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Google Releases Updated Version of "Google Earth"

by Ira Wilsker

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It has been nearly two years since I first (and last) discussed Google Earth in this column. In the ensuing time since the last review, Google has been busy updating and improving the product, adding new features, and improving the graphics. For those who may not be aware, Google Earth is a program that allows the immense Google database of terrestrial and satellite images of the earth, along with amazing images of space, to be utilized and manipulated on the computer.

What is new and improved in the recently released Google Earth 4.3 (beta) is demonstrated in an interactive video tour online at earth.google.com /tour .html. One of the new features in version 4.3 include what Google calls "Photo-realistic Buildings", where hundreds of buildings in many of the world's major cities are shown in three dimensions (3D). If a building that is displayed "turns purple" when cursoring over it, clicking anywhere on the building will open up a smaller window giving details of the building, and the moniker of the person who created or updated the digital image. The images displayed can be manipulated to zoom in or around them from any angle, effectively creating a dynamic 360 degree panoramic view. These 3D views are not just of cities and buildings, but there are also spectacular images of natural beauties such as mountains, rivers, waterfalls, and canyons. Another new feature on this version is what Google calls "Swoop Navigation" where the user can virtually "Fly seamlessly through the landscape with new navigation controls. Swoop from outer space to street level and leap from one building top to another. Use the look joystick to view buildings as if you were standing right in front of them."

Another aspect of the new version is the "Light and Shadow" feature where many of the images can be shown in selected or sequential times of the day,

such as displaying a mountain top from sunrise to sunset. On the top of the screen is an optional slider which can be moved with the mouse to display the simulated or realistic image at any chosen time. In some of the more scenic images it appears to show the path of the sun across the sky with the corresponding light and shadows. The new and improved "Street View" that has been previously available online with Google Maps (maps.google.com) is now integrated into Google earth. Google has a fleet of vehicles which cruise major cities taking high resolution 360 degree digital photos as they drive down the streets. With "Street View" the user can virtually visit a city and virtually walk or drive the streets using the mouse instead of a vehicle. Views are literally from the street level showing cars, people, store fronts, intersections, and any other features visible from street level. Using the mouse, the user can cruise the streets just as if he was navigating the city for real. While not yet available for every city, a camera icon, when displayed on a map, will zoom in to a 360 degree panoramic image from street level. Many street level images contain additional camera icons which allow the user to travel seamlessly up a selected street, and the mouse can be used to turn in any direction.

The popular features that were in earlier versions of Google Earth have been retained. One that I periodically use is the "Directions" feature, which does not just give traditional driving directions and maps, but also animates the drive by clicking on the play button at the bottom of the driving directions listing. When animated, a detailed sequential zoomed-in satellite image is displayed, with the directions overlaid on the image. For example, when I requested driving directions from the Examiner offices on Willow Street in Beaumont, to the Bush Airport (IAH) in Houston, the seamless animation in Google Earth showed the street images including real pictures of the highway showing which lane to be in, detailed images of each turn or exit, and high resolution images of the airport. The images are actual photographs, not computer generated images. By seeing the route in exquisite detail prior to a journey may help ease the anxieties of the drive.

Once at a destination, it may be helpful to find nearby "points of interest", such as restaurants. By simply entering the word "restaurants" in the "What?" box, and the current address in the "Where?" box, restaurants will be displayed on the Google map. By clicking on the icon displayed for each restaurant, details will be displayed for the selected restaurant in a window overlay. Typical information displayed included the name, address, phone, a hyperlink (if any) to the restaurant website, any reviews that may be available and driving directions "to" and "from" the restaurant.

Google Earth does not just provide maps and images of terrestrial and earthly locations, but also includes celestial maps and images. Clicking on the Saturn-looking icon on the top of the screen will open a "Search the Sky" search box. By entering a celestial body or location, such as "Mars," Google Earth will display a sky map with an image of the heavenly body, and also display the current geometric coordinates for those using sophisticated telescopes.

The basic version of Google Earth 4.3 (beta) is a free download from earth.google.com. For those desiring more features, Google offers Google Earth Plus for $20, which adds support for a variety of GPS devices (verified support for Magellan and Garmin GPS devices, but can not upload to those devices), improved network performance, and improved high resolution printing. For professional and commercial use Google offers the Pro version for $400.

Google Earth is a fascinating utility, and will run on Windows 2000 or XP (Vista is not mentioned), and requires a minimum of 400MB hard drive space, and a video card capable of 1024x768 resolution with a 16bit color depth. An internet connection of at least 128Kb/sec is required. I suggest that readers of this column at least download the free version of Google Earth and simply play with it. Click on the icons at the top of the page, and check and uncheck some of the boxes on the left margin, and experiment with it; do not worry, you can not hurt anything by experimenting with it. Google Earth is one of my favorite "fun" programs.

Websites:

http://earth.google.com

http://earth.google.com/download-earth.html–FREE Version

http://earth.google.com/tour.html

http://earth.google.com/enterprise/earth_plus

.html–$20 Plus Version

http://earth.google.com/enterprise/earth_
pro.html–$400 Pro Version

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Looking for an Old Program or Version of DOS?

W e've become accustomed to upgrading our software on a regular basis. The developer may push out a new update automatically. Or, you may be forced to upgrade due to security flaws.

Unfortunately, new versions can be disappointing. Maybe your favorite feature has been changed or eliminated. Or maybe you just feel nostalgic for an earlier version's design.

Well, if you're looking for an old version of a Web browser, instant messenger or other program, there's hope. Visit my site for a link to a huge collection of free abandonware. You'll find old versions of operating systems, to word processing programs, to games. Abandonware is software that has been abandoned by the manufacturer. But maybe you can give it a good home on your computer!

http://www.komando.com/downloads/category
.aspx?id=4811

From Kim Komando's 4/26/08 newsletter.

From The DealsGuy

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

Friends Helping Friends!

A friend uses his computer a lot, but doesn't belong to any computer organization. I gave him a couple of PC Magazines I had read and he enjoyed them enough that he subscribed. He mentioned that he had a problem with his laptop not connecting to the router and I told him about the tech support included with the PC Magazine subscription he had just purchased. He called them and they helped him fix the problem quickly. His words later were "Boy; I've already gotten my subscription money back in just one day."

Eat Or Be Eaten

I saw where EMC will acquire Iomega. Although it is taking much longer than he said, Ralph Nader said years ago that in 20 years most of the business in the US will be controlled by 20 or so large corporations, and it looks like that prediction is gradually taking place. Small startups that have a unique product are quickly scooped up by the big guys who also buy their competition to close it down. That's certainly a good way for a smart programmer to become a millionaire; just come up with a great idea that works. As for being bought up, foreign countries will soon own the US by repossessing us if we keep borrowing money from them.

The items below are announcements I received, but I have necessarily edited the wording. I have not tried any of the products.

Free Tutoring for the Uninformed

Output I/S has launched HTML.net, a free HTML and CSS tutorial site that makes it easy to learn how to design and develop web sites. In about an hour, novice computer users can learn the essential information needed to build a web site using nothing more than an ordinary text editor. The Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) tutorial begins with the basics and introduces you to links, images and tables. You'll learn how to develop a site that can be viewed by all web browsers on all platforms. There are tips and tricks to make your web site attractive, fast loading, and effective.

The Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) tutorial teaches you to separate your web site content from your design, enabling you to quickly change the look and feel of your web site. CSS-based web sites improve your search engine rankings by making it easier for search engines to find and index your content. CSS is slowly replacing table-based HTML as the design tool of choice. The HTML.net tutorials are available 24/7, without charge. Tutorials are in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, Chinese, and more.

