

THE COMPUTER CORNER

## No. 142. When Disaster Strikes

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And, it will. It happened to me the other day. It was probably something I did, coupled with two years of errors that all versions of Windows accumulate with time, that interacted in just the right way (or wrong way). My machine just would not start properly. The desktop was covered with one of those inane messages telling me to reboot in Safe Mode to correct an unknown error. And, of course, nothing I did to repair the problem would repair the problem and restore the usability of the computer.

So, I bit the bullet and reformatted the C: drive and reinstalled Windows (2000 Professional, a version which is as functional as XP, with fewer headaches). Almost exactly 8 hours later, the machine was up running perfectly, with all of the six dozen (!) programs in place and working. And, none of my data files (letters, documents, copies of these Computer Corner articles, etc.) were in any way damaged or lost. Now how in the world did I do that? An average disaster of this magnitude would result in weeks of work to reconstitute a computer, and many people would lose tons of personal data. I didn't even lose my email address list. It took some preplanning, but the planning paid off.

First and foremost, I do not use a single C: drive for Windows, programs and data. My C: drive is exclusively for Windows itself. No programs or data are kept there.

Programs such as Microsoft Office, CCleaner, Thunderbird, Firefox, Partition Magic, Primo PDF, Zip Genius and many others are exclusively on the D: drive. While the program files on the D: drive were not touched when I reformatted the C: drive, reinstalling Windows effectively uninstalled every one from Windows, since the new copy of the Windows Registry contained no mention of any of them. On the other hand, another practice made reinstalling all of them as painless as possible. After installing a new program, I always place a copy of the installation file in its folder. So, it was easy enough to double click that installation file to reinstall the program. Only a couple of biggies – like Microsoft Office, required messing around with installation CDs.

Finally, the data files (my creations) are all kept on the E: drive, and reformatting the C: drive did not touch them at all. Once Windows and the program files were up and running, there was no problem in accessing any of them since they were all still there. Of course, they are grouped in folders – My Docs, ARES/RACES, CC (Computer Corner), Graphics, Backups, and the like.

I use some special precautions with some special files. Every couple of months I make a backup copy of my email address book, which takes only a couple of keystrokes and a minute or so of my time. Where does that backup copy go? On the E: drive in a folder called Backups! Once Thunderbird was up and running after the new install of Windows, it was a simple matter to suck in a copy of that backed up address book from the E: drive, and voila, my email capabilities were restored. That works easily with Internet Explorer, too. I also treat my Bookmarks (Favorites, for you IE users) in the same way, so it was a snap to restore them once Firefox was up and running.

By the way, I also burn a CD or DVD every three months with everything on that E: drive. I could easily have restored my address book from an archive CD. Or, from one of the other machines on my network, such as my wife's machine, where a folder called Stan's Stuff holds a copy of everything on my E: drive. (Yes, I have a folder on my machine's E: drive called Nancy's Stuff, where her backups reside.)

So, everything was there – nothing was lost. It just took 8 hours in front of the screen to put it all back together in exactly the way it was before the crash. Eight hours is a long time, but it was a controlled and doable process. Oh well, I was going to reinstall Windows anyway, because I had noticed the slow degradation in performance that creeps in as Windows accumulates errors over the months. That is happening to your machine, too. So, get ready.

What then, do you need to be prepared? First, you MUST have a CD copy of whatever version of Windows you are using on your machine. I am not talking about a “recovery” CD or something similar, because you cannot reinstall Windows with one of those. You need a full-blown legal copy of the Windows installation CD for your machine. You say that you didn’t get one when you purchased your computer? You paid for it! Badger your computer vendor for one. And, when you next purchase a machine with Windows pre-installed, demand a proper CD with the machine.

Second, don’t put all your eggs in a C: basket! Divide your hard drive into three partitions, with Windows (C:), program files (D:) and your precious data files (E:) all separate. Are you planning to buy a new computer? Have your vendor do the work for you – ask for a C:, D: and E: partition. A good balance is to divide it like this: 40% C: drive, 50% D: drive and 10% E: drive. So if you get a machine with an 80 GB hard drive (small by today’s standards), that would work out to 32 GB for C:, 40 GB for D: and 8 GB for E:. You will never fill that 8 GB partition with creations, unless you are a photographer with hundreds of huge jpeg files. If you are, simply copy them to CDs periodically. And, 32 GB is plenty of space for Windows. A full-featured Windows 2000 Professional installation only occupies 4,068 MB (roughly 4.1 GB), and XP is not very much larger (since they are virtually the same operating system!). Of course, if you want to vary from that suggested 4:5:1 ratio for the partitions, you certainly can. Maybe 4:4:2 would be appropriate if you capture large numbers of photographs.

Third, when you install a program, lets say CCleaner, from the web, after it is up and running (on the D: drive), put a copy of the installation file (ccsetup202.exe) in its folder. How did I know what the name of the installation file was? I looked on my D: drive in the CCleaner folder. Yep, I practice what I preach. Now, if something happens and you need to reinstall the program, all you need do to start the process is to double click ccsetup202.exe. You don’t even need a web connection to download the installation file!

Finally, top off your preparations for rapid recovery. Using CDBurnerXP or some other quick, reliable free burner, burn a CD every three months. Burn a copy of just the E: drive. If it won’t fit on a single CD because you have so many photos in your Photos directory, burn two – one with Photos and one with everything else. Or burn a single DVD. It should not take you over half an hour to do all that. Put the CDs away on the shelf. They are safety backups of all your current hard work, and an archive of files you think you don’t need anymore. Erase the latter from your hard drive (“clean the closet”).

I wish you no disasters, but if you do encounter one, this will make it as painless as is possible. Now, sit back and enjoy your computer. Questions? My email address is at the top of this article. Happy Computing!