

Computer News

April 2005
Volume 22, Issue 4

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The Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group has served novice and experienced computer users since 1983. Through its monthly meetings, newsletter, on-line 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 more than 277 computers and 102 printers.

Using Mail Merge in Microsoft Word Will Be Discussed at NVPCUG Meeting April 20

The Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Club will meet Wednesday, April 20, 7:00-9:00 p.m., at the Napa Senior Activity Center, 1500 Jefferson Street, Napa.

Our April general meeting will consist of only two of our regular meeting segments: **Random Access**, an open-floor question-and-answer period, and **Computer Tutor**, a session in which you can learn how to accomplish specific tasks. Each of these segments will be much longer than usual, allowing more time for discussion.

In the **Computer Tutor** session, Michael Moore will continue his series of presentations on *Microsoft Word* special features by discussing mail-merge. This valuable feature allows you to prepare personalized form letters, envelopes, mailing labels and name tags, as well as customized documents and file labels, by using data such as names and addresses (or whatever else you want) stored in a list. This feature, which is also available in WordPerfect and other word processing products, can save you a lot of time, especially if you need to do a mass mailing or will need to do the work again.



Mike is a Computer Studies instructor at Napa Valley College, where he teaches *Microsoft Word*, *Excel* and *Access* courses at NVC. Prior to teaching, Mike had a varied and long career in industrial computer system design until he resigned from Westinghouse as the president of one of its high-technology subsidiaries. He is also the NVPCUG's Computer Tutor Coordinator.

During the **Random Access** period, which will precede the Computer Tutor session, you can ask questions about specific issues you have encountered in using computers and computer-related products and receive helpful information from other meeting attendees. Questions may be submitted in advance of our meeting by e-mailing them to Random Access Moderator Jerry Brown at Questions@nvpcug.org.

Would you like to get practical information on how to make better use of your computer? Come to this free meeting! Guests are always welcome.

Steps to the Future

by Orion E. Hill

Although our group is going through a difficult period due to the critical duties of several key vacant officer positions not getting sufficient attention, I'm very pleased to report that steps have and are being taken not only to continue but also to improve the educational activities and member services of our group.

- Efforts to find volunteers willing and able to handle the duties of the vacant offices are continuing.
- Presentations on topics of current interest to computer users are being arranged for our general meetings.
- Our newsletters and Web site are being improved. Editor **James Stirling** has significantly increased the educational content of our newsletters by making better use of all of the available space. Webmaster **Ron Dack** has improved the user interface at our Web site, making it easier to find information and complete online forms.
- A special interest group (SIG) for people interested in digital photography has been successfully reestablished after a two-year lapse. A SIG for new computer users is now being formed.
- Plans for a member discount purchasing program and for computer tune-up workshops are nearly complete, but both of these activities are on-hold pending more help with existing activities.
- Arrangements are being made for a used computer equipment sale, our major annual fund-raising ac-



tivity, on June 3 and 4. The net income from the sale is expected to cover at least one-third of our group's budgeted expenses for this year, keeping membership fees low.

In addition, our Computers-to-Schools program and our cosponsorship of the Napa County Computer and Electronics Recycling Event on June 10 and 11, our major community outreach activities, are satisfying community needs and generating much publicity and good will for our group.

Feeling Bad?

Have you been feeling bad because you have been enjoying the benefits of NVPCUG membership but have not been contributing to our group? Well, here's a sure-fire way not only to alleviate your pain but also to have some fun: Volunteer to serve as Vice President, Programs Director, or Special Projects Director or to assist any of our officers. We still need volunteers to help plan and administer some of our group's activities. Even if you can help for only about one hour each month or cannot help every month, your support would be very valuable and very much appreciated. To learn more about the many ways you can help, contact me.

Sound Off!

Got a suggestion for improving an NVPCUG activity? Want to help with an activity? Send e-mail to OHill@napanet.net or call (707) 252-0637. □

More Refurbished Computer Equipment Donated to Schools

by Orion E. Hill, NVPCUG President and Computers-to-Schools Program Coordinator

With the delivery of 30 more computer systems on March 16, the Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group has now donated 277 refurbished multimedia computers to Napa County public schools since January 2003. We've also donated 102 refurbished laser and inkjet printers, as well as a variety of other computer peripherals. Additional equipment that does not meet school standards has been donated to local nonprofit organizations or given to disadvantaged youths and adults.

The latest delivery consisted of Pentium 3 and Pentium 4 computers with 17-inch monitors, the current school standards. Twenty-four systems were given to the Napa Valley Unified School District's technology department for distribution to several district schools, including El



Centro Elementary School. The remaining six systems were given to the Napa County Office of Education for use in its Wintun and Liberty community schools

About 36 more Pentium 3 and Pentium 4 computers are nearly ready for delivery. Most of these computers will be donated this month to the Saint Helena Unified School District for use at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School.

We are most grateful to **Dey, LP**, a Napa-based producer of pharmaceutical products for the treatment of respiratory diseases and respiratory-related allergies, for providing most of the used computer equipment we have received. Additional equipment has been provided by
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the **City of Napa, County of Napa**, and numerous local businesses and residents. Also dozens of computers have been recovered for reuse at the Napa County computers and electronics recycling events we cosponsor each June

The following NVPCUG members have picked up, cleaned, inspected, tested, reconfigured, and delivered equipment since the beginning of this year: **W. L. "Buck" Buchanan, Hal Bunnell, Elmer Harris, Orion E. Hill, Linda Kemp, Roger Lewis, Ray McCann, John Moore, Ellwyn "Swede" Olmstead, Corinne Rau, Tom Rhyme, Rob Richards, Ray Riley, Don Robertson, and Bill Wheadon.** We were also very fortunate that **James onverse**, husband of NVPCUG member **Charlotte Converse**, could assist again by providing their large flatbed trailer for an equipment pickup and delivery work party.

If you would like to help at a Computers-to-Schools work party or have computer equipment to donate, please send e-mail to OHill@napanet.net or call (707) 252-0637. Also, watch your NVPCUG e-mail for weekly work party announcements. Regardless of your experience, skills, or physical strength, we can use your help. On-the-job training by our team of experienced volunteers will be provided to all neophytes. Come, contribute to a worthy cause, learn new skills, and have an enjoyable time working with other dedicated volunteers. □

Membership News

By Dianne Prior, NVPCUG Membership director

The Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group welcomes Davina Rubin and Priscilla Dillon as new members who joined in March.

Our group also welcomes back five members reinstated with the payment of dues in March—Jane Daugherty, Matt Tulskey, Linda Price, David Tognoni, and Tom Rhyme. Total membership now stands at 107.

And we always make room for more.

Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group Officers for 2005

Board of Directors

President	Orion E. Hill	252-0637	President@nvpcug.org
Vice President	(Volunteer Needed)		Vicepresident@nvpcug.org
Secretary	Julie Jerome	224-6620	Secretary@nvpcug.org
Treasurer	Roy Wagner	253-2721	Treasurer@nvpcug.org

Other Directors: Dianne Prior, John Simcoe, James Stirling

Appointed Officers

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

Computer News (ISS 0897-5744) is published monthly by the Napa Valley Personal Computer Users Group, Inc. (NVPCUG), P.O. Box 2866, Napa, CA 94558-0286. Subscriptions: \$30 for one year (12 issues). Editor: James Stirling, Editor@nvpcug.org. All material in **Computer News** is intended for noncommercial purposes and may not be reproduced without prior written permission, except that permission for reproducing articles, with authors properly credited is granted to other computer user groups for their internal, nonprofit use only. The information in this newsletter is believed to be correct. However, the NVPCUG can assume no responsibility neither for errors or omissions nor liability for any damages resulting from the use or misuse of any information. The NVPCUG is an IRC 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit educational organization (EIN 68-0069663) and is a member of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization. Donations to the NVPCUG are tax deductible as charitable donations to the extent allowed by law. Copyright © 2005 by NVPCUG.

Surviving the Crash

What to Do When Your Hard Drive Takes a Dive

by Chris Jackson (from *Smart Computing*, April 2005, Vol. 16, issue 4)

For many people, thinking about their hard drive failing is like contemplating their own mortality. Some never give it a serious thought, while others obsess over the reasons and the timing. And unfortunately, it's a matter of when, not if. Coping with a hard drive disaster doesn't need to be a traumatic event; a little planning and foresight can help mitigate the amount of damage you incur.

Why Hard Drives Fail

Hard drives fail for a number of reasons. Manufacturing flaws take their toll, as do environmental factors such as poor airflow in your computer case. Sometimes drives fail when they are dropped accidentally or when your computer's power supply fails to properly regulate the electricity powering the drive. Regardless of the reason for the failure, a hard drive crash doesn't need to be the end of your irreplaceable data. Depending on the severity of the crash and the size of your wallet, you can usually retrieve your data with a little patience, luck, and know-how.

Don't Forget Your Backups

Although backing up your computer is considered a given by many computer professionals, the average consumer typically doesn't devote as much attention as he should to backing up his computer. Unfortunately, it seems as if there's a karmic relationship between backing up your computer and the likelihood of a drive crash. After reading this article, the

first thing you should do is back up your computer. It may be a tedious task, but like any insurance, when you need it you'll be thankful that you invested the time and effort.

Early Warning Signs

The first symptoms of a failing drive can be quite subtle. Sometimes you'll restart your computer, only to be greeted by a cryptic message telling you that there is "No Fixed Disk Present" or "Disk boot failure, insert system disk and press Enter." Other times you'll hear the drive "spin up" but quickly "spin down" during the boot process. You may also have files that mysteriously disappear. The worst symptom is usually a clicking or grinding noise. Each of these is a sign that you need to take immediate action to preserve the data on the drive. Unfortunately, when a drive fails, your options are limited to salvaging as much data as possible off the drive before it becomes completely inaccessible. If there's a Golden Rule for coping with hard drive problems, it's probably "Don't Procrastinate."

Diagnosing the Crash — Physical Failures

The first thing to do when you're experiencing any of the above symptoms is determine whether you're experiencing an incipient problem with the hard drive's physical components or whether the problem is more critical. Physical problems can manifest themselves in many ways, while still

allowing the drive to function in a degraded fashion. If you hear abnormal sounds from your hard drive, such as clicking or a rough gravelly sound, one of your hard drive's components is probably failing.

A clicking sound usually indicates that one of the actuator arms or read/write heads is striking a platter on the drive. Ignoring this will eventually result in a catastrophic loss of data. Platters usually spin at velocities of over 4,200 rpm, and any metal striking the platter will quickly wipe out any data on the platter.

If you hear a rumbling, gravelly noise from your hard drive, the bearings in the drive motor or the motor itself is probably failing. This won't necessarily damage the data on your drive, but if the motor fails completely, you won't be able to retrieve this data without the expensive services of a company like *DriveSavers*.

Sometimes the failure is so severe that your computer won't be able to boot from your hard drive. This is usually indicated by a message from the BIOS (basic input output system). The text varies according to the BIOS vendor, but "Hard Disk Failure" or "Hard Disk Controller Failure" are two common error messages.

Coping With Physical Failures

If your computer won't boot, the first step is to try and boot the system again. Listen carefully for any of the aural clues we described, and watch for any error messages that may be displayed on your monitor. If you

NVPCUG Calendar

Wednesdays 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
April 4 7:00 p.m.
April 11 5:30-7:30 p.m.
April 13 7:00 p.m.
April 20 7:00-9:00 p.m.
June 3 & 4, 9:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.
June 10 & 11 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Computers-to-Schools work parties. To volunteer contact Orion Hill.
Board of directors meeting, Piner's Nursing Home, 1800 Pueblo, Napa
Investment SIG, 23 Skipping Rock Way, Napa
Digital Photography SIG, Piner's Nursing Home, Napa
General Meeting, Napa Senior Activity Center, 1500 Jefferson St., Napa
NVPCUG Used Computer Equipment Sale (location to be announced)
Napa County Computers and Electronics Recycling Event, Napa Valley College

get one of the BIOS errors we described, unplug your computer and make sure that the power and data cables for your hard drive are properly connected. Due to its design, it's rare for a power cable to become disconnected, but the ribbon cable carrying your data is not as securely connected. After checking these connections, try to reboot your computer again. If the symptoms persist, you might try replacing the ribbon cable as well as using an alternate power cable. Finally, you can try connecting the ribbon cable to a different IDE (Integrated Drive Electronics) or SATA (Serial Advanced Technology Attachment) connector on your computer's motherboard.

After exhausting these options, you may still be faced with a drive that won't boot. Essentially, your computer simply can't read data from the drive. This means that *System Restore* and other applications that take a snapshot of your hard drive won't work, since they rely upon access to your failed hard drive. Your next course of action depends on both your budget and your proficiency with hardware. If the data on the drive isn't essential, you may simply want to replace the drive and reinstall Windows and your applications. Be sure to contact your vendor if your computer is still under warranty.

If you can't afford to lose the data on your drive, you have several options: freezing your hard drive, using a company such as DriveSavers or attempting to revive the drive with an aftermarket tool such as IBM's *Drive Fitness Test* (www.storage.ibm.com/hdd/support/download.htm). This tool will conduct a series of diagnostic evaluations to try and determine what ails your drive. Although the tool is limited to evaluating IBM (now Hitachi) drives, most PC vendors can provide similar tools to assist you.

If you're able to boot your computer, but your drive is exhibiting the abnormal behavior that we've described, take prompt action to avoid losing your data. First, back up your system if possible. Try to minimize the number of times you restart your computer, because your drive experiences the most stress when it is first turned on and its motor spins up.

To back up your entire drive, you'll want to use a tool like Norton's *Ghost* (\$69.95; www.symantec.com). *Ghost* can create an exact copy of your drive. You'll need a second drive to store this copy, but you can temporarily store it on a home network if you don't have a second drive available.

