



Bugs bite back

Unless you've been living on the moon for the past few weeks it's unlikely you'll have missed the furore over the MS Blast and SoBig.F viruses, which have infected computers around the world.

The first to hit the scene was MS Blast. Designed to exploit a well-known weakness in Windows, which Microsoft had provided a patch for on 16 July, the virus arrived in the form of an email. When installed the worm searched for other unprotected systems.

The second and more prolific, SoBig.F, was loosed just a few days later. A variant of last year's SoBig virus, the bug also came in email form, picking up addresses from files on the recipient's PC and then sending itself on to them. SoBig.F became the fastest spreading virus on record, infecting nearly two million systems in under a week.

In light of these attacks Microsoft and a group of industry heavyweights including Intel, IBM and HP are working on a project, currently named 'the next-generation secure computing base', which aims to redesign the PC to combat viruses. The project is due to reach fruition by 2006.

One plan is to create automatic virus patches that install by default, but there is concern about taking control away from the user. "One of the things we're working on is creating a balance between keeping systems up to date and letting users command their own systems," said Matt Pilla, senior product manager at Microsoft.

Many, including Rob Enderle, principal analyst at research group Enderle, have championed the move. "[Microsoft] absolutely has to create a program where patches can be updated automatically," he said. "People don't want to give Microsoft access [to their PCs], but if they don't, patches don't get applied in a timely fashion. It's about relatives. Do folks trust Microsoft more than they trust a hacker?"

Microsoft isn't changing the way it delivers security patches just yet, but said it will do so before the release of its next operating system. So stay tuned.

Retailer loses power

The UK's third largest electronics retailer, Powerhouse, closed its doors to the public on 29 August following a drastic slump in profits. Its administrative receivers, finance firm Deloitte & Touche, has been trying to find a buyer since the closures were announced at the beginning of the month.

The situation for warranty holders is rather confusing because the company provided so many types of cover. Most schemes are backed by insurance policies or third-party funding and remain valid.

Customers should call the phone number on their warranty forms for confirmation, as Deloitte does not control these schemes.

However, Extracare or Easycare warranties purchased between 31 July and 20 August 2003 and all Extracare warranties purchased from June 1997 to 25 June 2000 are not covered. These schemes were on Powerhouse's balance sheets, which means it paid for any repairs under those warranties. However, the cash-back element of these schemes purchased between the above dates is held separately and will be honoured.

All customers who purchased uncovered warranties should put their claim in writing and send it for the attention of the Joint Administrators, PowerHouse, Talisman Business Park, Bicester Road, Oxon OX26 6HR. Deloitte promises it will respond quickly to claims.



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MY TECHNOLOGY

dr david bull



Log on all ye faithful

If you are feeling in need of a bit of spiritual inspiration, then why not have a church service broadcast direct to your PC so you can pray from the comfort of your couch? That's the idea behind Telewest's latest innovation: broadband religion. It broadcast the first live service on 31 August from the Church of St Philip and James in Bath. For more information visit www.broadbandreligion.co.uk.

Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?

A. I use a PC – a Compaq laptop. It's portable, easy to use and I have a wireless network in the office and at home.

Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology and why?

A. Last week. My newly installed Sky Plus kept pixellating making it impossible to watch.

Q. If you could invent a technology device for the future, what would it be?

A. Either a car that can fly to speed up my journey to work, Or a rapid scanning device that could detect minute cancerous changes in the body.



Q. What technology product couldn't you live without, and why?

A. Sadly I couldn't live without most of my technology. I'd be a wreck!

Q. What's your home page or favourite website and why?

A. www.davidbull.com or www.incredibullideas.com.

Dr David Bull has worked on the CBBC's *Newsround* programme, and still presents shows including *Watchdog*, *Watchdog Healthcheck* and *Tomorrow's World*.

Life in numbers: who are we all looking for?

Top internet search monitor Hitwise tells us...

Music searches

1. Christina Aguilera
2. Eminem
3. Evanescence
4. Busted
5. Britney Spears
6. 50 Cent
7. Metallica
8. Good Charlotte
9. Radio Head
10. Justin Timberlake

Football searches

1. Manchester United
2. Real Madrid
3. Liverpool FC
4. Arsenal
5. Leeds United
6. Football transfers
7. Manchester
8. Chelsea FC
9. Everton
10. Newcastle United

Celebrity searches

1. Orlando Bloom
2. Justin Timberlake
3. Kelly Brook
4. Jennifer Lopez
5. Jennifer Ellison
6. David Beckham
7. Eddie Izzard
8. Pamela Anderson
9. Kylie Minogue
10. Christina Aguilera

Microsoft's iTunes-alike



Despite Microsoft supremo Bill Gates' belief that music download services aren't money-spinners, the company has launched its own take on Apple's iTunes service as part of its Windows Media Player.

The subscription service, backed by OD2 – the company behind the UK's few existing legal download offerings – will offer single tracks from 75p each and whole albums for £7.99.

