

BITS AND BYTES

The Newsletter of the Midland Computer Club

August 2008

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: August 27th

**THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Club Picnic
Question and answer time**

PROGRAM COORDINATORS

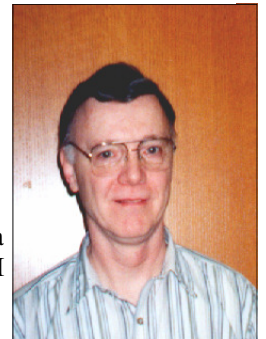
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The President's Corner

Before I begin, let me state up front that I have been using Microsoft Windows Vista in 64-bit mode for over fifteen months now (with the computer on almost 24/7) and have had only one time where the computer actually puked on me. That issue appeared to be a flaky video driver. Most of the software that I use on a regular basis has been software purchased for my Windows XP computer and moved to the Vista machine. I have also downloaded a significant number of other applications and most of those have performed as announced on the web sites.



With that said, recently I was reading an article in *PC World* about the various hot button things that have affected the world of technology during the past 25 years. One of the biggest hot button issues was from mid-2002 and dealt with the problems associated with Microsoft Windows. It seemed like everyone was griping about Windows XP — it's bugs, instabilities and software incompatibilities. That sounds suspiciously familiar today as anyone reading tech magazines can attest. It seems like any PC tech that speaks has nothing positive to say about Windows Vista and are announcing the demise of Microsoft and how everyone should switch to OS X or Linux.

At this point, my experience has been the exact opposite of those who write. Also, every person that I have helped buy a new computer in the last 12 months has installed Windows Vista and have not regretted the move. I know some people in the club have been running Windows Vista and their experiences have not been as positive as mine.

Seven years ago, people were saying they would never buy Windows XP and would wait for its successor. Now it appears that those same people are saying they will never buy Windows Vista and will wait for its successor. Will they? What do you think? Let me know.

— Howard Lewis

(The above comments are the opinion of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Midland Computer Club.)

What you missed!

In **June**, Howard Lewis gave a demonstration on various ways to transfer large files between two computers using various compression utilities and file splitters. This is convenient when it is necessary to e-mail a file greater than what the mail providers will permit. The second half of the meeting featured a demonstration on how to "slip-stream" your original Windows XP CD so that it contains the necessary security updates released since the original CD was created. By slip-streaming the Windows CD, you can apply all of the patches since the original release of Windows XP during the installation process when it is necessary to rebuild your system. This process is much faster than installing the original Windows and then applying all of the updates.

Upcoming Activities

The **August** meeting will feature our annual picnic. The club will provide hot dogs and soft drinks and everyone should bring a dish to share.

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September will have Howard Lewis talking about doing online medical research. If you are diagnosed with some strange condition, you can use the web to find out more about the condition and what are some of the options available for dealing with this condition. This does not supplant discussions with your doctor, but enables you to more intelligently discuss this condition with your personal doctor. The biggest problem with web research is who is providing you with the data? Is it someone you can trust or is it a quack selling some flavored water from the back of their wagon to cure arthritis?

In **October**, Joe Lykowski will talk about the various video encoding options available on your computer. As you create your videos from either pictures or video clips, it is necessary to create a CD/DVD that is readable by various CD/DVD players. This will be an opportunity to review some of the various formats and what are their strengths and weaknesses.

Also in October, is the time the club asks its' members to step up and volunteer for one of the board positions. Nominations are made by fellow members and voted upon at the following club meeting in November. Be thinking about what direction you feel the club should be going, ideas for meeting topics, and which board position you might like to fill. All positions are open for nomination in October. Go ahead, volunteer your own name!

Board Meeting

The next board meeting will be 7 p.m.,
September 9th, 2008, at Chapel Lane
 Presbyterian Church, 5501 Jefferson Ave.,
 Midland.

