Resource Parasites:  
Touching the Tar-Baby

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The U.S. Department of Energy’s Computer Incident Advisory Capability (CIAC) has issued an analysis of a dangerous category of software they are calling “parasite programs.” Advisory CIACTech02-004: Parasite Programs; Adware, Spyware, and Stealth Networks <http://www.ciac.org/ciac/techbull/CIACTech02-004.shtml> summarizes the situation as follows in the problem statement and the abstract:

“Programs are being intentionally packaged with legitimate software to display advertising on your screen, gather information on your browsing habits, and to sell your unused CPU cycles and disk space. Current applications are relatively benign but could easily be used for an invasion of privacy or other malicious purposes.”

“Recent reports from Internet marketing companies outlining their plans [have] brought to light the capabilities of parasite programs that are being installed along with legitimate programs. These parasite programs give the outside company the ability to watch your browsing habits, examine your files, and use your unused computer cycles and disk space. Most of these programs currently place directed advertising on your computer but have the ability to do much more. Buried in the fine print of the user agreements for those programs are legal releases that may allow the software company uncontrolled access to your computer. The stated future plans of at least one of these companies includes selling your unused disk space and computer cycles to other companies. In this bulletin we will discuss what is going on now, what could be done with the existing technology, and how to detect and get rid of it.”

The particular case studied in detail is that of the company Brilliant Digital Entertainment (BDE), which provides a utility for displaying three-dimensional images. The end-user license agreement (EULA) stipulates that the company can “change or modify any of the terms and conditions of this agreement and any of the policies governing the services at any time in its sole discretion.” In addition, “Your continued use of the software following BDE’s changes will constitute your acceptance of such changes.”

The CIAC analysts point to the additional statement, “You hereby grant BDE the right to access and use the unused computing power and storage space on your computer/s an /or internet access or bandwidth for the aggregation of content and use in distributed computing. The user acknowledges and authorized this use without the right of compensation.” Their conclusion? “they get to use your computer for free.” Finally, the EULA stipulates that if either party terminates the agreement, all the other terms of the agreement remain in force, including the company’s right to continue to use the user’s computer resources.

Based on their reading of a submission to the Securities and Exchange by BED, CIAC continues with their interpretation of the BDE objectives in installing the utility in the first place: “So, what are they going to do with your disk space and processing power? They are going to sell it
to other businesses to use. They are particularly targeting advertising companies to provide a place to store advertising content that they will push out to other systems. Note that while they do say they are going to compensate the owners of the computers they are using, they do not say how and they are not really required to compensate the owners according to the user agreement.”

The report continues with extensive details of how to deal with parasite programs.

I urge readers to read all EULAs with the CIAC findings in mind before allowing any “free” utilities to be installed on corporate computers. The same caution should be suggested to employees for their home computers, especially if they do any corporate work or store corporate data on those home computers.

Beware the e-Tar Baby.

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