ComputorEdge™ Online — 10/16/09

This issue:
Free Public Wi-Fi

A look at how to find free Wi-Fi hotspots and how to protect your home Wi-Fi network from intruders.

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Digital Dave

"Digital Dave answers your tech questions." by *Digital Dave*

A reader is tired of the big-name brands' customer service and wants to buy local; a reader is missing a file-association option and needs to tweak the Registry; why would a reader's new laptop suddenly stop working?

Dear Digital Dave,

I'm done with Dell and all customer service from the major computer makers. I'm a PC guy. I used to buy computers from private, local companies that made their own stuff, back in the '90s.

Can you recommend any local computer makers who stand by their products and build them out of quality components and definitely know what they're doing? Maybe that's simply too much to ask, but I thought I'd shoot it over to you.

And, if you don't mind, what manufacturer of laptops do you recommend?

Thanks,

JR
La Jolla, CA

Dear JR,

One of the advantages of buying from a local dealer is there is a place to take the computer if you have a problem. However, I wouldn't be in a good position to recommend a specific dealer. Most of the companies that are still assembling computers have survived because they know what they are doing. The hard times have certainly narrowed the field.

One of the best ways to find out who is the best is to look for a referral. (That's why you wrote me.) I would check out some of the Computer User Groups (*webserver.computoredge.com/online.mvc?article=usergrps*) in your local area. The members of these groups most likely know who does the best work and stands behind their products.

As for laptop computers, I've always had good experiences with HP products. However, I haven't tried enough other brands to say they wouldn't be just as good. When shopping for a new laptop, I do Google searches looking for problems with particular brands. Reviews by users are the best source of information. One advantage of buying in your local geographic area (as opposed to over the Internet) is that you can easily take the computer back if there is a problem.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

In your October 9 answer to Wally about file associations, you told him to right-click on the file and bring up a menu that contains "Open with." When I right-click I get some of the menus that you displayed, but mine does not contain "Open with." I only have Open.

When I click on Open, I get a list of programs. Fortunately, I know which to use (for the file in question), but I noticed that the item below that says "always use this program" is grayed out, thus preventing me from having the file opened each time with the proper program.

The file in question is a PDF that I saved from an e-mail attachment. Where is my "Open with," and why is the "Always open with" option grayed out?

Ron
San Diego, CA

Dear Ron,

Apparently there are a number of Windows computers that have been set up in the manner you describe. Supposedly it was to stop users from making these types of changes (probably in a corporate environment). Both of the issues that you have encountered are controlled in the Registry—the place where we only cautiously make changes.

The Open With menu will not be available for any program files, but you should have it for all other files types, including the PDF that you mentioned.

The following steps are for creating the appropriate item in the Registry for displaying the menu item. If you feel comfortable with the RegEdit program, you can also add the item directly to the Registry.

1. Open Notepad or another text editor.

2. Copy the following text and paste it into the editor:

Windows Registry Editor Version 5.00
[HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT*\

shellex\ContextMenuHandlers\Open With]
@="{09799AFB-AD67-11d1-ABCD-00C04FC30936}"

3. Save the file with the name "OpenWith.reg"

4. You can run the file by double-clicking the file OpenWith.reg or using the run command.

If you want to check to see if this value is missing, you can use RegEdit (Run=>regedit) to look for the "HKEY_CLASSES* \shellex\ContextMenuHandlers\Open With" entry (see Figure 1). It should appear as shown.

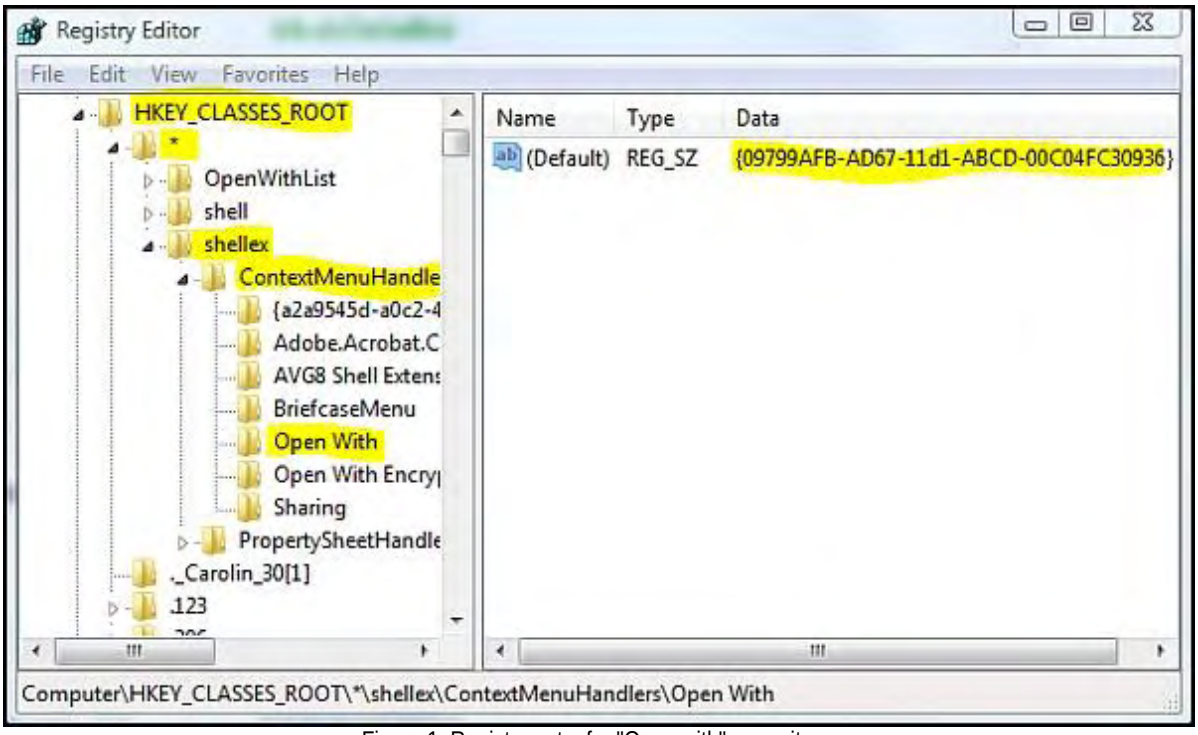

Figure 1. Registry entry for "Open with" menu item.

When the checkbox "Always use the selected program to open this kind of file" is grayed out, then there is an additional registry entry called NoFileAssociate (*technet.microsoft.com/en-us/library/cc775436(WS.10).aspx*) that is set on.

It can be found at the following location:

[HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Policies\Explorer]
"NoFileAssociate"=dword:00000000

If this entry exists in the Registry and is set to a value of 1, then you won't be able to set the file association permanently. Set the value to 0 or (if you are careful) remove the entry. For people without this problem, the entry most likely won't exist.

Digital Dave

Dear Digital Dave,

I own a laptop Compaq Presario V6000 with Vista OS. I was using it for two or three days with no problems occurring. Then, a few days after turning it off, I tried to turn on the laptop. Nothing happened, so I plugged it into the electrical outlet thinking that the battery was discharged. I know the power cord should be enough to make it work as long it is plugged, but I was wrong and it's still not working. I need your vast experience in this matter.

Noe Villegas
San Diego, CA

Dear Noe,

If the computer is still under warranty, take it back to where you bought it. If it is an older computer, there were a number of defects in that particular Presario model. (A bad BIOS setting for the fan was frying cards and the motherboard.) Hewlett-Packard (HP) did extend the warranty to two years from date of purchase. If you're outside that period of time, take it into a company that does computer service.

In these situations, if you can't get help from the dealer, then it's always good to check with the manufacturer. As may be in this case, your computer could still be in an extended warranty.

Digital Dave

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Finding Free Public Wi-Fi

"An ad hoc network of free Wi-Fi is growing." by Dawn Clement

> While there are still some cities and towns that have done a good job of providing Wi-Fi to their local community, the heavy lifting tends to fall to the commercial establishments that derive direct benefit from the users.

Imagine a world where you can pull out your laptop, wherever you are, and connect to the Internet for free. Sound great? It sounds great for plenty of other people too, and one of these days it may be a reality. Unfortunately we aren't quite there yet. Many cities have tried and failed to maintain free Wi-Fi networks (these are called municipal networks), primarily because somebody ultimately has to pay for the maintenance of the networks. With the economy being what it is, cities such as Houston, Chicago, St. Cloud, St. Louis, Boston, Philadelphia and San Francisco have found that they simply can't afford municipal networks at this time. However, there are still pockets of free Wi-Fi networks all over the country. Why have they succeeded where others have failed?

Community Wi-Fi Networks

If you happen to live in Mountain View, for example, all you need is a Wi-Fi-enabled device and a free Google account to access GoogleWiFi (*wifi.google.com/*)—a free wireless Internet service provided by Google as a service to its hometown. On the other side of the country, the City of Albany has maintained its municipal Wi-Fi, Albany Freenet (*www.albanyfreenet.net*), by setting the daily data limit to 200MB.

The Austin Wireless City Project (*www.austinwirelesscity.org*) in Austin, Texas is a non-profit, volunteer-run community network that was launched in 2003 with seven hotspots. Today it has 69 official hotspots. Rather than using public funds to support a citywide network, the efforts of both public (i.e., libraries) and private (i.e., coffee shops) free Wi-Fi hotspots are coordinated. This may become a model for other cities struggling with how to build a free Wi-Fi network.

Atlanta's Fastpass (*www.fastpass.net/index.php*) network began as a municipal network in 2004, but the city found that it was financially unsustainable. While the network is still around, it is now a pay service—$9.95 for 24 hours, $29.95 for one month.

