The Cursor

Monthly Newsletter of the
Washington Area Computer User Group

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Presidential Bits

by Geof Goodrum, President WACUG, president@wacug.org

The June meeting featured our semi-annual PC Clinic, a presentation by Lorrin Garson on free encryption software to keep your data secure, and an extended Questions & Answers panel session called "Hands On Help" where Paul Howard, Chuck Roberts, and I fielded a variety of questions from the audience. While the panel provided a lot of useful information, we still need an experienced Microsoft Outlook user to answer a question on recovering a contacts list lost during a Windows 7 upgrade.

Big thanks to our volunteer PC Clinic tech crew, Roger Fujii, Nick Wenri, and Scott Hanak, for helping our members with their computer issues!

Lorrin's briefing titled "Effortless Encryption for Anxious Users" is already posted as a PDF file on the WAC Recent Meetings web page (http://www.wacug.org/recmtgs.html). Key points discussed during the briefing were that deleted files on a hard disk can still be read, passwords must be strong to be effective, and there are a number of freely available tools to protect your sensitive data even if your computer is stolen. The briefing has plenty of web links for more information. Thanks, Lorrin!

For the next meeting on July 17th, Thom Clement (Executive Director of OLLI), Tom Hady (OPCUG member), and Ernestine Meyer (OPCUG/WACUG member) volunteered to tell us about their favorite Handheld Devices, specifically, RiM's Blackberry Tour, Apple's iPod Touch, and iPhone. We will use OLLI's new docucam system so everyone can get a clear view. Neal Grotenstein will provide the Learn 30 tutorial session on keeping your computer mouse clean and using compressed ZIP files within Microsoft Windows.

See you there.

Lloyd's Web Sites for July, 2010

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.

1. Major League Baseball for 2010 – www.forbes.com/mlb

2. Options for remaining Anonymous while you surf the Web. A company called Anonymizer is a major provider for this type of service for $80 per year. – www.anonymizer.com. Onion routing is another method; but very complicated – www.torproject.org

3. Geni: Free Family Tree – www.geni.com – Geni is the fast, free, fun way to create your family tree with your relatives and stay in touch. Free unlimited photo and video sharing

4. PetSide.com is the source of pet health information, pet news, pet care – www.petside.com

5. HubbleSite: Out of the Ordinary — Out of this World – http://hubblesite.org "NASA's best-recognized, longest-lived, and most prolific space observatory zooms past a threshold of 20 years of operation this month. On April 24, 1990, the space shuttle and crew of STS-31 were launched to deploy the Hubble Space Telescope into a low Earth orbit. What followed was one of the most remarkablesagas of the space age." Related site: Hubble Turns 20: A Retrospective in Pictures.

6. Major Malls in Northern Virginia:
   Ballston Common 4238 Wilson Blvd - Arlington, VA 22203; 703-415-2400 – www.ballston-common.com
   Dulles Town Center 21100 Dulles Town Center - Dulles, VA 20166 703-404-7120 – www.shopdullestowncenter.com
   Fair Oaks Shopping Center 11750 Fair Oaks - Fairfax, VA 22033 703-359-8300 – www.shopfairoaksmall.com
   Fashion Center at Pentagon City 1100 South Hayes Street - Arlington, VA 22202 703-415-2400 – www.fashioncentrepentagon.com
   Landmark Mall 5801 Duke Street Alexandria, VA 22304 703-354-8405 – www.landmarkmall.com
   Manassas Mall 8300 Sudley Road Manassas, VA 20109 703-368-0181 – www.manassasmall.com
   Potomac Mills Mall 2700 Potomac Mills Circle - Prince William, VA 703-643-1770 – www.potomac-mills.com
   Reston Town Center 11921 Freedom drive - Reston, VA 703-689-4699 – www.restontowncenter.com
   Springfield Mall 6500 Springfield Mall - Springfield, VA 703-971-3600 – www.springfieldmall.com
   Tysons Corner Center 1961 Chain Bridge Road - McLean, VA 22102 703-893-9400 – www.shoptysons.com
   Tysons II Galleria 2001 International Drive - McLean, VA 22102 703-827-7700 – www.tysonsgalleria.com

7. USPS Domestic Postage Price Calculator – http://postcalc.usps.gov

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/

Meetings start at 7:00 PM

Washington Area User Group Partners

Working Together For Our Members

NCTCUG

WACUG

OPCUG

GNU/Linux SIG

By Geof Goodrum, WACUG

Filling a Scanned Form with OpenOffice.org

This month I had to submit an architectural change request form to my homeowner's association. Unfortunately, the association's management company only provided a scanned image of the required form in PDF format. Worse, the image was skewed. The normal procedure is to print a hardcopy of the PDF, then fill it in by hand and fax it, mail it or drop it off at the management company (their offices are only open while I am at work, of course). Not very efficient, and I wanted to expedite the process by e-mail since I had a contractor waiting to begin work upon approval of the change.

After a Google search, I found the following link: http://www.linuxquestions.org/questions/linuxquestions-org-member-success-stories-23/how-to-fill-pdf-forms-even-read-only-%3B-better-than-acroread-v9-for-linux-796720/. The process only required the free ImageMagick graphic utility package and the OpenOffice.org Writer word processor, both included in most GNU/Linux distributions. Below is a summary of the steps I followed; the web article provides more details.

To convert the PDF to a PNG image (and correct the image skew at the same time), I used the ImageMagick convert utility in an X terminal window:

```
convert -rotate 1.5 -monochrome -density 150 -resample
150x150 form.pdf Output _ image.png
```

where form.pdf is the name of the input PDF form and Output_image.png is the name of the output PNG image file. I executed the command in the same directory with the input and output files. The -rotate 1.5 option rotated the image 1.5 degrees clockwise to remove the skew in the image (negative values rotate counterclockwise). I found the right value through trial and error and the ImageMagick command line display Output_image.png to view the result. Since I was working with a black and white form, I used the -monochrome option. The author of the web article recommended the output density settings of -density 150 -resample 150x150, and these options worked well for me. You can find out more about ImageMagick options for convert by entering info convert in the terminal, or visit the ImageMagick web site at http://www.imagemagick.org/script/index.php.

Once I had a good PNG image of the form, I created a new document in OpenOffice.org Writer and imported the image. As described by the author, this was accomplished by simply using the menu items Insert > Picture > From File, and selecting the Output_image.png file. I resized the form image to fit the page borders appropriately, then followed the author's directions by right-clicking on the image, selecting Anchor > To Page, then Wrap > In Background. Click outside of the image (along the page border), then proceed to enter text on top of the form image, adjusting layout as necessary (adjust borders, font size, line spacing, etc.) to fit the form.

Once I was satisfied with the results, I selected File > Save As to save a copy of the completed form for my records and as a template for future use, then File > Export as PDF to create a PDF file to e-mail to the property manager. The resulting single page filled-in PDF form was only about 34 kilobytes and quite adequate for the purpose.

With that said and done, the better long-term solution is to recreate the form from scratch using OpenOffice.org Writer or the Open Source Scribus desktop publishing software (http://www.scribus.net/), both of which can create PDF forms that can be filled in and saved directly with the appropriate PDF reader software. I can then provide the fillable PDF form to the management company for others to benefit from, but that's a project for another day.

GNU/Linux Distribution Releases

GNU/Linux distributions are bundled collections of software including a set of applications and an operating system built on the Linux kernel. Some distributions include general applications such as office suites, music players, and web browsers, while others may have specific purposes such as computer system recovery, network firewall, media center, or gaming. Individuals, community projects, or businesses create distributions. While some distributions are commercial and include fee-based technical support, other distributions are freely downloadable or can be ordered on CDs or DVD at low cost.

