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Opinions

The Ultimate Win 98 Install Tip

By Jim Seymour

My stats aren't as interesting as Mark's, Sammy's, or Roger's, but I'm having a pretty good season too: So far I'm 19 for 24. That is, I've installed Windows 98 24 times now, and the process has gone smoothly 19 of those times. The other 5 upgrades took some work--in 4 out of 5 cases, Microsoft's pigheaded installation routine was at fault--but I got all of them except the first running within half an hour. Based on what I read, what I hear from others, and your mail, that 19-for-24 record (and 24-for-24 tally for eventual success) means I'm close to leading the league.

The most interesting experiences haven't been the 19 painless installs, of course, but the 5 that had problems in one way or another. I don't claim to be a Win 98 expert, but I do think my problems are probably pretty typical. If you've had problems upgrading a PC to Win 98, or have been holding off upgrading because of horror stories you've read and heard about install problems, then my experience should be useful.

And I'll let you in on a little trapdoor, installed courtesy of the Redmond crowd, that's very likely the villain in most failed Win 98 installs. It turned the one installation that took me 6 hours into a nightmare, but now you and I can solve that nasty problem in a minute or two.

The machines I've upgraded have all been Pentiums, ranging from an ancient 120-MHz desktop to several more or less current 300-MHz and faster boxes. There were a couple of Pentium/133s, and a bunch of 166s and 200s in between. I haven't yet tried (nor do I plan to try) upgrading any 486 machines; let sleeping dogs lie. Sure, 486s can still do useful work, but they're just not appropriate platforms for the latest-generation operating system.

And by the way, no, I don't have 24 PCs. Several of these machines have been in my offices, most have belonged to friends who importuned me to do what they were afraid to do, and a couple were spur-of-the-moment upgrades in clients' offices, where I did it as a kind of demonstration.

One of the five failed (let's say troubled) installs involved a Number Nine Imagine 128 video card. I love Number Nine's products but have run into Win 95 upgrade problems with the

Imagine before, and so I shouldn't have been surprised. It took about 20 minutes to get the machine to run in anything other than 640-by-480 resolution after the move to Win 98. I kept installing the latest video drivers for the Imagine, and the card still didn't work. Finally, about a dozen reboots later, I tricked the machine into running at 1,280-by-1,024, which was what I wanted--and it's been perfectly stable, with the Imagine's usual fast video, ever since.

The remaining four problem upgrades all resulted from the nasty, behind-the-scenes work of a new Windows "feature": the almost unknown but evilly pernicious Version Control Manager.

Tired of hearing about customers' problems with old, outdated, idiosyncratic, and just plain weird drivers, Microsoft decided that Win 98 should clean up any drivers it finds at installation that it believes are old, outdated, or nonstandard. This is handled by the VCM, which first backs up those drivers, then (invisibly) overwrites them with what Microsoft believes are safe, up-to-date, generic, and broadly applicable drivers. The result rarely keeps an upgraded machine from booting but may very well disable key subsystems, because Microsoft's replacement files often just don't work with commonplace peripherals.

If you have a SCSI card in your PC or if you rely on a Twain.dll to control a scanner, digital camera, or other imaging device, the VCM's probably gonna get you. It will wipe out your SCSI driver and Twain file, replacing them with Microsoft-crafted substitutes, and in the process it may well wreak havoc on your machine.

In the best Microsoft fashion, the VCM is almost completely undocumented. In the worsening world of products without documentation, the VCM is a poster child for the problems a lack of documentation can bring to PC users. (This is also a good example of what happens when a vendor's hubris takes over--but hey, this is Microsoft, otherwise known as Hubris "R" Us.)

Fortunately, though the VCM does its work without asking permission, it makes reversing its damage easy--if you can find it. Bizarrely, the Version Control Manager is hidden six layers deep in the Windows 98 maze (oops, interface), and your chances of finding it, or even knowing of its existence without a little help from a friend, are small indeed.

Here's how to get to the VCM: Click on Start | Programs | Accessories | System Tools | System Information | Tools | Version Conflict Manager. Get through that and you'll have a small window that lists every file the VCM "updated" during the installation process. Just click on the files you want returned to their original states, then click on Restore Selected Files, and the chances are very good that you'll be back in business. Four times out of four it's worked for me, and it's always worked for the dozens of friends, coworkers, and clients I've told about the VCM, too.

If Microsoft hadn't adopted such a brute-force approach to the VCM--for example, if Win 98 asked during install whether you'd like to replace file Xyz.dll with a later version Microsoft believed

might be an improvement--fewer upgraders would get in trouble. But Win 98 doesn't work that way, with the result that far too often, upgraded machines just don't work properly any more.

Take note of that convoluted path to the Version Control Manager, and pass this tip along to your friends. I've become convinced that the VCM problems are at the root of 90-plus percent of Win 98 installation failures, so this one can really save your bacon.

Hot tip: I'm a long-time user of Adobe Photoshop, and I consider it a basic part of my toolkit (even if after all these years, it's still a bear to use). But a brand-new program, NetStudio, has replaced Photoshop for me at least 75 percent of the time when I create Web graphics.

NetStudio makes creating even very sophisticated Web graphics--such as complicated fades and cross-fades, automatic drop shadows, and much more--incredibly fast and easy. It has an endless undo capability that encourages experimentation, the familiar interface looks like Microsoft Word's, and it works beautifully with the market-leading Web site design package Microsoft FrontPage (and with the peerless professional tool NetObjects Fusion).

By stripping out almost everything necessary for print design and preproduction but irrelevant to Web work, NetStudio has become an exemplar of a new class of programs: They are easy to use but so capable that professional users will find them irresistible for their productivity boosts.

At $130 on the street (and shipping, I hope, by the time this column appears), NetStudio is one of the software bargains of the year. And a heck of a lot of fun.

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