

Painter X Product Review

by Tom Ekvall, newsletter editor and “Creative Imaging” Columnist,
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Painter X is everything a photo artist, like myself, could ever want in the way of a digital imaging program—or should I say a digital natural media painting program.

Corel Corporation has done a fantastic job upgrading its marquee program for both traditional painters, who create art from scratch, and those like myself who enjoy creating photo art.

The newest version, released in 2007, is geared towards running on Windows Vista (as well as XP and Macs) and incorporates under-the-hood performance enhancing improvements designed to make creating photo art a pleasurable experience—without the mess of paints.

I installed Painter X on my laptop, an Acer with Pentium Dual Core processors at 1.60 GHz, and 2 gigabytes of RAM. In the several months I have tried out the product, not once did my computer crash or significantly slow down due to running out of resources.

I first became hooked on the full version of Painter after using Painter Essentials 3 (a stripped-down version but with plenty of power to create photo art). I got the Painter Essentials 3 free with my Intuos3 tablet. A tablet with pen is essential to get the most out of the program,



although a mouse will work. However, using a mouse does not give you the pressure controls and other things that a “brush” can do using the pen.

After installing the program, which did not involve any problems, I was greeted with a Welcome Screen in the form of a flipbook. The welcome screen (*Figure 1*)

gives you tabbed options, such as retrieving documents, a gallery of what others have created, extra resources such as tutorials available, setting up Painter, and resources on the web. It can be turned off after you get familiar with the program.

I was pleased with all the tutorials, including video learning, available to

help learn the product, which is a complex program but once mastered produces incredible, realistic painted creations that give the feel and texture of a traditionally painted piece of art. Corel goes the extra mile to make sure you have the resources to get the most out of the product and provides links to these resources.

For photographers, a key feature is the Photo Painting System, which includes three modules: Underpainting, Auto-painting and Restoration.

Underpainting

The feature of Painter that I really enjoy is its cloning capability, whereby the colors come from the original source photo (rather than a separate color palette) with the brushes used to transform the image to a desired style. A Quick Clone

(see *Painter X* on page 2)

Figure 1



(Painter X—continued from page 1)

feature as part of the Underpainting palette creates a copy upon which the photo art will be created. A tracing paper is also created at the time which can be toggled on and off to show the original photo (when on) as a guideline for the applying the brush strokes in the appropriate direction. Turned off, only the painted image is visible on the workspace. This is true whether using the auto-painting feature or applying the brush strokes by hand (pen).

Painter X provides as a new feature a selection of color schemes as part of the Underpainting palette, such as Impressionist, classic, modern, water-color, sketchbook and chalk. Each style of painting may require changes to the original photo, such as increasing or decreasing saturation, increasing or decreasing contrast or making the colors more or less vivid. Pastels and chalks tend to be softer by nature while oil and acrylics tend to do best with increased saturation. Painter X allows you to use the Photo Enhance sliders as with Painter 9.5 and Painter Essentials 3 to make changes to the color, contrast or saturation; you can even use both to get the desired effect.

Auto-Painting

Despite the numerous brushes, effects, and paper textures that enable you to create every possible style of painting, Painter X also provides an enhanced auto-painting tool for those that may be somewhat artistically challenged as to painting, but want to create water-color, oil, pastel, acrylic, chalk, charcoal or impressionist-style artwork.

After making selections of brush stroke, opacity, brush size and other variables, you then rely on the program to automate the process of creating the art work with the touch of the “Play” button on the palette. No continuous drawing of brush strokes is required.

(see Painter X on page 3)

