Ask Jack

Phishing again

The security industry went into overdrive two weeks ago with the discovery of a new "phishing" attack on Microsoft's Internet Explorer for Windows. Download.Ject (aka JS.Scob) worked by adding JavaScript code to web servers running IIS v5.0 if they had not been patched against the Sasser worm (see MS04-011), and the Russian website was taken down the next day.

At the time, there were three main options: turn off JavaScript, install the Windows XP Service Pack 2 (only available in beta test form), or use a different browser. To turn JavaScript off in IE, go to Tools|Internet Options, click the Security tab, click the button marked Custom Level, and scroll down to Active scripting. However, so many websites use scripting that this is probably not a useful option for most people. It's always handy to have an alternative browser, and I frequently recommend Mozilla Firefox (**www.mozilla.org/products/firefox/**). Regrettably, many of the sites where security is important, such as banking sites, will only work properly with IE.

Microsoft has now produced a temporary workaround, which is to turn off the Windows feature (the ADODB.Stream control) used by the exploit. This "configuration change" is now available at **www.microsoft.com/security/incident/download_ject.mspx** or via Windows Update. AutoUpdate users will already have it. Microsoft is still working on a patch for IE, so similar attacks remain a possibility. Microsoft therefore recommends that users increase their browser and email security settings: **www.microsoft.com/security/incident/settings.mspx**.

Confused Outlook

Having recently bought Microsoft Office 2003, including Outlook, I thought it would be useful to keep track of my family's activities via their calendars, as I can do at work. However, this appears to work only for users with Exchange email accounts.
Ed Bywater

Jack Schofield replies: Exchange Server is Microsoft's solution for multiple PCs, and while quite good value, is not going to attract many home users. Microsoft has two alternatives. The first is to save or publish each person's calendar as a web page (search Google for 257984). The second is to use an MSN 9 online service, Office Outlook Connector for MSN (**www.msn.co.uk/premium/**), which is expensive.

Of course, there are third-party options. For a guide, see **www.slipstick.com/outlook/share.htm**, and for calendars in particular, **www.slipstick.com/calendar/olpubcal.htm**. However, your best bet is probably to use an online service such as Calendars.Net. Since you already have Yahoo accounts, I'd go with Yahoo calendar sharing (**http://help.yahoo.com/help/uk/cal/cal-15.html**), synchronised via Intellisynch.

Sunbird, the Mozilla Calendar project (**www.mozilla.org/projects/calendar/**), is also promising. However, the site says: "Although it is quite stable, we recommend it for testing purposes only." In any case, use the internet's iCalendar cross-platform standard, defined in RFC2445 in 1998 as a replacement for the old vCalendar format. Apple's iCal also follows this standard.

No DSO

I think I have picked up some spyware called DSO Exploit, and I cannot remove it with SpyBot.
Dave J Reid

JS: If you have a patched system, it's very unlikely that your PC has DSO Exploit. However, there is a bug in SpyBot, which means it can find this exploit repeatedly and apparently fail to fix it. For details of how to enter the correct value into the Windows registry, see the SpyBot forum at **http://masl.to/?E1CB21BB8**.

Backchat

● Linda Mitchell asked about new technology for students in higher education. Julie Mitchell (no relation) mentions some "hiccups" in my advice. Re recording lectures on a Tablet PC, she says: "Check with the lecturer — most do not like having their talks recorded on any medium." Re scanners, she adds: "Be aware that many libraries are happy for you to photocopy books, but the use of hand scanners in libraries is often frowned upon and the British Library will revoke your reading card if you try using even a pen scanner there." Julie also recommends two websites, JStor for journals (**http://uk.jstor.org**) and Project Gutenberg (**http://gutenberg.net**) for classic texts.

● Kirk Hammett is setting up a business and has been looking at "online printing sites" such as **Surfprint.co.uk**. "Have you, or any of your readers, had experience of any of them?" I have not, but I am happy to forward any recommendations.

Send your questions and comments to Jack.Schofield@guardian.co.uk. Published letters will be edited for brevity, but please include full details with your query.

