The Rochester Computer Society, Inc.

MONITOR

Vol. 24, No. 4 April 11, 2006

CONTENTS

Improving PC Performance Without Upgrading Your Hardware

Boosting the performance of your PC doesn't have to be difficult or expensive. Here's a step-by-step guide on how to do it.

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The most common reasons for PC slowdowns are viruses, spyware, too many temporary files, software conflicts, residues from unwanted (and uninstalled) trial downloads and other applications, and, sometimes, just too many applications running at the same time hogging all or most of your computer resources.

The following are nine things that Chip Manufacturers and PC Retailers don't want you to know or how to perform. Following this advice will drastically increase your PC performance and help you regain your sanity while saving loads of money. And, if your PC is three years old and can't afford to upgrade yet, you will be able to squeeze out some more juice out of the old thing!

1. Know What You Are Running:

Sometimes slow downs occur because you have too many programs open at the same time. Shutting down those programs that you are not using will immediately boost performance.

2. Monitor Windows Processes:

If you press CTRL+AL+DEL you will call up Tasks Manager which lists most of the processes that you are actually running.

Although limited, Task Manager will give you a reasonably good overview of what's running. But before ending processes to increase your performance please exercise extreme caution and learn what the processes do.

Nine things that Chip Manufacturers and PC Retailers don't tell you!

You will find that either there is too much running or there is something hogging your CPU and memory. With certain Windows Utilities you can even set-up your computer to run certain system configurations depending upon the type of application/s you are running at the moment. These utilities also give you an insight on resource allocation and, with the help of graphs, can help you identify which application and/or process is most likely to slow or crash your computer.

3. Have a Clean System:

One of the most common reason (probably the most common) for slow downs is viruses and/or spyware. Sometimes even spyware residuals that have escaped your anti-spyware products can plague you for months. I had a problem with MSAA .EXE which was not caught by three spyware scanners — I eventually figured out what I had running because of point #2 above!

Virus and spyware authors just love creating menaces that hog your system resources and the only protection you have is to have everything up-to-date.

Make sure your antivirus software is up to date with current virus definitions. Then scan your computer for viruses. Make sure your Spyware software is up to date with current definitions — because of the way spyware works you should try and use at least two different programs to scan your system (scanners are usually free of charge and Microsoft have a free Anti-Spyware product which you should use). Firewalls are also an important security tool but beware as having an active firewall may slow performance.

What you may do once you are 100% sure that your system is clean is turn off your security only when not connected to the Internet. This should help you increase your performance too. But remember to switch everything on before going online. Otherwise, you will be immediately at risk.

4. Update Your Operating System

Having the latest updates of Windows may not generally increase system performance. However, Microsoft are continually patching up any security loop holes or performance related glitches. So in the long run, your system will be better off with the latest OS updates.

5. Disk Clean-ups

Defragging and disc repairs are also extremely important. Defragging is the process of locating and consolidating your files and folders sitting on your hard drives. This can be done automatically by Windows and as a result your system can access these files and folders (and new ones) more efficiently and quickly. Regular defrags and disk repairs will keep your computer running at optimum levels.

6. Temporary File Management:

Cleansing your temporary files including your Internet history including cookies gives you a larger amount of hard disk space to work with. This, in turn, gives more space for Windows virtual files (Page File memory). I go as far as limiting how much space Windows uses to create temporary files. For example, my setting is 1 Mb. In other words, at any point in time Windows is only allowed 1 Mb of space to store cookies, activeX controls etc.

7. Start-up Management

Next time you start up your PC just time how long it takes to boot and let you start using your applications. If you are lucky, start-up times should be no longer than seconds. In most cases, however, it takes minutes.

The Windows Startup Folder tells you most of the more visible processes that are running in your system. However this is not enough - many installed applications start up processes at boot up that you don't even know about. Not that these are harmful, they're probably useful and required. However, by monitoring what is starting up, you have a good chance of finding out what should and what should not be started. Such utilities as performance optimizers (see #9 below) will automatically identify your start-up files and allow you to disable some or all of them. Again, exercise caution here. Be sure to disable only those start-up processes that are superfluous.

My start-up times (and as a result my CPU and MEM Usage) were very short until I installed a particular program which I needed. However I made the mistake of setting up the server version when I don't really need it — I confess, it wasn't a mistake it was a program that impressed me so much that I decided to install the server version

because I thought that I would have more visible functionality. However I was wrong. To cut a long story short, I had some system files installed on my system which were needed if my PC were actually a server (and not a client). One particular process hogged my system and used a constant 10,820 K of my memory when working in the background. Reinstalling the version I needed improved my performance without my having to spend as much as one penny.

8. Caution: Download in Progress

Be honest, whatever they tell you about security (although very true and serious), you just can't resist downloading and trying out new products and utilities. It's fun! I just love scouring the Internet looking for some new utility to try out.

A few weeks back I needed software that lets me sort out the myriad of documents I have on my PC. Thing is I didn't want to spend too much money so I started looking at Open Source products that are free of charge. Well, I must have downloaded and installed at least 10 different programs. I liked none so in a second round I found the one I wanted. However, when uninstalling all the programs I tried, I had to be very careful. The uninstall operation of most applications or programs almost always leaves residual files or folders in your system. No uninstall operation will leave your system the way it was — dlls, processes such as schedulers that kick in at start-ups, and other legitimate processes that, with the main program being uninstalled have no specific function except to hog your system unnecessarily.

What I usually do after I uninstall and reboot my machine is use a Windows Utility (WinTasks) to help me identify the processes which are unnecessary and just block or delete them. Again exercise caution when doing this - make sure that you have all the program and its sub components uninstalled, then reboot, then try the manual clean up. If you are unsure, it is better to leave them in your system but making sure that they are blocked.

9. Use Performance Optimizers

Finally, if either you don't want to perform many of these things manually or you have exhausted all possible avenues, you may want to consider a Performance Optimizer.

Even the more experienced users cannot manage to fully control and monitor all that is happening within their system without a small toolkit of software utilities that generally includes a sturdy performance optimizer.

If anything these utilities do the work automatically. I use performance optimizers because they can do the job better and in as little time as possible. When I use a computer I am either working or playing some game — I just don't want to hassle myself tweaking and looking under the hood of my PC. Performance optimizers have been designed to inch their way into the system and help you boost your PC performance drastically. These utilities usually don't cost more than $25 to $30 and give you much more value than investing in RAM simply because they seek and solve slowdown problems rather than mask it.

Sometimes RAM is necessary. But, I believe that following these nine steps and principles you can get much more out of your PC. Plus, performance optimizers go the extra mile because they improve your system's overall operation beyond any level that you can manage on your own steam; simply because operating systems are getting more complex by the upgrade and it is almost humanly impossible to keep track of all that goes on in your computer.

The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an inter-national organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

To Defrag, or Not to Defrag?

If you're looking for ways to speed WinXP machines, then the answer is Not.

by Carey Holzman

Defragmenting, of course, is the process of reorganizing all data on a hard disk drive so that each file is arranged into a single uninterrupted, or contiguous, location on the disk. Many system builders and technicians have been taught, and still believe, that defragmenting hard disk drives on a regular basis keeps PCs operating at peak performance. But that idea is behind the times.

