

# Chapter 1

## Windows XP: What's Not to Love?

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Why you might want to hack at Windows
  - ▶ When you should avoid taking out the machete
  - ▶ The dirty truth about hacks and mods
  - ▶ Keeping your powder dry — and your system safe
- .....

**L**et's face it. Most Windows users just sit there and take it. If Windows crashes and says it wants to send information to Microsoft, they just let it go. Literally. If their PC vendor put putrid pink wallpaper on the desktop, well, it could be worse, right? If AOL wants to stick its signup icon on the desktop and make it hard to remove, or if Norton keeps advising to send \$30 to keep all hell from breaking loose, or if Windows Media Player keeps ripping songs that can't be played on any other machine, well, that's the way the Windows gods set things up, right?

Guess what. The gods are *crazy*.

### *Well, Perhaps There's Room for Improvement*

I'll never forget the day, about ten years ago, when one of my readers wrote to me, castigating me for taking Microsoft to task about one of its truly stupid Windows design decisions (of which there are many). If Windows is so bad, he said, why don't I use some other program? Why do I always assume that key decisions are made simply to line Microsoft's coffers? And if Bill Gates has such lousy products, Woody, tell me this: Why is he so rich?

Indeed.

Several worms have turned in the intervening decade. Bashing Microsoft has replaced baseball as the national pastime, or so it seems. But even though we all love Windows and we hate Windows and we love to hate Windows, an old

truth still reverberates: *You don't have to take it.* You can change Windows significantly to make it work the way *you* want.

That's what this book is all about.

Microsoft put Windows XP together to make life easy for beginners and to convince you to spend more money (see, for example, the link to a DoubleClick ad on Microsoft's Start Something New page, shown at the bottom of Figure 1-1). After you use Windows XP for a couple of months, you're no longer a beginner — but it can be infuriatingly difficult to remove the training wheels and dislodge the advertising, and even more of a challenge to get Windows to work more like the way you do, instead of the other way around.



Hacking and modifying Windows puts you back in the driver's seat, right where you belong.

## When to Hack Windows XP — and When to Let It Be



If you read the books and magazine articles and rifle through the Internet, you'll find hundreds — no, *thousands* — of Windows hacks and mods. A large percentage of them don't do anything worthwhile. Some even make your machine unstable. Most simply take a lot of effort and accomplish basically nothing.

You tell me: Why would you spend half an hour trying to shave five seconds off the time it takes Windows to reboot? Take off your shoes, pilgrim; count on your toes; and do the math. If you reboot Windows three times a week, it takes . . . lesssee . . . two and a half *years* to break even. Sure, hacking's fun, but if you're going to devote some time and energy to the pursuit, why not do something worthwhile?

## Hacks that don't work



Having seen many hacks come and go over the years, I can tell you that these hacks are largely overrated:



- ✓ **Making Registry changes to speed up a computer.** In some very specific cases (which I discuss in Chapter 25), changing the Registry can speed up your computer a little bit. Sometimes. But by and large, spelunking through your Registry looking for a killer bit that'll boost your speed by 10 percent is a fool's game.

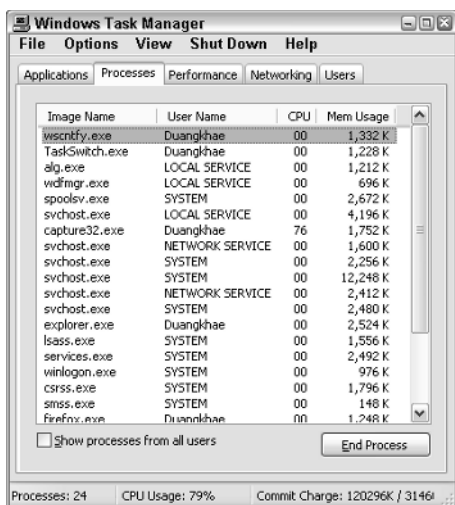
If you *do* find a hack that'll speed up your computer by 10 percent, you'll never even notice the difference. It takes a speed-up of 20 percent or so to be noticeable — and even a 30 percent gain won't seem like much after a day or two. On the other hand, if that speed-up hack makes your computer unstable, believe me, you will notice. Right between the eyes you'll notice.

- ✓ **Using any Registry cleanup utility.** There's one born every minute. Software companies have made millions and millions of dollars offering programs that scan and clean your Registry entries. I've never seen a single Registry cleaner that was both *safe* and *effective*. Sure, your Registry gets clogged up with useless entries. Does that make your machine slower? No. "Cleaning" little-known Registry entries can make your machine roll over and die. You're better off using a sledgehammer.
- ✓ **Disabling Windows processes.** I've seen a dozen reasons for disabling the Windows programs that automatically launch when Windows starts. (You can see which processes are running on your computer — except the really stealthy ones — by pressing Ctrl+Alt+Del and clicking Processes in the Windows Task Manager, per Figure 1-2). None of the reasons I've seen for disabling processes manually makes any sense. Years ago, a Windows process called UPnP opened a huge security hole in Windows XP. Microsoft fixed the hole, eventually, and for a while it made sense to disable the UPnP process.



