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**IT LEADERSHIP**

United Virtualities is offering online marketers technology that attempts to undermine the growing trend among consumers to delete cookies planted in their computers.



**Antone Gonsalves**, Contributor

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United Virtualities is offering online marketers and publishers technology that attempts to undermine the growing trend among consumers to delete cookies planted in their computers.

The New York company on Thursday unveiled what it calls PIE, or persistent identification element, a technology that's uploaded to a browser and restores deleted cookies. In addition, PIE, which can't be easily removed, can also act as a cookie backup, since it contains the same information.

Cookies are small files often uploaded to people's computers as they visit websites run by retailers, entertainment companies, newspapers and other businesses. The text files contain information that's used to track visitors' behavior, or to offer visitors products or services based on information gathered during previous visits, a process called personalization. In addition, cookie-gathered information is often pivotal for advertising campaigns and e-mail marketing.

According to JupiterResearch, a division of Jupitermedia Corp., 58 percent of Internet users have deleted the tiny files, essentially making many consumers anonymous during site visits. In addition, 39 percent of consumers are deleting cookies from their primary computer monthly.

United Virtualities's PIE helps combat this consumer behavior by leveraging a feature in Flash MX called local shared objects. Flash MX is a Macromedia Inc. application for developing multimedia Web content, user interfaces and Web applications. The technology runs on a Flash Player that the company says is deployed on 98 percent of Internet-capable computers.

When a consumer goes to a PIE-enabled website, the visitor's browser is tagged with a Flash object that contains a unique identification similar to the text found in a traditional

While consumers have learned to delete cookies, most are unaware of shared objects, and don't know how to disable them.

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Mookie Tanenbaum, founder and chief executive of United Virtualities, says the company is trying to help consumers by preventing them from deleting cookies that help website operators deliver better services.

"The user is not proficient enough in technology to know if the cookie is good or bad, or how it works," Tanenbaum said.

While United Virtualities, as well as marketers and publishers, focus on the benefits of cookies, consumers often see them as an invasion of privacy and resent having them loaded into their computers without permission, experts say. In addition, unscrupulous marketers can abuse the tracking capabilities of cookies.

Using technology like United Virtualities's to circumvent consumers could cause a backlash, JupiterResearch analyst David Schatsky said. The research firm found that many consumers understand cookies, and may be willing to allow some in their computers, if they are given the choice upfront.

"(PIE) sounds like it flies in the face of what consumers are telling us," Schatsky said. "They're seeking privacy and control, and if this is denied, then they won't be happy."

Tanenbaum also warned against using PIE to thwart consumers.

"Any abuse of this technology is not welcomed by us," Tanenbaum said. "We believe people should use this technology responsibly. If people don't want cookies in place, then (their browsers) shouldn't be tagged."

Consumers can make PIE inoperable by raising the security settings in their browsers to its highest level, Tanenbaum said. But he acknowledges that such a high setting would also hamper consumers' ability to visit non-PIE websites.

For its part, Macromedia has posted on its [website](#) instructions for disabling shared objects uploaded to browsers.

In addition, the San Francisco-based company is discussing with Microsoft Corp., the Mozilla Foundation and other browser makers the possibility of letting consumers control the use of cookies and shared objects from one location in a browser, Jeff Whatcott, vice president of product management for Macromedia, said.

"Our goal is to always put the user in control over their own data and machine," Whatcott said. "That's the approach we've always taken."

Flash-built websites often use shared objects in gathering information from visitors. Besides data on how the sites are being used, retailers, for example, can track what visitors place in their shopping carts, or store a list of previously purchased products.

## About the Author



**Antone Gonsalves**  
Contributor

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