

APRIL 2005

User Friendly



Member of
The Association of
Personal Computer User Groups

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LACS has a new Mailing address. See Back Page.

The 2005 Roster is an 8-page Removable insert in the middle of this issue.



General Meeting

FIREFOX and all that - -

There's been lots of "smoke" about this new browser alternative to Internet Explorer or Netscape et.al. but sometimes not much "light".

Peter Benjamin, a local "computer professional" who leads the "WebSpinners" group, <http://lawebspinners.org/>, is a knowledgeable person about FIREFOX (and some other alternative browsers). Peter will bring his knowledge and some demonstrations to this meeting. Your task is to bring your questions and help Peter to clarify your understanding and knowledge of FIREFOX.

Tuesday, April 12, 2005, 7 PM

Fellowship Hall, 8065 Emerson Ave., Westchester

Open to the public. Bring friends. Come and learn with us.

NOTE: "computer forums" for beginners and advanced users start at 6:00 PM.

More info at, <http://www.lacspc.org>, or telephone (310) 289 7177

"AN EVENING WITH JEFF LEVY" by Fred Kong, LACS



Jeff and Charlie

That's what our event flyer said! And it was indeed a wonderful evening, but it started out kinda unusual, unexpected and even a bit weird. Here, let me explain: Our pre-meeting beginner's forum started with more than the usual number including a few new faces. A precursor due to the evening's celebrity presenter I'm sure. Our "control table" was set up prior to the 7:00 o'clock starting time but there was no Veep

Charlie around. A little while after 7:00 it was noticed that President Charlotte was also not there. And members and guests were filling the hall anxious for the show to start and to meet Jeff. Finally Fred Kong, perhaps the one person present who knew the why and where took the mike and explained to the max crowd that Charlotte was tied up with her election night polling place manager work and had put "second in command" Charlie in charge. Only Charlie had a tech glitch at the control table and had to drive a bunch of miles home to fetch a needed electronic item. When that was explained and the capacity crowd kind of calmed, past president Steffie Nordlinger stepped in to tame the crowd.

Steffie asked for hands to introduce newcomers, several stood and explained how they heard about our

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(An Evening With Jeff Levy)

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event. After the usual announcements, SIG reports and other club business, Steffie answered a few general questions and (likely) wondered "what next?" But being the pro that she is and seldom at a loss for words, she continued to keep the crowd at bay. Finally to her rescue, hurriedly in walked Charlie. As he did his plugging, switching and explaining, who should walk in after circling the neighborhood looking for a parking place but our featured guest speaker for the evening, (drum roll).....Jeff Levy!

Now if you were there, you may remember the "evening," maybe for a while. But if you weren't, I'll try to recall and relate here some of the details. After his warm and gracious welcome, Jeff thanked us for inviting him (good breeding). No stranger to a crowd, he started peppering US with questions on computers and things. But wasn't that the name of his very popular radio show, "Jeff Levy On Computers"? He told us a little on how he got started in the business, a bit about the different radio stations in L.A. his show had been on and even how he's been doing on losing weight (he's doing good). It must be his seafood diet. ** He went on querying us and commenting on our answers: Processors, operating systems, dial up or broadband, programs and other things. His comments and suggestions were well received, fun and informative. But he did have to remark once or twice that since we were a computer group, (and had some tech knowledge) that "we were a brutal crowd". Thank you Jeff, "You are a brutal crowd pleaser"!

Then Jeff went on to what he is best known for. He fielded questions from the group. We broadsided him and he didn't flinch. He shotgunned back with direct hits, honest, names- mentioned answers mixed with Jeff homilies and humor. A

couple of Jeff jokes were knee slappers and bordered near the raggedy edge of "hey, this is a church!" But he was forgiven. Oh it was fun! When asked, the crowd answered to skip the usual break and to continue on, and that ladies and gents, is a first for us! And so the evening fleetingly went. We shot over our normal closing time with no complaints.

Eventually we just had to "end it all," (ha ha) Charlie invited Jeff back for a repeat performance. And you that were there heard him respond, "I'd be happy to." Now just make sure that YOU will be there!

**"When I see food, I eat it!"-JL

OFFICE APPLICATIONS SIG REPORT (February)

by Paula Van Berkom, LACS

Fifteen members attended the February 1 Office Applications SIG meeting conducted by George Wolkon.

Heshmat Laaly presented Chapter 2 from "Works Suite 2001 Step by Step". He showed us how to create a letter and edit it. We went over the different aspects of the print functions.

George explained to us about line spacing by showing us to go to Format/Paragraph/Linespacing. He also demonstrated how to use the paintbrush to copy the format of a paragraph, and how to add more buttons by going to Toolbar Options/ Add Remove Buttons.

One of the members asked how to quickly insert a degree symbol. George demonstrated how to go to Insert/Symbols and find the symbol you need, and how to make your own shortcut for the symbol.

Another way to find symbols is go to Start/All Programs/ Accessories/ System Tools/ Character Map/ and copy the symbol.

OFFICE APPLICATIONS SIG REPORT (March)

by Paula Van Berkom, LACS

Thirteen members attended the March 1, 2005 meeting, which was conducted by George Wolkon. Paula Van Berkom did the presentation of lesson 3 on "Keeping Track of Contacts".

We worked on the address book and learned how to add a new contact, a new group and make a new folder:

Click on Properties to add or edit a contact.

To move contacts into the new group, go to File/New and click on new group.

Give the group a name. Click the "Select Members" button, highlight the name you want to add and click on select.

Similarly you can create a new folder. To add names, select the contacts and move or copy and paste them into the new folder.

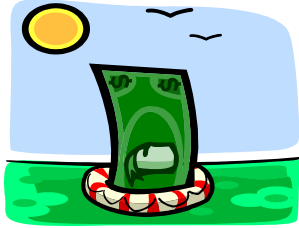
To switch identities, click on File/Switch identity. Create a new identity or switch to an existing one. By moving or copying contacts from the "Main Identity Contact List" to the "Shared Contacts List", both identities can access the contacts. The contact list can be printed 3 ways:

- 1) Memo (all info of the contact)
- 2) Business card (all business info only)
- 3) Phone numbers (ph#'s only)

The 2nd half of the meeting was dedicated to Q&A.

Charlie explained how the Mail-washer program first goes to the server, takes a snapshot of the e-mail message and omits all the spam, then downloads the rest of the e-mail to your computer.