Some of the best systems of free citywide Wi-Fi evolved with no government help at all. They are actually lists of hotspots, usually in commercial establishments. In San Francisco, Free Wi-Fi Cafes in San Francisco (*www.cheesebikini.com/2003/03/03/free-Wi-Fi-cafes-in-san-francisco/*) is a list of where you can get a meal and surf the Web. Another example of this type of ad hoc free Wi-Fi network is Tulsa Free Wifi Network (*www.tulsafreewifi.com/*) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. These sites are not so much a network as they are Web pages that list free hotspots in the local area.

Because of the cost of support and maintenance, most free Wi-Fi tends to have a commercial aspect to it—whether in restaurants or hotels. To promote its new Prius, Toyota sponsors a traveling "art" installation consisting of five Wi-Fi-enabled flower sculptures (each of which includes seating for 10 people). Each flower gives visitors free wireless

Internet and a place to plug in a laptop or cell phone. The flowers are currently in the Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco.

Finding Free Wi-Fi

Most airports, libraries and hotels offer free Wi-Fi, as well as many commercial venues such as coffee shops, book stores and fast food restaurants. You are also likely to find free Wi-Fi in and around hospitals and universities. There are numerous sites online that list local hotspots by area. A couple of examples are Wi-Fi Free Spot (*www.wififreespot.com*) and Open Wi-Fi Spots (*www.openwifispots.com*). Each give fairly comprehensive lists, but Open Wi-Fi Spots seems more up-to-date, since users can click and verify if a site is still running and update the information.

"Just because I left my Wi-Fi Internet open doesn't mean you can set up an office in my driveway!"

Wifi.com (*www.wifi.com*) (formerly Whisher) is trying to build a free network by aggregating all Wi-Fi connections people have at home. They are attempting to create the world's biggest free Wi-Fi network.

If you're flying, TravelPost offers a comprehensive list of airports (*www.travelpost.com/airport-wireless-internet.aspx*) that offer Wi-Fi—many of them free. While quite a few airports have only paid Wi-Fi, free Wi-Fi during layovers has become one of the most sought-after services for passengers.

If you're in the air, then you will see that some airlines are now offering in-flight Internet—yes, there is a fee ($9.95 or $12.95 depending upon the length of the flight). On some airlines Skytown Center will be offering a free, ad-supported, in-flight wireless network. However, if you want to leave their limited Internet mall and explore the rest of the Internet, you will be paying a fee. Prepare to be inundated with commercial ads.

Another way to find Wi-Fi hotspots is to use your cell phone. 4INFO (*www.4INFO.net*) offers a text message service for Wi-Fi and more. Just type a text message to 4INFO (44636 on the numerical keypad) which says "wifi," a space and then either a ZIP code or a city name spelled out, for example, "wifi 02720." You will receive one or more text messages back with the locations listed, including address (and sometimes the telephone number) and whether the Wi-Fi access is "free" or "pay." (Regular text message rates apply.)

If you're driving around downtown looking for Wi-Fi, then rather than booting up your laptop to search for signals, for about $15 bucks IOGEAR makes the key ring WiFi detector (*www.iogear.com/product/GWF001/*). It will show you that the signal exists and how strong it is, but it won't tell you if it's free and accessible. For that you'll need your laptop running.

Cautions for Hooking Up to Public Wi-Fi

There are a few things to remember when you use any public Wi-Fi network. First and foremost, these are generally not secured connections, and it behooves you to avoid entering any sensitive information while using a public connection. Secondly, make sure you are connecting to the network you think you're connecting to. Check the SSID in your wireless connection settings. Third, make sure your computer is charged up. There's no guarantee you're going to find a spare outlet to use (especially if you're in a local park). In addition, there is no guarantee that you will be able to use the network's own SMTP server (if they even have one), and if you need to send e-mail, you will have to use a Web-based e-mail account (such as Yahoo, Hotmail, Gmail, or your home ISP's Web mail). You should be able to pick up regular mail, but most likely normal sending will be blocked.

Many of the paid type of Wi-Fi hotspots are falling to the wayside in favor of free hookups—especially in hotels and restaurants. Free Wi-Fi is a powerful marketing message. It has become so easy to find free hotspots that the establishments with paid-only Wi-Fi are being bypassed. No matter were you are, you should be able to find free Wi-Fi—or at least no more than the cost of a cup of coffee (plus you get to drink the coffee).

While there are still some cities and towns that have done a good job of providing Wi-Fi to their local community, the heavy lifting tends to fall to the commercial establishments that derive direct benefit from the users. The ad hoc network of free Wi-Fi is growing to the point that some people no longer feel the need to have the Internet connected at home. This may be taking the concept a little too far.

Dawn Clement is a freelance writer, domestic engineer, and mother of three with a Masters of Arts in Philosophy and over nine years experience in technical support.

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Securing Your Home Wi-Fi

"How can any data sent into the open air be secure?" by Pete Choppin

While no network is 100 percent secure, you can make your wireless net just as safe as a wired one, and prevent all but the most dedicated and resourceful crackers from getting in.

The term "wireless security" may seem a contradiction in terms. After all, how can any data sent into the open air be secure?

It seems like wireless networking is everywhere now. From my workplace to the fast food restaurants and cafés to my home, wireless networks are everywhere. Every time you log on to a public Wi-Fi access point, you are transmitting your login name and password over open airwaves, and often a credit card number as well. How much do we know about wireless security?

A friend of mine recently found out how easy it was to infiltrate a public Wi-Fi network. He was just at the local mall with his laptop looking for a wireless network to jump onto. When he found one, it was of course not secured because it was public. However, he was able to gain access to their wireless network through the router because it was completely open. From there, he had full access to their entire network. Fortunately for the mall, my friend had no malicious intent, but it illustrates how easy it is for Wi-Fi access points and internal networks to be vulnerable—and how security is so lax.

What about home networks? While individual home networks may not be quite as attractive to wireless hackers, do you really want your neighbor stealing your bandwidth, or passersby snooping around your hard disk? Even if you aren't worried about your home network, and don't keep any valuable data on your hard drive, you should still be concerned about bandwidth hijackers.

In perhaps the most shocking Wi-Fi crime to date, a man using a laptop in a moving car was found by Toronto police downloading child pornography (*www.theregister.co.uk/2003/11/26/wifi_hacker_caught_downloading_child/*) thanks to open Wi-Fi nets in a residential neighborhood. Police only stopped him because he was going the wrong way down a one-way street. Worse, if such downloads are traced back to your IP address, you could be charged with a crime yourself. All hackers need is readily downloadable "sniffing" tools, such as those used by "wardrivers." (Hackers who wander the streets with Wi-Fi gear looking for networks to join—most are hobbyists or simple bandwidth seekers, but some are malicious.)

So what can you do to make your wireless net safer? Thankfully, the answer is "a lot." While no network is 100 percent secure, you can make your wireless net just as safe as a wired one, and prevent all but the most dedicated and resourceful crackers from getting in. And it won't cost you anything but a little time.

Here are some down-and-dirty tips to help you keep your private data private.

1. Make sure you are connected to a legitimate access point. This first step is often overlooked, but may be one of the most important. Rogue access points in public areas can have the same SSID (the wireless network ID) as what you'd expect in the area, but really connect directly to hijackers' databases to collect the passwords and usernames you use to sign in. Even worse, they can collect credit card data from people who sign up for new accounts.

2. Encrypt Sensitive Data. As you send e-mails from your laptop to the wireless access point and back, or as you enter your username and password to check your bank account balances, someone nearby can be "sniffing" (intercepting) those packets of data as they fly by. Much of the information—even information that you think should be encrypted—is sent in clear text. That means that the person intercepting those packets may be able to read your e-mails or learn your passwords.

While data sent to and from secure Web sites (those starting with https:) is generally protected, you can also use encryption in other contexts. If you are sending a sensitive file via e-mail, for example, encrypt it first with a password. A very nice encryption program called JavaEncryptor (*sourceforge.net/projects/javaencryptor/*) works very well, is easy to use, and it is free. Also, because it is written in Java, it is cross platform (will work with any system).

3. Use a personal firewall. A personal firewall will help you restrict the traffic allowed in and out of your computer. This protects you not only from attacks that originate outside of your network, but also those from other computers on the same network. Make sure you take the time to familiarize yourself with the product you choose and configure it properly to get the maximum protection without getting in the way of legitimate traffic and applications.

4. Use antivirus software. When you are on your home network or even on your company network you can operate with a fair assurance that the other machines on the network with you are at least as protected as yours is against viruses and other malicious code. When you connect to a public network you have no such assurance. Suddenly it is more important than ever to have antivirus software installed.

5. Keep your OS and apps up-to-date. It seems that almost every week there's a new "security patch" for various parts of the Windows operating system or Office programs. And it's not just Microsoft. Apple has its own fair share of security updates, as do most utility and business software vendors. Also, most of the malicious viruses and worms that have plagued users recently spread through e-mail, so be especially cautious about opening attachments.

6. Be aware of people around you. When you're at an ATM, you make sure no one can see you type your PIN. Be just as careful about typing in your name and password at a Starbucks. You pay big bucks for that mobile access account. Don't just give away your password.

7. Use Web-based e-mail accounts. Why? Most ISPs these days have a Web-based e-mail system you can use. These Web sites generally use secure sockets layer (SSL) or other security protocols, which protect your data while it's being transmitted. POP mail through Outlook does not.

8. Use strong passwords for personal data. Use strong passwords for sensitive files and folders, as well as for access to your computer as a whole. This is especially important for mobile warriors whose laptops are attractive theft targets. Consider keeping your most important data on an encrypted USB keychain storage device, so even if you lose your portable device, you won't lose your presentation or e-mail folder.

No network can ever be completely secure, but after you've implemented the recommendations here, wireless hackers will likely choose an easier target.

Just as important is securing your home wireless network (and the wired one too!). Here's a step-by-step guide to help make the process as painless as possible.

