PRODUCT REVIEW

VanBasco's Karaoke Player *by Jocelyn Doire*

I don't know if you are like me, but when comes the Christmas season, I like to sing. Especially when I'm in a group, but the results are not always as harmonious as I would like them to be. First, I often forget the words, then I miss a few notes here and there, and since I can't play any musical instruments, I cannot accompany my singing.

I heard many times of people using karaoke and have even seen it a few times, but singing in front of a crowd is definitely not my idea of fun. But as I found out last year, using karaoke on my computer is a great way to learn and practice lots of songs, and that can be a lot of fun when singing with a group of friends, where everyone can follow the words and the music as it plays.

I've tried a few karaoke programs, but the one I liked the most was Van-Basco's Karaoke Player. Not only is the program ad-free freeware, but it has all the features I want and more.

VanBasco's Karaoke can play MIDI or karaoke files, which are small files that contain all the notes of a song but not the singing like an MP3 file. Karaoke files are similar to MIDI files except that they also contain the lyrics. Note that sometimes a karaoke file has a .MID extension instead of the normal .KAR for compatibility reasons.

The installation is pretty straightforward - it simply asks for your language, the directory where to install it, and whether it should be the default pro-

gram to run .MID and .KAR files.

The program starts by displaying 6 different windows: playlist, piano, MIDI, control, karaoke and the main player window.

The playlist window (see Figure 1, p. 7) lets you manage a list of songs that can be saved and reloaded. You can add, remove, move, etc. any songs to the list, and then play them in order or at random using the control panel.

There are two windows that display the notes being played; the first one is a piano keyboard (Figure 2) which displays the notes as if someone was playing them in real time, and which can help you learn how to play a song on a piano. The second window, the MIDI output (Figure 3), shows all the instruments by name and the played notes as little moving rectangles. If you prefer, you can listen to a single instrument or turn off any of them by using the buttons on the left.

The next two windows (Figures 4 & 5) let you control what's being played. The main player window is similar to a music player, from which you can start, stop, rewind, fast forward and jump to the next song in the play list. You can also select to play the songs in order or at random, to repeat a single song or the whole list, and finally to turn on or off any of the other five windows.

The control panel lets you adjust the volume, the tempo and also the key, something very useful when the song is either to high or too low for your voice.

And finally, the last window, the karaoke window that displays the lyrics (if available) in real time, shows what to sing and when to sing it by turning the words red (Figure 6).

There are many sites that have MIDI and Karaoke files, for example:

http://www.cipoo.net/music_e.html
http://ingeb.org/
http://www.espace-francophone.com/karaoke/index.html (big, but with annoying ads)

The http://www.vanbasco.com web site also has a search engine that can help find MIDI or Karaoke files by entering an artist or a song name. When using a regular search engine, it generally helps to add ".MID" or ".KAR" with the search string.

I wish you a melodious holiday season! :)

Joc

(see various screenshots, p.7)

Inside this issue:

Next Meeting: **Wednesday, December 14th, 2005**

December Raffle

by Chris Taylor

At the December meeting, thanks to the generosity of Corel, we have a copy of WordPerfect Office 12 for the raffle.

This full-featured suite of applications includes the venerable WordPerfect word processor, Quattro Pro spreadsheet for crunching numbers, Presentations for creating stunning … well, presentations and the Pocket Oxford English Dictionary.

WordPerfect Office 12 has a street price of $350.

Raffle tickets are $1 for one, $2 for three, or $5 for ten.

Upcoming meetings

Wednesday, December 14, 2005—Back by popular demand! Harley Bloom from Bloom Microtech will be here for his 7th annual Christmas Wish list.

January 11, 2006—S. Cruise of Adobe Canada (topic TBA)

February 22, 2006 (FOURTH Wednesday)—Eliott Finkleman, Practical Computing, "Protect Your Computer from Virtual Crime"

March 8, 2006—TBA

April 12, 2006—DBx GEOMATICS, "Web Mapping with Scalable Vector Graphics" http://www.dbxgeomatics.com

November Prize Winners

At the November meeting of the OPCUG, **Cornel Bierman** won our raffle prize, a copy of the *Acronis True Image 8* software. **Maurice Duchene** took home one of the door prizes, a Symantec clock, while **Martin Pagnan** won the other, a copy of the book about PowerPoint titled "Beyond Bullet Points".

