
 - colspan Span multiple columns
 - rowspan Span multiple rows
 - width Set cell width

Of specific interest are the cell widths and the row/column spanning.

It is quite likely that you would want to have different columns be different widths. That column, all the way down the table, is allocated the same width. So only the first row needs width tags. Note that you cannot make a cell smaller than the browser itself determines is necessary to display the cell contents. So if you are

banging your head on the wall because *MSIE* is ignoring you, this may be why...

Then again, my DVD list/review document is a mess as *MSIE* seems to pick seemingly random widths for the tables – it works fine in *Fresco*!

thin & not wide	fatter and much wider!
--------------------------	---------------------------------

There may be instances when you would like to see a cell span multiple columns or rows. This is possible by using the <colspan> or <rowspan> tags. Note that you must *omit* the definition for the cell that the extended one would replace. So if you have three cells across and you set one to span two, you should only define two cells in that row. Consider the following:

SURNAME	How many...		Paid
	Adults	Children	

This little example could be a card where you sign your interest in a dinner party. The “How many” makes use of column spanning, while the columns themselves (note no horizontal border bits) use row spanning. This is actually a slight cheat. There are only *three* rows.

The first row is the “Surname”, “How many” and “Paid” row. Easy enough.

The second row is the “Adults” and “Children” row, with the column for “Surname” and “Paid” having a rowspan of 2.

The third row only has definitions for the “adult” column and the “children” column (as the rowspan drops down the other two rows). There are then a number of
 tags to open out the column’s length.

That concludes our look at HTML’s tables.

Before I go, I promised to tell you how to put a border around an entire table without bordering the cells inside. The trick here is to know that table cells can have just about anything inside them. So, you would define a table with a border. It would have *one* row and *one* column. The contents of that *one* cell would be... the table that you want a border around!

```
<table border=1 cellpadding=0><tr><td> your table </td></tr></table>
```

It’s easy when you know how! :-)

:) Go figure! (:

a ramble around Rick's mind...

Who do we trust?

As Dylan said, “*The times, they are a-changin’*”. There was a time, once, when it was not such a big deal to use a debit card nor a store loyalty card. After all, you bought stuff and the information held would be analysed to bring more of the sorts of things the shop’s customers wanted. In addition, you’d get money off and so on. So, in a way, everybody wins.

But I’m not so certain that applies today. Because, like the staggering number of inserted adverts in web pages show, technology is keeping apace with this. You can no longer use your debit card to purchase a can of beer and a ready meal, because with barcoding and the like, it is very unreasonable (and naïve) to imagine that I’m simply being paranoid when I say that there is a strong possibility that on some computer someplace is a record of which brand of beer I chose, which type of ready-meal I chose. And, thanks to the interlinking of all of this (I paid using plastic, not cash), it would not be difficult to look for a variety of trends. Do I buy cheapest? Most expensive? Pretty coloured packaging? Loyalty to a brand or a shop? How often do I shop? It would be fairly easy to make other assumptions based on this information. I’m probably not Muslim, I bought hot-dog sausages (pork)...

On the face of it, there is no real issue with some computer knowing my shopping habits. After all, if the SuperU in town stocked Heinz “Beanz” and bramley apple pies, I’d be in heaven.

But then you have to stop a moment and think about it. This isn’t simply an issue of recording what your favourite nosh is. You want to worry about identity theft – ask yourself what sort of a profile can be built about *you*.

From your telephony records, perhaps. It is, actually, not that difficult to pinpoint your position from a basic analysis of signals to and from your mobile phone (remember, such data was used to trace those two young girls that were kidnapped and later murdered – which shows that this information is kept for a length

of time). It is what radio geeks call “triangulation”, sort of how GPS and those *TomTom* things work, only in reverse. The mobile, if switched on, will show places of rest. Home, work, and if you have your mobile on while you are ignoring your wife and getting randy with the secretary, it will be possible to know the route you took to get to her place and how long you were there.

Your bank details... It is hard to survive in this world without buying stuff. And, because we are all supposed to fear “hoodies”, we tend to carry plastic instead of cash. So we buy with plastic. A pint at the local. A *KFC* for two. A newspaper and an overpriced geek magazine. Did I walk around town clockwise? Not only is there a record of what I bought, there is a record of when. Again, with a mobile phone in my pocket, it would be possible to know that I popped into the charity shop on the corner. They won’t know that I bought a tape of *Erasure’s* “*Wild!*” album and a *Toyah* LP, but there will be a record of my being there for twelve minutes. I’m not sure how accurate it is, if we’re talking metres or tens of metres (rest assured that you will not find the answer on-line – if it is possible to triangulate a mobile to five centimetres and also tell if it is vertical or horizontal, then that information is unlikely to be made public, you’ll just be told something like “within about twenty metres”).

So why am I worried? Well, I am worried for two reasons. The first reason is that all of this is secretive. Quite logically, as I’m sure many would rant and rave about their liberties if they knew the extent that it is possible to profile a person these days. But with this comes the problem of exactly *who* has access to this information, and for what purpose? Exactly *how* correct is the information recorded, and what rights do you have (if any) to have it modified or deleted? After all, you simply *cannot* prevent access to information that you don’t know exists!

I could give you several examples, but it would be foolish of me to complain about who has access to information while then writing about it!

I will give *one* example, that I've already discussed on usenet. I was over in France longer than planned. So I was unable to send my subscription to *Sky* (we're talking a decade ago!). I used to post them a cheque. I spoke to a Scottish man, explained it all, gave him the dates, etc etc. He said he would make a note of this on my subscriber account. Upon my return, not one but two nasty letters from their debt collection people. The first was "*please cough up the cash*", the second akin to "*pay up now or we'll kidnap your budgie and gas it*". So immediately I was on the phone to *Sky*. It turns out that not only didn't they really care, but also their computer simply sifts through looking for dates of last payment. The girl on the phone seemed unaware that any sort of "note" had been put on my account. So, lingering out there in some credit reference agency's database is that I failed to pay *Sky*, and failed to pay after one nasty letter. It wasn't until the threat appeared serious that I bothered to get off my ass and do anything about it. Well, that's not quite the truth, but I bet if I got in touch with the credit company (*Experian*? Some name that sounds like this), there will be no ancillary data recorded. There will be no record of my contact to *Sky* to explain. And if there was, people searching for my credit status would be unlikely to read it anyway – in much the same way that people looking at your CV don't care about the stuff you write, they just want a Powerpoint-style bulleted list of your experience.

So now, not only do we have a staggeringly large amount of data collated to profile you, but a number of tidbits can slip through the cracks while certain things can be overly emphasised, to twist the accuracy.

