MOTHERBOARD

A Publication of the Computer Users Group Of Redding, CA

Volume 2006, Number 03 http://users.snowcrest.net/ibmpcugr March 2006

YOUR C.U.G. PRESENTS

Thursday, March 23, 2006

Computer Crash Recovery

Panel and Audience Participation

MARCH ONLY MEETING DATE CHANGE

We Are Meeting On Thursday The 23rd Due To A 3-day Seminar By The Church.
Meeting time begins as usual at 6:30 P.M.

Door Prizes Are

Microsoft Streets & Trips 2005, a 50-pack CD-Rs, and a Paper Ream

One free ticket to members only at the door!

Club Business and Program Presentation 7 PM, coffee and tea available

Check at the Greeting Table for your name tag *and please leave it in the Tag Box when the meeting is over.*

General meetings are at the Palo Cedro Church Of Christ, 21895 St. Francis Way, Palo Cedro, CA.
Official Website: **http://users.snowcrest.net/ibmpcugr**
For more information call any Board member listed on Page 2.

CUG Calendar

CUG Board Meeting
Monday, Mar 27
at Jack-In-The-Box, Dana Drive

MULTI-MEDIA
10 AM, Saturday, Mar 25

DTP SIG
No Meetings in March

WINDOWS & MORE
No Meetings In March

SEE BACK PAGE FOR MORE SIG INFO

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Club Information

Club Website: http://users.snowcrest.net/ibmpcugr

Club Mentors

Members volunteering to help members!

New Users **PaintShop Pro**	**Dorothy Kirk** 246-9661, Anytime dak75@sbcglobal.net	**MS Windows** **98, ME, XP** **Hardware, Software**	**Bill Ball** bcard9@charter.net 275-4632
New Users	**Bob Rice** 357-2143, Anytime ricerl@snowcrest.net	**DTP;** **Graphic Prgs** **Photo Editing**	**Judi Ball** 275-4632 jebed@charter.net
MS Windows **Photo Delux**	**Darold Wright** 222-1781 daroldlwright@yahoo.com	**MS Word, PowerPoint** **Movie, Maker 2, DVD Prgs.** **Digital Image Pro**	**Jane Quinn** 365-0825 jquinn@charter.net

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Motherboard Newsletter Policies and Deadlines

The *Motherboard* newsletter is published monthly by the Computer Users Group of Redding, PO Box 494778, Redding, CA 96049-4778. The CUG is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. Subscriptions are included in the $25 annual membership fee. The purpose of the newsletter is to inform members of upcoming events and provide information about the use of IBM compatible computers.

Disclaimer: Neither the CUG, its Officers, the Editor, nor the newsletter contributors assume any liability for damages occurred due to the use of information provided in this publication.

Reprints: Articles from this newsletter may be reprinted by other user groups if credit is given to both the author, CUG and the *Motherboard*. Mail a copy of the newsletter where the article is reprinted to the Editor at the address in the first paragraph of this text.

Personal Ads For Members: Requirements are:

1. Advertiser must be a member.
2. The item must be computer-related.
3. The ad must be received by editor J. Ball by the *monthly date of the board meeting.* Sorry, no exceptions.

Other terms must be approved by the club's Board of Officers and Directors.

Article Submissions: All articles and reviews must be submitted to J. Ball by the *Monday of the monthly Board meeting (see Page 1 for date.)* Sorry, no exceptions.

***Motherboard* Editor** reserves the right to make corrections and deletions in all articles in the interest of grammar, style, and space.

President's Message

It's your club. Your input is of value to us…

For those of you who don't know me, I have two sons and four grandchildren who are my main inspiration for learning digital photography and slide show design. I lived in Germany for 22 years and have literally thousands of conventional photos that will someday be digitalized and edited.

I allegedly-retired from the federal government in 1999. I was a teacher in the school system that the Defense Department operates for American children whose parents are in the U.S. Military. I say, allegedly-retired, because, like many of you, I have been so busy in my life that retirement is just a word.

I'll be directing "The Solid Gold Cadillac" at the Riverfront Playhouse in August. I operate a website for people with my diet sensitivities (I'm gluten in-tolerant). I also teach Sunday School at the Little Country Church. Time flies when you are having fun and I certainly am having fun. Our computer club is, and will be, an important part of that fun.

Paul Colligan

Multi-Media SIG Update

by Jane Quinn

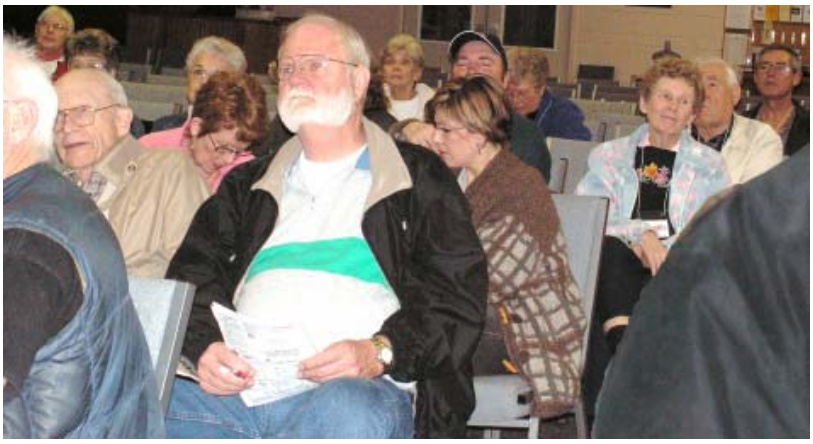
SIG meetings are every Thursday at the Senior Center in Anderson from 1–3pm. Members only will be able to use the club's laptop to burn their DVD movie projects. We also meet the Saturday following the General Meeting. March 25th will be the next SIG meeting date. At February's meeting we were fortunate again to meet at member Dick Marx's home. Thanks Dick. Great accommodations!

