

The Good Times Virus and Internet Warnings: A Folkloric Study

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Introduction

Starting in late November of 1994 (Jones, 1998), an electronic warning raced along the wires of the internet: users from around the world were warned that if they received a piece of email labeled "good times", they should not open it, but delete it immediately. Were the email to be read, it would cause drastic and terrible results to their computer. The message was convincing: the virus warning skimmed all around the internet, shuttled from hand to hand, changing as it traveled across the worldwide networks.

The full ramifications of the virus warning are not yet fully known: its successors still travel the networks, being distributed and spawning new virus warnings, both well-intended and malevolent.

This essay will explore the Good Times virus warning in the folkloric context of the internet. It will begin by trying to discuss (from a social viewpoint) what constitutes the internet; it will then relate folkloric communication to other, better-studied conduits: xeroxlore, telephones, and faxes. It will then point out a number of messages that are cognate with the Good Times virus, that came after the virus warning. Because there is little research on folklore through computer channels, the bulk of this essay centers on showing parallels between computer folklore and better known areas: xeroxlore, telephone communication, and pranks. In this context, the Good Times virus is merely one of a long chain of closely-related chain letters and pranks.

I note here that the Good Times virus warning is, in fact, a fake warning. Thus, this paper will refer to "Good Times", "the Good Times virus", and, occasionally, "the Good Times hoax" interchangeably.

What Was the Good Times Virus?

The origins of the virus warning are not well known. Jones reports the emergence of an email warning in late November, 1994:

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FYI, a file, going under the name "Good Times" is being sent to some Internet users who subscribe to on-line services (CompuServe, Prodigy and America On Line). If you should receive this file, do not download it! Delete it immediately. I understand that there is a virus included in that file, which if downloaded to your personal computer, will ruin all of your files.
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This version was not distributed as quickly as some other versions discussed later, but was one of the first. Of course, many variants have since emerged (see Appendix A). The warning skipped across computer networks, flooding machines. Versions that passed through authoritative hands would gain authority ("the FCC has reported that", in the "Nth Complexity Loop" version, Appendix A, even if there was no truth to the report.) The message made it onto radio stations (Jones, 1998) and into newspaper.

There have been a few theories about the origins of the Good Times virus, but it is universally agreed that it probably was initially meant as a joke or fake warning. There certainly is *no* such toxic email, and no way to corrupt another computer by simply sending email. No computers were ever damaged by the so-called virus.

This is not to say that no legitimate network warnings *do* exist. The PKZIP 300 warning (PKZ300.WAR, 1998) was passed around when a malicious group placed a damaging file that mimicked a well-loved free product on a number of public servers. The emailed warnings helped keep users from damaging their machines by downloading malevolent software.

Variation on the Internet as Folkloric Conduit

In the last few years, the internet has become a very popular research and networking tool, and therefore requires little discussion. Still, it is worth enumerating the user interfaces-the way that users "see" the internet. First, there is electronic mail: propagated nearly instantly, a message in plain text can be sent from one end of the world to

the other. There is virtually no cost, in time or money, for sending duplicate messages to multiple people, and little effort to forward email that arrived to someone else: usually two or three keystrokes will suffice. These form conduits, channels along which messages are propagated. Different authors will tend to send messages to the same group, over and over, and therefore tend to repeat patterns. The internet, then, in some ways matches the patters suggested by Degh (1975), as message conduits. The community of email readers is, to be sure, a large and diverse one. But they share some common interests, usually about the computers themselves. The earliest adopters of computer technology were computer technologists, discussing computers; this theme has remained as a dominant use of the internet.

Newsgroups are a sort of social community. Each newsgroup is accessible to many users, and are structured like a public bulletin board. Users can read, post and respond to messages posted on the board. Because some groups have readerships in the tens of thousands, or even millions, a message propagated to a newsgroup will reach many people. Messages posted to newsgroups may take more time to propagate across the internet and therefore may not reach distant points for several days. The intense social community that grows up around and within a newsgroup has been documented by Baym (1993), who argues that online communities are in all ways like the more traditional kinds. The shared interests, through, are less frequently geographic than based around more intellectual pursuits.