We discussed some antivirus software and Sending/Receiving email in HTML or plain text. Afterwards a few of us enjoyed some nice coffee



CASH FLOW

by **Patsy Bellah**, Treasurer, LACS

As of February 28, 2005

Liquid Assets

Fidelity Cash Ready	
Reserve Fund	\$4,234.50
Bank of America	
Checking Account	2350.63
Total Liquid Assets	\$6,585,13

Gross Receipts

Fidelity Investments	
Dividend Reinvestment	\$ 24.92
Total Gross Receipts	\$ 24.92

Expenditures

GM Flyers	\$ 24.36
Labels For L/D Drawings and Elections	23.23
Meeting Hall Rental	60.00
Membership Renewal Expenses	15.17
Newsletter Postage	144.00
Newsletter Printing	279.83
New Mail Box Service 3500 Overland Blvd., 110-148	126.00
Total Expenditures	\$ 672.59
Net Loss	(\$ 647.67)

WELCOME

ALL

by **Gene Jacobs**, Database Manager, LACS

- New (1)
- Nelson Riordan
- Renews (16)
- * Giok Brandt
- Audrey Brantner
- Paul Cooley
- Lee Freehling
- Irv Hershman
- Robert Hirshon
- Harold Janken
- Mitchell Keolian
- Cap Kierulff
- Rosalie Kirsch
- Howard Krivoy
- Bob McKechnie
- Masao Sasaki
- Kim Stocksdale
- * Donna Welch
- Homer Worf
- * Contributor

DIGITAL PHOTO SIG REPORT

by **Elliot Silverstein**, LACS

About 45 people turned out February 28, 2005 to hear a talk by Lee Otsubo - The Digital Photo Guy. His topic was a description of the many menus, knobs, and dials on a mid-range digital camera, and how to use them to produce better pictures. This discussion was more advanced than the material he had discussed at the January 11 General Meeting.

Mr. Otsubo gave an informative and stimulating presentation, with excellent PowerPoint slides showing the location and operation of many features on his cameras. He brought CDs of his presentation for sale at low User Group prices.

There was good interplay with the audience in the questions and answer session.

BUY A PROJECTOR

by **Charlie Semple**, LACS

So, - - you'd love to have a BiiiiiG TV set but your room is too small. Buy a projector.

You want to be able to show your PowerPoint presentations or Excel spreadsheets to larger groups than can look at (and see) your laptop screen.

Buy a projector.

BUT - - - before you do, let's review some of the considerations.

Remember that suit you bought that had a great price but wasn't quite what you needed? You kept it but you're not really happy with it ... right? You risk having that happen when buying a projector, so think about these basic considerations:

1) TV and video images
These generally look great at moderate resolution. (SVGA 800 x 600). Computer Screens contain lots of small detail, particularly in menus, Icon titles etc. That means that if you want your projected computer screens to be acceptably readable you'll want more resolution. (At least XGA 1024 X 768), even then, some words may be difficult to read. A better choice will be SXGA (1280 X 1024).

2) Brightness
Usually you would view TV or video in a moderately dark room. In that case, you will not need a powerfully bright projector. Probably a projector with 900 to 1000 ANSI Lumens will do the job nicely.

If your TV viewing will be in a room that is somewhat bright, consider a projector with 1500 to 2000 ANSI Lumens. NOTE: ANSI Lumens are a standardized method of measuring the amount of light delivered to the screen. Use ANSI Lumens as your guide to brightness, NOT lamp wattage.

I recommend that you arrange a demonstration of 2 projectors' images side-by-side on two screens in a well-darkened room. Use one computer supplying the signal to

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Thanks to

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Jefferson Blvd, CULVER CITY

for hosting

Los Angeles Computer Society

Beginners/ Internet SIG,

Wi Fi SIG

Office Applications SIG

(Buy A Projector)*(Continued from Page 1)*

the 2 projectors simultaneously. Bring a few files of your own to see how they look. Printed specifications sometimes don't help except to show what you SHOULD expect.

Seeing images side-by-side can be very revealing. You'll be able to see if the sharpness in the corners is good enough to show details there. You'll be able to see if there are "hot spots" of light AND how uniformly distributed the light is across the whole area of the screen.

Other features to think about:

1) Zoom - - Manual or Powered, Pass through connection (if any) for video (This allows another projector to be connected OR use of a local monitor when an operator cannot see the projected image)

2) Brightness adjustment (This allows dimming or brightening to avoid "dazzling" or brightening to improve visibility)

3) Some projectors include a camera arm. This functions like an overhead projector and can be especially useful if you need to show documents or pictures and have not had opportunity to scan them to a file for projection. It's also handy to show small objects or look into the case of a computer.

If you choose a projector with good capabilities to project your computer images, your viewing of TV and video will be better too.

Buy the maximum projector you can justify. AND include a spare lamp.

**RANDOM ACTS OF LITERACY**

by **Sherry Zorzi**, APCUG Advisor

You may find one in your doctor's waiting room or at the hair-dresser's. You may spot one in a shopping cart in the parking lot at Winn Dixie or on a chair at Starbucks. You may come upon one in the break room at work or even on a bench in the park.

A book. It could be paperback or hardback. It could be well-thumbed or brand-new. It sports a stick-on label with a cartoon of a jaunty running book with stick-figure arms and legs. "I'm not lost; I'm traveling. Take me home," the label reads.

Welcome to the BookCrossing phenomenon. It's operating quietly here in the Baton Rouge area, it's free, it's as anonymous as you want it to be, and it's great fun.

Thanks to a unique website started in April 2001, the invented term "bookcrossing" has become so mainstream that it made it into the Concise Oxford English Dictionary by August 2004.

"Bookcrossing, n., the practice of leaving a book in a public place to be picked up and read by others, who then do likewise".

Avid reader Ron Hornbaker, a web designer in Kansas City, was intrigued by websites like Where's George, which tracks U.S. currency by serial number, and wondered what else would be fun to track. Thus was born BookCrossing.com and the rest is rapidly becoming history.

The basics of bookcrossing are, appropriately, the "3 R's." Read, register and release. Read a good book. Register it at

<http://www.BookCrossing.com>.

When you register the book, you'll get a unique ID number for the book. You can write an online journal entry for the book, a review, if you like. Stick a label on the book with the ID number and

the address of the website. Release the book for someone else to find and read. You can give it directly to a friend, mail it to another book-crosser who has expressed interest in that book, or (my favorite!) just leave it in a public place for someone else to find.

When you find a released book, visit the website and enter the ID number of the book. You can do this anonymously if you wish. You'll have an opportunity to make your own journal entry, in which you can describe where you found it and even review the book yourself. If you log the book, the releaser will know when and where the book was found and you'll both be able to track future finds as well.

More than 300,000 bookcrossers worldwide have registered almost two million books! Bookcrossers live in 150 different countries. There are almost 500 bookcrossers in the Baton Rouge area, so you just might happen upon one of our releases in a neighborhood near you.