Our subject this month was how to use our stories created with M.S. Photo Story 3. A few of the members have taken advantage of this great free download that makes slide shows of your digital photos. This is the second month in a row we have studied Photo Story 3. We discussed the pros and cons of using this product verses using Movie Maker. Both are products of Microsoft. We agreed each has its advantages. Photo Story 3 has:

1. Ability to eliminate those Black Borders from photos that are portrait – oriented versus landscape orientation.
2. Automatic pan and zoom effects, known as the "Ken Burns effect," where you pan (move across and up and down

February Meeting

Paul Colligan gave a nice presentation of Gold Show Pro. He, Darold Wright, and Jane Quinn shared information about the program and answered questions from an interested audience.



Congratulations Winners

Phil Graham won the Microsoft Office Suite 2003

Joyce Long won the Intell Web Cam

Smile Margot!

Margot Letendre won the powerful surge protector

the picture) and zoom (move closer in on the image or back out). Your story now seamlessly floats from one still image to another.

3. The music automatically adjusts to the length of the story. But Movie Maker has to be manually adjusted to fade out, or to stop in sync with the story.

Movie Maker Pluses

1. Titles can be created to make a beginning slide, and ending slide, as well as inserting a titled slide before a photo clip, versus Photo Story which only allows text to be applied on the selected clip/image.
2. There are more interesting video transition effects like Shatter, Shrink and Whirlwind.
3. You can work in a timeline, which cannot be done in Photo Story.

However, we concluded that Photo Story's .WMV movies can be imported into Movie Maker. Best of all, these files can be imported into our Roxio DVD Builder software to create our DVD movie disc.

Together we walked through the steps of making a DVD menu where the .WMV movies appear as thumbnails on the menu screen. In the Advanced Features of the DVD Menu Settings Themes, we checked the box to animate the thumbnails. We also changed the background photo and selected our own music in the Menu Theme Advanced Feature Settings. The PDF handout files will be posted on the club's website. Contact Jane Quinn if you need assistance qjquinn@charter.net or qjquinn7427@gmail.com. However, calling works best at 365 0825. If you missed us this time, come and join our next meeting.

Tips: Helpful Website Resources

Ken Burns effect http://www.videohelp.com/guides

Creating Photo Collages: www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/learnmore/top10.mspx

Note: In Image Pro 9 and 10 you would click on the box that allows you to Save the open project for editing later. This will let you save the image so you will not have to print it. Upload this to a commercial photo website for poster size prints such as an 11 x 14.

Welcome To New Members

Barbara Pullar
Joyce Wallace

And Renewals

Ken & Marge George
Ralph & Shirley Schroeder
Richard Yoder
Burl U. Woodman

IBM/PCUG MEMBER WEBSITES

DAVE & BECKY HEMP
www.c-zone.net/dochemp/

JACK McAULIFFE
Real Estate Broker
www.realtyphoto.com

KITTYSTONE PERSIANS
Lynn Johanson
kittystone.com

MEXICAN-TOURS
www.mexican-tours.com
Lyle VanNorman
lyle@mexican-tours.com

QUESTIONED DOCUMENT EXAMINATION
Mary Ann Czermak
www.documents-examiner.com

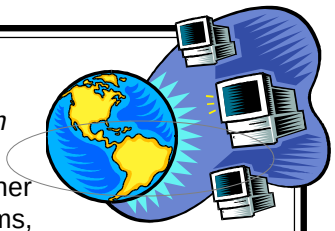
RIVERCITY JAZZ SOCIETY
Joyce Covey
jazzjoy@charter.net

REDDING REAL ESTATE
Rick Goates
www.reddingrealestate.net

RON COLE JR.
www.houseofspecialtygifts.com

Publicize Your WebSite Here for FREE!
(Members Only Please)

The Surfboard



by Mary Montague, twinsgranny228@aol.com

Spring is here and the greenery is coming back and calling to action those of us who like to raise our own food and bring color and drama to our yards and lawns. We are blessed with a long growing season here in this part of California, and now is the time to plan and prepare. So for this issue I chose to surf the web for good gardening information. This is just a sampling, but many of these sites have links to so many more that one could probably never run out of helpful guidance.

