

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 122. Cleaning the Closet

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As usual, Ed Rate (AA9W) has come up with another good question at one of the Ozaukee Radio Club breakfasts on Saturday mornings. Ed runs Windows 98 Second Edition, but the question applies to whatever version of Windows you might use. Basically, he asks how one gets rid of all the "junk" that accumulates as you work in Windows. He is absolutely correct – junk does accumulate in the form of files that are no longer of use and will never be used again.

So then, where does this stuff come from? The junk comes mostly from two basic activities. 1. Simple daily use of the computer, such as for surfing the web, writing documents, editing pictures and so on. 2. Installing and uninstalling software.

Daily use can result in a myriad of temporary files. If you use Word to create a document or to edit one that already exists, a temporary file is created which is not erased if your computer crashes. Editing pictures creates similar temporary files, which may not be deleted under some circumstances. Aside from cookies, surfing the web creates a myriad of files, which should be deleted when you are done, but which are often kept to repaint the screen with that website in case you should visit again.

The really BIG source of junk files results from installing and uninstalling programs. Many temporary files are created when you install a program, and some software manufacturers are not too careful to clean up these files when they are no longer needed. Even worse, uninstalling a program – even when you do it correctly from the Control Panel's Add/Remove Programs applet – often leaves behind a residue of many files that will never be used again.

So then, how do you clean the closet? How do you know that C:\Windows\Application Data\Real\Msg contains a file, CATEGORY.DAT that is useless and will never be used again? Or that C:\Windows\Application Data\Drwatson contains a file called FRAME.HTM that is useless to most users (but not ALL users)? Or that C:\Windows\System contains a 1.4Mbyte file, SHELL32.DLL, that you had better not delete or you may screw up your system? The simple answer is, you don't know!

Even an expert user doesn't know. Some of these files are not used by you, the user, but rather are invoked by other programs when they run. For example, on my system, here is a quick tabulation of the number of files (*.exe or *.dll) invoked by a couple of different programs:

Windows Explorer	59
System Tray	22
Norton System Doctor	21
Norton Antivirus	32
Zone Alarm (firewall)	43

This means that Windows Explorer will open and run up to 59 other files when I am using it! I had better not delete any of them, or my system will be damaged.

Clearly, Windows is a complex mishmash of interacting programs that no human can keep track of. Even a computer cannot keep track! The proof is that Windows does indeed crash (even XP). And, the software writers don't help. Did you know there is a Windows program in the System directory called

RUNONCE.EXE? Run once, indeed! It needs to run once, but every time Windows starts! Talk about misleading naming conventions!

So then, what to do? Well, as Dave Barrow (N9UNR) has said for years, it pays to reformat the hard drive and reinstall Windows every couple of years. That helps, but not completely, since Windows itself leaves junk files around when it is installed. But it helps. On the other hand, that is a daunting task. When I do it, it takes a couple of weeks of tweaking and adjusting to get the system back to the way I want it. Definitely, this is a step to be avoided until nothing else seems to help.

What then are some routine things you can do to help keep the closet clean? If you already have Norton Systemworks, one utility in the suite called Fast and Safe Cleanup will help a little, but not much. It does only a rather superficial cleaning of temporary files, but if you have the suite, use it. My favorite for a much more thorough cleaning, Window Washer, was reviewed in September 2002, No. 104, in this series. Window Washer (WebRoot Software, www.webroot.com) will do quite a good job of cleaning up junk, including cookies, histories and other sometimes-dangerous files. You can even customize it to leave stuff alone that you want to keep. It is, however, not freeware and will set you back \$39.95 for the latest edition (Version 5.5). Well worth the price, in my opinion. And if you are really into cleaning, get the free utility RegSeeker, V1.35 at www.hoverdesk.net (look for the RegSeeker icon at the bottom of the page). Be careful, though. This utility cleans your registry, not simply files. Do not delete anything that you are not sure of. On the other hand, it does make a backup of everything you delete (if you select that option, which you should), and it will restore items if you wish. This makes it somewhat safer. I have used it on three computers for about 6 months, and find it to be an exceptional tool.

There are manual cleanups you can do. A good guide for this search and destroy activity is in Windows 98 Annoyances, by David Karp, O'Reilly and Associates, Sebastopol, CA (ISBN 1-56592-417-7). Take a look at the website: www.oreilly.com. They are a very good group. Happy Computing!