

Computer Owners' Group Magazine Notes for October 2021 – November 2021

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All the computer magazines reviewed below are held in the SeniorNet office or the Wellington Public Library, and are available for borrowing. We do not review every magazine we receive.

Australian Personal Computer (October 2021)

Lost laptops

An article in this issue, "Where did all the laptops go?" (p.17), warns us that the market for laptops is pretty tight this year. There are a number of factors that help explain this. With many people around the world experiencing lockdown and working from home, demand for laptops has been high. Further, the production of computer chips has not kept up with demand generally and, exacerbating the situation, supply chains are under strong pressure. It is of interest that the Acer computer company has said that, on any given day, it can only fill "50% of the worldwide demand". So the message for our members is, if you're looking for a new computer (regardless of brand) and see the one you want, then you should buy it quickly – and not wait for the January sales.

Competing backups

Wellington SeniorNet is engaged in a long campaign to encourage members to back up their computer data. Many of those leading this campaign use Macrium Reflect as their backup tool. It's reliable, powerful and free. But it does have competitors. One is Acronis TrueImage (ATI), and there is an article in this issue which compares their paid-up versions. It is "Acronis vs. Macrium: Which drive-imaging app offers better protection?" (pp.36 – 37). There are two different issues here. The first is do you actually need to buy a paid-up version? The second is of course which of the two paid-up versions is the better?

On the first issue: the article is quite explicit. The free version of Macrium Reflect is "our favourite drive-imaging tool ... and has protected our PCs for years". Unlike Macrium Reflect, however, ATI does not have a totally free version; Acronis's product is free only for a trial period of 30 days.

So what additions do you get for the paid-up versions? (ATI costs \$A69.99 a year for one device: Macrium Reflect Home 8 costs a one-off \$US 69.95 for one device). Among other things, you can encrypt drive images; protect against ransomware; and backup individual files and folders. The article goes into a lot more detail about the differences between the two paid versions, and I'm not going to summarise all that here. The important thing is the final assessment. The article makes clear that ATI is a fine product

but considers that, on balance, the better purchase is Macrium Reflect Home 8.

Opening our eyes

Unexpectedly, one of the most important articles in this issue is on artificial intelligence. (See “The Machine Learning Revolution” (pp. 50 - 57.) What is “artificial intelligence (AI)”? The immediate answer given is that it is “any form of intelligence exhibited by machines”. That’s pretty obvious, but the article goes on to suggest that AI includes “the ability to adapt and improvise ... a large set of data is sorted through, but the precise parameters under which the data is processed aren’t defined. Instead ... algorithms are designed to spot patterns and statistical relationships, and learn in a trial-and-error fashion”. So, the article asks, is AI just hype or is it the “greatest paradigm shift in history of computing” (sic)? The answer given makes it clear that it is not just hype, but that we should not exaggerate its promise; and we should certainly take into account some of the huge problems that are part of the AI world. It’s not merely that driverless cars are having crashes, but, much more seriously, that machine learning has become so complex and advanced that even the experts involved don’t fully understand what’s going on. Consider: a very powerful government computer spits out recommendations. Officials are ready to act. But, as one luminary in the field confessed: “there is an AI black box in between the inputs and outputs, but if you look in the

box you can't tell what it means. You don't understand the math or circuits underneath". So, to put the issue on the block: do you trust the system enough to act on the output? There is much more involved here than just driverless cars. Not to put too fine a point on it, this could be an existential question.

Back-up: How to do it

This excellent issue includes a major article, "The Ultimate Backup Guide" (pp.63 – 67). It is based on Macrium Reflect. Get the article. Practical, informative, it's the next best thing to a one-on-one lesson at the Help Centre, taking you through the whole process.

