

OTTAWA

Happy New Year!

PC NEWS

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ARTICLE

Is Free Software Really Free? *by Alan German*

This is the title of one of OPCUG's fall presentations for patrons of the Ottawa Public Library system. The sub-title is "And, if it is free, is it any good?" So, what are the answers to these two questions? Well, for the first question, the answer is a definite yes – and no. And, come to think of it, that's the answer to the second question also!

But, we are getting ahead of ourselves. We first need to think about what do we mean by "free". The open-source community has the answer(s). We can mean free as in "free beer", i.e. software that is available to us at zero cost. And, we can mean free as in "free speech", i.e. there are no restrictions on what we can do with the software. Of course, real life is more complicated than this. We can have freeware that costs nothing but has certain – and not unreasonable - restrictions on its use. For example, a number of authors provide their software free for individual use but require commercial organizations to purchase licensed versions. A common requirement is a prohibition on end users selling the software to others. Open-source software has similar restrictions. The product costs nothing – and even the source code available – but the software is licensed. A special licensing scheme, such as the GNU General Public License, essentially requires that if anyone distributes a modified version of an open-source product, then the software and the modifications must be placed in the public domain. The intent of this so-called "copy-left" (basically the opposite of copyright) license is that

the open-source software remains completely "free".

Another question worth considering is why do some programmers give their work away? Many freeware authors have developed a program, for their own use, and just want to share the result with other computer enthusiasts. For such individuals, peer recognition is sufficient reward. Some organizations release free versions of programs, but charge for any support that is required. Or, a free – but lightweight – version of a program may be a teaser for a more fully-featured product that is offered for sale. The reasons for developing and distributing free software are as numerous and varied as the names assigned to the distribution modes.

Truly, there are many variants on "freely" distributed software, in addition to freeware and open-source packages. These include: shareware (sometimes called trialware or demoware) that is free to try but requires you to purchase it for continued use; nagware where a "light" version of a product keeps reminding you about a premium package that you can purchase; and adware where the free program downloads and displays advertisements.

Two particular software distribution modes are to be avoided. Spyware watches what you are doing and "calls home" over the Internet to report back to its master. This may be relatively benign like tracking which web sites you visit for marketing purposes, or it may be a

form of identity theft where the software steals your passwords and credit card numbers. Malware packages can be fraudulent, such as trying to sell you programs to fix non-existent problems, or they may turn your computer into a Spam-sending robot, or make it part of a network of zombie machines conducting a denial of service attack on some web server. Clearly, none of these types of applications are desirable to have running on your computer.

So, how can we avoid the malicious software that is out there? A good first line of defence is to check out programs on the web before downloading and installing them. For example, the first five pages of the results from a search on Google for "Antivirus XP 2008" provide hits with warnings about this rogue program and instructions on how to uninstall it. (The "anti-virus" program "finds" hundreds if not thousands of "problems" on your computer and then offers to sell you more software to eliminate the (non-) threats!). You should also only use reputable sources for software downloads (such as PC World, CNET, and Tucows) where editors review the programs being offered. Read multiple, on-line reviews but, once again, use discretion unless you are confident about the sources of the information.

(Continued on page 3)

Inside this issue:	
<i>Calendar / Coming Up / Raffle</i>	2
<i>Is Free Software Really Free?</i>	1,3,4
<i>Free Software Guide—Part 11</i>	5
<i>Contact Information</i>	6

Next Meeting: **WEDNESDAY, January 13th, 2010**

Coming Up...

► January 13th:

Member's Favourite Night

At the January general meeting, there will be presentations by three OPCUG members.

Chris Taylor will give a demo of the OPCUG on-line presence – The PUB. He will show you what services and benefits are available to you as part of your membership fees.