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 downloadable distributions do not include official technical support nor printed documentation. 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. 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.

DistroWatch.com lists the following distribution release announcements for the period June 3 – 30, 2010.

Distribution
Absolute Linux 13.1.1
Greenie Linux 7L
KANOTIX 2010
linuX-gamers Live 0.9.6
MoLinux 6.0
Pardus Linux 2009.2
Parted Magic 4.11
Peppermint OS One-06172010
Quirky 1.2
Sabayon Linux 5.3
Sabayon Linux 5.3 "SpinBase", "CoreCDX"
Sabily 10.04
Salix OS 13.1
Scientific Linux 5.5 "Live CD/DVD"
sidux 2010-01
Superb Mini Server 1.5.2
Syllable Server 0.4
SystemRescueCd 1.5.6
Ultimate Edition 2.7
Untangle Gateway 7.3
VortexBox 1.4
wattOS R2
Ylmf OS 3.0
Zenwalk Linux 6.4 "Core"
Zenwalk Linux 6.4 "GNOME"
Zorin OS 3

Linux Software of the Month

The software described below is downloadable at the links provided or copied onto a USB flash drive at the WAC meeting.

June 2010

GoogleCL – v0.9.7. http://code.google.com/p/google-cl/. Free Apache 2.0 License source code and Debian/Ubuntu package by the GoogleCL Project Team. GoogleCL provides a command line interface to Google online services, including Blogger, Calendar, Contacts, Docs, Picasa, and YouTube. For example, create a Google Calendar entry with google calendar add "Lunch with Jim at noon tomorrow" and create a new Picasa photo album online with google picasa create --title "Cat Photos" ~/photos/cats/*.jpg. Goo-

gleCL requires Python 2.5 or 2.6 and python-gdata >= 1.2.4 (preferably 2.0.x).

Iron – v4.0.275.2 (executable), v5.0.381 (source). http://www.srware.net/en/software_srware_iron_download.php. Free BSD License source code and executable by SRWare. Iron is a version of the Google Chrome web browser modified to remove features that could compromise privacy, including unique browser ID, timestamp when the browser was installed, an encoded string sent with all queries to Google, and redirections to Google on address errors and server not found.

Scan Tailor – v0.9.9.1. http://scantailor.sourceforge.net/. Free GNU General Public License source code by Joseph Artsimovich. Scan Tailor is an interactive post-processing tool for scanned pages. It performs operations such as page splitting, deskewing, adding/removing borders, despeckling, and others. You give it raw scans and you get pages ready to be printed or assembled into a PDF or a DJVU file.

The Butterfly Effect – Milestone 7. http://sourceforge.net/apps/trac/tbe/wiki. Free GNU General Public License source code and Linux installer by Peter van Ginneken and Klaas van Gend. The Butterfly Effect (TBE) is a physics game about cause and effect. You build complex mechanical systems using levers, rocket-like cola bottles and ordinary objects like tennis balls and bikes to accomplish simple tasks like toppling a Bowling Pin. This is also known as a Rube Goldberg machine or a Heath Robinson contraption. This type of game was pioneered by the game series The Incredible Machine in the 1990s. TBE is still in active development, but this beta quality release includes 30 playable levels.

Kernel Source – v2.6.34. http://www.kernel.org/. Free GNU Public License source code for all platforms by the Linux community.

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Several Screen shots from Geof's article follow on the next two pages... ➔

Handheld Tech Presentations

Tom Hady: **The iPod touch** is an iPhone minus the phone and a few other features. This note is an example of one use. It comes to you from my hotel room in Boston, typed on my itouch. I'll explain some of the other uses at the meeting.

Blackberry Tour, model 9630

The Blackberry Tour is considered "top of the line" among the Blackberry models. It is considered a "smart phone" because it can multi-task:

- search and view web pages on the Internet
- communicate via multiple email accounts
- end/receive text and picture messages
- take pictures and videos and share them
- use GPS technology to get directions, view maps, or locate specific addresses, businesses, or landmarks
- Make and receive phone calls internationally

