Bits of Blue

A Monthly Publication of the Tampa PC Users Group, Inc.

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Meeting

Holiday
Party

Wednesday, December 8, 2010

6:30 PM

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Tampa, Florida

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Meeting Preview: Holiday party and election of officers. Come an enjoy the food with your fellow computer club members.

Editor's Comments

By William LaMartin, Editor, Tampa PC Users Group
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Thanks to the ThinkPoint virus for giving Merle Nicholson something to write about in this month's newsletter. And thanks to Merle for taking the time to fill us in on this particular nasty problem. Also, thanks to Jim Purcell for the monthly meeting minutes.

Later in the newsletter, I tell you a bit about my Cloud Computing experience. And by that I don't mean using Google Apps or Microsoft Docs. What I am talking about is actually installing a Windows application in Windows Azure, Microsoft's version of the Cloud, and setting 15 instances to run simultaneously. The program could have been something I wrote, but in this case it was a program from Stanford University that does one computing task at a time of tasks assigned to it as its part in a very large distributed computing project involving 400,000 plus CPUs around the world.

I wonder if anyone in the group has purchased a Windows Phone 7. They have been out now for a couple of weeks at those providers like AT&T which use the GMS phone systems.

January Meeting: Merle Nicholson – More on Windows 7

Bits of Blue is published by the Tampa PC Users Group, Inc., a State of Florida registered non-profit corporation, to provide educational information about personal computer systems to its members. Our mailing address is P. O. Box 3492, Tampa, FL 33601-3492.

However, for business concerning this newsletter, Bits of Blue, please contact the Editor, William LaMartin, at 821 S. Boulevard, Tampa, FL 33606-2904; 813-251-3817; william@lamartin.com.

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Minutes of the November Meeting

By Jim Purcell, Secretary, Tampa PC Users Group
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The Windows Special Interest Group (SIG) normally opens our monthly meeting. The meeting began at 6:30 PM. The SIG is devoted to a discussion of all aspects of the Windows operating systems and of computer-related subjects in general. The moderator, Bob LaFave, introduces new or little known products and technological developments for discussion by the group. He accepts questions and requests for help in solving problems from attendees. Bob leads the group in finding answers to questions and solutions to problems. This month's SIG ended at 7:00 PM.

The business portion of the meeting was opened at 7:05 PM by John Witmer, the Tampa PC Users Group President. John gave a brief summary of the plans for the Christmas party. He reported that the menu would be basically the same as last year with a few additions. He added that members could bring food if they desired, but there is certainly no obligation to do so.

John reviewed the procedures for electing officers that will take place during the December meeting. He noted that all current board members except the Secretary have agreed to serve another term if no one steps forwarded. He encouraged members to volunteer to fill all positions, but he emphasized that there was an absolute need for someone to volunteer to fill the Secretary's position.

John appealed to the members to volunteer to deliver the presentation at one of our monthly meetings. He noted that we do not have a presentation scheduled for January which certainly highlights the importance of their participation. [Editor's Note: Member Merle Nicholson has agreed to do the January presentation.]

Mary Jo Combs of the Hillsborough County Public Library System opened her presentation of Library databases at 7:10 PM. Ms. Combs discussed databases that are free to the public and several additional databases that are subscribed to and paid for by the

What a nasty virus can do to your computer

By Merle Nicholson, TPCUG
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I recently was asked to remove a virus from a friend/client's notebook. For all intents and purposes, it rendered the computer completely inoperative. The virus was in a virus category of "Rogue antivirus software". There are many of them out there for the unwary to catch, and this one, called "ThinkPoint," even has the Windows flag on it to further fool you into thinking it is legitimate. The only option you can see is "Safe Startup," and that takes you to a virus scanner and a way to purchase the product. If you close it out, it shows you a blank desktop, no icons, no menus. You can turn the machine off, that's about it. Turn it back on, same situation. I did figure out a way to kill it through the Task Manager's Run command, and then run the desktop. I also found some things written up on the Internet to do something similar, but no help in removing it. I did remove it using some very clever, obscure skills, several virus scanners, then finding and removing twenty or so copies of it. But the computer really didn't work well enough to use. What I found surprised me, and this is what the article is about and what you can do.

