



The Cursor

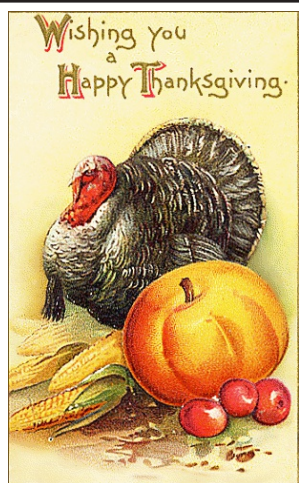


Monthly Newsletter of the Washington Area Computer User Group

Meeting Location:
OLLI, 4210 Roberts Road
Fairfax, VA



Next Meeting:
November 19, 2011



Presidential Bits

by Geof Goodrum

*President, Washington Area Computer User Group
president(at)wacug.org*

I apologize that I wasn't able to present my introductory Linux talk at the October meeting. I decided the audience probably didn't want me to share my cold, and I doubt my voice would have held up anyway. Thanks to Bill Walsh, Gabe Goldberg, and others for extending the Learn 30 session on the Apple iPad into a full meeting topic with only a day's advance notice!

The November 19th WAC meeting will feature a presentation by Dennis Courtney about Cloud Computing. Dennis, President of the Capital PC User Group and Information Technology Architect for the Inter-American Development Bank, will speak in "Plain English" about CLOUD Technology — what it is and what it can do for you! Confused about the cloud? Want to know what all the fuss is about? What about security risks? What does it offer to small businesses and individuals? Dennis will explain what you need to comprehend and to use the cloud. He will also compare some of the major cloud offerings that each vendor provides.

Lorin Garson will provide the Learn 30 tutorial in November about recovering from a double computer failure. The steps to recovery will be described including: (a) dealing with the computer manufacturer; (b) communication challenges; (c) data recovery; (d) software recovery; and (e) the special challenges of Microsoft Outlook. How do you survive information deprivation in the interim when "everything you know" is on the computer? How long did the recovery take? How much paranoia is sufficient? All will be revealed!

By the way, my Linux presentation is rescheduled for the December 10th as a Learn 30 demonstration of the newly-released Ubuntu 11.10 GNU/Linux distribution. This will be a good fit with the main meeting topic on Free Software to be given by John Kennedy of the Licking County Computer Society.

See you there!

Table of Contents

Lloyd's Web Sites.....	2
Linux News.....	3
GNU/Linux Distributions.....	3
Linux Software.....	4
Cable Co. Negotiations.....	6
Word Tips.....	7
Password Tracking.....	8
Excel Tips.....	8
Creative Landscapes.....	9

Only in the Download Edition

Building a PC.....	13
Want to Tweet?.....	15
Camera Gadgets.....	16

Lloyd's Web Sites for November 2011

by Lloyd Johnson

Columnist, Washington Area Computer User Group

Visit www.wacug.org for past issues of Web Sites with hyperlinks.

1. Men's Free online magazine. (health, cars, gear, fashion, relationships and more) — www.AskMen.com
2. U.S. Government Bargains — www.GovSales.gov
3. Weekly guide to Stars, Constellations, planets and other celestial phenomena — www.skyandTelescope.com/observing/ata glance
4. On-line nature guides from National Wildlife Federation — www.enature.com/fieldguides
5. NationMaster. A handy way to graphically compare Nations — www.nationmaster.com/index.php
6. Cap Tel 800 phone lets you listen to the caller and read word for word what he/she is saying. Some states offer these phones for free to qualified residents — www.captel.com
7. All-in-one Genealogy Resource. More than 275,000 Web Sites — www.cyndisList.com
8. How to find Patent Rich Companies. Good for Investors — www.patentboard.com
9. Raise Money for charity by letting a Mustache grow for 4 weeks after Thanksgiving — www.MustachesforKids.com
10. Count winter birds around your home — www.bna.birds.Cornell.edu/bna



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/>

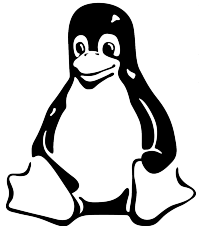
Meetings start at 7:00 PM

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WACUG

OPCUG



Linux and Open Source News

by Geof Goodrum
linux@wacug.org

Open Source Community Responds to Microsoft's Secure Boot Requirement

Microsoft requires PC original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to support the Unified Extensible Firmware Interface (UEFI, <http://www.uefi.org/home>) for their systems to be certified for Windows 8 (rumored to release in early 2012). UEFI is an interface specification that modernizes the Basic Input/Output System (BIOS) that helps hand-off the system to the operating system after power on, but unlike BIOS is not specific to the x86 PC architecture.

Part of the UEFI specification that Microsoft requires is a secure boot protocol for digital keys installed by the OEM that allow only authorized drivers and executables to run. As noted by tech blogger and Red Hat Senior Software Engineer Matthew Garrett (<http://mjg59.livejournal.com/138973.html>), "A system that ships with only OEM and Microsoft keys will not boot a generic copy of Linux."