One pursuit that nearly all computer users share is the safety of their computer. Seeing themselves as an online elite, of sorts, the computer becomes a symbol of communication ability. This critical connection to far-flung parts of the world also represents a serious financial commitment. They are, therefore, protective of their own machine, and of the network the machine runs on, and will do what they can to try to keep both the machines and the network working!

Folkloric Variation

Many chain messages, in particular, are sent on quickly, almost reflexively: the message is read, absorbed, and sent on immediately. Because it is so easy to forward email *without* changing the content, the data changes only slowly. The basic form of communication is an unchanged letter, without variation imposed. This makes it unlike storytelling (where no two performances are precisely the same), and much like xeroxlore (where images evolve, but only slowly). The most obvious variation occurs in subject lines and the openings to messages. There, users tend to append introductions as "you should really read this". It is potentially useful to apply Guigne's (1993) schema for folklore mutation (expanded from Burns (1970) on folksongs), in which these additional lines function as *authentication* and *moralization* (Guigne, 170-176). They add material that asks for, or offers, clarity on the message. The second version in Appendix A illustrates this quite well: the extraneous line "Here is some important information. Beware of a file called GoodTimes" is a summary of the later message, probably added by a different author: the message itself is not so duplicated in any other version, although different appeals and introductions launch other versions.

Dundes and Pagter (1991) describe a faxlore joke-cycle of the "Iraqi SCUD Missile Launching systems." Each of these is a slight variant of a camel with its genitals exposed to a stiff hammer blow. Perhaps most interesting about these is not that the images are similar, but that they are different: some are clearly enhanced tracings, while others were apparently done with the original accessible. Some of the enhancements are probably to correct for the inevitable degradation that occurs as a result of a "copy of a copy," as Preston (1994) illustrates with the degraded "secretary image:" a series of images, each faxed and then traced to restore quality. By the final version, little is left of the original, although it is still closely related.

Preston finds faxlore interesting as folklore precisely because it has a rapid distribution of identical-seeming copies. He feels that a critical aspect of photocopy-lore is the "look" of aging: the static and image degradation that suggest that a particular image has passed through many hands. Email can certainly pick up some of that "look:" many messages that have been forwarded repeatedly can gain a chain of attribution lines, and some messages seem to gain importance simply *through* the mechanism of repeated forwarding: implicitly, they ask, "do you see how important this message is? Look at how many people have seen it already!"

Preston also argues that the major variation in faxlore occurs through tracing and image enhancement between generations. This is a problematic explanation for computers, though: variations do arise, despite the fact that no degradation of the data occurs. Perhaps all differences can be entirely explained by a combination of unintentional enhancement (small edits and changes, adding small messages on the first line) and intentional changes (such as the addition of the phrase "Nth complexity binary loop" to the third version in appendix A.)

Different versions of the Good Times message do exhibit variation: the entries in appendix A attests to this. Yet this is not a broad variation, but tightly focused. A few internet and web searches turned up very few, if any, different versions than these: and these are, by and large, aggressively different from each other.

Some short messages, certainly, might skip media and be retyped. Bill Ellis (1998) refers to three different variants on the "warning from the trees," (reproduced in Appendix B) each clearly mutually influenced, but each different in capitalization, in phrasing, in grammar. One might argue the origin of these multiple versions to be changes of medium. Although email is forwarded without variation, xeroxlore is typed back in and stories are retold. This can cause variations as the stories are retold and recopied from memory to email repeatedly. It is important to realize, though, that this has now left the domain of electronic communication-this theory posits variation only when a message passes *out* of the written stages, and into the oral, dynamic ones. The first pair of messages, though, share a line in common, down to identical capitalization: 2 "StoP tHE LoGGiNg oR wE WiLl coNtInUE To KILL oNe CeleBRITy EaCh WeEK." It would be hard to argue that two messages with the identical lettering are widely separated: but then why the second line different? It must be a case of intentional editing to make it more convincing, more funny. I would not presume to try to decide *which* version is older.

