

letters

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DENY RESPONSIBILITY AND LET THE USERS SUFFER

For a long, long time now I have been bombarded by CD after CD offering the best and cheapest Internet access, with AOL and CompuServe fighting for the right to be my newest drinks mat.

But that is not my concern. One day, for the first time ever, I decided to read the small print on one of the CDs from my amassed collection – just for kicks. AOL was top of the pile and what I read surprised me greatly but worried me more. The legal disclaimer stated: 'AOL and its affiliates cannot accept responsibility for any disruption, damage and/or loss to your data or computer system that may occur while using this CD, the programs or data on it.'

Now, I know that legal disclaimers are all fine and dandy and absolve even the devil himself of guilt if God signs along the dotted line, but should computer companies really be allowed to make these cover-all declarations?

What they are saying is 'our program could well cripple your system but if you're fool enough to use it then that's your problem'. Why don't they go a step

further and say something like 'just looking at this CD makes every program that we have ever written free from any legal prosecution by you even if they are specifically designed to do nasty things'?

I don't think it's fair for a company to say it's not responsible for any damage that it expressly causes. What if I installed some software and then because of that some system files or the Registry got corrupted? They are saying that they are not responsible even though it's clear that the error originated from using that program.

This is quite a far reaching situation and, with the advent of the Internet, a global problem. I think the computing world needs to set some standards whereby companies can't just print a disclaimer and escape blame. Just think how much better the software produced would be if companies were responsible for any damage their programs caused.

Isn't it about time governments or the courts passed a law that made each company responsible for the damage that it may cause so they are no longer able to hide behind a shield of legal red tape? Unfortunately, because of the international nature of the manufacture of programs the passing of a law such as this would be a problem.

I never realised just how much of a grasp the software market has over society – it's pretty much what they say goes. If you try to stop or regulate them, they just exclude you from their business and it is you who must suffer that loss, while the company continues elsewhere.

In the June issue of PCW (p26) Tim Bjarin gave a good example of these tactics in action. Microsoft has a problem with the US Government but, because of its international status, it can just move production to another country and the good old USA doesn't have a leg to stand on. Software companies choose to hide within the legal complexities rather than to produce faultless quality goods knowing full well that, unless your country is willing to pay millions to prosecute them through a long legal battle, they are going to get away with it.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

TELEMARKETERS HIT BY DISHONESTY VIRUS?

As a home worker I get many phone calls from canvassers, usually hard-pressed students earning a crust in a call centre. I recently filled in an online form for regular updates on information from a certain company. Not wanting to have a mailbox crammed with junk I left the email field blank.

A few weeks later I got a call from a nice man purporting to be from said company explaining that its database had been hit by a virus, eradicating all the email addresses from their records. I suggested to the caller that this was a pretty odd virus, beautifully crafted to hit such a specific area of a database. He agreed that it must be a 'most remarkable' bit of code. His answer had incredulity written all over it and he clearly knew that the virus story was nonsense.

On further questioning he told me that he was only using the words on the 'script' supplied by the management. He was studying statistics, clearly knew a fair bit about computing and conceded that the story was a cover being used to fill in any empty fields on the database. Is this a new virus spreading through the world of telephone marketing, not a computer virus but just another of those little germs of dishonesty which slowly and inexorably causes you to lose faith in humanity?

DYLAN WINTER



Absolve the devil of guilt if God signs along the dotted line

If such a law as described above was passed, we would see an end to shoddily manufactured programs because companies would be investing more time into making stable and reliable programs due to the fear of prosecution. I realise the speed of production would go down but I am willing to wait for quality which has had proper testing – though I doubt it will ever happen.

