ROM

Newsletter of the Guildford PC User Group

Editor's Bit

ROM is issued six-times a year to members of the Guildford PC User Group All Contributions to the Editor Tony Hawes (details on page 2)

Because of the Easter holidays the April Meeting will take place one week later on Monday 16th April

Time again for the Annual General Meeting of the Group

In accordance with the rules, individual committee members will explain their past years' activities and the treasurer will present the accounts. Committee members of the Guildford PC User Group will stand down and an election of a new committee will take place.

If you have any points that you think should be raised at the AGM, please let your Chairman know before the meeting (you'll find his contact details on page 2).

This is the opportunity to help guide the group in the months ahead. Please let your requirements or wishes be known to the Chairman or a member of the committee. Remember, if you don't volunteer, things will remain the same and some work may not even get done.

Secretary's Notes

Monday 12th March 2007 - DVD. Our talk last month was a very comprehensive analysis about DVDs from their earliest beginnings to the current state-of-the-art commercial offerings and was given by our audio/video expert Laurence Fenn. It took the form of a specially produced DVD he had designed to detail his talk and provide illustrating clips. It started by outlining the history and capabilities of video recording systems from the Laser Disc invented by David Paul Glegg in 1958, through the Video CD with all the "rainbow book standards" of CD, Super VCD to the present DVD specification announced in 1995 and finalised the following year. A detailed specification of the various forms of the DVD was then given and the features supported. The reasons for regional coding was explained and a map of the world regions shown. Recordable DVDs with the five different recording formats for recording one's own material was discussed and the data capacities shown. The application of DVDs for games with interactive facilities was discussed with illustrations. The presentation ended by discussing the future of video recording with the now immerging Blu-ray and HD DVD specifications for the support of high definition 1080p. Throughout the talk snippets of program material were shown to demonstrate the points being made. Copies of the demonstration DVD were available after the talk.

ROM can be downloaded as a full-colour .pdf download from the Group web page at:
www.guildfordpcusergroup.co.uk

NEXT MEETING — Monday 16th April 2007 at 7.45 p.m.

Annual General Meeting

Committee members will present their annual reports and will want to hear from those present how best the Group can serve their needs. A new committee needs to be elected.

Afterwards Laurence Fenn will give a brief overview / demo of Face-Filter Studio 2.0 (see page)

Spread the word and please bring a friend — coffee, tea & chocolate biscuits are free.

Meetings are held on the 2nd Monday of each month at 7.45pm at the Stoughton Youth Club and Community Centre (opposite "The Royal" — Pub) Worplesdon Road (A322), Guildford.

Forthcoming Meetings

Monday 14th May 2007 at 7.45 pm
Corel Paint Shop Pro XI Tutorials. Got PSP 10 or XI? Your chance to learn from the experts.
Monday 11th June 2007 at 7.45 pm
Hacking — What to watch out for.
Monday 9th July 2007 at 7.45 pm
In arrangement

Members of club were much appreciative of the large amount of work Laurence had put in to:

1. The preparation of his talk and
2. Creating to demonstration DVD which will cover "everything you want to know about DVDs" for a long time to come.

Some links relating to the software used:

DVD-lab Pro 2 was used to author the Demo DVD, and is available from Mediachance at www.mediachance.com.

VideoStudio 10 was used to create the video titles, and that's available from Ulead Systems at www.ulead.com.

Crazy Talk was the software used to create the Ozzy Talks video clip, animated lip syncing from a digital photo. Available from www.realllusion.com.

DVD Shrink is used to 'backup' your DVD films from a dual layer original to a single layer copy. A free download from www.dvdshrink.org.

P.S. Copies of the Demo DVD are still available to members. Just email me to request a copy and pick it up at the next meeting. The Presentation Notes are available as a PDF download from the Group web site.

Review of the Year

April 2006. AGM and Microsoft's PhotoStory 3. AGM. Funds were a problem with a deficit which had to be funded from reserves. A general discussion took place concerning the financial position. Suggestions such as a cheaper hall, not holding meetings during the summer months and increasing the membership were discussed. The Chairman and members of the committee were unanimously re-elected. It was agreed that the subscription be raised to £20 per year. As the cost of printing ROM was a considerable expenditure it was agreed that ROM would in future be available as a downloadable .pdf file.

PhotoStory 3. A demonstration of Microsoft's (free) Photo Story 3 for Windows, freely available on the Microsoft Web site.

May 2006 — Computer storage. Neil Manuel gave a fascinating talk about the options to increase computer storage. Covering hard disks, both new and old ones, internal and external , Flash Memory drives, memory cards and using a CD/DVD record/replay external fast disk drive.

June 2006 — OCAD. Something rather different. Mike Bay, a long time member of the Club, gave us a talk on orienteering and the creation of maps used in the sport using OCAD-The Drawing Program for Cartography. Mike showed us how such maps can be prepared and the symbols applied. Mike also explained how such events were planned and organised.

July 2006 — Windows Vista. Tony Hawes demonstrated a 32-bit version (Windows Vista Beta 2). of He had previously installed Vista on a blank HD on his laptop and reported that installation was relatively quick for such a large program. He stressed, however, that although this beta version had more drivers than previously and the update website provided even more, many programs and much hardware do not yet have the necessary drivers to make things work properly. At first glance Microsoft Windows Vista is indeed an interesting operating system and from what we saw from Tony's demo Vista has much to offer.

August 2006 — Bring Your Own Computer Evening. This was the one evening in the year when members can bring their equipment to the club to get expert views on any difficulties they are experiencing or merely to show off any new purchases they have made. We then had a short presentation by Phil Ely, a lecturer at the University College for the Creative Arts at Farnham who is also a PhD student at the University of Surrey. It was in the latter capacity that he spoke on Monday. He is looking for willing participants to take part in a pilot study on the way that we innovate with home interactive technology. The study involves one home visit to create "Technology Biographies". These are profiles of users of home interactive technology and their attitudes to past, present and future technology in their home. The research forms a significant part of Phil's studies at the Digital Worlds Research Centre at Surrey University. The evening ended with Tony Hawes demonstrating Pinnacle Studio 10 Plus. This was a reprise of the talk he gave earlier but for this talk and demonstration he concentrated on the new features of the enhanced Studio 10 Plus version which incorporates the latest downloaded patch/s to bring the program up to version 10.6. Using a number of digital sequences from the Farnborough Air Show he showed how they can be edited by being spliced together using some additional still photos, which when enhanced with a number of different transitions, sound effects, background music and titles, can produce an interesting short and topical video.

September 2006 — DVB-T (Freeview) and Microsoft's new Flight Simulator program — FSX. The evening started with Tony Hawes demonstrating two pieces of hardware to provide TV reception on your PC. The first was a new USB connected device not much larger than a memory stick by TerraTec Electronic, the Cinergy T USB XE. Obtaining it's power from the USB socket this provided all the Freeview TV channels and the radio channels included in this service. Using his notebook the installation procedure ran well, channels were scanned and all the channels available were selectable from the menu.

For comparison the second piece of hardware was in the form of a PCMCIA card provided as part of a laptop package from Tony's daughter's new Targa notebook. Operated with Cyberlink Power Cinema, this provided DVB-T (Freeview), TV analogue and FM radio outputs and used a slightly larger vertical aerial for the TV reception and a ribbon aerial for DAB and FM reception.

Tony, in complete contrast, then went on to show a demo of the trial version of Microsoft's Flight Simulator X, the successor to Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2004. This available as a free 636MB download from: http://www.microsoft.com/games/flightsimulatorx/downloads.html. Flight Simulator X trial version includes two airports, three practice missions, and three different aircraft. All of the missions take place at St. Maarten in the Caribbean.

October 2006 — Dragon Naturally Speaking 9. We were treated to an outstanding demonstration of the new Dragon Naturally Speaking 9 software by Dr

Paul Kuzmin. Paul is a partner in a local GP practice and has used Naturally Speaking from Version 5 to prepare patients clinical notes for a number of years thus saving much time and considerable expense. He wrote an article for ROM Aug/Sept 2002 on Version 6 and has reported on the latest Version 9 in the Oct/Nov 2006 ROM.

He started his talk with a brief history of voice recognition from the earliest IBM Voice recognition program to this latest version of Naturally Speaking. It is available in three levels. Standard at £80, Preferred at £150 and Professional at £645 (all prices including VAT). The software Paul was demonstrating was the Professional level with the medical enhancement. The facilities offered at the various levels were outlined. It operates with most popular applications, including word processors, email etc and has basic navigation and control functions for a limited number of applications, although for full computer control one must look to the professional level. Although the claims are that

Version 9 "works straight out of the box" without training this was shown to be an exaggeration when our editor had a go, but Paul confirmed that Version 9 was amazingly accurate; about 30% more than the prior release and his demonstration confirmed this. He also demonstrated the voice playback function which can be in the originators voice if you wish. He finally recorded some notes on a hand held recorder and then fed them into the computer to be "recognised". The evening ended with some interesting questions.

November 2006 — Canon 8600F Scanner. Tony Hawes demonstrated the CanonScan 8600F scanner from Canon. Priced at around £137, it comes with plenty of software and attachments to enable you to scan photos, slides, negatives and documents. Features include 4800 x 9600dpi, 48-bit colour depth, FAU (Film Adapter Unit) - 12 x 35mm film strip and 4 x 35mm slides, FARE (Film Automatic Retouching and Enhancement) Level 3 dust/scratch removal for film, Super-fast scan engine, and comprehensive software package including SilverFast SE, Adobe Photoshop Elements 4, and OmniPage 4 SE (OCR), USB 2.0 Hi-Speed, 7 EZ buttons and Fast Multi-photo mode. Tony scanned some 1950's black and white photo prints and with the help of the new version of Paint Shop Pro turned them from faded images into great looking photos. Transparencies and negatives (of various sizes) were no problem for the scanner, and documents were easily scanned directly to PDFs using the supplied software and the dedicated buttons on the lid of the scanner.