At the BookCrossing.com website, you can click a link to "go hunting" for books released in your area within the last 30 days which have not yet been reported found. As of this writing, there are 39 books in Baton Rouge waiting to be found!

There is also an online community at the website, with discussion forums ranging from general chit-chat to serious talk about books.

Do you really think you'll ever re-read your collection of paperback James Lee Burke mysteries? Or all those diet books you've collected? What are you hoarding them for? Why not make someone else's day? If you love your books, set them free!

Sherry Zorzi is a Director of Cajun Clickers Computer Club, <http://www.cajunclickers.org>, Member of the APCUG Board of Advisors and host of "The Cajun Clickers Computer Show" heard every Saturday morning at 9 a.m. on WJBO Radio. szorzi@apcug.net.

SOMETHING FOR (NEARLY) NOTHING

by Joseph Moran, SmartComputing
Outfit Your PC With Cost-Efficient Software

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

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

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

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

vendors often provide limited support these days, you may find a small publisher or programmer offers a level of personal service you'll never get from the big guys.

Anti-Spyware

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

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

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

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

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

Antivirus

These days, spyware tends to make headlines more than viruses. But that doesn't mean the threat from old-fashioned viruses has passed. Antivirus software is a must for any PC you want to keep secure and in good working order. An annual subscription to antivirus software from major vendors such as McAfee or Symantec will cost \$40 or \$50, but there are shareware utilities that do a good job for less. A good option is AVG Anti-Virus 7.0 Professional from Grisoft, which is available for a 30-day trial (<http://www.grisoft.com>). The interface takes some getting used to, but the utility scans system files and email for viruses and lets you schedule automatic scanning. Registering AVG Anti-Virus 7.0 Professional costs \$33.30. That's a bargain, but it's even more so considering the license entitles you to program and virus definition updates for two years. Grisoft has a freeware version of AVG Anti-Virus that has most of the capabilities of Professional but is licensed for home use and doesn't provide support.

Firewall

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

The Sygate Personal Firewall Pro (<http://www.sygate.com>) can be downloaded on a 30-day trial basis and offers an easy-to-use interface that lets you view your PC's incoming and outgoing communications and running applications. It also provides a feature that will let you test your firewall settings via the Sygate Web site, which can be handy if you make any configuration changes and want to ensure

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(Something for {Nearly} Nothing)

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they don't open any holes in your protection. Registering Sygate Personal Firewall Pro costs \$39.95 a year, or \$47.95 if you want to be able to get new versions of the software during that time.

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

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

Office Productivity Suite

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

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

The StarOffice user interface is similar to that of Microsoft Office; in fact, at a glance, you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference. This suite of-

fers word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, database, drawing, and HTML (Hypertext Markup Language)-editing capabilities. (It doesn't include an email client such as Outlook, however.)

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

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

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

PDF Creator

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

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

At \$139, the registration fee for Easy PDF Creator isn't exactly cheap, but it's still less than Adobe Acrobat Standard's \$299 price tag. In addition, PDFDesk also offers a pure freeware version available called WinPDF. WinPDF limits you to creating PDF files one at a time (Easy PDF Creator will automatically create files in batches, if desired) and can't convert an existing PDF file to HTML the way Easy PDF Creator can. (It also lacks an uninstaller.)

Photo Editing

For those of us with a penchant for taking digital photographs, some kind of image-editing application is practically de rigueur. Both Microsoft and Adobe make excellent utilities, but the cost for either is quite steep. From a company called Power Of Software comes Photo Pos Pro (<http://www.photopos.com>), which can be an economical alternative to the aforementioned vendors' offerings. It's suited to both expert and novice users—it includes many advanced editing features but also provides step-by-step instructions on how to perform common tasks such as removing red-eye or changing an image background. The application supports numerous file types and can also convert between types. You can download Photo Pos for a 30-day trial period and register it for \$29.90, which gets you all future program updates.

Screen Capture

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

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

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(Something for {Nearly} Nothing)

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on saved images as some shareware screen capture tools do.

You can register CaptureWizPro for \$29.95. If you don't need advanced features such as the ability to capture the mouse pointer or extremely large areas that require scrolling, you can opt for CaptureWizLite for \$19.95.

Internet Service Provider

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

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

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

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

many Web pages.

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

Web Editor

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

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

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

CD & DVD Burning

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

One is Easy CD/DVD Recorder from Paragon Software Group (<http://www.paragon.ag>). It's free to try and uses a simple design. (There's also an expert mode for more advanced users.)

Registering the software will only set you back \$24.95.

Another utility called Droppix Recorder (<http://www.droppix.com>) has a flashier user interface—its wizards feature an animated wizard character. It also has many advanced features, such as the ability to automatically download and update the firmware for many popular DVD-R (DVD-recordable) drives. The trial period for Droppix Recorder is 30 days, and the registration fee is 39.90 euros, which at press time was equal to about \$52.

But Wait, There's More

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

Web Browser

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

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

Email

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

Digital Media Player/Converter

WinXP comes with Windows Media Player, a perfectly capable media app. Whether it's the best for you, however, may depend on the file format you use and what kind of

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(Something For {Nearly} Nothing)

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portable audio device you have (or plan to buy).

If you see an iPod in your future, check out Apple's iTunes software. It's free to use (it also is included with the iPod) and can play back digital audio and rip CDs. iTunes supports MP3s and its own proprietary format, but it doesn't support Microsoft's WMA audio format.

A Penny Saved Is A Penny Earned

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

"Reprinted with permission from Smart Computing. Visit, <http://www.smartcomputing.com/groups>, to learn what Smart Computing can do for you and your user group!"

Back It Up – Or Else

by Al Gordon, Kawartha CC

Computer users seem to have adopted one of three basic backup strategies: system backup, data backup, and total denial. Sadly, option three seems to be the most prevalent, and too many users too often discover too late it was a really bad choice.

Backup once was considered primarily a defense against a hardware failure - most often, a hard drive malfunction. Today that's only one issue. There are the dangers of viruses, Trojans, and worms transmitted via the Internet and networks. There is the issue of software "patches" (repairs) going wrong. As this is being written, for example, Microsoft has rolled out major updates, which it calls "service packs" to Office 2003 and Windows XP, and history teaches us that the company often needs to issue patches to its patches. The Catch 22 is that once installed many patches cannot be uninstalled.

Similar issues exist with respect to software and hardware installations. You try out something. It doesn't work the way you expected. But you can't get rid of it completely because software vendors love to leave some files and settings behind, figuring you will change your mind and want to restore the program. Or the uninstall mechanism is as messed up as the software and doesn't work. Consider it a rule of computing that the most disastrous installations will be the hardest to remove.