Blackberries are best known for the ease with which you can receive and send emails. The Tour model uses the full QWERTY keyboard with small push buttons. This is the primary reason I chose the Blackberry rather than one of the touch-screen smart phones.
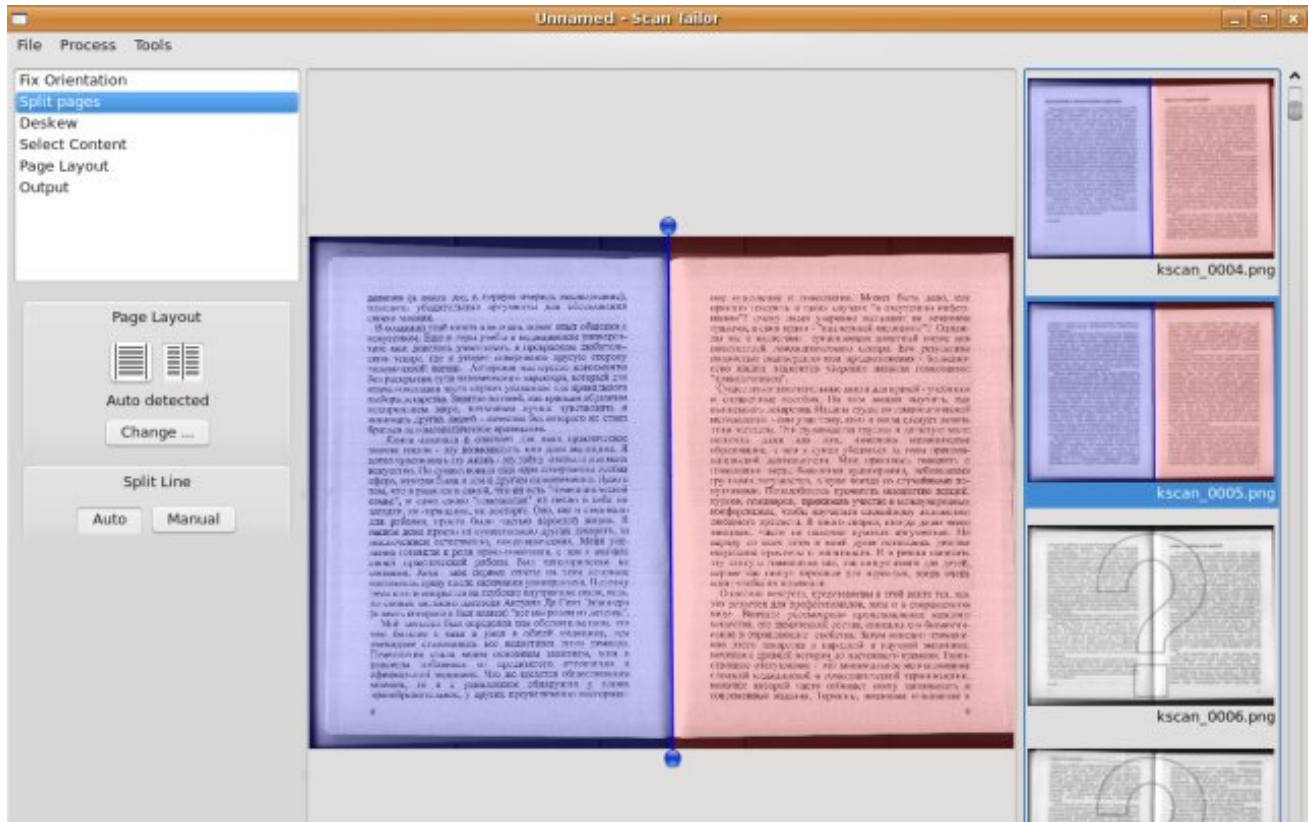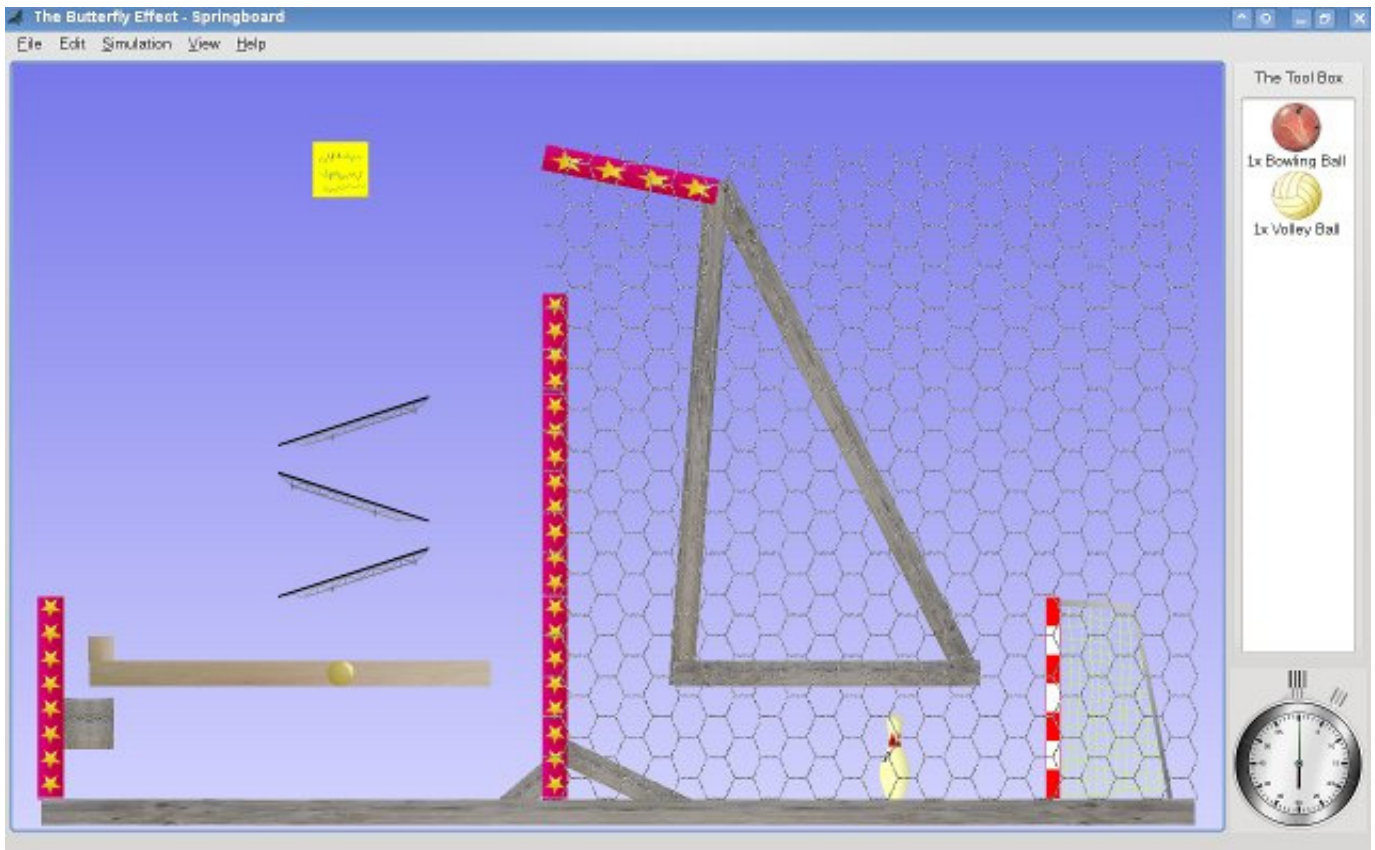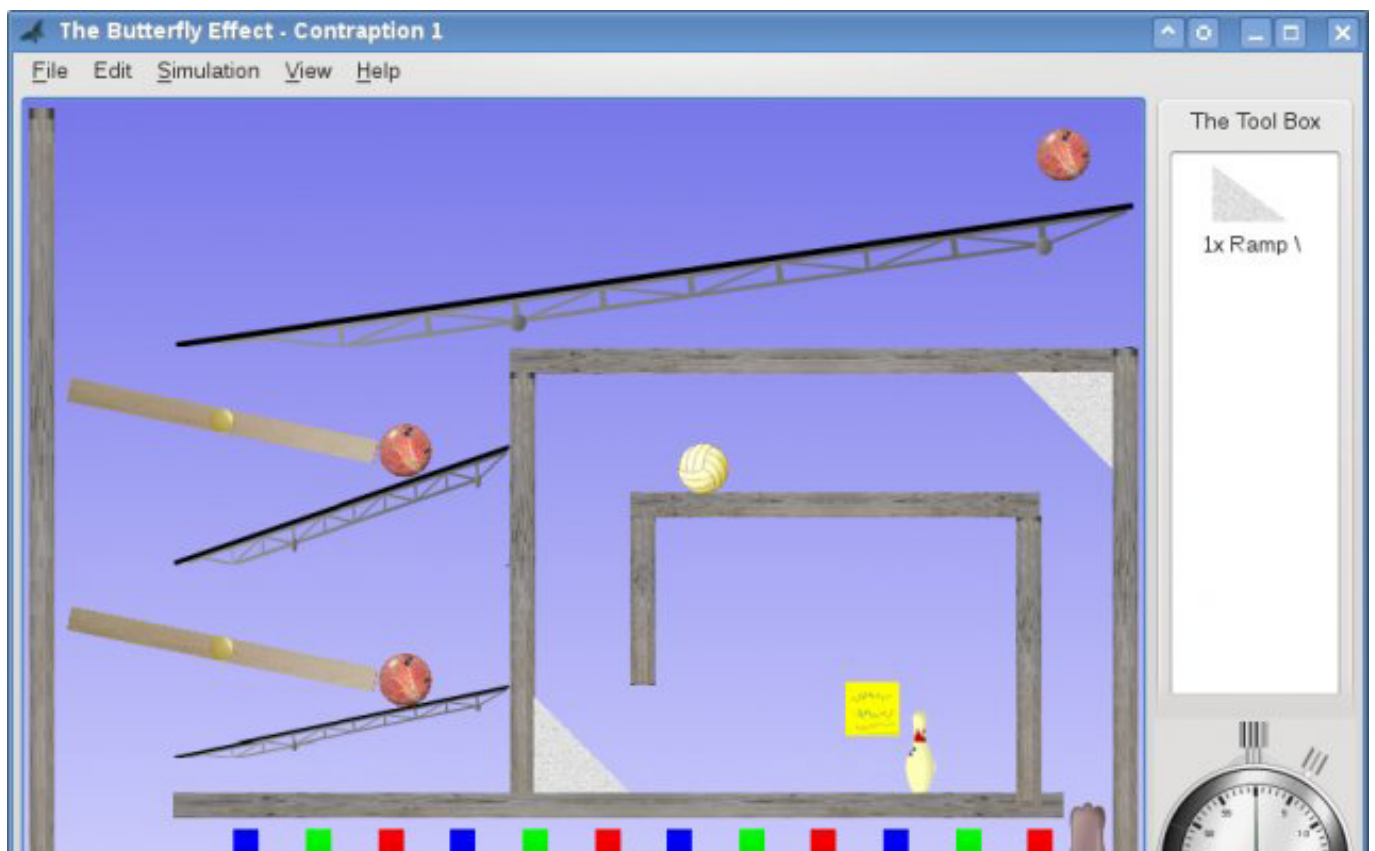
http://worldwide.blackberry.com/blackberrytour/ndsp2.jpg
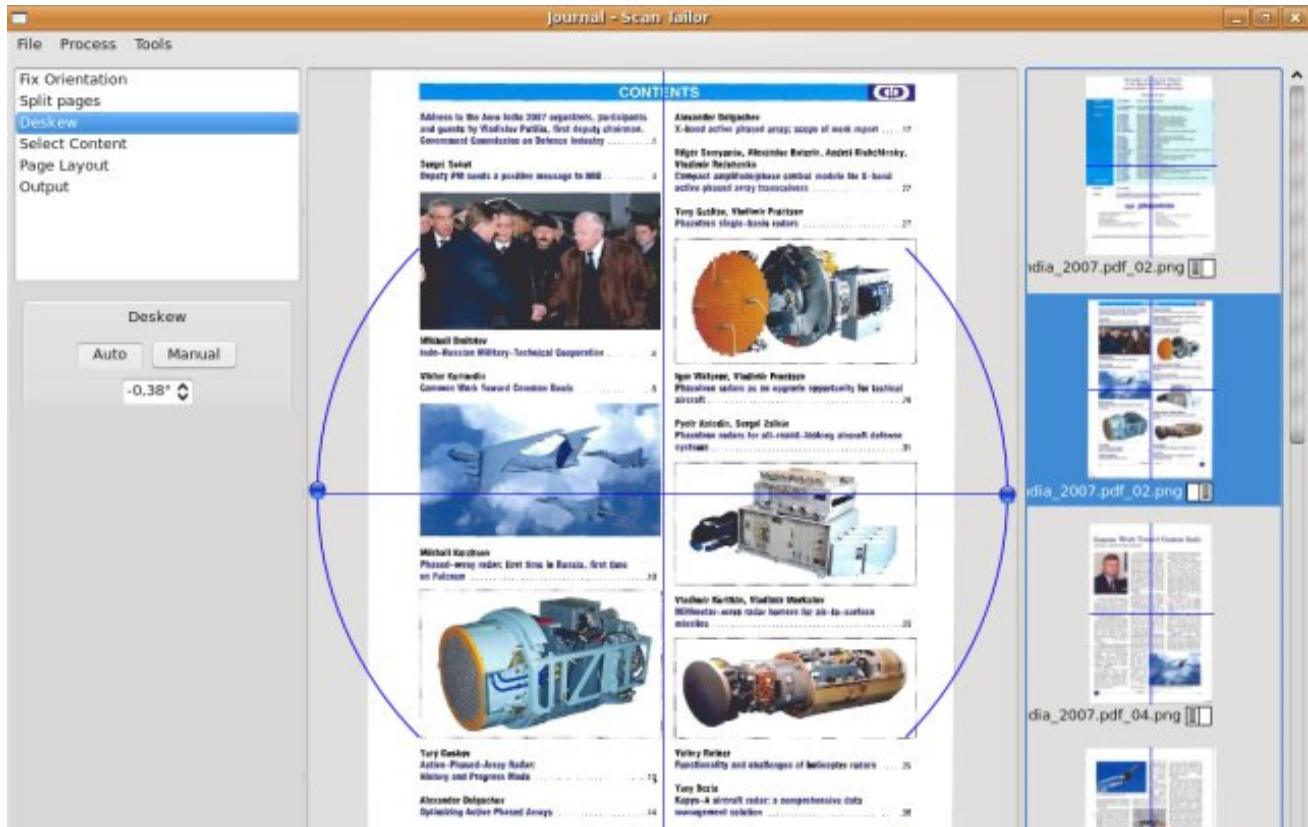
Scan Tailor (Deskew)

