■ BY MICHAEL DESMOND

There was a time, back in the days of DOS, when installing a program meant copying its files into a directory on a hard disk. 15 years and many versions of Microsoft Windows later, the install process has become so complex and treacherous that it's often blamed for everything from program incompatibilities to system crashes. In fact, a cottage industry has emerged just to clean up Windows Registries mucked up by things like partial software uninstalls.

It doesn't have to be that way. At least, that's what John T. Haller believes. A Web developer in Queens, New York, Haller was able to tune the Firefox Web browser so it could run from a single folder on a USB storage key.

It's a big deal. So-called portable apps, like Haller's mobilized Firefox, can run on any computer—even if the user lacks rights to install software. Plug in a USB key, double-click the firefox.exe file, and Firefox just runs. Or drop the program folder onto the hard disk, move a shortcut to the .EXE into the Start menu, and run the portable app direct from the hard drive. With portable apps, you can carry your programs and settings to almost any PC.

For Haller, what began as a simple project has turned into a full-time job. Today, he maintains and distributes portable versions of nearly a dozen open source applications, which can be found at www.portableapps.com. From Firefox and the Mozilla Thunderbird e-mail client, to popular open source programs like the OpenOffice suite and FileZilla FTP client, his work is getting noticed.

"I've got tons of e-mails from soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying 'Thank you for making this available and making my life easier. It's enabled me to keep in touch with my kids and family. It's enabled me to not take my laptop while I'm hiking up a mountain,'" says Haller, who also recalls having his site cited on such popular news sites as Slashdot and Digg on the day he released Portable OpenOffice. "It took out the site for about a day and a half. That was a first for me."

Productivity
on the Go

Productivity *on the Go*

So, should you be looking at portable apps as an alternative for your business? To help you decide, we looked at a bevy of install-free programs, ranging from productivity behemoths like the OpenOffice suite to nifty IT utilities like the Angry IP Scanner. The broad range of mature software surprised us,
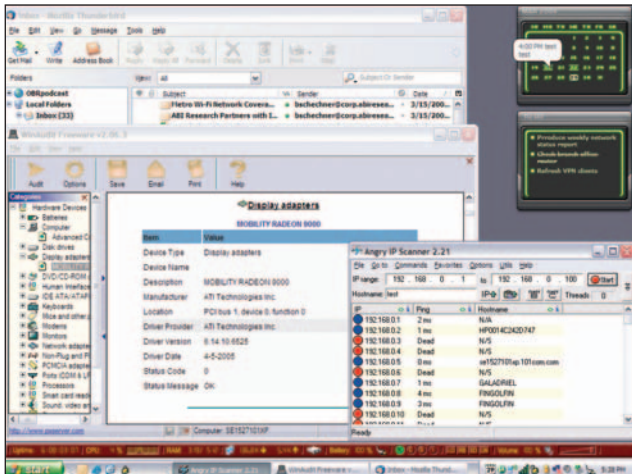

Figure 1. A host of portable apps can do everything from manage your schedule and e-mail to sleuth system settings and ping devices on the network.

as did the overall stability and performance of the portable code.

Productivity Apps

The Kitchen Sink
OpenOffice
http://portableapps.com/apps/office/suites/portable_openoffice
Disk space: 147MB
Almost ludicrously complete, this Microsoft Office competitor comes packed with word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, graphics design and database software. The massive download may be too large for many USB keys, but the programs run reliably and as quickly as the installable version of OpenOffice. The applications read and write the latest Microsoft Office formats and include built-in PDF output—a nice plus. The one concern: application load times. Launching from the hard disk, OpenOffice Writer took a full 15 seconds to come up on a 1.6GHz Pentium M-based laptop.
Rating: 4.5 USB keys

