

ComputerEdge™ Online — 12/17/10



This issue: Computer as the Entertainment Center

The home computer has become an entertainment hub where we play music and games and even watch movies. Here's a free program for managing the new entertainment center.

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Reading Books on an iPad

If you want to do more than just read e-books, such as browse the Web, send and receive e-mail, or play games, then the iPad is far superior to an e-reader like the Kindle. Also, the medical sector is turning to the iPad; free movies from sites like Hulu help save money; Apple Stores vs. Microsoft Stores; the future of publishing; and a tip on using the Close All command via the Option key to close multiple windows.

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OpenOffice Draw

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Digital Dave

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

Are there security risks when you forward an e-mail without cleaning it up before you send it?; a reader seeks a custom mobile form solution for use on a tablet or iPad; text in a Web form appears to have funky characters.

Dear Digital Dave,

Regarding the question from Poz last week and your answer:

Are there security risks when you forward an e-mail without cleaning it up before you send it?

And if so, what are the security risks? I have been asking a friend of mine to clean up his e-mails before forwarding them to me. Need the facts, please!

Thank you in advance for your reply.

*Wayne
Escondido*

Dear Wayne,

Unless there is an option in your e-mail program that strips pictures, links and attachments from a forwarded e-mail, the risk from a forwarded e-mail is exactly the same as that of the original. The purpose of forwarding is to send on the total content, including useful links and any attachments. It is the responsibility of the person doing the forwarding to not send you garbage, although this does not relieve you of your need to practice safe computer hygiene. Any phishing links that you click or malware attachments you open will be just as lethal as they were in the original.

If your friend forwards a copy of a spam e-mail, then you are receiving the same spam—except it will be from him, which makes it even more dangerous, since we tend to drop our guard when getting friendly e-mail. (This is why the malicious like to get a hold of someone's address book.) We depend upon our friends not to send us infected e-mail, but we can never regard any message completely safe until we have carefully checked it out. If I had someone continually sending me problems, I would stop reading them.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I work for a fleet operation as an accident investigator. Whenever I (or one of my team) go into the field to investigate a traffic accident, we have a 22- to 24-page form we need to fill out on site (insurance, registration, driver's license, make/model year of the vehicles, etc.). I am looking

for software where these forms can be scanned into a laptop, iPad, or tablet computer where we can turn it on at a scene, fill out the form, and when we get back to the office download the form (filled out of course) onto a flash drive and then plug it into a desktop computer and print out the form. I know you have probably answered this in the past, but I must have missed that Friday.

*James Murphy
El Cajon, CA*

Dear James,

There are probably many solutions that readers could relate, but the one that immediately springs to my mind is Adobe Acrobat (www.adobe.com/products/acrobatstandard.html). It has a forms builder that will create a PDF file with blanks for all the data you need to collect. PDF files are compatible with virtually all types of computers (including apps on the iPad). All you need to use the form is a PDF reader. (Adobe's reader is free and usually integrated into browsers.)

You can either recreate the form in Acrobat, or, I would guess, you could scan the original form and automatically convert static fields to fill-able ones with the Form Wizard.

Once you have filled in a copy of the form, you can save it with the new data. Later, you can either print it or compile it into a data form with other completed forms that can be exported to various data formats. There is also an option to e-mail the completed form—if you happen to have an Internet connection (Wi-Fi) on site.

I would be interested to hear what others are using for this problem—especially if it's free software.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I have a Web site form for a user's metadata. When the user completes the form, it automatically triggers an e-mail that I need to process the data. At times, the metadata is corrupted in the e-mail and looks like this sample "...â€œWhat's happening in ...inâ€" What causes this?

*Lynn Manning Ross
San Diego*

Dear Lynn,

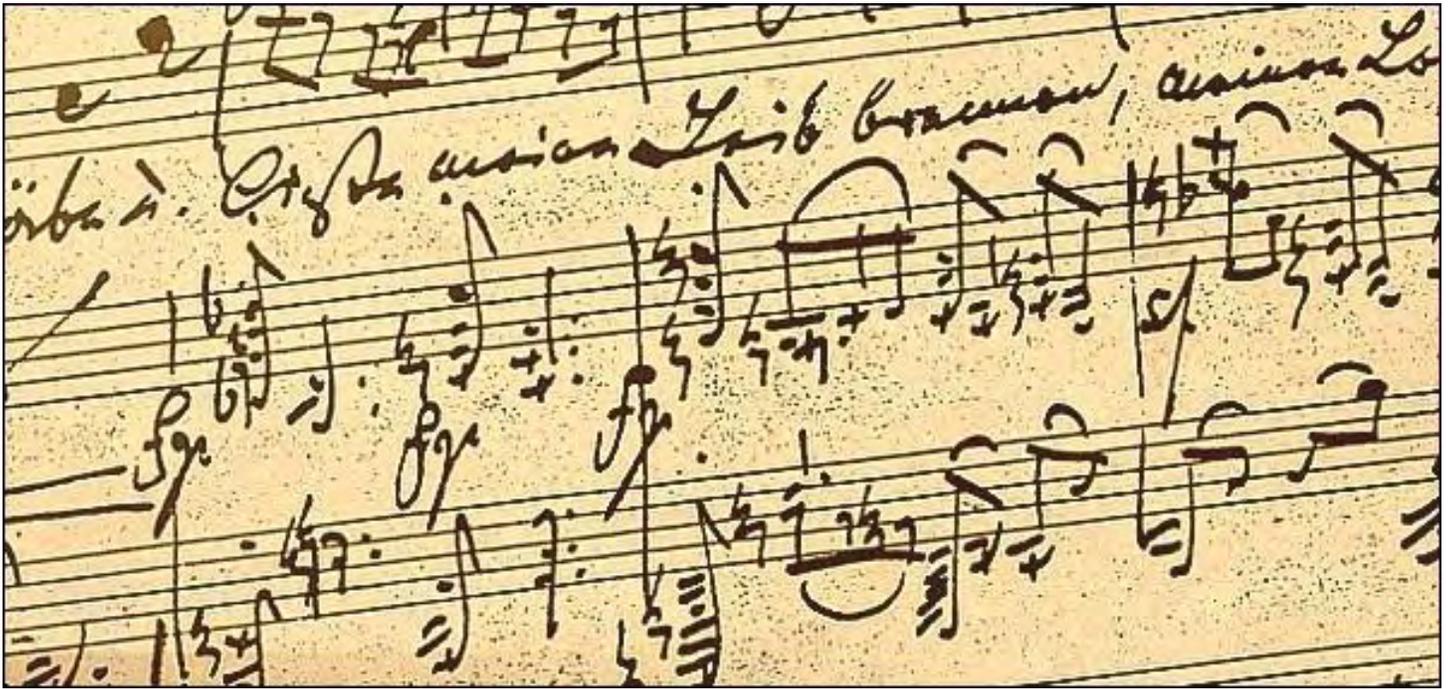
Actually, that is quite a common problem. The most likely reason that you are getting what look to be funky characters is that the person completing the form wrote that portion in another program, such as Microsoft Word, or copied directly from another source and then cut-and-pasted it into your form. The HTML page does not recognize special characters (curly quotes, curly hyphens, em dashes, etc.) and substitutes the equivalent characters in its code set. These strange-looking characters can come from a variety of sources—for example, the code set used by the Macintosh is not identical to that for the PC.

There are a variety of ways that Web sites can deal with this problem. One method uses filters to convert commonly used characters such as curly quotes to plain quotes. There have been efforts to make the Web character sets consistent by edict, but due to poor implementations throughout the Web, it has largely been ignored. Plus there is never any guarantee that third-party software won't do some other irregular things.

If someone wants to ensure that the text they are writing for insertion into a Web form will not appear to be corrupted, they should use a plain text editor such as NotePad before pasting it into the form. As for your end of things, you can either try to implement some character filters in your forms, or merely change them to the correct punctuation after you receive the submissions.

Digital Dave

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VLC Media Player

“Handles every type of multimedia in common use.” by Michael J. Ross

Multimedia files are overtaking our computers, draining system resources and causing confusion. Fortunately, a program called VLC may have you uninstalling those standalone multimedia programs and singing the praises of simplicity.

If you were to examine all of the programs installed on the typical personal computer, you would probably find a wide range of programs from several different categories: office productivity (such as a word processor and a spreadsheet program), system security (for spyware and virus detection), communication (such as an e-mail client and a VoIP application) and Web browsers. But the category that would probably claim the most members is multimedia. This would include utilities for playing music files (perhaps separate programs to handle MP3, WAV and Real files), Flash files and video files (separate programs for AVIs and MPEGs). The total lineup could be half a dozen programs, and some people have far more than that.



Are there any downsides to having so many multimedia programs on your computer? First, combined they can consume a lot of space on your hard drive, as well as in your Windows Registry. Second, many of these programs stay resident even when you are not directly using them, so that means wasted system memory. Third, the more programs you have, the greater the odds that one or more of them is out of date or fast approaching that point, at which time the program may start nagging you to download the latest version. Doing so can then cause system instability if you fail to wisely test any new version on a separate partition or second computer, in case it causes serious problems. (For anyone

J. Whiting

George can't decide if he wants to read an eBook, watch a movie, look at his photos, send an e-mail, listen to music, write a Blog, update his Facebook page, surf the Web, check his stocks, pay his bills, play a computer game, do his shopping . . . or just go to bed.

who questions the possibility of such a scenario, recall years ago when a new version of Nero was released, and installing it caused Windows computers to get the dreaded Blue Screen of Death when booting up, which made it impossible for newbies to fix on their own.) Fourth, most of these multimedia programs try to connect to their home servers, which increases the load on your firewall and also increases the odds that you will unwisely start allowing outbound connections when you don't recognize the programs.

The ideal solution would be a single program that handles every type of multimedia in common use, including DVDs, VCDs and various streaming protocols. It would be free to use, easy to install, open source and actively maintained. Also, it would run on Windows, Linux and Mac OS X. As an added bonus, you could use it for ripping DVDs. Fortunately, there is such an application, developed by VideoLAN, a volunteer-run project dedicated to developing open-source multimedia software. The application is VLC (www.videolan.org/vlc/).

VLC media player overview download features screenshots streaming skins

VLC media player

The cross-platform open-source multimedia framework, player and server

VLC media player is a highly portable **multimedia player** and **multimedia framework** capable of reading most audio and video formats (MPEG-2, MPEG-4, H.264, DivX, MPEG-1, mp3, ogg, aac ...) as well as DVDs, Audio CDs, VCDs, and various **streaming** protocols. See the [full features list](#). It can also be used as a **media converter** or a **server to stream** in unicast or multicast in IPv4 or IPv6 on networks.