Membership Enrollment form

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

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you may also pay for membership at a regular club meeting

The New, the Best, AND the Worst July - August 2008

Collected BY Pim Borman, Webmaster, SW Indiana PC Users Group
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Picasa web album

In June I took a brief vacation with son mike and cocker spaniel bonnie, touring scenic central West Virginia. We visited the stark rock outcropping known as Seneca rocks, admired the amazing 110-meter steerable radio telescope at the green bank national radio astronomy observatory, and found carnivorous plants in their natural habitat in the cranberry glades botanic area. Together we took over 400 pictures along the way that we culled down to 60-some upon our return. It is often said that the secret of great photographers is that they take hundreds of pictures but save only the one or two best ones. Nobody ever mentions how hard it is to pick out those few winners!

I decided to try and upload the best pictures to one of the online free photo albums. I was already somewhat familiar with Flick'r, but I decided to try the Google-Picasa web album instead. Picasa is an excellent simple photo editor and it gives direct access to the online web album. The album allows 1gb of storage, enough for some 4000 pictures, and you can get even more than that for a small fee.

Since I already had a Google email account, setting up the web album was easy, using the same user name and password. On the web site you can set up separate albums (folders, really) to store pictures in separate categories. I created a new album for my vacation pictures and prepared to upload them. After some trial and error I found it easiest to first assemble the captioned pictures in a Picasa album on my pc and then to upload them all at once to the web album. Once the pictures are uploaded you can add more or delete mistakes, move them around into the desired order, and add or change captions. By default, the photos are automatically converted to the optimum size for display on a computer screen, but there are options for larger (up to 20mb) or smaller file sizes.

Once the album has been installed it is ready to be shared with the rest of the world. You may choose to make your photos public, available to anyone, or keep them private, only accessible to those you share the URL with. The view album page shows large thumbnails of the photos. They can be viewed individually or as a slide show. The view map button brings up Google maps where you can indicate where you took your pictures. The Organize and Edit captions buttons are self-explanatory. A new features link at the top of the page leads to the latest features added. It is now also possible to upload videos from Picasa to your web album. That might be preferable to using YouTube, unless you want the whole world to admire your movie.

The web album displays the URL of your album site either as the address itself or as a short paragraph of html code that you can insert on your web site. Either way, it is best to copy and paste the information since the URL tends to be lengthy and confusing. My vacation pictures are located at <http://picasaweb.google.com/swipcug/westvirginiavacationjune2008?Authkey=kovcoyrboay>.

To do your correspondents a favor you should convert the URL with SNIPURL (<http://snipurl.com>) or TINYURL (<http://tinyurl.com>) to a simpler address, such as <http://snipurl.com/pimspix>. If you have never done that before, you'll find it easy to do. Just go to <http://snipurl.com> (or the TINYURL site) and paste the URL of your album in the box. Specify an easy-to-remember nickname (such as "Pimspix," but only available in SNIPURL) and "snip it!" the shortened URL (<http://snipurl.com/pimspix>) will be shown and also copied to your clipboard, ready to be pasted in your message.

Gathering CLOUDS

My experience with setting up a photo album "somewhere up there" is a typical example of the current trend towards "cloud" computing. Almost since the beginning of the world wide web we have been using online search engines that access indexed information stored "somewhere up there." many of us have changed from our pc-based email programs to online programs, such as Yahoo or Google Mail, that store our email correspondence on computers "somewhere up there." somewhere up there in the clouds, as it were.

The push is now to extend cloud computing to office suites. Instead of using expensive ms office we can choose to use Google docs and conduct all our administrative activities online, with the option of sharing our work with colleagues far away if necessary. Microsoft, always ready to recognize good ideas after others first thought of them, is moving versions of its office suite online under the "live" banner. Others are jostling to join the crowd.

If this trend continues and spreads to other computer activities, our operating systems, whether windows, Mac, or Linux, will become less and less important. The functions of the operating system will be taken over by browsers. To those of us using multiple

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Cloud Computing – The Future of Personal Computing?

By Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., Member and Contributing Columnist, Sarasota PCUG, Florida
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You may not have heard of it, but “Cloud Computing” is the latest buzz-word in computing circles. The question is, just what does it mean? The problem is that at this point, there is no really solid definition for this term. You can search for it and you'll find a number of interpretations. So, from all that I have encountered, I'll try to synthesize one for you. Cloud computing is being able to access files, data, programs and services all via the Internet. You would have little or nothing stored on your computer, in fact, your computer might simply be a device, desktop or handheld, that can access the web and all of its services. In addition, cloud computing offers the services of enormous computer networks that function as if they were components of a supercomputer. These networks can process tens of trillions of operations per second compared to three billion operations per second for the most powerful desktop computer. This kind of computing power can be used for analysis of risk in financial portfolios, delivering personalized medical information, and powering immersive computer games. These networks use hundreds or thousands of network servers using PC related technology.

I think this excerpt aptly describes the computer cloud. *“What is Google's cloud? It's a network made of hundreds of thousands, or by some estimates 1 million, cheap servers, each not much more powerful than the PCs we have in our homes. It stores staggering amounts of data, including numerous copies of the World Wide Web. This makes search faster, helping ferret out answers to billions of queries in a fraction of a second. Unlike many traditional supercomputers, Google's system never ages. When its individual pieces die, usually after about three years, engineers pluck them out and replace them with new, faster boxes. This means the cloud regenerates as it grows, almost like a living thing.”* (Quotation is taken from a Business Week article dated 12-13-2007 by Stephen Baker.)

Although some of these services may appear to be only of interest for corporations and their IT departments, services are also being made available for home and small business users. As you might expect, the availability of this Internet computer access depends on fast broadband access. An area where the U.S. lags behind many other countries. In this country we think that having 10-15 megabits/sec on our broadband is really fast. However, in Japan, 50 megabits/sec is closer to the norm, even for home users.

So who would be providing these cloud computing services? Actually, they already exist in the form of Google Apps, Amazon Elastic Compute (EC2), Sapotek's Desktop2 (www.desktoptwo.com), Zim Desk (www.zimdesk.com) and Zoho Office (www.zoho.com). (There are also a number of companies providing these services and more to large corporations only.) Sapotek claims to have 175,000 users of their Desktop2 and their servers can handle 8 – 10,000 of them at the same time. They have a partnership with Sun that will provide the equipment to handle as many as 350,000 users. Every time I look for more information on Cloud Computing I find new companies listed that are offering these services. It is a very rapidly growing industry.

So, if you wanted to take advantage of the services in the cloud, what could you expect to find? Let's take a look at Desktop2. This is a free service that provides normal office applications: writer, spreadsheets, presentations, notepad, and a calendar. It also provides hard drive storage, e-mail, instant messaging, blogs. MP3 player, RSS service and a web site editor. The free version does come with ads as you would expect.

Zimdesks is very similar to Desktop2. Its web applications includes pop3email, file manager, sidebar, RSS, browser, word processor, spreadsheet, calendar, tasks manager, accessories/widgets, web messenger, video conference, media player, Internet radio, web TV, games, zimcommunity, zimblog, and much more. It is also a free service that incorporates advertising. Like everyone else they have to support themselves somehow.

The third of these services is Zoho Office. On their home page you not only find a list of the services they provide, they are all available for trial simply by clicking on a icon. As with the previous services, the list of applications is quite extensive.

Google Apps is very similar in its offerings to the preceding services. However, it is more oriented towards business users. It does have a free version which might be useful for the individual user.

Zoho uses Java to run its applications on the web. Other services may use Flash or Java. Either of these allow the applications to run in your browser and to operate at reasonable speeds. I have tried out the word processing and found it to be no different than using a word processor on my computer. This is true even though the speed of my Internet connec-

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tion is usually only 500 – 750 kilobits/sec. When you are using a wireless card modem it is only on very rare occasions that you can match fast DSL speeds. I'm sure that those of you on cable or fast DSL would have no problem using a web-based application, at least with regard to the speed of the applications response. However, if you are preparing a graphic loaded presentation, then you might experience some slow down depending on the speed of your connection.

