Radio Days – 2011-10-01

Discussion – Slow Computers

Introduction

Have you ever bought a new computer and been delighted with its performance? Have you then be frustrated by its lack of performance just a few weeks later? Relax: you are not alone.

When you get a new computer it is probably the first one for years. In that time computers have made massive changes both in the hardware and in the operating system which runs it (Windows) and the programs which do what you bought your computer for (like Internet Explorer or Opera).

There is an excitement in your life which you have not known for some time, and everything seems both confusing (because it has changed) and the same (because these programs have the same foundations as the ones which you are used to using). All is brand new, and you cannot wait to use it.

After a while your computer is not as zoomy as it once was. There are a number of reasons for this to happen, and we will explore some of them in this article.

Psychological

When it is new, with its new-car smell and feel, your new computer is all so brand new and so much faster than its predecessor. After a while you get used to this new, faster computer. When you are used to your new computer it no longer seems as zoomy as it was in the beginning. This is something which happens with all new devices, and even with your new girlfriend or boyfriend! Then familiarity sets in and starts to breed the inevitable contempt.

It is at this stage that you wonder if you made the right decision to buy this new computer now that it has become so slow. Again, you can relax: if you made the right decision when you bought your computer then it is still the right decision now (unless, of course, your needs have changed massively).

For most people the bright shiny new computer is still the best one for their needs, and they are just stressing over a minor speed bump in the highway of life.

Setup

There are many options in the Control Panel which affect how your computer runs. If you make some changes here your computer will be smarter and run more smoothly. These are some options which I regularly check when I get to a new client's computer for the first time.

- **Date & Time**: this sets the time zone. Far too many computers think that they are on the west coast of the US, because that is where Microsoft is based. Change the time zone to yours: for my clients that is *Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney (UTC + 10)*.
- **Region & Language**: this sets the language(s) used and the region. For far too many computers this is set to *English (US)* rather than *English (Australia)*. This annoys many people because they are expected to spell *colour* the Yankee way: *color*.
- **Fonts**: too many fonts slow your computer down. In Windows 7 you go to *Fonts* in Control Panel and select all the fonts which you will not use and hide them. This one action can speed up a slow computer when there is very little RAM available because all your fonts are loaded when Windows starts.
- **Page File**: the page file is a part of the hard disc which is used as Clayton's RAM when Windows needs to load too much information into working memory. A page file which is too small or too large will always slow a computer down. Again, you can set the size of the page file: I use *System managed size*.

  The page file can become defragmented in Windows XP. Windows 7 has its own page file defragment program which automatically defragments the page file. PageDefrag is a free program which will defragment the Windows XP page file.

New Programs

There is another reason for computers to slow down as you use them. There is the inevitable slew of new programs which have added themselves to your computer without any action on your part or on the part of your family members.

In my work I have watched people do something with a mouse on the internet and then asked them why they did that. Almost invariable the answer is *I did not do that!* I then ask them to explain how the new program got onto their hard disc and they do not have the foggiest idea. I then point out that they clicked on a button on a web page, and show them the button, and still they do not believe that they were responsible for adding an unwanted program to their new computer. Another problem with adding new programs is that they, in turn, often add unwanted programs or toolbars to your computer. As an example, if you download iTunes (a popular Apple program), it will offer to install QuickTime as well. If you do not notice this offer you will have yet another program starting when you start your computer.

It is these actions which can slow a computer down without you knowing how it happens. Many of these programs also add a small part of themselves to the list of programs which start when you start your computer. You do not see each of these programs starting because nothing appears on the screen, but loading and starting each program takes time before you can use your computer. This time is one of the things which makes you feel that your computer has started a series of nanna-naps at your expense.

There are a number of ways to find out what starts running when you switch your computer on. These can be fraught with problems as you can disable a program which Windows needs to run. In increasing order of power and complexity they are:

- **msconfig** comes with Windows and is started by clicking ***Start » Run*** (or ***Start » Accessories » Command Prompt***) then typing *msconfig*. Press *Enter*, then click on *Startup*. Click to remove the cross for each program which you do not want to start when Windows starts. This is the best choice for beginners.
- ***Startup Control Panel*** by Mike Lin. This program has more power than *msconfig* and so a greater chance to create an unbootable computer. This is a good choice if you are a knowledgeable user and confident of your ability to repair damage to Windows' Registry.
- ***Autoruns*** is the power-user's option. For this reason I strongly suggest that you only use it if you know what each program shown by this program does. It has the highest chance of creating a boat anchor if you mess things up.

The Registry

The Windows' Registry is, depending on your point of view, either Microsoft's biggest-ever mistake (even bigger than Windows Vista) or the greatest thing to happen to computers. I tend toward the former view because there are more easily managed ways of handling the needs of operating systems and programs, such as the text files used by all Linux computers.

For the vast majority of people the Registry is, and should remain, an unexplored wilderness. The reasons for this are many, and they all boil down to the fact that a wrong change to the Registry will render your computer and expensive and useless boat anchor.

The Registry is where all programs (including Windows) store all the information they need to keep working correctly. Each program adds and removes information to the Registry, and this results in a registry which has holes in it. Some free registry defrag programs are given below. These are only useful if you use Windows XP because Windows 7 has its own internal registry defragmenter, so the registry does not become defragmented.

As a rule, before you make any (and I do mean ***ANY***) change to the registry it is important to backup your registry before you make your changes. The process for making a registry backup varies for each version of Windows and is beyond this article.

Multiple Anti-Virus Programs

Most new computers come with a trial version of an anti-virus program already installed. The manufacturer obviously wants you to keep using their program after the trial period ends. This will mean that you have to spend money, either over the internet or in a shop, after the three-month trial. Many people download one of the many free anti-virus programs and think that this will override the trial anti-virus.

This does not happen.

If you do download and install a free anti-virus program you finish up with two anti-virus programs on your computer. It is the nature of AV programs that they want to be the first program to check each and every program as it starts running, and when you get this sort of internal cat fight your computer slows down. This slow-down causes your computer to take longer to start and also causes each program to take longer to load. This is a major cause of many computer's slowness, and so a major cause of people's frustration with their computer.

When you are ready to uninstall the trial AV program I recommend that you use a program called Revo Uninstaller to do the removal. This program does a much more complete removal of all sorts of programs than does Windows' own uninstaller. You can download and install Revo Uninstaller from the link below.

When you use Revo Uninstaller please take the complete option: this will remove all references to your old AV program after your computer's next reboot. It is impossible for any uninstall program to remove a file which is in use because Windows ensures that that file cannot be removed. This is why all AV program uninstalls complete the process the next time that Windows starts (or boots).

After you have done this please check your computer to ensure that you only have one AV program installed. You might still have an internal cat fight going on!

Further Information

Startup Control Panel	www.mlin.net
Autoruns	www.sysinternals.com
PageDefrag	www.sysinternals.com
Eusing Registry Defrag	www.eusing.com
Quicksys Registry Defrag	www.regdefrag.com
Snapfiles Registry Defrag	www.snapfiles.com
Revo Uninstaller	www.revouninstaller.com