

THE WEB

Hey, Driver, Take the Free Way

By William Powell

Chances are, your day-to-day existence is free of thoughts about software drivers. But, as many computer users have learned, drivers can leave you scratching your head or pounding your keyboard in frustration. Thankfully, there are several Websites that will help you put your drivers on the straight and narrow.

Drivers are the software files that let your printer—or other peripherals such as modems, mice, and monitors—communicate with your computer. See, your

computer (Windows) likes to send out generic commands to attached devices. The driver then deciphers those commands into a language specific to that device and vice versa. I like to think of my computer as U.N. Ambassador John D. Negroponte, my peripherals as the United Nations, and the drivers as the U.N. translators busily repeating his comments into representatives' ears. (Computer identities can be switched to match country of user origin.)

Drivers tend to do their jobs well enough, and that's why computer users rarely have to deal with them. But, from time to time, something goes awry, your commands get lost in translation, and it's time for a new driver. When that happens, contact the manufacturer first; it usually has a list of drivers available for download on its Website. But, as is often the case, especially with older peripherals, the manufacturer might not be able to help.

There are Websites that specialize in compiling databases of device drivers. Notable among them is DriverGuide.com. The site offers more than 70,000 driver files in its searchable archive. (All are free of charge.) And it supports the three major operating systems: Windows, Mac, and Unix. More impressive is that most of its drivers are uploaded from members just trying to help out fellow users. A system of user feedback keeps uploads aboveboard.

Other free sites, such as CNet's Download.com, provide a wide range of drivers as well. So, before you pay, try the free way. At worst, you'll end up with a driver that doesn't work. But my personal experience has been so good that I doubt that will be the case.

If you're having trouble locating a manufacturer-approved driver, another free Website, Driverzone.com, supplies an extensive directory of links to guide you to a manufacturer's site, in addition to its archive of driver files.

On the pay-per side, WinDrivers.com offers a similar driver service, and includes security patches and anti-virus updates for the Windows platform. For an annual fee of US\$29.95 or a one-day pass for \$4.95, users can gain full access to the site's archive. Although the fee doesn't guarantee better quality, it does help to provide tech support should you run into trouble.

Another option is Driver Headquarters, which markets a software program



Email to Excess

Ever wonder where your day went? There's a good chance that nearly a quarter of it was spent on email. According to a 2003 American Management Association report, "Email Rules, Policies, and Practices Survey," the average time spent working on email is one hour, 47 minutes. What's more, 31 percent of respondents said that they spend more than two hours a day on email.

Although those figures seem like a lot, I'd wager that many users fritter away much more time on email than they think. The study points out, however, that three quarters of respondents spend less than 25 percent of their email time on spam or personal email. So at least they're working.



called Driver Detective. The software scans your computer and then offers a list of updated drivers, which can then be installed from what the company claims is the largest database of drivers online. Users will need to pay a one-time fee of US\$29.95. www.drivershq.com

Drivers aren't something to lose sleep over—until something goes wrong. Even then, updates can be downloaded and installed within a few minutes. Although the updates are usually issued to correct a minor glitch in the previous version, they might result in an increase in performance. So, for the general health of your computer, it's a good idea to check for driver updates a couple of times a year. Like balancing your checkbook, it makes you feel good for having done it.

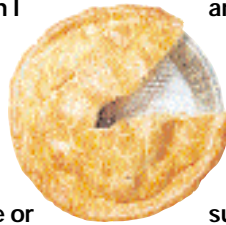
Quick TIP

You probably know by now that it's no longer necessary to type the `http://` prefix when entering a Web address into your browser, but you can save additional time with current browsers by omitting the `www` and the `.com` extension. Just enter the heart of the domain, for example `astd`, and press `Ctrl+enter`. Your browser will then wrap the rest of the address around the domain and send you on your way.

Pie Cam

It's no secret that I have a weakness—some would say addiction—for Edwards's single-serving slices of Key Lime pie. I have to check the fridge before every trip to the supermarket. So, you can imagine my interest when I read that Swedish appliance manufacturer Electrolux is working on a fridge cam that users can access from their cell phones.

The current prototype of the company's Food Management System consists of a digital camera housed inside your refrigerator and connected to the Internet. Users with a WAP-enabled cell phone or PDA can connect to their fridge cam and see what's inside as they browse the shelves at the local market.



Oh, and in case you're wondering, the connection via the wireless application protocol is secure, so you won't have to worry about having your connection hijacked and images of that five-year-old bottle of mustard and the quart of sour milk posted on the Web.

The Food Management System is still in the prototype stage, but I'm not getting my hopes up, yet. Several smart appliances have made it to market in recent years, only to receive a lukewarm response from consumers. Electrolux is still unsure about how or when the product will be released. Until then, I guess I'll just have to stock up.

The Unwritten Word

I've commented before on password security and the rules for strengthening them. And though those rules still hold true, a recent study by security vendor Rainbow Technologies of company administrators, managers, and security specialists suggests that there might be a glitch in the three simple rules for password protection.

But first a quick review: 1) Don't write your password down, 2) use passwords with a minimum of eight arbitrary characters, (letters, numbers, and symbols) avoid-

ing names or phrases, 3) change your password frequently—every couple of months. Now, back to the survey.

The problem, as the survey discovered, is that companies are asking users to follow those rules, which then require employees to remember complex passwords. Unlike your child's middle name, remembering something like X@2zP&3g isn't easy. Such passwords encourage users to write them down, thus breaking the cardinal rule of password protection.

An astonishing 80 percent of respondents said that following the aforementioned rules has increased the likelihood of employees writing their passwords down, sharing them with co-workers, or forgetting them entirely. And you won't make any friends in the IT department if you have to start each day with a help request because you're locked out.

There's no better way to ensure strong password protection than by using a password generator and storage device or software, of which there are several on the market. Whether your company requires you to

change your password once a month or twice a year, you'll know that your password is secure. But it's unlikely that individual users will buy one. So, here's a trick that might help if your passwords have you stumped. Use model numbers from objects you have around the home. You might try a combination of the TV and the hairdryer—or dishwasher, electric shaver, and stereo. It's silly, but it can give the appropriate combination of numbers, letters, and characters that you'll need.

That way, if you just can't get by without a reminder, you can put a sticky note on your computer with the words *microwave*, *VCR*, or whatever you've chosen, until you have the password memorized. Co-workers won't have a clue what they mean, or they'll think you're a bit odd. Either way, your password is safe.

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