Chapter 1

Giving Windows a Facelift

When you look at the desktop of most PCs running Windows XP, you see pretty well exactly the same thing. First to strike the eye is the background image, by default the one labeled "Bliss" in the Display Properties dialog box. Next you probably notice the icons, sometimes scattered around the desktop, other times lined up neatly. At the bottom of the screen resides the Taskbar, with its dark blue background and its somewhat garish green Start button bearing white text and the famous pastel Windows logo. Nice sky, nice hill, nice icons, nice Taskbar. But what you need is a desktop and an interface that are all about you.

Of course, nobody is about to suggest there's anything particularly wrong with the default Windows XP desktop. In fact, the only thing that's really irksome is the sheer lack of individuality displayed by most of its users. The layout, content, and styles of the desktop are almost infinitely changeable, to the degree that your desktop can look completely different from anyone else's. For some reason, however, few people do change the default desktop. Customizing your Windows XP desktop makes every bit as much sense as customizing your office or your study, and this operating system offers numerous ways to make it your own.

This chapter focuses on the appearance of the Windows XP interface — colors, screen resolution, fonts, icons, and more — and examines desktop organizational principles as well. By the end, you'll have all you need to create a desktop that suits your needs perfectly, and one that looks as elegant and organized — or for that matter as chaotic and gaudy — as you wish.

Why Fix It? Is It Broken?

Why would you want to change the default configuration of Windows XP? First, you work with XP's desktop every single day of your life, often for several hours during that day. Why not, at the very least, make it more pleasing to look at, more to your aesthetic taste? More importantly, you can alter it so that it suits your work methods, your preferences, and your needs. The Windows XP desktop works fine out of the box, but until you customize it precisely to your individual requirements it won't reflect your work methods as well as it could. Out of the box, some of the elements may be in the wrong place, others get in your way, and others may simply look wrong. You owe it to yourself to make the entire desktop better for *you*.

In all likelihood, you won't want to make all the changes outlined in this chapter. But, then again, you might. The most effective Windows interfaces are those in which the user has explored every possible alteration and in many cases *made* every one of those alterations. The interesting part is that once you make your changes, you'll probably find everyone else's desktop somewhat clunky to use.

Caution

By definition, customizing your Windows XP desktop means that it's no longer the standard version. Many organizations frown on customization, in fact, because of potential difficulties for IT personnel and because moving from one machine to another requires readjustment. Unless you frequently move from machine to machine, however, it makes more sense to tailor your most frequently used environment to your own needs. Besides, it doesn't really take all *that* long to readjust to the default XP desktop.

Figure 1.1 shows the initial XP desktop in all its uncustomized glory. Prepare to say goodbye to it.

Figure 1.1: The ho-hum default Windows XP desktop.

Choosing between the Logon Screens

Before you even get to the main XP desktop, you have to pass through the Logon screen. When run for the first time, XP presents you with the standard blue Welcome screen (see Figure 1.2), with colorful icons representing each user account. Click on an account icon, type in the password (if required), and you're on your way to that account's desktop.

Tip

Turning off the Welcome screen option can provide a significant security benefit in that you can configure it to force users to type in their usernames and passwords in order to log on to the PC. In addition, unlike the Welcome screen, the old Logon dialog box does not automatically display the already existing user accounts. When you use the Welcome screen, by contrast, anyone can simply click one of the user icons and then attempt to guess the password, and if you haven't enabled passwords for all accounts (an option in XP), you make it extremely easy for outsiders simply to force their way in. Of course, some degree of security still exists, but it's harder to guess both the username and the password than the password alone.

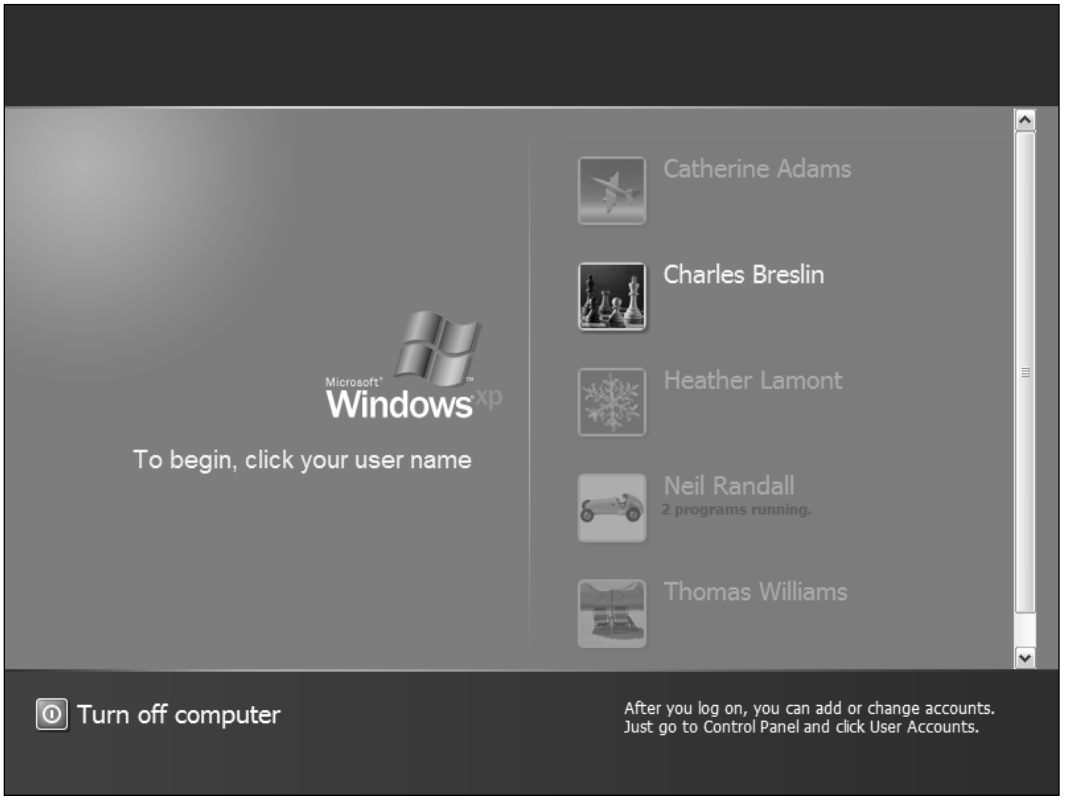

Figure 1.2: The scroll bar at the far right appears only if all the user icons do not fit on the screen.

But XP's roots lie in Windows 2000, whose Logon screen looked nothing like Figure 1.2. Microsoft chose the more colorful desktop screen to make XP more visually appealing — and possibly less intimidating, especially for users of XP Home Edition — but the previous Logon screen remains available to you (indeed, if your PC is part of a network domain, you have no choice: Windows switches to the older Logon screen automatically). To switch to this screen, do the following:

1. Click Start and then Control Panel to open the Control Panel folder.
2. Double-click the User Accounts icon.
3. Under Pick a Control Panel icon, double-click User Accounts.
4. Under Pick a Task, choose the option "Change the way users log on or off." Figure 1.3 shows the result.

Note

If you uncheck the Welcome screen option, you also automatically disable the fast user switching option. You can't use fast user switching with the older style Logon screen.

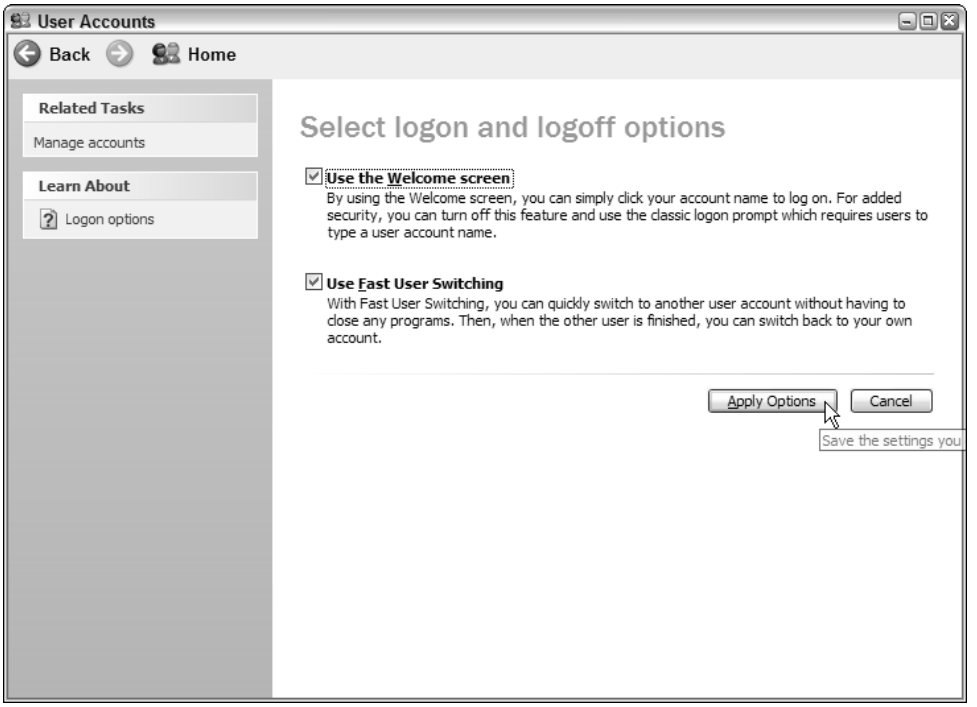

Figure 1.3: Changing the Logon screen option.