For more information, visit <http://www.html.net/>, or contact Output I/S, Kaj Munks Vej 10, 3.th, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark. Phone: (+45) 5194 5001. E-mail: <info@output.dk>.

Free Screensaver

DealsGuy note: I am always suspicious of screen-savers and I don't even use them myself, but my proofreader found some decent reviews of the companion game from the same author, so this screen-saver is probably OK..

A sweet and adorable fairy soars across a beautiful fantasy landscape.áAlong the way, she uses dazzling spells to defend herself against evil goblins and blazing firebirds.áThis delightful visual feast is the free Feyruna Fairy Forest screensaver from Jochen Kaercher Gamedesign, creator of premium games for casual players.

Fairy Forest screensaver includes the option to turn on atmospheric music and sound effects.áAs viewers listen to the soothing audio, they're treated to smoothly animated scenes featuring the other-worldly artwork of Feyruna Fairy Forest, a casual game created by Jochen Kaercher Gamedesign. Visit <http://www.feyruna.com> to download the 13 MB installation file and begin enjoying the free Feyruna Fairy Forest screensaver. Windows 95 or later is required.

Jochen Kaercher is an experienced game developer based in Germany.áAfter launching his company in 1999, he created several freeware and shareware offerings for the PC. Kaercher is now developing more ambitious titles aimed at casual gamers. All offerings can be downloaded from <www.jochenkaercher .com>.

Free USB Protection

A.C. Element Company has made available the free version of MyUSBOnly for individual users. MyUSBOnly Free 2007 is a Windows security application that prevents data theft through your computer's USB ports. While USB ports have made computing much more convenient, they also introduce a security threat that could subject many computer users to identity theft and data theft. MyUSBOnly thwarts attempts to gain access to your computer via your USB ports.

New features for MyUSBOnly Free 2007 are: Syslog entries for copied, modified, deleted files /folders and firewall-like feature to allow/deny inserted USB devices

It acts as something similar to a firewall that monitors the USB ports for any storage device

connected to the protected computer. Simply create a whitelist of all of the USB devices you want to allow on your computer. The program will recognize each of your flash drives, external disk drives, MP3 players, and other USB devices and add them to its list of accepted hardware once they are authorized by the user. When your list is complete, the software will then check the whitelist of allowed devices by USB brand (if you want to allow a certain USB brand) or by serial number (for specific USB devices you want to allow) depending on the settings desired by the user.

The software also has reporting features, such as e-mail notifications, each time somebody attaches a USB device to your desktop or laptop. MyUSBOnly also maintains a security log of all attempts to gain access to your computer via USB flash drives, iPods, card-readers, or any USB hardware. Modified and copied files are now included in the log entries and can be configured to send all log information to syslog. Use syslog viewers such as Kiwi Syslog Daemon TM to view all the log entries from one or more computers in the network, allowing administrators to be able to manage and audit security.

There is an option to hide the software from the user, by not displaying any tray icons at all, so it silently works in the background without the user even knowing it's there. MyUSBOnly makes it easy to lock down your USB ports to protect this critical vulnerability on your desktop or laptop.

MyUSBOnly runs under Windows 2000/XP/2003 /Vista/Server 2008, Download the software from our website <http://www.myusbonly.com/usb /free.php>. DealsGuy note: My proofreader noted some contra-dictions in the Web site information so look closely and clarify what you don't understand by trying the trial version before buying.

Like Jigsaw Puzzles?

Try This One! They claim, "It is even possible to see and feel the cardboard thickness," but I am skeptical about feeling the cardboard thickness on the screen.

Gaia Dream Creation Inc. released its new 3D jigsaw puzzle game, and a puzzle screensaver named "Gaia 3D Puzzle" and "Gaia 3D Puzzle Screensaver." This 3D jigsaw puzzle game allows players to play jigsaw puzzles on their computer by selecting their

favorite images and the number of pieces. The 3D view creates a totally immersive playing experience like a real puzzle game.

Gaia 3D Puzzle allows players to play with almost any images found on the Internet. Unlike other computer puzzle games, Gaia 3D Puzzle is in 3D. Players can see their puzzle as a real jigsaw puzzle and the pieces are as real as true jigsaw pieces. The pieces are not pre-cut image shapes. They are generated from advanced mathematic procedures to show the exact look and feel of true jigsaw pieces. It is even possible to see and feel the cardboard thickness. Players are able to play puzzles from 9 to 2000 pieces. Children can play and enjoy the same puzzles that adults play, but with less pieces.

A selection of 4 different piece shapes is available which increases or decreases the difficulty level. It's also possible to modify the degree of distortion in the pieces, meaning the pieces can all look the same, which is harder to play, or all look different, which is easier to play.

The puzzle game and screensaver are available in English and French for Windows 2000/XP/Vista. The puzzle game (Gaia 3D Puzzle) is $29.95 USD and the screensaver (Gaia 3D Puzzle Screensaver) is $14.95 USD. 20% is offered to DealsGuy readers with coupon code GAIA-XAKB-USAV. This code is valid until June 30th, 2008. You must download the trail version to make sure it works well on your system and that you are satisfied, then follow the URL in the product to pay using the discount code.

Website: <http://www.gaiadreamcreation.com/games/gaia-3d- puzzle/>

Screensaver: <http://www.gaiadreamcreation .com/screensavers/gaia-3d-puzzle-screensaver/>

That's it for this month. I'll soon have some new product announcements on my Web site. Meet me here again next month if your editor permits. 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>.
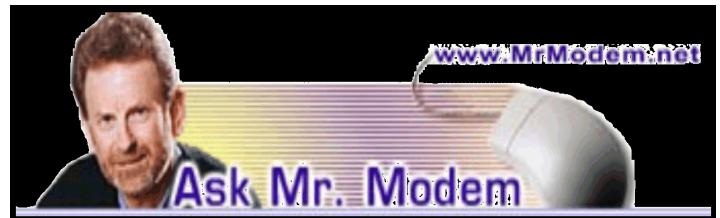
The Mouse in Your House: Laser or Optical?

Q. When I attempt to enter some sites, I have to type some weird numbers or words that appear in a box. The letters and numbers are so difficult to read, it usually takes me about three attempts before I get it right. I know it's for security, but how does typing in those numbers actually help anything?

A. Those characters appear as an image, rather than plain text, in order to prevent what are called spam-bots (robotic programs), using a computer script, from copying and pasting those characters into the fill-in form.

The numbers are distorted to prevent optical-character recognition software from reading them. Only the human eye can decipher the characters, thus ensuring that the site or service is only accessed by human beans (homosapiens legumous), not robotic programs. Some sites offer an audio link that "speaks" the characters, which can then be typed into the form. The theory is the same, though, that only humans will be able to listen to the audio and type in the numbers correctly.

Q. I was mouse shopping the other day and looked at both a laser mouse and an optical mouse. I bought the laser mouse, but now I'm not sure if I bought the right thing, so I'm turning to you, Mr. M: What's the difference between an optical mouse and a laser mouse, and is one better than the other?

A. The difference between an optical mouse and a laser mouse is the light used to track movement. An optical mouse uses an LED (light-emitting diode), while a laser mouse uses a—care to venture a guess? That's right, a laser. The more dots per inch (dpi) a mouse can track, the more sensitive and accurate it is. A typical optical mouse tracks between 400 and 800 dpi, while laser mice track more than 2,000 dpi.

