

Viruses: 20 years of techy treason

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Many important anniversaries are marked by flowers, chocolates, dinners and special celebrations.

But a significant anniversary in the computer industry passed quietly last week: Twenty years ago, the first "malicious computer virus" was identified.

It slowly spread from floppy disc to floppy disc, only contained a few lines of code and was written as a prank.

Since then, computer viruses have changed drastically. They now are a criminal enterprise that can infect millions of computers in minutes.

"I have to scrub viruses on a daily basis," said Ernie Rader, owner of Valley Network Engineers in Escalon. "I'm mostly a network engineer, but I have to make sure that every workstation and server on the network has anti-virus software or else risk having the business get shut down. It's a constant battle."

Although two computer viruses were discovered in the early 1980s, neither damaged computers or destroyed data.

Then on Jan. 19, 1986, researchers discovered "Brain," a virus that kept computers from starting. It was named Brain because the program's code contained the address and telephone number of Brain Computer Services, a store in Lahore, Pakistan. The owners of the store said they wrote it for a doctor who suspected a colleague was stealing his research papers. The virus was meant to shut down the colleague's computer as punishment.

Within a year, other viruses were discovered with names such as Jerusalem, Ping Pong and Frodo, said Vincent Weafer of Symantec, which makes Norton Anti-virus programs.

He said most early viruses were pranks that made text disappear from the screen or caused a computer to play a song repeatedly. Most were like Brain, taking weeks to spread and easily combated.

Today, computer viruses spread through e-mail, malicious code hidden in Web pages or as worms, Weafer said. A worm is a computer virus that scans the Internet for security weaknesses in computers.

"In the early days, you could see how it took weeks for a virus to spread around the world," he said. "In 1999, the Melissa virus propagated in 48 hours. Today, we see worldwide propagation in 30 minutes."

Viruses no longer are harmless pranks.

"We are transitioning again into a new world of for-profit viruses," Weafer said. "You have adware and spyware, phishing, spam and fraud."

Some viruses steal identities, others take intellectual property. Some are designed to shut down corporate servers until that company pays a ransom.

Symantec discovers seven to 15 new viruses each day, Weafer said. The number of viruses in Symantec's library

doubles every year, he said.

Although viruses have become quicker and more malicious in the past 20 years, the way to defend a computer against them has remained the same, said Detectives Kipp Loving and Lydell Wall. They are assigned to the Turlock office of the Sacramento Valley Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force.

Loving and Wall said computer owners should install an anti-virus program and a firewall program. Those programs and the computer's operating system must be continually updated.

The detectives said computer users never should open e-mails or click on Web links sent by strangers.

"Also take the time to learn how anti-virus programs work," Wall said. "They can save you a lot of grief if used correctly."

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