

Viruses, Spyware, & Firewalls... What does it all mean? (Part 2 of 3)

This is the second of a three part series of articles that will discuss the nature of viruses, firewalls, and spy/mal ware as well as how they affect you.

SPYWARE : It's not difficult to figure out what this software does, the name says it all. Some of it is created for malicious reasons, and others for advertising purposes but both can be considered an invasion of privacy.

Spyware ,in its commercial advertising form, can take the form of browser cookies or an application that runs on your system. The cookies hold bits of information about things like what type of internet sites you browse and how often as well as your email address. This information is gathered by the sites that promote this information theft and are used for marketing specific products to you in the form of ads on web pages, pop up ads, and/or spam.

The application form of the spyware ,though, is often the most annoying. These programs generally run in the background, often invisibly, and what's worse many of them use self preservation techniques similar to viruses to make sure that they 'stay alive' even when some of their files are deleted. These programs will collect the same sort of information that a browser cookie does except that they are actually active programs on your machine that take up your precious processor time and severely slow down your computer and can even end up blocking your internet access. They can also contact a given site on the internet to deliver the information that was gathered without you having to browse to any specific page on the internet.

Some malicious forms of spyware include key loggers that actually record every key stroke you type and deliver them to outside persons. These key strokes could be social security numbers, phone numbers, addresses, credit card numbers, and the list goes on. They can also record and deliver information like your computer's internet address or even more complex information that crackers can use to steal, alter, or destroy files directly from your system.

Okay now that you are scared to death and probably paranoid, what can you do to prevent this identity theft from happening to you? First, make sure you have good virus protection. Although spyware isn't really a virus, viruses create holes in your system that spyware can sneak through and into your system. Also, buy or download some good spyware protection programs such as SpyBot and AdAware. I would recommend getting at least two different spyware killers for the most complete protection. Beware, though, of some free spyware killers on the internet that are actually viruses or spyware programs in disguise. Third, if you use Internet Explorer, make certain that your browser security is set at a level that does not allow ActiveX programs to run without your permission. And last, have a good firewall set up on your system. We will further discuss firewalls in our last in this series of articles in March.