5. Uncheck the option labeled "Use the welcome screen."
6. Click Start, click Log Off, and then click the Log Off icon. After logging you off, XP presents the older Logon dialog box, in which you type your username and password.

Changing the Desktop: Backgrounds, Resolutions, and Color Quality

Once past the Welcome or Logon screen, you come to the desktop itself. This is where you can make the most noticeable changes to the XP interface because for many users the desktop *is* the interface, providing access to programs, files, and more. When you consider that Windows essentially began (with version 3.0) as nothing but a desktop, a set of clickable icons with no Start button or Taskbar whatsoever, the tendency to work strictly from the desktop makes sense.

But you don't have to leave the desktop as you find it. If you want brighter colors or no colors at all, go for it. If you want huge icons with huge fonts, go for that as well. If you want a background image showing the Milky Way galaxy, Fenway Park, or Elvis, go right ahead. These options, and many more, are readily available to you.

Changing Backgrounds

Windows XP backgrounds consist of images displayed on the desktop. All users can have their own settings and background. XP provides a fairly wide variety of backgrounds, but if you don't like any of them, or if you just get bored with them all, you can create your own or download gazillions of them from the Web.

Backgrounds are images. Some are large images, while others are small image files that combine to create a background pattern. Figure 1.1 shows the default XP background; it's called Bliss, presumably because XP's developers like blue skies and grassy fields (farmers might very well call this background Work instead). The Bliss background consists quite simply of an image, `bliss.bmp` (found in the folder `\Windows\web\wallpaper`), that XP loads every time you log on to that account. You can find all of XP's large background images in the same folder. You can see the smaller background images, from which XP creates its background patterns, in the main `\Windows` folder itself. You can use any small image to create your own background. If you choose not to tile it, it will simply occupy a small square at the center of the desktop; Figure 1.4 shows the background named Zapotec, a single image tiled to cover the entire screen.

You can change your background image in two fundamental ways: through the Display Properties dialog box or by assigning any image you find in My Computer, Windows Explorer, or Internet Explorer as the desktop. Any popular image type will do, with BMP, JPG, GIF, and PNG being the most common.

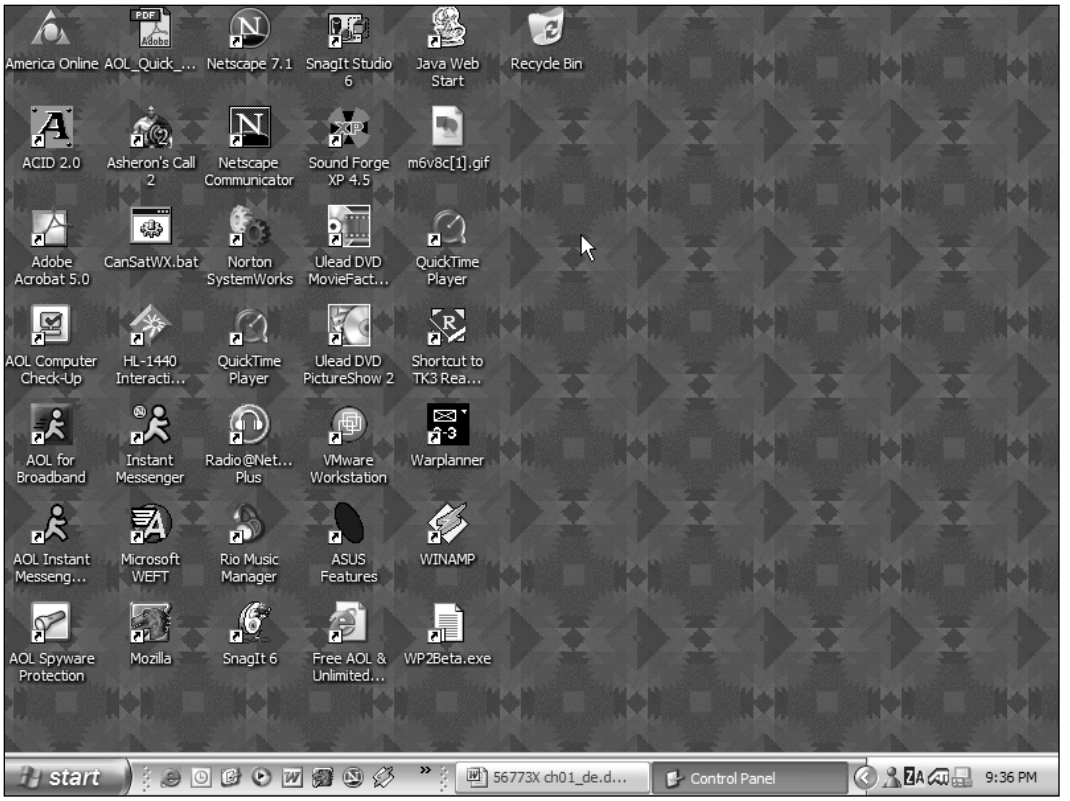

Figure 1.4: A small image tiled to cover the desktop.

CHOOSING BACKGROUNDS IN DISPLAY PROPERTIES

To gain the most control over your background selection, use the Display Properties method. You can open the Display Properties dialog box either by double-clicking the Display icon in Control Panel or, more easily, by right-clicking on the desktop itself and choosing Properties from the context menu. Because you need to right-click an unused part of the desktop, you'll probably find the Control Panel route easier if open windows already fill your desktop.

Tip

Whenever you want to see your desktop uncluttered by open program and document windows, click the Show Desktop icon on the Quick Launch toolbar on the Taskbar. This action minimizes all windows; you can restore them all to their previous state by clicking the Show Desktop icon a second time. If you don't see the Quick Launch toolbar (it's disabled by default), right-click an empty area of the Taskbar and then choose Toolbars and Quick Launch.

With Display Properties open, click the Desktop tab. Figure 1.5 shows the result, with the default Bliss desktop already selected.

Tip

In a nice gesture, XP lets you preview the background before you choose it. The preview area is extremely useful when choosing all your interface options.

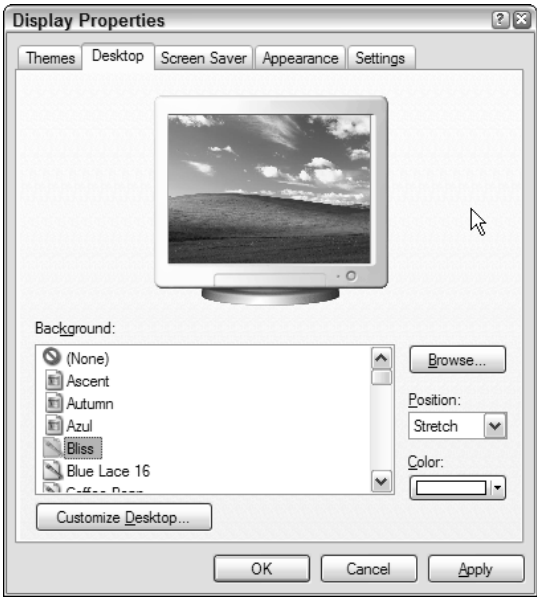

Figure 1.5: Preview the background before choosing it.

Click each of the icons in the Background area of this dialog box to see which one you want. When you've decided, choose it and click Apply or OK. Your desktop immediately takes on that image.

Stretch, Tile, and Center

As you click through the selections, take note of one difference between the full images and the patterns. When you choose a full image, such as Autumn, the Position drop-down menu to the right shows Stretch. When you choose a pattern, Position shows Tile. A third option in the Position menu is Center, although none of the images defaults to this choice.

