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Student gamers behind Mirai cyberattack

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Mirai was created by Paras Jha, left, a New Jersey college student, and two of his friends
DOMINICK REUTER/REUTERS

Hacking software that brought down major websites last year was not created by Russia or China, as experts first suspected, but by students obsessed with the video game Minecraft.

The Mirai "botnet" grabbed headlines in October 2016 when it shut down scores of websites including Twitter, eBay, Reddit and CNN, halting a large part of all web traffic in Europe and the US for hours.

traffic, causing connections to fail.

Mirai infected nearly 65,000 devices in its first 20 hours and ultimately commanded between 200,000 and 300,000 devices. Court proceedings in the US have revealed that Mirai was created by Paras Jha, a 21-year-old New Jersey college student, and his friends Josiah White, 20, and Dalton Norman, 21. It was later used by unknown third parties in the attack last year.

All three men pleaded guilty to cybercrime charges last week with the intention of extorting money from fellow Minecraft players and businesses. They will be sentenced next year.

For several years, Minecraft players have paid hackers between $5 and $55 to launch attacks on their rivals. Minecraft has 55 million users. Server companies, which allow players to compete in multiplayer games, have also commissioned attacks on competitors so that their service is disrupted and they become less attractive to customers.

Most previous attacks delivered up to 50 gigabits per second of traffic but Mirai could deliver more than 1,200 gigabits. "They didn't realise the power they were unleashing," Bill Walton, an FBI supervisory special agent, told Wired. His colleague, Elliott Peterson, added that Mirai posed an "existential threat" to the internet.