

BackUp MyPC v. 4.81
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Introduction

It goes without saying that computer users should be backing up their data. Nearly as uncontested is the assertion that many people aren't doing it. An easy to use backup program may make the difference and this one, BackUp MyPC, is worth checking out. It is the software formally called BackUp Exec Desktop by Veritas which before that was Seagate BackUp Exec. At one time Microsoft licensed it from Seagate to include it with Windows 32-bit operating systems through ME and called it Microsoft Backup. Be sure to check your system and installation CD to see if you already have this software (albeit an older version). In my case an upgrade to Windows XP prompted interest in the product. Used with the 12GB tape drive I picked up at the most recent TCS swap meet for \$5, the software makes for an effective backup solution.

Packaging

The boxed version includes one user's guide and one CD. To the product's credit, a substantial portion of the box is actually filled thanks to a handbook of nearly 160 pages. There is no obvious indication of the software version number on the box (or handbook). A table on the back includes a comparison of BackUp MyPC v. 4.81 to other similar software and shows some awards from as recently as April 2002. You might want to check the CD, which does have a prominent version number, to be sure.

Documentation

A review of an earlier version of this product, Seagate Backup Exec Desktop 98 Version 3.0a, was published in the TCS Journal in November 1998 (<http://www.aztcs.org/journal/98html/9811-sware1.html>) and there is also a review of the current version in PC Magazine of June 30, 2002 (<http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,4149,3582,00.asp>). The TCS review was critical of the lack of written documentation for the product. The situation has improved in the meantime and warrants some special attention.

Not only does the product ship with a printed version of the handbook, but a PDF version is available on the installation CD as well and help files are installed with the product. These three versions are very similar, but not identical. They are almost exclusively dedicated to a description of the various user interface controls and rather painstakingly describe all of the menus and dialog boxes. This was actually useful, because it allowed me to read the manual while away from the computer and thanks to the numerous screen shots keep good track of what was going on. New computer users should appreciate the detail and after all, shouldn't it be new users who are reading it and backing up their data for the first time? In addition to the static documents, context sensitive help is provided for most dialogs.

Realistically, however, most people won't need to open the handbook at all, in part because the program is so well designed. Attesting to this, a readme.txt file is included which verges on handbook proportions and duplicates information found elsewhere. This file is also written to disaster recovery diskettes. It does have a good table of contents, so it is easy to find any relevant information.

For both new users and experienced ones, the disaster recovery procedure will probably be a new experience. Having a hard copy handbook is especially important when the disk drive isn't working. Unfortunately, documentation about disaster recovery is sparse in the handbooks. They include detailed descriptions such as "follow the on-screen instructions" and are lacking any screen shots or hints of what instructions might be involved. A file called DRRest.htm in the help directory looks like it might provide additional information, but it is just as terse. Disaster recovery for Windows ME that I tested is text based (rather than graphical), includes only minimal on-screen feedback, and offers no help function. Improvement would be well received here.

To its credit, the handbook does contain a few chapters on topics not directly related to program operation: protecting data on a network, tools, using media, and troubleshooting tips. It also goes into the difference between differential and incremental backups in detail. Additional topics such as how best to organize partitions or directory structures to facilitate backup and how to rotate media for most efficient storage would round out the handbook nicely.

Installation

The installation program is very professional and ran without problem on two of three systems tested. The program relies on Microsoft Installer, which is added to your hard drive automatically if not already present. Although you can specify where BackUp MyPC is installed, Microsoft Installer is placed on drive C: whether you like it or not. On one system that drive was already nearly full and installation would not complete until I made more space available. After installation a reboot is required and you are notified of this. When I tried without one, the program wasn't able to see the CD-RW drive. When the program first ran after the reboot, my firewall popped up the information that Veritas Update Manager wanted to access the internet. While I'm sure that it was just trying to be helpful, this action was not covered in the handbook and I resent software that uses my network without express permission.