Another option if you don't need to back up your entire drive is to copy the data from the failing drive to a network share, to a removable hard drive, or to CD or DVD. Regardless of the final destination, you don't want to delay backing up your system. If you're uncomfortable with backing up your system, most computer stores will transfer data from your old drive to a new one for a fee. Although prices vary depending on the store, you should expect to pay from \$50 to \$100 for this type of service. If your computer is still under warranty, your vendor may replace the drive, but the company may require that you return the defective one. Before doing so, make sure that you've retrieved as much data from the drive as possible.

Software Solutions

You may also encounter a situation in which your drive is functioning mechanically, but some or all of your data is unavailable. Drives store data about your data (metadata) in files that can become corrupted or damaged. *Windows* uses this metadata to find a specific file it needs for booting or when you try to open a file.

When this occurs, your best solution

is to try one of the many data recovery tools such as *Stellar's Phoenix FAT & NTFS* (www.stellarinfo.com \$149) programs. *Phoenix FAT & NTFS* can often retrieve lost data from your drive. You can also download a free evaluation version of *Phoenix*. (You can't recover lost files with the evaluation version, but you can use it to see if your data is retrievable before investing \$149) *Phoenix* is designed to recover data from a damaged or defective drive and transfer it to another. To use this type of utility, you must first install the damaged drive as a second or slave drive on a working computer and then install *Phoenix* on the working computer. In addition to *Stellar's Phoenix* program, there are numerous other applications, such as *ERD Commander* (www.winternals.com), that are aimed at professional users. Although these applications are powerful, they may be too complex for the typical user. With the high price of such utilities, it's worth checking with your local computer store to see what it would charge for a similar service. The important thing to keep in mind is that your drive is on its last legs; don't delay moving your data to a new drive.

Inevitable But Not Unbearable

It's not unusual for a hard drive to run properly for years or even decades. Today's drive manufacturers have managed an incredible engineering feat in creating the spacious, speedy drives that we take for granted. Yet even the best mechanical devices eventually fail, and hard drives are no exception. Fortunately, when your drive begins to show its age, salvaging your data need not be a daunting task. □

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Something For (Nearly) Nothing: Outfit Your PC With Cost-Efficient Software

by Joseph Moran, from *Smart Computing*, March 2005 (Vol.16, Issue 3)

It doesn't seem like that long ago that the cost of a decently outfitted PC—even an entry-level model—would set you back many thousands of dollars. These days, good-quality basic PCs are available for as little as \$400, and even premium models can be had for barely more than \$1,500.

But being productive with a new PC isn't just about the hardware. The real value of a PC lies in its software, and depending on what capabilities you need, you may find that the cost of a handful of applications can approach or even exceed what you paid for the computer in the first place. And while most PCs come with several bundled name-brand applications, they're often little more than marketing vehicles, set to expire in a fairly short period of time in the hopes that you'll soon ante up for the full-priced version.

However, you don't have to shell out a pile of money for good applications. We'll look at a number of software categories that offer fine low-cost choices, including shareware and freeware that cost less than comparable products from brand-name publishers. All the applications highlighted are compatible with *Windows XP*, and in most cases, with earlier versions of *Windows*, as well. They also come with uninstallers (except where noted) so you can remove them fairly easily.

Most of the programs listed are developed by small firms or individuals, and their products may not always offer the same breadth of features or level of technical support provided by comparable products from well-known vendors. Having said that, people generally use a relatively small number of a program's capabilities, so most users likely will find these choices suitable. And because even the big vendors often provide limited support these days, you may find a

small publisher or programmer offers a level of personal service you'll never get from the big guys.

Anti-Spyware

Some of the software categories we list may or may not be relevant to your situation, but unless you plan on never going online, anti-spyware utilities are something you'll want to—nay, must—have.

Lately, it seems that there are almost as many anti-spyware applications as there are spyware programs, and some of the heavy-hitter publishers have recently thrown their hats into the ring, either with standalone utilities or as part of more comprehensive security suites (at \$30 and up). However, you don't have to pay much, if anything, to keep intrusive and malevolent spyware at bay.

One is *Ad-Aware SE* from Lavasoft (<http://www.lavasoft.com>). This shareware utility is adept at sniffing many of the pop-up generators, search toolbars, and other nefarious items that tend to attach themselves to your system over time. Better yet, there's no time limit on the shareware version, so you can continue using it indefinitely at no charge. (That said, donations are accepted, and the company offers an enhanced version of the utility for \$26.95.) One downside is that after *Ad-Aware* identifies harmful or questionable items, you can't bulk-select them for deletion. Then again, indiscriminately removing uncertain components from your system can often cause more problems than it solves, so manually perusing the list isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Another worthy utility is *Spybot Search & Destroy* (<http://www.safer-networking.org>). Like *Ad-Aware*, *Spybot* is free. (The author accepts donations via PayPal at his site.) *Spybot* adds a component called *TeaTimer*

that helps keep you one step ahead of spyware by monitoring your Windows Registry and configuration settings, which prompts you to confirm any changes that are made behind the scenes.

Antivirus

These days, spyware tends to make headlines more than viruses. But that doesn't mean the threat from old-fashioned viruses has passed. Antivirus software is a must for any PC you want to keep secure and in good working order. An annual subscription to antivirus software from major vendors such as McAfee or Symantec will cost \$40 or \$50, but there are shareware utilities that do a good job for less.

A good option is *AVG Anti-Virus 7.0 Professional* from Grisoft, which is available for a 30-day trial. The interface takes some getting used to, but the utility scans system files and e-mail for viruses and lets you schedule automatic scanning. Registering *AVG Anti-Virus 7.0 Professional* costs \$33.30. That's a bargain, but it's even more so considering that the license entitles you to program and virus definition updates for two years. Grisoft has a freeware version of *AVG Anti-Virus* that has most of the capabilities of Professional but is licensed for home use and doesn't provide support.

Firewall

Now that spyware and viruses are taken care of, security is finished, right? Well, not quite, because a software firewall can help protect you from all kinds of Internet-related threats.

The *Sygate Personal Firewall Pro* (<http://www.sygate.com>) can be downloaded on a 30-day trial basis and offers an easy-to-use interface that lets you view your PC's incoming

and outgoing communications and running applications. It also provides a feature that will let you test your firewall settings via the Sygate Web site, which can be handy if you make any configuration changes and want to ensure they don't open any holes in your protection. Registering *Sygate Personal Firewall Pro* costs \$39.95 a year, or \$47.95 if you want to be able to get new versions of the software during that time.

Another firewall worth looking at is the *Adorons Firewall* from Enigma Software Group (<http://www.enigmasoftwaregroup.com>), a free download with no registration fee. The *Enigma Firewall* will monitor your applications' access to the Internet and let you create custom rules to control Internet access to and from your computer. It also has the ability to determine access based on the time of day or day of the week.

If you're running *WinXP*, another option is to be sure that you've installed Service Pack 2, which includes a built-in firewall. The *Windows Firewall* is not as full-featured as most, but it provides basic protection and won't cost you a dime.

Office Productivity Suite

Few PC users could get much done without an office suite. You can use Windows' *WordPad* word processor in a pinch, but it lacks basic features such as a spell checker and word count. Besides, there's no similar spreadsheet or presentation application built into the operating system.

