ComputorEdge™ Online — 10/15/10

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Tips, tricks and advice about setting up a database on your PC.

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Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns.
"Almost Instant-On Computer," "Installing Windows 3.11 on a Modern Computer," "Pining for XP"

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Digital Dave

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

A reader is in an area with no cell service or DSL, surviving with dial-up. Are any tech alternatives coming?; A wireless Internet connection stopped working after a hard drive reformat; How can a reader keep a window "always on top"?

Dear Digital Dave,

I'm in an area with no cell service or DSL, on a phone modem with a weak (non-fiber-optic) phone line that is two parcels away from another phone exchange (I'm in Fallbrook). I have been living with a maximum connection of 28.8K. All of the newer Web site construction is so media-intensive that the newer graphics make it now almost impossible to load anything. Videos are out of the question, and I'm about to give up on home computing. Is there any *alternative coming besides Hughes Net or Wild Blue dish at $80 a month? Every time I hear a DSL Extreme ad for $14.95 I want to scream.*

Rodney Packwood
North County, Bonsall area

Dear Rodney,

With the emphasis on "coming," you're next best bet will be WiMAX (Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access) broadband, or as it's known in the cellular world, one of the 4G deployments. WiMAX is similar to the current cell phone network except that it is based upon the IP protocol used by networks and the Internet. That means it is ideally suited for delivering the Internet to both home and mobile devices. However, you will still have the problem of delivery to your geographic area.

The current deployments are going into urban areas of the country and world, although it is projected that it will reach into more remote areas since it is relatively inexpensive to set up—especially when compared to running cable.

For those who can get it, the current introductory price for bringing the Internet into a home with WiMAX is $35 per month (regular rate $55). That doesn't seem like much of a break, but if the coverage becomes wide enough, competition may force the price down. The higher speeds offered will make WiMAX competitive with all the other forms of Internet access. This may induce the satellite companies to reduce their rates.

For now, even at the high price, it looks like satellite may be your best bet in your area. Otherwise, until something new arrives in your area, you'll be stuck with dial-up.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I recently bought a new HP Pavilion DV5 laptop running Windows 7 Professional. I'm really enjoying the increased performance when running multiple applications, but I'm wondering if there is any way to

force a window, say my DVD player, to stay on top while I'm working on a window underneath it.

Bill
Fort Collins, CO

Dear Bill,

While "always on top" is not a feature specifically built into Windows 7, there are numerous third-party programs that will do the trick. If you do the search "window always on top" you will get a number of options. Always On Top and AutoHotkey are a couple of programs that came up in one search. I haven't used them, but I did check them out with CNET (*www.cnet.com/4504-20_1-0.html?tag=mncol;comp&dlProdId=10674028&dlProdId=11106884*). They both seem safe enough—and they are both free. (Other suggestions from readers are welcome.) Many programs such as instant messengers will include an "always on top" feature, but it will only affect that program.

Another option is to look for a Windows 7 Desktop Gadget that will play your DVDs or accomplish whichever capability you need handy. The Desktop Gadgets do have an "Always on top" feature that can be activated with a menu selection after a mouse right-click on the gadget.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

My Compaq computer running Windows XP crashed. I tried to "repair" using the disc, but no joy. I did the "C" format route. Everything installed, except now the wireless Internet connection won't connect to my home modem supplied by my provider. It used to, but won't now. I have tried doing what the provider said, but still no joy. I have downloaded what I think is the proper driver. I have run the "wizard," but still it won't connect. It tells me that the signal is excellent, and connected, but I can't get on the Internet. I tried connecting directly to the modem and that works, but what good is a mobile laptop if it isn't mobile? What do you suggest?

David Casey
Sacramento

Dear David,

I've always found that once I know that I am connected with a Wi-Fi signal, I'm most of the way there. (I usually reboot a couple of times, then the Internet starts working. Mysterious. Or reset everything including all routers and modems.) However, it is not unusual for a wireless connection to be "excellent"—as in your case—yet you cannot connect to the Internet or any other computer on the network.

The first step is to establish that you have communications with the modem. You can do that with the Command Prompt and the Ping command. You would enter "ping 192.168.0.1" (without the quotes—use the IP of the modem, which differs from the example) into the command window. If you don't get a response, then you are not on the network with the modem even though you do have a wireless connection. There are a few reasons that this could occur.

It is not likely to be the modem setup since everything worked prior to the computer crash—although you should bring in another Wi-Fi computer to make sure the problem is not in the modem.

It could be your installed Wi-Fi drivers, although you think you have that right.

You should ensure that you don't have an IP conflict, which I addressed last week.

If everything looks good from the network standpoint, then you most likely have a problem with your built-in Wi-Fi board. It does happen that some problems are hardware problems. Assuming that you have an expansion slot in your laptop, you can get a Wi-Fi card that will fit.

If none of these things work, than go out and look for a brand-new laptop computer with Wi-Fi capabilities. I'm not being flip. There are times when it is no longer worth the time and effort to keep an old computer running. There will be other problems eventually. I would look at a new Windows 7 machine—or a Mac, if you don't mind a little more cost.

Digital Dave

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Database Programming: Is It for You?

"Database software can do just about anything you want--if you know what you're doing." by Jack Dunning

Writing applications with database software is some of the most demanding and intensive computer work around, but if you're drawn to the process, database software can do just about anything you want.

Most people never think about database software. It's more complicated to use than a word processor and has a little more complexity than a spreadsheet. It generally takes a good bit of time to set up a database, especially if you plan to build a number of features into it. However, once set up, a database with the right routines is unsurpassed for the vast majority of applications.

"We're in a fine fix now! Esmeralda just deleted our database of frogs and snails and puppy dog tails. We have no backup!"

I'm a database person from way back. From the time I first owned a computer in the early 1980s, I was attracted to and used database software. In those days, the heavy for desktop computers was dBase. (Today, unless you're an old-timer, you've probably never heard of dBase.) From dBase I moved on to using FoxPro, which was later acquired by Microsoft. Today many people use Microsoft Access, but others are gravitating to open-source software such as MySQL which, in conjunction with a programming language such as PHP, is used to build many Web applications. What I find fascinating about database software is that it can do just about anything you want—if you know what you're doing.

Database software makes it possible to deliver a dynamic environment to applications and Web pages. The stored data determines the

outcome. Rather than building a static page for each portion of a site, the page can be changed based upon user input and stored data. For example, the *ComputorEdge* site is driven by database software. All the information needed to produce any of the pages is stored in a set of tables that comprises the database. There is no Web design program such as DreamWeaver needed to produce the weekly issues. That would actually be more cumbersome and awkward. If a change is needed, it can be made in one spot (via another Web database program), and it will instantly appear on the Web. When people access the site, the changes will appear even if the page was first published years ago.

Web users do not see the database language because it is run only on the Web server. The server delivers to the Web browser only HTML and JavaScript code, plus the text for the articles. If you were to review the source code in your browser, it would look like the code for any other static page. However, clicking a link could completely change the new page, even though the browser appears to be loading the exact same page. Although it is more complicated for the Webmaster to set up, a database-driven Web page (once the code is written) saves a tremendous amount of time. One program can generate thousands of varied pages. This would be inconceivable if you had to create each page by hand.

Databases Are Everywhere

Most people have used some form of database software, even if they don't realize it. Major applications are grounded and supported by powerful database software. In its simplest form, a basic table of names and addresses such as the contact list in your e-mail program is a database. If you use a financial program for personal or business accounting, the backbone is a database of all your current positions and transactions. When you do an Internet search, you're using a database. Catalogs from your favorite online e-tailers are driven by a database. You are a database user whether doing a Google search, updating your Facebook page, or reading *ComputorEdge* online.

Yet, few people actually use their computers to create and build their own database applications. The reason is that writing applications with database software is some of the most demanding and intensive computer work. A database programmer needs to know in great detail where the process will end before the data structure is designed and the code writing ever starts. The design of a database structure dictates the possible features of a new application. If the initial database structure is not appropriate to the desired end-product, one seemingly innocuous early misstep (or faulty assumption) can lead to many hours (or months) of extra rework. (Actually, this type of miscalculation happens all of the time. That's one reason why applications take so long to develop.)

How Databases Work

To determine if you want to put databases to work for you, it is necessary to understand a little about how they work. I've seen people build elaborate applications with spreadsheets such as Excel for applications that would be ideally suited for database work. Many people will keep names and addresses in a word processing file just because that is what they know best. Often this quick-and-dirty approach may be the right thing to do because, although you can achieve much greater flexibility and power by applying a database properly, it is more complicated to set up and needs special tools to retrieve the information the way you want it. If you understand how a database works, then you can decide whether you should venture down that path.

First Set the Table

The primary structure of a database is composed of tables of similar types of information. A table can be visualized as a set of rows with fields (not unlike the rows and columns of a spreadsheet) that contain the specific information, such as name, address, telephone number. Each row would represent information for a different person. Once the data is entered into the fields, the entire table can be sorted by any of the fields (name, address, ZIP code, etc.). Sorting databases can be very time-consuming, so these sorts are

often maintained in indexes that will make access to the information very fast. This is convenient for searching databases and creating special reports.

A database is usually not just one table, but rather a set of tables that are related in some manner. Name and address may be kept in one table, and all the orders placed by that person may be in another table related only by a customer number. (This is where the term "relational database" comes from.) The customer number would appear once in the name and address table and once for each order in the orders-placed table. Whenever tables are related, the "key" field(s) will appear in both tables. As you think about it, you realize that there could be yet another table that lists each product in a particular order, probably related by an order number.

By using different tables related to each other to track an order, it is possible to eliminate redundant data. For example, if we tried to maintain all of the information about the customer and all the orders in one table, we would need to add a new row (record) for each product item that would include duplicated name and address information. This would rapidly become very wasteful and cumbersome. The early decisions in database design relate to which data should be held in which tables, and what will the key field be. As you can see, it can get pretty complicated.

A Language of Manipulation

Database programming is done with a language that will sort, index and manipulate the database. The executed code is written to access the data in the desired way. Database language syntax uses pretty much the same types of commands as found in other programming languages, with the addition of special commands for sorting and searching while reading from and/or writing to the database. In SQL (Structured Query Language), queries are statements that use the available database tables and indexes to create new temporary tables. Writing an ASQL query can be quite complex and confusing. (It's certainly not for everyone, although there are tools to help people write them.)

The end product from database programming is an application or Web page that ideally is easy for anyone to use.

A Database for You?

If all you want to do is write, use a word processor. If you need to do redundant calculations, use a spreadsheet. If you have a complicated set of data that you need to sort and search before displaying or printing, then database software may be the solution. But before you jump into creating your own application, check to see if someone else has already solved your database problem. There is probably an answer somewhere. Unless you're a bit of a nerd, delving into building your own database may soon turn into a bag of worms. However, if you're like me and enjoy the complications, then use Michael Ross's article in this issue to help you install MySQL on your computer. It could introduce you to a whole new world of puzzles and solutions with your computer.

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

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MySQL for Local Databases

"A free database favorite should do the job for you." by Michael J. Ross

If you would like to create a database, there are a number of free and open-source relational database management systems (RDBMSs) that can be set up and configured to run on a standard PC. The favorite nowadays is MySQL.

Word processor documents, spreadsheets and plain text files are just some of the different types of files that are used for storing information. Even though files are the most common way to store data on a computer, they are certainly not optimal for storing data records so that they can be easily queried and modified. For such cases, the best option is to use a database.

If you would like to create a database on your own computer, there are a number of relational database management systems (RDBMSs) that can be set up and configured to run on a standard PC. Most of these options are free and open source. While they may not have as many advanced features as the proprietary RDBMSs, they are generally easier to set up and learn how to use. The favorite free RDBMS nowadays is MySQL (*www.mysql.com/*).

The average computer user might assume that databases are far too complex to be ever understood by non-geeks. But, as we shall see, it is not that difficult to install a database server such as MySQL on your own computer. (This discussion assumes that the computer in question is running a modern version of Windows—in this case, XP. But the steps involved are roughly the same on any other operating system.)

Downloading MySQL

The first step in installing MySQL is to obtain the installation file from the MySQL downloads page. For this article, instead of using the very latest version, we will be using an earlier version, 5.0.51a, which is quite stable and commonly used by Web hosting companies—which may be an advantage should you decide to put your database on the Web, perhaps as a data store for a Web site.

Begin by going to the Web page for downloading the MySQL Community Server (*dev.mysql.com/downloads/mysql/*).

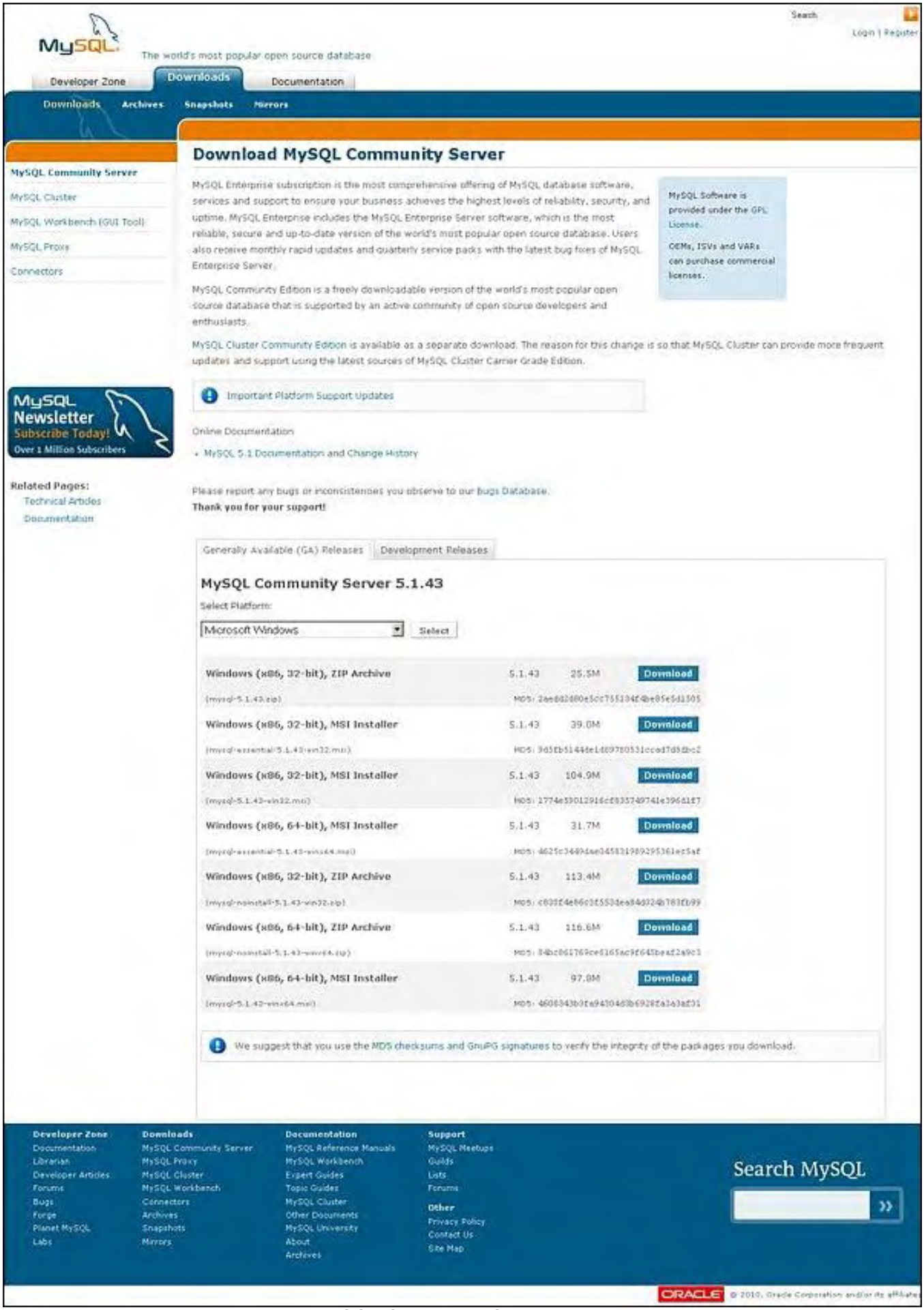

Figure 1. MySQL Community Server download page.

By default, Microsoft Windows is the selected platform. The page lists more than half a dozen download options, so you should choose the one that matches your PC (32- or 64-bit) and what type of installation file you prefer (ZIP archive or MSI installer). Most people choose the "Windows (x86, 32-bit), MSI Installer" option. If the MSI Installer does not currently reside on your PC, then you can choose the ZIP file or download the MSI Installer (*www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyId=5FBC5470-B259-4733-A914-A956122E08E8*) for free from Microsoft.

Click the appropriate Download link. The MySQL Web site may request personal contact information, but that is not required. A subsequent dialog will allow you to specify a destination for the installation file on your PC.

Installing MySQL

After the installation file has finished downloading, open it by double-clicking it, which begins the MySQL Setup Wizard.

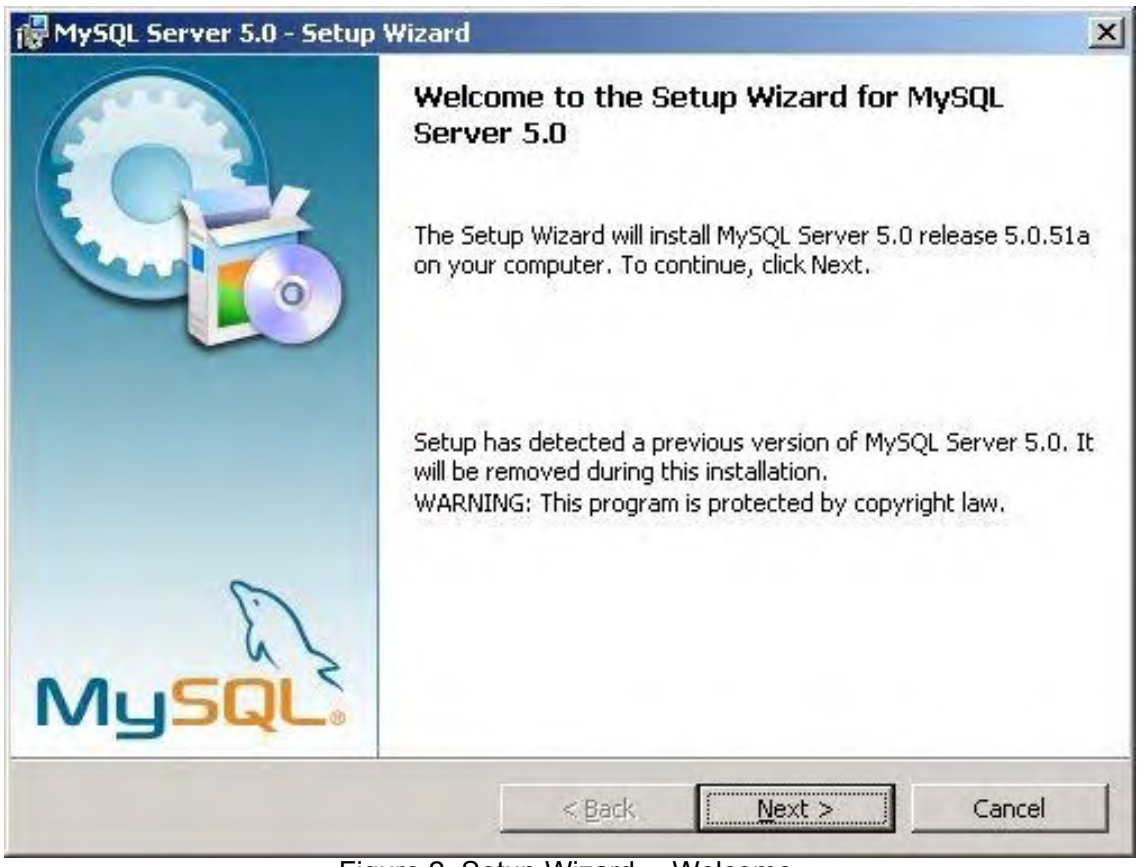

Figure 2. Setup Wizard —Welcome.

At the welcome dialog, click the Next button.

Figure 3. Setup Wizard — Types.

The MySQL Setup Wizard makes it possible for you to choose an installation directory on your PC, and whether to install the optional components. In the Setup Type dialog, you can pick from three types of setup: Typical, Complete and Custom. Select the first one if you would like MySQL to be installed in the default directory (C:\Program Files\MySQL\MySQL Server 5.0) and if you also want all three client programs to be installed (the Command-Line Shell, Command Line Utilities and Server Instance Config), but none of the C language "include" or library files. For most people, this setup type should be adequate. Alternatively, if you are a C programmer interested in examining MySQL's source code, then select a Complete setup to get all of the above.

In this article, we won't be using the default directory, and so we will choose the Custom option, and specify a different installation directory, C:_a\MySQL. Some computer users opt to install all programs in the default Windows directory, which should be C:\Program Files (unless you set it to a different directory). But using a non-default directory offers the advantage of clearly distinguishing user-installed programs from those already installed by Windows or forcibly installed by any software that does not allow you to specify an installation directory. The top-level directory name "_a" is concise, saving space in your Windows PATH environment variable, and its underscore pushes it to the top of any directory listing that is sorted alphabetically by filename—thereby making it more visible.

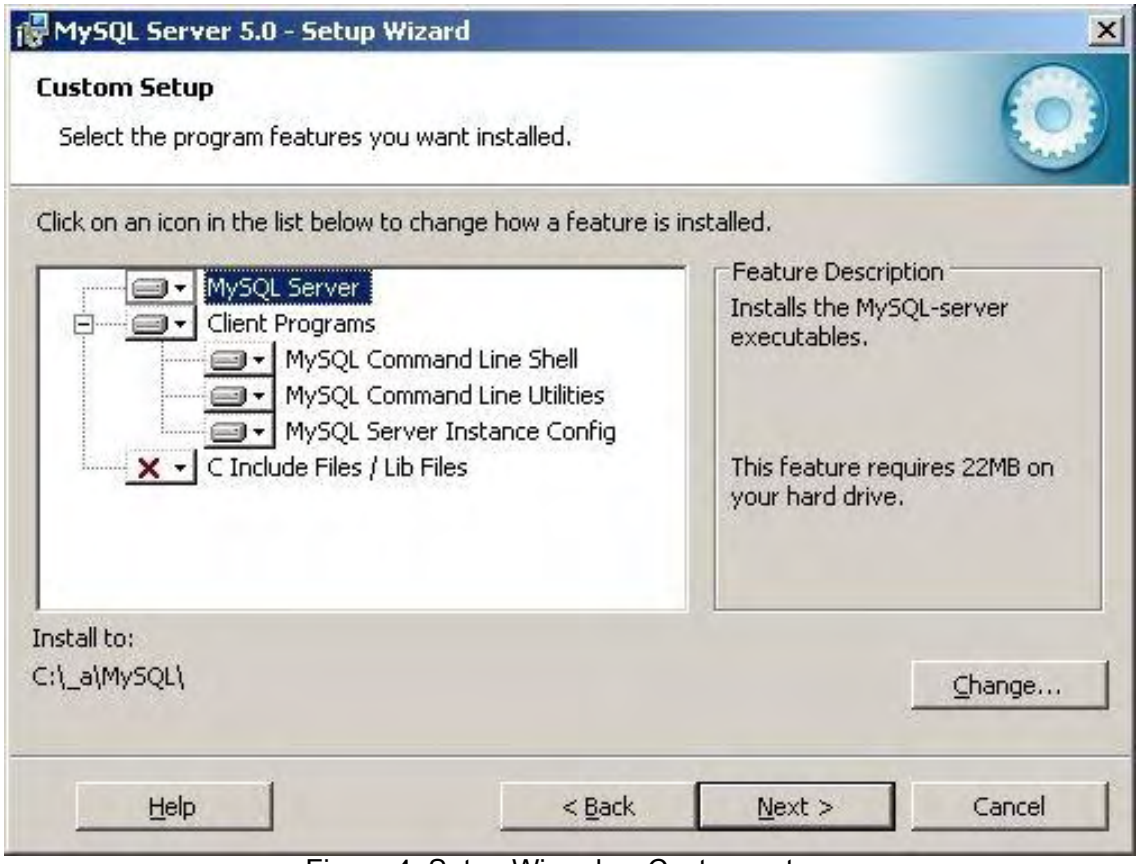

Figure 4. Setup Wizard — Custom setup.

After you have made all of these choices, click the Next button.

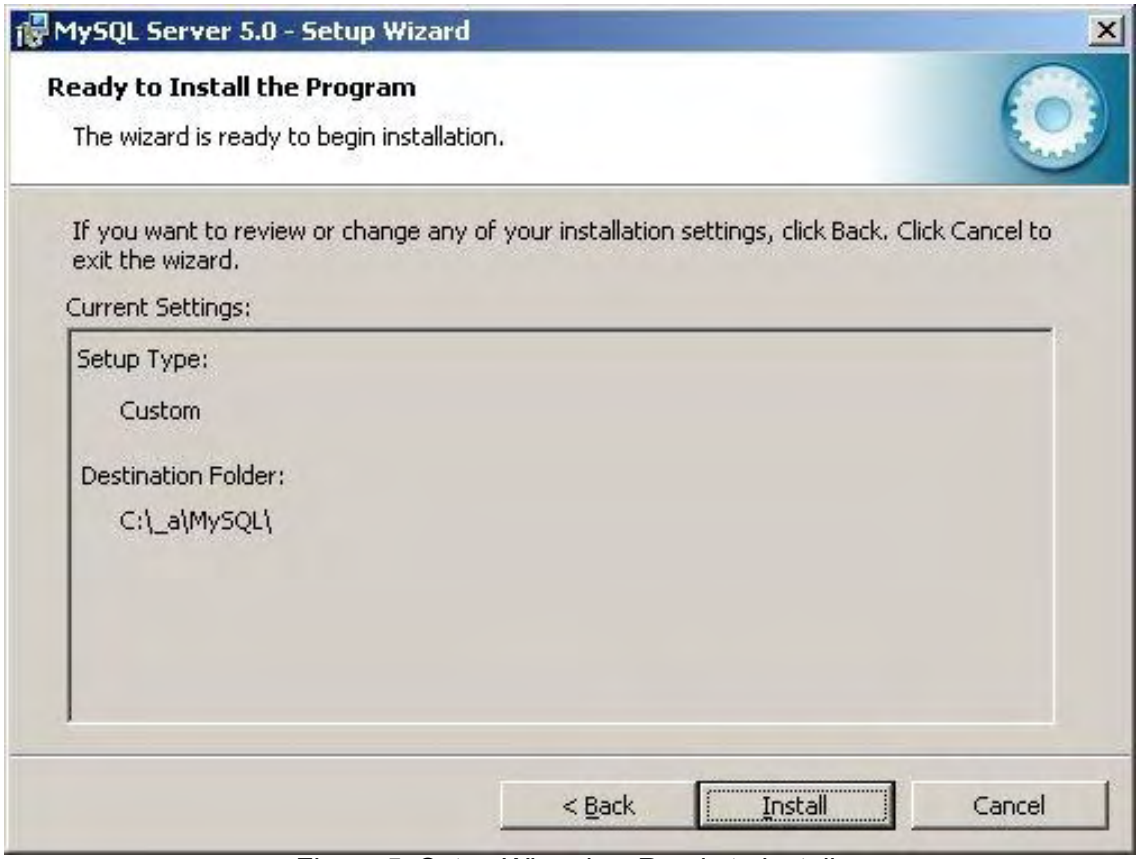

Figure 5. Setup Wizard — Ready to install.

You should now be ready to install MySQL's files, so click the Install button.

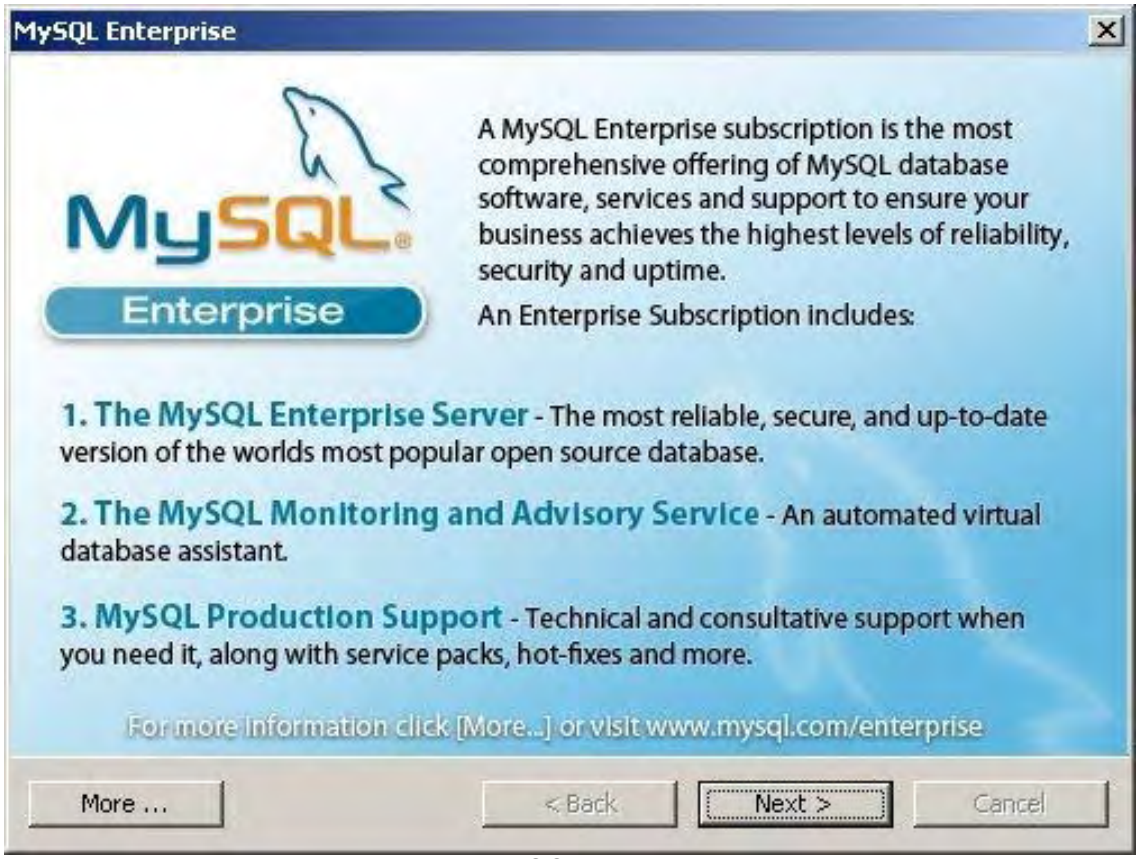

Figure 6. MySQL Enterprise - 1.

During this process, you may see some MySQL Enterprise advertisement dialogs.

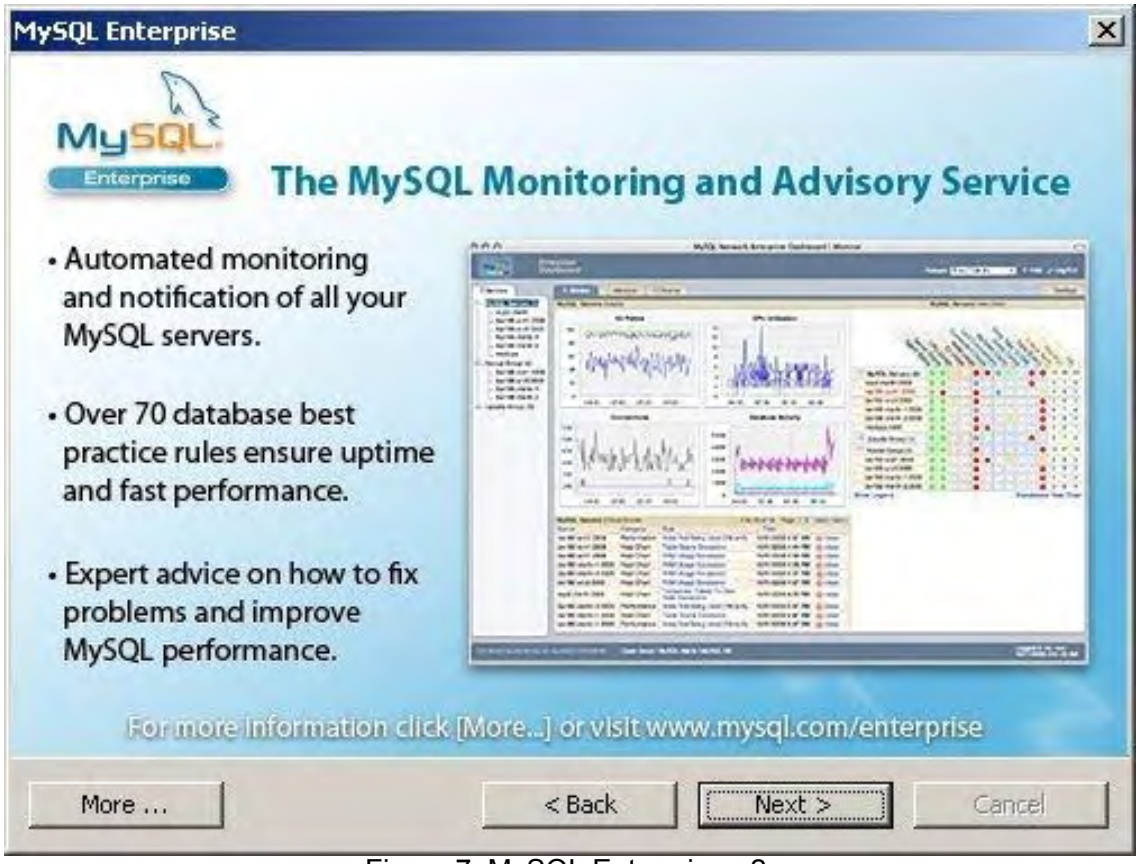

Figure 7. MySQL Enterprise - 2.

Feel free to immediately click through any such advertisement dialogs.

Figure 8. Setup Wizard — Completed.

When the Setup Wizard has finished, you can—and should—configure your new database server. Click the Finish button.

Configuring MySQL

Figure 9. Configuration Wizard — Start.

At the initial Server Instance Configuration Wizard dialog, click the Next button.

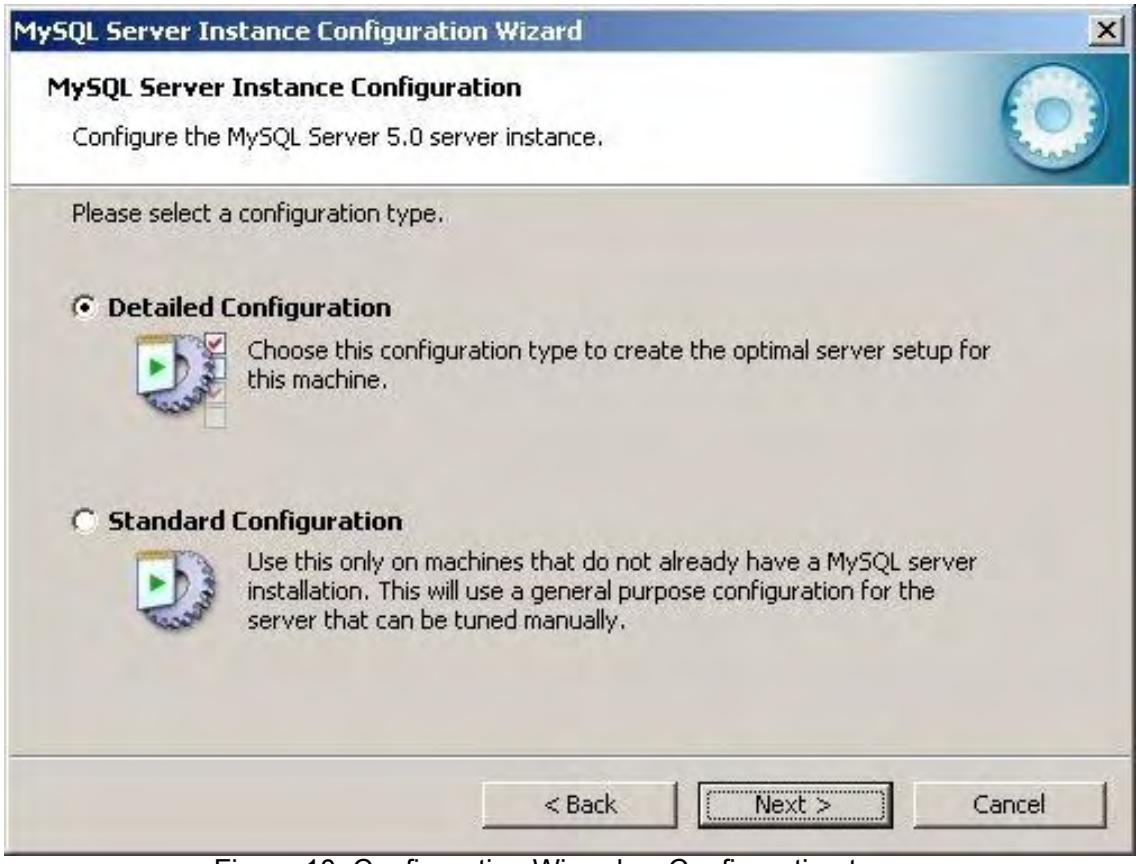

Figure 10. Configuration Wizard — Configuration types.

The configuration wizard allows you to opt for either a detailed configuration, which gives you more control, or a standard configuration. In this article, we will choose the former option (the default). Click the Next button.

Figure 11. Configuration Wizard — Server types.

At this point, you will need to specify how MySQL is going to be used on your computer: simply for development purposes, as one of many server applications, or as an exclusively MySQL database server. For the sake of simplicity, you can choose the first option (the default). Click the Next button.

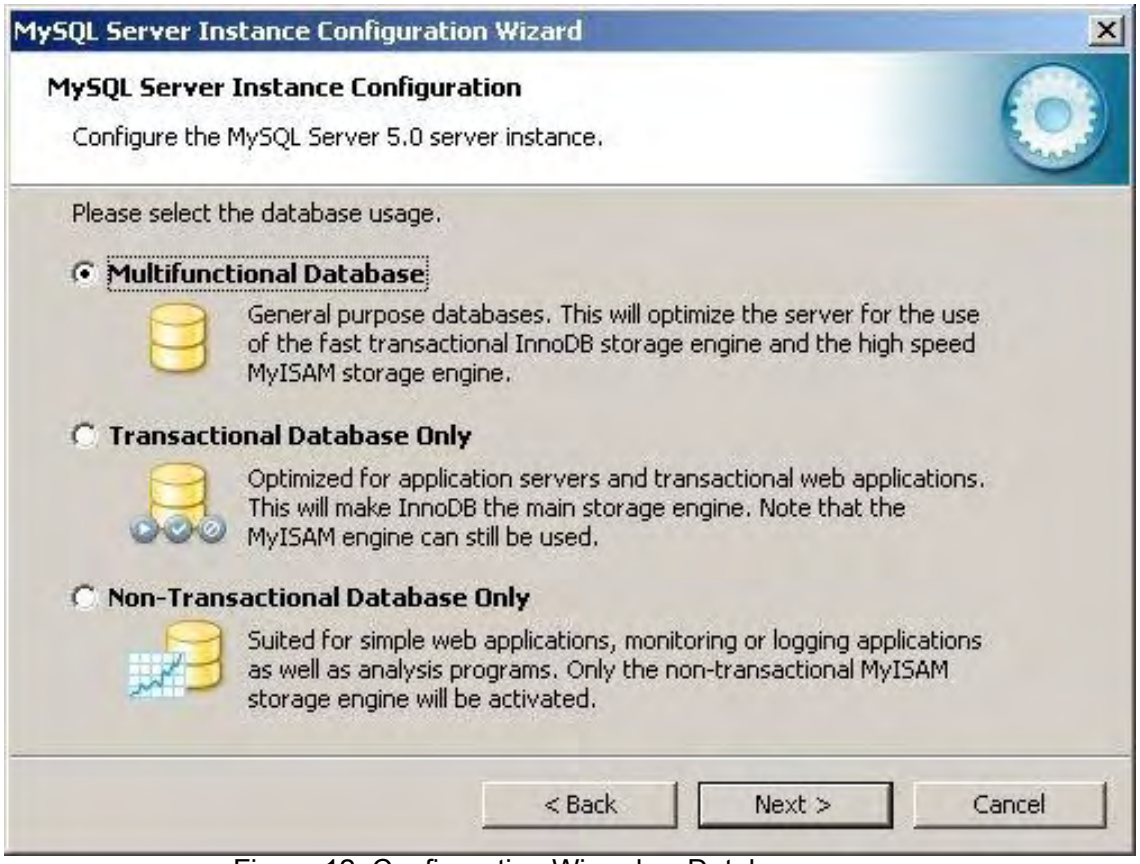

Figure 12. Configuration Wizard — Database usage.

MySQL offers two different database storage engines: InnoDB and MyISAM. Only InnoDB supports transaction functionality (we won't get into the details of that here), but does so at a cost of somewhat inferior processing speed (i.e., performance). If you are unfamiliar with transactional operations, or sure that you will not be needing them for any of the database applications that you plan to use with this MySQL instance, then choose the third option, Non-Transactional Database Only, which is what we will choose for this article. Yet if you suspect that your applications will be requiring transactions, then choose the second option, Transactional Database Only. (This option does not preclude you from using the MyISAM engine.) If you are not yet certain as to your future needs for transactions, or you if think they will be limited, then you can select the first option, Multifunctional Database (the default). Bear in mind that the InnoDB engine does consume considerably more disk space.

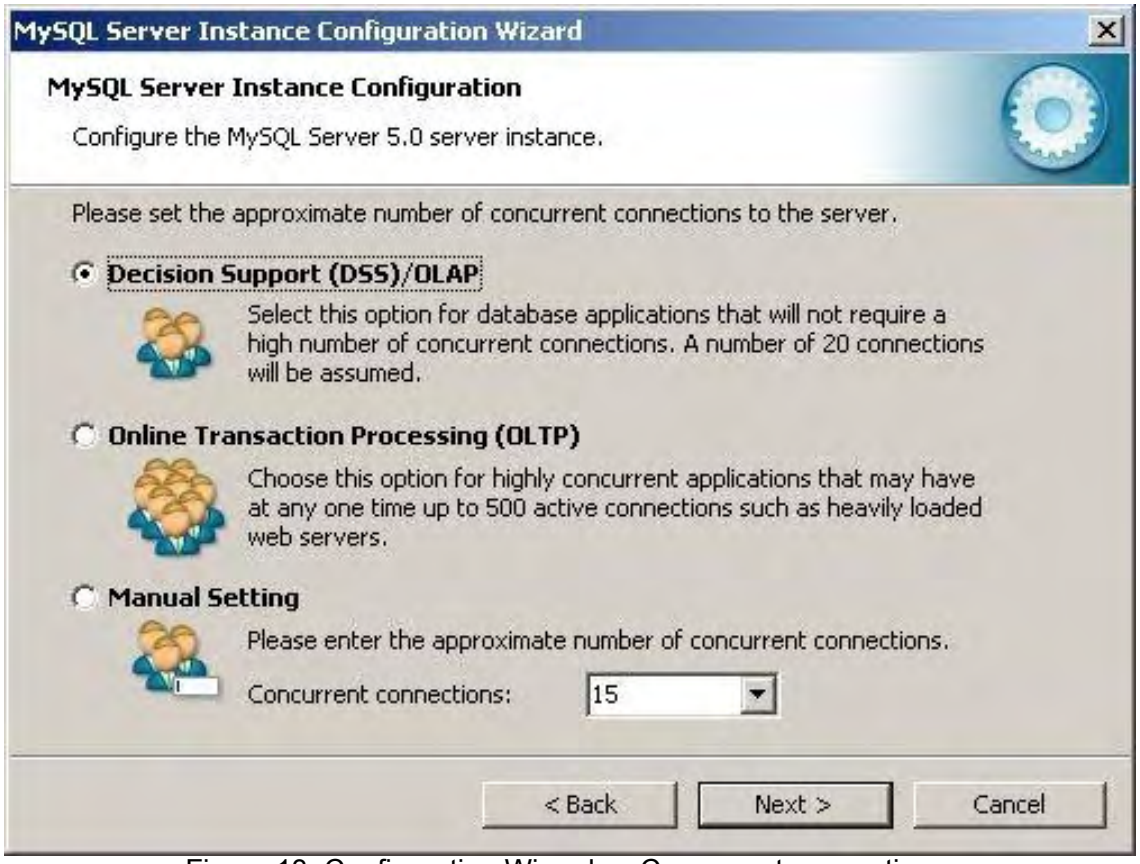

Figure 13. Configuration Wizard — Concurrent connections.

Since your database is probably for learning purposes at this point, then it won't be hit by a sizable number of client programs running concurrently and thus need a proportionally larger number of active connections. So you can select the default option, Decision Support (DSS)/OLAP, and then click the Next button.

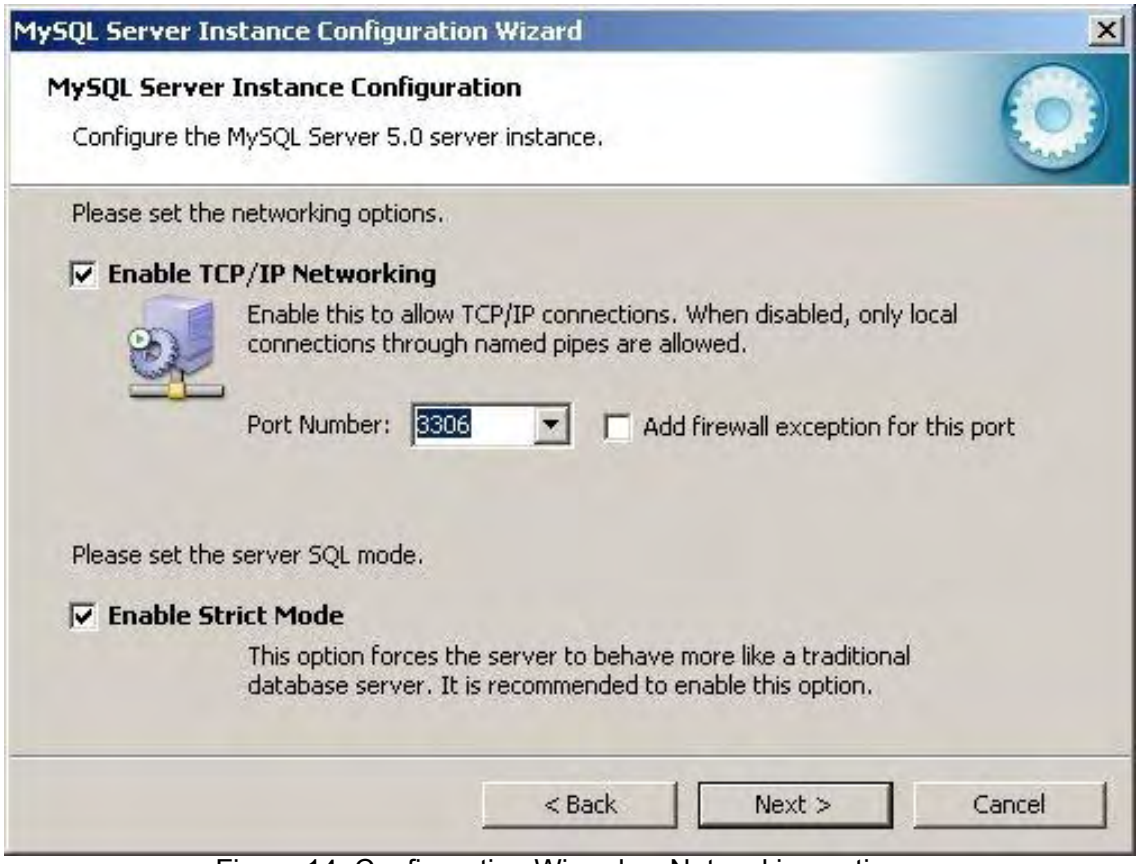

Figure 14. Configuration Wizard — Networking options.

