The Cursor

Monthly Newsletter of the
Washington Area Computer User Group

Meeting Location
OLLI, 4210 Roberts Road,
Fairax, VA

apcug
Member of

Next Meeting:
Sept 19, 2009

Presidential Bits

by Paul Howard, President WACUG, president@wacug.org.

Our joint August meeting with OPCUG was an outstanding success, with more folks in attendance than any time this year. We counted 52 noses, and as many heads.

Bill Walsh kicked off the "Learn 30" session with a discussion and demonstration of Skype video calls, with the 4.1 version of their software. The service allows free Skype to Skype calls anywhere in the world, both video and voice only. Calls to land line or cell phones incur charges. The session included a mini-webinar with Gene Barlow of User Group Resources answering questions about Acronis True Image, a PC backup and recovery software product he introduced to the group via a Skype video presentation in July.

Mike Mabee gave a terrific presentation on the Windows 7 operating system, scheduled for release in October. Mike's presentation with extensive feature comparisons between various Win7 versions, and screen shots of various features, is available on the web site's "recent meetings" page: http://www.wacug.org/recmtgs.html

September Meeting - Wireless Networking, TV / PC Convergence

Chuck Roberts will present a "Learn 30" session about wireless home networking, which has now evolved into a commodity business for several companies like Cisco, through Linksys, Geek Squad and Best Buy stores, but what are the basics for connecting a few devices like computers and printers and then sharing an Internet connection? What equipment is required and how is it all connected?

After it's installed, how do you secure your network to prevent drive-by hacking or to protect your idenity and your private personal data?

Chuck will tie this discussion into our TV / PC Convergence theme by describing how you connect multiple Tivos to your network and move recordings between receivers so you can watch any recorded program on any Tivo.

Rod Zumbro will discuss how you can watch Netflix movies on your TV

Plus Bonus Articles in the Download Edition

Lloyd's Web Sites for September, 2009

by Lloyd Johnson, WACUG Member

http://www.wacug.org/ is the URL for the Washington Area Computer User Group. Visit it for past issues of Web Sites with hyperlinks

September Sites: 2009

1. Ready for Some Football? Colleges and Pros – http://football.com – Pros – www.jt-sw.com/football

2. iTools – www.itools.com – "iTools Internet tools: Search, research, reference, look up or translate just about anything in one place."

3. How old would you be if you didn't know old you are? www.realage.com

4. Paper e-mail. To send a message to someone that doesn't have e-mail. Write your message, and the site will address, stamp and mail a traditional letter. Price starts at $1.16 but varies depending on where you are sending the letter. www.L-Mail.com. If you want to send an e-mail regularly, for $9.95 per month use www.Sunnygram.com

5. A website that helps you write and illustrate your own Comic Strips and e-mail them to friends/families – www.MakebeliefsComix.com

6. Bing Vs Google – www.bing-vs-google.com Want to compare Bing & Google results? This is the right place to be. Just put your query in the search box and press Enter. You'll see results from both engines side by side.

7. A presentation of our national debt will either grow on you or make you mad – www.usdebtclock.org

8. Mailbox Locator – www.payphone-project.com/mailboxes – "The Mailbox Locator helps you find USPS collection stations (blue mailboxes) and post offices in your area. ... Click on a state name or enter a zip code to see a list of US Postal Service blue mailboxes and post office locations in that area. Every listing contains location information (most with maps) and scheduled pick-up times for each mailbox."

9. Yahoo Maps – http://maps.yahoo.com – "Yahoo! Maps, Driving Directions, Satellite View and Traffic. Rated the best online mapping experience

10. No-Fee ATM's

Enter an address or Zip Code – www.allpointnetwork.com Also try: Money Pass This one lists fee-free ATM's coast to coast and includes driving directions – www.moneypass.com

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GNU/Linux SIG

By Geof Goodrum, WAC

Google Chrome Operating System

On July 7th, Google, Inc. announced the Google Chrome Operating System (http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/07/introducing-google-chrome-os.html). While the earlier Google Android OS is aimed at mobile devices like smartphones, the Google Chrome OS targets systems from small netbook PCs to full desktop systems. Google Chrome OS is designed to run web-based applications within Google's Chrome web browser (http://www.google.com/chrome), all running on top of the Linux OS kernel and a new windowing system.

There are several benefits to the Linux community; Google will continue to support Linux kernel development, a new, user-friendly interface will further promote use of Linux by non-technical users, and Google will finally deliver a fully-supported native version of the Chrome web browser for all Linux systems.

Given Google's market presence, Google Chrome OS stands a fair chance of grabbing back the netbook market from Microsoft. The market was initially dominated by Linux-based systems until Microsoft pushed a revived Windows XP for netbooks (for a related story from the Dell perspective, see http://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/08/12/dell_reality_linux_windows_netbooks/). It's also worth noting that Chrome will be the default browser on Sony PCs (http://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/09/01/sony_google_chrome_deal/).