Figure 2

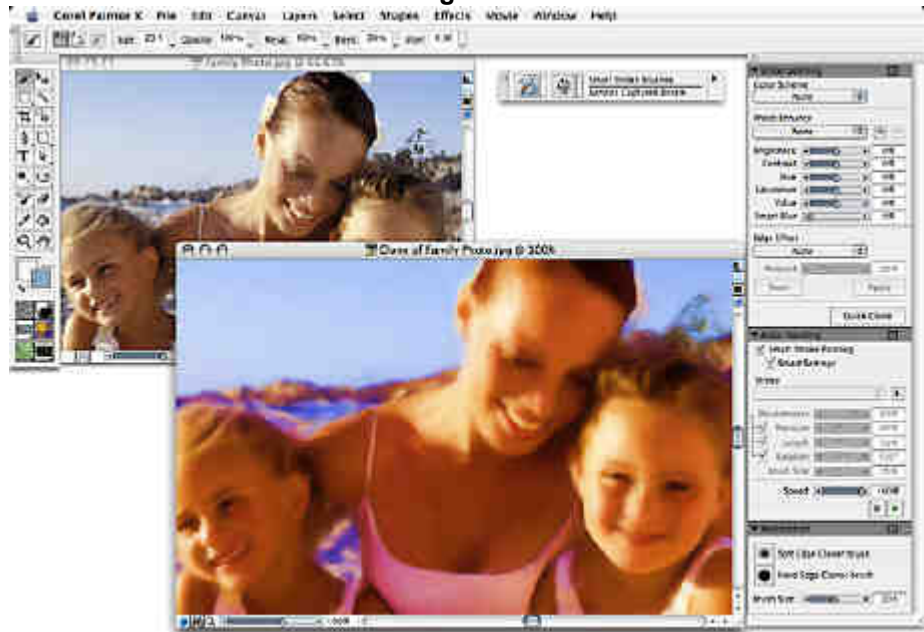


Figure 3

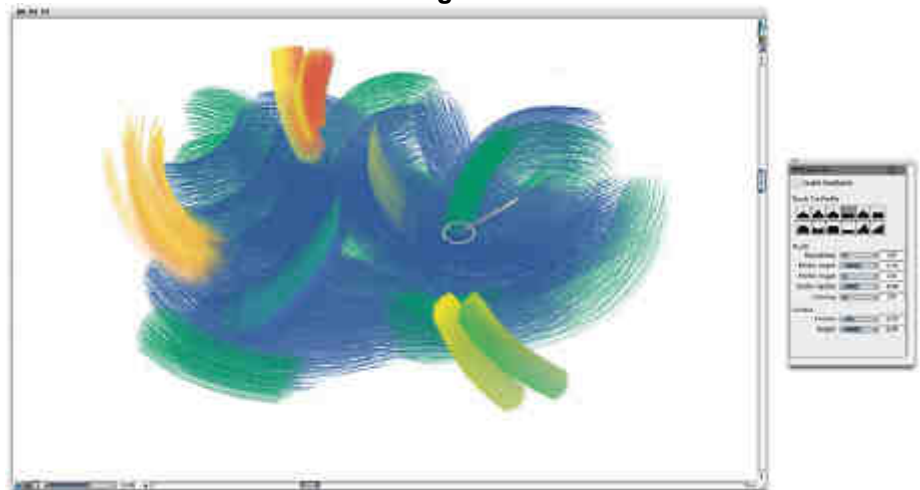


Figure 4



(*Painter X—continued from page 2*)

The auto-painting feature does a very good job of creating a realistic “painted” photo from my experience using this tool. Some may wonder why a high-end program would even offer an auto-paint palette. I find it desirable, as it gives me a chance to experiment with different strokes, brush sizes, paint brush styles, and other factors and produce a final product within a relatively short period of time. If I apply by hand (not using auto-paint), I use a low level of opacity to gradually build up the color values and style, and this takes time.

What is new, and which I find favor with, is the addition of a speed setting with the auto-paint tool that allows you to slow down the process of creating the picture so that you can stop it, make changes to types of brushes, opacity or size, and continue the process of painting the picture

Another new feature as part of the Auto-painting palette is the addition of Smart Stroke Painting and Smart Settings, where Painter will vary the stroke width, length, and pressure to follow the forms within the original photo as it randomly applies the brush strokes. There are 16 Smart Stroke Brushes, including those for watercolor, chalk, acrylics, sponge, charcoal, colored pencil and more. This is especially helpful to those who may be new to “painting” as they learn and master the types of brushes and effects that can be created.

Restoration

The Restoration feature includes two brushes (a soft edge cloner and a hard edge cloner) that enable you to restore original detail of the photo without a “painted” effect. This is invaluable when working with a portrait and you want to bring out facial features. Also new is the ability to open another photo/image with the desired color scheme and

use those colors on the photo being cloned. This is called the Match Palette effect. I have not tried this effect yet.

Figure 2 is an image of the Painter workspace with the Photo Painting System and its Underpainting, Auto-painting and Restoration tools on the right hand side.

Brush selection

There are so many brushes, more than you can imagine. However, some of them soon become favorites as you experiment and see how each performs. I like to use the cloner brushes which are adept at creating photo art from colors in the source photo rather than the Colors palette. Other brush categories can be used to draw color from the source photo by applying the Clone Color option from the Colors palette. It looks like a rubber stamp. If you forget to apply the Clone Color option, the color applied will be from the Colors palette, which I have done on occasion wondering why the color was green (the active color on the palette), rather than the underlying color from the source picture

Brush selection and control can be accessed on a toolbar on top of the workspace, with more than 30 types of brushes and many more variants for each brush style available. The opacity, brush size, and other relevant factors for a brush are also able to be changed on the top toolbar below the menu items.

A major new brush category in Painter X is the RealBristle Painting System, which provides the most realistic rendition of a brush on a canvas, down to individual hairs (bristles) on the brush showing up as if created by a real brush on a real canvas. It seems each new version of Painter comes up with added realism and this one is no different, as the RealBristle brushes reproduce the natural movement of the artist’s

brush. There are a number of brush variants to choose from, such as Real Round Bristle, Real Tapered Wet Flat, and Real Fan Soft. Multiple colors can be achieved with brushes with strokes fading as color is used up in the brush.

Figure 3 depicts RealBristle strokes created by another artist and a dialog box of brush tips.

As with prior versions of Painter, you can create your own mix of colors on a palette and blend and apply them to the canvas either to a photo or as a painting from scratch.

What has become an invaluable reference guide for me is Martin Addison’s book, *Painter X for Photographers*, published by Focal Press. Everything in the book is geared for creating photo art, and he goes into detail about each brush and brush variant, applications of the brush where best and pictures of the effect of each brush on the canvas. He also talks about Hand Tinting a photo with Painter X using layers, how to choose brushes, and how to customize brushes. The information is presented in a very understandable format and reduces the learning curve associated with mastering the brushes.