Here's a list of what I found. Some things are by deduction and may not be 100% accurate. But I am 100% certain that these problems existed. All of the things fit into a strategy that prevents you from fixing the computer.

1. The worst thing: The computer will not boot into safe mode. It bluescreens every time. I'm speculating that ThinkPoint either corrupted an existing driver or put a new one in that loads and then fails. The way to fix this is to do a system repair or a complete reformat and installation. I did not want to impose that cost on my customer, and she agreed (it's not a primary computer, and it's rather old). So I left it that way.

2. All the system restore points were unusable. Refused to restore to any point.

3. To run most anything, an official-looking popup would ask to confirm the logon user and give a box for an alternative user account that did not work. This is to make sure that everything you try is run under the current user account which has been modified to prevent circumventing the virus. What you want to run is Explorer.exe giving you your desktop, and every effort is made to prevent you from doing this.

4. Most – perhaps all – items in Control panel will not run. It gave a warning that the administrator account has restricted its use. I did manage to get into the power configuration, but it would not accept any change. The computer would go into sleep mode after about 20 minutes, keeping me from running a full system scan from any antivirus software unless I sat there and wiggled the mouse occasionally for four hours.

5. The Internet articles say that even if you purchase the software to fix a bogus virus, ThinkPoint stays on the computer. The uninstall just errors out.

6. The Internet articles say that it installs other viruses, and I did find a half dozen other viruses, mostly downloaders.

7. It leaves about 20 copies of itself under various random names, and places items in the registry to run each of them. So removing the active virus is just the beginning. I also found a couple of viruses in the System Restore files.

8. It apparently makes changes to the current user account profile that look like group policy changes, even though this was Windows XP Home, which

doesn't have group policy capability.

9.   Only after all the bad software is cleared from the machine can you then get rid of the modified account by creating a new administrative account, copying all of the user files from the old to the new – except for the profile files, then deleting the old account after locating the email files.

Isn't this scary? It is to me, and I (95%) fixed this one with a lot of work. The idea of having to fix my own machine after something like this gives me nightmares.

What you can do to prevent this: A sizable number of virus infections now are rogue anti-virus. There's an understandable reason for this. It creates revenue. Old-fashioned viruses are malicious, but have no revenue-producing strategy. In other words, it's now about money. Most all viruses are sent to you via web pages, and most of those are porn sites, either designed that way or hacked from outside. Porn sites are visited so often, they are a very good candidate for this kind of thing. Also, presumably the porn site owners don't have the skill to remove sophisticated hacks. But most any web site is vulnerable. In any case, you must select something on the site – click on it – to give the browser a chance to violate security rules.

The next common ways to get a virus is with downloads. And that means just about any download or file transfer. So you have to get any and all files from reputable sites like iTunes or Downloads.com, Amazon etc., which have the resources to check their own content.

But that leaves any and all file-sharing sites absolutely and definitely off the list. So if you're downloading songs for free, you're in trouble. Any file-sharing site's software must be uninstalled from your computer. And that also goes for any peer-to-peer gaming sites, LimeWire, Kazaa, and any and all IM programs that allow peer-to-peer file exchanges.

And while we're at it remove – uninstall – anything that says "Toolbar." Right now. Want to know why toolbars are free? Because they're a conduit for push-ing advertising to you; and they're easily exploited. Besides you don't need them. They want you to believe you do, of course! But the browser itself and a couple of favorites will do anything a toolbar will do.

An alternative is giving up gaming and IM and to start purchasing songs. So if you have kids who will just die without peer-to-peer gaming or IM and stealing songs, the answer is to live with it with some intelligent prevention.

First, if at all possible, put the kids (and maybe grandpa) on a Windows 7 machine. If you have some internal networking and file sharing, Windows 7 Pro is better because it will back up to a network drive. But so will Acronis Home, or 2010 or 2011, running under Win 7 Home Premium.