In many ways, the Google Chrome OS is Microsoft's worst fear from the past realized. Recall that Sun Microsystems promoted "The Network is the Computer" in the late 1990's along with Netscape Communications and Oracle Corporation, all of which threatened Microsoft's source of income from operating system and office application licenses. Microsoft responded with .NET, C#, Internet Explorer integrated into the OS, bundled apps on new PCs, etc. Microsoft is now responding to Google's web applications (e.g. Google Docs, http://docs.google.com/) with MS Office Live (http://www.officelive.com/en-us/), their own attempt at web applications.

WPA Encryption Weakness

First Wired Equivalent Privacy (WEP), now WiFi Protected Access (WPA). If you are using either of these two network standards to hide (encrypt) the content and protect the privacy of your wireless network communications, it's time to think about upgrading your network equipment to use WPA2. A weakness in the WEP standard allows a listener to decrypt (reveal) the contents of the wireless signal after monitoring for only a minute. [Note this only applies to communications that are not already encrypted – connections to secure web sites (i.e., address starting with https://) remain encrypted even if no wireless encryption standard is used.]

Two Japanese University security researchers recently published a method to attack the Temporal Key Integrity Protocol (TKIP) typically used in WPA connections(http://jwis2009.nsysu.edu.tw/location/paper/A%20Practical%20

Message%20Falsification%20Attack%20on%20WPA. pdf), and claim they can discover the key to decrypt the connection in as little as one minute. It is worth noting that this attack is not trivial to execute, as it is in the family of "Man in the Middle" attacks that require the attacker to intercept and relay a connection between the user and the wireless access point.

Fortunately, either WPA with Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) or the WPA2 standard (which uses AES by default) are still secure, and recommended if your network equipment supports it.

Linux Option Removed from New PlayStation 3

At first it sounded like great news – Sony announced a price drop on the Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3) from

US$399 to $299, as well as introducing a new "Slim" model (scheduled availability, 1 September 2009) that is 32% smaller, 36% lighter, and 33% more energy efficient than the current model. Unfortunately, in what Sony claims is a move to reduce on-going firmware support costs on the Slim model, Sony dropped the OtherOS option that allows the system to run Linux-based OS distributions like Yellow Dog Linux (http:// us.fixstars.com/products/ydl/). However, the option will continue to be supported on the older PS3 model, so some have questioned how significant the savings would be against the loss of some sales to users who want the option (some forum postings indicate that Sony lost a few sales for that reason). The PS3 has also been used to build inexpensive Linux supercomputer clusters (http://moss.csc.ncsu.edu/~mueller/cluster/ps3/). Since the PS3 is sold below cost with profit coming from game sales, there is some speculation that discouraging use as a computer/supercomputer cluster instead of a game console is a more likely reason for Sony removing the option.

The new PS3 models have also dropped backwards compatibility with PS1 and PS2 games.

FSF Lists Windows 7 Sins

The Free Software Foundation (FSF) began an awareness campaign to discourage businesses and individuals from purchasing Microsoft's Windows 7 operating system. According to the Press Release (http://www. fsf.org/news/windows-7-sins) the campaign outlines seven major areas where proprietary software in general and Microsoft Windows in particular hurt all computer users: invading privacy, poisoning education, locking users in, abusing standards, leveraging monopolistic behavior, enforcing Digital Restrictions Management (DRM), and threatening user security.

FSF executive director Peter Brown said, "Our national and local governments, NGOs, and our universities and schools that use proprietary software are undertaking bad public policy, often through ignorance or misplaced values. We hope to alert these decision makers to the positive contribution they can make to society by switching their organizations to free software."

The FSF created a web site to support the campaign at http://windows7sins.org/. Do yourself a favor and check it out before purchasing Microsoft's newest OS.

GNU/Linux Distribution Releases

GNU/Linux distributions are complete GNU/Linux operating system and application software collections. Many are freely downloadable or can be ordered on CDs or DVD at low cost. DistroWatch.com lists the following distribution release announcements for the period July 30 – September 2, 2009.

Distribution
Arch Linux 2009.08
CentOS 4.8
Estrella Roja 2.5
Finnix 93.0
iMagic OS 2009.9
kademar Linux 4.9
Linux From Scratch 6.5
Linux Mint 7 "KDE"
openmamba GNU/Linux 1.1
Parted Magic 4.4
PC/OS 2009.3
Red Hat Enterprise Linux 5.4
SAM Linux 2009

with Netflix-enabled devices such as a digital video player and some Blu-Ray disc players, game consoles, digital video recorders, home theater systems, and HDTVs. Netflix streaming allows you to watch some 12,000 movies and TV shows (free with regular Netflix subscriptions) of the 100,000 DVDs available from Netflix via postal mail.

OLLI member Rod Zumbro, has a Blu-Ray disc player connected to a small bridge device that accesses his home's wireless network. Rod will explain equipment options and set-up, Netflix streaming, picture and sound quality, picture size, etc.

