



# Computer News

December 2005  
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*The Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group has served novice and experienced computer users since 1983. Through its monthly meetings, newsletters, online forum, special interest groups, mentor program and community involvement, it has helped educate people of all ages. The NVPCUG provides opportunities for people to find friends who share common interests and experiences. Through its Computers-to-Schools program, members refurbish used computer equipment for donation to local schools. Since January 2003 the NVPCUG has donated 391 computers and 109 printers.*

## NVPCUG Annual Holidays Potluck Party

**December 21, 2005, 6:30 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.**  
**Peterson Family Christmas Tree Farm**  
**1120 Darms Lane, Napa, CA**

This month, instead of having a regular meeting, the Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group will gather at **Dick and Sandy Peterson's** Christmas tree farm for our annual holidays party—a wonderful evening of food, music, festivity, and great fellowship. This event is for NVPCUG members, their spouses or partners, and guests.

Four special activities will highlight our event: a potluck, the introduction of our new officers, an outstanding-member-of-the-year award presentation, and a silent auction.

The evening will begin at 6:30 p.m. with setting up the potluck and silent auction tables. For the potluck, please bring your favorite hot dish, pasta, salad, appetizer, or dessert to share. Our group will provide soft drinks, coffee, and other nonalcoholic beverages, as well as plates, cups, eating utensils, and ice for cold drinks. If you want alcoholic beverages, you must bring your own. For suggestions on what food to bring, contact **Roy Wagner** by calling (707) 253-2721 or e-mailing [rwagner@pol.net](mailto:rwagner@pol.net).

For the silent auction, bring whatever you think will be of interest to NVPCUG members and guests. You can either enter items in the auction, or donate them to our group for the auction. Our group will be offering many new and used items, including computer software, disk drives, printers, speaker sets, modems, and keyboard trays. Bid sheets will be provided by our group. This auction will be a great opportunity to get rid of your white elephants and buy items you need at bargain prices. For more information about the silent auction, contact **Orion E. Hill**, by calling (707) 252-0637 or e-mailing [OHill@napanet.net](mailto:OHill@napanet.net).

The award presentation to our outstanding member of the year, selected by our board of directors, will occur around 7:30 p.m. Immediately after the presentation, our new officers will be introduced. Afterwards there will be time for more socializing and bidding on the silent auction items. The auction will run until about 8:30 p.m., when each auction item will be sold to the bidder having written the highest amount on the item's bid sheet.

This party is a great opportunity for you to get better acquainted with other members of our group—a joyous event you shouldn't miss!

# Looking Back and Ahead

by Orion E. Hill

## What Have We Accomplished?

As my second year as President draws to a close, it's time to look back to see how our group fared during the past year. With a board of directors composed of only six members and with three key officer positions vacant—Vice President, Programs Director, and Special Projects Director—maintaining a high-quality user group program has been a major challenge, as board members have struggled to find time to handle activities that would normally have been handled by a greater number of people. Despite that difficulty, we've succeeded in offering valuable educational opportunities and services benefitting our members and our community.

Our monthly general meetings have provided practical information of interest to most computer users. Through our very successful Computers-to-Schools program, we've donated 181 refurbished computers to schools, nearly twice the number donated during the previous two years. We conducted a used computer equipment sale that raised \$1,941 to help finance our group's educational activities and programs benefitting Napa Valley residents. We cosponsored the Fifth Annual Napa County Computers and Electronics Recycling Event, which collected 208 tons of electronic equipment for materials recycling. We also established three new special interest groups: Digital Photography, eBay, and—new this month—a **Macintosh SIG**.

Our new **Macintosh SIG** is headed by **Jim Gillespie**, who recently joined the NVPCUG after attending several meetings. Jim has been a key leader of the Napa Macintosh Users Group for many years. He currently coordinates its activities. Founded in 1985, the group has about 15 attendees at each of its meetings. We hope that many more NMUG members will join our group, and we offer them a warm welcome. Meetings of our Macintosh SIG will coincide with those of the NMUG, with meetings held on the second Thursday of each month from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Napa Senior Activity Center. Guests are always welcome. For more information about the meetings, contact Jim by calling (707) 252-1665 or sending e-mail to [napanerd@pacbell.net](mailto:napanerd@pacbell.net).

Reflecting the strength of our program, our membership has increased from 93 members at the beginning of this year to 120 today, with more member applications expected. Our membership total is now greater than at any time since the summer of 2002.

I thank the officers and members of our group for the support they have given me during the past year and for the time and effort they have put into making our group successful. Several of our officers deserve special recogni-



Orion Hill

tion for exceptional contributions that have required many hours of work: **Mike Moore**, for coordinating Computer Tutor presentations and personally making six of them; **Jim Stirling**, for his excellent work on our monthly newsletters; **Ron Dack**, for maintaining our Web site and improving its user interface; **Dianne Prior**, for maintaining our member database and coordinating our very successful picnic; and **Bill Wheadon**, for coordinating our computer recycling activities. I also thank **Bill Wheadon** and **Ray McCann** for their major contributions as assistant coordinators of our Computers-to-Schools program, for which I serve as coordinator, and all of the CTS work party volunteers for the more than 1,000 hours they have devoted to refurbishing equipment.

## What Improvements Can We Make?

During the coming year, we need to arrange more frequent presentations of new products by computer product developers, service providers, and industry experts, and complement those presentations with practical presentations and panel discussions by our members. Due to industry economic conditions, it has become difficult to find vendors who are willing to send representatives to user group meetings. To arrange these presentations, we need a Programs Director. With that position vacant during the past year, I've handled the duties, but doing so has been a huge burden on top of my other duties. I'm delighted that **Susy Ball** has volunteered to serve as our Programs Director for the coming year.

We need to return to regularly having door prize drawings and raffles at meetings, activities that we usually had to forgo during the past year for lack of a coordinator who could devote time to soliciting giveaway products.

Our corporation bylaws need to be revised to make provision for corporation members who have the right to elect our corporate directors and officers. Our directors and officers should be accountable to those who pay membership dues, and direct election is fundamental for accountability, majority rule, and sense of ownership. Since the adoption of our bylaws by our board of directors in 2002, our "members" are members in name only and have no legal standing. All corporate powers are vested in our board of directors.

Also, I would like to see us establish a discount purchasing program, enabling us to obtain goods and services at special reduced prices from CompUSA and other vendors in our shopping area, and offer computer tune-up workshops. I was working on both of these projects, but had to set them aside last February for lack of time.

## New Officers

The ten directors elected at the NVPCUG Board of Directors annual business meeting on November 2 will take office at a transition board meeting on December 7. Their first order of business will be the election of new corporate officers—President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer—and appointment of subordinate officers for one-year terms. If you are willing to serve in one of the appointive positions (see officers list on page 4), please let any of our directors for the coming term know. Our directors-elect are listed below. An asterisk designates an incumbent director.

**Susy Ball**  
**Ron Dack**  
**Orion E. Hill\***  
**Bob Kulas**  
**John Moore**  
**Dick Peterson**  
**John Simcoe\***  
**Jim Stirling\***  
**Roy Wagner\***  
**Dean Unruh**

By the time you receive this newsletter, our board of directors transition meeting will have occurred and our new corporate officers will have been elected. I hope that you will give them your support. Whoever is elected as our new president will undoubtedly handle some matters differently than I have as president during the last two years. That can be a good thing. Every leader has his or her strengths and weaknesses, and new leadership provides an opportunity for introducing new ideas, new processes, and a new leadership style that can strengthen an organization.

