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Glick et al.

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(54) **METHOD USING KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE FOR THE DETECTION AND REMOVAL OF THREATS WHICH ARE ACTIVELY PREVENTING DETECTION AND REMOVAL FROM A RUNNING SYSTEM**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.** **726/24**; 726/27; 726/30; 713/1; 713/153; 713/165

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 726/22–26, 726/1–4; 713/1, 150, 152, 188, 189, 153, 713/161–165; 707/1, 3, 100, 200
See application file for complete search history.

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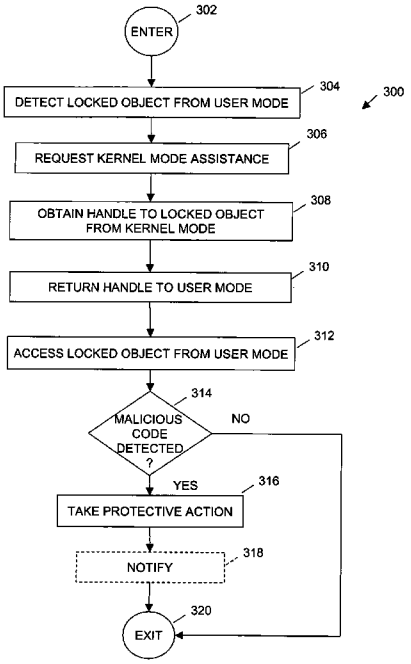
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A user mode application component invokes the assistance of a kernel mode driver component to detect and/or remediate malicious code on a computer system. The user mode application may include code that detects, for example, spyware and computer viruses, from user mode and when appropriate takes protective action when malicious code is detected. In one aspect, when the user mode application is unable to perform a selected operation in attempting to detect and/or take protective action, the user mode application invokes a kernel mode driver for assistance. The kernel mode driver assists user mode application in detecting malicious code and/or taking protective action by enabling or otherwise performing a selected operation for the user mode application.

2 Claims, 12 Drawing Sheets



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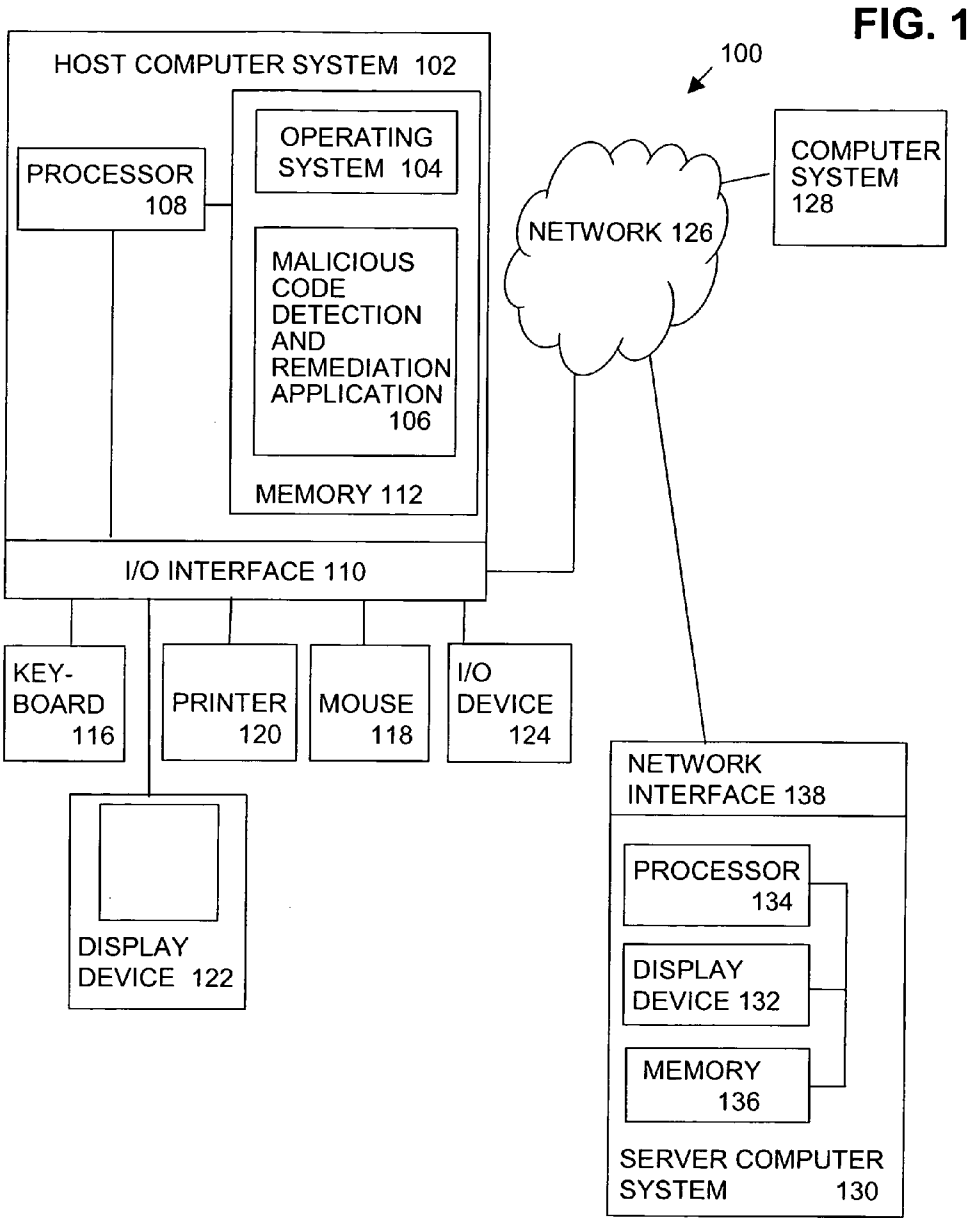
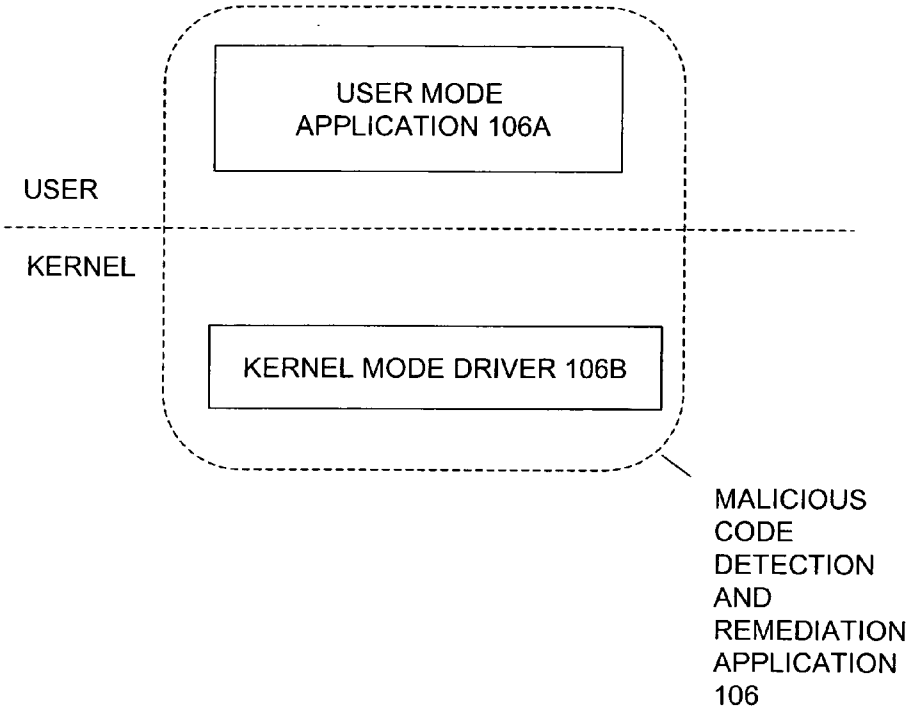


FIG. 1
100
HOST COMPUTER SYSTEM 102
PROCESSOR 108
OPERATING SYSTEM 104
MALICIOUS CODE DETECTION AND REMEDIATION APPLICATION 106
MEMORY 112
I/O INTERFACE 110
NETWORK 126
COMPUTER SYSTEM 128
KEY-BOARD 116
PRINTER 120
MOUSE 118
I/O DEVICE 124
DISPLAY DEVICE 122
NETWORK INTERFACE 138
PROCESSOR 134
DISPLAY DEVICE 132
MEMORY 136
SERVER COMPUTER SYSTEM 130

FIG. 2


USER MODE
APPLICATION 106A
USER
KERNEL
KERNEL MODE DRIVER 106B
MALICIOUS
CODE
DETECTION
AND
REMEDIATION
APPLICATION
106

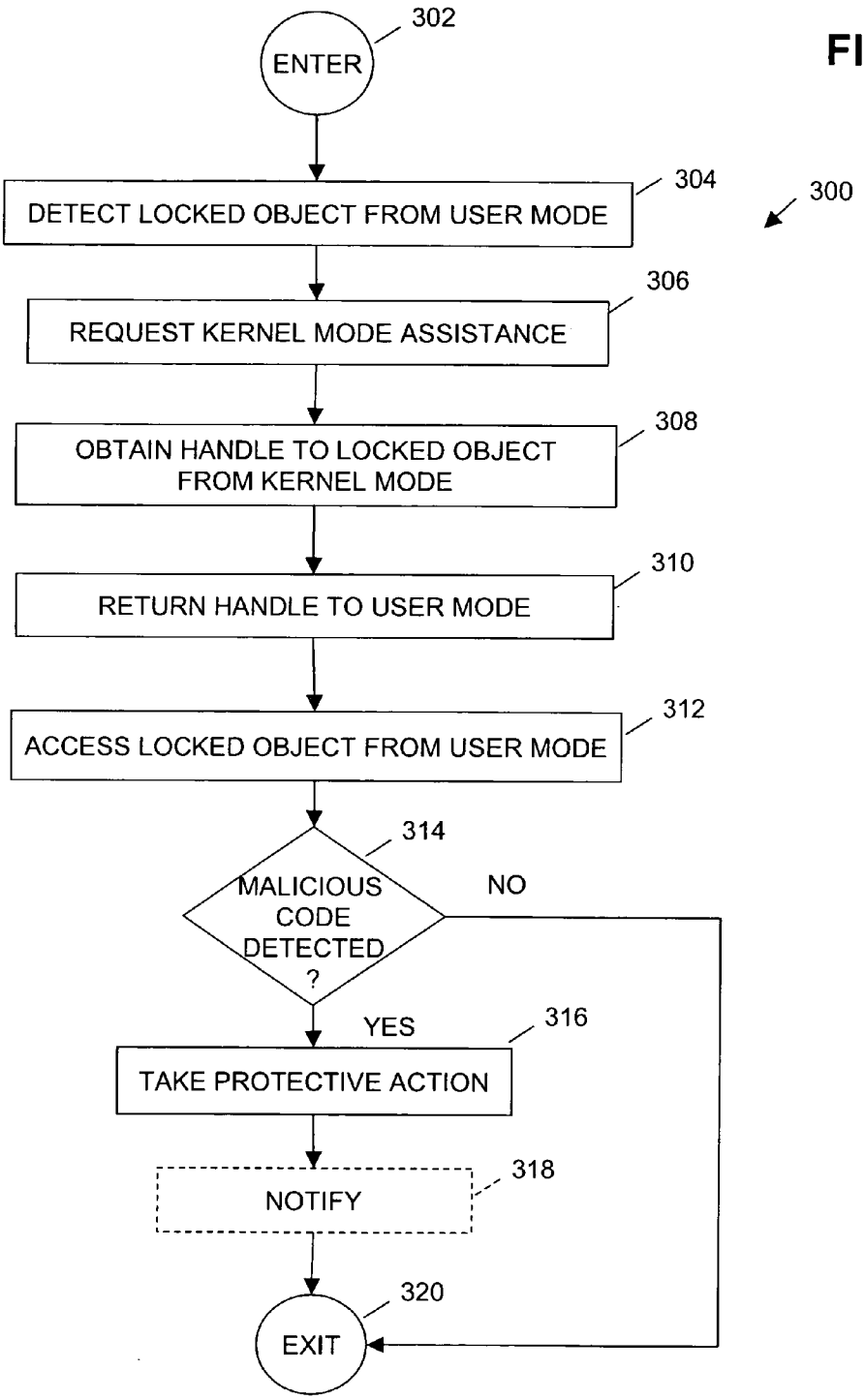

302
ENTER
304
DETECT LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE
300
306
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
308
OBTAIN HANDLE TO LOCKED OBJECT FROM KERNEL MODE
310
RETURN HANDLE TO USER MODE
312
ACCESS LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE
314
MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED ?
NO
YES
316
TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION
318
NOTIFY
320
EXIT

