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A look at today's devices for interacting with your computer.

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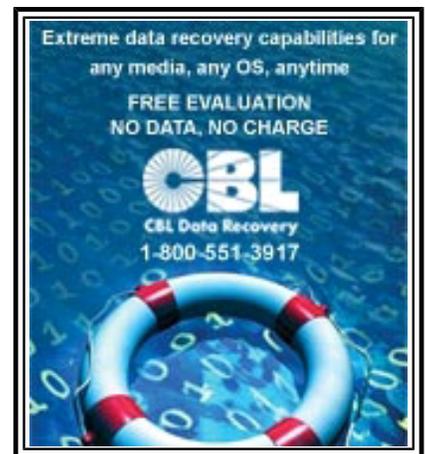
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Digital Dave

“Digital Dave answers your tech questions.” by *Digital Dave*

A reader is in the market for an MP3 player that plays videos; a reader's all-in-one printer/scanner is acting strange; a reader is having trouble saving WordPerfect files onto a memory stick.

Dear Digital Dave,

I'm in the market for a new MP3 player that plays videos. I'm not sure if you covered this before, but I noticed that different players can play only certain video codecs. I use VLC on my laptop, and it plays just about anything. Why isn't it the same for the MP3 players?

*Adjani
San Diego*

Dear Adjani,

The codec (coder-decoder) is the file format that compresses the audio/video data, making the file more portable while hopefully not losing too much quality. Over the years different codecs have been developed for various reasons, leaving us with a multitude of formats. That's why computer programs such as VLC are so useful, as they can decode all the commonly used codecs.

However, MP3 devices that don't have the capacity of the average computer are usually limited to a few formats as deemed worthy by the manufacturer. Which codecs are available will depend upon the loyalties of the device maker (Apple, Microsoft, etc.).

There are a number of codecs available for MP3 video players:

- WMV—a compressed video format developed by Microsoft.
- H.264/MPEG-4/AVC—a standard for highly compressed video used for storing HD files.
- DivX—a video compression format created by DivX supporting HD videos.
- M4V—a file type based on MPEG-4 available from the Apple iTunes Store in the form of music videos, TV shows and feature movies.

Which type of video support you want in your MP3 may depend on what you plan to watch. However, there are conversion programs for virtually all of the codecs, so ultimately you should not be limited regardless.

The one kicker to buying an MP3 player is if you plan to use iTunes. Apples tries to limit the use

of some iTunes features (syncing and managing media files) to Apple devices such as the iPod. This is an attempt to lock in more Apple sales. If you don't use the iTunes store, then this is not an issue.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I'm having some trouble with my HP PhotoSmart 3310 all-in-one printer/scanner/fax. Despite all my troubleshooting efforts (and HP customer support), I can't seem to figure out why I'm getting horizontal stripes with a rainbow-like effect in the dark areas of my images. I can't seem to find any information online regarding this problem. Is the bulb/lamp at fault? I can send you a sample image that may help explain the phenomenon.

Thanks for all you do for the computing community.

*Gabriel
Chula Vista, CA*

Dear Gabriel,

Yes, it could be the lamp in your scanner that's causing the problems. In order to produce the best image, the light source that reflects off the original needs to be steady and consistent. If there is any variation or a slight flickering, then it could cause the effect that you're seeing.

The way most scanners capture images is through the use of a white light source (the lamp) that travels down the length of the original, illuminating it to mirrors that reflect the image to a lens that separates the colors for capture by the charge-coupled device (CCD)—which senses and records the differentiated colors. Any variation in any part of this process can cause a problem. If there are smudges or dust on the mirrors or lens, you might see vertical lines on the image since the horizontal location of the problem would not change as the lamp traveled down the image. The same would likely be true for CCD problems. The horizontal variation is usually a problem with the light source, especially if the variation changes (rainbow) with the colors scanned (dark areas). It could be a problem with either the bulb or the power supply that feeds the lamp.

The bad news is that none of these parts are generally user replaceable. Plus, unless the scanner is still under warranty, it will probably be less expensive to buy a new all-in-one printer than to get the old one repaired. The good news is that new all-in-one printers are cheap.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I have a laptop with Vista on it. It works fine, but I am having problems when trying to save WordPerfect files onto a "stick." Is there a trick that I should use to accomplish this?

Thanks

*Kurt Benirschke
San Diego, CA*

Dear Kurt,

There always seems to be a few strange times when a file just won't save properly. Sometimes this may be due to some type of file locking or a security setting on the computer system/stick drive. I don't know what the problem may be with WordPerfect, although I've seen similar problems in other programs. In any case, you always need a work-around to get you where you want to go.

Rather than go through an elaborate trouble-shooting process (the time always seems to be short), I would save the file to a local directory, possibly giving it an alternative name—if necessary. Then I will open Windows Explorer and drag the file to the new location—the stick. This will completely bypass the problems in either WordPerfect or the operating system/folder security setup. Then, once the file is on the stick, you can change the name back to whatever you prefer.

Digital Dave

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Input Devices at Your Fingertips

“You're not stuck with the cheap devices that came with your computer.” by Wally Wang

With the huge variety of keyboards and input devices available, you're never stuck with what came with your computer. Find devices you prefer and then start using them to control your computer.

The keyboards and mice that come with most computers are functional, but not really optimized for anything. The keyboard will likely feel cheap, flimsy and mushy when pressing the keys. The mouse will likely plug into the back of the computer while offering the standard left/right mouse button with a scroll wheel in between.

If you plan on using your computer for extended periods of time, you might be happy with the keyboard and mouse that comes with your computer, but you may prefer something better, even if it costs more. If you fall into this latter category, the first step is to dump both the keyboard and mouse and start looking for alternatives.

Keyboards for Touch Typists

Most keyboards aren't designed for touch typists who rely on tactile feedback. That's because most cheap keyboards use something called dome-switches for each key, where pressing a key collapses a plastic dome underneath, creating a quieter keyboard, but at the expense of tactile feedback.

Keyboards that use mechanical switches are noisier, but let you feel and hear when you've pressed a particular key. If you find ordinary keyboards too soft, you'll probably be far happier with a mechanical switch keyboard, which are more expensive, but often worth the additional cost.

At one time, a mail-order company called Northgate Computers made one of the best mechanical switch keyboards. When Northgate Computers went out of business, it transferred its keyboard manufacturing to

another company called Creative Vision Technologies (www.cvtinc.com/products/keyboards/menu.htm), which now sells the old Northgate keyboards under the name Avant Prime for \$149 and up.

Another mechanical switch keyboard manufacturer is Das Keyboard (www.daskeyboard.com), which offers a \$129 keyboard. Curiously, the company also sells a completely blank keyboard so you can practice touch typing without the distraction of letters and numbers on the keys.

The best keyboard on the planet. Period.



Figure 1. Das Keyboard sells a completely blank keyboard to teach touch typing.

For only \$69, you can get a mechanical switch keyboard modeled after IBM's original keyboard design. Unicomp (pckeyboards.stores.yahoo.net/keyboards.html) took over the keyboard technology from Lexmark (who took it over from IBM), so if you prefer the old IBM style of keyboards, you can relive the past.

The Evolution of the Mouse

Initially, computer mice used a rolling rubber ball to track the movement of the mouse. However, these early mice soon ran into problems with dirt jamming the rubber ball, causing it to skip.

Rubber ball mice also had the problem of sliding on a smooth surface, so that's where mouse pads came from to provide a friction surface that the mouse could roll over easily without skipping.

Nowadays, most mice are optical mice, which means they use light to track the movement of the mouse. This means you can place the mouse on any surface (not just on a mouse pad), and the lights will translate the movement of the mouse to the computer.

The two main types of mice are wired and wireless. Wired mice are convenient since you just have to plug them in and start using them. Wireless mice are convenient because you can move them around without the restriction of a cord.

One drawback of wireless mice is that they usually require batteries. Once these batteries die, your mouse is useless—until you replace the battery. Also, if your computer is exposed in a high-traffic area, such as a computer used in a hotel lobby, then a wireless mouse will likely be dropped or carried away where a wired mouse will stay tethered to the computer.

Many companies now sell smaller mice as accessories for laptop computers. Such small mice let you pack and carry them easily, but pull them out when you need to use your laptop in a hotel or office so you don't need to rely on the trackpad of your laptop.

The biggest problem with any mouse is that you need a clear, flat surface to use them. Since not everyone has a clear area on their desk, many companies offer trackballs, which are essentially a mouse flipped over on its back.

The idea behind a trackball is that it stays in one place, but you move the mouse pointer by rolling the trackball in any direction. For even greater convenience, you can also buy combination keyboard/trackball or keyboard/trackpad combinations.

The idea behind such combination trackballs or trackpads embedded directly on a keyboard is to further save space. Of course, you can't move the trackball or trackpad away from the keyboard like you can with a separate trackball, so if you value saving space over the convenience of moving a keyboard separately from a trackball, then consider one of these combination keyboard/trackball units from companies such as Kensington (us.kensington.com) and Logitech (www.logitech.com).



Figure 2. Trackballs are basically upside-down mice.

The Future of Touch

Windows 7 offers touch features, but you need a special touch-sensitive screen to use this feature. The idea behind touch divides into two schools of thought.



One school of thought (typically the Macintosh) places the touch-sensitive controls on a trackpad. The idea is that it's easier to give touch gestures to a flat surface than



Joe got a little too excited when he was using his new touch screen computer monitor.

trying to reach across and touch a vertical screen.

The second school of thought (typically Windows 7) places touch-sensitive controls in the monitor, allowing you to directly manipulate objects on the screen. While this may seem convenient, it has the drawback of leaving fingerprint smudges on the screen as well as giving users something known as "Gorilla Arm."

Try holding your arm in front of you for a minute or two. Notice how tired your arm gets? That's "Gorilla Arm," where you're forced to hold your arm out over and over again. After a while, you'll likely get tired and then wind up using an old-fashioned mouse to manipulate objects on the screen instead.

Voice Commands

If you want a more futuristic input device beyond touch screens, consider using voice commands instead. With programs such as Dragon Naturally Speaking (www.nuance.com/naturallyspeaking) and MacSpeech (www.macspeech.com), you can speak directly into a microphone and train your computer to translate your spoken words into commands or text.

While this may sound like the best input device of all, it does have its drawbacks. First, you must speak out loud to use voice recognition. So if you're in a library, you probably won't be able to speak out commands to your computer.

Another drawback is that voice recognition programs aren't 100 percent accurate. Say something as innocent as "elegant pile" and the voice recognition might mistake that phrase to mean "erase file." If you don't mind the frustration of speaking out loud and speaking slowly and clearly to make sure your computer understands your commands, you may like voice-recognition software.

The Future

The future is clear. Every computer will need a keyboard and a pointing device. However, nearly every keyboard and pointing device included with a computer will likely be the cheapest quality possible, so take a moment to shop for replacement input devices.

With the huge variety of keyboards and input devices available, you're never stuck with what came with your computer. Find the keyboard and pointing device that you prefer and then start using them to control your computer.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter what type of input devices you choose if you don't have anything productive to do with your computer. Decide what's most important to you with your computer and then search for the type of input device that will make your task easier.

Despite exotic technologies like touch and voice commands, most people will probably still wind up relying on the old fashion keyboard and mouse. They may not be the best input devices around, but until someone comes up with something vastly superior, keyboards and mice will always be just good enough.

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 the following books:

- Microsoft Office 2007 for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470009233?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470009233)
- Beginning Programming for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702)
- Breaking Into Acting for Dummies with Larry Garrison (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468)
- Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541)
- Steal This Computer Book 4.0 (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050)
- Visual Basic Express 2005: Now Playing (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593270593?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593270593)
- My New Mac (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271646?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271646)
- My New iPhone (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271956?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271956)
- Strategic Entrepreneurism with Jon Fisher and Gerald Fisher (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894)

Every Saturday morning from 9:00 am - 10:00 am in San Diego, you can hear Wally with fellow co-hosts Dane Henderson and Candace Lee, on the radio show CyberSports Today (cybersportstoday.com/), which covers the video gaming industry on ESPN Radio 800 AM. Wally covers the military history side of the video game industry.

When not performing stand-up comedy or writing computer books, he likes to paper trade stocks with the video game Stock Reflex (www.plimus.com/jsp/download_trial.jsp?contractId=1722712&referrer=wwang), using the techniques he learned from a professional Wall Street day trader.

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Ergonomic Keyboard Alternatives

“Your health and comfort are priceless.” by Michael J. Ross

If you find that using a keyboard and/or mouse is causing cumulative damage and pain to your own computing appendages, consider upgrading from the industrial-style keyboards of the past.

For people who spend a lot of time working at a computer, their comfort and productivity are dependent less upon the technical capabilities of the computer—such as how much memory it has and the speed of its microprocessor—and much more upon the input and output devices attached to that computer. Yet the technical specs are typically overemphasized, while the I/O devices are oftentimes neglected as "peripherals" of little importance—cheap devices that just happen to come with the computer when it is purchased.