The idea of relying on Web-based applications and storing data in the "cloud" of the Internet has long been pushed as a way to do business on the road. Now software companies are making entire Web-based operating systems. They present themselves as a complete computer in the cloud and are aimed at a wider audience. These browser-based services could help those who can't afford their own computer.

There are also those who are convinced that this is the future of computing. However, some security concerns should be considered. Unless you know how secure your data is when you use a cloud system, you should be cautious about what you share with the on-line servers. You need to know how your data is protected from other users of the "cloud". As a service provider they should be willing to undergo external audits and/or security certifications. Also you need to know what kind of data protection and data recovery procedures are provided. As has been demonstrated many times, computers do fail. Finally, you need to know what happens to your data in case the company fails or is sold to another entity. This is also not uncommon in the high tech industry. As is always the case, before allowing sensitive information to be used or stored on the web, remember "caveat emptor".

Lastly, consider what computing might be like should the "cloud" become the method of choice. Certainly there would be no need for computers to have all the bells and whistles we now associate with them. Just think about the possible design of a system destined for use solely with cloud computing. It would only need a minimal operating system that would allow the computer to boot, then start the web browser which would connect to the Internet. Your cloud page would be your home page and display your chosen desktop. As for a hard drive, a 10 - 20 gigabyte solid state drive would probably be adequate. USB ports for printers, scanners, possibly other I/O ports would be included. The one thing you would want to be high end would be the graphics system. This would allow display of high resolution graphics used in online games and for viewing videos. It is possible that the graphics processing unit (GPU) would be more powerful than the CPU (central processing unit) or it might even incorporate the CPU. This could all be contained in a 1-2 pound laptop or compressed further into a handheld computer/cell phone. Although some of these characteristics are found now in smart phones, the spread of cloud computing would enhance the features of these phones. For most of us, the available screen size on these smart phones is not large enough, leaving a market opening for inexpensive laptops such as the ASUS Eee PC or the OLPC (One laptop per child). In neither case would we need an operating system as massive as Microsoft Windows.

One thing is certain, anytime you try to predict the future you usually miss the mark by a mile. So it will be interesting to see what reality brings about over the next few years.

Dr. Lewis is a former university and medical school professor of physiology. He has been working with personal computers for over 35 years, developing software and assembling systems.

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operating systems, such as windows and Linux, we already find that it makes no difference if we use Firefox in windows or Linux. Similarly, Picasa is Picasa and my new web album is the same no matter how i access it.

So far, that all sounds good. But gathering clouds threaten to bring rain. If everybody is going to use the Internet almost all the time, the current Internet infrastructure will not be able to keep up. There will be a need for millions of additional servers and drastically increased connection speeds.

The computer industry is aware of that. According to the Economist (May 24, 2008) Microsoft is building a new \$500 million data center near Chicago. It will require 3 electrical substations with a total capacity of almost 200 megawatts. Google is said to have 3 dozen data centers with an estimated million individual servers. More and more these extensive data centers are being built in out-of-the-way places near sources of low-cost power, even in Iceland with cheap geothermal power. With all this power consumption computers are becoming a major source of global warming.

To increase transmission speeds the industry is eyeing the airwave bands that will be freed up in February 2009 when analog TV will be phased out. There are so-called white spaces between the frequency bands assigned to TV broadcasts, and tech companies want to use those buffer zones for lightning-fast data transmissions. Initial tests show that it might wipe out nearby HDTV broadcasts, but they keep working at it. (Scientific American, June 2008)

The computer revolution has just begun!

Disable Start Menu's Drag and Drop

If you use a laptop on a regular basis, you probably have noticed the irritating habits of the touchpad. In fact, most people usually try to use a mouse whenever using their laptop. It seems like whenever you use the touchpad to access the Start menu, the touch always seems to grab onto an item and then you end up dragging and dropping it someplace else.

To avoid this irritating habit in Windows XP: Right-click any empty spot on the *taskbar*, then select **Properties**. Next in the popup window, click on the **Start Menu** tab and click on **Customize**. Now select the **Advanced** tab and in the *Start menu items* window, scroll to *Enable dragging and dropping* and remove its check mark.

