

(Approx. 798 words)

1964 Has Finally Arrived

Written by Bruce Preston, president, West Mountain Systems, Inc., long-term board member of DACS and conducted the Random Access sessions at the General Meetings as well as chaired the Microsoft Access SIG.

www.dacs.org

bpreston (at) mags.net

This article has been obtained from APCUG with the author's permission for publication by APCUG member groups; all other uses require the permission of the author (see e-mail address above).

One of the 'Gee-Whiz' attractions at the 1964 New York World's Fair was the AT&T Picturephone http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Videophone#AT.26T_Picturephone which people eagerly awaited for availability. And waited. And waited..

For a while I have been using Microsoft's Live Messenger instant messaging service, and while it supports video, I have never been really happy with it - audio/video quality were marginal. In addition, Windows Live Messenger (and its predecessors, Windows Messenger/MSN Messenger) doesn't support Mac, and our son Scott, who is away at college, prefers a Mac. He suggested that I try Skype instead. I installed it about a month ago and have found it to be easy to use and have much better video and audio quality. The icing on the cake is that for Skype-to-Skype calls, it is 100% free as well.

What you need: To start with, you need a broadband connection - cable or DSL, both work fine. To support voice calling you need a microphone and speakers. If you want video capability, you also need a webcam. For smooth video a USB 2 webcam is recommended. We recently outfitted my wife's notebook and her sister's desktop with webcams from MicroCenter.com - WinBook WB-7144 HD Webcam 2-pack - two USB 2 webcams with integral microphone, as of this writing the two-pack is \$39.99 + S/H. http://www.microcenter.com/single_product_results.phtml?product_id=0308734 It works fine over WiFi (802.11g) at both ends. Windows XP and Windows Vista both recognized the hardware and did not require an installation CD, although the product comes with a pair of identical CDs with ArcSoft photo editing/cataloging software and drivers for earlier versions of Windows. The base of the camera has three spring-loaded fingers which can grasp the top of a flat screen monitor or notebook.

The Skype software is a straightforward download and install. About the only decision you have to make is whether to install the Google Toolbar (which is installed by default.) I declined - I dislike add-on browser toolbars. You need to create and register a Skype name (not your e-mail address) and pick a password (at least 6 characters having at least one digit.) You need to provide a valid e-mail address for use in recovering forgotten password.

For Windows, Skype installs yet another little icon in the system tray down by the clock - but I have found it to be low-impact upon my machine so I have left it active. The image of the icon changes depending upon your computer's status - available for incoming calls, offline, do-not-disturb, etc. The same icons appear next to entries in your contact list showing their availability.

To populate your contact list, you need to provide either the Skype name or e-mail address of the other party. That's about it. Click on an entry in your contact list, select CALL (for a voice only call) or VIDEO CALL (for voice + video) and within about 5 seconds the other end will ring and your correspondent can elect what type of call to accept.

During a video call you have a large image of your correspondent. On a 1024x768 I am going to guess that it is near 800x600. A smaller picture-in-picture image at the lower left displays what your correspondent sees.

There is a small window within which you may type text a la instant messaging.

Recently I was having problems with establishing an account on a service, I couldn't make out the CAPTCHA distorted letters. (As some of you know, I am legally blind.) I called Scott planning on asking him to create the account for me. He pointed out that there was a "share my screen" capability in Skype. I did so, he read the characters for me, and I was able to continue. Nice!

As mentioned earlier, Skype-to-Skype calls are free. There is a charge for Skype to other types of telephone service, i.e. landline, cell etc. I haven't needed that. Lastly, some years ago eBay purchased controlling interest in Skype thinking that buyers and sellers would use it during the auction process - questions about items prior to the sale, shipping instructions after, etc. It never took off. Recently eBay sold most of their interest to an investors group led by Mark Andreessen (originator of Netscape) but the founding partners of Skype sued eBay claiming that eBay had violated the contract. That's up in the air, but it is highly improbable that the service will 'go away' It will be interesting to watch the case work its way through the courts.