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'Toolware' programs worth a look

By Al Gordon

When most consumers are shopping for software, their search usually takes them to a superstore or online merchant where they look for items that come in shrink-wrapped boxes with labels like "Microsoft," "Adobe," or "Symantec." But there are other corners of the software universe worth exploring.

A long list of niche manufacturers produce applications designed to meet needs that the big name vendors don't. I call this world "toolware." Some vendors are still, as in the early days of the tech business, one- or two-person shops where consumers can directly contact the person who wrote the program. Others have grown larger or been acquired by larger companies. Either way, if you ever find yourself wondering "I really wish someone would make a program that..." the odds are that someone does.

Here, by no means complete, are some of my favorites.

ThumbsPlus by Cerious Software (www.cerious.com), now in version 7, is a program I have been using for more than a decade. Long before every digital camera or graphics program shipped with software for managing and browsing images, "T+" was helping users catalog, revise, and manage their multimedia files. Thumbs (\$50 Standard; \$90 Pro – think home user vs. professional photographer) offers hundreds of ways to handle digital image files, ranging from assigning information tags to editing files by the batch. Windows only.

Fookes Software (www.fookes.com) makes NoteTab Pro, one of the best investments of \$20 a Windows user can make. It replaces the lame standard Notepad with a text editor that lets you do Microsoft Word-level work without Word's formatting complications. It's also an excellent tool for editing web page code. There's a free version, NoteTab Lite, as well.

A new product from the company that has become a best seller is Aid4Mail (\$25) a tool that converts email from one format to another and also lets you archive your old email. These products are for Widows only; the Mac counterpart of NoteTab is Bare Bones Software's (www.barebones.com) BBEdit, which I think is

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overpriced at \$130. However, there is a free version, TextWrangler.

Have a notebook and a desktop, or a couple of computers networked at home and want to make sure your Microsoft Outlook files are in sync? Your solution used to be an expensive, complicated Microsoft Exchange Server network. Now it's only a \$40 or \$70 proposition (depending on how many features you need) with Wisco's SyncPST for Outlook (www.syncpst.com).

Microsoft Office for Macintosh users get Entourage as their email-calendar-address book-task list management program, which is much less of a headache than the chronically troublesome Outlook. But it doesn't have as many features. Paul Berkowitz to the rescue (homepage.mac.com/berkowitz28/). Berkowitz is a prodigious author of Apple Scripts (programming language built into a Mac) that enhance Entourage. Many are free; his \$20 Import-Export bundle is a must-have for Entourage users.

My day job is consulting, which means keeping track of my time and billing people for it is a key to maintaining my income stream. In Windows, my application of choice long has been Responsive Time Logger (\$90, www.responsivesoftware.com). The software lets you set up "time clocks" to keep track of your work, then save the results into the program's database. At billing time you extract the data to either its built-in invoices or to files that can be imported into a word processor.

For Mac, Billings by Marketcircle (www.marketcircle.com) is not quite as easy to use as Time Logger, but at \$40 is a "best buy." I also like the innovative Task Capture software (www.captureworks.com, \$80) that is available for both Mac and Windows. In addition to the manual time clock approach, it will automatically time your work on Word or Excel documents, a huge help.

If you have your own website, the best way is to directly access your files through what's called a "FTP client" program – communications software using the "file transfer protocol" that is standard for the web. My choice here is CuteFTP from Globalscape (www.globalscape.com), which comes in home and professional versions for both Windows and Mac. Prices range from \$30 to \$60.

Information Appliance Associates (www.pocketmac.net) gets a mention here for having successfully mastered the art of putting a square peg into a round hole. The company's initial offering was PocketMac, software to sync a Pocket PC handheld with a Mac, kind of an oddball idea at first but now one for which the company gets the last laugh as Pocket PC owners experiment with Macs. And it has just scored a big hit by offering Mac software for syncing the popular BlackBerry handheld communicators.

Finally, Allume (www.allume.com) lets you take your data and go Stuffit. It's a data compression utility for Windows and Mac that uses both the standard "zip" compression technology and its own proprietary (.sit) format that can shrink your files even more. Even with broadband Internet connections and mammoth hard drives, there is still no reason to waste space and time by transferring or storing oversized files.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com

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