With Windows Vista, the procedure is slightly different: Right-click on an empty spot on the *taskbar* and select **Properties**. Next in the popup window, click on the **Start Menu** tab and click on **Customize**. In the *Customize Start Menu* window, scroll down to *Enable context menus and dragging and dropping* and remove its check mark.

This will not only disable dragging and dropping in the Start Menu, but it will also suppress using the right button to display the context sensitive menus.

Removing USB Devices

When removing a USB device such as a thumb drive or external hard disk, you should really use the Windows *Safely Remove Hardware* feature to make sure that Windows has written everything to the device. When you write data to these devices, Windows doesn't always immediately write the information to the device, but instead consolidates several small writes into one large write. This is done for performance reasons. Since the information is not immediately written, there may still be some information in memory when the device is removed. By using the *Safely Remove Hardware* feature, you initial a series of steps which will write any remaining information to the device before its removal. To safely remove USB devices:

Click on the *Safely Remove Hardware* icon (usually found in the *System Tray*).

Select the device to be removed (if necessary) and click **OK**

Once you get the notification that it's safe to remove the hardware, you can unplug the device.

Zoom in on your pictures (Windows Vista)

When using Windows Explorer you can change your file icons on the fly. This is particularly handy when looking in your picture folders as you can see the picture image in the icon. To change your icons in Vista:

Open any Windows Explorer window.

Select an icon, hold down CTRL key and scroll your mouse wheel.

Your icons will expand or contract depending on the direction you rotate the mouse wheel. This will make them easier to view as nearly every icon is a snapshot of the file itself.

Midland Community Center Parking Lot Construction

Phase I of the parking lot reconstruction at the Midland Community Center has been completed and Phase II started. This means that all **parking is only available from the Jefferson Ave. entrance**. At this time, the western part of the old parking lot and the lot in by the 50+ Center are closed. **Everyone will have to enter the building via the main entrance and proceed to the left to access the meeting room (K-111)**. Because of the walking distance, you might want to leave for the meeting a few minutes earlier than normal. The Welcome Center can assist you if necessary.

Howard

by Neil Stahfest, Librarian, Tacoma Area PC User Group, WA
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As I mentioned last month, Vista's Service Pack 3 is out. I didn't see any real changes in my computer after I installed it, most of modifications are supposed to deal with computer security. I have since encountered a problem with my printer.

I don't print too often from my "Vista computer" so the problem wasn't immediately obvious. When I did try to print some documents they "disappeared" without printing. My first thought was that I had changed the firewall on my print server and locked out connections from other computers on my home network (I've done that before). No that wasn't it. After checking and finding that I could transfer files between my computers, I went to the printer section of my control panel. That's where I discovered that Vista wanted a new printer driver installed. I don't remember any problems with the printer when I started using this computer. As I recall, Vista recognized my printer (a fairly new HP ink jet printer) and it just worked. Anyway, a search of Hewlett Packard's web site didn't reveal a new printer driver. In fact it told me to use the one built into Vista. I turned to the installation CD that came with the printer and reinstalled the printer driver from the CD. It worked and I can print over my home network using a wireless connection again. I have no idea why this happened but at least one other TAPCUG member also discovered a printer driver problem after installing Vista SP1.

Speaking of security (see paragraph 1), Windows Vista, like Windows XP, comes with a firewall program pre-installed. As all you computer gurus know, a computer firewall is a hardware or software tool that examines all Internet traffic letting only "safe" traffic into your computer. The firewall for Vista was supposed to scan Internet traffic both entering and leaving your computer. I can hear some of you saying, "If I scan incoming traffic to be safe, why do I care about outbound traffic?". Well, incoming traffic is the bigger threat to you. Using pre-defined rules it determines which programs are allowed to use your network connection or which ports can be used for communications. If some spyware, Trojans or or malicious "phone home" software slip past your firewall they may allow someone to take remote control of your computer to attack it other computers through your Internet connection (that's why Microsoft is always sending you those security updates). So a firewall that scans outbound traffic attempts to stop this. To make a longer story short, contrary to plans, the ability to check outbound traffic has not been provided with Vista's firewall.

