



THE OUTER EDGE

Tall Tales from the
Brink of Sanity

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Browser Brawls

PART 2 – The Gloves come Off

Court Protocol

Life in the kingdom of Windows, some say, is more Dungeons and Dragons than Wine and Roses. I used to be a loyal citizen until life became unbearable, but the Court has many ways of punishing those who don't conform. Thankfully the days of public beatings and show trials have given way to more refined methods: those who don't subscribe to the Court's newsletters and implement protocol updates soon find their access rights diminished. By contrast, the Court rewards model citizens with free gifts like **Windows Defender** and the **Power toys** designed by the royal architects to make their Windows work properly.

Last year, Redmond introduced a new service called **Windows Genuine Advantage**. The Court's website promotes WGA as a free health check, but everyone knows that it's a new scheme devised by the secret police to spy on citizens. I've heard people describe WGA as the electronic equivalent of a full body search, followed by a surgical endoscopy. Some claim that the Secret Police insert a listening device and a tiny camera during the procedure.

I don't subscribe to the Court's automatic update service since I want to see what surgical procedures Redmond's droids intend to perform on my PC, and choose the ones that are beneficial. As a result, I've been pushed to the end of the queue for updates. Patch Tuesday comes and goes but nothing comes my way, and that goes for important security patches.

Obstacles

For those citizens who use **Firefox** as the door to the internet, the Court has made access to its services a tough obstacle course, so I keep **Internet Explorer** handy for these occasions. When IE 7 beta 2 was released, offering better security and tabbed browsing, I downloaded and installed it. Even this route doesn't avoid a full body search by the Secret Police.



Once I'd passed the security check and installed IE7 beta, I clicked on the Help menu to explore the new options. Right away a panel popped up telling me that IE7 had encountered a problem and needed to close. The same thing happened when I tried to download one of the **Power toys** on the Court's website with the new browser.

Now I was stuck with a broken door and a busted letterbox, and my easy access to the Court had been terminated. I checked with Google to see if other citizens had struck similar problems. They had indeed, and a few offered a solution: they said uninstalling IE 7 beta made IE 6 return intact by some arcane magic. I tried this and, to my great surprise, it worked.

When IE 7 beta 3 was released, I thought the Court's architects would've sorted out the glitches I'd struck in beta 2. I downloaded beta 3 and went through the long install routine. Once it was finished, I clicked on the Help menu of IE 7 beta to check that this version could assist me without falling over. Alas, like a lemming following its sibling off the cliff, IE beta 3 leapt to its death with the same last gasp – 'Internet Explorer has encountered a problem and needs to close. Sorry for the inconvenience ...'

The same thing happened when I tried to download **Windows Defender** anti-spyware from the Court's website. I shook my head, brought up the Control Panel, opened 'Add or Remove Programs' and crossed IE beta 3 off the list. Just as it had last time, uninstalling IE 7 brought IE 6 back, but now IE 6 crashed when I tried to download **Windows Defender**. I brought IE 6 up again and clicked on the Help button and the old door came off its hinges again - it even mimicked the IE 7 beta to the letter: 'Internet Explorer has encountered a problem and needs to close ... sorry for the inconvenience.'

Somehow the various versions of **Internet Explorer** had managed to swap some genes, a new phenomenon to add to my growing experience.

Busted Doors

With my easy access to the Court closed off, I had to get hold of **Windows Defender** using **Firefox**. This meant subjecting my laptop to the Court's Secret Police and their security checks.

The Court claims that **Windows Genuine Advantage** is a service designed to protect citizens from crooks who sell counterfeit passports. 'Unlike a pirated or counterfeit copy,' the official announcement says, 'a genuine copy of Windows is supported by Microsoft or a trusted reseller partner, provides ongoing access to updates and enhancements, and helps protect against the [risks of counterfeit software](#). With a genuine copy of Windows, you'll get access to the latest technology and a rich computer experience.'

This 'rich experience' has become quite a joke among the citizens. Many say WGA is designed to make the King rich and keep the rest of us poor and frightened. I asked the Oracle of Google for ways to minimize the pain, and it pointed to an IE explorer plug-in for **Firefox**. I tracked it down on the Mozilla website and installed it, but soon realized that it was designed for viewing websites that were hard to see with **Firefox**, not as a cover to get me past the Court's guard dogs.