While it was true that defragmenting helped older PCs, it no longer applies. Today we have 7200-RPM (rotations per minute) hard disk drives with improved seek and latency times; many also contain an 8 or 16 MB cache buffer. Let's not forget Windows XP's ultra-efficient New Technology File System (NTFS). For PCs, servers, and workstations equipped with these innovations, defragmenting no longer makes much improvement, if any, to system performance.

This is even more of an issue with the new Serial ATA hard disk drives, which are quickly becoming the new standard. Examples of SATA drives include the Seagate Barracuda line <http://www .seagate.com/cda/newsinfo/newsroom/releases /article /0%2C%2C2733%2C00.html and new 10,000-RPM IDE (Integrated Drive Electronics) hard-disk drives, such as the Western Digital <http://www.wdc.com /en/products/Products .asp?DriveID=40 Raptor.

Still, defragmenting remains an important task. Why? For one, power consumption and heat can be directly related to an excessively fragmented hard drive. When the computer's operating system requests data, if a file is not contiguous, then extra seeking on the disk may be required. But a more important consideration is disk failure. Should a hard drive fail, the likelihood of successfully recovering data from the dead or damaged drive improves significantly if the data is contiguous rather than randomly scattered about the drive platters.

The software companies that create defragmentation software would like you to believe that their software does improve system performance. But my own in-house testing refutes that, as do recent findings from Steve Gibson, PC World and other system testers.

So What Works?

Since defragging the disk won't do much to improve Windows XP performance, here are 23 suggestions that will. Each can enhance the computer's performance and reliability. Best of all, most of them will cost you nothing.

1.) To decrease a system's boot time and increase system performance, use the money you save by not buying defragmentation software — the built-in Windows defragmenter works just fine — and instead equip the computer with an Ultra-133 or Serial ATA hard drive with 8 or 16MB cache buffer.

2.) If a PC has less than 512 MB of RAM, add more memory. This is a relatively inexpensive and easy upgrade that can dramatically improve system performance.

3.) Ensure that Windows XP is utilizing the NTFS file system. If you're not sure, here's how to check: First, double-click the My Computer icon, right-click on the C: Drive, then select Properties. Next, examine the File System type; if it says FAT32, then back-up any important data. Next, click Start, click Run, type CMD, and then click OK. At the prompt, type CONVERT C: /FS: NTFS and press the Enter key. This process may take a while; it's important that the computer be uninterrupted and virus-free. The file system used by the bootable drive will be either FAT32 or NTFS. I highly recommend NTFS for its superior security, reliability, and efficiency with larger disk drives.

4.) Disable file indexing. The indexing service extracts information from documents and other files on the hard drive and creates a "searchable keyword index." As you can imagine, this process can be quite taxing on any system.

The idea is that the user can search for a word, phrase, or property inside a document, should they have hundreds or thousands of documents and not know the file name of the document they want. Windows XP's built-in search functionality can still perform these kinds of searches without the Indexing service. It just takes longer. The OS has to open each file at the time of the request to find what the user is looking for.

Most people never need this feature of search. Those who do are typically in a large corporate environment where thousands of documents are located on at least one server. If you have no need for this search feature, I recommend disabling it. Here's how: First, double-click the My Computer icon. Next, right-click on the C: Drive, then select Properties. Uncheck "Allow Indexing Service to index this disk for fast file searching." Next, apply changes to "C: subfolders and files," and click OK. If a warning or error message appears (such as "Access is denied"), click the Ignore All button.

5.) Update the PC's video and motherboard chipset drivers. Also, update and configure the BIOS. For

more information on how to configure your BIOS properly, see this article on my site. <www .careyholzman.com/bios/index.html <http:// www.careyholzman.com /bios/index.html

6.) Empty the Windows Prefetch folder every three months or so. Windows XP can "prefetch" portions of data and applications that are used frequently. This makes processes appear to load faster when called upon by the user. That's fine. But over time, the prefetch folder may become overloaded with references to files and applications no longer in use. When that happens, Windows XP is wasting time, and slowing system performance, by pre-loading them. Nothing critical is in this folder, and the entire contents are safe to delete. It will automatically rebuild itself with current frequently used applications in no time.

7.) Once a month, run a disk cleanup. Here's how: Double-click the My Computer icon. Then right-click on the C: drive and select Properties. Click the Disk Cleanup button — it's just to the right of the Capacity pie graph — and delete all temporary files.

8.) In your Device Manager, double-click on the IDE ATA/ATAPI Controllers device, and ensure that DMA is enabled for each drive you have connected to the Primary and Secondary controller. Do this by double- clicking on Primary IDE Channel. Then click the Advanced Settings tab. Ensure the Transfer Mode is set to "DMA if available" for both Device 0 and Device 1. Then, repeat this process with the Secondary IDE Channel.

9.) Upgrade the cabling. As hard drive technology improves, the cabling requirements to achieve these performance boosts have become more stringent. Be sure to use 80-wire Ultra-133 cables on all of your IDE devices with the connectors properly assigned to the matching Master/Slave/Mother-board sockets. A single device must be at the end of the cable; connecting a single drive to the middle connector on this type of ribbon cable will cause signaling problems. With Ultra DMA hard drives, these signaling problems will prevent the drive from performing at its maximum potential. Also, because these cables inherently support "cable select," the location of each drive on the cable is VERY important. For these reasons, the cable is designed so drive positioning is explicitly clear.

10.) Remove all spyware from the computer. Use free programs such as AdAware by Lavasoft www .lavasoft .com <http://www.lavasoft .com or SpyBot Search & Destroy www.safer-networking.org <http://www.safer-networking.org. Once these programs are installed, be sure to check for and download any updates before starting your search. Anything either program finds can be safely removed. Any free software that requires spyware to run will no longer function once the spyware portion has been removed; if you really want the program even though it contains spyware, simply reinstall it. The applications mentioned above are great for removing Spyware once it's been installed. To prevent the installation of 80% or more of future Spyware, download and install Microsoft's *free* anti-spyware utility <wwwlmicrosoft.com and installing JavaCool Software's SpywareBlaster www.javacoolsoftware.com /spywareblaster.html <http://www.javacool software.com/spywareblaster .html For more information about what Spyware is and how you unknowingly get infected with it, visit this Web <http://www.tuglet.com/URLM RecordsTheURLThing.asp?nID=162957&f=www. webpronews.com/it/operatingsystems /wpn-22-20030610Removing Spyware.html Pro News page.

11.) Remove any unnecessary programs and/or items from Windows Startup routine using the MSCONFIG utility. Here's how: First, click Start, click Run, type MSCONFIG, and click OK. Click the StartUp tab, then uncheck any items you don't want to start when Windows starts. Unsure what some items are? Visit the WinTasks Process Library at www.liutilities.com/products/wintaskspro /processlibrary/ <http://www.liutilities.com/products /wintaskspro/processlibrary/. It contains known system processes, applications, as well as spyware references and explanations. Or quickly identify them by searching for the filenames using Google or another Web search engine.

12.) Remove any unnecessary or unused programs from the Add/Remove Programs section of the Control Panel.

13.) Turn off any and all unnecessary animations, and disable active desktop. In fact, for optimal performance, turn off all animations. Windows XP offers many different settings in this area. Here's

how to do it: First click on the System icon in the Control Panel. Next, click on the Advanced tab. Select the Settings button located under Performance. Feel free to play around with the options offered here, as nothing you can change will alter the reliability of the computer, only its responsiveness.

