Extensions for Windows: modular upgrade system
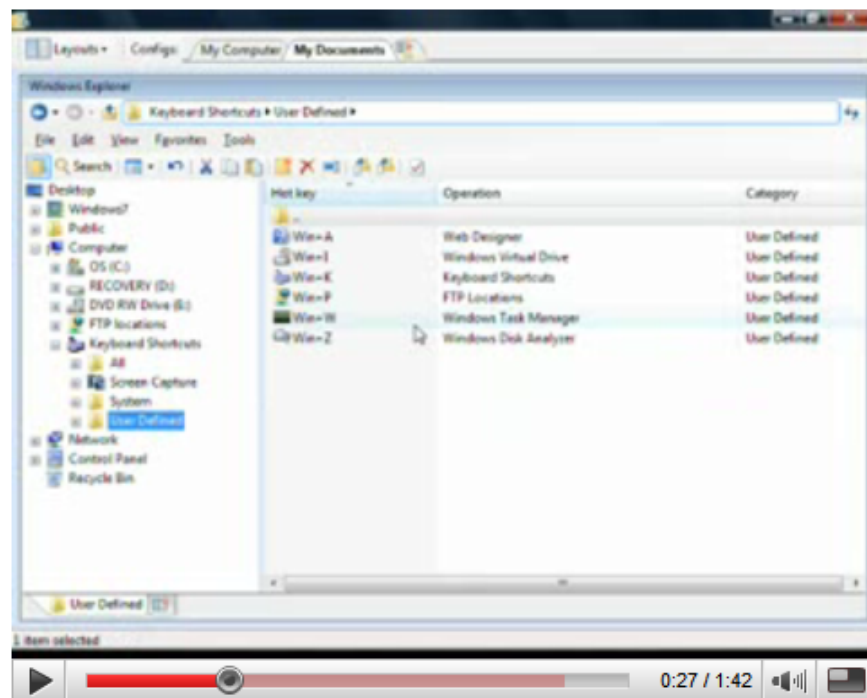
by Roland Quandt for WinFuture.de

A video showing what looked like features from Microsoft's still-in-development "Windows 7", the successor to Windows Vista, caused a sensation recently when it showed up on YouTube. Especially when it was discovered that Microsoft had nothing to do with the product being shown!

The video, showing innovations previously available only with the use of third-party software, was discussed on Microsoft's forums, asking if it was authentic. When Microsoft employees looked at the video and did a little research, they were forced to admit: nobody at Microsoft was working on anything like this!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5D43p4_qcY

This video triggered the fuss.
"Extensions for Windows!" by Extensoft

The forum soon discovered that the product being demonstrated was in fact called "Extensions for Windows", and further research uncovered the name of the developers, a company called Extensoft. Although Extensoft's website gives details about the product, there was no indication of where the company was located.

The domain name of the company was protected by an anonymous address, a service provided by many domain name providers. And the website expressed some concern over the video's appearance on YouTube, which is understandable: the company probably wanted to protect itself as it readies the product to be launched.

What exactly is "Extensions for Windows"?
According to Extensoft's homepage, Extensions is the first community driven, modular upgrade for Windows XP

and Vista. In fact, the software contains a number of new features, many of which Windows users have long hoped for as part of the operating system.