The default values again are the best choices for MySQL's networking, namely, enabling TCP/IP networking and port number 3306. Ignore the option to enable strict mode, which is only applicable if you will be using your database with applications, such as a proprietary shopping cart whose SQL queries you cannot modify. Click the Next button.

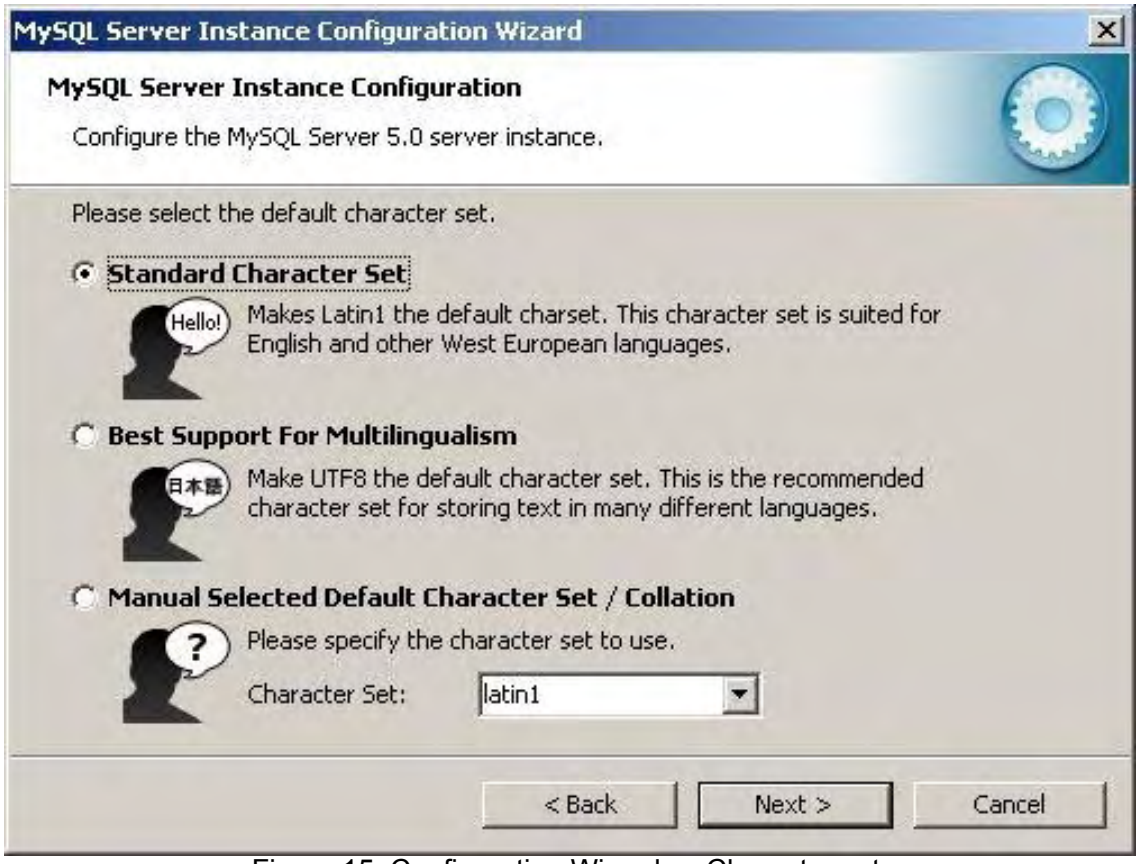

Figure 15. Configuration Wizard — Character set.

Opt for the standard character set (the default).

Figure 16. Configuration Wizard — Windows options.

Your MySQL server can be run by Windows as a service, and begin automatically when you boot up your computer. Those are the default and recommended settings. MySQL's binary directory—in this case, C:_a\MySQL\bin—contains more than a dozen executable programs. The Configuration Wizard can add that directory to the Windows PATH environment variable, so the programs can be run on the command line without explicitly including the directory. Click the checkbox to choose that, and then click the Next button.

Figure 17. Configuration Wizard — Security options.

When you reach the security options dialog, enter a new root password twice. For security reasons, do not select the option to "Enable root access for remote machines." Also, do not create an anonymous account, since you should do everything with named accounts, for safety's sake. Record your chosen root password somewhere safe, and click the Next button.

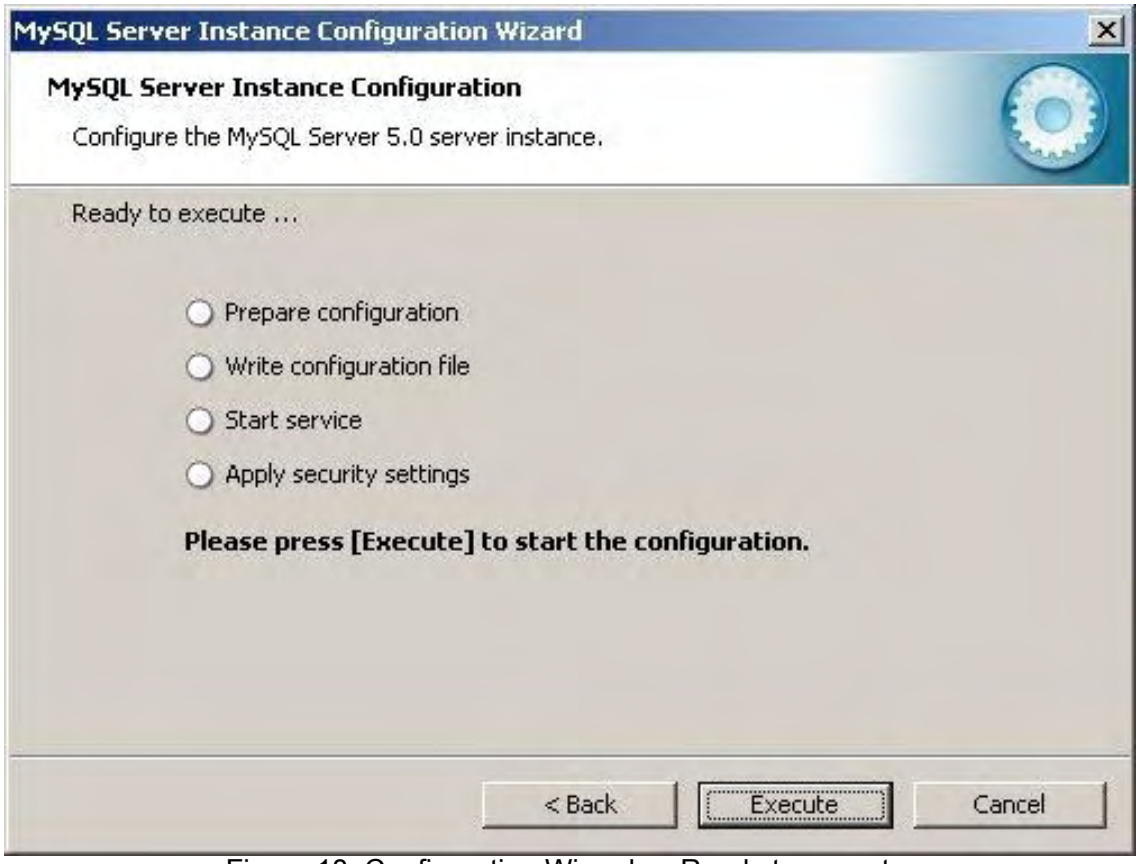

Figure 18. Configuration Wizard — Ready to execute.

The Configuration Wizard is now ready to apply the settings that you have indicated in the earlier dialogs. Click the Execute button.

If the configuration process does not get any errors, then you will be told that the configuration file was created, the MySQL service was installed and started, and your security settings have been applied.

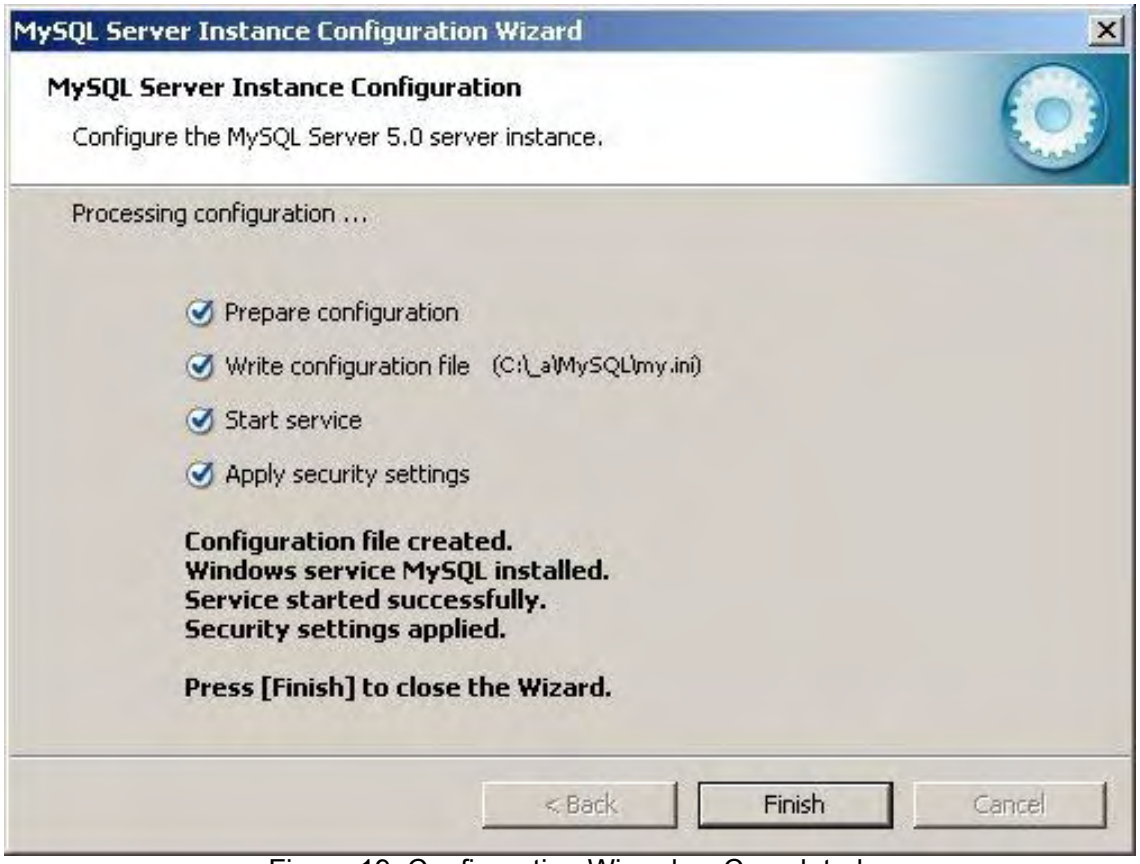

Figure 19. Configuration Wizard — Completed.

Verifying MySQL

Now that you have successfully installed a new MySQL server, you should verify that at a minimum its basic operations work without error. Go to a Windows command-line prompt, change the directory to the MySQL binary directory (in our case, C:_a\MySQL\bin), and start the MySQL monitor program, mysql.exe:

```
cd \_a\MySQL\bin
mysql –password –user=root
```

It should prompt you for the password you had chosen during the configuration process. When you enter that password, you should see a welcome banner and a command prompt: mysql>

```
Welcome to the MySQL monitor.  Commands end with ; or \g.
Your MySQL connection id is 4
Server version:  5.0.51a-community-nt MySQL Community Edition (GPL)
Type 'help;' or '\h' for help.  Type '\c' to clear the buffer.
mysql>
```

You can then go into the MySQL database, and display a list of the tables contained therein:

```
mysql> use mysql;
Database changed
mysql> show tables;
```

```
+-*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—+
| Tables_in_mysql            |
+-*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—+
| columns_priv               |
| db                         |
| func                       |
| help_category              |
| help_keyword               |
| help_relation              |
| help_topic                 |
| host                       |
| proc                       |
| procs_priv                 |
| tables_priv                |
| time_zone                  |
| time_zone_leap_second      |
| time_zone_name             |
| time_zone_transition       |
| time_zone_transition_type  |
| user                       |
+-*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—*—+
17 rows in set (0.00 sec)
mysql> quit
Bye
```

To gain insight into how MySQL works, consider exploring the structure of those tables.

At this point, you have installed and configured your MySQL database server successfully, and you can begin creating databases and everything that can be stored in them, including tables.

Online Help

To obtain further information about MySQL, check with the many resources available on the Web. In addition to all the books that focus on MySQL in considerable detail, be sure to explore the online MySQL Reference Manual (*dev.mysql.com/doc/refman/5.0/en/*). For most experienced database users, it is an excellent source of information. It contains more than two dozen chapters and seven appendices discussing installation, server administration, performance optimization, data types, functions, operators, stored procedures, triggers and much more.

No matter what you plan on using local databases for, MySQL should prove to be an excellent choice.

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

“Defragmentation Made Easy” by Jack Dunning

In the newer versions of Windows, defragmenting hard drives has become behind-the-scenes routine maintenance. You may never need to think about it again.

In the early days of PCs, hard drives were small—that's if you even had a hard drive in your computer system. Space was at a premium whether for program and data storage or loading up the minuscule amounts of random access memory. Everything needed to be done efficiently lest we run out of space. Program code was written tighter and stored files were closely packed on the drives. This created a problem when storing files.

Since files were written contiguously, there was minimal to no space allowed between any two stored files. If a new, larger copy of a file were written to the disk, a piece of it would need to be placed elsewhere where there was a vacancy. This caused the file to be fragmented. While this was ultra-efficient for disk space usage, it caused increasing fragmentation as more and more files were edited and saved. Eventually, computer systems were slowing down as hard drives needed to make many wasted motions in order to read just one file. Finally, the defragmentation program arrived.

I can remember watching an animated graphic of the defragmentation process as the program would copy a file from one location to another on the disk while clearing space for the files being put back into one piece. Depending upon the capacity of the drive and the number and size of the files, it could take hours to complete the process—especially if it had been a while since the last defragging. Sometimes if the drive was too full, the defrag would fail for lack of working space. In the old days, we routinely defragged our hard drives. Today, we rarely even talk about it—and it's *not* because we no longer need to defragment our computer storage.

This column is not so much a tip as it is an explanation of why few people who are using Windows 7 or Vista hardly ever think about defragmenting their drives.

Windows has a disk drive defragger built into it. Right-click on the icon for any drive in Windows Explorer and select Properties. In the Tools tab Defragmentation is found with the option "Defragment now..." (see Figure 1). In previous versions of Windows, this was a regular procedure that we were supposed to do. (In all honesty, we rarely defragged because we were either too lazy or forgot to do it.)