## Refurbished Computers Donated

The NVPCUG, through our Computers-to-Schools program, donated 27 multimedia computers to the Napa Valley Unified School District in November. The Pentium 3 and Pentium 4 computers will be distributed by the district's technology department to school sites for classroom use. Two computers were also given to disadvantaged adults.

## November Door Prize Winner

**Roy Wagner** won *Roxio Easy Media Creator 8 Suite* in the door prize drawing following **James Manning's** excellent presentation on DVD technology at our November 16 general meeting. We thank Sonic Solutions for donating this disc authoring, photo management, and video editing software package, which regularly retails for \$99.95.

## Time to Renew

For most NVPCUG members, whose memberships expire at the end of this month, it's time to renew your memberships for another year by paying your annual dues. Don't let your membership expire. Please use the Membership Application/Renewal form in the back of this newsletter to renew your membership.

To alert you in the future that it's time to pay dues, your membership expiration date will be printed on your mailing label. If your membership is due to expire within three months of the date the label is printed, the message "TIME TO RENEW" will also be printed on your label.

## Annual Holidays Potluck Party

I hope to see all of our members at our annual holidays potluck party on December 21 at **Dick and Sandy Peterson's** Christmas Tree House at their tree farm on Darms Lane. This event will be lots of fun, and you'll be able to congratulate our new president and the other officers who will have been elected and appointed to serve during the coming year, and whomever our board of directors names as Outstanding Member of the Year for 2005.

And don't forget to bring your white elephants for the silent auction. I've already heard about items that several people are planning to bring, including laser and inkjet printers, hard disk drives, CD and DVD drives, keyboards, mice, power strips, deluxe keyboard trays, modems, cables, speaker sets, software packages, and books.

## Best Wishes for a Wonderful New Year!

## NVPCUG Calendar

Wednesdays	9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.	Computers-to-Schools work parties. To volunteer, contact Orion Hill, (707) 252-0637.
December 7	7:00-9:00 p.m.	Board of Directors meeting, Piner's Nursing Home, 1800 Pueblo Ave., Napa
December 8	6:30-8:30 p.m.	Macintosh SIG meeting, Napa Senior Activity Center, 1500 Jefferson St., Napa
December 12	5:30-7:30 p.m.	Investors SIG meeting, Jerry Brown's home, 23 Skipping Rock Way, Napa
December 14	7:00-8:30 p.m.	Digital Photography SIG meeting, Piner's Nursing Home, 1800 Pueblo Ave., Napa
December 21	6:30-9:00 p.m.	Annual Holidays Party, Peterson Family Christmas Tree Farm, 1120 Darms Lane, Napa
December 28	7:00-8:30 p.m.	EBay SIG meeting, Napa Valley Genealogical Library, 1701 Menlo Ave., Napa

## NVPCUG Special Interest Groups

In SIG meetings you can learn about a subject in greater detail than is feasible at NVPCUG general meetings. SIG meetings are open to everyone. Meeting times and locations occasionally change, so for current meeting information, see our Web site, [www.nvpcug.org](http://www.nvpcug.org), or contact the SIG leaders.

### Digital Photography SIG

Meets: Monthly, second Wednesday  
7:00 to 8:30 p.m.  
Piner's Nursing Home,  
Conference Room  
1800 Pueblo Ave., Napa  
Leader: **Susy Ball**  
(707) 337-3998  
[SusyBall@aol.com](mailto:SusyBall@aol.com)

### eBay SIG

Meets: Monthly, fourth Wednesday  
7:00 to 8:30 p.m.  
Napa Valley Genealogical Library  
1701 Menlo Ave., Napa  
Leader: **Tom Kessler**  
(707) 258-1884  
[kesstom@yahoo.com](mailto:kesstom@yahoo.com)

### Investors SIG

Meets: Monthly, second Monday  
5:30 to 7:30 p.m.  
Jerry Brown's home,  
23 Skipping Rock Way, Napa  
Leader: **Jerry Brown**  
(707) 254-9607  
[bqandjbb@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bqandjbb@sbcglobal.net)

### Macintosh SIG

Meets: Monthly, second Thursday  
6:30-8:30 p.m.  
Napa Senior Activity Center  
1500 Jefferson St., Napa  
Leader: **Jim Gillespie**  
(707) 252-1665  
[napanerd@pacbell.net](mailto:napanerd@pacbell.net)

## Membership News

by Dianne Prior, NVPCUG Membership Director

We welcome new members **Jim Gillespie**, of Napa, and **David Christensen**, computer consultant, Home Help for Computers in Napa.

Thank you to the 21 members who have renewed. Many members whose memberships expire in December still need to send in dues. Your continued support enables our group to bring you our various activities—including the newsletter and many interesting meetings. Please bring your dues to the Holidays Party or mail them to NVPCUG, Attn.: Membership Director, PO Box 2866, Napa, 94558-0286. Regular members, \$30; Students, \$20; and Associates, \$10.

### Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group Officers for 2005

#### Board of Directors

President	Orion E. Hill	252-0637*	<a href="mailto:President@nvpcug.org">President@nvpcug.org</a>
Vice President	(Volunteer Needed)		<a href="mailto:VicePresident@nvpcug.org">VicePresident@nvpcug.org</a>
Secretary	Julie Jerome	224-6620	<a href="mailto:Secretary@nvpcug.org">Secretary@nvpcug.org</a>
Treasurer	Roy Wagner	253-2721	<a href="mailto:Treasurer@nvpcug.org">Treasurer@nvpcug.org</a>

Other Directors: Dianne Prior, John Simcoe, James Stirling

#### Appointed Officers

Computer Recycling Coordinator	Bill Wheadon	224-3901	<a href="mailto:Recycler@nvpcug.org">Recycler@nvpcug.org</a>
Computer Tutor Coordinator	Mike Moore	255-1615	<a href="mailto:Tutor@nvpcug.org">Tutor@nvpcug.org</a>
Computers-to-Schools Program Coordinator	Orion E. Hill	252-0637	<a href="mailto:CTS@nvpcug.org">CTS@nvpcug.org</a>
Facility Arrangements Coordinator	Steve Siegrist		<a href="mailto:Facility@nvpcug.org">Facility@nvpcug.org</a>
Greeter Coordinator	Bob Simmerman	259-6113	<a href="mailto:Greeter@nvpcug.org">Greeter@nvpcug.org</a>
Librarian	Marcia Waddell	252-2060	<a href="mailto:Librarian@nvpcug.org">Librarian@nvpcug.org</a>
Membership Director	Dianne Prior	252-1506	<a href="mailto:Membership@nvpcug.org">Membership@nvpcug.org</a>
Mentor Program Coordinator	Hilton Des Roches	224-6170	<a href="mailto:Mentors@nvpcug.org">Mentors@nvpcug.org</a>
Newsletter Circulator	Jim Hearn	224-2540	
Newsletter Editor	James Stirling	944-1177	<a href="mailto:Editor@nvpcug.org">Editor@nvpcug.org</a>
Product Review Coord.	Marcia Waddell	252-2060	<a href="mailto:Reviews@nvpcug.org">Reviews@nvpcug.org</a>
Programs Director	(Volunteer Needed)		<a href="mailto:Programs@nvpcug.org">Programs@nvpcug.org</a>
Publicity Director	John Simcoe	258-8233	<a href="mailto:Publicity@nvpcug.org">Publicity@nvpcug.org</a>
Random Access Moderator	Jerry Brown	254-9607	<a href="mailto:Questions@nvpcug.org">Questions@nvpcug.org</a>
Special Projects Director	(Volunteer Needed)		<a href="mailto:Projects@nvpcug.org">Projects@nvpcug.org</a>
Webmaster	Ron Dack		<a href="mailto:Webmaster@nvpcug.org">Webmaster@nvpcug.org</a>

\*All telephone numbers are in Area Code 707.

