

Virtual exercise/stretch assistants, a solution for an ever changing workplace

By Mathew Roller

Ergonomics in the workplace has become a big issue in today's workplace, and many products have come onto the market to meet the demand for better human-computer interaction.

I reviewed three software programs that have been designed to remind you to take short breaks from your computer. The first program we will examine will be Ergonomix for the PC. Publicspace.net

also has a Mac version named MacBreakZ. Ergonomix is a fine program that monitors the users activity and suggests appropriate times for rest and recovery breaks, providing a range of stretching exercises designed to relieve muscular tension and improve static posture, and provides ergonomic information on how to use your computer in a healthy manner. I found the ergonomic tips to be quite nice, you are able to cycle through them as you are taking your break. Although the ergonomic tips are nice, and an improvement over

fitatwork, and highly configurable as far as time durations go, I found Ergonomix to be annoying in that you can't get it off your taskbar, it doesn't minimize to the tray so it is out of the way. It is more expensive than Fitatwork and it doesn't have Kim your personal exercise assistant.

The second program that was put to the test was BreakTime by Little Hummingbird software, this is a free program, and simply pops up to remind you to take a break, nice and simple.

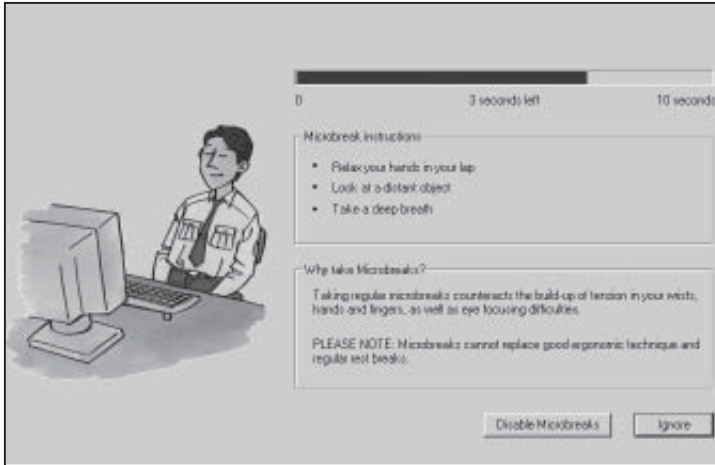
Our final program is Fitatwork which is groundbreaking new software program that is based around the 3D animated virtual Kim your personal exercise assistant. This software doesn't have any videos, so the program is very small. The unique thing about this program is that it performs the exercises/stretches for you to demonstrated them, then it speaks and leads you through a set of them. The default is to do three different exercises every break which is set for once every two hours.

You can select exercises by the area that you want to work on, or let it randomly select them for you. It has a first aid selection where you can tell it a problem you are having and it leads you through exercises that help, problems on the list include neck pain, "can not concentrate", "I am tired", back hurts, headache and "prevent tendon injuries".

You can play an audio cd while you are doing the workouts as well which makes it fun.

The nice thing about all three of these software programs is that they are small enough to put on a floppy disk. My plan is to place the shareware version of these programs on a floppy disk with a label on the disk with my clinic name, and hand them out, at speeches, occupational health classes, and to patients, so that they can benefit from them.

A big thanks to Publicspace.net and Fitatwork for supplying evaluation copies.



Ergonomix Interview Interview with Frank Reiff of publicspace.net

Tell me about yourself, and your company.

In 1994 I started a PhD in computer science which was oriented towards Computer Supported Collaborative Work; during this time I designed and implemented a proof-of-concept system which was called PublicSpace. I was looking for a few test sites for the system and thus came into contact with the Macintosh community and the shareware world. publicspace.net first only published PublicSpace which successfully deployed at over 200 international sites with around 5000 users.

I then started adding more products during the course of my PhD. Finally 2 years ago I terminated the original product, but continued developing shareware. I had a short RSI scare while writing up (many long days and evenings in front of the computer) and this experience prompted the development of the MacBreakZ! personal ergonomic assistant 2 years ago.

There are a few hundred licenses in circulation many of which are site licenses with several hundred users. I am currently working as a software architect at a major financial institution in Luxembourg and one of my colleagues, Georges Wantz, was very enthusiastic to enter the shareware world and he has ported many of my product to Windows.

What lead you to develop this product?

My initial experience with RSI. I developed a tendonitis during my PhD write-up phase and used other products for a while. It seemed logical to incorporate my own experiences and growing knowledge about the problem into a better kind of break reminder. I am still working on the finished product.

What type of feedback have you had about Ergonomix?

Ergonomix becomes part of their daily work routine and it is in the nature of the tool to get "into the way". Few people who feel a need for ergonomix are used to taking regular breaks and working in a healthy fashion. They find (at least initially) that the tool gets into the way of their 5 hour uninterrupted work sessions...

What did it take to make this product?

It took personal experience of the problems, the elaboration of a suitable recovery and prevention strategy, the work of a graphics artist and a lot of research (books, websites, etc..)

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I was surprised to find that 50% of my sales go to Holland and Scandinavia. People seem to be very conscious of ergonomics issues in general and RSI in particular in those countries. Other countries are less well informed and the introduction of a tool like ergonomix is often not supported by managed. It would be nice to get the "productive work is healthy work" across to more companies.



FIT@WORK Interview

Interview with Alen Jevsenak President

What lead you to develop this product?

Having big health trouble because of PC work by myself!

What type of feedback have you had about fit@work? In fact there was only one type of feedback from both groups. People really like it out there :-)

What did it take to make this product? I read that you spent 3 years in development.

Lots of pain ;-) ... developing a unique product, with big and the same time high quality content, "inventing&developing" a new realtime 3D technique to make it "fun and easy to follow", add some more "invisible intelligent" features AND make it run on almost every Windows PC out there. ... takes its time.

People doing the same know about this exactly. Doing something for the first time ever is hard.

In fact it is still the only realtime 3D software running on any regular office PC ... (especially on Windows NT4!)

But this was only the "little" development part ...

(fitatwork.com is a personally financed one man company based in Germany!)

For more info on these products see my website www.doctorroller.com

SPORTS

Upcoming tournaments:

Volleyball – May 4th

Softball - June 1st

Basketball – June 4th – 8th

Ping Pong – weeks 4 - 10