Scan Tailor (Split Pages)

The Butterfly Effect

Verbatim Nano Wireless Mouse

Reviewed by Fred Wassermann, Vice President, Programs
Seniors Computer Group, California
December 2009 issue, Bits and Bytes
www.scgsd.org / scgsd (at) cox.net

I just installed a new Verbatim Nano wireless mouse in my notebook computer. I had used another brand of wireless mouse which had a typical 2-inch long wireless receiver. It was satisfactory but because I had to remove the USB receiver to fit it into the carrying case, it was not ideal. It also worried me somewhat as I had already damaged two thumb drives on my desktop computer as well as destroying one USB female socket on that computer. Well, I damaged the one and my 75 pound dog did the other one. I learned but he didn't. You can see one totaled thumb drive below. It doesn't take much to kill one.

This got me thinking about possible damage to the wireless mouse receiver dongle as well as the possibility of damage to the notebook motherboard if anything bumped it or dropped on it. Replacement receivers are about half the cost of the whole mouse setup. Motherboards are very expensive to replace on notebooks. If you look at the Verbatim Nano Mouse in the figures at the top and bottom right, you can see that the receiver is extremely small. It barely projects ¼ inch from the computer. It is just big enough to be removable with thumb and forefinger. It is not likely to be in the path of anything that can break it. Problem solved, worry gone, and my notebook can be packed even with the receiver attached.

How does this mouse compare with other units? At a suggested list of $29.95, it is the least expensive wireless mouse sold with a tiny receiver dongle like this one. Similar Nano mice are considerably more expensive. The mouse is small, perfectly sized for your notebook, yet quite adequate for the average hand. A rubberized grip makes for easy handling. The Nano has the standard two buttons along with a programmable scroll wheel but no extra programmable function buttons. Of course, the included software allows left- or right-hand use. I found that extra mouse buttons are often accidentally clicked when those functions are least desired. This mouse shuts off to save batteries when not in use. It is not an issue with notebook users, but in my tests, the receiver worked flawlessly at ranges greater than 10 feet from the mouse, well beyond where one can see the cursor on the screen. My present desktop wireless mouse has the stutters when it is only 4 feet from the computer. That can be an issue when a desktop unit is as distant from the mouse as mine is. This would not be a problem with the Verbatim Nano.

Another consideration for those that have built-in Bluetooth in their notebook, this mouse is also available in a Bluetooth unit, requiring no dongle at all. Same price, same functionality.

The Verbatim Nano Mouse functions better than any wireless mouse I have owned. It has very good resolution, offers significant protection from bumping damage due to the small size of the receiver, is less expensive than comparable products, and comes
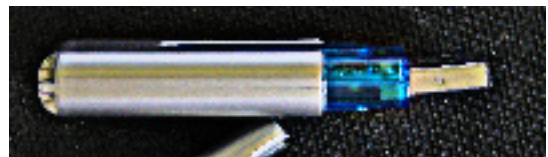
in six colors. I am partial to red.