Geof Goodrum will demonstrate watching TV shows and movies for free over the Internet from such sites as Fancast and Hulu. This is a great way to catch up on TV shows you (or your video recorder) might have missed. If you are a member of online video services such as Netflix, you can also watch selected movies on your PC over the Internet.

Paul Howard will demonstrate and discuss watching and recording over-the-air broadcasts or cable TV on your personal computer.

Scientific Linux 4.8 "Live CD/DVD"
SimplyMEPIS 8.0.10
Slackware Linux 13.0
Slax 6.1.2
SystemRescueCd 1.2.3
Tiny Core Linux 2.2
Trisquel GNU/Linux 2.2
Tuquito 3
VectorLinux 6.0 "Light Live"
Vine Linux 5.0

Linux Software of the Month

The software described below is downloadable at the links provided or may be requested on CD, or copied onto a USB flash drive at the WAC meeting. In addition, WAC can provide CD-R and DVD±R media for any downloadable GNU/Linux operating system distribution (e.g. Fedora, Mandriva, Ubuntu, Debian, Knoppix). Please note that download versions of commercial distributions do not include official technical support nor printed documentation.

Discs are available only by pre-order. Contact Geof Goodrum by e-mail (linux@wacug.org) at least 48 hours before meeting day to order or for more information. Single CD-R discs are available with a $3 donation; GNU/Linux distributions on multiple CD-Rs or single DVD±R are available with a $6 donation.

September 2009

eyeos – v1.8.6.2. http://eyeos.org/. Free Affero GNU Public License version 3 source code by the eyeos community. Sourceforge Project of the Month for August 2009, eyeos is software for a home, office, or school network that provides local web-based applications

that run entirely within a web browser. Eyeos, mainly written in PHP, XML, and Javascript, integrates with Apache web server and OpenOffice.org 2.4.2 to provide a Desktop environment in the web browser with sixty-seven applications and system utilities. It even works with portable devices via its mobile front end. Eyeos lets you upload your files and work with them no matter where you are. Applications include MS Office-compatible Word Processor, Spreadsheet, Presentation Manager, Address Book, PDF reader, Photo and Music manager. A list of available applications is online at http://www.eyeos-apps.org/. If you prefer not to run your own server or want to try eyeos out first, setup a new user account on the public eyeos server at http://www.eyeos.info/.

Gargoyle – v2009-08-25. http://ccxvii.net/gargoyle/. Free GNU General Public License source code by Tor Andersson, maintained by Ben Cressey. Gargoyle is an interactive fiction (IF) player that supports major IF formats, including Agility, Alan 2 and 3, Frotz (glk port), Glulxe, Hugo, Level 9, Magnetic, Scare, Tads 2 and 3. Gargoyle is particularly adept at rendering text:

- Subpixel font rendering for LCD screens.
- Unhinted anti-aliased fonts: beautiful, the way they were designed.
- Adjustable gamma correction: tune the rendering for your screen.
- Floating point text layout for even spacing.
- Kerning for even more even spacing.
- Smart quotes and other punctuation formatting.
- Ligatures for "fi" and, "fl".

- Plenty o' margins.
- Plenty o' line spacing.
- Integrated scrollback.

The Interactive Fiction Archive (http://www.ifarchive.org/) has a large library of free interactive fiction compatible with Gargoyle.

Scribus – v1.3.5.1. http://www.scribus.net/. Free GNU General Public License source code and executable packages for openSuSE 11.1, Debian/Ubuntu 9.0.4, and Fedora 11. Scribus is an Open Source program that brings award-winning professional page layout to Linux/UNIX, Mac OS X, OS/2 Warp 4/eComStation and Windows desktops with a combination of „press-ready" output and new approaches to page layout. Underneath the modern and user friendly interface, Scribus supports professional publishing features, such as CMYK color, separations, Spot Colors, ICC color management and versatile PDF creation. This release adds a switch to Qt4, source code refactoring, quicker rendering and loading of documents, sane inline text editing, the new object type „render frame", new document viewing modes, new path editing tools, better linguistic tools, more typography options, much easier legal Pantone color swatches support, various user interface improvements, new and improved import/export filters, improved print previews, and lots of bugfixes and smaller improvements.
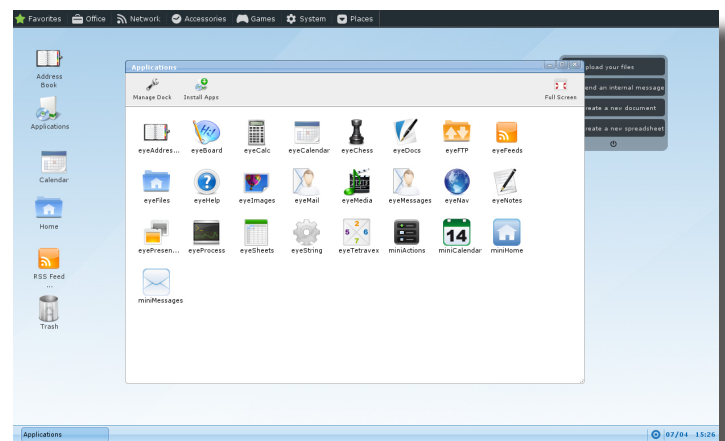
The King of Shreds and Patches – http://maher.filfre.net/King/. Copyrighted but freely distributable interactive fiction in Glulx format by Jimmy Maher. The King of Shreds and Patches is a novel-length work of interactive fiction. In it, you will explore a historically accurate recreation of Elizabethan London, circa 1603, interact with some fascinating characters both historical and fictional, and (if you are clever and lucky) thwart an occult conspiracy that threatens to bring down the entire city - or worse. Over two years in development, King features:

