



Titanium-clad value bundle

Let's face it. Apple's built-in support for burning discs is, to speak kindly, ordinary. While Apple has made so many great strides forward in other areas, disc burning has always seemed to be one task the crew at Cupertino left sitting on a shelf at the back of the room as they rushed to embrace more glamorous tasks. Thank goodness, then, for Roxio's Toast, which for years now has been the software of choice for bridging the functionality gap.

The latest Pro version of Toast comprises the bespoke authoring software plus an impressive bundle of apps. On the installation disc, in the same folder as Toast, is DiscCatalogMaker RE, CD Spin Doctor, Streamer, Disc Cover 2 RE, Get Backup 2 RE, and Mac2TiVo. In another folder titled Pro Applications, you'll find LightZone, FotoMagico, SonicFire Pro 5, and Soundsoap SE 2.2. There is also a plug-in for Toast to enable authoring high-def movies to Blu-ray or DVD.

You should now be starting to understand this story's headline. While the asking price may seem high, there's a lot of bang for your buck. But for anyone with a high-def camcorder, the ability to get your own footage onto Blu-ray is an exciting prospect indeed, especially as Apple has what seems to be a total indifference to supporting Blu-ray. You will, of course, need an external Blu-ray recorder to take advantage of the plug-in.

Toast covers practically any disc burning need you may have. Make audio CDs in a range of formats, create DVDs ready for DVD players, or compile data DVDs and encode them in a choice of formats for cross-platform compatibility. What's more, you can specify the number of copies you make of a given disc, which makes the task of making multiple back-up discs much easier than using Apple's burning solution, which only sets up for burning one disc at a time. I know a couple of photographers with stringent back-up routines who use Toast for this feature alone.

Using Toast's media browser, it's a snap to locate files from iTunes, iPhoto, iMovie or browse your hard drive

for files. A simple drag-and-drop routine organises your files ready for burning.

The DVD authoring tool - in which you gather a selection of video files, queue them up, define a menu layout and press burn - is basic by comparison to iDVD but sometimes a quick'n'dirty solution is all you need. Toast can also archive AVCHD files direct from a camcorder, and will span the video files across multiple discs. These discs will be recognised by Toast or iMovie as a video source. This provides a convenient way to back-up AVCHD movies you don't yet want to edit and don't want to store on your hard drive.

Other Toast projects include copying discs (but not CSS-encrypted DVDs), photo discs, VCDs and video file conversions to get content onto other devices, such as an iPhone, Blackberry, Palm Treo or Sony PSP, even an Xbox 360.

All of Toast's burning capabilities were put to the test and the software worked flawlessly. You can't get an easier-to-use and more capable disc authoring solution than this one, although you will find many of Toast's individual capabilities in other software.

For instance, Elgato's turbo.264 HD performs video conversions, so the tip is you should plan your software purchasing carefully. If Toast's authoring capabilities are a must-have in your Applications folder, buying video conversion software may be unnecessary or an indulgence.

If Toast's comprehensive disc authoring capabilities aren't enough, the bundled software makes for a package that will address an amazing range of tasks. It's beyond the scope of this review to address all of the additional software's capabilities but here's a taste of what you get: CD Spin Doctor will turn audio sourced from vinyl LP or cassette tape into iTunes-friendly files; Soundsoap will clean noise from audio files and it's particularly good at removing pops and hiss; LightZone is an innovative image editor; and Mac2TiVo enables sharing videos with a TiVo device.

In use, Toast 10 proved itself stable and problem-free, once a 410MB update had been applied. Among the additional software in the Toast package I could find fault only with CD Spin Doctor, which output filtered audio files that Quicktime wouldn't recognise.

If all you need is Toast's basic burning functionality, there's a non-Pro offering at \$179.

Australian Macworld's buying advice. An already well-respected disc authoring application now has more features and a software bundle that supports managing and sharing a range of file types. If you love working with digital audio and video, this is a title that should be in your software library. It's hard to imagine how Roxio could make this package any better. 🐼