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WebUser

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The best things online are free

Several years ago, I went through a brief 'freebie phase' – I'd request bizarre products and pointless samples from the web, just because they were free. Perhaps I just wanted some post that wasn't a bill or takeaway flyer, but I soon accumulated such delights as probiotic fish food, a packet of sunflower seeds and a Jolly Green Giant height chart, none of which was much use in my fish-, garden- and child-free flat. I did, however, receive plenty of follow-up junk mail from "our partners", so at least my thirst for post was quenched.

In this issue's cover feature, we've ignored good-for-nothing giveaways to focus on free stuff you might actually want or need. We've rounded up the best free products and services that are definitely worth something, because – until recently – you had to pay for them. From software, apps and games to films, TV shows and books, we've got a feast of freebies that's much tastier than a handful of seeds!

Robert Irvine, Editor
editor@webuser.co.uk
#webuser

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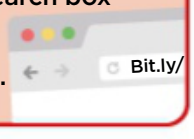
We use Bitly links to shorten web addresses that would otherwise be too long to print in the magazine. Type these into the address bar of your browser – not the search box – and you'll be redirected to the relevant web page.



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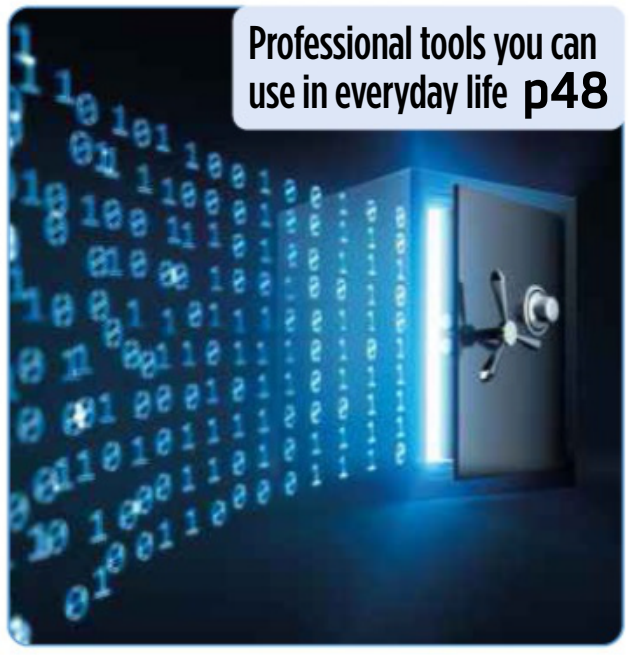

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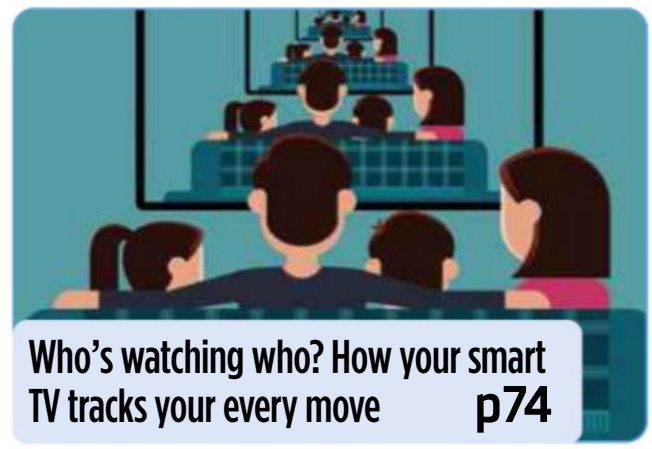

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PRINTING
Printed by Wyndeham Bicester, Oxon
Distributors Seymour 020 7396 4000

Web User is produced by Robirv Limited and published fortnightly by Dennis Publishing Ltd, a company registered in England 1138891.

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A DENNIS PUBLICATION
Web User is published fortnightly by Dennis Publishing Ltd, 31-32 Alfred Place, WC1E 7DP. Company registered in England.
ISSN 1473-7094

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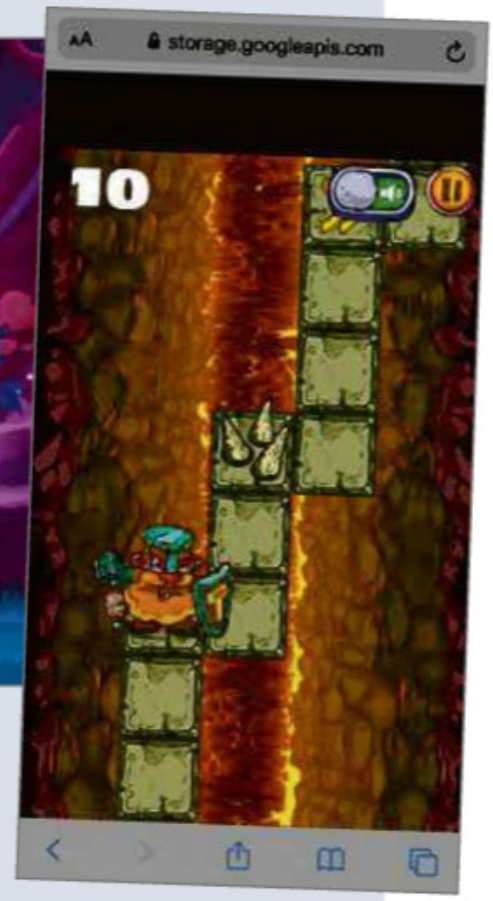
What's New Online

Play free games on any device



Fast smartphones running on 4G networks are now the standard in the UK, but that's not always the case in other parts of the world. Recognising this, Google's Area 120 experimental lab (area120.google.com) has been working with third-party developers to create free HTML5 games called GameSnacks that work on even the most underpowered phones, tablets and laptops.

None of the games are especially sophisticated, but they are good fun to play. You can choose from a Bejeweled clone called Jewelish Blitz, a tile-matching puzzler similar to Puzzle Bobble called Bubble Woods and the simple racing shoot-'em-up, Road Fury, along with Bridge of Doom, Jump With Justin and Groovy Ski. All of the GameSnacks can be played by touching the screen or using a keyboard and mouse, and none require instructions because they are simple to pick up and play.

Each game loads in a matter of seconds, thanks to a technique that reduces web-page sizes while putting scripts, images and sounds on standby until they're actually needed. If you like what you see and want more HTML5 titles to enjoy, you can click the logos of the five named developers. Since Google says it is on the lookout for more game creators, we can expect more GameSnacks to be added in future.

www.gamesnacks.com

Fly from Heathrow to Manchester online

bit.ly/heathrow496

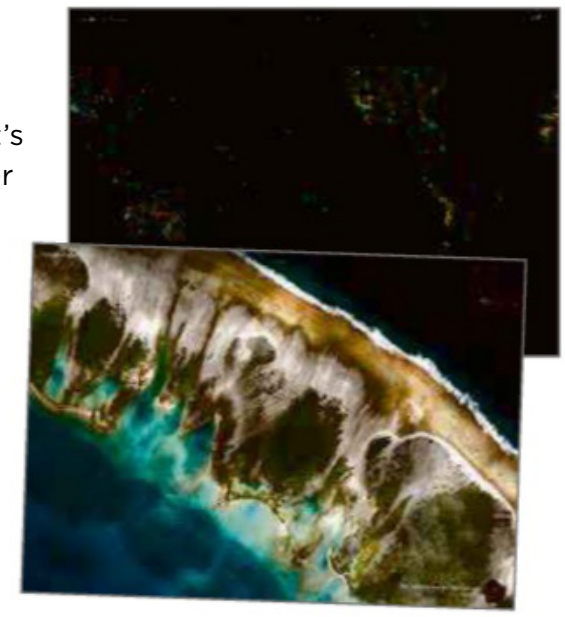
Take a virtual flight north from Heathrow airport using this online tool created by the UK's air-traffic control service NATS, and you can see and hear how planes are guided from takeoff to landing. Featuring conversations between air-traffic controllers and pilots, the visualisation puts each exchange into context, explaining what is being said and why.

The tool follows the journey using both 3D graphics and a map of the UK. As you scroll to bring each stage into view, it delivers interesting information along with explanatory graphics including details of the effects of weather on flights, how the height of an aircraft is measured and a rundown of the International Radiotelephony Spelling Alphabet.

Once you reach your destination, you'll see a ream of statistics. If you then click More Stories, you can look through past projects, with new topics being regularly added.

Download stunning Google Earth wallpapers

earthview.withgoogle.com



Google has added 1,000 wallpapers to Earth View – a vast collection of our planet's landscapes as seen from outer space. This brings the total up to 2,500 images, all of which are viewable on idle Chromecast screens, Android devices and Google Home, with resolutions of up to 4K.

Each stunning wallpaper can be seen in the Earth View Gallery, a website that lets you use the cursor keys or on-screen arrows to move from one image to the next. You can also kick back and watch them as a slideshow or use the new built-in map to find landscapes matching your favourite colours – a handy slider lets you filter out any colours you don't want to see.

When you find something you like, simply click the download button to save it or else share the wallpaper with someone else. You can also watch a behind-the-scenes video on YouTube.

We pick the 10 best things you must do on the web this fortnight

See a timeline of the coronavirus

bit.ly/corona496

Rather than merely giving you the current situation on Covid-19, this tracker lets you pick a past date to compare it with today. Using figures from the World Health Organisation, it shows where and when cases emerged and the number of people infected and killed. You can also map the 2003 SARS, 2009 swine flu and 2014 Ebola outbreaks.

Find tunes by songwriters

www.spotify.com/uk

Many pop stars rely on songwriters to pen their hits, but the latter's talent often goes unrecognised by a wider audience. Spotify is rectifying this with new shareable songwriter pages – also available to non-Spotify users. As long as the songwriter is involved in the beta, you can click their name to see their compositions, along with a list of their most frequent artist collaborators and a playlist. If you're a songwriter, you can request your own page, though Spotify is currently only working directly with publishers.

Reduce your mortgage by shopping

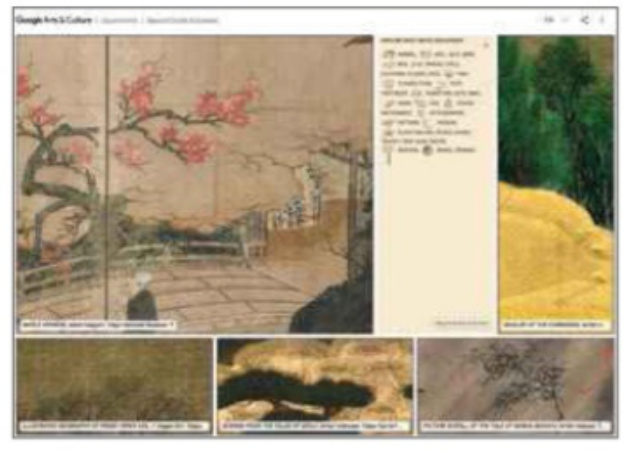
acceleratemymortgage.com

Cashback websites are a great way to save money when shopping online but what if the pennies you spend at big name retailers helped to shorten the length of your mortgage? That's the premise of Accelerate My Mortgage, which uses any built-up cashback over £50 to make overpayments – not only reducing your mortgage balance but saving you money on interest. Signing up is free and involves entering details about your mortgage, including when it expires (it uses that data to offer rates from rival providers). Just check first that your mortgage doesn't penalise you for overpayments.

Discover details in Japanese masterpieces

bit.ly/japan496

Japanese scrolls and screens are a celebrated art form packed with minute detail that can be invisible to the naked eye. Having captured them in very high resolution, this slick Google Experiment uses machine learning to reveal all – just click the bubbles to explore the designs and find connections with other works.



NEW VOICE COMMANDS

Set Sonos as speaker

To control Sonos speakers using a Google Assistant device, launch the Google Home app, open the device settings and select a default speaker for your audio.

Add a Gmail shortcut

The latest version of Gmail lets you activate a new Siri shortcut. This lets you say: "Hey Siri, send an email" to instantly launch the compose view.

Play stories from The Sims

Say "Alexa, open The Sims Stories" to engage in an interactive tale based on the popular game, called The Mystery of Strangerville.

Get game recommendations

bit.ly/steam496

Steam is making it easier to choose what to play from its thousands of games. Its new algorithm system offers recommendations based on your past purchases.

View your name as a colour

bit.ly/synes496

People with synesthesia experience colours when hearing, reading or thinking of letters and numbers. This tool created by Bernadette Sheridan, who has the condition, lets you see colours associated with your own name and share the result.

Check your Instagram interactions

www.instagram.com

Not all Instagram accounts are equal and you're bound to interact with some more than others. Now you can discover which ones you're neglecting by tapping Following and selecting Least Interacting With, so you can either take more of an interest or unfollow them.

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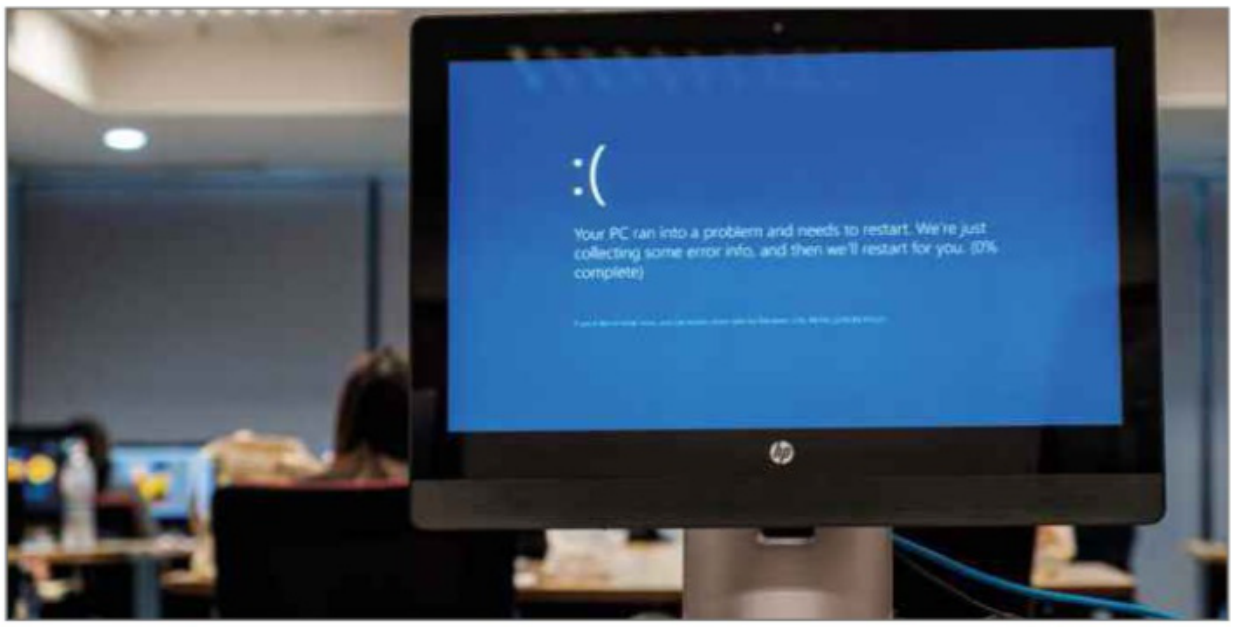
Need to Know

Microsoft suffers yet more Windows 10 update problems



Credit: Thannaree Deepul / Shutterstock.com

What happened?

Another round of updates for Windows 10 has been hit by bugs and errors. The February edition of the monthly 'Patch Tuesday' update – which is rolled out to fix security and performance flaws each month – has caused some computers to freeze and crash. The problem lies in one specific part of the update, which was pushed out for four days before being removed. Microsoft said only some devices were affected by the dodgy update: "This standalone security update has been removed due to an issue affecting a subset of devices".

But that's not the only problem. A separate update, issued to fix a range of security vulnerabilities, has been found to delete files or move them to a temporary folder, as well as causing boot failures, leaving users with a blue screen. Uninstalling the patch appears to solve the problem.

These bugs are the latest in a long line of problematic updates from Microsoft, with issues in nearly every single patch released by the company in the past year. Not all such bugs impact all users, but given the many millions who use Windows 10, a significant proportion of users are being affected.

Microsoft may be struggling to perfect updates on Windows 10, but it's made progress on Windows 10X, the dual-screen version of the operating system for upcoming tablets. Microsoft has built Windows 10X to update and reboot much faster, saying it will take less than 90 seconds. Hopefully, the faster update technology will soon come to laptops and PCs, too.

You can uninstall any updates that cause problems via Windows 10's Settings

Microsoft plans to change Windows 10 updates by introducing a new 'Optional updates' section to Windows Update for drivers, which are often a source of problems. Developers will be able to push out some driver updates automatically, to avoid systems suffering from non-working and out-of-date drivers. Other driver updates will be suggested as an optional installation to keep your system running smoothly.

How will it affect you?

The buggy section of the Patch Tuesday update removed by Microsoft will not be reissued, but the other security updates released alongside it are still installing fine. If you've had no problems running updates, either your PC wasn't affected by the bugs or you installed the update after the problematic patch was pulled.

If you did install the patches and are having problems with your computer, you can roll back updates by opening Settings in Windows 10 and going to Update & Security, then Update. Under View Update History, select 'Uninstall updates' and choose the one you want to remove. If you're having problems restarting your PC, boot into Safe Mode and head to Settings from there.

Windows updates aren't optional in Windows 10, which means users have no choice but to have these bugs foisted on them, unlike previous versions of Windows, which allowed updates to be put off until later. While that left users unprotected from security vulnerabilities, it meant they could delay updates by a few weeks to avoid unidentified bugs.

What do we think?

Despite the reported problems, it's best practice to install the latest updates. The Patch Tuesday updates fix security vulnerabilities that leave your PC at risk, while others come with useful feature upgrades. But it's no good fixing bugs if it breaks your computer in other ways. It's clear that Microsoft has an update problem it needs to tackle.

To be fair, Microsoft is providing code to many, many different types of computers, laptops and other devices. Patching isn't an easy task, and Microsoft usually gets it right, but the smallest mistake can have a big impact.

Microsoft needs to fix this problem or users will become so annoyed, they'll refuse to install such updates. Right now, that's not an option: Windows 10 updates are automatic. But if these problems continue, users will find ways to avoid updates or demand they be turned off. Patching millions of PCs each month is no easy task, but bugs should be the exception, not the norm.

We'll be explaining how to take control of your Windows updates in next issue's Web User Masterclass.

What we think of this fortnight's top tech news stories and rumours, and how they affect you

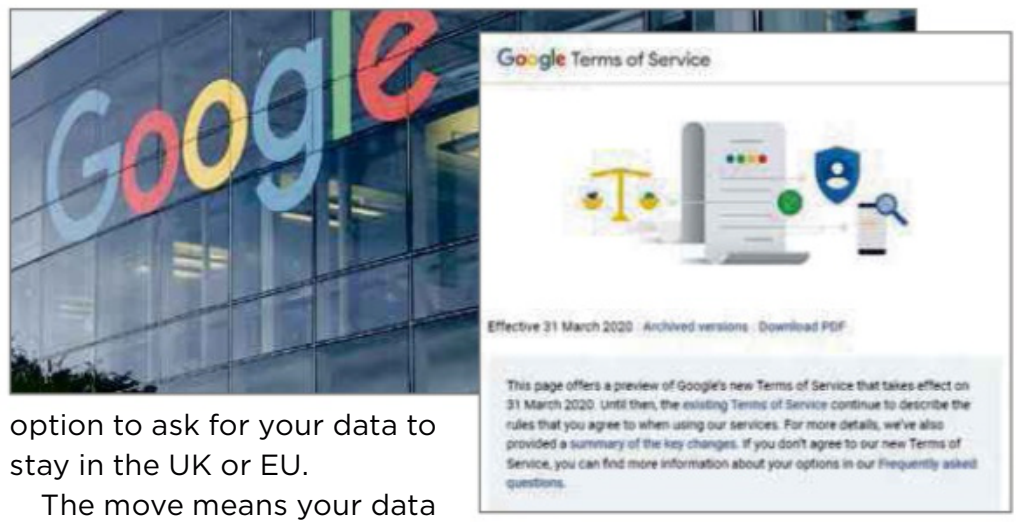
Google moves UK data to the US after Brexit

What happened?

Google will move the data of its British users from servers based in Ireland to the US. The move comes following Brexit, with data agreements between the EU and the UK still to be decided, and means users will be faced with the choice of letting their data sit relatively unprotected on US servers or deleting their accounts entirely.

How will it affect you?

Before your data is moved, Google will ask you to agree to new Terms of Service in order to tranfer your account to the US. If you don't agree, there's only one alternative: delete your account and stop using Google. There is no



option to ask for your data to stay in the UK or EU.

The move means your data will no longer be protected by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the EU's strict data-protection scheme, which still covers UK citizens during the transition period. The US has no nationwide data protection law and no privacy protections for non-US citizens. The move will also let British authorities have more access to the data, thanks to agreements between the US and UK.

What do we think?

The UK and EU need a data-sharing agreement to keep such moves from happening across all US tech giants. The UK will hope to gain an adequacy agreement with the EU – which means that the EU deems it good enough at protecting data to share with – but that could take months or even years. Indeed, if the UK waters down its own data-protection laws, we may never get that approval.

It's no surprise, then, that Google doesn't want to get stuck holding Brits' data in the EU. Of course, the company could have moved the data to another place: the UK itself. That it's chosen to shift everything to the US shows the future of our reduced data protections, if the government doesn't act soon.

Credit: Tada Images / Shutterstock.com

Facebook will pay to record your voice

What happened?

Last year, Facebook was caught using voice recordings from its Messenger app as part of its efforts to improve its transcription technology. It promised to stop the controversial practice but the social network clearly still wants your audio clips because it's now offering to pay for them.

Rather than surreptitiously harvesting voice messages, Facebook is asking for recordings via its Viewpoints market-research app (viewpoints.fb.com) as part of a new program called Pronunciations. Facebook will dole out 200 points for each recording, which

works out to about $1 each.

How will it affect you?

The Viewpoints app is limited to specific Facebook users – in particular, those in the US over the age of 18 – and, so far, the request for recordings has only be made to some of those users. Whether it's worth sharing your voice and speaking style to Facebook for a few dollars is up to you, but the company said the data won't be linked to your profile or shared elsewhere. It has yet to confirm whether the Viewpoints voice-recording scheme will expand beyond the US.

What do we think?

Machine learning and artificial intelligence systems – such as Facebook's transcription tool – need high-quality data for training purposes, and this is increasingly harvested from photos, text and even video recordings we've uploaded to the web. That's generally acceptable when it's used for academic research, designed to understand how we communicate or to control propaganda. However, in this case, Facebook is using it to develop its own products. Transcription is fairly benign, but scraped image data has been used to train facial recognition, too.

Paying for data is one way to get around that and, while no one will get rich taking part in this project, at least Facebook is no longer sneaking a peek at private messages. That's much more valuable.

Ring boosts security with two-factor authentication

What happened?

Ring, Amazon's smart home-security business, has made two-factor authentication (2FA) compulsory for all customers. In a statement on Ring's website, Leila Rouhi, company president, said: "we're making a second layer of verification mandatory for all users when they log into their Ring accounts. This added authentication helps prevent unauthorized users from gaining access to your Ring account, even if they have your username and password."

Ring already offered optional two-factor authentication, which requires users to confirm every sign-in using a second device, but making this compulsory should protect users from unauthorised account access should hackers try to take control of their home-security system. The company also announced plans to "temporarily pause the use of most third-party analytics services in the Ring apps and website," in a bid to protect users' data.

The move is a response to a string of hacks and negative headlines that have hit Ring where it hurts most: security. In December last year, hackers logged into Ring doorbells using stolen passwords. They then hurled abuse at unwitting residents and tripped alarm systems.

Those hacked passwords were taken from non-Amazon accounts, which Ring owners had reused.

January saw digital rights group the Electronic Frontier Foundation reveal that Ring's Android app was "packed with third-party trackers sending out a plethora of customers' personally identifiable information". Names, IP addresses, mobile networks and sensor data were sent to four marketing and analytics companies, including Facebook.

This, then, is Ring's straight answer to the question: 'if you can't keep our data safe, how can we trust you to keep our home safe?'.

How will it affect you?

As a Ring customer, expect to receive a one-time use, six-digit code every time you log into your account. This can be sent to either an email address or via text message – neither of which hackers should be able to access. Enter that code to verify the sign-in. Ring has already started rolling mandatory 2FA, so keep your eyes peeled.

What do we think?

With so much of our data now stored online, we say: the more security, the better – especially when that data includes cameras in our homes. 2FA should be mandatory for all data-sensitive accounts. It's a reasonable requirement for users, and, from a business perspective, should stem the rising tide of privacy blunders.

Despite suffering security breaches, Ring and Amazon are generally good at encouraging sound security behaviour. At the time of the hacking, Ring was urging customers to enable 2FA. Seems like it's decided to now take matters into its own hands.

FIRST LOOK

Samsung Galaxy Z Flip

bit.ly/flip496

The flip phone is back – sort of. Not to be outdone by Motorola's nostalgia-baiting reformed Razr (see First Look, Issue 494), Samsung's Galaxy Z Flip looks compact, snappy and really rather cool, which is just as well after the dismal debut of its Galaxy Fold.

The shimmering, square-ish clamshell design resembles the old Alcatel OT808, a budget phone with a QWERTY keyboard (remember those?). When closed, a minimalist 1.1in read-out displays time, date and notification icons. A double-tap activates the screen, while swipes access music controls and notifications.

Folding it out reveals a 6.7in screen on a par with any from the Samsung stable – except, unfortunately, there's a noticeable crease running across the middle of the fold, catching the light and hampering the smooth action of scrolling, swiping, tapping and typing.

The Z Flip's folding action has nylon fibres layered within the hinge – to keep out dust and dirt, and maintain a fluid flip. This 'sweeper technology' feels strong, with Samsung claiming it'll withstand 200,000 folds. That remains to be seen away from sterile R&D labs and out in the real world, but the adjustable folding angles certainly help you find a sweet spot for the perfect view and make hands-free video calls possible.

Make no mistake – with its £1,300 price tag, this is a premium smartphone. The specs include Samsung's modified version of Android 10 running on a Snapdragon 855+ processor with 8GB of RAM and 256GB of internal storage, along with a 10-megapixel front-facing camera supported by dual 12MP wide-angle rear cameras.

Samsung has certainly learned the lessons of the original Fold's failures. The Galaxy Z Flip features a superior design – one that slips neatly into any pocket or purse – but the hefty price tag will put it beyond that same pocket or purse of most buyers.

WHAT'S THE RUMOUR

Is Apple about to launch AirTags?

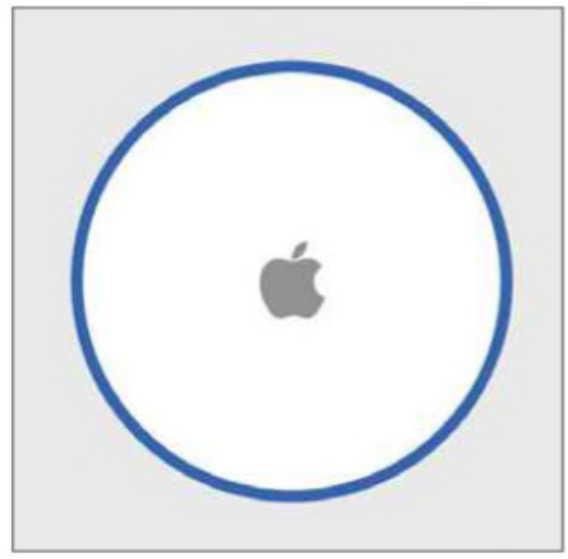
Apple's AirTags tracker system is set to launch later this year, if sources are to believed. The physical tracker can be attached to items and monitored via iOS's Find My app. It's essentially a smart key-finder that you don't have to whistle for – and one that helps track lost and stolen goods.

Ming-Chi Kuo, an Apple analyst with a stellar track record, revealed in a research note that Apple is ramping up production of AirTags to make tens of millions by the end of the year. Industry watchers say this timeline could lead to an official announcement as early as June, at the Worldwide Developer Conference.

This sounds too soon to be likely, but it would give developers a chance to familiarise themselves with the tag before release. Others believe Apple's annual iPhone reveal in September is a more plausible date. Given multiple leaks surrounding the 'secret' AirTags, could this lead to a muted 'one more thing' moment?

The personal item tracker, a rival to Tile, is thought to be a white, circular disc imprinted with the Apple logo. Kuo previously stated that he expects the tag to feature ultra-wideband technology, which offers better precision and accuracy than Bluetooth.

Working within the Find My app, rumours suggest that items will be added and managed in a new Items tab where you "tag your everyday items



with AirTags and never lose them again". You then receive a phone alert when you move too far from the tag.

LIKELIHOOD RATING

✓✓✓✓✓

Kuo is very reliable with his leaks, so a 2020 release would seem a safe bet. However, this isn't a question of 'if', but 'when'. AirTags are one of tech's worst-kept secrets. We expect to hear whispers of the tracker at Apple's developer conference in June, with a big, profile-raising reveal at September's broader, consumer-focused event. But Apple can always be counted on to surprise us, so an earlier reveal date isn't out of the question.

WEBOMETER

WE LIKE...

Windows Defender comes to Linux

Microsoft has released a Linux version of its Defender antivirus tool, saying it will come to Android and iOS later this year. Details of the public preview of Microsoft Defender Advanced Threat Protection can be found at bit.ly/defender496.

Twitter to label fake news

Twitter is testing a new feature that labels misleading news stories, so-called fake news and outright lies from public figures and politicians. Orange and red badges will appear under posts shared by Twitter users that are deemed 'Harmfully Misleading'.

WE DON'T LIKE...

MGM hotel chain suffers data breach

The personal details of 10.6 million guests who stayed at MGM Resorts hotels have surfaced online after hackers accessed the chain's servers in July 2019. Names, addresses and passport details for guests up to 2017 were spotted on a hacking forum.

Google bans yet more dodgy Android apps

Google has been forced to remove nearly 600 Android apps from its Play store for violating its policy about "disruptive" ads, and has now banned their developers. The company defines disruptive ads as those "that are displayed to users in unexpected ways".

What's new on Kickstarter

Our favourite new project on the crowdfunding site

Clicbot

bit.ly/clicbot496 | From £230

The playfully designed Clicbot is billed as 'the best educational robot ever', combining coding skills with a Lego-like configurability that lets you build the robot any way you choose, so it can walk, climb, dance, race and even draw. Why not pop a couple of wheels on it and code it to fetch the post? Clicbot can be used to teach code, but there's also a no-code programming option – a nice touch for novices – and, excitingly, its personality adjusts depending on how you build and code it. An early-bird starter kit costs around £230.

Stay Safe Online

News about the latest threats and advice from security experts

SECURITY ALERT! | What's been bothering us this fortnight

Mac malware infections overtake Windows

Cyber-threats aimed at Macs have overtaken those targeted at Windows PCs for the first time, signalling that Apple's computers are not as secure as they once might have been.

It was long believed that Apple Mac computers were virtually immune to malware, but the growth in popularity of Macs has seen them become a more attractive target for hackers. According to the latest data from Malwarebytes, in 2019 there were on average 11 threats per Mac compared to only 5.8 threats per Windows PC.

Malwarebytes noted that there has been a 400% year-on-year increase in Mac threats since 2018, making macOS significantly more at risk than Windows. "Part of that increase can be attributed to an increase in our Malwarebytes for Mac userbase," said the company.

Reassuringly for Mac users, the types of infection were very different between the two operating systems. Whereas Windows computers suffered Trojans, backdoors, hijackers, worms and ransomware, threats on macOS systems were almost exclusively limited to adware and potentially unwanted programs (PUPs) such as toolbars.

bit.ly/macos496

Google purges harmful Chrome extensions

Google has removed at least 500 malware-ridden Chrome extensions from its Web Store following the findings of an independent security investigation. The add-ons used aggressive 'malvertisements' to steer users to websites susceptible to malware downloads and phishing attacks.

Concern originally rose after independent security researcher Jamila Kaya detected more than a dozen Chrome extensions that were redirecting users to the same malicious URL. Kaya contacted Cisco's Duo Security team, and together they identified the add-ons as belonging to "a network of copycat plugins sharing nearly identical functionality". Duo said the group behind the network has been operating since the early half of the 2010s.