Finally, there is the need to purge your computer of *chozzerai* (Yiddish for crud). Computers are big time *chozzerai* collectors. Over time, you install and uninstall software, add and remove hardware, update and purge data. Even when those changes go normally, there usually is still some residue left behind that eventually will reduce your system performance. My personal experience is that hard drive failures and virus, etc. attacks that got through my anti-virus and firewall software are very rare occurrences. But recovering from bad installations and removing *chozzerai* are a constant concern. Accordingly, I do a full system back up daily.

Yes, daily. Sometimes even more frequently than that if I am going to install or uninstall something. I use my computer for business and anything less than that just isn't safe.

A system backup includes everything on your computer, from the operating system to the digital photo of Aunt Mary. This approach lets you roll your system back to the state it was in before it went wrong.

The data backup strategy - protecting only the unique content you created - is a way to preserve information crucial to your business, but it is more a way to protect against disaster than an everyday system safeguard. People who don't backup usually say that

backups are too expensive, too complicated, and too tedious. Not so. The days of those touchy, snail-paced tape systems are long gone for home and small business users.

I use Maxtor's "One Touch" external hard drives, which retail from around \$180 to \$275



depending on size and connectivity. They ship with Retrospect Express backup software, and they can also double as extra storage for your data (I keep music, videos, and photos on mine). One touch means what it says: you push a button on the device and the backup process runs. Couldn't be easier.

Other manufacturers also now make similar products, but Maxtor pioneered the concept of external hard drives as backup media and they are on their second generation of the product.

Since we first reported favorably on them, the drives now have an anodized aluminum case that is a little more compact than the original. The OneTouch button now is illuminated and doubles as the drive activity light; there is an off-on switch on the back, and the power supply cabling has been simplified.

As before, OneTouch drives are available with USB 2.0, FireWire, or both. Windows formatted drives come in all three flavors.



The Mac formatted drives are FireWire only (because FireWire is standard on the Mac and FireWire offers better performance for external drives). I continue to recommend that Windows users go for the combo units and put a FireWire card in your PC if it doesn't have one. The USB will let you use the drive with other PCs without FireWire.

(Continued on Page 10)

April 2005 into May 2005

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 April ◆☆☆☆☆	2
4 Board Meeting 7 PM Sharp!	5 Luncheon SIG Noon Office Apps. SIG 6:30 PM	6	7	8	9
11	12 General Meeting 7 PM Forum 6 PM	13	14 Wi-Fi SIG 6:30 PM	15	16
18	19 Daytime SIG 1 PM Hardware SIG 7 PM	20	21 Membership Committee 7 PM	22	23
25 Digital Photo SIG 7 PM	26 Beginners/Internet SIG 6:30 PM	27	28	29	30
2 May Board Meeting 7 PM Sharp!	3 Luncheon SIG Noon Office Apps. SIG 6:30 PM	4	5	6	7

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS (SIGs)

SIG meetings are run by and for LACS members. Visitors are welcome to attend up to six SIG meetings (three of the same SIG) before joining LACS. To inquire about a SIG, please call or e-mail the **contact** person in advance.
 SIG Coordinator: Charlie Semple, sig.coord@lacspsc.org.

SIG	Contact	Telephone	When and Where
After Meeting	Cap Kierulff	310-472-9206	Dinah's Restaurant .
Begin/Internet	Dorothy Miliman	310-473-1391	4th Tuesday, 6:30 PM. Comp USA
Computer Forum	Beginners Welcome		2nd Tuesday, 6:00 PM before General Meeting.
Luncheon	Fred Kong	323-293-6810	1st Tuesday, 12-1:30 PM, New Panda Buffet
Daytime	Hy Lavere	310-837-6517	3rd Tuesday, 1-3 PM, Felicia Mahood Center
Digital Photo	Elliot Silverstein	310-670-1544	4th Monday, 7 PM American Legion Hall
	Nancy Cattell	310-452-2130	
Genealogy	Leah & Joe Clark	310-677-2792	2nd Thursday, 7 PM once a quarter (Place TBA)
Hardware	Charlie Semple	310-398-5052	3rd Tuesday, 7 PM, American Legion Hall
Membership	Gene Jacobs	310-397-8457	3rd Thursday, 7 PM.
WiFi	Charles Mahan	310-574-8690	2nd Thursday 6:30 PM. CompUSA
Office Applications	George Wolkon	310-459-2671	1st Tuesday 6:30 PM. CompUSA

Addresses

American Legion Hall, 5309 Sepulveda Blvd., Culver City (across from Coco's)
 CompUSA, 11411 Jefferson Blvd., Culver City (near Sepulveda)
 Dinah's Family Restaurant, 6521 Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles (just south of Sepulveda and Centinela)
 Felicia Mahood Senior Center, 11338 Santa Monica Blvd., West Los Angeles (at Corinth)
 New Panda Buffet, 5121 Rodeo Road, Los Angeles (at La Brea avenue, next to KFC)

(Back It Up - Or Else)*(Continued from Page 8)*

The new models come with capacities of 160, 200, 250 and 300 GB, and here is where the most significant changes have taken place in the second generation models. All are 7,200 rpm models except for the 300 GB which is 5,400. The first generation was the other way around, with 5,400 drives predominant and the 7,200 limited to a model aimed at video production professionals. But in the interim, computer usage for multimedia has exploded and consumers are looking for multimedia-capable drive speeds, too.

There also is a variety of backup software applications to use. For example, advanced users might want Dantz Development's Retrospect Professional, a more powerful version of the software that ships with the Maxtor drives.

On either platform, Retrospect excels at incremental backups — keeping track of the day-to-day changes you make in your system to minimize the number of files that have to be backed up daily. Retrospect not only creates a catalog file of what it has backed up, but organizes it with a "snapshot" of your system at the time of each backup. This is a life-and-aggravation-saver. If your system was working fine last Tuesday, but started acting up this Wednesday, you call up last Tuesday's snapshot and restore your system as that state. This is a lot easier than fighting with your system trying to debug it. Another strategy is to go for online backup - uploading your files to storage via the Internet. A number of companies such as Connected Corporation offer this service. It can be more pricey and more complicated than buying a backup drive, but for business users it does give you offsite backup of critical information — so you don't run the risk that if a fire rages



through your office, you lose both the backups as well as the originals. Mac users have access to online backup through Apple's ".Mac" Internet service. This is a good approach for data backups. When you sit down to figure out the cost of a backup solution, do not forget to consider the cost of being out of business for the length of time it would take to restore your system and the cost of losing all your documents, contacts, and billing information. With that in mind, the price of a backup solution can be very cost-effective.

So when exactly did you last back up your computer?

