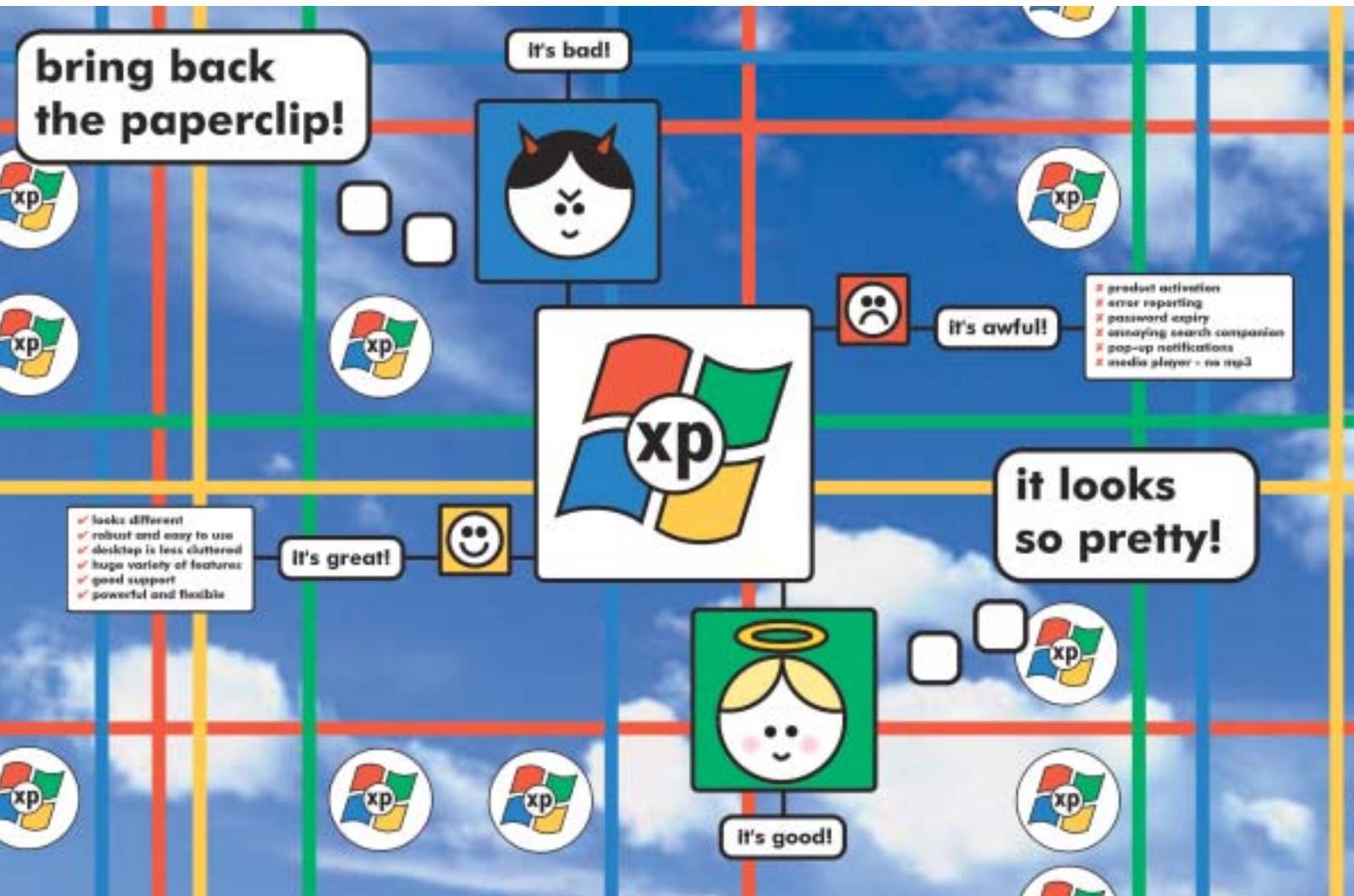


xp workshop



Love it or loathe it?

The arrival of XP met with mixed reviews, yet two years on the operating system is firmly grounded in today's computing world. Alex Katz runs through the good and bad points of the version of Windows with as many fans as detractors

Windows XP has ridden a rocky road to acceptance since its launch in 2001. The operating system received a barrage of criticism before it was even released, partly due to its questionable licensing system and its – how can we put it – slightly overwhelming Microsoft-ness.

In the two years it's been around, the critics and the PC-using public have come to accept that, despite its faults, Windows XP is the best, most robust and easiest-to-use OS Microsoft has ever made.

But that's not to say the operating system is perfect. Generally speaking,

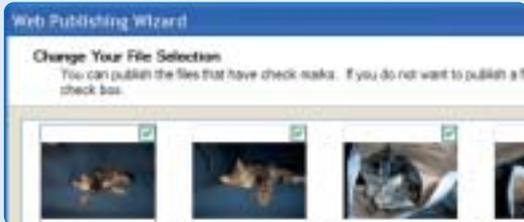
with XP there are fewer problems than with Windows 98. And despite our constant grumbling about driver signing and Windows Updates, we have to admit we're better off in Windows XP and can't imagine going back.

