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NEWS AND VIEWS

By Chuck Hajdú

Happy Holidays! Most people I know have a terrible time every year trying to think of some new gift ideas for their family and friends. Well, we've come through for you. This month's issue is loaded with some great holiday gift buying suggestions for the geek in your life.

When I began working on this column I started thinking about how many people around the world celebrate major holidays in December. The first thoughts I had were of the major holidays celebrated in the USA - Christmas, Hanuhhah and, for the past few years, Kwanzaa.

One of the greatest strengths of our constitution is that it guarantees freedom OF religion for all. Take note that it does not guarantee freedom FROM religion as some extremist wackos (those on

the Supreme Court and off) would have you to believe. Religious tolerance of others should be the keystone of every person's beliefs. A keystone holds things together and the archway of your life will collapse without it.

OK, so what other holidays are there in December you ask? How about 12/8—Bodhi Day, the celebration of Buddha's Enlightenment.

Of course every religion seems to have a winter solstice celebration of some kind. For the past 5,000 years, from the ancient Brazilians, Greeks, Romans, Druids, Incas, Zoroastrianists, Pueblos, Hopis, Wiccans, Pagans, and so on and so on. Whether they called it Jul, Mitwinternact, Bruma, Soyal, Inti Rami, Lenea or something else, everyone seems to have a reason to celebrate in December.

Happy Holidays!!

MCC

REVIEWS

By Bayle Emlien

WordGenius Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary

Given the Thesaurus and spell checker included with each modern word processing program, does one need a separate dictionary? Yes, if you're even half-serious about writing. A wordsmith can't have too many kinds of highly honed tools. I certainly need all the help I can get.

The Random House Dictionary Webster's Unabridged Dictionary expands on built-in Thesaurus features. With a bit of fussing, I could get either WordPerfect or Word to pronounce words for me, though for real read-along I'd want a true screen reader, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking. That's a whole other review.

Setting up speech is more bother than I've been willing to undertake for either word processing application. Installing the Random House electronic dictionary, however, was a piece of cake. Go to <http://www.eis-usa.com/ugbuynow.html>. (Note the user group section.) Click, pay, enter the code supplied, download. Installation consists of clicking on the .exe file. A Random House Webster's appears on your desktop.

I must confess that I was turned off by the promise of a Drag-on when I first read the product description. It awakened memories of an obnoxious wizard, who could be exchanged for an equally annoying dragon, that accompanied an application I've successfully forgotten. I would have quit right there, except that I'd already made the commitment to review the product behind the Drag-on. So, to quote my favorite English teacher, "Onward and upward."



Bayle Emlien

The EIS Drag-on has no scales or fire: just an icon of the Random House Webster's Dictionary. The user can highlight a word in any application (including internet) and drag it onto the icon. The dictionary pops up, with diacritical markings, phonetic pronunciation,

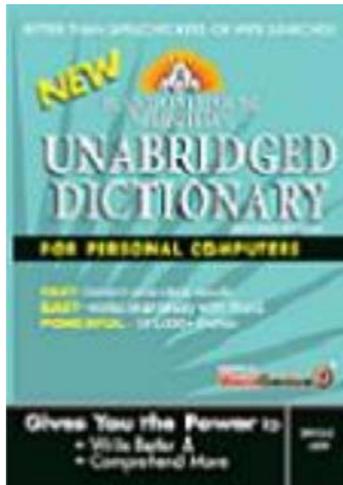


then definitions. Run your cursor over the phonetic representation and, unless you've told the Dictionary otherwise, it will speak the sounds. Decoding them and recombining them into a word will be second nature for those of you who learned to read via a phonetic method (identifying the sounds of each letter or group of letters and then blending the sounds into a word). For us whole-word folks, getting from fuh-oh-net-ik to phonetic takes just a small leap of faith. English pronunciation and spelling being the confusing conglomeration that they are, the feature is really helpful in clarifying such issues as soft or hard "g" and "c." It should be particularly helpful to English language learners and newer readers.

One could choose to not have the icon on the desktop, but that would defeat one of the major features of an electronic dictionary, which is having it right here at my fingertips. No chasing through the internet, diving through menus, or strength training when I pull the paper version off a shelf with both hands and then go diving through pages.

One drawback to the electronic dictionary is that it pretty much eliminates browsing my way to the word I need. On my way through the paper version, I frequently note interesting entries in the keywords and then something catches my eye as I skim down a column until I find my target. This lack of side-journeys and trips to the bookshelf cuts my look-up time exponentially, especially since I don't have to go back and remind myself of my mystery word multiple times during the process. For industrial-strength time-wasting, I have to intentionally enter words, choose related words to look up, and otherwise direct my wanderings through English. For serious work, Drag-On lets me keep my train of thought. I particularly like the inclusion of the date and context when a particular usage came into being. At a purely practical level, it provides some guidance to usage completely lacking in the electronic thesauri (formal, archaic, slang, etc).

