

Beware Spyware

Mrs. Smith" calls every two weeks, as punctual as the clock on her computer's desktop would be - if it worked.

Her machine has, as usual, ground to a halt. Rob Horncastle is used to the routine. "Every couple of weeks she gives us \$90 and we come over, wipe her machine clean and start over," the personable service technician says from behind a bemused smile. "The amount she's spent on service in the last six months alone would've paid for a computer."

Horncastle works for the Geek Patrol, a mobile computer-repair service. When he arrives at Mrs. Smith's house, she'll have up to 20,000 viruses and malware items on her computer.

"She doesn't seem to care. She says if she sees something on the Internet she likes, she just downloads it. She knows we can fix the problem later."

Expensive hobby

It's an expensive hobby. By Horncastle's estimate of frequency, she'll spend \$2,300 on repairs in the course of a year.

When asked if her infection level is uncommon, he shakes his head. "Nah, 10,000, 20,000. It's amazing what you see out there." Horncastle says, as he disinfects a frozen PC at the Spiritkeeper Youth Society offices, a downtown outreach agency. He pulls out a cell and dials a colleague.

"What's the number at now? 77.171? OK." He hangs up and is asked what's significant about the number. "That's the current record," he says.

Many personal websites won't be visited that many times in their lifetime. "What it comes down to," he says, "is that a lot of people treat their computer like their car. They just want to use it and forget it. And if something goes wrong, they call us just the same



Jeremy Loomie

Every day, the once-feared virus is becoming less a major problem and more an annoyance for computer users. But spyware is another matter entirely. Day 2 of the Sun's four-day look at computer security focuses on how to prevent this growing threat to your privacy and finances.



way that they'd call a mechanic."

When John Leishman started the company three years ago, he was banking on a niche market of unsophisticated users. What he hadn't counted on was that it was more norm than niche, and Geek Patrol has handled 30,000-plus service calls.

Most are for spyware, worms and viruses. Spyware includes items inserted on your machine to track activities. Viruses attack a computer's file structure disguised in files you download and open. Worms are self-replicating viruses that either use mail programs like Outlook to send themselves to other machines or infect your machine without even being downloaded deliberately, due to flaws in Windows security.

"The majority of the time, we find it's the kids doing it unwittingly through peer-to-peer file sharing," says Leishman. "It might be something innocuous but most of the time it's music. And they shouldn't be downloading free music."

Most of the problems stem from peer-to-peer programs such as BitTorrent, Morphous, LimeWire, DirectConnect and Kazaa. Even with a firewall and security in place,

popular songs, videos and software are hazardous because they're the first items infected. Script kiddies - kids who've downloaded software to hack or alter viruses - hit them first because they're most popular and are being downloaded before the virus or virus-variant in question has been sniffed out and accounted for by security firms.

"The truth is that there isn't a single vendor out there who has a panacea for all of the potential problems," says Alfred Huger, director of product development with Symantec, the leading computer-security software company.

Leishman believes much of the problem could be alleviated if parents paid attention to what their kids are doing and limited use by keeping computers in widely accessed areas, such as the den or living room. Letting kids have their own computer in their own room is asking for trouble, he says.

Often, however, parents don't realize there's something wrong with the computer until it's running so many processes - Windows' name for programs in use - in the background that "it's like molasses in January," says Leishman. "And people just en-

sure it until they can endure no more.

"If your kids are going to be on computer a lot, put it in public area where can see over their shoulder. They're your kids; they don't have a right to surf whatever they want."

"And the other thing you can do is TALK to your kids. Tell them what will happen if they go to porn sites or download shared files. Tell them the reasons why it's a bad idea and how it could lead to the computer not working."

Viruses and worms - once the most feared attacks on the Internet - are now usually the most innocuous. Spyware is a much greater threat, say security pros, because it's specifically designed to take advantage of people and not just to randomly shut down networks or cause havoc.

Bored teenagers

Vermont-based security expert and writer Frank Thornton says viruses have become the domain of bored teenagers desperate for attention.

"As long as you are somewhat aware of the threat and keep up to date with Norton or McAfee, usually they're no big deal. There are some nasty ones out there and they're pretty destructive, but the majority aren't."

"And if there's a virus on your machine and Norton or whatever security you're using can't get rid of it, there are a lot of removal tools available online, most of which can be found for free."

Most infections are caused by carelessness on the part of users, he says. "From my experience it's people being idiots. There are a lot of adults that open attachments and don't take precautions. It's amazing. They follow the speed limit and buckle the belt every time they get in a car, but they'll open e-mail from anyone."