

RANDOM

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I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

THOUGHTS

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Sharpening the tools

Craftspeople

say that time spent sharpening tools is time well spent. I believe that is true, so on Christmas Eve, I got out the "sharpening stone" and started working on my tools. The *sharpening stone* is a stack of CDs and the *tool* is my computer.

As you might imagine, I spend a lot of time with the computer and a sizable number of applications arrive, are installed and evaluated, and are then removed each year. So many that the computer begins to suffer from operating system entropy. ("If entropy is increasing, where is it coming from?") This is not a problem that is unique to Microsoft operating systems, but it is exacerbated by Microsoft operating systems because of decisions Microsoft made when disk storage space was expensive.

When programs are installed, they usually create their own directory. Files stored there can safely be deleted when the application is removed. But most programs also store dynamic-link library (DLL) files in the Windows directory or a subdirectory. These are supposed to be the latest versions of the shared files and no program is ever supposed to overwrite a newer version of a DLL with an older version.

When a program is removed, it can and should delete all files from its own directory. But what about the shared DLLs? Does some other application need the DLL? When I remove an application, I always take the conservative approach: any shared DLL the application installed is left in place. While this is generally safe, it can contribute to detritus in the Windows directory. And sometimes the later version of a DLL, which is supposed to be compatible with earlier versions, actually causes some applications that depend on the earlier version to fail.

The computer as a time bomb

It's no surprise that after 6 months or so my computer seems to take on a life of its own. Windows 2000 and Windows XP are both far more capable of dealing with this constant change than Windows 9x was, but the computer still needs to be stripped down and reworked every year or so.

The motherboard and CPU in my primary computer are 2 years old. Originally the system ran Windows 2000, but I upgraded to Windows XP. A few months ago, when I removed Norton Antivirus in favor of another application, the system developed serious malfunctions. The temporary fix was to reinstall Windows XP on top of the existing installation. The computer worked, but some applications didn't function quite right. The system limped along, waiting for me to find time to do what needed to be done.

I set aside part of Christmas day and the next couple of days to format the C drive and reinstall Windows. That would wipe out the Registry, meaning that I would have to reinstall every application on the system. Because I keep data on drive D, formatting the disk put very few files in jeopardy. Knowing there would be configuration files and some data files that I would want later, I used *Backup My PC* to create a full backup of the C drive on the D drive as well as on a removable hard drive backup device. Drives D, E, and F were already backed up. Drive J contains no valuable data. (G and H are CD drives.)

Critical applications

I use e-mail to keep in touch with friends and clients, so I wanted to restore The Bat first. That meant that I would also have to restore NOD32 Antivirus and the Zone Alarm firewall. Instead of starting on Christmas, I started at 11pm on Christmas Eve. (Why? I was up. I wouldn't be getting up early. I had a few hours to spare. "It seemed like a good idea at the time.") After confirming that I had good, readable backups and confirming that the drive I wanted to format was the 12GB partition #1 on IDE drive #0, I slipped the Windows XP CD into the drive, restarted the computer, and set off on the quest.

Installing Windows XP takes about an hour on my 1.1 GHz computer (and I remember when that was considered fast). By 12:15a.m., I was creating user accounts. I then installed Office XP and the service packs for Windows and Office. An hour later, I had installed and configured Zone Alarm, NOD32 antivirus, and The Bat. I had been out of touch with the world for slightly more than 2 hours. The next several steps involved downloading and installing all of the Windows XP security patches that have been released since Windows XP shipped. That took until 3. I was ready for bed.

A few more hours on Christmas, a few more on the day after Christmas, and still more the day after that got most of the applications back and running, with many of them modified for use the way I prefer them.

Yes, this took a lot of time. Yes, this was a lot of work. No, I don't recommend this course of action to casual users who

NOW what??

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

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don't add and remove a lot of software. For me the process was worthwhile. Applications are better organized. The system is more responsive than it's been for months.

Typeface changes

I'm not certain yet that one change that I've made was wise. We'll see. Because some work for clients must go to service bureaus to be imaged for printing presses, I have always used only Postscript "Type 1" typefaces. Windows uses TrueType faces and, increasingly, OpenType faces. Some applications automatically install typefaces (always TrueType) and it's difficult to limit TT faces to just those that are required by Windows.

