

From the TechnoManor

I received a piece of email in my Inbox last week. It was a 2-topic email. I'll tackle the 1st topic this week.

Is every update reminder legitimate? I have a Dell computer that will be one year old this month. The "active update" says ...

The following update is ready to install :

AIM (R) Software- Version 6.5.12.1 Update

"Install Now" -

Should I do this? Will it cost me any money? Why do I get these notices?

Ahhh, updates. They're a mixed blessing on our computers these days. In general, they are legitimate. They are attempts by software makers to fix mistakes in their programs. Many of these mistakes can pose security risks to your computer. The updates are attempts to plug the holes before they become open doors for viruses and spyware.

Ok, you see me using a few "weasel words" in my explanation. Some updates are also opportunities by software makers to slip new features into their products. Some of these features are nice. Sometimes these features are the groundwork for some future product that will cost you money.

Part of the confusion and frustration with updates is that each software maker has a different way to update their software. Microsoft and Apple have unified systems that try to minimize the noise. The other software makers don't use these facilities which gives rise to many, "what should I do here?" questions.

Trust me, I scratch my head each time I see one of these notices on my computers. Here are the ones I pay attention to:

Operating system (Windows and Mac OS)

Microsoft Office

Web browser (Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, and Apple's Safari)

Security software (your "aunties")

Java (from Sun Microsystems)

Adobe Reader

Adobe Flash

Any program you use often that accesses the Internet (e.g., iTunes)

All other updates (especially from Dell or HP), I ignore and try to disable.

And what about the AIM Update, above?

AIM is AOL's Instant Messenger program. If you actively use AIM to communicate with people, you should install this update. If you've never heard of AIM, or don't use it, don't bother to install the update. Also, if there's some check box or other thing allowing you to never be bugged again, check it!

Things to know about updates.

- Most software updates are free. The exceptions I've seen often have some kind of cancel button when they pitch for money. Besides, they would require you to give a credit card number, which is totally under your control. If you see that, click Cancel and call for help to find out what's going on.
- Be mindful of some of updates. Some like to bring in their friends when they update themselves. If you are given a choice, always take the bare minimum required (i.e., update only the program itself). Do not accept extra stuff that may be suggested or recommended. Google and Yahoo! toolbars like to sneak onto your computer this way.
- If you get a prompt to update a program you've never seen or heard of before, beware. This may be a virus or spyware masquerading as something legitimate. Click the Cancel button (if there is one), or the big **X** in the upper-right corner. Get help before proceeding on this.
- Do you have a choice to install updates? Typically, yes. But consider the consequences. If this is an important piece of software (see my list above), not updating may invite an infection to your computer. Most of the time, if you decline an update, you simply create a future nag from your computer. And it will nag you. So, get it over with, accept the update, and wait for your computer to be fiddled with. If this is a seldom-used piece of software, you may want to consider uninstalling it to avoid the nag.
- On Windows XP computers, you should switch from Windows Update to Microsoft Update. This will automatically update all Microsoft products on your computer, including Microsoft Office. Do this to make the switch:
 - Click **Start**.
 - Click **Windows Update** (near top of menu)
 - Internet Explorer opens, visiting the Windows Update page. Click **Microsoft Update** or **Try Microsoft Update Today** or some similar link.
 - On the Try Microsoft Update today Web page, follow the remaining instructions

From now on, Windows will use Microsoft Updates as part of the Automatic Updates process. This will keep Windows, Internet Explorer, Office (Access, Excel, Outlook, Powerpoint, and Word), and a host of other Microsoft products current.

On Windows Vista computers, Microsoft Update is used. So, don't worry about these steps.

And for your reference, Automatic Updates is Microsoft's system for keeping your computer software patched. It runs all the time, contacting Microsoft's servers for updates. Then, in the middle of the night, typically on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, it will install those updates and restart your computer. That's why you might find a Welcome menu on your computer certain Wednesday mornings, when you sit down with your first cup of coffee.

I hope this gives you another tool in your arsenal to tame your wily computer. Next week I'll address the 2nd topic from my emailer. It's on extended warranties.

But keep sending me those questions! My Inbox is open at:

frenchygrey@gmail.com

Someday, I'll have to tell you why it's called "frenchygrey." Some of you already know...

Dave Gillen