- Roughly 12 to 15 hours of play time
- A convoluted, compelling mystery to piece together
- Realistic interactions with more than a dozen potential friends or suspects - or both
- Realistic action sequences
- A huge variety of puzzles to solve in a variety of ways
- An integrated context-sensitive hint system

designed to give you only the information you need

- An auto-map to make finding your way around London a snap
- An RPG-style "quest tracking" system to keep you always oriented to your current goals and your place in the story
- An integrated tutorial to get those new to interactive fiction into the swing of things quickly and easily

...and much, much more, all in the service of a rich story presented through a sophisticated drama management system. Requires a Glulx interpreter such as Gargoyle.
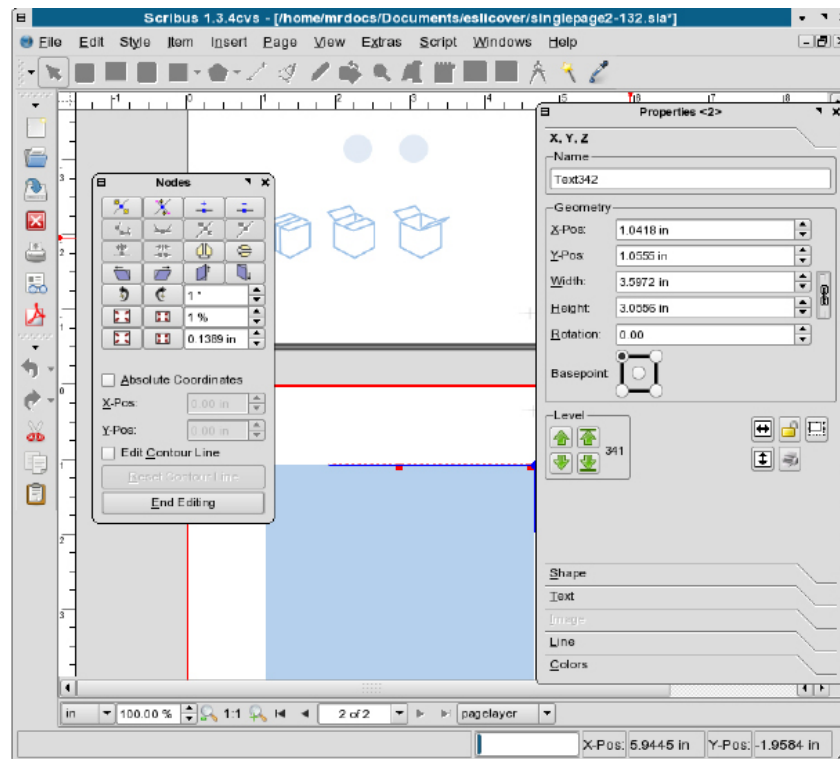
Kernel Source – http://www.kernel.org/. 2.6 kernel source code for all platforms (stable 2.6.30).