Google swiftly removed the extensions, which had been installed more than 1.7 million times, from the Chrome Web Store. "We appreciate the work of the research community, and when we are alerted of extensions in the Web Store that violate our policies, we take action and use those incidents as training material to improve our automated and manual analyses," said a Google spokesperson.

bit.ly/chrome496

Security Helpdesk | Your questions answered by security specialists

THIS ISSUE'S EXPERT: Anton Ivanov, Security Analyst at Kaspersky (www.kaspersky.co.uk)

Q How worried should Mac users be about the increase in malware threats (see story, above)?

Paul Giddings, Facebook

> "The most widespread threats that target macOS currently revolve around advertising"

A Despite macOS traditionally being considered safer than Windows, cybercriminals are now trying to profit from the platform by looking for new ways to deceive users, and actively using social-engineering techniques to spread their malware.

Luckily for macOS users, the most widespread threats currently revolve around pushing illicit advertising rather than more dangerous criminal activity, such as stealing financial data.

In 2019, Kaspersky prevented attacks carried out by Shlayer, a malware Trojan family, on at least one out of every 10 Macs using Kaspersky security software, making this threat the most widespread for macOS users. It specialises in the installation of adware – programs that plague users by feeding illicit ads, intercepting and gathering users' browser queries, and modifying search results to distribute even more advertising messages.

Shlayer uses a smart malware-distribution system to spread via a partner network, entertainment websites and even Wikipedia, demonstrating that even users who only visit legal sites need additional protection online. Shlayer's infection algorithm has hardly changed since it was first detected, making it an especially relevant threat that users need protection from.

A reliable security solution, and only installing programs and updates from trusted sources, can protect macOS users from threats such as Shlayer, and make browsing the web a safer experience.

Credit: mama_mia / Shutterstock.com

Email us your security questions at webuser@webuser.co.uk

IONOS by 1&1

CTRL your web business and **SHIFT** projects from good to great. **DEL** time-intensive administration and access management. **ESC** from long working nights with cold pizza. Your **ALT**ernative: The **IONOS Partner Program** for agencies, developers and designers.

www.ionos.co.uk/partner-program

Best New Websites

Site of the Fortnight

HOLIDAYS

RELAUNCH

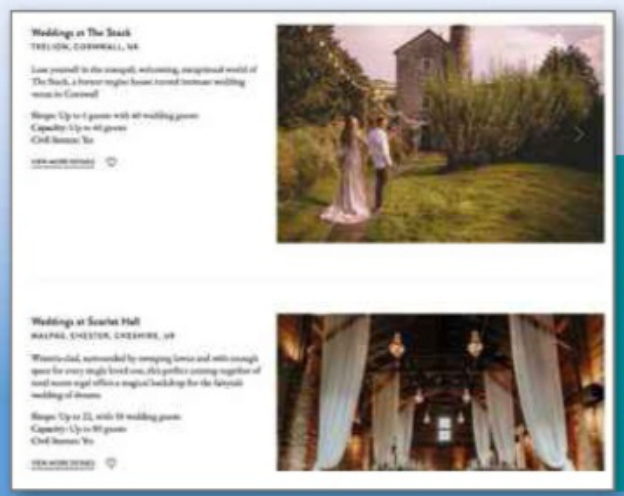
Unique Homestays

uniquehomestays.com

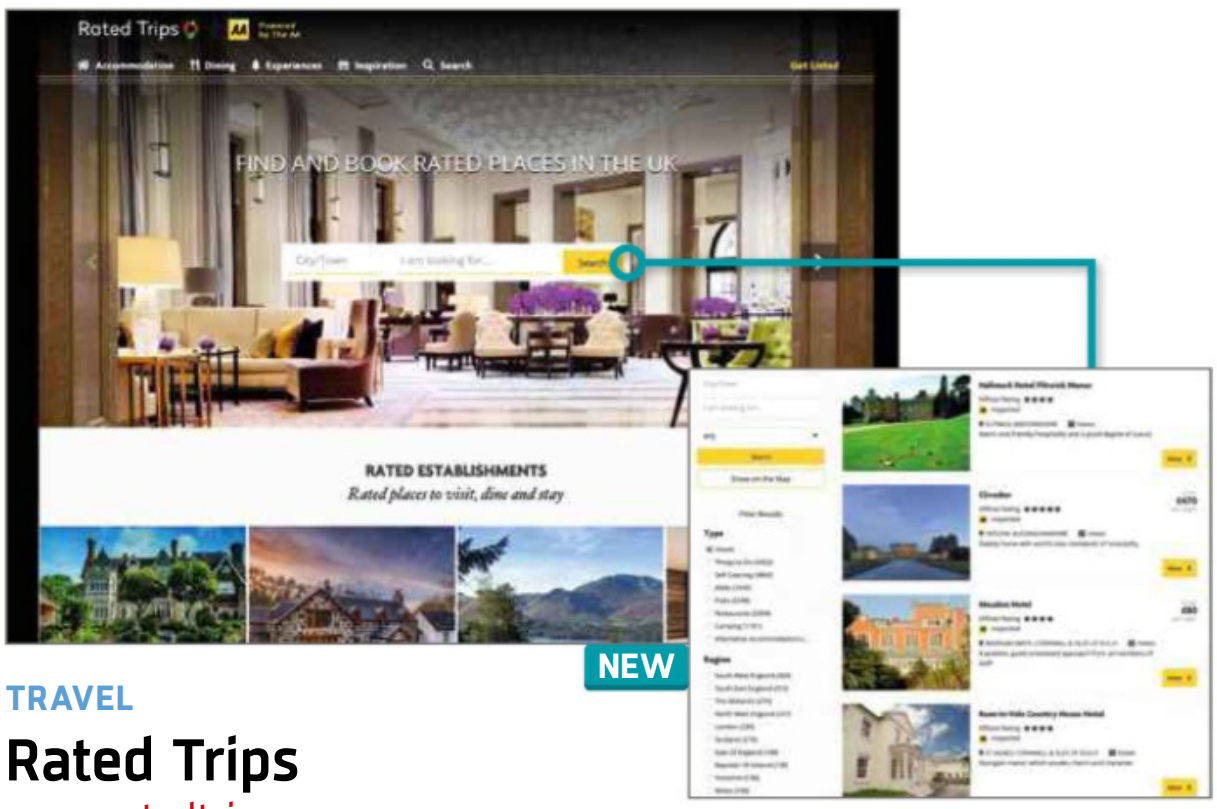
Rather than book a stay in a standard chain hotel, you may prefer to seek quirkier holiday accommodation by enjoying one of Unique Homestays' hand-picked selection of exquisite self-catering properties across the UK. You can see them all on its redesigned website, which lets you gaze longingly at the abundance of beautifully shot photos and get a vivid sense of what to expect. Lavish descriptions discuss the interior and exterior of each private home, along with clearly laid-out information about criteria such as size and pet-friendliness. Finding properties has also been made easier by using a variety of filters.

Our rating ★★★★★

LARGE PROPERTIES
Find country houses for group gatherings and use filters to locate the perfect stay



WEDDING VENUES
Properties particularly well suited for weddings are given their own section



NEW

TRAVEL

Rated Trips

www.ratedtrips.com

The AA and the UK's national tourist boards regularly grade hotels, restaurants, pubs and activities, giving you a good idea of the quality you can expect before paying a visit. This new website lets you view those ratings, which you can either find by searching for a location, indicating what you're looking for or clicking Inspiration for ideas. Dedicated pages for each property indicate the number of stars awarded, as well as summary of the inspector's view, a list of features and the venue's location plotted on a map. If you wish to book, you must do so directly, although the AA says it intends to offer a built-in booking system in the very near future.

Our rating ★★★★★

RELAUNCH

FOOD

Burton's Biscuits

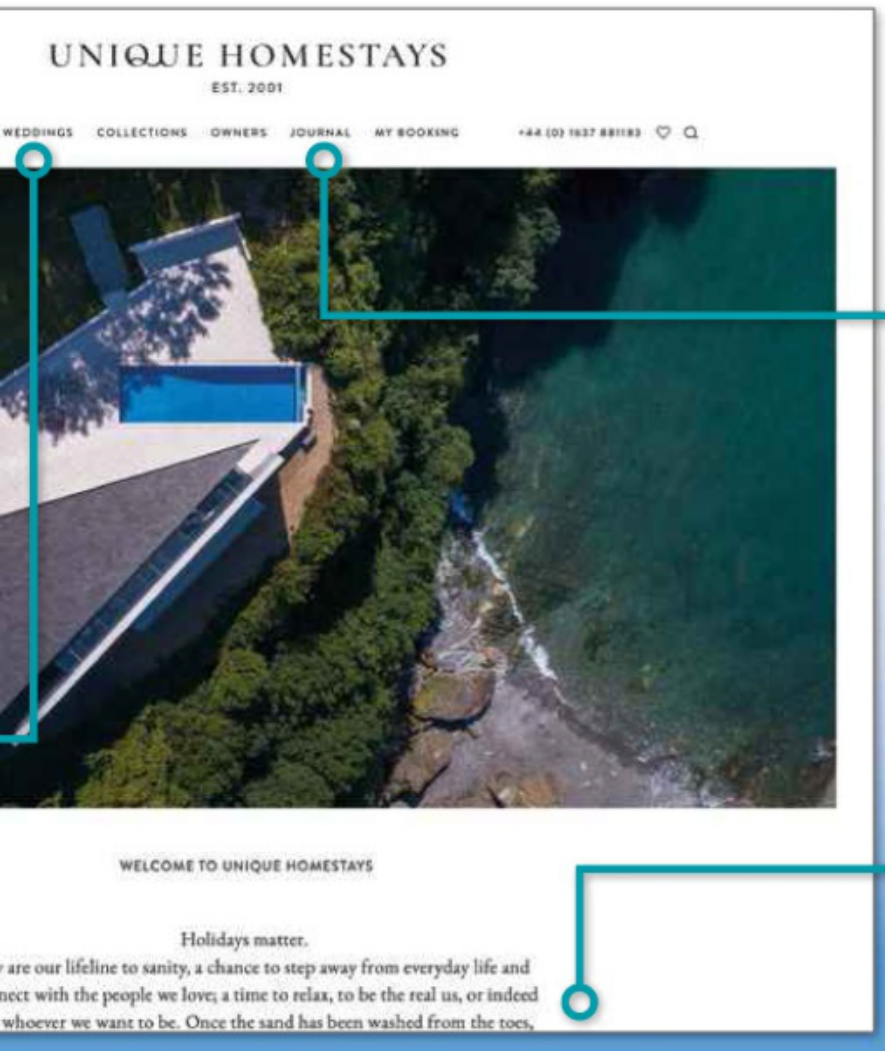
www.burtonsbiscuits.com

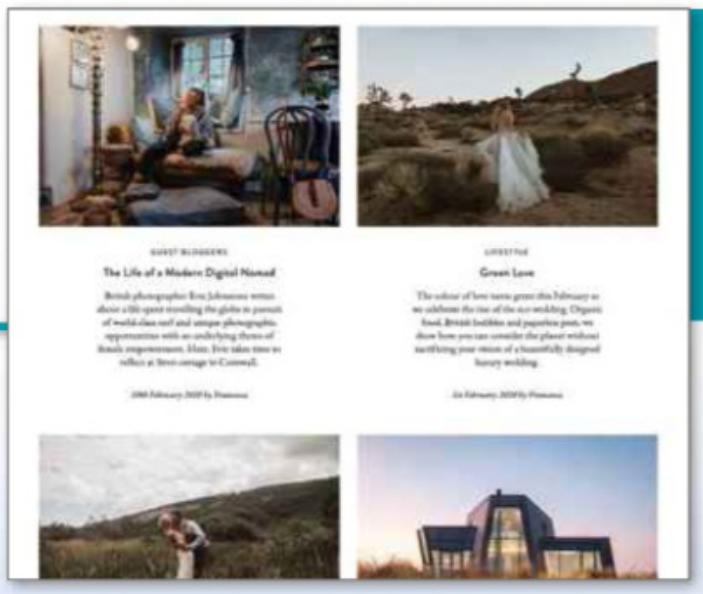
The smart cookies at Burton's Biscuits have been busy sinking their teeth into a new website showcasing brands such as Jammie Dodgers and Wagon Wheels. You can view the products in each range and enjoy fun facts alongside nutritional information and ingredients. But it's also a chance to digest the company's history, presented as a timeline dating back to 1829. The site brings things up to date with a look at Burton's modern factories that includes a behind-the-scenes video of the Edinburgh plant. To wrap it all up, there's also a blog, split nicely across brand, company and people news.

Our rating ★★★★☆

Reviews by David Crookes

We review this fortnight's best new and relaunched websites and rate them for content, design and features





BLOG POSTS
The interesting high-end journal with guest bloggers adds a nice touch of class

SUBSCRIBE
Discover the latest properties and news by signing up for the monthly newsletter

NEW

CULTURE

National Museums Liverpool

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

If you're not able to visit one of National Museums Liverpool's seven venues, you can now explore some of the collection online instead by browsing featured objects, viewing highlights from specific museums and art galleries or simply tapping in some search terms. It's a packed site that includes absorbing videos, details of forthcoming events, information on conservation and research, and a great set of learning resources for children. These include fun, downloadable PDFs on topics such as Ancient Egypt and Victorians.

Our rating ★★★★☆

NEW

MUSIC

Composeher

composeher.co.uk

Noting that just a fifth of commissioned UK composers are female, the Glasgow School of Art Choir is looking to bring some balance with its Composeher project, which has commissioned seven women to compose a set of new choral works. Use this easily navigable website to find out more, not only by reading the latest blogs but also by taking a look at the composers involved. The site is also highlighting an historical female composer each month, accompanied by a Spotify playlist, and there's a special essay written for the site, as well as a list of upcoming events.

Our rating ★★★★☆

RELAUNCH

DEALS

We Get A Deal

wegetadeal.com

Promoted as an alternative to Groupon and Wowcher, this online marketplace of special deals has the potential to save you bundles of money. As is typical of such sites, it has a strong focus on days out, food, drink, health and beauty, but there are many other products with often sizable discounts, too. Searching by location is tricky: we used the drop-down menu to find a region but had to enter a search term as well. That's fine if you have something in mind but not so good for finding random items. In any case, most of our searches came up blank. We also found that pages were slow to load.

Our rating ★★★☆☆

Tell us about your website via webuser@webuser.co.uk

Best New Websites

NEW

CAREERS

The Skills Network Professional

professional.theskillsnetwork.com

If you fancy retraining or enhancing your current career by accruing new skills and knowledge, this hub of professional distance-learning courses lets you browse six industry categories to see what's on offer, providing just enough information about the content of each course, as well as a preview to whet your appetite. To discover more before you commit, you need to request further details and agree to receive phone calls, emails and texts. If you decide to take the plunge, buying a course is as simple as paying in full or using the sliders to determine your deposit and monthly payments.

Our rating ★★★★☆

RELAUNCH

MUSIC

Harley Benton

harleybenton.com

Harley Benton is a fledgling guitar brand, offering instruments, amps and effects. To help you make the right purchase, its revamped website guides you through choosing the item (for instance, an electric or acoustic guitar, bass or ukulele) and style you want. The product pages are packed with specifications, images and customer reviews, with some offering audio samples. New products are flagged in their own section and items you like can be saved as favourites. You're routed to the Germany-based retailer and parent company Muskihaus Thomann to buy, however, which charges delivery fees to the UK.

Our rating ★★★★☆

RELAUNCH

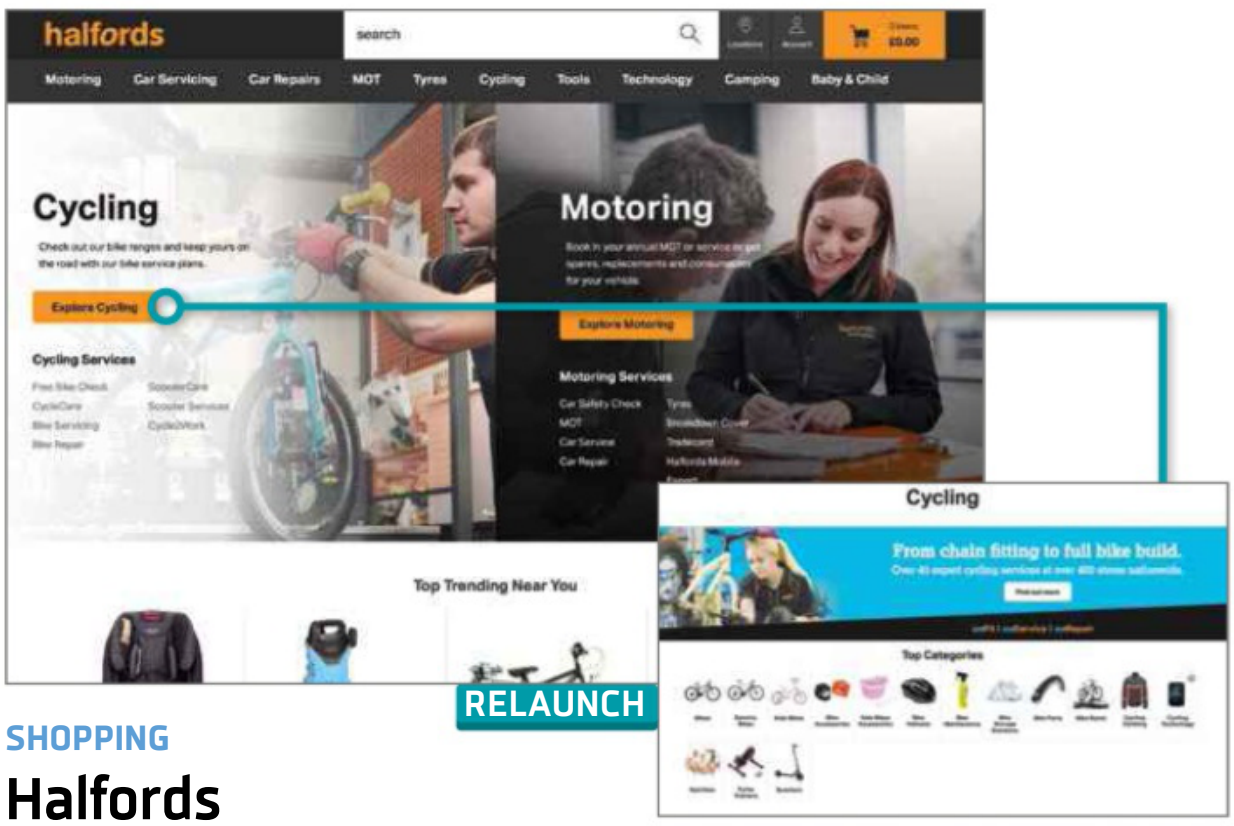
SHOPPING

DG Supplyline

www.dgsupplyline.co.uk

Specialising in double-glazing repairs and maintenance, this website sells a huge number of door and window parts such as handles, locks, hinges and tracks. If you know exactly what you're after, you can search by product for lightning-fast results. Otherwise, you can browse the well-presented drop-down menus, categories and brand filters. In all cases, the matter-of-fact descriptions provide the necessary specifications listed as bullet points. The items can also be shared on social media, if you reckon they'd be of interest to others. Trade customers get up to 40% off and there are brochures to download, too.

Our rating ★★★★☆



RELAUNCH

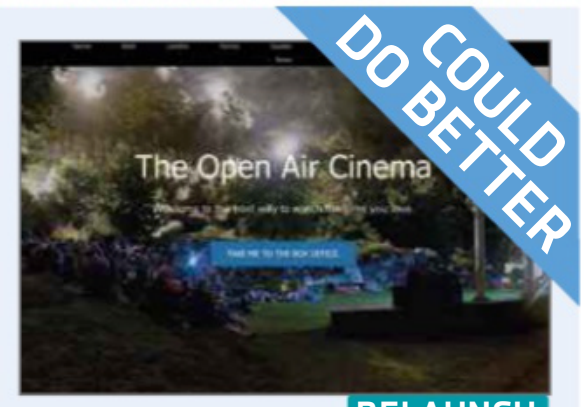
SHOPPING

Halfords

www.halfords.com

Halford's old website felt stuck in first gear but, one revamp later, it's cruising with most of its troubles left far behind. By splitting the site between cycling and motoring, it can better serve its two main sets of customers, putting the most relevant services such as booking bike- and car-safety checks upfront, while providing information about repairs and MOTs. There are plenty of buying guides and, by inputting your vehicle reg, you should only see relevant products (though you still need to confirm your tyres by looking at the existing set). You can enter your postcode to filter by service, and see fitting costs located next to non-fitted prices for greater clarity.

Our rating ★★★★☆



COULD DO BETTER

RELAUNCH

FILM

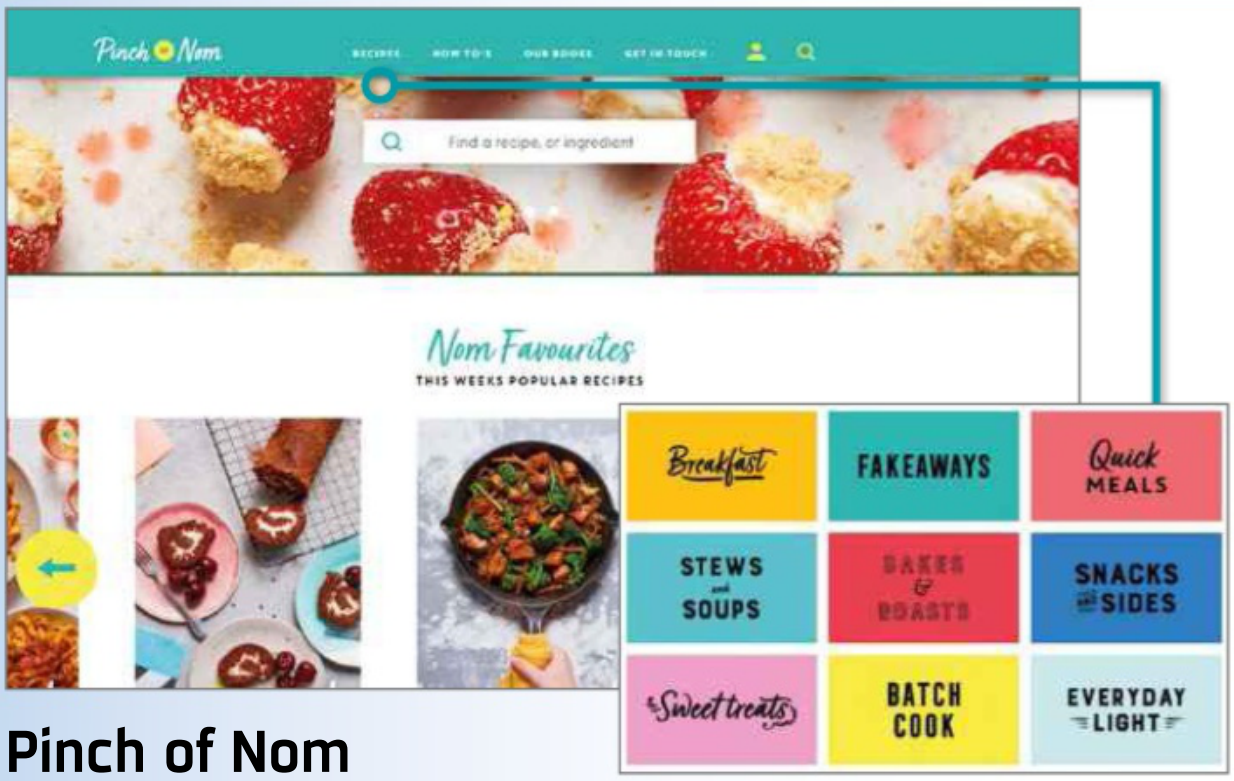
The Open Air Cinema

theopenaircinema.com

Forget stuffy multiplexes and overpriced popcorn, as the weather picks up, you may want to enjoy a film in the great outdoors by visiting an open air cinema. This company covers Kent, London, Surrey and Sussex but its website is more trailer than main event, since it tells you nothing about where the screens will be pitching up. Instead, you have to "registester" to be kept in the loop – you definitely won't get much joy from the paltry news section or the irritating About page that uses dark grey text on a black background. It's no blockbuster, that's for sure.

Our rating ★★☆☆☆

ESSENTIAL BOOKMARKS THIS ISSUE: Fascinating food sites



Pinch of Nom

pinchofnom.com

Losing weight needn't mean living off Ryvita – Pinch of Nom's thousands of slimming but satisfying recipes span categories including Stews & Soups, Bakes & Roasts, Sweet Treats, Vegan and Fakeaways (dishes that look like you've ordered them in). Started in 2016 by partners Kay and Kate, this immaculately presented site is a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach, with gorgeous photos, simple instructions and clear nutritional information. There are how-to guides on subjects such as peeling and preparing garlic, and cooking home-made chips, and all articles are labelled with a difficulty level. Pinch of Nom has already published a series of successful spin-off books and has just signed a deal with BBC Studios to create video and podcast content.

Love Food Hate Waste

www.lovefoodhatewaste.com

In the UK, we waste 4.5 million tonnes of food every year, so this site encourages us to get creative with our leftovers rather than binning them. It provides a huge selection of tasty recipes for recycling excess food, which you can search by ingredient and browse by dietary need, difficulty level and cooking time. Examples include potato peel soup, bacon and tomato soda bread, and rainbow fried rice. Other useful content includes an A to Z of food storage, which explains how to keep everything from apples to yoghurt fresher for longer; a portion calculator to stop you buying and serving too much; and tips for optimising the temperature of your fridge.

My Fussy Eater

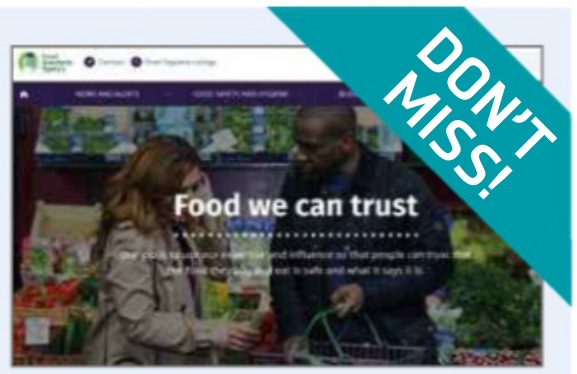
www.myfussyeater.com

Children are notoriously picky eaters, especially when it comes to 'boring' healthy food, but help is at hand for parents, grandparents and carers from this popular recipe blog. If your kids won't touch their broccoli, for example, perhaps they'll find it more appealing in the form of pasta, fritters or mac and cheese, all of which are tried, tested and explained by My Fussy Eater's creator, Ciara. There are more than 500 family-friendly recipes to browse by diet or category, including 15-Minute Meals, Hidden Veg Recipes and 'Healthy Grab & Go Breakfasts for Teenagers'. These are complemented by advice about getting kids (and stubborn adults) to eat more healthily, and a My Fussy Eater mobile app.

Foodstuff Finds

www.foodstufffinds.co.uk

This long-running blog is aimed at "people with an obsession for all things edible and new or different". It rounds up interesting items spotted in supermarkets, import stores and takeaway food outlets that you may not have encountered yet, and writes detailed, personal reviews that cover everything from packaging and preparation to value for money and flavour, complete with photographic evidence. Recent Foodstuff Finds entries include McVities' new pineapple-flavour Jaffa Cakes ("sweet and slightly acidic with little definition"), Müller's Gin & Tonic yoghurts ("a proper palette cleanser") and Gregg's Vegan Steak Bake ("terrible"). Updated every day, it could save you money and disappointment.



Food Standards Agency

www.food.gov.uk

There's more to the government's Food Standards Agency than the hygiene-rating stickers you see in restaurant windows may suggest. You'll find the latest food and allergy alerts ("undeclared mustard in Heston Mushroom & Gin Sauce"); advice about cooking and storing food to avoid the spread of harmful bacteria; useful information about use-by and best-before dates; and details of common types of food poisoning and the risks of drinking raw milk. You can also report problems with food products, labels and businesses through the site, if you fancy being a whistleblower!

Tell us about your favourite food sites via webuser@webuser.co.uk

Build a Better Site

Specialist tips, top tools and practical help

Top Tips of the Fortnight

Update WordPress sites with mobile blocks

We've had WordPress's wonderful Block Editor in the web interface for a few months now, but it's only just arrived in the mobile versions. It doesn't have as many blocks available, so you may still want to reserve complex jobs for when you're sitting at a PC, but if you need to get something that's more than just a page of text on your site while you're out and about, there's enough here to get you started. Choose from headings, lists, images, videos, separators and more.

Scan for security problems

Sticking with WordPress, GeekFlare (bit.ly/scan496) has

launched a new free tool designed to flag potential security problems with your site. Type your URL in the box and click the Scan Site button. The service returns a list of possible problems that you might want to deal with, from whether your Admin account is secure enough to checking if your plugins are up to date. If you own a WordPress website, it's well worth running a scan.

Deal of the Fortnight

A2 Hosting (a2hosting.co.uk) is offering its Fast Web Hosting package for £3.65 per month, which is 51% off the usual price.

Web-building Helpdesk

Q **I'm not very good with colours so I just want to build my site around a simple scheme that uses shades of the same colour. How do I work out what those shades are?**

Becky Martin, via email

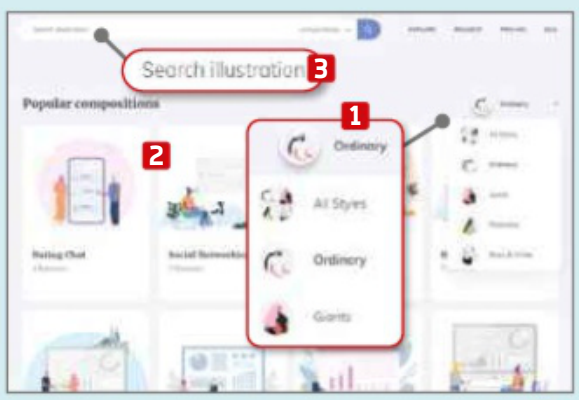
A Usefully, there's a website at bit.ly/pick496 that can do this for you. If you already know the HTML code of your colour, type it in the box. Otherwise, pick the colour you want from the chart. A swatch of colours appears on the right, with your chosen colour in the middle. The others are shades of your chosen colour, transitioning from black at the top to white at the bottom. Use the relevant code in your HTML or CSS to summon the colour on your website.

Andy Shaw, Technical & Reviews Editor

MINI WORKSHOP | Create illustrations to brighten up your website

ITG Builder: app.itg.digital | 10 mins | Any browser

If you aren't very artistic, try the brilliant ITG Builder illustration tool to give your site a visual makeover. This interactive clipart tool lets you build great-looking illustrations from stock graphical elements for free.



1 Click the Styles drop-down menu 1 to choose a type of illustration. They all feature people in a selection of locations but you can choose the overall colour and style from this list. Next, choose a topic or location from the available options 2 or search for something specific. 3

2 Most of the elements in an image can be clicked 1 to make changes. A dotted border appears around the element. Some, such as the backgrounds, usually let you change their colours. Others, such as the people, offer far more options, from their age and sex 2 to what they're wearing. 3

3 Remove an element using the bin icon. 1 You can also download individual elements as JEG files. 2 When you've finished composing your image, click Download Illustration. 3 You can download 100 JPEG images, free of charge.

Email us your website building questions at webuser@webuser.co.uk

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What To Watch Online

Pick of the fortnight

Watch Apple's Spielberg revival *Amazing Stories*

From 6 March

Amazing Stories is a reboot that's long been waiting to happen. Steven Spielberg's *Twilight Zone*-style anthology show aired in the US from 1985-87, and popped up at odd hours of the night on BBC Two in the early 1990s. Now, Spielberg is back as executive producer with a whole new set of weird tales, and you won't have to play hide-and-seek with the schedules to watch them.

Five new *Amazing Stories* episodes arrive on 6 March on Apple TV+ (£4.99 per month after 7 days free, tv.apple.com/gb). These include 'The Rift', starring Edward Burns (*Saving Private Ryan*) and directed by Mark Mylod (*Game of Thrones*), and 'Dynoman and the Volt', the final TV appearance by Robert Forster (*Twin Peaks*), who plays a man bonding with his grandson over a mysterious mail-order trinket. Enjoy the official trailer at bit.ly/amstories496.

If you fancy watching the original 1980s *Amazing Stories*, Dailymotion has several episodes at bit.ly/amazing496.