Laurence then took the stage to show how you can tweak a picture using PSP XI, before Tony finished the evening by scanning both 35mm colour negative film strips and 120-size black and white negatives and processing them into very acceptable positive images ready for printing. The scanner proved to be versatile and priced at around £137, is very good value for money.

December 2006 Microsoft Flight Simulator X and annual Xmas Quiz. The meeting on Monday 11th December was in two parts. First Tony Hawes gave a short demonstration of the newly released version of Microsoft Flight Simulator X. In his demonstration he showed short missions featuring a light aircraft, a glider and a helicopter. Perhaps the most obvious enhancements were the scenery, the showing of road traffic and the improved simulation of weather conditions.

Annual Xmas Quiz. The second part of the evening was devoted to our annual Christmas Quiz. As always Tony started by assuring everyone that this year it really would be easier by popular request. I am sure that at least some of us, no, most of us, were not of that view. While the papers were being marked we had more Tea/Coffee and mince pies provided by the other Tony our chairman. To the delight of some and the embarrassment of others the results were announced. The winners were, 1st Paul Kuzmin, 2nd John Childs and 3rd Ken Kibbey. All contestants (I like this type of quiz, received super prizes kindly donated by Logitech, Microsoft, McAfee, Nuance (ScanSoft) and others) to whom we are very grateful. A very good evening.

January 2007 — MP3 Audio Evening. For our first meeting of the New Year we had a sound/audio evening presented by Tony Hawes. MP3 is a compression system and the one used in the popular iPod and other MP3 players. Tony demonstrated transferring a sound track from a commercial audio CD on to his laptop using Windows Media Player and "ripping" this on to his Acer MP340 MP3 player (similar to an iPod). The track was then relayed on to a number of speaker arrangements. Examples of tracks at 32, 64, 128 Kbps and 192 Kbps were demonstrated. Although accurate comparisons could not be made because of the acoustics of the room, the 192 Kbps sample played via a Logitech Z2200 with its hefty sub-woofer was obviously far superior. This was followed by using a very small Logitech transmitter and receiver working on 2.4 GHz carrying the output from a MP3 player fed into the transmitter module, the transmitted signal being received up to 300 feet away by the small radio receiver which was connected to the amplifier of the Logitech speakers at the other side of the hall.

Another small transmitter was demonstrated, this time working on a number of frequencies in the FM/VHF band that allows an iPod or similar device to be relayed on to a FM car radio. This test involved the FM signal being received on Tony's portable FM receiver which again was at the far end of the hall. Such a low-power FM transmitter device only became legal in early December 2006.

Overall, considering the size of the players, transmitters and receivers, the quality was surprisingly good. A keen audiophile would probably consider the sound not of the quality he would expect from a dedicated and expensive HiFi, but considering the cost of the products shown and from comments made after the demo, many of those present thought the demonstration provided a welcome introduction into the possibilities of using MP3 players in alternative and different ways, rather than just hearing them through a set of ear-buds stuffed into ones' ears.

February 2007 - Photography: On Monday 12 February we had a memorable evening. Our John Childs, also the Competition Secretary for Digital Images at the Farnborough Camera Club, gave a comprehensive talk on digital photography; his hobby. He explained that almost all the work at the Club was now digital rather than film. Although certainly not cheap, professional digital equipment was now available at a more reasonable price. He did however subtitle his talk "A discourse on the wisdom of spending a small fortune on one's hobby". Laid out on the table he had many examples of his work; mounted A3 prints, which were quite outstanding.

He started by considering the range of cameras available from the "point and shoot" (perhaps part of a mobile phone) to the SLR with interchangeable lenses and showed his two Canon SLR cameras and the assortment of lenses he had available. He discussed the 5 sizes of sensors which are incorporated in various cameras and their merits, mentioning that Canon was the only manufacturer to incorporate a full frame sensor such that a 20mm lens behaves as 20mm. He mentioned the advantages of prime lens over zooms and the stabilising of the image. Most cameras can record the image as RAW (uncompressed) or JPEG files although the actual specification of RAW seemed to vary between manufacturers. He outlined the advantage of RAW although the file size is about four times that of JPEG. He then went on to demonstrate the type of corrections that can be made using PhotoShop before processing into the TIFF format. He emphasised, however, the importance of preserving the RAW image on, for example, a CD, for future reference.

He ended his talk by describing how he had calibrated his monitor using the Gretag Macbeth calibrator system, which costs about £180 and by always using Epsom inks and Jessop's glossy paper had profiled his Epson A3 printer, thus avoiding a lot of abortive guesswork in producing prints which matched the image on the computer screen. An outstanding evening.

April Funnies

In April Norman Risbridger our late Chairman was in the habit of sending me some pictures he'd picked up for publishing in ROM as April-Fool's jokes. Trouble is that they weren't always jokes but illustrations of real-life events. So I thought it worthwhile taking up his baton and having a go at finding those odd photos that can bring a smile to one's face. Here we are....

I don't think you'll find a policewoman dressed like this in London!

Not the sort of message you're likely to see on a gantry over the M.25

Image Formats — JPEGS, GIFs, TIFFs and others

by Geoff Arnold

JPEGs and TIFFS — Image Formats

Following on from John Childs' digital photography talk (February meeting), choosing the right file format for your images can be a pain. This guide to the most widely used formats will help you choose the right one for the job.

If there's one thing guaranteed to cause confusion in the minds of most computer users, it's the thorny issue of which file format to use when working with digital photographs and web graphics. With such strange sounding file extensions as JPEG and GIF to contend with, it's not surprising that it can all get rather confusing. So here's a definitive guide to what the most widely used image formats are and when you should, and when you should not use them.

The good news is that things are a lot clearer now than they used to be. This is mainly due to the rise in the use of email and the internet, and the need for standardisation in order to make web pages appear the same, regardless of the computer or web browser being used to view them.

Images

The most common way of storing an image on a computer is as a bitmap. Bitmapped images are represented as a grid of so many pixels wide and so many pixels high. These pixel measurements determine the image's resolution and the more pixels there are the higher the resolution and so the higher the image quality. For example, many digital cameras operate at resolutions of 1280x1024.

A bitmapped image also has a colour depth. This refers to the range of possible colours each individual pixel can display. Colour depth can be described in two ways -either as a number of 'bits' or as a total number of colours. Common colour depths are: 8-bit, giving 256 colours; 16-bit, giving 65,536 colours; and 24-bit, giving 16.7 million colours. Obviously, the higher the resolution and the greater the colour depth, the more realistic the image but the downside is a much larger the file size.

To get around this problem, a number of different ways of compressing the file sizes of such images have been developed so that they can be transmitted as quickly as possible over networks, including the internet.

On the internet, JPEG and GIF are the most commonly used types of image file but for general use, where quality rather than speed is the main consideration, there are other alternatives.

JPEG

Pronounced 'jay-peg' and named after the Joint Photographic Experts Group that formulated its specifications, the JPEG image format is closely related to the MPEG compression system used in DVD video and digital TV.

The main difference between the JPEG format and other bitmaps is that it uses a system known as variable 'lossy' compression to remove unnecessary data from suitable areas of an image. To achieve really small file sizes and consequently quicker download times, higher compression rates can be used, although finding the point where image loss becomes noticeable can be rather hit and miss.

Luckily, many image-editing packages provide JPEG optimisation tools that can display the impact on quality of varying amounts of compression, allowing the user to choose the most suitable ratio for any particular picture. To retain the highest quality, minimal compression should be used and although file sizes can still be dramatically reduced, you'll be hard pressed to spot the difference when viewed side by side with an uncompressed version of the same image.

It is due to this that most digital camera manufacturers employ JPEG compression to cram as many photographs into the camera's memory as possible. At lower levels of compression, there is no discernible loss of quality at all when compared to the widely used TIFF and bitmap formats. It is only when higher levels of compression are used that an obvious deterioration is apparent. Once compressed, there's no going back unless you start afresh with the original image.

While the perfect choice for photographic images with areas of continuous tone, JPEGs are not right for every image. Those with high contrast, such as line drawings or text-based graphics used on many websites for banners, buttons and navigation bars, can suffer drastically when over-compressed.

GIF

This format was originally created by US internet service provider, CompuServe, way back in 1987. A few years ago it was the subject of legal copyright wrangling, and the GIF format may at first glance appear to be the poor relation of the JPEG.

It supports a maximum colour depth of eight bits (or 256) colours and can only attempt to recreate more colours than this by dithering - the process whereby two colours are used in a checkerboard pattern to give the illusion of another colour. Given that limitation alone, you may be wondering why we are even mentioning this at all. Well, the GIF has several properties that make it by far the most widely used method of transmitting images on the web.

First, it uses a powerful compression system to reduce images to between two and 256 colours and unlike the JPEG system, it does a great job of compressing simple or text-based graphics with no loss of quality. When you consider that most websites have far more buttons, banners and navigation bars than they do photographs, you'll understand why the GIF is still so popular with web designers who need to build good-looking sites that don't take forever to load.

Second, the most recent variation of the GIF's specification supports transparency. This allows one of the colours to become transparent in order to let the underlying web page background show through - this is useful if you want to display a round graphic on top of a repeating wallpaper pattern, for example.

Third, like JPEGs, GIFs can be interlaced. That is, a low-resolution representation of an image can be downloaded first which will then be gradually replaced by a more detailed version, giving the illusion of faster downloading.

The final unique feature is its support for image cycling or animation. Many websites use animated GIFs, particularly for banner ads, and this allows constantly repeating image sequences in small files that can be downloaded quickly.

TIFF

Developed by desktop publishing software pioneer Aldus for use in their PageMaker program (which is now owned by Adobe), the TIFF (Tagged Image File Format) is the image type of choice for many graphics professionals.

