Windows XP Pro Tips and Tricks

11/15/2007



Random tips to (what else) enhance your experience, and how you can use Registry hacks without actually using the Registry.

Pretty Folder Pictures

We all know that images within a folder show up in the thumbnail view of the folder, but what if you want only one of these images to show up? Just rename this image to folder.jpg (folder.gif works too)! Even better, if you do this for your music collection, Windows Media Player will load this image as album cover art if you've disabled visualisations.

By default, Windows shares your all drives (C: shared as C\$, D: as D\$ and so on) so that you can access them over the network using your administrator password. However, if you're the paranoid kind or need to share your admin password with your colleagues from time to time, you might want to turn this off. You can do this using the Sharing tab under the drive's properties, but the shares are enabled again after you restart. For the permanent solutions, open the Registry Editor (Start > Run > "regedit" > [Enter]) and navigate to HKEY_

LOCAL_MACHINESYSTEMCurrentControlSetServicesLanManServerParameters. Right-click in the right-hand pane and select New > DWORD value. Call this DWORD "AutoShareWks", and assign it a value of 0 (which it should be by default). Restart your PC for the change to take effect.

Hate the "Shared Documents" icon at the top of your My Computer window? Instead of trying to figure out why this bizarre "feature" was needed, here's how you can be rid of it: open the Registry Editor (Start > Run > "regedit" > [Enter]), go to HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINESOFTWARE MicrosoftWindowsCurrentVersionExplorerMy ComputerNameSpace DelegateFolders, and delete the sub-key (it looks like a folder) called {59031a47-3f72-44a7-89c5-5595fe6b30ee}. You should see the effect immediately.

While you rarely see a BSOD with Windows XP, the few times they do crop up are usually due to misbehaving drivers. To see which of these (if any) is causing your problems, use XP's unsung Driver Verifier (Start > Run > "verifier" > [Enter]). In the first screen, select Create Standard Settings and move ahead to select which drivers to

verify. Once you've done that, you'll need to reboot to let the Verifier do its job. If a driver is indeed your problem, then you'll get a blue screen during the booting process which will tell you which driver it is. If your PC boots fine, then your problems lie elsewhere.

To reset the verifier, do Start > Run > verifier /reset > [Enter].

If you've got a large number of folders you want to share on the network, navigating to each one of them and going into their properties and changing them one by one can be quite a nuisance. Even sharing can be as simple as "Next, next, and next" with the Shared Folder Wizard (Start > Run > "shrpubw" > [Enter]).

You can even set share permissions right there, so there's no need to go back to those shared folders for additional settings. Just remember to check the "Run this wizard again" box at the last dialog if you want to move on to the next folder.

Speed Up With A USB Stick

If you've got yourself a large USB Flash drive (at least 1 GB, preferably 2), you can move your system's page file onto it for significantly better performance, because accessing flash memory is typically faster than your average hard disk.

You should also optimise the Flash drive for performance—right-click on it in My Computer, select Properties. Go to the Hardware tab, select your Flash drive and click Properties. Under the Policies tab, select "Optimise for performance".

A couple of caveats: Firstly, if you remove this drive while Windows is running, you could cause it to crash, so be careful there. Secondly, Flash drives are good only for limited read/write cycles, so this approach is definitely going to eat into its lifetime. Use this tip only for when you really need the performance boost rather than as a permanent solution.

Bad Doggie!

The Microsoft obsession with annoying animated characters didn't end with the demise of Clippy—here's how you can get rid of the animated dog that turns up every time you want to search for files.

In the search window, click Change Preferences > Without an animated screen character.

Furthermore, to get back the Windows 2000-style search window, go to Change Preferences > Change files and folders search behaviour and select Advanced. Finally—sensible search.

Tune ClearType

With XP, Microsoft introduced ClearType, which improves the quality of fonts displayed on your screen, especially if you're using an LCD monitor. However, the results on CRT monitors were a tad disappointing. However, with a little fine-tuning, you can get satisfactory results too. Just visit www.microsoft. com/typography/cleartype/tuner/Step1.aspx using Internet Explorer to start up the ClearType Tuner. The site will ask you if you want to download the ActiveX control. Accept it and go through the necessary steps to get the best ClearType setting for you.