Back to the Oracle of Google. It suggested trying another browser called **Maxthon**, which uses **Internet Explorer's** engine and even offers a **Microsoft Update** plug-in. Would it give me access to Redmond's fancy toys and services without the guard dogs giving me a hard time? I installed **Maxthon** and tried the Microsoft update plug-in, which made the browser slip into a long trance. It kept on repeating the mantra 'Checking the latest updates for your computer.'

Out of Options

I gave up and returned to the Court's website with **Firefox**. I still wanted to get my hands on **Windows Defender**, even if it meant subjecting my lapdog to WGA's guard dogs. The body search failed to appease them and they insisted on inserting their own plug-in, claiming it was quite painless. I gritted my teeth out of sympathy with my lapdog, but the plug-in didn't work either.

I pleaded with the guards, offering them proof that my Windows were the genuine royal issue. They took pity on me and came up with another validation method: if I agreed to perform certain feats, they'd give me a secret key that I was to put into a special box. After I'd done what I was asked to do, Cerberus grudgingly let me download **Windows Defender** with **Firefox**.

A couple of months later, the Court announced **IE7 Release Candidate 1**, which was said to be a more solid door than the early crashing prototypes. Once more I went through the humiliating routine Cerberus put me through, in the hope of regaining the easy access to the Court I used to enjoy.

When I prodded the installer into action, he demanded that I shut down all running software, including my malware protection. He didn't suggest doing the install offline, which confirmed my suspicion that all the Court's fancy talk about security was just that. I turned the modem off, then my security programs, and wondered how far the installer would get before he needed to call home.

A bright blue green panel appeared, telling me that IE7 was installing components. A row of dots flashed from left to right across the timing slot like the roaming eye of Big Brother in '1984'. As I stared back, I wondered why the king's architects had broken the protocol for software installers they'd imposed on all the artisans working at the palace: the standard panel with its tick-the-box options and the 0 to 100 time bar that charts the progress of the installation.

I watched the roaming eye until I felt dizzy, put the laptop aside and attended to other duties. An hour later the eye was still scanning my office. I closed the lid on it.

Evasion Tactics

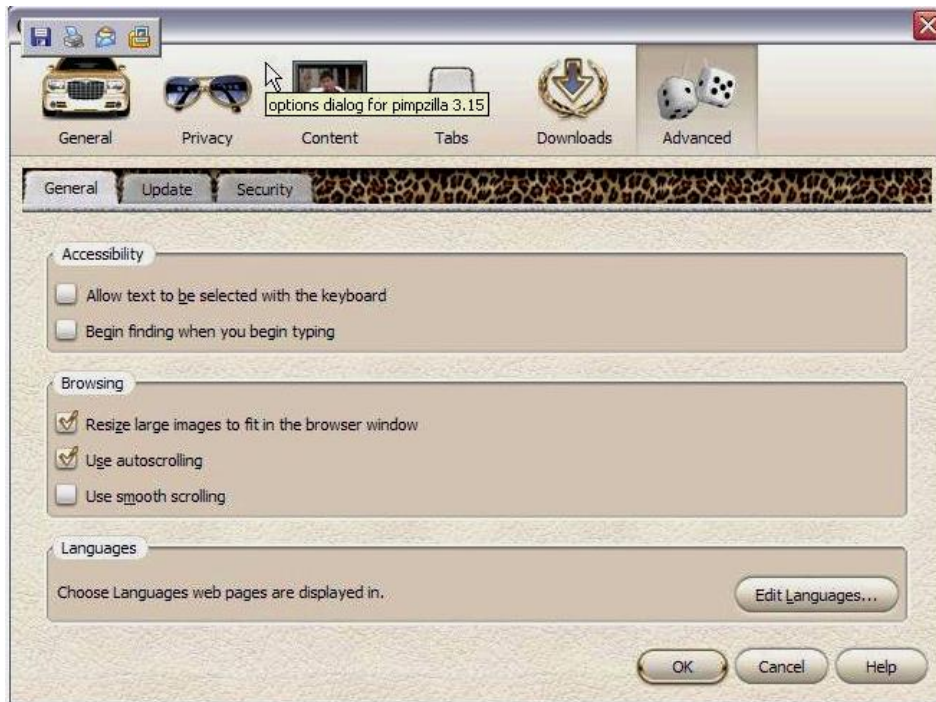
I tried hard to convince myself that I could live without the Court's free trinkets. **Windows Defender** wasn't the only free anti-spyware program out there, and some of the Court's free toys had strings attached as I discovered when I downloaded **Synchtory** from the Court's website a while ago. It promised to make synchronising files between PCs easy as pie, and that was attractive. After I'd installed **Synchtory**, it told me that it needed Microsoft's **.net framework** to work. I'd already tried to install several versions of this framework, only to see all of them collapse for no apparent reason. I had no desire to repeat that experience.

