

SPLat Happenings

A newsletter about machine control, automation, business and the Universe in general. Dedicated to the proposition that SPLat happens.

August 1999

Free to all registered SPLat customers world-wide.
Also available free on our website and by email.

Special announcement

Company renamed

After 18 years of trading we decided to change the name of our company. As of June 26th 1999 we are SPLat Controls Pty Ltd.

Why? It was simply a case of having a product that was so successful that we were being referred to by the product name rather than by the company name. We were thought of as "the SPLat people" rather than by our old name Microconsultants. So why resist it?

We have also changed our web site to www.splatco.com (a trailing .au is optional) and our email addresses change accordingly. The old microconsultants.com (no .au) will be accessible for at least 2 years. The process of changing over stationary, business cards etc is nearly complete. Whatahugejobthat is!

Rest assured that we may have a new name, but we are the same friendly people offering the same great products and service. 

Computer tip:

Right-click for faster results

One of the best kept secrets of Windows 95/98 computing seems to be the right-click menu. Yet this little feature is one of the greatest time-savers if you do a lot of "heavy duty" computing.

Most advanced applications that run under 95/98 (such as Word 97), provide short-cut menus when you click the right mouse button on an object. These menus are *context sensitive*, meaning they vary according to the object you right-click on, and give you a range of the most common operations you may wish to perform on that object.

Take for example Word. If you right-click on a misspelled word, Word will give you a menu of spell-correction choices. If however you right-click on a correctly spelled word, you will get a quite different menu with font and paragraph formatting options. The same sorts of things happen in Excel and non-Microsoft applications, and Windows Explorer takes on a whole new dimension.

Give the right-click a try. It can save you hours! 

Middy's get behind SPLat

In the last issue of SPLat Happenings we announced a national distribution agreement with AVH Electrical Engineering company Pty Ltd, giving us access to electrical wholesale outlets Australia-wide. The first wholesale company to take on SPLat company-wide is Middendorp Electric Company (affectionately known as Middy's in the trade).

Middy's have a chain of about 40 wholesale stores, located mainly in Victoria, though there are some in other states. Middy's are a dynamic player in the electrical wholesale industry, known for their depth of product and service, not to mention the hot pink colour they paint all their stores.

Middy's support for SPLat has been overwhelming. They have made all their representatives and store managers available for product training, and a program is about to start to train counter staff and purchasing officers.

SPLat product support for Middy's customers will be provided by Middy's and AVH as well as directly from us at SPLat Controls. 



(Left) AVH sales engineer Alex Stefanovic instructing Middendorp personnel during a training session in Benalla in country Victoria.



(Right) Middy's sales rep Justin Squires (left) familiarizing colleague Greg Long with the SPLat counter display stand and leaflets in the Middendorp store at Benalla.

Your business

Can you survive a computer disaster?

This is a true story: A small business in Melbourne's west is broken into and the main office computer is stolen. The computer is worth \$1000 tops. The information in it is irreplaceable. The tragic end result: bankruptcy and suicide.

Another true story: A jet-setting construction industry rep has his notebook computer stolen at Brisbane airport (airport theft of notebooks is an emerging New Age crime). 2 years' worth of sales leads, quotes and correspondence are lost. Anyone want to hire a wiser construction industry rep?

And how about this one: A retailer in an inner Melbourne suburb conscientiously makes a tape backup every night.

More next page...

Product News

New add-on boards for SPLat

We have just built our first batch of two new add-on boards for SPLat. These were designed in direct response to requests from customers. They are:

- **RLX8.** 8 output relays rated at 5A/240V/2400VA (resistive load).
- **IOX44.** 4 output relays (as above) plus 4 optically isolated inputs.

Several special features of these boards are worth mentioning. Firstly, the boards will drive the relays properly with any supply voltage between 12V and 28V (that requires special circuitry, because relay coils can misbehave or burn out if used at the wrong voltage). Secondly, the relays are fitted with MOV surge absorbers, to extend contact life. Finally, the opto-isolated inputs will work on anything from 12V to 240V, AC or DC, without any settings being required.

The list price is for both types \$133 each, and they are available through your SPLat dealer now. They will work with SL88, MM188 and OEM36. 

Alex gets it together in production



Alex Raicevic is the newest member of the SPLat Controls team. Alex brings to the company a total of 17 year's experience in electronics, especially the manufacturing of high reliability electronics products. Alex has held a number of senior manufacturing positions, including responsibility for the manufacture of a range of telephone products at the Telstra workshops in Bentleigh, Victoria.

Alex will be responsible for overall co-ordination of manufacturing SPLat and other products, and has started his career with us by fully re-organising the stores area and implementing an advanced computer-based stock, manufacturing and purchasing system.

Alex's hobbies are his girl friend and restoring pinball machines.



Can you survive a computer disaster?

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For three years he makes backups. Not once does he actually check that the tape has anything on it. He has a hard disk crash. Guess what happens when he goes to restore his data? The worst!

