Good times, bad times

Bugs in email software, BT's ISDN moves on (a bit), and your queries quelled. With Nigel Whitfield.

It's not often that words need to be eaten, but regular readers of this column might remember a couple of times when people have asked about the warning they've received telling them not to read messages that have a subject heading of "GOOD TIMES". Doing so, the warnings say, could cause problems for your PC.

The standard answer has always been that the only way reading an email message can cause problems on your system is by opening an executable attachment that contains a virus, or launching a document that has a macro virus in it. As you might have heard, however, thanks to the sterling effort of two of the most prominent net software companies — Microsoft and Netscape — that's no longer the case. Both have produced email software that is vulnerable to a particular type of attack, embedded not in an attachment itself, but in the tags that indicate there's an attachment to a message.

Half measures

They didn't do this on purpose — no-one sticks common programming errors into their software on purpose, although that's what some people think is at the root of this particular problem. But what both companies *are* guilty of is releasing half-finished, bloated software using magazine CDs and online downloads, to ensure that it reaches as many people as possible. Sometimes, there are useful new features in the latest web browser or email client. Java has certainly helped make some aspects of the web more usable. Dynamic HTML has promise. Depending on your personal feelings, you could view HTML email as a boon, or as an irritating infestation in your inbox. But would the world have ground to a halt if we'd had to wait a few more months for any of these features? It's unlikely. There's far more potential for damage to business

caused by sloppy programming leaving gaping security holes in mail programs, than by your boss not being able to send you email with red, underlined text in it. I'm sure the race to add more features and come out with browsers that have higher version numbers than the competition must be tremendously exciting for employees at Netscape and Microsoft, but it leaves many net users cold. Perhaps it's time more users stopped allowing themselves to be sucked into this rat-race of one-upmanship, and made their views clear? Reliable software should be a primary consideration. And if Netscape wants to survive as a player in the browser market, it might do well to concentrate on security and reliability; the ways of Microsoft are, sadly, unlikely to change.

The internet is a great tool. It's a shame that some of the best-known software companies view it chiefly as one they can use to send us beta-grade browsers in a race to score points against each other. So, next time someone offers you a new browser or email client, stop and think before installing it. Which bugs do you want on your system today?

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Highs & lows

Have you been waiting for ISDN to be a reasonable proposition for home users? If so, you've probably heard about BT's Home Highway service, and by the time this issue of *PCW* hits the streets you may

BT Homehighway
A FAST AND FLEXIBLE ROUTE TO GETTING ONLINE

also have heard about the pricing. If not, check out www.bt.com. Suffice it to say that the launch price isn't the dramatic leap towards affordable ISDN for which many people were hoping. In fact, it's not that much different from the pricing level of current ISDN services.

The significant difference is that you can also plug your existing telephones into the Home Highway box on the wall, and you'll be able to use network services such as dialling 1471 to find out who called you — though not on ISDN calls: that's still extra. From that point of view, it's a leap forward. And with a name like Home Highway, there's a better chance of BT actually realising people might have it installed in their homes — a point which previously, anyone who's ever tried to report a fault on an ISDN line and an ordinary line simultaneously, will realise is lost on BT. It's a shame that the pricing level isn't a similar leap forward on the part of BT. I would be interested to hear from any users who are thinking of switching to Home Highway.

☞ **On a more general note**, if you'd like to share your opinions on any of the aforementioned topics, please send them in. As ever, a personal response can't always be guaranteed, but feedback is always welcome. (See "*PCW* Contacts", page 254, for address details.)

Questions & answers

Q I have a web site, with a registration form. The important bit is as follows:

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<FORM ACTION="mailto:someone@somewhere.co.uk" METHOD="POST">
<INPUT TYPE="hidden" NAME="Origin" VALUE="Romilly's H.F.B. Web Site">
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Now, this works fine for many people who register — although some arrive with nothing in the text at all, and no attachment. And even at the best of times, my Eudora Light annoyingly puts the message into an attached file. I tried a test or two and it seems to work reasonably when I use Netscape as the browser, but not when I use Internet Explorer. Am I doing something wrong in my HTML? Or is there something wrong with my, and presumably other people's, IE3 setup?

a *The simple answer is that you're doing something wrong in your HTML. The "POST" action tells the browser that it should send all the contents of the form data back to the web server via the standard input channel. The action is the program that the browser will tell your server to run, and that program will receive the information input by the browser. However, your action field isn't a program on your server; it's a mailto URL instead, and only some browsers will spot that and launch an email program, because it's completely non-standard. And other browsers will be listing errors in the web server log, when the server can't find the program that the browser has asked them to run. You need to speak to the people who run your web server to find out*

what mail scripts are installed on it (most ISPs have a script that will perform this function). And if you run your own server, you'll have to find a script on the net, or roll your own. That's the only way to ensure that everyone can use the form, regardless of which browser they have.

