

Fix those PC bugs

Some days your PC works like a dream; other times Windows goes weird, hardware goes haywire and software embraces the silly season. Steve Bass shows you how to fix gremlins and gripes afflicting your system and unleash the power of your PC

We're forever being told that PCs are eminently useful – well that's the theory, at least. In practice, spending time with them can be anything but productive. As a recent BBC documentary highlighted, the personal computer has transformed our working and home lives. But getting it to do what you want it to can be one of the most frustrating experiences there is.

Windows itself has such a dizzying array of options and features I've lost count of the ways in which it can be customised, while even the seemingly simplest software application appears to be designed to hinder progress rather than assist it. And that's before I move on from the purely idiosyncratic to the stuff that just doesn't work as it should such as software that won't stop nagging and CD drives that refuse to stay shut.

As you might imagine, the same sorts of niggles and difficulties rear their ugly heads time and time again. I've rounded up some of the worst offenders, named and shamed them and provided you with words of wisdom on taming unacceptable PC behaviour.

I'll explain how to tackle the programs that clutter your System Tray, desktop and Start menu, and introduce invaluable fixes designed to put your PC back on the straight and narrow.

Broken Windows

GRIBE You're geared up for a fast PC experience but end up tapping your fingers as menus slowly come into view.

FIX In Windows 98, Me and 2000, right-click the desktop and choose Properties, Effects. Uncheck 'Animate windows, menus and lists' (Windows 98) or 'Use transition effects for menus and tooltips' (Me and 2000).

In XP, right-click anywhere on the desktop, choose Properties, Appearance, Effects and uncheck 'Use the following transition effect for menus and tooltips'.

GRIBE The Start menu's Documents folder (My Recent Documents in Windows XP) lets you reopen files you've been working on in a trice, but Windows lists only 15 documents there and older links disappear from the list too soon.

FIX To get access to more recently used files, place a shortcut to Documents (or My Recent Documents) on your desktop. Navigate in Windows Explorer to the Recent folder (its location varies depending on the version of Windows; mine is at C:\Documents and Settings\username\Recent).

Right-click and drag the folder's icon to the desktop. Release the right



ILLUSTRATIONS: EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

button and choose Create Shortcut(s) Here (XP loses the parentheses). When you open the folder with this shortcut you'll see links to all the files you've worked on since the last time you purged the list.

Regularly delete dead links and files you're unlikely to access again. Click either the Name or the Date Modified column heading on the righthand side to sort the shortcuts.

To make the folder even easier to use, right-click the Name field and uncheck Type and Size. Both of these are unnecessary categories in this folder since all its entries are 1KB shortcuts. The cleanup batch file 08fregistry_batch3.zip, which you'll find on our cover disc, limits the types of files that this folder lists.

GRYPE The Task pane on the left side of Windows XP's folder windows containing links and wizards doesn't always appear. Using the Close button (X) in the upper righthand corner of the Search or Folders pane usually reveals the Task pane, but it doesn't appear when trying to access it from My Network Places

FIX You've accidentally changed Folders view back to that of Windows 98 (or 'classic'). To correct this easy mistake Select Tools, Folder Options

and choose 'Show common tasks in folders' on the General tab. Click ok and the left pane of the folder window will once again display links to common folder tasks and other desirable spots on your PC.

GRYPE Copying a folder's path and name to paste into an email message or a file-save dialog box is unduly difficult.

FIX A fast alternative is to open Windows Explorer, navigate to and select the folder in question, click the Address bar to highlight it and press Ctrl, C. Voila! The path is in your Clipboard. If your Address bar isn't showing, select View, Toolbars, Address Bar.

GRYPE The Quick Launch toolbar has done a disappearing act.

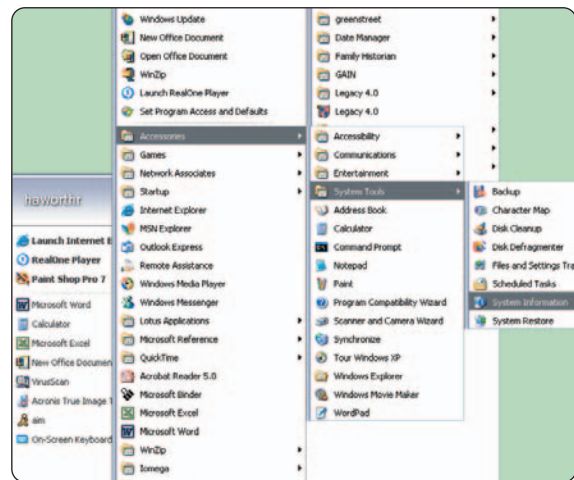
FIX I'm not quite sure why this occasionally happens, but to retrieve it simply right-click a free area of the Taskbar (you may have to drag it up to make room) and choose Toolbars, Quick Launch.

