

What determines which programs show up on the front page of the Windows XP Start menu?

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Raymond Chen

The principle is that programs you've run most often recently are the ones that show up on the front page of the Start menu. At least, that's what we started with, but it turns out that some fine-tuning was needed in order to get the experience to be more "natural". The basic rule is that each time you launch a program, it "earns a point", and the longer you don't launch a program, the more points it loses. The Start menu then shows the programs that have the most points. That's about all I'm going to say about the mechanics of point-winning for a variety of reasons.

- The details of the method by which the programs on the Start menu are selected are still patent-pending.[†]
- The details are also extraordinarily boring. I get drowsy every time I have to explain them.
- Exposing the details would just encourage people to "game the system" in order to improve the placement of their programs on the Start menu.
- Formally documenting the details would implicitly grant permission for people to rely on those details. This would prevent the Start menu designers from making adjustments to the rules (for example, to combat people who "game the system") or to scrap the process entirely and replace it with a whole new method.
- It's not this part of the Start menu selection algorithm that puzzles people.

After the basic rule is applied, the fine-tuning and detail-following kick in. Those are the parts that are puzzling to most people. The next several entries will go into many of the subtleties and fine-tuning behind the Start menu's list of frequently-used programs. Now, you may wonder about all these subtleties and whether they're really necessary, but it is these little fine-tuning steps that make the final result more useful and feel natural. Please hold off your questions until the (two-week!) series is complete, because I suspect a later entry will answer them. (This series is an expansion upon the TechNet column on the same topic. If you've read the TechNet article, then a lot of this series will be review.) **Pre-emptive snarky comment** [†]"Software patents suck!" It's irrelevant what your or my opinion of software patents is. So long as they are legal, they will exist, and you and I will just have to

deal with it. If you want a change, write to your congressman. Support candidates whose position on software patents is compatible with yours. Complaining to me accomplishes nothing.‡ It's sad that I have to write this, but any time somebody writes the word "patent" the comments degenerate into flamology about patents. I have a few future entries about patents; the response to this article will determine whether they stay on the schedule or quietly vanish like the stories about Bob. †Well, it does accomplish something: It gives me another reason to stop blogging.*

*Along with the people who keep bugging me about using daggers instead of asterisks. Hint: Asterisks already mean something in computer programming.

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