

## Cleaning Windows - the inside dirt.

(An Aussie user's light hearted account of the pain involved in tweaking his PC)

18 months have passed since I shouted my desktop a new motherboard and more memory, and since then the old thing's slowed down again.

This time I blame that guru with the baseball cap and the enormous watch who installed Spybot on my PC and introduced me to freeware.

At the time I was struggling through XP for Dummies, reluctant to admit that it was over my head. I cursed those Rogues in Redmond for stuffing the settings under obscure bushes as if they were hiding Easter eggs for kids.

I like my eggs easy these days so I paid a visit to the local newsagent, where PC mags offered 'jargon-free' advice and CDs full of tools for cleaning Windows and sprucing up XP.

There were more treasures here than you'd find in Aladdin's Cave. Free Download Manager made installing software less hit-and-miss and ZipGenius cracked all those cryptic files open in a flash. ExploreXP made files easier to sort and Foxit's nifty PDF Reader replaced the lumbering leviathan Adobe calls Acrobat. Browser extensions, image viewers and more security software followed. Then I was tempted by an online dictionary, a Thesaurus and Wordtoys, which made Microsoft Word look like a flashing billboard on a Broadway Theatre.

### Housekeeping chores

It wasn't surprising that the engine began to groan after all those guys piled into the back seat. I had to chuck out the freeloaders but that was easier said than done since I had trouble recognizing some of their faces, let alone their names. They all claimed to have done me favours and insisted that I couldn't get by without them.

The PC mags pointed to hidden ballast that accumulates in XP and said a good spring clean would restore my PC's vitality in no time. The full list goes something like this:

- Clean the hard drive
- Perform hard drive repair
- Clean Internet activity Remove duplicate/deleted files
- Make a system backup/hard drive backup
- Optimize Windows operating system
- Optimize Internet settings
- Optimize memory
- Defragment the hard drive
- Optimize registry settings
- Perform registry repair
- Clean the registry
- Defragment the registry

I'd only done two of these jobs on a regular basis: file backup and disk defrag. Now I learned that temp files, duplicate files, cookies, DLLs (whatever they were) and obsolete registry entries were clogging up the arteries of my desktop. Worse, without regular attention to his cholesterol levels, it was only a matter of time before he'd end up in the emergency room needing a triple bypass.

The official XP magazine's cleaning routine told me to use msconfig (typed into Run) to stop non-critical programs launching at start-up time. That made sense since they consumed precious memory, but the long list of services I found there looked like a page from the Greek edition of Homer's Iliad. Instead of providing a translation, the

author told me to disable processes I felt I could manage without, reboot the PC and check if it still worked. It was a little like suggesting that I stab myself in various places until I found one that would cause me to collapse.

### Forbidden Places

Next my guide wanted me to dive into the Windows Registry, head first. I'd read about the registry but had avoided it, for the same reason tourist should avoid a shortcut across the Scottish moors on a moonless night. Perhaps the time had come to face that challenge, but I wasn't going to that without preparation.

An article on the SmartPC website said: '... The Registry Editor will do little or nothing to warn you if you're making potential missteps, and ... it won't even ask you to confirm or save changes to the Registry - it just does it. Changes to Registry keys and values can damage your Windows installation'

You have been warned: one wrong step can land you in quicksand up to your neck. But wait a minute - isn't the biggest complaint about Windows (after the one that it doesn't do windows) is that it throws around warning messages like confetti at a wedding? And the same operating system lets a dumb user like me perform brain surgery on it without a single whimper?

Another site claims that it's a real thrill to get 'your hands dirty in the forbidden Registry ... [as] one mistake could damage your entire Windows installation, which makes you find the challenge even more fun.' I suspect the author used to get a thrill out of playing with matches in his Dad's tool shed when he was younger.

I looked for a more mature guide among recent editions of the official XP mag. One featured a tutorial on 'Mastering the Registry', which promised to 'Clear out and speed up with 20 top tips'. One of the example tweaks was adding an 'Empty' option to the mouse context menu when right-clicking on the Recycle Bin. Don't ask me why I'd want that but it seemed a harmless enough exercise so I typed 'regedit' into the Run field and a panel popped up that looked like Windows Explorer on the left and lines of KGB code on the right.

