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X1 Marks the Spot

By Andrew Binstock

March 15, 2006 — As bandwidth grows, it seems, so does the amount of material we store on our systems. And as that volume grows, desktop search tools go from desirable to mandatory. Developers in particular are enormous consumers of data: books, documentation, code, Web sites, groups, RSS feeds and, of course, e-mail. With a good desktop search engine, finding one item in this material becomes easy. The more you use a search engine, the more productive you become. The relationship is tight, and makes the choice of desktop search engines important.

For most people, the choice begins and ends with Google Desktop Search. But from the moment I loaded the first version on my workstation, I didn't like it. The software had (and still has) several key limitations. The first is how little control you have over how it crawls. As Google states in its documentation, the only way to rebuild an index of searched items is—you'll think I'm kidding—to uninstall then reinstall the software!

A second problem is called page depth: Google Desktop indexes only the first 5,000 words of a document. That's fine if your documents are all letters and PowerPoint presentations, but a real bummer if they're documentation (5,000 words is roughly 10 full pages of text). A third problem, which conclusively knocked out the product, is that it does not support Eudora mail. It doesn't even read the pure ASCII files in which the messages are stored. So, to search my mail, I either had to give up Google Desktop or Eudora Mail.

Easy choice. Eudora is a superb piece of software, with two compelling advantages over the Outlook default. First, it stores attachments as separate files, and preserves mail as ASCII in identifiable mailboxes; whereas Outlook stores all messages and attachments in one monumental, proprietary file that must be culled regularly to fit on a DVD. Second, hackers typically don't target Eudora with viruses.

In addition, Eudora is more configurable, easier to administer and more frequently revved. (A free version is at www.eudora.com.) So, I gave up Google Desktop Search.

Subsequent events validated this choice. As you may know, the U.S. government has been wrangling with Google to access its search records. While the company has bravely resisted this request, the situation highlights the importance of keeping your search history on your own system. Google Desktop 3, released in February, expands the situations in which search data will be sent to Google headquarters for analysis.

So, I began a quest for an alternative desktop engine: one that does not leak data to outsiders, that reads every word of every file on its crawl, that is configurable, and that reads Eudora mail (plus the dozens of other requisite file formats). Choices were looking surprisingly disappointing until I came across a truly stellar product—X1 (www.x1.com), a highly configurable search engine that is much faster and better designed than Google.

Faster than Google? Yes! Better designed? Yup! Google's interface is the familiar: "Type in the dialog box, see 10 possibilities, page through the rest." X1 begins its search with the first letter you type. As you type, it eliminates documents with no matches. Users of the search feature in Firefox are familiar with how this approach works. Moreover, it shows you far more than 10 selections per page. You can also limit searches to e-mail, documents, contacts and so forth, of course—which you cannot do in Google Desktop or in many other search tools.

X1 is so fast—I frequently find my match before I've finished typing the search terms—that it is now being OEM'd by other vendors, including Yahoo and Eudora.

But the kicker is the display mechanism: There is a built-in viewer for every kind of file, at least as far as I can tell. So, if your search term is in a Visio diagram and you don't have Visio—no problem! X1's viewer shows the diagram, just as you would see it in Visio. Word, Excel and the like are similarly displayed.

Want more magic? If your search item is a contact in Outlook, when X1 displays the info, it formats the entire contact record (each field with its name and contents) and it opens a toolbar that enables you to send e-mail to that contact with one click. If it finds an e-mail message, the toolbar changes to buttons for forward, reply, etc. Documents can be printed or edited. Each time, it calls up the right application, so that you can work directly from the search engine when a hit is found. Now that is an interface!

X1 is not free. But at US\$75 for the desktop edition (workgroup and enterprise versions are also available), it's one of the best bargains anywhere. The free 15-day trial, I am certain, will convince you.

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Page 1 of 1

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