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The first form of computer life I ever encountered, I guess you could say, was a virus. That first one I ran into made my old PC XT crash while displaying a banner saying "Legalize Marijuana" on the screen. That's not a life form? Is a flu virus alive? Ask several scientists and you'll get several answers, none of them conclusive. An objective scientist will say that it's a matter of opinion. My opinion, for what it's worth, is that a computer virus is alive. This is not just an arbitrary decision on my part, I have given it considerable thought.

First, viruses eat to survive. That one ate half my hard disk. It was only a ten meg disk, a piddling nothing nowadays, but it had a lot of work on it and I lost almost all of it. I've been pretty good about making backups ever since, and about virus scanning suspicious disks and anything downloaded from a BBS system.

Back to the virus. Second, the virus adapts to it's environment. A virus is a piece of code, a program, which attaches itself to other programs in any of a number of quite remarkable ways (at least many of the more crafty and annoying ones do it that way). The adapting part is that the virus doesn't know what will be there for it to attach to. It just looks around, finds a convenient program, and hitches a ride.

Third, a virus multiplies. You know, it has kids. Lots of tiny little viruses all over everything. That's the idea behind a virus, to spread itself around. The part that gives viruses a bad name is that most of them, either at random or on a specific date or triggered by a particular action, take off and cause some kind of problem. I saw one really interesting one which just locked the keyboard and then caused every letter or number on the screen to slide down, one at a time, until the screen was blank except for a tangled pile of garbage at the bottom. This would just happen at random. Cute the first time. A royal pain from then on.

I know, you could argue with my reasons, or even grant me that they're valid and still argue that a computer virus isn't alive. Go ahead, argue if it makes you feel better, but you probably won't change my mind.

The second form of computer life I encountered was a thing called an expert system. This is a special program which is designed to replace a living, breathing, human expert. What kind of expert does this thing replace? Consider the secretary in the front office who knows everything there is to know about the copier. You know, the person you don't go to until you have produced fifty or so pages of not-quite-right trash and now the thing has a jam that you can't figure out. She comes in, takes a piece of crumpled paper out of a hidden crevice, touches one button, and gives you your copy. She's an **expert**, and an expert system is supposed to replace people like her. That way you can get help when you mess up the copier without having to put up with those "Oh, you are such an idiot" looks from that secretary.

I found expert systems to be confusing. Mostly because I thought I would ask an expert program questions and it would give me answers. Wrong-oh! It asks a lot of questions, the kind with Yes or No answers, or 'A, B, C, pick the one closest to your situation' sort of things. Then, when it's done asking questions, it gives you an opinion. Not an answer, just an opinion, like "There is a 97% probability that you did not plug the copier in before trying to make your copy."

Again, I fear that many people would disagree as to whether or not this is a life form. The expert system I had the most experience with was designed to help repair technicians figure out what was wrong with TV's, VCRs, and Microwave Ovens. That thing ate up disk space and memory cards like they were popcorn at the movie theater. And multiply? In no time it seemed like every corner TV repair shop had one. You could tell because when you went into the shop you could hear
