

CREATORS ADMIT UNIX, C HOAX

COMPUTERWORLD: 1 May, 1991

Contributed by Bernard L. Hayes

In an announcement that has stunned the computer industry, Ken Thompson, Dennis Ritchie and Brian Kernighan admitted that the Unix operating system and C programming language created by them is an elaborate April Fools prank kept alive for over 20 years. Speaking at the recent UnixWorld Software Development Forum, Thompson revealed the following:

"In 1969, AT&T had just terminated their work with the GE/Honeywell/AT&T Multics project. Brian and I had just started working with an early release of Pascal from Professor Nicholas Wirth's ETH labs in Switzerland and we were impressed with its elegant simplicity and power. Dennis had just finished reading 'Bored of the Rings', a hilarious National Lampoon parody of the great Tolkien 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy. As a lark, we decided to do parodies of the Multics environment and Pascal. Dennis and I were responsible for the operating environment. We looked at Multics and designed the new system to be as complex and cryptic as possible to maximize casual users' frustration levels, calling it Unix as a parody of Multics, as well as other more risqué allusions. Then Dennis and Brian worked on a truly warped version of Pascal, called 'A'. When we found others were actually trying to create real programs with A, we quickly added additional cryptic features and evolved into B, BCPL and finally C. We stopped when we got a clean compile on the following syntax:

```
for(;P("\n"),R-;P("|"))for(e=C;e-;P("_"+(*u++/8)%2))P("|"+(*u/4) %2);
```

To think that modern programmers would try to use a language that allowed such a statement was beyond our comprehension! We actually thought of selling this to the Soviets to set their computer science progress back 20 or more years. Imagine our surprise when AT&T and other US corporations actually began trying to use Unix and C! It has taken them 20 years to develop enough expertise to generate even marginally useful applications using this 1960's technological parody, but we are impressed with the tenacity (if not common sense) of the general Unix and C programmer. In any event, Brian, Dennis and I have been working exclusively in Pascal on the Apple Macintosh for the past few years and feel really guilty about the chaos, confusion and truly bad programming that have resulted from our silly prank so long ago." Major Unix and C vendors and customers, including AT&T, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, GTE, NCR, and DEC have refused comment at this time. Borland International, a leading vendor of Pascal and C tools, including the popular Turbo Pascal, Turbo C and Turbo C++, stated they had suspected this for a number of years and would continue to enhance their Pascal products and halt further efforts to develop C. An IBM spokesman broke into uncontrolled laughter and had to postpone a hastily convened news conference concerning the fate of the RS-6000, merely stating 'VM will be available Real Soon Now'. In a cryptic statement, Professor Wirth of the ETH institute and father of the Pascal, Modula 2 and Oberon structured languages, merely stated that P. T. Barnum was correct.

In a related late-breaking story, usually reliable sources are stating that a similar confession may be forthcoming from William Gates concerning the MS-DOS and Windows operating environments. And IBM spokesmen have begun denying that the Virtual Machine (VM) product is an internal prank gone awry.