Invasion of the Data Snatchers

THE DAY THE HARD DRIVE STOOD STILL

Helpline mysteries solved

Do your PC's workings sometimes seem slightly out of this world? Is the way it acts somewhat alien? Fed up with unidentified computing behaviour, Steve Bass and Kirk Steers set about unravelling a few of the most irksome PC riddles

D o you ever wonder if your PC was manufactured in Roswell, New Mexico? If it had been, that would explain an awful lot – all those close encounters and paranormal crashes, extraterrestrial error messages and strange hardware phenomena. They're enough to leave even the most rational PC user ranting about insidious conspiracies and midnight visitations.
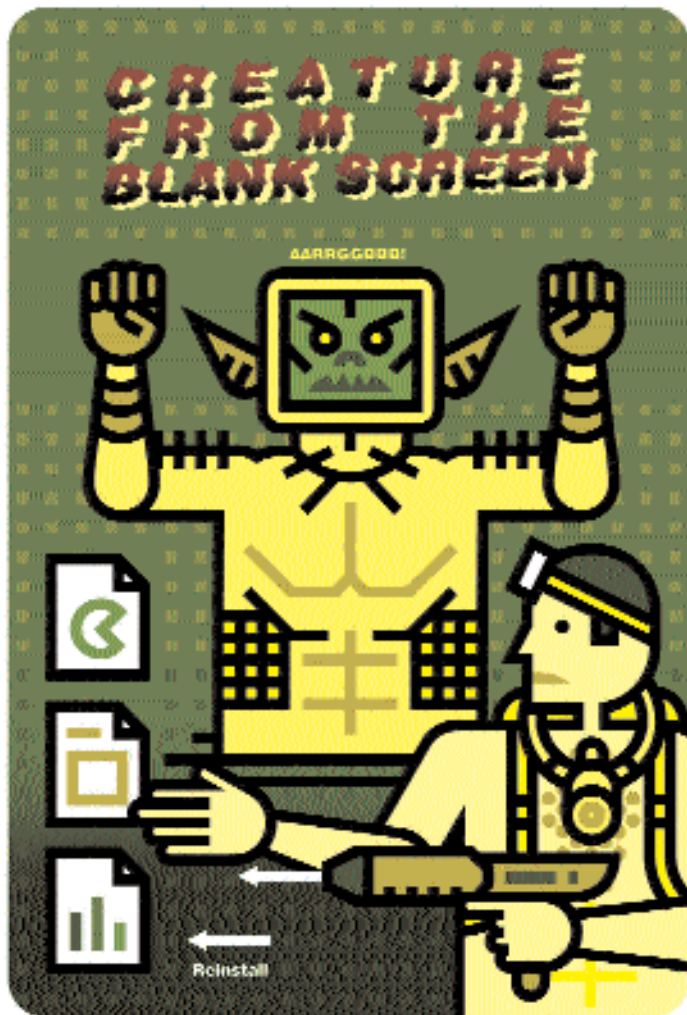
That's where *PC Advisor*'s problem solvers come in. Based on our own experiences of grappling with our PC's most aggravating, inexplicable errors, as well as those you've told us about in the past few months, we set about identifying the PC's peskiest problems. Then we looked for clues and came up with ways of eradicating these sources of irritation.

Our mission: to solve the mysterious glitches and techno-riddles that can cause your work to grind to a halt. So, when computing disaster strikes, don't get paranoid, get even, with a little help from *PC Advisor*'s troubleshooters.
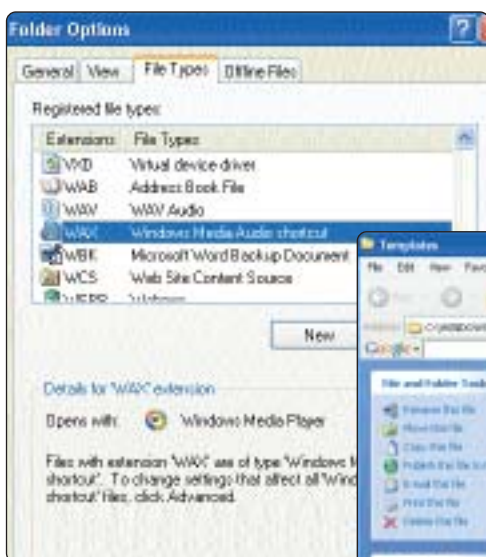
Windows demystified

Windows often produces the same sort of disturbances that frighten psychic investigators and makes UFO experts tremble. Things can disappear, make strange noises or start acting abnormally. Here are some of the mysteries we've encountered and solved.