- **Tile:** When you choose Tile, you instruct Windows to display multiple copies of the image, with each copy adjacent to the next, in a pattern of squares or rectangles covering the screen. You can tile any background image, but Microsoft has designed the pattern

images specifically with tiling in mind, so they fill the screen properly. Each of the full background images already fills a screen with a resolution of 800x600 pixels (the images are 800x600 in size), and tiling has no apparent effect unless you choose a higher resolution. Once you do, the tiled image results in four adjacent copies of the image across the screen, as you can see in Figure 1.6.

- **Stretch:** To compensate for the differences in screen resolution, XP provides the Stretch option. This option dynamically changes the size of the image to match the resolution you've chosen. You can stretch any image in this way, but if the image is small, stretching it will cause the image to become *pixilated*; all images consist of pixels, and when you display a low-resolution image at a higher resolution, the pixels themselves become visible. XP uses background images specifically suited to stretching (800x600 resolution at 96dpi), something to keep in mind if you want to create your own backgrounds.
- **Center:** As its name suggests, choosing the Center option centers the background image on the desktop. As you increase the screen resolution, the image stays the same size as before and therefore covers less of the desktop. Choose Center when you have a background image that neither tiles nor stretches well.

Figure 1.6: Tiling the Bliss background at a resolution of 1024x768.

Choosing Your Own Background Image

If you don't like any of the backgrounds XP provides, or if you simply want to look at something new when Windows launches, you can choose another image entirely. With the Display Properties dialog box open, click the Browse button. XP takes you directly to your My Pictures folder, which is located inside `\Documents and Settings\`*`YourUsername`*. To demonstrate this feature, Microsoft has stored four possible background pictures, all in JPEG format, inside the folder called Sample Pictures: Blue Hills, Sunset, Water Lilies, and Winter. Click any of these pictures to bring it into the Background area of the Display Properties dialog box and then click Apply or OK to accept it.

Note

The Sample Pictures folder is actually a shortcut to another folder, located in `\Documents and Settings\All Users\Documents\My Pictures`. When XP is installed, it creates a shortcut to this folder in the My Pictures folder of all user accounts so that all users have access to them.

ACQUIRING A BACKGROUND IMAGE FROM THE WEB OR ANOTHER PHOTO PROGRAM

If you find an image on a Web page you want to use as your background, you can do so directly from your browser. Virtually all modern browsers — such as Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, and Mozilla — offer a command to make this happen. When you see the image you want in your browser, right-click it and choose Set as Background (Internet Explorer) or Set As Wallpaper (Netscape and Mozilla). The image immediately becomes your background, and you can stretch, tile, or center it as you can any other background (it is centered by default). Open Display Properties, click the Desktop tab, highlight the generic name of the image — "Internet Explorer Wallpaper," "Netscape Wallpaper," etc. — and choose the options you want. Figure 1.7 shows the Background list with an image selected in the Mozilla browser.

You can also choose background images from some photography software packages. For example, XP includes two graphics programs, Paint and the Windows Picture and Fax Viewer. When you have an image file open in Paint, you can set the image as your background by choosing File → Set As Background (Tiled) or File → Set As Background (Centered). If you open an image in the Windows Picture and Fax Viewer, the default viewing program in XP, right-click the image and choose Set as Desktop Background from the context menu.

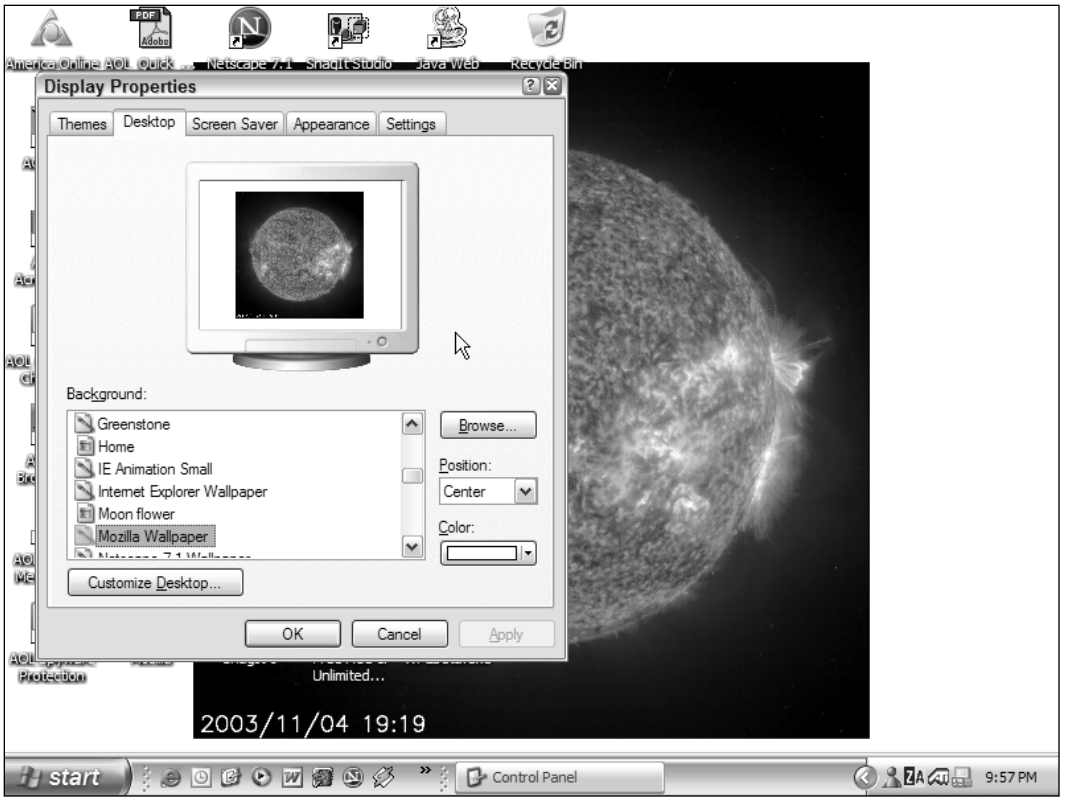

Figure 1.7: All options are available for all background images, no matter where you acquired them.

Where did my background image go?

One of the questionable design choices in XP is its handling of externally selected background images. Whether you choose an image from somewhere else on your PC or from a Web site, XP treats it as a temporary choice. In each case, once you choose the new background image, XP displays it in the Background area of the Display Properties dialog. If you chose a file from your PC, XP shows the file's name; if you chose an image from the Web, XP displays the generic name "Wallpaper" along with the name of the browser you've used (Internet Explorer, Netscape, Mozilla, etc.). But as soon as you choose a different background, these images disappear from the list. To choose them as background images again, you have to go out and find them.

To prevent this disappearance, copy the file into the folder that contains the built-in background images: `\windows\web\wallpaper`. This way, you have access to the image whenever you open Display Properties. If you've chosen the background from the Web, you'll need to give it a unique filename, so the best idea is to save the image into that folder directly from your browser.

Changing Your Screen Resolution

While changing your background image makes the most obvious visible difference to your desktop, adjusting your display resolution makes an even more dramatic difference to the way you work. Your resolution determines the amount of working area you have on your desktop, to the extent that the desktop itself effectively changes size. The higher the resolution, the larger the desktop, the more windows you can have open, and the more you can see inside each window.

Screen resolution is expressed as the number of pixels across the display by the number of pixels from top to bottom. A resolution of 640x480 (the original Windows resolution) therefore means 640 pixels horizontally by 480 pixels vertically. By comparison, today's graphics cards and monitors routinely support resolutions of 1600x1200 pixels, 1920x1440 pixels, and even higher. A resolution of 1600x1200 packs roughly three times as many pixels onto the screen as 640x480, and 1920x1440 gives you close to four times as many. Because everything you see on the screen is made up of pixels, the more pixels you crowd into each square inch of the screen, the denser—and thus the less choppy—the image. The smoothness of images and fonts depends entirely on the density of the pixels, so a higher resolution means a smoother looking desktop.

To see this difference at work, take a look at Figures 1.8, 1.9, and 1.10. All show the same desktop with precisely the same windows open. They differ, however, in the amount of information available to the user. Figure 1.8, with its resolution of 800x600, demonstrates a fully serviceable desktop, but if you like to work with numerous programs at the same time, say with multiple windows of a single program or with programs that function best with multiple interface elements open, a larger monitor with a higher resolution answers those needs.