There are a number of other new features of interest to professional designers, photographers, and artists. Suffice to say, this is a great product whether upgrading from a previous version of Painter or Painter Essentials 3, or buying for the first time. I cannot think of any cons about this program. It does what it is supposed to do, providing the ultimate in realism, flexibility and brush control.

I opened up a photo of a landscape scene and proceeded to paint pictures using a watercolor effect, an oil painted effect, a chalk painting and

(see *Painter X* on page 4)

(*Painter X—continued from page 3*)

other styles. *Figure 4* is my creation of one of the images painted.

The regular price for upgrading is \$219, while purchasing new costs \$419. Corel is presently offering discounts through their website (www.corel.com) at \$199 for an upgrade and \$379 for new users. A 30-day trial version that is fully functional is also available, as is *Painter Essentials 4* (which runs \$100/discounted to \$80). The product is worth the upgrade, especially if you are using a computer with Vista installed as the Operating System. Those with *Painter 6* or higher qualify for the upgrade price as well as those with Corel's *Corel-Draw Graphics Suite X3*.

And there are so many goodies provided through Corel and others to make the experience fun, such as brush variations, paper texture effects, new gradients, and more. It is a great creative tool as part of my digital photo art studio, which also includes *Photoshop CS3*. Note: Corel has continued to make enhancements to *Painter* to complement *Photoshop*, preserving layer effects and masks.

System requirements for PCs with Windows include Vista, XP, or Windows 2000 OS; a Pentium III with 700MHz or greater of processing speed, and 256 MB of RAM (512 MB recommended). The more power the better.

My next project is to create "hand tinted" photographs using *Painter X*. Looking forward to some really cool results.

Artwork in article provided by Corel Corporation featuring paintings and drawings by Andrew Jones (welcome book) and Cher Threinen-Pendarvis (RealBristle strokes) and used with permission. This article has been provided to APCUG by the author solely for publication by APCUG member groups. All other uses require the permission of the author at tekvall@new.rr.com.

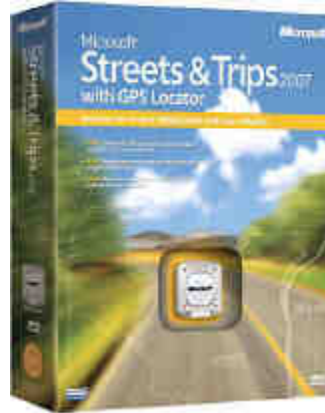
MS Streets & Trips 2007 with GPS

Review by Joseph Kluepfel, Director, Broward Personal Computer Association, Inc., www.bpca.com

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Overview

Install this on your laptop and you have the luxury of setting up your trip at home and then use it in the car. A laptop screen is four times bigger than a navigator installed in a car, or fifteen to twenty times bigger than a portable GPS.



dash mount for the laptop, and every time you start the application, you will have to accept the warnings from Microsoft about using it in a car. The best way of course is to have a co-pilot and a lap table or cushion will make it comfortable; remember how hot laptops get.

Microsoft Streets and Trips is a powerful mapping program, loaded with maps of cities and towns with nearby lodging, food and points of interest. The text directions for the trip include construction warnings, and these can be updated just before you leave. One great feature is the ability to click on a section of your route and drag the route to another road or location.

You can preset your trip with choices, such as start and end times, stops, speed, freeway or non-freeway, shortest distance or shortest time. I've learned to be careful of using Shortest Distance; it may take you off a freeway to city streets to save a fraction of a mile.

Installation

Installation of the application is simple and quick. The GPS connects to the laptop through a USB port, powered by an included car lighter adaptor. If your trip is extensive, you'll need a car adaptor to power the laptop, and a gadget to connect two adaptors if the car, like mine, has only one cigarette lighter. The GPS attaches to the windshield with a small suction cup and it can fall off occasionally. I found that the GPS will work fine just laying on the dash. You should have a floor or

There is a choice for male or female voices for the verbal directions. These will warn you as you approach exits or turns. I found that some of the directions were a little late, especially if you're driving fast. I did have a few occasions where the directions were wrong: right instead of left, or a left turn when the exit ramp was to the right.

It's best to print out the maps and directions, especially maps for the turns and highway exits. Names of the streets are not given, but I would find it annoying to hear the names as you cross each street. Hearing the name of the route or street where you will turn would be helpful.

The screen shows your actual speed, the distance to and direction of your next turn, and distance and time to your destination.

Conclusion

All in all, Microsoft Streets and Trips 2007 with GPS is a very useful aid for traveling and getting directions to unfamiliar locations.

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New Gadgets for 2008

by Sandy Berger, CompuKISS.com, www.compukiss.com

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Every year my husband and I attend the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas to see the latest and greatest high tech gadgets. This year didn't disappoint. We found everything from a Leggett & Platt's \$20,000 Starry Night bed with an HDTV projector, pop-up speakers, snoring sensors, iPod dock, automatic lighting system, and breathing pattern monitor to a General Motors Chevy Tahoe prototype car that drove itself. While I don't expect this GM prototype to make it to market anytime soon, some of the technology that it is built in will evolve and is sure to find its way into our future automobiles.