14.) If you are an advanced user who is comfortable editing their registry, try some of the performance registry tweaks offered at Tweak XP www.tweakxp .com/performance _tweaks.aspx

15.) Visit Microsoft's Windows update site regularly and download all updates labeled Critical. Download any optional updates at your discretion.

16.) Update your anti-virus software on a weekly, even daily, basis. Make sure you have only one anti-virus software package in-stalled. Mixing anti-virus software is a sure way to spell disaster for performance and reliability.

17.) Make sure you have fewer than 500 fonts installed on their computer. The more fonts you have, the slower the system will become. While Windows XP handles fonts much more efficiently than did the previous versions of Windows, too many fonts — that is, anything over 500 — will noticeably tax the system.

18.) Do not partition the hard drive. Windows XP's NTFS file system runs more efficiently on one large partition. The data is no safer on a separate partition, and a reformat is never necessary to reinstall an operating system. The same excuses people offer for using partitions apply to using a folder instead. For example, instead of putting all your data on the D: drive, put it in a folder called "D drive." You'll achieve the same organizational benefits that a separate partition offers, but without the degradation in system performance. Also, your free space won't be limited by the size of the partition; instead, it will be limited by the size of the entire hard drive. This means you won't need to resize any partitions, ever. That task can be time-consuming and also can result in lost data.

19.) Check the system's RAM to ensure it is operating properly. I recommend using a free program called MemTest86 www.memtest86.com/ <http:// www.memtest86.com/ The download will make a bootable CD or diskette (your choice), which will run 10 extensive tests on the PC's memory automatically after you boot to the disk you created. Allow all tests to run until at least three passes of the 10 tests are completed. If the program encounters any errors, turn off and unplug the computer, remove a stick of memory (assuming you have more than one), and run the test again. Remember, bad memory cannot be repaired, only replaced.

20.) If the PC has a CD or DVD recorder, check the drive manufacturer's Web site for updated firmware. In some cases you'll be able to upgrade the recorder to a faster speed. Best of all, it's free.

21.) Disable unnecessary services. Windows XP loads a lot of services that your customer most likely does not need. To determine which services you can disable, visit the Black Viper site <http:// majorgeeks.com/page.php?id=12 for Windows XP configurations.

22.) If you're sick of a single Windows Explorer window crashing and then taking the rest of your OS down with it, then follow this tip: open My Computer, click on Tools, then Folder Options. Now click on the View tab. Scroll down to "Launch folder windows in a separate process," and enable this option. You'll have to reboot your machine for this option to take effect.

23.) At least once a year, open the computer's cases and blow out all the dust and debris. While you're in there, check that all the fans are turning properly. Also inspect the motherboard capacitors for bulging or leaks. For more information on this leaking-capacitor phenomena, you can read numerous articles on my site.

Following any of these suggestions should result in noticeable improvements to the performance and reliability of your customers' computers. If you still want to defrag a disk, that's okay, just remember that the main benefit will be to make your data more retrievable in the event of a crashed drive.

By Carey Holzman, freelance writer; co-host of the nationally syndicated talk show Computer America; instructor at Glendale Community College in Arizona; owner of a computer-repair business, and author of The Healthy PC. *He enjoys sleeping in his free time. There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context with proper credit given the author. The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.*

How to Protect your Laptop and your Lap from Heat Build-up and Other Hazards

Or. . .

How to Prevent Groin Burns from Overheated Laptops

by José Calero
President, LapWorks, Inc.

If you had been this guy, you wouldn't be laughing! The BBC News World Edition reported that, "A Swedish scientist who rested his laptop computer on his lap for just an hour needed medical treatment for extensive blistering on his penis and scrotum. Unfortunately the blisters broke and developed into infected suppurating wounds." The concerned doctor who treated the victim wrote in The Lancet, the UK's best-known medical journal, warning the public of the potential dangers of using a laptop "in the literal sense." (Is the good doctor implying that we need to use some sort of "protection" and practice "safe" computing when we use our laptops?) Read the whole story: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2503291.stm

There you have it — proof positive that using a laptop computer unprotected can burn your lap and other delicate parts. So what are we to do? Stop using our laptops? I don't think so! There are ways to have safe computing, you know. But for the 65 million or so laptop users in America, the heat hazard poses an even greater threat to their computers. Over time, the heat source that burns our lap can have an equally devastating effect on the internal components of our laptop.

So how does one have safe computing without losing intimacy with our laptop, while also protecting it from overheating? The answer is obvious — use protection. What kind? Try a Google search with the keywords "Laptop Desk" or "Lap Desk" or "Lap Tray". There you will find all kinds of protection for both you and your laptop. We plowed through the many listings and narrowed the field to nine products that should help you practice safe computing.

But before we get to the product comparisons, let us be clear that groin burns aren't the only hazard that laptop users are susceptible to. There are other hazards-both to the user and the laptop itself-that originate from two common laptop uses: Mobile use (on your lap) and stationary use (on your desktop).

Hazards When Using a Laptop on Your Lap:

Based on research conducted by LapWorks, Inc. (www.lapworksinc.com), two-thirds of all laptop owners reported using their laptops while mobile more often than stationary. Which means that laptop owners prefer 2 to 1 using their laptop in their easy chair watching TV, in airline terminals, in hotel lobbies or in bed surfing the Internet, as opposed to desktop use. As we rove around using our laptops in different ways, lap (or groin) burns are possible unless we use some form of protection.

A pillow is not a good choice. Many mobile users will sandwich a pillow between themselves and the laptop to protect their laps from "Hot Leg." This comforts the user, but unfortunately does no favors for the computer. The pillow acts as an insulator and contains the heat within the laptop, accelerating overheating. The laptop's cooling fan then cycles on repeatedly 'gasping for air' until it shuts your computer down to protect itself from serious heat damage.

Finally, you could permanently damage your laptop with a fatal drop. A white paper study conducted by IDC (International Data Corp., a Framingham, Mass. research firm) concluded that 68% of all damage to laptops comes from being dropped. This includes sliding off the user's lap and crashing to a hard and unforgiving floor. IDC further reported that in 2001, it cost businesses and industry over one billion dollars to repair broken laptops, and replace them in some cases, totaling approximately $1,400 per incident.

Solutions to the Hazards of Lap Use:

Find a product with non-slip surfaces that spans your lap completely, can hold even the largest portable, and shields your lap from its blistering heat. Road warriors will also want something that's lightweight, thin, and folds so it can easily fit in the computer bag.

To protect the computer from its own heat, find something with built-in ventilation channels that can actually reduce heat. You can reduce heat in two ways: convection (exchanging warm air for cool

air) and conduction (transferring heat by contact from a warm surface to a cool surface). Look for products that reduce heat through convection or conduction or both.

Hazards When Using a Laptop on your Desk:

Strange as it may sound, the greatest risk of injuring yourself personally will most likely come when you use your laptop on a desktop over long periods of time. It is here that we risk injuring our neck and shoulders from hazards such as:

Lower than recommended viewing height of the laptop screen

Flat typing angle, or lack of incline of the laptop's keyboard

Since most laptop computers are set flat on the desktop, their screen heights are all below the recommended, "ergonomically cor-rect" viewing level. This means you must strain your neck to find information at the bottom of the screen, which can lead to more serious back problems over time. The recommended height for a computer screen is positioning the top of the screen at, or slightly below, eye level. This lets your eyes do the searching, instead of having to bend and strain your neck.