If you like VLC, please rate it on the [Freshmeat](#), [versiontracker](#) or [OpenSpiceTo](#) entries!

Download VLC

Binaries

Select your operating system to download VLC binaries:

- Windows
- Exilixity
- Mac OS X

GNU/Linux

- Debian GNU/Linux
- Red Hat Enterprise Linux
- Ubuntu
- Suseware Linux
- Mandriva Linux
- OS/2 Linux
- Fedora
- Arch Linux
- openSUSE

Source and other operating systems

For the other operating systems supported, there are no precompiled binaries. You will have to get the source code for VLC and its required libraries and build them yourself:

- FreeBSD
- Gentoo Linux
- NetBSD
- Solaris
- OpenBSD
- Qix

You can also directly get the [source code](#).

You couldn't find your OS / Distribution in this list but know where to find VLC media player builds elsewhere? Please [contact us](#) so we can add a link.

VLC 1.0 downloads: **128,200,842**
3.7 downloads per second

[Full statistics](#)

Features

For more information about what features are supported on your operating system, please see the [full features list](#). You can also have a look at some [VLC screenshots](#).

Documentation

See the [documentation page](#).

PlayOgg

PLAY OGG

Join [PlayOgg](#), a campaign to promote the use of free media formats including Ogg Vorbis and Ogg Theora.

Videolan - Website Map - Contact - See the statistics - \$Id: index.php 5719 2009-11-29 07:38:26Z boumitch \$
All rights reserved to the VideoLAN team. - valid XHTML 1.1 and CSS - 825 x 18 - Served by

Figure 1. VLC home page.

According to the site's statistics page, version 1.0 of VLC has been downloaded well over 100 million times. There must be a reason for such popularity (or possibly dozens of reasons, just glancing at the VLC feature list).

Multimedia, Not Multi-Mediocre

Most English-speaking people are familiar with the phrases "you can't be all things to all people" and "jack of all trades, master of none." The dangers of spreading oneself too thin applies equally well to the development with limited resources of computer programs. The end result is usually a program that tries to offer far too many capabilities, and fails to execute most or all of them adequately. More specifically, a program that attempts to be fluent in all the major types of multimedia formats, without sufficient development time, would likely fall into the same trap of mediocrity. But VideoLAN sidesteps this potential problem by distributing the workload among a team of dedicated programmers, a nonprofit organization to back them up, and innumerable programmers worldwide examining the open-source code with their unique perspectives, and strengthening it through endless field testing.

Not only does VLC run on the aforementioned operating systems, but it can also be used—albeit with restricted functionality—on the BeOS operating system (or at least its open-source continuation, Haiku), FreeBSD and mobile Linux (for handheld devices). But here we will focus on the Windows version. In terms of audio formats, VLC supports 28 of them, including MPEG Layer 1/2, MP3, Ogg Vorbis, WMA, FLAC and Real Audio. (Who would have guessed that there are at least 28 audio formats in the wild? And the number is probably growing.) ID3 tags are terrific for properly labeling MP3 files and better organizing a large music collection, which is one more reason to choose VLC. In terms of video formats, VLC supports 18 of them, including MPEG-1/2 and QuickTime. When watching foreign movies released in a language you don't understand, subtitles are a lifesaver. VLC displays most types, except closed captions for the Windows version, although the Linux and Mac OS X versions do handle closed captions. Lastly, VLC supports over a dozen A/V inputs and filters.

Even though the VLC user interface allows complete control over the playback of music and other content, if you spend much of your time within the Firefox Web browser (www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/), then you can take advantage of a Firefox extension called FoxyTunes (www.foxytunes.com/), which recognizes VLC as one of its media players. As a result, once you have the two programs installed on your computer, you can control the VLC playback of audio by clicking on icons within Firefox.

Video Landing on a Computer

To find out if VLC is a strong candidate for becoming your favorite music and video player, it is best to install it—preferably on a test partition, if you have one—and give it a whirl using different types of media. To get started, on the VLC home page (which confusingly is also the "download" page), click on the link for your favorite operating system. For those using Windows, the destination page divides the installation packages into two groups—one for the version that runs on Windows 2000 and later, and the other for a second version that runs on Windows 95, 98 and Me. Choose the appropriate group (our condolences to you if it is the latter), and save the installation file to some place in your Windows system where you can find it at any time.

Double-click the installation file's icon, and start working your way through the dialog screens. The first one will allow you to switch to one of over a dozen languages; English is the default. A rather important dialog is the one that gives you a chance to customize the list of components that will be installed. The Mozilla plug-in (i.e., Firefox) is disabled by default, and you may want to leave it that way, if you prefer that when you click on a multimedia link on a Web page,

Firefox prompts you to save the file or open it using an application. If the Mozilla plug-in is installed, then clicking on any such link immediately leaves the page and starts playing the multimedia file in your browser window, which is not what most people would want or are expecting to happen.



Figure 2. Installation components.

Scroll down further within the dialog screen, to the section that reads "File type associations." Unless you change those values, VLC will be made the default program for just about every multimedia file type invented, so you may want to disable those until you are completely sure that you want to drop your old multimedia programs for VLC—especially if you don't have a test partition on which to try it out beforehand.

Those people who have spent a considerable amount of time trying out various multimedia applications might notice something missing from the list of components—namely, codecs. Many of the multimedia players require you to manually download codecs, which can become quite annoying, and wastes time. VLC thankfully includes all of the primary codecs without forcing the end user to try to figure out what they are and how to install them.

When you run the program for the first time after installation, it will prompt you to specify if and when VLC should call out to an external server in order to download information on CD covers, or whether to notify you of available updates to VLC itself. After you have made your choices, you reach the VLC interface, which admittedly won't win any beauty contests, but is clean and straightforward.



Figure 3. User interface empty.

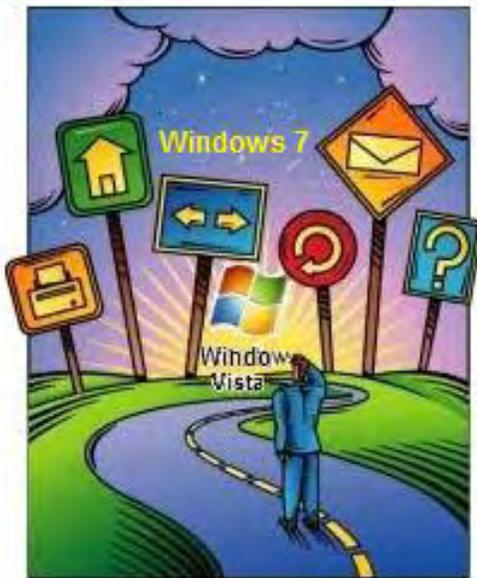
Test it by playing at least one music file on your computer, and perhaps a video file and a DVD, if you have any available. If you want to play some MP3 files, for instance, located on your hard drive, then choose the menu item Media/Open File. But note that in the "Select one or more files to open" dialog that pops up, the file type is set to "Media Files," which is a list of file extensions, and does not include ".mp3." So change the list item to "Audio Files."

When you are using VLC, you aren't limited to controlling it using the mouse-click elements in the user interface. The program supports a number of keyboard shortcuts <http://wiki.videolan.org/Windows>. The keyboard shortcuts can be customized, using the following menu path: Tools/Preferences/Hotkeys.

For eye candy much more attractive than the above figures, check out the VLC screenshots page (www.videolan.org/vlc/screenshots.html), which offers a wide assortment of sample screenshots for different versions of VLC. But nothing is more convincing than seeing an application working smoothly on your own computer. So don't hesitate to give it a try. You may find yourself uninstalling a bunch of standalone multimedia programs and singing the praises of simplicity.

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

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Windows Tips and Tricks

Windows Tips and Tricks

“Microsoft's Cloudy Outlook” by Jack Dunning

This column is more a review of Microsoft's attempt at cloud computing than it is a tip or trick. Many are predicting that Internet-based applications will be the demise of Microsoft. While I don't go that far, the company sure isn't helping itself.

This column is more a review of Microsoft's attempt at cloud computing than it is a tip or trick. Many are predicting that Internet-based applications will be the demise of Microsoft. While I don't go that far, the company sure isn't helping itself.

Even since I first downloaded Windows Live Mail, I've had an Internet account with Microsoft. It does have its advantages for backing up calendars and e-mail contacts, but to be honest, I haven't paid much attention to it. One of the features of Windows Live is Skydrive online storage. Currently, a free individual account can get 25GB storage with a 50MB maximum file size. In June of this year support was added for Office Web Apps. At first blush this looks like an enhancement. Support for Word documents, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote are included (see Figure 1). This might be great if you own Microsoft Office, but if you're an OpenOffice.org user like myself, it quickly turns into a bait-and-switch for the purchase of Microsoft products.