Wing SIG East is Alive!

The Beer BOF will meet again in December at Liam Maguire's after the meeting. The pub is at the corner of St. Laurent and Innes, within walking distance of the Museum. Their web site is at:
http://www.liammaguires.com/index.html.

If anyone is curious about Linux, Don Chiasson will have his laptop running the newest release of Suse.

CALENDAR		
Meetings	**Date**	**Time and Venue**
OPCUG General Meeting	Wednesday, Dec. 14th, 2005	7:30 p.m. Auditorium of the **Canada Museum of Science and Technology**, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd. http://www.science-tech.nmstc.ca/english/index.cfm
Beginners' SIG	Wednesday, December 14th, 2005	Immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting.
IT-Pro SIG	Wednesday, Dec. 14th, 2005	Immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting.
PIG SIG (Wing SIG West)	Wednesday, Dec. 14th, 2005	10:00 p.m. (after all other SIGs) at Chances "R" restaurant, Baseline Rd. at Woodroffe Ave. (College Square Shopping Centre)
Beer BOF (Wing SIG East)	Wednesday, Dec. 14th, 2005	10:00 p.m. (after all other SIGs) at Liam Maguire's, St. Laurent Blvd. at Innes Rd. (formerly Hooters')

Please note that unless otherwise noted, SIGs meet at 9:00 p.m. (immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting).
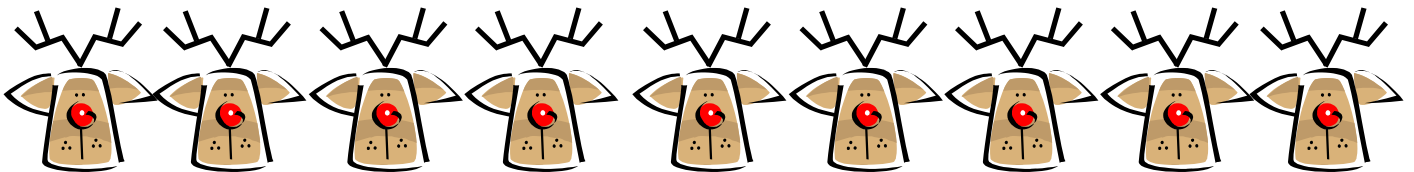
CLUB LIFE

Planning a Members' Presentations Night

In the past, we've had meetings during which some of our Group's members made short presentations on a favourite software application. Based on the feedback I've received, it seems to me that this meeting format is well-received by most of our regular audience. After all, it is precisely what our Group is all about: "Members helping members".

While our meeting schedule is nearly complete, I am attempting to plan a members' presentation night for early 2006. I hope all of you will consider making a short (10-15 min.) presentation on one of your favourites - it could be a backup utility, a web browser, file organizer, personal information manager, or even an unconventional use of a "more mainstream" application. This is a great opportunity to give something back to the Group.

If you are interested in helping out, please email our meeting program co-ordinator with your name, name and short description of product you would demonstrate, and estimate of time needed. We look forward to hearing from many of you.

Bob Gowan
Program Co-ordinator
Bob.Gowan@opcug.ca

OPCUG Elections for the 2006 Board of Directors

by Jocelyn Doire, OPCUG Secretary

Once a year, the OPCUG holds elections for the 9-member Board of Directors. We are once again coming up to this annual event.

I encourage all members to consider running for a board position or getting involved in some other manner in the operations of the OPCUG. If you want more information about what is involved, please talk to any current or past board member.

As well, we need a member to come forward to act as the head of the election committee. The duties are minimal. All you need to do is collect nominations by e-mail, postal mail, or in person at general meetings. If more than nine nominations are received, you would then need to select two other members to join you in an election committee and oversee the actual elections. If you are interested, please let one of the existing board members know.

