

# SU says no to Bear Scat

By denying a request for support from its creator, the SU has opted not to support the popular Bear Scat registration system, leaving its future uncertain

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Deputy News Editor

Students heading back to campus this fall might have one less option for choosing and registering in classes, as the Students' Union has officially decided not to offer monetary support for the popular Bear Scat web application.

According to SU Vice-President (Academic) Bobby Samuel, the SU has no choice but to discontinue its funding for the service.

"It crosses a major line for us," Samuel explained. "Essentially, it all comes down to why we pay tuition. Tuition is meant to go towards the academic functions of our university. We pay tuition to cover all of these academic expenses. One of our strongest arguments against supplementary student fees was that tuition should be covering all of these. If we do start paying for Bear Scat, a core academic service, we lose our moral authority on advocating for those issues."

An open letter was also published on the SU's website earlier this week outlining the Executive's stance and defending their decision.

In May, Steve Kirkham, Bear Scat creator and former U of A computing science student, made a presentation to Council explaining the urgency of addressing Bear Scat funding. He explained that the four-year-old hardware that the system currently operates off of would not be able to support the load of students using the system come the start of the fall semester.

Kirkham explained to Council that the growth Bear Scat has seen since its inception on 20 March, 2003, has made it one of the most widely used SU services, serving approximately 15 000 unique users in the winter 2007 semester. The SU opted to adopt a political policy in June that aimed at advocating to the University to support Bear Scat until Bear Tracks had been upgraded to a point that made it comparable to Kirkham's service.

However, aside from the recently released public letter, Kirkham said he has yet to hear any word from the SU on their position.

"Unfortunately, I haven't heard anything back from Students' Council," he explained. "They've been absolutely silent on the matter. I went forward and gave my presentation earlier this summer, laid out all the facts, replied to all the questions that came up. Although I've been in touch with Bobby Samuel, there's been no resolution reached with respect to the state of Bear Scat come September 1st."

He also stated that last year's Executive had committed funds to upgrade Bear Scat and make it more sustainable, but that that money has not come to fruition following Council's turnover in May.

"My interpretation of what happened back in April with the former Executive Committee of the Students' Union was essentially that an agreement had been reached to fund Bear Scat in around \$10 000 for hardware upgrades. Unfortunately, when the new executive took over in May, suddenly that \$10 000 vanished."

The University is currently preparing to undergo a campus-wide upgrade to PeopleSoft 9.0—a software system that handles a myriad of things, from human resources management to payroll—that will alter Bear Tracks.

University Vice-Provost and



FILE PHOTO: NICK WIEBE

**PAPA BEAR SCAT** Steve Kirkham claws at the SU for abandoning Bear Scat.

Associate Vice-President (Academic) Dr Paul Sorenson explained that, while the upgrade is still at least a year out, there will be an evaluation of Bear Scat's features when upgrading Bear Tracks.

"The student information system should be pretty intuitive," Sorenson said. "If it isn't, we haven't met our goal."

The cost of the upgrade has not yet been divulged.

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**STEVE KIRKHAM**  
BEAR SCAT CREATOR/OWNER

Samuel explained that the SU had lobbied the University to look at Bear Scat and implement some of the features it offered into the Bear Tracks upgrade, explaining that the SU feels there shouldn't be two registration services for students.

"Bear Scat was never meant to be operated in the long term, and I think everyone acknowledges that it was never meant to be a long-term solution for Bear Tracks lack of functionality. It was always meant to be a band-aid solution," Samuel said.

But Kirkham disagrees with this assumption, citing the positive effects

that Bear Scat has on the student population.

"It's just unfortunate that [the SU] identifies [Bear Scat as] an exceptionally successful service, as well as, strangely enough, a great advocacy tool," he said, "yet they're taking one of the most visible, one of the most useful services that the Students' Union has had in the recent past, and basically not supporting it."

As of now, Kirkham's plan will be to begin disabling specific functions to help keep Bear Scat at least partially up and running. Most of the interactive features currently offered—adding, dropping, and swapping classes—will be disabled to save processor power. However, students will still be able to access and print their class timetable, the primary feature that Bear Scat began with in 2003.

Kirkham did not shy away from placing the blame for these circumstances on the SU.

"What the Students' Union needs to do is take a step back and [ask themselves], 'how much money do we have to pay to continue supporting Bear Scat?'" Kirkham emphasized. "We're talking anywhere between ten cents and 75 cents per student per term. Then they have to ask themselves, 'how much money is it going to cost the University to offer the same services—the same increased functionality integrated within Bear Tracks—how much cost per student is it going to take to integrate those functions?'"

"It's really unfortunate that they're missing this, because at the end of the day, the Students' Union is making life harder for students."

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