Watch the latest *War of the Worlds* remake

From 5 March

HG Wells' 1879 alien-invasion classic gets yet another adaptation, this time shifting the action to the present day and starring Gabriel Byrne (*The Usual Suspects*) and Natasha Little (*This Life*). Two episodes debut on Now TV on 5 March, then six more arrive weekly. Watch the trailer, with its *The Walking Dead*-style post-apocalyptic city streets, at bit.ly/wworlds496.

War of the Worlds completists can also watch last year's BBC adaptation on Amazon Prime at bit.ly/bbcwar496 and Spielberg's 2005 film on Now TV at bit.ly/nowwar496. YouTube has full audio of Orson Welles' infamous 1938 radio broadcast at bit.ly/welles496, and Jeff Wayne's 1978 album at bit.ly/wayne496.

Watch Martin Freeman's family sitcom *Breeders*

From 12 March

Martin Freeman returns to comedy in *Breeders*, created by *Peep Show* writer Simon Blackwell and *The Thick of It* star Chris Addison. Freeman stars with Daisy Haggard as a couple dealing with the reappearance of estranged parents while also juggling their own kids.

FX production *Breeders* airs on Sky One in the UK, so you can stream its 10 half-hour episodes on-demand via Now TV with an Entertainment Pass (£8.99 per month, bit.ly/nowent496). Watch the trailer at bit.ly/breeders496.

Watch *Noughts + Crosses*

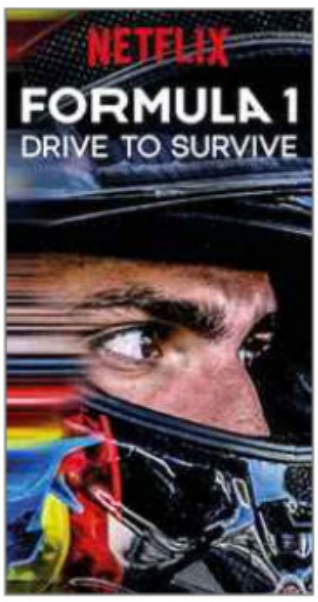
From 5 March

British rapper Stormzy stars with Helen Baxendale and Jack Rowan in this adaptation of Malorie Blackman's dystopian novel (bit.ly/ncbook496). All six episodes of *Noughts + Crosses* come to the iPlayer as a box set on 5 March, and you can watch the trailer at bit.ly/noughts496.

Noughts + Crosses screenwriter Toby Whithouse created one of the best BBC shows of the 21st Century, werewolf

We reveal what's new on Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Amazon Prime Video and other streaming services

sci-fi *Being Human*. All five series are on Netflix at bit.ly/human496.



Watch the Australian Grand Prix live

15 March

The 2020 Formula One season begins with the Australian Grand Prix, which you can watch online with a Sky Sports Pass (£9.99 per day, £14.99 per week, £33.99 per month or £5.99 for mobile only; bit.ly/nowsports496). The pass doesn't include catch-up so you'll have to set your alarm for 5.10am on 15 March for the live stream. You can get live Grand Prix updates from the free F1 app (Android and iOS, bit.ly/f1app496).

F1 Fans should also check out Netflix's new docuseries *F1: Drive to Survive*, which goes behind the scenes of the 2019 season. Watch all 10 episodes now at bit.ly/drive496.

BT adds Now TV and more flexibility

Now TV has finally arrived on BT as part of the platform's new 'flexible' TV packages, which let customers tweak the channels they receive from month to month.

Users can include providers such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and BT Sport in their pick-and-mix package, plus various Now TV passes. Changes are all made online, so there's no need to phone up BT or change any contracts.

Following the changes, content from all available providers is now integrated into BT's interface, avoiding the need to open different apps to find things to watch.

The big downside is that this 'flexibility' only comes with a two-year BT TV contract. An introductory package for BT Superfast Fibre broadband and entertainment starts at £37.99 per month (bt.com).

Watch new seasons of *Westworld* and *Babylon Berlin*

From 6/16 March

HBO's brilliant Wild West sci-fi *Westworld* is back for its third season on 16 March, with new cast members including Aaron Paul (*Breaking Bad*). Episodes arrive weekly at bit.ly/wworld496, where you can also watch Seasons 1 and 2. HBO has a season launch clip at bit.ly/wwlaunch496 and official trailer at bit.ly/wwtrail496, plus a *Westworld* microsite at bit.ly/wwhbo496.

Another thriller, back for Season 3, is the 1920s-set German crime drama *Babylon Berlin* on Now TV, where it joins Seasons 1 and 2 from 16 March at bit.ly/berlin496.

Watch two new Netflix Original films

From 6/13 March

Mark Wahlberg plays an ex-cop/ex-con turned justice-seeking amateur sleuth in Netflix's new action-comedy film *Spenser Confidential*, available from 6 March at bit.ly/spenser496. Watch the trailer there now for free.

Then, on 13 March, comes a rather more sober search for justice. Crime drama *Lost Girls* stars Amy Ryan as a woman who uncovers more than a dozen unsolved murders after her 24-year-old daughter goes missing. Watch the trailer at bit.ly/lost496.

In case you missed it...

Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon are eating and bickering their way around the Greek islands for Series 4 of *The Trip*, whose episodes arrive weekly on Now TV. The first two series (UK and Italy) are on Netflix at bit.ly/tripflix496, and *The Trip to Spain* is on Amazon for £12.99 (bit.ly/tripspain496).

The BBC's wonderful *Last Tango in Halifax* is back with Series 5 at bit.ly/halifax496, where you can also watch Series 1-4. Also on the iPlayer is new comedy *Bumps*, starring Amanda Redman as a broody 60-something, at bit.ly/bumps496.

Channel 4 has just begun a fourth series of its royal satire *The Windsors* (bit.ly/windsors496), and new Dave comedy *Meet the Richardsons* (bit.ly/rich496) is available online via UKTV Play (uktvplay.co.uk).

Product Test

We test and compare the latest products

Google Pixelbook Go

Google’s latest ChromeOS laptop is perfect for those who do most of their computing in a browser window

When ChromeOS first appeared, it seemed destined exclusively for low-spec and low-price laptops, but this hasn’t turned out to be the case. Google’s Pixelbook range is particularly high-end, and the latest additions are no exception. These models are slim (14.5mm), light (1.06kg), well built and have big, bright 13.3in screens. Unlike many Chromebooks, they use full-powered Intel processors. With their comfy keyboards and large touchpads, they’re proper laptops in every sense – it’s just that they run ChromeOS instead of Windows or macOS.

Design, build and price

Pixelbook Go prices start at £629 for the Core m3-based Pixelbook Go, which comes with 8GB of memory and 128GB of storage. There are four models in the range and, as you progress through the ranks, the prices rise, too.

We’ve reviewed the Core i5-8200Y with 8GB of memory and 128GB of storage, which costs £829. It’s a shame you don’t get the model with the 4K “Molecular Display” until you get to the top-end Core i7 Pixelbook Go – all the others, like our review model, come with the more basic 1080p screen.

Connectivity is minimal. You get a pair of USB Type-C ports, one on each side of the base towards the rear of the laptop, both of which can be used to charge, output video or connect peripherals. There’s also a 3.5mm headset jack on the left edge but that’s your lot for physical ports – there’s no microSD card slot or SIM card slot for on-the-go connectivity. Wireless connectivity is covered by dual-band 802.11ac Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 4.2.

> “The keyboard is a delight to type on, whether you’re a hunt-and-peck specialist or a high-speed touch-typing dynamo”

The keyboard is a highlight and is a delight to type on, whether you’re a hunt-and-peck specialist or a high-speed touch-typing dynamo. It has a solid base, with a light and quiet key action that’s just responsive enough to let you know your key presses have registered. Meanwhile, the key tops are large enough to keep typos to a minimum.

When it comes to layout, the usual Chromebook rules

> The battery life is stunning. This is a laptop you can work on all day without plugging it into the mains

apply. You get a Search button on the left-hand side where you'd normally find a Caps Lock key – something that continues to irritate a lot of Chromebook users – but, fortunately, the rest of the layout is pretty sensible. In the UK, you get a narrow but double-height Enter key, while the Shift keys have a decent width to them, as do the Backspace and Tab keys, and the cursor-key cluster isn't too cramped.

The touchpad works well, too. It's spacious enough to let you perform multi-touch gestures comfortably and the click doesn't feel either overly heavy or insubstantial. Note, however, that because it's mechanical, clicking doesn't work at the very top of the touchpad.

Screen

The Achilles heel of the Pixelbook Go is its display, though it's still perfectly adequate for most uses. The 1080p unit measures 13.3in across the diagonal and is perfectly sharp and reasonably bright. Our colorimeter measured it at 369cd/m² with the screen filled with white. That's not as bright as the brightest laptops but it should be good enough for most indoor situations and even some outdoor use – as long as you stick to the shade and don't try to work in dazzling sunlight.

Its colour accuracy is also excellent, and it has a very high contrast ratio of 2,275:1, ensuring on-screen images have punch and presence.

The display isn't without its issues, though. The viewing angles are disappointing – if you tilt the screen more than 45-degrees in any direction, the display dims noticeably. It's also a little grainy and a touch more reflective than we'd like.

However, the touchscreen element works well enough – for the few times you're likely to want to use it – clicking links, scrolling through web pages and so on. You're unlikely to ditch mouse control completely but it's good to have the option.

Performance and battery life

Diving deeper into the specifications, we were worried that our test unit wasn't going to have enough power, with Google sticking to the same range of processors it used in previous devices. However, we didn't notice any problems while using it. We tried it with dozens of tabs open in Chrome, with multiple large Google Sheets spreadsheets running, and it didn't faze the laptop at all. The Core m3 might struggle a bit more when you really load it up but it's clear you don't need anything faster than the Intel Core i5-8200Y or more than the 8GB memory our review device came supplied with.

In our benchmark tests, it performed similarly to last year's Google Pixel Slate, which was built around an identical processor and had the same amount of memory installed. It's a little less speedy than the Dell Inspiron Chromebook 14, however.

Where the Pixelbook Go demonstrates a significant lead over all its rivals is battery life. Quite simply, it's stunning in this regard. In our video rundown test, it lasted 14 hours and 15 minutes, which is almost five hours longer than the Dell Inspiron Chromebook 14 and nearly six hours longer than the Pixel Slate. This is a laptop you can work on all day without plugging it into the mains, perhaps more so than any other conventional laptop we've reviewed. The fact that you can charge it with any USB Type-C cable only adds to the convenience.

PRODUCT INFO

Google Pixelbook Go

Price: £629-£1,329 (model reviewed costs £829)
Buy from Google:
bit.ly/pbgo496

SPECIFICATIONS

- Intel Core i5 processor
- 8GB of memory
- 128GB of storage
- 13.3in Full HD touchscreen, 1,920 x 1,080 pixels resolution (166 ppi)
- 1080p 60fps webcam

FOR

- ✓ Brilliant keyboard
- ✓ Amazing battery life
- ✓ Lightweight and slim

AGAINST

- ✗ Disappointing viewing angles
- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Uses older Intel processors

MORE AFFORDABLE

Asus Chromebook Flip, £550
bit.ly/asus496

WINDOWS ALTERNATIVE

HP Envy 13-aq10000na, £779
bit.ly/hp496

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

The Google Pixelbook's battery life offers a genuine unique selling point that tips the balance in its favour. It's streets ahead of its rivals in this department and, coupled with a great keyboard, makes it a fantastic choice if you're in the market for a high-end laptop. With ChromeOS's ability to run Android apps, there's very little you can't do on this that you could on a Windows laptop.

The screen isn't as perfect as we would have liked, particularly with its limited viewing angles, but – overall – the Pixelbook Go is a superb option.

FEATURES	★★★★☆
PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆

TP-Link Tapo P100 Mini Smart Wi-Fi Socket

You don't have to update every device in your home to make it smart – just plug them into a smart plug instead

Converting your domestic environment into a smart home sounds like an expensive undertaking. However, TP-Link has just launched a new range of smart plugs that can turn any compatible device (a lamp or other socket-powered electrical item with a physical switch) into a smart device, and they only cost £10.

It's worth noting that TP-Link already has a range of smart devices, including smart plugs, under its Kasa brand. This device, branded Tapo, is a completely new range and uses a new Tapo app, which isn't directly compatible with the Kasa devices. Having said that, both work with Google Assistant and Alexa, so if you're using a smart speaker to control your devices with your voice, both systems can be easily integrated. It's only their base apps that are currently incompatible.

The new Tapo app doesn't work with IFTTT, either, and while this may change in the future, it's worth considering if you use the tool to create links between your devices.

PRODUCT INFO

TP-Link Tapo P100

Price: £9.99
Buy from Amazon:
bit.ly/tapo496

SPECIFICATIONS

- 2.4GHz 802.11b/g/n Wi-Fi
- External power button
- 72 x 51 x 40 mm
- Requires Android 4.3 or higher, iOS 9.0 or higher

FOR

- ✓ Affordable
- ✓ Small footprint
- ✓ Easy to set up and use

AGAINST

- ✗ Not compatible with existing Kasa range
- ✗ No IFTTT support

Setup and functionality

One of the great things about the new Tapo P100 is its size. Space is often an issue when positioning smartplugs, which may need placing behind furniture or other devices, and although these extrude nearly 4cm from your socket, their footprint is small so you shouldn't have any problem plugging devices into neighbouring sockets.

Getting the plug working is straightforward. Simply download the app, plug the device into a wall socket and let the Bluetooth on your phone discover it, then tap in your Wi-Fi password and the the connection is set up. You can now name the device, identify the room it's in and give it an appropriate icon.

Anything you plug into the Tapo P100 can be controlled from the app and connected to Google Assistant or Alexa. Rename it to the object you're plugging into the smart plug ('living-room lamp', for example) and it's added to your other devices, so you can turn it on and off with your voice; set it to come on at a particular time to deter burglars while you're out; and add it to groups with other devices, to save you walking around the house at night manually turning off all the lamps that have been left on.

> "Anything you plug into the Tapo P100 can be controlled from the app"

Another useful addition to the smartplug is a button on the side that you can use to manually switch a device on or off. While reaching down to wall sockets isn't ideal, it means you can still switch a light on, even if you aren't carrying a mobile device with the app installed or aren't within the hearing range of a smart speaker.

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

FEATURES	★★★★☆
PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★

These compact, affordable smart plugs are all you need to add a range of household items such as standard lamps to your smart home. It's slightly annoying that they aren't directly compatible with TP-Link's Kasa system but, if you already use Google Assistant or Alexa to control your home, it's no deal-breaker because they sit alongside any existing smarthome setup you may already have. If price is the only obstacle to making your home smarter, these plugs should be cheap enough to get you started.

BACK ISSUES DISC 2019

Our **2019 Back Issues disc** containing all 26 issues from last year is now on sale from Amazon

For more information, visit **bit.ly/webuser2019** or search for 'webuser disc' on Amazon

You can still buy our 2014-2018 Back Issues Discs

Search for 'webuser disc' on Amazon

Web User's Best Buys

Web User and its sister titles test over 2,500 products every year

HARDWARE, SOFTWARE & SERVICES

MONITOR

BenQ BL2780T

£209.97 from bit.ly/benq495
Tested: Issue 495

This BenQ monitor offers impressive screen quality, with excellent contrast and colours, for a reasonable price. It has a good selection of ports and is height adjustable. You can even rotate it by 90 degrees to use in portrait mode.

KEY SPECS

27in screen ■ 1,920 x 1,080 pixels resolution ■ 5 milliseconds response time ■ 1 x DisplayPort, 1 x HDMI, 1 x VGA ports ■ 2 x audio outputs ■ 2 x 2W speakers ■ 547 x 512 x 231mm ■ 7.2kg ■ One-year return-to-base warranty

MINI PC

Raspberry Pi 4 Model B

£34 from bit.ly/pi493
Tested: Issue 493

This latest Raspberry Pi effectively provides a full desktop computer with the footprint of a book of stamps. Its fast processor and quick networking make it snappier than older models, and it can be set up to use with dual monitors.

KEY SPECS

Quad-core 1.5GHz Broadcom BCM2711 processor ■ 1GB memory ■ Broadcom VC6 graphics ■ 2 x Micro HDMI ports ■ 2 x USB 2, 2 x USB 3 ports ■ Gigabit Ethernet, 802.11ac Wi-Fi ■ 86 x 57 x 19mm ■ One-year return-to-base warranty

SMARTPHONE

Google Pixel 3a

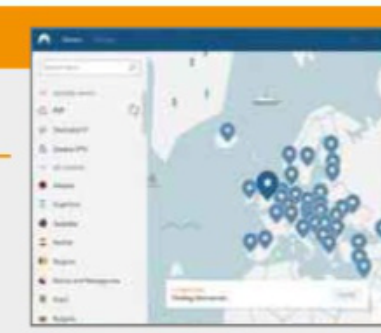
£399 from store.google.com
Tested: Issue 491

For a pure Android experience, the Google Pixel 3a can't be bettered for the price. It has a brilliant camera and an exceptional screen, plus the promise of access to future updates and security patches as soon as they're available.

KEY SPECS

8-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 670 processor ■ 4GB RAM ■ 64GB storage ■ 5.6in, 2,220 x 1,080 pixels resolution screen ■ 12.2-megapixel rear camera, 8-megapixel front camera ■ Android 9 ■ 151 x 70 x 8.2mm ■ 167g ■ 1-year return-to-base

VPN



NordVPN

From £2.68 per month from nordvpn.com
Tested: Issue 489

NordVPN strikes the perfect balance between usability, features and price. It's easy to set up a private connection and it has servers in dozens of countries across the globe.

KEY SPECS

Six simultaneous connections ■ Choice of 60 countries ■ 5,500+ servers ■ IKEv2, OpenVPN protocols ■ Double VPN security ■ Router support ■ 1,000+ BitTorrent servers ■ Static IP option ■ Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS, Fire TV

LAPTOP

HP Pavilion x360

£679 from bit.ly/hp487
Tested: Issue 487

Slim, attractive and powerful, and with a great keyboard, the HP Pavilion x360 gets more or less everything right, at a price that undercuts most of its rivals. The ability to flip the laptop's screen into tablet mode is a bonus.

KEY SPECS

Intel Core i5-8250U processor ■ 256GB SSD ■ 8GB memory ■ 14in screen ■ 1,920 x 1,080 pixels resolution ■ 2 x USB 3, 1 x USB-C ports ■ 802.11ac Wi-Fi ■ Windows 10 Home ■ 326 x 224 x 20mm ■ 1.61kg ■ One-year return-to-base warranty

CHROMEBOOK

Lenovo Chromebook 500e

£349.98 from bit.ly/leno483
Tested: Issue 483

This versatile and rugged convertible Chromebook has been designed for the classroom but would be just as useful at home and on the move. It's tough enough to survive a few knocks and you can use a stylus on its touchscreen.

KEY SPECS

Intel Celeron N3450 processor ■ 32GB storage ■ 4GB memory ■ 11.6in touchscreen ■ 1,366 x 768 pixels resolution ■ Intel UHD Graphics 500 card ■ 2 x USB-C, 2 x USB 3 ports ■ 290 x 204 x 20.4mm ■ 1.31kg ■ One-year collect-and-return

All prices correct at time of review

Web User Gold Award winners

The best software, online services and apps from our fortnightly tests

IMAGE VIEWER

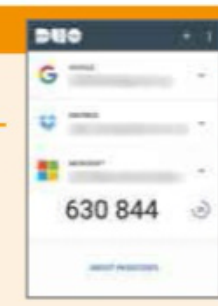
FastStone

NEW!

Free from bit.ly/faststone495
Tested: Issue 495
FastStone Image Viewer is a streamlined, incredibly capable tool that's easy to use but surprisingly sophisticated. You'll want to use this portable image viewer wherever you go.

TWO-FACTOR AUTHENTICATION APP

Duo Mobile



Free from bit.ly/duomob494
Tested: Issue 494
This slick app irons out most of the hassles surrounding 2FA security. It makes managing and organising your online accounts as simple as it gets.

DOWNLOAD MANAGER

JDownloader

Free from beta.jdownloader.org
Tested: Issue 493
JDownloader is the most powerful free download manager available, with every feature you need to control multiple downloads. It may look dated but its performance is sublime.

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

Kdenlive

Free from kdenlive.org
Tested: Issue 492
Kdenlive is a phenomenal piece of free software, crammed with useful tools for editing your video clips into seamless, sophisticated movies, complete with transitions and effects.

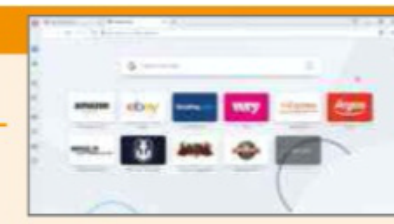
OPEN-SOURCE CLOUD STORAGE

Cozy

Free from cozy.io
Tested: Issue 491
Cozy is a cloud service that anyone can use – you don't need any extra tech know-how to get started. It's a great option if you want to switch from more famous storage providers.

PORTABLE BROWSER

Opera



Free from www.opera.com
Tested: Issue 490
Opera is the perfect portable browser. Its interface is clean and focused, but also rich in features, and includes elegant built-in privacy tools to help you browse more carefully.

EMAIL SOFTWARE

Mailspring

Free from getmailspring.com
Tested: Issue 489
Mailspring is a modern, well-designed take on classic email software. All the standard features are present, alongside some quirky extras.

OFFICE SUITE

Google Docs

Free from docs.google.com
Tested: Issue 488
Google's suite of cloud-based tools is the king of free office suites – online and off. It offers comprehensive collaboration, access from any device and unlimited file storage.

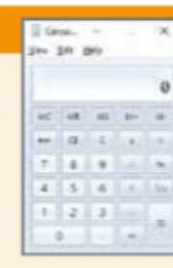
LINUX DISTRO

Lubuntu

Free from lubuntu.net
Tested: Issue 487
Lubuntu is as close to perfect as a lightweight operating system can get. Its interface is instantly appealing and is packed with all the tools you need.

CALCULATOR

Old Calculator for Windows 10



Free from bit.ly/oldcalc486
Tested: Issue 486
Old Calculator appears instantly when you call it, sits unassumingly in a corner of your screen when you're not using it and can perform all everyday calculations.

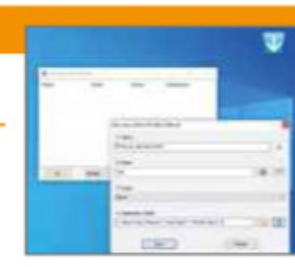
RECOVERY TOOL

Hiren's Boot CD

Free from www.hirensbootcd.org
Tested: Issue 485
Hiren's Boot CD isn't just the best bootable recovery disk, it's arguably the only one you'll ever need – packed with tools to fix just about every problem you're likely to run into.

FILE ORGANISER

DropIt



Free from www.dropitproject.com
Tested: Issue 484
DropIt's great innovation is to place a floating arrow icon on your desktop. When you have a file that needs sorting, just drag it over to the icon and drop it.

Best Free Software

VIDEO EDITOR

OpenShot 2.5

www.openshot.org
Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10, macOS or Linux
File size: 131MB

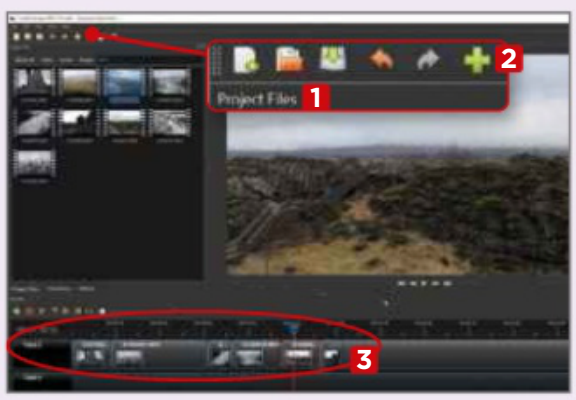
There are plenty of tools that let you edit videos directly on your phone but if you want to produce high-quality movies, then a PC-based editor will deliver much better results. OpenShot is an open-source tool that offers all the features you need from a video editor, including a drag-and-drop timeline, transitions and a wide range of effects such as Blur, Brightness & Contrast, Negative and Colour Saturation. It can handle most common video, audio and image formats, including footage shot in 4K, and edited movies can be saved in a choice of formats and resolutions.

The latest update to the software is described as the "largest release yet" by OpenShot's developers and includes experimental support for hardware acceleration, which transfers the "heavy lifting" from your PC's central processor to its graphics processor. This should significantly boost the performance of both encoding and decoding – provided you have compatible hardware. As an example, the developers say that when editing MP4/H.264 files, you can expect a 30-40% speed boost. Keyframe performance has been improved too, thanks to a rewritten keyframe system.

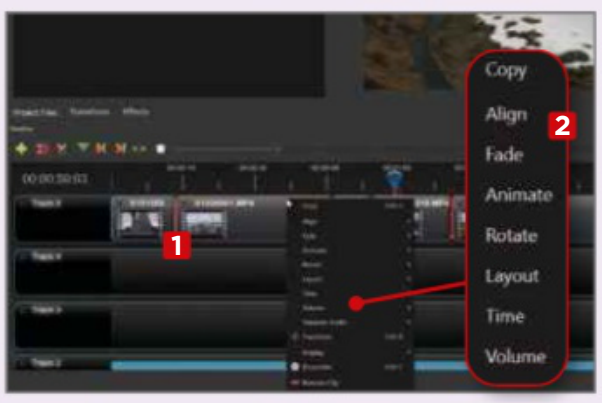
OpenShot can now import and export data in EDL and XML (Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro) formats, and generate thumbnails of video frames more efficiently, and the software now supports Blender 2.8+. There's a new ability to recover previous saves, and auto-backup is now more reliable.

Finally, the new update should reduce the issue of flickering lines and bars in the preview window, which was a problem in previous releases.

MINI WORKSHOP | Edit your videos using OpenShot



1 Launch OpenShot and drag and drop some videos, audio files and/or photos to its Project Files window. 1 You can also add content by clicking the green plus sign, 2 browsing for the items you want and clicking Open. Once you've added your clips, drag some to the timeline 3 below and arrange them in the order you want.



2 If you overlap one video with another, OpenShot will automatically create a transition. 1 Right-click a clip to open the context menu, 2 which contains a range of actions that let you align a track; fade the start, end or all of the video; add an animation; rotate the clip; speed up or slow down time; adjust the volume and more.

3 When you've arranged everything as you want it on the timeline, you can preview your movie. If you're happy with the result, click the red Export Video button. 1 Give your project a name and choose a save directory. 2 Select a video profile and quality, 3 then click Export Video. 4

This fortnight's top new software downloads to help you make the most of your PC, and they're all FREE

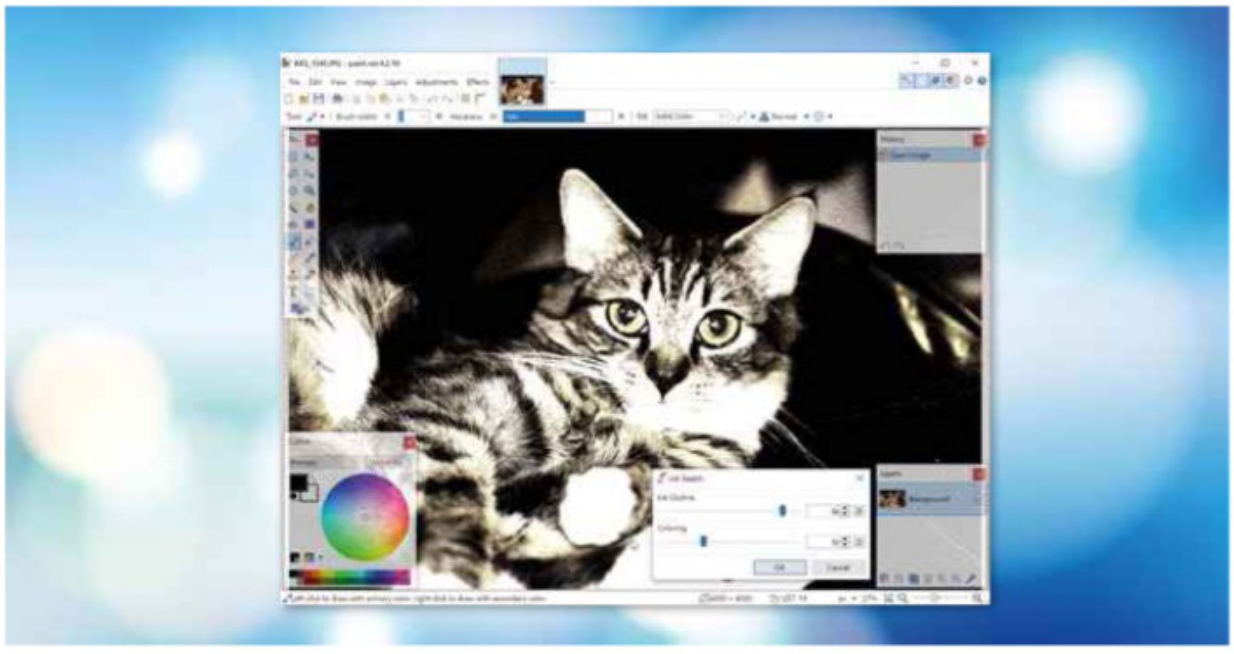


IMAGE EDITOR

Paint.net 4.2.10

getpaint.net

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10 **File size:** 9.9MB

Paint.net originally started life as a simple replacement for Microsoft Paint but has since grown to become one of the best and most popular free drawing tools-cum-image editors around. The first update of 2020 improves the program's performance in a number of ways and significantly reduces memory usage – by up to a third. A "busy spinner" has been added to the canvas when using the Magic Wand and Paint Bucket tools, and some annoying bugs have been fixed, too.

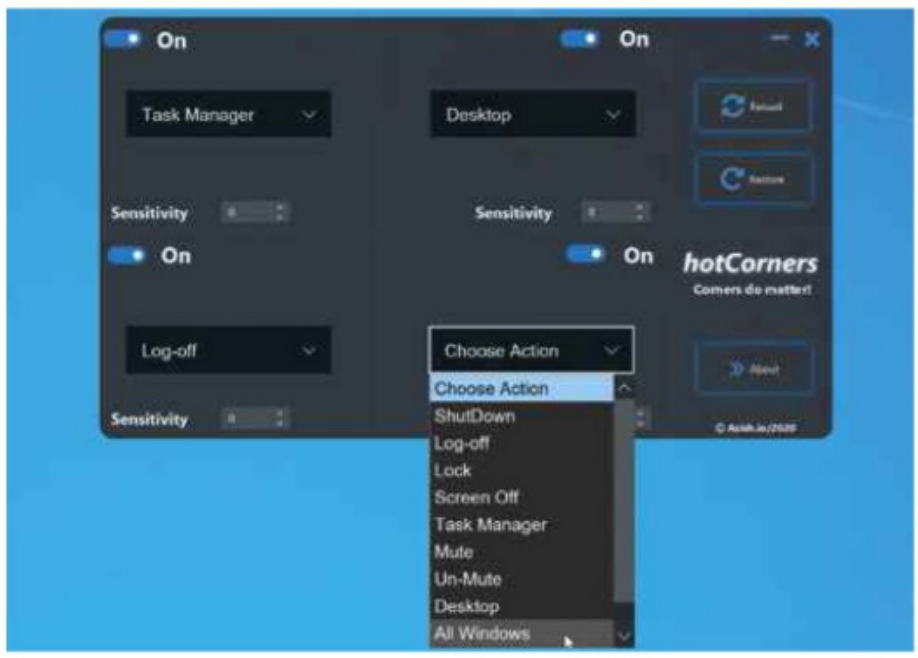
New Windows 10 App

Project Newsbar

bit.ly/news496

File size: 182.9MB

Project Newsbar is a new app from Microsoft that displays news as scrolling image thumbnails with text titles, in a docked sidebar in Windows 10. The app isn't currently available to download from the Microsoft Store, so you need to go to store.rg-adguard.net, enter https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/p/project-newsbar/9p7glmhlw7x6 into the search field and click the tick button. Download 'appxbundle' and click the file, press F2, give it an '.appx' extension, then install it.



