

BYTES & PIECES

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SHOULD I LIKE MICROSOFT?

“Peter doesn't like Microsoft”, or so I'm told someone said. Why should I?

Should I like a company that has been found guilty of infringing Stac Electronics' and Eolas' patents? Should I like a company that is being sued for infringing Burst's patents? Should I like a company that has been found guilty of anti-competitive behaviour in respect of Internet Explorer? Should I like a company that has agreed to pay \$USD1.1 billion to settle a class action suit alleging that it overcharged for its operating system? Should I like a company whose actions have led to investigations and charges in most of the Western world? Should I like a company that settled with the owners of DR DOS for trying to exclude DR DOS from the marketplace? Should I like a company whose Senior Vice-President admitted more than a year ago “Our products are not engineered for security”? *Well, perhaps not the company ...*

Should I go to Hardly Normal and pay \$278 for an office suite when I get one off the cover of a \$8 magazine that does what I want to do at least as well, and, in some ways, better? If I do make the latter choice, and tell other people about it, does that mean I dislike the company that makes the \$278 suite? Should I use an email client that is a major method of distributing worms and trojans, when I can use an arguably better email client that is not targeted as often and is not as vulnerable? Should I advocate that we all go out and do what too many home users do – i.e. use pirated software, when there are free and low cost products that can do the job equally well, or even better? *Well, perhaps not their prices ...*

Should I like a company whose idea of innovation is to buy other people's products (even buying the company where necessary) and brand them as its own, or, alternatively, to produce its own version of a competitor's product and then uses its dominance of the operating system market to take market share away from the competitor? Or should I prefer a company that genuinely innovates, producing applications and features that have no existing counterpart? If we don't support competitive products, how are we going to reap the benefits of competition? If we support unethical or anti-competitive behaviour, isn't that endorsing such behaviour? *Well, perhaps not their business practices ...*

On the other hand, when Microsoft produces a product that really offers innovation and value unmatched by its competitors, I will use it and I will tell you about it. Isn't computing about products that do the job, irrespective of who produced them? *But when their software is the best with which to do the job ...*

I have always been willing to publish articles reviewing Microsoft products and tutorials explaining how to use them. However, I am not going to spend hours researching and writing articles about products I don't use. Those members, who do use them, can do that and I will publish what they write. Funny thing, though, such articles are few and far between. Does that say something about the people who do use Microsoft products, something about the products themselves, or something about members' attitudes?

If I should like Microsoft products, simply because the label says "Microsoft", how come nobody is prepared to try and convince me?

FRONTPAGE IS GOOD

Lindows.com sees Microsoft as its main competitor, yet some of its webpages are constructed using Frontpage. As Michael Robertson, Lindows.com CEO explains:

... even though none of our main website is built using FrontPage, one of the people in our marketing department will occasionally use FrontPage to build a quick content page. And while there are solid HTML editors for Linux, none offer the robust WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editing and tight integration with web servers that make Macromedia's Dreamweaver or Microsoft's FrontPage ideal for quick jobs. LindowsOS is better than Microsoft Windows XP at basic Internet operations like web browsing, email and instant messaging, and when combined with StarOffice, is more than adequate to avoid paying Microsoft \$400 for Microsoft Office 2003, however that doesn't mean that it's better at every task...yet.

When I announced that I was doing a complete rebuild of the Group's website using Frontpage, one member sent me email warning me to be careful of Frontpage because "it produces bloatware code and the pages are many times larger than they would be if we just used simple html code produced by software like 1stPage or similar."

While that may have been true of earlier versions, it doesn't appear to be the case now. 1stPage includes a utility to tidy your HTML code. It could only achieve a 4% saving. Whilst tidying code is not necessarily the same as hand-crafting it in the first place, it still shows that Frontpage's code is reasonably efficient. However, it is not for its code quality that I chose Frontpage 2002 for the job, but for its many other features.

Frontpage was created by Vermeer Technologies Inc. in 1995. In 1996 Microsoft "innovated" by acquiring Vermeer so that it could add Frontpage to its product range. It has since made a number of improvements to the product.

Frontpage 2002 uses Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and wizards to create pages which share a common theme. You choose the theme and Frontpage will then create pages that share that look and feel. It also maps the website (or "Web" as Microsoft calls it). Frontpage also makes it easy to keep track of internal links, test external links, produce a site map, add navigation bars, and rearrange where pages fit in (drag and drop and it adjusts the links and the code). Unlike some web designer software, Frontpage gives you the choice of letting it publish your website, or using an external FTP program.

Is it perfect? No, I found it a little buggy and inconsistent. Sometimes I couldn't move pages around. Sometimes I couldn't attach an existing page and, although I amended the parts of the style sheet that appeared to control the choice of fonts, those changes were not reflected automatically in the website and had to be applied manually.

