

THE COMPUTER CORNER

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- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR
105 Martin Drive
Port Washington, WI 53074-9654
(262) 284-9346
skaplan@mcw.edu

At this writing it is the start of February 2005, and I have had several computing changes, discoveries and suggestions that would be good to share.

First, if you have not already done so, be sure to get both Ad-Aware and Spybot installed on your machine, and run them at least as often as their definition files are updated. There are a lot of malware programs out there that will pop a definition in your registry or elsewhere on your machine, which will send all sorts of information recorded on your computer back to wherever without your knowing it, whenever you are connected to the web. Both Ad-Aware and Spybot are excellent programs, but as is true with virus scanners, neither will catch all the malware. Your chance of getting and removing all the bad entries are about 99.9% if you use them both. This is not just my opinion. At least one study has been done to compare most of the "computer cleaners" available, some of which charge goodly sums for their software. Ad-Aware and Spybot (both free) came out at the top in detecting all the bad stuff that had been loaded on the computers for the test, but neither was able to detect everything. However, between the two of them, they got everything. One big caution, though. A spoof site has been using Spybot's name and selling software that doesn't work and may contain malware itself. When you get to the site to download the free software, be sure the software is called "Spybot – Search and Destroy". Just to be sure, use these URLs: <http://www.spybot.info/en/index.html>, and <http://www.lavasoft.de/software/adaware/>. These two are MUST HAVE programs, and they are free! Microsoft also makes a free Antispyware package but it is due to expire at year's end when they will start charging a fee for it.

Ed Rate (AA9W) sent me an email asking about Norton Systemworks usage graphs on memory usage. Specifically, he asked the difference between several types of memory sensors in Systemworks. Here they are with the definitions:

Memory Load: According to Norton's help file, when a sensor reports a 50% memory load, all the RAM (Random Access Memory, or the memory sticks you purchased at Best Buy last week) have been committed, and any subsequent memory commitment requires swapping between RAM and the Swapfile. Note that the Swapfile is also known as Virtual Memory in the Windows world, though it is not memory by any stretch of the imagination! Rather, it is just some space Windows lays out on the hard drive where it can write stuff temporarily, like a human using a scratchpad.

Memory Free: If Norton is consistent, this must be all non-committed RAM plus all non-committed space in the Swapfile.

Permanent Memory Free: Since the Swapfile is not permanent, this must be all of the free RAM memory only.

Virtual Memory Free: This would be all the non-committed space in the Swapfile.

User Memory Free: This is a little harder to define, because it doesn't refer to where the memory is, but rather how the memory is used. The memory in a computer is divided into three areas with regard to usage and priority. 1. Memory for the Kernel (core, heart), which is used to keep the operating system and essential services going. 2. Memory for the Graphical Device Interface (GDI). The GDI is used to paint the screen and otherwise change the computer's unfathomable musings into meaningful stuff a human can understand. 3. Memory for the User, which is everything not in 1 and 2, above, such as running programs to calculate your income tax or write a letter or play Solitaire. Hope that helps, Ed.

Two new programs that are taking the world by storm are Mozilla Firefox and Mozilla Thunderbird. Firefox is a browser, much faster, more efficient and safer than Internet Explorer or Netscape.

Nevertheless, it has all the frills and features of the two “biggies”. Thunderbird is an email program that replaces Netscape Mail and Outlook Express. It has a really good spam filter that learns incredibly quickly to filter junk mail. I downloaded both Firefox and Thunderbird and played with them for a few days. After that short introduction, I was convinced. I imported all my addresses and favorites from Netscape (which was my main browser), and dumped Netscape! Really good software, and it is free! Highly recommended. Note added 5May05: Both Firefox and Thunderbird continue to be great.

Finally, I upgraded the operating system from Win98se on my main machine. It had been crashing more often, and seemed sluggish, even with the good efforts of Norton Systemworks to keep it tuned up and virus-free. When Word crashed so badly that a reinstall was necessary, I concluded that it was time for a new installation. As Dave Barrow (N9UNR) says, Windows seems to accumulate errors over time, and at the very least, the operating system should be re-installed every couple of years. Rather than reinstalling Win98se, I opted for an upgrade. Windows 2000 was my choice, because it does not insist on “phoning home”. There is no requirement that you call or connect with Microsoft in order to activate your software (XP will stop working if you do not activate it within a few weeks of installing it). The installation went very smoothly, and Win2k (shorthand for Windows 2000) even presented me with a file containing a list of a couple of issues – drivers that needed upgrading in order for the software on my specific machine to work properly. That really impressed me – slick programming, indeed! It even detected my network settings and linked up with my other three machines, all by itself.

Win2k is an updated version of Windows NT, used by business for many, many years. Did you know that NT came out even before Windows 95? So, Win2k is built on a long history of use in the business world, where security and stability are paramount. I am finding it to be very stable and easy to use – the desktop is not much different from Win98se, so there is no significant learning curve. Yes, Windows 2000 is still being sold, and its Windows Update button gets the latest upgrades and security fixes direct from Microsoft (without sending any of your personal information). So far (a month), I like it very much, and my computer is back to its old speedy self. Note added Oct 05: Win2k continues to be excellent and very stable – no crashes in 9 months! Happy Computing!