We also found a few more down-to-earth gadgets and gizmos. In fact, there were several devices that you may want to check out for your own gaggle of high tech products. For instance, if you hate cleaning the gutters, the iRobot Looj has you covered. This robotic gutter cleaner cleans a 60-foot section of gutter in just 10 minutes. Yes, you must use a ladder to place it in position, but you don't have to move the ladder multiple times as you do in regular gutter cleaning. The demos looked marvelous. iRobot also has robotic vacuum cleaners and floor scrubbers.

Although we have been hearing about wireless technologies for what seems to be eons, this year some of that wireless technology became mainstream. Wireless speakers, which up to now were feeble and erratic, have finally found their voice. The Griffin Evolve is a great example. It is a compact speaker system for an iPod. It has two wireless speaker cubes that can be placed in any room in the house. It sounds great and is also easy to use. At about \$300, this is a great

solution to distribute music from your iPod throughout the house.

While prices of technology gadgets continue to drop, it seems that ink for that inexpensive ink jet printer often costs more than the printer itself. Well, thanks to Kodak, this trend may be coming to an end. The new Kodak printers are said to use 50% less ink, and ink cartridges are reasonably priced at \$15 for color and \$10 for black.

Polaroid, another well-known name in photography, has also released a breakthrough product. Their new inkless printer is made for printing pictures from a cell phone or digital camera. Not only does the printer use Bluetooth wireless technology, but it uses special paper that is embedded with 100 billion colored dye crystals. The colors appear when the printer applies heat pulses to the paper. This ink-less technology is called Zink, for zero ink. The 2-inch-by-3-inch prints cost about 30 cents each and the printer sells for \$150, which is not bad for cutting-edge technology.

Although computers are not the focus of the CES show, there were many computer manufacturers showing their wares. Lenovo, the Chinese company who bought IBM's PC division three years ago, has previously focused on their ThinkPad business laptops, but this year they introduced a line of consumer laptops called IdeaPads. These include facial recognition technology. Lenovo, Sony, and others will follow Dell's lead with the introduction of laptops in a variety of bright colors.

Bright colors were the norm at the show. There were MP3 players, cell phone, and gadget covers in every

color imaginable. There were red and blue ladybug-shaped iPod speakers and speakers that pulsed to the beat in vibrating, changing colors. There was even pink CAT-5 networking cable, whose purchase supports the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

Oh, and you can expect to be even more confused by television display technologies in the future. Sony's \$2500, 11-inch Organic light Emitting Diode (OLED) was small but clearly better than anything else on the market today...and it was only as thick as 3 credit cards. Mitsubishi's laser television was also a dramatic improvement. Samsung and Sharp announced backlit LCD televisions. While these technologies may take awhile to go mainstream, other manufacturers announced Internet-enabled televisions that are sure to appear quite quickly. For instance, the Sharp Aquos Net television displays small icons called widgets that showed news, weather, and traffic data from the Internet right on the television screen. Also next year, when digital television goes mainstream, you will see digital TV broadcasting in a variety of devices, including cell phones, cars, buses, and anything else they can possibly think of. One car at the show already had TVs in every door, and drop-down television screens for every passenger.

While we may not all be interested in watching television all the time, we will find some of these new technologies making our lives just a little more pleasurable in the future.

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The New, The Best, and The Worst

Collected by Pim Borman, Webmaster, SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc, swipcug.apcug.org

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Needles, Haystacks and Processing

Finding the needle in a haystack is the proverbial example of an impossible task. Wrongly so. Spread the contents of the haystack out over a large area and get 1000 helpers to each check a small amount of hay. The needle will be found in less than no time. It is a basic example of parallel processing.

According to Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SETI), as far back as 1960 astronomers were speculating that any intelligent life forms present in the universe might be detected by electromagnetic signals reaching us from space. Some astronomers started a Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) on a limited scale that over the years grew to include multiple radio-telescopes searching more and more radio bands for significant signals.

It soon became clear that looking for intelligent signals amongst the enormous volume of recorded data was even worse than finding a needle in a haystack. Parallel processing to the rescue! With an untold number of personal computers worldwide, capable of Internet access and sitting idle most of the time, an enormous amount of potential processing power was going untapped. The University of California at Berkeley (UCB), with sponsorship of The Planetary Society, started project SETI@home in 1999 to put many of those computers to work. They found many volunteers willing to download a small program on their computers, running in the background, to analyze small chunks of

radio-telescope data for signs of intelligence and return the results. As of now there are some 3 million contributors, but nary a sign of intelligent life yet. In any case, the enormous amount of computer processing by this project far surpasses what the best supercomputer might be able to do, at least until quantum computers will have been perfected.

The success of SETI@home inspired many other volunteer computing projects supporting worthwhile scientific causes. According to The Economist (12-8-2007) these include the design of drugs against AIDS, search for new prime numbers, climate modeling, and many others. It requires some snappy programming skills to send small chunks of a large problem to thousands of computers, provide them with the means to perform a set task, return the results, and combine the results for final evaluation before sending out a new crop of queries. That task has been made easier with a dedicated program, BOINC (Berkeley Open Infrastructure for Network Computing), made available by UCB. Over 40 BOINC projects are in operation, including many life sciences, Help Conquer Cancer, and Discover Dengue Drugs.

