BITS AND BYTES

The Newsletter of the Midland Computer Club

December 2007

GENERAL CLUB MEETING 7:00 P.M.
Meets 4th Wednesday of the month at the
Midland Community Center
2001 George St., Midland, MI
http://mcc.apcug.org/

This month's date: December 19th

**THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Annual
Christmas Party**

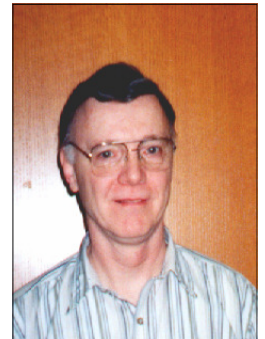**PROGRAM COORDINATORS**
Contact :
Frank Koenig   frankkoenig@charter.net
Co-Chairman-Larry Piper larryP56@chartermi.net

What you missed!
In **November**, Terry Brown gave a presentation on
the current options available for broadband Internet
in the Midland area. The primary options are quite
well known by everyone (Charter Communications –
877-728-3121 and AT&T – 800-ATT-2020), but
there are a number of other options. Among those are
standard wireless (Pilgrim Technologies – 989-837-
2099, Speednet – 866-297-2900, and Mercury Net-
work – 877-713-0478), cellular wireless (Verizon,
Sprint, AT&T, and Alltel), and satellite (HughesNet
– 866-550-5028 and WildBlue – 866-528-5010). So
if you are currently still using dial-up or are unsatis-
fied with your broadband provider, you can start
looking for a replacement using this list.

Upcoming Activities
The **December** meeting will be on the 3rd Wednes-
day (**December 19**) because of the holidays. As in

The President's Corner
    In my year-end Corner, I thought I'd
take a minute to mention the many or-
ganizations that help the club throughout
the year. First off, I'll start with the Mid-
land Community Center. Several years
ago, it became obvious that we needed
Internet access in order to effectively run
some of our meetings. Since the Salvation
Army couldn't help us in that respect at
that time (I think they now do allow other
organizations to use their Internet connection), the Commu-
nity Center stepped in to offer one of their rooms. They
agreed to let us use one of their rooms free of charge if we
would help them by staffing their computer lab several times
a month. I think this has worked out quite well for the club
and the Community Center. Next, I would like to mention
APCUG (Association of PC User Groups), of which we are
a member. With our dues, APCUG hosts our web page and
provides Jan Ensing many articles for inclusion in our
monthly newsletter. Also, I would like to thank the many
vendors who provide us with software and books that we
can review and use with as we wish. The ones who continue
to provide the most resources are: O'Reilly Media — who
provides books for review and donation; Microsoft — who
provides evaluation software; and the most recent is Marken
Communications — who interfaces with many other vendors
and provides us with "heads-up" on new offerings by ven-
dors such as Pinnacle, Corel, and others. Without these ven-
dors we would have few "goodies" available at today's meet-
ings.

I would be remiss if I didn't also mention all of the members
of the club who volunteer their time to serve on the board,
staff the computer lab at the Community Center and those
who have volunteered to give presentations — most recently
Joe Lykowski, Terry Brown, Larry Piper, Frank Koenig, Bob
Miller, and Bill Tower. I would also like to thank Jan Ensing
for producing the club newsletter and Frank Koenig for act-
ing as our webmaster so that we have an up-to-date and pro-
fessional web page.

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(Continued from page 1)

I've probably missed some people and/or organizations, for which I apologize. But I thought it necessary to let our members know the number of people and organizations that continue to help us keep this club going.

In the mean time, I'll plan on seeing all of you at our annual holiday party on **December 19**.

— Howard Lewis

(The above comments are the opinion of the author and

(Continued from page 1)

years past, the meeting will feature our annual Christmas party. The club will supply the pizza and soft drinks. You just need to bring along a dish to share. Oh, and by the way, one of our vendors is supplying some neat items for our monthly raffle!

In **January** we will be back to meeting on the fourth Wednesday with Bill Tower discussing hard disk imaging and it's pros and cons. You will need software specifically designed to capture a picture of your hard drive and write it to another device (second hard drive, CD or DVD drive). If you think you may need to restore your computer to its current state without having to reinstall Windows and your applications, this program is for you.