BONUS TIP To stop those irritating yellow file info pop-ups appearing, open Windows Explorer, select Tools, Folder Options, View and deselect 'Show pop-up description for folder and desktop items'.

GRYPE You've accidentally closed a program in the System Tray and can't now find that application on your Start menu. The program loads at Startup, so rebooting seemed to be the only way to get it running again.

FIX There is an easier way. Go to Start, Programs (All Programs in Windows XP), Startup as it's likely a shortcut to your program is listed on that menu. Click it to start the program again. If the program's not there select Start, Programs (All Programs in XP), Accessories, System Tools, System Information.

↓ Can't find something on your Programs menu? System Information will help you find that elusive app again



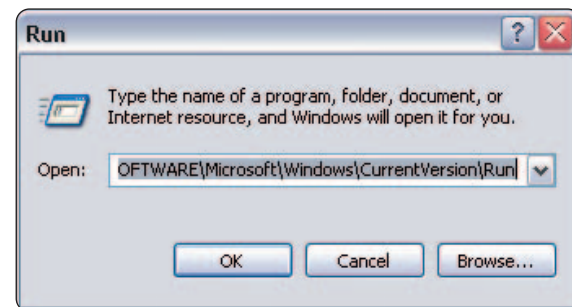
In the lefthand pane of the System Information dialog box, double-click Software Environment and select Startup Programs. The righthand pane will list all the programs that run at startup. Scary, isn't it?

You should find the program you're looking for in this list. When you see it, select it and press Ctrl, C to copy the entire line.

It would be nice if System Information let you copy just the command you need, but no: you must take the whole line or nothing. And if you use Windows 2000 you

can't press Ctrl, C to copy the line. Instead right-click it, select Save As Text File, type restart (or the name of your choice) in the File name field and hit Save. Open the text file you've just created, press Ctrl, A to select the text then Ctrl, C to copy it.

Choose Start, Run and press Ctrl, V to paste the line into the Run dialog box's Open field. Delete all the text before and after the command itself and press Enter. The program should reload and its System Tray icon should reappear.



↑ Paste a command line into the Run dialog box to restart an app that's not listed in the Programs menu

Enervating email

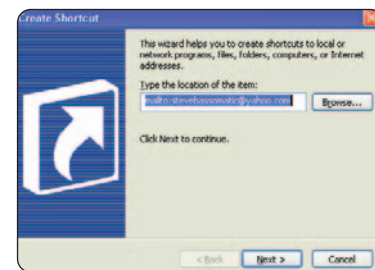
GRYPE You're fed up with emails in which the To field is longer than the text.

FIX If you send an email to more than one or two people, hide the recipient list by using the Blind Copy (Bcc) field. Address the message to yourself or leave the To field blank.

Be aware that some spam filters block email with a blank To field. To display the Bcc field, select View, All Headers in Outlook Express, View, Bcc Field in Outlook or To, Bcc in Netscape. In Eudora, Bcc is on by default.

GRYPE You often send email to a particular friend but your email program offers no shortcut keys to simplify sending a message to the same recipient.

↓ Hide long recipient lists by using the Bcc field - just go to View, All Headers to see it



← Make a shortcut to create instant emails to a regular recipient

↓ A simple Registry fix will add an 'Email Page' option to the Send submenu in IE

FIX Right-click your desktop and select New, Shortcut then type mailto: 'bestmate@hisISP.com' in the Command line (Windows 98 and Me) or location field (Windows 2000 and XP). Enter your friend's email address after 'mailto'.

Click Next, give the shortcut a name and place it in your Quick Launch toolbar. When you select it your email program will open a new message with your friend's address in the To field.

GRYPE You need to keep a copy of email messages you send but Outlook Express keeps deleting them.

FIX Set your email program to store a copy of outgoing messages. In Outlook Express, for example, choose Tools, Options, Send and check 'Save copy of sent messages in the Sent Items folder'.

