

# northbay news

The monthly newsletter of the NorthBay Chapter of the  
Society for Technical Communication

Volume 9, Number 2, Mar.-Apr. 2002

## In This Issue

- ❁ *Screen Capture with SnagIt 6.0*
- ❁ *Dare to Be Dumb (and Write Usable Error Messages)*
- ❁ *This Month's Meeting*
- ❁ *President's Column*
- ❁ *Make a Difference! Vote for Your Future!*
- ❁ *Professional Development Opportunities*



## Screen Capture with SnagIt 6.0

*John Underwood, NorthBay Chapter*

At the February meeting, Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer, lead technical writer at TrueTime, Inc., introduced the audience to SnagIt 6.0, a screen capture program from TechSmith in Lansing, Michigan. SnagIt captures image, text, and video from the Windows desktop. Starting with version 6.0 (6.0.1 is the latest), SnagIt is certified for use with Windows XP as well as Windows 98, 2000, and NT. TechSmith asserts that SnagIt provides excellent graphics and video and is easy to use. The presentation backed up this claim.

*Continues on page 5* ➤



*When you try SnagIt's hot features,  
you'll be over the moon!*

## Dare to Be Dumb (and Write Usable Error Messages)

*Rusty Jorgensen, NorthBay Chapter*

It's a tough time to be uninformed, dumb, or stupid: this is the Information Age, three centuries beyond the Age of Enlightenment. For most of us, the possibility of receiving a comment such as "That's the most stupid question I've ever heard" is embarrassing and possibly threatening. Such comments inhibit our inquisitiveness and keep us from daring to display our ignorance.

*Continues on page 7* ➤



*Dumb writers help create smart users.*

**northbay officers  
and committee chairs**

**president**  
kurt huget  
huget@sonic.net

**co-vice-presidents**  
barbara herbert  
barbara@sonic.net  
chris muntzer

**newsletter**  
editor: elyse lord  
elord@pon.net  
layout: mary flynn  
maryflyn@pacbell.net  
copy editor: genevieve duboscq  
gduboscq@sonic.net

**web**  
trudie folsom  
webmaster@stc-northbay.org

**membership**  
will ross  
members@stc-northbay.org

**hospitality**  
gabrielle de serres & kathy cia

**treasurer**  
liz kaiser  
ehkaiser@sonic.net

**submitting articles and ads**  
We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. Please e-mail simple text to the newsletter editor.  
Advertising rates (per issue): \$20 for 1/4 page, \$35 for 1/2 page.

**reprints and distribution**  
If you reprint articles from the *northbay news*, please credit them and forward a copy to the editor. Reprints in non-STC publications are subject to the author's approval.  
Copyright © 2002 *northbay news*.  
*northbay news* is free to NorthBay Chapter members.  
Non-member subscriptions in hard copy are \$12 per year.

**This Month's Meeting**  
**Thursday, March 21, 2002**

**Panel Discussion**  
**“How to Find a Technical Communications Job”**

Recruiters Andrew Davis and Alan Cooper, senior technical communicators John Dibs, Eunice Malley, and Toby Wraye, and hiring manager Bruce Wohlert will share their ideas about how to get a job in challenging times.

**Meeting Schedule**

**Location:** TrueTime, Inc., 3750 Westwind Blvd., Santa Rosa

**Time:** 5:30 - 6:15      Networking, Show and Tell  
6:15 - 8:00      Introductions and Program

**STC Mission Statement**

The mission of the  
Society for Technical Communication  
is to improve the quality and effectiveness  
of technical communication  
for audiences worldwide.

## President's Column

*Kurt Huget, President*

### SRJC Scholarship Program

Thanks to an excellent suggestion by chapter members Annette Gooch and Trudie Folsom, our chapter leadership has decided to pursue the development of a scholarship program for qualified students of Santa Rosa Junior College. In principle, an annual scholarship of \$1,000 or more will go to selected SRJC students who demonstrate the potential to make a strong contribution to the field of technical communications. The program will be open to full- or part-time students studying technical writing, Web design, applied graphics, or other disciplines relevant to technical communications.

