A FINAL NOTE ON C AND UNIX.

You might have gathered that C and Unix are not our favourite language and operating system. Knowing that we are biased, we thought it appropriate to offer another view of these controversial topics, so here is an assessment from the Usenet news. We do not know who originally wrote it, so we can't give credit as due.

CREATORS ADMIT UNIX, C HOAX > > 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 Nichlaus 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 risque 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
- > spokesman have begun denying that the Virtual Machine (VM) product is
- > an internal prank gone awry.

NOTES :

- The Usenet message is reproduced above as received. It seems likely that the "-" signs in the C instruction quoted should be "--"; if nothing else, this illustrates what is one of probably the two most prolific sources of mistakes in C. (The other is the use of == as the equality operator.)
- Professor Wirth's first name is "Niklaus"; we met him, and Oberon, in the chapter LANGUAGES FOR WRITING OPERATING SYSTEMS. He has some interesting views on C, expressed forthrightly in the paper quoted in that chapter. Just in case any doubt remains, we remark that we think he's right.
- "Soviets" are committees which formed the basis of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), a historical Marxist state centred on Russia. After extensive misuse in military circles by people who obviously had no idea what it meant, a "Soviet", in some circles in the USA, came to mean any citizen of the USSR. The illusion that every resident of the USSR was in fact a committee could go far towards explaining the ridiculous persistence of the cold war; it is difficult to think of any more persuasive reason.
- P.T. Barnum is reputed to have said^{IMP16} : "There's a sucker born every minute".
- The reference to "Pascal on the Apple Macintosh" will be specially piquant to anyone who has tried to develop system software in Pascal for a Macintosh. Our comments on the complicated APIs characteristic of operating systems written using conventional languages (*LANGUAGES FOR WRITING OPERATING SYSTEMS*) were not merely hypothetical. The inventors of C might well feel quite at home. It is also interesting that the Macintosh system, originally written in assembly language and Pascal, is now in C. The API has not improved.

REFERENCE.

IMP16: Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (Little, Brown, 15th ed., 1980), page 536.