How To...

A step-by-step guide to tweaking your PC Experience

PUT WINXP ON A DIET

Let's get rid of unnecessary start-up programs, services, and overall bloat

BY TOM MCNAMARA

If you haven't cleaned up Windows XP since you first installed it in 2001, it's probably ready for an overhaul. It's time to purge all the random files you've long forgotten, all the extraneous services you'll never use, and all the unnecessary Registry entries hiding in the depths of your machine. It's time to gather up all the muck and smite it in one single blow—a nice, quick alternative to the much more elaborate strategies outlined in our August 2002 "Clean Start" cover story.

This article is your hammer. Get ready to strike. When we're done, your copy of Windows XP will purr like a cheetah.

MAXIMUM PC TIME TO COMPLETION 00:43 HOURS MINUTES

Take Advantage of Service Pack 1

After you install Service Pack 1, you can remove *Internet Explorer, MSN Messenger,* and a few other Microsoft programs that were previously embedded. To do so, go to Start>Control Panel>Add or Remove programs>Add/Remove Windows Components, uncheck the programs you want to remove, click "Next," and reboot to make the changes. Removing *Internet Explorer* will disable the automatic Windows Update service, but you can still access updates by going to **www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/security/default.asp.** Of course, you don't want to uninstall *Internet Explorer* if you don't have another Internet browser installed.

Not everyone needs the Microsoft apps that are automatically installed with the OS. Luckily, Service Pack 1 lets you remove the pesky embedded software that you don't want.

Windows Components Wizard ✕

Windows Components
You can add or remove components of Windows XP.

To add or remove a component, click the checkbox. A shaded box means that only part of the component will be installed. To see what's included in a component, click Details.

Components:

☑ 🌐 Internet Explorer	0.0 MB	▲
☐ 🖳 Internet Information Services (IIS)	16.1 MB	
☐ 🖳 Management and Monitoring Tools	2.2 MB	
☐ ✉ Message Queuing	0.0 MB	
☑ 📶 MSN Explorer	13.2 MB	▼

Description: Includes Windows Accessories and Utilities for your computer.

Total disk space required: 57.2 MB
Space available on disk: 16776.9 MB   [Details...]

[< Back] [Next >] [Cancel]

Resizing Your Caches

The *Internet Explorer* cache gets 2 to 3 percent of your hard drive by default. This small percentage adds up to more than 600MB on a 20GB drive and up to 3GB on a 100GB drive. Lower this setting by opening the browser and going to Tools>Internet Options and clicking the Settings button. 200MB is a good size, but 300MB is advisable if you have a dial-up modem or frequently visit sluggish sites.

System Restore is next. Right-click My Computer, select Properties, and click the System Restore tab. System Restore uses around 12 percent of the drive, so adjusting to 1 percent can reclaim many gigabytes of space. It's advisable to leave at least 700 to 800MB for System Restore.

The Recycle Bin must also be addressed. The default setting is 10 percent—that's 10GB on a 100GB drive for you math whizzes. You can reclaim several gigabytes by moving the slider down. We recommend that you set the Recycle Bin to accept about 500MB maximum. Note that files larger than the size you choose will be permanently deleted.
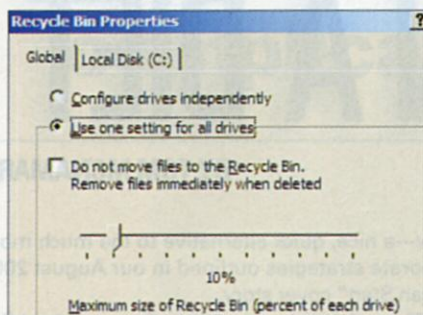
By default the Recycle Bin eats 10 percent of your hard drive. That's a whopping 10GB on a 100GB drive. We recommend setting it to take either 500MB or 1 percent of your disk, whichever is larger.
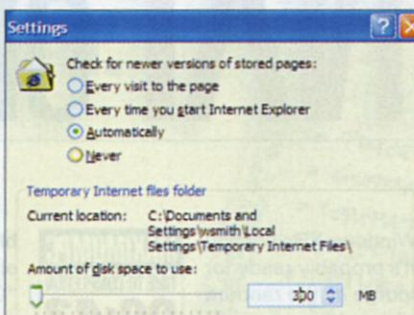
You probably won't need more than 300MB of disk space to set aside as *Internet Explorer's* image and file cache.
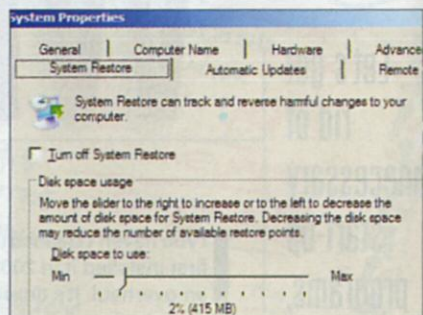
System Restore is almost as bad as the Recycle Bin for eating disk space. We recommend setting System Restore to use no more than 800MB of your hard drive.