Board Meeting
The next board meeting will be 7 p.m., January 8, 2008, at Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church, 5501 Jefferson Ave., Midland

Annual Christmas Party, Dec. 19th
Bring a dish to pass and any techie toy you would like to show & tell !

Membership Enrollment form

NAME _____   PHONE_____

ADDRESS _____ *CITY* _____

ZIP _____   *EMAIL ADDRESS* _____

Membership dues   FAMILY ($20)   STUDENT ($15)   NEW Member ____   renewal ____

Please fill out the above form and mail it along with payment of check or money order to :

MIDLAND COMPUTER CLUB   **Attn: membership chairman**
 P.O. box 132
 Midland, MI 48640-0132

you may also pay for membership at a regular club meeting

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The next board meeting will be 7 p.m., January 8, 2008, at Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church, 5501 Jefferson Ave., Midland

Free Help for Creating Greeting Cards
By Sandy Berger, CompuKISS
www.compukiss.com
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Obtained from APCUG with the author's permission for publication by APCUG member groups

A recent trip to the greeting card store left me in sticker shock. While the text with the price of the card was smaller (or is it just my aging eyes?), the price tag was definitely larger than last time I looked. Who wants to pay $3 to $5 for a greeting card? Instead, put your ink jet printer to work with free clip art and pre-designed cards.

You don't even have to be terrible crafty. Just check out these websites where you can get free templates of holiday greeting cards and holiday clip art. They also have a great selection of greeting cards that can be used with your own photos. So that personalized master piece won't cost you an arm and a leg.
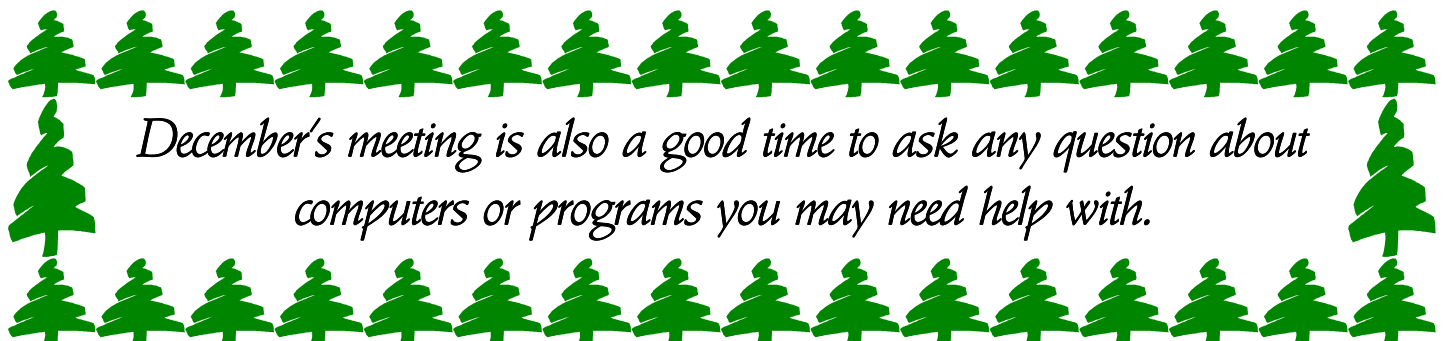
The Canon Creative Park (http://cp.c-ij.com/english/index.html) is one of my favorite websites for free templates to help you create greeting cards. They have cards for everything including Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, New Year's, Easter and Birthday, to name just a few. You don't have to own a Canon printer to use these greeting cards. You can use any type of color printer. The selection is excellent, and best of all, there are detailed instructions for printing and fold-ing. If you are adventuresome, you can even customize your envelopes. While you are at this site, check out the 3D pa-per craft section, the scrapbooking area, and the wonderful calendar templates. All are good-looking and free.

Not to be undone by Canon, HP (hp.com / click on Festive Greetings)) also has an Activity Center that allows you to create greeting cards and other crafty projects. They have some beautiful eclectic greeting cards as well as beautifully illustrated fantasy-inspired cards. Like the Canon site, the HP website gives full instructions. They also feature some unusual printer projects like party decorations, stickers, and puzzles.

