



OTTAWA PC NEWS

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The newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group

June 2002

SOFTWARE REVIEW

Alpha Five v4.5 Relational Database

by Bob Gowan

For as long as I've been a regular (daily) user of personal computers, some 15 or 16 years, I guess, I've had the most fun working with databases. With my first "real" PC, a used laptop (that had dual 3.5" floppy drives and no hard disk drive), I got a copy of a "home-made" personal organizer that the original owner had developed. I used this application extensively for several years, and although I never got it to do everything I wanted, I had a great time trying to figure out how it worked, and in trying to customize it to suit me. Since then, I have continued to dabble with databases whenever I can. Over the years, I've used most (at least a dozen different ones) of the popular "personal" database software products, and seen a number of them come and go. Although I am by no measure a serious developer, I have created a number of "quick and dirty" applications for use by me alone, or my family and friends, and even a few for co-workers and student employees, to collect, analyse and report on specific sets of data. In recent years, I've had less chance to work with databases and had almost forgotten how much I enjoyed it.

Then, a little over a year ago, I dug out a copy of the Alpha Software's original Windows product, Alpha Five version 1, which I purchased at (I believe) a surplus sale, but never really used. I remembered, however, that this one was known for its ease of use, and its field rules to control

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CLUB NEWS

June Raffle *by Bob Gowan*

At the June 12th Meeting, the OPCUG will hold another software raffle. This month, courtesy of the kind folks at Alpha Software (<http://www.alphasoftware.com>), we have a full boxed copy of their flagship product, a relational database software called Alpha Five version 4.5.

This easy-to-use and powerful program makes it possible for non-programmers and professional developers alike to build complex applications in minimal time. It comes with lots of helpful wizards and pre-defined templates that will get you started, and with its comprehensive programming language, you will have little to hold you back. A review of this program is found in this issue.

Help keep your OPCUG membership dues low by buying some raffle tickets.

As always, tickets are \$1 for one, \$2 for three, or \$5 for ten.



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Next meeting:

WEDNESDAY, June 12th, 2002 - BBQ!

Speak for Yourself at the OPCUG BBQ!

by Tim Mahoney

At the upcoming June 12th meeting, you're the Speaker, as we enjoy our first OPCUG BBQ before we break for the summer.

Take the opportunity to speak for yourself as you chat and socialize with fellow OPCUG members while enjoying food and beverages outdoors. Food, beverages, picnic tables, party tent, music, BBQ grills, and cooks will all be supplied by the OPCUG. The only thing you need to bring is yourself, your family, or a prospective member.

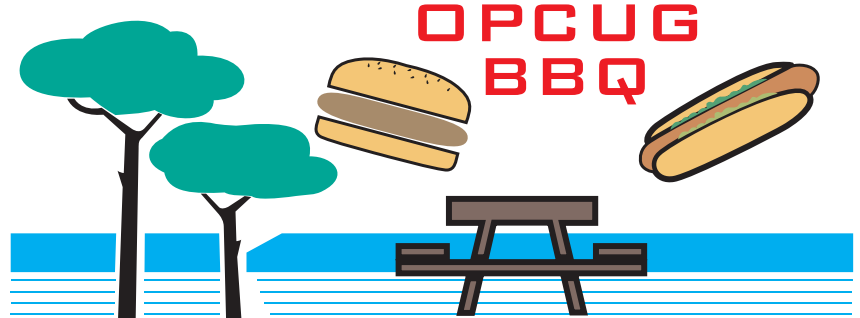
As usual we will have a few administrative announcements and door prizes to give away. Later we will have our regular SIG meetings inside.

We'll start our meeting a bit earlier — so that we can enjoy the sunshine — at 6:30 p.m. under the party tent near the front entrance to the Museum of Science and Technology building. Later at 8:00 p.m., we will have our regular SIG meetings inside.

Please take a moment to email me at timothy@cyberus.ca to indicate you're attendance and how many in your party to ensure that we have plenty of supplies on hand. Also please indicate your preference for hamburgers or hot dogs, and if you're a big eater or tiny eater.

