TECH LAB

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Microsoft's free antivirus program changes game

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | October 1, 2009

You paid for your antivirus software? Why?

Good free options have been available for years, mainly from no-name companies. Nervous consumers figure they're better off buying major brands, like Norton security software from Symantec Corp. Well, here's a major brand for you: Microsoft Corp.

Security Essentials is now available at microsoft.com. It is the successor to the company's Windows Live OneCare, a $49.95 computer protection suite that included identity theft protection, a firewall program, and a file backup utility along with the malware detector. OneCare never gained traction, perhaps because its early versions received savage reviews from independent testing labs. Microsoft learned its lessons, and this summer, OneCare was ranked second among 16 rivals by one major testing lab.

Of course, no antimalware product is perfect, especially not against the latest attack programs. George Ledin, a computer science professor at Sonoma State University in California, pointed out that dozens of new malware programs appear daily, and it takes a long time to tag these new threats so the software can defeat them. "By the time they put it in the catalog, it is months old," Ledin said. As a result, thousands of computers with the latest antivirus software are compromised anyway.

Still, some protection is better than none. Microsoft reckons that about 60 percent of home computer users are defenseless against malware. Some do not know they need protection; others don't know how to get it; still others are put off by the expense, which can run $60 or $70 a year. Unprotected computers put the rest of us at risk, because many are saturated with zombie programs, which let bad guys seize control of them and bombard the rest of us with spam e-mails and malware attacks. Some tainted computers even pump out ads for fake antivirus programs. Install one, and you have turned your own computer into a zombie.

To get enough people to use antimalware software, there must be a product that is free and simple, and comes from a reputable source. And here it is.

Microsoft Security Essentials takes the company's basic antivirus system and combines it with Windows Defender, a spyware filtering tool released in 2006. Defender blocks spyware - programs that cover your screen with pop-up ads or swipe your personal information - but it is useless against viruses, worms, and Trojan horse programs that can commandeer your machine.

Security Essentials drops some OneCare features that are built into Windows already, so it is well under 10 megabytes in size and downloads in seconds if you have a broadband connection.

Security Essentials has a simple on-screen interface well suited to the casual user. A green icon on the Windows toolbar tells you the software is scanning incoming files in real time. The moment it detects tainted software, up pops a warning and a recommendation about the best course of action. Or just press a button marked "clean computer," and Security Essentials gets rid of the file. It works fast, too. I transferred a standard antivirus test file over the Internet to a Microsoft-detected computer, and instantly got the warning message.

I tried Security Essentials on an old, slow machine crammed with music and photos. Running a complete scan

of every file took about eight hours, hardly an impressive performance. But all the while, I could send e-mails, browse the Web, and write part of this column, on the same machine that was nearly unusable while running an antivirus scanner from McAfee Inc. That's because Microsoft tuned Security Essentials to free up processing power when the user is running other programs. Symantec and other makers of pay-to-play antimalware products say that for free, Security Essentials is worth every cent. Rival security suites are excellent products, crammed with extras like software to test the security of your home's wireless network. But Symantec's Norton Internet Security 2010 costs $70, which includes just one year of vital updates. After that, you must pay another $60 to update the program.

Microsoft is now changing the game, the same way it changed the Internet browser business - by giving the software away. It will mean lower profits for the virus fighters, but safer computing for the rest of us.

Hiawatha Bray can be reached at bray@globe.com. ∎