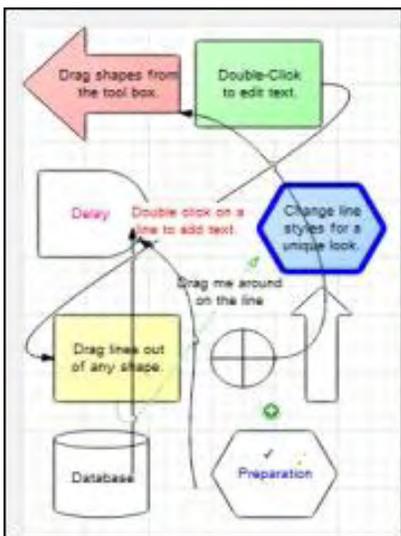


# ComputerEdge™ Online — 12/10/10



## This issue: Diagramming Software

For creating diagrams and flowcharts, Microsoft Visio isn't the only game in town.

### Table of Contents:

#### [Digital Dave](#) by *Digital Dave*

Digital Dave answers your tech questions.

A reader seeks to lose the extraneous garbage that accumulates when an e-mail is forwarded multiple times; do IP address "hiders" really work?; a reader wonders, what is Microsoft .NET framework?

#### [Dia: Free Diagramming Software](#) by Michael J. Ross

Diagramming for the rest of us.

Who needs Visio? If the economic doldrums have put a squeeze on your software budget, consider Dia for your diagramming needs.

#### [LucidChart for Online Diagramming](#) by Michael J. Ross

A flowchart tool flowing with features.

LucidChart, an alternative to Microsoft's Visio, is garnering significant interest and accolades for creating flowcharts and other structured diagrams.

#### [Windows Tips and Tricks](#) by Jack Dunning

Intuit's QuickBooks vs. Windows 7

Some programs just don't respond well to various versions of Windows. Jack is currently troubleshooting an apparent compatibility issue between QuickBooks and Windows 7.

#### [Wally Wang's Apple Farm](#) by Wally Wang

Diagramming Software

If you need to create diagrams for work or school, OmniGraffle should be the first program to consider. Also, SnagIt for the Mac is for anyone who needs to capture screenshots to use in presentations, manuals or brochures; a glimpse into future technology; antivirus programs cripple Windows; AntennaGate strikes HTC too; Babelshot is an amazing app for travelers; and a tip on fast switching between open programs.



(Click Banner)



(Click Banner)



(Click Banner)

## [Rob, The ComputerTutor: Technology Solutions](#) by Rob Spahitz

### OpenOffice Impress

This week we wrap up our investigation of the Impress tool from OpenOffice, a free competitor to Microsoft's Office suite. Impress is the competition for PowerPoint.

## [Worldwide News & Product Reviews](#) by Charles Carr

The latest in tech news and hot product reviews.

Facebook App Aims to Give an Edge on Gift Shopping—Fulfill My Wishlist prevents the social stigma of re-gifting; Droid R2D2—If you're a fan of the man (George Lucas), R2D2 might well be worth the extra money; Castle Crashers—Anyone who picks this game up is in for a treat; Free Gordon ... for FREE!—A must for Half-Life junkies; Get a Hold on Your iPad—Nifty device solves tablet-induced fatigue.

## [Beyond Personal Computing](#) by Marilyn K. Martin

E-mails and Instant Messages: Now and Forever

Today, e-mail is everywhere and colors every aspect of our life. Is this non-stop flow of information and data storage always a good thing?

## DEPARTMENTS:

## [Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers](#) by ComputerEdge Staff

Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns.

"No History in the Outlook Express Sent Folder," "Windows Freeze-Up," "Professional Photography," "Michael J. Ross Articles," "Telepathy," "Carrying Clipboard Forward," "Apple Rechargeable Batteries"

Send mail to [ceeditor@computoreedge.com](mailto:ceeditor@computoreedge.com) with questions about editorial content.

Send mail to [cwebmaster@computoreedge.com](mailto:cwebmaster@computoreedge.com) with questions or comments about this Web site.

Copyright © 1997-2010 The Byte Buyer, Inc.

ComputerEdge Magazine, P.O. Box 83086, San Diego, CA 92138. (858) 573-0315



(Click Banner)



(Click Banner)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



## Digital Dave

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

A reader seeks to lose the extraneous garbage that accumulates when an e-mail is forwarded multiple times; do IP address “hidiers” really work?; a reader wonders, what is Microsoft .NET framework?

*Dear Digital Dave,*

*What's the best way to clean up e-mail that's been forwarded many times before forwarding it again? I'd like to get rid of the previous addresses, the ">" symbols, all those vertical lines, and have the sentences rewrap.*

*Poz  
San Diego, CA*

Dear Poz,

If an e-mail has been forwarded a number of times, it can certainly accumulate a great deal of extraneous garbage. There are many reasons that you may not want to continue forwarding this additional chaff.

I've found the easiest way to clean up a message that I'm forwarding is by selecting (after clicking the Forward button, then holding down the left mouse button and dragging over the target text) the unwanted portion of the e-mail in the forwarding window and pressing delete. You should be able to delete any or all of the previous messages. Then you will be sending a much cleaner version of the original message.

Digital Dave

---

*Dear Digital Dave,*

*I've been reading your column for many years and have not had to ask a question, because you always seem to have answered them—until now. I do not remember you answering this question. Do those sites that advertise software that can block an IP address work?*

*Marshal C.  
Santee, CA*

Dear Marshal,

The primary reason for wanting to hide your IP is to conceal your activities, such as downloading copyrighted movies or music, from those who are looking to catch you. But even if you don't hide your IP, the investigators still can demand your name and address from your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Your IP address will only identify your ISP, not your computer.

While companies such as the one you mention can display your current IP and the general location of your computer, they cannot identify you without the help of your ISP. If you're using proper security with a firewall and practice safe computing, then it is highly unlikely that you will ever have a problem. Also, IP hiding will not protect you from malware if you click the wrong link or open the wrong attachment.

The way the IP-hiding services work is by adding another stop into your Internet communications track. When you browse, rather than going directly to a Web site, you make an intermediate stop at the IP-hiding server, where you are assigned a new IP. Then, the return path will be via that same server. The possible problems are immediately apparent.

First, depending on the service, you may be adding a bottleneck to your Internet activities. Many people have reported that everything is slower when using IP hiding. Also, it is an opportunity for the server to interject advertising or other annoying items. Remember, all of your activities are now being directed through the IP-hiding service, which could make you susceptible to its whims. Also, people have reported that the program added to their machine has interfered with other installed applications. Unless you really need IP hiding—say because you are trying to get around the controls in a particular Middle Eastern country—I would recommend against it. It is much better to take steps to ensure that your computer is protected from attack.

If you decide that you want to proceed with IP hiding, then check out the programs and user comments at CNET's downloads ([download.cnet.com/1770-20\\_4-0.html?query=hide+ip&tag=srch&searchtype=downloads&filterName=platform%3DWindows,Webware&filter=platform%3DWindows,Webware](http://download.cnet.com/1770-20_4-0.html?query=hide+ip&tag=srch&searchtype=downloads&filterName=platform%3DWindows,Webware&filter=platform%3DWindows,Webware)). The ones with the best reviews and highest number of downloads are your best bets.

As an additional note, although not really the same thing, if you want to be invisible to PCs trying to contact you, use Peerblock ([www.peerblock.com/](http://www.peerblock.com/)).

It'll prevent your PC from talking to IPs on the blocked list. This includes ad servers, spyware servers, p2p monitoring servers, etc. You just won't exist for computers on the block list. This is different from hiding your IP, but it prevents people from spying on your activities by making you disappear. The list is fairly comprehensive and you'll probably have to allow some connections through sometimes, depending on what you're doing. It's interesting to see how many times you get pinged by Chinese police departments and the like.

Digital Dave

---

*Dear Digital Dave,*

*Your column is a weekly must! What is Microsoft .NET framework, and do I need to download it?*

*Jock Joe  
Denver, CO*

Dear Jock Joe,

Most likely you already have the .NET framework installed. In the most recent versions of Windows, it comes as part of the operating system. Even if it didn't for your version, it probably would have been loaded with a program that required it.

.NET (pronounce "dotnet") framework is a layer of software that sits between the Windows operating system and applications that use that framework. This allows programmers to design for .NET without concern for the particular version of Windows, the type of CPU, or memory issues. The .NET framework is designed to make the programming problem easier in the Windows environment. (I'll let programmers comment on whether this is actually true or not.)

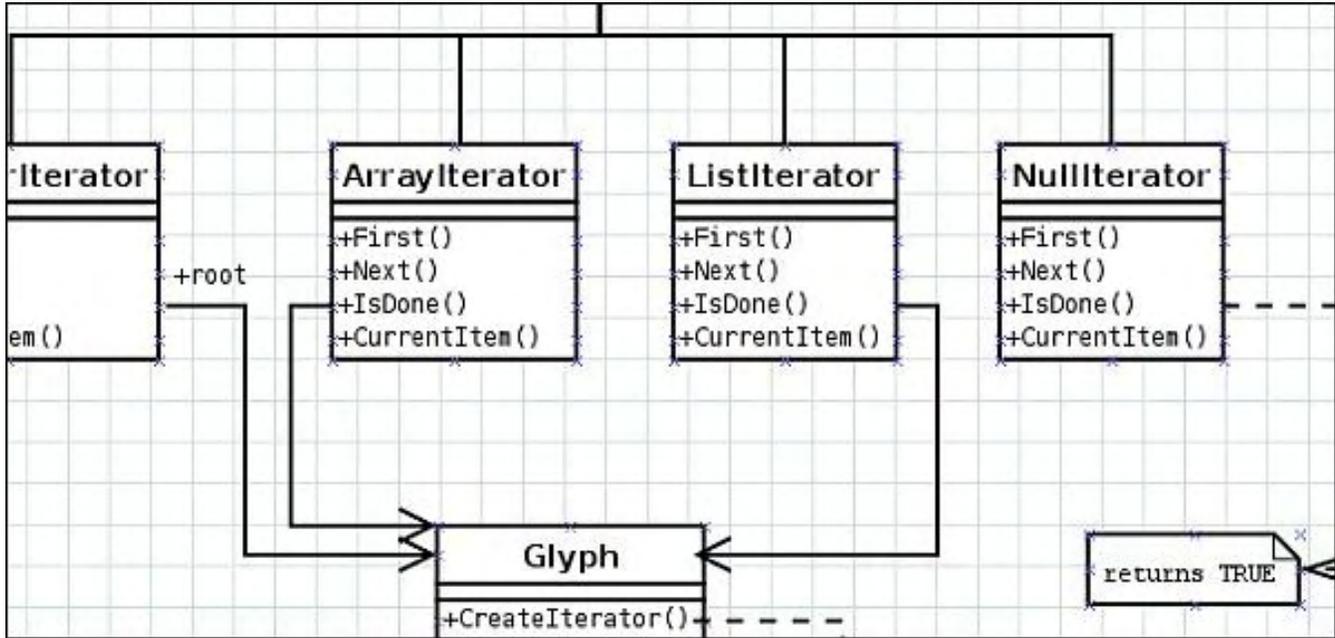
If you have a program that requires a .NET version that you don't have installed on your computer, the best programs will tell you that you need to get it installed. Unless you're a programmer, you most likely will never need to deal with .NET issues. In Windows 7, which comes with .NET 3.5, you can neither install nor uninstall it.

If you want to check your versions of .NET, there is a .NET Framework Setup Verification Tool ([blogs.msdn.com/b/astebner/archive/2008/10/13/8999004.aspx](http://blogs.msdn.com/b/astebner/archive/2008/10/13/8999004.aspx)) available.

Digital Dave

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



### Dia: Free Diagramming Software

“Diagramming for the rest of us.” by Michael J. Ross

Who needs Visio? If the economic doldrums have put a squeeze on your software budget, consider Dia for your diagramming needs.

There are countless reasons why you might need to create a diagram of some sort. For instance, you and your partner may be about to move into a new house, and you two want to plan the location of every large piece of furniture so the movers can place all of the heavy items close to their final destination, so you can avoid having to shuffle them around later. In your workplace, your supervisor might task you with creating a workflow diagram, an organizational chart, or an office layout.



Joe's first action item for his new business was to make an organizational chart.

Regardless of the purpose of the diagram you wish to make, there are a number of ways you could go about doing it. Dusting off your old pencil and ruler might initially seem a faster route to completion, compared to installing and learning some diagramming program on a computer. But similar to doing taxes by hand, the final result of freehand diagramming versus computer-based diagram software is a final product that will probably not be as precise, can only be modified by erasing elements manually, can only be reproduced on a photocopier machine, and will never look as good as a diagram produced on a computer and output to a laser printer.

Diagramming applications come in all shapes and sizes (no pun intended), as well as prices. In the world of Microsoft Windows, probably the best-known diagramming application is Microsoft Visio. For many years now, Visio has been an integral part of the Microsoft Office suite of office productivity tools, including the latest edition, which includes Visio 2010 ([www.microsoft.com/office/2010/en/visio/download.aspx](http://www.microsoft.com/office/2010/en/visio/download.aspx)). In addition to the conventional package

designed to be installed and run on your local computer, there is an online version ([office.microsoft.com/en-us/visio/default.aspx](http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/visio/default.aspx)), which is part of Office Online. Even though a 60-day free trial period is offered, the Standard version costs

almost \$260 (\$130 if upgrading from an earlier version) or, for the Professional version, almost \$560 (or \$350 if upgrading). If your employer is willing to spring for either one of these packages, then you may opt to use Visio or some other commercial alternative.

## Diagramming for the Rest of Us

But perhaps the economic doldrums have put a squeeze on your company's budget for new software, or the given drawing project is for personal use, or is only a one-off effort, and you do not want to spend any money on new software. In this case, consider using a free program, such as Dia ([live.gnome.org/Dia](http://live.gnome.org/Dia)). (By the way, many Web sites that link to Dia have not updated to the new Web site address, and still link to Dia's old home page ([projects.gnome.org/dia/](http://projects.gnome.org/dia/)).

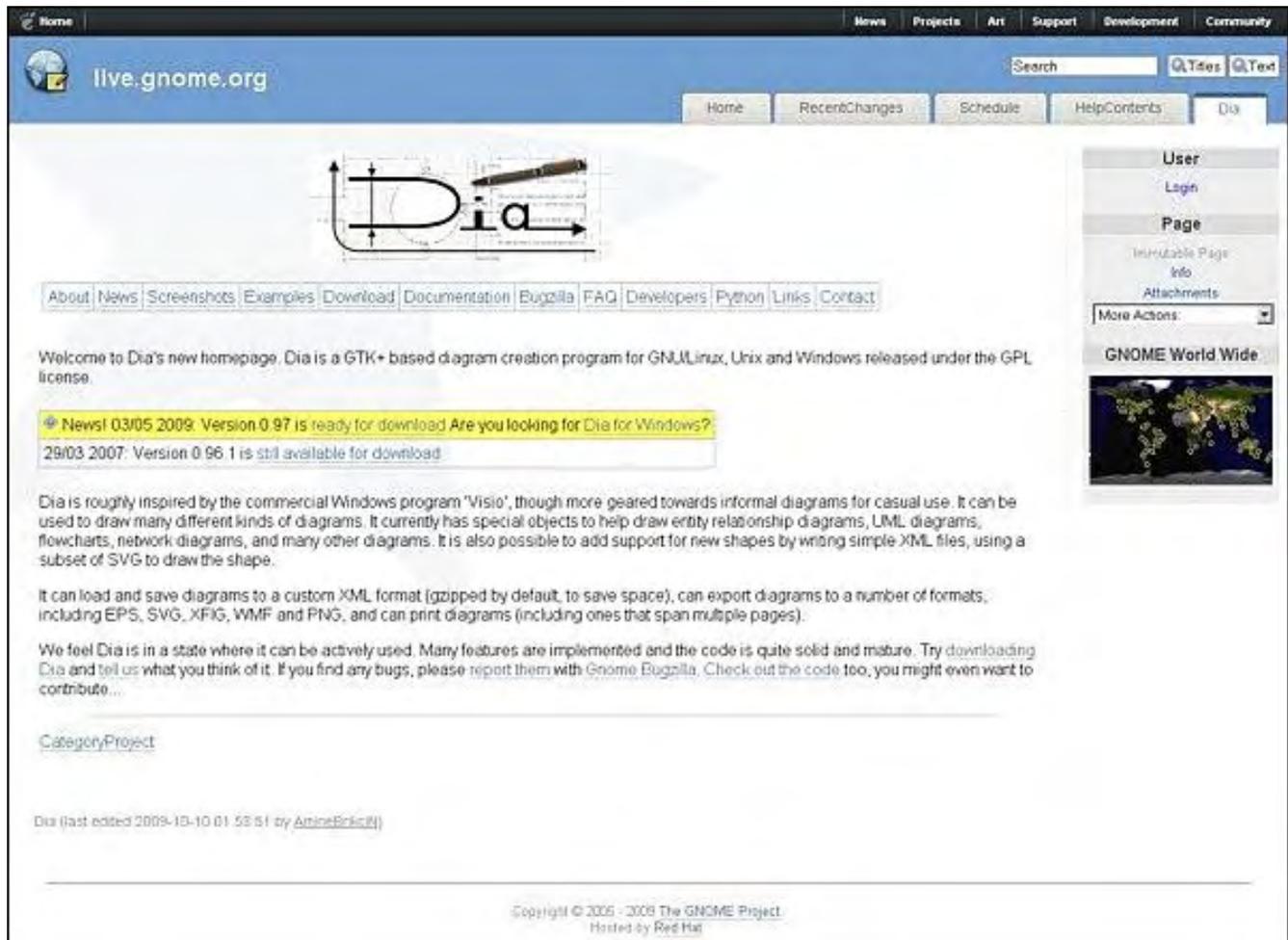


Figure 1. Dia home page.