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# Locked Out of Your Computer?

Vinny LaBash, Sarasota PC Users Group, Florida [labash@spcug.org](mailto:labash@spcug.org)

Some time ago one of my students came to me with what appeared to be an insurmountable problem. She had lent her laptop to a relative who changed the password allowing her access to the hard drive. A dispute developed between the two, and the relative refused to disclose the new password. Upon boot-up, a message appeared that the hard drive was now password protected. She asked me, "How can I break this password and access my computer?"

I had mixed feelings. Most people ask me how to protect their data and equipment, and prevent unauthorized access. I was now being asked to break into a machine. Even though the woman was the legitimate owner of the laptop and the data recorded on it, it felt strange to be on the other side of the fence. After dusting off my notes, we tackled the problem.

Before revealing what actually worked, let's examine what you can do if you are ever locked out of your own computer.

We started with the presumption that the password was embedded in the BIOS, which stands for Basic Input/Output System. Your BIOS is a set of instructions that tells the computer who it is and what it has. Imagine that every morning you wake up with total amnesia and someone has to tell you not only who you are but how to walk, talk, read, and use your brain. The BIOS is like that.

To make things more obtuse, the settings in the BIOS are dynamic. They need some kind of electric power to work. If you take out the battery on your motherboard or let it drain, the BIOS settings are lost. What saves you is that the BIOS resides in ROM (Read Only Memory), which is not battery dependent.

Try resetting the BIOS to its defaults. This can be done by removing the CMOS battery after turning the computer off. The CMOS battery is about the size of a five-cent piece, and you'll find it on the motherboard. Some motherboards will let you reset the BIOS by using jumpers. Your owner's manual may be helpful. If you don't have an owner's manual, go to the manufacturer's Web site, and look for an online version. Some sites list the default BIOS password. Don't hesitate to call the manufacturer and ask for help. Sometimes the company will have a master password, but you will need to provide the serial number of the machine. If you're dealing with a laptop, the manufacturer may have more stringent requirements for proof of ownership, since theft is a serious issue with these machines.

Many people use dumb passwords like their pet's name, child's birthday, anniversary or birth dates, employer's name, brand of car, etc. Generic passwords

like these examples can be easily defeated. Don't forget to try "password." I never cease to be amazed at how often this works. The other two most common passwords are God and love.

BIOS manufacturers have their own list of passwords. This Web site may be helpful: <http://www.elfqrin.com/docs/biospw.html>.

There are cracking programs that will reveal passwords in many cases. If you decide to go this route, make sure you check for viruses. You can find free programs at the following sites:

<http://www.cgsecurity.org/>

<http://www.11a.nu/>

<http://natan.zejn.si/rempass.html>

Before accusing me of giving lessons on how to hijack computers, keep in mind that the bad guys already know these tricks and a lot more. There is nothing immoral or illegal about trying to retrieve your own data.

More drastic steps would be to take your machine to a computer repair shop and have the BIOS replaced. You could also have the hard drive replaced, but this would mean losing all information on the disk, and you would need to reinstall your operating system and applications.

What finally worked? The woman baked her cousin's favorite pie and sent her daughter to deliver it as a peace offering. The password was shortly forthcoming. Go figure.

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

## Come to the NVPCUG General Meetings

Held the third Wednesday of each month, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.  
Napa Senior Activity Center  
1500 Jefferson Street, Napa  
(except in December)

# USB Flash Drives

By Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D. Sarasota PCUG, Florida

You may already be familiar with the small USB flash drives that plug into a USB port. However, you may know them by another name. Flash drives, JumpDrives™, Pocket drives™, Pen drives™, and Thumb drives™ are all names for the same thing. They are a solid-state medium for storing data, music, photos, and/or applications. Now there is also a new version, the U3 smart-computing platform, which allows the user to carry applications and data from one computer to another and to launch the applications on any USB-equipped computer. Many flash drive manufacturers are already jumping on this bandwagon and producing U3-based drives. Since flash drives are growing in capacity, functions and speed, they will probably be important in your computing future. So let's take a closer look at them.

A flash drive consists of a solid-state circuit board inside a plastic casing. Most of these casings are strong enough to stand some substantial abuse. My one gigabyte (GB) drive has managed to fall on the floor several times and it "still keeps on ticking," as the saying goes. It tolerates this kind of abuse because it has no moving parts. Imagine if this had been a magnetic hard drive with several spinning platters and a movable read/write head. Just one fall could knock it completely out of alignment and cause it to fail. So that is one advantage of the flash drive. Another is its portability. Flash drives are small and very lightweight. Mine measures 2 ¾ inches by ¾ inch x ½ inch. They can easily be carried in a pocket or strung on a lanyard or a key chain. The USB A type connector on these drives is frequently covered by a plastic cap that protects the connector.

Flash drives are powered directly from the USB port on the computer. When they are disconnected, the information stored in them is retained, not lost. The silicon chips used in flash drives are referred to as a form of non-volatile memory. The RAM memory in your computer requires constant electrical input to retain information. The same is true of the BIOS chip. But flash drives retain information for greatly extended periods of time without any electrical input. Some estimates indicate data can be retained for periods of up to ten years, possibly longer.

Flash drives also have low power requirements, needing only the five volts and 100-500 milli-Amps provided by the USB port. However, their power demands are such that they generally will not run when plugged into a non-powered hub. You are always better off to directly connect the drive to the computer's USB port.

Flash memory was originally developed in 1988 and has seen considerable use in storage for digital cameras. (For the technically minded, flash memory is based on NAND gates where the transistors have two inputs and

one output.) Some smart phones and PDAs are now using nonvolatile flash memory to retain information when the device is turned off. This reduces the drain on the device's battery. Flash drives are believed to work for up to 10,000 write/erase operations. However, some sources indicate that flash drives can survive for up to ten million operational or write/erase cycles. Even so, all this indicates that flash drives have a finite life span. To me, this life span seems to exceed that of a standard hard drive, which is supposed to operate for up to half a million hours. In practice we know that hard drives generally fail much sooner than that. So a flash drive having a finite life span is really no different than a hard drive.

Flash drives now on the market have capacities of 3 – 4 gigabytes. Samsung has also announced a flash chip capable of storing 16 gigabits. (Note that this is bits, not bytes.) It would take 16 of these chips to make a 32 gigabyte drive. As an indication of what is coming, BitMicro has announced a 155 gigabyte flash drive!

