

From the Technomanor (Part II)

Last week, I was answering this question from my Inbox:

My new computer was great, but lately it has become increasingly slower and more difficult to use. What can I do to get my computer to perform better and faster?

This week I'll talk about tools and techniques to figure out what might be causing the slowness. I'm preserving the order of the causes from Part I, but omitting those where I have nothing to add.

Put on your "propeller caps" and let's get to work. Be sure to have paper and pencil on hand. You'll be writing a few things down.

Insufficient memory (RAM)

To see how much memory (RAM) that you have physically installed in your computer, follow these steps.

In Windows Vista:

- Click Start circle.
- Right click **Computer**.
- Select **Properties**.
- Look down the properties page to the System section.
- Look at **Memory (RAM)**. This is the amount of memory in the computer.

- Click **X** to close the page.

In Windows XP:

- Right click **My Computer** if it's on the Desktop.
 - Otherwise, Click **Start**.
 - Right click **My Computer**.
- Select **Properties**.
- Select the **General** tab (it may already be selected).
- Look down the System Properties page.
- The amount of RAM is typically displayed as the last line of information.

- Click **OK** to close the page.



Extra (unwanted) programs running in the background

To locate extra or unwanted programs that may be slowing down your computer, we're going to use the MSCONFIG tool (a.k.a. System Configuration). With this

tool, we'll look at programs that start after Windows starts, but before you are given control.

MSCONFIG gives extra information about each program: the program name, name of the Manufacturer (in Vista), and the command used to start the program.

Do the following to start MSCONFIG:

In Windows Vista:

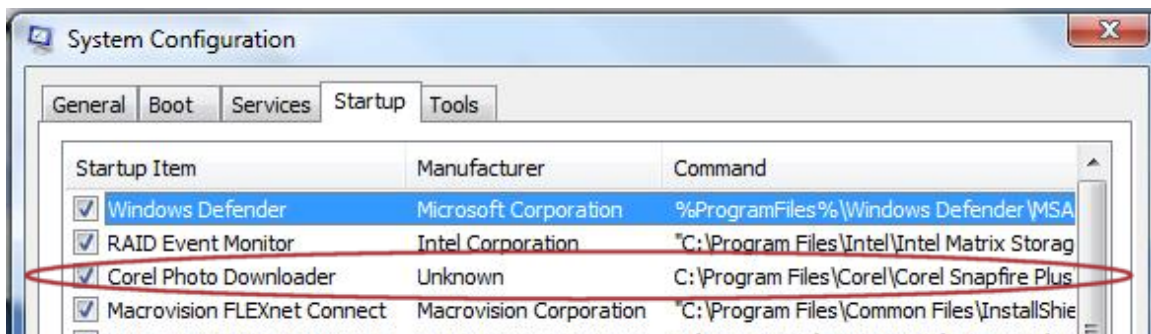
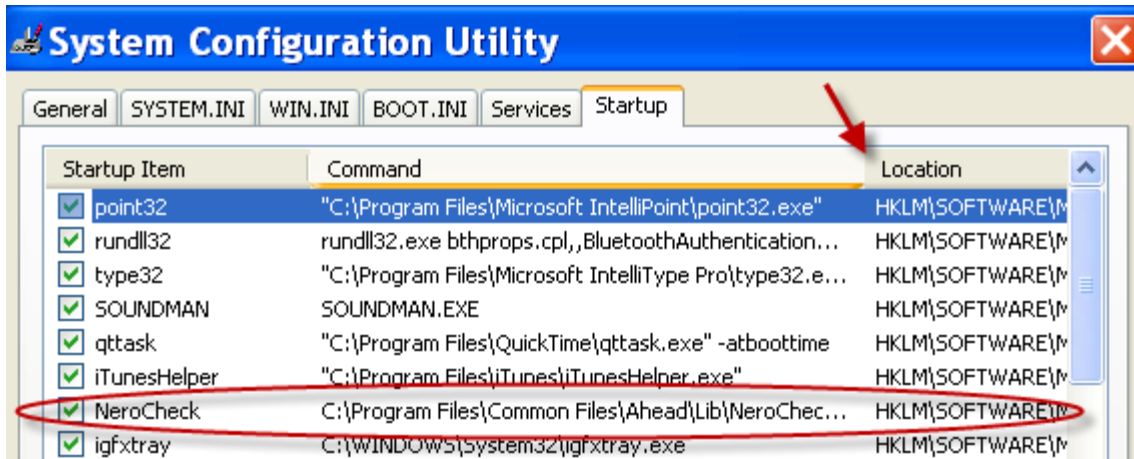
- Click Start circle.
- Type **msconfig** in the Start Search box.
- Click **msconfig** in the Programs list. The System Configuration utility starts.
- Click the **Startup** tab. These are all the programs that start after Windows but before you get control.
- Look at the list.

In Windows XP:

- Click **Start**.
- Click **Run**.
- Type **msconfig** in the Run box.
- Click **OK**. The System Configuration utility starts.
- Click the **Startup** tab. These are all the programs that start after Windows but before you get control.
- Look at the list.

Now, look for programs that “don't seem quite right.” How can you tell? Basically program names, program folders, or Manufacturers with names that are wrong, unknown, or unfamiliar.

Following are a couple of examples. To help you get a better look, you should “grow” the columns in the System Configuration dialog box. You do that by moving the cursor to the faint line between column headings: like between Command and Location. When you put your cursor there, the cursor will change. Click your left mouse button and drag the cursor to the right. It will expand the column so you can see more information.



