



GeekSpeak

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These days we hear a lot

about fragile environments, and rightly so. One action with a particular goal might serve to achieve that goal, but it may also cause something much greater or worse in the process. It is called the law of unintended consequences.

I live on the Oregon coast in the middle of the world's largest expanse of shifting, oblique sand dunes. The problem with these beautiful and majestic giants is that they—well, they shift, burying virtually anything that comes in their way. In the 1970s, biologists started to plant European Beach Grass along the edges of the dunes to fortify them. And they were very successful—in most areas, the dunes stopped wandering. What these scientists did not anticipate, however, is that these wandering dunes will eventually come to a complete and irreversible halt when, in a few decades, they will be gone, supplanted by an ever-thickening growth of firs that have finally been able to take hold in the sand because the beach grass provides the stability their roots need. There have been many attempts to burn, rotor, or otherwise stop the conquering growth, but none of these efforts have been successful. The grass is much too hardy to be killed or it would not have grown here in the first place.

That is a long story for an illustration, but I think it is a good one. Computers (and I hate to admit it, but here it is—especially Windows computers) are very much like a fragile

ecosystem. We successfully try to install a new program, update an application, or connect a new peripheral device, but in the process we unintentionally change a setting for another program, driver, or even the operating system and things go downhill from there. Uninstalling the application or reverting the setting might help, but it also might not. Like the roots of our beach grass, the bits and pieces that have been altered may have penetrated too deeply to be extracted.

But this is where our illustration may help us. Unlike the biologists from the Oregon Parks and Recreation department, we DO have ways to go back.

Windows versions ME, XP, and Vista have a very helpful feature called System Restore, which allows you to revert to an earlier point in the life of your computer. Every time a change in the system configuration is performed (and automatically every other day), Windows creates a “restore point” that allows you to jump back to that earlier point. If you perform something on your computer that you are not sure about, you can also create a restore point manually.

To access System Restore, select *Start > Programs > Accessories > System Tools > System Restore* in Windows ME or XP, or in Vista Windows you can just type “restore” into the Start menu search box and then select *System Restore*. If you choose to restore your computer, you can now select the date and the system change you would like to restore it to.

Selecting *Next* will restart the computer to that point. Any programs or drivers that have been uninstalled or installed during that time period will also be reversed. However, documents that you may have worked on will NOT be affected by this.

While this option can be a huge lifesaver (in Windows Vista you can even use it if you cannot start your computer properly anymore), please realize that this does not change the two basic axioms of computing (and this is true for Mac and Linux users as well):

1. Perform regular and exhaustive back-ups.
2. If it ain't broke, don't fix it—in other words, do not fiddle with your computer or update or install new programs unless you have a very good reason for it.

Stay tuned for an upcoming column where I will address how to evaluate those reasons.

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The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost also publishes a free technical newsletter for translators (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit).