

FOX TALES



Official Publication of the
Fox Valley PC Association
"Established January 1985"

Volume 19, Issue 3

JANUARY 2006

A Message From Our Past President

As the recent past president of the FVPCA, it has been a long time since I submitted an article to the newsletter. I want to take this opportunity to wish everyone a Happy New Year and a belated Merry Christmas. It has been a pleasure to serve the club during the past years. Reflecting back over this past year, the club has seen a lot of changes happening. The major change has been in the way the club can give a presentation now. As a club, we have finally moved up to the 21st century. In June of this year, at the AmericInn, we gave our first internet presentation! What an exciting time we had. We were able to surf the internet to different sites and check out their content. Some of the sites that we explored had to do with antivirus programs, anti-spyware, maps, popular computer stores, and EBay (The ultimate place to find those items that we need so badly!). Also at the meeting, Rita and Eugene Moretti reflected where we have been in the past twenty years as a PC club and where we are heading. The contrast given to us was that the PC Junior cost over seven hundred dollars at that time without a high speed internet connection, as compared to today's PC Pentium processor for around three hundred dollars with high speed internet connection. How well technology has served us.

I look forward to this coming year and hope we will accomplish what we want to accomplish. I believe the club is in good hands with Jon Jackman as president. I know Jon has a short follow up survey in mind to be distributed this coming year. So please take the time to fill out the survey that Jon has put together so we can get an idea what direction our organization should be taking. It will take less than four minutes to fill out and it will be of tremendous help for the executive team to know what you expect and want from us. Again, Happy New Year and may the next year find you and your family in good health. God bless.

Past President,

Craig Mc Gregor

Make Your Computer Run Better -- With Help From Process Library

by Larry Bothe, 12/11/2005

I'm sure you have heard and read, over and over again, that in order to keep your machine running in tip-top form you need to run Disk Cleanup and Disk Defragmenter ("Defrag") on a regular basis. "Regular" is in the eye of the beholder, but I do it weekly, along with my backup. However, even if you run Cleanup and Defrag on a regular basis your computer can become slow over time. It may seem like it takes forever to boot up, and half of forever to shut down. Programs don't load and run as fast as they used to either.

One of the reasons for this slowness is that many of today's application programs have components that start on boot-up whether you actually intend to use them or not. I think it's an ego thing; the people writing and distributing the software all think that their program is then most important program you have. They want it to start and run tray icons, schedulers, counters and quick-start routines even though you aren't going to use any of it. Still others hope you will do something with their software that will result in additional financial gain for them; so you get messenger programs, catalogs, basic applications that want to sell you the full version, etc., etc. Over time this stuff builds up on your machine without you even knowing it. Your machine takes longer and longer to boot up as each of these routines takes a while to start, and at shutdown you get the same effect. Each one has to have its settings saved and be shut down. While you are actually using your computer these routines running in the background are sapping system resources, which means eating up your available RAM. Pretty soon everything is slow, and you're not happy.

You may know all this, but you don't know how to manage it and make improvements. If you open Task Manager (cntrl-alt-del) you can see what applications are running, and what and how many processes. I just checked, and at the moment I am running just one application, Microsoft Word so I can write this article, but there are in fact 46 processes running in the background. Those processes, including the Windows XP operating system, are using 206 megs of my 384 megs of RAM. The question now becomes; how did all those processes get started, and do I really need them all?

The answer to the first part is easy. The processes got started because at the time the program was installed on to your computer an entry was put into the Startup portion of your System Configuration file. That's easy to go look at. Do Start>Run, and type in "msconfig" (without the quotes) in the box. Click on OK and the System Configuration Utility will open. Click on the Startup tab and you will see all the processes that are starting at the time you boot up. My machine has 31 entries. There is a checked box at the left of each entry, and you can turn it off by unchecking the box.

But here's the rub. How do you know which ones you need? That in part depends on which programs you use, and which features of those programs you care about. First, you need SysTray. Leave that one alone. Next, you need anything to do with your security programs, like Norton AntiVirus. Symantec owns Norton, so I left anything with Symantec or Norton in it

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checked. Do you run AOL? If so there are a lot of entries with AOL in them, but you probably don't need/want them all. Beyond those that you recognize there are quite a few others that make no sense. For example, what in the world is 'nwiz', or 'carserv'?

My friend, there is help for you. Direct your browser to www.processlibrary.com. This site has a listing of essentially all of the entries you might find in the System Configuration Startup list, literally thousands of potential entries. There is a search box. Simply type in the name of the entry from the Startup Item column and click on Search Now. Process Library will find the item and tell you what program it relates to, what it does, and whether or not you need it. Based on that information you can check or uncheck the box in System Configuration – Startup to govern whether or not the item starts on future boot-ups. The idea of course is to uncheck as many non-essential things as you can.

Once you have made your selections be sure to click on Apply and OK. The machine will tell you that you need to restart for your changes to take affect. You can either restart now, or just continue with whatever else you were doing and wait for your next session to enjoy your newfound computing efficiency. Note that the next time you boot up you will get a warning box reminding you that you are starting up in a custom configuration. Put a check in the box that says, "Don't show me this warning again", and then click on OK. Now you won't be bugged about it any more.

