

Paul Smith mourns the passing of one of the **seminal characters** of internet development.

Your number's up



If you had to name one guru of the internet, who would it be? Marc Andreessen, the first person to corner the market in web browsers (and vowels)? Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the worldwide web? Or big, bad Billy G, who just owns the

whole thing? Me, I would probably vote for Jon Postel, except that he has just excluded himself from the running by dying. Postel, who was 55, just looked the part, with his t-shirt, long straggly hair and wild, frizzy beard. Postel almost single-handedly invented and, until his death on 16th October from a heart attack, controlled the single most crucial element of the whole internet: the numbering system.

Someone once told me that, when you type in an address such as, oh, say, www.paulsmith.com, the internet has no direct way of knowing where that site resides. Instead, it is translated from a URL into a number of the form 123.456.789.012 by a directory naming service (DNS) server. Well, that naming system is what Postel started way back in the sixties.

He also spent his spare time administering another important part of the internet, the "request for comments" (RFC) system of designing and amending net standards. Actually, that's not fair. The "Numbers Tsar" devoted his whole life to what has become the key technology of the decade. He also did it without much reward; while lesser people around him created fortunes out of nothing, Postel stuck to his hippie roots and foreswore excessive payments. His real spare time was spent outdoors, backpacking around Yosemite National Park in California.

Recently, Postel had been in the news a fair bit as the United States prepared to open the naming system to a more international body. Actually, Postel helped keep the system pretty much the way it was, but with a new name. One of the big problems is that there's much more demand for names than there are cool names left. The best ones are already taken. Obviously, www.paulsmith.com has gone. Someone else has got www.paulsmith.co.uk, www.lard.com, www.buttsville.com; even www.becausewecan.com has been taken. And there have been suggestions of new top-level domain names, such as .firm for firms' sites, .sex for sex sites and

.dom for dom sites. These are, by and large, silly. So I propose a new set of root domain names. For example, .mine for sites that are mine. Obviously, there would also have to be a .yours, for your sites. I also think there should be a .pants, because there are so many sites that are, frankly, pants. Actually, we shouldn't have URLs at all. They're not uniform, most sites aren't that resourceful, and while they may help computers locate them, they sure don't help humans. I mean, who was it that thought adding "www." to the beginning and ".com" to the end of all these names was going to be helpful, anyway? It was probably that Postel bloke, who's got a lot to answer for, in my book.

Here's a warning. In a rare and exceptional lapse, I am about to provide you with some information that could actually be construed as useful. Regular readers of this column should avert their eyes... now. I've recently discovered a couple of Internet Explorer 4 tips I thought I'd pass on. Now, to pre-empt the standard "everyone knows that" response which all tips are, by law, required to generate from 25% of readers, let me just say that I didn't and it's my column, so there.

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OK, Tip Number One. You know that if you just type in a single word in the address box, IE4 will search for the site with different prefixes and suffixes, right? Type in "buttsville" and it will search for "www.buttsville.com", then "www.buttsville.org" and so on. You can, however, change this order to include, for instance, "www.buttsville.co.uk", by opening the Registry and editing the HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\Software\Microsoft\Internet Explorer\Main\UrlTemplate thingy. Tip Number Two. If you're sure it's "www.something.com" site, just type in "something" and hit Ctrl+Enter. Cool, eh? Don't tell the people who shut their eyes. OK, everyone, you can look again. And I promise not to be useful again.

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