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Windows workout

Whatever version of Windows you are running, the chances are you could be making more of it. Kyle McRae offers a selection of performance enhancing tweaks and workarounds to shape up your operating system

If Windows was perfect, we would be out of business – and if it was just plain broke, you would be using a Mac. It happens to be neither which is why most of us manage to muddle along with it in one form or another, occasionally grumbling and gritting our teeth.

But Windows is also perfectly amenable to manual intervention, with the consequence that you can often tweak it out of a bad habit or buck it up in some measurable manner.

Over the next few pages we fiddle, customise, enhance and otherwise muck around with Windows in the pursuit of, if not perfection, then at least a better set up system.

Perk up performance

Short of a memory or processor upgrade or reinstalling Windows for a fresh start, what can you do to restore long-lost gusto to a once nimble but increasingly creaky computer? Well, one rewarding approach is suppressing superfluity. Turn off the bells and whistles for a leaner, swifter system.



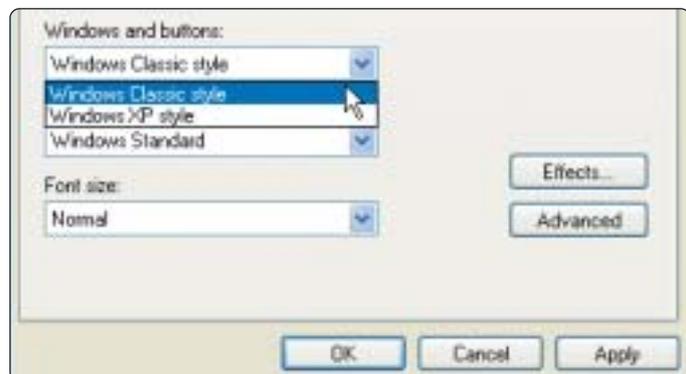
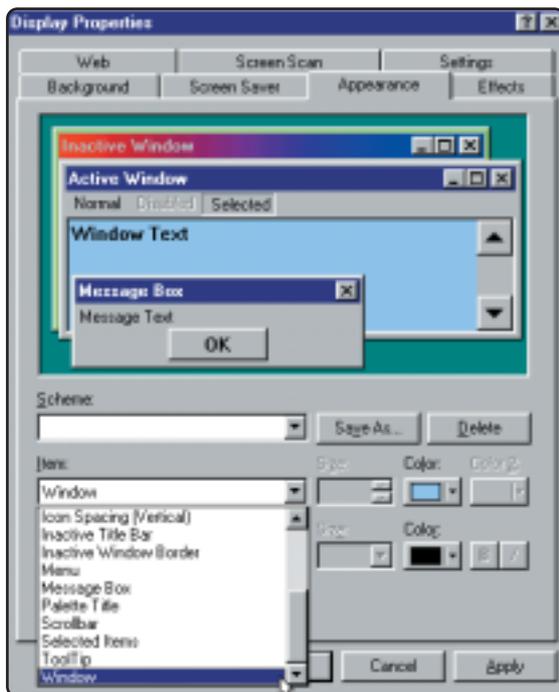
• Phase out fripperies

In Windows XP it is possible to selectively disable elements of Luna, the funky but graphically-demanding user interface. From the Control Panel, select Performance and Maintenance followed by Adjust Visual Effects. By default some 16 options are checked here but you can



Tweak your appearance

If you're happy with an identikit computer, all well and good. But those of us with a little more imagination (okay, time on our hands) prefer the personal touch.



1 With earlier versions of Windows it is possible to customise the appearance of just about every onscreen element: titlebars, message boxes, buttons et al. Click Start, Settings, Control Panel, Display and play around in the Appearance tab. Experimentation here goes a long way towards creating a uniquely beautiful user interface or a monstrosity of unimaginable garishness, depending. Alternatively, select one of three dozen or so built-in complete colour schemes

2 To do something similar in Windows XP you must first make it behave like Windows 98. Click Start, Control Panel, Appearance and Themes. Select Display, Appearance and choose the Windows Classic style from the Windows and buttons drop-down menu. Now click the Advanced tab for full control over colours. The down side, unfortunately, is complete loss of XP's feel and style

3 If you use the Advanced button with Windows still in Luna mode, you may be in for a surprise. Some elements of the interface can be tweaked here – icon and titlebar dimensions, for instance – but many of the colour options simply do not work. You can customise the colour of menus and fonts but changes you make to the titlebar are not carried through. Your only options short of a third-party skinning tool (see the *Utilities* section on page 106) are XP's two alternate colour schemes: olive green and silver



deselect any or all of them and see whether there are gains to be made.