Theveggielady.com Toni Salter, "The Veggie Lady," calls herself your on-line expert on organic gardening. Says Toni, "Let me show you how to easily grow organic food in your own backyard, whether you live on a 5-acre property or in a crowded inner city terrace." Since she is Australian, you will see words like "pummet" for those little trays of seedlings found at the nursery, and names such as "beetroot" for what we call just plain beets. Her advice is adapted to either hemisphere, and you will be asked to check Northern or Southern Hemisphere before you proceed to explore the site. Gardening is gardening wherever you live, and gardeners deal with the same problems such as soil, water, light, fertilizer, pruning, etc., so her location does not really matter, especially since Australia and Redding are both representative of what is known as a Mediterranean Climate. This site has links to Free Advice, Resources, and Help (including "Contact me" via e-mail, or direct mail or even mobile phone). In addition, there are featured articles and links to garden suppliers. You don't necessarily have to be organically oriented to gain from this website, but if that is important to you, you might appreciate it even more.

Gardenweb.com is another helpful resource for gardeners. Among other things it includes "Garden Bazaar," a directory of garden-related businesses with a A-Z categories from African Violets to Wildlife Gardens, "Gardening Q & A" on African Violets to Woodlands, "Exchanges and Trading," which is a resource for trading seeds, plants, books and other gardening items, and "Garden Voices," which lists gardening blogs, news sources, and other advice from around the internet.

Gardenstew.com is a place to participate in forums on garden subjects. Registration is free and necessary for full participation, but you can read discussions already posted on many subjects. Read blogs and, of course, create your own. The site has links to articles on a wide range of gardening topics as well.

Lewisgardens.com is subtitled *Beginners Guide to Perennial Planting*. Dig into this one. Gardening topics include Soil Prep, selecting plants, compost, light types, pruning, and much more, plus "Ask the Plant Lady," which is a Q & A on basic gardening. Links include a wide range of subjects and provide layers and layers of informative material. When I picked Perennial Web, I found a whole new world of information. Gardening Info yielded a list of articles on a wonderful array of gardening topics starting with "Gardening for Butterflies" and on to many more on many other topics of interest to gardeners.

If you are the gardener who likes to conserve water, not to mention energy (your own), and are not really all that into pruning and fertilizing and pampering your garden, you live in the right place here in Redding and surrounding areas. Beautiful gardens are possible with the use of drought resistant plants which require little to no water (once established), and which are pest and disease resistant as well. Try what is called xeriscaping. There are a number of excellent websites on this topic. One very good one is **Xratedgardening.com**, a great categorized list of drought-resistant plants from annuals and perennials to ornamental grasses, vines, bulbs, shrubs, trees, and turf. It is produced by Garden Centers of Colorado. The California Integrated Waste Management Board also has a link on their site dedicated to the subject of xeriscaping at www.ciwmb.ca.gov/organics/xeriscaping/, which I also highly recommend. Happy gardening, and don't forget the liniment!

Bits and Pieces

by Rush Blodget; IMB/PCUG of Redding, rblodget@snowcrest.net

Outsourcing

Many vendors provide one or two free technical help calls for a limited time after the purchase of their product. I had twice in the past received courteous knowledgeable on-line help from one of the major software vendors. After thanking the first technician I inquired where he was located and found that he was a computer science student attending a college in Minnesota who had attended a summer training program at the vendor's main plant and on return to school had provided a schedule of his free hours. The second technician said he was located in a small town in Nova Scotia. These persons showed a considerable knowledge of the vendor's product and quickly guided me to the appropriate solution.

I recently had occasion to seek help again from the same vendor at a time now outside the original time frame for free assistance. I hoped that my problem would be considered intrinsic to the software and perhaps free help would again be provided; this was not the case and I was advised that assistance would now cost $35 for each incident. I acquiesced; after considerable transferring of calls and assignment of a case number I was assigned to a technician. This very polite person, who, although seeming anxious to help, did not understand the problem and after a few minutes went off-line to consult with another technician to whom they ultimately transferred the call; this process was repeated three times with the connection being broken on the last transfer. It was then that I realized that I had been connected to an overseas call center. I had not bothered to copy down the case number and hence was unable to call back. Realizing that I had to solve the problem myself, I dug into the software reference data that I had at hand and did work through the problem in less time than I had spent on line. I guess the moral to the story must be that those of us in computer clubs might first exhaust their own resources then ask for help from their fellow computer club members who have volunteered to give assistance in various spheres.

I recently purchased a three-digit combination lock and cable for a laptop. The combination was set at a default of 000 with instructions that it could be changed when not attached to the laptop by toggling a flipper and resetting the numbers. I very carefully applied the lock with its integrated cable to the laptop using the default as a trial. Removal using this same default setting was impossible. After consulting the manufacturer's home page on the Internet to verify that I was doing it correctly, I decided to take advantage of their offer to call their technician for telephone advice should such a situation occur. After explaining the problem to the technician, he did not come up with a magical way to remove the lock, but advised me to first try all the possible 3-digit number combinations and if that failed, to see a locksmith. Actually I would have been quite worried had he suggested a secret way to remove the lock inasmuch as a thief could have asked the same question. The next day I showed the problem lock to my mechanical engineering son who proceeded to try changing the combination by one digit as a trial and presto it opened. Somehow a wheel had slipped in while inserting it. I am not sure I will use it at all.

Broadband

I changed from DSL to cable several months ago and have been quite pleased with the fact that I have not had the occasional loss of signal that I had with DSL. I do note, however, that my DSL delivered the promised 1-megabit per second, whereas the cable company promised 3 megabits per second, but only delivered 2.6 megabits per second during off hours (Feb 15, 2005 at 2 A.M.) and less than 1 megabit per second during peak hours. One of their linemen explained that the more people on the line, the greater the dilution of the signal and that if there is too much dilution they can add more "nodes."

