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Opinions

Two More Win 98 Tips

By Jim Seymour

Several issues back (November 17, 1998), I passed along what I called "the ultimate Win 98 install tip." (In case you missed it, the column reveals the workings of Windows' little-known but critical Version Control Manager.)

I've already had a pile of reader mail thanking me for that tip and asking whether I had any more similarly obscure but useful tricks up my sleeve. Here are a couple--not perhaps as potent as turning VCM to your advantage, but well worthwhile for anyone running Microsoft Windows 98, and in the case of the second tip, for Windows 95 users as well.

Tip 1: Win 98's new System File Checker is almost as deeply buried as VCM, and it's nearly as useful. It can search your Win 98 installation CD for missing or damaged files, then uncompress and reinstall them.

Why would you need this?

In my long experience with PCs--especially with notebooks, and even more (I'm sorry to say) with Win 98--system files have a way of randomly disappearing. You boot up and find an infuriating screenful of DOS-level text: Can't find abc.dll, and so on. In a way, that ugly message is good news: If the file that's gone is truly system-critical--that is, your PC can't run without it--you probably won't even get to the message; instead, the box will simply lock up.

But it's hard to think "good news!" when your PC is snarling ugly DOS error messages at you.

Because it's almost always a system file--maybe even more than one--you know the replacements are lurking somewhere on your Windows installation CD. But finding them, uncompressing them, and getting them installed in the right place means searching for that damned CD and then wrestling with Microsoft's crummy CAB-file directory-and-unpack tools. Grrr....

System File Checker (SFC) makes that routine much easier. Once you know how to use it.

Over the years I've gotten in the habit of keeping my notebooks' Windows installation CDs in their CD drives. That way, when I'm

on the road and need to fix something, the resources I need are right there. I keep CD AutoPlay off, so that the Windows CD doesn't try to start a new installation every time I turn the machine on. You should too--by keeping the Start | Settings | Control Panel | System | Device Manager | CD-ROM | Settings | "Auto insert notification" box unchecked--because AutoPlay steals way too many CPU cycles for its marginal benefits.

Now, with that CD in the drive, click on Start | Programs | Accessories | System Tools | System Information | Tools | System File Checker. (They sure tried to hide this one, didn't they?) Click on "Extract one file from installation disk" and enter the name of the file Windows said it didn't find when you booted up. Then click on Start. When the Extract File window appears, click on the Browse button to find the "Restore from" line and enter the correct address for the file, which will be found in X:\Windows 98\win98 (where X is the drive letter for your CD-ROM drive). Make certain the C:\Windows\System folder is shown on the "Save file in" line.

Bingo! System File Checker searches through all those CAB files on your Windows CD, finds the needed file, uncompresses it, and reinstalls it in the correct place. One frustration: You have to do this file by file if your PC reported more than one missing during boot-up. SFC just isn't smart enough to handle retrieving more than one missing file at a time.

Even though System File Checker is buried so deeply, this is a far faster and more reliable way of restoring munged files than the manual approach.

Tip 2: Use desktop shortcuts minimally, instead adding frequently used programs to your Start Menu--and with Win 98, to the Quick Launch bar.

When Windows 95 came out and made shortcuts on your desktop practical and useful, I fell hard for them. Before long, Windows wallpaper was redundant for me, because I had so many shortcut icons littered across my desktop I wouldn't have been able to see wallpaper. I'm obsessive enough to have spent time lining them up--and realigning them, and realigning them, and realigning them, as they crept around because of sloppy program-launching double-clicks. (Why has Microsoft never added a "lock-down" option for desktop icons, to end icon creep?)

But that became self-defeating, as does overuse of any time-saving trick.

I began dragging the EXE icons of my most-used programs to the Start button, so those programs appeared on the Start Menu. I keep the Start | Settings | Taskbar and Start Menu "Show small icons in Start menu" box checked, letting me easily see as many of these quick-start entries as I need. I try to stay below 20 entries, so the list I have to scan isn't too long.

With the advent of Win 98, we got the Quick Launch bar, that little cluster of mini-icons at the lower-left edge of the screen to the right of the Start button. It comes preloaded with some icons, but you can dump those you don't need by right-clicking

on them and choosing Delete or just dragging them to the Recycle Bin.

Then drag the program icons of the programs you use most to the Quick Launch bar. You can choose where they appear, left to right, by dragging each icon before you drop it, noting the black I-beam marker's position. This gives you three possible fast-access program-launching positions (in addition to creating context-sensitive right-click entries, which use pop-up menus on-screen--and which I dislike).

My approach: I use almost no desktop shortcut icons, put my most-used programs on the Quick Launch bar, and put somewhat less used but still important programs in the Start Menu.

There's one big advantage to the latter two choices, by the way. You can get at icons much more easily when you're running other programs than desktop shortcuts. For example, I keep Word, Excel, Outlook 98, PageMaker, Hotline, and Ecco in my Quick Launch bar, but I keep Character Map (charmap.exe)--the Windows utility that displays all the characters in a font with their Alt + 0xxx assignments--in my Start Menu, since I often use it while I'm running other programs but don't use it as a primary app.

Make sense?

I confess: I still use desktop shortcuts. When I'm cruising the Web, I often save pages to the desktop, where they appear as icons, then later sort and move them into appropriate folders. That's faster than rumbling around in Windows' "Save As..." box every time to find the right directory.

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