While Microsoft responded that it is up to the OEMs to make secure boot a user option (<http://blogs.msdn.com/b/b8/archive/2011/09/22/protecting-the-pre-os-environment-with-uefi.aspx>), the Open Source community is not confident that the OEMs will do so; the UEFI specification does not require such an option. While it is possible for Linux OS distributors to provide keys to OEMs, secret signing keys are not consistent with open source development and there is no guarantee that the OEMs would include them.

The Linux Foundation published a paper (<http://www.linuxfoundation.org/publications/making-uefi-secure-boot-work-with-open-platforms>) recommending that customers be allowed to install keys. GNU/Linux OS distributors Canonical and Red Hat jointly published a white paper on the same topic with similar recommendations, summarized by Victor Palau on the Canonical Blog

(<http://blog.canonical.com/2011/10/28/white-paper-secure-boot-impact-on-linux/>) as "we recommend that systems manufacturers include a mechanism for configuring your own list of approved software" and "we recommend that PCs include a User Interface to easily enable or disable Secure Boot and allow the user to chose to change their operating system."

Perhaps just as important is that Microsoft, with Windows 8, is restricting what its users can do with the hardware they buy.

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 free download 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.

The following list summarizes distribution release announcements from [Distrowatch.com](http://distrowatch.com) for the period September 29 – November 2, 2011.

AgiliaLinux 8.0.0
Alpine Linux 2.3.0
ALT Linux 6.0.0 "Centaurus"
ArchBang Linux 2011.11
AVLinux 5.0.2
blackPanther OS 11.1

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

Bodhi Linux 1.2.1
CAELinux 2011
Calculate Linux 11.9
DoudouLinux 1.1
Edubuntu 11.10
Finnix 103
Kororaa Linux 15.1
Kubuntu 11.10
Kwort Linux 3.2
LinEx 2011
Linux From Scratch 7.0
Lubuntu 11.10
Mythbuntu 11.10
Parsix GNU/Linux 3.7r1
Parted Magic 6.7
Puppy Linux 5.3 “Slacko”
Sabayon Linux 7
Sabayon Linux 7 “Core”
SalineOS 1.5
Salix OS 13.37 “Ratpoison”
Scientific Linux 5.7 “Live”
Superb Mini Server 1.6.2
SystemRescueCd 2.4.0
Ubuntu 11.10
Ubuntu Rescue Remix 11.10
Ubuntu Studio 11.10
Xubuntu 11.10
Zentyal 2.2-1
ZevenOS 2.0 “Neptune”

Featured Linux Software of the Month: November 2011

The software described below can be downloaded at the links provided or copied onto a USB flash drive at the WAC meeting. However, please check the online package management tool included with your GNU/Linux distribution first, as installation is often just a click away.

GNU Typist – v2.9.

<http://www.gnu.org/software/gtypist/>. Free GNU General Public License source code by Tim Marston. GNU Typist (gtypist) is a universal typing tutor. It includes typing tutorials in several languages and for several keyboard layouts. GNU Typist is a direct descendant of the famous program “Typist.”

Minerva – v2.6.1. <http://www.minervahome.net/>. Free GNU General Public License scripts by Steven Goodwin. Minerva is a complete, easy to use home automation suite. It allows you to switch your on lights from anywhere using a mobile phone or PC, email your video, check CCTV footage, control your central heating, and much more. It relies on command line and can therefore be run from virtually any platform (smart phone, PDA, laptop, or remote PC) with identical functionality. The architecture consists of three parts; input, output, and process. Each is completely distinct, meaning you can control any of the house processes from any supported input conduit such as a Web browser, remote control, or SMS. Reports or notifications can be sent to any of the available output conduits. Minerva uses Perl, PHP, and Unix scripts.