FIG. 3

FIG. 4

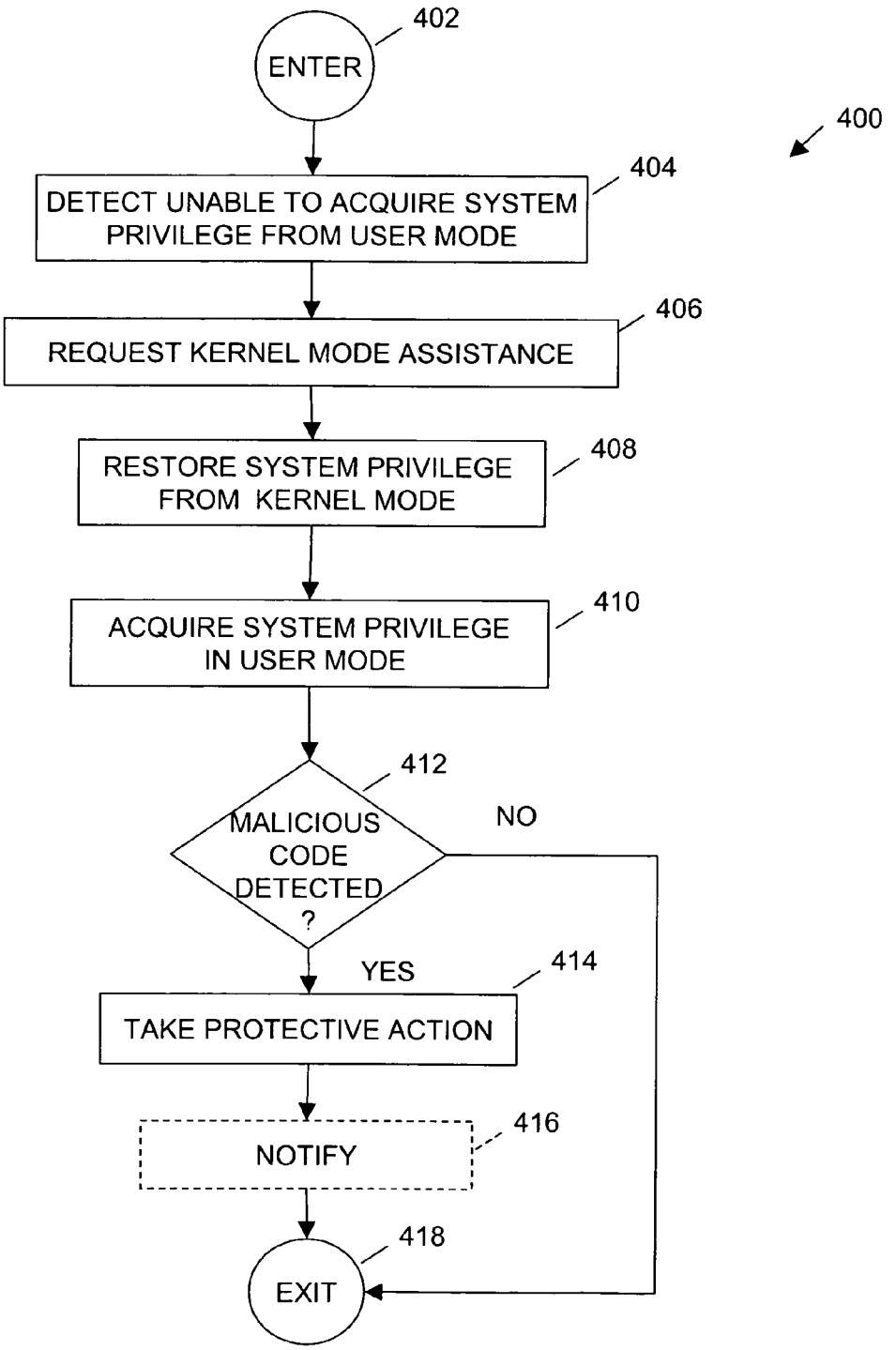

400
402
ENTER
404
DETECT UNABLE TO ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE
406
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
408
RESTORE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM KERNEL MODE
410
ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE IN USER MODE
412
MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED ?
NO
YES
414
TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION
416
NOTIFY
418
EXIT

FIG. 5

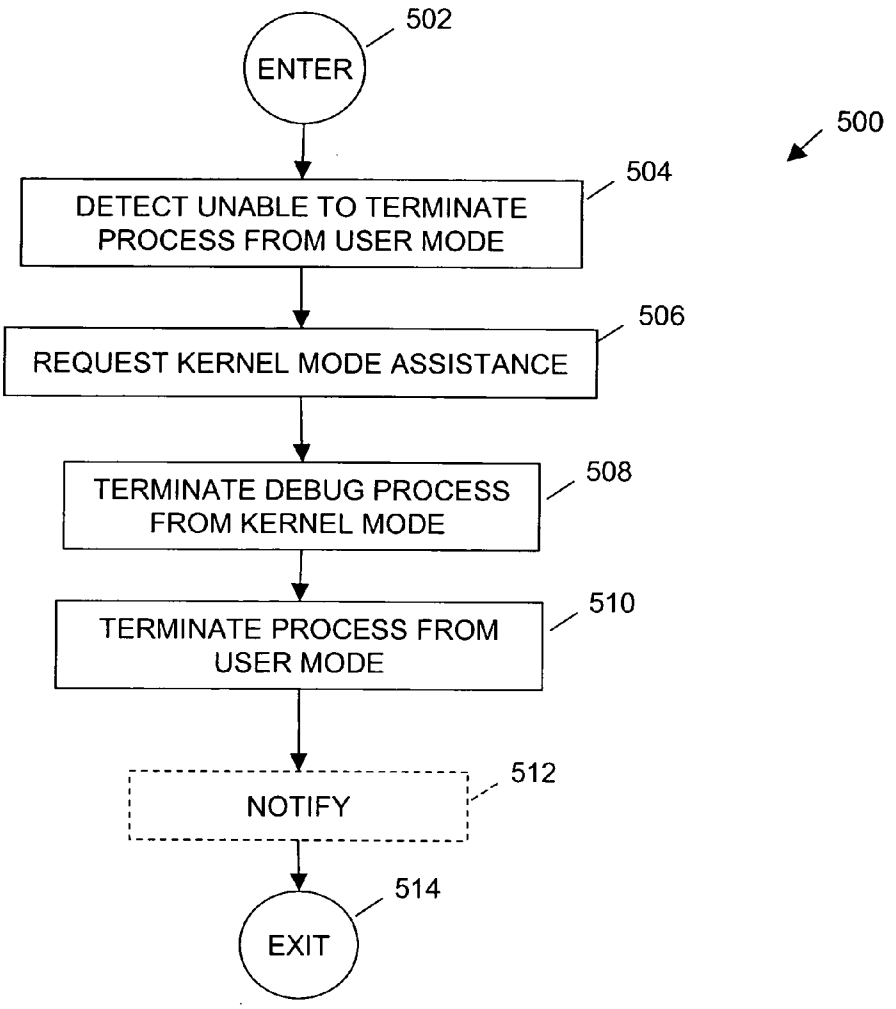

500
502
ENTER
504
DETECT UNABLE TO TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE
506
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
508
TERMINATE DEBUG PROCESS FROM KERNEL MODE
510
TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE
512
NOTIFY
514
EXIT

FIG. 6

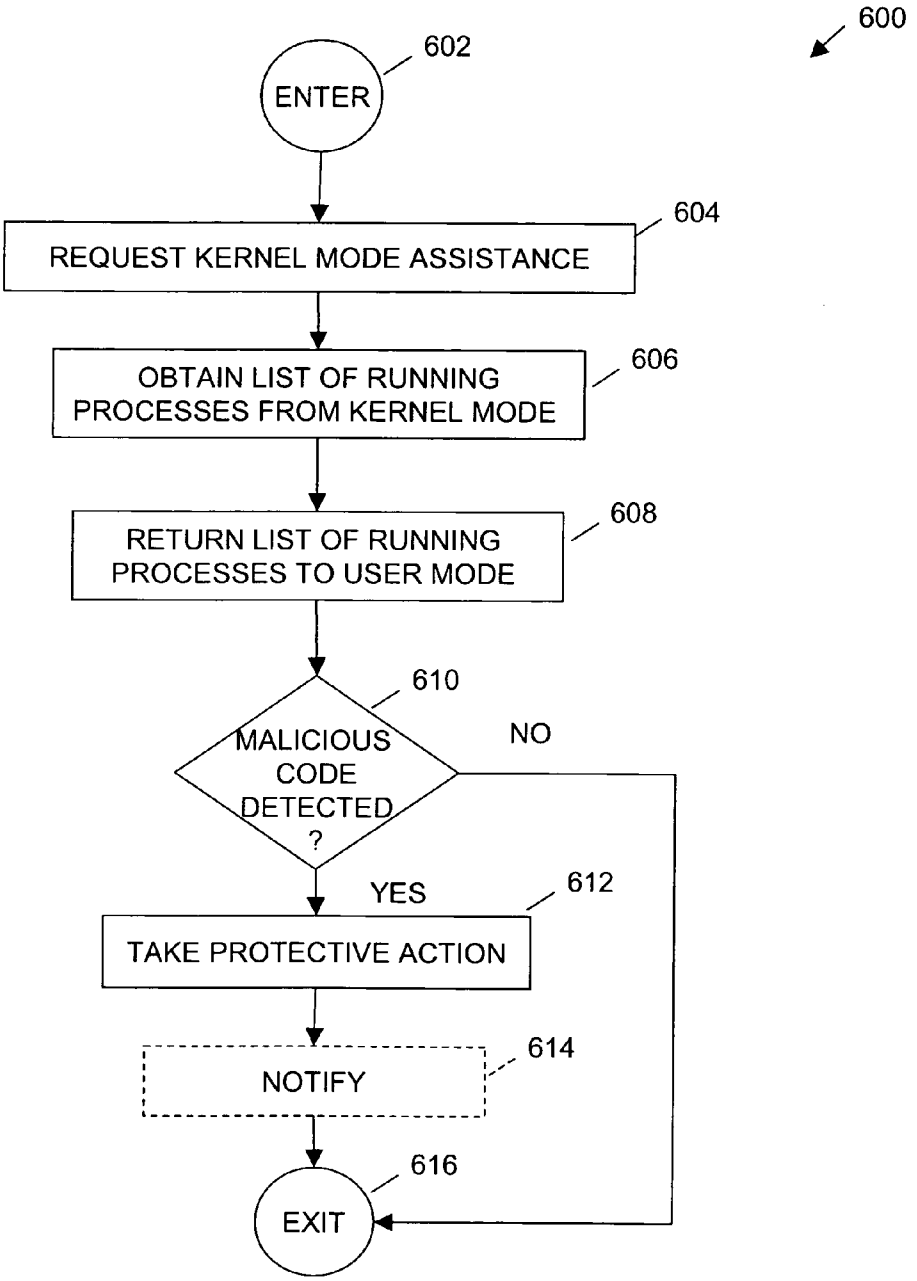

600
602
ENTER
604
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
606
OBTAIN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES FROM KERNEL MODE
608
RETURN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES TO USER MODE
610
MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED ?
NO
YES
612
TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION
614
NOTIFY
616
EXIT

