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Laying down tracks

Windows Media Player provides a simple way to organise, access and enjoy your music as well as delivering some great video features for budding movie makers. Wendy Brewer explains how it works

There are numerous free media players for your PC, allowing users to listen to the growing onslaught of internet radio stations and peer-to-peer music swapping sites or simply to organise and catalogue their growing collection of CDs. In effect, the virtual player has almost removed the need to ever buy a stereo again.

Although most of the movers and shakers in multimedia applications, including RealNetworks and Apple, have expressed their support for the open standard Mpeg-4 digital media format, Microsoft has chosen to stick

with a proprietary technology, distributing its player through Windows in a bid to make its own digital media format the de facto standard.

"We've spoken to our customers and we hear they want advanced streaming technologies like 5.1 surround sound enabled by world-class compression and innovative codecs like Windows Media Audio 9.0 Voice and Windows Media Video 9.0 Screen," said Johnathan Usher, director of the company's Windows Digital Media Division.

"Mpeg-4 does not provide these capabilities and delivers poor video quality

at a given bit rate compared with today's state-of-the-art technology."

The industry wants to create in Mpeg-4 a recognised standard for delivering broadcast transmissions. Despite Microsoft's decision to swim against this tide, things are working out well for the software giant. It currently has around 15 million users in the US, closing rapidly on its biggest competitor RealNetworks which boasts more than 17 million users according to the latest research from analysts at Nielson NetRatings.

"Our success can be attributed to the fact that we are opening up new scenarios for consumers and businesses and new opportunities for content providers," said Usher. "We have invested a great deal to stay technologically ahead of our competitors."

Windows Media Player has two main functions – audio and video – is easy to use and comes free with Windows, so there is no need to download it from the internet. Upgrades, however, are downloadable, and best of all they are absolutely free. Over the following pages, we take a look at the features of WMP and show you how to get the best from it. Plus we take a peek at what's new in WMP 9.0.

Using the audio player

There's nothing more annoying than hunting through your CDs for your favourite Tom Jones album only to find that its case contains Will Young's latest or, worse still, no disc at all. Windows Media Player removes this problem by allowing you to store all your CDs in one place, neatly catalogued and easily accessible.

Track and artist information

When you load an audio CD into the PC the Media Player will read the information on the disc and match it to any information it contains in its database. Simply click the Copy CD tab from the menu to do this.

On most CDs this will work with ease – in fact we've yet to come across a CD that the program doesn't recognise. This means either we've got a pretty measly music collection or the player has an extremely wide database of recognised titles.

Despite its huge catalogue, Windows Media Player may be unable to return a

What's new in WMP 9.0?

Microsoft is in the process of testing a new version of Media Player, known as 9.0 series. You can download the unsupported release candidate of this software from www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/9series/player.asp. The full, supported version should be available for download early in the new year.

The new Media Player, which runs on Windows XP and earlier versions back to Windows 98 SE, offers plenty of new features to explore. Highlights include:

- 1. Smart organisation** In earlier versions of Media Player, if you move your Media files – MP3s, Mpegs or whatever – the player loses track and you have to add them to the Media Library again from their new locations. Media Player 9.0 can follow their movements so that it can continue to pull together your files for copying or adding to playlists.
- 2. Auto volume levelling** When you collect together audio tracks from different sources to burn on to a compilation CD you may have trouble matching the volume levels at which the different tracks were recorded. The new Media Player automatically balances volume levels so you don't have to worry about this.
- 3. Auto info tagging** You can now get Media Player to tag the correct track, artist and album details to any music files without having to play them. WMP will go through, find all your media and search out the correct information tags to assign.
- 4. Mini Player** As well as being able to choose the onscreen appearance, or skin, of Media Player, most of which are smaller than the full display, you can now select Mini Player. Minimise Media Player, and Mini Player appears as a miniature control panel in the Taskbar. Even in this miniature version, you can start and stop music and video and move between tracks.
- 5. Video smoothing for narrowband** If, like most of us, you still use a dialup modem internet connection, you'll probably find video clips play back very jerkily over a 56K line. Media Player series 9.0 applies extra smoothing and interpolation between frames to make video appear smoother over narrowband connections.
- 6. Lossless audio** Most of the current audio compression techniques are 'lossy', that is some information is lost when the files are compressed. If you want to make sure the audio files you work with are not degraded in any way, you can now save them using lossless compression.

successful search on older CDs or lesser-known artists. In this case it will display the word 'Unknown' in place of the usual artist and title information and you will need to enter the data manually.