By following this procedure earlier today I was able to cut the boot-up time on my wife's machine in half, from 4 minutes down to 2, and the shutdown from 2 minutes to about 30 seconds. I have some additional RAM on order for it that will improve things even further, but I'm never going to get the boot-up time down to the 30 seconds or so that we used to experience. That's because of the unfortunate need to run sophisticated (and time-consuming) security programs. As the bad guys become more devious the programs to protect us become more complicated with more protection modules. These things take a long time to load, but we need them to protect ourselves. We have to accept somewhat more lengthy boot-up times so Norton, McAfee or Panda can load up and take care of us.

Larry Bothe is an associate member of CAEUG and an honorary member of FVPCA. He was President of CAEUG for a time back in the 90's when he lived in the Chicago area. Larry presently resides in southern Indiana where he is retired from the plastics industry and teaches people to fly airplanes. He can be contacted at Lbothe@aol.com.



USB Flash Drives

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

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

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

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

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

Flash memory was originally developed in 1988 and has seen considerable use in storage for digital cameras. (For the technically minded, flash memory is based on NAND gates where the transistors have two inputs and one output.) Some smart phones and PDA's are now using nonvolatile flash memory to retain information when the device is turned off. This reduces the drain on the device's battery. Flash drives are believed to work for up to 10,000 write/erase operations. However, some sources indicate that flash drives can survive for up to ten million operational or write/erase cycles. Even so, all this indicates that flash drives have a finite life span. To me, this life span seems to exceed that of a standard hard drive which is supposed to operate for up to half a million hours. In practice we know that hard drives

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generally fail much sooner than that. So a flash drive having a finite life span is really no different than a hard drive.

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

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

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

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

Earlier, I mentioned the new U3 (smart drive) specification for flash drives. This allows applications to be developed that can be stored and run from a flash drive. Software is already available for such drives. One such example is Mozilla's Firefox browser and their Thunderbird e-mail software. There are other applications that synchronize office files, folders and Outlook e-mail between a computer and a U3 flash drive. There is a version of Pass2Go that securely stores passwords, banking and credit card information on these USB smart drives. Also announced are photo management software and instant-messaging programs. Skype, a VoIP provider has announced a U3 version of their software that would permit voice calls over any computer with a U3 flash drive. The U3 flash drives and the associated software will run only on computers using Windows XP and Windows 2000. A Linux version is expected to be announced shortly.

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

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

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

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POTPOURRI

Bill Swiss, Editor

A miniature version of the Potpourri

As a reader of this column, do have any difficulty reading the lettering in the version? How about this lettering? This is a different style of lettering called Times New Roman. Or, does it make any difference to you as a reader. Just trying to see if any of the members are actually reading this section of the Newsletter.

Newsletter Articles Wanted

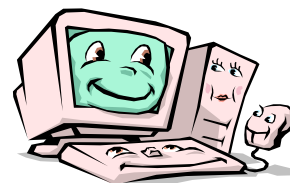
Do you have any articles or short stories you can submit to the Editor than can be used in the “Fox Tales” Newsletter? Don't worry about the spelling or the grammar, I can fix that quit easily. Just be a little discrete about the subject material.



NEW LOCATION FOR THE NEXT MEETING
The January meeting will be held at the Batavia Public library, 10S. Batavia Ave., Batavia. A map will be available on the Club Website.

DID YOU GET ANY NEW EQUIPMENT?

Was Santa good to you over the Holidays? How about making a list and describe the items to the rest of the attendees at the meeting? I got a new external hard drive and have to learn how to use it.



A LOT OF NEW PROGRAMS COMING

Come to the meeting and meet a lot of friendly computer users.

NEW VICE PRESEDENT TO GIVE PROGRAM AT THE JANUARY MEETING

The program will be Linux: an overview by VP Tom Anzalone

The "FOX TALES" Newsletter

The "Fox Tales" Newsletter is published monthly by the Fox Valley PC Association, Post Office Box 369, Oswego, IL 60543, a non-profit organization, established to provide information about IBM PCs and IBM Compatible personal computer systems to our members.

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The Following Members have
paid their dues.

***Allen J. Hergenbahn
Gaylon Mace
Stan Naruz
Daryl Randolph
and
Rhonda Woods
"Thank You"***

THE FOX VALLEY PC ASSOCIATION

The Fox Valley PC Association is dedicated to the task of providing computer information to our fellow members. We are a non-profit organization. The group has been active since January 1985. The dues are \$30 per year. Our meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month.

The meeting location will be described on the Club Website. (www.fvpca.org) The formal meeting starts at 9:00 A.M. Non-Member Visitors are always welcome.

"USERS HELPING USERS"



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The Fox Valley PC Association Web site is:

www.fvpca.org

Courtesy of our Club member, Bob Tuftee



“Program of the Month”

Linux : An Overview by Tom Anzalone

The Next Meeting Will Be
January 21, 2006

At the Batavia Public Library,
10 S. Batavia Ave., Batavia.
A map on the Club website.