

Hard-Disk Hide and Seek

By Jeremy Wagstaff *The Far Eastern Economic Review*

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I have lost count of the number of times I have written about finding text in files on your computer. It's such a basic idea that you would think it would come as a standard function on most operating systems. In fact, if you're a Mac user, it does. For the rest of us, finding stuff is harder than finding something on the Internet. This has to be the dumbest thing that future generations will laugh at us for, except perhaps for considering white plastic garden chairs a charming lawn ornament and acceptable seating option.

But it's not through lack of trying. I remember a program from the late 1980s called askSam (www.asksam.com) which did a very passable job of allowing users to search through large chunks of text quickly and efficiently. But it was quirky and required a lot of patience on the part of the user. In fact, it's still going (and still quirky). In the late 1990s, a company called Enfish Corp. (www.enfish.com) launched a great product called Tracker Pro that indexed your hard drive and allowed you to search for text or chunks of text, and not only find them instantaneously, but also to view them inside Tracker itself. Tracker Pro was ahead of its time, and like all things ahead of its time now is sitting in the corner mumbling to itself, ignored, dribbling out of the corner of one toolbar menu. Enfish continues to push something called Find that is a shadow of its former self, and seems aimed more at the commercial customer than the individual. There's also a product called dtSearch (www.dtsearch.com) that does text searches quite well.

Now, the Holy Grail may have arrived. It's called X1 and is simply a fast way of searching for stuff on your hard drive or network. (Trial versions are available free from www.x1.com and <http://download.com>; the pro version is \$50.)

It's a bit like Googling your own computer. The program appears as a rather suave-looking toolbar on the top of your screen. Enter the text you're looking for and it will immediately start displaying files that include those words. X1 is similar in look and feel to Enfish Find (indeed until a week ago it, too, was called Find), but where I think it may succeed is that the folks behind it, U.S.-based Idealab, seem to have learned their lessons well. "Our approach isn't that much

different than others, but we are staying focused on simplicity and speed," says Idealab's Mark Goodstein.

Mr. Goodstein believes that the program's interface is sufficiently intuitive and innovative to allow users to narrow their searches down instantly from all to just a few, as opposed to today's search engines and desktop dtSearch utilities, which take forever. Using X1, it takes about 10 seconds to find an exact match. Part of the problem with previous programs, I think, is that people have just grown used to not being able to find stuff. So we have forced ourselves to create complicated filenames and separate folders for everything we do.

The result is we sit around twiddling our thumbs as we search through mountains of e-mails or documents. The folks at Enfish, despite their heroic efforts, never succeeded in persuading us that this was something we really needed. I, however, at least tried. I used Enfish products since they were first launched and only stopped this year when I couldn't get them to work properly with Windows XP. During all that time I tried to persuade my friends, colleagues and passers-by to use Enfish; in most cases without success.

New Features Coming

So what will X1 do that the others failed to do? The software was only released last week, but if my discussions with Mr. Goodstein are anything to go by, these guys are serious. For one thing, they seem to have taken the suggestions of beta testers (suckers like myself who enjoy testing unfinished software, and then reporting problems and offering input) seriously. The team works from the long list of suggestions and bugs and appears to have incorporated nearly all of them in the final version. That's pretty impressive, especially when you see that the program remains sleek and uncluttered, without lots of unnecessary buttons and options.

Not that X1 is perfect. I had some problems viewing the contents of Word documents. I also found some of the option boxes a little confusing. But these are minor gripes. Mr. Goodstein promises that the program will "get richer over the coming weeks and months, as we add more consumer features." These include easier searches for files that aren't just text, such as pictures and music, and also support for indexing attachments, contacts, events and Adobe Acrobat files. (For the full transcript of an e-mail interview with Goodstein, see my blog.)

It's early days. Tracker Pro looked like a winner when it appeared four years ago; now its descendants seem to be happy jostling for space in a small corner of the corporate world. If X1 is going to survive and prosper, it's going to need to

persuade ordinary users that it's not the inevitable order of things that their computer files are about as accessible as last year's tax receipts.