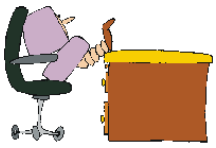
Adjusting the Sensitivity of the touch pad on a Laptop

According to David Einstein, the computer technical writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, this can be easily done by going to the mouse option in control panel.

Spam

An article in *Business Week* states that some companies are abandoning e-mail in favor of other software tools such as "blogs," Instant Messenger, and "wikis" which they define as searchable archivable sites that allow a group of people to comment on and edit one another's work in real time due to the fact that despite strong filters at least 60% of the e-mail received by business e-mail is *spam*.

Put Your Computer To Work By Using The Evaluations/Review Program!



Don't forget to check out the Evaluations Program offered by this organization! If there is an application you would like to have, put your request in to Jane Quinn and she will contact the company/vendor to see if the product is available for review. If it is, she will order it for you.

This could be a new program to you, or it could be the newest version of a program you already know.

When it comes in, Jane will let you know, and you will have at least three months to install the program, learn to use its most prominent features, then write a review that will be published in this newsletter and sent to the company to complete their requirements.

Evaluations Person, Jane Quinn
qjquinn@charter.net

Monthly Treasury Report

Note: The three following four articles, Pages 7 & 8, were supplied by the *North American Precis Syndicate, Inc. (NAPSI)*

Filing Taxes On-line Now Stress Free, Cost Free

For many Americans, the 2005 tax season will tax the nerves, take a lot of time and maybe cost a bundle, too.

Happily, there are ways to make doing taxes a lot faster, stress free and, possibly, cost free.

This is all possible because a tax industry maverick has broken down the barrier to free tax preparation. Customers can now e-file their returns without charge through www.TaxACT.com as well as prepare and print them for free.

A number of good reasons exist for filing your taxes on-line, including these:

1. It's faster. The software is designed in an easy-to-understand Q&A format. It asks intelligent questions in plain English and sorts out the tax code so that you don't have to.
2. It's easier than preparing your taxes by hand. There's no more erasing or whiting out. TaxACT asks smart questions based on previous answers. Users can also start their return and then save it to pick up again days or weeks later. How convenient.
3. You'll make fewer mistakes. Many programs flag mistakes and incomplete information (including TaxACT).
4. It's less costly. Filing returns on-line is less expensive than using an accountant. The software can be affordable and even free in the case of TaxACT Standard. Some taxpayers can file on-line for free at the IRS Web site, but ALL taxpayers can electronically file online for free at TaxACT.com.
5. Faster refunds. The average return time for e-filers is less than two weeks, whereas it can be months if you mail returns in.

Filing on-line this way not only eliminates costs associated with completing and filing your returns. The software also contains all of the forms, schedules and worksheets you'll need to prepare your federal tax return quickly and easily.

This year's edition of TaxACT Standard Federal features a simple seven-step process with reliable reference tools and automatic flags for inaccurate information to make the process convenient, speedy and reliable. TaxACT also automatically collects information for state returns, which makes preparing a state return just as fast and easy.

For those requiring extra advice or who have complex tax situations, a TaxACT Deluxe edition includes additional forms and gives more support.

To learn more about preparing and electronically filing your taxes for free, visit www.TaxACT.com.

FASTER RETURNS

The average return for e-filers is less than two weeks.

What To Look For In On-line Tax Prep And Filing Software

You may have a less taxing time this April if you let computer software do much of the hard work filing with the IRS.

You won't be alone. According to IRS data, more than 68 million tax returns were filed electronically last year, with more than 17 million taxpayers filing their own returns online.

"There are a number of benefits that on-line tax prep and e-filing offer, but you should do a little bit of homework first to get the greatest value for your dollar," said Debra Gray, tax software manager for CCH.

According to Gray, some of the questions you should look to answer are:

Is The Software Easy And Secure?

Online software can save time because you don't have to download it to your computer. Make sure, however, the program is easy to navigate, helps you organize your information and provides the support resources you need to complete your return, as well as encrypting your data using recognized security standards.

Can You Work At Your Own Pace?

Online tax preparation sites let you password protect your work, logging back in as often as you need. Make certain the program also automatically checks for errors or oversights and provides links to the problems for quick correction of potentially costly mistakes.

What Becomes Of Your Return After You File?

Make sure the program maintains a record of your prior year's return, so you can roll over basic information from one year to the next.

Does it clearly show the cost of preparing and filing your returns?

Navigating the add-on pricing structure used by some tax software providers can be taxing in itself, with some promoting a federal price or free federal filing but not clearly indicating added costs for completing a state tax return. According to Gray, most do-it-yourself taxpayers should be able to find a good tax program for under $40, including costs for preparing both a federal and state return and e-filing the returns.

What Are The Payment And Refund Options?

Many sites let you deduct the cost of using their program from your expected tax refund and allow direct deposit of your refund into your bank account, for even faster access to your refund.

What Are The Help And Support Options?

Ideally, the program should be straightforward but you will want this safety net, so make sure the tax program offers support features via e-mail or live online chat.