Impressive as the computer power may be that is being exerted on these projects, there is still room for significant improvement. The short history of the PC not only includes a dramatic improvement in CPU processing speed, but also in auxiliary components that speed up graphics performance. In response

to the extreme image rendition requirements of computer games, fast graphics cards have become available that use special processing chips and hardware to relieve the load on the Central Processing Unit. Rendering the millions of pixels that make up a screen image is perfectly suited to parallel processing, a task for which the graphics chips are optimized. Further adapting these chips to participate in general purpose programming may be a way to increase the parallel processing power of a desktop computer anywhere from 10- to 50-fold. NVIDIA and AMD, the largest graphics-card manufacturers, are working on it. Nvidia has already set up a product line for non-graphics applications and is developing a specialized programming language to go with it.

Next time you hear complaints that something is like finding a needle in a haystack, tell them it's easy: many hands make light work.

Foxit Reader for PDF Files

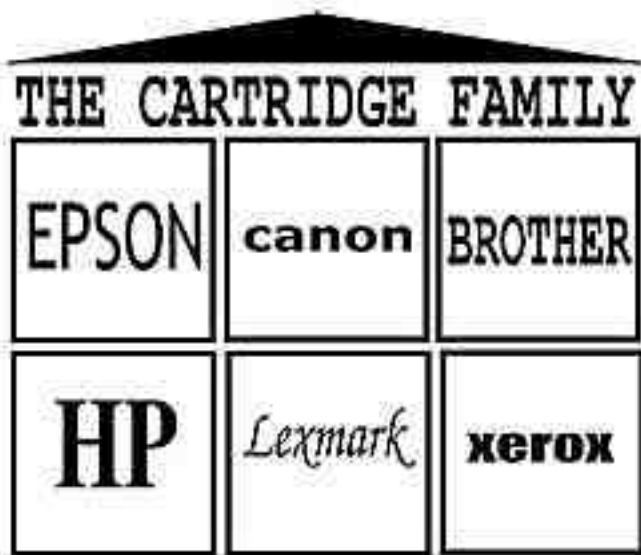
Acrobat Reader is now at version 8 and has been getting more powerful but also more cumbersome with each successive iteration. Steve Bass (PC World, January 2008) found a free program, Foxit Reader and Printer, that is compact, fast, and includes some nice extra features. I especially like that it allows searching all the PDF files in a directory for keywords. I tried that on a directory where I keep all the newsletter files since 2000 and got almost instantaneous results. Impressive! The print function

(see *The Best* on page 7)

The Cartridge Family

by Grant Fuller, a member of Big Blue & Cousins, Canada. www.bbc.org

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We're beat. I hate to admit it. I come from more innocent times when fairness was something to strive for. Family values were not measured by the Sopranos, but by families with more law-abiding objectives.

I hate to give up without a fight but I do not hold much hope for us. If you have a printer that functions well by refilling cartridges, keep it. Repair it when it becomes necessary and show it your unconditional love. The new printers come with chips on the cartridges that the "dealers" say are for telling us when our ink levels get low. Those chips also tell the printer to stop printing after a certain number of nozzle firings or page counts and I strongly suspect that one of my printers is set to refuse a cartridge that was removed and replaced.

I bought some replacement cartridges that were substitutes at a much better price than the gouging name branders, but the trick to

beating the dealers required me to remove the chip from the old cartridge and put it on the new one. This is much easier than it sounds; an X-acto knife can pop the chip out of its little plastic holder and it can then be slipped into the ready and waiting slot on the new cartridge.

I replaced the color cartridges and the printer began flashing lights in the tank bed as each cartridge was replaced. It took me a while to figure out what it was trying to tell me, but I should have known right away. I assumed that my chip replacement skills were not up to par or maybe I had been swindled while attempting to swindle the other swindlers. Out of curiosity, I took one of my black cartridges out (this printer has two blacks) and checked it for ink, still lots. I replaced it and the blinking light began on this slot as well. The same thing happened with the other black.

Apparently, there is more going on with this little chip than meets the eye. Well, actually, nothing meets the eye, it's all too small, but this new aggravation raises the stakes. Now the ink re-filling industry has a chip resetter that we can buy which presumably sets the chip to its original state where it says to the printer, "I am brand new and full." I have not tried this, but I would like to hear from anyone who has, pref-

erably, if you have had success. If I can find a way to beat these printers I own, I will keep them in good repair. The price of ink for inkjets is beyond outrageous and some people are getting very rich. I can only try to imagine what wonderful gifts we would find under the tree of the Cartridge Family this year.

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(The Best—continued from page 6)

works just fine. Foxit also has more sophisticated tools for annotating and writing PDF files and forms, but adds evaluation marks to the output unless you buy the Foxit Pro version (\$39). You may not need that, since there are several other (free) ways to create PDF files, including openoffice.org Writer and MS Office 2007 (with a special download from Microsoft). My Epson scanner can scan images and also output them as PDF files. But at \$39, Foxit is a bargain compared to Adobe Acrobat 8 Standard at \$299.

Download Foxit Reader and Printer free from www.foxitsoftware.com. Linux versions are also available.