In common with the JPEG and the GIF, it also employs compression to reduce the size of its files. Unlike these 'lossy' methods it uses a 'lossless' system to throw away redundant colour information without sacrificing any of its detail. The end result is a file that is considerably smaller than its equivalent bitmap but one which retains all of the detail in the original. This, more than anything else, makes the TIFF the file format of choice for anyone to whom image quality is more important than the amount of hard disk space it occupies or how long it takes to transmit via the internet.

When you look at those glossy pictures in your favourite magazine it's almost certain that most of the photographs and screenshots that appear in their printed pages are TIFF files, as TIFFs offer compatibility between the Apple Macintosh computers traditionally used by page designers and the PCs used by writers, TIFF picture quality is excellent and on a large and fast network, file size isn't really an issue.

There are some downsides though. Probably the one to be most aware of is that there are

many different types of TIFF files as a result of different implementations of the original standard on different software and hardware platforms. Generally speaking, most decent image editors will have no problems opening a Mac or PC TIFF that has been created using the most popular LZW (Lempel-Ziv Welch) compression technique.

As with other compressed formats, particularly large images, such as those used to fill a whole A4 page which can be many megabytes in size, TIFFs require lots of PC muscle when being opened, saved or otherwise manipulated, and a powerful computer will make things much easier.

Windows Bitmap — BMP

Unlike the other image types discussed, the BMP format is specific to Windows and cannot be viewed easily on other operating systems or computer platforms. While supporting both 8 and 24-bit colour images and just as good as the TIFF system where quality is concerned, the major drawback with bitmaps is that they offer no compression whatsoever.

Windows has traditionally used bitmaps for small graphics such as tiled backgrounds for Desktop wallpaper and program icons and for these they are ideal, requiring no decompression that would otherwise slow down the normal operation of Windows. It makes no difference whether the image is a colour photograph or just a block of a single colour — the file size is the same.

Indeed, as many parents have discovered, mysterious disappearances of hard disk space can often be attributed to the saving of multiple drawings produced by their offspring in Windows' own Paint program.

Conclusions

As mentioned, depending on how you intend to use them, most graphic images should be saved as JPEGs, GIFs or TIFFs. The Windows bitmap can be pretty much disregarded unless you are in the habit of creating your own icons or wallpaper backgrounds.

If you have a scanner and use it to scan in photographs and documents, which you then store on your PC's hard disk, the TIFF format, with its good balance between image quality and file size, is the best bet. For other photographic images that you may want to email to friends or relatives or upload to your own home page, JPEG's ability to squash files down to very small sizes while retaining a high level of detail make it the perfect choice. That just leaves the GIF, which is ideally suited for images of 256 colours or less, such as banners and buttons used for web pages.

Whether new to image editing or a 'pro', a good image-editing package will allow you to work with all of these file types and most will also offer facilities for optimising your pictures as well as a wealth of useful image manipulation tools. Your scanner or digital camera will have come bundled with some suitable software but if you are looking to buy image-editing software, have a look at Paint Shop Pro XI (Currently £44.97, down from £90 at Amazon.co.uk) or Adobe Photoshop Elements the cut-down version of the Adobe program used by most professionals. Both programs are good but within the Group there are users with expertise in PSP, so bear this in mind if you want individual support!

FILE TYPE	JPEG	GIF	TIFF	WINDOWS BITMAP
File extension	**.jpg**	**.gif**	**.tif**	**.bmp**
Maximum Colour Depth	24-bit (16.7 million colours)	8-bit (256 colours)	24-bit (16.7 million colours)	24-bit (16.7 million colours)
Main uses	Photographic images	Web graphics and animation	Desktop publishing/print and photography	Windows icons and wallpaper
Pros	Small file sizes ideal for websites and email	Small file sizes, transparency, animation	Compression with no loss of quality	No loss of quality
Cons	Too much compression can lead to lost detail	Not suitable for photographic images	Large file sizes, compatibility problems	Very large files

Diskeeper 2007 — Now Vista Compatible

The Number One Automatic Defragmenter Diskeeper 2007 now compatible with Vista, ensuring Maximum Performance.

Diskeeper Corporation announces that its award-winning and revolutionary defragmentation software called Diskeeper 2007, is now compatible with Windows Vista. Diskeeper 2007 is the first truly automatic defragmenter which defragments files on the go without any impact on the system. As soon as fragmentation occurs, Diskeeper 2007 steps in using only idle system resources to make it a perfect partner to keep the new Vista file system at maximum performance.

With the new Diskeeper 2007 defragmentation software, innovative new technology called InvisiTasking allows you to defragment your computer automatically. This means that all you have to do is simply install the software and Diskeeper 2007 will do the rest. This is a major advancement from previous defragmenting software, where even though the software has worked in the background you still had to

schedule it to defrag your computer.

Other benefits of Diskeeper 2007 for Vista include:

- New real-time defragmentation automatically and transparently handles fragmentation as it occurs providing maximum system performance at all times.
- I-FAAST 2.0 (Intelligent File Access Acceleration Sequencing Technology) dramatically increases file access by up to 80% above and beyond the improvement of defragmentation alone.
- Terabyte Volume Engine 2.0 - Powerful defragmentation for high capacity & high traffic servers with disk volumes containing hundreds of thousands to millions of files (e.g. NAS, RAID, and SAN). Also allows unobtrusive, thorough free space consolidation on busy 24/7 servers.
- Automatic online directory consolidation boosts anti-virus scans and back-up speed. Every system will benefit from

Diskeeper 2007. A site-wide Diskeeper installation will improve performance and reliability on all systems.

For more information on Diskeeper products visit:

http://www.DiskeeperEurope.com.

About Diskeeper Corporation Europe

Diskeeper is the Number One Automatic Defragmenter for Windows NT, 2000, XP and OpenVMS operating systems, producing more than 95 percent of the network defragmenters used in the corporate market and selling over 23 Million licences.

Note — A review copy is on its way and a review of Diskeeper 2007 will appear in the next issue of ROM — Ed.

Windows Vista — Release Version

Reviewed by Tony Hawes

At long last and after some persistent prodding of Microsoft's PR team I managed to get my hands on a release version of Windows Vista to see how it compares with the Beta 2 version that I reviewed in July last year. I won't repeat some of what I said about the Vista's new features at the time, but concentrate on seeing whether the pre-release hype lives up to what you're going to find on either a new computer or an update over an existing version of Windows.

Overview

Since the middle of 2006 I've been using Vista (the Public Beta and RC1 versions) on my laptop and for the last couple of weeks have used the release version of Vista Ultimate full-time on a newly built desktop, which means I'm not a complete novice when it comes to using Vista. So what are my initial impressions of the release version of Microsoft's new OS as compared with my experience of the Beta and RC1 versions?

It's now five years since the launch of Windows XP and with five years to rewrite its operating system, you might expect Vista to be an obvious break from the Windows we've known, but clearly it isn't. Despite all the claims that Vista looks and works differently from XP, underneath it remains recognizably Windows. Some of the anomalies I disliked with XP are still there: error messages that don't always offer any advice on how to correct them, programs that inexplicably fail to install and one occasion a full system crash. Noticeably the hourglass icon which displayed as the computer did its stuff has gone — now you watch a spinning blue circle instead.

Vista is Not Cheap

Vista is not a cheap or easy update. The version most home users will want, Home Premium, sells for £125 if you upgrade from an older copy of Windows, or the full version can be bought for £187, but remember not every version of Windows qualifies for the upgrade option. Only PCs equipped with Windows XP or Windows 2000 can be upgraded, if your PC is running any other versions of Windows you will have to buy the full version and remember that to run effectively Vista needs far more clout than XP, so you'll be looking for a minimum of a 40GB HD with 15GB of free disk space and although Microsoft says that 512Mb of memory is adequate for Windows Vista, your PC will be much happier with 1GB or 2GB of RAM. Even if your PC meets these requirements, should your graphics card be relatively old, you may find your card is too slow to draw Home Premium's very attractive "Windows Aero"

interface.

Windows Vista Versions

As mentioned in the last issue of ROM when I covered the London launch of Vista, Windows Vista comes in various flavours, from the high-end "Enterprise" version aimed at big corporate customers down to a very basic "Basic" version. Sitting between these are the two versions that are likely to appeal to most users: the "Home Premium" version which if perusing the magazine ads is likely to satisfy most home users requirements and the all bells and whistles (and expensive) "Ultimate" for the power user who has to have the best.

Before you Begin

If you have Windows XP on your computer and you are considering upgrading you shouldn't think to buy an upgrade to Vista without first running Microsoft's free Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor (http://microsoft.com/windowsvista/getready) to see if your hardware and software can cope with Vista's fairly demanding requirements. On a computer with enough hard disk space, memory and processing power, Vista is a viable upgrade, but for most people with older machines, Vista in both cost and performance terms demands too much to justify its benefits, in which case one should think seriously about buying a new Windows PC, which will almost certainly feature Vista as the installed operating system.

Installation

With the release review copy to hand and with a new Core 2 Duo powered computer I decided to do a 'clean' install of Windows Vista Ultimate onto a blank newly-formatted (NTFS) serial ATA (SATA) hard disk. This meant I had no other features that could interfere with the install of a virgin copy of Vista. Earlier, using Acronis True Image 10 which is both XP and Vista compatible, I'd backed up to an external HD my essential documents, music and pictures from my old computer and knew I could import these after I'd installed Vista. OK I'd need to rein-

stall what I consider my most important applications/programs: Microsoft Office 2003 (including Word and Publisher), Adobe Acrobat, Corel Paint Shop Pro, Abbyy Fine Reader Pro OCR, Acronis TrueImage 10 for back-up, Microsoft FSX flight simulator as a game I enjoy, plus a couple of other minor applications. This I knew would keep me going, especially in allowing me to create and edit ROM. Other programs could remain on the back-burner until I got around to re-installing them.

