

tools ^{of the} trade

SOLO® has been around for almost 100 years, and its laptop cases come in a wide variety of styles including metal attaché cases and backpacks. The two pictured here are the 15.4" ladies tote and the 15.4" laptop portfolio. Both will accommodate a 15.4" laptop. The ladies tote is 16.5" × 13" × 3.75".



Solo laptop bags

It has soft straps, pebble-grain textured vinyl, protective feet, and business organizer pockets. The Ride Along Pocket™ slips over a rolling luggage handle. The tan laptop portfolio is made of leather and has a padded pocket in the main compartment, disk and accessory pockets, cushioned carry handles, zip-down organizer compartment with pen loops and business card holders, accessory pockets, and cell-phone pocket. There's a full-length zippered pocket on the back and a removable/adjustable shoulder strap. www.solocases.com

If you use your laptop for presentations or occasionally view movies on it and find the sound a little disappointing, the **Sound Blaster® Audigy® 2 ZS** sound card could provide the advanced sound system you've been looking for. The PCMCIA format card offers home theater sound quality with 256



Sound Blaster Audigy notebook sound card

times the clarity of the basic notebook sound. For movies, the Audigy card has built-in Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES decoding; for digital music, it features EAX Advanced HD Music Tools including bass boost, multiband graphic equalizer, audio cleanup, and full surround on 5.1 or 7.1 speakers. Smart Recorder software is included to let you record music and audio samples in 24-bit audio quality with high-fidelity 24-bit/96kHz inputs. The box includes the audio card, speaker docking cable, carrying case, Creative earphones, and software including Creative's DVD-

Audio Sampler Disc. www.soundblaster.com

Corsair, Inc., has released a new line of extremely rugged USB 2.0 flash drives called **Flash Survivor™**. The flash drives are encased in CNC (Computer Numerical Control) milled aluminum of the type used in aircraft manufacture, and there's the additional protection of a rubber molded collar shielding that absorbs shocks and vibrations. The two end caps reinforce the metal tube to keep it from collapsing. The drive is water resistant to 200 meters (650 feet) at 20 atmospheres with an ethylene propylene diene monomer waterproof seal. Obviously designed for use in the field, the Survivor can also be the solution for anyone who has ever dropped and stepped on the drive with the final copy of their presentation. Two formats are currently available: Survivor GT 8GB and

Web Kaleidoscopes

Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ A KALEIDOSCOPE IS A WONDROUS DEVICE that creates its dazzling variety all within a single compact tube. In a similar way, there are kaleidoscopes on the Web where, through a portal or beneath a single button, there exist pathways to hundreds or thousands of images.

Beneath a Button

There's a great widget for browsers called StumbleUpon (www.stumbleupon.com). Once you load this small program, it puts a Stumble button on your browser's toolbar. Click the button, and the program loads a random website

that has been preselected as a place of interest.

To give you an idea of where Stumble will take you, I have just clicked through a few pages. The first to come up shows an image of what looks like a brass coin with words incised on it. The caption explains that it's actually the head of a pin that was found on a prisoner when he died in his cell in Sing Sing back in the late 1800s. The prisoner, A. Schiller, was a forger, and the tiny etchings seen on the heads of seven pins found on him were the words of "The Lord's Prayer." One of the pins "was flawless and a true masterpiece. Schiller had spent the last

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Corsair shock- and waterproof flash drive

Survivor 4GB. Both drives provide sustained read/write speeds up to 34MB/second and 28MB/second, respectively. The GT drive can transfer 20 office files in less than a second or transfer a 1.6GB movie in about 80 seconds. Both drives are preloaded with a security application that lets you create a hidden, password-protected partition. The password is encrypted with 256-bit AES encryption.

www.corsair.com/corsair/flash_memory.html

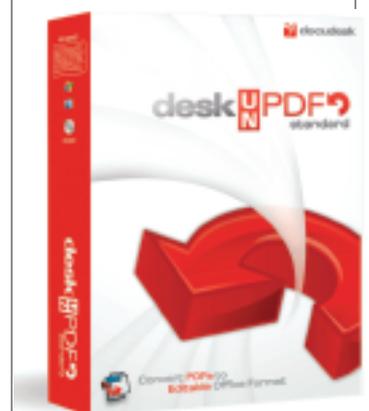
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desk® is a PDF converter that lets you edit PDF documents when updating is necessary or when you want to reuse PDF content in other forms. The program quickly converts the entire document, including all the images, lines, and hyperlinks, and offers the most accurate choice of fonts while maintaining the text layout from the document being converted. The Accu-Text digitally maps text placement and chooses the best font and font size to maintain the look of the original, but you can override the choices to change the layout manually. With deskUNPDF, you