Backup

Although the program is divided into three functional areas, backup, restore, and compare, backup receives the most attention and the program certainly excels at it. The backup screen is set up like Windows Explorer with a tree

on the left side for navigation and a details view on the right side. BackUp MyPC adds a check box next to anything that it can backup. Simply click in it and the file, directory, registry (or system state), desktop shortcut, etc. is selected and will find its way to the specified backup media. It can be that simple.

In some cases, of course, it isn't quite that straightforward, but the program does a good job dealing with the complexity. The registry, for example, has a special status and in the tree it is shown directly under My Computer. Click on it and in addition to the check next to the registry, some files on the C: drive will be checked. The program has tracked down registry files for you. In a similar manner any links that have been placed on the desktop that can be saved will result in files in the Windows directory being selected. Also, if you save the entire C: drive, the registry and desktop links are automatically marked as being included. One confusing part about saving the registry though is that the details view on the right does not change to show details of the registry (or a blank screen) but continues to display whatever was there last.

There are a few places where additional simplification would be helpful. For some reason, not everything in the tree view has a check box next to it: My Computer cannot be selected, for example. To do that one has to select each of the drives individually. The same holds for the desktop and networks. Secondly, if you have good vision, you will see that there are two kinds of check marks: big blue and small green. Small green is for directories where not everything is selected. Perhaps a filled box (strike) and a partially filled box (spare) would be more easily understood. If you select a directory, then individual files are automatically selected. If you deselect all the files, then the directory is still selected. This is confusing. It is described in the handbook as being intentional, but no explanation is given. The key is to realize that the first check sets up a positive selection of *.* and that deselection of individual files creates a negative selection. The negative selection does not remove the positive selection, so the check for the directory remains. Small green checks are for directories without the positive *.* selection. You can check the file profile.dat for a hint of this. Having two selection types can be handy. If a new file is ever added to the directory it will be saved because it is included in the positive selection but not the negative. A few words in the handbook about this would go a long ways.

Quite a few of options are available for backup jobs and most have good defaults so that few will have to be changed. One option is for password protection of a backup. Note that although the password is encrypted, the data is not (except by virtue of possible compression). That means that something as simple as a text editor could be used to extract sensitive data. If data is sensitive enough for a password, then it is probably sensitive enough for encryption, so be careful. Parameters for jobs (including file selection) are stored in the file profile.dat, essentially a Windows ini file, rather than in separate data files. It would be tempting to generate a

selection list programmatically, but unfortunately the specific format of the file is not documented.

When I eventually got around to backing up the selected files, I was very pleasantly surprised that my underpowered computer was responsive during the backup process. BackUp MyPC seems to do a very good job at sharing the CPU and other system resources. With the software I had previously been using, a system backup of about 2GB to tape took overnight. This one of approximately 5.5GB completed in about 80 minutes and averaged almost 1MB/sec while at the same time not forcing me off the computer. Speed was a problem, however, when I went to create a catalog for the tape. The catalog is a database of what is contained on the various backup media. Usually the catalog is created during the backup process. In this case, however, I appended to a tape that had been used previously with Microsoft Backup and wanted to include those older files in the catalog for the tape. This is accomplished by recreating the catalog based on media content and importing it. When I went to create the catalog, I was informed that one already existed for the tape. Unfortunately, that was the incomplete catalog that had just been made. To get a complete catalog, that partial catalog had to be erased and a new one created from scratch. The database operations involved took a substantial amount of time (tens of minutes) and made me wish for a faster computer in addition to some progress report from the software. Be sure to catalog any old media before appending to it.

If you backup to a disk of some kind (CD, Jaz, Zip) rather than sequential media (tape), be aware that the entire media will be dedicated to a file called backup.qic that can itself encapsulate multiple backups. It is not possible to share the media with other applications. If you need to share, then choose the backup to file option. This will create one or more sequential files (e.g., "MyBackup 00001.qic", "MyBackup 00002.qic") that can coexist with other files. This option does have disadvantages, especially when it comes to disaster recovery. Files are numbered so that file size limitations imposed by the file system can cleverly be avoided. The extension QIC is strangely reminiscent of Quarter Inch Cartridge which was a popular tape format for PCs some years back and may show the origins of this software. It is somewhat unfortunate that there is no viewer program for these files that could display or extract their content independently of the full-fledged backup program.

