Lost in Disk Space

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The next BIG THING in anti-HIV drug may be discovered not in some high-tech, super-secure lab but lurking in the RAM-ridden recesses of your very own computer. FightAIDS@Home, a new project launched last September by San Diego-based start-up Entropia, utilizes your PC's idle resources to retrieve small pieces of data (let the wonks sweat the details) and perform calculations that model how drugs interact with various HIV mutations. It only takes about 15 minutes to download a free software program from www.fightaidsathome.org. While you're checking e-mail or working on a spreadsheet, it runs in the background. "A PC uses only about 5 percent of its capacity," cofounder Scott Kurowski says. "This program lets you recycle that lost capability." After a chunk has been processed, results are packed up and sent back to scientists at the Scripps Research Institute. If your number-crunching nets a promising computation, reps have pledged to officially recognize the processor-with-the-mostest.

Inspired by the SETI@HOME project, which uses a similar method to "listen" for extraterrestrial activity in outer space, Entropia is harnessing the power of PCs -- about 2,500 at press time -- to combat the much-mutating virus. (A Macintosh version should be available within a year.) One HIVer we asked to test the program confirmed the simplicity of installing the application on his computer. "It was even easier than I expected," says 29-year-old Troy Salisbury of Atlanta. "And it's cool that your computer can be used for more than cruising around AOL chat rooms."

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