Windows 11

Every computer magazine for the next few years will have an article somewhere in it related to Windows 11. The one present in this issue is "Prepare your PC for Windows 11", (pp.92 – 93). It's a perfectly competent article, but if you're excited about this new Windows operating system, you probably know most of what's set out here. If you're not really interested in this topic, then you don't need to bother with it. Windows 10 will be supported until at least 14 October 2025.

Australian Personal Computer (November 2021)

Antivirus (but not that virus)

The lead article in this issue is “Security Suite: Group Test” (pp. 50 – 56). For computer anti-vaxxers, the message in this article is blunt: “... saying that you don’t need protection for a computer nowadays is ridiculous”. So the article takes 12 antivirus/anti-malware programmes, and rates them. The list includes well-known ones such as Avast, AVG, Bitdefender, Kaspersky, Malwarebytes, McAfee, Microsoft Defender and Norton 360. There is a lot of valuable detail and good advice here, and each programme is rated for protection, performance and usability. What’s the recommendation? The author says that “after decades of reviewing anti-malware products it feels incredibly weird to say that you don’t need to buy them anymore because Windows is finally inherently protected. But fair’s fair, Windows Defender ... deserves the title of Best in Show”. (Even so, the article sensibly warns, no matter how good a security program is, it won’t protect you from your own human error, or website scams.)

Many of us use the free version of Malwarebytes. Now the article was reviewing the Premium version (in other words the paid-for one), but some of the points made would apply to both programmes. A surprising and disturbing point was that Malwarebytes “greatest failing is not to protect against threats that have already been discovered and

catalogued by the industry”. I presume that the author meant to say “some threats”, but regardless of possible intentions, the claim is a serious one. His summary of Malwarebytes Premium is that it is “overpriced, under-featured and [has] too many holes in its security net”.

Don't frighten the grandchildren

As if there's not enough for young people to worry about today (I'm sure I don't need to mention Covid and COP26), a major article in this issue explores the possibility of another Carrington Event. See “Event on the Horizon” (pp.58 – 65). The last Carrington Event occurred in 1859 when there were astonishing electrically-based disturbances across the globe. An astronomer called Carrington observed that these were associated with a very large coronal mass ejection from the sun which struck the Earth. Physicists believe that such a powerful geomagnetic storm nowadays would cause massive and world-wide electrical disruption, smash power grids, wreck communications systems, and, in the midst of an almost indescribable catastrophe, would destroy millions of computers and wipe computer storage facilities (not to mention our own hard disks). EFTPOS anyone? Now what are the chances of all this happening? In 2014 a physicist, having looked at the records of solar storms over the past 50 years, calculated the odds of another Carrington event striking this planet in the next 10 years as 12%. So this is an additional subject not to discuss at Christmas dinner.

Christmas present

It is against this background that this issue reports (p. 12) that Western Digital has announced a 20 TB hard drive. There was no mention of a release date in New Zealand, or of an expected price. But if you have a large number of photos...

TECHlife Australia (December 2021)

The Great Transfer

The lead article in this issue is “Escape from Windows” (pp.48 – 57). In a new version of the “Prisoner’s Dilemma”, we have to consider that it’s all very well to escape *from* something, but what are we escaping *to*? The answer in this case is Linux. Now a small number of SeniorNet members are interested in this rather abstruse topic. Some of them have old laptops which cannot even run Windows 10, but which are otherwise healthy computers. There is no doubt that they could run a Linux operating system, and then, once again, perform useful service for their owners. That would include surfing the net, sending emails, playing music and writing novels. To be quite blunt: almost everything that you can do on a Windows computer can be done with Linux. The present article describes in considerable detail how to go about converting an old Windows computer over to Linux. The article is a good one. But the answer to your question – whether I myself had the courage to climb into the trench, and then follow instructions on how to go safely through no-

man's land - the answer has to be, as you, dear reader, would expect: it is no. I certainly want to do this, but an abundance of caution suggests that I should wait until next year when I hope to attend a dedicated SeniorNet session, and to be guided safely through the minefield. In the meantime, Happy Christmas!

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