Article: COMPUTERS BEHAVING BADLY
Topic: SECURITY
Author: Mark Ahearn (c.b.b@optusnet.com.au)

We now live in an age where your computer should have an electronic 'shield' to protect it against attack. It also needs to be able to monitor and remove any attempt to invade your data. The main reason viruses and hackers and the like make it to TV and News Bulletins is we – the public – are reactive instead of being proactive.

To this end you need to have, at a bare minimum: a firewall, spyware protection, adware protection, virus protection and optionally, email spam protection. For any solution to be effective, the onus is on the user to make sure they are 'turned on' and kept updated.

A Personal Firewall is software that builds a logical 'brick wall' between your computer and the outside world. They are designed to protect your PC against attacks from both internal and external threats. They achieve this by controlling all data flow to and from your computer. All communication channels are 'listened' to and only traffic that you choose to permit is allowed through. Permanent rules can be established to always permit or deny certain channels, this way; the firewall learns over time your preferred access channels.

Spyware can take the form of a program that may be running on your computer that typically is there, without your knowledge, collecting data on, for example, sites visited or keys pressed. Common, harmless spyware activity involves your start page in Internet Explorer being reassigned or extra Internet Sites being added to the Favourites list.

But even if you don't notice anything, you may still be infected. Spyware, as the name implies, usually is invisible to the user. It sits in the background, silently tracking your usage. It could then be used to produce a profile that may be sold to companies – the modern day, electronic mailing list. More alarmingly, these spyware programs can gather account and password information, as used in Web Banking, and pass this data onto who-knows-where.

Adware is very similar to spyware, but usually (not always) as aggressive. Adware can take the form of those annoying, pop-up messages, advertising 'this' or enticing you to 'that' web site. What is not realized is they may allow a means for the creators of these applications to gather information about those using them. This can been done without your knowledge or permission.

There is a certain degree of overlap with the above software as one may give protection over an area already protected by another. But remember the old adage – "You can never have too much protection".

The good news is that spyware and adware protection and personal firewalls are freely downloadable from many providers off the Web. There are, of course, also commercial equivalents available from many of the retail computer stores.

Next issue – Viruses.