

Issues

PERSPECTIVES GRAEME PHILIPSON



Alert, maybe, but not all armed

Anti-virus protection is big business, but it might give a false sense of security that could make your system more vulnerable.

THE modern world is an insecure place. Both the real world and cyberspace are inhabited by people out to get us. Physical and electronic security have become part of modern life.

Anti-virus software comes standard nowadays with most computers — anyone who receives emails or spends any time on the internet is susceptible to the various nasties that some people obviously delight in inflicting on others.

The psychology of virus merchants has not been widely studied but most of those who are caught seem to be of the nerdy look-what-I-can-do type, electronic vandals seeking attention by inflicting misfortune on others.

Organised crime is also increasingly involved.

There are many variants of virus software, and there are the spammers and scammers from phishers to Nigerian con men. Cyberspace is a dangerous place.

There are two things most of us do (or should do) to secure our computers. The first is to install anti-virus

software. The second is to use it properly. Unfortunately, the second does not follow from the first. Indeed, by making you feel safer, anti-virus software can actually increase the likelihood of a security threat to your computer.

In October 2004, America Online and the US National Cyber Security Alliance asked 329 home internet users whether they used anti-virus software and whether they thought their computers were safe. Their machines were then scanned to see how close their perceptions were to reality.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 per cent) said they thought their computers were secure, and 83 per cent said they had anti-virus software on their computers. But two-thirds (67 per cent) either had no protection or had not updated their software recently, and a scan of all computers in the survey found that 80 per cent were infected with a virus or spyware software.

Many had misconfigured their software or had assumed that it would configure itself. Most were

unaware of simple security issues such as the difference between anti-virus software and a firewall. They thought they were protected, merely because they had the software, but had not paid attention to the importance of regular updates and maintenance.

Anti-virus software has become an enormous industry in its own right. Dozens of companies are in the market, which Microsoft has now entered. Symantec remains the market leader, having acquired the popular Peter Norton range of products some years ago. Symantec's main rivals include McAfee, Computer Associates, Kaspersky and AVG.

But the fastest growing is AVG, from Grisoft.

Grisoft was founded in Brno in the Czech Republic in 1991 by programmer Jan Grizbach. In 1998 it set up a US office and recently received significant funding from Intel's venture capital division, which tells you something. In bulletin boards and chat rooms, AVG is increasingly mentioned as the best value and easiest to use anti-virus system.

Many of the comments on these same bulletin boards are scathing about Symantec, and the comments are too common and

on too many websites to be easily dismissed. One of the main reasons Symantec attracts so many negative comments is because it is so widely used — it is shipped "free" (after 30 days you have to pay) with many PCs, and many people use it automatically without considering the alternatives.

Ed Foster, who used to write the Gripeline column in popular US computer magazine *Infoworld*, runs an amusing website called Gripelog, where people vent frustrations about lousy products and services. For the past two years he has run a reader poll on which anti-virus software people trust the most. AVG came first and Symantec third, but the majority of negative com-

ments were about Symantec. Most of them have to do with Symantec's service, the difficulty of getting through to tech support, and the complex ways its pricing and renewal structure works. Two members of my family have experienced the last of these first hand and ended up paying for products twice. My own experience is no better — after paying hundreds of dollars for a network edition,

I was told that the only way I could make it work was to install and maintain it on individual machines, which rather defeated the purpose. So, on the advice of a programmer friend, I switched to AVG. It's much cheaper (it's even free for individual users, though it's better to get the subscription version), easier to use, and the service from Melbourne-based distributor Avalanche is far superior.

Symantec is now a very large company, and the same bulletin boards that criticise its low-end products praise its efforts at the enterprise level. It is involved in a range of software and continues to acquire companies as it grows. But it really needs to do something about pricing, service and usability at the low end of its range, which is where most of us operate.

I raised these issues with Symantec Australia. It seems the company has been listening to its users, because it acknowledges there have been some problems.

A company spokesman told me that Symantec AntiVirus 2006, to be released this Monday, will directly address these concerns.

Perhaps they will, but for now, I'm sticking with AVG.
 graeme@philipson.info

By making you feel safer, anti-virus software can actually increase the likelihood of a security threat.

CHATROOM STAN BEER

Vividas' local product's great, but what about the funding

One of Australia's more innovative small IT companies provides an interesting insight into the way the industry in this country works. Vividas is one of the world leaders in video streaming, as seen in its full-screen internet commercial released a few months ago called *The Big Ad*.

The streaming technology behind *The Big Ad*, plus promos for United International Pictures, including teasers for the films *Serenity*, *Madagascar* and *War of Worlds*, were all provided by Vividas.