If you have a notebook, I recommend this product. If you just have a desktop unit I recommend it as a worthwhile accessory. Wireless has come a long way with this product. More info is available at: http://tinyurl.com/29sww5k

MS Office Tips
Provided by Sharon Parq Associates

Indenting Cell Contents

Microsoft Excel allows you to format the contents of a cell in a myriad of ways. One of the formatting options you can apply is to indent the contents of a cell by a certain amount. This is similar to indenting done in a word processor, such as Microsoft Word, except that the indenting is specified in a number of characters, not in a linear distance such as inches or points.

To set the indent to be used in a cell, follow these steps:

1. Select the cells you want to format.
2. Display the Format Cells dialog box. (In Excel 2007 display the Home tab of the ribbon and click the small icon at the lower-right corner of the Number group. In older versions of Excel
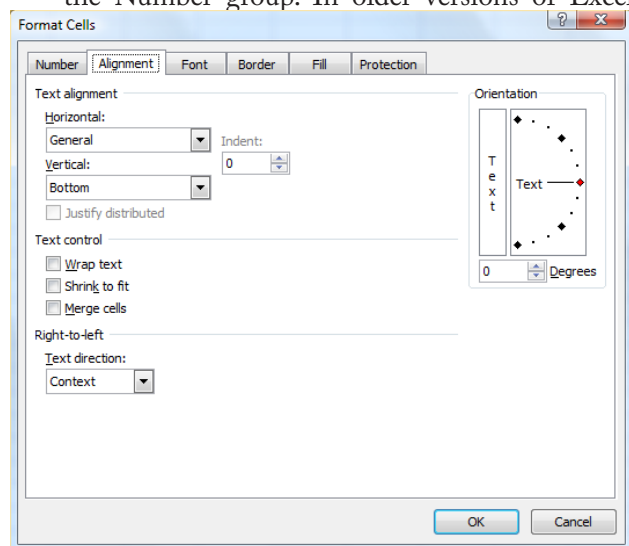
The Alignment tab of the Format Cells dialog box.

choose Cells from the Format menu.)

3. Make sure the Alignment tab is selected.
4. In the Horizontal drop-down list, choose Left (Indent). If you are using Excel 2002 or a later version, you can also choose Right (Indent).
5. Using the Indent control, specify the number of characters by which the cell contents should be indented from either the left or right side of the cell. You can pick any whole number between 0 and 15.
6. Click on OK.

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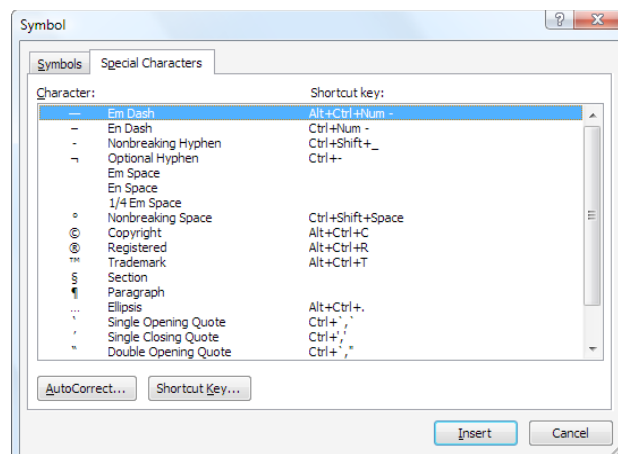
Inserting a Non-Breaking Hyphen

When Microsoft Word calculates line length and wraps text to the next line, it tries to wrap (or break) the line at a space or a hyphen—a dash. Sometimes, however, you may not want Word to break a line at a dash. For instance, dashes are used in telephone numbers, and you might not want a line to break in the middle of a telephone number.

The answer is to use non-breaking hyphens instead of regular dashes when you don't want Word to break a line at the hyphen. To do this, hold down the CTRL and SHIFT keys as you type the dash (this is the same as typing CTRL and an underscore). Word will then not break the line at that point.

You can also insert a non-breaking hyphen by following these steps:

1. Choose Symbol from the Insert menu or, in Word 2007, display the Insert tab of the ribbon,

The Special Characters tab of the Symbol dialog box.

click Symbol in the Symbols group, and finally click More Symbols. This displays the Insert Symbol dialog box.

2. Click on the Special Characters tab.
3. Highlight the Nonbreaking Hyphen character.
4. Click on Insert.
5. Close the dialog box by clicking on Cancel.

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Virtual Magnifying Glass 3.3.2 A free, open source, screen magnifier, for Windows, Linux, FreeBSD and Mac OS X

By Jim Townsend, Managing Editor, Brevard User Group, Florida
The Bug Newsletter, May 2010 Issue
www.bugclub.org / newsletter (at) bugclub.org

A while ago I installed this program on my notebook computer, tried it out and forgot about it. I started to cleanup and defrag the hard drive and came across it.

So of course I had to play with it. The notebook has an LCD screen with 1280x800 resolution and some sites are hard to read with fine print, colored backgrounds and the dimming when it is on battery power.

When you click on the program to open it you have four choices to pick from, one of which is the web site. I clicked on that and read the instructions. Simple and to the point, "even a caveman could do it." Once the program is started, you can click the mouse and it will drop to the system tray on the task bar, where you can bring it up when needed. After a reboot you will have to restart the program again, so a shortcut on the desktop would be convenient.

The program defaulted to a 3x5 inch box, which I found could easily be changed, also with different levels of magnification. You could change the width to read a line of text and three or four lines in height, then just drag the box down the page.

Did I mention it was FREE. The author asks for a donation through PayPal; if you find it useful please consider paying something.

http://www.magnifier.sourceforge.net
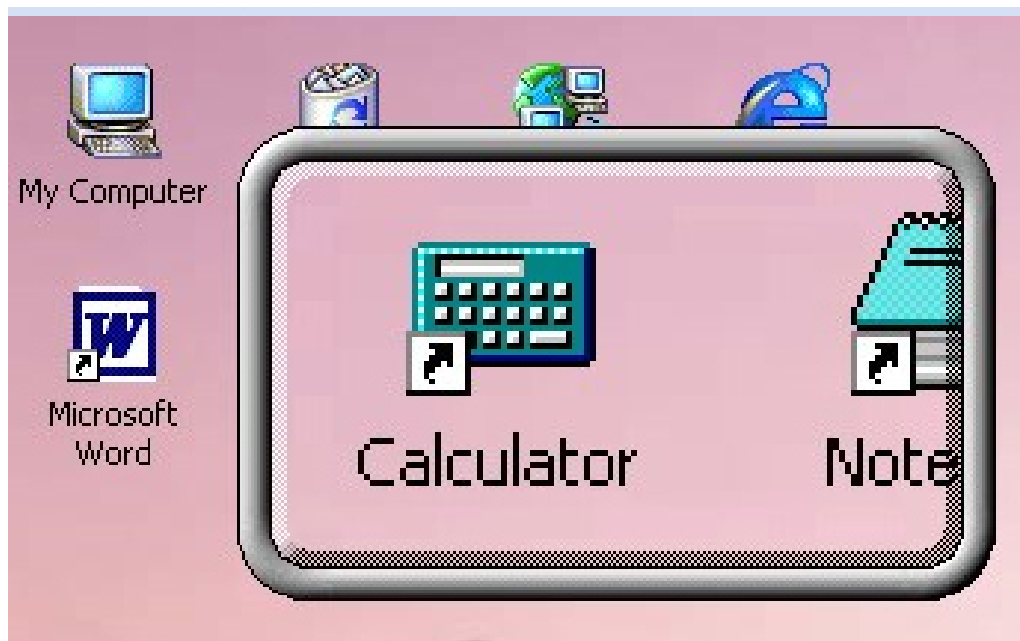
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The Cursor provides news, commentary and product information to members of the Washington Area Computer User Group.