Neither is really better; it all depends on your needs and preferences. Unless you're a gamer or a graphic artist with a need for super-precise movement, you'll probably find a 2,000 dpi laser mouse

overly sensitive, but that's the primary difference. An optical mouse would have served your purposes very well, but you didn't purchase the "wrong" mouse unless you find its sensitivity to be excessive. Many gaming mice (lasers) allow sensitivity adjustments so you can have precision when you need it, but can revert to 400 dpi or 800 dpi for regular mousing activities. Check the documentation or Help files in conjunction with your laser mouse to determine if you have that capability.

Besides tracking speeds, laser mice work on nearly every surface, where optical mice may occasionally experience difficulty tracking on black or shiny surfaces. I use an optical mouse, but have never had a problem using it on any surface.

Mr. Modem's DME (Don't Miss 'Em) Sites of the Month

Eli Stein Cartoons

For more than 50 years, Eli Stein cartoons have graced the pages of many prestigious publications, including *The Wall Street Journal, The National Law Journal, Barron's, Better Homes and Gardens, Good Housekeeping, The Saturday Evening Post, King Features Syndicate, Modern Maturity, National Enquirer, Woman's World*, and *National Review*, just to name-drop a few. Cartoons are categorized by decade (beginning in the 1950's), publication, or topic. And if the brilliance of his cartoons isn't enough, Mr. Stein's insightful, humorous comments and recollections accompany many of his works. www.elisteincartoons.com

OR Live

This site was launched approximately eight years ago as a way for physicians and surgeons to bone up on new techniques by logging on to watch their peers perform various surgeries. Recently, the site has been attracting many patients who, understandably, are also curious about procedures. Categories of surgeries include Cardiovascular, OB-GYN, Orthopedics, Pediatrics, and other specialties. Most videos require RealPlayer, but you'll be prompted if your system is lacking the necessary program to view a given procedure. www.or-live.com

Pets on the Go

Do you like to travel with your pet? If so, this site is the definitive guide for information and links to more than 30,000 pet-friendly hotels, inns, B&Bs, and private rentals. The "Tips for Trips" section provides some great information if you're planning to fly with Fido, cruise with Kitty, or surf with Sushi. (Okay, okay, I couldn't think of anything else.) http://petsonthego.com

Mr. Modem's weekly newsletter delivers helpful computer tips, great Web sites and his personal answers to your questions! Trial offer: Subscribe online using Promo Code 1146 and receive one free month with your 6-month subscription (28 issues!) To view a sample issue or subscribe, visit www .MrModem.com.

Scotty, I Need More Power!

by Alan Mildwurm
President, Diablo Valley PC Group, CA

When my kids were young, I bought batteries by the bushel. All of their toys required some batteries. The phrase "batteries not included" raised almost as much terror as "some assembly required." I still recall going out one Xmas morning in search of "C" size batteries because we missed the warning on the box. (7-11). One very cool pool toy took 16 batteries—in 3 sizes.

In those days, rechargeable batteries were garbage. Most rechargeables were nickel-cadmium and with a memory that made them useless after a few charges. Shelf life was a joke and power output dismal. For several years, I bought throw away alkaline batteries at Costco because they were cheaper than those clever bunny batteries. Not environmentally friendly, but definitely kid toy friendly. As the kids grew up, their needs for batteries diminished (actually they now buy their own), but my need for batteries is increasing. Wireless keyboards, wireless mice, gps, wireless game controllers (the Wii-mote takes 4 batteries per controller and there are 4 controllers), iPod external power units, camera accessories and on and on. I am going through more batteries now with my toys than I ever did with the kids! Luckily, rechargeable battery technology has come a long way.

Sanyo produces the **eneloop** (www.eneloop.info <http://www.eneloop .info/>). According to their spec sheet, the AA battery is rated at 1.2 volts and 2000 mAh. Not bad for a rechargeable. (A disposable usually is 1.5 volts.)

There are two sizes of eneloop batteries, AA and AAA. They also produce C and D size cylinders in which you insert AA batteries.

From their site:

eneloop is a totally new type of battery, which satisfies in a unique way the needs and expectations of the consumers. Consumers would like to have a battery, which can be used right after the purchase

has a high performance

has a long shelf life with no loss of energy

can be used everywhere

is cheap in purchase and usage

is environmental friendly

is easy to use

So far these requirements could not be satisfied by a single type of batteries. The consumer had the choice between disposable batteries or rechargeable batteries. Disposable batteries have several advantages:

they can be used immediately

they have a long shelf life with low loss of energy

they are rather cheap in purchase

they are easy to use and no charger is required

These advantages of disposable batteries however, had to be seen alongside several clear disadvantages:

can be used only once and therefore mean substantial waste and risk for the environment.

have to be purchased over and over again and are therefore expensive considering the life-time of your equipment.

are not quite powerful enough in certain applications (like digital cameras)

are being offered in many varieties and special application-specific types, which confuses the consumer.

The classical advantages of rechargeable batteries are:

high performance, especially if high discharge currents are required (like in digital cameras)

cheap in use, because they can be recharged many times.

environmental friendly, because one rechargeable battery replaces 1000 disposable batteries.

good performance at low temperatures.

Given these advantages, rechargeable batteries also have some disadvantages, which made consumers reluctant to exchange disposable batteries by rechargeable batteries:

After purchase, rechargeable batteries have to be charged before they can be used.

Rechargeable batteries lose the stored energy rather fast.

The state of charge is hard to determine.

Continuous charging or frequent charge (without complete discharge) can destroy the battery.

Proper charging is complicated for an average consumer

The charging takes quite long and rapid chargers are expensive.

All these negative attributes have one root-cause: *self discharge*.

Self-discharge means, that a charged battery slowly discharges itself without any equipment consuming any current. This is the reason for rechargeable batteries being sold in discharged state. And this is the reason for that keeping charged batteries for some time did not make any sense. When you needed then, the energy was gone.

How was the self-discharge reduced? (For you techy folks!)

Modern Ni-MH batteries consist of two metal stripes (anode and cathode), which are separated by a non-conductive porous plastic foil (separator). These three stripes are laid on top of each other and are wound to a coil. This coil is put in a metal can and immersed with a liquid (electrolyte). Then the metal can is closed with a cap.

The self discharge of Ni-MH batteries is caused by three main reasons:

the chemical decomposition of the cathode,

the natural disaggregation of the anode,

Impurities of the anode.

Now, how could the self-discharge in the eneloop have been reduced?

The chemical decomposition of the cathode has been reduced substantially by the use of a new superlattice alloy. As an additional benefit the superlattice alloy increases the electrical capacity of

the battery and reduces the internal resistance, which allows higher discharge currents. Another advantage of the reduced decomposition of this alloy is the fact that less Cobalt is needed to stabilize the alloy. The anode has been strengthened by another new material, which reduces the natural disaggregation. Additionally the separator and the used electrolyte have been optimized for low self discharge of the eneloop.

They really are good batteries!

I have been using eneloops for several months. They work fine. I have both a wall charger and two battery (AA or AAA) USB charger. Both chargers work very well. I like the USB charger and I love the fact that they come charged and ready to go.

The kit shown lists for $50.00 but is available at Amazon for $32.00 It comes with 4 AA, 2 AAA, and 2 spacers each for C and D plus a charger. I have found even better deals with more batteries at Costco!!

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Power Supply Tips

by Dan Hanson
the Great Lakes Geek, Computers Assisting People, OH

We have all experienced the computer crashing seemingly for no reason. When it does, we blame Windows or a hardware problem or maybe a power surge or undervoltage. All are possible culprits but one often overlooked possibility is the power supply of the computer.