Obviously, the flash drive has many advantages over other removable media such as floppy disks, CD-ROMs, ZIP disks and others. Unlike Zip disks, floppies and CDs, flash memory lacks moving parts, making it ideal as a simple solution, requiring only a port to interact with a system. It doesn't require any special hardware, it is smaller, more portable and it is not as likely to develop storage errors. Flash storage devices, compared to other storage media, are fast, high-capacity, durable, and compact. Some computers can already boot from a flash drive that makes them an ideal replacement for bootable floppies or CDs.

Floppy drives are not even included in many new computers. As flash drives already exceed the capacity of CD's, they are becoming a replacement for them. Certainly they are more portable than a CD or a DVD and only require a USB port to run on any computer running *Windows XP*. They can be run on *Windows 98*, providing the manufacturer's specific driver is installed. Additionally, flash drives are not subject to scratches, dust, coffee or other liquid spills. In fact, some have survived being passed through a washing machine! However, this is not recommended treatment for them. The popularity of flash storage devices may be attributed to their compact size, operating system compatibility, and their use of the standard USB interface.

With all of their capabilities, it is possible to foresee some applications for flash drives that may show up in a reasonable period of time. For example, if the read/write speeds can be increased to a level comparable to that of current RAM memory, flash memory could then replace RAM chips. If the cost of flash memory is also reduced,

then it could be used to replace the current computer hard drives. Think about what this would do to the size of computers and their power requirements. Think about replacing that 10,000 rpm hard drive and its casing with a flash drive that can be connected to any computer's USB port. Certainly if we can produce 155 GB drives now, what will the capacity be in a few more years?

Earlier, I mentioned the new U3 (smart drive) specification for flash drives. This allows applications to be developed that can be stored and run from a flash drive. Software is already available for such drives. One such example is *Mozilla's Firefox* browser and their *Thunderbird* e-mail software. There are other applications that synchronize office files, folders and *Outlook* e-mail between a computer and a U3 flash drive. There is a version of *Pass2Go* that securely stores passwords, banking and credit card information on these USB smart drives. Also announced are photo-management software and instant-messaging programs. Skype, a VoIP provider, has announced a U3 version of their software that would permit voice calls over any computer with a U3 flash drive. The U3 flash drives and the associated software will run only on computers using *Windows XP* and *Windows 2000*. A *Linux* version is expected to be announced shortly.

The U3 smart drive contains software that functions as

a "launchpad" to provide a menu of applications on the flash drive. It also has options for drive management and a link that leads users to a Web site where they can obtain additional U3-compliant software. When the drive is removed from the USB port, the system software automatically shuts down any applications running on the USB drive and cleans out data fragments, so no personal information is left behind on the computer. This U3 system software uses about 6 MB of the drive's capacity and loads within 30 seconds after the drive is plugged into the USB port. One result of this capability is that the U3 compatible flash drive can become your "personal" computer. Certainly it is even more portable than any laptop computer.

The day may come when your computer will be not much more than a motherboard, sound cards, wireless ethernet and USB ports. This reduces the moving parts to not more than a cooling fan, if that. All of the software and data will be on your flash drive. The face of computing is continuing to change. Fascinating, isn't it?

Dr. Lewis is a former university and medical school professor who has been working with personal computers for more than thirty years. He can be reached via e-mail: [bwsail@yahoo.com](mailto:bwsail@yahoo.com).

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## Tid Bits

by Gregory West, Editor, *SCUG Report*, Sarnia Computer User Group, Canada

### Biometric Thumb Drive

According to *gizmo.com*, what is known as a "fingerprint reader" is the first USB drive with built-in biometric authentication, or a "Bio Computer-On-a-Stick." Most thumb or flash drives will only store your files; Bionopoly does much more and for about the same price as the others. This gadget claims it "will pave the way for you to do away with the usual startup process of your computer and directly boot to it. This is because the bootable USB flash drive has a built-in operating system of its own. The system further contains *OpenOffice* to support *Microsoft Office* files, the *Mozilla Firefox* Web browser, an e-mail client, as well as an instant-messaging client which supports services like Yahoo and AOL, and a PDF creating program." Fabulous features; however I am going to wait until they offer more GBs of storage ...and the price wars really begin. The 1-gigabyte model sells for \$149; the company expects to produce others with capacities up to 8 gigs. Find it at [Bionopoly.com](http://Bionopoly.com).

### Extra protection for your *Firefox*

One of the reasons *Firefox* is safer than *IE* is that *Firefox* does not entertain *Active X-Controls*. Now *Firefox* gets even safer with a new "*NoScript*" control feature. "*NoScript*" is a program designed for the *Fire-*

*fox* browser to allow you to control Web sites from automatically using *JavaScript*, *Java*. You control which sites you want to use these features, the sites you trust such as your "home-banking" Web site.

"This whitelist-based preemptive blocking approach prevents exploitation of security vulnerabilities (known and even unknown!) with no loss of functionality."

Staying safe has never been so easy! Experts will agree: *Firefox* is really safer with *NoScript*. Go to <http://www.noscript.net>. For all *Firefox* extensions go to: <https://addons.mozilla.org>.

### Convert Your Files to PDF

Fast and free. It doesn't get much simpler to make your own PDF creations. Some free PDF makers insert advertising or watermarks, but not the *CutePDF* utility. And to make things even better, this program's "configuration choices are pretty close to nil" (*PCWorld* November 2005). Get the full details and program download here: [www.cutepdf.com](http://www.cutepdf.com).

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

# Legal Bytes: What is CALEA and Will It Affect My Life?

By John Brewer, Computer Club of Oklahoma City *eMonitor*, November 2005

In 1994, Congress passed a law known as the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (CALEA). The purpose of CALEA is to define the existing statutory obligation of telecommunications carriers to assist law enforcement in executing electronic surveillance pursuant to court order or other lawful authorization and requires carriers to design or modify their systems to ensure that lawfully authorized electronic surveillance can be performed. That is a mouthful.

In simple terms, the focus is electronic surveillance of telephone calls. A bit of history preceding the enactment of CALEA is helpful.

Electronic surveillance consists of either the interception of call content (commonly referred to as wiretaps) and/or the interception of call-identifying information (commonly referred to as dialed-number extraction) through the use of pen registers and/or trap-and-trace devices. Lawfully authorized electronic surveillance is considered to be an invaluable tool for law enforcement in its fight against crime and terrorism.

In 1968, Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, which laid out the meticulous procedures law enforcement must follow to obtain the necessary judicial authorization to conduct electronic surveillance. The law was enacted after Congress debated issues concerning law enforcement's need to effectively address serious criminal activity and an individual's right to privacy.

In 1970, Congress amended the federal wiretap statute to make clear the duty of service providers and others to provide law enforcement with the technical and other assistance necessary to accomplish the intercept.

In 1978, Congress passed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) to safeguard national security by authorizing select government agencies to conduct electronic surveillance of a foreign power or an agent of a foreign power for the purpose of obtaining foreign intelligence information.

In 1986, as a result of developments in telecommunications and computer technologies, Congress enacted the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, which amended the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act by broadening its coverage to include electronic communications (including e-mail, data transmissions, faxes, and pagers).