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Check Alternative Travel Site for Deals

By Ira Wilsker, APCUG Director; Columnist, *The Examiner*, Beaumont TX; Radio & TV show host

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We have all seen the TV commercials with the gnome fretting over travel problems, and have seen the black-clad inspectors prancing all over a hotel snooping in every nook and cranny. One thing the internet is not short of is travel websites that offer airline tickets, hotel rooms, cruises, rental cars, and package deals combining all of the above. Many of the proprietary airline and hotel sites, such as Continental.com and Hilton.com, themselves guarantee the lowest rates, but neglect to show what the competition is offering. One advantage to the direct sale proprietary travel sites is that they generally do not add a service fee for online bookings, unlike the fees charged by the independent commercial travel websites. On the other hand, the commercial travel sites can show the rates and fares from multiple providers, allowing for comparison shopping for both cost and schedule. While there are many well advertised mega-travel sites like Expedia, Hotels.com, Orbitz, and Travelocity, there are also some lesser known websites that offer a service that some of the mega sites are lacking.

One such site that I recently learned about from a professional acquaintance is Ultimate Fares, at www.ultimatefares.com. While similar to the mega travel sites in appearance and function, it had some different travel results when I compared it to some of the mega sites and proprietary websites in a side by side comparison. In one example, I was looking for the lowest possible airfare from Beau-

mont to Las Vegas on some specific peak travel dates. Travelocity and Expedia displayed a nearly identical selection of flights and airfares, many of which were duplicated on Ultimate Fares. What was unusual on the Ultimate Fares website was the ability of the user to choose from some unusual indirect routings where the user had the choice to choose between a lower fare (not offered on the mega sites) and a longer flight time, including connections. If for the traveler, at his personal choice, it is worth saving in some cases over a hundred dollars in airfare, in exchange for a two or three hour longer total flight time, the user at least has that choice. One specific example was on the Beaumont BPT – Las Vegas LAS example on some peak travel days in the Christmas – New Years time period, when the airlines were extremely busy and heavily booked. While the traveler could select a direct Beaumont – Houston IAH – Las Vegas route from one carrier, or a combination of carriers, both by changing planes in Houston, Ultimate Fares had some lower fares listed with some unusual city pair combinations. When I ran the comparison for this column, Ultimate Fares showed several lower fares than the mega sites, but with the longer flight times by about two hours by going from Houston IAH to the Orange County, California John Wayne airport, another change of airlines, and then a short direct flight back to Las Vegas. If the traveler is on a tight budget, and the difference in cost (savings) is worth more than the hours of addi-

tional time each way and inconvenience, then this could be a good alternative. My only concern would be for the timely arrival of the baggage after being on three different airlines! Ultimate Fares will email two confirmations to the traveler, the first the purchase confirmation, and the second will be the airline confirmation number and itinerary. This second email is the document that will be required to pick up boarding passes at the airport, so be sure to save it and print several copies, and bring the printout with the airline confirmation number to the airport!

Another area of travel deals where Ultimate Fares had rates as good or in some cases even better than the competing mega sites was cruise deals. I randomly selected some dates, and compared the featured cruises on each of the websites, and then found the comparable cruise on the other sites. In many of the cruises compared, Ultimate Fares had lower rates and larger discounts than the mega sites. In one specific example, I selected next September for a date range, and compared Caribbean cruises. Ultimate Fares showed rates for interior, ocean view, balcony, and suite cabins that were very competitive with the mega sites, and in some cases, better deals. According to Ultimate Fares, some of the best deals offered savings off of the published cruise line brochures of “up to” 77%, 75%, and 72%! Remember that on almost all travel sites, taxes and fees will be added to the quoted

(see *Travel* on page 10)

Evaluating Your Anti-Spyware Program

by Vinny La Bash, Member of the
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For many years, the most acute danger to your computer was some kind of destructive virus. Today the danger has shifted from software that is programmed to destroy files, corrupt programs, and disable systems to something more insidious, and perhaps even more treacherous. This threat comes in two broad categories known as Spyware and Trojan Horses.

Spyware started out as a stealth program surreptitiously installed on your system to track your web surfing habits. The developers of spyware didn't want to damage your computer. They wanted only to sell you something. That may be annoying, but there is nothing criminal about it.

A Trojan Horse is a program that pretends to be something other than what it really is. For example, a screensaver could be designed to install a program that will take over your system to forward spam to other machines. Trojan Horses have been used to initiate denial of service attacks, where the target such as a bank, credit card service or other high profile website becomes so saturated with external requests that it cannot respond to legitimate traffic.

When selecting an anti-spyware program, start out by selecting one with a comprehensive signatures database. The best anti-spyware programs have databases that can recognize more than 750,000 different kinds of spyware and Trojan Horse programs. Read the

documentation or call the company. This is important.

The best signatures database won't do you any good if it isn't updated frequently. The bad guys never seem to rest. They release new poison daily. Don't buy any solutions that require manual updates. You have better things to do. Insist on automatic updates.

Another important capability is active monitoring of your system. Wouldn't you rather prevent a malicious program from installing rather than removing it after the damage has been done? Avoid any program that removes infections found only after conducting a manual scan. This probably means avoiding some otherwise adequate free programs. There's an old saying about getting what you pay for. The best anti-spyware programs prevent spyware and Trojan Horses from ever being installed on your system.

Go for a program that allows you to customize your scans. We don't all use our computers in the same way. Some people require more comprehensive scans than others. If you are constantly browsing the internet, you are likely to benefit from a daily scan that checks active memory, system folders, the registry, and all hard drives. If you rarely use the internet or find yourself visiting the same six sites over and over, a weekly scan may be all you need.