Folkloric Interpretation

As Prank

A more meaningful interpretation of the Good Times virus might be as a prank. Pranks-as Smith (1957) and Dundes (1989) rightly point out, are associated with frontiers: Smith prefers the geographical frontiers of the American West, while Dundes prefers technological and employment frontiers: sending new people on ludicrous jobs. There is no question that the internet is perceived as a frontier to most people today: the technology is new, and, generally, mysterious: a large expensive humming box whose mechanisms are difficult, and which require gurus and geeks to operate well. Eventually, the technology will become everyday, just as the car and television have. But now, the internet is a mystery: and, as such, the information that comes across it is imbued with a sheen of authority.

The last such revolutionary communication change was, arguably, the telephone. When the telephone was as mysterious as the computer is now,

"phones were a serious miracle, intended for business, social exchanges, or gossip. Humor caught them [adults] unawares, and they were generally unable to sense buffooning or mockery. If The Telephone asked a question, it got a straight, unsuspecting answer." (from Brooks, 1984)

writes Ken Brooks. The authority of the telephone allowed impressive pranks. Once, for example, his uncle convinced his town to store up water for an upcoming outage, simply by mentioning a possible rumor.

There may be greater power to a message from the frontier *about* that frontier: not only does the message come through this medium, and therefore must be more authoritative, but it speaks about its own medium, and therefore must know something about itself. The potential for abuse is great.

"Hello, this is the phone company. We are making checks on our customers' phones in your area. Do you hear a clicking noise? (Tap phone with pencil.) You can fix this by unscrewing the microphone ends of your phone while still listening to me and taking out the rubber washer. If you don't have the washer then take the plastic diaphragm out. Next you carry the phone with

you into the middle of the street and scream like a chicken." (reported in Harris, 1978).

Perhaps this is innocent enough: by the end, the receiver is left with a half-unscrewed phone and a foolish feeling. But how about the more dangerous version?

"Just call your favorite party and identify yourself as a representative of the telephone company. Explain that there are some problems with the above ground telephone lines in the area, and that a repair crew will be working in the area with extremely high voltage equipment. Ask that they not answer or use their telephone for the next fifteen minutes because if they do the telephone repairman will receive a fatal shock... A few minutes later call their home again. They probably won't answer but let it ring seven times. Call 12 minutes later and if they answer let go a blood-curdling scream..." (reported in Harris, 1978).

This, perhaps, is close to the effect of the Good Times virus. All of a sudden, the use of the communications medium is fatal: no one wants to alienate the phone company (and thus sever their telephone connection), but that means leaving the telephone unanswered: a serious social gaffe! It takes a certain degree of sophistication to understand that the telephone won't shock a repairman, and that it is a prank. Similarly, email is meant to be *read*-but the virus means that email is too dangerous to read.

Other pranks on the internet show a clear initiatory structure. A favorite joke list that is passed around, for example, is the "stupid computer user stories," usually legendary and labeled as true. Almost always, they are initiatory. Consider this, from a page significantly labeled "Humor for Webmasters" (PC Cup, 1998)

True story from a Novell NetWire SysOp

Caller: "Hello, is this Tech Support?"

Tech Rep: "Yes, it is. How may I help you?"

Caller: "The cup holder on my PC is broken and I am within my warranty period. How do I go about getting that fixed?"

Tech Rep: "I'm sorry, but did you say a cup holder?"

Caller: "Yes, it's attached to the front of my computer."

Tech Rep: "Please excuse me if I seem a bit stumped, it's because I am. Did you receive this as part of a promotional, at a trade show? How did you get this cup holder? Does it have any trademark on it?"

Caller: "It came with my computer, I don't know anything about a promotional. It just has '4X' on it."

At this point the Tech Rep had to mute the caller, because he couldn't stand it. The caller had been using the load drawer of the CD-ROM drive as a cup holder, and snapped it off the drive.

Clearly, there is an internet-aware grouping: those who know something about the technology, and those who don't. Those who have been initiated can freely laugh at those who can't tell the CD ROM drive-a precise, expensive piece of equipment-from a cup-holder. The tech support, of course, are sophisticated, and can tell.