Sorry, no alcohol is permitted on the grounds, but the PIG SIG will be meeting at Chances 'R' later the same evening.

Let's step away from our computers for a while and have some fun!



CLUB NEWS

May Meeting Prizewinners

by Mark Cayer

David Curling won the copy of EDR commander which was raffled off and Micheline Johnson won the "memory eraser" (bottle of wine) door-prize.



CALENDAR

Meetings	Date	Time and venue
OPCUG General Meeting	Wednesday, June 12 th	6:30 p.m. Auditorium of the National Museum of Science and Technology, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd.
Internet SIG (I-SIG)	Wednesday, June 12 th	Come and join our discussions!
Developers SIG	Wednesday, June 12 th	Immediately following the main OPCUG presentation, and occasionally at other locations in the region.
Delphi User Group	TBA	8:00 p.m. at Chapters Store in the Pinecrest Mall (at the Queensway)
Ottawa Paradox Users Group	3 rd Thursday each month	6:00-8:00 p.m. — Corel Bldg 1600 Carling Ave

Please note that unless otherwise noted, SIGs meet at 9:00 p.m. (immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting).

Alpha Five *...continued from page 1*

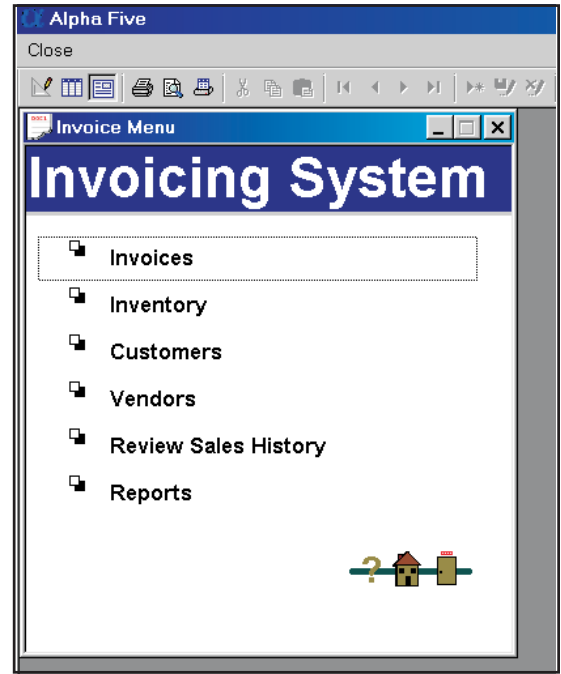
and validate data entry, and this was what I needed for a new “project.” Alpha Five “fit the bill” all right, and renewed my interest in database programming. Anyone who read my report on the recent Alpha Five Developer’s Conference, in the May newsletter, will know already that I’m impressed with this product. Since then, I’ve received a review copy of the current version of Alpha Five – version 4.50 (build 266). As expected, this is a whole new world from the original version, so this article will not attempt to compare the two, nor to describe all the “new” features. And I have not tested this copy in a networked environment. Instead, this review will simply try to introduce to the OPCUG a few of the many terrific features of this little known gem of a product.

I should point out that Alpha Five is not easy to find in “bricks and mortar” stores. Your best bet may be ordering it directly from Alpha Software, where it can be obtained as a download or on CD. The URL for Alpha’s web site is provided at the end of this article. Take a look at this excellent site, check out its variety of resources for Alpha users, download a time-limited trial of version 4.50 and try it out for yourself before committing to purchase. Alternatively, I can direct you to a Canadian supplier, who features Alpha Five prominently in both its mailed catalogue and online store. The CD version comes in a striking orange and blue package that does seem to be designed for recognition on a store shelf. Inside, there is a single jewel case and CD, and a single sheet of paper containing the software registration key. Following an all-too-common trend, all of the documentation for this version is digital. While I do not mind this approach if the software is easy to use, I suspect many users do expect some printed documentation; at least a “getting started” guide. The CD label does indicate that this guide is available on the CD, so those that think they need it could print a copy before starting.