In the category of I/O devices, most of the input to the computer is done through a keyboard—even in today's Internet-powered era, in which people are using pointing devices more than ever for navigating around Web pages. Computer users continue to type documents, e-mail messages and tweets; they utilize keyboard shortcuts and hotkeys just as much as ever; and the humble command line still holds the loyalty of countless people, particularly Linux enthusiasts and recent converts.

Yet most computer users continue to put up with cheap and poorly made keyboards and mice that were clearly designed not to maximize the comfort and long-term health of the human being using them, but instead to minimize the short-term financial cost of the purchase—ignoring the long-term financial cost of lost wages and workers' compensation, for those people who are unfortunate enough to become stricken with carpal tunnel syndrome or some other repetitive stress injury (RSI), any of which can cause persistent and debilitating pain in the wrists and forearms.

These problems have prompted the development of ergonomic research and best practices, books on RSI treatment and prevention, workplace safety consultants and even full-time employees, speech recognition technologies, and a wide variety of input devices intended to alleviate physical discomfort and damage from long-term use—including ergonomic keyboards, touchpads and mice. In this article, we will survey the leading candidates in that first category.

My assessment of the keyboards discussed below is largely informed by more than two decades of almost-daily computer usage, as well as my experiences from trying out most of the input devices and practices available. Ask any veteran programmer or other long-term computer user, and they should be able to tell you of harsh lessons learned from years of banging on "five dollar keyboards," and the strain it can cause to overworked fingers, wrists, forearms and all the connecting muscles, tendons, nerves and fascia.

Keys to Keep Your Fingers Well

We will start by looking at my favorite keyboard, designed by Kinesis (www.kinesis-ergo.com/keyboards.htm), which is located in Bothell, Washington. Although the company currently offers eight different types of office ergonomics products—ranging from laptop devices to USB hubs—Kinesis is probably best known for its distinctly shaped keyboard, known as the Contoured (also confusingly referred to by another name, the Advantage).



Figure 1. Kinesis Contoured.

All of its keys are organized into four separate groups, with a majority of them in two separated key wells, which significantly reduces the strain of rotating your hands outward simply to match the horizontal rows of keys on a traditional keyboard. Admittedly, a similar separation, though to a lesser extent, is offered by Microsoft's supposedly ergonomic keyboards, including the Wave (its original version), all of its current models, and the countless knockoffs that followed the original.

But that's where the similarity ends, because the Kinesis Advantage makes possible a much more natural position of the arms. Secondly, it allows you to drop your fingers down into the key wells for less muscular strain, especially with the logical key positioning, which requires less travel by the fingers. Thirdly, the most commonly used keys—such as the Enter, Space, Back Space, and Delete—are all controlled by the (more powerful) thumbs. Another advantage is the flat open space on top of the keyboard, between the two key wells, because it is an ideal location for a touchpad, if you choose to use one. That configuration allows you to kick back, put the keyboard on your lap, and avoid reaching forward to your desk to reach a mouse.

The Contoured keyboard is available in three different colors (including black, shown here), with a USB or PS/2 connection, and prices starting at \$299 for the basic programmable model and \$359 for the Pro model, which allows for greater programmability. Both models make it possible for you to reassign keys at will, and even store commonly executed keystroke combinations into any individual key or combination thereof. Consequently, there is finally a use for those otherwise obsolete function keys, F1 through F12.

Kinesis also offers two other keyboard lines, the Maxim (which looks similar to the Microsoft Wave) and the Freestyle, in which the two key groups are separated even further, into two separate but connected panels. Yet it is the Contoured for which the company is best known.

This is evidenced by the MALTRON L-Type, which largely appears to be a copy of the Contoured. It is available from PCD MALTRON (www.maltron.com/), located in Stafford, United Kingdom. For the model lacking a built-in trackball, prices start at £375 (British pounds—about \$615 at today's currency rates).



Figure 2. MALTRON L-Type.

Like the Contoured, the L-Type has a built-in USB controller, so it can be used on both PCs and Macs without need of any conversion hardware or software. Also identical is the resultant positioning of your hands and wrists for greater comfort and safety. However, unlike the Kinesis product, the L-Type is not programmable—nor are the other models offered by MALTRON, including a single-handed keyboard that looks even more unusual than the dual-handed ones.

Not Prone to Pronation

One of the key factors that cause conventional typing positions to result in RSI is having to twist your hands out from the center line, with partial pronation, just to be able to get your fingertips on top of the home row of keys, which are positioned in a straight line, with no gap between. This configuration may be optimal for the robots on a factory floor, manufacturing these devices with great speed and no feelings; but it is certainly not optimal for human beings equally confined to a cubicle, typing on these devices with great speed, and with feelings ranging from sharp pain in the wrists to numbness and tingling in the fingers.

Several ergonomic keyboards have been designed so as to place the hands in a much more natural, vertical position. For instance, the Kinesis Freestyle mentioned above can be attached to a platform that places the two separate keyboard panels into vertical position, allowing the user to avoid the over-rotation demanded by regular keyboards. Oddly, the platform, known as a Multi-Tent Accessory, costs twice as much as the keyboard itself—\$199 versus \$99. The Freestyle is available in several international versions, including French Canadian, German, Swedish and British.



Figure 3. Kinesis Freestyle Ascent.

The SafeType Keyboard (www.safetype.com/) is similar to the Ascent, in that it eliminates the aforementioned misalignment—technically known as extension, pronation, and deviation (and no, that's not referring to any kinky Web sites we may "accidentally" stumble upon). Instead, the vertical design allows you to type in an orthopedically neutral position.



Figure 4. SafeType Keyboard.

Unlike the Ascent, the SafeType Keyboard panels are positioned so that the further keys are rotated even more away from you, which makes it impossible to see the keys you are typing—if it were not for the built-in side mirrors, which do give this keyboard a strange appearance. Of course, the same can be said of any decent ergonomic keyboard. But their purpose is not to win a fashion contest, but rather to win the hearts and

minds and wrists of keyboarders everywhere.

The SafeType works with both PCs and Macs, supports USB, and is sold for \$295.

Still somewhat lost in the haze of prototyping, the Grippity1.0 BackTyping keyboard—developed by Grippity (www.grippity.com/) of Israel—takes the idea of orthopedic neutrality to a new level, because instead of holding your hands and fingers straight out in front of you, and typing inward, you grip the back side edges of the Grippity1.0, and type toward yourself. The problem of the keys not being visible is solved by having the key letter labels facing toward you, with plenty of space between the key rows, so you can see the position of your fingertips.



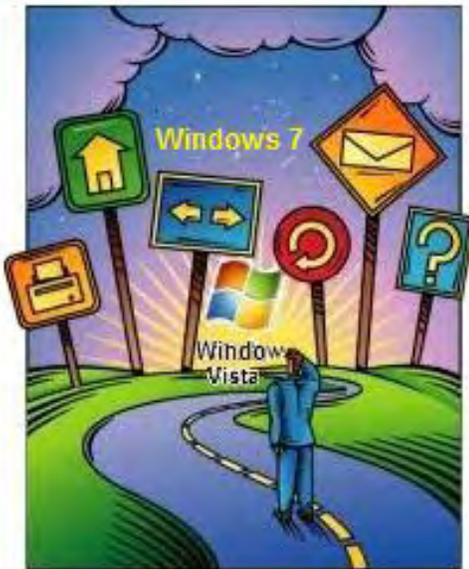
Figure 5. Grippity1.0.

The picture above shows the media center version of the keyboard. Unfortunately, the standard BackTyping keyboard is not displayed on the company's Web site, and may still be under development. But at least you get a good idea as to the overall principle, which is rather clever, and lends itself well to reclining while typing. In addition, the keyboard is smaller and lighter than even the cheapest mainstream keyboards.

These are not the only ergonomic keyboards available on the market, but they certainly represent many of the innovative ideas dreamed up by creative engineers and workspace-optimization experts. If you find that using a keyboard and/or mouse is causing cumulative damage and pain to your own computing appendages, be sure to seek advice from your health practitioner, and definitely consider upgrading from the industrial-style keyboards of the past. It may require a financial investment on your part, or that of your employer, but bear in mind that your health and comfort are priceless.

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.

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Windows Tips and Tricks

Windows Tips and Tricks: Resizing Windows Without a Mouse

“An all-around Windows tip that applies to every version.”

by Jack Dunning

There is a not-well-publicized trick to using the Move and Size commands without using a mouse.

This is an all-around Windows tip that applies to every version of Windows. It is about a feature that most of us have seen, but don't know how to activate. Most of the time we probably don't need it, but when we do it is certainly handy. It involves the Move and Size commands that can be accessed in any open window.

Usually when we want to move a window, we merely click and hold the left-mouse button on the title bar of the window. As long as we hold down the button and drag the mouse, the window will move with our dragging motion to the new location. It is quick and easy. In fact, it is so easy that we never consider using the Move command that appears when we right-click on the title bar of the windows (see Figure 1). Even if we activate the Move command, we see a movement cross symbol, but it doesn't seem to do anything. A click of the mouse and the cross cursor is gone.

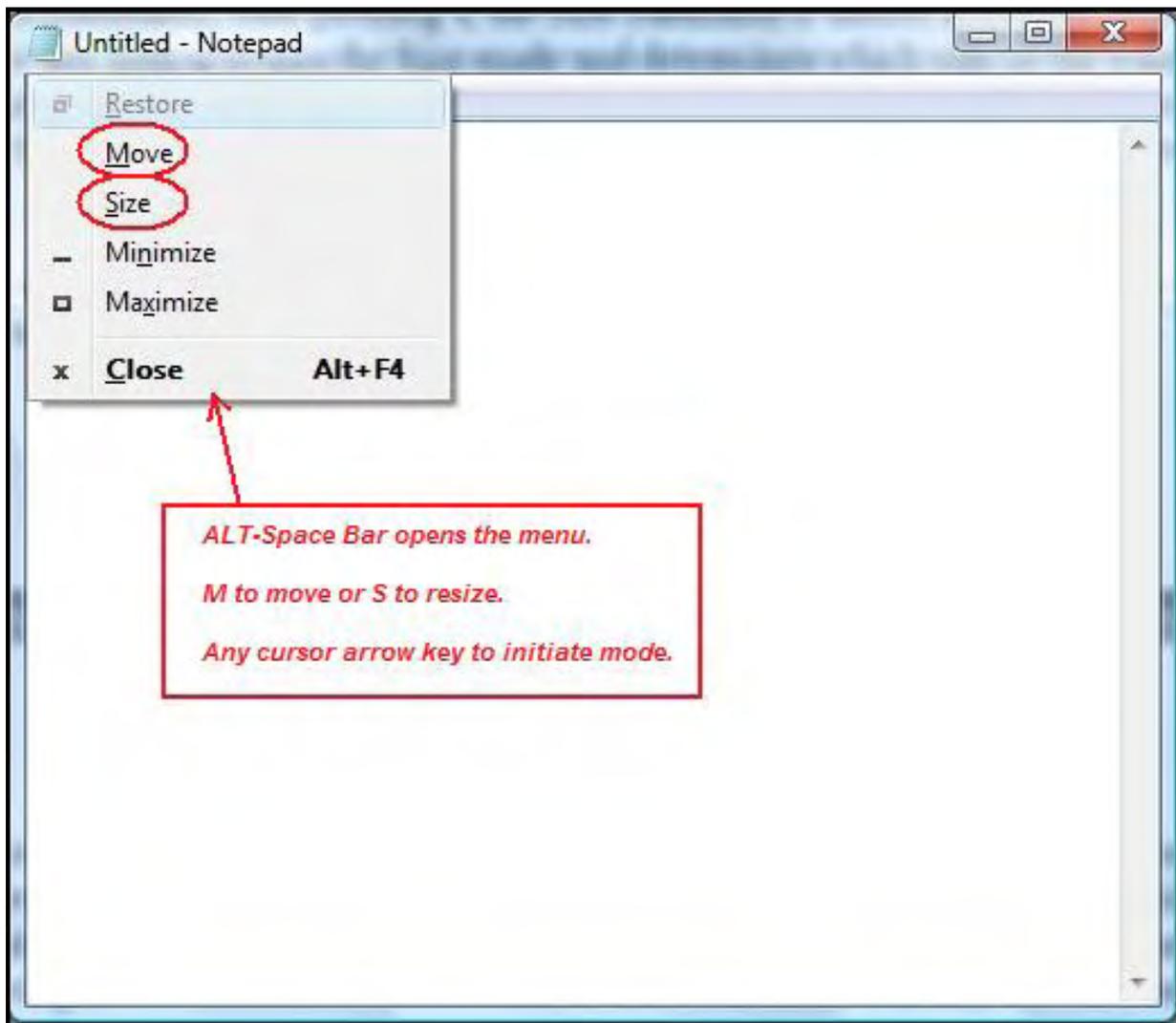


Figure 1. The right-click menu in the title bar of a window.

The primary time that I have wanted the Move command to work is when the title bar has been out of sight of the cursor. I wasn't able to click and hold on the title bar to move the window into another position. Or if for some reason, I didn't have a mouse or mouse pad available, I didn't know how to use the Move command to reposition the windows. There is a not-well-publicized trick to using the Move and Size commands without using a mouse.