The Tabs Have It
Mozilla Firefox
http://portableapps.com/apps/internet/browsers/portable_firefox
Disk space: 19MB
The feature-identical version of the popular Firefox browser weighs in at just under 20MB and offers familiar features like tabbed browsing, support for plug-ins and automated program updates. Portable Firefox loads a bit less quickly than the installable version, but the time difference is negligible. This is a must-have app that can help secure your surfing. Just be sure to manually turn on caching and other settings if you intend to run this from your system's hard disk; these settings are turned off by default to streamline performance on flash-based USB keys.
Rating: 5 USB keys

All-in-One IM
Portable GAIM Beta 2
http://portableapps.com/apps/internet/chat/portable_gaim
Disk space: 15MB
This multi-protocol IM client replaces dedicated IM software for MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, AOL IM, and a host of other protocols (including GroupWise, IRC and SameTime). Quick and unobtrusive, GAIM includes nice features like Buddy Pounce for catching elusive contacts the moment they log on. It also integrates better with Windows than Miranda, another portable IM client alternative.
Rating: 4 USB keys

POP Goes Your E-mail
Mozilla Thunderbird
http://portableapps.com/apps/internet/email/portable_thunderbird
Disk space: 12MB
This capable POP3 e-mail client comes packed with junk mail controls, user-customizable e-mail filters, and capable search and sort functionality. While Thunderbird ably supports multiple POP3 accounts, the configuration interface is difficult and controls for managing passwords and upstream connections are unnecessarily complicated.
Rating: 3.5 USB keys

PDF Portable
FoxIt PDF Reader
www.foxitsoftware.com
Disk space: 2.6MB
Whether you work the line in IT or man a desk in marketing, you gotta read PDF files. FoxIt PDF Reader ensures that you can read any PDF, from any machine.

In our tests, it displayed large and complex PDF files with aplomb, opening them in a fraction of the time of the criminally bloated Acrobat 6 client. Scrolling and navigation are also slippery fast—a far cry from the delayed rendering of Adobe's client.

One annoying quirk: while FoxIt PDF Reader faithfully displayed text edit marks in our PDF files, it failed to pick up the associated text. The $35 Pro version includes edit tools.
Rating: 5 USB keys

An Undercooked Calendar
Mozilla Sunbird
http://portableapps.com/apps/office/organization/portable_sunbird
Disk space: 7.44MB
Mozilla's answer to Outlook's scheduling and task management features is not nearly ready for prime time (as the 0.2 version number attests).

While there are daily, weekly and monthly calendar views and support for recurring appointments and alarms, Sunbird suffers from some show-stopping issues. For instance, error messages can bedevil alarm notifications, especially when several overdue events clamor for attention.
Rating: 2 USB keys

Productivity *on the Go*

PIM and Proper
EssentialPIM Portable
www.essentialpim.com/?r=products&pr=dvsp
Disk space: 1.7MB

Outlook schmoutlook. EssentialPIM could be the killer app that keeps your Registry tidy and your schedule and contacts in order. The program offers
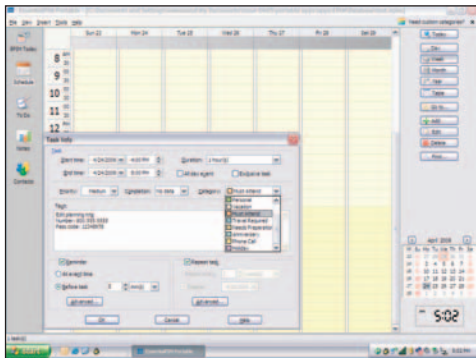

Figure 2. EssentialPIM supports recurring events and custom alarms, and lets you import calendar and task data from Outlook and Outlook Express.

ample calendar views and options, including recurring appointments and a useful text filter for hunting down tasks, notes and contacts. Like other options here, the application can import and export industry-standard iCalendar files. Most impressively, it will find and import your existing Outlook or Outlook Express data, including contact, schedule and other information.
Rating: 5 USB keys

iCalendar Eye Candy
Rainlendar
www.ipi.fi/~rainy/index.php?pn=projects&project=rainlendar

