

Folklore on the Internet: About the Internet (and a Bit about Computers)

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Times change and so does fashion. The once popular subject of fashion trends has gradually been replaced by cyber trends – it might very well be that in the future, people are not judged so much by the way they dress or which stores they visit, but by the brand of computers and software they use and by their philosophy. Fashion trends have been substituted by cyber trends and day-to-day interaction revolves not around snakes being imported from exotic countries in handbags and dresses impregnated with embalming liquids, but around the newest, most dreadful computer viruses and cyber criminals.

Folklore on the Internet and circulated by means of the Internet is shaped considerably by the evolution of its users and the Internet itself. Since its introduction in the 1960s until the end of the 1980s the Internet was a communication channel used mostly for academic as well as military use. The Internet was neither known outside these circles nor had it received any significant feedback, it was not something “a man on the street” would have been interested in. Originally, an Internet connection was used for exchanging messages (the slang term ‘snail-mail’ denoting ordinary mail was probably coined around this time), later also for exchanging files. The enhancement of the Internet was carried out under laboratory conditions, which were closely monitored to ensure that it evolved in a certain direction.

Despite all this the Internet gradually made its own way. New possibilities emerged that no-one could have foreseen. UseNet, for example, which is used mainly for transmitting web-news – news often being any message that a follower of UseNet news finds worth circulating. In order to avoid confusion the news

items of UseNet are classified under different 'newsgroups'. Of course, if necessary, a message can be sent to different newsgroups simultaneously.

Besides UseNet other possibilities cropped up, for example, gopher making the Internet information accessible as a tree-shaped catalogue system. Chat-rooms and MUDs¹ – multiplayer interactive games played via net have also emerged.

The Internet was created from the ideas of its original users. The ideas of a relatively independent and at the same time free information channel almost impossible to destroy or censure by any given organised pressure group, generated by people from academic circles and others, including hackers², were used to develop the Internet. The unfavourable side-effects of it were crackers, people who break into the computers of others in order to gain profit or for some other reason.

The beginning of the Internet and in a way the beginning of cyber space dates back to the mid-1960s when more-or-less modern computer networks were created. The intention of DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) to develop network technology for creating a computer network which would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to put out of work contributed to the process. It developed into a network which unlike the earlier ones had no centralised information channels but consisted of a cluster of smaller nets interrelated by different channels. At the beginning of the 1980s the protocols of Internet now adhered to were agreed upon.

With easier access to the computers, the growth of the professional folklore of computer-users and specialists started to accelerate. The process boomed at the end of the 1980s in the course of Internet's sudden expansion followed by an interest in mass media. Sometimes incompetently done, it often propagated urban legends and beliefs. Rumours over mass media travel fast and tend to become a real and true information for some people.

¹) MUD – an acronym denoting 'Multi-User Dungeon/ Dimension'.

²) A hacker is a person who differs from ordinary users in his interest in acquiring the bare minimum of the information, he likes to study the details of programming systems and expand their possibilities; is an enthusiastic programmer or a person who enjoys programming, not theoreticising over it. [From a jargon file containing different terms, acronyms, abbreviations, etc of hacking].

FOLKLORE SPREAD VIA INTERNET

Here we are concerned with a perfectly ordinary kind of folklore which differs from the traditional only by its untraditional mode of transmission. Not all traditional genres of folklore are spread over the Internet – it has generated accounts of the supernatural, UFO and ghost stories, and also the vast number of jokes. Jokes are one of the few genres where the tolerant and racially correct philosophy of the Internet has been ignored. Thus the jokes on the Internet are a perfect vehicle for voicing one's biased attitudes towards certain groups of people (Afro-Americans, blondes, etc). According to the general opinion this is the only way such texts could appear over the Internet altogether.

In addition to the jokes, certain chain-letters and personal artistic mail-signatures resembling a synthesis of album verses and graffiti have also been circulated over the Internet.

BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

There are many beliefs and attitudes towards the fear of technological, and in particular computer- and Internet-related innovations. It is not clear why technological progress has caused anxieties in people. Such fears may change the way people think about their future. Unlike in former times when people speculated on ideal future societies – utopias, we are now concerned with dystopias. We now believe that our world either repels technology or, on the contrary, gets entirely lost in technology and its waste. The former belief results in chain-letters over the Internet, concerned mainly with disturbances over the UseNet, the self-destruction of the Internet, the modem tax which will be imposed any minute by the FFC and other similar topics (generally, a situation without the accustomed society, communication, etc seems totally unacceptable for most people). The popularity of the subject among the vast number of Internet users is demonstrated by the mere fact that similar rumours reappear every other month and are spread extremely fast.

The latter belief – that the world has fallen under the control of an ultra-modern high-technology and/or the giant corporations employing it – is supported by the gradually increasing rate of development of computing technology, as well as the emer-

gence of totally new trends. Regardless of all our speculations, virtual reality (or VR) has become a part of our every-day reality.

We can speak about a whole category of commonplace beliefs concerning the employment of virtual reality or virtual futures. Sometimes it is combined with beliefs concerned with performing certain surgical operations on people or applying various genetic impulses for enhancing the efficiency of mankind in using future technology. The image of virtual reality is extended by visions of unstable ecological systems, where a part of our planet has been turned into a desert and the other part is exposed to constant cloud, gloom and excessive rainfall. The virtual futures are often seen as ones where the majority of mankind (or all of it) has been transplanted from reality, or has voluntarily settled in virtual reality.

In virtual space a 3D image resembling reality of some environment is created for people, who receive it through a specific headset. Interaction with the environment is performed by the means of special gloves or a suit augmenting the movements of the human body. Nowadays, virtual reality is mainly used for the remote operation of robots, training people (surgeons, aircraft pilots, etc) and entertainment.

This poses real dangers. There is hardly any computer user who has not heard of or even passed on numerous stories of new and terrible computer viruses; however, along with real virus warnings and cautionary stories the Internet also spreads a certain number of sc. mind-viruses and warnings against them.

The most expressive examples of mind viruses are probably "Good Times" and "Energy Matrix". The former is a warning against one of the 'deadliest' viruses in history which is transmitted via e-mail, spreads by itself and is initialised by opening the message containing the virus. The warning "Good Times" started to circulate on the first days of Dec. 1994 and is still making its rounds. Along with the version in English it is also spreading in Spanish. A typical warning mail looks like this:

Please be careful and forward this mail to anyone you care about.

WARNING!!!!!!! INTERNET VIRUS

**

The FCC released a warning last Wednesday concerning a matter of major importance to any regular user of the Internet. Apparently a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of AMERICA ON LINE that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other more well-known viruses such as “Stoned”, “Airwolf” and “Michaelangelo” pale in comparison to the prospects of this newest creation by a warped mentality. What makes this virus so terrifying, said the FCC, is the fact that no program needs to be exchanged for a new computer to be infected. It can be spread through the existing email systems of the Internet.

Once a Computer is infected, one of several things can happen. If the computer contains a hard drive, that will most likely be destroyed. If the program is not stopped, the computer’s processor will be placed in an nth-complexity infinite binary loop – which can severely damage the processor if left running that way too long.

Unfortunately, most novice computer users will not realize what is happening until it is far too late. Luckily, there is one sure means of detecting what is now known as the “Good Times” virus. It always travels to new computers the same way in a text email message with the subject line reading “Good Times”. Avoiding infection is easy once the file has been received simply by NOT READING IT! The act of loading the file into the mail server’s ASCII buffer causes the “Good Times” mainline program to initialize and execute. The program is highly intelligent – it will send copies of itself to everyone whose email address is contained in a receive-mail file or a sent-mail file, if it can find one. It will then proceed to trash the computer it is running on. The bottom line there is – if you receive a file with the subject line “Good Times”, delete it immediately! Do not read it. Rest assured that whoever’s name was on the “From” line was surely struck by the virus. Warn your friends and local system users of this newest threat to the Internet! It could save them a lot of time and money.