"Taxpayers who have been trying to complete their returns using pencil and paper or have been frustrated by the tax software programs they've used in the past, really owe it to themselves to take a look at the features available in online tax software this year," said Gray. "Preparing taxes isn't how most people want to spend their time, but if they're using the right tools, they can save time completing their returns online. As an added bonus, they will likely learn a few things that can help them save even more on their taxes this year and beyond."

You can learn more about using online filing from CCH CompleteTax, an online tax preparation and filing service created by experts in tax law and software. It can be found at www.completetax.com.

Receive Your Tax Refund Fast

More than 70 percent of American taxpayers just like you receive a check from Uncle Sam each year for overpayment of their Federal income tax. Last year, the average federal tax refund topped $2,200, so why would you wait to get your money any longer than you have to?

A growing number of Americans are electronically filing their tax return each year for just that reason — to get their refund back fast. If you're due a refund and you send your return in the old-fashioned way-by U.S. mail-it could take as long as eight weeks to get your money back. By electronically filing your return, you will receive your refund in as little as seven to 10 days with direct deposit.

Last year, more than 66 million taxpayers e-filed their return. That's half of all returns received by the IRS. In addition to receiving a faster refund, with e-file, you receive an official e-mail confirmation directly from the IRS when your return is received and accepted.

"E-filing and online tax preparation is a no-brainer. It is easy to follow and navigate," said Chelsea Wong, an e-filer from San Francisco, Calif. "My relaxation time is very important to me, so any technology that makes my life easier is a plus. Thanks to e-file, I can do things with my time that really matter."

The fastest way for taxpayers to prepare and e-file their return is with inexpensive and easy-to- use computer-tax software or online tax-preparation Web sites such as www.turbotax.com. These convenient, affordable options help you get all the deductions you deserve and do the math for you — even guaranteeing calculations. Using tax software or the Internet to do your taxes and e-filing has three distinct advantages:

- Saves you money. The average cost for filing online is just $20.
- Say goodbye to late fees. Even if you owe the IRS, simply e-file now and schedule a payment to be automatically deducted from your bank account on or before April 15.
- Saves you time and eliminates errors. Compared to pencil and paper, on-line tax preparation slashes the time it takes to complete a standard 1040 from 13 hours to less than four hours. And according to the IRS, less than 1 percent of e-filed returns contain errors compared to 20 percent of returns prepared manually.

Visit www.turbotax.com to join the millions of taxpayers who get their refunds back-fast.

The fastest way for taxpayers to prepare and e-file their return is with inexpensive, easy-to-use computer-tax software or online tax preparation.

Safe Ways To Shop Online

The number of Americans who shop online continues to grow, with the average e-consumer spending three and a half hours a week browsing through Web pages, according to a survey from WSL Strategic Retail. However, with this increase in online shoppers, comes an increased risk of identity theft and Web scams.

Last year, the Federal Trade Commission reported identity theft victims lost more than $547 million and almost half of that amount was from Internet-related crimes. The following tips from experts at EDS Security and Privacy can help online consumers protect their personal information:

1. Always check a company's Web site for contact details that show a physical address and phone number. Also, look to see if the site is a member of a trustmark or trust seal program. This certifies that the business meets certain standards.

2. Shop at secure Web sites that use encryption technology to scramble the information you send. Secure sites include https:// at the beginning of their addresses. Also, look for a closed padlock on the bottom of your screen. If the lock is open, it could be a sign that the site is not secure.

3. Beware of phishing. E-mails that appear to be from trusted businesses may actually be identity thieves "phishing" for your personal information. Reputable businesses will never ask you to divulge personal information from an unsolicited request.

4. Reputable companies post privacy and security policies on their sites. They tell you what information the company collects, how it is used and what is shared.

5. If you shop with a foreign company, you may not be protected by U.S. consumer laws. Be sure to print out, date and save all terms, conditions, warranties, item descriptions, company information and confirming e-mails.

6. Passwords should include at least eight characters, numbers or symbols. Using information such as Social Security numbers or birth dates as passwords can make you an easy target for identity theft.

7. Update anti-virus and firewall software on your PC and regularly apply critical security patches to your PC's operating system. Run virus scans once a week and remove any unwanted adware and spyware.

8. Check your credit report regularly. Consumers can get a free copy of their credit reports annually from one of the three major credit bureaus. The Federal Trade Commission is also a good source of information about identity theft. Visit http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft/index.html for more information.

There are ways to protect your identity while shopping online.

USB Flash Drives

by Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., Sarasota PCUG, Florida

You may already be familiar with the small USB flash drives that plug into a USB port. However, you may know them by another name. Flash drives, Jump-Drives™, Pocket drives™, Pen drives™, and Thumb drives™ are all names for the same thing. They are a solid-state medium for storing data, music, photos, and/or applications. Now there is also a new version, the U3 smart-computing platform, which allows the user to carry applications and data from one computer to another and to launch the applications on any USB equipped computer. Many flash drive manufacturers are already jumping on this bandwagon and producing U3 based drives. Since flash drives are growing in capacity, functions and speed, they will probably be important in your computing future. So let's take a closer look at them.

