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SUN'S 3D DESKTOP

Executive Vice President of Software at Sun Microsystems, Jonathan Schwarz, has excited the Linux world with his demonstration of the 3D desktop that Sun is developing.

Current computer desktops were originally designed in the 70s and 80s. Back then, changing the colour of a single pixel required a relatively large amount of resources. Desktops were accordingly designed to require minimal resources and the result was the flat simulation of a pile of pieces of paper and folders that we have come to know.

Today the task of changing pixels is handled with ease by the video card's own processor and memory. Sun's designers argue that we should take advantage of that. So they began asking questions. What if windows were translucent so that you could see the multiple windows you're working on at the same time? What if



you could tack a note to yourself right on the Web page you're viewing? What if your CD or movie database became a 3D jukebox, where titles were joined with images to make finding what you want easier than ever?

What if you could juggle ten or a dozen open programs at a time by turning their windows sideways?

Written in Java, Sun's new desktop paradigm adds a third dimension to the flat desktop to produce some eye-popping candy. Will it be more productive in a business situation? Only time will tell. In the meantime, take a look at the following to see what it can do. Remember, though, that this is only a prototype and is far from complete.

http://www.sun.com/software/looking_glass/details.html

http://www.sun.com/software/looking_glass/demo.html

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MANDRAKESOFT EXITS BANKRUPTCY

Mandrakesoft is a leading Linux distributor. Based in France, it underwent a series of financial losses and sought protection from bankruptcy in January last year. Pessimists in the Linux community were convinced that signalled the end of a popular Linux distribution. Now Mandrakesoft has recovered and is planning a new release of Mandrakelinux.

On 30 March 2004, the French Commerce Court accepted Mandrakesoft's exit plan from 'redressement judiciaire' (Administration in Australian terms, or Chapter 11 in US terminology). The plan was approved as proposed by the company and its court appointed administrator.

The plan provides for the payment of creditors, without recapitalization as a precondition, over a period of nine years. The turnaround was largely made possible by improvements in the company's financial results -- Mandrakesoft recently recorded its first profitable quarter since 1999. This signals the return to normal operations for Mandrakesoft after a 14 month observation period.

Mandrakesoft chose *redressement judiciaire* in January 2003. During the observation period, the company normalised its activities by refocusing its core business on Linux, dramatically reducing costs, optimising business activities, and by developing high margin revenue lines. As a result of restructuring, Mandrakesoft recorded its first quarterly profit since 1999 of 270,000 EUR on 1.42M EUR of revenue during the period between October 2003 and December 2003.

Mandrakesoft will release its new operating system "Mandrakelinux 10.0 Official" in May 2004, and plans to announce in upcoming months several new products for the corporate and individual markets. The company also recently closed several deals with government and corporate clients.

Meantime, those wanting a preview of Mandrakelinux 10.0 can obtain Mandrakelinux 10.0 Community. You can download it from <http://www.mandrake.com>, if you don't mind downloading more than a gigabyte of software, or you could go to <http://www.elx.com.au> and they will whip you up a four CD set for \$24.95 plus post and handling.

Mandrakelinux 10.0 is the newest version of the popular operating system. The Community branch is designed for those who need the very latest features at the soonest opportunity, regardless of potential glitches. Those who prefer an even more tested version should wait for the 'Official' release.

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WINDOWS UPDATES AND DRIVE IMAGING

Last issue I mentioned SP1a for Windows XP and other updates. I applied them and Windows developed a number of glitches. Whether the updates were to blame or not, I don't know.

Attempts to restore the system using Windows XP's System Restore failed, so here's a suggestion. If you haven't already added the updates, make a disk image first. That way, if all else fails, you can completely restore your system to the way it was before you began updating. That's the way I solved my problems, even though my disk image wasn't quite up-to-date. I simply backed up files that had been downloaded since image was made, copied the entire Eudora folder and saved my bookmarks. My documents were already located on another partition so would be unaffected when the image was restored.

After restoring my drive from the image, I added a few programs that were no longer there and made a new

image of the restored drive.

So take Robert Crombie's advice and get a drive imaging program and use it regularly. You never know when it is going to get you out of trouble.

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ORGANISE YOUR DESKTOP

Some people use a great many applications. Rather than leaving them where they have to click several times to start each one, they may choose to keep them all on the desktop. This can result in a cluttered desktop where it is difficult to find the program you want to use. Organisation would seem to be the key, but how best to do it?