A copy of *Microsoft Office* will lighten your wallet significantly—between \$150 and \$300, depending on which components you need and whether you qualify for upgrade pricing. But for a mere \$79.95, you can purchase the *StarOffice 7 Office Suite* from Sun Microsystems. You can also download a full-featured 90-day trial version at <http://www.sun.com/software/star/staroffice>.

The *StarOffice* user interface is similar to that of *Microsoft Office*; in fact, at a glance, you'd be hard-

pressed to tell the difference. This suite offers word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, database, drawing, and HTML (Hypertext Markup Language)-editing capabilities. (It doesn't include an e-mail client such as *Outlook*, however.)

Each *StarOffice* module is compatible with current and past versions of its Microsoft counterpart, and *StarOffice* also includes a built-in PDF (Portable Document Format) writer, a feature *Microsoft Office* doesn't offer.

If \$79.95 is too rich for your blood, check out *OpenOffice.org*. This suite is completely free and provides most of the same features as *StarOffice*—in fact, both suites are based on the same code and thus virtually identical. You do lose a few features in *OpenOffice.org*—namely the database, some fonts, document filters, and a collection of clip art—but most users won't miss them.

Both *StarOffice* and *OpenOffice.org* are compatible with Windows 98 or later (unlike *Microsoft Office 2003*, which runs on *Windows 2000/XP* only). Both applications require (and include) Java for full functionality.

PDF Creator

As mentioned earlier, both *OpenOffice.org* and *StarOffice* include the ability to output a document to PDF format. But if you're already using a productivity suite you're happy with, there are stand-alone PDF converters available, as well.

Consider *Easy PDF Creator*, available for a 14-day trial period from *PDFDesk Informatique* (<http://www.pdfdesk.com>). This simple, unobtrusive utility installs as a printer on your system and allows any Windows application to output to a PDF document. *Easy PDF Creator* also lets you control what attributes a PDF file will receive (for example, to prevent editing or printing) and can password-protect PDF files with 128-bit encryption.

At \$139, the registration fee for

Easy PDF Creator isn't exactly cheap, but it's still less than *Adobe Acrobat Standard's* \$299 price tag. In addition, *PDFDesk* also offers a pure freeware version available called *WinPDF*. *WinPDF* limits you to creating PDF files one at a time (*Easy PDF Creator* will automatically create files in batches, if desired) and can't convert an existing PDF file to HTML the way *Easy PDF Creator* can. (It also lacks an uninstaller.)

Photo Editing

For those of us with a penchant for taking digital photographs, some kind of image-editing application is practically *de rigueur*. Both Microsoft and Adobe make excellent utilities, but the cost for either is quite steep.

From a company called Power Of Software comes *Photo Pos Pro* (<http://www.photopos.com>), which can be an economical alternative to the aforementioned vendors' offerings. It's suited to both expert and novice users—it includes many advanced editing features but also provides step-by-step instructions on how to perform common tasks such as removing red-eye or changing an image background. The application supports numerous file types and can also convert between types. You can download *Photo Pos* for a 30-day trial period and register it for \$29.90, which gets you all future program updates.

Screen Capture

Sometimes you may want to capture all or part of your Desktop image to include in a document, and although Windows' built-in tools make this possible, they certainly don't make it easy.

One utility that does is *CaptureWizPro* from PixelMetrics (<http://www.pixelmetrics.com>). This program consists of a small and unobtrusive toolbar that lets you capture a Desktop window, the entire screen, or anything in between. During the 30-day trial period, *CaptureWizaPro* doesn't

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put a watermark on saved images as some shareware screen capture tools do. You can register *CaptureWizPro* for \$29.95. If you don't need advanced features such as the ability to capture the mouse pointer or extremely large areas that require scrolling, you can opt for *CaptureWizLite* for \$19.95.

Internet Service Provider

Major ISPs (Internet service providers) such as America Online, EarthLink, and MSN charge more than \$20 a month for unlimited dial-up access. However, there are cheaper options that still won't limit the amount of time you can spend online.

One option is PeoplePC (<http://www.peoplepc.com>). For \$10.95 a month, the company provides unlimited access, and unlike many ISPs, you can try PeoplePC for 30 days without providing your credit card information. You also get a number of security features, such as e-mail virus scanning, pop-up control, and spam filtering, along with 10 MB of e-mail storage.

Another good low-cost ISP, NetZero (<http://www.netzero.com>), offers a similar unlimited access service, but for a buck less a month. (NetZero's \$9.95 doesn't offer a pop-up blocker, however.) NetZero also offers a no-charge access plan. The catch is that you're limited to 10 hours of access per month, get only 2MB of e-mail storage, receive no off-line access (i.e. *Outlook Express*) to email, and have to look at ads. But if you plan to go on-line sparingly, you can't beat the price.

For an additional \$5 per month, NetZero and PeoplePC both offer accelerated Internet access, which uses compression and caching technology. This upgraded access doesn't make files download any more quickly or enable you to view higher-quality streaming media, but it will speed up the load time of many Web pages.

If you'd sooner have a root canal

than surf via dial-up, you may be able to get broadband access from your cable or phone company for as little as \$30 if you bundle it with other services. Check with your carrier for details.

Web Editor

If your Internet plans include accessing Web sites and developing and maintaining them as well, you can shell out about \$200 for *Microsoft FrontPage* or twice that amount for *Macromedia Dreamweaver*.

Before you do that, you might want to check out *Coffee Cup HTML Editor 2005* from Coffee Cup Software (<http://www.coffeecup.com>), which is available for a 30-day trial. It has a few peculiarities such as some unnecessary sound effects and buttons that say "Cool!" and "No Way" in place of the standard OK or Cancel, but it's as easy to use as *FrontPage* and includes helpful tutorials. And at \$49, the registration fee for *Coffee Cup HTML Editor 2005* is less than either of the aforementioned products.

That \$49 will also buy you a copy of *SiteSpinner* from Virtual Mechanics (<http://virtualmechanics.com>). *SiteSpinner* is an HTML editor comparable to *Coffee Cup*, and it's also available as a trial download (but only for 15 days of usage).

CD and DVD Burning

WinXP includes built-in support for writing to CD-Rs (CD-recordables), but it doesn't provide any way to create recordable DVDs. Roxio's *Easy Media Creator* is a good choice, but budget-minded users have other options.

One is *Easy CD/DVD Recorder* from Paragon Software Group (<http://www.paragon.ag>). It's free to try and uses a simple design. (There's also an expert mode for more advanced users.) Registering the software will set you back only \$24.95.

Another utility called *Droppix Recorder* (<http://www.droppix.com>) has a flashier user interface—its wizards feature an animated wizard character.

It also has many advanced features, such as the ability to automatically download and update the firmware for many popular DVD-R (DVD-recordable) drives. The trial period for *Droppix Recorder* is 30 days, and the registration fee is 39.90 euros, which at press time was equal to about \$52.

But Wait, There's More

Although Windows includes software for things such as e-mail (*Outlook Express*), Web browsing (*Internet Explorer*), and digital audio conversion and video playback (*Windows Media Player*), there are usually a few no-cost alternatives to the built-in Windows components.

