ComputorEdge™ Online — 01/16/09

This issue:
Income Tax Calculation Help—Software and on the Web

When doing your taxes, there is no need to break out a pencil and calculator. There are software programs and Web sites ready to do the job for you —many of them free.

COMPUTER FOCUS:

Digital Dave by *Digital Dave*
Digital Dave answers your tech questions.
A reader wants to remove "offensive" wallpaper from a computer; Is Microsoft Works compatible with Microsoft Word?; a reader is having trouble deleting e-mails.

Income Tax-Preparation Software Programs by Michael J. Ross
Software can save your sanity at tax time.
The best-known and most commonly used tax-prep products are TurboTax, TaxCut and TaxACT. There are also lesser-known alternatives. Which is right for you?

Income Tax Resources Online by Michael J. Ross
The Web can help the stressed-out taxpayer.
Fortunately, there are a variety of informative resources on the Internet that can be a big help to the stressed-out taxpayer, and we'll take a look at some of the more promising Web sites.

Windows Vista Tips and Tricks by Jack Dunning
More on Keyboard Shortcuts
A reader writes in with more keyboard shortcut suggestions, and Jack offers some tips for creating your own keyboard shortcuts in Windows Vista.

Wally Wang's Apple Farm by Wally Wang
Macintosh Tax Programs
Apple's latest Work '09 suite contains Numbers '09, which can help you get your finances organized for tax time. Also, is Apple withholding the newest iMac and Mac mini models until iLife '09 is ready? And, a look at Contour, a new story-development program. Finally, a tip on tapping the top bar of your iPhone to scroll the screen to the top.

Web InSites by Dawn Clement
Free Income-Tax Preparation Help
There is an organization that will answer your tax questions and help you prepare and file your taxes, all for the nominal cost of zero

dollars: the AARP Tax-Aide program.

Little Linux Lessons: Tips and Tricks from Users by ComputorEdge Staff

Linux users share ideas and ask for help.

Art has some insights into the permissions discussion from last week, K.P has gotten an old Sony Vaio to recognize Puppy Linux, and Jack has a suggestion for Ed's problem with Linux recognizing video hardware.

Rob, The ComputorTutor Does Computer Programming by Rob Spahitz

Programming with Microsoft's Visual Basic

This week, we begin learning about how to program a computer. As we move forward, we'll learn how to apply these concepts to Microsoft Office products, Web pages and custom Windows-style applications.

Worldwide News & Product Reviews by Charles Carr

The latest in tech news and hot product reviews.

Backup Early, Backup Often—Be prepared in the event of natural disaster or man-made calamity; Color Me Happy: Crayon Physics Deluxe Is Here—A review of the puzzle/sandbox game; Bento = EZ Databasing—A review of the personal database program.

Techno Talk by D'Artagnan Fischer

Getting Rid of Old Technology

Rather than have our old technology discards collecting dust on a shelf somewhere, we can find new ways to reuse the old stuff.

DEPARTMENTS:

EdgeWord: A Note from the Publisher by Jack Dunning

It's Tax-Software Time Again

Now that we have computers, there is no problem if the tax code gets more complicated each year—as long as the programmers keep up.

Editor's Letters by ComputorEdge Staff

Readers write in with letters to the editor.

"Some VoIP Thoughts," "Digital Dave and Leaking Ports?," "Vonage to Ireland," "Use Both Skype and Windows Live," "Question and Suggestion"

Digital Dave

"Digital Dave answers your tech questions." by *Digital Dave*

A reader wants to remove "offensive" wallpaper from a computer; Is Microsoft Works compatible with Microsoft Word?; a reader is having trouble deleting e-mails.

Dear Digital Dave,

A used laptop that I bought has an offensive wallpaper that shows every time I start the computer. How do I remove it?

Oliver Studdard
Chula Vista, California

Dear Oliver,

Assuming it is a Windows laptop, the look of your desktop is configured through the Display Properties window (called Desktop Background in Vista). In both Windows XP and Vista, you can change the wallpaper on your screen by right-clicking on the offensive image. In Vista, you will pick Personalize/Desktop Background (see Figure 1).
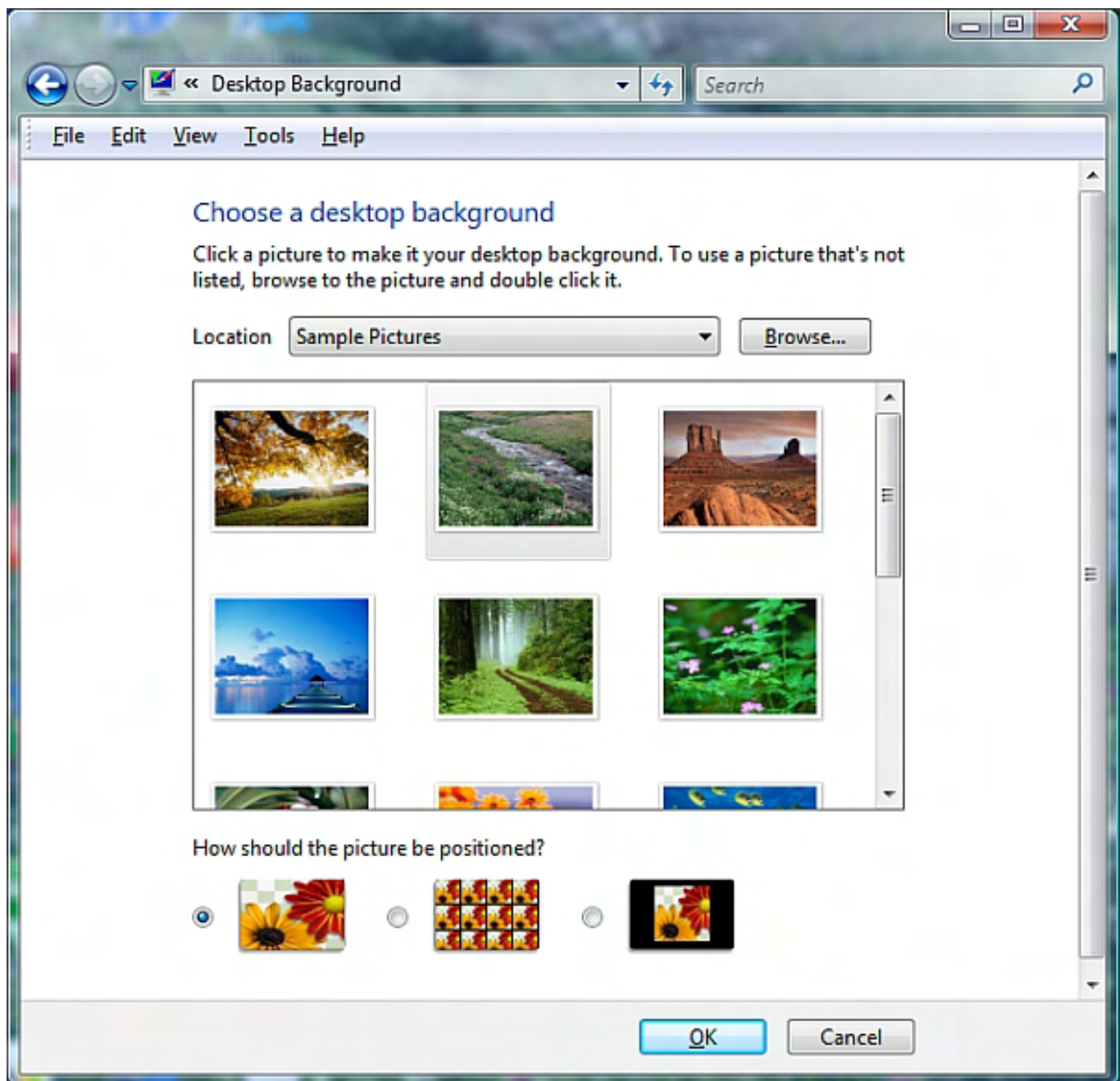
Figure 1. Desktop Background window in Windows Vista.

In XP, after the right-click, you will select Properties, then the Desktop tab (see Figure 2). In both Vista and XP, you will be able to Browse your computer for other images that can act as your wallpaper, thus eliminating the problem image.

Figure 2. Desktop tab in the Windows XP Display Properties window.

I recommend that you check out the other options for the appearance of your screen. This is where you can change the resolution (dots per inch) for better readability and make other adjustments to your display.

If you're changing the desktop wallpaper and it changes back, there could be some kind of virus.

Digital Dave
Dear Digital Dave,

Why isn't Microsoft Works compatible with Microsoft Word? Or, maybe it is, and I am not aware of it. Please help!

Mary Tyer
Vista, California

Dear Mary,

The reason Microsoft Works and Word are not compatible is because they were developed at approximately the same time along two separate paths using different file formats. Works uses a format designated by the .wps file extension, while Word uses the now well-known (and dominant) Document (.doc) format. Since Microsoft Word is the most used word processing program (part of Microsoft Office), the .doc format has become the standard for sharing word processing documents. Virtually all word processing programs will read (and write) Word docs. Only Works will read .wps files.

Note: For Word 2007 and beyond, Microsoft is using the file format .docx, which is an XML format.

Microsoft Works is the weak sister that is often included free with new computers. There is usually a trial version of Microsoft Office (including Word) on the same computer, but the full version is available only at a price. Works will read and write Word files, which you will need to do if you're sharing the files with others. If you send the .wps Works files to people, you will often get confused replies.

Works is buggy and often crashes at inconvenient times. If you want a free word processor, I recommend OpenOffice (*www. openoffice.org*). You will still need to read and write Word .doc files for sharing (OpenOffice uses the .odt format), but you will have far less problems than you will with Works.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I have three e-mails that I can't delete. I delete them, and within a minute they are back. I have tried to put them in a folder and then delete it, but the same thing happens. I have tried other things, and no luck. Can you help me?

Robert Mullet
Rancho Bernardo

Dear Robert,

This is not an uncommon problem for various e-mail programs. The causes can be anything from a full mailbox to an antivirus software compatibility problem.

Make sure that your antivirus software is up-to-date, and run a scan. (I have heard of a compatibility problem between Norton and Vista, but it may be resolved now.)

To eliminate the possibility of full mailboxes, empty your Deleted Items folder and empty the Recycle Bin in Windows Explorer. Make sure that all folders are compacted (methods depends upon your e-mail program).

In some cases, if the problem is embedded in the e-mail, closing the Preview pane will make it possible to delete the item. Without the preview, the rogue code in the e-mail will have no opportunity to activate. In most cases, the preview pane can be deactivated by opening the Window Layout Properties window (View/Layout...), deselecting "Show preview pane," and clicking Apply (see Figure 3). Once the pane is closed, delete the file(s).
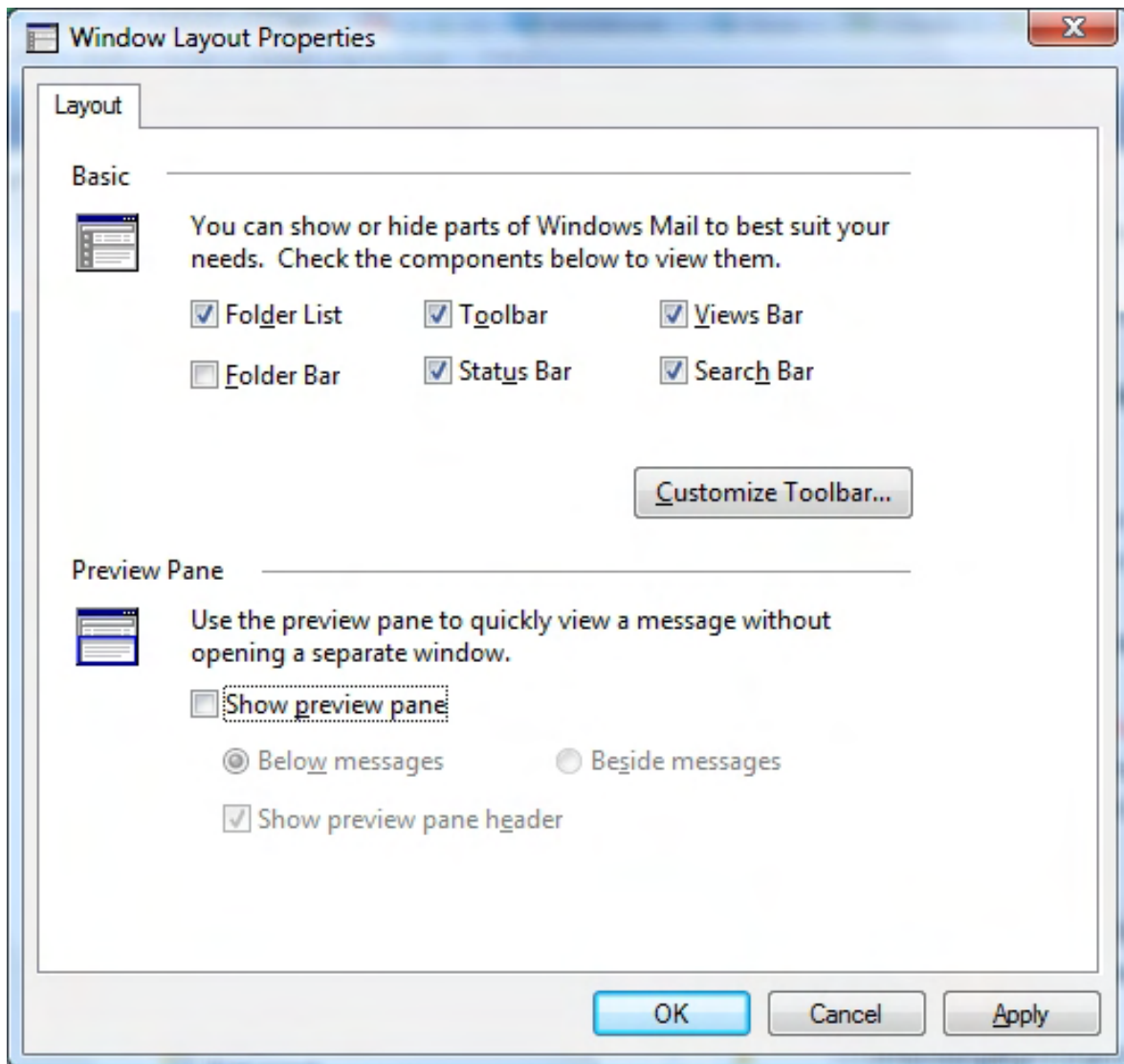
Figure 3. Window Layout Properties window in Windows Vista.

Prior to Windows Mail (Vista), Windows programs kept all messages in a database for each mailbox. In some cases, these databases could become corrupt. When this happens, it is necessary to recreate the databases. The best way to do this is to reinstall the e-mail program. Be sure to export all the e-mails you want to keep to another file. Then, you can import the saved e-mails after you've done a clean install.