The new home page mentions that Dia was partially inspired by Visio, "though more geared towards informal diagrams for casual use," in other words, lacking in some of the advanced features, but easier to use. For most people looking to create a typical diagram, the difficulty of using complicated software can quickly overwhelm the benefits of having advanced features available. (This is similar to the way that most people are able to meet most if not all of their document needs using a word processor as basic as Windows WordPad, and can use it to get the job finished faster than if they were required to learn and use a much more substantial word processor, such as Microsoft Word, which is loaded with features, most of which the typical user will never even need or attempt to figure out.) Unlike Visio, there is only one version of Dia, and it comes with all the basic features for generating diagrams.

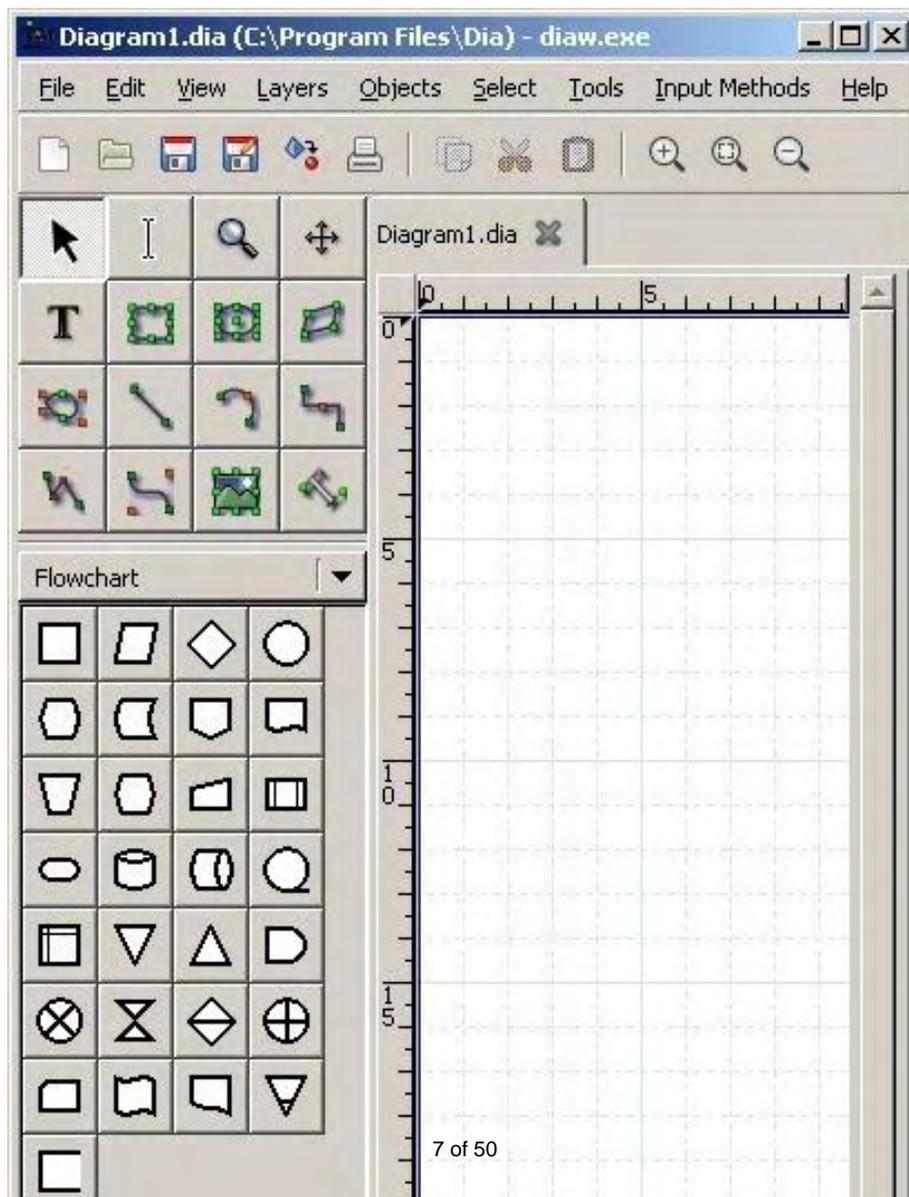
The Web site also mentions that Dia can be utilized for building diagrams for a wide variety of purposes, including entity relationships (frequently used in software and database development), Unified Modeling Language (UML), flowcharting and networking. Dia offers a rich palette of shapes, which can be supplemented by defining your own new shapes, using Extensible

Markup Language (XML), which is similar to the HTML that lies at the heart of every Web page. Dia is a favorite among programmers for creating UML diagrams, partly because it makes it possible to add a UML component to a diagram—such as a class, a template, or an object—and then edit its properties.

The diagrams that you create using Dia are saved by default as XML files, which confers several advantages: First and foremost, XML is a completely open and well-understood markup language, quite unlike the proprietary file formats used by commercial products. Also, minor changes to a saved diagram can be made simply by editing the XML file, which is plain text. In fact, if you have any programming skills and interest, you can create scripts that read Dia files and produce code or generate Dia files from code—the sort of powerful functionality normally found in (expensive) applications dedicated to computer-aided software engineering (CASE). There is a growing user community of people who write such scripts, in order to generate C++ and database code (specifically, SQL) based upon UML diagrams in Dia files. Dia also supports the major digital image/graphics formats, including Portable Network Graphics (PNG) and Scalar Vector Graphics (SVG).

## Try Before You "Buy"

To see if Dia would be suitable for your current and future drawing projects, you can try it out, in little time. To do so, click on the Download link on the Dia home page, and on the destination page look for the link that corresponds to your operating system. In this example, we will use "Dia for Windows." Save the installation file someplace on your computer where you can find it, and then open it up when the download is finished. The setup wizard presents to you a series of dialog screens, which should be easily intelligible. The default settings will work fine for most users, although you can disable the installation of the translations if you plan on only using English within the Dia user interface. Once the setup wizard has completed, you can begin running the program.



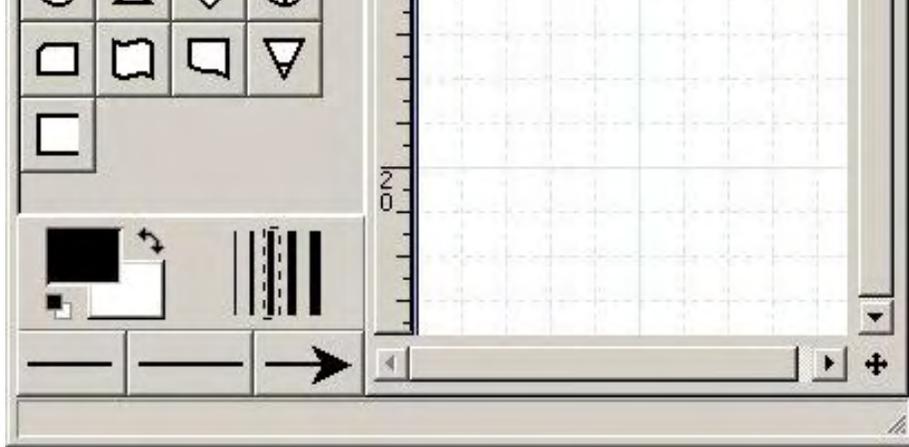


Figure 2. Dia user interface.

You may want to maximize the Dia window, in order to give yourself the largest canvas possible. At a bare minimum, you should increase the height of the window, so all of the symbols in the left-hand sidebar are displayed.

Before getting started creating any new diagrams, you may want to check the program settings, under File/Preferences.

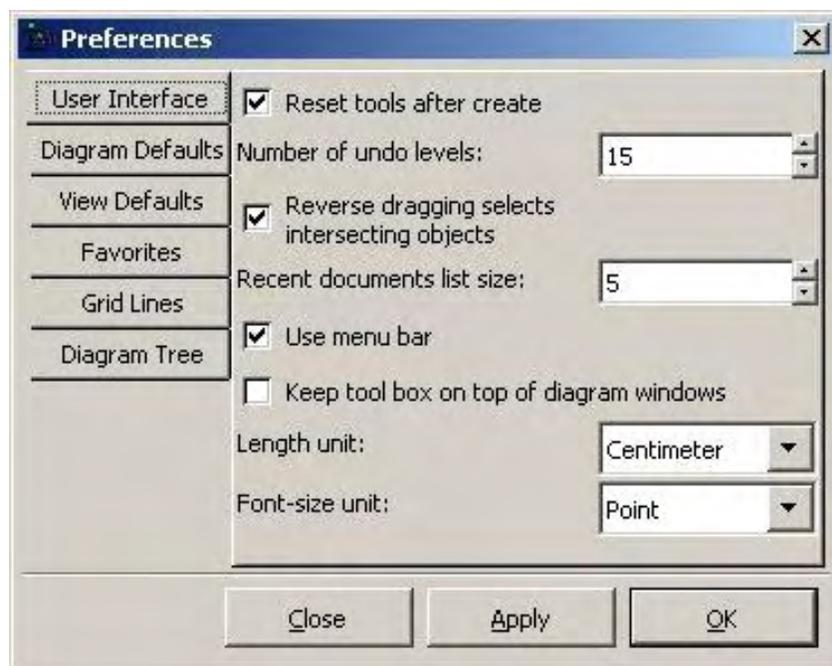


Figure 3. Dia preferences.

Even though the initial settings could be adequate for most purposes, you should increase the "Recent documents list size" if you plan on creating more than five images and you want to be able to quickly reopen those images later, perhaps for modification. If you are in the United States, you probably will want to change the paper type from A4 to Legal, on the Diagram Defaults tab.

Underneath the menu bar, there is a horizontal row of over a dozen icons (only two of which have tool tips assigned, unfortunately). These icons duplicate actions available from the drop-down menus, and thus may see little use.

In the side panel, on the left, there is the Toolbox, which contains icons for basic objects and special objects, separated by a drop-down list. Diagrams can comprise shapes, text, digital images, and other objects. There are 16 basic objects, and you can hover your mouse pointer over each icon in order to read its tool tip, which summarizes its purpose and specifies the keyboard shortcut. The special objects displayed depend upon which sheet is currently specified in the drop-down list, which initially is set to Flowchart. As of this writing, there are almost three dozen special sheets available, and each one can be chosen using the "Other sheets" menu item. Three of the most commonly used ones—Assorted, Flowchart and UML—are displayed at the top of the drop-down list.

To create a new diagram, choose File/New. To add an object to the canvas, click on the object's icon in the Toolbox (or use its keyboard shortcut, if any), and then click on the desired location on the canvas, which causes the object to appear on the canvas where you clicked. To move an object, simply click and drag it. To change its size, click and drag one of its green or red handles, which look like tiny boxes connected to the object. To change an object's properties from the default values, simply double-click on it. You can even connect objects with lines, by placing a line object on the canvas, and dragging each end of the line to a desired object.

To illustrate what has been discussed so far, you can put all of this together and create a simple canvas, consisting of six object types.

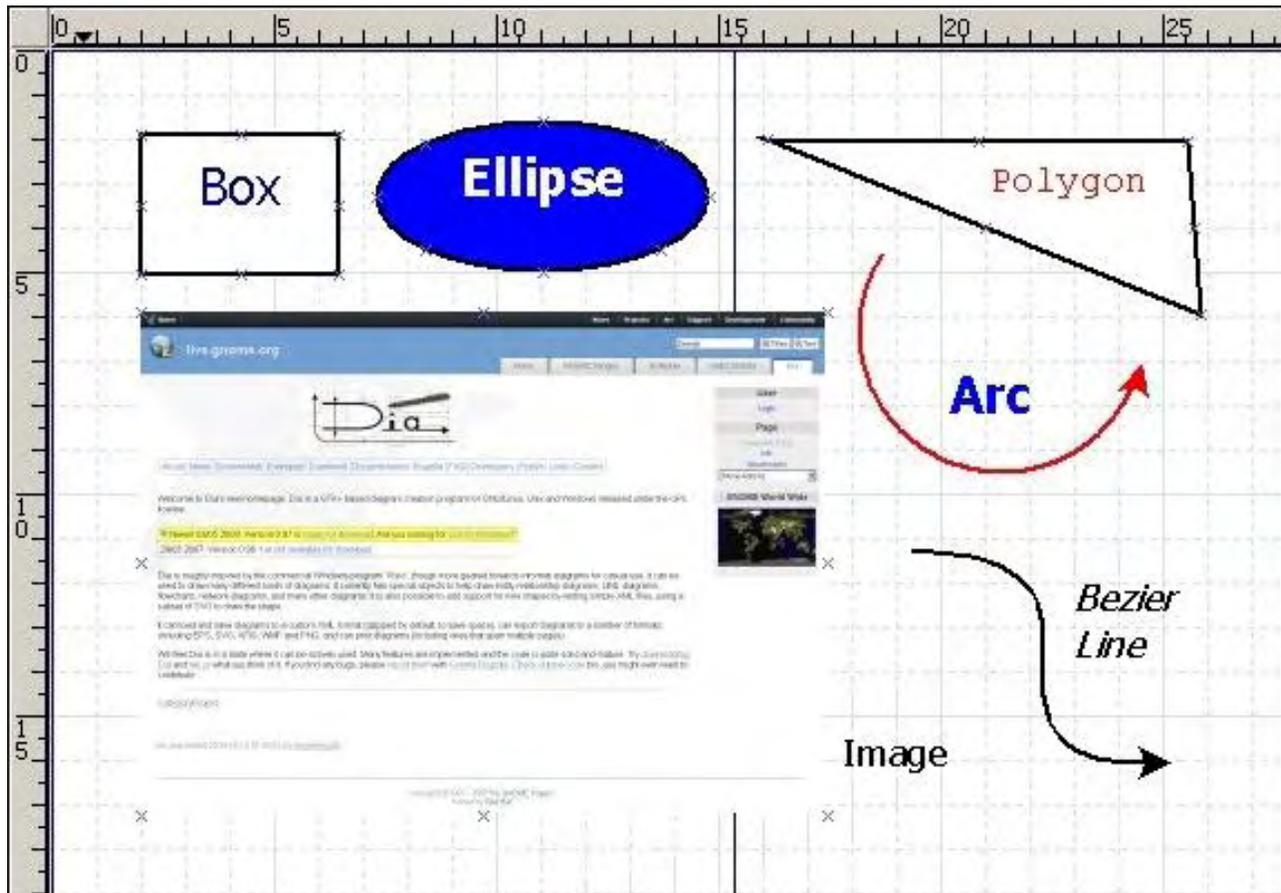


Figure 4. Sample canvas.

To learn more about how to use Dia, first read through the online help manual (accessed using the Help menu), which is quite extensive and includes a quick-start guide, for those of us with more time demands than patience. Then, as needed, you can read the sections that go into the details of the canvas, objects, toolbox, customization, layers and working with Dia on a command line.

---

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

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

# LucidChart for Online Diagramming

“A flowchart tool flowing with features.” by Michael J. Ross

LucidChart, an alternative to Microsoft's Visio, is garnering significant interest and accolades for creating flowcharts and other structured diagrams.

Tools for creating flowcharts and other structured diagrams have traditionally been made available by vendors in the form of desktop software. On the Windows platform, one of the better-known diagramming applications is Microsoft's Visio. In fact, most computer users have not even heard of any other commercial desktop products, which include Inspiration ([www.inspiration.com/Inspiration](http://www.inspiration.com/Inspiration)), OmniGraffle ([www.omnigroup.com/applications/omnigraffle/](http://www.omnigroup.com/applications/omnigraffle/)), Schematic ([www.hypergraphics.co.uk/Schematic.shtml](http://www.hypergraphics.co.uk/Schematic.shtml)), SmartDraw ([www.smartdraw.com/](http://www.smartdraw.com/)) and StarDraw ([www.stardraw.com/](http://www.stardraw.com/)). There are several free (and in some cases, open-source) alternatives, such as Diagram Designer ([meesoft.logicnet.dk/](http://meesoft.logicnet.dk/)), Kivio ([www.koffice.org/kivio/](http://www.koffice.org/kivio/)) (part of the KOffice suite), OpenOffice.org Draw ([www.openoffice.org/product/draw.html](http://www.openoffice.org/product/draw.html)) (part of the OpenOffice.org suite), and XCircuit ([opencircuitdesign.com/xcircuit/](http://opencircuitdesign.com/xcircuit/)).

Desktop software functionality in general continues to be migrated to the Internet, and diagramming is no exception. As a result, there are numerous Web-based diagramming tools, including Creately ([creately.com/](http://creately.com/)), Flowchart.com ([flowchart.com/](http://flowchart.com/)), and Gliffy ([www.gliffy.com/](http://www.gliffy.com/)). Flowchart.com is currently in beta, and free to use without charge, but there is no indication that it will stay free forever. All of these Web applications have their fans in the computer media, and no doubt also have some loyal users. But one such application that is apparently garnering significant interest and accolades is LucidChart ([www.lucidchart.com/](http://www.lucidchart.com/)).

