Information Technology

Whack – A – Mole, Computer Style

Remember when pop-ups were books with 3-dimensional cutouts that unfolded when you opened the pages? These days, when the word "pop-up" pops up, what do you think of? Yep, me too.

Whack-a-mole may be mindless fun, but most people rate pop-ups just below spam as an annoyance. Sometimes pop-ups go beyond annoying. We've seen computers so choked with them that windows would never open. And for chutzpah, it's hard to beat the pop-up that advertises a pop-up stopper.

Where do they come from? Apparently, the same people who create spam: porn and commercial sites install "cookies" or small programs on your computer that automatically open windows to their sites when you start a web browser. (Most cookies are harmless, but you have no way of knowing until the popups start.) If you click on an ad or download a free game, you may be installing one of these without knowing it. They may change your home web page without permission and fire ads at you, slowing your computer and preventing you from getting work done. Close one pop-up and two more pop up. It's like whack-a-mole, with the game fixed in favor of the moles.

So, how do you get rid of these pests? There are two approaches, often used together. One is a program that examines your computer and deletes known ad-ware and other nuisances. The best known of these is Spybot Search and Destroy, written by a German programmer who got fed up with pop-up ads. It's a free download, though the author appreciates contributions. Another approach stops the browser from opening new windows without your permission. There are several of these, with names like Stopzilla, Panicware and Adsgone. Ad-aware is widely used. Some Internet Service Providers (including Optimum Online) offer pop-up stoppers (as well as spam stoppers) at reduced prices or for free. If you install the free Google toolbar, it will block popups.

When using any of these products, be sure to understand what it's doing. You may think that Gator is a convenient utility to remember passwords, but Spybot S&D or Ad-aware thinks it's ad-ware and will remove it unless told otherwise. Fortunately, most have undo features.

Where's that hammer? Time to whack some popups.

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com. Past columns are available at www.maclamor.com.