

## [Do you really need Microsoft's Windows Genuine Advantage?](#)



*Stump the PC Club is a free tech-advice column written by members of the **North Orange County Computer Club**, which has been in existence since 1976. Visit the club's site at [noccc.org](http://noccc.org). And don't forget to stop by the Gadgetress' home for the PC Club, at [ocregister.com/link/pcclub](http://ocregister.com/link/pcclub), to find out how to ask a question and read past answers.*

**QUESTION:** I am running Microsoft Windows XP Professional, SP3 on my Dell Dimension 4550. Starting about two weeks ago, every time I boot my computer the first thing to appear is an installation wizard titled "Windows Genuine Advantage Notifications." Apparently Microsoft wants me to install a program on my PC to verify the authenticity of my software.

I am confident that ALL of my software is legitimate. I have no pirated programs on my computer, and have purchased (often at inflated prices) all of the software that I run. I have nothing to fear regarding the origins of my programs, but I greatly resent the idea of Microsoft snooping around my computer.

When this wizard appears, there are only two options available to me: install the software, or cancel. Naturally, I cancel. The question is how do I prevent this window from appearing in the first place? Will I be forced to cancel every time I start up my computer? It seems like a gross invasion of privacy to me. - Tom



**Windows** PC Club: Let's start with a definition of [Windows Genuine Advantage](#) (WGA) from [Wikipedia](#) since I couldn't have said it better myself:

“Windows Genuine Advantage (WGA) is an anti-piracy system created by Microsoft that enforces online validation of the licensing of several recent Microsoft Windows operating systems when accessing several services, such as Windows Update, and downloading Windows components from the Microsoft Download Center. WGA consists of two components; an installable component called WGA Notifications that hooks into Winlogon (this loads the user profile at logon among other things) and validates the Windows license upon each logon and an ActiveX control that checks the validity of the Windows license when downloading certain updates from the Microsoft Download Center or Windows Update. WGA Notifications covers Windows XP, Windows Vista and current test versions of Windows 7.”

What you are experiencing is very normal, Tom. Although there are some tricky workarounds to avoid this, the best thing is to allow this to install on your PC. The fact that you are experiencing this in no way reflects on your integrity and it is not accusing you of pirating software. It’s unfortunate that we must be submitted to this but it is one of the costs associated with using the Windows operating system.

If your version of Windows XP is not genuine and does not pass the validation schemes, you won’t be able to download security patches from Windows Update, or install the latest version of Internet Explorer 7 and other software.

However, Microsoft is continuing its policy of allowing even those who can’t prove they are running non-pirated copies of Windows to still obtain critical security fixes. So, essentially, you don’t really need WGA, which Ryan Russell, a writer at Windows Secrets, points out in his column “[Windows Genuine Advantage is still genuinely bad.](#)”

There are several approaches to dealing with Microsoft’s WGA policy:

1. Install it so you won’t be asked again.
2. Dismantle it, as suggested by [ComputerWorld’s “What it is, how to ditch it.”](#) This, however, involves editing the computer’s registry so only attempt this if you know what you’re doing. I won’t offer the step-by-step instructions here because it is complicated. But detailed instructions are on Microsoft’s own support page, “[How to disable or uninstall the pilot version of Microsoft Windows Genuine Advantage Notifications for Windows XP](#)“ (link: [bit.ly/Yhep4](http://bit.ly/Yhep4))
3. Let someone else handle security updates for you. Individual PC users can install all security patches - whether rated “Critical,” “Important,” or any other level of severity - without WGA hassles. The following are a few free examples:
  - **The Software Patch.** You can do without “Automatic Updates” and “Windows Update/Microsoft Update,” which can be hamstrung by WGA, by using [The Software Patch](#). This is a free Web service, which [won raves](#) from Scott Dunn, contributing editor of the Windows Secrets newsletter (see “[Get free patching without Windows Update](#)“).

- **Online Software Inspector.** My [Feb. 18, 2009, column](#) described [Secunia.com's](#) Online Software Inspector (OSI). This free service scans your PC on demand. OSI then enumerates the security patches that are needed by your copy of Windows, in addition to patches for dozens of applications from Microsoft and other software vendors. Secunia also has a Personal Software Inspector (PSI). This is a free download that you install and run on your PC. At present, its primary purpose is to inform you of security updates for hundreds of applications, and you should run PSI in conjunction with Windows Update or Microsoft Update

Personally, I opt for #1 and #3 above for my PCs. I let Microsoft install WGA and to have Secunia alert me for all my software, such as the Flash plug-in. Plus, for those users that do have a valid version of Windows XP, Microsoft offers some special promotions when visiting its [Genuine Windows Benefits page](#). - *Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member.*  
View his blog at [www.edwardns.com/blog](http://www.edwardns.com/blog).