The Cursor

Monthly Newsletter of the
Washington Area Computer Users Group

Meeting Location:
Fairfax County
Government Center

Next Meeting:
March 19, 2005

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Presidential Bits

March 2005 Meeting

By Paul Howard

At the February meeting, the nominated slate of candidates was elected by acclamation, and the prior year's officers and board members were affirmed at the meeting of the Board of Directors that followed. We still seek volunteers to serve the membership on the Board. There are always things to do, and while we may be a computer group, many hands still lightens the load.

March's meeting will be held on Saturday, the 19th, at the Fairfax County Government Center, in conference rooms 9/10. Please join us for an introduction by Chuck Roberts to the latest version of the popular photo and image editor that's made many fans in WACUG.

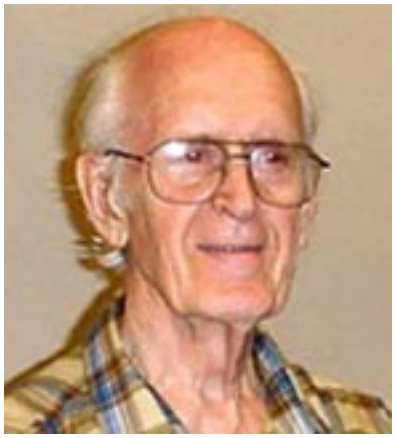
Adobe recently released the latest version of Adobe Photoshop Elements, V.3. This product has finally graduated to the top of their consumer product list. In fact, it is considered by many to be of "prosumer" status already. But why should you upgrade?

Chuck will explain why, and demonstrate some of the program's enhanced new features, including how to "save" your digital negatives and organize and find images on your computer.

Also on tap will be a display of several new books written especially for Photoshop Elements 3 and Chuck's demonstration of an Epson PictureMate photo printer.

Jim Brueggeman has compiled an exciting CD of the Month, with a variety of useful utilities for getting into the background workings of your PC. Also included are some programs to deal with music, images, and web sites. The CD will include a collection of prior issues of the Cursor, and four books on Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook, made available to us by their author, Stephen L. Nelson. (See http://www.stephenlneslson.com)

Don't forget the many resources WACUG provides through its web site: Links to Recent Meeting information; Protection for your computer with listings of AntiVirus, Firewall, and Anti-Spyware; and the collection of Lu Sprigg's Internet web site recommendations for the last five years.



Lu Spriggs Web Sites for March 2005

by Lu Spriggs, WACUG Internet Support

http://www.wacug.org/ – This is the URL for the Washington Area Computer Users Group web site. Visit it for past versions of Spriggs Web Sites w/ hyperlinks.

1. http://www.pctools.com/spyware-doctor/ – Download this premium removal program for spyware. Free, v.3.1 is a 4.1 MB download. Signature database includes over 1000 bad sites.
2. http://search.msn.com/ – New search site by Microsoft, to compete with Google and Yahoo.
3. http://maps.google.com/ – Google Maps are really clean and easy to read. Also, the maps are scrollable; just click and drag. Easier than Mapquest which must redraw the map.
4. http://www.x-raypc.com/ – Similar to Task Manager in XP, this program will show a list of active processes in non-XP Windows programs. Download is a zip file which can use Power Desk to unzip.
5. http://www.cutepdf.com/ – This program will convert any printable file into Adobe PDF (Portable Document Format) for Win 98 or newer, Ver. 3.0.
6. http://www.pdf995.com/ – For Win 95 or newer, to convert any printable file into Adobe PDF format.
7. http://www.sourceforge.net/projects/pdfcreator/ – For Win 95 or newer. Open Source PDF Creator.
8. http://www.idsafety.net/ – Here is a quiz to help you protect yourself from Identity Theft.
9. http://www.cnethelpu.com/ – This site has numerous free on-line courses on various subjects: Windows HP Introduction, Spyware, Personal Web Site, Digital Photography, etc. Each class has a qualified instructor..
10. http://www.smallstep.gov/ – This site has guidance on healthy living, including diet, exercise. Free newsletter is available. Sponsored by Health & Human Services.

NCTCUG

Visit our "sister" user group. The National Capital Technology and Computer User's Group meets the first and fourth Wednesday of the month. They meet in Carlin Hall in Arlington at 5711 South 4th Street.Visit their web site for more information, a map and directions:

http://www.nctcug.org/

Discounts for WAC Members

By Geof Goodrum

Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG) Annual Meeting (The Cursor, February 2005) have special offers available to WAC members. Here are a few of them.

