

Smileys or Emoticons

If you've ever typed a colon or semicolon next to a parenthesis in a written statement, then you just might be violating copyright laws. The use of certain emoticons – which is the term of art for those little smileys and frownies composed of punctuation marks – is trademarked in certain contexts.

Despair, Inc., who created the infamous Demotivator posters, owns the U.S. frownie copyright – but only on printed materials. A Russian entrepreneur, Oleg Teterin, claims rights to various smileys and frownies but promises not to enforce them on end users – just on deep-pocket tech outfits. And in Finland, where many a text-friendly mobile phone is made, almost as many emoticon expressions are protected under trademark law.

It all comes down to context. Despair, Inc. has just one particular frownie – :-(– for some kinds of print media. Other emoticon claims revolve around the conversion of punctuation strings into animated images, as happens in instant message applications. Nobody could reasonably apply for, gain, or enforce a copyright to all emoticons, everywhere. And, trying to prevent people from typing out an emoticon without first paying a license fee is not going to go far in the courts, though common sense really doesn't enter into it. You can thank the legal intellectual property concept of prior art.

The documented use of emoticons is older than the word emoticon itself. Using of punctuation-based symbols for emotional content (especially sarcasm) is even older. In 1969, Vladimir Nabokov told The New York Times, "I often think there should exist a special typographical sign for a smile – some sort of concave mark, a supine round bracket." The DARPA and ARPAnet was just figuring out packet-switching at that point, so the idea of an emoticon predates the Internet.

By 1982, Internet-based communication was common enough that its regular users had recognized the need for something akin to the "supine round bracket" that Nabokov proposed – and somebody said so. While many users probably independently solved the problem, one man gets credit for launching the emoticon concept – if not the word – into the online lexicon.

Dr. Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, is credited with inaugurating the era of the online emoticon. On Sept. 19, 1982, Fahlman posted the following message to the university's general science

Internet bulletin board:

"I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:~)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:-(

Fahlman's proposal was quickly embraced on the Carnegie Mellon boards and from there spread to ARPAnet, then Usenet, and thus the world. None of which was anticipated or intentional, as Fahlman himself recounts the strikingly casual context of the post.



The original iconic yellow-and-black smiley face image was created by Harvey Ball in 1963 for an employee morale campaign at State Mutual Life Assurance Company. It fell into public domain and was pasted on every conceivable novelty item during the 1970s.

Roughly simultaneous to the pop-culture smiley's debut, teletype operators were composing crude proto-emoticons for their typewritten communications. By the time the smiley face logo was popping up on buttons and t-shirts in the '70s, users of the PLATO System were enjoying graphical emoticons called down by hotkey sequences. Finally, several British Telecom Internet users adopted a set of tongue-in-cheek emoticons – most similar to -) with other punctuation mixed in – three years before Fahlman's famous post.

Thus, Fahlman didn't conjure his smileys from whole cloth, but either serendipitously or subconsciously synthesized their current Internet incarnations. Not to worry; Fahlman has other accomplishments to fall back on. He's done significant work on semantic and neural networks, as well as Carnegie Mellon's Common Lisp programming language. Oh, and he created a Carnegie Mellon Award for the student who accomplishes the most to further technology-assisted person-to-person communication: The Smiley Award.

Unnecessary Vista features to disable on back

Unnecessary Vista features to disable

Here are some Vista features that you can turn off right now - The latest Windows packs a lot of code - more than any version of Windows ever - and some of it is just plain unnecessary. All of that excess code has a way of slowing down an operating system. You can regain some PC performance by removing unneeded features.

Should you really turn off all of these things right this minute? That depends on your computer, your work habits, and your tastes.

Just to be on the safe side, make sure to create a restore point before you turn any of the items off. That way you can quickly return your machine to its present state should you decide that you don't like the change. To make a restore point, click Start, type sysdm.cpl, and press Enter. Choose System Protection, Create, and then follow the prompts.

Sidebar

You pay a heavy performance price for the analog clock, thumbnail slide-show viewer, and Microsoft-centric RSS news feed that dock in the Windows Sidebar. Turning the whole thing off gives you a big speed boost, especially at boot time.

To remove the Sidebar, right-click anywhere on the Sidebar and select Close Sidebar. Uncheck Start Sidebar when Windows starts, and then click OK.

Aero

Microsoft put a lot of Vista's visual enhancements under one technological and marketing umbrella: Aero. Among those features are the thumbnails of your windows that appear when you hover the mouse pointer over the taskbar, as well as the Flip 3D view you get by pressing Windows-Tab. Aero adds a little practicality and a lot of panache to the Vista user interface, and personally, I like it.

If your PC is underpowered or overloaded, however, Aero may be more trouble than it's worth. To turn it off, right-click the Windows desktop and select Personalize, Window Color and Appearance. In the resulting "Window Color and Appearance" dialog box, click Open classic appearance properties for more color options (if you don't see the option, that means Aero is already turned off). Select Windows Vista Basic and click OK.

Remote Assistance

Don't worry about turning this item off if you run Vista Home (Basic or Premium). You don't have it. If you run Vista Business or Ultimate, though, you can use Remote Assistance



Windows Vista™

to control one PC from another—a useful tool if you regularly provide tech support for a relative living far away.

On the other hand, if you're not providing long-distance support, or if you prefer a third-party remote-control program, Remote Assistance is just a waste of resources. To get rid of it, click Start, right-click Computer, and select Properties. Click Remote Settings. Uncheck Allow Remote Assistance connections to this computer.

Windows Meeting Space

I like Windows' built-in peer-to-peer collaboration program, Meeting Space, which lets you share files across a network while editing them with a remote colleague. But I don't have any use for it in my daily life, and neither do most of the people I know.

So you can shut Windows Meeting Space off. Simply uncheck Windows Meeting Space while you're in the Windows Features dialog box. If you're not in the Windows Features dialog box, see the tip on the previous page for instructions on getting to it.

Search Indexing

This one is a real trade-off. Turning off Vista's indexing will slow searches to a crawl - I'm talking minutes, not seconds. But ditching this convenient feature could very likely speed up your general PC use significantly.



In other words, turning off indexing will help your PC's performance only if you seldom search by file content, or if you use a third-party search tool such as Copernic Desktop or Google Desktop (in which case you probably have two indexing routines running at the same time, which is an even bigger waste).

If you match either of those descriptions, turn off indexing by clicking Start, typing services, and pressing Enter. Find and double-click Windows Search. In the "Startup type" drop-down menu, select Disabled, and then click OK.

UAC: Boon or Bloat?

One of Windows Vista's most controversial new features is User Account Control (UAC), which attempts to protect your system from malware by forcing you to authorize certain system-altering actions by clicking through a dialog box from time to time. To some people, this feature is an unwanted annoyance that must be eliminated. Other users appreciate the added security. While I wouldn't go so far as to lump UAC in with the other wasteful features in this article, I can certainly understand why some folks would like to turn it off - or at least minimize its intrusive behavior.