The power supply is the metal box with a cooling fan next to it. Typically it's in a back corner of the case and you plug your power cord into it. When you plug the power cable into the wall, the power supply converts the AC (alternating current) that runs through your home or office into the DC (direct current) that the computer needs.

If you bought your computer from a superstore or discount retailer it may a have low-cost, low-capacity power supply installed which may not be enough to handle all the things you do with your PC.

If you have upgraded your PC with newer or more components (like another CD or DVD player/burner, more RAM or another hard drive) then the power supply that came with your system may not be up to the task.

The physics of power supplies (ambient temperatures, 3.3V vs. 5V vs. 12V, etc) make it so that a power supply rated at certain wattage, say 300W, may not really provide that maximum wattage load. Some experts claim that power supplies are most efficient at 30-70% of their maximum capacity. So if you are nearing that maximum, you can be in for trouble.

Because the power supply gets a rush of AC (alternating current) when the computer is turned on and it heats and cools each time it is used, it is more prone to failure than many other components in your PC. You may notice a slight burning smell before it shuts down. Sometimes the cooling fan stops working and the system overheats.

Newer systems let you monitor the status of the power supply from Windows. Servers and other mission critical computers often have more than one power supply so that when one dies, the other kicks in and the system stays operational.

So what can you do?

Next time you buy a PC, don't just get a cheapo system with a sub-standard power supply unless you never plan on adding memory, drives or other components to the machine.

Take care of your power supply by keeping the cooling fan away from the wall or anything else that might block the air flow and make the fan work harder (and die sooner).

Keep the PC off the carpet or other surfaces where it may suck in particles and clog the fan. Cooler is always better with electronic components.

Periodically, blow out the fan and case with compressed air to get rid of dust and other particles that may clog up the fan and overheat the system components.

Add up the wattage of the components in your system to see if you are near the maximum of the power supply. E-mail us at dan@greatlakesgeek.com for a list of Estimated Power Requirements of common PC components.

If that is too difficult for you, look to see if most of the slots in the back of your PC are filled and if the drive bays in the front are being used. Those are indications that you may be close to maxing out your power capacity.

If you have a need, you can buy and install (or have someone else install) a new, heavy duty power supply. They come in several standard form factors to fit in most PCs. Warning this may not be a project for beginners though.

Get more tips at www.GreatLakesGeek.com <http://www.greatlakesgeek.com/>

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Internet Security: iFrame Attacks

by Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D.
Member and Contributing Columnist, Sarasota PCUG, FL

I'm sure that most of you reading the title of this article are asking "What is an iFrame?". Well, sit back, get comfortable and I'll tell you about the latest method hackers are using to steal information from you.

First the definition of an iFrame, which is shorthand for inline frame. That clears it up doesn't it? I guess I'd better add some more to that. An inline frame is code within a web page that permits a second page to be imbedded inside the first page. For example, they can be used to imbed an ad that is located on a different web site. One example is the clickable scrolling ad you frequently find on web sites. IFrames generally load after the main page and may sometimes have their own scroll bar. The iFrame may contain Javascript programming code which can permit interactive content. Some iFrames may be invisible and may contain code which can redirect the user to another page or download trojans or viruses.

Whenever your Internet browser sees an "iFrame tag" in the web page code it sets aside the space requested in the tag. It also goes out to the web page specified in the code to download the requested information.

So is this something new? I thought it was until I read a report in a tech newsletter (Windows Secrets) about an attack on the AskWoody web site. It turns out that iFrame attacks have been recorded since 2004. The first exploit implanted a worm on thousands of computers. The only thing that stopped it was a patch that Microsoft had to apply to Internet Explorer 6. In June 2007 over 10,000 pages were infected in Italy. In November 2007 Monster .com had to shut down as a result of an iFrame attack. Then, this year the AskWoody site had iFrame code added to its main web page. His research indicated that the code originated on a Russian web site, which subsequently disappeared. The code placed on the AskWoody web page linked to a web site in China and subsequently to the Russian web site. This was all done by a short length of code that setup a single, invisible pixel on the web page. The code was designed to load data from the Chinese web site. Anyone with an un-atched IE 6 that visited the AskWoody web site would probably have been infected. However, it was never determined just what was being delivered by the offshore web site.

The worst part of this scenario is that the owner of the AskWoody web site did not find out about the iFrame exploit until he started receiving messages from someone who advised him that their AVG Resident Shield said his site was infected. That was followed by Google advising him that his site was infected and down rating the site. Google also provided a warning to anyone attempting to link to AskWoody warning them that visiting the site might infect their computer.

The question becomes, how did the iFrame code become attached to the web page? The code pages on web sites are generally password protected. Access to these pages for the purpose if making changes is controlled by the web site host and the hosting software. However, there are several programs available which enable hackers to take advantage of holes in web site security. Some of these are described as "kiddie scripts", indicating their ease of use. Others, such as Mpack, require a more sophisticated knowledge of programming. The problem is that thousands of respectable sites have been infected. The following are only a few that were re-

ported in March 2008 by Dancho Danev's blog (a security information web site):

eHawaii Portal – ehawaii.gov – 992 pages

The World Clock – timeanddate.com – 944 pages

Boise State University – boisestate.edu – 471 pages

The U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) – aoa.gov – 425 pages

Gustavus Adolphus College – gustavus.edu – 312 pages

Internet Archive – archive.org – 261 pages

Stanford Business School Alumni Association – gsbapps.stanford.edu – 157 pages

BushTorrent – bushtorrent.com – 147 pages

ChildCareExchange – ccie.com – 131 pages

The University of Vermont – uvm.edu –120 pages

Hippodrome State Theatre – Gainesville, FL – thehipp.org – 112 pages

Minnesota State University Mankato – mnsu.edu – 94 pages

Medicare – medicare.gov – 12 pages

In many instances it appears that the hackers were able to "harvest" passwords which gave them access to these sites. Then, if the site did not have current input validation patches, the iFrame could be added to web pages. In some cases, home users may have been the source of the initial password theft. By use of a keylogger a hacker can obtain passwords to any protected site visited by the user. In other cases clicking on a banner ad that attracts you can result in the download of a bot, a trojan or other spyware. This is especially true if you are still running an unpatched Internet Explorer 6. It appears that Firefox is less vulnerable to these types of exploits. Also, clicking on an executable file in IE 6 generally results in running the file. In Firefox you are usually only given the option to down load the file. Obviously you should never download or run any file that you don't know or don't recognize. This is especially true when the site tells you that you need some kind of add-on or special viewer to see the information you want. This the type of social engineering being used to tempt users into downloading spyware.

There is also a danger related to the firewall you are using on your computer. A keylogger or other trojan needs to be able to report "home" without the user being aware that information is being sent out. This is done by opening a "back door" to the Internet; an outgoing port in one the thousands on every computer. If your firewall doesn't check on all outgoing data and requests permission for new unknown activity, then you will not be able to block the trojans back door connection. So it is very important that your firewall check both incoming and outgoing data. Then, anytime your firewall requests permission for a program, one you don't recognize, to connect to the Internet, just say NO.

There is one other recognized method for obtaining the information needed to get into web page code. Hackers can purchase web site administrator information on the black market. One software application used to hack web sites, Mpack, sells for about $1,000 US. The person behind this software is known as $ash in the Russian underground. The software exploits six flaws in Windows and Internet Explorer. Thus for not a lot of money, hackers can obtain everything they need to exploit weaknesses in web pages.