News

Beaten by a whisker

Older data centres and e-government sites should take heed of problems assailing the Colorado secretary of state's office. A series of computer outages has been traced to small metallic filaments, known as zinc whiskers. The fibres form a fuzzy surface on zinc-coated surfaces such as data centre flooring and ageing computer casings. As the minute filaments detach, they are sucked into computers by their cooling fans, and can cause power supplies to short or even cause data errors by shorting out the connectors on microchips. In Colorado, the resulting downtime prevented electronic filings of business and elections documents.
http://masl.to/?K25B626B8

Trouble in store

Most British companies could be heavily fined because of their failure to comply with data storage regulations, warns Adaptec, a data storage company. In a survey of 100 firms by Vanson Bourne, 85% admitted they have not had formal training on how to comply with the burgeoning regulations on data retention. About a third had no policy on company email storage, and 53% could not retrieve emails more than three years old. Key legislation that could apply to companies includes the Data Protection Act, Basel II, the US regulation Sarbanes-Oxley, and the recently updated Combined Code.

Better weather

The Met Office is upgrading the supercomputers it uses for modelling worldwide weather systems. The current Crays will be replaced by two NEC SX-6 machines, which have been shadowing the older systems during a test period. The computational power will be increased six-fold, and the Met Office claims forecast accuracy will be improved by around 6%. Although capable of a trillion calculations per second, the Met Office hardware falls a long way behind the system from which it takes some of its data. The European Centre for Medium-Range Forecasts (ECMWE) uses IBM eServer pSeries 690 servers that can reach speeds of 16 trillion calculations per second.
http://masl.to/?M2BF32BB8

McAfee back

McAfee is the new name for Network Associates. The company's decision to revert to its former name follows the sale of several product lines that prompted the change in name after it acquired Network General in 1997. McAfee is selling its Sniffer Technologies unit to Silver Lake Partners, and Texas Pacific Group and has already divested its Magic Solutions help desk to BMC. Last month, there was a rumour that Microsoft planned to buy McAfee. This has been quashed with Microsoft's disclosure that it is considering including anti-virus software in its Windows portfolio, but will probably do it through partnerships.
www.mcafee.com

Simpler coding

Microsoft has announced a string of lightweight Express programming products aimed at "hobbyists, enthusiasts, and novices who want to build dynamic Windows applications and web sites" — or who just don't want to use the full Visual Studio system. The range includes versions of Visual Basic, C#, C++ and Web Developer 2005. Users can download beta test versions from **http://lab.msdn.microsoft.com/express/**.

Bag tags

RFID tags may help trace luggage

Airlines and airport authorities are looking at radio frequency identity (RFID) tags to end the nightmare of baggage going missing. Delta Air Lines plans to be the first to launch the tracking system across its US routes. The company claims that trials show that an investment of between $15m and $25m will save the company up to $100m each year. The company will tag all luggage at check-in and remove the tags when the bags arrive at the destination airport's carousel. Later, it plans to allow passengers to track their own baggage throughout a journey.

Handy storage

Ximeta has launched its low-end NetDisk storage system in the UK. Basically, it's a small, portable hard drive that can be attached to a PC via a USB port. Unlike similar products, it can also be plugged into an Ethernet network via a network switch — or you can go for the NetDisk Office product, which combines the hard drive with a switch. A NetDisk can therefore be plugged into a small office network, perhaps for back-up purposes. Take the drive home at night and you have a cheap, off-site back-up in case of fire, theft or other disaster. The main drawback is that a special driver has to be installed on each computer that uses the drive, unless you attach one to a PC and use Windows File Sharing. (NetDisk does not come with an IP address and does not run TCP/IP.)
www.ximeta.com

Contributions from Eric Doyle and Jack Schofield

CYBER WITH ROSIE BY ROBERT THOMPSON

ROSIE! ARE YOU CRAZY? INTERNET EXPLORER HAS SO MANY SECURITY HOLES IT'S LIKE A CYBER TEA BAG!

REALLY?

THE RUSSIANS ARE PROBABLY READING YOUR ITSY STROKES AS WE SPEAK AND PINCHING ALL THE MONEY FROM YOUR BANK ACCOUNT

NO WAY I HAVE 100% SECURE PROTECTION ON THAT

I'M THREE GRAND OVERDRAWN

Man of the moment

His innovative and practical websites — usually created in his spare time — have won Phil Gyford a loyal following. **Bobbie Johnson** went to meet him

Phil Gyford is not a name that trips off the tongue alongside those of internet visionaries such as Jeff Bezos, Sergei Brin or Larry Page. For Gyford's business — if you could call it that — is not big, and it doesn't make headline news. He would probably be the last person to describe himself as a guru, but Gyford has made a real mark on the net.

An unassuming freelance web designer by day, by night he's an amateur agitator, an unpaid online inventor with a track record of qualified, but recognisable, innovation. Gyford's wide range of pet projects combined with his no-nonsense approach to the net, continue to draw admiration from casual surfers and web experts alike.