Another shortcoming of Vista's firewall is that it does not create a log of all attempts to contact your computer from a local network or the Internet. This kind of record can be useful if you suspect a hacker has been visiting your computer in the middle of the night. Actually, there is a way that you can modify Vista's firewall to create a log and examine outbound traffic. The process to set this up is probably more complicated than most of us would like to deal with so I offer a much easier solution. Turn off Vista's firewall and install a third party firewall program. Do not try to use two or more firewall programs at the same time. They do not play well together. There are a number of firewall programs that you can purchase as well as some that are free. I've been using the free version of Zone Alarm for many years and I'm satisfied with its protection. It also creates a log that I can use to examine attempts to connect to my computer. You can find it on the Internet at www.zonealarm.com.

System Mechanic 8 – A PC "Swiss Army Knife"

By Ira Wilsker; APCUG Director, Columnist, The Examiner, Beaumont, TX, Radio and TV Show Host
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WEBSITE:

<http://www.iolo.com>

<http://www.iolo.com/downloads.aspx> - FREE TRIAL SOFTWARE

Frequent readers of this column will be well aware that there are many computer utilities in cyberspace that can improve the performance of our PCs. As we use our computers, the registry becomes cluttered and inefficient; useless files consume valuable real estate on our hard drives; and other maladies caused by the software on our computers deprive us of the performance we paid for and deserve. While I admittedly use several different utilities to maintain peak operating efficiency of my computers, if I had to choose only a single utility for computer maintenance, it would be Iolo's System Mechanic (www.iolo.com). I have used System Mechanic for many years in its earlier versions, but now Iolo has

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released the latest iteration, System Mechanic version 8.

Simply, System Mechanic 8 is arguably the most comprehensive PC maintenance utility available, with over 40 distinct performance and security tools included, giving it "Swiss Army Knife" features. According to published sales figures, System Mechanic is the #1 best selling PC tune-up software on the market, and has won awards for excellence from dozens of computer publications, including Cnet's Editors' Choice, Windows Magazine, PC Computing, ZDNet Editors' Pick, Computer Shopper's Top 100, Computerworld, and many others.

Rhetorically, why would I choose System Mechanic 8 over all of its competitors? Because of what it does, its power, versatility, and features; that is why. Compared to its major competitors, none of them offer the feature rich set of functions that System Mechanic offers. According to Iolo, "Over 98% of PC problems are caused by clutter and faulty settings that are the result of everyday PC use." System Mechanic 8 can repair or otherwise remedy virtually all of these problems. Many of a PC's problems can be traced to problems and errors in the registry, a large data file that contains information on the hardware and software installed on the computer. The registry is almost constantly written to, and read, often leaving obsolete data in the registry. This obsolete, and eventually erroneous data left in the registry consumes some system resources, and can promote errors and other problems as faulty data is read and processed. The registry must be periodically purged of useless data, defragmented and compacted in order to contribute to better PC performance, a function that System Mechanic 8 excels at.

Our computers are constantly reading from and writing to the hard drive, and that drive often becomes cluttered, fragmented, and may also have some errors in the data stored on it. While almost all flavors of Windows have some type of "defrag" and "chkdsk" software to defragment the hard drive, and check it for errors, the Windows integral versions of those utilities are very basic and lack the power to do a truly thorough job, as System Mechanic will do. Clutter and useless files consume a lot of the storage space on our hard drives; System Mechanic 8 can identify and remove

that clutter, freeing up that hard drive space, making for a more efficient hard drive.

Got PC problems? System Mechanic is your solution!