Logitech gives a 15% discount off retail pricing and free shipping to user group members on selected items purchased through the web site http://www.buylogitech.com/apcug/. Login with the username pcuser and password apcugr3ward. The coupon code for free shipping is APCUG.

Pixifun provides projects that create professional keepsake items such as key rings, sticker albums, magnets, CD/DVD labels and badges using your digital photos. To order Pixifun kits, visit http://www.pixifun.com/pixifun/. A special discount for user group members is available by entering the promotional code COMPUGRPQ404 when placing your order.

Firetrust provides e-mail security tools including MailWasher® Pro to stop spam, Benign® to neutralize viruses, scripts and web bugs, and Encrypt to secure information. More information and 30-day free trial versions of these products are available from the Firetrust web site at http://www.firetrust.com/. Complimentary copies are also available to user group members who are willing to demonstrate the product for the group and provide a review. Contact Chuck Roberts if you are interested.

As mentioned previously in The Cursor and at meetings, WAC participates in Smart Computing magazine's "Buy 5 Get One FREE" user group program. For every five magazine subscriptions credited to WAC, WAC receives a free gift subscription to use as an award or door prize. If you plan to subscribe to Smart Computing, PC Today or Computer Power User (CPU), visit http://www.smartcomputing.com/groups/ and use the "Subscribe or Renew Today" link for the online subscription form. Make sure to select "Washington Area Computer Users Group – Falls Church VA" in the user group drop-down menu before submitting the form. Note that this form can be used by anyone, so encourage non-members to use it and credit WAC, too! Please let a WAC Board Member know when you subscribe.

GNU/Linux SIG

By Geof Goodrum

PC Virtualization

VMware®, Inc. (http://www.vmware.com/) publishes an excellent software package that allows multiple operating systems (e.g. Microsoft Windows, Linux, Netware) to run simultaneously on a single PC without affecting each other. This is useful when someone needs to quickly switch between applications that run on different operating systems or to develop and test cross-platform software. However, it is commercial software with a price tag of US $189 (VMware Workstation 4, electronic download).

A three year old Open Source project by the name of Xen (http://xen.sourceforge.net/), managed by the University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory, recently garnered support from Sun Microsystems, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Novell, Intel, AMD and Red Hat. Like Vmware, Xen is a virtual machine monitor (VMM) for x86-compatible computers. Xen can securely execute multiple virtual machines, each running its own OS, on a single physical system with close-to-native performance. Unlike VMware, OS's must be modified to achieve high performance with Xen. Linux 2.4 and 2.6-based OS distributions and NetBSD are stable under Xen, with FreeBSD and Plan 9 coming shortly. While there is a port of Microsoft Windows XP for Xen, it is not available for distribution.

The latter problem will be addressed by upcoming virtualization features in AMD and Intel processors. Intel will provide Virtualization Technology for desktop systems in 2005 (http://www.intel.com/technology/computing/vptech/index.htm), which allows unmodified operating systems to run under Xen (although not as fast as modified operating systems). At LinuxWorld Boston, AMD announced it will support Xen on their 64-bit x86 processors and will provide Pacifica technology with virtualization features in future processors.

Future releases of Linux distributions, including Novell's SUSE

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Linux Professional 9.3, Fedora Core 4 and Red Hat Enterprise Linux 5, are expected to include Xen software.

Linux CD of the Month

In addition to the CD-R discs described below, I can provide any downloadable GNU/Linux operating system distribution (e.g. Fedora Core, Mandrake, Debian, Knoppix) on CD-R. Note: download versions of commercial distributions do not include official technical support or printed documentation.

Discs are available only to WAC members by pre-order. Contact me by phone (703-370-7649) or e-mail (ggoodrum@bigfoot.com) at least 48 hours before meeting day to order or for more information. Single discs cost $4 each; GNU/Linux distributions on two or three discs cost $6 per set. All executable programs are for Intel x86 compatible Linux distributions unless stated otherwise. Your requests and suggestions are always welcome!

Abe's Amazing Adventure – v1.0.1. Free GNU General Public License source code by Gabor Torok and executables for Fedora Core 3 and Mandrake. A scrolling, platform-jumping, key-collecting, ancient pyramid exploring game, vaguely in the style of similar games for the Commodore+4. Requires SDL and the X Window System.

