

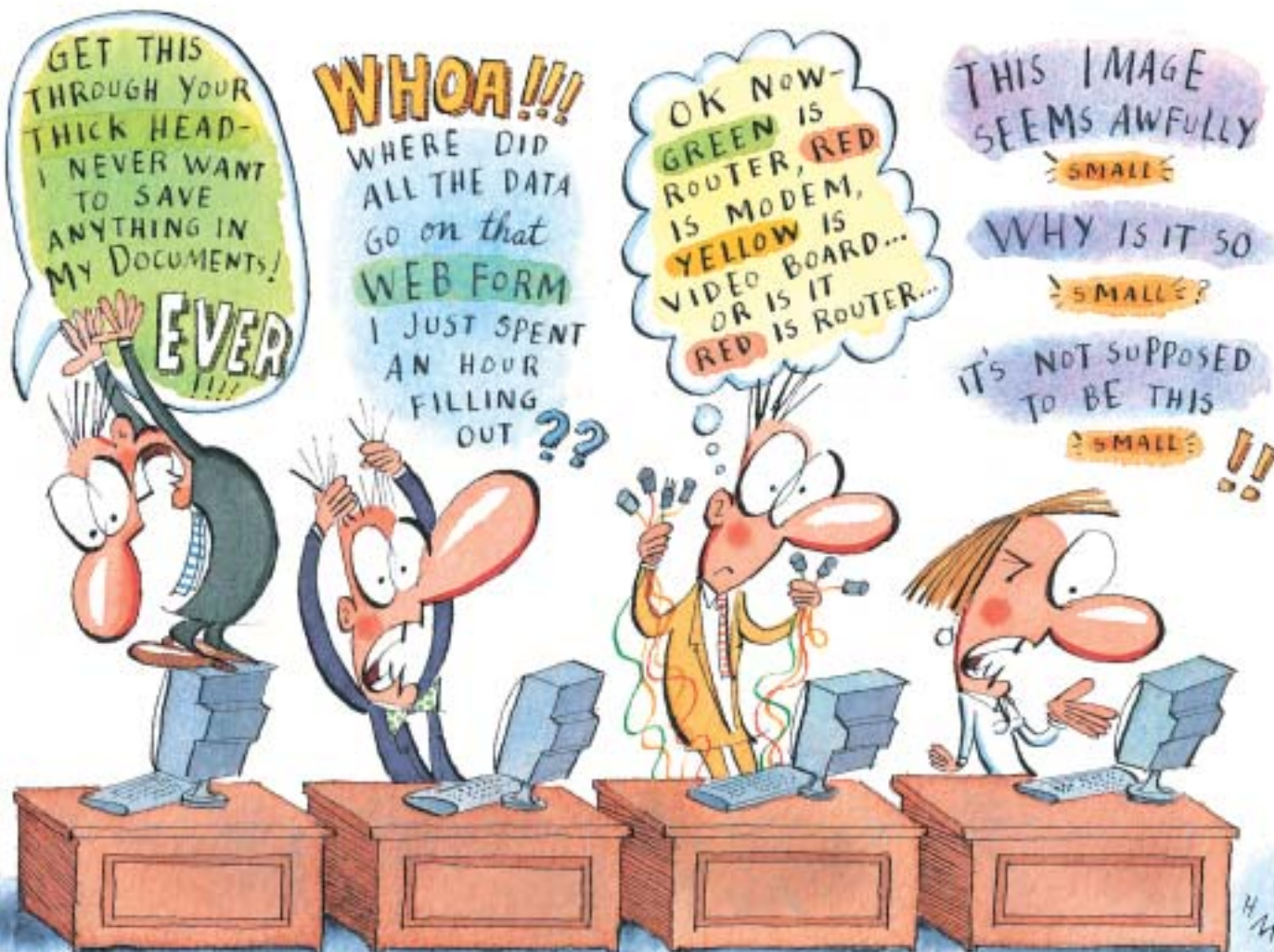
21 ways to keep your PC trouble-free

Desktop deviance driving you bonkers? With your sanity in mind, we asked Steve Bass to put a technological tearaway back in its place

Fattery will get you everywhere. So when my commissioning editor came up to me with a winning smile and said she couldn't think of a better man for the job, I was sold. Little did I know she was referring to my reputation as *PC Advisor's* foremost complainer. She's right, though, I can moan for Britain. Little wonder – if there's a PC problem to be found, without fail it will make its presence felt on my desktop. And you know what they say about a problem shared...

