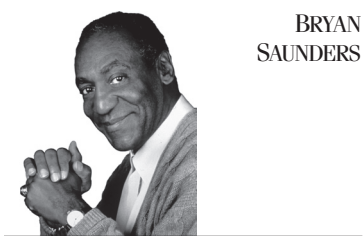


# WebCT deserving of more hatred



BRYAN SAUNDERS

Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't a "tool" something designed to make tasks easier? Wasn't the hammer invented because pounding nails into the floor with one's forehead was a little too demanding on the skull?

I'm pretty sure the saw was invented because trying to tear a tree in half with just your bare hands was something that very few people could do. So how is it that the people behind the University's online application Web Course Tools (WebCT) get away with calling their program a "tool?"

As it happens, I have the pleasure this semester of being registered in a first-year course, and chuckled to myself when my professor told the bright-eyed freshmen that all notes would be on, as he put it, "the spawn of Satan known as WebCT."

The freshmen innocently tittered at this comment thinking this was just a joke; I chuckled knowing that they would soon discover it wasn't. For those who've never had the pleasure of using WebCT before, allow me to break down the procedure into three simple steps:

- 1) On the login page, enter your CCID and password. Hopefully, this will be one of those days where WebCT actually recognizes it.
- 2) After a brief wait (usually six or

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seven millennia), your "blackboard" should have loaded. This is your personal homepage on WebCT, and it's as archaic and outdated as it sounds. On it, you will find links to each of your courses that use the program.

I should note at this point that you will only get this far if you have a web browser compatible with WebCT, you have cookies enabled, java installed and enabled, and you've turned off your pop-up ad blocker. Basically, to use WebCT, one must do everything they can to expose their computer to viruses and spyware—well, everything besides browsing free porn sites.

3) Select a course, and follow the links to the lecture notes you desire. Click on the link for these notes, and wait a few more millennia for them to load. Which they usually do. Eventually. God willing.

Now if, for whatever reason, they don't load, I'm afraid that's the end of the line. Don't even think about clicking on "save target as" and seeing if that works, because "no such interface is supported." If you want to see notes, you have to see them using the WebCT program first. If it isn't working, you could contact AICT or the WebCT help desk, but they'll likely just assure you that there's no problem, and that even if there was,

it probably originated with the user (read you).

Now, I've taken a few computer courses in my time, and I can even do some coding and programming, so when told I don't know how to use a computer, I'm offended. Furthermore, I really don't think it's because my brand-spanking-new computer doesn't have enough RAM, or that it can't process quickly enough. The problem either lies with WebCT, or Windows Vista, or E-learning, or Blackboard Learning, or whatever "catchy" name they're calling the minion of Lucifer today.

After WebCT has failed me once again, I cry quietly inside—or, alternatively, bubble with rage. Feel free to do either—usually, I go with bubbling with rage for the rest of the day.

So, to the University administration: If you really want the U of A to be a world-renowned institution, WebCT (and Bear Tracks) have got to go.

Instead, there should be a single, functional site where students can go to check their email, register for courses, download notes, and pay tuition. Until you understand this, our university and its students will just be seen as dimwits living in the primitive days of "blackboards" who, like stupid tools, pour money into the pockets of WebCT and its developers.

# The frustrations of snail mail can now be experienced online thanks to U of A



MARIA KOTOVYCH

It exists among us, completely undetected, while we're hypnotically distracted by something else.

Day by day, it chugs along, hoping that nobody will notice it and expect it to change. It breathes a quiet word of thanks to others like it for the recent attention they've been receiving, happy that our eyes are being directed far, far away from its own ineptitude.

But though its powers are limited and people are frequently frustrated by it, they say nothing. Others just ignore it or pretend it doesn't exist.

This scourge is closer to us than we can imagine, and it's not going anywhere soon. Students on this fair campus have been embroiled in a discussion about Bear Scat and Bear Tracks, but have forgotten that there's another University computer service that truly deserves our attention. I suggest that students take off their scat-covered blinders and turn their indignation towards the true bane of a U of A student's existence: WebMail.

Bear Tracks is a dream compared to the useless WebMail. My unsuccessful

attempts to send attachments with it are outnumbered only by Lindsay Lohan's failed attempts to dry out. And how often is WebMail "temporarily unavailable" or painfully slow?

What's more, the U of A green and gold interface is butt-ugly, and the abundance of folders has always baffled me. WebMail is way more convoluted than it needs to be, which makes navigation tedious.

**Until students stop complaining about Bear Tracks and turn their attention to WebMail, this train wreck will continue frustrating students.**

Some may ask why I don't just use another email service. I do—but I like using my U of A account for things like job applications. I prefer to deal with all my professional communications through my WebMail account, as I feel that a university email address projects a more business-like image.

But perhaps the best thing about my other email account is the sheer amount of spam that I receive. Nothing beats reading a really stupid, funny, or nonsensical subject line on a spam message. I mean, how can WebMail's spam filters deprive

us of reading hilarious subject lines such as, "Hottest new offer but without any results" or "No no Yugoslavia?"

While I don't actually open any of that spam, some of those messages are so chock-full of suspense that they've come close to convincing me to open them. Take, for instance, a message with the subject line: "My name is. Can I ask you?" The anticipation to find out what this mystery person wants nearly kills me, and I struggle with the temptation to open this message. It's not easy. But if I use WebMail, that mystery is completely gone.

Until students stop complaining about Bear Tracks and turn their attention to WebMail, this train wreck will continue frustrating students. And really, is Bear Tracks all that bad? Sure, it's far from perfect, and it could definitely be organized better, but I've never had it seize up on me or fail to perform a function that it's designed to do.

Like many of you, I use my email several times a day, but I certainly don't access Bear Tracks with that same frequency. Email is often a convenient way for students to communicate with professors or to take part in some components of course work, so it's much more crucial to have this working properly than the seldomly used registration software. However, until that happens, WebMail will keep clunking along under the radar, and students will simply have to grin and bear it.

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