If you use any Microsoft Office Products, especially Microsoft Word, you will find a wealth of free products in Micro-soft's Celebrate Holidays with Office Clip Art and Media area (http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/clipart/default.aspx). Just about every holiday is covered, but there are also many non-holiday-related themes like flags, food, technology, and business. You will find everything from clip art to borders to music. If you click on some of their outside providers like Animation Factory or iStockphoto, there is a charge for the images, but all of the clip art and templates on the Mi-crosoft website are free. They can, however, only be used if you have the appropriate Microsoft program installed on your computer.

Presenting your friends and relatives with a homemade, customized greeting card really shows you care. On top of that creating your own greeting cards can save you money..... And you might have some fun as well.

If you don't want to make your own cards, there is another way to create a win-win situation for obtaining greeting cards. Check out CardsThatGive.org where you can make your greeting card money to do more than just supporting the greeting card company. It's a very well compiled list of Charities that provide greeting cards, complete with pictures of their cards. You get some great cards, and your favorite charities get support.

December's meeting is also a good time to ask any question about computers or programs you may need help with.

Did we mention that there is a Christmas Party on Wednesday, Dec. 19th @ the Community Center in our usual spot?

Pizza and pop provided.

Bring a dish or plate of cookies to share.

Also bring your family or spouse. If they are not a regular attendee of our meetings, invite them to come to get to know what the club is all about.

It's not just for the geeks, some of us are very low tech-savy!

Useful, useless and strange (in no particular order) Web Sites:

A compendium of technology related museums on the web:

www.computerhistory.org	The Computer History Museum has timelines and history of computers and the Internet.
www.thetech.org	The Tech Museum of Innovation has many online exhibits on technology.
www.movingimage.us/ site/online	The Museum of the Moving Image features the technological innovation used in movies.
americanhistory.si.edu	Smithsonian National Museum of American History includes a collection of images and info from the Smithsonian collections featuring things from household to industrial technologies.
www.hfmgv.org/explore	The Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village site contains the interesting history about The Henry Ford's exhibits.
www.loc.gov	Visit the U.S. Library of Congress Online Catalog to browse the Libraries historic collection.
www.wave.co.nz/ ~jollyroger/GM2/ podcasts.htm	Global Museum Podcasts contains links to podcasts from museums around the world.

And for those interested in alternative museums:

chapeauxbibitop.blogspot.com	For some really "different" hats, look in the archives of the Gallery of French Hats!
www.museumofquackery.com	The Museum of Questionable Medical Devices contains some interesting items that people (and companies) have tried to pawn off on people to help "improve" their personal lives.
www.condimentpacket.com	Some people collect all sorts of "different" things. The Condiment Packet Gallery currently features 724 condiment packets.
www.plan59.com	Plan 59 contains many, many different ads from the mid-20th century. For those of us old enough to remember some of these ads, this is a good trip down "Nostalgia Lane."
www.burntfoodmuseum.com	The Museum of Burnt Food is another site that has a rather "interesting" collection. Some of these items are the result of human error, however, some of them were planned. Some have comments on how they happened, where others just have the resulting photo.

Tips, Tricks & Techniques

Display the Menu Bar in Internet Explorer 7

When Internet Explorer 7 is installed for the first time, the default look does not contain the Menu Bar. If you like this look, but need to temporarily use it to access some of the features that it contains, you can temporarily display the Menu Bar by simply pressing and releasing the *ALT* key. Once you are done using the Menu Bar, you can re-hide the bar by simply pressing and releasing the *ALT* key a second time. This will return IE7 to the original "lean and clean" look.

However, if you wish to always have the Menu Bar displayed, simply right-click the *Command Bar* near the top of the screen (the bar where the **Tabs** are displayed) and click on *Menu Bar*. If at any point in time, you wish to re-hide the

Weird Windows Behavior
By Sandy Berger, compukiss.com
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Obtained from APCUG with the author's permission for publication by APCUG member groups

Have you ever been completely dismayed by your computer? Does it seem to do unusual things that you can't trace back to any of your actions? Well, you are not alone. This happens to all computer users. In the computer world, unusual things sometimes happen. Here is a list of some weird computer behavior and how to combat it.