Have you ever gone into a supermarket and bought a bunch of stuff which also contained bleach, a nitrogen-based plant fertiliser, and sugar? You can, with some know-how and a bit of a death-wish, make a homebrew explosive using those ingredients, and some other bits and pieces you'll find around the house. If you are a man and you buy some 'household' crap for your wife/girlfriend that just happens to include specific combinations (no matter if the bleach was for the toilet, the fertiliser for her tomatoes, and sugar as a perfect match for your *Tetley's* tea bags), you might be recorded with a

question mark next to your name. This may have no significance whatsoever... until some dreary October morning thirty four years later when a person you've never met who knows you better than you know yourself asks you to justify something you don't remember and seems to phrase his questions in ways designed to trip you up. You said you might have bought a steak knife when you bought *Grand Theft Auto 3* for the *Playstation*. Actually, you bought it for an *X-Box*, therefore you lied (remember, this is 34 years later when our cutting-edge consoles look more like *Pong* than the stuff kids play "today"). Anyway, whatever, you lied. You are a liar. Number one prime suspect. What was that knife for, exactly?

Now for the second issue: Given this secretive, and most likely unreliable (or skewed) data collection, exactly how much do you *trust* anybody with this information, especially if you can't trust the information itself?

Which leads us to...

Sadly, the very-real prospect of DNA profiling of the population. We are told it will reduce the risk of terrorism. We are told that law abiding citizens have nothing to worry about.

Yet we are expected to believe that this trustworthy government, along with a trustworthy police force (see note below), will use this database of DNA, along with the stupid (and delicate) biometric passports, to combat terrorism. That never ever will the details be leaked to any other organisation. Never will you be denied medical treatment because your DNA says you're going to die anyway. Never will your children be denied insurance because your DNA suggests an inherited illness (that you may be totally unaware of) that would be expensive to treat. Sadly this isn't me getting all fruitcakey again – this has already happened.

And a brief note for the police: I feel very sorry for the average "Bobby on the beat". While there are some sickos in the police (like there are child molesters in the church), I feel that the average police(wo)man is a decent hard-working person. Who, with the raft of stupid laws, "Human Rights" preventing discipline

and letting bad people walk, the Law Lords making decisions so inane that the “soft” judges seem sane in comparison, the government talking about being “tough on crime” and then doing the most useless thing they possibly could, Asbos as a form of street-cred (and name for “well’ard” doggies everywhere), and most of all the *de Menezes* case turning into a very failed cover-up, the average police-person must surely be asking “why?!?”.

Who can put their hands up and say they have trust in the English judicial system? The face of which is the policemen and women you see around (who must surely have many of the same “*what the hell!?!?*” thoughts as the rest of us), and also not forgetting that loud-mouthed twit Ian Blair...

That old Global Warming issue

Basically, it’s a wind-up. I’ll explain...

You see, the governments of the world didn’t have their heads so far up their asses that this passed them by until now it is the 11th hour and the 59th minute. But turn on the TV, you’d be led to believe that if we don’t systematically destroy all the 4x4s in the world, along with changing to energy-saving bulbs, and turning the heating down by one degree, then the world will end. Sod the “*Carbon Footprint*”, this time it is for real. *This time it’s personal.*

That’s what we are led to believe. Why? Because it scares the hell out of us. And, in response, the government can – after the ’80s and ’90s encouraged loads of bad habits – tax the hell out of us for everything we do that isn’t “ecofriendly”.

Here is what I perceive to be the truth: We are in a situation where the planet is warming up. We will experience unusually hot or cold summers and winters, and more severe storms, as a side effect of the disturbance to what we see as long-established weather patterns.

And there isn’t a damn thing we can do about it.

The governments taxing our un-ecofriendly habits will be laughing their way to the bank.

We all know about the ice age. A period of time when a lot of Europe was under a slab of ice and the only way to survive was to snuggle up to a woolly

mammoth. So what exactly makes it so difficult to imagine the reverse is not also true? In days long gone, they grew vines up near the border of Scotland, because the climate was warmer. Mediæval times. Step back a bit longer, it was some 10 degrees (celsius) warmer when those big ol’ dinosaurs roamed the planet. Evidence of this is provided in what English weather forecasters sometimes seem to think of as a frozen wasteland – yes, I’m talking about Scotland again, in which lie the fossilised remains of trees that simply wouldn’t have existed in the climate of much of northern Europe. The bible, along with most other religious texts, have some sort of flood story. For Christians, it is Noah and his ark. We can ignore the 40 days and 40 nights – for we know that people in biblical times had a totally different idea of the passage of time (or did these people really live for several hundred years – I doubt it!). Think, picture it in your mind. No, not the creepy-crawlies marching around two by two, but the flood.

Global warming, anyone? The ice caps melt, water levels rise? If you make a boat and don’t travel very far, then the horizon point is around 40-odd miles. It may well look to you as if the entire planet is underwater.

It is a shame that it is unfeasible to stop all use of the internal combustion engine, and all use of fossil fuels, for a period of a decade. Because I strongly believe that while our habits do have an effect on the world around us, when it comes to natural fluctuations (ice ages and global warming), we actually have little real effect in creating the situation, and we will prove to be utterly powerless to do anything about it.

It may be quite possible that by chopping down swathes of the natural balance (such as the Amazon), we have triggered this to begin early – in our lifetime, but what makes you think that it wouldn’t have happened naturally in our children’s lifetime?

There are the remains of a forest in the English Channel. In Roman times, Fishbourne was an important port. The Romans may have been advanced, but they didn’t release vast amounts of CO² into the atmosphere. Yet, the climate changed for them.

And now, it is slowly changing for us.

This isn't to say that you should crank your heating back up again. If nothing else, turning it down a little will save you some money. However you should go on-line, do your own research and draw your own conclusions and be very wary of the scare tactics you hear on the TV.

Don't let this pass you by. It is a very serious issue indeed. There will be utter chaos as millions of people, displaced by the rising waters (and some countries, like Holland, wiped off the map completely) try to squeeze in with the growing population. The Earth will be okay. That much I can assure you. It may, however, turn into something that is mostly inhospitable for us humans. A land mass maybe half the size with twice as many people and vast areas of Europe being mountains or desert, with temperatures up in the islands around what used to be Cardiff resembling what people *EasyJet* to Portugal for today. So we'll grow the crops and raise the livestock *where*, exactly?

Just, you know, *THINK* about it. And ask yourself if an eco-tax is going to do anything. In fact, what is this tax money going to be used for?

Or is it just another source for Gordie to pilfer the next time the twits in the Commons vote for more perks for themselves (we have to buy our own stamps, why can't ministers? if they don't like that idea, the answer is simple, resign and get a real job).

Will taxation and mutterings about using low-energy light bulbs (which are a whole different sort of Eco-hazard) really save the planet? *I don't think so...*

An idea? Simple. Plant forests and hedgerows. Not silly little square-kilometre set-asides, but try to put in motion a plan for large-scale forestation. If CO² is such a big issue, put in place something useful and effective to suck that CO² right out of the air.

