THE VIRUS GOING AROUND

A COMPUTER VIRUS FROM BELGIUM HAS HIT MACINTOSH UNITS IN LAFAYETTE.

Fortunately, it hasn't done much damage so far.

A new computer virus attacking Macintosh units in Lafayette is spreading rapidly, much like a common cold. It spreads quickly, doesn't do a whole lot of damage, but takes a while to get rid of.

The virus has ratted Macintosh users since it turned up here a couple of weeks ago. It's unusual in several respects, and many businesses and Macintosh personal computer owners may not even know they have it.

Viruses are damaging instructions written into programming that spread from computer to computer and system to system. They have proliferated as the computer field has developed. They can be spread on diskettes, electronic bulletin boards, central data bases and even through infected software sold commercially.

In one celebrated case, a jury last week convicted Robert Morris, a Cornell University graduate student whose "worm" program crippled a nationwide computer network. Morris was the first person tried for violating a 1986 federal computer fraud and abuse law.

Viruses, worms and "Trojan horses" in programming are not necessarily catastrophic, and there are ways to detect and destroy the newest Macintosh virus, called WDEP, circulating through Lafayette Mac units. But WDEP is serving as a reminder of how easily an infection can occur.

"It seems to be more easily spread than any virus I've ever seen before," says Mike Maher, who is the manager of the Macintosh facilities for the communications department at USL. He found the WDEP virus in five different places, including throughout the Macs in the communications department and the offices of the Vermilion student newspaper. It's also been found at The Times and other businesses in town. It did not get into the main systems at USL because of controls established on those systems, according to Della Bonnet, director of computer and information services.

WDEP was first spotted in December in Belgium and in a computer lab at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. It hides in the desktop file of a disk or a hard drive, and spreads because the desktop file is involved in everything the computer does. Other viruses cannot be spread until a specific application is activated, but WDEP can be spread by the simple act of inserting a diskette.

"By the nature of the way it moves it spreads very, very fast," says Benzo Young, a systems consultant for MicroAge Computers in Lafayette and a USL student in mechanical engineering with a computer option. "It spreads just by inserting a disk.

WDEP is probably all over the store by now, Young says, because he transferred diskettes between his personal computer and MicroAge. It is probably all over town too.

Following a recent meeting of a Mac users group in Lafayette where information was provided about the virus, group members began checking for WDEP and found it in their systems. "Two-thirds or more of the people don't know that they have it," Young says.

Businesses and institutions most vulnerable to a computer virus are those whose computers have public contact with other computers or diskettes brought in from outside.

At The Times, for example, the WDEP virus could spread from a sister company, Craddick Production Art, through shared software.

At USL, says Bonnett, "The ones infected are the ones generally intended for students." At USL and other universities, students frequently bring in their own software to use on a university computer. In most cases, universities have set up controls on their systems, such as requiring that all outside software be run through a virus-detecting station before use. But the WDEP virus was new so that it wasn't spotted by various virus-detecting programs available.

The good news is that the WDEP virus appears to be relatively harmless. There have been some reports nationally of some serious problems, but no major damage as a result of the virus has been reported locally. Several experts in writing virus-detecting programs for computers worked together to come up with free programming to detect and destroy WDEP, and it's available through Macintosh user groups and other sources.

Young says individual Mac owners can also clear the virus from their systems by following the instructions for rebuilding the desktop from their instruction manuals.

"This is one of those things that takes a long time to get rid of," says Young. If the WDEP detection programming is installed in a computer system, it will eradicate the virus, but it has spread so quickly that it may well be on every diskette and hard disk drive in a business.

"I'd have to go through the whole storeroom," he says.

The best means of preventing computer viruses by a computer user is caution—being careful about how much contact one's computer has with networks, bulletin boards and outside software. "It's something that we're just going to have to continue to worry about," says Maher. "It's just like a cold or a mosquito."

—JANE NICHOLES

FOOTNOTES

CHEAPER GARBAGE. The lowest new bid on residential garbage collection for the city of Lafayette should result in the price cuts for residents. Bids for a one-year collection contract were opened last week and the lowest bidder was Waste Management, which held the previous contract. Waste Management bid $5.19 per household per month, down from the current charge of $7.13. The bid includes the separate collection of yard waste for composting and the transportation of the rest of the garbage to Waste Management's landfill in Livington parish. At press time the contract was scheduled to be awarded at the Jan. 30 City Council meeting.

TEMPORARILY IN CHARGE. Dr. Sammie Cooper, a retired vice president of USL, was named by the state Board of Regents last week as interim commissioner of higher education. Cooper was named to the post after Frank Vondrach, former president of Texas A&M, turned down the job because of questions raised over the funding of part of his salary from private sources.

NEW LEAD BOARD MEMBER. Dr. David Manuel, dean of the business school at USL, has been named as a USL appointee to the board of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority. Manuel replaces John Stephens, who has left USL for a missionary post in the South Pacific.

VFTEOD BUDGET. The Lafayette Parish Council has voted to override Parish President Walter Comeaux's veto of the current budget. Comeaux said he vetoed the operating budget and the five-year capital improvement budget because he was concerned that commitments made in the budget might strain the general fund. The vote to override the veto, on the grounds that the parish was able financially to handle the commitments, was 6 to 1.

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