Icons disappear
Right-click on any open area of the computer desktop, then chose Arrange Icons By. If your icons have accidently become hidden there will be no checkmark in front of Show Desktop Icons. Just click that option and your icons will reappear.

Unusual windows appear
Windows has a lot of keyboard shortcuts that can be accidently accessed. For instance, when I started this column, I wanted to hit the Shift key and the letter "h" for the word Have. However, my finger slipped and I hit the Ctrl key and the letter "h" instead. A window popped up asking what I wanted to Find and Replace, which is not at all what I intended. If this ever happens you to you can usually just close the pop up window, but occasionally you have to look a little further into what happened. For instance, when working in Microsoft Word, it you accidently hit Ctrl+N, a new window will appear making it look like you just lost your entire document. If you look closely you will be able to figure out that all you have to do is close the new window and the document you were working on will reappear.

If you can't figure out what happened or you get caught in a loop, restarting your computer will usually bring you back to normal.

Lost toolbars
As noted before, an errant key press can cause a problem. This time the culprit is one of the F keys. Accidently pressing the F11 key can make the toolbars disappear. This is often used as a feature when you want to show something in what they call "full screen mode". If this happens to you, just press F11 again to make the toolbars return.

The toolbar moves
Have you ever had the toolbar that usually appears on the bottom of the screen show up on the side or top of the screen? There is an easy way to get it back where it belongs. Just place your cursor right next to, but not on, the Start button. Then hold the mouse button down and drag the toolbar back where it belongs.

Dramatic slowdown
A dramatic slowdown can mean that your hard disk is filling up. The computer uses the hard disk as sort of a scratch pad when it computes, so when your hard drive starts to fill up, it can slow the computer down significantly. Click on My Computer and highlight the drive called Local Disk (C:). Look at the Details area to see how much space is free. You should have at least 10% of your hard drive free. If you don't, a hard drive cleanup is in order. Delete unnecessary programs and backup old files and photos to an external drive or CD so you can delete them from the hard disk. You can use the Disk Cleanup utility to empty the recycle bin and delete unnecessary temporary files. To access it, click on Start, choose All Programs, then click on System Tools where you will find Disk Cleanup listed. It will walk you through the cleanup. Once your hard disk has more free space, you computer will perk up considerably. You might also consider defragging your computer to speed it up. The Disk Defragmenter utility is in the System Tools area. Remember there are other things like viruses and spyware that can also slow down your computer.

No sound
Sometimes the sound gets muted by mistake. Look at the taskbar at bottom of the screen. In the right hand side you will see a small icon that looks like a speaker. If it has a red X on it, the sound has been muted. Click on the icon, then click to remove the checkmark in front of the word Mute. If you don't see this icon, go to the Control Panel and choose Sounds or Sounds and Audio Devices where you will find a place to uncheck the Mute option. Many laptops and some desktops also have a volume button on the keyboard which you can use to mute and unmute the speaker.

Mouse shutters
If your mouse is hard to control or acting erratic, it may need a cleaning. An optical mouse with a flat bottom just needs a cleaning with a damp cloth. If your mouse has a roller ball on the bottom, remove the ball and clean the rollers inside the mouse with a Q-tip soaked with isopropyl alcohol.

Converting to a Portable Office
By Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., a regular columnist and member of the Sarasota PCUG, Florida
www.spcug.org
bwsail at yahoo.com

Many times over the fifteen years that I have been writing for the Monitor I found myself approaching the deadline while I was on the road. Since I usually travel with a laptop I managed to get something written and sent off to the editor. Now, however, I am in the process of changing to a completely mobile lifestyle. That means that everything I need has to fit in a very small space on a travel trailer where there is no room for a desktop and a CRT. I also needed to add storage to the laptop so that all of my research files, geneal- ogy files, photos, videos, etc would be able to go along. That's what this article is all about – fitting every- thing into as small a space as possible. First, a disclaimer. Although I will be mentioning various brands, they just happen to be the ones I used. There may be better ones or equivalent items available. This is not to be considered a review or recommendation of any specific hardware or software components. I have included the brand names for those who might want to get more details on the components.