eyeos
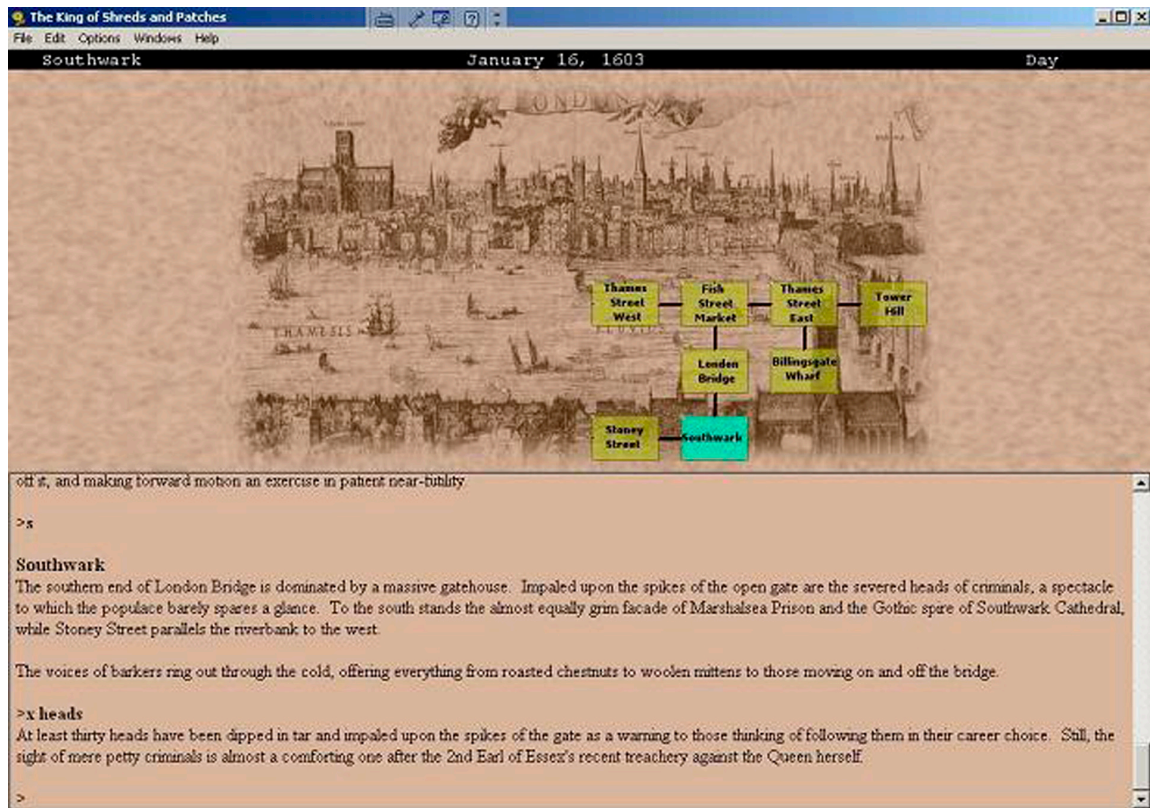
The King of Shreds and Patches

Scribus

Optimize Your PC

Written by Jon Jackman, President, Fox Valley PC
Association, Illinois
Fox Tales, August 2009
www.fvpca.org
jockojkj (at) aol.com

I saw an e-mail from PC World inviting me to speed up my slow PC. This directed me to a link for a "free scan" of my computer using PC Pitstop Optimize 3.0. Recently, we had a discussion at our general meeting of slow system performance, so I decided to give it a try and document the effort here. It may postpone an inevitable Windows re-install, but we will see.

The scan yielded some interesting results and offered to do it for me if I purchased the program (for about $30.) I looked at the results and wondered how I might be able to do this manually for free? I looked around on Google and found some step-by-step guides on basically accomplishing the same things that PC Pitsop's Optimize would do if I paid the $30. I ran the program and it began to scan my system. Interestingly it ran 3 scans of my Download speed. Not sure what that was about. It then displayed several pages of results: Junk Files, Internet Settings, Startup Programs, Registry Fixes and Performance Tweaks. When I reboot, it reminds me of what it can do to make thinks run better by displaying red messages. I will try some manual fixes and watch to see if the start-up scan gets progressively greener.

Looking at what Optimize tries to do I first decided to run CCleaner, a free program that has been a recent DOQ offering (2009 DOQ-2). Alternately, you can download it from www.ccleaner.com.

Junk Files

The first Optimize Results screen listed the junk files that I could safely delete. In my case, Optimize listed Temporary Files, Recycle Bin and Internet Caches. Using CCleaner in the Cleaner option under the Windows tab, files for Internet Explorer, Windows Explorer and System are listed by default, so I ran the "Analyze" tool. I was reminded to close Firefox to enable the Internet Cache to be cleaned as well. After several minutes it was complete and it said that ANALYSIS COMPLETE – (526.859 seconds), 555.9MB to be removed. (Approximate size). As a comparison, Optimize indicated that 729 MB would be cleaned. I ran the "Run Cleaner" option.

Internet Settings

The second Optimize Results screen looks at Internet Settings and explains that they may be tuned for faster throughput and may provide a substantial increase in Internet performance. In my case, my connections (HTTP, TCP/IP and Firefox) had no recommended adjustments. However, you may try using the Optimize free scan yourself and see that you have some that are recommended. In that case, you may try to Optimize your settings manually. Search Google for "TCP Optimizer", download and run it. Select "Optimal", then apply. Look around carefully and see what else you might optimize.

You will need to reboot.

Startup Programs

When Windows starts up it automatically loads a number of programs, many of which you may not need. As you install more and more programs, this list can continue to grow. In my situation, there were several Startup Programs that Optimize considered "unnecessary." (You could run the free scan and see what it says about your system.) The ones listed on mine were: InstallShield Update Service (2 instances), Adobe Acrobat SpeedLauncher, QuickTime Icon and Realtek HD Audio. Using CCleaner I went to Tools and then selected Startup. I looked at the programs that Optimizer 3.0 suggested and right clicked on them and chose "Disable".