For a one-click approach select Adjust for best performance. You'll have to live with a flat, grey Windows 98 interface but the performance benefits can be appreciable, particularly with an underpowered video card.

 • **Nobbly background programs** Some applications have a habit of starting automatically with Windows and running constantly in the background whether you want them to (an antivirus scanner, say) or not (like the RealPlayer StartCenter or SammysSuperSpyware). Each requires

a few clock cycles here, a megabyte or two of RAM there and the cumulative effect can be considerable.

To put them out of action there are three possibilities. First, the application itself may have a 'Don't start with Windows' option tucked away in its Preferences menu. Failing that, delete



Hide the Administrator account

Here is a simple customisation that everybody running Windows XP should perform with haste. There is a default, semi-secret, all-powerful account on your computer called Administrator.

If you log on to XP Home Edition in Safe Mode (press F8 while the computer is booting), it appears as an option on the Welcome screen. In Windows XP Professional, press Ctrl, Alt, Del twice at the Welcome screen and type Administrator in the user account field.



1 Open the control userpasswords2 screen by choosing Run from the Start menu, typing control userpasswords2 and pressing ok

Remarkably, the password for this account is blank, which means that anybody could log on to your PC quite regardless of your other user accounts and passwords. They could then delete all other user accounts or change the passwords, thereby locking you out of your own computer. Thankfully, it is impossible to log on to the Administrator account remotely.

It therefore pays to make two changes: rename the Administrator account to something less universal and assign it a password.



2 Ensure that the 'Users must enter a user name and password to use this computer' box is checked and highlight the Administrator account. Click Properties and change the username to something unobvious but easy for you to remember. Finally, use the Reset Password button to secure the account with a strong but equally unforgettable password

any shortcut to the program from the Windows Startup folder: click Start, (All) Programs and Startup.

However, neither of these methods will disable a program that runs in the background without displaying a System Tray icon. For that, click Start, Run and type msconfig. In the Startup tab you will see a list of programs and processes that launch on the fly with Windows. Uncheck as many as you want.



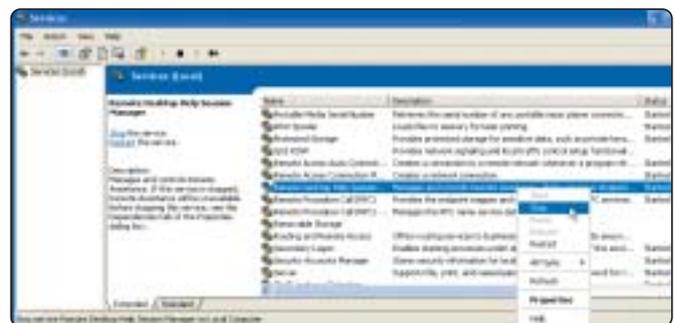
• **Disable services** If you use Windows XP or 2000 you also have the option to start, stop, pause and otherwise configure services (shown right).

A service is a background program that supports other applications or monitors the system; many are simply unnecessary during normal operations. To launch the services console, type services.msc at

→ A service should be disabled only when you are confident that you don't need it, or, services

the Run command prompt. The Description field tells you what a service does – sometimes in plain English, sometimes not – and you can double-click any entry to determine its future behaviour. To free up memory, stop services you don't need and change their startup status from automatic to manual or disabled.

How do you know which services you don't need? For a comprehensive guide



see Black Viper's geeky but helpful site at www.blackviper.com/winxp/servicecfg.htm.



• **Tweak the Bios** Reducing the tally of tasks and applications that automatically start with Windows allows the operating system to get going that much faster. To speed it up still further, try your hand at these simple Bios tweaks.

Access the Bios Setup program by pressing whichever key your PC requires during boot (usually Del) and look for the section that determines the order in which the computer addresses drives during startup.

Set C drive – or whichever drive holds Windows – as the first device in the chain. This will only shave a second or two from the boot procedure but, hey, life is short and seconds add up. If you ever need to boot from either a floppy disk or a CD-ROM, reorder the boot priority.