Alternatively, you could get the ClearType Tuner powetoy here:

www.microsoft.com/typography/ClearTypePowerToy.mspx

Trash Files With Crowded Desktops

If you want to drag a file to the Recycle Bin, but have too many windows open, just drag the file to an empty area on the taskbar—the windows will all minimise, giving you free and uninterrupted access to the Recycle bin!

Start > Run Shortcuts

Use these shortcuts in Start > Run to get to your configuration tools faster in Windows XP Professional:

compmgmt.msc Computer

management console

Device manager devmgmt.msc diskmgmt.msc Disk management dfrg.msc Disk defragmenter Shared folders fsmgmt.msc gpedit.msc Group policy editor lusrmgr.msc Local users and groups perfmon.msc Performance monitor secpol.msc Local security settings

services.msc Manage services

Avoid The Registry

You don't really need the Registry Editor or third-party tools for every single tweak you want to make to Windows. If you're using XP Professional (sorry, Home Edition users), the Group Policy Editor (Start > Run > gpedit.msc > [Enter]) hides an obscene number of settings that you can use to control your PC. If you're a domain administrator, these settings affect all users under your domain. Here are some of its finest:

Customise IE's Look

You'll find these settings under User Configuration > Windows Settings > Internet Explorer Maintenance > Browser User Interface. Here you can add your own title to the IE title bar, change the icon on the top-right corner and even add your own custom toolbar buttons!

Clear The Page File On Shutdown

This setting may or may not improve your system's performance (it depends on your usage patterns), but it does provide relief to the paranoid. Your Windows swap file may contain unencrypted text, including passwords, that could be exploited by interested parties. To delete the file when you shut down your system, you'll find a setting under Computer Configuration > Windows Settings > Security Settings > Local Policies > Security Options called "Shutdown: Clear virtual memory pagefile". Double-click this, select Enabled and click OK. Your shutdown time will increase marginally, though.

No More Windows CD

To avoid the hassle of hunting down your Windows XP CD every time you want to restore a system file (Windows File Protection at work) or add and remove components,

just copy the entire thing to your disk and modify a setting in the Group Policy Editor. Navigate to Computer Configuration > Administrative Templates > System. On the right-hand pane, you'll find "Specify Windows installation file location". Double-click this, select Enable, and enter the path to your Windows XP setup file. You can even point it to a network path on your office LAN, so you don't have to run to your system admin every time Windows wants the installation CD.

Disable Windows Key Shortcuts

If (for whatever reason) you want to prevent users from using shortcuts like [Windows] + [E] and so on, navigate to User Configuration > Administrative Templates > Windows Components > Windows Explorer and enable the "Turn off Windows + X hotkeys" setting.

No More System Tray

You'll find this setting under User Configuration > Administrative Templates > Start Menu and Taskbar. Double-click "Hide the Notification Area" and choose Enabled. When you log on next, you'll only see the system clock in the tray, which you can also remove by right-clicking on the Taskbar, selecting Properties and un-checking "Show the Clock".

Select Control Panel Applets

You can choose to show only a given set of Control Panel applets to users. The option is under User Configuration > Administrative Templates > Control Panel. On the right-hand side, you will see "Show only specified Control Panel applets". You'll need to know the exact names of the Control Panel applets to use this, though. For example, appwiz.cpl corresponds to Add/Remove Programs and so on.

Get Rid Of The Update Nag

Aren't you frustrated by the number of times Windows asks you if you want to restart after an update? It won't even listen if you tell it to restart later! Here's how you can get rid

of that.

In group policy, you'll find this blissful setting under Local Computer Policy > Computer Configuration > Administrative Templates > Windows Components > Windows Update > Re-prompt for restart with scheduled installations. Done! Now all you have is an icon in the system tray to remind you in the unobrtusive way that it should have in the first place.

Media Players

We're all obsessive about our music and movie collections, and ergo, about our media

players. Here are some handy guidelines to use your favourite programs better.

Winamp

Use The Global Hotkeys

For some reason, this feature has been disabled by default, but it's extremely useful if you're listening to music while working on another program and don't want to bother yourself switching to Winamp to change the song you're hearing. Go to Options > Preferences (or [Ctrl] + [P]) > Global Hotkeys and check Enable. All the hotkeys are simple [Ctrl] + [Alt] shortcuts that work even when Winamp isn't in focus. You can even add your own and customise what exists—which you might need to because volume controls sometimes don't register with Windows XP.

