

/dev/random

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through.

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Wading through all the ballyhoo about the Stuxnet worm being a “game-changer” (what game would that be, exactly?) by dint of its very precise targeting, sophisticated coding, and really rad fashion sense, my thoughts began to wander (the way they always do) down the well-beaten path of baseless speculation. Apparently/ reportedly/allegedly Stuxnet was created to, among other things, mess with the rotational speed of the specific centrifuges in use by the targeted nuclear fuel processing facility in an unnamed country that rhymes with Tea Lawn. Leaving aside the glaring question of why anyone would want to make centrifuges network-accessible—and, for that matter, how they would go about it—I want to turn instead to a fascinating (and I use that adjective because even in this enlightened day and age we’re not allowed to print the more satisfying one) exploration of other applications of this, um, technology.

Before I proceed further, I would like to snatch yet another moment of your precious time to discuss the whole concept of computer worms, or, rather, the nomenclature thereto appertaining. Why a *worm*? Worms, or anyway the worms I’ve encountered in my backyard with spade in hand and crabgrass demise in mind, can wriggle and flop with the best of them but intimidation or propulsion-wise they’re not on top of the game. I would think computer *eel* or computer *adder* or even computer *spirochete* would be more descriptive and menacing than just plain ol’ *worm*. I wasn’t there when that train left the station, though; I guess the fella what calls the turn names the baby.

If some unidentified malware incubator can spit out a worm to take over centrifuges in a uranium-enrichment plant, that same coding acumen could be applied to something more useful to the average Joe such as, say, getting better seats at the ball game or lowering the price on that expensive flat-screen HD. What if you could gain control over the local amusement park infrastructure long enough to change the duration or max speed on your favorite roller coaster? SCADA systems are just about ubiquitous these days, probably far more so than most people understand. All sorts of big, important, dangerous doo-dads are connected to the Interwebs now, including flood control gates, electrical grid routing substations, distillation/cracking systems at refineries, chemical manufacturing equipment—just about anything with a flow rate, liquid level, temperature, voltage, rotational velocity, or other parameter that can be measured and controlled via feedback loops. Not to mention your garage light, blender, microwave, and dog flap.

Throughout the history of American pop culture (it doesn’t officially become *pop* culture until your pop no longer understands it), or at least the history of American

pop culture from the early 20th century onward (and prior to that I don't think we had much, since pop culture requires widespread media access to propagate), the litmus test for things that we as men feel powerless to deal with has been the superhero (women resort to shopping). Like canaries in a coal mine, the appearance and sudden popularity of a Superman or Batman or Mighty Mouse (a nod to Steinbeck; you figure it out) has heralded a conscious or unconscious collective conclusion by the creative/imaginative segment of the populace that the Powers That Be ain't cuttin' the mustard from a problem-solving perspective. Captain America slew the Nazis for us, for example. Superman took care of all those pesky urban criminal gangs and served as a sort of science fiction bellwether. Batman explored our profound sense of moral ambiguity concerning violence perpetrated in the name of justice. Plus, he wore really cool black outfits and had a fabulous black car with big tail fins.

Now that I've segued so neatly from SCADA to Batman, I think it's time that a certain sidekick finally came into his own. I must say I never understood the point of Robin. What the heck kind of hero gets named after a migratory thrush, anyway? (The North American robin is not related to the European one, FYI.) I mean, why would a robin hang around with a bat in the first place? Robins aren't nocturnal; they're birds, not mammals; they navigate by sight, not sound. What's up with that bizarre pairing, then?

I think I've uncovered the answer: Kane and Finger were prescient. That stuff they put out at the time about Robin being named for Robin Hood (hence the pseudo-Medieval Hollywood costume) was just a cover story. Robin really *was* named for the bird because...and this is where genius rears its glittery head...they anticipated the need one day for a superhero *who eats worms*.

That's right, folks: remember, you heard it here first. Robin is the obvious superhero for the age of self-propelled malware. While Batman dukes it out with insane circus clowns and fugitive animated store window manikins from "Polyester Billy's Short 'n' Waddy Men's Wear," the Boy Wonder takes on the latest polymorphic encrypted code monster. Even zero-days are no match for the (Es)caped Crusader and his new protégé, *Early Bird*. Thrill as they dodge razor-sharp distributed denial of service packets. Gasp as our heroes narrowly avoid being ensnared by the heinous *Spearfisher*. Perch on the edge of your chair, wring your hands, and postpone going to the bathroom until your eyes cross repeatedly while the insidious *Identity Thief* works his oily wiles on the unsuspecting citizens of Webtropolis. Don't forget to visit our snack bar and bring your automobile title.

The pundits say that increasingly sophisticated worms are an inevitable consequence of our interconnected world. A hero will rise to struggle against these vile abominations in the name of goodness and low-calorie sweetener and that hero will be clad in crimson vest, green tights, and antique gold satin tablecloth.

All hail the stalwart savior of SCADA, the worm's nemesis: *Robin the Aviator*.