

Even Mac hard drive's need a little TLC

Time Machine makes backing up hard drive easy

Two and a half years ago, I wrote a column on a new iMac we got my wife and business partner for Christmas. A few months later I put a 500 GB external hard drive for the Time Machine backup utility to protect all our pictures and her files.



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Since then I have not had to manage any spyware, virus or trojan issues nor have I had to mess with any hard drive problems, software corruption or performance degradation.

Sometimes I wonder whether I would still have a job if everyone had a MacIntosh. Seriously, these computers are physically so well built with very solid software that makes them nearly immune to viruses and spyware they are basically maintenance-free.

Once in a while I'll see the Apple update icon bouncing on the dock telling me it is time to download and apply some software updates to which all I have to do is say "yes" and it does the rest. The backups have been so dependable that I have to force myself to test out Time Machine's restore capability once every few months just to verify all is getting saved to that external hard drive reliably.

Only recently have I come across a client's iMac that was

having some difficulties with the hard drive. This is so rare because it was the first time I've been called to troubleshoot a file storage problem on iMac since I started supporting Apple computers at the beginning of 2008.

My guess for the strong reliability of iMac's file systems is that Apple only uses high quality internal hard drives and it's Mac OS X has very good file system integrity software running deep down in the operating system. This is possibly because Apple matches and integrates specific hardware to their proprietary software.

The problem on the client's MacBook laptop was that some files had been lost and a few others had been corrupted as a result of some unknown event several weeks before. Before I even started to troubleshoot the problem I brought over a new 1 TB external hard drive and configured Time Machine to use it for backups.

It was real hard to perform this integration since I had to plug the USB cable of the hard drive into the MacBook and then hit the YES prompt of the Time Machine application that automatically saw the newly installed

drive and asked me if it could use it for backups. Wow ... that was really hard.

We gave it a few hours to back-up the internal hard drive for the first time and then we started analyzing what condition the files and folders were in now that we knew what we had was definitely backed up and safe.

In the Microsoft Windows world I would have started up a CMD window with the DOS prompt and typed in "CHKDSK C: /F/R" but since we were talking Apple the utility was a tad less complex. Using the Finder and clicking on Applications, then Utilities, I ran the Disk Utility program on the iMac.

This started up a window which displayed the hard drives attached to the computer. One was the external backup drive that Time Machine was using and I knew this because under the Seagate 500 GB listed drive it said "Time Machine Backups." I didn't have to waste many brain cells figuring that one out.

The other 230 GB hard drive was the internal one that was in question so I highlighted it and new options appeared on Disk Utility window being First Aid, Erase, RAID and Restore. I picked First Aid and then chose the Verify Disk action which evaluated the condition of the internal hard drive by checking

numerous things like volume bit-map, catalog file, extents overflow file and multi-linked files.

This process took 15-20 minutes but found no problems. If it had found any serious file system problems on the hard drive the greyed-out button that said "Repair Disk" would have become available to enable me to have the Apple OS fix the problems.

Since none were found that told me the hard drive was in good condition and probably not degrading as we had feared. So my next step was to verbally investigate more about the events that lead up to the lost files.

My client then remembered that during an Apple software upgrade something went wrong and the computer crashed numerous times both during the upgrade and the days following.

Then later after an additional software upgrade had been automatically downloaded and installed the crashing problem ceased. It was only then my client discovered the missing and corrupted songs and pictures.

This told me that the most likely cause of the file problems were due to the numerous crashes which messed up several files that were probably open at the time during the unstable period of a week or two before the secondary update was applied.

With some luck and a little digging we were able to find other copies of those trashed files in other folders. This enabled us to copy the good versions over the damaged ones to get the iPhoto and iTunes programs to see those digital pictures and songs again. I showed my client how to continue this effort and before long all those files were recovered.

We were lucky that copies had been made in other folders that were not damaged. It would have been much easier if Time Machine had already been installed and backing up files to that external hard drive before the crashing event took place.

Mac OS X is great but we still all need to use good system man-

agement practices like backups — am I sounding like a broken record yet? By the way, Carbonite.com online backup works with Macs now also.

Bottom line: Even Macs need some tender loving care and built-in utilities like Time Machine should be implemented first so you will not have to rely on last resort ones like Disk Utility's First Aid.

Next column: Helpful government Web sites — Believe it or not!

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