We feel that this scholarship program will reap many rewards for all concerned. First, we'll be giving a helping hand to dedicated and deserving students. In turn, these and other students will be introduced to our STC chapter and learn of the benefits that our organization can provide them, both academically and professionally. Consequently, we'll be sowing the seeds of new membership in the years to come. The program will no doubt raise our profile in Sonoma County's academic and business communities. And most important of all, we'll be "doing good by doing good work."

Our hope is to implement the program by year's end, with a deadline for application submissions in December, followed by recipient selection and scholarship awards in January 2003. In the meantime, we have a lot of work to do, including:

- ◆ Define the guidelines and criteria for the application and selection process.
- ◆ Coordinate the program with SRJC administration and faculty.



*STC NorthBay Chapter wants to make a Technical Writing Student's dream come true!*

- ◆ Work out funding logistics. (The NorthBay chapter will fund the initial award, with subsequent funding to come from corporate and private donors.)
- ◆ Create a selection committee, to be composed of three chapter members and two SRJC faculty or administration members.
- ◆ Assign a dedicated chapter member (or committee) to manage the program.

This is a new adventure for our chapter. We're at both the beginning of this exciting project and at the bottom of the learning curve on how best to proceed

(and succeed). We would greatly appreciate any input that anyone has to offer us in this endeavor. Feel free to contact any chapter officer with your advice or suggestions. Also, in the coming months we'll be looking for volunteers to serve on the above-mentioned committees.

### Upcoming Chapter Elections

Part of our April meeting will be devoted to conducting chapter elections for the 2002–2003 year. That will bring to an end my term as chapter president. It has been a valuable experience for me, both professionally and personally. I've developed some skills and personal strengths that I never would have imagined possible just one short (but eventful) year ago. All in all, it's been

enlightening, enriching, and a whole lot of fun.

Our chapter continues to grow and prosper, thanks to the hard work, dedication, and creative input of our active members. I have no doubt that each and every one of you has something special to offer our chapter and your fellow members. Please give some serious consideration to running for a chapter position. I speak from experience when I say that you'll be glad you did. Also, think of some qualified chapter member whom you'd like to nominate for an open position. Sometimes all it takes is a gentle nudge to make great things happen.



## Make a Difference! Vote for Your Future!

*Andrea L. Ames, STC Associate Fellow,  
Silicon Valley Chapter*

In response to inquiries and requests from several chapters' leaders for an article about my candidacy for the position of STC second vice president (VP), I'd like to share my thoughts with you about our future—yours, mine, STC's, and the technical communication industry's—and why I want to continue to serve you on the STC board of directors for the next four years.

The candidate elected as second VP will serve for one year in that position and one year each as first VP, president, and immediate past president. This is an important vote, and I hope this article enables you to make an informed decision when you cast your ballot.

If you have any questions about my candidacy or me, feel free to contact me at [andrea@verbal-imagery.com](mailto:andrea@verbal-imagery.com). You can also visit my Web site ([www.verbal-imagery.com](http://www.verbal-imagery.com)) for postings of recent chapter-meeting presentations and other information.

### The Vision

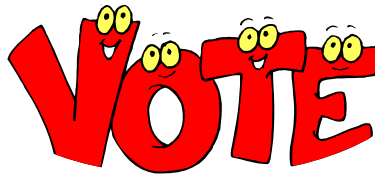
If elected, I will work for the next four years to raise our strategic value—as individuals and as an industry—to the organizations for which we work.

I see an industry in which we design and develop information to enable users to use products, not to fill in for the deficiencies in product design. In this vision, we will no longer define ourselves by the information products (manuals, help, etc.) we deliver, nor the tools we use to develop them.

Instead, our employers will recognize the value we bring to the products and information we design and develop. Think about it: The real value we bring is not the documents we develop but users' increased success! My goal is to work to help the

organizations in and with which we work understand this and help enable them to get the most value from us.

As I've traveled around the country, I've met many STC members who share this vision. From more than 17 years of experience in the industry, my network of associates, and the strategic work I've done with various kinds of organizations, I'm convinced that this is the right vision. The question remains: How will it happen?