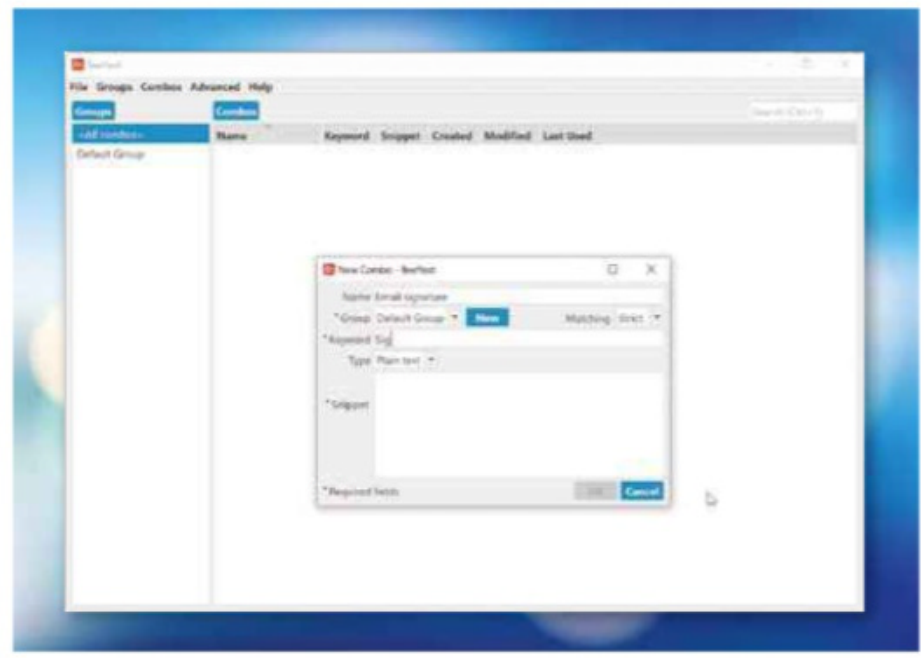
SYSTEM TOOL

HotCorners

bit.ly/hotc496

Min requirements: Windows 10 **File size:** 9.8MB

MacOS has a useful feature called hot corners, which lets you perform preset actions from any of the four corners of your screen, and the aptly named HotCorners brings that same functionality to Windows 10. It comes with some actions included – such as shutdown, log-off lock, screen off, Task Manager and custom app. You can choose which corner does what via a straightforward user interface, and adjust the sensitivity (the reaction time) as required.



TEXT TOOL

BeefText 7

beeftext.org

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10 **File size:** 7.9MB

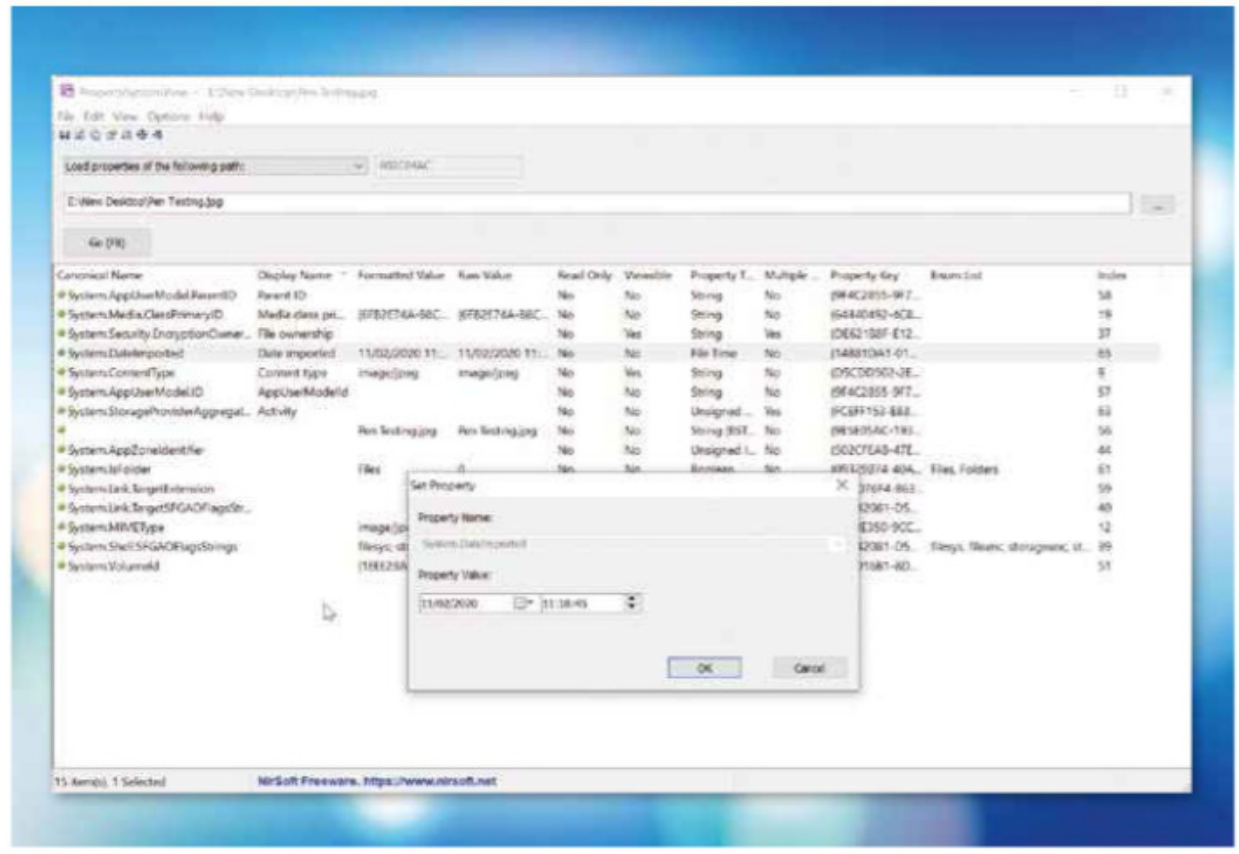
If you find yourself regularly typing the same long piece of text – a custom email signature, for example – then BeefText can save you some time and effort. All you need to do is type your text into the program, then assign it a 'combo' (a text shortcut). This updated version of the software implements rich-text editor controls, and lets you import and export preferences. It also moves the location of automatic backups and user-provided translations.

SYSTEM TOOL

PropertySystemView

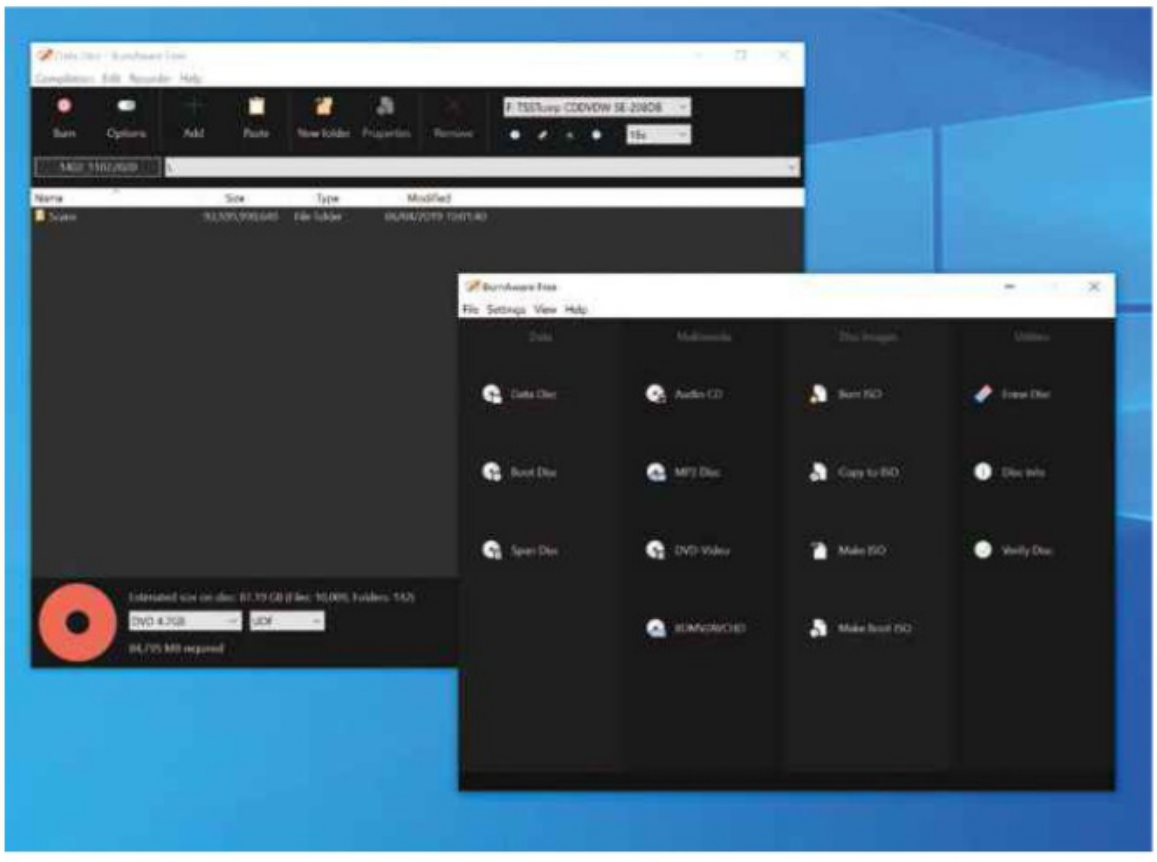
www.nirsoft.net

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10
File size: 84.3KB



The latest free portable tool from prolific software developer NirSoft lets you view and modify the properties of a file. This can be useful, for example, if you want to add data such as Author Name or Date Saved to a document.

To use the program, either load a file by clicking the three-dot button and navigating to the item, or drag and drop the file onto PropertySystemView's interface. You can also drag the crosshair icon to a program window to view its properties. Click Go or press F8 to see the list. Look out for a workshop in our next issue.



DISC-AUTHORING TOOL

BurnAware Free 13

www.burnaware.com

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10
File size: 8.5MB

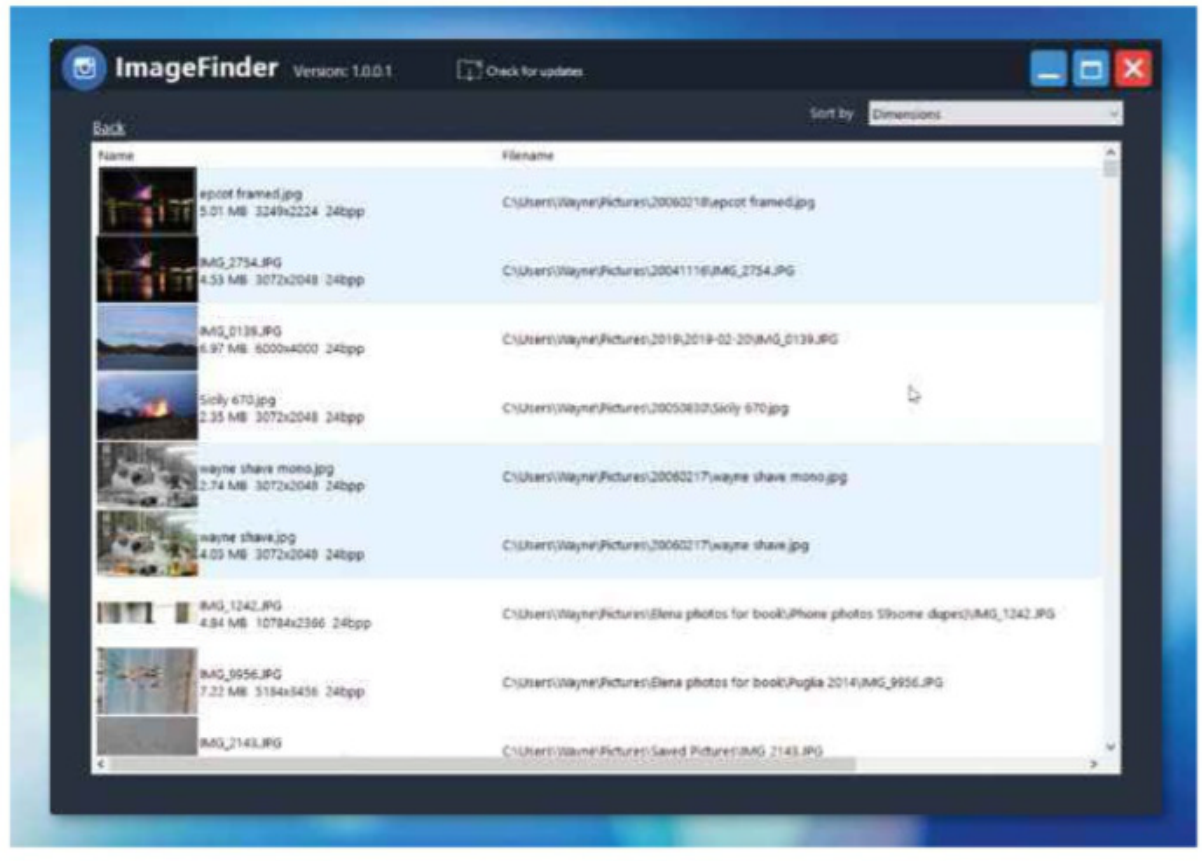
The free version of BurnAware can write to CDs, DVDs and Blu-rays, produce audio discs and video DVDs, create and burn image files, erase rewritable media, and more. This update gains a new dark theme, as well as new icons (if you prefer the old ones you can switch back to them using the 'classic icons' option) and a redesigned interface that displays better on high-res screens. It also improves audio-track conversion and enhances the burning process and data verification. Screen-reading software support has been updated, too, as has the session-import process. Be careful to decline the bundled junk when installing.

DUPLICATE FINDER

ImageFinder

kurtzimmermann.com

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10
File size: 804KB



It's easy to accumulate large numbers of duplicate files without noticing. ImageFinder can locate multiple instances of identical photos on all your drives, even if they have different names. It can also track down images that are similar – just use the slider to adjust how alike you want them to be. The software is very easy to use – just drag some folders to the interface and click the Search button. You can include subfolders, if required.

The program settings let you customise the size of thumbnails and add any folders you want the software to ignore when looking for duplicates.

GAME

Catastrophe Clingers

bit.ly/cataq496

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10 or macOS **File size:** 23.6MB

In this entertaining game, you play an elderly lady whose house is being shaken apart by a series of earthquakes. Fortunately, you're armed with a staple gun that fires out clinging cats – yes, cats – and you can use this to strengthen the defences of the building. Just don't touch any of the kitties or they'll freak out and let go. It's as mad and fun as it sounds!

✓ Install this program...

Executor

www.executor.dk

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10
File size: 2.1MB

This handy free launcher makes it easy to find and open programs, documents, files, folders and websites. It includes keywords for locking your computer, shutting it down, turning off the monitor and muting the sound. Executor can manage your clipboard history, show all running applications, search your activity history using wildcards, perform calculations, send emails, sound an alarm and much more. When you first run Executor, it lets you choose from a number of skin styles and interface sizes.

LaunchBar Commander (see our workshop on page 57) is another good customisable launcher.

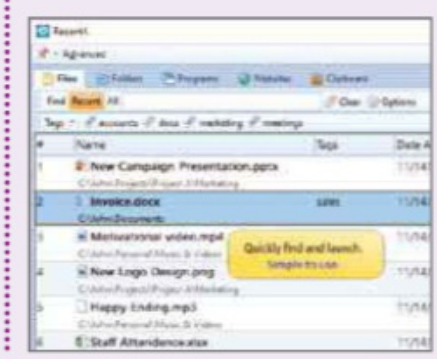
...Not this one ✗

RecentX

www.conceptworld.com

Min requirements: Windows 7/8/10
File size: 19.2MB

Would you pay to open your own files, programs and bookmarks on your own PC, if you could do so just a little bit faster? Probably not, but RecentX will charge you the princely sum of $19.95 (£15) for the privilege, after a 30-day free trial. Best to stick with Executor, which is completely free to use and offers more features, too.



OTHER OPERATING SYSTEMS What's new for Linux and macOS

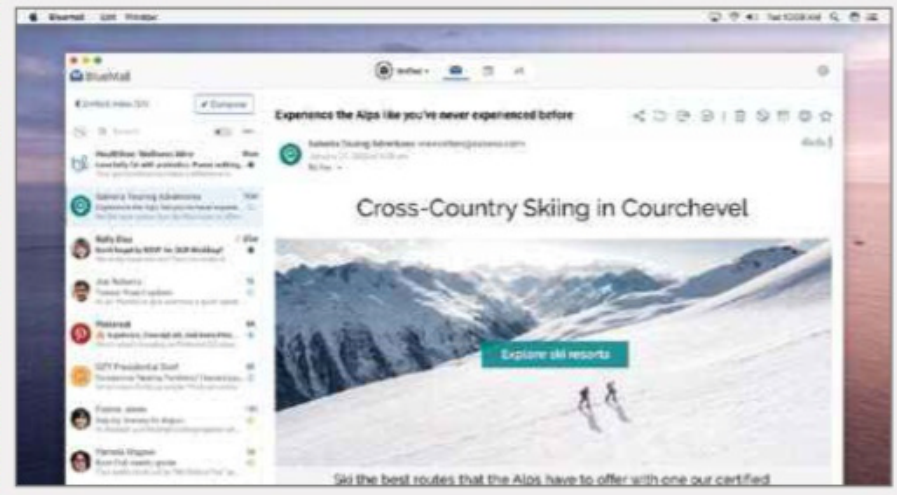
LINUX DISTRO

OpenMandriva Lx 4.1

www.openmandriva.org

Min requirements: 2GB RAM, 10GB of hard-drive space
File size: 2.6GB

OpenMandriva Linux is designed to appeal to newbies and developers alike. This new release includes an updated Linux kernel (5.5.0) and applications, and offers the open-source Fakon web browser by default, though you can easily replace this with your preferred browser. If you're switching from another OS, you can pick a theme that best matches it – including Ubuntu, Windows 7 and 10, and macOS. There are versions for KDE Plasma and AMD processors.



EMAIL CLIENT

BlueMail

bit.ly/bluemail496

Min requirements: macOS
File size: 73.4MB

BlueMail is a fast, secure email app that can handle an unlimited number of accounts from any provider, including Gmail, Outlook, Hotmail, Yahoo Mail, iCloud and Office 365. Apple removed the app from its App Store eight months ago for a bug which it said could cause security and privacy issues, but the problem has now been resolved and the app is once more available in the store.

BlueMail is also available for iPhone and iPad.

GET FREE SOFTWARE FIRST subscribe to Web User at subscribe.webuser.co.uk

Best New Browser Tools

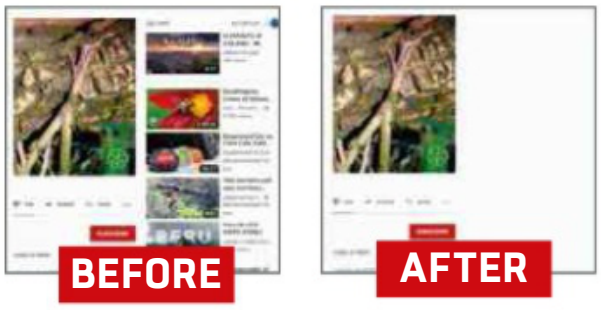
CHROME

Hide your activity on Facebook Messenger

One glance and they can see that you've read their message and haven't bothered to reply. And you know that pretty soon an accusatory follow-up is coming. Then, when you finally decide to reply to a Facebook message, the recipient can see you're typing.

For some people, this can cause a fair amount of stress and worry. Others are mindful of their privacy. The new Chrome extension Messenger Unread (bit.ly/unread496) eliminates this problem at a stroke. The browser tool hides your Facebook Messenger activity, so your friends, family or Nigerian princes won't see a tick when you read their message, and can't see the hovering dot-dot-dots as you type your reply.

No setup is required and, by clicking the extension's toolbar button, you can switch it off at will. Best of all, the developers state that "we're firm believers in data privacy and don't collect or share any data". Unlike Facebook, of course 😉.



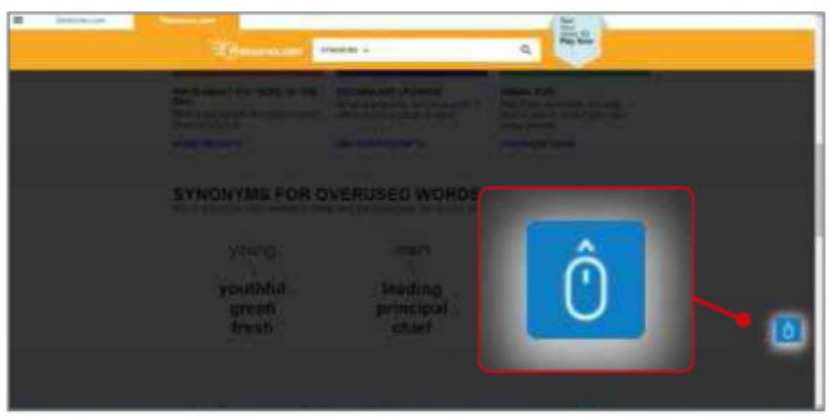
Block website distractions

Baitblock (bit.ly/bait496) helps you stay focused online by creating a distraction-free environment. Rather than stubbornly preventing you from visiting sites you've added to a block list, you're free to set daily limits of between five minutes and two hours. With a list of no-go sites, the tool's Intelligent Blocker then kicks in, preventing these links appearing on Google, DuckDuckGo, Bing, Facebook, Reddit and Twitter. It also strips away recommendations on YouTube – a notorious time thief – and lets users add a 100-word summary of a site, so you don't waste a click.

And if that wasn't enough, Baitblock also blocks cookie notices, which are often enough to drive you to distraction.

Skip to the top of a page

Scrolly (bit.ly/scrolly496), like all good extensions, solves a simple problem many of us face online: in this case, the effort of scrolling back to the top of a web page. It adds an unobtrusive button



to the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. Click this and, as if by magic, you're taken back to the top. A minor nitpick: it's not possible to stop mid-scroll. It's all the way to the top or bust.

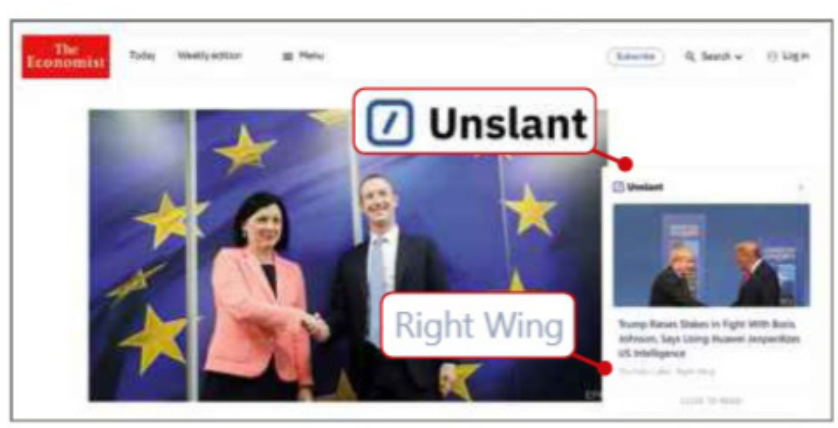
On night mode-style pages, the extension helpfully adds a glowing light around its button, so you can find it in the dark.

Get a different perspective online

The web, generally – and social media, specifically – helps create bubbles: echo chambers where views aren't debated but accepted without question, and dissent will not be tolerated. That's what makes Unslant (bit.ly/unslant496) such an intriguing proposition.

This browser tool "surfaces contrasting takes from outlets on the other side of the political spectrum, creating a more balanced news diet for you". So, visit a news site that's pro-this and, to the right of the screen, you'll see a discreet pop-up directing you to a website that's pro-that. These sites are also labelled right-wing or left-wing. It's a clever way to burst online political bubbles without restricting content.

While most supported outlets are American (think Fox News and CNN), there are some UK ones, including The Economist and The Telegraph. Hopefully more will be added soon.



This fortnight's most useful tips and add-ons to help you get the most from Chrome, Firefox, Opera, Edge and more

FIREFOX

Accept the bare minimum of cookies

Minimal Consent (bit.ly/minimal496) is the latest addition to the growing range of cookie blockers. Whenever a website requests cookie access, the extension steps in, automatically accepting the basics required to visit the site, and nothing else.

The tool does away with annoying cookie banners – the ones we usually just click Accept on without checking – and rejects all third-party tracking to keep a lid on your data. This way, your browsing experience isn't broken while privacy and security remain intact.

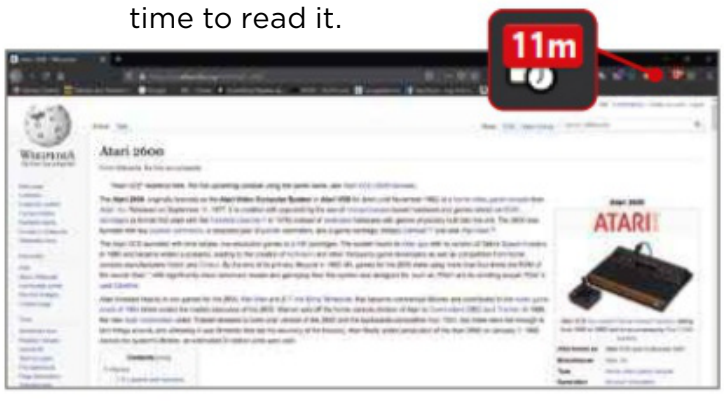
Since only the minimum number of cookies are allowed, there's no additional setup – or even any settings. Minimal Consent is also available for Chrome (bit.ly/minimalchrome496).

Check how long a site takes to read

The website Medium (medium.com) features an estimated read-time for articles, so you know if you've got time to get through it all. Now, you can take that functionality almost everywhere else with How Long to Read (bit.ly/longread496).

Head to a web page and the extension calculates how many minutes it'll take to get from the first to the last word – this is displayed as a notification badge on its toolbar button. It's a subtle tool, which makes it great as an optional extra that won't bother you every time you visit a website, or when you have all the time in the world.

While it worked on most sites we tried, such as Wikipedia, there were a few on which it failed to estimate a reading time. The only other option we'd like to see is a Pocket-style ability to save the page for when we have more time to read it.



Jump straight to all Google services

Google Toolbox (bit.ly/toolbox496) is a black menu-style extension that lets you leap straight to 186 different Google services. Clicking the extension's toolbar button reveals a short list of popular services, such as Gmail, YouTube, Docs and Photos. Select More and you'll be presented with the other 178 options, some of which you may never have known existed (such as Arts & Culture, Scholar and cybersecurity R&D unit Jigsaw). The list is ordered alphabetically, with familiar logos to help guide you without overwhelming you.

True, most of us will only need the core services, and it's nice to have them instantly to hand. While many of the options are for businesses, it's interesting to see just how many products and services fall under the Google umbrella.

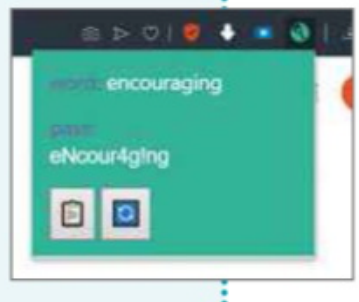
OTHER BROWSERS

Get picture-in-picture mode

Picture-in-picture has become a mainstay on browsers, thanks to dedicated extensions. The effect pops out your video into a small, always-on-top box that can be moved anywhere on the screen. Now, Video Picture in Picture (bit.ly/pip496) brings that ability to the new Chromium version of Edge. Try it now: play a video on YouTube, press the extension icon and picture-in-picture mode is instantly enabled. Another click and the video returns to normal. Controls are sparse, with just play/pause, and 'back to tab', but that's really all you'll need.

Create passwords on the fly

Conjuring up unbreakable passwords is simple, but actually remembering them is another matter entirely. Memorable Passwords (bit.ly/password496) is a simple tool that creates strong passwords, using letters, numbers and symbols, based on easy-to-remember everyday words. Conforming with basic security requirements, each password you make will be at least eight letters or more. Click the add-on's toolbar button to generate a random memorable word and, beneath this, the word translated into a password style. For example, the word 'electrical' becomes '3/ecTrical'. Beneath this are two options to copy the password in plain text or make a new one.



Best Free Apps

App of the Fortnight

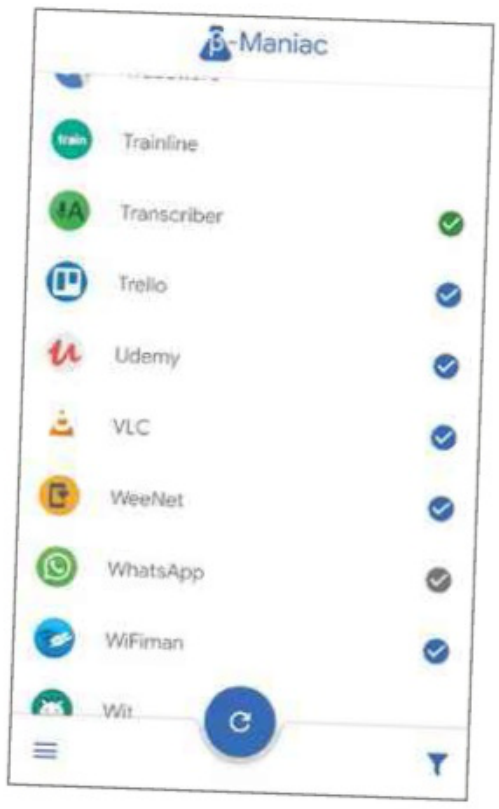
TOOLS

Beta Maniac

NEW

bit.ly/beta496

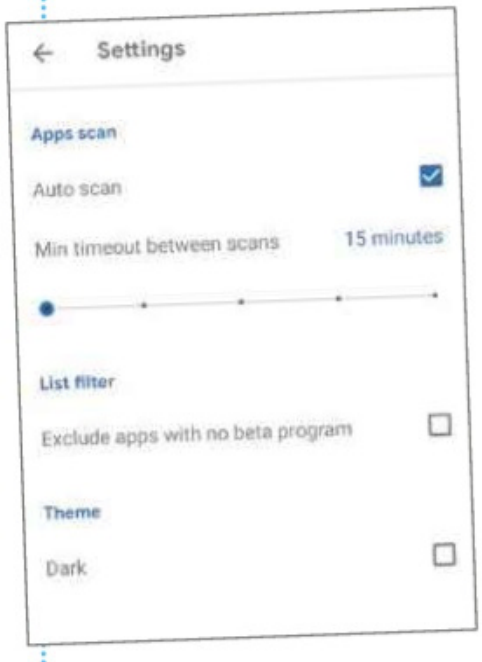
5



Are you the sort of person who likes to stay ahead of the pack? Someone who's always up for trying the latest tools and tech? If that sounds like you, then it's likely you've tried out preview or beta software and services in the past.

Beta apps are great because they let you experience new features ahead of their public release – often for free. The only trouble is that it's not always obvious whether there are beta programs available for the apps you use, and you may not know how to sign up for them – or how to leave them, should you decide you want to go back to the standard version. To make matters worse, some beta tests are limited, meaning you have to act fast if you want to secure a chance to try them.

Beta Maniac is an app that's designed to make signing up for and enjoying beta programs much simpler. Its aim is to provide a centralised resource from where you can sign up to new beta programs for your favourite apps, as well as manage any beta programs you're already signed up to. The app can also regularly scan for available places on limited beta tests, so you never lose out.



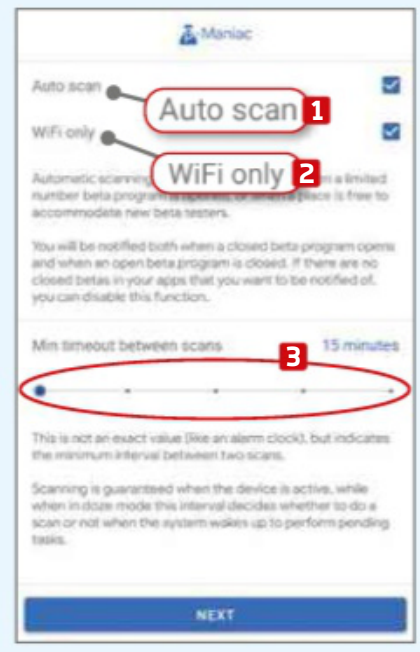
Clearly Beta Maniac won't be for everyone – apps that are in beta can be unstable, for a start. But if you consider yourself a tech enthusiast and regularly install preview apps – including those we recommend in these pages – then Beta Maniac is well worth downloading.

The standard Google Play version of the tool is free, but is ad-supported. If you'd prefer an ad-free version instead, then you can download it (also for free) from the XDA Developers forum (bit.ly/betafree496).

