

Chapter 1

First Things First: Why You Should Clean

In This Chapter

- ▶ Determining whether your system needs cleaning
 - ▶ Balancing the pros and cons of cleaning
 - ▶ Focusing your cleaning efforts
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My system isn't messed up, is it? (What? Me worry?)

Yes, you should worry. Or, you should at least be aware that you may need to worry. Computer systems easily and quickly become untidy and messed up. If you don't clean yours, you run the risk of big problems down the road.

Do I really need to point out the benefits of a clean computer system? (Probably, so I do — a little later in this chapter.) Does someone need to come into your house and point out why you need to pick up your clothes, dust the furniture, wash the dishes, and tend to the dog? Probably not; you know that a clean house is healthful, inviting, and safe.

It's the same with computers. Over time, your computer can become cluttered with unused programs, unknown data, and unwanted visitors. With a little effort, you can clean your system so that it runs at top form, and you can breeze through your work faster and easier than you can on an unclean system. In addition, clean systems are more reliable, less prone to failure, and easier to protect from attack by malicious programs.

Before you can begin cleaning, however, you need to recognize the need to clean and why you should spend the time to do it.

Telltale Signs of an Unclean Computer

How can you know whether your system needs cleaning? I've compiled a list of several sure-fire signs that you need help. (Envision Jeff Foxworthy standing in front of your computer, speaking with his signature twang.)

You know you have a messed-up computer . . .

- ✔ If you have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs so you don't get lost finding your way through the options in your Start menu.
- ✔ If every pop-up on your computer inspects your computer, notices the mess, apologizes for bothering you, and quietly closes on its own.
- ✔ If you try to install a new program, and the installation program automatically reports your system to the Board of Health.
- ✔ If you think "Defragment" is the name of a new rap song by Busta Rhymes (Yo!).
- ✔ If the only way to add more icons to your desktop is to get a larger desktop.
- ✔ If you start the program to balance your checkbook, only to find that your son's illegal copy of *World of Warcraft* ate the last month's worth of transactions.
- ✔ If someone mentions "backup," and chills run up and down your spine.
- ✔ If virus software refuses to install itself on your system for fear of contamination.

Perhaps such observations aren't worthy of Jeff Foxworthy or the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, but this list highlights some good indicators that your computer needs cleaning. The next few sections detail some other obvious signs that you need help.

The view from the desktop isn't pretty

Does your desktop look like the one shown in Figure 1-1? If so, you have problems. Maybe you bought into the old adage that a clean desk is a sign of a sick mind, and in the process lost your ability to effectively use your system. Whatever got you to this point, you need your Windows cleaned. Badly.



Figure 1-1:
A cluttered desktop is a sure sign that your system needs cleaning.

Your computer desktop is supposed to be a clean, inviting place where you store only a few icons of your most commonly used programs. For too many people, the desktop becomes a catch-all repository of every stray icon that comes their way.



A cluttered desktop is a good sign that your entire PC is cluttered. The solution is to clean your system and rid yourself of all that mess.

If your desktop is as cluttered as the one shown in Figure 1-1 — and especially if it's even more cluttered — head to Chapter 12, where I give you some help regaining control.

Traversing the Start menu jungle is an adventure

Can you imagine running Windows without the Start menu? Neither can I. The Start menu is indispensable for quickly and easily finding the programs you want to run.

At least, that's the way it's supposed to be.

On many systems that I've seen, the Start menu gets cluttered with lots of programs the user seldom, if ever, uses. Figure 1-2 shows one such Start menu, just itching to be cleaned.

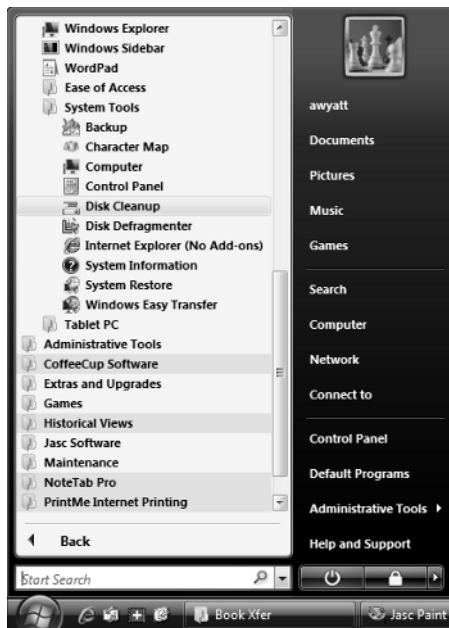


Figure 1-2:
Long, deep,
and
cluttered
Start menus
can hinder
your work.