### The Implementation

The move toward this vision has already begun, primarily via STC. As our new mission statement proclaims, we are “designing the future of technical communication.” STC is one of the most valuable and powerful tools we have. The power of many, the visibility of a large and well-respected professional organization, and vision and leadership are the ingredients that will change the face of our industry.

I want to work with STC to enable members of our industry to lead and to receive recognition for that leadership, particularly within our organizations and among our industries.

Working with the board of directors, committee managers, and chapter leaders, I can support and maintain important programs—like branding and governance—that are already moving us in this direction. I can also work with other leaders to devise new initiatives to raise the visibility of STC and our industry, as well as help our employers and clients further recognize our value.

### Why Me?

I've spent most of the past five years working to change our industry to fit my vision. In my career, I have focused on learning and developing skills, technologies, and tools to design and develop information for products and user experiences, rather than documentation deliverables.

To assist others in the effort to move toward the future, I've acted as a mentor, teacher, and educational certificate coordinator to:

- ◆ Design programs and courses around these skills and technologies
- ◆ Impart strategies and problem-solving skills to my students
- ◆ Guide others to develop their careers in similar directions

I've spoken at many STC chapter meetings, regional conferences, and annual conferences. My presentations aim to help you make career development choices that increase your value to the industry and to your employers and clients. I've encouraged you to:

- ◆ Think outside the traditional documentation box
- ◆ Evangelize usability, user-centered design, and development techniques within your organization
- ◆ Participate in your organization's design and development process at a strategic level

I used my term as director-sponsor (1998–2001) to learn as much about you and STC as possible. Understanding how our organization works enables me to influence STC's direction and effect change.

The results of these programs are already changing the way we do business. From the board of directors to chapters to members, everyone will feel the impact of these very positive changes.



## Screen Capture with SnagIt 6.0

Continued from page 1

### Image Capture

For Image Capture, Input is the most important menu bar item on the SnagIt interface. Under Input, SnagIt users make their decisions

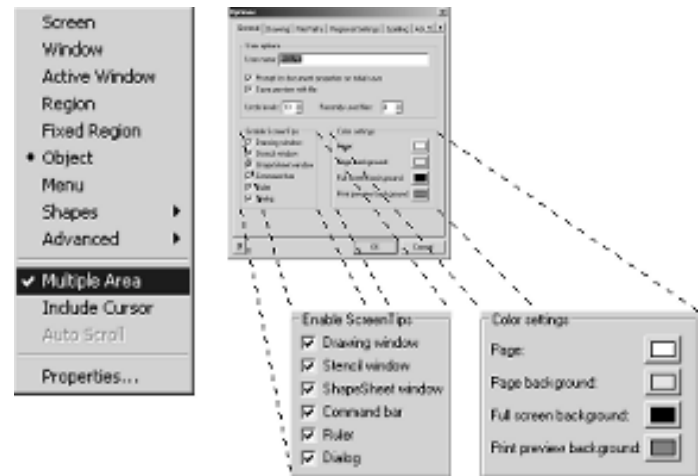


about the type of image that they want to capture. Some of the image choices are Screen, Window, Active Window, Region (an area users select when they make the capture), Fixed Region (a predefined area), Menu, and Object (any Windows object, such as an icon). However, Menu is the most useful image type for documenting software procedures, according to Dlugy-Hegwer. As the name implies, Menu allows users to capture a menu from a target program.

The procedure for using Menu capture is typical for SnagIt. With both a target program (such as MS Word) and SnagIt running, users select Menu in SnagIt and configure it. Some typical configuration choices are to include the cursor in the shot and to enable Preview Window under the Output menu. Under Properties in the Input menu, users can choose to include the menu bar and do cascaded menus if they wish. With cascaded menus selected, SnagIt can capture both a menu and submenus at the same time. For example, users can have the File menu in MS Word and the Send To submenu in the same image.