Tired of hearing me gripe about disappearing data, less-than-intuitive operating system setups, web pages that freeze without warning and applications that insist on being installed, the task fell to me to start looking for useful fixes. Of course, the various versions of Windows and their idiosyncrasies could merit a troubleshooting and customisation feature all of their own. You need only turn to our regular Helpline pages (starting on page 152) to get an idea of the sorts of difficulties other *PC Advisor* readers have encountered.

But the operating system is only part of the equation. Programs that are supposed to help can actually be a hindrance, particularly when they attempt to take over and adjust your PC settings so they become the default.



Then there's the really annoying stuff us PC users have to contend with on an all-too-regular basis, such as printing out half a tree's worth of pages because Word doesn't make it sufficiently easy to print just the section you need. And, when your head's throbbing with the sheer frustration of having to work in these conditions, it doesn't help that your PC itself adds to the pain with its constant whirring and grinding noises.

See, I told you I could moan. But to banish some of these blues once and for all I've compiled a collection of the most annoying and downright stupid things my PC does on a regular basis and worked out how to deter it from ever doing them again. No doubt you'll recognise some of the following instances of PC disobedience – perhaps you've even discovered your own way of working around them. If this is the case, don't keep it to yourself. Share your useful tips with other readers by emailing pcadvisor_letters@idg.com, using the subject heading Pass it on.

For now, though, here's *PC Advisor's* top 21 ways to wipe out the most aggravating PC behaviour.

Vanishing web data

- The annoyance You spend an hour filling in a lengthy form on a web page only to be told after you submit it that it's missing an item. The omission might be your fault but when you hit the browser Back button everything's disappeared, meaning you have to retype the whole lot. It's no wonder you want to snap someone's head off.
- The fix Instead of growling, fix your browser's cache settings to hold on to the information. In Internet Explorer, select Tools, Internet Options. Click on the General tab, choose Settings and then check the box marked 'Every time you start Internet Explorer'. In Netscape, select Edit, Preferences, double-click Advanced and choose Cache. Set the memory cache to at least 1,024KB and the disk cache to a minimum of 7,680KB. Then clear both caches. You may have to click on your browser's Refresh button to see a revisited page's dynamic data.

RealOne running amok

- The annoyance Near the top of *PC Advisor's* list of irritations is RealNetworks'

RealOne Player. It's infuriating how RealOne peppers your PC with desktop icons and browser links and then offers confusing choices for audio and video file associations. Your blood pressure doesn't need this sort of treatment.

- The fix If you're installing RealOne from scratch, pay close attention to each screen. Always choose a custom installation to see more options. On the Program Location and Desktop Settings screen deselect the locations you think are nonessential. You can probably deselect the lot – after all, a RealOne icon is bound to end up in your Start menu anyway. At the Default Media Player screen, choose Customize, scroll through the choices and carefully select which of the 14 audio and video file types you want to associate with RealOne.

If RealOne (or RealPlayer) already resides on your PC, dump all the program's icons except the one you use most often, such as the icon on your desktop. Next, remove the RealOne shortcut from your System Tray. You don't need it, since the player loads automatically whenever you open an associated file.

