

EDITORIAL

A Troubled World

It would be profane and disproportionate at a time of such intense international crisis to talk of 'war' and 'warfare' in any context other than mortal combat - this journal has in the past made occasional reference to the 'computer virus war'; the analogy may be apposite when peace prevails but is probably best shelved for the time being.

It would also be futile, as the level of conflict and violence intensifies, to rain emotional invective on those people who write computer viruses. Their activities, which many countries have designated crimes, are seemingly trivial (but not completely inconsequential) in the face of current world events.

It is now obvious that many lives will be lost in 1991 - a year that has already wrought a succession of sobering images in the electronic and printed media worldwide. Matters of life and death invariably sharpen peoples' perspectives and help us to regain a sense of proportion. Regardless of individual loyalties and conscience, it is important to will *peace, justice and progress* for all people, everywhere.

This journal's function is to report on a technical threat to computers - software, hardware and data. It attempts to address an increasing, but not yet overbearing problem which besets computer users in all the developed and developing nations of the world. Stopping this problem at its source will depend on *reason, clarity and logic*, both on the part of those people seeking to curtail the threat and from those who are actively promoting it. *In this respect, computer misuse, albeit unlikely to cause extreme trauma, is not dissimilar to the greater issues which trouble the world.*

In the very first *VB* editorial in July 1989, the indiscriminate nature of computer viruses, which victimise in *arandom* and *unpredictable* manner, was presented as one of the clearest reasons for the virus writers to desist from their activities.

Parallels with terrorism are perhaps drawn too easily here; computer viruses are not *yet* designed to kill, although the repercussions of a multitude of safety critical systems being attacked by these means might well involve death and injury. *Reason, clarity and logic* combined may even (if certain academics and computer industry experts are to be believed) provide a rationale for developing such programs.

It remains, however, stupefyingly difficult to find a rationale for the sort of vandalism which manifests itself in the random, indiscriminate destruction of peoples' data and programs.

Temporarily discounting matters of *peace and justice*, where is the *progress* in all of this? Inflicting such damage is more than just a hindrance - it is patently regressive.

The apologists for these activities invariably argue that it is the big organisations - the multinationals, the banks and all the other institutions that supposedly 'oppress' - which suffer most from computer misuse. In fact, these organisations are well aware of the dangers, are well defended and can respond quickly and appropriately to the threats they face.

The *real* victim of computer viruses is, and increasingly will be, the individual - be it the computer user; wholly dependent on his data, ignorant to the threat and woefully ill-prepared to recover from the effects of malicious software, or the 'man in the street'; temporarily or permanently inconvenienced by essential medical, welfare, financial or other personal data becoming corrupted or inaccessible.

We are all responsible for our own actions and the people who develop and propagate viruses should, at the very least, realise that they are responsible for impeding other peoples' freedom, creativity and progress indiscriminately. Millions of peoples' livelihoods and welfare are now dependent on the humble personal computer - to attack such systems is irresponsible, if not palpably wicked.

The world is troubled and faces enormous dangers which makes many other problems appear quite inconsequential. *However, every responsible course of action by every individual, whatever his particular field of interest or knowledge, serves to lessen the world's problems in some small but significant way.* This is as relevant to computer programming as it is to all other endeavours.