Although I don't think that this is your problem, there is another way that deleted e-mail will mysteriously reappear—sometimes in huge numbers. Some people, such as myself, have set the e-mail program to leave messages on the server for a few days. Open Tools/Accounts, click the account, Properties button, then Advance tab (see Figure 4). The purpose of this is to allow time for multiple locations to pick up e-mail. This way, I always have a backup of all my e-mail on a separate computer—even while traveling. (This has helped me on a number of occasions.)
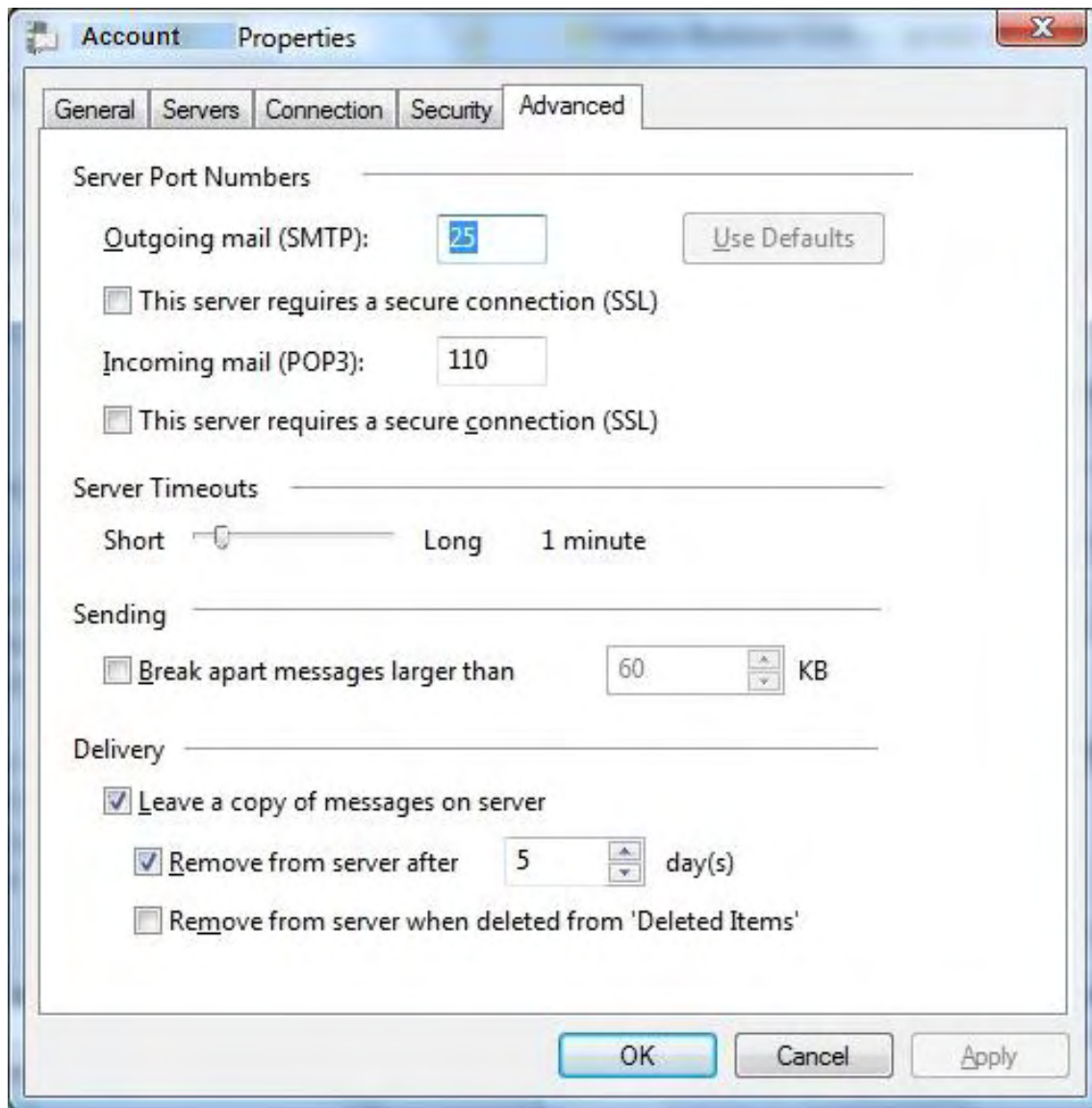
Figure 4. Account Properties window in Windows Vista Mail.

However, if the Deleted Items folder is emptied prior to deleting files on the server, then the e-mail program will not recognize that the deleted messages have already been picked up and download them again. To protect against this, make sure that the "Remove from server when deleted" box is checked.

I'm sure that many readers will have other fixes for specific e-mail problems that they have encountered. I would like to hear them, and they will be added to the bottom of this column.

Digital Dave

Income Tax-Preparation Software Programs

"Software can save your sanity at tax time." by Michael J. Ross

> The best-known and most commonly used tax-prep products are TurboTax, TaxCut and TaxACT. There are also lesser-known alternatives. Which is right for you?

When you are faced with the joyless chore of completing your U.S. federal and, for many Americans, state income tax returns, then you have essentially four options: hire a tax accountant or other tax preparer to do them for you; fill out the tax forms yourself, by hand; use tax-preparation software on your computer; or use a tax Web site and submit the information online. Each approach has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Having someone else do your taxes is an irresistible option for countless Americans every year—especially at the last minute, and even more so for people confronting the greater complexity that accompanies, for example, running a small business or investing overseas. Admittedly, it is so easy and tempting to dump onto someone else's desk your W-2 forms, 1099 forms and paycheck stub (or stubs, if you work multiple jobs to make ends meet). After all, these tax experts tend to be much more knowledgeable about the tax code than the rest of us, and can often identify—or create—deductions that reduce your tax burden by more than the fee for their work. In those cases, using their services truly pays for itself. Not only can it save you money, but it definitely saves you time and frustration.

On the other hand, hiring someone else to do your taxes can have disadvantages, aside from the financial cost. There is no assurance that they will be able to (legally) reduce your tax bill any better than you could have done yourself, especially if your tax situation is simple. Furthermore, even though the tax preparer will fill out all of the needed paperwork and perform all of the calculations, ultimate responsibility for any errors rests on your shoulders. Any and all promises of quality service and money-back guarantees will be worth nothing if and when the Internal Revenue Service decides to enliven your existence with a tax audit, and you

> "I had to do it. After Wilbur got his new income tax calculation software, he enjoyed paying his taxes *way too much*!"
>
> — J. Whiting

discover that "Joe's Fly-By-Night Tax Service" has suddenly relocated to the Caymans.

Perhaps the only advantage to filling out paper forms yourself is that it reduces your tax-preparation expenses to an absolute minimum. But it is also the most costly in terms of time—and that downside will most likely get only worse in the future, because Congress seems to have no interest in simplifying the federal tax code. You also have to endure the hassles of reading the IRS publications and forms; filling them out; performing the calculations manually; double-checking those calculations; fixing any errors using correction fluid, or filling out the form again; photocopying the documents, for your records; and mailing in the originals.

Furthermore, you have to request all of the paper forms from the IRS and, if applicable, your state tax agency, or pick them up at one of the distribution points (which are shrinking in number). This process must be repeated if you failed to get all of the needed forms. To have copies (always advisable), you must scan or photocopy the originals before mailing them in. Even then, you end up with only image files or photocopies, and thus the data cannot be exported for use during the next tax year.

Software to Save Your Sanity

The third option—using tax-preparation software on your own computer—might be your best choice. After all, that is what the tax-preparation companies are doing once they receive your data. The desktop tax applications available to individuals have greatly matured over the years in terms of accuracy, ease of use, error detection, audit alerts and automatic updates due to last-minute changes to the tax code.

The best-known and most commonly used products are TurboTax, TaxCut and TaxACT. We will examine some of the lesser-known alternatives momentarily. We will also briefly discuss some of the Web-based programs, because nowadays there is a trend away from desktop software.

Intuit's TurboTax (*turbotax.intuit.com/*) has long been the dominant tax program, and the one for the competition to beat. With its incremental but constant evolution, it has now reached a level of stability, completeness and usability such that most customers are happy with its results and functionality. Intuit offers several federal editions, which can export data to state-specific editions. The Free edition is suitable for filers with simple tax situations, who don't need to import from previous years, and do not need tools for checking their audit risk, maximizing deductions, or providing guidance for investments, rental properties, or self-employment income.

The Basic edition, at $14.95, adds import capabilities. For $15 more, the Deluxe edition adds audit checking and deduction maximization. An additional $20 gets you the Premier edition, which handles investments and rental income. Another $30 on top of that delivers the Home & Business edition, which provides guidance on self-employment income. For state income taxes, you will need to pay $25.95 for each state. All of the editions include free electronic filing with the IRS ("e-file").

H&R Block's TaxCut (*www.taxcut.com/*) is also quite well known, partly because H&R Block has, for decades, been a leading firm for tax planning and preparation, and other financial services, with their brick-and-mortar offices throughout the United States. TaxCut comes in four different editions, but none of them are free. They range from the Home edition, at $19.95, up to the Home & Business edition, at $79.95, which includes unlimited state returns. As with TurboTax, all of the TaxCut choices include free IRS e-filing. Some users of TaxCut strongly prefer it over TurboTax, but I experienced poor results with TaxCut, years ago—specifically, eight serious problems, including TaxCut changing data values when printing on a different machine, and ignoring data pasted into entry fields. These bugs would have cost more than $100. As always, do not assume that your chosen program's results are flawless.

TaxACT (*www.taxact.com/*) is the newer contender, and not as well-known, but that is changing, as people discover that its free edition offers more functionality than those of the rival programs. Each set of state tax forms is an additional $13.95. Similar to the previously discussed programs, TaxACT includes free e-filing.

Online Options

Two of the aforementioned tax programs offer free editions, and all three are well-regarded and reasonably priced —particularly when taking into account the rebates typically offered in computer stores. Nonetheless, some customers may wish to try out alternatives, for whatever reason. In those cases, they usually select one of the Web-based programs/services.

This approach does not require you to purchase, download, install or configure any software on your computer. The downsides are that you will have to trust an online service to properly and securely store all of the tax data that you have laboriously entered. Also, you will have far less control over the entire process, which could be especially disadvantageous to people who want to run numerous "what-if" scenarios, or who have greater control over their income, expenses and deductions—such as small-business owners and people who have yet to contribute to an IRA.

TaxSlayer.com (*www.taxslayer.com*) offers two different editions, Classic and Premium, which are both billed as being free. However, you have to pay $9.95 or $19.95, respectively, when you want to print or e-file online. But why would anyone go to all the trouble of inputting their tax information if they were not going to print or e-file? The programs can be either downloaded or accessed online.

TaxBrain (*www.taxbrain.com*) makes available four different editions: EZ ($14.95), Basic ($19.95), Deluxe ($39.95), and Premium ($69.95). All of them include free IRS e-filing. But to add a state, you must pay an extra amount that is greater than that for all of the other competitors. The only apparent benefit of TaxBrain, versus some of the competitors, is that it includes free live assistance.

Using these products, you should be able to take advantage of a wide range of deductions, some of which you may not have previously considered. Just don't assume that any of these programs—either running on your desktop or in your Web browser—are free of all bugs. What you don't find, the IRS probably will.

Michael J. Ross is a Web developer (*www.ross.ws*), writer, and freelance editor. He creates Web sites that help entrepreneurs turn their ideas into profitable online businesses.

Income Tax Resources Online

"The Web can help the stressed-out taxpayer." by Michael J. Ross

Fortunately, there are a variety of informative resources on the Internet that can be a big help to the stressed-out taxpayer, and we'll take a look at some of the more promising Web sites.

Benjamin Franklin once noted, "In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes." For people slogging their way through income tax forms, there may not seem to be much difference between the two. Even fleeing the country may provide no relief (especially for citizens of the United States, which is one of the few countries that taxes personal income made outside of the country).

According to Wikipedia (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tax_rates_around_the_world*), as of 2005, personal income-tax rates worldwide range from zero percent in Monaco, to 53.2 percent in Denmark (talk about something being rotten!), and topping out at 59 percent in Sweden. Admittedly, in many countries, people earning little or no money pay no income tax. In the United States, the percentage has reached 38 percent, and is trending upward.

For those of us who have Uncle Sam on our payroll, paying income taxes means complying with the federal tax code created by Congress and enforced by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). For Americans who do not throw up their hands in disgust and turn it all over to tax accountants and CPAs, this annual stress-fest typically involves figuring out the federal tax code as it applies to their individual cases, deciphering the vague IRS publications, and filling out the endless IRS forms. People with especially complicated financial situations—such as those running small businesses on their own, or who have investments in foreign partnerships and royalties—often find that the process of completing the pile of tax forms can easily consume several weekends (and aspirins).

Fortunately, there are a variety of informative resources on the Internet that can be a big help to the stressed-out taxpayer, and in this article we will examine some of the more promising Web sites.

From the Horse's Mouth

Many Americans now do their taxes using tax-preparation programs that run either on their PCs or on the Web, and for these people, there is no need to locate any federal tax forms, because those forms are included with the programs and can be updated to the latest tax-code changes, either automatically or manually. The remaining taxpayers, going into it on their own, could try to obtain blank tax forms from one of the distribution points in their local area—such as libraries. However, every year the number of such distribution places seems to decline, undoubtedly because more and more people are doing their taxes electronically. Also, the forms available tend to be only the most commonly used ones.

The remaining alternatives are to download the taxes from the IRS Web site (*www.irs.gov/*), or to request—online or over the telephone—that the forms be mailed to you. The site has a section devoted to forms and publications (*www.irs.gov/formspubs/*), where they can be found using the form or publication number, by category, or by using the site's built-in search feature. All of the forms are in Adobe PDF (*get.adobe.com/reader/*) format, and can be printed on your computer printer. Years ago, the forms were only static PDF files, but now the forms can be filled out electronically, similar to how California has been doing it for several years.

The IRS Web site has a number of other resources, most of which are never utilized or even known to most taxpayers. As of this writing, the site offers 15 tax-preparation tools: You can check the status of your refund online (72 hours after you e-filed, or three to four weeks after you mailed a paper return). If you are an employee, you can calculate the optimal amount to have withheld from your paycheck, to avoid being hit by a high tax bill and possibly penalties (due to underwithholding), and to avoid giving Uncle Sam too much of an interest-free loan (due to overwithholding). If you are an employer, you can request an Employer Identification Number (EIN). The

Electronic Federal Tax Payment System (*www.eftps.com/ (EFTPS)*) is a convenient way to securely pay your taxes online (no more worries about lost checks), and particularly helpful if you have to make quarterly payments. If you need to break up your tax liability into multiple payments, as a result of financial hardship, you can apply for the Online Payment Agreement (OPA). If you are interested in having your taxes prepared locally, with someone who can then file them electronically, you can search for an authorized e-file provider in your area. Tax professionals can apply to become approved IRS business partners, and be listed on the site.

Additional tools allow you to determine whether you may be subject to the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT), and whether you are eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). If you earned $54,000 or less in 2007, Free File makes it possible to prepare and file your federal income taxes online, at no cost. You can calculate the amount of optional state and local sales tax you can claim on Schedule A. You can identify tax-exempt charities, and figure out how much a contribution to one or more of them is tax deductible. You can sign up for the IRS's subscription services, which sends out information via e-mail. The Tax Trails online wizard steps you through a series of questions to help you answer yours. You can locate the nearest Taxpayer Assistance Centers, in case you have grown tired of being on hold when calling the IRS for help, and would prefer talking to an IRS representative face-to-face.

More Federal Tax Info

The Web offers a wealth of non-governmental sources of federal tax information. Yahoo Finance has a Tax Center (*finance.yahoo.com/taxes*), which makes available tax news, 15 how-to guides, calculators, articles from financial pundits and an extensive glossary of financial terms, a number of which are tax-related. About.com Taxes (*taxes. about.com/*) has similar information, but generally with more substance, and a much cleaner delineation between tax material and everything outside that realm. You will find a blog written by William Perez (a tax accountant who represents clients going up against the IRS), as well as many articles that he has written on tax basics, filing status, dependents, investing and popular tax breaks.

The Tax Foundation (*www.taxfoundation.org/*), based in Washington, D.C., focuses more on in-depth tax information and analysis, without any of the tax calculators and other tools listed on the Web sites mentioned above. The organization offers tax news, research publications, a tax policy blog, data on almost every tax in the United States, a tax policy webcast, an FAQ, and a page explaining Tax Freedom Day (*www.taxfoundation.org/ taxfreedomday*), which is the day that the average American has earned enough to pay their federal taxes (in 2008, it was April 23). Foundation president Scott Hodge notes that "Americans will still spend more on taxes in 2008 than they will spend on food, clothing and housing combined." Other financial Web sites corroborate this point, documenting how—for the typical American—taxes, and not housing, is the primary expense.

Small-business owners will find online material geared toward their interests. For instance, FileTaxes.com (*www. filetaxes.com/*) has a service that allows you, the business owner, to submit payroll information online, and they generate the 1099 and W-2 forms for you. If you are first getting started with your own business, then the first time you fill out your federal taxes, you will need to know your IRS business activity code (*www.naicscode.com/*).

