

The Computer Doctors Ltd

Newsletter: July 2007



Welcome to the July edition of our newsletter

Hello, its me Craig the trainee here. Once again I've got the sought after job of assembling the monthly newsletter. I usually get stacks of articles all vying for their place in the current newsletter. But this month, as everybody has been on holiday for the **whole of June**, I've got a couple of URLs written on the back of a (still soggy) Spanish beer mat, a flyer from PC World showing all their super cheap TV ads (you know the ones, "Oh I'm sorry sir, we've just sold out of that product. But we do have an alternative at twice the price") and an article on "Flat-head Skinners" written on the inside flap of an old pizza box. (Sorry that should read "Flatbed Scanners", a piece of dried on pepperoni looked like an "H").

So here we go, If I really get stuck I might have to put in a few pictures of my cat!

The Best Site for Outlook Problems

Whenever you have an Outlook or Exchange question or problem the first place to go is Slipstick.com. Almost certainly you'll find the answer to your query in their extensive problem database. They also have good coverage of add-ins for Outlook. We've mentioned Slipstick before but judging from the emails we get there are many folks who simply don't know about this excellent free resource.

<http://slipstick.com/>

Outstanding Site for Free Digital Photo Software

If you are interested in digital image processing you should check out this site that specializes in free photo software. Utilities listed include digital editors, viewers, filters, albums, correction programs and a whole lot more.

<http://www.photo-freeware.net>

Lots of Vista Extras



If you have a new PC running any of the Vista flavours, Microsoft have been busy creating lots of extras and utilities to keep you out of mischief. If you think that a clock and the weather on your desktop is really cool, then you will love this site.

<http://bhandler.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!70F64BC910C9F7F3!1844.entry>

Users Volunteer to Get Their PCs Infected!

When Belgian security professional Didier Stevens ran a tongue-in-cheek Google text advertisement offering users the opportunity to get their PCs infected with a killer virus, he didn't expect much of a response. He was wrong; 409 people clicked on the ad over a six month period. Those who clicked the ad ended up at Stevens' benign web site so no harm was done but they could just have easily landed at a hostile drive-by download site. It certainly makes you wonder about human behaviour. Google has now pulled the ad.

<http://didierstevens.wordpress.com/>

Computer Doctors very own Toolbar.

Groan! Not another toolbar I hear you cry. Well....yes actually, but we have tried to include handy items that you would like to have to hand when you are surfing the Internet. It has a Google search bar built in, drop down shortcuts to the most popular pages on our site (The Best Free Software etc.), a radio bar where you can choose your style of background music depending on your mood, a BBC news feed with all the most popular UK news, an Email notifier which you can set up to let you know when you have mail and a weather station to let you know the weather in your town. Quite a feat to get all that in the width of a browser window. But it's quite neat, doesn't take up much space and is shrinkable if you are the one user in the UK with a screen resolution of 640 x 480. Plus you can save some space by unticking your other toolbars which aren't so useful.

Incidentally in case you don't know, you can turn your toolbars on and off in Internet Explorer by right clicking on a blank area of the any toolbar (top of the IE window) and click the various toolbars to toggle them on and off. A tick appears against the ones that are on show. So if you have five different search boxes at the top of your browser window just hide the four that you don't want.

You can install our toolbar from the link below and naturally, it goes without saying, it comes without any spyware or pop-ups as with some toolbars **and** has an uninstaller. At the moment we have versions for Internet Explorer and Firefox. So why not give it a try; you can customise it, or hide it if you don't like it.

<http://computerdoctors.ourtoolbar.com>

Can I make my PC Run Faster?

Every week we get emails from customers asking us whether they should buy a particular PC tune up utility or subscribe to a particular commercial tune up service that claims to make their PC run faster.

In each case our advice is the same: save your money. You can easily tune up your PC using free utilities and in many cases get a better result than using expensive commercial products.

There are two freeware tune up options: the first is to use a specialist tune up utility that will do the job for you with a single click. The second option is to use a number of different freeware utilities each addressing one particular area of cleanup and tuning.

The first approach is easier, the second is more comprehensive. Let's look at the products we recommend for each approach.

