

## The Birth of Spyware

Advertisers realized that if they wanted to still make money online, they would have to change tactics. Many advertisers turned to affiliate programs, in which publishers would get paid for actual sales made, not just for a click on a banner. The other advertisers thought of new ways to advertise; they found a way that would allow them to advertise products without even having a website or servers serving advertisements. This is how spyware emerged.

At first, spyware was bundled into freeware and shareware applications, but word quickly spread around the Internet about this new threat, so advertisers had to resort to dirty tricks. Many spyware developers now use hacker exploits to install spyware onto computers.

If you use any of the popular operating systems, chances are you will have spyware. It is probably safe to say that most home users have lots of spyware on their computers. This spyware is just sitting there, quietly informing advertisers about your music-listening habits, your web-browsing habits, or your favorite programs. If you are unlucky, you will be infected with a nastier spyware application such as a porn dialer.

### NOTE

Porn dialers are programs that ring up sex lines, usually overseas. The phone bills from porn dialers can be huge; last month, my elderly neighbors received a phone bill for more than 8000 dollars, all from a porn dialer ringing up a European number from a New Zealand-based address.

Browser hijacking is a common way for spyware programs to get you to visit their website. If your home page keeps changing to an advertisers' web page, no matter how many times you have set your favorite home page, you definitely have spyware. More often than not, you will also see pop-up windows appearing in your browser, even if you are offline!! Although these windows might advertise mundane products, you might also be flooded with tacky porn sites. A very good tool for dealing with browser hijacks is a program called HijackThis, which you can find here, along with instructions on how to use it.

Spyware not only invades your privacy, it also causes stability issues with most operating systems. Spyware coders don't really care how sloppy their coding is. Why would they? They are only after your money. Poor coding leads to spyware damaging a user's system; sometimes only visiting a site that has spyware exploits embedded into the HTML can bring your system to a crawl. Most anti-virus applications do not recognize spyware, so removing spyware from an infected machine can be difficult. If a novice attempts the removal, it can even be dangerous to the system because registry editing is always involved.

As more legitimate companies move toward bundling spyware with their software, it is very important that all computer users start to use spyware scanners. Spyware scanners are a relatively new phenomenon; there are a lot of spyware cleaners around, but not all are reputable. Companies that also make spyware have even made some spyware cleaners!!! I'm sure that if virus coders started making anti-virus products, the industry would be concerned.