So it seemed only appropriate that, as we say a fond farewell to our dedicated XP Advisor pages, we should remind you of the best and worst bits of the operating system to which this section has been dedicated over the last year.

Here, then, is our definitive roundup of the things we love and the bits we hate about Windows XP.

Publishing pictures on the web

Windows XP has a number of built-in wizards to make it simpler to perform common tasks. One of the most useful is the Web Publishing Wizard, which lets you easily post pictures or documents on the internet.



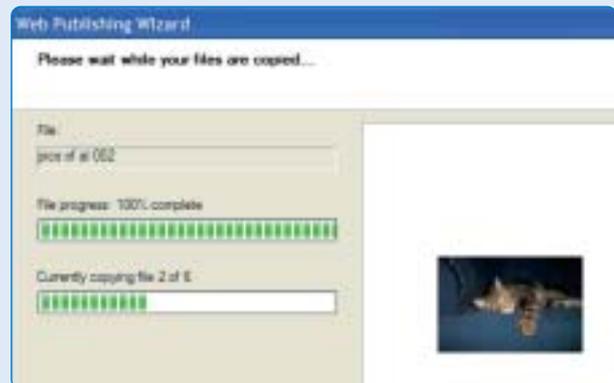
1 Open a folder full of pictures on your hard disk. In the lefthand Task Pane click on the 'Publish this folder to the Web' button. The Web Publishing Wizard opens. In the first screen you can select which of the files in that folder you want to upload. Alternatively, to publish the whole folder click Select All



2 You now need to choose where you want to publish the pictures. If you don't have any other services set up, the easiest thing to do is publish them on MSN Groups. Access to this is free if you have a .NET Passport. You can either save the pictures in your default group, called My Web Documents, or create a new group with a more memorable name for other people to view



3 The wizard tells you the URL of the group you've created so you can direct friends to the website. It also offers to add the URL to your Explorer Favorites. You have limited space on the MSN server and need to ensure pictures download quickly, so let the Wizard resize them – 640x480 pixels should be ample



4 The wizard will upload the pictures from your hard drive to the website. Once it's finished, use the weblink you were given to view your snaps online

New look and feel

The first thing you notice when you start up Windows XP is that it looks different. The change is refreshing as the old Windows 95/98 interface was certainly starting to look dated. But if you prefer your operating system to look the way it used to, you can easily revert to Windows Classic style.

Some of the changes are not just aesthetic but practical too. For example, a list of your most frequently used applications appears on the Start menu. You can also add a directory of your most recently used documents.

Having buttons grouped together on the Taskbar saves on clutter and makes it

easier to find the window you're looking for. The Notification Bar automatically hides items which are not in use – again, helping to reduce clutter.

On the other hand, some of the changes go too far. The Control Panel defaults to the new Category View which is designed to hold the hands of novice users. We think this makes it harder to find the settings we're looking for.

But the general concept of having a taskpane in each window, with a list of commands and options that you're most likely to need, is a welcome improvement that makes less experienced users more productive while making life easier for professionals.

Customisation

One of the biggest advantages of XP's interface is its flexibility. You can extensively modify the Start menu. You can alter the number of application icons it shows and choose which other items, such as My Computer, My Network Places and even a list of recently used documents, are shown. You can also control how the Taskbar behaves so if you don't like the way it groups similar items together you can turn off this feature.

There are only three colour schemes available for the standard interface: blue, silver and the rather unpleasant olive green. So if you want to fully customise colours and appearance you'll have to

Remote Assistance

One of Windows XP's most powerful features is Remote Assistance, where you can invite an expert user to help you out with a problem. They can view your screen and even take control of your mouse and keyboard over the internet.



1 From the Help and Support Center, click on the button that says 'Invite a friend to connect to your computer'. When prompted, choose 'Invite someone to help you'. In the subsequent screens you choose the settings for the invitation and how you send it. Either select a Windows Messenger buddy or enter your friend's email address. Then specify how long you want the invitation to last and choose a password

2 Your friend will receive an email or an instant message with an attachment. They simply have to click Yes to initiate the connection. Once your friend attempts to connect you will be alerted to the incoming request. To accept the call, click Yes



3 This window will appear on your screen. In it, you and your friend can type messages to communicate with each other and you can specify other settings such as whether or not to hand over control of your keyboard and mouse. Your friend will be able to see a full and live view of everything that appears on your screen within a window on his or her PC. Messages appear in the Chat History bar on the left

revert to the Windows Classic style. However, XP makes it much easier to use your own images as your desktop background or even as a screensaver – remember the instability of 98's Active Desktop? And thanks to the flexibility of the Start menu and Taskbar, you can create a virtually icon-free desktop.

Added functionality

Part of what makes Windows XP so special is the huge variety of features that have been added to make your computing experience easier and more productive.

Some of these are in the form of wizards. The CD Writing Wizard takes the effort out of copying data on to a CD-R/RW disc, while the Web Publishing Wizard makes posting your pictures or

documents on the web a cinch. Then there's the Scanner and Camera Wizard that simplifies the process of importing digital images.