Web Browser

If IE's security issues have you feeling uneasy, give the popular *Mozilla Firefox* (<http://www.getfirefox.com>) a spin. It's free and impervious to most pop-up ads and many other pests that tend to occur with IE.

Another excellent alternative browser is *Opera* (<http://www.opera.com>). You can download the software free, but you'll be forced to look at ads unless you ante up a \$39 registration fee.

E-mail

If you feel much the same way about *Outlook Express* as you do about IE, check out Mozilla's Thunderbird e-mail client (<http://www.mozilla.org>). It doesn't yet have all the bells and whistles of OE, but like *Firefox*, it is less susceptible to the security issues that often plague Microsoft's products.

A Penny Saved Is a Penny Earned

As you can see, you don't have to spend a lot on name-brand applications to be productive. By choosing the software shown here, you can outfit a new PC for a fraction of the price charged by major publishers. □

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Linux Moves In

By Orv Beach, Vice President of the Simi-ConejoLinux Users Group, orv@orvsplace.net

An “operating system” is the collection of software programs that runs computers, including your PC. Once upon a time it seemed inevitable that everyone would use Microsoft software. How things can change! The increasing utility and usability of *Linux* have caused many people to look at it seriously. Those looks have led to an explosion in the use of *Linux*. The robustness and openness of this twelve-year-old software “phenomenon” are well known in the computing community. Uptimes of over a year are considered unremarkable when you’re running *Linux*!

Originally used mostly as a server platform, *Linux* has improved so much that many companies are now looking to deploy it on the desktop. The GUI (Graphical User Interface) has improved in usability and looks (leading to the phrase “eye candy”). Its increasing ease of use and simplified installation and configuration are making it more attractive for home desktops, too.

Unlike Microsoft OSs, many applications you’d need to buy come with *Linux*. Things like *OpenOffice*, a complete suite of great desktop applications compatible with *MS Office*; a great graphics program *GIMP*, to rival *Printshop*, and many other applications all come with the CDs, at the same low, low price! When you do a *Linux* installation they’re all installed and can be found on the menus for your use.

Yes, *Linux* is inexpensive. It can be had for as little as nothing, by just downloading the ISO (CD) images from the net. Or, if you’re relatively inexperienced, buying a copy of a *Linux* distribution at your local store is a good way to start, as you get some great documentation with the CD’s.

There are specialized versions of *Linux*, too. If you’re interesting in trying *Linux*, you can try it without

even loading it on your hard disk. *Knoppix Linux* is a *Linux* that runs right off of a CD. You can get your feet wet with *Linux* without making a commitment. *Knoppix Linux* is found at <http://www.knoppix.net>.

There are specialized versions of *Linux*. Some are designed to run strictly as a firewall for your household. They’re fast and easy to install and configure. Search *Google* for *Smoothwall*, *IPCop*, or *ClarkConnect*; I use the latter, and it was fast and easy to install and configure. I burned a CD, booted with it, answered a couple of questions about what type of incoming line I had (PPPoE, DHCP or static IP?) and turned it loose. Twenty minutes later it was up and running, protecting my household network!

What kind of hardware do you need to run *Linux*? In the famous words of Anonymous, “it depends.” If you just want to use an old PC as a firewall, you’ll need a PC with two Network Interface Cards. The firewall will run nicely on a Pentium 100 with 32 Megabytes of RAM and 500 Megabytes of disk space. On the other hand, if you want to run a workstation, with a high-resolution screen with deep color depth, it takes more CPU power to move those windows around on the screen. Still, for good performance *Linux* doesn’t require as much horsepower as *WindowsXP* (for example). Good results can be had with a 600 Mhz PC, 128 Megs of RAM, and 3-4 Gigabytes of disk space (a bit more if you go crazy and click on “load everything”).

And if you don’t feel comfortable with the idea yet of switching out your whole operating system, you can experiment with *OpenSource* software in the comfort of your *Windows* computer: *OpenOffice* is available for *Win32* as well as *Linux*. (<http://www.OpenOffice.org>.) *GIMP*, the *Photoshop* replacement, has been ported to

Windows. [Http://www.wingimp.org](http://www.wingimp.org) and *GAIM*, the *GNU Instant Message* program that’s compatible with *AIM*, is found at gaim.sourceforge.net. It’s improved so much recently that many people prefer it over *AIM*. It’s also multilingual, speaking *AIM*, *ICQ*, *MSN*, and several other instant messaging protocols.

And if you burn CDs with these programs, feel free to share them with your friends; they’re under the GPL (GNU Public License), and can be legally copied.

If you start working with *Linux* and need help, there are many LUGs (Linux Users Groups) around the Southland. Their members are happy to give you a hand. You can find your local LUG at ssc.com:8080/glue/gjouis/.

Additionally, the Southern California Linux Exposition, a nonprofit, community organization, holds SCALE (the SoCAL Linux Expo) every year. SCALE is a show where commercial *Linux* vendors, *Linux* enthusiasts, and academia demonstrate the many facets and features of *Linux* to a curious public. The first SCALE was held last November, and was so successful that the 600 attendees overflowed USC’s Davidson Conference Center.

SCALE2X will be November 22nd, at the Los Angeles Convention Center. For information, including complete lists of speakers and sponsors, check socallinuxexpo.com.

Come and see why *Linux* is so attractive. But be warned — it’s seductive in its power and utility! □

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Digital Camera Scene Modes - What are all those symbols for?

By Larry Horn, Editor & Review Coordinator, pcugsj@comcast.net
PC Users Group of South Jersey, www.pcugsj.org

You went out and purchased a digital camera for Christmas and now you have to learn how to use it. The instruction book mentions "Scene Modes" and you see a lot of funny icons on one of the dials of your camera, so what are they and what do they do?

The first thing to remember is that this is a still camera, and you get a picture by having the right amount of light hit the film (or light sensor in a digital camera). You do this by adjusting the size of the lens opening (aperture), or the length of time the shutter is open (shutter speed). How you adjust the two of these in tandem will make a difference in your picture. Without going into a long photography course, I will briefly explain what each of these does.

The Aperture controls how much light is hitting the sensor at any instant and the depth of focus. If I want everything in the picture to be in focus, both near and far objects, I will choose a small aperture. If I want selective focus, for example, taking a portrait with a blurred background, I adjust the camera the other way.

The Shutter Speed controls how long the shutter is open, so the light can get to the sensor. For a sporting event where you want to stop the action, you would use a short shutter speed, but if you want to blur the movement to imply motion, you would use a longer shutter speed. You would also use a very long shutter speed for night shots with motion you want to capture, like fireworks.

How does this relate to Scene modes? In its default setting, the camera guesses at the best exposure, adjusting the aperture and shutter speed without really knowing what you are taking a picture of. It goes for an average setting. By selecting a "scene" on your camera, you are telling the camera what you are taking a picture of so

it can make a better choice of how to set the camera. It generally gives more accurate and pleasing results than the default Auto mode.

