CONFERENCE REPORT

A Storm in a Coffee Cup

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The first time VB2002 was dubbed (jokingly) 'the confer-ence from hell' by its organisers, no one imagined how apt that description would turn out to be. However, amongst storms, floods and wrangles with US customs, good humour prevailed, and a thoroughly entertaining conference was enjoyed by all.

Lessons in Meteorology

The *VB* team arrived in New Orleans a couple of days ahead of the start of the conference, to be greeted by an unnerving warning from the staff of the Hyatt Regency. We were warned that evacuation of the hotel (and indeed the entire city) might be necessary, in preparation for another visitor to Louisiana: Hurricane Isadore – expected to arrive on the opening morning of VB2002.

The prospect of 300 delegates each bringing a blanket and a pillow to the hotel ballroom (as indicated in the Hyatt's safety instructions 'what to do in the event of a hurricane') conjured up images of a giant sleepover and memories of the Girl Guides. Perhaps we would have to turn the event into a one-stream conference and convert other hotel guests into AV experts – a good opportunity for end user education perhaps.

Before long, all eyes became glued to *The Weather Channel* and every member of the *VB* crew seemed to have become an expert in hurricane tracking overnight. The outlook seemed gloomy in more ways than one as our welcome drinks reception on board the Creole Queen paddlewheeler had to be cancelled (something to do with not knowing where the Mississippi ended and the streets of New Orleans began), our photographer felt he would be unable to reach the hotel, the entertainment agency admit-ted it was unlikely any entertainers would make it to the gala dinner, and reports were flying (*ahem*) around the hotel that the airport was closed and delegates would be unable to reach New Orleans.

Meanwhile, the hotel staff were either sent home to batten down their hatches or moved into the hotel, and the hotel entrance was sandbagged as the water level in the loading bay rose to waist height.

As New Orleans began to shut down – shops closed, bars boarded up their windows and sandbagged their doors – the *VB* crew could only feel sorry for those delegates who had come early to do some sightseeing, but who were left with no alternative on the entertainment front than to frequent the hotel bar or channel hop between *The Weather Channel* and the local news stations.

Happily, many delegates had arrived in New Orleans prior to the closing of the airport. As the city prepared for the onslaught of the storm, VB2002 delegates revelled in the 'wartime spirit' and a lively drinks reception was held in the Hyttops sports bar in the hotel – somewhat safer and drier than the Creole Queen under the circumstances.

Thankfully, Isadore had quietened to tropical storm status by the time it reached the Hyatt and, although the hotel slipped a list of safety instructions under each of the bedroom doors, and a city-wide curfew from 10pm to 6am put paid to any late night exploration, it was with relief that we awoke on the opening morning of the conference to find no windows had been blown in, the flood waters had not reached the third floor and the bar was still operational. (Concerned delegates were heard to ask: 'If we get stranded in this hotel, will there be enough wine and beer to keep us going for the duration?')

I Still Dream of Memphis

Yet inclement weather was not the last of the troubles to beset the *VB* crew. While the storm clouds rolled in, another problem was brewing.

A week prior to the conference, a shipment was sent from *VB*'s offices to New Orleans. Boxes full of copies of the conference proceedings, CDs, bags, t-shirts, posters, and so on were packed up carefully, the accompanying paperwork was completed – making sure the contents were itemised in fine detail (or so we thought) – and the shipment was despatched. It made it as far as Memphis, Tennessee.

Apparently, US Customs' idea of fine detail was a little different from *VB*'s – questions fired back at us included 'what is the country of origin of the t-shirts?', 'what ink was used to print the logos on the t-shirts?' and 'how many stitches are there per inch of t-shirt?'. It took more than a little rooting around, but we managed to come up with an answer for every probing question.

However, when it came to coffee cups intended for the sole purpose of pencil-holding at the *VB* registration desk, the matter was passed over to the FDA (Food and Drug Administration). OK, so we were attempting to import two coffee cups emblazoned with the words 'VIRUS BULLETIN', but *we meant computer virus …*

To our horror (and subsequent amusement) the FDA deemed it necessary to send the two coffee cups for laboratory analysis – presumably to be poked, prodded and

tested for new strains of biological virus. Meanwhile, conference registration opened and delegates could be seen wandering around with the perplexed 'I'm sure I'm supposed to have something else' look after being presented with nothing more than a name badge for their efforts.

