

Software to Add Functions To The Basic CarPC

Your CarPC works, but you want more ! Read this article and discover that you are not just restricted to MP3s and GPS functions.



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Table of Contents

	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Page</u>
An Overview		3
Phonecontrol.net		3
Girder		3
Infomatics.info		4
Steveig.org Access Control		5
Steveig.org Mobileweb		6
Interchange		6
Gamma Control		7
Skinbedder		7
Freedrive and MapMonkey		8
CDex		9
Websites and Forums		10
My Conclusions		10
Terran Brown – Biography		11
About CarTFT.com		11
Disclaimer		12



An Overview

A CarPC front end is only half the story, most of them rely on third party applications to perform the functions that they do but just show the information in its own format. These support applications can perform a multitude of functions from a hands free car kit to synchronising your files so let's take a journey through some of the more well known programs at the moment that a lot of front ends can work with. Its not all of them mind you and it will only give you a taster and many of them will run in a stand-a-lone mode as well so have a look and visit one of the many forums the programmers haunt to get a feel as to whether these are what 'you' need for 'your' system.

Phonecontrol.net

Phonecontrol.net is at the moment a very unique application at this moment in time in that it allows you to control your mobile phone (subject to compatibility) and even use your CarPC as a mobile phone car kit (with a microphone etc).

Not only does it do this but it is a skinnable application but it currently is directly supported by a number of major front end applications including Road Runner, Mobile Media Centre, InCar Terminal and even Meedio.



It allows you to access your phone book and dial out using an on screen touch interface and even access your SMS message functions. The best part is that when some one calls you on your phone you can set it up to show either the money and or a picture of those calling you. Having tested this both with Bluetooth and a cable I can safely say this is a very flexible application.

Currently (08/05) priced sub £20 (subject to exchange rates) it is a very reasonable price to pay for such a fantastically feature filled application.

More information can be found at <http://zoran-horvat.de/private/CarPC/>.

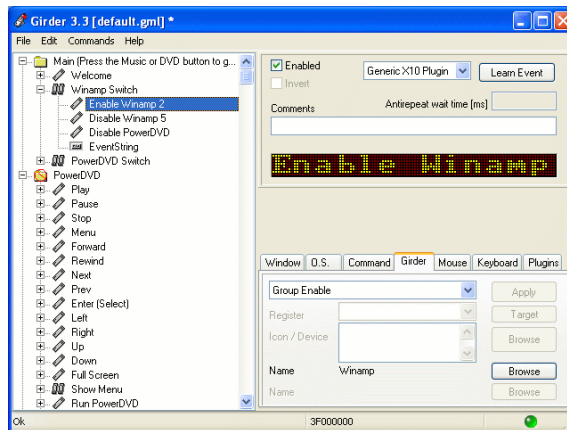
Girder

Girder originally started life as a freeware application doing what no other application did. Then because of its success Promixis integrated it in to their portfolio and further started charging for it.

This is no bad thing though because Girder now has corporate support it should not be going any where for a long time as well as getting further developed. So what can it do ?



It basically allows control from any input device to any output but because it uses scripts to do this it is not limited to one key press but can perform a whole series of commands.



An example of this could be that you press 'On' on your RF (Radio Frequency) remote and Girder then sends an IR (Infrared) signal out to a DTV box and then tunes the software for PCI TV card to the Aux port.

I could spend hours reviewing this item of software because of the functionality it provides but I won't. The best thing for you to do is to have a quick [look on their site](#) to see if you have compatible hardware and if not what to buy. One particular useful gizmo is the USB-UIRT which is basically a USB IR transmitter and receiver – and it does not cost the earth.

[Infomatics.info](#)

[Infomatics.info](#) is a new free service that has been created to provide a common standard of data feed from many live sources. The data it carries it covers is live traffic data, matrix signs, weather and many more, it also will provide at a later date a method for tracking your movements and live updates of safety cameras. Unfortunately it will only launch with UK coverage how ever there is no reason this may be expanded because like Freedrive and MapMonkey [Infomatics.info](#) is another community run project of which I am a member of.