Creating a Postscript output file on a system that has duplicate TT and T1 faces loaded is a recipe for disaster. When the resulting file gets to the service bureau, it won't print. While TT faces are theoretically less efficient than T1 faces, most people who have used them for high-resolution output have been pleased with the results. When I reinstalled the typefaces, I selected only TrueType faces. Later, realizing that some of the faces I consider essential were available to me only as T1 faces, I reinstalled the T1 sets. But then I worked my way through 4000 typefaces to eliminate any T1 instances of faces that had been installed as TT faces.

Is 'Lindows' really 'Windows'?


The Lindows folks are asking the court to void Microsoft's claim to the word "Windows". Why? Because the Lindows folks would like to use it. I'm not an attorney and I'm certainly not a trademark attorney, but ...

I hope the Lindows folks lose big time. "Windows" is a trademark and I have a special disdain for those who try to misuse another's trademarks. If you read the last issue of this little newsletter, you already know that.

For the Lindows folks to be able to use "Windows" would suggest that Lindows can run Windows applications. It can run a few Windows applications, but not many. And the Lindows component that allows this is reported to be so buggy that it's not even included in the base installation.

Anybody who buys Lindows and expects to be able to run Windows applications will be in for an unpleasant experience.

Lindows may have a place, but that place is not in my office. I need an operating system that runs the applications I use. If Lindows is able to produce that operating system, I'll consider using it.

But until the Lindows folks can produce an operating system that can run Windows applications, they'd be better off avoiding the use of "Windows". And even if they develop an OS that can run Windows apps, there's still that trademark thing. 



It's been only a few days, but so far I've seen no problems with output files and the problems I had been encountering because of duplicate typefaces are gone.

A few problems

The most serious was with V-Com's CD Anywhere application, a utility program that creates a CD image on disk and allows the computer to "see" it as a standard CD drive. On this computer, boot time exceeds 10 minutes when the program is installed and the system becomes unacceptably slow. Because CD Anywhere works perfectly on computers that don't have SCSI devices present, I suspect the existing SCSI devices are the source of the conflict.

This problem will be resolved when I replace all the SCSI devices. The much maligned IDE interface has been improved so much that IDE disks rival all but the fastest SCSI disks – at about half the price. Disks can connect via Firewire (IEEE 1394) and USB2 ports, too. Even Apple has abandoned SCSI in favor of IDE, Firewire, and USB2.

Some installation CDs were unreadable, meaning that I'll have to get them replaced. Fortunately, all of the applications I consider critical were on CD or download files that were intact.

So far, I'm delighted with the results of sharpening the blade. With luck, I won't have to do this again for another year – maybe longer.

If you decide to take the plunge

The most important part of reinstalling the operating system is planning the operation. Make sure you know which files must be preserved and be absolutely certain that they are backed up.

Many years ago when I was updating a Windows 9x system, I replaced a CD-ROM drive at the same time and found myself with a non-bootable disk drive and a CD reader that needed a driver that was on a CD. It was the perfect catch 22 situation: I couldn't read the CD with the necessary driver because the CD reader wouldn't work without the driver.

The solution involved a lot of muttering under my breath as I took out the new CD reader and re-installed the old CD reader, formatted the drive, installed the driver for the new reader, and went on with the planned installation. A little forethought would have avoided that entire situation. Time spent carefully planning an upgrade is never wasted!

My current installation still suffers slightly from a decision I made when I installed a "big" 30GB drive. I made the C partition "just" 12GB, which isn't enough to install all the programs that I use regularly or test. As a result some applications are installed on the C drive and others are on the D drive.

Next time, I'll put all applications on the D drive because then I can format the C drive, reinstall the operating system, reinstall all the applications, and expect to have most of the configuration files in place. Restoring configuration files from backup is easy enough, but the process would be even easier without this step. It's not the applications that become confused, but the Windows Registry. A machine with just the OS and the Registry on C could be cleaned and restored faster than a system with a lot of applications on drive C.

If you want to feel a bit nostalgic, think about when 10MB disk drives cost \$1000. A new Western Digital 120GB drive set me back about \$220. Good 'ol days? I don't think so! 