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

R M D Munro

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

`

Australian Personal Computer (June 2021)

Quit Whining

Do companies care about data leaks? What do you think? Is Facebook concerned? Well, there's an informative article here, "Facebook wants you to quit whining about its 533 million account data leak" (p.17). Discussing this leak in an unexpectedly frank comment, a Facebook representative said "we expect more [such] incidents and think it's important to both frame this as a broad industry issue and normalise the fact this activity happens regularly". The article revealed that the "breach is known to include phone numbers, Facebook IDs, full names, dates of birth, gender, locations, bios, marital status, employer and in some cases email addresses." Now you know.

Speak Easy

Your granddaughter is at a traditional New Zealand secondary school where she is learning Spanish. (Māori isn't taught there because there is a major national shortage of trained Māori language teachers.) An intelligent girl, she knows you go to SeniorNet and is wondering what assistance she could get from computer apps. As it happens, you've just been told about a helpful article in this magazine which reviews two of the best-known apps, "Duolingo vs. Babbel" (pp.44-45). The article makes it clear that each of these apps has strengths; but each reflects a different learning style. Duolingo's approach is game-oriented, with instant feedback as to how one's learning is going. Babbel's approach is much more formal, and reflects traditional lessons. Certainly, there are tests, but they're more spaced out. The question is of course, which learning style more suits your granddaughter. (Memo: check with her.) As to

cost, Duolingo's entry level is free. Babbel offers a week's free trial, and then, if you like what you've seen, it's $US10 per week.

Incidental intelligence

Expect the prices of hard drives and of solid state drives to rise. This is not just because of supply chain problems, but because the demand for these items has increased world-wide because eager crypto-miners are chasing them down to assist in their efforts to create crypto-currency. (See p.12.)

TECHlife Australia (June 2021)

The lead article in this issue is "Super Guide: Keep your Windows PC Secure" (pp.50-59). It's a comprehensive overview, possibly aimed at intermediate level computer users, but even experienced SeniorNet members would find material of value here. There are sections on the following: how to

a) remove malware, including stubborn infections;
b) avoid web skimming (this occurs when you think you're paying a merchant but your payment is actually being redirected to a criminal enterprise);
c) strengthen browser protection;
d) prevent drive-by hacking; and
e) deal with ransomware.

There are many articles of this sort, and over the years I've reported on more than a few. However, where this one stands out is that it's impressively practical and realistic.

Walking round the Christmas tree

We're not being allowed to forget that there are fewer than 100 days to Christmas. With this in mind I draw your attention to a useful feature article, "iPad Buyers Guide" (pp. 68–73). It's a thorough piece of work, and if you're in the market for an iPad, you need to read it.

Australian Personal Computer (July 2021)

Colossus

The story of how, with Colossus, Britain broke Germany's Enigma cipher is now very well known. There is, however, a feature article here, "A Colossal Secret" (pp.52–59), which contributes some interesting new details about the Bletchley Park enterprise, and sets out what happened to some of the key personnel after the war.

How good was Colossus? The article says that "a competition to celebrate the rebuilt Colossus pitted it against modern computers in receiving and decoding Lorenz messages". Using a 1.4 GHz laptop and a program written in Ada, the winner was able to find the settings for all four German wheels in 46 seconds. Colossus did the same, but took three and a quarter hours. By today's standards that seems pretty slow, but the article makes the point that it was impressively quick for something built in 1944.

Free, yes free

The quickest way to focus attention in SeniorNet is to announce that something is "free". So my blood started racing when I spotted the article, "The best of the freebies: 50 completely free programs you should install on your PC" (pp.68-75). If you're just getting into computing, this sort of list would be utterly invaluable. Just for the sheer joy of the thing, I've listed them at the end of this present report. I haven't set down more than their names. If you want to know more, you'll have to read the article, or employ Mr Google. But, as it stands, the list will give you an idea of what's available, without cost.

Incidental intelligence

More good news: the magazine says that computer memory prices are rising (p.12).