The product has been in limited public beta testing only since May 10, 2008. Users can register for the beta test at the website; for now, testing is limited to 2000 people. If you are one of the lucky few chosen, you will receive a download link and registration key for the software via e-mail.
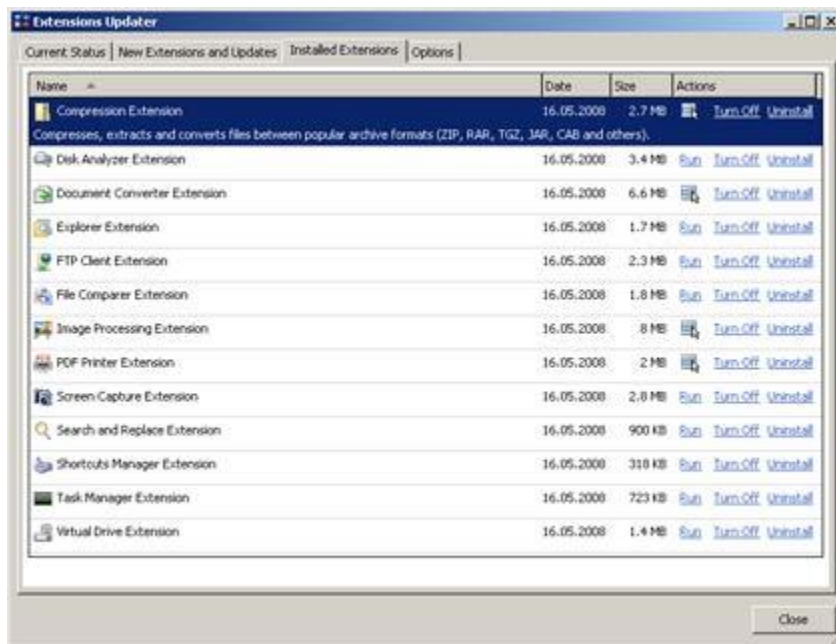
That the beta requires a product key suggests that Extensions for Windows will not be a free program -- and indeed, the website explains that final pricing for the product will be announced this July. At the moment, the developers are considering offering a free ad-supported version of the program, along with an advertising-free "Pro" version for less than 50 U.S. dollars. The product remains free to use during its beta period.

The program's functions are already quite extensive, with still more on the way. The current version contains a set of powerful tools, including: Drive Usage Analyzer, Explorer Extension, File Comparer, FTP Client, Screen and Animation Capture, Search & Replace, Keyboard Shortcut Manager, Extended Task Manager, and Virtual Drive.

What can "Extensions for Windows" do?
Let's take a closer look at the functions that "Extensions for Windows" provides. Most of the functions are available via the Windows context menu, under an entry labeled "Extensions", although some are integrated directly with the standard Windows functions they enhance.
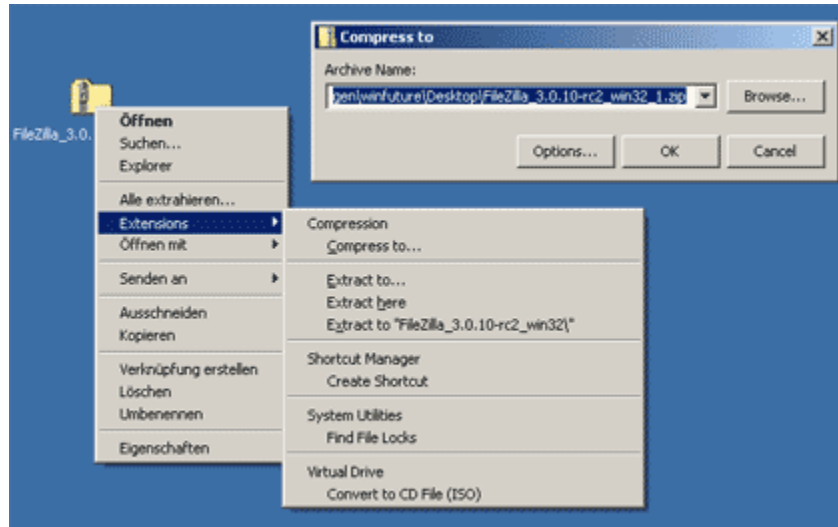
Once installed, "Extensions for Windows" places an icon in the Windows system tray, from which extensions can be downloaded, installed, and managed. The beta version comes with 13 separate extensions, each of which can be disabled or removed. By keeping the extensions' operation separate from the central management console, the developers hope to encourage other third-party developers to create their own extensions, following the example set by Firefox, while maintaining a single user experience.

This approach carries through to the program's configuration. All the settings for every extension can be set through a single window. The program's underlying "Extensions Engine" handles all the heavy lifting, allowing users to make changes to the whole system, such as adding Windows themes, from a central location.