Fortunately this is very easy to do: simply click Get Names and then type in the name of the artist. Once you click the Next tab the information will automatically be stored on your database. You can also rename tracks by right-clicking the file icon and choosing Rename or the Properties dialog box.

Using the Media Library

The player contains a Media Library for storing audio and video files, as well as any related information. All CDs and DVDs you copy are automatically saved into the Media Library and can be found by clicking

Start, Windows Media Player and then Media Library. Alternatively, you can save them into a folder of your choice elsewhere on the desktop. Double-clicking an audio file associated with WMP will automatically launch the player.

Although Windows XP is designed to minimise the space taken up by audio recordings you do have the option to reduce this even further by saving recordings at a lower reproduction standard, something which is perhaps of most benefit to users running older operating systems.

Obviously, the less space you take up with each application the more memory you will have to run other applications. Just click on the Copy Music tab and then reduce the quality by simply sliding the tab down the scale.

Storing and cataloguing tracks

Constantly swapping CDs in and out of your CD drive whenever you fancy listening to a different album is unnecessary as Media Player lets you copy entire CDs to your hard drive. WMP sorts and catalogues your CDs and stores them in an online database where they can be kept in order.



1 When you load your CD into the PC the Media Player will read the information on the disk and match it to any information it contains in its database. Connect to the internet and insert a CD into your CD-ROM drive. When Media Player is displayed, click Copy from CD



2 The player may be unable to return a successful search on older CDs, in which case it will display Unknown, which means you will then have to enter the information manually. Click Get Names and then Next to type in the name of the artist. Now type in info, and then click Next. Click Finish to save information to the database

3 You can copy tracks from your CD (or from downloaded MP3s) straight to your hard disk so that you don't have to load the CD each time. Again click Copy from CD, then tick the boxes of only the tracks you wish to copy and the click Copy Music. To ensure tracks you've downloaded start up in WMP (Windows Media Player) rather than another media player, you can change their association. Right-click the track in question and choose Properties. Then, under the Opens With option, hit Change and specify Windows Media Player. All the tracks in the folder will change to the new player option automatically. If you don't want to edit the player option permanently, right-click the file and use the 'Open with' option instead



Listening to the radio

The rise of internet radio stations means people can now log on to any style of music from around the world by the click of a button. You can find anything from stations that service small towns in the middle of nowhere to specialist stations playing one particular genre and even stations dedicated to unsigned artists. WMP lets you tune to them all.

Simply click on the radio tuner and connect to the internet. Go to the station finder tab and type in whatever you are looking for by genre, artist name or song title, then let Media Player do the rest.

Once you've found the sounds you want, you can add the station to your presets by clicking the tab, which will store the song in your Media Library so you can find it easily next time.

Another good search site is Radio Locator (www.radio-locator.com), a massive database of worldwide radio stations. From here you can click on links to more than 2,500 audio streams, searching against frequency point, genre or location. And if you want to hear one of *PC Advisor's* journalists sounding off, you can always tune in to LBC's technology show, the Lab (www.lbc.co.uk/thelab/index.html).

Watching and editing video

Within Media Player is Microsoft's Movie Maker, which allows you to copy, edit and play your own movies, without the need for additional editing software. Those running Windows XP can use this alongside the software's digital photography package and take full advantage of the useful links to online processing facilities.

The Maker is under Video in the control bar at the top of the player. Once you have opened it you can download images directly from your digital or analogue camcorder. Here you can edit out the bits you don't like or turn the images into a

film by adding music and sound effects. It won't be long before you are well on your way to becoming the next Steven Spielberg. Well, you'll have taken the first step, at least.

