Week of the Geek

The other day, I was saving some data to my favorite backup media – which happens to be a 128 Meg SmartMedia card. The card is small and has the capacity of 88.8888 … (Oh heck – let's round it off to 90) floppies. I carry the card in my sunglass case. A friend saw me pulling the card out of my glass case and called me a "geek."

Me? A geek? Probably. I'm not ashamed of it. In fact, I think I'm a bit proud of the title. But do I look like a geek? In fact, how do you tell who the geeks are? There used to be certain indicators that you were a geek. The best sign used to be black plastic eyeglass frames (with white tape holding them together at the nosepiece). Now, thanks to laser eye surgery, geeks don't need to wear them anymore. Also – thanks to retro fashions – lots of people who are not geeks are wearing black plastic frames, which happen to be in fashion. (Sure, now that I don't wear them anymore!)

Another sign used to be a plastic pocket protector full of pens and pencils. Nowadays, I own a single all-in-one writing instrument that has a palm stylus, black pen, red pen, and pencil. No pocket protector needed. And in the very old days, a dangling slide rule at the belt was also a prerequisite of geekhood. Nowadays, slide rules dangle in the Smithsonian.

What we need today are contemporary indicators of being a geek. After some thought, I submit the following list as reasonable indicators of geekiness:
- You have 50 people in your online address book, but only three have real addresses.
- You send more e-cards than real ones.
- Some of your best friends are people you have never actually met in person.
- When in a bookstore, you pick up an "X for Dummies" book, you read a bit, laugh, and say, "Nobody could really be THAT dumb."
- You automatically add a "com" after a period when typing.
- When you introduce yourself, you include your e-mail address.
- You attend a conference and automatically look for a seat near an outlet, so you can plug in your computer.
- When you travel, you already know where outlets are located in the airline gate areas.
- A good hotel is defined as one where you can get a 52K bps connection (bonus points if you know which hotels in advance).
- You have e-mail addresses for different facets of your personality. For example, david.cook@hill.af.mil for work, and brainy_stud@someISP.com for home. (Only the first one is actually mine.)
- You frequently wish life had an undo or back key.

- When your significant other says you need to communicate better, you think that means you can get DSL.
- By looking at the control panel applications, you unconsciously determine whether the computer is running 95, 98, ME, 2000, or XP.
- You go to conferences where well-dressed guys wear suits or sports coats with very short high-water pants and running or tennis shoes. Extra points for white socks. Double points for white socks with black or navy pants.
- You have gotten up in the middle of the night to check the status of either a big download or a disk defrag.
- You wonder whether you can daisy chain USB port replicators to give you more than four USB connections per computer port. Extra points if you really need more than four USB connections per computer port.

Recently, I was at the Software Engineering Process Group conference in Phoenix. During a fine southwestern pork lunch, I asked friends at my table to help me focus on signs that would ping a geek meter. The following signs were mentioned (thanks to John, Lisa, Les, Jim, Janna, Nicole, Jeff, Marsha, and Kate):
- You know all the "Star Trek" plots (with emphases on classic Trek, not TNG). You utter such phrases as, "He's dead, Jim" and "I'm a doctor, not a (fill in the blank)," and your friends laugh.
- You live in the West or Southwest, and the people at Fry's electronic superstore know you by name. (If you live elsewhere, CompUSA will substitute.)
- You know the words to most Monty Python songs, and you can quote sections of "Monty Python and the Search for the Holy Grail" from memory.
- You can also recall quotes from *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.
- Your watch has more dials, buttons, and functions than a Swiss army knife. Double extra bonus points for having a wristwatch that automatically synchronizes itself with the National Bureau of Standards via short wave. Triple bonus points if you're thinking, "Cool! I want one, too!"

Do you know other signs of being a geek? Well, the theme of the December 2002 issue of CrossTalk is "The Year of the Scientist and Engineer." If you will e-mail me your geek stories and indicators, I will compile them and have an appropriate BackTalk for the December issue. Send them to me at david.cook@hill.af.mil. We'll have a "Top 10" geek indicators list.

To conclude, if December 2002 marks the "Year of the Scientist and Engineer," I hereby proclaim the Software Technology Conference 2002 to be the "Week of the Geek." Hope I see you there.

By the way, one sign of being a geek might be that you wrote your BackTalk column on a palm computer while attending a computer conference. Mind you, I'll just call it good time management!

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P.S. By the way, three trips to Fry's during a four-day conference is not abnormal. And that was not the only reason I decided to attend.