Compression Extension
The compression extension can compress files to all the common compression formats: ZIP, RAR, TGZ, JAR and RAR. When you select a file and right-click, the context menu will show compression options under the "extensions" sub-menu. This menu will only appear when the selected file can be compressed. The Packer can also convert files from one compressed format to the other.
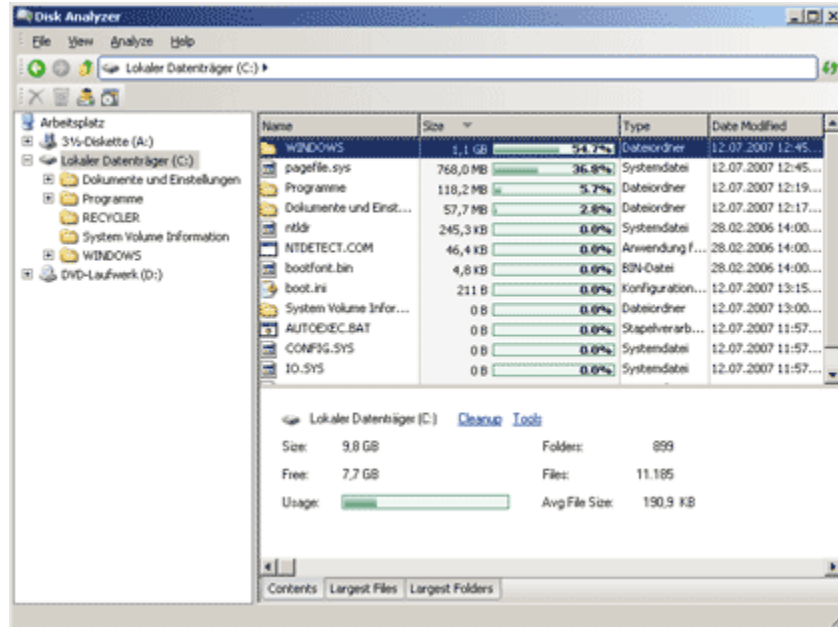

In normal use, the Compressor operates using only simple dialogues. In most cases, the user will have nothing to do at all besides selecting where they want to save the new file. If needed, though, an advanced dialog allows more specific control.

Disk Analyzer Extension
The Disk Analyzer Extension shows you how much space is available on each of your PC's drive and, upon request, the number of files and folders on each.

At a glance, you can determine what percentage of the drive is used up and, with the help of the Disc Analyzer Extension's practical features, keep data mess under control by easily locating the largest files and archives and deleting them.

The Disk Analyzer allows you to quickly determine where storage space is needed, and to create additional space using Windows' built in dialogues to run disk clean-up and remove installed programs.

Document Converter
The Document Converter allows the conversion of various document formats to other formats. For example, a document in the Open XML format can be quickly converted to Office 2007's DOCX format, even if Office 2007 is not installed.
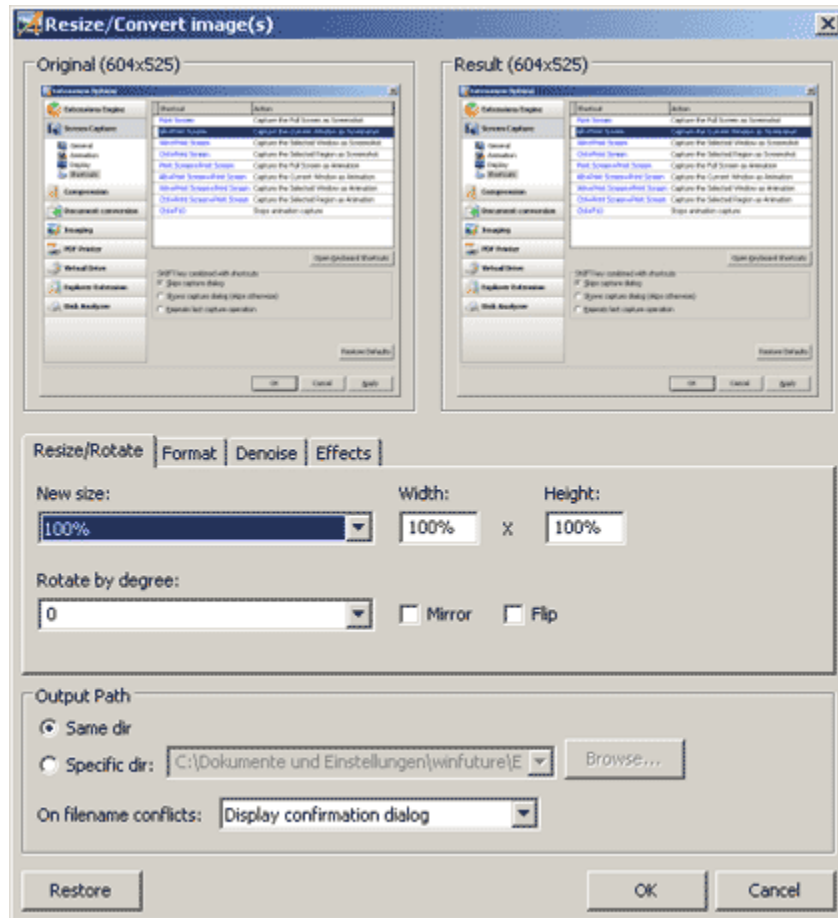
Document conversion is somewhat limited. At the moment, only Word documents, RTF and TXT files, and HTML and PDF files can be converted. The results are highly variable. Depending on the type of source material and the target format, the results range from perfect to very damaged.