These were the instructions from the mag:

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'... look under HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT/ *shellex/Context Menu Handlers. Now add one new key called {645FF040-5081-101B-9F08-00AA002F954E} with the default value 'Empty Recycle Bin', and another called 'Empty Recycle Bin' with the Default value set to {645FF040-5081-101B-9F08-00AA002F954E}. Now make the same Empty Recycle Bin, with the Default value again set to {645FF040-5081-101B-9F08-00AA002F954E} in HKEY_ROOT/ Directory/ Background/shellex/Context Menu Handlers ...'
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There were many more lines of code to decipher, but I got the message: learning Urdu was a doddle compared to fiddling with XP's registry. Languages are tricky enough: A talented young Australian flautist once won a scholarship to study with Jean-Pierre Rampal in Paris. When she was introduced to Pierre and some colleagues over cocktails, she said: Comment ca va, les pipeurs (how goes it, fellow flautists?). They blanched, spluttered or spilled their drinks. Rampal later explained to our young flautist that pipeur was a slang word for cocksucker.

### Mechanics and Doctors

Next I trawled the Net for utilities that would do the delicate housework for me. Registry Cleaners made the kinds of noises I longed to hear, like 'Release the power of Windows XP.' Winboost promised to 'Increase available computer memory up to 300%', while XP Smoker grabbed me by the lapels and yelled: 'Want your applications to run faster? Want to surf the Internet with blazing speed? You don't need a new computer. You simply need XP Smoker.'

But it was PCDoc Pro that took the cake: 'Reclaim the sexy, new dream machine you first bought.' It also promised that I'd '... save \$1,500 from unnecessary upgrades and avoid costly call out and repair charges.' Then it added whipped cream to the Black Forest Gateau: 'Experience a sense of security and comfort. Feel better and more

positive about yourself.' It topped the whole thing off with a juicy maraschino cherry: 'Be the centre of attraction - even envy - among your peers.'

This was no simple doctor, I realized, but a team of plastic surgeons with the skills to turn me into a youthful Sean Connery, all for 29 bucks! I may be a dumb user but I didn't come down with the last shower. A little more digging revealed that the trial version of PCDoc would report 500 serious problems in your PC and fixed 5 of them. To get the other 495 fixed, you had to put money on the table. One victim reported that the software had also installed a password stealer on his PC (PWStealer).

Beam me down, Scottie

I no longer believe in the Easter bunny but the idea of beaming a brain surgeon down into my PC was too tempting to let go. I checked my trusted sources on the Net and turned up a short list of serious contenders: Advanced System Optimiser, System Mechanic, TuneUp Utilities, TweakXP and Norton SystemWorks. I was keen to see what the Norton boys were up to so checked on them first.

'The first time we tried installing SystemWorks,' TopTenReviews reported, 'we received an error that shut our computer down. Although our second attempt was successful, SystemWorks is not simple to install, requiring us to go through several update checks and to restart our computer at least four times in the process.'

Yes, the Norton boys were up to their old tricks, and some new ones: 'As we went to press,' ComputerPowerUser wrote, 'news broke that Symantec was using a rootkit to accomplish certain functions in SystemWorks ...'

I checked C/Net and ran straight into a credibility gap: The editor gave SystemWorks 6.7 points out of 10 (very good), while users gave it a wooden spoon of 2.7. I noticed the Norton ad in the sidebar but I'm the suspicious type. One user said SystemWorks made his systems crash and forced him to reinstall XP. Another said when he enabled the GoBack feature, 'the computer promptly crashed ... Nothing I've encountered before, no virus, no worm, no malevolent hacker, has ever caused me such severe damage ... I'm in awe of Symantec's business savvy. Every virus writer tries to harm your computer, but Symantec manages to charge you money to do it.'

System Mechanic got 6.7 from C/Net as well but users rated it 4.2 (mediocre). One user reported that 'the software ... runs ponderously slow, with many annoying involuntary restarts. My system started and ran much slower and more erratically AFTER its "tune-up".' Another said it caused several system crashes and '... took all night to defrag my hard drive compared to less than an hour using the built-in Windows defragmenter'. Hard to believe, that.