First, to open the title bar right-click menu in any selected window, hold down the ALT key and hit the Space bar. This will open the menu shown in Figure 1. To activate any of the commands, press the underlined letter that appears within the command in the menu. If you want to Maximize, press x; Minimize, press m. Move and Size are m and s respectively. (We've done this before, but then we tried to use the mouse to move the window—the command was merely deactivated.) To make the Move command work, it's necessary to use one of the cursor arrow keys to initiate the action. Once a cursor key is pushed, the feature is in effect.

When we activate the command, the window will move in the direction of the cursor arrows pressed, as in Figure 2. No mouse is necessary, although since the cursor is now locked to the window, the mouse will also move the window without pressing any buttons. Once the Enter key is pressed (or the left-mouse button clicked), the window drops out of the Move mode in its new positions. (Press ESC to cancel without the move.)

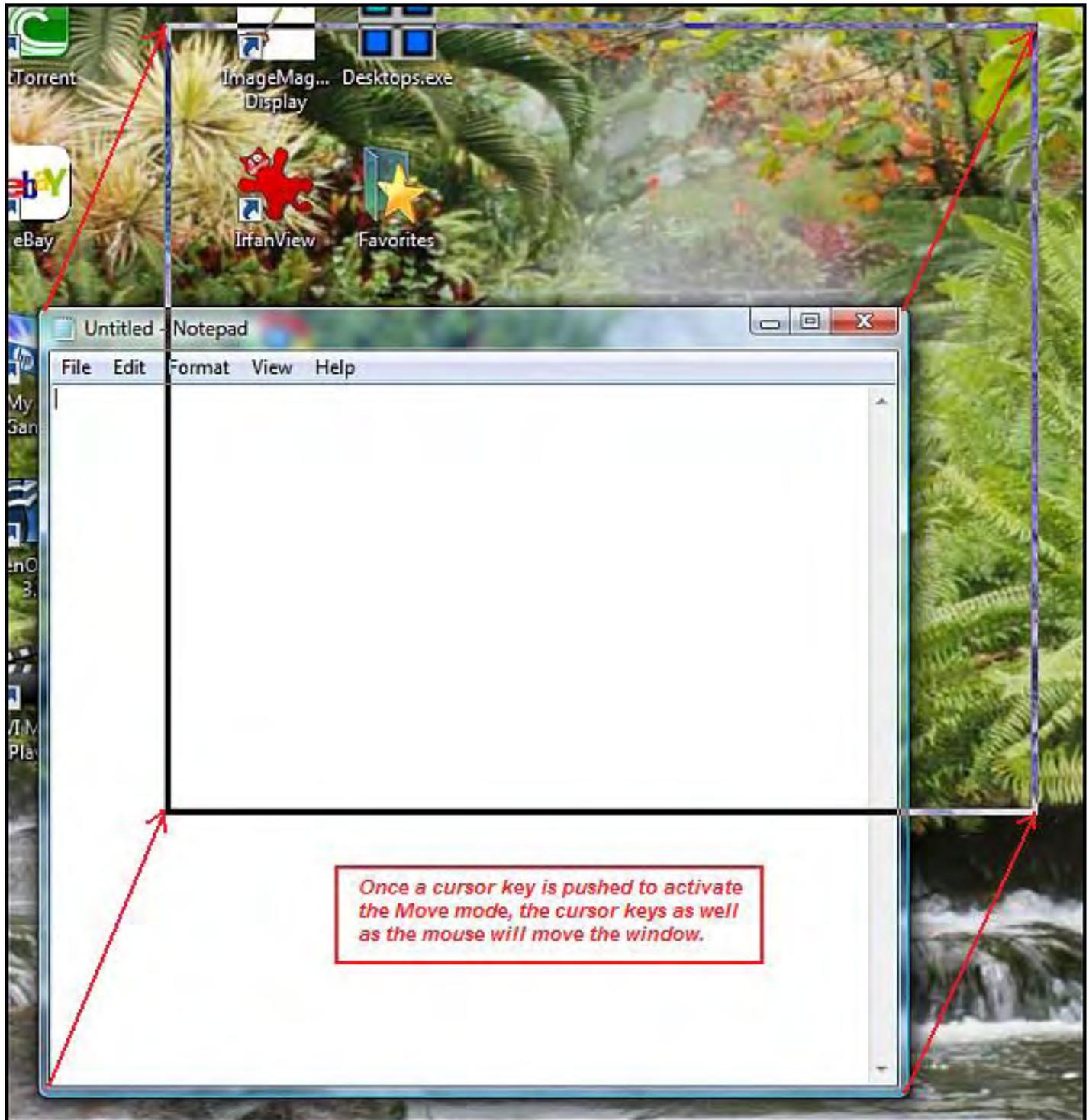


Figure 2. Once in the Move mode, the windows will move with the cursor arrow keys or the mouse.

The Size command works in much the same fashion as the Move command, only its purpose is to change the size of the window. When we use a mouse to resize a window, we drag any edge or corner of the window with a click and hold of the left-mouse button when over the respective edge or corner. If we don't have a mouse or mouse pad available, by holding the ALT key and simultaneously pressing the space bar (as with the Move command), then pressing s, the Size command is almost activated. The first click of the cursor arrow key both activates the Size mode and determines which side of the window will move. The second cursor key determines which adjacent sides we move. (Only two adjacent sides may be selected.) See Figure 3. Once activated, the cursor keys or the mouse may be used to resize the window.

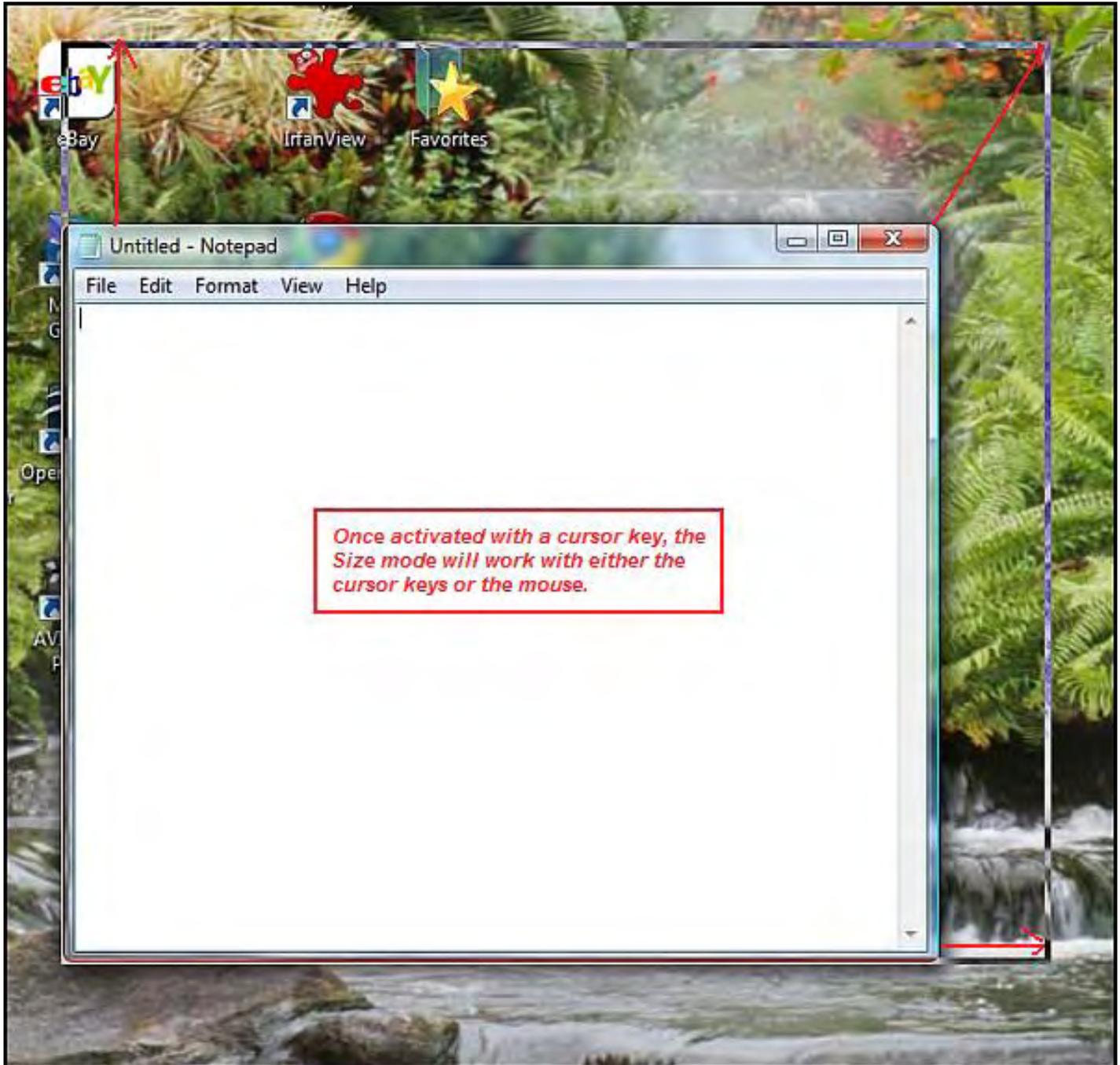


Figure 3. ALT Space Bar plus the letter "s" allows the Size mode to be activated with the press of one of the cursor arrow keys.

I can only think of a couple of times when I wanted to move or resize a window without using a mouse. The first was when either the title bar had somehow disappeared off the screen, or the resizing bottom-right corner couldn't be reached with the mouse. The second is when I didn't have a mouse available. At those times, knowing how to activate the Move and/or Size command with a key combination is certainly useful.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputerEdge* 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

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Wally Wang's Apple Farm

Wally Wang's Apple Farm

“Computer Input Devices” by Wally Wang

Ideally, Apple will one day sell a portable, mouseless trackpad that you can use with a desktop Mac to give you the same features as a laptop. Until then, the Magic Mouse is the best alternative. Also, a look at Toast 10, which is easy to use and far more powerful than Mac OS X's basic disc-burning capabilities; a discussion of Windows 7 upgrade woes; and a tip on an easier way to burn discs.

The Macintosh helped make the mouse part of every computer. Despite turning the mouse into a common computer accessory, Apple has a long history of making the worst mice in the world.

The initial Macintosh mouse had just one button, while every other company added two (and Logitech went overboard by adding three buttons). When other companies added a scroll wheel to their mice, Apple dragged its feet and finally released a two-button mouse.

Of course, Apple also released its hockey puck mouse, with the original iMac, that was so perfectly symmetrical as to make it hard to hold and even harder to orient. Later, Apple released the Mighty Mouse, which improved upon the scroll wheel by replacing it with a scroll ball. While the scroll wheel let you scroll up and down, the scroll ball let you also go side to side.

Then Apple made its first real breakthrough with the touchpad on its aluminum laptops. Unlike other laptops that clutter the touchpad with two buttons and sometimes add a pointing stick embedded in the middle of the keyboard, Apple stuck with its minimalist design.

Eliminating the mouse button allowed Apple to enlarge the trackpad. To replace the mouse button, Apple simply made the entire trackpad a button. Press one finger to left-click and two fingers to right-click. After a few moments, using this new buttonless trackpad seems surprisingly obvious and simple, which makes old-fashioned trackpads with mouse buttons feel like antiques in comparison.

While laptop users could enjoy the futuristic trackpad, desktop Mac users still had to use an ordinary mouse. Now Apple has remedied that problem with the introduction of the Magic Mouse.

The Magic Mouse is a cordless mouse that eliminates the clumsy scroll ball altogether. Instead, you get a smooth, touch-sensitive surface that lets you scroll right/left or up/down with just a flick of a finger.

Still, it's not quite as slick as the mouseless trackpad, but it's a start. Ideally, Apple will one day sell a portable, mouseless trackpad that you can use with a desktop Mac to give you the same features as a laptop. Until then, the Magic Mouse is the best alternative.

Suddenly, everything clicks. And swipes. And scrolls.

Introducing Magic Mouse. The world's first Multi-Touch mouse.
Now included with every new iMac. And available on its own for just \$69.



Figure 1. The Magic Mouse.

Toast 10 Titanium

Burning files or entire folders to a CD/DVD on a Mac is easy. Just right-click on a file or folder and choose the "Burn" option from the pop-up menu. Hold down the Command key and you can click on multiple items to burn to a disc.

While Mac OS X makes it easy to burn files to a disc, you may want more control over burning discs. In that case, you might want a program like Toast 10 Titanium (www.roxio.com/enu/products/toast/titanium/overview.html).

One major feature of Toast that you won't find in the standard Mac OS X disc-burning feature is the ability to create discs for both Windows and Mac OS X. Just load the files you want to burn, then select check boxes to determine which operating system can display particular files and folders.