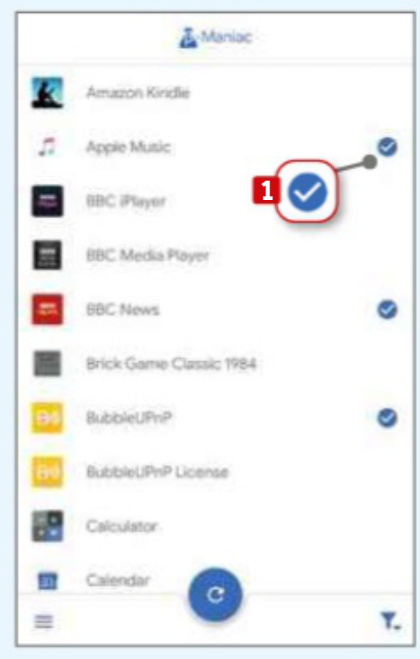
MINI WORKSHOP

Sign up for beta programs with Beta Maniac

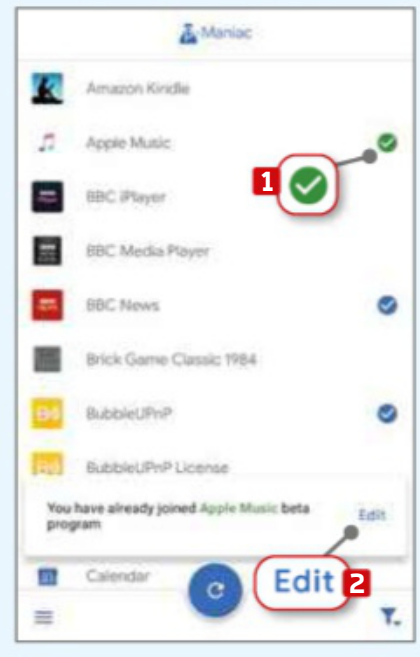
1 Launch Beta Maniac and tap through the introduction screens. When prompted, sign in using your Google account. Once you're logged in, you'll see a page of options. 'Auto scan' 1 checks for places on limited beta programs – keep this ticked if you want to check for these, but set it to 'Wi-Fi only' 2 if you don't want to use mobile data, and use the slider 3 to set the scan frequency.



2 Press Next, and you'll be taken to a screen where all your currently installed apps are listed. If an app has a blue tick, 1 that means that there is a beta testing program available for it. Tap it, then read any information about the beta program and, if you wish to join it, select 'Become a Tester'.



3 The tick will change to green for any apps you've signed up for beta testing with. 1 Any new beta versions of the app will be downloaded automatically as long as the app is installed. To leave a beta program at any time, select the app, then tap Edit in the message that pops up 2 and choose 'Leave the Program'. You'll need to uninstall and reinstall the app in question.



Our rating ★★★★★

This fortnight's top free and paid-for apps for Android and iOS phones and tablets

NOTES

NEW

Napkin Calculator and Notepad

bit.ly/napkin496

6

It's said that many of the world's biggest problems have been solved on the back of a napkin, and this app attempts to create a virtual equivalent of that concept. Essentially, it provides an uncluttered space for you to jot down notes or ideas, make quick calculations and more. Your notes are saved automatically, and the calculator supports variables, so it's almost like an informal spreadsheet.

The absence of ads and a minimal design with light and dark modes makes this app easy to like.

Our rating ★★★★☆

MUSIC

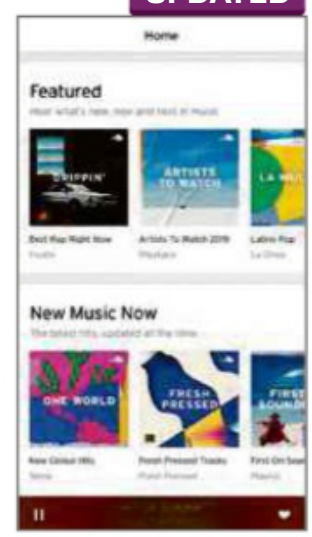
UPDATED

SoundCloud

bit.ly/sounddroid496

bit.ly/soundios496

5 11



Musicians looking to publish their tunes online just got a big boost, thanks to a new update for the SoundCloud app, which adds support for uploading tracks directly from your iPhone or iPad. This functionality comes thanks to integration with Apple's own Files app, allowing you to select audio files – including FLAC, WAV, MP3 and more – from your device's storage. Though this ability is currently restricted to the iOS version of the app, SoundCloud promises on its blog (bit.ly/soundblog496) that Android support is "coming soon".

Our rating ★★★★☆

MAPS

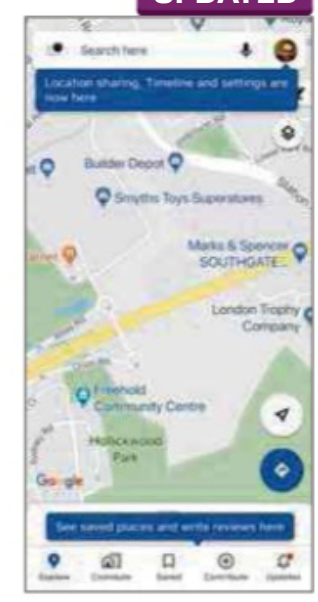
UPDATED

Google Maps

bit.ly/mapsdroid496

bit.ly/mapsios496

(varies) 11



Google has decided to celebrate Google Maps' 15th birthday by gifting the service's mobile app a substantial redesign. The new simplified layout sees a switch to five tabs along the bottom of the screen, providing access to the app's main features, including an improved Saved tab that lets you browse and share your favourite locations quickly. You can tap Contribute to write reviews, and tapping your user icon reveals location sharing, timeline and more. You'll notice that the app's icon has had a facelift, too!

Our rating ★★★★☆

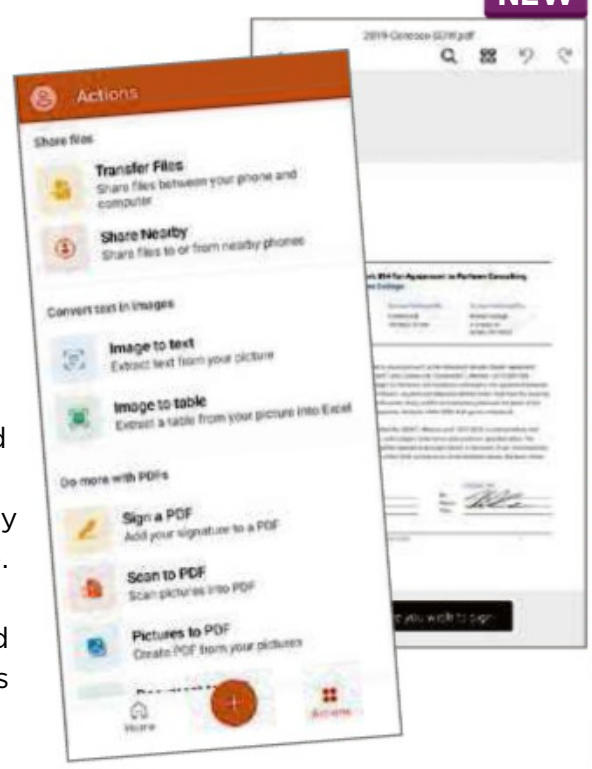
OFFICE

NEW

Microsoft Office

bit.ly/msoffice496

6 12



Until recently, if you wanted Microsoft Office on your mobile device, you'd have to install each tool as a separate app (Word, Excel, PowerPoint and so on) which didn't exactly make for a fully integrated experience. Well, all that has now changed – for Android users, at least – thanks to a new Microsoft Office app that effectively repackages all three of Office's main tools into a single app. The apps themselves have been redesigned from scratch and there are a few new features to enjoy, such as an Alt Text Pane tool for adding captions and other details. Individual Office apps have been updated on iOS, too.

Our rating ★★★★★

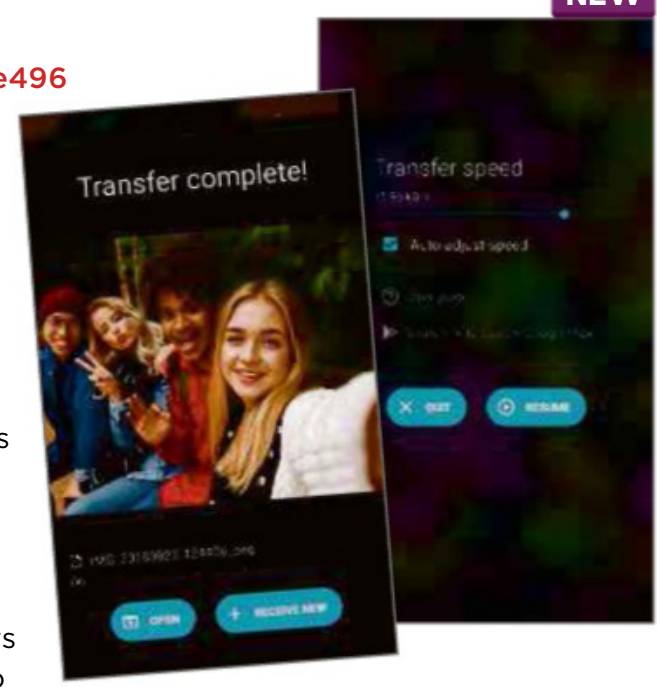
SHARING

NEW

Screencode

bit.ly/screencode496

5



Apple users have access to an offline sharing tool called AirDrop that allows them to send photos, links and pretty much anything else to each other instantly. Screencode offers a similar ability to Android users, but the really clever thing is that it doesn't rely on Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or any kind of proprietary wireless connection. Instead, it lets you share data via an on-screen image that's akin to a complex QR code. Point the receiving device's camera at the sending device's screen to transfer the file. Larger files can take longer to transfer but it's great for small photos, links and docs.

Our rating ★★★★☆

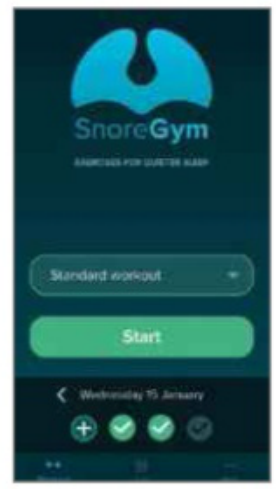
5 NEW APPS WORTH PAYING FOR

HEALTH

SnoreGym

bit.ly/snoredroid496
bit.ly/snoreios496
Price: £3.99
5 11

Do you or your partner suffer from snoring? If so, this app could help. It offers tongue and muscle exercises that can reduce snoring, along with a snore calendar to help you track the condition.



WEATHER

Weather Radar Pro

bit.ly/weather496
Price: £6.99
5

This fancy new weather app earns its place on your home screen, thanks to real-time, animated maps that track rain, cloud, wind and more – all packaged in a tidy, configurable interface.

TOOLS

Annotate

bit.ly/annotate496
Price: £3.49
5

Annotate effectively allows you to jot and scribble on pretty much anything you want on your Android device's screen. Use the pen, eraser and shape tools, then take a screen grab.

FONTS

PKblooming Latin FlipFont

bit.ly/PKblooming496
Price: £1.69
2.3

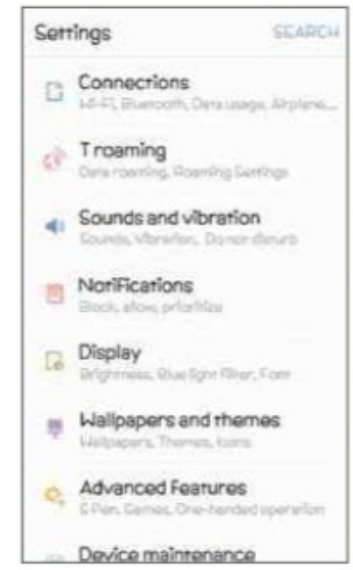
Not all Android devices support alternative fonts (check under Settings, Display to check before you buy), but if yours does, you can use this friendly, organic-looking font for all on-screen text.

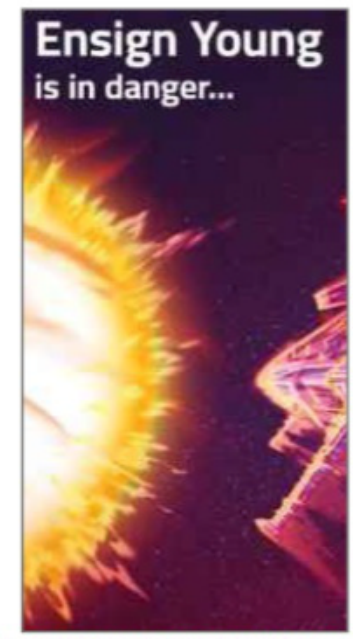
GAME

Loop - The Distress Call

bit.ly/loop496
Price: £4.99
9

This choose-your-own-adventure-style game involves you taking on the role of an investigator tasked with uncovering the mystery of a distress call sent from a spaceship, then guiding its crew to safety.





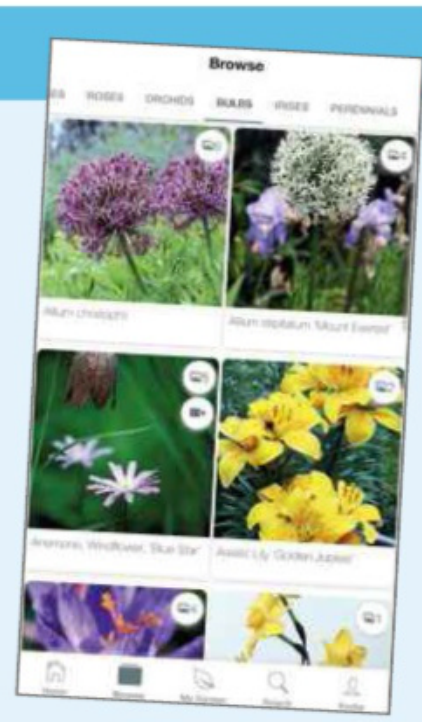
SnoreGym | Weather Radar Pro | Annotate | PKblooming Latin FlipFont | Loop - The Distress Call

✓ Install this app...

Right Plants

bit.ly/plantdroid496
bit.ly/plantios496
4.4 10

With Spring on its way (hopefully, soon!), it's the perfect time of year to turn your attention to the garden. But if you're not naturally green-fingered and you'd rather not slog your way through encyclopedic gardening books, then this app could be just what you need. It's basically a portable database of more than 5,000 plants, shrubs and flowers, with information to help you identify them, advice on keeping them healthy and more. You can create your own virtual garden with plants you already own, create a wishlist of plants and add notes to any item in the database.



...Not this one ✗

Plant Base

bit.ly/base496

Like an overgrown lawn, this garden reference app needs a lot of attention. Its unsightly UI design looks like a throwback to Android's early days. It also requires a complicated, unwieldy setup that involves downloading the app's database files on a PC and transferring them to your device manually. Annoyingly, the app defaults to Latin names, too. And, if that's not bad enough, the developers want to charge you £11.99 for the pleasure.

Take a Screen Break

Take a rest from your browser with our fiendish fortnightly challenges. Can you solve our cartoon-character emoji and guess our Wikipedia article?

WIN A WEB USER 2019 BACK ISSUES DISC!
Email your answers to editor@webuser.co.uk – one correct entry will win a disc

CAN YOU GUESS THE CARTOON CHARACTERS FROM THE EMOJI?

1 🐞 🐞 🐇

2 🛣️ 🏃

3 ⬜ 📯 🦵 📯

4 🫒 🛢️

5 🥇 🇪 💩

6 🧽 👦 ⬜ 🩲

GUESS THE WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE

Can you work out which technology-related Wikipedia entry the following clues refer to?

1 "It was one of the pioneers of the early internet era in the 1990s. It provided a web portal, search engine and related services, and at its height was one of the most popular sites in the US."

2 "Its name had previously been trademarked for barbecue sauce, knives and human-propelled watercraft. To get trademark control, its founders added an exclamation mark."

3 "In February 2008, Microsoft made an unsolicited bid to acquire it for $44.6bn. The bid was formally rejected amid claims that it "substantially undervalued" the company".

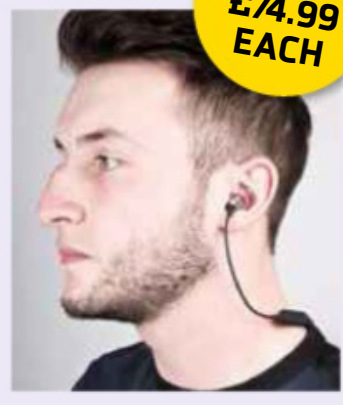
5 "In 2016, it disclosed details of a data breach, in which information associated with at least 500 million user accounts was leaked – one of the largest security breaches reported to date."

Credit: Mitchell Aidelbaum

COMPETITIONS

WIN 1 OF 3
Rock Jaw T5 Connect Ultra earphones

WORTH £74.99 EACH



These exceptional wireless earphones have HD audio, a wide range and an 11-plus hour battery life. They're made with an aircraft-grade aluminium, and include filters that let you tailor audio to perfectly suit your taste. To enter, email your address to webusercomp@dennis.co.uk with 'T5' in the subject line. For more info, visit rockjawaudio.com and follow @rockjawaudio on Twitter.

WIN 1 OF 5
devolo GigaGate Starter Kit

WORTH £220 EACH

The devolo GigaGate Starter Kit provides your home with ultra-fast Wi-Fi, peaking at 2Gbps. The base is quick to set up and connect to your router, and you can position the satellite unit wherever you need fast internet, boosting activities such as online gaming and music streaming. To enter, email your address to webusercomp@dennis.co.uk with 'devolo' in the subject line. For more info, visit www.devolo.co.uk and follow @devoloag on Twitter.

FAQ

Everything you need to know about the most interesting new technology trends and events

Health sensors

Wearable devices are becoming smarter and more accurate at monitoring our health, as **David Crookes** explains

What are they?

Technological sensors are being used in an ever-growing number of wearable consumer devices to help us monitor and potentially diagnose a range of health conditions. They detect and collect our body's biological signals, allowing wearers to keep a check on their own wellbeing and be alerted to any problems. Medical professionals are also issuing them to patients to help manage their conditions, with their data being used to better personalise healthcare.

What sort of things are they sensing?

The Apple Watch monitors your heart rate and detects irregular rhythms

The most popular – and well-known – wellbeing devices right now are those from Fitbit and Apple, which go beyond simply allowing you to set health and fitness goals. They can be used to monitor your heart rate and pick up on irregular rhythms and, by scanning the heart's electrical signals, work as an echocardiograph (or ECG) to potentially diagnose atrial fibrillation. Sleep habits can be monitored using sensors, too, and some of the wearables even alert you to loud noises to protect your hearing.

But how sophisticated are they?

Currently, the Apple Watch can predict 'VO2 max' (a measurement of the amount of oxygen breathed into your lungs) based on the changes to your heart rate during exercise, while in January, Fitbit rolled out a software update that can estimate the amount of oxygen in the blood. This uses an SpO2 sensor – which has been included in many Fitbit devices for the past three years – to work out the fraction of oxygen-saturated haemoglobin relative to total haemoglobin. The data can be used to detect specific problems such as sleep apnoea and determine whether or not you're enjoying enough rest at night.

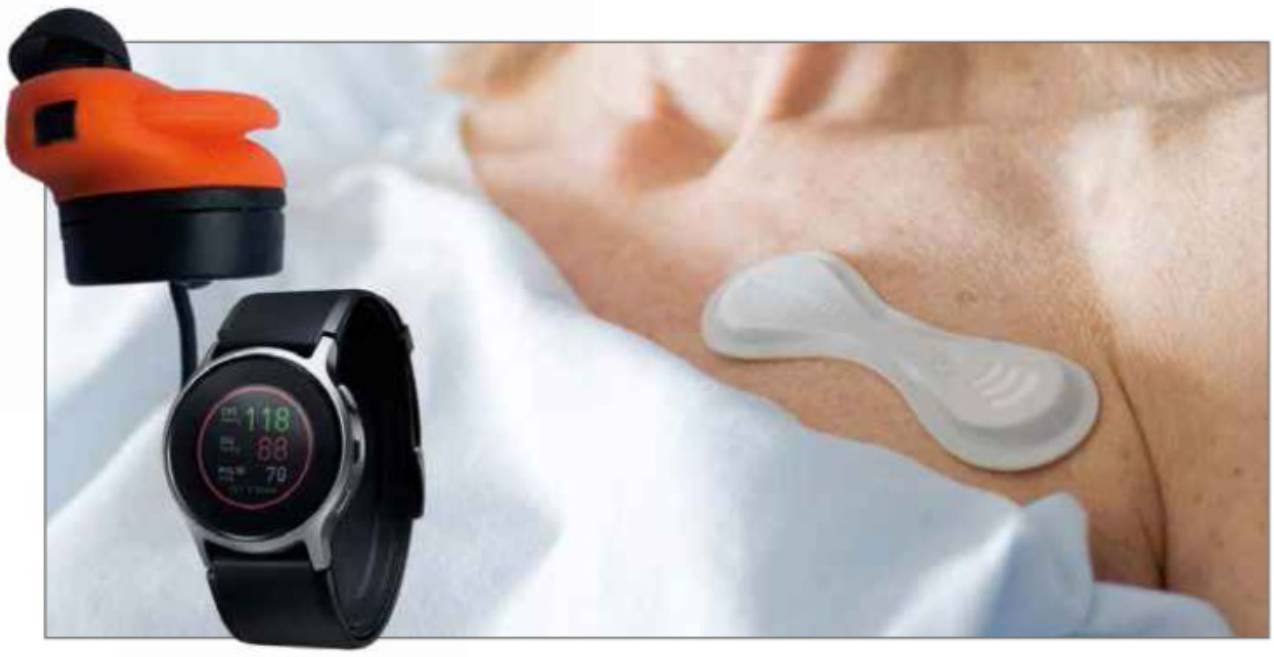
What other companies are involved?

As well as big names including Samsung and Garmin, companies such as French firm Withings (www.withings.com) have moved into the market, the latter heralding its Move ECG as the world's first analogue watch with a built-in electrocardiogram last year. At the CES exhibition in January, it unveiled its classy-looking ScanWatch which, aside from having a SpO2 sensor, uses photoplethysmography (PPG) – a green LED paired with light-sensitive photodiodes – to monitor your heart. It works on the premise that blood absorbs green light, so the ScanWatch can constantly detect when the heart beats increase and blood flow is greater. If irregularity is picked up, the user is prompted to take an ECG reading using the device.

The ScanWatch from Withings uses green light to detect heart problems

Is there much of an appetite for self-monitoring?

Yes. According to analysts Markets and Markets, in a report issued last December, the global medical-wearable market is likely to grow in value from $6.22bn (£4.8bn) in 2017 to $14.41bn (£11.8bn) in 2022. Research has also found that more than 80% of consumers would be happy to wear fitness technology that can monitor their health. This could be in the form of activity monitors, smartwatches, patches and even smart clothing – there have been numerous attempts to create a smart bra for the detection of breast cancer, for example.



Health sensors are being used to measure all manner of medical conditions

What else can sensors measure?

Philips has produced wearable biosensors that are fixed to the chest using silicone or hydrocolloid adhesive (depending on how active someone is likely to be), and these record heart and respiratory rates as well as skin temperature, body posture, ECGs, step-counts and more (bit.ly/philips496). It is also possible to take blood pressure measurements – in fact, Omron has created a watch called HeartGuide that can take your blood pressure using an inflatable cuff within the watch band (bit.ly/omron496), while health-tech company Valencell has been working for 10 years on a set of in-ear buds that can use a PPG sensor to detect high blood pressure (bit.ly/valen496).

Valencell hopes its device, which relies on the greater blood flow present in the inner ear to get a reading, can eventually replace cuffs and be integrated into consumer earbuds and hearing aids. Since 12.5 million people suffer from hypertension in the UK alone, and high blood pressure kills an average of 75,000 each year, this could be a huge life-saver, especially given that millions of adults are going undiagnosed.

What about combating obesity?

Gadget creator HealBe (healbe.com/eu) claims it can use bioimpedance sensors to pass a small electrical current through the body and measure the number of calories being consumed. When this was announced at the CES in 2015, medical experts were sceptical but HealBe – which uses the technology in its GoBe products – says the technique can measure fluid moving in and out of skin cells and base a reading on glucose curves. It says stress levels and water balance can be predicted, too, by taking into account attributes such as physical activity.

HealBe's GoBe devices can measure fluid moving in and out of skin cells

Could sensors help control diabetes?

There are some interesting developments here, too, including a new biosensing contact lens capable of detecting glucose levels (bit.ly/lens496) and another device, the K'Watch Glucose, which claims to check your sugar levels without needing to prick your finger for blood. It says it will do this using so-called "SkinTaste" technology, which it explains consists of a "biochemical and micro-points" on a disposable adhesive patch called a K'apsul. According to the company, the micro-points come into contact with interstitial fluid in the upper layer of the skin and allow for bloodless monitoring. You can sign up for updates at bit.ly/glucose496, but a release date has yet to be confirmed.

Can health sensors be used for research?

Yes. In 2018, Apple sought to monitor the symptoms of Parkinson's disease by adding an feature called Movement Disorder to its ResearchKit framework. This monitors for signs of tremor at rest among patients wearing an Apple Watch running watchOS 5 or later, as well as for known side-effects of treatments including fidgeting and swaying. Fitbit also encourages use of its devices in research studies, while Garmin recently published the results of a sleep study (bit.ly/sleep496).

Fitbit is encouraging the use of its wearable devices in medical research

Private healthcare companies are also tapping into sensor-based tech: insurer Vitality has offered discounts on Apple Watches for people who earn enough points by staying active.

Will they keep our data secure?

The companies will certainly aim to do that although we have seen past examples of hackers accessing the data of wearable fitness devices, giving them access to GPS history and details of the times that people go to sleep or become active. There are also concerns that insurance companies may want to access the data gathered about our health but, perhaps most worrying, employers are taking an interest as well. Some companies, including insurer Aetna in the US, are already giving workers extra perks if they are seen to be getting enough rest. While such monitoring could make the workplace more productive and potentially reduce absenteeism, it could also be seen as an invasion of privacy.

FALSE POSITIVES AND OVERDIAGNOSIS

People who buy wearables containing health sensors tend to be young and conscious of their overall wellbeing. The trouble is that these users tend to have fewer health problems so any positive alerts they receive tend not to be serious, and yet they cause more people to see a GP for reassurance, putting extra strain on the NHS.

The same is true for very young users. Wearable baby monitors that monitor heart rate, respiration, sleeping position, body temperature and blood oxygen levels can also lead to overdiagnosis and panic. Could health sensors in consumer devices turn us all into hypochondriacs?

FREE AT LAST!

COVER FEATURE

Some of the best online freebies would once have cost you dearly. **Wayne Williams** rounds up the latest and greatest things that you previously had to pay for, but can now get for free

We all know that there's lots of stuff to be found online for free, but much of it is free for a reason: namely, that nobody would consider paying for it in the first place. That doesn't stop us downloading, streaming and ordering things for free rather than forking out money for them, but it's always a pleasant surprise when a quality product or service that used to cost money becomes available for nothing. This is more common than you'd think – you just need to know where to look.

In this feature, we round up the latest and greatest examples of paid-for stuff that you can now get for free from the web – safely and legally. We've picked the best big-name programs, apps and games that have ditched their price tags for 2020; TV series, films and music that you can enjoy without paying for a streaming subscription; and plenty of other fabulous freebies, too.

SOFTWARE & APPS

Upgrade to Windows 10 for free – yes, still!

Microsoft made Windows 10 available for free when it launched back in 2015, but the software giant made it clear this was a time-limited offer that would only be good for the first year. If you want to buy a copy of Windows 10 Pro now, it will cost you £219.99, while the Home edition is £119.99. However, it's still possible to get Windows 10 for free – legally and direct from Microsoft.

Provided you're running a licensed version of Windows 7 or 8 or 8.1, you can upgrade to Windows 10 for free by downloading the Media Creation Tool (bit.ly/mct496). Be warned, though, that using this tool to upgrade your OS will wipe your apps and settings, so you'll need to reinstall and reconfigure them. Once installation is complete, you should receive a digital licence that you can view under Settings, Update & Security, Activation.

Burn discs with Ashampoo Burning Studio 2020

Ashampoo's Burning Studio disc-authoring software originally sold for $29.99 (£22.68) but the 2020 edition is now entirely free to download. This powerful software can write data to CDs, DVDs, Blu-rays and specialised media such as BDXL or M-Disc; rip and burn audio discs; create and write disc images; and print covers and labels. It also makes backups from smartphones and tablets at the click of a button, and offers scratch protection, so you'll be able to access your data on a disc even if it has a damaged surface. Download the free program from bit.ly/ashampoo496.

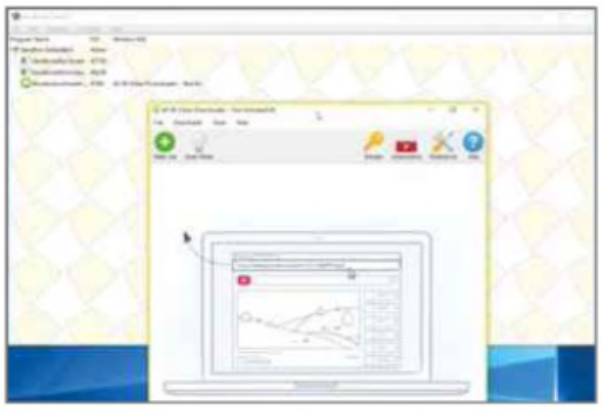
Recover lost files with Seagate File Recovery Software

Premium Seagate File Recovery Software usually costs $100 (£75.61) but you can currently get it for free. It's available for Windows and macOS, and although it's designed for Seagate hard drives, it will work with any local storage.

To get the program for free, go to bit.ly/seagate496, add it to the cart and proceed to checkout. Fill in your details (we'd suggest making something up using a temporary email address from temp-mail.org) and click Place Order. Follow the link in the email, install and run the software, then activate it by clicking the link in the bottom left and filling in the details from the email. Alternatively, you can download the program directly from bit.ly/psfrs496.

Run any program safely with Sandboxie

Sandboxie (www.sandboxie.com) has been around since 2004 and lets you run any program in a secure and disposable section of your computer's hard drive, preventing malicious applications from taking control of Windows or making unwanted changes. Software running in the 'sandbox' is allowed to read data from the hard drive, but it can't write data outside of the sandbox. Sandboxie was acquired by Sophos in 2017. The company released the full paid-for version of the program, which used to cost $21 (£15.90) a year, as freeware last September, and has announced plans to make Sandboxie open-source in the future.



Get paid-for software for free – legally!

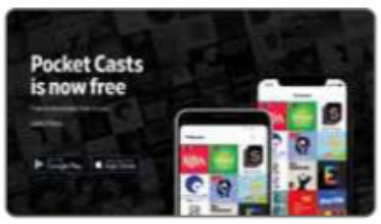
Websites such as Tickcoupon Giveaway (giveaway.tickcoupon.com) and Giveaway of the Day (www.giveawayoftheday.com) offer paid-for licensed software for free. The former has Windows, macOS, phone and tablet downloads, as well as extended free subscriptions (three months of Malwarebytes Premium, for example), while the latter has giveaways for Windows, Android, iPhone and games. There are also money-off deals.

The offers change regularly, so you need to keep an eye on the sites and act quickly when you see something of interest, or subscribe to their newsletters. If you miss a giveaway, there's a chance it will be repeated in the future.

Manage podcasts with Pocket Casts

If you enjoy listening to podcasts on your phone, there are a number of excellent apps that streamline the process. One of our favourites is Pocket Casts (www.pocketcasts.com), which is available for both iOS and Android, offers lots of customisation options and includes all you need to find, stream, download and listen to your preferred podcasts. It can even play local files.

Pocket Casts has been a paid-for product since it launched in 2010 but, last year, the developers decided to drop the $3.99 (£3) price tag and make it entirely free. There is a Plus version that adds additional features for $11.99 (£9) a year, but the standard version should be enough for most users.



Get NetNewsWire for macOS

Feed readers aren't as popular as they once were, but they're still a great way to view all the latest articles from your favourite sites in one place. Launched in 2002, NetNewsWire for Mac (bit.ly/nnwire496) has undergone a couple of changes of ownership. Now back in the hands of its original creator, the software – which previously cost $19.99 (£15.12) – was relaunched in 2019 and made free and open-source. NetNewsWire 5's highlights include direct feed downloading, syncing via Feedbin, AppleScript support and keyboard shortcuts. There's also a dark mode and a Safari extension for easy adding of feeds.

