

Computers Use Can Be Costly

Editorial

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Something has taken over your computer.

Unsolicited software is slowing down your machine, filling your hard disk with unwanted material. It's tracking your progress across the Web and bombarding you with advertising. It may be reporting information on what sites you browse to third parties.

At its most malevolent, such spyware can track every keystroke you make, record every URL you click on and report the details back to its masters. Digital demons can alter your system settings. Browser hijackers and plug-ins can change your home page - possibly to a pornographic site - or switch your search page to a pay-per-search site. Some programs can secretly change your dial-up settings so that you connect through an expensive 900 or international telephone number instead of your local Internet provider. Cyber-worms can even commandeer your Webcam and microphone, recording everything you do and say in front of your computer.

Such malware usually enters your computer without your knowledge. You click on a Web site or install what seems to be a keen little piece of software, and the spyware rides along. It might even be e-mailed to you.

Some software that purports to help you remove spyware installs its own spyware. Many of the cyberparasites are all but impossible to get rid of without costly, expert help.

Proposed legislation aimed at slowing the insidious invasion has recently been introduced in both the state and the U.S. Houses of Representatives.

"The issue of spyware is quickly replacing spam as the No. 1 concern of most computer users," said state Rep. John Fritchey, D-11th, who has introduced