BOOK REVIEW

the 123 of digital imaging (an electronic book)

Reviewed by Chris Taylor

I have been interested in photography for many years. I have shelves filled with books on photography, darkroom techniques, etc. Yet, when I bought a digital camera a couple of years ago, I was a little bewildered.

Things are different enough between digital cameras and film cameras that I felt somewhat lost. Too bad I didn't have access to *the 123 of digital imaging – Interactive Learning Suite v3.5* by Vincent Bockaert back then.

123di is an electronic book that contains 138 topics in 16 chapters and has over 3,000 pages of information. In the author profile section, Vincent says 123di "…aims to synthesize the essential information available today that you will need to make the most out of your digital photography experience.", which I think is a very good description of 123di.

123di is broken down into three broad *steps*.

Step one has three chapters which cover digital photography basics as well as digital cameras themselves and how to choose a camera. There are clear explanations of all aspects of digital cameras and how they differ from film cameras. As well, general camera terms such as aperture priority and metering are covered very well.

Nine chapters in *step two* teach about editing digital images. 123di uses various versions of Photoshop (Elements, v7, CS, & CS2) to show different techniques. However, not having a copy of Photoshop is not a barrier to learning. Most image editing programs include similar functionality. I use Microsoft's Digital Image 2006 and I found I could easily apply most of the techniques in step 2.

Step two is really the "meat" of 123di. This is where digital imaging really shines. It is astounding the degree of control you have over your images after having taken them. 123di explains it all. There are sections on choosing image editing software, colour management, adjusting resolution, cropping, adjusting brightness and contrast, removing chromatic aberrations and lens distortion, changing the depth of field, sharpening, removing vignetting, retouching, removing back-

grounds, and much, much more.

Step three is all about what to do with your images after you are done perfecting them. There are 4 chapters that help you organize, view, share, print, and process your images.

The Appendices contain interactive manuals for Adobe Photoshop Album 2, Photoshop Elements 2 & 3, Photoshop 7, CS, & CS2.

Information throughout 123di is broken down into three levels of detail, *starter*, *essential*, and *advanced*. There are icons at the top of the window that let you jump immediately between the three levels. The *starter* information is an introduction to the topic. It is really useful if you are unsure of what a topic is all about or whether you are really interested in it. *Essential* info starts to get into the real substance of a topic and covers the really important aspects. In the *advanced* sections, the author digs deeply into the topic. I found the interface to 123di a little quirky in the beginning. But that is because I just dove in and started clicking around without stopping to learn the way 123di was designed. Once I took the time to read the sections that describe how the electronic book works, it became much easier.

I still find myself distracted by the myriad of cross-reference links. I find I seldom can manage to go in and read on a single topic without jumping off in the middle to related material. But at least now I don't tend to get lost.
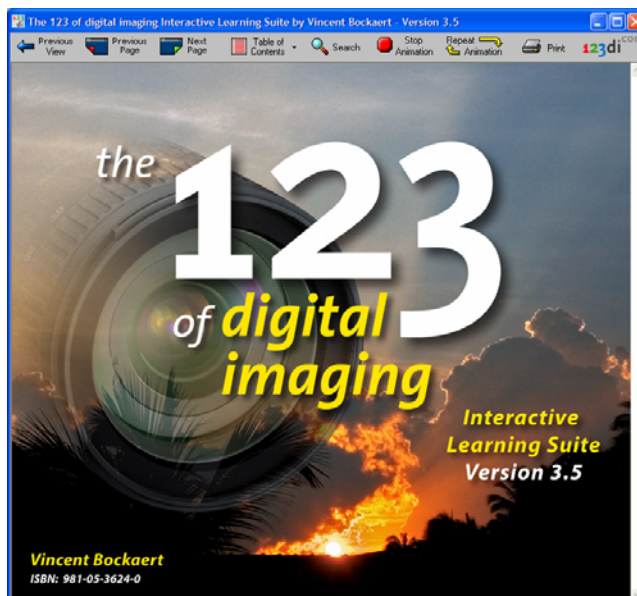
The topics covered in 123di covers are enhanced through built-in animations where appropriate. They really help in understand some complex topic such as histograms and how you can use that information to adjust your images.