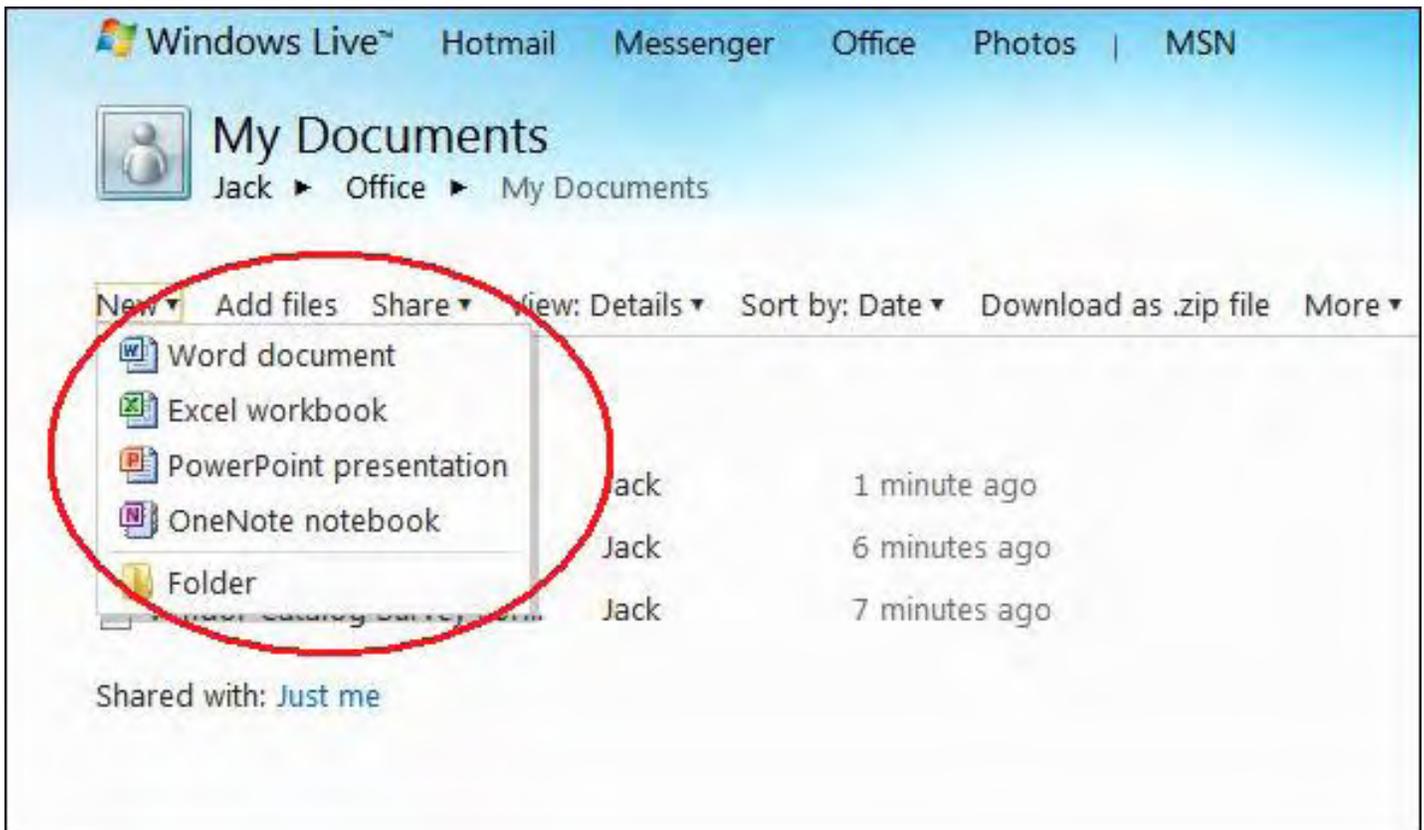


Figure 1. Files can be created for Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote in Windows Live Skydrive.

While it is easy to upload any type of file, opening a file in one of the online applications—or importing a file—is difficult (if not impossible) if you don't own Microsoft Office—even in Microsoft format. For example, after opening the Word Web App, you will note that there are limited options in the File menu (see Figure 2). If you click the Open in Word option, it tells you that you need to get Microsoft Office (free trial). There is no option for importing any other type of file.

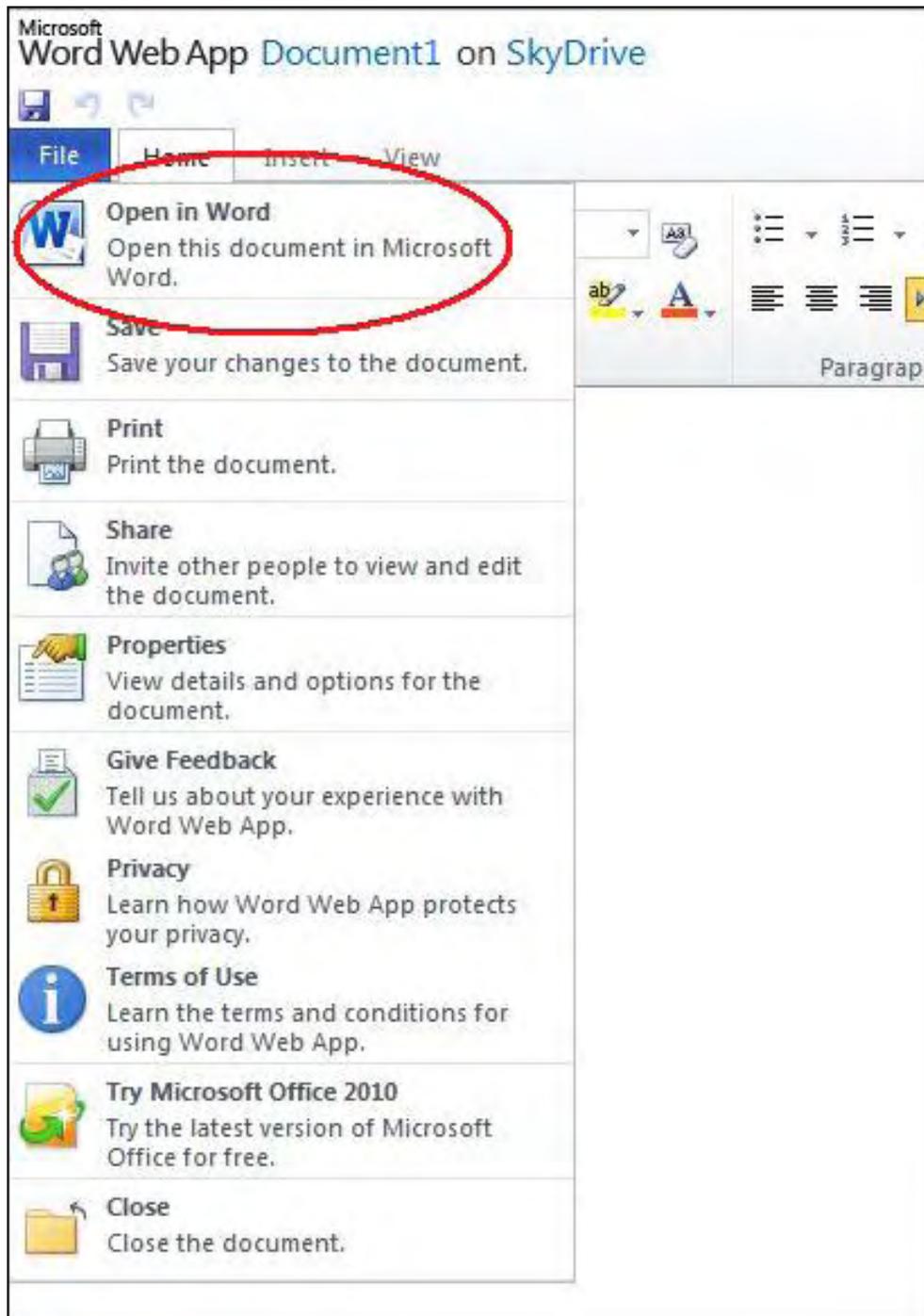


Figure 2. The File menu in Word Web App may not allow for opening a file, then editing it, even in a Microsoft format.

I did upload a Microsoft DOC file to test the program. While Word Web App did display the contents of the file, when I clicked "Edit in Browser" it first converted the file to its own unknown Word format, then gave me the error "This document cannot be opened because ..." (see Figure 3). Ultimately, it directed me to the Microsoft Office program—which was the original second option.



Figure 3. Something in this Microsoft Document file was not supported by Word Web App.

I guess that there may be a way around this, but I didn't bother to dig deeper. If it isn't easy or done in a familiar way, then I'm not interested. Microsoft is too wrapped up in the sale of Microsoft Office to truly take cloud computing seriously.

To do a quick comparison, I went to Google Docs. I was able to upload and edit documents in a number of formats, including that Microsoft DOC file. I was also able to import a CSV (Comma Separated Values) file into the Google Apps spreadsheet program. I was not able to do this in Window Live—unless I purchased Excel (part of Microsoft Office).

If you are already a Microsoft Office user, then this Windows Live Skydrive might be great. However, it seems to me that Microsoft is so busy protecting Office that they may just get run over by the future. Others may have more insight into the situation.

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

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Wally Wang's Apple Farm

Wally Wang's Apple Farm

“Reading Books on an iPad” by Wally Wang

If you want to do more than just read e-books, such as browse the Web, send and receive e-mail, or play games, then the iPad is far superior to an e-reader like the Kindle. Also, the medical sector is turning to the iPad; free movies from sites like Hulu help save money; Apple Stores vs. Microsoft Stores; the future of publishing; and a tip on using the Close All command via the Option key to close multiple windows.

Amazon's Kindle is a great e-book reader that's small, light, easy to read in bright light, and almost always available with a battery charge that can last for days. If all you want is an e-book reader, then you should be happy with a Kindle or a Barnes and Noble Nook, which can display color.

However, if you want to do more than just read e-books, such as browse the Web, send and receive e-mail, or play games, then the iPad is far superior. Although the Kindle is much better for reading in bright sunlight, the iPad is much better for reading in the dark.

Although you can buy e-books through the iBookStore, there are plenty of free e-books available in PDF format. If you download and install the free iBooks app for the iPhone or iPad, you can use it to read either e-books stored in the open standard EPUB format, or any files stored in the PDF format.