The latter wizard suffers from a relatively limited list of supported devices, so the chances are you'll need to use the drivers supplied with your peripheral. But in general XP has built-in support for a much wider variety of hardware, in particular printers and faxes, so many third-party devices are genuinely plug and play.

Windows XP makes file interaction a joy. We've already mentioned the taskpanes that appear in most windows and provide a convenient list of common functions. There are also new folder views which make browsing your data far easier. The Filmstrip and Thumbnails view, for

example, provide instant previews of images – an invaluable addition for those often working with graphics.

File management features have been significantly beefed up too. You can compress files and folders to save hard disk space without the need for any third-party utilities. Windows XP has built-in support for ZIP files so, again, you don't need an additional utility to decompress files you've downloaded from the web. But if you're an advanced user and want your ZIP files handled by say, WinZip, it's far from simple to turn off this built-in ZIP functionality.

Windows XP makes setting up and accessing both home and office networks easy. Features such as Internet Connection Sharing make having a small

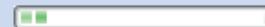
Top 10 XP irritations

- 1. Product Activation** Having to activate your copy of XP over the internet or by phone is supposedly a piracy protection measure but it feels like just another way for Microsoft to gather data about its users.
- 2. Driver signing** How much of an assurance is it to know that some hardware drivers have been tested by Microsoft when the majority haven't and work perfectly well?
- 3. Control Panel** The default Category View in XP's Control Panel is supposed to make it easier for inexperienced users to customise their system settings. We think it just makes Control Panel icons harder to find.
- 4. Windows Update** The concept of having your system kept up to date without having to think about it is great, but the size of the update files makes them a totally unrealistic prospect for 56K modem users. And the constant reminders are frustrating even if you have a broadband connection.
- 5. Error reporting** If your system or a Microsoft application crashes you can send an error report to the company over the internet. As if they're going to pay any attention.

- 6. Windows Media Player** Windows' built-in media software only lets you rip music from CDs in WMA format, rather than the industry-standard MP3, unless you have a third-party plug-in. This is just one of many examples of Microsoft trying to lock you into using its own solutions and technologies.
- 7. Passport reminders** Try and use any Microsoft service and you will be electronically bullied into signing up for a .NET Passport. Eventually you'll find yourself signing up just to get rid of the constant reminders.
- 8. Pop-up notifications** Windows XP may think it's being helpful by reminding us about things such as having unused items on the desktop, but these notifications just get in the way and slow you down.
- 9. Search Companion** Never thought we'd say it but the animated dog that appears whenever you search for anything makes us miss the Office paperclip.
- 10. Password expiry** Windows XP Professional seems to spend a disproportionate amount of time telling you that your user password is about to expire. You can turn off this setting but it's complicated and convoluted.

Searching for all documents with "report" in the file name.

- Looking in document folders first, then everywhere else.
- Not looking in system folders.
- Not looking in hidden files and folders.
- Searching C:\Drivers\updated\microsoft\



Stop



↑ Yes, we know he's cute. But that Search Companion doggy uses valuable processing power and slows down searches. At best, he's a nice distraction for kids. If you don't have children we advise you turn him off

home network a realistic prospect. The operating system also has a built-in firewall to help protect against unauthorised access to your system.

Secret support

The integrated technical support in Windows XP is a dramatic improvement over previous versions. The Help and Support Center works as a single, easy-to-use interface, combining a variety of different resources.

It can be a little overwhelming at times and there is a lack of consistency between what is handled by simple text documents, Support Center walkthroughs or the Interactive Training Center. However, its tools make for a smoother running PC and the Help Center has plenty on offer.

System Restore allows you to return your PC to its original or last stable state by undoing any damage caused by a dodgy

software installation, while Remote Assistance lets an offsite individual fix a problem using your own mouse and keyboard (see page 130).

Private matters

Remote Assistance is just one of many services within Windows XP that either invite you to sign up for a Windows Messenger account, a .NET Passport or to join up to MSN. And as if having these reminders thrust in your face every time you open an app wasn't enough, you also have to contend with pop-ups from the Notification Bar and not-so-subtly positioned desktop and Start menu icons.

Some see this as a sinister data-gathering exercise by Microsoft to sell you more products and services by recording your computing activity. Perhaps these fears are unfounded, but there's no denying that constant reminders are a pain.

One of the biggest issues Microsoft has had to deal with in terms of users' privacy concerns is Product Activation. We can't deny Microsoft the right to try and cut down on piracy by limiting each copy of Windows XP to one computer. But if you want to move your copy of XP to another PC or make significant changes to your existing machine, then you have to contact Microsoft to reactivate the software. Why should the company have the right to know what people are doing with their PCs?

Accepting the inevitable

Windows XP undoubtedly has its faults and there are some irritating features. But when all's said and done, XP has been accepted into the mainstream – and not just because it comes as standard on new PCs. Windows XP is the most stable, powerful and intuitive operating system that Microsoft has ever built. ■