System Failure Dumps and Lost Chains

Whenever your system crashes to a blue screen, it will write a small dump file, and this file can reach epic proportions if the OS isn't set up correctly. To make sure you've got it set right, right-click My Computer, select Properties, click the Advanced tab, and go to "Startup and Recovery." Now click Settings and go to the "Write debugging information" drop-down menu. The recommended setting for a home user is "Small memory dump (64 KB)." If this is set to "Complete memory dump," then you'll end up creating a file equal to the amount of RAM you have.

Disk checking programs will also leave behind files in the root directory if your disk has "lost chains" of data. Lost chains are files that have been deleted from the FAT, but haven't been fully deleted. Note that NTFS partitions don't have the lost chain problem. If you want to free up some disk space, it's safe to delete files with the CHK extension from your c: drive.

If you want to minimize the amount of disk space that Windows takes when it blue screens, set the debugging info to "Small Memory Dump."
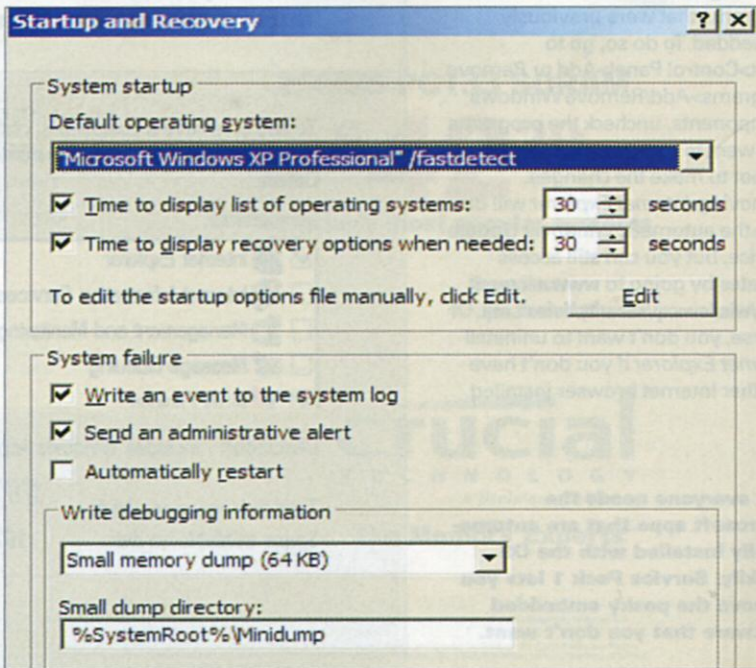
Nixing Annoying Start-Up Programs

After a while, a lot of programs will start showing up in your SystemTray (the area near the clock) every time your computer starts.Those little apps can eat a lot of system memory, slow down your boot times, and just plain annoy you with their presence.

To disable or remove these items, go to Start, then Run, then type `msconfig` and press Enter. We recommend against using MSConfig to disable services, but you can use it to turn off peskyTSRs (terminate and stay resident programs) and other apps. At the Startup tab you'll see a list of every program that loads when you boot, along with the location of the startup files. *Winamp*

Agent, for example, is unnecessary because the program loads automatically when you open an MP3 file. On faster computers— 2GHz and speedier—the quick-start option for apps like *Mozilla* and *OpenOffice* aren't necessary because they load quickly anyway.