You should be able to schedule unattended updates and scans. Your machine should be yours to use as you wish. Any decent anti-

spyware program should be able to run in the background unattended, and not require interrupting your activities. The program should work according to your preferences, not the other way around. Choose a program that permits unattended maintenance and administration.

It's also important that an unattended scan can quarantine infections without requiring intervention from you. Why do some anti-spyware programs ask if you want to remove infections? Of course you do! Of all the features in anti-spyware programs, that is the dumbest.

There are innumerable derivations and iterations of spyware being created. This makes it difficult for even the best anti-spyware programs to catch and destroy them. If you open the Processes tab in Windows Task Manager, you will observe the Process Manager in action. You will see a list of objects running on your system. Some of them are applications like word processors. Others are mysterious entities that don't provide a clue as to what they do, but you can't run Windows effectively without them. Among them would be Windows Explorer, Internet Explorer, Media Center, Windows Mobile Control Center, and many others.

Beyond shutting down a process or resetting its priority, there isn't much a non-specialist can do with this feature. Clever programmers can create spyware that won't

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price, and should be included in any final comparison.

Hotel rooms and airline seats are considered as perishable commodities if not booked, and go unused. Hotels often have some last minute unsold rooms, airlines have unsold seats, and rental car companies have cars left in the lot. Ultimate Fares offers “Last Minute Deals” which offer combinations of flight, hotel, and car deals which can be booked up to 14 days in advance, and offer package discounts of up to 70%. These last minute deals would be ideal for the person or family who has the flexibility of date and location, and will accept a smaller combination of offerings in exchange for deep discounts. The smaller combination of possible offerings is not a sparse offering; as I type this in late December, Ultimate Fares has a lengthy list of last minute deals from Houston, including 230 last minute flight and hotel deals (double occupancy, car optional), 115 flight and car deals, and 47 hotel and car deals, all at package prices of up to 70% off retail rates.

Many of us rent cars at our destination when we fly to distant cities. As an example, I compared rental car rates for an upcoming week at DFW airport. Ultimate Fares listed the rates for 10 different car companies, ranging from no-name deep discount companies, to the major national rental car companies. Ultimate Fares quoted rates up to 40% less than the mega travel sites for the same cars on the same dates! Just remember to include taxes and fees, which are quoted by the website prior to actual booking, in any comparison.

Now, I always heard that if a deal is too good to be true, it probably

is. Ultimate Fares, while not well known, has privacy certificates from Verisign and Trust-E, and is a member of the ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents). I looked up some of the online reviews of Ultimate Fares and they were a mixed bag of positive and negative reviews. One often repeated warning in the online reviews of Ultimate Fares (that also applies to all other travel sites as well) is to be fully cognizant that the original price quoted does not include all taxes and fees; fees and taxes can substantially increase the total cost of the trip! To be fair, Ultimate Fares, just like almost all other travel websites, does indeed disclose the taxes, fees and total price prior to the traveler entering any credit card information. I did find when comparing taxes and fees on some sample airfares between Ultimate Fares, the mega sites, and the airline websites directly, that the Ultimate Fares taxes and fees were about \$10 to \$30 a ticket higher than the airline site which only charges taxes and mandatory fees (but no surcharges), but competitive with the mega sites that have the same taxes and mandatory fees, but also add on some type of surcharge.

Before buying any travel services from anyone online, checkout the reputation of the seller, and use a major credit card that is likely to side with you in the event of a dispute. Be emphatically sure to review the itinerary and any taxes and fees prior to entering credit card information and finalizing the booking process, as many fares and deals are rigid and non-refundable, or have hefty fees to change an itinerary.

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show up in the Process Manager. Any decent anti-spyware program has to have its own built-in process manager that will recognize, track down, and eliminate malevolent software that may not even be in the signatures database.

Anti-spyware programs should be able to monitor programs that load when Windows starts up. There are many very sophisticated spyware programs that do not show up in the Process Monitor or in Control Panel’s Add/Remove section. If your anti-spyware program lacks this capability, find another one.

Assuming your anti-spyware program has the capabilities mentioned above, it is an excellent choice for individuals. However, businesses or organizations with multiple computers will require even more. Whoever is in charge of PCs will not have time to manually monitor or administrate individual machines. It is simply impractical in a large organization for support staff to visit every workstation, apply updates, schedule scans, and ensure that infestations are removed. If this applies to you, look for a program with a centralized administration console. This capability has the unfortunate drawback of being quite expensive, but the time saved generally justifies the cost.

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What's a Good Computer to Buy? Some Tips

by Doug Fairchild, Director, Exton PC Council, PA, www.extonpccouncil.org

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As a person who is active with a computer users group and who has had formal training in Windows 2000 and Windows XP, I'm often asked "what computer should I get?"

This is an age-old question in terms of computer technology time. Almost any professional that provides unbiased advice will tell you that it is not an easy answer. The first question that comes to mind is, what do you intend to do with it?

Many persons, who are not involved with what's current, do not really know just what's encompassed with their regular routines. A typical answer is, "I don't do that much and don't need an elaborate machine".