PDF printer
For converting documents to PDF, a built-in PDF printer is used. This not only allows the conversion of various documents, but also the creation of new PDF files from any program. As with other PDF printers, the user needs only to select the "Extensions PDF Printer" from the "Print" dialogue of any program to print a document as a PDF.

Image resizing and converter
"Extensions for Windows" also offers several options for converting images. The Image Processing Extension converts BMP, GIF, JPEG, PNG, or TIFF images from one to any of the other formats. The user is limited to the format options available.
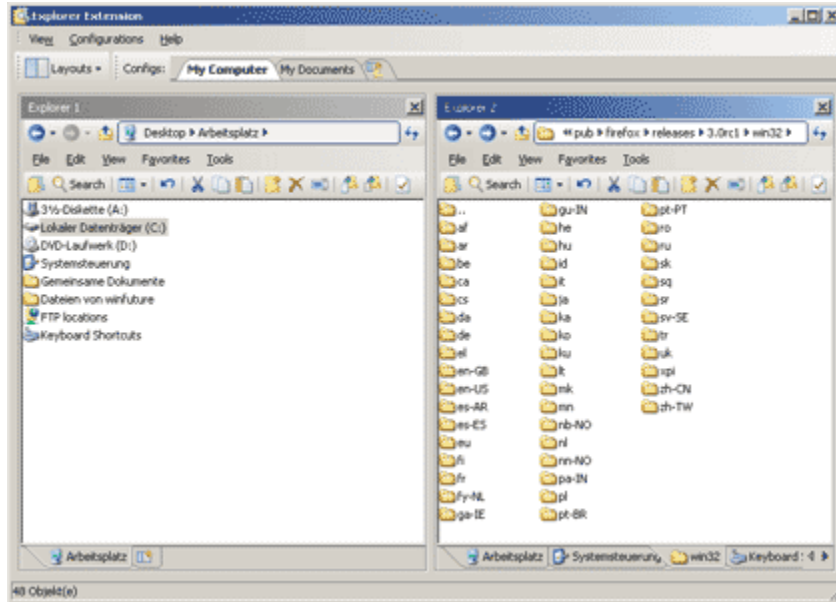
The Image Processing Extension makes it easy to specify, among other things, how to apply JPEG compression when converting images to JPEG. The extension can also handle simple image processing tasks, such as quickly reducing or enlarging an image. Other options are available through the context menu, including conversion options, a noise filter, and even effects.

Explorer and FTP Client Extension
The included Explorer Extension is a replacement for Windows File Explorer. The most obvious difference is the two-paned interface that, if you wish, can show two different folders at the same time. The Explorer Extension strongly resembles an FTP interface.

