This dog can hunt

WatchDog software tracks where 'Net users go – and what they look at / **Hiawatha Bray**

EVER GET THE feeling that your computer is watching you? Mine has been keeping an eye on me, and I don't much like it.

I've been trying out a clever, creepy piece of software called Internet WatchDog that tracks every move I make on my office or home computer. Despite its name, Internet WatchDog doesn't track just on-line activity; it keeps a log of every program running.

The program was created by Algorithm Inc. in Atlanta, and is being marketed by Charles River Media in Rockland. I've run Internet WatchDog on my home machine for about a week now, and I have only one problem with the product – it works. It's a superb piece of software that makes my skin crawl.

Blame it on experience. Years ago, I worked at the US Postal Service on an electronic mail sorting machine. In those days, Postal Service managers assumed that all workers were lazy and dishonest. We were constantly watched through video cameras and two-way mirrors to make sure we weren't stealing anything. And computers monitored us at the sorting consoles to ensure that we put forth our maximum effort.

Programs like Internet Watch-Dog could bring some of that same flavor of paranoia to business offices all over America. But David Pallai, president of Charles River Media, says that's not what he has in mind. Pallai's goal was a less intrusive, more efficient way to monitor the Internet.

"We did not believe in censorship or in blocking," Pallai said. Internet blockers like SurfWatch or Cyber Patrol rely on lists of naughty 'Net sites drawn up by a sort of electronic Legion of Decency. It's a job Pallai didn't want. Besides, so many new sites open every day that these blocking programs must be constantly updated, and customers must pay for the privilege.

"We decided that what we need is something that monitors, as a telephone bill monitors calls, instead of a blocking program," Pallai said.

Internet WatchDog is available in Windows or Macintosh formats. It starts whenever you turn on the computer. You can switch it off, but the program will tell your boss if you do. The boss gets a password that lets him or her read the information that Internet WatchDog has filed away.

Internet WatchDog stores a log of every important computer event. It remembers when you turned the machine on, the name of every piece of software you've used and when you used it. Start up your Internet dialer or a copy of Doom, and it's there.

Do you occasionally download photos from the Internet? Don't save them on your hard drive. Internet WatchDog searches the drive and lists every file in the GIF and JPEG formats, the most popular ways to distribute pictures on the net. So keeping files with names like NEKKID.GIF isn't a smart idea.

The slickest, spookiest part of Internet WatchDog is its automatic screen capture. The software keeps count of the changes in pixels – the thousands of tiny glowing dots on your computer screen. If enough of the pixels change, the program knows that some new image has flashed up on your screen.

When that happens, it takes a screen snapshot, marks it with the date and time, and files it away. Even if you don't change screens, a snapshot will be taken every 15 minutes. Then the boss can see the same images you've been looking at all day.

The program will save up to 10 megabytes of data – more if the boss asks for it. You can go back in time and see exactly what an employer was doing on his computer at 2:15 last Wednesday.

Internet WatchDog has only been on sale for a few weeks, but already, Pallai has gotten lots of feedback. "When I hear from the CEOs, they love it," he said. "When I hear from the employees, they hate it." I'll bet.

Of course, employers aren't the only ones who can use Internet WatchDog. Pallai is also selling his products to parents and school systems who want to monitor children's use of computers. Indeed, Pallai estimates that about 60 percent of his customers so far have been parents and school systems.

Snooping on the kids is fine with me. Children were made to be monitored. It's using this stuff on grown-ups that I don't care for.

Even Pallai isn't entirely thrilled. To make Internet Watch-Dog a little less intrusive, he tweaked some features. For instance, the program doesn't spy on you in secret. It announces its presence when it starts up. Pallai decided not to include a feature that would identify every Internet site you visit. And there's no version for networks yet – Pallai's not sure he wants a network administrator to look in on every worker's computer anytime he likes. "We were trying to make it not too Big Brotherish," he said.

But other firms are selling snoop software designed for network use. Much of it was developed to ensure that workers aren't using pirated programs on the job, but it can also be used to analyze every move you make on your computer. And the rise of the Internet has given companies a big new reason to track corporate computer use.

After all, it's the company's machine and the company's time. Your boss has every right to keep an eye on you. Still, it adds an unwelcome hint of paranoia in a world that already has enough to go around. Soon, we may all be staring at our computers, wondering whether they're staring back.
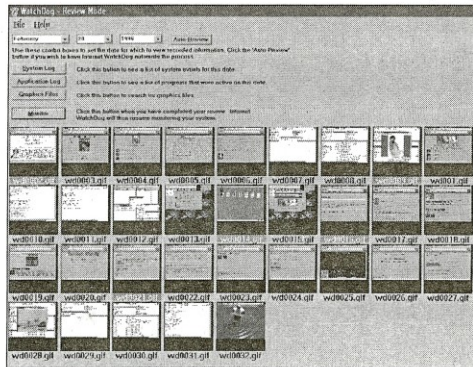
One of the features of **WatchDog** is automatic screen capture, which takes a screen snapshot whenever users look at something new. The software marks the snapshot with the date and time and files it away.

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