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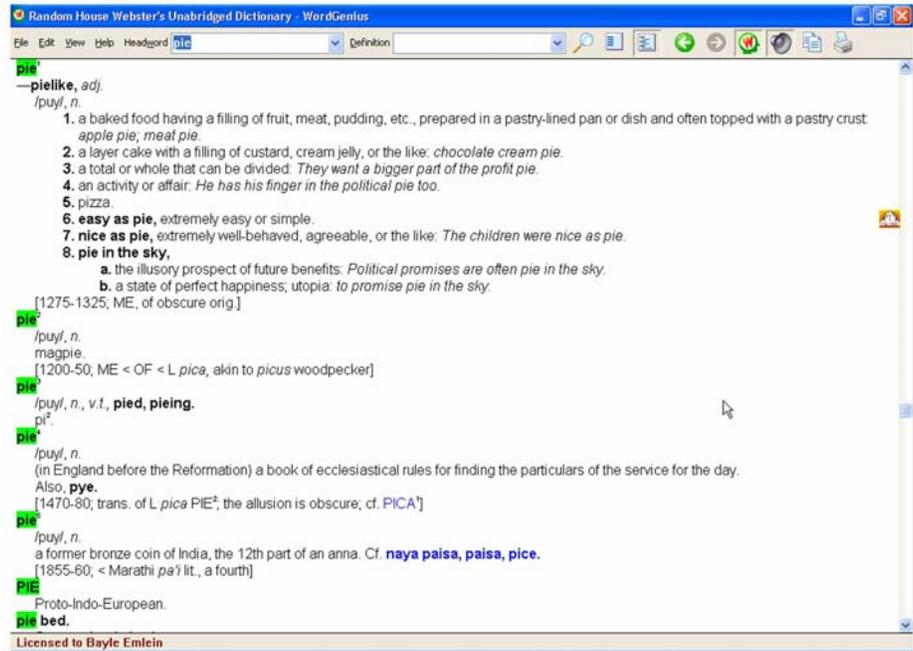
REVIEWS

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Randomly thumbing through a paper dictionary or thesaurus doesn't come close to the fuzzy search available in the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary from WordGenius. Not sure of spelling? None of the choices in the word processing spell checker match the word you have in mind? Try Inserting a * in place of your doubtful letter(s) in the Headword window on the RH Websters' menu bar.

The Drag-On icon, as it self-installed at the large size, managed to cover exactly the portion of the screen I needed to see, no matter where I put it. Only a truly great programmer can create an icon or pop-up that is always in the way on any part of the screen. It didn't take me long to discover that right-clicking on the dictionary icon brings up a context-sensitive menu and right there is the option to adjust the icon size. With the "small" choice, about a quarter of an inch square, I can stash it in a blank spot on a menu bar. Pretty much the same size as the rest of the icons, it sits on my desktop wherever I left it (at least one thing in my life stays where I put it). It's bright enough to stand out and small enough to be reasonably unobtrusive. I am finding it to be a real convenience to have the dictionary always ready—even more accessible than the keyboard shortcuts to the Thesaurus that my fingers find automatically just as the thought that I need a better word begins to form. I also like the feature, shared with WordPerfect, that I can enter any word into the search box. Word will often send me off to the internet, whether I want to go or not. I seem to have particular trouble staying online (yes, I pay the bill regularly). So wandering through the entire compendium of online language aids is not only a potential distraction, but also not a consistently available resource.

The completeness of the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary definitions make it a reasonable addendum for a thesaurus. Combined with those of both Word and WordPerfect, my word power becomes truly awesome. With its online linkages, the Word Thesaurus has some of the same features, such as clarification of phrases, idioms, and com-



pound words (such as "put on" as in put on a show or put on clothes). The electronic thesauri are not to be particularly helpful with such compounds. The Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary from WordGenius makes it a piece of cake.

All by itself the eComPress®-enhanced Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary won't turn you into Shakespeare or even JK Rowling. But it will help you find just the right word, avoid words and phrases with overtones you don't mean, and enable you to eschew obfuscation in your communications. As a gift, it tells young writers that they are ready to take off the training wheels and use the equipment that professionals employ.

Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (2nd Edition) over 315,000 entries.
WordGenius incorporates EIS (Eurofield Information Solutions) eComPress® electronic dictionary technology including spoken phonetical voice pronunciation

MSRP \$49.99

Computer User Group Member's price: \$39.99

The Random House Webster's College Dictionary
Over 87,000 word entries (not reviewed)

MSRP \$29.99

Computer User Group Member's price: \$14.99

<http://www.eis-usa.com/ugbuynow.html>