

Opusculi

BY  
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There are lots of big expensive things desktop-computer users can buy; there are also lots of things they can buy at a modest price. The tendency is to hear lots about the former, and little about the latter. But it's time to clean the study, which also makes it a good time to talk about neat little things.

First and foremost in the category is the best personal/small-biz bookkeeping system I've used — and I've used several, even written my own in younger and more foolish days.

Quicken for Windows is the successor to the DOS-only product. From Intuit, this modestly-priced (around \$45 in the deep-discount stores) gem uses a checkbook metaphor for its ledger. This is a nice idea; most of us understand a checkbook register, and are less than comfortable with things like journals and general ledgers. Intuit's bright designers also realized that there are those of us (my hand is raised on this one...) who can never remember which is a credit and which is a debit; the company calls things like this "increase" and "decrease." In short, this is a program designed for people who want or need to keep books, but don't really want to boogey on over to the local community course for Bookkeeping 101.

For all that it is simple, Quicken does not lack for features. Multiple accounts are a snap. The Chart of Accounts (which is a list of things you're likely to have to pay, or from which you will get funds) is fairly complete and it can be modified. Add in your checking account data, and your investment account data, and the list is soon what it needs to be. And you'll never find yourself talking about a "chart of accounts!"

All these accounts are cross-referenced. So, suppose I send Corel Magazine's editor a bill for this story. I enter the item in the Corel Magazine account, indicating that this is an increase and an income-editorial item. When I get a check from the boss-lady, I enter that amount in the Corel Magazine account as a decrease, and indicate that it should be deposited to the bank account. Voila! Over in the bank account records, the item shows up as an increase to the checking account. Now all I have to do is make sure I deposit the check (which is harder; I have to leave my computer and walk to the bank).

Each month the bank sends me a statement, and eventually, I get to look at the unpleasant state of my funds. This is never a happy time, but Quicken lets me do something I never really did well: I can balance my checkbook. It pretty much automates the process, and for the last several years that I have used it, I have had a pretty good idea of what my financial position is at any given moment.

Writing checks -- that other unpleasant chore my landlord, among others, expects me to do each month -- is also easy, if not fun. Quicken memorizes transactions, so the regular items take but a couple key strokes to enter. The hardest part is filling out the checks.

Actually, Quicken will do that, too. Intuit will gladly sell you appropriate checks for continuous-form or laser printers, as well as other forms matched to the system. You don't need them, but you can have them if you want.

Quicken is a well-thought-through, modestly priced product. It is completely professional, and come tax-season,

if at no other time, the program, with its standard reports and the like, will make life easier. Run, do not walk, to your local software store and buy a copy.

Moving along, there is something in the pile that I will recommend not buying. Generally, I don't do that, but this is a special case. John Dvorak et al. are perpetrating another volume of entirely forgettable punditry on the desktop-computing public. According to the publicist for this volume, Dvorak reaches around seven million people with his various columns; that means there are seven million potentially misled desktop-computer users.

The new volume is called Dvorak's Guide to PC Connectivity. The thesis is that PCs connect things and connect to things -- this is not news, since that message has been preached for about five years (by me, among others, and in lots of places before it became a PC Magazine given). The text is supposed to tell you how to transfer files, how to plug in cables, how to convert files and how to network. All this in around a thousand pages, for \$50. This book is too thin to prop up a monitor that is too low, and for \$50 you can go buy Quicken.

The counterargument (I know about those; I used to teach how they are constructed...) is that you get lots of free software goodies. You get Lantastic Z, Artisoft's adapter-independent version of an excellent peer-to-peer network operating system. You get Word for Word -- a wordprocessing-document conversion program, and a trimmed version of Inset's popular Hijaak, which does the same thing for graphics files. You get a graphic-file viewer. You get "other super utilities" -- whatever that means.

It is not specified that these are Windows versions of the products, and I doubt very much they are. The description suggests that they are limited introductory versions of the programs; you get a taste of some nice stuff, but real use means buying the real thing.

