

Bytes & Pieces

Newsletter of the Hobart Computer Users Group Inc.

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Is a firewall really necessary?

A while back “Stanley M.” asked just that question in a CNET forum. More recently, I have been asked the same question on more than one occasion. Stanley's query was answered by “Miguel K. of Columbus, Ohio”. The following is a condensed version (partially paraphrased) of Miguel's excellent reply:

A firewall acts a gatekeeper between your computer and the Internet. Your computer is identified to the Internet by a unique number,

known as its Internet Protocol (IP) address. The IP number is like the phone number of a multi-department business. If every call had to go through a single connection and operator, things would slow considerably and the system might collapse completely. Similarly, your computer can attempt to browse the Internet, download your email, and update your antivirus software simultaneously. To allow this computers use “ports”. These ports are not physical entities like those used to connect hardware such as your mouse or a scanner, but rather numerical addresses which act like multiple extensions. When a remote computer “dials” your IP number, it also specifies a port. This is like dialing a known party’s direct extension. To keep your system running smoothly, different processes in your computer listen for “calls” coming through specific ports. When a call comes through the appropriate port, your computer responds by providing whatever information is being requested, usually in the background, **without your knowledge** (Emphasis mine – Ed.). And therein lies the importance of having a firewall.

If a remote computer can detect a port on your computer, that port is considered to be “open”. When a remote computer finds an open port, it can use it to exchange information and you will generally not be aware that it is happening. While many ports must remain open to permit legitimate processes to access the Internet, most don’t, and their exposure merely provides an invitation for trouble. Hackers can easily scan for available open ports, and when a computer answers, they can request all sorts of sensitive information, and your computer will gladly send it over.

A firewall “closes” ports by preventing unauthorized “calls” from getting through. Because your computer doesn’t answer, a hacker’s scanner will assume no computer exists at the particular IP address, and move on. A good firewall practically makes your computer invisible to hackers, while allowing for legitimate programs to access the ports needed for flawless performance.

You may think that there is nothing on your computer worth stealing, but most computers contain sensitive financial and personal information. However, that information is not the only reason that a hacker may wish to access your computer. Malicious hackers can act as vandals and delete information from your hard drive and corrupt system files, essentially rendering your computer useless. They can also remotely control your computer, turning it into a zombie machine used to send viruses or spam, or even launch denial of services attacks to companies like Microsoft, Google, CNET, and Amazon.com - severely slowing down Internet traffic. So, you see, an unprotected computer represents a potential risk to all of us!

Fortunately, a firewall can prevent these and other headaches. The choice between installing one, and trying to explain why your computer is disseminating child pornography over the Internet, is no choice at all.

Once you understand how a firewall works and just what it prevents, you will see the need to install one, especially if you have broadband access, or you spend long hours on the Internet. For a home computer, it will generally be sufficient to install a software firewall – a program that closes the unused ports and monitors access to and from your computer.

If you use Windows XP and have not added another firewall program, make sure the Windows firewall is turned on. While it is not the “best” firewall available, it will not conflict with the programs you want to run and will block unauthorised access to your computer.

For something better you have three choices. Firstly, you could buy a complete utilities package. These can include antivirus, firewall, anti-spam software, and maintenance utilities. Secondly you could buy a security suite. These usually include antivirus, firewall and anti-spam software. By buying a suite of tools, you have the vendor’s assurance that they will all work together without clashes. You will usually have to pay an annual fee for antivirus updates.

Your third choice is to mix-and-match your own collection of free tools. For a choice of firewalls, including reviews of both free and commercial ones, try:

<http://www.firewallguide.com/freeware.htm>

Despite the name, this site has much more to offer including links to alternative browsers, email clients, anti-spyware software, anti-spam software, security testing and much more. I rather like their slogan: *The Internet is a hostile network like the wild west without a sheriff!* Get your sheriff now and bring some law and order to your computer.

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New ZoneAlarm Pro

A completely reworked version of ZoneAlarm Pro has been released. Because of the extensive changes, some commentators are urging caution. Here’s what Langalist’s Fred Langa has to say:

My main concern with this and similar tools that are getting more and more complex is the possibility--- maybe even probability--- of negative interactions between different tools as each tries to carry out a similar function. Colloquially, we’ve referred to that as security tools “stepping on each other’s toes.”