First I set the BIOS to boot from the CD and booted the computer with an ISO CD containing Seagate's Disk Tools which I'd downloaded previously and burnt as an ISO CD, this allows one to quickly format a drive and add the necessary SATA drivers before booting with the Operating System DVD. With the HD formatted I connected and turned on my printers, scanner, modem etc (to allow Vista to recognise these peripherals and install any necessary drivers as Vista went through its install routine), placed the Vista DVD in the CD drive and rebooted again.

When I last installed an OS (Windows XP) onto a blank and newly formatted hard disk it took around the best part of an hour to install with lots of user input between restarts. Vista is a different kettle of fish and after the initial selection of my geographical location and UK keyboard and number preferences and the serial number, Vista did its thing and installed in around 35-minutes flat which included several automatic restarts, the whole process requiring very little input from me. The installation went without a hitch. My two printers, a four-year-old HP LaserJet 1200 and relatively new Canon Pixmar IP6600D inkjet were recognised straight away and appropriate drivers installed from the Vista DVD install disc. My three-year old Epson 4990 Photo scanner needed Vista drivers from Epson's web site, and I download and installed these later. Anti-Virus programs still caused some trouble. My favourite, MacAfee's Internet Security Suite initially refused to work, but a visit to their web site allowed me to download updated drivers to use it with Vista, but this caused me no end of trouble with false warnings about downloaded e-mail messages being either SPAM or infected with a viruses, or from untrustworthy sites, so I uninstalled it and downloaded Alwil's AVAST AntiVirus package which is free for home users. This works fine with Vista and has been since I tested Vista Beta 2 last summer. AVAST has the beauty of updating and installing its latest virus signatures fully automatically. AVAST will also work with the 64-bit version of Vista when I come round to installing it on my 64-bit laptop for review purposes. FWIW AVG also has a free version of their Antivirus program that is Vista capable, but I haven't tried this but have had good reports from other

users.

As is usual it's necessary to "activate" Vista, you are asked to do this at the installation stage by ticking the appropriate box, if yo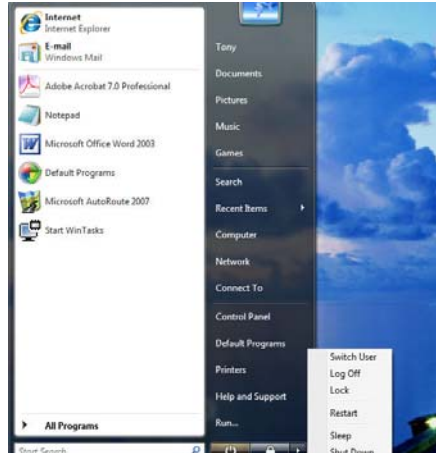u don't tick the box Vista will work normally for 30-days. If after 30-days you still haven't activated it, Vista it goes into reduced functionality mode. On the assumption that things could/can go wrong during the first days after installation and the hassle in telephoning and explaining to Microsoft why you need to re-install Vista, my advice is to leave activation until the 30-days are nearly up when you are sure your system is working perfectly.
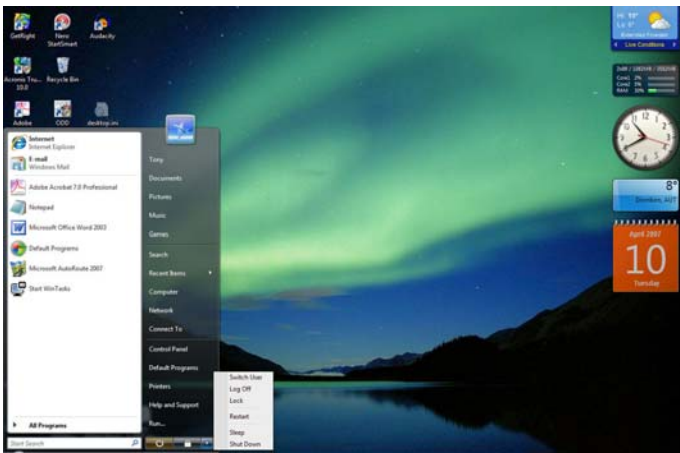
Vista Desktop with one of the new wallpapers. "Gadgets" on the sidebar at the right. New search and shut-down box bottom left.

There is a brand new Welcome Centre which helps you get started with Vista. This allows you to setup devices to Personalise your version of Windows, including adding New Users, access to Windows Media Player, connect to the Internet, access the Control Panel, add a Printer, use Windows Easy Transfer (to transfer files and settings from one computer to another); Register your copy of Vista, and view your Computer Details including Hardware and Windows settings.

Start Menu and Close-Down Menu. One noticeable new feature of the Start menu is the search box at the bottom of the box. This allows you to search either on the computer, in a particular application or program or on the web for a particular word or file or anything similar.

Vista's Start Menu replaces XP's Turn off Computer option with a Power Off button. This appears on the bottom right of the start menu, the default is to shutdown to low-power mode where the OS takes a snapshot of the system at the time of shutdown and writes the contents of memory to a file on the hard drive. This allows for a quick restart to where you left off, whether in the middle of editing a word file, game or whatever. To access the other options such as Log Off, Restart or Shut Down, click the arrow in the bottom right-hand box and select the option what you want.
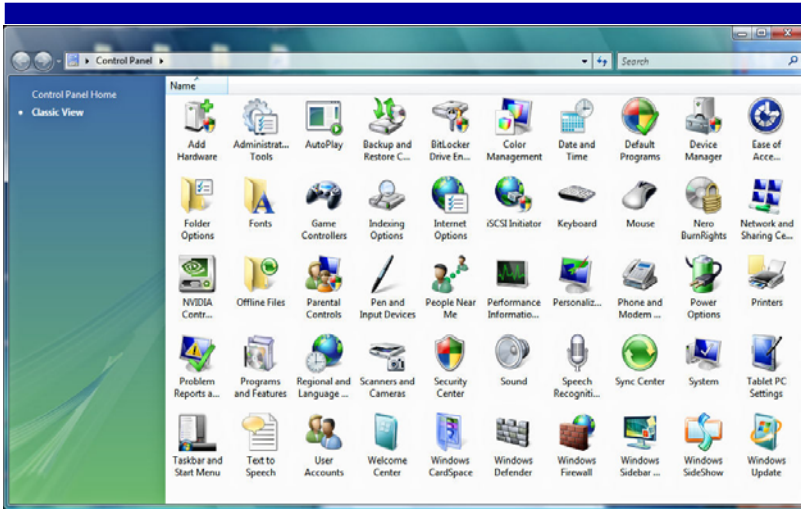

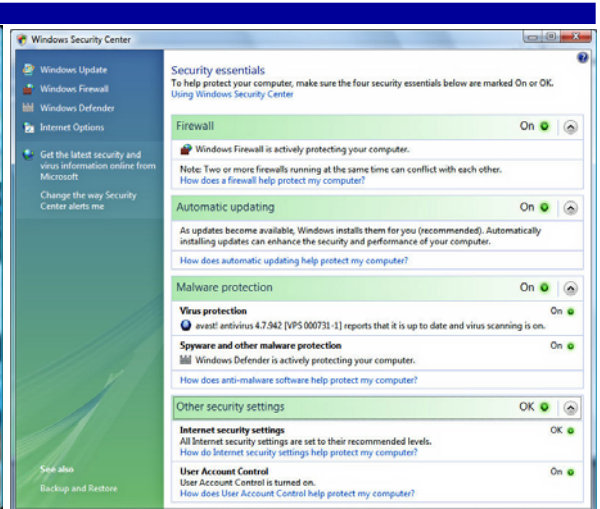Personalise your computers user interface screen.
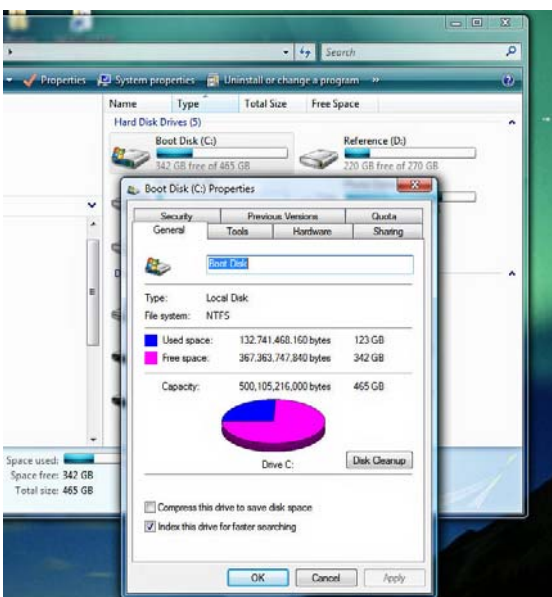
The My Computer folder has a new layout

[Alt]+[Tab] now displays a virtual task switcher, but if you click [Windows]+[Tab] there is a more useful 3D window task switcher.

The Control Panel has a new look. Add and Remove Programs is now accessed by clicking on the Programs and Features icon.
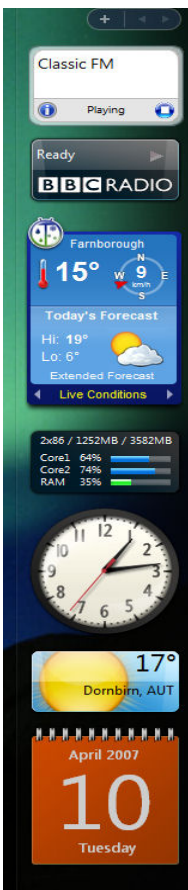
The Security Centre shows all is OK with your PC.

My Desktop showing the populated Sidebar on the right

Some of the Sidebar (Gadget) utilities that can be dragged and dropped onto the Sidebar. There are many more on line.