A flash drive consists of a solid-state circuit board inside a plastic casing. Most of these casings are strong enough to stand some substantial abuse. My one gigabyte (GB) drive has managed to fall on the floor several times and it "still keeps on ticking", as the saying goes. It tolerates this kind of abuse because it has no moving parts. Imagine if this had been a magnetic hard drive with several spinning platters and a movable read/write head. Just one fall could knock it completely out of alignment and cause it to fail. So that is one advantage of the flash drive. Another is its portability. Flash drives are small and very light weight. Mine measures 2 ¾ inches by ¾ inch x ½ inch. They can easily be carried in a pocket or strung on a lanyard or a key chain. The USB A type connector on these drives is frequently covered by a plastic cap that protects the connector.

Flash drives are powered directly from the USB port on the computer. When they are disconnected, the information stored in them is retained, not lost. The silicon chips used in flash drives are referred to as a form of nonvolatile memory. The RAM memory in your computer requires constant electrical input to retain information. The same is true of the BIOS chip. But flash drives retain information for greatly extended periods of time without any electrical input. Some estimates indicate data can be retained for periods of up to ten years, possibly longer.

Flash drives also have low power requirements, needing only the five volts and 100-500 milli-Amps provided by the USB port. However, their power demands are such that they generally will not run when plugged into a non-powered hub. You are always better off to directly connect the drive to the computer's USB port.

Flash memory was originally developed in 1988 and has seen considerable use in storage for digital cameras. (For the technically minded, flash memory is based on NAND gates where the transistors have two inputs and one output.) Some smart phones and PDA's are now using nonvolatile flash memory to retain information when the device is turned off. This reduces the drain on the device's battery. Flash drives are believed to work for up to 10,000 write/erase operations. However, some sources indicate that flash drives can survive for up to ten million operational or write/erase cycles. Even so, all this indicates that flash drives have a finite life span. To me, this life span seems to exceed that of a standard hard drive which is supposed to operate for up to half a million hours. In practice we know that hard drives generally fail much sooner than that. So a flash drive having a finite life span is really no different than a hard drive.

Flash drives now on the market have capacities of 3 – 4 gigabytes. Samsung has also announced a flash chip capable of storing 16 gigabits. (Note that this is bits, not bytes.) It would take 16 of these chips to make a 32 gigabyte drive. As an indication of what is coming, BitMicro has announced a 155 gigabyte flash drive!

Obviously, the flash drive has many advantages over other removable media such as floppy disks, CD-ROMs, ZIP disks and others. Unlike Zip disks, floppies and CDs, flash memory lacks moving parts, making it ideal as a simple solution, requiring only a port to interact with a system. It doesn't require any special hardware, it is smaller, more portable and it is not as likely to develop storage errors. Flash storage devices, compared to other storage media, are fast, high capacity, durable, and compact. Some computers can already boot from a flash drive that makes them an ideal replacement for bootable floppies or CDs.

Floppy drives are not even included in many new computers. As flash drives already exceed the capacity of CD's; they are becoming a replacement for them. Certainly they are more portable than a CD or a DVD and only require a USB port to run on any computer running Windows XP. They can be run on Windows 98 providing the manufacturer's specific driver is installed. Additionally, flash drives are not subject to scratches, dust, coffee or other liquid spills. In fact some have survived being passed through a washing machine! However, this is not recommended treatment for them. The popularity of flash storage devices may be attributed to their compact size, operating system compatibility, and their use of the standard USB interface.

With all of their capabilities, it is possible to foresee some applications for flash drives that may show up in a reasonable period of time. For example, if the read/write speeds can be increased to a level comparable to that of current RAM memory, flash memory could then replace RAM chips. If the cost of flash memory is also reduced then it could be used to replace the current computer hard drives. Think about what this would do to the size of computers and their power requirements. Think about replacing that 10,000 rpm hard drive and its casing with a flash drive that can be connected to any computer's USB port. Certainly if we can produce 155 GB drives now, what will the capacity be in a few more years?

Earlier, I mentioned the new U3 (smart drive) specification for flash drives. This allows applications to be developed that can be stored and run from a flash drive. Software is already available for such drives. One such example is Mozilla's Firefox browser and their Thunderbird e-mail software. There are other applications that synchronize office files, folders and Outlook e-mail between a computer and

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Ram & Reason: A Virus and Incident Checklist

by Rob Rice, Member of the Computer Club of Oklahoma City

Much has been said about virus and malicious software prevention, but what if all of your precautions fail? So there you are, happily clicking along the Internet when suddenly a popup ad obstructs your view. You start to close it and then another and then another pops up so that in just a few seconds there are so many pop-up ads that you cannot possibly close them all as they just keep coming. So what do you? Delete them as fast as you can in hopes that they will stop? Turn off the computer? Suddenly a program appears from nowhere and informs you that you have been infected with a trojan virus and the program needs to scan your system so that the trojan can be removed. The problem is that you do not remember ever having installed this program. Do you trust it?

There are some industry-accepted procedures for dealing with this type of incident and any virus or trojan infection. Just follow these five simple steps in the following order to minimize damage:

1. Do not turn off your computer unless you are certain that your files are being actively deleted!
2. Disconnect the network cable from your computer and/or turn off your wireless connection.
3. Write down any error messages and the names of any programs or software that was running at the time the infection occurred.
4. Mark the computer "Do Not Use".
5. Run any of your applications that you are certain are yours and that might have opened identifying a virus attack. Next, run your antivirus, anti-trojan tools.