Problem	Solution
Random errors, crashes and restarts	Fixes Registry problems, clears clutter, and repairs security vulnerabilities
Sluggish programs, downloads and startup	Defragments memory and hard drives, optimizes settings, boosting performance up to 300%
PC won't start, system or drive is down	Drive Medic™ emergency rescue CD revives downed systems and drives
Costly professional help required to repair and maintain your PC	Automatic maintenance keeps your PC fast and reliable

Sometimes, and it will likely happen eventually to each PC user, the computer will not properly boot. For that particular eventuality, System Mechanic 8 will allow the user to create a bootable emergency CD that may be able to revive "crashed" sys-

tems. Another irritant that many of us suffer through on a regular basis is the boringly slow boot process itself, where we wait and wait for our computer to become usable. System Mechanic 8 claims to have 19 different ways that it can speed the boot process by making it more logical and efficient. Another way that we are losing performance that we are paying for is by having improper internet settings. Many of these settings are mundane and not readily accessible to the typical user. By modifying these settings to their ideal point, internet throughput can be improved, in some cases tripled. System Mechanic 8 will analyze our internet connection, and make any changes necessary to maximize performance.

PC security is a major issue that all of us must deal with on a constant basis. System Mechanic 8 contributes to system security by fixing settings that would otherwise allow an intruder to access the computer, making cyber attacks that more difficult. Sometimes we have files that we want to securely delete, being well aware that normally deleted files are easy to recover, which may create another security problem. This utility offers the user a military grade wiping function that can securely delete unwanted data.

System Mechanic 8 retails for \$49.95 for a one-year license, and can be used on up to three computers; discounts are available online (www.iolo.com) for longer licenses.

For those who want an even more feature rich product, Iolo offers System Mechanic Professional, version 8 (\$69.95 for 3 computers). This Professional version is an integrated bundle which includes most of Iolo's other popular products. The bundle includes Iolo's antivirus software, renowned for its hourly updates; and its Personal Firewall to protect from intruders and malicious software. Another program included with the Professional bundle is another personal favorite of mine, Iolo's Search and Recover. This program can recover files that were deleted, including photos, videos, documents, email, music, and other data that may have otherwise been lost. Search and Recover can undelete files from hard drives, digital cameras, memory cards, and almost all other digital media.

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Professional also includes DriveScrubber, a utility that can securely erase data from hard drives. This is necessary when donating a computer, selling it, or recycling it. Without securely deleting our personal data, others can access it and use it for a variety of purposes, including identity theft. DriveScrubber overwrites the data using methods that meet strict government and military standards, ensuring the destruction of that data, without harm to the drive itself.

iolo has a winner in System Mechanic 8. For those who like to try software before they purchase it, iolo offers a free, 30 day, fully functional trial version of each of its products at www.iolo.com/downloads.aspx. If you try the software, you will probably like it as much as I do, and find it indispensable.

Windows XP Expires

By Sandy Berger, CompuKISS
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Obtained from APCUG with the author's permission for publication by APCUG member groups. On June 30th, 2008, Microsoft started the death march for Windows XP. As of that date, Microsoft stopped shipments of Windows XP as a stand-alone shrink-wrapped product. So after supplies are exhausted, you won't be able to go into a store and purchase Windows XP. Microsoft also stopped most sales to PC manufacturers. So Dell, Lenovo, HP and others will not get any new copies of Windows XP to install on their mainstream computers. However, Windows XP, Microsoft's longest-lived and best-loved operating system, isn't going to vanish overnight. You will still see copies of the XP software and/or computers with Windows XP in stores until inventories are depleted.

Microsoft has made four important concessions that will also keep XP alive: Microsoft will support Windows XP until April 2014. They will offer updates, security patches, and technical support until that time.

Smaller local PC makers can continue to sell PCs with Windows XP until January 2009.

Computers with limited hardware capabilities which are sometimes called ultra-low cost PCs (ULCPC) can sell with Windows XP Home until June 2010.

With the purchase of Windows Vista Business or Windows Vista Ultimate, the two most expensive versions of Vista, a customer will be able to move back to Windows XP Professional via what Microsoft is calling "downgrade rights." Details on how this will be handled have not been clearly defined to the public at this time. It is even possible that different manufacturers will handle this in different ways.