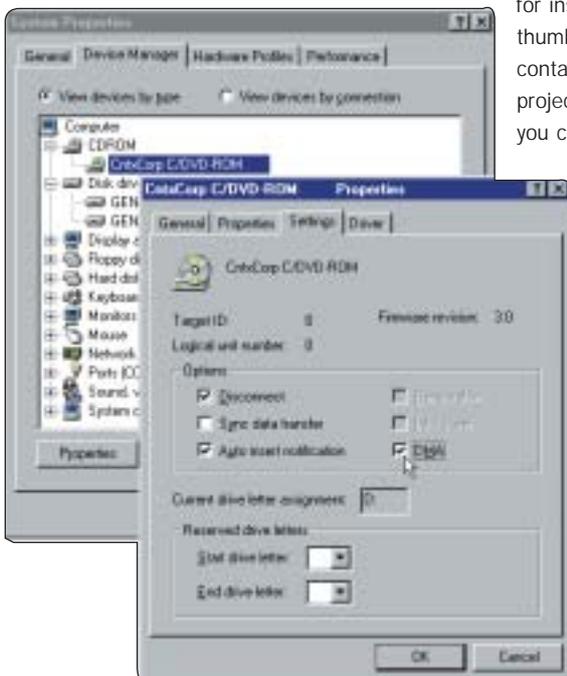
If your Bios has a Quick Post or similar option, enable this as well. This allows the Bios to skip a couple of rudimentary self-examination steps during bootup.



• Enable DMA Direct Memory

Access lets drives talk to memory without tying up the processor. As a rule, DMA should be enabled if it is available – it's by default in Windows XP – although there is a slight risk that your motherboard chipset will take exception to DMA and throw a wobbly.

The solution is to enable DMA on one drive at a time, reboot and see what happens. Do this by clicking Start, Settings, Control Panel, System, Hardware tab and opening Device Manager. Right-click a drive, select Properties and look for a checkable DMA box in the Settings tab (shown below). If the box is greyed out the drive does not support DMA.



Windows settings

While we tend to adapt to our computer's way of working, it is equally possible and often more fruitful to take the reins. Here are a few ways to ring the changes in Windows.



• Cure the views blues

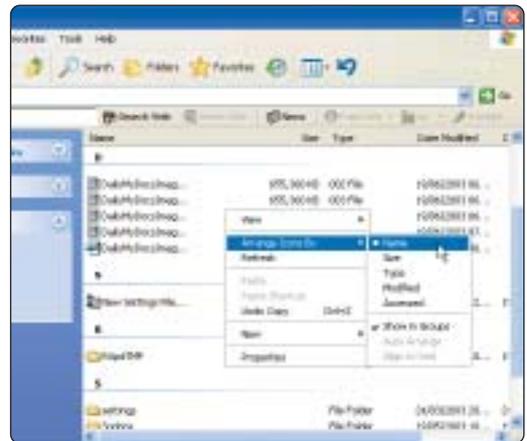
After a year or so of using Windows XP on a daily basis you might begin to get the hang of Explorer's new views: thumbnails, tiles, filmstrip and so on. Until then you may well be perplexed to find folders displaying files in seemingly random views – a Details View here, a List View there. To instill some consistency without sacrificing flexibility, here is what to do.

First, open the My Documents folder and use the Views toolbar button or the Views menu to display files in the way that suits you best. Now right-click inside the folder to further arrange file icons (shown above). The Show in Groups option is particularly useful for clustering files by date, type or filename. When you are content, click Tools, Folder Options, View and Apply to All Folders. That's it: every Explorer window will open with the same default view from now on.

However, you can still change folder views on a case-by-case basis without affecting the global setting. You might, for instance, prefer to turn on the thumbnails view for a folder that contains a desktop publishing project. Here you have a choice: you can either have Explorer forget individual folder settings as soon as you close the window (which is handy if you alternate between views regularly); or you can force it to remember individual folder settings and apply them every time.

Still in My Documents, click Tools, Folder Options,

← Where available, DMA frees up the processor from unnecessary involvement with drives. DMA is always enabled by default in XP



↑ Work with files and folders the way you prefer time after time

View and either check or uncheck 'Remember each folder's view settings' in the Advanced Settings box.

Incidentally, similar considerations apply with Windows 98, Me and 2000 but the folder view options are much more limited than in XP. Consequently, the scope for confusion – and flexibility – is reduced.



• Kill the pane

If you don't like Windows XP's default Tasks View pane – the sidebar replete with context-sensitive shortcuts and links that appears on the lefthand side of every folder window in Explorer – you can temporarily disable it in favour of a hierarchical view of files and folders simply by clicking the Folders toolbar button.

Toggle back to the Tasks View at any time with the same button. For further options, select an alternative Explorer Bar from the View menu and replace the Tasks View pane with a search window, your Favorites folder or the History record of recently accessed files and web pages.