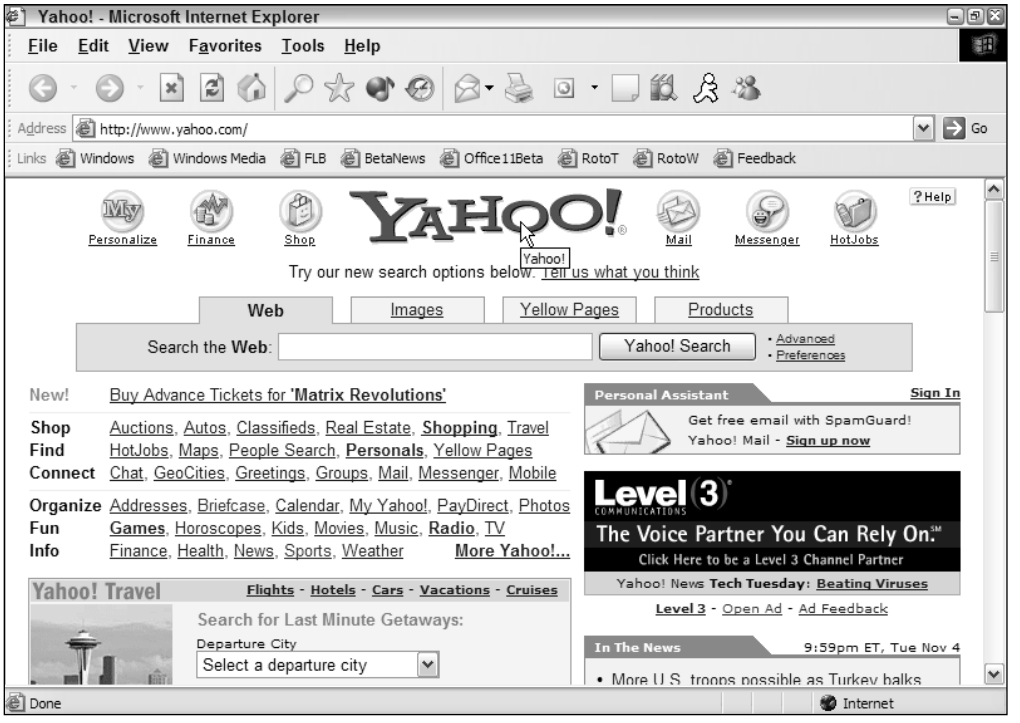

Figure 1.8: The Windows XP desktop at 800x600 resolution.

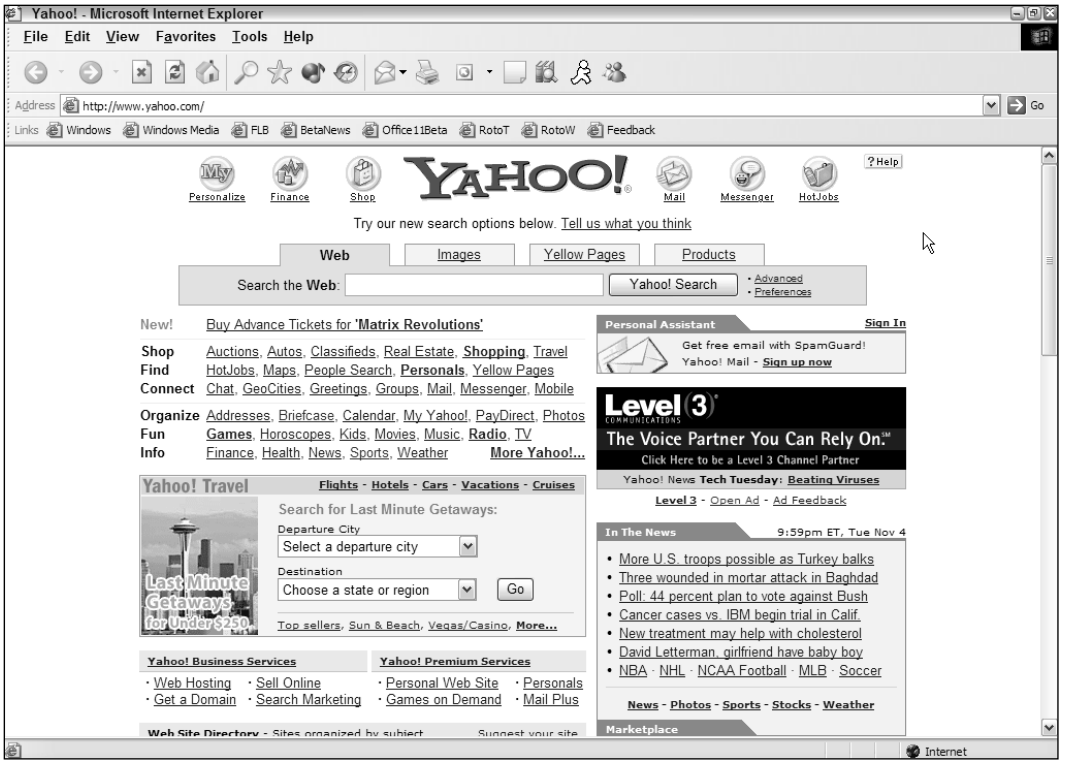

Figure 1.9: The same XP desktop at 1024x768 resolution.

Clearly, the screen in Figure 1.10 offers considerably more room than the other two screens. It also provides more information at a glance — that is, without the need for moving the windows or scrolling them — than any of the others.

So why not always choose a high resolution? Well, for several reasons:

- In many cases, it's harder to read text at higher resolutions. A high resolution on a small monitor means small fonts in documents, in menus, and throughout all interface elements. Even on a larger monitor, lower resolutions can be much easier on the eyes than higher resolutions.
- The quality of your monitor helps determine the suitability of resolutions: Some monitors are simply made better than others.
- Higher resolutions take more processing power to render, so lesser-powered PCs and graphics cards will slow down when set to these resolutions. In some cases, a higher-resolution desktop can even look like it's flickering.

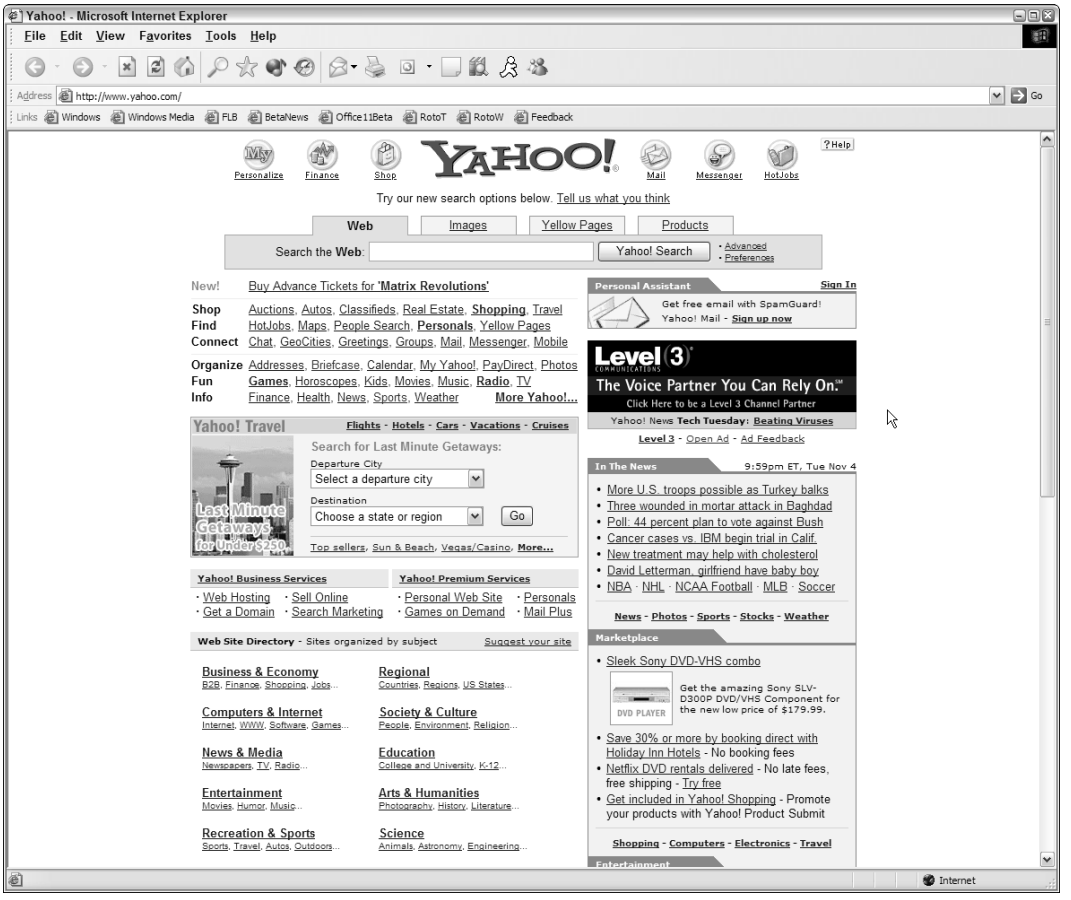

Figure 1.10: The same XP desktop at 1600x1200 resolution.