To the home users, this all means very little, unless you need a new computer and are violently opposed to Windows Vista. To business users, these new policies and extensions mean that they will be able to keep their fleets of Windows XP computers running for several more years. Microsoft has announced that Windows 7, the next version of Windows, will be available in 2010 so many businesses will be able to skip Vista entirely instead to Windows 7. Intel has already announced that they will do just that.

What this means for everyone is that Microsoft, while not writing off Vista, has made it an "interim" operating system. Microsoft is still pushing Windows Vista. They recently announced that Vista now supports 77,000 printers, cameras, speakers and other devices and components. They also brag that more than 140 million copies of Windows Vista have already been sold, making it the fastest selling operating system in Microsoft history. So Windows Vista is not a flash-in-the-pan like Windows ME which was quickly replaced by Windows XP.

In my opinion, Vista is both better and safer than Windows XP and if you are already using Vista or plan to make the move, it is not a bad choice. Yet Vista has become a lame duck. Microsoft definitely has a dilemma on their hands. The only way they will come out of this is if they can get Windows 7 out quickly while making it faster, safer, and easier to use. They also need to give it a good name and get the members of the press behind it. I'm not sure if the lumbering giant can pull that off – especially if Apple and/or Linux find a way to take advantage of this Microsoft predicament!

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Using CrossLoop to Troubleshoot and Control Remote Machines

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Third party Windows applications are rarely examined in this column, but CrossLoop is too good a utility to ignore. Trying to walk someone through a computer problem over the telephone is often an exercise in frustration. There is no substitute for seeing what is actually on a user's screen to find out the root cause of a problem.

Vista has a built-in support tool known as Remote Desktop, but far from making the process easy, it has a tendency to confuse those with no technical background. Remote Desktop makes it rough on those who don't know how to handle the added complications of firewalls and routers. CrossLoop, which is a free remote support utility, could be an excellent solution.

CrossLoop shields users from tricky situations involving communicating through routers, firewalls, and other potential obstacles. Setting up a communications session between two computers physically separated, but connected through the internet, is reduced to a process hardly more complex than turning on your TV. Those concerned about security can relax. CrossLoop uses something called TightVNC which safeguards data with 128 bit encryption.

Crossloop is useful for people who want to train or support others remotely. If you're an experienced web surfer, for example, and need to show someone how to access a disk drive or retrieve a lost document, CrossLoop allows you to take control of their computer screen, and show them exactly how to do it.

Hard core geeks may not be satisfied with CrossLoop. It's not complicated enough. It works better than most similar commercial utilities, and your technically challenged friends and relatives will find it aggravation free.

You can download the program without charge from <http://www.crossloop.com>. The site has a video that demonstrates how to install and use the program which is very helpful for technophobes.

Once you're up and running, the interface presenting itself is a model of simplicity which effectively masks the complexity behind the scenes. As mentioned earlier, security and remote control is handled by TightVNC. VNC stands for Virtual Network Computing, and is a very well designed software tool that easily allows remote access to Operating Systems with a graphical interface. The technical specifications say you need Windows 98 or higher. A broadband internet connection is also a requirement. Dialup connections won't work. Drive space, processor speed, and memory requirements are negligible given the general power of today's computers.

Another benefit of TightVNC is the built-in 128 bit encrypted security. When you begin a communications session, the program generates a new 12 digit access code. The access code then generates the encryption codes giving you an additional layer of security. Not bad for a free utility.



Running the program is so easy it's almost boring. As you can see from the illustration, the interface is simple and straightforward. Assuming you started the session, the next step is to communicate the access code to the person you are communicating with. You can do this by email, telephone, screaming into the next room, etc.

After starting the session, your friend types the access code into the box and clicks **Connect**. When the **Connect** button is clicked on both sides the two PCs are linked.

This method of troubleshooting a remote PC eliminates all the hassles of trying to interpret what an inexperienced user is attempting to explain. It's difficult to imagine anything less complex than a one button interface. With 128 bit encryption built in, it's tough to beat.

Other applications that make such connections possible have been available for years, but nothing I've seen makes it as simple as CrossLoop.