

Fortuity Research Report

We have evicted the previous tenants and moved into the vast industrial site which is the new Fortuity Research Complex. Heating is provided by some obsolete supercomputers humming away in the basement, but we have had the gas laid on for the kitchens. Our gas meter is the newest model from Origin Energy, which emails its measurements back to base. Our Surveillance Section managed to intercept one of these, and here it is:

Hi Boss,

Greetings from the sunny Blue Mountains! Boy, it's quiet enough here during the day, but you should have heard the party they threw last night! I'm doing fine and making new friends. The water meter just goes with the flow, but the electricity meter is still putting up some resistance (Ha!). Take care,

Your Faithful Employee,

Trevor the Gas Meter.

BTW, they used 27.3 cubic metres of gas.

We know Trevor's return address, too, but I'm not publishing it here for fear of spam. We don't want a soufflé spoiled because Trevor's too busy reading Viagra ads and studying digital pictures of lonely Russian appliances.

The Fortuity Kitchens, by the way, are busy cooking their way through all the recipes on the Internet. These are then distributed to our testers and rated for taste. The current leader is Chicken a la Dave, from **recipes.gocurious.com**, while Kitty Litter Cake – from **haphazardgourmet.blogspot.com** – is running dead last.

Most of the testing is done by programmers from our Linux lab, whom we have taken in off the streets and allowed to work for food in the hope that their enormous energy and enthusiasm can ultimately produce something useful. Some of them have been inspired by the recent *Hulk* film to install Linux versions on to bootable USB memory sticks. With these, like electronic gamma rays, they can turn a mild-mannered Windows PC (Bruce Banner) into a powerful Linux monster (The Hulk) which has enormous strength but lacks basic communication skills. Unlike Bruce Banner, though, once the USB stick is removed and the PC rebooted, it returns to normal with no memory of its wild rampage. Meanwhile all the user's documents and settings are stored on the stick, and it can be inserted into another PC to go on from where it left off, making it essentially a forty-gram portable computer.

Some of the more user-friendly Linux versions like Ubuntu – if Linux distros were dogs, Ubuntu would be a big boofy Labrador puppy – are already offering USB installation as part of their standard package, but those that aren't can be still downloaded and installed on to USB easily with the free and catchily-named Unetbootin package from **unetbootin.sourceforge.net**. And there's no good reason why Windows couldn't be set up the same way. To carry your entire working life

around your neck like this, you will need a memory stick with a capacity of at least eight gigabytes, which will currently set you back less than \$40 at most computer stores. And a lanyard, which they will probably throw in for free.

In fact Fortuity Research has invested heavily in USB sticks, which will inevitably replace hard disks before very long. We have also discovered a nifty application which allows their contents to be rapidly cloned, in the same way that CDs can be copied, all-at-once rather than one file at a time. This reduces the time for duplicating complex structures – like a preinstalled operating system – between USB sticks from a matter of hours to a few minutes. The application is called All Image, and a trial shareware version is available from www.towodo.com/products/allimage. Commercial licenses are available from \$US25 up, which is about a quarter of what it costs us here to have a technician reinstall and set an operating system on a hard disk that the gremlins have got at.

‘Gremlins’, of course, in computer parlance usually means ‘members of the public’, who will keep on getting up to things that they are not supposed to. For instance, RickRolling. This consists in repeatedly referring to the 80’s British rocker Rick Astley online, often in completely inappropriate circumstances, including purportedly serious hyperlinks which in fact take the user to a YouTube video of Astley doing a medley of his hit, *Never Gonna Give You Up*. Thousands of RickRollers have now rolled Astley into the Number One spot of the MTV Europe 2008 music awards, making him officially the Best Act Ever According To Europeans Until The Next Awards When People Will Have Got Over It, We Hope. Astley’s competitors included such all-time greats as Britney Spears and Tokio Hotel, who might have won if people hadn’t thought they were just the venue for next year’s award ceremony. Rickrolling has its own Wikipedia entry at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rickrolling and the video of *Never Gonna Give You Up* can be found almost anywhere, but especially at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu_moia-oVI.

Fortuity has also invested heavily in MP3 players, which are after all just memory sticks with a headphone jack, or in the case of the iPod, a headphone jack and Attitude. This is not for their entertainment value (in case the Tax Office happens to be wondering about those deductions), but in order to investigate whether they can be made to suit our particular requirements. Here at Fortuity we spend a good deal of time listening to audiobooks, podcasts and recorded radio programs, and right now the MP3 player market is heavily skewed towards people who want to listen to short music tracks. As a result all the MP3 players we have tried so far are lacking some important features. What we are looking for is a player that will accept and display long file names like *Geekworld Podcast 20081015 – Matt and Jasmine discuss whether Steve Jobs actually looks better with a beard.mp3*, both in a playlist and while actually playing, by scrolling if necessary. It would be ideal if it could group files into directories and play one file from each directory in sequence before going back for the next one. It needs to be able to store and jump to ‘bookmarks’ and remember where it left off playing last time, preferably for several different tracks at once. It requires buttons that skip forward and backwards 30 seconds at a time so that users can leap over unwanted musical interludes and advertisements. Because podcasts and audio book files are long, it needs accelerating fast forward and rewind options, and – for the sake of our sanity and a kinder, more rational world – the fast forward control and the Next Track controls should be so distinct that there is no

chance of triggering one when trying to activate the other. Oh, and a Delete Current Track option would be handy too.

So far the only device we have at Fortuity which even comes close is not an MP3 player as such but an old Compaq PDA running a mini version of Windows Media Player. The software designers have clearly thought this thing through long ago: now all that remains is for the hardware designers to catch up. But if you have a dedicated MP3 player that actually works well for long podcasts and audio books, send an email about it to the address at the end of the article, and we will plug it for all it's worth in the next issue.

Finally, the Fortuity Web Browser Evaluation Team have completed their detailed review and analysis of the new Google Chrome browser, and produced a report which I reproduce here in its entirety: 'Underpowered Firefox'. Just why Google thinks the world needs a new web browser any more than it needs another Ice Age is hard to tell, but no doubt its role in their plans for global domination will become clearer over time. In the meanwhile, the only new features it appears to offer are a home page which displays thumbnails of the sites one has visited recently, and an 'incognito mode' option whereby one can visit sites secretly without leaving a record in one's history files (now, *why* would anyone ever want to do that?). But both features are already available in Firefox profiles and extensions, with ever so much more besides. In fact whenever the Fortuity team installs a new system they set up Firefox immediately with two extensions: Adblock Plus, which screens out 99% of all known advertisements, and Adblock Filterset.G Updater, which maintains a list of new ads to be blocked as they appear. Productivity goes up immediately! Our other favourites are FlashKiller, which hides those irritating animated Flash panels, IE Tab, which allows Firefox to pretend it is Internet Explorer for those sites like Microsoft.com which are really picky about who they let in, and Unhide Passwords, which displays your passwords in plain text rather than in those annoying dots or asterisks, so that those of us who are not always expert with the keyboard can see what we actually typed.

From today our technicians are going home every night with red-rimmed eyes and palsied fingers. Next month Fortuity Research produces a report on game consoles.

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