For one click cleaning the stand-out product is Advanced WindowsCare Personal from IObit. The Personal version is a feature reduced version of their Professional product. It's an impressive package for a freebie and this, combined with one click operation, makes Advanced WindowsCare Personal an easy top recommendation for non technical users. It really only lacks in one area: it doesn't defragment your hard drive. However IObit, the makers of Advanced WindowsCare offer on their website an excellent free defrag program called SmartDefrag. If you use this in conjunction with Advanced WindowsCare you will have a remarkably complete tune-up package for free.

More technically inclined users will however find the lack of fine control in Advanced WindowsCare frustrating. Such users are more likely to be attracted to using several specialist packages each offering more settings and better user control. This approach is less convenient than a one click package that "does it all" but ultimately it's more customizable to the individual user's needs and more powerful in the individual cleaning functions offered.

It's also less dangerous. A one click approach encourages haste and discourages careful consideration of what is being done. Advanced WindowsCare handles this by taking a system checkpoint before the start of cleaning which allows the user to bale out if something goes wrong.

Alternatively, there are several different tune up utility combinations that can be used. Many of you in fact will already be using some of these utilities but for those who aren't, here's our basic "freeware clean up kit" suggestion:

Spyware / Adware Cleaning: AVG Anti-Spyware,

Disk and Privacy Cleaning: CCleaner

Registry Cleaner: Regseeker

Defragmenter: Diskkeeper Lite

We recommend you run the utilities in the order they appear in the list above. Do check the settings for each program before you run them, particularly CCleaner whose default settings are a little aggressive. Remember that cleaning your PC always involves a small element of risk so backup and/or create a Restore Point before you start.

If you find you have spyware that can't be removed by AVG we suggest you download HijackThis and follow the instructions **carefully** as this can destroy your PC if not used sensibly.

So how often should you tune up your PC? For most users

we recommend that you run a spyware scan weekly and the other cleaning operations monthly. After each monthly Windows update is an excellent time to run a clean up. If you install and uninstall a lot of products or use Limewire or Bittorrent, you may want to increase this frequency to weekly. If you have never tuned up your PC you should see a real improvement in speed and responsiveness the first time you run these programs. However on subsequent runs the improvement may be much less noticeable, but still worth doing. All these free programs are available from our "Best Free Software Page".

<http://www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/links.htm>

WEEE are not amused!



Now that all manufacturers and retailers are conversant with the Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment regulations (WEEE). The cost of ethically disposing of a PC has increased to £50.00. This means that we are now no longer able to dispose of customers old computer equipment for free, when they purchase a new PC from us.

In an effort to give our customers the best quality PC for the best possible price, we slash the profit margin on the excellent Viper towers that we supply. Most people think that we make a huge profit on hardware, but competing on price with Dell and Curry's (irrespective of their quality) makes that an impossibility. Therefore, an extra £50 for disposing of our customers PC is just not sustainable.

Under the new regulations, manufacturers are responsible for disposing of their old unwanted equipment and Viper Europe have put into place a system whereby any distributor, such as ourselves, can collect end of life Viper hardware for disposal and Viper will arrange disposal.

So if you have an old PC, your first port of call should be the original manufacturer. Most by now have systems in place and are keen to be seen as environmentalists. If they are complacent, then please give us a call, but we are only able to collect in small numbers and at a cost of £50.00.

<http://www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/recycle.htm>

Test your own Emails (Update)



When we introduced the free, "Test your own Emails" Email address last month

(test@computerdoctors.uk.net) we tried to make it as similar to real world conditions as possible by passing it through a number of Email servers (as opposed to sending yourself an Email i.e. to your Email server and back again).

Unfortunately, many of our customers complained that it was a bit **too** real world, as at peak times, it was taking up to 20 minutes to get the response back to say that the Email was OK. We must admit this is not ideal so we are working on speeding up the transfer without losing the real world effect.

The automatic response comes from our web server and we have already taken steps to speed this up. So if you have an Email problem or think that you might have, give it a try. Its fairly quick (few minutes) at non peak times, but be prepared for a bit of a delay at peak times.

Updating Microsoft Office



Everybody knows about Microsoft updates that help keep your PC free from abuse on the Internet and fix minor imperfections. (Bug fixes). But have you ever thought about doing the same for Microsoft Office?