To stop automatic loading, either uncheck the box next to the app entry, or track down the parent application and disable the SystemTray option from there. We recommend you disable only one app at a time. That way, when you're rebooting the computer to enable the changes, you'll have a much easier time tracking down problems in the event that something goes awry.
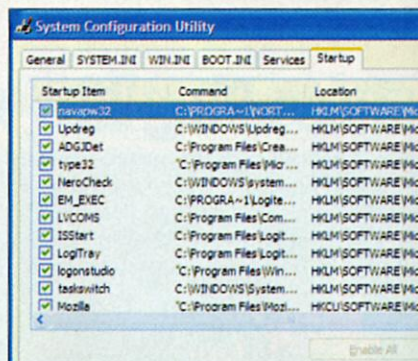
Instead of mucking about in the Registry, you can use MSconfig to disable just about anything that's set to run on your system at boot time.

Removing Unneeded Services

The default install of Windows XP Professional has more than 40 services running in the background. Check it out by going to Start, Control Panel, AdministrativeTools, then click Services. Click the "StartupType" column at the top for a list if all the currently running services. When you start disabling these services, do just one or two at a time, then reboot and make sure your PC is still working right.That will make troubleshooting significantly easier.

Now, right-click the Alerter service (which should be at the top) and select Properties. Here you can start or stop the service, set its startup mode, check to see what other services rely on it, and what services it depends on.There are also a couple tabs you won't need to worry about for this little project.

Here are the services that you can probably safely disable:

▸ Alerter is unnecessary if you're not connected to a corporate network or if you have a lone home computer.

▸ Com+ Event System and Com+ System Application are unnecessary if you don't have any programs in the ComPlus Applications directory in Program Files, which is usually the case.

▸ Computer Browser is necessary only if you have a home network and use file or printer sharing.

▸ The Error Reporting service is useful only for people who debug code.

▸ Network Location Awareness (NLA), Remote Registry, Portable Media Serial Number, System Event Notification, andWireless Zero Configuration may not be necessary to a home user.

▸ TheWireless Zero, Portable Media, and NLA services are needed only when hooking up those devices to your computer or network. If you don't have a wireless LAN, an MP3 player, or a network, you can safely disable all three of those.

Disabling some of these services may bring up error notices in the Event Log, but that's most likely justWindows flapping its arms. However, if your system starts acting flaky, you should experiment with re-enabling some of the services. And don't forget to go back and stop the services you start, or else they may just keep running. A compendium of service information can be found at **www.blkviper.com.**
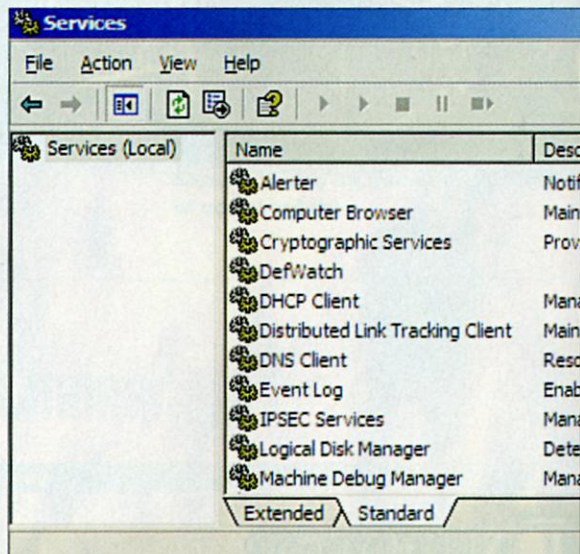
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Leftover Program Files

Sometimes programs will leave files and directories on the hard drive even after they've been uninstalled.To remove these files, browse to c:\Program Files\ and look for directories named for apps that are no longer on your system. Frequently the uninstall routine will leave files that have been added to the app directory or changed after the install.That will cause the entire directory to stay behind too. Before you delete these directories, you should browse through them and make sure there aren't any files you need to hang onto to. ∎