What are some of the more common Scene Modes? I have listed them below.

P Program or Auto: This is the default where the camera makes all of the settings, based upon an average.

A Aperture Preference: Here you set the aperture according to the effect you want, and the camera sets the appropriate shutter speed.

S Shutter Preference: You set the shutter speed—fast for sports or slow for a motion-blur effect, and the camera sets the appropriate aperture.

M Manual: With this setting you select everything with no help from the camera. Reserve this for experienced users who want to get creative.

• **My Mode:** This is an Olympus term which lets you set everything manually and then save those settings. This is useful if you are frequently taking pictures in a set location and lighting setup. An example would be if you frequently sell items on eBay and want to include pictures, so you set up a "stage" where you take your pictures and want to easily remember the correct settings.

• **Movie:** Many digital still cameras can now take short movies, limited in length by the size of the memory card. They are low resolution and generally limited to only 1 or 2 minutes or less.

• **Night:** This sets a slow shutter speed to capture the available light and may also allow for the use of flash for a subject close to the camera.

• **Landscape:** This setting is self-explanatory.

• **Action/Sports:** This is really a shutter priority mode, setting a high shutter speed to freeze the action.

• **Portrait:** Used for taking pictures of people with the background blurred.

• **Play:** This is usually a triangle, similar to the play button on a CD player. It is used to view the pictures you have taken on the LCD screen.

• **Macro:** You would use this setting to take close-up pictures.

Some cameras, like my Nikon CoolPic 4100, do not have all of these icons on the main dial, but rather have a setting that says SCENE and that brings up a menu on the LCD screen where you can set them. The Nikon even has scene modes for Party/Indoor, Beach/Snow, Sunset, Museum, Fireworks and others. The Nikon also has an additional feature they call Assist Modes. These modes actually place lines over the image in the LCD screen to assist you in positioning the subject in a more pleasing way and/or line things up for panoramas or architecture. You might even find a Burst or Multi-Shot mode for firing off a set number of pictures in rapid succession. I used this to get some great action shots at a bull riding competition last year.

I suggest that you pick up a good book on basic photography when you get your camera. Even with the camera's help, good pictures require the picture taker to understand the basic principles of photography and graphic composition. We have reviewed several in the Cache. Digital or Film, it

(Continued on page 11)

RSS Feeds

By Greg Lenihan, Editor, Pikes Peak Computer Application Society, Colorado <http://ppcompas.apcug.org/>

I believe I am an information junkie. I get more e-mail and subscribe to more newsletters than I can read. And yet I'm still searching for more. A few months ago, around the time of the presidential election, I discovered the world of Blogs (or Weblogs). These are on-line journals where authors post opinions and commentary and often link to the articles they are discussing. These often track back to more Blogs, and more authors worth reading, and before you know it, you can spend a good deal more time than you can afford searching for obscure opinions and facts.

After collecting a number of these sites as favorites in my browser, it became difficult to keep up with them. There are all kinds of subjects to choose from, but my favorites are news sites, political sites, and especially technology sites. Most of these sites had icons, which I knew had something to do with "feeds," so I decided to find out how to obtain the reader software necessary to subscribe to these feeds (or "channels").

RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication" or "Rich Site Summary." RSS is a text-based format (XML, actually) that contains various tagged items like a title, summary, and a link to a URL. Instead of you having to continually go from site to site to see if there have been updates

posted, these sites are able to "feed" their updates to you. All you need is a news reader or what is called an RSS "aggregator." This is a program that collects and organizes these feeds periodically so you can read them when you want. Then you can subscribe to these sites and automatically get these new postings. It's like creating favorites or bookmarks, except you don't have to continually go there. They come to you.

I started by going to http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10088_7-5143460.html to read reviews and to gather recommendations. I found more options and more reviews of readers at http://email.about.com/cs/rssfeedreaders/tp/top_rss_windows.htm. There are many different readers; some free, some not, with different goals. Some are stand-alone, others work with *Internet Explorer*, and one worked with *Outlook*. But the one that caught my eye was free and did not require a software installation. *Bloglines* (<http://www.bloglines.com>) is Web-based, which means I can access it from any computer with an Internet connection. I could be at home, at work, on the road, and I could still get my info fix.

The signup was quick at the *Bloglines.com* site. I was just asked for a username (e-mail address), password, time zone, and language. A

confirmation message was then sent to my e-mail account. I simply clicked on a link they provided, and I was confirmed. In addition, the site posts the top Blogs people enjoy, and with the click of a button you can subscribe. Of course, you are not limited to their selections. Any Blog or site with an RSS feed can be added to your aggregator. That is how you can use those XLM icons. If you click on one you'll see a lot of tagged text, much like HTML. But it supplies the link that enables you to subscribe by pasting this link into your aggregator.

Once you have your aggregator and get it running, all that is left is to find sites or Blogs whose content you are interested in. The site where you obtain your aggregator will probably offer you a number to choose from. To get an idea of what is out there, go to <http://www.blogstreet.com/search.html> and see the number of topics to pick from. I frequently subscribe to something that looks interesting, and if it is not what I expected, it only takes a matter of seconds to unsubscribe. But actually right now, I have more feeds than I have time to read. □

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(Continued from page 10)

is still photography. Additional suggestions Check camera and printer manufacturers' Web sites. They frequently have lessons and tips.

Kodak is an example. Go to: <http://www.kodak.com>, then click on the Taking Great Pictures box on the top of the page.

Olympus also has lessons that are more geared toward their cameras for examples, but they are still informative: (olympusdigitalschool.com/

photo_lessons/index.html).

I like a monthly magazine called *PC Photo* (www.pcpotomag.com).

PC World Magazine (pcworld.com) has newsletters that are very informative (pcworld.com/resource/newsletters). One of the newsletters by Dave Johnson was the inspiration for this article.

I hope I have given you some enlightenment as to what scene modes are and what they do. I encourage everyone to read their camera's man-

ual to see what is available. Then use the scene modes, because when you tell the camera what you are doing, it can use that information and do it for you. You don't have to know the details of how to adjust the settings. The end result is more successful pictures that you will be proud of. □

The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups brings this article to you.

The New, the Best, and the Worst

Collected by Pim Borman

SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc., Indiana

Alternatives Revisited

Last September I wrote about alternatives to Microsoft programs. I specifically recommended the free (Mozilla) *Foxfire* as an alternative to *Internet Explorer*, and *OpenOffice.org* as a free replacement for *MS Office*. I also recommended the Linux-based *Linspire* operating system and programs library to replace *MS Windows* and virtually eliminate risks from MS-targeted viruses and worms. *Linspire* includes *OpenOffice* and *Foxfire* as well as dozens of excellent multimedia, photo editing, productivity and entertainment programs. Hundreds of more specialized programs are available by subscription to its extensive library. *Linspire* is the most user-friendly of the many Linux distributions available and requires absolutely no knowledge of Linux on the part of the user.

The column was reprinted in several other PCUG newsletters and finally caught the eye of Microsoft. I received a letter from Aaron Coldiron, manager of Mindshare, the MS connection with the User Group community. The letter is too long to reprint here, but is available on our Web site at <http://swipcug.apcug.org/special/MSalts.htm>. Following are some quotes from the letter and my comments.