The CD label also lists three simple steps (Start – Run – Setup) for installation of the software and documentation. From this point, the Wise Installer guides you through selection of program files destination and what other components (templates, documentation, etc) to install — indicating space requirements for each. Both Adobe Acrobat (PDF) and Word (DOC) versions of all documentation are available for installation. They appear in a sub-menu called “Books” under both the Start ... Program Group and under Alpha Five’s Help. I will return to the documentation later in this article.

When you start Alpha Five, the Welcome dialog gives you a choice to create a new empty database, to create a new database from an existing template, or to open an existing database, either from a list of those recently used or using the Browse dialog. Alpha provides many step-by-step procedural guides, called “genies” to help you complete most operations. The New Database Genie give you a choice of a variety of complete “real world” applications, such as an Invoicing or Inventory systems, Employee Records, Membership or Mailing List Managers and a Contact Manager, that could be used as created, without

modification. Alpha Five uses “sets” to define the linkages between “tables” in its relational database structure. The tables use the well-known DBF format so can easily be exchanged with most other “Office suite” software.



Each of the application templates includes a fully-working sample of the components of a typical Alpha Five application: menus, sets, tables, field rules, forms, browses, reports, letters, labels, operations and code. Using Alpha’s Control Panel one can examine, under separate tabs for each of these components, any object or detail of these components and learn a great deal about relational database design or Alpha’s programming language, Xbasic. A right-mouse-click on any object opens a context-sensitive menu dialog giving access to any of that object’s properties or the operations that can be performed on it. For instance, for a table, the right-click dialog menu includes edit table structure, edit field rules, define index, pack, and more. By simply exploring these options, it’s easy to discover the power and ease of use of Alpha Five for yourself.

Whether you use one of the sample application templates above, or create a new database from scratch, when you add a new table, the context-sensitive New Object Genie allows to pick from a list of about 35 table templates.

Alpha Five ...continued

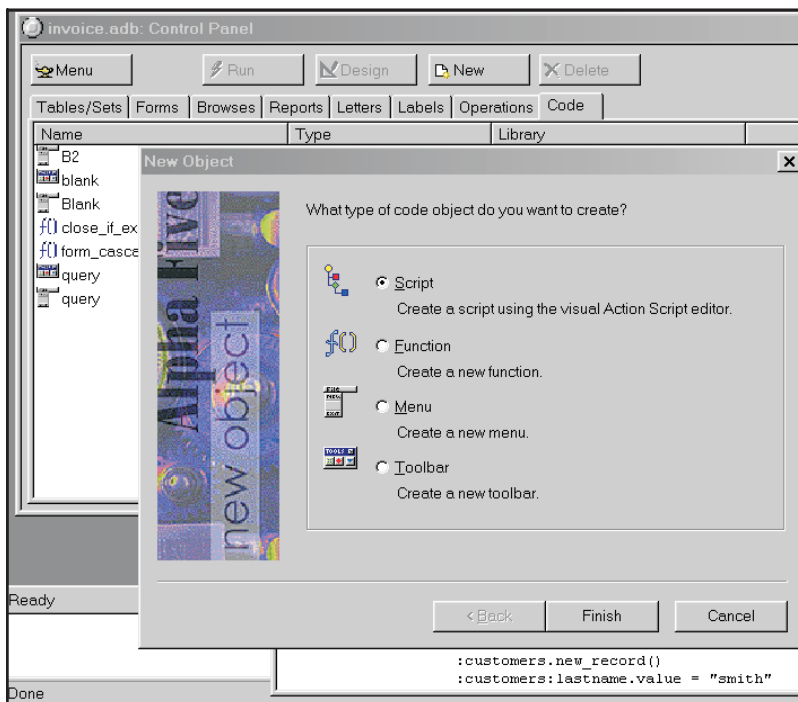
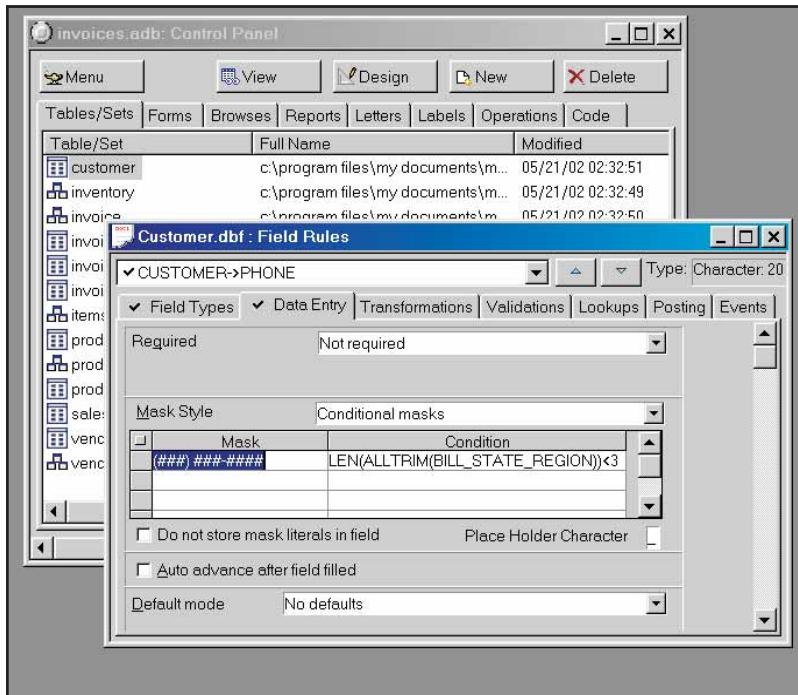
These samples are suitable for a variety of business (personnel, finance, sales) or home (collections, friends, memberships) applications. Tables can contain any of the usual types of data fields, including RTF or BMP memos and OLE objects. But one of Alpha's most widely-acknowledged features is its comprehensive set of Field Rules for speeding up data entry and preventing data entry errors. Alpha Five v4.50 has 20-some field rules covering masks or templates for data entry, data transformations and

