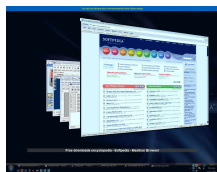


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Be a Windows Tamer!

Add visual pleasure to windows switching system

Windows users looked over the fence into the competition's yard craving for the cool effects they have seen there. Windows, Linux and Mac, they all permit working with windows but including additional effects to the handling process started a real frenzy. The normal ALT-Tab function enriched with new features attracts users like a magnet. The Redmond giant considered introducing new effects when it started working at the so called Longhorn project lately renamed Vista. Now the available Windows Vista delights users with its new interface along with the implementation of new effects applied on the windows. For those who want to add cool effects to the windows switching process in Windows XP, Otaku Software is providing a tray resident application which extends the universe of the ALT-Tab function introducing switch effects based on different user setup hot keys. The responsible application is Top Desk. At a competitive price of 14.95 USD it can instantly give you a thumbnail view of all the opened windows, allowing you to quickly show/hide and change the active windows on the desktop or have a per ensemble 2D or 3D view. The application can be downloaded and tested free of charge for a period of 30 days which I consider more than enough to build yourself a firm opinion about the functions and utility of it. The installation procedure worked flawless but not unattended, because it acted as a setup guide at the same time. Besides accepting the legal terms, the user is asked to select some preferences: the layout style, the main hot key which can be the default Alt-tab combination or simply the F9 key and an image quality standard. The last option mentioned is very important and depends on the system you are running the application on. Because graphic effects are involved, the better your machine is the smoother the effects that are rendered; therefore, when asked, you need to choose what is most convenient: to sacrifice some CPU or a part of the memory. The standard image quality means using more memory and less processor but if you believe that your computer is speedy enough you can select the improved windows image quality giving more work to the processor for a better image. All the steps being completed, the application started working in background placing a tray icon near the Windows clock. I checked the task manager in order to get some information about the memory it eats. Tested on an AMD 64 3000 + with 512 MB Ram and having previously selected the standard image quality for windows I can tell you that the program eats up 33.844 k of memory and comparing it to other running applications like MS Word (46.948 k) or Yahoo Messenger 8 (42.300k) I can say it uses fair resources. About the graphical interface there are not too many words to be said because we are dealing with a background running application and its only interface can be found under the options window. The preferences selected during the installation process are not the only ones. Top Desk provides a variety of options which can be accessed by right clicking the tray icon. The first option, a mandatory one in my opinion, is starting along with the Windows Startup. I advise you to use it in order to get used to the new behaviors the application introduces to the windows switching process. The option menu is structured under two tabs: User Input and Windows. I found it very easy to configure the application using the options menu. The User Input tab is related to all the commands that can be transmitted by the user in order to use the switching effects. Top Desk offers 3 methods to induce windows switches: using hot keys, floating buttons or mouse hot spot actions. The variety of interaction options is a plus. Regarding the hot keys, you are able to use single or key combinations linked to four tile actions: All Windows, Visible Windows, Application Windows and Hide Visible Windows. Moreover, attached to these hot keys, users can select the creation of floating buttons. These buttons are generated by the application to offer quick

access to the tile options mentioned above. This is a great feature for those who find it difficult to use or remember hot keys. The floating buttons are transparent and reside on the desktop. Users have the freedom to drag them wherever they find it convenient for a proper usage. Mouse hot spot actions is a catchy feature that permits setting up an invisible but sensitive area on the screen where, when placing the mouse over, it reacts undertaking an action preselected by the user. The area size and activation delay are easily customizable throughout the options menu by using two sliders. Mouse hotspots can be deployed for all the desktop corners as well for the in-betweens. Only the center of the screen cannot be used. Moving forward, we get to the Windows Tab where options regarding the windows information and animations are found. The beauty of the application resides in the diversity animations. Tiling windows can be done with simple scale or using both scale and rotation on x, y and z axes. All these along with the hiding window animation can be setup in the Tiling Animation section with the possibility to adjust the speed level using two comfortable sliders. The last section is dedicated to the tiled windows. Users can select the update method for the tiled windows or change the image quality settings I have mentioned before during the installation process presentation. For a convenient usage, developers attached to the tiled windows an information stripe with the name of the application to whose window it belongs. This stripe can be easily removed or, if kept, users can choose the preferred font and size according to their tastes. Maybe the most relevant option of Top Desk is choosing the layout. There are three layouts available: Grid, Spatial and Flip. The number is not impressive. Though I would have loved to have more layouts available, the three ones do their job alright in order to produce visual pleasure. To sum it up, I can say Top Desk is an enjoyable application that brings a new feeling to Windows XP. It detaches users from the daily routine of working in a monotone computer environment by adding eye catchy effects. I recommend using it in case you do not plan to switch to Vista. **The good** It breaks the monotony of the standard windows switching system. All features are well linked with related options permitting the user to have full control and customize at will. Vista-like effects easy to apply on Windows XP; Multiple control possibilities: hot keys, floating buttons and mouse hotspots; **The bad** A small number of layouts provided – only 3 It does not work too well when it is used while playing games. **The truth** Top Desk has a fair price for the features provided. Although it brings cool visual effects I can say it is just a whim for those who are looking for the beautification of the desktop.