

Understanding Bots and Their Different Uses as well as Misuse

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In brief

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You've probably seen or heard about bots online. Many have been advertised for their useful applications and efficiency. In other cases, we find services adamantly asserting that they have a no bot policy.

For example, SocialWick, a website that helps social media accounts boost their growth, continuously assures its users that they do not use bots. It makes you wonder how bad they must be.

What is a Bot?

By definition, a bot is a software that can perform specific tasks repeatedly. The tasks are performed and restarted without any human interaction. As with any software, the tasks depend on the original code that was written. That is, if a programmer wrote a code to create a software to repetitively check an email account for updates, that's all the code will do.

Instead, the programmer could choose the malicious route and create a software that repeatedly signs out of an email account, effectively blocking the user from access. Of course, we're over simplifying the types of tasks that bots do, for illustration purposes.

The Most Common (Legal) Uses Of Bots

Bots are actually meant to simulate the tasks that used to be performed by humans. The internet would not be what it is today without bots, because search engines make excellent use of this type of software to scan and index content over the internet. Imagine the time and manpower it would take to do that by traditional means!

Other useful applications include chatbots that can hold a conversation reasonably well. These used to be very obvious, and only specific phrases could get responses, but advances in machine learning have created more complex bots that can be used in customer support fairly well for the most part.

Malicious Applications

Human history has proven that anything can either be used for good or for evil. The same concept of a bot can be applied for many malicious uses., For example, content scrapers are software used in a black hat manner to copy content from a website and steal it, without the website owner's permission. In other instances, people have used bots for spam, or even for manipulation of stock prices.

There have been instances in the past, where governments have used bots to spam social media to flood out anti-government messages. Others have used it to influence a public opinion prior to elections in hopes of swaying votes towards a candidate.

Conclusion: Are Bots Good Or Bad?

In the end, a bot is simply a program and cannot be inherently good or bad. It is similar to asking a question about fire: while it burns down buildings, it can also provide heat and cook food. Bot software can be used for both white hat and black hat purposes, depending on the human behind its use.

Most websites these days have a specific policy about how bots can and cannot be used, to define the lines between malicious and useful. People with malicious intent will likely ignore whatever rules are in such a policy.

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