To start with my laptop has a 60 GB IDE hard drive partitioned into 35 GB and 25 GB. The 25 is the space I use for Linux (Ubuntu), while the 35 GB is my Windows XP. On my desktop I had a very fast 250 GB SATA drive and a Plextor DVD burner. The DVD burner in the laptop burns only DVD+ disks at a 1X speed. The Plextor burns DVD+ & - discs at a much faster speed than the laptop drive. I also have a 250 GB SATA drive that I use for backup of both the desktop and the laptop. All of these were really what I needed for the expansion of my laptop. Or, I could have popped for a new laptop. The cheap way out was to keep my older drives and make them available to the laptop. Since the desktop hard drive has a SATA interface it has a much faster data transfer rate than the older IDE drives. To get a new laptop with a SATA drive would be more expensive than purchasing external cases. Also, my laptop has four USB 2.0 ports which allow a maximum 460 mbps transfer rate. They can certainly handle the SATA data transfer speeds. (If you are confused by the terms IDE and SATA, check out the TechTalk article for February 2003 on the SPCUG website.)

I already had one external case that I used with the backup drive. It is a Vantec NexStar 3 aluminum case which connects to either the laptop or the desktop via a USB 2.0 port. It also has a SATA connection which can be used with the external SATA port on the desktop. Although this case does not have a cooling fan, the aluminum case seems to be very successful in radiating the heat generated by the drive. It also doesn't add any noise to the workspace. This case cost $30 plus shipping. Since it had worked so well with the backup drive I purchased another one for the drive I removed from the desktop unit.

Removing the drive from the desktop and installing it in the NexStar case was the easy part. Since this hard drive had been a bootable drive, it had many applications on it as well as a complete Windows XP setup. First, I deleted any applications that were duplicates of ones already installed on the laptop. Then, in order to prevent problems related to having two bootable Windows partitions, I deleted the complete Win- dows folder on the external drive. After doing this I defragged the main partition on the external drive. Fi- nally, I checked some of the applications still installed on the external drive. Amazingly several of them were still functional. However, most had to be reinstalled before they could be used. That is not surprising since most software has to be installed in the Windows registry which in this case was now on the laptop's hard drive, the bootable C partition.

So now I had a hard drive with more than adequate space available for any photo or video project I wished to work on. It could also be partitioned to for Linux data storage.

The next step was to transfer my Plextor DVD burner to an external case. In this case Vantec has a Nex-

Star-2 drive enclosure designed for 5 1/4" CD/DVD drives with an IDE interface. This enclosure is a light weight plastic case with a cooling fan and a USB 2.0 connection. The price for this case was $28.00 plus shipping. Installing the burner in the case was really quite easy. The instructions that were included were very complete. Once I had the installation completed I connected the USB cable to the laptop and turned on the unit. Windows very quickly identified the drive as a CD/DVD burner and assigned it a drive letter.

I did have some CDs that I needed to burn. My burner application (CDburnerXP Pro) was not on the laptop. It was one that I had on the external hard drive that needed to be reinstalled on the laptop drive. That took only a few minutes. When I started the application it found both of my burner drives. I selected the Plextor and the files to be burned. The process was completely successful and was much faster than if I had to depend on the slower built-in drive.

So now I have a laptop with 300 GB of hard drive capacity and two CD/DVD burners. All of this can be stored in a very small space and can easily be packed in foam cushioning for travel.

Next I needed to consider what to do about scanning, copying and printing. I had a Canon photo printer and an Epson photo scanner. However, there just isn't enough room for both pieces of equipment. The Canon had fit in a cabinet, but there was no place to stow the scanner. So I spent some time doing some research on all-in-one units. All though I preferred laser printers, I also needed color capability. The size of color laser printers just didn't fit with the space I had available. So that seemed to restrict me to inkjet units. I finally found a Brother all-in-one that actually takes up less space than did my Canon printer. It also has network capability if I should ever need it, and it will read my camera's memory cards. The scanner is only letter sized but that should be adequate for my needs while traveling. It is also a USB 2.0 unit so the data transfer speed is fast enough. Since the scanner uses a standard TWAIN driver it works perfectly with my GIMP graphics software. That also makes it usable if I am running UBUNTU instead of Windows. (The TWAIN standard is designed to link applications and image hardware and is compatible with Linux, MAC and Windows operating systems.) The scanner also has a sheet feeder which is very useful. Especially since I can scan and convert documents for storage in a PDF format, not just as a JPG picture. This allows me to store important documents on the hard drive and shred the original. That reduces the need for storage of paper documents. Although most of my bills are electronic, there are always a few that arrive by snail mail. Not every business operates electronically, even in the twenty-first century.