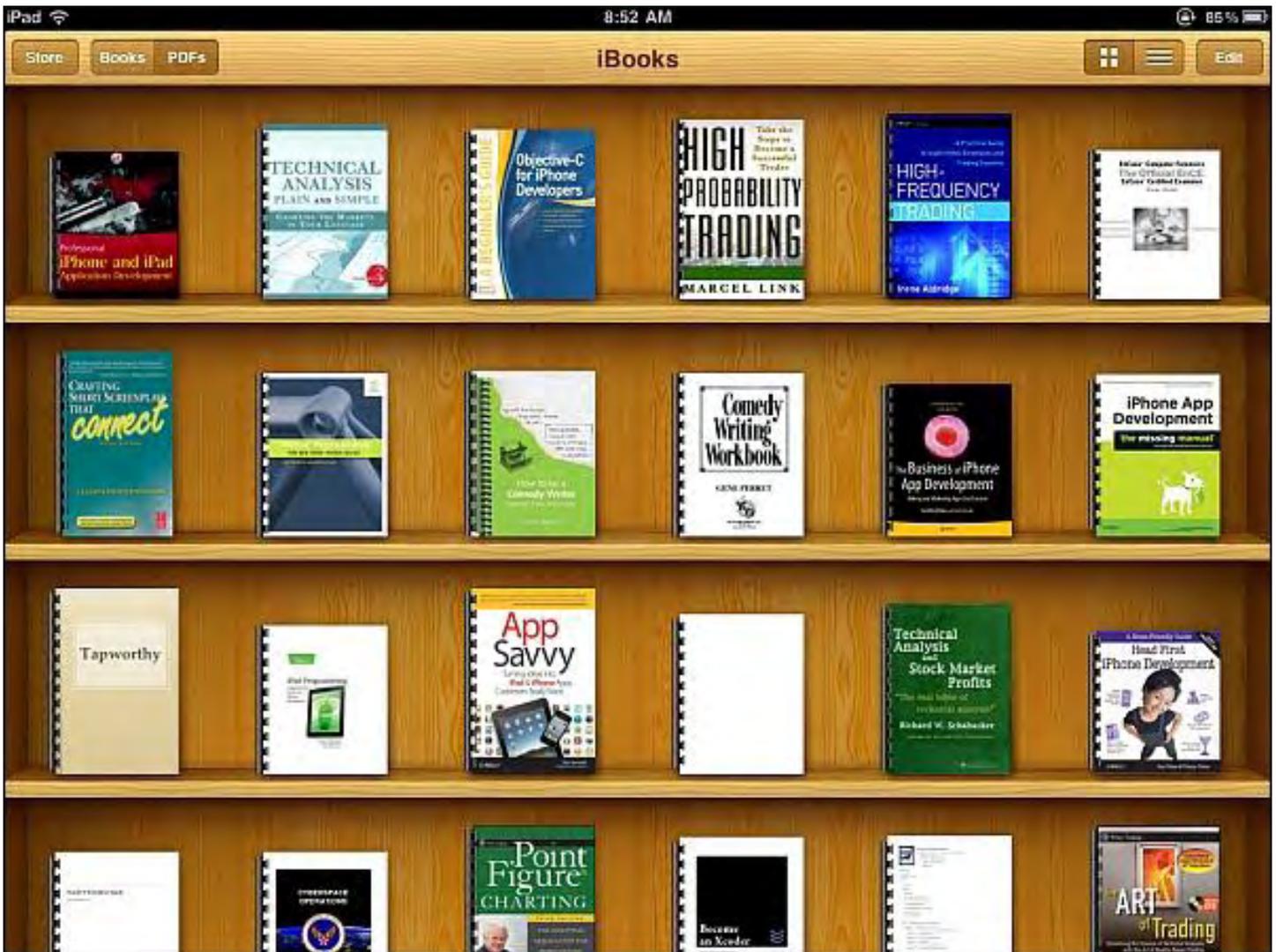


Figure 1. iBooks lets you choose between EPUB e-books and PDF files.

To get an EPUB or PDF file into your iPhone or iPad, you must drag the EPUB or PDF file into the Books category in the iTunes window. Then the next time you connect your iPhone or iPad to your computer, you can transfer any e-books from iTunes into your iPhone or iPad.

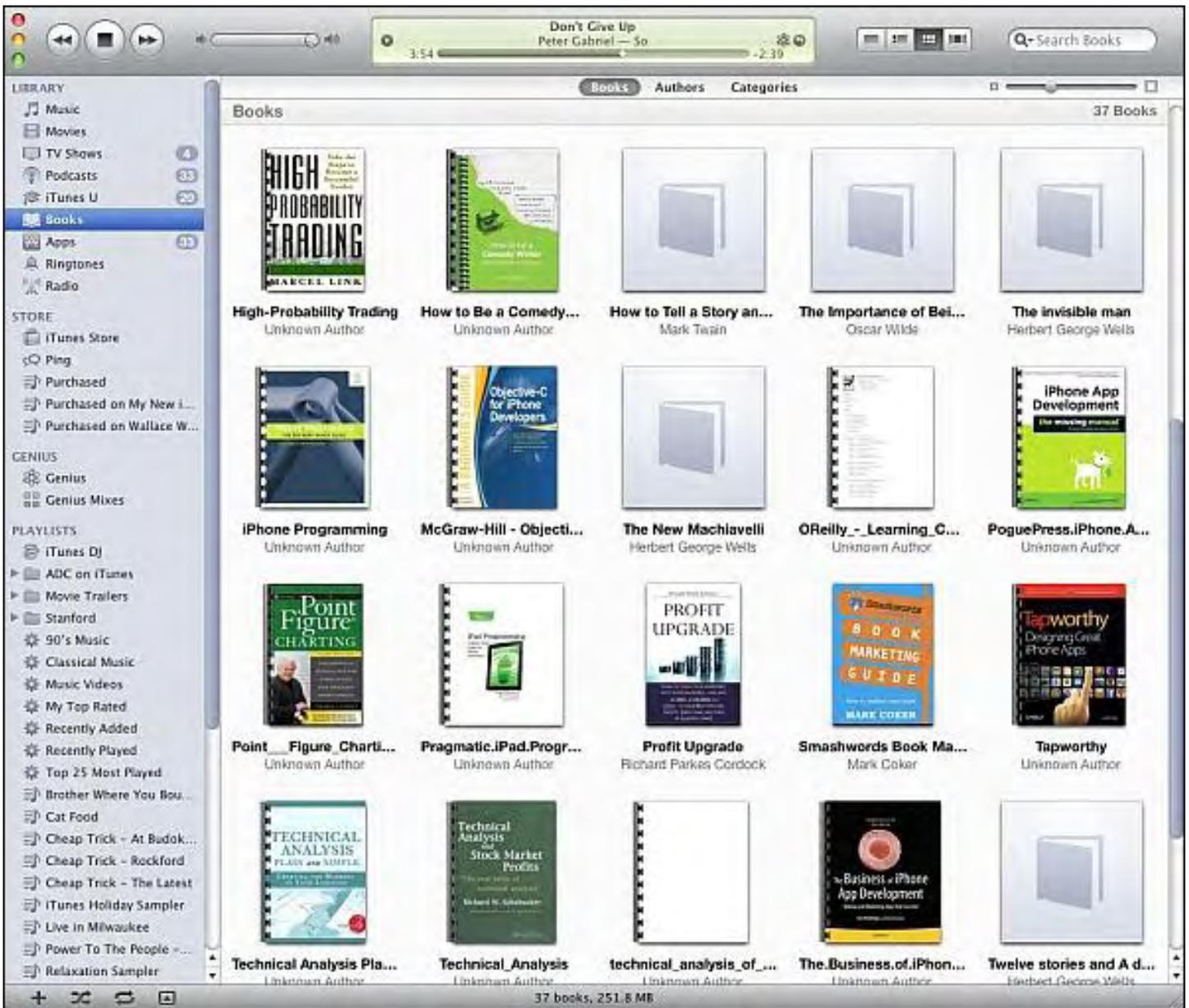


Figure 2. The Books category in iTunes lets you transfer e-books to your iPhone or iPad.

Reading e-books on the iPad offers several advantages over paper copies of a book. First, the iPad's screen makes it possible to read in complete darkness without requiring a reading lamp. Second, if the text appears too small, you can enlarge the text with a simple pinching motion with two fingers.

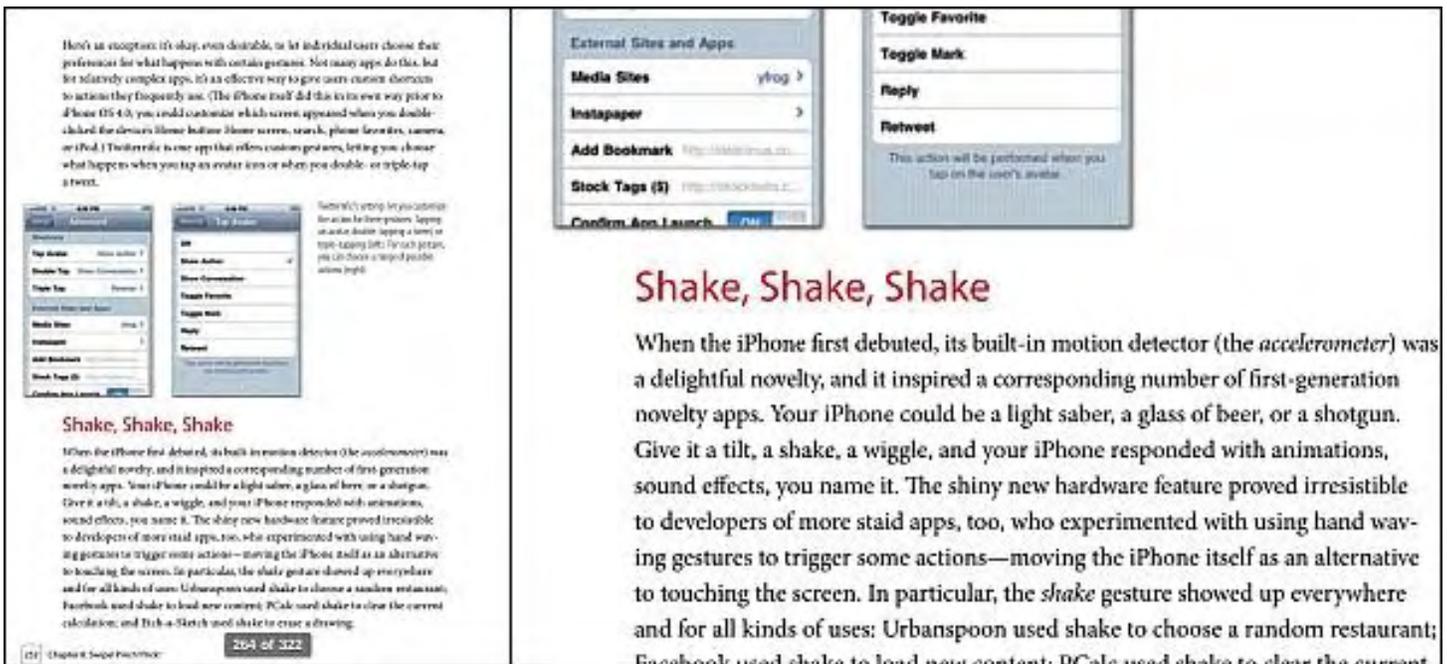


Figure 3. A pinching gesture lets you shrink or expand text to make it easier to see.

This ability to enlarge text means you're no longer limited to reading special large print books. Instead, your iPad can display all books in large print.

One problem with e-books is that they don't give you a visual way to determine how many more pages might remain in a chapter or in the rest of the book. To mimic this ability, the iPad can display all the pages of a PDF file as thumbnail images that you can scroll through to see your current place in the book. These thumbnail images also let you quickly jump to a new page, as well.

