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A Closer Look
Programs to Pummel Pop-Ups

By *Rebecca Rohan*
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They spring up like zits on a teenager's face, quizzes in class or moles in a backyard -- but pop-up pitches in uninvited Web browser windows don't go away if you age, graduate or move.

If you're sick of beating them back with the "close window" keyboard shortcut, it may be time to go after them with one of the numerous programs that defeat the Web-page coding that launches these marketing messages. Some go beyond that, to address more serious privacy and security issues.

Most of the current crop of these browser utilities run on Windows 95 or newer Microsoft operating systems, including Windows NT 4 and its descendants, Win 2000 and Win XP. Most of the utilities offer the closest compatibility with versions of Internet Explorer; Netscape users have fewer options. (Then again, you could switch to a competing browser, such as Opera, that offers built-in controls for pop-up ads.)

Panicware's Pop-Up Stopper Pro 1.6 (www.panicware.com) is a decent, if simple, example of this crop; this \$20 utility kills pop-ups and helps with downloads but does little else. (A free, non-pro version includes just the pop-up-killing functions.) The Pro version's most helpful addition is a tool-bar button that instantly locates the folder to which the last file was downloaded. But we couldn't find Pop-Up Stopper itself after installation -- until, that is, the company explained that an IE bug disguised it as a second "Radio" item in the browser's menu of tool bars.

XFX JumpStart's PopUp Killer 1.45 (software.xfx.net/utilities/popupkiller/) has the key advantage of being free to use, although the developer requests a \$7 donation. It also lets you choose what sound it will play as it kills pop-up ads (a feature shared by Pop-Up Stopper Pro) and can scramble descriptions of killed sites in its log, since the words may be explicit. But this program was slow on the draw in our experience -- pop-ups would begin opening, then freeze and perish. That's not exactly interruption-free browsing.

Smasher Internet Privacy Tools Suite 2.4.1, by the confusingly named www.PopUpStop.com (no relation to the preceding products) goes beyond bashing pop-up ads to offer options to regulate the

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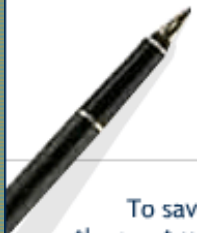
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cookie files Web sites place on your hard drive. It even disables "Web bugs" -- tiny images that can relay information about your browsing habits -- and can password-protect your copy of Internet Explorer to keep others from using your user ID online. At \$19 (with a free trial), this program represents a good deal -- just not as good as two other applications, AdSubtract Pro and WebWasher.

The first, Intermute's AdSubtract Pro 2.45 (www.adsubtract.com) is the priciest of the bunch, at \$30 with no free trial. (A non-pro "SE" version is free for six months of home use.) This is one ambitious annoyance zapper, killing pop-ups, many non-pop-up ads, background music, page background images, animated GIFs, auto-refresh commands on pages, cookies, referrer functions that tell sites where you just came from, or Java applets and JavaScript. You can turn off any of these critters for all sites or individual ones. AdSubtract Pro even includes a choice of three sound schemes ("birds," "guns" and "pinball").

WebWasher AG's WebWasher 3.0 (www.webwasher.com) offers more options than AdSubtract Pro, but the price -- free for home use -- handily bests its competitor. (Corporations looking to save on bandwidth costs pay \$19 a copy.) This is also the only program of this bunch to run on Mac and Linux computers as well as Windows PCs. WebWasher smooths out the Web the way a Cadillac quiets the road, filtering pop-ups, ad banners, Web bugs, referrers, animations, cookies, types of files, scripts and much more, with plenty of fine-tuning allowed. For example, you can choose to see only the first frame of an animation, repeat an animation a specified number of times or remove animations completely. In that case, WebWasher can leave the space blank -- or, perhaps better yet, replace it with the image of *your* choice.

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