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Feedback

31 August 1996

DURING the recent hoo-ha about the meteorite from Mars which may, or may not, provide evidence of life there, many science magazines overlooked one angle: profit. The Wall Street Journal, however, notes that the price of Martian meteorites has shot up from \$200 to \$2000 a gram as a result of the announcement.

According to NASA, only 12 meteorites known to be from the Red Planet have ever been found. Competition for even a tiny fragment is now so intense that at known sites of meteor landings, says the paper, “you might find four or five dealers...standing around becoming animals”.

MEANWHILE, a colleague was thumbing through some old copies of New Scientist the other day and, in the very first issue of the magazine (22 November 1956), came across an article entitled “Our neighbour Mars”. The introduction ran: “Three-quarters of its surface is a dusty Sahara. But on the remainder are signs of vegetation—and even animals may long ago have existed there.”

NEVER wear bunny rabbit slippers at work. This stern warning comes from the Health and Safety Commission in a news release about dangerous footwear in the workplace.

The problem with bunny rabbit slippers, the commission explains, is “the attached floppy ears”. One worker fell down a flight of stairs and suffered a broken leg after tripping on one of the ears while wearing a pair of these slippers.

The commission has now published a guidance leaflet, Protect Your Feet, which gives employees practical advice on “safe and sensible footwear” which will help to protect their feet from injury at work.

HOLLYWOOD has mixed some imaginary physics with the real thing in the thriller Chain Reaction, which opens in Britain next week. The real physics is sonoluminescence, in which ultrasonic waves are focused onto tiny bubbles in a liquid. These oscillate at high speeds and emit bright flashes of

light. The process also generates high pressures, and temperatures that may reach a million degrees.

Although the phenomenon was discovered in the 1930s, its cause remains mysterious: over a dozen respectable theories have been proposed, but none have been well accepted. The fictional discovery that drives the film's plot is how to use sonoluminescence to split water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen burns cleanly, and can provide a tremendous amount of energy. In the film, the bad guys try to suppress the discovery to preserve their vested interests in the power industry. However, heroes Morgan Freeman and Keanu Reeves risk their lives to share it with the world.

It is true that hydrogen is a clean fuel, and University of Washington physicist Lawrence Crum says "you can indeed separate hydrogen from oxygen within a sonoluminescing bubble". "However," he adds, "there is no way you can get those two separate species out of there without doing an amazing amount of work," so if the hydrogen and oxygen stay in the same spot, they recombine as soon as the bubble cools.

In other words, we are sorry to have to report that Hollywood's scriptwriters have not yet come up with a cheap, environmentally friendly way of generating energy.

STONEHENGE has been closed to visitors for some thirty years. They try and carve their names in the stones or chip off pieces as souvenirs, so they are kept at bay by fences. Now English Heritage has put the ancient site on the Internet, using a virtual reality program developed by Californian software company Superscape, with funding from Intel.

"To walk virtually through the stones is better than not to walk at all," said Jocelyn Stevens, chairman of English Heritage, at the official launch at the Planetarium in London. "Anyone, anywhere in the world, whether in Britain or Australia, will be able to visit Stonehenge this way."

Well, yes and no.

The launch demo was impressive, as well it should be when using a £20 000 Intergraph computer containing two 200MHz Pentium processors running in parallel. But the walk through the stones was running from a disc, not a telephone line, and there were no PCs actually connected to the Internet for visitors to try.

But credit where due. When asked if this was really a fair trial, one of Intel's team went back to his hotel, collected a laptop computer, found a phone socket in a back office behind Madame Tussauds waxworks and plugged it in. Up came the Stonehenge site (<http://www.intel.com>), and very good it looked, too.

To cut a long technical story short, Superscape's Viscap software cleverly sucks a computer model of Stonehenge down the line and then works on it inside the PC. So there is no relying on the treacly Internet for smooth motion on screen.

The Intel computer had, however, already been set up by experts to do the job. If Feedback's weeks of struggling to repeat what they did are anything to go by, amateur archaeologists round the world may have a lot more difficulty walking virtually than the publicity suggests.

AND here's another daft manufacturer's warning to customers. As the proud owner of a new car, Michael Francis's mother was concerned for its security. She didn't want an alarm for fear of it going off in the middle of the night and waking up the whole street because she couldn't turn it off.

So instead she opted for a simple manual lock that stretched from the clutch peddle to the steering wheel, immobilising them both. Printed in large bright letters on the end that hooked around the steering wheel was:
"Warning—Remove Lock Before Driving."

SURPRISINGLY few readers have written in to point out that a technical glitch, combined with Feedback's lengthy summer vacation, resulted in the same story (about NASA's "Clipper Graham" rocket) being run twice, on [13 July](#) and [17 August](#). Thank you, dear readers. We know you were being kind rather than so stupefied by your own lengthy summer vacations that you didn't notice.

FINALLY, we would like to know what, exactly, was intended by this advertisement for a snooker club, spotted recently by a puzzled Tony Holkham. "Free Membership," the ad proclaimed, adding: "Special rates for students."

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