

Technology Corner

By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

Some Great Utilities for Microsoft Windows

In spite of all the robust features of Microsoft Windows, now in its XP Version, there are several features that are lacking. Fortunately, due in large part to the efforts of independent programmers and software developers, a variety of affordable utilities have been developed over the years that can make one's experience with Windows a whole lot more enjoyable and productive.

In this column, I will attempt to cover several of these utilities in the hopes that this information will at least peak your interest; perhaps you will look into some of them further and even give a few of them a try. Please note that I have not personally tried all of these, although I have used or tested a fair number of them. These utilities will include some that are designed to enhance your Internet online experience and help you better manage your files and hard drives.

Internet–Browser Add-ons

In spite of the recent growth in browser alternatives to Internet Explorer due to the introduction of products such as Firefox and Opera, all browsers have their limits. What you need to look for are third-party tools that can work in tandem with and as an addition to your favorite browser.

One of the biggest hassles is the ability to browse the results of a browser search. If you are a user of Internet Explorer, let **Browster (beta)** come to your rescue (www.browster.com). This program is a free download that integrates with IE and makes reviewing much easier. Once you have your search results, an identifying icon appears next to each result. If you mouse over one of those icons, the program previews the site. The program can even preview links on a search page.

For those of you who want to know when new information is posted on your favorite site, try **Coper-**



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nic Tracker 1.1 (\$49.95) (www.copernic.com). This program can be set to check on a given page as often as the user likes and even to look for certain kinds of changes. Notification of changes is provided either by pop-up or by e-mail.

Here is the bane of all browser users, how to better organize your bookmarks. Here, there is a solution that works with all the popular browsers. It is called **Bookmark Buddy 3.3** (\$29.95) (www.bookmarkbuddy.net). This program organizes bookmarks in a separate standalone window. It lets you encrypt, annotate, sort, rate and search them using key words. It even tells you which sites you have visited recently and most often. It also can save and encrypt log-on passwords.

Have you ever had problems organizing your favorites? If so, you might want to give **WebPicker 2.0** (\$24.95) (www.superlogix.net) a try. When you find a Web page you want to keep, all you do is right-click and select the program. You then can save the page in a personal repository in the WebPicker library. By using a separate window, you can brows that library, organize things to your liking and even edit pages.

For those of you who have failing eyesight like me, **Web Eyes 2.2** (\$25.95) (www.ionwebeyes.com) might be just the thing. This program can instantly adjust the text size (from 4 to 144 points) and font for any Web site. It also allows you to read a Web site like a book instead of scrolling down, and it can even remove graphics from a page.

Internet–Browser Toolbars

Here, we are talking about a variety of toolbars that integrate with your browser and assist you in quickly performing searches over multiple search platforms.

One of my favorites—and still one of the best—is the **Google** toolbar (toolbar.google.com). Not only is there a version for IE, Netscape and Firefox, but it is free. Its biggest feature is the small search window that becomes part of your browser toolbar (no more having to log onto the Google home page). In addition, the program comes with a very handy pop-up blocker and a feature that automatically fills out forms when doing online shopping. The newest features include a spell checker for filled-in Web forms, a word translator to translate English into other languages and an autolink feature that turns street addresses into links to online maps.

Ask Jeeves also has a toolbar (www.ask.com/toolbar) that offers fast access to Jeeves search results. It

also can search for local weather reports and you can zoom in on the active page.

Even **MSN** has a toolbar (toolbar.msn.com) that connects to its own search system. This includes access to answers from Encarta and the ability to solve calculations. It also can search for multimedia files and locate phone numbers in the white or yellow pages.

Yahoo's toolbar distinguishes itself by coming with an anti-spyware component (except in the Firefox version) that is based on PestPatrol's technology (companion.yahoo.com). It does the searches that MSN does plus local weather and movies. You can customize the toolbar, but only by signing onto Yahoo.

An alternative is to use a metasearch toolbar that gives you the search capacity of five or 10 of these search tools all in one. One of these is **Clutsy Toolbar (beta)** (www.clutsy.com). Another is **Copernic Meta 1.5** (www.copernic.com). A third is the **Dogpile** toolbar (www.dogpile.com). If you want to stretch your site visit limits a little, try the **Advanced Searchbar** toolbar which will allow you to search 90 engines, albeit one at a time, and comes with many bonus features (www.advancedsearchbar.com). Even Websters has a toolbar called **Merriam-Webster Online Toolbar** (www.m-w.com/toolbar) that gives you fast access to their dictionary, thesaurus and word of the day.