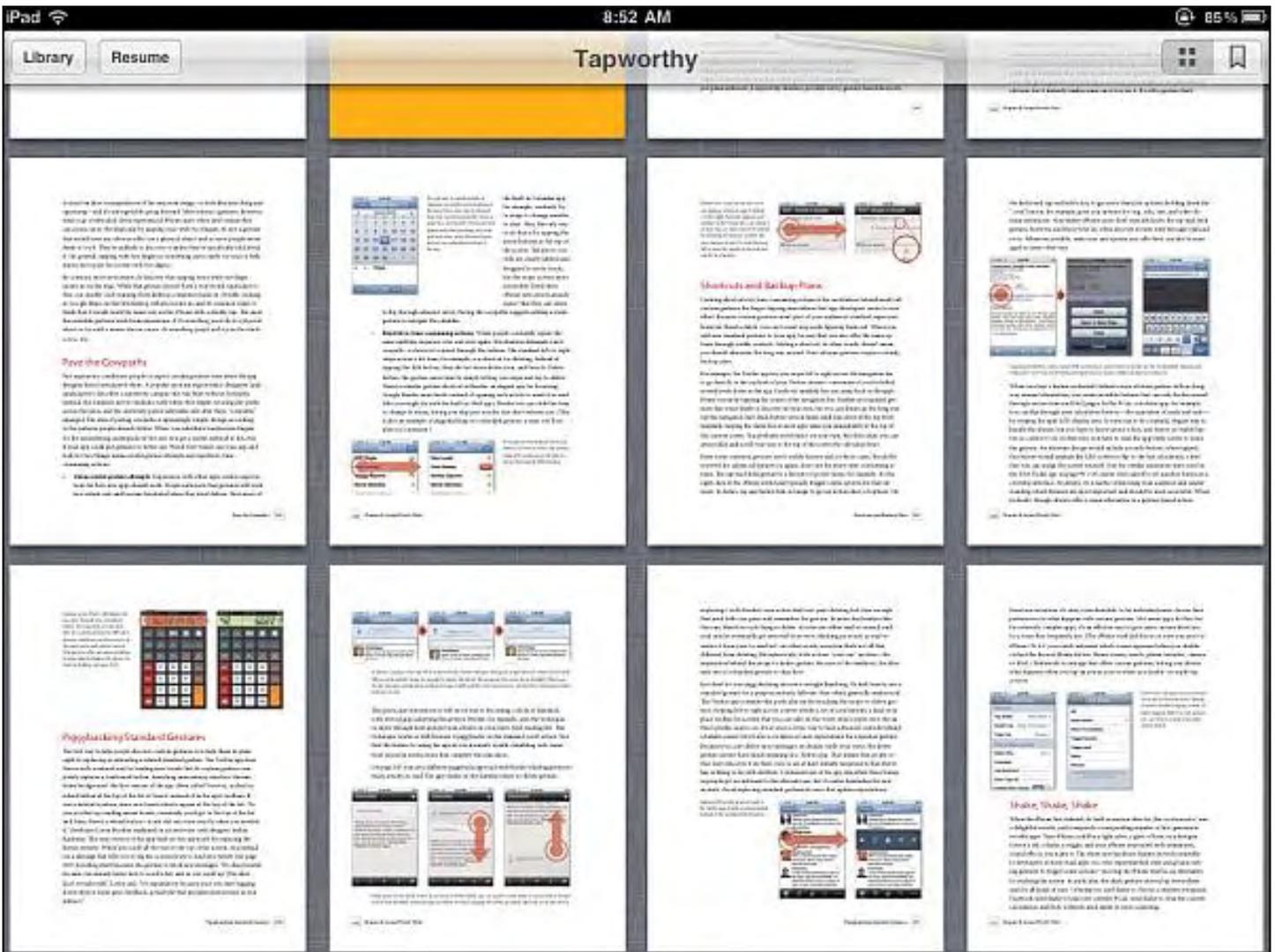


Figure 4. iBooks can display the pages of a PDF file as thumbnail images.

Just like a real book, you can place a bookmark on a page in a PDF file. Just tap the bookmark icon to mark a particular page.

Since e-books typically take up a few megabytes, you can cram a huge number of e-books into any iPad. By carrying a single iPad, you can literally have hundreds of books at your fingertips ready to read at any time.

Naturally the iPad can also play music and videos, but for real entertainment that you can enjoy in brief moments such as standing in line at the bank, reading e-books can be convenient and easy. If you already have a Kindle, download the free Kindle app for the iPad and you can transfer and read all your Kindle books on your iPad.

With free apps like iBooks or Kindle, you can take your iPad everywhere you go and read far more books than you might have done otherwise if you had to lug paper books around all the time. The future of books is digital. You may still prefer a real book occasionally, but once you take advantage of the extreme portability of e-books, you'll see that there can be room for both types of books in your life.

Medical Companies Using iPads

Many salespeople lug around laptops so they can give presentations. Unfortunately, waiting for a laptop to boot up can be annoying, and forcing someone to crowd around a laptop's screen can be awkward. That's why many companies

are arming their sales force with iPads, especially the medical-sector (chicagobreakingbusiness.com/2010/12/abbott-other-using-ipad-in-medical-sales.html).

"The iPad enables our sales employees to do a much better job of engaging in a really different way than we've done before," Mike Hedges, chief information officer of Medtronic, said in an interview.

Instead of waiting for a laptop to boot up, sales people can leave an iPad in sleep mode since its batteries last all day. Then, when a prospect appears, the salesperson can instantly turn the iPad on to give a presentation. Best of all, the prospect can hold the iPad and manipulate the presentation in a more engaging manner than passively watching a presentation on someone else's laptop.

Georgetown University has even started using iPads to train doctors in the operating room so they can view patient data, images and procedures (reviews.cnet.com/8301-31747_7-20024808-243.html). The iPad's small size and light weight allows it to be mounted within viewing distance of doctors and nurses in ways that the clumsier form factor of a laptop or netbook could never do with a keyboard permanently hinged to its screen.

"Georgetown University Hospital orthopedic surgeon Dr. Felasfa Wodajo, who has been using the device during surgeries to view patient images and records, as well as to 'review relevant anatomy to the point of care,' believes it's only a matter of time before iPads—or tools like it—become as indispensable in the OR as a scalpel."

"The iPad clearly has the potential to be very useful in the hospital and in the operating theater,' Wodajo writes (www.fiercehealthcare.com/story/ipads-or-one-surgeons-take/2010-12-09). 'Medicine is, by its nature, a mobile occupation and a powerful and flexible computing device will almost certainly play some role in our future everyday practices.'"

Obviously the medical community isn't embracing the iPad just because they want the shiniest new gadget on the market, but because they have found practical uses for the iPad to simplify and improve their everyday work. Most likely, the iPad isn't just practical for the medical community but for other industries as well. Chances are good that you could find a compelling reason to use an iPad in your line of work just by applying a little imagination and creativity, and by dumping any pre-conceived notions you might have against anything made by Apple.

In his book *Six Thinking Hats* (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0316178314?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0316178314), author Edward de Bono defines six different ways to think about any problem using different color hats to visualize the type of thinking required at that time.

Most people (especially anti-Apple critics) focus on what Edward de Bono calls "black hat thinking," where they criticize an idea and only look for flaws and problems. There's nothing wrong with looking for problems, but if that's the only thinking you can do, you'll miss out on opportunities because you simply won't or will refuse to see them.

Edward de Bono also emphasizes "yellow hat thinking," where you concentrate on finding something positive and optimistic about any idea. There's also "red hat thinking," where you can express your emotions about an idea without having to justify your reasons. "White hat thinking" focuses only on facts, while "green hat thinking" concentrates on new ideas. Finally, there's "blue hat thinking" that concentrates on understanding the overall picture of an idea.

By deliberately forcing yourself to think about any idea from multiple points of view, you can expand your thoughts and possibilities about any topic, which is why so many people from diverse backgrounds have embraced the iPad as a useful tool. Limiting yourself to strictly criticism ("black hat thinking") is one way to think, but never the only way to think, which is nearly impossible to teach someone who insists on only concentrating on flaws and problems without opening their eyes to other possibilities.

Free Movies

Every week, Hollywood rushes a new batch of movies that everyone can pay \$7 a ticket and up to see. In each week, there are very few movies worth the price and many more that should never have been made in the first place. If you'd prefer not wasting your money seeing mediocre movies, do something different and start watching movies for free at sites like Hulu (www.hulu.com) and Crackle (www.crackle.com).

Both sites offer a large film library of pure garbage, usually centered around cheap horror flicks or raunchy sex comedies. However, both sites occasionally offer first-rate films for a limited time, so you have to keep checking the sites periodically to catch a good movie you might have missed.

In the past few months, I've seen "Tootsie," "Quiz Show," "His Girl Friday," "On the Waterfront," "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," "Paper Moon," "The Fisher King," "Glory" and "La Femme Nikita," which are all older films that still tell an interesting, compelling story without the use of 3-D, computer generated special effects, or scantily clad actresses who can't act (think Megan Fox).

Watching older movies for free can save you money on rentals or movie tickets while also letting you see influential movies that are still far superior to the latest slickly packaged garbage that Hollywood pumps out far too often.

If you enjoy watching movies, then spend some time browsing through Crackle or Hulu on a regular basis. Just because a movie is free and several years old doesn't mean that it isn't worth watching. After all, people still watch Shakespeare's plays, and look how old those stories are compared to the latest Hollywood movie based on another video game, children's book, comic book, TV show, or remake of another movie.

Apple Stores vs. Microsoft Stores

Microsoft is busily expanding its retail Microsoft Stores at every mall that has an Apple Store. After a recent visit to both the Apple and Microsoft Store in San Diego, I'm not quite sure what Microsoft hopes to accomplish trying to mimic Apple.

At the Apple Store, crowds of people were busy trying the iPad, MacBook Air, MacBook Pro and iMac computers scattered around the store. Behind a roped off section, an Apple employee guarded a stack of iPad and MacBook Air boxes. People were buying products and talking to nearly every employee.

A few stores down at the Microsoft Store, which looks nearly identical to the Apple Store, activity was virtually non-existent. Most Microsoft Store employees were standing around (dressed in nearly identical T-shirt designs as Apple Store employees) waiting for someone to show up, and the only items that people seemed interested in were the Xboxes where you could play a game for free.

The Microsoft Store did display a Microsoft Surface table, which ran a multiplayer game called Galactic Alliance (also available on the iPad). While the game was fun and interesting, the Microsoft Surface's sheer bulk and high price tag (\$12,000) makes it impractical for most people to buy and use. With so few Microsoft Surface users around, it's not hard to see why so few developers would want to spend their time creating programs for a minuscule Microsoft Surface market.

In another lonely corner of the Microsoft Store sat tables full of Windows Phone 7 phones. Nobody was near those tables, and most of the computer tables were also empty except for a few people using an occasional laptop.

If you live near a high-end shopping mall with both an Apple Store and a Microsoft Store, go visit both of them during

this holiday season to see for yourself which store has the most people and which products seem the most popular. Microsoft definitely has a hit with its Xbox motion detection controller, Kinect, but judging from the lack of enthusiasm for their other products, it seems like Microsoft would have more success if they just sold Xbox consoles, games and accessories.

