

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 123. More Goodies

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There are lots of programs out there that can make your life easier. Often, the software will let you do things better than the software that came with your Windows operating system. In other cases, the software will provide you with information not otherwise available to you, the end user, because Microsoft decided you did not need that information. I will share a couple of these programs with you.

Of course, there are companies in business that provide programs that are often excellent and very useful, and sometimes it is well worth the fee you must pay for them. I have written about several that are definitely worth the money: Norton Systemworks, Partition Magic and Zone Alarm Pro are among them. But then there are lots of smaller programs out there that are also excellent. They generally fall into two categories. Shareware are software programs you can try for a period, and you pay for them thereafter if you find them suitable for your needs. Freeware programs are free – often written by folks to do stuff that they themselves wanted to do, but could not find available software to do it. So they wrote the program to meet their own needs, and then decided to make it available to others at no cost. Very nice, indeed!

By the way, Zone Labs is an unusual company. Although they are in business and therefore expect to collect money for their services, they make Zone Alarm available free. Oh yes, it is true that they charge a (quite reasonable) fee for their Zone Alarm Pro. But they distribute their basic Zone Alarm program without cost to individuals, and it uses the same basic engine as Zone Alarm Pro. Their motive in providing the free product is to protect the computers of home users. This is truly an unusual and commendable example of a corporation with stellar moral principles!

The goodies I would like to mention are all freeware. Each can be downloaded and used without cost.

First is METAPAD by Alexander Davidson. METAPAD was written as a Notepad replacement when Mr. Davidson became frustrated with the poor usability of the Notepad text editor. It is tiny – the zip file you download is only 46kb in size. Yet, it is fast, and it loads in an instant. It works with just about every version of Windows (9x, ME, NT, 2000, XP). It has lots of options that make it easily customizable for your needs. Best of all, his website gives instructions on how to install it so that, whenever Notepad is invoked, METAPAD will load instead. METAPAD is a very useful, free program. Get it at <http://liquidninja.com/metapad/>

Next is SIW (System Information for Windows), by Gabriel Topala. This is an amazing freeware program that will tell you just about anything you want to know about your computer. Under Hardware, it will show great detail about the motherboard, the BIOS, the CPU, the PCI bus and more. It will also show detailed information about Software and any Network you may have installed. Amazingly, if you click Tools, Secrets, it will show the serial numbers of the Windows CD used to install your version, as well as the numbers of other installed software that required a serial number during installation. Even more amazing, the yellow “smiley-face” icon invokes a sub-program called Eureka. When started, Eureka provides a magnifying glass for you to pass over any starred-out password (****) on the desktop, which is then revealed in English. SIW is definitely a handy program for quickly ferreting out information about your system. Download it (1,090kb) from Mr. Topala’s website at <http://www3.simpatico.ca/gtopala/>. Watch that www3; it is not a typo.

BA (BIOS Agent) is a tiny (318kb) program that focuses on the BIOS and associated information that would be needed for a BIOS update. BIOS type, date, ID, OEM sign-on, Super I/O, Chipset and

Operating System are shown instantly, along with the CPU type, speed and other details. The program then wants to take you to the vendor's website to order a new BIOS, but you can easily opt out of that pathway. Worth the trouble to download if you want detailed information on your BIOS. Get it at <http://members.driverguide.com/driver/detail.php?driverid=117565>. Look for BA.EXE.

Finally, DISKCHECKUP, a 44kb zip file available at <http://www.passmark.com/download/index.htm>, is a utility that will check the SMART status of all the hard drives in your system. SMART = Self Monitoring Analysis and Reporting Technology, which many people don't know about. All modern hard drives have the ability to note and record errors that occur, and this little utility will show the data recorded in the small database on each hard drive in your system. What kind of information? Read errors, power on time, power cycle count, seek errors, spin retries and much more. More important, aside from all the "techie" stuff, there is a column that says OK, WARNING or FAIL. If you see either of the latter two descriptors, it is time for you to back up your data and buy a new drive, because it will not be long before the old one dies! Well worth the effort to download and install, DISKCHECKUP is a tool that can save you from losing everything on your hard drive.

I have said before that a hard drive is the most complicated mass-produced electromechanical device on earth. What is even more amazing is that, with the advent of the new SMART technology, this incredible device also monitors its own state of health! Get and try DISKCHECKUP to access and read what your hard drive thinks of itself, if only to satisfy your own curiosity. Happy Computing!