Of course, many farmers here in rural France are ripping out ancient hedgerows with an unimaginable enthusiasm. This is probably a product of the teachings of the '80s and '90s. Generally they appear to see trees as annoying things that make their fields smaller, and impede on the growth of the allocated crops. A few of the more enlightened local farmers

are replanting hedgerows or tidying up those they have. But if you want photos of ten different "tree graveyards", it is probably within cycling distance...



Why am I bashing farmers? Because behaviour like that is where I think you'll find the main problems will appear to stem from, in a few decades. We have to put in eco-friendly septic tanks, while farmers dump animal waste over thousands of hectares in a day. It isn't specifically *my* local farmers (though the above junk, that will be *burnt* off, *is* local), but farming practice in general. And the *CAP* abhorration.

And, briefly, on the topic of burning logs

Some people don't seem to understand why burning logs is *not* a Bad Thing, environmentally speaking, but burning coal, oil, and gas is.

Here it is in a nutshell:

A tree takes carbon dioxide from the air in the process of growing. If you cut it down and burn it, the CO² that is released into the atmosphere returns to balance out a cycle that (with sustainable forests) takes around twenty to thirty years, and rarely more than about a hundred and fifty years. The long-term average, balanced between what we burn now and what is planted to suck back the CO². If we give quantitative units, +50 into the air from air fires and -50 sucked into the trees is what? *Nothing*. A balance of sorts.

The problem with "fossil fuels" is that the CO² trapped in these fuels, and released upon its burning (China, are you listening?) has not been in our atmosphere for amazing lengths of time. Since the days of the dinosaurs – yes, them again. So by burning these fuels, we are royally messing up the balance.

Writing movie reviews

On my website you will find, in the Digibox section, two documents reviewing movies. The oldest of these reviews movies that are broadcast on *Zone Horror* (Sky FTA channel #321). I have not been able to add to this document recently as the transponder appears too weak for me to have received in the past three or so months. Shame, I'm one shy of 100 reviews. [later: 100 passed!]

Catching up quickly, and one might suggest more deservedly, are my *Film4* reviews (Sky FTA channel #315 (or #316 for 1 hour delayed version)); or *Freeview* channel #31 (and #32 for the +1 hour).

I do not think there is any specific "way" to review a movie. Microsoft's *Cinemia 97* product shows that of the two main reviewers, one tended to write knowledgeable pages (*Ebert*) while the other (*Matlin*) aimed for a concise paragraph. Perhaps most telling was that, in some instances, the scores awarded to the movie differed considerably. It has been said that *Barry Norman*, who used to do the BBC film review programme (before selling out to Sky), was fond of subtitled black and white movies. I'm sure *Jonathan Ross*, the current BBC film critic, has genres he prefers and those he would rather skip over. In this respect, I am fortunate. I do this sort of thing as a pass-time, not an occupation. Moreover, I write, for free, on my website. You don't pay to read it, and I don't get paid to write it. So if I wish to take a screenful to say how lovely *Jennifer Love Hewitt* looks, then I shall! Furthermore, if a film doesn't look interesting, I can simply not watch it. That, of course, is not to say that I didn't like all of the films not reviewed. I have a life. I have other stuff I do. I am missing loads of potential content now – as I write this, sitting in the car on the way to my weekly French course!

So what does it take to review a movie? I think what you need, at the very least, is to have a few *hundred* movies under your belt. This isn't so much to ask, watch one an evening and you will have seen around 300 in a year. Three years, it could be 1000.

If you loathe subtitles, watch some subtitled films anyway. Try several different genres, and better still try related films (originals and their remakes, or stuff by the same director). Look at patterns, examine the visual styles, and investigate how the shots are framed. Some people just "make" the shots follow what is going on, while others put as much attention into creating the most felicitous angles possible as they put into the rest of the movie.

Sometimes this can fail. The *Winona Ryder* film "*Lost Souls*" could have been described as an artistic masterpiece. Unfortunately *Janusz Kaminski* (the



Digitised from DVD, UK release.

director) put so much time and effort into making each shot perfection itself that the film comes across as a montage of beautifully constructed shots with the story (story? what story?) definitely taking a back seat. On the other hand, *Ridley Scott's* masterpiece, based upon the amusingly titled book "*Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep*" blends a solid story with inspired photography, every moment of the whole production looks so effortlessly perfect. It is just a shame the studio savaged the film with that terrible narration!

This leads us to the second necessity of film reviewing. You absolutely must know of what you are speaking. You may perhaps notice that various pop culture references and other movie references crop up frequently in my reviews (not to mention here in *Frobnicate*). It is absolutely no good saying for a movie "*the camera incessantly moves, but with a cadence that seems inspired by Oliver Stone*"... because your readers will probably not bother to point out that *Oliver Stone* is the steadicam guy and that you probably meant to say that *Martin Scorsese* is the incessantly-moving-camera guy.

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Now we come to the most important part of reviewing. You will need to score the film. I score out of ten, though I rarely score below six unless the film was truly dire. A 6/10 means it was “okay” but didn’t really do anything for me. I highlight titles that get more than 8/10 as being something special. In between six and eight are things like 7½! However, you have to be able to justify this. You must carefully construct your review to briefly explain the movie without giving away major plot points, while at the same time justifying why you have scored it as you have decided – particularly if your score is above or below “average”.



“A Clockwork Orange”, digitised from Film4

Certainly, don’t be afraid to rate films. One thing I noticed, one winter evening in the staff room at a residential home where I worked, several years ago, was that various members of staff were discussing “*The Blair Witch Project*”. Some loved it, some hated it. There seemed to be no middle ground. Here I shall say that I have enjoyed, and rated highly, some films that might cause people to question my sanity. Feel free to score a massive 9/10 for “*The Santa Clause 3*” if you feel you can provide a solid explanation for why you chose that score for that movie. This is important because movie reviewing is highly subjective. While it is true that there are many “bubblegum” films, others play with you in subtle and not so subtle ways. You cannot possibly hope to score on technical merit alone when faced with something such as *Dario Argento*’s “*Suspiria*”, which is perhaps better “experienced” than watched. If nothing else, that *Goblins* soundtrack will rattle around your head for a while afterwards, even after your ears have stopped ringing!

In essence, the trick is to “*know what and why you like*”. It is not enough to know that you enjoyed (or hated) a film. It helps to be able to take apart both

the film and your own psychology in order to figure out why it made you feel that way about it. And, if you plan to write a review, it would help to have a slightly better reason that “extremely cute female lead”, and with that I think we’re back to *Jennifer Love Hewitt*, and so we have more or less come full circle.

Try it yourself. The next time you watch a movie, especially if you have paid to see it at the cinema, think about it. Did you like it? If so, why in particular? Was it the acting? The filming? The use of colour or location? The soundtrack? Were there parts you were less keen on? Did you expect more, or less? Did the ending “feel” right?