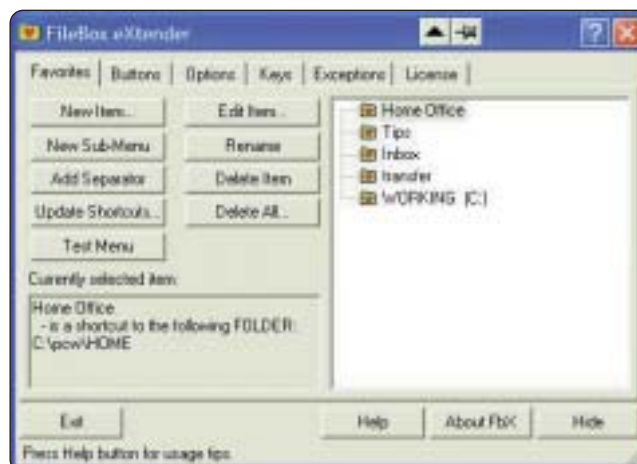
Identity crisis

- The annoyance Take a look at those icons on the back of your modem, router, sound card or graphics board. Isn't it almost impossible to identify the ports they represent? If companies wanted to make it easier for users they would place raised labels above the ports that we could read without resorting to a symbology guide and magnifying glass.
- The fix Before installing any card or device that cables plug into – and while you can read its port icons – stick a small label above the port describing what it is. You can bring order to that morass of cables lurking under your desk in a similar way by wrapping them with labels describing which peripheral they belong to.

Dialog box dilemmas

- The annoyance Every Microsoft program automatically tries to save new files in the My Documents folder. However, many of us have no intention of using that folder and only ever do so by accident. It's probably also the last place you'd think to look for a file you've misplaced.
- Microsoft Office applications also don't let you add or remove items from the lefthand panel of the Open and Save dialog boxes, leaving you stuck with the History, My Documents, Favorites and My Network Places shortcuts.
- Oh, and there's one more: don't you just hate the way that Windows opens a dialog box window the size of a postage stamp whenever you open or save a file?
- The fix There's no cure for the My Documents default setup, but you can

→ Exercise more control over your Windows dialog boxes by investing in the FileBox eXtender utility



use utilities to make dialog boxes work your way. Start with FileBox eXtender, a \$20 (about £13) utility that you can purchase from www.hyperionics.com. This handy tool adds two buttons to the File, Open and File, Save dialog boxes that display your favourite and recent folders (as shown above).

FileBox eXtender also makes unresizable Windows dialog boxes larger. If you use Windows XP, grab a free copy of Tweak UI: it lets you add up to five favourites to Common Dialog box panels. Just choose Common Dialogs, click Custom places bar and select an option from each drop-down menu.

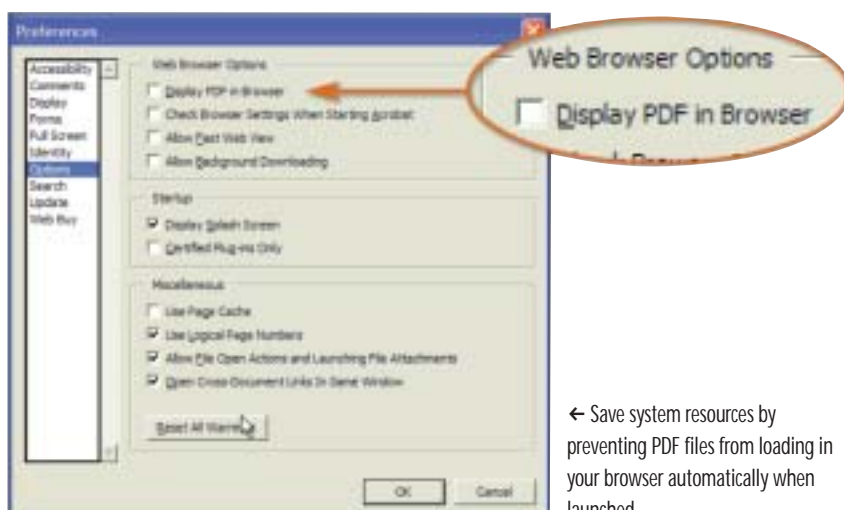
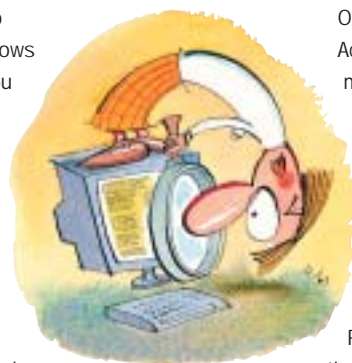
You can find Tweak UI, a trial version of FileBox eXtender and many of the other

helpful, sometimes sanity-saving programs and utilities on our cover disc.