In the first example, why do I have NeroCheck starting? In the second example, why is Corel Photo Downloader starting? Where did these programs sneak in. They don't look familiar to me. That also don't look necessary.

To learn if you don't need them, in the System Configuration dialog box:

- Uncheck the box next to the Startup Items (e.g. NeroCheck)
- Click **OK**.
- Click **Restart** to restart your computer.

Windows restarts. Observe the behavior of your computer. Answer these questions:

- Is it any different?
- Is everything working?
- Is it faster?

If something isn't working as before, then clearly this program was needed. Start MSCONFIG as shown above. Check the box next to the Startup Item, Click OK, and Click Restart to restart your computer. This should restore the needed program.

If there's no difference in behavior, you didn't need this program. If you're seeing an improvement in speed, you have found a misbehaving program that you really didn't need!

Repeat this process (start MSCONFIG and look for odd startup programs) until you have exhausted the list of startup programs, have made improvement in your computer's speed, or are tired of fiddling.

You should write down the names of the programs you have disabled. Ultimately you should uninstall them using the Add or Remove Programs control panel. But disabling them for now is sufficient.

"Bad citizen" program

We can use a similar technique from the last section to locate "bad citizen" programs. The technique this time is to boot Windows as a "clean" system, devoid of extra programs. Then add them back one at a time until you notice Windows becoming noticeably slower. The last one you added back is most likely the bad citizen.

Follow these steps to create a "clean" system:

- Start MSCONFIG using the steps from the last section.
- In MSCONFIG, Click the **Disable all** button.
Note: When you disable all the startup items, you will also be disabling your security software. Do not read email or surf the Web at this point!
- Click **OK**.
- Click **Restart** to restart your computer.
- Windows restarts.

Observe how your computer behaves. Windows should be running much faster. If it isn't, then something else is wrong with the computer. Skip to the end of this section.

Now, the time-consuming part. We're going to use MSCONFIG to turn on one program at a time, then observe how Windows works.

- Start MSCONFIG using the steps from the last section.
- Check one of the Startup Items. (Start at the top of the list and work your way down.)
- Write down the name of this Startup Item.
- Click **OK**.
- Click **Restart** to restart your computer.
- Windows restarts.
- Observe how your computer behaves. Does it feel sluggish? If it does, you have found the "bad citizen." The last Startup Item is the culprit. You can skip to the end of this section.

- If there's no difference in how your computer behaves, then repeat these steps. If you've re-enabled all the Startup Items, then there's nothing else to do. There is no single bad citizen program. Something else is causing the computer slowness.

This is the end of the section I told you to skip to. Whether you found a bad citizen program or not, let's do a little cleanup. Follow these steps:

- Start MSCONFIG (you know how by now).
- Click **Enable All**.
- Click **OK**.
- Click **Restart** to restart your computer.
- Windows restarts.

If you discovered a bad citizen program, what should you do? First, locate the Startup Item name you wrote down and any additional information. If you need the program, check for an update with the manufacturer. They often have a Web site with a Download section. If you don't need the program, disable it with MSCONFIG, or uninstall it with the Add or Remove Program control panel. There's no need to keep it around.

Disk Full or Fragmented

To defragment a hard drive, the steps differ between Windows XP and Vista.

In Windows Vista:

- Click Start circle
- Type **defragment** in the Start Search box
- Click **Disk Defragmenter** in the Programs list
- Click **Defragment now** in the Disk Defragmenter dialog.
- Make sure only the **C:** drive is checked (uncheck all others).
- Click **OK**.
- The Disk Defragmenter runs. Time passes.
- The Disk Defragmenter is finished when the **Defragment now** button appears again.
- Click **Close**

In Windows XP:

- Click **Start**.
- Select (All) **Programs**.
- Select **Accessories**.
- Select **System Tools**.
- Click **Disk Defragmenter**.
- Select **C:**.
- Click **Defragment**
- Time passes. Watch the chart as disk space is defragmented.
- Click **Close**, when Disk Defragmenter finishes.
- Click **X** (in upper right) to close the Disk Defragmenter.

Computer ok but surfing the Web slow

You can measure the speed of your incoming network connection using various tools on the Web. I prefer to use one from Verizon because of its simplicity. Visit this Web site: **<http://infospeed.verizon.net/speedtest>**.

This speed test will start automatically. Note the number in the column: *Your Speed in*. Does this roughly match what you're paying for? If it doesn't, then it may not be your computer that's the bottleneck. Your network connection is bogging down.

If the speed of your network is ok, then it may be the Web sites you're visiting. Sites that are laden with photos, graphics, and animation can be slower because all that "eye candy" has to be produced on their servers and downloaded into your computer.

Visit a more spartan Web site such as **www.google.com** or **www.whatismyip.com**. If they respond quickly, then the problem is not your computer or your network connection – it's the Web site you're visiting.

This should give you some basic tools and techniques to track down speed bottlenecks in your computer. There are other tools and techniques, but we have to stop somewhere. Also, there are situations when these don't help. At that point, it's time to call in a pro to figure out the cause of the slowness.

Next week I'll be pawing at my Inbox, looking for your technical questions. Send them to me at:

frenchygrey@gmail.com

I'll attempt to answer one question each week in *The Link*. I also promise next week's column will be shorter!

Dave Gillen