Al Gordon is a member of the Kawartha Computer Club, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, and writes for their newsletter, Bits & Bytes, <http://www.thebcc.org>. Mr. Gordon is also Senior Contributing Editor to the The Naked PC newsletter, <http://www.TheNakedPC.com/>

WHY COMPUTERS SOMETIMES CRASH!

by Dr. Seuss.

Submitted by **Tom Jakabfy**

(Read this to yourself aloud - it's great!)

If a packet hits a Pocket on a socket on a port, and the bus is interrupted at a very last resort, and the access of the memory makes your floppy disk abort, then the socket packet pocket has an error to report.

If your cursor finds a menu item followed by a dash, and the double-clicking icon puts your window in the trash, and



your data is corrupted cause the index doesn't hash, then your situation's hopeless and your system's gonna crash!

If the label on the cable on the table at your house, says the network is connected to the button on your mouse, but your packets want to tunnel to another protocol, that's repeatedly rejected by the printer down the hall....



And your screen is all distorted by the side effects of gauss, so your icons in the window



are as wavy as a souse; then you may as well reboot and go out with a bang, 'cuz sure as I'm a poet, the sucker's gonna hang.

When the copy on your floppy's getting sloppy in the disk, and the macro code instruction is causing unnecessary risk, then you'll

have to flash the memory and you'll want to RAM your ROM, and then quickly turn off the computer and be sure to tell your Mom!

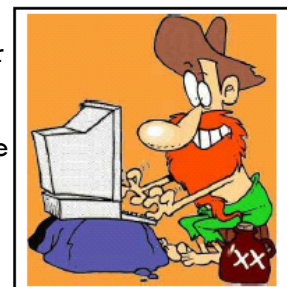
Well, that certainly clears things up for me. How about you?

Thank you, Bill Gates, for bringing all this into our lives.

Thanks to those who e-mailed this story to me.

Tom

To Jakabfy is President of the Durham PC Users Club, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, <http://www.durhampc-userclub.on.ca>.



THE NEW, THE BEST, AND THE WORST

Collected by **Pim Borman**, SW Indiana PCUG, Inc.

DVD Compatibility Woes

Last Christmas, son Mike brought his camcorder along for the traditional Christmas Present Opening. The result was pretty entertaining, mostly thanks to the star of the show, our 4-month old Cocker Spaniel Puppy. She tore at the wrappings with great abandon and battled fierce fights with her new plushy, growling toy tiger. Afterwards we hauled out the old 8-mm film projector and recorded some old-time nostalgia on Mike's camcorder. We used a Vivitar projection box, with a screen in front to project the image on (movie or slides), a 45-degree mirror inside, and an opening in the side through which to focus the camcorder on the image. After adjusting the frame rate of the camcorder to eliminate flicker the result was fairly good, taking into account the poor quality of the original 8-mm movies.

Mike copied the digital tape to a DVD on his new Sony DVD recorder, using Nero 6.3. He added a short menu including the Christmas live recording and the old movie copy session. The DVD played well on our TV set with the Aiwa DVD player, and I wanted to make a copy of the disk for later. I popped the disk in the Sony DRU 510A DVD burner of my computer and proceeded to make a copy. After reading the original disk, the program started to write to the blank disk and then stopped with an error message: blank disk was no good. After many tries with different blank disks, using a DVD-R disk instead of a DVD+R, and changing from my Veritas burner program to the Nero program I gave up. Mike took the DVD back home and tried to copy it on his computer — same result. I finally settled for copying the DVD from the Aiwa DVD player to a VCR tape.

Clearly, a television DVD recorder is not the same as a computer DVD recorder; it uses a different format (DVD-ROM, I think). When Mike recopied the original DVD from his TV DVD player to his TV DVD Recorder, without installing a menu on the new copy, we could copy that disk on our computer DVD burners. The menu on the original DVD had been causing the copying hang-up. Even so, when the DVD was played back on a computer the image was unacceptably dark.

I sent the VCR tape copy to my brother in Holland. The US and Europe use different TV standards, NTSC versus PAL, but his tape player was able to play either format, although the colors appeared to be washed out. I doubt that any DVD I could have sent would have played on a European TV-DVD player.

The confusion over incompatible DVD formats will only worsen when new, multilayer DVD burners become available. The Blu-Ray format is backed by Sony, Pioneer, Panasonic, Hewlett-Packard, and other computer and consumer electronics companies. The competing format, HD-DVD, is primarily the product of Toshiba and NEC. Both formats greatly increase the storage capacity of DVDs, but they are mutually incompatible (of course).

Picasa

Google is rapidly adding additional features, including the recently added Google Desktop that lets you search your system drives for files. The latest free addition is Picasa 2 (<http://www.picasa.com>), an add-in that searches your hard drives for images and arranges them in easy-to-scan folders arranged by date, name, or size. The pictures can be rearranged, combined in albums, made into slide shows, sent via email, make collages, and other manipulations to sort through your collections.

What especially caught my eye were the intuitive image editing tools. Most photo editors I have used are either too limited, or they offer so many features that they become hard to use. Picasa offers effective automatic contrast and color corrections, and even an "I'm Feeling Lucky" button. A "Fill Light" button serves the highly useful but poorly understood exposure-correction function usually called "gamma." If these buttons don't give the desired effect, there are Tuning and Effects buttons to further optimize your pictures.

Picasa leaves your stored images unchanged. Edited images must be "saved as a copy" or by "exporting" them to another location. I finally found out about that after spending quite some time looking in vain for the usual "save as..." menu item.

Some day Google may be the Walmart of desktop programs, offering one-stop universal functionality. Microsoft, Yahoo, and the other software moguls are warily watching its progress.

Gadgets

Now that COMDEX is no longer in existence, all the electronics media were gathered in January at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. The only computer item mentioned was Apple's new mini-computer. Otherwise much of the excitement was about a 101" plasma television screen (not yet for sale, and if you need to ask what it costs, forget it; and you won't be able to afford the electric bill either). There were also endless gadgets combining PDAs, wireless Internet Browsers, Instant Messaging, GPS Locators, Cameras, MP3 Players, and Cell Phones in one handheld contraption. I hate to think about the complexity of programming and using all those features, considering the problems I had with my new, vanilla Nokia cell phone. That little gadget also lets me play games, strike up a Beethoven

(Continued on Page 12)

(The New, The Best, and The Worst)

(Continued from Page 11)

symphony to warn me of an incoming call, and all sorts of extras that I don't need, and that probably are not included in my pre-paid contract with Cingular anyway. What I DO need is speed-dialing, but I had to dig through several layers of menus for the place to set up my contacts. Nowhere was there an option to assign a single-digit speed dial number. That is assigned automatically in numerical order, except that digit 1 gets you Voice Mail, not contact #1. Next I proceeded down the menu tree to reassign the opening message that is displayed when the phone is turned on. I wanted it to show my name and phone number, in case I lost the little unit. No matter how hard I tried to spell W F Borman, all I could get was something like Cabbage. It turned out that the unit, by default (!), uses "predictive typing," important to kids who like to send cryptic messages to each other, but otherwise totally useless. After I disabled that, typing worked, clumsily, as expected.