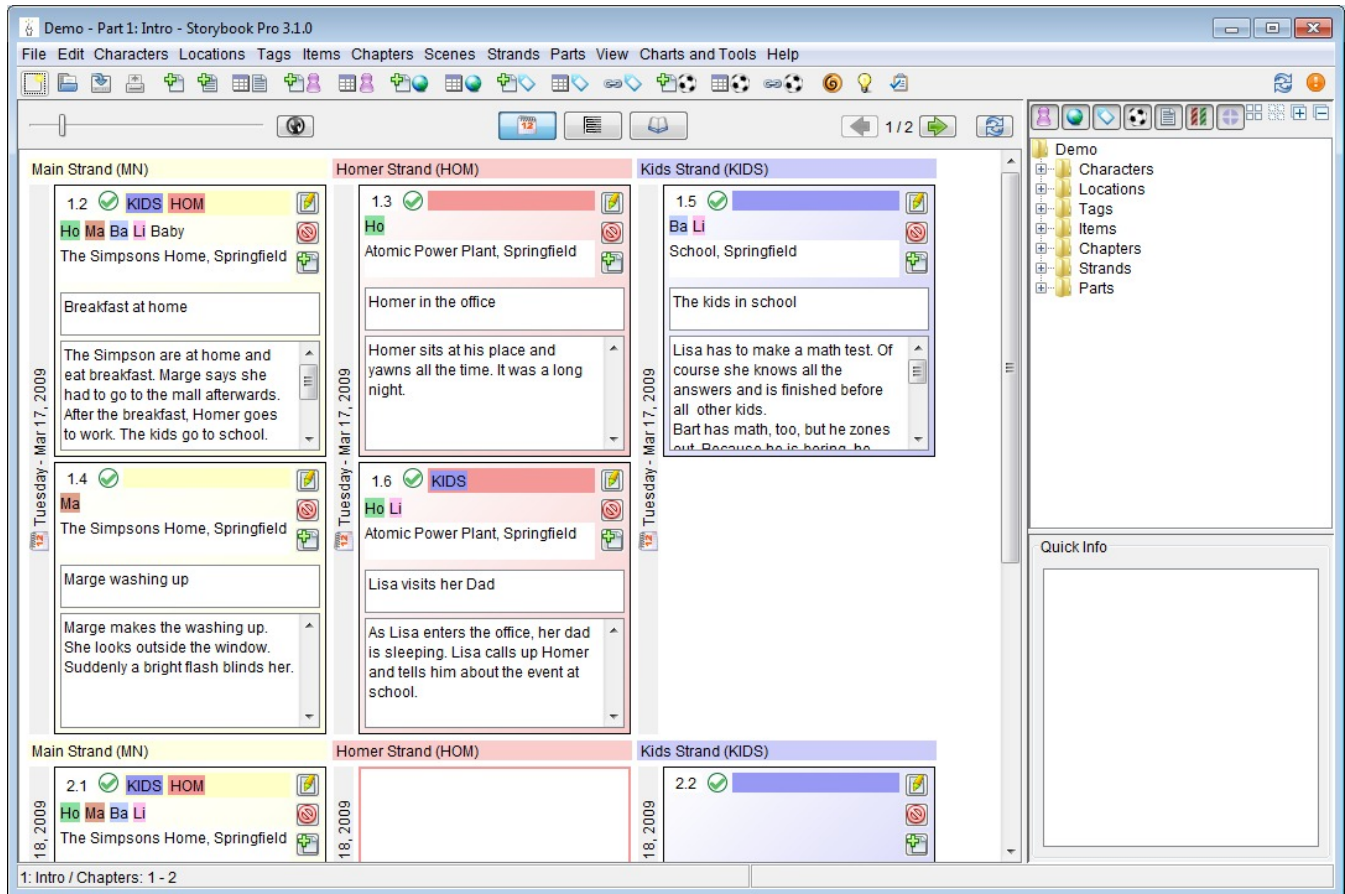
moneyGuru – v2.4.1.

<http://www.hardcoded.net/moneyguru/>. Contribution-based BSD Revised License source code and Debian executable packages by Hardcoded Software. moneyGuru is a personal finance management application. It allows you to evaluate your financial situation so that you can make informed (and thus better) decisions. Most finance applications have the same goal, but moneyGuru’s difference is in the way it achieves it. Rather than having reports which you have to configure (or find out which pre-configured report is the right one), your important financial data (net worth, profit) is constantly up-to-date and “in your face.” This allows you to constantly make informed decision rather than doing so periodically. moneyGuru is loosely based on the double-entry accounting system, can import QIF, OFX, QFX and CSV files and can export to QIF.

Storybook – v3.1.0. <http://www.novelist.ch/joomla/>.

