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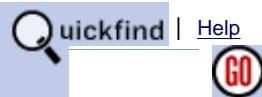
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HomeLAN defense

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GCN Staff

Lab looks at antivirus Tools

You have been infected, or at least affected.

Anyone who has used a computer for any length of time knows about computer viruses. Perhaps one of them once ruined your files or randomly mailed an infected attachment to your friends. Maybe a self-replicating worm squirmed though your system looking for private information.

Even if you have been lucky enough to avoid direct contact with a virus, you probably know someone who was hit hard. Or you've watched news coverage of the latest global virus threats and felt a little less safe online.

Virus writers are basically terrorists. If they can't harm you directly, they'll do everything they can to make you afraid. Perhaps you feel wary of online buying and don't open attachments from anyone anymore. Let's hope there is a special circle of hell for these miscreants, where they have to perform entry-level phone technical support using infected computers.

The good news

On the bright side, antivirus programs have advanced to the point that there's little or no chance of infecting a computer properly updated with the latest profiles.

Heuristic scanning, standard in all antivirus applications these days, can catch even unknown viruses based on their characteristics. It's as if a cop walks down the street and sees a guy in a ski mask about to throw a brick through a window. The cop might not know the guy's history but can deduce that he's up to no good.

Each of the four antivirus programs in this review succeeded in blocking everything the GCN up with a stealth virus that slipped past at least one of the programs, but the protection level

The only reason viruses spread these days is that too many users don't have antivirus softw heuristics, current profiles are still the best defense.

Just because all the programs worked, however, doesn't mean we can't contrast them. To us

If an antivirus program's constant pop-up interruptions annoy you, or you must take your con really any better than the marauders it guards against?

The four antivirus programs in this review are suitable for a traveler's notebook PC, a telewo field office lacking strong antivirus and firewall protection.

Besides the interface, scanning time is crucial because it equates to downtime. No other wor

Other valued factors are smooth installation and smooth behavior—protection without intrusi Pentium 4 PC with 512M of RAM. Panda Software Inc. has always tested well in our antiviru tried Panda Titanium Antivirus 2004.

Titanium altered the antivirus playing field. It had the fastest scanning engine, stayed mostly

It seemed slick right from the installation, which took just over a minute. An auto-update proc must register the product and buy the updates on a yearly basis.

A full scan of all files on our test system took six minutes, 35 seconds—a full minute faster th slowest.

The interface was easy to use. It offers a clearly defined selection of files to scan in case a u scan.

One of the most helpful options is to scan only e-mail, the likeliest channel for infection. That users.

We did find one annoying feature in Titanium. A pop-up window randomly activated to inform general virus news.

Unlike another product in this review, however, Titanium did not accompany this news with c us into buying more software.

Because Panda supplied a button to disable the pop-ups permanently, we did not reduce its viruses bouncing off a protected PC over and over. Come on—from a company called Panda

Titanium was a solid antivirus program, almost like an Abrams battle tank because it was su and a Reviewer's Choice designation.

From gold to silver

Symantec's Norton AntiVirus has been the gold standard in protection for years, and Norton

Setup took longer than with the Panda software and had a few notable glitches. You should and running.

And if you live in Washington, where the GCN Lab is located, you probably resent taxation w registration without representation. You can't select Washington as your area. The District of manually fill in that field. Some government registrants therefore must contact the company.

Once installed, the Norton program was unobtrusive and had the same clean interface as pr

Scan time also was good, at seven minutes, 47 seconds, somewhat slower than Panda. Also Panda did on the same system. This did not affect virus-stopping performance, but it did take

Norton 2004 would be a good choice for most users, although it was outclassed slightly by P designation.

The biggest surprise was Global Hauri's ViRobot Expert. Last year, ViRobot got the lowest s because of the tiny number of files scanned and the prolonged download and installation tim

That's all in the past. Any government user who wants a solid, inexpensive antivirus program General Services Administration schedule.

The interface is easy to learn, without the usual distracting bells and whistles. The most diffi requires searching the manual. But after one minute, 54 seconds, installation was complete.

With a slight increase in installation time, we could scan the computer for bugs before begin legacy and repurposed systems are common. Use the prescan feature to make sure a forei suspect the system is already infected before you begin.

When updating the program, we noticed there was little to download—2M or so—and it took provided detailed reports after every major update or system scan. For example, it told us th to tell whether you're updating too often or too infrequently.

The easy-to-find system scan button let us know how long a scan would take via a meter at programs in the review to give this valuable information.

We found three negatives. First, the ViRobot Resident Scan and the ViRobot Expert names the monitoring program, whereas the Expert manages operations such as system scans and

Second, Global Hauri should add an automatic setup function after installation. The other pr who might finish the installation and feel protected when in fact ViRobot is not yet operating.

The third minor change we'd like to see in the next version of ViRobot is more detail on the s we've seen, but it could be improved.

Although ViRobot killed the viruses in the lab's bug petting zoo, it only scanned an average 2 could be more comprehensive. A hacker who knew which files were excluded could perhaps

The scanning engine was a little slow, covering the 20,821 files in an average eight minutes,

the Buck designation. It kills bugs, not wallets.

Network Associates' McAfee VirusScan 2004 8.0 put so many alarms and alerts on the main
convinced they are infected with every known virus. This is no program for hypochondriacs.

Network Associates placed ads for free trial versions of its software next to every threat and
it difficult to perform essential tasks such as scans, but it also would scare users into thinking
product.

The main menu has five toolbars to describe the level of security on a scale of one to 10. Th
Index and My Antivirus Index, are the only ones users can control. The other three remain at
installs Network Associates' antihacker, antispam and antiabuse programs.

On the left side of the menu window are tabs that lead to uniform resource locators for buyin
are distasteful.

McAfee further disturbs the user with audio and visual pop-ups that appear out of the right si
worms and viruses.

We could not figure out why they should appear, or why they must trigger a whistle when the
upper right side of the VirusScan main menu. What's worse, we couldn't turn off the pop-ups
system was continually catching a virus.

Panda has pop-ups, too, but without the disturbing sounds and with an obvious icon for turni

On the plus side, installation was simple and led us directly to setup, which ViRobot didn't do

A bit confusing

To update the VirusScan engine, we had to register and create a profile with a user name an
of after the installation. That was confusing because Virus-Scan for some reason rebooted a

We had to update again and go through another reboot to get the first new virus profiles. Thi
long registration process.

Without all these hoops to jump through, the software took about 55 seconds to update. With

VirusScan detected and quarantined all the bugs in our zoo and was pretty thorough at scrut
however, averaging 10 minutes, 18 seconds per scan.

McAfee should clean up its interface, drop the scare tactics or at least make them easy to di

We gave McAfee AntiVirus 2004 a C because it did what it was supposed to do—but the oth