Despite its potential, Vividas might not have got off the ground if it had been forced to rely on the Australian investment community. Vividas listed on the London Stock Exchange in March this year. Australian chief executive, co-founder and chief technology officer Dave Winter says: "In 2003 we met with the who's who of Australian venture capitalists and the best offer we got valued us at 25 per cent of what we got from a UK-based VC."

When it came to taking Vividas public, Australia, a country built on the back of small businesses, once again came up short.

"One of our broader goals was to list and the only place where major institutions participate in the small-cap market is London," says Mr Winter. "In Australia, if you're a small company and you want to raise \$10 million, you struggle to get a major institution to see you."

Although Vividas Plc is now officially a British company, the news is not all bad for Australia. Of the company's 40 employees, 20 remain in Australia, and the rest split between its London and recently opened New York offices.

Most important, however, is that the core development team of 10 are based in Australia, and, according to Mr Winter, that's not likely to change any time soon.

"Australia is a fabulous place to develop IT," he says. "It's cheaper than London and New York and there's ready access to well-trained developers and programmers."

Vividas is recruiting more local developers. The prerequisites are experience and proficiency in low-level languages, including assembly language and C++ with at least five years of experience, preferably in a related industry such as video, audio or encryption.

Now that Vividas is British-owned, however, we can only hope that some bright spark on the board in London

doesn't get any ideas of moving the development team to the motherland.

Hilf on open source?

A big name being touted as a key presenter at a high-profile open-source expo in Sydney next year is about as far removed from Linus Torvalds as you can get. Bill Hilf, who will be presenting at the Linux-world expo, is Microsoft's director of platform strategy. After an open-source role at IBM, a big part of Mr Hilf's job is to educate Microsoft managers about the ins-and-outs of open source, including identifying weaknesses that the proprietary software

model can exploit. We wonder what messages Mr Hilf could bring to delegates attending a conference centred on a theme diametrically opposed to just about everything for which his company stands.

Ageless Google

Apparently our October 4 story about age diversity in hiring practices caused some mild consternation at search-engine giant Google in the US.

We discussed the age prejudice of a young software start-up only interested in hiring young people who could fit in with the company's off-to-the-pub-after-work culture. We pointed out that most of not all of the world's great IT companies embraced age diversity and used Google, a company that has an image of being young and innovative, as an example.

To support our claim, we cited as examples two of Google's senior engineers, Alan Eustace and Bill Coughran, both of whom we pointed out were "no spring chickens". It appears that our story got back to Mr Eustace, who we believe may have misunderstood the gist, as his email to us implies:

"Google hires computer scientists of all ages and levels of experience. What we are looking for is incredible talent, which isn't a function of age. If you visit the small but growing Google engineering office in Sydney and meet the engineers, you'll see that very clearly. If you got another impression from a recruiter, please let me know, and I'll make sure that our message is unambiguous the next time. If you have any great referrals, I can take those as well!"

We wish to thank Mr Eustace for his email and reassure him and the folk at Google that we have no problem with his company's hiring practices and would like to refer his statement to the young Australian software start-up mentioned in our previous story, and any other IT companies and recruiters who may think of binning a CV because the applicant is old enough to give parental advice to the people responsible for hiring.



Bill Hilf



Alan Eustace



Vividas streaming technology was pivotal in the so-called Big Ad.

MIS SECURITY BREAKFAST

MANAGING INFORMATION STRATEGIES

BIOMETRICS - INVADING OR PROTECTING SECURITY & PRIVACY

Are biometrics a threat to or a benefit for our privacy?
Are biometrics the answer to security problems?
How can organisations protect privacy & ensure adequate security?
Where will biometrics be used in the next five years?

Hon. Terry Aulich, director of Aulich & Co will examine the benefits of biometrics. Terry's firm provides security and privacy advice including audits to major Commonwealth government agencies and the private sector. As Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on the Australia Card he was a driving force behind the introduction of the Privacy Act, establishment of the Privacy Commissioner's Office, the Tax File Number system and the 100 points bank account identification system.

A panel of industry experts will offer their opinions and share their experience with biometrics. We will examine which developments in biometrics should be developed in the short and long term, and how would it change the approach and solidity of security? This fascinating breakfast is compulsory for every forward thinking CIO and senior IT executive. His talk will be followed by a panel discussion of industry experts, and the opportunity for questions to be asked from the floor.

Date: Wednesday, 26th October 2005 Time: 7.30am - 9.00 am
Venue: Hilton, Ballroom B, 488 George Street, Sydney
Ticket Price: \$88 (incl. GST).

To book your ticket visit: misweb.com/securitybreakfast
Or for more information call 02 9282 2951 or email fbmevents@fairfax.com.au

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