The luscious looking Rainlendar calendar program keeps your schedule in style. This freely available app employs nifty transparency effects and features an active community of skin and plug-in writers to deliver some great-looking calendars for your desktop. The software can read and output standard iCalendar (.ICS) format files and offers a plug-in for displaying Outlook calendar data. While you can set up recurring appointments and task lists, the software falls short as a

PIM replacement. But it sure is pretty.
Rating: 3.5 USB keys

HTML Hotness
Nvu
http://portableapps.com/apps/development/web_editors/portable_nvu
Disk space: 10.3MB

Creating HTML content was meant to be simple, straightforward and clean, but along the way vendors like Microsoft and Macromedia also made it expensive. The solid, open source Nvu HTML editor lets you create standards-compliant HTML pages for nothing, and the portable version lets you do it from anywhere. The interface can be a bit brittle—for instance, HTML code and rendered output reside under different tabs rather than side-by-side. But the graphical interface produces clean and consistent HTML that roundtrips reliably with Dreamweaver and other well-behaved HTML editors.
Rating: 5 USB keys

Freeware Photoshop
The GIMP
http://portableapps.com/apps/photos_design/image_editors/portable_gimp
Disk space: 16.3MB

Adobe Photoshop may be the 800-pound gorilla of image editing, but the popular, open source application The GIMP has earned a spot in the primate display. A richly featured photo and image editor, The GIMP comes packed with powerful tools, controls and filters for creating professional-quality images. The portable version can take a long time to load, and the beta I worked with coughed up three or four error messages during launch. But the program lets you work with all manner of files—including Photoshop native .PSD files—and can be used for everything from photo touchup and logo design to ground-up image creation. Best of all, you can't beat the price ($0 U.S.) with a stick.
Rating: 4 USB keys

Play Anything
Video LAN Client (VLC)
www.videolan.org/vlc/download-windows.html
Disk space: 35MB

Never open Windows Media Player again. VLC is a self-contained media player that supports an incredibly broad range of codecs and formats. Unlike the popular and portable Media Player Classic (MPC) app, VLC doesn't rely on system-installed codecs to interpret files. Instead, support for everything from .MPEG and .WMV to

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U3 Eases Portability Hassles

The portable applications reviewed here will run from almost any media—portable hard disks, flash memory-based USB keys, even CD/DVD optical discs and network drives. Alas, few mainstream vendors are likely to publish portable applications because they can be so easily copied and pirated. Also, the lack of a standard installer to do things like place a shortcut in a Start menu or other launcher can make these apps a bit difficult for consumers to use.

U3 aims to change that. Founded by leading flash storage device makers SanDisk and M-Systems, U3 provides a framework for enabling portable applications tied to flash memory-based storage. U3-enabled USB storage keys use a special controller that uniquely identifies the device, so software makers have a way to tie each copy of their product to a specific piece of hardware. A hidden partition lets Windows AutoRun fire up the U3 Launcher interface, a sort of Start menu for U3-smart devices, while encryption prevents a lost USB key from creating an embarrassing data spill.

Users can buy U3-smart devices today from SanDisk, including devices with pre-loaded applications. Adding applications is a simple matter of downloading the software to the U3-enabled drive.

U3 has some merits, but it's not clear if the standard will get off the ground. The two companies leading the charge have yet to rope in other portable storage firms, and no major ISVs have released U3-smart versions of their software. Still, if successful, the effort could help make portable apps more commonplace.

— M.D.

Dvix and XviD-encoded files are contained within the (rather hefty) 35MB download. The volume and scrubber controls can be a bit unrefined, but otherwise, VLC is an extremely full-featured program for playing back audio and video files of every stripe.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Music to My Ears
XM Player
www.un4seen.com/xmplay.html
Disk space: 1.4MB

XM Player could make you forget all about WinAmp. While it falls short as a true music library application—for instance, it won't nest titles within artist and album entries—the software is slick and stupid fast, loading instantly on my desktop PC. By contrast, WinAmp often needs 10 seconds or more to do the same thing. The interface can be a tad quirky, with its right- and left-click aware buttons, but a broad selection of skins helps make XM Player easier to use.