Don't Read ID3s All At Once

By default, Winamp will load a song's information as soon as it's queued into the playlist. If you've loaded a large number of files, though, you might want to reduce the time between Winamp starting up and your music actually playing. Go to Options > Preferences > Titles (under General Preferences) and select "Read metadata only when files are played".

Really Random Music

One quirk with Winamp is that when using the Shuffle feature, you might wind up listening to the same set of songs over and over again—we've seen situations where out of 500 songs in a playlist, only 200 were played often, and the rest rarely. This is actually expected behaviour, since shuffling doesn't necessarily mean that songs won't be repeated. You can tweak the Shuffle Morph Rate in the preferences (Options > Preferences > General Preferences > Playlist), but if the results don't satisfy you, turn off the shuffle feature and instead, click on Misc. in the playlist editor and select Sort > Randomize List for a truly random playlist.

Magic With Music

If you're having one of those days when you need to hear only slow, depressing songs, or if you're having a party and don't want any of the aforementioned songs getting in your way, use the MusicMagic plugin that comes bundled with Winamp. It analyses your music and relates tracks according to their "acoustic fingerprint", so similar-sounding tracks fall under the same playlist. You can access it from the Media Library (it's the second entry from the bottom) and change its settings under Options > Preferences > Media Library > Predixis MusicMagic.

Don't Load Your Old CPU

If you've experienced choppy sound from Winamp while you worked on Word or Excel,

especially on older PCs, Winamp might be taxing your CPU too much. A possible cure (it's in the experimental stage) is Options > Preferences > Plugins > Output > DirectSound output. Select the plugin, click Configure, and under the Buffering tab, tick "Enable CPU usage control".

30 Minutes Experts

Master Nero Recode 2

Authoring your own DVD is easier than you think!

Burning a DVD or a CD today means using Nero—the simple user interface and powerful features have made it the de facto burning software. Most of us use Nero regularly, but in addition to the burning program, Nero bundles lots of useful goodies. One of these is Nero Recode 2.

Nero Recode 2 is a tool that can be used to copy, compile, and convert to and from DVDs that aren't copy-protected. You can launch it from Start > All Programs > Nero 7 Premium > Photo and Video > Nero Recode. In the main window, you will see five tasks:

Recode an Entire DVD to DVD
Recode Main Movie to DVD
Remake a DVD
Recode DVDs and Videos to Nero
Digital
Recode Main Movie to Nero Digital

Click on "Recode an Entire DVD" to DVD to copy the entire DVD. The DVD-Video area of the backup window for your DVDs will now open.

Copying DVDs To DVDs

Click "Import DVD" to open the dialog to import the selected DVD or files onto the hard drive. You can use the Enable and Disable buttons to include or exclude parts of the title (such as extras) from the compilation. You can even enable or disable parts of the main movie or extras. In order to maintain the menu structure and compatibility of the recoded DVD, something else needs to take the place of the part that has been deleted. Use the drop-down to select the substitute—you can choose from among

Custom Picture, Slide Show (where you can view a slide-show of stills from the deleted video) or Custom Color.

Tweak The DVD Compilation

Click on "Lock Ratio" to stop the recording quality of a DVD title from being changed automatically. However, you can still change the quality manually by moving the slider. Click "Unlock Ratio" to let Recode automatically modify the video quality. The "Fit to Target" check box is checked by default—this means that the disc inserted will be automatically recoded to fit the size of the blank disk inserted (where possible). If "Fit to Target" has been checked, you can select the target from the dropdown—the choices available are 8 cm DVD (1.4 GB), DVD-5 (4.7 GB), DVD-9 (8.5 GB), and Custom. The level indicator will be adjusted depending on the target. When the box is disabled, the size of a copy can be specified independently of the disc's size limitations. Click on an item in the list and click on Play to preview the video. In the Audio area, you can select which audio track you want in the output—many DVDs have 2.1 as well as 5.1 channel sound tracks; some even have multiple-language audio tracks. Here you can choose the sound track of the format and language suitable for you. The Subtitles area works the same way. At the bottom of the page is the space indicator that lets you keep check on the size of the DVD. You should not allow the indicator to enter the red region.

