

Chapter 1

What Is Windows XP?

In This Chapter

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Chances are, you've probably heard about Windows. In fact, millions of people all over the world are puzzling over it as you read this. Almost every new computer sold today comes with a copy of Windows XP preinstalled — cheerfully greeting you when first turned on.

This chapter helps you understand why Windows lives inside your computer, and how to keep it alive and well with Microsoft's *service packs*. It explains which service packs you need to keep Windows XP up-to-date and how to deal with the burdens they lay at your feet in the name of increased security.

What Is Windows and Why Are You Using It?

The answer to this one's pretty easy: You're using Microsoft Windows because you don't have much choice. Nearly every computer sold since late 2001 comes with Windows XP preinstalled. A few people escaped Windows by buying Apple computers (those nicer-looking computers that cost more). But chances are, you, your neighbors, your boss, your kids at school, and millions of other people around the world are using Microsoft Windows.

And just what *is* Windows? Sold by a company called Microsoft, Windows isn't like your usual software that lets you write term papers or send angry e-mails to mail-order companies. No, Windows is an *operating system*, meaning it controls the way you work with your computer.

Yes, Microsoft *is* sneaky

Microsoft may tout Windows as your helpful computing companion, always keeping your best interests in mind, but that's not really true. Windows always keeps *Microsoft's* interests in mind. You'll find that out as soon as you call Microsoft for help on making Windows work right. Your first two questions are free if you pick up the long distance charges to Redmond, Washington. The third call (and all the rest) cost \$35 apiece.

Microsoft also uses Windows to plug its own products and services. Sometimes you click a

menu item that touts something helpful, but Windows simply leads you to a Web site where you can purchase additional items from Microsoft or its business partners.

Simply put, Windows not only controls your computer but also serves as a huge Microsoft advertising vehicle. Most of the offers you see on Windows aren't necessarily the best ones — they're just the ones that make the most money for Microsoft. Many of its offers are simply advertising flyers stuffed inside your computer.

Windows gets its name from all the cute little windows it places on your monitor. Each window shows information, such as a picture, a program that you're running, or a baffling technical reprimand. You can put several windows on-screen at the same time and jump from window to window, visiting different programs. You can also enlarge a window to fill the entire screen.

Like the mother with the whistle in the lunch court, Windows controls every window and each part of your computer. When you turn on your computer, Windows jumps onto the screen and supervises any running programs. Throughout all this action, Windows keeps things running smoothly, even if the programs start throwing food at each other.

In addition to controlling your computer and bossing around your programs, Windows XP comes with a bunch of free programs. Although your computer can run without these programs, they're nice to have. These programs let you do different things, like write and print letters, browse the Internet, play music, and even whittle down your camcorder's vacation footage into a three-minute short — automatically.

- ✔ Believe it or not, Windows XP isn't just the newest version of Windows; it's actually the best version so far. (Just ask people who upgraded from previous versions.) Windows XP doesn't crash very often. And if one Windows program crashes, it doesn't drag the entire computer down with it, like earlier versions did.
- ✔ Windows XP makes it easier for several people to share a single computer. Each person receives his or her own user account. When users click their names at Windows XP's opening screen, they see their *own* work — just the way they left it.

- ✓ Because Windows XP is sturdier and more secure than earlier Windows versions, it's also more difficult to figure out. Computers are pretty dumb, so when a potential security problem arises, they simply make you decide how to handle it. (I cover safe computing in Chapter 10.)

Windows XP's Luggage: Service Packs

Microsoft launched Windows XP in 2001, making it a creaky old-timer in computer years. To keep its old boat afloat until its replacement in 2006, Microsoft has released not one but two chunky add-on programs called *service packs*.

Service packs, given away for free, provide the Microsoft folks a chance to go back and fix the things they messed up when they first released Windows XP. For instance, if Microsoft discovers a programming mistake that keeps Windows XP from working with a certain computer part, the service pack fixes that particular problem.

Most importantly, service packs repair oodles of security problems. Every week, some smart alec figures out a new way to break into Windows XP. Microsoft analyzes the problem and releases software to plug that security hole. Service packs provide all the patches, fixes, and plaster Windows needs to bring your computer up-to-date.

The next section explains how to tell what service packs are on your computer, if any, and how to install Service Pack 2 to make your computer as secure as possible.



- ✓ Windows XP Service Pack 1 contains all the patches released during Windows XP's first year of operation. Service Pack 2 contains all the patches in Service Pack 1 and *more*. Installing Service Pack 2 brings your computer up-to-date with all the patches released through mid-2004.
- ✓ Although Service Pack 2 includes lots of patches, it doesn't include the newest patches — patches released *after* Service Pack 2. To keep your computer up-to-date, be sure to set Windows Update on Automatic, a simple procedure I discuss in Chapter 10.
- ✓ Microsoft doesn't let its service packs install on illegitimate copies of Windows XP. If your copy of Windows XP isn't installed legally, the service pack leaves this message when you try to install it: The product key used to install Windows is invalid. If you see that message, contact the person who sold you Windows XP.