PDF blues

- The annoyance Does it annoy you when you try to read a PDF file on a web page and Adobe Acrobat Reader 5.0 insists on opening in the browser?
- On top of that, a small Acrobat applet loads into the memory, taking up valuable system resources. And that applet doesn't unload when you close the reader, either.
- The fix It's simpler, more efficient and just as fast to open Acrobat Reader separately. Launch the Reader from your Start menu. Select Edit, Preferences, choose Options and uncheck 'Display PDF in Browser' (shown below left). Now when you select a PDF file while browsing you'll see a File Download dialog box. Acrobat Reader starts automatically when you choose Open.

On the other hand, if you use the Reader within your browser you can unload the applet after closing your browser by pressing Ctrl, Alt, Del, choosing Acro32 and clicking End Task. In Windows XP and 2000 choose the Processes tab in Task Manager, select acro32.exe and click End Process.



← Save system resources by preventing PDF files from loading in your browser automatically when launched

Too many CDs on the road

- The annoyance It's a right royal pain having to drag all your CDs around with you when you take your notebook on the road, but games that scream blue murder

The unfixables

There are some PC annoyances that we simply have to learn to live with. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't give the powers that be an earful about how poorly their products are engineered.

- **Don't do that** Whenever our system freezes and we have to reboot the PC, Windows paternally tells us as it's reloading that we shouldn't have turned it off without exiting correctly. Well, fine. We won't do any more unauthorised restarts if you never crash again.
- **Stop fleecing me** If you run a small business, a government agency or a corporation, Microsoft happily gives a discount on Windows XP, Office and many other products by way of a site licence. The company will also gladly give a price break to students. But if your family has more than one PC (an increasingly common circumstance), you're stuck buying a separate copy of the programs for each machine.
- **You're in trouble** Error messages rarely tell us anything. And what in the world does Windows 98's notorious 'You have performed an illegal operation and the system will shut down' error message mean? We didn't do anything illegal, honest.
- **Why reboot?** Why do Windows 98 and Me insist we restart our PCs every time we make the slightest change to our network settings?
- **Ask my permission** Programs that automatically (and arrogantly) install themselves in our Startup group without

permission make our blood boil. Worse are the dunderheads that place components in a hidden spot in the

Registry, making it even tougher to find and eradicate them.

- **Change locations** Windows 2000 and XP do one thing right – all the important data is in the Documents and Settings folder, making regular backups a breeze. Then they muck it up by filling the folder with temporary and cache files, along with other junk that we have no desire to back up.
- **Why pay for a free trial?** Any company that charges our credit card the minute we sign up for a free trial and then takes three months to process the credit when we cancel has automatically earned a special place in the all-digital eighth circle of hell.
- **Drivers rebel** Why do vendors treat drivers as an afterthought? Microsoft's solution is to scare the living daylight out of us when we install an uncertified driver.
- **A pop at pop-ups** One pop-up advert on a website may be a fair price to pay for free content, but some sites overdo it with tons of pop-ups, pop-unders and all the rest. Panicware's Pop-Up Stopper (on this month's cover disc) or Google's Toolbar Browser Control feature help ensure they pop straight back to wherever they sprang from in the first place.



if you don't load them from the CD drive are just as bad. For a little outlay, peace of mind can be yours once again.

