

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 183: Updates

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How the heck do you keep up with all the updates of software and drivers that are spread around the hard drive of your machine? There are security and performance updates for your Windows Operating System (XP, Win7, or whatever), and these are pretty well taken care of by Microsoft, providing you have automatic updates turned on. And some stand-alone programs, like Microsoft Security Essentials, will update automatically if you have the correct boxes checked in the program's settings. But what about drivers, that are almost never automatically updated? What about Adobe Flash Player, which will never update unless you specifically select its automatic updates provision, an option that is difficult to find?

Outdated drivers are not the worst things in the world. You may take a hit in performance with old drivers, but most commonly using an old one is at least not dangerous. However, Adobe Flash Player is. There have been a number of back door attacks by hackers recently, through Adobe, and the company continues to scramble to plug the openings. You'd better be right up to date with anything from Adobe, including Acrobat, for your own security. So what do you do?

There are a lot of pay-for programs out there that claim to do the job. But, there are a few free ones that will work, too. Probably the best one to keep your *programs* updated is Patch My PC (get it at <http://www.patchmypc.net>). What you download is an .exe file – a program – that you can simply double click to start – no installation is required. Those programs that you have installed on your machine that are out of date show up in red. The ones that are the latest version show in green. A simple mouse click will cause the latest version of a program to download and install. When everything is in green, you are done. You can choose which programs you want scanned, so it is flexible. It is also lightweight – it only uses resources while it is running, not when you close it. I recommend this program highly, especially to keep Flash Player updated. It will not, however, update drivers for you.

Another tool to keep *programs* updated is Secunia PSI (PSI = Personal Software Inspector). Perhaps more thorough than Patch My PC, Secunia PSI must be installed (but it is a free program). You can get it at majorgeeks.com, left panel under Security. While certainly valuable and thorough, be aware that the current version takes quite awhile to load and scan your machine. I routinely start it, then minimize it and go on to something else. A few minutes later, it is ready to go and I can come back to it to install updated programs. A green icon in your tray says, "all is OK", while a red one tells you something is outdated, so it is always running. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile tool.

Drivers are another story. Any driver updater package needs to scan your computer, and then find the correct version among thousands of drivers available on the Internet. My favorite freeware program to do this is SlimDrivers (find it at majorgeeks.com, left column, Site Info, Top Freeware Picks, under Update Your Drivers). It works. I install it and run it every 6 to 9 months to update my drivers, and then I uninstall it. It is a program you do not need running on your machine at all times – just now and then to see if your drivers are all up-to-date. You certainly don't need it using resources each time you boot. And use caution when installing it. Opt out of everything you don't need or it will install unasked-for software that has nothing to do with updating your drivers. But, it is truly valuable. I have used it to find and install drivers on ARES/RACES rebuild machines that I just could not find in any other way.

Happy computing!

"The supercomputer is technologically impossible. It would take all the water that flows over Niagara Falls to cool the heat generated by the number of vacuum tubes required." --Professor of Electrical Engineering, New York University.