Add Useful Data To The DVD

Click on "DVD Data Files" to move to the Nero Recode 2 data area. You can add data to the DVD here. Unlike the video area, you only have a window that shows the list of files. With "Recode Main Movie to DVD", you can import and recode the main movie of a personal, non-copy-protected DVD to another DVD, keeping the video quality intact. Here too, you can remove unwanted subtitles and audio tracks, and also trim the video.

Create Nero Digital a.k.a. MPEG-4 Content

"Recode DVDs and Videos to Nero Digital" allows you to convert content from one or several personal, non-copy-protected DVDs to Nero Digital or MPEG-4 files. The process is similar to creating a DVD video, with the difference that you can choose from among different Nero Digital categories such as Nero Digital, Nero Digital AVC, Sony Memory Stick Video, and Apple iPod. Under Nero Digital Profile, you can select Mobile, Portable, Standard, Cinema, and HDTV—their purpose is self-explanatory. You can also trim the video to remove unwanted portions. What's more, you can also create chapters by clicking on the Chapter button to give your DVD a more professional feel. After you click on Next, you are provided with the option to either create the recoded files on the hard drive, burn to a CD/DVD-RW, or create an image file. You can also tweak the quality settings in Nero Digital Settings, but it's better to leave these alone unless you know exactly what you're doing.

Make It Sound Better

The Enhance plugin greatly improves the quality of your video.

Winamp sounds decent as is, but for better quality, you might want to try a couple of third-party plugins to both decode audio as well as enhance it. You'll find Enhancer 017, a free DSP plugin that, well, enhances your audio here: www.winamp.com/plugins/details.php?id=81361. This is undoubtedly the best DSP plugin you can get for Winamp, and fans have gone so far to say that it makes even your onboard audio card sound like

a Creative X-Fi (an exaggeration,

we're sure).

Another thing you might want to try is to change your input plugin from DirectSound to waveOut. Do this under Preferences > Plugins > Output. The waveOut plugin is dated, but it offers better quality on some sound cards. You could also try a different decoder altogether—the MAD MP3 decoder

(www.mars.org/home/rob/proj/mpeg/mad-plugin/), for example.

Windows Media Player 11

Better Searching

Searching your large (and no doubt ever-growing) media library can be as easy as using Google, thanks to WMP 11's search modifiers. For example, you can use "who are you artist: The Who" to search only those tracks sung by The Who. The full list of search modifiers is here, though we wonder who'd be searching for songs by their release date, or by whether it's DRMed or not. In addition to these, you can use operators like AND, OR and NOT to refine searches. For example, "Pink Floyd NOT Album: The Wall" will get you all tracks for Pink Floyd except those from the album The Wall.

Search Modifier

Album Name Album
Performing Artist
Genre Genre:
Song title Title:

Album artist AlbumArtist:
Music composer Composer:
Orchestra Conductor Conductor:

Contributing artist Contributing Artist:
Album release date DateReleased:

Content Provider ContentProvider:

Make The Toolbar Notification Fade Out Faster

When you've got WMP running in the toolbar mode, a notification fades in every time you hover the mouse over the toolbar, and then fades out when you move the mouse away. To control the time it takes to fade out, you need to create a Registry DWORD called DeskbandFlyoutTimeout in

HKEY_CURRENT_USERSoftwareMicrosoftMediaPlayerPreferences. Set it to 0x0 to stop this deskband from ever appearing, 0xFFFFFFF to keep it forever, or any value in milliseconds that you wish.

Remember The Song

One of the smarter things about Winamp is that it remembers which playlist and song you were playing when you quit, so the next time you start, all you have to do is push play to resume your playlist where you left it. To duplicate this in WMP, all you need to do is ensure that "Save file and URL history in the player" under Tools > Options > Privacy (right-click on the title bar to get to the main menu) is checked.

Rate While You Listen

To rate songs that are currently playing in Windows Media Player, use [Ctrl] + [Windows] + [0-5], depending on what you want to rate it]. This nifty little feature works even when WMP isn't the active window, so you don't need to babysit the player if you want to rate your tracks.

Command Line Options For WMP

These are quick ways to get things done from within Start > Run itself.