- **The fix** Try CD Anywhere from www.v-com.com. This \$30 (around £19) utility saves compressed CD images to your hard drive. You can then run many games and most other content from a CD without requiring the physical disc. Hard drive access is faster so games run quicker. And besides travelling much lighter it also helps preserve the notebook's battery life.

Foggy ClearType settings

- **The annoyance** This would get anyone's pulse racing: you've just upgraded to Windows XP, bought a cool LCD monitor and are looking forward to seeing crisp, sharp fonts on the screen. But no – XP ignores your hardware and leaves you high and dry, expecting you to dig around to find your LCD's Type Display settings.
- **The fix** Right-click anywhere on the desktop, choose Properties, Appearance

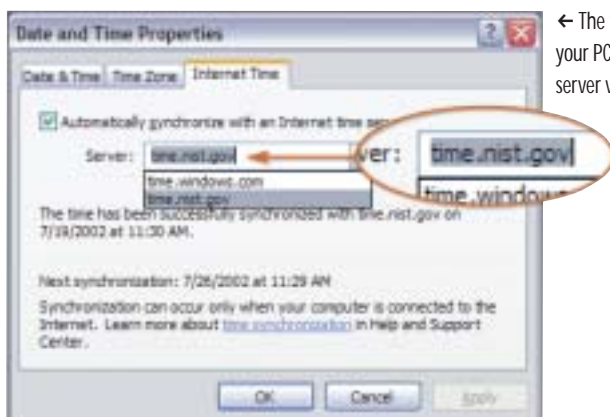
and click the Effects button. Make sure that 'Use the following method to smooth edges of screen fonts' is selected and choose ClearType from the drop-down menu. (This fix is ideal for setting your notebook's fonts as well.) If you would like to do even more fiddling around with your ClearType settings, grab a copy of ClearTweak, shown below left, from this month's cover disc.



← The free ClearTweak utility presents you with many more options for resetting the contrast of your ClearType fonts

AutoComplete overload

- **The annoyance** Most PC users will admit that Internet Explorer's AutoComplete feature is useful. It stores what you type into web address fields and forms. So instead of entering the same information repeatedly, you can just double-click a field to bring up a history of entries. What's tiresome is having to wade through a long list of ancient entries.
- **The fix** When an entry you rarely use comes up, select it and press Delete. Now and then it's worth doing some major housecleaning and dumping the entire list of web form entries. Open IE, click Tools,



← The time is right when you sync your PC's clock with an internet time server via this setting in Windows XP

Internet Options, select the Content tab, choose AutoComplete and then click the Clear Forms button.

PC noise pollution

- The annoyance PCs make far too much of a song and dance when they're in use: hard disks grind, fans whine and cases clatter. Thankfully, it is possible to do something about this cacophony without resorting to shutting your computer in a cupboard to muffle the din.
- The fix You can reduce the noise with a few simple tweaks. Switch off your PC first, then remove the case cover, turn the system back on and use a car mechanic's stethoscope – more commonly known as a paper-towel tube – to isolate the noise source. Don't forget to turn off your PC and put the case cover back on once you've dealt with the problem and want to start using it again.



If your hard drive chatters, make sure the screws attaching it to the PC case are tight and examine the bracket holding the drive to confirm that it's tightly connected to the PC. Check the gap around the case cover for vibrations. If you detect any, wedge in a piece of cardboard or use sealing foam.

If you're careful it's possible to lubricate the cooling fans by removing the sticker covering the lube hole and dripping one drop of oil into it. Wipe off any excess oil and then either reapply the sticker or replace it with tape.

Right place, wrong time

- The annoyance Some people never check the clock on their PCs to see whether the time and date are accurate. If your email application sorts incoming messages by date, new ones can get lost among the old ones you've not yet deleted from your inbox.

- The fix If you use Windows XP double-click the time in your System Tray (just to the right of the Taskbar). Select Internet Time and then check 'Automatically synchronize with an Internet Time Server'. Choose time.nist.gov from the drop-down menu (shown above). Alternatively, if you use Windows 98, Me or 2000 you can download the free Atomic Clock via the link on the cover disc. This keeps your PC synchronised and up to date with the exact time.