Step One

Do not turn off your computer. Not every trojan and virus is the same so this rule will have exceptions, but generally you do not want to turn off the computer unless you can see that the virus is deleting your files. If you think that it can be stopped from deleting your files without turning off the computer, then this is a better option than turning off the computer. The reason is that while turning the computer off will temporarily stop the damage more harm can come when you turn the computer back on. System files can be infected when loading, boot sectors contaminated, hard drive partitions erased, registries corrupted. For example, on a Windows system every-time you make a major system change one of the first things that it wants you to do is reboot, "To allow the changes to take affect." In the case of a virus or trojan, the last thing we want to do is to allow the changes to take affect.

Step Two

Disconnect the network cable from your computer and/or turn off your wireless connection. Trojans are designed to open a door and let other trojans, spyware and viruses in. Physically disconnecting its link to the Internet stops this behavior, prevents your personnel information from going out and prevents other machines from being infected. Many checklists have this action rated number one and for good reasons. I rate it here as step two because step one is simply a quick decision that can have a significant impact on the recovery outcome.

Step Three

Write down any error messages that appear and the names of any programs or software that were running at the time the infection occurred. This is important not only for repairing the system but also for identifying which alerts are real and which ones are bogus. Error messages that contain misspellings and poor grammar are likely bogus and generated by the virus.

Step Four

Mark the computer "Do Not Use." This is in case you get called away and have to leave the system alone for any length of time.

Step Five

Run any of your applications that you are certain are yours and that might have opened to identify a virus attack. Next, run your antivirus anti-trojan tools.

It's possible that your antivirus or anti-trojan software may have detected the attack and started running a system scan or is prompting you and waiting for instructions. If you are certain that it is your software then let it do what it wants to do and let it clean the system. If you have any doubts as to whether the program is in fact one of your programs then DO NOT RUN THE SOFTWARE!

Some trojans actually install and run a program pretending to be antivirus/antitrojan software and scan your system all the while claiming to be cleaning your computer. In reality it is part of the trojan. Some of these programs look very commercial and very polished so be careful!

Rob Rice is a computer specialist working in Anchorage, Alaska. Rob can be contacted at articles@isp.com

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USB FLASH DRIVES

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a U3 flash drive. There is a version of Pass2Go that securely stores passwords, banking and credit card information on these USB smart drives. Also announced are photo management software and instant-messaging programs. Skype, a VoIP provider has announced a U3 version of their software that would permit voice calls over any computer with a U3 flash drive. The U3 flash drives and the associated software will run only on computers using Windows XP and Windows 2000. A Linux version is expected to be announced shortly.

The U3 smart drive contains software that functions as a "launchpad" to provide a menu of applications on the flash drive. It also has options for drive management and a link that leads users to a web site where they can obtain additional U3-compliant software. When the drive is removed from the USB port, the system software automatically shuts down any applications running on the USB drive and cleans out data fragments so no personal information is left behind on the computer. This U3 system software uses about 6 MB of the drive's capacity and loads within 30 seconds after the drive is plugged into the USB port. One result of this capability is that the U3 compatible

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What Your PC Really Does When It's Idle

by Vinny La Bash, vlabash@home.com, Sarasota Personal, Computer UG, Inc.

You're sitting at your machine, thinking about what to do next, when your disk drive starts whirring and the light flashes, indicating that something is going on. What is your machine doing? Your hands are nowhere near the keyboard or the mouse, and you can be relatively certain that neither telepathy nor telekinesis is at work.

One possibility is that your system is loading automatic updates from Micro-soft.com because you set your system to download updates automatically. The same could be true for anti-virus programs, firewalls or any application software that offers this type of automated service.

The Task Scheduler may be running a background utility. Your automatic backup may be kicking in, or an online sub-scription service is delivering requested information as part of a service it provides. Any number of similar operations could be going on. There is a dark side to this. You may be infected by a spyware program reporting back to its master over the internet. Most spyware blabs about your web surfing habits to a commercial entity so that it can tailor ads to your individual tastes. Many people consider this annoying or intrusive. Nevertheless, the designers of these programs have no desire to hurt you. They only want to sell you something.

However, something far less benign could be going on. A program could be attempting to steal your banking information, PIN numbers, credit card records, social security information, and other financial data with the intention of draining your bank account.

A Trojan horse program may be downloading spam to retransmit from your machine, making it look to recipients that you are the spammer. Other programs make your machine a "zombie" or a node in an array of machines designed to launch a Denial of Service (DOS) attack on a web site.

Worst of all, there have been instances reported of stealth programs downloading child pornography and retransmitting it to another machine. These programs make it look like you are the culprit, making you subject to arrest and incarceration. This kind of frighteningly malicious activity has been rare, but the danger is real.

If you are concerned about this, and you should be, Windows XP offers a solution:

Click Start. Click Run.

In the text portion of the Run dialog box, type cmd and click OK.

This brings you to the Command Interpreter, which starts out by displaying the Version of XP that's running on your machine and some copyright information. Now enter the command netstat -o, which displays network statistics about your current active connections.

