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SOFTWARE

SYSTEM MECHANIC 4 PROFESSIONAL

Utility Suite Goes Under The PC's Hood for Repairs

WHEN A UTILITY SUITE PROMISES NOT ONLY system fixes and fine-tuning, but also protection from hackers, viruses, pop-up ads, and spyware, it holds a lot of appeal. Iolo Technologies' \$69.95 System Mechanic 4 Professional is such a product, though its multitask approach has a few shortcomings.

The core program offers a wide array of optimization, cleansing, repair, and recovery tools. Unlike competing products such as Norton SystemWorks, System Mechanic can also tweak various aspects of Windows' appearance and operation—everything from menu flyout speed to CD-ROM autorun settings.

The suite scores points with its clean main interface, informative descriptors that appear when your mouse floats over any tool, and excellent built-in help. Still, even experienced users should plan on visiting the help screens, as some of System Mechanic's modules aren't particularly intuitive. The Registry cleaner and optimizer, for instance, digs up

invalid Windows Registry entries, but it doesn't provide any useful information about them or indicate whether they're safe to remove. Thankfully, that module has an undo option, but some of the others don't—they send you to the Recycle Bin to recover any mistakenly deleted files. Ultimately, the lack of guidance in some of the more system-intrusive tools left us uncomfortable.

Internet security is provided courtesy of Panda Antivirus Platinum 7.0, which includes firewall protection and a one-year subscription for updates. We liked the utility's attractive interface and support for virus quarantining and scan scheduling. Nevertheless, we were bothered by its persistent registration demands (and tendency to forget our ID and password) and concerned that the Mydoom virus hadn't been added to its definitions list a full month after it struck.

System Mechanic's hard drive defragmenter, spyware detector, and pop-up killer all performed commendably. The latter also removes ad banners from Web pages, which makes for slightly faster page loading.

System Mechanic 4 Professional serves up a vast array of system and security utilities—some invaluable, some confusing, and a few hazardous if not handled with care.

—Rick Broida