However, even working around those problems, I was able to create a new website, largely from scratch, much more quickly than I could have done using other programs. And without compromising on its features and look. That's why I call Frontpage 2002 a good product. Now that all non-commercial users can buy "academic" versions of Microsoft's software, Frontpage is even reasonably priced!

If you need support or additional themes and templates, there many websites that can assist. Indeed,

Frontpage's popularity has spawned a whole Frontpage industry. Just point your favourite search engine to search for templates, themes or tutorials for Frontpage and then take your pick! Note, though, that some themes and templates are free, but many are for sale.

INTERNET EXPLORER AND ACTIVE X CHANGES

Eric Picard writing for ClickZ Today says:

Back in August, Microsoft lost a patent infringement case related to how Active X controls load into Internet Explorer. Eolas (which holds the patent in question) was awarded a whopping \$500 million dollars. Active X is the mechanism used by most Explorer-compatible plug-ins, including Macromedia's Flash and Shockwave, Quicktime, Real Media, Adobe Acrobat, and many others.

As a result of the ruling, Microsoft has chosen to alter the behavior of its browser rather than licensing Eolas' technology. I downloaded a developer version of the new browser to review how they're planning to work around the patent.

It isn't pretty.

Essentially, any time an Active X control is called, a small pop-up warning asks if you want to continue loading the content. It actually stops all content from loading onto the page while the message is displayed -- not just the Active X control. Perhaps most disturbing is that Internet Explorer launches this popup message every time the browser encounters an Active X control on the page, not just once per page load. If a page has multiple Flash ads, every single ad would halt page loading. Surfing the Web could become almost unbearable.

The good news is Macromedia plans to release some server-side tools to allow the security mechanism to be bypassed. The bad news? Every Web site, ad server and content provider in the world will be compelled to adopt and to release this solution prior to Microsoft's release of the Explorer update that enacts the mechanism. It won't be a one-line code change. It involves integration of a server-side code engine that will read through every piece of HTML placed into the browser, then switch the code to comply with the change. Macromedia and many other companies are collaborating with Microsoft engineers to develop toolkits to enable publishers and ad servers to develop server-side solutions that will prevent the pop-up warning from appearing. There's no guarantee a workaround won't be blocked by legalities.

Based on my experiences watching people use the developer version of IE, the experience of Web surfing would be onerous, at best. Visit any Web page with Flash (almost every existing Web site that carries advertising uses Flash) and you'll get a series of halts, skips and jumps. The interruptions in content loading are so jarring it's almost shocking.

Although Microsoft announced a while back that they did not plan to produce any further standalone versions of Internet Explorer, it looks as if there will be a major update early next year, as a result of Microsoft's attempts to work around Eolas' patents.

“NEW” WEBSITE ON THE WAY

While some sections need some expansion, the rebuild of the website structure is complete. It is planned to unveil it at the next Committee meeting and to upload the revised site soon thereafter.

Among the changes are the use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), instead of frames and tables. I have also abolished the JavaScript buttons in favour of simpler ones. Thus, instead of loading a frameset, JavaScript and two tables, the entire home page now takes around half the code that the main page (not including the frameset and contents page) required before. Which means that it should load much more quickly.

The use of Frontpage 2002 and CSS insures that all pages have a similar look, that they all have navigation bars, navigation text for those not using graphics, a copyright notice, a disclaimer, a site map, an update date,

and an HCUG logo, all without effort! It also means that I can add pages to any part of the website by simply right-clicking on the page that is to be the new page's parent and choosing either New Page or Add Existing Page, as required. I can also drag and drop pages from one section of the website to another and Frontpage will adjust all the links and the site map. All of which adds up to a website that is easier to maintain and improve.