validation expressions, a whole range of look-ups (from lists, cascading lists, tables, etc) and even postings to another table. It is the ease of use of this extensive collection of field rules that initially grabbed my attention. To create similar data entry control capability in most of the other database software requires extensive coding – in Alpha Five, it is done in a few mouse clicks.

Among Alpha's long list of Genies, more, they claim, than any other database program, are those for many table and record operations: joins, intersects, crosstabs, imports, exports, search and replace, copy, subtract, mark duplicates, unmark, delete, post, query and more. There's a Button Genie that makes it a snap to add to a form a button that will perform some task like posting data to a master table, or printing a report. Alpha's Query Genie allows you to pick either Query by Form or Query by Table to find any records in the most complex data sets. The reports designer makes it easy, by simply dragging and dropping, to create impressive reports and there are specific genies for letters and labels. Alpha Five's network optimization, full-text indexing and ODBC support for SQL databases make it simple and fast to find any of your data.

Alpha's very extensive programming language, Xbasic, makes it possible to extend the capability of Alpha Five about as far as you could imagine. And you don't have to be a programmer already to take advantage of this language because Alpha provides an easy-to-use features and tools like its Action Scripting, Xbasic Explorer and Script Recorder that will guide you through the learning process. New Scripts, Menus, Toolbars or Functions can be created step-by-step with Action Scripting using the New Code Genie, and then converted to Xbasic. Though I have not yet made much use of these tools, it seems to me that the code they generate is very "clean" as compared to other code generators I've seen in previous database development work.

No doubt the best way to become proficient in Xbasic is to work through the sample applications and the 500-page Xbasic Reference Manual included with the on-line documentation. While I have heard some complaints about Alpha Five's documentation, I think this must be simply about the lack of hard copy. I found that overall, the documentation is well-written and extensive –



Membership Drive Wrap-Up

by Bob Gowan

900 pages in all – and each document includes a table of contents and an index, both very detailed. Alpha Five's Help files are also comprehensive, well-organized and consistent with the the PDF and DOC Books. In addition to the Xbasic manual, there is a "Getting Started" guide, a Users Guide (258 pages) and a "What's New" guide, all based on the 4.0 version; as well as a "What's New in Version 4.5" document. In addition, there are other published books, written by third parties, at both beginners and advanced levels, and available through Alpha's web site.