Only by trial and error can you determine which resolution is correct for your system and your personal preferences. However, when you first install Windows XP, the operating system chooses the best resolution for your hardware, a choice you can later change via Display Properties.

Follow these steps to change your screen resolution:

1. Open the Control Panel and double-click the Display Properties icon.
2. Click the Settings tab.
3. In the area labeled "Screen resolution," move the slider toward the right for a higher resolution or to the left for a lower resolution. As you move, watch the resolution measurement below the slider, and watch the view area (the monitor) in the space above. The view area gives you an idea of how the resolution affects the size and position of the Display Properties dialog box.

4. Before clicking OK to set the new resolution, click the Advanced button to set the behavior of XP whenever you change the resolution or color settings. In the compatibility area, choose one of the three options:

   a. Restart the computer before applying the new settings

   b. Apply the new settings without restarting

   c. Ask me before applying the new settings

   In most cases, the second option (b) works just fine. If you experience problems when changing resolutions or colors, typically only with older programs, choose option (c), which presents you with the dialog box shown in Figure 1.11 every time you alter these settings. Only if you really enjoy waiting for XP to restart should you choose the first option.

Figure 1.11: By checking "Don't ask this question again," you tell XP to revert to option (b) in the Compatibility area of the main dialog box.

5. Click OK until you exit the Display Properties dialog, at which point the XP desktop changes to your chosen resolution.

CHANGING COLOR QUALITY

The term *color quality,* as it appears on the Settings tab of XP's Display Properties dialog box, is something of a misnomer. Color *quantity* would be more accurate, given that the term refers to the *number* of colors XP has available for its displays. The greater the number of colors, the richer the display (which is where the term color quality comes in). Just as with screen resolution, however, the higher the color quality, the slower the rendering. That said, pretty much all recently purchased PCs sport a powerful enough graphics card to support the highest color setting easily, so you'll find few reasons not to choose this setting. Then again, unless you work extensively with high-quality graphics, such as photographs, you'll find very little visual difference between the 24-bit color and 32-bit settings. Do some experimenting to determine which works best for you.

To change the number of colors on your display, double-click the Display icon in the Control Panel and click the Settings tab on the resulting Display Properties dialog box. In the Color Quality area, choose your preferred setting from the drop-down menu. Depending on your PC's video subsystem (graphics card and monitor), you might have two, three, or even four choices. The setting labeled Medium (16 bit) enables your PC to display roughly 65,000 colors, while High (32-bit) gives you over 16 million and Highest over 4 billion. Depending on your system, you might also have settings for 256 colors, once considered the standard for PC displays and still very often the quality of images on the Web, and maybe down as far as 16 colors. If you set your PC to 256 colors or lower, you definitely notice a visual difference on graphics-rich programs, and even on the basic XP display. Photographs at 256 colors appear blotchy and at 16 colors downright ugly.

CHANGING RESOLUTION AND COLOR SETTINGS TEMPORARILY

The screen resolution and color quality setting on the Settings tab of Display Properties applies to your entire XP environment: the desktop and all programs. You can, however, set an individual program to run at low color quality and low resolution by adjusting the Compatibility settings on its Properties dialog box. You might need to do so in the case of some older games or to test designs—particularly for the Web—to see what your visitors will experience if they use systems set to those settings.

To change the settings of a program, locate the icon that launches that program. You can use an icon on the Desktop, the Taskbar, the Start menu, the All Programs list, or in My Computer or Windows Explorer in the folder where the program's files reside.

1. Right-click the program's icon.
2. On the resulting Properties dialog box, click the Compatibility tab.
3. In the Display Settings area, check one or both of the options "Run in 256 colors" and "Run in 640x480 screen resolution." Figure 1.12 shows these settings selected.
4. Click OK.
5. Launch the program.

When the program starts, XP changes to the color and/or resolution setting you've specified. It retains these settings until you exit the program.

Note that running the program sets the entire XP environment to those temporary specifications, not just the program itself. If you need to work with two programs with different specifications, you need to close and reopen the reset program as often as necessary. Still, this feature can come in extremely handy and tends to be much more convenient than readjusting the entire display.

Tip

If you want to isolate the program even further from all others, check the third option under Display Settings to disable the visual themes you've configured or selected, including changes to menu text, window borders, etc. This change, too, lasts only until you close the program.

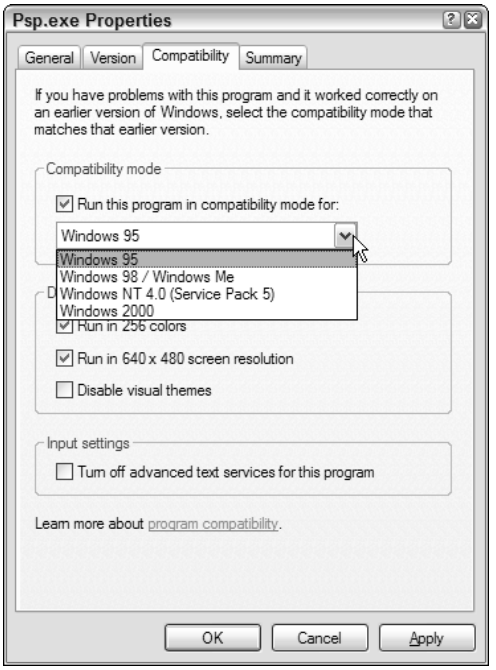

Figure 1.12: Choosing compatibility options.

Setting Up Your Favorite Fonts

Like everything else on the XP interface, Microsoft has optimized the fonts to appeal to the widest possible audience, and it takes little time for most users to realize that they can change the icon fonts quickly and easily by choosing desktop themes. Less apparent, however, is the ability to customize the font choices throughout the interface, beginning with desktop icons and running through the menu bars, window titles, warning boxes, and other messaging subsystems. Not only that, you can also tailor the font colors and decorations, to the degree that you can render the interface as effective and appealing as you wish.

Your control center for customizing fonts is the Appearance tab on the Display Properties dialog box. Once there, you can perform a global font change by choosing one of the options from the Font size drop-down menu. The choices are Normal, Large Fonts, and Extra Large Fonts. In this global scheme, Normal means 8 point (or 10 point for window titles), Large means 10 point (14 point for window titles), and Extra Large means 12 point (17 point for window titles). These increases occur as soon as you click Apply or OK, affecting every font occurrence in the XP interface. The fonts in the display pane reflect the changes you make.

Most of the time, however, you'll want finer control over your fonts and their sizes. To exercise that control, click the Advanced button on the Appearance tab, revealing the Advance Appearance dialog shown in Figure 1.13. The trick to using this dialog box is to pay attention to the display pane, which changes to reflect the alterations you make to each interface component. Ultimately, you

have to click OK to accept all the changes and to see what your customized desktop actually looks like, but while you design it, the display pane helps considerably.

In fact, the Advanced Appearance tab lets you change more than just your fonts. For example, the default selection in the Item drop-down menu is the Desktop. Here you can customize only one property of the desktop: its color. Choosing a color changes the background color for the entire desktop but does not affect whatever background image you might have chosen. Background images reside atop the desktop itself, and if you use a background image that fills the whole screen the only way to see the desktop color is to shrink the background image (try the Center option) or remove it by choosing None on the Backgrounds list.

To change fonts, open the drop-down menu by clicking the down arrow, choose the item whose font you want to change, and make the changes. For example, to change the font of the icon labels on the desktop, choose Icon from the menu and choose the font name and its size along the bottom row of menus on the dialog box (see Figure 1.13). On installation, XP sets the icon font to 8 point Tahoma, but you can change it to any font installed in the Fonts folder of the operating system and any size your system accepts. You can also bold or italicize the font by clicking the appropriate button beside the icon size menu.

Figure 1.13: The Advanced Appearance dialog box.

Tip

You can change the size of the icon itself from this dialog box by choosing from the Size drop-down menu immediately beside the Item menu.

You can choose individual fonts and sizes for the following interface elements:

- **Active Title Bar:** The title of the currently selected window as displayed along the top of that window.
- **Icon:** The text label of icons on the desktop and in the My Computer and Windows Explorer folders.
- **Inactive Title Bar:** The titles of all windows except the currently selected window as displayed along the top of those windows.
- **Menu:** The text on all menus, including the menus of all programs.
- **Message Box:** The text included in a box containing a system message, including dialog boxes and warnings.
- **Palette Title:** The title of the small program-specific windows/toolbars known as palettes.
- **Selected Items:** You can assign a separate font and size to the currently selected item in a list, giving it an even greater distinction from the remaining members of the list.
- **ToolTip:** The explanatory text that appears when you hover the pointer over a button or icon.