The provisions of Title III of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, as amended, continue to govern the U.S. procedures for obtaining legal authority for initiating and conducting lawful interceptions of wire, oral, and electronic communications.

CALEA seeks to expand the capabilities of law en-

forcement agencies to perform electronic surveillance and stay current with changes in technology. The issue that has become a current controversy is the cost of compliance by the private sector. A term that is attached to this sort of compliance issue is "unfunded mandate."

A recent article in the *New York Times* addresses CALEA and the cost of compliance. "The federal government, vastly extending the reach of an 11-year-old law, is requiring hundreds of universities, online communications companies and cities to overhaul their Internet computer networks to make it easier for law enforcement authorities to monitor e-mail and other online communications. The action, which the government says is intended to help catch terrorists and other criminals, has unleashed protests and the threat of lawsuits from universities, which argue that it will cost them at least \$7 billion, while doing little to apprehend lawbreakers. The order, issued by the Federal Communications Commission in August and first published in the Federal Register last week, extends the provisions of a 1994 wiretap law not only to universities, but also to libraries, airports providing wireless service and commercial Internet access providers. It also applies to municipalities that provide Internet access to residents, be they rural towns or cities like Philadelphia and San Francisco, which have plans to build their own Net access networks."

The technology that has created the sudden brouhaha is the ability to make telephone calls over the Internet. Internet traffic is sent in packets of data, and they do not necessarily follow each other in a constant stream of traffic. In fact, they are often sent through different Internet routes and assembled at the receiving end.

According to the *New York Times* article, "technology experts retained by the schools estimated that it could cost universities at least \$7 billion just to buy the Internet switches and routers necessary for compliance. That figure does not include installation or the costs of hiring and training staff to oversee the sophisticated circuitry around the clock, as the law requires, the experts said." Terry Hartle, a senior vice-president of the American Council on Education, is quoted as stating, "This is the mother of all unfunded mandates. Even the lowest estimates of compliance costs would, on average, increase annual tuition at most American universities by some \$450, at a time when rising education costs are already a sore point with parents and members of Congress."

On October 25, 2005, a coalition of public interest and business groups asked the federal appeals court for the District of Columbia to overturn the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruling requiring that broadband Internet and interconnected voice-over Internet Protocol

(VOIP) services be designed to make government wire-tapping easier.

In the ruling finalized on October 13, the FCC ordered distributors of broadband and certain VOIP services to comply with the CALEA. CALEA requires telephone companies to design their systems to ensure a baseline level of government wiretapping capability. Some experts opine that when Congress passed CALEA in 1994 it specifically exempted the Internet from its reach.

The civil liberties, privacy and high-tech industry advocates opposing the FCC ruling warn that it extends the wiretapping rules to technologies it was never intended to cover, imposes a burdensome government mandate on innovators and threatens the privacy rights of individuals who use the Internet and other new communications technologies.

The appeal was filed by a number of parties that include the Center for Democracy and Technology, COMP-

TEL, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Pulver.com and Sun Microsystems.

The merger of the voice telephone system and the Internet has created new challenges that are yet to be resolved.

*John Brewer practices law in Oklahoma City, is a member of the Governor's and Legislative Task Force for E-Commerce, and enjoys issues relating to eBusiness and cyberspace. Comments and questions are welcome and can be emailed to johnb@jnbrewer.com.*

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*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

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## What Comes After You Have Your Pictures in Tip-Top Shape?

by Donald Cummins, APCUG Representative, Fresno Personal Computer Users Group, California

Paper and ink are a team – one without the other is just paper or ink. Paper is one of the least understood or overlooked items.

Paper should be used with care. A wedding picture may be a total loss if you put it on the incorrect type of paper. If the picture is taken on the soft side (not very sharp) and printed on very glossy paper, it will look out of focus. It would be much better if it is printed on less glossy paper or, even better, on a matte-finish paper. Many of the wedding photos may need to be printed on a number of different types of paper to find the best results. At the same time, the ink cartridges may need to be changed from one group of photos to another.

Some people feel you should use only one brand of paper that is made for your brand of printer; e.g. Epson printer should use only Epson paper and Epson original ink cartridges. They say do not “mix and match.” Others say, stick with one brand of paper or ink and know everything about them. This can be a huge effort at the beginning but may pay off later. Each photo should be and must be looked upon as being unique unto itself.

Now this is where ink comes into play. There are two types of ink dye and pigment. Dye inks produce somewhat brighter colors and are prone to fading. They now may last 10 years or longer. Pigment inks are less bright and last longer than dye ink on photos.

Some feel that the larger number of dots per inch is one of the biggest things that will enhance the finished

photo. The other side says 1440 dpi is all you really need. The droplet size may be the finishing touch to the photo if your printer can put down a droplet size of four picoliters and/or smaller; this is too small for our eyes to see. Some printers are even putting down droplets as small as 1.5 picoliters.

Does the ink bleed through or run or take forever to dry and cause the paper to cup up? Some will lay down the ink in a number of passes, and others may lay the ink down in one pass. One may require the paper to move through a number of rollers, and others will pass straight through.

One item that can affect the finished photo is how thick the paper is. You need to check how the paper moves through the printer, because the way it moves will control how thick the paper can be.

Printers now have many more capabilities than four or five years ago. They have more ink colors, ink placement size, and speed than ever before.

For detailed printer information, check the following Web sites for their information on printers, ink and paper information:

Epson – [www.epson.com](http://www.epson.com)

Canon – [www.canon.com](http://www.canon.com)

Hewlett-Packard – [www.hp.com](http://www.hp.com).

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

# Tips for Locating Misplaced Files

By Dave Gerber, APCUG Advisor, Region 5; *Dave's Bits & Bytes*, A Periodic Newsletter  
for the Members of the Sarasota PC User Group and the World; Director, Sarasota PCUG, Florida  
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Losing files on your PC is a lot like misplacing your car keys in a cluttered apartment. You know that the things you're looking for are close by, but actually finding and using them can be a challenge.

Unlike your apartment, though, Windows has a helpful feature that can locate wayward items and save you a good deal of frustration. In *Windows 95/98* (*Win9x*), this feature is called Find. In *Windows XP* and *Windows Me*, it's called Search. There are also third-party programs that can ensure that you never have to endure the loss of an important file again.

In this article we'll show you one of the more popular ways to find lost files and some techniques to keep you from losing them in the future. We'll start by covering the Find feature in *Win9x*. The *WinMe* and *WinXP* version of this feature is significantly different and warrants a separate explanation. Note, however, that many of the tips included in the *Win9x* section apply to later versions, so don't skip ahead.

## Find It In *Windows 95* and *Windows 98*

There are two fast ways to access the Find feature in *Win9x*. One method is to click Start, point to Find, and click Files or Folders. Shortcut keys also work for this feature; press Windows-F to display the search program instantly. If you're certain a file is in a specific folder, don't use the Find feature from the Start menu; a faster way is to press the F3 key in *Win9x* (or CTRL-F in *WinMe*) when you're already at the right folder window or have the folder displayed in *Windows Explorer*. This will display the search window already set to search the current folder.