At the last members' night, Alan German outlined the features of a number of free utility programs. This year he's back with more of the same – but quite different – software! Some of the offerings at this session will be utilities to help you give the images from your digital camera meaningful file names and number sequences; an easy-to-use but powerful file synchronization program; a program to make your Windows desktop look like a Mac; an update to a favourite disk defragmentation utility; a look at Redmond's entry for free anti-virus software; an editor for the right-click context menu of Windows Explorer that comes from a surprising source; and possibly even more free and open-source goodies!

Finally, Harald Freise will be demoing some of his favourite programs. What are they? You will have to come out to see!

February 10th:

Microsoft Hack and Defend, Bruce Cowper

March 10th: TBA

April 14th:

Colossus and early computing, Bletchley Park

May 12th:

PhotoShop editing, Bert Schopf (Blackbird PCD)

June 9:

Pizza Night and speaker (TBA)

December Prize Winners

Through the generosity of Harley Bloom from Bloom Microtech (<http://www.bmtnet.com>) Christmas came early to a large number of audience members at our December meeting. The meeting raffle featured a wide array of prize choices and members **John Archibald, Dan Byrne, Gary Byron, Paul Campbell, Norman Dafoe, Jeff Du-bois, Bob Herres, Tim Hillock, Jacques Jubinville, Bernard Lipski, Keith Martinsen** and **Anthony Toscano** were lucky winners. Even three visitors including **Graham Beckett** and **Don Popadick** got in the act and took home a prize (third name withheld by request).

To be honest, a few of our winners were luckier than normal with some of them (and you know who you are) winning more than one prize!

Many thanks to Harley Bloom and his two able assistants for a great presentation and all the early Christmas gifts.

Linux SIG

Andrea Wells, the Linux/Open Source SIG's newest member, is an enthusiastic supporter of Linux and open source software in general. She has a long background of working with Linux in a scientific environment as well as on her home computers. Andrea has volunteered to take over the leadership of the Linux/Open Source SIG from Don, who recently had to step down from his very active roles in the OPCUG. On behalf of all members, I would like to thank Don for all his amazing work for the Group and in particular for his founding of the Linux/Open Source SIG.

At the January SIG meeting, Andrea will be showing the Ubuntu Netbook Remix running on an LG netbook. Based on the hugely popular desktop version of Ubuntu Linux, Netbook Remix is optimized for the Intel Atom processor found in pretty much all netbooks and features a launcher that allows users to get on-line more quickly and have faster access to their favourite applications.

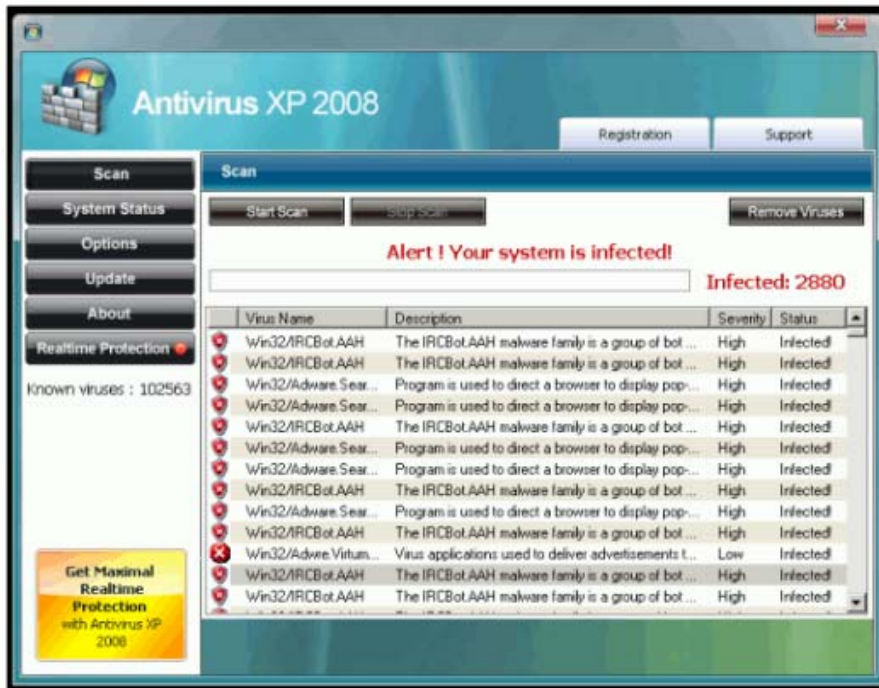
Also, if you have ideas about topics for the Linux/Open Source SIG, Andrea would like to hear about them. You can let her know at the SIG meeting or send her an email at Andrea.Wells@opcug.ca. Come on out to the SIG and join the discussions.