FIG. 7

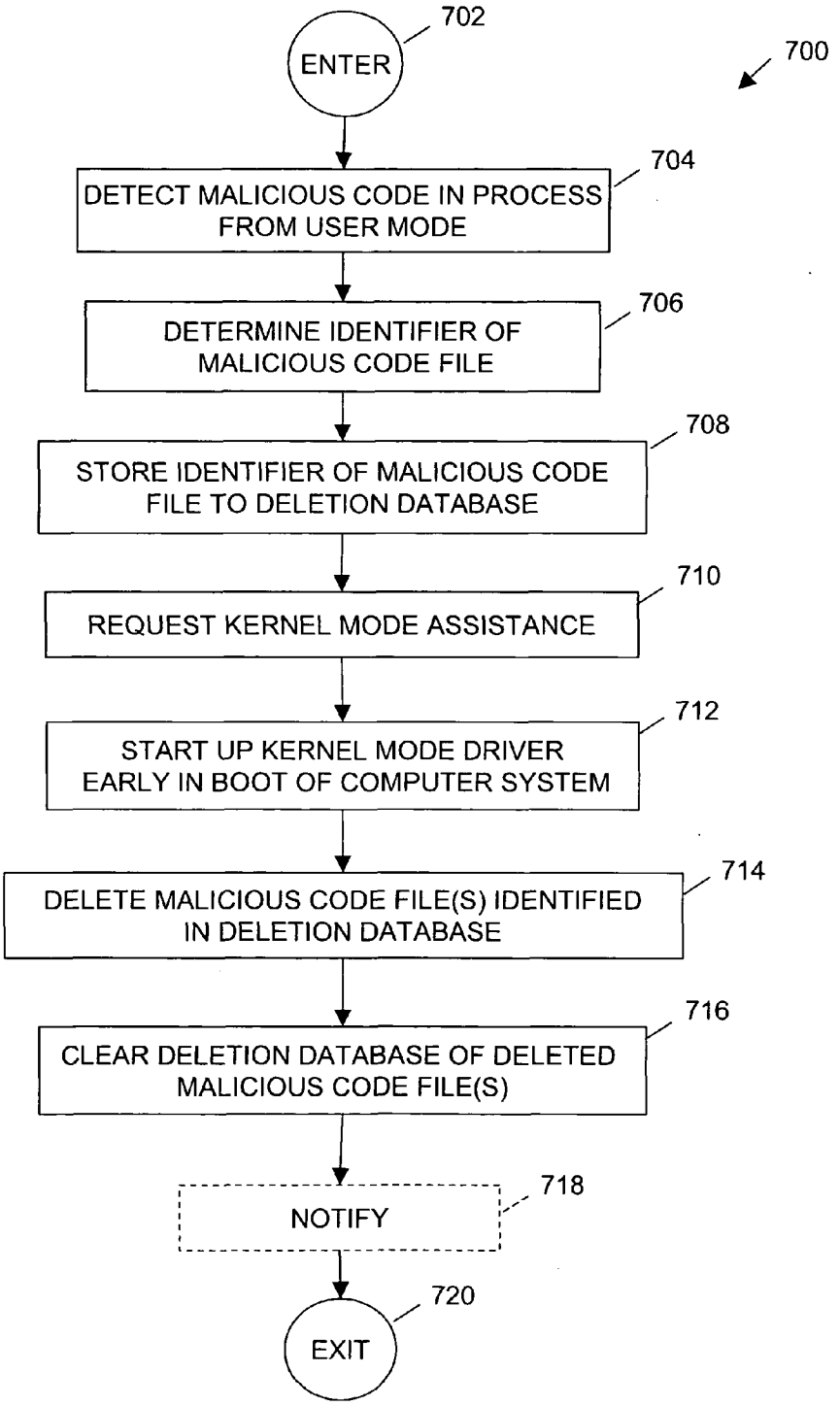

700
ENTER
702
DETECT MALICIOUS CODE IN PROCESS FROM USER MODE
704
DETERMINE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE
706
STORE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE TO DELETION DATABASE
708
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
710
START UP KERNEL MODE DRIVER EARLY IN BOOT OF COMPUTER SYSTEM
712
DELETE MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) IDENTIFIED IN DELETION DATABASE
714
CLEAR DELETION DATABASE OF DELETED MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S)
716
NOTIFY
718
EXIT
720

FIG. 8

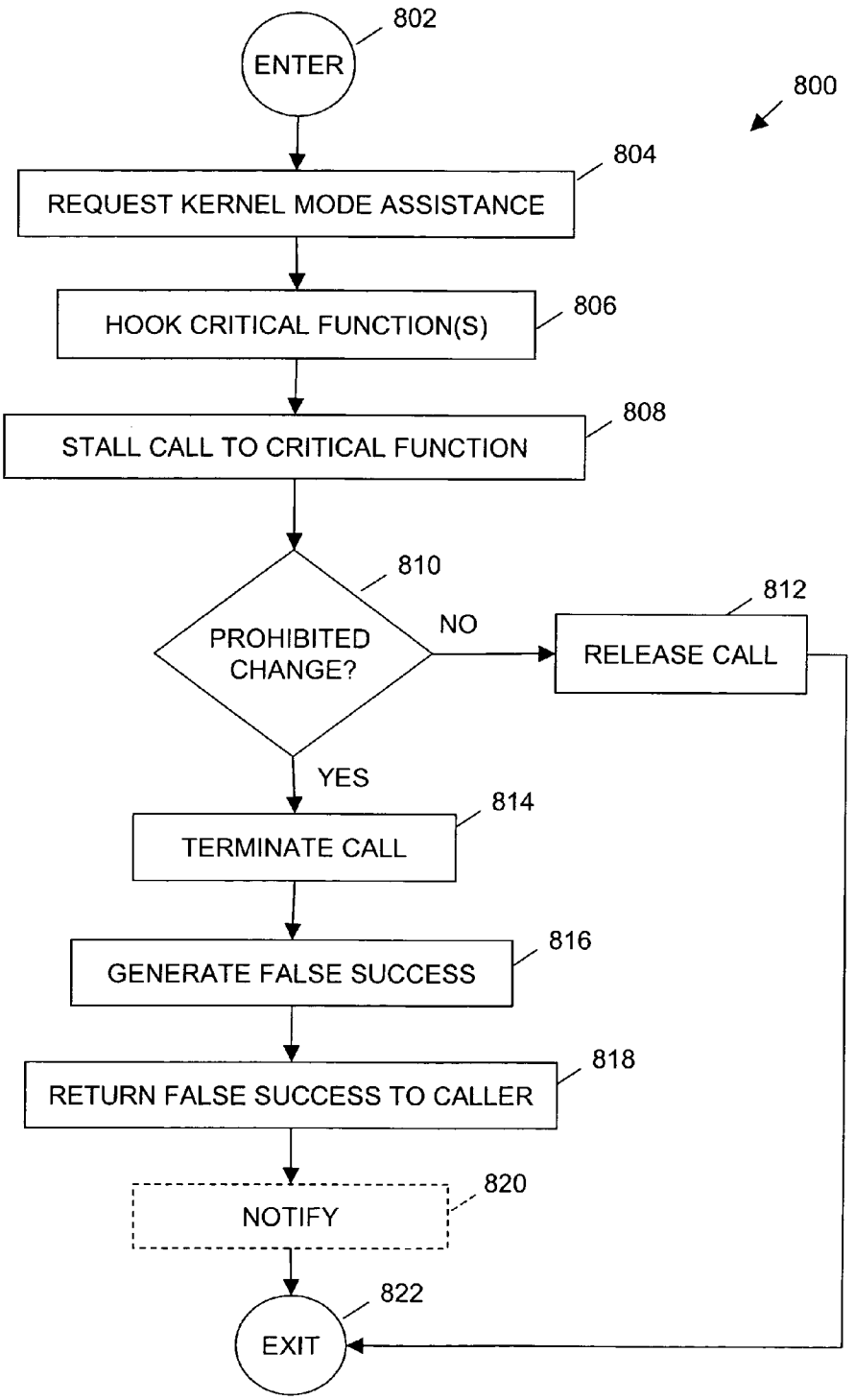
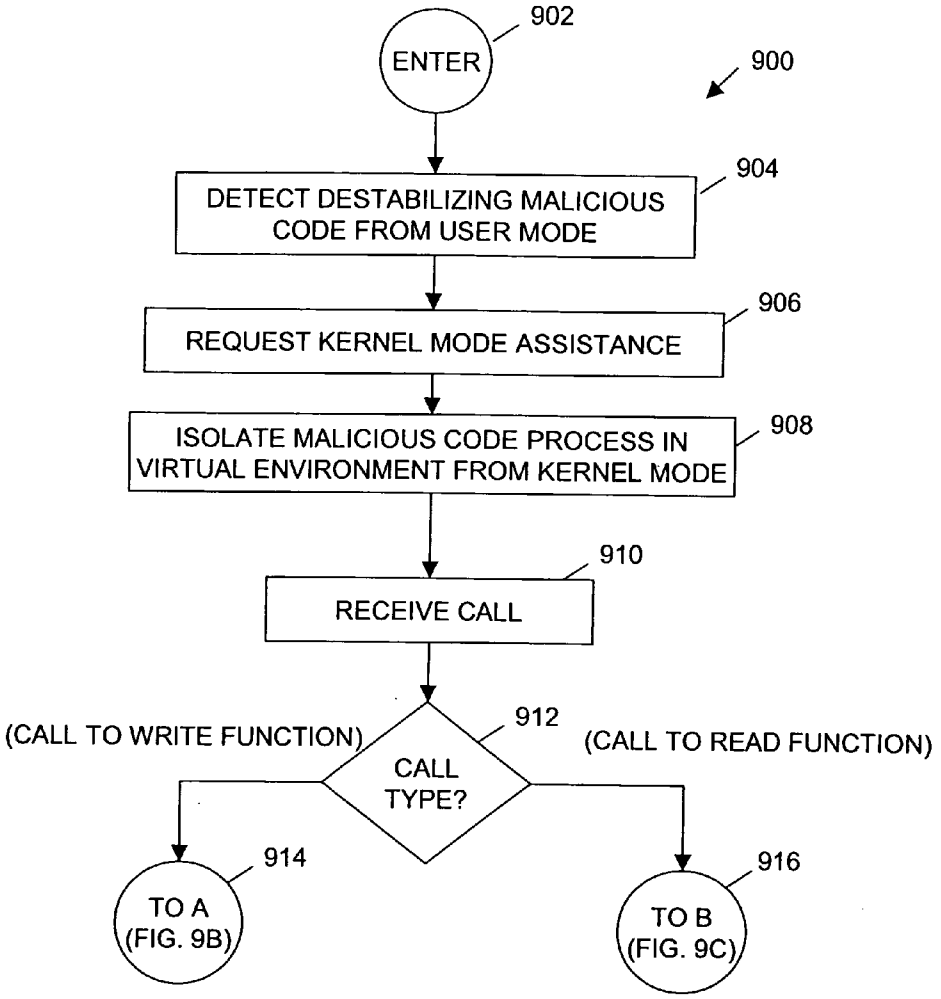
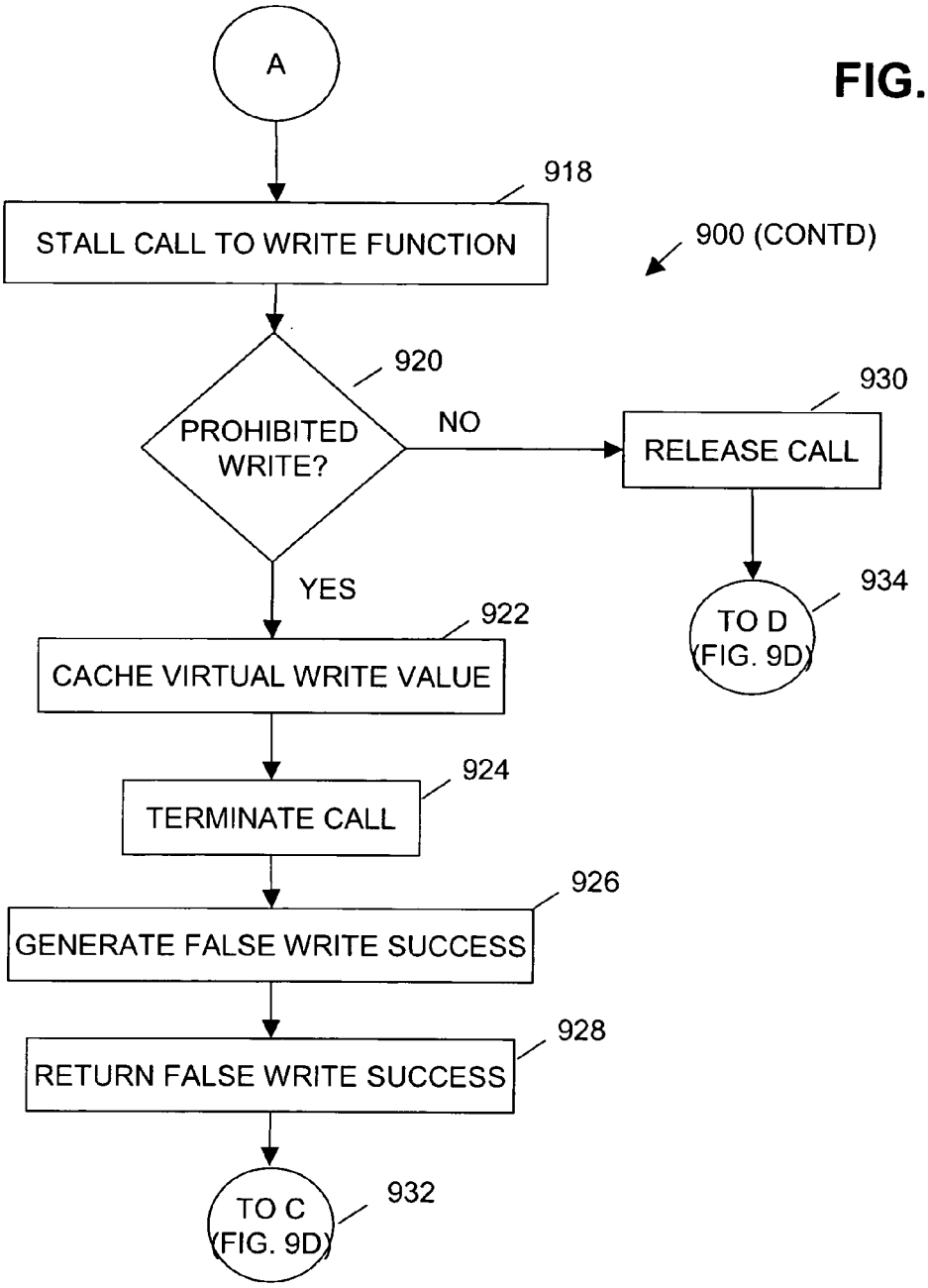