Playing for keeps

Mystery The MP3 player you installed has taken over all your media files – video, photos, music and even WAV files.
Solved Body snatchers are bad enough, but data snatchers? Open the application you don't want to associate with the files, check its Options menu and look for a setting to disassociate the files. Repeat with the application you do want associated with the files. Alternatively, in Windows Explorer, select View, Folder Options or Tools, Folder Options. Choose File Types, scroll to the type whose association you want to change and select it. In Windows 98, click Edit twice and enter the path of the program that should open the file (or browse to it, if you prefer). Then click ok. In Windows Me, 2000 or XP you can do the same thing
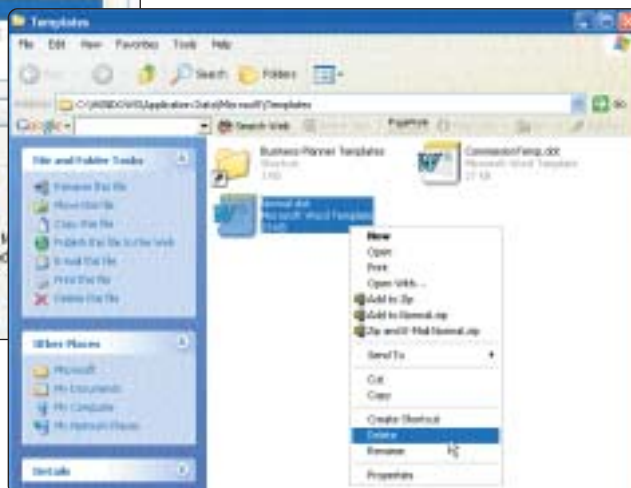
CREATURE FROM THE BLANK SCREEN

AARRGGOOD!

Reinstall

2003
: A Cyber Space Oddity

Error Message

What's this?

using the Change button (shown below). Look up extensions at File Extension Search Engine (http://extsearch.com). Tip: Make associations permanent by right-clicking a file in Explorer and selecting Open With (Open With, Choose Program in XP). Select the desired program and check the Always box.

Not so normal.dot

Mystery You click the Word icon, but it doesn't load. Instead, an error appears. After trying again and scanning for alien life-forms, you get a blue screen. Reinstalling Word doesn't help, nor does uninstalling and then reinstalling.

Solved Somehow the mother ship corrupted Word's normal.dot template file. Use Windows' Find function to locate normal.dot then delete the file (shown below). Once it is gone, Word will create a new normal.dot file and all will be fine.

Uninstall headaches

Mystery You try to uninstall a program with Windows' Add/Remove Programs but get the following error message: 'The log file deisl1.isu is not valid or the data has been corrupted'. Or the Add/Remove applet lists programs no longer on your PC.

Solved Find the program's folder (it should be nested in the Program Files folder) and delete the deisl1.isu or uninst.isu file (it may be in a subfolder). Reinstall and then uninstall the program using Add/Remove Programs. If that doesn't work, you may have to use brute

↑ Select a different file association by opening the Folder Options dialog box and clicking on the File Types tab

← If Word won't load, try deleting the normal.dot file. Windows will then automatically create a new one which, hopefully, won't be corrupt

Windows' built-in sleuths

Let's face it: Windows crashes so often it could be called the OS that fell to Earth. Use these tools to help your system get back up and running.