Registry Fixes

Programs sometimes leave incorrect information behind in the registry, either because they uninstall improperly or because the files associated with the entries have been moved or deleted. Cleaning the Windows registry would hope to keep your PC in working order and keep the system running at peak performance. Using CCleaner, select Registry and then "Scan for issues". You can then choose to Fix them. Afterwards, not too many of the Optimize findings were changed.

Performance Tweaks

Optimize made some recommendations to adjust some settings in the Registry. Using the suggested tweaks I searched the Registry and made the adjustments to the keys that I could find, although not all of the ones recommended could be found. As always, back up your registry first! (CCleaner would have done that prior to fixing the registry in the step above.) Start, Run "rege-

dit", then Edit, Find and enter the string. Right click and adjust the value.

Additional Fixes

Use Auslogics Registry Defrag

Defrag your hard drive!

Uninstall Optimize 3.0… You might want to reinstall it and run a new scan after you have done all of these steps to see if you made progress.

You should see a faster booting, faster running machine!

Good luck!

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Free Software Helps Caregivers

Written by Mike Morris, Editor, Front Range PC
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kByte™ Newsletter, June 2009
http://www.frpcug.org
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An article with the title "Caring for the Caregiver" appeared in the in the November/December 2007 issue of AARP magazine[1]. Here is an extract from that article:

"...A cascade of studies in recent years has shown that caregivers stand at particular risk for a host of mental and physical illnesses, many of which have roots in stress, exhaustion, and self-neglect—symptoms some medical professionals have begun calling caregiver syndrome. . . . According to a 2004 national survey by AARP and The National Alliance for Caregiving, nearly 23 million households are currently home to a caregiver, most often a woman who is taking care of someone 50 or older. Some 43 percent of these caregivers are over 50 themselves—13 percent are over 65—and they spend good chunks of their weeks on a heady range of chores, from medication management and bathing to feeding, clothing, and arranging health care services. . . . Unfortunately for many friends and family members of caregivers, it is difficult to know when to step in—or what to do…"

I recommend this article to all caregivers, and to friends and family members of caregivers. Yes, it is difficult for friends and family members of caregivers to know what to do. It can also be overwhelming for a caregiver to add another task—coordinating help from those friends and family members—to an already burdensome schedule.

Both caregivers and those willing to help may find a scheduling solution with a web site called [Lotsa Helping Hands.com.](#) This web site allows a caregiver or family member to:

"Create a free of charge, private, web-based community to organize family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues – a family's 'circles of community' — during times of need…"

There are three primary templates:

1. Caregiving
2. Eldercare and Long Term Care
3. Military and Veterans Families

There are four additional templates:

1. Volunteering
2. Parenting
3. Schools
4. Religious Groups

These templates allow one person to coordinate the activities of others by identifying the needs and allowing volunteers to accept tasks. All of this activity takes place online, relieving the caregiver of the burden of many phone calls and separate schedules. For those familiar with Google Documents™, there is a slight similarity between the two. However, the Lotsa Helping Hands templates are designed specifically for caregiving situations:

"Each community includes an intuitive group calendar for scheduling tasks such as meals delivery and rides, a platform for securely sharing vital medical, financial, and legal information with designated family members, and customizable sections for posting photos, well wishes, blogs, journals, and messages.

Now, when someone asks 'what can I do to help?' the answer is 'give me your name and email address' – the system takes over and allows people to sign up and start helping."

A web based service such as Lotsa Helping Hands is certain to generate questions about privacy and security. You will find answers to these questions in the "Terms of use" page of the web site. Included in the Terms are descriptions of the data security, data integrity and access (among other) protections.

[Note: The scheduling features are not dependent upon the use of private information. It is not necessary to include medical, financial or legal information on the web site—although that information is protected].

Lotsa Helping Hands has many non-profit partners, including the Alzheimer's Association, the Family Caregiver Alliance, The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and many more. Check the Partners page of the Lotsa Helping Hands web site for more information.

You can read what national media, such as Business Week, NY Times and others have to say about Lotsa Helping Hands by clicking on the links on the Media page of the Lotsa Helping Hands web site.

I have not personally used this service, although there was a time, not so long ago, when I would have used it had I known about it. After reading the description of the service, and the "How It Works" section of the web site, I am convinced that the service is, indeed, very valuable and also secure. I recommend that caregivers try this service. There is at least the potential to reduce your levels of stress and exhaustion associated with your role of caregiver.

_____

[1] Crute, Sherre, "Caring for the Caregiver." AARP Magazine, November and December, 2007

The Cursor

The 2009 WAC Board of Directors, SIG Leaders and other Volunteers

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The Cursor provides news, commentary and product information to members of the Washington Area Computer User Group.