If I was prepared to forgo the Court's free gifts, I could make do without **Internet Explorer**. The all-important Windows Updates were still arriving, if not in a timely manner due to my place near the end of the queue.

I'd installed **Firefox** on my laptop after reading that IE 6 could not be trusted with matters requiring discretion, but I the Foxy Lady had some habits that annoyed me. At first, I was taken in by her generous configuration, and for the way she lets you dress her up and choose her accoutrements. Once the excitement wore off, I noticed that we were always running late because she's such a slow riser. This isn't a problem during surfing sessions (once she's up and awake) but it is annoying when you just want to open a saved html document.

I asked Google about this habit and the Oracle pointed me to websites offering advice. Typing aboutconfig into the search window opens **Firefox's** kimono and lets you play with the hidden delights any way you please. I only adjusted a few pubic hairs with the help of the guide I'd found but, sadly, it didn't reduce the time it took to arouse **Firefox** from her slumber.

Still, the lady's wardrobe is impressive: it ranges from the most elegant silk gowns to gaudy outfits featuring leopard skin and flashy bling-bling.



Mind you, all these trinkets seem to slow her down. She uses a lot of resources to keep up appearances and spends ages choosing garments from her vast wardrobe. Her fondness for dressing up doesn't mean she's not a willing courtesan who tries to accommodate your every need. She also has enough surprises in her bag to indulge all your fantasies, from a chicken foot to a platypus and a grease monkey.

Maxthon is a more nimble browser and has nicer knobs and handles than **Internet Explorer**, from tabbed browsing to retrieving pages you close accidentally. It's easy to get along with apart from the nag screen that pops up when you first open the browser, asking for a donation. I tend to make donations for good freeware and I don't mind the odd reminder, but a hand held out every time you open the door wears a bit thin after a while.

There's another pop-up when you close the browser, asking if you really mean it. In between, the browser is easy to configure and a pleasure to use, if a little slower than IE to load pages. In fact **Maxthon** is so good that you wonder why Microsoft didn't just buy the firm out of petty cash instead of redesigning its old door.

Opera is a more elegant diva to begin with, but her toolbars take up much of the stage and aren't easily moved. She's surprisingly slim for a lady with a lush voice, and she's lightning fast despite the gadgets she carries with her. She only nags you once (when you call on her services), demanding to know if she's your performer of preference. The many attractions of **Opera** are hard to resist, even if her mouse gestures take some getting used to. She even offers to take care of your mail, which you'll appreciate if you're running on an older PC with limited memory.



These browsers offer enough delights to keep the adventurous amused for days. My needs are simple, however: I don't want my computer screen to become a stage for gala performances, nor do I want it turned into a zoo or a two-dollar shop of gadgets. I have a radio in my office, a watch on my wrist and a calculator on my desk. All I want is a door to the Internet that allows me to go where I want to go, via the shortest route possible.

And now for an Encore

Every story needs an ending and this story didn't have one until **Internet Explorer 7**, the finished door, was ready to be delivered to every home in the kingdom. Once more I trod the slippery path around Cerberus and downloaded IE7. The installer still demanded that I turn off my antivirus protection and once more the roaming eye flashed from left to right and left to right and left to ... What was it doing? It had to know the layout of my office by now, down to the last paperclip.

This time it stopped after ten minutes, then the installer wanted to call home and check for updates despite having just downloaded the latest version. I turned my protection and the modem back on, then stared at the roaming eye as it scanned my office for another ten minutes before it threw up a panel with this message: 'Microsoft Update has encountered a problem and needs to close – sorry for the ...'

Yet another broken door, I thought, but after it shut down I saw the IE 7 icon on the screen and curiosity got the better of me. Clicking on it brought up the new door and, wonder of wonders, it managed to open the Help menu and take me to the Court's free goodies site without collapsing under the strain.

These are the kinds of trials the citizens in the Kingdom of Windows have to endure. Most of them will install IE7 to get easy access to the Court and to keep the Secret Police off their backs, not because it's a great door or easy to install. By now, they're so used to the convoluted protocols the King's architects impose on them that many have lost their bearings along with their freedom.