As a result, I suggest waiting a bit when the new ZoneAlarm is offered (some users are getting the update notices right now...). The pre-update version is fine, and works well--- there’s no urgent need to upgrade. Let other braver or risk-loving souls take the plunge, and watch for feedback. Once the new tool has been installed on a couple million systems (it won’t take long) we’ll **know** if there are problems with the new ZoneAlarm tool conflicting with, say, Norton or Sygate or AntiSpyWare or other tools. My guess is that some

conflicts are almost inevitable; but I also thing the folks at Zonelabs will get things fixed pretty fast.

So, a few weeks or a month or two after release, the new ZA tools should be stable and ironed out enough to be fine.

As this is not a minor upgrade of the current ZA, but something far more complex, I **strongly** urge you not to jump in headfirst as soon as the new version is out. Let others see if the water's safe, and when it is, **then** dive in. <g>

Fred is a long-time computer journalist and his opinions are usually well worth considering. To read the whole of the current issue and/or to subscribe go to <http://langa.com> and follow the links.

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Reviewers wanted

From time to time as Editor of this newsletter I receive offers of software to review. I don't have time to do it and, in any case, run a Linux system with most of these programs being Windows applications. I thought I had the problem solved when a member of the Group offered to review programs “depending on what the programs are”. It turns out that his taste in programs is so restrictive that he hasn't reviewed anything yet.

So once again I appeal to the readers. Grab the review copy, write a few paragraphs – largely a paraphrase of the press release tempered with your own conclusions about the hype – and keep the program. If interested, drop an email to editor@hobartpcgroup.org.au and the job's yours.

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Next meeting

I hate to keep harping, but the next meeting is on Tuesday, 9 August 2005 and is the most important meeting of the year – the Annual General Meeting. Under the present Management Committee, the Group has begun to turn around, gaining new members and holding meetings that reflect the tastes of the majority of members. Show them your support and help them continue the good work by attending the AGM and/or standing for Committee vacancies.

Members who are unable to attend are reminded that they should tender an apology by emailing the Secretary (secretary@hobartpcgroup.org.au) or through a member who will be attending.

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A new Secretary?

After much arm-twisting, President Paul reports that he may have found a new candidate for the Secretary's position. Paul still has to get a signature on the nomination form, but seems confident that the necessary scribble will be forthcoming. There's still room on the Committee for one or two more Ordinary Committee Members and, of course, you are free to nominate candidates to run against those who have already nominated.

In all the years that I have been a member I can only recall an election being necessary once, but I live in hope!

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Another sale to Asia

First it was IBM merging its PC business with Lenovo of China. Now it's Philips selling its monitor business to Taiwanese corporation [TPV](#), making TPV the largest manufacturer of monitors in the world. TPV paid Philips \$357.8m and the deal will include taking ownership of Philips' western OEM partners as well as manufacturing facilities for [CRT and flat screen monitors](#) in Hungary, Brazil, Taiwan and China.

According to Dr Gottfried Dutiné, a member of Philips' management board, “This partnership marks an important next step in the transformation of Philips' consumer electronics business from a volume driven manufacturing business to an

innovation and marketing driven business.

“The partnership with TPV enables us to focus our efforts on innovation and product breakthroughs as well as on brand and channel management. Working with leading OEM/ODM partners to manufacture and supply the majority of our products will strengthen our competitive position through an 'asset light strategy'.”

TPV is the world's largest manufacturer of CRT monitors and is looking to expand its operations into flat panel designs. The company's majority shareholder is the Chinese conglomerate, BOE Technology.

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Credit card fraud

In a recent Microsoft Security Newsletter (6 July 2005) was this advice:

When you use a credit card, you can be vulnerable to fraud, whether you pay online, over the phone, or even in person at your neighborhood grocery store. That's because whenever you pay with a credit card, companies need to verify your account before they can provide you with goods and services. Unfortunately, because this credit information is stored on large computer servers, it can also be the target of hackers looking for ways to break into the system and get the information so they can use it to commit fraud.

If you think you've been the victim of fraud or a scam, immediately follow these steps. The faster you contact the proper authorities, the more likely you are to minimize the damage a scammer can do to your identity, your credit, and your bank account.

- Close any affected accounts
- Place a fraud alert on your credit reports
- Contact the proper authorities
- Record and save everything

Read the full details of the steps Microsoft recommends by following the link below. It is well worth reading.

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/privacy/fraudvictim.msp>

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Windows anti-spyware (beta)

In the same Microsoft Security Newsletter was an article on Microsoft's anti-spyware software, currently undergoing beta testing i.e. You can download and use it, but Microsoft does not guarantee that it will work perfectly. If you do try it and find problems, please report them so that they can be fixed before the finished software is released.

