Taking back your Inbox:

I have been running my own web server for years. For the last few years, I have been running postfix with procmail and using server side “actions” to sort my email. So, today I’d like to address a few problems, solutions, and tools to taking back your Inbox.

Why does e-mail suck?

It would be hard to explain the difference between how I use e-mail and how normal people use e-mail without first explaining some fundamental problems with it.

1. Email is plain text. There is no structure to the email, there is only headers and body, much like an HTML page except every client has their own set of accepted tags in addition to the agreed upon format. This is very much like an HTTP request.
2. Just like HTTP, everything in an email can be forged. Using the right tools you can completely control what an email header and body looks like. This can cause annoying problems for the receiving end.
3. As mentioned above, every implementation can be different. Some mail relay servers could turn off sending error messages. A mailbox could be full but not return a 4.2.2 Mailbox is full error. And the person/server sending the e-mail may just disregard the error codes completely and assume it is sent. Like many of the projects I’ve worked on, there is no backup option when a mail error occurs. Some people don’t understand that e-mail actually works a lot like snail-mail/ground mail in that when something goes wrong, it is returned to the sender with an error code.

Stop trying to change e-mail and change yourself:

E-mail has been around for a while, it is widely accepted and it’s here to stay. Services like Gmail keep trying to pack more features in like HTML images and the concept of “Labels”, but it’s all just plain email using the same crappy protocol for the last 30 years. So, we can’t really suddenly **change** how email works, but we can change how we think of it and out expectations of it:

1. Just like I mentioned above, email works a lot like snail-mail. So, just like with USPS, sometimes they screw up delivery and mail gets lost. Don’t make e-mail your only mode of communication, especially when it comes to transferring sensitive information. Use and FTP server, or a file hosting service like Dropbox or Microsoft SkyDrive, and always insure that your point-to-point communication is encrypted.
2. E-mail is plain text, with headers and a body. What else has these same attributes built in? HTTP, DAV, RSS. All of these structures work well and are widely accepted without the notion of “SPAM”. Sure there are advertisements in web-pages, but that is what AdBlock Plus is for. Similarly, RSS feeds are usually organized by topic, so why don’t we do the same thing with email?
3. You signed up for the site, of course you are going to get spam from it. I am a collector, and I happen to like having the option to see latest news in a particular industry. How is voluntarily signing up for ICanHazCheezBurger’s daily email any different from signing up for Groupon from an ethical standpoint? They are both going to e-mail, sometime’s one will be more useful than the other.
4. By abstracting our email addresses in to a virtual setting, we can determine exactly who is sending us unwanted mail. If you don’t want 3rd party email, then give them an address you don’t use or don’t want to see. Send that mail straight to the trash, without completely ruining the usefulness of that email account.

Shell hell and back again:

Take back your inbox by using virtual email addresses. A single user can have many different email addresses which are all delivered to the same inbox. With the addition of server side scripts to organize the emails you can change from “every email is flooding your inbox” back to “seeking out information” just like you do with the other mediums mentioned above.

Conclusion:

Here is what we have covered in this article:

1. Problems with email and what you can do to fix it.
2. Changed your way of think from mail-coming-to-you to you-seeking-out-information.
3. Scripting server side rules for organizing your mail so that only the important stuff goes straight to your mailbox.
4. Save time purging your mail.