On the other hand, the Apple Store seemed to have plenty of people interested in buying iPhones, iPads, MacBook Airs, MacBook Pros, iMacs and iPods. The contrast is startling. By placing Microsoft Stores so close to Apple Stores, Microsoft has made it easy for people to see the stark difference in the public's enthusiasm for both company's products. The future of computing is clear is you're just willing to look and accept the evidence right before your own eyes.

The Future of Publishing

Printed materials are too expensive to make, bind, print and distribute. Why get limited, day-old information from a newspaper when you can get more in-depth news as it occurs directly off the Internet?

While newspapers are sinking, magazines are next and it's only a matter of time before books die as well. Today's e-books offer minor advantages over their printed counterparts, but for a hint of the future, look at this interactive e-book for the iPad that displays Aesop's Fables (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pqk2yiUfJE).

Besides displaying text, this e-book also offers audio (like an audio book) plus the ability to record your own voice to read and play back so a parent can record their own voices reciting a story and a child can hear that person's voice instead of the normal narrator. Instead of being locked into the linear structure of printed and bound pages, this e-book lets people spin a wheel to determine which fable to read next.

For another example of interactivity in an e-book, watch this video of Alice in Wonderland on the iPad (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gew68Qj5kxw&NR=1). Readers can tilt the iPad and make the illustrations move or change shape so rather than be passive observers of the story, they can become active participants.

Interactivity, animation and audio are the future e-book models. The question is how can we apply these same principles to non-fiction books and novels. Today's books with static pictures and bound pages will seem so restrictive compared to the freedom of tomorrow's e-books that printed books will likely become collector's items that will be treasured as antiques one day.

The iPad may not become the primary medium for distributing e-books in the future, but it will definitely play a large role in shaping the direction of e-books for tomorrow. This can either be an exciting time to take advantage of new opportunities, or a time to mourn the fading importance of paper and try to hold back progress by discouraging others to adapt a new way of getting information. Just watch the death throes of the newspaper industry to see where magazine and book publishing is heading, and it should be an easy choice to decide where you want to be.

* * *

If you have multiple windows open within Pages, you can close each window individually, or just take the shortcut and hold down the Option key. Now click on the File menu and you'll see a Close All command.

Holding down the Option key and clicking on the File menu will often display a Close All command, a Save All command, or nothing different at all. The next time you're using your favorite Macintosh program, hold down the Option key and click the File menu to see if any new commands magically seem to appear.

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 particples with Jack Dunning and go to the gym to pump iron with Dan Gookin.

Wally is responsible for the following books:

Microsoft Office 2010 for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470489987?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470489987),
Beginning Programming for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702),
Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541),
Breaking Into Acting for Dummies with Larry Garrison (www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468),
Steal This Computer Book 4.0 (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050),
My New Mac (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271646?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271646),
My New iPhone (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271956?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271956),
My New iPad (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593272758?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593272758),
Strategic Entrepreneurism with Jon Fisher and Gerald Fisher (www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894),
How to Live With a Cat (When You Really Don't Want To) (www.smashwords.com/books/view/18896).

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

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

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Rob, The Computer Tutor

Rob, The Computer Tutor: Technology Solutions “OpenOffice Draw” by Rob Spahitz

This week we wrap up our investigation of the Draw tool from OpenOffice. Draw lets you create and manipulate images.

This week we wrap up our investigation of the Draw tool from OpenOffice. Draw lets you create and manipulate images. As a reminder, you can download the free OpenOffice applications from www.OpenOffice.org

Pens, Markers and Mice

When you think of drawing, what comes to mind? Before the computer, you probably thought about paper or canvas and pens, pencils, markers, crayons, paint and maybe chalk. With the computer, you've probably come to realize that there are tools out there to make it feel like you are still using these tools. They often even change the mouse pointer to look like pencils or paintbrushes.

OK, and what types of things do you hope to create with this tool? In those old days (and maybe still today) you were probably looking to create a little piece of art, even if it was just intended to show someone a visual representation of what's in your head (like a bird or flower or collection of streets on a map).

These days, many of the computerized drawing tools consist of two types of tools. One is a bitmap-based tool, for creating fixed pictures (like drawings but also photographs); the other is a vector-based tool, for creating things that can be scaled larger or smaller without losing the original picture (since these are really mathematical formulas used to create a picture).

The big tool in the industry is Adobe Photoshop. This tool has all the latest features to allow professionals to make great pieces of art with minimal effort. Of course, you pay a lot of money for this privilege. And there are others. Corel Draw and Painter are other high-end tools for this. And, of course, on the Windows side, when you install this O/S you get Microsoft Paint, which is a barely adequate tool for handling bitmap pictures.

As we previously saw with things like Microsoft Office, there is a movement in the industry to offer very similar features in a free "open source" version. On the paint/draw side, a big one is GIMP. However, since the OpenOffice product has one built in called Draw, we'll explore that. And as a reminder, I have never worked with this tool before but have done some basic work with many of the competitors so I'll share my successes and pains.

And the Winner Is...It's a Draw

When you first launch the Draw tool, aside from some common menus and tool bars, you see two panels as seen in Figure 1.

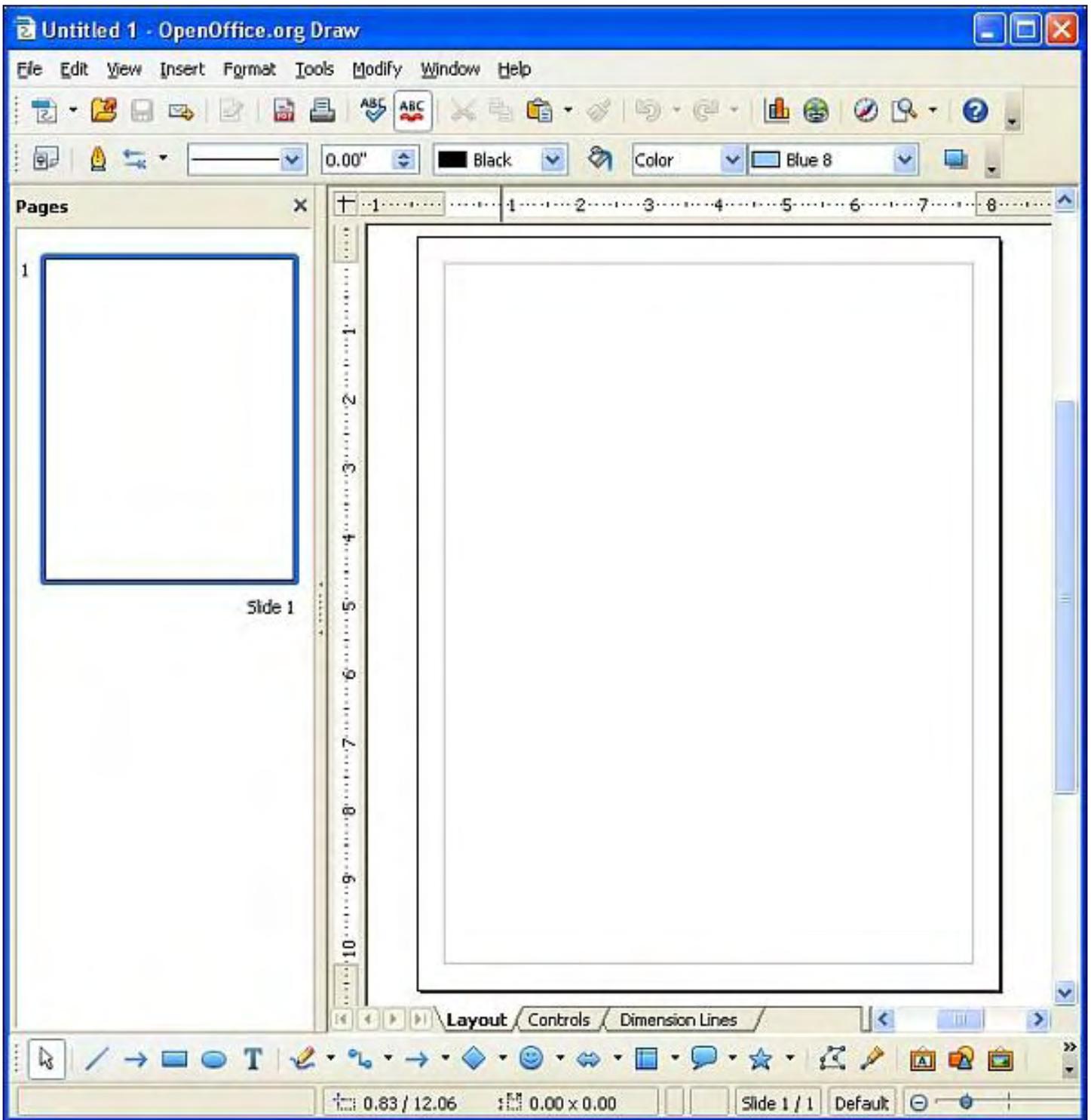


Figure 1. Draw's new File.

Apparently you can create several pages so you see a smaller version on the left, similar to a PowerPoint-like file. On the right you see the design page with rules along the left and top. On the bottom you see a few tabs. And below that you see another toolbar with a bunch of shapes.

Aside from this, I also see a small floating toolbar showing a collection of rectangles (some filled, some framed, some as squares and some with pointed and rounded corners).

What eventually strikes me is that there's a little crooked line on the bottom toolbar next to a pencil. It has little circles

on the ends and when I hover over it a tool tip box appears and says "Connector." Hmm....I've seen this before in a tool from Microsoft called Visio. For those not familiar with that, Visio is a tool to let you create flowcharts. Basically, this lets you explain the flow of a process by putting words inside various shaped boxes (rectangles, circles, diamonds) connected by lines (and arrows) to show how the pieces flow. This could be an interesting investigation, but I'm here to look at pictures today.

OK, let me start by looking at things that I do for my articles. I have two ways that I commonly capture screen shots. One is to use the common Alt-PrintScreen to capture the current window. Then I open an old version of PaintShop Pro to save the image as a bitmap. Finally, I insert it into my document as a link. The other way is to use a tool I created using VB.Net to capture a rectangular area of the screen. I then save that and load it into my document. If I were on a newer version of Windows (Vista or Windows 7), I'd use the great clipping tool that comes with it.

So can this tool help me to do things like capture part of the screen or at least crop out parts of a picture that I don't want? As I look through the menus I see nothing to get a screen shot. But in fairness, I don't think I've seen that in any other general-purpose drawing tool either.

So let me see about the crop feature. Alt-PrintScreen and paste into the design area seems to paste the application into the design area, centered. The insertion is automatically selected and a new toolbar appears. This includes an icon with scissors on a piece of paper that tells me that it does "Crop Picture," as seen in Figure 2, circled in red.