Send membership inquiries and address changes to: membership@wacug.org
Send article submission and reprint requests to the Editor: cursor@wacug.org

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_____

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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: • Jul 17   • Aug 14   • Sep 14   • Sep 18   • Oct 16
Call (703) 370-7649 for the latest meeting information or Visit our Web Site at:
http://www.wacug.org

All Meetings are held at the _Osher Lifelong Learning Institute_ 4210 Roberts Road, Fairax, VA. Call our help line or visit our web site if you need additional information.

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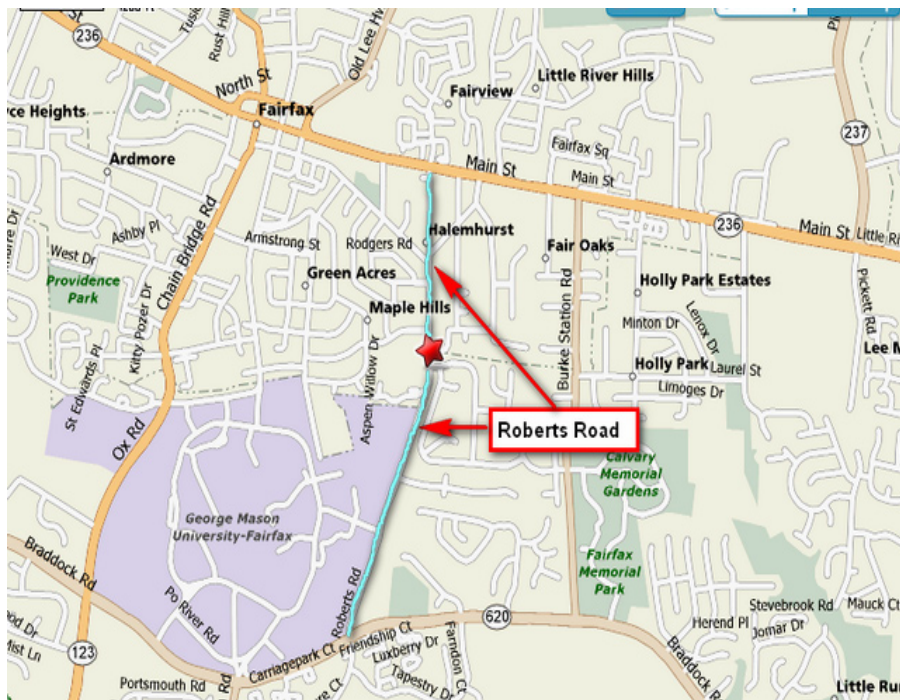
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July 9, 2010

The Slickdeals Approach to Cable Company Negotiations

By Gabe Goldberg, Computers and Publishing, Inc.
Slickdeals (at) gabegold.com

For some people, their cable company is "the company they love to hate". Most folks just accept the cable company for what it is, a semi-regulated utility providing useful or necessary services. And the remainder -- often to the mystification of the first group -- just love their company, even singing its praises when cable service is discussed.

To make sense of this variation, remember that cable service is generally provided by regional monopolies, with territories granted by local governments, so features, customer services, and costs indeed vary widely. And even one company's characteristics can vary with geography, depending on factors such as local management, franchise arrangements and fees, and infrastructure age and quality.

As early as possible in this process, request your free credit reports and ensure that you're shown as being financially responsible, with all account payments up-to-date. Felicia Blow, Cox Cable's Director of Public Affairs, notes that the better a credit history is, "the more flexibility Cox has in avoiding the customer having to pay deposits and the like to get or restore service."

But separate from everything else is the need to negotiate effectively with the company, whether establishing new service, changing what's provided, or simply haggling for a better deal.

So, prior to any conversation or transaction, do your homework. Understand everything you'll need to consider and perhaps mention: competition to cable services in your area (satellite and over-the-air TV, phone company DSL or FiOS, cell phone service), services offered, service levels (e.g., Internet connection speeds, TV channel bundles), features (telephone caller-id, voicemail, speed dialing, three-way calling, etc.), list prices, bundle discounts, and current or recent promotions offered.

This is complicated enough that you want to get it right, selecting no more or less than what you need and want, while paying the best price possible. So start with a list (or, better, a spreadsheet) showing what to discuss, each item's relative importance to you, the cable company's quoted price, and any available bundles or promotions.

Just as a retired couple likely doesn't need a seven-passenger SUV and a young singleton won't rent a McMansion, don't get carried away by glittering features and services. Cox's Blow suggests remembering your "station in life" before ordering the fastest Internet connection if you'll just send email and do light Web surfing, though if you have far-flung family, a generous phone package might ultimately save money.

Similarly, a killer online gamer might go for blazing DOCSIS 3.0 Internet bandwidth and skip phone service entirely, depending on cell phone connectivity.

Bundles -- combination service packages costing less than the sum of their individual components -- can save or waste money. Think carefully about whether it's worth spending more money to save some, or whether better value comes from mixing-and-matching bits from multiple providers.

Consider freebies offered but remember that they only have value if they're useful. Internet services may include spam filtering, security tools, parental controls, anti-virus, anti-spyware, etc., but compare their quality to other free and fee tools to ensure that you're getting best of breed. If you won't use them, don't let a cable rep seduce you into paying premium prices because they're included.

You'll likely be offered prepaid protection for inside cable facilities. Unless you're aware of problems, it's usually best to decline this -- it's essentially overpriced insurance against rare problems with cable wiring. The company is responsible for connectivity to your dwelling's main termination, and will usually address (Internet, TV, phone) signal quality issues at no cost. But check with neighbors regarding company service and fee policies regarding inside work.

Once you're a customer, you're not done chatting with your CableCo. Don't suffer service problems or billing issues silently, or just gripe to friends and neighbors. Cable companies understand they've had public relations problems and work to be better liked. Online services such as real-time customer service chats may resolve problems at 3 am. And some companies have online monitors watching for complaints in forums and on Twitter.

Even satisfied customers benefit from occasionally evaluating services and adding/deleting features, and calling to request lower prices can cut monthly bills. This can involve citing competitive services – for example, if your neighborhood has just been wired for FiOS with promotional rates offered, you can threaten to terminate service unless the lower price is matched.

Make this more credible by mentioning that you're not tied to CableCo email addresses; note that you use Webmail service accessible through any ISP or that you have your own domain (both of which are good practices to avoid having to change email addresses when moving from one company's territory to another!). If you've suffered problems or outages, suggest that it's only fair for you to be compensated by lower rates.

You may be required to commit to service for some period in order to have fees reduced. One customer reduced his monthly Internet cost $20, to $29.99, while getting about 30Mbps download and 3.5Mbps upload speeds -- hardly shabby, and worth agreeing to stick around for a year. If you're content to remain a customer and don't expect to move soon, that's a good bargain. Of course, watch the calendar and haggle again if your rate ever increases.

Finally, if you work with a competent and helpful rep – whether for initial orders, account changes, service or billing issues – ask for direct contact information, both telephone number and email address.

It's immensely helpful having continuity in dealing with normally faceless businesses, and service providers increasingly recognize how much personal service improves customer satisfaction. Not all companies or reps provide this, but -- as with everything else this article suggests -- it can't hurt to ask.