800
802
ENTER
804
REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE
806
HOOK CRITICAL FUNCTION(S)
808
STALL CALL TO CRITICAL FUNCTION
810
PROHIBITED CHANGE?
NO
812
RELEASE CALL
YES
814
TERMINATE CALL
816
GENERATE FALSE SUCCESS
818
RETURN FALSE SUCCESS TO CALLER
820
NOTIFY
822
EXIT

FIG. 9A



KEY TO FIG. 9

FIG. 9A	
FIG. 9B	FIG. 9C
FIG. 9D	


A
FIG. 9B
918
STALL CALL TO WRITE FUNCTION
900 (CONTD)
920
PROHIBITED WRITE?
NO
930
RELEASE CALL
934
TO D (FIG. 9D)
YES
922
CACHE VIRTUAL WRITE VALUE
924
TERMINATE CALL
926
GENERATE FALSE WRITE SUCCESS
928
RETURN FALSE WRITE SUCCESS
932
TO C (FIG. 9D)

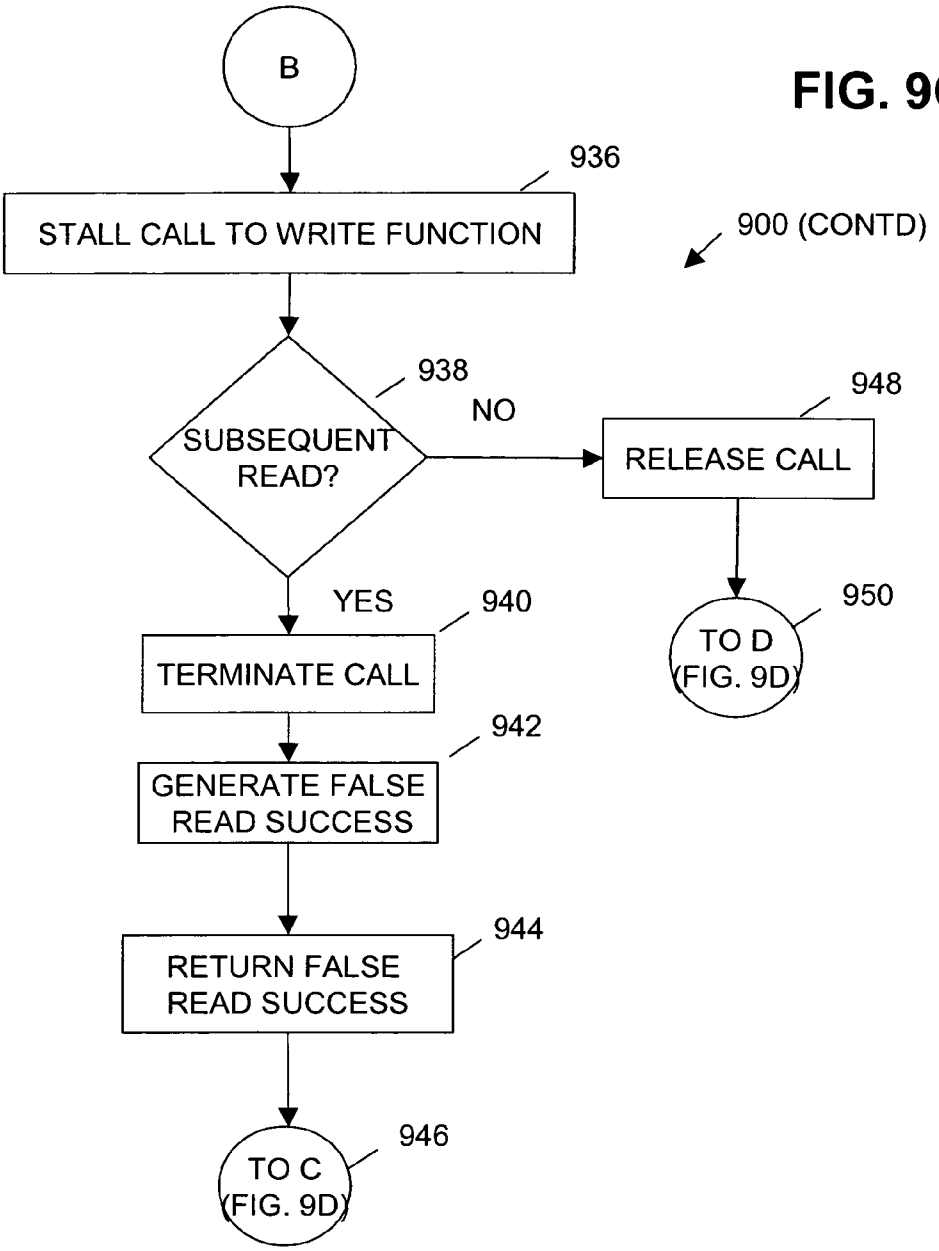
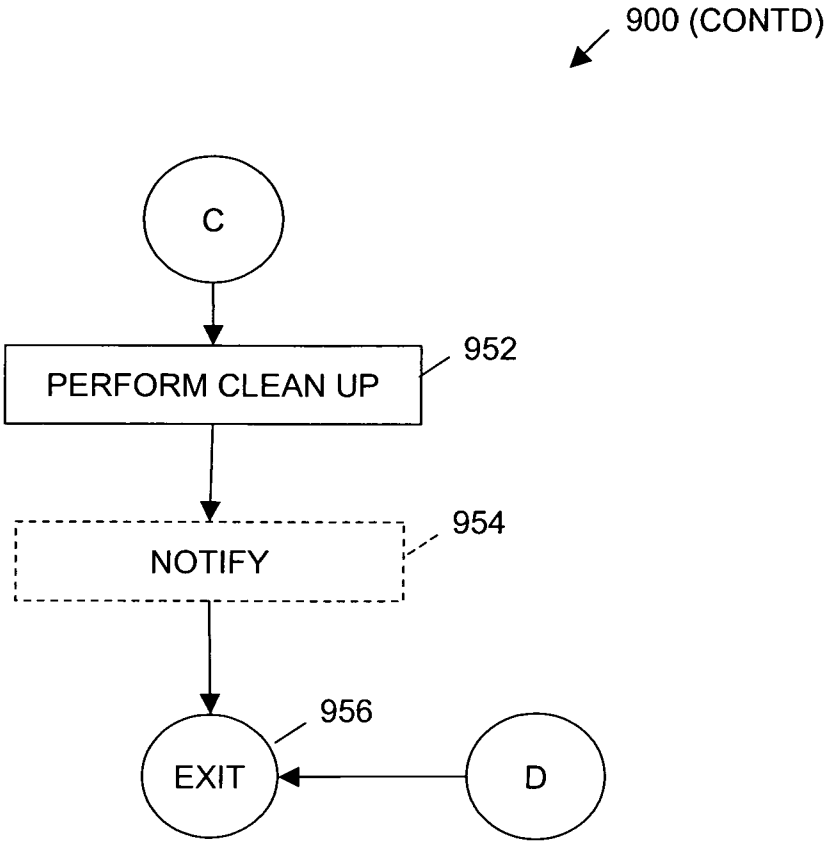

B
936
STALL CALL TO WRITE FUNCTION
900 (CONTD)
938
SUBSEQUENT READ?
NO
948
RELEASE CALL
YES
940
TERMINATE CALL
950
TO D (FIG. 9D)
942
GENERATE FALSE READ SUCCESS
944
RETURN FALSE READ SUCCESS
946
TO C (FIG. 9D)

FIG. 9C

FIG. 9D



METHOD USING KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE FOR THE DETECTION AND REMOVAL OF THREATS WHICH ARE ACTIVELY PREVENTING DETECTION AND REMOVAL FROM A RUNNING SYSTEM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to computer systems. More particularly, the present invention relates to the protection of computer systems from malicious code.

2. Description of Related Art

Increasingly various forms of malicious code, such as spyware and computer viruses, protect their presence on computer systems using a variety of stealthing and persistence techniques. These techniques actively prevent detection and removal of the malicious code from a running system.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Embodiments in accordance with the invention include a kernel mode driver that assists user mode component(s), such as a user mode computer security application, in the detection and/or removal of malicious code on a computer system.

Embodiments described herein are best understood by reference to the following detailed description when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a diagram of a client-server system that includes a malicious code detection and remediation application executing on a host computer system in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **2** is a block diagram illustrating a user mode application component and a kernel mode driver component of the malicious code detection and remediation application of FIG. **1** in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **3** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for accessing locked objects using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **4** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for restoring a system privilege using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **5** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for gaining access to processes that prevent access by attaching to each other as debuggers using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **6** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for detecting malicious code using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **7** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for preventing removal of malicious code files marked for deletion on reboot from a registry using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **8** illustrates a flow diagram of a method for preventing removal of malicious code files from a registry using kernel mode assistance in accordance with another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **9** is a key to FIGS. **9**A, **9**B, **9**C, and **9**D that illustrate a flow diagram of a method for isolating destabilizing malicious code in a virtual environment using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

Common reference numerals are used throughout the drawings and detailed description to indicate like elements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Referring now to FIG. **1**, FIG. **1** is a diagram of a client-server system **100** that includes malicious code detection and remediation application **106** executing on a host computer system **102**, e.g., a first computer system, in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Host computer system **102**, sometimes called a client or user device, typically includes a central processing unit (CPU) **108**, hereinafter processor **108**, an input/output (I/O) interface **110**, and a memory **112**. In one embodiment, memory **112** includes an operating system **104** such as a page-based virtual memory system that uses pages, e.g., memory areas.

For example, Windows 2000 and Windows NT are 32-bit operating systems widely used on home and business computer systems. Windows 2000 and Windows NT provide page-based virtual memory management schemes that permit programs to realize a 4 GB (gigabyte) virtual memory address space. In one embodiment, when processor **108** is running in virtual memory mode, all addresses are presumed virtual addresses and are translated, or mapped, to physical addresses each time processor **108** executes a new instruction to access memory.

Conventionally, the 4 GB virtual memory address space is divided into two parts: a lower 2 GB user address space, also referred to as user mode address space, or ring 3, available for use by a program; and, a high 2 GB system address space, also referred to as kernel address space, or ring 0, reserved for use by the operating system.

To protect the integrity of the operating system code, and other kernel address space code and data structures from errant or malicious programs, and to provide efficient system security (user rights management), Windows 2000 and Windows NT separate code executing in the user address space, e.g., user mode, from code executing in the kernel address space, e.g., kernel mode. User mode code typically does not have direct access to kernel mode code and has restricted access to computer system resources and hardware. To utilize kernel mode code functionalities, user mode programs utilize system calls provided in an application program interface (API), e.g., win32dll and Ntdll, which interface between the user mode and kernel mode functions.

