PS3 firmware update could cripple Air Force research program

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Last month, Sony essentially neutered the PlayStation 3 by removing its “Install Other OS” functionality [1]. This precipitated a huge customer backlash (and, as of this writing, at least two class-action lawsuits [2]), but there’s one foe Sony hadn’t anticipated—the United States Air Force.

In 2009, the Air Force acquired 336 PS3s and built a 53 teraFLOP processing cluster. They subsequently obtained 1,700 more PS3s, and used them to build a supercomputer “for research into high-def video processing and systems with brain-like properties.” Why such an investment? According to Ars Technica [3], “Off-the-shelf PS3s could take advantage of Sony's hardware subsidy to get powerful Cell processors more cheaply than via any other solution.”

The original computing cluster using 336 PlayStation 3s.

Using the PS3s, the Air Force Research Laboratory eventually came up with a 500 TeraFLOPS Heterogeneous Cluster, with each system imaged to run Linux. Obviously, Sony’s new firmware update won’t directly affect the cluster. Like consumers, the Air Force can choose not to update. But if a PS3 should break,

trouble will arise—newer PS3s have the firmware update pre-installed.

According to the Air Force Research Lab, “this will make it difficult to replace systems that break or fail. The refurbished PS3s also have the problem that when they come back from Sony, they have the firmware (gameOS) and it will not allow Other OS, which seems wrong. We are aware of class-action lawsuits against Sony for taking away this option on systems that use to have it.”

To be clear, the “Install Other OS” functionality wasn’t a loophole, nor was it some vulnerability that hackers exploited. It was a clearly-advertised feature [4]. Sony claims their firmware update is optional, which is technically true. But if you don’t install the update, your PS3 is essentially crippled—you can’t access the PlayStation Network (PSN), and in some cases, you can’t play new games and Blu-Ray movies (which often require the latest firmware update). This is intolerable.

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