

Weekly Highlights

This week's "softlights"

I don't know about you, but it's been a hell of a week for me: dealing with all the spring frenzy, getting the right presents for all the ladies in my life (what can I say, big family), IE8 Beta 1 launch and testing all that software really raised the hectic level to limits I never knew I had.

So, this week we've been going through [this](#) and [this](#) file protection software, an [FTP client](#), frilled XP up with a nice [Flip 3D effect](#), [freed up some of the RAM](#) tangled in the system, peeked at the [next Internet Explorer](#) and turned some pictures into [great looking sketches](#). All are useful tools for different activities and different interests, coming at a more or less accessible price, or even for free.

Internet Explorer 8 - First impression

The week's star was definitely the release of [IE8 beta 1](#) to the general public, which caused quite a commotion on the Internet and soon turned into a catalyst for leading websites to analyze (well, mostly criticize) the new release, right after Microsoft servers had made the software the software. It turned out that Microsoft did not want to change our opinion on beta software and launched IE with a few glitches, nothing major, just a slip here and there. It seems that Microsoft's next web browser did not impress users too much, as they had too high hopes for it and were expecting an avalanche of features which, sadly enough, were not delivered.

But it seems that most of the changes were internal and targeted a more stable web browser that could reduce the impact of crashes to minimum, by offering the possibility of recovering all opened tabs should such mishap occur. We did not record a great difference in resource usage compared to IE7 and, unlike the current stable version, it passed Acid2 Test of the web standards with flying colors. Acid3 was indeed an utter failure and it scored very low with 17 out of 100 (for your information, **Firefox 3 Beta 3** recorded a 59/100 score, **Safari 3 Beta** went with 39/100, while **Opera 9.5 Beta** came with a whopping 64/100). Read it all [here](#).

As for IE8's features, they did not come abounding, Activities and Webslices being the most prominent of all. Sure, crash recovery is also notable, but the fact that you can now make parental settings and get a better look at the accessed domain in the address bar are details not many users can appreciate.

We have a review right here (<http://www.softpedia.com/reviews/windows/Internet-Explorer-8--Review-80257.shtml>) that presents in more detail various aspects of the application, as well as the novelty announced for helping web developers with testing in various IE versions, Developer Tools.

SmartFTP coming your way

[Smart FTP](#) is the FTP client we decided to give a spin to and it performed beautifully during our testing, but it showed no support for SSH2 (although you have great security options) and there was one feature that did

not work in our testing. But downsides are well shadowed by its upsides, as the application is designed for professionals, but it can also be easily used by novices. All options are at hand, the interface can be customized whatever way you deem fit, while the set of features and functions is overwhelming.

Users may have a bit of trouble setting it up and locating all its options, but that is really the greatest effort you are going to invest. Learning curve is almost non-existent, but if you have questions, the online help is at your disposal, covering all aspects of the application.

For faster transfer rates, SmartFTP makes available on-the-fly compression that does an amazing job with text and HTML files, shrinking them to 15-30% of the original size. The use of tabs for both parts of the dual pane view (local and remote) increases the flexibility of the application, making transfers easier to achieve (drag and drop is supported).

XP with a Flip

It seems that almost whatever software Microsoft releases on the market, a better alternative will always come out some time after. With Vista's Flip 3D, it happened exactly the same and a myriad of apps rolled in either in suites or as stand-alones. We picked [WinFlip](#) for a try and though it does not know much, it does a great job with providing a cool way to switch your windows and, as beauty is not everything, it also injected functionality.

The little thing comes with some flaws, but nothing that can't be corrected. The new features it lays on the table consist in the fact that when in 3D view each window is assigned a letter and typing that letter on the keyboard will shift focus to the corresponding window. Mouse gestures play an important role in the app, as they can be used to initiate the flip view of the windows, either by drawing circles with the mouse on the desktop, or by clicking desktop edges (you define which ones), or by simply using the mouse-wheel button.

WinFlip needs no installation and can be used on a portable device with no problems, and one of the few flaws it comes with is its inability to start with Windows on its own and an invisible mode for system tray icon. Otherwise, it can be a good substitute for the genuine Flip 3D in Vista, as resource usage is much lower (during our testing we recorded about 9MB).

Any file encryption solution

Security of your files is a simple matter to take care of, considering the various solutions on the market. [File Encryption XP](#) (don't let the name fool you, it works great on Vista as well) provides strong Blowfish encryption for your files and the possibility of wiping beyond recovery data on your disk. It can be installed on portable devices as well and move encrypted files during the process. It all works fine, but you should be aware of the fact that wiping will not mask the name of the file (but it will overwrite it with random data, so that the file becomes unrecoverable).

The password manager on the side allows the user the creation of new passwords based on a user-defined

template. That is the instrument will copy the structure of what you feed it: if the template contains uppercase letters and special symbols, the resulting password will have the same amount of uppercase letters and symbols (but not the same ones).

On the downside, there is the price which is quite spiced up, \$29.95. During our testing there were no glitches, mishaps, crashes or unfortunate events, and the application turned out to be a good tool for securing your files (especially that it uses the proprietary FEX format which brings the chances of breaking the protection closer to nil).

A sketch a minute

Drawing sketches is not for everyone, well, at least that's how it used to be until digital editing spread around. Now, you can create all sorts of effects with simple mouse clicks and little training. But turning a picture into a sketch is no longer costing, nor does this require learning special techniques. All you need is [Photo to Sketch](#) and the stack of digital photos you want to apply the effect to.

The procedure is as easy as loading the picture and pressing a single button; additional adjustments can be made in order to reach the desired result. More than this, you can add texture in the image if you think it cooler. Results are visible on the spot and you can email them directly from the software, as it activates the default email client on your system and automatically adds a subject and body to the message and attaches the image.

However, there are small inconveniences in the software, like the fact that you cannot perform a simple undo operation; instead you can clear the entire work and start from scratch. Truth is that the software can be improved and has plenty of potential to become one of the best sketch effects on the market. But considering that it is absolutely free, all its flaws seem to atone a notch.