

Don't byte these turkeys

Lazy programmers have ruined your appetite for these flawed programs / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

THERE'S LITTLE IN the world of computers more frustrating than a poorly designed program.

All too often bad design is the result of programmer laziness. Typically what happens is that a programmer, in a rush, doesn't take the time to think through the way that people will actually use the program. The programmer saves a few hours of coding time, and tens of thousands of people end up wasting a few minutes here, a few minutes there, every time they use the program.

These products from nameless programmers are turkeys, and deserve to be roasted.

Frustrating Photo Album

I have been evaluating the Sony DSC-F1 digital still camera, an otherwise excellent \$700 machine that is crippled by a program called the "Album Utility." The Sony digital camera takes great pictures, but the only way to get these pictures into your computer is by using Sony's utility program. And it's dreadful.

The worst part about the Sony utility is its speed — drying paint could well be faster. Both the camera and my Sony laptop are equipped with high-speed infrared ports that can transmit data at up to 4 million bits per second. Theoretically, the camera should be able to download its 50 images in

less than 10 seconds. But Sony's program pegs the download to a maximum rate of 38,400 bits per second. It takes more than a minute to download a window of 20 thumbnail images to let you see what photographs you took, and more than 15 minutes to copy all 50 photographs to your hard drive. And the program is a hog: You can't do anything else with your computer while downloading.

To make matters worse, the utility insists on downloading the same thumbnails over and over again. Delete an image from the middle of the camera's memory bank and the program pauses for a minute while it re-downloads all of the thumbnails a second time.

The program also prints the wrong error messages when something goes wrong; for example, saying that you have filled up your hard disk if you accidentally move the camera during the download and interrupt the infrared beam. And programmers didn't even bother to use the standard Windows 95 dialog boxes for opening or saving files.

Sony's utility is the painful program that makes this part of the digital photography experience more of a chore than a joy.

United Disconnection

Many turkeys are born because a product manager fails to adequately anticipate the needs of

the program's users. Consider United Connection, an electronic travel agency run by United Airlines. With United Connection, you can search for flights (on any airline, not just United), select your seat, order a special meal, and view your United frequent flier account. All of this is done with a special program that runs on your PC, which I find a lot easier to use than those Internet-based travel agencies.

My gripe with United Connection is that, for security reasons, the service will send a ticket only to the billing address of the credit card that you use to pay for your ticket. That's a problem for me. Living on Martha's Vineyard, I have to pick up my mail at the Vineyard Haven Post Office. That's where my credit card statement is sent. But FedEx won't deliver to my PO box; they want my street address, and United Connection uses FedEx to deliver tickets for trips that are less than two weeks away. As a result, each time I've used United Connection, I've had to tell the computer I will pick up the tickets at a United Airlines ticketing location (there aren't any on the Vineyard, of course), and then call up United Connection and have the tickets manually printed out and sent to me using Priority Mail.

Instead of taking just a few minutes, the whole process takes half an hour, and all because the folks at United Connection have made no provision for people who get their credit card statements at PO boxes.

No Space

A growing number of companies doing business on the Internet



want customers to type in their credit card numbers. Unfortunately, few of these sites let you type in the number the way it appears on your credit card — four groups of numbers separated by spaces.

Visa and Mastercard put those spaces in your credit card number for a good reason: The spaces make it less likely you'll make a mistake when writing down a credit card number or reading it over the phone. But for a programmer, these spaces are just a hassle: It takes an extra three lines of computer code to take them out.

Rather than taking the time to write the program correctly, the programmers have these Web

sites simply tell you that your credit card number is "invalid" if you try to type the number the way it appears. Well, you're not invalid. These programmers are turkeys.

There's only one way that the computer industry is going to get its act together, and that's for consumers to complain and complain loudly when things don't work the way they should. Write letters. Send e-mail. Tie up their telephone lines. Get out your baster, and roast these companies with your words.

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