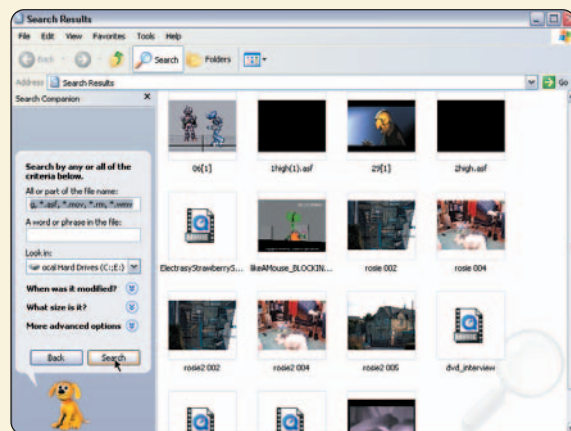
GRYPE IE 6.0 adds a body text message to all your emails informing you it has attached files to them



when you choose File, Send, Link by E-mail. It also identifies the email subject line as Emailing, followed by a portion of the link text, instead of letting you decide the subject.

FIX The Registry file SendPage.zip will add an Email Page option when you right-click in IE. The message is the name and URL of the website; the subject is the site's name. Go to www.kellys-korner-xp.com/xp_tweaks.htm and scroll to line 60, 'Email Page - IE' to download the file or load it from our cover CD.

GRYPE Some people reply to the most mundane emails, even if you simply send an interesting link or some other nugget marked FYI. You need a polite way to say 'don't RSVP'.



↑ Track down all the multimedia files on your system and relocate them to a central repository

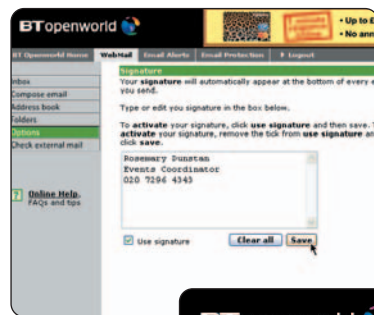
Stream video to play offline

Most videos automatically save to your hard drive while playing in your media player. Once you've learned how to find, rename and relocate the files for replaying, you can run them whenever you like.

The filename usually appears in the player's titlebar while the video is playing. Alternatively, search your hard drive for all files that have a video extension. Select Start, Find, Files or Folders (in Windows 98), Start, Search, For Files or Folders (in Me and 2000) or Start, Search (in XP). Then in the Named field (in Windows 98), the 'Search for files or folders named' field (in Me and 2000) or the 'All or part of the file name' field (in XP), enter the following video filename extensions (minus the last full stop, of course): *.avi,*.mpg,*.mpeg,*.asf,*.mov,*.rm,*.wmv.

The trick is to find the video files as soon as you've played them (they disappear when you empty your temporary internet folders), so search by date, looking exclusively for current files. In Windows 98, set your date criteria on the Date tab. In Me and 2000, bring up the Search Options link to set date criteria. In XP, click the 'When was it modified' chevron and choose Specify dates; the default will be today's date.

When you find the file (it's likely to have a temporary name in your internet cache folder), rename it and move it to a new location. Once you have moved the file you can open it by double-clicking it. See our tips on saving Flash movies elsewhere in this feature.

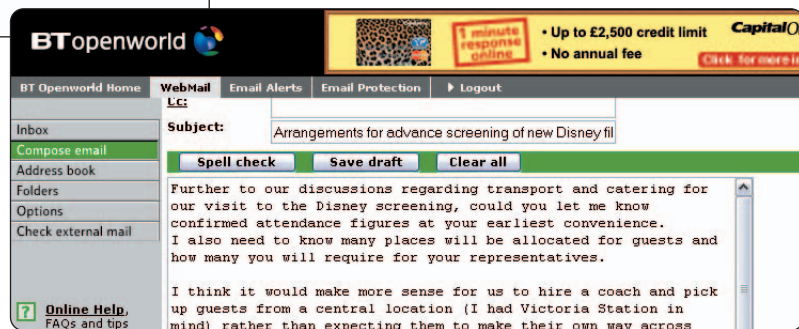


← Add a brief signature to your email so that it's not in danger of dwarfing your message

FIX End your email with 'This is just FYI, so don't feel obliged to reply'. It invites people not to respond with something pointless such as 'Thanks' or 'I agree'.