Q I've recently connected to the internet and use Outlook Express as my mail and news client. When writing mail I have the option to use plain or HTML format text. I would like to know whether the latter is readable by any email program, or does it need to be viewed with a web browser?

a *HTML email, while not quite the spawn of Satan, is one of the more irritating things to have afflicted the internet recently. While an increasing number of email programs can read HTML mail, it is by no means a majority, and a lot of people*

will see the raw HTML code in their inbox. Of course, they can save the message to a file and open it in a web browser, but frankly, I'd be more likely to delete a message than go to that trouble, and I expect most other people would, too. As a general rule of thumb, turn off features like HTML email,

unless you know that the person to whom you're writing has a program that can understand it. Particular contempt should be reserved for those mail programs that insist on sending two copies of your messages, one in HTML and another in plain text. While this means that most people can understand the messages, it more than doubles the size. Again, turn this option off unless you want to force people to spend twice as long downloading your messages as they need to.

Some email programs allow you to specify who in your address book can receive HTML or other types of mail. If you want to communicate easily, that's certainly the best way to do it — and have the mail program send plain text to people who don't want HTML.

Q I'm using IE4.01 and have set up an FTP site with all our word documents, spreadsheets, images, etc. I also have a file viewer with a web viewing capability that will open and display all of these file types, and more. Unfortunately, clicking on the file name lau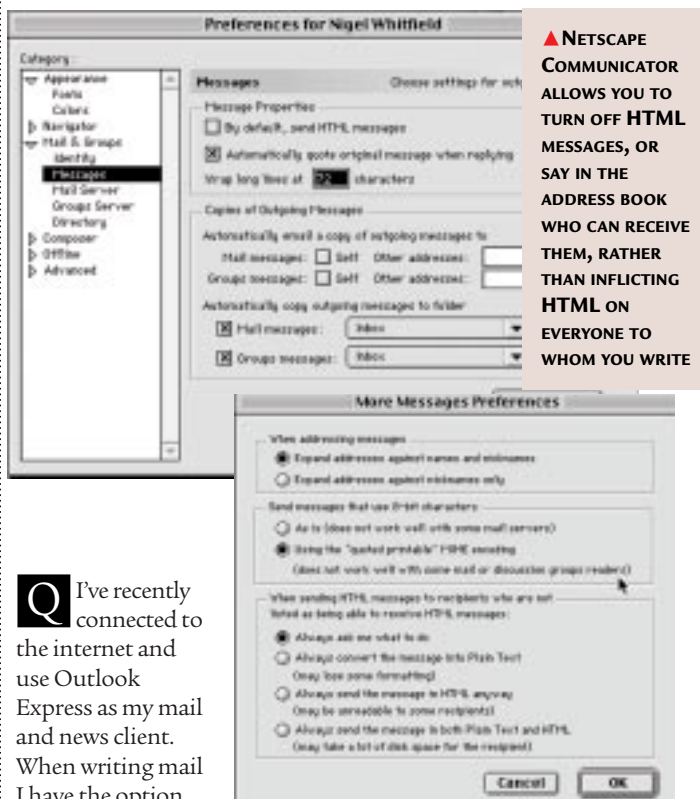nches the native application within the browser. How can I have a different application association when using the browser to that used in Windows? I'm sure you used to be able to do this in IE3.02.

a *You used to be able to do this, but Explorer 4 is integrated with the operating system. Since it can be used as the desktop browser, it needs to use the same database as Windows to decide what happens when you click on an application. And this is, of course, a great leap forward and an enhancement of your user experience. But if you don't want your browser to be so tightly integrated with Windows, you'll need to revert to IE3 or install Netscape Navigator.*

▲ **NETSCAPE COMMUNICATOR ALLOWS YOU TO TURN OFF HTML MESSAGES, OR SAY IN THE ADDRESS BOOK WHO CAN RECEIVE THEM, RATHER THAN INFLICTING HTML ON EVERYONE TO WHOM YOU WRITE**

PCW CONTACTS

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