Start WMP with a playlist:

wmplayer /Playlist [playlist name]

Play a song or video:

wmplayer "[filename]"

(add /fullscreen if you want it to play in the full screen mode)

Play a DVD:

wmplayer /device:DVD

(add /fullscreen if you wish to)

Play a song or video with a certain skin:

wmplayer "[filename]"?wmpskin=[skin name]"

Open WMP in the Copy From CD Mode:

wmplayer /Task CDAudio

Getting to grips with the new interface

If you've spent a lot of time with Windows Media Player 10, version

11's minimalistic interface can catch you off-guard for a while—especially the lack of the classic menus.

While you can enable them by

right-clicking the title bar, here's how the new interface is organised—you'll notice that it's more intuitive than

it seems.

Right-Click on a yab for quick access to potion.

When you right-click on any of the tabs (Now Playing, Library, etc.), you get a context menu relevant to the activity you would perform in that tab. Right-clicking on Rip, for example, lets you set your rip format and bit rate right there—eliminating the need to go to the classic preferences dialog to set them. You can also get this menu by clicking on the subtle down-arrow button that you see when you roll the cursor over the tab, but the right-click is so much easier.

When you want to add album art to a collection, WMP 11 is simplicity itself—just hunt down the image on the Web, copy it to the clipboard, right-click in the Album art area and choose "Paste Album Art"!

More Library Views

The Library view in WMP 11 has been simplified over its version 10 avatar, but you can get those back with just two clicks—in the Library view, right-click on Library in the navigation pane and select "Show More Views". Voila! More categories under the Library.

Get more views under the library

iTunes

Playlists With Brains

One of iTunes' best yet surprisingly under-used features is the Smart Playlist, that lets you specify criteria for iTunes to build playlists—much like WMP's "Music Listened To On The Weekend" and so on. To start creating a new smart playlist, press [Ctrl] + [Alt] + [N]. You can now specify songs filtered by Artist names, when you last heard them, genre and beats per minute, to name a few. Also make sure that Live updating is selected, because this will ensure that any new songs that you add to your library will automatically be considered for the playlist.

Back Up Your Collection

With version 7, iTunes lets you easily backup your music collection—you can find its backup utility under File > Backup To Disk. It lets you back up your entire collection including playlists, or just backup songs that weren't backed up the last time. And as with all other iTunes features, it's simple as can be.

Keep Updating Your Library

For whatever reason, iTunes lacks the ability to monitor one or more folders for new music—perhaps Apple assumed that we'd be getting music only from the iTunes Music Store. Thankfully, using a little tool called the iTunes Library Updater (http://itlu.ownz.ch), you can work around this flaw. It gives you a simple GUI where you can select which folders your music is in, and automatically update your iTunes library.

You'll need the .NET Framework 2.0 for iTunes Library Updater to work; find it on this month's Utilities CD.

Prevent Automatic Syncing

With iPod

Imagine going over to a friend's place with your iPod, connecting it to his/her computer and firing up iTunes, only to see that your 'pod's been wiped clean! This could happen if your friend's iTunes is set to automatically sync with the iPod connected to it.

To avoid this, hold down [Ctrl] + [Shift] from the moment you connect your iPod to the time that it appears in iTunes. Your collection will remain safe.

No Pod, No Helper

If you don't own an iPod, it's pointless to have the iTunes services (iPodService and iTunesHelper) running in the background—disable iPodService using the services console (Start > Run > "services.msc" > [Enter]). Double-click on the service name, and select Disabled under Startup Type. To disable the iTunesHelper, go to Start > Run > "msconfig" > [Enter] and uncheck iTunesHelper under the Startup tab.

Use The Shortcuts

WMP 11's keyboard shortcuts aren't exactly the most intuitive, but they can help you get things done fast. Here they are:

Function

Zoom to 50%

Zoom at 100%

Zoom to 200%

Toggle display for full-screen video

Retrace your steps back through your most recent views in the Player

Retrace your steps forward through your most recent views in the Player

Switch to full-screen mode

Switch to skin mode

Turn shuffle on or off

Eiect CD or DVD

In full mode, show or hide the Classic Menus (menu bar)