Make sure you have a full system backup, and replace it monthly. Use Windows 7 Backup or Acronis. Believe me, restoring the entire system hard drive is way, way better than any alternative that I can think of. Look at what I had to do with ThinkPoint. Want to try it?

I guess it's obvious, but a strong anti-virus program running on your machine is essential. BUT – this is important – make sure you look at the scheduling part of it and make sure it will automatically download new definitions and also run a full system scan at a time of day that the machine will most likely be turned on. Same for Windows Updates. Make certain that all important updates are installed as soon as they are available.

Password protect your main administrative account (this is the one that comes first with the computer) and bury the password paper in the back yard and leave the location with your attorney. Better yet, Win 7 allows you to create a flash drive that will unlock the computer. Hide it under some rubber fake dog poop someplace.

THEN: Create a non-administrative account for yourself – a regular non-privileged account, and a separate one – or one for each kid. A regular account cannot

Virus........Continued from page 4

install software. But most importantly, SOFTWARE that is run under this account can't install software. Ah HA!

Then one more step. Set the screen savers to require a sign-in on wake-up, and ALWAYS log off when you leave the computer. That's especially essential when leaving the administrative account.

Skills: There are a few things that would be very helpful to learn. The big one is navigating the computer file system using Windows Explorer. Find out how your files are organized, and more importantly, how to change what files you can view. That's in Windows Explorer, Tools, Folder Options, View tab. Second Important Skill – learn to use the Add, Remove Programs. That's "Programs and Features" in Vista and Win 7. When you find an installed program that you are not using (say, anything with the word Apple or toolbar), just uninstall it, see how it goes. ◆

Comments........Continued from page 1

Or have all our members who want smart phones already purchased an iPhone or an Android one? I plan on acquiring a Windows Phone 7 but will have to wait until my provider, Verizon, has the CDMA version of the phone. As of now, all I know is that is supposed to occur in early 2011. Perhaps there is even an advantage in having to wait in that some of the early bugs will be removed by then.