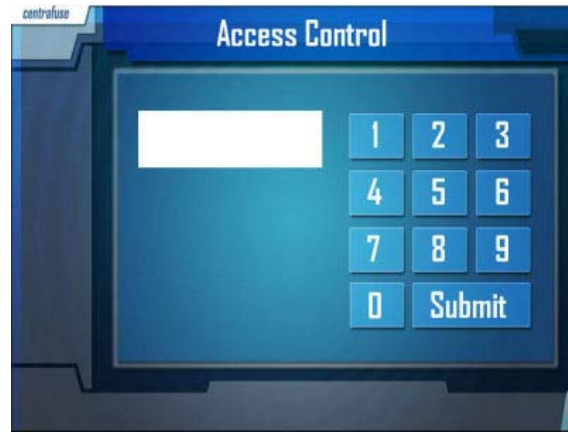
An early screen shot of a road works incident

The ultimate aim is that using this common data standard any application on any platform at all that can access the Internet will be able to use it and in fact already some of the major players like Freedrive are looking at implementing it. In the mean time Traverse has been designed to work over or in conjunction with any application. It will provide an automated way to collect the latest data (about 10k per update for a 50 mile radius) and show that data graphically. The great thing about Traverse is that an SDK will be provided with it allowing programmers to very quickly start integrating it in to their software.



Steveig.org Access Control

Want to protect your CarPC while out of site ? Want to listen to how your car is treated when its in for a service ? Well if so then this is an ideal add on for your system. Intended to be placed in the 'Startmenu' of your system it prevents access to the main GUI until you have entered the right code. It can also be setup so that until that right code is entered it will record the audio (using an attached microphone) to be reviewed by your self later on.



You may want to check your local laws on using this sort of covert function first before you do but even if you are not allowed to the access panel ensures no one will play with your system when you're not with it or your car.

Stevieg also is currently looking at integrating video recording in to the application so you not only get a audio track but you can also see who's been in the car. This may be useful should your car be subject to a stolen and recovered situation – sadly this will only be available in a future undetermined release to the application.



Steveig.org Mobileweb

Steveig created this after I came up with the concept. It came from the continuing quest for live traffic information which at the time (and still is) new web based services were starting up and pushing very hard to be used. This is great for a static user or some one who wanted to check on conditions before they left but not much good on route.

Thus Mobileweb was born to allow a touch screen interface set up to quickly access predetermined web pages, of course you do need an Internet connection still but that's another story. As long as you have the right plug-in's (i.e. Macromedia Flash) and MS Internet Explorer this will work for you – and its skinnable .

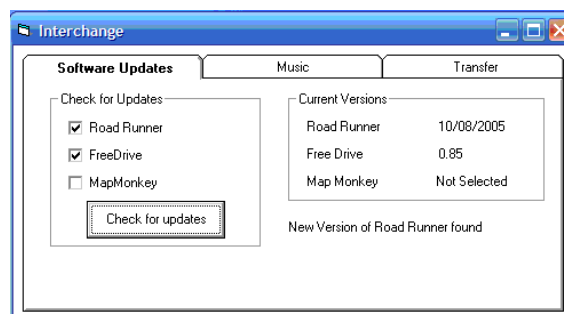


Steveig has further enhanced its functions buy allowing it to work with Map Monkey and Phonecontrol.net to deliver more localised information and integration and because it is a separate program it will work with any front end that supports external applications.

Interchange

Interchange is designed to seamlessly transfer software updates, music and pretty much any data type to a car PC automatically either via wireless, wired or a USB device. It automatically detects whether a USB device is attached to the desktop computer. Interchange consists of two parts, a desktop application for organising and checking for updates and a CarPC based client to automatically transferring the data.

Once the client is installed on the CarPC no intervention is required other than plugging in a USB Device or initialising a transfer session via a wireless or wired connection, Interchange does the rest.



