Digital Cameras Blossom as Popularity Increases

by Ira Wilsker

APCUG Director; Columnist, The Examiner, Beaumont, TX; radio and TV show host

Much to no one's surprise, the popularity of digital cameras is exploding, as the quality improves even more, and the cameras become more affordable. Digital photography, which was initially slow, grainy, and sometimes difficult to manipulate has matured, and is now nearly universal. With the dramatic improvements in digital camera and storage technology in recent years, much of what early adopters of digital photography experienced has changed for the better.

Sitting in front of me as I type this column are two digital cameras, each of which are representative of the respective technology of the day. One of the cameras is a JVC GC-S1U which is about 5 years old, and when it was new it was considered a technological marvel and state of the art in its day, but by today's standards, while still functional, is technologically obsolete. One of the first digital still cameras available, it has a .3 (that is 3/10) of a megapixel image of 640x480 pixels, which is miniscule by today's standards. It takes 4 AA batteries, which are good for only a few dozen photos before they are exhausted, even less if the integral flash is used. Reviews of the day used the expression that this camera "eats batteries." One of the first cameras on the market to take a memory card, it uses the now large format by current standards CF or Compact Flash card for additional photo storage. Connecting to the computer via a very slow serial connection made photos slow to download, unless an external card reader was used to read the CF card. One feature that this antique camera has, that is still impressive by today's standards is a 10x optical zoom. The processor in the camera is horribly slow by today's standards, with a noticeable lag between pressing the shutter and capturing the image, along with a long delay for a follow up snapshot.

The newer digital cameras on the market clearly show the technological improvements that have become commonplace. New digital cameras come in a wide assortment of prices and features, from tiny key-chain size cameras, to cameras embedded in a ballpoint pen, to inexpensive disposable cameras to pocket size marvels, to SLR (Single Lens Reflex) type cameras with extreme resolution rivaling 35mm film, and using an assortment of available lenses, just like traditional 35mm cameras. Zoom can range from the less expensive and generally inferior digital zoom, to the superior optical zoom. Zoom ranges typically range from 3x to 12x, with some models offering a combination of optical and digital zoom to increase the ability to manipulate the closeness of the image. Many of the newer digital still cameras can also capture video and sound, often in the popular MPEG-4 30fps (30 frames per second) format, the length of the video being only limited by the amount of storage available on the memory card.

The second camera I have in front of me is a new, state of the art Casio EX-S500, one of a series of new cameras Casio is producing in the "Exilim" series. The camera is actually small compared to my older camera, only being about 3.5 inches wide, by about 2.3 inches tall, and about .6 (6/10) of an inch thick, weighing only about 4 ounces. This full featured camera will easily fit in a shirt pocket or purse. It uses the tiny SD memory cards. With an excellent 5 megapixel maximum image size, this camera will take digital photos in six different sizes ranging from an enormous 2560x1920 pixel size (5 megapixels), to the smaller 640x480 size (3/10 of a megapixel). It should be noted that the smaller the image, the more images that can be stored in the memory card. Also, the smaller images are more appropriate if they are going to be emailed, an important consideration in "netiquette." The larger size images are appropriate if large photos are to be printed in 8x10 inch or 11x14 inch sizes, or even larger.

Zoom is provided by a telescoping 3x optical zoom, which can be coupled with an integral 4x digital zoom, giving a maximum zoom of 12x. The lens produced very bright and sharp images. When the camera is turned off, the telescoping zoom lens is retracted into the body of the camera, making the front of the camera nearly flat. One technological marvel built into this camera an "Anti-Shake DSP" which is a digital signal processor that removes the effect of moving the camera while the image is being recorded; this contributes to an exceptionally sharp image by removing or minimizing the blurring many of us encounter when we move the camera as we take a photo.

Despite the small stature of the camera, it also can record movies and sound in three formats, 640x480 in both high quality and normal mode, and a smaller image 320x240 size for extended play. Video is saved in MPEG-4 format, and the sound is saved in the universal WAV format. With a common and inexpensive 256 megabyte memory card, the camera can capture about 8 minutes of video and sound at the high quality setting, and about 45 minutes at the extended play setting. Simply, available memory and battery power is the limiting factor in the length of the video that can be shot at any given time.

While my old camera ate batteries, having a very short battery life, this new Casio Exilim has a proprietary rechargeable lithium ion battery with a normal capacity of about 200 photos before it needs to be recharged.

The camera has a shutter speed of 1/8 to 1/2000 of a second, rivaling many of the classical 35mm cameras, and includes a multi-mode flash, self timer, bright 2.2 inch LCD screen, and a mini-cradle which simultaneously connects the camera to a USB 2 high speed connection as well as AC power to charge the internal battery. There is also an "AV Out" jack on the cradle. Included with the camera are two CDs of software to download and manage the still images as well as the video. A set of included video cables allows the playing of video direct from the camera when it is docked in the cradle.

The body of the Casio Exilim EX-S500 camera is stainless steel, and available in a typical steel grey color, as well as while or orange toned stainless steel. This camera has a suggested retail price of $350. Locally these cameras are available at Circuit City, CompUSA, Radio Shack, Target,

Ritz Camera, Sharper Image, or online from Casio at www.casio,com.

Casio is now marketing some excellent quality digital cameras, and should be strongly considered when shopping for better quality and full featured digital cameras.

A Computer in a Smart House

by Linda Soloski
Greater Tampa Bay PC User Group

I got this from a friend who just moved to North Carolina. Her husband is being deployed to Iraq.

Hello, everyone! It is so good to return to the land of the living.

We've had quite an adjustment getting ourselves here to North Carolina, electronically speaking.

The saga began in Brandon [Florida], when—for some unknown reason—Verizon decided to disconnect our service four days early. Repeated attempts to get back online failed, as did numerous attempts to retrieve all my lost email correspondences (which I had not yet saved) and all of my email contacts.

Charlotte, my DAR friend, actually located your address on a scrap slip of paper stuck between the kid's medical record and the telephone book!

So, please, if you have a mass email from me with numerous addresses, forward it to this new address, as I am trying to compile a list from scratch. Did I mention that no one at Verizon seemed to know that one could actually store email addresses in their "Address" box? Interesting.

Finally, with much ado and nothing to show for it, we get to North Carolina. We bought our house in a nice little rural neighborhood with quiet streets, so quiet in fact, that apparently the cable company had no idea we existed.

For three weeks, I called back and forth trying to get someone to acknowledge that we are here and we do indeed exist. On the third week without internet access, I have completed my 12-step compulsive-computer-user-withdrawal program and the pangs have started to subside when the cable guy stops by to say we do, indeed, exist and our lines, as I've repeatedly shouted, are running all through the house.

Did I mention we purchased a "smart" house? Yep. It's so sophisticated that you can turn electronics on from any phone or internet extension anywhere in the world. (Too bad we can't get internet, huh?) The entire house is hard-wired with wireless internet, surround sound, security systems, the works!

Then we move to step two.

The "other" cable (not the one that says you exist, a different one) has to come by and actually stick the cables together and connect them to their box.

Another nine days go by and the drool and shaky hands are back. It's so hard to be addicted to technology. I'm telling you, the guy seemed to have a glow all around when he approached the door and I thought I heard the faint sound of harps playing.

