

Information Technology in the News

EU WANTS RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

■ The European Union (EU) has solicited proposals for a European Institute of Technology (EIT), which would conduct research and would work to commercialize products and services that result from the research. Suggesting models for the EIT, the EU pointed to MIT—which has been very successful in bringing the fruits of research to market—as well as emerging research centers in China and India. The EIT, with an annual budget of as much as one billion euros, could be a single entity or a virtual one, representing collaboration among existing colleges and universities. Jose Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission (EC), said that the EIT will “act as a pole of attraction for the very best minds, ideas, and companies from around the world.” Officials from a number of institutions rejected the very idea, saying that trying to build a European version of MIT would fail. The League of European Research Universities called the plan “perverse” and said that in its solicitation, the EC demonstrated a lack of understanding of the academic community in Europe. (*The Register*, <http://www.theregister.com/2006/02/22/european_mit/>)

MIT PLANS WIRELESS NETWORK IN CAMBRIDGE

■ MIT has announced plans to deploy a wireless network covering Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the university is located. Working with Harvard University and Boston’s Museum of Science, MIT will set up the network using mesh technology, which provides service that is slower, but significantly less expensive, than that offered through commercial providers. With a traditional wireless network, wireless access points are installed to cover the desired area, and every access point is hardwired to the network. Mesh technology eliminates much of the wiring

by relying on a small number of wired antennae and many other antennae that relay signals to the wired ones. Jerrold M. Grochow, the vice president for information services and technology at MIT, described it as “hopping from antenna to antenna to antenna.” Mary P. Hart, the CIO for the City of Cambridge, commented that the proposed network will allow the city to determine the demand for wireless access. Grochow noted that unlike the situation in other municipalities, MIT’s project has not run into opposition from commercial Internet providers. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, <<http://chronicle.com/daily/2006/02/2006020601t.htm>> [subscription required])

SURVEYING THE OPEN-SOURCE LANDSCAPE IN HIGHER ED

■ A new study from the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness paints a picture of higher education as very interested in, but cautious about, open-source software. Based on a survey of officials at more than two hundred campuses, the study found that although two-thirds are investigating open source, only one-quarter are currently implementing open-source applications. Concern about the shrinking number of IT vendors for such products as course management systems is behind some of the interest in open source, as is the notion that each campus has sufficiently unique needs to justify the effort of implementing open source and customizing its functionality. Many campus officials said that they remain happy with their commercial products, however, and that committing to open source means taking care of campus systems without vendor support—a move that many institutions are reluctant to make. Kenneth Green, the founding director of the Campus Computing Project, echoed the study’s characterization, calling it “affirmative ambivalence.” He noted that there is a lot of interest in and talk

net news

CONGRESS LIFTS THE 50 PERCENT RULE

Tucked inside a budget bill passed by the U.S. Congress is a provision that repeals the 50 percent rule, which permitted federal financial aid only to students attending colleges and universities that offered fewer than half of their courses online or that enrolled fewer than half their students at a distance. The rule was enacted in 1992 to combat diploma mills, many of which operate online. The growing numbers of students enrolled in online education—at both for-profit and nonprofit institutions—and a strong lobby for commercial colleges/universities helped push through the repeal. The congressional members who sponsored the lifting of the rule, John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Howard McKeon (R-Calif.), said that the change will expand educational access to nontraditional students and help Americans join the workforce. Opponents of the rule change advised moving more cautiously, arguing that online education has not demonstrated that it can be as effective as traditional education. (*New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/01/national/01educ.html>> [registration required])

about open source but that many technology leaders still believe open source is “not quite ready for prime time.” (*Inside Higher Ed*, <<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/03/01/open>>)

CARNEGIE MELLON TO USE SIMS FOR ALICE SOFTWARE

■ Carnegie Mellon University will incorporate technology from *The Sims*, a popular computer game, into its

