# CONFERENCE REPORT

The Full Fairmonty

The luxurious Fairmont Hotel atop Nob Hill in the centre of San Francisco is a sight for anyone's sore eyes. For the *Virus Bulletin* crew, 'fresh' from the Thames Valley, it meant respite for sore something-elses after an airport taxi-ride over the city's extraordinary hills. The hotel provided a stunning backdrop to the seventh annual *Virus Bulletin Conference* – more popular than ever, with over 250 delegates, speakers and exhibitors from Europe, Russia, Australia and of course, the good ol' US of A. With temperatures in the eighties outside, and top-notch air-conditioned facilities inside, the conference swung into action in comfortable style.
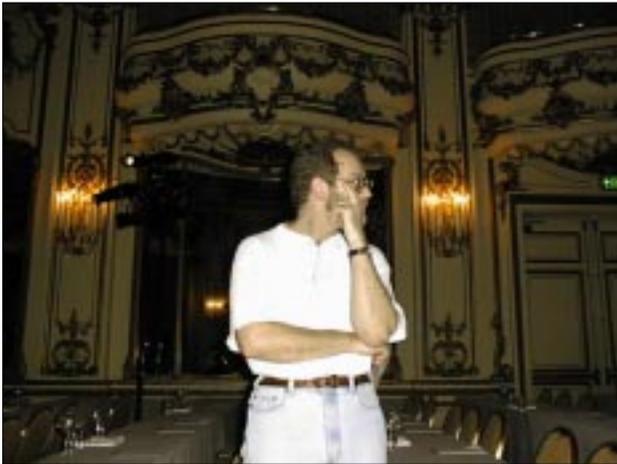
Wot… no delegates?

On Wednesday evening, *Symantec* sponsored the welcoming cocktail reception, which, despite a rival bash in the Penthouse, spilled onto the terraces of the Pavilion room as old diehards and fresh faces mingled over champagne and spring rolls. For many, it was the first chance to meet *VB's* new editor, Nick FitzGerald, since his appointment in June. The evening was a great success, cultivating an atmosphere of camaraderie which was characteristic of the conference throughout.

After an all-American breakfast involving careful negotiation of a muffin mountain and vats of fresh OJ, Nick opened the proceedings on Thursday morning with a paper on the two most frequently asked questions he encounters as editor of *VB*. The first, concerning large-scale manageability tests, was quickly put to bed, but he discussed the second question – 'what will be the next big computer security threat? – in more detail.Keynote speaker Paul Ducklin from *Sophos* then took over. His energetic and enthusiastically received talk centred on the relationship between 'us', 'you', and 'them'; anti-virus developers, anti-virus software users and virus writers. He explored the convoluted development of the anti-virus industry, complete with speculations on the motives of virus writers, predictions for product development and caution concerning the volatility of the business.

Delegates split into corporate and technical streams, more often than not shuffling between the Gold and Venetian Rooms to catch parts of both presentations. Thanks to the restrained use of industrial-strength fog horns, most sessions (with one or two notable, but I'm told, not unusual, exceptions) ran to schedule.

Frances Ludgate from *Cybec* opened the corporate session with a lively paper about perceptions of and attitudes to anti-virus evolution and marketing, while *Norman's* Carl Bretteville discussed the possibilities for native *NetWare* viruses. Phil Bancroft and David Aubrey-Jones, both highly respected and common sights at *VB* conferences, rounded off the first morning with talks on the distribution of anti-virus tools and *Office 97's* impact on macro viruses.

DataFellows sponsored a very well-attended and beautifully presented lunch, which was followed by a hugely entertaining paper for the corporate stream from Sarah Gordon and Joe Wells on 'Hoaxes and Hype' – or 'Hypses and Hoax' as Sarah knew she'd end up putting it. *The Imperial Cancer Research Fund's* David Harley followed this tough act with an overview of the *Macintosh* virus situation. Martin Overton of *ChekWare* informed the technical audience of issues with boot viruses and FAT32, prior to Jeffrey Kephart's live demonstration of *IBM's* immune system – a development to keep an eye on.

After tea, where it was loudly and universally noted by both corporate and technical bods that refreshments (ranging from 'cookies' through 'biccies' to 'tucker') were significantly absent, Robert Vibert (*Sensible Security Solutions*) and Bruce Burrell of the *University of Michigan*, discussed virus prevention and cure respectively, ending the day for the corporate stream. *FRISK's* Vesselin Bontchev and *VB's* technical editor Jakub Kaminski, from *Cybec*, closed the technical side.