There are five columns of information displayed. The Proto column tells you what communication protocol is being used for a particular process. In most instances this will be TCP (Tele-Communications Protocol). This is irrelevant for our purposes. Local Address is your machine.

Foreign Address is the IP address and port number of the machine the process is communicating with.

State informs you if the communication session is sending or receiving, waiting, acknowledging or finished.

PID (Process Identifier) is the piece we need, because it identifies the process (program) that is controlling the communications session from your computer.

4. Perform the Ctrl+Alt+Del keystroke sequence to bring up the Windows Security window.

5. Click Task Manager.

6. Click the Processes tab.

7. Click the PID column. This sorts the information, making it easier to find the program you're looking for.

Note: If the PID column is not displayed, you can activate it from the View menu.

Examine the PID list until you find the PID number(s) you found with the netstat command. If it's msnmgr.exe or iexplorer.exe, there is nothing to worry about. These are normal Windows XP processes and no cause for concern. There are many other legitimate Windows XP processes that are likely to be listed in the Task Manager.

How do you tell the good from the bad? Unfortunately, Windows itself isn't much help in showing what any given process is doing and you can't shoot them all and "let God sort them out". A search of Microsoft's web site won't yield useful information.

A great place to find valuable information about common Windows processes is: http://www.liutilities.com/products/wintaskspro/processlibrary/

This site contains information about all common Windows processes, and the site administrators do an excellent job of keeping posted information current.

Knowing what's going on in your system is good, but the best protection against intruders is to keep your anti-virus, firewall, and other specialized protection programs up-to-date.

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flash drive can become your "personal" computer. Certainly it is even more portable than any laptop computer.

The day may come when your computer will be not much more than a motherboard, sound cards, wireless ethernet and USB ports. This reduces the moving parts to not more than a cooling fan, if that. All of the software and data will be on your flash drive. The face of computing is continuing to change. Fascinating isn't it?

Dr. Lewis is a former university & medical school professor who has been working with personal computers for more than thirty years. He can be reached via e-mail: bwsail at yahoo .com.

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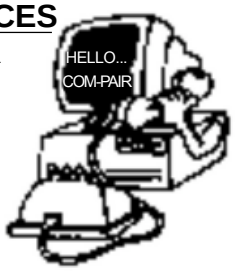

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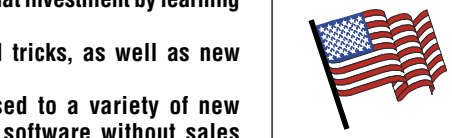

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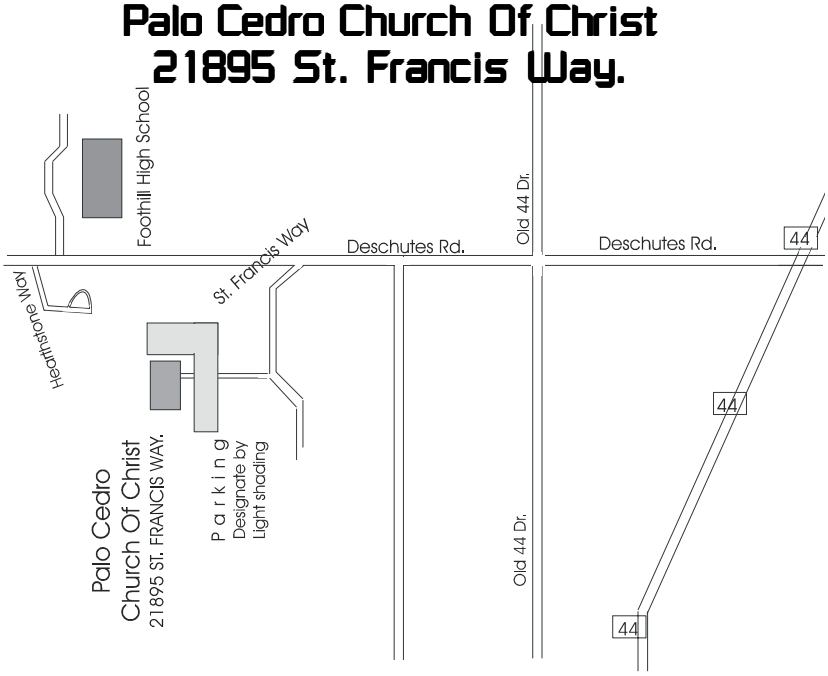

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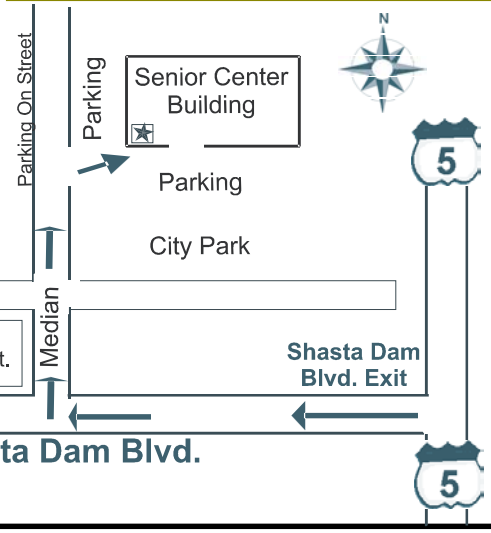

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See map to left for meeting place.

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