The screenshot shows the LucidChart website interface. At the top, there are links for 'Log In' and 'Sign Up' on the left, and 'Forums' on the right. The main header features the 'LucidChart Beta' logo and navigation links: 'Home', 'Tour', 'Features', 'Reviews', 'News', 'About', and a prominent 'Register Free Account' button. Below the header, the main content is organized into three columns. The left column contains three promotional sections: 'Be Brilliant. Together. Create Professional Diagrams' with a 'Learn more' link, 'Collaborate & Publish' with a 'Learn more' link, and 'Access Everywhere' with a 'Learn more' link. The middle column features a large image of the LucidChart software interface. The interface shows a flowchart titled 'POP Requirements' with various nodes and connecting lines. A sidebar on the left of the interface contains a palette of shapes. On the right, a 'Revisions' pane lists a series of document versions with timestamps, such as '1502 4:15 PM Ben-Daly' and '1502 3:28 PM Ben-Daly'. Below the interface image, the text 'Review past revisions of your documents!' is displayed. At the bottom of the page, there are two large green buttons: 'Instant Demo' and 'Sign Up Free'. The footer contains the copyright notice 'Copyright © 2010, LucidChart, LLC' and links for 'Contact us', 'Privacy policy', and 'Yadda yadda yadda'.

Figure 1. LucidChart home page.

In at least two respects, LucidChart stands apart from its competitors. Firstly, most of the charting applications are based upon Flash (a Web multimedia technology from Adobe), yet LucidChart may be the only one currently based upon JavaScript (a client-side Web scripting language that is considered more open and non-proprietary). Admittedly, this difference is of much greater concern to the developers of those applications, and not the end users. But it would have a significant impact if, for whatever reason, one of those technologies were not available to an individual or team working within an organization. For instance, the IT staff of a company might prohibit the use of Flash or JavaScript on corporate PCs, for security reasons—especially if some new browser vulnerability has been identified and is spreading rapidly in the wild. Given that JavaScript is a critical component of most of the new Web-based applications that offer dynamic page refreshing, while Flash is increasingly facing strong resistance by Web designers and end users, it may be wiser to bet on the former.

Secondly, the features page ([www.lucidchart.com/pages/features](http://www.lucidchart.com/pages/features)) for LucidChart begins not by describing the editing capabilities, but instead states that the application is optimized for collaborative work. What this means is that, within any group or organization, many people can each have an account on the LucidChart site, and for any diagram, the original author of the document can easily add other people as viewers, editors, or co-owners. Invitations can even be sent to a mailing list of people who don't have LucidChart accounts. When an author makes and saves any modification to a diagram, everyone else viewing it sees those changes immediately. Changes made by others can be reviewed by anyone with sufficient privileges, using the history browser, which records who made what changes and when. While a number of people are editing a single document, they can communicate within the application itself, with its built-in group chat facilities.

## Flowing with Features

LucidChart makes it easy to create diagrams composed of various kinds of shapes, referred to as "blocks," simply by dragging them onto the canvas and dropping them where desired. They can be easily moved, re-sized, or deleted, and the text inside each one can be changed at any time. That text is "rich text," meaning that you can set formatting, such as changing the font size, font weight (e.g., bolding), font styling (e.g., italics), etc., just like text in a word processing document. You can change the size of the diagram's canvas ("page size") and orientation (between landscape and portrait mode), as well as the granularity, by zooming in and out. You can alter the color, size and style of any block and line.

When two or more blocks have been placed on the canvas, lines can be drawn between them by clicking an edge of one block and dragging the mouse pointer to the edge of another block. The lines can be labeled just as easily as the blocks. Since not all diagrams are small, a diagram can be spread over an unlimited number of pages, using blocks that indicate transition of the flow from the current page to a different one. Custom digital images can be uploaded to the LucidChart site and added to any diagram, in just a few steps. As a result, you are not confined to the shapes provided by LucidChart, but can add your own in the form of images.

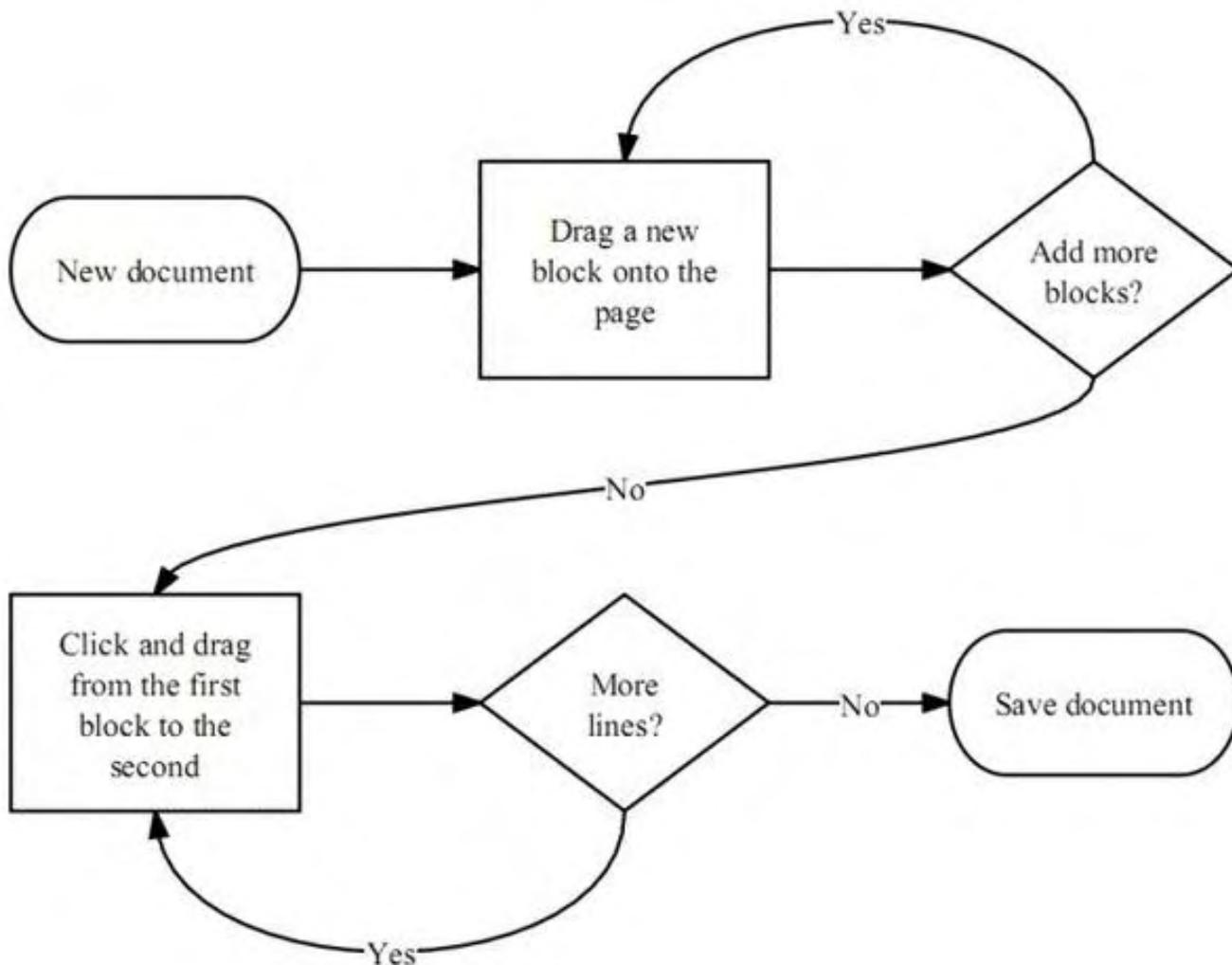


Figure 2. Sample diagram.

The LucidChart interface has been designed so power users can be productive at a fast pace, by employing common keyboard shortcuts, such as Ctrl+S to save any changes made to the current diagram under development. You can easily cut, copy and paste every block within a diagram. In addition, the unlimited undo and redo capabilities can be a godsend for testing out new ideas, without losing earlier work.

LucidChart has been verified to work well in most of the latest Web browsers—Chrome, Firefox, Safari and Internet Explorer. It even works in Internet Explorer 6, though at this point we should pity anyone still using that browser, voluntary or otherwise.

You can publish a diagram as a Web page, a PDF file, or an image (JPEG and PNG file formats are supported). A diagram can be made print-ready, to avoid it being chopped off when output to a printer. What may be most remarkable about creating and publishing diagrams with LucidChart, is that if you later make changes to a published diagram, they are automatically reflected in the published version, without even requiring a page refresh, since those are done for the visitor automatically.

### Demos and Dollars

The LucidChart Web site offers a few sample diagrams to illustrate what can be created using the product, as well as some video-casts demonstrating how the collaboration functionality works and how to publish diagrams online. But to really get a feel for how the application functions, you can try it out without even signing up for a free account. Simply go to the "Instant Live Demo" page ([www.lucidchart.com/documents/demo](http://www.lucidchart.com/documents/demo)), where you can create a flowchart or an organizational chart, within your browser.

The current pricing for LucidChart is quite reasonable—certainly more so than that of some competing services. There are four levels: Free, Personal, Professional and Team. The accounts page ([www.lucidchart.com/pages/account\\_types](http://www.lucidchart.com/pages/account_types)) has all

the details, but in essence the Free account is free, allows one user, 40 objects per diagram, and five megabytes for images on their server; it allows editing, publishing and collaboration on diagrams, with no watermarks. The Personal account costs \$39.95 per year, removes the limit on the number of objects per diagram, increases the saved image space to 100 megabytes, and allows you to create custom document templates. The Professional account costs \$99.95 per year, allows unlimited collaborators from an organization, increases the image space to one gigabyte, and add some extra features, such as SSL connections for securing confidential documents and revision history. The Team account costs \$249 per year and adds multiple users and increases the image space to five gigabytes and above, and sharing images and templates within an organization.

New features are being added to LucidChart, and you can read about some of them on the news page ([www.lucidchart.com/threads/news](http://www.lucidchart.com/threads/news)). However, there is no RSS newsfeed to which one could subscribe, nor any indication that the service has an associated Twitter account, or any other social networking connection. The site does host a forum ([www.lucidchart.com/threads/forum/1](http://www.lucidchart.com/threads/forum/1)), where users can discuss the product.

So if the standard desktop diagramming programs are too complicated or pricey for your tastes, or you want to make it easier for teammates to work on the same diagrams, take a look at LucidChart.

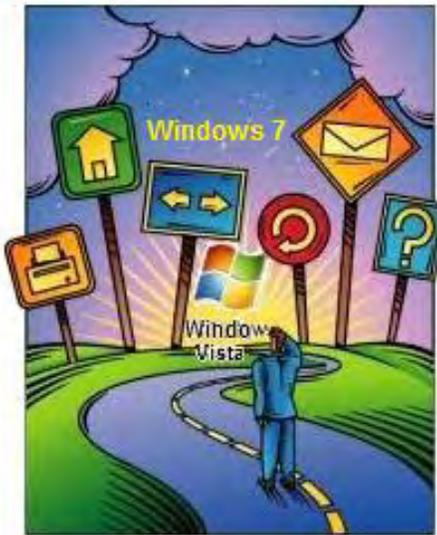
---

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

---

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



# Windows Tips and Tricks

Windows Tips and Tricks  
“Intuit's QuickBooks vs. Windows 7” by Jack Dunning

Some programs just don't respond well to various versions of Windows. Jack is currently troubleshooting an apparent compatibility issue between QuickBooks and Windows 7.

What's amazing about computers is how much time you can spend trying to fix them. Plus, some programs do not respond well to various versions of Windows. I'm now referring to Intuit's QuickBooks and Windows 7. While I don't really need QuickBooks to run on my Windows 7 machine, it would be nice to have. The killer is that there are no errors or other major symptoms—the program appears to start loading and then goes away.

I've done an extensive search of the Web and tried everything mentioned. I even called Intuit support and spent an hour with them on my computer. They tried everything I had already done. (I was impressed with the fact that a company as big as Intuit offered the free online support—even if their knowledge seemed a little less than my own.) The problem may still come down to Microsoft's .NET framework. (I noticed that Digital Dave has a short explanation of .NET this week.) However, other than checking it out with a verification tool (also from Digital Dave), Windows 7 has .NET built-in and it cannot be uninstalled and reinstalled. It appears to be intact.

One of the possibilities that I checked out was a conflict with another program. While it didn't fix my problem, this is a useful technique if you suspect that something in software is interfering. You can do this in all three of the most common versions of Windows (XP, Vista and Windows 7). The tool is called System Configuration and can be started from the Run command (`msconfig.exe`). While there are a few differences with the System Configuration Utility in XP, for the purposes of this testing, all versions are essentially the same.

The first step is to load System Configuration either with Run and `msconfig.exe`, the program name, or in Windows 7 and Vista, you can type "system" into the Search field of the Start Menu and select System Configuration from the menu. The windows will open with the General tab open (see Figure 1).

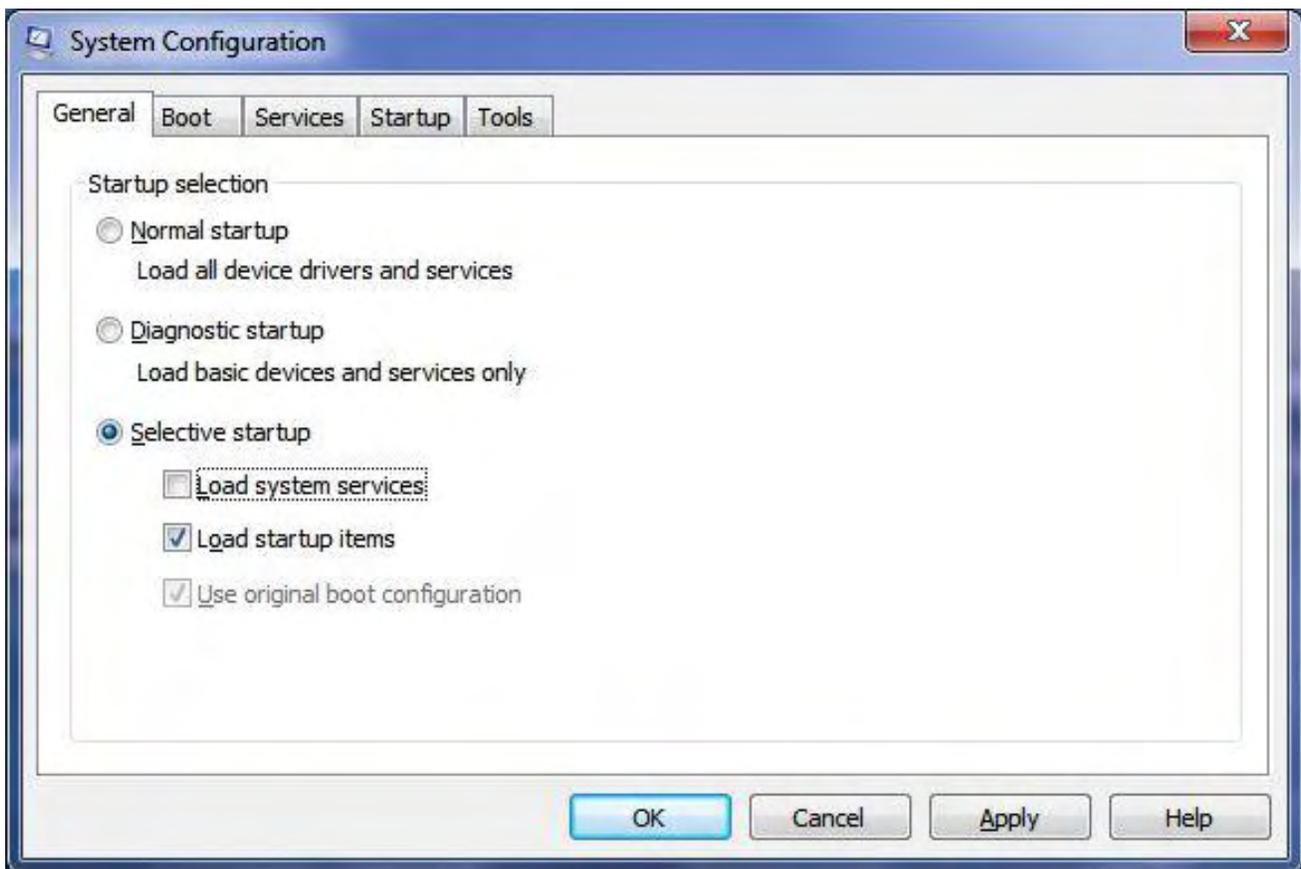


Figure 1. The System Configuration window displaying the General tab.

By default, "Normal startup" will be selected. (This is where you will want to return your system when you've completed your testing.) You may want to try Diagnostic Startup first. As it says, this will only load basic devices and services. After you click Apply and OK, you will be given the option to Restart. Do it. Once your computer has restarted, try running your problem program again. If it runs then you know that one of the devices or services not loaded on this boot is the culprit. However, if you continue with the same symptoms you probably have a different problem, although not necessarily.