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Microsoft Security Essentials - Free Anti-Malware Protection

by Ira Wilsker

I recently encountered a situation where one of my computers was unable to load a new beta (pre-release) version of one of the popular security software suites that I was beta testing. The purpose of beta testing is to find serious bugs and other problems before the software is officially released. I have been a beta tester for dozens of titles over the years, and am fully cognizant of the problems and risks of beta testing. While the software publisher's beta support team has not yet resolved my issue, which was repeatable, this particular computer was now lacking any security software, and was at risk while performing normal online and offline tasks. I could have reinstalled my previous security suite, which has proven itself as reliable and effective, but I decided that this would be a good opportunity to try something new. There are a lot of security utilities available, both commercial and free, so I decided to try one of the few free products that I had not tried on one of my personal computers. I decided to try Microsoft's Security Essentials.

Microsoft had sold online and through retail channels its previous security product, Windows Live One-Care, which was met with mixed reviews regarding its level of protection and performance. In late 2008 Microsoft announced that it would discontinue Windows Live OneCare on June 30, 2009, and replace it with a new offering code named "Morro". "Morro" was released in its final version in 2009 for free distribution and download as Microsoft Security Essentials. This product is available for download directly from Microsoft at www.microsoft.com/Security_Essentials. As is common with almost all other Microsoft services, Microsoft will digitally determine the validity of the Windows installed on the computer before allowing the download; this process only takes a few seconds. Security Essentials will run on almost any Windows computer with a genuine copy of XP (Service Pack 2 or SP3), Vista (Service Pack 1 of SP2), or Windows 7. Versions are available for either 32 bit or 64 bit operating systems. Since Security Essentials is an integrated anti-malware product that protects from both viruses and spyware, it will disable Windows Defender (Microsoft's dedicated anti-spyware utility) if Defender is already installed on the

computer. Unlike other competitive security suites, Security Essentials does not include a firewall, but instead activates Window's integral firewall, and works with it. Also, since this is an "Essentials" utility that only provides malware protection, it does not include most of the other enhancements incorporated into the commercial products, such as anti-spam, website protection, and other tools. Security Essentials is ICSA Labs certified, and has been awarded the VB 100 Virus label, meaning that it detected 100% of the threats in a standardized testing environment. This is important as it indicates that Security Essentials does an acceptable job in protecting systems from malware.

Downloading Security Essentials directly from Microsoft was very fast, the 64 bit version only being about 7mb in size. Installing it was simple, but it did recognize that I had some other security software on the computer, and directed me to uninstall the other software before installing it. Once I uninstalled the other security software that it identified, Security Essentials installed very quickly, and did not present any complicated configuration questions. After installing the program, it asked to perform an update, and then completed a quick scan of my hard drive. The scan was very fast, among the quickest that I have experienced, a plus for Security Essentials.

The interface for Security Essentials is clean, with few options available. The "Home" screen shows if the real-time protection is on, and if the signature files are up to date. Also on the Home screen are buttons for a quick, full or custom scan. The "Update" screen shows the date and time that the definitions were created, as well as virus definition and spyware definition version numbers. The "History" screen shows threats that were detected, quarantined, or allowed. Under the "Settings" tab, the screen shows the scheduled scans, file exclusions, some simple "Advanced" settings, and an ominous selection "Microsoft SpyNet". Microsoft SpyNet is an online community that helps the user respond to threats. By default, Security Essentials sends basic information to Microsoft about any possible malware that was detected. One interesting statement on the SpyNet setting says, "In some instances, personal information might unintentionally be sent to Microsoft. Microsoft will not use this information to identify you or to contact you." The "Advanced membership" is basically the same, but sends additional software information to Microsoft.

One setting that is missing in Security Essentials that is on almost all other security products, is some type of setting to determine how often the software should "phone home" to check for updates. Microsoft says that it automatically updates, but does not indicate any standardized frequency of updates. My former security suite by default checked for updates every hour, and another product that I have used "pushes" almost continuous updates to the user, keeping them reasonable up to date. By contrast, Security Essentials has an apparently unpredictable update pattern, such that today I received a warning on the task bar icon, which flashed red; clicking on the icon told me that my definition files (virus signature files) may be out of date. Looking at the "Update" tab on the program showed that my files were two days out of date, so I manually updated the software by clicking on the "update" button. The update was quickly downloaded and installed, but it was interesting to note that the time stamp on the latest update was about six hours old. As I type this, the "Update" screen shows that my definitions are over 10 hours old, so I just clicked on the update button again; Security essentials duly checked for an update, and reported that my software is up to date, but still shows the 10 hour old definitions as being the latest. Several years ago, daily updates were the industry norm, but today, with thousands of new threats appearing daily, infrequent updates may indicate a potential weakness in system defenses, as competitive software would have already been updated several times today.

One very pleasant surprise with Security Essentials is how fast it loads at boot, and how little it degrades system performance. I use a software utility called Soluto to monitor and control my boot process; using my prior security suite, boot time was about 100 seconds, but with Security Essentials, my computer is booting in about 50 seconds, or twice as fast! Likewise, programs seem to load much faster with Security Essentials than my previous product, and browser performance is greatly improved as well, with web pages loading much faster. This may be explained by the fact that since Security Essentials is precisely what its name implies, only the basic essentials load; other overhead is not loading and running like the more comprehensive competitive security suites.

It is up to the user to decide if the minimal but adequate protection provided by the free Microsoft Security Essentials is worth the significant improvements in performance that it allows. Since my personal choice is to have increased protection, even at the cost of some performance degradation, I will go

back to my favorite comprehensive commercial suite as soon as the beta issues are resolved, or the final version is released. Still, in the meantime, I will stay with Microsoft Security Essentials until that time.

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WolframAlpha - Computational Knowledge Engine

by Ira Wilsker

WEBSITES:
http://www.wolframalpha.com
http://www.wolframalpha.com/examples/
http://www.wolframalpha.com/screencast/
introducingwolframalpha.html
http://www.wolframalpha.com/about.html
http://www.wolframalpha.com/downloads.html

We are all familiar with the common search engines, such as Google, Bing, AllTheWeb, and Yahoo. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of search engines, and they all pretty much provide somewhat the same information. Last year Microsoft introduced Bing, its latest search engine iteration, which also had some decision making capabilities and built-in intelligence. Microsoft used its power and wealth to inundate the computing world with information and promotional materials about Bing in an attempt to steal market share from Google and the other major search engine providers. At about the same time (May 15, 2009), a much smaller company, Wolfram Research, the publisher of the Mathematica software, introduced its computational knowledge engine WolframAlpha.

WolframAlpha is not a traditional search engine that displays listings of web links, but instead displays the answer to a question, formula, or other inquiry. For example, if I type "Beaumont Texas" in Google, I am presented with a listing of nearly 7 million web links containing the term "Beaumont Texas", with some rank ordering placing the most popular results near the top of the display. If I type "Beaumont Texas" in the search box on WolframAlpha (www.wolframalpha.com), it directly displays the facts about the topic. In this case, WolframAlpha displayed the population, map, current local time and weather, cost of living index, median home price, unemployment rate, sale tax rate, crime rate, commute time, geographic information, links to the county and nearby cities, and a hyperlinked list of famous people born in Beaumont.