Host computer system **102** may further include standard devices like a keyboard **116**, a mouse **118**, a printer **120**, and a display device **122**, as well as, one or more standard input/output (I/O) devices **124**, such as a compact disk (CD) or DVD drive, floppy disk drive, or other digital or waveform port for inputting data to and outputting data from host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is loaded into host computer system **102** via I/O device **124**, such as from a CD, DVD or floppy disk containing malicious code detection and remediation application **106**.

Host computer system **102** is coupled to a server system **130** of client-server system **100** by a network **126**. Server system **130** typically includes a display device **132**, a processor **134**, a memory **136**, and a network interface **138**.

Further, host computer system **102** is also coupled to a computer system **128**, such as an attacker computer system, by network **126** over which information can be sent from malicious code, such as spyware or computer viruses, installed on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, computer system **128** is similar to host computer system **102** and, for example, includes a central processing unit, an input output (I/O) interface, and a memory. Computer system **128** may further include standard devices like a keyboard, a mouse, a printer, a display device and an I/O device(s). The

various hardware components of computer system **128** are not illustrated to avoid detracting from the principals of the invention.

Network **126** can be any network or network system that is of interest to a user. In various embodiments, network interface **138** and I/O interface **110** include analog modems, digital modems, or a network interface card.

In one embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is typically stored in memory **112** of host computer system **102** and executed on host computer system **102**. The particular type and configuration of host computer system **102**, computer system **128**, and server system **130** are not essential to the present embodiment.

Herein, in one embodiment, malicious code is defined as any computer program, module, set of modules, or code that enters a computer system environment without an authorized user's knowledge and/or without an authorized user's consent. A computer virus is one example of a malicious code. Herein malicious code can exist in either user mode or kernel mode.

FIG. **2** is a block diagram illustrating a user mode application component and a kernel mode driver component of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. In one embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** includes a user mode application **106**A and a kernel mode driver **106**B. In one embodiment, when malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on a host computer system **102**, kernel mode driver **106**B is dynamically installed. In some embodiments, a separate installer program is used.

In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A includes code that detects malicious code, such as spyware and computer viruses, from user mode and when appropriate takes protective action when malicious code is detected. In the present embodiment, when user mode application **106**A is unable to perform a selected operation in attempting to detect and/or take protective action, user mode application **106**A invokes kernel mode driver **106**B assistance.

Kernel mode driver **106**B assists user mode application **106**A in detecting malicious code and/or taking protective action by enabling or otherwise performing a selected operation for user mode application **106**A, and in some embodiments performs other operations. In some embodiments, kernel mode driver **106**B returns information to user mode application **106**A, and user mode application **106**A utilizes the returned information in performing the selected operation. In some embodiments, kernel mode driver **106**B invokes kernel mode functionalities and performs the selected operation. In some embodiments, protective action is taken by user mode application **106**A, while in other embodiments protective action is taken by kernel mode driver **106**B.

Some malicious codes prevent other applications, such as user mode antivirus (AV) applications, from accessing selected objects, such as files, by overriding selected user mode and/or kernel mode API functions that allow iteration of files or subdirectories in a directory, effectively locking the affected files or subdirectories. For example, some malicious code will prevent iteration of files or subdirectories in a directory by overriding the user mode FindFirstFile( ) and FindNextFile( ) API functions, or by overriding the kernel mode ZwQueryFullAttributesFile( ) or ZwQueryDirectoryFile( ) API functions.

Thus, an AV application attempting to iterate the files or subdirectories, is prevented from enumerating the files or subdirectories, thereby preventing malicious code detection and deletion by the AV application. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B is used to obtain access to locked objects as further described herein with reference to FIG. **3** and method **300**.

FIG. **3** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **300** for accessing locked objects using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **3** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **300** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In one embodiment, method **300** is entered at an ENTER operation **302**, and from ENTER operation **302**, processing transitions to DETECT LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **304**.

In DETECT LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **304**, user mode application **106**A detects a locked object on host computer system **102**, such as a locked file. Herein in this embodiment, a locked object is an object that cannot be iterated due to a kernel mode or user mode API function, which allows iteration of files or subdirectories, being overridden by malicious code. For example, user mode application **106**A attempts to access a locked object, such as a file, on host computer system **102** and is returned a notification that the resource is locked, e.g., access is denied.

Typically a user mode application opens a file via a system call to a user mode API, such as by using CreateFile( ) in a Windows 2000/NT operating system. The system call is then typically forwarded to a native dll, such as Ntdll, which then performs associated operations to call at the operating system function associated with the CreateFile( ) call. When the file is exclusively locked, the call is failed as the access controls present on the file are checked during the typical calling process. From DETECT LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **304**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **306**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **306**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to assist in accessing the locked object. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A requests kernel mode driver **106**B obtain a handle to the locked object, thus bypassing the typically system call route through which access to the locked object is unavailable.

For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an input and output control (IOCTL) function, such as DeviceIoControl, and kernel mode driver **106**B performs the requested operation, e.g., obtain a handle to the locked object. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **306**, processing transitions to an OBTAIN HANDLE TO LOCKED OBJECT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **308**.

In OBTAIN HANDLE TO LOCKED OBJECT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **308**, kernel mode driver **106**B obtains a handle to the locked object. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B receives the request generated in operation **306** and obtains a handle to the locked object.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B calls IOCreateFileSpecifyDeviceObjectHint( ) with the parameter IO_IGNORE_SHARE_ACCESS_CHECK. This allows kernel mode driver **106**B to open a handle with which to access

the locked file. The operating system, e.g., operating system **104**, generates and returns the handle to kernel mode driver **106**B. From OBTAIN HANDLE TO LOCKED OBJECT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **308**, processing transitions to a RETURN HANDLE TO USER MODE operation **310**.

In RETURN HANDLE TO USER MODE operation **310**, the handle obtained by kernel mode driver **106**B in operation **308** is returned to user mode application **106**A. From RETURN HANDLE TO USER MODE operation **310**, processing transitions to an ACCESS LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **312**.

In ACCESS LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **312**, the locked object is accessed by user mode application **106**A using the returned handle. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A calls at the handle returned in operation **310**, and obtains access to the locked file. From ACCESS LOCKED OBJECT FROM USER MODE operation **312**, processing transitions to a MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **314**.

In MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **314**, user mode application **106**A scans, e.g., iterates through, the locked file and determines whether malicious code is detected in the locked file. User mode application **106**A uses one or more of a variety of AV techniques for detecting malicious code in the locked file, such as scanning, and signature matching.

When malicious code is not detected ("NO"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **314**, processing transitions to an EXIT operation **320**, with processing exiting method **300**, or optionally returns to operation **304** upon detection of a next locked object by user mode application **106**A.

Referring again to MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **314**, alternatively, when malicious code is detected ("YES"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **314**, processing transitions to a TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **316**.

In TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **316**, protective action is taken. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is deleted from host computer system **102**. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is automatically copied to a text file and sent to a security evaluation center. In one embodiment, the user is prompted for input prior to taking protective action, e.g., the user is asked for permission to take protective action. From TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **316**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation **318**, or directly to EXIT operation **320**, or optionally returns to operation **304** on detection of a next locked object by user mode application **106**A.

In optional NOTIFY operation **318**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code detection on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **318**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **320**, or optionally returns to operation **304** on detection of a next locked object by user mode application **106**A.

Differently, some malicious codes modify security permissions on a computer system to deny operations that could be used to detect or remove the threat. For example, a malicious code can remove the SE_DEBUG privilege from a computer system's administrator account in the registry, so that an AV application is not able to acquire the SE_DEBUG privilege, and is not able to detect and terminate the threat. As another example, some malicious code modifies the access control list on a file so that a computer administrator does not have access to the file.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B is used to restore a system privilege specified by user mode application **106**A, and/or to perform an action on behalf of user mode application **106**A as further described herein with reference to FIG. **4** and method **400**.

FIG. **4** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **400** for restoring a system privilege using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **4** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **400** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In the present embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B is loaded prior to all user mode software applications during boot up of host computer system **102**. In particular, kernel mode driver **106**B is loaded prior to user mode code in the boot process of host computer system **102** to protect privileges being removed by a threat. In one embodiment, method **400** is entered at an ENTER operation **402**, and from ENTER operation **402**, processing transitions to a DETECT UNABLE TO ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **404**.

In DETECT UNABLE TO ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **404**, user mode application **106**A detects that it cannot acquire a specific system privilege. For example, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A attempts to acquire the debug privilege of the administrator account on host computer system **102** in order to determine whether malicious code is present in a process running on host computer **102**, e.g., to scan a running process. A failure code is returned to user mode application **106**A, for example due to removal of the debug privilege from the administrator account by malicious code.

Herein although the examples used herein in discussion of the present embodiment refer to restoration of the debug privilege, those of skill in the art can recognize that the present embodiment is also applicable to restoration of other system privileges, such as restoration of an access control list entry. From DETECT UNABLE TO ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **404**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **406**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **406**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to assist in restoring the system privilege. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A requests kernel mode driver **106**B restore the system privilege, e.g., the debug privilege, to the administrator account so that user mode application **106**A can utilize the system privilege of the administrator account.

For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an IOCTL function, such as DeviceIoControl, and

kernel mode driver **106**B performs the requested operation, e.g., restores the system privilege. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **406**, processing transitions to a RESTORE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM KERNEL MODE operation **408**.

In RESTORE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM KERNEL MODE operation **408**, one or more system privileges are restored from kernel mode. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B receives the request to restore the one or more required system privileges and restores the one or more required system privileges.

For example, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B restores the debug privilege to the administrator account. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B locates the system privileges in the key descriptor table of the registry and resets the privilege flag to allow user mode application **106**A to use the debug privilege of the administrator account.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B returns a success code to user mode application **106**A notifying user mode application **106**A that the system privilege was restored. In instances where kernel mode driver **106**B cannot restore the system privilege, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B returns a failure code to user mode application **106**A notifying user mode application **106**A that the system privilege was not restored. From RESTORE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM KERNEL MODE operation **408**, processing transitions to an ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **410**.

In ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **410**, user mode application **106**A acquires the system privilege and accesses the object. For example, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A receives a success code returned from kernel mode driver **106**B indicated that system privilege, e.g., the debug privilege, is restored. User mode application **106**A then acquires the system privilege, e.g., the debug privilege, by initiating access to the object.

In instances where a failure code is returned to user mode application **106**A, processing transitions to an EXIT operation **418** with processing exiting method **400**. In some embodiments, an optional notification is provided to the user indicating that a system privilege cannot be acquired and/or an object is inaccessible. From ACQUIRE SYSTEM PRIVILEGE FROM USER MODE operation **410**, processing transitions to a MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **412**.

In MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **412**, user mode application **106**A scans, e.g., iterates through, an object, such as a running process, accessed using the restored privilege, for example, the debug privilege, and determines whether malicious code is detected in the object. User mode application **106**A uses one or more of a variety of AV techniques for detecting malicious code in the object, such as scanning and signature matching.

When malicious code is not detected ("NO"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **412**, processing transitions to an EXIT operation **418**, with processing exiting method **400**, or optionally returns to operation **404** on detection that a system privilege cannot be acquired by user mode application **106**A.

Referring again to MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **412**, alternatively, when malicious code is detected ("YES"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **412**, processing transitions to a TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **414**.

In TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **414**, protective action is taken. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is deleted from host computer system **102**. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is automatically copied to a text file and sent to a security evaluation center. In one embodiment, the user is prompted for input prior to taking protective action, e.g., the user is asked for permission to take protective action. From TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **414**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation **416**, or directly to EXIT operation **418**, or optionally returns to operation **404** on a detection that a privilege cannot be acquired by user mode application **106**A.

In optional NOTIFY operation **416**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code detection on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **416**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **418**, or optionally returns to operation **404** on detection that a privilege cannot be acquired by user mode application **106**A.

Differently from modifying or removing system privileges, such as the debug privilege, to prevent detection and removal, some malicious codes utilize techniques to prevent their processes from being terminated. For example, some malicious codes create two processes that attach to each other as debuggers. As only one debugger can be attached a process at a time, the two processes prevent any other process from attaching to them. Another process, such as an AV application, cannot attach to either of the processes, thus the AV application is prevented from terminating malicious code in either of the processes from user mode.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B is used to terminate the first and/or second processes that are attached to each other as debuggers as further described herein with reference to FIG. **5** and method **500**.