Another hazard comes from the laptop's flat keyboard. In this position, we are forced to move our elbows away from our body to get our hands in the right position to type. Supporting our arms away from our body for long periods of time eventually strains the shoulders and back so that typing becomes tiring and more stressful.

The immediate effects of neck and back strain are discomfort and reduced productivity, but medical experts agree they can lead to more permanent health problems over time.

Solutions to the Hazards of Desk Use:

Ideally, the answer is to raise the back of the laptop computer to such an angle that it will:

Allow natural convection (and conduction if possible) to take place under the computer, reducing heat build-up and cooling your computer.

Raise the viewing screen height closer to eye level, reducing neck strain.

Put the keyboard in an incline allowing elbows to remain by your side in a more ergonomically comfortable typing angle.

Heat is Your Laptop's Worst Enemy:

Aside from the catastrophic crash to the floor, the greatest damage to laptops comes from poor ventilation that causes overheating. Eventually, this overheating causes permanent damage, shortening your laptop's life.

Overheating is the result of the market's competitive demand for the thinnest form factor and greater processing power. The solution? Find a product that can actually reduce the heat by as much as 15% to 20%, which means your laptop's cooling fan won't cycle on as often, and your laptop computer can live a longer, healthier life!

Conclusion:

There are products that address these hazards, each to a greater or lesser degree. Keep in mind that the hazards listed above are real and documented, not just sales hype. If you are a committed laptop user, you'll want to create the safest computing environment whenever and wherever you choose to use your laptop.

Give serious consideration to the below list of nine products and select the one that best meets your specific needs. And be careful out there . . . now that groin burns have been documented, you'll want to use protection from now on so you can always practice safe computing.

Note About Products:

In the interest of relevance and brevity, the universe of laptop computer desks was narrowed to those that can solve most or all of the hazards listed above.

Laptop computer desks that were excluded were those on the periphery or with specialized applications like wheelchair mounted desks, automobile computer desks, clam-shell style computer bags, beanbag desks, tripod and pedestal computer desks, wheeled suitcases with flip-out desks, and the most voluminous category of all - furniture desks made of wood for home computing use.

View the product comparison chart at http://laptopdesk.net/press-articlesf .html#chart

About the Author: José Calero is the developer of the Laptop Desk™ and President of LapWorks, Inc. During his 2 1/2 year study of the mobile computing field, Mr. Calero has evaluated many lap desk products and developed an understanding of the market's needs and the limitations of current lap desk offerings. The goals of

this article are to make people aware of the hazards of improper laptop use, and to raise the flag on the damage caused by excessive heat build-up within the computer. José lives in Rancho Cucamonga, California with his wife, Leslie, of 33 years. They have 3 sons, two granddaughters, one dog and one cat. José can be reached by e-mail at jose@laptopdesk.net <mailto:jose @laptopdesk.net>

Media Notes

by Bill Petitt

Southeast Virginia Computer Group

Has this been a winter or a roller coaster? The plants are budding out but the circus is coming to town. You remember what that has been like in years past. Sometimes the computer world is like that too. On the one hand we are promised a much more robust DVD system that can hold an astounding 45 Gigabytes and on the other we might not be able to use it to its full capacity unless we upgrade all of the components. Read the good news and the bad news below.

New DVDs already sparking copy-protection confusion

When the first high-definition DVDs finally hit shelves this spring, a mad scramble may ensue—not for the discs themselves, but to figure out what computers and devices are actually able to play them in their full glory.

Unraveling the mystery won't be easy. Many, if not most, of today's top-of-the-line computers and monitors won't make the cut, even if next-generation Blu-ray or HD DVD drives are installed.

That's because strict content protection technologies may automatically degrade the DVDs' picture quality, or even block them from playing at all, if the right connections and digital protections aren't in place. Even the most expensive computers sold today mostly lack those features.

Indeed, the consumer backlash has already begun. Graphics-chip makers such as ATI and Nvidia are drawing criticism online for marketing products that are "ready" for these new copy-protection tools but that nevertheless lack critical features needed to let the discs play at top quality.

"This is a sticky issue," said Richard Doherty, an analyst with the Envisioneering Group. "It's going to be very confusing for consumers, and it's going to be very daunting" for computer makers.

The copy-protection muddle stems from Hollywood studios' desire to avoid the film piracy that was born when tools for unlocking the encryption technology on today's DVDs began spreading online in late 1999.

Along with a picture quality upgrade, the new generation of DVDs will be shipped with new digital rights management controls, with strict computerized rules attached saying exactly when and how a movie can be played.

For people who buy standalone DVD players and HDTVs, this mostly won't be a concern, as the right plugs will generally already be built in.

But computer buyers will face a far more challenging landscape. The everyday analog plug that connects most computers to monitors today doesn't support copy protection, and so is viewed as unsafe by Hollywood studios. Movies playing on a computer over this ordinary analog connection will likely be downgraded to near-DVD quality.

Even worse is the so-called DVI plug that sends high-quality digital signals to a monitor but also doesn't support copy protection.

That offers an even greater risk of copying in Hollywood's eyes. Studios have persuaded Microsoft to add a feature in the upcoming Vista operating system that can shut down that connection altogether, unless the computer has an Intel-created encryption technology called HDCP, or High-bandwidth Digital Content Protection, turned on to guard the signal all the way to the monitor screen.

Put another way—if the DVD doesn't like your plug, your monitor may go black.

A newer connection technology called HDMI almost always comes with built-in encryption. If both the computer and the monitor have this installed, everything should work as planned.

Simple question--will it work?

Today, it's extraordinarily difficult to find information that explains whether a company's products will be compatible with the new DVDs.

Part of the problem is that the copy protection technology for the discs hasn't been officially announced, even though the new DVDs are supposed to hit shelves in just three months. A cross-industry group is working on a technology called the Ad-

vanced Access Content System, slated to protect both HD DVDs and Blu-ray discs, and is expected to release its work as soon as the end of last month. The HDCP technology has widely been expected to be a critical part of those rules, however.

In an unusual step, Microsoft told computer makers last year, as part of a preview of its new Vista operating system, that they should start using the Intel-based technology in order to be ready for the high-definition video rules.

IBM engineer Don Leake, who works with the AACS group, confirmed that Intel's HDCP would be approved under the new rights-management rules.

But this opens up a new set of potential land mines for consumers.

In one early example, graphics-card maker ATI has marketed some of its top products as "HDCP ready" and says that its newest "All-in-Wonder X1900" card "gives effortless playback of next-generation HD DVD."

However, it doesn't mention that "ready" probably won't be good enough to make the high- definition discs play at full quality. The graphics systems actually have to have the Intel technology turned on, which has to be done by the computer maker, or by ATI itself when it sells a graphics card at retail.

Nvidia, another big graphics-chip maker, says it too has built support for HDCP into its chip designs but that it's up to the computer makers to turn it on. Almost nobody has so far, and that's drawing bitter criticism from gamers and other hardware enthusiasts online, who call the situation a "nightmare."

"We certainly are concerned over end users, and we want to make sure there is no confusion," said Godfrey Cheng, ATI's director of marketing. "But we leave it in the hands of the board vendors and (computer makers) as to whether they want to put that in."