Initially sceptical I now find the Gadgets I've added to my sidebar fascinating and useful.
Gadgets I've added, including add-ons from the Web include (LEFT) Top to Bottom:
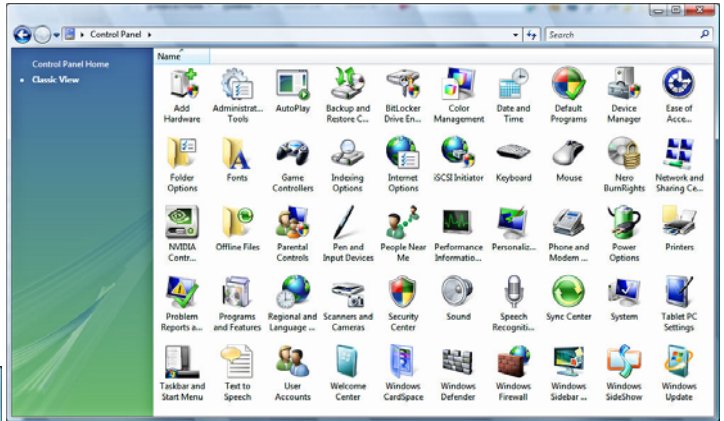
1. UK Radio Player

2. BBC Radio Player

3. WeatherBug. This shows the current weather at Farnborough airfield a couple of miles to the east of me. Click for an extended forecast and the forecast for the next five days is shown.

4. CPU activity: Shows activities of the two cores of my Intel Core 2 Duo CPU and bottom side bar amount of RAM in use.

5. Time.

6. Weather in Dornbirn Austria, near my wife's family home. Seventeen degrees Celsius and sunny.

7. Today's Date.

Right is part of the list of UK radio station feeds accessible through the UK Radio Player Gadget. It works very well indeed.
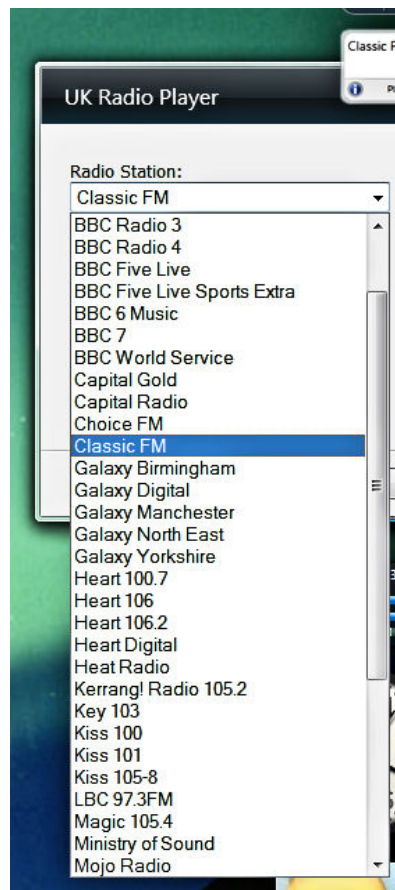
The Control Panel (left) has 11 largely self-explanatory classifications helps find the item you're looking for.
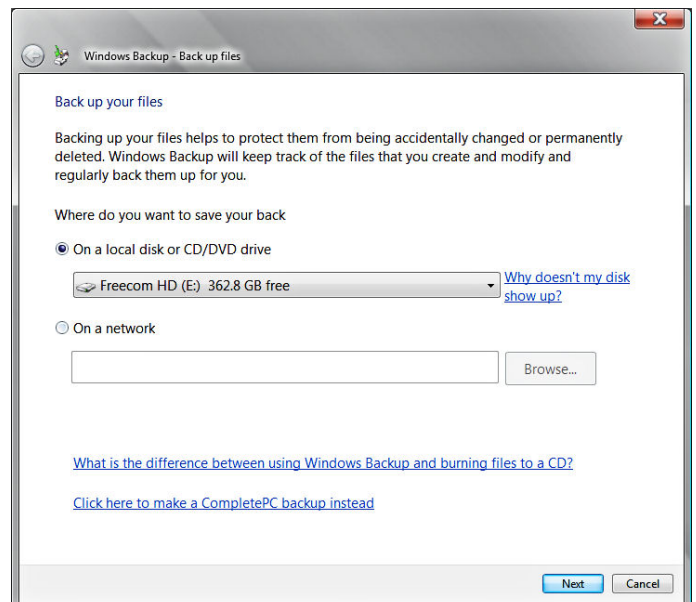

Outlook Express is now called Windows Mail and for the first time includes a new junk e-mail filter, a feature similar to that in Microsoft Outlook that detects and consigns spam automatically to the new junk e-mail folder. NB. Importing your messages from Outlook Express needs special handling. See separate article.

Control Panel — Category view (above left) — the link to take you to this view is called Control Panel Home and is broken down into eleven largely logical classifications: System and Maintenance, Security, Network and Internet, Hardware and Sound, Programs, Mobile PC, User Accounts and Family Safety, Appearance and Personalization, Clock Language and Region, Ease of Access and Additional Options.
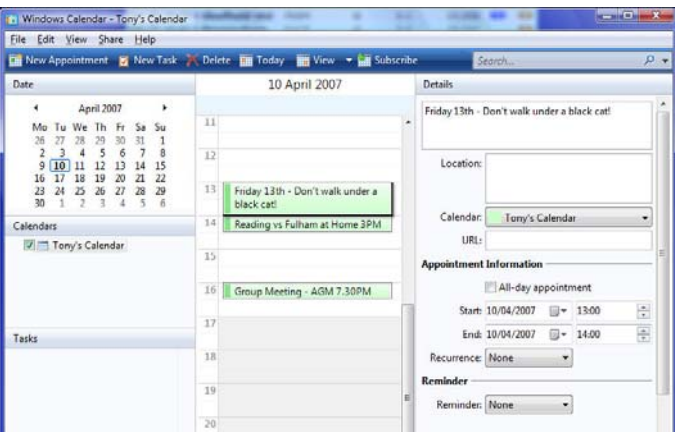
Control Panel — Classic view (above): Some of the most commonly used Windows XP icons have been changed. Add or Remove Programs is no more, it's now called Programs and Features and Display no longer has it's own icon — if you want to change your Display it is now accessed via the Personalization icon.

A useful calendar at last

Backup to CD/DVD, Network or External HD and Even Backup your Complete PC!

Windows Photo Gallery. For photo and video editing enthusiasts Microsoft have included a useful Photo Gallery that allows you to edit and manage your digital photographs and videos.
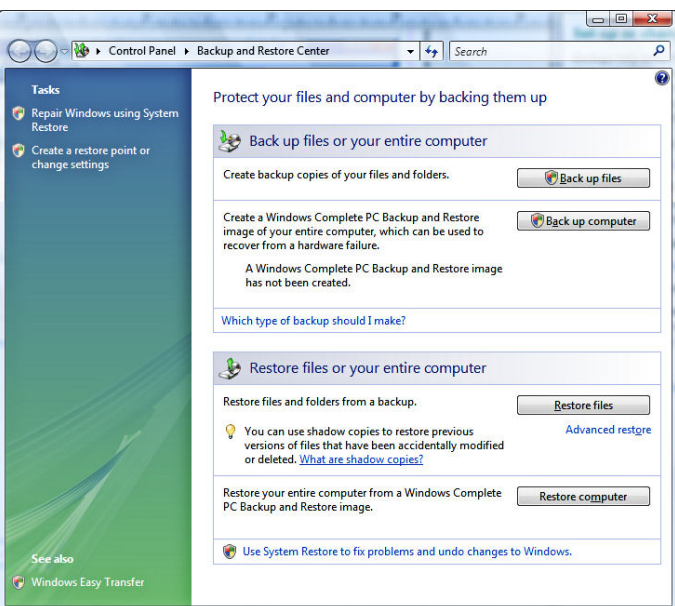
Vista — Final Conclusions

What's my verdict on Windows Vista?

Microsoft have obviously put a great deal of effort and work into it. As I mentioned above Vista is still Windows, but in a changed form. The most obvious change is the interface. The polished new look is more than superficial; the live thumbnails, Flip 3D, and gadgets make you more productive and keep you entertained as well.

There's no longer a need for Windows users to be envious of Mac users, but there's a lot more to Vista than the most obvious interface changes — there are the benefits of much-improved security for example.

Initially apathetic about the Gadgets on the SideBar and thinking that I'd never want to use them, I'm now really hooked, they just add fun to an OS! The Radio Station Gadget is always running in the background and gives me perfect reception of my favourite radio stations.

The new search feature is a cinch and makes it far easier to find information from wherever you need it, whether from the web or wherever it's tucked away or hiding on your computer.

..and Finally

Is Vista a better version of Windows? Yes — it's definitely better than XP and most of the new built-in features are impressive. In the month or so that Vista's been in daily use on my new desk-top, I've got to like it a lot and there'll be no going back.

There is an old saying that computer user's can easily adapt to a new operating system, but have difficulty in forgetting what they've learnt about an old and trusted one (like XP). In the last month I've learnt to forget what XP was all about, which just about sums up my experience.

Pricing and Availability

Home Premium: Buy the Home Premium Upgrade version (£125) if you intend upgrading an existing computer that is running an older copy of Windows (XP — but **not** ME), whilst the full version of Home sells for £187. Both prices include VAT and are from Amazon.co.uk

Vista comes with a stunning selection of new desktop wallpapers. I thought they were specially commissioned by Microsoft, but this doesn't appear to be the case as most are listed in the commercial Getty Images portfolio as available for licensing/purchase. The picture of the pier leading into the sea for example (below right) also features in Qatar Airways publicity material.

Vista Tip — Importing Outlook Express Messages into Vista's Windows Mail

When you try to import your Outlook Express messages from an old computer with Windows XP, to a new computer running Vista you can run into problems.

Below is a résumé of how to overcome these problems.