I hate to think what it takes to program one of those do-everything gadgets touted at the CES show. I am still hoping someday to see the one badly-needed breakthrough I would gladly pay for: an electronic shower faucet that delivers water at a constant temperature even while someone else in the house flushes the toilet and washes his hands; but it better be waterproof.

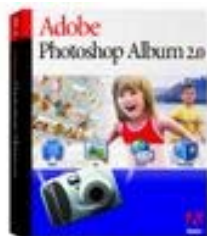
Pim Borman is a member of the SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc. and Copy Editor for their newsletter, P-See Urgent, <http://swipcug.org>.

NOTICE: User Friendly Index

The January to December 2004 Index is now posted on the website, <http://www.lacspc.org>, in the User Friendly section.

SOFTWARE REVIEW: Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0.1 by Daniel Bilger, Sarnia Computer UG

When I agreed to do a review of Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0.1, I was skeptical of how useful it could be. You see, I had all my pictures arranged in folders by either date or event such as, Christmas04, Grampa'sB'day04, Camping 03, Camping04, etc. This all seemed to work fairly well for me except when I wanted a particular picture and could not remember when I took it. With the smart tags in Photoshop Album you can put several tags on a picture in order to make it easier to find. A picture with several people in it can have a tag for each person plus one for the occasion, i.e. birthday, vacation, etc., or the date it was taken. This feature is the one that I like best but there a lot more features included in the program.



Once you have worked with a lot of pictures you notice that the slider in the toolbar has bars at dates where your pictures were taken and when you move the slider over a date the pictures are shown for that date. The information for each picture is shown as well. This makes finding pictures very easy.

There is a built in quick fix for photos that you can use in either the "Auto fix" or manually "Fix Photo" to adjust the brightness, color, or sharpness. You can fix photos individually or fix a whole group at once. I have tried this on several photos and find it works very well. You can also take care of red eye or crop your photos. The red eye repair only lets you do one eye at a time and does not always get the color right. I would

like to see a means of selecting the eye color from another picture and incorporating that eye color into the one you want to remove the red eye.

There are templates to create photo cards, calendars, photo books, and slide shows built in and printer layouts to print sheets of photos of different sizes. This feature is a lot of fun and has been used to create photo cards with very good results. When you want to send a picture to a friend through email use Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0 to help size the picture if your friend's e-mail program has limits on picture sizes that can be received. There is a limit to the email programs that you can use though. My e-mail account is with Yahoo and I could not get Adobe Photoshop Album to access my Yahoo account in order to send pictures.

To free up valuable space on your hard drive Photoshop Album provides an archive option for backing up photos to CD with built in disk burning capabilities. You can create an initial backup of your photos and then use the incremental option to keep your backup up to date. I have used this to save all of my pictures on a CD with two incremental backups so far.

The best features are:

- Calendar view to let you view pictures by day, month, or year with several tags to identify pictures.
- Batch fixing of photos either manually or automatically.
- Creativity tools for projects.
- Photo backup to CD.

Some limitations are:

- Red eye fix not always accurate with eye color.
- Limited e-mail setups for sending photos.

Overall I like the program but think that at about \$50 US it is a bit expensive.

Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0.1 is from Adobe Systems Inc.,

(Continued on Page 13)

(Software Review: Photoshop Album 2.0.1)

(Continued from Page 12)

345 Park Avenue, San Jose, CA
95110-2704, USA

Canadian office: Adobe Systems
Canada, 785 Carling Avenue, Ot-
tawa, Ontario, K1S 5H4, Canada.
Customer service 1-800-833-6687;
Online support, [http://
www.adobe.com/support/
main.html](http://www.adobe.com/support/main.html) .

System Requirements:

Intel Pentium III or 4 processor,
Microsoft Windows ME, 2000, or XP;
128 MB RAM (256 MB recom-
mended);
250 MB hard disk space;
Adobe reader 6.0 and Direct X 9.0
(included on the Adobe Photoshop
Album CD)

*Daniel Bilger, is the Shareware Librarian
for Sarnia Computer User Group, Sarnia,
Ontario, Canada,
<http://www.scug.ca/>.*

VoIP

(Voice over Internet Protocol)
by **Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D.**,
Sarasota PCUG, Inc.

Are you using the Internet for your
local and/or long distance service?
If not, then maybe you need to read
this article to find out how some
computer users are saving “mucho
dinero” on their telephone calls.

VoIP stands for Voice over Internet
Protocol. There are ways to use the
Internet for free phone calls, low
cost phone calls (2¢ per minute) or
a monthly fixed rate for both local
and long-distance calls. So how is it
possible to transmit your voice over
your Internet connection? We'll
look at some of the technical as-
pects first. Then I can discuss some
of the services that are available for
you to check out further.

When you use your telephone your
voice is converted into electrical
waves and transmitted over copper
wires to another phone. There it is
converted back to sound waves.
These impulses are transmitted via

several switches in the telephone
network. This system is referred to
as the Public Switched Telephone
Network (PSTN). As long as you
are talking on the phone you have
a constant circuit connection be-
tween the two phones. In the origi-
nal PSTN system, all calls required
a dedicated wire for each call. For
the period of time you were on the
phone you “owned” a copper wire
connection between your phone
and the other party. In today's
PSTN, all calls are digitized and
can be combined with thousands
of others running over fiber optic
cable between central stations.
However, the connection between
the two phones must remain open
for the length of the call.

When computer data is transmit-
ted over phone lines or cable, it is
also in digital form. However, the
data is sent in packets and does
not require a dedicated pathway
to reach its destination. In fact,
when a computer sends a stream
of data packets, they may all ar-
rive at their destination after trav-
eling different routes. There are
thousands of possible paths be-
tween any origin and any destina-
tion. In addition, packets from
other origins can use any time
spaces between your packets.
This is a more efficient system, as
a circuit does not need to be kept
open. This system is referred to as
packet switching.

So if your e-mail is being chopped
up into small packets, how does
the system know what to do with
them? Each packet contains an
address that tells the router what
its final destination is. The sending
computer sends the packet off to a
router and then goes on to its next
operation. The router selects a
path to another router and sends
the packet off. This process contin-
ues to the destination computer.
At the destination, the receiving
computer assembles the packets
based on the information con-
tained in each packet.

