

Java jumpiness



Everything you've read about Java makes you think it is an instrument of light and verity. Well, it is; I believe it. The examples you can see at <http://java.sun.com> and at <http://www.gamelan.com> are fairly incredible, and stretch your concept of what's going to be possible in the immediate future, both from the standpoint of user interactivity with this weird new medium and from the standpoint of the ways information can be presented.

That aside, there are a few warning bells already going off on issues of privacy and personal information.

The first time you run most browsers, you're prompted to fill out some personal information; this is especially likely with the browsers that let you send E-mail directly without using a separate E-mail program. You often fill in an organization name, your full name, and your return E-mail address.

What the browsers don't tell you—yet—is that a lot of that information can be retrieved using either Java or JavaScript. (Java is the programming language; JavaScript is the more user-friendly version that nonprogrammers will be able to use.)

Java and JavaScript are tremendous additions to the Web arsenal. They are languages in which both simple and complex programs can carry out either local (browser, screen, hard drive) or global (network, Internet) activities.

But a few weeks ago, I noticed a surprising five-line JavaScript program when I looked (out of idle curiosity) at “View Source” to see the code for a page I was visiting. This particular program runs automatically on your machine when you visit a page that has it (this is how all Java and JavaScript mini-applications or applets run). There's no way for you to know exactly what it's doing, and you may even miss its operation. It automatically grabs your E-mail address as you entered it in the “Preferences” or “Options” dialog box of your browser, and sends the address to the owner of the page.

Hmm, I hear you say, why is this? Netscape, among others, thought the E-mail address would be something useful for remote systems to be able to grab for registration and other purposes, so it's available as a "client variable" of sorts. Their server has always been able to retrieve this information; JavaScript opens it up to the rest of the world. For some reason, no browser has incorporated a button reading, "Keep E-mail and personal information inaccessible remotely; use it for my purposes only." Perhaps we'll see that soon.

In mid-March, Netscape released Navigator version 2.01, which fortunately closes this particular hole and some related Java and JavaScript bugs and security problems. The company removed the ability to submit forms via E-mail without the user's knowledge; however, the many users of Navigator 2.0 are still vulnerable until they update—and this solves only one class of problems.

There's been some discussion in the U.S. Congress—before the latest porn legislation—about privacy on the Internet. Most organizations and companies that collect mailing addresses and personal information through phone polls, buying lists, and other methods are obliged by law to keep chunks of it private

and confidential, and use it only in certain ways or face penalties.

Many of these restrictions certainly apply in spirit to the Net, but as there's no specific law to cover electronic gathering of information—like the legislation I described above—there's probably no recourse at the moment for Web surfers who don't want anyone gathering this kind of information.

I'm obviously not a lawyer (and don't even play one on the Web), but it seems to me there must be legal questions about collecting information such as names and E-mail addresses without informing users and giving them the option to leave without providing that information.

Yet a lot of the forms you might fill out on the Net are going to people and places that you know nothing about and who may not feel that they are covered by the same covenants and legal restrictions that govern the so-called real world.

Oddly, with all the focus on credit-card-number theft over the Net—and I have yet to hear of a single substantiated case of such theft, only third-party urban myth—the issue of more private information being captured has been largely ignored. The kind of information we're talking about, though, is equally

important, if not more so. I would rather give up my credit card number than my E-mail address. I can cancel my credit card and get a new number, but I can't cancel my E-mail and get a new address—in practical terms, it would be like abandoning my home.

One of the side effects that these new information-gathering capabilities will undoubtedly cause is the increased sale of sophisticated E-mail programs like Qualcomm Eudora. Eudora allows the use of “filters” that parse through a message for certain “from” addresses or mail contents. Junk mail gets thrown immediately into the Trash Can—though in the current political climate, I'd better make sure that, as in Windows 95, it's a Recycle Bin. ●