How to back up your OE (Outlook Express) files and settings

To backup and restore OE5 and 6 messages, make a copy of all the files in the folder that contains the dbx files. Do a search for *.wab and back that up as well (address book). Also export these 4 registry keys:

1. HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Identities\{ GUID}\Software\Microsoft\Outlook Express
2. Where GUID represents your Identity number.
3. HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Internet Account Manager
4. HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Outlook Express
5. HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\WAB\WAB4\Wab File Name

To restore the messages on a reformatted machine, or to move them to a new machine, copy all the backed-up files to the exact directory where they were located in their previous life. Then, before opening OE, import the 4 keys into the registry. If OE has already been run on the computer to which you are restoring, then delete those 4 keys from the registry (back it up first) before importing the 4 saved ones.

Importing single dbx files into Outlook Express

To backup and restore a single OE5 or 6 mail folder, save the appropriate dbx file. To restore, create a new folder in OE5 or 6 (call it archiv1, for example) and access it once. Then close OE and find archiv1.dbx and delete it. Make a copy of the folder you want to restore and rename it to archiv1.dbx. Then copy that file into the directory where the previous file was deleted. Open OE and the messages you wanted to restore will be accessible via opening that archiv1 folder.

Windows Mail

To backup and restore Windows Mail messages, make a copy of all the files in the directory that contains the message and database files. The location of the message store can be found via Tools | Options | Advanced | Maintenance | Store Folder (the default is %USERPROFILE% \AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows Mail\) and the location is also specified as the "Store Root" value under the Windows Mail registry key below.

In addition to backing up those files, export these 3 registry keys:

HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows Mail

This is the most important registry key and contains nearly all the settings and rules for Windows Mail.

HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Identities

This key is kept for legacy purposes, but no longer contains much information. The Identities feature of Outlook Express has been removed in Windows Mail.

HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\IAM

This key contains some information on the default accounts. In Outlook Express this key held all of the account information. In Windows Mail, most of the account information is now in .oeaccount files in the message store. See New Handling of Account Data on the Microsoft website. Note that when restoring a backed up copy, if Windows Vista has been reinstalled, the account passwords will need to be re-entered by the user manually.

Windows Mail now uses the Vista system wide Contacts instead of the address book. See Windows Contacts on the Microsoft website.

To restore a backed up copy of Windows Mail

To restore a backed up copy of Windows Mail. Create a new directory that matches the previous directory and make sure it also matches the "Store Root" value listed under the Windows Mail registry key, and empty that directory of all files and subdirectories. Then copy the backed up files to that directory, making sure that the files are not read only. Run Regedit and delete the 3 registry keys listed above in the target partition, and then merge the backed up registry keys. Windows Mail can then be started and should be restored to the backed up state.

A similar method can be used to share the message store between bootable Vista partitions. The "Store Root" value in the registry can be equated so that the message store can be shared. Account passwords however will need to be entered manually between booting to each partition, unless one backs up and overwrites the .oeaccount files between each boot, due to the handling of the password information. When booting between partitions sharing the same message store, be mindful that many changes in settings are stored under the Windows Mail registry key, so changing such in one partition may not be reflected in the other OS partition unless the key is re-equated between each OS.

Importing into Windows Mail from Outlook Express

OE dbx files cannot be individually imported into Windows Mail. Windows Mail will only import (File | Import | Messages) from dbx files in an intact message store that contains a non-corrupt version of folders.dbx (note that the files MUST NOT be read only). In order to import dbx files into Windows Mail, they must first be incorporated into an Outlook Express (or possibly Outlook) message store and then imported using File | Import | Messages.

To import from the Outlook Express message store into the Windows Mail message store, do the following:

1. Create a directory under the current user's Documents, such as Documents\OEMail. This directory needs to be within the user's space, such as under Documents, in order to prevent possible access permissions problems.
2. Copy all the dbx files from one Outlook Express Identity into this directory, ensuring that folders.dbx is included.
3. Go to Edit | Select all in Windows Explorer and select all the dbx files. Then right click on the selection and choose Properties and ensure that the read only attribute of the files is unchecked.
4. In Windows Mail go to File | Import Messages and choose Outlook Express 6 format and choose to import from a directory.
5. Then use the Browse button to browse to the directory of dbx files. Make sure that when you set the directory that what is listed in the path is correct **(NOTE: Vista can put the wrong path in here sometimes, so instead of c:\mypath it puts c:\mypath\mypath, so check the path to verify that it is correct, and if it is not correct then fix it).**
6. Then select the files from which you wish to import messages and click Import.

Alternatively, one can extract the messages from the dbx files as eml files (e.g. DBXpress) and then these eml files can be dragged from Windows Explorer and dropped into a Windows Mail folder to incorporate them into the Windows Mail message store. The eml message files in Windows Mail can also be dragged and dropped back into machines using OE.

Steganos Safe 2007

Reviewed by Tony Hawes

From Steganos

Are you sharing your computer with others — at home or in the office? Do you work with data that is nobody's business but yours? Are you uneasy at the idea that this data is saved unprotected on your PC? Do you want to avoid having to note several complicated passwords? Do you sometimes transport sensitive data stored on a memory stick or CD and worry that it might fall into the wrong hands? Do you use your iPod as a data storage device because it is so handy? Steganos offers a solution that makes high data security easy — The Steganos Safe.

The Data Safe, offers virtual, encrypted drives in no time, on which you can securely save a total of 256 GB of sensitive data per drive. The number of drives is unlimited: This enables you to create new Data Safes as required. You can easily change the number of safes afterwards. Fill your safes with files from text processing or with content directly from the Internet. Even for multimedia content the Safe provides sufficient storage space. The best part: the drives disappear at the click of a button. Your files will only be available again when you enter the correct password exactly where you left them. You won't notice the fact that the AES (Advanced Encryption Standard) is working for you in the background with the strongest 256 bit encryption. Thanks to live encryption, your data can be encrypted in real time. Automatic Crash Protection (ACP) ensures that your data is encrypted, even in the event of an abnormal system shutdown or power failure.

Using Steganos PicPass, you can open your safes using specific picture series instead of a traditional password consisting of letters and numbers. On demand, these two methods can also be combined. Like with any other passwords, you need to apply special diligence in handling your key picture series: Please note that there is no way of accessing your data if you lose or forget your password or the selected picture series!

The more safes you create, obviously the more passwords accumulate. Steganos Safe allows you to store your passwords on portable media. You can, for example, transport all your Safe passwords on a USB memory stick that is attached to your bunch of keys. You can also use this practical function with mobile phones with Windows Mobile. Simply connect your storage medium and the corresponding secure drives open automatically. Alternatively, you can also use your iPod for storing keys - you keep it with you most of the time anyway.

Steganos Portable Safe is the ideal complement to secure drives. Install a safe on a portable medium such as e.g. a memory stick or even your iPod, which you can use as

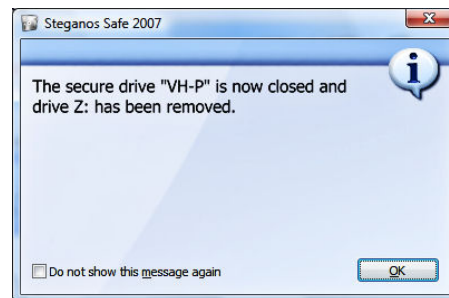Steganos Safe waiting to be opened

Key in the Password to open the safe

... and Bingo! Your safe is open to work on the contents

easily as the virtual hard drives on your PC. As soon as you save data on this medium, it is encrypted in real time and securely protected. Then simply connect the medium to any PC or laptop and decrypt the data by

Click on the "Close" Icon and the safe is closed and secure once again.

entering a password: The software for decrypting the medium is already included in Steganos Portable Safe - you only need administrator rights once on the PC you are using. Alternatively you can also use non-removable media and can burn encrypted data on a CD or DVD and DVD DL (double layer), for example. You can rest assured that your data is safe, even when you do not have the data carrier with you.

And when you no longer need to keep sensitive data, but want to destroy it, then you can use the Steganos Shredder. With the Shredder you can permanently destroy unwanted information: with simple overwriting, US military technology or the highly secure Gutmann Method.

In Use

Steganos safe for example allows you to create up to four virtual 250GB password protected drives in Windows 2000, XP and Vista with NTFS file system and 4 GB if you are running an older version of Windows with FAT32

I tried it on my computer (Windows Vista OS) and asked Steganos Safe to create two extra drives: Drive Y and Z, Steganos even suggested that the four-digit password I'd initially selected was insecure and I should add additional letters/digits/punctuation characters to make it more secure — which was a neat touch. When open these "safes" can be used like any other drive, its drive letter is added to Windows Explorer, so you can run applications, create directories and files, files can be dragged and dropped and documents edited and photos viewed as you would on any other unencrypted drive on your computer. When you've finished working on the files, click on the icon to close the drive and the safe drive disappears from view. The only way to reopen the safe drive is to enter the appropriate password.

Thanks to live encryption, opening and closing a secure drive is very quick: you can encrypt your entire drive in just seconds.

Portable Safe

Steganos Portable Safe allows you to

transport your sensitive data safely and easily. Install a safe on a portable medium such as a memory stick, which you can use as easily as the secure drives on your PC. Portable Safe creates a folder on your desktop where you are to place all of the data that will be encrypted. You simply burn that folder when you are finished, and that's it.

As soon as you save data on this medium, it is encrypted in real time and securely protected. Then simply connect the medium to any PC or laptop, when the drive is recognised it's only necessary to enter the password you have selected to decrypt the data: Steganos Portable Safe already contains the required data decryption software. Alternatively you can also use non-rewriteable media and, for example, you can burn encrypted data on CD or DVD and DVD DL (Double Layer). Because of the Portable Safe technology the decryption software is automatically integrated into the file to be burnt. With this method you can take up to 8.5 GB of encrypted data on a DL DVD with you, knowing, it is totally secure, place it in another computer, enter the password and read or edit the data you have burnt.