It seems to me that as technology advances, more and more uses will become commonplace, requiring more oomph from the computer being bought today. Therefore, my recommendations focus on a machine that is good enough for now, with specifications that would hopefully add enough to carry over for a little time to come.

Any professional who keeps up with technical publications can tell you that ratings change faster than the weather. Also, new machines and technology keep changing.

So how's a person to choose?

Typically, in the past, the common time frame was to hope for a machine that would last 5 years before being outdated. Today, the best equation I can offer is that it's like buying a new car. How much can you live with, before getting something that has great new features?

With that being said, let's look at the core components of a computer with what, *in my opinion* would be the minimum for a *Windows* machine to last for a little while. These choices are based on using equipment with name brand components and include websites, where applicable, for further research of these products. I strongly recommend that if you are considering an alternate to name brands, you research that brand.

Some comments about Apple computers follow after the discussion on recommendations for Windows machines.

Operating System—Windows XP (any version), Windows VISTA (Home Premium or better)

Since the release of VISTA, many computers are still being offered with Windows XP. VISTA Home basic is considered by most professional reviewers as less desirable than any version of Windows XP. While there has been a lot of VISTA bashing, some of the derogatory statements are not true. For clarification and a better understanding of problems related to VISTA see tinyurl.com/yqqstj.

It is definitely true that some peripherals, like various printers and some other devices, do not work with VISTA. However, it needs to be said that at some point, progress needs to preclude older technology. For example, how many people can work on their automobiles like they used to. It takes much more sophisticated and expensive equipment. To see what devices will be affected by VISTA, download and run *upgrade advisor* from

tinyurl.com/3b27j6. Even though you are not upgrading, but considering a new computer, this will let you know what devices will be affected by VISTA.

CPU—Processor—Intel® Core™2 Duo (www.intel.com) or AMD equivalent (www.amd.com/us-en).

RAM (base memory)—Window XP: 1GB (or more—consider 2GB); Vista: 2GB (or more)

The type and specifics will be controlled by the computer model you select. One consideration is to allow for expansion at a later date. Check to see if there are open slots to add additional memory. It can be worthwhile and can save in the long run to pay a little more upfront by having the memory configured to allow for this upgrade. While Windows Vista states 1GB as minimum, you probably will want 2GB.

VRAM—Video RAM (memory on your graphics card): 256MB (or more)

This is frequently ignored by inexperienced shoppers, but can make a world of difference on the performance of a PC. For a detailed explanation see tinyurl.com/38kdfg.

A few popular graphic card manufacturers are: ati.amd.com, pny.com, and nvidia.com.

Hard Drive—100GB (or more)

Most new hard drives use a newer type of interface referred to as SATA (Serial ATA). Look for this specification, unless you have an older hard

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drive you wish to use in your new computer, which is more likely a PATA (Parallel ATA). One of the newest technologies is a Flash Hard Drive. Currently this is primarily for notebooks (laptops). It has some definite advantages but also some drawbacks. It's expensive and has limited capacity. It may be the upcoming future of Hard Drives. See tinyurl.com/2ymre9 for a PC World review.

A couple of popular hard drive manufacturers are: seagate.com (note that Maxtor has been acquired by Seagate Technology), and westerndigital.com.

Power Supply—Varies with the devices built into the computer. If you believe that you may be adding internal devices, consider a computer with a power supply that has more capacity than needed for preconfigured devices. This can be a little complicated, but should be an answerable question to the person selling the computer (get someone who has technical awareness). For an explanation of the power supply, see: tinyurl.com/2gv53z. There is also an excellent video at this site to gain a basic understanding of the core components.

Motherboard—Normally this will be controlled by the computer model you select, unless you are purchasing with the option to customize. Being aware and specifying the other core components listed, the motherboard should be suitable and not normally something you choose independently. If you are buying a desktop, you may want to inquire about available PCI slots or other expansion capabilities. In the past, this has afforded the ability to economically install hardware upgrades which may keep your machine current for a longer period of time. Laptops do not, as a rule, offer the same capability to expand and upgrade, other than memory and optical drives.

Optical Drive & Other

Peripherals—There are many choices, and most computers today offer a DVD drive with read/write (this is the ability to play and create DVD and CD disks). Ask what it has and what it will do—also compared to other options.

Notes on Apple Computers—While I do not have firsthand knowledge about Mac (by Apple) computers, the reviews and information I've seen tend to make me believe that the new Macs are superior to many other brands of PCs. I would emphasize new versus computers manufactured prior to 2007. One of the indicators that this is true, is the fact that while sales of other PC manufacturers are falling, Macs have realized an increase in sales. They are, however, more expensive.

If I had the money, I would look seriously at a new Mac with the idea of loading Windows as a second OS (operating system). Mac has a feature called Boot Camp which accommodates adding other OSs. Boot Camp is software included with Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard that lets you run compatible versions of Microsoft Windows on an Intel-based Mac. While they do not offer technical support for other OSs, Mac's will run multiple OSs (including VISTA) as well as other PC OSs. You, of course, have to own or buy the additional OSs to be installed. See www.apple.com.

Notes on Linux OS—Again, I do not have firsthand knowledge about Linux OSs. However, I've been led to believe that they make a lot fewer demands on the computer. From what I've heard, you probably in most cases do not need a new computer to install and run. For more information see www.linux.org.

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