TECHlife Australia (July 2021)

Listening out

A lot of attention is paid these days to headphones. Some of us are surprised to see them in Lambton Quay as fashion accessories. Others of

us, browsing in consumer electronics stores, are surprised to see how expensive they often are. Many of us have been glad, I suspect, that we were not in that market. But as with so many things, Covid has changed all that. For example, I'm now noticing that more than a few people are wearing headphones on their Zoom calls. And certainly in terms of reducing the auditory impact of these meetings on one's household, this makes sense. As always at SeniorNet, we wonder - are there any top-quality items at a reasonable price? I tell you all this because there is a review in this issue which answers that question. See "Sennheiser HD 250BT" (pp.36-37) where the answer is unequivocally yes. Now this particular Sennheiser might not win the fashion stakes on Lambton Quay (although it'd look perfectly fine in Willis Street), but "if sound quality is your be-all and end-all, these wireless on-ear headphones demand your attention [and] at a startlingly low price" ($A130). And they use Bluetooth 5. If they're not at Noel Leeming, could they be whipped in from Amazon?

Enmeshed

Pity the person who has problems with their home network. In these Covid times, all we want when we go home is to sink into a favourite armchair, to have a cup of tea - and to have the home network working flawlessly. Remarkably, despite the complexities involved, our home networks often do work. But when turning the router off-and-on doesn't solve all relevant problems, one needs help. There is a Superguide in this issue, "Networking: boost your Wi-Fi" (pp.50–63) which I hope you will never have to read. But people on our Help team probably will, and some of our members will be grateful they did.

Check the stable door

Being connected to the Internet is to be open to the world. Regrettably, the world is not a safe place and there are people (who you have never met) trying to get access to your home. More precisely, they are trying to get inside your computer. Among the methods for stopping them is the use of passwords. Unfortunately, passwords are not, for various reasons, always effective. Breaches occur again and again. Now there is a highly relevant article here, "Password monitors: time to check if your passwords have been stolen" (pp. 96 – 97). This article tells you what to do, and I'm about to do it.

Australian Personal Computer (August 2021)

Key date

If you hadn't heard, Microsoft has broken its promise and will be replacing Windows 10 – with Windows 11. In that context, Microsoft says that it will stop supporting Windows 10 on 14 October 2025. (See p.13). That decision raises many questions which will keep SeniorNet meetings occupied for some time to come. Microsoft is keen for you to create a Microsoft account. In fact it is very keen for you to do this. An article in this issue helps explain why. It says that doing so will allow "Microsoft access to your location activity, Cortana and speech activity, browsing history, search history, app activity and media activity". (See p.17.) So now we know.

The dreaded blue screen

There is an interesting article in this issue entitled "How to fix a Windows Blue Screen of Death (BSOD)" (pp.90-91). Reading about this is rather like opening a medical textbook, being horrified, and realising that there are very good reasons why the practice of medicine is not a place for home-handymen; why we have doctors and surgeons. By the same token, the blue screen of death indicates one or more significant computer problems, which are probably well beyond the ability of most normal SeniorNet members to solve. Therefore they can expect to be grateful to our Help Centre for advice and treatment.

Australian Personal Computer (September 2021)

Here we go – again

Microsoft's Windows 11 is a highly predictable topic for computer magazines. There's a special feature on it in this issue: "Windows 11: Everything you need to know" (pp.42-42). If you're keen on such advances as rounded corners and new colourful icons – not to mention new sounds for common actions which are "a little more atmospheric and lighter", then you'll want to closely study this article. However, something more genuinely positive could be in "Microsoft Speech Services". This is reportedly "a new and improved app to help you type using your voice". (See p.49.)

Suffer the little children

I remember in the 1980s taking our two daughters to programming lessons. We had a magnificent Atari 800, and the girls were supposed to be learning BASIC. The whole exercise didn't last many months, but we did all take some first steps in programming – and as usual in these things the fathers involved got much more pleasure out of the process than did their long-suffering children. One of the things we all quickly absorbed was that it was a long haul from learning a few minor BASIC commands to creating a classic like Space Invaders. Whatever, happy memories.