Now I wish I could say I'm exaggerating, but seven hours, yeah, *seven hours* later, he still can't get the lines hooked up. Apparently our "smart" house is smarter than our cable guy.

He leaves, then returns, then calls the home office, then another cable guy. At 7 pm, my husband comes home and dismisses the guy in lieu of going to dinner and asks him to come back the next day.

"Sure" the guy says. Of course, the next day, no one shows. After several calls we're told only the home office can schedule and the next available slot is five days from now. A familiar pang hits my gut like an alcoholic at a night club.

We press on and five days later, not one, not two, but *three* cable guys show up. In 15 minutes, we're up and running. Internet, email, the works! *Hallelujah*!

So you think now we are we up and running? Nah. Once again, our "Smart" house has outsmarted us. Our 21st century top-of-the-line electronic package left us without a connection in the dog-gone office! ('Cause no one wants a computer in the office, right?)

I'm off to Best Buy for a wireless router to network with our smart house. Installation, as is always the case, was a blast! I never realized I had a drinking problem.

That night, before I've had a chance to surf even the first Website, we have a terrible electrical storm. No problem, we've got the monster surge protector, we'll be fine.

You guessed it! No power.

The next day, no computer, either. I wish I could say I am joking. Two trips to Best Buy's "Geek Squad" and I'm told I have no - let me repeat that—*no hard drive*. They try rescuing it, but, as is par for this course, there is just no saving it. I take a week off to lick my wounds and try to heal then run out and buy a new laptop.

Now I have a nice new computer that is completely useless until I fill it up with all of the software I lost. Did I mention I *hate* electronics? I've lost all my family tree stuff, all my World War II information, all the stuff on book publishers for the family history, the Daughters of the American Revolution stuff, everything. I would appreciate anything that any of you may have that could help me rebuild. And yes, I'm putting it all on CD this time so as not to lose it.

As for my internet days, I'd like to say I'm cured. But like a bad addition, I find myself inexplicably drawn to the blue-gray glow of the computer screen and the hum of a hard drive kicking in is like the melodic sirens off the coast of tiny islands, drawing unsuspecting sailors toward their doom.

At least for that brief period, when everything works according to plan, I may be able to reach that euphoric nirvana of a captain sinking with his ship, knowing he's going down doing what he loves.

Configuring a Basic User's PC

by Gabriel Goldberg
APCUG Advisor, Region 2; Columnist, AARP Computers and Technology Website

D on't be alarmed by the high-falutin word "configuring". It just means deciding what components—otherwise called "parts"— will perform various PC functions. It's like old-days car buying: reviewing a dealer checklist to pick dozens of individual features, from radio to power steering to disc brakes and more. The good news is that almost any current PC with a printer and Internet connectivity will

handle mainstream requirements. That means that a generic Windows PC is usually adequate—but you should upgrade if you'll do anything challenging or exotic.

Just as when buying a car, the first step in buying a computer is deciding what you'll do with it: e-mail, Web searching/viewing, or word processing? Financial work with Quicken? Digital photography? Simple games? Ultra-demanding tasks like high-end games and digital video editing?

Just as when making any major purchase, a small investment in learning pays off for years. Before buying a PC, learn the basics:—take a class, buy a book, attend local computer user group meetings, consult Web sites, read technology magazines at the library.

As you look at applications' system requirements (processor speed, RAM size, hard drive storage capacity, video card speed and memory, etc.) note differences between minimum and recommended specifications. Vendors are often too optimistic—and that's being charitable—about what's needed for their software to run productively. It's much safer, and not much more expensive, to buy at least the recommended choices. In fact, I usually buy a little more power than I need. This bumps cost just a little and it avoids future problems and upgrades. Purchasing this way greatly extends a PC's life and makes it more compatible with future innovations, at least for a while.

Remember that as PCs evolve, a range of choices is always available, from bleeding-edge new to borderline obsolete. An equally valid—and more economical -- approach to configuring is finding the current technology "sweet spot" the point where cost, performance, compatibility, and useful life are in balance. A key decision is whether to buy a brand-name system or an unknown-brand machine, have a PC built to order, or build it yourself. Choices for laptop computers are much more limited: brand-name systems dominate, trailed by a few off-brand manufacturers. There are no build-it-yourself options, though manufactured systems can be customized extensively.

Each purchasing choice has advantages and advocates. Brand-name systems can be evaluated and compared by consulting references such as Consumer Reports magazine, are available everywhere via catalog or online shopping, and may have better standard or optional warranties (often worthwhile for quick service and peace of mind). But brand-name systems sometimes suffer from using commodity parts vs. best-quality components.

Unknown-brand machines can be reliable money savers or risky acquisitions. I'd only buy such a system from a trusted store with a flexible return policy. I favor having PCs built to order by small local shops with established reputations, offering maximum flexibility and consultation during design. And I've enjoyed watching my PCs take shape as they're assembled from a tableful of parts!

Some people build their own PCs, often with training and mentoring from computer user group volunteers. This demystifies system innards, greatly facilitating diagnosing and repairing problems and upgrading components. Build-to-order and build-yourself allow specifying brand-name parts for improved performance and reliability. No matter where you purchase, look carefully at monitor choices. Traditional CRT monitors prices have declined, allowing buying larger devices with better resolution. And newer/thinner/lighter

LCD panels offer a powerful—though sometimes less flexible—alternative. Visit stores to compare brands and models and explore settings to match your preferences.

Decide how you'll back up your software and data. Choices include a second—perhaps external or removable—hard drive, writable optical media such as DVD, and tape. The first two are most often used, with each having unique advantages. Follow your backup plan regularly; nothing ruins a day like losing months or years of can't-be-replaced data, not to mention having to reconstruct all your software.

Small choices can make large differences in productivity and comfort. For example, mouse technology has advanced far beyond the traditional two-button wired device. Mouse alternatives include trackball and wireless devices, gadgets with many extra programmable buttons, wheel mouses allowing horizontal/vertical scrolling, etc. Considering how much time you'll use your pointing device, it's worth spending a little extra money to have the device that suits you best!

Windows offers many choices for easing use—enlarging type, making keyboarding easier, providing special audible and visual cues, etc. Accessibility options are found in different places— usually via Control Panel or the Start menu. It's worth exploring these to tailor your PC to your individual preferences. Similarly, small add-on programs can greatly improve a PC's comfort factor. Remember that Windows is highly configurable: you can change how it looks and operates. As you become familiar with your new PC, explore options/settings/preferences. Just as you wouldn't insist on driving a car with seats and mirrors exactly as they came from the dealer, don't be captive of Microsoft's initial settings!

Name-brand computers usually include software bundles. Vendors shout about how valuable they are and how much money you're saving on them—but that's only true if you'll use the software provided. As soon as you have your machine, examine pre-installed software and remove anything you know you won't use. Then defrag your disk and then install the programs you'll use. These simple steps will make your machine run better by decluttering it.

Finally, If you understand how to do this, use built-in tools such as MSCONFIG to chop out unneeded services started by default when your system boots.