The functions are much more advanced than they appear at first glance. Users can easily add new views, custom shortcuts to their most frequently-needed folders, and call up the Control Panel. They can also easily add new tabs simply by navigating to the desired folder and hitting a button.
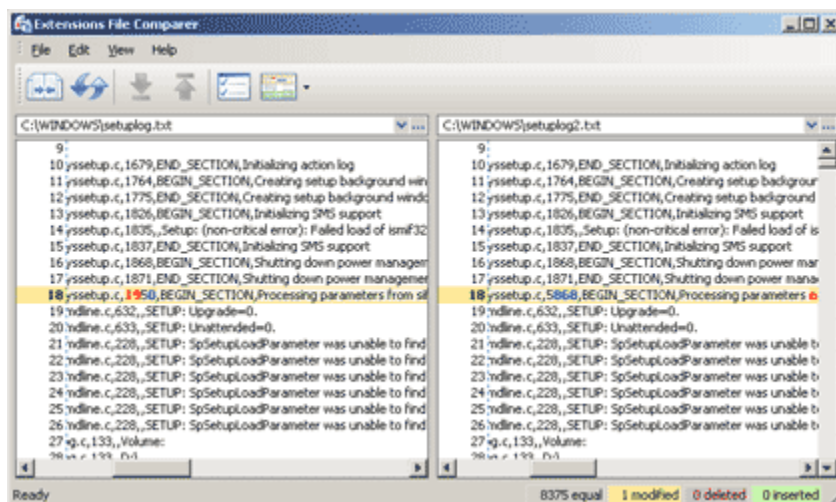
Anyone who has used a tool like "Total Commander" before will quickly become a friend of the Explorer Extension. Of course, the extension also offers support for all of Windows' own functions, as well as support for the company's own FTP Locations Extension.

The Explorer Extension includes simple FTP functions. Users need only to add an FTP location, the same way they'd add a customized location.

The FTP server information is entered into the extension's regular configuration options. With a right-click, a new entry can be created. The user adds their FTP address, login name, password, and port number, and can choose whether to use standard or secure FTP.
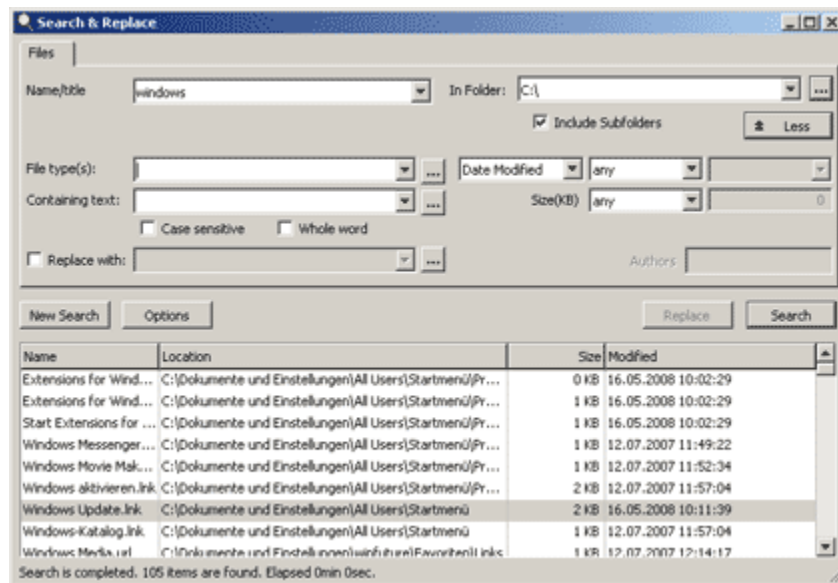
File Compare Extension
As its name suggests, the File Compare Extension allows users to compare the content of two files. The feature can be used with text and HTML files as well as with program code.The contents are compared side-by-side and differences are highlighted.
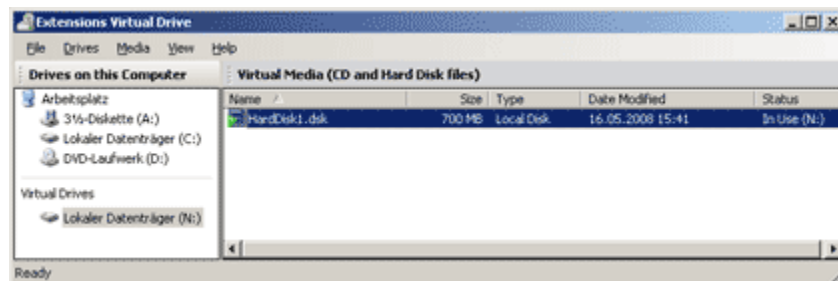

