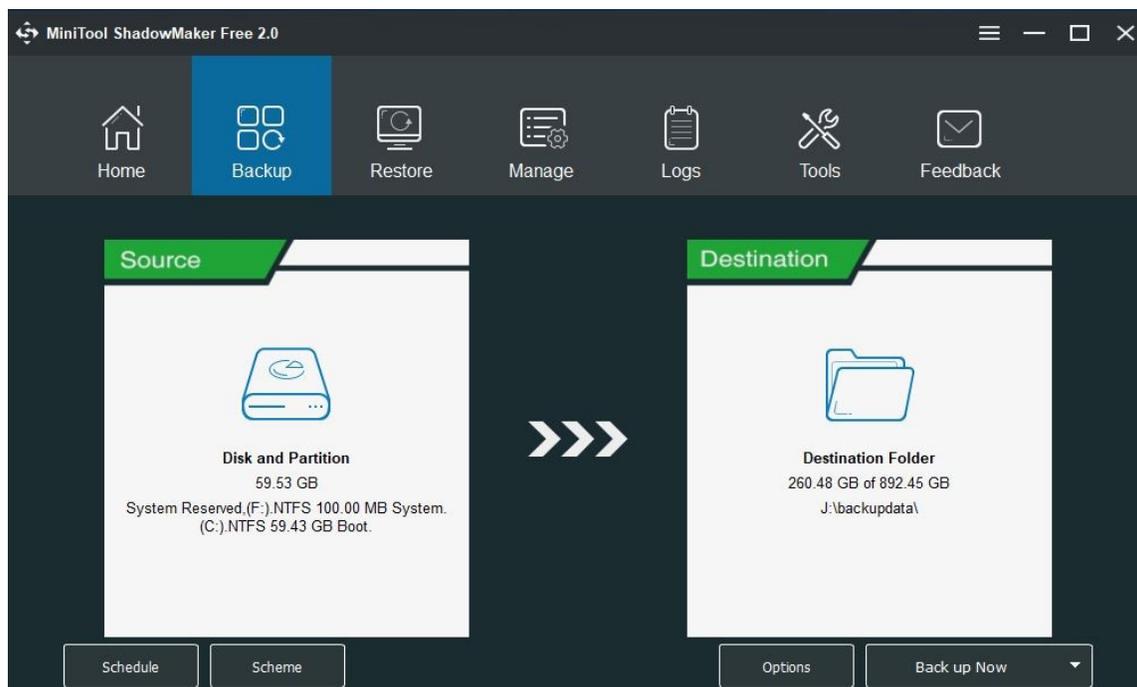# MiniTool ShadowMaker Free

### By Alan German

Both Chris Taylor and I have been strongly recommending various backup systems to members as almost a must-do method for protecting your computers and especially your irreplaceable data files.  Each of us has their favourite disk imaging program so does the world need yet another piece of such software?  Well, sure it does – when the product is Canadian made!

Enter ShadowMaker, a disk imaging system developed by Vancouver-based MiniTool Software Ltd.  ShadowMaker is the latest in a line of disk utilities that includes Power Data Recovery, a program that was reviewed earlier and copies of which have been featured as prizes in our monthly raffles.

The current review takes a look at the major features of ShadowMaker Free which, as the name suggests, is the free version in a suite of programs that also includes Pro, Pro Ultimate, Business Standard and Business Deluxe versions.  As with most such free software, ShadowMaker Free provides less features than its more powerful cousins; however, the available capabilities should be sufficient for many home users.

The free version allows images to be made of both disks and individual partitions, including options for incremental or differential images.  In addition, backups of multiple files and/or folders may be made.  Disk images may be restored in full, or mounted and browsed, allowing individual files and folders to be recovered.  The program allows for scheduling so that multiple backups can be made on a regular basis.  Bootable rescue media can be produced under WinPE (Windows Preinstallation Environment) a lightweight version of Windows which provides a familiar environment should use of the recovery media be required.  An HTML help file, accessible from the main program window, provides clear instructions and graphics to explain all of the program's features.

As noted above, there are some limitations of ShadowMaker Free when compared to ShadowMaker Pro.  For example, management of remote computers (machines on the same LAN) is not supported, the backup scheme (image retention/deletion) used to control the disk space occupied by backup files cannot be changed, and the WinPE rescue media can't be used to create or manage backups.  In addition, support for various versions of Windows Server is only provided by the business editions of ShadowMaker.  So, if you require any of these features, or licences for multiple machines, you will need to purchase one of the higher-level versions of the software.