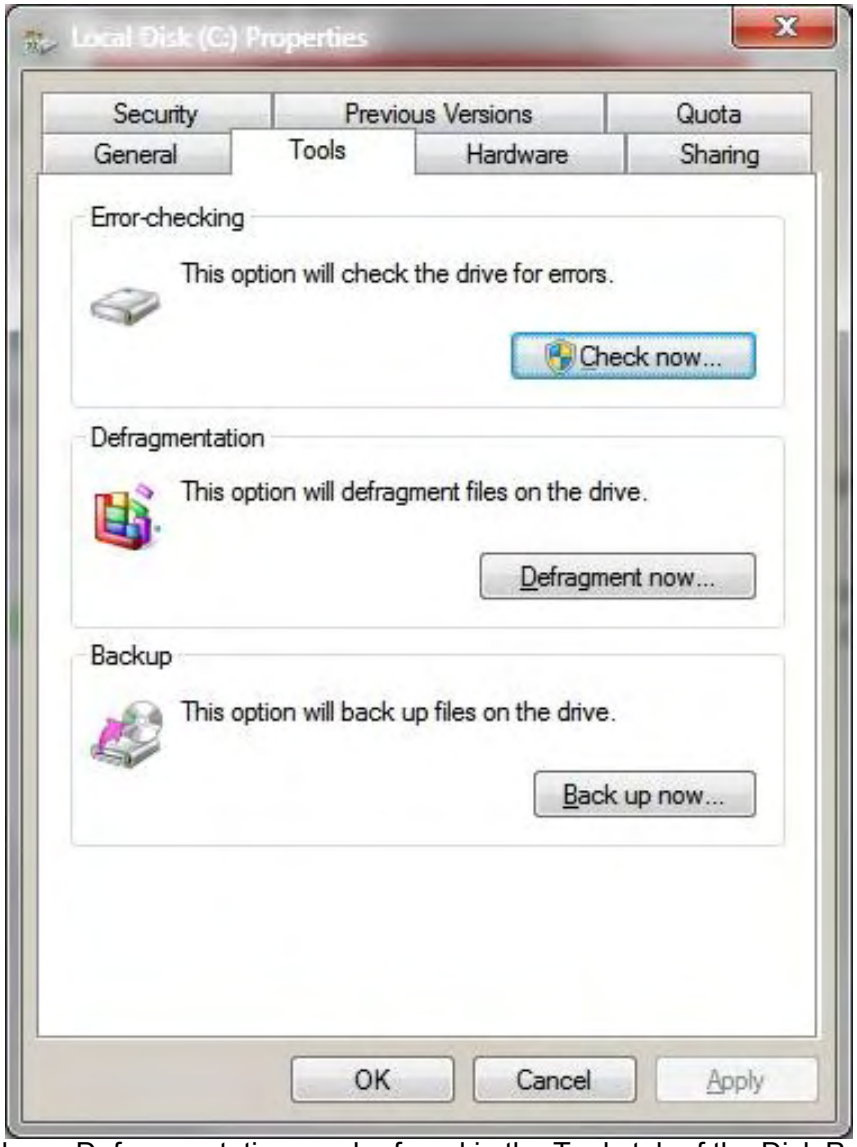

Figure 1. In Windows, Defragmentation can be found in the Tools tab of the Disk Properties window.

Starting with Vista, by default, we no longer needed to think about putting our files back together on a hard drive. Windows does it automatically on a regular schedule—unless the automatic feature gets turned off.

To access the Disk Defragmenter in Windows 7 and Vista, you can either click the button in the Properties window shown above or type "defragment" into the Search field in the Start Menu. A window listing all of the installed drives will open (see Figure 2).

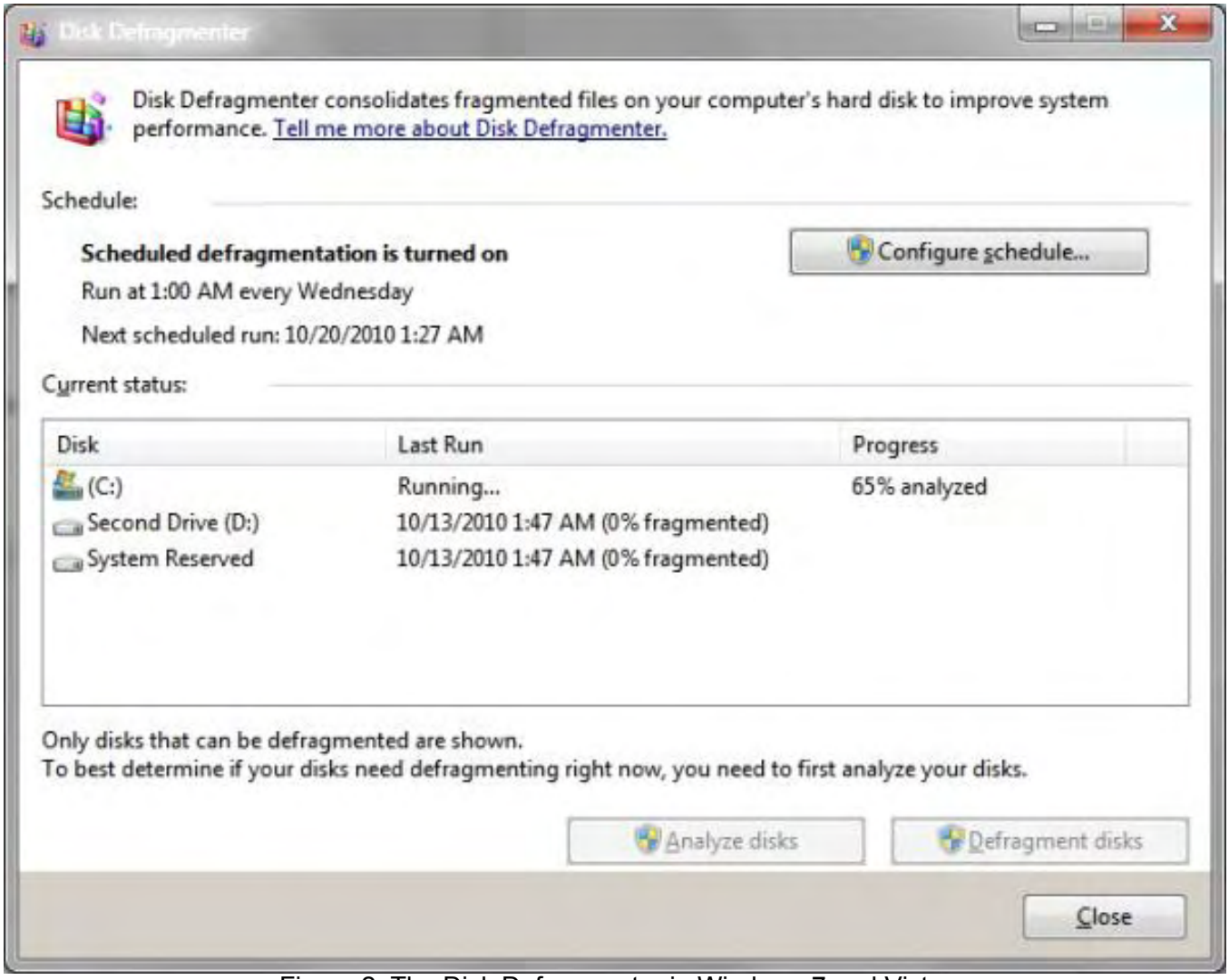

Figure 2. The Disk Defragmenter in Windows 7 and Vista.

Next to each drive is the date and time of the last run plus the percent fragmented. As you can see, it is scheduled to run once a week after midnight. The reality is that since the program is run automatically every week, the actual running time is rather short. There isn't that much more work to do each week. If you want to check the current fragmentation on any drive, select the drive and click "Analyze disk." If you haven't turned off the automatic schedule by unchecking the box in "Configure schedule..." then you haven't needed to worry about it.

If you checked the same drive with the defragger in Windows XP, you would see that the drive is not actually 100 percent defragmented. The new program in Windows 7 and Vista optimizes by ignoring file pieces 64MB or larger. It has been determined that rewriting and moving file pieces that large did not appreciably increase the performance of the input/output of the drives. Why worry you by reporting anything less than 100 percent? (If you're the type of person who need 100 percent defragmentation, then there is a switch (-w) that can be run from the command prompt (i.e., defrag c: -v -w).

In the newer versions of Windows, defragmenting hard drives has become behind-the-scenes routine maintenance. You may never need to think about it again.

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

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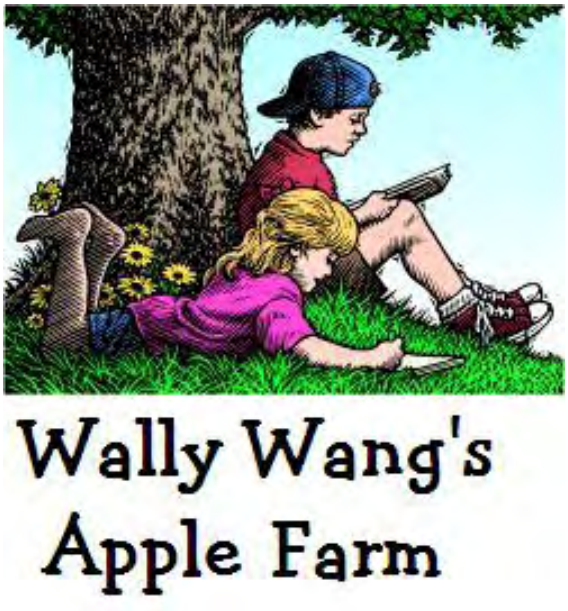

Wally Wang's Apple Farm

"Databases on the Mac" by Wally Wang

With choices such as Bento, FileMaker Pro and Base (from OpenOffice), you can store, save, sort and view your data in the way you like best. Also, sales of the iPad continue plowing ahead; the future is always brighter, with revolutionary products on the way; and a tip on getting a desktop Mac to recognize a Magic Trackpad via Bluetooth.

The simplest database most people ever need is to store a list of names and addresses, which they can do using the free Address Book database that comes with every Macintosh. The Address Book acts like a simple Rolodex file so it's easy to use, but may also be a bit too limited if you need to store anything other than names and contact information.

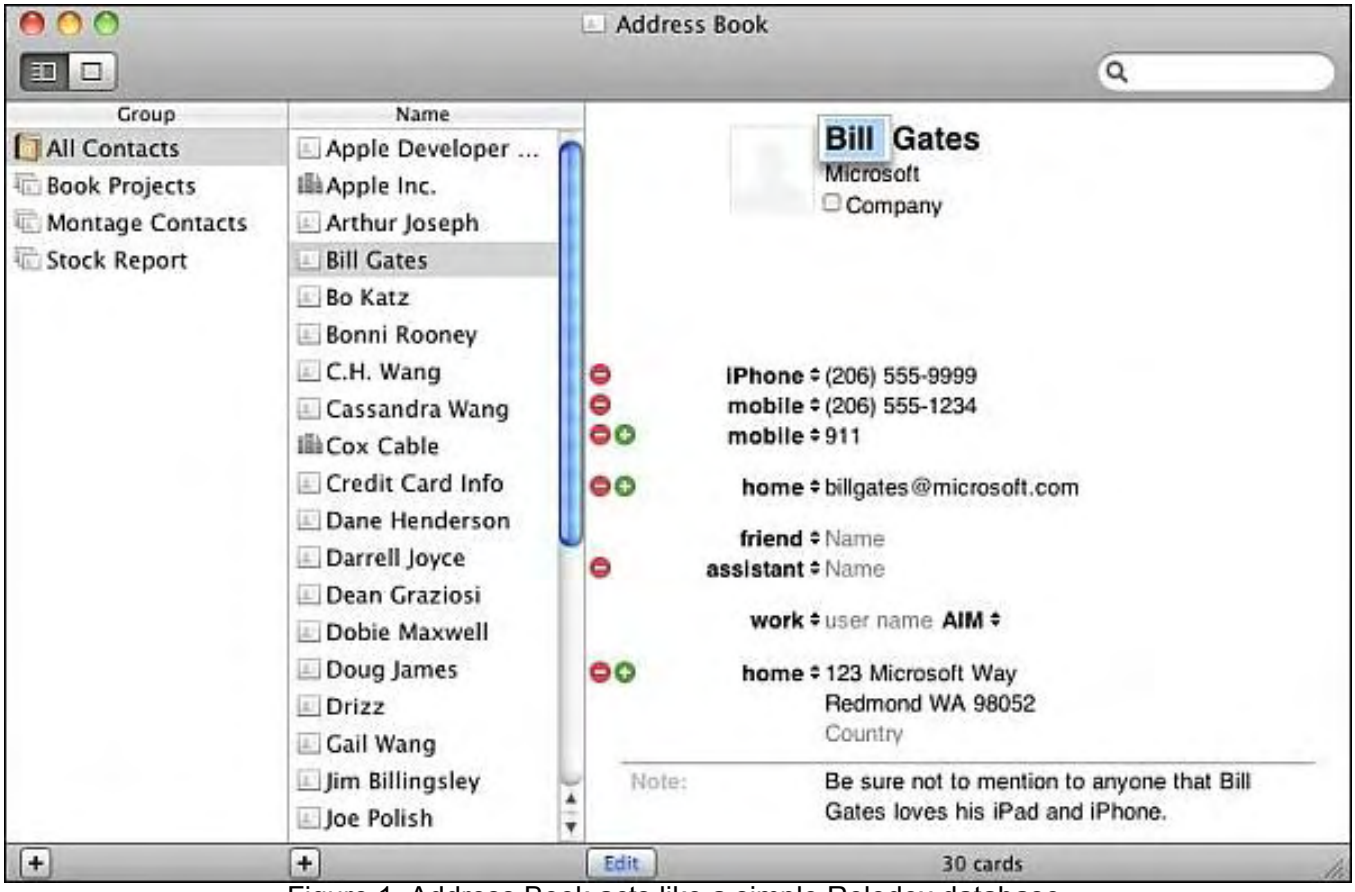

Figure 1. Address Book acts like a simple Rolodex database.

Besides giving you Address Book for free, Apple also gives you a calendar and appointment program called iCal. Many times you'll only need to store contact information or appointments, but what if you

need to see both types of information so you can see who you made an appointment with and how to get in touch with that person?

You could just switch back and forth between Address Book and iCal, but you may want to consider getting Bento (*www.filemaker.com/products/bento/*), a simple $49 database program that can display both your Address Book and iCal data in a single screen.

Figure 2. Bento combines the data from Address Book and iCal.

What makes Bento unique is that instead of importing data from Address Book and iCal (and risking duplicate data stored in two different places), Bento simply links to your Address Book and iCal data. That way, any changes made to Address Book or iCal (such as through synchronizing with an iPhone or iPad) automatically appear in Bento.

FileMaker, the company that publishes Bento, regularly offers free templates to help you organize different types of information for students, families, or business people. If you create a particularly useful template for Bento, upload and share it with others at the Bento Template Exchange (*solutions.filemaker.com/database-templates/index.jsp*). If you need a unique template, browse through this template exchange and download templates that others have created.

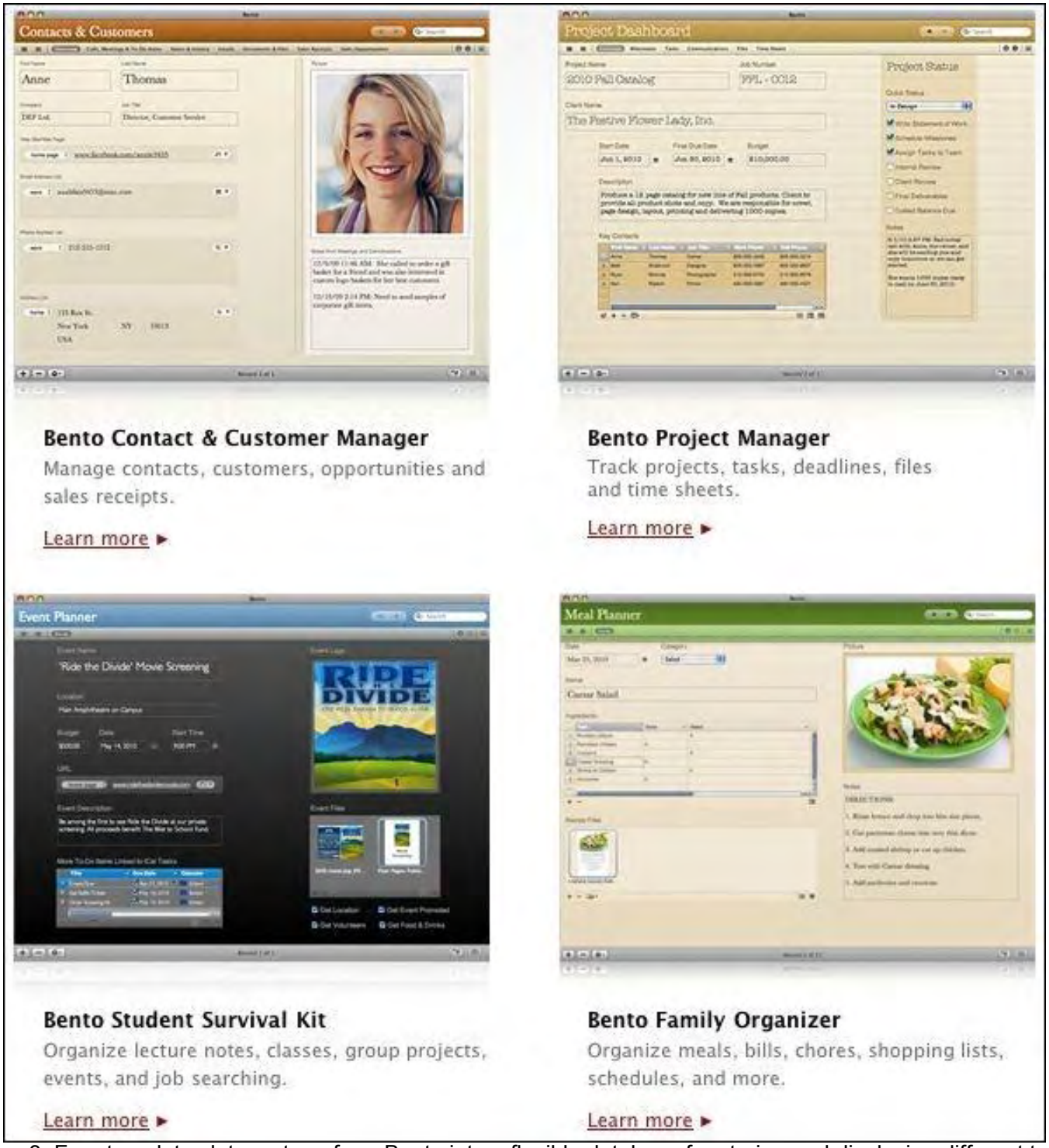

Figure 3. Free templates let you transform Bento into a flexible database for storing and displaying different types of information.