With the desired menu selected from target program, users type in a hot key sequence for capture. The default hot keys in SnagIt are Control+Shift+P, but this is configurable from the dialog box under Options, Program Preferences, and the Hotkeys tab. The resulting capture appears in SnagIt's Preview Window (provided that feature has been enabled). Users can then Cancel the shot or Finish it. If they select Finish, they have a number of Output choices, including Print, Clipboard, and File.

Multiple Area and Auto Scroll captures are available from the Input menu. With Multiple Area, users can break down complex menus into their component parts. Auto Scroll allows captures of images



too large for one screen, such as a Web page. Custom Scroll under the Advanced features of the Input menu allows users to control the amount of off-screen material they capture.

Shapes is another useful Input choice. Shapes gives the capture a geometric shape such as a rectangle, triangle, or a freehand shape, depending on the option chosen. Users can pick the background color for the shapes under Input Properties.

SnagIt offers a range of output choices, including Printer, File, Web, Clipboard, and Send Mail. The File option under Output allows SnagIt users to save the capture in a variety of graphics formats: BMP, GIF, JPG, PCX, PNG, TGA, and TIF. Although SnagIt does not offer true optimization with its File output, it does provide some file compression tools. For example, users can select JPG quality in a range from 1 percent to 100 percent and compress the file so that it is only one-twentieth of the original size.

Under the Filters menu, SnagIt users can find capture filters to further modify their image before completing the output operation. The first group of capture filters controls color conversion; among the choices are monochrome and custom conversions. The next group modifies color effects, such as brightness and saturation, and permits color inversion. The third set of filters adjusts printer and image resolution, as well as image scaling. For best results with image scaling, Dlugy-Hegwer advises enabling the Smooth Scaling option. Other filters allow users to add features to their images such as captions, borders, and watermarks.

The Send Mail command directs the capture to users' e-mail service. However, this output requires a 32-bit MAPI e-mail client, such as MS Exchange. SnagIt is capable of multiple outputs too. Users can

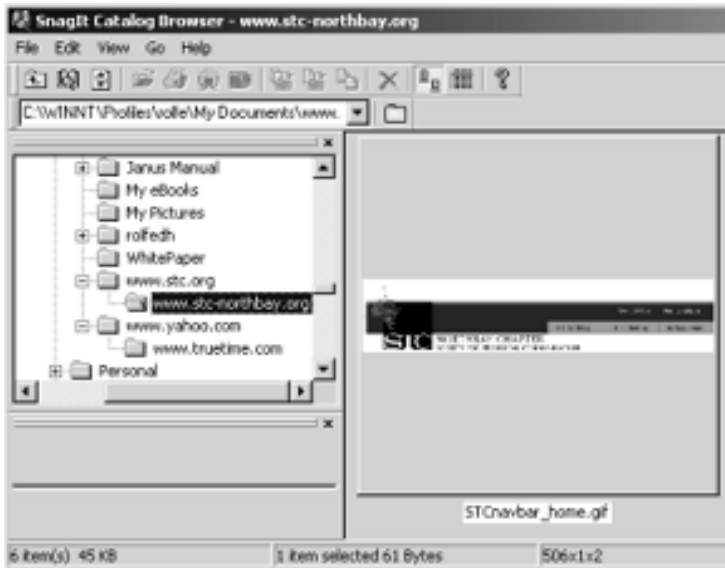
Continues 



Continued from previous page

send the capture to the printer, a graphics file, the Windows clipboard, and any other output at the same time.

Also under the Output menu are Catalog Browser and SnagIt Studio, two productivity tools that come bundled with SnagIt. Catalog



Browser allows users to see a thumbnail of the files saved to the catalog. That way, they do not have to waste time trying to remember file names. In SnagIt Studio, a complete graphics utility, users can edit their captured images, doing anything from simple cropping to adding callouts. Of course, they can edit captures in any graphics program, not just Studio. For example, Dlugy-Hegwer uses Visio and PowerPoint to put callouts on an image.

## Text and Video Capture

SnagIt can do more than take screen images. It can capture text, video, and get images from the Web. Dlugy-Hegwer demonstrated the first two SnagIt features in his presentation.