1. Change your router's name and password. This is always the first line of defense. It's easy for attackers to find out what the default name and password are for various manufacturers. You should make sure you rename the router and assign a strong password for accessing the router configuration software.

2. Enable infrastructure mode only on all access points and clients on the network. Disable the "ad-hoc" mode, which lets clients set up peer-to-peer networks and could allow rogue users to connect to your network through a legitimate

wireless client.

3. Disable SSID broadcast. The SSID (Service Set Identifier) is essentially the network name for the wireless portion. With broadcasting off, wireless clients must first know the SSID before they can connect. Experienced hackers can still find such "closed" networks, but at least you will not be openly inviting them. Neighbors or passersby will not see or accidentally connect to your network.

4. Turn on the MAC addressing filter in your wireless router. Each network device (such as a computer, Wi-Fi card, or printer) has a unique MAC (Media Access Control) address, and by allowing access only to pre-defined MAC addresses, you reduce the risk of accidental or rogue clients connecting with or perusing your network resources. This takes the closed network concept a step further.

5. Enable WPA (Wi-Fi Protected Access) or WPA2 encryption. Encryption is the next step in the wireless security ladder. You might see an encryption setting on your router called WEP (wireless equivalency protocol); however, its underlying algorithm is flawed and subject to relatively easy cracking. Without going into the gory technical details, it can be broken in minutes. While WEP is better than nothing, it will only keep out the neighbors and opportunistic hackers. For true protection, you need WPA or WPA2.

6. Use a strong firewall. The steps we've discussed so far focus on securing the wireless network, but once your wireless data reaches the access point, it becomes part of the wired net, and subject to any attacks or snooping that might come in through your broadband gateway (or from other users on your local wired net). Furthermore, WEP, WPA and WPA2 encryption apply only to data in the air; as soon as it passes through the Wi-Fi gateway, data is decrypted. Most home networking routers come with built-in firewall capabilities. The firewall is usually a basic port-blocking or packet-filtering firewall that lets you permit or deny incoming traffic on certain ports. (See last week's issue of ComputorEdge for more details on firewalls).

7. Turn off wireless devices when not in use. The final word of advice for home wireless networks is "Turn it off!" While it may seem like a pain, you'll sleep easier knowing that since your gateway, computer, laptop etc. are not turned on, no one can access them. A computer that isn't connected can't be hacked or compromised from the network.

We live in a wireless world today, and although the technology has become more advanced, it is still vulnerable. If you think about it, you are merely sending your personal or sensitive information over a radio signal—not all that different than broadcasting a station from a radio on your desk, and all one needs to receive that signal is a wireless adapter.

It's your data. Keep it safe and secure.

Resources:

What is wardriving and how can you prevent it (*www.webpronews.com/topnews/2004/08/18/what-is-wardriving-and-how-can-you-prevent-it*).

WPA PSK Encryption Step-by-Step Tutorial (*www.wi-fiplanet.com/tutorials/article.php/3552826*)

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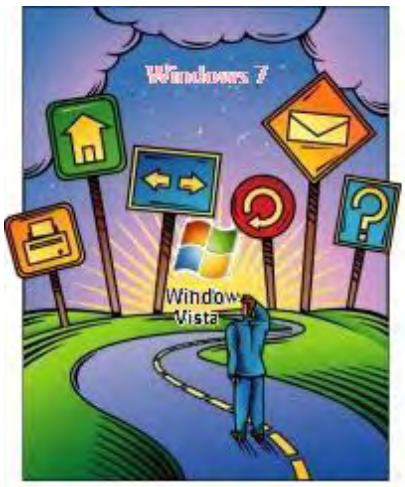

Windows Vista Tips and Tricks

(and some Windows 7)

Windows Tips and Tricks: Windows 7 Versus Windows XP

"Is it really time to drop XP?" by Jack Dunning

If your Windows XP computer is doing everything you want it to do, you may not want to upgrade to Windows 7. The biggest immediate benefit you will see in a new Win 7 computer will come from the performance of new hardware, not the new operating system.

I've seen many articles about Win 7 vs. Vista, but what about an article about Win 7 vs. XP?

My family (including two seniors) and our family business (a non-profit) have been using XP on our three computers for years. I'm pretty comfortable with it, but my wife is weak with computers. She can e-mail, write simple documents and print them, and browse the Internet, but has a hard time learning anything different. We tried a Vista laptop once, hated it, and took it right back to the store.

Is there any good reason for us to switch to 7? How will it be better?

Bob Di Giorgio, San Diego, CA

That's an excellent, timely question. I have no doubt that there are many people in your situation. Admittedly, Windows Vista was a bomb when introduced—although it is working pretty well for many people now. Microsoft is now trying to make amends with Windows 7. However, just because Win 7 is universally acknowledged as better than Vista, doesn't necessarily mean it is time to drop XP. Bob's question prompted me to investigate the subject, and there is a great deal of data available.

Windows 7 Versus Windows XP Performance

Numerous people have run benchmark tests using the same equipment with Windows 7, Windows Vista and Windows XP. In my review of the results, the vast majority showed that both Win 7 and XP consistently outperformed Vista. The comparison between Win 7 and XP is less clear. Most results were very close, with a slight edge being given to XP.

While Windows 7 offers better performance than Windows Vista, it does not seem that this alone would be a good reason to upgrade from Windows XP to Win 7. There are specific applications that ran faster on Win 7 than XP, and it appears that Win 7 may be a much better platform for multimedia applications. But overall XP was either tied or slightly ahead of Win 7 in speed.

If you did purchase a new Win 7 computer, most of the noticeable increase in power would be from the new hardware. If your XP computers are more than a few years old, you will benefit from the latest hardware. If your XP computers are relatively new, then you may want to wait.

Security and Support

Some believe that the primary reason Win 7 doesn't outperform XP is because of the increased security functions. Over the years Microsoft has had to plug numerous security holes in XP. The security on Win 7 is said to be much more robust than XP. However, if you've been keeping your XPs secure all this time, there is no reason to believe the situation will get worse once Win 7 is released.

I should also note anecdotally that I had far more random crashes with XP than I've seen in Win 7—or Vista for that matter—although most of them are probably related to application software (Internet Explorer in particular) rather than XP.

Microsoft won't be discontinuing support for Windows XP until sometime after 2010. That should be plenty of time to ease into Windows 7—if you decide to take the plunge. At this point, I'm not sure how much support you could need.

Learning Windows 7

If you were a Vista user, I could easily recommend Windows 7 from both a performance and learning aspect. The differences between XP and Win 7 are greater (although not overwhelming) than those of Vista and Win 7. Overall the look and feel of Win 7 is substantially the same as Windows XP. However, I've worked so much with Vista and Windows 7 that it's difficult for me to judge how steep the learning curve would be for you. Sometimes the slightest change can cause unbelievable confusion to a new user. Many of the features of Win 7 are located in the same place as they are in XP. However, some things have changed just enough in Win 7 to make it hard on someone who is accustomed to XP.

To make a transition easier, convert one computer at a time. The first should be that of the most computer-savvy person—who can later help the other users when they get a Win 7 machine.

Windows 7 Features That Help

Quite a bit of thought has been put into Windows 7 features. Many of them are good features from Vista. Others are new ways of working that do make computing easier. Whether anyone needs them is a matter of personal preference.

A big deal was made about Windows Aero, which added enhanced 3-D effects to desktop navigation in Vista and is included Win 7. I never use it and couldn't care less if Microsoft dropped it completely. (Others may differ.) When Windows Aero is deactivated, resources are freed up. However, there is a feature of Vista and Win 7 that I've found extremely valuable. It's the Start Search field (called "Search programs and files in Win 7") found in the Microsoft Start Menu (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Search Field in Windows 7 makes finding everything easier.

Window XP keeps programs (and files viewed with Windows Explorer) in a tree structure. In order to find a program, it's necessary to navigate through a maze of menus to find the right program. This is no problem if you know where all your programs and files are located, but at times it can be tedious and frustrating. As more programs are installed on (and files added to) the computer, the more difficult it becomes to locate the ones you want.

Win 7 and Vista have the same tree structure, except they automatically index for searching everything that gets loaded into your most important folders (including the text in documents). That means that all you need to do to find a program or file is type part of the name into the Start Search field (see Figure 2). You can still open "All Programs" in Win 7—the menus open in place rather than spreading to the right across the screen as in XP.

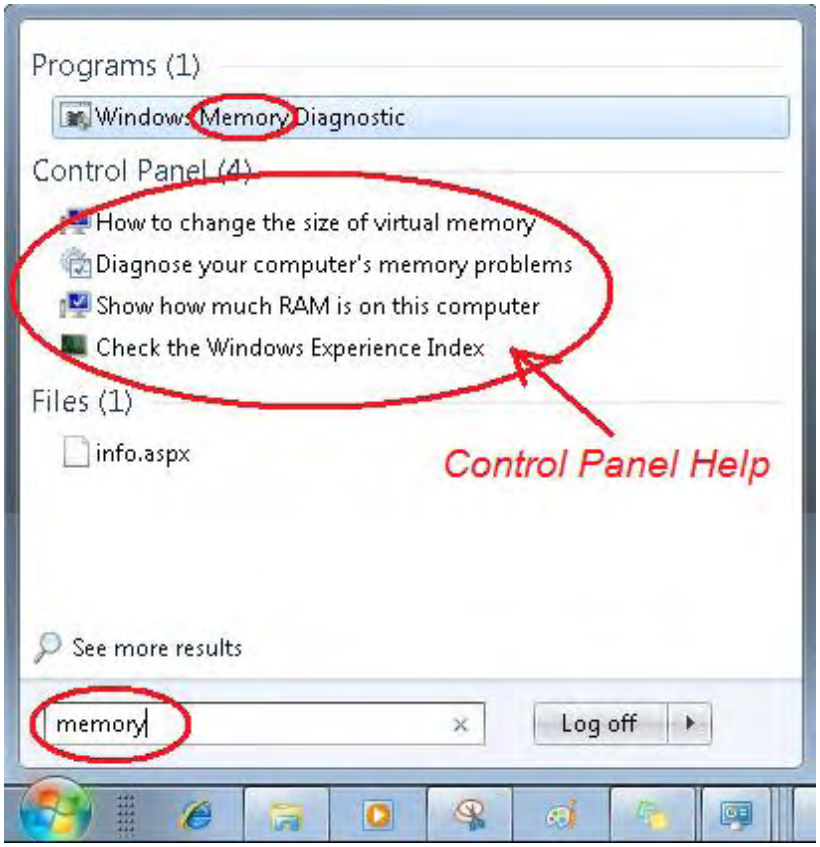

Figure 2. The word "memory" is typed into the Search Field in Windows 7.