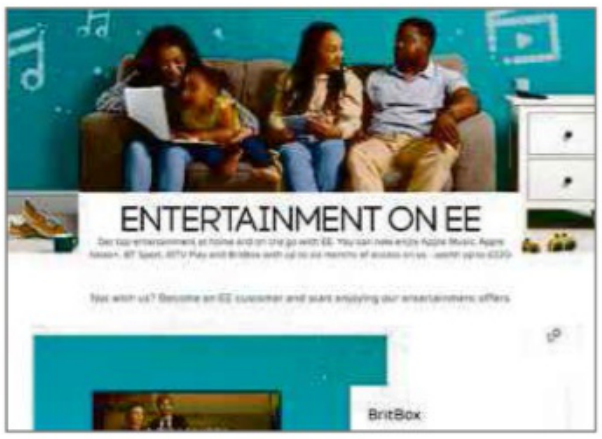
ENTERTAINMENT

Enjoy Amazon Music for free

Amazon Prime costs £7.99 per month and offers a lot of perks beyond free next-day (or same-day) delivery, one of which is access to more than two million songs through the retail giant's music-streaming service. The company also offers a paid-for version called Amazon Music Unlimited from £7.99 per month, which gives you access to 50 million songs. The good news is that you don't need to pay a penny to listen to Amazon Music – you can now enjoy an ad-supported selection of playlists and thousands of stations based on song, artist, genre and more – for free (you can't select specific tracks). The service is accessible through the Amazon Music app on iOS, Android and FireTV, and also on the web (music.amazon.co.uk).

Get six months of BritBox free

BritBox is the new streaming service from the BBC and ITV that focuses on delivering British TV shows and films. It costs £5.99 a month after a 30-day free trial but, from 13 March, EE pay-monthly customers can get a free six-month subscription to the service. You aren't limited to watching on a phone or tablet, either – you can enjoy content on a TV or streaming device. The offer is part of Entertainment on EE (bit.ly/britbox496), which also gives you six

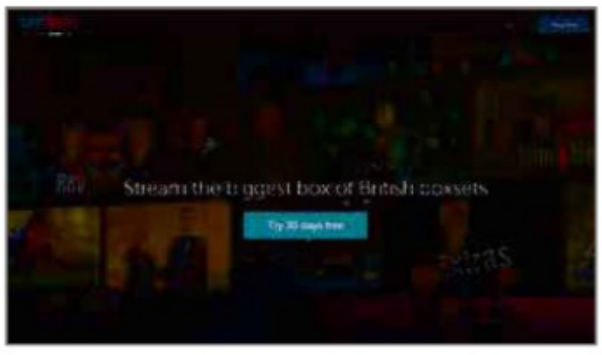


months of free Apple Music, six months of Apple News+, three months of BT Sport and six months of MTV Play.

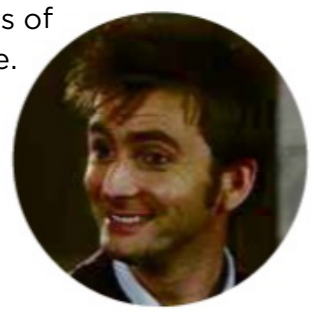
Watch Classic *Doctor Who*

Doctor Who has been a staple of British telly for years, and continues to draw viewers. You'll no doubt have your favourite Doctor – Jon Pertwee or Tom Baker, perhaps, or maybe David Tennant or Matt Smith if you prefer the more recent incarnation of the show. 558 *Doctor Who* episodes, dating from 1963 to 1989 and spanning William Hartnell to Paul McGann, are now available to stream on BritBox, and you can watch them all with a free 30-day BritBox trial. Bear in mind that this equates to viewing nearly 19 episodes a day, so you may need to be selective!

You need to enter your credit-card details to sign up to BritBox, but as long as you remember to cancel your subscription before the 30 days are over, you won't be charged a penny. As



mentioned in the previous tip, EE customers can get six months of the streaming service for free.



All 165 episodes of the rebooted *Doctor Who* from the last 15 years are available to stream and download on BBC iPlayer (bit.ly/iplayerwho496).

Watch *Impulse* for free

YouTube has spent a lot of money on producing original shows, in a bid to compete with Netflix. While some series, such as the *Karate Kid* spin-off *Cobra Kai*, were a huge hit, YouTube failed to persuade enough people to pay for its content and, last year, made the decision to cancel a lot of its shows and make existing originals available to watch for free. *Cobra Kai* is still behind the YouTube Premium paywall (£11.99 a month) but you can now enjoy two seasons (22 episodes) of the excellent – and criminally underappreciated – *Impulse* for free at bit.ly/impulse496.

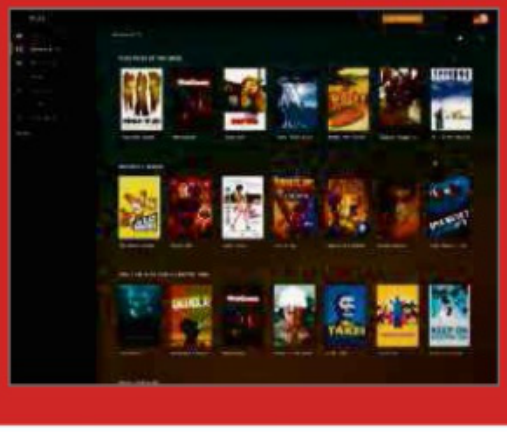
Executive produced by Doug Liman (the director behind *Edge of Tomorrow* and *The Bourne Identity*), *Impulse* is a spiritual (and quite dark) sequel to the 2008 movie *Jumper*, and follows a teenage girl who discovers she has the ability to teleport.

Watch *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* for free

Netflix has launched a sequel to its hugely popular teen movie *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, and to celebrate the arrival of *To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You*, the streaming giant has made the original free to watch on the internet, no Netflix subscription required (bit.ly/netflix496), which is great news for anyone with teenage children or grandchildren. This is a time-limited offer, however – you only have until 9 March to watch the film.

Watch free movies and TV shows with Plex

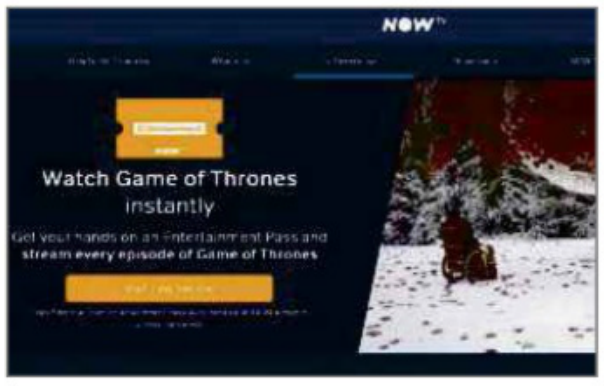
Plex (www.plex.tv) is a powerful media server that lets you stream movies stored in a central location to any device on your network, or beyond, as well as watch live TV and DVR content, web shows and more. At the end of last year, Plex added the ability to stream thousands of movies and TV shows for free – no subscription required. There are a couple of catches to be aware of, however. First, the content is ad-supported and, secondly, although the new feature is a global addition, UK users have a disappointing selection of titles on offer. That said, if you use a VPN such as Windscribe (windscribe.com) to make it appear as if you're browsing from the US, you can unlock classic titles such as *Thelma & Louise*, *Rain Man*, *Escape From New York*, *WarGames*, *Teen Wolf* and *Raging Bull*.



Binge-watch every episode of *Game of Thrones*

After eight seasons and 73 episodes, *Game of Thrones* finally came to an end last year. If you missed the show – or would like to go back to the beginning and watch it all again – you can do so for free, rather than paying nearly £100 for the DVD box set. However, you'll need to be prepared to do some serious binge watching.

The trick is to sign up for a 7-day free trial of a Now TV Entertainment Pass (www.nowtv.com). You need to be a new customer and cancel the plan before your trial runs out, otherwise you'll be paying £8.99 per month.



Now TV offers a wide range of shows beyond *Game of Thrones*, as well as live streaming of many Sky TV channels, which you can watch with your free trial – if you have any time left!

Watch all nine seasons of *Seinfeld*

The enduring popularity of *Friends* means many people view it as the best (American) sitcom of all time, but there are rival shows that are held in just as high – or even higher – regard, and *Seinfeld* is one of them. The show ran for 180 episodes between 1989 and 1998 and starred Jerry Seinfeld, Jason Alexander, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Michael Richards. You can remind yourself how good it was, or watch it for the first time, for free on All 4 (bit.ly/seinfeld496). You will have to sit through adverts, mind you, but it's worth it.

The first three series arrived on 7 February, with the rest following every Friday. By the time you read this, all 180 episodes from all nine seasons should be available. You'll want to start watching sooner rather than later, though, because Netflix has purchased the rights for five years starting in 2021.

FUN & GAMES

Play free titles from the Epic Games Store

The Epic Games Store (bit.ly/epic496) gives its members a free game every week, as well as access to free-to-play games. To get a free game, sign up for an account, visit the Store page and select the game you want from the available choices. Once you've claimed a game, it's yours to keep forever. Free titles often have add-on content available to buy.

You can save a lot of money over the year because even the cheapest giveaway games usually cost from £7 to buy. At the time of writing, the time-limited freebies were the big-name Assassin's Creed: Syndicate and the lesser-known Faeria, so it's worth paying regular visits to check the latest offers.

Play the original Half-Life games for free

Games developer Valve is mostly focusing on its Steam gaming platform these days, but it has also been working on its first official Half-Life game in 13 years – Half-Life Alyx. This is a VR-only title, so not everyone will get to play it. However, to celebrate the game's launch, Value has made both Half-Life and Half-Life 2, and the latter game's episodes, available for free for all Steam users. You need to have Steam installed to play them, and they will only be free until Half-Life Alyx launches on 23 March. To get the games, click the links at bit.ly/halflife496. They usually retail for £7.19 each.

Download the original StarCraft for free

Blizzard's StarCraft is a real-time strategy game in which four alien species battle for supremacy. Originally released in 1998, Blizzard gave the game a graphical overhaul in 2017, while at the same time making StarCraft and the StarCraft :Brood War expansion free for PC and Mac owners to download and play. To get the game, go to bit.ly/scraft496 and click the download link. If you've never played the game, it's definitely worth righting that wrong. The remastered version of StarCraft is available to buy for £12.99.

Play Pandemic Express for free

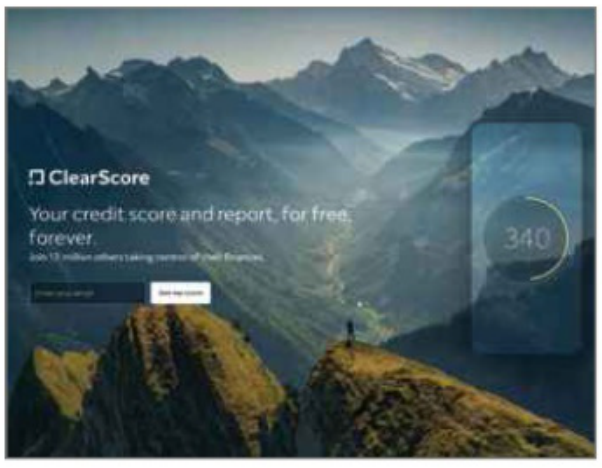
Pandemic Express (www.pandemicexpress.com) is a multiplayer survival game, in which up to 30 players (including yourself) have to make it to a train in order to escape a zombie apocalypse, with the twist being that one of the group is already infected, and can infect others. It's a great idea, and the game plays well, but unfortunately it failed to find enough people willing to pay £11.39 for it, so the developers have now made it free to play on Steam (bit.ly/pefree496).

HOME & LIFESTYLE

Get a free credit score (with no catches)

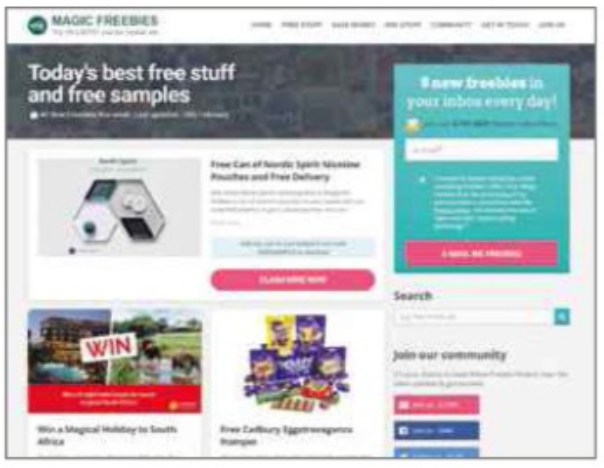
When you go to borrow money, arrange a mortgage, or take out a credit or store card, the lender will check your credit score, which shows how well (or otherwise) you've handled credit in the past. The higher your score, the lower the risk you are, and the more favourably lenders will look upon you.

Credit scores are calculated by a credit reference agency (CRA) – in the UK, these are Experian, Equifax and Call Credit. Viewing your Equifax credit report and score is free for the first 30 days but costs £7.95 afterwards. However, ClearScore (www.clearscore.com) lets you view your Equifax credit score and report for free, and as many times as you like, without getting stung by follow-up fees.



Order free products from the web

There are lots of sites that offer products and samples for free, although there may be catches to be aware of – you might need to sign up for a service, or provide feedback or personal details, so always check the offers carefully before committing yourself. Some of the better sites to visit are Magic Freebies (www.magicfreebiesuk.co.uk), Get Me Free Samples (getmefreesamples.com/uk) and MoneySavingExpert.com's Freebies forum (bit.ly/mse496).



Visit the Homebuilding & Renovating Show

If you're planning to build your dream home, or renovate, extend or change the internal layout of your existing abode, you might fancy a visit to the National Homebuilding & Renovating Show at the Birmingham NEC – for free. There, you can hear specialists talk about everything from finding a plot to perfecting interiors, get personalised advice on your project and view a vast range of products from home-building brands.

Simply go to bit.ly/home496 and register your details to receive two tickets for the exhibition, which runs from 26 to 29 March, via email. This will save you £36 on the door – but note that tickets are valid for one-day entry only.

PHOTOS & ARTWORK

Download France's most famous art

Viewing artworks held across France's many museums isn't cheap – you'll have to pay for flights (or Eurostar and SNCF trains) as well as the price of admission. There is a cheaper solution, though, which we featured in Issue 494's What's New Online section.

Paris Musées, which oversees Paris's 14 municipal museums, has digitised over 150,000 artworks, from the likes of Paul Cézanne, Gustave Courbet, Eugène Delacroix and Anthony van Dyck, and made them available to view, free of charge, through its Collections portal (bit.ly/musees496). In addition, you can download high-resolution copies of your favourite art under a CC0 (Creative Commons Zero) license.

Get 10 free stock images from Shutterstock

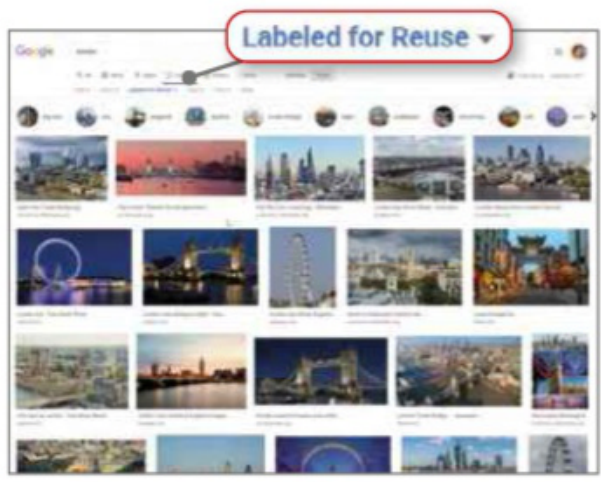
There are a number of excellent stock-image libraries on the web. Shutterstock is one of the best known, and you can get 10 images a month for £228 a year (the equivalent of £1.90 per image). However, you can try out the Shutterstock 10-images-per-month plan for free by entering the code PICK10FREE when you sign up.

As with most such offers, you need to remember to cancel the plan before the trial ends to avoid being charged. Cancelling isn't simply a matter of clicking a button, though – you'll need to contact Shutterstock through the link on the page at bit.ly/sstock496 – but it's straightforward enough.

Get copyright-free images from Google

If you're looking for a photo to use on your website or in a project, then Google Images is a great resource. However, many of the results it returns aren't free to use, and you'll effectively be stealing them and breaching copyright if you incorporate them in your own work. Fortunately, you can filter the results to only show those that can legally be used.

Search for your topic on Google Images, then go to Tools, Usage Rights, 'Labelled for Reuse'. This means you will only see pictures that are in the public domain or licensed under Creative Commons CC 2.0 for private or commercial use.



EBOOKS & AUDIOBOOKS

Read *The Call of the Wild* for free

Jack London's classic 1903 novel about a pet pooch from California who becomes a sled dog in the wilds of the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s has been adapted for film and television a number of times. There's now a new version of *The Call of the Wild* starring Harrison Ford and Karen Gillan out at cinemas but, if you want to read the book before you see it (or just want to read the book on its own merits), you can download an ebook copy for free from the brilliant Project Gutenberg (bit.ly/callwild496). You can view *The Call of the Wild* in HTML format online, or get a copy in EPUB, Kindle or plain-text format, saving you £4.49 on its current paperback price.

Download the entire *Flora Graeca*

John Sibthorp's *Flora Graeca* (1806-1840) was one of the most lavish and expensive books of its age, and has been called "one of the most extraordinary botanical publications of all time". Cataloguing the plants of Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, only 25 full copies were produced, and each sold for £254 (in 19th-century money), with the 10-volume set containing nearly 1,000 hand-coloured illustrations. Now, the entire original work has been digitised and made available for free as part of the Biodiversity Heritage Library's Expanding Access to Biodiversity Literature project (bit.ly/flora496). You can download all 10 volumes from the site in various formats – it's written in Latin, but the beautifully reproduced plates mean you can just enjoy the floral pictures.

Listen to free Audible books through Alexa

If you own one of Amazon's Echo smart speakers, you can enjoy free audiobooks through Audible. Each month, Amazon makes three titles available to listen to, ranging from classics to recent titles. You can browse the choices at bit.ly/alexa496 or say "Alexa, what's free from Audible?" and ask for the title you want to be read aloud. You don't need an Audible account to access this service.

There are considerable savings to be made – in February, the three books on offer sold for a total of £90 when bought through the website.

Borrow books from the Open Library

Open Library (openlibrary.org) is run by the non-profit Internet Archive, and its goal is to provide a page on the web for every book ever published. In addition to that, the site lets you read classic novels and 'borrow' books that you can read in your browser or on an iPad or Android device. Titles available to borrow include best sellers from Stephen King, Douglas Adams, Bill Bryson, Tom Clancy, Dan Brown and George RR Martin. You can take out up to five books in one go, but there is a catch – only one person at a time can borrow a book. If the title is "out", you can add yourself to the waiting list. Loans expire after two weeks, although some books are returned early.

Discover free and discounted ebooks

BookBub (www.bookbub.com) lets you find and download free and discounted ebooks from well-known publishers and independent authors. Sign up and the service will email you the best offers every day.

If you prefer, you can just browse the list and download free books found on the likes of Amazon, Google Play and Apple Books (bit.ly/bubfree496). You aren't going to find anything from big-name writers such as Stephen King or JK Rowling on the site, but you might discover a gem or two in the list. ■

NEXT ISSUE on sale Wednesday 18 March 2020

PROTECT YOUR DATA FROM...YOURSELF

Why YOU are the biggest threat to your online privacy – and how to fix it

PLUS...

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Apps that boost your home network's speed and security

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STOP WINDOWS UPDATES
Don't let Microsoft mess up your PC in the background

SUBSCRIBE TO WEB USER AT SUBSCRIBE.WEBUSER.CO.UK

Best free driver updaters

Drivers are the small but essential programs that help Windows control the hardware fitted in your PC. **Andy Shaw** tests six free tools designed to ensure they're always up to date

IObit Driver Booster Free | bit.ly/driboo496 | ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★☆ PERFORMANCE ★★★★★ EASE OF USE ★★★★★

What we liked:

Once you've got past the hurdle of installing IObit Driver Booster (see 'How it can be improved', below) and launched the software, it starts its first scan. This only takes a few seconds to complete.

There's a big button at the top that offers to upgrade all the out-of-date drivers it finds in one go, though we'd recommend scrolling down and doing them one-by-one instead – just click the Update button next to a driver to update it. Once you've updated one, it's best to run your PC for a while and check that everything's still working before you update the next one. This more cautious approach makes it much simpler to roll back the update if a new driver is incompatible with your particular configuration of components.

Driver Booster's interface looks modern and uses icons to help break up the design into sections that make it clear exactly which job the different drivers perform.

On our old PC, the software found and flagged 18 out-of-date drivers – a similar count to the Bronze Award-winner Driver Easy Lite. Updating them is simple to do and didn't cause any problems on our PC.

There are a handful of extra tools included, such as the option to scan for the drivers of any unplugged hardware that you haven't used for a while, though ironically (but sensibly), it doesn't uninstall them in case you change your mind and can't find the right drivers in the future.

You can run IObit Driver Booster as regularly as you like and it won't try to install itself and run in the background.

How it can be improved:

The software is heavy-handed in offering upgrades and extra paid-for tools, which means you have to tread a little carefully around its interface for fear of downloading something you don't want. Even the driver-scan results page entices you to upgrade so you can update even more files, though these turned out to be Windows components rather than traditional drivers, so don't worry – you're not missing out on anything with the free version.

OUR VERDICT

IObit's driver updater nags you to upgrade with annoying frequency but it looks good and managed to root out the outdated drivers on our test PC. Installing drivers one at a time is a straightforward task and, if anything goes wrong, it's easy to roll them back again.

DriverMax | drivermax.com | ★★★★☆

FEATURES ★★★★☆ PERFORMANCE ★★★★☆ EASE OF USE ★★★★★

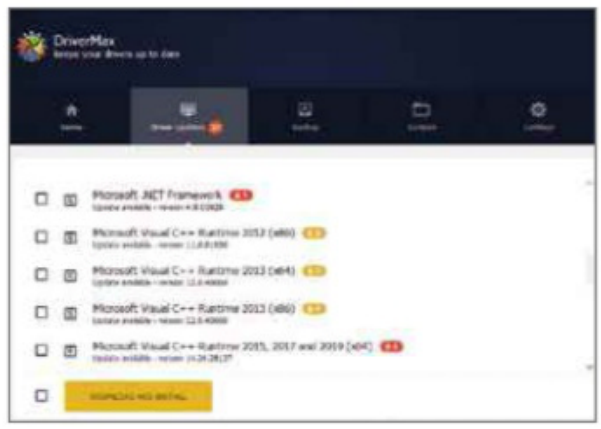
WebUser SILVER AWARD

What we liked:

We installed DriverMax on our old PC, where it scanned for missing drivers and discovered 27 items – around 10 more than our other award-winners. On close inspection, most of these extra files were actually third-party software updates, and some aren't vital if you're not running programs that specifically require them.

The software has tools for creating a system restore point and making a backup of existing drivers. The restore options are even more plentiful, offering access to Windows' own roll-back tools, and the option to choose versions of drivers you've downloaded previously.

It's not the slickest looking software we tested but its tab- and menu-based interface is familiar and simple to use. While there are a few nags and the occasional pop-up advertising the paid-for version, you can switch off most of its annoyances in the Settings.



How it can be improved:

We're not convinced that bundling software updates and system components together with drivers and warning us that they need updating is quite what we want from a driver-updating tool, because it muddies the waters. We appreciate you can get something here that our other award winners aren't providing in their free versions, but we think software updates would be better left to a separate scan.

OUR VERDICT

DriverMax found more out-of-date software than any of the other tools, but the same number of drivers as our other award winners. The program includes a number of extras, but they aren't essential.

Driver Easy Lite | www.drivereasy.com | ★★★★☆

FEATURES ★★★★☆ PERFORMANCE ★★★★☆ EASE OF USE ★★★★☆

WebUser BRONZE AWARD

What we liked:

Driver Easy Lite discovered 17 out-of-date drivers on our test PC, along with three more that were listed as 'Unplugged devices'. These latter alerts relate to drivers that only need updating if the devices are connected to the PC again.

There's an option to click a button that updates all 20 drivers, or you can update them individually. A drop-down menu lets you see more detail or hide the update if you decide that you need to keep the version you've got and don't want Driver Easy pestering you about it the next time you run a scan.

Driver Easy Lite comes with a collection of useful extra tools, including a driver backup you can run before you start, to make it easy to restore drivers in case something goes wrong. There's also an uninstall tool you could use if you want to restart your PC and have Windows find its preferred driver for a particular device.

How it can be improved:

If you don't select the custom install, the software may set up an automatic driver-scanning schedule, which is probably overkill if you aren't constantly switching around your hardware.

OUR VERDICT

Driver Easy's simple design makes it a good alternative if you don't like Driver Booster's more cluttered interface. However, the fact that it tries to run with Windows unless you opt out is a tad excessive.

BEST OF THE REST

Driver Talent

www.drivethelife.com

Driver Talent's attractive black interface certainly looks the part, but it struggled to find any of the problems on our test PC. Where the award winners found a range of drivers in need of an update, Driver Talent only found one missing driver and one in need of an update.

DriversCloud

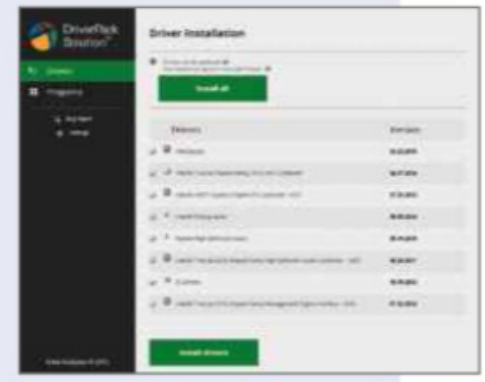
bit.ly/drcl496

This clever program presents its information in your browser, so you download the software, run it and then return to your browser to get the results. The web page it creates captures a lot of information from your PC, including your hardware specification, so it can check whether the drivers you have installed are the latest and best options available. However, the mix of software and browser interface makes the package fiddly to use.

DriverPack Solution

drp.su

We saw DriverPack Solution mentioned regularly while researching software for this feature, but we got no further than downloading it because a significant portion of the malware-scanning tools on VirusTotal (www.virustotal.com) flagged it up as potentially dangerous.



It doesn't look like it contains a virus but it was so widely detected as potentially unwanted software that we decided not to risk it.

Best BUSINE you can use

Why should hip young professionals have apps? **Jane Hoskyn** reveals how you can tools to make your home

"Slack me the Trello card, man". What *are* these trendy business types on about? Ironically, they're talking about tools that make communication simpler. They're just doing it in ridiculous marketing jargon which – like all jargon – is designed to befuddle outsiders like you and me.

Don't be fooled. These trendy apps are not just for millennials who hand-sew their own coffee. Hidden within silly language about 'synergy', 'moonshots' and 'incentivising' are clever tools that can help you keep in touch, plan projects and organise trips far more easily than using email or WhatsApp groups. In this feature, we pull back the Wizard of Oz curtain to reveal the best tools the pros would rather keep secret.

Communicate instantly using Slack

slack.com

Web, Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS

They use it to:

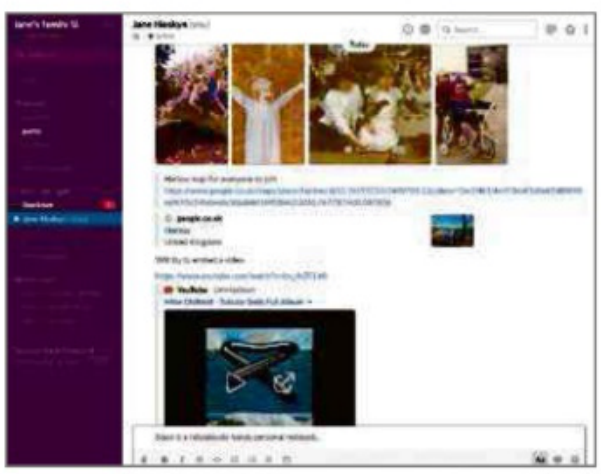
Chat to colleagues without having to speak face to face.

You can use it to:

Organise events with friends and family all over the world, via this supremely feature-rich instant mass-messenger. You can create separate searchable public and private 'channels' (say, one for an upcoming party) and add people to them, then share photos, videos, GIFs, links and content from integrated tools, such as Google Calendar or oodles of widgets. You can even have a conversation with yourself, turning Slack into a memo pad (see screenshot).

Is there a free version?

Yes, Slack Free (bit.ly/slackfree496) gives you unlimited channels, free voice and video calls (one-to-one only) and up to 10 linked apps. It also lets you search your last 10,000 messages.



Turn Slack into a personal memo pad or use it to stay in touch with distant family

Organise your life using Trello

bit.ly/trello496

Web, Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS

They use it to:

Delegate tasks and manage projects.

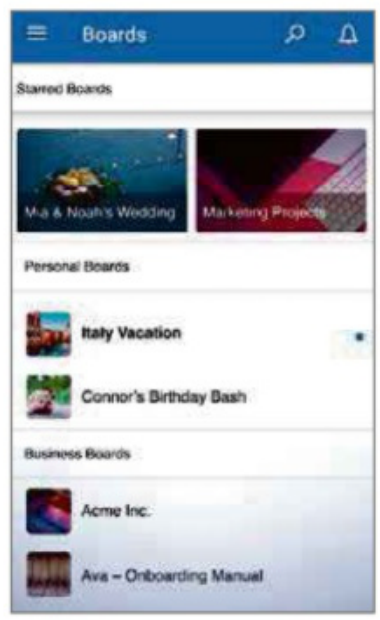
You can use it to:

Make big projects less overwhelming. Trello's 'Kanban' system of colour-coded 'cards' for tasks that you drag and drop between lists ('planning stage', 'hiring' and so on) is like a big virtual wall of sticky notes. It's great for visualising the progress of anything from a holiday booking to a house sale.

You can assign due dates, photos, collaborators and comments to cards, and integrate hundreds of apps. Everything is secured using two-factor authentication (2FA) and synced across your devices.

Is there a free version?

Your own personal boards are completely free, no matter how many you want to create. Even collaborative 'team boards' are free for the first 10 boards.



Plan holidays, parties and other projects using Trello on your PC and phone

Track household expenses in Wave

www.waveapps.com

Web, Android, iOS

They use it to:

Send invoices and accept payments.

You can use it to:

Upload receipts and manage your household budget. The separate Wave Receipts app (www.waveapps.com/receipts) lets you scan receipts on the go.

Wave is so hip it doesn't even have a desktop version, and the Android app is an APK that bypasses the Play Store. However the service is security-conscious and uses banking-grade encryption to keep your data safe (my.waveapps.com/security).

Is there a free version?

Wave is entirely free for accounting, receipt scanning and even invoicing. You only have to pay to accept credit card payments.

Wave helps to keeps your accounts organised and monitors your spending

SS tools at HOME

all the best programs and use the latest trendy office life easier

Automate tedious tasks with Zapier

zapier.com

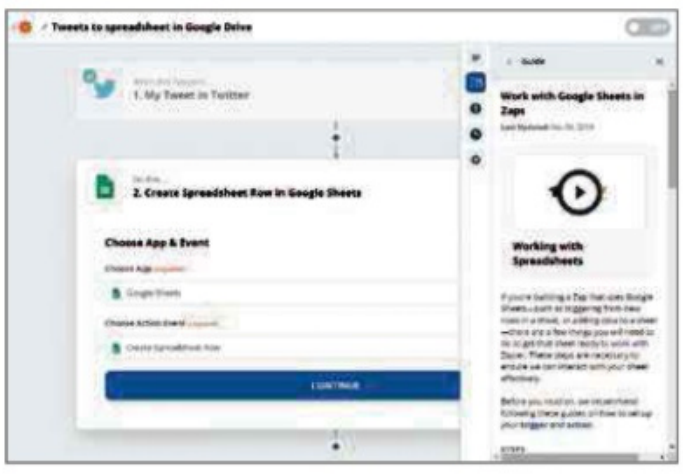
Web

They use it to:
Send automated email responses and other robo-business irritants.

You can use it to:
Save time by making your most-used tools, such as Gmail and Facebook, do useful things automatically (for example, recording all your posts in a spreadsheet). These automatic connections – 'Zaps' – cover hundreds of apps and can be customised to do more or less whatever you want.