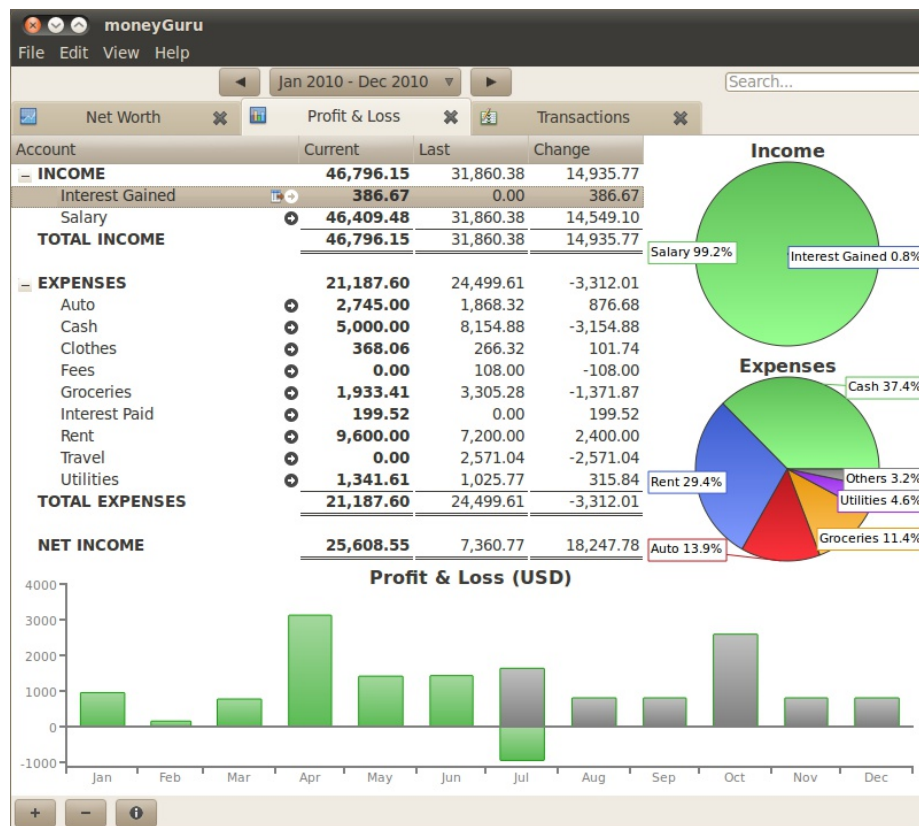
Free GNU General Public License Java code by Intertec. Storybook is novel-writing software that helps authors keep an overview of multiple plot lines while writing books, novels, or other written works. It assists you in structuring your book. It lets you store all the information about your characters and locations in one place, then use the included Storybook features for managing chapters, scenes, characters and locations, items, and tags. A simple interface is provided to enable you to assign your defined characters, locations, items, and tags to each

Continued on page 6



Above: Storybook Chronological View

Below: moneyGuru Profit and Loss Report



scene and to keep an overview of your work with user-friendly chart tools. With the Memoria Tool, each object can be followed in dependence on time.

Kernel Source – v3.1.1. <http://www.kernel.org/>. Free GNU General Public License source code for all platforms by the Linux community.



The Slickdeals Approach to Cable Company Negotiations

by Gabe Goldberg

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.

Do your homework and make sure that you’re ready to negotiate, not beg

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.

Make sure that you’re not buying more services than you need

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

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 6

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.

Even customers can negotiate

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. I was able to reduce my 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.

Gabe Goldberg has developed, worked with, and written about technology for decades. This article originally appeared on the slickdeals.net Web site, <<http://slickdeals.net/>>. © Gabriel Goldberg 2010.

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Word Tips: Making Banners in Word *by Allen Wyatt*

Got a birthday celebration coming up, a retirement party, or some other type of shindig? You may want to create a banner for the occasion, and you'll rightly wonder whether you can use Word to create the banner.

The answer to the question really depends on what needs to be displayed on the banner. If you want the banner to include graphics or to have a complex layout, then you will be disappointed—Word can't handle this sort of need. (There is an exception to this blanket statement; more on that in a moment.)

If your banner is text only, then you can easily print out a single letter on a series of pieces of paper. For instance “Welcome Home Fred” could be printed on 15 pieces of paper (17 if you include the spaces), and then you would tape together the individual sheets into the desired message. The hardest part of creating banners in this manner is to make sure you get the letters in the right order as you tape them together. This approach provides the benefit of allowing you to

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

use a wide variety of formatting options (font, size, attributes, etc.) for the letters you are printing on each piece of paper.

The exception I mentioned earlier doesn't necessarily apply if you are using a printer that can handle very long pieces of paper. Some printers use roll paper or continuous feed paper (such as the older dot-matrix printers). With these you can simply set your page up, in Word, as landscape and use a very large width. Word will handle a width of up to 22 inches. While this is pretty wide, it isn't that wide for a banner.

You may also be able to find some solutions by using the templates that Word provides for new documents. Search through the templates available in Word and you'll find several different banner templates available. The templates basically provide a ready-made way to implement the techniques already discussed in this tip.

There are, of course, other approaches you can take to creating your banners. Perhaps the best approach is to use a different program. Some people like to use Microsoft Publisher (which comes with some versions of Office), but you can also do a search on the Web for the term "banner maker" and find all sorts of ideas.

WordTips is your source for cost-effective Microsoft Word training. (Microsoft Word is the most popular word processing software in the world.) This tip (8758) applies to Microsoft Word versions: 97 | 2000 | 2002 | 2003

You can find a version of this tip for the ribbon interface of Word (Word 2007 and later) here: Making Banners in Word (http://wordribbon.tips.net/T008760_Making_Banners_in_Word.html).

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Excel Tips: Arranging Workbook Windows

by Allen Wyatt

If you have more than one workbook open at a time, Excel allows you to view all the workbooks at the same time, and to arrange each window as you desire.