Could you pass this along to your global mailing list as well?

“Energy Matrix” is a warning against a virus which is said to exist on every on-line service and WWW and which not only infects the computers but has a damaging effect on people.

VIRUS*WARNING*VIRUS

This is not a joke or some “X-Files” spoof or some other kind of hoax. There is a virus on the WWW and all online services. Disinfect programs are of no use. This virus is an energy matrix that uses on-line and other communication services as a conduit to infect you mentally via your computer screen.

There is no way to screen for this virus and no way, as of yet, to prove its existence beyond a doubt. Downloading or uploading text/e-mail files should not put you at risk; however, prolonged exposure to your screen while it is on-line is dangerous. All forms of communication services including radio and television can act, to some extent, as a conduit for this virus, but not as strongly as the computer on-line interface.

If you are irritable, depressed, emotionally upset, or otherwise have negative or destructive thoughts that do not seem to be your own then the virus has infected you. Repeat exposure will be increasingly harmful.

Your only protection is to use these tools for constructive or helpful purposes, and not for mindless entertainment, playing around or the dissemination of disharmonious messages. Chat rooms are the most contagious areas! If you feel you really need to use the Net, use it as judiciously as possible.

Regrettably, this warning sounds like a poor attempt at humor; nevertheless, it is completely serious. This warning is not a plot, part of someone’s political agenda, or the raving of a delusional paranoid. Ignore it at your own risk. **YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!**

Despite the existence of numerous believers of such stories, the general attitude is that there is no truth to them (it is quite inconceivable) and they were started as a practical joke that went out of control.

THE EVERYDAY-USERS

Folklore about ordinary computer users is generally related to a genre of jokes aimed at the ordinary computer user who often fails in his work. The jokes can be divided into 3 groups according to their content and/or credibility:

1) How users with no technological knowledge whatsoever do it?!

Here are jokes where those who have never seen a computer or used it and know nothing of the functions or control of certain hardware. The most common piece of hardware is a mouse, keyboard, discs, and also drives. Quite popular are stories about users who complain about the computer not working, when it is not switched on.

a) Mouse. The target of 'mouse jokes' is generally characterised by his inability to use the mouse properly – it is usually impossible to use the mouse as a remote control aiming it towards the screen, or as a foot switch.

A user called the PC Support line of the university having trouble with her Mac. It was handed off to one of the Mac guys... "What seems to be the problem?" "It's not working." Eyes roll. "What's not working?" "My Mac." (Five minutes of drawing the problem out of the woman deleted) "Okay, to access the files on the disk click the mouse on the picture of the disk." Pause. "Nothing happened. I told you, I've already tried this." Support guy makes as if he is strangling the phone. "Okay, do it again. Is the mouse moving?" "Yep." "On the screen?" "Yep." "Now click twice on the picture of the disk." Pause and the consultant hears the two clicks again. "Nothing." "Ma'am, double-click once more for me." Clink-clink. "Ma'am, are you hitting the screen with your mouse?"

A salesperson hoping to demonstrate to a skeptical corp. how easy it is to use windows. "Just point and click" he says. "Just point to the application you want and click on the mouse button." So the exec takes the mouse, lifts it, hefts it like a tv. remote points at the screen and clicks the button.

I remember when my new Amiga arrived (way back in 86!). I had a class to go to, but my roommate was kind enough to set it all up for me. When I got back from class, he was having a great time playing with it. His only problem was using the mouse. Turns out he was holding it in his hand and rolling the ball with his fingers! I don't even remember how he was coping with the mouse buttons.

b) Keyboard. The main topic of "keyboard jokes" is a text 'press any key to...', appearing on the screen every now and then, which should be followed by the user's press on a random key. Such jokes are based on an understanding that the user tries to press the key marked 'any' that he cannot find. It is a pun – the commands to press any key and 'any' key are identical.