Text Capture omits the graphics of a screen capture and preserves the text in ASCII format. With this feature, SnagIt users can even get text from applications that do not support cut and paste. For example, they can capture a file list from Windows Explorer. In addition, SnagIt can save text in a tab-delimited format for importing into a spreadsheet. Note that SnagIt cannot capture text in all situations. For instance, it does not capture the text on an MS Word menu.

Video Capture gives SnagIt users the ability to capture onscreen motions from any application or procedure and store them in an AVI format file. As Dlugy-Hegwer demonstrated, users can clearly document cursor movements and drop-down list scrolling in a video file. With a dialog box in Output Properties, they can add an audio track to the video as well. Using Video capture involves some tricks. First, the monitor should be configured to 256 colors in order to

keep the AVI file to a reasonable size. Second, video motion can sometimes be jerky, especially with cursor movement that is not smooth. Therefore, users should rehearse cursor action before they start their capture.

---

*SnagIt can capture text, video,  
and get images from the Web.*

---

## The Value of SnagIt

Screen captures are an important part of documenting software procedures. Writers can reduce the amount of text in a procedure 25 percent to 50 percent by using captures. The remaining text is simpler and clearer as well. For readers who are not familiar with software terminology, such as *menu bar* or *access key*, seeing the objects to which the terms refer can be reassuring. A valuable feature of SnagIt is its ability to include the cursor in a screen capture. The cursor focuses readers' attention on the important part of the image and lets them know that some kind of cursor action is part of the procedure. The presentation demonstrated that SnagIt provides writers with a wide range of image capture possibilities for their documentation.

---

*SnagIt users can clearly document  
cursor movements and drop-down  
list scrolling in a video file.*

---

SnagIt is available from the TechSmith Web site, [www.techsmith.com](http://www.techsmith.com). Visitors to the site can download a shareware version of the program for a free, 30-day evaluation; however, some of the features are disabled. The fully operational version is available to download for \$39.95; a CD copy is available for \$4.95 extra to handle shipping costs. TechSmith offers free online customer support and two free one-tenth upgrades. The current version is 6.0.1; therefore 6.1 and 6.2 would be free. The TechSmith Web site also provides three tutorial videos and an informative white paper about SnagIt.



## Dare to Be Dumb (and Write Usable Error Messages)

*Continued from page 1*

But inquisitiveness and curiosity are the foundation of good technical writing in general and good error message writing in particular. These days, you can't stifle dumb questions and write well: the process of technical writing should influence product design as much as the final design influences the content and format of its documentation. To explore the relationship between dumb questions, good design, and good technical writing, consider "error messages" (on line, on screen, on paper).

---

*Inquisitiveness and  
curiosity are the  
foundation of good  
technical writing.*

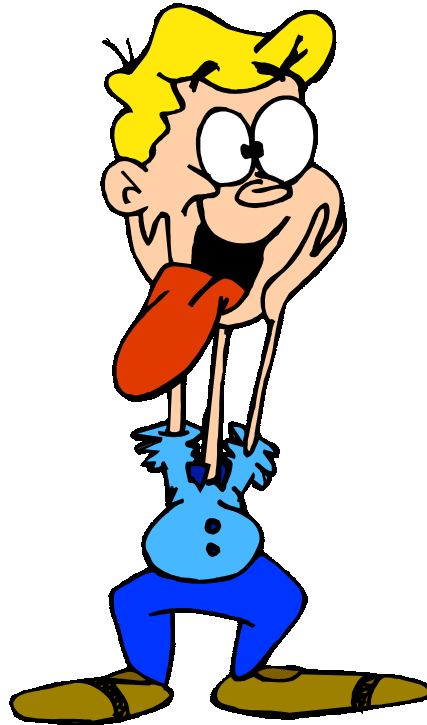
---

In recent years, error messages have evolved from cryptic puzzles to readable messages; we've moved from "Error #911" to "Disk not ready." Now it's time for tech writers, armed only with dumb questions and a thick skin, to graduate from error to information messages.

Error messages often are ambiguous and force users (and should force the writer) to ask dumb questions, such as "Why isn't the disk ready? What's 'ready' mean? Now what can I do?" In contrast, information messages are specific, sufficient, and answer users' questions ("What went wrong? What now?"), but not without effort on the part of the writer.

