THE WEB

Taken!

By William Powell

Spam, scams, and fraud—enough already! Where's all the shiny, happy news that's fit to print? Maybe next month.

For five gut-wrenching days I thought that I'd become one of an increasing number of Web users taken by Internet fraud. It all worked out in the end, but my recent scare sent me in search of a better way to do business online. Sure, when dealing with online auction sites and classifieds, I've bought a little, sold a little, and, to date, I've had exceedingly good luck. But luck can quickly run out. So, if you, like me, have been crossing your fingers every time you send out a check for that eBay purchase, you might want to consider the following suggestions for avoiding fraud.

Check that feedback. It's amazing the confidence that a little positive feedback instills. Without eBay's feedback system, no one would've ever blindly sent money for a set of Elvis TCB coasters to someone across the globe. Now, we're

performing such transactions thousands of times a day.

If a buyer or seller has a substantial amount of positive feedback over a long period, you can rest assured that your transaction will probably be fine. No feedback or just a little positive feedback doesn't necessarily mean you should be concerned; it could just mean that the buyer or seller is new. Use feedback only as a starting point to gauge safety.

One caveat: Beware of unusual selling patterns, such as someone buying several small items and then selling a big-ticket one. The sale may be legit, but that's how many fraudulent sellers pad their feedback.

When in doubt, pick up the phone. If you want to know who you're dealing with, one of the best ways to find out is to talk to the person. A good scam artist can fool you just as easily over the phone as through email, but you can find out more about the person and the product in a five-minute conversation than you can in several emails. Follow up with email to confirm method and amount of payment, expected delivery, and condition of the item. It's always best to get such terms in writing, should you need it later.

Insist on a method of payment that makes you feel comfortable. If it's an item of little value and you're willing to take the chance, you can send a personal check. For a little more security, send a USPS money order via certified mail or, better yet, registered mail with signature confirmation. That way, you know that your payment or product reached the intended person safely. It also gives you some measure of recourse.

PayPal ◀)) **www.paypal.com** and other online payment services are a fairly safe way to do business. In case of fraud, many companies will work on your behalf to recover your funds. PayPal is now offering a money-back guarantee for buyers who use its service. Not all items qualify, so check with PayPal for more details.

Shop from a site you trust. EBay is big for a reason. Its system works, and it has taken substantial steps to provide insurance for sellers and buyers. In addition to its own fraud prevention measures, the online auction behemoth now partners with SquareTrade Services ◀)) **www. squaretrade.com** to mediate disputes.

It's better to go with escrow. If you're purchasing a big-ticket item—anything over

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Golden Arches at the
Golden Gate

For those of you who are following the developments of **McDonald's Wi-Fi rollout** (and who isn't?), Intel, Wayport, and McDonald's recently announced plans to enable **San Franciso**-area locations with Wi-Fi in earnest. As I reported earlier this year, a select group of New York locations were set up with Wi-Fi on a trial basis, but the Bay rollout will be more comprehensive, with some **75 locations** being wired for 802.11b technology. Wayport, which is providing the hotspots, is also considering future rollouts of 802.11g or 802.11a.

Pricing is reasonable at **US$4.95** for two hours of use. Locations will range from 12 in San Francisco to six in San Jose, California, as well as parts in between. Locations equipped with the service will bear Intel's new Centrino logo.

〉〉〉〉 US$500—always use escrow. This service allows the buyer to inspect the item before the funds are released to the seller, and it's your best bet for getting what you pay for. Escrow.com ◁ᵚ)https://www.escrow.com is a subsidiary of the world's largest escrow company. **Trust your gut.** If for any reason the buyer or seller makes you feel uneasy, pass. Even if everything works out in the end, you'll avoid the uncertainty and the headache of dealing with someone you don't trust.

For more information on avoiding and combating Internet fraud, visit these Websites:

- Fraud.org ◁ᵚ)www.fraud.org
- Internet Fraud Complaint Center ◁ᵚ)www1.ifccfbi.gov/index.asp
- U.S. Postal Service Department of Inspections ◁ᵚ)www.usps.com/websites/depart/inspect.

Hoedown in Hackerdom

Some things invite trouble. When you set out to see how many Websites hackers can deface in a six-hour period, you're asking for it. Zone-H, an independent security company that monitors and records hacking, cracking, and spamming activity, was the designated scorekeeper in the Defacers Challenge. The challenge was quickly seized upon by the media, not when one of the online greats such as AOL or Yahoo was defaced, but when the contestants quickly turned upon the promoters by launching a denial-of-service attack on Zone-H.org. The attack rendered the site inoperable for the next 12 hours. As for those contestants that actually played by the rules, 600 defacements were recorded, all of which took place on insignificant sites. The award was to go to the first hacker to deface 6000. I guess that means we won't be seeing hacking and cracking in the next X Games.

Yo! G

Products equipped with 802.11g Wi-Fi capability have been on the market for some time now. But it wasn't until June that the new standard finally gained approval from the Standards Board Review Committee of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. A green light from the IEEE is huge step for 802.11g that could usher in a high-speed wireless networking standard.

Where the 11g standard differs from the more common 11b standard is speed. 802.11g is fast, offering connection speeds of up to 54Mbps. To put that into context, a typical home cable connection is 3-10Mbps. Another upshot to 802.11g is that it's backwards compatible with 802.11b.

With high-speed and backward compatibility, you'd think that 802.11g would be a slam dunk. Well, not quite. There's another high-speed standard in this alphabet soup of Wi-Fi connectivity.

The competing standard 802.11a, introduced in 1999, offers 802.11g-level performance with a couple of twists. The 11a standard operates at a much higher frequency, 5-6GHz, which avoids interference from popular short-range wireless devices, such as those equipped with Bluetooth and even your microwave. That's its most noticeable advantage. But for some analysts, 802.11a's stumbling block is its lack of compatibility with earlier standards. So, if you want the speed of 802.11a and you're already an 802.11b user, you're going to have to shell out the big bucks. Oh, and 11a hasn't received governmental approval in much of Europe.

Reports on the future of wireless standards from the Wi-Fi Alliance are rather utopian, where all formats coexist in multistandard devices, but whatever happened to the goal of one standard? For now, there are plenty of gadgets coming to market that work with both 802.11b and 11g.

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The Web *covers Internet technology trends, news, and tips. Send comments, questions, and items of interest to theweb@astd.org.*

Correction

As a careful reader pointed out, my inclusion of the game Elf Bowling in my June article on scams was misleading. I implied that the game, developed by NStorm and often forwarded to users around the holidays, is in some way harmful. In fact, it's not, though it might get you in trouble with your boss.

To download a copy of Elf Bowling, now Elf Bowling III, visit ◁ᵚ)www.nstorm.com.