The Start menu is supposed to provide a convenient path to all the programs installed on your system. Over time, some paths are used more than others, and some paths become completely unused. Even though the Windows Vista Start menu is a bit easier to traverse than in previous versions of Windows, you can still benefit by removing unused items from the Start menu and organizing what is left.

When you remove unused programs from your computer (which I show you how to do in Chapter 5), your Start menu will look better and better. When you really need to give your Start menu a makeover, Chapter 12 (where I discuss taking back control of the user interface) will be invaluable.

Your PC is slower than molasses

Shortly after microwave ovens first came out (yes, I'm that old), I remember watching my grandma use one to bake some potatoes. She anxiously looked through the oven's door and mumbled, "Hurry up, hurry up."

I chuckled about it then, but years later I find myself doing the same thing with my computer. When I got the computer, it seemed really, really fast. Now, after using it for a year or so, it seems to be slower than I remember it. Yes, it is still faster than doing things the old way (sort of like baking potatoes in a conventional oven), but I find myself talking to the computer, begging it to "hurry up."



If your PC seems slower than it should — particularly if it seems slower than when you first got it — your system is a prime candidate for cleaning. Over time, the detritus that your computer collects during everyday use can start to bog it down. If you don't periodically banish that junk, it can affect the work you do. The change is typically slow, ever so slow, until you notice one day that your computer just doesn't run like it used to.

If you want to make your programs run faster, you're in luck because I show you how to do that in Chapter 4. To make Windows itself hum right along, check out Chapters 13 and 14, which cover getting the cobwebs out of Windows and making your file system run faster, respectively.

You have files older than your dog

I've had my dog for just over 3 years, which makes him in his 20s in dog years, right? Does that mean he's been chewing up my son's shoes for 3 years or 20 years? Hmmm. Converting people years to dog years may be philosophically confusing, but there is nothing confusing about examining the age of the files on your computer. If you look at the files on your computer, I'll bet you could find some that are 3, 5, or even 10 years old.

I can hear you now: "Not on my system. I just got it a year ago, so I don't have anything as old as your dog." Wrong, bucko! Computer files tend to follow you around, over the years, without you even realizing it. For instance, computer files are commonly transferred from an old system to a new system. When transferred, the files retain their old file dates — they are old files.

You may also share files with other people in your office, family, or circle of friends. Place the files on your computer, and you may quickly forget about them. But they are there, aging like a not-so-fine wine, taking up space and adding to the general clutter of your system.



A large number of old, old files are a sure sign that you need to clean your system. You can archive your data or create backups that allow you to remove unneeded data from your hard drive, freeing up space for other data and tasks. Chapter 7 gives you the straight scoop on how to keep only the data that you need.

Your Notification area looks like a parking lot

You know what the Notification area is, don't you? (Come on; you can admit it — nobody's watching.) Well, come to think of it, you may not know what it is, but you may know what it was. You see, Microsoft decided to rename what used to be known as the system tray so it is now known as the *Notification area*.

In case that doesn't help you any, the Notification area is at the right side of your Task bar. Take a look at the bottom of your computer screen. Do you see the Start menu button? (If you don't, you may need to move your mouse pointer to the bottom of the screen to make the button appear.) See it? Good. Now shift your eyes all the way to the right. What do you see? You probably see the current time and maybe a few icons. Even if you don't realize it, you're looking right at the Notification area (refer to Figure 1-1).

In Windows Vista, the Notification area is a little deceiving because it hides some of the icons. Perhaps the folks in Redmond don't want you to be consciously aware of how cluttered this area can become. Don't let that stand in your way, however. If you click the small left-pointing arrow at the left side of the Notification area, the area expands to the left, allowing you to see the entire contents of the Notification area.

Each icon in the Notification area represents a utility program currently running in your system. You may see icons for any number of programs. How many do you see? Five? Ten? More? Some programs that you install on your computer are a bit egotistical — they think they're so important that they deserve a place of honor in your Notification area. When you install one of these egotistical programs, besides adding itself to your Start menu and your desktop, it stakes out prime ground in your Notification area. Good examples are video players such as QuickTime or RealPlayer. They (and their ilk) are notorious for this Notification area bullying.