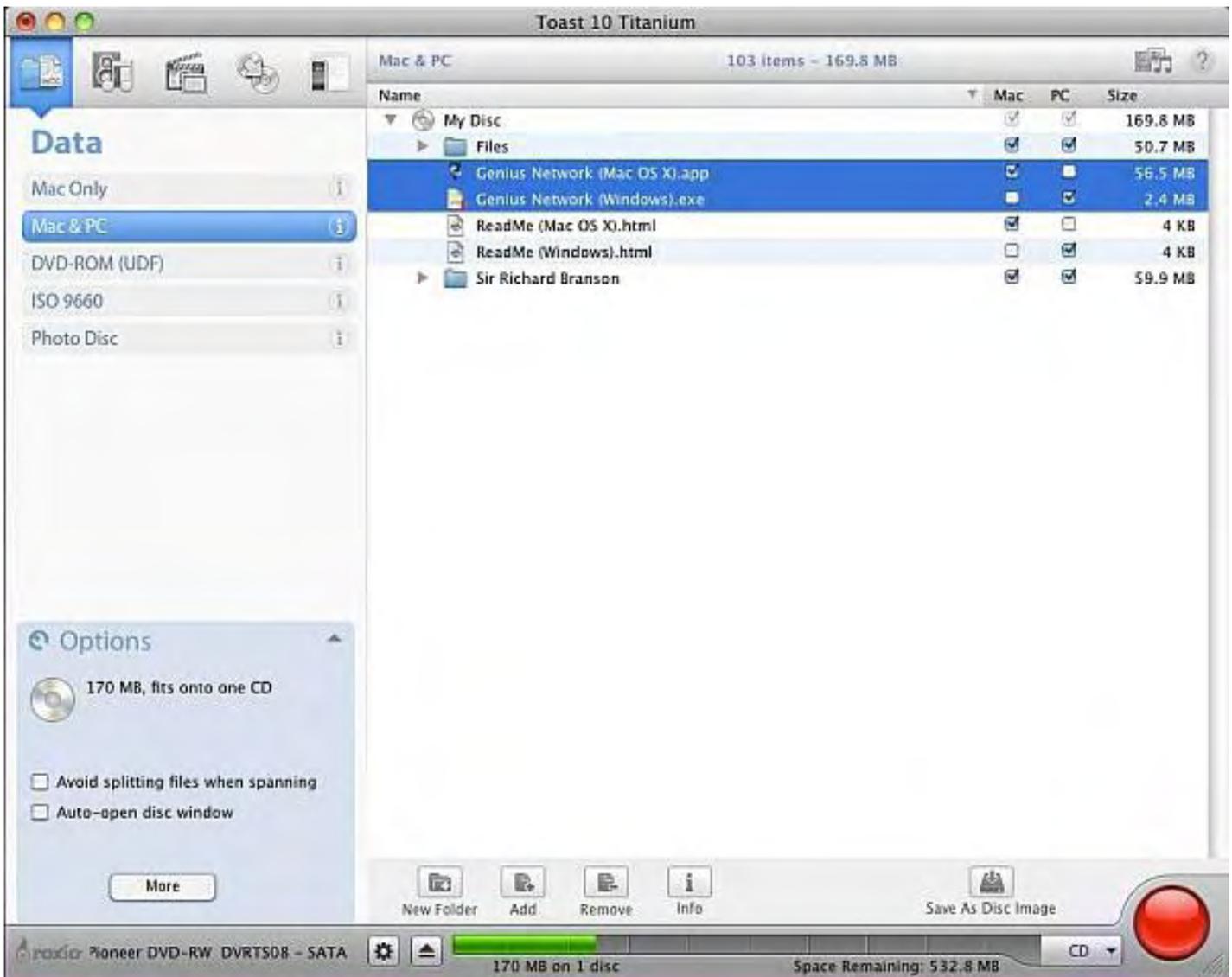


Figure 2. Toast 10 can create discs that display different files on Windows and Mac OS X.

Now if you stick the disc in a Windows PC, you'll see one set of files and folders, but if you stick that same disc in a Macintosh, you may see an entirely different set of files and folders. This ability to burn Windows/Mac OS X-specific discs can help you tailor your discs for each operating system.

If you need to burn your own Blu-ray discs, you'll have no choice but to use a program like Toast. If you have a video camcorder, you can transfer those video files directly from your camcorder to a DVD without going through an intermediary step of storing it on your hard disk first.

If you have non-copy-protected DVDs, Toast can convert your video files into QuickTime or MPEG-4 files. Pop a non-copy-protected DVD into your Mac, and Toast can strip away the audio and store it in iTunes so you can load it on your iPod and just hear the audio.

Maybe you'd like to create a combination audio/data CD. This lets you store an audio track on a CD so people can hear it on their CD player, but also pop the disc in a computer to retrieve data off the disc.

Toast 10 Titanium offers so many unique features that separate it from the ordinary disc-burning capabilities of Mac OS X that if you need to burn discs more than once, you'll find the flexibility of Toast 10 far outweighs its cost and learning curve.

Toast 10 is easy to use and far more powerful than Mac OS X's basic disc-burning capabilities. If you just need to burn files to a disc occasionally, you probably don't need Toast 10. However, if you burn files to discs regularly, the \$99.99 cost for Toast 10 makes it a great investment for anyone who regularly stores any data on discs.

Windows 7 Woes

A friend of mine had the right idea. After his Windows XP computer died on him, he was going to start with a brand new PC running Windows 7 (64-bit). He had already backed up all his important files to an external hard disk so it was simply a matter of hooking up his new Windows 7 PC, connecting the external hard disk, and reinstalling all his old programs and data on to the new computer. Sounds easy, right?

As you might expect, what should have been a simple task turned into a nightmare. First, Windows 7 refused to recognize his wireless keyboard, so we pushed that aside and used the ordinary USB keyboard instead.

Next, we tried plugging in his Hewlett-Packard Color Laser 1600 printer, but that didn't work either. Finally, we plugged the external hard drive into the Windows 7 PC and it recognized the hard drive, but claimed the entire disk was empty.

Hooking this same external hard disk to my MacBook Air proved that it was loaded with files, but plugging it back into the Windows 7 PC showed that the hard disk contained no files at all.

To get around this problem, we resorted to copying several folders at a time off the external hard disk on to a USB flash drive and then copying those folders off the flash drive on to the Windows 7 hard disk. Three and a half hours later, all we managed to do was get Windows 7 up and running with all of his files intact, but without a printer or wireless keyboard.

Does this sound logical—that setting up a computer could be so difficult? Apparently the only safe way to get Windows 7 is to buy a new PC and buy brand-new equipment specifically designed to work with Windows 7.

More disappointing was the speed of Windows 7. It's definitely faster and more responsive than Vista, but running on my friend's new PC with 6GB of RAM and an AMD Athlon II X4 620 quad-core processor, Windows 7 didn't feel dramatically faster. Instead, it felt slightly more responsive than my friend's previous PC running Windows XP with 1GB of RAM on a Pentium 4. With such a dramatic hardware upgrade, I expected to see a massive speed difference, like going from a bicycle to a Mach 3 SR-71 spy plane. Instead, it felt more like moving from a bicycle to a motorized scooter.

While struggling to get Windows 7 to cooperate with all his old accessories, I kept wondering, why do people put up with this? Rather than take the risk of switching to a Macintosh or just sticking with a new PC running Windows XP, people think it's perfectly acceptable to waste half a day setting up a new Windows 7 PC and still not get the same results as their previous computer.

Too many Windows users simply feel that computers are always going to be this troublesome, so there's no point in trying anything new, since anything new will be equally or more troublesome, which isn't true at all.

After struggling to get Windows 7 to work, I'm more convinced than ever that everyone should at least consider alternatives. Most Macintosh users were once Windows users, so they can appreciate the differences between the two. However, most Windows users have rarely used a Macintosh recently, which

means their blind allegiance to Windows is based more on ignorance rather than facts.

If you're willing to waste several hours just to get a new Windows PC working, you should be willing to invest at least an hour trying out a Macintosh to see what it can do. The Macintosh isn't 100 percent trouble-free, but it's far simpler than most people realize. If you're frustrated with Windows, you have little to lose by trying anything else. Try a Macintosh, try Linux, try Solaris, but try something. You might be surprised at what you'll find out.

* * *

If you want to burn files or folders to a disc, you can select those files and folders, right-click, and choose "Burn" from the pop-up menu. However, another way to burn discs is to click the Finder icon on the Dock, then choose New Burn Folder.

This creates a folder that contains everything you want to burn to a disc. Now you can leisurely copy and paste files and folders into this burn folder, and when you're ready, right-click on this folder to burn its contents to a disc.

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 the following books:

- Microsoft Office 2007 for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470009233?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470009233)
- Beginning Programming for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702)
- Breaking Into Acting for Dummies with Larry Garrison (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468)
- Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541)
- Steal This Computer Book 4.0 (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050)
- Visual Basic Express 2005: Now Playing (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593270593?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593270593)
- My New Mac (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271646?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271646)
- My New iPhone (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271956?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271956)
- Strategic Entrepreneurism with Jon Fisher and Gerald Fisher (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894)

Every Saturday morning from 9:00 am - 10:00 am in San Diego, you can hear Wally with fellow co-hosts Dane Henderson and Candace Lee, on the radio show CyberSports Today (cybersportstoday.com/), which covers the video gaming industry on ESPN Radio 800 AM. Wally covers the military history side of the video game industry.

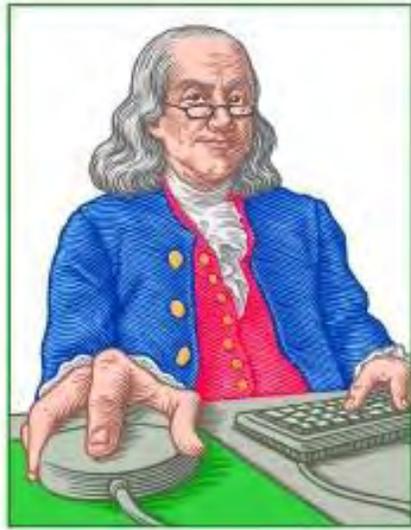
When not performing stand-up comedy or writing computer books, he likes to paper trade stocks with the video game Stock Reflex (www.plimus.com/jsp/download_trial.jsp?contractId=1722712&referrer=wwang), using the techniques he learned from a professional Wall Street day trader.

Wally can be reached at wally@computoredge.com and at his personal web site (www.wallacewang.com/).

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Linux Lessons: Tips and Tricks from Users

“Puppy Linux and GIMP”
by ComputerEdge Staff



LINUX LESSONS

**"AN INVESTMENT
IN LINUX KNOWLEDGE
PAYS THE BEST
INTEREST."**

A reader shares recommendations on Puppy Linux, which works well on older computers; and a Windows version of GIMP; a reader thinks ComputerEdge Linux articles are too geeky, while another suggests Ubuntu; a reader needs to remove the GRUB boot loader; and a question about migrating to Linux while keeping BlackBerry-Windows sync functionality.

Puppy Linux and GIMP

Hello Linux Lessons:

I just wanted to mention a couple of things. One is Puppy Linux (www.puppylinux.com), a distro that fits on a thumb drive and seems to work pretty well on older computers. I loaded it onto a CD and ran it on a machine that is at least eight years old. I was able to load it on the hard drive, but the interface is a little non-intuitive. I took me a few tries before I got it right.

The other item is GIMP (www.gimp.org/) (an image manipulation program). I loaded this onto a machine running Vista and it works really well! Though it was originally done for Linux, I found this Windows version. I wonder how many other programs originally made for Linux could be used on Windows?

John H.

Help the Linux Curious

Linux will never become mainstream if all the topics discussed in your articles are about things the average Joe won't understand. If someone was curious about trying Linux they probably will be turned off by the Linux articles in your magazine.

I have played with Linux on and off for years. I've installed it on several computers. Why would anyone pay for software when open source has such quality stuff?

I know just a little, but I get turned off from learning any more from the *ComputerEdge* if the topics you will be covering will be about; "grep, basics of cp, SSH tunneling, Python, pico, or fsck." I have only heard of

Python. I believe it is a programming language. All the rest of it is unfamiliar to me. I am a strong supporter of Linux. I am not a programmer. I just want to use the software and learn more about everyday user-type things.

I want Linux to be used by a good many people, but you will turn off most people who are interested/curious if the terms in your articles are "geek to them."

Please write your articles to help people become more interested in Linux, not push them away. I am usually disappointed in the info you have in your Linux articles. If all your articles are geared toward "geeks," you will not win any converts. The majority of people think that Linux is beyond them and is just for experts. Little do they know, it's not.

I installed Linux in my brother's laptop. He has no idea what it is. He just knows it works.

Don't the majority of Linux users want to spread the word? Don't we want more people to take advantage this great free software?

All the programmers who contribute to Linux and other open source software deserve to get the credit for all their time and talent.

I will try to send questions from the average Joe's perspective.

Bill
Crystal Lake, Illinois

How Do I Remove GRUB?

I was running a dual-boot system about a year ago, and I needed to uninstall Ubuntu Linux from my boot machine. I don't remember the reason. When I uninstalled Linux, the GRUB boot loader was left and I couldn't remove it.