AC adapters on steroids

- The annoyance The engineers who design oversized AC adapters should be sentenced to 20 whacks with a geometry textbook. The power transformers that come with some notebooks and handhelds seem to weigh more than the device they are powering.
- The fix Get your hands on a surge protector that has sockets sufficiently far apart to cope with these giant

→ PC power tools: devices such as these can accommodate bulky AC adapters

powerpacks. If you have a number of packs you might also need an extra power strip – again, ensure there's enough distance between the sockets to accommodate the adapters. And don't forget to plug the power strip into the surge protector rather than straight into the wall. Both APC (www.apc.com) and Belkin (www.belkin.com) produce suitable products; some are even available in handy rack-mounted versions.

You can save on the number of powerpacks you need to lug around, too, by investing in a Targus Universal AC Adapter (available from www.targus.co.uk for £84.99 ex VAT). This can power most notebooks and recharge many mobiles and PDAs (personal digital assistants).

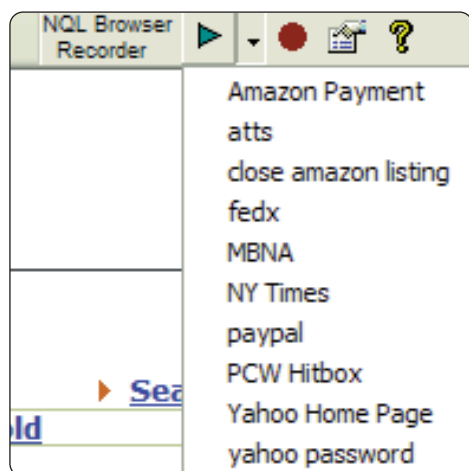
Show me the menu

- The annoyance Office 2000 and XP insist on hiding menu options you've not used for a while, which is more of a pain than a useful feature. Do you want to see all your menu options without waiting or making an extra click?
- The fix Custom menus are the default in Office, but once you change this setting in an application it affects every other installed Office program in one fell swoop. In Word, click any empty spot on the toolbar, choose Customize, Options and check 'Always show full menus'. Et voila! No more à la carte Office menus.

Wasteful Word printing

- The annoyance When printing from Word you might wish to print only the page currently onscreen or even just a few lines on that page. You can select the text, hit File, Print, choose Selection and then ok





← Replay your browsing with the NQL Browser Recorder plug-in for Internet Explorer

and highlight the text in the Description field. Type 'Prints highlighted text only'.

Now hit the Keyboard icon to customise the setup and, in the dialog box, choose 'Press new shortcut key' field. Select a suitable shortcut key or key combination – such as Alt, T – remembering to avoid any shortcuts that may already be in use. Leave the 'Save changes in' list set to 'normal.dot'. Finally, click Assign then Close.

Having recorded one macro it's easy to follow the same steps to create a second that lets you quickly and easily print the onscreen text. Add two Toolbar buttons by right-clicking the toolbar in Word, choosing Customize and clicking Commands. Under Categories list, click Macros. Locate those you've just created and drag them to the toolbar.

but this is cumbersome. And even with specific text selected, Word still prints the whole document if you click on the toolbar's Printer icon.

- The fix Create a macro for each task. Choose Tools, Macro, Record New Macro. In the Macro name box, type a name such as Print Selection. Leave the 'Store macro in' list set to All Documents (normal.dot)

Password overprotected

• The annoyance Websites that you visit daily still bug you for a password. Some of them even manage to override Internet Explorer's AutoComplete function so you have to tap in the same characters over and over again. It might be for our protection, but if the only desktop snoopers around are your canine companions you might think such measures are overkill.

