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**Real Life Internet Evil: Microsoft's Smart Tags**

By Richard Lowe

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You've worked hard on your web pages. If you are anything like me, you've spent countless hours writing content, finding or creating graphics, cursing at tables, juggling lists and learning HTML and possibly even CSS, Java, DHTML and countless other things.

My web site is uniquely mine. It is a product of my imagination, my sweat, my brain and my frustration. I have spent many sleepless nights and countless long days adding just the perfect content to communicate exactly what I wanted to say.

Now Microsoft has come along with a "brilliant" idea. They want to piggyback their own selected content on top of that work. The idea is to have their products (such as Internet Explorer and the Office suite) scan web pages and documents for keywords and phrases known to the Microsoft. Any of these that are found would be underlined with a special purple "squiggle" to show that they are "smart tags".

Anyone viewing the page could then click on the smart tag and be transported to a Microsoft web site for more information. For example, you could write a web page about the Grand Canyon, and the phrase "Grand Canyon" could be underlined, allowing your visitors to check out the Expedia.Com page about how to book travel to the area.

Why does Microsoft want to do this? It's really very simple – to make an incredible amount of money. Look at it this way, Microsoft suddenly would have at their disposal every single document viewed with a new Microsoft product as a potential advertisement. Wow. That's power. No, this is an understatement of incredible magnitude. This is more than power – this is the harnessing of everyone's creative energy into a huge global advertising tool. It totally staggers the imagination.

You could be looking at a newspaper site, reading an article about train travel, and click on numerous links to Microsoft sites (and presumably third party sites which paid Microsoft for the privilege) selling train related products and services. If you read a classified ad on that same newspaper site selling an automobile, the word "Cadillac" could be underlined with a

smart tag linking to a Cadillac dealer.

Content (the tags) are added dynamically to web pages by the browser without the permission of the person who created the pages (the webmaster or author). While strictly speaking this might not violate copyright laws (but it might be considered vandalism), it sure is rude. In fact, most people would consider it highly unethical.

As an example, suppose you bought a book through a book club. Before it was shipped to you, someone opened the book and examined every single page, adding comments here and there about how you could purchase this or get more information about that. You would be very annoyed if you were the author, you'd probably be livid if you were the publisher of the book, and you'd almost certainly return it if you were the customer.

Carefully crafted web pages whose look and feel has been lovingly built for countless hours by dedicated designers, authors, artists and webmasters would be randomly covered with trash by a company intent on siphoning away visitors to their own sites and pages.

And what about the problem of inappropriate content? Suppose you had a site which was against animal cruelty, yet Smart Tags went ahead and added to your pages links to other sites which sold muzzles for horses? You wouldn't like that very much, would you?

Another problem is that Smart Tags are "opt-out". This means the tags are inserted unless you (the webmaster or the user) indicate that you do not want them. Opt-Out is the preferred method of removal for many advertisers because they understand that most people will not bother to remove themselves from the list. Opt-in is the preferred method of most consumers because then they receive only what they have requested.

Webmasters can keep smart tags from working on their site by including a special "opt-out" metatag in the header of each and every page. I highly recommend that all webmasters include this tag to prevent smart tags from operating.

As soon as Smart Tags appeared in a beta release of Windows XP, the furor began. It was awesome to see. Microsoft was hit from all sides by just about everyone, because their intentions were so transparent and so blatantly monopolistic that even the most conservative could see what they were up to. The dangers caused a flood of protests to be received by the giant company, so many that Microsoft was forced to remove the feature from their products.

"As a result of smart tags in beta versions of Windows XP and IE, we received lots of feedback, and have realized that there is a need to better balance the user experience with the legitimate concerns of content

providers and web sites," Microsoft said in a statement on June 28th, 2001.

Keep an eye on Microsoft, however, because they also added, "Microsoft remains committed to this type of technology, and will work closely with content providers and partners in the industry in the coming months to further refine how it can be used."

Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets at <http://www.internet-tips.net> – Visit our website any time to read over 1,000 complete FREE articles about how to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.

### **Real Life Internet Evil: Ezula**

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If you were worried about Microsoft's smart tags, then perhaps you should read this article. Whereas you could argue that Microsoft didn't have the best of intentions with smart tags, at least they provided a way for webmasters to prevent them showing on their pages.