I have been running Vista since then. I have a different machine now and want to do a dual boot again, but I don't want to have GRUB left if I do an uninstall again. The plan is to install Ubuntu 9.10. If it doesn't work, and I uninstall Ubuntu, I don't want GRUB to be left. Is there any fairly simple way of doing this?

Bill
Crystal Lake, Illinois

Migrating to Linux

I would love to migrate to Linux completely, but need I Windows to sync with my BlackBerry and I need MS Word 2003 because most companies want resumes in ".doc" format.

I know that OpenOffice.org Writer can save files in the ".doc" format, but there seems to be formatting problems. It doesn't come out right. My understanding is that Wine is a complicated process. Does Evolution sync with Blackberry? I couldn't find anything when I did a search.

Are there any workarounds that aren't too complicated for someone who doesn't know his way around a command line?

Bill

Crystal Lake, Illinois

A Message From a Geek

Bill,

There is one very simple response for your request to have *ComputerEdge* write "... articles to help people become more interested in Linux": Download and install Ubuntu. If all you need is a basic working install of Linux, it doesn't get anymore simple than that. You won't ever need to program, use the command prompt, connect to anything, worry about your file system, or do any of the things you describe as "geek."

However, if for some reason one day you did need to open a terminal and interact with the shell; move, copy, delete, or examine files from the command prompt; connect to or send files to other systems over a network connection; automate a task using a shell script or other programming language; have a need to interact with the built-in mail programs outside of the GUI-like pine; mess around with file permissions; or gain more in-depth understanding of your Linux system in any way, you, or other readers who may be more than a little bit curious about Linux, may want to either look for help or post questions on *ComputerEdge* in the Linux Lessons section.

Please forgive me; I do not mean to patronize you. I do want to point out, however, that there are, indeed, a great many new Linux users out there who already understand that installing the Linux OS is a relatively simple process—what they do beyond this is where the real understanding begins. These users are looking for the next proverbial step to make their Linux system either more effective or to add functionality which does not come native with the basic install.

Some call this "geeky"; I chose to call it a learning process. Linux lends its users to learn more. Less can be said for some other more popular commercial operating systems ;)

Pete Choppin (webserver.computoredge.com/editorial/prg/authorbio.mvc?contribid=CHOP)

* * *

Give Us Your Linux Tips and/or 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, or a favorite Linux software application, 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 *ComputerEdge* 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 words "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

ComputerEdge

ComputerEdge 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 "ComputerQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at ceeditor@computoredge.com.

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Rob, The Computer Tutor

Rob, The ComputerTutor Does VB.Net 2010

“Visual Basic-Database (DB) 08 Versus 10”
by Rob Spahitz

Last time, we connected a VB project to a database. This week, we'll compare the difference between how VB.Net 2008 connects versus the initial beta release of VB.Net 2010.

Last time, we connected a VB project to a database. This week, we'll compare the difference between how VB.Net 2008 connects versus the initial beta release of VB.Net 2010.

Note: These columns are written using VB.Net 2010. However, most of the features will work just fine with VB.Net 2008 or even earlier versions. To see how to install VB.Net 2010, check my July 31, 2009 column, and to retrieve project files, check my server at www.dogopoly.com/ce.

Review

Let's rebuild last week's project. For more details, look back to that column.

Create an Access database named VBDB with one table, tblPerson, with fields PersonID (primary key, autonumber), FirstName and LastName.

Create a new VB Windows Form Application project called DBApp3.

Go to menu Project and select Add Existing Item. In the window that appears, locate the VBDB database (you may need to change the bottom dropdown to show all files to see this), then add it. VB asks what Database Model to use; there's only one choice of Dataset, so select that. Next, expand the Tables view and select all of tblPerson by clicking on the checkbox next to it, then change the name at the bottom of the window to dsPerson, as seen in Figure 1, then click the Finish button.

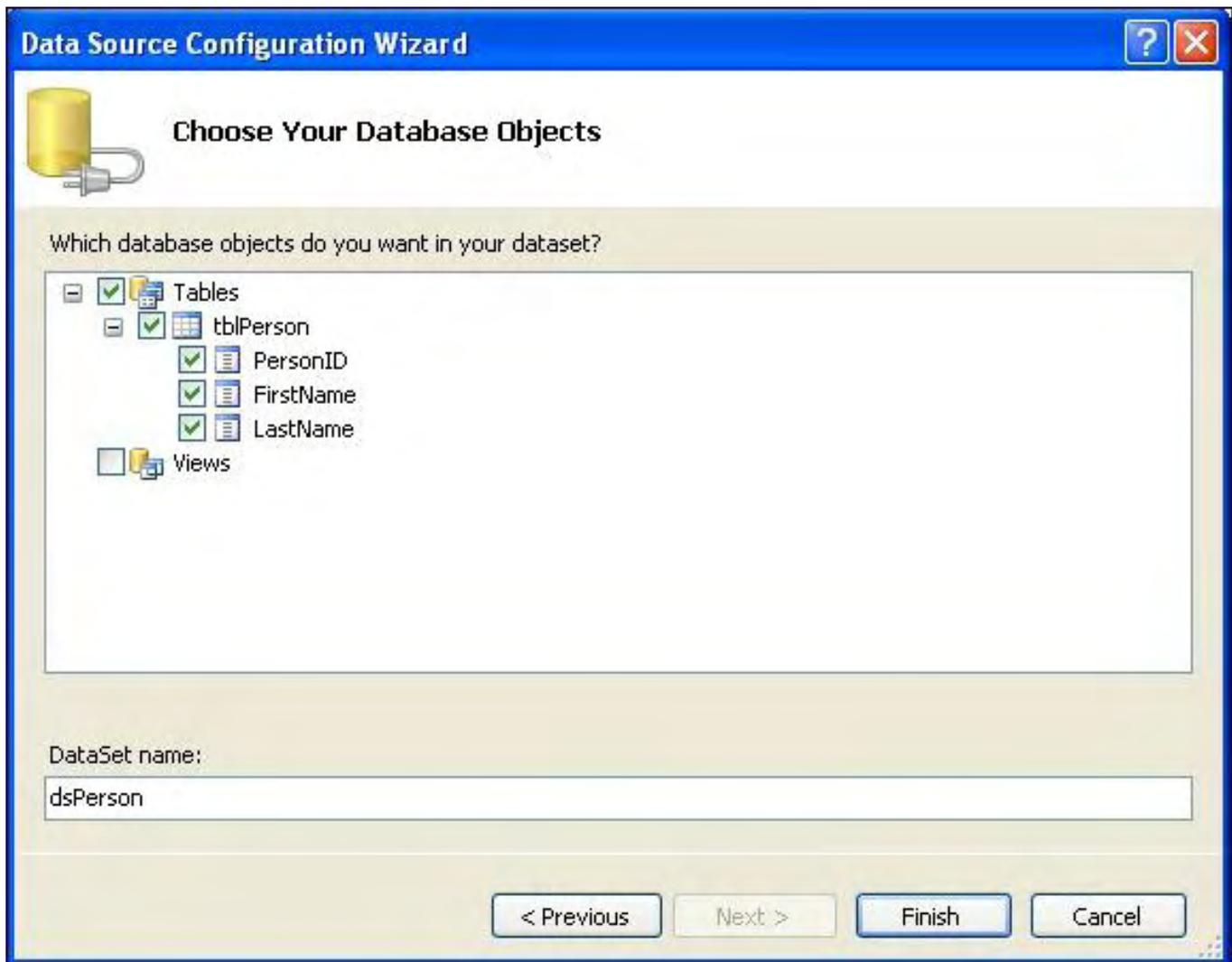


Figure 1. Defining a Data Set.

Here's where we'll differ a bit from last week's column. Instead of adding a Grid, we'll explore the way to add a collection of controls that lets you manage the fields one piece at a time. For example, instead of a grid cell for a yes/no (boolean) field, you could use a checkbox. And instead of a cell for a date field, you could use a date-time picker control.

VB.Net 2008

The current officially released version of VB.Net is the 2008 edition. So if you were doing the above in the 2008 edition, you'd see a form and the database there, just like in the 2010 edition. However, when you finish the above in 2008, you see a Data tab selected next to your Project Explorer, as seen in Figure 2.

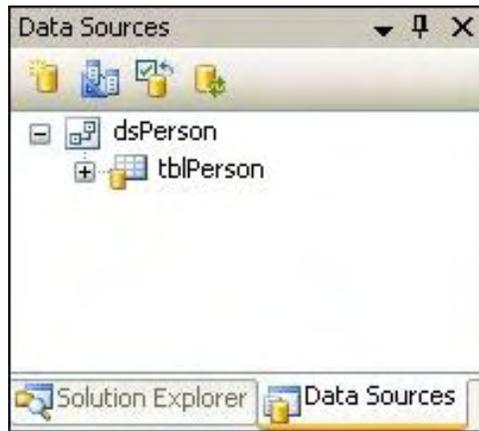


Figure 2. VB 2008 Data Sources Tab.

Notice how the Data Set you just created appears there. We didn't see that in 2010. We'll get to that shortly.

When you expand the "+" next to tblPerson, you see a list of fields from the table, as seen in Figure 3.

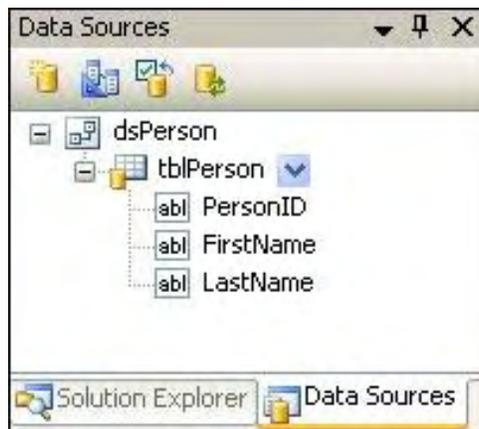


Figure 3. Data Sources fields.

Notice that each field has an icon next to it that looks like the icon in your toolbox for a TextBox. This indicates that these fields are currently linked to that control if you add them to the form (which we'll do shortly). The controls that appear are based on the database fields and may show up with different icons. Also, when you do expand the table, you get a dropdown list next to the table. Click on it and you'll see something like what is in Figure 4.

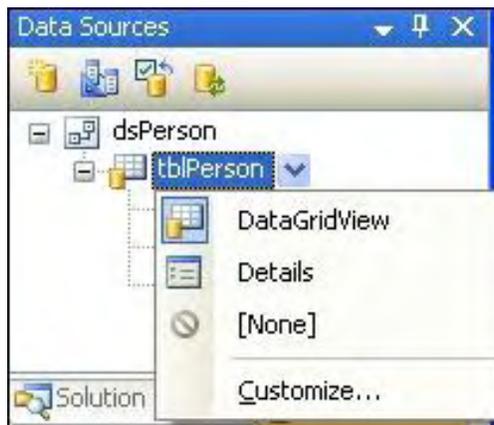


Figure 4. Table Options.

With the options as they are now, we can see how this table can be used with your form. The icon next to DataGridView has the same icon you see next to the table. That means you can simply drag the entire table name to your form, and it will build the grid that we painstakingly added last week, including the navigation bar and code to make it work. If you choose the Details option, you will get individual fields appearing on the form if you drag the table over. With the None option, the table cannot be dragged (which I suppose is good if your mouse sometimes has a mind of its own and likes to take over your machine). Lastly, Customize would let you organize your own, although that's something I've never tried, so if you've done it, let me know and we can share the benefits together.

OK, with this knowledge, let's add the fields. Select Details from the options. Drag the table icon (showing the Details—Form and controls image) to the top-left corner of the form (leaving a bit of room for a navigation control that will appear at the top). When you're finished, it should look something like Figure 5. Also note that if you wanted something other than TextBoxes, you could click on the individual field in the Data Sources tab and select a different control from the set of choices.