Create a new playlist

Open a file

Play or pause playing

Stop playing

In audio playback, turn repeat on or off

Specify a URL or path to a file

Close or stop playing a file

Rewind video

Turn captions and subtitles on or off

Fast forward through video or music

Use a fast play speed

Play at normal speed

Use a slow play speed

Return to full mode from full screen

Edit media information on a selected item in the library

Add media files to the library Refresh information in the panes Mute volume Decrease volume Increase volume

```
Shortcut
[Alt] + [1]
[Alt] + [2]
[Alt] + [3]
[Alt] + [Enter]
[Alt] + [Left Arrow]
[Alt] + [Right Arrow]
[Ctrl] + [1]
[Ctrl] + [2]
[Ctrl] + [H]
[Ctrl] + [J]
[Ctrl] + [M]
[Ctrl] + [N]
[Ctrl] + [O]
[Ctrl] + [P]
[Ctrl] + [S]
[Ctrl] + [T]
[Ctrl] + [U]
[Ctrl] + [W]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [B]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [C]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [F]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [G]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [N]
[Ctrl] + [Shift] + [S]
[Esc]
[F2]
[F3]
[F5]
[F8]
[F9]
```

Controlling The Visualisations

You can turn on the iTunes visualisations using [Ctrl] + [T], but to control the effects themselves, you need these shortcuts:

Control the visualiser with simple shortcuts

[F10]

- C Show current effect information
- Q, W Cycle through shapes
- A, S Cycle through effects
- Z, X Cycle through colour schemes
- Shift + 0-9 Save current effect combination
- 0-9 Access these effect combinations
- R Random effect
- M Toggles between:User config slideshow mode—Cycle through your saved effectsFreeze current config—Keep showing the current effectRandom Slideshow—Go back to random visualisations
- F Toggle the frame-rate display
- I Toggle track information
- D Reset to the default visualisation

VLC Media Player

VLC is an incredible tool for not just playing video without codecs, but streaming ot too.

Broadcast!

If you've set up a home network or office LAN and want to broadcast a video to everyone on the network, simply use the streaming wizard (File > Wizard or [Ctrl] + [W]), and choose HTTP when asked how the stream will be sent. Users on your network can now open this stream in VLC by typing in http://your.ip.address:8080 in File > Open Network Stream.

Oft-Used Shortcuts

VLC's shortcuts are among the easiest of all media players, and they're fully customisable. You will find them under Settings > Preferences > Interface > Hotkeys settings. Here's a list of the ones you'll be using most often:

Fiddle With Video Settings

If you want to tweak the way your videos look or sound in VLC, use the Extended GUI ([Ctrl] + [G]) to view a plethora of settings you can change—hue, saturation, brightness, as well as an equaliser for audio settings.

Use VLC's extended GUI to adjust and correct your video's quality.

Mouse Gestures In VLC

You can use mouse gestures in VLC as well. First enable the Mouse Gestures interface by selecting Settings > Add Interface > Mouse Gestures. Once you've done this, use the

following gestures to control VLC (you need to hold down the right mouse button when using these):

Right: play the next item in the playlist

Up-Right: Go fullscreen

Down-Right: Quit

If you'd like the Mouse Gestures interface to be enabled every time you start VLC, go to Settings > Preferences > Interfaces > Control Interfaces and check "Mouse gestures control interface".

Just Hit Delete

VLC is very forgiving when it comes to its own faults—if you ever experience any problems with it, just go ahead and delete the configuration file. Really! You'll find this file under C: Documents and Settings{your username}Application Datavlc. Delete the file called "vlcrc", and your woes with VLC will most likely end. The next time VLC starts up, it'll create a new configuration file with all the standard settings.

The Web Interface

VLC has an extremely customisable interface, and gives you a whole lot of options to view it just the way you want to. The default interface is called wxWidgets. You can switch to the skinnable interface (called Skins 2) by going to Settings > Switch Interface.

Use the web Interface to control VLC over the network

The really cool part is the HTTP interface—enable it by going to Settings > Preferences > Interface > Main Interfaces and checking "HTTP Remote Control Interface". This lets you control VLC through a browser, using the URL http://[your IP address]:8080. Logging into the Web interface takes you to index.html, which you can use to play music and have access to your playlists. Go to info.html to get information about the server (the PC you're connected to), and type in /admin to get to the administration control pages. The default username/password for this folder is admin/admin.