There are many more things I could write about – perhaps in a future article – hardly covering the basics of what this software can do. Those interested in databases should check out Alpha's website for more description of features and testimonials from users much more experienced than me. While a new version, 5.0, is expected this summer, anyone interested should not wait – there is lots they can learn and do with the current version. Besides, Alpha will credit the full purchase price of the current version towards upgrading to the next version on its release. You just can't lose !!

System Requirements (as stated by developer):

- 486 or better processor
- 32 MB RAM
- 12 MB of Disk Space (32 MB recommended)
- VGA Display
- Microsoft Windows 95/98/NT/2000/ME/XP

The Bottom Line:

Product: Alpha Five version 4.50

Developer: Alpha Software

Web site: <http://www.alphasoftware.com>

Price: US\$145 (Download) or
US\$149 + S&H (CD)
(3- and 5-user network packs and
unlimited runtime version also
available)



In recent issues of your newsletter, you may have seen our promotion of the 2002 membership drive. Over the past few years, OPCUG, like most other computer user groups, has experienced a steady decline in membership. If we hope to continue to attract speakers for our general meetings, we need to maintain a healthy membership and have a strong turnout of members and guests at our meetings.

While all members are encouraged to bring a guest to any meeting, those who signed in their guest(s) at the last two (April and May) general meetings have a good chance of winning one or more of the great prizes provided for our membership drive. Thanks to all of the members who brought a guest to either meeting. For any guest signed in at the last two meetings who has joined OPCUG before the START of the June meeting, their sponsoring member will receive two additional chances to win a prize.

At our June meeting, the prizes for sponsoring members will be determined by draw. A total of four membership drive prizes will be awarded. The first one drawn, and in attendance at the meeting, will have their choice of either:

- **Drive Copy v4.0** (software)
donated by PowerQuest,
- **Drive Image v5.0** (software)
also donated by PowerQuest,
- **Koala HTML** (software)
donated by Avantrix or
- membership for one year to the
Ottawa PC Users' Group,
donated by OPCUG.



Any winners not attending the June meeting will be contacted, in order drawn, for their choice of remaining prizes.

Thanks to PowerQuest Corporation and Avantrix Inc. for their contributions. Good luck.



NTFSDOS by Chris Taylor

In April and May, I reviewed portions of the Winternals Administrator's Pak 3.0 — ERD Commander, Remote Recover, and Disk Commander. This month, I wrap up the Admin Pak with reviews of NTFSDOS Pro and Monitoring Tools.

When NTFS was introduced by Microsoft back with Windows NT v3, many hailed it as a real breakthrough. Finally, we had a journaling file system that was far more robust than the old FAT file system. But with that robustness came a price. It was no longer possible to access a disk that was formatted as NTFS unless you were in Windows NT.

That made for a real problem when it came to trouble-shooting. If you could not get Windows NT to boot, you could not get access to the file system to attempt to fix the problem. A real “catch-22”.

Well, the folks at Winternals came to the rescue with NTFSDOS. Currently at v4.02 in the “Pro” version, it permits you to access NTFS-formatted drives from MS-DOS. NTFSDOS Pro uses the existing NTFS drivers from Windows NT/2K/XP. Since it is Microsoft's driver code being loaded, compatibility is assured. Very slick!

You must supply your own DOS boot disk and it must be at least DOS5. However, it is recommended that you use at least DOS7 — the version included with Windows 95 and 98 — as that is the first version to support long file names. As well, to set up an NTFSDOS boot

disk, you need to have a working copy of NT, 2K, or XP somewhere, as it needs to make copies of some of the files.

A wizard walks you through the creation of a pair of diskettes. The instructions they provide might lead you to believe you can add NTFSDOS Pro to a bootable DOS disk. The problem is, once the disk is bootable, there is not enough remaining disk space to add the required files for NTFSDOS. Fortunately, it is easy enough to work around this problem. Just feed blank, formatted floppies to the wizard. Then, boot with a bootable DOS disk, swap out the disk for the disk containing NTFSDOS and load the program.