- The fix NQL Browser Recorder is a \$10 (£6) Internet Explorer plug-in that creates 'dynamic bookmarks' and plays back entire sessions of web navigation you've recorded (available from www.e-botz.com). It can save sites which require password entry and the utility, shown left, is password-protected so it's quite secure. Netscape owners can use ShortKeys Lite (on the cover disc), a free tool that plays back recorded keystrokes.

I've been setup again

- The annoyance When downloading a program or an upgrade the last thing

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the following outlets**



you want is for the file to be named something like 'setup.exe' or 'install.exe'. You may not be intending to install it straightaway and in any case, with such a non-descriptive name you're bound to lose track of it.

- The fix Simply rename the file in the Save As dialog box before downloading it, using the program's name and version. This won't affect the function of the file.



Image resizing with IE 6.0

- The annoyance Internet Explorer 6.0 has an irksome way of handling large or unusually sized images: it resizes them to fit the screen, even though most of us would prefer to see an accurate depiction.
- The fix Open Internet Explorer and choose Tools, Internet Options. Select the Advanced tab, scroll down to Multimedia options and untick 'Enable Automatic Image Resizing'.

Dynamically dumb XP menus

- The annoyance Windows XP has an irritating habit of hiding things for its convenience rather than yours. First it files away infrequently used icons in the System Tray, then it adds program shortcuts to the Start menu's left pane.
- The fix Take charge of your System Tray icons by right-clicking the Start button and choosing Properties. Select the Taskbar tab and untick 'Hide inactive icons'. You can also decide which System Tray icons you want to see and which ones you want out of the way.

Leave 'Hide inactive icons' checked, click Customize and then choose each icon one at a time. You can set its Behaviour to Always show, Always hide or Hide when inactive.

If you don't want XP to add items to its Start menu list of frequently used programs, reopen the Taskbar and go to the Start menu Properties dialog box. Choose the Start Menu tab, then hit Customize and set 'Number of programs on Start menu' to a figure of your choosing depending how short you want to keep the list (shown right).

Fix your font size

- The annoyance Every other web page seems to have a different font size: one's too small, the next is too big. It's enough to throw Goldilocks into a tizzy.
- The fix To dictate how text appears in Internet Explorer, choose Tools, Internet Options. Under the General tab, click Accessibility and then choose 'Ignore font sizes specified on web pages' (the wording varies depending on your version of IE).

In Netscape 6.0 and 7.0, choose Edit, Preferences, select Fonts (double-click Appearance if you don't see Fonts listed), and then either check 'Use my default fonts' or uncheck 'Allow documents to use other fonts'. Again, note that the wording of these choices varies depending on your version of Internet Explorer.

Hyperlinks from hell

- The annoyance When you're writing in Word or WordPerfect and type a URL or email address, the program automatically creates a hyperlink which can make editing the document a nightmare.
- The fix In Word, click Format, AutoFormat and choose Options. Under Replace, uncheck 'Internet and network paths with hyperlinks'. Click

ok and Cancel. In WordPerfect, click Tools, QuickCorrect, select the SpeedLinks tab and deselect 'Format words as hyperlinks when you type them'.

Play big sounds the mini way

- The annoyance Winamp, Windows Media Player and all the other media players you've tried are behemoths. All you really want to do is play some Brubeck while you work and not feel overwhelmed with features, gaudy skins and flashing, razzle-dazzle visualisations.
- The fix You can have the bells and whistles with Chime's TrayPlay (on the cover disc), a tiny player with no superfluous features. It has all the control basics including random play and volume. And because this freebie settles in the System Tray, it doesn't take up space on the Taskbar.

Linkin parp

- The annoyance Have you noticed that every time you upgrade Internet Explorer, it changes your home page to MSN and adds a half-dozen new items to the Links bar?
- The fix To reinstate your home page navigate to your chosen URL, choose Tools, Internet Options and click 'Use Current in the Home page area' under the General tab. Thwart home-page interlopers by clicking Use Blank. And you can wave goodbye to those unwanted links by right-clicking them and choosing Delete. ■

→ Limit the number of shortcuts on your Start menu via this Windows setting