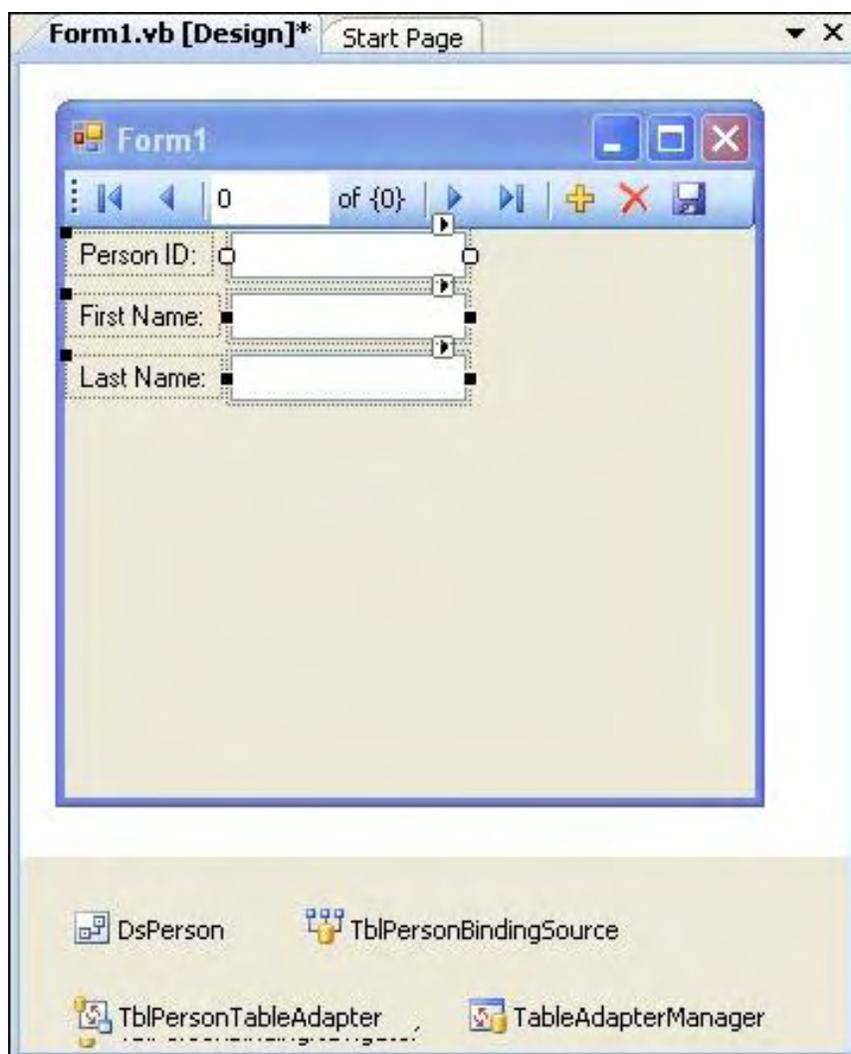


Figure 5. Form with Dataset Details Controls.

In addition to the fields, you also see all of the Tray objects we saw last week.

Notice how the navigation bar contains icons for adding records ("+"), deleting ("X") and saving (floppy disk). The save option was something we had to manually add and code last week.

Let's do one more thing before we try this with 2010. Return to the Solution Explorer by clicking the tab at the bottom of the Data Sources tab we saw created earlier. As we did last week, click on the database and change the "Copy To Output" property to "Copy if newer." Run the app, add (+)/change/delete (X) some data, save it, close it and run again. Your data should be there. Simple!

Note that the usage of this form is still not as simple as an Access form. To make it more user-friendly, you'll want to add some additional programming to better manage this, like disabling the PersonID field, detecting when a change is made (so you can ask the user to save if the Save button is not clicked) or even auto-saving, automatically adding a new record when tabbing past the last field, etc. These are really just design features; some are more useful than others, so I leave them to the reader to explore.

VB.Net 2010

When we look at 2010, we don't see the Data Sources tab. When we explore windows in the View menu, we also don't see this option. In my opinion, this was a feature that was overlooked when they created this beta version. I'm hoping it returns in the final release.

Meanwhile, you have two solutions. Either do as we did last week or create the project in the 2008 edition and then open it with the 2010 version. Further, if you look around this Beta edition, apparently it is focused more on SQL*Server (a Microsoft product that is a high-end database.) If you look in the View menu, you can see an entry called Server Explorer. Viewing that, it's obvious that the version is not really designed around a simple database like Access (although it is still supported). Further, if you try to create a new project, one option is to create a Database project (rather than Windows project). When you look in this tab, you only have one option—guess which one? See Figure 6.

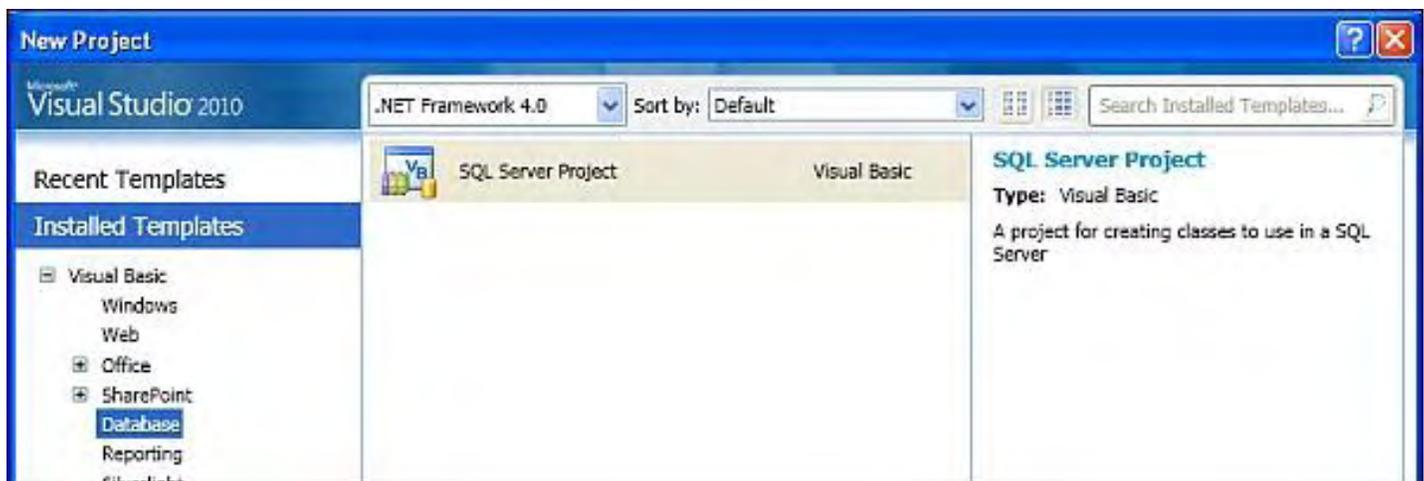


Figure 6. Database Project Source Options.

So stay tuned and hopefully in the final release of VB.Net 2010 we'll get all the nice features we have had in several previous versions, like what we saw with the 2008 version above.

There are many more things that we can do with Visual Basic. Next week, I'll start looking at how to create custom components for your toolbox.

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 *ComputerEdge* 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.



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Worldwide News & Product Reviews

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



Top 10 E-Mail Blunders of 2009—The biggest e-mail horror stories this year capitalized on consumer and business fears during the recession; Will Wal-Mart Be the "Tipping Point"?—Wal-Mart will offer a cheap, branded low-cost prepaid service called "Straight Talk"; Earphones with Buttons—A review of Scosche's IDR650M earphones.

Top 10 E-Mail Blunders of 2009

According to the e-mail security, archiving and data loss-prevention company, Proofpoint (www.proofpoint.com), "It is no surprise that the biggest e-mail horror stories this year capitalized on consumer and business fears during the height of the recession. These blunders, attacks and mishaps have wreaked havoc on e-mail systems and caused financial stress for consumers, corporate executives, politicians and, of course, e-mail administrators."

In no particular order, Proofpoint highlights some of this year's e-mail mishaps:

1. *Trojan Horse Empties Bank Accounts*

In September, it was reported that a banking Trojan horse, dubbed URLZone, had thwarted fraud-detection systems, to enable software to actually steal money while users are logged in to their accounts and display a fake balance. Victims' computers were infected either by clicking on a malicious link in an e-mail or visiting a Web site that has been compromised with hidden malware. The Trojan also kept a log of the victim's bank account login credentials; took screenshots; and snooped on the user's other Web accounts, such as PayPal, Facebook, and Gmail.

2. *FBI Forgery*

The wife of FBI Director Robert Mueller banned him from online banking after he nearly fell for a phishing scam. Mueller received a seemingly legitimate e-mail from what he thought was his bank, which prompted him to verify some information. He even went as far as filling out some of his personal information before realizing it might not be a great idea. He said he barely caught himself in time before falling victim to the scam. As a result, he changed his passwords and tried to pass the incident off to his wife as a "teachable moment." However, that did not stop Mrs. Mueller from sanctioning Mr. Mueller's online activities.

3. *White House Adopts Spammer Tactics*

In August, the White House e-mailed thousands of messages to Americans detailing its stance on the contentious issue of healthcare reform from an e-mail account created to gather and dispel rumors, but some recipients claimed the messages were unsolicited. The White House acknowledged the unsolicited e-mail and blamed third-party groups for the mass e-mail.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done. Critics questioned whether the White House used address-gathering tactics similar to those employed by spammers.

4. Hotmail Phishing

Most recently, more than 10,000 Hotmail accounts were compromised in October and passwords were posted on several Web sites where developers typically share programming code. News site Neowin reported it had seen part of the list, which has since been removed, and notified Microsoft of the issue. In this phishing scam, hackers sent out legitimate-looking e-mails under the letterhead of banks, eBay and other institutions, telling consumers they needed to reset online passwords to their Web sites for security purposes.

It seems that many of the affected account holders could have used a password reset. Security researchers with copies of the exposed passwords reported that "123456" was the most commonly used among them.

5. Startup Suicide

Back in September, social media advertising and applications startup RockYou sent out a mass e-mail to its customers and associates announcing its new site redesign, but instead of using BCC, they displayed the entire mailing list of more than 200 e-mail addresses in the CC field. Not surprisingly, many of those addresses ended up on a spammer's list.

Two months later, the startup sent out another mass e-mail using a mailing list. Unfortunately, the e-mail asked contractors to provide information for their W-9 tax forms. This resulted in people inadvertently sending personal information to the entire mailing list.

E-mail may not be as trendy as social networks, but companies still need to use both properly.

6. Judge Orders Gmail Account Deactivated

In August, Wyoming-based Rocky Mountain Bank mistakenly sent names, addresses, Social Security numbers and loan information of more than 1,300 customers to a Gmail address. When the bank realized the problem, it sent a message to that same address asking the recipient to contact the bank and destroy the file without opening it.

No one responded, so the bank contacted Google to ask for information about the account holder. U.S. District Court Judge James Ware in the northern district of California ordered Google to deactivate the e-mail account and also disclose the Gmail account holder's identity and contact information. The Gmail user hasn't been accused of any wrongdoing, but someone at the bank should be a little more careful when typing in the To field in an e-mail.

7. Payroll Panic

Payroll processor PayChoice was the victim of a Web site breach in which customers received targeted e-mails purporting to be from the company, but were designed to trick people into downloading malware. Workers received e-mails that directed them to download a browser plug-in or visit a Web site to continue accessing the Onlineemployer.com PayChoice portal.

Clients were notified within hours and the site was shut down. It was later learned that the e-mails were sent from a Yahoo e-mail account and the links were hosted from servers in Poland.

8. UK Tax Terror

Britain's tax authority, HM Revenue & Customs, issued a warning about a rash of scam e-mails that used convincing (but fake) government e-mail addresses in an attempt to lure recipients into divulging their personal information to receive a tax refund. The scam messages claimed that recipients were entitled to a tax refund and asked for bank or credit card details, so that the fictitious refund could be paid out.

Like most legitimate businesses and government organizations, the HMRC stressed that it would not inform citizens of a tax rebate via e-mail, nor would it invite them to complete an online form to receive a tax rebate.

9. Death, Taxes and Phish

In September, a fake e-mail notice that purported to come from the Internal Revenue Service continued to make the rounds, widely ramping up attacks against businesses and individuals. The attacks were concealed in a bogus e-mail containing a subject line of "Notice of Underreported Income," according to US-CERT. The e-mails contained a link or an attachment that, if opened, will infect users with the Zbot/Zeus Trojan, a nasty credentials-stealing program that seeks to compromise banking login information.

Proofpoint reports that these phishing e-mails continued to be widely circulated as the October 15 deadline for filing extended tax returns approached.

10. UCSD Fake-Out

Twenty-eight thousand students were turned away from UC San Diego in one of the toughest college entrance seasons on record after a particularly cruel twist in the perils of instant communications. All 46,000 students in the entire freshman applicant pool received the same misfired message of acceptance, which could have led to the largest freshman class at any university globally.

The 18,000 students who were actually accepted breathed a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, the rest of the applicant pool had to march on in the grueling college application process.

Will Wal-Mart Be the "Tipping Point"?

According to New Millennium Research (www.thenmrc.org) (NMRC) executive director Allen Hepner, the recent announcement that Wal-Mart—the United States' largest retailer—will offer a branded low-cost prepaid service, "Straight Talk," at the \$30 and \$45 levels, could end up being the "tipping point for millions of consumers who are already considering moving away from expensive contract-based cell phone service."

On the basis of Wal-Mart's move and past research done by his company, Hepner believes that millions of Americans could shift in the coming months into lower-cost prepaid plans in order to save money during the current recession.

"While not endorsing any particular product or service," says Hepner, "the \$30 plan (with 1,000 minutes, 1,000 texts per month, mobile Web access and no-extra cost 411 calls, with no contract and no penalties) and the \$45 plan (unlimited calling, texting, mobile Web and 411) that Wal-Mart now offers under the 'Straight Talk' brand are likely to play out as real 'head turners' for consumers who associate the massive retailer with the experience of buying goods and services at the lowest possible price.