If you have an iPhone or iPad, you can keep your data synchronized through the iPhone/iPad version of Bento, which costs only $4.99. If you need a simple, easy-to-use database program, take a look at Bento, which you can download and try for free. If you need something more powerful that you can customize and program, then you may want to move up to Bento's bigger cousin, FileMaker Pro 11 (*www.filemaker.com/*).

If you're a programmer, you can even develop custom applications with FileMaker Pro and sell them to others. Since FileMaker Pro runs on both Windows and Mac OS X, you could create a cross-platform database program customized for a niche market such as dentists, dog breeders, or stamp collectors.

For a free database, download a copy of OpenOffice (*www.openoffice.org/*) and use the included Base database program. Base may not be as easy to use as Bento or as powerful as FileMaker Pro, but it's free and may be flexible enough to meet your needs.

Databases may not be the most exciting type of software, but it can be one of the most important ones. With choices such as Bento, FileMaker Pro and Base (from OpenOffice), you can store, save, sort and view your data in the way you like best.

The iPad as the Fourth Most Popular Consumer Electronics Device in History

Sales of the iPad continue plowing ahead with Apple selling three million iPads (*digitaldaily.allthingsd.com/20101005/whos-your-daddy-ipad-rewriting-adoption-records/*) just in the first 80 days. According to Bernstein Research, the iPad could become the fourth most popular consumer electronics category right after TVs, smartphones and laptop computers.

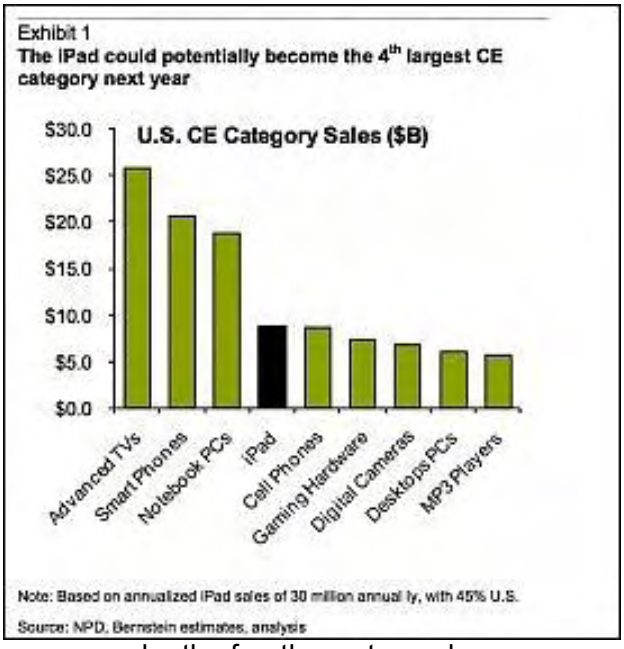

Figure 4. The iPad may soon be the fourth most popular consumer electronics device.

What's even more remarkable is that sales of the iPad continue growing, even when other companies are blaming their own slow sales on the recession. Target, Wal-Mart and Best Buy are now selling iPads (*online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704366504575278451855784216.html*) and overseas sales of iPads continue to soar. For a single product to become the fourth most popular consumer electronics device by itself is even more amazing, especially considering that no single company dominates the other top three consumer electronics categories (TVs, smartphones, or laptops).

Even the most dedicated cynic can't ignore the fact that the iPad is popular, successful and versatile. Now take a step back in time to the beginning of this year where the Windows 7 News site explains why the iPad will fail (*www.windows7news.com/2010/01/28/why-the-ipad-will-fail-and-help-windows-7-to-succeed/*).

After criticizing the iPad as too expensive and ugly, the author of this Windows 7 News site then goes on to gush about how gorgeous the MSI and Dell copycat tablets are, even though they mimic the iPad's appearance. Even stranger is that the author claims that the iPad will stimulate sales of tablets running Windows 7 because people really want the multi-touch features of Windows 7 and not the multi-touch features of the iPad.

The author concludes by saying, "All this will have come about because Apple has done the R&D and released a product that's been instantly derided as ugly and not what people want. If I were Steve Ballmer today, I'd be splashing out on an extra skiing holiday."

Five months later, the author of this Windows 7 News site wrote a second blog post (*www.windows7news.com/2010/05/06/why-the-ipad-will-fail-and-help-windows-7-to-succeed-part-2/*) explaining that the iPad's initial sales may look impressive, but that no operating system, including the iPad's iOS operating system, is finger-friendly. For a true finger-friendly operating system, the author pins his hopes on Windows Phone 7, an operating system that copies iOS, the operating system running the iPad.

Regarding the question of actually using an iPad, the author cheerfully states: "I will freely admit I've not used one myself but I have spoken to people who have, and their impressions have been largely similar [sic]."

To continue embarrassing himself regarding his complete ignorance about the iPad, the author asks the questions: "But what precisely is the market for this device? Does it offer enough features and functionality to press all the right buttons with different consumer groups (techies, casual users, business users, home users)? Sadly I still don't think it does."

These curious predictions about the iPad aren't just coming from some nut with no computer experience whatsoever, but from Mike Halsey, the author of *Troubleshooting Windows 7 Inside Out (*/www.amazon.com/gp/product/0735645205?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0735645205*).*

In hindsight, Mike Halsey's predictions of the iPad's imminent failure are laughable, much like predictions that heavier-than-air machines would never fly or that water-tight doors would make the Titanic unsinkable. How could so many people be so sure that the iPad would fail when the complete opposite has turned out to be true?

The answer starts with prejudice. If you don't want to believe in something, you'll look for evidence to back up your beliefs and avoid or ignore evidence that contradicts your beliefs. This explains why the Windows 7 News site insisted that everything about the iPad is useless and ugly, but any copycat design that mimics the iPad is magically gorgeous. Logically, this can't be possible, but logic never enters into the minds of those who are prejudiced against a company like Apple or against people with certain skin colors or religious backgrounds.

Can you imagine someone claiming that PCs with AMD processors are completely useless and pointless, yet believe the same PCs with Intel processors are suddenly wonderful, versatile and flexible? Would anyone seriously listen to someone claiming that PCs are useless, yet admit that he's never used a PC before in his life?

Critics of Apple products seem to live in an Alice in Wonderland fantasy world where contradictions make perfect sense and utter nonsense is undeniably a fact. While such prejudiced minds can continue spinning their tangled threads of blatant lunacy, the rest of us can objectively examine our options and choose the best product for our needs, regardless of the company name behind that product.

The Future Is Always Brighter

Back in the 1950s, visions of the future included flying cars, vacations to Jupiter, and pills that could cure any possible disease. Obviously the world of the future is always brighter in fiction than in fact, but the future in the computer world can be equally exciting in a more limited, but still revolutionary scale.

The first major revolution involves REAL Studio Web Edition, which has dubbed itself Web 3.0 (*www.realsoftware.com/web/*). The major revolutionary change REAL Studio Web Edition will introduce will be the whole idea of creating a Web site.

Right now, creating a Web site involves HTML, JavaScript, PHP and CSS stored in separate files that reveals all the code used to create your Web pages. REAL Studio Web Edition eliminates that problem by letting you design Web pages by dragging and dropping items on a window. When you're done, you can make your Web page interactive by writing BASIC code.

Finally, you can compile your entire collection of Web pages into a single executable file that can run on a Windows, Linux, or Mac OS X server. Running a Web site from an executable file not only means your Web site is faster and more responsive to the user, but also much tougher for hackers to modify to deface Web pages or insert Trojan horses to steal passwords or credit card numbers. Best of all, an executable file doesn't require any special plug-ins so users won't even know that your Web pages are compiled rather than running as separate HTML files connected together by PHP programs.

No programmer would ever give away the source code to a valuable program, yet Web page designers must do this every time they store Web pages on a server. With REAL Studio Web Edition, Web page designing may take on a new dimension, which is why REAL Studio Web Edition calls itself Web 3.0.

To see a demo of REAL Studio Web Edition in action, watch this YouTube video (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=jspPXd6aE0o*). The most interesting part occurs around 10:50 where the programmer demonstrates how to play YouTube videos on a Web page while the YouTube video spins around.

Another revolutionary product is Parallels (*www.parallels.com/*), which was the first virtualization program that allowed Intel-based Macs to run Windows reasonably well. After making it easy to run Windows on an Intel-based Mac, Parallels went one step further and introduced a feature to compress virtual machines to make them smaller.

Still later, Parallels added another feature called Coherence, which lets you choose between running and displaying the full Windows desktop within a Mac window, or just running a Windows program inside a Mac window, creating the illusion that the Windows program is running directly on the Macintosh (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjVZt-G2qC8*).

If you get the special Switch to Mac edition of Parallels 6, you'll get a USB cable that will let you connect a Windows PC to a Mac. Through this cable, you can suck Windows out of your PC and install it as a virtual machine on your Mac, essentially cloning your Windows PC within your Mac. Although you'll only need to do this process sparingly (every time you want to transfer a physical Windows PC to a virtual one inside a Mac), the process is surprisingly straightforward.

In the past, virtualization programs like Parallels ran Windows at a slightly slower speed than a regular PC (or a Mac when running Windows through Boot Camp, which turns a Mac into a PC clone). The latest Parallels 6 runs Windows so quickly that there's no longer a noticeable difference between running Windows through Boot Camp and running Windows through Parallels on Mac OS X (assuming you have enough memory to run Mac OS X and Windows at the same time).

Parallels 6 even supports 3-D graphics, so if you want to play all your Windows games through Windows running on Parallels, you may not notice a slowdown in performance at all.

If you're still not convinced that Parallels can help you migrate from Windows to the Mac, you might consider getting an iPad so you can run the free Parallels iPad app. Just run Windows as a virtual machine on your Mac, sign up for the My Parallels service, and you'll be able to access your Windows virtual machine directly from your iPad as shown in this YouTube demo (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2I-*

jCY4N9I).

Figure 5. Parallels for the iPad lets you remotely control a virtual machine on your Mac.

If you want to run Windows programs on an iPad, Parallels gives you that option. Obviously the speed between running Windows on an iPad and running Windows as a virtual machine on a Mac won't be the same, but the ability to control a Windows virtual machine remotely through an iPad might make you want to buy both Parallels 6 and an iPad.

In the past, Parallels and its major rival, VMWare's Fusion (*www.vmware.com/products/fusion/*) were nearly identical in features. However, Parallels 6 has finally pulled ahead where the comparison is no longer equal. Given a choice between Parallels 6 or Fusion 3, Fusion 3 is still a solid product, but Parallels 6 is now the clear winner.

* * *

If you get Apple's Magic Trackpad, put aside the installation instructions, because like most installation instructions, they don't work. To get my Mac mini to recognize my Magic Trackpad, I had to click on the Bluetooth icon at the top right of the menu bar. This pulled down a menu where I could choose Set Up Bluetooth Device.

Figure 6. To get a desktop Mac to recognize a Magic Trackpad, you may need to go through the Bluetooth menu first.

After you set up the Magic Trackpad as a Bluetooth device, then you can follow Apple's installation instructions for getting a desktop Mac to recognize the Magic Trackpad.

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 2010 for Dummies (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470489987?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470489987*),
Beginning Programming for Dummies (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702*),
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*),
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*),
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*),
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*),
My New iPad (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593272758?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593272758*),
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*),

How to Live With a Cat (When You Really Don't Want To) (*www.smashwords.com/books/view/18896*).

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.

In his spare time, Wally likes blogging about movies and writing screenplays at his site "The 15 Minute Movie Method." (*www.15minutemoviemethod.com/*) Wally can be reached at *wally@computoredge.com*.

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Rob, The ComputorTutor: Technology Solutions

"Open Office Spreadsheets" by Rob Spahitz

This week we continue our investigation of the Calc tool from OpenOffice, a free competitor to Microsoft's Office suite. Calc is the competition for Excel.

This week we continue our investigation of the Calc tool from OpenOffice, a free competitor to Microsoft's Office suite. Calc is the competition for Excel. As a reminder, you can download the free OpenOffice applications from *www.OpenOffice.org*.

Quirks

As I continue to use the OpenOffice product, I see little issues that make it a bit quirky compared to Windows products. The latest one is that, in Writer, if I select a block of text using mouse drag-drop, once I release the mouse button I don't seem to be able to change the size of the selection without starting over. In most Windows applications (that are using the standard Windows editing functionality, including non-Microsoft products) after selecting text, you can hold the Shift key and click elsewhere to expand or shrink the selection. In Writer, if you select text with mouse-drag, as soon as you release the button, the selection seems to be fixed and you cannot change it with the above-mentioned shifting features. However, I can then use the keyboard option (shift-arrow left/right/up/down) to extend the selection.

Oddly enough, in Calc's edit area (i.e., the Input Line, which matches Excel's Formula Bar) this drag/shift feature works fine.

It's odd how you start to take for granted some of the features that you apply on a regular basis and only notice them when they no longer work.

More Feature-Testing

This week, since one of my readers, Bill B., found the Charting features a bit difficult to use (maybe quirky?), I have decided to build some data and see what I find. Readers should keep in mind that I'm new to OpenOffice, so I'm sharing my discoveries, including things that are simply different for me compared to other products I've used for years.

Let me start by creating some data. In Excel, I can create a sequence down in a column in several ways. One simple way is to enter two numbers (like 1 and 2) in adjacent cells (like A1 and A2), and then select the two cells and drag the little black box in the bottom-right corner of the selection.

I see that Calc has the same little black box. I decided to simply put a value of 1 in cell A1 and drag the box down to see what happens, as seen in Figure 1.

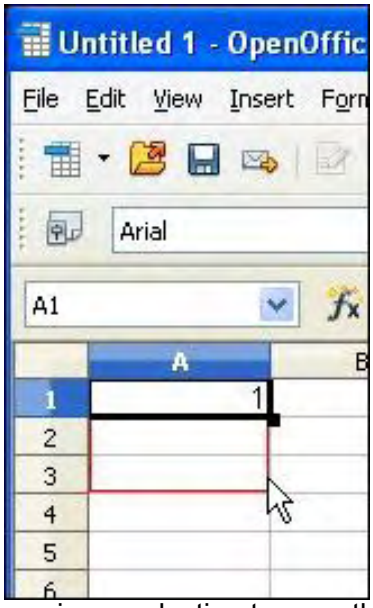

Figure 1. Dragging a selection to copy the contents.