OpenTaxSolver – 2 Mar 2005. Free GNU General Public License source code by Aston Roberts. OpenTaxSolver (OTS) is a free program for calculating Tax Form entries and tax-owed or refund-due, such as Federal or State personal income taxes. An optional graphical front-end, OTS_GUI, was recently added. TaxSolver versions are available for 2004 tax year: US 1040 and Schedules A, B, C, & D; States: California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, Virginia. Preliminary versions for Canada and United Kingdom were posted for 2003 tax year.

Xen – v2.0.4. Free GNU General Public License source code and executable by the University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory. Xen is a virtual machine monitor (VMM) for x86-compatible computers. Xen can securely execute multiple virtual machines, each running its own OS, on a single physical system with close-to-native performance. Xen currently runs only on the x86 architecture, requiring a 'P6' or newer processor (that's any Intel or AMD x86 CPU purchased in the last five years). Multiprocessor machines are supported, including basic support for HyperThreading (SMT). A port specifically for x86/64 is in progress, although Xen already runs on such systems in 32-bit legacy mode.

GNU/Linux Distribution Updates - Security and bug fix monthly updates for Fedora Core 3.

Kernel Source - The latest versions of 2.4 and 2.6 kernel source code for all platforms.

Cyber Security in 2005?

by Pim Borman
SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc.
www.swipcug.apcug.org

As more and more computer users gain fast, always-on, broadband access to the Internet via cable or ADSL telephone lines, computer security becomes a critical issue. This was convincingly illustrated in an article in *USA TODAY* (11-30-2004, thanks to Duane Morrow). The paper teamed up with Avantgarde, a tech marketing and design firm, to see what kind of attacks were attracted by variously equipped computers hooked up to a broadband DSL connection. Relatively unprotected computers, wide open to the Internet, underwent attacks at a sustained rate of 340 per hour, or once every 10 seconds on average. These computers consisted of a Dell Windows XP with Service Pack 1, and an Apple Mac X. Most of the attacks were no more than "door knob rattlers" and did not result in actual penetration. Nevertheless, out of 139 thousand attacks in two weeks nine managed to take over the Windows XP computer and started to tie it into a larger network of hijacked systems. Another computer, equipped with Windows Small Business Server, underwent 25 thousand attacks in two weeks, 61 per hour on average, of which one managed to take over the system. The Apple computer was not compromised, probably because it uses an operating system not targeted by most intruders.

Computers protected by an active firewall underwent far fewer attacks, from 2 – 4 per hour, because firewalls hide the presence of a computer on the Internet from casual passers-by. These comput-

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ers used Windows XP with Service Pack 2, Windows XP with the ZoneAlarm firewall, and a Microtel Linspire (Linux-based) computer with a basic firewall in the operating system.

Note that these "honey pot" systems were totally passive. Attacks did not depend on users' actions, such as visiting infected Web sites or downloading email attachments that might cause infiltration by worms and viruses. It is also clear that fairly simple protection measures, such as a firewall, thwarted the vast majority of malicious attackers.

The foremost obstacle to achieving a safer Internet is the ignorance and/or indifference of too many computer users, especially those with a broadband connection; but notice that with an attack rate of once every 10 seconds even Internet browsers using a limited telephone connection can be vulnerable!

Here are the important safety measures once more:

- A firewall, stand-alone as in ZoneAlarm, or part of a package as in ZoneAlarm Plus, Windows XP SP2, or Norton Internet Security (combined with anti-virus and more). Optimally also a hardware router, even if you don't need one for a home network, to add additional firewall protection.
- An anti-virus program, if not already included in the firewall software. Norton is good, or you can use a free program such as AVG from www.grisoft.com. It is essential to update the virus data files weekly or more often.
- Regular updates of your operating system and Office programs with newly issued patches from the providers (e.g. Microsoft).
- A spyware blocking/removal program such as AdAware (free) or AdAware Plus (extra features), or the excellent, free Spybot Search and Destroy.
- Disconnect from the Internet when not needed, or turn the computer off altogether when not in use for a longer period (use Hibernate with Windows XP for faster start-up).
- Use common sense! Don't trust e-mail attachments unless you expect them. If you have any doubt whatsoever, ask the sender to confirm that it is OK. Even then, be skeptical. Delete obvious chain mail unread.

Knoppix to the Rescue!

Sooner or later something is likely to go wrong with your computer. A nasty virus or spy program may take over and lock you out, or Windows starts acting weird and refuses to be of service any longer. Maybe the Knoppix rescue disk can help you to recover your precious data files, at least, and maybe to remove a virus or restore Windows to good health.