Note that the program "Windows Memory Diagnostic" is displayed at the top. If there were more programs installed on the computer with the word "memory" in the name, then they would all appear. There is only one file shown that contains the key word in it. If you saved a file (.txt, .doc, .html, etc.) with the word memory in the file, it would also appear.

Another plus in Win 7 (not in Vista) is that Control Panel options on the menu help you to locate the right tools when you're having a problem. As can be seen in the above figure, they are in the form of how-to, show-how, and check-type statements, to help you find your answer.

This Start Search field has become my primary method for finding programs and obscure files in Vista. I also use the Favorite Links portion of Windows Explorer extensively. I move links to the folders I need regularly in and out of Favorite Links as it suits me. This makes opening a working folder as easy as loading Windows Explorer and clicking the link in the left-hand navigation menu. Windows XP also has a Favorites menu item available that I never used. It's not quite as easy to use or drag folders in and out in XP.

One feature I'm looking forward to using in Windows 7 is Libraries. Libraries help you to organize a file system of any type. The files can be combined from various sources, whether drives or folders. The files can then be quickly found by folder and other tags depending upon the type of library (see Figure 3).

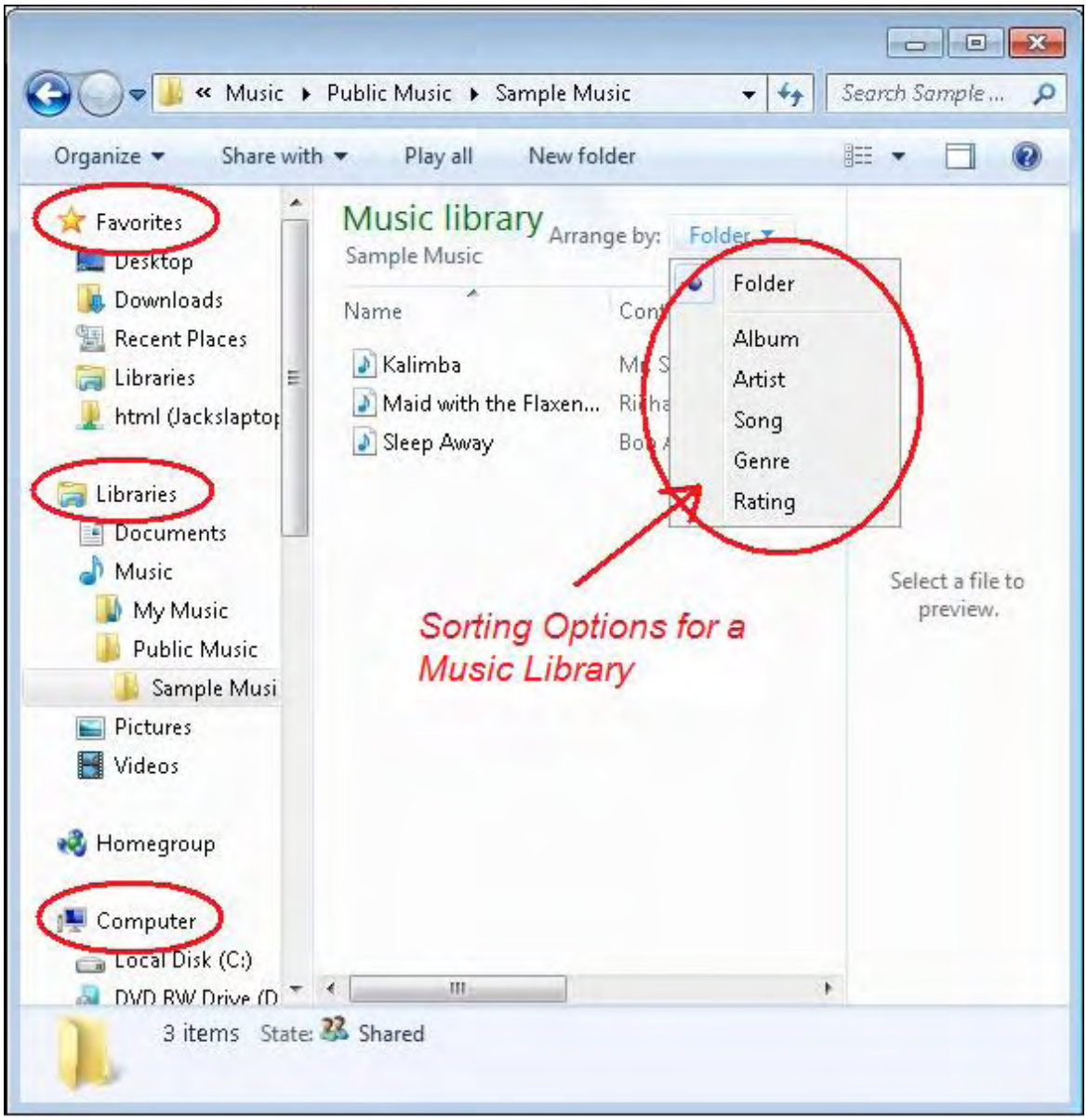

Figure 3. In Windows 7, Windows Explorer include Favorites, Libraries, and the regular tree structure in navigation pane.

Another feature of Windows 7 (not Vista) that may help a person to compute efficiently is the new configuration of the Quick Launch buttons. The Win 7 Quick Launch buttons also act as tabs on the taskbar. That means a program (and all subsequent program windows) that you launch with a Quick Launch will become a task tab in the same location. Unlike in both XP and Vista, where the location of the active program tab on the taskbar is dependent upon when the program is launched, Win 7 Quick Launch tabs will always be found in the same place (see Figure 4) . When you have 30 program windows open, it's much easier to find a particular program when you know where it's going to be.

Figure 3. In Windows 7, Quick Launch buttons also serve as tabs on the taskbar.

How Old Is Your Hardware

If your Windows XP computer is doing everything that you want it to do, then you may not want to upgrade to Windows 7. The biggest immediate benefit you will see in a new Win 7 computer will come from the performance of new hardware, not the new operating system. However, there are a number of useful features in Windows 7 that in the long run will make your computing easier.

Converting from XP to Win 7 may be uncomfortable at first. Give yourself some time to grow accustomed to the slightly changed interface. Play with the new tools, but many of the old XP tools will still be available. Ultimately, when the XP computers start to die, there will be very little benefit in spurning Win 7 and sticking with Windows XP.

Jack is the publisher of *ComputorEdge* Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called *The Byte Buyer*. His Web site is *www.computoredge.com*. He can be reached at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*

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Wally Wang's Apple Farm

“Accessing Wi-Fi” by Wally Wang

With a Macintosh, it's easy to connect to a Wi-Fi network; just load up Safari. Also, a look at Storyist, which isn't just another screenplay formatter, but a story organizer; the latest Apple/Mac rumors; and a tip on using the Universal Access window to modify your screen.

Less than a year ago when I would check into a hotel, they would offer free Wi-Fi service. However, the last time I was in Las Vegas and Phoenix, I noticed that the hotel room now included an Ethernet cable. One hotel in Gila Bend, Arizona didn't offer Wi-Fi at all, but just an Ethernet cable.

When I asked the hotel clerk why there were only Ethernet cables, he told me that it was for simplicity and security. Many people had trouble connecting their laptops to the Wi-Fi network, so the hotel just got rid of it. They also worried that guests could have their passwords or other sensitive data stolen over a Wi-Fi connection, so they figured Ethernet cables could solve both problems at once. Just plug it in and you have a safe and simple connection.

So despite the advantages of Wi-Fi, hotels seem to be trending toward providing Ethernet cables in every room. That's great for every laptop except for a MacBook Air, which can only connect through Wi-Fi, since it lacks an Ethernet port.

While hotels may be leaning toward Ethernet cables, most other public places still rely on Wi-Fi since it's easier to connect to Wi-Fi rather than string Ethernet cables all over a library or coffeehouse. With a Macintosh, it's easy to connect to a Wi-Fi network.

Just load up Safari, and if you can't connect, you'll see an error message displaying a big Network Diagnostics button. Click this Network Diagnostics button and the Network Diagnostics program starts up, displaying a list of Wi-Fi networks. Click the one you want, and if it doesn't require a password, you'll be connected. That's it, nice and simple.

Figure 1. The Network Diagnostics program appears when connecting to a Wi-Fi network.

When using Wi-Fi, you don't have a secure Internet connection, so don't order anything online that requires typing a credit card number. While the risk is low that someone could snare your credit card number through a Wi-Fi connection, there's no point in taking that risk unnecessarily. Just use Wi-Fi to browse Web sites or check e-mail and assume that anything you type can be read by anyone around you.

Figure 2. Selecting a Wi-Fi network.

Getting Creative with Storyist

If you want to write a novel or screenplay, you have two choices. One, you can use an ordinary word processor like Word or Pages. Writing a novel isn't too bad in a word processor, but writing a screenplay is more troublesome since you need to define the formatting yourself.

Pages, found in Apple's iWork suite, includes a screenplay template, but you might want something more. The two most popular screenplay formatting programs are Final Draft and Movie Magic. However, you might consider an alternative called Storyist (*storyist.com/index.html*).