I have already written a program for the Windows Phone 7 and tested it on the Phone 7 Emulator in Visual Studio, but I have to wait for an actual device to really know how well the program works. ◆
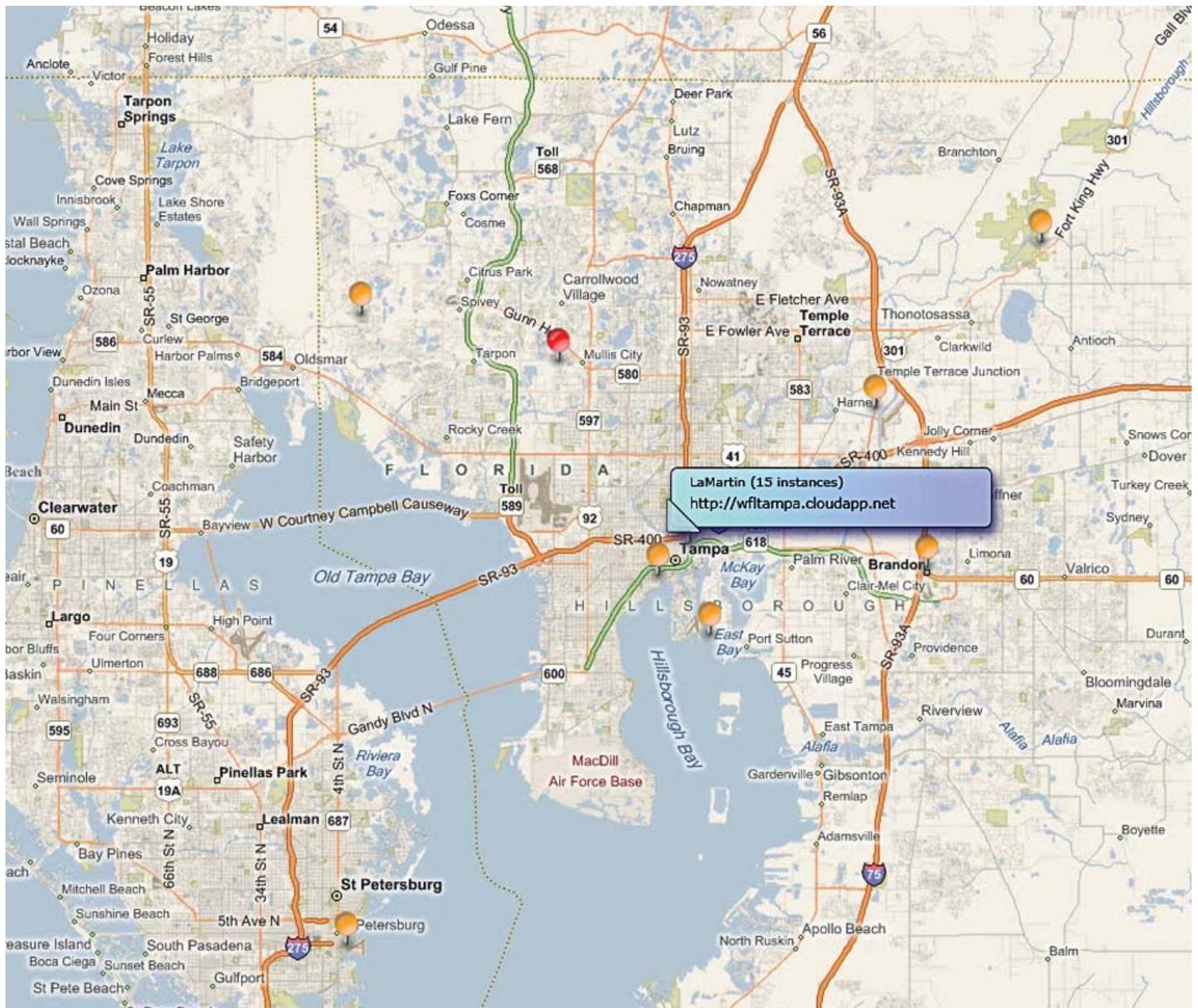
Internet Picture of the Month

Windows Phone 7

Pictured above is the recently introduced Samsung Focus Windows Phone 7 as sold by AT&T.   The image is from the site http://microsoftfeed.com/ with the specific URL of http://microsoftfeed.com/2010/windows-phone-7-samsung-focus-full-specification/

December's Interesting World Wide Web Locations

Tampa PC Users Group (that's us)   http://www.tpcug.org/
Folding@home   http://folding.stanford.edu/
Windows 7 Solution Center   http://support.microsoft.com/gp/windows7#tab0
Panopticlick - Check your computer's fingerprint   https://panopticlick.eff.org/
Tom's Hardware Windows 7 Forum   http://www.tomshardware.com/forum/forum-63.html
Alligator Photos   http://people.biology.ufl.edu/ljg/Wildlife%20Pho
                                                   tos%20pdfs/Gator%20Photos%20web%202009.pdf

LaMartin (15 instances)
http://wfltampa.cloudapp.net

Cloud Computing and Alzheimer's

By William LaMartin, Editor, Tampa PC Users Group
william@lamartin.com

You certainly may be forgiven for wondering what Cloud computing has to do with Alzsheimer's disease, and then to further question what the above map would have to do with either of these items and why is my name on the map. Well, it all started with my attendance at a one day session at the Microsoft Tampa office on Windows Azure, Microsoft's Cloud computing platform.

Don't make a big deal of the Cloud. It is just computing on the Internet of interest mainly to large

scale users and not to most of us. Windows Azure is a Windows environment for running applications and storing data on computers in Microsoft data centers (the Cloud). A number of other large companies offer competing platforms. The advantage of putting your applications in the Cloud is that you don't have to worry about infrastructure; you spend your time on writing code and, if there is to be a public-facing interface (web page), developing that. If demand for your service is small, you only pay for the computing resources and storage needed for that. If the demand increases, you then pay for the extra servers, storage and transaction time needed for that increased traffic.