convert PDFs to an editable DOC (Word) or TXT (text) format, and it will even convert PDFs that were created with Visio, CAD, or QuickBooks programs. Once you make your updates or edits, you return the document to the PDF format so that it can be read by the universal PDF viewer. A WYSIWYG (what-you-see-is-what-you-get) preview lets you check the settings before you complete the conversion. Usually the conversion is a simple two-step process where you open the PDF document and then click the convert button. You can convert the entire document or select a single page for conversion. deskUNPDF is available for single users at \$39.95 or for small businesses in license packaging from five to 100 seats. Docu-

desk also sells a companion program called deskPDF, which is a modestly priced PDF writer that lets you create PDFs that are 100% Adobe Reader compatible from any application. The program features drag-and-drop creation and something called PDF instant e-mail, which allows deskPDF to automatically compose a new e-mail with your default e-mail program and attach newly generated PDFs.

www.docudesk.com



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25 years of his life creating the pins, using a tool too small to be seen by the naked eye. It is estimated that it took 1,863 separate carving strokes to make it. Schiller went blind because of his artwork.”

Next click went to www.drawingsofleonardo.org, a page of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings that includes portraits, anatomical studies, landscapes, and some interesting drawings of war machines.

Next click landed on a page (www.specialdefects.com/v2) that was covered with the image of sand on a beach. As you moved the cursor, footprints were impressed in the sand, accompanied by a soft stepping sound. You could walk the footprints in any direction you wanted. When I saw a white dot in the center of the page, I moved the cursor to it, and a small menu opened that contained links to other Flash pages, including a living heart beating, explosions in the night sky, and a match that ignited when you moved the mouse over it, which then burned the page you were looking at.

Next click brought me to the TextureKing’s page where you could download zipped images of all kinds of textures—paint, metal, plastic, wood, and so on. These were free stock images for designers and artists. The glass images were interesting, but I didn’t think this would be a page with wide appeal.

The next click went to, purportedly, actual stories from travel agents on a page titled “Why Americans Should Not Be Allowed to Travel.” One item read: “A woman called and said, ‘I need to fly to Pepsi-cola on one of those computer planes.’ I asked if she meant to fly to Pensacola on a commuter plane. She said, ‘Yeah, whatever.’”

And you could continue this odyssey of fascinating as well as totally irrelevant sites that you might never have seen had it not been for Stumble’s tour director. The program also lets you save your favorites in a personal directory. It’s as easy as clicking on the “thumbs up” icon. You can also share the better ones with your friends.

On a growing list that I can access from any computer, I have a six-page list of sites I can revisit or show others. There are a couple of optical illusion pages, a dancing pipe cleaner figure that you choreograph with various keys as you tap to one of several musical selections, a collection of astounding photographs of tornadoes as they’re forming and while they are tearing up the landscape, a gallery of pierce-carved pencils, a page of bubble wrap that you can pop, and dozens of others. One of the best humor sites I’ve discovered with Stumble is a site called “The Sneeze—Half zine, Half blog, Half not good with fractions.” The “Steve don’t eat it!” portion of the site chronicles this guy’s worldwide search for the most exotic (and revolting) packaged foods, which he partakes in and reports back on—everything from potted meat to something called natto (fermented soybeans). The language can be as strong as the food, so you might want to skip it, but the site, like many of the others, is unique.

StumbleUpon has a growing fan base with well over two million users already signed up. Its appeal is obvious once you try it—the same kind of curiosity that keeps you turning the barrel of a kaleidoscope.

Through the Portal

There are many pages online that serve as specialized miniportals.

Many have very little formatting or design—they just look like large lists of links that are there as a doorway. Often they reflect specialized interests.

A recently uploaded portal of this sort is this year’s winner of the Webby awards. The Webbys are the Oscars for websites, sort of. This year, the index page for the winners (www.webbyawards.com/webbys) has a collage of micro thumbnail images in the middle of the page, which is a little like a kaleidoscope with hundreds of mirrors instead of the usual two rectangular ones in the tube. As you mouse over the collection, short descriptions of the sites appear, and, if you click on the tiny thumbnail, a larger panel shows the image and more complete information on the winning site: name, Web address, category, and so on. Winners and nominees appear side-by-side in the collage. It’s a Flash application, and if it’s a little too quirky for you, you can click on the link above it that offers “View the non-Flash winners list here.” That list is easier to browse if you’re looking for particular categories or want to view winner, people’s choice, and the nominees all within the same category (such as banking or corporate communications, fashion, or parenting).

A particularly instructive winner is the one that got best visual design—www.jonathanyuen.com. If you’d like a clear demonstration of how different a website is from the printed page, film, television, or any other kind of medium, check it out.

It’s worth the time to browse the winners to get a current picture of the condition of today’s Web. And whenever you come across a Web kaleidoscope, take the time to pick it up and give it a turn. You never know where it will take you. ■