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Malicious Advertising

By Daniel Punch

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Advertising is a necessary irritant in the world today. You can't drive down the street without coming across an ad, either a billboard suspended over a road or a large poster plastered down the side of a bus. If you walk into a shopping centre it doesn't matter where you look, you see an advertisement of some kind. Even the tables in the food court now have ads embedded in them, and on my last trip to Melbourne I noticed that they were starting to embed flat screen TVs into the tables to deliver the full commercial experience to your meal. If you jump on the Internet you have to contend with pop-ups and banner ads, with some advertising agents being ruthless enough to write malicious code that embeds the ad into your computer so that you still receive the pop-ups even when you're not at the original site.

In the past, pop-ups and banner ads have been easy enough to avoid with the right software installed (incidentally, am I the only one who finds pop-up ads that advertise pop-up blockers tremendously amusing?) but now the software developers have worked their way around that little problem. The solution was simple; sell advertising space in your software, not just on your web page.

As much as I like to complain about this new idea, it does come with a significant upside. These days, not all Shareware applications drop out after a limited period of use, nor do they constantly remind you to register. Having ads in the software provides the application developers with the necessary funding to live but leaves the user free from having to pay to use the software. It ends up being in the developer's best interest to ensure that the user continues to use the software for as long as possible, because that means an increased income. In my opinion this was a brilliant idea, and I wholeheartedly supported it until they started building unblockable pop-ups into the software.

The gaming world is getting in on the act as well, which could be both positive and negative. The Internet provides the functionality for games to constantly update the virtual world with new billboards, TV ads, clothing and so on, keeping the content fresh and the ads current. From an advertising standpoint it's an amazing idea, people are spending less and less time watching TV and more and more time immersed in virtual worlds. The interactive nature of the ads means that they will remain in a player's mind for a lot longer than the TV ad break that can be walked away from, flicked over or simply ignored. The game developers on the other hand now have an added source of income, meaning that

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they can take more risks without the fear of losing money.

Advertising in games is not a new idea, the soft drink '7-Up' created a game many years ago called 'Cool Spot', which had the player controlling a red dot with sunglasses in his quest to collect 7-Up logos. The game was remarkably solid, leaving the players to enjoy the game while still getting its message across. I played it a long time ago as a child, but I still remember how much fun it was and exactly what product it was pushing. Pepsi released a Playstation game called 'Pepsi Man' that involved a blue and white striped super-hero running around collecting cans of Pepsi. Red Bull got in on the game with 'Wipeout' featuring 'Red Bull' banners and a loading screen bearing the phrase "Increase your reaction time with Red Bull". 'Worms 3D' featured Red Bull as a power up. 'Crazy Taxi' had customers jump in the player's taxi and holler "Take me to KFC!" or any of the numerous other licensed locations in the game. 'True Crime' had the characters dressed in 'Puma' attire, with the main

character changing his outfits several times throughout the game. Until now I've always thought that the ads in games were amusing and, so long as they didn't interfere with the playing of the game, I was all for them. However, there are new ideas afoot that seem set to change my mind.

The main problem I have with ads in games now is the same as my issue with Pay TV. You're shelling out a lot of money for a product (new games being sold for upwards of \$50.00 U.S.) and you're still getting ads. If developers are going to start flooding my entertainment with advertising, I'd like to see a significant drop in the price of games.

The other big issue is that of spyware. Until now, spyware has been a hated part of existence. This malicious software digs its way into your system and collects information about you: your Internet surfing habits, the contents of your hard drive(s) and even the unblocked ports available on your computer. This has led to the necessity of loading a system with anti-spyware utilities to run alongside the pop-up killers, anti-virus programs, firewalls, registry guards and whatever other protective measures a paranoid PC user has to implement. Now paradoxically, someone has had the 'fantastic' idea of building spyware into software, and games in particular.

In the future the games that you've just paid such a high price for will sit there monitoring you in the background, watching your every virtual move. Then they can target ads that are more likely to have an impact on you based on the contents of your hard drive or your Internet surfing habits. The best part about it is that as soon as you click 'I Agree' and install the software, it becomes legitimate and you've agreed for them to access information about you. Many software products already feature clauses in their license agreements that have the user permitting the developers to collect 'anonymous information in order to provide the customer with a better experience'. The other part of this that irks me is the fact that I'm going to have to have my computer connected to the Internet and chew through my download limit just to play a single-player game.

In the end, I suppose that there's no way to avoid advertising in our current world. Having it implemented into software and games was simply the next logical step. I suspect that I will be looking to download the inevitable 'Ad Blocker' cracks that I imagine will appear shortly after the wholesale introduction of advertising into the gaming industry, but I do believe that with appropriate tact and respect for privacy, advertising could turn out to be a positive addition to the interactive experience.

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The Saga of the Annoying Adware

By Monty Cordello

When we think of adware, what comes to mind are those annoying and pesky ads that pop up out of nowhere whenever we are surfing the net. Anybody who has surfed through the net has encountered those irritating pop-up adwares advertising everything from computer software down to Viagra. Adwares are some of the most derided objects in the web alongside viruses, spyware and other malicious softwares and programs. Although adwares are alleged to be the most benign form of spyware, most web users hate the blatant and bothersome way of advertising. Most are often tricked into clicking on such adwares and end up unintentionally downloading something far more serious.

What are adwares, anyway? Adware or advertising-supported software is defined as any computer program or software package in which advertising and other marketing material are included with or automatically loaded by the software. Adwares are usually played back after installation. Some malicious adwares upload information about the computer or its user's activities even without the consent of its user. Adwares most often take the form of banner ads that appear on pop up windows or anywhere on the computer screen.

Software applications display these advertising banners whenever a program is opened or through some other triggering mechanism. Most adwares are integrated into a free application. This is a way for the developers to recover the costs of creating such software. A prominent example of this is the Opera browser software, which is a free application but comes with a banner ad. The adware can only be removed once the user purchases and registers his copy of the software. It is also a revenue-generating mechanism. A company can sponsor adwares to capture more visitors and potential customers. Adware as a marketing strategy is just one of the many techniques used by websites to attract more traffic.

However, some adwares are more than just pesky and garish ads. In many cases, adwares accompany a more malicious program, which uploads information about the user collected without permission. The users surfing habits are then tracked; in some cases, the browser home page is altered or redirected to the adware company's sponsoring site. These types of adwares are dangerous since they may jeopardize the computer system's health. Aside from installing malicious software, they may also become an avenue for viruses to invade the system.

Adwares have come under fire not only because of their annoying presence in the form of pop ups and banners but also in the way they invade the privacy of the user. Trackware and Spyware are just two of the "evil" forms that adware can take. That is why most computer users make an effort to get rid of these adwares. Because of the annoying nature of pop-up adware, most browsers now employ an adware blocking system through the form of a pop-up blocker or adware blocker. Browsers such as Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Mozilla's Firefox all use pop-up blockers, which instantly block or

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close any window that is triggered by adware in the sites that the user visits. These steps have significantly reduced the number of irritating adware that pop up every time a site is opened.

Most antivirus programs and utilities now feature an adware search and removal system. These programs indexes known adwares and spywares in the internet universe and searches for it in the user's computers system then subsequently quarantines or deletes the malicious files. Nevertheless, despite the numerous efforts against adwares, they continue to plague web surfers with their showy

ads and banners as well as the nasty programs they introduce into the computer system. As the sage of the annoying adware continues, web surfers are also equipped with the best tools and utilities to combat them.

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