Clutter, clutter, clutter. If you have a bunch of icons in your Notification area, your system is a prime candidate for cleaning. Get rid of a few of these babies, and you may find your system running leaner and faster than before.



Don't try to delete any of the Notification area icons yet. Some of the icons will go away as you remove old programs. You can also find out how to reclaim this prime area of your system by controlling what programs run when your computer starts; Chapter 13 provides this important information.

Cleaning Up: The Pros and Cons

If your system needs cleaning, you've come to the right place. *Cleaning Windows Vista For Dummies* is a great resource that you can use to get your system back to near-new condition. If your mind works like mine — I know that's a scary thought for some — then you will want to examine the pros and cons of cleaning your system, which can help you decide whether you want to clean your system right now.

The pros

You've finally reached the big time — the pros! Oh, sorry, wrong homonym. . . . In this instance, “the pros” mean benefits. Specifically, the benefits of cleaning up your system, which I list here:

- ✔ **Speed:** A clean system runs faster than one that needs cleaning. Do you remember when you first got your PC? You probably thought it ran very fast. If your system stays clean, you shouldn't notice it running any slower over time. Unfortunately, most systems don't stay clean and require your attention. Give your system the attention it craves — that is, do the cleaning — and it can run just as fast as it did the day you got it.
- ✔ **Efficiency:** If you're using a clean system, you can get through your work faster and therefore more efficiently. A clean system doesn't make you immensely more efficient — if it did, the self-help publishing market would shrink dramatically. You can still get sidetracked playing games or arguing religion and politics on various message boards, but with a clean system, you can do even those things more efficiently.
- ✔ **Reliability:** A huge benefit of a clean system is that it is more reliable than one that isn't. If you fail to clean your system, over time it goes from clean to cluttered to messed-up to unstable. Unstable systems crash. Unstable systems have a tendency to lose data. Unstable systems are a real pain. Clean your system, and you should see stability jump dramatically. No pain, big gain.

- ✔ **Stress reduction:** Do you like to sleep at night? Do you prefer having no worry? Believe it or not, having a clean system can reduce anxiety and provide a pleasant ease of mind. How so? Consider the worry that you'd have if your system were infected by a virus, or you weren't sure that the financial data on it was safe, or you didn't know what programs were running on the system, or . . . You get the idea. Worry comes in all shapes and sizes. If you clean your computer, you have a better handle on what's on your computer and how it's being used.
- ✔ **Economics:** Cleaning your computer can save you money — sometimes lots of money. I suspect that hard drive clutter has helped boost the bottom line of hard drive manufacturers significantly over the years. Running low on space? Get a new drive. Computer running slow? Get a new system. Chances are, some of those new drives and new systems would have been unnecessary had the users done just a little housecleaning.

The cons

Every coin has two sides, and unless you're a bunko victim, the two sides aren't the same. I'm no bunko artist, so I'm pleased to point out that doing a cleanup also has its negatives. You need to be aware of these negatives, right from the get-go:

- ✔ **Time consumption:** Cleaning your computer takes time. You probably feel strapped for time right now, don't you? (Most people do.) Cleaning your computer can take anywhere from a trivial to a substantial amount of time. I've cleaned some systems — completely — in as little as two hours, but I've spent days cleaning other systems. How much time will your cleanup take? I can't answer that, but I can say be prepared for a time commitment and be patient. Your time will pay off in the end when your computer is running more smoothly.

Fortunately, you have some control over how and when to spend that time. You don't have to spend it all in a single block, although you could. You can spend the time over a period of days or weeks, as the time becomes available. Check out Chapter 2, where I discuss setting up a cleaning schedule to help you manage your cleaning time.
- ✔ **The learning curve:** Part of the time required to do the cleanup is rooted in another drawback: the learning curve. Figuring out how to use some of the cleaning tools takes time. If you're already comfortable with your computer and the cleaning tools, your learning curve is lower than for those who are unfamiliar.

