IT Corner - December 2002

DVDs

Well, the Alliance-Française (also known as the Alliance Franco-Gambien) has begun playing movies and a number of people have been asking questions about what exactly Video CDs and DVDs are (what is the difference). Many people here in The Gambia are under the impression that Video CDs that are widely for sale here (extremely illegal versions of movies) are DVDs. This is not the case.

A DVD uses a special type of disk that is very different from a normal CD. This format allows the disk to hold a great deal more information (between 10-20 times the amount of information -- you will notice that if you compare a DVD disk to a normal CD that the DVD tends to be thicker) meaning that movies recorded to DVD can, potentially, have a much better quality picture than those recorded onto normal CDs. When designing the specification for DVDs the industry decided to include what is known as "regions" in DVDs. The world has been divided into six regions (North America is region 1, the UK is in region 2, for example). The idea is that a DVD created for a particular region cannot play in players from another region so, if you wanted to play that DVD you picked up in the states in your UK player you would be faced with the dreaded "Region Lock" message and would be unable to play that movie. The idea behind this was to (somehow) stop illegal copying of movies. Now, many people on the Internet find this a ridiculous thing and have written "Region Hacks" for most DVD players (including computer-based ones) to get around this limitation. These hacks are NOT illegal but they are potentially dangerous to install (though I have never experienced any problems).

Movies can be recorded onto CD in a number of different ways one of which is in the "Video CD" format which allows the movie to be played on any "Video CD" player or on any computer (as long as it has a video player such as "Windows Media Player" installed). There are other formats used on the Internet but typically these only work on computer-based video CD (notice no capitals) players. Because movies created with the "Video CD" format must use a smaller capacity disk from a DVD the quality of such movies tends to be far inferior to that of a DVD.

At Alliance they recently were attempting to show Video CDs of a particularly bad quality (and dubious heritage) that was why it was such a bad picture (and sound, etc). DVDs have no such problems.

Internet Access

Although you can get access through any number of Internet Cafes throughout The Gambia many people have been asking as to how, if you have your own computer and a telephone line, you can get access from home.

Here is a list of all the Internet Service Providers in The Gambia:

Gambia Telecommunications (Gamtel) Internet Services
Telephone: 397557
E-Mail: info@gamtel.gm
Costs: 50 D *Optional* Installation Charge, 200 D Monthly Unlimited Access Cost (1st month in advance)
Includes: E-Mail Account

QuantumNet
Telephone: 223021, 201115, 223022, 222833, and 222834
E-Mail: info@qanet.gm
Costs: 50 D Installation Charge, 220 D Monthly Unlimited Access Cost (1st month and installation charge in advance)
Includes: E-Mail account

Netpage Solutions
Telephone: 378180, and 378181
E-Mail: info@netpage.info
Costs: 220 D Monthly Unlimited Access Cost
Includes: E-Mail account, 30 MB web space

Free Web Sites

A number of people have also been asking me about where they can find free web space in order to put up pictures (etc) from their work here in The Gambia. There are a number (believe it or not) groups that provide "free" web space on the Internet, here are a few to consider:

- **Geocities (http://geocities.yahoo.com)** - One of the biggest (and original) groups offering free web space. The only down-side is that they require that you display a window with advertising for their service on each of your web pages (this can be disabled using other software but this contravenes the web site policy). Amount of space included: 15 Mb (3 Gb/month of bandwidth)
- **FreeServers (http://www.freeservers.com)** - Includes free subdomain of a number of various web addresses, including freeservers.com, freehosting.net, htmlplanet.com, etc (so, <yournamehere>.freeservers.com, for example). All sites hosted with FreeServers include mandatory advertising and you will also be sent periodic e-mails from them (spam). Amount of space included: 12 Mb
- **FreeWebSpace (http://www.freewebspace.com)** - Includes free subdomain (so, <yournamehere>.freewebspace.com, for example). Amount of space included: 20 Mb

If you are interested in one of these, I would advise visiting their site and reading about what services are exactly on offer (be careful about the "extra" features and when they require a credit card...). All of these services offer additional features for a "small" monthly charge (if you want them). There are MANY of these such services on the Internet, go to your nearest search engine and type "Free Web Site" to see.

Death of a Laptop

I am sure that a number of readers will be amused to learn that after the last newsletter article about the "Care and Feeding of Laptops" my laptop seems to have packed up working completely. My tale is one of tremendous heartache and woe.

One day about two months ago now I was using my computer (yes, properly ventilated on the kitchen table, nothing to block the air intake, etc, etc) and I was notified about a bad sector. I thought this was a bit odd and immediately ran the "ScanDisk" utility in Windows to see if it could fix the problem. Over the course of the next few days I unsuccessfully tried to run the utility but it never completed -- it was taking more than 12 hours! Eventually, the hard disk stopped working completely -- a fact confirmed by running the built-in diagnostic features on my laptop -- and I contacted IBM (the manufacturer) who informed me that the hard disk needed to be replaced (tell me something I don't already know...). After informing the insurance company of the costs I had a hard disk shipped from the UK.

Eventually, the insurance company notified me that they would cover the cost of the replacement hard disk (hurray!) and when it arrived I installed it only to discover that the fan on the computer had stopped working and the computer would no longer work at all (*sigh*).

The saga does not end here. I contacted the local IBM representative in Dakar (the closest) but had no luck interesting them in attempting to fix it so I will be returning with the laptop to London at Christmas to have it fixed there.

Moral of the Story: Despite EVERY precaution you might take it is always possible that something might still happen to your laptop. Be CAREFUL!

Training Material

If anyone is interested, I have been doing some informal training sessions at my workplace on various computer topics. These topics are geared towards those already familiar with computers but looking to do a bit more (such as technical support). I have some presentations in PowerPoint containing all of the material (including examinations and review sessions). The material consists of:

- 4 Classes of "Computer Essentials" (Covers theory and core configuration)
- 4 Classes of "Computer Networking" (Covers theory and core configuration)

Future topics will include:

- Internet and Web Page Development
- Systems Analysis (Including basic programming theory)
- Database Technology

Please let me know if you would like a copy of any or all of these.

As per normal, let me know if there are any topics you would like me to discuss/address in this column.

Take care – All the best for Christmas and the New Year!

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