Control Center

Unified launcher for thinkBio software, tutorials, and assessments

Bruce Patterson - Wednesday, February 18, 2015

General and overview

The 'Control Center' is a unified launcher that allows you to run all thinkBio software from a single launched application. Whether the software itself actually runs in a browser or is an executable file, Control Center checks against a centralized database to make sure your copy is the current one, updates it automatically if needed, then opens the relevant webpage or launches the software.
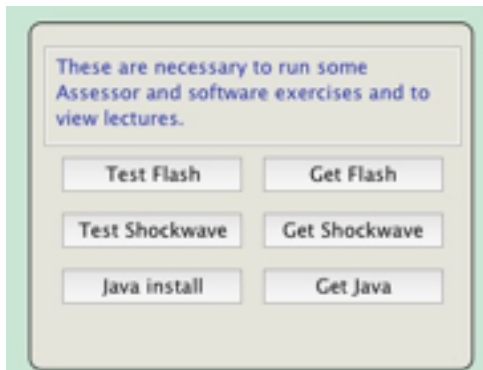
For students, the software automatically embeds the course number (the generic download corresponds to course #357, which is the number used for testing and demo; it is this course that the thinkBio website assigns for default account creation.

Welcome page: general and assessments

On launch, the program pauses to make sure it's own internal components are up to date (as of Feb. 2015, the program doesn't function offline). It also runs a check to see if the Control Center itself is current. The program cannot update itself; if out of date, you will be referred to a location to retrieve the latest version.

Several sections on the Welcome screen are devoted to learning how the software operates and making sure your system has the appropriate helper software to run exercises. First, note the Test/Install section in the lower righthand corner:

The buttons are paired; the left takes you to an informational or test page about the software in questions; the right allows you to acquire it.

Each of the three elements shown is from a major software company (Flash and Director are from Adobe; Java is from Oracle). These components are as safe as anything can be on the internet, and each is regularly updated to close down any vulnerabilities that are discovered.

!!! One caution. The profit models for each of these involves the companies offering to install additional software such as 'Google toolbar'. Keep an eye open for these and make sure that you UNcheck boxes offering these delights unless you are sure you want them. The installation will continue.

Also, when testing shockwave (or running some of the software), you may see additional messages requesting that you allow installation of 'vList xtra', 'secureNet xtra' or other 'xtra' files. These are required for some functionality and are safe. You can also save yourself future hassle by giving the software to 'run all software from this location in the future.'
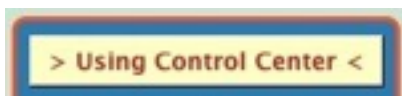
I've also provided specific information and troubleshooting pages:
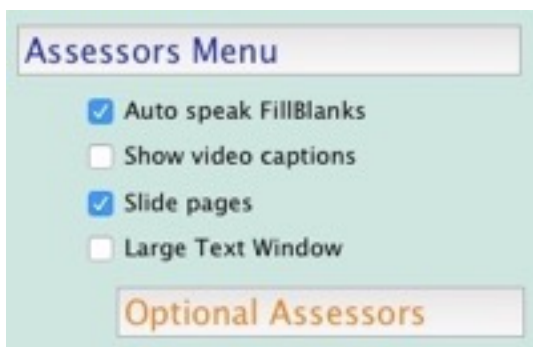
Shockwave set-up

Java set-up

How-to movies

These pertain mainly to use of a version of Control Center in classrooms at the University of Arizona. but may get updated to include more general information.

Assessment tools (and tutorials)

The Control Center was initially designed as a course management tool, and can deliver 'Assessors', which are rich feature set online homeworks. If you insist, you can call them quizzes but virtually any kind of question/task can be embedded and scored.

As of Feb. 2015, the software for grading and recording scores has not been re-created on the thinkBio site, but this could be easily done were anyone to want this capability. In lieu of that, I have set the status of many of the exercises to 'Optional Assessor'. In this format, a user is warned if they have an answer incorrect and are given the option to change it or to advance. In 'real' Assessors, this behavior can be selected by the author independently for each question, and when on, only two warnings are issued before the user's answer is accepted regardless of correctness.

Since some of these activities are still 'live' at the University of Arizona, many of the Assessors are present only in the 'non Optional format' since I don't think it would be appropriate yet to post them here in a format that is functionally an answer key. Unique exercises are already available under 'Optional' and these are fully functional.

The checkboxes control the behaviors within Assessors. 'FillBlanks' are a unique format of question, wherein a user is presented with a paragraph with unfilled blanks. If the 'Auto speak' option is checked, the program reads the text (the thinking being that the user is free to look at any images present, think about the issue, etc.). Then a blank becomes available, with a number of boxes corresponding to the missing word beneath it. If the user's initial attempts are not correct, the program first puts a *scrambled* version of the answer into these blanks, and slowly unscrambles them. The overall idea is to partly 'gamify' learning and recall and to fall back in steps, leaving the student as much opportunity to participate as possible. The program will accept synonyms to 'correct' answers if they have been inputted for a given word.

Captioned videos are for visually challenged students; videos are only present in a small number of cases.
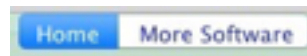
'Slide pages' is a visual option for transitions between questions.

'Large Text window' is an option designed for lab groups working around a single computer, in an attempt (suggested by the teaching team at UA) to make the ongoing work more accessible to all members of the group. It might also prove useful for folks with vision challenges.
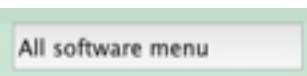
All the rest of the software

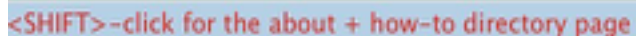To find the rest of the software, click the 'More Software' tab at page top:

On this page, there are to forms of display. The 'All software menu' simply lists all the software and resources in alphabetical order.

Alternately, there are a number of categories

Since many of the software and interactive webpages are relevant to several lines of inquiry, some components will appear in multiple positions. To *launch* software or open a webpage, simple click on its title. To open a webpage with links to purpose, instruction, teaching rubrics, etc., hold down the [SHIFT] key while clicking the software title. A window will open in your browser and display the relevant thinkBio content. There's a reminder to this effect at page top:

More to come

It's my intention to unlock more of the Control Center's capabilities and to expand this document as I do so.