I was itching to try some of these tools before I crossed them all off my list. When I saw that Advanced System Optimizer got a gold medal from TopTenReviews and 5 out of 5 from download.com, I ignored the users who begged to differ with 3 stars. Maybe this was a forum for disgruntled users to get their own back. ASO came with more knobs and levers than the mixing console in a recording studio, but it didn't make my PC sing any better. It was the same with TweakXP, although it offered a bonus of 30 trial runs rather than a 30 day trial. Tuneup Utilities got gongs from experts and users alike but didn't restore my desktop's lost vitality.

Perhaps it was testing three of them at the same time, but one morning my desktop reported to work in a drunk and disorderly state. System Restore pulled me out of the quicksand that time but I hate calling in the paramedics. The tuning suites include registry cleaners that offer several wash cycles, from gentle to severe. I'd used the gentle cycle and still ended up with broken glass. How come?

More digging through user reviews revealed that all of these suites can cause systems to crash, although ASO emerged as the prime suspect. Advanced System Destroyer, one user called it. Download at your own risk, another warned.

Call in the experts

Yet all the PC mags insisted that cleaning the registry was as much part of the housekeeping as washing the dishes. PC World said: 'Garbage lurking in the Windows Registry is the worst kind of junk ... A program that you've uninstalled may leave behind an unnecessary Registry key that can end up causing havoc.' Others warned that this delicate job was best left to specialized crews, which made me think of those guys in space suits who remove asbestos from old office buildings.

When I looked over the hundreds of registry cleaners, mechanics, doctors, plumbers and repairers out there, I saw the true genius of Bill Gates: Microsoft rules the PC space like Louis 14th once reigned over France. He might've been the laughing stock of Paris with his wig and powdered nose but his court gave comfort and job security to thousands. Microsoft did the same simply by building a palace so full of holes that it needed armies of engineers, builders and carpenters to keep it from falling apart. They all shake their heads in disgust at the workmanship but they all make a nice living at King Bill's court.

Some of the registry cleaners made old familiar claims: 'Make your slow Computer a thing of the past! Realize your system's true potential! RegCure - unparalleled system performance at the click of a button. A high performance PC is just a mouse click away!'

The tuning suites had made me respect their power, much as you respect the destructive forces of nature, so I surveyed the resumés of registry cleaners with great diligence. Reg Supreme from Macecraft came with a stack of outstanding references, including one from the Great Gizmo. It found over 1600 stains on my PC's registry and that was on the gentle cycle. But when it presented the full laundry list for my inspection, I was staring at 10 pages of the Koran in Arabic. I said a short prayer before clicking Yes to fixing all. That was after making sure I had a recent System Restore point, even though Gizmo said that Reg Supreme wouldn't break the crystal in XP's cabinet. The machine worked fine after a reboot and I breathed easier, but the promised lift in speed didn't show up.

#### Fragments of a Dream

I'd lost the desire for more of this - it was too much like defusing landmines - but I wondered why all these utilities had come up so short of their tall claims. In the search for an answer I came across Ed Bott's Windows Expertise website. Ed is the author of many books on Windows and this is what he said about Registry Cleaners:

'Don't run registry cleaner programs, period. I won't go so far as to call them snake oil, but what possible performance benefits can you get from "cleaning up" unneeded registry entries and eliminating a few stray DLL files? Even in the best-case scenario the impact should be trivial at best. Maybe a second or two here and there, maybe a few kilobytes of freed-up RAM, and I'm being generous. How can you balance those against the risk that the utility will "clean" (in other words, delete) something you really need, causing a program or feature to fail?' (Editor's note: I'm with Ed. - Gizmo)

I took his point. Eventually I settled on CCleaner, a no-frills piece of freeware that gave me a short laundry list of boxes to tick - temporary internet files, history, cookies and so on. It'll clean both IE and Firefox, unlike EasyCleaner which has a more friendly interface. Both will clean the registry but I was content for them just to do the basic housekeeping.

Going through the carwash more often doesn't make the thing go better, I realized. Nor does putting the garbage out speed up the cooking in the kitchen. The mags I was reading said disk defragging would do that - too much fragmentation leads to system slowdowns, PC crashes, slow startup and shutdown, they said. I could see the sense in that: when your files are stacked in random piles all over your office, it takes forever to find the one you're looking for.

I'd been using XP's built-in defrag utility but now I read that it wasn't well thought of. I opted for a trial of Perfect Disk, which had a gorgeous interface and a price to match. Gizmo had DirMS (Do it right Microsoft) on his list of 46 Best Freeware Utilities, so I tried it as well. Its face is so plain that only its mother could love it but

many users loved it too. Now my disk looked neater than the rows of reference books lawyers line their office walls with, but neatness hadn't translated into performance.

Back to getting hands dirty

In despair I turned to the tweaking guides I'd seen on the Net, which promised lots of tricks to make XP go faster. Reading them soon made me feel like little Red Riding Hood lost in a forest full of wolves. They offered advice on optimising the page file and the pre-fetcher, on reducing the disk space taken up by the garbage bin and System Restore. Others suggested turning System Restore off, an act akin to cutting loose the lifeboats to make the Ocean Liner go faster. Most suggested disabling some of XP's graphics features but did I really want to go back to the concrete slabs of Win 98? Why did I buy Windows XP if not for the trimmings?

About that time I found a nifty piece of software called Desktop Sidebar, which gave me real-time snapshots of cpu and memory usage. Just running Word, Outlook, IE and PC-cillin (plus Windows Defender, Sidebar, Google Desktop Search, a screen print utility and a photo editor) the PC was burning up 400 of its 512mb memory. It reminded me of sitting at the traffic lights in an old V8 I owned once, watching the petrol gauge go down as it idled

Once more I checked the Processes tab in Task Manager and counted well over 40 guys in the back seat. This time I wanted to know who they were. System and system idle process were sure to be Windows services, and I recognized explorer.exe and taskmgr. I saw that Acronis True Image had installed 3 services at start-up, even though I did my backups manually. I worked out that the processes with tm in their cryptic names belonged to Trend Micro, as did those that start with PcC (PC-Cillin). But who the hell were BPowMon, CPLTray.exe or wdfmgr.exe?

One of my PC mags said Process Library from Uniblue would answer my prayers. It was free, had a tiny footprint and was easy to install. Now when I opened the Task Manager I saw a little blue i next to each process and, when I clicked on one of them, the little guy phoned headquarters and asked for a full report. This was what HQ came back with on wdfmgr.exe:

'wdfmgr.exe is part of Microsoft Windows media player. This process decreases compatibility problems whilst the product is in use. This program is a non-essential process to the running of the system ...'

So why was this guy hanging around when I wasn't using Media Player? I clicked on another guy who seemed to have several duplicates: svchost.exe. HQ said: 'svchost.exe is a system process belonging to the Microsoft Windows Operating System which handles processes executed from DLLs. This program is important for the stable and secure running of your computer and should not be terminated.'

Fair enough, I thought, until I saw the notes attached to the message:

'Note: svchost.exe could also be a process which is registered as a Trojan. It could ... be a registered security risk and should be removed immediately.'

'Note: svchost.exe could also be a process registered as a backdoor vulnerability ...'

'Note: svchost.exe could also be a process which belongs to the 007 Spy Software ...'

Determining whether this process is a virus or a legitimate Windows process depends on the directory location it executes or runs from in WinTasks.'

How the hell would I know? Ah, here was the answer: 'To get control over your running programs we suggest using a program called WinTask. For more info about svchost.exe get WinTasks 5 Pro Now!' I was reminded of the literary agent who was asked what kind of writing paid the most money. His answer was: Ransom Notes.

I asked Google for a second opinion and found a site called AuditMyPC, which told me that svchost.exe was also known as the Leox.B Worm, which was '... a serious vulnerability that should be fixed immediately!'

I felt a cold chill at the thought of this worm eating his way through the bowels of my system. My frantic trawling on the Net dragged up some uncertainty about sychost's true identity. Then I found a blog where someone had asked the same question I was desperate to get an answer to: is sychost friend or foe?