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6 Of 13 - 05/09/2005

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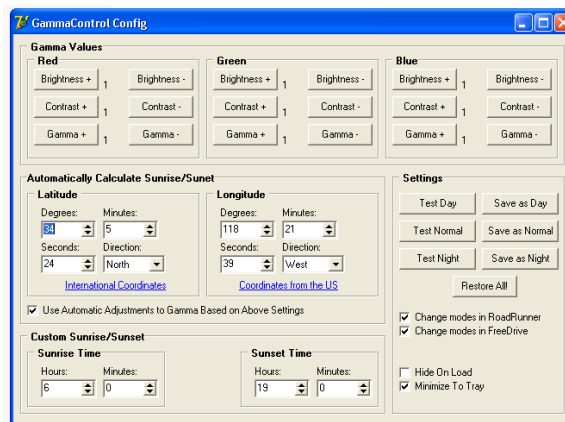


Interchange is planned to be scriptable in later releases to allow updates to any Front end and can already be configured to update play lists on the fly as music is transferred.

<http://www.mpug.co.uk>

Gamma Control

This is a super cool program and even some front ends such as Road Runner have supported it for a long time. Put simply it gives you total control over making your screen lighter or darker with out the need to change the settings on your screen. It does this by changing the gamma setting of your screen in the same way Adobe Photoshop can with images.



This means you can set it up and it will automatically darken your screen at a set time or variable so that it does not distract you nor blind you while driving in the late evening or night. It does have support for a number of other programs as well and its writer 01331 keeps the application up to date where needed.

Skinbedder

Also from 01331 is another application called Skinbedder. This application basically overlays its own skin or graphic on to a program that is not very CarPC friendly. An example of that is below where you can see it been used with iGuidance making a once difficult programme a lot more usable.

The program its self does rely on you having [Autoit](#) installed how ever as that is free there is no real cost issue. What it does allow you to do though is make your own skins and although this currently is a little tricky the effects can be stunning once completed.

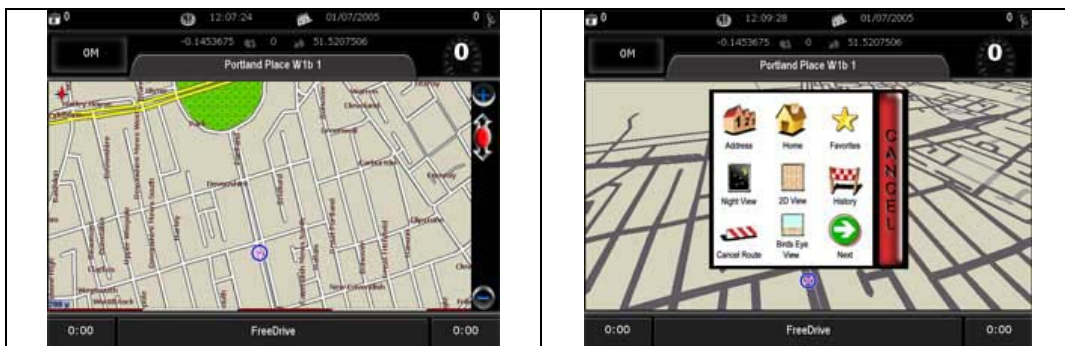


Imagine been able to use your favourite GPS application in your car and not been tied to one or another software house... and it does not have to be GPS applications. Skinbedder will work with any application – only time and patience will be needed to create a working interface.

Freedrive and MapMonkey

The first thing to remember about Freedrive and MapMonkey is that they are based around Destinator so you will need to have bought a copy both for licence reasons and for the maps them selves, also you may require a copy of the Dest_DLL.DLL file which is available though the Destinator SDK at extra cost.

So what advantages do these new front ends to Destinator give us ? LOTS ! Ok so we are still limited by the same map views but the extras you get are obvious straight away – a better looking interface. (Software houses take note) This is achieved by making the applications fully skinable and in the case of Freedrive this can even be done using Macromedia Flash – oh the possibilities.....



Freedrive

Safety camera alerts are available in both applications although Freedrive in my opinion presents this better to the driver.