2010 CALENDAR

Meetings	Date	Time and Venue
OPCUG General Meeting	Wednesday, January 13 th	7:30 p.m. Auditorium of the Canada Museum of Science and Technology , 1867 St. Laurent Blvd. http://www.science-tech.nmstc.ca/english/index.cfm
Beginners' SIG	Wednesday, January 13 th	Immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting.
Linux / Open Source SIG	Wednesday, January 13 th	Immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting.
Beer BOF (Wing SIG East)	Wednesday, January 13 th	10:00 p.m. (after all other SIGs) at Liam Maguire's, St. Laurent Blvd. at Innes Rd.

Please note that unless otherwise noted, SIGs meet at 9:00 p.m. (immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting).

Is Free Software Really Free? *(Continued from page 1)*



Antivirus XP 2008 manages to “find” almost 3000 infected files on a system with an on-access virus scanner that is updated daily, both software and hardware firewalls, and up-to-date patches of the operating system! What's wrong with this picture?

OPCUG members know that being a member of a user group can be of assistance. Our members have access to frequent software reviews, written by other club members, and published in Ottawa PC News. The Linux Free and Open-Source Software Special Interest Group (<http://www.opcug.ca/public/LinuxSIG/LinuxSIG.html>) has web pages listing all of the freeware and open-source packages for which reviews are posted on our web site. And, finally, The PUB, our members-only on-line system, allows us to ask questions about what software is available for a specific task, and to receive feedback from other members on programs they use or have tried.

So, if people take heed of most of the above advice, they will find that freeware does indeed provide a wide variety of very useful programs. In fact, it is quite possible to build a comprehensive software toolbox – with security applications; office suites; web browsers; E-mail clients digital image, music and video file management systems; backup programs; and even entire operating systems and their associated applications – all with free software. But, the question remains – if it's given away, can it really be any good? Certainly some freeware is very good, and can in fact be better than some similar proprietary software products. The following are examples of some freeware in the specific categories mentioned.

In terms of security products, many OPCUG members use AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition as their virus scanner of choice. The program is actually a mild form of nagware although, most of the time, the nagging part of the nagware isn't evident. AVG normally goes about its business in the background, scanning files “on access”, as they are either read from or written to disk. Even the daily updates, for new virus signatures, and occasional changes to the scan engine, take place without any user notification or interaction. But, should you open the main menu screen, a drop-down notification panel will offer to sell you the AVG Internet Security Suite. You can click on a Hide Notification button and the panel will disappear – only to return next time you open the main menu. A minor inconvenience in an otherwise very efficient package.

The software firewall most commonly used is ZoneAlarm. Although many users report that the notification messages are intrusive, the vast majority of these can be eliminated by simple configuration changes. In particular, you should turn off “Alert Events Shown”. This will eliminate the nuisance reporting but allow any real alerts to still be displayed. The other thing to do is to use “Allow – Remember this setting” for all of the programs that you regularly use to access the Internet, such as your web browser and E-mail client. Perhaps surprisingly, even Microsoft is in the freeware game with an anti-spyware product. Windows Defender comes bundled with Windows Vista, but a version of the package is also available as a free download for Windows XP.

The free (open source) office suite of choice is undoubtedly OpenOffice. This package is comparable to Microsoft Office which features Word, Excel and PowerPoint, with the OpenOffice equivalents being Writer (word processing), Calc (spreadsheets), and Impress (presentations). The functionality of the suites are very similar, and the OpenOffice programs will even read and write DOC, XLS and PPT files, although sometimes with formatting issues. OpenOffice also comes with Base (a database manager similar to Access) and Draw (a drawing package).