Much of what happens when discs are finally put into computer will ultimately depend on the movie studios themselves. On each disc, it's up to them to set the rules that make all of these alphabet-soup technologies swing into action.

For example, if studios are worried that consumers might be disappointed by degraded resolutions and blacked-out monitors, they could in theory relax those rules until the approved technologies are more widespread.

Backers of the new content protection tools say they're necessary to keep the high-definition discs at the cutting edge for years to come, however.

"What we're coming out with is something that's probably going to live for 15 years or more," IBM's Leake said. "HDCP, even though not well deployed today, will be well deployed in five years. We are planning for the future."

Microsoft announces Office 2007 pricing details

Microsoft offered further details on the next version of Office, announcing plans for a new home version as well as new server-based products and a new high-end enterprise edition of the desktop suite.

The software maker also offered pricing details for some, though not all, of the new products. In general, Microsoft said both businesses and consumers should expect to pay about the same for the new Office as they have paid for past versions.

"We do not expect our customers to notice any significant change in our pricing," said Parri Munsell, a group program manager in Microsoft's information worker unit. Office Standard, for example, will sell for $399, while Office Professional will sell for $499. Also, as widely expected, the version formerly code-named "Office 12" will be known as Office 2007 when it ships in the second half of this year.

Munsell said the new Office will offer a bevy of new features, including an all-new user interface and new XML-based file formats.

"There's a tremendous amount in the new Office 2007," he said. "We do believe this is the most significant advance in over a decade."

Microsoft released an initial beta of Office 2007 in November, with a second beta planned for this spring.

In the biggest change for consumers, Microsoft is replacing its Student and Teacher edition with a $149 Home and Student edition that can be used by all home users.

Microsoft is also removing the Outlook e-mail and calendar program from that edition and instead is including its OneNote note-taking application. As with the Student and Teacher edition, the home

version of Office can be used on up to three PCs in a home, but cannot be upgraded to a future version of Office.

On the business side, Microsoft is offering two high-end collections in addition to its professional and standard editions, in keeping with CEO Steve Ballmer's statement to analysts last year that there would be new premium versions of Office.

The "professional plus" and "enterprise" editions can only be purchased by businesses through Microsoft's volume-licensing program, and Microsoft did not detail the cost for those options. With the Professional Plus version, the standard Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook applications are augmented with the Access and Publisher products that come with the professional edition, the Office Communicator instant messaging program, InfoPath form-creation software, and server-based content management and forms management capabilities.

The enterprise version adds Groove, the collaboration program — developed by Ray Ozzie — that Microsoft acquired last year. Users who get the Groove desktop software have the choice of running their own Groove server or subscribing to a hosted service. For small businesses and others, Microsoft is also offering a Groove Live service for a $79 annual subscription per user.

Microsoft has also been showing off new server-based abilities for Office, but had not detailed how those would be made available. Many of the new capabilities will be included in SharePoint Portal Server, which has been expanded from a tool for handling portals to one that also handles other Office tasks, including forms management, spreadsheet hosting and content rights management.

"We think Office SharePoint is going to be the heart of the Office system," Munsell said. For those who don't want the full abilities of SharePoint, Microsoft also plans a server program aimed solely at forms hosting and management.

As it does with other server-based programs, Microsoft is requiring customers to also purchase a license for each PC that accesses the new Office servers. Microsoft is offering two bundles of those so-called client access licenses (CALs). The "Core CAL" combines licenses for Windows Server operating system, Exchange Server, Office SharePoint Portal Server and Systems Management Server. The new "Enterprise CAL" includes those licenses, as well as Microsoft Operations Manager, Microsoft Office Live Communications Server as well as rights-management and security products.

Microsoft is also using the SharePoint brand for a new Web site-development program. Microsoft Office SharePoint Designer 2007, like Microsoft's Expression Web Designer software is based in part on its current FrontPage web-authoring tool, though that program is being phased out. Microsoft said it will sell the SharePoint Web design program for $299, while pricing and availability for Expression will be announced "in the near future."

Although both programs are based on FrontPage, Microsoft said that they serve different audiences. Expressions is more for professional Web designers building standards-based sites, while SharePoint is aimed more at typical cubicle dwellers looking to post information on internal Web sites and automate business processes.

Avoid data loss by safely removing your thumb drive

Did you know that when you unplug the thumb drive from the USB port, you might get an error message? It will warn you that it was not safely removed. Okay, if you want your thumb drive to play nice, you must be nice to it. This means you can't just pull it out of the USB port. That can cost you your data.

Before you unplug the drive, close all programs that are accessing it. Then, click the Safely Remove Hardware icon (it's the one with a green arrow) in the notification area, and click the thumb drive in the popup list. You'll receive a message saying you can unplug the drive.

Despite the error message, data loss from an improper removal isn't likely with a thumb drive. However, external hard drives are different. Windows enables write caching for them. With that, a drive stores information in memory and tells Windows it has it. Then, the data is written to the drive. It is not permanently stored until it's actually written. Unplug the drive before the data is written, and you lose it.

Gates Outlines ID Management for Vista, XP

'InfoCard' technology will work like a Web wallet for identity management

Microsoft plans to include technology in both Windows Vista and Windows XP for allowing users to manage their passwords and identities across multiple Web sites, according to the company's Chairman and Chief Software Architect Bill Gates.

Gates discussed Microsoft's plans for the technology, code-named InfoCard, during a keynote at the RSA Conference 2006 in San Jose, California. The technology acts as a "wallet" where users can store the identity and password information for how they would like to be identified on various Web sites, said Michael Stephenson, Microsoft's director of product management for identity and access, in an interview following Gates' keynote.

Using InfoCard will eliminate the need for users to remember multiple identities and passwords for Web sites with which they do business, he said. It also will help them manage what information is provided across those sites.

Multiple Web Site Problems

Companies have been trying to solve the problem of managing authentication and identities across multiple Web sites as e-commerce, online banking, and other online business has become increasingly pervasive. Microsoft first discussed its plans for a technology like InfoCard last year, but Tuesday was the first time the company articulated how it might work.

Microsoft users will see InfoCard in the control panels of Windows Vista and also in Windows XP, as well as in Internet Explorer 7, which the company plans to offer for both versions of the OS. Windows Vista is expected to be available sometime in late November or early December of this year.

InfoCard also must be supported on a Web site in order for a Windows user to take advantage of it, Stephenson said. Microsoft plans to include the technology as a part of WinFX, the programming model for Windows Vista, so developers can use the technology in Web-site development, he said.

Additionally, Microsoft today released a developer resource kit for InfoCard that can be used in conjunction with the test preview of Windows Vista that was released in September. The kit, called the Federated Identity and Access Resource Kit, is available here.

Microsoft Releases Public Beta of Windows Defender Anti-Spyware - The new release is a significant upgrade that includes improved detection and removal and a simpler interface

Microsoft announced on Valentines' Day a public Beta 2 release of a significant upgrade to its free anti-spyware utility. Renamed Windows Defender, the anti-spyware software has an updated spyware-detection engine and a heavily revised interface.

Windows Defender supports Windows XP, Windows 2000, and Windows Server 2003. Microsoft's Windows Defender product manager Mike Chan says the anti-spyware utility, which was originally acquired when Microsoft bought Giant Software, will continue to be offered freely for download to all users whose computers are running authorized (non- pirated) versions of the supported Windows versions.