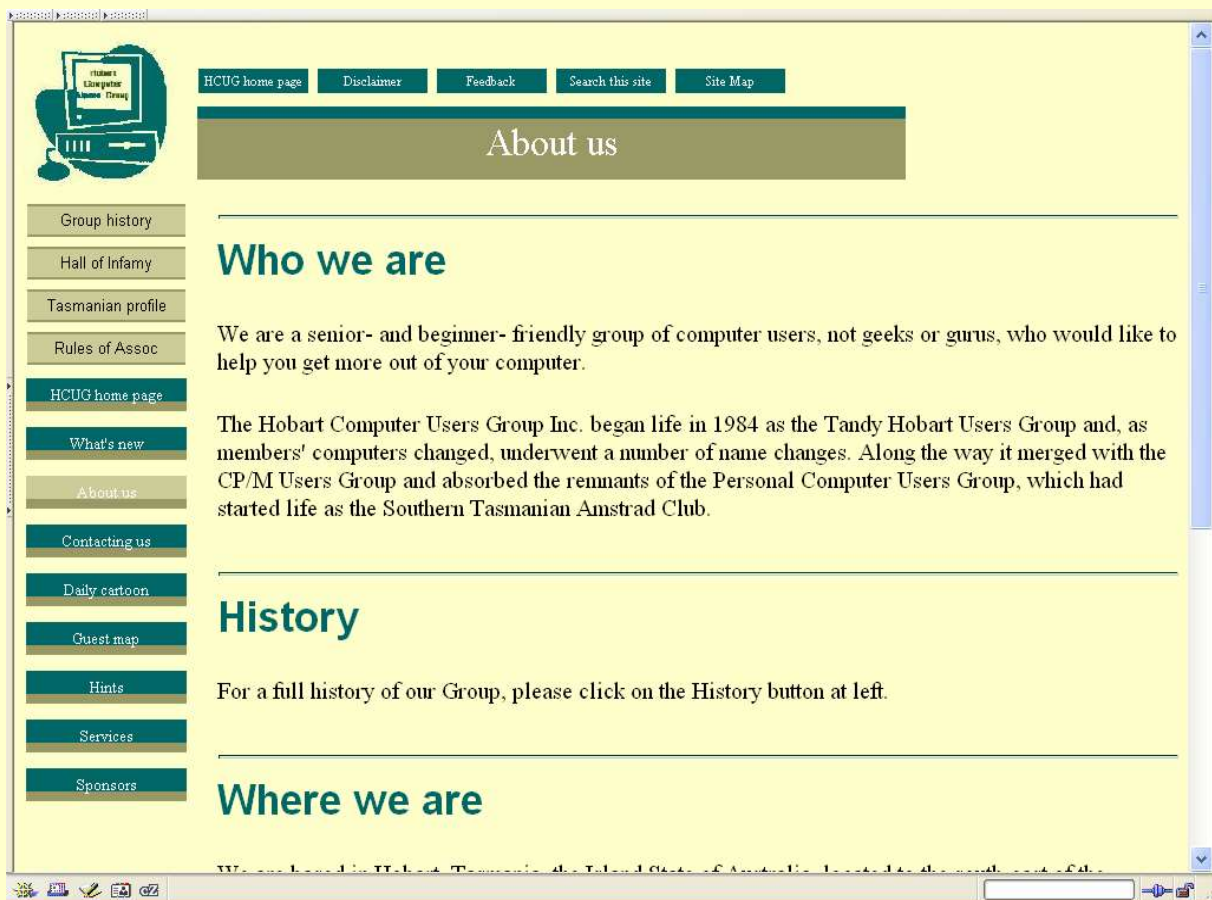
A number of new features have been added and some features of the "old" website have been integrated into the revised version. As the old pages had CSS information embedded in the header, it was simply a matter of amending the header so that it referred to the new external style sheet. Now we can restyle the entire website by simply changing the style sheets, subject to a couple of apparent Frontpage bugs.

All information on the website has been checked and edited as necessary to ensure that it was up-to-date at the time each page was completed. Some links to other sites have been changed as a result and new links have been added.

The font size chosen for most text is 10 pt. This may seem a little small when working at 1024 x 768 pixels. However it is text, not graphics and the viewer's browser can be used to increase its size. In Mozilla/Netscape 6+, this can be done by holding down CTRL and pressing the + key. In Internet Explorer it can be done from the View/Text Size menu option.

Although the screen dump below is not the final version, it will give you an idea of the new colours and layout. Note that the screen dump is of a Mozilla screen at 1024 x 768 pixels with the font size increased to 150%. The top menus have been collapsed to display more of the webpage.

One improvement I would like to see is a better logo. I suggest a map of Tasmania as the background with some computer-oriented motif as the foreground. If you can devise a suitable logo, email it to webmaster@hobartpcgroup.org.au and, if I like it, it will become our "official" emblem on every page of our website.



WILL THE LAST COMPUTER HOBBYIST PLEASE TURN OUT THE LIGHTS?

Asks John C. Dvorak in PC Magazine October 20, 2003

What ever happened to the computer hobbyist? Computers were a hobby once. That was how I got seriously interested. From the moment the concept of a personal computer developed, I was on board. Early on, the devices were called microcomputers, then personal computers, then desktop computers. Things changed when the names changed.

Over the years, most of the self-professed hobbyists gave up or started specializing in collecting old computers and keeping them running ...

But these isolationist pursuits were not what the hobby was about. It was largely an anti-big-machine and anti-big-business revolution. The feelings behind the movement were popular in the 1970s. Wide lapels, wide ties, and anti-IBM sentiment were the themes du jour.

I've thought about this era and tried to understand what changed since then ...

