BUZZ

A recent decision of the House of Lords has finally confirmed what many of us have suspected for some time: just because a venue contains a coin-op that doesn't mean that it can be classified as a cinema.

AMIGA VIRUS MULTIPLIES

"Virus" programs which can affect, and in many cases destroy, any disk with which they come in contact are causing increasing concern among Amiga software producers, distributors, retailers and consumers.

The original virus is reported to have emanated from a Swiss-based group of hackers calling themselves the SCA (Swiss Crackers Association) but, according to Silica Shop's Paul Ellis, the "copycat" syndrome has meant that there are now at least four different viruses in existence.

None of the strains of virus permanently affect the Amiga's own operating system, but the virus is transmitted from disk to disk via temporarily "infected" computers. If the computer is not switched off at the power source betweeen booting different disks and the offending code is present on one of the disks booted, the Amiga's RAM will become a virus carrier, infecting all the disks subsequently loaded.

The effects of the virus on the disks vary, depending on the nature and complexity of the software in question. In a large number of cases the main manifestation of the virus is the appearance after booting of a message — the SCA's one reads "Something wonderful has happened — your computer has come alive" — followed by the program crashing. The virus operates randomly so that it will not show up at every booting. When the message doesn't occur, the game will usually boot and play normally. However in many other instances the effects of the virus are far more devastating: if certain disks are booted in a carrier machine, they become corrupted, and useless. In general it would seem that the more sophisticated the program, the more susceptible it is to the latter "terminal" effect.

It seems that the virus is spread either through people secretly booting infected disks into demonstration models of the Amiga in software shops or through Amiga owners running other people's pirated or borrowed software on their own machines.

While the scale of the problem is perhaps not as widespread as some of the reports have suggested, Silica Shop are taking it seriously enough to warrent the development, continual upgrading and free distribution of virus "killer" disks which will check whether a virus is present in any of your disks and remove it. They have found it necessary to produce successive upgraded killer models — within a matter of weeks — in order to deal with the new "strains" which have appeared. But for those who have shelled out large sums of money for top-of-the-range games which are totally destroyed by the virus, the killer is obviously useless: your only solution is to write to the games manufacturer or retailer for a replacement.

"I think the guys who wrote the virus are pretty warped", says Silica Shop's Paul Ellis, "most of the people buying Amiga games are young people, paying with hard-earned money. And with this virus anyone who's made a major investment in Amiga software could find that their collection has been ruined".

Among the companies whose products are most seriously threatened are Amiga specialists like Psygnosis and Novagen. "Anybody whose products contain a sophisticated protection system, like ours, will have their software destroyed by the virus", according to Novagen's Bruce Jordan.

How can a virus be transmitted onto write/protected disks? Despite some mutters within the software industry suggesting shortcomings in the Amiga's write/protect system, Electronic Arts' Mark Lewis feels that this is unfair, citing instances in the past of viruses occuring in IBM and Apple systems: "I don't believe that there's a disk drive built that can't in certain circumstances be made to write to a write/protected disk".

And the selfish jerks who programmed the virus?

"I don't think you could print what I'd do to them if I got hold of them", was how Paul Ellis summed up his feelings. But EA-man Mark Lewis had rather different views: "these guys are, basically, criminals, operating on the edge of the industry. But I also think that the virus-creators are most creative people, and I just wish that they'd ring me up so I could get them using their talents in positive rather than negative ways, writing games rather than destroying them."

SAFE BOOTING — how to protect your disk collection:
1. Only buy software from accredited dealers — don't pirate, or use pirated software.
2. Always switch off your Amiga *at the power source* between booting games — the virus can't be spread if your RAM is clean.
3. Check all your disks for the virus and disinfect any that you find to be affected. You can do this by using a reputably manufactured "virus killer" — Silica Shop will send you their latest "killer" program, complete with detailed instructions on how to use it, if you write to them, enclosing a (preferably formatted) blank 3½" disk plus a suitable stamped addressed envelope, at: Amiga Virus Killer, Silica Shop, 1-4 The Mews, Hatherley Road, Sidcup, Kent, DA14 4DX.
4. Have all software checked in the shop before purchase.

Perhaps surprisingly, this decision was not a foregone conclusion. As reported in Commodore User last May, two lower courts had previously found in favour of Westminster City Council who argued that arcades, chip shops, youth clubs and indeed any premises whatsoever which contained a video game should be covered by the Cinemas Act (1985) in that it constituted "an exhibition of moving pictures".

Under the Gaming Acts stringent regulations are laid down covering how, when, where and by whom gambling machines ("one-armed bandits" etc.) can be played, but arcade games — which don't involve any element of "gaming" — are, of course, not covered by these laws. And a certain Councillor Robert Davis and his colleague, not being able to see any distinction between gambling machines and video arcade games, decided that they would try to bring coin-ops under the Council's control in order to protect young people from being harmed by them. (When asked for any proof for the proposition that arcade games harmed young people, or anybody else, Councillor Davis and Co, declined to respond).

So the local authority scrabbled around the statutes books and eventually came up with a possible loophole in the definition of "cinema" in the above mentioned act. If the House Of Lords had agreed with Westminster City Council, Councillor Davis and his followers could have effectively banned or severely limited arcade games from being played in public by requiring that various regulations be enforced and licence fees be paid under the Cinema Acts which were, of course, utterly inappropriate and never intended to apply to coin-ops. And remember: all this could have been done without any public debate ever being held on the issue of whether arcade games are harmful to minors. Happily, however, the Lords decided otherwise.