Whatever technique you use to launch the Find utility, you end up with a dialog box named Find All Files. It has five menu options: File, Edit, View, Options, and Help. The Name and Location tab is the most commonly used area of the Find command, as it includes the Named and Look In text boxes. *Win98* also has a Containing Text text box listed here. (In *Win95* this option is on the Advanced tab.) If you know the name of the file you want to locate, just type it in the Named text box, make sure the Look In path is directed at the correct drive location, and click Find Now. You'll know the search has started because the magnifying glass icon begins to move in circles. When the search is complete, matches appear in the results

window. This window shows all relevant information about the file, such as file name, type, size, location, and date modified. Remember that you don't have to let a search complete its examination; click the Stop button to bring things to an immediate halt. This is especially useful when you accidentally start a search over a gargantuan hard drive that takes several minutes to inspect. There are many variables that can help you narrow your searches and save time. If you're fairly certain of the folder in which a file is hiding, click Browse on the Name and Location tab and specify the correct folder. On the other hand, you might not have a clue as to which folder to look in; in that case click the Include Subfolders checkbox to investigate a folder hierarchy from top to bottom. In all *Windows* versions, there are some other options that let you control the search. The Date and Advanced tabs in *Win9x* let you find files by type and size. The Containing Text text box lets you constrain results to those with specific phrases in them. In *Win9x* an Include Subfolders option lets you widen your search. (In *WinMe* click Advanced Options, which lets you Search Subfolders or look for file names using the Case Sensitive option.)

## Search *Windows Me* and *Windows XP*

*WinMe* and *WinXP* have their own version of the Find command, called Search. To get started click Start, point to Search and click For Files Or Folders, or press Windows-F. You will see a Search Results dialog box that's laid out like a Web browser, complete with Back and Forward buttons.

In *WinMe* type the name of the file you need in the Search For Files or Folders Named text box. The Containing Text option is listed just below, as are the various search options, such as Date, Type, Size, and Advanced Options, all of which work similarly to *Win9x*.

In *WinXP* you will need to select the type of file you are looking for before you can begin a search. We recommend selecting the All Files And Folders option because it will search your entire hard drive for the file. If that takes too long, the other options, such as Pictures, Music, or Video, will narrow the search parameters and likely make the search more efficient.

Once you've outlined the parameters of your search, click Search Now or Search. After *Windows*

completes a search, you can press F3 or CTRL-F to alternately shrink and enlarge the Search Results window, providing more (or less) information about selected files on the left side of the screen.

Both operating systems have useful extras on the left side the Search Results window, including image file preview. In the past, when you wanted to know what was in a mysterious graphics file (usually with a file name extension such as .JPG, .BMP, or .TIF), you had to open the file with a separate program, which takes time. With *WinXP* and *WinMe*, you can use the Preview function instead. Just click the file, and a tiny version of the image appears in the Search Results area. To see thumbnails in *WinXP*, from the View menu, click Thumbnails to make image thumbnails appear.

If it takes too much time to complete searches, you may want to streamline the search process in *WinXP* by using the Indexing Service feature. With this feature, your computer will maintain an up-to-date list of the files on your hard drive, which makes subsequent filename searches much faster.

To use the Indexing Service, in the Search Results window, click Change Preferences in the left pane. Click With Indexing Service and then click the Yes, Enable Indexing Service radio button. Click OK, and your PC will run the service when the computer is sitting idle.

**Find files with dates.** If you don't find your files with an initial search or *WinXP* index searches, you might want to search for files by date. In *Win9x* from the Start menu, point to Find and then click Files Or Folders. In the Named Or text box, type \*.xls (or \*.doc, or whatever file type you most often use). Click the Date Or Date Modified tab and click Find All Files Created Or Modified. Click the During The Previous option and then adjust the number of days you'd like this search to work for. (A week is probably a good starting point.)

You can do this in *WinMe* by clicking the Date checkbox. Select Files Modified, Files Created, or Files Last Accessed from the drop-down menu. Then click the In The Last option, followed by the number of days you want the search to cover.

In *WinXP* after you click All Files And Folders, you can enter part of the file name and then click When Was It Modified? to narrow your search to a range of dates. You can also use What Size Is It? and More Advanced Options to make searches more specific; you can even include hidden files in the search if you prefer. After you set the parameters in your OS, run the search by clicking Find Now, Search Now, or

Search.

*Windows Me's* Search feature works like the Find option in previous Windows versions but has some extra power under the hood.

**Saving a search.** Once your PC completes its file hunt, you may want to save your search settings to reduce the amount of data entry you have to complete for your next complex search. After a search ends, from the File menu, click Save Search. This saves a shortcut on the Windows Desktop or a folder of your choice with a name that refers to the search. When you want to do a speedy search for commonly accessed documents, just double-click the shortcut and the search parameters will load automatically.

*Win9x* will also let you keep the results of searches, plus the parameters that created those results. From the Options menu, click Save Results. To create a shortcut to these results, click Save Search from the File menu.

**More search options.** More archaic computer skills also sometimes come in handy for searches, the best example of which is the use of older DOS commands to aid your search. The easiest to use is probably the asterisk symbol. It acts like a wildcard, standing in for at least one character in the name of the file or folder you want. For instance, if you know you want to find a file that ends in .INF but aren't sure what the first part of the file name is, you'd type \*.INF, which instructs the search utility to display every file ending in .INF.

The question mark is also useful; unlike the asterisk, it replaces only one character in a name. For example, entering Sysfile?.DOC would find every file with one character following the Sysfile name that ends with .DOC. The search variable can also be used together in flexible combinations. For example, enter \*dos?.\* to locate file names with any filename extension and that start with any number of characters, following by "dos," and then any single character.

Searching by file type is another useful parameter. Select this option, and you'll see dozens of file types from which to choose. The best thing about this option is that file types aren't displayed with cryptic extensions. Instead, there's a short description of the type (an AOL e-mail, for instance).

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

# Speed Up Your Computer – Clean Your “Startup”

By Ira Wilsker, APCUG Director; Columnist, *The Examiner*, Beaumont, TX; Radio and TV Show Host

Web sites referenced: <http://www.sysinfo.org>, <http://www.safer-networking.org> and <http://www.answersthatwork.com>

I recently received several questions on my weekly radio show (KLVI 560AM, Saturdays 1-3pm) and my TV show (KEBQ-TV22, cable 99, Saturdays 4-5pm) about computers that were slow to boot and had obvious performance degradation. While there are many causes of this inadequate performance, such as a fragmented hard drive, and other problems, one of the most common causes of slow booting and poor performance is having too many programs automatically load when the computer is booting.

Fortunately, there are several good solutions and resources that can speed the boot problem and improve performance. The manual solution, available on most but not all versions of *Windows* from *Windows 98* to *XP* is to utilize the integrated command MSCONFIG. If available, MSCONFIG can be accessed by clicking on START – RUN and then typing “MSCONFIG” (no quotes, and it is not case sensitive) in the box, and then click on “OK.” A window will open showing several tabs, one of which will be labeled “Start” or “Startup.” This will typically be a white window with black print, showing a checkbox followed by a program name or path. Boxes that are checked indicate a program that will load when the computer is booted. Unfortunately, as the computer is used, and more software is installed, many programs like to have themselves unnecessarily load at boot time, and many viruses and Trojans also utilize this method to load each time the computer is turned on.