Alice programming language, which the university developed as a teaching aid for new programmers. Alice is currently used at more than sixty colleges and universities and approximately one hundred high schools, according to Randy Pausch, a computer science professor and the director of the Alice Project. Alice works to teach students the basics of programming by allowing them to work with three-dimensional animations. Pausch said that although the tool has proven successful, the animations remain crude. Steve Seabolt, the vice president of Electronic Arts, the maker of *The Sims*, said that adding the company's animation technology to Alice will help "make computer science fun for a new generation of creative leaders." (*USA Today*, <http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2006-03-12-sims-mellon_x.htm>)

INITIATIVE TO HELP FIND TRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION ONLINE

■ A new Web site being developed by researchers at Syracuse University and the University of Washington (UW) will provide users with tools and tips for separating good online information from the vast amounts of unreliable material. R. David Lankes, an associate professor of information studies at Syracuse, and Michael Eisenberg, a professor in the Information School at UW, are codirectors of the Credibility Commons, which is funded by a \$250,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Lankes said that many users assess the credibility of online information based on what a site looks like or whether it tells users what they want to hear. The Credibility Commons will gather computer programs—written by others and by the organizers of the new site—that can help users find credible information on the Web. The site will also solicit feedback from users for how best to locate reliable, accurate information. The tools

developed by the Credibility Commons will be available as open-source applications, which users may download and modify provided that they share those changes with the site. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, <<http://chronicle.com/daily/2006/03/2006032901t.htm>> [subscription required])

VAST WI-FI NETWORK DEBUTS IN AUSTRALIA

■ The Department of Education in Victoria, Australia, has deployed what officials there said is likely the largest unified enterprise wireless network in the world. The network consists of 10,000 access points in 1,700 locations covering 540,000 students, 42,000 teachers, and more than 200,000 computers. According to Loris Meadows, the head of ICT security for the department, the project faced a number of significant hurdles to becoming a reality. The department developed EduPass, a custom security services and proxy appliance that allows the network to function. Although the technology is based on open-source software, officials at the Department of Education are keeping a tight lid on the changes they made, saying that security concerns are more important than sharing the code. Even IT staff at individual locations are not given access to the operating system. (*ComputerWorld*, <<http://www.computerworld.com.au/index.php/id;734924574;fp;16;fpid;0>>)

ACADEMICS DEFEND COMPUTER GAMES

■ Two academics at Brunel University in the United Kingdom argue that in their study of the online game *RuneScape*, teens defy the common perception that playing computer games impedes their development, social and otherwise. Simon Bradford and Nic Crowe said that in their research, *RuneScape* added to social experience for those playing, rather than minimizing it. Players can assume an identity very different from their own—a different gender or race, for example—and can

Security Matters

MARYLAND RESEARCHERS UNVEIL DRM TECHNOLOGY

Researchers at the University of Maryland's R.A. James Clark School of Engineering have developed digital rights management (DRM) technology that they say is highly resistant to the dilution that afflicts other DRM tools when many users collude on piracy. With most DRM technology, if one hundred users work together to create a pirated copy of a movie, for example, the digital "fingerprint" is diluted one hundred times, making it very difficult to identify those responsible. According to Assistant Professor Min Wu at the Clark School, with the new technology, if a group of users collude to copy a protected file, the researchers can identify all of those who participated. The new DRM technology can be used to protect movies, songs, images, and other documents. Sony BMG, which was recently involved in a brouhaha over attempts to add its own DRM protection, has expressed interest in the technology, as has the U.S. Department of Defense. (*PC World*, <<http://www.pcworld.idg.com.au/index.php/id;92233453;fp;2;fpid;1>>)

practice social interactions that will help them in real life, according to Bradford and Crowe. In addition, the game teaches players a level of responsibility in areas such as time management that many do not experience until they go off to college. One teenager in the study said she spent considerable amounts of time in the game's downtime places, specifically a waterfall where the teen said she liked to sit and relax for hours. Bradford and Crowe suggested that in this way, the game provides players with experiences that they might not be able to have otherwise. (*BBC*, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4774534.stm>>)

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