

Some tips on killing 'immortal' software

Help Desk

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Did we all miss the memo about granting immortality to software when we install it?

At one time or another every-

one with a personal computer comes up against this problem: you uninstall a misbehaving program in an attempt to fix corrupt settings (tech support folks just love to tell you to do that). But after you reinstall you find that the same old settings are still there. At which point, tech support directs you to take the tedious step of editing the "Registry" (Windows) or deleting "preference

files" (Mac), as well as searching for various files scattered across your hard drive. A simple task winds up killing most of a day.

The source of the problem is that when you install software you don't just install the program itself. You also install various components that integrate the program with your computer's operating system and hardware, plus other files to keep track of

your software's settings. A typical uninstall program will eliminate the program files, but leave many of the support files and settings in place.

Some of this is technically necessary (support files that are essential to your computer's operations should not be erased) or sensible (files containing custom features installed by users). But for the most part, it reflects a the-

ory among software developers that users couldn't possibly want to get rid of the company's program, so settings should be left in place to let users quickly return to the status quo once they come to their senses.

That's unacceptable — and unnecessary. On rare occasions one will encounter a program for

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which the uninstaller will allow you to uninstall all your settings. That ought to be a standard for Windows software. Alternatively, companies should follow the lead of Symantec — the security and utilities maker is a big offender on partial uninstalls but deals with it by making available a tool on its support web site that will do full uninstalls.

Curiously, Macs are in some ways more problematic in this regard. Unlike Windows, there is no centralized install/uninstall function. In fact, there is no standard installation procedure at all. Some Mac programs have Windows-style installers — but they don't all have uninstall tools — while others install by simply dragging the program onto your hard drive. As a result, Mac users need software to manage their software: Pacifist (charlessoft.com) to work with installation “packages” and AppZapper (appzapper.com) for drag-and-drop installations.

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This is a strange season for software upgrades. Apple is in the final phases of completing its switch to Intel processors, but not all key software has transitioned to the “universal binary” format that fully supports both the new and old processors. Microsoft will roll out a new version of Windows — Vista — at the

end of the year, and it's not 100 percent clear what it will do to existing software. Accordingly, users should hold off on upgrades unless they come with “Vista compatible” guarantees or, for Mac, are universal.

FileMaker Pro 8.5 for Mac and Windows, and Adobe's Premiere Elements 3/Photoshop Elements 5 bundle for Windows are the most interesting of the current round of upgrades. FileMaker goes Universal on the Mac, making it a must for Apple aficionados. Both versions have enhanced capabilities for creating Web-based distribution of your data — increasingly essential these days.

While Premiere and Photoshop Elements can be purchased separately, the bundle of the two makes the most sense because of price and because the two integrate for such things as video slideshows. Premiere gets a much-needed simplified interface and now supports exporting videos to iPods and Sony PSPs. Elements gains an equally needed capability to create multiphoto montages, clever new tools for jazzing up colors, and enhanced capabilities to create photo books, slideshows, and the like.

On the other hand, if you upgraded Quicken for Windows to Quicken 2005 or later, and the Mac version to Quicken 2006, you have no need to consider Quicken 2007. While Intuit's business model calls for annual upgrades,

some years the software development team comes up empty — and this is one of those years.

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Sound familiar? You cut-and-paste something from an email or the Web into a document or another email and you get — gibberish. All sorts of rogue formatting, strange layouts, unneeded characters — pretty much everything except the simple text you wanted in the first place. Now there is a solution: TextSoap (unmarked.com).

It was first introduced as a Mac application, but a Windows version is now available. The Windows edition has fewer features at the moment, but still does the job — and enhancements are on the way. TextSoap comes with a wide range of “cleaners” designed to relieve you of such tedious tasks as getting rid of the “<” marks in emails, changing the case of text, or fixing paragraphing. You can also create your own custom cleaners. Cleaners can be run separate or in any combination.

Software to get rid of the effects of other software. No wonder consumers hate dealing with computers.

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