In a State of Shock

Unless you live in one of the seven states that levy no income tax whatsoever (Alaska, Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, Texas, Washington and Wyoming), then even when you have finished your federal tax forms, you still have miles to go before you sleep. You may be reeling from the federal burden, but your state legislators still want their cut. The pain will be lessened if you are using a tax-preparation program with the ability to calculate your state figures for you and print the completed forms; most if not all programs support this.

If you have specific questions and issues that go beyond what your tax-preparation program can answer, or you are doing your taxes without such a program, the fastest way to get the needed forms and instructions is from the income tax section of your particular state's Web site. For instance, Californians can check with the Franchise Tax

Board (*www.ftb.ca.gov*) (FTB—there is a toll-free phone number if you would like to speak with a representative, but the wait times can be quite lengthy, particularly during tax season).

For those who are curious as to what residents of other U.S. states are paying, as individuals and as corporations, the aforementioned Tax Foundation has detailed and up-to-date information on state individual income tax rates (*www.taxfoundation.org/news/show/228.html*), state corporate income tax rates (*www.taxfoundation.org/news/show/230.html*), and the combined state and local tax burdens (*www.taxfoundation.org/publications/show/336.html*). The tables show, for each state, the federal deductibility status, the marginal rates for single filers, the standard deductions and the personal exemptions. Lower tax burdens in nearby states may be enough to tempt some people to do a bit of "relocation research."

The online resources noted in this article are by no means exhaustive. Readers are invited to submit any other worthwhile sites that they know of.
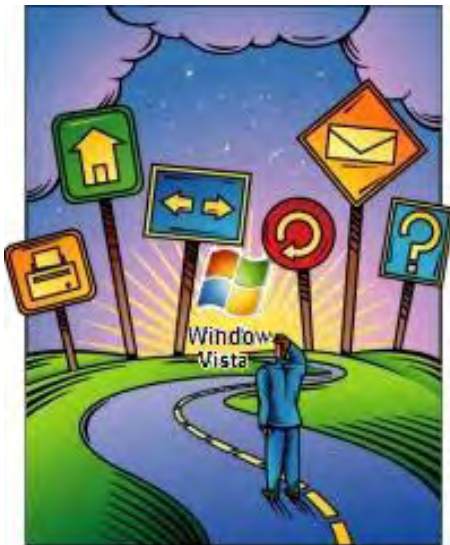

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Windows Vista Tips and Tricks

"More on Keyboard Shortcuts" by Jack Dunning

A reader writes in with more keyboard shortcut suggestions, and Jack offers some tips for creating your own keyboard shortcuts in Windows Vista.

In response to last week's column on keyboard shortcuts:

One use of the Windows key is Flag+D. This hides all windows, giving immediate access to the desktop. To get the windows back, press the keys again, as long as no other windows were opened since the last time Flag+D was pressed. Some others:

Flag+L locks the computer
Flag+R opens the Run box

All these work in XP—I don't do Vista.

Phillip
Alexandria, Virginia

All of these keyboard shortcuts also work in Windows Vista. (Flag is the key with the Microsoft flag logo on it. "Flag+D" means hit the D key while holding down the Flag key.)

It should also be noted the Flag+D keyboard shortcut can be particularly useful if someone, such as your boss, suddenly enters the room. This will quickly hide any inconvenient windows on your computer. The downside is that the clean desktop makes it look like you're doing nothing.

I like the idea of Flag+L. If you need to leave the room for a short (or long) period of time, this key combination will return your display to the locked login screen. To return back to the working screen, login is required.

Another combination that you may find useful is Flag+Pause, which will open the System window. The Pause key can be difficult to find on your keyboard; plus, if you're using a laptop, it may be necessary to add the Alt key to the combination to get it to work.

The Flag+R shortcut for the Run command is useful since, unlike XP, by default the Run link does not appear on the Start menu in Vista. However, you can add the Run link to the Start menu in Vista.

To customize the Start menu and add the Run link, right-click on the Start Flag in the lower left-hand corner of the screen and select Properties from the menu that pops up. Select the Start Menu tab and click Customize (see Figure 1). As you scroll through the options, you will see the items that are available for listing on the right side of the Start menu.
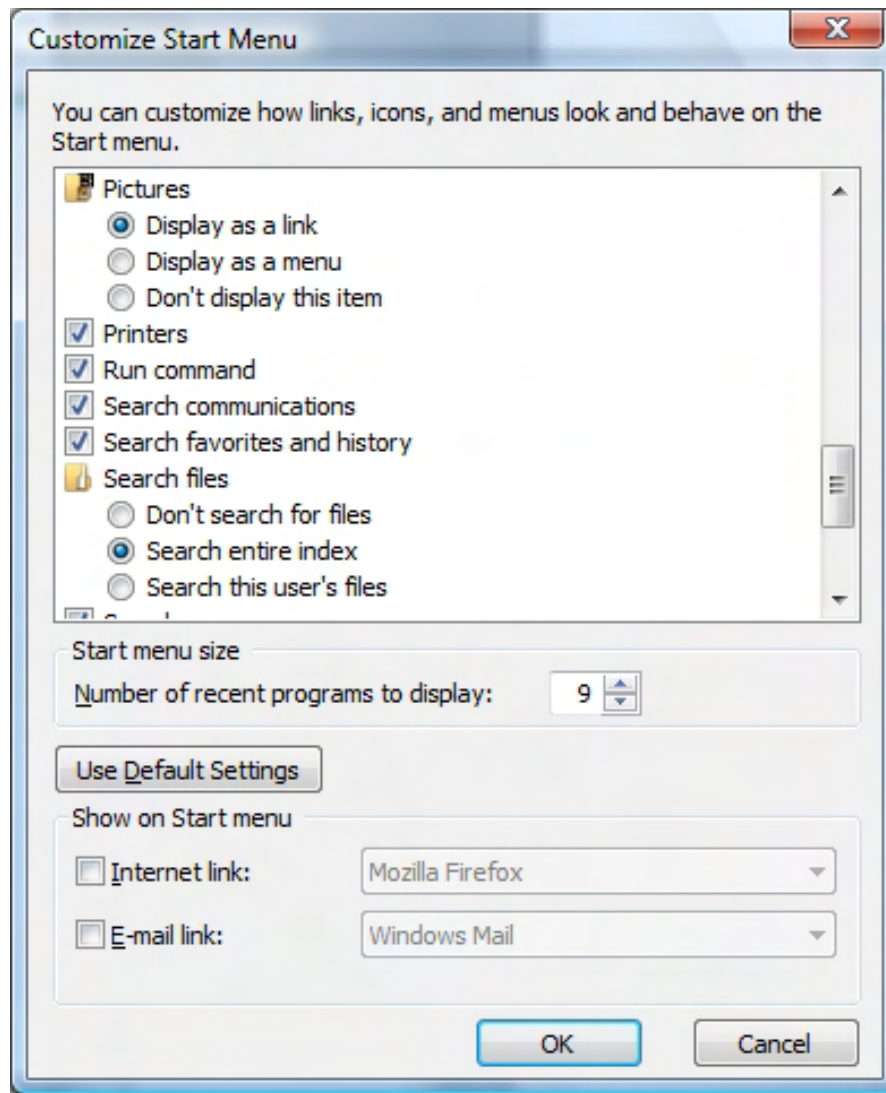
Figure 1. Adding the Run command to the Windows Vista Start menu.

If you have put Quick Launch shortcuts in your taskbar, then you can access those programs with Flag plus the position number of the icon. But if you have more than 10 (0-9 with 0 representing the tenth icon) shortcuts, then you will need another keyboard shortcut for launching the program.

Create Your Own Keyboard Shortcuts

If you have a number of programs that you use routinely, rather than using the Start menu (or Quick Launch), you can assign a keyboard shortcut that will give you quick access. Any program or feature that you can bring up with the Start menu Start Search field can be assigned a keyboard shortcut that in most cases will include Ctrl+Alt.

For example, unless you're using IntelliType software (I don't), there is no shortcut for the Control Panel. Use the following steps to assign the combination Ctrl+Alt+P for opening the useful screen.

First, open the Control Panel Properties window by typing "control" into the Start Search field in the Start menu, right-click Control Panel from the top of the menu and select Properties (see Figure 2). (It's important to use this Start Search field method rather than attempt to right-click the Control Panel link on the right side of the Start menu. The latter will *not* give you a Properties window option for the shortcut. If you get a Properties window without a Shortcut tab, then you will not be able to assign a keyboard combination for quick access.)
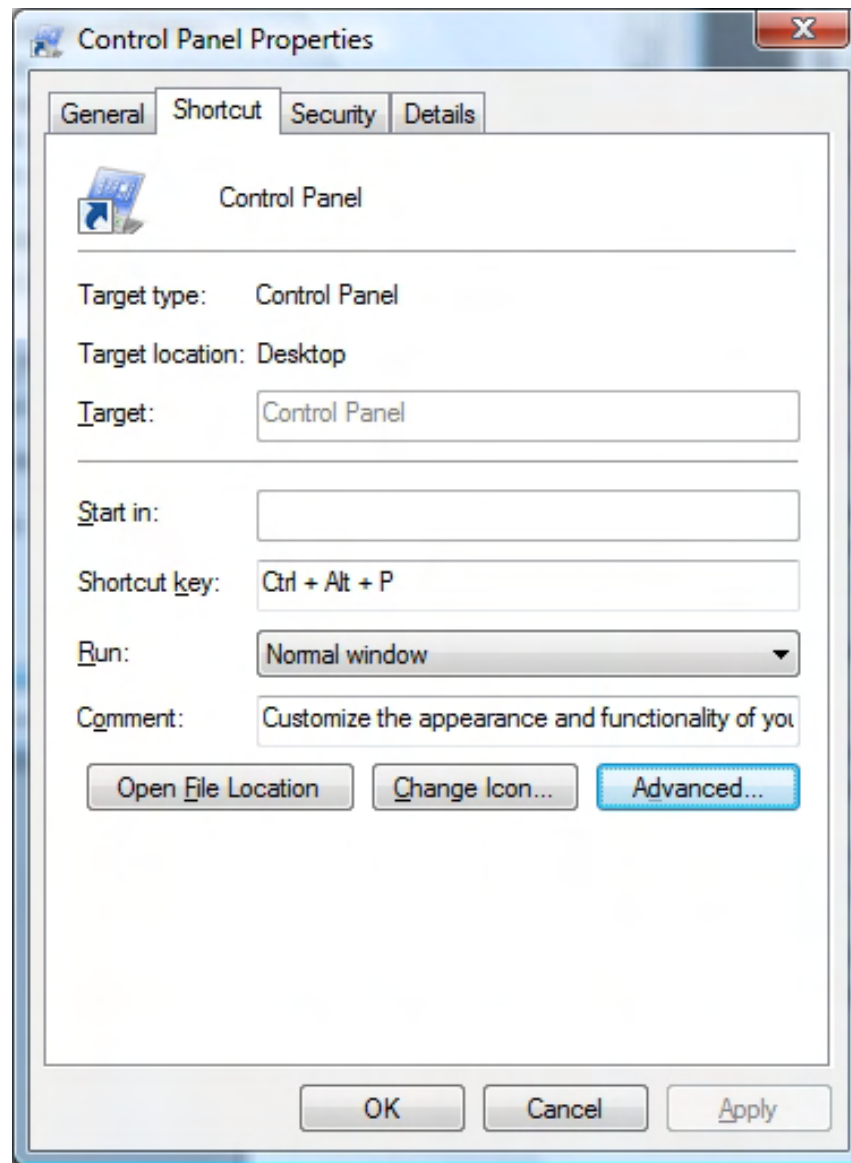
Figure 2. Control Panel Properties window with the Shortcut tab selected.

Click in the "Shortcut key:" field, which will initially hold a value of None. Merely hit the key ("p" in this case) that you would like to use. The entire Ctrl+Alt+P will instantly be added to the field. Apply. This should work for most of the keys on the keyboard. It is not case sensitive. Using the Shift key will yield the same result. Punctuation is not allowed. However, any of the Function keys (no Ctrl+Alt will be required), plus the Numeric Keypad keys (number lock on and off give different combinations), may be assigned as a shortcut.

Once this is done, the key combo will launch the desired program. I found that when I first set up some key combinations, it would take about 10 to 15 seconds for the program to respond. However, after I rebooted (I had a number of other programs opened at the time), the system was responsive to the new keyboard shortcuts.

It's possible that some of the shortcuts will not work in some programs, as the combination may be used in that program. Don't set up too many shortcuts, since you might not remember them all. Reserve this technique for only your most used programs and Vista features. Of course, you can always keep a list.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputorEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is *www.computoredge.com*. He can be reached at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*

Wally Wang's Apple Farm

"Macintosh Tax Programs" by Wally Wang

Apple's latest Work '09 suite contains Numbers '09, which can help you get your finances organized for tax time. Also, is Apple withholding the newest iMac and Mac mini models until iLife '09 is ready? And, a look at Contour, a new story-development program. Finally, a tip on tapping the top bar of your iPhone to scroll the screen to the top.

The one area where the Macintosh lags behind Windows is in financial software. While this is slowly changing, it doesn't help you right now. If you want to use the latest tax-preparation programs, you could do it the hard way and install Fusion or Parallels, run Windows as a virtual machine, and then load TaxCut or TurboTax in Windows.

Of course a much simpler solution is to get the Macintosh version of TaxCut or TurboTax, but be aware that the Windows versions of both programs routinely offer more features and better performance. Still, the Macintosh version is no longer relegated to second-class status anymore with the growing Macintosh user base. However, less important than tax-preparation programs are programs that help you organize your finances in the first place. After all, if you put incorrect data into any tax-preparation program, you'll always get the wrong answers.

While it's too late to change the way you organize your finances to pay for your taxes this year, take the time right now to plan how you'll organize your finances for the next year.

Apple recently released its latest iWork '09 suite that contains its spreadsheet, Numbers '09. If you're a heavy-duty number cruncher, you'll find that Excel is still better, but a peek at Numbers '09 reveals some interesting features.