The next step is to once again load the System Configuration utility as shown above. This time select "Selective startup." You now have the additional options to uncheck "Load system services" and "Load startup items." If you suspect that the Startup items are the problem, then you can uncheck just that box and do a quick check with all those items disabled. But if you want to check for another program running as a service causing a conflict, uncheck the "Load system services" box. Then select the services tab (see Figure 2).

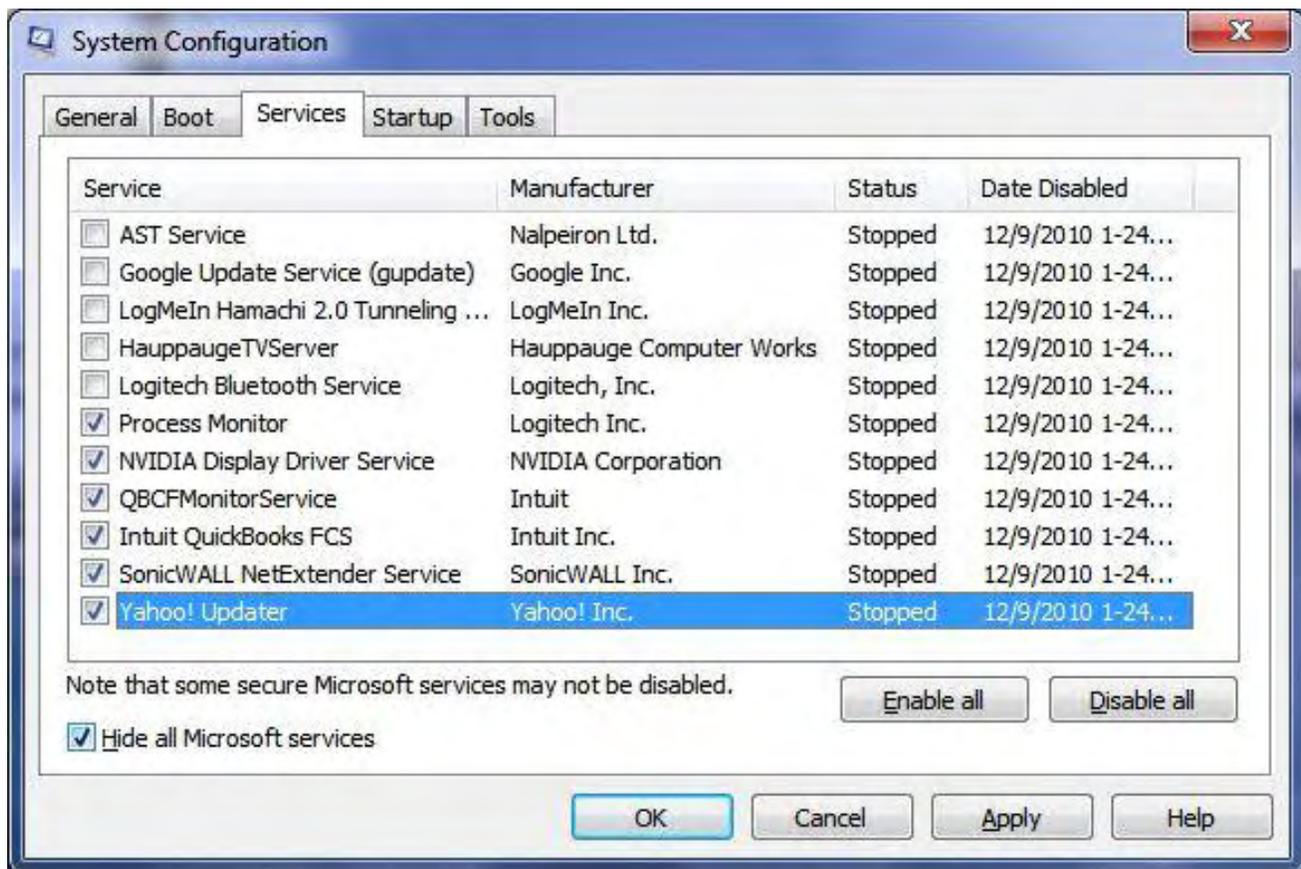


Figure 2. The System Configuration window displaying the Services tab.

Be sure to check the "Hide all Microsoft services" box at the bottom of the window. It's dangerous to not load system services, since many are required for the proper functioning of Windows. By hiding those critical services, you will be left with those from other programs—and you won't inadvertently disable something important. Uncheck half of the remaining boxes. This will prevent those items from starting on bootup. If after restarting your program works properly, you know that the problem is in the half left unchecked. You should then recheck half of the unchecked programs and restart. If the problem returns, you know that you have just checked the problem program. Continue this process until you isolate the offending service.

If you still have the problem after checking the first half, switch the halves that are checked (uncheck one half and check the other). If you eventually uncheck all of these services without resolving the problem, then a conflict with one of these services is not the problem. Be sure to restore your computer to normal startup. This is my current situation. I suspect that I may need to do a clean install of the operating system. This is not something that I plan to rush into, since I don't actually need QuickBooks on this Windows 7 machine. I'm currently installing QuickBooks in Windows XP Compatibility Mode to see if that will work. I also suspect there could be some hardware driver issues, although I haven't found any yet. I'll keep you updated on my progress.

I welcome any thoughts, but don't be surprised if I've already tried that.

P. S. After I installed QuickBooks in the Windows XP Compatibility Mode (Window Virtual PC) on the Windows 7 machine, the program loads. Definitely a Windows 7 problem, but I suspect that Intuit has some culpability.

---

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](http://www.computoredge.com). He can be reached at [ceeditor@computoredge.com](mailto:ceeditor@computoredge.com)

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



## Wally Wang's Apple Farm

“Diagramming Software” by Wally Wang

If you need to create diagrams for work or school, OmniGraffle should be the first program to consider. Also, SnagIt for the Mac is for anyone who needs to capture screenshots to use in presentations, manuals or brochures; a glimpse into future technology; antivirus programs cripple Windows; AntennaGate strikes HTC too; Babelshot is an amazing app for travelers; and a tip on fast switching between open programs.

# Wally Wang's Apple Farm

When you want to create a picture, it's easy to use a free program like Paintbrush ([paintbrush.sourceforge.net](http://paintbrush.sourceforge.net/)) to doodle away on your Macintosh. However, when you need to create more structured pictures, such as flowcharts, hierarchies, or brainstorming diagrams, you may want a more specialized graphics program such as OmniGraffle ([www.omnigroup.com](http://www.omnigroup.com)) (\$99.95).

OmniGraffle simplifies creating structured pictures right away by offering a wide variety of templates for brainstorming or creating organizational charts. Each template still provides you with a blank canvas, but as you start adding ideas, the program creates your drawing based on the template you chose.

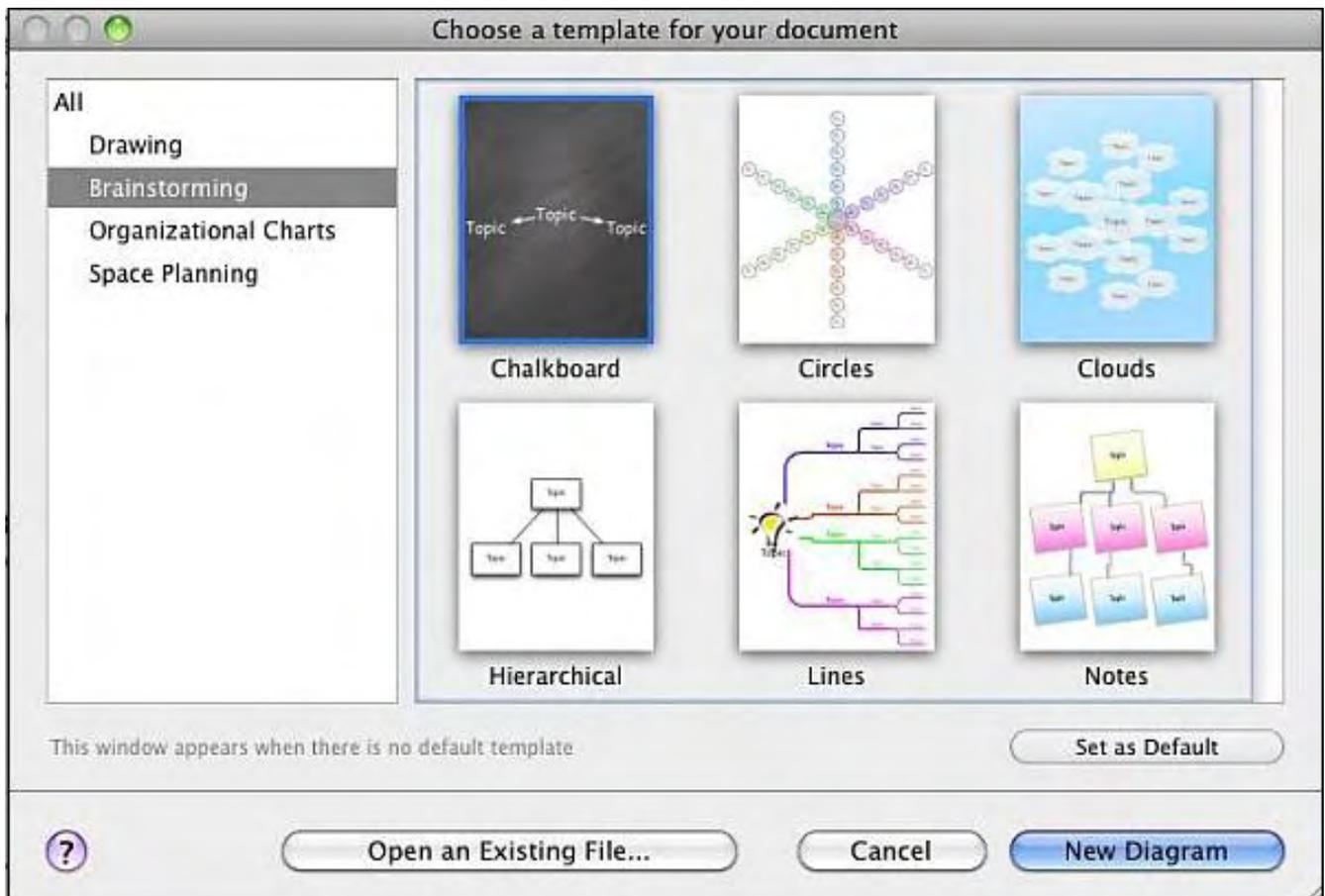


Figure 1. OmniGraffle provides templates for creating common diagrams.

You could use OmniGraffle as a simple diagramming program, but part of the power of the program lies in its outline view, which gives you two ways to create and modify a diagram.

First, you can place objects in the program window, type text in each object, connect them with lines, and OmniGraffle automatically creates an outline displaying the text from each object as an outline heading or subheading.

Second, you can type your text in an outline form and OmniGraffle automatically turns your outline into a diagram.

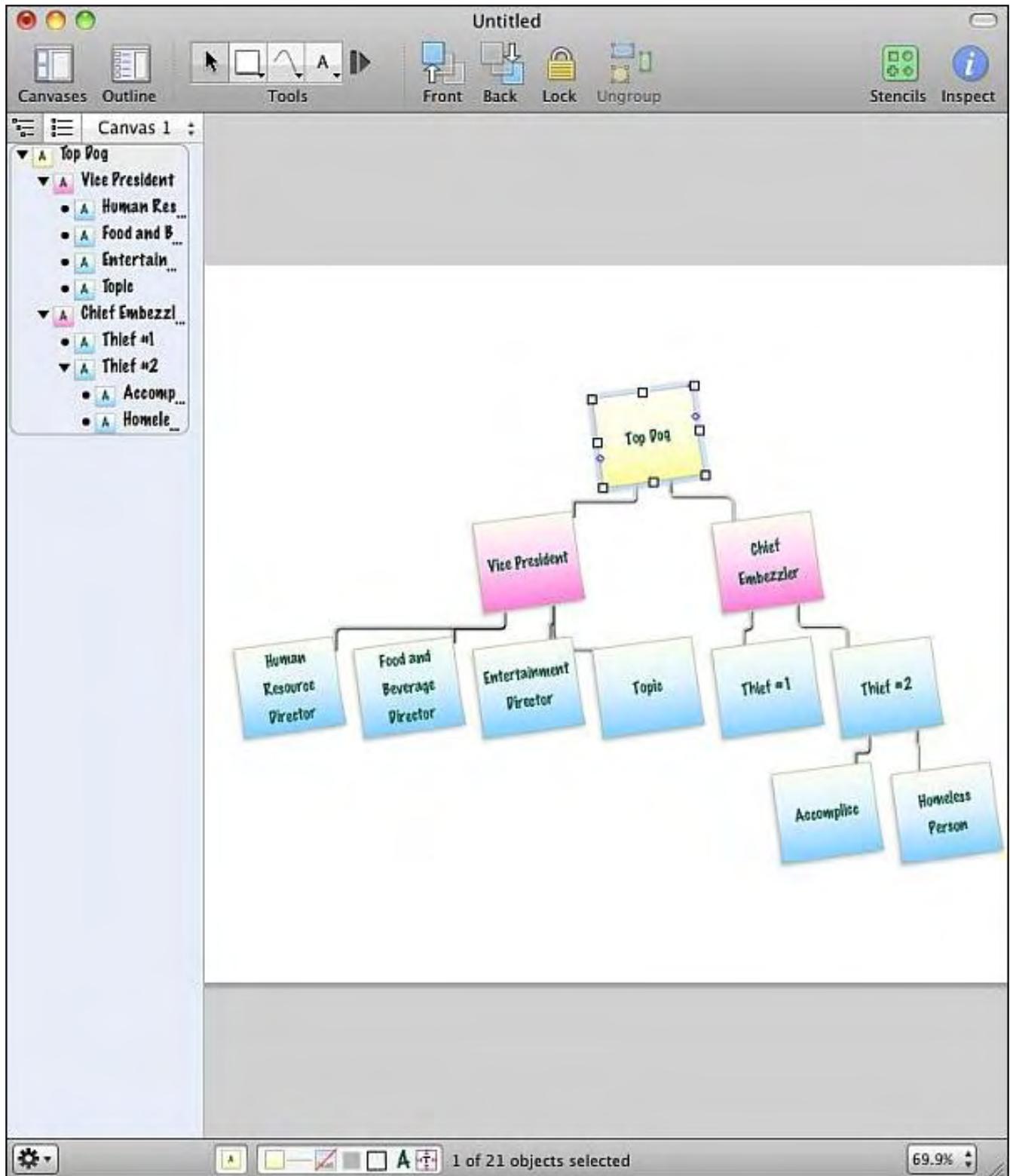


Figure 2. OmniGraffle synchronizes your text outline in the left pane with your diagram.

No matter how you choose to create your diagram, you can easily modify it by dragging items on the screen or resizing lines and objects along with changing their visual appearance such as colors or shape. This freedom to jot your ideas down and let the program worry about connecting your thoughts together frees you to focus less on the mechanical process of drawing and more on the creative, thinking part of capturing your ideas.

OmniGraffle can save your diagrams in a variety of bitmap or vector formats including PDF, JPG, Photoshop and SVG for maximum compatibility with other programs. The program can also import (but not export) Microsoft Visio files, just in case you need to accept diagrams sent to you by Windows users relying on Visio.

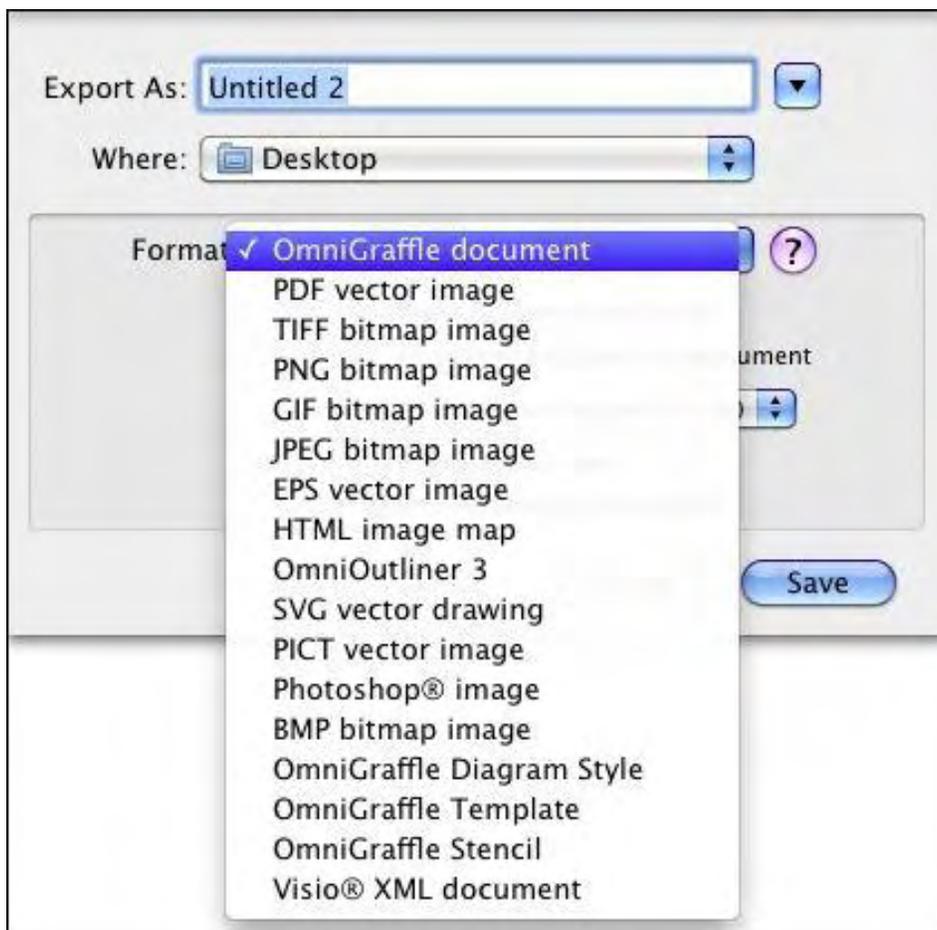


Figure 3. OmniGraffle can export your diagrams in a wide variety of file formats.