Send membership inquiries and address changes to: membership@wacug.org

Send article submission and reprint requests to the Editor: cursor@wacug.org

WAC Membership/Renewal Application

Dues are collected on an Annual basis and includes: downloadable links for WACUG Selected Software (formeraly DOM), and WAC's monthly newsletter, *The Cursor*, in PDF format

Individual/Corporate/Family Dues: $25.00
$5 annual surcharge for delivery of the Cursor by 1st Class mail

Remit payment in person at the WAC Membership table on meeting day, or by mail to:
Washington Area Computer User Group
30 Fendall Ave.
Alexandria, VA 22304-6300
Make checks payable to WAC. Please do not send cash by mail. ***Thank you for joining WAC!***
Complete if you name and address do not appear on the reverse side. Include E-mail Address
Name: _____
Street: _____
City: _____
State: _____   Zip: _____
Phone: (   )   –

E-mail: _____
Membership Survey: Help us to help you by completing this survey. List the computer systems you own / use (in order of preference)

_____
Operating System(s): _____
Modem(s): _____
Printer(s): _____
Other Hardware: _____
Favorite Software: _____
Connection: (circle one)   Dial-up   or   Broadband

Circle Your Interests: Photo Printing   Investing   Games
Digital Photography   Internet Access   Education   Music
Graphics/Animation   Genealogy   Video   Finance
Programming Language(s) _____
Hardware Upgrades/Repair   List others below

Next WAC Meetings: • Sept 19 • Oct 17 • Nov 21 • Dec 12 • Jan 16

Call (703) 370-7649 for the latest meeting information or Visit our Web Site at:
http://www.wacug.org

May Meeting will be held at the *Osher Lifelong Learning Institute* Fairfax, VA. Detailed directions were provided in the January Cursor on page 5.

FREE ADMISSION

BRING A FRIEND!

Service Desks Open at 12:30 Meeting Starts at 1:00 PM
FREE ADMISSION
BRING A FRIEND!

Bring Your Flash Drive!

Washington Area Computer User Group
30 Fendall Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22304-6300
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Label

Microsoft Releases Free Beta of New Security Software

Written by Ira Wilsker, APCUG Director,
Columnist, The Examiner, Beaumont, TX; Radio
Show Host
Iwilsker (at) apcug.net

WEBSITE:

http://www.microsoft.com/security_essentials
(effective June 23)

Many of us love to kick Microsoft as the 600 pound gorilla who created the most popular computer operating systems and also attracted countless miscreants who locate and take advantage of security breaches. Microsoft has produced some very good security products, such as the anti-spyware product Windows Defender, and some mediocre products such as Windows Live OneCare. Now, Microsoft is releasing a free public beta of its newest incarnation of comprehensive security software code named "Morro", but publicly named "Microsoft Security Essentials" (MSE). The public beta release of MSE should be online by the time you read this, at www.microsoft.com/security_essentials. There are some reports that Microsoft will limit the number of beta downloads of MSE to 75,000.

MSE's final release version is scheduled to be available later this year, and is planned to be a free security package designed to protect the computer from viruses, spyware, rootkits, and Trojans. MSE will be replacing Microsoft's current commercial offering, Windows Live OneCare, which Microsoft announced will be discontinued as of June 30. Initial reports that have leaked from Microsoft indicate that MSE will be a low-end security product, competing against the wildly popular free offerings from AVG and Avast, but lacking the full featured security capabilities of such commercial powerhouses as McAfee, Norton-Symantec, and TrendMicro.   MSE will be a free download, and will run on Windows XP, Vista, and the new Windows 7. Separate installers will be available for 32 bit and 64 bit versions of Windows, and will vary from 3mb to 7mb in download size. It should be noted that only users of genuine licensed copies of Windows will be able to download and install MSE, as Microsoft claims that the MSE installer will be able to detect illicit copies of Windows and block the installation.

Preliminary anecdotal reports leaked about Morro, the precursor of MSE, indicate that it will install with a wizard that will require the uninstallation of any antivirus software that is on the computer before MSE can be installed. MSE will also deactivate Microsoft's Windows Defender anti-spyware if it is installed on the computer, as it will no longer be needed.

MSE will offer free frequent updates of virus and malware signatures, as well as system scans on demand and at scheduled times. MSE was designed to minimize the impact on system resources, and not significantly degrade system performance. The user interface (UI) is simple and clean, much like Windows Defender, and does not require any technical skills to properly operate. Microsoft designed MSE to be a simple but effective free security utility to protect Windows computers lacking effective antivirus and anti-spyware software. At present, it does not appear that MSE will be offering additional security features and benefits included in the top-selling commercial security suites. "This is security you can trust," said Alan Packer, general manager of Microsoft's anti-malware team, when asked to define how it differs from rivals, both free and not. "And it's easy to get and easy to use." "Rather than scan and clean, which it also does, it's trying to keep you from being infected in the first place," Packer said.

