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Better CD burning

There are dozens of CD writing packages with which you can copy data, documents and multimedia files and most of them put Windows XP's built-in burning wizard to shame. Jason Whittaker explains how to resume command of the recording process

Almost without exception, if you buy a new PC these days it will come with a CD writer or rewriter. And if you've got an older system you can pick up a suitable internal drive for as little as £30 or £40. The humble floppy disk is capable of storing just 1.44MB of data, while a CD-ROM can hold 650MB.

Even so, with hard drives capacities pushing the 100 to 200GB levels, the CD is already being usurped by writable and rewritable DVDs (or it will be once a DVD recording format is standardised).

However, CDs still offer one of the most convenient ways to exchange files and store or archive data, and even the cheapest PCs now come with CD writing hardware as standard.

Basic burning

Although in this feature we will be concentrating on third-party applications for burning CDs, if you use Windows XP a utility is already included that covers precisely this task: the CD Writing Wizard.

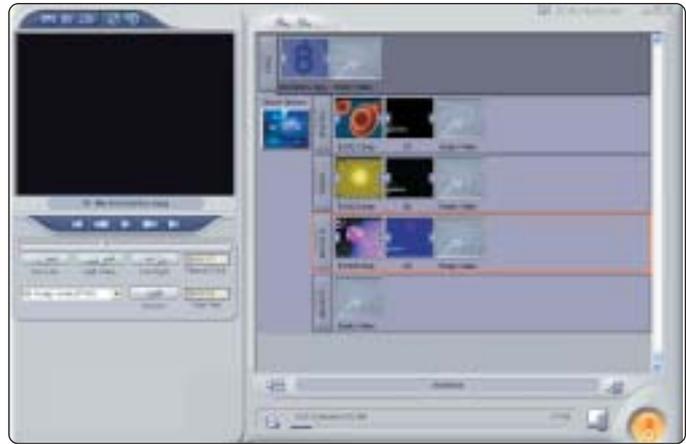
Because of its close integration with the operating system, this Wizard is particularly easy to use – assuming that you do not have any extra requirements. If you have auto insert notification selected (that is, CDs autoplay when inserted in the drive), simply placing a blank disc into your CD burner will kickstart the wizard.

If you do not choose to start the CD Writing Wizard immediately, open My Computer when you are ready and navigate to the folder storing the files

Making DVDs with Easy CD & DVD Creator



1 Start Easy CD & DVD Creator and select DVD Builder. When it has loaded, click on the icons beneath the menu to import video, audio or image files. Now you can change backgrounds, organise your clips and add menu titles in DVD Builder. To change a theme, double-click Main Menu in the Workshop area and click the Menu Theme Library button at the bottom of the screen (the button with an image of a palm tree)



2 Organise your clips in the right order by dragging them into place. You can rename movies by right-clicking on the tab for Movie A, Movie B etcetera and selecting Rename, then type something more descriptive. When you have all relevant menu entries, preview your project onscreen by clicking the remote control button in the bottom righthand corner, next to the large, orange burn button. If your DVD plays as expected, click the orange button to burn your project to disc

you wish to copy. Then, in File and Folder Tasks, on the lefthand side of the window, select Copy this File/Folder or Copy Selected Items. You then need to select your CD burner and Windows will copy your files to a temporary folder.

The process is slightly different if you are copying files from My Pictures. Select Copy to CD so that Windows will automatically create a temporary folder without you needing to select the relevant drive. In both cases (for My Pictures and other folders), a balloon appears on the Taskbar telling you that files are ready to copy. Click on this to display the folder and select Write these Files to CD or choose Delete Temporary Files if you no longer wish to copy them.

As even the cheapest third-party applications retail for more than £20, for XP users the choice between CD burning for free using the XP wizard and CD burning with another program appears simple: surely free wins every time?

XP limits

If you create CDs very infrequently XP's free utility may be enough, and with the latest version of Windows Media Player

Microsoft has much improved its software's capacity to create audio CDs as well as data backups.