"With average monthly contract plans reported to be about \$81," Hepner continues, "the more than 140 million U.S. contract-based wireless customers who use less than 550 minutes a month may now have even more reason to consider switching to a less expensive cell phone option, particularly in a changing environment in which plans for 1,000 minutes are available through Wal-Mart for \$30 per month."

Highlights of the NMRC surveys (Mar. 2009 and Dec. 2008) include the following:

- Two out of five Americans with contract-based cell phones are likely to cut back on their cell phones to save money if, as is widely expected, the economy gets worse over the next six months. (March 2009)
- No fewer than 40 million Americans—26 percent of consumers with contract-based cell phone service—are "more inclined today than ... six months ago to look at a way to save money on your cell phone bill, such as by switching to a prepaid cell phone service." (March 2009)
- Of those Americans with cell phones, fewer than one in five (16 percent or nearly 29 million people) have a prepaid phone. Of the balance, 85 percent have "postpaid"/contract-based service where they pay a monthly fee. (The two percentages add up to more than 100 percent because of a small number of consumers who have both prepaid and postpaid cell phones.) (December 2008)
- Only 44 percent of those age 18-24 years of age say they know when their contract-based wireless phone penalty ends. This percentage increases to 58 percent among those 25-34 and reaches its peak of 61 percent with those age 35-44. The percentage decreases somewhat to 55 percent for those aged 45-64 and declines sharply to 37 percent among those age 65 and over. (December 2008)

Earphones with Buttons

Scosche's IDR650M earphones (www.scosche.com/products/sfID1/210/sfID2/320/productID/1722) belong to a new breed of in-your-ear-canal-phones that take advantage of new features in Apple's latest iPhone, iPod nano, Shuffle and touch models. Importantly, instead of rummaging around in a pocket, purse, or backpack to extract your music player and change tunes or volume level, simply press the appropriate buttons on the earphones' integrated remote control and the player automatically responds. This really handy feature requires compatible earphones, and that's where the IDR650M fits in.



Figure 1. The IDR650M earphones' abundant (52 inches) cable incorporates a microphone and TapLINE control buttons (encircled) that reduce the need for fussing with an iPod's clickwheel or iPhone's touch screen.

To achieve its magic, the IDR650M is equipped with an additional hardware component known as TapLINE control technology (shown in Figure 1). This remote control consists of a plastic piece built into the cable about 4.5 inches below the right earphone. The TapLINE's end closest to the right earphone has a plus sign (+), the end furthest has a minus sign (-), and the middle has an oval bulge. Each of these three regions of the TapLINE functions as a button when you press it between your thumb and index finger. The (+) end increases the music player's volume level, the (-) end decreases it, and the center has similar functionalities as an iPod clickwheel's center button—play/pause; next/previous track.

But wait, there's more! TapLINE's center button also activates the new VoiceOver feature supported by the iPhone 3GS, fifth-generation nano and third-generation Shuffle. VoiceOver (www.apple.com/ipodshuffle/voiceover.html) is Apple's synthetic speech technology that announces the currently playing tune's name or the currently selected playlist's name.

One more thing about TapLINE: It houses a tiny microphone for making calls on an iPhone and recording dictation with the Voice Memo app in iPhone 3.x software. In my testing with a second-generation iPod touch, TapLINE's microphone was satisfactory for ordinary speech in normal environments, but you'll want a professional-grade microphone when the utmost audio quality is desired.

Although the TapLINE control is this product's feature I like most, it has a couple of shortcomings. One is that the center button could be pressed without your awareness (for instance, a book in your backpack bumps against it), thereby activating your current playlist. This is what I presume happened twice during my testing.

Imagine my surprise to find that my touch was dutifully playing songs, and its battery was more than 50 percent drained rather than the close to fully charged condition when I last intentionally used it!

Another shortcoming is that a bit of practice is required to get the hang of properly pressing the multifunction center button. For example, triple-pressing the center button is supposed to play the previous song, but I typically end up pausing the current tune instead. Evidently, my way of pressing results in the system recognizing only my first press.

My second favorite feature of the IDR650M is the audio quality delivered by the 11mm drivers (frequency response rated at 15Hz–20kHz). Anyone who has used only the stock earphones that Apple ships with its music gadgets will be impressed with how their preferred tunes sound using the IDR650M—crisp and clear mids and highs, adequate bass, without tinniness or muddiness. Thanks to the single- and dual-flanged silicone tips in three sizes each that come as standard equipment, users with ear canals too small to accommodate Apple's stock earphones are sure to find a good fit. And the better the fit, the better the sound isolation and bass quality of your tunes. Note, however, that demanding audiophiles might perceive the IDR650M's sound quality to be below their high standards.

One more feature worth mentioning is that the IDR650M has qualified for Made for iPod and Works with iPhone certification. This means that you'll pay a tad higher price (MSRP \$99.99) than non-certified competitors in return for assurance that the IDR650M is plug and play rather than plug and swear.



Review contributed by Barry Fass-Holmes

In addition to being an editor and columnist for *ComputerEdge* 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.

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ComputerQuick Reviews

News and Reviews from Readers and Staff

ComputerQuick Reviews

“Computer Product Opinions from ComputerEdge Readers and Staff” by ComputerEdge Staff

Microsoft is lauded for its input devices; and a call for experiences and recommendations on backing up your data.

Computer Input Devices

There are many manufacturers of input devices out there. Among the leaders are Logitech, Kensington and Microsoft. Who was that? Yes, that was Microsoft. The company has been a top seller of input devices for several years now.

From its ergonomic keyboards and mice to its gaming devices like the Xbox 360 wireless gaming wheel, Microsoft has been a leader in quality input devices. Which seems odd, since it is primarily a software company, isn't it? Well, somehow someone got it right and Microsoft has been making very good keyboards and mice for a few years now. Where I work, we've tried the economy keyboards and mice and they just do not hold up. For the extra money you will spend for the Microsoft name, I found it is worth every penny.



"Basic Wired Keyboard and Mouse—This is Microsoft's basic set. It does the job and works well. It will run you anywhere from \$29 to \$35."



"Wireless Ergonomic Black and Silver—This is a stylish ergo keyboard and mouse with some extras. It is comfortable but the keys take some getting used to because they are thin and low profile. But the keys are nice and quiet."



"Wireless Ergonomic Standard—This is a good quality ergo keyboard and mouse. It is a little more pricey than the economy keyboards, but worth it. It has a rock-solid feel and

the keys are well placed and comfortable. A must for anyone concerned with ergonomic positioning."

I have tried all the top brands and for my money, Microsoft is the winner.

(Source for images and descriptions—CDW (www.cdw.com))

Pete Choppin (webservice.computoredge.com/editorial/prg/authorbio.mvc?contribid=CHOP)

* * *

Next Week: Backup Strategies: Tools and techniques for protecting your data.

Next week, ComputerEdge will be talking about backing up your data. How do you protect your data? Do you use an external USB drive, an online service, or do you let it ride without a safety net? We want to know what works for you. Your comments will appear right here in ComputerQuick Reviews. Send your thoughts to ComputerQuick Backup Strategies (ceeditor@computoredge.com).

We Want Your Opinions About Hardware, Software and Web Sites

Over the years, *ComputerEdge* has had great input from our readers. In particular, people have submitted short reviews of equipment, software and Web sites that they really like. In some cases readers have offered tips (such as avoiding flakes on Craigslist). ComputerQuick Reviews is our column dedicated to highlighting those things that you most like and want to recommend to others. The problem is that if this column doesn't appear, it becomes forgotten and less likely to receive input from you.

We have decided to include this feature in every issue as a reminder that this is your magazine—even if we don't have any new reader reviews. If you would like to see the type of reviews that we have run in the past, then check out ComputerQuick Reviews (webservice.computoredge.com/sitemap.mvc?feature=Columns&columnedcode=persrev&column=ComputerQuick%20Reviews) in the *ComputerEdge* Site Map. You will find that they are quite varied. We would like to see more. Consider this column a gentle prod saying that we would like to hear from you.

You can send us an e-mail at ComputerQuick Reviews Submissions (ceeditor@computoredge.com).

The purpose of this column is to give our readers an opportunity to express their opinions about products and services that they have found particularly useful. If you have had experience with hardware, software or a Web site that made you say, "This is really great! I want to tell everyone about it," then this is a good place to do it.

ComputerEdge 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 "ComputerQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at ceeditor@computoredge.com.

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Spam of the Week

Spam of the Week: Another Facebook Variation

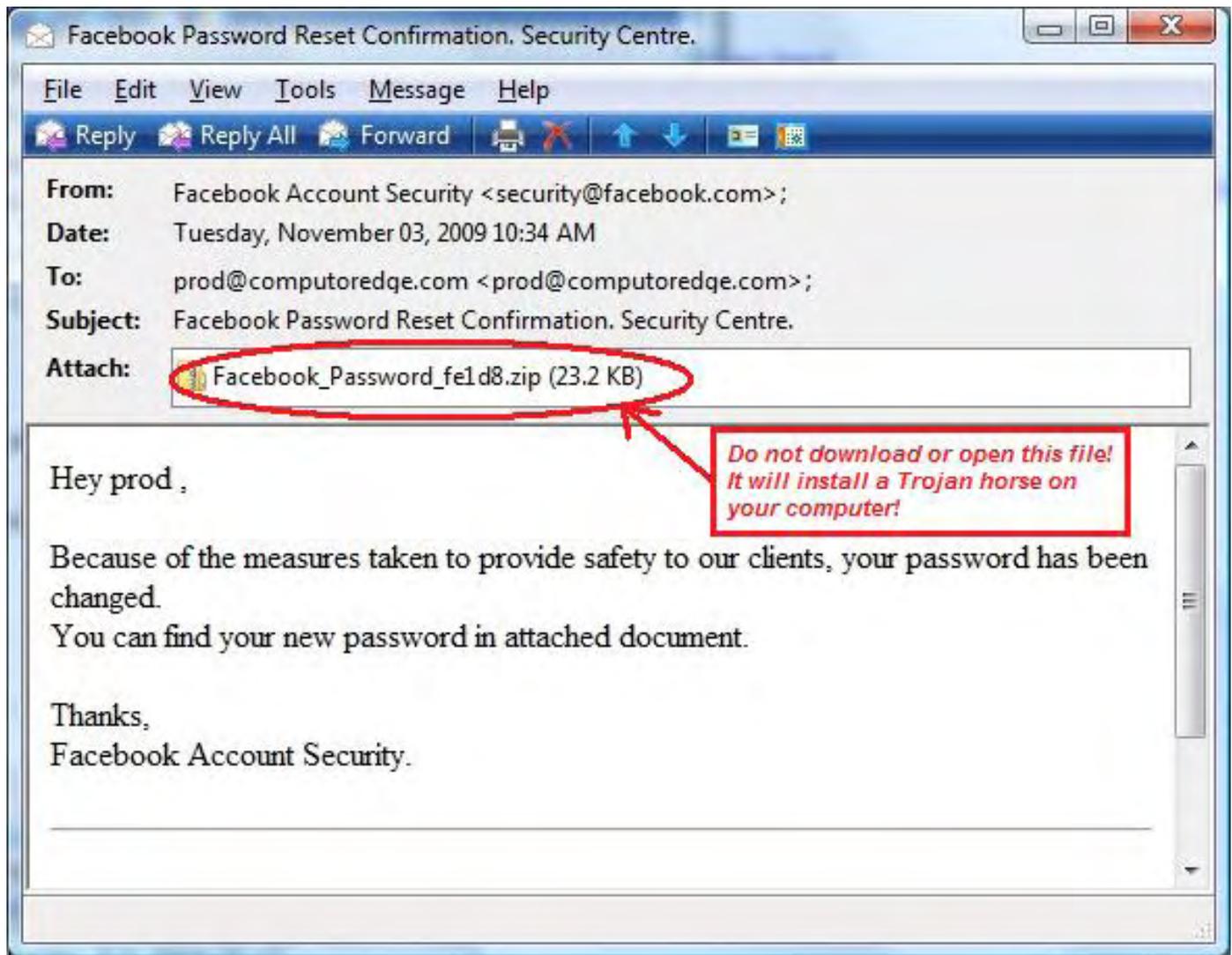
“The latest in annoying and dangerous e-mail currently making the rounds.” by ComputerEdge Staff

Another Facebook spam scam appears to be making the rounds. Never open an attachment from anyone, even friends, unless you are expecting it and know what's in it.

Last week we saw a plethora of Facebook phishing e-mails. They seem to be continuing this week—maybe slightly abated. For now the Microsoft Outlook Update attack has died down. Look for it to be back in a month or two—maybe with a Windows 7 look to it.

*We are starting to see another Facebook spam scam, "Facebook Password Reset Confirmation. Security Centre." Do **not** download **or** open the attachment, "Facebook_Password_fe1d8.zip"!*

This spam tries to convince you that your Facebook account password has been reset. There is a ZIP file attached that supposedly has your new password in it. This is a common phishing technique used when spam is spoofing as various banks and financial institutions. In this case, it is the Bredolab Trojan horse (blog.trendmicro.com/bredolab-revealed/) that downloads and executes files from the Internet. Delete the e-mail without downloading or opening the document.



