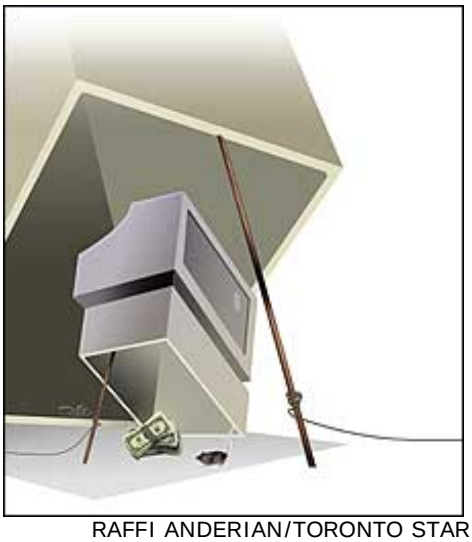
TORONTO STAR
www.thestar.com
Mon. Jul. 12, 2004. | Updated at 02:10 AM

Jul. 12, 2004. 01:00 AM

Scam trap

`Internet's first blood sport' involves chasing after those trying to rip you off Scambaiters lure fraudsters by pretending to b



RAFFI ANDERIAN/TORONTO STAR

PATRICK CAIN
STAFF REPORTER

The messages — with their fractured syntax and wild promises — are a familiar sight in e-mail inboxes. Sent primarily from Nigeria, they promise recipients up to tens of millions of dollars if they agree to take part in an arcane banking scheme.

Naive victims — spurred by promises of vast wealth that always remains tantalizingly out of reach — endure a constant drain of money as the scammers invent an endless series of fees and commissions, which will only end when the victim pulls out of the scam or is penniless. It's often referred to as the 419 scam, after the section of the Nigerian penal code it violates.

In turn, the scam has spawned a growing Internet subculture of people who decided that they wouldn't just hit the delete key when they are sent the lure: They'd get even, and have fun doing it.

They invented "scambaiting": faking interest in a 419 scam artist's scheme and wasting his time with drawn-out, bizarre e-mail exchanges than can go on for months.

In the process, they created what has been called "the Internet's first blood sport."

If a scam artist's time is wasted, scambaiters reason, it's time he can't spend on genuine victims. And if the swindler is misled by surreal e-mail exchanges that never deliver what they promise, that seems more a case of just deserts than injustice.

Last year, 166 Canadian victims were known to have lost $6.2 million to the scam, according to Phonebusters, a joint unit of the Ontario Provincial Police and Royal

› Grads 2004
› Horoscopes
› Lottery Results
› Traffic Cams
› TV Listings

Initiatives

› Classroom Connection
› Fresh Air Fund
› Santa Claus Fund

The Star

› About Us
› Advertising Sales
› Affiliates
› Archives
› Careers @ the Star
› Contact Us
› FAQ
› Internships
› News Releases
› Pages of the Past
› Photo Sales
› Subscribe

Search the Web

GO by Google

Canadian Mounted Police that tracks fraud cases. But those figures may represent as few as 10 per cent of the true number of victims, explains Detective Constable Gus LaForge of Phonebusters.

"A lot of people don't report it," he says.

"They don't want to let people know that they've been scammed."

Scambaiter culture has birthed several sites where participants show off their successes and dissect failures. The largest are scamorama.com and 419eater.com, which has more than 1,500 members.

Artists Against 419 takes a different approach, orchestrating denial-of-service attacks — bombarding a site with an unmanageable number of page requests to crash it — against fake bank sites used by scammers.

Aware that their hobby involves tormenting potentially violent criminals (an American fraud victim, lured to Nigeria, was murdered in Lagos in 1995), none wanted their full names used in this story.

"At the moment, I'm baiting one of these guys, posing as Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*," says Stuart, a Winnipeg man who is a moderator on 419eater.com, referring to the Anthony Burgess novel of a futuristic society whose main character speaks in a slang the author partly conceived from Russian words.

"He doesn't quite understand what I'm saying, but he writes back, and it's been going on for about a month now. There's a lot of humour in that. He keeps trying to hit me up for $500, $1,000 to pay for lawyer's fees, that kind of thing. I keep promising to send him the money, it never arrives, he keeps writing me back, so it just keeps going and going," Stuart says.

Tim, an undergraduate at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., invented a character who is very superstitious and keeps having dreams that delay closing the deal.

"The scammer's psychoanalysis of the made-up dreams is truly hilarious," he says.

"Most wouldn't put up with as much as this one does."

John, a Waterloo-area man who took up the hobby while surfing during downtime at work, once strung a target along for six weeks. His characters include "the multiple-personalitied Goofus N. Gallant and burned out '80s metalhead Reo Speedwagon," he explains.

Part of the game is seeing what the person on the other end of the e-mail exchange, who thinks he has a victim on the hook, can be talked into doing.

The 419eater.com site has pictures, sent by the scam artists in response to demands made by their "victims," of people kissing a large fish, stoically showering in a brown suit, and holding an endless variety of signs. ("Gracious in Defeat," "I'm a Pest" and "This is not a scam" are some of the more printable. The first in the series says, "Welcome to the Trophy Room.")

The scam itself can be very lucrative, as the police statistics reveal, so the scammers can often be persuaded to go along with fairly bizarre demands, if they're made

stridently enough by someone who seems hooked.

Scambaiters say they have no pity. For instance, to see how low his targets would go, John once responded to a scammer's e-mail by claiming to be a man who had worked at a Chicago airport for 35 years and was about to retire.

"I wanted to portray a hard-working, African-American character who had saved up for his retirement, just to see if they would continue the con once they learned about my character's back story," he explains.

"They continued to try and convince me to bring my life savings over to Amsterdam and give them to the security company. Any doubts I had were removed. They are criminals who would try and take money from anybody."

Scamming the scammers is probably a safe hobby, so long as baiters keep their distance, police say.

"It's certainly not going to hurt any ongoing investigation," says OPP Detective Staff Inspector Barry Elliot, who heads Phonebusters. "I just would not recommend that they meet these people personally. I've seen some sites where they've taken pictures of people that they've met. I wouldn't recommend that. But if they want to have some fun talking back and forth on the Internet, I can't see how that would hurt anybody."

Print Story E-mail Story Next Story

FAQs| Site Map| Privacy Policy| Webmaster| Subscribe| My Subscription

Home| GTA| Business| Waymoresports| A&E| Life