While there are countless thousands of legitimate and illicit *Windows* programs that want to load at boot, there are several resources, some of them free, which can identify programs as necessary or unnecessary at boot. Once identified, unchecking the appropriate box on the MSCONFIG – STARTUP list may stop that program from loading. An excellent and fairly up-to-date Web site listing most of the items that may show up in the startup box is the Paul Collins (a.k.a. “Pacman”) startup list available at [www.sysinfo.org](http://www.sysinfo.org). The user of this Web site can enter either a program name from the startup list (without the path; *c:\directory\program.exe* would only use “*program.exe*”). Once the item is found on the Web list, it is clearly described and labeled as: “Y” – Necessary, leave it alone; “N” – not required and could be started manually if needed; “U” – Users’ choice; “X” – Definitely not required, a resource hog, virus, spyware, or other item that should not be loaded at boot; “?” – Unknown, not listed. If the file listed adjacent to the checkbox is listed as a “Y”, leave it checked, and if listed as

“X”, then uncheck the box. Items marked as “N” should be unchecked, unless they are frequently used shortly after the computer is booted.

Many users are not comfortable performing such tasks manually, but there are several utilities available that contain a startup manager to ease the process of deciding what to allow to run, and what to stop. One free utility that actually is intended for another function, but contains an easy-to-use startup manager is the popular anti-spyware product *Spybot Search and Destroy* ([www.safer-networking.org](http://www.safer-networking.org)). Since many spyware products install themselves in the startup list, *Spybot* allows the user to control those malware programs as well as all other startup programs at boot. Download the *Spybot*, install and update it, and then open it. Click on “Mode” on the menu bar, and select “Advanced.” On the left side of the window will be a choice of utilities. Go to “Tools” and click on “System Startup.” This will load a list of programs loaded at boot, along with their corresponding checkboxes. The right edge of the window has a narrow gray bar with two triangular arrows, one right (close) and one left (open); click on this bar and the data from Paul Collins’ startup list (mentioned above) will be shown as each listed item is clicked on. Necessary items are highlighted in green, and users’ choice items are highlighted in yellow. Dangerous and unnecessary items are highlighted in red, and white items are unknown to “Pacman.” Unwanted items can have their corresponding “check” removed by clicking on the checkbox; this will stop the item from loading at boot. Items can also be deleted using the red “X” at the top of the window. When *Spybot* is exited, the changes to the startup will be saved, and should not load at the next boot.

A reasonably priced (\$20) commercial program that offers greater power and flexibility to control what loads when the computer boots is a British program “*The Ultimate Trouble Shooter*” available at [www.answersthatwork.com](http://www.answersthatwork.com). Open the program and click “Startups”. Initially, startup programs will be labeled in the traditional red (remove), yellow (personal choice), green (leave it alone), and white (not listed). Upon clicking on any startup item a detailed description is displayed on the bottom half of the window. Unchecking a box will stop the item from loading at the next boot.

There are several other utilities that contain startup managers, and most will do a satisfactory job. By cleaning the files that load at boot, the computer will boot faster, have fewer software conflicts, run faster, shutdown faster, and increase your computing satisfaction.

Contact Wilsker at [iwilsker@apcug.net](mailto:iwilsker@apcug.net).

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups has provided this article.*

# Windows Recovery or Restore Disks: Problems and Alternatives

By Vic Laurie, Princeton PCUG, New Jersey [victor@vlaur.com](mailto:victor@vlaur.com)

Once upon a time you received a copy of a full *Windows* installation disk when you bought a computer. This allowed you to reinstall individual system files or *Windows* components if anything went wrong. But no longer. These days the best you can hope for from many vendors is a so-called “recovery” or “restore” disk”. And many major vendors do not even provide that much. Instead they put stuff on a hidden partition on the hard drive. This is all the backup that you get, and if the hard drive crashes, the hidden partition goes too. Then you have no way of reinstalling *Windows* on a replacement hard drive without getting a disk from the original PC vendor. From what I read on the Web, this last process can take some time and effort, if you succeed at all. If you are out of the warranty period, you may be completely out of luck.

Some vendors may provide a *Windows* disk when you buy a PC, if they are prodded hard enough. However, there may be some kind of “handling and shipping” fee. Note that, if you do finally get a disk, it will probably be an OEM (original equipment manufacturer) version and may lack some features of a full-fledged version. Also OEM versions of *Windows* are often not eligible for upgrades.

The failure to provide an actual *Windows* installation disk with new computers is convenient for Microsoft and the computer vendors, but it can be a real problem for the PC user. There are many problems that can be fixed by copying a single system file or reinstalling small portions of the *Windows* operating system. Without an installation disk, PC users need to have some other source for these files. If you put a recovery disk into your CD drive, it will want to reformat your hard drive and reinstall an image of your computer that is a replica of the way your system was on the day you bought it. Any changes that you have made will be wiped out. All those programs you installed, all those Microsoft patches, *XP SP2*, all of it will be gone. The same thing applies when you restore from one of those hidden partitions.

Therefore, an alternative is needed. At the very least, a source of files for adding and removing *Windows* components and restoring corrupted files should be available. Sometimes the vendor will have put the *Windows* installation files in the root of your hard drive or in the *Windows* folder. In *Windows XP* look for a folder named “I386” (without the quotes). If you do have one of these folders, burn a copy to a CD for backup. This CD will not have all the functions of an installation CD, since it will not auto-run, nor will it boot. However, reinstallation can be initiated by clicking the file *Winnt32.exe* (assuming that you can get your system to boot). If you have a FAT32 disk and can use DOS, *Winnt.exe* is the appropriate file to access from a DOS boot disk.

A problem is that you will have a disk that lacks any of the multitudes of patches and updates that will have come out since you bought your computer. Therefore, you need to “slipstream” with the *XP SP2* update. Slipstreaming is a way of merging updates with the original files so that everything is updated. This is not a quick job, but it is worth doing. An excellent detailed step-by-step procedure is given at the Elder Geek site. If you can borrow a *Windows XP* installation disk (almost any version will do), you can extract the image that is needed to make the CD bootable and add that to the disk. Details for using common CD burning software to do all this is given at the reference cited above ([theeldergeek.com](http://theeldergeek.com)).

One more problem can be getting the *Windows XP* product key for your system. It may be pasted or written somewhere in the documentation that came with your computer. Be sure to make a permanent record of it. If you cannot find the product key, there are several free applications that will retrieve it from your system. One is *ViewKeyXP* and is available at [www.michaelstevensstech.com/ViewKeyXP.htm](http://www.michaelstevensstech.com/ViewKeyXP.htm). Another is *Keyfinder*, which is available at [www.magicaljellybean.com/keyfinder.shtml](http://www.magicaljellybean.com/keyfinder.shtml). Also, system information applications like *Belarc Adviser* can reveal the key.

At the end, you will still have something that provides backup only for the *Windows* operating system. Since I want to be able to restore everything, including software that I have installed, I prefer to spend a few dollars and use disk imaging software. It makes keeping up-to-date backups on CDs or other external media very easy. *Norton Ghost*, *BootIt Next Generation* or *Acronis True Image* are all reasonable choices.