With Excel, you're stuck with a giant spreadsheet, where changing the size of a single row or column affects the entire spreadsheet. With Numbers '09, you begin with a blank canvas where you can create, resize and arrange spreadsheets. Now you can create rows and columns that don't align with each other, or that appear in different colors or formats.
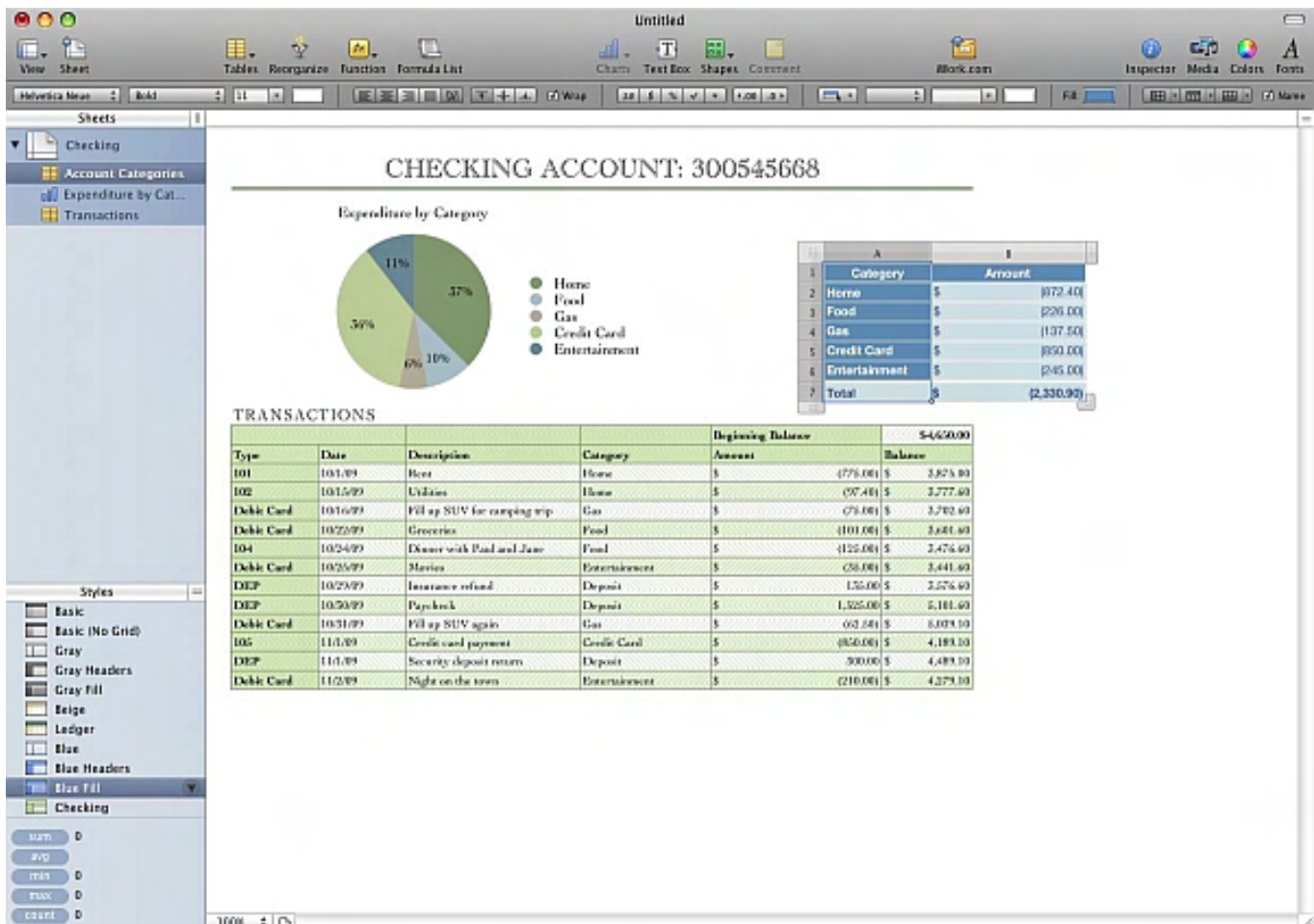
Figure 1. Numbers '09 lets you arrange multiple spreadsheets on a single page.

Numbers '09 can also import and export Excel files, including the latest .xlsx format, so you can switch from Excel easily. Numbers may not be as powerful as Excel, but in many ways it can be more fun to use, and that can encourage you to use it every day to organize your next year's taxes.

<p align="center">*   *   *</p>

Besides introducing iWork '09 at Macworld, Apple also introduced iLife '09, which won't be available until sometime later in January. Since iLife '09 isn't quite ready, that brings up an interesting question: What happened to the rumored iMac and Mac mini models that were supposed to appear at Macworld?

Back on November 14, Apple was rumored to be ready to release new iMac and Mac mini models for the holiday shopping season. Then the rumors abruptly halted when Apple announced it had no plans to release any new products. Predictably, sales of iMacs tanked, as nobody wanted to buy a soon-to-be obsolete model for full price when they could wait another month and get a newer model at the same price.

Now Apple has mysteriously withheld new iMacs and Mac minis once more, even though recent source code listings in Mac OS X 10.5.6 hint at the existence of new iMac and Mac mini models.

Apple could have released new iMacs and Mac minis at Macworld, but then customers would be stuck with the old iLife suite. So it seems likely that Apple is withholding the newest iMac and Mac mini models until iLife '09 is ready by the end of the month.

That means if you're thinking about buying an iMac or Mac mini, hold off as long as possible. When the new iLife '09 comes out at the end of January, expect announcements of new iMacs and Mac minis at the same time.

Another possibility is that the new Mac OS X 10.6 Snow Leopard may actually be closer to shipping than originally thought. After all, why release new iMac and Mac minis now and then force people to upgrade their operating system a few weeks later when Snow Leopard comes out a short time afterward? It makes more sense to hold the latest Macintosh models up until the software is ready, whether it's iLife '09 or Mac OS X 10.6.

*   *   *

If you've ever watched a movie and thought, "I can write something better than that," now is the time to make a New Year's resolution and do just that. Just visit Mariner Software's site (*www.marinersoftware.com/sitepage.php? page=138*) and download a trial version of Contour, a new story-development program exclusively for the Macintosh.

The idea behind Contour is that movies tell stories in predictable chunks. At the beginning, the main character is like an Orphan, lost and confused in the world. Then the main character becomes a Wanderer, learning new lessons. After learning more about the world he (or she) is in, the main character starts fighting harder for a goal as a Warrior. Finally, at the end, the main character becomes a Martyr, willing to sacrifice for what's right.
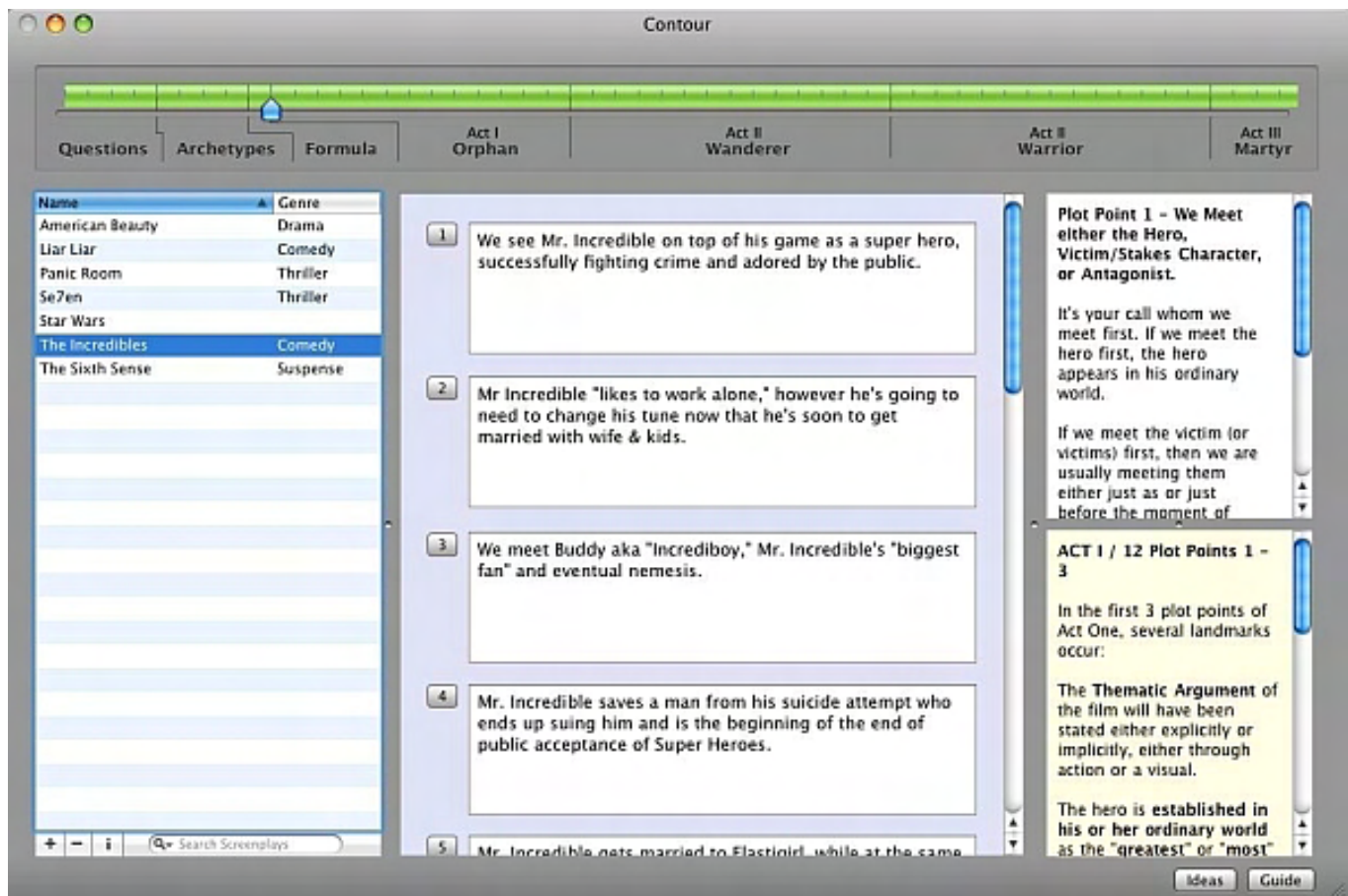

Figure 2. Contour divides a movie story into specific parts.

Studying a screenplay through Contour's viewpoint can be more helpful than saying a screenplay is divided into three acts. Knowing how the main character needs to progress through a story helps you create a more engaging screenplay.

By prodding you to think of a story as a broad progression of the character's development, you'll still need to do the creative (and hard) work of developing characters, plot and setting since the software can't do that for you. After breaking down the basic plot points of your story, Contour can print it out so others can get a quick overview of your story without spending time reading the actual screenplay.
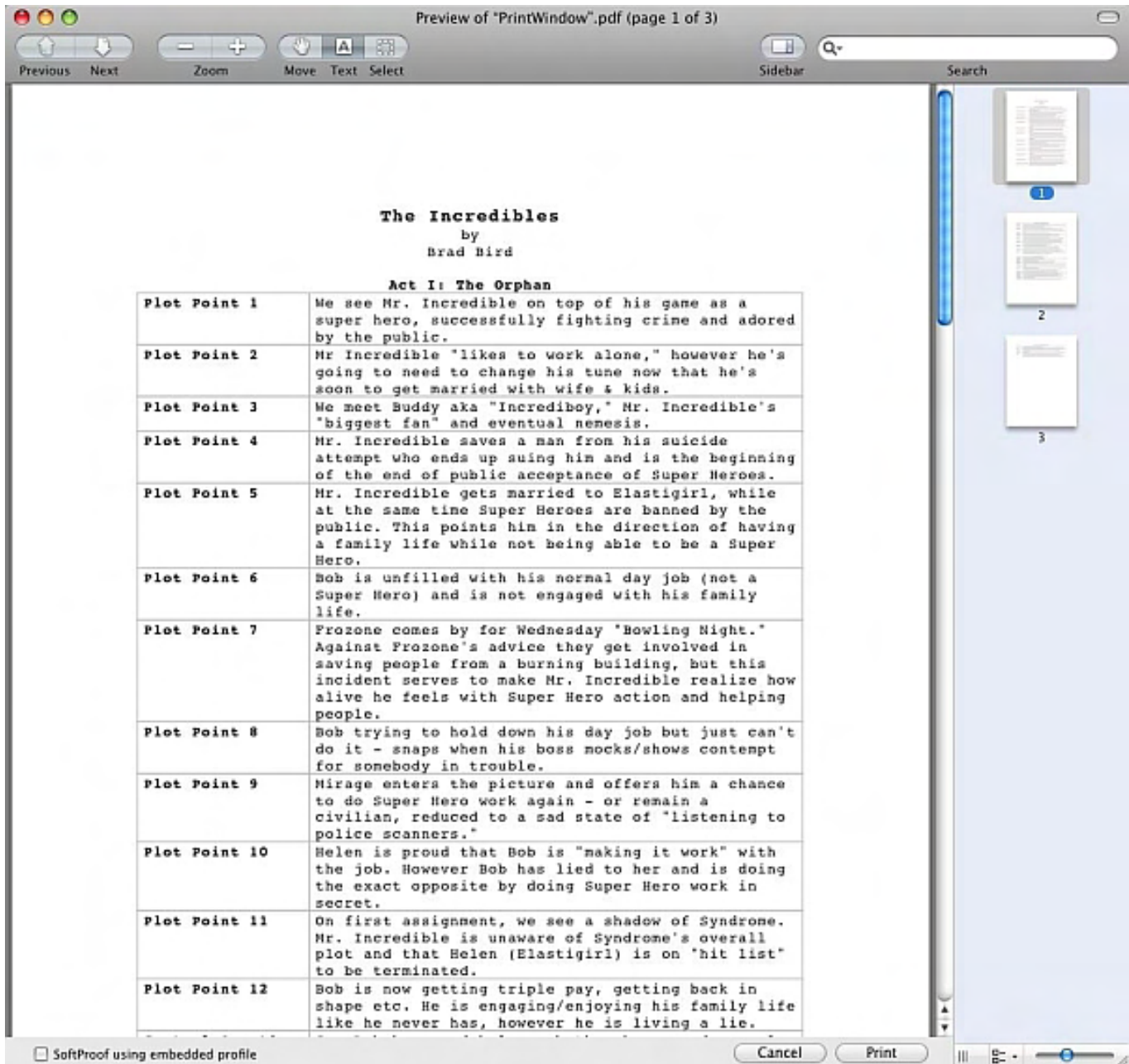
Figure 3. Contour can summarize your story and print out major plot points.

After you finish fleshing out your story in Contour, you'll still need to use a special screenplay formatter to write your actual script (although you could torture yourself and do it in an ordinary word processor). For convenience, Contour can transfer your story idea into Montage, Mariner Software's script-formatting word processor.

With the help of Contour, you too can come up with a blockbuster movie idea. Now the only question is whether the movie studios will recognize talent when they see it or opt to churn out another bad movie starring Paris Hilton.

*   *   *

If you have an iPhone, here's a quick way to scroll to the top of any screen. Just tap the top bar that displays the time, battery life and signal strength. Tapping this top bar immediately scrolls the screen to the top.
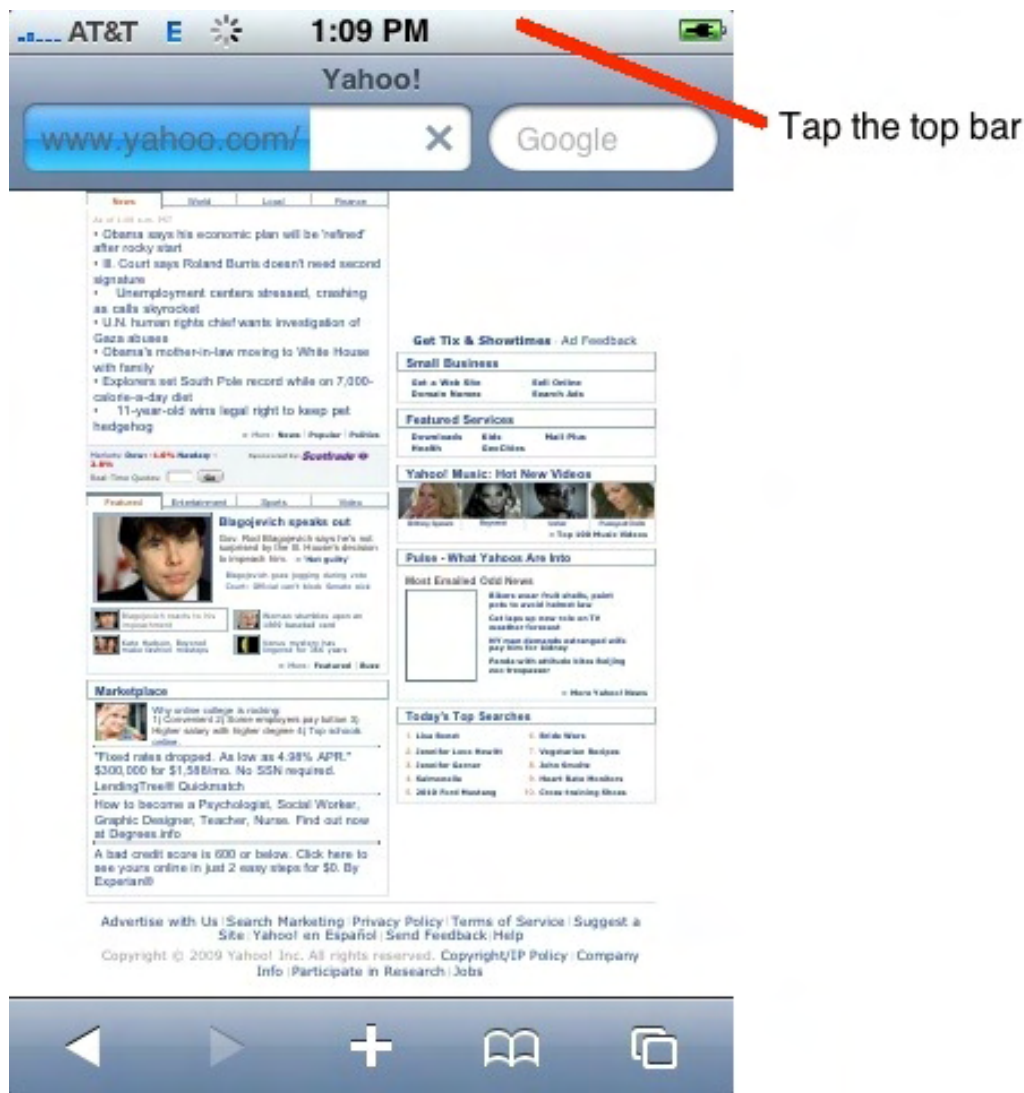
Figure 4. Tap the top bar of your iPhone to scroll the screen to the top.