If your business relies on a computer to store vital information, be it commercial data, design drawings, SPLat programs or whatever, it is absolutely essential that you have a well thought out backup strategy in place. This strategy is a combination of suitable technology and an understanding of your specific needs. It also involves an understanding of human nature.

Technology:

Data can be backed up in many ways: To floppy disks, to a tape unit, to a removable hard disk, across the network to another computer, across the Internet to another site etc. In considering technologies you need to consider the amount of data being backed up, whether you are also backing up programs and Windows setups and how often you need to back up.

Human nature:

People tend to be lazy. They are also frightened of technical matters they don't understand. That means the backup procedure should be as easy as possible to perform. Don't expect your book-keeper to feed 73 floppy disks through the accounts computer every month!

SPLat Controls is probably a fairly typical small but growing company which depends heavily on its computers. It may be instructive to describe the strategy we have evolved for our backup needs.

Once per day each of us backs up our data to a central "backup server" on the LAN. This is an old machine dedicated to the backup

function, which we upgraded with a 10GB hard drive and a 20GB tape drive. We presently have a total of 2GB of data, so there is ample capacity to grow.

Each of us is responsible for doing our own daily backups to the backup server, but with the help of a utility program called DoubleImage this requires only a single mouse click. DoubleImage (<http://www.hostinterface.com>) only updates data that has changed, so it usually takes only 2-3 minutes to "squirt" the data across the LAN to the backup machine.

Every night the backup server automatically backs up all user data to tape. We have several tape cartridges, which are changed daily, and all but the one in the tape drive "lives" in a director's car.

Every few weeks we perform a "sanity check" by deleting an unimportant file from a computer and

then restoring it from tape. We also have the tape backup program (Seagate Backup Exec) set to verify every tape. This means after it has written a tape it rewinds it and compares the tape contents with the original files on the hard drive.

This particular strategy suits us and the way we work. It will allow very rapid restoration from the backup hard drive if a single user computer fails. It will allow total recovery of files if we have a break-in or a fire. It *will not* allow a file to be restored if it was accidentally deleted more than a week ago (in some companies this would not be acceptable). It does not back up software.

Your ideal backup strategy may differ from ours. One thing is for sure, if you don't develop a sound strategy, and put it in place, you are running a terrible risk.



SPLat happening

SPLat distribution in Venezuela

Word of SPLat is certainly getting around the world, thanks to the Internet. We have recently appointed a distributor in Venezuela, giving us our first representation south of the Rio Grande! So next time you are over that way, and need a SPLat to sort out a problem, contact our representative there:

Jose R. Melendez M.
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Carrera 19 entre calles 14 y 15
Barquisimeto, Lara 3001
Venezuela
Tel: +58-51-513280
Fax: +58-51-523294



SPLat warranty extended

Reflecting our excellent track record of SPLat product reliability, plus our new distribution arrangements, we have decided to alter and extend our regular warranty terms. The parts and labour warranty on all SPLat boards is now 24 months from date of manufacture (previously 12 months from date of purchase). That means there's no need to provide proof of purchase date, because the every SPLat board carries its month of manufacture. The new terms include all SPLats ever made.



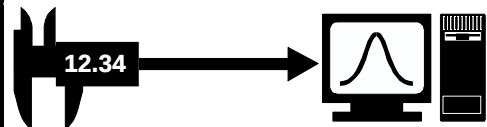
Technical

SPLat and safety

When you are using electronics to control potentially hazardous machinery, you must pay careful attention to safety issues. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- Any emergency stop button (or other safety override) must *never, never, ever* be wired into a SPLat (or any other controller for that matter) and rely on the controller to stop the machine in an emergency. The whole point of an emergency stop is that it must work if something has gone wrong, and that includes the controller. The stop button should usually interrupt power to the machine and otherwise force it to a safe state. If hydraulics and/or pneumatics are involved, the effect of these must be taken into account in an emergency.
- The machine should be designed such that a power failure at *any time* will not make it dangerous.
- The OFF state of SPLat outputs should be the safe state for the rest of the machine. We go to a lot of trouble to ensure that at power-up the external outputs on SPLat boards do not turn on spuriously, even for a moment.
- Your SPLat program should be designed in a structured, systematic manner, so its behaviour is fully predictable. Trial and error solutions are not good enough. For a complex control, finite state machines are the best way to get a solid program design.

All SPLat literature and packaging currently being used contains a notice regarding the safe use of SPLat. This states that it is the SPLat user who is responsible for the ultimate safety of his/her design. This reflects the situation in many legal jurisdictions, where if something goes wrong it will be the machine designer or supplier who is held responsible.



Using a Mitutoyo measuring gauge?

GaugeLink connects a Mitutoyo digital gauge directly into your PC for fast, accurate readings.

Made in Australia by SPLat Controls P/L
Only \$249 including universal software to send measurement data to *any* Windows program. Ideal for QA/SPC

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