Search & Replace

The Search and Replace Extension allows replacing words and whole text paragraphs in any file or email. The user can search for specific file types and also limit the search to the time period in which the files were created. The search optionally works even with external search applications such as Windows Desktop Search or Google Search.
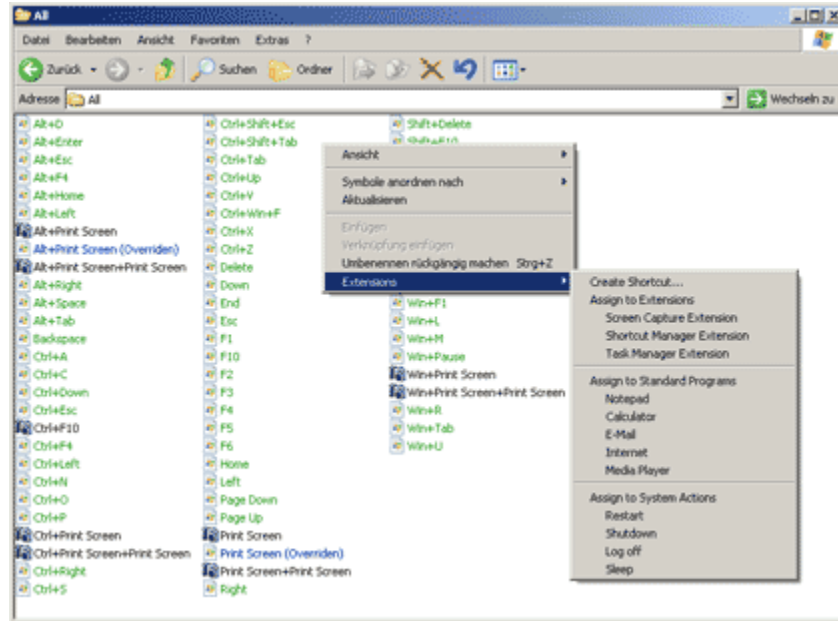

Virtual Drive Extension

The Virtual Drive extension can convert any file or folder to an ISO image that can be mounted as a virtual drive. The extension's functions can be accessed at any time via the context menu or can be launched as a stand-alone program in order to access more options.

The extension offers a transparent interface for creating and managing virtual drives, which can be encrypted so they can only be accessed after entering a password.

