

No. 96. Is the Floppy Dead?

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Well, not quite, but it is on its way out. Floppies have some disadvantages. They hold limited amounts of data – today's common version holds only 1.44 Mb. Another disadvantage is that they are only temporary storage media. Anyone who trusts the integrity of a critical file on a floppy placed there more than a year ago is playing with fire. Oh, your files might be just fine after even three years, but don't bet on it. The microscopic magnetic domains tend to weaken with age and even bleed into adjacent tracks, so it is not a way to store critical files unless you refresh them (write them again) every year or so. That will remagnetize the domains. However, the magnetic properties of a floppy can themselves be a pitfall. Stick one up on your refrigerator with a magnet and you are sure to instantly destroy the data. Place one too near an active "wall wart" (one of those little plug-in transformers that power everything these days) and the data will go poof. Place a floppy closer than 6 inches away from your computer monitor for any length of time and the data will go poof.

On the other hand, they are quick and easy to use. "Sneaker Net" is the nickname for using them to transfer files from one computer and another (as opposed to a real network where two or more computers are cabled together to share data). That is one of their handiest features. Another is that they are quite practical for creating a quick backup for that letter you just wrote to your credit bureau, or whatever.

Now, wouldn't it be nice if you could do that with CD-ROMs? CD-ROMs are non-magnetic (optical) media, and passing a magnet over them will not alter the data they hold. You can even pin them to the refrigerator with a magnet (though that is not recommended, because you might scratch the surface, and that can destroy the data). They hold huge amounts of information – 650 Mb each or more, depending on the type you buy. That figures out to the equivalent of 450 floppies worth of data. Moreover, they are inexpensive. You can buy CD-Rs today for 30¢ each or less. The data written to them is said to be good for between 10 and 100 years, depending upon the brand.

Yes, wouldn't it be nice if you could just drag a file from a folder on your hard drive to a formatted CD-ROM? Well, you can. The Adaptec software company (now called Roxio), which is the clear leader in CD-ROM writing software, has made it a snap.

Easy CD Creator 5 from Roxio will format a CD-R (write once) or CD-RW (write, erase and rewrite many times) for you using technology called UDF. UDF stands for Universal Disk Format. When you format a CD using CD Creator, it copies the UDF Reader to it. This then allows you to read and write files to and from the CD just the same way that you do these tasks with a floppy or hard drive. In other words, you can drag and drop a file onto the CD drive letter, and it will be copied just as if that drive letter was a floppy drive.

I just did it. I formatted a CD-R disk, which took 18 seconds. Thereafter, I copied my entire 2001 Computer Corner folder from my hard drive to the CD-R, by just dragging and dropping the folder to it. It seemed to take less than a second to finish copying about 1.2 Mb worth of files. Slick and quick!

Now then, it is not totally like working with floppies. If you format a CD with CD Creator, you cannot just push the eject button to get it out (CD Creator locks the drive to prevent data loss). You must first select from among three choices before CD Creator will eject the disc. 1. Leave the CD as is (ready for adding more files when you put it in later). Note that a standard CD-ROM drive will not be able to read the CD in this state. 2. Close the CD to UDF. It can then be read in most CD-ROM drives, but, it will need to be opened later when you put it back in before more files can be written to it. 3. Close the CD so that it can be read on any computer. Once you have selected from among these three, CD Creator will eject the CD.

I generally keep mine open (choice 1) so that I do not need to waste time re-opening it every time I wish to copy files to it. Even though it is open and cannot be read from a standard CD-ROM drive, the drive that I used to create it can both write to it and read from it just fine. When I am ready to archive the disk (file it on the shelf with no expectation of writing anything new to it), then I select option 3 – close the CD so that it can be read on any computer. On the other hand, when I want to copy stuff to other computers in my office, I select choice 2 so they can read the CD, but the option of adding more files to it later is still possible.

You can even copy a newer version of a file to the CD-R disk using Windows Explorer. When you do, Windows 9x will ask you if you want to overwrite the older version, just as it does with a floppy. If you say yes, it does not actually overwrite the data on the CD (space on a CD-R can only be used once). Rather, it copies the new file version to the CD and creates a new directory entry for it that replaces the directory entry for the old file version. Remember, when you erase a file from a CD-R, you do not actually erase it. The proof of this is that, when you erase a file from a CD-R disk, no additional space is freed up, because the data is still there, even though it is not accessible under ordinary circumstances. An erased file can be recovered (or read by someone if you throw the disk into the trash). If you are security conscious, physically destroy any CDs that you discard. Make deep scratches in the data surface (the underside). That will do it.

It will not be long before all new computers have a CD (or DVD) Read/Write drive, but no floppy drive. It is getting easier and easier to use the new technology, and like everything in life, the new will eventually replace the old. Happy computing!