WolframAlpha displays a lot more than just text, as it is a powerful computational engine. There is an entire menu consisting of hundreds of sample inquiry topics at www.wolframalpha.com/examples, and some other suggestions in the margins of several of the pages that the user can utilize to practice on the system, and master some of its powerful features. One of the suggested sample ideas is to enter the user's date of birth; I entered mine and was presented with a lot of information about my birthday. The results showed my age in years, weeks, and days; holidays and observances that are held on my birthday; historical events that occurred on that day (not necessarily in the same year) and a listing of celebrity and historical figures who were born or died on that day. Other information is displayed about the selected date, including the moon phase on the day I was born. By entering one or more stock symbols, a wealth of information is displayed. As a test, I entered the symbol "VZ" for Verizon, and was presented with current price information, financial fundamentals, dividend and yield, historical returns, a large variety of charts, performance comparisons between Verizon and it competitors, histograms, and other detailed information about the company.

WolframAlpha is one of the handiest and most informative calculators available. Using the example "$250 + 15%" displays both the result ($287.50) and how it was calculated; this could be a great tool for teaching basic arithmetic. Mathematical formulae are computed with ease, displaying detailed results of the computation. Using the digital term " $x^2 \sin(x)$" (x squared times sine of x) displays graphical plots on various scales, alternate forms of the mathematical expression, roots, derivatives, and other functions.

Math and simple facts are not the only computational capabilities of this excellent service; it also has hundreds of other forms of information that can be calculated and displayed. Other areas in which WolframAlpha can provide extensive information are statistics and data analysis, physics, chemistry, engineering, astronomy, earth and life sciences, money and finance, dates and times, places and geography, socioeconomic data, weather, health and medicine, food and nutrition, sports and games, music, and many other topics. Users of my weather page sometimes ask me for historical weather information, usually for a specific date and location; as a default, WolframAlpha uses

the location of the computer requesting the information, which is in my case, Beaumont. I simply entered "weather summer 2008" (for other locations enter the city or other geographic information), and was presented with time and temperature ranges, humidity, graphs showing meteorological information, and information about the weather stations that gathered the information presented. I picked this particular search to display the effects of Hurricane Ike, such as the wind speed and barometric pressure, which conspicuously stand out on the graphs. Using the hurricane template under the topics menu, the user is presented with detailed information on a particular storm, wind speeds, and comparisons. Using the comparison feature, I compared Rita to Ike by entering the search term, "Hurricane Ike, Hurricane Rita", and was presented with a table comparing those two local disasters. Rita was the stronger storm, but according to the composite tracking chart displayed, both had nearly identical tracks.

The amount of computational knowledge available from WolframAlpha is almost endless. If the user needs to calculate monthly payments and an amortization table, this can do it. If an investor needs commodity and futures prices, WolframAlpha provides that information in detail. Mortgage terms can be directly compared; by searching with the expression, "mortgage $150,000, 6.5%, 30 years" produces charts and graphs that display the monthly payments, graphical comparison of principle and interest over time, and other information. Present values, currency conversions, bond evaluations, different forms of options and derivatives, salaries, wages, income taxes, sales taxes, and historical financial information are easy to determine with WolframAlpha. In the economics classes that I teach every semester, the students are asked to calculate what has happened to prices over their lifetimes, and what may happen to prices when they are ready to retire. Using this engine the students can instantly calculate the current value of a historical quantity of money ($1000 in 1965 is worth what today?), compute historical equivalent value of today's money ($1000 today compared to 1980), and convert one historical quantity of money to another ($1000 in 1945 was worth what in 1990?).

While WolframAlpha is accessible from any internet browser, it is also accessible using other means, without a browser, or as a browser plug-in to automate the computational process. From the website at wolframalpha.com/downloads.html, the user can put a gadget, widget, or deskband on his desktop (Mac OS X, Vista and Windows 7) to enable him to access information directly from his desktop. WolframAlpha toolbars are available for Internet Explorer, Chrome, and Firefox which enable searching from the browser toolbar. Firefox and IE8 users can add WolframAlpha as a search engine add-on, automating the search function from the browser menu. Apps (applications) are available for the iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch that enable users of those devices to directly access the capacity of this service. Regardless of how accessed, the massive capabilities of WolframAlpha are readily available.

Now that I have had some experience with WolframAlpha, I will be more likely to use it to acquire information and calculate data, and less likely to use the traditional search engines such as Google when I need to find something. WolframAlpha is one of those services that I did not originally know that I needed, but now I cannot do without it.

# Variations On a Theme of Flash Drives

Reviewed by Fred Wasserman, Vice President,
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December 2009 issue, Bits and Bytes
www.scgsd.org / scgsd (at) cox.net

Flash drives have become not just interesting little toys but essential storage and data transfer tools. How many of us still use floppy disks to pass data along from one computer to another? They fit in a shirt pocket. For bigger stacks of data, a CD or DVD was necessary, but didn't fit in that shirt pocket. When flash drives came along disk media were relegated to just long-term storage or for sending data by mail. Flash drives in use is doubling every year. That means there is a real opening for manufacturers to come up with newer and better versions of the product.

I came into possession of some really interesting and useful variations on the flash drive, or thumb drive, as it is sometimes called. They both held my interest as very useful devices. One is so small and flat that it can easily be put in your wallet where it would probably make less of a bulge than a folded dollar bill. Great idea. They both come equipped to clip on to your key chain. The larger one, called "TUFF-CLIP" has a retractable protector on the connector end and a spring latch to connect to anything like a key ring. The little one, called "TUFF-N-TINY" can also be attached to a key chain with the supplied lanyard. A consideration with that USB Drive is you
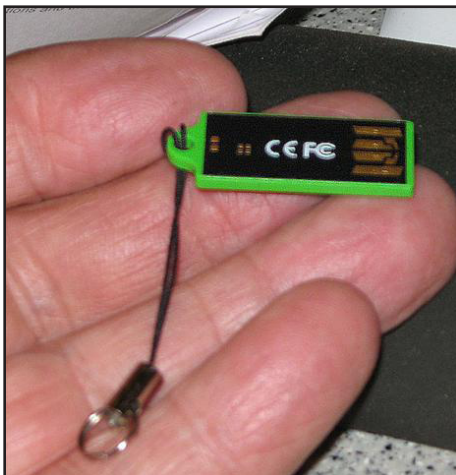
must remember to keep the contacts facing up when connecting it to the USB port, though it won't suffer damage if you don't.

It doesn't just stop there. The TUFF-N-TINY is completely sealed, water and dust resistant, measures just 1 by ½ inch and is no thicker than a penny and offers 2, 4 or 8 Gb of storage for $12 to $27. Until now, the one flash drive weakness was their fragility. These are complex little devices with their delicate circuit board components within some kind of brittle plastic casing soldered to the external connector. But this Verbatim product addresses the fragility problem by design and elimination of the weakest point, the connector-to-body attachment. The connector, electronics and housing are just a single strong plastic potted circuit board.

TUFF-CLIP, the other innovative USB drive, is an extremely tough unit that is designed for extreme environments and can be clipped to backpacks, belt loops key chains or what have you.

As an added convenience, both come with the application built in to encrypt the data contents in any Windows environment. If lost or stolen, your data is safe but only if you use that capability.

Last, but in no way least, is that these USB drives are enhanced for users of the newer versions of Windows. They are Readyboost capable. You will ask, what is Readyboost? With Widows Readyboost which is available with Windows Vista and Windows 7, you can use appropriately designed USB flash memory to improve performance without having to add additional memory to the computer internals. The flash drive acts as the additional memory cache that, like your installed RAM, can be accessed faster than hard drive storage. Visualize 4- or 8-Gigabytes of additional memory to speed up your large file-intensive programs such as working on a large Photoshop image.

Verbatim, producer of the old - 5.25 inch floppy that my first computer ran from has added these new products to its expanding line of useful media and is still making the good stuff.