Caution

While changing fonts and sizes tailors the appearance of the interface elements however you want them, you can easily create a fairly ugly-looking system. More importantly, you can create an interface in which some elements effectively work against other elements. Start by changing one or two of the more obvious fonts — Icon and Menu, for example — and progress to a completely customized look.

Making Other Interface Adjustments from Advanced Appearance

You can do much more with the Advanced Appearance menu than simply adjust fonts. The sizes and colors of the various interface elements are also at your disposal. For example, you can resize the scrollbars and change the spacing between the icons on the desktop, once again altering your display and the interface with it. Here are the remaining elements adjustable via this dialog box. To choose the size of the item, click the arrows of the Size menu to the right of the Item menu. To choose the color, click the down arrow and choose the color you want.

- **3D Objects:** The size of 3D objects in the interface.
- **Active Title Bar:** The thickness and color of the strip, along the top of the active window, which contains the title of the active window.

- **Active Window Border:** The thickness and color of the border surrounding the currently selected window.
- **Application Background:** The background color of the windows belonging to your programs. For example, in a Word document, adjusting this color changes the color of the window into which you type the text.

Note

Be careful not to choose a background of precisely the same color as the text, or you won't be able to see what you type.

- **Caption Buttons:** The size of the buttons in the title bar of the window that allow you to minimize, maximize, and close the window.
- **Desktop:** The color of the desktop itself.
- **Icon:** The size of the icon on the desktop and in XP's folders.
- **Icon Spacing (Horizontal):** The horizontal spacing between the icons on the desktop and in XP's folders. Increasing the size sets the icons at a further width apart from one another; decreasing the size brings them closer together.
- **Icon Spacing (Vertical):** The vertical distance between the icons on the desktop and in XP's folders. Increasing this size moves the icons further apart from each other upwards and downwards; decreasing the size brings them closer together.

Note

The closer you move the icons to one another, the greater the chance of abbreviating the icon labels. Moving them further apart results in being able to read more or all of the icon labels.

- **Inactive Title Bar:** The thickness and color of the strip along the top of all windows not currently selected.
- **Inactive Window Border:** The thickness and color of the border surrounding all windows not currently selected.
- **Menu:** The thickness and color of the bar that acts as a background for the menus at the top of each window, immediately below the title bar.
- **Scrollbar:** The width of the scrollbar at the right of each window.
- **Selected Items:** The thickness and color of the bar that acts as a background for the currently selected item in a menu list.

- **ToolTip:** The color of the ToolTips, which appear when you hover the pointer over an icon or button.
- **Color:** The color of the window itself.

Why change these elements? The reasons, as always, are personal preference and — more importantly — usability. You might prefer a wider scrollbar, for example, if you typically have trouble positioning the pointer inside the scrollbar; you might prefer a narrower one if you decrease the screen resolution and no longer need the scrollbar's full width. The same holds true of menus: Increasing the size of the strip in which the menus reside can help with pointer positioning. Then, too, you might simply want a different interface experience from time to time.

Saving Your Interface Adjustments as a Theme

Once you've finished adjusting the interface elements, you can save them as a group in order to restore them whenever you wish. Each such collection of interface elements is called a *theme*. To save your current selections, click the Themes tab on the Display Properties dialog box, and click the Save As button beside the Theme drop-down menu. By default, XP targets the My Documents folder as your save location. Give your theme a name, and click Save to store it on your hard drive.

Once you've saved a theme, you can recall it by returning to the Themes tab of the Display Properties dialog box and then choosing it in the Theme drop-down menu. Because XP looks only in its system folders and the My Documents folder (for each user), you should always store your themes in My Documents. XP does not provide a way to browse for a theme.

Tip

You can use themes extremely effectively to build a collection of situational interfaces. If your organization demands that you create presentations using a particular screen resolution and desktop color, along with specific font sizes and colors for specific elements, you could create such a theme and then store it as a theme called Presentations. You might create another theme for the most effective use with a newsletter you regularly edit and another for working on spreadsheets and reports. By creating and storing three separate themes, you can recall the themes without the need to make individual adjustments each time.

Be Kind to Your Eyes: ClearType

Out of the box, set to a reasonably high resolution (at least 1024x768 but perhaps even higher) and Medium, High, or Highest color quality, Windows XP looks good. It gives you rich colors, smooth edges to its graphics, easy-to-read menus, and more. But XP contains a built-in feature called ClearType that makes fonts look even better. Designed specifically for laptop computers and LCD displays, in general ClearType makes every bit as much difference to PCs with CRT desktop monitors. Essentially, ClearType fills in the gaps between the pixels of text characters, resulting in a much smoother display for typed documents and Web pages.

Figures 1.14 and 1.15 demonstrate the marked difference between a normal display and a ClearType-enabled display. The figures show a text-heavy Web page. The fonts on the normal display (Figure 1.14) look choppy, almost spindly, when compared with the ClearType-enabled version (Figure 1.15). On an LCD display, particularly for laptop computers, ClearType makes an even greater difference. Generally speaking, however, ClearType enhances usability — through increased readability — to an extremely significant extent.

For reasons probably having to do with Microsoft's paranoia about making changes that might not work on older PCs, ClearType is turned off by default when you install XP. Having it turned off is the safe thing to do, of course, because the non-ClearType display has proven its compatibility and usefulness over the years. But ClearType provides such an improved text display that the interface should at least offer to switch to it for you, both when you launch XP for the first time and then periodically as you work in the XP environment. As it stands, many people don't even know the option exists, when it could significantly assist them. XP confounds the issue even further by making the option somewhat difficult to find.

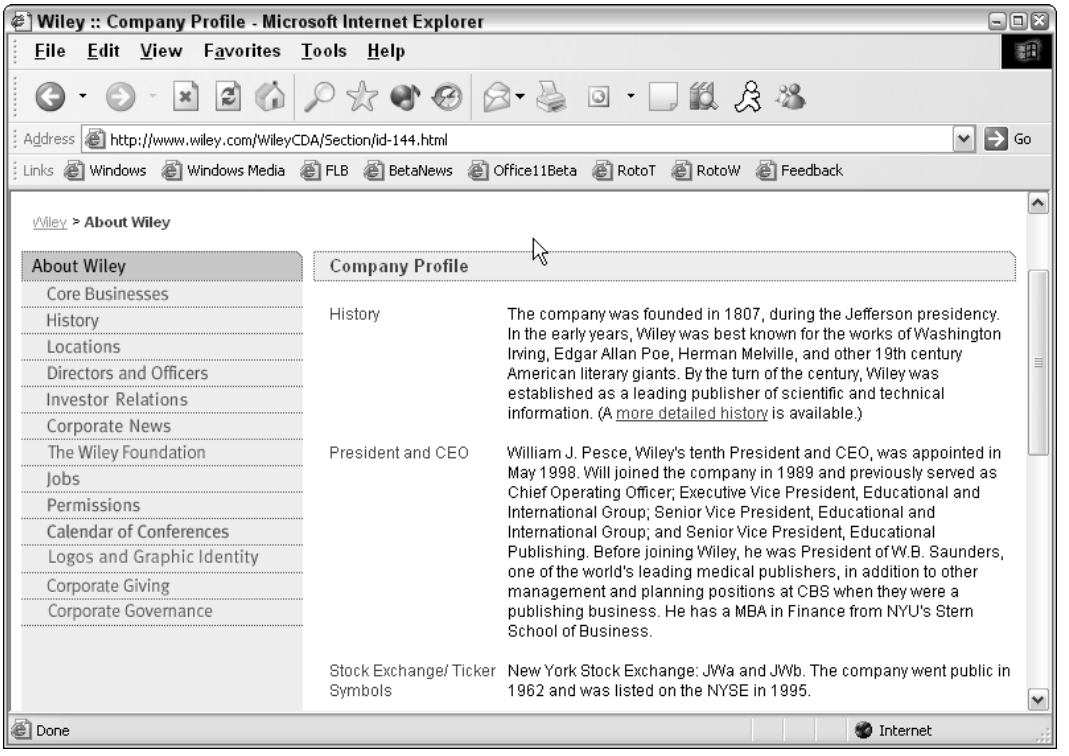

Figure 1.14: This text in Internet Explorer lacks the smoothness of ClearType.