MapMonkey has the unique feature of offering an SDK and plug-in system which allows programmers to further enhance functionality. An example of this is the tracking plug-in which allows drivers to re-trace their journeys – an ideal feature for company car drivers.



Freedrive will also be offering direct integration with infomatics.info in future releases allowing access to live traffic information and more presented on screen and on the map.

It is hard to say which one of these applications is the best because they are both quality pieces of software and I have (and still do) use both of these on a daily basis. What I will say is that these applications meet 90% of CarPC requirements for GPS software even though it is based on now discontinued software because it was designed and contributed to by members of the community and if the software houses wanted yards sticks to measure by either of these would do.



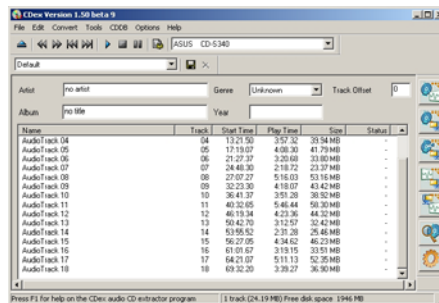
MapMonkey

CDex

Although CDex is not strictly a CarPC application it is a very useful tool to have both on your desktop and CarPC. MP3s really are at the hart of CarPC user's world in order to place music on to the hard drive from your own CDs. It has a very small foot print on the hard disk and seems to work with the majority of CD and DVD readers out there.

To use simply place the CD into the drive and click one button, it will then extract and convert the music in to a MP3 format and even correct where possible for any 'jitter' errors while reading scratched or damaged CDs. One extra function it does do requires connection to the Internet, that is that the application will read the unique code that each CD has and download the play list and title for it. This information provides the basics for file names and MP3 track data making it a very clean process indeed.

CDex is free where so there is no major investment needed and although there are more complex and newer applications out there I feel this wins hands down because of its sheer simplicity.





Websites and Forums



There are a number of web sites out on the web where you can get further information from, <http://www.digital-car.co.uk/> for local UK members and for the international scene <http://www.mp3car.com> which is where the majority of community development goes on. You will also find a very extensive 'Software and Development' section which you will find well worth a visit should you have any technical questions – and you will also probably find that new releases are more likely to be announced here first.

My Conclusions

With so many new applications been created by the community its hard to keep up. Some do very simple jobs and will only be released once because that all they need and some will grow and grow as the community finds new uses and additional functions. Its best to review each of these as quite often the programmer will have written it for them selves then released to the community rather than the other way around. In short if you have a need to do some thing via your CarPC or automatically look around first – you'll probably find some one has already written a application for the task in mind.



An Example Donor Car



Terran Brown – Biography



Terran has worked in the IT industry for 'Blue Chip' companies since the early 90's on various technical roles from wide area networking, to PC build and server support. Currently he works as a Project Manager for a leading international outsourcing company still working with large 'Blue Chip' customers. It was a result of his technical background that his interest in the CarPC technology grew to the point where he is now of the more recognised enthusiasts from the UK.

His project home site can be found at <http://www.letscommunicate.co.uk/carpc/>

About CarTFT.com



CarTFT.com was founded in spring 2003 with the goal to offer people a cheap way to integrate computers into cars. As we do a lot of cross-border selling we know that trustworthiness is everything in online business. That's why we try to support the community, offer external insurance for every order, and try to have large stocks to enable shipping of orders as fast as possible. We also try to resolve RMA cases within only days instead of weeks / months where possible.

Our "technical" goal is to offer products which allow the customer to have an open platform and no proprietary system, where he / she can't change anything.

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- Additional Photos curtsy of <http://www.mpug.co.uk/>
- Additional Photos curtsy of <http://www.whipflash.com/vamr/>
- Additional Images curtsy of Stuart McLernon @ <http://www.inside-guide.co.uk/CarPC>

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11 Of 13 - 05/09/2005

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Although the facts stated in this document are understood to be correct – it is up to you to ensure they are as technology changes



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