System requirements:
Win95/98/NT/2000/ME/XP,
about 110MB disk space.

You can download a demo version of 123di from http://www.123di.com, which contains a few of the sections of the full product. You can purchase the full product through a download at the web site for US$45. You can order 123di on CD-ROM for US$58 (shipping included) which adds the freeware *Adobe Photoshop Album Starter Edition 3.0, cdTree 3.1.4 Standard,* and *Panorama Tools* as well as demo or trial versions of *Adobe Photoshop Elements 3.0, Adobe Photoshop CS2,* and *PTGui 4.1.*

After I saw how wonderfully useful 123di is, I asked Vincent Bockaert if he would be willing to donate a copy as a door prize at the OPCUG 2005 Digital Imaging Workshop and he immediately agreed. So if you are lucky enough to have gotten a spot at the workshop, you have a chance of winning a copy of *the 123 of digital imaging.*

ENTRY FOR BEST NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

For contest details, see September's newsletter or visit http://opcug.ca/public/Articles/contest2005.htm.

Are you ready for Linux? Linux is ready for you.

by Lionel Wagner (*lionwag@ncf.ca)*

After writing this article, I posted it on the internet discussion group comp.os.linux.misc They provided many comments that were useful in improving accuracy. Sentences below that are in italics were the most controversial.

For years an alternate operating system has been floating around the net. It Is completely open and shared by everyone. Computer experts from all over the world have been refining it to a high degree. There are over 100 different versions (distributions). They mostly share the same core (kernel).

In its raw form, Linux is powerful, and more complex than DOS [1]. Fortunately, most distributions have a GUI (graphical user interface) that makes it very similar in operation to Windows. Its philosophy of operation is different: *When you make a mistake in Windows, the computer may "crash" and you have to re-boot. When you make a mistake in Linux, nothing happens, until you do the right thing*. There is no such thing as the "blue screen of death" in Linux. Matter-of-fact, one distribution offers it as a screen saver!

There are two levels of users in Linux. The root user has his own password and can go anywhere and do anything. Other users have their own passwords and are well separated from each other. They have their own desktops, documents, and e-mails. The root user can control who does what, by granting "permissions". For example: Dick and Jane can read and modify a certain document, but Tom can read it only. This hierarchy gives Linux a measure of protection against viruses and other stupidities. If Dick catches something on the net, it will not necessarily affect Tom and Jane. If Jane makes a mistake it will not affect Tom and Dick. Nobody can do anything out of the ordinary without permission from the root user. This inhibits the spread of trojans and worms since they need password protected permission to spread.

A good web site to get information on the different distributions of Linux can be found at: http://www.distrowatch.com. Some distributions provide a free demonstration CD that enables you to try Linux without affecting your computer. Ubuntu has been kind enough to ship me a half-dozen copies. In order to test run, it is necessary to do a tiny modification to the BIOS of your system. You simply have to alter the boot sequence so that the computer "sees" the CD first. Most computers have a sequence: A then C. This should be changed to D-A-C or D-C-A so long as D is first. This modification can be left in place permanently. The only effect it will have is lengthen the boot-up time by about 5 seconds. Once this is done, you simply power up the computer with the demo CD already in place. The computer will run off the CD without any effect on the hard drive. The only exception being if you have less than 64megs RAM. In this case Linux will create a swap file on your hard drive to compensate. It can be left there or deleted from the root directory of C. If for any reason you are unable to configure your BIOS to boot from the CD- ROM, you can make a floppy boot disk. Ironically this disk can be made in Windows! Once made, you can boot in Linux and proceed with the demonstration or installation.

When using Linux, check its ability to read complex MS Word documents. Linux has word processors that will more-or-less recognize Word and Word Perfect. Its word processors, Open Office and AbiWord, will enable you to save documents in HTML and many other formats, including MS Word. There is a Windows version of Open Office that can do the same things as MS Office for free!