Once loaded, NTFSDOS will find all hard drive partitions and assign them drive letters. From there, you have complete read/write access to the NTFS partitions. You can replace corrupted files, edit configuration files, run anti-virus software, etc.

Also included is NTFSCCHK, which is similar to CHKDSK included in NT, 2K, and XP. It allows you to boot from DOS and perform a standard repair process on an NTFS volume. Very nice.

The final portion of the Administrator Pak v3.0 is Monitoring Tools, which is actually a pair of programs—Filemon/EE and Regmon/EE. These are two terrific trouble-shooting programs designed to shed some light on what is going on under the hood. Filemon/EE monitors accesses to the file system and Regmon/EE monitors accesses to the registry.

More frequently than I would like, I have seen programs fail (most frequently installation programs) with obscure messages such as “file not found”. The problem is that they frequently give you no clue as to what file was not found.

Filemon/EE, monitors all attempted file system accesses. It gives a time stamp, the process that was attempting the access, what type of request was attempted, the full path to the file being accessed, the result, and “Other”. Typically, this last bit of information gives you things like an offset into the file being accessed, attributes being set on a file, etc.

#	Time	Process	Request	Path	Result	Other
31565	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	FSCTL_IS_VOLUME_MOUNTED	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	
31566	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	Create	C:\Updates\sample.txt	FILE NOT FOUND	W Attributes: Any Options
31567	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	FSCTL_IS_VOLUME_MOUNTED	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	
31568	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	Create	C:\Updates\sample.txt	SUCCESS	W Attributes: A Options: C
31569	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	UserClose	C:\Updates\sample.txt	SUCCESS	
31570	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	FinalClose	C:\Updates\sample.txt	SUCCESS	
31571	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	FSCTL_IS_VOLUME_MOUNTED	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	
31572	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	Create	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	R Attributes: Any Options
31573	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	QueryDirectory	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	FileBothDirectoryInformat
31574	6:54:16 AM	WINCMD32.EXE:1732	UserClose	C:\Updates\	SUCCESS	

#	Time	Process	Request	Path	Result	Other
24797	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	OpenKey	HKCU\software	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE2EE6800
24798	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CreateKey	HKCU\software\Helios	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE3367520
24799	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CreateKey	HKCU\software\Helios\TextPad 4	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE12E7300
24800	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CloseKey	HKCU\software	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE2EE6800
24801	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CloseKey	HKCU\software\Helios	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE3367520
24802	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CreateKey	HKCU\software\Helios\TextPad 4\Tips	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE3367520
24803	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CloseKey	HKCU\software\Helios\TextPad 4	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE12E7300
24804	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	QueryValue	HKCU\software\Helios\TextPad 4\Tips	SUCCESS	0x1
24805	7:00:27 AM	TextPad.exe:1544	CloseKey	HKCU\software\Helios\TextPad 4\Tips	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE3367520
24806	7:00:27 AM	DriveMonitor.exe:476	OpenKey	HKLM\Software\Executive Software\Di...	SUCCESS	Key: 0xE36C5340
24807	7:00:27 AM	DriveMonitor.exe:476	QueryValue	HKLM\Software\Executive Software\Di...	SUCCESS	"C:\Program File

If you are having a problem with file access, you can start Filemon/EE and then run the problem program. Once you get the error, you can switch over to Filemon/EE and look for the error. Then you at least have a fighting chance of figuring out what went wrong and how to fix it. I will caution you, there is typically a *huge* amount of info you have presented to you. On my system, with about a dozen programs running, but (I thought) not doing much, I generated over 3,000 lines of information in Filemon/EE in under a minute!

Also be aware that, unless you are a programmer, it is highly unlikely you will really understand all the information presented. File system requests such as “fsctl_is_volume_mounted” are Greek to me. Fortunately, in most cases you are looking for more obvious problems, such as a failure of an “open” request.

Regmon/EE works the same way as Filemon/EE, but instead monitors registry accesses. The information it reports is the time stamp, the process attempting a registry access, what the request was (such as querying a key or setting a value), the path in the registry, the result, and “Other”. Typically, the “Other” column is used to detail values read or written.