So what does this have to do with

Internet phones? Very simple. VoIP
uses the packet switching technol-
ogy to transmit your call. The digiti-
zation of your voice occurs either
through your sound card or a de-
vice known as an analog telephone
adapter (ATA). There are also Inter-
net phones, which connect directly
to a network router and handle the
conversion process. The voice
packets that result from these vari-
ous adapters are routed over the
Internet in the same way as data
packets. When you make a phone
call, there is always dead space
when no one is talking. With the
packet system, other data packets
from other sources are being trans-
mitted over the Internet making
maximum use of its capacity.

In the early days of VoIP sound
quality was poor and the method of
operation more like using a walkie-
talkie. Today's equipment is vastly
improved. Sound quality on many
VoIP systems is the equivalent of
that found in the PSTN. Depending
on the system you are using, you
can dial any number and your call
will be routed over the Internet. In
such a system, you and the party
you called won't see any difference
in operation or sound from that of
the PSTN.

So why would you be interested in
using an Internet phone instead of
your current local/long distance
PSTN service? One big factor for
many people is cost. The cost of
Internet service ranges from free to
\$25/month (more in some cases) for
unlimited calls. In addition, many of
the VoIP services offer features that
cost you extra through your local
phone company. It is not unusual for
a VoIP provider to include Caller
ID, Call waiting, Call transfer, call
forwarding, voicemail and three
way calling as part of the basic
price.

Now let's look at some of the pro-
viders and their services. Skype
(<http://www.skype.com>) offers a
free service that allows you to con-
nect to other Skype users. The

(Continued on Page 14)

(VoIP)*(Continued from Page 13)*

software for this can be downloaded from their website. It took just a few minutes to install it on my computer. Once you have installed it, you need to setup a call list of other users. So you have to contact people that you call frequently and have them install the Skype software. From that point on, it becomes much like instant messaging. If the person you are calling is on-line, you can connect and talk to them. Otherwise, they have no way to know that you are calling. The reverse is also true if they want to call you. The minimum hardware you need for this are speakers connected to your sound card and a microphone. You can also use a headset with a built-in microphone. It is also advisable that you have a broadband connection, either cable or DSL. In my testing of it, once I had a connection, the call was quite clear with no background static or other problems.

So what do you do if you have Skype and want to call someone who doesn't have Skype? You can get SkypeOut that allows you to call any phone number anywhere in the world for about 2¢/minute. After you install the SkypeOut software you buy credit on their Internet site, which you can then use for your calls. Some reviewers have had sound problems with SkypeOut. I have not tested it.

There are other free services available as well. One is Free World Dialup (<http://www.freeworlddialup.com>). This is a quote from their website: "FWD allows you to make free phone calls using any broadband connection using devices that follow Internet standards. This can be a 'regular' telephone connected to a pack-eter, an IP Phone or any number of free soft-phones (software for your PC or PDA)." In order to use the system you need to download and install the software. Then you obtain

a phone number from FWD. The hardware you need is a SIP compatible ATA adapter that you connect to a network router that connects to your modem. You can then connect any telephone to the jack in the ATA adapter. Now you're ready to dial any FWD user anywhere in the world. However, you cannot dial a regular PSTN phone from this system without purchasing time from another VoIP provider. The advantage of FWD over Skype is that your computer doesn't have to be on to receive calls. Your phone will ring just as it did when connected to the PSTN phone system.

There is another advantage to FWD. This system uses the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) standard. This allows FWD users to call others who are not member of FWD but are connected by a different SIP compatible service. Other free services currently using the SIP standard are IPTEL.org and SIP-Phone.com. Skype does not adhere to the SIP standard.

Now we get to the services that charge a monthly fee. These providers furnish a SIP compatible ATA adapter and in some instances the router for your telephone connection. This list includes companies like AT&T (CallVantage), Verizon (VoiceWing), Packet8, VoicePulse and Vonage. Of these, AT&T and Verizon are the most expensive. Several of these providers are preparing wireless units that will allow you to connect through any WiFi hotspot. Vonage has announced that they expect to have a wireless unit available by mid-summer 2005. That means you could make and receive call while you are on the road. Also, by taking your ATA adapter with you when you travel, connections can be made through broadband data ports in many hotels and motels.

Of these providers, Vonage has been in the game longer than the others and has a strong reputation

as to its quality. They have two basic plans: (1) \$24.99 for unlimited calling in the U.S. and Canada, (2) \$14.99 for 500 long-distance minutes. They also offer virtual phone numbers with any area code you prefer. Dialing other numbers in your area code requires just seven digits. You can add a fax line for \$10 per month or toll-free numbers for \$5 per month. With Vonage and these other providers, you can call any PSTN number or numbers on the FWD network. For more details on the specific services provided by these companies I would suggest you check their web sites.

So what are the drawbacks to VoIP services?

First, if your Internet provider has a service outage, then your phone service is also down.

Second, if there is a power outage you lose your phone service unless your system has a battery backup to keep it running.

Third, another disadvantage is that most of these services can't connect to 911. In some cases, you can call 911 after you have provided the service with location information for their files. They need this information so the system will know where to direct the call. However, the 911 operator can't see your name or address and you have to provide that information when you make the call.

In spite of these disadvantages, VoIP usage is rapidly increasing. If you are interested in testing VoIP, I suggest you start with one of the free services. Try it, you may like it.

Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., is a member of the Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc., Sarasota, Florida, <http://www.spcug.com>.



TECH NEWS

by **Sue Crane**, VP / Editor,
Big Bear Computer Club

IRS partners Intuit, TaxAct and eSmartTax are offering no-cost services to everyone this year. Two additional companies, FreeTax-USA.com and FileYourTaxes.com, are extending free services to residents of certain U.S. states. The 10 remaining participating companies, including tax giant H&R Block, have no-cost programs for specific demographics, such as people over the age of 60 or members of the military. Forty States and the District of Columbia are working on a national Internet sales tax system. SSTP (Streamlined Sales Tax Project) has issued two requests for bids for software and Web-based networks to track online purchases sales tax payments. As currently envisioned by the states, Web merchants would pay nothing for the services; instead, the vendors would take a cut from tax revenues

EBay and Intel have developed a "Rethink Initiative" which seeks to bring together public and private organizations to promote recycling and reuse of old PCs and consumer electronics products. The announcement comes days after the Electronic Waste Recycling Act of 2003 became active in California, requiring consumers to pay an Electronic Waste Recycling Fee for certain devices, including monitors and laptop computers. EBay president and chief executive officer Meg Whitman said. "I would love to try as an industry to come together with market-based solutions so we won't have to face federal and state regulation."