The CD Writing Wizard is inflexible compared to other packages because, to its credit, Microsoft has concentrated on making it easy to use. But even simple tasks such as adding more files to a CD or creating an image for burning at a later date can be difficult if you do not use the wizard approach.

And once you start to move beyond the basic features – to create bootable CDs, for example, or to span content across multiple CDs (useful for backups) and write video discs – the XP wizard really begins to reveal its limitations.

While future versions of Windows will probably have built-in support for DVD formats, at present you will need an alternative application. Even creating video discs for CD (such as mini-DVD or SVCD) is awkward with XP, particularly if you need to add menus or a graphical interface. Utilities bundled with CD writers tend to have limited capabilities too.

We have concentrated here on CD burning tools. All of them, however, offer extras such as templates for CD covers,

utilities for copying and managing audio and data files and, in most cases, tools for writing to DVD as well as CD.

Keep your options open

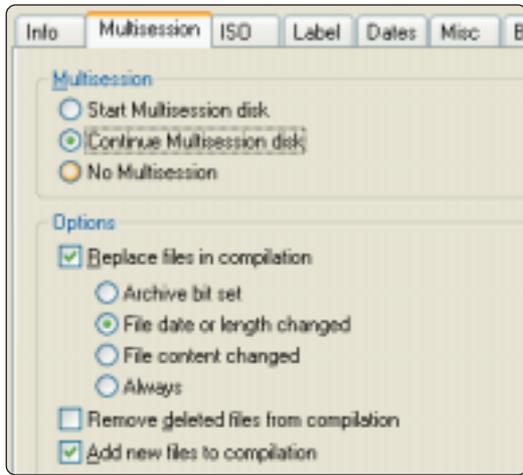
If you're not running Windows XP or need more control than the CD Writing Wizard offers, it's worth considering one of the following packages.

- Ahead Nero Burning ROM 5.5 The latest version of Nero adds support for writing to DVD and, though its interface can be intimidating for the complete novice, it's the best all-round package if you want complete control over burning discs. There's a wizard for creating common types of disc such as data backups or audio CDs, but its main appeal is its straightforward access to every setting you may wish to change on a disc.

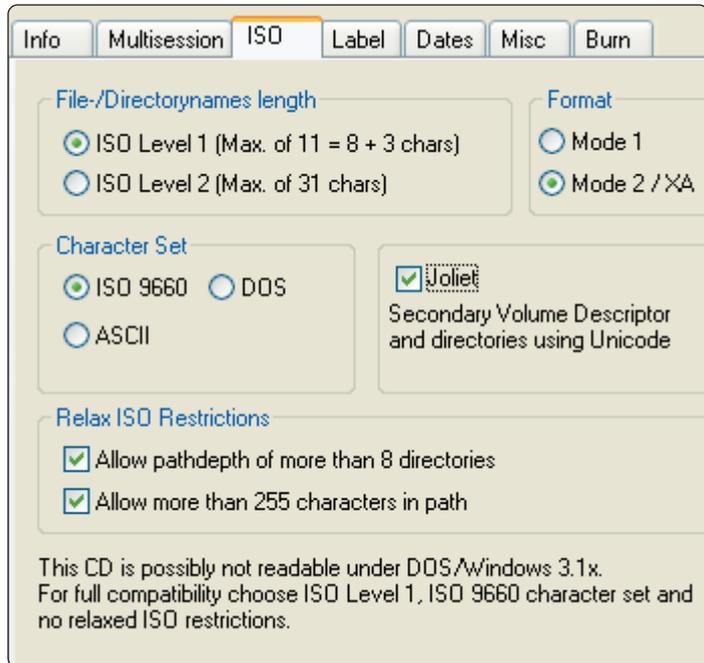
If you have to burn CDs that are as compatible with as many systems as possible this is the application to use. What's more, the download version (without media player or labelling software) is a bargain.