Note that the figure shows the drag in process, from that little black box in the corner of the selection. However, the screen-capture process I used added an arrow for the cursor rather than the black "+" cursor that was shown while I dragged. But I left the arrow since it makes it easier to see where the mouse is located.

Anyway, I continued dragging down to row 15. The end result in Excel would have been 15 cells filled with the value 1. Calc seems a bit more intuitive and creates the sequence of values from 1 to 15. A pleasant surprise, since I only have to enter one number before dragging to get a sequence.

Just an aside: When I tried the same thing starting with the number 10, I got a sequence from 10 to 22 rather than 10 to 150 adding 10s each time. Although this is fine, I suspect that many times you are doing this with larger numbers, you want to increment by something other than 1.

One more thing. When I tried to delete this selection I just added, in Excel I can just hit the Delete key and it clears the cells (which always seemed a bit strange since I expected it to "delete" the cells rather than delete the contents of the cell). In Calc, I get a window of options, as seen in Figure 2.

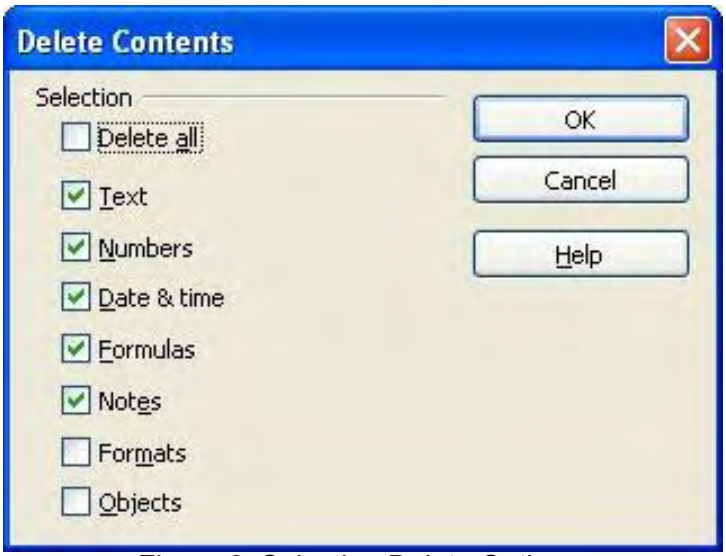

Figure 2. Selection Delete Options.

If I simply press the Enter key or the OK button, it clears the contents of the cell. This is still taking some getting used to since it's an extra step I don't have to do in Excel.

To make things interesting, I decided to add some random numbers between 1 and 100 in column B next to the values in column A. In Excel I could use the RAND function like this: =INT(RAND()*100)+1

That also works in Calc, so I now have some data to chart. This data will keep changing on every sheet recalculation, so it will make the chart show different levels each time to help demonstrate the features.

And to further test the compatibility, I double-clicked on the little black box in the corner of the selection when I accept the value in cell B1. As with Excel, it copied the formula down to match the column to the left (down to cell B15).

Charts

Finally, we have some data to chart. I see a little chart in the top toolbar with three adjacent colored bars. This is the same picture in the Insert menu next to the word "Chart." When I click this, it immediately adds a sample chart and begins the wizard, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Calc chart.

One thing to note is that I clicked into cell C1 before launching the wizard, and apparently it added that and the adjacent numbers to the sample chart. As you click on the various chart types, the sample on the sheet changes to reflect the latest selection. This is much nicer than Excel 2003 and very similar to Excel 2007.

The second step of the wizard, as seen in Figure 4, identifies the source of the data. Here I changed it to exclude column C.

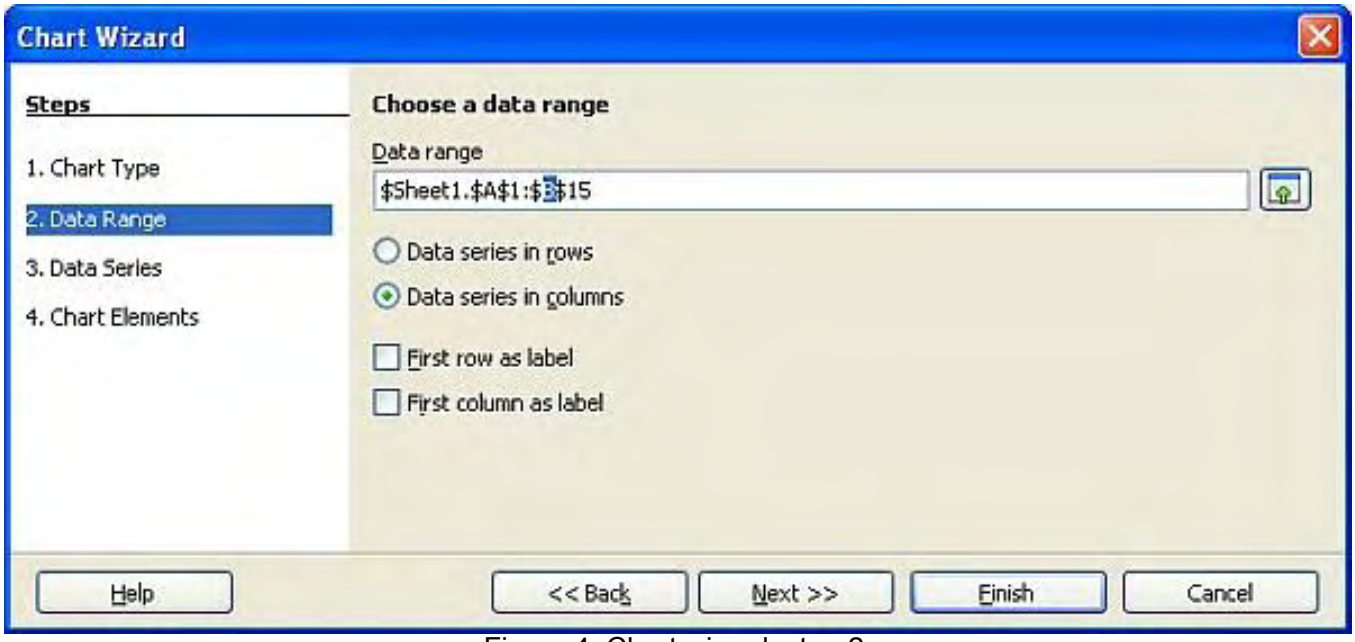

Figure 4. Chart wizard, step 2.

The third step of the wizard, as seen in Figure 5, identifies the parts of the data and how you'd like them represented in the chart.

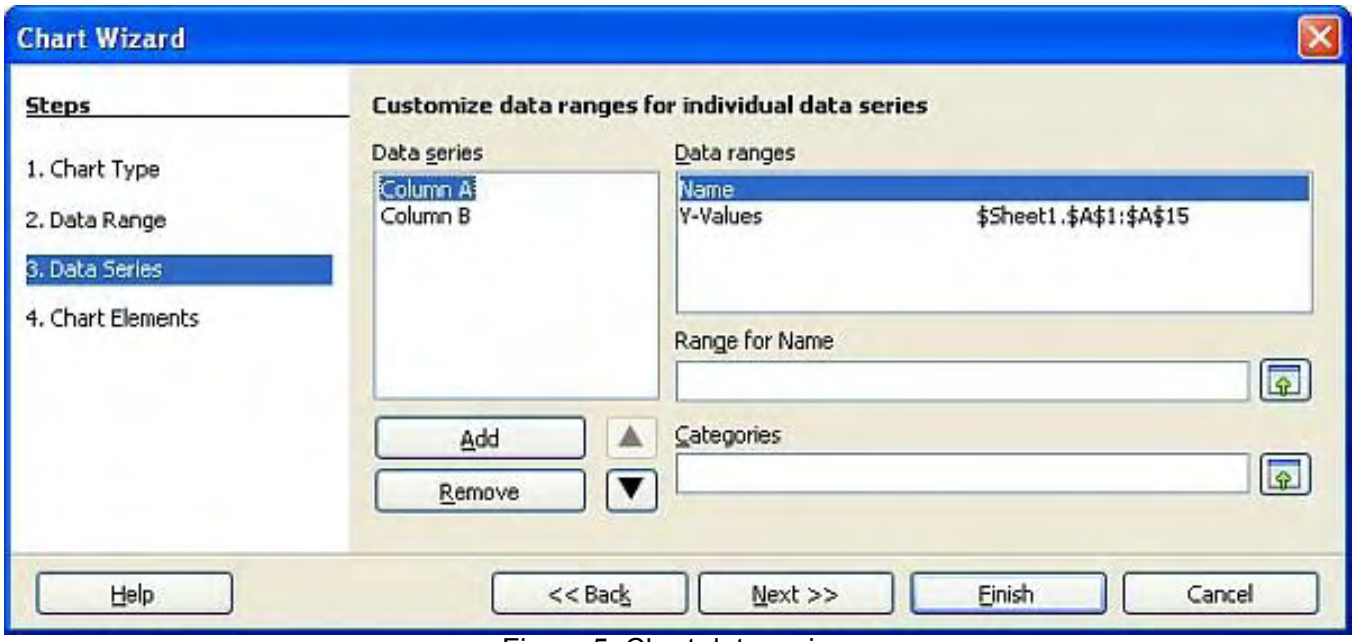

Figure 5. Chart data series.

The final step of the wizard, as seen in Figure 6, lets you change additional elements of the chart.

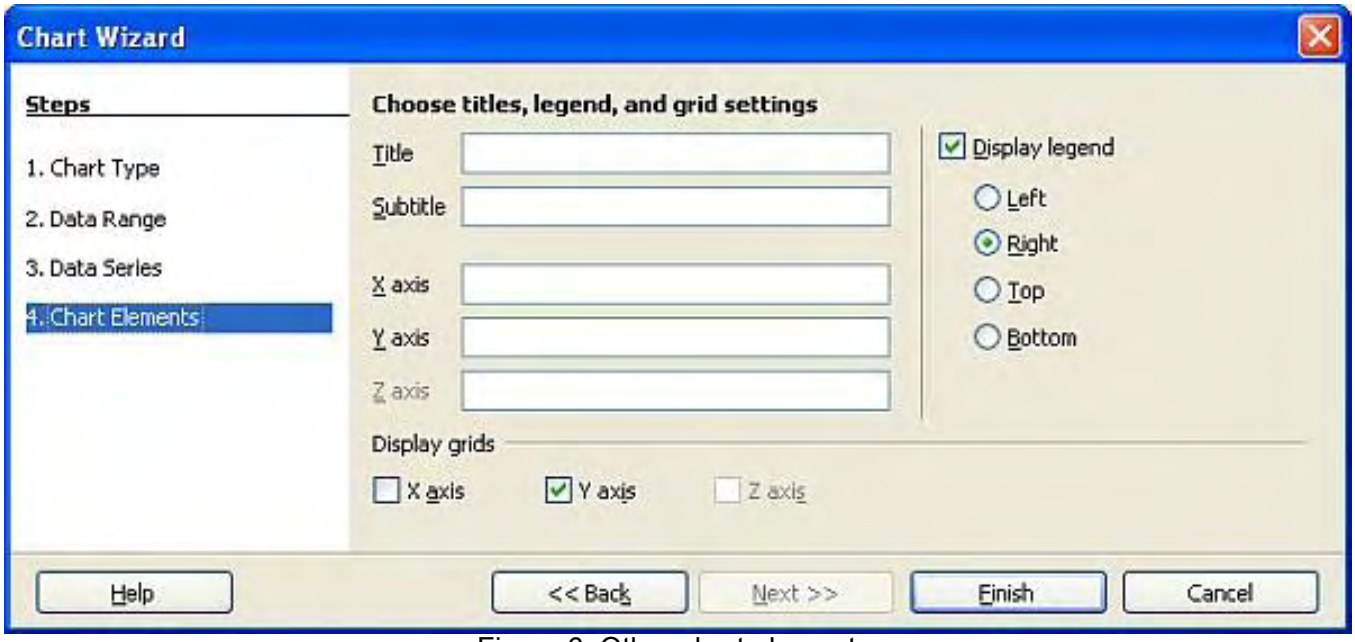

Figure 6. Other chart elements.

Talking again of quirks, I seem to have located one here. When I looked back at my chart, I noticed that it had changed from the original one I saw in Figure 3. Notice that Figure 7 has the same look for column B (red) and now shows the values on the right side of the chart.

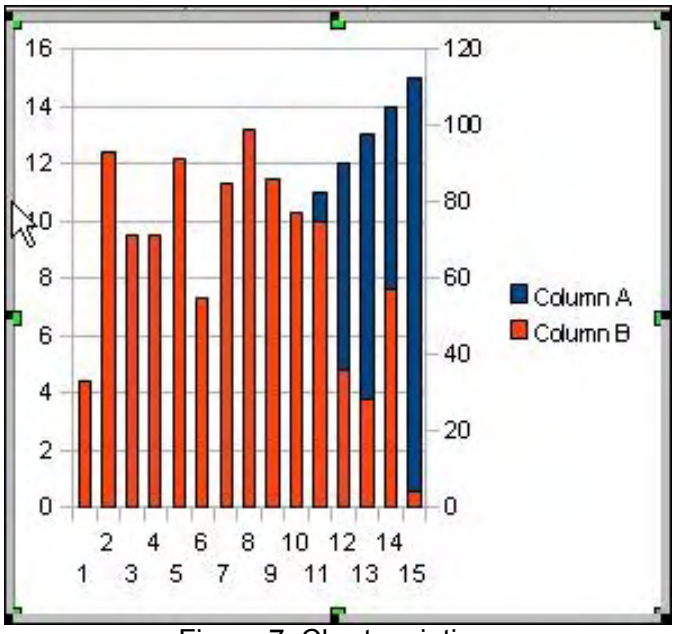

Figure 7. Chart variation.

I suppose that this could be a variation since I changed from three columns of data into two. The left side shows the values for the first column and the right side shows the values for the second column.

Where it gets quirky is when I turn on the "3D Look" check box (again, seen in Figure 3). With this setting, the chart reverts back to what I see in Figure 3, but with a three-dimensional look. I would have expected it to show Figure 7's chart with a 3D look. Go figure. Maybe that's a bug worth reporting.

Finally, after clicking the Finish button on the wizard, I could work directly with the chart. When I right-click on the chart, it gives me a collection of options as seen in Figure 8.

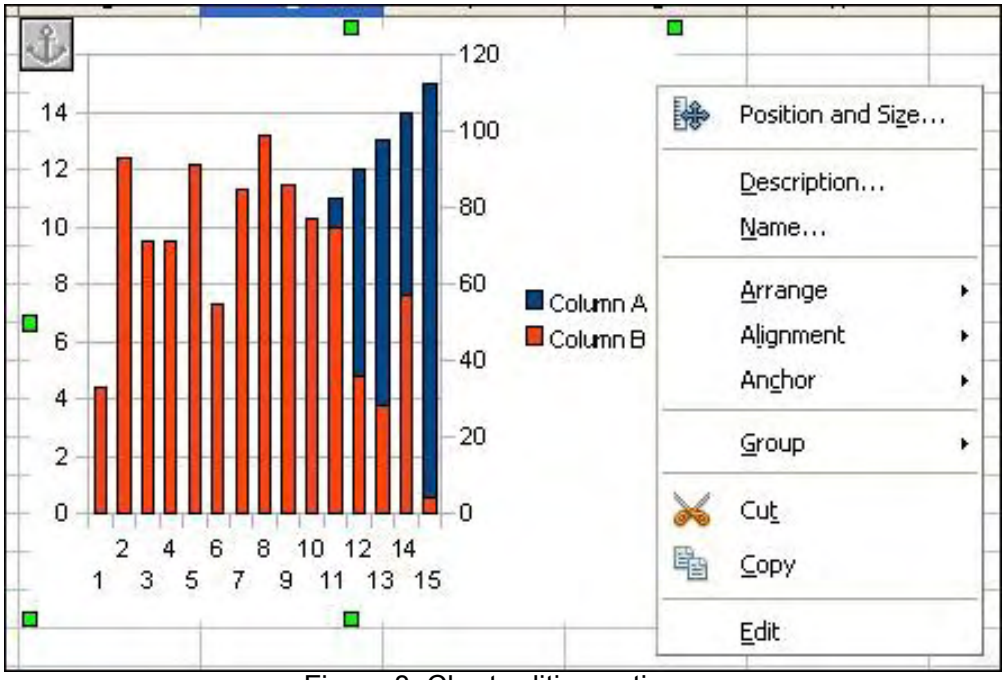

Figure 8. Chart-editing options.