This may have the prank structure, but few people have actually gone on quests for computer cup holders. For true confusion, perhaps it is best to turn to the Internet Cleaning. Here, again, there is a threat passed along the networks: very powerful machines will delete all data still connected to the internet (see appendix B). It was originally distributed as an april fools' (or leap years') joke, but has spread far beyond this limited scope, and is frequently reposted in some form or another. Today, it has become a simple way to distinguish the new user from the experienced one. The letter always claims to operate infrequently: in one dominant version posted in mid-May, the Internet Cleaning occurs on the 366th day, February 29th. Since most internet users joined the electronic community within the last two years, the last leap-year was long enough ago that few people were on the internet. Thus, users will not quite be sure whether the internet cleaning can effect them. They would realize, of course, that it was a prank as soon as they heard an officemate or friend refer to that day's email, and thus be initiated.

The Good Times virus has no such definite ending point, no time when the joke has clearly been resolved. There is no "day after" when a user can feel secure that they survived the attack. A number of versions of the virus, in fact, were authenticated by users who were sure that their latest computer failure was the fault of a computer virus, or who, after receiving the letter, did their first-ever virus scan, and found one. Pre-existing conditions, then, were misunderstood to be symptoms of the virus. By this process, some of the already "initiated"-still unsure of their knowledge, but trying-changed their minds back, and decided that in fact the virus was a risk, and might in fact exist.

By and large, the communication thread about the Good Times virus warnings at this point is of the form, a single email asking about the virus, followed by a long list of replies assuring the user that the virus is a hoax. Everyone is proud to be an initiate, and wants to have the chance to initiate another user by sharing the truth with them.

As Chain Letter

A critical aspect with any warning-prank or otherwise-is to ensure that the full audience is covered. Therefore, they will carry an invocation to send the message to as many people as possible. This, of course, links it into the long traditions of chain letters. The Good Times invocation to "Forward this to all your friends" fits in very well with the chain mail tradition of requiring a certain number of copies to be made. But with the Good Times virus, like the Craig Shergold tale, forwarding the message is altruistic-and better! Protecting one's friends from this deadly virus would also, implicitly, protect the user from his friends' mail files and computers propagating deadly messages back to him.

This is made even more explicit with one of the many descendants of Good Times, "AOL RIOT" (see Appendix C.) Under AOL RIOT, one *must* forward the message to ten other users, or be threatened with a virus that will "have [their] computer friend." Much of the email passed around on this rubric is of the form "I don't believe this... but just in case."

Good Times and World View

It is a limited world-view that is necessary, to be sure, but a certain set of beliefs needs to be in place in order for this, or any, prank to be effective. It is these underlying beliefs that allow both the Good Times virus to survive, and for it to have a never-ending series of successors, each promising doom to the computer that fails to comply with their message.

In order to believe the Good Times virus, a number of beliefs need to be in place. The user must believe in their own ignorance of mystery of the internet: that there are unpredictable forces from other computers that can affect their own lives. The user must believe-even, be frightened-that a random computer can malevolently damage another, changing the data without knowledge or approval of the first. That this damage can occur through the medium of email, and hit every single user who uses email, on a wide variety of platforms.

They must also have certain beliefs about the reliability of the communication mechanism. The internet's communication systems-known to be reliable and accurate for their good and thorough information about such valuable cookie recipes as Mrs. Fields' (Neiman-Marcus), such heartwarming social appeals as Craig Shergold's, and such important safety information as kidney thieves-truly can, and do, provide good information and legitimate warnings.

Each of these alone is a stretch for the cynical, experienced internet user. But for the beginning user, just exposed to the great power of their computer and the connectivity of the internet, with its copious information, these are realistic beliefs.

Certainly, they are still preyed upon. Shortly after the Good Times notifications, the Irina virus threatened destruction to computers that downloaded a message entitled "Irina." The following message was actually a book promotion by Penguin Books (Jones, 1998), and was entitled "Irina." Speculation has it that users were supposed to laugh at the false warning, and read the following email, which would promote the plot of the book. This tactic failed. Rather, the first few users deleted the book promotion immediately-after all, it had the fatal name. The warning propagated quickly, although it has largely died out.