Coldiron wrote: "I'm concerned that some user groups are pushing members to adopt software that they ultimately won't be happy with." Pushing? Heaven forbid! Suggesting maybe.

Quote: "First, Windows XP Service Pack 2 is available on CD for free, and has been since August. The CD order form may be found here <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/updates/sp2/cdorder/en_us/default.mspx>." Microsoft's issuance of XP-SP2 to cor-

rect weaknesses in Windows XP was not unlike a car company issuing a recall – for free - for a potentially dangerous brake design. Later in 2004 we received a supply of the CDs from the Mindshare program that we distributed to our members who asked for them.

Quote: "Also, you may not know that Microsoft provides free technical support for Service Pack 2 should a user have any problems installing." That is good to know.

Quote: "Finally, you mention various incompatibilities with SP2. This isn't actually quite true. As you may know, Microsoft eliminated certain ways programs may access various resources throughout the operating system; we did this to tighten security and close loopholes that aren't officially supported programming functions. As a result, some programs which aren't designed to run under the tighter security protocols of SP2 may not function correctly (or at all) until the program is updated to a more recent version. There is a list of about 35 known incompatibilities on Microsoft's help site here <<http://support.microsoft.com/default.aspx?kbid=884130&product=windowsxpsp2>>." It is a point well taken, although it doesn't help if your peripheral or program suddenly doesn't work any longer.

Mr. Coldiron appended a copy of a letter he wrote earlier in response to a review of *OpenOffice*. In it he writes: "For instance, we created the *Works Suite* of applications for consumers who don't need to do spreadsheet functions and can use the free *Outlook Express*. *Works 2005* can be bought for as little as \$69 at major internet shopping sites." Well, yes, but *OpenOffice* is free, and in addition to its *MS Word*-compatible word processor it includes an *Excel*-

compatible spreadsheet, a *PowerPoint*-compatible presentation manager, and simple database and drawing features. And as far as compatibility is concerned, I notice that *Word 2002* needs a conversion utility to display older versions of *Word*, including some available in *Works*.

Also: "Microsoft Office is the gold standard in interoperability. I'm sure you could think of a long list of features you love given a few minutes. Here's a few of the ones I like. As I type this I'm using *Word* as my e-mail editor, allowing me to use advanced word processing functions if I want. Icons appear next to names in the "to" bar telling me if they are on or offline and allowing me to instant message them. I use *OneNote* which allows me to drop in meeting dates and times directly into my note files. I can also send my scribbles from *OneNote* as the text of an e-mail – in my own handwriting if I want. I can copy and paste *PowerPoint* Slides whole into other applications like e-mail. For that matter, I can drop *Excel* spreadsheets into *PowerPoint* and even link them so that the *PPT* file updates automatically if I change the spreadsheet in *Excel*." Impressive, but few of us need that sort of software acrobatics.

Furthermore: "Several studies have shown that Microsoft Office has a lower total cost of ownership than its free or open source competitors. It has a higher up front cost, but the additional productivity and lower support cost more than offset the higher up front cost." Maybe for a corporate office, but not for individuals.

Finally: "I really hope that consumers choose the suite that best fits their needs, whether it is *MS Office 2003*, *Works 2005*, or one of our

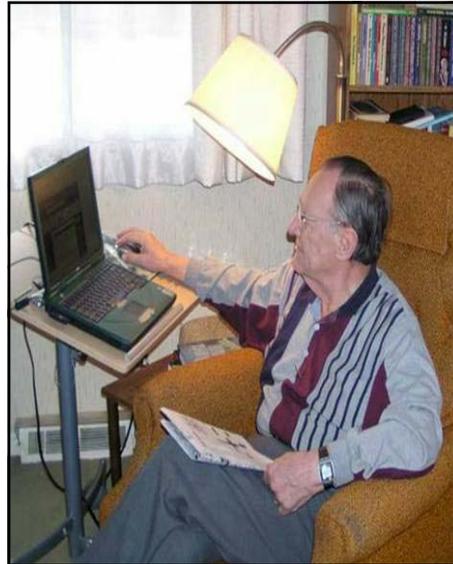
competitors' products. I just wanted to point out that it isn't just a case of the price out of the box. There are a lot more factors to consider." I agree.

The Bottom Line

Few will argue that *Microsoft Windows*, with its built-in Internet features, is the Cadillac of operating systems. Not everyone needs or can afford a Cadillac and a less expensive brand may be preferable, maybe even a foreign make. The customer has the choice, based on his pocketbook and his needs. When shopping for a computer from a major manufacturer other than Apple, it is impossible to avoid having to pay for the installation of the *Microsoft Windows* operating system and usually at least one of its software suites. Last September I wrote that Dell would start selling computers, in Europe only, without an operating system, leaving it to the buyer to add his own. It never happened. According to rumor, Microsoft threatened Dell that it would no longer make *Windows* available at an especially low, OEM price. That may, or may not, be true.

Currently only a few minor, obscure computer manufacturers, often outside the U.S., sell systems with one of the Linux distributions preinstalled, or nothing at all. You can order one on the Wal-Mart web site and find others through links on the Linspire or Xandros Web sites. Of course, you can also go to a local computer builder, or build your own.

It may take a long time to break the Microsoft monopoly in the U.S., where the *Microsoft Windows* and *Office* programs are deeply entrenched and anti-trust laws seem to be a quaint footnote to history. But overseas, and especially in rapidly developing countries such as China, there is greater open-mindedness to



Pim Borman

ward new ideas, and Linux is making rapid inroads. It also helps that the open-source nature of Linux allows foreign governments to make sure the software doesn't contain backdoors for access by spy organizations.

I own three Wi-Fi connected computers. The newest, a 3.1GHz Dell Inspiron laptop uses *Windows XP Pro*. I update the operating system, *MS Office*, spyware, virus, and firewall programs with great regularity. I use it mostly for photo editing and financial programs, as well as to maintain the SWIPCUG Web site, because I am familiar with the programs. My older desktop, a 600 MHz Dell Dimension runs *Windows ME* but is mostly used to evaluate various *Linux* distributions on a dual-boot basis.

The computer I use most is an old 600 MHz Celeron Inspiron laptop running *Linspire 4.5* – Linux laptop edition. It sits on a small roll-around desk stand next to the La-Z-Boy in my den. It connects wirelessly with the router on the other end of the house. At any time I can check e-mail, get the latest news from all over the world, look up crossword puzzle clues with Google, maintain my checkbook file, and play *FreeCell* or *BreakOut*.

All of that without fear of being attacked by worms and viruses. Seeing is believing – I add a photo taken by my wife Pat.

This article represents only the opinions of the author and not necessarily those of the Southwestern Indiana PC Users Group, Inc.

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The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups brings this article to you.