Now, if another generation of parents wants to teach their children about these matters, there's a useful article here: "A parent's guide to programming" (pp.64-67). BASIC is mentioned, but it has been updated and is now is called BASIC-256. As you'd expect, styles of learning about programming have changed considerably for young people since the 1980s. Now there's an emphasis on block-based languages. So there's little free-form typing, but programming for them centres on "dragging blocks – which we can think of as statements – from a palette on to the scripting area, and editing by manipulating those blocks".

As well as BASIC-256, the languages discussed in this article include Scratch, Blockly, Bee-Bot and Blue-Bot, Logo, Sonic Pi, Python, and C++. The article makes the powerful point that "understanding concepts is actually more important than learning specific languages".

TECHlife Australia (September 2021)

Macs beware

There is a myth that Mac computers are impervious to harm. It's been great marketing, and was true that, in the early days, Macs were not targeted to the same extent that Windows computers were. But these days Mac owners need to be as careful as any of the rest of us. A super guide in this issue is helpful for them. It is "Boost your online security" (pp.50–57). It's all sensible stuff and well worth more than a glance.

The best Apps for iPhones

Many of our members have iPhones and rejoice in them. They value their apps too. These people may well find value in the feature article, "App Store Gold: 100 must-have apps for your iPhone" (pp.66–77). Now I don't have an iPhone but was wondering which of these apps could be of interest to you. Two stood out. The first is "Just Press Record" (p.70). The descriptor is: "better than your iPhone's native voice memos app, Just Press Record not only lets you record any audio, it also transcribes recorded speech for you – which is a massive bonus – and can start recording instantly by holding the app icon. It costs $A 7.99 but is definitely worth it." The second is "Star Walk". The descriptor says that "using AR [augmented reality], this app lets you explore the night sky in vivid detail. With iPhone in hand, you can go out and identify thousands of stars and constellations, track celestial bodies in real-time and even travel through time" (p.73).

Now there are equivalent apps available for the Android, but, as always and regardless of your type of smart phone, read the reviews before you install.

TECHlife Australia (October 2021)

Music Streaming

To many in my generation the greatest progress in music reproduction lay in the development of CDs. And some of us enjoyed sizeable collections of them. But the name of the game today is change, and these days, I am assured, CDs are obsolete. Now, in case you haven't heard, streaming is how modern people listen to their music. If, like me, you know little about this modern phenomenon, here is our chance to learn what we've been missing. There is a highly informative article here, "Turn on, tune in, sign up" (pp.48–59). The article reviews the main streaming programs: Deezer; Amazon Music Unlimited: YouTube Music; Spotify; Apple Music; Qobuz; Primephonic; and Tidal. Then, well-informed, you can put on a CD.

Under attack

iPhone owners (particularly those in sensitive positions) will have been greatly concerned to discover that their phones can be attacked by Pegasus spyware. It is capable of "reading text messages, tracking calls, collecting passwords, location tracking, accessing the target device's microphone and camera to make it a remote spy device, and harvesting information from apps, all while remaining completely invisible". An article in this issue points out that Android owners also need to be careful about spyware – "Time to check for Android malware" (pp.94–95). Headings include – what are signs that you have malware?; ransomware on Android phones; where does the malware come from?; how to avoid Android malware; and anti-malware apps.

✱ ✱ ✱

Annex: The Best of the Freebies

a) Maintenance and repair

01 TechPowerUp GPU-Z
02 CPUID HWMonitor
03 CCleaner
04 CPU-Z
05 WinDirSat
06 Cinebench
07 CrystalDiskMark
08 Recuva
09 MediaInfo
10 FurMark

b)   Customisation and efficiency

11 QTTabBar
12 F.lux
13 Rainmeter
14 Fences
15 Folder Marker
16 EarTrumpet
17 ShareX
18 Everything
19 MyFolders
20 7+Taskbar Tweaker

c) Gamer's toolbox

21 Razer Cortex
22 LaunchBox
23 Pin Steam
24 Discord
25 GeForce Experience
26 MSI Afterburner
27 SuperF4
28 GameSave Manager

d) Essential free games

29 Call of Duty: Warzone
30 Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

e) Creativity and productivity

f) Entertainment