What the Tech?!: Antivirus
by Joe McCormick

If you're connected to the Internet, or allow others to access your computer, it is important that you have working and updated antivirus software installed. There are a wide variety of antivirus programs, but all of them basically do the same tasks.

It used to be that Norton Anti-virus led the market back in the 90s, but these days many companies are taking their own approach and have begun selling their own anti-virus software. But we college students may not have the money to spend on fancy antivirus or word processing software, so I'll only ever recommend the free stuff. When it comes to free antivirus software, the obvious choice, in my book, is Avast! Antivirus.

Avast! has come a long way when it comes to building a smart, efficient, and useful program. In the past, a big issue with antivirus software was that it took up a lot of processing power to run, leaving your computer sluggish at times. Taking up almost no processing power at all, Avast!'s seven service-shields run silently in the background.

Working off of the principle that multiple low-level shields can do a much better job than one wide-level shield, Avast! allows us control over seven different ones. Continuously scanning primary sites of infection, these shields work independent of each other: File, System, Mail, Web, P2P, IM, Network, and Behavior. Because they're independent of each other, you can pick and choose which ones you want to have running. Unless you turn them off, these shields are always running, yet separate from the system-wide scans that Avast! also offers.

Using system-wide scans is extremely easy. When you start the program, you'll be on the Summary page of the Avast! graphical user interface. A menu, on the left side, shows us four different sub-menus: Summary, Scan Computer, Real-Time Shields, and Maintenance. Click on Scan Computer to get to the next major function of Avast!

System-wide scans have been the staple of antivirus programs since they were invented. They look at every single file on your computer and crosscheck them with a virus database that has been growing since the 90s. Avast! allows you to do "file-system scans" and "boot-time scans."

Under the Scan Now menu, all you have to do is click the "Start" button on one of four types of scans: Quick, Full, Removable Media, and Folder. If you click "More details" on any of these, you can further fine-tune the scanning options. But for most users, the basic options should be satisfactory. I recommend running a Full System Scan at least once a month if not more.

Some viruses can be really nasty and crawl into your computer's start-up files. This means that they are virtually impossible to delete while your operating system is running. To resolve this, antivirus programs allow you to do a boot-time scan. To do this in Avast! just click on the sub-menu "Boot-time Scan" and hit "Schedule Now." Next time your computer starts up, a full-system scan will take place before any viruses can turn on.

Other Avast! options allow you to see shield statistics. Clicking on "Real-time Shields" on the main menu will take you to a sub-menu of each of your shields. Clicking on any of these will give you real time statistics on the number of files each shield is scanning.

The last important thing you need to know about is the Virus Chest. To access the chest simply click on Maintenance>Virus Chest. This is the place where viruses are quarantined if found in a scan. If you know what you're looking at you can right click each file here and either delete or restore it. If you don't know what these files are, it's best to just leave them here instead of deleting them. Antivirus has been known to quarantine semi-necessary computer files and deleting them could be hazardous.

Have a question for What the Tech?! Email us at wtt.globe@gmail.com.