Once you have tried Linux, and like it, you can consider installing it. Before doing so, check if your printer and other hardware will work. Information on supported hardware can be found at:

http://www.linuxhardware.org
http://www.tldp.org/howto
http://www.linmodems.org
http://www.linux-tested.com

Linux will support most printers, sound cards and video cards, but there is a problem with modems. Most computers have built-in cheap "stripped down" modems that rely on Windows to do some of their work. *A lot of these Winmodems do not work with Linux*. You require a stand-alone modem. All external modems will work. There is no problem with Ethernet cards, so you can connect on high speed.

It is possible to install Linux on the same hard drive that has Windows. Your computer will have the capability of booting-up in either system. Make sure the hard drive is big enough: about 4gig. Defrag Windows before.

When you install Linux it formats the hard drive in its own way. So if you do not partition it properly, you risk not being able to access Windows. For this reason, I prefer to install Linux on an old "spare" computer, or at least, another hard drive.

Years ago, Corel, under the direction of Michael Cowpland, created their own version of Linux. It was simple and smooth. It won awards. I found this version to work well in a Pentium II with 64megs of RAM. Sensing a threat, Microsoft "invested" in Corel. You guessed it... a few months later Corel abandoned Linux. Fortunately, Xandros has taken it over. I have ordered this version and am looking forward to testing it.

Another version of Linux is called "Damn Small Linux" (DSL). It has the Firefox browser and its own little word processor built-in. It occupies only 50megs of hard drive and will work on 32megs of ram. It can run off a USB pen or within Windows. It can even run on a 486! All with a GUI !

This version of Linux is ideal on an old second computer dedicated for internet use. Because Linux's internal "language" is totally different from Windows, *it is unaffected by 95% of the viruses, adware, and spyware that pollute the net*. My "big" computer is used for fancy things such as: photo processing, music, and games. It rarely goes on the net. The older computer has Linux and is bullet proof on the internet. A happy marriage!

[1] *A Linux user writes:*
"Unfortunately the original Unix people working on old teletypes wanted brevity rather than understandability. Thus <creat> rather than 'create', <grep> rather than something like 'search' or even 'newdir' etc. This is combined with the philosophy of many small things tied together to accomplish a task. This makes the command line share many many features with necromancy. Obscure, long rituals, in which if you got even one little thing wrong, you would either get nothing or could get immense destruction. (Recall Mickey mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice). And the books of Runes (called man in Linux) are about as obscure as the books of spells. Once you get used to it, it is wonderful, powerful and logical."

ENTRY FOR BEST NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

Beyond Making MP3's (a synopsis) *by Dunc Petrie*

Alan German's series of articles gave me the idea to go a bit further and deeper into various aspects of digitizing your favourite oldies. If you already have the equipment - fine. Perhaps you are interested but have no hardware, where do you begin? Current audio equipment is oriented towards home video theatre: an "amp is an amp" but it may not have the features you require to playback successfully your flea market treasures. New equipment is great but do you really need to spend a lot of money? The answer is no. Haunt the second hand stores (for example, Salvation Army Thrift Shop), pawn shops and garage sales. Amazing bargains can be found; often in surprisingly good condition.

