# Use and abuse

**Security on the net** needs improving to boost user confidence, says Nigel Whitfield.

Connect to the internet and your systems will be hacked! You'll have people breaching your security and stealing your personal data! Nothing will be safe from these destructive people bent on taking over our universe!

OK, so that's verging into B-movie territory, but there are people out there who'll try to get into your computer systems. Often it's just for the thrill of it, or your computer may be a stepping stone as they try to cover their tracks on the way to their ultimate destination. The chances of someone actually wanting to attack your system for a particular reason are probably small.

## Not my problem?

Is this of no concern to people who have a PC at home? It might well be: with well-known security breaches such as Back Orifice, people can connect to your system and do a lot of damage. You might not think that's a tremendous problem if you dial up and have a different IP address assigned each time you connect — and you'd be right. But jump forward a few months, past BT's trial of ADSL (giving a few people an "always on" connection) to the time when it's more commonplace. Imagine the potential for havoc if you annoy someone at work, and they try to mess up your system for you, or you end up in the middle of someone else's flame war. There have even been cases of someone maliciously placing pornography on a system and then tipping off the police.

Most of it can be avoided by following sensible security precautions and keeping your system up to date with patches. It can be a time-consuming job. And things aren't always made easier by those who distribute software. A well set-up system may not be completely immune to attacks, but it's a lot more

*Most of this havoc can be avoided by following sensible security precautions*

---

## THE RIGHT SCRIPT

Forms keep rearing their head in messages sent to net.answers; as some rightly point out, it can be pretty simple to design a form in a graphical web-page editor, but the problems I recently covered still crop up. I've looked at some examples of how to write parts of a script, and I'd love to provide more in future. The biggest problem is, what sort of script would you like to learn about? Do you want to know how to write something in Visual Basic that will process data on a Windows system? How about using Perl under a Unix web server? There's even AppleScript, now much faster with OS 8.5. So I'd like to hear from you, about what systems your web pages run on, and what you'd like to know about running scripts on web servers. Do you want to know Perl, or should I enlist the help of the VB experts? How about good old-fashioned C? Send an email to net.answers@pcw.co.uk and I'll try to present some useful scripts over the coming months that will help you do what you really want.

---

secure — and can help you find who's trying to get in, and from where. Almost every day, the logs on my firewall reveal information about who's been trying to gain access to some of my systems.

## Low-key ISPs

Unauthorised access is a breach of the Computer Misuse Act, so you'd expect ISPs to take it seriously. But they don't all treat it the same. Some have responded to reports of people trying to attack systems with "This user's account has been terminated", and others with "He's been warned". Some have revealed the offender's name, offering co-operation with the comment, "We've had other complaints about him". You might consider that type of response unsatisfactory, or indeed useful to know where someone is. To an extent, I feel comfortable knowing — and I can ban all users of that particular ISP from the net services I run. Yet what's more disturbing, and will be more so as "always on" connections grow, is low ISP co-operation. Complain about a hacker, and they might be kicked off the net. Then they'll sign up with someone else and do the same thing again. One ISP said it couldn't share information because it would be against the Data Protection Act, although it would probably be covered by the many exemptions for protection and prevention of crime. Collating logs showing a hacker's movements is time consuming. You might think you've a right to sniff around and discover if someone's web servers have security vulnerabilities, but you don't. So keeping everything safe can be a hard job.
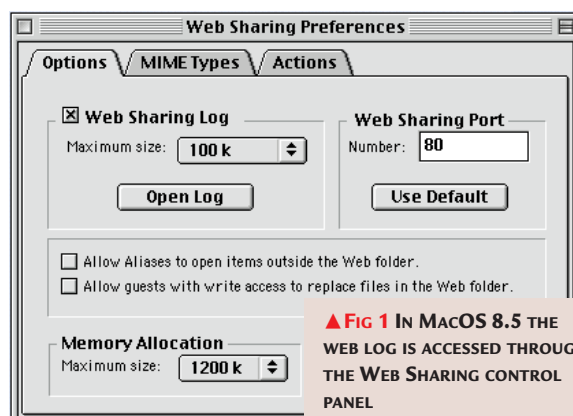
## Act accordingly

The net has grown partly because of people providing useful things free of charge. But if the result is attacks on your computers and little chance of compensation, how many will want to maintain that tradition? If ISPs really want the net to grow, they must act in a co-ordinated manner, so people taking their first steps on to the net can do so with confidence, not trepidation. Of course, everyone has to protect their own computers, but a little help — and perhaps some application of the Computer Misuse Act — would go a long way to making customers confident.