I'm almost out of space to test all of these options. On first appearance they appear to be very similar to those that I've seen in Excel. However, there's no entry for changing the Data Source. Apparently to get there you need to choose the Edit option. From there, you can right-click again in various places to get the additional options shown in Figure 9, depending on where you right-click.

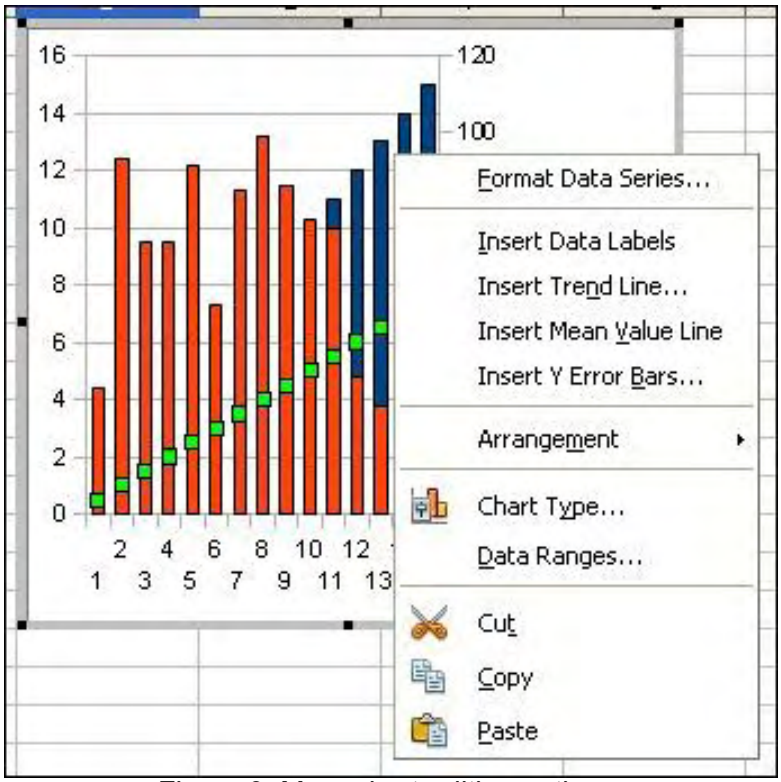

Figure 9. More chart-editing options.

Next week, I'll continue to explore more Calc features to see if they can handle something like the tax-calculator that I use to determine my state sales taxes for my small Dogopoly board game business.

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

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

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Beyond Personal Computing: Search Engines

"Going Nowhere at the Speed of the Internet" by Marilyn K. Martin

> Some keys to surviving whatever bizarre, nonsensical or off-topic "information" your search engines turn up.

In our current Age of the Internet, anyone who wants to research some specific information has to endure a trial by fire called "Using a Search Engine." These are electronic gofers that sift through a humongous amount of information in the blink of an eye to find helpful material related to your search word or phrase. Or not.

Competition between search engines is fierce. You can choose from among dozens of search engines, and set your favorite as the default. I usually choose a conglomeration-default search engine, which mashes together a half-dozen of the most popular search engines. And I do find some obscure and surprising links. I just have to slog through nearly the entire first page of paid-advertiser links first.

The attempts by various search engines to be overarchingly "helpful" usually aren't. Some search engines open up their first page of links, headed by what I'm sure they think are "helpful suggestions" for what you are *really* looking for. Usually with questions starting "Did you mean ...?"

These clarifying attempts can occasionally be helpful, especially for people like me who are spelling-challenged. And kids, who text in one-letter words and emoticons (I (heart) U!), may forget that computers don't recognize search phrases like "lol videos." ("Did you mean videos of lollipops?") So kids may find these clarifying attempts useful, if only to bridge the gulf between texting shortcuts and the King's English.

And kids have no shame about using the Internet to help solve the most mundane of problems. Say a child grumbles about cleaning up his room, and pounds out the frustrating search phrase, "Where do I put all my stuff?" Up pops some clarifying questions, ranging from "Did you mean better storage for my stuff?" to "Did you mean temporary storage for my stuff?" The little tyke may actually get some ideas. Although Mom may not be so pleased with all the sudden sales calls from Seven Blocks of Storage Units and Wall-O-Shelves.

But for most adults, who already possess the precise thought processes and grasp of English to make their search phrases very specific, these clarifying attempts can be very annoying. A search phrase for "Explore transliterate alphabets" may get frustratingly non-clarified with "Did you mean explore literate translations?" or "Did you mean alphabetizing exploration vacations?"

But, alas, even specifically worded search phrases can wander off into the Twilight Zone. I did an Internet

search one time for "where to buy episodes of The Prisoner" (the British TV show from the 1960s). Up popped a link for a "Music Concert Recorded Live At Manitoba Prison." Uh, no thanks. The Prisoner was about an ex-spy being held for knowing too much. Not a common attribute in most incarcerated prisoners.

Regardless of which search engine you use, they all seem to apply the mantra More Is Better. At first, you are impressed by the 10 or more pages of links that pop up in answer to your search phrase. Until, into your second page of links, your search phrase is being dissected and mangled and you are getting links not remotely close to your search -phrase. "Bistros in the Bronx" has de-evolved to "Beasts in the Bronx Zoo" and "Bizy Bronx Messenger Service." By the end of the third page, you realize that you are seeing the same links over and over again.

Everyone seems to think that starting a search phrase with "Best" or "Free" will cull only the hardcore essence of what they are looking for. Ha! First of all, Google recently announced that the word "free" was the #1 term attracting the most virus-infected sites. Once again, the criminals are one step ahead of the rest of us. They must figure that so many people are on the Internet searching for "free" anything that they can maximize their devious chances of downloading their Delightfully Understated Monetary Bureau Although Seemingly Stupid virus. (Otherwise known as the DUMBASS virus.)

And the lure of free is also not lost on that lesser class of criminals called advertisers. They must spend hundreds of thousands of dollars every quarter on studies called "Maximizing Acquisition of Every Last Consumer Penny." They routinely squeeze sizeable profits out of advertisements screaming "Free!" "Free Software Download!" usually means a few months free, then you have to pay full price. "Free Pickle Stickles!" usually means you also have to buy three slow-to-move products near their expiration dates, to qualify for the Stickles. Like Pineapple Chunk Bread, Guppy Stew or Molasses Lard.

Even if you staunchly stick with putting "Best" at the beginning of your search phrases, there will be problems. First of all, do you have any idea how many manufacturers, corporations, service providers and patented inventors on this planet are certain that their product or service is the absolute "Best"? You can stop counting when you get to a trillion, give or take a million.

Most maddening, perhaps, is the unfathomable "logic" of search engines. They all seem to have an inflexible set of priorities about your search phrase: 1) The first word is King, all following words will be treated as mere serfs; 2) First and second words will dominate; 3) The third and remaining words in your search phrase are to be treated as dangling-indecipherables.

Say you do a search for "Best Free Beer." You are already limiting your safe choices by attaching that glob-o-virus word "free." Plus, "Best" is highly subjective, in terms of food and drink products. And worse, your key destination word, "Beer," has been relegated to the nebulous realm of being a dangling-indecipherable in third place.

Besides, beer is one of those love-it-or-hate-it products. Not much in between. Beer drinkers are always ready and willing to pay for their favorite brand of beer, and advertisers know it. No need for those strange "taste-athons" like they have for soft drinks. It is even rumored that beer drinkers gave birth to that important cultural icon, the "keg party." So beer is seldom free, at least at undiluted full strength. Although you can try looking around to pay $10 in some bar's mid-week, dead-day special of "All The Beer You Can Drink for One Price, with No-Wait Urinals!"

And beer drinkers are passionate purists. Don't ever expect to see Beery Wine, or Whiskey-Beer Coolers. Beer drinkers, generally speaking, are fierce, proud, dedicated and ready to party hearty if the breeze changes direction. Think of this amorphous mass of beer drinkers as a cross between a pro football team and a military branch. "We came. We drank. We burped. We won."

So on the first page of links to pop up under this hypothetical search phrase, you will find a few

references gamely trying to use all three words: best-free-beer. But you'll be lucky to find them all attached. Most likely, you will see split-references like "FREE BEER if you can eat all 15 pounds of El Barfo Burger! ... BEST El Barfo Burgers in Cleveland!"

Once you get into the middle pages of links turned up in this search, your search parameters are totally unraveling. Suddenly you are getting links to "Best" products and services, with only toss-off references to "Free" or "Beer," like those ubiquitous Top 10 Lists all over the Internet and under Letterman's desk. In other words, interesting, but nothing close to what you are looking for. And if you are on deadline for a project, you can't afford to get sidetracked for an hour chuckling over the "The Top 10 Reasons Sushi Resembles The Plague."

If you are stoked on food and caffeine, and have the time to bravely forge ahead to the very back pages of your search-phrase links, you will indeed wonder what alternate universe has taken over your Internet search. By page seven, your word "Free" is now tangled up with "Land of the Free," and cross-referenced to the Declaration of Independence and Early American History. And bizarre political movements that start with "Free!" like "Free The State Toad!"

Even your destination word "Beer" seems to have gotten seriously sidetracked by page nine. Suddenly you are getting links to "Beer in Ancient Mesopotamia" and "Best Cures for Beer Hangovers." You may even turn up a foreign children's site, where "Beery Bear Wants To Sing For You!"

By the very last page of your search-phrase links, your key but third and expendable word "Beer" is long gone. And "Best" and "Free" are spinning in their own little nonsensical universes, totally unrelated to drinkable alcohol. When you get to references for "Best Bed and Breakfasts in Tazmania" or "Freedom Songs of India," you can pretty much figure that your "Beer" search is kaput. Muttering to yourself, you recast your search phrase until your desperation shows, and you sound like English isn't your native tongue: "Beer Best Free Please?" and "Beer Free and Fast I Need!"

If you have time on your hands, or are in between projects and need to look busy at your computer, enter a strange search phrase to see what you get. I was researching "propulsion" for a while. No matter what word I entered before "propulsion," links always turned up. So, on a lark, I entered "milk propulsion." Sure enough, up popped a link to actual boat-racing events using boats made from milk cartons!

And, with full-fledged artificial intelligence on the horizon, search engines are probably destined to get even more stupid-smart in the near future. I practice at elbot.com. This is a pseudo-AI cartoon robot who will answer your questions. Sorta.

I once asked Elbot, "Did you hear the one about the pig who went into the bar?" First of all, he totally missed the idea that it was a joke setup. And he must have been programmed to avoid all mention of alcohol or drinking. (Which, fortunately or unfortunately, is what bars exist for.) And even pigs can be controversial, since some cultures consider them unclean.

So his politically/culturally correct answer was related to the most common and totally safe aspect of many bars: music. Soon Elbot was jabbering on and on about "atonal yodeling." Which is a dubious form of music seldom heard anywhere in the world, least of all in a bar.

So I guess that's the key to surviving whatever search engines turn up. Humor! Laugh it off when your search turns up bizarre links. Then re-word your search phrase and start all over again. Just keep smiling. No frustrated atonal yodeling permitted.

Marilyn K. Martin is a freelance writer of nonfiction and fiction living in East Texas. She is the author of several published mini-articles and is currently writing a Young Adult Science Fiction series, Chronicles

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Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

"Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns." by ComputorEdge Staff

"Almost Instant-On Computer," "Installing Windows 3.11 on a Modern Computer," "Pining for XP"

Almost Instant-On Computer

[Regarding the October 1 Digital Dave column:]

The difference between an appliance, light bulb, and computer is software—where it is accessed and attached. A little thought and careful planning could make a computer much more of an appliance!

-Michael Viehman, Julian, CA

David, you might look into using an SSD drive and something like DSL (Damn Small Linux). Although it will not be instant, from what I can see it will be very fast to load.

-Bill Gilbert, Melaque, Jalisco, Mexico

Installing Windows 3.11 on a Modern Computer

[Regarding the October 1 Digital Dave column:]

In my recent experience, I had trouble just installing XP on a "modern" computer. The reason was somehow related to the drivers for the new SATA hard drives not being recognized in older operating systems. I ended up hiring the seller to do this for me, which was a popular "big box" store with a support staff. I'd recommend finding a newer machine, but not a brand-new machine to install 3.11. The line might be drawn where IDE busses were still being used. SATA definitely causes problems.

That said, I have a P4 with an IDE bus that has a DOS boot region that has 3.1 on it. More for fun than for functionality.

-Tom, Lakewood

If you have Excel on your new PC, click it then click Save As, and then click the bottom box that gives a list that Excel supports (My Excel 97 list Excel 2.1 worksheet). If the current version of MS Excel will save the worksheet in Excel 4, then I would copy the worksheet to the new PC and see if the "latest and greatest" Excel will run it!

-Walter, San Diego CA

A new PC with Windows 7 and MS Office bundle should be able to use an Excel 4 worksheet. The problem is Excel 2010 will ask you to save an Excel 4 worksheet in Excel 2010 form, which Excel 4 can't use because the worksheet has about 10 times as many columns and rows as an Excel 4 worksheet!

The macros should work because all versions of Excel use Visual Basic for the macros.

-Walter, San Diego CA

You can surely run Windows 3.11 on just about any modern computer, though I think you are better off with Windows 7. All modern computers support the complete x86 instruction set in addition to 64-bit, and various other extensions.

You will need to find one that has BIOS options such as "Legacy" or "Compatible" for the drive controller, which will present the drives as if they are IDE, though they are SATA. Generally the options available vary depending on the system, but common options are: Legacy, Compatible, SATA, AHCI.

Once you set the legacy options, boot from a DOS floppy (or perhaps FreeDOS CD) and create a 2GB FAT16 partition (on your probably 500GB drive). Install DOS, then Windows 3.11 and Excel 4. It should work perfectly, though I don't know about the sound. The only other thing I am not sure about is what himem.sys or emm386.sys are going to do with 2GB+ RAM. They might get confused; I really cannot say, but DOS itself will boot on modern hardware, so Windows 3.11 should run.

To the guy having issues with installing XP:

Most new computers are going to ship with AHCI or SATA set. If you want to install Windows XP and it does not see the drive(s), press F6 when prompted for SCSI/RAID drivers and present a floppy or use something like nLite to integrate the drive controller's driver directly on your installation media.

Newer versions of Windows (Vista+) typically have a better time with recent hardware, though almost everything for sale still supports Windows XP (and probably Windows 2000).

-Justin B., Beaufort, SC

Pining for XP

[Regarding the August 20 Windows Tips and Tricks column:]

I agree. [I] pined for XP Pro's interface, but my system died and would require too many hardware changes to make it right. I ordered a couple of new Dells, but they were DOA [and customer service was unhelpful].

I ordered a ZT systems quad with an AMD Phenom 3.2GHz, had 8GB of DDR3 RAM, and it's wonderful. I upgraded to Win 7 Pro 64-bit, online for $100 to run VM so as to overlay XP Pro in 32-bit. I have my Outlook 2003 installed there so I could at least get at my .pst file and addresses; it was a pain to have to switch, so I just bought a copy of Office 2010 Small Business to have the new Outlook 2010 to run on the 64-bit system, and it's great on Win 7 Pro. To have 8GB of RAM is great. I bought a 4GB strip, so I'll slowly add new DDR3 strips as the price starts to drop on DDR3 modules.

Like your columns; my corner liquor store used to have them, but discovered you have the online version, too.

-enbe, San Diego

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