Many of our customers are still running Office 2000 on their XP machines without any updates and to be fair, the adage "If it aint broke don't fix it" is still a good one. But 2000 has had hundreds of bug fixes and numerous major service packs to improve its security, so any non updated version is like a Swiss cheese waiting for a worm to crawl inside.

Even if you have a later version, you are not immune, 2002 (Office XP), 2003 and even the new 2007 all have updates available to prevent minor (and major) errors in the program and to improve their security.

You might say, "who's going to break into my Word documents and read my letters to auntie Maud", but Word has a very powerful macro facility which was hijacked last year, by the spyware writers and used to destroy data as well as retrieve some personal information from users PC's. Microsoft quickly brought out a fix for this, but how many people have downloaded it?

So how easy is it to update? Well the first item we must mention is product validation. If your version of office is not genuine, has been used on more than one PC or you don't have the CD or product key, then do not attempt it. If halfway through the installation you are asked to insert the Office CD and you can't, the upgrade installation will abort and your Office programs will often fail to work afterwards. Also Office 2000 has no product activation so consequently, it has been installed on hundreds of machines using the same product key. Microsoft now have a list of the most popular rogue keys and will likely stop your Office programs working if it finds one installed on your PC.

Having said that, if you have a genuine version of Office, then all the updates are freely available from Microsoft and as always, are listed on our "Best Free Software" page.

<http://www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/links.htm>

How Does Your Firewall Rate?



A firewall protects your PC from the jungle that is the Internet and is an essential piece of software.

Windows XP and Vista have one built in so why would you need to buy another one?

Windows firewall is "adequate" for most non technical users and is pretty undemanding. But if you require something a bit more powerful and are happy to "train" the program, as least initially, then take a look at the best there is.

At this site they test all the major firewalls using leak-tests. Now outbound leak-testing is only one criterion for assessing firewall performance indeed some would argue that inbound protection is more important. Our view is that both are important as are user friendliness, resource usage, software compatibility and resistance to termination by hostile agents. That said Comodo, Jetico and ZoneAlarm

Pro, top the list while the Microsoft XP SP2 firewall get the wooden spoon. ZoneAlarm free was another notable poor performer.

<http://www.matousec.com/projects/windows-personal-firewall-analysis/leak-tests-results.php>

How to Permanently Wipe a Hard Drive

If you are disposing of an old PC it's a good idea to permanently wipe its hard drive to completely destroy any data that it may hold. You can securely erase files and drives using free utilities like "Eraser" [1] and "Boot and Nuke" [2] that overwrite the data multiple times. At this site [3], they show how you can securely wipe a drive using a little-known feature built into many hard drives.

[1] <http://www.heidi.ie/eraser/>

[2] <http://dban.sourceforge.net/>

[3] <http://blogs.zdnet.com/storage/?p=129&tag=nl.e622>

Symantec Norton 360: First Impressions



We used to be great admirers of Norton Antivirus. Indeed we used to recommend it. While it's effectiveness in detecting viruses has always been reasonable it acquired over the years a reputation as a resource hog. Each successive version seemed to cause your PC to run slower and slower. Around 2004 it got so bad that we stopped supplying it and migrated to Avast. We were not alone; thousands of knowledgeable users abandoned Norton AV and Norton Internet Security Suite for more resource efficient security products. Symantec's response was to initiate a project called "Genesis" to create a new security product from scratch. This was to be a ground up re-write rather than a revamp. Furthermore this new product would not only include anti-virus capabilities but anti-spyware detection, rootkit detection, behaviour based malware analysis, phishing and malicious site blocking, a stateful firewall, backup and more. We are not aware of any other security vendor who has totally re-written their core product. Most just enhance their existing products and bolt on additional modules leading to every larger, more unwieldy and less efficient products. Project Genesis gave rise to Norton 360 [1] that was released earlier this year. Early reviews [2], [3] have been good and suggest that Symantec may have succeeded in creating a product that is effective, resource efficient and user friendly. As with all multifunction products of this type, it does integrate itself into the PC and may cause conflicts with similar installed utilities also, let's hope that Symantec have finally produced a product that will uninstall cleanly. It costs around £60, but can be installed on 3 PC's in the same household.