In the early days, before Wally became an Internationally renowned comedian, computer book writer, and generally cool guy, Wally Wang used to hang around *The Byte Buyer* dangling participles with Jack Dunning and go to the gym to pump iron with Dan Gookin.

Wally is responsible for *Microsoft Office 2007 for Dummies*, *Breaking Into Acting for Dummies*, *Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies*, and *Mac All-in-One Reference for Dummies* from *www.dummies.com*, as well as, *Steal This Computer Book 4.0*, *Visual Basic Express 2005: Now Playing*, and *My New Mac* from *www.nostarch.com*. He is also the co-author of *Strategic Entrepreneurism* from *www.selectbooks.com*.

Every Saturday morning from 9:00 am - 10:00 am in San Diego, you can hear Wally on his radio show, CyberSports, which covers the video gaming industry on ESPN Radio 800 AM.

Wally can be reached at *wally@computoredge.com*.

Web InSites

"Free Income-Tax Preparation Help" by Dawn Clement

> There is an organization that will answer your tax questions and help you prepare and file your taxes, all for the nominal cost of zero dollars: the AARP Tax-Aide program.

Why do people hate doing their taxes? Our taxes pay for Social Security, Medicare, safety-net programs, veteran's benefits, scientific research, transportation infrastructure, education, domestic security, military defense and much more. Our taxes help this great country run, and it is our civic duty to pay our taxes. So why does everyone groan when tax season approaches?

Each year, more than 45 million tax filers have no tax liability and may actually be due a refund. You would think those filers would be eager to complete their taxes early and get their checks, but still we wait until the last minute to file. Why? Perhaps it's because filing taxes is complicated and frustrating to the majority of people. No one likes to feel stupid, and trying to figure out your tax forms can make anyone feel stupid. Tax laws change every year, and just when you think you have it, there's some new detail that you can't make sense of. In 2009, there are more than 100 new changes to the tax laws—do you know what they are?

According to the IRS, the most common mistakes on tax returns are simple mathematical errors, forgetting to include your Social Security number and forgetting to sign and date the return (or problems with your digital signature in the case of electronically filed returns). Of course, these are just the mistakes that the IRS cares about. If you miss a deduction, you're out of luck. Missed deductions can cost you money. Commonly missed deductions include: non-cash charitable contributions (i.e., Goodwill donations), points on your mortgage (new or old), health-insurance premiums, educator expenses (elementary level only), higher-education expenses, clean fuel credit (if you drive a hybrid vehicle), investment and tax expenses, retirement tax credit, work-related moving expenses, state sales tax and child-care credit.

Did you know that you can deduct out-of-pocket charitable contributions, such as the ingredients for food you prepared for a nonprofit organization's potluck, the cost of stamps you buy for your school's fundraiser, or mileage for delivering meals-on-wheels (or any other charitable cause)? Did you know that you may be able to deduct your health-insurance premium? Or that the bag of clothes you donated to Goodwill is deductible? If you moved more than 50 miles because of a new job, your moving expenses are deductible. Are you certain that you got all the deductions coming to you last year?

What if I told you there was an organization that would answer your questions, and help you prepare and file your taxes, all for the nominal cost of zero dollars? Here's a hint: It's not the IRS! I'm talking about the AARP Tax-Aide program (*www.aarp.org/money/taxaide/*).

The AARP Tax-Aide program is the largest free tax-assistance and preparation service in the United States, and is available for low- to middle-income people, with a preference given to those over 60. (If you don't qualify to use the Tax-Aide program, don't worry, because anything you spend on tax-preparation services is tax deductible.) The Tax-Aide program is part of the AARP Foundation, which is AARP's affiliated non-profit charity. The Tax-Aide

program was founded in 1968 with four volunteers. That first year, they assisted approximately 100 people to prepare their tax returns. In 2008, that number was closer to four million!

The sheer number of tax credits and deductions has created a tremendous amount of complexity to the tax code. Figuring out your tax return can be mind-boggling; however, there are more than 32,000 specially trained Tax-Aide volunteer tax specialists at more than 7,000 sites nationwide available to help you figure it all out, and obtain all the tax deductions and credits that you're entitled to. The best part is that this service is offered free to the public. If you think your taxes are simple, and you don't really need help filling out the return, but get stuck on one line, you can even e-mail Tax-Aide your question, and they'll answer your question as soon as possible.

Or perhaps you have completed your return already, and just want a second pair of eyes to make sure you haven't made any glaring mistakes; they can do that too! This program has been so successful, that last year the IRS awarded the Tax-Aide program the Commissioner's Award. This is only the second time in the history of the award that the IRS has given this award to an external organization, and acknowledges the valuable contribution that the Tax-Aide program makes to the public each year at tax time.

Taxes don't have to be scary and intimidating. There are people and programs who want to help you—all you have to do is ask! Just remember that the Tax-Aide program is staffed by volunteers—who are not paid for their services. These kind people are helping others out of the goodness of their hearts. So no matter how frustrated you may be with your taxes, please don't take it out on the Tax-Aide volunteers.

To learn more about AARP's Tax-Aide program, or to find a staffing location near you, visit the AARP Web site (*www.aarp.org/money/taxaide/*).
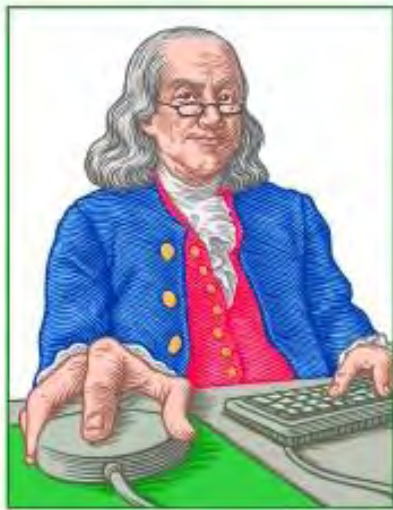

Dawn Clement is a freelance writer, domestic engineer, and mother of three with a Masters of Arts in Philosophy and over nine years experience in technical support.

Little Linux Lessons: Tips and Tricks from Users

"Linux users share ideas and ask for help." by ComputorEdge Staff

Art has some insights into the permissions discussion from last week, K.P has gotten an old Sony Vaio to recognize Puppy Linux, and Jack has a suggestion for Ed's problem with Linux recognizing video hardware.

Making Permissions (and other editing) Easy

In reference to the discussion of permissions in last week's column:

I used to go the command-line route to make Unix work. Now, I automatically add Krusader to my Kubuntu systems. It has the multiple tools that you paid for to make earlier Windows stuff work in DOS (like XTREE and Commander).

But before you install it, make sure that you have ALIEN and the other unzip/archive programs installed first. Krusader works with them too. I like the Kate editor and install it too.

After installing Krusader, you have a powerful and user-friendly manager. Just remember that it is *powerful* and easy to change things you shouldn't.

Art Blackwell

Installing Puppy Linux on an Old Vaio (SR33K)

Thanks, Terry, for the information on DSL. I will have to check it out. Being able to install from a floppy drive might be easier.

I did manage to get Puppy Linux 3.01 to install on my old Vaio with the external, PCMCIA-connected CD player. You need to type in a boot command when the Live CD first launches. There's about a five- second delay to start typing this command, so watch for the prompt. (Note that you don't need to type fast! Once you type the first letter, the installer will patiently wait for the rest of the line, regardless of how long it takes you to type it in.) That command is:

```
puppy ide1=0x180,0x386 nopcmcia acpi=off
```

I'm sorry that as a newbie to Linux, I have no idea what that command means, but it does force the installer to look at my PCMCIA-connected CD player where the Live CD is.

It was worth the effort getting Puppy Linux on this old machine since the operating system really flies on it. However, note that I installed Puppy Linux 3, and not the current version, 4. For some reason, my magic command

line won't work on the most recent version. I've no idea why. Sigh—it's always two steps forward and one step back with computers.

Many thanks and cheers!

K. P.

Linux and Driver Problems

For Ed in Costa Mesa who asked the following question:

"I have an Ubuntu 8.10 system using an Nvidia GeForce 5200 with 128MB. With Windows, I can get it to run at 1,280x1,024x32bpp. But in Linux, I cannot get it to go beyond 800x600. I tried downloading an Nvidia driver, but it worked the same way."

I don't know if this is going to be any help, but as we haven't received any responses to your question—which was republished last week—I'll pass along a few words.

I talked to Scott, who has worked with Linux more than I have, and he's run into a number of problems when installing new hardware on Linux machines. Scott says that if all the boards are in the machine before Linux is installed, then there is no problem with the hardware and drivers working properly. However, a change in hardware may go unrecognized. Scott has solved the problem by reinstalling Linux.

All this seems a bit drastic to me. As you suggested, it seems that there should be a configuration file somewhere that would be able to reach your video board. If anyone out there knows what Ed should be looking for, please drop us a line.

Jack Dunning

Looking for Some More Questions

*If you have an opinion on these or other Linux topics, then please let us know. Also, if you have another Linux tip that works for you and would like to pass it along (or have a question), please drop us a line at Linux Lessons (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*).*

This is a column for Linux and Unix-like operating system users. The goal is to give Linux users an opportunity to share tips, tricks and ideas with both fellow users and the *ComputorEdge* Linux newbies. Each week in this column, we will highlight the thoughts you submit to us. This is your column. As long as a submission is dealing with the Linux/Unix-like world, we want to share it.

The tips and tricks may be short or long, and can include graphics. If there is a little technique or program that you use on a regular basis, then we want to hear about it. You may also pose questions for other Linux users to answer. E-mail your ideas or questions to Linux Lessons (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*). Be sure to put the word "Linux Lessons" in the subject line so it won't get lost in junk mail. We depend upon you to make this column a success.

Jack Dunning
ComputorEdge

ComputorEdge always wants to hear from you, our readers. If you have specific comments about one of our articles, please click the "Tell us what you think about this article!" link at the top or bottom of the article/column. Your comments will be attached to the column and may appear at a later time in the "Editor's Letters" section. If you want to submit a short "ComputorQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at *ceeditor@computoredge. com*.

Rob, The ComputorTutor Does Computer Programming

"Programming with Microsoft's Visual Basic" by Rob Spahitz

This week, we begin learning about how to program a computer. As we move forward, we'll learn how to apply these concepts to Microsoft Office products, Web pages and custom Windows-style applications.

If you truly want to control your computer, you'll need to learn how to program it. Of course, sometimes just being able to run applications well is enough, but when none of the applications do exactly what you want, and you're tired of "working harder rather than smarter," then it's time to learn programming.

I'm beginning a series of columns on how to program Microsoft Windows using a language called Visual Basic. Also, note that many of the concepts we use here can be applied to any computer language and can be applied to any type of computer on the market (including Macintosh, Linux and Unix machines, and also Web page programming).

As we continue through, we'll apply these concepts to various tools such as Access, Excel and Outlook. Later, we'll create custom applications using a product that is currently a free download from Microsoft: Visual Basic 2008 Express edition.

History

Since the dawn of time, people have been trying to figure out how to manipulate data, whether it is things being counted or things being measured. Along the way, counting and measuring got more sophisticated, so some people with spare time came up with mathematics to help. Those rules also gave way to more sophisticated ways to handle the numbers, often giving those in the know an advantage in wars and crops.

Eventually, math opened up the field of engineering, which presented new challenges. Finally, the early computers were created to help with the management of math, engineering and other science challenges.

The simple concept of the computer is a tool that lets you automate a process. As we think of it today, the computer helps automate certain tedious tasks, tasks that are very error-prone, or tasks that the typical person simply doesn't know how to do.

For example, when you read my columns on the Internet, you are using technology that automatically sends a message from your computer to your ISP, through a collection of databases, out to the *ComputorEdge* computer, then asking it to locate the column, package it up, and send it back using a special language that your computer will translate into something that your computer can understand to show you the printed document and corresponding pictures.

For all this to work, someone had to create instructions that the computer could understand to manage all these things. And remember that the computer is really just a collection of diodes and transistors and other electronics that really just transfer electrons from one place to another. Fortunately, some geniuses figured out how to control the electrons by creating a connection of wires that allows this type of control.

In the early days, control was created by manually moving wires around. Later, it was done with buttons (such as light switches, and similar to what you have on many microwave ovens for setting the time to run the oven). And, of course, these days control often occurs with electronic typewriters, usually called keyboards. (And you've

certainly seen other tools for controlling the computer, such as mice and touchscreens.)

Once you get the instructions into the computer, it needs to understand those instructions. Originally, connecting the wires to the right places was enough to redirect electrons and, essentially, turn lights on and off within the computer. These were eventually designated ones and zeroes to represent electron charges and no charges. They called these "bits."

Since many zeroes and ones are difficult to work with, people combined the digits and started using letters to represent certain combinations. For example, 1010 may be replaced with MOV, to move a number from one place to another, and 0101 may be replaced with STO to store a value. Technically, the electrons are still flowing through the computer, and there are no numbers and no letters, but we can interpret them any way we want as long as we get consistent results.

Eventually, this naming style gave way to what is typically called a third-generation language (3GL), where more common words are used instead of short strings of letters. One common 3GL is BASIC, offered by Microsoft as Visual Basic. You may have also heard of others, such as COBOL, FORTRAN, C and Java. When you write using these languages and submit it for the computer to interpret, you are programming the computer.

Some people have tried to create 4GLs, which typically try to program the computer for you. They never really took off as expected, but remain as things like "wizards" that program small tasks for you by asking a series of questions about how you want things done.

Visual Basic

As mentioned, Microsoft created a version of BASIC known as Visual Basic (VB). As a programming language, it is used to control the computer. However, since Windows is really controlling the computer (well, it controls things that control things that control things that control the computer), VB's job is really to control Windows.

In addition, Microsoft recognized the power of VB and made it available to control any of its Office products. In this case, it is called VBA because it is Visual Basic for Applications, able to manipulate things like Excel and Access.

And what's the difference between VB and the original BASIC? Well, BASIC was more designed to control the computer, and VB was more designed to control Windows. Controlling the computer directly has many problems. For example, if you program the computer to show some graphics on the screen, and then you get a new graphics card, the program may not work. If you program sound and change sound cards, the sound may not play. Windows is a very complex application designed to manage that for you so you don't have to, so VB is generally a much better tool for programming than BASIC.

How does VB actually work? First, a couple of things. Modern programming languages typically have just a few words (commands) designed to control the flow of instructions being translated for the computer to interpret. Instead, the key to writing good modern-day programs is delegating! The way this works is what is called Object-Oriented Programming (OOP), which lets you treat things in the computer like objects. When you learn how to use an object, you can delegate to that object to perform a task for you. You'll see how that works as we move forward.