www.ahead.de/en; \$49 ex VAT download, \$69 ex VAT retail

Creating a CD image with Nero



1 To begin writing a new CD, click on File New. This displays the New Compilation dialog box. You can use the wizard by clicking the relevant button but for more control over the recording process select the type of CD you wish to create (in this case CD-ROM) in the window to the left. Next select the button for new/continued or no multi-session disc. Multi-session is particularly useful for CD-rewritable discs, but for straightforward CD-R it is probably best to use a no multi-session disc. Under the Label and Dates tabs you can add information such as a name and publisher as well as specify dates for recording filenames (useful for backups). Meanwhile, Misc lets you specify the size of files that can be cached to the memory buffer in your CD writer



2 The ISO tab frequently confuses new users. ISO refers to the standard for creating CD-ROM images. Strict ISO standards only allow filenames of up to eight plus three characters (ISO Level 1) or 31 characters (ISO Level 2). When creating a CD in a modern operating system such as Windows XP, you can ignore this and select the Relax ISO Restrictions checkboxes. But be warned: your discs may not be readable on DOS PCs

- Pinnacle Systems Instant CD/DVD 7.0 As its name suggests, this package handles both CD and DVD and is quick and simple to use. Indeed, along with Roxio's Easy CD & DVD Creator, Instant CD/DVD 7.0 offers the simplest interface of all the programs here. It is also slightly cheaper than the Roxio software, particularly as Instant Copy is included in the price. This is a competent piece of software, but the download version of Nero offers more for less. www.pinnaclesys.com; £37 ex VAT
- Pinnacle Systems Instant Copy The second program from Pinnacle, Instant Copy is probably the most restricted in terms of what you can do, but is also by far the cheapest.

With this program you can copy DVDs and CDs or copy DVDs to CD – and that's

about it. If you are happy with Windows XP's built-in CD-writing software but also want the ability to copy discs, this is the cheapest option available.

www.pinnaclesys.com; £24.75 ex VAT

- Roxio Easy CD & DVD Creator 6.0 This comes a close second to Nero's offering for all-round flexibility and its DVD creation features easily outstrip it. Its user interface is one of the simplest (along with Instant CD/DVD) and it comes with a host of utilities including an audio media manager and player – less useful if you have the latest version of Microsoft's Media Player – a photo manager, label creator and, most importantly, improved backup and disc copying facilities.

Easy CD & DVD Creator wins Brownie points for its new DVD Builder: if you never intend to create DVDs, Nero is still ahead

in the race, but this program is the easiest for budding directors.

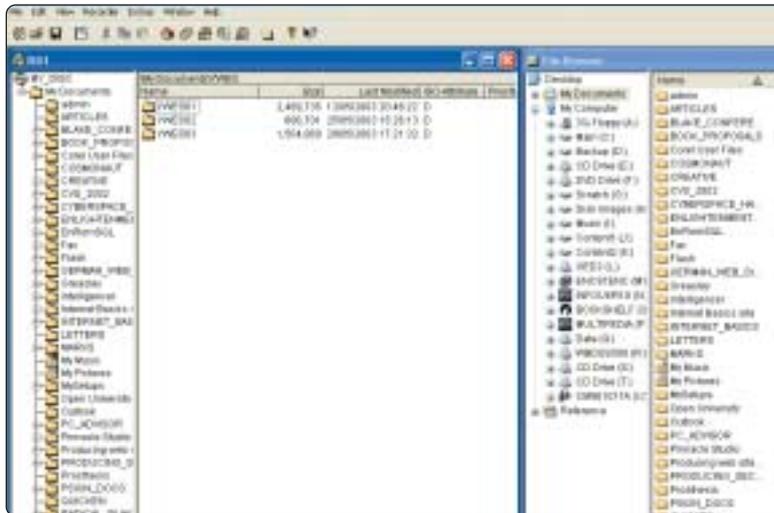
www.roxio.de/english; £41.24 ex VAT

- Roxio WinOnCD 6.0 Roxio pitches WinOnCD as its burning software for sophisticated and advanced projects. It supports video overspan across multiple discs, as well as data overspan (something most programs are capable of), enabling you to archive DVDs across multiple CDs.