Conclusions

If you are paranoid about the data on your computer details falling into the wrong hands, or need to keep commercial or financial details secure whether at home or at work Steganos Safe 2007 is recommended. I've trialled it on Windows XP and Vista and on both operating systems it works well.

Pricing & Availability

£29.95 and can be purchased online from:

http://www.steganos.com/en/products/consumer/

Even better; Steganos have a trial version available for download (from the same site) so trial it to see whether it meets with your requirements.

Reallusion's FaceFilter Studio 2.0

We've received details of FaceFilter Studio 2.0 an interesting graphics program. Laurence Fenn is reviewing and his review will appear in the next issue of ROM. For the moment here is what the company's press release states:

AN JOSE, CA, March 12, 2007—Men and woman alike spend billions of pounds a year on personal care products, make-up, plastic surgery, and other cosmetic solutions to look their best, and, yet, when it comes to their most cherished photos, they are often forced to sacrifice their images—and, more importantly, their self-image—to the luck of the draw.

Revitalize the beauty of your photos

Hide Pimples & Blemishes
Smooth Skin & Remove Wrinkles
Facial Morphing
Automatic Red Eye Reduction
Enrich Skin Tone
Camera Flash & Gloss Reduction
Natural Expression Enhancement

NEW! Smart Color Correction for Human Figure Photos

NEW! Multi-Expression Photo-Sticker Printing

Enter FaceFilter Studio 2.0

FaceFilter Studio 2.0, the new and improved version of Reallusion's award-winning photo enhancement software, empowers amateur photographers at every stage with a user-friendly and inexpensive solution that finally takes the nervous uncertainty out of taking photos, to give them a perfect shot every time.

New Features in FaceFilter Studio 2.0:

Smart Portrait: The powerful image colour correction function, Smart Portrait, auto-detects human face and skin tone to create vibrant colourful photos from imperfectly lit images, be they over- or under-exposed, taken with a low- quality camera or washed out due to backlighting;

Automatic Red-Eye Reduction: Red-eye often seen in flash photography due to reflection of the retina can quickly and easily be removed with a single click with automatic red-eye reduction. This new function can simultaneously find red eyes on multiple faces in your photos. Also, it is easy to change eye colour to any colour you desire;

High-Resolution Rendering: FaceFilter Studio 2.0 also supports high-resolution image rendering up to 12 Mega pixels for professional camera users;

High-Quality Prints and Stickers: Additionally, you can print professional quality prints in a flash or create instant, fun photo-stickers with various mood expressions.

Other Highlights:

Turn That Frown Upside Down: Restore photos by removing undesirable facial expressions;

Lose the Weight—and the Years: Reshape and tone faces for automatic thinning and removal of wrinkles and other signs of ageing;

Get the Skin You've Always Wanted: Repair facial blemishes and unwanted shine on chins and noses for perfect skin. Also, the digital cosmetics skin tone palette allows you to put a little colour into those cheeks or even give yourself a tan;

Choose Your Expression: Browse different expressions from the Facial Expressions Library for quick preview and select from numerous facial expression options; and don't worry about group images: you can select and edit single and multiple faces from portraits, candid's and group photos.

FaceFilter Studio 2.0 will be available in April at a MSRP of £29.99 inc Vat from www.amazon.co.uk For additional product information, visit: www.reallusion.com/facefilter.

..and remember Laurence Fenn will be showing some of the programs capabilities after the AGM at this month's meeting.

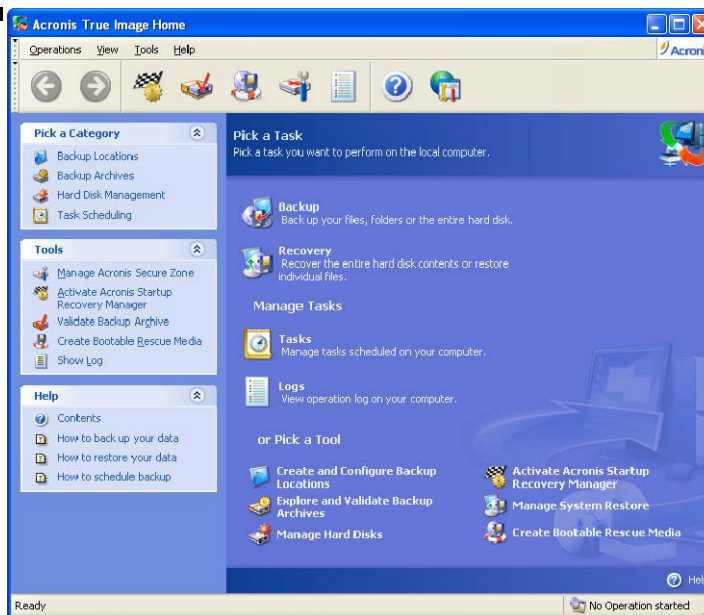# Acronis True Image 10 Home Edition

Reviewed by Laurence Fenn

Introduction

One of the main points that computer experts tell users, aside from making sure your computer is up to date with AntiVirus software, is to back up your data. Large hard drives, recordable DVDs and external backup drives are cheaper than ever, so there's no excuse for not making a copy of your data. Gone are the days of having to boot up using a floppy disc to backup your system and Acronis True Image 10 Home Edition offers a wealth of tools to allow you to make and restore backups of your computer's system. You can filter by file types so you don't need to store all your photos in My Pictures or your music in My Music folders as it will search for the files wherever they are. In practise I doubt that many people have their music collection or pictures all over they hard drive, but maybe other people aren't as organised as I am!

Installation

Installation is rather odd as the serial number has to be verified online as part of the procedure, before you even choose where to install it. I was online as the time, but I don't know if the program would fail to install if I wasn't. It's a different approach from the 'activation' method. Once you register you can install the software five times (without any checking of the serial number online), and if you lose the disc you can log onto the Acronis Web site and download a new copy.

There are wizards that will guide your through the process of backing your entire computer, data, applications or just email. Outlook is now supported and not just the emails, but also the calendar, tasks and contacts. There are programs that do only that, some of them free, but even though Microsoft do have an import and export function built into Outlook it can be fiddly at the best of times. More on the email backup later, though.
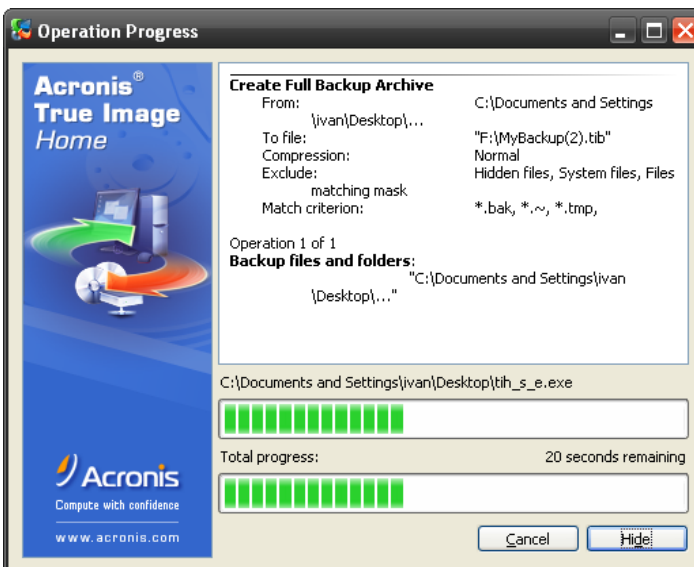
The computer backup option copies everything, so in case of a virus or hard drive error you can restore a fully working system. Bootable files are created (the CD the software comes on is bootable with a Linux version of the software) and a Startup Recovery Manager creates a zone on your hard drive, so you can access your system without logging into Windows itself. When backing up partitions, it's a simple case of selecting that partitions or disks to be imaged, then where to save the image file. The backup target can be a local folder, DVD/CD, FTP server or network drive. If you only backup files you can setup rules to exclude certain files, saving on backup media usage and time.

Backing up a System Drive

Backing up a 25GB system drive took around twenty-five minutes and resulted in a 16GB backup file. That's still four DVDs worth, but if you have an external hard drive or a second partition that's not very big. True Image can create a hidden partition on the hard disk on which to store partition images. These can be accessed from the main program, or bootable recovery utility. I can't really see why you would want to hide your backup partition, unless you needed to protect it from a virus or malware but that's an option available if you don't have a separate backup device. The MBR is backed up when using partitions and can be restored by itself. This is useful if something has happened to your system and you can't boot up but you don't want or need to restore the rest of your data.

Make Regular Backups

You can set up the program to make regular backups, but this does means a few services installed to run all the time. It really does annoy me that software makers seem to think you want to have part of their program loaded every time you start your computer. I've seen computers with more than twenty icons sitting in the systray. This obviously takes up memory and resources on your system. It's helpful if you can't remember to back up your system, but if you don't schedule backups and run the program manually it still loads the services. Aside from this, it always struck me strange as to how you can back up your data if you are using it. All of these backup programs say that you can continue to use your computer when backing it up, but if you are working on, say a Word document, how can the backup program copy it when you are editing it? I've never used True Image before so I couldn't really say if version 10 is worth upgrading to if you have an earlier version. New features include Windows Vista support, Selected file backup, Outlook

backup, Application protection and restoration, Quick backup, Explore backups (without mounting), Create backup rules, Email notifications and Save to FTP.

Incremental Backups

You don't have to back up the entire disc every time. You can make incremental backups that only copy the files that have changed since the last full back up. The integration of the backup files also means it's very easy to restore individual files. You just browse to the backup file in Explorer and double click on the file. It opens up with the tree structure of the original file system, so you can copy and paste files with ease, no matter where the backup is. Whilst support for Vista is no doubt welcome (it will be while before I upgrade my OS though) some of these features are not going to be used that often (like save to FTP).

