Scumware (1):
What is Scumware?

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In recent years, a new way of abusing computer users has spread like a disease through the Web: scumware. In this short series of articles, I will describe the functions of scumware; examples of software labeled by this unappealing term; legal issues raised by scumware; and defenses against scumware.

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Scumware is any software that significantly changes the appearance and functions of Web pages without permission of Webmasters or copyright holders. For example, a number of products overlay banner advertisements with other ads, sometimes for competing products. Scumware may add unauthorized hyperlinks to a user’s view of a Web page – sometimes using links to possibly objectionable sites. Such programs can interfere with existing hyperlinks by adding other destinations to the intended target. In addition, some products install themselves without warning users of these functions; others bury the details of their Web-page modifications in the extensive legalise of end-user license agreements. Some scumware is difficult or impossible to control; for example, the programs are difficult to uninstall, introduce instability into the operating system, and conflict with other applications.

Scumware is sometimes known as thiefware.

One of the best-known instances of scumware was better documented than most: the Microsoft XP Smart Tags “feature” was announced as an improvement for MS-Office products. Using Smart Tags, specific words in lists could have pop-up menus; these menus could offer options for useful functions such as choosing the style of pasting wanted for text (e.g., formatted, unformatted and so on). Smart Tags were also planned for the MS Internet Explorer (IE) v6 Web browser; however, many critics argued that the way Smart Tags were to be implemented, there would be an opportunity to hijack Web content by showing extra hyperlinks. These extra links would direct users to MS-related sites or to sites which had bought space in the Smart Tag space. There were waves of outrage all over the industry and MS withdrew its proposal for Smart Tags in IE.

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For further reading:

Definitions:
http://wuas.org/
http://www.thiefware.com/

Smart Tags:
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