Software bundles often include junior-grade versions or limited-time trial copies of critical tools such as anti-virus and anti-spyware software. For system reliability and security, upgrade these to full versions and subscribe to update services.

Not much else in modern life besides computers keeps getting faster/better /cheaper. And it's not hard to find or build a computer that meets needs for several years, runs reliably, and doesn't break the bank.

Tech Books for Non-Dummies

by Gabriel Goldberg

APCUG Advisor, Region 2; Columnist, AARP Computers and Technology Website

With the approaching holidays, those reading this portion of AARP's Web site will seek techno-gift ideas for family, friends, and themselves. But with conflicting suggestions from stores and manufacturers all around us, a trusted guidebook is valuable. So it's a luxury to

have three such references from which to get great gift ideas, or to develop your own wish list.

These guidebooks would be Sandy Berger's Great Age Guide to Better Living Through Technology, Great Age Guide to Gadgets and Gizmos, and Great Age Guide to the Internet. Each book offers an open and uncluttered design, amply illustrated with easy-to-read screen images and photos, and clearly written in an engaging style that builds confidence in the reader.

Sandy shares her sense of excitement and discovery with the reader, offering clear opinions on technology and how it affects us. Nothing is dumbed down—there's no mention of dummies or idiots—which is pleasantly different from many technology books. And whether you agree or disagree on individual items, you'll certainly know where Sandy stands.

The "Great Age" title is credited to Pablo Picasso, who said "Age only matters when one is aging. Now that I have arrived at a great age, I might as well be twenty." Chapters begin with other thought-provoking quotations. My favorite, highlighting the empowering nature of the books' subject matter, comes from marketing guru Greg Arnold, who said that "All greatness is achieved while performing outside your comfort zone." Although these books aren't uncomfortable reading, they may challenge you to try new things.

Each book opens onto Contents at a Glance, a list of chapter titles and page numbers which offers a handy, quick review of its content, and a brief "What's Inside" write-up. The Technology and Internet books include valuable sidebars calling out Sandy's Tips, Blooper Alerts, Lingo, and Trivia. Selected items in Gadgets and Gizmos are designated as Sandy's Favorites.

Great Age Guide to Better Living Through Technology reminds us how pervasive technology is, how much things have changed in our lifetimes, and how change is accelerating and never-ending. It addresses how technology has affected shopping, travel, health, finances, and even meeting people, and how families can take advantage of the digital world. Throughout, it encourages continued learning at any age and illustrates just how much there is that's worth learning. For example, it lists diverse search engines, giving attributes and advantages for each. Many are specialized and lesser known than Google or Yahoo but may be better for fulfilling certain information quests, such as the Library of Congress, available to all online.

The Great Age Guide to the Internet focuses on getting online and learning the language of the Internet, but also to have fun while avoiding problems. The book starts gently, introducing Internet concepts and terms, and assembles them into tips and tricks for Web searching, e-mailing, understanding Web advertising, and even building our own Web pages. It gives tips for picking an ISP (Internet service provider), demystifies browser windows components, and offers netiquette advice for instant messaging.

The Great Age Guide to Gadgets and Gizmos is a different sort of book. It serves as a catalog, shopping guide, and tour guide through current and future technology, offering gift ideas for oneself or Santa. It's not Consumer Reports, since it doesn't compare choices head-to-head, but its interesting and opinionated narrative provides both good and bad news about products. Its general advice and principles regarding technol-ogy keep it from becoming outdated as fast as a simple products list.

All three books are complementary, an easy read cover-to-cover, or useful as references for specific topics, services, and products. Their indexes locate topics quickly and, although there's some necessary overlap of content, each provides different information with varying orientation and emphasis. Overall, the books deliver usable information about evolving technology areas.

Specifications

Title: ***Great Age Guide to Better Living Through Technology***
Author: Sandy Berger
Paperback: 288 pages
Publisher: Que
ISBN: 0789734400
Price: $19.99
URL: Purchase Great Age Guide to Better Living Through Technology from Barnes & Noble

Title: ***Great Age Guide to the Internet***
Author: Sandy Berger
Paperback: 288 pages
Publisher: Que
ISBN: 0789734427
Price: $19.99
URL: Purchase Great Age Guide to the Internet from Barnes & Noble

Title: ***Great Age Guide to Gadgets and Gizmos***
Author: Sandy Berger
Paperback: 264 pages
Publisher: Que
ISBN: 0789734419
Price: $19.99
URL: Purchase Great Age Guide to Gadgets and Gizmos from Barnes & Noble

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The DealsGuy

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

I can't emphasize enough the value of users group help and here is an example: Recently, while preparing to drive over to our beach condo for a couple of days, I wanted to copy a floppy disk containing some important files not backed up. When I attempted to copy it, the process stopped in the middle telling me my second disk was corrupted. I tried to stop the process so I could use another disk, but couldn't get the procedure to go away. Even when I killed Windows Explorer, then restarted it, and was ready with a new disk, it tried unsuccessfully to resume the process. Finally, I

decided to reboot the computer in an effort to clear it, and when it tried to restart, all I got was the opening Intel screen and nothing more. After forcing the machine to shut down, and a brief pause, I tried to start the computer again and it would not go past the startup Intel screen.

Horror set in and I wondered what I might have done to screw it up, and what to do next. I was lost! All of a sudden I remembered something I had read only a couple days before in a users group newsletter while browsing a write-up about their Q & A session. A member reported that they could not get their computer to boot and finally removed a USB Flash Drive they had been using before they shut it off. It booted up just fine with the flash drive removed. Since I was using a USB Flash Drive while trying a new backup program, I removed it, tried to boot again, and was very relieved when the computer booted normally. I am running Windows XP Professional.

I can't remember which newsletter I read that in, but my thanks to the user group community and the newsletters I receive from them. I read them from cover to cover, especially about their Q & A sessions and sometimes find good information that I think my readers might use. It was interesting that when I tried rebooting again with a 256 Meg USB Flash Drive plugged in; it booted just fine, but would not boot with the one gig USB drive plugged in. I would never have thought to remove that flash drive so I hope my experience was useful to my readers.

Problems in Dell Land

I read in Ed Foster's Gripe Line about a company that had bought almost 200 Dell Optiplex GX270 PCs, and when a known defect arose concerning a capacitor on the motherboard that tended to swell and cause problems, it should have been covered by their support contract, but Dell didn't live up to their agreement. They started to replace them, but after more problem boards were found, they stopped and instead eventually wanted the company to trade them in. For financial reasons the customer didn't want to do that and any negotiations finally stopped. It was known that some larger companies with the same problem had gotten it resolved, but nobody knows why. Up until now, I had thought Dell had a good name in the industry and I don't know the outcome. Ed Foster's Gripe Line URL is [http://www.gripe2ed.com], but I couldn't find this story posted at this writing, maybe because I read it in an August issue. You need to set up a password to access the Gripe Line Web site. For other information about the problem, check [http://www.dslreports.com /forum/remark ,13709831].

For the folks who ask me about the trade shows, we recently worked the National Safety Council Show [http://www.safety2005.org] that was very interesting. It used about 500,000 square feet of exhibit space and had over 20,000 attendees from around the globe. You wouldn't think so, but I saw some cutting-edge technology featured there. Like many trade shows here, they had an evening party for attendees at Universal Studios.