Similar incidents occurred with another two virus hoaxes, RedTeam and Join The Crew. RedTeam was a rewriting with little variation of the Good Times warning, and-as a service to the reader-provides a virus sweeper that will supposedly inoculate a computer from the virus. Unfortunately, there is a real virus: the "sweeper", which in fact automatically sends out more copies of itself.

The text of Join The Crew in Appendix C shows interesting new features. Specifically, it warns users away from messages labeled "RETURNED MAIL OR UNABLE TO DELIVER"-but this is a standard message returned by computers for misaddressed email. Clearly, this fits the initiatory prank structure very well.

Appendix C also includes copies of BadTimes, an anonymous, but widely satire on Good Times. BadTimes attempts to show how absurd Good Times is by exaggerating

Many of the same belief structures involved in the Good Times Virus are used by the AOL RIOT and Bill Gates \$1000 notices. In each of them, the user must believe that their email can be, and is tracked around the internet: for AOL RIOT, because the user's account will be decimated if they have not reproduced the message sufficiently; for Bill Gates, because there is a substantial cash incentive for forwarding the email. (Note that a thousand people is an extremely small number: this message would have reached the first thousand within a few hours of the message being send.)

Conclusion

Examining both relatives and variants of the Good Times virus gives a powerful perspective on the messages that swept across the internet. As a prank, it was singularly effective, affecting millions of users across the internet, and spawned all sorts of successors. Analyzing the beliefs that underlie the virus allows some knowledge of the sorts of messages that the virus passe, and how people react. It is clear that this particular bit of folklore was malevolent and damaging-a folkloric understanding can help defuse it.

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Appendix A: Sampled Virus Reports

Good Times warning, December 1995 ("Happy Chanukah").

This is one of the earliest Good Times warnings, and circulated through late 1995 through early 1996.

Here is some important information. Beware of a file called GoodTimes.

Happy Chanukah everyone, and be careful out there. There is a virus on America Online being sent by E-Mail. If you get anything called "Good Times", DON'T read it or download it. It is a virus that will erase your hard drive. Forward this to all your friends. It may help them a lot. (in Jones, 1998)

One of the dominant versions of Good Times messages ("ASCII BUFFER"):

Thought you might like to know...

Apparently, a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of America Online that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other, more well-known viruses such as Stoned, Airwolf, and Michaelangelo pale in comparison to the prospects of this newest creation by a warped mentality.

What makes this virus so terrifying is the fact that no program needs to be exchanged for a new computer to be infected. It can be spread through the existing e-mail systems of the InterNet.

Luckily, there is one sure means of detecting what is now known as the "Good Times" virus. It always travels to new computers the same way - in a text e-mail message with the subject line reading simply "Good Times". Avoiding infection is easy once the file has been received - not reading it. The act of loading the file into the mail server's ASCII buffer causes the "Good Times" mainline program to initialize and execute.

The program is highly intelligent - it will send copies of itself to everyone whose e-mail address is contained in a received-mail file or a sent-mail file, if it can find one. It will then proceed to trash the computer it is running on.

The bottom line here is - if you receive a file with the subject line "Good Times", delete it immediately! Do not read it! Rest assured that whoever's name was on the "From:" line was surely struck by the virus. Warn your friends and local system users of this newest threat to the InterNet! It could save them a lot of time and money. (in Jones, 1998)

The "Nth Complexity Loop"

This version is interesting, in that it displays a number of Guigne's mutations added to the ASCII version printed above: localization ("last Wednesday"), authority (FCC), convincing text (the technical sounding, if meaningless, "nth complexity infinite binary loop").

The FCC released a warning last Wednesday concerning a matter of major importance to any regular user of the InterNet. Apparently, a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of America Online that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other, more well-known viruses such as Stoned, Airwolf, and Michaelangelo pale in comparison to the prospects of this newest creation by a warped mentality.