Special Interest Groups

Visual Basic .Net SIG   (and sometimes Access SIG)

This SIG meets the third Wednesday of the month at 6:30 PM. For information, contact Editor William LaMartin at william@lamartin.com.

Windows SIG

This SIG occupies the first 30 minutes of our monthly, regular meeting and is devoted to a general Windows and computing discussion. Member Bob LaFave moderates the discussion.

Cloud.......Continued from page 6

At the Microsoft session, they first gave us their presentation on the Azure platform, provided lunch, talked a bit more and then provided each of us with a user name and password that would allow us to use our own computers to access a temporary Azure account good for one month. They then led us through downloading several files from the Internet that would allow those who brought their laptops (as had been suggested) to use Visual Studio to create a Cloud application on the laptop, then test it on the laptop in a "Cloud simulator," and actually deploy it to the Cloud and make it active.

I would say only a hand-full of attendees managed to accomplish the above. One big problem was that the guest wireless network withered under the assault of over 50 people trying to download all the files required. I managed to get all the files via a neighbor's thumb drive after he had downloaded them via his laptop's wireless card and not the guest network. However, that is where things stopped for me since I could not get Visual studio to run the Cloud application that we were supposed to modify and then deploy to Azure.

Later at home I did get everything to work on my desktop computer and was able to deploy the application that I describe below to the Cloud. I also eventually solved the laptop problem by moving the downloaded Cloud application to a different location on the hard drive. Strange, but sometimes Visual Studio objects to running programs created on other computers at certain locations on a different computer's hard drive. However, I didn't look any further into the laptop problem since I had everything working correctly on the desktop computer.

So what was this application? Recall SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, where they used thousands of people's home computers to run a program that did small bits of the processing required to do the search? This program was similar, and you can download a version to run on your home computer if you want to participate.

The program is called Folding@home with the goal: "to understand protein folding, misfolding, and related diseases." It is run out of Stanford University, and the web site is http://folding.stanford.edu/. Go there and read about the project and how it relates to such diseases as Alzheimer's, ALS, Huntington's, Parkinson's and many cancers. Then if you are interested in participating, download the executable and run it on your computer.

Now back to the map. The map at the beginning of the article is a screen capture of the Tampa area of a world map showing the Microsoft Azure teams efforts in the Folding@home project. There are about a dozen of us in the greater Tampa area with about nine in this map area. Orange indicates active, red inactive. There is a fly-out from my pin noting that I have 15 instances of the folding program running in Azure. The fly-out covers another orange pin with the name of Jeff Odell. Sorry about that, Jeff. I assume most of the orange pins in the Tampa area will turn red in another week or so since we were only given a month of free time on Azure. Once this newsletter is at our web site, the online Adobe Acrobat version will show the map in color.

If you go to http://wfltampa.Cloudapp.net/, you can see the list of work units I have completed on the project – 220 as of November 30. There is also a link to the Microsoft Azure team's results and the map there.

Microsoft gave us the ability to test out other programs (worker roles) at the site. I originally used only 10 of the 20 instances allotted for the Folding@home program, then increased it to 15 with the thought that I still might try something else with the remaining 5, but so far I have not had time to do anything else. ◆

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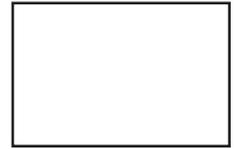
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Minutes........Continued from page 2

library and are offered free of charge to those possessing a Hillsborough County Library System card. She provided members with a 16-page outline of data that is available through the library. Although some of the links to websites in the outline are readily available to the public, they were placed strategically in the outline to assist in research and to amplify databases restricted to those possessing a library card. She suggested that members go to the library web site at http://www.hcplc.org and click on "databases and websites" and work themselves through databases of interest to them. There are detailed help pages available and a "Contact Us" link at the bottom of the initial page, if all else fails.

The meeting ended at 8:55 PM. ◆

to I-275

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