We recommend enabling 2FA for your Google account (go to bit.ly/g2fa496) when using client tools such as Zapier and Shift. These tools are careful to encrypt and secure your data, but a double-lock is always wise.

Is there a free version?
You can create up to five Zaps per month, carrying out up to 100 actions, for free. Upgrades cost from $20 (£15) per month.



Track your online activity on a spreadsheet using Zapier's customisable Zaps

Build a research library with Mendeley

www.mendeley.com

Web, Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS

They use it to:
Organise 'datasets' of academic research.

You can use it to:
Gather documents and articles into a searchable library that you can access securely from any device. Mendeley's extension (bit.ly/mendweb496) automatically detects PDFs and citations in web articles (such as medical studies) to help you find similar pages. It also lets you annotate any PDF and export it in DOC format.

Is there a free version?
Mendeley is completely free to use, and includes 2GB of storage space.

Turn researcher by adding fascinating web articles to your private Mendeley library

Create email newsletters with MailChimp

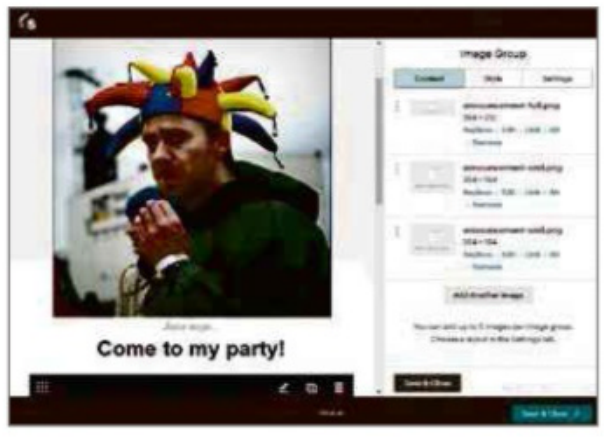
mailchimp.com

Web, Android, iOS

They use it to:
Send out spam – sorry, 'email marketing campaigns'.

You can use it to:
Create email newsletters and invitations for your club or event, and build a basic website. You get templates, drag-and-drop tools, photo editor and a free MailChimp domain.

Is there a free version?
Yes. The free plan slaps a MailChimp slogan on your newsletter and lets you send it to up to 2,000 subscribers each month.



Use MailChimp's design tools to send your email contacts a party invitation

Check your PC remotely using Splashtop

www.splashtop.com/personal

Windows or macOS plus Android or iOS

They use it to:
Access and control their employees' computers remotely.

You can use it to:
Securely see your PC screen from the free Splashtop Personal mobile app (Android bit.ly/splashdroid496, iOS bit.ly/splashios496). Ideal for checking the progress of downloads or malware scans from another room.

Is there a free version?
Yes, but it doesn't let you transfer files, or access computers outside your home Wi-Fi. For that, you'd need Splashtop Pro ($99 per year).

Use Splashtop to check what's happening on all the computers on your network

Combine messaging accounts in Shift

tryshift.com

Windows, macOS or Linux

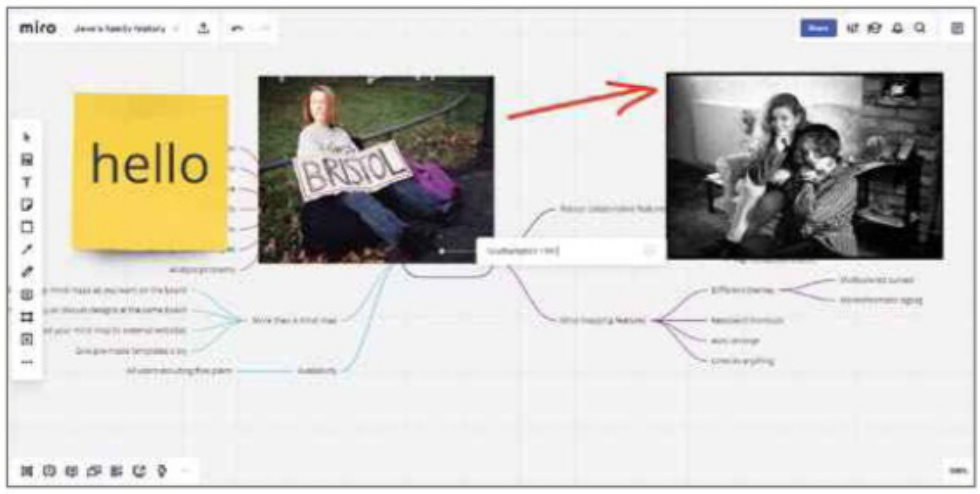
They use it to:
Increase efficiency by accessing all their business in one integrated window.

You can use it to:
Cut the hassle of switching between apps and devices when juggling multiple accounts such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram and Gmail. Spotify, Pocket, YouTube, Evernote, Dropbox and hundreds more are supported, too; check out the list at tryshift.com/apps.

Is there a free version?
The Basic plan is free, but it only lets you connect two accounts. The Advanced plan is unlimited for $100 (£77) per year.

Collect all your most-used accounts in a single window using Shift

Business tools you can use at home



Get past Miro's business buzzwords and enjoy its powerful online scrapbooking tools

It's early days for our dream shed, but SketchUp's free web tool lets us improve it endlessly for free

Build an infinite scrapbook with Miro

miro.com

Web, Android, iOS

They use it to:
Brainstorm ideas on a collaborative pinboard.

You can use it to:
Create an 'infinite' virtual scrapbook, or use the mind-mapping templates to plot that novel or memoir you always wanted to write. We found Miro's templates too businessy for comfort, so start with a blank page. You can add, edit and rearrange notes, photos, comments, drawings, links, documents and more, via upload, linked apps or Miro's web extension (bit.ly/miroweb496).

Is there a free version?
The free plan gives you three editable boards and support for 'core' apps including Adobe Creative Cloud. You can also invite unlimited collaborators, which could be handy for putting together a family memoir.

Design your dream shed in SketchUp

bit.ly/sketch496

Web, Windows, macOS, Android, iOS

They use it to:
Create virtual 3D models of swanky new office blocks.

You can use it to:
Draw up ideas for your new garden shed, kitchen, model railway or whatever glorious engineering project you have in mind. Explore SketchUp's YouTube channel (bit.ly/sketchup496) before diving into the powerful but complex array of drawing and virtual modelling tools.

Is there a free version?
The desktop program costs an eye-watering $299 (£230) per year, but the web version is completely free. SketchUp's mobile apps (bit.ly/skdroid496, bit.ly/skios496) are free, too, but they're just for viewing (and showing off) your handiwork.

Use Asana as your personal assistant

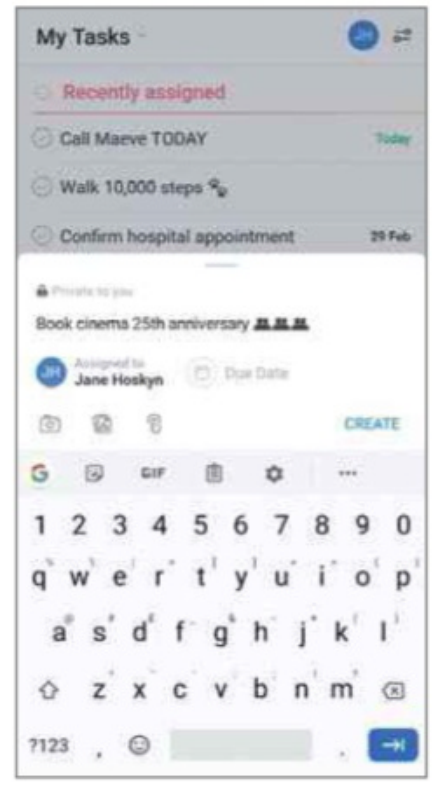
asana.com

Web, Android, iOS

They use it to:
Schedule meetings and set deadlines.

You can use it to:
Create to-do lists that nudge you to get things done. The Asana mobile app is particularly good, with integrated My Tasks and Projects screens that you fill with chores or mini goals (such as your daily steps), then set to trigger reminders and tick off when done. The web version includes the new Asana Timeline, an animated visual calendar that springs into life automatically when you import a spreadsheet.

Is there a free version?
The apps are free, and most web features are included in the free Basic plan. However, Timeline requires Asana Premium (£9.49 per month after a 30-day free trial which, annoyingly, you have to "apply" for).



Get things done by creating detailed to-do lists in Asana

TRENDY TOOLS THAT SHOULD GO OUT OF FASHION

PukkaTeam (pukkateam.com): 'See their status throughout the day,' with real-time video selfies. Perfect for ensuring home-workers are grafting every waking moment.

Atto (attotime.com): This one lets employees clock on, have their location tracked while 'on', and then clock out. Simple, intrusive and not even free.

Yo (www.justyo.co): Sends a notification containing the word "Yo". That's it. A recent update added the option to include a hashtag and live location, but it's still the app equivalent of the creepy guy in the pub.

Faceless (bit.ly/faceless496): 'Talk freely' by posting anonymous comments about people. Your personal info is never stored. Great news for bullies.

Paper Phone (bit.ly/paper496): 'Have a little break away from your digital world' by printing a booklet of today's 'key info'. Nice idea (we do love words on paper) but it regularly gets details and print formatting wrong. Buy a newspaper instead.

Browse the web *WITHOUT* A MOUSE

Take the strain off your clicking finger, as **Robert Irvine** reveals the best alternative ways to get around online

Use Vimium's keyboard shortcuts

All web browsers let you use keyboard shortcuts for basic, everyday tasks such as opening new tabs (Ctrl+T), searching for text (Ctrl+F) and printing the current page (Ctrl+P), which saves you a bit of pointing and clicking. But to properly navigate the web without a mouse, you should install Vimium for Chrome (bit.ly/vimiumc496) or Firefox (bit.ly/vimiumf496) – it also works in the new Edge browser.

This handy extension provides simple keyboard shortcuts for scrolling up, down and around web pages; opening, closing and switching tabs; and – best of all – opening links without clicking. Press `f` on your keyboard and every link on the current page will be highlighted yellow and assigned a letter code. Type the relevant letters to open links in the same tab – pressing `F` instead of `f` opens them in a new tab. You can view Vimium's full list of shortcuts by pressing `?` on your keyboard (Shift+/) and even create your own.

Try Vivaldi's mouse-free features

The brilliant browser Vivaldi has a Quick Commands feature that gives you speedy access to various tasks using only your keyboard. Press F2 to open the Quick Commands menu, then use your cursor keys to browse the list, which includes options such as Delete Browsing Data, Move Tab to New Window and Capture Area to Clipboard, and lets you search across your bookmarks and tabs. There are also keyboard shortcuts for many of the tasks, which you can customise by going into Vivaldi's Settings (Ctrl+F12) and choosing Keyboard.

Another mouse-free feature, called Spatial Navigation, lets you move around a web page by pressing Shift and the arrow keys, then hit Enter to open a link. To activate this option, go to Settings, Webpages and select Vivaldi or Chromium/Blink under Spatial Navigation.

Open links on pages by typing

Excessive mouse use can lead to repetitive strain injury (RSI), so why not give your wrist a rest by using DeadMouse (bit.ly/dead496)? With this Chrome extension, rather than clicking links on a web page, you type a few letters of a word that appears in a link to make it shake to show a match. You can then press Enter to open the page in the same tab, or Ctrl+Enter to open it in a new one. If several links contain the same word, name or phrase, press the Tab key to move between them. Although DeadMouse hasn't been updated for over seven years, it still works well on most sites and is safe to use.

Browse the web using your voice

Bypass your keyboard *and* your mouse by installing the fantastic Chrome (and Edge) extension Handsfree for Web (bit.ly/handsfree496), which lets you do everything online using only your voice. Its extensive range of commands allow you to open, scroll and bookmark web pages; 'click' links and other elements (say "click" and all items on a page are assigned a number for you to speak); control audio and video playback; dictate, copy and paste text; search the web or within a page; download files; and much more.

Unlike many voice-recognition tools, the add-on is completely free to use, with no premium-locked features, although we couldn't change the default language from US English. If you're worried about privacy, you can make Handsfree stop listening to your microphone after three minutes of silence, or opt to press Ctrl before each command. ■

5 ESSENTIAL SHORTCUTS

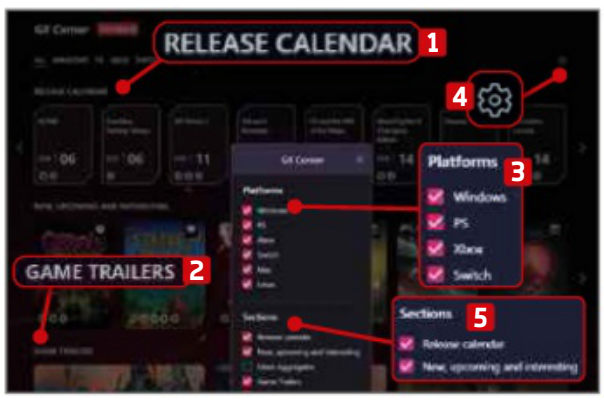
- Ctrl + Shift + T **Reopen last-closed tab**
- Ctrl + Z **Undo your last action**
- Ctrl + W **Close the current tab**
- Ctrl + L **Jump to the address bar**
- Ctrl + D **Bookmark current page**

Browse the web with Opera GX

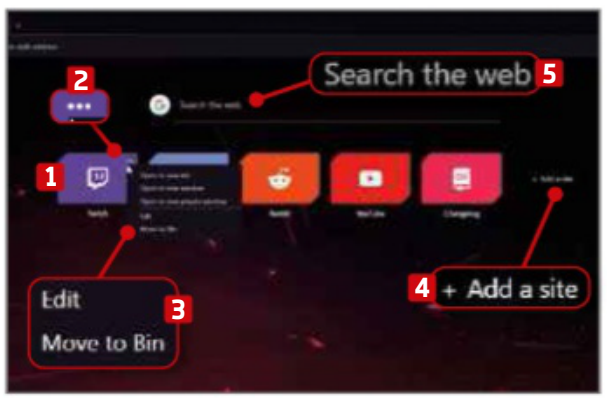
Opera GX is a special version of the Opera browser that lets you control memory, processor power and bandwidth. Here's how to use it

Opera GX: www.opera.com/gx | 20 mins | 7, 8, 10

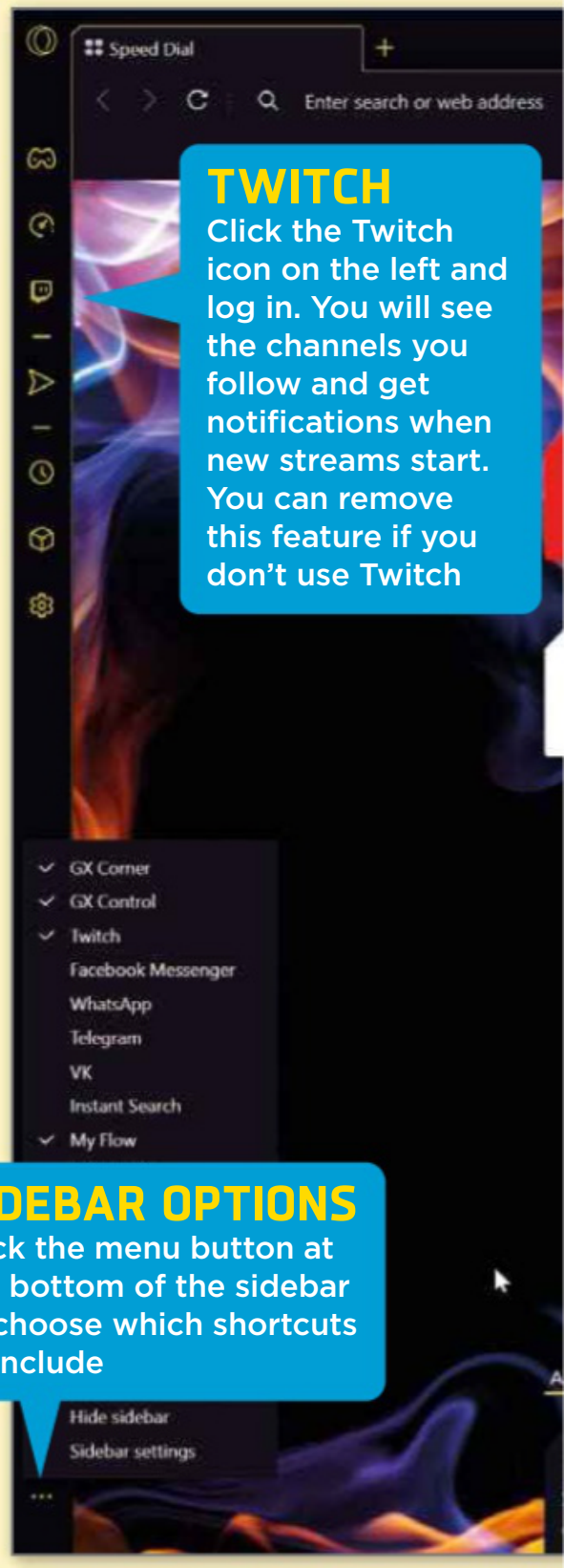
Web browsers such as Chrome and Firefox consume a lot of resources. The more tabs you have open, the more memory and processor power they require, which can lead to your system slowing down or even crashing. Opera GX is a new browser that lets you set limits so it doesn't interfere with your other PC activity. It's designed with gamers in mind, and even includes gamer-specific features such as Twitch integration and a games release calendar, but you don't need to be a Fortnite fanatic to benefit from it. Its resource-limiting features make it useful for anyone, especially if you're running an older PC or you often perform a lot of intensive multi-tasking.

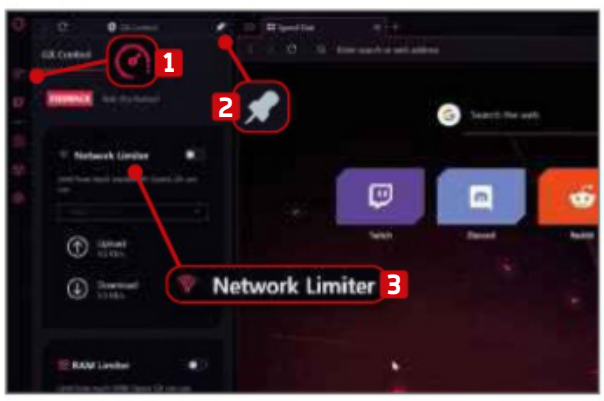


1 The GX Corner includes the games release calendar 1 with links to new, upcoming and interesting games, trailers 2 and more. You can filter the games by platform. 3 Click the cog 4 to customise which gaming platforms and sections 5 are displayed on this page.

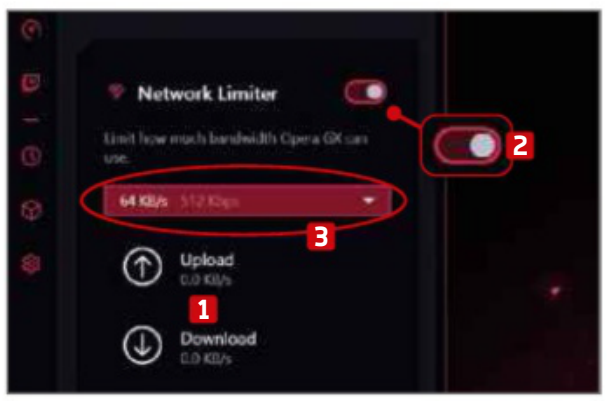


2 Open a new tab to see the Speed Dial page, which lets you quickly access favourite sites. The default selection are all games related 1 but, if you hover over a site and click the three-dot icon, 2 you can edit or remove an item. 3 You can also add new sites 4 and search the web. 5





3 The browser's most notable feature – which makes Opera GX appealing to gamers and non-gamers alike – is GX Control. Open it by clicking its button. 1 You can pin the sidebar to keep it open. 2 The Network Limiter 3 is where you manage the amount of bandwidth used by the browser.



4 The current upload and download speeds are shown. 1 Toggle the feature on 2 and select one of the preset options in the drop-down menu. 3 These range from 64KB/s (512Kbps) to 25MB/s (300Mbps). You can adjust the setting as and when required. Crank it up to make a download complete more quickly.

5 Browsers consume a lot of resources. Enable the RAM Limiter 1 to see how much memory Opera GX is currently using. 2 Adjust the memory limit using the slider. 3 You can also enable the 'hard limit'. 4 Turning this on will stop the memory limit from being exceeded, no matter what.

SNAPSHOT
Opera GX comes with a built-in screenshot tool. Click the camera button to select an area to snap or capture the full screen

NEWS
Add news headlines to the Speed Dial page, sorted by category. Click the cog icon to choose a language and country

6 You can also control processor usage. Its current percentage is displayed here. 1 Enable the CPU Limiter, 2 then use the slider 3 to set the maximum processor limit. You can increase the amount of processing power at any time.

7 Customise the browser by clicking the Settings cog in the vertical toolbar on the left 1 or click the button on the far right to open the 'Easy setup' bar. 2 From here, you can change the colour 3 and select a different wallpaper (including animated ones). 4 You can also add your own wallpaper. 5

8 You can also customise the style of the tile animation 1 and remove specific elements from the browser. 2 Opera GX has some interesting in-browser sound effects and typing sounds 3 that you can toggle on or off. The browser can also block ads and trackers, and has a built-in VPN, too. 4

Secure your Google account with Advanced Protection

Google Advanced Protection Program: bit.ly/googleprotect496 | 20 mins | 7+ 10+

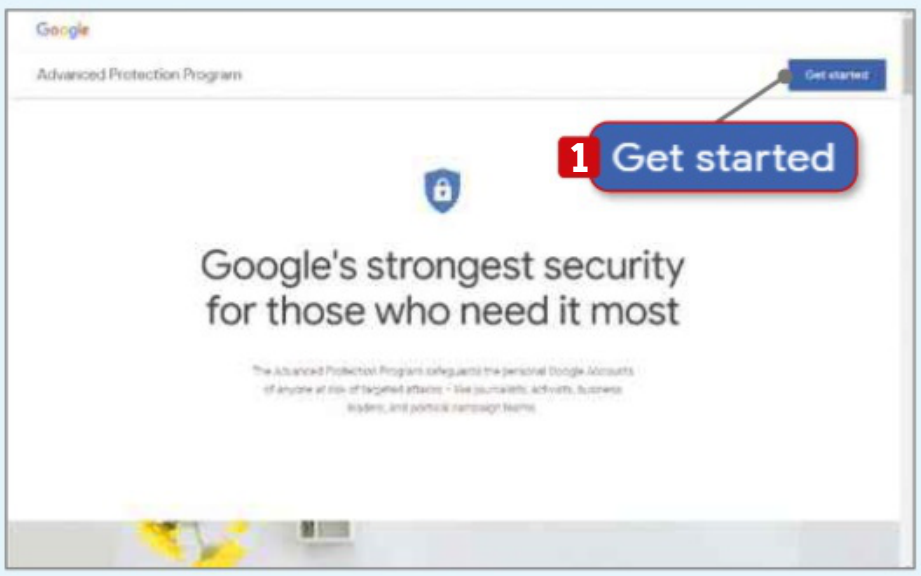
Security is paramount if you're going to venture online, and making sure your accounts are fully secure is a priority. These days, that means enabling two-factor authentication (2FA), which requires you to sign in twice to access an account.

In Issue 494 (bit.ly/webuser494), we ranked the best two-factor authentication apps and, here, we're looking at Google's Advanced Protection Program. This new opt-in service doesn't need an additional app but provides an extra layer of security by using your phone or physical keys to confirm your identity every time you log in. Google claims that its program goes even further than 2FA. By enrolling, your account should be protected against sophisticated phishing attacks, while Google safeguards which apps can access your data and blocks fraudulent account access.

EXPERT TIP

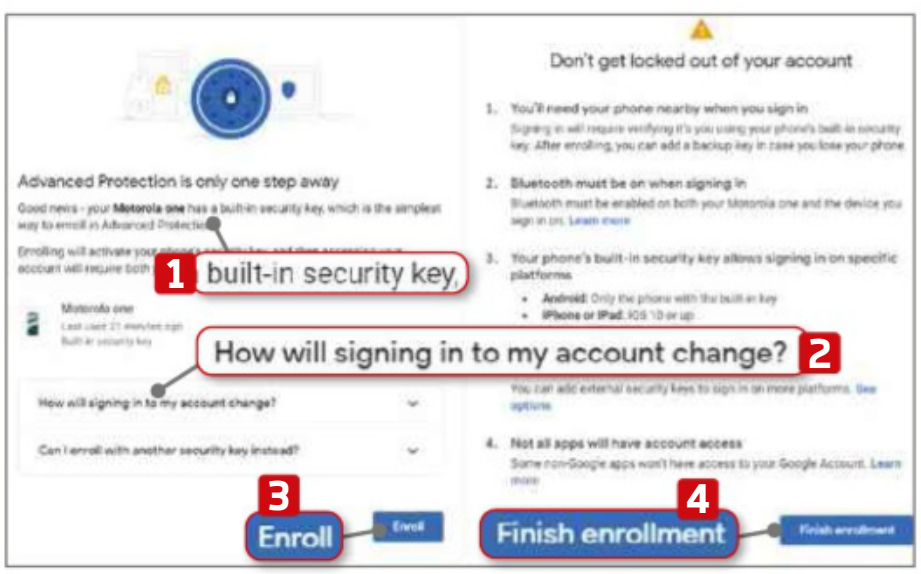
Steve Clark says

Google's Advanced Protection Program works best with Android 7+ but we show you how to use it on older phones, too. It also works on iPhones that run iOS 10 and above and, once you've download and set up the Google Smart Lock app (bit.ly/smartlock496), the enrolment process is the same as with Android, letting you use your phone's built-in security key.

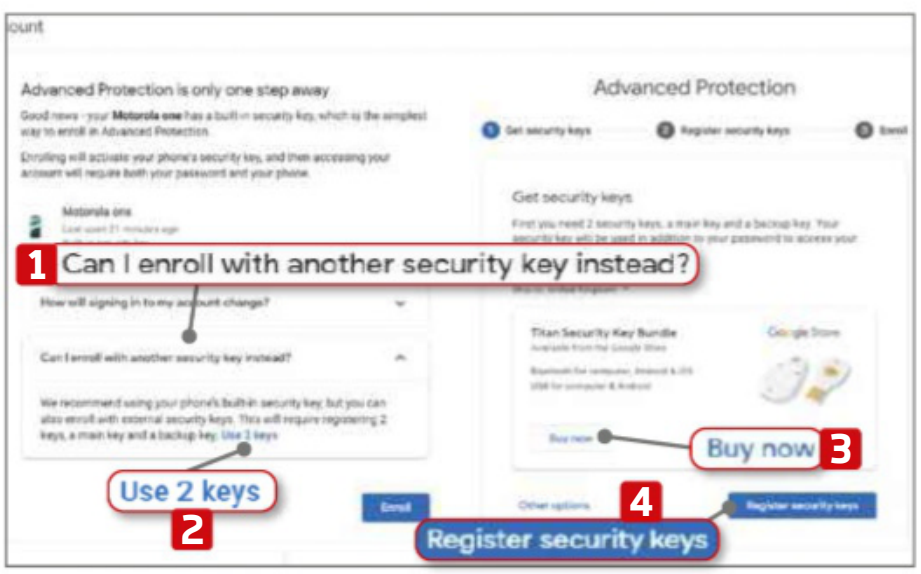


1 Head to bit.ly/googleprotect496, where the website explains what the Google Advanced Protection Program is and how it works. In short, it keeps your accounts safer, defending against certain cyber-attacks and preventing other people from accessing your account. Click 'Get started'. 1

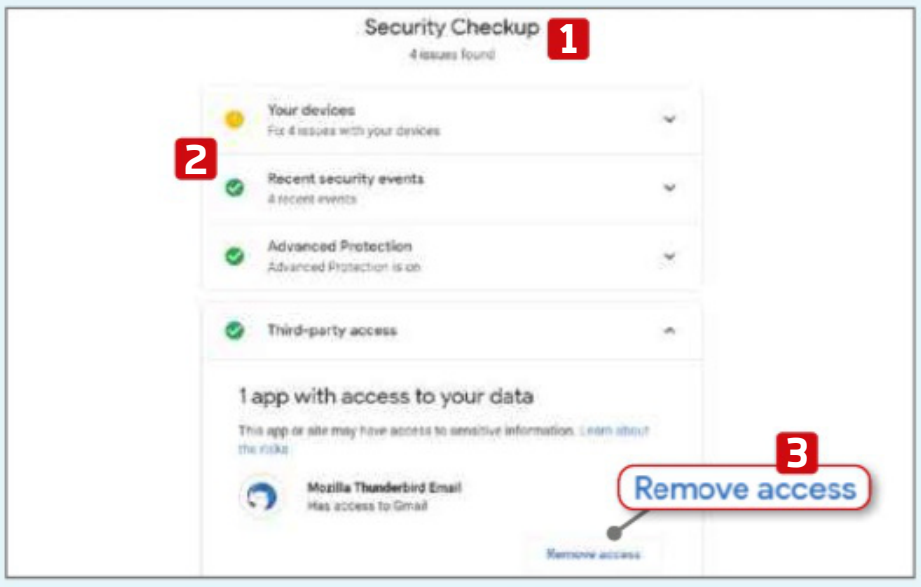
2 If you aren't already signed into your Google account, do so now. On the following screen, press Next to confirm that you wish to enrol in "Google's strongest account security". 1 You must then verify you're the account holder by re-entering your password.



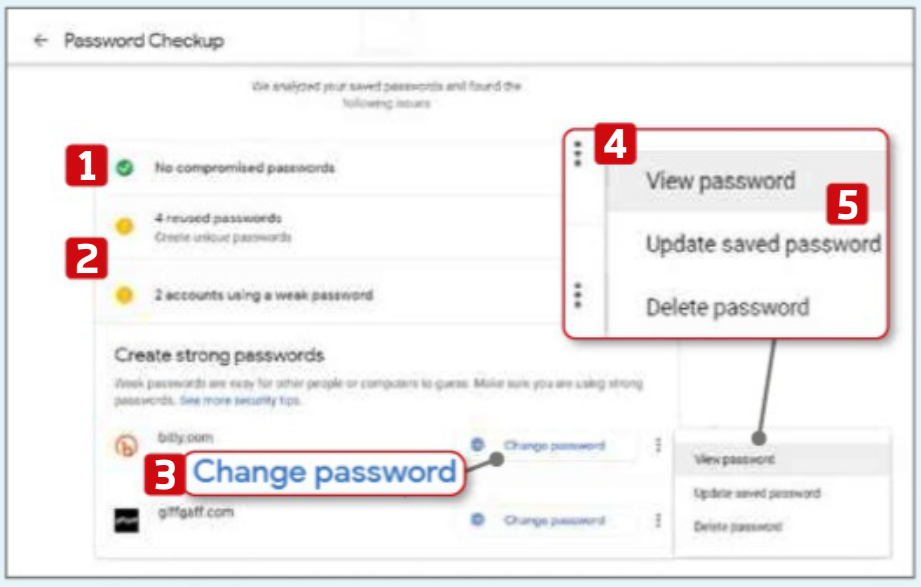
3 Depending on the phone you have, the next screen may vary. Most modern phones – those running Android 7 and above – feature a built-in security key. 1 You can see what this means by clicking 'How will signing in to my account change?'. 2 When you're ready, click Enroll, 3 then Finish Enrollment. 4



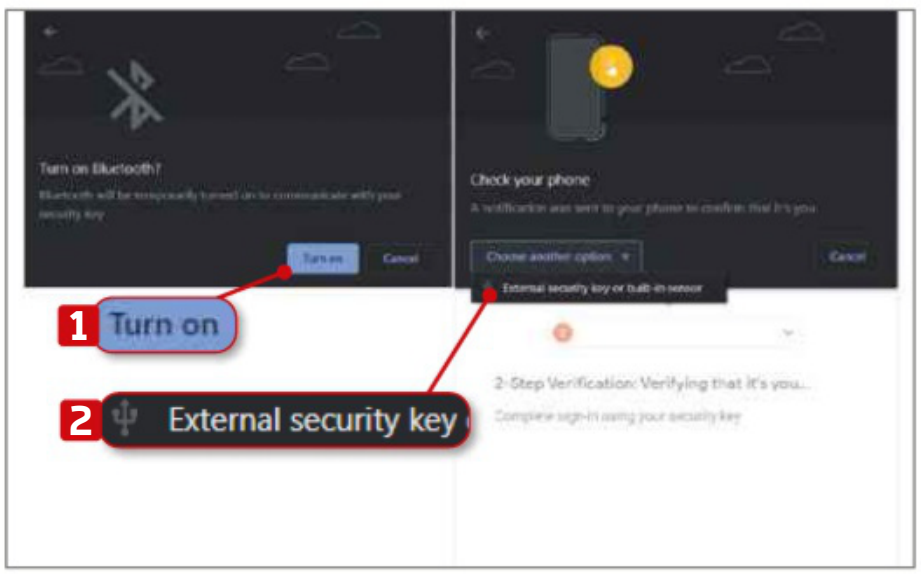
4 If your phone is an older model or you'd rather use physical keys, click 'Can I enroll with another security key instead?', 1 then choose 'Use 2 keys'. 2 From here, you can buy 3 and register 4 the Titan Security Key Bundle. However, this will set you back £50.