In addition to malware signatures which will be updated frequently, MSE will use a feature Microsoft calls "Dynamic Signature Service" which links the computer with MSE installed to Microsoft's servers. If MSE detects suspicious behavior, but does not have a digital malware signature in its database, MSE will query Microsoft's servers. "If it sees something new, like a new binary, the client queries the back end," Packer said. "The server can then ask for a sample, which the client sends as a hash." The user can control and consent to the sending of the potential malware to Microsoft, as MSE will ask for permission to send it. If Microsoft has already created a digital signature and remedy for the malware, the server will instantly push the signature to the computer. "We have a list of known good software, of course, but outside that, if a program is doing things like hooking Autostart points in the registry, or trying to kill other processes, Essential will query the servers." Packer said.
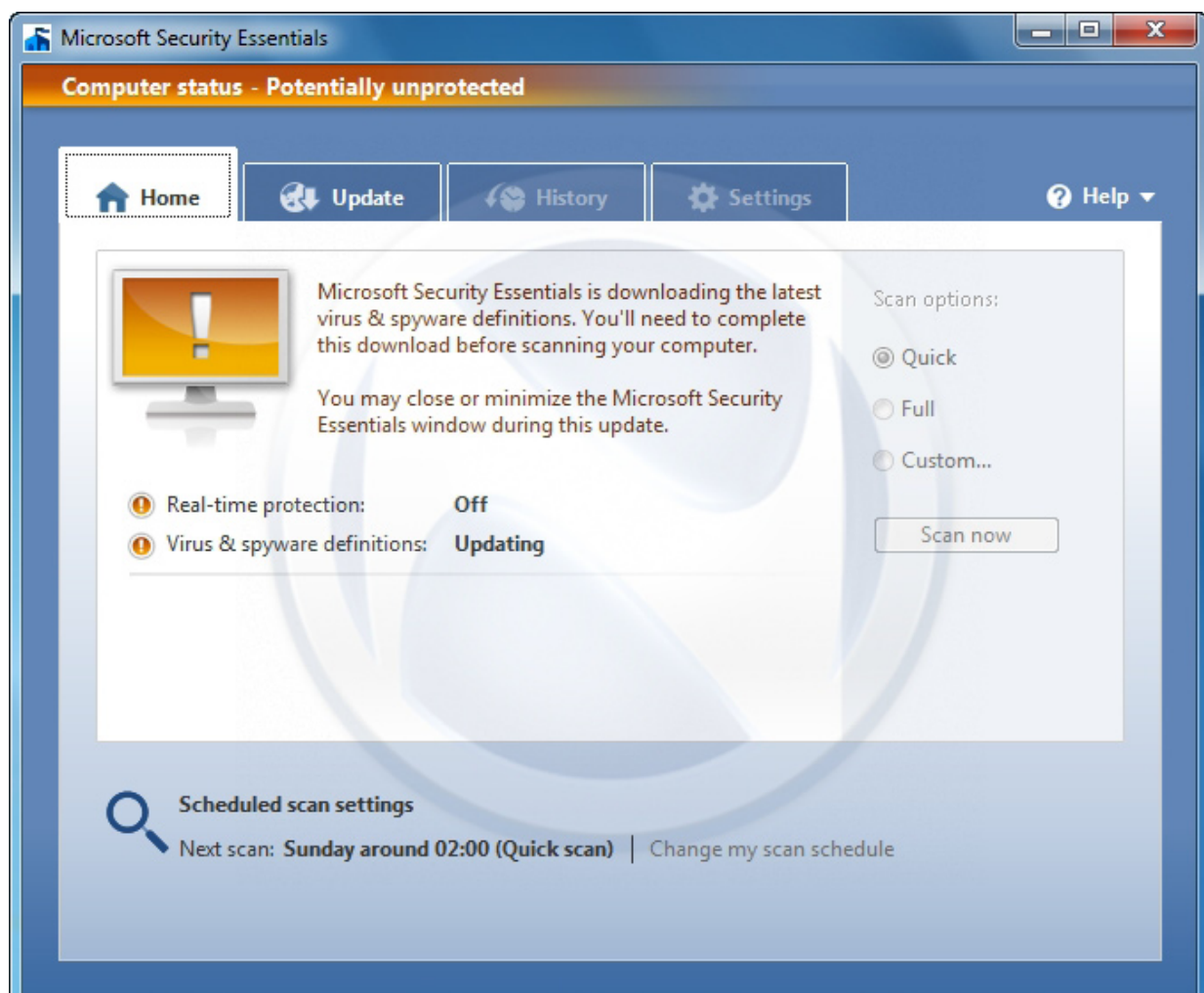
It is too early to tell about the quality of protection offered by MSE, as it has not yet been tested and rated

by the independent services that test and rate security products. It also needs to be noted that the current software is a "beta" or pre-release version, and may contain unresolved bugs or other problems that will likely be resolved by the final release later this year. Still, if your PC is lacking effective security software, or your subscription to a commercial product is about to expire and you are willing to take the risk of having beta software provide basic protection to your computer, then Microsoft Security Essentials may be a worthwhile consideration.

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