Storyist isn't just another screenplay formatter but a story organizer. In the past, you might have typed your novel or screenplay on a computer, but jotted notes about your story, plot, and characters on separate sheets of paper scattered all over your desk. With Storyist, you can write your story and store your notes using a single program.

One nice feature of Storyist is the ability to switch between text, outline and storyboard view. The text view simply displays your novel or screenplay as full text. Outline view condenses your text into chapter (for a novel) or scene (for a screenplay) headings.

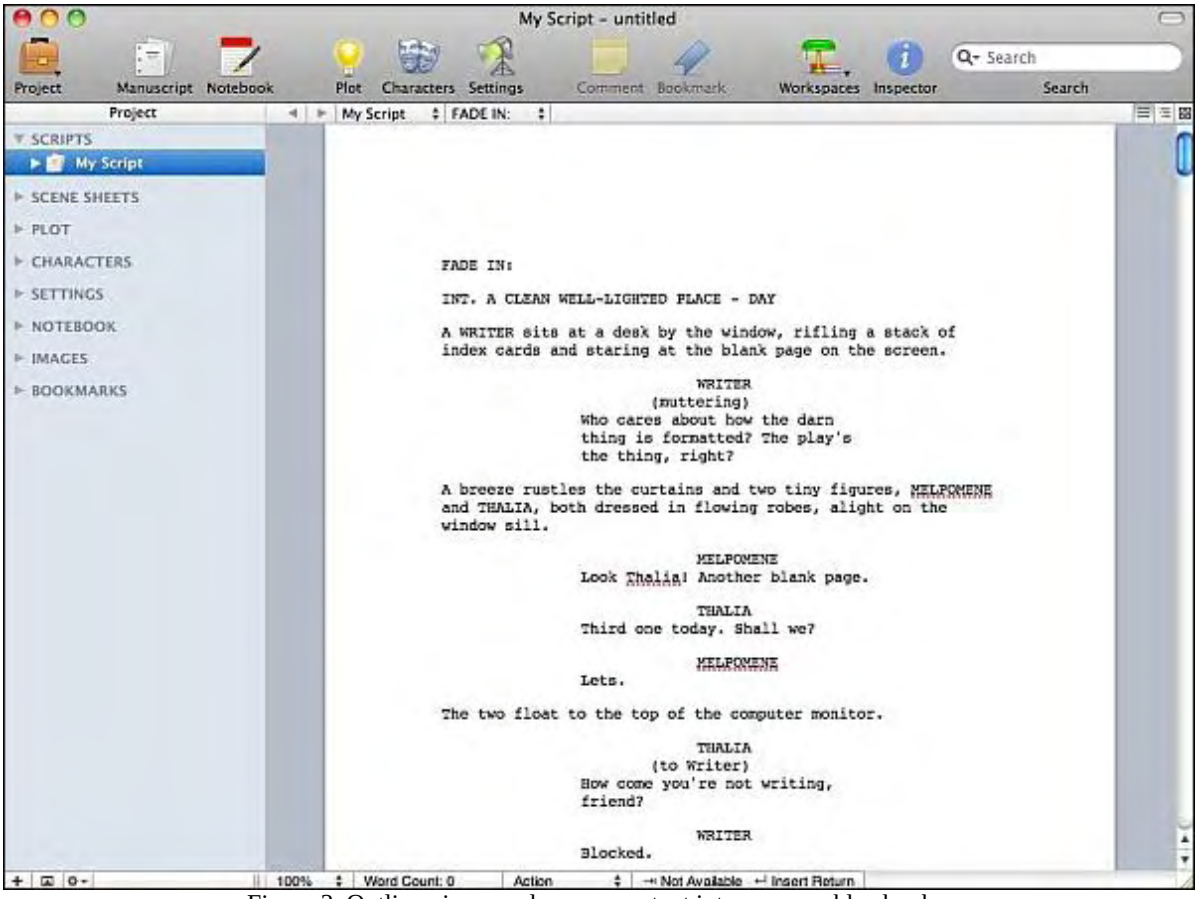

Figure 3. Outline view condenses your text into manageable chunks.

In case you're the type who likes to plot scenes or chapters using index cards, you can use the storyboard view to mimic pinning cards on a corkboard. By using the storyboard view, you can get a quick overview of your story without reading all the text.

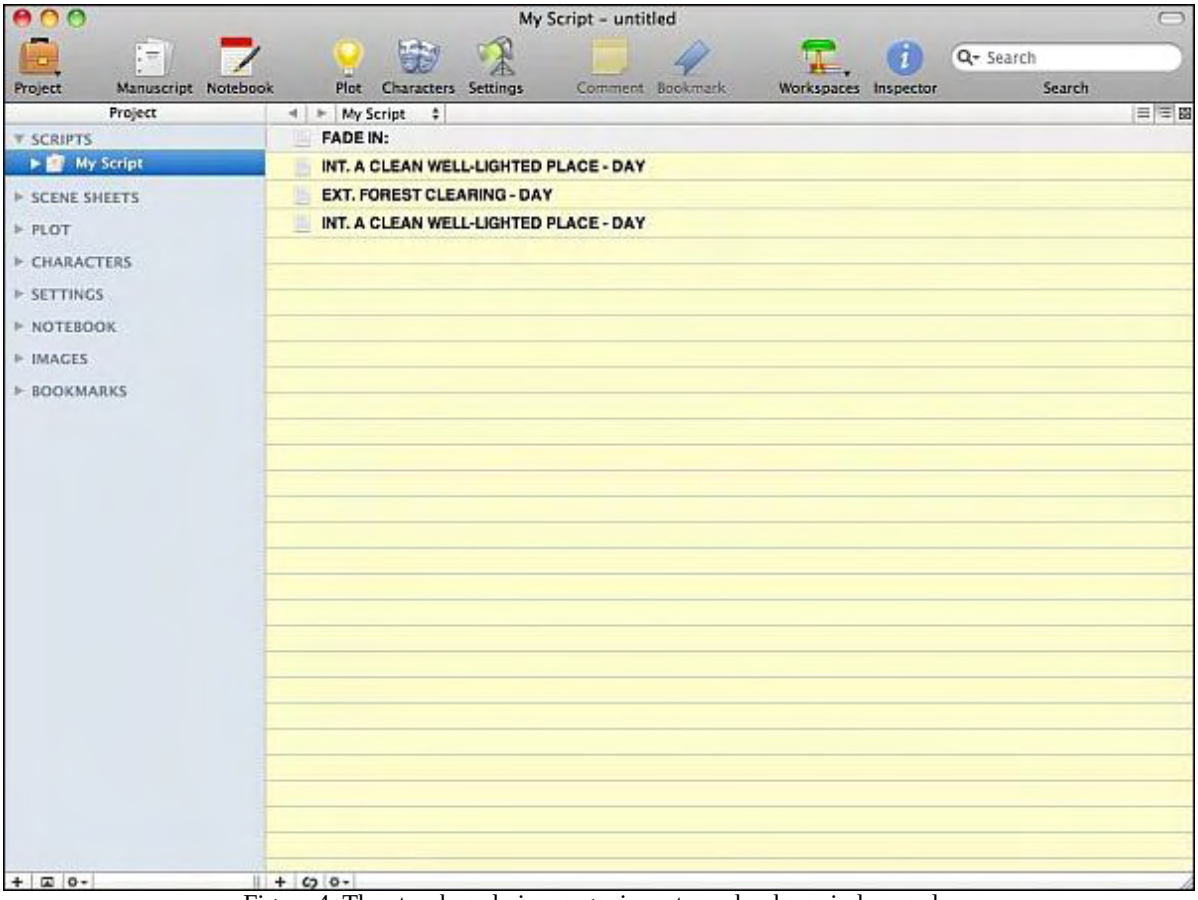

Figure 4. The storyboard view organizes story chunks as index cards.

Another neat feature are scene or section sheets, which let you jot down ideas and notes for individual scenes. This lets you plot your story so you can see how it flows before you waste time doing any actual writing that you might not need anyway.

Perhaps the biggest problem with any program, such as Storyist, is that you need to take time learning how to use its features. Storyist isn't just another word processor that you can load up and start typing away. To get the full benefit of this program, you'll need to read its online help to learn how to access all of its features.

By itself, Storyist won't magically turn you into a best-selling novelist or blockbuster screenwriter, but it can channel your creativity so you can keep your notes stored in the same file as your novel or screenplay.

For $79 (boxed edition) or $59 (download edition), Storyist is an inexpensive program that every creative writer should consider. If you're serious about writing novels or screenplays, you need a better tool than an ordinary word processor, and a program like Storyist can help you turn your raw ideas into a completed manuscript.

Windows 7 and Mac Updates

On October 22, Microsoft will officially announce Windows 7. Sometime before that date, expect Apple to release new iMac, MacBook, and Mac mini models. According to a Google ad inadvertently displayed in Europe, Apple is planning to promote a new thinner, lighter, and more affordable family of Macs.

The Mac mini will likely get a price cut and a slight upgrade in processor speed and hard disk size; the iMac is supposed to get a thinner enclosure with a possible quad-core processor and Blu-ray drives; and the MacBook is supposed to get a price cut from $999 to as low as $799.

Of course, Apple isn't lowering prices out of the goodness of their heart, but because they plan to blunt Microsoft's October 22 announcement of Windows 7. Most likely, Apple will announce these new Mac models before October 22 and entice buyers to opt for a low-cost Macintosh rather than a Windows 7 PC.

Whether you like the Macintosh or not, anyone who works with computers should learn to use one. It's no longer a Windows-only world, so if you're involved in setting up and maintaining computer networks, you should learn Windows and Mac OS X.