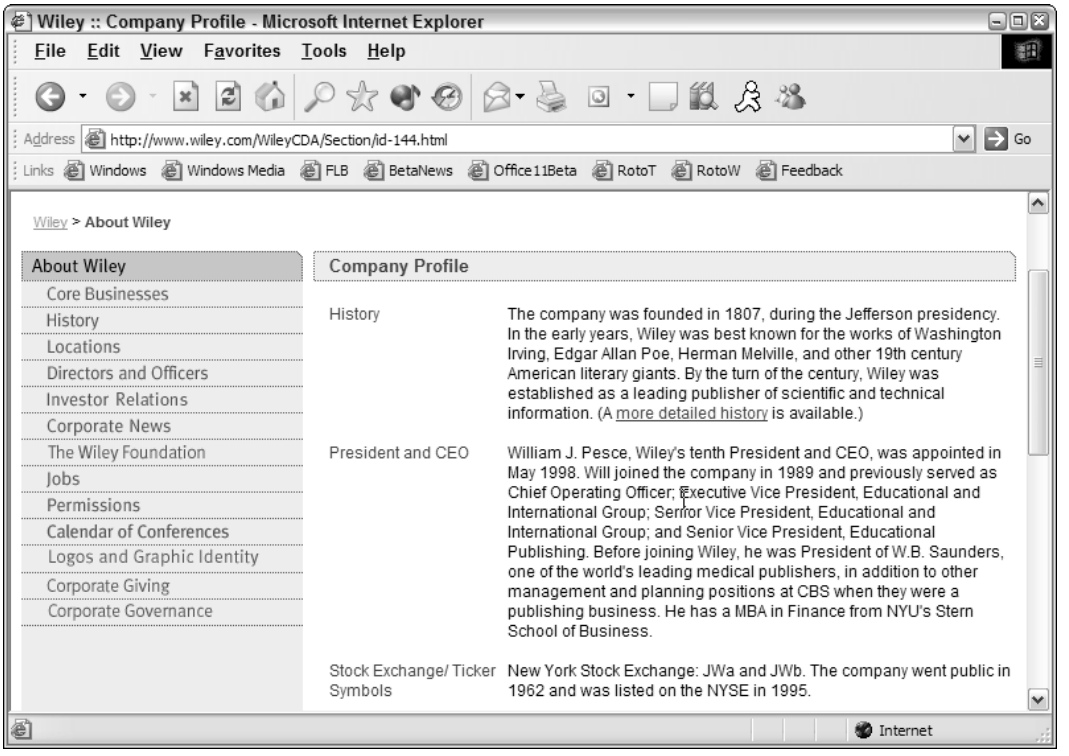

Figure 1.15: ClearType fills in the gaps between pixels, resulting in a display that looks much closer to the quality of print.

To turn on ClearType, double-click the Display icon in Control Panel. Next, click the Appearance tab. Once there, click the Effects button. In the drop-down menu under the option "Use the following method to smooth edges of screen fonts," choose ClearType. Click OK until Display Properties closes. XP immediately changes your display to reflect the ClearType technology.

Getting Rid of Desktop Clutter

Like real-world desktops, XP desktops tend to gather clutter. No question, you use many of the items, but others often have a barely remembered (or no longer relevant) purpose. And also like real-world desktops, you can improve the functionality of your XP Desktop by occasionally cleaning it up.

First, you can delete any icon from the desktop by right-clicking it and choosing Delete or by highlighting the icon with your cursor and either pressing the Delete key or dragging the icon over the Recycle Bin icon and dropping it in.

Note

All of these options place the icon in the Recycle Bin, where it is available for recall if you later change your mind.

Getting an Icon-Free Desktop

The most dramatic way to rid yourself of desktop clutter is to get rid of not just a few of the icons, but *all* of them. Early in the development of Windows XP, in fact, Microsoft seemed to want all of us to do precisely that, focusing attention instead on the revamped Start menu. But as with so many innovations over the history of Windows, the company made the empty desktop an option instead of a default. But the option remains in place, and many users find that hiding the desktop icons provides a cleaner desktop.

To change to an icon-free desktop, right-click an empty area of the desktop, choose the Arrange Icons By command, and uncheck Show Desktop Icons. The icons remain in place — the command doesn't delete them — but you can no longer see them.

Tip

XP provides a way to use your desktop icons even if you've opted not to show them on the desktop. Right-click an empty area of the Taskbar and choose Toolbars → Desktop. This action places a Desktop button on the Taskbar, with a clickable arrow as part of that button. Click on the arrow to see the Desktop icons arrayed in a list. Choosing any one of these icons opens the program or file associated with the icon.

Arranging Your Icons for Easier Viewing

The Arrange Icons By command offers several other organizational possibilities for your desktop icons. The easiest choice is Auto Arrange, which allows XP to organize the icons according to its built-in programming. In fact, Auto Arrange does little more than snap the icons into line according to a vertical and horizontal grid (think of it as a table or spreadsheet), filling in any empty spaces (cells) by moving icons into those spaces. If you turn off Auto Arrange, you can still snap the icons to this grid by choosing Align to Grid, but unlike Auto Arrange this command does not automatically fill in the empty spaces.

Whether or not you use the Auto Arrange or Align to Grid commands, you can organize your icons further by choosing the Name, Size, Type, or Modified options:

- **Name:** Organizes the icons alphabetically (in descending order only) according to their names. If you have folder icons on the desktop, XP places these first, also organized according to their names.

- **Size:** Organizes the icons according to the size of the files they represent. This feature can be useful, to cite just one example, if you want to sort graphics or video files by size in order to determine which ones are suitable for including in e-mail or posting to a Web site.
- **Type:** Organizes the icons alphabetically according to the file extension portion of the name of the files they represent. All program files sort under EXE (nearly all program files in Windows bear an EXE filename extension), while icons for Web pages typically sort under the extensions HTM, HTML, or ASP. Multimedia files sort according to the extensions as well, not according to the multimedia categories we would normally recognize. XP doesn't sort the icons into graphics files and video files, for example, but rather according to their file extensions: BMP, GIF, and JPEG (graphics files) are interspersed with AU, MP3, MID, and WAV (audio files) and AVI, MPEG and MOV (video).
- **Modified:** Organizes the icons according to the most recent modification date. Use this option if you want to determine which file you changed most recently, particularly in the case of similarly named files.

Organizing Icons into Desktop Folders

One of the most useful organizational exercises for the desktop is to create folders for the various categories of programs and data files and move the icons into these folders. If you wish, you can take this a step further, creating folders within folders for further organization. For example, you could name a folder "Client Presentations" and create a folder for each client — or each of your products or services — within that folder.

The trick to successful folder organization, indeed, is making the folders meaningful for the tasks you perform. If you organize your work according to clients, then create folders with your clients' names. If you organize your work according to days and months, create folders for the months and subfolders inside those folders for each week. If you work according to the project type, create folders with names such as "Word Processing Documents," "Spreadsheets," and so on. Think about the way you work and organize accordingly.

The reason you have to do this kind of thinking yourself is that XP doesn't do it for you. XP doesn't organize its desktop icons according to any useful system, and only a few elements of the interface make any such attempt. The Control Panel offers a category view, intended as a help for newcomers (but with the jury still out), and the new Start menu does a very useful job of organizing the various Windows functions. Windows XP also does a creditable job of organizing the programs you install with the operating system, into the Start menu folders such as Accessories, Administrative Tools, and Games (to use three examples). But, for the most part, Windows XP assumes you want to work with programs rather than tasks, and it's up to you to provide whatever organization you need.

Changing Your Display with Your Graphics Card's Tools

The Display Properties dialog box provides a comprehensive means of customizing your display, but many graphics cards offer software that makes some of the alterations easier and quite possibly offers additional enhancements. Typically, graphics card manufacturers place their customization features in three locations in the XP interface: the System Tray, the Display Properties dialog box, and the Control Panel.

The System Tray resides at the far right of the Taskbar in the bottom right corner of the display (unless, of course, you move the Taskbar itself), and it consists of one or more small icons that allow fast access to the program the icon represents, or at least some portion of the program (such as its Preferences or Properties dialog boxes).

In the case of graphics cards, you can usually right-click the icon on the System Tray and choose from a list of screen resolution and color quality settings. This feature eliminates the need to open the Settings area of the Display Properties dialog box, thereby reflecting the purpose of the System Tray itself, which exists solely for ease of access to important controls.

Tip

The System Tray is a great idea, and for purposes such as quick adjustment of display settings it works superbly. But far too many programs consider themselves more important than they should, placing an icon on the System Tray when you install them. Some even insist on drawing attention to themselves by flashing little messages to you throughout your work session. Make your System Tray effective by getting rid of any icons you don't regularly use. To do so, open the Preferences or Options dialog box in the associated program and locate the command or setting to stop the System Tray icon from appearing.