We also worked the interesting Bank Administration Industry show. [http://www.bai.org] You would have easily recognized many names exhibiting there, which included well known ATM machines, security names, and software companies like Micro-soft, Adobe, Oracle USA and many others well known to user group people. The exhibit area was about 400,000 sq. ft. of area. Free food for the attendees too. Attendance was about 12,000. Central Florida is a hotbed of trade show activity, but we only work a few of them.

Still Good

Don't forget the deal is still good for the WebBuild Express software for creating your Web site. To download it at [http://store.esellerate.net /nfti/store], use the coupon code CPN8348901136, when it calls for it, to receive your 25% discount. I have a trial version but I have not tried it out yet. Between health problems and laziness, I don't have much for you this month, but I hope you took advantage of the APCUG announcements for deals.

The Lost Can Often Be Found

Have you ever deleted a file and later found you should not have done that? No problem, just go to the Recycle Bin and get it back. Come to find out though, it has been dumped by the Recycle Bin. Now you have another problem; but not if you have PC Inspector, which can do unbelievable things when it comes to recovering deleted files from your hard drive. Your hard drive has to be working properly for it to work.

Best of all, PC Inspector is Freeware and it can be downloaded at [http://www.pcinspector.de/file_recovery /uK/welcome.htm]. If you have used Secure Clean or Wipe Drive, forget about it. I found this information in a UG newsletter, but have not tried it personally.

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].

Don't Be a Loser
at the Rebate Games

by Jim Sanders
Editor, North Orange County Computer Club

Most of us have bought something that sounded like a great value—"After Rebate or Rebates." Everywhere from a great price to FREE! Most are legitimate. Most require a fair amount of work to claim. Most are never claimed. Most say you will have to wait 6 to 10 weeks for a check (for some that turns into 6 to10 months). Many have tricky fine print. A few are outright scams!

Below are a list of things that you should do, as opposed to just think about, if your going to buy an item with a rebate and have any real intention of claiming the rebate and actually getting it. Following that are three emails that dealt with a denied rebate claim for our new President Elise Edgell.

If you are going to buy an item with a rebate, while you are at the checkout stand, **NOT AFTER YOU GET HOME**, do the following:

- Write down the sales clerk's name then ask him to show you that you have all the items needed to claim the rebate. Ask him to put an X on the correct UPC barcode.

- Make sure you have a copy of the correct rebate form(s). Some are inside the box. You just paid for the item, it is yours, open the box and read the terms.
- If it is an upgrade rebate, it is better to find out if your old product qualifies BEFORE you go to the store. Check the vendor's website, call the store and ask!

READ THE FINE PRINT! THEN READ IT AGAIN!

- Read the "Proof of Purchase" requirement list.
- Does it require the original "Sales Receipt" or is a copy OK. If the original is required, ask the store for a duplicate original that is acceptable for a product exchange if there is a problem with the product. Some stores provide a "Rebate Receipt." Make sure that matches the requirement list.
- Check the postmark requirement, I have seen one that gave you only three days to get it postmarked. Don't wait till the last day to mail it.
- Make sure a website address and/or telephone number is included that you can use to contact the rebate center about your rebate. Most of the upscale rebate centers include an 800 number.
- Make two copies of ALL documentation submitted. If a cheesy rebate center decides to tell you they never received your request, without copies you're up the proverbial creek. I am working on an article about using your scanner for this purpose.
- I think it is a good idea to include one of the documentation photocopies with the submission to make the point that you have copies. Mark it "CC: Vendor, My Files." On the larger rebates, buying the $.95 proof of delivery service at the post office is cheap insurance. Having a witness to the mailing doesn't hurt. Error on your side of the game. If it says 6 to 8 weeks, check at 6 weeks, don't wait three months. Be reasonable with phone calls but check the website as often as you like. Mark your calendar to remind yourself to check on the rebate. Keep a folder for all of your rebates. Move completed ones to another folder. Once you get your rebate check, read how long it is good for. Some are good for 6 months. Most are void after 60 days. A few are void after 30 days. I got one that was expired when it was delivered. When you think you have been shafted, don't just grimace and bear it, complain. Complain to the retailer. Complain to the vendor. If all else fails, file a complaint with the FTC at www.ftc.gov. You can also file a complaint with the Better Business Bureau at www.bbb.org. Taking the retailer to Small Claims Court is an option.

The email exchange with BFG Technologies, Inc.

Dear Sir, My name is Jim Sanders, and I am the editor of the North Orange County Computer Club's newsletter, the Orange Bytes. PDF copies of the publication are available at http://www.noccc.org. For several weeks I have been gathering material for an article on the rebate games. Our members should see it in the next issue of the newsletter. This is a hot issue with our members as a number have been burned by various rebate offers. In a lot of cases it was due to not reading the fine print, not crossing all T's or dotting all I's, a claim that the request was never received or not received in time.

In some instances the rebate was a pure scam. A few refused rebates may be caused by human error on the part of the highly trained, intelligent, well paid staff of the rebate center. A common reason given for a rebate denial is that a required piece of documentation was not included.

All too often, that claim cannot be refuted as the original was sent in and the suggestion to photocopy all submitted documentation was not followed because of the hassle involved. In an interesting coincidence of timing, our club President, Elise Edgell, showed me the rebate denial post card that she received on 7/16/2005. The reason given for the refusal: "We did not receive a sales receipt with your request." She purchased a BFG GeForce FX 5500 OC at a special Fry's Electronics' one day sale where a $50 rebate was offered on your product. In this case, Elise did scan all the documentation sent in with the rebate and kept it as a JPG file. In addition, the original documentation was stapled to a printout of that file and a notation was hand printed on that sheet, in bold marker pen: "CC: Vendor, My Files." That file is attached to this email. As both of us bought the product and requested the rebate in the same way, it will be interesting to see if I get the same post card.

I understand that you contract the rebate function to other companies, but the typical club member that has a problem thinks the problem is with the company that made the product and offered the rebate. It is your reputation that suffers, not the rebate center.

Would you express your opinion on which of the above reasons might be the cause of this rebate being denied?
Sincerely,
Jim Sanders, Editor, NOCCC Orange Bytes
Hi Jim,

Thanks for contacting BFG Technologies, and thanks for giving us the opportunity to clarify this particular rebate situation.

Looking at the picture in your attachment of Elise's submission, it appears there is not a copy of her "Sales Receipt" included along with the other required items.

In addition to the "Rebate Form/Receipt" and the "Proof of Purchase" cut from the box, a copy of the "Sales Receipt" is required. With Fry's it can sometimes be confusing because they label the Rebate Form as a "Rebate Receipt." This could lead a customer into thinking that the form was both the rebate form AND the sales receipt, although they are actually two separate items.

Some additional information that may be of interest; this is one of two rebates that have the highest redemption rates we have ever run. This indicates to us that majority of customers are including all the correct documentation and getting the rebate for this particular program.

In this particular case, the rebate house did refuse the rebate on proper grounds. However, we will contact the rebate house and approve Elise's rebate, and yours as well. We often do that for customers who contact us and believe that they were denied incorrectly. We look into individual cases and make approvals where the facts support it.

Thanks again for giving us the opportunity to respond. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us.

Kind regards, John @ BFG

Hi John,

Thank you for your quick response and also for fixing the problem.

In an effort to resolve why it became a problem in the first place, I made a trip to the Anaheim Fry's Electronics store. I asked to speak to the person in charge of dealing with rebates. The woman that responded to that request was pleasant enough, but not very helpful. I asked why Fry's was having their checkout clerks tell customers that the "Rebate Receipt" is the same as the full sales receipt for rebate purposes. Her response was:

"Well, sometimes it is and sometimes it's not." The discussion lasted several minutes. It bogged down into questions of semantics, perception, lack of explicit wording, and responsibility. Her rebuttal to your assertion that it is a "Rebate Form/Receipt" was that if you cut that form in two just above the line "Rebate Form:" you have a "Receipt" and a "Rebate Form." That to help the customer by not having multiple, small, separate documents that are more easily lost, or difficult to match up with the appropriate rebate form, they are printed together. That the "Proof of purchase requirements:" Section 3, says "a copy of your receipt," not "Sales Receipt," not "Full Sales Receipt," not "Rebate Receipt," just "Receipt." That obviously the "Rebate Receipt" is a receipt. I commented that the Fry's IT department controlled what is printed and how it is printed. That it would be trivial for them to better separate the two forms with a couple of extra blank lines, a line of asterisks, and a line that says "Cut here." That they could easily have changed Section 3 to explicitly state what kind of "Receipt" was required. That if printing the "Rebate Receipt" is supposed to be a courtesy to the customer, it would be trivial to have the computer print out a "Duplicate Sales Receipt" when that was required by the vendor. That if Fry's is going to the effort to provide this courtesy service at all, they should go the extra step, and endeavor to do it correctly, rather than in the current, confusing, fashion. I commented that Fry's apparently feels it is their responsibility to remind customers that they should make a copy of all documentation submitted for a rebate by handing out a yellow sheet with that warning, why not expand it to include a caution about the receipt problem.

Her response was in essence, I don't have any control over what the IT department does. I counted to ten, thanked her for her time and left. I hope this feedback helps you with future programs.

Sincerely,

Jim Sanders Editor, NOCCC Orange Bytes

On 7-23-05 we put on our best optimistic face and went to the http://www.rebatestatus.com website to see how well the rebate had been approved. We were hoping to see a message like: "The check is in the mail.," and lo and behold we did.

Pony Express or 4th Class, but in the mail.

Media Notes

by Bill Petitt

Southeast Virginia Computer Group

The first article is another case of big brother thinking he knows best for us. I'm not buying it. What do you think?

New York County to Require Secured Wi-Fi Nets

In a bold but somewhat misguided attempt to eliminate the dangers posed by open Wi-Fi networks, New York's Westchester County has proposed a requirement that all "commercial businesses" with an open wireless access point—such as most Wi-Fi hotspots—must have a "network gateway server" outfitted with a software or hardware firewall. Ostensibly, this is to protect data that sits on the same network, such as store credit records or other sensitive data, which certainly sounds like a good idea. But the reality is that the routers used by most Wi-Fi hotspots are not connected to computers used for the business end of things, rendering the law unnecessary. And on a practical basis, who is going to enforce such requirements? There are already laws on the books that protect the privacy of consumer data. How a business implements compliance with those laws should not be legislated on a technical level, when new technologies and new ways to hack into them pop up every day.

Hitting closer to home, the law would also require computers attached to Wi-Fi networks in people's private houses to be secured with a firewall. This would apply whether the Wi-Fi net was encrypted or not, subject to fines of $250 or $500. While we strongly urge all home Wi-Fi users to secure their networks, again this seems like an overly invasive and unenforceable law. Finally, public hotspots would be required to post a sign indicating that users' personal data is at risk when connecting at a hotspot. This last proposal is the one we can agree with.

Skype to make U.S. retail debut - Net telephone service Skype Technologies is set to make its first appearance in a U.S. retail store.

The Luxembourg-based Net telephony company, founded by the people behind the Kazaa peer-to-peer service, announced in mid-November that it has struck a partnership with consumer electronics chain RadioShack.

More than 3,000 RadioShack locations nationwide began offering the Skype Starter Kit, which includes the software that enables a customer to use Skype's free computer-to-computer telephone service, a headset and 30 minutes of Skype's premium service, with which a user can call a landline or cell phone, company executives said.

The move is an attempt by Skype, the world's largest provider of voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP, to introduce its service to mainstream America. Before this deal, U.S. consumers could only get Skype service by downloading the software from the Internet.

"Skype has grown rapidly among early adopters, and this partnership with RadioShack will bring Skype to the mass market," said Saul Klein, Skype's vice president of global marketing.

Since launching in 2002, Skype has rattled traditional telephone companies by offering free computer-to-computer VoIP calls and low-cost connectivity between computer and landline or mobile phones. While Skype can boast 66 million registered users and a growth rate of 180,000 new customers per day, the market is still in its infancy, and major conglomerates have begun venturing into the sector.

A tiny fraction of Americans use VoIP, and analysts have predicted that continued growth in the market may ignite a landgrab by large players.

Also, electronics kingpin Sony launched a free Web-based phone service designed to link users via their computer video cameras. Yahoo, America Online and others have long offered computer-to-computer phone services. Microsoft revealed plans earlier this month to offer Internet-to-telephone calling.

Skype's competitive position was bolstered in September when deep-pocketed eBay announced that it had agreed to acquire Skype for between $2.5 billion and $4 billion.

Besides growing competition, another obstacle Skype faces is entrenched consumer behavior, said Charles Golvin, a telecommunications analyst for Forrester Research.

"When consumers think of making phone calls, they look for their phone and not their PC," Golvin said. "I think moving into retail is a smart move by Skype. It removes one of the fundamental impediments to its business: It puts the necessary equipment into people's hands, and it helps to spread the word that free Web phone service exists."

Dual Core?

Here's a question I've been getting lately: I am looking at buying a new computer and am not sure if I should go with dual or single core. I use it mainly for media, office and statistics application. Should I go with the FX-55 or the 4800 dual core?

Is it that the dual core is the future or can I get the single core for the next three years?

Depending on how much you use it for statistics you might want the extra crunching power of the dual-core. But, hey, have you thought about 64 bit processing? Not knowing how fast either technology is going to progress doesn't make the decision easy. I already have 64 bit dual-core with XP 64bit. So, if you're trying to decide between Pentium or AMD, go dual-core 64 bit. You won't regret it.

Dual core CPUs are pretty expensive right now—the lowest priced seems to be the AMD X2 3800+ around $315. But you can save now and have it both ways.

A fair number of motherboards are dual core ready, but you can use a single core CPU until dual core CPU prices come way down. All you need is a motherboard with the 939 pin CPU socket that accepts both single core and dual core AMD CPUs. Intel dual CPUs require a different chip set than their single core CPUs—and why bother with Intel when AMD's Dual Core CPUs consistently outperform Intel's and cost less? Asus, for example, has about 10 motherboards that can accept both single and dual core CPUs. Go to: http://support.asus.com/cpusupport /cpusupport.aspx and search for a specific speed dual core CPU to get a list of all Asus motherboards that accept them as well as single core CPUs. If money is an issue, get a single core AMD64 CPU now and the dual core in a year or two when prices are more affordable.

Here's something for you to ponder—another question put to me by a customer:

Why don't printers last? My last printer, an Epson, didn't even last 2 years. I now have a Canon S750 printer, about 3 years old. I don't print high volumes, maybe 300 sheets per year, including some photos. I have been quite happy with it, but it has now stopped printing color correctly. Over the course of about 10 full color prints it went from perfect to streaky, then to hardly colored at all. It still prints just fine in black.

I ran through all of the maintenance tasks, including head alignments, deep cleaning etc., twice but to no avail. I renewed all 4 ink cartridges, but still no good. Am I right in thinking that my only remaining options are a new printhead, or a new printer?

As far as I can see printheads cost about 60% of the cost of a comparable new printer. so it hardly seems worth it.

Am I missing something? Is there anything else I can try?

By the way, I have tried to economize by not using Canon original ink cartridges. Is that likely to have caused my problem?

Probably—I always advise against 3rd party inks. With inkjet printers, the printers themselves are sold at a loss usually. Printer companies make it up on the back end with inflated cartridge prices. But the printers are still constructed pretty poorly most of the time, so they will break down. Usually the cheapest route is to just buy cheap printers, and then get a new one once the supplied ink runs out. Inkjet printers aren't worth getting attached to.

Windows Vista, HDCP and Digital Rights Management

Microsoft intends to support HD DVD and video on all its current operating systems and is building in Output Content Protection Management into Vista.

Part of the feature set of Microsoft's upcoming Windows Vista (né Longhorn) operating system is support for High-Definition (HD) content, either through television signals, HD or Blu-Ray DVDs, or Internet video. Along with this support though, is a new set of restrictions designed to ensure the sanctity of HD content and protect it from copying.

HDCP (High Definition Copy Protection) is a new method of encrypting the digital (DVI) signal between the origin of the signal (receiver) and the display device. The standard was developed for the home theatre market first, for the purpose of ensuring that digital HD content could not be successfully captured and copied between the HD receiver and the television set that displays the signal.

Microsoft, as you might imagine, intends to support HD DVD and video on all its current operating systems, especially the upcoming Windows Vista. To this end, the company is building support for HDCP into the operating system as part of its suite of DRM (Digital Rights Management) abilities called Output Content Protection Management (OCPM).

This fact has caused an outcry in the media and the computing community, since HDCP- enabled monitors will apparently be required to view High-Definition DVDs and other encoded content. This outcry is not necessarily justified, missing the facts that; a) there's no guaranteeing that HDCP is going to take off as a standard for high-definition copy protection, and; b) if it does, it's not just going to be Microsoft boxes that require HDCP monitors and TVs for full HD-DVD playback, it's going to be every new DVD player and cable/satellite receiver. Stand by, things are going to get interesting over the next year.

Sony launches free Internet phone service

Add Sony to the list of companies getting into the telephone business

The electronics giant launched a free Web-based phone service in November called Instant Video Everywhere, designed to link users of the service via their computers. According to an advertisement on Sony's Web site, the new service will ship with the company's latest version of Vaio BX laptops, which are equipped with built-in video cameras.

The move comes as traditional phone companies are losing their grip on services that were once theirs exclusively. In September, auction powerhouse eBay announced that it had agreed to pay $2.6 billion for Net telephone provider Skype, one of the premiere VoIP, or voice over Internet Protocol, companies. eBay said it plans to boost communications between buyers and sellers.

Yahoo, AOL and others also offer video-calling services similar to IVE. Video- phone services have long been touted by technology enthusiasts but have struggled to attract a mainstream audience. In June, Sony signaled that it might offer a consumer telephone offering, when it rolled out an IVE service aimed at businesses. Sony is working with Glowpoint, a Hillside, N.J.-based video-phone service provider known for its "All You Can See" unlimited video dialing plans and easy-to-use services, which include features such as live video operators and video-call mailboxes. Sony said it will also offer to connect IVE users to landlines and cell phones for a monthly fee of $9.95. Sony executives did not immediately return calls for comment.

How To Spot Fake Products On eBay

Fake items abound on eBay, and it takes much effort not to be duped by scammers who peddle these wares. There have been many painful stories relating to how a seemingly legitimate item turned out to be either fake or defective.
It is possible, however, to avoid these scams if you are careful and vigilant. Buyers should be wary of any purchase on eBay, and should take steps to ensure the authenticity of the item and to make sure the item is in reasonable condition.

------- Be Vigilant

You should take the initiative by doing plenty of background research. You must learn as much as possible about the products before bidding on them. If the seller provides pictures of an item, they should not be taken at face value. Comparison of these pictures with the real item helps in this regard.

Many sellers will use pictures from manufacturers that do not represent the item they are actually selling; you should ask the seller for actual pictures of the item. If the seller balks, you should refrain from bidding. Collector's items, autographed
memorabilia, and historical artifacts are common items that are misrepresented on eBay.

------- Authenticate

Familiarize yourself with the various bodies that certify respective items. For example, reputable merchants of autographed sports memorabilia should include a COA (certificate of authenticity) from a trusted third party. Counterfeit or misrepresented items should be reported to eBay. When buying on eBay Motors, you may have an inspection service double-check if the seller is accurately representing his automobile.

------- Look at the Feedback

Analyzing feedback is another helpful exercise to prevent scams. Sellers who have an established history of credible sales are usually helpful and professional to deal with. Negative feedback should be a red flag as to whether you should pursue a trade with the person. The same thing applies for those who do not have feedback ratings at all.

You must be careful however, since it is possible that a scammer has hijacked an account that has positive feedback.

You should also make sure they have read the entire product description on its eBay listing. Things to look out for are disclaimers, damages, current item condition, years of use, and others. If this information is not specified, you should contact the seller for clarification.

-------- The Price Theory

Yes. you've heard the expression many times, but it is worth remembering that if the price for an item is too good to be true, it probably is. Auctions that carry outrageously low prices should be taken skeptically.

Now for something in a lighter mood

Wi-Fi mosquito killer coming to a porch near you—A biotechnology company with a specialty in killing mosquitoes is turning to wireless technology and computers to make a killing for itself.

American Biophysics, a small private company based in North Kingstown, R.I., runs a healthy business selling the "Mosquito Magnet," a system to rid American backyards of biting insects, according to its new CEO Devin Hosea.

Simply described, the magnet emits a humanlike scent that includes carbon dioxide and moisture to attract blood-sucking insects. When the bugs flutter past, they're sucked into and suffocated by a vacuum like device.

Now AmBio, as the company is commonly called, is upping the ante with a "smart" mosquito net, or computerized defense system, to serve the corporate and public health sectors. By the first quarter of 2006, AmBio executives hope to have finalized sophisticated software to control a network of magnets—forming a kind of wide-scale fence—which will be able to communicate with a central network through wireless 802.11b tech-nology.

That way, the system will be able to efficiently ward off bugs from golf courses and resorts, or even help mitigate cases of malaria in third world countries, according to Hosea.