Backup jobs that have been saved can also be scheduled. BackUp MyPC has its own scheduler that it uses on versions of Windows that don't already include a scheduler. On my Windows XP system Task Scheduler was already installed, for example. Be cautious of using the 29th, 30th, or 31st of the month for scheduled backups, especially in February. There is no way to specify last day or second to last day of the month.

Restore

Files that have been backed up can be retrieved, of course, but this is something that hopefully never needs to happen. The rarity of this event is reflected in the fact that restore jobs cannot be saved. File selection must be made anew each time. This limits the ease with which the program can be used for data exchange or even archival purposes, which involve more frequent restores. Since the program is billed as a backup program, this is not tragic.

The restore window can be configured in three different ways. The first is a folder view which is almost exactly the same view as one sees for backup. The directories and files listed are taken from the catalogs created during the backup process. There is a quirk in that the restore tree shows the registry not as a child of My Computer, but as a sibling of Desktop. There is also a media view in which different trees are shown for each backup medium. The last view, device view, can be used to show the contents of the media presently loaded into a device when a catalog is not available.

In testing I had no problem restoring files. To help track down a file there is a very handy find file function provided via a menu item. On the other hand, restoring files to an alternate location or single directory that does not yet exist is somewhat of a chore because the dialog box displayed offers no possibility of specifying a new directory. That's no surprise under Windows.

Compare

The last major capability of the program is the comparison of files. The screen here is almost exactly the same as the restore screen and the functionality is almost identical as well. There is one minor difference in that the registry is not shown at all in the tree view. Registries cannot be compared, apparently. Rather than writing the files to the hard drive, the program compares them to whatever is already there. In general, it is advisable to do this as part of the backup process, but it can be repeated later, of course. It also helps check for missing files on the hard drive or in the backup.

Disaster recovery

If restoring files is a rare occurrence, disaster recovery should be almost unheard of. Disasters happen, however, and if your hard drive bites the dust or your notebook gets stolen, then knowing your files can be recovered is welcome consolation. BackUp MyPC makes it so simple that the most difficult task was finding enough old AOL diskettes that would still format cleanly to make the recovery diskettes.

The diskettes are created by the Recovery Wizard which guides you through the process. The program lets Windows create a startup diskette and then edits it to include the necessary drivers to access the backup device as well as the recovery program. Almost everything was automatic except for the selection of SCSI controller, which had to be picked from a list. The wizard

allows for few options and demanded blank media for a complete system backup which I had just completed on my only blank tape, so I had to cancel out of that. This action may have had the side effect of preventing the wizard from automatically testing the diskettes. It is hard to tell because the documentation is very sketchy in this area and needs improvement. I tested manually by booting from diskette and sure enough, it seemed to work. I wish though that there was a very clear indication of when files were or were not being written to disk to better distinguish between a test and the real recovery. Chances are that I chickened out too soon as file names started appearing on the screen.

Technical support

During testing I did run into a couple of problems that provided worthy reason to contact technical support. File types can be specified for exclusion from the backup in the job options dialog. Unfortunately, this crashed the program on one computer. Another problem was encountered when multiple tape drives were attached and the backup job spanned tapes. When the program went back to verify data, I was instructed to insert the tape not into the drive that had just written the data, but into the other drive. Lastly, the program had difficulty in initializing tapes that had at one time been written in other drives and by other programs, possibly with unusual things like filemarks or setmarks. It complained of unformatted media and gave end of volume errors.

Stomp, Inc. has no toll-free technical phone support. Its web site lists no email addresses, but instead guides you to forms that can be filled out and submitted. I was a little worried when I indicated the BackUp MyPC product and was shown a list of backup devices that belong instead to Simple Backup, a different Stomp, Inc. product. You are also limited to a 256 character description of the problem, which is insufficient in many cases. After pressing the appropriate button, you are presented with a page that says "Thank you." There is no email confirmation that your question is being processed, no case number, and for more than four days in this instance, no response. This is worrisome to say the least. The eventual advice for the first problem was to update the operating system by (re)installing the most recent version of Internet Explorer, which I did not find helpful or informed. Hoping that the presales department would have a better response time, I filled in a form asking for clarification of a point in the license agreement that referred to a warranty period that was never specified. Response has not been forthcoming.