The easiest method of arranging workbook windows is as follows:

1. Choose Arrange from the Window menu. Excel displays the Arrange Windows dialog box.
2. Make sure the Tiled option is selected. (This divides the screen space evenly between all your windows. The main benefit is that all your workbook windows get at least a piece of the screen.)
3. Click on OK. The windows are all displayed.
4. Click on the window whose size you wish to adjust. It becomes active.
5. Move the mouse cursor near the border of the active window. When the cursor turns into a set of arrows, press the mouse button and drag the window edge to the desired size. Release the mouse button.
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 for each window you want to adjust.

ExcelTips is your source for cost-effective Microsoft Excel training. This tip (2738) applies to Microsoft Excel versions: 97 | 2000 | 2002 | 2003

You can find a version of this tip for the ribbon interface of Excel (Excel 2007 and later) here: Arranging Workbook Windows

(http://excelribbon.tips.net/T007885_Arranging_Workbook_Windows.html).

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Password Tracking – Windows and Mobiles

by Merle Nicholson

Secretary, Tampa PC Users Group, FL

September 2011 issue, Bits of Blue

www.tpcug.org

[merle \(at\) merlenicholson.com](mailto:merle(at)merlenicholson.com)

Tracking passwords has always been a problem for me. Years ago I started a password document to track everything, and, while it worked, it left a great deal to be desired. The problem was much larger than just username and password. I needed to save the URL to

Continued on page 9

Continued from page 8

log in to websites. I needed to track expiration dates for subscriptions. I needed key codes for software. I have five different logins with Microsoft. Yes, I could reuse some of those, using the same login and password, but not always. For instance, sometimes your login is the same as your email address, but most times not. Making it more complicated, different sites have different login and password requirements.

And Verizon! I have SIX different logins with Verizon: Call Assistant, Verizon Central, Verizon FIOS, Verizon Mail Account, Verizon Mail and Verizon Wireless.

So I developed some “password rules” for myself. I decided that if I could remember more than just a couple of passwords, it was because 1) I had to reuse them (a bad thing) and 2) they were too simple. So something had to go. I decided I need really good passwords and I couldn’t handle it in my head.

One of my sons suggested the KeePassX database he’d been using for a while, and I started using it sparingly, slowly embracing its features as I got used to it. The program is maintained professionally and is available free of charge. You can look at the program at <http://www.keepassx.org/> to see if this will suit your own needs. Of particular interest is the variety of devices that it works on. You won’t see any mobile versions at the website, but each of the mobile devices has a version available from its own app store. I use the Android version on my Motorola Droid X.

The program uses an encrypted database, and I guess ideally there should be a way to automatically update or synchronize between devices. I own several computers and my Droid, and I need the database on all of them. I could use Microsoft Live Mesh or Dropbox or something like that for synchronization, but I dislike the idea of my password database being in the “cloud.” So for now I use a flash drive to copy the database file to my computers, and I connect my Droid to my base computer via USB and drag and drop the file.

I’ve found that, in practice, I don’t have to refresh the files very often. None but the one on my main computer is up to date at any one time, but it never seems to matter.

What is so useful about this program is that I can store any useful information along with the URL and the logon and the password. For instance, my Amazon/Kindle account logon has the names and Kindle email addresses of two Kindles, two Droids (smart phones) and two PCs. It’s a logical place to keep all this stuff.

Right now I count 82 database entries, and I’m very careful to keep it trimmed of anything not useful. It has a configurable password generator and the ability to look at the password when you want to instead of a line of *****.

I got an email to my Droid with a notification of an event on the TPCUG forum before I would even think of firing up my main computer. I needed to log on using a regular account on the forum. The peculiarities of a smart phone with just an on-screen keyboard that needed a complex login and password should have been just too daunting. But on the Android version of KeePassX, when you select the group (TPCUG) and title (User Logon), the database puts two little buttons in the notification strip at the top of the screen. So when you open the browser to the site, you just poke the login notifier, then poke and hold on the login box and a paste menu appears that you poke and it’s pasted in place. Then the same for the password and I was in and out in seconds.

What a deal, and it’s free. There are versions for Linux, Mac OSX, Windows, iPhone, PocketPC, Blackberry and Android. And if you think you don’t need one, your passwords are too simple and you’re using the same one for everything.



Book Review: Creative Landscapes - Digital Photography Tips and Tricks

By Mark Mattson

Editor, Computer Users of Erie, PA

October 2011 issue, Horizons

www.cuerie.com

cuerie1 (at) verizon.net

Walk out your door. It can be either into your front yard, or backyard...doesn’t matter. Look around you.

Really look.

Continued on page 10

No matter where you live — city, rural area, the middle of the desert — what you see (beyond the ordinary, everyday items that fill our lives) is a rich tapestry of earth and sky that makes up the landscape around us.

Photographers that specialize in landscape photography do the same thing as you just did...they take a look around them, and work out ways of showing the world around us in a new and different way, one that can evoke emotions and feelings in viewers that gives you insights into the way the creator of the image sees the world.