Internet–Passwords and Filling out Forms

No matter how much we cruise the Web, it seems as if there is no end to the number of different user IDs and passwords we have to remember. This is made even more difficult by the fact that many of the sites we visit are only visited by us once or twice a year, if that, making it all that more difficult to remember these.

Come to the rescue is a program called **Login King** (\$23.95) (www.loginking.com). This program is one of the newest password managers, and it has received high marks from reviewers so far. Not only is it very intuitive, but it takes password management to a new level. One particularly nice feature is the One-Click Logins list which almost acts like a favorites list when you need to jump from one location to another. It can be installed as a stand alone or a part of the IE toolbar. You can save user IDs and passwords as you visit and log onto a given site or you can create them as you go. Importantly, you can easily back up all your saved logons.

RoboForm Pro 6.3 is another option (\$29.99) (www.roboform.com). Not only does it operate similarly to

Login King, but it also can fill out online forms, which greatly simplifies frequent online shopping. It also has an add-on called Pass2Go that will allow you to store program data on a USB key drive. A free version is available that is limited to 10 logons.

A third option is **Account Logon 2.5** (\$24.95) (www.accountlogon.com). While it functions a lot like Login King, it does not add itself to the IE toolbar. It also does not automate the collection of the login data.

Internet–Trace Removers

Many Internet users do not realize that their browser catches or saves Web pages as they visit them in order to speed up repeat visits to the same page. It also keeps track of your browsing history in order to help you retrace online steps and fill in URLs faster as they are typed. The history also remembers all the documents you have opened and the terms you have searched for. The problem with all of this is that, while these convenience functions are nice to have, they are quickly eroding your privacy, as anyone with access to this information on your PC can view this data and make other than good use out of it. They can even do this remotely without your even knowing it is happening.

What is one to do? You might consider one of the following products. They all work under Windows 98 and up and will clean up browser history for IE and at least one other browser. They all will wipe out the browser cache, history and cookies, as well as those pesky Windows temporary folders, files in the Recycle Bin and recently used lists for the Run and Search commands.

The most popular product is the **Acronis Privacy Expert Suite 8.0** (\$29.99) (www.acronis.com). In addition to the usual tricks, it cleans up browser traces and comes with a slick DriveCleanser module that can clean disks using every option you can think of.

CyberScrub Privacy Suite 4.0 (\$49.95) (www.cyberscrub.com) is a noticeably improved product in its current Version 4.0. Not only does it handle most of the popular browsers, but it will also do cleanup work on several popular e-mail programs.

R-Wipe & Clean 5.0 (\$28.99) (www.r-tt.com) is one of the best at cleaning up Windows traces. You can also define your own wipe list. It too handles all the popular browsers. As added bonuses, it eliminates invalid desktop shortcuts and comes with a pop-up blocker.

TracksCleaner 3.0 (\$19.95) (www.tenebril.com) cleans fewer browsers than most, but it lets you protect specific items in cache, history and cookies. It is good at doing clean wipes of disk space. As program updates are released, you can freely download them.

Window Washer 6.0 (\$29.95) (www.webroot.com) is another popular program. It handles over 450 third-party applications and all the popular browsers. It can also manage a number of the popular e-mail programs. You can even wipe an entire drive with this product on any computer.

Desktop Organizers

You say that you do not like the look and feel of your Windows desktop. Well, if this is the case, then why not change it with one of the following utilities, as most of these can not only improve the look and feel of your desktop but provide better ways to organize the data and run the applications that are there.

One excellent option is **Elastic Desktop** (\$29 to \$179) (www.elasticworkspace.com). This program is known for making it easier to work with multiple applications at the same time, mainly by providing independent windows on the screen. Moreover, you can save a given open Windows setup for later use.

A dramatically different change can be found using **3DNA Desktop 1.1** (\$29.99) (www.3dna.net), as it substitutes its own 3D interface for the rather static Windows desktop. This interface consists of (default mode) a loft apartment where all the tools are found as items on the screen, including the trash can which is logically located under the desk. There is a kiosk in the center that is used to navigate and customize this radical new environment.