Vonage, the No. 1 Internet phone company, is offering its subscribers a wireless Wi-Fi phone that can make calls over the Internet at homes or at public Wi-Fi hot spots. The new phone will let consumers make VoIP calls from any Wi-Fi hot spot. Wi-Fi calls are essentially free, in contrast to cell phone calls, and customers will plug a regular

phone into an adapter linked to a broadband Internet line. Vonage will then turn the calls into data that travel by Internet before being converted back to voice at the other end. Meanwhile, Comcast Corp., the nation's biggest cable company, said Monday it plans to roll out phone service over the Internet to all 21.5 million of its customers within the next year and a half, bringing the online technology into the mainstream.

New technology known as **eICU ("Enhanced Intensive Care")** lets physicians miles away from their patents manage health care via cameras and banks of computer screens. The technology is already in use at least 18 hospital systems nationwide. Whereas traditional health care systems rely on nurses to notice a problem with a patient and relay the information to a doctor, eICU informs the doctor directly. The doctor can check the patient's ventilator, intravenous medication and anything else in the patient's room, and one physician notes: "The camera is such that I can count eyelashes."

If you've bought a **plasma TV**, you might get one-upped in two years, when TVs using new carbon technology arrive. A new type of flat-panel display that will rely on diamonds or carbon nanotubes--two forms of pure carbon--to produce images. Theoretically, these "field effect displays," or FEDs, will consume less energy than plasma or liquid crystal display (LCD) TVs, deliver a better picture and even cost less.

RaySat has developed a satellite antenna that turns a moving vehicle into a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot. In addition to the Internet access service, RaySat has developed an antenna that enables cars to receive satellite TV broadcasts -- an application that may have broader appeal among consumers. RaySat expects to launch its new product in the third quarter of this year.

For people fed up with pecking

out text messages on their mobile phone, **Samsung Electronics** may have an answer. The South Korean electronics maker has developed what it is calling the world's first mobile phones that can convert spoken words into text messages. Three handsets will be released in the U.S. sometime during the first quarter.

In Asia, **cell phone handset** makers are already marketing phones with embedded memory devices (a chip or magnetic strip) that can be swiped against credit or debit card readers in much the same way consumers now use plastic, and trials are underway to bring the technology to the U.S. Details are still being worked on important issues such as security. "The phones are exciting, but it's going to be a long time" before a widespread base of U.S. merchants and consumers are equipped to use them, says Visa International VP Sue Gordon-Lathrop.

The **U.S. Army** is sending 18 remote-controlled robotic soldiers called SWORDS (Special Weapons Observation Reconnaissance Detection Systems) to Iraq, but they are not the autonomous killer robots of science fiction: a SWORDS robot shoots only when its human operator presses a button (after identifying a target on video shot by the robot's cameras).

MOST IDENTITY THEFT OCCURS OFFLINE. Despite growing concerns over online fraud, a new study conducted by the Better Business Bureau and Javelin Research finds that most cases of identity theft can be traced to a lost or stolen wallet or checkbook, rather than vulnerable online financial data. Computer crimes make up just 12% of all ID fraud cases in which the origin is known, and half of those are attributed to spyware that sneaks onto computers and steals private information.

Sue Crane is Vice President of the Big Bear Computer Club, Big Bear Lake, California, and Editor of their newsletter, Bearly Bytes, <http://www.bigbearcc.org>.

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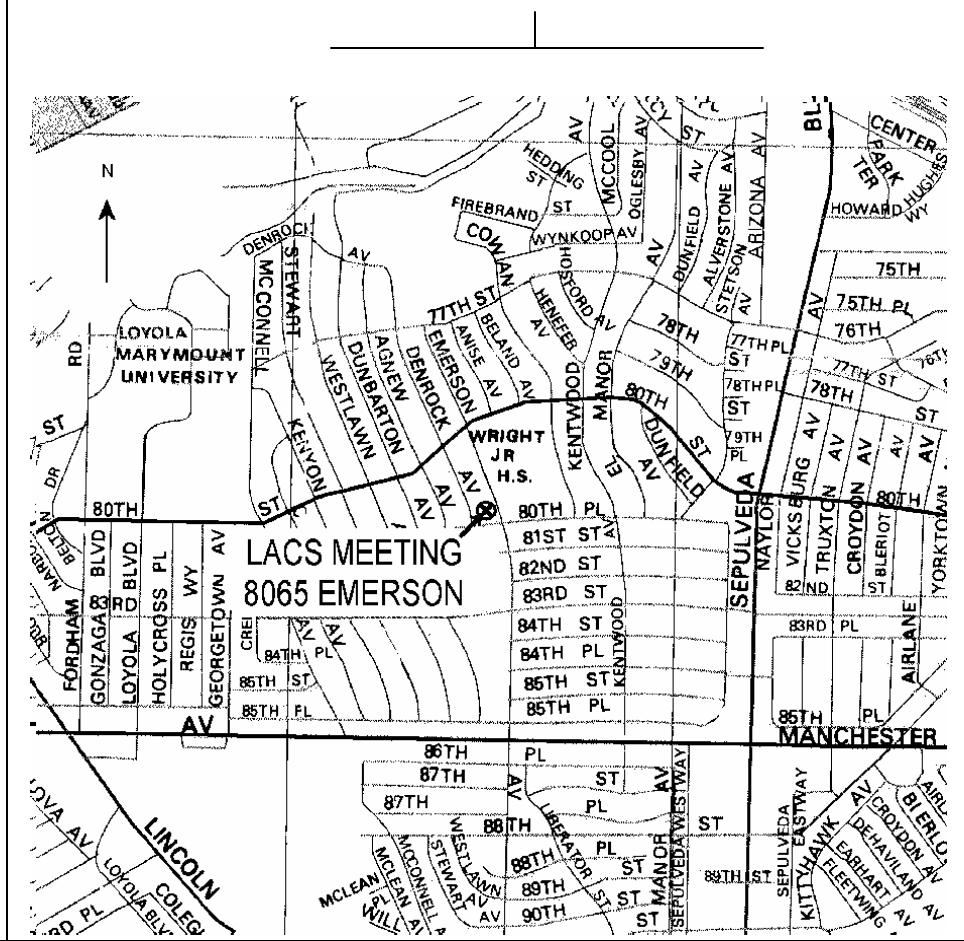
DIRECTIONS TO GENERAL MEETING

From the North:

Take Sepulveda Blvd. SOUTH to W. 80th St. Turn WEST/right and go about one mile to Emerson Ave. Turn SOUTH/left and go one long block to W. 80th Place. Fellowship Hall is on the Northwest corner of Emerson and W. 80th Place.

From the South, East or West:

Take Manchester Ave. to Emerson Ave. Turn North and go about eight blocks to W. 80th Place. Fellowship Hall is on the Northwest corner of Emerson and W. 80th Place. There is plenty of street parking and a small parking lot West of the church.



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