The program has a user interface featuring a wizard system that allows any given task to be specified in a step-by-step manner.  The first program window invites the user to manage backups for either the local computer or a remote machine (but, note that this latter option is not actually available in the free version).  Connecting to "This Computer" brings up the main menu screen that provides large icons for Home, Backup, Restore, Manage, Logs, Tools, and Feedback.

Without reading the help file, the processes are not always completely intuitive, but trial and error seems to work well for those of us who just like to dive into programs without consulting the instructions.  For example, the "Backup" option is clearly designed to create an image of a disk or partition from a source disk to a destination disk.  But, what if we wish to make a backup of a disk folder or several files?  The answer is to click on the "Source" window in which case a subsequent "Select Source" window offers "Disk and Partitions" or "Folders and Files".  In either case, additional windows allow browsing and selecting the desired source material.  The destination path is similarly determined.  Then, a "Back up Now" button (with a "Back up Later" drop-down) commences the imaging process.

The program has a number of idiosyncrasies that don't appeal to my way of maintaining backups.  Firstly, it doesn't allow the user to name the backup image.  So, a full disk image ends up displaying a list of partitions to be included such as: System Reserved, (F:), (C:), DataDisk, (E:), (*),(*), ===> J:\z_images\MiniTool\{24be04ae-135b-4749-8cd5-1716a3f3fe20}. This essentially reflects the precise nature of the source and target components of the image, albeit in a very wordy manner.  The actual image file is named: disk20180810000-full.mpi and is located on my backup disk at: J:\z_images\MiniTool\{24be04ae-135b-4749-8cd5-1716a3f3fe20}.

Sure, I am allowed to add "Full hard disk backup 10-Aug-2018" as a comment associated with the backup image but, this comment is only visible once a backup file has been selected to be restored and the Restore File Wizard implemented.  Consequently, this is of little value in selecting a particular image from an entire list of such images.  And, this comment is retained by the backup program and will be added to any future backup file unless the comment is deleted or overwritten.

A second issue is that, while most tasks issue static success messages in pop-up windows, for some reason when a backup task is completed, the program pops up a somewhat cryptic Windows notification that stays on the screen only briefly.  And, by cryptic, I mean a message such as: The plan "Files to image: : System Reserved, (F:), (C:), DataDisk, (E:), (*),(*), ===> J:\z_images\MiniTool\{24be04ae-135b-4749-8cd5-1716a3f3fe20}" completed.  Now, that is a cryptic success message!

The other oddity is that a round, on-screen button displaying the word "Good" is now displayed on the screen.  Clicking on this button (to find out what it means!) identifies that it is an indication of the hard disk's status.  In my case, I was delighted to learn that my 250 GB SSD has: Health Status: Good.  MiniTool call this feature a "Floating Ball".  However, the problem that I have is that the ball is floating!  It's completely "disembodied" from the program while it could at least be part of the main program window.  Also, there is no option to toggle it on and off, which would be my preference.

As noted earlier, restoring an image calls up a Restore File Wizard that uses much the same step-by-step method used for backups, albeit "in reverse".  Clicking on the "Restore" icon brings up a window listing all of the available images.  Once an image is selected, the wizard asks which portions of the image are to be restored.  For example, an individual file from a folder may be restored rather than the entire contents of the image file.  In addition, a target drive and folder may be specified where the restored file is to be saved, i.e. it doesn't have to be restored to its original location.

A very useful feature under the Tools menu is the ability to mount an image of a disk or a partition.  The image then appears in File Explorer as a new (virtual) drive.  The virtual drive is mounted as read-only and allows specific files and folders to be easily copied back to the original drive.  Unfortunately, ShadowMaker doesn't let the user set the drive letter, and doesn't even indicate which drive letter has been used.  This is a minor inconvenience since, by default, the drive letter used for the image is likely to be adjacent to that of the original disk.  So, for example, the image of DataDisk (D:), my dedicated data drive, was mounted as DataDisk (E:).  The mounted image is also easily determined by simply looking at Tools – Dismount where the only choice to dismount an image is E:\.  Another oddity in the program is that, when the disk image is unmounted, it isn't immediately removed from the list of available drives in the left sidebar of File Explorer. But, clicking on the drive pops up a message indicating the drive is unavailable.

ShadowMaker Free likely offers all the features that a home user would use, albeit with a somewhat strange (to me) image naming protocol.  But, if this isn't an issue for you, the package provides a viable backup solution for entire disks or individual files and folders.

MiniTool Shadow Maker Free (Freeware)
Version 2.0
MiniTool Software Ltd.
Vancouver, BC
https://www.minitool.com/backup/system-backup.html