So here are the most common VB commands:

• **Let**—assigns a value to a part of computer memory. Over the years this has morphed into a new form that does the same thing without the word.

• **If**—checks to see if one value, part of memory or a calculation compares against another, then jumps to one set of commands or another.

• **For**—loops through a set of commands a set number of times.

• **Do**—loops through a set of commands until some condition is met.

• **Call**—processes a separate predefined set of commands. This has also morphed into a new form that does the same thing without this word.

That's it! Can you memorize those five commands? If you can, and you learn how to use them properly, you're halfway to being a computer programmer. And, since these are almost identical to the commands used by most modern-day languages, you can quickly learn how to program in lots of OOP languages.

VB also has a set of important functions to help work better with data. It's important to learn the main ones, many of which you've seen or can figure out, like +, -, Int, Left and Mid. Learning these allow you to manipulate your data so it can be stored, compared or used otherwise.

So why all the hoopla about computer programmers being paid so well? The answer is not in learning the words, but learning how to put them together the right way and at the right times. In addition, as mentioned earlier, you must learn how to delegate. Delegation requires knowledge. Do you know the old saying, "if all you know is a hammer, everything looks like a nail"? That applies quite well here. If you only know one object, you try to make that object work for every problem. As you learn about more objects, you find that some can do a better job than others, so you can delegate to those objects at the proper time.

Computer Objects

So what are computer objects? How does VB use them? The answer in modern-day computers is that everything is an object. VB uses them by "talking" to them and letting you know what they can do. Then it's up to you to figure out which object to use for a job, and how to tell it to do the right things.

Let's start with a simple example from Access, then wrap things up for this week.

In Access, the main way to work in the environment is to pick an appropriate object. You see a "main menu" listing tables, queries, etc., as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Access Objects.

When you work on a form (an object), you are presented with a toolbox (see Figure 2), which has more objects that you can work with.

Figure 2. The Access Toolbox.

This toolbox contains a set of objects (technically, "classes" that define how objects will work). You have common Windows components like labels, text boxes, check boxes and command buttons. When used properly, you get a smooth-running application that people understand how to use. If used improperly, your users get confused and make mistakes. A good programmer knows how to use objects properly and knows which object to use at the proper time.

With each tool, you use one of the VB commands listed earlier, surround the commands with additional VB requirements, and you get a great Access form. By the way, writing a computer program is similar to writing a novel: The heart of the story defines how good it will be, but you'll also need to organize it with paragraphs, chapters, a table of contents, copyright information, a title, etc., in order to properly market it. In VB, you'll need things like variables, error-trapping, subroutines and functions and executables in order to make it truly useful.

Next week, we'll go back to Access and learn how to use VBA in Access, including all of the administrative things required to make things work, then additional things that will make your program more efficient and, ultimately, better than many other programmers on the market today.

Please keep your questions coming and let me know what additional topics you'd like to see as we move forward.

Rob has been in the computer industry for over 25 years and is currently a part-time teacher, offering classes in Excel, Access, Visual Basic, and a variety of other technical tools. He has loved *ComputorEdge* since 1990 and can be contacted at *RSpahitz@Dogopoly.com*.

Looking for a great boardgame? Grab a copy from DOGOPOLY.com (*dogopoly.com*) and have a dog-gone great time.

Worldwide News & Product Reviews

"The latest in tech news and hot product reviews." by Charles Carr

Backup Early, Backup Often—Be prepared in the event of natural disaster or man-made calamity; Color Me Happy: Crayon Physics Deluxe Is Here—A review of the puzzle/sandbox game; Bento = EZ Databasing—A review of the personal database program.

Backup Early, Backup Often

Sure, we don't get to vote as often or as many times as we might like, but Andy Marken of Marken Communications makes the case for a practice not proscribed by constitution: making not just one, but multiple backups:

Too many things have been going on around us that are totally outside of our control. Hurricane Gustav chased an estimated two million people from their homes. Fires in Southern California and Yosemite Park areas destroyed thousands of acres and burned hundreds of homes. Floods in the Midwest swept into homes despite residents' best efforts. Every day natural disasters take their financial and emotional toll.

The fires that raged through the San Diego area hills last spring was stopped five miles from the canyon-top home of Lou and Gideon Zekan. But that was close enough to begin packing and making the agonizing decision of what they might have to leave behind.

A collector of her family's antiquities, Lou was concerned that she might have to leave some of her family heirlooms behind if they had to evacuate. She busied herself as the flames crept over the hills by taking photos of everything in their home and yard. "I read somewhere that having a photo record of valuables made insurance claims easier." She downloaded all of the photos to her new Mac notebook computer, backed up all of her photo/video projects to an external 160GB hard drive, and uploaded copies to her online photo service.

Lou was also concerned about a photo project she had started a few months before that she wanted to complete for her dad's birthday. She had amassed hundreds of irreplaceable photos and documents from her mother, her dad's military service friends, and friends of friends. She wanted to put together a one-of-a-kind "My Dad" scrapbook. She had already scanned, stored and returned 50 percent of the documents and photos and shuddered at the thought of losing any of the rest. All of the content she had in digital form was backed up on her external drive, sent to her online photo space and CD copies, as well as the original photos, were sent to her in-laws in Northern California.

"Gideon had other priorities," she said with a smile. "He was concerned about saving all of his computer gear, our two dogs and getting his very pregnant wife to safety as quickly as possible if necessary." Now that fire danger is behind them, she is busy scanning and organizing the other photos and documents. "I can't wait to complete the scrapbook and give it to Dad," she said. "Some of his most enduring memories are of war times."

Tracy Laidlaw of Peoria, Arizona, who has never experienced a loss from a natural disaster, said all of her losses and near losses was of her own making.

"You hit the wrong key when you're editing a photo, and if you're lucky you start the editing process all over again," she commented. "If you aren't lucky, the photo is deleted, gone forever!" Tracy now uses a continuous backup software program to back up her files to an external hard drive. In addition, she copies all of their photos and videos to DVDs, which are stored in a fireproof lockbox.

"Because DVDs have so much capacity," she noted, "I do an incremental backup until the disc is full. Then, I make a duplicate. One goes to work with me. The other goes to my mother's house in San Francisco."

Marken contends that, while true natural disasters don't happen every day, computer failure and viruses do happen all the time, to all of us. Putting together your photo/video/data backup and archive solution is half the job. Rigorously using it is the other half.

Marken pitches Verbatim CD and DVD recordable media and a Web site called *PhotoStorageGuide.com* that outlines and highlights the benefits of different archiving and backup solutions.

Color Me Happy: Crayon Physics Deluxe Is Here

If you've never fooled around with Crayon Physics (*www.crayonphysics.com*), the winner of the 2008 Independent Games Festival Grand Prize, then you've been coloring inside the lines too long. Set aside those flashy first-person 3-D shooters, MMORPGs and strategy sims and try something deceptively unassuming and utterly refreshing.

Draw objects that drop and make the little red ball hit the yellow star.

The game's Helsinki, Finland-based creator, Petri Purho, describes Crayon Physics as "a 2D physics puzzle/ sandbox game in which you solve puzzles with your artistic vision and creative use of physics to get to experience what it would be like if your drawings would be magically transformed into real physical objects."
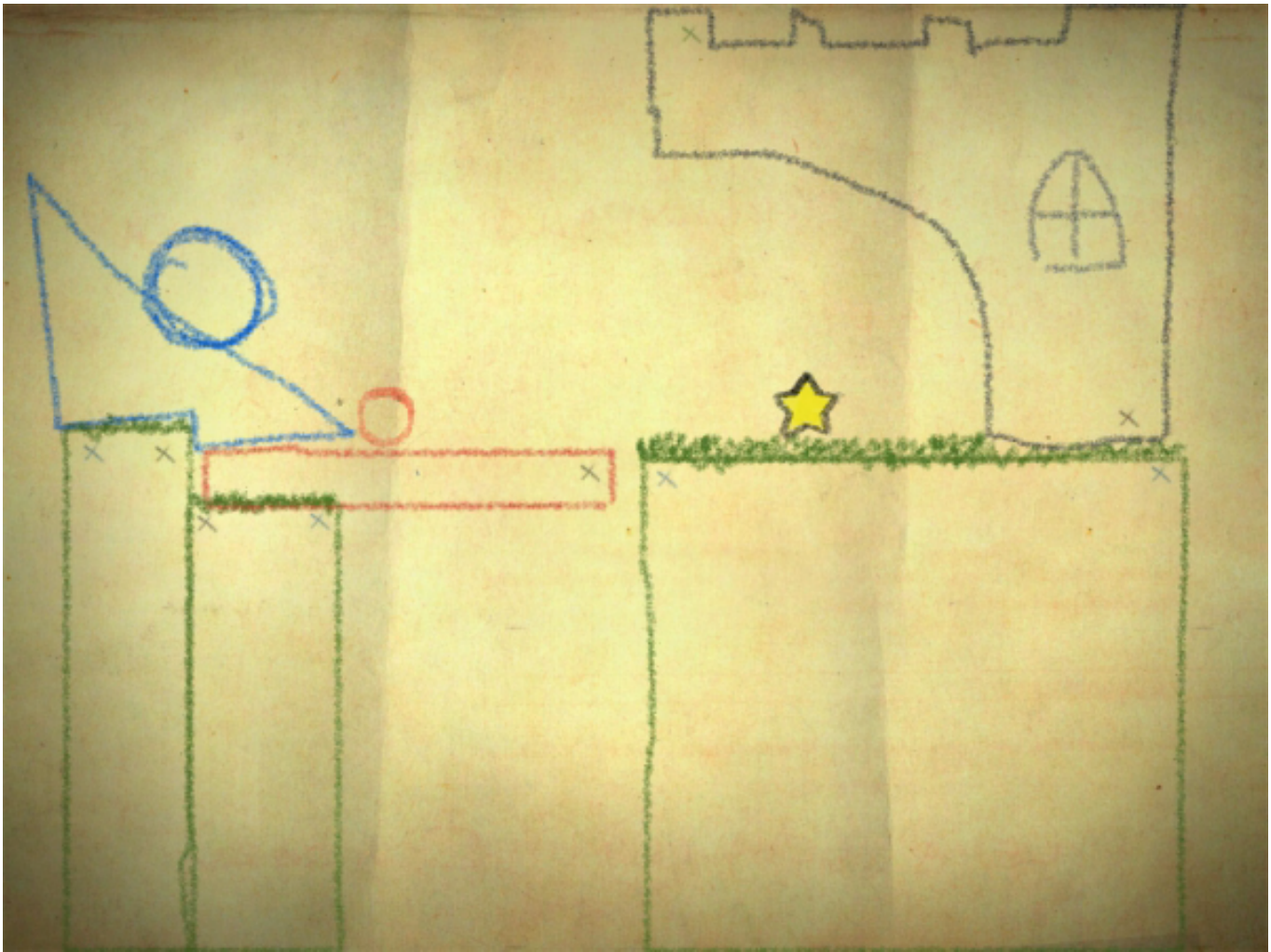
Draw objects that roll and make the little red ball hit the yellow star.

Released over a year ago as a free demo with only a few levels, the Deluxe version has just been completed with 70 levels and the ability to create your own puzzles and share them on the Web—as well as download other people's puzzles for your own enjoyment.

Crayon Physics Deluxe is available for the PC for $19.95. Not ready to buy? There's still that free demo available at *www.crayonphysics.com*.

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* * *

Bento = EZ Databasing

If technobabble such as "SQL," "schema," or "portal" raises question marks over your head rather than elevating your excitement levels, Bento might be the solution to your data-management needs.

Bento is a personal database program intended for consumers and small businesses, developed by the same company that publishes FileMaker Pro (*www.filemaker.com/products/bento/*) (FMP). Although FMP has been lauded in this column for its user-friendliness, Bento sets a new standard for ease of use.

What makes Bento so easy to use? First, its interface closely resembles Apple's iApps and thus is immediately familiar to anyone who has used iPhoto or iTunes (see Figure 1). Second, FileMaker, Inc. provides tons of free

support for Bento users, including demos (*www.filemaker.com/products/bento/tours_tours.html*), tutorials (*www. filemaker.com/products/bento/tours_tutorials.html*), and an actively maintained and monitored forum (*forums. filemaker.com/fmbnto/?category.id=Use*). Lastly, Bento's feature set is trim rather than bloated, a quick learn rather than overwhelming. Because Bento is so user friendly, there are beaucoup ways of putting it to work instantly (*www.filemaker.com/products/bento/uses/*).
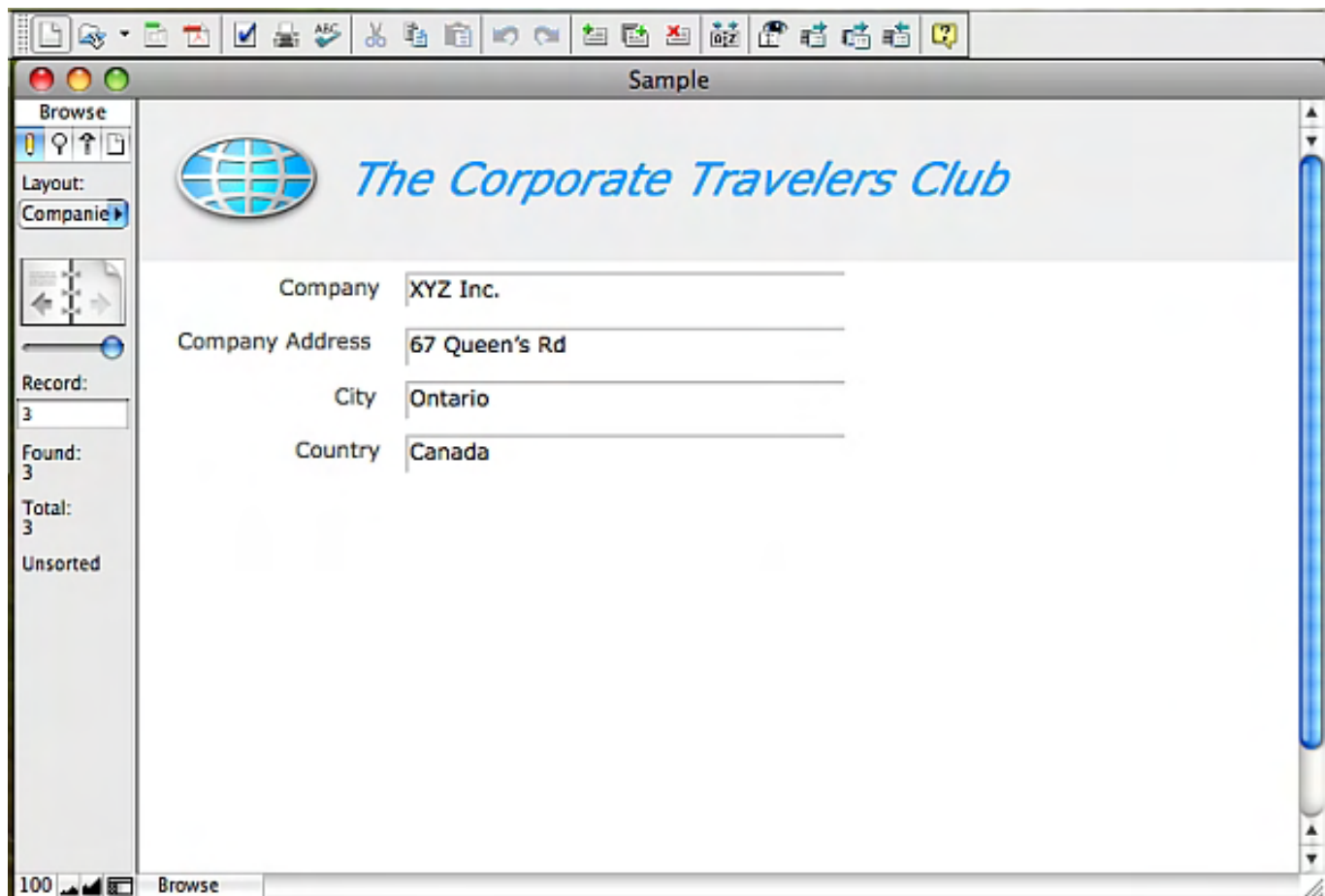
Figure 1. Bento (top) looks and behaves more like iTunes than FileMaker Pro (bottom).

Bento's resemblance to iTunes is more than skin deep. In Bento, collections are analogous to playlists, smart collections are analogous to smart playlists, and libraries are like the categories "music," "movies" and "audiobooks" in iTunes. Any individual record in Bento can appear in multiple collections but is stored on your hard drive only once, just as any song in iTunes can appear in multiple playlists but is stored in a single MP3 file. Unlike iTunes, however, Bento has 31 built-in themes for displaying individual records, which are akin to styles in a page-layout program. For example, Figure 1 shows the "bookworm" theme.

In addition to its user friendliness, Bento has some really smart features. For instance, during launch, Bento displays an alert asking if you want to back up your data and then it displays a sheet containing one-click buttons that provide access to handy options. Another smart feature is support for importing from and exporting to Apple's Numbers spreadsheet program; this feature helps integrate Bento with Apple's iWork suite of productivity applications. For advanced users, Bento supports relationships between libraries.

Perhaps my favorite feature is Bento's unique split view, which displays multiple records in a spreadsheet-like table at the top of the window and individual records in the form view at the bottom (see Figure 2). Another good one is the summary row which, for each existing column, has a cell with a pop-up menu from which the user chooses one of five computed values—sum, count, average, maximum, minimum—to display (see Figure 3).
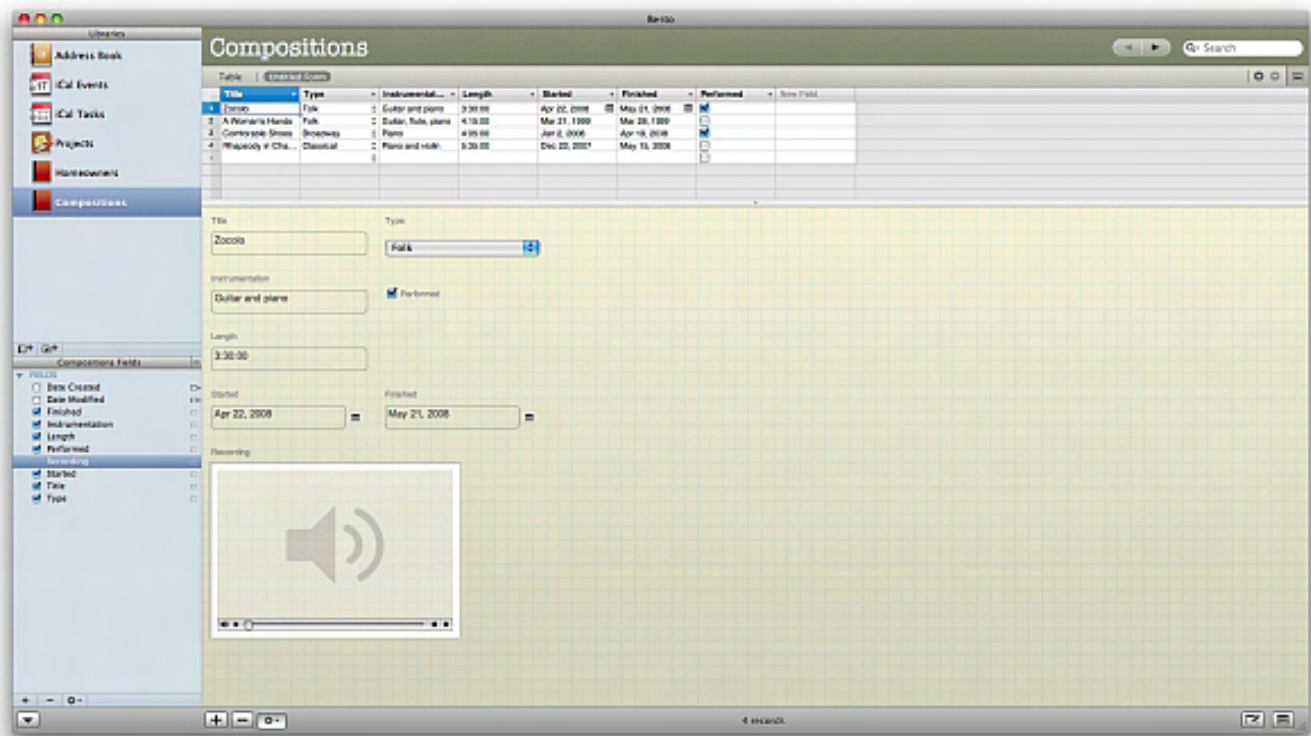
Figure 2. Bento's split view is a best-of-both-worlds display in which a scrollable list of records is shown in a spreadsheet-like table at the top and individual records are shown in a form display at the bottom.
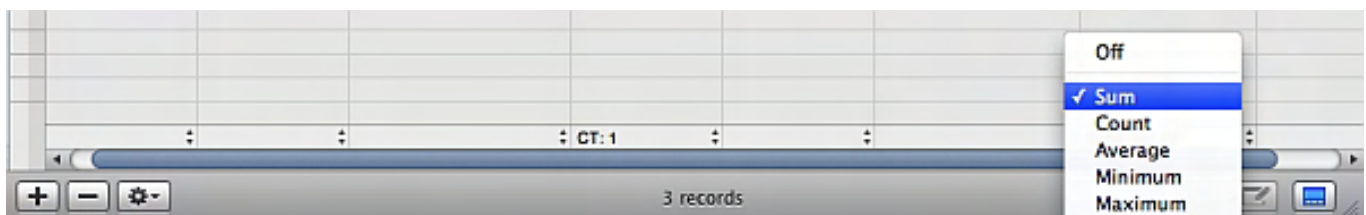

Figure 3. The summary row, which can be hidden or shown, contains user-configured statistics for any given column in Bento's table view.

Along with the above smart features, Bento also has some cool eye-candy effects. For example, a ripple effect displays (see Figure 4) when you change the form view's theme.
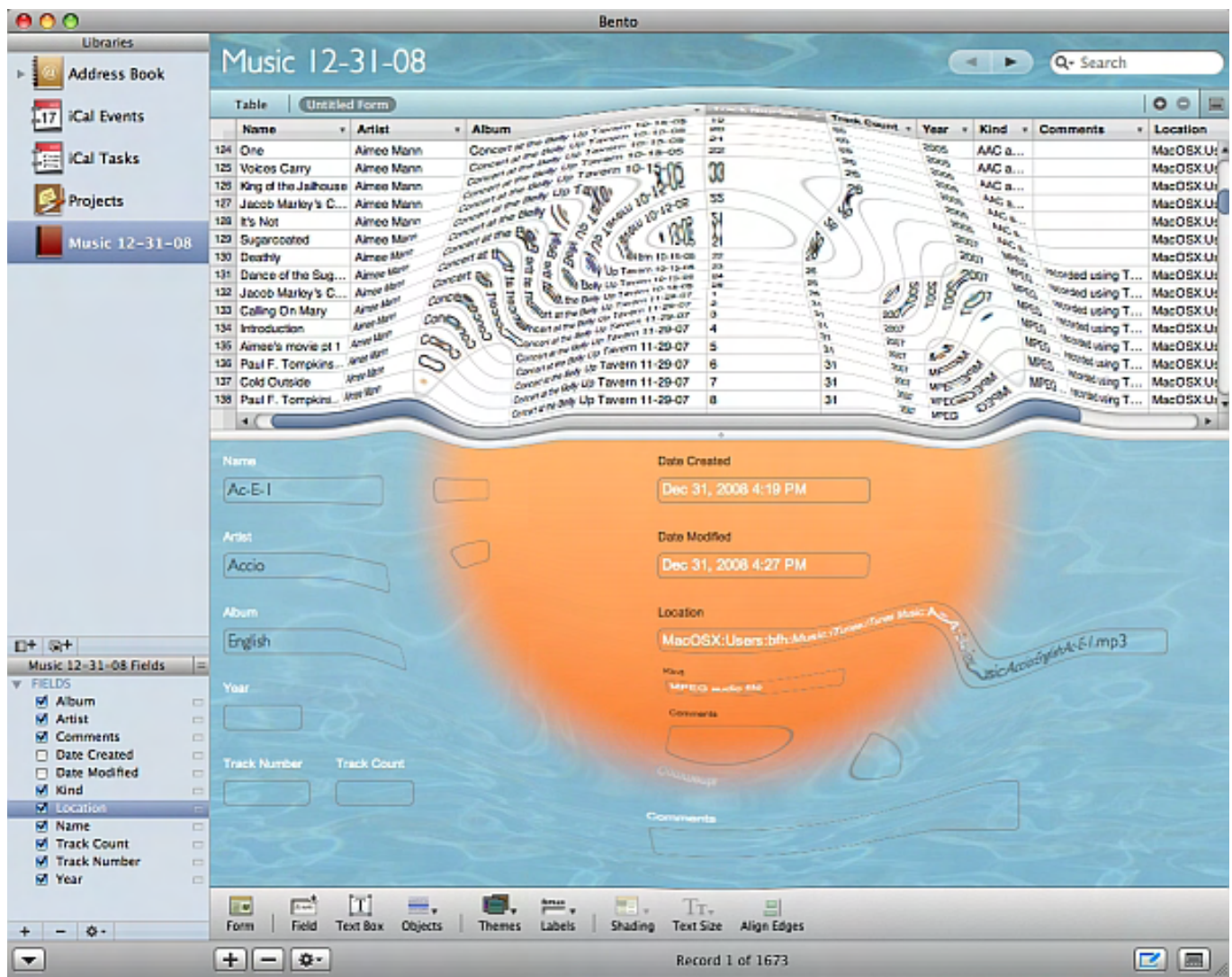
Figure 4. The ripple effect that Bento displays when you change from one to another of the 31 built-in themes is an animation shown here in stop-motion.

Bento has its share of weaknesses, some of which reflect its developmental immaturity. Bento currently is at version 2.0.3 and lacks seemingly basic features, such as inclusion of a find-and-replace function, support for Mac OS X's Fonts panel, or integration with iTunes (however, a Bento user has provided instructions (*fmbnto.lithium. com/fmbnto/board/message?board.id=contsugdat&message.id=123*) on how to accomplish this manually, which I have tested, and they do work as advertised).

Other weaknesses presumably are due to product design choices intended to keep Bento simple and user friendly. For instance, the preference settings are very limited, and the toolbar (for editing forms) cannot be customized or rearranged at all (see Figure 5). Bento does not have its own programming language or support for FMP scripting; this could become a sore point for advanced users seeking to gain efficiencies through automation. Printing options are pretty limited, making it difficult to generate a customized report. A field's or field label's text cannot be changed to whatever typeface/point size you prefer; instead, you can choose only "smallest," "small," "medium," "large," or "largest."
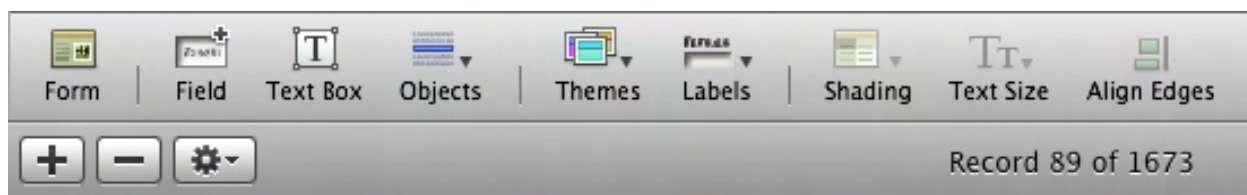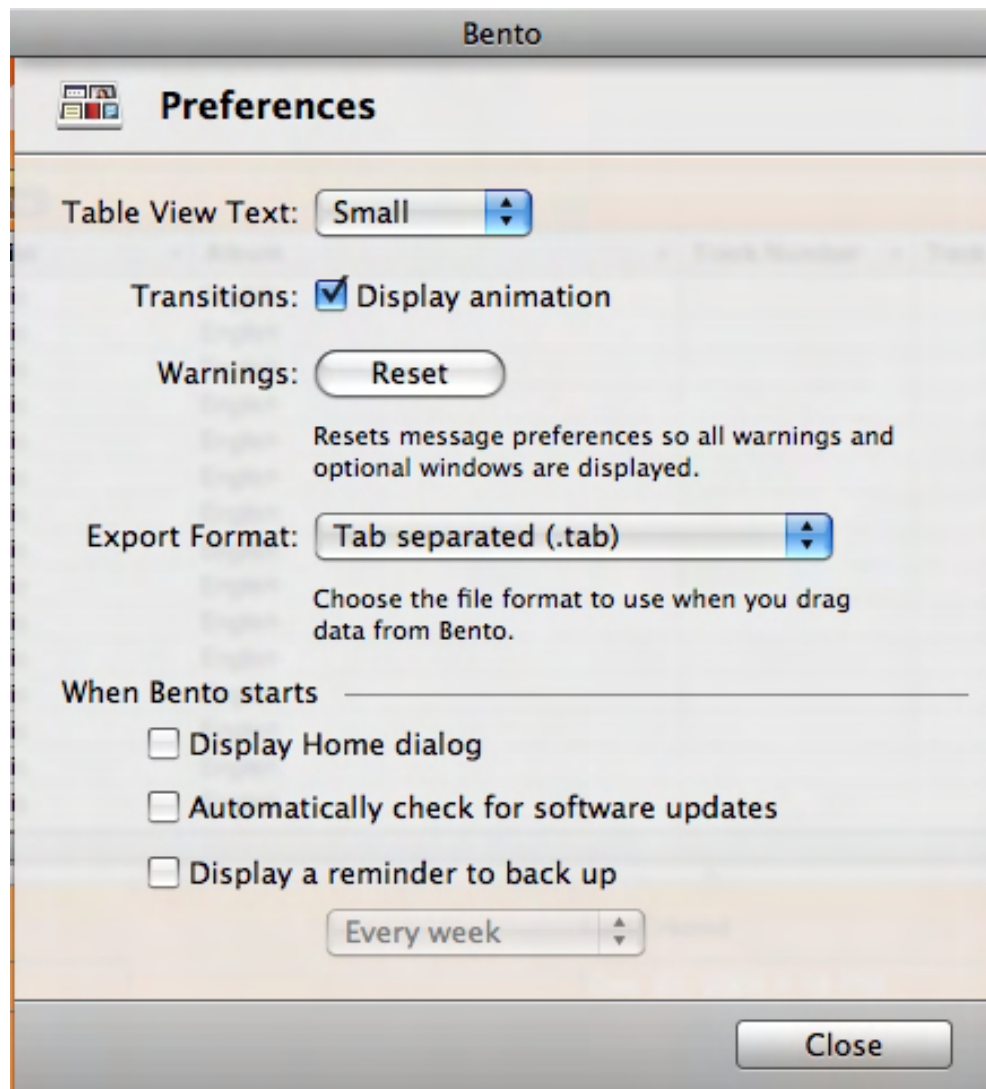
Figure 5. Bento's preference settings (top) are limited and its toolbar (bottom) has static options that are fixed at the bottom of the window.

One final point is noteworthy for beginners—Bento's file paradigm is different from other programs. Whereas Excel or FMP can open new files (.xls and .fp7, respectively), each of which is displayed in its own window, Bento cannot. Instead, it creates a single "bento.bentodb" package (in your user account's Application Support folder) and displays all entered data within a single window. Records can be exported to a file in Excel, Numbers, or text (comma-, semicolon-, or tab- delimited) format, but not to a Bento-specific format for sharing with other users. Like other database programs, Bento automatically saves changes as you make them and lacks a Save item in its File menu.

Despite these weaknesses, Bento is an important program because it represents an affordable ($49 MSRP; $99 for five licenses Family Pack) companion to Apple iWork or Microsoft Office and it could help wean users from organizing and maintaining their information in a spreadsheet program when instead this should be done in a database.