GRIPE You prefer to respond to some emails the old-fashioned way: by phone. But you're fed up searching

→ Planning a meeting? Send the details and let your recipients know if they need to reply



through contact lists to do so since most people don't stick their phone number on their emails.

FIX Lead by example: stick a signature line at the bottom of your outgoing email. This is invaluable because it will let the recipient know right away who sent the message – something not always obvious from the email address. A courteous signature is short and to the point (no more than four or five lines). It need contain no more than your email address, phone number and physical location or postal address.

As witty as your favourite poetry/movie/inspirational quotation might be, leave it out: a signature longer than the message itself makes your readers think you don't have anything original to say.



Hardware headaches

GRIPE Despite all the technology packed into mobile phones, you still have to enter phone numbers one at a time.

FIX Just £10 will buy you a keyring SIM backup device from www.porta-charge.co.uk. Simply slot your SIM card in to the Mogo Sim Card Backup's slot and you have an instant record of up to 250 names and numbers. This can be quickly restored or copied to a new handset, whether you are upgrading old hardware or have lost your phone.

GRIPE Removable flash media devices are a great alternative to a floppy disk, but it's a pain having to crawl under your desk to stick it in to a USB port on the back of your PC. **FIX** Many larger-capacity flash drives come with their own USB cable, but some cheapo models don't. Get a 6ft male-to-female extension cable from a site such as www.ebuyer.co.uk or your local electrical outlet and you'll be back to working on your desk, not under it.

GRIPE The monitor sometimes flickers on and off. Rebooting fixes it for a while but a few hours later the flickering starts again.

FIX Loose cables are responsible for more computer users' tantrums than any of us would ever admit. The same problem can arise with your modem, scanner, printer or any other device connected to your PC with a cable. Most cables have two connection-tightening screws; make sure both are twisted tightly in place.

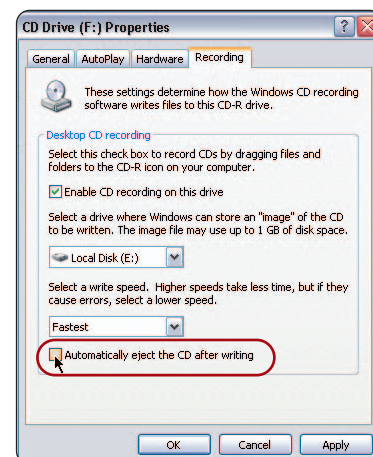
GRIPE Windows XP insists on popping open the CD-RW drive every time you finish writing data to a CD – regardless of whether or not you actually wanted to eject the disc.

FIX Open My Computer, right-click your CD-RW drive to bring up its Properties, choose the Recording tab and uncheck 'Automatically eject the CD after writing'.

GRIPE Travelling light when you're on business is hard enough without having to lug around a mobile phone charger. Half the time charging it slips your mind so you end up with a dead battery in any case.

FIX If you're taking a notebook too, you can double up. Accessories such as APC's USB Mobile Phone Charger can power up your phone from your notebook's USB port. Devices for all models cost £8 from www.apc.com.

GRIPE Whatever its cause, a sudden power outage is no joke.



↑ Uncheck this option and Windows won't automatically eject discs when burning's finished

← Put your contacts on your keyring with Porta-Charge.co.uk's Mogo Sim Card Backup



FIX Get an uninterruptible power supply. A small UPS (from £60 at www.apc.com) keeps your system going for about five to 10 minutes – long enough to close your open files and apps before turning off your system normally.

GRIPE Your LCD monitor's colours and sharpness weren't quite right but tweaking settings with the built-in adjustments does little to stave off squinting and eye-rubbing.

FIX Forget the monitor's own settings. Instead try the free DisplayMate utility, available on the cover disc. It's great for adjusting sharpness, colour, contrast and dozens of other settings on both CRT and LCD monitors.

GRIPE You don't just use your notebook when you travel and it's a pain having to reconnect its cables and peripherals whenever you want to use it as a main PC at home.

FIX Belkin's Hi-Speed USB 2.0 DockStation (£88 from www.dabs.com) has one parallel, one serial and two USB 2.0 ports, as well as VGA and ethernet connectors. Attach your monitor, keyboard, printer and so forth to the DockStation and run two cables from it to your notebook. When leaving town, simply disconnect the two cables from the notebook and you're out the door.



↑ Put an end to all that plugging and unplugging with Belkin's Hi-Speed USB 2.0 DockStation

Annoying audio/video

GRIPE Roxio's Easy CD Creator is a great program, but it's overkill for converting a single audio file.