Unlike many programs that bury you under a layer of complexity that keeps you from using the program until after a lengthy learning curve, OmniGraffle is easy use right away to create your own diagrams. If you've already used a drawing program before, such as Adobe Illustrator, mastering OmniGraffle will be easy.

If you've never used a drawing program before, you'll need time to get used to the idea of creating a drawing by using objects such as rectangles, ovals and triangles on the screen. Instead of creating a drawing like scribbling with a crayon on a piece of paper, drawing programs like OmniGraffle work more like cutting out pictures from a magazine and pasting them on a piece of cardboard.

If you need to create diagrams for work or school, OmniGraffle should be the first program to consider. You can download a free trial version to test out its features and see how fast you can create a decent diagram.

Creating diagrams might not seem like a fun task, but OmniGraffle makes it simple and enjoyable. For people who need to put together presentations, a diagramming program like OmniGraffle might come in handy. For ordinary users, OmniGraffle can be

like capturing your ideas in an outline and having OmniGraffle turn them into a simple mind map automatically.

Not everyone may need a program like OmniGraffle, but once you try the program and see what it can do, you may just find yourself depending on it anyway.

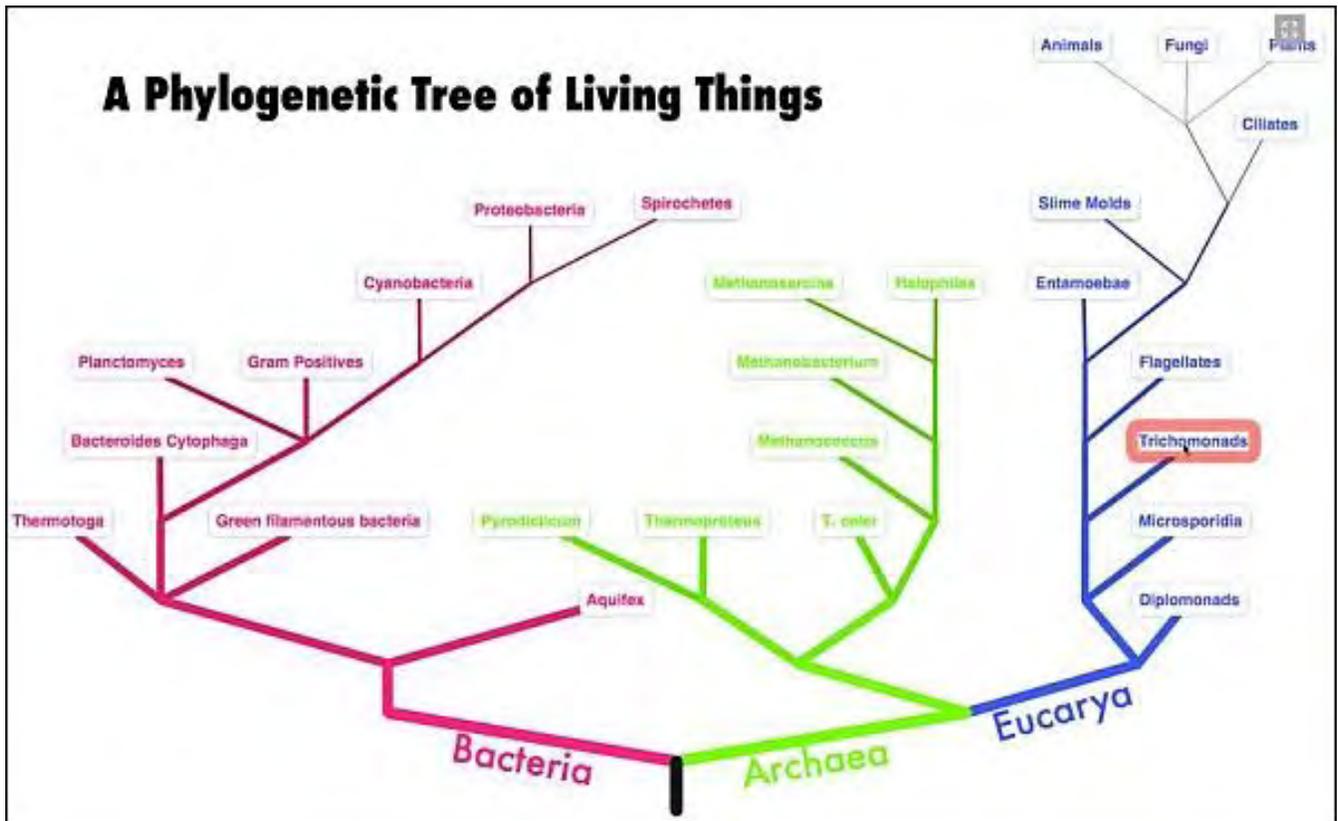


Figure 4. OmniGraffle can help you create colorful, visual outlines for presentations.

### SnagIt for the Mac

If you want to capture images on your screen, you can use the free Grab program buried inside the Utilities folder in your Applications folder. Grab can capture entire screens, windows, or just any portion of the screen you want. However, Grab lacks editing features and can do nothing to help you capture large Web pages. If these features are important to you, you'd be better off using the \$49.95 SnagIt for the Mac ([www.techsmith.com/snagit/](http://www.techsmith.com/snagit/)).

Like most screen capture programs, SnagIt can capture any portion of your screen, save your screenshot in a variety of file formats, and wait a fixed amount of time before capturing something on your computer, giving you time to do something such as manipulate a game.

If you use both Windows and Mac OS X, the single price of SnagIt gets you the Windows and Macintosh version of the program. Now you can use the same screen-capturing program on different computers without having to relearn all new commands every time you switch operating systems.

One unique problem with capturing screenshots occurs when viewing Web pages. Unfortunately, many Web pages require scrolling to see the entire page. You could repetitively capture part of a Web page and then try to stitch the different images together. Since this is time-consuming and frustrating, SnagIt offers a unique scroll capture feature that works with the Firefox browser to capture a complete Web page, no matter how large it might be.



Figure 5. SnagIt can capture a scrolling Web page.

Most screen-capturing programs are fine for saving a screen image, but you still need to use a separate editor, such as Photoshop, to modify that image, such as adding arrows or typing text. SnagIt comes with its own simple editor that allows you to add arrows, text or visual effects. With SnagIt, you have a single program for capturing images and editing them afterward.

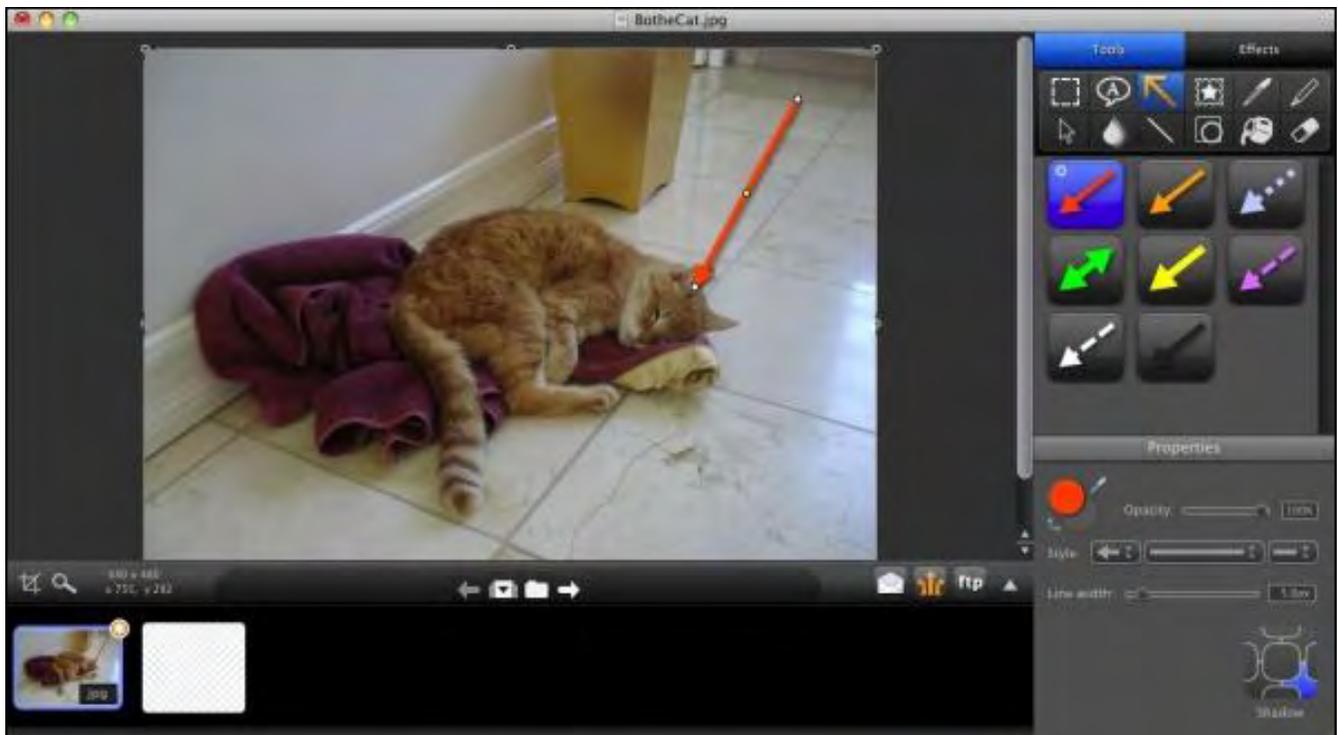


Figure 6. SnagIt's editor lets you modify captured screenshots and other images.

Most people may not need to capture screenshots on a regular basis, but for those who do, a program like SnagIt is far superior than the built-in Grab program that comes free with every Macintosh. SnagIt is for anyone who needs to capture screenshots to use in presentations, manuals or brochures.





Figure 8. A typical QR code.

The Japanese pioneered the use of QR codes, and now the rest of the world looks like they'll slowly catch up. In Japan, businesses use QR codes on business cards and signs so people can load data into their mobile phone without typing a thing.

QR codes are free to generate and use, so this could be a new way for advertisers to provide information on bus stop benches, flyers, signs and brochures. Since people must deliberately scan QR codes into their phones, they represent prospects who want more information, which is exactly the type of customers any marketer wants to reach.

QR codes may be part of the future, like radial menus, or they may just hint at something much bigger to come. Whatever happens, thinking about how different products can affect the future is certainly more constructive than trying to convince others not to think at all and avoid trying anything different.

As the future approaches, old things tend to pass away. Television displaced radio as the primary means of communication, and then the Internet helped cripple both television and newspapers.

One remaining industry in its death throes is the book industry ([nymag.com/news/media/50279/](http://nymag.com/news/media/50279/)). Book stores like Borders and Barnes and Nobles are struggling and will likely never see a return to massive growth as people read books less and less, and digital books become easier and more convenient to find (and pirate).

With e-book piracy on the rise and the ability to create, publish and distribute your own e-book over the Internet, brick-and-mortar bookstores look increasingly obsolete and traditional book publishers look equally irrelevant, like Blockbuster Video stores. The future of the printed book or magazine will rely on digital interactivity.

Think of those pop-up children's books where you turn a page and a paper castle and dragon pops out of the pages. Now imagine a similar interactive book or magazine, except with video that you can manipulate and control.

Today's e-books are only minor improvements over regular books because they translate static text and pictures like frozen amber to the digital realm. Once writers and publishers realize that e-books don't need to mimic printed books in the same way that early movies mimicked stage plays, they'll truly have the freedom to be creative by adding interactivity to their information.

If you want to survive and thrive in the future, you'll need to let go of old technology and embrace the new. Nobody knows where new technology will take us, but everyone can agree that clinging to outdated technology will only lead to an eventual dead end sooner rather than later.

## AVG Anti-virus Cripples Windows

If you were one of the unfortunate few running Windows 7 and using AVG Anti-Virus, you might have tried updating your AVG program on December 1. If so, you may have been unpleasantly surprised by continuous reboots and the inability to use your computer ([www.windows7news.com/2010/12/02/avg-update-cripples-windows-7/](http://www.windows7news.com/2010/12/02/avg-update-cripples-windows-7/)). Fortunately, AVG quickly removed the defective update, replaced it with a patched version, and issued instructions for how to regain control of your computer after the AVG update wrecked it.

Forcing non-technical users to continuously maintain their computers instead of doing actual work on them is bad enough, but having a program that's supposed to protect you inadvertently wreck your computer instead is even more horrifying. Then making non-technical users follow technical instructions to recover their disabled computers can lead to further frustration.

This problem of antivirus software accidentally crippling a Windows PC might seem like a rare occurrence, unless you tried to update McAfee on a Windows XP computer back in April. The April McAfee update accidentally crippled Windows XP computers ([www.geek.com/articles/news/mcafee-update-cripples-windows-xp-machines-worldwide-20100422/](http://www.geek.com/articles/news/mcafee-update-cripples-windows-xp-machines-worldwide-20100422/)), causing continuous reboots and requiring users to follow a lengthy list of technical instructions to recover their PCs.

In October, another security vendor, Kaspersky, released an update that crippled Windows Server ([www.h-online.com/security/news/item/Kaspersky-Anti-Virus-cripples-Servers-1124659.html](http://www.h-online.com/security/news/item/Kaspersky-Anti-Virus-cripples-Servers-1124659.html)). In March, BitDefender released a faulty update that killed 64-bit versions of Windows ([www.bleepingcomputer.com/forums/topic303968.html](http://www.bleepingcomputer.com/forums/topic303968.html)). In February, Microsoft's own security update crippled Windows XP computers ([www.computerworld.com/s/article/9155419/Windows\\_patch\\_cripples\\_XP\\_with\\_blue\\_screen\\_users\\_claim](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9155419/Windows_patch_cripples_XP_with_blue_screen_users_claim)).

Way back in 2007, Symantec crippled Windows PCs ([www.computerworld.com/s/article/9019958/Symantec\\_false\\_positive\\_cripples\\_thousands\\_of\\_Chinese\\_PCs](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9019958/Symantec_false_positive_cripples_thousands_of_Chinese_PCs)) in China with their security update. In 2008, Trend Micro's update crippled Windows XP and Vista PCs ([www.networkworld.com/news/2008/090908-flawed-trend-micro-anti-virus-update.html](http://www.networkworld.com/news/2008/090908-flawed-trend-micro-anti-virus-update.html)).

The stories behind all of these flawed security updates are strikingly similar. Instead of detecting a virus, the security programs mistakenly removed a crucial Windows file, treating Windows as a malicious program (which may have been accurate). With AVG, McAfee, Symantec, BitDefender, Trend Micro, Microsoft and Kaspersky releasing updates that kill Windows instead of protecting it, how safe do you feel running such security programs and updating them on a regular basis?

For real security, use a program like Parallels ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0041DVQ8M?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B0041DVQ8M](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0041DVQ8M?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B0041DVQ8M)) or Fusion ([www.amazon.com/gp/product/B002Q72JB8?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B002Q72JB8](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B002Q72JB8?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B002Q72JB8)) and run Windows safely within a Macintosh. Create a snapshot image of your entire Windows configuration, and now if something like a McAfee, Kaspersky, Trend Micro, BitDefender, Symantec, Microsoft, or AVG update crashes your computer, you can just revert back to an earlier version of your Windows configuration and be up and running within seconds.



Figure 9. Parallels let you capture an entire Windows configuration as a "snapshot" that you can retrieve later.

Or you could insist on running Windows on a PC, waste your time running numerous maintenance programs just to keep your computer working, and waste even more time recovering your computer the next time another security update accidentally wrecks your Windows operating system. If you don't value your time and enjoy trying to keep Windows working just so you can use your computer, then feel free to avoid the Macintosh and programs like Parallels and Fusion.

### AntennaGate Strikes HTC

Back when people first discovered that holding the iPhone 4 near its base sometimes caused its signal strength to drop, everyone got into an uproar claiming that Apple made defective products and refused to acknowledge that their antenna design was faulty. Now HTC, makers of the HD7 running Windows Phone 7, is facing similar problems ([www.computerweekly.com/Articles/2010/12/02/244306/HTC-defends-HD7-handsets-after-antenna-problems-reported.htm](http://www.computerweekly.com/Articles/2010/12/02/244306/HTC-defends-HD7-handsets-after-antenna-problems-reported.htm)) with its own antenna.

HTC users have discovered that holding the HTC HD7 incorrectly causes its signal strength to plummet. HTC's spokesman offered this explanation:

"However, it is inevitable that a phone's signal strength will weaken a little when covered in its entirety by a user's palm or fingers. We test all of our phones extensively and are confident that under normal circumstances reception strength and performance will be more than sufficient for the operation of the phone when network coverage is also adequate."

