

A Guy Named Bob

By: Lawrence J. Magid

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A guy named Bob just moved into my house. He's a pretty smart guy - he knows how to write letters and balance a checkbook, as well as keep track of appointments, addresses, and phone numbers. He's a whiz at e-mail and he's given me all sorts of personal advice, from how to maintain my car to what to feed my dog.

But despite his attempts to be friendly, Bob has some annoying personality traits. He takes up a lot of space, is hard to understand at times, and can be a bit patronizing.

In case you haven't already guessed, Bob is a Windows-based program from Microsoft that's designed to put a friendlier face on home computing. Microsoft Bob was announced on January 7 at the Consumer Electronics Show by Microsoft Bill (Gates), and is expected to be available for about \$100 by the end of March.

I don't usually write about programs you can't buy yet, but Bob is more than a program, it's a metaphor for the way Microsoft wants to reshape the face of home computing. And many of Bob's traits are already showing up in software from Microsoft and other companies.

Meet Bob

I first met Bob last December via a prerelease copy of the software. Like all prerelease or beta programs, its specifications and features are subject to change. Still, the Bob I met should be pretty close to the one users will encounter in a couple months.

Bob's goal is to personalize your computing experience by eliminating as much computerese as possible. Even the name "Bob" is designed to demystify the program - Microsoft's attempt to make the computer feel like a good friend. The concept is more than a whim. It's based in part on research from Stanford University professors, who came to the conclusion that people respond more positively to a computer with a name and personality.

Professor Clifford Nass, who introduced me to Bob, says that people like to deal with their computers on a social level. "They know it's a machine but they treat it as if it were a person."

Nass and his colleagues discovered that people are less likely to express anger toward a computer when they're talking directly to it. In an experiment, he had a computer ask users what they thought of it. The users responded less negatively

toward the machine when it asked about itself than when it asked about other computers. It's as if they felt the computer had feelings.

Bob's "human" face takes the form of a cartoon guide who helps you run programs and perform other tasks. The default guide is a cute dog named Rover. But you can choose from ten other guides, including Java, a coffee-drinking, hyperactive creature from Guatemala City; Ruby, a rather mean-spirited parrot from Brazil; and Orby, who is billed as "the greatest globe you'll ever meet." The guides are supposed to provide help, but all you get when you click on them is a menu of options and the admonition to "start a program by clicking on it." Anyone who's ever run Windows already knows that.

Bob comes with eight built-in programs: Address Book, Calendar, Checkbook, Household Manager, E-Mail, Financial Guide, Letter Writer, and a quiz game. The checkbook can be configured to let you pay bills electronically; the Household Manager provides advice on everything from automobile maintenance to going on vacation.

Instead of pull-down menus or clearly marked icons, Bob's interface consists of a room full of objects. To write a letter, for example, you click on a piece of paper. Unfortunately, there's no obvious way to tell what's an object and what's just decoration (lots of doo-dads in your "room" are there just for show).

Other programs that use this type of metaphor either mark the items, use unambiguous icons, or have a label appear when you move your mouse over the icon. But Bob requires that you hold down the F1 key before he'll show you that the ledger takes you to the household inventory program, or that you use the stack of envelopes to send and receive electronic mail. Let go of the function key and these labels disappear. Bob could use some lessons in communication.

Of course, you'll eventually learn the meaning of the icons by association, sort of like the way you learn a foreign language by hearing and speaking it. But it doesn't make it easy for first-time users to find their way around. Experienced Windows users will probably find Bob harder to navigate than programs that use traditional pull-down menus and well-labeled icons.

What's more, Bob defeats one of Windows' major advantages - the ability to create a separate window for each application and work on several things at once. Bob takes up the full screen and doesn't let you use more than one function at a time. Contrast this with Microsoft Works, which lets you use a word processor, spreadsheet, database, and communications package simultaneously, and you can see that Bob is not the world's greatest productivity tool.

Face to Face

Bob is hardly the first program to humanize or personalize a computer. Lots of people customize their PCs with screen savers or "wallpaper," which displays scenery or other graphics on the screen. I know plenty of people who've named their PCs and I've been known to swear at mine from time to time.

And it's not the first program to provide a homier front end. EdMark's KidDesk is a wonderful menuing program that lets you set up a PC so it's easy for kids to launch their own programs and virtually impossible for them to run software or mess with files you want to keep off-limits. KidDesk also features a calculator, a calendar, and "notes" you can leave for family members.

Block Financial Software's Managing Your Money also puts on a friendlier Windows face. In this home finance package, you click on a ledger, desk drawer, or other object in an office-like environment to select the feature you want to use. Several of Microsoft's other home products, such as Creative Writer, use a nonstandard interface designed to make the program less intimidating.

While Bob and these other programs present a prettier interface, they are not necessarily easier to use. Call me jaded, but I actually find it easier to use Windows Program Manager and other standard Windows and Macintosh programs than to find my way around Bob.

I've criticized Creative Writer because it presents a confusing - almost frenetic - interface. Bob isn't as bad, but it seems to be cut from the same cloth. The folks at Microsoft have always been trendsetters, and I suspect they'll be pushing this type of interface in future home products. It may even creep into their business software. While I applaud their desire to make computers friendlier, easier to use, and more personal, I'm not sold on their implementation.

Of course, Bob isn't meant for experienced users like me. It's designed for the millions of people per year who are using computers for the first time. If you're a new user, Bob's interface should encourage exploration, and its wacky characters may be just the comic relief you need to get past any initial phobias. But once you're beyond the basics, I suspect Bob will leave you cold and a bit bored.

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*Lawrence J. Magid is the author of *Cruising Online: Larry Magid's Guide to the New Digital Highways* (Random House, 1994) and *The Little PC Book: A Gentle Introduction to Personal Computers* (Peachpit Press, 1993). He is also an internationally syndicated columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. You can reach Larry on the Internet at magid@latimes.com, via CompuServe at 75300,2105, via Prodigy at KPVN58A, via America Online as LarryMagid, or care of Computer Currents.*

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