[1] <http://www.symantec.com/content/en/uk/norton360/>

[2] <http://www.pcpro.co.uk/reviews/110678/norton-360.html>

[3] http://reviews.cnet.com/internet-security-and-firewall/norton-360/4505-3667_7-32330411.html

Firefox Updated to V2.0.0.4



Mozilla released a performance and security update for Firefox on the 30th of May. The new version 2.0.0.4 has better Vista compatibility and fixes five security flaws one of which was rated as "critical." Also released were the corresponding updates for the older Firefox V1.5, Thunderbird and the SeaMonkey Suite. To our knowledge there are no current exploits in circulation that utilize these flaws. However, it is essential that you update now as the spyware writers routinely reverse engineer security updates to identify flaws to exploit in unpatched machines. Users with automatic updates enabled should have had the new version automatically delivered and installed. You can check by selecting Help / About from within Firefox. If your version number is less than V2.0.0.4, then you can download it from our "best Free Software" page.

<http://www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/links.htm>

Play safe in a Sand Box



The good old days of casual and carefree surfing are over. Today a simple act like clicking on a search engine hit or responding to an ad may take you to a hostile website whose main mission is to infect your PC with spyware, Trojans and worse.

And don't expect your anti-virus program to save you. Many of these evil sites make use of specially crafted malware products that your AV program doesn't know about or cannot see.

Nor can you hope to be saved by keeping your software up-to-date with the latest security patches. These hostile sites often exploit new or undocumented flaws in Windows, your browser or other products to take control of your PC. Users who rarely stray from well known sites are not really at risk. It is folks who surf widely and regularly to the nether regions of the web who are most exposed. However most heavy internet users are sooner or later going to run into one of these sites.

The good news is that it's possible to protect your PC against hostile sites. There are actually several different ways but one of the most convenient ways is also one of the most effective.

"Sandboxing" is a technique of protecting your PC by corralling off potentially dangerous applications such as your browser from the rest of your PC. Sandboxing your browser means that your browser effectively runs in a virtual PC within your PC. Anything nasty that happens in this sandbox cannot affect your real PC.

That means if you get infected while browsing in the sandbox you can remove the infection by simply shutting down the sandbox. Any malware files downloaded or actually running will be deleted and your "real" PC is unaffected.

To run your browser sandboxed you must first run a sandboxing program that creates the sandbox environment. Our favourite is SandBoxie. It's effective and it's free for home use. It will work with Win 2000, XP or Vista.

Before installing SandBoxie always make a full system backup or create a Windows restore point from *Start / Help and Support / Undo changes with system restore / Create a restore point*. That's because SandBoxie can create problems on some PCs. You can minimize the risk of problems by shutting down all your security programs before installing. After installing SandBoxie you will need to reboot anyway and that will restart all your security software. Once SandBoxie is installed there are various ways to open your browser in a sandbox. You have to do it manually unless you are running the registered version where it's possible to setup your browser to automatically run sandboxed.

This should start your default browser securely locked away in its own sandbox. SandBoxie indicates to you the browser is sandboxed by putting a "#" sign before and after your browser window title bar caption.

You can use your sandboxed browser perfectly normally. In fact apart from the # signs in the title bar you wouldn't know that it is sandboxed.

That means that for all practical purposes your real PC cannot get infected by visiting a hostile website.

When you have finished browsing shut down your browser and then right click the yellow SandBoxie tray icon again. This time select "Terminate Sandboxed Processes".

Once selected everything that happened while surfing is deleted, including any malware infections and files.

That also includes any bookmarks you created and any files you deliberately downloaded. You can copy downloaded files from your sandbox to your real PC before you delete the sandbox contents. Its good practice, before you move any file out of the sandbox to first install the downloaded file from within the sandbox. If your security software doesn't sound any alarms and the programs seems to be behaving as you expect then go ahead and move it to your real PC and install it again. Remember though to still delete the contents of the sandbox.

<http://www.computerdoctors.uk.net/pages/links.htm>

Contact Us

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As always if you do not feel confident about installing any program please give us a call to arrange for an engineer to do it for you. Free software is installed entirely at the users risk.