What makes this virus so terrifying, said the FCC, is the fact that no program needs to be exchanged for a new computer to be infected. It can be spread through the existing e-mail systems of the InterNet. Once a computer is infected, one of several things can happen. If the computer contains a hard drive, that will most likely be destroyed. If the program is not stopped, the computer's processor will be placed in an nth-complexity infinite binary loop - which can severely damage the processor if left running that way too long. Unfortunately, most novice computer users will not realize what is happening until it is far too late. (in Jones, 1998)

Appendix B: Related Internet Messages

The Internet Cleaning

This reference is from (Hall, 1998). Note the letter seems to be addressed to sysops, and therefore gains authority merely by associating itself with knowledgeable people.

From: Doug Hall <doug@elmail.co.uk>

Subject: Alert! Read This!

Date: Wed, 14 Feb 1996 10:36:34 +0000 (GMT)

*** Attention ***

It's that time again!

As many of you know, each leap year the internet must be shut down for 24 hours in order to allow us to clean it. The cleaning process, which eliminates dead email and inactive ftp, www and gopher sites, allows for a better-working and faster internet. This year, the cleaning process will take place from 12:01 a.m. GMT on Feb. 29 until 12:01 a.m. GMT on March 1. During that 24-hour period, five powerful internet-crawling robots situated around the world will search the internet and delete any data that they find.

In order to protect your valuable data from deletion we ask that you do the following:

1. Disconnect all terminals and local area networks from their internet connections.
2. Shut down all internet servers, or disconnect them from the internet.
3. Disconnect all disks and harddrives from any connections to the internet.

Refrain from connecting any computer to the internet in any way.

We understand the inconvenience that this may cause some internet users, and we apologize. However, we are certain that any inconveniences will be more than made up for by the increased speed and efficiency of the internet, once it has been cleared of electronic flotsam and jetsam.

We thank you for your cooperation.

Kim Dereksen

Interconnected Network Maintenance staff

Main branch, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Sysops and others: Since the last internet cleaning, the number of internet users has grown dramatically. Please assist us in alerting the public of the upcoming internet cleaning by posting this message where your users will be able to read it. Please pass this message on to other sysops and internet users as well. Thank you.

Warning From the Trees

These were collected in (Ellis 1998). He points out the differences: "they were not skiing accidents" as compared to "there are no skiing accidents"-a difference more interesting in that the first line is, character to character, identical.

Date: 1/22/98 1:30 PM

> FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

>

> FROM: THE TREES

> _____

>

> StoP THE LoGGiNg oR wE WiLl coNtInUE To KILL oNe CeleBrITy Each WeEK.

> theY WeRe nOt SKiInG "aCciDenTS".

>

Date: Mon, 26 Jan 1998 12:21:42 +0000

> FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

>

> FROM: THE TREES

>

> StoP THE LogGINg oR wE WiLl coNtInUE To KILL oNe CeleBrITy Each

>WeEK.

>

> theRe ARe nO SKiInG "aCciDenTS".

Date: Fri, 30 Jan 1998 23:09:17 +0000

Ransom Note from Trees

StOp CuTtInG DoWn ThE TrEeS oR wE WiLl KiLl MoRe Of YoUr

CeLeBrAtIeS! ThErE Is nO SuCh ThInGs As SKiInG AcCiDenTs!

Appendix C: Good Times Descendants

RedTeam

Collected from Kaspersky, 1998.

Hiya!

Just thought I'd warn you about a destructive new e-mail virus. Here is some info:

> The "Red Team" virus is a complex new computer virus that spreads via
> the Microsoft Windows operating system, and Internet E-Mail. Although
> it is not the first virus to spread via E-Mail (that was "Good Times"),
> the Red Team virus is unparalleled in its destructive capabilities.
> Further more, the virus is exceedingly common - it has already been
> reported in much of western Europe, the USA, Russia, Australia, and
> Japan. In short, everywhere.

>

> We at QUEST, have spent several weeks analyzing this virus, and are proud
> to announce that we finally have a cure! The program, named "K-RTEAM"
> (Kill Red Team), can be executed in any Microsoft Windows environment, and
> will reliably detect (and remove if necessary) the Red Team virus from
> your system buffers.

>

> --

> Julia Blumin

> QUALCOMM Enterprise Software Technologies

> World Wide Web: <http://www.qualcomm.com>

The reason I thought I should warn you, is that we recently had a run in with this beast. Luckily we managed to get a copy of the excellent 'K-RTEAM' programme before the destruction really started. Just in case you should suffer the same misfortune, I have included this programme for you too.