Once known as Stormbringer, young ex-virus writer Mike Ellison presented the most controversial paper of the conference. At 5.15 pm, the two streams merged to hear his justification for his possible employment within the anti-virus industry. The ensuing Q&A period overran as the audience, split into enthusiastic supporters and unconvinced sceptics, debated the validity of his claim, and the position and value of virus writers in general. An impromptu poll was taken in answer to the question 'If you were negotiating a licence for anti-virus software, and learned that the vendor had an ex-virus writer on the staff, what effect would it have on your decision?' Two people admitted it

would have a negative impact, while thirty to forty thought it would not. Of that number, nearly half felt it may exert a positive influence. The session ended on an energetic if tantalizing note, with a enthusiastic shout of 'you're hired!' from Dmitry Gryaznov of *Dr Solomon's Software*. Watch this space!

Alie Hothersall and 'friends'.

Blocking the door of the Pavilion Room, a sinister, black-clad, 1930s gangster, with an incongruous boyish smile, ensured two hundred and fifty acknowledgements for the Gala Dinner sponsors. Entry to the well-stocked bar was guaranteed with a whispered '*Command Software*'. Suitably mollified, 'Bugsy' proceeded to entertain delegates and partners at their tables with card tricks and conversation. Traditional 'thank-yous' culminated in a hilarious exchange between *VB* ex-editors Richard Ford and Ian ('what I want to know is – why do *Trend* and *McAfee* feel stress balls to be appropriate freebies, particularly?') Whalley as they presented their unsuspecting successor with lavish gifts of software giveaways (oh, and a fairly decent pen [*Thank-you – Ed.*]). Enthusiastic, nay, rowdy appreciation was shown for faultless organization by a far too good-looking crew – conference manager Alie, Petra, John, and 'mike' girls Müsli and Kim.

The prudent omission of candles in close proximity to the dubiously named but delicious vodka beef prevented the resurrection of an old *VB* tradition – trooping out to the tune of a fire alarm. After a hearty spread, gambling commenced with delegates generously unconcerned that their shiny new $500 chips were worth their weight in plastic. Heartfelt thanks are due to Bruce Burrell for his reassuring probability statistics and magic tricks, and to Shane Coursen for subsidizing the editorial assistant even unto dire poverty. There's one born every minute! The partying continued into the small hours, with the impromptu *a cappella* singing becoming increasingly voluminous as its practitioners became increasingly legless.

On Friday at 10 am, avocado-tinged delegates took the scenic route past the muffin mountain and two mugs of the strong black stuff into invigorating papers on

hoaxes and the Internet from David Chess and on alternatives to the WildList by David Stang. After topping up at the coffee break, youngbloods Dan Schrader and Carey Nachenberg presented the corporate stream with energetic and informed ideas on anti-virus distribution across intranets and into the 21st Century. The techies were treated to presentations on macro viruses – one from Jimmy Kuo; the other from Allan Dyer and Motoaki Yamamura.

Rejuvenated and refreshed by a superb lunch sponsored by the *NCSA*, the ever-popular Steve White (an original *VB* conference fixture – he's been to every one!) preceded Nick Engleman of *Cybec's* corporate talk on virus education for PC users. In the Venetian Room, Dmitry Gryaznov and Ian Whalley addressed scanning Usenet for viruses and security threats on the Internet. Igor Grebert closed the technical session with a paper on email scanning, while the *NCSA's* Roger Thompson discussed worldwide virus-tracking initiatives with the corporate stream. There was more to come as the speakers' panel session prompted more discussion among a lingering crowd from both streams, eager to prolong the debate. A short slide show presented the images of *VB'97* and this is available for download from http://www.virusbtn.com/VB97/.

Over the honking of the sea-lions on Fisherman's Wharf, the clanging of the cablecars on Powell Street and the swish of limousines at the front step, the sounds emanating from the Fairmont's Gold and Venetian Rooms were innovative, well-researched and superbly delivered to lively and appreciative delegates. Thanks are due to all the speakers and attendees who, after all, make the conference each year. Thanks too to the team who set up and executed the 'do' so apparently effortlessly and so consistently cheerfully.

Thanks to the Fairmont, not least for the prompt arrival of stacks of great 'tucker' at tea-time on Friday, to Ken Bush for his tarot cards, to Kim Ducklin for prudent use of the fog horn in the face of adversity, and to Mikko Hyppönen, for charming Immigration at San Francisco International.

Most of the speakers in a more serious mood. An image map with links to the speakers' biographies can be viewed at http://www.virusbtn.com/VB97/.