The version of Lantastic included in the package is a good example, and one I know well. People who've read my stuff here or elsewhere know that I like Lantastic; I consider it the ideal networking product for graphics users -- it is easy to install, easy to use and is perfect for making the best use out of what is in the average graphics studio. I use Lantastic in my study, to hook up all the stations and printers and so on. I also use Lantastic Z -- for one thing: it connects my notebook computer to my main machine. Lantastic Z is a two-station-only product, linking one machine to the other through serial ports, parallel ports or via modem. None of these is a viable connection for more than limited file transfers; the transmission rate (from 2400 bits per second using a slow modem connection, to 115 kilo-bits per second on a parallel port connection) is substantially slower than the two million bits per second I get using Artisoft's proprietary cards, or the ten million bits per second needed for larger (more than six stations) networks. Lantastic Z cannot grow, and Lantastic does not support bridging, so it cannot link into another network, even another Lantastic setup. Using it will give you the flavor of running a simple network, but real use means buying a Lantastic starter kit -- the real thing. Buy the real thing.

All this is certainly true for a trimmed-down version of Hijaak, and probably true for the other products. Add to that, most software today comes with excellent filtering capability for all but the most esoteric cases (the filters for which, of course, are never in trimmed versions).

In short, this is a case where you can blow \$50 and not get anything you either don't already have, or will still have to buy elsewhere.

Enough vitriol. Here's an item you may want to have on hand. You will not use it a lot, probably, but when you do need it, it will prove invaluable. Called JAG, this comes from a Mac-oriented firm of French graphics programmers who got religion (or something -- whatever it is Mac-users have...) and moved to Silicon Valley. Religion aside, their financial good sense has brought them to Windows programming, and this is their first venture. JAG is an anti-aliasing utility. It gets rid of jaggies.

In most cases, anti-aliasing is not a great problem. Bitmap-oriented software -- paint and image-editors -- commonly make provision for this; good programs have more than one way to do the job. For example, Picture Publisher (Micrografx's high-end image-editor) has several smoothing filters as well more specialized tools for getting rid of the jaggies. Vector-drawing programs approach the matter differently, but most offer some kind of line-smoothing enhancement where that is needed. Finally, high-quality output software commonly applies a range of image-enhancements, including anti-aliasing; a good example is Zenographics SuperPrint.

With all this technology already in place, a standalone anti-aliasing program seems redundant. But I have found a couple cases where I was using a bitmap grabbed from some other source; JAG did just what I needed done,

and it did it without the bother of loading a cannon-like program to do a fly-swatting job. JAG deals with 8-bit to 24-bit images in a broad range of bitmap formats; it converts less-than-truecolor images to 24-bit images for processing, and it can show multiple images on the screen. It's a simple utility to use, and makes a nice low-cost tool for the kit.

Shift gears; let's talk ergonomics. If you spend a lot of time in front of the system, you know that it can be wearing. Things can be done to make life easier. A computer desk for most people is 27 inches floor-to-desktop; your monitor should sit at the right height on that desktop (for a good ergonomic example, take a look at NEC's FG-series of monitors).

You could also buy some relatively inexpensive add-ons to make life easier. My current favorites come from a firm called PC Compatibles, Inc.. I use one of their WristPerch products (they make one with a foam bed underneath the keyboard, one without the bed; I've used both, and can't make up my mind which is better). The company also makes variations for notebook computers, people who work with the keyboard in their lap, and so on. For folks with tired feet, PC Compatibles offers a Foot-Turtle, a half-cylinder of foam that sits on the floor and rocks to the correct angle to support your feet. A side benefit: Roll your feet back and forth to get some lower-leg exercise and improve circulation in the lower extremities. Mrs. Jenner uses this both at her computer desk and her writing desk.

I am not an ergonomics expert; I checked with Betty Alsberg of Betty Alsberg Interior Design here in New York (she's done office interiors for some of the corporate headquarters here in the city). Betty's comments were generally favorable; she had some reservations about the foam colors (grey and a medium-blue) and the use of the available fleece covers (she doesn't care for fleece). Her strongest recommendation was that covers in colors coordinating with standard office interiors would be a good addition to the line. As to the ergonomics, I can add that it seems to make longer typing sessions possible; I am working on a book at the moment (not on computer graphics...), and long sessions are less wearing than before.

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An Article From Donald Jenner Consulting -#page#2#-

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