Keyboard Shortcut Management Extension

Extensoft also includes an extension for the management of keyboard shortcuts. This extension provides an accessible overview of all the keyboard shortcuts and allows for the creation of new ones, and their deletion. With the help of a collection of custom shortcuts, users can handle many tasks comfortably from the keyboard. If desired, users can also disable Window's own shortcuts, such as the CTRL-P combination for "Print".
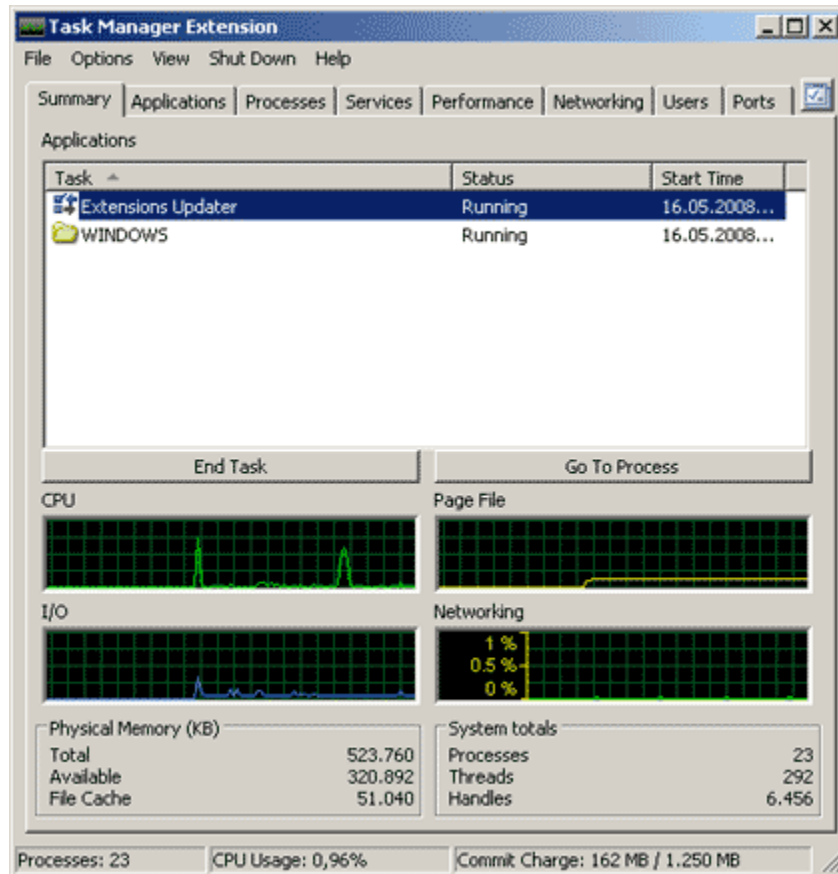
Screen and Animation Capture Extension
With the Screen Capture extension, Windows' ability to create screenshots is nicely expanded. The extension can capture images of the entire screen or a single program window, but users can also create videos, recording their actions on the screen.

Users can select a specific area of the screen to film, or can film the entire desktop. They can also specify various options, including video format and frame rate. The utility can record in any codec available on the machine. If desired, the results can even be sent via e-mail.

Task Manager Extension
The Task Manager Extension integrates many new functions into Windows. The Task Manager creates a new task list, showing both the running applications, their memory requirements, and general information about the current state of the system, as well as the CPU load, I / O and network transfer rates, and the size of the swap file, all in an easily understood graphic format.

The application index includes a "Go to the process" button which allows the user to select an application and go directly to its associated process. This is particularly handy when the name of the process and the name of the program it belongs to do not correspond.

Unlike Windows' own task manager, which shows only whether programs that "running" or "not responding", the Task Manager Extension can also identify programs and processes that are only temporarily frozen. The process list also allows users to apply filters, showing for example only the processes that belong to the current user or to the system.

The Services tab offers several charts, showing the data flow in an understandable way. Users can mouse over the graph to see data flow rates per second, and can also reconstruct CPU load peaks.

The Task Manager also gives an overview of open ports. The Ports tab provides a detailed overview of all processes that are currently accessing an open port. The utility lists the port numbers, local and remote IP addresses, the active protocols, and similar information.

Each tab in the Task Manager offers several customization options, as well.

Conclusion & Download
Overall, Extensoft's "Extensions for Windows" has already achieved a high quality standard. It provides a variety of very useful functions which Microsoft is only just starting to integrate into Windows. They have also done a great job of assuring that the appearance of the application fits well within the existing Windows interface.

Some of the tools, like the Task Manager Extension, will be indispensible after only a few hours of use. The ability to monitor the computer's activities in detail with only a glance, or to see which programs are accessing the Internet of the network, is very practical.

The same is true of other extensions, which seem to have been selected so well that almost every Windows user will find a use for them. If the concept gains broad support, we will probably soon start seeing more enhancements for Windows. The only condition is that the program be priced attractively -- at best, free.

Anyone who is interested in trying out "Extensions for Windows" now can register to apply for the beta. There are only about 1800 places left, though, so hurry!

For more information & beta test registration: Extensoft.com

Download: Extensions.exe (12.9 Mb)