

Freeware Friday

Protecting Yourself Against Computer Viruses

by Scott Holstad

Remember talking about those evil scary viruses last time we got together? Well, in today's article, I'm going to jump right into developing a virus prevention plan (replete with anti-virus links), so you can go out and get right on it, protecting your computer from (dramatic music)...the terrors that lurk....

There are two rules about avoiding viruses which are commonly espoused by virus makers and hackers:

- 1) Don't buy a computer, and
- 2) Don't turn a computer on.

Well, if you're reading this, it's too late for at least one of those, so on to more realistic prevention procedures.

* Back Up Your Data

Do something I never did (until I was hit with my virus), and back up everything. Tape backup unit prices are increasingly reasonable, so there's little excuse not to get one. For those of you not yet willing to plunk \$150 or so down on a backup unit, make every attempt to back up vital info onto floppies. You can make backups as often as you feel necessary -- the more system changes and additions you make, the more frequent the backup process should be. I typically back up at least once a month. By the way, always use a virus-free backup to restore data (obviously).

* Use Virus Scanning Utilities

Virus scanners do exactly that: they scan your computer for known viruses. If they find one, they'll alert you and advise some form of action. Non-virus specific **Checksummers** work by searching for system changes (through comparison values). The downside is that they detect any changes made (including legitimate ones), and this can be incredibly annoying! Fortunately, some programs are now coming out which utilize various methods (exclude lists, etc.) to prevent this. **Virus scanners** have been programmed to recognize specific viruses and issue warnings. **TSR scanners** are similar, but rather than being command-driven, they automatically run in the background, monitoring all actions.

* Use Regularly Updated Anti-Virus Software

Since new viruses regularly appear, it's important to use anti-virus software which is regularly updated. The better ones will provide updated versions every one to two months. (These updates typically can be downloaded from the Net.) You can have the best, most expensive anti-virus product on the market, but it won't be able to snag current viruses if it's a year old.

* Develop a Virus Recovery Plan

If it appears that you've been hit by a virus, do the following:

- * Calm down.

- * Turn off your computer.
- * Insert a pre-made boot disk (a virus-free, write-protected floppy disk with system files -- such as command.com, autoexec.bat and config.sys -- which will enable you to "boot" up your computer from the floppy itself) and restart your computer. Ideally, you may wish to use your original system disk for this. Mac users may attempt to create their own boot disk -- you need System and Finder, both of which are large files -- but, generally, Mac users can bypass this step, due to the differing Mac architecture.
- * Use at least two different (and current) virus scanners to isolate your infected file(s). Then "clean" the file with anti-virus software (if cleaning, rename the file), or (and this may be the best method) remove the file and later replace it using the original software. If cleaning and file deletion is ineffective, there's always the dreaded last resort of a low level format of your hard drive.
- * If a virus has been found, assume everything is infected (which hopefully won't be the case, but you can't be too careful at this point). Scan all floppies with your anti-virus software (as time consuming as this may be).
- * After everything is clean, test and re-scan the system to ensure everything has been checked over twice and is safe.
- * If you are completely unsure of how to proceed, or if you've found a new virus, contact CERT (Computer Emergency Response Team).

Anti-Virus Software

Truth be told, there are infinitely more PC viruses than Mac equivalents, which explains why there are so many anti-virus programs for PCs. Fortunately, there are many useful freeware versions (for PC and Mac) which you can download from the Net. My personal preferences are based on both the following products' scores in benchmark tests, and the grudging respect shown for these products by virus makers. (You'll never see them do anything but laugh about IBM's AntiVirus product often pre-installed on PCs.) Alan Solomon is widely regarded as one of the most important virus researchers on the planet. His Dr. Solomon's FindVirus for DOS, updated bi-monthly, is one of the finest products available. E-PROT is another widely regarded -- and regularly updated -- tool. ThunderBYTE is thought by many to be the fastest of the programs. Each program has its own merits, and it's not a bad idea to use two or more. (None are proven to catch every virus -- after all, these companies are constantly having to play catch-up.)

While there are probably more than 9,000 PC viruses, there are less than 50 Mac viruses, making the following two Mac anti-virus programs more than sufficient. Gatekeeper is a system extension which always runs in the background (like TSRs on PC machines), monitoring for actions which are virus-like and alerting you if anything is found. Installing and running it is easy. The most widely regarded anti-virus software, however, is Disinfectant. Get it, love it, use it (although, honestly, the thing is S-L-O-W). Again, the combined use of Gatekeeper and Disinfectant should be more than adequate for combating known Mac viruses.

While there is no way to guarantee that you'll never get a computer virus, you can take precautions. Educate yourself, obtain good anti-virus software (and keep it up-to-date), limit access to your system, and practice good software acquisition habits. With practice and luck, you'll never need to use your virus recovery plan.



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