

## **Growing Up Can Be Evil**

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### **Google Bundles Toolbar and Desktop Search Application with WinZip**

Why do our friends change so much when they grow up? Remember when we were kids and didn't have to think about dealing with utility bills, mortgage instalments, taxes, rent, student loans, groceries and car payments? After passing through the awkward stage of adolescence, most of us find ourselves resigned to compromising our values in one way or another in order to get a bigger piece of whatever pie we are chasing. It happens so subtly that most of us don't even notice that we have made such compromises or that they have changed our lives. It just happens that way. Through talent, dedication, luck, and the fortunate conflux of all three at the same time, some find great wealth, influence and power when they grow up. Google officially became an adult late last summer after surviving the techno coming of age ritual known as the IPO. Now that they are all grown up, Google appears to be willing to make compromises on their beloved core mission: to make money without being evil.

Late last month, [WinZip Computing Inc.](#), the makers of one of the most popular file compression tools made an agreement with Google to bundle two well known Google applications in with downloadable versions of their WinZip software. As of last week, people downloading WinZip will also download copies of the Google Toolbar and Google's desktop search application. While users are given an opt-out option, the WinZip executable file will, by default, install and activate the toolbar and desktop search application. The odd thing is neither application has anything to do with compressing files except perhaps to help a user find such files on the net or on their hard drives.

To be fair, Google's toolbar and desktop search applications are both very useful applications but Google's use of this method of distribution is starting to disturb many in the web community. By bundling their software in with unrelated applications, it appears Google is muscling its way onto unwitting users' hard drives, a practice that leaves long time Google watchers questioning their motivation and marketing savvy. To remain fair, [Yahoo does it as well](#) but Yahoo has no pretensions around their relationship with stuff that might be considered "evil".

The [toolbar](#) provides users instant access to a wide array of Google applications with a search query box, a pagerank meter, a pop-up blocker, an auto fill feature for online forms and a bunch of other user-defined features. It also includes the infamous [Autolinks](#) button that alters websites by adding links from Google Local, Google Maps, FedEx, UPI, Carfax or Amazon (depending on the content) when activated. The toolbar provides Google with a great deal of [information](#) about its users.

Google Desktop keeps a highly useful record of files stored on a user's computer by spidering the contents of that user's hard drive. While the spider and all results are kept on the user's computer, non-identifying information such a page visits, document views, searches and usage, are shared with Google.

Both applications are used to provide Google with deep mines of demographic data to support the development of direct contextual ad distribution, and of course, a better search experience for its loyal users.

Bundling one piece of software in with another application is not a new thing and might not be considered "evil". As a matter of fact, this is hardly the first time Google has used bundling in their marketing efforts. In exchange for Google inspiring and fostering their growth, several basic versions of the Firefox browser default to a Firefox flavoured Google homepage. As noted in [Search Engine Watch](#), Google also bundles the toolbar and desktop with DVD creation software from [InterVideo](#) and with downloads of [RealPlayer](#).

Bundling can also provide an avenue of distribution for smaller software developers who have created complimentary applications for the products they tag along on. Small but useful pieces of software are often distributed by attaching their executable files to the EXE's of software packages they were designed to compliment. Multiplayer online games often come with a copy of the [GameSpy](#) search application which helps gamers locate nearby or favoured servers to play on. Users of accounting programs like QuickBooks or Quicken might find third party software designed to help file taxes online or calculate local income tax rates included in the initial install. These additional applications are useful to the end-user and their inclusion is a form of business partnership that provides a valuable customer service.

Sometimes bundling is used to pay the bills. That's when bundled software can bring big time badness. A few years ago online file traders faced all sorts of problems after they installed versions of Kazaa and Bearshare infected with Gator user-tracking and marketing software. Not only did it watch and record what users did, in some cases it took over other applications. Websites wouldn't load properly, URLs would be redirected and unrelated apps would mysteriously stop working properly.

When I was in Toronto recently, while visiting my parents, I was forced to install Firefox and then cleanse my father's computer of mal-ware to access my Gmail account. An IE toolbar offered by a local Toronto radio station had malicious software bundled into it. Software designed by a company whose penchant for lawsuits is legendary prevented me from accessing Google and my Gmail account by redirecting anything with the Google URL to a spam-site search tool.

Sometimes bundling is used to control or dominate a market. Windows operating systems are the ultimate example of how bundling can be used to deliver extremely complementary applications as an all-in-one package with the goal of outright OS domination. The kneecapping of Netscape in the short browser wars of the mid-90's was accomplished by bundling Internet Explorer in with versions of Windows95. Previously, Internet Explorer was sold as stand-alone software.

Acquiring new users and maintaining user loyalty is a major piece of the overall marketing pie for every major search engine and Google is increasingly including pieces of itself with the install of other pieces of software. While working to increase Google account holders by any means possible, the practice of pushing products on users who wanted to use an unrelated product is producing PR problems. Not only does Google need to avoid being evil, it needs to avoid appearing to be evil.

These are problems that don't really need to happen. Google already allows application developers to work Google search technology into their creations through their [Application Programming Interface](#) (API) program. Yahoo also offers a similar [Developer Network API](#). Allowing developers access to branded search technology helps build a better web and, in the context of power-giants like Google and Yahoo, is a much cleaner method of brand distribution than the piggyback method of bundling.