

Back Up That Registry!

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Have you ever had the gremlin in your computer strike, making mincemeat of your registry so that Windows couldn't seem to do anything except give you cryptic error messages? I am not talking about a virus attack here. I am describing a seemingly random corruption of the registry that can essentially destroy the integrity of that Windows installation that you worked so hard to personalize and fit to your needs. It can happen for no apparent reason. No one can explain it. It probably occurs because Windows is such a bloated, unnecessarily complex program that the occasional random change in a single byte of information (perhaps due to a cosmic ray going through your computer) can do a tremendous amount of damage to the logical processes. Well, I have had it happen to me on more than one occasion.

The first time or two, I simply bit the bullet and reinstalled Windows, a process that takes only an hour initially but tens of hours to mold the program back into your personalized version. Then, I began using a parallel port tape backup, which worked well and saved me from untold grief on more than one occasion. Now, although I still make complete backups of everything on my hard drive every three months, I have found an easier way to repair the occasional registry glitch. It is quick, easy and it works. However, it does require that you have the latest version of Norton Utilities for Windows mounted on your computer. Designed for both Win95 and 98; the latest version is called Norton System Works 2000. It is not just a good program; it is a GREAT program. This software package is really a rather large suite of programs, any one of which is worth the price of the whole thing. Since Symantec (the company that owns NSW 2000) recently purchased Cleansweep, (another excellent program), all of Cleansweep is also included in NSW 2000. I have said before that the Norton package should be your very first purchase of software after Windows. I personally will not be without it.

Well, what the heck is this registry thing? It is just a big, fat database, but a critical one. It tells Windows everything it needs to know to run itself. It records what directories (folders) are present, what drivers to use for what equipment and where they are located, what kind of sound card, hard drive, floppy drive, modem is in the belly of your computer, and so on and so on. Each little bit of information about one thing or another is called a key; each key is sort of like a one-line statement describing whatever it describes. The keys are organized in a way that makes it possible for Windows to find information fairly quickly. The computer I am typing this on tonight has over 20,000 such keys! My other one across the room has just under 30,000! Talk about bloated!

Well, I am sure you can imagine that anything that scrambles even one of those keys can wreak havoc with your machine. So what is my latest fix? Back up the registry often, and if a bad glitch occurs, restore it.

Here are details. First, run Norton System Check (several minutes) to make sure everything is OK. If System Check finds any errors, let it fix the problems. Then continue to work, observing everything is to your liking. A couple of days later, when you have confirmed that all seems OK, run System Check again. If no errors are found, back up the registry RIGHT THEN. You will be fairly certain to be creating a backup of a perfect registry. Here is how.

Click the Norton System Works icon, then Norton Utilities, then Troubleshoot, then the Norton Registry Editor. When the Registry Editor window appears, click File, then Backup Entire Registry. It will then prompt you for a name for the backup. I use 19991101.reg to denote the date of the backup, using the new International Date Convention. Either note carefully where Norton wants to put the backup, or choose a subdirectory that you prefer. I use a Backups subdirectory on my E: drive to store these. Then let her rip. It will probably take a full minute or longer to write all those lines. Don't be fooled if the window disappears ... it is still writing. The backup window is set to drop into the system tray at the bottom of your screen after the first couple of dozen keys. You can call it right back on your screen by finding it in the tray and clicking on it. That way, you can watch it complete the job.

Continue to do this about once a week so long as your machine is working to your satisfaction. Always do a system check first, to make sure all is well. After a month or so – 3 to 5 backups, you can start deleting the oldest backup each time you make a new one. You don't want to leave useless, outdated backups on your hard drive because they take a lot of space. The backups on my smaller machine occupy nearly 3 megabytes each!

Now, if a big bad glitch occurs, you can at least restore a perfect copy of your registry. Open the Integrator again; click Troubleshoot and then the Registry Editor. Again click File, but this time Import Registry File. Find your latest backup and select it as the file to be imported. In a minute or so, everything will be back the way it was.

Darned gremlins! We'll beat 'em yet!!! Happy computing!