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InstallAware Product Review   

Written by InstallWorld Admin
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InstallAware: A Script-driven Software Packaging Tool for Creating Windows Installer Packages

Until the introduction of Microsoft™ Windows Installer in 1999, the installation landscape was evenly laid out: On the one hand, you had InstallShield™, with their somewhat bulky but sophisticated installation authoring tools, and on the other, you had Wise™, which produced leaner and meaner installers with an easier authoring experience. The introduction of Windows Installer rocked the installation authoring scene and things haven't been the same ever since. InstallAware™ is relatively a new tool promising to bring back the golden days of setup authoring with a renaissance of the script-driven model - but can it deliver?

Genuine Scripting for Windows Installer: Build an MSI from an installation script

One of the cornerstone features of Wise Script™ is its intuitive setup authoring methodology as far as legacy installation systems (non-MSI) are concerned. Wise Installation System™ offers graphical views for high level tasks such as installing files and creating registry entries, but also provides a script which controls the entire installation, and which the graphical views are ultimately updated. You can switch back and forth between the two, and the changes made in one view would always update the other. This is very different from InstallShield™ InstallScript™, which also provides graphical and scripting views, but without much relation between the two. With InstallShield™, it is hard to control the installation of a file that you added to your project visually from your setup script, but with Wise Script™ all you need to do is add an **IF** clause around the script line that installs the file.

In my own opinion, one of the main reasons for InstallShield™ users to switch over to Wise™ had been this great scripting, and how much easier it made creating and maintaining setups. It was a little disappointing for Wise Script™ developers to see that Wise™ did not implement this two-way integrated scripting approach in its Windows Installer based product. Wise for Windows Installer™ is not much different than InstallShield's™ Windows Installer product as far as creating an MSI file is concerned - you have separate graphical and scripting views, with not much relation between the two. What you do in your script doesn't bear much impact on your main installation, and this makes it somewhat hard to develop intelligent installations that work the way you want them to.

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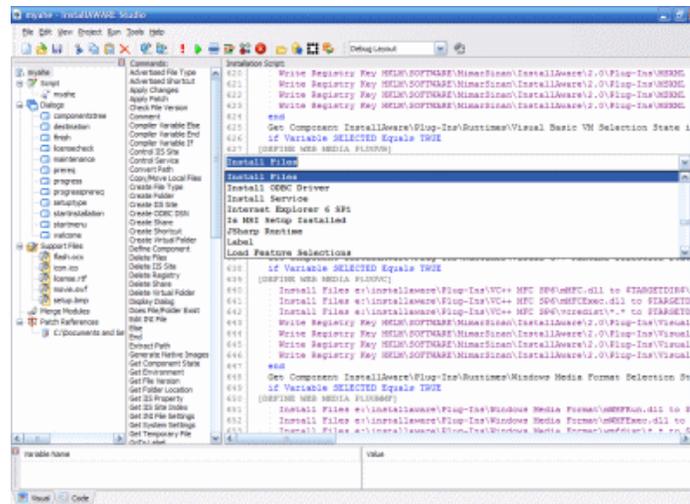


Figure 1. Genuine Scripting for Windows Installer that is offered with InstallAware™, looking just like Wise Script Editor™ (click to enlarge).

I found out about InstallAware™ while searching for MSI scripting on Google. The InstallAware page I came across had a term called "Genuine Scripting for Windows Installer", and I hoped it would bear some kind of resemblance to the good old Wise™ script I had come to know and love.

Over the next couple of days, I played with the InstallAware™ IDE and created several setups. I actually found out InstallAware's™ scripting to be very powerful - you get to control not only the dialogs and logic of your install, but also the uninstall. If you ever wanted to do more than just run a custom program or show the standard uninstall dialog, you can do that in InstallAware™.

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Web Media Blocks: Partial Web Deployment

While investigating my setup scripts, I came across with some **compiler directives**, just like the compiler variables I was used to from Wise™. The Project Wizard generated scripts used some of these for one-click patching (another exciting InstallAware™ feature I'll save for a later time), and there was also a new type of directive called a Web Media Block. I double-clicked one of them to see what it was all about.

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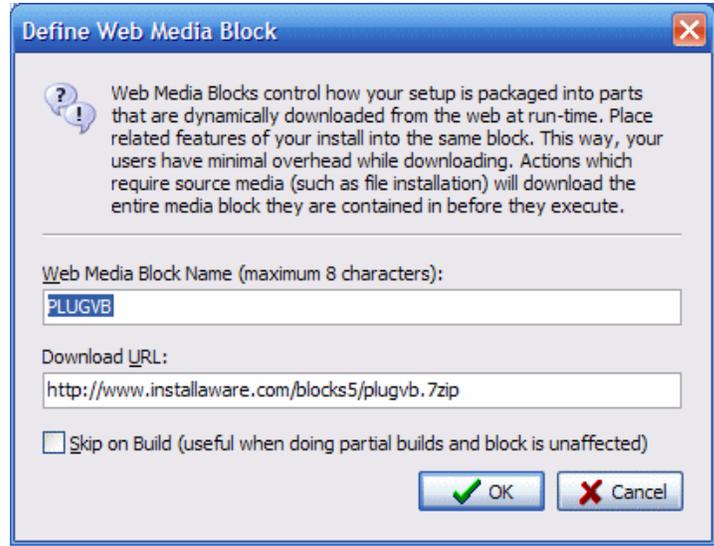


Figure 2. Web Media Block configuration screen.