"We got the idea from institutions that were jury-rigging our technology to computer networks and mesh networks, with PC panels, to see how many mosquitoes they'd caught or how much propane they had left...It's unbelievable the lengths people will go to, to get rid of mosquitoes," said Hosea, a former National Science Foundation Fellow in artificial intelligence.

"We've meshed a great mosquito-catching machine with a computer technology on top of it, and wireless network technology on top of that, and then turned it into a great defensive shield against mosquitoes coming into your habi-tat," he said.

This week, AmBio received a cash infusion of $15 million to commercialize the planned corporate product. Investors led by Chicago- based Ritchie Capital Management, an early backer of the biotech company, participated in a series B round of funding in 7-year-old AmBio. Hosea, who is manag-

ing director of Ritchie Capital's Biotechnology Venture Group and former president of Internet software company Predictive Networks, was also named AmBio's president and CEO this week.

Mosquito-catching has long been part of a thriving market for gizmos. People living in bug-bite climates like Atlanta and Boston have relied on everything from spray repellants and rolled-up newspapers to netting barriers and devices like the bug-sucking Bugzooka.

Aside from the pest factor, mosquitoes can carry diseases like the West Nile virus in the U.S. and malaria in developing nations. Malaria is one of the largest killers outside developed countries, and as many as 90 percent of malaria victims contract the illness from infected mosquitoes.

AmBio spends about $5 million to $10 million annually on research for new attractants that will lure new species of biting insects into its traps, including female mosquitoes (the ones that bite), and sand flies.

Its current, odorless formula combines carbon dioxide, moisture, heat and a short-range attractant called octenol. Each magnet, powered 24 hours a day by a standard 20-pound propane tank, or a combination of propane and electricity supplied through a low-voltage (12-volt) power cord, has a 100-yard range for drawing bugs.

The main device is basically a vacuum cleaner that sucks insects in and dehydrates them until they die "a horrible death," Hosea said. "So far we don't know of any mosquito rights group, so it's totally PC to kill as many as you want." (Non-bloodsucking bugs, such as butterflies and beetles, are not attracted.)

The Mosquito Magnet currently has roughly 65 percent of the antibug market, according to the company.

The coming smart magnet system harkens back to the early days of networked PCs, Hosea said, when people came up with the idea of "LAN-tastic," for a local-area network or a ring of network connectivity.

AmBio plans to create an electronic self-diagnosing network of magnets all communicating with one another through the 802.11b wireless standard. Centralized servers in the middle of the network, or what AmBio's chief technology officer calls "brain machines," will record and analyze data transmitted from the computerized magnets on air quality, humidity, wind direction and pollutants. The data is transmitted to AmBio and its client for remote administration.

If it's raining on a magnet-wired golf course, for example, the system will shut down to save power and propane. If the wind is coming out of the north, the south line magnets will shut down and let the mosquitoes blow by.

AmBio has already set up a beta test of the system at a house in Key West, Fla., where mosquitoes thrive. "It's a phenomenally nasty place in terms of bugs," Hosea said. The house is on two acres surrounded with the magnets.

Next year, the company plans to test its system at the refugee camp Trat Camp in southeast Thailand on the border of Cambodia. The camp houses roughly 15,000 refugees, but the population drops annually by 500 to 600 people because of malaria. The project will be funded by money from the United Nations.

But will it work?

Gilbert Waldbauer, professor emeritus of entomology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and author of "Insights From Insects: What Bad Bugs Can Teach Us," said that despite advances in bait-traps like the Mosquito Magnet, attempts to control adult mosquitoes have largely been futile.

Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water like golf-course ponds or within swampy regions. One pond can produce enough adult mosquitoes to scatter over five square miles during breeding time, Waldbauer said.

"The way to control mosquitoes is to go to these ponds and float a harmless oil," that will suffocate the larvae when they come up for air, he said. "It seems like an awful lot of trouble and expense to do otherwise."

"Think of this as a war, and the enemy has a really good cannon," Waldbauer said. "You have to attack where they're loading artillery."

Ram & Reason:
A Virus and Incident Checklist

by Rob Rice
Computer Club of Oklahoma City

Much has been said about virus and malicious software prevention, but what if all of your precautions fail? So there you are, happily clicking along the Internet when suddenly a popup ad obstructs your view. You start to close it and then another and then another pops up so that in just a few seconds there are so many pop-up ads that you cannot possibly close them all as they just keep coming. So what do you? Delete them as fast as you can in hopes that they will stop? Turn off the computer? Suddenly a program appears from nowhere and informs you that you have been infected with a trojan virus and the program needs to scan your system so that the trojan can be removed. The problem is that you do not remember ever having installed this program. Do you trust it?

There are some industry-accepted procedures for dealing with this type of incident and any virus or trojan infection. Just follow these five simple steps in the following order to minimize damage:

1. Do not turn off your computer unless you are certain that your files are being actively deleted!
2. Disconnect the network cable from your computer and/or turn off your wireless connection.
3. Write down any error messages and the names of any programs or software that was running at the time the infection occurred.
4. Mark the computer "Do Not Use."
5. Run any of your applications that you are certain are yours and that might have opened identifying a virus attack. Next, run your antivirus, anti-trojan tools.

Step One:
Do not turn off your computer. Not every trojan and virus is the same so this rule will have exceptions, but generally you do not want to turn off the computer unless you can see that the virus is deleting your files. If you think that it can be stopped from deleting your files without turning off the computer, then this is a better option than turning off the computer. The reason is that while turning the computer off will temporarily stop the damage more harm can come when

you turn the computer back on. System files can be infected when loading, boot sectors contaminated, hard drive partitions erased, registries corrupted. For example, on a Windows system every time you make a major system change one of the first things that it wants you to do is reboot, "To allow the changes to take affect." In the case of a virus or trojan, the last thing we want to do is to allow the changes to take affect.

Step Two:

Disconnect the network cable from your computer and/or turn off your wireless connection. Trojans are designed to open a door and let other trojans, spyware, and viruses in. Physically disconnecting its link to the Internet stops this behavior, prevents your personnel information from going out and prevents other machines from being infected. Many checklists have this action rated number one and for good reasons. I rate it here as step two because step one is simply a quick decision that can have a significant impact on the recovery outcome.

Step Three:

Write down any error messages that appear and the names of any programs or software that was running at the time the infection occurred. This is important not only for repairing the system but also for identifying which alerts are real and which ones are bogus. Error messages that contain misspellings and poor grammar are likely bogus and generated by the virus.

Step Four:

Mark the computer "Do Not Use." This is in case you get called away and have to leave the system alone for any length of time.

Step Five:

Run any of your applications that you are certain are yours and that might have opened to identify a virus attack. Next, run your antivirus anti-trojan tools.

It's possible that your antivirus or anti-trojan software may have detected the attack and started running a system scan or is prompting you and waiting for instructions. If you are certain that it is your software then let it do what it wants to do and let it clean the system. If you have any doubts as to whether the program is in fact one of your programs then *do not run the software!*

Some trojans actually install and run a program pretending to be antivirus/anti-trojan software and scan your system all the while claiming to be cleaning your computer. In reality it is part of the trojan. Some of these programs look very commercial and very polished so be careful!

