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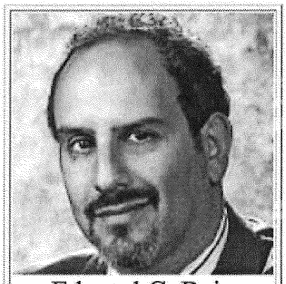
Tech Review

Bits of organization clear clutter

Dots, Snippets streamline your time on the Net

By Edward C. Baig, USA TODAY



Edward C. Baig

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I'm not the neatest person you'll ever meet. The last time anyone saw the top of my desk was during the Eisenhower administration. OK, I exaggerate. But I need all the help I can get organizing the piles around me.

I'd rather be more orderly on the Internet, too. For all the Net's riches, it can be a royal pain in the rear. There's too much happening, and accessing even the simplest stuff - a quickie stock quote or weather forecast - takes too long. Sure, I can bookmark favorite sites or customize a portal page. But those involve surfing from site to site. What if I'm not in the mood, or simply don't have the time? Why must I be exposed to a full Web page each time I want to digest a slice of the material on display?

Several start-ups - DoDots, iWare, NetSanity, Snippets.com and Winfire among them - narrow the distance between you and Net content you crave in a hurry. Some of these companies have unleashed browser companions, or toolbars that run along the edge of your Netscape or Internet Explorer browser. Others offer approaches that work completely outside the browser.

One of the most appealing solutions is in the latter camp, and it puts a new spin on the term "dot-com." DoDots, started by Stanford alumni and twin brothers George and John Kembell, is built around small,

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discrete windows known as Dots. Think of them as bite-size Net applications that sit on your desktop. But you need not type Web addresses to get to them. Dots can hold your daily schedule, pictures or restaurant reviews; the typical Dot contains about one-tenth of the contents found on a full page. You can resize Dots, turn them on or off, and drag them around the screen. The first Dots went "live" last month, though the program is in its pre-release stages.

The Kembells, who have a consumer packaging background, extend the packaging metaphor to the Web. "Before Dots, companies were putting everything on the Internet in the same way - big pages," John Kembell says. "That's like putting everything a store sells in the same box."

To use DoDots, download a free HomeDot at the DoDots site. The HomeDot is the first thing you'll see when you subsequently click on the DoDots icon and log in. With it, you can store and categorize Dots you collect around the Web, found at the DoDots home page and partner sites. You also can click a Get button in the HomeDot to find available Dots.

The idea is to connect the Dots to the tasks that brought you to the PC. While I typed this column in Microsoft Word, for example, I accessed a Merriam-Webster thesaurus and dictionary Dot. Burned by the ILOVEYOU virus last week, I checked the latest "love bug" news by perusing stories in a ZDNet Dot. For more detail, I clicked on a link and jumped to the ZDNet site.

You can e-mail Dots to friends, who can view them if they've downloaded the HomeDot. Online merchants can send you Dots with branded product pitches. Most promising is the ability to group active Dots into packs that can "talk" to one another. You might play MP3 music files in one Dot, display an album cover or lyrics in another, and open another Dot to buy concert tickets.

I have a few quibbles. You can get Dots only from the 20 companies DoDots has partner deals with, though more are on the way. I'd like to be able to make a Dot out of any site. You also can't print from Dots yet.

If Dots don't do, Snippets might. Snippets version 2.0, out Wednesday, is a free, downloadable toolbar with side-by-side thumbnail icons called snippets. Individual Snippets represent dynamic slices of the Web, parsed from the company's partners. An advantage over DoDots is that the always-visible Snippets use graphics and color to convey information. You'll see local temperature on the Snippet representing weather, provided incidentally by Yahoo! A thumbnail version of the Yahoo! weather satellite photo is visible on a separate weather Snippet. Financial Snippets (from Go.com) display stock quotes and charts. When you click on any of these small icons, a window pops up with

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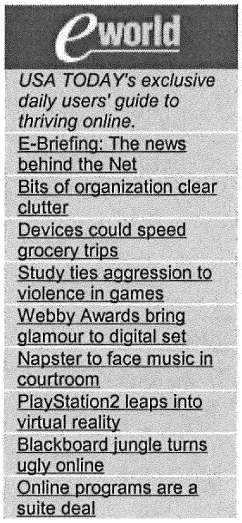
more detail (earnings per share, a more complete weather forecast). When you click again, you'll move to the complete Web pages of the information providers.

As with DoDots, I displayed Snippets for Merriam-Webster and ZDNet. My Snippets drawer, as it's called, also included icons for *Dilbert* cartoons, the *Letterman* Top Ten list and USA TODAY.



To add or delete Snippets on the toolbar is a cinch. You can hide the Snippets drawer if you want to devote the full screen to other purposes. One nice feature: If a favored site isn't among Snippets' partners, you can add a bookmark Snippet and type the Web address you want to access.

You can receive visual alerts (a glyph, grayed-out Snippet) when stock prices hiccup, auction bids are updated, or other content is revised. And you can schedule when Snippets are updated or even shown - for example, displaying stock prices only on weekdays.

Now the nits: You can display the toolbar at the top or bottom of your screen but can't drag the bar elsewhere. Nor can you change the size of individual Snippets or lift the icons off the drawer to place them anywhere you want. Another downer: The preview version I tried froze a few times.

Taking scraps from the Web makes sense on the PC. But increasingly you'll view fragments on an array of hand-held devices. NetSanity, which offers a free browser companion, the SmartBar, plans "digital pebbles" for mobile phones and personal digital assistants this summer.

Choosing Dots, pebbles or Snippets is a matter of taste. But whether used on a desktop computer or a portable device, it's neatness that counts.

Bottom line

DoDots (3 out of 4; www.dodots.com**)**
Pro: Bite-size information. Dots can be resized, dragged anywhere around the desktop and e-mailed. Plus, separate Dots can work together.
Con: Relatively few partners so far. Can't create Dots for your own sites.

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Snippets (3, www.snippets.com**)**
Pro: Clever toolbar conveys a lot of information before you click on anything.
Con: No way to drag icons off the toolbar. A little buggy.

Edward C. Baig covers technology for USA TODAY.

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