NEWS EXTRA — Computer buffs' prank turns sour as the industry pursues cure

'Virus' plague taps a system

"SOMETHING wonderful has happened. Your AMIGA is alive, and even better some of your disks are infected by a virus... Another Masterpiece of the Mega-Mighty SCA, SCA, SCA, SCA."

The bizarre message, which has been appearing on many AMIGA computer screens in Perth, started as a prank by European computer buffs. But now it has become a costly and embarrassing nightmare for the Australian computer industry.

Electronics experts call the disruptive message a "computer virus". They say it has reached Perth "infecting" hundreds of AMIGA brand computers.

Now the industry fears that a second and more deadly "strain" affecting IBM computers is in Australia.

The IBM virus takes the form of an electronic chain letter and can grow so large it can stop a company's computer system.

Companies including IBM and Commodore are working around the clock to check if their systems and computer software are infected by either virus.

□ Bands of renegade teenage computer whizz kids are being blamed for the electronic "virus" plague which has hit computer systems around the world.
□ As SCOTT BRANDRETH discloses, the virus has reached Perth, affecting hundreds of AMIGA computers in businesses and homes.

Industry sources suspect the AMIGA virus programme came to Perth on high-tech computer games disks imported from the U.S. and Europe.

A group of hackers calling themselves the Swiss Cracking Association have claimed responsibility for the AMIGA virus.

Strangely, the SCA has also produced an antidote to the virus. One copy has reached Perth.

But some American experts fear the antidote might well be another strain of virus.

The West Australian was told yesterday that the Swiss group was one of a big number which used hacking techniques to gain illegal entry into large computer systems.

Hacking began in the late 1960s but has flourished this decade with the growth of personal home computers and the release of a Hollywood movie called "War Games".

The movie was considered a landmark in hacking history. It prompted U.S. security agencies, including the FBI, to seek out and charge teenage hackers trying to emulate the film hero.

Many hackers formed groups using "handles", or names, including the SCA, "Corner Crackware", "Esson" and "Danish Gold".

Most are in their early teens. They spend their spare time trying to find passwords to break into large company computer banks.

The extent of illegal hacking, and virus creation by teenagers in the U.S. was revealed in 1985 in a book which rocked the computer industry.

"Out of the Inner Circle", by 19-year-old Bill "The Cracker" Landreth, revealed that some destructive hackers created "Trojan horses" or viruses to attack computer memory banks and software.

A friend of Landreth's and former computer hacker, Tom Anderson told *The West Australian* that the AMIGA virus could have been created by just one person.

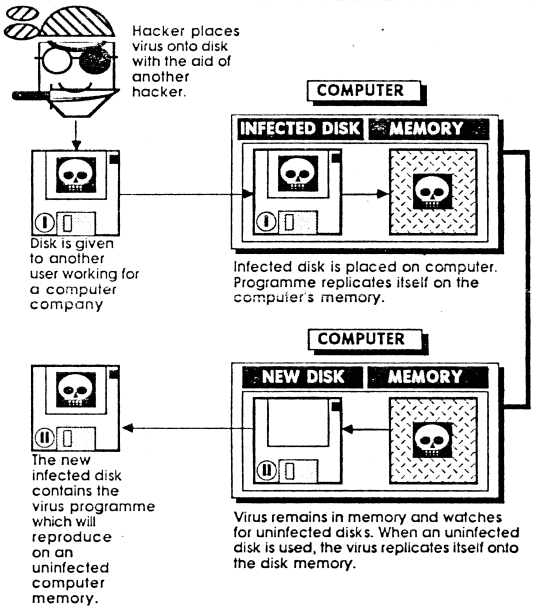
The 17-year-old, who now writes computer programmes for some of the biggest U.S. computer companies, said the SCA was not known in U.S. computing circles.

But he was wary about the SCA virus antidote.

"The antidote may well be another virus. In fact I assume that's what the group has probably done," he said.

Steve Burnap, a San Diegan programmer and ex-hacker who has worked with Bill Landreth, claimed it could be impossible to rid Perth systems of the virus.

"Fortunately the more destructive viruses are easy to get rid of, but the smaller messages may keep popping up for years," he said.



The diagram traces way in which the computer "virus" is introduced and its subsequent movements to the point where it remains in the system and watches for uninfected disks.

The Swiss Cracking Association's graphic that indicates how to rid the virus.

Infection like an electronic AIDS

THE spread of a new "virus" through the world's computer systems has been likened to an electronic AIDS.

Basically, the virus is a set of instructions recorded on a computer disc by an operator.

The instructions can produce a simple message on a computer using an infected disk or command the computer to carry out a variety of uncontrollable functions.

The virus programme infecting some Perth systems has been created to ensure that each time an infected disk is used, the virus duplicates itself. In turn a set of virus commands transfers to the computer's memory bank.

The virus in the computer memory can then duplicate itself and infect any uncontaminated disks used in the computer.

Once on a disk the virus competes for space with other stored information.

Eventually the virus can destroy the disk, making it impossible to retrieve pre-programmed information.