FIG. **5** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **500** for terminating processes that are attached to each other as debuggers using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **5** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **500** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In one embodiment, method **500** is entered at an ENTER operation **502**, and from ENTER operation **502**, processing transitions to a DETECT UNABLE TO TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **504**.

In DETECT UNABLE TO TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **504**, user mode application **106**A detects that it cannot terminate a running process from user mode. For example, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A detects malicious code in a running process, e.g., a first process, on host computer system **102** and attempts to terminate the running process, e.g., the first process.

A failure code is returned to user mode application **106**A, for example, because another malicious code process, e.g., a second process, is attached to the first process as a debugger. From DETECT UNABLE TO TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **504**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **506**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **506**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to assist in terminating the process to which termination was denied, i.e., the first process. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A requests kernel mode driver **106**B terminate the second process and break the dual debugger attachment to the first process.

For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an input and output control (IOCTL) function, such as DeviceIoControl. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **506**, processing transitions to a TERMINATE DEBUG PROCESS FROM KERNEL MODE operation **508**.

In TERMINATE DEBUG PROCESS FROM KERNEL MODE operation **508**, kernel mode driver **106**B terminates the debugging process attachment of the second process to the first process allowing termination of the other process, i.e., the first process. In one embodiment kernel mode driver **106**B performs the operation defined by the IOCTL function, e.g., terminates the debugging process. When the debugging process to the first process is terminated, user mode application **106**A can terminate the first process, as the first process and the second process are no longer dually attached to each other as debuggers. From TERMINATE DEBUG PROCESS FROM KERNEL MODE operation **508**, processing transitions to a TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **510**.

In TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **510**, user mode application **106**A terminates the process of which termination was earlier denied, e.g., terminates the first process. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B communicates the termination of the second process to user mode application **106**A and/or instructs user mode application **106**A to terminate the first process. User mode application **106**A terminates the first process. From TERMINATE PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **510**, processing transitions to a an optional NOTIFY operation **512**, or directly to an EXIT operation **514** with processing exiting method **500**, or optionally returns to operation **504** on detection of a next process inaccessible by user mode application **106**A.

In optional NOTIFY operation **512**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code termination on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **512**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **514**, or optionally returns to operation **504** on detection of a next process that cannot be terminated by user mode application **106**A.

As earlier described, typically user mode applications cannot directly access operating system functions in the kernel. Rather, user mode applications access operating system functions through a user mode application program interface (API), such as win32dll or Ntdll. The user mode application calls a specified user mode system call which implements associated code. The associated code typically calls a native API function that accesses an associated operating system function from kernel mode.

Some malicious codes hook user mode APIs and subsequently mask the presence of the malicious code. For example, some malicious codes hook the PS (process status) API that is used to iterate all running processes on a computer system, such as the EnumProcesses( ) APIs. The malicious code modifies information returned as a result of a call through the hooked PS API so that processes listed in the information returned through the PS API and associated with the malicious code are removed or otherwise hidden on return to the caller.

User mode AV applications that utilize standard API calls that have been hooked by malicious code as described above are returned false information. In this way a malicious code hides its presence from file system searches, and in particular from file system searches performed by user mode AV applications.

In one embodiment, rather than user mode application **106**A accessing operating system functions through standard user mode APIs, which can be hooked by malicious code, user mode application **106**A accesses operating system functions through kernel mode driver **106**B and bypasses standard user mode APIs as further described herein with reference to FIG. **6** and method **600**.

FIG. **6** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **600** for detecting malicious code using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **6** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **600** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In one embodiment, method **600** is entered at an ENTER operation **602**, and from ENTER operation **602**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **604**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **604**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to return a list of all running processes on host computer system **102** and/or all dlls loaded into each running process. For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an input and output control (IOCTL) function, such as DeviceIoControl. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **604**, processing transitions to an OBTAIN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES FROM KERNEL MODE operation **606**.

In OBTAIN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES FROM KERNEL MODE operation **606**, kernel mode driver **106**B receives the request from user mode application **106**A and a

list of running processes and/or dlls loaded into each running process is obtained by kernel mode driver **106**B. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B receives the request to obtain a list of running processes and/or all dlls loaded into each running process, and obtains the list of running processes and/or dlls loaded into each running process on host computer system **102**.

For example, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B calls a kernel mode native API function, such as ZwQuerySystemInformation( ). The call to ZwQuerySystemInformation( ) is communicated to the associated operating system function that obtains the list of all running processes on host computer system **102** and returns the list to kernel mode driver **106**B. From OBTAIN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES FROM KERNEL MODE operation **606**, processing transitions to a RETURN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES TO USER MODE operation **608**.

In RETURN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES TO USER MODE operation **608**, kernel mode driver **106**B returns the list of running processes and/or dlls loaded into each running process obtained in operation **606** to user mode application **106**A. From RETURN LIST OF RUNNING PROCESSES TO USER MODE operation **608**, processing transitions to a MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **610**.

In MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **610**, user mode application **106**A evaluates the list of running processes and/or dlls loaded into each running process returned in operation **608** and determines whether malicious code is detected on host computer system **102**. User mode application **106**A uses one or more of a variety of AV techniques for detecting malicious code in the list, such as scanning identified processes and signature matching. In this way user mode application **106**A performs the evaluation on information returned from kernel mode driver **106**B and circumvents the use of user mode APIs and the attendant risk of false information provided by malicious code that has hooked the user mode APIs.

When malicious code is not detected ("NO"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **610**, processing transitions to an EXIT operation **616**, with processing exiting method **600**, or optionally returns to operation **604**.

Referring again to MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **610**, alternatively, when malicious code is detected ("YES"), from MALICIOUS CODE DETECTED check operation **610**, processing transitions to a TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **612**.

In TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **612** protective action is taken. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is deleted from host computer system **102**. In some embodiments, the malicious code file is automatically copied to a text file and sent to a security evaluation center. In one embodiment, the user is prompted for input prior to taking protective action, e.g., the user is asked for permission to take protective action. From TAKE PROTECTIVE ACTION operation **612**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation **614**, or directly to EXIT operation **616**, or optionally returns to operation **604**.

In optional NOTIFY operation **614**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code detection on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **614**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **616**, or optionally returns to operation **604**.

Differently, some malicious codes attempt to entrench themselves in a computer system and prevent themselves from being removed by attaching to a critical process. For example, some malicious codes inject themselves into critical operating system processes and cannot be deleted while the critical operating system process is running as terminating the critical operating system process will destabilize the computer system. Thus the malicious code effectively prevents itself from being deleted while the process is running.

As a user mode AV application that detects the malicious code cannot terminate the critical process without destabilizing the computer system, some AV applications wait to delete the malicious code files from the computer system on reboot of the computer system. For example, in Windows NT/2000 an AV application can use the MoveFileEx( ) with the MOVEFILE_DELAY_UNTIL_REBOOT flag (and destination value set to null) to delete files and directories currently being used. The next time the system is rebooted, the boot operation deletes the specified files and directories. Typically the operating system stores the location of the specified files in the registry, for example, in the HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Control\Session Manager\PendingFileRenameOperations registry key.

However, some malicious code monitor the registry and/or the invocation of commands that mark them for deletion and can remove themselves from the registry when they are listed for deletion on reboot. Thus, although detected and listed for deletion by an AV application, some malicious codes actively prevent their deletion.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B monitors the registry on the host computer system and prevents changes to the registry that prevent a listed file from being deleted on reboot as further described herein with reference to FIG. **7** and method **700**.

FIG. **7** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **700** for preventing removal of malicious code files marked for deletion on reboot from a registry using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **7** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **700** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In one embodiment, method **700** is entered at an ENTER operation **702**, and from ENTER operation **702**, processing transitions to a DETECT MALICIOUS CODE IN PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **704**.

In DETECT MALICIOUS CODE IN PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **704**, user mode application **106**A detects malicious code in a running process. For example, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A detects malicious code in a process running on host computer system **102**, such as by scanning the process. From DETECT MALICIOUS CODE IN PROCESS FROM USER MODE operation **704**, processing transitions to a DETERMINE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE operation **706**.

In DETERMINE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE operation **706**, user mode application **106**A determines an identifier of the detected malicious code. For example, in one embodiment, the identifier is the file name and/or address of the running process. In one embodiment, the identifier includes information that operating system **104** utilizes to locate and delete the malicious code file(s) from host computer system **102**. From DETERMINE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE operation **706**, processing transitions to a STORE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE TO DELETION DATABASE operation **708**.

In STORE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE TO DELETION DATABASE operation **708**, the identifier of the malicious code file identified in operation **706** is stored off, such as to a file or other data storage structure in memory. In one embodiment, the identifier of the malicious code file is stored in a deletion database maintained by malicious code detection and remediation application **106**. In this way, the deletion database maintains a listing of malicious code files for deletion on reboot separate from the registry. From STORE IDENTIFIER OF MALICIOUS CODE FILE TO DELETION DATABASE operation **708**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **710**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **710**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to prevent the malicious code from removing its files from the registry, and in particular from the portion of the registry key listing the malicious code file for deletion on reboot. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A requests that kernel mode driver **106**B start up early in the next boot operation of host computer system **102** and delete the malicious code file(s) identified in the deletion database from host computer system **102**.

In this way, even if malicious code has removed itself from the portion of the registry that identifies files to be deleted on reboot, kernel mode driver **106**B, starts up before any user applications in the boot process and removes the malicious code files from host computer system **102** based upon the listing in the deletion database. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **710**, processing transitions to a START UP KERNEL MODE DRIVER EARLY IN BOOT OF COMPUTER SYSTEM operation **712**.

In START UP KERNEL MODE DRIVER EARLY IN BOOT OF COMPUTER SYSTEM operation **712**, kernel mode driver **106**B starts up early in the boot operation of host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B receives the request from user mode application **106**A generated in operation **710** and initiates operations to ensure it is loaded early in the next boot of host computer system **102** and prior to user applications.

A wide variety of techniques can be used to set kernel mode driver **106**B for early start up in the next boot of host computer system **102**. For example, kernel mode driver **106**B adjusts registry settings and/or lists itself in the registry for early run or prefetch. Early start up of a driver in a boot operation of a host computer system is well known to those of skill in the art and is not further described herein to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From START UP KERNEL MODE DRIVER EARLY IN BOOT OF COMPUTER SYSTEM operation **712**, processing transitions to a DELETE MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) IDENTIFIED IN DELETION DATABASE operation **714**.

In DELETE MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) IDENTIFIED IN DELETION DATABASE operation **714**, kernel mode driver **106**B deletes the files identified in the deletion database from host computer system **102**B. For example, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B generates a call to ZwDeleteFile( ) identifying the malicious code file(s) to be deleted using the malicious code identifier as a parameter of the call.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B iterates through the deletion database deleting the identified malicious code files until all the identified malicious code files are deleted from host computer system **102**. From DELETE MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) IDENTIFIED IN DELETION DATABASE operation **714**, processing transitions to a CLEAR DELETION DATABASE OF DELETED MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) operation **716**.

In CLEAR DELETION DATABASE OF DELETED MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) operation **716**, each identifier of a malicious code file that was successfully deleted from host computer system **102** in operation **714** is removed from the deletion database. For example, in one embodiment, each malicious code file is iteratively removed from the deletion database as it is deleted from host computer system **102**. In another example, all malicious code files are removed from the deletion database upon deletion of all the listed malicious code files from host computer system **102**. From CLEAR DELETION DATABASE OF DELETED MALICIOUS CODE FILE(S) operation **716**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation **718** or directly to an EXIT operation **720**, if operation **718** is not performed, with processing exiting method **700**, or optionally returns to operation **704** upon detection of a next malicious code.

In optional NOTIFY operation **718**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code detection and/or deletion on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **718**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **720**, or optionally returns to operation **704** on detection of a next malicious code.

In an alternative embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B prevents modifications to the registry that prevent a malicious code file from being deleted from host computer system **102** and further returns a false success to the calling process to pacify the initiating malicious code and circumvent possible retaliatory actions as further described herein with reference to FIG. **8** and method **800**.

FIG. **8** illustrates a flow diagram of a method **800** for preventing removal of malicious code files from a registry using kernel mode assistance in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **8** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **800** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. In one embodiment, method **800** is entered at an ENTER operation **802**, and from ENTER

operation **802**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **804**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **804**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to prevent prohibited changes to critical structures such as the registry, selected files, selected processes, and/or synchronization objects. For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an input and output control (IOCTL) function, such as DeviceIoControl. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **804**, processing transitions to a HOOK CRITICAL FUNCTION(S) operation **806**.