Knoppix is the brainchild of Klaus Knopper, a guy who makes it his business to go around fixing peoples' computers. In doing so he uses a variety of software tools that he carries around on CDs and floppies for use on the affected systems. He also carries a boot CD to start computers that won't start up because of a nasty virus or other problems. Knopper eventually added his repair tools to this boot CD, running Linux. The CD includes programs to detect peripherals, including networks, USB ports, Internet connections, sound and graphics cards, as well as Open Source programs such as OpenOffice and The Gimp to make it possible to access and copy text and graphics data on the infected computer. In the spirit of Open Source programming, he invited others to join in the effort. The resulting CD goes way beyond being a technician's repair tool; with the addition of numerous utilities, games, emulators, sound and graphics programs, the current CD, called Knoppix, is a full-fledged Linux distribution for non-Linux geeks, comparable to Linspire and Xandros. The difference is that the whole program can run from the CD without using the computer drives.

Some 1700 MB of programming is contained in compressed form on a single 700 MB CD. The latest version of the program can be downloaded for free or you can order a CD from a variety of vendors for $5.00 and S/H. Booting the program takes only a few minutes; as many of the essential features of the program as possible are copied to RAM. As a result, the programs run surprisingly fast. The Linux-based KDE windows program is a clone of MS Windows and easy to use by

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non-Linux users.

Next time your computer suddenly goes on the blink, you might be able to continue some work and copy your data to a safe location simply by booting from the Knoppix CD-ROM. I have recently received a review copy of the book "Knoppix Hacks" by Kyle Rankin from its publisher (O'Reilly, ISBN 0-596-00787-6, $29.95, user group member discount available) and I hope soon to discuss more details of this interesting program.

Pim Borman is Web Site Editor and APCUG representative of the SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc. (SWIPCUG). The above article appeared in the January 2005 issue of the P-See Urgent, SWIPCUG newsletter. Permission is granted to other non-profit computer user groups to use this article in their publications with credit to the author and the SW Indiana PC Users Group.

Sounding the Alarm Over Spyware Threats and Antispyware Cooperation

by Linda Gonse, Editor, Orange County IBM PC Users' Group, www.orcopug.org

When I first learned about spyware makers iSearch and iDownload threatening anti-spyware advocates and anti-spyware makers in February to cease and desist listing them as candidates for removal or face legal action, I was incensed. http://www.windowssecrets.com/050224/

Several sites have received the letters and now face steep legal fees in fighting this brazen and outrageous threat to consumer rights to share information and protect ourselves from being victimized by spyware. http://www.edbott.com/weblog/archives/000491.html

What these spyware makers are saying is that their products are not spyware, although available studies and articles all show that the products are indeed spyware. http://www.dslreports.com/shownews/60608

But, wait. It gets stranger. Another spyware company, WhenU, actually struck a deal with Aluria to be delisted as spyware. Aluria develops anti-spyware technology used by AOL and several other ISP's affecting millions of users. Aluria actually agreed to remove WhenU from the definitions it uses for Spyware Eliminator. WhenU products are now declared "Spyware SAFE" and are left intact on the systems of users, although WhenU's products did not change! What's more, Ad-aware and Pest Patrol have also stopped listing WhenU's spyware. http://www.dslreports.com/shownews/58023, http://tinyurl.com/6b96j

Why is this happening? And, what effect will it have on users?

Apparently, spyware vendors, in anticipation of looming anti-spyware laws, are attempting a public image makeover that includes buying legitimacy from anti-spyware developers. http://tinyurl.com/4rj9o The spyware makers are being driven by money. And, antispyware makers who cooperate with them do so for the money, as well.

If we cannot learn who makes spyware from advocacy sites, and we cannot rely on antispyware makers to list them for removal, we computer users are the ultimate targets/victims for the sleazy programs that install and run on our computers without our knowledge and approval, that affect the performance of our computers and programs, and invade our homes and our privacy, without fear of litigation or removal.

Isn't this where computer users and user groups must band together and pressure antispyware companies to keep these perpetrators in their databases? Shouldn't we lend our support to antispyware vendors and tell them not to cave into these demands or we won't buy or use their products? Isn't this a good time to write to your legislator? NOW! Before you lose the right to protest and deny these companies access to your computer and private information.

Names and addresses of your elected state and federal officials are at http://www.congress.org/congressorg/home/. Find contacts at antispyware companies by clicking on links at https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ehowes/www/soft6.htm .