Apparently the iPhone 4's antenna problem isn't unique to the iPhone, but simply a problem that affects many other mobile phones as well. Now that other mobile phone manufacturers are finally acknowledging this problem in their own products, we can all sit back and wait for the critics to attack Apple for another perceived flaw that actually exists in everyone else's products as well.

### Amazing App for Travelers

If you travel to foreign countries, you may have a language barrier communicating with the natives. However if you download the \$4.99 Babelshot app ([itunes.apple.com/us/app/babelshot-photo-translator/id334194705?mt=8#](https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/babelshot-photo-translator/id334194705?mt=8#)) for your iPhone, you can take pictures of signs, menus, or books and have the Babelshot app translate the text instantly.

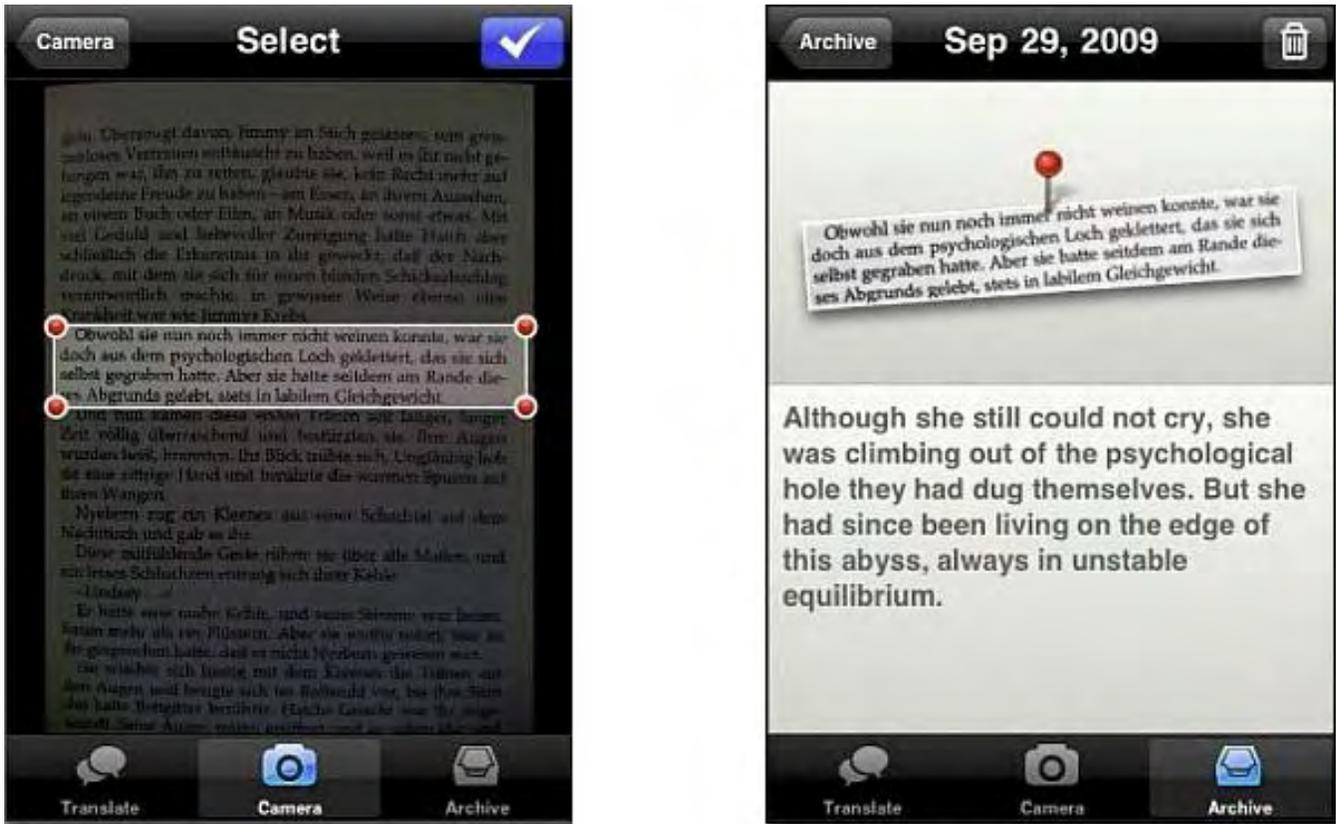


Figure 10. Babelshot lets you take a picture of text, select what you want to translate, and then read the translation in your language.

Babelshot works with Afrikaans, Albanian, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Galician, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Malay, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog and Turkish.

\* \* \*

If you regularly switch between multiple programs, you could click on a different program icon on the Dock. However, there's a faster way. Just press Command+Tab and a list of open program icons appears on the screen. Now you can just click on the program icon you want.



Figure 11. Fast switching between open programs.

If you have a Magic Trackpad for your desktop Mac, or have a newer MacBook laptop with a trackpad, you can also swipe four fingers across the trackpad to see that same list of open program icons in the middle of your screen.

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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.15minutemoviemethod.com)) Wally can be reached at [wally@computoredge.com](mailto:wally@computoredge.com).

---

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



## Rob, The Computer Tutor

Rob, The ComputerTutor:  
Technology Solutions  
“OpenOffice Impress” by Rob Spahitz

This week we wrap up our investigation of the Impress tool from OpenOffice, a free competitor to Microsoft's Office suite. Impress is the competition for PowerPoint.

This week we wrap up our investigation of the Impress tool from OpenOffice, a free competitor to Microsoft's Office suite. Impress is the competition for PowerPoint. As a reminder, you can download the free OpenOffice applications from [www.OpenOffice.org](http://www.OpenOffice.org).

### Gifts

Before continuing, this is the time of year that people are looking for great gifts to hand out to loved ones. Obviously, the computer industry offers an overwhelming collection of gifts, from new computers and peripherals and parts (memory chips, USB drives, memory cards) to phones to cameras to electronic toys on the hardware end. For software, there are probably even more choices. You can go with CD games, subscription games, software upgrades and things like productivity software.

If you look at my columns over the last few years, you'll see that most of them focus on how to use common household applications like Microsoft Office's Word, Excel and Access. The new 2010 version makes a great gift. However, as I pointed out, the cost can be a bit more than you'd like to spend since it can climb as high as \$500 for a single home license. More recently (since September of this year) I started investigating the open-source product called OpenOffice.org.

The open-source movement has the goal of offering non-commercialized applications that can be updated by anyone (with the right knowledge). The unexpected (to me) side effect of this is that many qualified individuals have stepped up from around the world to collaborate on making some great competition for popular products, like we see with OpenOffice.

In many cases, including OpenOffice, the products are well-tested, free of viruses, and free of cost. Further, as I've found through my investigations, this product competes well with Microsoft Office. Probably the only "issue" is that it was created to compete against Office 2003 and does not include some of the newer features of Office 2007 and 2010, such as the Ribbon Bar. However, many people who have used the older versions of Office chose not to upgrade because of the learning curve to figure out how the Ribbon Bar works.

So with all of that, why not consider giving away copies of OpenOffice to your friends who don't have Microsoft Office or those who are missing some of the parts? The only real issue is that this product is not a commercial product, so you'll have to do a little bit of work to package it up yourself.

So download OpenOffice.org's latest offering (OOo 3.2.1). Insert a CD-ROM disc into your CD burner (which most people have on their PCs these days) and transfer the file to the blank disc. Next, if you can find them at a stationary store, buy some blank labels designed to overlay discs. Run the software and copy the logo ([www.openoffice.org/branding/images/bannerlogo.png](http://www.openoffice.org/branding/images/bannerlogo.png)) from the Web site (use the link to copy it) and insert into the label. Print it and adhere it to the completed CD (after verifying that you can pull it off the CD and start it).

If you don't have the CD label, you can use other labels. However, understand that if they're not placed and balanced on the CD just right, they can cause problems in reading the CD or could get caught in the CD reader and jam the mechanism.

Another alternative is to buy a cheap USB drive (like those \$10 ones with 4GB) and put the software on that plus a label with the logo. You could even include some fancy family picture and a greetings message to enhance the experience.

Or include a personal presentation using the Impress software that we'll continue exploring now.

## Impress More

As seen last week, the Impress tool can create a PowerPoint-like presentation. Let's see how you can deliver it to someone else for viewing.

First, create a new Impress presentation from the OpenOffice application. The idea will be to create a custom greeting card.

In the "wizard" that starts when you begin, choose the "From template" option, and then the default Presentations drop-down choice, and then "Introducing a new product" (aka a new greeting card) as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Creating a new presentation.

On the second page of the wizard, pick a new background, such as Glacier, and then click the Next button.

On the third page, pick an Effect, such as Dissolve, and then click the Next button.

On the fourth page, enter your family name and Greeting Card in the subject, and then click the Next button.

On the fifth page, uncheck all except Title and Customer Wishes, then click on the Create button.

When done, you should see two pages something like Figure 2.

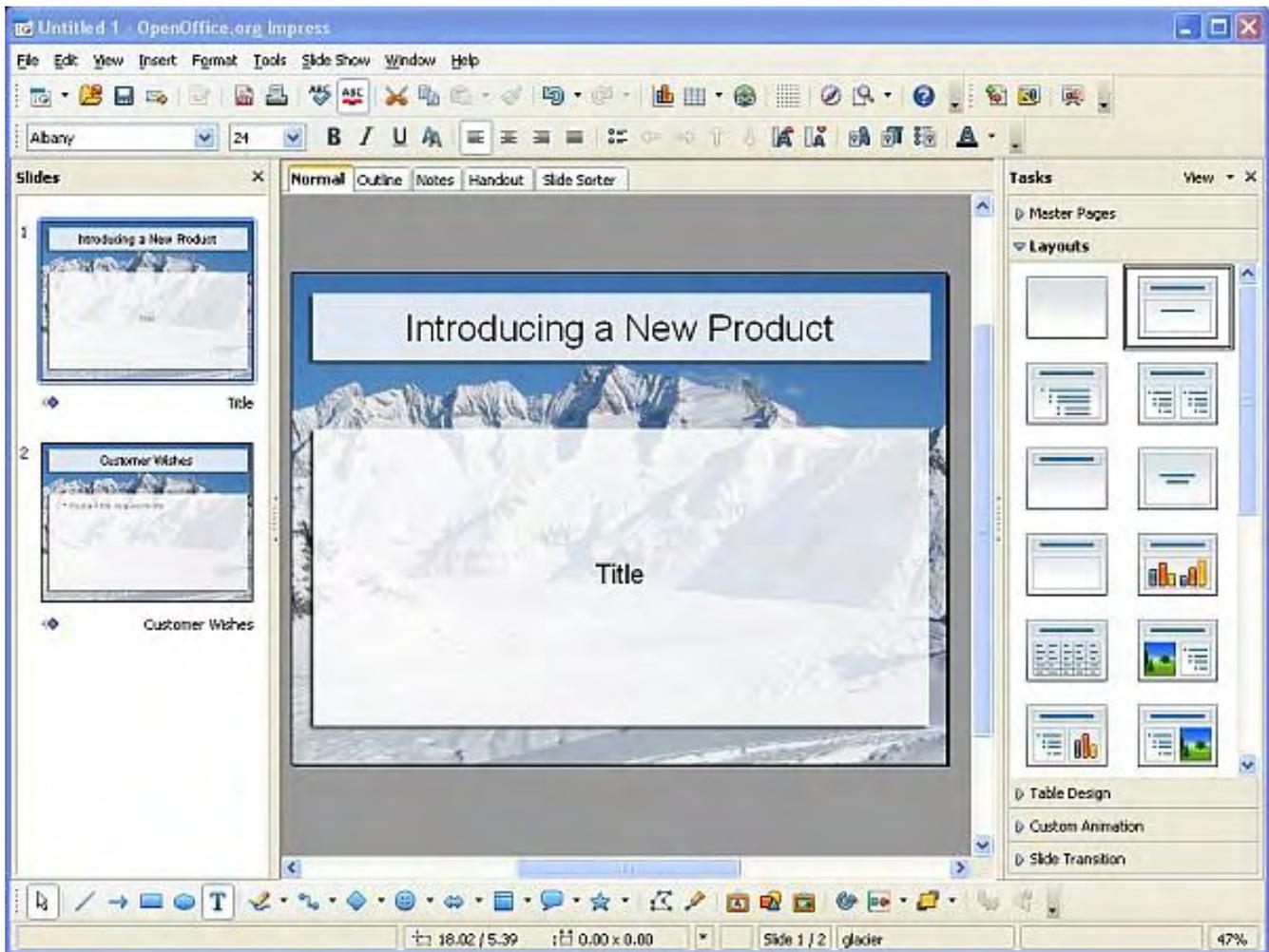


Figure 2. Sample presentation.

Click on the title of the first page. You should be able to change the text, so modify it to something like "My Greeting Card To You." Likewise, change the body of the main text block from Title to something nice like, "Here is my holiday greeting card to you. Please click here to see an awesome shot of us and our story."

Click on the second slide in the left column and add a picture and some text as done last week (i.e., menu Insert/Picture/From File).

Next, try to preview the presentation. For this, try the F5 key or use the menu Slide Show/Slide Show. It should show the current page with the specified transition effect, as seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Presentation in action.

If you were to start at page 1, you would see the first page appear with that transition. After clicking, you should see it switch to the next page. Another click and it will indicate that the presentation is done.

This is great, but suppose you want to deliver it to someone who doesn't own the OpenOffice product? Well, there are several options. You can obviously just save the document (menu File/Save As) and you'd have the option to save using ODF Presentation format. That would be good for reloading and editing later. You could also save as an OpenOffice.org 1.0 Presentation for those with an older version. And, as expected, you can save in Microsoft PowerPoint 97/2000/XP format (basically any version before the 2007 edition, but that version should also be able to load it.) You also have a few other options. However, all of these are really designed to allow future edits.

Instead, let's make it a truly independent file that could be sent to a Windows system, Mac system or Unix system. For that, rather than using Save As, try the menu File/Export as PDF option. From there, you have a variety of settings. When you click on the Export button, then enter a filename (e.g., Greeting Card), it will create a cross-platform PDF file, ready for most systems to open the file and view your presentation. I have Adobe Reader 7.0 loaded on my system and it seems to have opened perfectly. However, it seems to lose the special transition effects. Oh well, you can't have everything. Or can you?

It seems that you have other options with the Export feature. One other choice is to save as a Macromedia Flash file (.swf) or a Web page (.html). I tried both and the Flash file is nicer than the PDF, but also loses the transition effect. With Web page, it takes you through a wizard looking for different formatting options. By choosing all of the defaults, it exported nicely (saving various images as separate files) and would be nice to add to a personal Web site for all to see. However, the transition was still lost (as expected here, since those transitions are difficult to emulate on browsers, as they tend to be very inconsistent with rendering

pages).

So there may be more options for making this into a slide show like you'd see within the tool itself. However, I'm not an expert on this, or even on PowerPoint, so feel free to write in and tell me other options to make this work more nicely (like downloadable player that doesn't require having the full-fledged tool).

Again, all in all, this looks like a great free alternative to Microsoft Office's counterpart, and could make a great holiday gift if you package it nicely.

Next week, I'll quickly explore OpenOffice Draw. I don't think this has a real match in MS Office, but it's a welcome tool in the package since you often want pictures for word processors and presentation products. See you then.

---

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.



[Return to Table of Contents](#)

## Worldwide News & Product Reviews

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



Facebook App Aims to Give an Edge on Gift Shopping—Fulfill My Wishlist prevents the social stigma of re-gifting; Droid R2D2—If you're a fan of the man (George Lucas), R2D2 might well be worth the extra money; Castle Crashers—Anyone who picks this game up is in for a treat; Free Gordon ... for FREE!—A must for Half-Life junkies; Get a Hold on Your iPad—Nifty device solves tablet-induced fatigue.

### Facebook App Aims to Give an Edge on Gift Shopping

A new Facebook app called Fulfill My Wishlist might just be the very thing to take the edge off Christmas shopping. According to the publisher:

Thanks to Seinfeld, the practice of recycling unwanted gifts into "new" gifts to unsuspecting others now has a more official name: "re-gifting."

Re-gifting is no more comfortable than the moment an unwanted gift is opened in front of a beaming friend or relative. A polite grimace followed by the uncomfortable but necessary prevarication, "Thank you, I love it!" leaves a feeling of insincere gratitude.



The new Facebook application, Fulfill My Wishlist (built by the same team as the recession-busting app, Hire My Friend) aims to prevent the social stigma of re-gifting and those awkward holiday moments.

The app allows any Facebook user to create a 10-item wishlist through a shopping portal within. Users add items to their wishlist, which are then published to their friend-feed.

That user's friends can then peruse their friend's wishlist and see exactly what they want. Links from within the application allow friends to go directly to that item online and purchase it on the spot.

The application also allows users to subscribe to receive e-mail reminders when a friend has an important occasion coming up, such as a birthday wishlist. Reminders are sent one month, one week, or one day in advance of the occasion.

"Fulfill My Wishlist essentially takes the complicated guess-work and cumbersome list-building out of holiday shopping. A Facebook user can simply visit the app to see all of their friends' wishlists compiled in one place," says Applify Social Media Labs founder, Sharon Feingold.