✔ **The bother:** I won't lie to you — cleaning up your computer can be a bother. If you approach the task as a chore, then it will be bothersome. But I encourage you to fight the urge to procrastinate cleaning; don't put it off as you might other bothersome tasks. To borrow a phrase, remember that it's not just a job — it's an adventure. Try to overcome the "bother factor" by looking on it as a learning experience. If necessary, spread the cleanup out over several days so that you don't max out your stress level in a single session.

Balancing pros and cons

You may come up with other pros and cons than those I present in the preceding two sections. Some may be specific to your particular situation. (Is your job in jeopardy if you don't clean up your computer? Is the valuable data on your computer at risk?) If you write the pros on the left side of a sheet of paper and the cons on the right side, you can easily see how they balance out — and then determine which side wins.

In general, I think that the pros outweigh the cons by a significant amount (hence, this book). I'm guessing you think so, too; that's why you're reading this book. Still, you may need to work on timing or attitude before you can bring yourself to actually do it. Just keep in mind that you may find having a clean computer beneficial in more ways than you can imagine.

Paying the price

If you're short on time, you may be tempted to pay someone else to clean your system. After all, you can pay someone to clean your car, your office, your house, and your yard. Why not have someone else do your computer cleaning for you?

Why not, indeed. You certainly can have someone else clean your computer, but chances are good that you won't like the price. Plan on paying anywhere from \$50 to \$150 per hour for computer cleaning. Do the math — if it takes

two, four, six, or more hours to clean your computer, how much will you pay? Ouch!

Also, you should understand that cleaning isn't just a one-time thing. However, if you change your behavior, you won't have to clean as often or pay as much in the future. You can't pay someone else to change your computer behavior, which makes all you can discover while cleaning your computer yourself valuable.

Keeping Your House Tidy

Just like keeping your house tidy takes concerted effort on your part, keeping your computer system clean takes effort, too. Some people mistakenly think that caring for their computers should be as mindless and easy as caring for their TVs, and they don't even think about cleaning their computers. But if you read this whole chapter, you know that you need to clean your system — and that you can benefit from cleaning it. So, you're ready to jump right in and tackle the job. (You are ready, right?)



Throughout this chapter, I show you that you don't have to dread cleaning your system. Sure, this job takes some time, but it doesn't have to be an intimidating task. In fact, you can even clean your system over a period of weeks — a little here and a little there — and before you know it, it's done.

As you seek to clean up your system, the different areas you can focus on include

- ✓ **Your programs:** The entire purpose of your computer is to create an environment in which you can effectively use different programs. If your programs don't run well, the value of your computer decreases. If you concentrate on cleaning up your programs or making them run faster (the focus of Chapters 3, 4, and 5), you immediately increase the value of your system.
- ✓ **Your data:** Chances are good that your programs eat, sleep, and breathe data. Programs need data to run, to fulfill their purpose in life. If your data is messed up, then your programs may just refuse to work properly. Managing data can be a monumental task, but doing so effectively will free up space on your hard drive and allow your programs to run faster. Head to Chapters 6 and 7 to find out more on keeping your data clean.
- ✓ **Your e-mail:** We live in a well-connected world. If you use e-mail (and who doesn't?), you can clutter up your system without even realizing it. Spam and viruses routinely bombard your system through e-mail. If you manage your e-mail well (as I show you in Chapters 8 and 9), you can lessen clutter and make your system more secure.
- ✓ **Your Internet use:** E-mail isn't the only use for your Internet connection. As you browse the Web, your system routinely fills up with files that you don't even know about. Whether these files are benign or harmful, they all add to the clutter of your system. If you pay attention to what's stored on your system, you can take the steps to reduce the clutter and improve overall performance. Chapters 10 and 11 can help you tackle the Internet beast.

✔ **The operating system:** Ah, Windows. What can you say about Windows? Actually, you can say quite a lot — and not all of it bad! Windows Vista is a great operating system, and one of its biggest strengths is its configurability. In Part IV, I show you ways to tweak and prod Windows into running faster than it ever did before.

There are also some advanced things you can do, such as tweaking your hardware (or adding new hardware), improving your security profile, and — shudder — diving into the Registry. Such endeavors (which I cover in Part V) are usually relegated to the last, after you work through other, less advanced cleaning techniques. I recommend that you proceed into these areas with extreme caution.

How do you know when your system is finally clean? You know you've succeeded when your system runs smoother, faster, and more reliably than before. You know your computer is clean when you can finish your work quickly, without getting bogged down.