Bye!

P.S. Make sure you warn all your friends of this new threat!

Join The Crew

Collected from (Scar Moi, 1998)

Subject: NINNIES, WATCH OUT. VIRUS WARNING.

From: scarmoi@aol.com (Scar Moi)

Date: 1998/02/13

Message-ID: <19980213022000.VAA17398@ladder03.news.aol.com>

X-Admin: news@aol.com

Organization: AOL <http://www.aol.com>

Newsgroups: alt.music.nin

Just got this, for all of you who didn't. Don't now if it's true or not but it's worth watching out for:

VIRUS WARNING !!!!!!

>

> If you receive an email titled "JOIN THE CREW" DO NOT open
> it. It will erase everything on your hard drive. Forward
> this letter out to as many people as you
> can.

>

> This is a new, very malicious virus and not many people know
> about it. This information was announced yesterday morning

> by IBM; please share it with everyone who might access the
> internet.
>
> Once again, pass this along to EVERYONE in your address book
> so that this may be stopped.
>
> Also, do not open or even look at any mail that says
> "RETURNED OR UNABLE TO DELIVER". This virus will attach
> itself to your computer components and render them useless.
> Immediately delete any mail items that say this.
>
> AOL has said that this is a very dangerous virus and that
> there is NO remedy for it at this time. Please practice
> cautionary measures and forward this to all your online
> friends ASAP.

BadTimes: The Satire

Collected from (TCurryFan, 1998)

Subject: PARDOY: VIRUS WARNING!

From: tcurryfan@aol.com (TCurryFan)

Date: 1998/02/20

Message-ID: <19980220023300.VAA25935@ladder03.news.aol.com>

X-Admin: news@aol.com

Organization: AOL <http://www.aol.com>

Newsgroups: rec.arts.tv.mst3k.misc

Hey, all!

I saw this on alt.fan.power-rangers... I have no clue where it was originally posted or who originally wrote it:

NEW VIRUS WARNING

If you receive an e-mail with a subject line of "Badtimes," delete it immediately WITHOUT reading it. This is the most dangerous Email virus yet.

It will re-write your hard drive. Not only that, but it will scramble any disks that are even close to your computer. It will recalibrate your refrigerator's coolness setting so all your ice cream melts and milk curdles. It will demagnetize the strips on all your credit cards, reprogram your ATM access code, screw up the tracking on your VCR and use subspace field harmonics to scratch any CDs you try to play.

It will give your ex-boy/girlfriend your new phone number. It will mix antifreeze into your fish tank. It will drink all your beer and leave its dirty socks on the coffee table when there's company coming over.

It will hide your car keys when you are late for work and interfere with your car radio so that you hear only static while stuck in traffic.

Badtimes will make you fall in love with a hardened pedophile. It will give you nightmares about circus midgets. It will replace your shampoo with Nair and your Nair with Rogaine, all while dating your current boy/girlfriend behind your back and billing their hotel rendezvous to your Visa card.

It will seduce your grandmother. It does not matter if she is dead, such is the power of Badtimes, it reaches out beyond the grave to sully those things we hold most dear.

Badtimes will give you Dutch Elm disease. It will leave the toilet seat up and leave the hairdryer plugged in dangerously close to a full bathtub.

It will wantonly remove the forbidden tags from your mattresses and pillows, and refill your skim milk with whole. It is insidious and subtle. It is dangerous and terrifying to behold. It is also a rather interesting shade of mauve.

These are just a few signs.

Be afraid!

Be very afraid!!

Same fears: AOL RIOT

Collected from (Gpf_Man, 1998)

Subject: LCW TAKIN OUT "AOL" AOL RIOT JUNE 1, 1998???????????

