

Keeping Your PC Trouble-Free, Part I: Software Programs and Utilities

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Cars and personal computers have some interesting similarities. Just like an automobile, computer systems are available from dozens of manufacturers. Just like a car, computer systems have a price range for most every budget. Potential owners can opt for an economical system that gets them from point A to point B and does little else, or they can break the bank on a system with more bells and whistles than they'll know what to do with. And just like every car that's on the road today, computers also need the occasional tune-up and regular maintenance to keep performing.

But people seem to have a different mindset when it comes to taking care of their computers. While anyone would acknowledge that it takes a certain amount of time and money to keep a car in good working order, people tend to let once-powerful PCs waste away into obsolescence, forgetting to do such basic things as defragmenting a hard drive, updating antivirus software, or installing the newest drivers and software upgrades.

If you're not inclined to tuning up your system, there are a number of programs and services available to help computer users maintain their systems, speed up their PC's performance, and prevent them from crashing. In this article, we'll review some of the best software utility packages that will help keep your computer operating as smoothly as the first time you turned it on.

Software

Norton Utilities: A Proven Winner

First released about six months ago, the latest version of Symantec's Norton Utilities offers an array of programs for maintenance, tuning up and optimizing your system, and emergency recovery. This version also adds virus scanning capabilities and tools for editing the Windows registry, making it one of the most comprehensive utility packages currently available.

One of the best features of Norton Utilities is a program called the Registry Tracker. Every time you add or remove a piece of hardware or software, changes are made to your system's registry. Registry Tracker records any changes that are made whenever you install a new program or device. This way, if any conflicts arise, you can quickly undo the changes to the registry and get your system back up and running.

System Genie, another new feature, lets users customize the appearance of their computer without having to delve into the Windows 95 registry. For instance, System Genie lets you rename or remove desktop items such as the Inbox. You can adjust the speed of menus so that they don't appear as quickly. And you can protect file extensions so that they won't get accidentally overwritten by other programs.

Perhaps the best program on Norton Utilities is Live Update, which automatically connects users to the Symantec website for news releases, program updates and monthly virus definitions. This feature can be customized so that new software updates and patches will be downloaded and

installed automatically, without having to browse to the Symantec website manually.

There are several other programs that also add to the value of Norton Utilities. Norton Disk Doctor checks for major and minor errors on your hard drive and can repair most of the problems it encounters. The Multimedia Benchmark program tests the performance of your PC's monitor, CD-ROM drive and sound cards and displays how well they are running. And the CrashGuard program protects your computer from running into general protection faults and other fatal errors.

This is not to say that the program is without fault, however. For instance, the Norton Diagnostics program only runs in DOS, and it occasionally reports the wrong devices and test results. And if you're inexperienced with Windows 95, don't even think about playing with the Registry Editor -- you can wreak a lot of havoc on your system in a short amount of time. These minor problems aside, it's a solid package of programs and is well worth the price -- approximately \$69 or more as we go to press.

Nuts and Bolts: More for Less?

If you have a tighter budget, another great utilities package to consider is Nuts & Bolts, made by Helix Software. Released last summer, Nuts & Bolts was designed to compete directly with users who were considering buying Norton Utilities. While it does lack a few of the features of Symantec's product, it also carries a much lower price tag -- only \$39. Nuts & Bolts also offers some programs that Norton Utilities doesn't, and has a slightly easier user interface.

Just like Norton Utilities, Nuts & Bolts offers all the standard programs you'd expect to find in a good utility package. For instance, the Registry Wizard provides a number of options for fine-tuning the Windows registry. There's even an option that lets users rebuild the registry from scratch and removes any corrupted entries.

Nuts & Bolts also offers programs for optimizing your system's hard drive. The DiskMinder program repairs and recovers damaged hard disk sectors and scans the hard drive much faster than similar utilities. DiskTune defragments your computer's hard disk and reorganizes saved files for faster performance. If hard drive space is a problem, Nuts & Bolts Cleaner removes fragments and leftover files from uninstalled applications that take up unnecessary room.