But what do you do with it? Read on. Here's how to set it up, test it, calibrate it and some limited thoughts about do-it-yourself maintenance and repair. I have neither the space nor the knowledge to conduct "Repair Technician 101" but there should be something for everyone. Those who want to delve a little deeper will find references for a series of test instruments that will do a superb job for very little money. How, you ask?
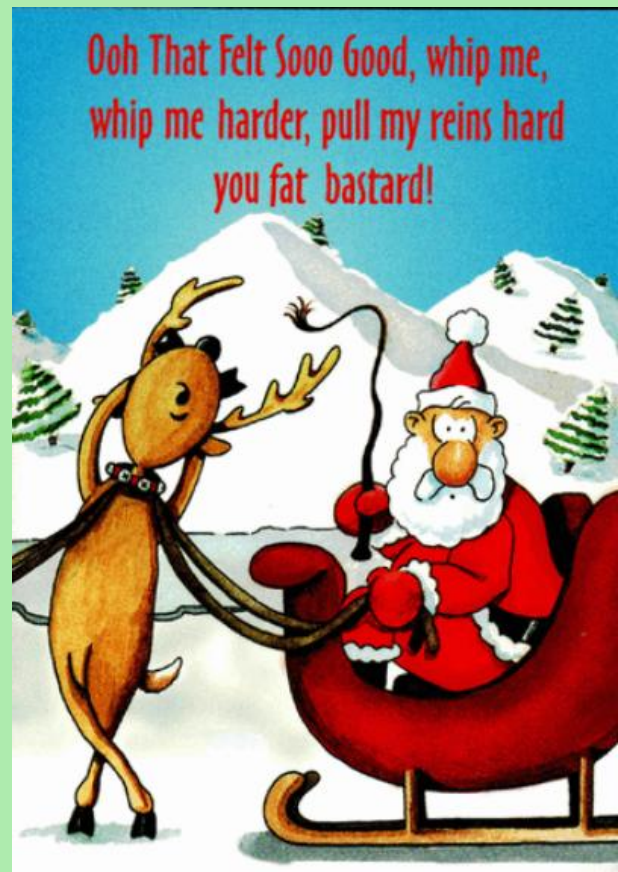
All you need is your computer, a soundcard (need not be state-of-the-art) and two or three pairs of test cables (can be bought but fabrication falls easily into the do-it-yourself category).

For those who still have cassettes for their old car but now have a CD player, this article will have a few thoughts about converting the tapes to CD. Surprisingly, these cassettes had quite good audio quality particularly with highway noise as a background. Dolby noise reduction took care of the hiss; better, the pops and scratches of an LP are absent (unless that was your original source). As a bonus, second hand cassettes (in all the usual places, above) are often in much better physical - and sonic - condition than LP's.

The article includes several support websites and a short bibliography of resources.

For the full article, go to the newsletter section of the OPCUG website at: http://opcug.ca/public/Articles/2005.htm or download the article in Rich Text Format (67.3 KB) from http://opcug.ca/public/Articles/MP3_More.rtf. It will open in your default text editor (e.g. Word or WordPerfect).

Santa Humour
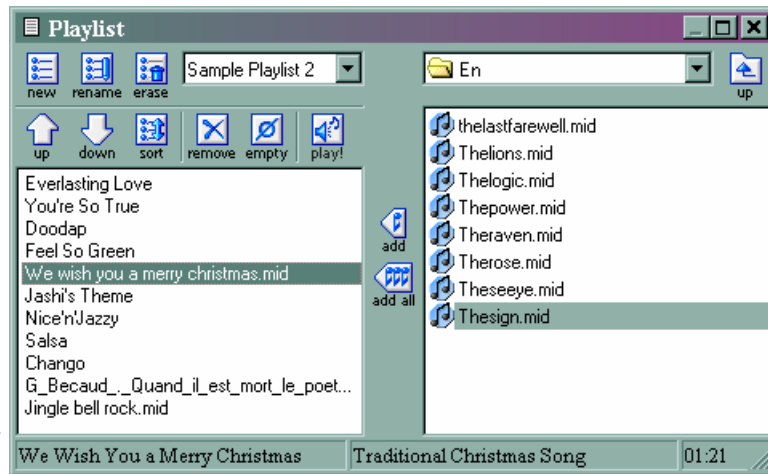
Karaoke *Continued from page 1*
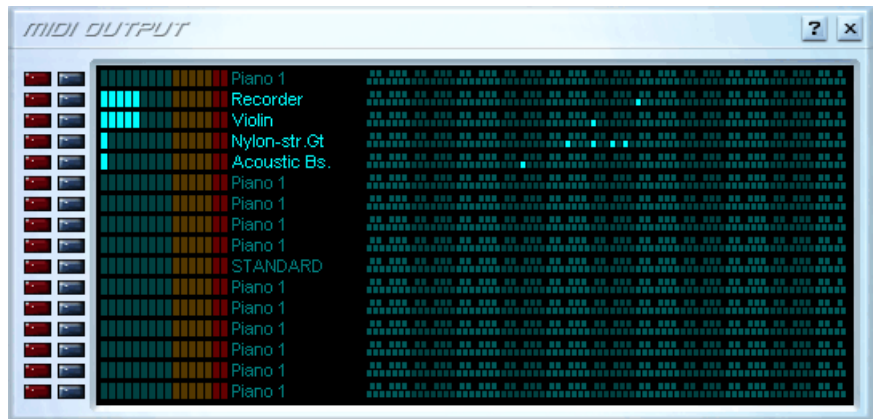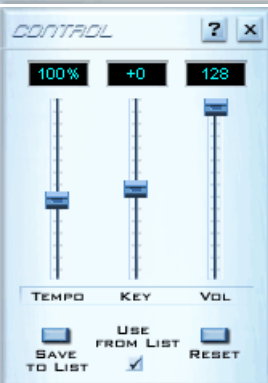
Screenshots

