

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 115. Uninstall Those Programs Correctly

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Almost all computer users have discovered that you cannot simply transfer a program from one computer to another. Rather, most programs need to be installed on each machine they are used on. There are several reasons why this is true. First, when we speak of a “program”, we are actually describing a group of files that work together to do whatever the program is supposed to do. Let me construct an illustration.

Let us suppose you have a “program” called MyEditor, a word processor. You use it to type documents, save them and print them, much like Microsoft Word. MyEditor is really a suite of many files that work together to do the job. You might find MYEDIT.EXE in the main MYEDIT folder. MYEDIT.EXE is the main program that starts the whole works when you click on the icon. The icon itself might be a separate file, MYEDIT.ICO. For sure the “program” has several DLL files (MYEDIT.DLL, SCRMSG.DLL, etc.) that were placed in the C:\Windows\System folder during the installation process. These DLL (Dynamic Link Library) files contain programming routines to do things like showing a dialog box on the screen or sending a document to Windows so it can be printed or opening a file needed when you invoke the spell checker. The spell checker’s dictionary itself might be in a file called MYWORDS.DIC. There might also be an uninstall program, typically called UNWISE.EXE, residing in the main MYEDIT folder. But don’t invoke it to uninstall the program. Its name alone should warn you!

The point is, MyEditor is really a bunch of files, perhaps several dozen or more, installed in various places all over the hard drive. And to top it all off, when the program was first installed, several entries were written about it in the Windows Registry, a database containing information about all the hardware and software in your machine. Complicated? You bet. It would take at least several hours of careful hand sleuthing by a human to discover all of the files and their locations associated with MyEditor. In the old days of DOS, a program might consist of three or four files, all in one folder. To uninstall the program, one just erased the folder and all of its contents. Those days are long gone!

So then, how does one properly get rid of a program? Click on the Control Panel, then Add/Remove Programs, then find MyEditor and highlight it and click the Add/Remove button. What you are doing this way is letting Windows be the umpire. Windows will look in its Registry and perhaps the program’s installation log and find (hopefully) all the files associated with MyEditor. It will remove the entries in the Registry, and perhaps some of the program files, then close. MyEditor will no longer be in the list of programs shown when you invoke Add/Remove programs.

You are not quite done, though. The icon for MyEditor may (or may not) still be on your desktop. If Windows did not remove it, right click it and select Delete. Now, use Explorer to find the MyEditor folder. If you cannot find it, click Start, Find, Files or Folders and type MyEditor in the dialog box (which, by the way, is shown by Windows by opening one of its own DLLs). That will tell you where the folder is. Now navigate to it using Explorer, right click it and select Delete. That should do it. At least 90% of the files associated with MyEditor are gone. Forget about any remaining ones – you will probably never detect them.

During the Add/Remove Programs process, you may see a message that Windows has found a shared DLL (possibly shared by other programs), and it wants to know if you want to delete it. Just for safety's sake, don't. Some other program may well need it to operate properly, and you don't want to bollix up anything but MyEditor.

Some people think they are uninstalling programs when they delete from the desktop the icon for that program. Wrong! The only thing they have deleted is the icon. All of the program files are still on the hard drive, and even the icon itself can be restored. And they wonder why, after a couple of years, no more space is left on the hard drive. If you don't clean your closet out, you can bet that it will eventually get full!

Next time we will have some words on installing programs correctly. Happy computing!