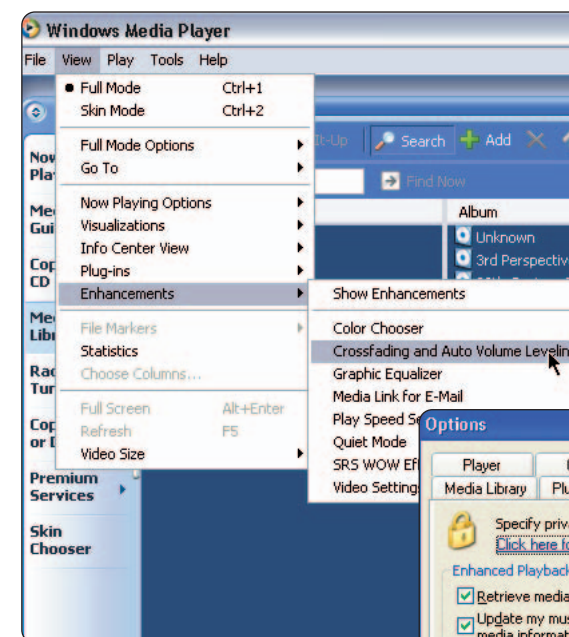
FIX Why spend more time loading a program than you spend using it to convert a file? Illustrate's free DBpowerAMP Music Converter (from www.dbpoweramp.com or our cover disc) does WAV-to-MP3 conversions, and vice versa, in the blink of an eye. Right-click a music file in Windows Explorer, select Convert To and change either MP3 or WAV.

GRIPE You've ripped lots of MP3s on to your hard drive from your CD music collection but the volume each track plays at is completely inconsistent and unpredictable. How can you make tracks play at a uniform volume?

FIX The trick is to adjust (or normalise) the sound level as you rip the MP3 to disk. Such a feature is found in many audio programs. Once you have taken the music track from your CD, the sound problem is in the player. Microsoft's Windows Media Player normalises the volume of MP3s as you play them.

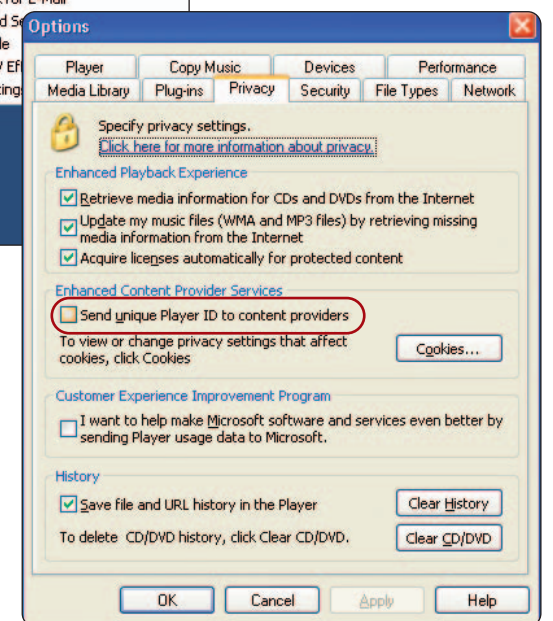
Click View, Enhancements, Crossfading and Auto Volume Leveling. For a permanent fix, use MP3Gain (available for download from <http://mp3gain.sourceforge.net> or save yourself some time and load it up straight from our cover disc). This utility analyses and normalises the sound levels of each of your MP3 files.

GRIPE Trying to play videos in Windows Media Player is driving you round the bend.



← Windows Media Player normalises the volume of MP3s as you play them

↓ Uncheck this option to protect your privacy



FIX Formats for digital video abound and each one requires a different playback codec (the program that compresses and decompresses the videos). Open Windows Media Player, click Tools, Options, Player and select Download codecs automatically. Then try to play the video.

If this doesn't help you may be missing the one specific codec that you need. Download Windows Media Player 9.0 (www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/download/default.asp) to obtain whatever version it is that your system is lacking.



Your System Tray runneth over

Uninvited icons from AOL, Netscape, Real, Yahoo and others take up screen space and gobble resources when dumped in your System Tray. These steps will prevent them scattering their icons about and show you how to remove them after they appear.