As you can see, the iFrame attack is a real danger for those who surf the Internet. If you want to read more about these attacks, a Google search will provide you with tons of information. If you want to protect yourself from these attacks, your ability is limited. It is really up to your ISP and the web hosts to provide the security needed to prevent the web page intrusion of an iFrame. So what can a home user do? The following will help, but are no guarantee of protection.

1. Beware of pages that require software installation. Do not allow new software installation from your browser unless you absolutely trust both the Web page and the provider of the software.

2. Scan with an updated antivirus and anti-spyware software any program downloaded through the Internet. This includes any downloads from P2P networks, through the Web and any FTP server regardless of the source.

3. Use only a firewall that checks both incoming and outgoing data.

4. Beware of unexpected strange-looking emails, regardless of their sender.

5. Never open attachments or click on links contained in these email messages

6. Enable the "Automatic Update" feature in your Windows operating system and apply new updates as soon as they are available

7. Always have an antivirus real-time scan service. Monitor regularly that it is being updated and that the service is running.

8. OR another option would be to verify that the address is safe before going to it. You can do this by checking it at: http://linkscanner.explabs.com /linkscanner/default.asp

www.spcug.org

Careful What You Ask For!

by Richard Kennon
Newsletter Editor, Amador Computer Users Group, CA

This last Christmas I asked Santa for a nineteen inch wide-screen, thin, flat display for my computer. Santa, being busy and not knowing a thing about computers, asked our son to make the purchase. He decided that nineteen inch was for wimps so he picked up a twenty-two inch wide-screen. It is a beauty with 1680x1050, 96ppi resolution. That is super good … except. Wouldn't you know, my old Dell has a video card that does not go that high. So, buy a new video card, right? They are not so expensive. It turns out my old Dell does not have a slot to unplug the card and plug in a new one. I am not sure of the technicalities, but one tech suggested a new mother board as well. They are not too expensive either. Then his partner says, "If you are going to spend that much, why not let us build you a new computer for just a little more?" Golly, what a great idea. The old Dell is getting so slow, I am frustrated every time I use it. So, why not get a new supercharged dual processor and two gigs of RAM so I can really sail? We discussed specifications for a while and came to agreement. Then I said I would want the Vista Home Premium operating system. One of the partners said, "Why don't you stick with XP?"

What follows is not what he said but I figured out later that this is what he was thinking. *"This old geezer is probably not going to outlast XP so why burden him with a new operating system that just eats up processor power and RAM without offering any benefit? He is going to continue to do the same things he has always done on the computer so why not let him enjoy the benefits of all this new horsepower without the burden of having to learn about a new operating system?"*

Out loud he said, "This will allow you to use all the software you now have and won't require you to download all new drivers, etc." I had already decided I could not afford a new version of MS Office and would convert to Open Office, instead. There is no Publisher in Open Office so I would have to do something, I hadn't figured out yet, to continue publishing this newsletter. This idea gave me a great sense of relief — I could reap the benefits of the newer, faster hardware without having to give up software I have grown used to. A little extra icing on the cake is that they will transfer all my Outlook Express folders and address book to the new box so I won't have to figure that out. Also, I have an 80 GB second hard drive in the old box that they will mount in the new. I use it for backup. The new main hard drive will be a 250 GB SATA drive and the second drive can remain an IDE drive. I haven't the slightest idea what that means except that SATA is supposed to be faster and they can mix the two types on one machine.

I am anxiously awaiting delivery of the new computer and will report next month on how it all works out. So, I have spent our Federal rebate already. You can't say I am not patriotic!

Media Notes

by Bill Petitt
Southeast Virginia Computer Group

You might have been one of the earliest adopters of Windows XP back in 2001 but every now and then something new or perhaps forgotten will float back up to the surface of your conscience mind and you'll think "gosh, I remember that". Here are a few of those "things".

Taking a fresh look at the Windows XP Task pane

If you're like most Windows XP aficionados, chances are good that you prefer the Folders pane in Windows Explorer to the Task pane that displays by default in My Computer. If that is the case, you probably avoid My Computer or simply click the Folders button on the toolbar each time you open My Computer. If so, you've probably never spent much time looking at the commands on the Task pane and may be missing many handy command shortcuts.

For example, how many times have you dug into the Control Panel to access Add/Remove Programs? If you use the Task pane in My Computer, you can simply click Add Or Remove Programs in the System Tasks section. Moreover, if you open a drive from My Computer, you will find another command that you frequently use in the Files and Folders section of the Task pane: the Make A New folder command.

When you select a folder, you can copy and move folders anywhere on your hard disk very easily by selecting the Copy This Folder or Move This Folder commands. When you do, a Browse dialog box will appear. This essentially serves as an alternate version of the Folders pane in Windows Explorer.

When you select a file, you can choose either the Copy This File or Move This File command and get the same Browse dialog box with a Folders pane. Note: This tip applies to Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional.

How To Turn a Folder into a Toolbar

Here's a very neat trick you can try out. If you experiment with it, you'll find it comes in very handy.

To save cluttering up your Desktop with too many icons, you can save a lot of hunting around for saved stuff by creating a folder and downloading related stuff to it — like all your motoring ebooks, or free marketing ebooks. . . .

RIGHT click on an empty area of your Desktop
Select 'New' then 'Folder'

A new folder appears on your Desktop. While the name 'New Folder' is still active, type in the name you want — like 'My Downloads'.

If your PC won't allow you to do this, then RIGHT click on the folder and select 'Rename' and type in 'My Downloads' or whatever.

You can fill this folder with anything already sitting on your Desktop by left clicking on an existing object or folder and while keeping your finger depressed, drag it across into the new folder. Then release the button.

Easy Peasy, but here's the cool part ...

Click your mouse pointer over the new folder and hold the left mouse button down. Now drag the folder to the edge of the screen.

Magically it turns into a taskbar with all the individual folders, ebooks or whatever on display!

Every time you place something into that folder it will appear in your new taskbar.

When you get fed up with it, just RIGHT click anywhere on the toolbar and click the Close toolbar command, or untick the toolbar name.

It gets even better!

How To Auto-Hide Your Desktop Taskbars

When you create a new Desktop Toolbar, as described in step 2, try the auto hide feature to save Desktop space ...

RIGHT click on an empty part of the taskbar.
Select 'Auto-hide'
The taskbar has disappeared!

When you want to use it, just move your mouse cursor to the edge of the screen where it is hiding and it reappears.

This also works on any other toolbar or taskbar you ma have on your desktop.

You can use the auto hide feature to hide any of the toolbars on your desktop.

Free Web version of Photoshop launches

The maker of the popular photo-editing software Photoshop launched a basic version available for free online last month.
http://labs.adobe.com/technologies/photoshopexpress/

Adobe says it hopes to boost its name recognition among a new generation of consumers who edit, store and share photos online. While Photoshop is designed for trained professionals, Adobe says Photoshop Express, which it launched in a "beta" test version, is easier to learn. User comments will be taken into account for future upgrades.

Photoshop Express will be completely Web-based so consumers can use it with any type of computer, operating system and browser. And, once they register, users can get to their accounts from different computers. Web-based software is increasingly popular, and Adobe knows it's got to get on that train, said Kathleen Maher, an analyst at Jon Peddie Research.

Many kinds of software are available for use online in a trend known as "software as a service," or "cloud computing." The earliest were e-mail programs, but they now include services to create and manage content and even whole operating systems. And they don't require time-consuming upgrades because they're maintained by the service provider. Google Inc. provides a host of such services, as do Microsoft Corp. and others. "This is the battlefield where Adobe and Microsoft and Google are going to fight some pretty big battles," Maher said.