As author Harold Davis puts it, “At it’s best, landscape photography should be conducted as a spiritual exercise related to finding ourselves and our place in the universe.”

Through this book, Harold sets out to do just that: to give you, the reader the insights on how he views his place in the universe by capturing stunning images of the world around us.

Creative Landscapes gives you 239 pages of valuable information, accumulated over many years of photography experience, on how best to create landscape photos that will allow you to share your vision with others.

Divided into four parts, there are a total of 39 chapters inside the covers. That may seem a lot, but they are relatively short and sweet, and much of the page space is taken up with samples of Harold’s imagery and descriptions of how he made the photos...and his thoughts behind them.

Part One opens the book by discussing why landscapes make powerful images, and how they an emotional and almost spiritual place in our lives.

Part Two gives pointers on selecting cameras and lenses and how best to use them to create successful landscapes.

Part Three talks about the many varied locations and types of landscape scenes a photographer can shoot - ranging from seasonal to urban, desert to seascape and more. Information on how to best capture each locale is given.

Finally, Part Four describes and illustrates how to enhance landscape images in post-processing. Topics

examined include RAW file processing, enhancing your images using HDR software and procedures to increase quality and drama; enhancing in Photoshop; and using LAB color mode to sharpen and enhance your images.

Ansel Adams was a big influence on Harold in his early childhood years. Encountering “Moonrise Hernandez, New Mexico” at the age of ten in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, changed Harold and set him on the course he follows today when it comes to his photography. He attempts to impart some of the wonder and creativity this encounter inspired in him to his readers...and does an admirable job of it throughout the volume.

The majority of the book is illustrated with color images, but he also includes black and white as well, noting that it doesn’t matter what the color of an image is; the emotions it can evoke go beyond the color space it is created in when executed properly.

This book is one of the 30+ titles Harold Davis has authored on different areas of photography. I personally have several of them, notably the Digital Darkroom I and II volumes. In every case, his writing style is tight and concise, but also easy to read and understand, in order to allow you to apply his methods to your own imaging.

Personally, I find it highly rewarding to take images of landscapes. Most of my photography now is centered on this subject. Although I’ve been making photos for going on 45 years, there is nothing wrong with learning how to make better ones. Through the use of this book and Harold’s lessons and advice, I’d like to think I could also improve my skills to take my landscapes to the next level.

If you share the passion of landscape photography, be sure to add this book to your library. It is definitely worth every penny and the time to read it cover to cover.

Creative Landscapes is published by Wiley. It carries a list price of \$29.99, but can be found on Amazon.com for \$19.59, a savings of 35% (shipping is extra).

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Monthly Circulation: 60

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Building a PC

by Dick Maybach

October 2011 issue, BUG Bytes

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There are several reasons why you might want to do this: you may be an experienced user with definite ideas about what you want; you may like to tinker and want a system that is easy to change; or you may want to save money by cannibalizing old systems. You probably won't save money, because you will probably use higher-quality and higher-performance parts than do PC system manufacturers. You will learn how PCs are assembled (but not how they work), which means that your computer will be easy to expand.

If you are building a new system, I highly recommend the book *Building the Perfect PC*, by Robert and Barbara Thompson, which describes six different PC designs, one of which is probably close to what you have in mind. They discuss system design and component selection, as well as the construction process, and recommend specific manufacturers and vendors. This is by far the best book I've read on the topic, and it's worth a scan at your local bookstore, even if you have no plans to build anything. You may find, as I did, that it will inspire you to get busy. There is just one caveat; although the book was copyrighted in 2011, technology has advanced, and there are superior replacements for many of the components they recommend.

If you are interested in the repair and refurbishment of older PCs, get a copy of *Upgrading and Repairing PCs* by Scott Mueller. This costs twice as much as the Thompson's book and is four times the size, but its scope is comprehensive. This isn't a set of step-by-step instructions, but is more of a PC reference book; as a result, you can expect to do some heavy slogging.

For the remainder of the article, I'll assume you are building a new PC with modern, high-quality components. (While it's interesting to assemble a system on the cheap, using no-name components, it will be difficult to build and perhaps unreliable.) The project will have four phases (1) system design, (2)

parts orders, (3) construction, and (4) software installation and configuration, with system design taking the longest, typically longer than the other three combined.

You will first select the CPU. Both Intel and AMD make excellent products, but each has different strengths. (See the Thompson's book for the details.) I prefer Intel, because over the years I've had only good experiences with their CPUs and motherboards. Intel's website is invaluable in helping you to pick the CPU that best fits your needs. You can read not only data sheets on particular models, but also download white papers on their technology. The site will also assemble tables that compare several CPUs, which makes it easy to see their differences. Years ago, we compared CPU performance by looking at just their clock rates, but today with such advanced features as multiple cores and multi-threading, this is no longer appropriate.