• Safe Mode **If Windows won't launch properly, start your PC in Safe Mode (a bare-bones version of Windows where you can access Device Manager and other troubleshooting tools). Hold down F8 just before Windows boots and select Safe Mode from the resulting menu.**
• System Configuration Utility **This invaluable tool lets you enable and disable software and configuration files for trial-and-error troubleshooting. Click Start, Run and type msconfig, or click Start, Search to find it and then run it from the Results window. System Configuration is great for isolating and testing parts of Windows configuration files.**
• Step-by-step confirmation **To identify troublespots in the Windows launch process, use this tool on the Windows 98/Me Startup menu so drivers will load one at a time.**
• System Restore **Windows' restore capabilities have improved dramatically with each version. Windows 98 has a primitive Registry backup utility called ScanReg that saves**
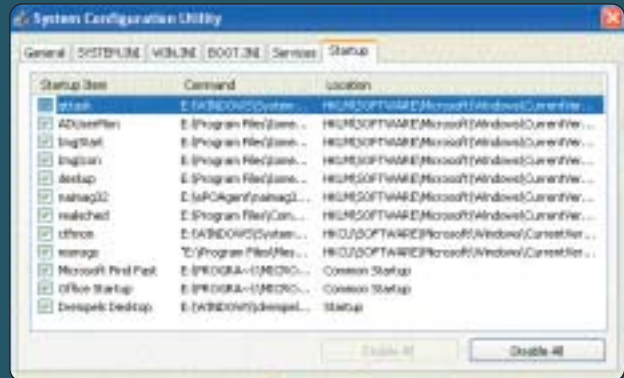
↑ Enable and disable configuration files with System Configuration Utility

five days' worth of backups. To restore a backup, run ScanReg from the DOS prompt. Windows 2000 and Me let you restore the 'Last Known Good Configuration' from the Advanced Options menu. Windows XP and Me have a more sophisticated restoration utility, System Restore. Select Start, Programs (All Programs in XP), Accessories, System Tools.

force: delete the program's folder, click Start, Run and type Regedit. Select File, Export to save a copy and then delete the program's keys in both Hkey_Local_ Machine and Hkey_Current_User.
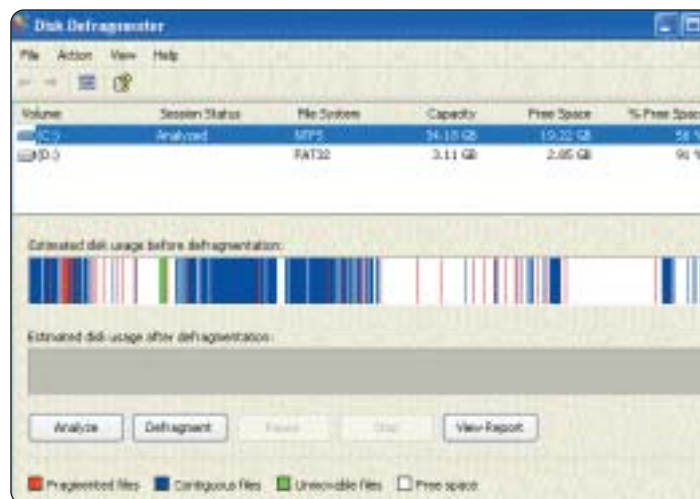
An easier way is to purchase the $20 (£13) Ashampoo UnInstaller 2000, a utility that guides you through the process. Ashampoo even eliminates names of long-gone software languishing in Add/Remove Programs. This can also be done with Tweak UI, a freebie available for various versions of Windows from the Download Directory on *PC Advisor's* website.

If your system crashes midway through a Microsoft Office 2000 installation, you may have trouble uninstalling or reinstalling Office. Use eraser2k.exe, a Microsoft utility available from http://support.microsoft.com, to remove Office files and Registry settings.

← Buffer underruns getting you down? Try defragging your hard drive – it might just do the trick

CD-RW secrets

Silver discs flying through air used to be the cause of hysteria. Today they are more usually the result of it, as angry music fans are driven mad by balky CD-RW drives. Here are our fixes.

Musical malady
Mystery Your audio CDs will play on your CD-ROM or DVD-ROM drive but remain eerily silent on your CD-RW drive.
Solved The audio signal from the drive playing a music CD passes through your sound card via a small cable. Chances are your CD-RW drive doesn't have one of these cables or your sound card only has one connecter for audio input. To play audio CDs from either drive you'll need a Y-cable (available at electronics stores) which splits the line into two or a sound card with two ports.