So now I think I am ready for the next change in my life. Living a mobile life style without having to depend on having a fixed address. This is something that the Internet, VOIP telephones and cell phones have made possible. See you on the road!

Dr. Lewis is a former university and medical school professor of physiology. He has been working with personal computers for over thirty years developing software and assembling systems.

Windows Live Hotmail
by Lynn Page, Editor, Crystal River Users Group, Florida
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Obtained from APCUG with the author's permission for publication by APCUG member groups.

I have had a Hotmail account for many years and use it regularly. The latest Windows Live Hotmail is easier to use and includes many impressive features. With 5 GB inbox so you don't have to worry about it filling up while you are away. Safety features, including color codes alert you to suspicious email and spam filtering automatically sorts out unwanted email. You can even drag and drop messages between folders to keep things clean and organized.

I use the full version, which contains some more advanced features but you can choose the classic version. Hotmail opens to the Today page, showing a status meter of mail usage, current news headlines, and a folders view showing how many unread emails are in the inbox.

Color codes make it easy to tell at a glance whether a message is safe or not. The bar at the top of a message comes in three colors: White means the message is from known contacts. Yellow means the message is from someone not on your contacts list. Red means the message appears to be fraudulent.

Control junk email with filters and senders lists. Select low, standard or exclusive filters. I use standard and it catches most of the spam. I also have junk email found with the filter sent to my junk email folder, where it is automatically deleted after five days. However, I look at the folder and empty it daily. After using the filter for some time, you may decide to immediately delete junk email. You can mark a message as safe or unsafe. Clicking the mark as unsafe link, automatically reports the sender to Hotmail's junk email filters and deletes the message. Then the sender will no longer be able to send you email and will receive notification that your address is not valid. If a non-junk email gets accidentally filtered to the Junk folder, clicking on the Not junk link to report a message as not junk. If someone is trying to solicit personal data, like passwords or financial information you can report the phishing scam. Click the down arrow by the Junk link and select Report phishing scam.

Maintain your safe senders, safe mailing lists and blocked senders to be sure you get the email that you need. Be careful when blocking a sender in choosing whether to block only the sender or domain.

I like to keep things organized and Windows Live Hotmail makes it easy to keep email organized. Just create new folders and file existing messages in them for later reference. Move messages by checking those to move, then use the Move to drop down menu to file them. The full version makes it even easier. You can drag and drop messages into the proper folder. To delete messages, select the messages, and then click delete.

If a filing system goes awry, you can use the search box above the inbox to find messages in one of your folders or inbox. Just type in a search and select the Mail button. Clicking web accesses images, news, or information across the Web based on your search.

Hotmail can even help maintain contacts. Contacts can be imported from Outlook, Outlook Express, Windows Contacts, Yahoo Mail and Gmail. On the other hand, when you receive an email from a new contact you can easily add that person to your Windows Live Hotmail contact list. Just click the Add contact link below the From: line on their email. And your address book automatically updates anytime a contact changes Windows Live contact information.

You can export Windows Live Hotmail contacts to a CSV file to transfer to another email account or save a backup copy. If you regularly add email addresses to your contacts when you receive mail, duplicate contacts can become a problem. Now when you add a new contact from your inbox by clicking Add contact in a received message and the contact has the same name as an existing one, you're asked if you want to merge them. You still have the option of keeping them separate, giving you complete control over your contact list. Running clean up duplicate contacts searches for and cleans up duplicates. Just choose to delete, edit or merge information into one contact.

Windows Live Hotmail contacts have fields for most information you need and probably more. Add a first and last name, nickname; personal and business email address, phone numbers and address; birthday and a note for other information.

Options provide personalization features to suit your needs. Forward email from other accounts to Hotmail or forward Hotmail to another account. Set up a personal vacation reply when you will be unavailable. The reply is sent to any message that goes into the inbox. If you receive many messages from one person, they will get the vacation reply every four days.

