The Pluto Switch Mystery

Written by Marco Attard
13 September 2012

It is February 2012. An office at the town of Shelby, Iowa receives a mysterious piece of hardware. A label reads "Pluto Switch." Two workers at the office, baffled by the device, post photos on networking-forum.com, an obscure networking hardware forum.

The two men know a fair bit on networking hardware, but the Pluto Switch looks like nothing they have ever seen or even heard of. A number of networking ports at the back of the long, thin hardware are of unfamiliar design, and the writing on the back is in Finnish, of all languages.

"That must have come from outer space (as the name also implies)," one forum user says.

The two men manage access the switch console, but all it provides is gibberish, at first. Further tinkering with the console provides identification for the hardware board inside the device.

"Google Planet8541 Pluto Edge Switch," it says.

The ending of the story, at least according to the forum posts, is slightly disappointing-- the finders manage to contact a Google engineer and decide send the Pluto Switch back home, even after forum members offer to buy the switches. In return, Google gives to duo a handful of exclusive Google t-shirts and very little else when it comes to actual details.

The forum posts are still online, complete with pictures-- even if the original posters requested to have had their identities deleted, author name changed to "Steve." No more was heard from them ever since.

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The incident happened 7 months ago, but it remains relevant. After all, it represents a peak inside the secretive world of Google data centres.

Speaking to Wired Magazine, SeaMicro founder Andrew Feldman claims he knows the engineer who built the Pluto Switch, but does not link the switch to Google. But Feldman has a link with Google-- he used to work with Force10 Networks, once networking hardware supplier to Google... until Google decided to design its own.

It pays for the giants to design their own hardware. Economies of scale dictate vast savings can be made by stripping down hardware (down to and including the ports and connectors) to the essentials. Not to mention designing your own hadware removes the middleman, the likes of Cisco and HP.

Google is not the only company going down the "DIY" route. AMD paid $344 million for SeaMicro. Intel owns technologies from Cray, Fulcrum Microsystems and QLogic. Amazon, Facebook and even Microsoft are looking into custom-built data centres.

Welcome to the mysterious world of secret data centres.

Go [Exclusive Pictures of Google's Pluto Switch (networking-forum.com)](networking-forum.com)

Go [Mystery Google Device Appears in Small-Town Iowa](#)