However, every time you close and reopen a folder the Tasks View pane reappears in its rightful position. If this behaviour drives you around the bend, be done with it for good.

Open My Documents, click Tools, Folder Options and check 'Use Windows classic folders' in the General tab. Folders will now open in a single window with no sidebar. You can still invoke Explorer Bars on demand for a split-screen approach but the Tasks Views pane is defunct.



Back up the Registry

We suggest a few Registry tweaks on these pages but before making any such changes you should, of course, take precautions.

Should you need to restore an old key to get out of trouble, use the Registry Editor's File, Import command or just double-click the saved file. For added security, copy this file to a floppy disk, CD-R or network location. For details on how to back up the entire Registry, access the relevant Microsoft Knowledgebase web page (see right).

- **Windows 98 and Me**

<http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;en-us;q256419>

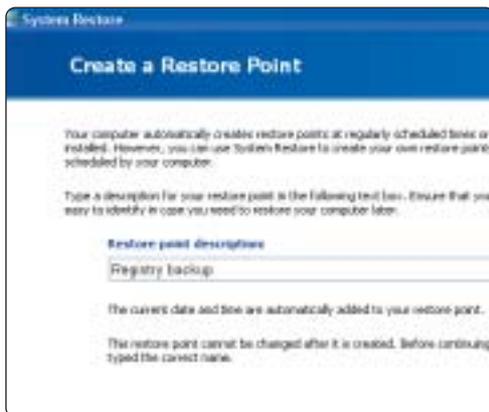
- **Windows 2000**

<http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;en-us;q322755>

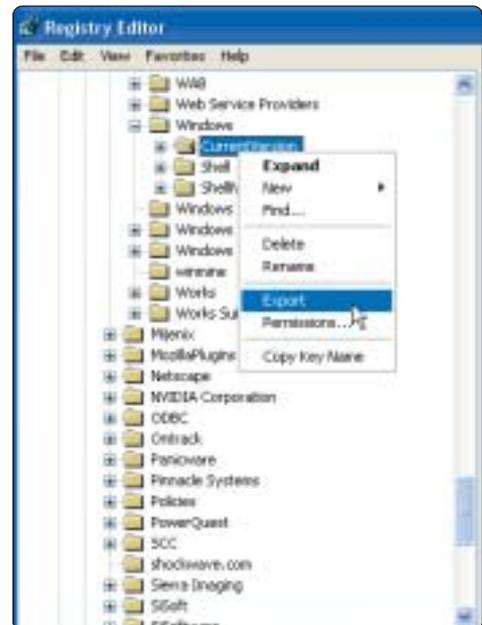
- **Windows XP**

<http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?scid=kb;en-us;q322756>

1 If you use Windows XP or Me, make a System Restore checkpoint. You can then back up the Registry in one hit: click Start, (All) Programs, Accessories, System Tools and System Restore



2 Failing that, back up the Registry key that you intend to edit. Open the Registry Editor by clicking Start, Run and typing regedit. Navigate to the appropriate key in the left pane. Right-click it (or choose Export from the File menu) and select Export (which means 'save a copy of'). Save the key to a file on your hard disk



- **Bypass passwords**

One of the benefits of user accounts in Windows XP, aside from letting different people share a single PC, is

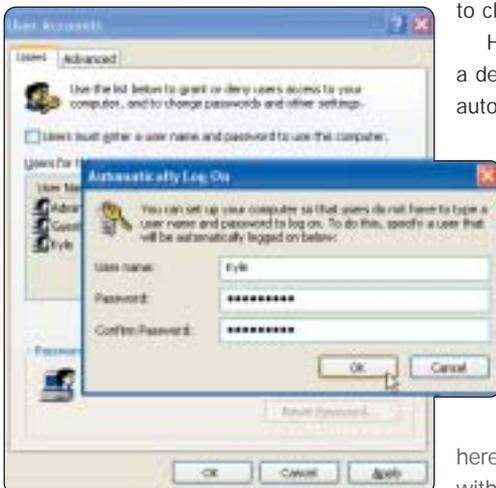
being able to password-protect each account to prevent unauthorised access to your machine. One effect of this is that Windows pauses at the Welcome screen upon every restart and waits for a user to click an icon and enter a password.

However, it is possible to nominate a default account that Windows will automatically log on to. This is ideal if the same user – you, for instance – always starts the PC first thing in the morning and it is only later that others might require access to their own accounts.

