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StealthSurfer

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Globe and Mail Update

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Product Rating

Product rating:

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Child's Play
Ease of Use

- The Rating System

- **The Good:** Works on any Windows computer, Mac version available; keeps browsing-related files on the memory key instead of on the computer's hard drive where someone might snoop them; can also be used for data storage; password protected.
- **The Bad:** Significant premium over memory-only keychain drives; takes up to a minute to load the Stealth Netscape browser; browser sometimes crashes; password lock only, offers no encryption for extra security.
- **The Verdict:** If you want to keep evidence of your surfing habits from being recorded on a PC, this will help.

- **Reviewed on:** Cicero (Future Shop) 3.06 GHz Pentium 4 PC with an Intel D845GERG2LK motherboard, 1GB of PC2100 DDR memory, an ATI Radeon 9800 video card with 128MB of video memory, Windows XP Home, a Maxtor 300GB SATA hard drive running at 7,200 RPM, and a KDS Rad-7c LCD panel.

REVIEW:

USB keychain drives, also called "thumbdrives" or memory keys, are pretty handy little gadgets on their own — a portable personal storage system that works with any computer equipped with a USB port is something that appeals to just about anyone these days. But they're suddenly getting even more useful as enterprising developers realize that when people start carrying keychain drive for personal storage, there's suddenly a market for special personal programs that can be run from them.

Some of these programs can be downloaded and added later, but a few keychain drive makers are building more complex software right into the products at the factory. One such company is StealthSurfer, which has developed a memory key product line that goes by the same name.

On the surface, the StealthSurfer looks like a run-of-the-mill keychain drive, although it's a bit sleeker and thinner than most of the competing devices. It's a USB 1.1 drive that comes in capacities ranging from 64MB right up to 512MB (and priced from $69 U.S. to 298.95 respectively), and like its competitors it plugs-and-plays with Windows ME through XP. It works with Windows 98, but you'll have to load a special removable storage driver onto the computer first, as you do with all USB drives for that operating system.

I tried the 64MB version, and it was easy to use. Plug it in, and the computer recognizes it as a removable hard drive so that you can drag and drop files to and from it. That's just what you'd expect from a thumbdrive, but the first trick you'll notice with the StealthSurfer is that the memory is protected. To access the drive, you'll need to type in a password. This keeps the data from prying eyes if the device is lost or stolen (a Mac version is also available, but without password protection for some reason).

After you've typed in the password, things get more interesting. Most of the StealthSurfer's memory is available for you to store files on, but part of it is reserved for a little program the company calls "Stealth Netscape." It's permanently stored on the drive, and when you run the executable file it activates a special version of Netscape 7.

The principle behind Stealth Netscape is simple. It's a browser that runs directly off the memory key.

In practice, it's a little more complex of course. The software temporarily overrides the browser settings in Windows. It won't affect browsers installed on

the computer, but when you run Stealth Netscape, all the related files — be they cookies, cache files or temp files — get stored on the memory key instead of on the host computer's hard drive.

Why would you want to do this? Well, removing your browsing history from a computer is actually quite complex. Simply clearing the cache and the cookies only removes the most obvious evidence of your surfing session. You leave a remarkably detailed trail of other files and data about your surfing session behind on a computer every time you browse the Web, use Web mail, and so on.

If you have nothing to hide, it's not a big deal. But at other times it can be disastrous if someone with malicious intent decides to snoop around the PC after you've gone to see what you've been up to.

One of the obvious examples the company cites is porn. Anyone who has been surfing off-colour Web sites probably wants to keep that fact private — enough said. But there are more advantages to the StealthSurfer than just covering up "blue browsing" on sex sites.

For example, you might want to keep sessions private if you check personal Web mail (such as Yahoo! Mail or Hotmail) from work. The same thing goes for checking Web mail or your bank balance on-line at an Internet cafe or on a friend's PC.

Many students, whether in High School, college or University, have computer access in the classroom and student lounge. The StealthSurfer can keep surfing on these types of public computers confidential, too.The same thing goes for work-related Internet time done from a hotel computer on a business trip, or even a home PC after hours. More and more businesspeople are leaving the laptop at the office and taking a memory key containing their work along with them instead, since computers are everywhere these days, and the StealthSurfer can keep this surfing private, too. In fact, the company told me the biggest single market of buyers for the device so far has been lawyers with something to hide ...

Besides the privacy aspect, the device is also a convenience for people who do a lot of browsing. You can have your regular passwords stored so that StealthNetscape pops them in when you browse (no matter where you're doing the browsing), and it also keeps track of all your Favourites and Bookmarks. No matter whose PC you're surfing on, you'll have "your" copy of Netscape on the screen with all of your familiar resources.

The more I thought about it, the more reasons I could see to have a personal browser in your pocket that you could load on any machine. There are some rough edges, though.

The main issue I had with StealthNetscape is that it can take about a minute to become fully active after you enter your password and click on the StealthNetscape icon. Part of this is likely due to the time it takes to set itself up on the computer you are using, but I'm sure part is due to the extremely slow (12 Mbps) transfer rate of USB 1.1. A USB 2.0 version of the StealthSurfer would probably reduce the load times quite a bit.

But once you're up and running, surfing is no different from running a Web browser off a hard drive. The performance was excellent, and I didn't notice extra lag except for the odd time when there would be a split-second pause between when you'd start typing a URL and the word would start appearing. The browser also shuts down instantly, just as it would if it was running off your hard drive.

I did encounter some glitches, though, usually with sites that featured audio and video content such as streamed advertisements or large animated graphics. The browser would either freeze periodically when trying to load these pages, or sometimes crash completely and drop me back out to my Windows desktop.

The other qualm I had was that the password system is just a blocker, not a full encryption system. It's a physical hardware lock - the memory is frozen by the controller chip within the StealthSurfer itself. If a hacker makes it past the basic password screen, they'll have full access to all your data and the browser history.

I'd love to see StealthSurfer add encryption to the data on the device to make it even more secure. I broached this with a company official, and he said StealthSurfer is looking into producing a USB 2.0 device at some point in the future that would have 128-bit encryption built in. In the meantime, you can encrypt the files stored on the key using a third-party encryption program from the computer if you need to.

And even though you're browsing off the memory key instead of the computer's hard drive, it won't disguise your IP address or protect a computer from viruses floating around on Web sites and in e-mails. If you catch something while surfing with the StealthSurfer, it's probably going to infect the main computer too. Most anti-virus programs work with StealthNetscape, though — if the computer's hard drives are protected by an anti-virus package, the removable StealthSurfer drive should be protected as well by default since the computer considers it a removable hard drive.

My one other concern is that the company makes no promises about browser updates, so the useful life of Stealth Netscape may be limited due changes in how browsers, and especially their underlying security technology, work. You're paying a decent premium over a standard memory key to get Stealth Netscape bundled in, but while the memory key should be good for decades, the software will be obsolete long before that.

That said, while it's not a virtual Fort Knox in terms of security, it's a useful gadget. If you're looking for a way to keep your surfing habits private, whether on your own machine or when travelling, the StealthSurfer is worth a look.