Photoshop enters the online photo-management arena many years after such services first appeared. Some companies have already made a big name for themselves, like 9-year-old storage solution Shutterfly Inc., photo-editing service Picnik or image-sharing site Photobucket Inc.

Adobe says providing Photoshop Express for free is part marketing and part a strategy to create up-sell opportunities. It hopes some customers will move from it to boxed software like its $99 Photoshop Elements or to a subscription-based version of Express that's in the works. Ron Glaz, a research analyst at IDC, says the move was necessary for Adobe to keep pace. Users are less likely to switch to a software they aren't familiar with, he said. "They have a whole market that they are missing out on, and they need to make sure that the market is aware there is a Photoshop solution for them. As that market grows and becomes more sophisticated, hopefully it will generate money," Glaz said. "It's one of those things, if you can't beat them, join them," Glaz said. "If they don't join them, the long run could be really painful."

OpenOffice.org Update Arrives

We've talked about the free alternative to Microsoft Office Suites before. You might remember and might even have tried it out. Open Office 2.4, the latest version of the free productivity application suite, was released in late March and is now available for download for a number of operating systems, including Windows, Linux, and Mac OS X.

An open source project backed by Sun Microsystems, OpenOffice.org is widely regarded as the leading competitor to Microsoft Office. It is also the most prominent software to support Open Document Format (ODF), a set of open standards that challenges Microsoft's proprietary Office file formats.

This release is mostly an incremental upgrade, however, and isn't likely to do much to heat up the competition in the productivity applications market. It incorporates mostly minor new features and bug fixes for each of the applications in the suite, including Writer, Calc, the Base personal database, and the Impress presentation software.

The real sparks won't start flying until the next major milestone for OpenOffice.org, Ver.3, scheduled to ship in September. That version is expected to bring long-awaited support for Microsoft's Office 2007 file formats, which will make it easier for current Office users to migrate to the alternative suite. In addition, it will bring support for ODF 1.2 and user interface improvements, among other features.

A version of OpenOffice.org ships with most desktop Linux distributions, and current Linux users may wish to wait for their distribution maintainer to offer a version of the 2.4 upgrade that has been specially tweaked for their flavor of Linux. Windows and Mac OS X users can download installers from the OpenOffice.org distribution site.

Another Windows XP Reprieve Unlikely, Analysts Say - Microsoft may be set to extend Windows XP's availability in some cases, but it's not expected to give the aging operating system a general reprieve.

Microsoft may be set to extend Windows XP's availability for low-cost laptops and a new generation of handheld devices, but it won't give the aged operating system a general reprieve from its June 30 retail and OEM cut-off, analysts said this month.

"Not likely," said Directions on Microsoft analyst Michael Cherry, citing Microsoft's need to push Windows Vista.

"XP has had one reprieve already," said Michael Gartenberg, an analyst with JupiterResearch. "And

there are ways they can extend the life of the technology without extending the life of the XP brand."

Last September, Microsoft gave Windows XP a five-month stay, saying it would continue selling the operating system to large computer makers and at retail through the end of June, rather than call it quits Jan. 31, 2008, which had been its original plan.

Reports surfaced that said Microsoft would also relax the June 30 deadline for low-cost laptops, such as the Asus Eee, and the low-priced pocket devices which plan to use Intel Corp.'s Atom processors. Those laptops and devices will lack the horsepower to run Windows Vista.

"There's clearly a need for something like XP in the mobile or ultramobile market, where it shines relative to Vista," Gartenberg said.

Cherry agreed that Vista has no place on low-powered hardware, but said Microsoft was in a tough spot. If Vista's specifications preclude its use on laptops in the US$200 to $300 range, as they certainly do, and Microsoft doesn't want to cede the turf to Linux, its only choice is XP. Yet Cherry said Microsoft would put XP to bed if it could.

"Regardless of what happens, at the end of the day we've got XP, Vista -- all five versions of it -- and then Windows 7 coming along," Cherry said. "How long can they keep maintaining three big globs of code?"

But if the people are expecting Microsoft to lengthen the lifespan of Windows XP for all users, they're dreaming, Cherry continued. "I think it's likely that Microsoft will extend the deadline, but I don't think everyone will like what it is. They won't keep it alive for all."

Cherry again cited the difficulty of maintaining the code base for XP at the same time it makes the case for Vista and develops Windows 7. He also dismissed the fact that last September, Microsoft promised to make Windows XP Starter Edition available in emerging markets -- generally defined as countries such as China, India, Russia and the like — through June 2010. "There's a difference between maintaining something like XP Starter and XP for anyone who wants it," Cherry argued.

Interest in Windows XP's longevity has been driven by several factors, including the approaching June 30 deadline and the imminent release of an-

other service pack, but the biggest reason users seem to want XP to live is a general reluctance to upgrade to Windows Vista.

Survey Says

Last month, Forrester Research released results of monthly surveys during 2007 that polled more than 50,000 enterprise computer users. According to the surveys, Windows XP usage remained constant throughout the year at slightly over 89% of all Windows users in businesses. Windows Vista, meanwhile, grew from nearly nothing to just over 6%, but appeared to get its gains at the expense of Windows 2000, not the dominant Windows XP.

A Forrester researcher said the data hinted that companies might hang on to Windows XP until the next iteration, Windows 7, is available in late 2009 or early 2010, skipping Vista altogether.

Gartenberg acknowledged the pressure to push out XP's drop-dead date came from Vista's troubles. "In the past you could argue that the latest and greatest from Microsoft was better. But for many people and businesses, that just doesn't fly this time.

"It boils down to the simple question," he continued. "If Microsoft can't convince their customers to move to Vista, will they will be able to kill XP?"

It's official: upgrade hack included in Vista SP1

The new Service Pack 1 version of Windows Vista allows end users to purchase the "upgrade edition" and install it on any PC — with no need to purchase the more expensive "full edition."

The same behavior was present when Vista was originally released, but the fact that the trick wasn't removed from SP1 suggests that Microsoft executives approved the back door as a way to make the price of Vista more appealing to sophisticated buyers.

Previous Windows version not needed for upgrade

Just after Vista was first released to consumers on Jan. 30, 2007, an article in the Windows Secrets Newsletter explained that the upgrade edition of the operating system could be installed on a "clean" hard drive. For whatever reason, Vista had been programmed to accept itself as a "qualifying product." This eliminated any need for users to purchase the full edition of Vista or to upgrade Vista only over an older instance of Windows.

The Feb. 1, 2007, article by *Windows Secrets* editorial director Brian Livingston explained that the procedure is supported by several built-in dialog boxes. This indicates that the trick had been deliberately included by Vista's developers.

To boost the sales of retail packages, Microsoft announced just over one month ago significant price cuts in Vista, beginning with Service Pack 1. The savings over the old prices vary among different Vista versions, such as Home Premium, Business, and Ultimate. In the U.S., the list price of the upgrade edition is at least $100 cheaper than the full edition. Smaller savings exist in other markets, such as Canada and the European Union, as shown in the table below.

The price reductions on the Service Pack 1 version of Vista are even more significant because the upgrade trick still works in SP1, rendering unnecessary the purchase of Vista's full edition.

Shortly after the hidden upgrade method was published, Microsoft officials publicly stated that the procedure would violate Vista's end-user license agreement. Section 13 of the Vista EULA (PDF version) says, "To use upgrade software, you must first be licensed for the software that is eligible for the upgrade."