In the Display Properties dialog box, graphics card enhancements appear as part of the features of the Settings tab. Open Display Properties, click the Settings tab, and then click the Advanced tab. The graphics card's installation process adds more tabs to the top of the Advanced dialog box, reflecting the features of that particular card. Figure 1.16 shows the Advanced dialog box for an NVIDIA Ti 4200 card, with the new tabs "3Deep" and "GeForce4 Ti 4200." 3Deep refers to a feature included with NVIDIA cards that displays 3D games with accurate lighting and shading. Much more significant for daily use, clicking the GeForce Ti 4200 tab opens a menu with numerous sub-windows, all accessible from the same area of the Display Properties dialog box. The bullet list that follows, highlights a number of these options in order to demonstrate the wealth of customization options available through a well-developed graphics card. NVIDIA's primary competitor in the graphics card industry, ATI Technologies, offers similar Display Properties enhancements, as demonstrated in Figure 1.17.

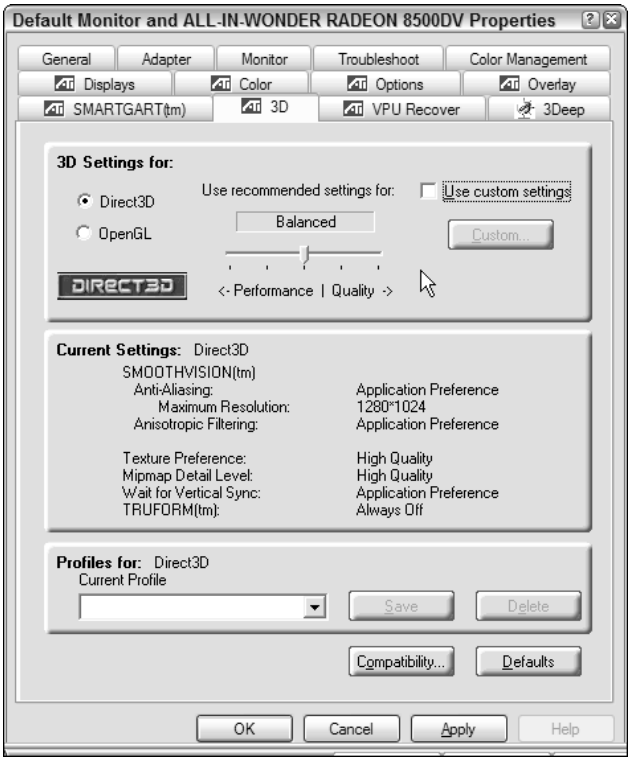

Figure 1.16: Some of the NVIDIA display options.

Tip

As with any dialog box, you can get help with the contents of these windows by clicking the question mark icon beside the exit icon at the top right of the dialog box and then clicking the item you want to know something about. Well-constructed dialog boxes offer such help for all items that appear in the dialog box.

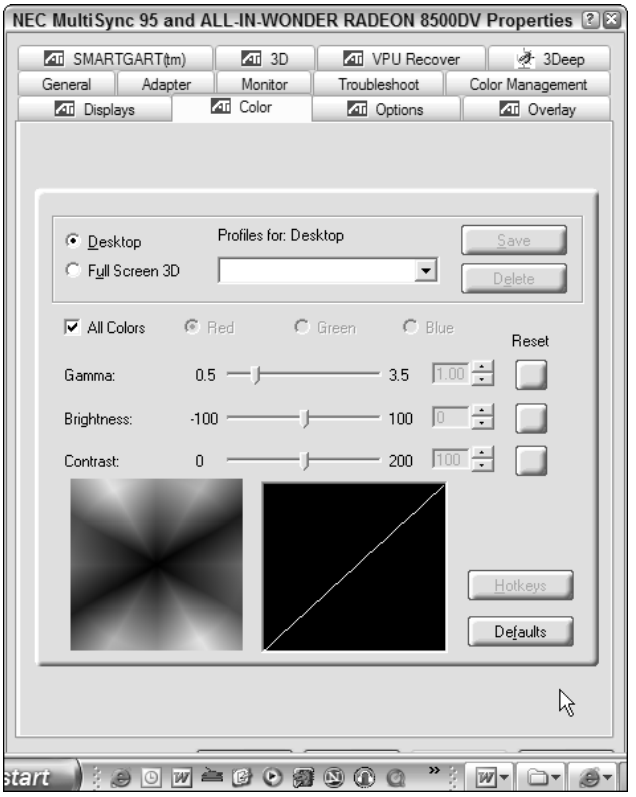

Figure 1.17: ATI's multi-tabbed Display Properties enhancement.

The NVIDIA configuration options are as follows:

- **Technical Details:** You might very well find the technical details uninteresting, but they can be of significant use if you're troubleshooting your system with Technical Support representatives.
- **Multiple Monitors:** If you attach more than one monitor to your system, you can adjust the way the configuration works. This feature is important for NVIDIA cards because the majority of them have built-in dual display capabilities, with two monitor ports on the card.
- **Image Smoothing:** In this window you can choose between displaying your images at the highest possible quality or, at the other extreme, at the highest possible speed. The other two sliders, Antialiasing and Anistropic Filtering, provide additional smoothing effects for images. In each case, the higher the setting, the higher the quality but the slower the performance.

- **DVD and Video Adjustments:** The Video window lets you configure how your graphics card plays DVD and other video. If you have more than one monitor, you can choose which monitor will actually display the video. Numerous other video settings are available here as well.
- **Media Center and Desktop Manager:** The Desktop Utilities sub-window lets you display the icon for the NVIDIA Media Center on the System Tray for easy access to all the submenus of the Display Properties dialog box. You can also enable the Desktop Manager from here, enabling virtual desktops.
- **Display Rotation:** The NVRotate area lets you rotate your screen 90 degrees in either direction. While this is useful only for monitors that support rotation, you can give yourself or your colleagues an experience not quickly forgotten by rotating the display and figuring out how to deal with it.

Other NVIDIA-specific controls let you configure the display settings when running programs that use Direct3D or OpenGL. These technologies enhance three-dimensionality in displays, but often they require tweaking in order to function at their best with a specific graphics card and monitor. Often the program itself performs best with specific settings, and this sub-window lets you establish those settings.

Many graphics cards install a further set of interface enhancements on the Control Panel. Both ATI and NVIDIA, the two most popular manufacturers, provide such features. As an example, NVIDIA installs an icon called NVIDIA nView Desktop Manager in the Control Panel, and double-clicking it opens the nView Desktop Manager dialog box. Each of the 10 tabs on the resulting dialog box contains a range of features for customizing the XP interface, and taken together — even without the rest of the customizability discussed throughout this chapter — the features represent enormous interface possibilities. For example, under the Effects tab of the nVidia Desktop Manager dialog box, you can change the XP interface so that you activate windows by simply moving the pointer over them, by making windows transparent when you drag them, and much more.

The list that follows, outlines a few of the most dramatic interface enhancements available through the nVidia Desktop Manager. Naturally, depending on your hardware, your mileage is likely to vary.

- **Collapsible windows:** A button on the title bar of all windows makes it possible to collapse that window to show only the title bar on the screen.
- **Virtual desktops:** You can establish up to nine virtual desktops, including the ability to allow programs to run on all desktops or only a single one. Each desktop can have its own background image.
- **Shell extensions:** You can add a Windows Explorer and My Computer shell extension that lets you switch among desktops and drag windows from one desktop to another.
- **Transparent windows when dragging:** You can make the window transparent (to the degree you specify) when you drag it, so that you can see the other windows and accurately place the one you're dragging.

- **Transparent Taskbar:** Having a transparent Taskbar eliminates the need to hide it if you want to expand your applications to cover the full length of the screen.
- **Window colors:** Assign a different color to the title bar of each application and its associated windows for easy identification.
- **Hot keys:** Assign keystroke combinations to actions ranging from locating the cursor (useful on desktops) to switching desktops and making windows transparent.
- **Dialog box positioning:** On multiple monitor setups, you can center each dialog box on the monitor its application occupies.

Every one of these features — and the dialog box offers lots more — changes the Windows XP user interface. Practice by using them one at a time to get used to them, because they really do make a substantial difference in how you interact with your desktop and your applications.

Summary

With your color, font, and resolution adjustments taken care of, and your icons organized in folders to help you find your way to the resources you need, you're well on your way to a personally-tailored Windows XP interface. In Chapter 2, you'll work with two essential interface elements, the Taskbar and the Start menu, to move your customization along even further. Chapter 3 takes you into the Control Panel to perform still more adjustments, while Chapter 4 outlines the remaining major methods for tailoring the interface, the Accessibility Options and TweakUI. Get through all four chapters, and your Windows XP interface will never again look like the one straight out of the box.