The **Web Media Block** compiler directive seemed to tell the setup compiler how to package the source files of the installation (see figure 2). Every command that follows this directive, such as Install Files, puts its source files into the indicated location. That location can either be a URL (a "web" media block), or the main setup.exe file (an "offline" media block). At runtime, when a command inside a web media block executes, the installer seamlessly downloads it from the web. By combining offline and web media blocks, I saw that I could create lean-and-mean installers. I stripped the .NET runtime and stored it inside its own web media block, and my actual application itself remained fully self-contained in the main setup.exe file. Users who may be interested in downloading my program do not waste any bandwidth by re-downloading a .NET runtime that they might already have, yet the setup they may download works without requiring an Internet connection.

InstallAware's™ web deployment method is the most flexible I have ever seen - with other software packaging tools, its all or never web deployment: you get to put either the entire setup, including your application, online, or pack it all into one massive monolithic download. With InstallAware's™ web media blocks, I could do a partial web deploy, and precisely craft what parts of my application (and runtimes, for that matter), went where. InstallAware's™ template scripts also make good use of web media blocks, especially in downloading and installing the Windows Installer runtime on-the-fly, if a suitable version is not found on the end-user system. While using Windows Installer typically ends up bloating setups with the MSI runtime, InstallAware's™ web media blocks forms the perfect answer to that as well.

InstallAware's setup compression is also another important product differentiator that we should mention. InstallAware™ is very impressive in terms of using advanced setup compression. It did wonders with not only my setup size, but also the .NET runtime size. While the .NET runtime is approximately 23 MB, InstallAware™ reduced that size to only 11 MB. This is literally half the size of the runtime, and I can only anticipate the relief of end-users who will be faced with having to download the runtime.

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Dialog Editing, Themes

I was hoping that InstallAware™ would have the support for the latest Windows XP themes and looks, something which other setup authoring tools are lacking. InstallAware™ is again quite similar to Wise™ as far as the dialog editor is concerned. It lets you customize everything, and rebrand the installer dialogs with whatever I please (unlike InstallShield™, who forcibly impose their InstallShield™ brand name to remain on the wizard pages). Like the rest of the InstallAware™ package, I was not disappointed.



Figure 3. The Attractive theme, resembling the Windows XP installer (click to enlarge).

Far from just supporting Windows XP themes, InstallAware™ actually ships with 12 unique setup themes. Each and every one of those themes are unique - they are not just changes of wizard bitmaps and colors. Do you remember the Visual Studio .NET installer, which has only two pages, and condenses a lot of feature, directory, and Start Menu selection information into a single screen? InstallAware™ has a theme just like that (see figure 4). Do you remember the Windows XP installer itself, with a nice animation of square boxes that light up in succession? InstallAware™ has a theme like that one, too (see figure 3). And of course, InstallAware™ has its own home-designed set of setup dialogs, ranging from conservative to festive.

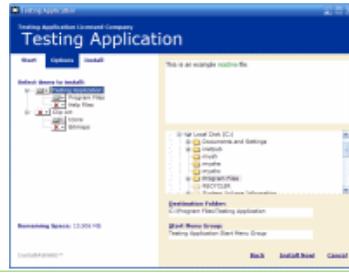


Figure 4. The Impact theme, resembling the Visual Studio .NET installer (click to enlarge).

The dialog editor itself is very cool - it features more controls than I have seen in any other product, including HTML and Flash controls that can be used as interactive billboards to entertain your user while the product is still installing! Sure beats static bitmaps. InstallAware™ lets you customize every aspect of your dialogs, and does not forcibly impose its own brand name on wizard screens (although the standard themes do ship with the InstallAware™ branding, you are free to remove it).

Getting/setting the values of fields in your dialogs, such as a password form, between your script and the dialogs is automatic. You can even configure how controls on the dialog respond to one another - such as disabling the Next button when the license agreement check box is not checked. I was once again surprised to see that nothing is hard coded in InstallAware™ - everything is completely customizable. I used the dialog editor to create my own custom theme from scratch.

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Microsoft released the updated version of Microsoft Windows Installer 3.1: KB893803 (version 2.0) on May 12, 2005.

Microsoft Windows Installer 3.1 (v2) is now available as a redistributable system component for Windows 2000

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Conclusion

I am impressed with InstallAware™. Having used major MSI setup authoring tools, I can say that InstallAware™ represents a unique and fresh alternative to the existing installers, which are essentially different front-end user interfaces to MSI databases and require Windows Installer knowledge.

InstallAware™ completely isolates the setup developer from Windows Installer tables. The tool itself is not designed to be a database editor but it builds an MSI database based on your InstallAware™ script actions. This makes the MSI development very easy for a user who is not familiar with Windows Installer or a user who does not want to directly deal with the raw data found in MSI tables. On the other hand, if you want to see Windows Installer tables and/or make direct modifications to tables, InstallAware™ may not be the right tool for you. Because it does not directly expose any Windows Installer tables to the user. Essentially it is not designed to be a MSI database editor.

If you are used to Wise script™ or SMS script™ development but confused or not sure how to tackle with Windows Installer, you will like InstallAware™. It lets you keep the same setup authoring practices and migrate all your existing skills to Windows Installer. You will completely avoid setup re-engineering, and get going with Windows Installer right away.

And, if you are an InstallShield™ user who doesn't care much for the two-way integrated scripting metaphor available with Wise™ and InstallAware™, I still think InstallAware™ is worth a good look. With its partial web deployment, advanced compression, sophisticated dialog editing, and overall fully customizable installers, InstallAware™ has a lot to offer.

Husnu Kaplan
Senior Consultant @ InstallWorld

To download a free fully functional 30-day evaluation version of InstallAware visit <http://www.installaware.com>

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