There is lots of choice when it comes to web browsers and E-mail programs, but many users end up with the Firefox web browser and the Thunderbird E-mail client. Both of these programs have lots of built-in features, but much more functionality is available from a wide range of “add-on” modules.

There are also many programs that offer ways to manage your digital photographs. Packages like Google's Picasa 3 provide ways to organise your photos. with albums and image tags, a variety of editing features, the ability to create slideshows or movies and to share photos. by E-mail or on the Internet, plus a multitude of printing options. Batch File Renamer is a very useful utility that, as its name suggests, allows you to rename a group of image files with names of your choice, and numerical sequencing that makes a lot more sense than IMG_0617.JPG and IMG_0618.JPG.

(Continued on page 4)

...Really Free? *(Continued from page 3)*

Similarly, if you do wish to send a number of images by E-mail, or post them to a web site, Microsoft's Image Resizer utility can shrink your photographs to a reasonable size for the purpose.

When it comes to audio and video files, there are numerous programs that will play these for you. Old favourites like Winamp can be dressed up in "skins" to drastically change their on-screen personae, and the initial Spartan layout of VLC can be enhanced through a variety of menu options. If you need to be able to record sound or edit audio files, then a program like Audacity can provide all of the tools that you will need.

Archiving files, including digital images and audio compilations, can easily be achieved by transferring your files to either CD or DVD using free programs like CDBurnerXP. And, when it comes to file backup, SyncToy, yet another of Microsoft's PowerToys, will let you set-up "folder pairs" for file synchronization, making it easy to echo (create an exact copy of) a file structure from one disk to another, including external USB devices.

Some utility programs provide replacements or extend the functionality of software that form part of the Windows operating system. For example, the disk defrager in Vista tells you – "This may take from a few minutes to a few hours" – which is not very helpful. But, Auslogics Disk Defrag provides a more familiar display with flashing, coloured sectors showing the action, and a progress bar indicating how long the defrag is likely to take. Everest Home Edition gives you a snapshot of your hardware, with lots of details, in lots of categories, such as information on your CPU, monitor display, and storage devices. And, Notepad++ provides many more features than its Windows equivalent, including opening multiple files under different tabs, and spell checking.

Finally, it's even possible to obtain a complete operating system, together with a host of applications, at zero cost. One well-known example is Ubuntu Linux which features new releases every six months. Downloading and burning an ISO file creates a Live-CD so that you

try Linux without changing anything on your hard drive. Installation from the CD is simple, and the distribution (distro in Linux-speak) includes OpenOffice, Firefox, the Evolution E-mail client (although Thunderbird can readily be downloaded and installed), plus software for handling digital image, audio and video files.

So, the answers to our original questions can clearly be identified as yes and yes. Lots of software is available at no cost, and much of this is very good indeed. However, it does take a little research to find the ideal package that will accomplish your specific task. But, that's why we like playing with computers – isn't it?

Bottom Line

Audacity

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Auslogics Disk Defrag

<http://www.auslogics.com/disk-defrag>

AVG Anti-Virus Free

<http://free.avg.com/>

Batch File Renamer

<http://www.ezyware.com/>

CDBurnerXP

<http://cdburnerxp.se/>

Everest Home Edition

http://www.oldversion.com/Everest_Home_Edition.html

Firefox

<http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/upgrade.html>

Image Resizer - Microsoft PowerToys for Windows XP

<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/powertoys/xppowertoys.msp>

Image Resizer - PowerToy Clone for Windows

<http://www.codeplex.com/PhotoToysClone>

Notepad++

<http://notepad-plus.sourceforge.net/uk/site.htm>

OpenOffice

<http://www.openoffice.org/>

PhotoStory 3 for Windows

<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/PhotoStory/default.msp>

Picasa 3

<http://picasa.google.com/>

Thunderbird

<http://www.mozillamessaging.com/en-US/thunderbird/>

SyncToy

<http://www.microsoft.com/prophoto/downloads/synctoybeta.aspx>

VLC Media Player

<http://www.videolan.org/vlc/>

Winamp Media Player

<http://www.winamp.com/>

Ubuntu Linux

<http://www.ubuntu.com/>

Windows Defender

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/products/winfamily/defender/default.msp>

ZoneAlarm

<http://www.zonealarm.com/security/en-us/free-upgrade-security-suite-zonealarm-firewall.htm>

OPCUG Free Software Guide—Part 11 Compiled by Alan German

This guide features an annotated list of free computer programs. The software mentioned has not been reviewed (except where noted) nor have any tests necessarily been conducted. Consequently, no guarantees are provided that the individual programs will perform as described. Rather the list of available software is provided for the information of our members who may find one or more of the programs useful. If you try one of the listed items, you are encouraged to share your experience, good or bad, by providing a brief review of the program for a future issue of the newsletter.

Microsoft Security Essentials

Microsoft Security Essentials provides real-time protection for your home PC, guarding against viruses, spyware, and other malicious software. The free download is simple to install, easy to use, and always kept up to date. It's easy to tell if your PC is secure — when you're green, you're good. It's that simple.

Current Release: Version 1.0.1611.0

Web Site: http://www.microsoft.com/Security_Essentials/



Inkscape

Do you want the power of programs like Adobe Illustrator or CorelDraw, but in an open-source package? Perhaps you should try Inkscape, a vector-graphics editor with the same tools and resources as those other drawing applications.

Current Release: Version 0.46

Web Site: <http://www.inkscape.org/>

AMP WinOFF

This utility will schedule your computer's shut down at a specific time, after a certain length of time, or you can select from a number of other options.

Current Release: Version 4.55

Web Site: <http://www.ampsoft.net/utilities/WinOFF.php>



Audacity

Audacity is a free, easy-to-use audio editor and recorder for various operating systems, including Windows and Linux. You can use the program to record live audio; convert audio tapes and vinyl records into digital recordings or CD's; edit MP3, WAV or other sound files; cut, copy, splice or mix sounds together, and more!

Current Release: Version 1.2.6

Web Site: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

TaggedFrog for Windows

Andrei Marukovich, a software consultant based in Toronto, offers TaggedFrog to help organize your files, documents and Web links. Just add objects to the library and tag them with any keywords. That's it. You can forget the file name or where the file is located — the tags will find the file for you!

Current Release: Version 1.0.3

Web Site: <http://lunarfrog.com/taggedfrog/>

Autoruns for Windows

Unnecessary services and applications that run whenever you start your PC are a big cause of system slowdowns. This Windows Sysinternals utility has the most comprehensive knowledge of auto-starting locations of any startup monitor. It shows you what programs are configured to run during system bootup or login, and shows you the entries in the order that Windows processes them.

Current Release: Version 9.56

Web Site: <http://technet.microsoft.com/en-us/sysinternals/bb963902.aspx>



Pictomio

Pictomio easily manages thousands of images and video archives using libraries and albums. You can view thumbnails in 3-d folders and image carousels, and even apply geotags to your digital photos.

Current Release: Version 1.2

Web Site: <http://www.pictomio.com>

OTTAWA PC NEWS

Ottawa PC News is the newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group (OPCUG), and is published monthly except in July and August. The opinions expressed in this newsletter may not necessarily represent the views of the club or its members.

Member participation is encouraged. If you would like to contribute an article to Ottawa PC News, please submit it to the newsletter editor (contact info below). Deadline for submissions is three Sundays before the next General Meeting.

Group Meetings

OPCUG meets on the second Wednesday in the month, except July and August, at the Canada Museum of Science and Technology, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd, Ottawa. Meetings are 7:30–9:00 p.m. and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) go until 10 p.m.

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