From: "General Protection Fault" <gpf_man@hotmail.com>

Date: 1998/04/20

Message-ID: <01bd6c68\$1c556900\$3d5108c3@umluhgc>

Newsgroups: alt.hackers.aol.sucks

[More Headers]

[Subscribe to alt.hackers.aol.sucks]

IM A UK based phreak/hack/crack etc and my girlfriend in maryland USA got this message like a million others is it a prank or 4 reel co sid b happie to participate in takin out da Mutha Fuckazz

PEACE

gpf_man@hotmail.com

AOL RIOT JUNE 1, 1998

WARNING:

You must forward this letter to 10 people or your account will be terminated on June 1, 1998. All recipients of this e-mail are being tracked. When you received this, when you forwarded it, who you forwarded it to, is all on record. We are AOL's most elite hacker group, known as LcW. We have hacked AOL's (easily infiltrated) systems on numerous occasions. We have shut down AOL keywords, we can kick any AOL Staff member off for 24 hours, we have gained access to Steve Case's account, we have created AOL's most famous hacking programs (Fate X, HaVoK, HeLL RaIsEr, MaGeNtA) and we can certainly get your credit card info. However, if you send this to 10 people, like you are told, you will escape unharmed. We won't terminate your account and you will be able to continue using AOL. So if you know whats best for you, you will send this to 10 people as soon as possible. If you think we are bluffing....just wait till June 1, and see if you can sign or not.

CAUTION: THERE WILL BE A VIRUS UPLOADED ON AOL'S MAIN SERVER ON JUNE 1, 1998. ANY USERS WHO HAVEN'T FORWARDED THIS MESSAGE WILL AUTOMATICALLY HAVE THE VIRUS DOWNLOADED INTO THEIR SYSTEM. WE SUGGEST YOU FORWARD THIS MESSAGE OR YOUR COMPUTER WILL BE FRIED.

Because of the outrage of AOL's increasing prices, LcW has decided to create a riot on May 1, that will cause havoc on AOL. We will be sending viruses out to thousands of AOL users. We will be terminating accounts. We will be hacking into Guide chat rooms and kicking guides offline. There will be no AOL Staff - just complete pandemonium. If you want to join this riot, we urge you to! You won't have to worry about being TOSed or Reported because there will be no Guides online! So do whatever you want - punt, scroll, tos, just turn AOL into a war zone!

LIST OF LcW HACKERS ON AOL

We represent LcW.

The following Hackers will be co-ordinating the Riot and hacking AOL's mainframe computer, and uploading viruses into the system.

WaReZxHaCk

MaGuS

ReDxKiNG

HaVoK

SkiD

SeMeN

NoStRa

PhoneTap

InetXWeb

Psy Acid

PoiSon iV

PaUsE

CooLant

InFeRnO

XStatic

Chronic Burn

Zone Degreez

WaTcHeR

AOL RIOT ON JUNE 1, 1998 - You have been warned

LcW is taking over America Online.

This is not no fucking joke either.

You have been warned.

Same fears, different story: Bill Gates

At least four different distinct versions of the Bill Gates story appeared in late November. This is representative, and copied from Snopes' web site (Snopes, 1998).

Hello Everyone,

And thank you for signing up for my Beta Email Tracking Application or (BETA) for short. My name is Bill Gates. Here at Microsoft we have just compiled an e-mail tracing program that tracks everyone to whom this message is forwarded to. It does this through an unique IP (Internet Protocol) address log book database. We are experimenting with this and need your help.

Forward this to everyone you know and if it reaches 1000 people everyone on the list you will receive \$1000 and a copy of Windows98 at my expense.

Enjoy.

Note: Duplicate entries will not be counted. You will be notified by email with further instructions once this email has reached 1000 people. Windows98 will not be shipped until it has been released to the general public.

Your friend,

Bill Gates & The Microsoft Development Team.

Danyel Fisher, 1998

1 The "FCC Modem Tax" chain letter (Jones, 1998, among many others) is a wonderful example of a letter, passed around the network quickly and frequently. It was a protective measure across the internet: each user convinced that he, personally, held the power to democratically change the internet and protect it from the government. The FCC holds a profoundly ambiguous place in internet folklore. 2 Differences in spacing are unlikely to be important. Many email programs will automatically change spacing and line differences. Similarly, ">" symbols merely indicate that a message has been resent, and is automatically added by the computer program.