For hints on installing and using this product, go to:

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/spyware/software/howto/default.msp>

Supported Operating Systems: Windows 2000; Windows 2000 Advanced Server; Windows 2000 Professional Edition ; Windows 2000 Server; Windows 2000 Service Pack 2; Windows 2000 Service Pack 3; Windows 2000 Service Pack 4; Windows Server 2003; Windows XP; Windows XP Home Edition ; Windows XP Media Center Edition; Windows XP Professional Edition ; Windows XP Service Pack 1; Windows XP Service Pack 2; Windows XP Tablet PC Edition

Note: Users of Giant software, from which this product is being developed, should continue with their existing subscriptions and not switch the Microsoft version as it is only a beta version.

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SleuthHound

Our reviewer passed up the opportunity to review this application for searching your computer. Here's the Press Release. Perhaps someone else may care to take up the challenge:

The Sleuthhound!

Desktop Search Brings the Power of Web Search to Your Desktop!

IsleuthHound Technologies introduces an improved version of their celebrated The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search, a search tool for local systems. The state-of-the-art indexing technology deployed in The Sleuthhound! v.4.6 provides the user with extended functionality. You will be amazed at the riches of information that you had at your fingertips and yet unavailable. Don't bother about extensions, folders and dates. The only thing The Sleuthhound! Wants from you is a word.

Most options of a web search are also embedded into The Sleuthhound! Search engine. The program supports Boolean operators, file type filters, truncated words with wildcards, phrase search, file, date and name filters and other advanced features.

The host of plug-ins provides support for most file types that can contain verbal information. It now embraces most text formats, email messages and HTMLs, multimedia files, web browser histories, bookmarks and favourites. The supported files are scanned whether archived or attached to email messages. If a particular extension is chosen for a search, archives and attachments will be scanned for this extension only, making the already fast search instantaneous. IsleuthHound Technologies constantly works on new plug-ins so that your search engine can provide support for ever increasing range of applications.

The miraculous speed of The Sleuthhound! Derives from a unique indexing technology. The built-in index/search server browses through your search zones and makes file inventory in its database. First inventory will be made after the start wizard leads you into the program. Later The Sleuthhound! Will be updating the index database either at the system start or when the system is idle. You can balance the system workload so that indexing doesn't interfere into the system performance.

"Since we launched The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search in 1999 huge work has been done to improve it and extend its functionality," says Dan Walker, CEO of iSleuthHound Technologies. "The latest version has a number of new advanced features. It allows, for instance, sorting the results by relevance. The built-in analyser will rate the relevance of search results against the input phrase. You can start searching for highlighted words with a hot key from any application. Several improvements were made in search zones indexing. As the volume of information grows The Sleuthhound! Search engine evolves to supply the user with most advanced search options."

Most improvements into The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search were brought about by the feedback from users. IsleuthHound Technologies appreciates users' participation in the development process and looks forward to their involvement. Here are some of feedback mails from The Sleuthhound! Users:

"A great tool for managing data! It saves a lot of time and doesn't eat into system resources. It is just what you need when it comes to finding things on your desktop," Nigel Grant, Canada. "I've never realised that something as effective as web search you can use on the local hard disk." Jane Paige, USA.

The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search v.4.6 Features at a Glance:

- Support for multiple search zones;
- Search zone updates at prescheduled time and when system is idle;
- Support for Microsoft Office files, Acrobat PDFs, email, attachments, archives Zip and Rar, all popular music, picture, and video formats, web browser history, and Favorites;
- Support for Boolean operators, exact phrase search, file type, name and date filters;
- Search results sort by date, size, location, relevance, sender and addressee (for emails) etc.;
- Allows scrolling through the context with highlighted search words;
- Hot key from any application.

Availability and Pricing

The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search runs under Windows 98, Me, 2000, XP platforms and costs 20 USD for a standard edition, 29.95 USD for an extended Pro edition and 74.95 USD for a Pro power pack with all available plug-ins. Free technical support is extended to all registered users. A trial version is available for download free of charge at <http://www.isleuthhound.com/download/sleuth.exe>

About iSleuthHound Technologies

iSleuthHound Technologies specialises in advanced indexing and searching technologies. The company also designs complex Search Systems for the Internet and Intranet access to databases. Our flagship product The Sleuthhound! Desktop Search has won numerous awards and is deployed in corporate and personal systems world-wide.