Customize your email by selecting a language, reading pane settings and your email signature. Set whether to save a copy of sent email. You can even have sent mail include a different reply to address. Select the reading pane configuration to make the reading pane appear on the right or bottom of the screen or turn it off altogether. I personally keep the reading pane off in all of my email accounts. That way if a junk email gets through the filters, I can select and delete it without dealing with the message at all.

However, the full version of Windows Live Hotmail has a reading pane so you can preview a message without risk. The reading pane lets you quickly view your e-mail. Email from unknown senders has a yellow safety bar, and the attachments, pictures and links blocked to help avoid alerting spammers. You quickly go from message to message without opening and reloading the page. Double click the message to open it up in the full window. You can also change your inbox layout.

If you like to get an audible alert of new email, set Windows Live Messenger to notify you. In Windows Live Messenger, go to select Options in the Tools drop down menu. In Options select Alerts & Sounds and then Display alerts when e-mail is received.

To send an email, click the New envelope icon that in the top menu bar. In the full version, clicking the drop-down arrow to the right of the New button opens a menu to create new Folders, Contacts and Groups. If you click away from the email you're composing, you'll receive a prompt to Save as draft. Use font styles, sizes and formatting, bullets, graphics and even emoticons while creating a message. Add recipients to an email from your list of contacts. Or with the full version just start typing the first or last name of the recipient and auto-complete finishes it from your address book.

If you regularly send email to the same group of people create personal distribution lists. Create a new list from your contact list. Just click on All contacts in the Contacts section and select the contacts in a group and then click the down arrow to open the Add to group drop down menu. Choose to add them to an existing group or create a new one. Once a group has been created type it's name into the To box when you want to send mail to everyone at once. Remember to use bcc.

I personally don't use blogs but if you do you can publish blog entries to your Windows Live Space from Windows Live Hotmail. If you have a customized a MSN.com page you can add your inbox to it. Then a glance at the page lets you know when you have new email. You can access and reply to email from a Web enabled cell phone or mobile device. Browse to www.mobile.live.com and log into your Windows Live Hotmail account.

The New, the Best, and the Worst
October 2007
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Mobile Supercomputers
Ever since Compaq designed a "portable" version of the old IBM PC there has been a trend to make computers easier to carry around. Soon there were laptops, then notebooks, and by now some are cell-phone add-ins. But what if you need more computer power than a desktop can provide?

Large enterprises depend on computerized data centers that support the various administrative aspects

of the business and support a network of desktop computers. Those data centers are typical arranged in bulky stacks of servers and memory banks, located in air conditioned rooms to keep them from overheating. Such expensive data centers are typically custom-built, take months to construct, occupy expensive real estate in office buildings, and are as immobile as the Empire State Building.

Sun Microsystems has come up with a (more) mobile version of the typical database center by putting all the hardware in a standard 20-foot shipping container. It has up to 250 servers with seven terabytes of active memory (what we usually call RAM I guess) and up to 2 petabytes (2 million gigabytes) of storage. It can support 10,000 desktop users. The individual servers use Sun's proprietary 8-core Niagara chips that are not only fast but also at 70 W per chip use a lot less power than common server chips.

Because of the standard construction, such a center can be much more quickly built and delivered at a fraction of the cost of a custom data center. It can be parked in a parking lot or basement of an office building or moved to a disaster zone, battlefield or third world aid center. Rumors have it that Google is interested for their ever-expanding data storage needs.

Of course, there are still some minor problems. Air blown across the electronics boxes has to be cooled with heat exchangers requiring 60 gallons of water per minute that may have to be recycled through external coolers. It will take a sizable, dedicated fiber optics cable for data input and output, and a big wall outlet with a super extension cord to power it all. And don't forget the nerdy teenager to program it all.

The Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) will be the first end-user to get a Project Blackbox portable data center from Sun Microsystems. The 20-foot shipping container (which will be painted white, not black) will sit on a concrete pad behind the computer building with hookups to power, a 10-gigabit network connection and a chiller located on an adjacent pad. It will allow the SLAC to expand its computing capacity even though its existing data center has maxed out its power and cooling." (From Scientific American, with additional details from the Internet)

Super Jigsaws

If you like jigsaw puzzles as well as computers you may have tried some computer versions of jigsaw puzzles. In my limited experience they were primitive and unsatisfactory, but I may not have looked long enough.