If you have renegade processes, they're symptomatic of another problem — generally a worm, spyware, or some other form of malware. You should treat the problem by zapping out the offending software instead of attacking things piecemeal by manually disabling a running process that you don't understand.

**Figure 1-2:**  
All of the  
processes  
running  
on your  
computer  
(except the  
really  
sneaky  
ones) show  
up in the  
Task  
Manager.



✓ **Assigning fancy file access permissions.** Yes, I know you can fine-tune folder and file permissions, even with Windows XP Home, so you can allow certain people to see your files, keep others out, and make others dance like bears before the data comes up. But for most people, it isn't worth the effort. Why? If you really need to set up sophisticated file access permissions — so that John can read a file and Mary can update it — and you aren't willing to use passwords, you need to bite the bullet and install a server, Windows XP Pro, and Active Directory. The half-fast approaches to restricting access in Windows XP Home are doomed to failure simply because the tools aren't all there.

✓ **Doing anything involving DOS.** Okay, there are exceptions. I even talk about one of them in this book (see Chapter 8). But if you aren't conversant with DOS — and few of us are after all these years — you can almost always find a better way to accomplish what you want by using Windows alone or one of the nearly infinite number of free utilities.

✓ **Making parental control software and modifications.** Doomed to failure, no matter how hard you try. Windows doesn't have the tools to properly implement parental control, and the world on the Web changes much too fast. Don't even bother.

## *Keeping hacks and mods in perspective*

You aren't going to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. And with a little luck, you won't mess things up and turn things the other way around — although I *have* seen fancy systems that look and run like a sow's ear.

The best hacks and mods make Windows do something that you really like — something that will make your day go better or get you home earlier. The worst ones gum up the works and cause no end of problems down the line.

## A Quick Look at Some Cool XP Hacks and Mods



Here are my favorite hacks and mods, replacements, and enhancements:

- ✓ Without doubt, **TweakUI** — Microsoft's tool with a checkered past — rates as the premiere hacker's Swiss army knife (Chapter 4). If you want to change the way Windows looks or works, chances are good that making the change takes only a couple of clicks, thanks to this enormously powerful tool.
- ✓ Many people don't realize that they can change the contents of the **Quick Launch Toolbar** — the devilishly clever box of icons to the right of the Start button (Chapter 6). Even those who have discovered Quick Launch don't know the many different shortcuts it can handle or how to customize them.
- ✓ **Google Desktop Search** (Chapter 10) has changed my life. Really. I used to dread having to use Microsoft's enormously buggy search functions, both in Windows and in Office, and after I ran a search through the wringer, I could never be sure if Windows or Office found everything. All that's a thing of the past because I can put my finger on what I want, right now.
- ✓ It may be just as buggy, statistically, as Internet Explorer, but I breathe easier knowing that **Firefox** (Chapter 11) keeps me out of the crosshairs of most of the world's malware miscreants.
- ✓ Working with big photo files drove me nuts until I discovered Microsoft's free **Image Resizer PowerToy** (Chapter 12). Now I can change a giant photo file into a high-quality snapshot with a simple right-click.
- ✓ On the fun side, I just about flipped when I discovered how to use a photo as my "**user picture**" — both on the Windows logon screen and at the top of the Start menu (Chapter 14).
- ✓ I'll never pay for an antivirus product again — or put up with their begging me to part with my hard-earned cash for another update. I use **AVG Free**, and it works just as well as all the expensive programs (Chapter 18).
- ✓ Microsoft wants you to use its proprietary file format for all of your music. Why? Does the phrase "feeeelthy lucre" mean anything to you? You need to twiddle a setting and know when to stick to your guns (Chapter 20), but using **MP3 files** makes your music-listening experience a whole lot simpler.

- ✓ And my **iPod**. Oh, my iPod. There's something cool about the little beast — and something comforting in the knowledge that I can hornswoggle Windows into working well with an Apple product (Chapter 21).
- ✓ I detest **malware**, sleazeware, and all those other pieces of junk floating around. It's personal. Back when the PC was new and Windows was a gleam in Bill Gates's eye, we computer folks hung together, helped each other, and (heaven help us!) believed in The Common Good. All of that's changed, particularly with the commercial success of all that crapware. But there are good, solid ways to fight back, and I talk about them in Chapter 18.
- ✓ I use the firewall that ships with Windows XP Service Pack 2, and I feel a whole lot better knowing that I can **lock down Windows Firewall** with the click of a single icon (Chapter 17).

Of course, this book abounds with hundreds of hacks, mods, tweaks, and tips, and I urge you to give them all a once-over to see which ones are right for you.

## *Staying Safe and Sound While You Work*

When you hack and slash at the innards of Windows, you need to be prepared for the possibility that something will go bump in the night. Of course, everyone knows that you should back up your data and program settings. Be that as it may, you really *should* back up your data and settings. Know what I mean?