Product page link: <http://www.isleuthhound.com/sleuthhound/index.php>

Download link: <http://www.isleuthhound.com/download/sleuth.exe>

Web: www.isleuthhound.com

Email: info@isleuthhound.com

Fax: +1.771.594.8293

Just download a trial copy and let other members know what you think.

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Macros anyone?

Our (non-?) reviewer also passed on this one:

Boost Your PC Operating Productivity with Desktop Macros from xStarter Solutions

xStarter Solutions announces today the release of the newest version of Desktop Macros, a macro recorder to relieve you from monotonous operations on your PC. This application enables you to record keyboard and mouse manipulations within a given period of time and replay this sequence when the need arises.

Every day we perform chains of repetitive clicks and keystrokes when logging on to websites, receiving emails, filling in various forms and reports or working with complex applications. Now you can trust all these recurring operations to Desktop Macros. A click on the desktop shortcut will do away with manual operations, making your computer operations more productive. While Desktop Macros performs all monotonous tasks, you can gain some time for more creative things. And a coffee break.

The unique macro technology used in Desktop Macros guarantees the accuracy of recording and playback. You can start recording or playback from any application by pressing a specific hotkey combination. Macros can be customized to include specific information such as passwords, filenames and dates. A pause made when recording the macro will be replicated in the playback. Here you can add specific information. Then the macro is resumed. You can apply macros to a wide range of operations and protect vulnerable information from unnecessary exposure.

Sometimes it is necessary to run only keystrokes without mouse manipulations. After customizing settings in the playback options window, Desktop Macros will perform only them. When playing back the recorded sequence, you can set the speed of performance at nine different levels or repeat the sequence as many times as you need with a loop playback. Find your way of working with Desktop Macros and send monotony to the recycle bin.

“In creating Desktop Macros, we put much emphasis on accuracy and reliability of the tool – these are the main features of the product,” says Alex Gilev, CEO of xStarter Solutions. “The advanced technologies used in the macros recorder guarantee accurate performance even at the maximum processing speed. Hotkeys and the intuitive interface make recording macros a one-click affair. Desktop Macros enhances your computational habits. By eliminating all repetitive tasks, we make operating PC more productive and very fast.”

Desktop Macros v. 2.0 Features at a Glance

- Records all mouse and keyboard manipulations;
- Records keystrokes only or along with mouse movements and clicks;
- Pause for sensitive or variable information;
- Hotkeys from any application;
- Shortcut for macros on the desktop;
- 9 levels of performance speed.

Pricing and Availability

Desktop Macros runs under Windows 98, Me, NT4, 2000, 2003, XP platforms and costs \$19.99 USD for a single-user edition. Free technical support and lifetime updates are extended to all registered users. A free fully-functional evaluation version of the program is available at: <http://www.desktop-macros.com/download/macros.zip>.

About xStarter Solutions

xStarter Solutions specialises in desktop enhancement technologies for automating routine operations and improving computational performance.

Our flagship product is xStarter. It is an advanced task scheduler which has gained popularity with users worldwide. For more information, visit us at <http://www.desktop-macros.com>.

Product page link: <http://www.desktop-macros.com/>

Download link: <http://www.desktop-macros.com/download/macros.zip>

Web: <http://www.xstarter.com>

Email: pr@xstarter.com

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Get the colours right

One complaint that computer users sometimes make is that the colour of their printed digital photos is substantially different from what appeared on the screen. The problem here is in translating colour information from one device to another and in the variations between printers and inks.

A standard called sRGB has been devised and, if your monitor and printer both subscribe to the standard you may be quite happy with the results that you get. If so, be thankful. If not, go to this URL, click Print near the bottom of the page and print out the document that appears. It's packed with good advice on how to get more accurate colour.

VoIP

Voice-over-Internet Protocol as a means of making telephone calls is still in relative infancy and, naturally, there are competing systems. One making the early running is Skype. Michael Robertson of Linspire criticises Skype for using proprietary standards that lock out all others. On the other hand, Xandros, who market a similar Linux distribution – and, in my opinion, do a better job – have added Skype to the applications available from Xandros Networks.