- **Stay alert when installing** Always go for custom installation so you choose where the software plants its icons. The program will still appear on the All Programs submenu of your Start menu regardless of your decision.
- **Protect your System Tray** WinPatrol alerts you whenever a program attempts to add itself to your PC's Startup group or Registry. It guards every place a Trojan horse, internet dialler or other sneak is wont to hide itself. When WinPatrol detects a forced entry, you can let it know whether it's legit; if not, WinPatrol blocks its subsequent attempts to invade your Startup group. See the cover disc for your copy.
- **Make a clean sweep** Hover your mouse over the icon to see which app it loads. Click Start, Programs (All Programs in Windows XP), Startup - to check your Startup group for programs that don't need to start automatically when Windows loads.

Use the free Startup Control Panel 2.8 to remove programs that start at bootup. You'll find this utility on the cover disc.

BONUS TIP If you try to play a video only to be rudely informed you lack the proper codec, download Gspot (www.headbands.com/gspot), a free utility that determines which codec it requires. Once you have that info, head to Codec Central (www.dbpoweramp.com/codec-central.htm) for a terrific collection of codecs.

GRYPE Video files you played in Window Media Player opened a site in your browser you didn't want to visit. **FIX** The source of this aggressive browser behaviour is a dreaded HTML script embedded in numerous Windows Media files.

Brett Bartholomew's free WMPopKill turns WMP's scripting on and off like a switch. The program automatically downloads any patches it requires for some versions of WMP. Visit www.bartdart.com for your copy.

GRYPE You don't like the idea of Windows Media Player using unique ID numbers to exchange information about you with websites. **FIX** To turn off the SuperCookie tracking in WMP 7.0 and later, choose Tools, Options, Privacy. Deselect 'Allow Internet sites to uniquely identify your Player' or 'Send unique Player ID to content providers' (depending on your version) and click ok.

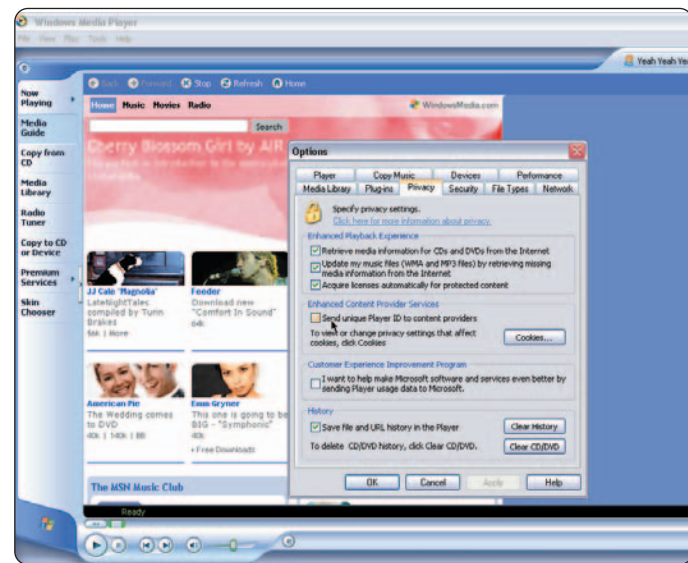
GRYPE Every time Windows Media Player tries to access the internet, your firewall pops up to alert you to the fact with an annoying dialog box. You are quite happy for WMP to go online so why does ZoneAlarm have to get all jumpy about it? **FIX** Your firewall is simply doing the job asked of it - watching for anything coming in to your PC from the internet as well as monitoring all things outbound.

You can let Windows Media Player head online and never bother you again by checking 'Remember this answer the next time I use this program' in ZoneAlarm's Alert before you click Yes. Other firewalls have a similar option to designate specific sites and services as safe. I don't recommend ticking it, however.

Windows Media Player is a particularly meddlesome program,

eager to help you download album covers when you play MP3s or to use a unique ID number to report on you to Microsoft's website. For your privacy's sake, it's best to decide on

↓ Turn off SuperCookie tracking and WMP won't leak info about you

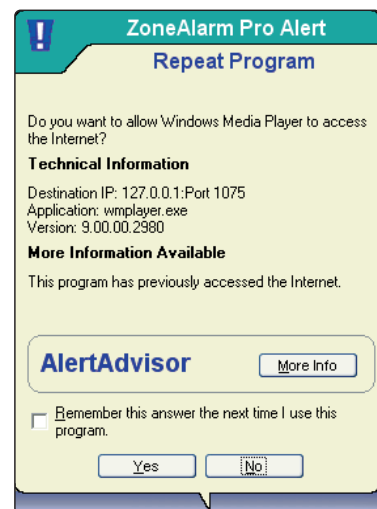


a case-by-case basis whether to let the program access the internet.