As more people use the Macintosh in the business world (and Linux in the Web server world), everyone who works with computers will need to broaden their knowledge or risk obsolescence. When October 22 arrives, you can pick up a new Macintosh along with a Windows 7 PC and start learning the idiosyncrasies of both.

* * *

If your eyesight isn't as strong as you'd like it to be, you could have trouble reading your computer screen. Many programs, such as Microsoft Word, let you magnify the appearance of text without physically changing the text size. This lets you read the text easily without blowing it up so large that other people find it annoying.

However, for a much simpler solution, you can adjust the appearance of your screen by clicking on the Apple menu and choosing System Preferences. When the System Preferences window appears, click the Universal Access icon under the System category.

The Universal Access window appears where you can adjust the screen contrast, magnification, or alter between white text against a black background (as opposed to black text against a white background). By modifying these options, you can make your screen easier to read.

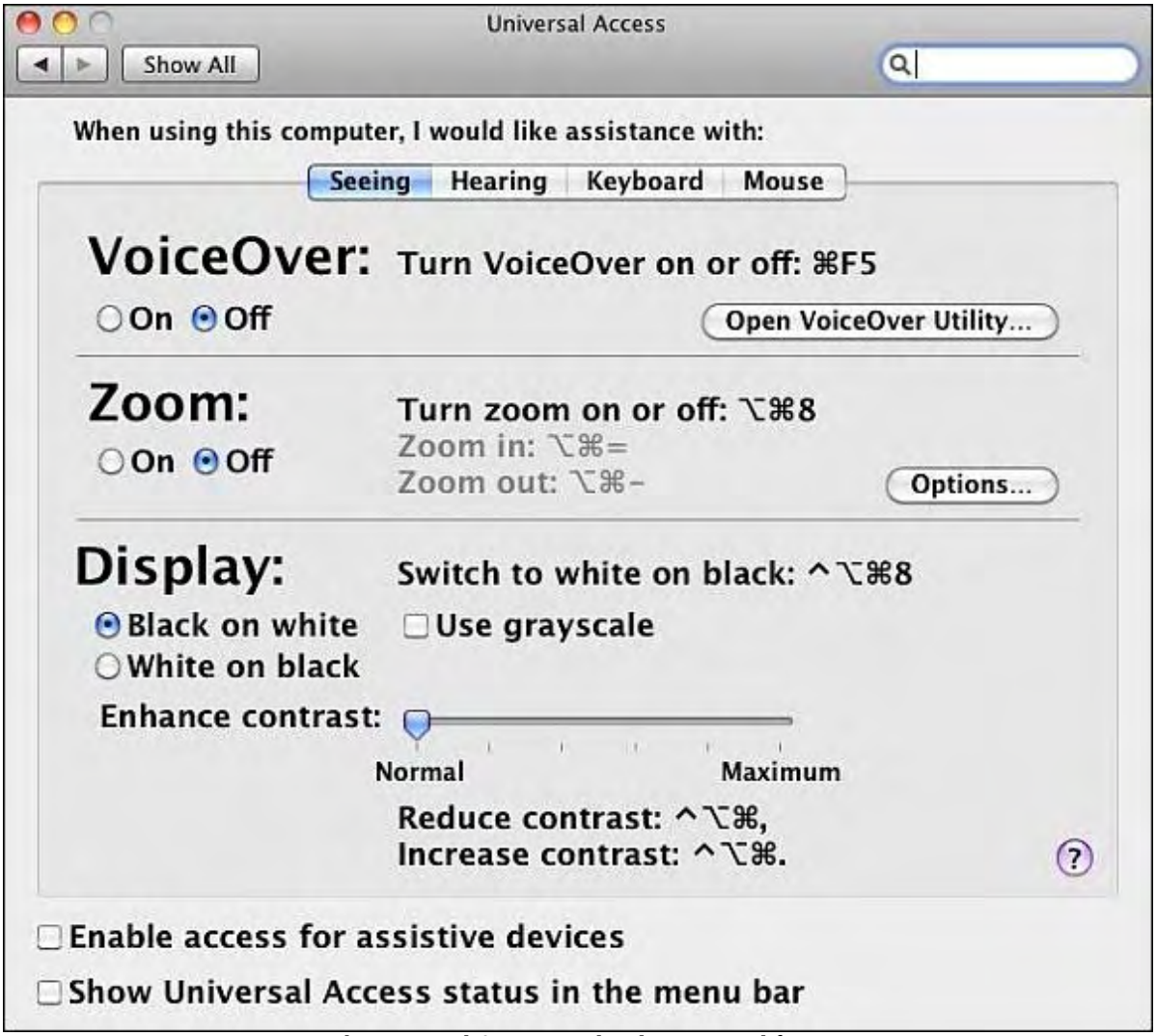

Figure 5. The Universal Access window lets you modify your screen.

In the early days, before Wally became an Internationally renowned comedian, computer book writer, and generally cool guy, Wally Wang used to hang around The Byte Buyer dangling participles with Jack Dunning and go to the gym to pump iron with Dan Gookin.

Wally is responsible for the following books:

• Microsoft Office 2007 for Dummies (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470009233?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470009233*)
• Beginning Programming for Dummies (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470088702?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470088702*)
• Breaking Into Acting for Dummies with Larry Garrison (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764554468?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0764554468*)
• Beginning Programming All-in-One Reference for Dummies (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/0470108541?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0470108541*)
• Steal This Computer Book 4.0 (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271050?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271050*)
• Visual Basic Express 2005: Now Playing (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593270593?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593270593*)
• My New Mac (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271646?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271646*)
• My New iPhone (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593271956?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1593271956*)
• Strategic Entrepreneurism with Jon Fisher and Gerald Fisher (*www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590791894?ie=UTF8&tag=the15minmovme-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1590791894*)

Every Saturday morning from 9:00 am - 10:00 am in San Diego, you can hear Wally with fellow co-hosts Dane Henderson and Candace Lee, on the radio show CyberSports Today (*cybersportstoday.com/*), which covers the video gaming industry on ESPN Radio 800 AM. Wally covers the military history side of the video game industry.

When not performing stand-up comedy or writing computer books, he likes to paper trade stocks with the video game Stock Reflex (*www.plimus.com/jsp/download_trial.jsp?contractId=1722712&referrer=wwang*), using the techniques he learned from a professional Wall Street day trader.

Wally can be reached at *wally@computoredge.com* and at his personal web site (*www.wallacewang.com/*).

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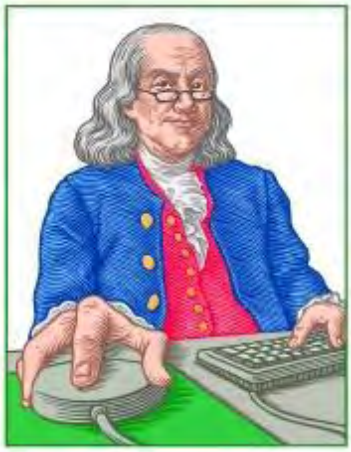


Linux Lessons: Tips and Tricks from Users

“Conky is a good example of a simple Linux tool”

by ComputorEdge Staff

> Conky is a great tool for one simple job: letting you know how your computer is doing on the inside. And that's something that appeals to many inquisitive Linux users!

Linux (and indeed Unix) has long held the philosophy of "one tool for each job, and one job for each tool." This can lead to quite a paradox for newcomers to Linux: Why are there so many tools that do similar things?

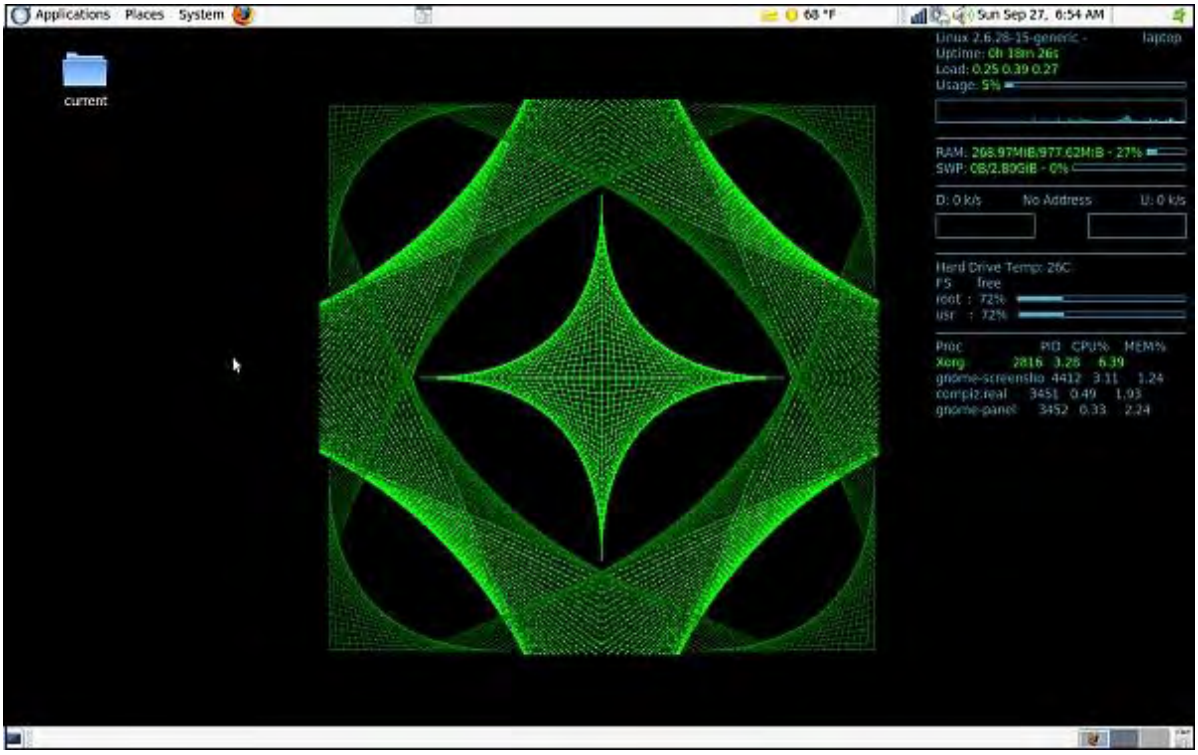
Part of the reason for this is the open-source approach. As soon as a great open-source application is available, all the hackers of the world (and here I use "hacker" in its more noble form) are able to start "messing around" with the code. Improvements to the code may appear in the original application, or they may appear in a new application based on that original application. Soon there may be dozens (or even hundreds) of choices—whatever happened to "one tool for each job"? Well, welcome to Linux.