Once you have a CPU candidate, the Intel site can recommend a matching Intel motherboard. (Gigabyte and ASUS also make excellent motherboards and would probably be your choice for an AMD CPU.) Again, letting the Intel site build a comparison table will help your selection process. You should design more than one system; perhaps what you think you want, one with lower cost and performance, and one with higher. Keeping three balls in the air will help prevent you from making your final judgment too early. You should now download the manuals for all the motherboards you are considering. (The one I chose for my project was 88 pages, which was quite a nice change from the postcard-sized sheets we used to get with motherboards sold at computer shows.) Studying these manuals will help you select the best motherboard for your use.

Before going further with the electronics, you should consider cases, which must fit your motherboard. I used one from Antec on my project, and I'm very impressed with it, although I've also used Lian Li cases, most of which are aluminum models and hence are relatively light. If you have size constraints, you may find that you need a motherboard that is smaller than the standard ATX size. A small system box appears desirable, but be realistic; usually you can find room for a full-sized case on the floor and the

Continued on page 14

cramped interior of a compact one makes it difficult to assemble and often noisy to cool. Again, download the manuals for any cases you are considering and eliminate any units for which good manuals are not available. My Antec case manual had 13 pages (again a nice contrast to the single sheet we would get for computer show cases).

Loop through the CPU-motherboard-case selection process as many times as needed to be sure you have sensible designs for the core components before you continue on to the other parts. For RAM, I prefer Crucial, but Kingston and Corsair are also good. Entering your motherboard model on Crucial's Website will result in a good recommendation, but check against your motherboard manual to be sure. Since most motherboards include quite capable integral sound and display controllers, you won't need expansion cards for these functions unless you have special requirements. I've had good luck with Seagate drives and always use these. Removable drives are a bit of a problem, since price considerations have driven high-quality products off the market (the Wal-Mart effect). Fortunately DVD drives are cheap and easily replaced. (Don't even consider a diskette drive, as the quality of the few available models is extremely poor; many are dead on delivery, and so cheap that they are not worth returning. You probably can't get around this by using an old drive, since it probably has an IDE interface and modern motherboards have only SATA ones. Although IDE expansion cards are available, their quality too is very poor.) The only remaining internal component is the power supply, which I've left until last because you need to know how much power the other components require and what power connectors they use. Consider units from Antec, PC Power & Cooling, and Seasonic.

The most important external component is the display, where you shouldn't be stingy on the size, although it does have to fit within the space on your desk. I chose an ASUS one, but NEC, Samsung, and ViewSonic are also good. I think that the reliability of those with an LED backlights is worth the small premium price over units with fluorescent backlights. Keyboards and mice are commodity products, but I prefer Logitech and Microsoft over the slightly cheaper no-name alternatives. Don't count on reusing

your old keyboard and mouse; they probably have PS/2 connectors, and new motherboards have only USB ones. Finally, I like Logitech speakers.

Many components are available either as consumer or OEM (original equipment manufacturer) parts. Consumer parts typically come in a package with instructions, mounting hardware and cables, a guarantee, and access to the manufacturers help line, while OEM parts include none of these. Also OEM components are frequently stripped down to reduce their costs; as a result they may have fewer features and lower performance than the consumer versions. For example, consumer CPUs include a cooler designed for that unit, while OEM CPUs do not. Usually, getting the consumer model is worth the small added cost. It appears that hard disks are available only on an OEM basis, which means it's important to buy them from a reputable manufacturer.

Up to now, you've only spent your time, but this changes when you order parts. I've had very good luck with Amazon and Newegg, but neither is perfect. Many items on Amazon's Website are sold directly by them, but for others they are just an agent for another company and here you must be careful. I had one of these companies try to charge me \$200 shipping on a \$30 expansion card. When I complained to Amazon, they were not the least bit embarrassed, saying that they took no responsibility for the unethical behavior of third parties. With Newegg you have to be careful in placing your order; their process is not as refined as Amazon's, and in particular it's easy to place your order twice. With both, check the shipping costs carefully. Having said that, I prefer to deal with these two companies when I order electronics. A very valuable feature of both sites is the customer reviews. Ignore the numerical ratings, which mean little, but carefully read the comments, where it is easy to identify the balanced, knowledgeable comments from the petty whines.

While you are waiting for the parts to arrive, print out all the manuals you've downloaded, because once you unpack the boxes you will find only quick-start guides. The only tools you will probably need are Phillips and flat-head screwdrivers. I also use a wrist-band to discharge static electricity (available from Radio Shack), but you can skip this if you are careful.

Continued from page 14

(See the Thompson's book.) An experienced user can assemble a new PC in about an hour, but expect to take longer since you will probably have to do some things several times to get them right. I find that after an hour or so, I need a break, preferably until the following day. Often, during the break I will think of something I should have done differently. Some steps can be tricky; it took me three tries to get my motherboard installed in the case correctly, even though I've built several PCs. In any case, take your time; it's supposed to be fun, and if in doubt take a break.

