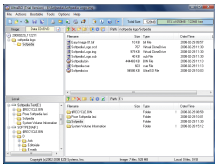29 February 2008   By: Ionut Ilascu, Editor, Software Reviews

The New UltraISO #9

Additional functionality included

UltraISO

Someone said on some forum that soon the age of optical drives would come to an end and that softwares like UltraISO would soon become useless. The truth is that this is far from happening, especially when Blu-ray won the HD war and it's just started to warm up. Plus, optical media is the best solution for long term keeping of files; I have a 7 years old CD that still works with no problems (although I probably should make a copy, just to stay on the safe side).

 But our interest today is the latest version of UltraISO, so let's get to it while it's still hot (it was released yesterday). At a first glance, the version number 9 of the software does not seem to have brought changes, but a closer look will reveal its extended functionality. The same limitation is maintained in the trial version, so you still can't use the application for working with more than 300MB worth of files.

 The interface preserved its looks and the same explorer functionality is available, with dual panes for viewing both local files and folders as well as the structure of the image. Adding files from one part to another is easily achieved with a drag and drop operation or by using the context menus of both panels. Simply put, UltraISO is that sort of the software you can't possibly find hard to use, maybe a little confusing at the beginning, but, once you've grown accustomed with it, you cannot but appreciate its display of options in the window and the dual pane structure of the interface.

 UltraISO comes as a great solution for ISO image format management, as well as other popular compressed image formats on the market. Its price tag reads $29.99, which is well under the software's real worth, especially with the latest improvements.

 Application's capabilities are pretty extensive, allowing the user easy manipulation of a compressed image by compressing it even more, writing it on a disc, mounting it on a virtual drive, create an image from a disc or convert the image to different other formats. And on top of all this, it can also create bootable Cds/DVDs. Editing ISO images is no longer a time consuming chore as you can add and delete files in an image with the effort of pressing Delete button of your keyboard or dragging desired files inside.

 Audio CDs can be saved under BIN/CUE, MDF/MDS, IMG/CCD/SUB or NRG image formats and, from them, UltraISO can automatically burn another disc, a perfect replica of the original. No quality loss with little hassle. Ripping an Audio CD is a snap as all the effort invested in the operation consists in opening the disc from UltraISO, selecting the storage location for the files and dragging them there. The files are automatically saved as WAVE sound, so there is no quality loss; later, you can encode them in a different, less space costing format like MP3 or OGG. Also, you can create an image of the disc for later use. Mind that the application can create Audio CDs from WAV and MP3 files only.

 When editing an image, the user has the possibility to create folders, add files and directories, or, my favorite option, hide some of the files. This way, you can mount the ISO to a virtual drive but only the files you want will be visible. Everything else that has been set to hide mode will not be seen, even if you turn on the view for hidden files.

All ISO images can be mounted in a virtual drive created with UltraISO. The application can load up to 8 virtual devices and rack them up in your file manager very fast and with no impact on the system. The procedure can be executed from the application's Configuration menu, under Virtual Drive tab. If you already use a drive virtualization tool, UltraISO may detect it and you can designate it as the default virtual drive program. One of the virtualization tools the application can detect is **Virtual CloneDrive**, as you can see in the corresponding picture at the end of the review.

UltraISO makes available recompiling of ISO when these are saved directly, backing them up automatically, creating file checksum upon saving the file, as well as generating checksum of ISO image (MD5, CRC-16 under TXT format or CRC-32 under SVF format).

Disc burning software can also be automatically detected by UltraISO, but only if you are using one of the top used apps for this operation: Nero or Roxio. Fortunately, just like in the case of virtual drives, you can assign a program as default for disc burning.

Integration of the application into Windows shell makes its using more comfortable and saves some time as well. The list of image formats it can be associated with is to be found under Integration tab of Configuration menu. Users familiar with the software will probably notice that UltraISO has enriched the list of supported formats and DAA and UIF have been added, extending its functionality a bit more.

Shrinking ISO images even more comes with a list of settings that stand as default. Sure, when time comes you can customize them according to your needs. There are six different compression levels to choose from, going from the "fastest" to "heavy compression" through "fast", "normal", "small" and "smallest". After compression, the resulting file will be in ISZ (ISoZipped) format which is somewhat equal to a compressed ISO.

If you go with "heavy compression" for shrinking an ISO, you'd better get busy with something else as the process is quite slow (actually is the slowest out of all the options). During our testing, a 264.5MB ISO with audio files inside took about 13 minutes (actually it was exactly 12'30") to compress to an ISZ and most of the times the CPU power was over 80%. As audio files do not support too much compression, the result was barely notable, but, when compressing an ISO containing mostly text files and images, the results were remarkable as the file was reduced with 35%.

As any archive should support, UltraISO compressed format supports **password protection**, which can be encrypted with either AES 128-bit or AES 256-bit algorithm, so it should be pretty secure for you. Password's length is limited to 32 characters, which makes for great protection in combination with AES encryption.

Converting to different other image formats is no sweat for UltraISO as it supports the most popular image formats: **BIN/CUE**, **NRG**, **ISZ**, **MDF/MD5** or **IMG/CCD/SUB**. The application supports a myriad of other image formats (over 30) belonging to about 20 applications. Mac's DMG and HFS are also supported, although the latter is not supported by OS X.

Writing the image on disc with UltraISO is not too different than using a burning software. You still get to set burn speed, write method (disc at once or track at once), you can erase RW discs and the integrity of the job can be verified at the end. No need to mention that only the image content will be burned and not the archive itself. The entire report of the operation can be saved to your computer under TXT format.

UltraISO comes as a complete solution for managing ISO image and converting to a

popular compressed image format a less popular one. It has added support for DAA and UIF format and permits compressing an ISO to smaller sizes (it depends on the file types included in the archive) as well as burning them to disc. Additionally the application can create as many as eight virtual drives on your system and mount the images. Not to mention that it can create XBOX DVD, DVD Video, PS2 CD/DVD, Audio CD image, UNIXLinux CD image and even floppy image.

The Good

The application is extremely easy to use, as all windows are disposed logically in the interface and it only takes a minute of your attention to learn all its goings on.

Supports a myriad of formats and can convert them quite easily into more popular image formats.

Double paned view for image and local files, as well as drag and drop support between them, really makes working with UltraISO a walk in the park.

Can archive ISO images to lower sizes and there are four levels for the user to choose from. Reverse operation is also possible within UltraISO. The application can make an image of the entire hard disk, which you can mount on a virtual drive.

UltraISO is able to detect the disc burning software installed on your computer, as well as some software designed to create virtual drives.

The Bad

We encountered trouble dismounting images from the virtual drives created by UltraISO in Vista environment. Although the software gave the message that the drive is ejected, the image previously mounted could still be accessed when the virtual drive was accessed.

Accessing "Make Multi-Boot CD/DVD" from Bootable menu automatically opens a page in the browser pointing to the software that can do that.

The Truth

UltraISO performed beautifully during our testing and successfully completed any job we gave it, within the limitations of the trial version. With the new version, its functionality has been extended further, adding support for DAA and UIF image formats.

Working with it is a breeze and although I've seen some complaints on the fact that its help file is not too helpful for a neophyte, I must warn you that UltraISO is not for novices, but they can easily make their way into application's functions with a bit of effort.

Bottom line is that it supports almost all known image file formats and can convert them to the ISO standard. For easier access, it integrates in Windows shell so its main functions can be accessed at a right click.

Here are some snapshots of the application in action: