

Life & times

Every day's a fools' day online

Craig Gamble
FAST LIVING



There probably isn't a bigger fan of a good April Fool's Day joke than all those fun people on the interweb. The online community I have most to do with, the football simulation game *Hattrick*, pulled a good one on the day, posting a news item that implied most of the active 4000 players in Australia and New Zealand would have to ditch their meticulously created teams and start afresh. The chaos! The recriminations! The dummy-throwing! It really was quite fun, until someone twigged it was all a joke.

A much bigger joke may currently be being played on nearly 10 million Windows PCs worldwide with the Conficker virus. The virus's wide reach has caused consternation amongst the world's IT security experts, worried about its potential to cause harm to computer systems worldwide. While no one seems sure yet whether this particular nasty will in fact wreak chaos after April 1, we do know that it will become "active" and start scanning websites for instructions of what to do next. At the time of writing, there doesn't seem to have been any harm done, but the threat may not be over.

Conficker is a botnet: the virus invades your PC, turning it into a sort of unwilling robot that joins a couple of thousand other infected machines in performing a variety of functions, many nefarious, such as sending millions of pieces of spam email, or swamping a site with so many connections that it could be knocked offline. You can see how that would seriously inconvenience a site such as Google, for instance, or a big internet gambling site. These sorts of shenanigans are a part of the growing illegal or criminal activity on the internet today.

A new report, put out by the FBI-



backed Internet Crime Complaint Center, found the number of complaints from victims of internet crime rose by a third in 2008 to 275,284. In money terms, approximately \$370 million was lost to internet fraudsters. It's probably no surprise that most of the reported perpetrators came from the United States (two out of three) as did most of the complaints - 93 per cent. The top five countries for perpetrators were the US (66.1 per cent), Britain (10.5 per cent), Nigeria (7.5 per cent), Canada (3.1 per cent) and China

(1.6 per cent). Happily, Australia figures somewhere below the bottom of the top 10, which is Romania on 0.5 per cent. Australia ranks fourth in complaints made, but that's with a tiny 0.57 per cent. The most popular scam was a simple non-delivery of merchandise that had been paid for 32.9 per cent, auction fraud, on sites such as Ebay (25.5 per cent) and credit card or debit card fraud (9 per cent). The venerable "Nigerian letter" fraud was still bringing in the dollars at 2.8 per cent. The median figure for losses reported in the

Anti viral: The Conficker virus's wide reach has caused consternation amongst the world's IT security experts, worried about its potential to cause harm to computer systems worldwide. **Photo:** JESSICA HROMAS

complaints was \$1300, but I'm sure even the 15 per cent of complainants who reported a loss of under \$140 would still be feeling the pain, let alone the 15 per cent who got stung for more than \$7000.

So what should we do to stop ourselves from becoming victims? Perhaps we should take the lead from Telstra's New Zealand subsidiary Telstra Clear, which recently hired notorious hacker "Akill" (19-year-old Owen Thor Walker) as a security advisor. Walker had been the subject of an FBI investigation himself for his activities, which included setting up a worldwide botnet in the style of the Conficker virus mentioned above, and was finally caught by New Zealand police last year. He escaped conviction, being ordered to pay a share of the damages he had caused and stay off computers - well, I guess unless he's helping out a big phone company, that is. Returning to the "Nigerian letter" scandal, one group of US-based internet vigilantes went a lot further than hiring a security expert. They responded to one Nigerian scamster by scamming him straight back and duping him into, among other things, travelling from his home in Nigeria to war-torn Chad, at some risk to his own life. There's a brilliant and disturbing podcast of this episode put together by the marvellous crew at *This American Life* (www.thislife.org): look for the episode called *Enforcers*.

Rather than hiring your own Akill or pursuing those who have wronged you to the ends of the earth, the FBI has advised some simple rules for avoiding becoming a victim: don't respond to unsolicited emails, don't click on links in emails and be wary of messages claiming to be representing officialdom (such as bank officers or government departments). I could add another: get women in the family to do your internet business. More than 55 per cent of complainants were male. On average males were taken for more money than females, losing \$1.69 for every \$1 lost by females. I guess we blokes are just that much more gullible.

Pace of life simply depends on the right pet project

SLOW LIVING



Few pets are slower than stick insects. To see them do anything at all takes real patience - more often than not their activity can be gauged only by the crinkled edges of nibbled leaf and the myriad pellets that litter the terrarium floor. They do nothing but hang around, literally, occasionally swivelling tiny heads while crunching tinier jaws into another slice of eucalypt.

My friend PJ has five - three fat females and two dark and twiggy males - housed in a purpose-built

mesh "palace" in the living room, where they're warmed by summer sun or gas heater, depending on the season. Whenever I visit, I gravitate at some point to the "stickies", and the world falls away as I observe twisted, mysterious legs indistinguishable from curled leaves, and bodies plump as my fingers dangling like dried cocoons from quivering branches. I can sit for minutes on end and do nothing, watching them do nothing, fascinated by their alien forms - huge, the length of my hand.

It's not only the insect form, magnified to such proportions, that fascinates. Slow pets are alien in other ways: their alternative way of being challenges us to stop interacting for a minute and just be

near. Small fish can do it, seducing with the monotony of wavering movement in their flutter-finned way. A worm farm might do it, or a coiled python over days of extended digestion. Dogs and cats don't count - like us, they're too busy.

Held gently in the hand, a stick insect will slowly walk, goaded by unfamiliar surroundings to seek another tree, another set of edges to munch on. Mostly they just hang, though there are eggs on the palace floor so other slow activities must take place when no one is looking.

As children we kept miniature turtles in a tank. They had to be walked on the lawn daily to prevent their shells from softening. The five minutes allocated was endless, we



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couldn't even poke at them to hurry them up, or blow on them to make them get along, or they'd clam up inside their shells and sit tight. We didn't learn to be zen, to meditate, to slow down. We just chattered and sang, "Is it long enough yet?"

As I blow on the mesh to make the stickies dance, which I do every time I visit, I feel guilty for this compulsion to interact, to provoke, to see results. Slow pets might not invoke greater calm in the watcher, then - but their stillness draws us in nevertheless and punctuates our own constant, restless dance.

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