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Editor's View

Nuisances of Computer Life

For all that computers offer, there are lots of times when using them leads to irritation.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

I like computers. To be more honest, I like the things I can do with computers. That's why I'm in this field.

But there are an amazing number of annoyances that seem to go with the territory and, for some reason, it's getting worse, not better. Many of the little aggravations I deal with day in and day out could be resolved without much difficulty, either by the folks who provide the software or those using it.

E-Mail Annoyances

Since e-mail is huge part of what I do, let's start there. I've had a CompuServe account for about ten years now. Once I started using e-mail to communicate with people around the world, I never looked back.

As editor of FoxPro Advisor, e-mail is even more important. Our columnists and other writers are scattered around the world. We use e-mail to send articles back and forth throughout the editing process. The work I do for DevCon also involves exchanging lots of files – in fact, these are often an order of magnitude larger than the ones for the magazine. Of course, almost all of what I send back and forth to writers and speakers is zipped first to cut down on file size.

Over the last year or so, I've noticed a couple of phenomena. First, quite a few of the messages I get these days aren't wrapped properly. To read them, I have to grab all the text and put it into an editor. In addition, many messages lately come through both as plain (badly wrapped) text and as a file attachment containing the same message in HTML format. My sources tell me that both of these problems occur when the sender is using Outlook Express as an e-mail client.

Much more annoying is that a number of people lately have sent me document files without zipping them. Apparently, these folks just choose File-Send To from Word's menu (or whatever software they're using) and never consider that those of us without permanent, high-speed connections to the Internet might not want to spend 5 minutes downloading a file that would take 20 seconds zipped up.

The final e-mail problem I ran into is clearly a case of bad software design. I attempted to send a huge file (over 7 MB) attached to an e-mail. The server on the other end rejected it as too large. So I got a message telling me it had been rejected. So far, so good. However, the entire 7+ MB file was attached to the rejection notice. So not only did I get to upload the whole file, I got to download it again (and then, of course, upload

it again once I'd broken it into smaller zips). Surely, it would have been sufficient to just tell me it couldn't be received and give me a choice about downloading it again. (I can see cases where the sender might want the file back, like if he's deleted the local copy.)

The Internet is pervasive, no question about it. But it's a mistake to assume that everyone's access to it is the same. Those of you connected all the time, please take pity on the rest of us and remember that file compression is still a good thing. Let's also hope that Outlook Express, which is clearly getting more common, gets better with each new version, so that the rest of us don't have to put it with its oddities.

Uninstall Aggravation

It's not only e-mail that has annoying features. I needed to uninstall an old version of PowerPoint the other day. No problem, right – I went to Control Panel and choose Add/Remove Programs, selected the right version of Office, and chose Add/Remove. At which point I was prompted to insert the Office CD. Now why the heck do I need the installation CD to *uninstall* the program? What if I don't have the CD anymore? Am I doomed to either keep the program forever or be stuck with all the file and registry leavings I'd have from manually deleting it? Requiring a CD to uninstall a program is totally unacceptable.

Interface Matters

Getting back to file compression, I use Nico Mak's WinZip every day (a lot). I think it's a fantastic tool. But it doesn't completely follow the Windows interface guidelines and at least one of its differences messes me up day in and day out. In the Windows interface, CTRL-A is a menu shortcut for "Select All". I use that shortcut a lot in many different applications. So my fingers know it without even thinking about it. Unfortunately, in WinZip, CTRL-A means Add. You have to use CTRL-/ to Select All. Why?

Another application I use quite a bit doesn't support CTRL-Backspace to delete a word the way most apps do. Again, why?

I was reminded of these issues by a conversation I had with a fairly new member of CompuServe's VFox forum. This woman has strong views about how her applications should work and they don't always follow current standards. In particular, she controls colors and fonts and the like inside her applications rather than allowing the user to control them. Her view is that using a single color scheme is monotonous and that the brain appreciates more stimulation.

When I first started working in Windows, I felt much as she does (and, in fact, I think she is a recent convert from FoxPro/DOS.) The longer I use Windows and the more different applications I need to use on a daily basis, the more I appreciate the standards. These days, I find that whenever I use an app that doesn't follow the interface standards, I end up annoyed, as I am whenever I hit CTRL-A in WinZip.

What do you think? Are the interface standards valuable? Should we, for the most part, follow them in our applications or would our users prefer us to branch out and create our own standards? Where do you draw the line between creative design that makes your applications shine and following standards so your users can transfer old knowledge?