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figures 4 & 5

Figure 6

We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
And a Happy New Year.

OTTAWA PC NEWS

Ottawa PC News is the newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group (OPCUG), and is published monthly except in July and August. The opinions expressed in this newsletter may not necessarily represent the views of the club or its members.

Member participation is encouraged. If you would like to contribute an article to Ottawa PC News, please submit it to the newsletter editor (contact info below). Deadline for submissions is three Sundays before the next General Meeting.

Group Meetings

OPCUG meets on the second Wednesday in the month, except July and August, at the Canada Museum of Science and Technology, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd, Ottawa. Meetings are 7:30–9:00 p.m. and Special Interest Groups go until 10 p.m.

Fees:	OPCUG membership:	$25 per year
Mailing Address:	3 Thatcher St., Nepean, Ontario, K2G 1S6	
Web address:	**http://opcug.ca**	
Bulletin board — PUB II (BBS)	**http://opcug.ca/default.htm**	

President and System Administrator
    Chris Taylor   chris.taylor@opcug.ca   727-5453
Meeting Coordinator
    Bob Gowan   bob.gowan@opcug.ca
Treasurer
    Alan German   alan.german@opcug.ca
Secretary
    (Mr.) Jocelyn Doire   jocelyn.doire@opcug.ca
Membership Chairman
    Mark Cayer   mark.cayer@opcug.ca   823-0354
Newsletter
    Brigitte Lord (editor/layout) brigitte.lord@opcug.ca
    (Mr.) Jocelyn Doire   jocelyn.doire@opcug.ca
    (e-mail distribution)
Public Relations
    Morris Turpin   PR@opcug.ca   729-6955
Facilities
    Bob Walker   489-2084
Webmaster
    Brigitte Lord   opcug-webmaster@opcug.ca
Privacy Director
    Bob Thomas   privacy@opcug.ca   820-6835
Director without Portfolio
    Wayne Houston   wayne.houston@opcug.ca
Beginners' SIG
    Chris Taylor   chris.taylor@opcug.ca   727-5453
IT-Pro SIG
    Bob Thomas   ITProSIG@opcug.ca   820-6835

How to get the OTTAWA PC NEWS by e-mail

Want to get the newsletter electronically? There are two formats available: plain text and Adobe Acrobat PDF. Simply send a message to **listserve@opcug.ca**. Leave the subject blank and in the body of the message, type (in plain text, **not HTML**):

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(to get the plain text version).
Or:
subscribe newsletterpdf
(to get the Adobe Acrobat PDF version).

And if you decide you do not need the printed version mailed to you anymore, simply let Mark Cayer (membership chairman) know. He can be reached at general meetings, as well as by e-mail at **Mark.Cayer@opcug.ca**. You might want to wait until you have successfully received at least one issue electronically before opting out from the printed version.

To subscribe to the Announcements List, e-mail **listserve@opcug.ca**. Leave the subject blank and in the body of the message, type (in plain text, **not HTML**):

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Within a couple of minutes you will receive a confirmation message from the listserver.

"Announcements" is a low volume list that the Board of Directors uses to get in touch with the membership. Subscribers can expect at least one message per month – the meeting reminder that goes out a few days in advance of the general meeting. Other than that, the only time it is used is when the Board feels there is some important news that should be brought to the attention of all members.