CD-RWs are from Mars
Mystery Your CD-RW drive stops halfway though a recording session, displays a 'buffer underrun' error message and leaves you with a useless CD.
Solved Many older CD-RW drives need an uninterrupted flow of data to write CD-R discs. If the stream of data runs dry, even for a second, the process terminates and renders the target CD completely unusable.

The easy way to solve this is to buy a new CD-RW drive armed with technology that protects discs from buffer underrun

errors. A cheaper alternative is to lower the drive's write speed in your CD-burning software. This means the drive will work at a slower pace, but you'll eliminate buffer underruns.

Another approach is to maximise data flow to the drive by reducing the processor workload. Log off your network and close all open applications. If you're moving data from your CD-ROM or DVD-ROM drive to your CD-RW drive, you could also consider copying the data to the hard drive first, as it will move data faster than CD-ROM drives. To optimise the hard drive, you can run Windows' ScanDisk and Disk Defragmenter (shown below left). These are in Start, Programs (All Programs in XP), Accessories, System Tools.

Tip If your CD-RW drive is connected to your PC via the EIDE bus, as most internal drives are, you should make sure that it isn't attached to the same IDE cable as your hard drive. Most PCs come with two IDE channels and each channel can have its own cable which is capable of supporting two drives.

Web weirdness

You're buzzing around the internet, grabbing downloads, when the connection dies due to a page fault error or some other perturbation in the Force. Here's how to get back into hyperspace.

Jinxed Java

Mystery On some web pages, boxes pop up containing movies, games and funny animations. On other sites they don't.
Solved Java programs and Flash animations should work perfectly, unless you (or a diagnostic utility you used) have changed the browser settings. To ensure they do, you should check that Java is enabled. In Internet Explorer, select Tools, Internet Options, Advanced Under Microsoft VM, select Java logging enabled and JIT compiler for virtual machine enabled. In Netscape, select Edit, Preferences, Advanced and check Enable Java and Enable JavaScript.

If you use an ad-blocking program, such as AdSubtract, uninstall it temporarily, clear your browser's cache and then check whether or not those sites work. If they do, configure the ad blocker to permit Java to run (on those selected sites, at least).

Online's offline

Mystery Yesterday you were browsing at warp speed. Today, Internet Explorer tells you that your connection is gone.
Solved If you can send and receive email but you can't browse the web or vice versa, there's a good chance your ISP's web (or mail) server isn't working. If you can't access either one, call your ISP and ask if its servers are down.

Before blaming your ISP, check that all cables are plugged in. If you're an ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) or cable modem user, turn off the modem and then switch it back on to resync your connection. Do the same with your PC.

If your ISP seems to be working okay, check your browser options and make sure that they're set to 'No proxies'. If your

My PC is a zombie

You might enjoy pondering the unexplained – crop circles, UFO sightings, Liz Hurley's impossibly perfect figure. But when your PC won't start, you don't have time for leisurely musing. Here's our practical emergency checklist.

• Stay calm **Catastrophic failures do happen, but fixable problems are more likely. Turn off your PC, wait 10 seconds and then turn it back on. It often works.**
• Check the obvious **Make sure power cords, cables and connecters are firmly in place. Check your surge protector for a blown fuse or for damage from a power surge.**
• Look for clues **When a PC boots up, it runs a test of hardware components called Post (power-on self test). Watch your monitor for system warnings and error messages. Press Pause to freeze the screen if the messages disappear too**

quickly. **After running Post, your PC initialises higher-level devices like the CD-ROM drive. Watch for warnings or note the last initialised device to appear before the PC locks up.**
• Listen for clues **Pay close attention as your PC starts up. You should hear both the power supply fan and the hard disk rev up. If either one is quiet, it may be the culprit. You may also hear a series of beeps before your system freezes – that's a primitive error message. Note the number and the length (long or short) of the beeps. Your system manual or the computer manufacturer may tell you how to decode the PC's audio error message.**
• Smell for clues **Though rare, monitors have been known to spontaneously combust. If you smell the delicate bouquet of burning circuitry, unplug your computer immediately and get help from a trained technician.**

browser still won't work, try using the operating system's Repair tool. Go to Control Panel, Add/Remove Programs, Microsoft Internet Explorer, (Add/Remove, Repair Internet Explorer in Windows 98 and Me, see below).