"Christmas shopping can be very stressful. The pressure, the stress, the anxiety, the crowds, the deadline of December 25th... and not knowing what people really want leaves you taking random stabs in the dark. Our app aims to eliminate that stress, so people can simply enjoy the holiday season.

"And, with 500 million people now using Facebook, its user base has become cross-generational. A grandmother, her daughter, and her granddaughter might all be connected on Facebook. These are essentially the same people sitting together for Christmas dinner and opening up presents under the tree."

Fulfill My Wishlist was featured recently in the Wall Street Journal ([online.wsj.com/article/the\\_mossberg\\_solution.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/the_mossberg_solution.html)). It can be found on Facebook ([apps.facebook.com/fulfillmywishlist](https://apps.facebook.com/fulfillmywishlist)) and has a fan page ([www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=112621705437736](http://www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=112621705437736)).

## Droid R2D2 (Motorola/Verizon)

Verizon Wireless' limited edition (only available until ... the future!) Droid R2D2 ([www.verizonwireless.com/b2c/store/controller?item=phoneFirst&action=viewPhoneDetail&selectedPhoneId=5534&deviceCategoryId=1](http://www.verizonwireless.com/b2c/store/controller?item=phoneFirst&action=viewPhoneDetail&selectedPhoneId=5534&deviceCategoryId=1)) (\$599.99 full retail, \$349.99 w/2-year contract, \$249.99 after mail-in rebate, \$15 or higher data package required) has the inner workings of the Motorola Droid 2 smartphone with the look and demeanor of arguably the most famous sidekick in all history (present or future): Star Wars' lovable R2D2. And, considering all it offers, you're likely going to want to make he/she/it your little buddy as well.



### *Specs (from Verizon Wireless):*

Camera

\* 5.0 megapixel

\* Auto-focus

\* Touch-to-Focus

\* Face detection

\* Panoramic modes, and more

\* Dedicated Camera Key

## Video

- \* DVD–D1 video capture
- \* Direct upload to YouTube
- \* Slow-motion capture
- \* Fast-motion capture and more
- \* Blockbuster Mobile application for downloading full-length movies the same day they are available on DVD.

## Music

- \* Android Music Player
- \* Create and manage playlists
- \* Amazon MP3
- \* Download MP3s from Amazon Music Store
- \* Exclusive "The Best of R2–D2" movie with Original Cantina Music
- \* 3.5mm headset jack

## Web

- \* 3G mobile hotspot with support for up to five devices
- \* Full Suite of Google Apps, including Google Maps with Street View, transit and Wikipedia information; GTalk with Presence; Gmail; YouTube, Latitude, Google Calendar
- \* Webkit5 HTML browser
- \* Photo Sharing: Facebook, Picasa, Photobucket and Print to Retail

## Communication

- \* Integrated Google, Exchange, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter contacts
- \* Push E-mail support: Gmail, Exchange, Yahoo
- \* IMAP and POP, MSN Hotmail, and AOL Mail also supported
- \* Unified Google Calendar and Corporate Calendar (supports Exchange 2003 and 2007 protocol)
- \* Bilingual interface
- \* GPS-capable for E-911 emergency
- \* Speakerphone
- \* Advanced speech recognition
- \* Virtually limitless contacts (only constraint is on-board memory (8GB)).
- \* TTY compatible
- \* Hearing aid compatibility = M3/T3

## Bluetooth

- \* Bluetooth v2.1+ EDR
- \* Bluetooth profiles supported: Headset, Hands–free, Stereo, Audio/Visual Remote Control, Dial up Networking, Human Interface Device, Object Push for VCard, Message Access, Phone Book Access

## Design

- \* Custom, authentic Lucas Films R2–D2 designed Droid 2
- \* Exclusive Empire Strikes Back Binoculars App
- \* Star Wars Live Wallpapers: Millennium Falcon and Space Slug

## Dimensions

- \* Dimensions: 4.58 x 2.38 x 0.54 inches
- \* Weight: 5.96 ounces

## Operating System

- \* Android 2.2 (Froyo) OS with Motorola Application platform

## Display

- \* 3.7-inch touchscreen
- \* 480x854 WVGA display
- \* Supports up to 16M color

#### Keyboard

- \* Physical slide-out QWERTY Keyboard

#### Battery

- \* Battery: 1400 mAH Li-Ion
- \* Usage time: up to 575 minutes
- \* Standby time: up to 315 hours
- \* SAR: Head: 1.49 W/kg; Body: 1.50 W/Kg

#### Memory/Processor

- \* TI OMAP 1GHz processor with dedicated GPU
- \* 8GB internal memory for e-mails, texts, and apps
- \* 8GB preinstalled microSD card for music, videos, and pictures (expandable to 32GB)



I really enjoyed the time I spent with R2D2. Froyo (Android 2.2) is a very good operating system, but it's not quite there yet. For example, it sometimes makes decisions for you that you might wish to make for yourself. You can't view the phone's home screen in landscape mode unless you open the keyboard. What if I want to use it in landscape with the on-screen keyboard? The ever-present (good) Back key should always, always, *always*, take you back to where you just were. In certain menus I occasionally had to manually force a return to the home screen, then re-click the app I was running (bad). One more: pinch-to-zoom finger gesturing should always be active, not just in certain apps—something that will probably be worked out as apps are

updated. Also, battery life could be better, but you should be able to make it through the day if you don't run too many apps at once (download the superb free program Advanced Task Manager from the Android Market to help with that) and turn off features you're not using (Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, etc.).



On the plus side, there's a lot to love. The Droid R2D2 has excellent reception. It got a signal in places owners of other Verizon phones told me they could not. It also feels extremely well-constructed. The backlit keyboard slides out smoothly with a good solid click and is easy to use. Sound is excellent. Finally, the Droid R2D2 really does look and sound a lot like the original (see pics). Most operations are associated with R2's characteristic chirps and squawks.

Bottom line: If you're a fan of the man (George Lucas), R2D2 might well be worth the extra money. If not, get a Droid 2. It's the same phone sans R2D2.



### Castle Crashers (Xbox 360)

Castle Crashers is a humorous dungeon crawler game by the indie company The Behemoth that tells the simple story of four knights who are tasked with rescuing four princesses. Accompanied by a spectacular soundtrack that almost sounds Hollywood-worthy, rich game play, and some quirky 2-D graphics, anyone who picks this game up is in for a treat.



The combat system is going to be loved by all of you button-mashing junkies and strategic players alike. You can jump right in with your saber and slash away at the baddies, or take a more indirect approach: blocking attacks with your shield and shooting away with arrows and magic. And don't worry if you're not causing huge damage right off the bat, because there's a whole level-up system integrated in the game. Just keep on beating up on the other guys, and you'll earn enough XP to be leveling up in no time.

With each level you earn skill points too, which you can spend based on your playing preferences to increase the devastation you cause! Whether you prefer magic, ranged, or m  le attacks, you can spend those skill points based on how you play. And the action only increases when your friends jump in. Play locally or via Xbox live with up to three friends, smashing through the story line while giving CPR to fallen teammates and rescuing the princesses, but this time with a twist. Every time you rescue the princess, you're pitted into a lust-filled battle to the death with your friends, and the victor wins the princess.

Those of you looking for a good laugh will love the humor plotted through the game, which kept me laughing for a good while. The weapon selection gets pretty creative with a variety of everything from sticks to light sabers. The bosses were so outrageous at times I couldn't help but chuckle; from an over-sized bat with a toxic bowel disorder, to fighting literal catfish (and I literally mean a cat's head with a fish's body), you will certainly find something that will have you laughing in no time.

There were only two things that I particularly didn't like: first, in some areas you will end up with too many of the same scenarios lined up, and it gets a tad repetitive. And second, playing solo definitely proves difficult the further in you push, I found myself dying and having to repeat the level on a few more occasions than I would've liked. Altogether, though, this barely hampered my experience of the game.

For all of you looking for a solid single or multiplayer experience, or maybe even just a stocking stuffer for your friends at Christmas, you can pick up a copy on the Xbox Live Arcade for only \$15.



Review contributed by Jeremy Halligan

## Free Gordon ... for FREE!

Half-Life fans rejoice! Trolling through the Internet the other day I came across Codename: Gordon, a fan-made 2-D side-scrolling adventure of Gordon Freeman himself, and the best part is ... *it's free!*



You play as Gordon himself and set out to discover the reason behind the disappearance of the third dimension. With some surprisingly addictive game play (yes, the gravity gun makes an appearance), and people and locations based directly from Half-Life itself, it's a must-try for all you—I mean US—Half-Life junkies.

Just paste "steam://install/92" (without the quotes) into a browser on a computer with steam installed to get a hold of this bad boy. Give it a try. The best things in life are free, right?



Review contributed by Jeremy Halligan

## Get a Hold on Your iPad

The phrase "innovative product" might conjure up thoughts of Apple's iPad, Chevy's Volt, Google's Android OS, or other prominent companies' ingenious inventions. But sometimes the little guys (rather than the heavyweights) are the ones who come up with something truly innovative, and that's the case with Hand-e-holder Products Inc.'s ([www.handeholder.com](http://www.handeholder.com)) namesake accessory for tablet devices.

Hand-e-holder innovatively solves one of the iPad's weaknesses—wrist and/or finger fatigue that eventually creeps in while grasping the tablet's margin. Although the iPad weighs in at only 1½ pounds, try holding it upright without support for more than about 10 minutes and your paws are likely to begin complaining.

To solve tablet-induced fatigue, Hand-e-holder relies on an innovation that is exactly the same as Velcro in function, only different—tiny but rock-solid fasteners shaped like mushrooms (Figure 1A). These fasteners cover two surfaces—one is on a thin, donut-shaped disc (2 5/8-inch outer diameter, 1½-inch inner diameter) with adhesive on its opposite surface that you apply to a tablet's

or protective case's backside (Figure 1B); the other is on a plastic disc (also 2 5/8-inch diameter; visible in Figures 1A and C) that we'll revisit shortly. Hand-e-holder's fasteners collectively ensure that this accessory is securely and semi-permanently affixed to the tablet or protective case, as you'll see momentarily.

Three additional innovative features are Hand-e-holder's rotating spindle, octagonal disc and ergonomic strap. A short, narrow spindle connects the aforementioned plastic disc to a wider octagonal one (circled in red in Figure 1C). The connection is designed so that the spindle and octagonal disc are free to rotate. A 2¼-inch-wide strap snakes through a metal retainer and slit in the octagonal disc. What's innovative about this strap is that it has Velcro at its ends to form an adjustable-size loop, and it has an ergonomic pad in the middle where the user's palm rests after inserting her/his hand into the loop (Figure 1D). Very clever! (Note: Shaq was unavailable for this review to assess the strap's support for ginormous hands.)

How does Hand-e-holder stay securely and semi-permanently affixed to a tablet or protective case? The aforementioned donut-shaped disc (which is adhered to the tablet or protective case) and plastic disc (which is connected to the rotatable spindle that, in turn, is connected to the octagonal disc with its ergonomic loop-forming strap) both have a fastener-covered surface. When the user aligns these two surfaces with each other and presses down (Figure 1E), the fasteners collectively click and form a closed connection. Because the spindle and octagonal disc are rotatable while the fastener-covered discs remain stationary, the tablet freely turns in either direction between portrait and landscape orientations (Figure 1F).

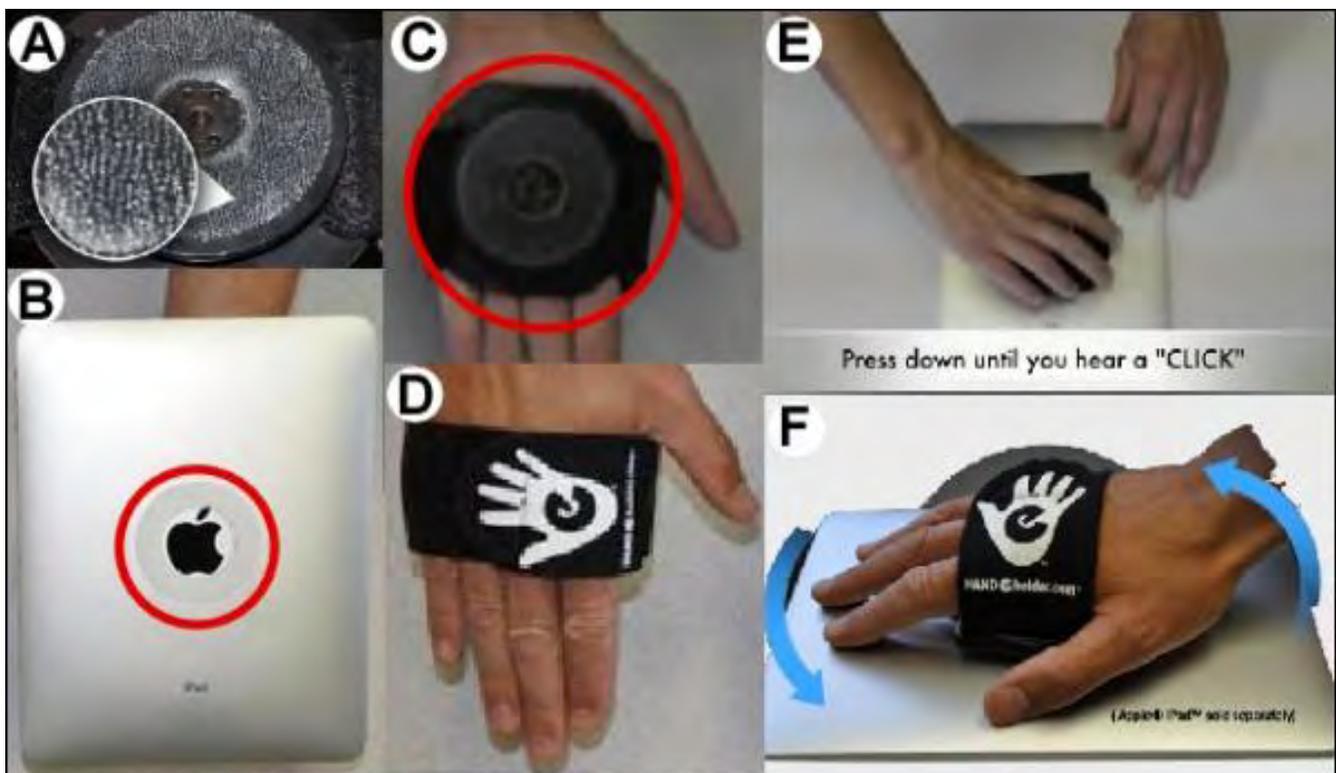


Figure 1. Hand-e-holder consists of two lightweight (~3.5 oz. total) parts—an adhesive donut-shaped disc and the holder unit—which rely upon tiny but rock-solid mushroom-shaped fasteners (inset in A) to do their job of supporting the tablet's weight in your hand. The donut-shaped disc (B) has fasteners on one side and adhesive on the other side, which you apply to the tablet's (or protective case's) posterior. The holder unit includes a small spindle that connects two plastic discs—one (visible in A and C) is similar in size to the donut-shaped disc and covered with fasteners; the other (outlined in red in C) is wider, octagonal, and has a metal retainer and a slit that together accommodate an adjustable-length padded strap (D). When you press the holder unit (with the fastener side pointed down) onto the donut-shaped disc (E), the fasteners make an audible click indicating that the two parts now are semi-permanently connected. Because the spindle and octagonal disc are mutually rotatable, you can turn the tablet or octagonal disc freely as desired (F).

If you have any doubts or lingering skepticism about the innovative fasteners' rock-solidness, point your Web browser to a video clip at the company's home page ([www.handeholder.com](http://www.handeholder.com)) showing (at the 40 seconds point) a demonstration of Hand-e-holder remaining firmly connected to an iPad despite vigorously shaking it. I replicated this demonstration several times during my evaluation, confirming that the connection is rock-solid. (Note: No iPads or tablets were harmed in the writing of this review.) On the flip side, suppose you want to disconnect Hand-e-holder from your iPad (because, for example, it doesn't fit in a sleeve or

carrying case). Piece o' cake—the English-only instructions card says to "...place your finger tips underneath the circular disc on the Hand-e-holder and pull back gently. With light pressure the Hand-e-holder will disconnect from the [adhesive] disc on the iPad/tablet device..." Should you decide to return or sell your tablet, remember the company's caveat—"Please do not remove the adhesive disc as this will render it unusable." Replacement adhesive discs are available for \$6 from the company's online store ([www.handeholder.com/3.html](http://www.handeholder.com/3.html)).

My testing confirmed that the Hand-e-holder effectively and comfortably supports the iPad's weight in the user's hand for extended periods of time without putting stress on fingers or wrists. Additionally, the tablet freely rotates between portrait and landscape orientations, just as advertised in the online demo video. It is compatible with almost any activity, with the exception of two-handed typing on the iPad's virtual keyboard and games designed for using both hands simultaneously.

Suppose, however, that hand-holding an iPad or tablet isn't your cup of tea. Or suppose that you'd rather do something else with your hands while cooking up an on-screen recipe, reading a book, or watching a video. No problem—Hand-e-holder has its own ecosystem of compatible stand-holding accessories. They include a tripod, three types of clamps, and three different stand designs (one of which also holds a wireless keyboard).