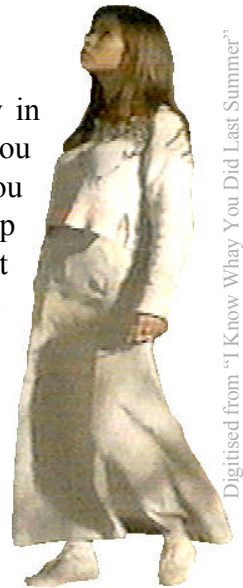
Who knows? Even if you do not plan to write reviews, if you have read this far then maybe I’ll have convinced you to be a little bit more analytical about movies. While some might say that knowing some of the “behind the scenes” stuff steals the magic, I think that being aware of the processes involved gives you so much more. You will start to be able to understand why things happen in a certain way, to better appreciate those complicated crane shots, to understand why a good film is good, and - finally (!) – no longer be wowed by second-rate CGI passing as a plot device.

I shall sign off with a favourite question of mine, and one that has kept my friends and I up practically all night: *If they had given you the entire script before filming so you could be a “script doctor”, what would you have changed, and why?* (on more than one occasion, we rewrote entire blockbusters, I like to think “*for the better*”!)

Rick, 2006/11/14



“Whisper Of The Heart”, digitised from Film4
Called “*Mimi wo sumaseba*” in Japanese.



Digitised from “I Know What You Did Last Summer”

C's nooks && crannies

This little article is intended to shed some light on some of the darker parts of the C programming language. C has variously been described as the highest low level language, or the lowest high level language – there is little doubt that C isn't afraid to get down to the bit level if that's what you need.

Unfortunately, most books gloss over the dustier parts of the language, which are not important to most people but may be exactly what you need...

There is a popular misconception that programmers spend most of their time bashing out code. Actually many spend the time chasing obscure bugs which are multiplied if the project crosses platforms...

You see, *anybody* can write software. It takes a *programmer* to write software that works. And it takes a *hacker* to do that when they aren't being paid!

It was a voyage of discovery for me when moving from RISC OS to DOS (and later Windows). Suddenly the majority of my programs failed. Okay, it was naïve of me to expect to load the code and simply recompile, so hopefully by covering a few things it will stop you running into the same problems!

As-you-need loop variables

This is a fairly new addition to the language which is supported by the *Acorn 32bit compiler*, but not by *Borland TurboC++ (v1.0)* or *OpenWatcom v1.2*.

While C requires all variables to be declared, sometimes it can be annoying to have to declare those variables used as loop counters, so the extension permits:

```
for (int loopcnt = 0; loopcnt < 16; loopcnt++)
{
    some_buffer[loopcnt] = loopcnt;
}
```

It is a contrived example, but it shows you the principle. The integer *loopcnt* was declared in the definition of the *for* loop, and its scope is purely within the *for* loop. Once the loop is done with, *loopcnt* ceases to exist.

This can be faked in conventional C, but it is ugly:

```
{
    int loopcnt;
    for (int loopcnt=0; loopcnt<16; loopcnt++)
    {
        some_buffer[loopcnt] = loopcnt;
    }
}
```

This works because you can declare block-local variables after an opening brace.

Beware of array contents

Sometimes the simplest way to load and save data is to block-read and block-write the structures used. Here is a contrived example:

```
typedef struct videodef
{
    char name[64];           // title
    int score;              // how user rates it
    int bbfc_rating;       // official rating
    int media_type : 4;    // VHS? Beta? DVD?
    int read_only : 1;    // '1' if read only
    int padding : 11;     // unused
    long media_length;     // length IN MINUTES
    long remaining;       // MINS; 0 if readonly
};
```

Can you see a few problems here? The first is the assumption that an *int* is 16 bits (the bitfield declarations add up to 16). This is not true for RISC OS, for example. The compiler is free to insert 16 bits of nothing in between the padding and the media length to bring it to a 32 bit value. Then again, a PC compiler may, or may not, wish to word align the following *long* declaration (sometimes you can control this by choosing whether or not to “pack structures”). So essentially the actual layout of the elements in a structure are as much the decision of the compiler as they are yours.

The next, more critical, problem comes when we ask ourselves *how we should represent an integer?* It is a 16 or 32 bit value, right? This means it will require more than one byte to represent it. If we stick with 16 bit for simplicity, then one byte will be the quantity of 256s, the other byte will be the rest. This is just like counting when we have “tens” or “hundreds” or “ones”, only it is working to the computer's own way of counting. Let's say the two bytes have the value 4 and 5. Is that 4 amounts of 256 plus 5 (which is 1029), or is it 5 amounts of 256 plus 4 (which is 1284)? If you were to write a program under RISC OS and port it to the PC (or vice versa), you'd quickly discover that the two systems represent their values differently.

As if that isn't enough, we have the added problem of:

```
int value;
value = 90210;
```

This works fine under RISC OS, but fails under Windows. This is because an *int* is the same as a *long* with RISC OS (32 bits), but an *int* is the same as a *short* with Windows (16 bits). We touched on

that a few paragraphs ago when we said “*It is a 16 or 32 bit value, right?*”, and we haven’t even started with the issue of *signed* values yet!

You have no idea how much of my RISC OS code declared *int* and printed with `%d`, which totally failed when ported to the PC. This certainly wasn’t helped by a quirk in the way the x86 works that caused the compiler to pick up a seemingly random value if you try to print an *integer* value (`%d` in place of `%lu`) but pass a *long integer*...

How you deal with these problems are essentially a matter of choice. If you have no inclination to port code between systems, you don’t need to worry. When porting code, I tend to put a marker in the file to say “made on a PC” or “made on RISC OS”, and include a special foreign-format-read routine, while simply block-loading/saving the native format. You may find reading and writing textual files to be saner...

Modular code

Never forget, also, that there are numerous things that different computers do things in different ways. Wouldn’t it be so useful if you could get a Windows program to open `<Obey$Dir>.romimage?` Sadly, it won’t work, any more than RISC OS would know what to do with a file specifier such as `\Progra~1\Myprog\romimage.dat!`

This is, of course, before we get into anything beyond basic console input and output, like graphics or coloured text, not to mention writing a multitasking program! All of these issues are when modular code comes into its own. You can create source files specific to each system (such as “*ioriscos*” and “*iodos*”) and simply use the predefined constants to determine which to load, like this:

```
#ifdef __riscos
#include "ioriscos.c"
#else
#ifdef __MSDOS__
#include "iodos.c"
#else
#error Operating system not supported!
#endif
#endif
```

Another possible idea is to use the facilities provided by one system, and then fake it on other systems. This is what I have attempted to do with the quick’n’dirty RISC OS port of my *Amélie system emulator* where I am putting together a port of the necessary parts of the DOS *conio.h* (graphical text) and *dos.h* (various system-specific things). More details and an explanation are on my website.

The other “while”

We know of:

```
while (expression)
{
    code
}
```

If the expression is “true”, then the code is executed. There is, however, a slightly different version:

```
do
{
    code
} while (expression);
```

The difference is that the code is always executed at least once. An example could be for stripping control codes from text strings. There will always be one code – the newline. Why more? CRLF? You could throw in some space-stripping too...

