

Old droids, new tricks

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Why let your old smartphones gather dust when you can give them a new lease of life?

One of the things Asians, and Malaysians especially, are ahead of the rest of the world is in smartphone ownership. Even when we own a perfectly working smartphone, we can't stop ourselves from getting the latest model.

So what do we do with the old one? Some sell it, some give it away and some just dump it.

If you fall in the third category then you are at the right place – we have tips for turning your old Android smartphone into something useful. And in most cases, it will also work with tablets.

Universal remote

Every appliance in the house has its own remote control which in this day and age seems a little archaic, not to mention messy.

What if you can chuck them all away and just use one device? If you happen to own an old smartphone with an IR (infrared) blaster, you can. Phones such as the Samsung S6/S6 Edge have a built-in IR – check if your old phone does on the Wiki page at bit.ly/2baE-30i.

Don't worry, all is not lost if your phone is not on the list as you can purchase a Universal IR blaster like the Anymote (anymote.io) and use your phone as the controller. Sure, you will end up spending more cash but most Universal IR blasters have a few advantages – they have better range and can learn new commands (more on that later).

Whichever option you go for, you will also need an app. Our favourite is Smart IR Remote – AnyMote (RM25.37)/AnyMote Universal Remote + WiFi (free, ad supported) by Color Tiger. As you can tell from the names, Color Tiger is also the maker of the Anymote.

The company's app has an extensive database of devices (> 90,000) so you just have to add the ones you own and you will be able to control all of them with just your phone.

However, even with such a large database, you will find that some of your appliances are not on the list. If your phone or universal remote is capable of learning new commands then you can just use the app to record the IR signal from your existing remote (so don't chuck them away just yet).

Pro tip – disable the lock screen and create widgets for your remotes so you don't have to waste time unlocking your phone or launching the app.

Secure your home

More and more people are not satisfied with just fixing a burglar alarm system in their home, as they also want CCTV to capture the thief in the act. Sadly, not all of us can afford a CCTV system so if you have a spare phone then you could just save yourself some money.

And would you say no to an app called Alfred to protect your batcave, erm, home? All you need is a Gmail account and you can set up as many smartphones as you want as "cameras".

The app has a motion detector feature so it will alert you and send you a snapshot as soon as somebody crosses its “line of sight”. If it’s something out of the ordinary, you can initiate a live video session to see what’s happening in your home.

The free version, however, has ads and doesn’t allow you to record in HD – for that you have to pay RM16.90 monthly. But the good news is that you get to monitor your home even from a PC with the free version.

If Alfred doesn’t feed your needs, another app worth checking out is Surveillance & Home Security by TrackView.net.

And even if you don’t wish to use it to secure your house, it will be great for recording your pet’s antics when you are not at home.

Helping hand

The best thing you can do with your old smartphone is actually not to use it much at all. Yes, you read that right – instead lend the smartphone’s processing power to a good cause like Folding@home which researches disease by simulating protein folding, computational drug design and other types of molecular dynamics.

It’s a distributed computing project that harnesses the power of devices connected to the Internet to tackle issues that require huge computational resources.

If disease research is not your thing then maybe looking for an alien is – Seti@home is a scientific experiment that also takes advantage of distributed computing to “search for extraterrestrial intelligence”.

Your smartphone will basically download and analyse radio telescope data to look for intelligent life.

This is actually not new – in the days when PCs ruled the world, we used our old machines for the same purpose.

Sadly, we have yet to locate ET but don’t give up now cause the more people help, the higher the chances that we find something.

Enter VR

If you are into gaming, and who isn’t, why not turn your old phone into a dedicated gaming device?

And you don’t even need a big TV or monitor for an immersive gaming or movie watching experience.

Thanks to VR (virtual reality) technology, and in particular the Google Cardboard, you don’t even have to spend much.

The Google Cardboard, as the name suggests, is a VR headset made out of cardboard which you have to assemble yourself – don’t worry, if you don’t have trouble with Ikea products, you should be right at home here.

The best part is the price and although it varies by a lot, you can get one for about RM20.

You will also need to download the Cardboard app on the Google Play store.

If you have not experienced VR before, you are in for a treat. Even the simplest games come alive in VR, and you will also get to watch videos and concerts in full 360°.

Even if VR doesn’t tickle your fancy, you can just turn the smartphone into a dedicated gaming device by installing your favourite apps.

Make it kid friendly

If you have kids, chances are they are attracted to your smartphones and tablets like the Earth to the sun and that’s not all bad.

When used correctly they can be excellent learning tools which parents can use to educate their child. You are probably not going to find a better resource for instructional apps, games and videos.

While most parents tend to lend their kids their own phones this is not always a good idea – you don’t want them to accidentally damage your primary phone, or worse, delete something important.

And you probably have heard horror stories of kids racking up huge bills via in-app purchases.

But before you pass your old phone to your child, let’s make it kid friendly first. The simplest way is to install a launcher that will take over the Android system like Luna Launcher or Kid’s Shell.

These launchers will allow you to monitor your child’s usage and also restrict them to only certain apps and hours.

Some manufacturers also offer such apps. If you have Samsung, for instance, you can just download the Kids Mode from the Galaxy Apps store, and you'll be ready to go.

Window to the world

This is just purely for fun but it can be addictive and works even better if you have a smartphone with a big screen or tablet.

Why not turn it into a permanent window to anywhere in the world? Just download an app like Webcams by [EarthCam](#).

You'll be able to watch live scenic and popular places in the world, including Times Square, Mulberry Street and Fifth Avenue, as well as elephant sanctuaries.

The app has over 170 webcams so you are likely to find something you enjoy and it only costs RM18.24 to unlock them all.

Alternatively, you can get an app like Dayframe, which will turn your smartphone or tablet into a digital photo frame.

This app is great as it works with most services like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Google+, Dropbox, Flickr and Twitter so you don't have to manually transfer the photos yourself which can be tedious.

The app also routinely checks for updates so it displays your new photos and that's just cool because we are all guilty of shooting thousands of photos and not looking at them ever again after posting them on social media.

That's not all – if you have Google Chromecast you can stream your photos to your big TV if you have a family gathering.

So get the app and a stand and it will take care of everything else.

There's plenty you can do with your old smartphone or tablet such as turning it into an alarm clock, machine for checking recipes, handy ebook reader or dedicated machine for video chats.

All you really need is the right app.