



ON COMPUTERS : Headset works right, right away

BOB AND JOY SCHWABACH

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We got a Virtual Phone Booth noise-canceling headset from Plantronics, and to our utter amazement, it worked. We don't mean we were amazed because it was from Plantronics, which has been in the headset business since dinosaurs ruled the Earth, but because it actually canceled outside noise.

Virtual Phone Booth is a set of ear buds, as they're called: tiny things you stick in your ears, like the ones that come with MP 3 music players. Hate 'em. But these are sculpted and fit quite well. There's also a slim microphone stick attached to one of the buds.

Joy plugged the ear buds and microphone into her Sony laptop and logged onto her Skype account to make a free phone call to Bob. The call went through with no problem, and the quality was excellent. Just in case that was because of the Skype service and not the Virtual Phone Booth, she turned on a radio a couple of feet away and tuned it to full volume. Bob could hear the radio faintly in the background of the call, but there was no distortion or loss of call quality. She then added a nearby device that reproduces thunderstorm sound effects. Couldn't even hear it. We don't usually get stuff that works right, right away.

The Virtual Phone Booth is very tiny and weighs about an ounce. The list price is \$ 110, from Plantronics. com.

SORRY, WRONG VUMBER A Vumber is a phone number from any area code you select that is then linked to your home, work or cell phone. When someone calls your Vumber, you press "1" if you want to answer. This has possibilities: You could give out your Vumber to those you don't want to have your number, or, on the other hand, to a special group you want to have only the secret Vumber. (We know it gets confusing.)

You can also call out with your Vumber number. First dial your Vumber, then dial the number. Everybody clear on this ? The service costs \$ 5 a month, and there's a one-month free trial. Extra Vumbers are \$ 2 a month each, at Vumber. com. **BY THE SEAT OF YOUR PANTS**

We'll look next at a ridiculously priced device for playing with your Microsoft Flight Simulator X. (It also works with other flight simulator software.)

It's called the Dreamflyer, and it's basically a chair with controls that looks like a piece of exercise equipment and is supposed to mimic an actual pilot's seat. It weighs 100 pounds, measures 3 feet by 6 feet, and costs \$ 2, 800, plus an extra \$ 199 for a tri-monitor bracket (if you use three monitors), plus \$ 450 for shipping in Canada or the United States.

Unlike actual flight simulators of the type used by the military and airlines, there are no hydraulics or motors involved to move you around as the airplane would move were you actually in the air. The feeling of motion is delivered by you, the program pilot, shifting in your seat mounted on weights and pulleys (maximum pilot weight is 250 pounds).

The foot pedals, steering yoke and throttles are supplied by Saitek, which is a leading maker of joysticks and other controls, like those for planes and cars. If you want to enhance your flight or driving simulators with just these controls, go to Saitek. com. Prices are generally moderate, but if you want everything Saitek has for flight, the cost would be about \$ 400. You can also search the Web for discount prices.

More info on the Dreamflyer can be found at MyDream-Flyer. com. What the heck, it's cheaper than an airplane.

ORGANIZE IT ON A MAC FileMaker has released Bento, a \$ 49 version of the FileMaker database for the Mac's Leopard operating system. FileMaker is a really great database program, and this is an easy-to-use version for people who don't have severe database demands (which is most of us). Bento is good for the usual phone-book applications, plus organizing events, tracking projects, recording inventory, making libraries, etc. In short, unless you are operating a large business, most database tasks are relatively simple and can be handled easily by a program like this. About 140, 000 copies have been downloaded from FileMaker. com since the program came out in mid-November. User ratings are very high.

INTERNUTS A podcast is a kind of Internet broadcast that you can hear and watch on your computer, an iPod, MP 3 player or a number of similar devices. There must be more than a million podcasts, and Podcast. com lists many of them, plus its 10 most popular of 2007. Leading the list is a podcast on soccer. If that doesn't grab you, other top choices include CNN News, 60 Minutes, Geek News, NOVA and the BBC's Best of Today. CollegeFanz. com looks to connect fans of college sports teams. It has photos, videos and lots of opinions on teams. Go ! Rah !

BOOKS: GRAPHICS The Essential Blender, edited by Roland Hess; \$ 45 from Blender. org.

Blender is one of several high-end graphics and animation programs that are available free. They are a great way for people interested in these fields to start learning at low to no cost. A copy of Blender 2. 44 is packaged with the book, and you can also download it from Blender's Web site. Blender works with PCs, Macs, Linux and several other operating systems.

If you do a Web search on this topic, you will quickly find several dozen graphics programs and add-on tools available for free. If you want to see what these programs are capable of, go to the producer's Web site, where you will often find a section called "gallery" or "user showcase." These galleries are filled with great images and are worth the visit. **NOTE:** Readers can search several years of columns at the "On Computers" Web site: [www. oncomp. com](http://www.oncomp.com). You can e-mail Bob Schwabach at [bobschwab@aol. com](mailto:bobschwab@aol.com) and Joy Schwabach at [joydee@oncomp. com](mailto:joydee@oncomp.com).