Notable new features and functionalities of Windows Defender Beta 2 include, according to Microsoft, an improved detection and removal anti-spyware engine, deeper monitoring points for the real-time malware protection functionality, fewer pop-ups from the real-time protection, a much simpler interface, protection for all Windows user accounts with or without Administrator privileges, signature updates delivered by Microsoft's Automatic Updates, integration with IE6 or IE7 that lets it scan downloads, and the ability to scan Outlook Express attachments.

The new anti-spyware utility also uses the Windows system tray notification area more efficiently. The Windows Defender icon only appears when spyware is detected or when a scan or update is in progress.

The default settings for Windows Defender take an automatic approach. The utility will automatically clean up any spyware or malware that's a known part of its signature files. Chan stresses that the strategy behind Windows Defender is to protect PCs with a minimal amount of interruption for the user.

Windows Defender Beta 2 is available for free download. The English version is available today for 32-bit and 64-bit Windows. Globalized and language versions will be available in the weeks to

come. The download size of the English version ranges between 6.4MB (7.9MB for 64-bit) and 14.3MB, depending upon the options selected during installation. All previous versions of Giant AntiSpyware, Microsoft AntiSpyware, Windows AntiSpyware, and Windows Defenders must be uninstalled prior to running the online installation.

Microsoft offers these additional resources for Windows Defender Beta 2:

· Windows Defender Beta 2 Frequently Asked Questions

· Windows Defender Beta 2 System Requirements

· Windows Defender Support and Training

· Windows Defender home page

The Cost of OneCare

We've known for quite a while that Microsoft was going to be launching a security service called OneCare that includes firewall protection, anti-virus, data backup and cleanup tools for your computer. The service has been in beta testing for several months, and now Microsoft has announced their pricing: $49.95 per year. The good news is that for that price, you can protect three PCs, making it a less expensive alternative than Sy-mantec's and McAfee's products. Meanwhile, the free beta is still available until April 30th if you want to try it out, and beta subscribers can get their first year of One-Care for only $19.95.

The service, which has gone through several beta revisions, will hit the market in June this year as a self-updating utility featuring virus scanning, firewall protection, data backup and PC cleanup tools.

The company plans to add anti-spyware protection from its Windows Defender product when the final version is released.

The $49.95 per household price tag is about $20 cheaper than competing products from Symantec, McAfee and Trend Micro. The service will available from retailers and via the Web.

To lure new users into testing the service, Microsoft announced a promotional deal offering the first year of OneCare for $19.95 to beta customers who become subscribers between April 1 and April 30, 2006.

The free beta is available until April 30 and can be downloaded from the Live.com portal.

With the last paragraph in mind, it might be worth your time to sign up when the flag goes up on April 1st. On the other hand, if you have recently renewed your subscription, you might want to give it a pass.

Review

Moving to Linux
Kiss the Blue Screen of Death
Goodbye!

by Bill Thornton

North Orange County Computer Club

That title grabbed my attention. For years I wanted to plant that kiss on Windows' forehead, but Linux seemed formidable. As an ex-geek I knew what it takes to learn and use a new operating system, so I've been reluctant to jump in even though Linux offers greater security, speed, and conservation of resources, not to mention versatility and Savings.

Author Marcel Gagne's instructional book, in its Second Edition, fills the bill both in the easy- reading text and in the accompanying CD which the author openly encourages readers to copy and distribute. With clear instructions, examples, and a very light touch of humor he makes Linux a pleasure to leam for the novice as well as the experienced user. It's more than a "how to" book. He also provides perspective, making it easier to choose which of the included software packages is right for you.

The bootable CD contains a full-featured Debian-based Linux load-and-go distribution called Knoppix that won't affect your existing Windows setup. The operating system is slightly modified for use with the book. It uses temporary files (RAM disk and other) which disappear when you are finished, so you cannot save any data or install or modify any programs. (But, if you are a very serious student, the author does tell how to override those limitations. For example, on page 23, how files can be saved on a hard drive or USB memory key. And, on page 28, if you can't stand the slow CD, he reluctantly tells how to install it on your hard drive.)

The CD is packed with useable software. From a choice of desktops to word processors, spreadsheets, presentation graphics, digital photography and art (including 3D animation), multimedia, games, e-mail, and Internet browsers, it seems to have it all. The book provides enough information to get you started on some of the packages. By the time you have worked your way through them you will have enough familiarity with the Linux look-and-feel to take on the additional software.

Information is provided about running Windows programs on Linux under WINE. However, the author opines that there is so much offered in existing Linux-based software that you probably won't need to go back to Windows.

The appendix comprises one-sixth of the book. There's more to Linux than clicking on icons: There is the command line. Here you are introduced to guru power. The appendix also covers installation procedures for Mandrake (now Mandriva), Suse, Xandrose, and other Linux systems.

The book is great if everything works as presented. However, I would like to see more emphasis on what to do if something goes wrong. A major source of problems is dealing with hardware drivers. For a Linux newbie like me, I could have used more guidance. The book says there is further support at the author's website, http://www.marcelgagne .com but that was not readily apparent to me. I found it to be more a promotional site than help.

I think the author did a great job in enabling me to get started with Linux. I recommend this book to all.

Moving to Linux: Kiss the Blue Screen of Death Goodbye! Marcel Gagne, 480 pages, Addison-Wesley, list $40. (User Group members may receive discounts on A-W books; check at www.awprofessional .com. A-W members can buy this book for $28: http://www.awprofessional .com/bookstore/product asP?isbn=0321356403&rl=1

From The DealsGuy

by Bob (The Cheapskate) Click
Greater Orlando Computer Users Group

As time goes forward, my health gets more complicated. I have been a Type II diabetic for a few years now and other than some swelling in the legs, my sugar control is pretty good, which I assume many of you can relate to. Problem is I started the sugar control too late and suffered serious heart damage. Now it seems that I have developed a large blood clot in my lower leg, I believe from a fall, and the doctor put me on Coumadin (Warfarin), better known as rat poison. It has a long list of drugs that cause interactions. I am already a walking pharmacy so now it gets complicated. This turn for the worse seems to bring other unexpected complications. I have started getting temporary spikes upward in my blood pressure for no apparent reason, which sometimes causes a nosebleed. I am afraid to go anyplace these days because I might get a nosebleed, although I can stop it now rather easily. My doctor has prescribed medication for my blood pressure as a solution to the changes and I sure hope it works. Getting old sure gets complicated, but the alternative to getting old "really sucks." It looks like I will have five more months on the rat poison, if I survive. I have talked to many people also taking Caumadin who tell me even worse stories about bleeding where you don't want to and a lack of good control by their doctor.

Right now, I need a blood test at least once a week for my INR, (the clotting ability of the blood). The doctor says I can purchase a machine to do that test at home, but I checked on the Web and it would cost $2495 (no decimal point). I'll let the clinic do the testing. Medicare only pays for that if you have valve problems in your heart. I'm still doing my best to continue cheating my wife out of the life insurance money. Whenever I start to slow down on exercise etc., I get a vision of my wife sitting on the beach of some south sea island with a stud sitting next to her, and she is writing a check on my insurance money for their next vacation. That little vision gets me right out of the chair to exercise.

How Secure is Your System?

I read an article in Information Week magazine that was both amusing and interesting. It concerned a company whose CIO hired security investigators to test how good their system stood up to being infiltrated. The director of the network operations center was sure they couldn't break into the

systems or facilities, but they very soon proved him wrong. Some of the weaknesses were so stupid that I had to chuckle, such as many of the passwords for work stations were written on a note taped to the machine or hidden under the keyboard. They gained access to limited access places just by calling the receptionist and telling them that some agents were coming in to do an audit and needed access, which was easily granted to the very people who made the call. Office keys were sometimes in the secretary's desk. You can find this article at <http://www .informationweek.com/management/showArticle .jhtml?articleID=177100115 and you'll find it enlightening.

Leaky Capacitor Update

A while back, I wrote about a leaky capacitor problem on motherboards that I read about in Ed Foster's Gripe Line, and gave you the URL to find out more. Since then, I received a message from Carey Holzman, author of Healthy PC, who tells me that is a four-year-old issue and that there has been "some" resolution in the matter. He says he has covered it since it first came up four years ago and more information is available on his Web site. <www.careyholzman.com. Also a second URL: <www.badcaps. net.

Great, The Bundle is Back

Colleen Toumayan from Executive Software sent a message letting me know that their "bundle" is back. For a limited time you can get both the award winning Diskeeper 10, Home Edition, and Undelete 5, Home Edition, products for just $49.95 plus S&H. I have never heard anything but praise about these fine products. Mine is not the latest, but it always works well, and fast. Use this link to order: <http://purchase.diskeeper.com/checkout/addtocart .aspx? Item =1382.

ExtraLabs Releases Version 3.4 of Feed Editor (an edited announcement)

New RSS Editor Makes Anyone An RSS Guru!

ExtraLabs Software unveils Feed Editor 3.4, a full-fledged RSS editor that offers you an easy way to create and maintain RSS feeds and podcasts. Compared to other RSS editors in its category, Feed Editor combines an unprecedented number of features including support for various RSS formats, a podcasting support, a wysiwyg html editor, an XML editor, an RSS Feed preview, an FTP upload and publishing, automatic date management and an ability to convert CSV or HTML to RSS, and back.

Feed Editor can create and maintain an unlimited number of RSS feeds and podcasts, thus letting you maintain and distribute multiple content streams simultaneously. To create a new RSS feed, you can use a New Feed Creation wizard that will guide you through the RSS setup process in a step-by-step fashion. Additional convenience comes with a built-in WYSIWIG HTML editor that allows you to edit a feed in much the same way as you would edit a word processing document. You can format the text, apply styling, and insert images and hyperlinks. Also, "Feed Editor" can generate a feed from a CSV and HTML file. Once a feed is ready, you can preview it and publish online using an FTP upload facility.

Read more about Feed Editor at <http:// www.extralabs.net/feed-editor.htm Download an evaluation version to try it for free <http:// www.extralabs.net/FeedEditor Setup.exe (1.72 Mb.)

ExtraLabs Software is glad to offer the newest version of "Feed Editor" with 50% off the regular price making it just $19.95. Also, ExtraLabs will offer all user group members an additional 5% discount on the purchase of the program during April and May. Follow this link for the extra discount: <http://www.regsoft.net/purchase.php3 ?productid =74108 &pc=312aY.

Feed Editor 3.4 runs under Windows 95/98/Me/2000/NT/XP/2003. Registered customers are entitled to free lifetime updates and premium technical support. Discounts for volume buyers are available.

If You Like Games, Check This Announcement

From the creators of "Zzed" comes a new game of Wonderlines by NevoSoft. Wonder-lines is a remake of a popular game. Only balls and lines remind you of its predecessor here and the rest is covered with the charm of novelty. A player will see a new bonus system, a new intricate game play structure and a fresh interface design. The music and visuals are great.

Puzzle, Action, Zen Way modes are different, yet each requires special skills. Generally, the game

stayed nearly the same yet now you match several balls of one color in a line, but also blow them up over certain brown squares. The challenge of the game is to remove all brown squares in each level. 70 levels of the game are very different one from another. Another merit of the game is new bonuses: the miraculous multicolor ball, dazzling diamond and clever hammer, triple or quadruple bomb and others, which help a lot while making your way through Wonder-lines.

Wonderlines runs under Windows 98/ME /XP/2000 and costs $19.95 (USD). NevoSoft offers a 30% discount to user group members if you use this link: <https://www.regnow.com/softsell/nph-softsell.cgi?item=8323-16&ss_coupon=NEVO-GPCU. Registered customers are entitled to the unlocked game play and lifetime technical support. An evaluation version of the game, that offers 60 minutes of game play, is available as a free download at <http://www.nevosoft.com/wonderlines /wonderlines_demo.exe. Be aware that this vendor has no privacy statement on their Web site about protecting your information.

For more information, visit us at <http:// www.nevosoft.com Product page link: <http://www .nevosoft.com/downloadable-game/en/games /wonderlines.html

That's it for this month. Meet me here again next month if your editor permits. Be sure to check the new announcement pages on my Web site. This column is written to make user group members aware of special offers or freebies I have found or arranged, and my comments should not be interpreted to encourage, or discourage, the purchase of any products, no matter how enthused I might sound. Bob (The Cheapskate) Click <bobclick @mindspring.com. Visit my Web site at <http://www .dealsguy .com.

Rip-Off Alert

by Barry Brown

Diablo Valley PC Users Group

On November 27 last year I purchased "My DVD Studio" from Sonic software. As I understand it they use a company called "Digital River" for distribution and billing. I downloaded the software and ordered a backup CD.

I received an e-mail from Digital River advising me that the backup order was shipped and I would see a charge on my credit card to cover this under the name "DR'Sonic Solutions" and to reassure me that this was a legitimate charge for the software. What they fail to tell you is that they appear to have an arrangement with a company called "WLP Reservation Rewards." When you order the software on line a box appears asking you to check it in order to obtain a discount on your next purchase. It doesn't mention that this enrolls you in this rewards program which then proceeds to bill you $9 per month on the same credit card you used for the purchase.

I noticed the charge on my most recent credit card bill for $9 and immediately contacted the program. Fortunately I was able to get the "membership" cancelled and they say they will reverse the charge on my credit card.

I checked out ReservationRewards on the internet on www.ripoffreport.com and found over 1200 complaints from people there under that name and also "WLI*ShopperDiscount," Webloyalty.com and several others all sharing the same address in Connecticut.

I have informed "Digital River" about this problem and advised them that I will also post on the ripoffreport site and name Sonic as the perpetrator unless a satisfactory ex-planation is forthcoming.

I think all members should be aware of this subterfuge which obviously is widespread and not just a Digital River phenomenon.

Beware and if you notice charges of $9 from some merchant you don't recognize ask about it!

Society News

Planning Meeting Notes

March 7, 2006

by John McMillan

Sally Springett welcomed Bob Avery, Tony Dellelo, John McMillan, Dan Rothfuss, and Steve Staub to the March planning meeting that Arpad Kovacs led.

The meeting started with a discussion of February's meeting. Most felt that attendees enjoyed the discussion on Search Engine Optimization. Mary Anne Donovan probably could have held the audience for another half hour, if the time had been

available. The topic was enhanced by active interchanges with members, one of whom works as a web site designer. Bob Avery added links to the Societies web page so members could access the slides used in the presentation.