Click Start, Run and type control userpasswords2. Now uncheck the 'Users must enter

a user name and password to use this computer' box. When you click Apply you will be prompted to enter a user account name and the appropriate password (shown below). Next time you restart the computer, Windows will log on this account without going through the Welcome screen.

However, you will be prompted for your password if you subsequently log out of your account and try to log on again, even if you use Fast User Switching. Password protection is still in place; this method merely bypasses the delay during restarts.



← Nominate your user account here and Windows will log you on without requiring a password



- **Burst balloons**

If Windows XP's incessant balloon tips – those bubbles that pop up from the Taskbar to remind you to clean up the desktop, free up disk space, take your medicine – get your goat as they get ours,

take a pin to their pomposity and prick them permanently.

Open Registry Editor by clicking Start, Run and typing regedit. Navigate to Hkey_Current_User\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Explorer\Advanced. Click Edit, New, Dword value and create a new Dword called EnableBalloonTips. Now double-click it and set the value data field to zero. If you ever want tips back again (you won't, we guarantee it), change the value to 1.

 • **Prevent accidental shutdowns** Hands up if you've ever turned off your PC when you really just wanted to log off Windows? Here's a neat way to prevent accidental shutdowns. It is particularly useful when you have user accounts set up on your computer because an unexpected shutdown causes all active users to lose unsaved data.

In the Registry Editor, navigate to Hkey_Current_User\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Policies\Explorer. Create a new Dword value, call it NoClose and set the value data field to 1.

Next time you restart the computer or log off and back on to Windows you will find that the Shut Down or Turn Off Computer button has vanished from the Start menu (needless to say this also makes for much mirth on 1 April). To shut down, press Ctrl, Alt, Del twice at the logon prompt or, in Windows XP,

↓ You can still log off but no longer shut down with this effective Registry tweak



the Welcome screen. To restore the button simply delete this Dword value from the Registry Editor.

 • **Change your identity** During installation Windows XP asks you who you are and who you work for. As there is a strong possibility that you didn't install Windows XP yourself, chances are you are technically known as 'ABC Computers Customer' or similar. To change these details, open the Registry Editor and navigate to Hkey_Local_Machine\Software\Microsoft\Windows NT\CurrentVersion. Look for entries called RegisteredOrganization and RegisteredOwner and change the values to anything more fitting.

Utilities

Truth to tell, Windows needs a helping hand when it comes to customisation. Here's a few must-have add-ons specifically for XP.

 • **Tweak UI** This tool is essentially a Registry Editor in friendly clothing. For starters it lets you disable AutoPlay on optical drives, kill the unread mail alert on the XP Welcome screen and customise the Start menu. www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/home/downloads/power toys.asp

 • **Desktop Wallpaper Changer** It's a simple enough concept – regularly change your wallpaper using picture files plucked from any folder – but it's new, it works and we like it. www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/experiences/downloads/create_power toy.asp

 • **Windows Blinds and Style XP** Two skinning tools that let you do what Windows XP does not – dramatically change the colour scheme and appearance without reverting to Classic mode. Neither utility is a giveaway (\$19.95 each) and neither lets you create your own skins from scratch, but you can try them for free for a while. www.windowblinds.net; www.tgtsoft.com

 • **Plus Digital Media Edition** Finally, if you must – if you really, really must – get hold of Plus DME (around £20) and install digital dancers on your desktop. www.microsoft.com/plus ■

Five old favourites

Nothing revolutionary here, but you might be surprised what you can achieve with the simplest measures.

 1. **Reduce colour depth** Give your video card a break and Windows will snap into place on your screen faster than the human eye can see. Well, almost. Right-click the Desktop, Properties, Settings tab and lower the colour depth to 16bit or, preferably, 256 colours. Switch back only when you really need to.

 2. **Defragment the hard disk** Yes, we know you already know the benefits of regular defragging, but who remembers to do it? Click Start, (All) Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Disk Defragmenter.

 3. **Disk Cleanup** Another perennial system tool, particularly useful for freeing up hard disk space before defragmenting.

 4. **Drivers and patches** A new graphics card driver can make a world of difference to games playing, while program updates and patches can help cure stubborn Windows stutters.

 5. **Reboot, reboot, reboot** RAM that should be freed up when you close a program does not always get released back to the general pool. Reboot periodically to flush the memory modules and start afresh. Thankfully, this is not generally necessary with Windows XP.



↑ Windows Update can help you find drivers and patches but it also pays to visit manufacturers' websites