The comma

The comma allows you to group statements. There is really only one time where this is going to be useful:

```
offs = strlen(data);
for (loop=0; loop < strlen(data); loop++,offs-)
{
    reply[loop] = data[offs];
}
```

What this code does is reverse a string. You could, in this example, have used:

```
reply[loop] = data[offs-];
```

instead. It’s just to show how the comma can be used. It makes debugging hell though!

Of questions and colons...

Everybody writes debug code. A hidden thing which, when activated, will spit out an “internal status”. This is because the majority of debuggers are not scriptable, so they can be a pain to use. Many programmers prefer to just drop in some well placed messages instead.

So, have you ever:

```
printf("The world has ended : ");
if (world_done_for)
    printf("Yes\n");
else
    printf("No\n");
```

If you have, it is time for some great news. You can do a yes-or-no right there in the *printf*.

The syntax is:

```
(expression) ? false_value : true_value
```

If the *expression* is true, then the true value is returned, else the false value.

Let’s see this in action:

```
printf("The world has ended : %s\n",
((world_done_for) ? "No" : "Yes") );
```

I will leave it an exercise for you to define a macro to return the larger of two given numbers.

I hope you’ve found this useful.

Virus 101

Following last issue's examination of an infector, we shall briefly turn our attention to two types of 'infection' that are prevalent these days; and ideas.

While it is quite true to say that traditional infect-and-conquer viri exist on the PC platform, the more common form of attack nowadays is a little bit different. Certainly, don't give up on your *Norton* installation just yet! (though I use *AVGFree*...)

1. Macro virus

These come by email in some form that panders to your cluelessness, with subjects such as "check out these great pictures I took with my new digital camera" as the subject, often coming *from somebody you know*, with a filename such as "mypictures.jpg.vbs". Well, there is so much crap floating around Windows that you are expected to see the ".jpg" bit and figure it is a picture, the ".vbs" is probably some daft encoding to email it, right?

Well, that's the *idea*.

Reality – .vbs is a type of script language based upon *Visual Basic* called, uninspiringly, *VBScript*. Many *Microsoft* applications support it, it does have its uses. However if you choose to run this attachment, then before you know it you could be sending out a message about *your* new digital camera pictures to everybody in your addressbook (i.e. they'll see this message coming from *you*), and so it is supposed to go on and on.

How about infection by those that you don't explicitly ask to look at? Well, *Outlook Express* has an annoying 'preview' where it'll show you a little bit of the highlighted message. Perhaps it is just me, but I think this is a perfectly idiotic idea – either open the message or don't, don't just sort-of look at it! Now if you wrap the content of the message in a VB script...

Thankfully the preview can be turned off. I *think* this may be found under View -> Layout, but I don't have OE installed here to check.

Note that this is not the same thing as *adware*, *spyware*, *malware*, or related infection via HTML emails. These types of 'infection' are often caused by pop-ups and off-screen links trying to auto-install software *claiming* to be useful. Such as the "*Yahoo! toolbar*". Perhaps *Yahoo!*'s toolbar is totally innocent. I just find it highly suspicious that it hung the "Add/Remove Programs" dialogue three times today on an XP machine I was clearing some unwanted stuff out of. End result? *Yahoo!*'s toolbar is still installed. If it was truly useful, it would not object to being uninstalled, would it?

The purpose of *spyware* and *malware* is not to break your computer. No, it can be employed for a far more profitable task than that – here are the three common reasons, in no order:

a. Stealing personal information, either for an all-out identity theft, or just snarfing bank account details. In our fast-flowing on-line life we expect to click a few buttons and order whatever takes our fancy from any part of the globe. Sadly this simplicity can be abused, and in my experience the banking system is rarely willing to admit any mistakes on its part.

b. Tracking what you do and where you go, as I'm sure *doubleclick.net*'s inserted adverts do. This isn't just to advertise products that they feel may be of interest to you based upon what you do on-line, they are actually able to build up a complete profile of you from your on-line habits. Some might say it is scary, I say it is none of their business. Check your cookies regularly and destroy any from places that you do not recognise. Certainly, if your browser allows you to auto-refuse cookies from specific domains (*MSIE* does), add known trackers to the list. Some less-insidious spyware operates in a similar manner but instead of building a profile from your on-line activities, it 'hides' in your computer (often pretending to be something useful) and there it can lift a more complete profile. Did you register your version of *Windows* in your own name? Easy to get to. How would you feel if *Microsoft* wanted to know why the *Windows* registration key linked to you is circulating Europe? Do you have multiple login profiles (hinting at a family)? Who is your ISP, and

what are your login and password? Somebody nasty in the same country could connect ‘as you’ to send emails with illegal content or for illegal purposes. Are you networked? What sort of applications software is installed – do you use a spreadsheet, *Word*, *VisualBasic*, *GTA*? If you go to “Add/Remove Programs” in XP you’ll see it maintains a ratio of how often you use a program – rarely, frequently, often... All of this information can be read, plus a lot more. It can be encoded and sent back to the spyware supplier. Really clever spyware may even be able to poke in a subtle reconfiguration of your firewall software to permit its own outgoing data without you being notified.

c. The final type is the DOS (Denial Of Service) attack. Imagine the impact on popular sites, such as *Google* or *Microsoft.com*, or political targets such as *WhiteHouse.gov* if the DOS trojan installs itself on 60,000 always-on broadband computers in the course of several months, then on a specific trigger date – say 9am EST (UTC -5) on the 11th of September, all of these computers begin sending connection requests to the ‘victim’ as quickly as possible. The result? Perhaps a server crash, perhaps not – but certainly it will appear non-responsive due to the number of connection requests. It is possible for a router to send a source-quench request to another router (this is usually to shut up a failed computer that is spewing rubbish onto the network), but the logistics of doing this globally for tens of thousands of computers mean that even with a sensitive incoming firewall that won’t permit too much nonsense... it’ll still be a successful DOS. And there is nothing to say it won’t suddenly stop at 10am, and then happen all over again tomorrow.

With today’s broadband speeds, an application sending a few hundred kilobytes of “personal” information may be hard to spot. If I was writing spyware, I’d hook onto the network interface statistics, and I’d send my stuff off while the data transfer rate is *high* – it would go a lot more slowly, but it would be perfectly hidden by the two-way communication of your download-in-progress.

Have you ever thought “this thing isn’t very fast”, only to see after a while that Windows has updates ready for you? There’s a lot of communication going on behind your back...

2. Buffer overflow infections

Consider a short BASIC program:

```
DIM buffer% 64
FOR loop% = 1 TO 80
    buffer%?loop% = 0
NEXT
```

It will get as far as clearing element 64 (BASIC counts from zero, but it allocates one element extra in case the programmer hasn’t yet mastered this – it is BASIC after all!) and then it will abort with an error such as “Out of bounds at line XX”. This, basically (excuse the pun), means that you cannot clear array element 65 as there is no such element.