Given some time and the willingness to do some research, a new Linux user learns which applications (tools) have been around for a while and have generally been accepted as the right tool for the task. Do not be surprised, however, to find alternatives popping up here and there—that is all part of the Linux evolutionary process, and sometimes variations catch on and turn out to be wonderful improvements on the original application.

Is there a typical Linux user? Probably not, but if you hang out with various Linux users long enough, you will find some similarities in those that you most admire and trust: They know what is going on with their computer, sometimes to the extreme. How often have you seen an online discussion of Windows users about the inner configurations of their laptop's hard drive temperature sensors? I know: Most Windows users would say, "That's because we don't have to worry about that stuff." Well, that may be true, depending on how they use their computers. Many Linux users, however, have an innate curiosity that wants to learn as much as possible about their computer—what slows it down, what can be tweaked to improve performance, are there any signs of hardware problems, etc. Notice I did not include "do I have a virus?" or "am I hacked?" Take some basic precautions with Linux, and those simply will not be a problem.

Which brings me to Conky, a great tool for one simple job: letting you know how your computer is doing on the inside.

I came across Conky indirectly. A common feature in Linux forums and publications is to have users post a screen shot of their desktop. Here's mine:



See that part on the right that looks all complicated and detailed—the kind of thing you may see on the screen of a science-fiction starship or something? That is one simple little tool called Conky. After seeing enough screen shots with that on them, I did a bit of research and figured out how to get that on my own computer.

Like many Linux applications, Conky began as a "fork"—a project variation that split off from an existing project, in this case, Torsmo. Conky is easy to install and is also available in the Synaptic Package Manager. The documentation on installation is excellent, so I will not go into that here. Once installed, Conky can be run from a terminal (just type in "conky"), and you can then close that terminal and Conky will remain on your desktop. Of course you can configure Conky to automatically load on startup, but since I use the terminal a lot, I just call it up when I open the terminal.

Like nearly every Linux application, Conky can be configured extensively. By default it will tell you which processes are draining the system the most, system uptime, etc. The hard drive temperature may not show up, but that has to do with permissions—reading the hard drive temperature requires root access, so you'll have to hack a bit to get Conky that information. Doing so will allow you to read the hard drive temp, and you will learn a little more about Linux permissions and configuration files in the process. While you are modifying Conky, you will see that you can have it display many things beyond simple system information. Conky can be modified to have the latest weather information displayed, the "on this day in history" entry from the Unix calendar command, or even the latest news headlines.

Conky is a great little application that exemplifies the UNIX philosophy. Installing, configuring and running Conky will be great practice for those new to Linux who want to learn more about their computers and their wonderful operating system.

Author's Note: I am not expert, only a volunteer who uses and loves Linux. Throughout this article, Linux can be replaced with FreeBSD, and I do not want to imply that Linux is "better than" FreeBSD in any way. So...no flames :-).

Linux/Unix Philosophy references:

• FreeBSD (*www.freebsd.org/*)
• Unix Philosophy (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unix_philosophy*)
• The Art of Unix Programming (*www.faqs.org/docs/artu/index.html*)
• The Linux Information Project (*www.linfo.org/index.html*)

Conky/Torsmo references:

• Conky System Monitor (*conky.sourceforge.net/*)
• TyopoytaORvelo System MOnitor (*torsmo.sourceforge.net/*)

Submitted by Richard from Longmont

* * *

In the August 14 Linux column, Jack Hamilton offered an agenda for future columns. Everyone is welcome to contribute. As a thought, the following possible topics are taken from Jack's list:

Admin basics:
• chmod/chown/chattr/lsattr
• fsck
• fdisk
• formatting with mkfs

If you would like to contribute to this or any other Linux topic, send your input to Linux Lessons (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*).

* * *

Give Us Your Linux Tips and/or Questions

*If you have an opinion on these or other Linux topics, then please let us know. Also, if you have another Linux tip that works for you, or a favorite Linux software application, and would like to pass it along (or have a question), please drop us a line at Linux Lessons (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*).*

This is a column for Linux and Unix-like operating system users. The goal is to give Linux users an opportunity to share tips, tricks and ideas with both fellow users and the *ComputorEdge* Linux newbies. Each week in this column, we will highlight the thoughts you submit to us. This is your column. As long as a submission is dealing with the Linux/Unix-like world, we want to share it.

The tips and tricks may be short or long, and can include graphics. If there is a little technique or program that you use on a regular basis, then we want to hear about it. You may also pose questions for other Linux users to answer. E-mail your ideas or questions to Linux Lessons (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*). Be sure to put the words "Linux Lessons" in the subject line so it won't get lost in junk mail. We depend upon you to make this column a success.

Jack Dunning
ComputorEdge

ComputorEdge always wants to hear from you, our readers. If you have specific comments about one of our articles, please click the "Tell us what you think about this article!" link at the top or bottom of the article/column. Your comments will be attached to the column and may appear at a later time in the "Editor's Letters" section.

If you want to submit a short "ComputorQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at *ceeditor@computoredge.com*.

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ComputorQuick Reviews

News and Reviews from Readers and Staff

ComputorQuick Reviews

"Computer Product Opinions from ComputorEdge Readers and Staff" by ComputorEdge Staff

A reader shares coffee-shop Wi-Fi experiences; a reader's new Gateway desktop computer is powerful and running smoothly; a call for hard drive disposal experiences and stories.

Free Wi-Fi at the Pannikin

I've been using the Pannikin's free Wi-Fi (in La Jolla) ever since I got my OQO (*www.oqo.com*) in mid-2007. Too bad they went out of business (OQO, not the Pannikin).

Most of the time the Wi-Fi service works great—very fast and reliable. Earlier this year it seems like they replaced their black router with a white box. Now whenever I see the Internet symbol missing from the networking icon, I simply tell the staff and they briefly unplug, then restore power to the white box. So remember folks, if there's no Wi-Fi, it's not your fault; just speak up.

Ron

* * *

A Good Deal on a Display Model Computer

I recently bought a Gateway desktop computer to replace an aging HP dual-core 2.2-gig PC that seemed to be getting slower. While losing the connection to my second 100-gig hard drive, it would sometimes boot without the D drive or it would lose it while it was still running. Since I pre-bought a copy of Win 7, I decided to get a computer with enough muscle to use all of the new OS capabilities and also had enough resources to run any current or future program, (32 or 64 bit). The new Gateway is the DX4300; it has an AMD X4 Phenom 9750 2.5GHz processor (I guess the difference in speed is the number of processors not the speed of the individual processors), 8GB RAM, and a 1TB HDD.

I have only been using it for about two weeks now, but it seems to be at least twice as fast as my old HP. I know I haven't used even half of its resources, as I have loaded only a few of the utilities that I used with my old PC's XP OS, and my music and pictures (they look and sound great). It was loaded with Vista, but I have ordered the free Win 7 upgrade (a very easy process once I found the Gateway site and the serial number of the new PC).

This new PC has all of the bells and whistles you could want—TV card, HDMI, high-end video card, ATI Radeon HD 4650, Gigabit Ethernet LAN and 802.11b/G wireless LAN, plus 8-channel high-definition sound, multi-card reader and double layer (label flash) DVD recorder.

I got a good deal on it from my local Best Buy because it was a discontinued display model and I did some hard bargaining with the manager. But I noticed that it is still advertised at Best Buy online.

Buck from El Cajon, CA

* * *

Next Week: Scrubbing Hard Drives: What to do with those old drives before you dispose of them.!

Next week, ComputorEdge *will be talking about how to safety handle your old hard drives. Tell us how you disposed of yours. Your comments will appear right here in ComputorQuick reviews. Send your thoughts to ComputorQuick Wi-Fi*

*Reviews (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*).*

We Want Your Opinions About Hardware, Software and Web Sites

Over the years, *ComputorEdge* has had great input from our readers. In particular, people have submitted short reviews of equipment, software and Web sites that they really like. In some cases readers have offered tips (such as avoiding flakes on Craigslist). ComputorQuick Reviews is our column dedicated to highlighting those things that you most like and want to recommend to others. The problem is that if this column doesn't appear, it becomes forgotten and less likely to receive input from you.

We have decided to include this feature in every issue as a reminder that this is your magazine—even if we don't have any new reader reviews. If you would like to see the type of reviews that we have run in the past, then check out ComputorQuick Reviews (*webserver.computoredge.com/sitemap.mvc?feature=Columns&columnedcode=persrev&column=ComputorQuick%20Reviews*) in the *ComputorEdge* Site Map. You will find that they are quite varied. We would like to see more. Consider this column a gentle prod saying that we would like to hear from you.

You can send us an e-mail at ComputorQuick Reviews Submissions (*ceeditor@computoredge.com*).

The purpose of this column is to give our readers an opportunity to express their opinions about products and services that they have found particularly useful. If you have had experience with hardware, software or a Web site that made you say, "This is really great! I want to tell everyone about it," then this is a good place to do it. While we do want to post warnings, we are not interested in slamming the obscure bad products, because there are too many of them. We would like to hear about those things that you would recommend to your best friend. The only caution is to please use proper capitalization (do not use all caps) and complete sentences. If it takes us too long to edit the piece, it may be a long time before it's published on this site.

