A Better Backup

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My friends know that I am a fanatic about Monty Python; indeed, just before writing this article I showed another in the original Monty Python series at the Norwich University Monty Python Society which I founded three years ago. So when LiveVault created a new advertising video starring John Cleese, a friend sent me a YMS (Your Morning Smile) message pointing to <http://www.livevault.com/>. With the latest Flash plugins loaded, we see John Cleese in a white lab coat looking very serious.

Dr Harold Twain Weck (Cleese), Director of the Institute for Backup Trauma, introduces the pathetic hulks of humanity who have shattered their lives through failure of their backups. Cleese performs up to his usual standards of hypomanic rage, with occasional lapses in his bonhomie revealing a deep well of rage and incompetence. His riff on techies in gopher-cubicles lined with Dilbert cartoons and stacks of soda cans had me in stitches – it’s in the same league as the culmination of the Architect Skit for Python fanatics (“you whining, hypocritical toadies, with your bleeding secret Masonic handshakes and your bleeding Tony Jacklin golf clubs…”).

The film will probably offend some defenders of mentally-ill patients, since it represents the survivors of backup failure as homeless people and as members of an insane asylum. Considering how much trouble Vermont Teddy Bears got into over its “Crazy For You” bear <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6989224/?GT1=6190>, look for fireworks over this one too as soon as word leaks out.

LiveVault offers continuous online backups to disk either locally or via encrypted network connections. The solution is described as a fully scalable service with guaranteed total availability (see below). One of the nicest features is the continuous backup option, which is much like a big RAID system – nobody has to pay any attention to it once it is set up. Options are available to poll remote offices for backups too.

From a technical perspective, the white papers available on the site after a single registration seem interesting and worth reading. I thought “Top 10 Reasons why Online Backup is Replacing Tape at Small and Medium Businesses” was good.

I called the company and spoke with Scott Jarr, VP of Product Marketing. He told me that there are a number of analyst firms quoting rates similar to the 50% number; one is from the Yankee Group, which reported around 40% failure rate. However, their definition involves failure of the entire backup process, including human failures such as forgetting to run the backup, overwriting the same tape, ignoring error messages, not handling open files, and so on.

In any case, the growing amount of data stored on backups inevitably drives overall failure rates higher. Recall that the probability of at least one failure on a system with n independent points of failure is

\[1 - (1 - p)^n\]

where each unit has a probability “p” of failing.
Spend a little time playing around with this formula in a spreadsheet and you will find that with a failure rate of 1 in a million, it takes 700,000 files to result in an expected 50% failure rate where that’s defined as at least one bad file on the backup medium.

By the way, Mr Jarr told me about a secret click in the “Virtual Tour” after the video finishes that brings up another couple of minutes of classic Cleese. Have fun. And by all means try The Third Button.

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A Master’s degree in the management of information assurance in 18 months of online study from Norwich University – see <http://www3.norwich.edu/msia> for details.

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