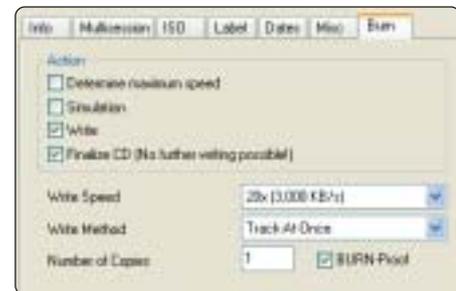
While the slightly cheaper Easy CD is recommended for greater flexibility, if you are looking for more options for creating music and movie discs than Nero can cope with, WinOnCD is the most comprehensive package. It comes complete with Mpeg-2 codecs (an extra with Nero that significantly bumps up its price) and advanced audio support for better quality music.

www.roxio.de/english; £49.49 ex VAT

Nero burning options



1 Click ok to show a new window for the CD image (marked ISO in the lefthand pane above). Selecting the files you wish to copy is as simple as clicking on folders or files in the righthand pane and dragging them across to the lefthand ISO image



2 Once you have copied your files into the CD-ROM ISO window, click the burn button on the top toolbar. From here you can specify certain settings: whether Nero should determine the maximum speed for your writer and media; whether to simulate the burning process (to check for potential errors); and whether to finalise a CD so that no further files may be copied across. To create your CD, click Write

Which burner?

Of the third-party burning packages available, we would probably recommend two programs – particularly to XP users who've outgrown the limitations of the operating system's built-in burning wizard.

The first of our suggestions is Ahead Nero Burning ROM 5.5. This package is suitable for occasional novice users who want a little extra, but sophisticated users can also delve into its options to create just about any disc format imaginable.

Easy CD & DVD Creator comes a close second: it is not as flexible for advanced users (Roxio recommends WinOnCD for them) but if you need to create DVDs complete with interactive menus, its DVD Builder is second to none and the program as a whole is a pleasure to use.

Hot burning tips

With the standard CD-writing hardware included with most new PCs, and the CD Writing Wizard in Windows XP, you can create backups of your audio and data files with minimum fuss.

By using an application such as Easy CD & DVD Creator or Nero Burning ROM, however, it's possible to get even more from the humble compact disc. Here's how to ensure the process goes smoothly.

- **Speed freak** Obviously you need faster CD writers to write fast CDs, but that is only one part of the equation: CD writers are often only as good as the media they use, so check the speed rating of the CDs you buy. While it is often possible to burn a CD at higher rates than stated on the box (which tends to be the minimum rate), be prepared for the occasional useless CD if you do this with cheap, slower media.

- **Boost your buffers** Fortunately, with ultra-fast CD-writers with large memory drives, buffer underruns are largely a thing of the past. What happens in such cases is that the hard drive is not providing enough data to the CD writer memory buffer, so the writer temporarily stops burning to disc, wrecking the entire burn process, and you end up with a CD that's only good for use as a coaster.

New drives tend to be 'burn-proof' – that is, they are capable of experiencing short delays in the stream of data without ruining the entire disc. Burn-proof or not, though, defragment your drive from time to time to speed up data throughput, and cancel any background operations such as screensavers or antivirus software that may interrupt the process.

- **Feel the burn** Sometimes you will find that an audio or data CD is longer than

the normal 74 minute CD-R (640-680MB), although 80 minute (700MB) CD-Rs are commonly available.

Even with smaller capacity CD-Rs, however, it is sometimes possible to 'overburn' to a CD, writing more data than is typically allowed for by using read-in and read-out tracks to store data.

Overburning is not normally recommended, as at the very least it frequently leads to read errors and at the worst can potentially damage the CD writer. For that reason, in general you should purchase higher-capacity CDs. However, applications such as Nero and WinOnCD include expert features for you to overburn smaller-capacity CDs if you need to do so (Nero even allows you to overburn 80-minute CD-Rs).

- **Protect and survive** While modern pressed CDs can last for decades with only a modicum of care, CD-Rs are much more sensitive, especially to light and heat. Store your backups in a cool, dark place away from direct sunlight, but also be prepared to make backups of your backups at frequent intervals. ■



See our cover disc for full and trial versions of many programs mentioned in this workshop