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'They wasted my day': Glitch grounds United flights 2 hrs.

O'HARE | Airline says schedules back to normal today

June 21, 2007

BY **MONIFA THOMAS** Transportation Reporter
mjthomas@suntimes.com

Officials at United Airlines say they still don't know what caused its flight dispatch system to shut down Wednesday morning, grounding takeoffs all over the world for two hours and delaying flights for the rest of the day.

The dispatch system's backup also malfunctioned, raising questions about whether Wednesday's computer meltdown could happen again.

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A departure board in the United Airlines terminal at O'Hare International Airport shows travel problems caused by a systemwide computer outage. (AP)

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United says it expects to have flights back on schedule today.

But that's little comfort to United passengers stranded at O'Hare on Wednesday afternoon.

"I called the airline before we left home, and they said there was a computer problem, but I was told the airplane would leave on time. Then we got here, and it's two hours late," said Muhammad Mikbel, waiting with his wife and two children for their twice-delayed flight to Frankfurt, Germany. "They wasted my day."

Tandem failures worry experts

The dispatch system that backfired performs critical functions such as determining the weight of an aircraft, relaying flight plans to pilots and confirming that maintenance checks have been completed.

When it stopped working at 8 a.m., United was forced to abort all takeoffs. The glitch was fixed by 10 a.m., but the outage caused average delays of 60 to 90 minutes for at least 268 flights worldwide, United spokeswoman Robin Urbanski said. The airline also canceled 24 domestic flights.

United has an electronic backup system that's supposed to kick in if the flight dispatch system fails, but it also was disabled by the outage, Urbanski said.

That concerns aviation experts such as Diego Klabjan, an airline consultant and associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"How can both of them fail at the same time?" Klabjan said. ". . . They should definitely have . . . an option where you can make flight plans by

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Contributing: *Howard Wolinsky*

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