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'Living In a Tech World' Column

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10 Ways to Muck-up Your Tech World: #3 – Don't install or update anti-virus and anti-spyware programs

Think about how much simpler your tech world could be if you forget about that anti-virus and anti-spyware program. Those programs are always blocking some application you want to use and to install some programs you even have to disable your protection. And those updates, it seems like every other day your antivirus program wants to add more files to your hard drive. Then there is the cost, unlike most programs that only charge for version upgrades these programs have to be renewed every year.

But of course without them you can probably count on spending hours removing a virus or worm or at least once probably resorting to reformatting a hard drive and reinstalling Windows and every program you had installed. On review maybe this muck-up is better prevented. As we've discussed before it is dangerous out there. Using little programs referred to commonly as viruses, Trojans and worms the bad guys want to control your computer, steal information from you or get you to click on links that will download more malicious programs or pay them for your clicks.

In the early days as the PC became a ubiquitous tool in offices and homes, viruses, small programs attached to other programs, were written for fun or as pranks. Today we see more worms and Trojans because they can be used for profit.

Malware creators can profit from their infections by using their infected computers to do work for the creator. The infected computers are used to send out spam messages. The advantage to spammers of using infected computers is they provide anonymity and with thousands of infected computers they can send out tens of thousands more spam emails.

In order to coordinate the activity of many infected computers, they use botnets. Botnets can be used to push upgraded malware to the infected systems, keeping them resistant to anti-virus software or other security measures. These programs actually 'call home' connecting to servers to get new instructions and thus evolve.

A couple of years ago malware was mostly a nuisance that took over your browser, created popup ads and generally slowed down the operating system to a near halt. But today's versions are much more dangerous. It is possible for a malware creator to profit by stealing sensitive information from a victim. Some malware programs install a key logger, which intercepts the user's keystrokes when

entering a password, credit card number, or other information that may exploited. This is then transmitted to the malware creator automatically, enabling credit card fraud and other theft. Similarly, malware may copy the CD key or password for online games, allowing the creator to steal accounts.

Spyware programs are commercially produced for the purpose of gathering information about computer users, showing them pop-up ads, or altering web-browser behavior for the financial benefit of the spyware creator. For instance, some spyware programs redirect search engine results to paid advertisements. If you have looked at the results of the scans from a spyware program you will see hundreds of 'cookies' These are arguably benign spyware. Mainly these just register your visit to a website but cause little harm or invasion of privacy.

Prevailing wisdom is that only Windows PC owners need worry about all of this. But just this past week Symantec, a developer of anti-malware programs, has identified the first Mac based botnets. Thousands of Macs have been infected by downloading pirated copies of iWork 09 and Photoshop CS4. And this will probably be only the beginning.

If, with a better understanding of what malware can do you decide to protect yourself you can consider using the programs from McAfee or Norton that probably came on your newer computer in a trial version. I find both of these take so much control that they slow down your computer and create some of the problems that make you want to go without protection. If you are a home user there are free versions of several programs that can give you good protection as long as you are not a high risk web surfer and think before you click. Two of these are AVG and Avast. Check out our website for links to these and other tools that can keep you safe.

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