

# RANDOM

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I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

## THOUGHTS

2003:12

### My 3-part program for dealing with spam

I get more questions about spam than about anything else, whether from people who listen to Technology Corner or from clients. Spam is a difficult problem to solve and it work to maintain control. If you haven't read my long summary at [www.610tech.net](http://www.610tech.net), I encourage you to do so soon. Look for the October 19, 2003, show synopsis.

I use a multi-part method:

1) Any mail that comes to [blinn.com](http://blinn.com) is scanned by SpamAssassin and graded. I have fine-tuned this application and it needs continuous monitoring to be effective. But it is effective. Currently SpamAssassin catches most spam and rarely returns a false positive.

1a) I changed my e-mail address from "bill" to "william.blinn" because that's harder to guess. Additionally, when I sign up for an on-line service, I create a special address. For example, if I were to sign up for a *Wall Street Journal* on-line service, I would provide the address "wall.street.journal@blinn.com". Dozens of special addresses forward to a single collector account. Why? If somebody sells/rents/loans my address to a spammer, I'll know who did it.

2) I have disabled the "default e-mail account", which means that I will no longer receive messages directed to "blinky@blinn.com". Any message sent to a bad address is simply discarded without comment. Internet RFCs specify that undeliverable messages be returned to the sender, but most messages with bad addresses are spam.

3) Additionally, messages pass through GoodbyeSpam.com, which is a challenge/response system. GoodbyeSpam has a *whitelist* (addresses, domains, and phrases) for messages that I always want to receive and a *blacklist* (also addresses, domains, and phrases) I want to always reject. Anything that can't be accepted or rejected based on my rules goes into quarantine.

GoodbyeSpam can send unknown mailers a challenge message and they must reply to it before the mail is released. I can release the message or the sender can release the message by following a link in the challenge message.

**Important caution:** Even though the challenge happens only once per address, this is a very **bad** idea for a business account. A prospective customer who receives a challenge may be offended. Horrid first impression. With GoodbyeSpam I can turn OFF the challenge messages. I am then solely responsible for checking the quarantine box and releasing good messages.

I also glance at the GoodbyeSpam's trash before dumping it and usually find 1 or 2 messages per week in the trash. About 10% of the messages in quarantine are ones I want. Advantage: Trash and quarantined messages are not downloaded to your computer until you clear them. This saves time if you're traveling and using a slow dial-up line.

3) The final hurdle e-mail has to clear before I see it is

SpamPal, a free open-source filter (see [www.spampal.org](http://www.spampal.org) for details) that runs as a proxy on my machine. It depends heavily on public blacklisting services. The user can tune SpamPal to be aggressive (increases the risk of false positives) or relaxed (increases the risk of unmarked spam.) I have set it to "extremely aggressive".

**SpamPal is the last line of defense. Mail it sees has already been vetted, but it still kills a few spams.**

This multi-part approach works well for me. Of the 500 or so messages I receive daily, at least 40% are spam. Another 45% or so are mailing-list messages, subscriptions, and the like that I want. The remaining 5% are individual messages from friends, co-workers, and clients.

The fix isn't something that happens overnight and I must spend a few minutes each day to maintain the system, but the result is that a few (never more than 5) spams get through to me on any given day.

Good luck ridding your mailbox of spam! 





### Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

*Dead Trees* seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

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#### Home

Last Checked 4:23am PT  
Bill Blinn

Number	Message Status (click to preview messages)
10	<a href="#">Inbox</a> 
2	<a href="#">New Quarantine</a> 
0	<a href="#">Old Quarantine</a> 
100	<a href="#">Trash (click to empty)</a> 

[Check Mailboxes](#)

If you still think spam isn't a problem, you will change your mind soon. In a recent 8-hour period (11pm-7am) I received 100 spams. (GoodbyeSpam.com)

# Remember the 'Good Old Days'? Were they?

**Unless** you're a hermit living in a cave, you probably interact every day with one or more computers. Remember when banks used to close shortly after noon so they could get their books in order by the time people went home at 5? Computers have eliminated the need to do that. For better or worse (and it's a little of both) we could not live the way we do had computers not become widely available.

The first "computer" was called ENIAC. It filled a room, required a team of technicians to run it, and had less power and less storage capacity than the Handspring Treo that fits in my pocket. The Treo also serves as a phone, which ENIAC didn't. The Treo also saves all my login IDs and passwords, which ENIAC wouldn't have – partly because login IDs and passwords for computers didn't exist then and partly because I didn't exist then, either.



## Encyclopædia Britannica in a small box

In early November, the entire *Encyclopædia Britannica* (complete with "movies", illustrations, and pictures arrived on a single DVD. I installed the whole thing (4.1 GB) on my hard disk because I have plenty of space (2 120GB drives). Fifteen years ago (give or take) I would have paid well over \$1,000,000 for that kind of storage and it wouldn't have fit in my house or run on the available electric circuits.

As for the encyclopedia itself, my parents "invested" (encyclopedia sales-speak) in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in about 1963 and I still have it. The books probably cost more than \$1000 in 1963 dollars (minimum wage about \$1, expensive cars went for about \$2500, and gasoline was 25 cents per gallon.) Britannica lists the DVD at \$70, but it is widely available for \$25, which is what I paid.



## Impatience exacerbated

I visited Tucson in September to teach at the inaugural PowerPointLive conference. Despite staying downtown at a "name brand" hotel, the best Internet connection I could get from my hotel room was 21.6Kbps. Fortunately, the conference had a DSL connection and provided WiFi connectivity in the conference area.

I had to carry the computer down to the conference's help center, but when I glommed on to the WiFi connection, I had 10Mbps Internet connectivity. Oh – and I thought I was being inconvenienced.

When my website host (also used by several clients) found itself on the receiving end of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack for a week in September, there were occasional site outages. The longest was about 6 hours, overnight, the first day of the attack; others lasted no more than 15 minutes to half an hour. Some e-mail messages were delayed. And we were all *just terribly distressed* about the inconvenience. Inconvenienced? Really? Because a few e-mail messages were 2 hours late?

## Changing expectations

Acquaintance Donna Melton who lives in the San Juan Islands west of Seattle and uses a ferry boat to get to the mainland commented about things we take for granted:

- I ask PageMaker to redraw a 36x24 inch page full of complicated graphics, multiple fonts (that's fonts, all you typographers – I'd never mix that many typefaces in a single document), and rotated images, then I fume and bang the keyboard shelf if it takes more than 1.4 seconds. This would have taken days to accomplish not many years ago. No, I wouldn't have attempted most of it then.
- My son is forever asking why the Internet is so slow because it's been 20 seconds and the page containing 30 photos isn't quite done loading.
- I can sit in my jammies at 3:00 in the morning as I scan through my choice of dozens of movies on digital cable, then I get angry when the picture pixelates.
- Not too long ago it wouldn't have occurred to me to call anyone from the top of a mountain. Now, the connection doesn't go through as I'm surveying the surrounding mountain tops, and I'm having a temper tantrum because of a little "no service" message. Watch older movies sometime with an eye toward cell phone use. So many plot points vanish. Now, those moments have to include the obligatory scene where the woman in jeopardy looks at her phone and says, "Oh no! Out of range!"

Taking things for granted? Who? Me? 

## CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett.

Planning is like rooting out bamboo. It's hard work!