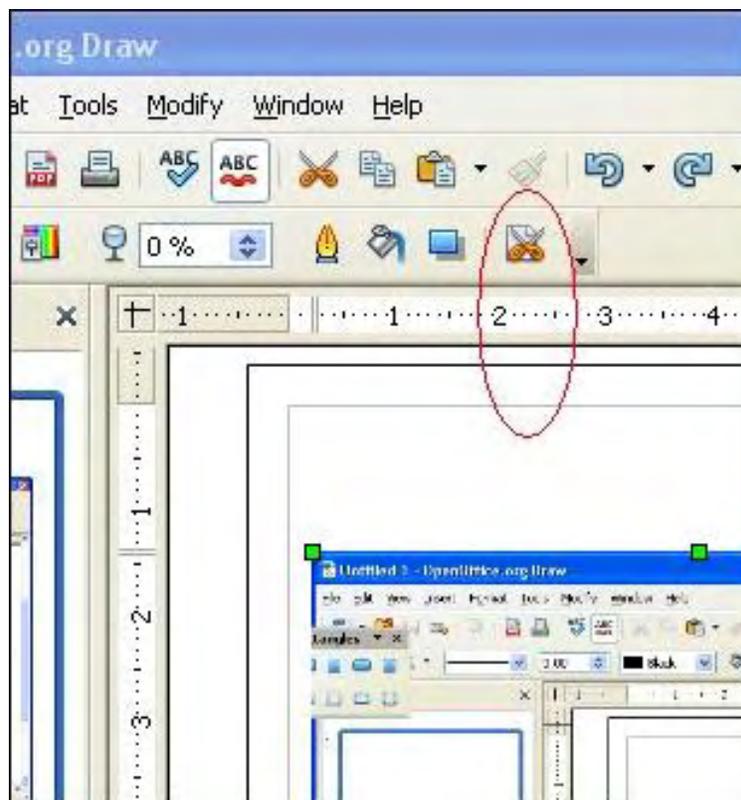


Figure 2. Image Crop Tool.

By selecting this tool, the selection markers around the image change from little green boxes into larger gray boxes. I can drag any of these and rather than resizing the image, it hides parts of the image as though I cut them off with scissors. A sample with the right and bottom cropped appears in Figure 3.

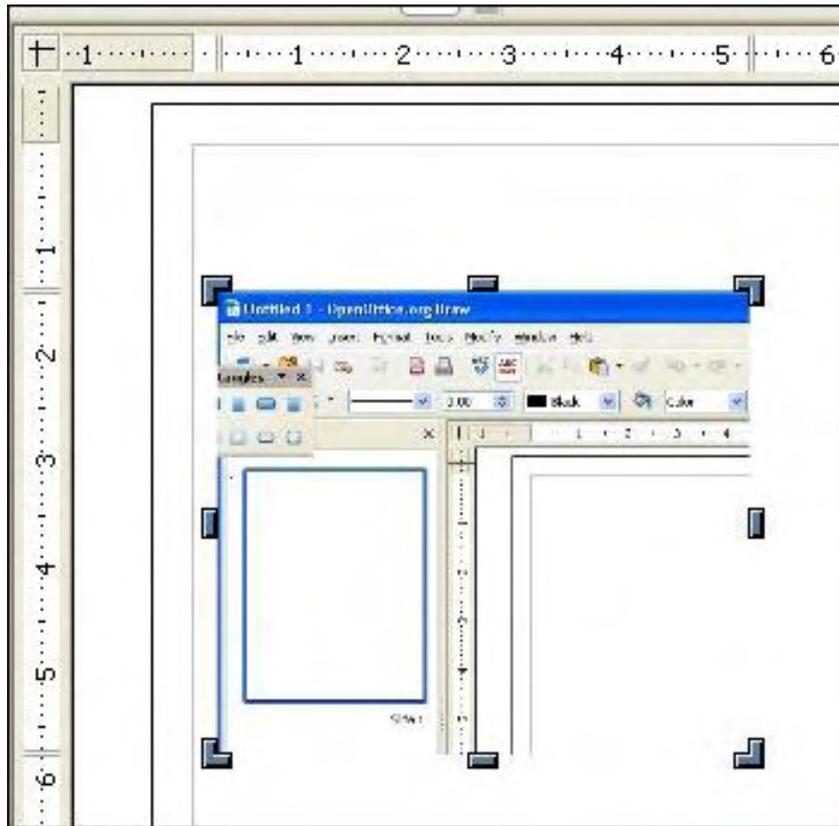


Figure 3. Cropped Image.

Shaping

So far so good. Now I'd like to add a red circle to show off things like that in the previous figure above.

I figured that the oval in the bottom toolbar might do the trick. However, when I did this with the image selected, it ignored the oval and simply let me drag the image. (Ctrl-Z/Undo nicely reset that, like in many other applications.)

OK, so maybe I need to de-select the image first. Click on the page background and try again. This time I get a circle overlaying the image as I was hoping. However, it's filled in with blue. So how do I change that? Well, that floating toolbar with rectangles just kept staring at me like it wanted me to try it. By the way, part of that float-bar appears in the top left corner of the selected object in Figure 3.

Let me try to use one of those rectangles and see if it can apply to the oval. No such luck. Instead it seems to collapse the toolbar to show nothing. And with a little experimentation, I think that's a bug in the application.

How else can I change this oval to clear the fill color? How about right-click? Ah, there's a menu there, as seen in Figure 4.

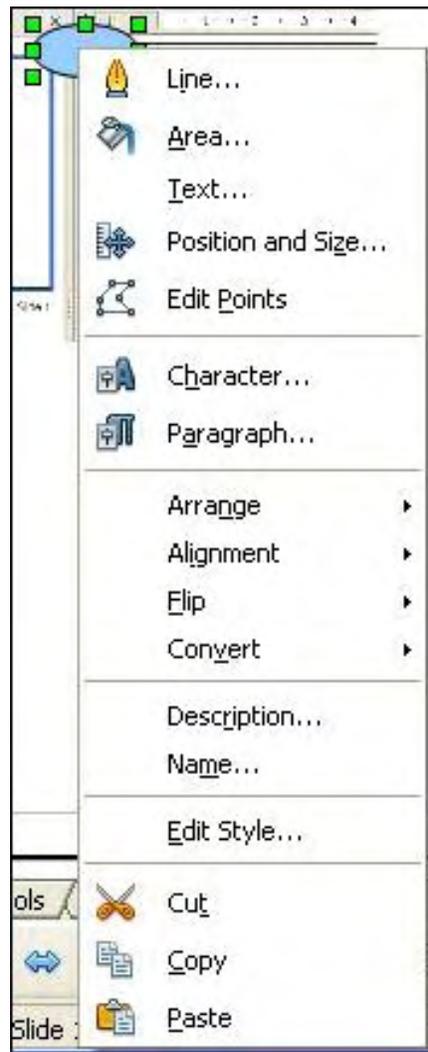


Figure 4. Shape Right-Click Menu.

One of those options is Area. That seems to do it. As seen in Figure 5, I can change the color or change it to no color.

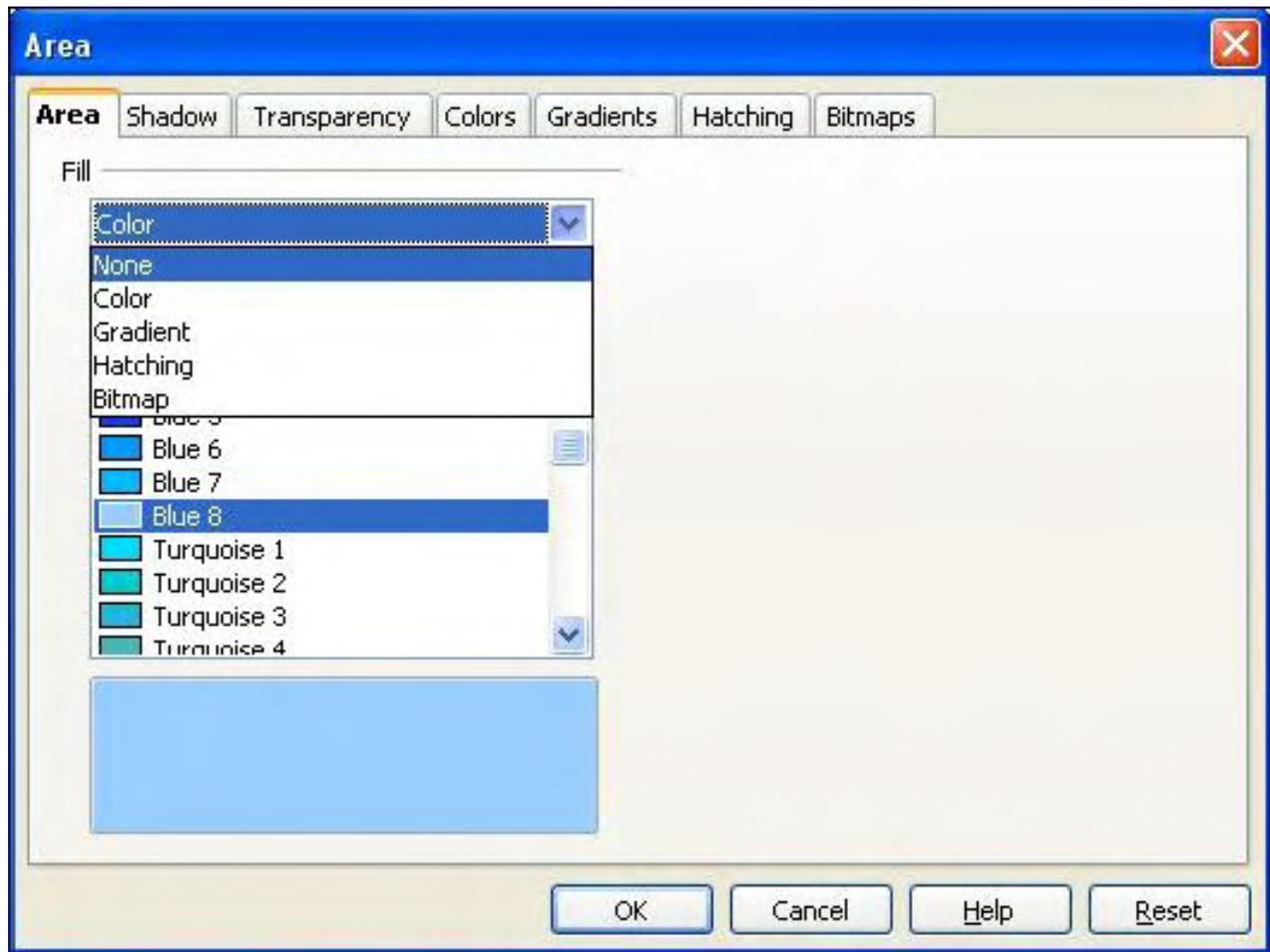


Figure 5. Shape Color Selector.

