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through.

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I stayed home from work for the past few days because I picked up a nasty virus while on vacation in southern Mississippi. Lying in bed thinking is always a ripping adventure for me, because my brain loves to take off on cross-country jaunts and tumble into half-hidden abysses from which there is no easy extrication.

Having been trained as a biologist, I tend to think in those terms no matter the subject. It was, I suppose, inevitable that I would eventually decide to analyze the overall suitability of the malware:virus analogy. To begin, we must first familiarize ourselves with the froo-frooferly that lies on each side of this equation.

A biological virus is essentially a horrifyingly efficient little robot. It uses chemistry to track, latch onto, and inject a cell with its own genetic material. When the infected cell starts the reproduction process, it just keeps making copies of the virus until it pops and releases them, ready to start the process anew *ad nauseum*. Viruses don't, as a rule, have any payload per se other than their own DNA. They're just programmed to make more viruses, like those tiny DVD replicators that creep under the door into your house and use up all your blank disks to make endless copies of ancient "My Mother the Car" episodes while you're asleep. That doesn't happen to you? Never mind. My mother (Cord L-29 Special Coupe, light blue with wide whitewalls) always said this was an odd neighborhood.

Computer viruses, in contrast, almost always seem to have a less-than-pleasant payload attached. This can range from zombie-inducing botnet software, to utilities that damage the host system (intentionally or otherwise), to simple "gotchas." This means effectively that they more closely resemble pathogenic bacteria than viruses. Infectious bacteria frequently sport either endo- or exotoxins that wreak havoc on the host organism. The deleterious effects of viruses are mostly by-products of the fact that host cells can't really do their job once they're, you know, *lysed*.

Lounging about the domicile, fending off invisible legions of microorganismic doom, facilitates all manner of half-cocked cogitation. I found myself, for example, wishing I could use vi commands and regular expressions during face-to-face conversation. Jump lines, go back a paragraph, skip to the end, substitute, insert, delete all strings that contain "like" or "awesome"—that kind of thing. That would be, like, awesome. Especially :q!

What if life, I now feverishly speculate, were more like UNIX? I could bring up the process table at will to see what tasks were running in my background, and *kill -9* any I didn't want. I could look at memstat or iostat to examine what was bothering me or find out what I was supposed to be doing. Better, I could just mod my kernel

and reload to solve any pesky medical issues. All of those little seemingly insoluble problems I encounter on a daily basis could be settled by calling up the man page. (Well, for the most part. I've encountered a few man pages that look as though they were written by an alien engineer describing the process for adding quark injection to your galaxy hopper's hyperdrive. I tried that once and it *really* gums up the intake manifold.)

As I drift lazily along the sludge-like stream of my overheated subconscious, the sky overhead now begins to darken ominously and thunder rumbles in the distance as we enter that forsaken region known only as "The Cloud." Here is a rare glimpse of the underworld, replete with blaze-eyed daemons, towering black grisly giants, and puissant phantasms eternally ripping and tearing at the firmament. Leviathan doom machines grind away tirelessly in bottomless pits filled with raw data, whilst toothless grinning gargoyles stand guard. Their cockpits glowing with hideous evil, jagged sable dive-bombers swoop and scream among the fluttering packets, fragile butterflies in the bombastic blitzkrieg. At every turn unblinking red eyes stare out from the darkened thickets, heavy with menace.

While Jim (I forgot to mention him) wrestles the saber-toothed beast known only as "QoS" to the oil-streaked tarmac, I dodge and weave to avoid the hordes of vicious stinging "features" that swarm suddenly from gaping fractures in the towering wall of fire separating us from the swirling maelstrom of fractal turmoil raging outside our beleaguered perimeter. Lava-like bit torrents erupt without warning from fissures that split and seal at random with a sound that resembles nothing if not the angry snort of some great sea serpent, enraged by the white-hot fluid belching from its orifices. Ships flying the flags of all the well-known anti-virus vendors pitch and rock anchored firmly in the harbor, helpless against the rapidly rising seaweed-choked swells rushing in from the Malware Sea. Children huddle against their mothers and wail inconsolably along the docks as their treasured stuffed penguins are dashed against the needle-sharp rocks of Scada Point.

Fire, brimstone, sobs, and swirling toxic fog fade at last into an idyllic scene of gently rolling green hills dotted with happy little thrumming servers, each the king of its own sovereign domain of countless unseen workstations. The peaceful serenity is broken only occasionally by a wandering slime monster, known to the local tribes as "The Ravaging Replicator," with a large anvil-like appendage that smashes servers at random and leaves them hemorrhaging data copiously over the verdant sward. Replicators, it turns out, have no natural enemies, so the only thing that can be done is wait until one experiences the inevitable page fault and then drive a sharpened poignard deep into its exposed BIOS.

All fevers eventually break, and when mine did the world reverted to a much less interesting place. On the bright side, the path to the bathroom is no longer fraught with deadly digital dreamworld diaspora. For this, at least, I am grateful.