For more information about the  
NVPCUG,  
visit our Web site:  
<http://www.nvpcug.org>

*The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal*

# Browsing WebRings: Communities of Web Sites

By Gabe Goldberg, APCUG Advisor, Region 2; Columnist, AARP Computers and Technology Web site

If the Internet is the largest library created in human history, where are its card catalog and friendly librarians to explain how the Internet's "shelves" are arranged? Where's a rhyme and reason for how things are arranged, and the Dewey Decimal System (<http://www.oclc.org/dewey/>) when we need it most? Search engines and directories like Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) and Yahoo! ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) are helpful, but can be overwhelming. And search results often appear jumbled, lacking the comfort of neighborhood libraries which shelve related books together—so that if you find an interesting mystery, cookbook, or science tome, its nearby shelf neighbors may be an unanticipated bonus.

But the Internet does offer the equivalent of library shelves, called WebRings ("rings" for short). Not stashed where you can physically touch them, rings are linked sets of Web sites concerned with specific topics.

So rings exist for diverse topics -- physical fitness, photography, falconry, biking, etc. In fact, those topics were all featured on *WebRing.com* <http://dir.webring.com/rw>, a directory of rings, on the day I browsed it.

The WebRing concept is simple: Webmasters of sites with a common theme agree to link to each other, and to a hub Web site; each ring site includes links named Ring Hub, Random, Previous, Next, and Join Now. A ring's hub is like the center of a circle, with all the ring's sites connected to it. The hub describes the ring, gives statistics (how many Web sites belong, how many times the hub has been visited, etc.), and lists member sites with brief descriptions.

WebRing.com combines aspects of a portal site (linking to WebRing-related information and resources), a directory site (providing categories of rings such as Business & Finance, Family & Home, Health & Wellness, and Hobbies & Crafts), and a search tool. Searching is helpful when you're not sure which category includes your topic of interest or when the topic may span categories. For example, searching on "gardening" located 128 WebRings. That doesn't sound like many, but remember that each ring includes a few, dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individual sites. Among the first 20 rings, Friends of the Garden (<http://e.webring.com/hub?ring=friendsgarden>) has the most members, 243 Web sites. Its cheery greeting reads "Welcome to Friends of the Garden Web Ring. We are the largest gardening Web ring in the WebRing Community! Please visit our members and if you have a gardening web page, consider joining! We welcome both the backyard gardener with his own home page or the commercial grower. All have something interesting to add to our virtual garden tour."

Navigating *WebRing.com* by topics provides a hierarchical view of its thousands of WebRings -- for example, clicking the Science category yields about two dozen disciplines including Astronomy, Biology, Ecology, Energy, etc. Biology includes an amazing 3,200 rings, while the new science of Nanotechnology has only one ring.

Ring hubs offer a unique search tool with two pull-down menu choices. You can enter a keyword and search only the ring whose hub you're viewing (the Ring choice), or search the entire *WebRing.com* list of rings (the WebRing search choice). Searching within the ring can help narrow search results. For example, the Amateur and Pro Photography ring has 87 sites. If I'm interested in English photography, rather than touring the entire ring—entertaining though that might be—I can use the ring search for "England" and find the four relevant sites.

Clicking the Random link is like closing your eyes and hopping to an unknown site—it can be entertaining or not, depending on luck. Previous/Next links navigate around a ring's sites so you'll eventually return to your starting point. And Join Now is for Webmasters to enroll sites within a ring; this requires first creating a free account on *WebRing.com*.

WebRings don't replace search engines, directories, portals, one's own bookmarks, and referrals from friends for finding worthwhile material. And they only link sites that have chosen to enroll. But they're a useful and powerful tool for locating and navigating congenial and related Web sites, and they give topics such as gardening and photography much more a sense of community than do bare links from a search engine.

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The NVPCUG is an accredited IRC 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Your dues payment may be tax-deductible as a charitable contribution.

\* To request a Corporate Membership Application/Renewal form, e-mail: [Membership@nvpcug.org](mailto:Membership@nvpcug.org).

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# Buying a PC for the Holidays

By Vinnie Labash, Sarasota PCUG, Florida [labash@spcug.org](mailto:labash@spcug.org)

Don't buy a low-end PC this year if you have any plans of moving to Microsoft's new *Vista* operating system next year. If you're sticking with *XP*, almost anything will do, even video that's integrated with the motherboard. *Vista* is not due for almost a year, but a little forethought before buying will prevent much regret in 2006. I say this because if Microsoft keeps only half its promises about new features and improved security in *Vista*, most of its customers will want to make the move to the new operating system. If your computer's specifications are too weak or only marginally acceptable to *Vista*, you will either not be able to upgrade or wish you hadn't tried.

Let's start with the processor. You don't need top-of-the-line CPU, but don't buy anything that's less than mid-range. Either Intel or AMD will do, and you should probably go for a dual-core processor for added speed and processing muscle. By the time *Vista* is on the scene, a lot more 64-bit software may be on hand. A 64 bit processor makes good sense since it can also handle today's 32 bit programs.

Microsoft appears likely to make 512MB of RAM its minimum requirement. Never settle for minimum requirements with memory. I'm sure you could fly cross-country in a two-seat one-engine monoplane, but your flight would be much more comfortable if you were sipping your favorite beverage while lounging in a high powered commercial passenger jet. Memory is cheap. Buy at least one gigabyte of memory, two if you decide on a 64-bit processor.

Only masochists should buy a machine with video that's integrated with chips on the motherboard. Integrated video shares your processor memory with your applications and often results in poor performance. Buy the cheapest video card that has at least 256MB of on-board RAM. You will be happy.

You will need a fast DVD drive that is capable of recording multiple formats. This is an ideal storage medium for backups. Get two. They're not prohibitively expensive any more.

More and more people have digital cameras, picture-phones, music players, video-cams, and other peripherals which attach to computers in one fashion or another. Look for a machine with at least six USB 2.0 connectors. It doesn't hurt to have one IEEE 1394, or Firewire connector.

You owe it to yourself to have a 17" or larger flat panel monitor. Don't tell me you can't afford it. Dell makes a 23" outstanding flat panel device for less than \$1,000. Even good 19" monitors can be had for \$450 or less.

Hard disk space has never been cheaper. Dual 250GB hard drives need not be an extravagance this holiday season if you want the space for music and video files. Optionally, install RAID 1 for disk mirroring and instant automatic backup. If one hard drive is enough, an external USB 2.0 connected hard drive is an excellent backup device. Audiophiles can consult Creative Labs and drool over X-Fi Elite Pro. Then spring for good speakers with a subwoofer. The rest of us can be content with audio chips integrated with the motherboard.

Media center PCs come with remote control devices and a TV tuner. They are meant to be operated from a distance to play music, present slide shows, view photos, and watch TV. Don't buy the cheapest machines because they leave out a lot of important features.

Most salespeople are paid on a combination of salary, commissions, and bonuses for selling specific makes and models. Know what you are looking for before visiting a showroom, and don't let a sales person talk you into more or less machine than you want. It's a very good idea to come to your next PC User Group meeting and get the best advice from all the friendly people you will meet there. Many of them will help you configure your new machine.

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