Review contributed by Barry Fass-Holmes

In addition to being an editor and columnist for *ComputorEdge* and *ComputerScene* Magazines, where he has written hundreds of feature articles and cover stories over the past decade, Charles Carr has also penned well over 1,000 non-tech newspaper and magazine articles and columns for various publications, including two widely-read columns each week for San Diego's *North County Times* newspaper.

Carr has covered such diverse topics as pesticide use in area schools, invasive background checks for county volunteers, asthma awareness, the debate over standards-based grading, potential vulnerabilities in electronic voting machines, and Southern California's devastating 2003 and 2007 wildfires. He has also written many humorous pieces.

Carr has also edited dozens of stories and articles written by others which have appeared in major publications and web sites across the country.

He has been a contributor and technical advisor to *L.A. and San Diego Parent* magazines and receives dozens of requests a year to appear on Southern California television and radio stations to talk about important events in the tech world.

Carr has judged many writing competitions including San Diego Press Club and Time-Warner Communications contests and was sole judge for the national NAPPA Tech Toys awards for five years (which his kids really appreciated). He was recently a judge for the national "Poetry Out Loud" competition.

He has won many writing accolades, including Press Club awards for Best Column Writing, Consumer Writing and Best Arts and Entertainment, and has repeatedly taken top honors in San Diego Songwriter's Guild competitions for his original musical compositions.
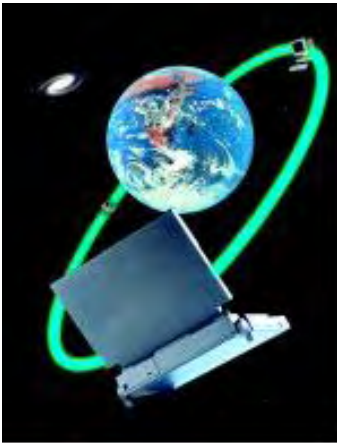
Carr will soon publish his first book, *What a World*, a collection of his best writings.

Learn more at *www.charlescarr.com*.

Techno Talk

"Getting Rid of Old Technology" by D'Artagnan Fischer

Rather than have our old technology discards collecting dust on a shelf somewhere, we can find new ways to reuse the old stuff.

As time passes, for anyone involved with computers and technology, there is quite often a batch of leftovers that are the result of upgrading your systems. It also follows that, as people become increasingly aware of the environment, we should really strive to keep our old technology items out of the local landfills. So, the question then becomes, "What do we do with all our old technology stuff?"

The "laws" of equipment and technology reuse are really not laws at all, but here is the list as it stands today:

1. Find another use
2. Sell it
3. Give it away
4. Donate it
5. Take it to a recovery center

Note: If you happen to be a particularly creative type, you might even be able to cleverly turn your old items into some form of artwork. Unfortunately, for the larger population of us all, this is hardly an answer.

Although we will be primarily focused on number one, a few words about the other options.

First off, if you sell off your old technology items, your wallet gets bigger, and that's always a nice thing. Your items go to someone who can use them, and you get some cash!

If you give away your old technology items, the hassle of what to do with the old stuff is taken off your hands, and someone is likely made happy by your old treasures. It doesn't make your wallet any fatter, but it does give you the warm fuzzies from having given to others.

Donating is a very viable solution, because it helps to address the need to get rid of the old "junk." However, a lot of the places that will currently take technology-related donations also have rules/guidelines as to precisely what they will, and will not, accept in terms of donations. Obviously, if you donate something that they can't use, then they would have to deal with getting rid of your "junk," so they tend to address this right up front in terms of actually accepting your items or not. On the plus side, if you are able to donate your items, a large number of these types of organizations will also provide you with the necessary paperwork in order for you to write off your donation on your taxes. It does not make your wallet fatter, but can help you keep some of what you already have!

The last law is simply to take your items to a recovery center. Unfortunately, this has the potential of costing you money in order to "dump" your junk. It does not cost in all cases, but it does in enough cases that this needs to be mentioned. The real bottom line is that technology-related items should never be sent to the landfill. Many of these items have chemicals and materials that are really harmful to the environment, and simply sending them to the landfill—is very bad! In addition, a lot of the cities now impose fines for putting technology-related items into the

trash. And, if you happen to get fined, you might still have to deal with dropping your items at a recovery center anyway.

Alternative Uses

So, let's find alternative uses for your technology items. A few people will probably come up with all kinds of ideas in this area, but for the rest of us, a lot of our old technology items end up in a box, or on a shelf, and that's where they'll live for the next decade—or at least until we have to clean up all our "stuff."

Hard Disks

One of the easiest items to address is old hard disks. Granted, if you happen to have some of the really old massive "boat anchor" type of hard disks, then this will not apply. However, if you happen to have old hard disks sitting around that aren't too ancient, there are some good options. Add the old drive internally, if possible. Or, install the old hard disk into an external USB chassis, and use the old drive as external storage.

For example, if you have a desktop computer, and you just upgraded from a 60GB drive to a 200GB drive, that old 60GB drive would make a great external USB drive. Or better still, that old 60GB drive might work well with your laptop that never seems to have enough space.

Personally, I have taken advantage of big sales and upgraded my laptop hard disks. The thing about laptop hard disks is that they are so much smaller, and as luck would have it, there happen to be perfect tiny external hard-disk enclosures that makes for ideal portable external drives. I actually hate to admit how many tiny 20GB and 40GB hard disks that I have, but they sure do beat even the biggest USB thumb drives (which aren't quite that big just yet).

There are even adapters to install laptop drives in desktops. There are external drive enclosures that allow you to set up a hard disk as a wireless network drive, and on and on. The point is that there are a lot of options available to you that will allow you to reuse your old equipment in new ways. And, if all else fails, sell it or give it away. Unless it is truly an old boat anchor, someone somewhere will probably have a use for it.

Monitors

OK, so you just upgraded to the latest LCD monitor from an old CRT monitor. It might not seem like a big positive to continue using an old CRT, but allow me to offer yet another perspective.

Most operating systems out there on the market today—Mac, Windows, Linux, etc.—support multiple monitors. They all really tend to make the process easy to set up and configure, but actually getting there is where the confusion lies. Most folks are more likely to replace an old monitor with a newer fancy one, but why not consider putting the old one side by side with the new one? The concept here is that you will have the screen space of both the new monitor and the old one. Believe me, it is so much nicer to have more screen real estate available when you want to open a lot of windows (and I tend to open a ton of windows).

Now, if you are lucky, your display card already has an extra video jack for hooking up another monitor, but if you don't, then you might need to look into adding an additional video display card. In this case, the operating systems are not precisely the same. Some might allow for as many display adapters inside the computer as can fit, whereas others might allow for only two. Be sure to review your current operating system options *before* adding any new display adapters.

Your "main" monitor would likely be your new and fancy monitor, but your older monitor would be a secondary monitor. The operating system will allow you to configure where the secondary monitor is located in relation to the main monitor. This way, your mouse will jump to the new monitor, and in the right direction, when it is moved toward that monitor. This likely sounds a lot more complicated than it is.

Computers

Older computers that are replaced outright will more typically be Windows or Macintosh platforms. In this case, you might consider reusing the system by loading on a flavor of Linux. Typically, Linux offers functionality and speed improvements that make older systems comparable to newer computer systems. For example, loading Linux on an older PC that had been running Windows can potentially make that older system perform like a new system. It may not be an option that you would have considered before, but the use of Linux can breathe new life into older equipment.

Printers

An older printer is a technology item that does prove more difficult to find alternative uses for. However, if you happen to have a home network spread through your house, having an extra printer in different locations might prove to be handy. This would most likely be achieved by networking the printer, and then printing to it from any of your networked workstations. One idea might be to have a printer near the door, and printing out your driving directions before actually leaving the house. Again, reusing printers will prove to be more of a challenge, but you can certainly sell it or donate it too.

Everything Old Is New Again

Rather than have our old technology discards collecting dust on a shelf somewhere, we can find new ways to reuse the old stuff. Of course, we can also sell it or give away, but just don't let your old gear head for the landfill. That old landfill may complain one day, and toss all that old stuff back at us. Let's just make sure that there's a lot less of it, and maybe make, or save, some money in the process!

D'Artagnan Fischer has been a Technology Manager for a major accounting firm, a senior systems administrator, an Enterprise Consultant, has worked for DHS, the Navy, and even San Diego City Schools. His main interests are computers, technology, and digital photography. He also enjoys writing Science Fiction stories, and dreams of one day having one of his stories made into a movie. He lives with a menagerie of animals, and is in the process of growing a family.

EdgeWord: A Note from the Publisher

"It's Tax-Software Time Again" by Jack Dunning

Now that we have computers, there is no problem if the tax code gets more complicated each year—as long as the programmers keep up.

It's the time of year to look at tax software. Now that we have computers, there is no problem if the tax code gets more complicated each year—as long as the programmers keep up. For quite a few years, I've used TurboTax, and I've had no complaints about it as a software application.

For many years, I was signed up to automatically receive it every December. I finally gave that up because I couldn't see that I was getting any kind of a deal. The past couple of years, I've been using a coupon at Costco ($10 off this year through January 25) because it saved me a few dollars. I've noticed that there are a number of changes this year.

First, the prices have gone up. As I remember, the price last year for TurboTax at Costco (Deluxe version with federal and state) was about $40. For a one-week period in January 2008, there was a Costco coupon for $15 dollars off, bringing down the price to a very reasonable $25. The one downside was that it was the first year that there was no rebate for e-filing the federal return. This year, the price at Costco has been raised to $50, but there is the $10 coupon mentioned above. Amazon is selling it for a discounted $43 price (no tax, but maybe shipping). This year, federal e-file is included free (up to five).

This is just getting more complicated, because TurboTax also sent me a free copy of Deluxe, which includes one free e-file. They want to get me back as a subscriber. There is one big problem with the offer: I still need to pay $35 for a state download.

There is disarray in the marketing of the tax-preparation software. Last year, charging for e-filing ($15) must have been a disaster for TurboTax. (I wasn't getting anything back, so I printed and mailed my return.) This year, e-file is free. For years, TurboTax offered a rebate. Now, all the major software programs are offering free e-file. Some programs are offering up to five free e-files for those who want to do all the family returns. What TurboTax once viewed as a possible revenue stream has now become a marketing tool.

One of the real moneymakers for tax software companies is the sale of state income tax programs. TurboTax advertises the state download for $26, but that's only with the free edition of the federal program—all others are $35. (The $40 for the Deluxe version at Costco includes the state download.) When picking your program, be sure to check for the cost of the state program.

TaxACT is offering a package that includes federal, state and e-file for $20. That's half the price of TurboTax with the Costco coupon. I haven't used TaxACT, so I can't say how it compares. I would be interested to hear from people who have used it—especially, if they have also used TurboTax.

If you have relatively easy tax calculations (1040EZ, no Schedule A, etc.), I recommend that you look at getting the free version of either package ($54,000 maximum income). Then, rather than buy the state package, check with your state income tax Web site to see if you can file your state tax return directly. Many states do offer a free Web service where you can plug information from your federal return into the state form at their site.

I recommend that if you have any complications at all, buy a combo package that includes, federal, state and federal e-file. I'm not sure that it matters which one you buy. If you do buy a combo package, filing will be easier. Information from last year can be imported, the state calculations will automatically flow through, and you will get immediate confirmation of filing with the e-file. For peace of mind, it may be worth the $20-$40 to get the paid

program, even if you qualify for the free version.

The IRS would like everyone to use tax-preparation software and e-file. That way, they could spend more time auditing people.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputorEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is *www.computoredge.com*. He can be reached at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*

Editor's Letters

"Readers write in with letters to the editor." by ComputorEdge Staff

"Some VoIP Thoughts," "Digital Dave and Leaking Ports?," "Vonage to Ireland," "Use Both Skype and Windows Live," "Question and Suggestion"

Some VoIP Thoughts

Regarding your article ["VoIP: Talking Over the Internet," in the January 2 issue:]"

What you miss is that Comcast is trying to block VoIP from Vonage and others. What they have stated is to block the ports that are used. Vonage has had to move my ports two times so far in the last year. They even admit to blocking ports. They want you to subscribe to their costly phone system.

-Gary, Las Cruces, New Mexico

Good article!

A couple of additional fantastic features that I use heavily on VoIP (not every VoIP service does this, but at least some do):

• Every call to my office VoIP phone rings concurrently on my cell phone. It can ring sequentially or concurrently on up to four phones!

• Every voice mail sends a text message with the caller's ID to my cell phone.

• Every voice mail is sent to my e-mail as a sound attachment.

I have tested five or six different providers over the last five years. AT&T has been the most stable and dependable, but it's the same price as Vonage ($25 plus assorted taxes), which is now *high* for residential VoIP.

I also use VoIP from ViaTalk now—it's a one-time $200 payment, but that covers two years of service. That's less than $10 per month! The modem is just slightly bigger than my wallet and is true plug-and-play (all of the others required some configuration). It travels with me wherever I go, so I don't need to burn cell phone minutes at an office or hotel.

Please keep up the great work, and thanks for all you do!

-Dave Amen, Centennial, Colorado

Your comment, " . . . many VoIP subscribers abandoned [tacked-on fees] precisely in order to get away from all of those tacked-on fees," isn't exactly accurate. Those fees are not the problem at all.

As a Vonage subscriber myself, I was not blind to the fact that there were regulatory and other fees, most of which are required by the FCC, when I subscribed with Vonage. Regardless of whether you use a traditional phone company or a VoIP service, I agree, they are charges. But they are also minimal compared to the extra costs of added-on features the phone company bundles into expensive packages, which are all included in the base cost of the Vonage service at no extra charge. Additionally, the frustrations of having to deal with an enormous phone

company that doesn't have the time or interest to provide adequate customer service was infuriating.

Depending on my long-distance calling and the features that I would have to purchase separately for a traditional phone service that I now get for free on Vonage, I am saving $70 to $100 per month. That savings includes the regulatory fees from either service. So the regulatory fees are actually insignificant compared to outrageous "feature bundle" costs and poor customer service that the traditional phone company offers.

-Pete, Roy, Utah

Digital Dave and Leaking Ports?

[Regarding Digital Dave's January 2 column:]

The command "netstat -a" in a command window can be useful in detecting unexpected network connections.

-Stewart A. Levin, Centennial, Colorado

You can try using Ethereal/Wireshark. It's a fairly common tool for packet sniffing. Granted it's fairly technical, so use only if you have at least a rudimentary understanding of networking and packets.

David Eddleman, Oceanside, California

Vonage to Ireland

[In reference to the January 2 EdgeWord:]

Vonage is $25 a month and calls to landlines in Dublin are free.

-David Shean

Use Both Skype and Windows Live

[In reference to Jack Dunning's January 2 article,["The Skype Is the Limit":]

I use video calling with relatives in Germany. Sometimes I use Skype and sometimes I use Windows Live Messenger. I do like the picture quality better on Windows Live Messenger. Both images are the same size and clearer. Since the audio connection on Messenger is not that good, I use audio from Skype, then minimize Skype, and open Windows Live messenger for the video transmission.

You should try it and let me know what you think.

-Herbert Boettcher

Question and Suggestion

[Regarding the January 2 ComputorQuick Reviews column:]

Appreciate your "Resolutions." I think a short article on "stop(ping) unwanted startup programs" would make for a good article. Any chance?

Thanks,

-Dave Stang

I'm not sure which operating system you're using, but here is a Vista column that talks about startup: November

14, 2008, Windows Vista Tips and Tricks. Also, you can use the Startup tab by running msconfig in the Run program in Windows. —Editor

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ComputorEdge always wants to hear from you, our readers. If you have specific comments about one of our articles, please click the "Tell us what you think about this article!" link at the top or bottom of the article/column. Your comments will be attached to the column and may appear at a later time in the "Editor's Letters" section.

If you want to submit a short "ComputorQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*.