

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Update the changes to your modifications

Does it seem to you that updates have gotten out of control? I use Pidgin for instant messaging; recently it notified me that a new version was available and asked if I wanted to download it. I did, so I clicked the appropriate link and Firefox tried to open. There was a message about an update for one of the add-ins, so I allowed that to happen, but then Firefox noticed that it was due for an update, too. Finally, I reached the Pidgin site, downloaded the update, and installed it. Then I started my e-mail program, which notified me that I needed to download an update and, while that was happening, the Windows Update notifier let me know that Windows wanted to download and install a new file. Before that process finished, a Tray pop-up from Adobe told me about tens of megabytes of downloads for Creative Suite 3. And, of course, some of the updates required restarting the computer.

Before I could start working on whatever it was I had planned to do, I had to deal with more than 20 minutes worth of updates. And that's with a fast connection. On dial-up, the process would have taken hours.

It's not that I dislike the updates. I understand that they're a part of life in the computer age. Security flaws are located and fixed. Annoying program anomalies (aka "bugs") are identified and retired with extreme prejudice. Developers add minor features or fix major features that were broken in the current release. Particularly in the case of open-source software, minor step upgrades happen every few weeks (or every few days).

I could avoid some of the interruptions by allowing Windows Update to modify the operating system on its own. That's probably safe, but I like to know what Microsoft has up its sleeve because even a monitored update service can go off the rails, install old drivers in place of new drivers, and turn your computer into a smoldering pile of rubble.

No solutions in sight

Several organizations have attempted to establish uniform omnibus update services that every software vendor would send its updates to for distribution. Despite the inescapable logic of such a plan, there are concerns—some real, some imagined—about security

problems. And then there's the corporate/political question: Does anyone really believe that Microsoft, Adobe, and Corel will cede control of their own update procedures to some third party? And what about the thousands of other organizations that write applications for just the Windows platform? Who would be liable for what and to whom in the event of a malfunction?

A Windows update could break a Corel application, for example. If that happens, who's responsible for fixing the problem? Would it be Corel? Microsoft? The third-party provider of updates? The vendors would probably have to grow third hands to have enough fingers available to point at each other while the responsibility for fixing the problem would fall where it always falls: To the user.

If somebody ever develops a third-party update service that works, I'll be an early adopter. Who's the likely candidate? In my world, it would be the operating system. All applications would contact the operating system's "update service" when an update is available. It would be the operating system's responsibility to verify the credentials of the update. It would be the operating system's responsibility to download the update. It would be the operating system's responsibility to show the user a list of all updates downloaded within the past X number of hours (selectable by the user), to ask the user which updates to install and when, and to coordinate the installation of the updates so that they won't get in each other's way. In fact, this is quite close to the procedure Ubuntu Linux uses, at least in a limited fashion.

I'm not expecting an operating system to handle all updates anytime soon, but if somebody does invent one, I already have the name for it: *Nirvana*. **B**

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Seagate is Maxtored

Over the past 20-some years, I have come to consider Seagate disk drives the most reliable consumer drives on the market. When Seagate acquired Maxtor, a company with a far less impressive reputation, I wondered if the acquisition would bring Maxtor's quality up or drag

Seagate's quality down. I'm afraid that I have the answer, and it's not the one I wanted. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

Recently, I bought a Seagate FreeAgent disk drive. It looked good, was priced competitively, had a lot of space, and plugged into the USB port. Within days, I began to develop concerns about the drive's reliability. This drive's sole purpose is to maintain a copy of my current working directories. I use Microsoft's SyncToy to duplicate specific directories from the desktop computer to the FreeAgent drive. It's a simple procedure: SyncToy retains information about files on the desktop system and files on the FreeAgent drive. When I run SyncToy, it copies all new or changed files from the desktop to the external drive. This is about as simple and basic as things get.

Sometimes the copy process halts with an error and the only way to proceed is to disconnect the drive, reconnect it, and start the process again. In one instance, SyncToy said that it would copy more than 2000 new and changed files to the FreeAgent drive, but then began pitching errors after about 1000 files because it couldn't write to the FreeAgent drive. Neither could the Windows Explorer, a command line utility called *robocopy*, or a third-party synchronizer tool called Beyond Compare.