Advanced users have yet another option at their disposal. Remove the Winsock keys from the Registry, uninstall the TCP/IP protocol (non-XP PCs only) from the network configuration and reinstall TCP/IP (Windows will reinstall Winsock). Click Start, Run and type Regedit. Make a full backup of the Registry (File, Export) then find and delete the Hkey_Local_Machine\System\CurrentControlSet\Services\Winsock key, as well as the Hkey_Local_Machine\System\CurrentControlSet\Services\WinSock2 key.

Next, in Windows 98/2000/Me, choose Control Panel, Network (in 2000, you must

then choose Network and Dial-up Connections, right-click Local Area Connection, then Properties). Locate and double-click your TCP/IP component(s), record the information on each tab for later use, delete the TCP/IP protocol and reboot. Return to the Network applet, click Install to add back the TCP/IP protocol, enter your recorded settings, reboot and get back to browsing the web.

Graphics gremlins

Video abnormalities are as frequent and disturbing a sighting in computer households as UFOs converging around a vortex in the Mojave Desert. You'll be please to hear, though, that our solutions haven't been hidden in a bunker by the FBI.

← IE given up the ghost? Windows' Repair Internet Explorer tool may get it up and running again
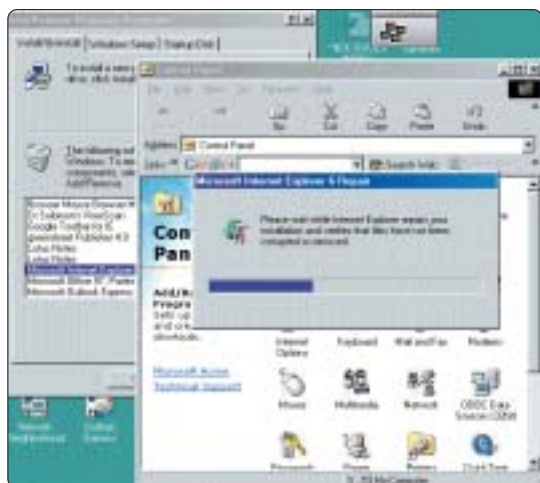
Display disturbances

Mystery When you launch a program or view an image your PC may freeze with no pattern and no error message. At other times, your icons mutate into forms weirder than a pupating alien.
Solved Try reinstalling your graphics card's drivers or, if this fails, experiment by deselecting visual effects (in XP) or incrementally reducing your hardware acceleration (in other Windows versions).

If you're an XP user, right-click My Computer and select Properties and open System Properties. Click the Advanced tab and then the Performance area Settings button. On the Visual Effects tab, deselect individual effects or choose Adjust for best performance to deselect all of Windows' special visual effects.

For all other Windows versions, except 2000, open System Properties, select the Performance tab, click the Graphics button and use the Hardware acceleration slider. (This may help with mouse problems, too.) Alternatively, try decreasing colour depth and/or screen resolution.

If you use Windows 2000, select Start, Settings, Control Panel and open Display. Click the Settings tab, the Advanced button and then the Troubleshooting tab. Use the Hardware acceleration slider to change the settings. Another option for calibrating your monitor is to try the free DisplayMate utility at www.displaymate.com or access it from this month's cover disc.
Tip Beware the card creep. Over time, all cards – graphics and otherwise – on your

PC can slowly work their way out of their motherboard slots, leading to problems. Make sure they're seated properly.

Video vexations

Mystery Some videos – especially ones with an ASF or ASX extension – won't play.
Solved Do not adjust your set. If you don't have Windows Media Player 7.1, get it. This has lots of current codecs. If you already have the player, reinstall it.