Email Backup

Email Backup was a troublesome affair. I went through the wizard selecting my email program (it couldn't detect my default program, but it did find which email programs were installed) and where I wanted the backup, But when I clicked the start button the program crashed before completing. It did save an 8Mb file though. This happened every time, even if I rebooted the computer and ran the back up first. I then looked for updates for the software on the website and found one which was effectively a complete new build of the software, 104Mb in size. As ever, people who do not have a broadband connection are not favoured. After installing the new version and rebooting I ran it again. It took a long time before I saw any indication of the program working. It showed the folders it was backing up but progress bars on the dialog did not move. A pop up message showed it was complete and the full backup file was 19Mb.

Updates

I installed the most recent update dated 2007-03-12 Build #4942. This fixes:

- Backup creation of MS Outlook 2000 and MS Outlook 2003 imap accounts
- File level archive creation fixes
- Better hardware support
- Bootable media fixes

- Fixes for working under Windows Vista 64
- Fixes of working with FTP.
- Windows Vista restoring fixes
- Email notification fixes
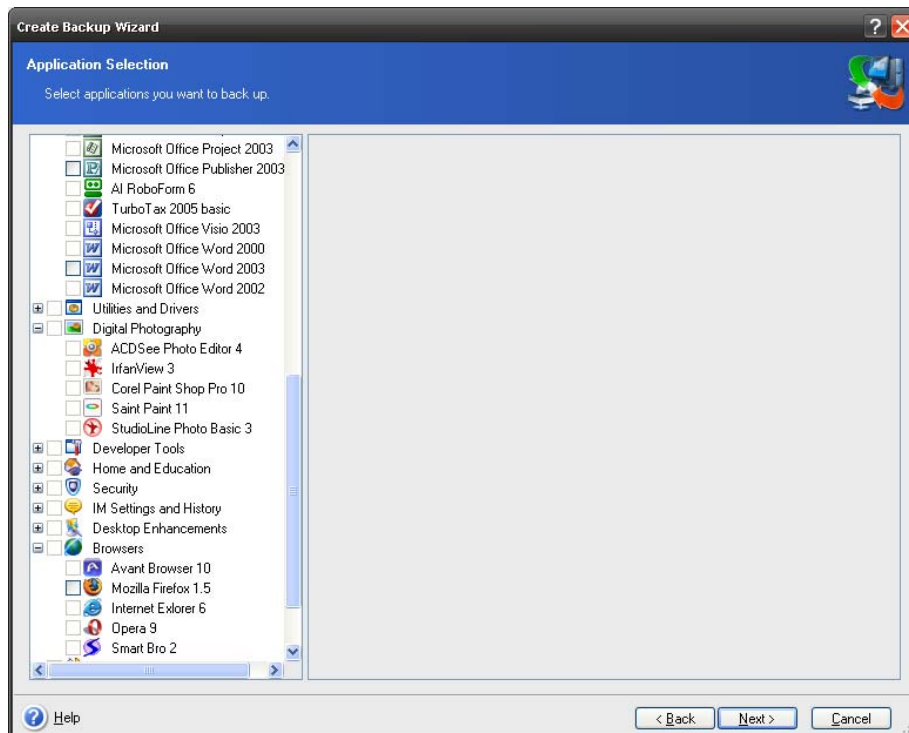
Application Backup

The application backup is a good idea, supposedly saving your settings for many programs, but in practise it is poorly implemented. The program scans your computer for applications then lists a long list of software divided into categories. Programs that it detects have tick boxes that you can select, but they are drawn in black rather than grey (for the other applications in the list). They weren't very clearly highlighted, and were version specific.

The categories are:

Design Tools: (Photoshop, KoolMoves 5.5, Macromedia Flash 8, etc).

Business and Productivity: (Office Access, Excel, Money, OpenOffice, etc). It detected Access 2003, Excel 2003, PowerPoint 2003, Publisher 2003 and Word 2003.

Utilities and Drivers: (ACDSee 8, FlashGet, Adobe Reader 7, Winrar 3 WinZip 10). ACDsee is currently at version 9, Adobe Reader is at version 8 and version 3.61 of Winrar was not detected.

Digital Photography: (ACDSee Photo Editor 4, PSP 10, Saint Paint 11). Paint Shop Pro XI is the latest version, but not detected or on the list.

Developer Tools: (Dreamweaver 8, UltraEdit 32, Visual Studio 2005).

Home and Education: (Google Earth 4, TypingMaster 7 Pro).

Security: (Ashampoo AntiSpyware 1.4, McAfee SecurityCenter 2006, Norton Antivius 2005, Spyware Doctor 4).

IM Settings and History: (AOL Instant Messenger 1.2, Google Talk 1, Yahoo Messenger 8)

Desktop Enhancements: (Cuckoo Clock 3D Screensaver, ASton 1.9, DesktopX 3).

Browsers: (Avant 10, Firefox 1.5 Internet Explorer 6). I have Firefox 2.0 but the program detected it as 1.5. The latest version of Internet Explorer (note correct spelling) is 7.

Audio and Video Applications: (Power DVD 7, Premiere Pro 1.5, RealPlayer 10.5, Sound Forge 8, WinAmp 5, Media Player 10). Microsoft's Media Player is currently at version 11, which is what I have, but it wasn't detected by the program.

Networking: (CuteFTP 7 Pro, Remote Desktop Control 1.7). I have CuteFTP Pro 8, but the program didn't find it.

Acronis Software: (Disk Director 10, Provacy Expert Suite 9. Snap Deploy 2)

iPod Software: (iTunes 6, iPodSync 2.28). As I don't have an iPod I can't tell if these are the latest versions of iTunes or iPodSync.

The progress bars do work when it backs up the settings, but just like Microsoft's version of time when copying files, when there where 5 seconds remaining it took 20 seconds to finish. What the program should do is list only the installed programs, a fairly simply thing to do. I don't really need to know that it can backup Photoshop, iTunes or Saint Paint as I don't intend to buy them. Even after the update the list is still out of date. I installed all of my software on my PC and I know what they do, so I don't need to have my software categorised for me. Microsoft just lists them when you go to the Add/Remove option in the Control Panel.

Conclusions

True Image 10 is certainly easier to use than Ghost 10 and the back up files are marginally smaller. They both take about the same time with the standard compression settings.

Acronis True Image 10 may have won awards from Computer Shopper, CNet, PC Magazine (version 8), PC World (in 2005), Personal Computer World (version 8) and Smart Computing (again in 2005) but version 10 needs a few tweaks here and there before I can give it a full recommendation. It costs around £25.

April Fools' Pranks You May Have Missed

When 1st April comes around it's normal for someone somewhere to broadcast a spoof story to deceive the listeners / viewers. On 1st April the only certainty is that everything is uncertain!

Here are listed some of the most successful April Fools Day broadcasts from around globe.

The Swiss Spaghetti Harvest

Probably the most famous television hoax. In 1957, BBC's Panorama showed Swiss farmers harvesting a bumper crop of spaghetti from their spaghetti trees following a mild winter and the virtual elimination of the disastrous spaghetti weevil. When presenter Richard Dimbleby mentioned a home grown variety, the BBC received hundreds of calls from viewers wanting to know how they could cultivate a harvest.

Earth's Gravity Lessened by Planetary Alignment

Patrick Moore told an astounded British public listening to Radio 2, that anyone who jumped up and down at 9.47am on 1st April, 1976, would experience a strange floating sensation. This, he said, was caused by a once-in-a-lifetime planetary alignment. Hundreds of weightless jumpers claimed to have had the experience.

Swedish Nylon Colour Television

Pity the poor Swedes. In 1962 there was only one television channel. And it broadcast in black and white. No wonder, then, that hundreds of thousands of people believed the station's technical expert Kjell Stensson when he told them, on April 1, to pull a nylon stocking over the screen and see their favourite programme in colour.

Smelly Telly

Never mind colour television. In 1965 the BBC claimed a boffin had created Smellovision, which transmitted aromas produced in a television studio. They even aired an interview with the 'expert' who chopped some onions and brewed a pot of coffee. Gullible viewers telephoned to say they had smelled the aromas transmitted through their sets.

Nixon for President

In 1992 Americans were told by National Public Radio's Talk of the Nation that disgraced US President Richard Nixon would run for office once again. "I didn't do anything wrong, and I won't do it again," was his slogan as his candidacy speech was aired. Except it was comedian Rich Little. Bill Clinton eventually won. Following his 'incident' with Monica Lewinsky he too told the American public that he hadn't done anything wrong and he wouldn't do it again.

Gooooal

Football goals are going to be bigger, said the BBC's Football Focus, by two feet in height and four feet in length. Harry Redknapp, West Ham United manager at the time, gave his thoughts. Next week, the show broadcast his out-takes. It was an obvious April Fools, although someone should perhaps tell Steve McClaren

Millennium Dome Burns

This was wishful thinking on behalf of Channel 4 show The Big Breakfast. Footage was shown of flames leaping from New Labour's Great White Elephant in 1998. The authorities were not happy. Wrists were apparently slapped.

Sheepdog Drives a Car

That's Life, the long-running BBC television magazine series; broadcast a feature on an Old English Sheepdog driving a car. Viewers were fooled. But then, the show did once feature a talking dog whose catchphrase "sausages" entered the British lexicon, so perhaps it wasn't so unbelievable.

Water on Mars

In 2005 those whacky boffins at NASA posted a story on the official space agency website declaring the water had been found on Mars and that there were pictures to prove it. The photo was a glass of water on a Mars bar. A year later, they did find evidence of water flowing on Mars and posted pictures to prove it. Nobody mentions boys crying wolf.

Bill Gates Assassinated

Although we know he wasn't. It was a joke on a number of Chinese and South Korean Websites posted in 2003. CNN had reported it, they claimed. The stock markets found it less than amusing as 1.5% was wiped off shares!