In C now:

```
char buffer[64];
for (int loop = 1; loop <= 80; loop++)
    buffer[loop] = 0;
```

Does the exact same thing, even insofar as counting from 1 (which is considered ‘alien’ BASIC cruftiness to C programmers!). The difference? *IT WILL RUN!*

Consider the following, which compiles without error with the OpenWatcom 1.2 compiler (DOS 16 bit executable), and runs – apparently normally.

```
// BadCode source
// Compiles with OpenWatcom v1.2 as a 16bit DOS exec.

#include <stdio.h>
#include <conio.h>

char bufferone[32];
char buffertwo[32];

int main(void)
{
    int loop;

    printf("Starting...\n");
    for (loop = 1; loop <= 80; loop++)
        bufferone[loop] = 0;

    printf("Halfway...\n");

    for (loop = 1; loop > -12; loop-)
        buffertwo[loop] = 0;

    printf("Done (ye gads!)...\n");
    getch();
    return 0;
}
```

You can see we are messing with the data storage here. I've not bothered to poke around the segment registers (it's a DOS application, remember!) but if I could locate the far call to `_getch`, writing `0x90` (`NOP`) five times, it would cause that instruction to be skipped.

How does the buffer overflow work?

Now let us examine a system where dynamic memory allocations occur "on the stack". The stack is basically a sort of dumping ground, and these days it is quite common for local and procedure-scoped variables to be stored on the stack. Consider:

```
Stack:  Return address from proc 1
        Data items used in proc 1
        Return address from proc 2
        Data items from proc 2
```

In this stack, procedure zero has called procedure one. The return address (back to procedure zero) has been automatically pushed onto the stack, so when the procedure exits it knows where to go back to. Procedure one then set up some variable storage for local variables. Procedure one then calls procedure two, which does the exact same thing.

Why is this done? When procedure two exits, the stack pointer will point to the last variable allocated by procedure one. All of procedure two's variables will be gone (not entirely true, but let's not complicate matters). If we did not do this, we would need to allocate a heap in which to store temporary variables, and we would need heap management functions. The processor stack offers us a similar arrangement "built in".

Anyway, let us examine procedure 2's stack allocation in more detail:

```
0x7C data      proc 1's data...
0x78 word      return address
0x38 string    64 bytes string space
0x37 byte      string length value
0x36 byte      loop counter
```

Stacks tend to work backwards, this is reflected in the arbitrary offsets shown. Procedure 2 can accept a string input up to 63 bytes long (plus terminator), assuming 8 bit characters (i.e. not DBCS, Unicode, or Unicode surrogates). Let's assume that due to some sort of bug in the program, it is actually possible to get the program to accept, and write, 68 characters. What will happen to these other four characters? They will overwrite the return address (and the null terminator may overwrite the last byte

of procedure 1's variables). When procedure two comes to exit, some junk will be where the return address should be and the program may well crash.

Where we can turn a potential bug into a security flaw is if we understand well the software in use, and we insert a special string that the computer can interpret like this:

```
        address of "here"
.here
        set config flag to allow unsecure
        scripts to run
        fire off a subprocess to fetch such
        a script
        return to pre-known address of proc 1
```

As procedure two exits, it will pick up the address pointer that is actually a small function that was provided in the bogus data. This does two example things to allow access to your computer, before passing you back to where you should have been originally. This sort of thing may not fit into 64 bytes. It ought to fit into 512... Anyway, in a "show as hidden" window, a script will be fetched that will have access to your computer. The infection granted permission and loaded a script, the script can then retrieve and auto-install the payload (be it a virus in the traditional sense or spyware). This is a fiddly example as we are assuming a 64 byte buffer. If the buffer is larger, say 32K, then it may be possible to transfer a complete program in one go – the (iomega) Zip disc tester "*Trouble In Paradise*" was written entirely in assembler (by the security consultant responsible for *Shields up!* at `grc.com`), the program is a complete Windows application with user interface and all the expected stuff, that runs as-is with no special support libraries. Your exercise for this issue is to locate a copy of that software and *gasp* at the *tiny* size of the executable. If you stay the hell away from Microsoft's "Automation" and steer clear of one-size-fits-all libraries, you will find that a small program can do a lot... yes, even under Windows!

This, the buffer overflow is the most insidious of all. If the vulnerability is in your firewall or generic internet "stack" software, or some program that you have running which responds to external requests, you don't even need to be doing anything on-line to be infected, you just need to be connected and wait for something to scan for your presence. This can

happen automatically from the other side of the planet, in a tiny amount of time. And if it happens, you'll probably be none the wiser... not until it is too late. They'll be counting on that.

[remember, you used to be able to bring down Windows95 by poking *NetBEUI* in the gut, remotely]

Protecting yourself

To protect yourself you need anti-virus software that can also scan incoming emails. Then you need a firewall to try to ensure that nothing can run rampant on your system by keeping a careful check on what comes and goes.

Oh, and it'd be great if it didn't cost the earth.

For the anti-virus, look no further than *AVG Free*. It is regularly updated and free for use for private individuals. You can download a copy at:

<http://free.grisoft.com/>

I do not know if the free version is able to remove infections (called "healing" in the documentation) or if it just quarantines infected files. This should not be an issue so long as you keep your virus database up to date and scan all incoming files, if not everything.

The most important thing to remember is that you absolutely must keep your virus database as up-to-date as possible, which should be daily if you have broadband. An out-of-date database is false security which could be worse than useless.

For the firewall, running along the same lines is *Zone Alarm* – though I do not run a firewall on my machine as I am not on-line so I cannot comment further on this. *Google* should locate this software for you, though I'd be inclined to try the obvious:

<http://www.zonealarm.com/>

Other things you can do

Increase your web browser's security options. How you do this depends upon your preferences, but if it was me I would start with the most secure and paranoid settings and work backwards from there if the settings blocked things I *wanted* to do. Remember, some browsers allow you to explicitly allow or deny certain types of content (such as cookies) from specified sites. Thus you could allow,

say, www.labanquepostale.fr to use cookies while the default is to refuse them. Learn what options are available and make use of them.

Keep an eye on your cookies. Don't hesitate to delete those you don't recognise. The worst that should happen with a reputable site is you'll be asked to identify yourself again, or maybe you'll need to set up your preferred options again (i.e. *Google*, whether or not to use "Safe Searching"). That said, it has been reported that *Google* keeps tabs on its users. Perhaps nuking the *Google* cookie every couple of visits may be worthwhile?

Do not be scared by automatic warnings that appear saying that a site *requires* cookies. Any site that fails if you refuse cookies is a site written by an idiot. Those warnings are usually worded in a way designed to scare/intimidate you into accepting their cookie, and thus allowing that site to keep tabs on you.

If you tend to visit sites that push less desirable content, soft-porn popups, etc. it might be worthwhile to **install a separate browser** (*Firefox*, *Opera*, etc) with extended options (such as disallow such popups).