You can make movie clipboards and post them on your homepage, make a short film out of a mish-mash of holiday videos, or email a few clips to loved ones. As well as creating your own stuff, you can watch full-length feature films via your DVD-ROM drive.

Microsoft has covered a large catalogue of possible errors by installing a troubleshooting section within the Maker – you may have to alter sound quality or be experiencing wavy lines across the picture. The most important aspect of this program is its ease of use, within a few minutes of clicking on buttons and dragging and dropping footage, you can create professional looking film.

More to come

Microsoft's latest assault on the digital music market is its Windows Media 9.0 player, still in beta format (see *What's new in WMP 9.0?* on page 131). The new player features sneaky extra features that can only be enjoyed by users running XP, although the basic program will run on

earlier operating systems. Microsoft denies this is a way of pushing people towards upgrading to XP.

"Windows XP provides technologies that enable features that would be difficult on older operating systems," said Microsoft's Usher. "In addition, Microsoft's number-one goal in the media player component of the OS was to make XP the best digital media OS ever. Users of older operating systems, who haven't had an upgrade since WMP 7.1, receive a major player upgrade enabling access to new content, new features and performance improvements."

Media Player 9.0 offers faster streaming and better compression, audiophile-quality music playback and support for multi-channel surround sound. The minimum configuration for running the player is a 233MHz Pentium PC with at least 64MB of RAM and 30MB of available hard disk space.

Version 9.0 also supports music subscription services, allowing users to buy and download tracks over the internet. Integrating music subscriptions in this way makes it easier and perhaps more attractive for users, encouraging them to visit peer-to-peer sites and other such services. To enhance the experience of the Media Player, Microsoft has added an

information centre where users can view album art and other artist information while listening to music.

The information centre links to the net to inform users about websites, band photos or cover art of your chosen artist. The centre also boasts the handy function of a tag editor that lets you edit information or even enter lyrics, which can be used for karaoke.

Under attack

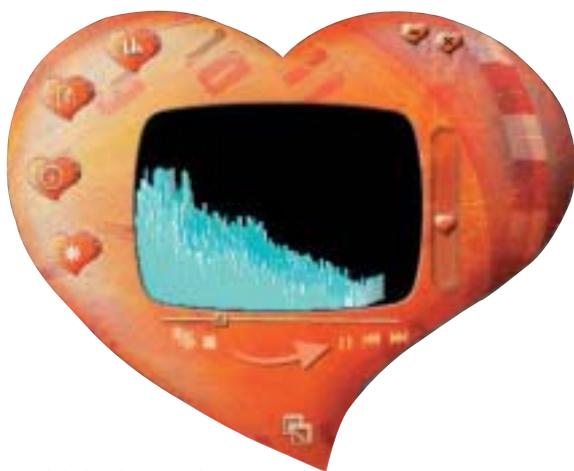
But media players as a whole have come under attack from the European Union, which claimed this new technology adversely affected its users' privacy, by logging the users' listening habits on a central database.

This information can even be gathered when the user is listening to music on a CD while the PC is online, leaving them oblivious to the fact that their habits are being recorded.

Microsoft insists it does not monitor users' listening habits and has been rewarded in the past for its strong commitment to user privacy. "The player does do CD song title lookup which requires contact with a web service, but this contact is completely anonymous," said Usher. ■

Next of skin: customising your player

You can customise the appearance of your Windows Media player by using skins. There are 13 skins to select from within XP and many more can be downloaded from



1 Click Skin Chooser in the lefthand column of the player and then choose your favourite design and click Apply Skin

Microsoft's website, from hearts to old fashioned-style radios and alien heads. The player automatically takes you there when you click on the More skins in the Skin Chooser box.

2 If the 13 skins within XP don't find favour, there are many more which can be downloaded from Microsoft's SkinGallery. Your player will automatically take you there when you click on the More skins in the Skin Chooser box