Establish whether the video file is corrupt by running a different video with the same extension. Use File Investigator (visit www.robware.com or load up a trial version on this month's cover disc) to identify the video's codec. Then see if you have the codec. Go to Control Panel and open Multimedia (Windows 98), Sounds and Multimedia (Me/2000) or Sounds and Audio Devices (XP). Click the Devices tab (98/Me) or the Hardware tab (2000/XP), and double-click Video Compression Codecs (98/Me) or Video Codecs (2000/XP). If you don't have the codec you'll find it at http://gonow.to/codeczone.

Hardware hassles

You've tried to troubleshoot your PC with everything from mind melds to phasers set on stun. Now try Windows' Device Manager. This powerful tool lets you reinstall drivers for tired hardware, forces Windows to re-examine all of your PC's devices and upgrades drivers as necessary.

Device Manager magic

Mystery You're plagued by odd icons, screen lockups, page fault errors, mouse pointer freezes or scratchy audio.
Solved Use Device Manager (in System Properties) to check the status of your installed hardware. Before changing any settings, consider creating a shortcut to Device Manager. Go to Control Panel (in XP Category View, select Performance and Maintenance). Right-click System and choose Create Shortcut.

If you're uneasy about making changes, print a record of the current settings. Open System Properties (see *Display disturbances* on page 114) and the Device Manager tab (in 2000 or XP, click the Hardware tab). Click Print (in 2000, select

Inside the Bios

An unseen force controls your PC: its **Bios. This manages the flow of data** between the silicon synapses of your PC's hardware and the dysfunctional personality we know as Windows. Tweaking an imperfect setting can solve problems and improve performance.

Access Bios settings via the Cmos setup program. Watch your screen and press the named key, usually Delete or F1, as your PC starts up. You'll see a main menu screen and submenus leading to various hardware settings.

PCs are unforgiving of faulty Cmos settings. If you think you've accidentally changed the wrong setting, select the Exit without saving changes, exit the setup program and try again.

Sometimes new hardware won't work with an older Bios. Most PCs have flash Bios that you can upgrade via a downloadable program. Get the date and version number of your Bios (usually displayed on the PC startup screen) and check with your PC manufacturer for updates. If you upgrade, follow the program's directions to the letter.

Cmos setting language may be down-to-earth or downright extra terrestrial, such as 'CAS# Width to PCI master write'. Scan them all – you'll find many useful settings. For example: does your modem wake your PC every time the phone rings? Check the power-savings and modem settings and disable Wake PC on Ring.

Slow printer? The parallel port may need optimising. Set Parallel Port Settings for high-speed ECP or EPP mode operations.

Another Bios trick, use BIOS Wizard, a free utility that checks and identifies the Bios. Find this handy program in our Download Directory at www.pcadvisor.co.uk.

↑ BIOS Wizard's simple interface helps you easily check and identify your PC's Bios

View, Print; in XP, select your PC on the top line and choose Action, Print). Choose All devices and system summary and print a copy for reference. Force your system to take a new inventory of installed devices: click the Refresh button (in 98 or Me) or right-click your PC on the top line and select Scan for hardware changes.

Now you're ready to solve the mystery. Boot to Safe Mode (press F5 at system startup), open Device Manager and trawl for long-gone devices, discarding references to those that are no longer in your computer. You'll probably find duplicates of modems, mice and graphics cards. Ridding your system of its lengthy history of abandoned devices will help to eliminate conflicts.

Of course, the problem may be right in front of your nose – your monitor. Often, pushing its degauss button or removing nearby sources of electromagnetic radiation (another monitor, a microwave,

an intergalactic-navigation beacon) can remedy splotchy discolouration.

Noises hard drives make

Mystery Strange noises are emanating from your hard drive and you're wondering whether to check for tiny green men.
Solved Chances are it's not your hard drive. When a hard drive fails, usually it grinds to a halt. Play it safe by backing up your PC (or at least your critical data). Investigate other noise sources, such as the power supply, case and CPU fans – all are common culprits. Fans can catch dirt or could have bad bearings.

Try a car mechanic's trick: open the case and listen to the components through a piece of hose to home in on the noise source. If the problem is your hard drive, stop using it at once. To recover your data, use SpinRite, an $89 (about £58) hard drive disaster recovery tool from Gibson Research (www.grc.com). ■