In HOOK CRITICAL FUNCTION(S) operation **806**, kernel mode driver **106**B hooks one or more critical functions on host computer system **102**. Herein, in one embodiment, a critical function is an operating system function that modifies a registry, file, process, or synchronization object on a host computer system, e.g., host computer system **102**.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B hooks one or more critical functions in a dll or system call table such that calls to the one or more critical functions are redirected to kernel mode driver **106**B. Examples of critical functions include those operating system functions callable using RegOpenKey( ) RegOpenKeyEx( ), RegCloseKey( ), and RegSetValue( ).

Other examples of critical functions include those operating system functions callable using NtDeleteKey( ), NtDeleteValueKey( ), NtEnumerateKey( ), NtEnumerateValueKey( ), NtOpenKey( ), NtQueryKey( ), NtQueryValueKey( ), NtSetValueKey( ), NtSaveKey( ), ZwDeleteValueKey( ), ZwEnumerateKey( ), ZwEnumerateValueKey( ), ZwOpenKey( ), ZwQueryKey( ), ZwQueryValueKey( ), ZwSetValueKey( ), ZwSaveKey( ), and ZwRestoreKey( ). Hooking of critical functions can be performed utilizing a variety of hooking techniques.

For example, in one embodiment, a service descriptor table entry associated with the RegOpenKey( ) in a service descriptor table, e.g., the win32dll service descriptor table, is modified so that a call to the associated operating system function, e.g., the RegOpenKey( ) function, is redirected to alternate code, such as a hook module of kernel mode driver **106**B. In one embodiment, a function pointer in the service descriptor table entry is modified to point to the hook module rather than the RegOpenKey( ) function.

In an alternate embodiment, a separate hooking component, such as the SymEvent driver (available from Symantec Corporation, California) intercepts calls to critical functions on host computer system **102** and forwards the intercepted calls to kernel mode application **106**B. From HOOK CRITICAL FUNCTION(S) operation **806**, processing transitions to a STALL CALL TO CRITICAL FUNCTION operation **808**.

In STALL CALL TO CRITICAL FUNCTION operation **808**, a call to a critical function is received by kernel mode driver **106**B and stalled. More particularly, a call to a critical function is redirected to a hook module of kernel mode driver **106**B, the call is stalled at kernel mode driver **106**B allowing kernel mode driver **106**B to further evaluate the call for a prohibited change to a critical structure.

For example, kernel mode driver **106**B receives a call to a critical function that modifies a registry on host computer system **102**, herein termed a critical registry function. The present embodiment is described with reference to a critical registry function that is an operating system function that modifies a registry on host computer system **102**, however, those of skill in the art can understand that the present example is not limiting upon the invention and that the present embodiment is applicable to the other critical functions described above, i.e., those critical functions that modify a file, process, or synchronization object on a host computer system. From STALL CALL TO CRITICAL FUNCTION operation **808**, processing transitions to a PROHIBITED CHANGE check operation **810**.

In PROHIBITED CHANGE check operation **810**, kernel mode driver **106**B determines whether the call to the critical function includes a prohibited change. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B determines whether the call to the critical function identifies one or more parameters indicative of a prohibited registry change.

In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B examines the contents of the call to the critical function and evaluates the contents in accordance with a prohibited change heuristic. In one embodiment, the prohibited change heuristic prohibits calls to critical functions that modify a critical structure, e.g., a registry, a file, a process, or a synchronization object, in a prohibited way, such as in a way that prevents removal of a malicious code from the critical structure.

For example, kernel mode driver **106**B examines the contents of the call to the critical registry function and evaluates the contents in accordance with a prohibited change heuristic that identifies a prohibited registry change, such as a change that modifies a selected registry key so that a malicious code file is removed from a listing of files for deletion on reboot and/or a setting associated with the malicious code file in the registry is changed so that the malicious code file is not subject to deletion from host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, the prohibited change heuristic is maintained in kernel mode.

In another example, the function name and/or parameters associated with the call to a critical function are compared to a database of prohibited functions and/or prohibited function parameters, herein termed a prohibited change database. When a function name and/or parameter of the call matches a prohibited function name and/or prohibited parameter in the prohibited change database, the call is determined to be a prohibited change, otherwise it is determined not to be a prohibited change. In one embodiment, the prohibited change database is maintained in kernel mode.

When a prohibited registry change is not detected ("NO"), from PROHIBITED CHANGE check operation **810**, processing transitions to a RELEASE CALL operation **812**.

In RELEASE CALL operation **812**, the call to the critical function stalled in operation **806** is released and allowed to complete. In particular, in the present example, when the stalled call does not indicate a prohibited registry change, the call is allowed to complete. From RELEASE CALL operation **812**, processing transitions to an EXIT operation **822**, with processing exiting method **800**, or optionally returning to operation **808** upon receipt of a next call to a critical function.

Referring again to PROHIBITED CHANGE check operation **810**, alternatively, when a prohibited is detected ("YES"), the call to the critical function is not allowed to complete as further described herein. In the present example, when the stalled call to the critical registry function indicates a prohibited change, the call is not allowed to complete. From PROHIBITED CHANGE check operation **810**, processing transitions to a TERMINATE CALL operation **814**.

In TERMINATE CALL operation **814**, the stalled call to the critical function is terminated and not allowed to complete. In the present example, the stalled call to the critical

registry function is terminated and not allowed to proceed to the critical registry function. In this way the critical structure is not modified in a prohibited manner. In the present example, the registry is not modified to remove the malicious code from deletion from host computer system **102**. From TERMINATE CALL operation **814**, processing transitions to a GENERATE FALSE SUCCESS operation **816**.

In GENERATE FALSE SUCCESS operation **816**, kernel mode driver **106**B generates a return response that falsely indicates the action in the terminated call to the critical function was successful, herein termed a false success. In some embodiments, kernel mode driver **106**B generates return parameters or other data that falsely indicate that the terminated call to the critical function was successful. From GENERATE FALSE SUCCESS operation **816**, processing transitions to a RETURN FALSE SUCCESS TO CALLER operation **818**.

In RETURN FALSE SUCCESS TO CALLER operation **818**, the false success generated in operation **816** is returned to the caller, i.e., the calling process. In this way the calling code, e.g., the malicious code, is not informed that the call to the critical function was unsuccessful, e.g., was terminated. This mitigates retaliatory actions from being implemented by the malicious code in response to termination of the call. From RETURN FALSE SUCCESS TO CALLER operation **818**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation **820**.

In optional NOTIFY operation **820**, the user of host computer system **102** (FIG. **1**), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network **126**, are notified of a malicious code detection on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation **820**, processing transitions to EXIT operation **822**, or optionally returns to operation **808** on receipt of a next call to a critical function.

In an alternate embodiment, the above method is also applicable to preventing prohibited changes to files, processes, and synchronization objects.

Differently, some malicious code destabilize the operating system when they detect removal or attempted removal, such as by deliberate crashing of the operating system or destabilization by system resource exhaustion. For example some malicious code will crash the EXPLORER.EXE or WINLOGON.EXE processes when the malicious code detects its configuration information is deleted from the registry or a configuration file, causing the machine to reboot. As another example, some malicious codes continuously re-install themselves in the "run" key when they detect removal causing high CPU utilization.

In one embodiment, when a destabilizing malicious code is detected, user mode application **106**A requests kernel mode driver **106**B isolate the destabilizing malicious code in a virtual environment allowing protective actions to be taken to remove and/or otherwise remediate the destabilizing malicious code as further described herein with reference to FIG. **9** and method **900**.

FIG. **9** is a key to FIGS. **9**A, **9**B, **9**C, and **9**D that illustrate a flow diagram of a method **900** for isolating destabilizing malicious code in a virtual environment using kernel mode assistance in accordance with one embodiment of the invention. Referring now to FIGS. **1**, **2**, and **9** together, in one embodiment, execution of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** by processor **108** results in the operations of method **900** as described below.

In the present embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is installed on host computer system **102** and includes user mode application **106**A that operates from user mode and kernel mode driver **106**B that operates from kernel mode. Referring to FIG. **9**A, in one embodiment, method **900** is entered at an ENTER operation **902**, and from ENTER operation **902**, processing transitions to a DETECT DESTABILIZING MALICIOUS CODE FROM USER MODE operation **904**.

In DETECT DESTABILIZING MALICIOUS CODE FROM USER MODE operation **904**, user mode application **106**A detects destabilizing malicious code on host computer system **102**. For example, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A detects destabilizing malicious code on host computer system **102**, for example, by scanning processes and files on host computer system **102**. From DETECT DESTABILIZING MALICIOUS CODE FROM USER MODE operation **904**, processing transitions to a REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **906**.

In REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **906**, in one embodiment, user mode application **106**A generates and sends a request to kernel mode driver **106**B to assist in subduing the malicious code and preventing it from destabilizing host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A requests kernel mode driver **106**B isolate the malicious code in a virtual environment and prevent prohibited changes to file(s) and or the registry by the malicious code.

For example, in one embodiment user mode application **106**A communicates the request to kernel mode driver **106**B utilizing an input and output control (IOCTL) function, such as DeviceIoControl. IOCTL functions are well known to those of skill in the art and are not further described to avoid detracting from the principles of the invention. From REQUEST KERNEL MODE ASSISTANCE operation **906**, processing transitions to an ISOLATE MALICIOUS CODE PROCESS IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **908**.

In ISOLATE MALICIOUS CODE PROCESS IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **908**, kernel mode driver **106**B isolates the malicious code process detected in operation **904** in a virtual environment, commonly termed sandboxing. Any of a variety of techniques can be used by kernel mode driver **106**B to isolate the malicious code process.

For example, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B hooks one or more critical functions on host computer system **102**. Herein in one embodiment a critical function is an operating system function that modifies a file or the registry on a host computer system, e.g., host computer system **102**, and can allow a malicious code to destabilize the host computer system, e.g., host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a critical function is an operating system function that writes a value to a file or the registry on host computer system **102**, herein termed a write function for purposes of this embodiment, or reads a value from a file or the registry on host computer system **102**, herein termed a read function for purposes of this embodiment.

In one embodiment, user mode application **106**A hooks one or more critical functions in a system call table, such as win32.dll or ntdll.dll. Examples of critical functions hooked in ntdll.dll include those operating system functions callable

using NtWriteValue( ), and NtReadValue( ). Hooking of functions in a system call table such as ntdll.dll is well known in the art and can be performed utilizing a variety of hooking techniques.

For example, in one embodiment, a service descriptor table entry associated with the NtWriteValue( ) in a service descriptor table, e.g., the ntdll.dll service descriptor table, is modified so that a call to the associated operating system function, e.g., the NTWriteValue( ) function, is redirected to alternate code, such as a hook module of malicious code detection and remediation application **106**. In one embodiment, a function pointer in the service descriptor table entry is modified to point to the hook module rather than the associated operating system function. In one embodiment the hook module is present from kernel mode driver **106**B. From ISOLATE MALICIOUS CODE PROCESS IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT FROM KERNEL MODE operation **908**, processing transitions to a RECEIVE CALL operation **910**.

In RECEIVE CALL operation **910**, a call to a hooked critical function is received by kernel mode driver **106**B. Herein for purposes of example, a call to a hooked critical function is either a call to a write function or a call to a read function as earlier described with reference to critical functions. From RECEIVE CALL operation **910**, processing transitions to a CALL TYPE check operation **912**.

In CALL TYPE check operation **912**, a determination is made whether the call received in operation **910** is a call to a write function or a call to a read function. In the present embodiment, CALL TYPE check operation **912** is included to provide a clearer description of the present invention. It can be understood by those of skill in the art that the functions of operation **912** can be variously implemented, such as by an event handler or other process for routing calls received by kernel mode driver **106**B. When the call is a call to a write function, processing transitions from CALL TYPE check operation **912**, at operation **914**, to a STALL CALL TO WRITE FUNCTION operation **918** (FIG. **9**B).

Referring now to FIG. **9**B, in STALL CALL TO WRITE FUNCTION operation **918**, the call to the write function intercepted in the sandboxing of the destabilizing malicious code process is stalled to allow further evaluation as described herein. In one embodiment, the call to the write function is stalled at kernel mode driver **106**B. From STALL CALL TO WRITE FUNCTION operation **918**, processing transitions to a PROHIBITED WRITE check operation **920**.