Rating: 4 USB keys

Pixel Perfect
XnView
www.xnview.com
Disk space: 14.4MB

Whether you manage gigabytes of digital photos or need to retouch screen shots and graphics, the free XnView application can do the job better. Much better. Fast and intuitive, XnView displays virtually any
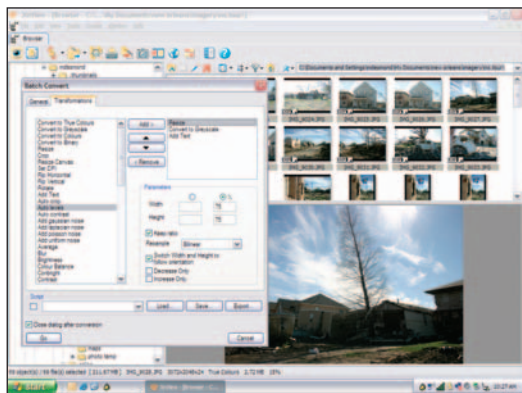
Figure 3. Rich batch conversion tools let you transform entire collections in a single step—a huge time saver.

graphic (and even many video) file formats in a familiar Explorer-like split screen interface. Powerful, rules-based batch conversions let you rename, resize, compress, adjust and even transform images to new formats. Create slide shows, output contact sheets and produce attractive Web pages of your photos. A ridiculously complete, yet intuitive, image-management program.

Rating: 5 USB keys

IT Tools
Able Uploader
FileZilla
http://portableapps.com/apps/internet/ftp/portable_filezilla
Disk space: 3.29MB

If you need to upload and download files from a remote server, the popular FileZilla open source FTP app has been the ticket. The portable version of this client keeps the fast and well-designed UI, so you can carry your numerous server pre-sets anywhere. Unlike other FTP apps, which have gone on to embrace bloat, FileZilla does one thing very well—move files across networks. A must have.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Password Manager
KeePass Password Safe
http://keepass.sourceforge.net/index.php
Disk space: 750KB

Password confusion is a growing malady. Rather than keep passwords in an easy-to-snoop text file or on sticky notes, store them in KeePass and protect them with a universal password. Because the app is portable, you can run this secure storage utility from any Windows PC. A killer app for the portable set.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Itty Bitty BitTorrent
uTorrent
www.utorrent.com
Disk space: 155KB

This tiny app lets you tap into the vast BitTorrent distributed file sharing network. Used to enable everything from the download of software patch-
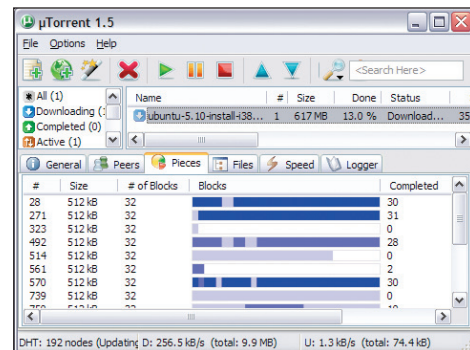
Figure 4. Despite its compact size, uTorrent gives you helpful information about the status of your file transfers.

es and technical documentation to outright media piracy, BitTorrent uses an innovative distributed access scheme to speed file transfers. While there are plenty of BitTorrent clients, uTorrent is smaller and more portable than the rest.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Heads up Display
Statbar
www.statbar.nl
Disk space: 330KB

To diagnose an intermittent system or connectivity problem, you need situational awareness. Few utilities do a better job of providing heads-up system intelligence than Statbar, a compact dashboard that displays everything from CPU and memory usage to network throughput, system uptime and battery charge levels. Handy volume and system on/off/lock controls offer one-touch access to oft-used functions.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Diagnostic and Troubleshooting Tools
Document and Overcome
WinAudit
www.pxserver.com/WinAudit.htm
Disk space: 620KB

Take stock of your entire system hardware and software configuration, from BIOS, OS and application-version information to the status of open ports and services. You can select which areas of the system to audit, and can print, e-mail or save the results as a report, including to a .CSV file.