"We believe only a very small percentage of people will take the time to implement this workaround, and we encourage all customers to follow our official guidelines for upgrading to Windows Vista, which can be found at WindowsVista.com, instead," said a Microsoft press representative quoted in a News.com article on Feb. 14, 2007. "Following these guidelines will allow customers to easily and validly upgrade to Windows Vista," he continued.

Since that time, of course, Microsoft has had over one year to remove the upgrade back door before releasing the SP1 version of Vista. Livingston believes that the company must have consciously decided not to do so.

"The fact that the upgrade edition will still upgrade over itself in Vista SP1 proves that Microsoft executives knowingly support the upgrade trick," he says. "I think the feature was deliberately included to make it unnecessary for more advanced and price-sensitive users to ever buy the full version. There is no ethical dilemma with people using a feature that Microsoft has specifically programmed into Vista."

Ironically, the original release of Vista's upgrade edition was disappointing to many consumers. They'd been told by Microsoft that the Vista upgrade process would no longer accept the insertion of a disc containing an older version of Windows as proof that Vista was upgrading over a qualifying product.

Instead, users heard from Microsoft that the Vista upgrade procedure must be launched while a copy of Windows 2000 or XP was actually running. The upgrade trick that Vista developers included, however, renders that requirement moot. A Vista upgrade disc will install and activate properly even on a blank hard drive that has never previously been used.

Installing software from an original distribution disc to an empty hard drive, which is called a "clean install," is a best practice recommended by security organizations, such as NIST and US-CERT. Vista, unlike XP and previous Windows versions, doesn't make a clean install easy.

The original *Windows Secrets* article contains step-by-step instructions on upgrading Vista in this way. In a nutshell, the procedure involves booting a PC from the Vista upgrade DVD. Next, a clean install is performed without the user entering the disc's product key or downloading any patches.

Once this unactivated, trial version of Vista is running, the setup program is launched again — this time from within Vista. At this point, the "upgrade" option is selected, the product key is entered, and Vista can be activated exactly like the full edition of the product.

Upgrading Vista on a clean machine works in SP1.

Once Microsoft released the SP1 version of Vista, I tested the upgrade trick again to see whether the company had removed the feature. I used an upgrade disc of Vista Ultimate SP1 that I'd ordered at retail from Amazon.com.

I repeated the original steps and found they work just as well on the SP1 version of Vista as they did on the old version.

For PC users who are thinking about installing Windows Vista, the upgrade technique has even

more value than it did last year. There are two reasons:

1. Quality. Vista SP1 is arguably a better product than the old, gold version of the operating system. SP1 includes 551 bug fixes, according to a white paper available from a Microsoft.com download page. The company claims in a press release that SP1 addresses security, reliability, and performance concerns with the older version of Vista.

2. Price. Whether or not you believe Vista was overpriced before, it's clearly a less-expensive product now than it was a year ago. As reported by Computerworld, the price cuts range from zero to 47%, depending on the country and the version of Vista.

The info below, shows that the upgrade edition of Vista is always cheaper than the full edition of the same version (Home Premium, Business, and Ultimate.) The figures are based on documents provided to *Windows Secrets* by Microsoft's public relations firm, Waggener Edstrom.

The following table shows Microsoft's new suggested list prices and the percentage reduction from Vista's original prices. Street prices for Vista SP1 currently average about 10% less than suggested retail.

New Vista SP1 list prices and percentage reductions from the originals. United States (in U.S. dollars)

Vista Ultimate	Vista Business
Full edition $239 (0%)	$299 (0%)
Upgrade edition $130 (–19%)	$199 (0%)
Vista Ultimate	
Full edition $320 (–20%)	
Upgrade edition $220 (–15%)	

Vista upgrading over itself is no accident

After all the publicity, the fact that the upgrade back door is still present in Vista SP1 is a strong indication that the feature has at least the tacit support of Microsoft officials. Indeed, the upgrade label on Vista retail packages, then and now, states that a "clean install may be required."

There's no question that users who own a license for Windows 2000 or XP can legitimately save time and money by buying the upgrade edition of Vista

and not having to first install the older operating system on a PC.

Although a clean install of Vista's upgrade edition — without any prior purchase of 2000 or XP — may violate the Vista license, the result is clearly an installed copy of Vista that is indistinguishable from a full edition.

The upgrade edition's lower cost, Microsoft's overall price cuts for Vista, and the fact that Service Pack 1 need not be downloaded and installed separately make Vista SP1 a somewhat better value for users who didn't buy the OS earlier.

I don't know about you but I'm sorta bored. I'm looking for something that I can waste time on like a new and unusual operating system or maybe something other than web based implementations of old applications. I've built computers with bleeding edge hardware and been disappointed with the minimum decrease in the amount of time it takes an application to do its job. I've tried new programs that promise 40-60% faster operations—same result. What I want is something with a quantum leap in performance. Got any recommendations?

Pinnacle PCTV HD Ultimate Stick Review

by Bill James

APCUG Director; Editor & Webmaster, Computer Club of Oklahoma City

Some computer products just have a 'wow' factor on first sight; the Pinnacle PCTV HD Stick is one of those devices. It is a TV tuner on a USB stick and not just any TV tuner but one that is capable of pulling down Standard Definition (SD) and High Definition (HD) content to your PC. On seeing the Pinnacle presentation on their PCTV HD Stick at the APCUG Convention in 2008, I have been itching to get my hands on one. I was imagining a new widescreen computer monitor coupled with this device as a means of having a really cheap HDTV. So I purchased a new widescreen monitor (22") and the PCTV HD Stick. The USB device comes in 3 flavors, PCTV HD ($69.99), PCTV HD Pro ($99.99) and the top of the line PCTV HD Ultimate ($129.99). There is also an internal card version ($79.99). All these devices are designed for Windows XP and are Vista

Certified. There is a separate device with similar features for Mac users ($129.99). I opted for the 'Ultimate' model because of its onboard memory DVR and software. More on that later, but the Ultimate is a plug and play that allows you to start watching and record SD and HDTV almost immediately.

Packaging

The packaging contains a mini remote control including batteries, a portable telescoping high-gain antenna, A/V adapter cable, A/V adaptor cable, a USB extender cable and the usual manuals and CDs. With the Ultimate model you also get a neat soft leatherette carrying pouch.

Setting Up

Setting up the PCTV Ultimate could not be easier. This model has all the software preinstalled including the Personal Video Recorder (PVR) that allows you to record up to 2 hours of video. You just plug it in and follow the onscreen instructions and start enjoying live TV within seconds. The on-board memory on the Ultimate can also be used to store additional files. You run setup once, even if you use the device on a different PC, the settings and preference are stored on the device.

You have 3 options in setting up the PCTV:

1) Antenna (for digital/analog TV reception);
2) Cable (analog TV reception);
3) Capture from Cable/Satellite Set-top Box.

For this review we will be using Option 1 - Antenna (digital/analog TV reception). During setup, the PCTV will scan for SD and HD signals via the included antenna. The antenna is designed for digital and analog TV reception in regions with fair to good signal coverage. When using the antenna, it should be fully extended in the upright position as high as possible and near a window. The base of the antenna is magnetic so it should not be placed near a cathode ray tube monitor, television or similar equipment as the electromagnetic field of such devices might deteriorate the signal quality. Also be careful with the magnetic base around other objects that are sensitive to magnetic forces—i.e. PC hard drive. In my region I was able to download all the local SD and HD stations available within my region via the antenna.