I was trying to teach this sales person (for automated entrance system[they made gates]) how to enter his letters into Word Perfect. I told him to select Word Perfect from his menu and when he did it gave him the opening screen which said, "Press any key to continue..." He looked at the keyboard for a while then asked me, "Where is the 'any' key?"

2) How can people misunderstand such simple things!

Here we are concerned with jokes about people who have failed to understand certain computer commands – the majority of such jokes are allegedly true stories. They are mainly puns based on the similarity of names of different computer parts (a request to close the drive door is followed by a loud banging of door heard over the phone; the user installing a program asking whether he can take out some of the four inserted floppies as there is no more space in the drive).

3) Let's see if they get the joke...

The jokes of this group may seem somewhat cruel, even sadistic at first. Just imagine someone truly capable of doing such things. One of the best examples was provided by the Estonian computer magazine "Arvutimaailm": Advice: 12 different ways to take care of a floppy. As you might suspect, following even one piece of advice about caring for your floppies would permanently damage the floppy and cause the inevitable loss of information

on the disc. Stories about people who have actually thought them as true might be classified under urban legends.

4) Folklore about computer specialists or spread by them. Most of the hacker-related attitudes, beliefs and information belong in this group. Several translations of hackers' slang have been published in "Arvutimaailm".

COMPUTER AND SOFTWARE FOLKLORE

This genre includes stories and beliefs about the 'mythic' peculiarities/characteristics of different software/hardware, incidents with different computers and/or programs. Certain explanations of different acronyms belong here as well: e.g.

PCRCIA – People Can't Remember Computer Industry Acronyms;

MACINTOSH – Machine Always Crashes If NoT Operating System Hangs.

In addition to these it also features several stories about the origin or actual meaning of a name or an acronym.

FOLKLORE ORIGINATED IN AND BELONGING TO THE ENVIRONMENT OF COMPUTERS AND COMPUTER NETWORKS.

New jokes and legendary personalities have emerged in the course of progress in computer and network technologies. A person later known as KIBO used UNIX's search program Grep to surf through the information in UseNet, located articles containing his name or nickname and replied to them all. This resulted in the emergence of a certain cult around his virtual pseudo-person called kibology. The process of searching the whole UseNet data for one's name or some other information is called kibosing.

Another legendary character of UseNet is BIFF (also B1FF). It is a made-up character who allegedly sends stupid messages with spelling mistakes and capitalised letters from his brother's computer. Over the Internet texts in capital letters are considered as shouting or at least containing some special emphasis. One of the peculiarities of BIFF's writing is the substitution of letters with numbers (O > 0, I > 1, E > 3), and also the seeming

mistyping of exclamation mark without pressing the shift-key resulting in number 1. The latter mistake was somewhat exaggerated as the keyboard of the Commodore 64 that BIFF said he used did not have these functions under the same key. BIFF came into being in 1988 as the prototype of a freshman computer user unaware of the ways of the world.

“WHO IS BIFF?”

BIFF IZ A REELY K00L D00D !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!1 HE POSTS 2 THE
NET FROM HIZ
BIG BROTHERS C-64 !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!111 BIFF IS AWESUM

By now Internet folklore is being transmitted in written form. But part of it has been passed on orally. Further research should reveal what part of it and to what extent it is actually orally transmitted.

Internet folklore can be found in easily accessible lists. It is easy for everyone to add his or her own stories. The biggest problem here is those who are trying to be witty or to attract attention with self-created jokes instead of forwarding an anecdote or a similar folkloric story. A large part of folklore is lost in the vast flux of correspondence, messages and self-promotion.

The material on WWW-sites and different FAQ lists is more even and of higher quality, generally reviewed/ edited by a certain editor/collector of stories. Sometimes, folklore can be found in the introductory homepages of WWW, as well.

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