

Launch the new year with safety – and fun

When I was in Grade 3 – no need to discuss how long ago that was – the chapters in our math textbook ended with a story about how the subject material would impact our future. The story I remember most clearly was about a time when we would receive paycheques via some form of “digital transfer.”

Not only that, but we wouldn't need to carry bulky paper money or chequebooks; we'd be able to pay with the tap of a card. At the time, it seemed like pure science fiction – something I certainly wouldn't see in my lifetime. But here we are in 2018 and my bank doesn't even have a physical branch.

New Year security resolutions

Technology continues to weave itself into our daily lives in ways Grade 3-me would never have thought possible. This progress can be daunting at times, especially when it comes to how we integrate technology into sensitive areas such as our finances and our homes. Last year produced yet another litany of data breaches – from the more than 145 million people affected by the hack of the Equifax credit reporting system, to Yahoo's three billion-plus accounts being breached.



Alex Kinsella

The new year is a great time to take a look at your online activity and make changes to help keep you and your family's data more secure. Using Internet services and online networks will never be 100 per cent secure, but there are two things you can do today to make yourself safer.

It should go without saying, but having strong passwords for your online accounts is step one. Use passwords with mixed cases, numbers and, if allowed by the service, a special character such as the \$ or #.

One of the best ways to create and manage your passwords is with a password manager app such as LastPass. The first step is to create a strong master password that you will use for all of your other accounts. From there, you can add your existing online accounts and only have to remember your master password.

LastPass is free for individuals. It offers a family service for \$4 per month that allows everyone in your home to store their passwords together. This is a great option

for emergency access, or if you have an agreement within the family to monitor online activities, such as when a teenager just has to have their own Instagram account.

LastPass is available for your Internet browser (Chrome, Safari, Edge and Firefox) and your iOS or Android smartphone. Learn more at www.lastpass.com.

The next step is to add an extra level of security. Enter two-factor authentication or 2FA, the digital equivalent of having a deadbolt on your front door. With two-factor authentication turned on, a secondary code is required when you try to log into a service such as Gmail or Twitter. The secondary code is usually a series of numbers you need to enter within a set period of time.

Google, Microsoft, Apple, Twitter, Facebook and most major online services offer two-factor authentication as an option; you can check with your financial institution to see if they offer it as well.

It is important to note that two-factor authentication codes can be sent in one of two ways: via a SMS message (text) or through a code generator app, such as Google Authenticator or Authy (authy.com). Using a code generator app is the better of the two methods, as text messages aren't

secure and can be easily intercepted.

If you use text messages for your two-factor authentication on Apple products with iMessage enabled, you may also want to consider using a code generator app. When text messages are set up on your iPad or Mac laptop, the two-factor code will be sent there too. This means if someone steals your laptop, they will be able to see the code and potentially gain access to your accounts.

There are always going to be people looking to exploit holes in security – but these two steps will help make your online life a little more secure.

Looking ahead virtually

I was recently able to try a virtual reality experience that aims to be the next generation of not just VR – but possibly the next generation of arcade.

Everyone from Facebook to Google and hundreds of startups across the world have been working to make virtual reality and augmented reality tech the must-haves for

entertainment. In 2018, we can expect more refined virtual reality offerings from Facebook-owned Oculus, Samsung, Google and others.

The previous offerings from Oculus required high-powered personal computers to work, but they're rumoured to be moving toward standalone units that don't require additional hardware.

Locally, Kitchener-based startup Mirage VR has opened its first VR Experience Centre in the former Boehmer Box Factory at 283 Duke St. I had the opportunity to try out Mirage VR and it was the most mind-blowing tech experience I've had in a long time. What makes it different is that it has practically solved virtual reality's biggest problem – movement.

In the majority of virtual reality experiences, your motion is limited to handheld control. For some, this disconnect between the virtual sensation of moving while physically not moving causes motion sickness or disorientation.

Mirage VR has worked with a personal

computer hardware company to develop systems that are worn like a backpack. Combined with an Oculus headset and feet and arm sensors, you are truly in control of your virtual experience. Inside Mirage VR's expansive space, you're able to walk around, duck, jump – even do a flip – without any wires or barriers in your way.

Even better, the experience is built for up to four players at a time. In my demo, I was able to high-five another player in the game and in real life.

I've been playing around with virtual reality tech for a while and the mix of physical and virtual experience offered by Mirage VR is one of the best I've ever had. Experiences are available at 50 minutes for \$30 and 30 minutes for \$20. You can book today at miragevr.ca.

Here's to a safe, secure and exciting new year!

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region's tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it's Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at @alexkinsella

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