

# Attack of the zombies

Spam is a growing plague, thanks largely to home PCs being infected by viruses and unwittingly churning it out, says Mark Harris



Zombies as seen in Shaun of the Dead. The PC versions are more of a threat

**B**eware zombies attacking you with spam. No, it's not some bizarre Monty Python sketch, but a warning of a coming plague. Colin Wells from Exeter receives a staggering 44,000 junk (or spam) e-mails every day, making him the most spammed person in Britain, according to a UK-based anti-spam software company.

Wells doesn't even work in a hi-tech industry — he's a foreman for Stagecoach buses. One mistake he made was to e-mail the spammers in an attempt to unsubscribe. "For a couple of months I was clicking a link to stop them resending, but I found out this confirms the e-mail address as active. From then on, the amount of spam I was getting was doubling every couple of months."

It's a problem that's worsening — but why? Back in 2004 Bill Gates predicted the end of spam within just two years. Instead Wells is racking up 16m junk

messages a year. Spam now accounts for more than 80% of all e-mail traffic, by some industry estimates.

The problem is largely due to so-called "zombie" computers — home PCs that have been infected by a virus (often contracted from an e-mail attachment) and are sending reams of spam without their owners' knowledge. The criminal gangs

**'Criminals use the zombies to attempt financial fraud'**

that control the zombies use them to fire off thousands of messages offering porn, attempting financial fraud and of course selling Viagra. Worse still, many gangs also gather e-mail contacts lists from zombie computers, ensuring the owners' families and friends are deluged with spam.

"We live in a very interconnected world," says Con Mallon of Symantec, an American security software company. "Spammers are moving tactics all the time. It can take days or weeks to change our filters, giving time for spam to build a lot of momentum. For the bad guys it's a numbers game."

And those numbers are terrifying. Commtouch, an Israeli anti-spam company, estimates there are at least 10m zombie computers active worldwide. Although many spammers target richer, developed nations, it's countries that can't afford the latest security technologies that tend to suffer the worst zombie infestations. Turkey alone houses an estimated 1m compromised computers, with Brazil and India not far behind.

Dave Rand of Trend Micro, a company that makes anti-virus software, lays the blame at the doors of internet service providers (ISPs). "ISPs need to take a more active stance at protecting their customers," he says. "They should tell customers when their computers are exhibiting signs of being compromised. Most ISPs today choose to ignore the problem."

The rules for preventing your computer becoming a spam zombie are the same as avoiding viruses: don't open e-mail attachments unless you're certain of their origin and keep your security up to date. Another golden rule is not to reply to any spam, no matter how tempting the offer. Or you can do what Colin Wells did — spend extra on specialised anti-spam software. His ClearMyMail service costs £18 a year, but Nucleus Research, the American hi-tech analysts, estimates that the time wasted dealing with spam costs businesses more than £350 a year per employee.

Bill Gates's rosy predictions notwithstanding, spam is going to get worse. "Unless we do something, at some point people will give up on e-mail as a communication medium," says Rand.

## HOT LINKS

This week's best clicks

### SECURITY DANGER

There is a gaping security hole in the way the internet works, it emerged last week. Discovered by accident, the flaw allows criminals to redirect users to fake web pages, even if they type the correct address into a browser. Unless this is fixed, it could lead to consumers being duped into visiting websites purporting to represent banks and building societies, where their personal data could be stolen. Internet service providers and Microsoft are working behind the scenes to rectify the problem. To avoid falling victim, run your computer's automatic-update feature, ensure your security software is up to date, and set it to the highest level of alert until more details emerge. Read more at [www.doxpara.com](http://www.doxpara.com).

### ALERT ME

Are you missing out on crucial news or hot bargains? A new website called **Alerts.com** says it will remind you about more or less anything you ask it to. Cherry-pick the things that matter to you — from traffic information to birthdays — and the service will send you alerts via e-mail or SMS text. The site proudly proclaims: it's new, it's free and your personal information is secure.

### KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

It's tempting to think that history only began in the early 1990s with the advent of the internet, as so many journalists rely on the web for background research. As an antidote to this misconception, Times Online has launched the

biggest online newspaper archive in the UK and possibly the world. This enables you to browse editions of The Times dating back to 1785. It's currently free to try at [tinyurl.com/69f8gu](http://tinyurl.com/69f8gu).

### OUT OF THIS WORLD

Are you convinced that UFOs exist? The National Archives has released another tranche of "secret" UFO files at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo). Perhaps the truth really is out there. Meanwhile, a professor at the University of Florida has designed a real flying saucer in partnership with Nasa that will be able to fly without any moving parts. He says that electrodes on the saucer's ceramic surface will transform surrounding air into plasma, which is electrically conductive and responds strongly to electromagnetic fields. An onboard power source creates an electrical current to propel the saucer and hover. Discover more at [tinyurl.com/5moxno](http://tinyurl.com/5moxno).

### NORTHERN BLIGHT

Motorists have come to rely on their sat nav to get them from A to B. Unfortunately, interference from the aurora borealis, or northern lights, can degrade the quality of the GPS signal, making sat navs less accurate, say researchers at Lancaster University. They have created a live AuroraWatch website at [tinyurl.com/n7ssx](http://tinyurl.com/n7ssx) that will e-mail you warnings of any such auroral activity. Your sat nav is likely to be affected only if near to the Earth's magnetic poles or in about five years' time when we reach the peak of the solar cycle.



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