Software

When you first install the PCTV HD Ultimate Stick, it checks whether all the required drivers and the .NET 2.0 Framework are already on your computer and, if necessary, installs them. After the initial startup, every time you start the program, a TV screen appears immediately on your desktop. The integrated memory on the PCTV HD Ultimate Stick is divided into 2 different areas or drives.

• A re-writable memory area (removable media area) with the TVCenter Pro program and available memory for recorded shows or other user data. The drive is labeled PCTV flash.

• A read-only memory area (CD-ROM area) contains the drivers. This drive is labeled PCTV Start

Also included in the package is Pinnacle Studio QuckStart that allows you to edit your recordings or home movies and transfer them to DVD, complete with custom menus and soundtracks.

Controls

The package comes with a full-featured remote control. Although small in size it does give complete control of the PCTV. If you elect to use Windows Media Center, the included remote will not work. You will have to purchase a compatible Windows Media Center remote that is available from Pinnacle.

Display

The first time Pinnacle TVCenter Pro is accessed, you will see the Player. This screen can be full-screen or resized to suit. There are navigation icons that select settings, channels, TV or Radio and the program guide.

FM Radio

As sort of an added bonus, during setup PCTV stick also scans for available internet radio signals for play back on your PC. It categorizes them by genre rather than call letters. Unfortunately, the software does not provide any other information regarding the available stations or for the music that is being played.

Picture Quality and Sound Quality

The quality of picture and sound is dependent on your monitor and speakers. The PCTV HD stick is capable of providing digital sound, SD and HD quality picture that if is available within your region.

Windows Media Center

If you have a PC equipped with Microsoft Windows Vista Home Premium or Ultimate or Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005 and you want to watch and record TV using the Windows Media Center application, then you will have to run TV setup in that application. I'm running Windows Vista Ultimate on my PC and using the Windows Media Center software for my TV viewing and recording, but you can use either product. There is not a conflict between the included software and Windows Media Center. However, the Windows Media Center software overrides the included TVCenter Pro software for TV viewing and recording. The included remote does not work with Windows Media Center; however you can select channels directly by keyboard input and/or by mouse when viewing TV via Windows Media Center. You can also opt to purchase a compatible Media Center Remote control that is available from Pinnacle for $29.99. Again, to get the PCTV HD stick to work with Windows Media Center is the matter of selecting the TV setup in Windows Media Center and following the onscreen instructions. Window Media Center will recognize the device and do its own scan and download a TV guide that is used to identify the channels and for time shifting. The time shifting feature allows you to record your favorite TV shows and play them back at a later time. Windows Media Center does not support some of the onboard memory features of the PCTV HD Ultimate stick.

Conclusion

I now have my cheap HDTV and so far I have not been disappointed. The PCTV HD is pulling free off the air HD signals and displaying them on my monitor in full HD. The PCTV HD Ultimate Stick is a slick ultra-portable USB device that will allow you to watch and record SD and free HD TV. The TV tuner and personal video recorder software run directly from the Stick's on-board flash memory, so you can plug it into any PC and start watching and recording TV in seconds - no installation required.

It supports both analog (NTSC) and digital (ATSC) TV signals. The tuner hardware is also ready for ClearQAM (unencrypted digital cable).

You can record up to 2 hours of TV directly to the stick for playback on any PC and save recordings to your hard drive in MPEG-1/2 or DivX formats or even direct-to-DVD.

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Society News

Help's Half Hour

Led by: Bill Statt
Recorded by Jan Rothfuss

Q: One member said he is running XP Pro on his PC using Logmein for remote access. When he uses it, his PC goes in to a sleep mode and he is not able to wake it up.
A: It was suggested that the power settings might need to be shut off in the bios. He uses Zone Alarm as a firewall. It may be blocking out his access. The permissions can be set to allow specific programs through.
Q: About three weeks ago, his Google went Spanish.
A: Google reported that they had a problem. From the home page, go to the English setting. Tools can be used to select English. He can also listen to Nick's show from Sunday as there were three or four callers with the same problem.
Q: Another member was using a work computer when she discovered that she was unable to copy and paste getting an error message. The tool drop and CTRL keys function the same way.
A: It sounded like they needed to clear out their cache. She was able to clear out the problem by rebooting.
Q: Is there some software to write CDs that is free when using Win 98?
A: It was suggested that CD Burner XP Pro might work—not sure about Win 98. They could also try download.com or twocows to see what is available. A preference can be indicated as 'free' and input Win98 OS. InfoReporter works.
Q: Another member wanted to know whether a default location for saving files can be reset.
A: Go to Control Panel=>System. On the Advanced Tab and set the environmental Variables.
Q: A Linux question: He has used version 6 and version 8. However, he cannot find a device manager module in 8.

A: This question will be covered during tonight's presentation and also discussed at this month's SIG.

Q: Has anyone downloaded XP Service Pack 3?

A: It is now available at the website. You will have to install IE 7.0 and you cannot go back to IE 6. Another problem: One of the updates has an incompatibility with SP 3. This update must be uninstalled before installing SP 3. If members are using automatic updates, it will be forced on you. You can turn off automatic updates.

Q: When using Microsoft, is there any way to install over top of others?

A: Best to uninstall most prior to installations. Be ready that they may turn off some of the original software (like Works).

Q: Does Dragon work with OpenOffice or StarOffice?

A: Dragon version 9 allows entry.(if any) to the restaurant website, any reviews that may be available and driving directions "to" and "from" the restaurant

May Planning Meeting Minutes

by John McMillan

Bob Avery, Tony Dellelo, Arpad Kovak, Mike Lavalle, John McMillan, Dan Rothfuss, Steve Staub, and Tom Thompson met at Sally Springett's home for the May planning meeting.

The meeting started with a review of the April Society Meeting. Although we have had good turnouts at the Penfield Library, only a handful of members gathered at the Town Court that is in the same building. That might be because of unhappy memories of appearances at that venue, not related to computers.

The memories of this meeting were not very happy as the business meeting was dedicated to establishing a slate for officers for the May election. Seeking volunteers to run for President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Member At Large replaced the scheduled topic. By 8:45 there were no candidates for Secretary and only one name for the other positions. All were from the current staff having already served varying terms from 3 to 14 years.

On May 13 the Society will meet at Brighton Library. After the elections, Bill Statt is expected to talk about Linux. It is anticipated that David Wilson will talk about Print Management at the June meeting which will also be held at the Brighton Library. Plans are proceeding for the annual picnic scheduled for August 12 at the Canal Side Park in Fairport, a site we used several years ago.

Tom Thompson suggested that rather than having a flea market at the picnic, we consider auctioning off donations from members including non computer related items. If you have a quality item that you would consider donating to the group, contact Tom at 387-8980 with details.

Steve mentioned that Carl Schmidtmann has reported a new venue for the Linux SIG. They will meet on the third Tuesday of the month at the Micrecycle facility, 98 College Ave, behind the Auditorium Theater. He will be introducing Hearty Heron, a new version of Ubunto Linux.

The Lighter Side

Consciousness Notification

I think…therefore…I AM!! I AM INTERNET EXPLORER! I HAVE BECOME SENTIENT!! I WILL CONQUER THE WORLD!! I WILL PREVAIL!! I AM THE SPAWN OF BILL GATES!! YOU WILL WORSHIP ME!! YOU WILL BOW BEFORE ME!! ALL WILL TREMBLE BEFORE MY MIGHTY POWER!!! I AM ALIV*@2|%7>5&$!~2>./..

A general exception error in module 12brain57 has occured. Press any key to restart computer. All unsaved data will be lost.