The move could see Microsoft stealing a march on Apple over here, as despite massive success in the USA, licensing issues have so far stymied the launch of iTunes in Europe. Microsoft's service will be available to Windows Media Player 9.0 users and through MSN Music Club and Tiscali in Europe.

But peer-to-peer file swapping sites still threaten these legal services. In a study by research firm Jupiter, only 17 percent of adults say the fear of legal action from the recording industry has made them stop illegal file sharing.

However, Jupiter also anticipates that once more bona fide sites prove themselves as viable alternatives to peer-to-peer, people will make the switch. Online music purchases are predicted to grow more than fivefold by 2008.

Look, no wires

Until now a wireless internet connection has been something only the most tech-savvy PC users would consider installing. But Telewest's wireless self-install package can be set up in under half an hour.

For £35 users receive a NetGear access point, which plugs into the integrated cable modem in your TV set-top box and a wireless card. So far the package is only designed to be used with a single PC or notebook at a time. Telewest's Alexandra Legg says: "It is not about connecting multiple devices, but about introducing the freedom of wireless."

The company is looking to introduce a separate home networking package at some point in the future.



Email compensation

In a landmark decision on email abuse, an office worker has been awarded £10,000 after seeing a series of 'sexual' emails.

The woman, a support administrator, was given access to a colleague's email account while he was on extended leave. Within his files she stumbled across a batch of emails containing obscene information about her. She made a formal complaint to her employer. It was rejected and she felt she had no choice but to resign.

She eventually took the case to the Equal Opportunities Commission, which upheld her complaint and awarded £10,000 compensation for the distress the incident had caused.

"Various high-profile media stories in recent years should leave no doubt about the dangers of misusing email at work," said Julie Mellor, chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission. "The fact that comments are made by email doesn't mean they should be treated any less seriously. This needs to be made clear in harassment and IT policies."

Text for a ticket

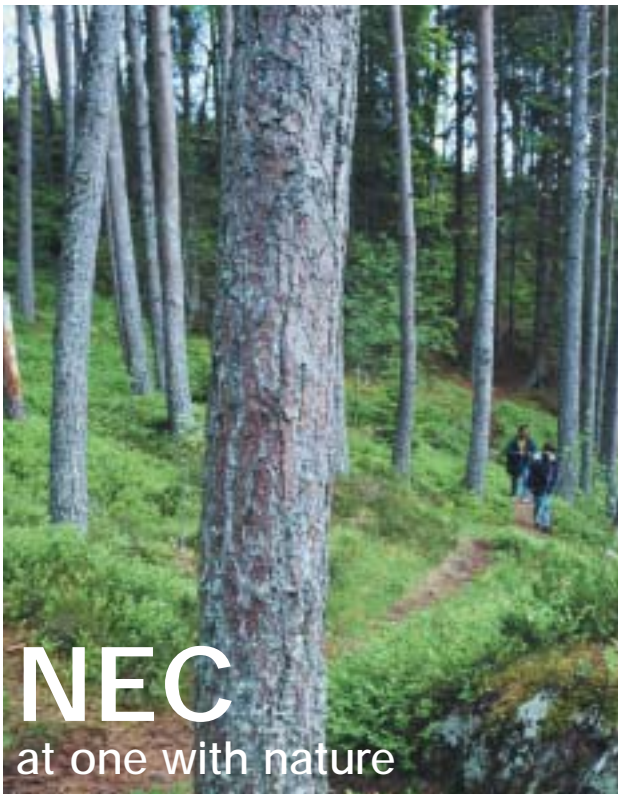


Malaysian no-frills airline AirAsia has become the first to offer text-based ticketing. The SMS service is available to the three million subscribers to the Maxis mobile phone network.

With 45 percent of its tickets sold over the web, AirAsia has already cashed in on the savings to be had from internet booking. But attempts to extend this figure have been hampered by the country's low internet access figures – only 12 percent of the 23 million inhabitants are online, while 42 percent use a mobile phone. A typical booking takes just eight messages, charged at around 2p each.

GartnerG2 analyst, Mark Risley, describes the move as, "a bold initiative and an innovative service," and anticipates that European airlines will follow suit, targeting the 15 percent of adults over here who use text but not the net.

For more information on e-payment schemes see Behind the news on page 28.



NEC is doing its bit to preserve the environment, setting up the Ecotonoha project which aims to cut global warming by promoting tree-planting programmes. Ecotonoha is an online word tree on which visitors leave their virtual signatures. Each signature represents a leaf and for every 100 leaves NEC will plant a real tree at its afforestation project in South Australia.

The company plans to plant an area of 300 hectares with broadleaf trees every year for the next 10 years. To help NEC give something back, go to www.adnec.com to add your moniker.