RICHARD LEE

IN SUPPORT OF PENGUINS

With respect to Peter Henderson's letter in the June issue, entitled: 'What do you get if you cross a penguin...? I have been running SuSE Linux for 14 months and haven't had a 'major' problem with its operation. I am a hardware engineer and am well practised the art of installing Windows 95 and 98. I was shown Linux by a colleague who was running Red Hat 4.2 and I thought I would give it a try. I obtained my first copy of SuSE Linux at version 5.2 from a magazine cover disc. I will admit that I didn't get along with it, but decided to purchase a copy of SuSE 6.1 when it became available.

I ran this copy quite happily and upgraded to version 6.2. I did encounter a problem accessing the DNS server information for my ISP, but I found out a file had been omitted from the distribution by SuSE. A quick visit to its FTP site to obtain this file corrected the problem within a minute.

Now I am up to the 6.3 release and have obtained some more hardware. I have a Sound Blaster card. I discovered

that the Open Sound System software didn't support this card and thought it would be a problem. However, a quick read through the Linux Documentation Project that comes with SuSE distributions advised me what to do. Once the modifications had been implemented the card worked fine and as well as it does under Microsoft OSs.

I also have an Allied Telesyn UTP/fibre-optic network and have successfully configured my system to run as a server

between myself and my other half's system. Once connected up, I configured the IP Masquerading and firewall software to allow my other half to surf the net at the same time as I do.

Setting up SAMBA, Apache and other software was made a lot easier by the purchase of Sybex' Linux Complete book. I have now got to the point of dual-booting Linux and 95. But 95 is there mainly for Windows applications. However, Microsoft Office documents can mainly be read through Sun StarOffice, so I don't worry too much about Windows.

In his letter, Peter Henderson said that 'As a serious alternative to MS Windows, for the average user, I think not.' It may not be ready for the big screen, but (a) it is only nine years old, Windows is 17 years old and (b) Linux has certainly started to make inroads over Windows in the past 12 months.

STEWART SMEDLEY

REGISTRATION HAS A ROLE

In response to Irfan Shaffi's letter in June's issue, about registering software, I work for a company that produces software and we encourage customers to register their purchases. Not, as Mr Shaffi implies, so we can sell their details to the highest bidder. Nor is it because we love to spend our time deciphering the scrawl that appears on the cards so we can enter them in our database – just for fun. No, it's so we can inform our customers about new versions and patches for the software they have

bought, because they prefer to be told by us than have to check every few months.

We have also found that customers have a nasty habit of throwing away the packaging – and with it all the serial numbers for our software. When they next come to install the software, oops, no serial number. They call us up and the first question we ask is 'Did you register the product?' If yes then after a quick look in the database we can give them their serial number. If no then it's proof of purchase or no go.

Of course, this is all our fault and we're being totally unreasonable, but I can't tell if you've genuinely lost your serial number or if you've bought a copy from the bloke in Charing Cross Station for a tenner (and yes this has happened). So while I admit sometimes there seems little point in registering, one day you may find it's actually worth your while.

DAVID PHILPOTTS

GROW UP - GIVE US SECURITY

The recent outbreak of the LoveLetter virus prompted me to write a letter. Industry commentators frequently urge users never to open email attachments, or at least to open only those sent by prior arrangement. However, this is not always feasible.

Technology becomes valuable once it has found a role in mainstream economic life. Email has done, but the IT industry that created it must support the way users wish to operate it, not how the creators originally conceived it.

As a finance consultant, I routinely exchange work with my clients and associates in Word and Excel formats using email attachments and that has become a way of life for many businesses. To protect myself, I buy the best anti-virus software I can find and keep it up to date, but that protection is not wholly sufficient. The advice of 'Don't' is about as helpful as that given to my sister by my maiden aunt ('Just say no'). It doesn't fit with the aim of making the technology work for the user rather than vice-versa.

What is needed is for the industry to develop a methodology to make email safe in the same way as safety is accepted as paramount in other technologies (eg engineering). That is why I find ideas such as Digital Immune System and Artificial Immune System so promising.

It is time for the IT industry to grow up and provide users with the security they need.

CHRIS BUNTON