To our immense relief and gratitude, delegates took the lack of the conference materials in good humour. For the duration of the conference (and despite countless telephone calls attempting to expedite its onward journey), the shipment of proceedings remained in Memphis.

Late on the final day of the conference we were delighted to be informed that some palettes had arrived at the hotel, marked for VB2002. However, it was to our dismay (but, let's face it, not complete surprise) that we discovered that only *half* of the shipment had arrived – and the copies of the proceedings were … still in Memphis. The delegates patiently formed an orderly queue during the afternoon's coffee break while they waited to collect their VB2002 bags and t-shirts, better late than never.

Conference Programme

The disruption caused to travel arrangements by Isadore called for some emergency re-jigging of the programme to allow for two full days of presentations. Reserve speaker Martin Overton stepped in with his paper 'When Worlds Collide' and the ever-versatile Graham Cluley magic-ed up a second presentation ('Viruses: a year in review') to complete the programme.

In his scheduled presentation, Graham Cluley spoke on the subject of e-bugs and debated the question of whether anti-virus vendors should include detection of governments' keystroke logging devices or turn a blind eye. In the absence of an attendee from the FBI, unsuspecting *VB* first-timer Nina Gaubert of the UK's National High Tech Crime Unit was hauled from the audience to take part in a telephone role play with Graham. Game for a laugh, Nina took the challenge in her stride and pulled off an admirable performance – we await VB2003 to see how she chooses to get her own back. Graham's presentation ended with a straw poll indicating that approximately 100% of the audience felt they would like AV vendors to include detection of e-bugs in their products.

Robert Vibert gave a few delegates a rude awakening by catapulting doughnuts into the unsuspecting audience. Prior to the food fight he had been charting the growth of AVIEN since its inception at the *VB* conference in Orlando two years ago and detailing the progress of some of AVIEN's ongoing projects.

On introducing Nick FitzGerald's presentation, session chair Randy Abrams delighted the audience by producing a

bottle of Arrogant Bastard Ale, which he explained was intended as an incentive for Nick to, well, get to the point. Nick spoke on the subject of free anti-virus techniques – or was it second-hand cars? After several slides of classic Mini Coopers and Lamborghinis Nick finally did start talking on the subject of anti-virus and justly earned his bottle of ale.

Security consultant Klas Schöldström focused on education, presenting an overview of what he considers to be one of the most effective corporate education tools – a live virus demonstration. Klas detailed how he takes with him a portable virus lab when he visits companies and gave the audience an example of one of his training demonstrations using samples of W32/Explorezip.

John Lambert presented an overview of the Software Restriction Policies feature in *Windows XP* and *.NET Server 2003*, explaining the thinking behind the feature and its use in an anti-malware role. Heuristics came under the spotlight when Andreas Marx reported the results of his retrospective testing of old AV products with newer viruses and Markus Schmall considered the question of whether *Java 2 ME* will provide a playground for malicious code, concluding that, although a secure platform in its current form, mobile telephone vendors, telephone carriers and the AV industry must work together to ensure it remains that way.

A lively panel session brought the conference to a close, with speakers Jeannette Jarvis, Andreas Marx, Richard Marko, Dmitry Gryaznov, John Morris, Carey Nachenberg and (non-speaker) Righard Zwienenberg, who kindly stepped in at the last minute. We learnt that Vesselin Bontchev recently patched his mother's PC for the first time since 1998 and had some interesting discussions including a debate about the likelihood (or otherwise) of cyberattacks being sufficiently severe to bring down the Internet.

The Frills and Spills

An evening of spectacular entertainment at the gala dinner went quite some way towards making up for the disappointment of being unable to cruise the Mississippi on board the Creole Queen paddlewheeler.

The evening kicked off with a fabulous Voodoo show, complete with boa constrictor (although I'm not sure whether delegates were entertained or merely terrified at the point at which the snake was taken on a tour around the audience). The organisers were touched that the Voodoo priestess gave the conference a (much needed) special blessing – we needed all the help we could get!