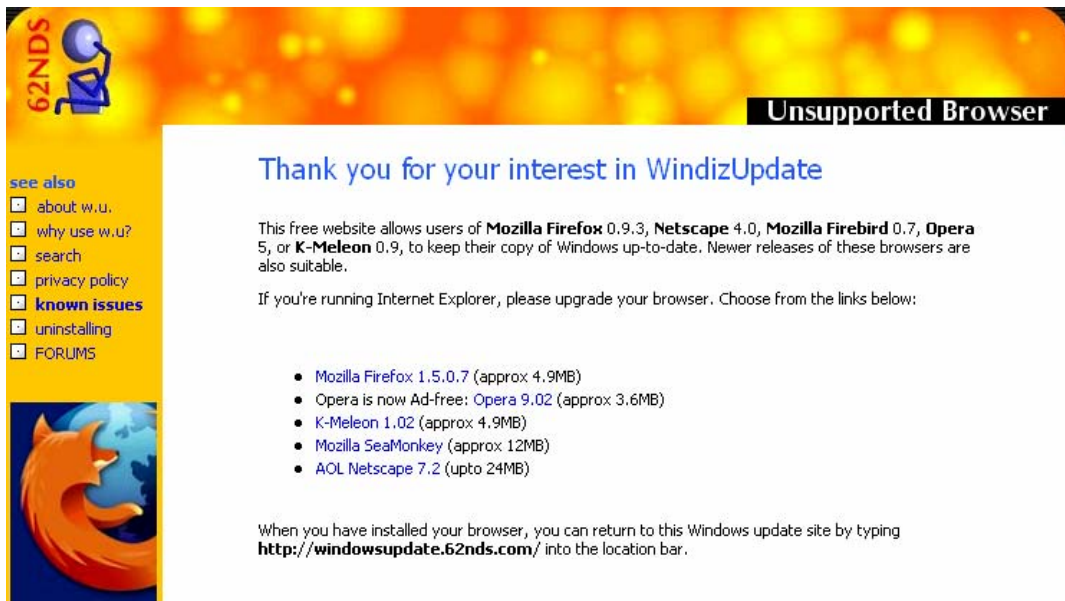
Another World

Firefox 2 was released not long after IE7, and upgrading from **Firefox 1.5** was so easy that my 2-year old grand daughter could've done it. It was a 5mb download (15mb for IE), installed itself in a flash, checked the extensions and add-ons I'd used and updated them for me. It didn't demand that I turn off antivirus software and didn't ask me to reboot the machine. The whole upgrade took little more than five minutes, including half a dozen extensions.

Add-ons and extensions for **Firefox** aren't full programs but tiny plug-ins that download in a flash and then huddle like kids in their mother's skirts. And most of these kids are pretty helpful. By contrast, the only useful extension I found for IE7 was *Browster*. It took longer to install than the entire Firefox 2 upgrade and then blocked both browsers from accessing the Net. I feel that's taking security a little too far.

Free at Last?

Lately, the underground seems to be gaining in strength and confidence. One of the cells, known by the code name **Windiz**, offers to check your machine and tell you what updates are available from the Court, just like the official service does. It downloads only the updates you want and installs them with no need to do battle with Cerberus. In a gesture of true rebellion, **Windiz** refuses service to users of **Internet Explorer** and encourages them to switch to **Firefox**. This is the message you get when you access <http://windowsupdate.62nds.com/> with **Internet Explorer**:



62NDS

Unsupported Browser

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Thank you for your interest in WindizUpdate

This free website allows users of **Mozilla Firefox** 0.9.3, **Netscape** 4.0, **Mozilla Firebird** 0.7, **Opera** 5, or **K-Meleon** 0.9, to keep their copy of Windows up-to-date. Newer releases of these browsers are also suitable.

If you're running Internet Explorer, please upgrade your browser. Choose from the links below:

- Mozilla Firefox 1.5.0.7 (approx 4.9MB)
- Opera is now Ad-free: Opera 9.02 (approx 3.6MB)
- K-Meleon 1.02 (approx 4.9MB)
- Mozilla SeaMonkey (approx 12MB)
- AOL Netscape 7.2 (upto 24MB)

When you have installed your browser, you can return to this Windows update site by typing **http://windowsupdate.62nds.com/** into the location bar.

Beyond the Kingdom of Windows lies a land where life is free and easy, it seems. I've had a taste of it and I'd like to see it with my own eyes.

PART 1 – [A SHORT HISTORY OF WINDOWS AND DOORS](#)