One reply said: 'Make sure it's sychost you're looking at, not svhost. It's perfectly normal to have several svhost processes running in Windows.' The guy who'd asked the question came back, saying: 'I checked the fine print and it's svhost I'm seeing, not sychost. Thank you very much.'

Thank you indeed. The fine print in the Task Manager panel isn't easy to read on my CRT screen and, when I put a second pair of glasses on, it turned out that I'd made the same mistake. I could breathe again.

#### Decoders and Translators

After that scare, I tossed Process Library overboard. Its process was pretty clunky anyway, opening up a new IE window for every entry it checked with HQ. I tried Autoruns but it gave me too much information. Starter from CodeStuff was enough for my simple needs: it gave me a list of the programs, services and processes running, and it gave me a one-click translation for every line of code.

All I had to figure out now was which of these services were safe to disable.

I found it on the TechRepublic website. With Starter it was easy to disable services, but it took time since double-checked every change I made. When I was done Task Man listed 30 processes, a big advance on 45. I rebooted the PC and it came up in just over a minute. Programs launched faster and files opened without reluctance, but the screen looked odd. After staring at it for a minute I realized that it'd reverted to the concrete panels of Win 98. I dived into Properties/ Display/ Themes to change it back to Windows XP, but that option had vanished. Clearly I'd turned something off that I shouldn't have, but what was it?

I went back over TechRepublic's 10-page list and stopped at a service called 'Themes'.

The list's description was: 'Provides user experience theme management - Safely Disable? - Yes - Ramifications if disabled: Themes cannot be used.' I hadn't counted on the need for translating the author's messages into plain English. Now I searched the web for less laconic advice on disabling Windows services and found it at <http://www.theelderageek.com/>. Once more I went through the list and rebooted. The PC worked fine. At last I'd got some return for the hours I'd invested. Hallelujah!

#### Redmond strikes back

One Friday afternoon I did my usual file backup, ran CCleaner, defragged the disk and scanned for scumware with Spybot and Windows Defender. The next day my PC reported for work in a very disorderly state: icons I clicked on went dull and sulked, programs I launched arose like sailors woken too early after a night on the town, wobbly and bleary-eyed. Some of them swayed on unsteady legs, others collapsed back into bed.

It was time to visit System Restore. Windows Defender creates a Restore point every day so there were plenty to choose from, but when I selected the most recent one, all the Restore points vanished in front of my eyes. I went back and forth but the calendar panel was as blank as a new page. As I stared at the screen I thought of the pundits who'd suggested turning this service off, claiming it was useless.

A dear friend runs a small computer company and this was the time to take him up on his longstanding offer to make his staff available for assistance. I asked them to upgrade the memory to 1gb while they had my PC open, and to add a bigger disk if it wasn't too much trouble. They did all that and threw in a DVD burner as well. My desktop came back with its old Seagate Barracuda 20gb drive and a new Seagate with 320gb capacity. If only the software business had made strides like that.

The moral of the story? For an outlay of 250 Aussie dollars I got a far greater lift in performance than all those hours of tweaking produced. But I'd have missed all the fun I had going through Microsoft Elementary School, wouldn't I?

Alright, I'm not good at sarcasm. It's ludicrous to expect users like me to climb Mount Everest without oxygen just to get a decent view. Why can't a modern operating system figure out which services I don't need or use - smart cards and wireless or home networks, for example - and arrange itself accordingly?

And if that's too much to ask, why doesn't Bill Gates pay someone to put a little guide in the XP box that explains the basics? It's not the money, is it?

Sure, I could go to his website and wade through a warehouse of technical documents, including 50-page white papers on the optimal size of the page file, but I'd rather stand under a cold shower and stab myself in the eye with the shampoo bottle.

That's what the magazines are for, I hear you say: to show us how to do stuff. You mean the court jesters and clowns who want to teach us brain surgery by correspondence? I suspect they're in cahoots with the Sadists in Seattle - I can hear them laugh about us dumb users when they go for a few beers at the pub on Fridays.

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