Tech News

By Sue Crane, Big Bear Computer Club, California

Microsoft Authentication Changes Again

Customers who find themselves reinstalling *Windows XP* should be ready for a headache: Microsoft will no longer support activation over the Internet for PCs with *Windows* preinstalled. Intended to curb stealing and selling of Certificates of Authenticity, the new security measure will initially be limited to the *Windows XP* software preinstalled on systems shipped by the top 20 PC sellers.

New Laser Chip

Intel has created a chip containing eight continuous Raman lasers by using fairly standard silicon processes rather than the somewhat expensive materials and processes required for making lasers today. The lasers emit a continuous stream of light that can then be modulated, or chopped up, into a stream of impulses that can represent data. Cheap optical parts could not only lead to faster computers but also to less expensive and more accurate medical equipment..

Browser Doohickeys, Doodads & Gizmos

by Vinny La Bash, vlabash@home.com

Member of the Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc., Florida www.spcug.org

Most people change their surrounding to suit themselves. Your desk probably has some pictures that trigger pleasant memories. You may have added some new plants to your garden. Whether you have engaged in something as monumental as redecorating your house or as trivial as changing the default ring on your cell phone, your general point is to make your surroundings look and act the way you want them to, not the way someone else thinks they should.

Tweaking your internet browser isn't any different. Due to the number of software add-ons available, you can change or add many different features. Some allow you to change the appearance of the interface; others help you to retrieve information more quickly. Several of them may even make using the Internet easier. Despite their sophistication, most install quickly, and the majority of them are free.

Almost everyone who searches the Web uses Google, Yahoo or both. There are many other search engines, but these two dominate the bulk of the traffic. Switching between the two sites gets old quickly, so why not try Google's toolbar? It maintains a link to Google's Web site, allowing instant access to many of Google's features, no matter where else you may be on the Web. You can search, spell-check, block pop-ups, even turn UPS tracking numbers into Web links.

Yahoo's toolbar has similar features, and it lets you search on-line yellow pages. You can check local movie and TV schedules. Yahoo has a nice e-mail element, and it's very strong in financial features. You also get an anti-spyware tool.

Yahoo's toolbar is easy to find. Go to <http://www.yahoo.com>. Look toward the upper right-hand corner of your browser window, click on the link, and follow directions.

For Google's entire bag of goodies, direct your browser to <http://www.google.com>, and then click on the "more" button. You may need to scroll down the list of other tools to get to it. When you're finished, make a trip to <http://labs.google.com> and enjoy the feast. This is Google's technology sandbox. These are prototype projects Google is currently working on, meaning they are not quite finished yet. Even if you're not particularly adventurous, try the new Map feature. You may be so impressed you'll never use *Mapquest* again.

I do a lot of research on-line, and I have become a fan of *Net Snippets* because I can straightforwardly save a snapshot of a Web page or any part of the page. The utility lets me save these "snippets" to organize for off-line viewing. This eliminates the need to search for the same page multiple times, and it is a godsend if the site ever goes off-line.

Net Snippets is the kind of tool you never knew you needed, but now you can't live without it. There is no one thing that grabs you, but a host of little things like the ability to highlight and annotate that make *Net Snippets* a "must have" tool. Get it at <http://www.netsnippets.com>.

RSS readers are rapidly emerging from obscurity to necessity. Depending on whom you ask, RSS stands for "Rich Site Summary", "RDF Site Summary", or "Really Simple Syndication." RSS is a dialect of XML, and its "geek-speak" nature has probably contributed to its slow acceptance; but its benefits are undeniable. The technology notifies you whenever something on your favorite Web sites changes.

The original RSS was designed by Netscape as a format for building portals of headlines to mainstream news sites. It has rapidly evolved into something far different and much more useful. Get news headlines, stock quotes or alerts when an item you've been waiting for is available. You can save yourself a lot of time because you don't have to visit individual web sites to see what's new. A large bonus is that RSS feeds can't be tampered with. What that means is they are immune from attacks by spyware, viruses, Trojans, and other assorted evil-intentioned software.

In Windows, *Pluck* is the most popular RSS add-on. It's easily downloaded from <http://www.pluck.com>. If you're still using the basic plain vanilla browser, try at least one of these tools to boost your web experiences. □

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Tech News

By Sue Crane, Editor, Big Bear Computer Club, CA

Molecular Computer Would Be Faster, Smaller and Cheaper.

Researchers from Hewlett-Packard have created devices called crossbar latches that can be used to perform calculations in microprocessors, the same function silicon transistors now have. Crossbar latches--which consist of a grid of microscopic wires linked by molecules at their intersections--are far smaller and, potentially, far cheaper to make because they are produced using processes more like inkjet printing than the etching processes required for today's chips. HP has already shown how crossbar latches can be used in memory. "This is the final piece of the puzzle for building a molecular computer," said Phil Kuekes, senior computer architect and primary inventor at HP's Quantum Science Research (QSR) unit.

Faster Hard Drives

Dataslide proposes to abandon hard drive rotation in favor of vibration. A new prototype drive has a rectangular plate coated with magnetic storage material. A second plate hovers above with an array of lithographed heads on its surface. The lower plate vibrates from side to side at 600 times per second, a process that delivers data 10 times faster than a 15,000 rpm rotating disk drive. Dataslide envisions tweaking the product to increase the vibration to 100,000 a second -- equivalent to a disk rotating at 12 million rpm.

Your Cell Phone Could Infect Your Car!

A report by IBM Security Intelligence Services predicts that viruses spreading to mobile phones, PDAs and wireless networks could infect the embedded computers that increasingly are used to run basic automobile functions. The average new car runs 20 computer processors and about 60 megabytes of software code, raising more opportunities for malfunctions.

New Technology Could Bring Sight to the Blind

A small camera mounted on spectacles and connected to the optical nerve could restore the sight of thousands of people suffering from deterioration of the

retina, European scientists said Monday. The technology could also help people with the retinal disease macular degeneration, which can lead to loss of fine-detail sight and which is one of the leading causes of visual impairment in the United States. A camera mounted on glasses sends images to an electronic device implanted behind the eye and stimulates the optic nerve, which passes the information to the brain.

Edible Origami by Canon?

The Canon i560 inkjet printer doesn't just print menus for the Moto restaurant in Chicago; it prints menus you can eat. Homaru Cantu, the executive chef, prints menus and many other items onto edible starch-based paper. Instead of using the typical CMYK inks--cyan, magenta, yellow, and black--Cantu has filled the cartridges with edible solutions. Think SSSB: sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. Cantu uses combinations of these four liquids on the edible paper to create dishes unlikely to be found anywhere else, such as "baked map of Alaska" and a type of maki sushi that he wraps in flavored paper bearing images of sushi, instead of seaweed.

Antispam Tools Initiate New HIV Vaccines

At the Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in Boston, workers for Microsoft Research said they have been using database and antispam software to identify previously unseen patterns in genetic mutations of HIV. The researchers said their work illustrates how medical experts can use machine-learning, data-mining and other software methods to sort through millions of strains of HIV and improve vaccines. By seeking out genetic patterns that could be used to train a person's immune system to fight the virus, they are already making headway, the researchers said. The group reported that the first of its proposed vaccine designs is already undergoing laboratory testing. □

The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups brings this article to you.

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