FREE

Computer Tools

There are very few people these days who do not have a least one computer at home and most people can find the task of keeping their computer safe and running properly to be a daunting one, and an expensive one.

Every computer, even without an Internet connection is vulnerable to viruses. Although we hear mostly about viruses infecting our computers through email attachments there is also the nearly forgotten threat of infection from files transferred via CD or floppy. So even without an Internet connection, your computer is vulnerable. If you don't have anti-virus software, get it now.

Which leads us to: Where can I get reliable anti-virus software for free?

Grisoft's **AVG Anti Virus** is an excellent anti-virus program that offers full functionality for free (for private use) and is available at:
http://free.grisoft.com/doc/2/lng/us/tpl/v5

If your computer is used to access the Internet, you are going to have to protect yourself from even nastier hazards, particularly if you have high-speed access through cable or DSL (Digital Subscriber Line).

The first hazard is unauthorized access to your computer via the Internet by a hacker. I won't bore you with the technical details, but remote hacking can be a very real threat. Fortunately a "firewall" can protect you. A firewall makes your computer invisible to hackers and prevents unauthorized access. The easily best freebie firewall is Zonelabs **ZoneAlarm**. The free version is tricky to find from the home page but can be found at http://www.zonelabs.com/.

- Click on "**Download and Buy**", then
- Click the "**ZoneAlarm**" tab, then
- Click on "**Free Download**", then
- Click on "**Download FREE ZoneAlarm**" and the file will download.

You now have the two most essential programs your computer needs, but there are still more dangers lurking…

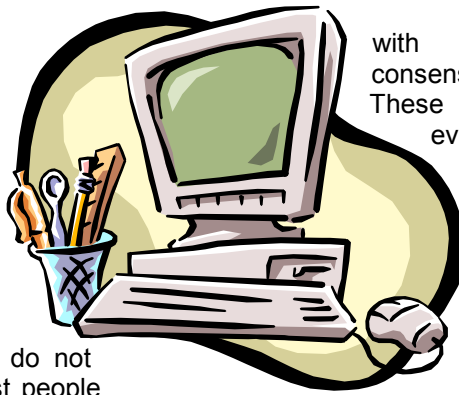There is a group of programs know as Spyware, Adware, Malware, etc. These programs often sneak in with other programs that you consensually install on your computer. These malware programs can do everything from track your surfing habits in order to tailor commercial pop-ups, to alter your home page, to gather sensitive information that could result in identity theft. These programs usually install along with another program without your knowledge. A popular music-sharing program called **Kazaa** is known to install spyware.

There are a few good programs for detecting and removing spyware, malware, or adware and I recommend that you install at least two as no one program is completely adept at finding them all.

LavaSoft's **Ad-aware** is available at:
http://www.lavasoft.com/

Spybot Search and Destroy is available at:
http://www.safer-networking.org/en/index.html

If you would like to try some other free programs, you can try:

- Microsoft's **Anti-Spyware** is still in Beta, which means that it's still in the testing stages and might have a few bugs. Get it at: http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/spyware/software/default.mspx

- Emco's **Malware Destroyer:**
http://www.emco.is/downloads.html
(the freebie is near the bottom of the page along with some other free utilities of interest)

There are also some several freeware programs available for more pleasant tasks…

For compressing/decompressing archived files such as ZIP, ARC, CAB, etc. there are two good programs available:

- **TugZip** – Supports ZIP, 7-ZIP, A, ACE, ARC, ARJ, BH, BZ2, CAB, CPIO, DEB, GCA, GZ, IMP, JAR, LHA (LZH), LIB, RAR, RPM, SQX, TAR, TGZ, TBZ, TAZ, YZ1 and ZOO archives. Also supports BIN, C2D, IMG, ISO and NRG disc-images. Go to http://www.tugzip.com/

- **Izarc** – Same support as TugZip and can be found at http://www.izarc.org/

How about Microsoft **Office** for free? Yah, I'll bet you would! I can offer the next best thing though; **OpenOffice**, an open source program that is

compatible with Microsoft **Office** with it's own versions of **Word**, **Excell**, **Powerpoint**, etc. completely free. You can check it out at http://www.openoffice.org/.

Got Kids? Got DVDs? My 4-year-old daughter has a ton of DVDs she loves to watch over and over. While DVDs won't wear out from being played they will suffer damage from being handled by young hands. The trick for me was to make copies and put the originals out of harms way. If the copy is wrecked, I just make a new one. And it's perfectly legal to make copies of your own media for your own personal use. My program of choice is **DVD Shrink**, available at: http://www.mrbass.org/dvdshrink/.

*(Note: the official **DVD Shrink** website no longer provides a download link so you'll have to get a copy from third-party sites such as the **mrbass.org** site. Third-party sites tend to be a bit flaky and can go down without notice, so you might have to do a Google search for a new site.)*

DVD Shrink also lets you "re-author" the copy so, if you want, you can just copy the main feature without all the previews and bonus material. A very nice feature that let's you create a copy that younger children can insert into the DVD player without the hassle of menus and previews. You'll also be able to shrink a dual-layer DVD's content to fit onto a single-layer DVD. You'll need a DVD burner and a copy of **Nero DVD Burning** (which **DVD Shrink** meshes with seamlessly) software to burn the copy.

Although **DVD Shrink** is a fairly powerful program, there are still other tricks that manufacturers will use to prevent you from copying your movies. If you have a DVD that just won't copy or are simply interested in learning more about DVD encryption methods go to: http://www.doom9.org/.
This site also has lots of freebies for audio and video editing.

If you have a digital camera then, like me, you likely have a *LOT* of pictures on your hard drive and it's getting hard to organize them all. Google (the search engine people) offer this freebie: **Picasa**. I haven't used it (although I should) but it comes highly recommended.
Get it at http://picasa.google.com/index.html.

And speaking of digital photos; **Paint.NET** is free image and photo manipulation software that was developed at Washington State University as an undergraduate senior design project mentored by Microsoft, and is currently being maintained by some of the alumni that originally worked on it. Originally intended as a free replacement for the **MS Paint** software that comes with Windows, it has grown into a powerful yet simple tool for photo and image editing.
Get it at http://www.getpaint.net/download.html.

While I was researching for this article I came across a website that offers several graphics and publishing related programs. I haven't tried any of them so I can't tell you if they're any good, but if you're still interested, go to http://www.freeserifsoftware.com/.
Let me know what you think.

If you'd like to tinker with Windows and alter some of its features you can try out Microsoft's **PowerToys** from http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/powertoys/xppowertoys.mspx.
The programs are professionally developed by Microsoft but are not supported. In other words, use at your own risk.

Which reminds me; the programs I've suggested are from reliable sources and have received favourable reviews from independent sources, **but use at your own risk**. Just because I, and others, haven't had problems with them doesn't mean you won't. Some programs, especially anti-virus programs, can conflict with other similar programs you may already have on your system, so uninstall one before you install the other.

If you're not sure about compatibility or if you are planning to tinker with your operating system, I would strongly recommend you back up data first.

And wouldn't you know it, I just happen to know of a free backup program. **Backup4all** (version 1.3.0) is the last freeware version and is no longer available from the commercial **Backup4all** website, but you can get a copy at this link:
http://www.321download.com/LastFreeware/downloads321/b4all130.zip.
Type in the whole URL and the download will begin automatically.

Got any freebies you like to use? Let me know and I'll mention them in a future article.

J. JOHNSTON