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# A sampler of software upgrades

## By Help Desk

Al Gordon

Upgrades, to borrow the phrase from Forrest Gump, are like a box of chocolates: you never know what you are going to get.

All too often you wind up discovering that the highly touted software you just purchased mainly upgrades the bank account of the company that sold it. But now and then, there are pleasant surprises — and as it happens this has been a good year for pleasant surprises.

Case in point: **Quicken 2006**. This personal finance program has been around so long you would think that Intuit, the software's maker, would be out of ideas for it. And, in fact, for many years the upgrades were pretty lame. But this time around, there are fresh signs of life. Quicken for Windows, among other changes, has greatly improved its reporting and graphing functions so that they are much easier to use and give more useful information on your financial picture. A helpful new touch is an instant report tool in the check registers that, when you are entering a payment or writing a check, lets you look up what your previous half-dozen payments were to that recipient. Perfect for answering those "did my electric bill jump last month?" type questions in these days of volatile prices. On the Mac side, Quicken finally allows users to download data from financial institutions using more than one user ID — in other words, both you and your significant other now can manage your joint accounts in one file.

In my view, a product is a valuable upgrade if the changes made are ones you actually use even if the overall revisions may not be dramatic. The **FileMaker Pro 8.0** database program, for example, is largely a detail change from the last version. But one of those details is a significant improvement in the process for combining multiple Microsoft Excel files into a unified FileMaker database. That might not sound like much, but being able to combine multiple lists into one data source is precisely the reason why someone would want to move from Excel to FileMaker in the first place.

Another venerable product, **Easy Media Creator 8**, also has taken

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a leap forward, although this one falls into the "much awaited" category rather than "unexpected." Sonic, the maker of the most user-friendly DVD-making software for Windows, acquired Roxio, which makes Creator, and Version 8 adds the Sonic technology to the bundle. The result is the most comprehensive, easiest-to-use multimedia bundle for Windows. A unified, task-oriented interface makes it a breeze to make do everything from putting your home movies on DVD to managing your digital photo and music collections. **Toast 7**, the Mac counterpart, is a more modest advance mainly focusing on keeping the software up to speed with support for multilayer DVD and High Definition technologies.

Nero, Easy Creator's archrival, also is out with a new version: **Nero 7 Ultra Edition**. As is typical with Nero, it is more technically advanced in some respects than Creator, but not quite as user-friendly. It supports MP4 encoding (known to iPod users as "AAC"), for instance, and its burning tools are more tolerant of multitasking. However, an ambitious attempt to build an integrated media player/recorder/editor interface, Nero Home, did not work with my PC's TV tuner card. Nero still has some work to do on the package.

Adobe has upgraded its consumer-oriented "Elements" lineup to **Photoshop Elements 4.0** (graphics) and **Premiere Elements 2.0** (video). The former, already my favorite graphics editor, really gains only a few minor bells and whistles in this update. Premiere, however, has become much easier — and faster — to use, making it the hobbyist/home user tool it was supposed to be. Since the best deal on these products is to buy them as a bundle, think of it as getting an important video upgrade with some photo tools as an extra.

Security — the plague of Windows computers — has gained a new top dog in do-it-all suites: Zone Lab's **ZoneAlarm Internet Security Suite 6.0**. While I continue to like **Norton AntiVirus** and **Webroot's SpySweeper** in those categories, ZoneAlarm's included anti-virus and anti-spyware components are robust, and the overall package simply offers more protection than the competition does.

Amateur audio editors with Macs are the beneficiaries of the new **BIAS Peak 5 LE**, the consumer version of the company's professional sound-editing software. It also is sold in a "Studio Edition" bundle with **Deck LE 3.5**, a multitrack mixer (for manipulating multiple sound sources — you know, the way pop producers put a snip of symphonic music into the background of a rock song). BIAS consolidated a couple of different versions into one consumer product that, among other things, is great for creating soundtracks for Mac iMovie and iDVD projects.

Speaking of Mac, Apple users have just gone through a round of software upgrades tied to the new features in the OS-X "Tiger" operating system update released this year. Word to the wise to Windows users: The same thing looms ahead with the planned release of Windows Vista in 2006. As the year goes on, you are going to want to hold off on changing your software until Vista compatibility issues are sorted out.

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