Take the time to learn how your firewall actually works, then allow access to the ports/programs you actually need. If you find the firewall keeps blocking you (thus it is probably misconfigured), you may be more inclined to switch it off "just for now" and not remember to re-enable it. This is one of the really cool features of *Norton* – a normal disabling of the firewall is for a specified period of time (by default 5 minutes), after which the firewall comes back on-line.

Learn what is important. I could not get AVG's email scanner to correctly scan outgoing messages from OE. Rather than worrying too much, I turned the outgoing scanner off. I care deeply about what comes in to my computer, I am less concerned about what goes out, based on the assumption that if an email virus doesn't make it in...

When I have Internet of my own I'll play with this a little more deeply – it's probably something dead simple!

Be strict with your email policy, and allow no exceptions except for closest most-trusted friends.

My own policy is:

1. no .exe, Powerpoint, or script attachments
Messages failing this rule **will be deleted**. Completely wiped, gone, irretrievably.
2. no attachments over ~80K without some prior notification
Messages failing this rule will be *quarantined*, unless the attachment is over a specified size in which case it will be *wiped*. The trigger size depends upon the file format (I may get a 3Mb JPEG, fine, but I don't want a 3Mb Zip...).
3. no external references (such as images within HTML messages)
Messages failing this rule will be processed to replace the "img src" with "img uri" so the fetch fails but the URI is present should I require it.

I had written a program to do all of this under RISC OS, I hope to do likewise under Windows.

When your browser asks if you'd like it to remember passwords, **answer NO!**

Assurances of virus checking on software are nice. I have virus checking here and feel confident that none of my downloads are infected. *It means nothing*. Always check stuff with *your own* up-to-date virus checker.

Lots of software (*except mine, as a policy decision*) will offer to check for updates *automatically*. The only thing that actually *needs* to do this is your anti-virus software. For all the rest, it should suffice to check manually say once a month. I know *WinAmp* is likely to be updated. It is not likely to be updated daily!

Make very sure that remote access components are disabled, and that you aren't sharing any resources except perhaps locally only, and requiring a password to access (yes, even locally).

Signing up for a trial service, such as *BioMediTest* (I made this up) or the like? Never use your login password! A method I use is to make up a six-letter

word based upon the site's name or purpose, and do numerical replacement. For "*BioMediTest*", the obvious two are "biomed" or "medtst", which could become "b10m3d" and "m3dt5t" respectively. In this way, each service has a unique password which is useless to anything else.

Make a complete system backup as often as you can, and at least once a quarter/month/fortnight (finances depending). Back up your important documents at least once a week, if you use a multisession CD-R then you ought to be able to do it several times per disc, plus you have the benefit of using an ISO multiple mounter (such as *ISOBuster*) to refer/revert to previous versions even if later versions "replaced" earlier ones.

Don't "try" loads of interesting looking software. Everything puts garbage into Windows. The more it fills up, the slower it'll run. You'd be best off picking only things that really appeal to you. In other words, you don't need five graphics packages...

Fancy running a web server to share your ideas or perhaps a webcam? If your broadband router has several ethernet ports, or can be connected via a hub (in other words, it isn't a simple USB modem) then why not get yourself a simple cheap little computer with a harddisc "large enough" for your needs with a network card and run the server on that? If I had broadband tomorrow, I would not run the server on my main computer. I would probably, for now, run *WebJames* or something on my A5000 or RiscPC and leave it "in the background". I don't have a useful PC around the 200MHz mark – running anything on a 66MHz 486 is likely to be a bit on the slow side. Anyway, let the lamb be sacrificed...

Above all, be vigilant. The fight against virus infection is much like "The War On Terror". You can't just do one thing and it's all sorted. It is ongoing and for always. The only way to totally protect your computer is to unplug it from the internet and never install anything new on it.

Perhaps this would suit you? If so, chances are you won't be reading this... as going on-line to download it would be "risky"!

Happy Holidays!



Best wishes for 2007
from Frobnicate!

Notes from France

Hello everyone!

Here it is the end of November and still warm enough in mid-afternoon to have the front door open for the cats. It's not that we live anywhere particularly warm, it's just been a very mild autumn. This time last year we had already had snow, which is very rare for this part of France (the climate being influenced to a great extent by the Atlantic winds). Of course when the sun isn't shining, we have had a whole lot of rain. Low water-tables aren't going to be a problem for the local farmers just now. During the past few weeks the big diggers have been clearing out all the deep ditches at the sides of the lanes, you know when they start doing that, it will be a wet winter.

Coming back from my teaching job two weeks ago, Rick saw a telephone pole wobbling up ahead, and asked what that could be. It was an automobile, sideways in one of the ditches, hitting the pole. Being first on the scene, we stopped, put up warning triangles, hazard-warning lights, and directed traffic while I rang 112, which you really can use even when there is no credit on your mobile telephone. Wow, the person at the other end of the line must be setting a record for the number of words they could say in the space of one minute! I told them what had happened, and where we were, and then flagged down a motorist (everyone else had driven past) who very fortunately was a young male nurse! He took over the mobile, and quite soon after that the emergency services were dispatched. It could be interesting to note that the local reporter was at the scene before the rescue services. In all there were about 8 firemen (who do rescue as well as disabling vehicles), one gendarme, and a female fireperson nurse. The victim was unconscious for five minutes, but when she did regain consciousness she was alert and worried about not turning up at her work. We left after three quarters of an hour, the firemen were grateful that a non-French person stopped to render

assistance and kept thanking us. Both the car and the telephone pole were total write-offs, but the lady inside the car appeared to be not too badly injured, considering the impact with the pole.



We are back in hunting season now, having to lock the cats up in the sheep stable all weekend. Even though we put a big wooden barrier across the top of our lane, they still come down alongside the house - we can see footprints of big dogs by the edge of the pond. All summer we enjoyed seeing partridge running up the lane early in the morning (why don't they fly?), and also we occasionally saw a mother and baby deer in the field beside the brook that forms the western boundary of the property. Not that long ago Rick and I were walking through the back field (oilseed rape this year, more about that in a moment), and we could see hoof-prints of the deer, and more dog footprints. That doesn't sound like a happy combination. does it? We are looking after a cat that belongs to our friends over in the next village. They return to England for 6 weeks each year at Christmas-time. Last year their lovely cat was killed on a Hunting Sunday, so now their new feline comes to stay with us when they are away.

I read somewhere that there is a new initiative in Brittany to convert agricultural machinery (tractors, mostly) to run on oilseed rape oil (it is called "colza" over here). That might be why so much of it is seen

in the fields this year, although it is also used as a cover-crop. Farmers are now supposed to have some kind of a crop growing in their fields right through the winter, you no longer see land rough ploughed and left fallow until the Spring. Who knows what the long-term effects of keeping the land in constant use will be. It looks a little odd to see so much greenery sprouting at this time of year. There is a lot of barley, the oilseed rape, and a cover-crop up on the hill that generally has maize.