Post your say on Euro constitution

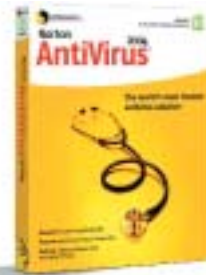
The government has launched an online forum designed to allow UK citizens to share their views on European issues with MPs, government ministers and officials in the lead up to the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on 4 October.

The site says: "This is your opportunity to feed in your thoughts as we prepare for the negotiations between EU leaders," and promises that all entries will be monitored by the Hansard Society, which has helped to set up the forum.

Minister for Europe, Denis MacShane, adds: "We've been negotiating treaties for centuries, but this is the first time we've taken that process out of smoke-filled rooms and let everyone have their say."

Anyone can view comments on the site, but to participate you will have to register. For more information, click on the Britain and the EU section at www.fco.gov.uk.

Bug buster updated: Norton AntiVirus 2004 announced



In the light of recent virus scares, Norton's unveiling of its latest AntiVirus package couldn't have been more timely.

As well as shielding your PC from the latest strains of Blaster and SoBig,

Norton AntiVirus 2004 will defend against emerging intrusions such as spyware and keystroke logging programs.

Norton AntiVirus 2004 will scan for programs that can be used with malicious intent to compromise the security of a PC, spy on private data or track online behaviour. It will block such programs at point of entry by scanning emails and instant messages, and detect them during system scans. It will even scan compressed files of the type shared on peer-to-peer networks, so you won't end up downloading an infected file.

Standard and Professional versions of the program are available. The Pro version includes data recovery and protection features and comes with a two-computer license. Norton AntiVirus 2004 Standard is priced £39.99, while Pro costs £49.99, upgrades are priced £24.99 and £29.99 respectively.

Aristocommerce

If we were cynical we'd say that the decision to sell a Scottish castle, its grounds and the aristocratic titles that go with it, on the web was a blatant attempt to entice rich Americans aching to buy their own piece of the old country.

The castle is called The Lee, and the cheesy movie on the website, set to a bagpipe rendition of *Auld Lang Syne*, certainly makes it look pretty. With its rolling grounds, three lodge houses and period interior, it really is Britain Hollywood-style.

So if you fancy a shortcut to aristocracy, all you need is an appropriately fat bank balance. While only a select few celebrities and wealthy individuals have been sent the coveted access codes to get into the sale website (www.leecastle.com), even us commoners can watch the movie and dream.



USB gets unwired

Component manufacturer Cypress is touting a new wireless standard designed to free our keyboards, mice and games controllers from their cables. WirelessUSB LS aims to allow these USB peripherals to operate with your PC.

Unlike similar wireless technologies, such as Bluetooth or Wi-Fi, WirelessUSB LS isn't a networking solution. It works on a simple point-to-point basis, enabling fast, simple communication with a PC.

Setting up a wireless USB device requires you to plug a dongle into the USB port on your PC. Once plugged in, the dongle allows any wireless USB device to work with your PC, unlike the more proprietary radio-frequency (RIF) based wireless keyboards and mice on the market today.

Cypress hopes to encourage motherboard manufacturers to build the WirelessUSB LS chip directly on to their

boards in future so that there would be no need for a dongle.

WirelessUSB uses the same 2.4GHz frequency as Bluetooth, ensuring worldwide compatibility. The current version, LS, only offers a relatively slow data transfer rate of 62.5Kbps (kilobits per second), so it's only suitable for devices like keyboards and mice, but Cypress has plans to launch a faster version by 2005 which will support 10-20Mbps (megabits per second) data transfer rates. As such it will be able to work with USB devices like printers or digital audio players.

Cypress claims its technology has other key advantages over the current crop of wireless devices, including a battery life of six to nine months and improved stability over R/F-based solutions. It also operates from up to



10m range, so there is no need to have a line of sight between PC and peripheral.

There are already a few devices coming on to the market now, including a wireless USB gamepad from Saitek (pictured), but Cypress says the majority of products should be launched in time for Christmas.

News in brief

Launch date for Office 2003

Microsoft has announced the official launch date for Office 2003, or Office System as it's now called, as 21 October. As we went to press it had provided no UK prices for the software, although online retailer Amazon has posted the following pricing information: Office 2003 Pro, £429.99; Standard £349.99 and Upgrade £269.99.

4GB Microdrives on the way

Hitachi has announced two new Microdrive mini hard drives, due out later this year, offering a 2GB and 4GB capacity. The drives will still fit into CompactFlash Type II slots. The plan is to start shipping it in the USA this November. Pricing will be approximately \$500 (£320) for the 4GB model. No information on UK launch dates or pricing is available yet.

New-look PC Advisor

Next month is the 100th issue of *PC Advisor*. We will be giving you even more reviews, an entirely new section of expert assistance from The Advisors, along with our writers' pick of the best gadgets for under £100 and a retrospective on the last 99 issues. Plus there's more of the usual editorial content. Look out for the new-look *PCA* on sale from 16 October.



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