Like Filemon/EE, Regmon/EE generates a *lot* of information. On my system, I had about 500 registry accesses in the first minute of operation. And again, like Filemon/EE, most of it was pretty Greek to me. But if you are trying to trouble-shoot a problem, it may jump out at you when you see, for example, a

registry write being denied. Maybe someone tightened down security on registry keys more tightly than a particular application can deal with.

Filemon/EE and Regmon/EE share many capabilities. First, the /EE portion of the name stands for “Enterprise Edition” and indicates that you can monitor a remote system over the network. You can also filter and highlight lines based on certain text. You can pause scrolling and capturing of data. You can print or save out the information to a file. And you can set the windows to be “always on top”.

Like most of Winternals programs, both Filemon/EE and Regmon/EE provide a wealth of information that generally will not help the true novice. But if you have any degree of skill at trouble-shooting, they provide you with that extra information you may need to understand what is going wrong.

All three programs in this review are available in more limited forms from the www.sysinternals.com site. Sysinternals is run by the Winternal folks, but contains a wealth of free utilities. Among other things at the site, you can find NTFSDOS v3.02, Filemon v4.34, and Regmon v4.34

NTFSDOS works basically the same as NTFSDOS Pro, but in read-only mode. Filemon and Regmon are very similar to the “EE” versions but lack the ability to save to a log file as the data is generated and they can only access the local system, not other systems over the wire.

System Requirements

- NTFSDOS Pro – a drive formatted with NTFS and a DOS bootable diskette (at least DOS5, DOS7 recommended)
- Monitoring Tools – Windows 95 through Windows XP supported.

Administrator’s Pak v3.0 – US\$699

NTFSDOS Pro v4.02 – US\$299

Monitoring Tools – US\$44



OTTAWA PC NEWS

Ottawa PC News is the newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group (OPCUG), and is published monthly except in July and August. The opinions expressed in this newsletter may not necessarily represent the views of the club or its members.

Member participation is encouraged! If you would like to contribute an article to *Ottawa PC News*, please submit it to the newsletter editor (contact info below). Deadline for submissions is three Saturdays before the next General Meeting.



Group Meetings

OPCUG meets on the second Wednesday in the month, except July and August, at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd, Ottawa. Meetings are 7:30–9:00 p.m. and Special Interest Groups go until 10 p.m.

Fees

OPCUG annual membership: \$25 per year.

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CLUB NEWS

Examination of OPCUG account record for 2001

by John Archibald

I have examined the OPCUG's account records for calendar year 2001 as requested and have the following to report:

- The year began with a bank balance of \$6,119.41 on December 20, 2000.
- I found no items, or discrepancies, in the records, that cannot be easily rationalized. I have attached notes, for the OPCUG treasurer's attention, to the monthly bank statements affected.
- Cash surpluses during year 2000 were invested in bank GICs and totalled \$7,500.00 at the close of the year 2000.
- On 15 October, 2001, cash was growing in the bank balance. It was apparently decided at this point to invest some of this money and an account was opened with Ing. A deposit of \$4,000.00 was made which, effectively, opened a second account and a second set of books.
- On 20 November, 2001, the maturing \$7,500.00 GIC, plus interest, was deposited and the cash on hand now stood at more than \$10,000.00. The GIC principle and \$1,500 was then deposited to the ING account.
- The last transaction of the year 2001 resulted in a bank balance of \$1,975.04 and to this can be added the last statement from ING, which totalled \$12,036.38, as cash invested. This produces a grand total of \$14,011.12 in cash.
- This examination does not take into account the new sales of mugs and tools to members. The value of unsold items is not accounted for, except in deposits to the bank which appear to be included with revenue from raffles, etc. and cannot be identified. The value of unsold items therefore should be reported as an asset, assuming they will not depreciate from purchase cost, as do items used for operation of the club. These latter items include those which are consumed, wear out, or become redundant through usage.

Attested to by John A. Archibald, member #1071,
OPCUG, this 6th day of May, 2002.

GGG