If all you want to do is spruce up your existing Windows desktop at very little cost, then consider **Desktop Cyclor 2001** (\$15.00) (www.magellas.com). This tool allows you to instantly change things like the wallpaper, screen saver, desktop and tool bar skins plus start menu icons and Windows 9x start-up and shutdown logos. You can even program it to change these things randomly for you on its own.

With **WindowBlinds 4.5** (\$19.95) (www.stardock.com), you have yet another way to alter the desktop and skins. You can change colors and vary toolbar icons, plus it handles all of this a lot easier than trying to do it with the Microsoft OS system. There is also a free version available.

Some of the best control over the look and feel of the desktop can be obtained by using **Object Desktop 2004**

(\$49.95) (www.stardock.com). It comes with a copy of WindowBlinds and a whole host of other tools. One interesting tool is IconPacker that allows you to change each icon on your desktop. You can also design your own Windows skins and icons. You can even add animation and effects to the Windows operating system. With DesktopX you can even go so far as to toss out the existing desktop and create a new one of your own.

Screen Grabbers

Have you ever had a need to capture a browser screen and then paste that screen into a lecture outline or a notebook or a PowerPoint or Presentations slide show? This is something that is more commonly done these days than it used to be and yet, each time we try it, it seems as if the tools for doing this have changed so much that we end up having to start all over. Anticipating this frustration, here are a few of the well known tools to keep in mind.

Perhaps the most popular one is **SnagIt 7.2** (39.95) (www.techsmith.com). This product can capture just about anything, including moving images and full-screen videos. You can grab only portions of your screen or entire Web pages. You can also edit images, add annotations or insert text comments. What is really slick is that you can also capture the text from things like error messages, menu bars and other windows that typically do not allow that text to be copied and pasted—what a boon if you are having technical problems that you are trying to explain to a tech support person by telephone or e-mail.

Another one that I have found useful from time to time over the years, especially since it is easier to use than SnagIt, is **FullShot 8.5** (\$49.99) (www.inbit.com). Its standard version does not do video and scrolling captures like SnagIt does, nor does it capture entire Web pages, but it can capture windows, menus, other objects, and rectangular and freehand regions. You can also draw and annotate on captured images and add effects like drop shadows or glare.

For the budget minded, there is **Easy Screen Capture 1.2.3** from Longfine Software (\$19.95) (www.longfine.com). It will capture windows, desktop objects and any rectangular regions you wish to define. It cannot capture freehand regions or scrolling windows.

File Managers

For most of us, Windows Explorer alone is probably the only file manager we will ever need. However,

it is slow, not customizable and very inconvenient to use. Because of this, it may make sense to choose a file manager that either supplements or replaces Windows Explorer. Here are a few that just might fit the bill.

Directory Opus 8 (\$65) (www.gpssoft.com) is actually an Australian entry, but it is considered to be the only file manager that is powerful enough to be used as a replacement for Windows Explorer. It has a tab interface that makes it very easy to use, and a checkbox interface that is handy for dealing with multiple files. Advanced users have a high degree of ability to customize the menu and toolbar system.

ExplorerPlus 7.0 (\$39.95) (www.novatix.com) is a two-pane file manager, viewer and FTP manager all rolled into one that comes with easy folder synchronization and fast file-finding capabilities, but is slower and less powerful than Directory Opus.

A third entry in this group is **PowerDesk Pro 6** (\$49.99) (www.v-com.com), which is very similar to ExplorerPlus. The interface is nicer and its Layout Manager can create a toolbar icon for a saved layout. The big plus of this product is that it supports many file compression formats that the others do not recognize.

Advanced File Organizer (\$29.95) (www.softprime.com) is a file database that lets you organize files into browsable categories. You can also scroll all the files in a given category regardless of where they are located on your hard drive. The database format allows for instant searches. Microsoft is considering adding similar capabilities to its upcoming new version of Windows (currently called Longhorn).

This Issue's Featured Web Sites

Organize and Store Your Bookmarks Offline:

- <http://del.icio.us>

Decipher Medspeak—Unveiling the Mystery:

- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/mplusdictionary.html
- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/encyclopedia.html

Electronic Access to the Courts:

- www.abanet.org/tech/ltrc/research/efiling/home.html

The Incidental Traveler

- www.airports.com
- www.jiwire.com/browse-hotspot-airport-united-states-us.htm
- www.seatguru.com
- www.tripadvisor.com