# Questions
## & *answers*

**Q** I'm running a Mac with the web sharing enabled. Is there a way to see a log of who's been accessing the web pages?

**a** *Not if you're using MacOS 8.1 and the standard Apple Web Sharing extension. If you upgrade to MacOS 8.5 you can view a log, which is in a standard format most web analysis tools will be able to understand. To access the log, open the Web Sharing control panel and go into the Preferences [Fig 1]; from the Options tab, ensure the "Web Sharing log" check box has an X in it. To open the log, click*



▲**FIG 1** IN MACOS 8.5 THE WEB LOG IS ACCESSED THROUGH THE WEB SHARING CONTROL PANEL

*the Open Log button; you may see a message from the Finder asking you which application you want to use to view it.*

**Q** I've downloaded version 4.0 of AOL and I'd like to know if it's possible to change the default setting of the US version of Channels to the UK version instead. If this can be done, please tell me how. If not, then let me know the next best thing.

**a** *The main menu and the channels screen are chosen by AOL depending on*

*the version of the software you are using; you can't change the default, but you could always create a shortcut to the UK pages, which are reached via the keyword INTERNATIONAL. The best solution is to wait a while for the UK version of AOL 4, which should be out by the time you read this.*

**Q** I've brought back from the US a new Compaq Presario 1810 portable with a built-in 56K modem. Unfortunately, the modem won't talk to BT. Any suggestions?

**a** *The modem should recognise dial tone, but you can find out if it doesn't by using the command ATX0,*

*which will tell the modem not to listen for dial tone. It's worth turning on the speaker with the ATM1 command so you can hear what happens. The best program to do all this in is HyperTerminal [Fig 2]: tell it you're creating a direct cable connection, then type the commands shown, followed by ATH1 to take the modem off the hook — you should hear the dial tone. If you don't, then you'll need to change cables. Contact a company like TeleAdapt <www. teleadapt. com> which can supply cables that will sort out most problems like this.*
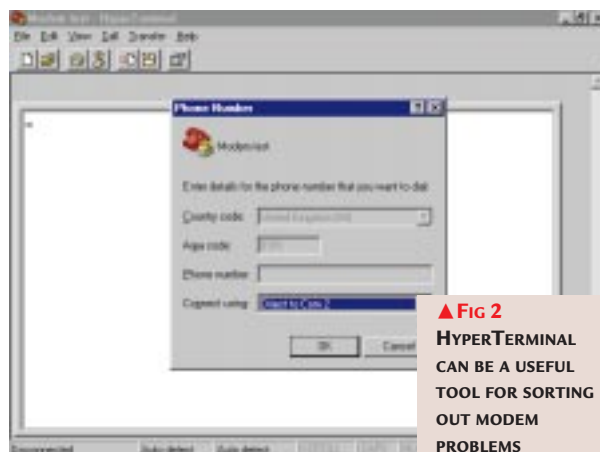


▲**FIG 2** **HYPERTERMINAL** CAN BE A USEFUL TOOL FOR SORTING OUT MODEM PROBLEMS

**Q** I have ugraded to Navigator 4.06 from the *PCW* CD, but every time I start Navigator, halfway through the loading screen I get a box saying 'The local configuration file specified a configuration URL but the AutoAdmin component could not be loaded. AutoAdmin is required to support remote configuration URLs. You will be unable to load any remote documents.' Navigator works perfectly after I have clicked on OK, but why does this happen?

**a** *This is most likely because Navigator is attempting to load details of its configuration, including which proxy servers to use, from a remote location. By doing that, system administrators can easily configure a large number of systems just by changing a single file. You need to check the preferences (on the Edit menu), and in the Advanced section you'll find options that relate to using remove configuration URLs. Make sure that none of these are selected and your problems should go away.*

**Q** I've created a web page on my PC, but my friend who uses a Mac says that the colours I've chosen

for the background aren't smooth — they come out with lots of little dots in them. Why is this?

**a** *The problem arises because you're most likely using a 256-colour display, as is your friend. You run into trouble with some colours because the Mac and the PC both have a slightly different palette of colours in 256-colour. If you choose a colour for your web page that doesn't appear on both platforms, you'll see grainy colours with flecks of other colours in them as the computer tries to get the closest match that it can. The solution is to use a web design program that allows you to pick from the common palette so that you can be sure everything will work fine whatever platform you use. You can find information about the problem on the web. One useful page, which has an online colour chart with all the values you'll need for coding your web pages, is at www.lynda.com/hex.html.*

## PCW CONTACTS

*Nigel Whitfield welcomes readers' suggestions and feedback for the Internet column. He can be contacted via the PCW editorial office (address, p10) or email internet@pcw.co.uk*