Expecting a quick resolution from Seagate, I visited the company's website and described the problem. Two days later, a Seagate technician responded by saying that Seagate doesn't support third-party software. The FreeAgent drives come with no software, so the only choices a buyer has are the operating system or third-party applications. I pointed that out to the technician, who tried another tack: "I am sorry to say you that you will not be able to 'Mirror' an internal hard drive to the external hard drive. I would suggest you to make a 'Image backup' of your internal hard drive to external hard drive."

I hadn't mentioned mirroring the drive and doing so would require third-party software, which the technician had already told me wasn't supported by Seagate. It was beginning to appear that the FreeAgent drive was a highly reliable overpriced paper weight.

Attempting to move the process forward so that the problem would be resolved before the end of the 5-year warranty, I provided my own diagnosis and requested that Seagate replace the drive. Seagate's reply: "I would suggest you to download 'SeaTools for Windows' and run 'Short Generic Test' and 'Long Generic Test' and check whether it is giving you any error message."

Although the fact that I couldn't reliably write files to the drive seemed to suggest a problem with the drive, I

downloaded the utility and ran the long test, which failed. What a surprise that was! The short test failed, too.

I reported the results to Seagate, included pictures of the screen to show the failure message, and requested that Seagate issue an RMA. That, of course, required dealing with another department that is open only from 7am until 4pm Mountain time, Monday through Friday.

The bottom line

The drive is finally on its way back to Seagate (packed and shipped at my expense) and the company will send a replacement. I hope that it's as reliable as other Seagate disk drives I've owned over the years. And I'm hoping that this is just an isolated problem in which Seagate's quality control temporarily went awry on a specific line of drives. Any company can make a mistake and perhaps they have things under control again. I still trust Seagate, but no longer unquestioningly: When I upgraded the hard drive in my notebook computer this week, I did still specify Seagate.

During the diagnosis, I was never asked what was wrong with the drive and Seagate's instructions explicitly said not to include any information with the drive. Given the retail price of the drive and the cost of a technician's time, the drive will probably be dropped into the trash when it arrives in Texas, but you'd think that Seagate might want data about how drives fail so that they could look into changing the manufacturing process.

It's not just me

The problem with these FreeAgent drives from Seagate seems to be fairly widespread. A Google search for "seagate freeagent fail" reveals comments such as these:

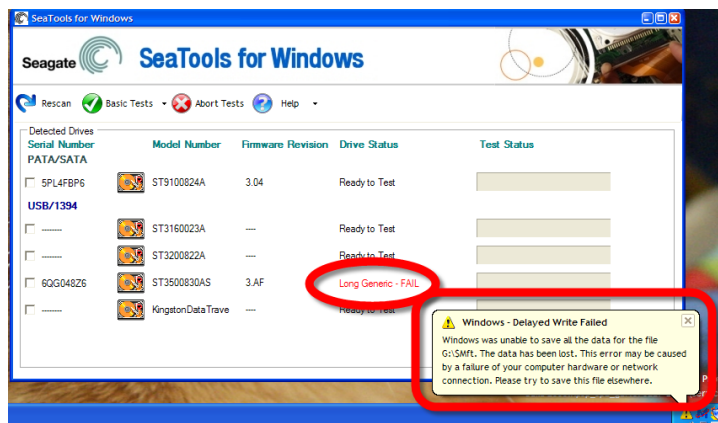
"My 500 GB Free Agent also failed about a week after I first got it I arranged to send it back to Seagate, they sent me a replacement drive in about a week. The second one is working fine."

"Nice design, nice price...not worth the risk, sorry."

"Failed after 3 days. Lost all data."

"It is particularly tempting to get a 500GB drive for roughly \$150 and consolidate/backup all of your data, but you will be sorry."

Seagate products typically have a 90% favorable rating, but these drives are lucky to hit 60% favorable. If you're looking for a big drive, beware those with too-low prices. **B**



on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"Be ready for new employees when they report for work and provide them with a complete introduction to the job, the results expected of them, and their co-workers."