Many folks get confused about the various types of backups that Windows and software manufacturers make available. Not all backups back up the same things. Here's a quick guide to backing up for hackers and modders:

- ✓ **Data backups** involve making copies of your data files and sticking them someplace where they won't get clobbered. That way, you can copy the originals back if your original data (or hard drive) goes kaput. Hacking Windows rarely disturbs a data file, but if anything should go wrong, you'll be happy to have a pristine copy.



Although your choices for data backup are legion, I've always used a small, reliable program called ZipBackup ([www.zipbackup.com](http://www.zipbackup.com)), which compresses data and stores everything in zip files. That way, if you need to get your data back, you don't need to hassle with loading a complicated restore program — you just grab a zip and you're on your way. At \$29.95 (with a free 30-day trial), I think it's a great deal.

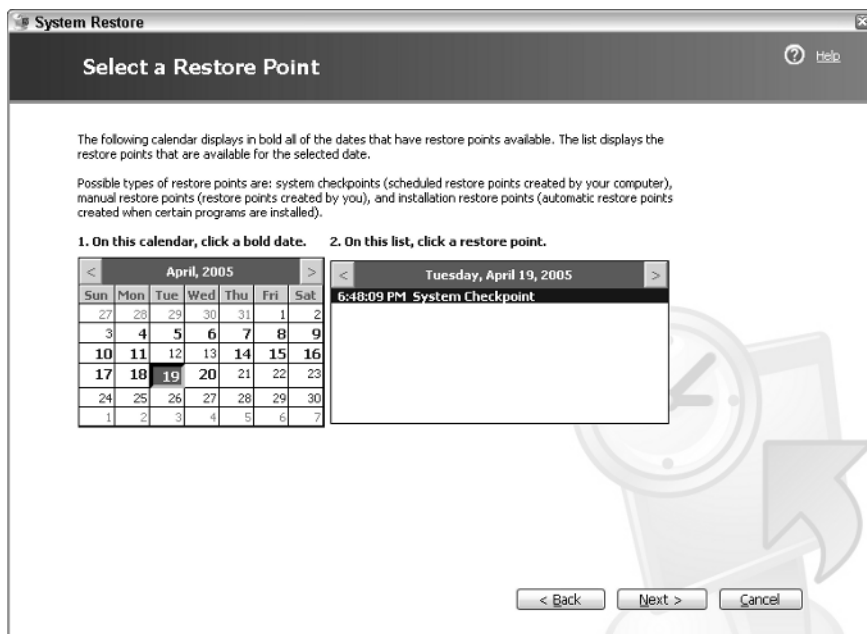


- ✓ **Registry backups** take the contents of the Windows Registry and write everything out to a data file. In effect, you turn an amorphous glob known as the Registry into a simple (if lengthy) text file, which you can subsequently back up like any other data file. I give you the lowdown on Registry backups in Chapter 24.
- ✓ When you (or Windows or an application program) establish a **System Restore Point**, Windows creates one big file that includes a full Registry backup, copies of all the users' personalized settings (even the ones that aren't in the Registry), and copies of many key system files.

Note that a System Restore Point doesn't do anything with your data files. You can create a Restore Point, change a gazillion Word documents and spreadsheets, copy a thousand pictures and songs to your PC, and then go back to the Restore Point, and all of your data comes through intact.

Most programs (including Windows updates) and hardware device drivers create restore points before you install them. If something goes wrong, it's relatively easy to "roll back" to the Restore Point and get your system running again. You can roll back to a Restore Point manually by choosing Start→All Programs→Accessories→System Tools→System Restore and following the wizard, shown in Figure 1-3. (You can roll back to the last System Restore Point by starting Windows while holding down the F8 key and then choosing Last Known Good Configuration.) For all the key details on System Restore, look at Technique 64 of *Windows XP Timesaving Techniques For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

**Figure 1-3:**  
Rolling back to a Restore Point takes a few minutes and requires a restart, but the wizard makes it easy.





- ✓ The most thorough backup? **A complete copy (frequently called a *ghost*) of your hard drive.** Running a ghost not only backs up your data files, but also gets your Registry and everything that would go into a Restore Point — and all the other little bits and pieces.

The archetypal disk ghosting program, Norton Ghost ([www.symantec.com/sabu/ghost](http://www.symantec.com/sabu/ghost)), will set you back \$69.95, but it's the most complete and reliable solution to the perennial backup problem.

Personally, I use ZipBackup daily to keep my data backups fresh and Norton Ghost once a month, just in case. I let Windows and the program installers automatically generate System Restore Points. The amount of time and effort involved is minimal, and if I ever get carried away with my hacking, I know that relief is just a few clicks (and maybe a two-hour-long restore!) away.



Windows XP has a built-in backup program called NTBackup, but I don't use it. If you're connected to a Big Corporate Network, you may want to try it, but I don't think it's worth the effort. Windows XP Home users, in particular, have to jump through all sorts of hoops to get NTBackup to work.