Broadband is coming to our tiny village (population 252)! We can't get it, we don't have a land-line, but Rick is nevertheless impressed. Our nearest library, in a small town of just over 2,000 people, already has a 18 Mbit connection. I love going there once a week for my half hour of Internet Intrigue. One of my favourite sites is a live streaming video of the Bay Bridge in my home state. I sit mesmerised, watching the traffic, thinking "Wow, that's happening right now!". I've also found some websites here in France that will post exciting flavours of pasta right to your front door – Rick really likes the idea of sending off for chocolate pasta (no kidding):

PENNE AU CACAO & GARME DE BLÉ MORELLI
<http://www.italiadelizie.com/index.php?act=prod&id=261> (all one line)

Now here is something completely different! Especially for those of you who have told Rick that there is no up-to-date photo of Rick's Mum, here is one taken just six weeks ago. This is the big Lire-en-Fete day, a national celebration held in all the libraries. I was supposed to be a barn-owl living in an old wheelbarrow, but in my absence was typecast into all the mad old witch roles. So here I am, on 13th October, being a mad old witch (look closely for the bat hanging from my belt!). There was a baguette – the bread roll kind – in the carrybag. French people also refer to magic wands as baguettes. You can guess the rest.

There is no Best Read to recommend this time, I have been reading several of Mary Higgins Clark's mysteries, and they are all good. If you don't already know her, and like gentle, suspense mysteries, give her a try.

We may be moving next year. Rick finished his 8 week assessment that was supposed to be part of offering him part-time employment in the same establishment. Only after the eight weeks, there was no job offer. If we do move, we are going to go a bit further south... at least to the other side of the Loire. It isn't necessarily much warmer there, but the houses are built in a "Roman" style, and they *look* warmer!



Youppi!

Whatever holidays you celebrate,

I hope they are happy ones.

The Wrap Party



DrawFiles, please!

They say “a picture paints a thousand words”. I would have liked to employ many more diagrams and artwork within Froblicate. The problem is that all of the diagrams in recent issues were created by !Draw running under Archie – and my 466MHz computer is not really up to a convincing emulation of an 8MHz RISC OS computer! I would like to be able to create DrawFiles natively under Windows, so if anybody knows of free software to do such a thing – please let me know. Or, alternatively, if anybody has a package such as *OakDraw* which is no longer required, would you consider passing it on? Before you ask the obvious – it seems *OvationPro* may have various “issues” with diagrams in the WMF format. This may in fact be an issue with the Windows GDI system itself, as it appears that displaying a WMF (in your own code) with an arbitrary rotation (say +90°) is not something trivial. Additionally, using WMFs means that the documents would no longer work entirely correctly under RISC OS – and I pushed things last time with the inclusion of a couple of PNGs!

More thoughts, less code

Another change that you will have seen is that there is more on my perspective of the world and less “geeky” stuff. This is perhaps due in part to the change of platform (hands up who wants to read VB code?), and also due in part to my belief that fewer and fewer people are interested in programming for programming’s sake. This is reflected in, and has been touched on before in *Froblicate*, the fact that while a great range of quality programming tools exist for the PC... nothing comes “as standard”. There is no BASIC. Sure, most Microsoft applications support *VBScript*, but this seems more aimed at supporting little background activities and fluff – rather like JavaScript on a web page.

This also is an incidence of the fact that I am running out of nerdy things to write about. Do you want to read in *Froblicate* how a harddisc works? I know you’ll find a better description and better photos if you pop over to *Google* and do some research. Indeed, there is a lot that you can look up on-line that would, by far, outstrip what I could write about. This is one of the main reasons behind my I²C articles – there is very little about how to do this in software on-line. Same for Ewen’s great articles on multiple satellite reception. I did find two sites dealing with this. One was practically an advert for an installer, while the other was so weighed down with mathematics that it effectively would have been gibberish to many people. This, again, demonstrates the beauty of *Froblicate*. It’s a subject that interested Ewen, it is something that he has put together himself, and he was also capable of putting together a clear explanation of how it all works. An article for an enthusiast written by an enthusiast. Pretty much what *Froblicate* has always been about.

But the politics?

What about the politics? Okay, sure, you may prefer not to read these things – but I see that something has gone very badly wrong in the world, and I also see our supposedly-elected leaders not paying attention to what the people actually want. No, I’m not referring to the various crazies that appear time-to-time on *Teletext letters* (“Write On”, ITV p346) demanding an

instant return for all British troops in Iraq, or that the country pull itself out of the EU immediately. No, I mean that America (with loads of British help) has, so far this decade, ruined two countries in the guise of providing democracy and rooting out evil. Really simple mistakes, the sort of things that you learn about in Junior school when you do global role-play. You can’t “put all your eggs in one basket”, but on the other hand you can’t “spread yourself too thin”. And, without doubt, “know your enemy”. Old proverbs that got lost somewhere along the way. Closer to home, we have the pouring of large amounts of money into Africa, while people are being denied medicines on the NHS on the basis of it being too expensive. I’m not being racist here, as surely any sane government would consider its *own* people in its *own* country (i.e. those who elected them in the first place) to be *their* priority.

There are many more examples I could point to (such as a man being murdered for “street cred”), however I shall leave that as an exercise for you if you so desire. Point is, my country of origin is now a very messed up place.

And, here, I am pointing out some of the things that I feel make no sense to me. I don’t think I’m going to change the world, but in my mind it is better than keeping silent and turning a blind eye to all the craziness.

For sure, though, I don’t want to keep on writing about this (the national ID card scheme will no doubt be the same for issue #29 as it is now, so there’d be nothing much to add). This is where you come in. You can write an article (they say “if you think you know about something, try writing about it”, you might surprise yourself!), or you might prefer to send me some suggestions of things that I can write about. I know that my target audience has changed, and I reckon the majority have probably *never* used RISC OS... so how should *Froblicate* change? Articles on 26bit ARM code are no longer particularly relevant. What *is*? Write me!

And so it is...

...that another year has come to pass. It doesn’t seem so long ago that I was writing about making a jumper with the knitting machine. I’m a year older, but remarkably the only thing that has changed is my appreciation for the rampant bizarreness of the French “system”. In British terms there is probably not much in living in Somerset, working in Wales, and paying your tax to an office in Devon. To try the same in France would cause no end of grief. Unfortunately we live on the boundary of not only four départements (counties), but also two regions (might as well be different countries!). Somebody (French) told me that this was all implemented after WW2 so if an invading force tried to take France, the French could turn around and say “uh, non, you have taken the Poitou-Charente, *not* France” and the invading force would flee, screaming...

Happy Holidays!

Whether you may, or may not, believe in, I hope you have a good winter holiday time – with lots of chocolate (!). All the best for 2007.

Thank you for reading Froblicate #28.

Best wishes, Rick.

2006/11/29