Computer Tips

Knowing Your Operating System

When you turn on your computer, it's nice to think that you're in control. There's the trusty computer mouse, which you can move anywhere on the screen, summoning up your music library or Internet browser at the slightest whim. Although it's easy to feel like a director in front of your desktop or laptop, there's a lot going on inside, and the real man behind the curtain handling the necessary tasks is called the 'operating system'.

The purpose of an operating system is to organize and control hardware and software so that the device it lives in behaves in a flexible but predictable way. In this and several following articles, we'll tell you what a piece of software must do to be called an operating system, show you how the operating system in your desktop computer works, and give you some examples of how to take control of the other operating systems around you.

All desktop or laptop PCs come installed with an operating system. The most common one is Microsoft Windows. Some PCs use the Macintosh operating system developed by Apple, while others use the UNIX (or Linux) operating system. There are hundreds of other operating systems available for special-purpose applications, including specializations for mainframes, robotics, manufacturing, real-time control systems and so on.

More recently, operating systems have started to pop up in smaller computers as well. If you like to tinker with electronic devices, you're probably pleased that operating systems can now be found on many of the devices we use every day, from Ipods and mobile phones to GPS units. The computers used in these little devices have gotten so powerful that they can now actually run an operating system and applications. The computer in a typical modern mobile phone is now more powerful than a desktop computer from 20 years ago, so this progression makes sense and is a natural development.

In any device that has an operating system, there's usually a way to make changes to how the device works. For a desktop computer user, this means you can add a new security update, system patch, new application or even an entirely new operating system rather than throw out your computer and start again with a new one when you need to make a change. As long as you understand how an operating system works and how to get at it, in many cases you can change some of the ways it behaves.

Continued next article. ...