ComputorEdge *always wants to hear from you, our readers. If you have specific comments about one of our articles, please click the "Tell us what you think about this article!" link at the top or bottom of the article/column. Your comments will be attached to the column and may appear at a later time in the "Editor's Letters" section.*

If you want to submit a short "ComputorQuick Review", or yell at us, please e-mail us at ceeditor@computoredge.com.

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EdgeWord: Everything Should Be Free!

"The Allure of "Free"" by Jack Dunning

Our attitude that most things software and Internet related should be free isn't going to change, and more companies, including Microsoft, are trying to seduce us with freebies.

So much in the world of computers and the Internet is free that we tend to think that everything should be free. It's certainly true that a person could easily use the Internet on a daily basis without ever paying for a connection. There are so many locations that offer free Wi-Fi that someone could visit a different hotspot every day of the week. Of course, if you were forced to buy a cup of coffee or sandwich to suppress your guilt, then on a monthly basis you could skip those extras and easily afford the cost of bringing an Internet connection into your home. There is no doubt that free Wi-Fi Internet is a boon for the traveler—if only for the short period of time the user is at that location.

We also expect that all the content on the Internet will be free. If a Web site tries to charge us a fee when visiting, we quickly move on to another free page. This definitely responds to the law of supply and demand. There is so much supply on the Internet, that it's almost impossible to compete—unless the content is supplied free. This makes it very difficult for a Web site to make any money. Fortunately, the costs of launching and maintaining a Web site can be very low—if a person does it all him or herself.

The concept of free information or entertainment isn't new. Originally, both radio and television thrived by offering a free service through the sponsorship of commercial enterprises. However, today most people are now paying for a cable or satellite television connection. Radio broadcasts continue to be free with drive time car radios dominating the market. Few people want to pay for radio, as XM and Sirius Radio have found out.

The Internet and its information isn't all that's free. There is a vast store of software available for every type of computer. If someone takes the time to do a Google search, then a free version of virtually every type of software can be found. This makes it tough for commercial software developers who want to introduce a new, innovative product. Most of them have found that they need to offer either a less capable free version of their product, or put a time limit on its no-cost use. In either case, we are loath to pay for any software unless it is a very high-priority program.

Microsoft Office has dominated the business suite market (word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, etc.). While a number of companies have tried to compete head on with Microsoft, virtually all of them have failed. The strategy has changed. Today, companies are attacking Microsoft with a number of very capable (free) software suites such as OpenOffice.org, Google Docs and StarOffice. Can Microsoft continue to maintain its dominance when the price of the alternatives is zero? However, other than eroding Microsoft's sales figures, what do these other competing companies gain?

The open-source movement has been a tremendous impetus for free software. People write and debug software, offering it to the world free of charge. They are often supported with donations and the occasional corporate sponsorship. Some projects have grown out of university or government programs. The movement is strong and greatly increases the amount and quality of free software.

After noting that almost everything may be available free in the areas of software and Internet content, our computers and home or business Internet hookups are not free. There is a startup cost for computing. We must buy our computer equipment and (if we want Web and e-mail access at home or office) our Internet connection. There have been experiments with giving away computers to get people to sign up for a service. (Some cell phone companies are offering $200 netbooks to anyone signing a two-year contract for cellular Internet.) However, people like to pick their own computer. Most people do not want to settle for a semi-free netbook.

If we want Internet in our home and business—and most of us do—we must pay for it. So, if you calculate in the connection costs, our Internet, the Web content and e-mail is not free. The fact that the ISPs get to keep that fee is incidental. If a free Web site wants to make any money, it needs to be done through advertising revenues (unless it is a retail site selling products). This means that the Web site must make the connection between its visitors and real-world companies. There are so many sites attempting to do this that it's a tough problem to crack for any new Web business.

Ultimately, our attitude that most things software and Internet should be free isn't going to change. Today even more companies, including Microsoft, are trying to seduce us with freebies. As the Internet has increasingly become an integral part of our lives, Google and others are offering free Web apps that will make our lives more portable and computer independent. They hope to make money in the long run by capturing the free market now. Will it work?

Whose knows, but I'll probably give some of the services a try. After all, it's free!

Jack is the publisher of ComputorEdge *Magazine. He's been with the magazine since first issue on May 16, 1983. Back then, it was called* The Byte Buyer. *His Web site is* www.computoredge.com. *He can be reached at* ceeditor@computoredge.com

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Editor's Letters: Tips and Thoughts from Readers

"Computer and Internet tips, plus comments on the articles and columns." by ComputorEdge Staff

"Widescreen Monitors," "DIY Surge Suppressor," "Converting to Windows 7," "Seniors Who Will Not Easily Slide into Windows 7," "Windows 7, Home or Professional?," Switch Is Not Compatible with Snow Leopard"

Widescreen Monitors

[Regarding the October 2 Digital Dave column:]

My understanding [about the reason for] widescreen monitors is so that the maker can save money by not having to build both 4:3 and 16:9 monitors, and selling the idea that everyone should go 16:9. For reading purposes, it is actually easier/better to read up and down shorter lines than going side to side with longer lines. But, like you stated, I do like some gadgets and icons on the sides of my widescreen.

-Brian, Poway, CA

I think Brian is on the right track, but I suspect that the huge demand for LCD HDTVs is to blame. The makers of LCD panels are ramped up to make widescreens, and the monitor manufacturers probably cannot get 4:3 panels. Besides, they can make an HDTV and sell it for one price, strip out the HDTV tuner and sell it for more. As an example, I just bought a 22-inch 1080P HDTV to use as a secondary monitor for $199, and 23-inch monitors with the exact same resolution cost $250.

-Marcus, Alabama

I recently bought a Dell Optiplex, which came with a widescreen 19-inch monitor. I hated the monitor and returned it to Dell for a 4:3 ratio 19-inch LCD. It is both digital and analog. I love it!

-Rachel, Encinitas

DIY Surge Suppressor

[Regarding the September 25 Digital Dave column:]

If Escondido John can't find a single outlet surge suppressor, but knows how to solder, he could make his own like I did from a few parts from Radio Shack and a home store like Home Depot or Lowes.

Three types of parts provide three types of protection. Two chokes suppress current spikes, three Metal-Oxide Varistors (MOV) suppress voltage spikes, and two capacitors suppress noise.

Putting these together went something like this:

1. Install the two chokes:

1a. One is installed between the black/hot wire of the power cable and the small slot on the outlet.

1b. The other is installed between the white/neutral wire of the power cable and the larger slot on the outlet.

2. Install the three MOVs:

2a. One is installed between the small slot on the outlet and the ground connection of the outlet.

2b. One is installed between the larger slot on the outlet and the ground connection of the outlet.

2c. One is installed between the small slot on the outlet and the larger slot on the outlet.

3. Install the two filter capacitors:

3a. One is installed between the small slot on the outlet and the ground connection of the outlet.

3b. The other is installed between the larger slot on the outlet and the ground connection of the outlet.

Parts list:

• A 3-prong extension cord from the home store, where you'll cut off the female end exposing the black, white, and green wires.

• A single gang outlet box, a 3-pronged outlet, a cover for the outlet

Parts from RadioShack:
276-570 - 3 130V 10A MOVs
273-102 - 2 100 uHz RF chokes
272-1052 - 2 .047 uF capacitors

-Doug LaRue, San Diego, CA

Converting to Windows 7

[Regarding the September 25 Digital Dave column:]

If you buy a new computer with Windows 7 installed, please think about donating the old one to a charity that you support. They should take responsibility for wiping your files from the hard drive.

-Don Bishop, Lakewood, CO

Seniors Who Will Not Easily Slide into Windows 7

[Regarding the September 25 Digital Dave column:]

Dave, I agree with your opening comments regarding the "seniors who will not easily slide into the new world of the Windows 7." I think that you should point out to these people that they probably don't own their 1949 Pontiac either, because their new Lexus with air, cruise, etc. is a lot more comfortable and reliable; however, they had to learn a lot of new technology. It's just coming a bit faster.

-Don Piller, Escondido, CA

Windows 7, Home or Professional?

[Regarding the October 2 EdgeWord: Which Version of Windows 7, Home or Professional? column:]

Absolutely, Jack. I completely agree.

I have a friend that asked me this very question, and I really had no definitive answer for him, other than don't waste your money if you don't have to.

I have said it before: Microsoft is a commercial software company. They are in business to make money. That is their sole objective and everything they do—from pricing to licensing, to development, to marketing, to all of their slick talk about their wonderful products—the only reason for any of it is to make a profit. And if we can keep this in mind when we are considering which version of Windows 7 to buy, we will be better off.

It is very similar to buying a car from a dealer. You had better not walk into a dealer with the idea in mind that they have your best interest in mind. Microsoft, like a car dealer, has only one goal in mind and that is for us to spend money—it's that simple. It is our job, then, to determine which product will best suit us. We cannot get emotional. We cannot afford to get all worked up about ego and words like "Ultimate" or "Professional."

My considered opinion about all these varied and confusing versions and pricing schemes is to take a look at what is and is not included for each product and then make the best choice based on what we truly need. Pay little attention to the label of the product. It is little more than a marketing ploy to get us to part with more of our money.

*I found a pretty good comparison chart (*www.neowin.net/news/main/09/04/30/windows-7-whats-the-difference-between-the-editions*) that gives all the features of each version of Windows 7.*

Thanks for this great explanation of where we can waste money if we are not careful.

-Pete Choppin

Switch Is Not Compatible with Snow Leopard

[Regarding the August 28 Wally Wang's Apple Farm column:]

I did a Google search to find a product that can replace Switch, which is not compatible with Snow Leopard, to convert my WMA class lectures to MP3. I came across your page. You mention Snow Leopard, and immediately following you mention Switch. Just so you are aware, Switch is not compatible with Snow Leopard. Just an FYI.

-Jennell

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