The main element that has never returned to its former state is the ease with which you could program the computer yourself. Except for coding in HTML, which is not really programming, working with today's programming languages requires some schooling and a full-time commitment in too many cases. Even using hardware and software today is hardly easy or fun. Word processors are complex and products such as Adobe Photoshop are a nightmare to the newcomer or casual user. To make matters worse, products such as Photoshop change radically from release to release, making casual use almost impossible except for the most fundamental chores.

On top of that, you have the lack of variety. Throughout the 1980s there were dozens and dozens of word processors. Aside from the definitive program of its day, WordStar, there soon emerged WordPerfect and XyWrite, Volkswriter, Perfect Writer, and on and on. Microsoft Word was a distant tenth in the race. Most of these programs fell by the wayside as the market went to the Windows GUI, with Microsoft greasing its own skids in the process.

As the software scene imploded, computing as a hobby had less and less to offer. Eventually Lotus 1-2-3 fell by the wayside and Microsoft Excel became the standard spreadsheet program. Even the earlier excitement over hot database management programs died off as companies botched their way to failure, leaving Microsoft Access standing alone. The DBMS scene was actually interesting and rich when companies were finding cool methods for storing and presenting data in ways all users could program and understand. Soon creating databases became a chore and reverted to the arcane, with SQL—an enterprise solution—dominating the scene. Now nobody talks about database management programs. Only the superb FileMaker hearkens back to the good old days when the individual user was empowered, and even that program takes some effort to use ...

So computers have become mainstream, and their characteristics as a lovable hobby are probably nil or close to it ... My question is, will the computer hobby ever reappear, or are we heading down an incredibly boring road?

I found the above (edited) article of interest because one of our members recently put a similar argument to me, saying that members usage of software had become "ho hum". (You may care to read the full article at <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,4149,1358125,00.asp>.)

That may well be true for existing members, but there are many users – potential members – out there who are only just getting started. What to you is humdrum, to them is new and interesting. But they don't know we exist. That may be **your** fault! The Management Committee could raise the membership fee to around \$55 (a commonly charged amount elsewhere) and spend some of the money advertising. Instead, over the years, they have tried to keep the fee low and rely on word of mouth advertising to swell our ranks. If you aren't spreading the word, then it **is** your fault if the group fades away. You may find it all too boring, but, if you focused on getting new members and helping them, you could reinvigorate your computer experience. Won't you at least try?

VOLUNTEER NEEDED TO DO 15 MINUTES' WORK A WEEK

To simplify the production of this newsletter, I am now only producing the PDF version. Email subscribers are advised when it is available and can download it, or read it on-line. It is also be made available via the website.

This new arrangement applies until someone volunteers to convert the .pdf or .sxw/.doc version into a text, html, or rtf email version. I have found that the conversion process, which is a simple cut and paste, alters the formatting, which then needs some adjustment. The conversion also involves removing the page references in the "In This Issue" section. Once you become conversant with what is involved, it could take you all of fifteen minutes, so I really don't expect anyone will be willing to take it on. Of course, I could be wrong. I often am.

You have my email address if you want to tell me so.

UNCOVER THE REAL POWER OF XP'S MAINTENANCE TOOLS

From Fred Langa's *Langalist*

Windows XP has gussied up some of its built-in maintenance tools, but in doing so, has actually hidden some of their power. For example, take Defrag. The normal, manual way to run Defrag is to click to Start/Control Panel/Performance and then select "Rearrange items on your hard disk to make programs run faster." All those clicks, and all that verbiage, simply starts the Defrag.Exe program (usually located in the Windows\System32 folder). When you run Defrag this way, it comes up with a graphical front end that requires still more pointing and clicking to make anything actually happen. So, this approach is useless for automated defrags when no one will be there to point and click as needed.

*And that really *is* the way Microsoft steers you to use tools like Defrag. For example, if you search for "Defrag" in XP's help file, the primary search results ("Using Disk Defragmenter" and "Disk Defragmenter") offer links to the graphical, manual – and limited – version of Defrag.*

*But Defrag actually can run *better* with no graphical front end at all and that's the key to using it (and other, similar system tools) in a far more powerful and fully automated fashion.*

We'll start with the basics to make sure those new to Windows and XP are on board. But we'll end with some advanced ideas that can let your PC perform multiple automated unattended maintenance tasks of arbitrary complexity, and in whatever sequence you choose--- and all for free, using only the tools built into XP!

For example, if you want to have your PC automatically wake itself up every night at 3AM, clean up your hard drive, backup all your files, defrag every disk or partition in your system, and then go back to sleep – no problem! In fact, it's easy, once you know how.

Let me show you how simple it can be, using Defrag as the working example. Just click on over to the free article at <http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=15600170> for the full scoop. See you there!

Recommended reading for those who want to automate tasks.

BUY BUY

If you have something for sale, or notice a bargain around town, let everybody know through the HCUG-list and this newsletter. Remember the list is open to everyone, not just Group members, as is this newsletter.

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