For prove-in I prefer an Ubuntu live CD-ROM, which doesn't use the hard disks at all and lets you check out your new hardware before you spend time installing an operating system. Who knows, you may find you like it well enough to set up your PC to run both Linux and Windows.

Your last step is to place all the packing slips, receipts, installation DVDs, manuals (both those included with the parts and those you downloaded) into a large envelope, place all the parts and cables you didn't need in a single box, and label both. If you later expand the system or add software to it, store the paper, DVDs, and extra parts in the same envelope and box. This will make upgrades and repairs much, much easier.



Do you want to tweet?

by Linda Gonse

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Many more people are turning to Twitter now that they realize using it is more than announcing your breakfast menu and where you shop for your socks. So, if you are thinking of joining in on this real-time, constantly changing, global communication, but are unfamiliar with some of the jargon, let me help get you started.

When a person writes 140 characters or less in their message box on Twitter and presses Send the message appears in their "timeline" and in e timelines of all the people who have chosen to "follow" that person. The message is called a tweet. You send tweets, get tweets, and read tweets.

When referring to other people on Twitter, the terms "tweeps" or "peeps" are used. I have seen "Twitterers" but that has too many letters to be used much. (No one uses "twits" which would be a negative term not linked to Twitter.)

All of Twitter has been called the "Twittersphere" but again, too many letters to refer to it

In a tweet, unless it's in a short tweet. Tweets that you read and enjoy can be forwarded to people who follow you. Forwarded tweets are called Retweets. You can also flag a

tweet you write with a hashtag which looks like a pound (weight) symbol. The # symbol plus wordorwordswithnospaces is inserted in a tweet, usually at the end. It allows that tweet to be seen by everyone who searches for that subject; for example: #twitterhumor

Hashtags have other purposes, too, but are not ever necessary to use in a tweet.

I often get breaking news from subjects that "trend" — this is where a multitude of tweets are sent about the same time and the same subject. These tweets may or may not be marked with hashtags. Trending topics recently were Occupy Wall Street, RIP Steve Jobs, Chaz Bono.

Three Gadgets for Your Digital Camera

by Sharon Walbran

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October 2011 issue, *The Digital Viking*

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As an avid photographer with a couple point-and-shoot digital cameras I am always on the lookout for gadgets to improve the experience, but that will not break your pocketbook. Here are three gadgets under \$20.00 that solve issues with digital cameras, and are worth exploring.

Delkin LCD Shade. LCD displays are great for giving you a preview of the picture you are about to take and then, after the picture is taken, showing the picture you took for review. Unfortunately, in the bright sunshine, the LCD display is almost impossible to see. The Delkin Popup LCD Shade 2.5", sold through Amazon.com, is a good solution.



This simple, lightweight plastic shade attaches to the body of the camera with adhesive.

When flipped up the LCD can be read even in bright sunlight. The side wings fold in and the shade folds down to neatly cover the LCD and protect it from scratches and damage. The side wings are delicate and could easily break. In the closed position the shade has a small footprint so there is no added bulk from this device. The price varies but can usually be purchased for around \$10.00.

Quikpod Compod Extendable Handheld Tripod. If you've ever been on a trip and wanted to take a photo of yourself and another person but hesitated to hand your camera



over to a stranger, then this is the gadget for you. This device is about a foot long with a diameter of about

an inch and easily fits in a purse or a backpack. On one end is a screw that attaches securely to the bottom of your digital camera. Then from the end nearest you, you can release a chrome knob that extends the Compod to as long as 38.5 inches. To take a photo of yourself or yourself and others, turn on the self-timer on the camera, strike a pose, and take the shot. The Compod can also be used to take a photo over a crowd of people. It has a solid, steady feel even at a considerable extension. Aiming the camera in the precise location takes some practice. The Compod is just one of several products in this category. One of the other products is the Quikpod Convertible Tripod and more accurately called a tripod, because the rod converts to a 3-legged tripod. The Compod is available from Amazon.com for under \$20.00.

Joby Gorillapod. Taking photos in low light demands the use of a tripod because no one can hold a camera steady enough at such a low shutter speed.

Sometimes finding a flat surface to place a tripod on is difficult. The



Gorillapod screws into the bottom of the camera and then, with its flexible spidery legs, can be twisted to secure the camera to a fence post or the branch of a tree to hold it steady. The Gorillapod comes in different sizes to fit compact digital camera and the heavier SLR Cameras. Higher end and more expensive models now come with a level bubble so you can check that the camera is level when it takes the photo. Of course, the Gorillapod can be set up as a conventional tripod as well. It's lightweight and fits into a purse or backpack. The Gorillapod is available from Amazon.com, Target.com, Adorama.com, and numerous other sellers. The model for the compact digital camera usually sells for under \$20.00.

These are just a smattering of the gadgets available. In a future article I'll review additional gadgets after I've put them through their paces.