If WMP wants to retrieve a video you requested, fine. But if the warning pops up when you're playing a file stored on your system, have ZoneAlarm block it.

GRYPE The icon in your System Tray that you use to adjust the sound levels has vanished.

FIX Open Control Panel. In Windows XP, choose Sounds and Audio Devices (if you're in Category View, open Sounds, Speech and Audio Devices



← We don't recommend you check the 'Remember this answer the next time I use this program', tickbox for Windows Media Player

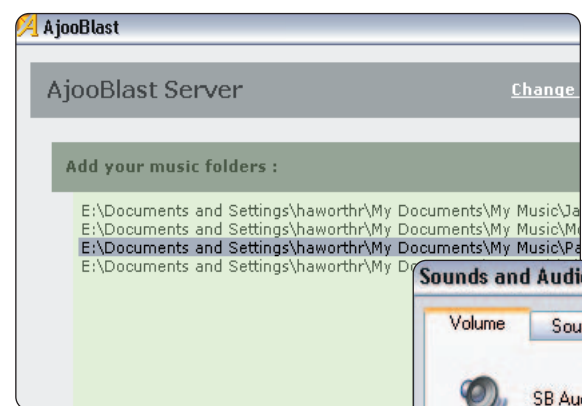
first). Select 'Place volume icon in the taskbar' under the Volume tab and click ok.

Sounds and Multimedia, Sounds, 'Show volume control on the taskbar' (Me and 2000) or Multimedia, Audio, 'Show volume control on the taskbar' (Windows 98) provides the same result for non-XP users.

BONUS TIP Sometimes even when 'Place volume icon in the taskbar' is checked, the volume icon still won't show in your System Tray. In this case, uncheck the box, click Apply, recheck the box and click ok.

GRYPE You've a huge collection of MP3s on your home PC and want to be able to play them at work - without dragging a huge stack of CDs with you.

FIX Load up Chime Software's free AjooBlast Server, a cool little (about 80KB) program that lets you listen to the music files stored on any PC from



← Listen to music files on your PC from anywhere in the world with AjooBlast

↓ Keep volume controls handy by checking this option



any other PC in the world. AjooBlast (available from www.chime.tv/products/ajooblast.shtml or our cover disc) is totally secure, limiting access to the folders you specify. You can't download your music files, however: they're solely for listening.

The one down side is that if you're behind a router, you'll need to fiddle with its settings to open port 8080.



↓ Block annoying ads which appear even when you're not surfing



Internet irritations

GRYPE When you revisit a website, Internet Explorer automatically inserts your password. That's fine, but you want to see what it is.

FIX Lostpassword.com's free Asterisk Key utility (a copy of which is on our cover disc) shows the password hidden behind practically any row of asterisks. Use it wisely.

GRYPE You're plagued by pop-up advertisements even when you're not surfing the internet.

FIX Messenger Service ads (also called directads) are pop-ups that blindly shower a range of IP addresses. If you have Windows 98 or Me, don't worry about them. But if you run Windows 2000 or XP without a software firewall, or if you're not attached to a router with a hardware firewall, you may see these ads pop up.

To stop them until your next reboot select Start, Run, type services.msc and press Enter. In the righthand pane, right-click Messenger and choose Stop.

For a permanent solution, get Shoot The Messenger from <http://>

grc.com/stm/shootthemessenger.htm or the cover disc. It's designed to blitz spam from Windows Messenger but will block these ads as well.

GRYPE IE doesn't always remember to launch as a maximised window.

FIX IE New Window Maximizer (from www.jiisoft.com/ie_maximizer or the cover disc) automatically maximises every new window and lets you hide or close all IE windows with the keystroke combination of your choice.

GRYPE You have to change your notebook's network configuration every time you connect to a hotel LAN or a client's network.

FIX The cure is NetSwitcher, a \$14 (around £7.50) shareware program from www.netswitcher.com that lets you save several different network configurations. Whenever you reach a new network location, add and save the new network settings.

Once you get home, restore your previous network settings with a couple of clicks. And whereas Windows insists on rebooting no matter what, NetSwitcher only does so if you modify a parameter that can't take effect without a reboot. ☒

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