Each accessory includes a black plastic or clear acrylic adaptor plate (Figure 2) measuring 6 x 3¾ x 1¼ inches that supports vertical and horizontal adjustments for achieving an optimal screen angle. Two of these accessories—the Tri-pod and C-Clamp 2.5—were included with the Hand-e-holder supplied for this review. Let's take a quick look at them.



Figure 2. Hand-e-holder accessories rely upon an adaptor plate (shown looking down upon it from overhead) made of black plastic or clear acrylic. The inner surface of the plate's side walls has a groove (red ovals) into which the Hand-e-holder's octagonal disc fits.

The Tri-pod (Figure 3) is made of sturdy black plastic. Its parts include a stabilizing leg measuring 7 inches in length, two other 6-inch long legs, an adaptor plate, and a tightening knob for the rotating ball joint used to orient the adaptor plate at the desired angle (say, for reading). The Tri-pod comes with a 4¼-inch-long retention pin that slides through two holes in the adaptor plate just above the grooves into which the Hand-e-holder's octagonal disc fits, thereby preventing the iPad from falling out inadvertently. During my testing, the Tri-pod conveniently facilitated my iPad usage (catching up on back issues of ComputerEdge, watching videos, listening to music, etc.).



Figure 3. The half-pound Tri-pod consists of three plastic legs, a plastic or acrylic adaptor plate, rotating ball joint and tightening knob. The adaptor plate securely holds a Hand-e-holder equipped iPad at the user's desired angle.

The C-Clamp 2.5 (named as such because it opens to a maximum of 2½ inches) primarily is constructed of black plastic with

some metal (Figure 4). It uses the same adaptor plate as the Tri-pod. The clamp's gap ranges from 1 to 2½ inches; thus, its compatibility is limited to edges (counter, desk, table, etc.) that are at least 1-inch thick. In my testing, the C-Clamp came in quite handy (pun intended). It dependably secured my iPad to the back of a dining table chair and oriented the tablet's screen perfectly for watching a video clip while eating.



Figure 4. The 10.6 oz. C-Clamp 2.5 makes use of some of the same parts as the Tri-pod—adaptor plate, ball joint, and tightening knob—plus a clamp with screw and tightening knob.

In addition to its highly useful functionality, the Hand-e-holder is a socially responsible product. It is advertised as "100% made in the U.S.A.," ships in a box containing corn starch peanuts that are biodegradable (i.e., dissolvable in water and compostable), and comes in a package made of #1 recyclable plastic that is easily opened (without requiring a chain saw like some packages do) and resealed.

Hand-e-holder's price is \$39.99, which is in line with other iPad accessories such as sleeves, carrying or protective cases, etc. The One-Piece Stand costs \$49.99, the Rectangular Stand \$45.99, while each of the other available accessories costs \$39.99.

IMHO, this practical product would make an innovative stocking-stuffer for iPad owners.



reviewed 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](http://www.charlescarr.com).

---

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



## Beyond Personal Computing

“E-mails and Instant Messages: Now and Forever” by Marilyn K. Martin

Today, e-mail is everywhere and colors every aspect of our life. Is this non-stop flow of information and data storage always a good thing?

"Electronic mail," or e-mail, is another taken-for-granted aspect of computers and the Internet that seems to have been with us forever. But actually, instant messaging only arrived once multiple personal computers were established in most businesses.

And cubicles became barriers, where you couldn't see if Ralph-By-The-Coffee-Machine was in his cubicle, so you could yell down a question. These "messages" could fly from one user to another, but only if both were logged in to the same host or mainframe at the same time. Which was obviously an upgrade on leaving multiple messages on phone machines, or waiting days for paper memos to circulate.

The demand for these paper-and-time-saving "instant messages" even helped drive the creation of the Internet. Seriously! It wasn't an insatiable desire to logon to video games, view pornography or participate in blaster-blogging that pushed for a wider market for "instant messaging." It was, instead, the more mundane reality of busy offices that needed more immediate communication to get more immediate things done.

Today e-mails and instant-messages are everywhere. It is estimated that there are 1.06 billion instant-messaging accounts worldwide. If each account was a person, that population size would be a country falling somewhere between the U.S. (310,232,863 people) and India (1,173,108,018 people). (And be called ... MessageLand? Or UnitedWeSend? Or maybe the Republic of QuickTalk?)

Even kids can set up their own e-mail accounts. Which is a great way for them to stay up with their friends from summer camp or exchange gross jokes, or get help with their homework from a grad school cousin in another state who keeps changing his e-mail address to avoid a pesky cousin clogging up his e-mail account asking questions like, "Is 'hyperbole' a computer game?" Or "Do you store 'granite' in a silo?"

Some hyped-up new parents even open e-mail accounts for their newborns. Although what the blubbery little drooling set, working on mastering that stage of life requirement of sitting up, actually does with an e-mail account, is something of a mystery.

Most likely, Mom or Dad answer Baby's e-mails, pretending to be Baby. "Actually, my favorite baby food vegetable is carrots. Mommy says I'm less likely to upchuck carrots, than Bran-O-Spinach." Or "Daddy says I need to grow up a little, and learn to ride a bicycle first. So 'taking a spin to a Montana Rally' on your motorcycle, Uncle Clyde, is decades away. Or maybe never, if Mommy has anything to say about it."

Today, in businesses large and small, e-mails fly fast and furious. Some companies even have a "No personal e-mails!" rule, which is easy to get around: "Hello Real-A-Tive Incorporated! Thanks for the picnic products' demonstration last Saturday.

Always enjoy seeing fellow salespeople, who somehow all look vaguely like our family, in a casual setting. Did the lady from 'Aunt Claire's Burnt Cookies' table ever find her false teeth? Had a great time. Thanks."

And, with today's electronics designed to give law enforcement at least a slight edge over the criminals, "deleting" an e-mail is never the end of the story. "Deleted" messages are recovered all the time from computers and cell phones, with transcripts read in court, and occasionally splashed all over the media.

And who doesn't chuckle when reading or hearing about the inevitable, in-too-deep e-mail that ends with, "And whatever you do, make darn sure you *delete this message the instant after you read it* Those IRS guys are unforgiving, and my wife won't stop crying if we get another yacht confiscated."

And that tiresome dodge of "I never received that e-mail!" doesn't work either. It's like claiming you "never got" that phone call from Mr. Indicted, when your subpoenaed phone records cast doubt on your claim that there was a 45-minute conversation between Mr. Indicted and your recording machine on the date and time in question.

That quickly "deleted" e-mail can and will be retrieved to haunt you, bet on it. And, if it was an e-mail from your job, your trustworthy IT department will make a special point to find it. (Any truth to the rumor that abandoned missile silos are being converted into e-mail storage?)

And if you've "deleted" some dastardly illegal or compromising e-mail on your home computer, rest assured that big guys with three federal letters on the backs of their jackets will show up to cart away your entire computer. And if you feel safe after deleting that "Looking for Contract K'r" e-mail sent to all the homeless shelters in the U.S., rest assured it will be found. And you'll end up in that Bars-and-Electric-Fence "Shelter" called prison.

And then there is the frustration of e-mails that somehow "delete" themselves through one glitch or another, even when you're in the middle of typing it. Who hasn't spent 45 minutes on a carefully written e-mail (which happens a lot with the hunt-and-peck, non-typists using only index fingers) that suddenly blips out as you near the end? One helpful suggestion is to type lengthy messages into Notepad first, then cut/paste them into an e-mail.

Today, everyone "twitters" in short-hand to stay within the word limit, even though a recent survey found that nearly 90 percent of most tweets went unanswered. Tweets can flash around the globe babbling "I love my green hair! It's just food coloring, and washes right out!" No wonder most twitter-ers can easily multitask, as they quickly scan-and-delete these instant-idiot messages in elevators, restaurants, restrooms, gridlocked freeways, stop-lights or church services.

Non-response, however, is usually not a problem with most serious or professional e-mails, like at your job. You scan-and-delete an e-mail at your own risk if it says something like "Legal has informed me that your department hasn't been in compliance for seven years. Call personnel about early retirement. And then call me. In that order."

One of the most hotly debated issues right now is how long business e-mails should be saved or archived. Multiple government regulators have various rules for business e-mail retention and storage. While bloggers are actively warning IT types that the retention rules should be managed by legal departments—not IT or business managers.

Even Europe is arguing over "retaining electronic data," six months to two years, which covers all electronic business and personal messaging. According to the EU Data Retention Directive, this covers storage of phone calls, text messages, e-mail and "other Internet traffic." This European Directive is supposed to aid in the fight against terrorism and general crime.

Counterarguments are already popping up about "restricting privacy" and creating a "surveillance society," as well as the odd personal excuses like, "If my husband finds out, I'll sue!" Or "OK, yeah, I visit a lot of bomb-making and lock-picking sites. But I'm always looking for a new science fair project!"

Here in the U.S., the problem is not so much about what and how long to store electronic data, but where to put the vast sea of business e-mails that seems to grow exponentially every year. A 2008 study by Barracuda Networks reported that a surprising 82 percent of 200 surveyed IT professionals viewed "e-mail archiving" (saving and protecting e-mail data for future use) as "Important" or "Very Important" for their organizations. But more than two-thirds of those same IT respondents said they favor

archiving e-mails for reasons "other than" regulation compliance.

So what exactly drives corporations—or their belly-of-the-beast IT departments—to save e-mails practically forever? What needs, or potential needs, are met by a billion e-mails like "Hey, Fred—Your floor's printer is fixed. Tell the lady with the nail file to call us next time, instead of trying to fix it herself. Is her hair growing back? See you at the Stadium Sunday. I'm bringing my Armadillo RoadKill Chili to the tailgate"?

Maybe the idea of saving those e-mails for posterity is at the heart of all this e-mail archiving. No future historian will have to shake his head, lamenting, "We have absolutely no idea what President Taft was doing between first grade and puberty." Or "We're not sure who claimed ownership of the moon first. But spotty data indicates a possible connection between China's Lucky Lunar Mining Operations, and the U.S. needing more space to store corporate e-mails."

Or, regardless of the content, perhaps the date and time of a past e-mail is what is really important. Especially if everyone is just a little fearful of damaging their career or having to go to court without "proof of innocence" in some archived e-mail. ("See? I told ya! This e-mail from Jasper Higgenboggle is from January 6th, 2054. Clearly, he was just fine three days *after* that server blew up after I repaired it, which he claims threw him into a coma for seven months!")

Maybe there will even be future courts presided over by brainy robots, where the only evidence offered will be e-mails yanked from dueling archives. Prosecutor: "*This* batch of e-mails, Your Honor, clearly establishes that the Mars Colony clearly knew they were buying illegal weaponry from RockoSocko Armaments." Defense: "Then why did that same Mars Colony send and receive *these* e-mails, thinking that RockoSocko was a discount soccer-goal distributor? 'Metal-Netting for Launch Capture' does not sound like a high-tech weapon, now does it?"

And, with all the regulation, compliance and legal concerns being cited for mega-storage of corporate e-mails, it's even more curious why, at least in the U.S., more commonplace "security concerns" are *not* stored. If electronic-message retention is viewed as potentially useful to law enforcement, then why do all those ubiquitous surveillance video cameras work on a taped-over loop? Or produce daily videos that are only retained for maybe a few months?

Do security departments possibly back up what they've seen on video in e-mail logs, for when the police or Homeland Security come calling? ("06/17/19 - 12:47:33PM—Unknown man with ill-fitting clothes and a bad haircut entered premises through front door. Guard Ralph Dempsy approached unknown subject. Man was surly and impatient, but did provide ID upon request. Guard Dempsy reported that the Unknown Man was named "Gustav-something," and had an unknown accent. He was released, and made a rude and well-known finger-signal at Guard Dempsy's back as he walked away. So extraterrestrial origins were definitely ruled out.")

E-mails were originally text-only. But today's e-mails can be extended to carry multimedia content (from documents to photos and even videos) as "attachments." These are great for personal photos and videos. Now Grandma can see the torn, outgrown clothes she gave her smiling, bean-stalk grandchild for Christmas. And Uncle Pete can just let people wonder why his screensaver is a video of a belly dancer in New York City, which his traveling nephew had e-mailed him in an attachment, based on Uncle Pete's specific instructions.

This method of "electronic submission" in a business sense is also great, in terms of no longer having to laboriously package up personal documents or other paperwork, then go stand in line at the post office to get the correct postage and ending up behind Mrs. One-Of-Every-Stamp-And-Please-Describe-Each-One. Even the IRS now encourages electronic submissions at tax filing time. And everyone wants to keep those guys happy!

But remember, "official" e-mail attachments do need to be distinguished from those glob-o-virus attachments in your spam, which should *never* be opened. So resist the temptation when you read short, tantalizing spam messages like "Your inheritance instructions being attachment." Or "If kindly read your prayers-answered attachment." Or "You winning Tibetan Lottery! If you desiring real money and not yaks, reading attachment and tell us choice of you!"

So long live the e-mail! And if you bought an abandoned missile silo and don't know what to do with it—just hang onto it. Some IT department, looking for more corporate e-mail storage, will undoubtedly pay you handsomely for it in the not-too-distant future.

---

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 of Mathias, ([www.amazon.com/Chronicles-Mathias-One-Reptilian-Rebirth/dp/1598249002](http://www.amazon.com/Chronicles-Mathias-One-Reptilian-Rebirth/dp/1598249002)) Volume One and Two are available on Amazon.

---

---

[Return to Table of Contents](#)



## Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

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

"No History in the Outlook Express Sent Folder," "Windows Freeze-Up," "Professional Photography," "Michael J. Ross Articles," "Telepathy," "Carrying Clipboard Forward," "Apple Rechargeable Batteries"

### No History in the Outlook Express Sent Folder

[Regarding the November 19 Digital Dave column:]

Did Rob Macfie verify that in Outlook Express, Tools/Options, Send tab, the top check box: "Save copy of sent messages in the Sent Items folder" is checked? I do not know, specifically, how OE handles sent e-mails if unchecked.

-Bruce Osterberg, Temecula, CA

### Windows Freeze-Up

[Regarding the November 19 Digital Dave column:]

I sometimes get a freeze-up while running Internet Explorer on Windows XP. I just do the CTRL/ALT/DEL thing, find Internet Explorer, and kill it, then start over. I just blame errors like this on poor programming from Microsoft.

-James Adair, San Diego, CA

### Change in Professional Photography

[Regarding the November 26 EdgeWord: A Note from the Publisher column:]

I'll add a comment based on the fact that I took a semester course on photography and purchased the usual lot of special lenses for my X-700 SLR back in the day. I have purchased an EOS-based adapter, now I need to buy a digital back to fit \$1K worth of lenses.

The sheer number of *bracket* shots (look it up) meant that the photographer often spent several hours just looking at what he/she/it was *best* to print; that meant that the "best" shots were highly subjective and this "search" was what you paid for—that was the "professional time" that you paid for along with the time spent at the shoot. That wedding album actually is the results of 4X total shots actually taken and sorted!

Nowadays, you can supply a DVD of *all* the shots taken and *let the consumer decide* what are the good shots, but few "pros" are willing to allow *all* of the physical labor (setting up, brackets and incidental shots that the customer my really want) be part of their "work of art."

Case in point: That incidental shot of Uncle Ralph at the wedding reception may be the last picture of him taken before he died of a heart attack. Important to you, but of no interest to the "pro" ; it was a bad shot in their opinion.

This change is similar to the change that the personal computer made on the "keeper of the keys and Priesthood" of the IBM 360 and other mainframe computers.

-Art Blackwell, Evergeen

## Michael J. Ross Articles

[Regarding Michael J. Ross's November 26 article, "MapleXp: A Free Time Tracker":]

Ross' articles are always appreciated for their clarity, visuals and in-depth analysis.

-Lynn Manning Ross, San Diego, CA

## Telepathy!

[Regarding James Hartnett's November 19 article, "The Ultimate Computer Christmas Gift: Telepathy!":]

I always enjoy articles by this writer, he is well read and interesting. I want to get my head around brain scanning, or maybe I mean get a brain scanner around my head! Thanks James!

-Moe, Akron OH

## Carrying Clipboard Forward

[Regarding the November 26 Editors Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers column:]

Concerning Clipboard availability: Go to an older version of Windows, such as XP, and copy/paste this neat little program (clipbrd.exe—the ClipBook Viewer) where needed—such as in Win7. It works for me.

-Cicero, Colorado Springs

## Apple Rechargeable Batteries

[Regarding the November 19 Wally Wang's Apple Farm column:]

Anyone considering purchasing Apple AA rechargeable batteries should be aware that they are marked-up and rebranded Sanyo Eneloops, as described here ([www.engadget.com/2010/08/12/apples-rechargeable-aa-batteries-are-rebranded-sanyo-eneloops/](http://www.engadget.com/2010/08/12/apples-rechargeable-aa-batteries-are-rebranded-sanyo-eneloops/)).

-Gabriel, Chula Vista, CA

---

**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](mailto:ceeditor@computoredge.com).

---

---

Send mail to [ceeditor@computoredge.com](mailto:ceeditor@computoredge.com) with questions about editorial content.

Send mail to [cwebmaster@computoredge.com](mailto:cwebmaster@computoredge.com) with questions or comments about this Web site.

Copyright © 1997-2010 The Byte Buyer, Inc.

ComputerEdge Magazine, P.O. Box 83086, San Diego, CA 92138. (858) 573-0315