On the other hand, Ezula (and its product TopText) is the scum that scum wipes off scums feet. The company is evil. While they are not in the same league as Osama Bin Laden (who needs to be volunteered to a special project to determine the effects of nuclear missiles on human flesh), they are evil. With them, though, the best "nuke" is to ignore their pitch and never install the product. If you've got it, remove it immediately. It's simple and and obvious.

Here's what Ezula does. They sell users on some exaggerated benefit (much like that other scum product called Gator) and use this to get their product installed on the user's computer. In this case, Ezula "gives" their users something almost identical to smart tags.

The product basically scans HTML pages as they are loaded onto a system, looking for keywords. When it finds a keyword, it replaces it with a special link to the page (or pages) of a page advertiser (along with some links to content of some kind – that's the "benefit" that gets people to install the silly product).

Let's take an example. Pretend you want to sell tires, so you purchase the Ezula rights to the keyword "tires". Now, every time any web page of any Ezula user loads it is scanned for the word "tires". Ezula replaces those with links to your site – even if it is the site of one of your competitors! Or even a site about how people get tired ("he tires easily") or anything like that.

Here's what they tell the users (the poor suckers who download this excrement): "eZula, Inc. is a leading provider of real-time contextual Internet solutions. eZula's flagship product TopText iLookup is the premier personal Internet reference and simplification tool, empowering millions of Internet users with an easy way to retrieve relevant information and simplify Internet Navigation."

Sound's great, doesn't it? Man, if that's all you read you'd run to download this garbage. But wait, read more of the website. Go to the advertisers section and you will read, "eZula's platform leverages the content that the user is viewing in real time and turns key phrases, that best describe the advertiser, into a global advertising opportunity that drives qualified traffic to the advertiser from anywhere on the Web."

They further describe, "ContextPro™, eZula's Contextual Keyword Platform, puts you in front of millions of Internet Users, wherever they are on the Web, and enables you to reach them, based on the Context of every Web page that they are viewing in real time."

Here's an analogy. Suppose you were a webmaster and had a product to sell. You spend your good money creating a beautiful brochure which you are going to pass out at the local mall. The brochure includes some helpful content and some advertisements of your product. You are proud of it because you've put your heart and soul into it's creation and you expect to make a few sales as well.

Now as you walk around the mall handing out your brochure, some sleazy guy in a trench coat is following you around. Once in a while, as you give the brochure to someone, he steps in front of you, takes the brochure out of your hands, pulls out a pen and makes a few changes. He crosses out a few words, writes in some new advertisements (along with some "content" to make it seem legitimate), then hands it off to the person you were giving it to. Worse yet, you don't see this happening and as far as you are concerned the end user received your brochure with your ads. Only it's been changed without your knowledge or permission.

You, the webmaster, have no control over these links. They could be competitors. They could be the links of pornographic sites (I couldn't find anything on the Ezula site which excluded such sites). They could be links to sites which you disagree with for ethical, moral, religious, racial or any number of other reasons. The point is you (the webmaster) have no control over the links from YOUR site. To the user, these appear to be YOUR links.

In fact, they will be sites of people and companies who are unethical and scummy enough themselves to sink to this level of advertising. They will be the sites of any company which is willing to shell out the cash.

Want more information? Check out the following site for the whole story.

<http://scumware.com/>

If you want to help stop this special brand of evil, then you can take some steps yourself. First, don't install the product

on your computer systems. If you've already installed the thing, then immediately uninstall it.

Second, if you do have a problem with this form of scum, then by all means file a report with the better business bureau, write an article of your own, send tell your friends and spread the word. You might also send an email to the advertisers who purchase this "service" (if you installed the product you would find out who they are) and inform them of your distaste. Be sure and point out that you will not purchase their products as long as they advertise in this method. The mighty dollar speaks volumes.

Finally, if you are a webmaster, you can add the following graphic to your pages, along with a link to <http://scumware.com>

<http://scumware.com/images/bugverysmall.gif>

Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets at <http://www.internet-tips.net> – Visit our website any time to read over 1,000 complete FREE articles about how to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.



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