Similar to the fill, I can adjust the color and thickness with the Line option in the menu. Changing to Light red and a width of 0.02 inches seems to handle it.

All of that seemed a bit awkward, but maybe that's not really what this tool is about.

Saving

Let's see what I get when I go to save. As seen in Figure 6, you don't get the traditional file formats.

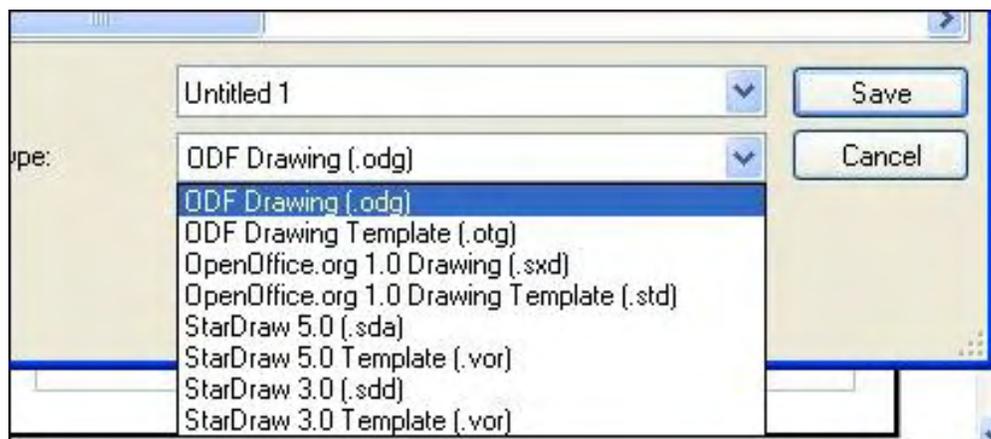


Figure 6. Draw's Save Options.

You can save this as an ODF/odg file, which seems to be the current OpenOffice file format for this tool. You can save it as an sxd file, which seems to be an older version. And you can save it as StarDraw, which I've never seen before.

Why can't you save as a BMP or GIF or JPEG? I think that the answer is that same as when you save a Photoshop file. Once you save as that format, you cannot go back and manipulate the different pieces since they have been "flattened" into a simple image. If we save and come back later, we can still move that red oval to a new location.

So how do I turn it into a bitmap? I guessed that there's an Export option. Sure enough, as seen in Figure 7, you can convert this into any of several common image formats.

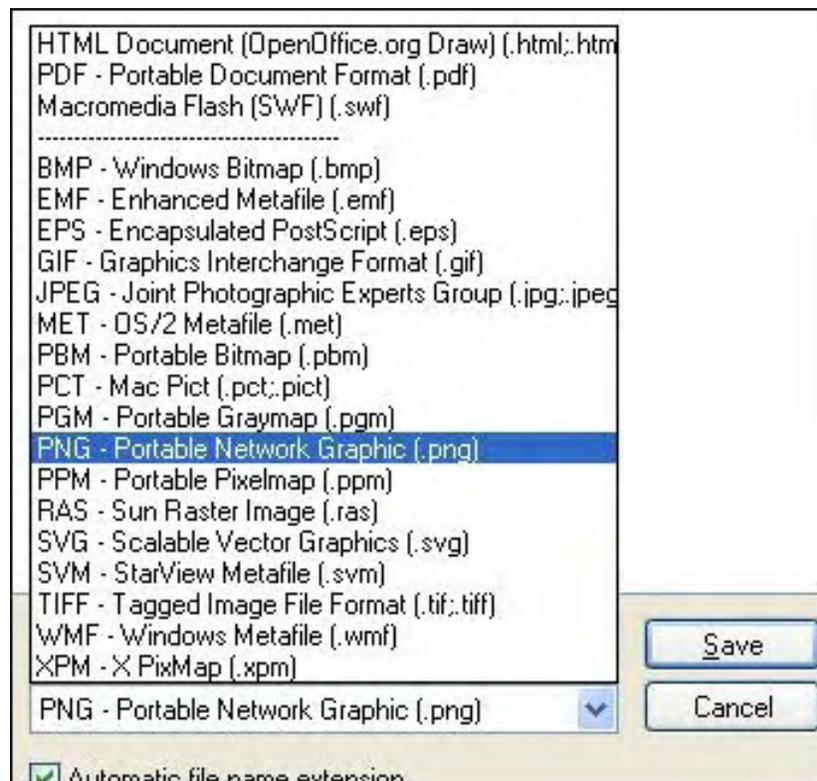


Figure 7. Draw's Export Options.

The default is PNG. This is a non-proprietary format created to compete with GIF format, which apparently had some copyright issues years ago and spawned this non-copyrighted version.

I exported as a BMP and loaded it into Paint Shop Pro (PSP). It allowed me to define a color depth for the export (1-bit, 4-bit grayscale, 4-bit color, 8-bit and 24-bit, with a few variations). I could also change the resolution or size of the resulting image. I chose the defaults. The resulting file created a perfect bitmap, able to load into my version of PSP. That's good because I've noticed that there are newer versions that aren't compatible with my version (from 1995)!

Next week, I'll explore a few more things with this Draw tool and summarize the entire suite of OpenOffice applications.

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.

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dog-gone great time.



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edge **W O R D** **“”** EdgeWord: A Note from the Publisher

by Jack Dunning

The news about WikiLeaks can give you pause (or, at least, should make you pause). It's not just the fact that so much classified data was released on the Web, but how easily it was obtained. Without commenting on the content or effects of this massive Web dump there are implications that concern all of us and today's direction in computing—in particular "cloud computing." Putting everything on the Web and working over the Internet is being touted as the solution which will put Microsoft out of business and create the market which will dominate technology for the coming decades. There are predictions that there will be a regressive move toward thin client terminals getting all their applications and data over the Internet. Eventually, the sole computer with independent software and file structures will be obsolete.

While this concept may be overblown, the trend certainly does appear to be moving in the direction of the Cloud. For example, bureaucrats dream of the day when all medical records (for everyone) will be available online. We are reassured that there will be plenty of security to protect our privacy, and this may be true when accessing data over the Internet. But what will protect us from the lone individual with a thumb drive who just happens to have access to the computers and servers holding all of this information? The real problem may not be electronic security, but rather the malicious or larcenous employee who decides it's time to harvest some data. There is no way to absolutely protect your data (and thereby your privacy) from the person with access, ability and bad intentions. Plus, if the data is merely copied to a thumb drive, no one may know that the information has ever been stolen.

Based upon what they put on their Facebook pages, many people do not have much to hide. But when you consider the sheer volumes planned for storage in data centers (medical records, financial data, etc.), there will be no one who is not affected. As the monster cloud grows, our personal information will be sucked in as if feeding an insatiable, ravenous blob. Who knows how it will be used? The blob becomes our Big Brother, only this Goliath is not controlled by anyone—not even the government.

While I do like how the Internet connects us, there is something comforting in owning a self-contained computer—a machine which can operate without the requirement of Internet access. A laptop can be taken into the woods running on batteries, continuing to help us do most of our work without the assistance of cyberspace. Of course, there would be no Skype, Netflix, Facebook, or online auctions, but why would you need those in the woods? For that it would be better to stay home.

I see myself being dragged into the Cloud bit by bit. It's inevitable. It is hard to conceive being without the Internet for so many of the routine daily tasks. I know that I leave a data trail and a certain amount of myself on the Internet. I can accept that. But what happens when my personal data—along with that of billions of other people—gets dumped on a WikiLeaks type site all because of someone who happens to carry a thumb drive in his pocket.

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

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Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

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

Using Firefox and IE

[Regarding the December 3 Digital Dave column:]

For Joe in San Diego who needs both Firefox and IE, install an add-in to Firefox called IE View. It allows you to right-click on a Web page in Firefox and have it open in IE. Perfect for those improperly coded pages.

-Cathy, Denver, CO

In order to access IE only Web sites (ones that fail to comply with World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards) I use the Firefox Add-on, User Agent Switcher. When I encounter a Web site the brings me to a dead-end page that says I must use IE, I go back to the previous page and set my user agent to IE, then proceed. This has worked for every site that I have tried.

-Dennis, San Diego, CA

Suitable Writing

[Regarding the November 19 EdgeWord: A Note from the Publisher column:]

"I would like to see *ComputerEdge* become a reflection of the readers. We will publish anything that is relevant and well-written." I fully agree. IMHO, an easy way to tell whether an author is suitable (relevant) is to see if the resume includes statements like "writer of nonfiction and fiction." In other words they like to write for the sake of writing but don't care whether or not it provides useful information. The utility is secondary. Putting words in print is primary, which should not be the goal of *ComputerEdge*. I struggle to read posts by people for whom English is not their native language because of the content. It is often the case that well-written content often masquerades as relevant when it's not. Remember Omni and Discover magazines? The problem with Omni was that people felt ripped off paying for the half of the content that was irrelevant to them.

-Ron Cerrato

Sparking a Light for Backup

[Regarding the June 20 Windows Vista Tips and Tricks column:]

Jack, I really enjoyed your article on backing up. Got me fired up, I have an extra computer with XP which I can use as a remote without the sync control. My new laptop with Windows Enterprise provides the VPN in Windows Sync Center. Cool, I'm two for two, can I get a router to hook up the XP to the Internet? The laptop has wireless AT&T, I also have a

docking station which I may be able to hook up the XP. I'm thinking I might have a router in the dock station, I assume they are a router.

Interesting, I didn't know or understand much about routers, much less putting together a back-up system. To be able to access remotely gets me excited and confident that I can do it. For some reason your article sparked a light and allowed me to comprehend. An excellent article, really.

I remember when *The Byte Buyer* first started to circulate. It was the thinnest magazine around. Strange how we remember some things.

-Hector

Uninstall Reinstall the Program

[Regarding the December 3 Windows Tips and Tricks column:]

In trying to fix problem software, if I find I must uninstall a program before the reinstalling of it, my habit would be to cycle the power between the uninstall and the reinstall. Even if the uninstaller does not ask for the power cycle.

-Chuck, Broomfield, CO

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.

Send mail to ceeditor@computoredge.com with questions about editorial content.

Send mail to cwebmaster@computoredge.com with questions or comments about this Web site.

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