Tech News

By Sue Crane, VP / Editor, Big Bear Computer Club, www.bigbearcc.org

IRS partners Intuit, TaxAct and eSmartTax are offering no-cost services to everyone this year. Two additional companies, FreeTaxUSA.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.

40 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. 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. ll 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

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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.

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)

By Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., Member of the Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc, .www.spcug.org

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 aspects 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 impulses 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 between the two phones. In the original 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 transmitted 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 arrive at their destination after traveling different routes. There are thousands of possible paths between any origin and any destination. 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 continues to the destination computer. At the destination, the receiving computer assembles the packets based on the information contained in each packet.

So what does this have to do with Internet phones? Very simple. VoIP uses the packet switching technology to transmit your call. The digitization of your voice oc-

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curs either through your sound card or a device known as an analog telephone adapter (ATA). There are also Internet phones which connect directly to a network router and handle the conversion process. The voice packets that result from these various 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 transmitted 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 providers and their services. Skype (www.skype.com) offers a free service that allows you to connect to other Skype users. The 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 (www.freeworldialup.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 packetizer, 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 can not 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 SIPPhone.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

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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. 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.

Editor's note:

A local company, SunRocket, also offers unlimited local and long distance service for $24.95 per month or $199 per year. Visit www.sunrocket.com *for details and to see if the service is available in your area.*

March PC DOM Files

The following files are found on the March Disk of the Month for the PC which will be available at the March meeting.

CacheMan 5.50

CoolMon 1.0

Darn Passwords

FxFoto 2.0

HTTrack Website Copier 3.32-2

ITunes for Windows 4.6

JDiskReport 1.2.1

Process Explorer 8.41

Statbar 2.406

SpywareBlaster 3.2

Tweak UI 1.33

(For Windows XP use "TweakPowertoySetup.exe")

Web Drive 6.03

WinPatrol 8.1.2

Xplorer2 Lite 1.0.0.2

Use this link for the full details on this WACUG CD of the month:

http://www.wacug.org/wincd/windom0503.pdf

For an index of available CDs of the month:

http://www.wacug.org/lnxindx.html

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

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Telecommunications	Internet Access	Education	Music
Graphics/Animation	Spreadsheets	Video	Finance

Programming Language(s)
Hardware Upgrades/Repair List others below

Next WAC Meetings: • **March 19** • **April 16** • **May 21** • **June 18** • **July 16**

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

Meetings are held at the Fairfax County Government Center

Through Front Entrance to the Left Hallway, Past the Elevators to: Conference Room 9 -10

Service Desks Open at 12:30 Meeting Starts at 1:00 PM
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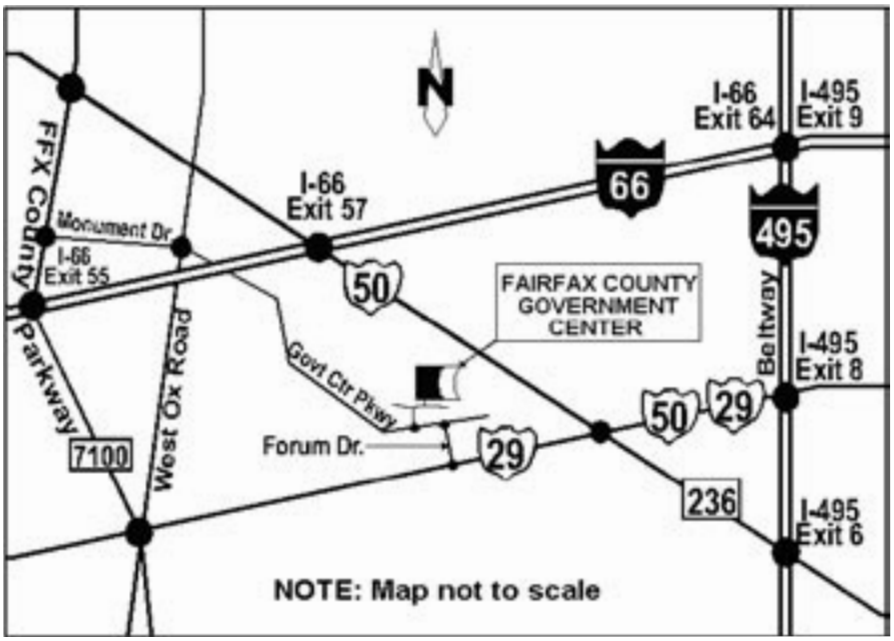

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