One solution involves designing a special background. Using a graphics program such as Adobe Photoshop, design a background with different coloured sections on which you can organise the applications into logical groups. One problem with this approach is that many people prefer to have a photo as a background, or may even want the background to change every hour or so. Another problem is Windows tendency to rearrange icons even when you don't request it. With Windows XP, you can show icons in groups and lock them to the grid and this may be sufficient. For other versions of Windows, you may need to purchase a program to lock the icons in place.

Another approach is to put the icons into folders, grouping them according to type. If you also edit your Start menu so that it has the programs grouped in a corresponding manner, you'll quickly come to remember where each application can be found. With this approach, there are also a couple of disadvantages. Firstly, you cannot see the icons until you open the appropriate folder, but which is the correct folder? If you are unsure how to classify a particular program, make a number of shortcuts and put one in each folder that you deem appropriate. The second is that it requires more clicks to find your program. If you change your options from two clicks to one click when opening a folder or launching a program, the number of clicks can be minimised. You may also be able to program your mouse so that one button, or a combination of buttons, corresponds to a double-click.

Yet another option that can help is the multimedia keyboard. This has programmable buttons that can be used to launch your favourite programs. While there are not enough buttons to launch every program on your computer, using as many as possible, you could reduce the number of icons on your desktop, improving functionality.

If you have an approach to desktop organisation that I haven't covered here, email me the details and I'll include your ideas in a future update to this article.

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ACER IN TASMANIA

Well-known computer manufacturer, Acer, has opened a service centre in Hobart and this was duly reported in the radio news I was listening to the other day. What wasn't mentioned is the other Tasmanian link. Reseller and managed services provider ComputerLand Tasmania has added Acer to the brands it represents in a bid to diversify its hardware vendor base.

Colin Pedersen, director at ComputerLand Tasmania, said the reseller had formerly relied on HP, which has a 70 percent install base with ComputerLand's government customers. Since the merger with Compaq, the situation with HP had changed, he said.

"We have been looking for other partners. We partnered with Ipex and Acer approached us so we also decided to partner with Acer," Pedersen said.

Acer had made definite moves to ramp up its presence in Tasmania, including opening service centres and employing staff, and had an excellent delivery track record, he said. "If they're going to do that, we'll support them," he said. "They're serious about increasing their market share. That's in line with our strategy."

Another major advantage was Acer's Australian-based call centre. ComputerLand customers had been very

unhappy with vendor support that was outsourced overseas to countries such as India, he said.

So look for Acer to be sold more aggressively in Tasmania and don't forget Acer's other brand, the one they use for consumer items and components, is Benq.

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TELSTRA DOES A BACKFLIP

When Telstra slashed its broadband prices some weeks ago, there was an outcry from its competitors that Telstra had taken advantage of its position as a telecommunications wholesaler and indulged in anti-competitive behaviour by lowering its retail broadband prices without a corresponding decrease in wholesale prices. One competitor complained that it had negotiated a deal for broadband at \$36 that Telstra was now retailing at \$29.95! After the outcry, Telstra did make some concessions on wholesale prices, reportedly reducing the \$36 to \$29.75.

Not surprisingly the ACCC intervened and threatened Telstra with a \$10 million fine plus on-going fines if the anti-competitive behaviour continued.

Now Telstra has offered its wholesale customers a choice of two price structures. They can either have an across the board discount of 40% (bringing the \$29.95 package down to \$17.97 wholesale), or they could choose what Telstra called a "growth option" which offered lower rates on the higher speed services.

Whether what Telstra did was a breach of competition law, or not, the important thing for retail consumers is that the new wholesale charges ensure that better broadband deals will remain in the market place and more users will be able to dispense with their slow dial-up links in favour of the more useful broadband.

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GOOD BUY

I went in to Angus & Robertson at Eastlands on Saturday and noticed that they have a new series of computer books entitled "An Absolute Beginners Guide to ...". Priced at \$39.95, they nevertheless looked to be very good value for anyone wanting to learn about Microsoft Office, or any of the other topics covered by the series.

In a bin at the door were some "Brainfood" titles, heavily reduced in price. Among them was a well-illustrated book on MS Office XP for \$8.00!!! I cannot guarantee that there will be any left by the time you get there, but have a look anyway.

Some computer components, especially memory, are rising as shortages occur in the marketplace and the rise and rise of the Australian dollar against the Yankee greenback comes to an end. However, some bargains can still be had if you act quickly.

What bargains have you noticed around town? Please email the details to me, or post them to HCUG-List so that we can all save a dollar or two. The Group exists so that we can help one another. Get more value out of your membership by helping others in this easy way.

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