The effort involved comes in setting one's ego aside (this may be a small or large

challenge), daring to be dumb, and asking the product designer, "What does 'Disk not ready' mean, and what should the user do?" The designer may say, "The disk is either absent, unformatted, or write-protected." Based on that, the error message evolves to "Disk not ready: Make sure the disk has been inserted, formatted, and is not write-protected."



*Dumb writers can still retain their dignity.  
Too bad no one mentioned that to this guy.*

To redefine the nebulous "not ready" as absent, unformatted, or write-protected is a good step forward. However, the user still has only one chance in three of doing the right thing; two times out of three, he'll see another error message, possibly the same one.

No time for fear now. The next question is "Can we determine which of these three possibilities is the current problem?" If the designer answers, "No," that may be the end of it. But it's always nice to confirm

what one has been told: "So the machine can't tell whether a disk is absent or present in the drive, right?" "Well," says the designer, "actually we can determine that. We haven't implemented the code yet but could pretty easily." Assuming the code is implemented, we are left with two information messages: (1) "Insert the disk in the drive," and (2) "Make sure the disk is formatted and not write-protected."

The next question, of course, is "Can the machine tell the difference between an unformatted disk and a write-protected disk?" "Sure," says the designer, "that's easy." The writer thanks the designer and writes three specific, enabling information messages.

---

*You can't stifle  
dumb questions  
and write well.*

---

As a result of a few dumb questions, the writer contributes to the success of the product in several areas:

- ◆ Product improvement: less reliance on the documentation
- ◆ Documentation improvement: less of it; no need to explain or augment understandable, complete information messages
- ◆ Process improvement: stronger working relationship between writer and designer
- ◆ Individual improvement: better understanding of product

Dare to be dumb, it's the smart way to work.



## Professional Development Opportunities

### Content Management: Strategies for Single Sourcing

June 3-4, downtown San Francisco

\$995 to \$1,195

<http://www.cm-strategies.com>

### Hands-On Introduction to Java Programming

May 4, 11, 18, and June 1, downtown San Francisco

\$650

<http://www.unex.berkeley.edu/cat/133777.html>

### March Web Developers' SIG

Adobe Atmosphere: Explore the Web in 3D

March 26, San Rafael

Free to NBMA members, \$10 for nonmembers

[http://www.nbma.com/events/developers\\_3-02.html](http://www.nbma.com/events/developers_3-02.html)

### STC Sacramento Chapter Conference and Job Fair

April 6, Sacramento

Cost TBA

<http://www.stcsacramento.org/WIW2002/index.htm>

### Interactionary: A Design Competition

March 19, San Rafael

Free to NBMA and BayCHI members; \$15 for nonmembers

[http://www.nbma.com/events/big\\_event\\_3-02.html](http://www.nbma.com/events/big_event_3-02.html)



---

# W R I T E R I N T H E W O R K P L A C E

SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SACRAMENTO CHAPTER  
C O N F E R E N C E A N D J O B F A I R

## COMMUNICATION: THE VITAL LINK

SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2002 • AMERICAN RIVER COLLEGE • SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Leadership and Excellence  
Emerging Technologies  
Best Practices  
Resume Review



New Opportunities  
Career Management  
Core Competencies  
Job Fair

Details available at  
[www.stcsacramento.org](http://www.stcsacramento.org)

Stipends available for serious  
technical writing students

**Attend Writer in the Workplace. Don't become the missing link!!!**

Co-sponsored by the Sacramento Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication  
and American River College Extension



**We meet on the third  
Thursday of each  
month**

**Our March Meeting  
Thursday,  
March 21, 2002**

**Topic:  
Panel Discussion  
“How to Find a Technical  
Communications Job”**

**Our April Meeting  
Thursday,  
April 18, 2002**

**Topic:  
To Be Announced**

We meet at:  
TrueTime, Inc.  
3750 Westwind Blvd.  
Santa Rosa

<http://www.stc-northbay.org>