What service pack version is on my computer?

Despite the way service packs polish Windows XP and protect it from evil-doers, your computer certainly doesn't shout for joy when it has received one. In fact, the only way to know if you have a service pack installed is to probe your computer's menus. Follow these steps to reveal the service pack that's currently installed on your computer:

1. **Click your Start menu.**
2. **Right-click on the My Computer icon and choose Properties.**

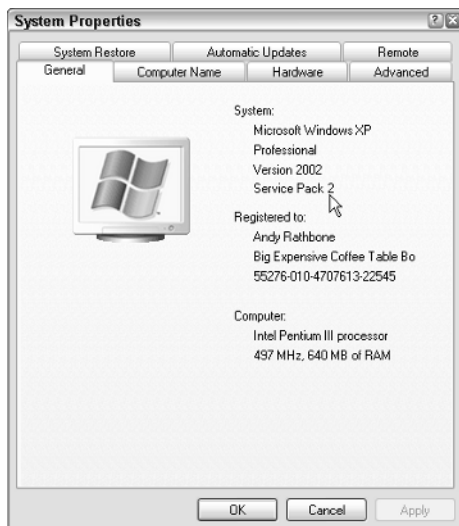
The System Properties dialog box appears, revealing intimate technical details about your computer.

3. **Look for your service pack version in the System section.**

You should see the words *Service Pack* as the bottom line of the window's System section. The number after the words Service Pack reveals its version number. For example, the computer shown in Figure 1-1 has Service Pack 2 installed. (The mouse's arrow points to the words.)

- ✓ If you don't see the words Service Pack 2 listed, your computer has serious security problems. Jump to the next section to install it as soon as you can.
- ✓ If your computer already has Service Pack 2, you don't need to install Service Pack 1. Service Pack 2 includes Service Pack 1.
- ✓ If you see the words Service Pack 1 listed, you still need to install Service Pack 2.

Figure 1-1:
Your computer should say the words *Service Pack 2* in the System section.



What's in Service Pack 2?

Installing Service Pack 2 is like receiving an updated version of Windows XP with new features — all for free. Here are some of the tastier tidbits that this huge 100MB program brings to Windows XP:

- ✓ Service Pack 2 contains several years' worth of security patches and repairs, making Windows XP much safer and more stable.
- ✓ A pop-up ad blocker to Internet Explorer keeps ads from exploding in your face as you visit Web sites.
- ✓ Internet Explorer's new Add-On manager lets you know when something's trying to install itself onto Internet Explorer. The manager lets you weed out nasty Web parasites but approve the things you *do* want installed, like helpful toolbars.
- ✓ The new, improved firewall not only turns itself on automatically but also protects your computer from intruders.

I cover all these features in Chapter 10. You can find also more information about Service Pack 2 on the Internet at www.microsoft.com/security.

Installing Service Pack 2

Microsoft lets people install Service Pack 2 in two different ways depending on how you connect to the Internet, either by dial-up (through the phone lines) or broadband (cable or DSL):

- ✓ **Dial-up:** Because Service Pack 2 is such a large download (100MB), dial-up Internet users should probably visit Microsoft's Web site at support.microsoft.com and sign up to receive Service Pack 2 on a CD.
- ✓ **Broadband:** Internet users with this speedy connection can download Service Pack 2 from Windows Update, found by opening Internet Explorer and choosing Windows Update from the Tools menu. Your computer connects to Microsoft's Windows Update Web site and automatically downloads and installs Service Pack 2.



Even after you install Service Pack 2, you still need to use Windows Update. That keeps you updated with fixes discovered *after* Microsoft released Service Pack 2. I explain how to make Windows Update run automatically in Chapter 10.

Service Pack may make some of your programs behave strangely. If you're having problems with any of them immediately after you install Service Pack 2, visit that program's Web site to see whether it offers a patch.

What's Windows XP Professional?

Windows XP comes in two basic versions: Windows XP *Home* and Windows XP *Professional*. Both versions look and act almost indistinguishably from each other. Chances are, you're using Windows XP Home, the version designed for homes and small businesses. Larger businesses often use Windows XP Professional because that version has a few extra menus tucked away for things like advanced corporate security. Other than those extra menus, the two versions are virtually indistinguishable.

If you're planning on using your computer to connect to the office through a network, ask the person in charge of your office's computer networks which version he or she recommends. Windows XP Home connects to most corporate networks without problem, but only Windows XP Professional can connect to a specialized *Windows server domain*.

I run Windows XP Home on my main computer, but I run Windows XP Professional on another computer just to see what the fuss is about.