Rob Rice is a computer specialist working in Anchorage, Alaska. Rob can be contacted at articles@isp.com

What is Podcasting?

by Sharon Housley
Tampa Bay Computer Society

Podcasting is quickly becoming a buzz word among the techie crowd. So what is podcasting, anyway? Podcasting is online audio content that is delivered via an RSS feed. Many people liken podcasting to radio on demand. However, in reality, podcasting gives far more options in terms of content and programming than radio does. In addition, with Podcasting, listeners can determine the time and the place, meaning they decide what programming they want to receive and when they want to listen to it.

Listeners can retain audio archives to listen to at their leisure. While blogs have turned many bloggers into journalists, podcasting has the potential to turn podcasters into radio personalities.

Podcasting can be used for:
- Self-Guided Walking Tours – Informational content.
- Music – Band promotional clips and interviews.
- Talk Shows – Industry or organizational news, investor news, sportscasts, news coverage and commentaries.
- Training – Instructional informational materials.
- Story – Story telling for children or the visually-impaired.

Podcasting is the syndication of audio files using RSS. Podcasting works the same as a standard RSS feed reader or news aggregator, the only difference is that the feed you subscribe to contains an audio file in it. Instead of reading content in your RSS feed reader or aggregator, you can listen to the contents of your feed using a reader or aggregator that supports podcasting, or you can listen to them on an iPod or similar device. While podcasting was named for the iPod, you do not have to have an iPod to listen to a podcast. Podcasts can be displayed on websites with clickable links to audio files and many of the standard RSS readers, like FeedDemon's latest beta, have begun supporting audio enclosures.

The audio file that makes the feed a podcast rather than a standard RSS feed is contained in the 'enclosure' tag. The easiest way to think of this is as an e-mail attachment.

Although the "enclosure" tag is not new to RSS feeds and has been included in the RSS v2.0 specification for about four years, podcasting has only really been around since August of 2004.

Webmasters are finding creative ways to provide media-rich content. The syndication aspect and potential increase in audience size are an attractive lure. Listeners benefit from podcasting because, like RSS, podcasting is a means to publish content that ultimately gives the recipient the control over the information they want to see or hear.

It will be interesting to see how this publishing medium develops. Currently, only the technical crowd has endorsed podcasting as a new audio medium, but the potential is real and the process is not overly complex. With a little time I think this field will develop and prosper.

Podcasting Resources

Podcasting Tools	http://www.podcasting-tools.com
Podcast Alley	http://www.podcastalley.com
PodcastBunker	http://www.podcastbunker.com
Podcasting News	http://www.podcastingnews.com

Sharon Housley manages marketing for FeedForAll http://www.feedforall.com software for creating, editing, publishing RSS feeds and podcasts. In addition Sharon manages marketing for NotePage http://www.notepage.net a wireless text messaging software company.

From the December 2004 issue of Bits and Bytes, the newsletter of the Tampa Bay Computer Society.

Planning Meeting Notes

December 6, 2005
by John McMillan

It was a dark and dreary night, the first Tuesday of the month and the kind of overcast day that December so often has to offer when the sun is down from the southern sky before 5 o'clock, not exactly stormy though, as only the occasional lazy snowflake descended from the heavens to the warm embracing ground where it quickly changed to a tiny puddle instead of joining others in a bright white frost, or worse, a treacherous icy coating that covered the roads and threatened the the life and limb of many a tree. Except for Ron Matteson,the usual gang had gathered at Sally's house to discuss future plans for the Rochester Computer society

This planning meeting has been moved to the first Tuesday of the month so it was the groups second consecutive meeting since the November club meeting. As a result, discussion of the last society meeting was bypassed. Arpad mentioned that he will not be in town for meetings slated in January.

The December society meeting is scheduled for the thirteenth at the Penfield Library. Arpad reported progress on the computer related Jeopardy game planned for that meeting. This led to a discussion of time allocation and it was decided to limit Jeopardy and Double Jeopardy to twenty five minutes each, thereby keeping the presentation to about an hour. If the topics do not take that long, the game will move right along. with door prizes to be drawn after the awarding of prizes.

Bob was not able to reserve a room in the new Pittsford Library and the Brighton Library is not available for January 10th, so other possibilities will be explored. The speaker will be John McMillan discussing the use of Sound Bytes Forums. Bob stated that RCS also has a forum which could be mentioned at that time.

Ron had reported by e-mail that the Smart Computing Group confirmed their return for the April meeting. Sally received a phone call from a member asking about transferring images from a camcorder to a CD. She thought this might be a possible topic for a future presentation. Linux and Build Your Own Computer are also being considered as possible topics for future meetings.

Steve reported that the treasury was down but many memberships expire in December or January plus he knew of another possible advertiser for the Monitor. He had purchased 2 fresh ink cartridges for Monitor printing and Arpad mentioned pricing a third printer to further reduce the printing time. The printing team reported a near record time for completing the December *Monitor*, having finished by 2 pm The December issue was hand stapled because there is still a problem with the stapling machine.

Arpad used his laptop to demonstrate how the game would work. Some of the questions and answers were not working as expected so Sally's desktop machine was used to display the original slides.

Helps Half Hour

Led by: Ron Matteson
Recorded by Jan Rothfuss

Q: A member has a new Dell notebook. When she uses the DVD player, it seems to skip. The support line had no answer.

A: You may need to check the drivers for the hardware that is on the machine. Even though it is new, there might be updates. Sound card and video card would be important. It was suggested that she generate an email with the items numbers and they should send back the links where the most current drivers can be found.

Q: One member uses a JumpDrive. But when trying to open a Word Perfect item, she gets a dialog box that asks some weird questions.

A: Perhaps you might need to reload/install the software. Could also try opening two Explorer windows, setting up one as an "E" drive (the other will be "C"). Then drag and drop the items between the two locations. They should then be able to copy them over.

Q: One member had a question about interference with their cordless phone.

A: The basic wireless signal is not very strong. You can check the strength of the wireless signal. If it is less than "High", you may have an issue. Interference can also be caused by walls.

Q: A member has installed UBUNTU (Linux). However, when he runs it, the video display at only 640 X 480.

A: One of the weaknesses of Linux is that some drivers are not available. He needs to go to the Linux website and locate the make/model that he has. Then download the driver that they need. Try 'googling' it with the model and word Linux.

Business:

Planning meeting the first Tuesday
New program chair is still needed.
Be sure to volunteer to run Help's Half Hour.
Next month in Penfield: John McMillan will speak on the Soundbytes and RCS Forums
Asked for suggestions for future programs.
Arpad described the rules for tonight's Jeopardy program. There were some great prizes for winning the game or general door prizes. Members could put in their tickets to be drawn to play the game or special door prizes.

The Lighter Side

Tech: "I have put this Movie Magic screen- saver on for you."
Manager: "Wow, that's a nice picture."
Tech: "Yeah, it's not bad, is it?"
Manager: "Can you set the screen-saver so the picture doesn't change?"
Tech: "Huh?"
Manager: "You know, so the same picture stays there while we work?"
Tech: "Oh! You want this as the wallpaper?"
Manager: (angrily) "No! I don't want you to start decorating the office!"