In PROHIBITED WRITE check operation **920**, kernel mode driver **106**B determines whether the stalled call to the write function is a prohibited write. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B determines whether the call to the write function identifies one or more parameters indicative of a prohibited write to a file or registry on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a prohibited write is an operation that modifies a file, registry, process, or synchronization object on host computer system **102**. In one embodiment, a prohibited write is an operation that modifies a file, registry process, or synchronization object on host computer system **102** in a prohibited manner.

For example, in one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B examines the contents of the call to the critical function and evaluates the contents in accordance with a prohibited write heuristic that identifies prohibited writes. For example, the prohibited write heuristic prohibits writes to the registry of host computer system **102** that could destabilize host computer system **102**.

In another example, the function name and/or parameters associated with the call to the critical function are compared to a list of prohibited write functions and/or write functions parameters. When a function name and/or parameter of the call matches a prohibited write function name and/or prohibited write function parameter, the call is determined to be a prohibited write, otherwise it is determined not to be a prohibited write.

When a prohibited write operation is not detected ("NO"), from PROHIBITED WRITE check operation **920**, processing transitions to a RELEASE CALL operation **930**.

In RELEASE CALL operation **930**, the stalled call to the write function is released. More particularly, the call to the write function stalled in operation **918** is released and allowed to proceed to the called function. From RELEASE CALL operation **930**, processing transitions, at operation **934**, to an EXIT operation **956** (FIG. **9**D) with processing exiting method **900**, or optionally returns to operation **910** on receipt of a next call to a critical function earlier described.

Referring again to PROHIBITED WRITE check operation **920** (FIG. **9**B), alternatively, when a prohibited write operation is detected ("YES"), from PROHIBITED WRITE check operation **920**, processing transitions to a CACHE VIRTUAL WRITE VALUE operation **922**.

In CACHE VIRTUAL WRITE VALUE operation **922**, the virtual address value at which the information would be stored in the target file or registry is determined and cached in a memory location, for example in a sandbox database, in some embodiments the information to be written to the target file or registry, or a pointer to that information, is also stored in the sandbox database. From CACHE VIRTUAL WRITE VALUE operation **922**, processing transitions to a TERMINATE CALL operation **924**.

In TERMINATE CALL operation **924**, the call including the prohibited write is terminated and not allowed to proceed and write to the target file or registry. In this way host computer system **102** is not modified by the destabilizing malicious code. From TERMINATE CALL operation **924**, processing transitions to a GENERATE FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **926**.

In GENERATE FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **926**, a false success is generated for return to the calling malicious code. In one embodiment, the false success identifies a false virtual address where the write is ostensibly stored. Thus although the prohibited write does not occur, a false write success is generated to make it appear that the prohibited write occurred. From GENERATE FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **926**, processing transitions to a RETURN FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **928**.

In RETURN FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **928**, the false write success generated in operation **926** is returned to the calling malicious code. In this way the calling malicious code receives an expected return of a successful write and is not alerted that the call including the prohibited write was not successful. In this way, retaliatory destabilizing actions are circumvented. From RETURN FALSE WRITE SUCCESS operation **928**, processing transitions, at operation **932**, to a PERFORM CLEAN UP operation **952** (FIG. **9**D).

Referring to FIG. **9**D, in PERFORM CLEAN UP operation **952**, kernel mode driver **106**B implements clean up operations as needed. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B deletes files and or registry keys associated with the malicious code or the sandboxing of the malicious code. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver **106**B initiates actions to remove the malicious code from host computer system **102**. In some embodiments, clean up is performed by user mode application **106**A, or both by user mode application **106**A and kernel mode driver **106**B. From PERFORM CLEAN UP operation **952**, processing optionally transitions to a NOTIFY operation

954, or directly to EXIT operation 956, or optionally returns to operation 910 (FIG. 9A) on receipt of a next call to a critical function.

In optional NOTIFY operation 954, the user of host computer system 102 (FIG. 1), and/or a system administrator of the network, e.g., network 126, are notified of a malicious code detection on host computer system 102. In one embodiment, a record or error message is generated and provided to the user and/or system administrator. In one embodiment, the notification identifies the particular malicious code and/or any protective action taken.

The user and/or administrator are notified using any one of a number of techniques, e.g., by using a pop up window, by generating an e-mail, by writing to a file and/or otherwise by logging the event. Further, in one embodiment, a notification is provided to a security center. From optional NOTIFY operation 954, processing transitions to EXIT operation 956, or optionally returns to operation 910 (FIG. 9A) on receipt of a next call to a critical function.

Referring again FIG. 9A and CALL TYPE check operation 912, alternatively, when the call to a critical function is a call to a read function rather than a write function, processing transitions from CALL TYPE check operation 912, at operation 916, to a STALL CALL TO READ FUNCTION operation 936 (FIG. 9C).

Referring now to FIG. 9C, in STALL CALL TO READ FUNCTION operation 936, the call to the read function intercepted in the sandboxing of the destabilizing malicious code process is stalled to allow further evaluation as described herein. In one embodiment, the call to the read function is stalled at kernel mode driver 106B. From STALL CALL TO READ FUNCTION operation 936, processing transitions to a SUBSEQUENT READ check operation 938.

In SUBSEQUENT READ check operation 938, a determination is made whether the call to the read function is a read of information subsequent to an associated write of information. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver 106B determines whether the call to the read function is a call to a location in a file or the registry of host computer system 102 that was ostensibly written to, and a false success returned, in a previous write operation by the malicious code process. In one embodiment, kernel mode driver 106B compares parameters of the call to the read function to determine whether the call is a subsequent read to a prior write. When the call to the read function is a subsequent read ("YES"), the call is assumed to be associated with malicious code, and from SUBSEQUENT READ check operation 938, processing transitions to a TERMINATE CALL operation 940.

In TERMINATE CALL operation 940, the call to the read function, which is a subsequent read, is terminated and not allowed to proceed and read from the target file or registry. As the earlier associated prohibited write was terminated, the values from the prohibited write are not present on host computer system 102 in the location identified in the call to the read function, and false information will need to be returned to the caller. From TERMINATE CALL operation 940, processing transitions to a GENERATE FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 942.

In GENERATE FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 942, a false read success is generated for return to the calling malicious code process. In one embodiment, the last cached write value associated with the location identified in the call to the read function e.g., the cached virtual write value stored in operation 922 (FIG. 9B) in the sandbox database, is obtained and used as a parameter in generating the false read success. From GENERATE FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 942, processing transitions to a RETURN FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 944.

In RETURN FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 944, the last virtual write value cached in operation 922 (FIG. 9B) associated with the location identified in the call to the read function is returned to the caller, e.g., to the calling malicious code in the false read success generated in operation 942. Thus, the calling malicious code receives an expected return of the last cached write value and is not alerted that the call to the read function was not successfully made to the target location. Again, in this way retaliatory destabilizing actions are circumvented. From RETURN FALSE READ SUCCESS operation 944, processing transitions, at operation 946, to operation 952 (FIG. 9D) earlier described.

Referring again to FIG. 9C and SUBSEQUENT READ check operation 938, alternatively, when the call to the read function is not a subsequent read ("NO"), processing transitions to a RELEASE CALL operation 948.

In RELEASE CALL operation 948, the call to the read function stalled in operation 936 is released and allowed to complete. In particular, as the stalled call to the read function does not indicate a subsequent read of a value in a prohibited write, the call to the read function is assumed to not be destabilizing and allowed to complete. From RELEASE CALL operation 948, processing transitions, at operation 950, to EXIT operation 956 (FIG. 9D), with processing exiting method 900, or optionally returns to operation 910 (FIG. 9A) upon receipt of a next call to a critical function.

In some embodiments, SUBSEQUENT READ check operation 938 further includes an evaluation of the calling process. Thus in some embodiments, a calling process that is determined to be a subsequent read, may be excluded from termination, for example, when determined to match an exclusion list.

In an alternative embodiment, rather than user mode application 106A initially detecting malicious code to be sandboxed by kernel mode application 106B, i.e., operation 904, when an application on host computer system 102 performs a write, i.e., calls a write function, kernel mode driver 106B is called, for example by user mode application 106A. Kernel mode component 106B determines whether to allow the write or be sandboxed as earlier described with reference to FIG. 9 and method 900.

Asynchronously, other applications on host computer system 102 can perform read operations, i.e., call read functions. The read operations are evaluated as earlier described in FIG. 9 and method 900 against the database of the sandboxing process. If a match is found, i.e., a subsequent read is determined, the cached value of an associated write, which is cached in the database, is returned.

Although malicious code detection and remediation application 106 is referred to as an application, this is illustrative only. Malicious code detection and remediation application 106 should be capable of being called from an application or the operating system. In one embodiment, an application is generally defined to be any executable code. Moreover, those of skill in the art will understand that when it is said that an application or an operation takes some action, the action is the result of executing one or more instructions by a processor. In one embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application 106 includes a user mode application 106A and a kernel mode driver 106B.

While embodiments have been described for a client-server configuration, an embodiment may be carried out using any suitable hardware configuration or means involving a personal computer, a workstation, a portable device, or a network of computer devices. Other network configurations

other than client-server configurations, e.g., peer-to-peer, web-based, intranet, internet network configurations, are used in other embodiments.

Herein, a computer program product comprises a medium configured to store or transport computer readable code in accordance with the embodiments described herein. Some examples of computer program products are CD-ROM discs, DVDs, ROM cards, floppy discs, magnetic tapes, computer hard drives, servers on a network and signals transmitted over a network representing computer readable code.

As illustrated in FIG. **1**, this medium may belong to the computer system itself. However, the medium also may be removed from the computer system. For example, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** may be stored in memory **136** that is physically located in a location different from processor **108**. Processor **108** should be coupled to the memory **136**. This could be accomplished in a client-server system, or alternatively via a connection to another computer via modems and analog lines, or digital interfaces and a digital carrier line.

More specifically, in one embodiment, host computer system **102** and/or server system **130** is a portable computer, a workstation, a two-way pager, a cellular telephone, a digital wireless telephone, a personal digital assistant, a server computer, an Internet appliance, or any other device that includes components that can execute the functionality of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** in accordance with at least one of the embodiments as described herein. Similarly, in another embodiment, host computer system **102** and/or server system **130** is comprised of multiple different computers, wireless devices, cellular telephones, digital telephones, two-way pagers, or personal digital assistants, server computers, or any desired combination of these devices that are interconnected to perform, the methods as described herein.

In view of this disclosure, the functionality of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** in accordance with one embodiment can be implemented in a wide variety of computer system configurations. In addition, the functionality of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** could be stored as different modules in memories of different devices.

For example, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** could initially be stored in server system **130**, and then as necessary, a portion of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** could be transferred to host computer system **102** and executed on host computer system **102**. Consequently, part of the functionality of malicious code detection and remediation application **106** would be executed on processor **134** of server system **130**, and another part would be executed on processor **108** of host computer system **102**. In view of this disclosure, those of skill in the art can implement the various embodiments described herein in a wide-variety of physical hardware configurations using an operating system and computer programming language of interest to the user.

In yet another embodiment, malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is stored in memory **136** of server system **130**. Malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is transferred over network **126** to memory **112** in host computer system **102**. In this embodiment, network interface **138** and I/O interface **110** would include analog modems, digital modems, or a network interface card. If modems are used, network **126** includes a communications network, and malicious code detection and remediation application **106** is downloaded via the communications network.

This disclosure provides exemplary embodiments. The scope of the various embodiments described herein is not limited by these exemplary embodiments. Numerous variations, whether explicitly provided for by the specification or implied by the specification or not, may be implemented by one of skill in the art in view of this disclosure.

What is claimed is:

1. A computer implemented method comprising:

executing, on a processor, a malicious code detection and remediation application, wherein said executing includes:

detecting a locked object by a user mode application, wherein said user mode application is included in said malicious code detection and remediation application, and said user mode application operates from user mode;

sending a request, from said user mode application to a kernel mode driver, to obtain a handle to said locked object,

wherein said kernel mode driver is included in said malicious code detection and remediation application,

wherein said kernel mode driver operates from kernel mode, and

wherein the sending bypasses the user mode application program interface to the locked object;

obtaining said handle to said locked object by said kernel mode driver;

returning said handle to said user mode application;

accessing said locked object by said user mode application; and

determining whether malicious code is detected in said locked object; and

taking protective action upon said determining finding malicious code was detected in said locked object.

2. The computer implemented method of claim **1** further comprising:

notifying a user of said malicious code detection.

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