There are also a number of valuable prevention and protection programs contained in Nuts & Bolts. The Bomb Shelter feature prevents your system from crashing. If a crash does occur, however, Bomb Shelter will let you save whatever you're working on first, avoiding what could amount to hours of lost time. And the Trash Guard program protects users from accidentally deleting necessary files.

What sets Nuts & Bolts apart from Norton Utilities are the extra programs other utility packages don't offer. The Zip Manager, for example, allows users to create and manage compressed archive files, saving valuable disk space. There are also encryption programs that let users turn their e-mail messages into secure, password-protected documents that would-be thieves can't read. And there's a great diagnostic tool called Discover Pro that provides users with valuable information about memory storage, port compliance, compatibility issues -- even the actual speed of your hard drive and modem connection.

Choosing the Right Package

So which one is better? You really can't go wrong with either product. If you're familiar with Norton products and like their setup and design, go with Utilities. If you don't have as much money to spend, then Nuts and Bolts might be worth a look.

Before you purchase either program, however, a good idea would be to test both at a computer store, then decide which one best suits your needs. To help you choose, we've provided a table comparing some of the features of each program.

Feature	Norton Utilities	Nuts & Bolts
System Crash Protection	Yes	Yes
Optimizes Hard Drive	Yes	Yes
Clean & Repair Windows Registry	Yes	Yes
Rebuild & Optimize Windows Registry	No	Yes
Emergency Rescue & Recovery Disks	Yes	Yes
Repairs and Recovers Damaged Files	Yes	Yes
Free Automatic Virus Updates Online	Yes	No
High Security File Encryption	No	Yes
Removes Duplicate, Unnecessary & Outdated Files	Yes	Yes
Automatic Program Updates Online	Yes	No
Automatic Program Updates Zip/Unzip Files	Yes	Yes
Cost	\$69 and up	\$39

Oil Change Fixes Program Leaks

With program updates, patches and bug fixes popping up quicker than the local fast food restaurant, keeping your computer in top form can seem like a full time job. Norton Utilities and Nuts & Bolts can refresh your PC, but what about your other programs?

That's where Oil Change, a new program from Cybermedia software, comes in. Oil Change automates the job of finding software updates and patches by checking a centralized database to determine whether or not your computer's programs have the latest drivers, patches, and fixes.

First, it takes an inventory of all the applications and drivers on your system's hard drive. Next, it checks the central database for whatever upgrades and patches are available for download from the Internet. It also tells you what the benefits are from receiving each upgrade.

In some cases, Oil Change will automatically download the updates to your system. Other patches and fixes need to be installed manually. For safety's sake, the program automatically backs up any drivers that are affected by new upgrades and patches. This way, if an incompatibility issue arises, you can reinstall the old drivers to take care of any possible software conflicts.

Oil Change has an Undo option that will remove any patches or updates you install and replace them with the previous programs and drivers. (Unfortunately, this feature only works on upgrades that Oil Change has handled automatically.) There's also a Scoreboard feature which logs each upgrade you've made to your system and keeps track of whether you've made the upgrade manually or automatically. And for users who like to be informed of the latest changes to their system's drivers and applications, Oil Change will notify you via e-mail whenever a new patch or fix is available for downloading.

There are a couple of downsides to Oil Change, however. For instance, the company's central database currently provides upgrades and patches to only about 700 programs, although that

number is expected to grow rapidly in the near future. Another problem is that it's not free. After one year, users will be charged an annual fee to access to program's database of downloads. If you have a relatively small amount of programs and don't want to pay a yearly charge, you may be more content to browse the Web yourself and make manual upgrades and changes to your system's software. However, if time is a factor and you have dozens of older programs that need to be updated, Oil Change might be worth a look.

In part II of this series, we'll review a number of services available on the Internet that will help you maintain your computer online. In part III, we'll help you set up a schedule for maintaining your computer and list some essential pieces of hardware and software you should have to keep your PC up and running properly. As always, we welcome your feedback. If you have any questions or comments about this or other articles in the column, please feel free to contact me.

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