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## Microsoft patch causes users pain

By [John Fontana](#) and [Ellen Messmer](#), *Network World*, 04/10/06

Companies using [Microsoft's](#) ActiveX technology within their Web applications will have to install a patch this week to avoid the possibility that changes in Internet Explorer could affect those applications adversely.

The issue is similar to one users and independent software vendors faced with Windows XP SP2, which included security changes that broke some applications. The potential effects of the ActiveX changes being made in an Internet Explorer security patch slated to ship April 11 are less severe, in that they can change the way some Web-based intranet and Internet applications function but will not shut them down completely.

Microsoft is taking the unusual step of offering a compatibility patch to the April 11 patch that is designed to reverse the ActiveX changes for two months to give users more time to test their applications.

If users don't change their application code, patched versions of Internet Explorer will still load ActiveX controls within those applications, but users will have to click on them before they are activated instead of them automatically being live.

Some users are not pleased about the work involved in making changes.

Doug Sweetman, senior technology officer at Boston-based financial services firm State Street, says he considers the changes, brought about by Microsoft's involvement in a patent-infringement case, to be time-consuming and disruptive for his company.

State Street uses ActiveX in some of its intranet and Internet-facing applications. "We have to test [the patch] first to make sure it doesn't break our applications," he says.

Microsoft officials say the time and difficulty required by Web developers to change applications is "scaled based on the number of pages and controls affected."

Some users have already done testing and are working to fix applications.

"A lot of our internal applications rely on ActiveX controls, and the vendor has not updated those yet,"

says Jay Leal, vice president of technology for the Inter National [stet - two words] Bank in McAllen, Texas. He doesn't characterize the changes as a major application rework, but says developers do have to tweak the way ActiveX controls are loaded.

### Patching Internet Explorer

Microsoft this week is issuing a temporary compatibility patch so corporate users can block changes being made in the way Internet Explorer handles ActiveX controls, which could affect Web-based applications negatively. The temporary patch gives users time to test their applications. Here are Microsoft's recommendations:

#### Enterprise users:

- Test applications against the ActiveX changes, which were released Feb. 28.
- Deploy the Internet Explorer security update when it ships April 11.
- Deploy the compatibility patch, which blocks the ActiveX changes, as part of the April 11 update, to ensure that applications still function as usual.
- Finish testing applications before June 13, the day the compatibility patch will expire.

#### Independent software vendors

- Test applications against the ActiveX changes.
- If problems occur, contact Microsoft.
- Release new code before the June 13 expiration of the compatibility patch.

#### Users

- Upgrade Internet Explorer 6.0 using Windows Update or Microsoft Update.

Some widely deployed programs that use ActiveX controls within the browser include Adobe's Reader and Flash, Apple's QuickTime Player, Microsoft's Windows Media Player, RealNetworks' RealPlayer and Sun's Java Virtual Machine.

Leal, who cites recent patent cases against Research in Motion and eBay, says he believes more of this type of litigation is coming and will possibly be disruptive to corporate users.

"For the most part, Microsoft has helped people along, let them know what is going on, and they are providing a fix for this," he says.

But others say the issue attests to what they have believed all along about the dangers of using ActiveX, which is similar to Java Applets but provides little security and only operates within Internet Explorer.

"This is giving us more fodder not to have [Internet Explorer] on our desktops," says Keith Mann, network engineer for Harrison School District 2 in Colorado Springs, Colo. "We have made major application decisions where vendors who couldn't guarantee us support outside of [Internet Explorer], we just didn't deal with them."

Microsoft's alterations to the way ActiveX controls are loaded in Internet Explorer are in response to an ongoing patent infringement case brought by Eolas Technologies and the University of California. A jury awarded the pair \$521 million in damages in August 2003. In 2005, a U.S. Court of Appeals

overturned the verdict, and a new trial date in district court is expected to be set for this year.

In the interim, Microsoft is making changes that will require ActiveX controls be loaded via scripts instead of embedded in HTML code.

Microsoft is mum on why it is making the changes, citing the ongoing legal dispute, but it has been vocal in recommending that users test their applications before the ActiveX patch ships April 11. It is a required upgrade for Internet Explorer 6.0 running on Windows XP SP2, Windows Server 2000 SP1 and Windows Server 2003 R2.

The compatibility patch is effective until June 13. "We do not expect major incompatibility issues," a Microsoft spokeswoman says. "Microsoft is releasing the compatibility patch because some enterprise customers have given feedback that more time is needed to ensure corporate line-of-business applications are compatible with the ActiveX changes."

Microsoft says the ActiveX changes are applicable only to Internet Explorer and not other applications

that host ActiveX controls such as Office, or application components, such as Excel and Acrobat Reader, that are hosted within Internet Explorer and not loaded as objects.

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