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CHALLENGE



Sean Rooney, technical director, Integrity Solutions: 'Anti-virus vendors are now doing a lot more testing on software'



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Viral attacks are rising and, considering how much damage they can cause, it is little surprise that firms are determined to do all they can to prevent them, writes **Emmet Ryan**

Recent years have seen anti-virus developers take greater heed of how their products affect a computer's performance. Developers are now paying more attention to the relationship between anti-virus software and the machines they are meant to protect.

"If you have a performance impact, you are not going to make any friends. In the worst-case scenario people are not going to use it," said Ronnie Dockery, Windows client lead with Microsoft. "That's not good for developers or customers if something goes wrong."

Keeping on the good side of customers without neglecting the threats they face is no easy task. The biggest challenge for the anti-virus industry is keeping up with the immense volumes of malware produced.

According to research by ESET, there are 25,000 unique viruses found in Ireland every day. In January 2007, some five million unique malware samples were documented. In January this year, that jumped to more than 30 million.

"Cybercriminals are counting on overwhelming numbers to drown defences in attacks," said Urban Schrott, Global IT security and cyber-crime analyst with ESET.

"Imagine the strain on virus definition updates for anti-virus software when it has to keep up with such numbers."

The scale and size of these assaults put an increasing burden on a computer's system resources and means anti-virus firms are researching multiple approaches to meet efficiency needs without sacrificing safety.

"Just relying on regular updates of virus definitions is no longer reliable enough," said Schrott. He said firms were now developing software that recognised malware by what it did rather than how it looked. This can keep the software small, light and fast.

The key reason vendors are placing a premium on keeping software light is to make sure users don't have any reason to switch off their anti-virus protection.

Once the door is opened, users are at risk, so vendors are taking measures to steer people off this path.

"With regular everyday users, if security is

Top ten detections of malware in Ireland

1. Win32/Toolbar.MyWebSearch	4.55%
2. INF/Autorun.gen	3.19%
3. Win32/Agent	3.11%
4. WMA/TrojanDownloader.GetCodec.Gen	2.85%
5. INF/Autorun	2.71%
6. Win32/Conficker.AA	1.93%
7. Win32/Genetik	1.88%
8. Win32/PSW.OnLineGames.NNU	1.82%
9. Win32/PSW.OnLineGames.NMY	1.80%
10. Win32/Adware.Virtumonde.NEO~datafile	1.38%

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hindering something, they might disable it," said Sean Rooney, technical director with Integrity Solutions.

"Anti-virus vendors are now doing a lot more testing on software to try and reduce the memory print and the amount of time it takes to complete a scan," said Rooney.

"They are also moving away from traditional signature scanning which would have used a lot of memory. This will reduce the burden on PCs," he said.

While vendors are taking great strides in avoiding hindering PC performance, there are some steps users can also take.

Take a common sense approach when looking to improve performance. Rather than looking for a bunch of ways to speed up performance with programs found online, try talking to an expert for advice on what steps to take.

"People download any sort of junk they find on the web as a performance enhancer. If they just got rid of all these performance enhancers it would probably help," said Michael Conway, director at Renaissance.

"It comes down to having multiple forms of junk on machines. Really if you have one good suite you will benefit hugely."