This phishing scam attaches a file that will install malware on your computer if opened.

When malware is compressed (and disguised) as a ZIP file, it is said to be packed. If your antivirus software is up-to-date, it should have recognized the file as malware and removed it from the e-mail. A statement similar to "Viruses found in the attached files. The file Facebook_Password_fe1d8.zip: Virus identified Packed.Revolt. The attachment was moved to the Virus Vault." should be at the bottom of your e-mail.

Never open an attachment from anyone, even friends, unless you are expecting it and know what's in it.

ComputerEdge 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 "ComputerQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at ceeditor@computoredge.com.

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EdgeWord: Touchscreens--Who Needs Them?

“Touchscreens may not be embraced by users.” by Jack Dunning



While the idea of a laptop computer with a touchscreen seems cool in a science fiction sort of way, it would most likely turn into an annoyance rather than a useful attribute.

Everyone develops their own way of working with their computer(s). Which input device is used depends upon how the computer is being used. If someone needs an accurate cursor, such as in Computer Aided Design (CAD) or some graphic arts jobs, a trackball may be more precise and easier to use. Clicking a button on a mouse will often jerk the mouse, while a trackball won't be subject to the movement.

An artist will most likely want a pen-pad input device. This is the best way to simulate the action of pen and paper on a computer. Drawing with either a mouse or a trackball can be quite tedious. Once people become accustomed to the way they work with their machine, they tend to prefer it and stick with it.

It's difficult to estimate the impact of computer touchscreens. With Apple and Windows 7 both supporting the feature, computer makers are introducing computers with the enhanced capability. However, I'm not convinced that they will be readily accepted by users. For me a touchscreen would be a novelty, but I don't need it. If I had one, I'm not sure how much I would use it.

I'm a mouse and keyboard user. I generally work with the mouse in my right hand and perform keystrokes with the left. A great deal of my work involves cut-and-paste actions. All of the basic functions I need can be done with my left hand: cut (CTRL+X), copy (CTRL+C), and paste (CTRL+V). If I make a mistake, I can undo (CTRL+Z) the error with the same hand. I can select all (CTRL+A) and save (CTRL+S) without taking my right hand off of the mouse. If I need to find some text, CTRL+F brings up the search field. These combinations work in almost all computer programs.

The mouse is for navigating around the screen. I click links and open menus with the left mouse button. Special menus are accessed with a click of the right mouse button. I use the scroll wheel (found in the center of most of today's mice) to move up and down the page. If I click the scroll wheel, it puts me in a funky mode where I can pan up and down (and left and right if there is a horizontal scroll bar) using the mouse with very little movement. This mouse/keyboard combination works for me because it fits the type of work that I do, but it's probably not for everyone.

I don't think that I would use a touchscreen because I don't have a third hand. In order to take advantage of a computer that has a contact-sensitive display, I would need to move either my left hand away from the keyboard or my take my right hand off the mouse. I can't see using my finger as being more effective (or accurate) than the mouse. Owning a touchscreen might be cute, but it wouldn't be very useful for me.

I do think that touchscreens may be just the ticket for very young children and educational software. Toddlers are adept at poking at and grabbing things—especially if they fit into their mouths. (When we are on Skype with our grandchildren, the number-one thing the younger ones want to do is grab the camera and put it into their mouth. This makes for an interesting view. When a little older, they are constantly repositioning the camera so they are the only one in view.) When very young, kids have a tough time using a

mouse, let alone a keyboard. Early on, a touchscreen could be ideal—until they touch it too hard, with their feet.

Touchscreens work on small devices such as the iPhone primarily because they are small. The entire screen is quickly covered by one or two fingers. Gestures and taps can be quickly implemented and interpreted. I would guess that once the learning curve is overcome, most people become adept at using a smartphone with a touchscreen. However, this does not necessarily translate to a computer screen. Computer monitors are much larger than the span of the thumb and forefinger. The gestures that work so well on the iPhone are much more awkward on a computer.

The best use of touchscreens that I can see is probably in engineering. Even then, the process works best with a stylus (a pointed pencil-like device). Already a common feature of tablet computers, contact-sensitive screens can greatly enhance any graphic process. The pointed stylus gives accuracy and responds well to hand motions. People who are employed in these areas know what works for them, and I would guess that they wouldn't be excited about a standard laptop with a touchscreen.

While the idea of a laptop computer with a touch screen seems cool in a science fiction sort of way, it would most likely turn into an annoyance rather than a useful attribute. Would a fly landing on the screen close windows and reorient the cursor? A child touching the computer (as they are going to do) could select and delete some critical items.

Even though Windows 7 will support touchscreens, I won't be looking for one on my next computer.

Jack is the publisher of ComputerEdge 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

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Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

“Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns.” by ComputerEdge Staff

"Fried Wi-Fi," "Internet Explorer 8 and Firefox," "Securing your Net," "Spam of the Week," "Windows 7 Versus XP?"

Fried Wi-Fi

[Regarding the October 23 Digital Dave column:]

Sometimes a frozen card will reset if you unplug the power adapter and take out the battery for half a minute.

-Stewart Levin, Centennial, CO

Internet Explorer 8 and Firefox

[Regarding the October 23 Digital Dave column:]

After my recent (today) experience with downloading and installing Firefox, I can tell you why the people that don't use Firefox don't!

First, AVG and IE7 didn't want to let me download it, then when I got a copy of it on my hard drive, AVG wouldn't let me install it. When I finally persuaded AVG that I really did want to use Firefox instead of IE7 and tried to test the new browser by logging onto my favorite site for watching TV episodes I've missed because I work nights, AVG and IE didn't want me to download and install the version of Flash player that works with Firefox.

Well, to make a long story (and lengthy install) shorter, I finally got it all to work together after two hours, and watched a few minutes of Fringe on Hulu. But then I had to go to bed so I could go to work.

Mind you, I've been working with Windows since Win 2.5 and have downloaded and installed hundreds of programs, but never I had the operating system and security program fight me this much. And to top it all off, I still have to do the Firefox learning curve. I'll let you know if it was worth it in a week or so after I worked any other bugs out of it and learned how to use it.

-Buck, El Cajon, CA

I too have had serious issues with IE8. It would lock up and I would have to restart it and it just kept getting worse. I tried regressing to IE6, IE7, and had no luck, so I downloaded Firefox 3.0 and tried to put it on my computer. It gave me fits at first. I spoke to an IT person where I worked and he said to uninstall all the Web browsers using the Control Panel and then to reinstall just Firefox. It now works great. I have since upgraded to 3.5.3. I don't regret going to FF, but now I have to send for MS Updates via a CD since the MS update site wants you to use IE on your computer prior to letting you download any updates.

-Dave, King George, VA

Regarding the discussion of Firefox and IE (and Dave in VA): We use FF and love the advantage of security over IE (I have XP). The updates are set for "notify me first," and they download fine via custom download, even with FF as the open browser. If it's an update you specifically look for, just open IE for that download, instead of using a CD or other method. As one of our other tech newsletters stated, going to IE (vs. FF) for an update is pretty safe, since you don't expect that site to cause problems. Just my two cents worth as a non-technical person.

-Sandy, San Diego

I have had Firefox as my default browser for a couple of years and have reinstalled Firefox after a clean install of Win 7 RC1 (and IE8). I have not had any problem with them installing easily or co-existing, and by using the available IE tab for Firefox, even MS updates (manual installation) are easily available without using IE8, as well as other sites requiring IE. I am currently using Avira AntiVirus and Microsoft Security Essentials together with Win 7 RC1 and no problems. Perhaps the installation problems are with interaction with the antivirus programs, which should be turned off for application installations anyway.

-Ray, San Diego

Why not Opera 10?

Agreed that Opera is not widely used, but it's by far the best browser. Here is why:

- 1. Fastest browser, lightweight (5MB install) and low memory footprint*
- 2. The very first browser to bring the concept of tabbed browsing*
- 3. Integrated password manager, download manager, RSS reader, mail client, etc.*
- 4. Extensible via widgets*
- 5. You can get the USB version in your flash drive and can use it anywhere*

I don't disagree that the other mainstream browsers don't offer those features, but it usually requires downloading separate components and integrating them later. Give Opera a try. You won't regret the decision.

-Ram, Denver, CO

Securing your Net

[Regarding Pete Choppin's October 16 article, "Securing Your Home Wi-Fi":]

This bears repeating. I have sent a similar letter before.

Both the network and the systems connected to it should have firewalls. Not the Windows one; a real one that can ask you if this connection is allowed. "Teaching" the firewall starts out asking a lot of questions, but as it "learns," the questions become fewer and are real questions about a possible attack.

I use Comodo Pro on my Windows boxes. I use Firestarter on my Linux boxes.

My wireless router has a hardware firewall (Zoom X6), but it has to be properly set up.

Keeping the "Black Hats" out of your net is your responsibility. When a "White Hat" (I've been one since DARPANET; I still have the Network General Sniffers to prove it) tells you that your setup is insecure, you

had better fix it pronto.

-Art, Evergreen

Art,

Indeed, network security can be the bane of the network administrator.

It sounds like you are locked down well.

I agree. Certainly, sophisticated firewalls and security systems need constant attention and adjustments. Perhaps this is what discourages users unfamiliar with security systems like those you've described. It is also what intruders count on. Like a house burglar, they look for the easy target—the least secured network.

If I was looking for a vulnerable network to infiltrate, yours would not be the first one on my list. But an easier target, say one with an unsecured Wi-Fi down the street broadcasting their SSID with no encryption, still using the default account on the router that came with it when they purchased it, including the password. I may stand a better chance at obtaining much more information on that network than yours. There also might be far less risk of me getting caught intruding on an open network with no security than on one such as yours with so many precautions put in place, as I am sure you have several traps and monitors which can trace my steps if I make such an attempt. This is a risk that intruders are leery of taking as well. They like to go in and leave unseen, with no way to be tracked down.

So even if an average home user doesn't have extensive knowledge of firewalls and security, they can deter a would-be intruder by making their network less attractive just by taking these simple steps.

Pete Choppin

The article mentioned turning on the MAC addressing filter in the wireless router. For many people, this is more trouble than it's worth. First, the MAC ID of a network card (each is unique) can be cloned, and the security defeated. Second, if you ever have guests over, they won't be able to use your Internet connection (not even wired; most routers don't make that distinction). If you follow all the other advice in the article, this is a totally unnecessary step, and a big hassle for each time you have a visitor with a laptop.

Furthermore, what would happen if you forgot about the MAC addressing filtering, and blamed your new wireless device? No, it won't tell you filtering is in effect, it just fails to connect! In short, MAC filtering was never really intended for the home. Rather, it was meant for industrial use with wired computers on one or more networks with different levels of security.

-John Thomas, Vista, CA

John,

Any measure of securing your network has a trade-off of convenience vs. security. Let's take a look at the pros and cons for a moment on MAC address filtering.

First of all, if I leave MAC address filtering turned off, and all things being equal with every other security measure in place, an intruder with decryption software, which is readily available on the Internet, will need to decrypt the wireless signal. Once they have decrypted my signal, they are free to sniff network traffic and can view any information, such as passwords and credit card numbers I send out to the Internet—even SSL secured data—all without being limited because there is no restriction of any addresses to connect to my

router. If on the other hand I did enable MAC address filtering, they would not be able to connect unless I explicitly gave them access. You are correct that they could emulate that address and connect to the router, but this takes time.

Wireless networks are inherently insecure, and these tips will merely help you better secure your network. If someone is really determined to gain access to your network, given enough time, a good hacker can get access. These tips, however, will deter the average wardriver from gaining access to your network. Although these methods are not definite security measures, and some may seem futile or redundant, they will change your network from being something that can be hacked in a matter of seconds, to something that will take a determined hacker days if not weeks of work, all of which will have to be done while in close proximity to your network. And no hacker wants to take the time or remain that conspicuous, unless you are transmitting something extremely valuable, in which case I recommend that you do not do that over a wireless connection at all.

-Pete Choppin

Spam of the Week

[Regarding the October 23 Spam of the Week: Microsoft Outlook Update column:]

Keep up the good work! ComputerEdge is always at the cutting edge. When I lived in SD, I looked forward to it each week and picked up your print copy. You provide valuable information in an easy-to-understand form, even for us "computer challenged" seniors.

-David, Avondale, Arizona

Windows 7 Versus XP?

[Regarding the October 9 Windows Tips and Tricks column:]

I've seen many articles about Win 7 vs. Vista, but what about an article about Win 7 vs. XP?

My family (two seniors) and our family business (a non-profit) have been using XP on our three computers for years. I'm pretty comfortable with it, but my wife is weak with computers. She can e-mail, write simple documents and print them, browse the Internet, but has a hard time learning anything different. We tried a Vista laptop once, hated it, took it right back to the store.

Is there any good reason for us to switch to 7? How will it be better?

-Bob Di Giorgio, San Diego, CA

[Your wish is our command! See Windows Tips and Tricks column dated October 16. —Editors]

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