Instead of Skype, a number of commentators – including Michael – recommend the Gizmo Project, so I thought I would have a look at that, but first I need someone to call via Gizmo. Anyone care to join me in looking at this technology? For satisfactory results you need a broadband connection, preferably with a reasonable download quota. Despite Mr Robertson's endorsement, Gizmo is not available for Linux yet, though it is said to be coming “soon”. For Linspire Michael recommends PhoneGAIM, but that isn't available for other distributions of Linux yet. There is always Kphone, I suppose, if ever I can figure out how to work it!

I'm also interested in making Skype calls, once I solve the minor problem of being able to hear the incoming call, but not be heard by the caller – and, yes, my microphone is working! I know because Skype works perfectly when I reboot my computer into Windows XP. The glitch is only in my Xandros setup – and it used to work okay!

VoIP telephone services are being offered by many companies. Calls to overseas and within Australia are sent via the Internet. With the higher data capabilities of broadband and improving VoIP technology sound quality is generally quite acceptable and VoIP calls could result in substantial savings if, for example, you make a lot of long-distance calls.

Among the more interesting VoIP-based offerings are those of Australian company, Engin, which styles itself “The Broadband Phone Company”. Have a look at their services to get an idea whether they would save you money. Then do an Internet search to find other similar offerings, before signing up with anyone.

<http://www.engin.com.au/public/index.asp>

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Save 15% on Ability Office Professional

If you are only using your “office” software for personal purposes, do you really need to pay business prices? Ability Office version 4 is much cheaper than most competing products and includes two new modules, Presentation and Photo Album, as well as numerous improvements to the word processor, spreadsheet, database and PhotoPaint. Its interface has been improved to blend into different versions of Windows and to mimic Office 2000, XP and 2003. And you can save 15% off the regular price by buying online now. Just follow this link: <http://www.ability.com/sales/news/mail0506b.php>.

For a comparison of the features of the different packages available (Basics, Classic, Standard, Small Business, Professional), go to Ability's website: <http://www.ability.com>.

While there, you can help Ability improve their product by completing a survey on what “office” software you use and what you think of it: <http://www.ability.com/sales/survey.php>.

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Updating Firefox and its extensions

Like all popular software applications, Firefox developers are looking to patch any security flaws and bugs that are found, and to make general improvements. Similarly, the developers of the many extensions continue to work on them. How do you know when you need to do an update? Simple, just look for an up-pointing arrow (↑) near the top righthand corner of the screen. If it is there, then there are updates waiting. If it is red, then there are security updates available and these should be installed without delay. Just click on the arrow to start the process.

To ensure that Firefox checks for updates to extensions and themes, go to Tools/Options (Edit/Preferences in Linux versions), click Advanced, scroll down to Software Updates and make sure that there is a tick against My Extensions and Themes. If you want to force a check, click on the Check Now button.

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Sick b.....!

Spammers have been sending Londoners emails claiming that dialing 112 when there is no mobile phone signal on the Underground will transfer the call to 999 via satellite and even help trace them. *"All phone companies have signed up and as it is a satellite service it also gives them a trace to you if you don't know where you are,"* the email claims.

As 112 is the European equivalent of 999, it is thought that the hoaxers may be in Europe. Wherever they are, this particular hoax can only be described as sick, because 112 can only transfer callers to 999 where there is a mobile signal. There are no mobile phone transmitters on the London Underground and satellite signals cannot penetrate below ground. Mobile coverage for London's "Tube" is planned for 2008. Given recent events, consideration will no doubt be given to implementing it sooner, rather than later.

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Handhelds dropping

There are times when technology comes up with solutions for which there are no problems, or, at least, only a limited market. The Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) may fall into that category. Early versions, such as the pioneering GEOS-based ones, had little impact. Palm enjoyed some success, so much so that Microsoft produced a version of Windows specifically for incorporation in such devices, competing with Palm's proprietary operating system. Now sales of PDAs are reported to be slumping dramatically. Sales of handheld computers declined by 20.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2005, according to new data from analyst firm IDC.

One reason given for the slump is that purchasers are going for models that incorporate a mobile phone, while Acer and Yakumo achieved a sales increase by bundling a PDA with global positioning technology (GPS) that allows the device to be used as a navigation tool.

Manufacturers are now looking for new markets to reignite the interest for personal organisers, according to Kevin Burden, research manager at IDC's mobile devices programme. "Discovering and developing these new solutions are essential for driving the handheld device beyond personal information management and returning the market to growth," he said.

What would your ideal pocket device have? PDA, mobile phone, camera, GPS and MP3 capability, perhaps? It will be interesting to see what manufacturers create to try to make these devices a "must-have", something which, in my opinion, they have never quite been.

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