Rating: 4 USB keys

Productivity *on the Go*

Scan and Deliver
Angry IP Scanner
www.angryziber.com/ipscan
Disk space: 108KB

When I need to reach out and ping a bunch of systems, I reach for Angry IP Scanner. This bitty utility launches in a flash and lets me ping and resolve hundreds of local and Web-based IP addresses in a single go. I can discern IP addresses from URLs and perform tasks like traceroute and geolocation. A Favorites list keeps frequently pinged addresses handy and the program can write out scan results to a variety of formats.

Rating: 4.5 USB keys
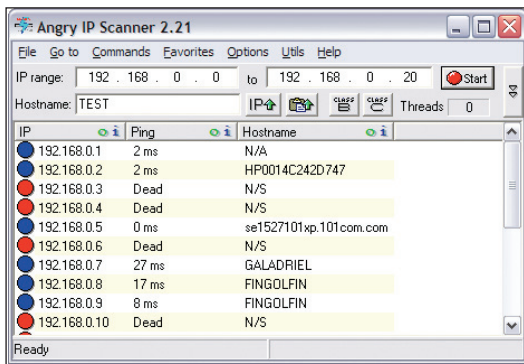
Figure 5. Ping and resolve hostnames for a range of IP addresses—just the thing to see who is awake on your LAN.

False Start Finder
Sysinternals Autoruns
www.sysinternals.com/Utilities/Autoruns.html
Disk space: 333KB

Autoruns plumbs your Registry and system settings to find every executable, DLL and component invoked between the moment you hit the power button and when Windows finishes loading.

Each entry offers a Google link, which launches a Web browser with Google search results for the selected file name—great for sleuthing mystery entries (and you will find a few). Use the tabbed interface to explore items by category, while the Hide Signed Microsoft Entries setting spots third-party components that can be the source of trouble. A simple checkbox interface lets you disable components

that autoload. Just be careful—users have hosed their boot routines by axing the wrong bits.

Rating: 5 USB keys

Task Manager on Steroids
Sysinternals Process Explorer
www.sysinternals.com/Utilities/ProcessExplorer.html
Disk space 1.4MB

The Task Manager's Processes tab is the first place IT-savvy folks go to search for a runaway process or locked up application. Sysinternals' Process Explorer is a much more functional—if cluttered—utility that offers exhaustive detail and fine control. For instance, I can display the CPU history of each running item, so I can track down apps that intermittently hog resources. The program also lets you promote or demote process priorities, kill or suspend processes, and even perform system events like shutdown or restart of the PC.

Rating: 4.5 USB keys

Connect More
Sysinternals TCPview
www.sysinternals.com/Utilities/TcpView.html
Disk space: 104KB

If you need to sniff out active network connections on a Windows-

based PC, Microsoft includes the text-based netstat utility. Sysinternals' TCPView does pretty much the same thing, but offers a sensible Windows interface that makes the resulting output much easier to process. You can sort results so it's easy to find specific processes, or save a snapshot to a .TXT file for review offline.

Rating: 4 USB keys

Disk Drive Scanner
Scanner
www.steffengerlach.de/freeware/index.html
Disk space: 156KB

Windows Explorer makes it maddeningly tough to figure out how much disk space is being consumed by a folder.

Steffen Gerlach's freeware Scanner application displays a concentric pie chart that reveals the size of every folder and file on a disk—all at once. Great for assessing what might be filling up your PC's hard disks.

Rating: 4 USB keys

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