If you have a technical question that isn't covered by Stomp, Inc.'s FAQ, it might be worthwhile to check the Veritas support site at <http://support.veritas.com/>. Veritas makes BackUp MyPC's big brother products and sells them directly. Another possibility is the technical forum at <http://www.tek-tips.com/gthreadminder.cfm/lev2/7/lev3/49/pid481>.

Recommendation

This is a very fine product despite some slightly rough edges and I would give it a B grade. Chances are that it will work perfectly for you. To be sure, however, download the trial version first and test it with your particular hardware. Keep in mind that not all media that work for simple backups also work for disaster recovery. If you encounter any problems that don't have simple solutions, then it might be more efficient to look elsewhere than to get a response from technical support.

Company/Product information

Vendor: Stomp, Inc.
Address: 2302 Barranca Parkway
Irvine, CA 92606 USA
Tel: 866-713-7700 (presales)
949-263-8560 (technical support)
949-442-1060 (customer service)
URL: <http://www.stompinc.com>
Email: See <http://www.stompinc.com/contacts.phtml?stp>

Product: BackUp MyPC v. 4.81
Cost: free 30 day trial version from <http://www.stompinc.com>
\$69.00 download version from <http://www.stompinc.com>
\$79.00 boxed version from Stomp, Inc.
\$79.99 boxed version from <http://www.compusa.com>
\$79.99 boxed version from <http://www.bestbuy.com>

System requirements

The box, handbook, and web site all list system requirements, sometimes even calling them *minimum* system requirements. Each list is different, however, and they are much more recommended system configurations than requirements. The required part probably has more to do with your chances of getting technical support than anything else. Some lists are split up by operating system. Here is the version from the box which isn't:

Processor: Intel Pentium (or equivalent) at 166MHz or faster
Memory: 64 MB
Disk space: 50 MB
Operating System: Windows 95 (OSR2), 98SE, ME, NT 4.0 (SP4+),
2000, XP Home, XP Professional
Drives: CD/DVD, Tape, Zip, and Jazz (sic)

A list of supported drives is available from Stomp, Inc.'s web site. It does not include, for example, a 250MB USB Zip drive that does seem to work, and the list can't include every single tape drive. If you have a device similar to any that are listed, test it with the trial version of the software.

Test systems

HP Pavilion Notebook

Processor: AMD Mobile Athlon 4 at 1GHz
Memory: 256MB
Operating System: Windows XP Home Edition
SCSI Controller: None
Drives: TOSHIBA DVD-ROM SD-R2002 (IDE, CD-RW)
Iomega Zip (USB, 250MB)

Midwest Micro Desktop

Processor: Intel Pentium at 100MHz
Memory: 128MB
Operating System: Windows ME
SCSI Controller: Adaptec AHA 2940AU
Drives: HP CD-Writer+ 8000 Drive (IDE, CD-R)
Iomega Jaz (SCSI, 1GB)
SCSI Tape Drives

Gateway 2000 Desktop

Processor: Intel 486DX at 100MHz
Memory: 32MB
Operating System: Windows 95
SCSI Controller: Adaptec AHA 1542
Drives: SCSI Tape Drives

SCSI Tape Drives (based on inquiry string)

ARCHIVE Python 04106-XXX Drive (4mm, 12GB)
ARCHIVE Python 28849-XXX Drive (4mm, 2GB, 4-tape changer)
ARCHIVE Python 28388-XXX Drive (4mm, 2GB)

A special short 100MB tape was used to test media spanning.

Biography

Keith Alcock spent nearly ten years writing data exchange software for SCSI tape drives on Unix and Windows systems and knows the value of a good backup. He is still programming and can often be found at the Developer's SIG meetings.