Bertram Nicolay of the Fraunhofer Institute for Production Systems and Design Technology and his colleagues have greatly improved the state of the art. When the Berlin Wall came down and East Germany was to be reunited with the West, the East's State Security Service was in a panic to destroy mounds of secret, incriminating documents in a hurry. Available shredding machines weren't up to the task, so they tore up some 45 million documents by hand. The resulting 600 million pieces of paper are stored in 16,250 bags. To piece the fragments back together would take 30 persons an estimated 600-800 years. Computers to the rescue!

First all the pieces have to be scanned, on both sides, a gigantic task, made possible by technology developed by a daughter company of Bertelsmann, AG. Then the pieces are presorted, based on color and texture of the paper and ink. The scientists have developed algorithms to speed up the matching of edges, and the original documents are reconstituted one piece at a time.

Subsequent work now makes it also possible to reconstitute documents that have been shredded by machine. That task is much more difficult, since all the edges are identical. But already, for Germany's Tax Authority, a bag full of shredded documents has been successfully reconstructed. (From The Economist, 9/8/07, with thanks to Louis Ritz. See also http://www.ipk.fraunhofer.de/pr/pressekonferenz)

Amazon

Recently I was called upon to edit this newsletter, a seemingly simple task since it only consists of 8 Xer-

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oxed pages, mostly text in a 2-column format. Using OpenOffice Writer, but with no experience in page layout, I found the task harder than expected,.The formatting clearly had a mind of its own, the help files did not help, and it is a wonder that I finally cobbled something together that looked OK.

In order to be prepared for the next time this might happen, I visited Amazon to look for a helpful book. Surprisingly, there was not a great deal to choose from, but one book stood out as the best-looking choice. The OpenOffice.org 2 Guidebook by Solveig Haugland received rave reviews from 9 reviewers. It was also pricey, at $59.99, but at the bottom of the listing Amazon provided a link to "2 used & new available from $36.00." Clicking on that link led to an offer of the book, in new condition, for $36.00. The choice was easy and I ordered the "used" book.

Amazon sent me the usual confirmation, but the following morning I received another note, from the author, Solveig Haugland, thanking me for my order and she was shipping the book the same day. Because the book is self-published, the author is free to sell her books directly at lower cost than the advertised store price. Anyway, a great way to save $24! More about the merits of the book in a forthcoming newsletter.

Burj Dubai Babel Babble

Reading about the tallest tower at 2625 feet now under construction, the Burj Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, makes me think of that earlier venture, the Tower of Babel, also in the Middle East, but a few thousand years ago. As you may remember, that project came to grief because the contractors spoke different languages. Now we have computers, of course, who keep in touch wirelessly. Let's hope they all use the same operating system, regularly updated and patched, with protection against viruses and rootkits!

Google

Google generates personal profiles of its users, based on the many ways they use its services. It uses the profiles to target ads based on individual preferences and interests. The ads are unobtrusive so you may hardly notice them. But if you are reading a message in Google mail it is interesting to pay attention to the ads shown on the side, clearly related to keywords in the message that Google is reading over your shoulder.

After Google-mailing the comment about the Dubai tower (above) to myself, including BCC to some correspondents, the message came back with the following "sponsored links" in the margin (hypertext links omitted):

Ocean Front Condos $118k, 2 - bedrooms or 3-bedrooms Ocean Front, 55 mins fm Panama City
Charlotte NC new condos. The place to live in Charlotte... All the amenities. Reserve today.
San Jose Luxury Living. Downtown Residential Tower Dramatic Views. Historic City Park
Macintosh Computers $199. Refurbished G4 G5 Macs from $199 Powermacs iMacs eMacs at Low Prices
Teksale.com
Trump Tower Chicago. View all available Trump Tower Chicago condos with full details.

Makes you wonder about privacy, doesn't it? I often use Google to find answers to crossword puzzle clues. I wonder what conclusions Google draws about me, based on those off-the-wall questions?

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