His latest project, TheyWorkForYou.com, was launched last month with the intention of bringing parliament closer to the British people. With a team of almost 20 volunteers, Gyford helped build the site, which provides information on members of parliament and a readable version of Hansard, the parliamentary record.

"There's lots of interesting stuff," he says, explaining the motivation behind the site. "But it's so unappealing to read the Hansard site. For example, there's no way that webloggers can link into it. Presenting it in a readable way was something that had been talked about a lot before, but never done. We started making plans for it last August or September, but we probably started working on it properly just before Christmas."

The system was a prime example of a collaborative, voluntary web project, building on the work of existing sites including FaxYourMP.com and PublicWhip.org.uk. "They had all the clever stuff," admits Gyford. "On top of that, it took about six months of us all working part-time on the project."

Gyford's ambition, though, is to build useful websites, not to cover himself in glory. He believes voluntary projects benefit from a lack of the bureaucracy that can make commercial projects so difficult, and if Hansard came up with an official version to compete with TheyWork-ForYou, he would be among its first supporters.

Another of his most prominent sites, PepysDiary.com, already has him signed up for the long haul. An online version of the famous 17th-century journals of Samuel Pepys, it started as a side project to help Gyford plough his way through the voluminous diaries. With little fanfare it became something of an overnight sensation, drawing thousands of readers every day and developing a large community of seasoned web surfers, enthusiasts and academics. But running the site is not an enterprise for the weak-willed. Pepys — like his 21st-century counterpart — was an insatiable worker, and completing the day-by-day project will take Gyford almost a decade.

"It hadn't really bothered me until it launched and everyone kept telling me what a big commitment it was," he says. At the O'Reilly Emerging Technologies Conference last year, Clay Shirky, the respected web expert, said that he realised weblogs had a future because of Gyford's 10-year commitment to the Pepys site.

He seems taken aback that others might look to him as a shining example as what is good about the internet, but his admirers are legion.

"Phil's one of the few people in this industry who produces much more than he promises; the complete opposite of the loud new media bullshitter," says one friend. "He not only has the savvy to understand and build complex projects... but the motivation to see them through and keep them going for years."

Testament to his dedication are Gyford's other long-term creations such as Byliner, a service that helps surfers keep track of their favourite journalists, and Haddock, a collaborative site that, he says, was "probably Britain's first weblog". Some of his ideas could — and probably should — have been taken up by commercial organisations. But he got there first, with a plain-speaking style that appeals directly to web users more used to self-serving guff and unfulfilled promises.

"Quite a lot of the people I know who make websites came to it from more of a design angle, rather than science," points out Gyford. "It brings up an interesting skill set, because they've got a combination of design skills are essentially self-taught. It's a throwback to the earliest moments of the web, when anyone with a good idea and some guts could give it a try. Over time, the dotcom industry — built on self-motivation and innovation — has conspired to trade in those qualities for sensible business models, shareholder profits and professional training. Gyford, however, has remained a jack of all trades.

Part of this approach could be down to Gyford's background. He trained as an illustrator, and his web and coding. As new media gets bigger, all those people at the start who were called webmasters — as everyone who could do a bit of everything was — have had to pick one discipline or the other."

A survivor of the can-do ethos that fired the dotcom revolution, his early days as a self-confessed "alpha geek" were with the short-lived UK version of Wired, the technology magazine, followed by spells working for Capital Radio's online operation, local information site UpMyStreet and a number of web design and consultancy firms.
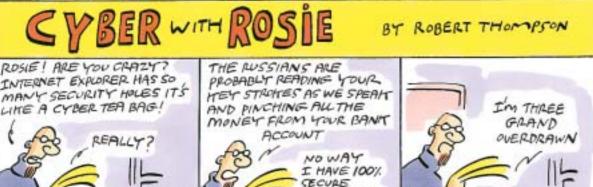
Perhaps the strangest move in his career was a year-long stint in Houston, reading a master's degree in studies of the future.

"I was tired of the London new media scene," he says. "I just wanted to do something completely different."

But what does his own future hold? He says he doesn't have any new projects in the pipeline — enough of his time is taken maintaining the ones he already has on the go.

"Something like PepysDiary only takes a couple of hours a week," he says, modestly. "But even a couple of hours a week mounts up over the course of 10 years. I could always pass it on to someone else, I suppose, but I'd like to see it through."

Making his mark: Phil Gyford's latest site, TheyWorkForYou.com, aims to open up parliament Photo: Martin Argles