WASTED GEAR
I read David Alan Grier’s column titled “Click Here to Empty Trash” (The Known World, Sept. 2008, pp. 6-8) with great interest.

It is amazing to consider the amount of computer gear this world has been wasting. It seems to me that we do not take enough care to continue to use our existing systems as long as they provide adequate service. Sometimes we replace working systems just because there is a newer version of Windows, a fancy new game, or whatever other kind of software that seems to have more bells and whistles—even though all of the additional functionality is not necessarily very useful.

A real challenge is finding a good balance between global efforts to invent and implement energy-efficient technical equipment and efforts to preserve our “nature-friendly and nonpolluted” environment. Sometimes, the relationships between the two efforts result in exporting obsolete computers and other technologies to developing countries to avoid filling local rubbish-heaps with wasted gear.

In contrast, I keep trying to persuade people to use their “old cans” as long as possible, including the ancient MS-DOS-based machines and monochromatic black-and-white monitors if they do not need fancy GUIs and other enhanced-text abilities. Such equipment probably is not as energy-efficient as the factory-new models, but isn’t that the same with our dozen-year-old refrigerators or washing machines that many of us still use in our households? Consumerism principles push us to renew our equipment as frequently as possible, but the current economic crisis might make us more environmentally aware.

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The author responds:
I appreciate these thoughtful comments and am grateful that we’re seeing members of the computer industry take this issue seriously. The problem of computer waste and electrical consumption has the potential to embarrass the industry quite badly if it is not addressed.

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PROGRAMMERS AND XML

When I first read the article, thinking of it as being ironic, I found it hilarious. Then I reread it, realizing that it was not ironic at all. That second reading was sad because of the fundamental truth the article expresses: Only real programmers can achieve the expected deadlines (usually).

This article is a must read for everybody in the software business.

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ON TARGET
After reading the president’s message in Computer’s December 2008 issue (R. Kasturi, “Enhancements to Society’s Products and Services: Report of Progress Made in 2008,” pp. 7-9) describing the online wonders available to IEEE Computer Society members, I was tempted to write stating why I haven’t tried them: Access requires a username and password. I gave up my attempt to gain online access to a telephone bill after the company rejected my first five attempts to create a username, saying they were already taken—difficult to believe given the ones I tried—and giving no further hints. Viewing and paying utility bills are not in my view activities requiring high security.

Somehow we need a better compromise between security and usability that allows users to determine how strongly they will protect their own information (like utility bills) and allows simple transactions to be completed easily and if possible without requiring users to remember accounts and passwords. The IEEE and the ACM could take a lesson here: If those e-mails I get announcing the availability of digital editions of publications contained a link that would allow me access without forcing me to log in, I might actually try it, and I can’t see how doing this would harm the societies.

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MADRID’S BRILLIANT IDEA
Although the lessons Simone Santini learned as a result of his Kafkaesque experience with trying to use Paypal to pay for a wireless ISP are amusing to read, lesson one doesn’t withstand reality.

He says, “We’re not as stupid as they think.” I work for an ISP and once also worked in IT support at a large corporation. We regularly run password-cracking programs to assess the level of password security. You wouldn’t believe how many users choose ridiculously bad passwords. So yes, they can be that stupid. After all, not all of us are professors.

Let’s consider what would happen if Paypal didn’t insist on strong passwords, and a user chooses a trivial password for an account. Then a hacker guesses the password and uses the victim’s account to make purchases. Now do you really think that user is going to say, “Okay, it was foolish of me to choose a bad password. I’m to blame. Never mind the damage”? Think again. He will move heaven and earth to get his money back from Paypal, accusing the company of not having insisted that he choose a more secure password given they knew there were evil hackers out there stealing Paypal accounts. If users didn’t react that way, why would Paypal—and other websites with sensitive user accounts—bother to insist that users have strong passwords?

By the way, it is indeed possible to get along with just the same three passwords employed according to the website’s requirements: one with only numbers, one with a number and one capital letter, and one with a special character and a capital letter. This covers 100 percent of all websites I know of.

A second point is that conference organizers don’t require strong passwords to prevent the CIA from reading submitted papers, but rather to prevent students, enemies, or any moron with too much time on his hands from messing with submissions just for the fun of hassling the authors. So the issue here is not protection against unauthorized reading but against unauthorized manipulation.

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The author responds:
I am not sure users would react the way you indicate. Well, maybe in the US—but then that is a country where you can sue because your coffee was too hot, so it doesn’t really count.

In most countries, all Paypal would have to do to avoid liability is to post a warning about weak passwords and, maybe, if the user entered a weak password, provide notification that the user is using that password at his own risk, but without rejecting it. In any case, good passwords can be cracked too. If I have to go out of my way to find a password that satisfies Paypal, and that password is cracked, then, believe me, hell hath no fury….

As for the conference organizers, if they do all that for me, then I hereby require them to stop doing things for me. Why can’t I just send them my paper by e-mail? Who would mess with my submission then? In general, I am not so paranoid as to believe that people will want to mess with my conference submissions just for the fun of hassling me. My submissions are not that important.

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