The urgent need for a program chair was discussed as the current commitments expire with the April meeting. Mary Anne might return with a different topic and Jeremy Sarachan, who spoke on video editing. was considered as another potential speaker. A "Tips and Tricks" or a new Jeopardy game were also mentioned. Linux would be interesting if we could find a speaker to address the entry level concerns for that environment. Sally suggested polling March meeting attendees for suggestions of topics and or contacts.

Arpad stated that the laser jet 8000 DN printer the Society purchased on E-Bay is in transit for delivery to his home where it will be tested. There was some discussion of the transfer to St. Stephens and a revised layout of the printer room. Once installed, ink costs are expected to decrease by 60 to 80 % and printing time should be reduced significantly. Another suggestion was to contact Hammermill-Bond directly to see if we can get a better paper price than is available locally. Tony will continue to explore the stapler problems which have not yet been resolved.

Despite a $100 cash donation, the treasury is still in a critical stage as mentioned at the February meeting. Other cash contributions would be most appreciated. The Society also received contributions in the form of a dot matrix printer and a scanner. After any necessary refurbishing they may be offered for sale on e-Bay for immediate relief of the cash flow problems. In addition two of the existing printers, used for the Monitor, can be sold, once a Monitor mailing has been successfully printed with the newer equipment. Other donations of equipment or soft-ware no longer needed or used would be most welcome.

Whoever hacked the Societies web site changed the administrators pass word. This has increased the difficulty of reestablishing the sites security which Bob and Arpad will continue to explore. Dan recommended deleting the link which he felt might solve the problem.

Meeting Notes

March 14, 2006
by John McMillan

Club business: Steve Staub reminded members that annual dues in arrears should be paid to him immediately. There is an acute shortage of funds in the treasury so the officers are considering a dues increase, possibly to take effect in June. It has been several years since the dues were raised so inflation is overcoming us. He also suggested support of fund raising activities like refreshment donations that contribute to the treasury.

The Monitor will be assembled at 9:30 am March 18th at St. Stephens using the current printing processes. The Society has purchased a new printer which must be tested before being used for a scheduled monitor printing. The planning meeting will be held the first Tuesday of April at Sally Springett's.

Steve said there is a continuing need for a Help's Half Hour leader and a critical need for a program chairperson since the April meeting with the Smart Computing Speakers is the last established topic. Members should not be bashful about making suggestions for future subjects. The idea of a speaker to describe one or more of available Registry clean up programs was mentioned but did not generate any comment.

After a short refreshment break our own Tony Dellelo opened the topic "Build Your Own Computer." This was a slide presentation supplied by Intel and augmented by an assortment of hardware exhibits Tony supplied. Attendees received a key ring flashlight to help shed light on this presentation.

The slides promoted PCClub, as a source of components. E-Bay, Amazon.com and Computer Shows might offer lower prices but Society officers recommended using local sources that: could provide a quicker response if component changes were necessary; might offer supervisory assistance during construction and testing; and had contacts for software acquisition. Tony stressed that this presentation was to determine the number of members interested in building a machine at a future workshop meeting after considering component selection and getting a ball park estimate of the cost. This is the same pattern used several years ago when

about 10 society members built their own machines in a Saturday session that lasted about 4 hours.

After some reassuring comments about the ease of construction, Tony began describing off the shelf components. The processor is the most important part of the computer so you should start with the best one you can afford. PC Club starts with Intel's Celeron 2 Ghz. processor which is more than adequate for the average user with word processing, e-mailing, and web surfing interests. For more advanced computing consider a Pentium 4 or dual processors, both available at a higher price.

The motherboard connects a number of chip sets and memory to the processor through a System bus so careful integration is essential. A slower System bus might prevent future upgrading. Tony stated that Intel does a very good job of balancing these components.

PC Club promotes a mother board (I don't remember the exact number but it ended in 945) that includes support for graphics, PS 2 and Firewire ports and 4 memory slots. These days most machines come with 2 memory sticks, holding from 128 megabytes up to a Gigabytes. Tony recommended using both slots which increases the access speed but if both slots are used, they must contain identical sticks thus 2 64's = 128 megabytes; 2 128's = 256 megabytes; and so on up to 2 gigabytes. Increasing memory is one of the most cost effective ways of increasing multitasking capability and computer throughput.

Modern hard drive capacities range from 40 to several hundred Gigabytes. If you are into video editing or storing photographs on a hard drive, larger drives are essential and you might even consider a pair of hard drives. Revolutions per minute will affect speed as will the choice of technology to control the drives. As the size goes up, so does the price and the difficulty of backing up the stored data.

Optical drives for CD's and DVD's must also be considered. An increasing number of software packages use DVD's so a DVD ROM drive is almost a necessity. Tony's personal recommendation is for a 2 layer DVD+/-RW CD-RW for its ability to read and write both DVD's and CD's and easier backup of the hard drive.

He also expressed a liking for 3.5 inch floppy drives though most machines these days do not include one. They are especially useful for archiving small files or for group environments where individuals need their own "take away" files. Key drives of varying capacities, the modern equivalent, and digital camera cards are becoming more common on new machines. He had a slide that showed a combination 3.5 floppy and card reader.

Most mother boards also include graphics enhancement and sound capability which can be overridden if other cards are installed. Graphics accelerator cards have their own processor and usually include on board memory to speed up processing with cost ranging up to several hundred dollars.

To get an idea of the cost, PC Club priced a basic system excluding speakers and monitor at $578. Local prices could be different but offer previously mentioned advantages. Tony estimated the cost of his version which included the Celeron chip on the Intel motherboard, a 2 layer DVD RW unit, monitor, speakers and a combination 3.5 inch floppy/card reader at $27. Those interested in gaming, video editing, or other graphics intensive operations needing high end graphics cards and other components would need to adjust that estimate upwards. Tony concluded by asking attendees to give Intel feedback via the web at www.intel.com/personal /pcug/seminarsurvey. There was also a sign up list for anyone interested in pursuing this type of project further.

Treasurer's Report

by Steve Staub

Balance 2/14/06	$272.88
Income	
Dues and donations	$221.64
Expenses	
Ink	$29.15
St. Stephen's	60.00
Arpad Kovacs (new printer)	200.00
	$289.15
Balance 3/14/06	$205.37

Renewals: Bernice Blake, Michael deStefano, Roger Hart, Ron Nichols, Charles Rinehart, Ted Zajac
New member: Emily Carpenter

The Lighter Side

A customer called, saying his computer was sparking, and they were afraid it was going to catch fire and burn the place down. This was a new computer, installed less than a month ago. Fearing the worst, I headed out to the site. All the cables had been unplugged and moved as far away from the computer as possible. Clearly, they were taking no chances.

But there were no burnt odors anywhere. No scorch marks on the carpet, any of the cabling, or inside the computer. I plugged all the cables back in and turned on the computer. It booted up fine.

Finally, I realized the Ethernet transmit light was orange in color, instead of the usual green. Eventually we figured out that they had seen it flickering when the lights in the room were off and mistook it for sparking.

With users like this, I know I have job security. But will I be able to keep a straight face?

Customer: "Your sound card is defective and I want a new one."

Tech Support: "What seems to be the problem?"

Customer: "The balance is backwards. The left channel is coming out of the right speaker and the right channel is coming out the left. It's defective."

Tech Support: "You can solve the problem by moving the left speaker the right side of the machine and vice versa."

Customer: (sputter) (click)

Tech Support: (snicker)