5 Once you've enrolled, check your phone for confirmation. On your computer, ignore Google's attempts to sell you back-up keys by clicking 'Add key later'. Google now performs a Security Checkup. 1 Click each section 2 to view potential issues. Click Remove or 'Remove access' 3 to plug any security gaps.

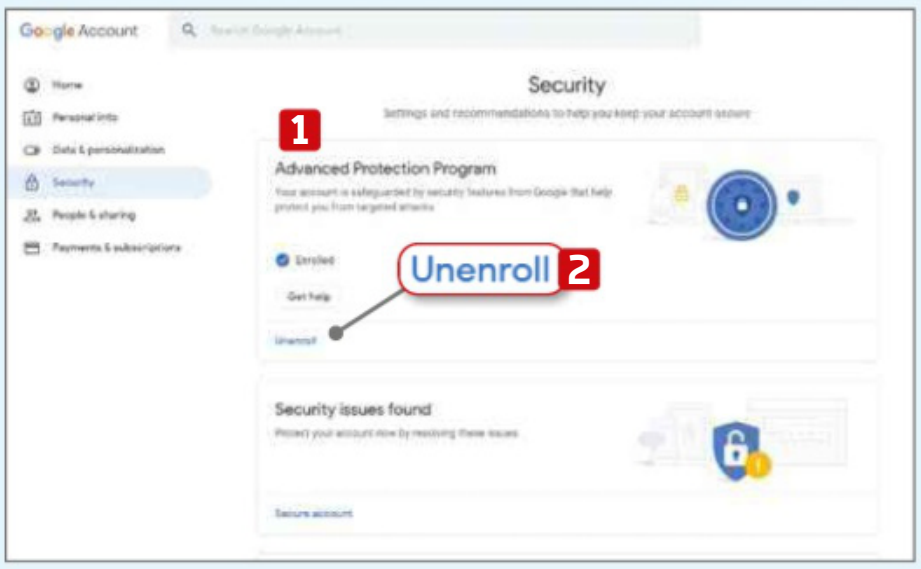


6 At the foot of Security Checkup is Password Checkup. Click this, then select 'Check passwords' and sign in again. Google searches for compromised passwords 1 and suggests fixes for repeated and weak passwords. 2 You can select 'Change password' 3 or click the relevant three-dot icon 4 to View, Update or Delete a password. 5



7 Check that the Advanced Protection Program is working by switching on Bluetooth and Location services on your phone, then open Gmail on your PC. Google prompts you to turn on your computer's Bluetooth, so press 'Turn on'. 1 You may also choose to sign in using a physical security key. 2

8 Check your phone for the Google prompt. You're asked, 'Are you trying to sign in?'. Tap Yes 1 – unless you're not, in which case, choose 'No, it's not me'. 2 When your phone and device are connected, you have the option to untick 'Don't ask again on this computer'. Click Next.



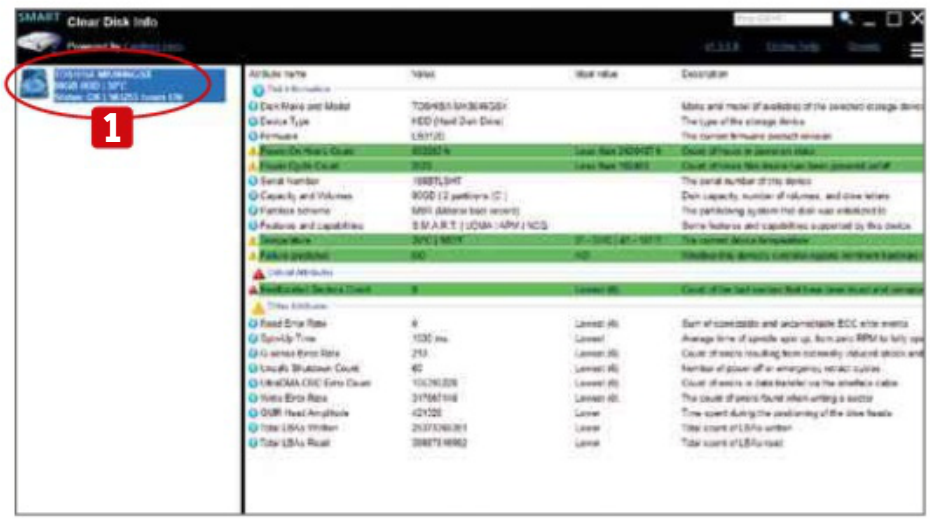
9 If you don't want to continue in the program any longer, go to myaccount.google.com/security. Under the Advanced Protection Program section, 1 click Unenroll. 2 As you'd expect, you need to sign in and click Unenroll again. On the next screen, select 'Change settings'.

10 Sign in again and you're greeted with Google's 2-step verification zone. Here, you can add additional security keys, 1 back up your passcodes, 2 enable Google sign-in prompts on your phone, 3 and so on. To remove a security key, first choose to Turn Off 4 the service, then Turn Off again. Finally, click the Trashcan icon. 5

Monitor your hard drive's health

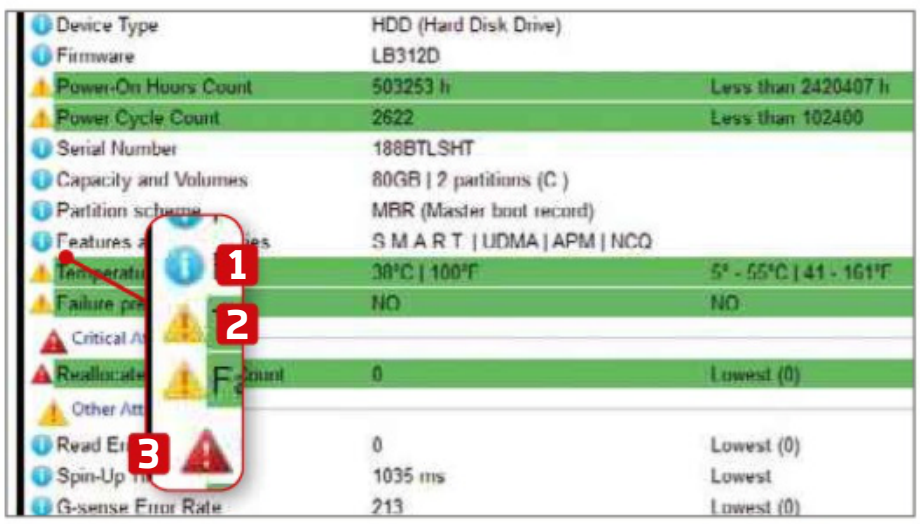
Most modern hard drives use SMART (Self-Monitoring Analysis and Reporting Technology), which means they keep an eye on themselves and know if they're about to fail. Clear Disk Info gathers this list of numbers from your hard drive and presents it in a clear, understandable way, highlighting the information that's particularly worth taking notice of.

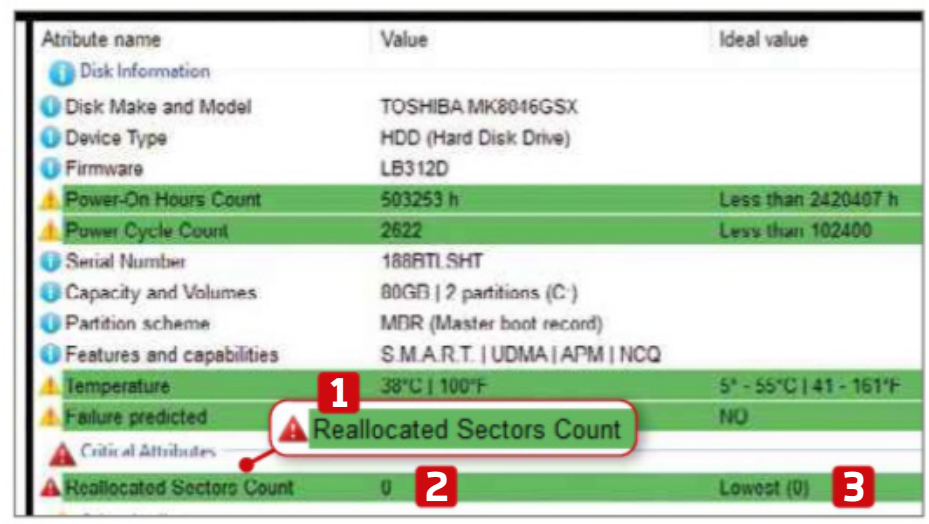
Clear Disk Info: bit.ly/clear496 | **10 mins** | **7, 8, 10**



1 Download Clear Disk Info and run the EXE file, which is portable and doesn't need installing. It seeks out any drives attached to your computer, including both internal and external models. Your drives are listed in the left-hand column. **1**

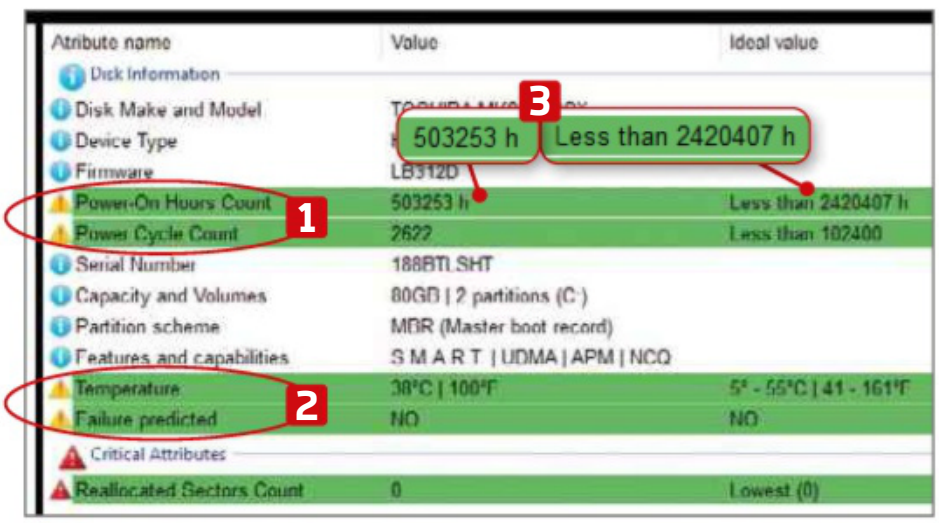
2 The basic drive information is summarised here. You can see the temperature, **1** how many hours of service the drive has provided, **2** and whether it senses any imminent problems. **3** You can also find more detailed information in the Disk Information section. **4**

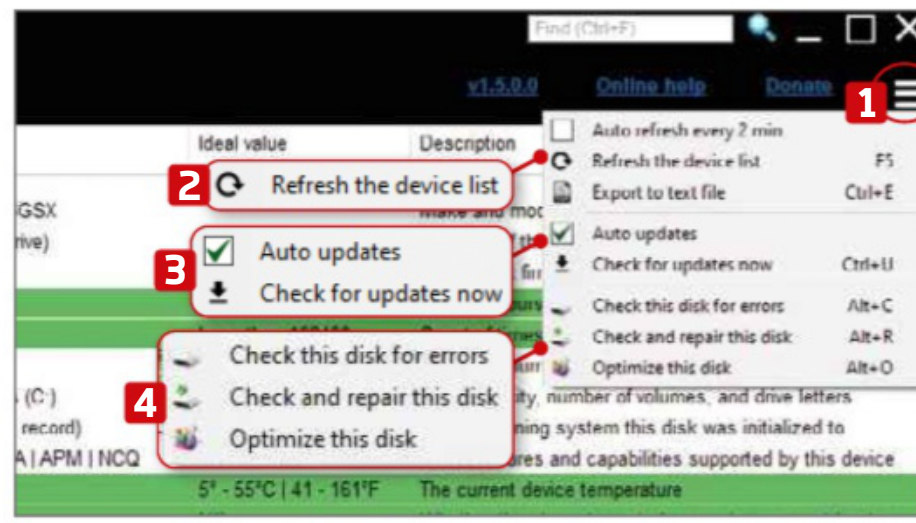




3 Each attribute has a status: a blue 'i' (informative), **1** a yellow warning triangle (important) **2** or a red warning triangle (critical). **3** Yellow and red warnings are also highlighted in green. Although they sound bad, there's no need to panic – just keep an eye on anything that's flagged.

4 For example, on our hard drive, the Reallocated Sectors Count **1** gets a red warning because it's in the Critical Attributes section. At the moment, however, its Value of 0 **2** is identical to the 'Ideal value' of 0. **3** Keep an eye on it, though, and make sure you're regularly backing up your data.





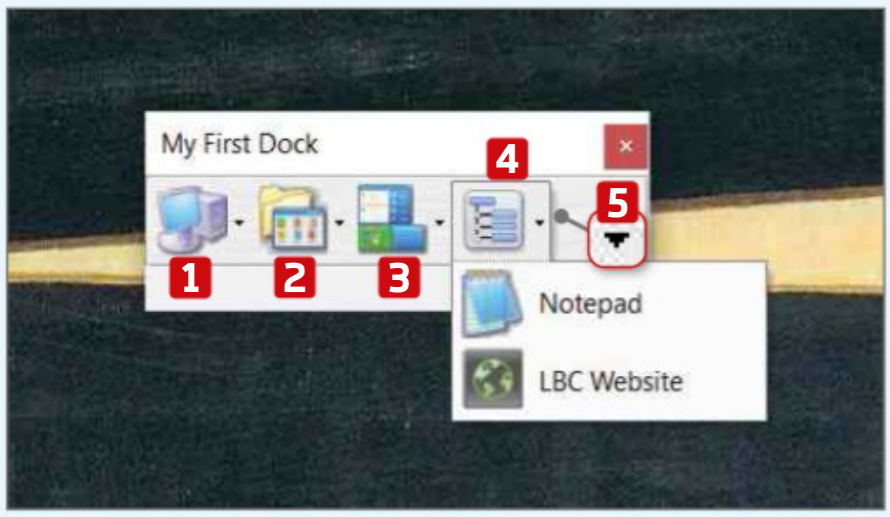
5 Other values to watch out for are the Power-On Hours Count, Power Cycle Count **1** and the Temperature and 'Failure predicted' attribute. **2** Our rating of 503,253 hours switched on is still comfortably below the 'Ideal value' threshold of 2,420,407 hours. **3**

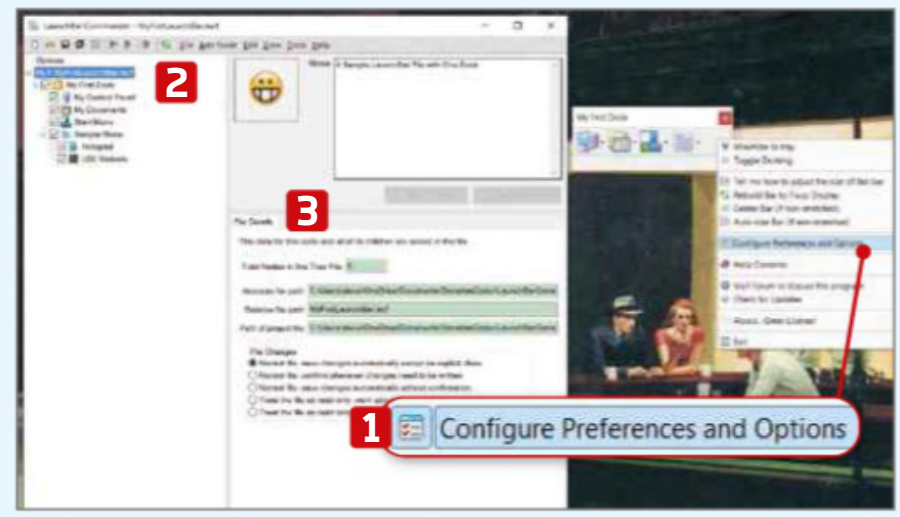
6 Access the menu from the three-line button in the top-right corner. **1** From here, you can refresh the list of drives, **2** update the software **3** and run the 'chkdsk' and 'defrag' commands. **4**

Create your own Windows launcher

LaunchBar Commander is a fully customisable application that lets you dock programs, files, folders, and more. It's not a flashy piece of software by any means and looks rather basic, but its settings provide rich customisation options for building multiple docks. The aim of the free tool is to increase efficiency by placing your most used programs within easy reach.

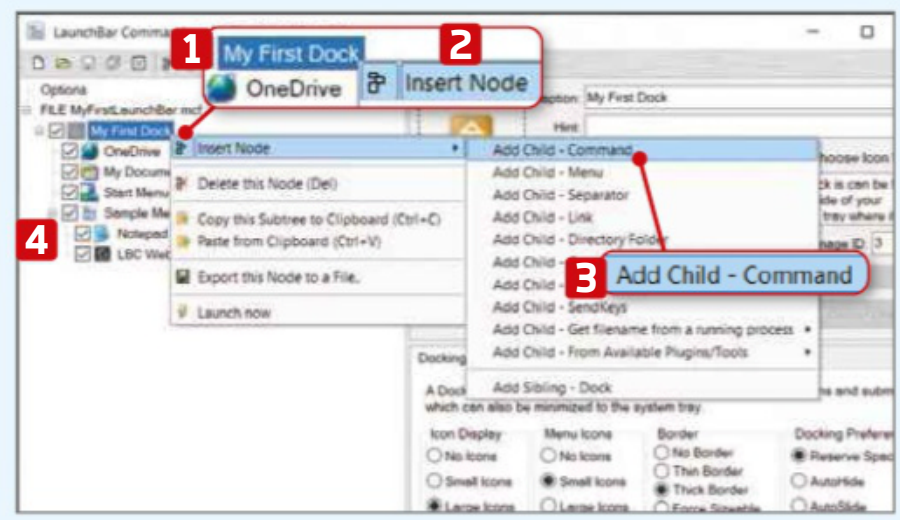
LaunchBar Commander: bit.ly/launchbar496 | **10 mins** | **7, 8, 10**





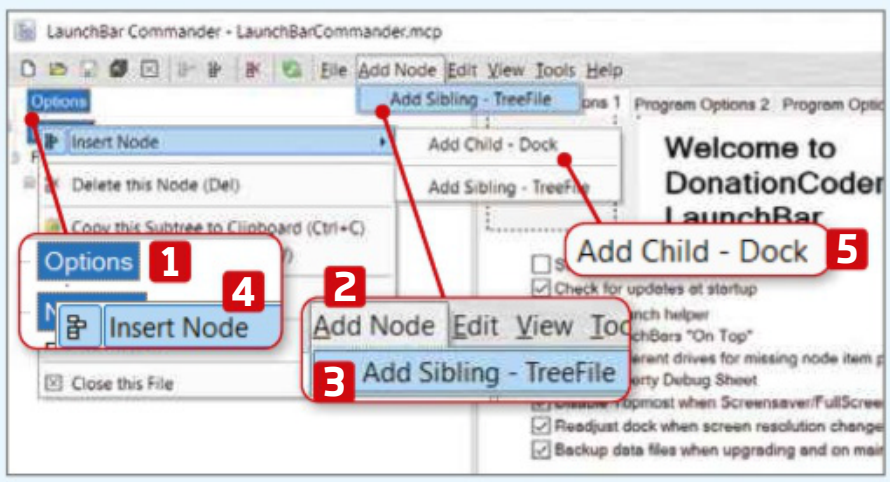
1 Start LaunchBar Commander to display a hovering panel – which overlays any open window for easy access – with four default jump buttons: Control Panel, 1 Documents, 2 Start Menu 3 and a Sample menu. 4 Clicking a jump button's arrow 5 lets you view all actions within each option.

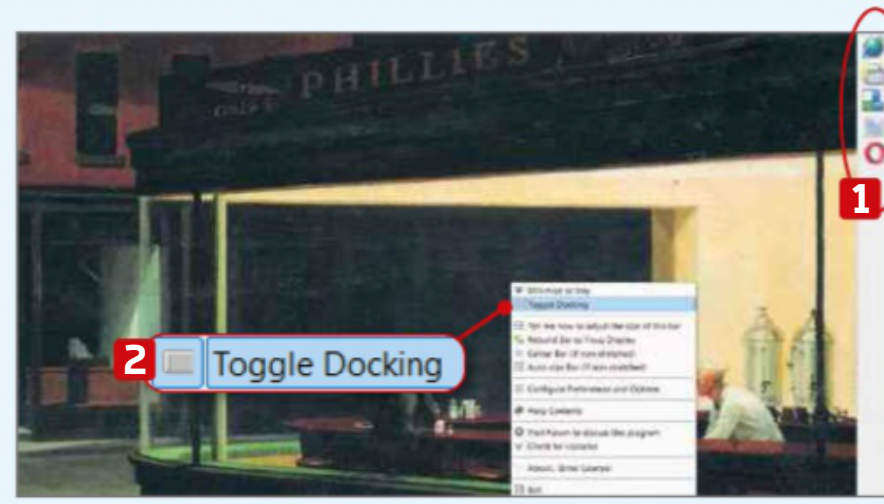
2 To start customisation, right-click inside the launchbar and choose 'Configure Preferences and Options'. 1 In the dialogue box that pops up, the left-hand panel shows the current dock and options in a hierarchical tree-view. 2 The main window shows details for selected options. 3



3 Open the My First Dock menu 1 and click any option below. 2 Click the folder icon by 'Root Folder to Display' 3 and browse to find your new option – we're switching Control Panel to OneDrive. 4 Rename the Caption, 5 click Choose Icon Image, 6 then Save Changes. 7

4 To add more options to the dock, click My First Dock, 1 then right-click Insert Node 2 and select Add Child – Command. 3 As before, give the node a name and icon, and choose the 'Command path' folder. 4 Use File Explorer to find your chosen program, file or folder. Click Save Changes.





5 To create a launchbar from scratch, highlight Options 1 and click Add Node, 2 'Add Sibling – TreeFile'. 3 Click the New File that's created and, again, click Add Node or right-click and choose Insert Node. 4 Select Add Child – Dock, 5 give it a name and icon, then click Save Changes.

6 The tool is typically used as a secondary taskbar. Drag the dock to any side of your screen and LaunchBar Commander expands into a full-length taskbar. 1 To go back to the 'always on top' hovering panel, right-click anywhere inside the dock and choose Toggle Docking. 2

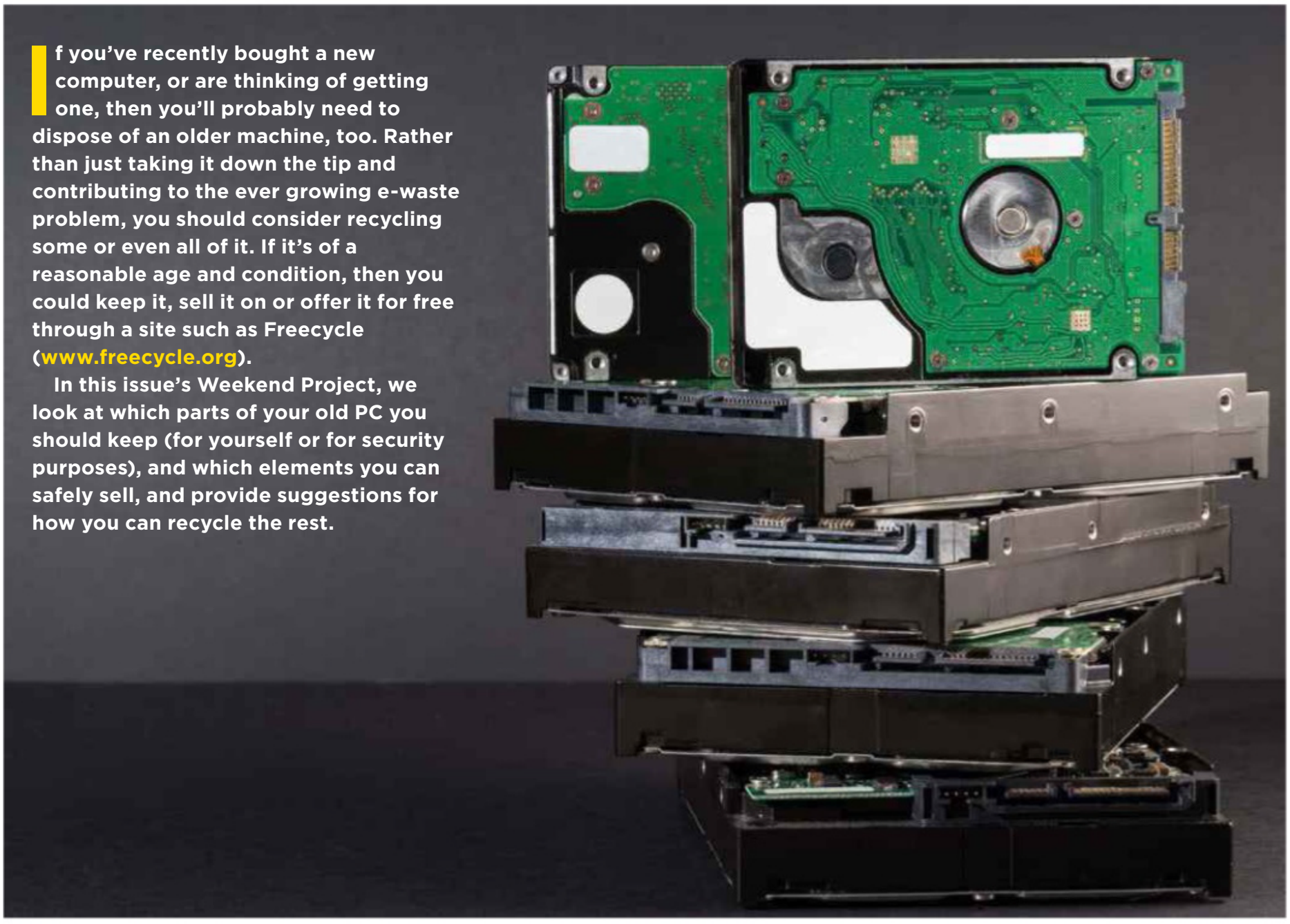
Weekend Project

Get to grips with some serious tech tinkering to boost your computer and other devices

How to...

Recycle the best parts of an old computer

Don't just lob your old PC in the bin. **Wayne Williams** shows you what's worth salvaging and how best to dispose of the rest



If you've recently bought a new computer, or are thinking of getting one, then you'll probably need to dispose of an older machine, too. Rather than just taking it down the tip and contributing to the ever growing e-waste problem, you should consider recycling some or even all of it. If it's of a reasonable age and condition, then you could keep it, sell it on or offer it for free through a site such as Freecycle (www.freecycle.org).

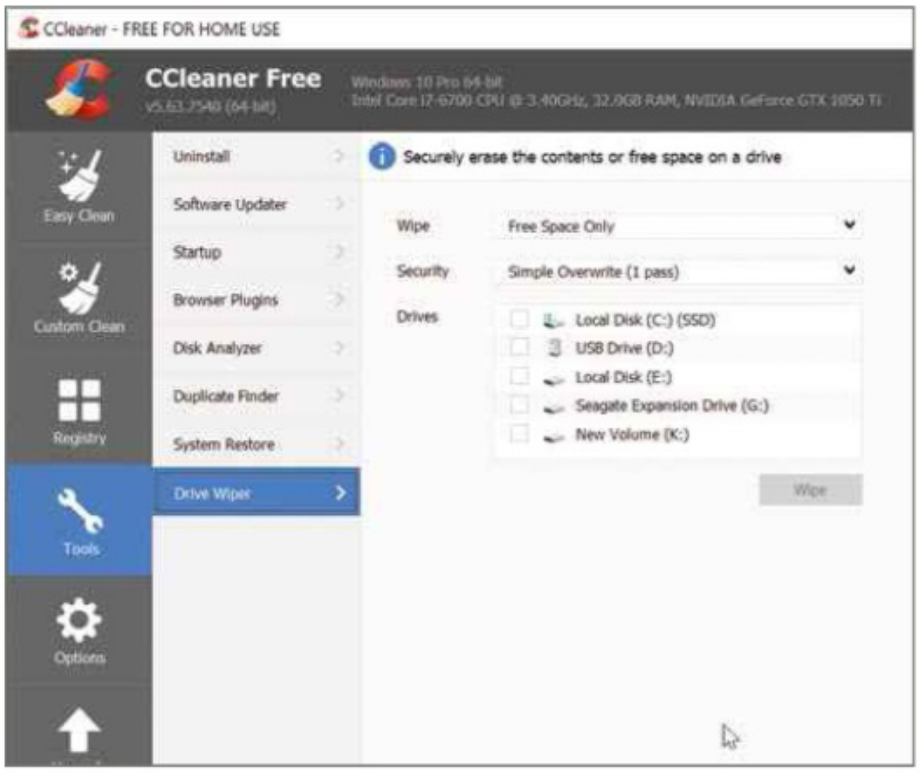
In this issue's Weekend Project, we look at which parts of your old PC you should keep (for yourself or for security purposes), and which elements you can safely sell, and provide suggestions for how you can recycle the rest.

INTERNAL HARD DRIVES

Mechanical hard disk drives (HDD) and solid-state drives (SSD) are the parts of your PC you should give the most thought to when it comes to recycling. If you plan to sell a drive on and don't properly wipe its contents, then there's a very real chance someone will be able to recover your personal files and gain access to your online accounts. Simply formatting a drive to wipe its data is nowhere near secure enough because even free software such as Recuva (www.recuva.com) can easily be used to restore files from it.

The trick to wiping a drive is to use a program such as Darik's Boot And Nuke – DBAN for short (www.dban.org). This overwrites the drive's contents numerous times, making it impossible to restore the data. It can be run from a CD/DVD or USB memory stick and, ideally, you should choose the strongest wipe method offered with the highest number of passes. The process takes several hours to complete, so you may need to leave it running overnight. Once the drive has been thoroughly wiped, you can install a new operating system on it, if you want or need to.

Popular system-cleaning tool CCleaner (www.ccleaner.com) also includes a Drive Wiper option that can securely overwrite



CCleaner comes with a tool that lets you securely wipe an old drive to prevent data recovery

Transform an internal hard drive into an external one with a USB enclosure

your drive. You'll find this under Tools.

For obvious reasons, you should make sure you've backed up absolutely everything you want to keep before proceeding because once the drive has been wiped, your data will be gone forever with no chance of restoring it.

If you want to keep your drive to use on another computer, that's an easy job – just buy a USB enclosure for the type of drive you have (desktop PC, laptop or SSD). You can find enclosures on Amazon for as little as £7. Place your old drive inside, connect the wires and plug the device into a PC using a USB cable.

CD/DVD DRIVE

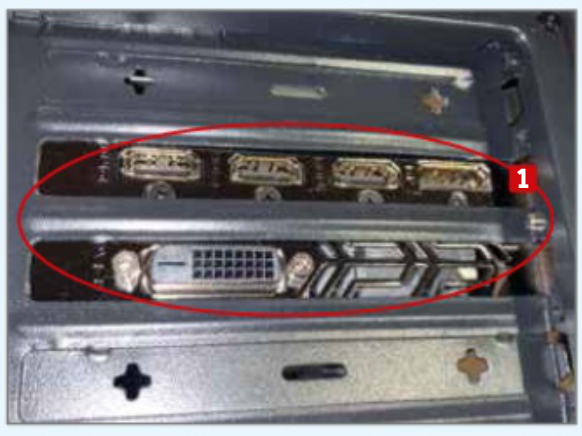
Optical disc drives are much less common these days – most new desktop and laptop PCs don't come with them as standard, and people rarely write data to discs. But if your old PC has a CD, DVD or Blu-ray drive inside it, you can pop this out and buy an enclosure for it – just as we suggested for the hard drive in the previous section. You can write discs whenever you need to, and put the drive away when it's not required.

MEMORY

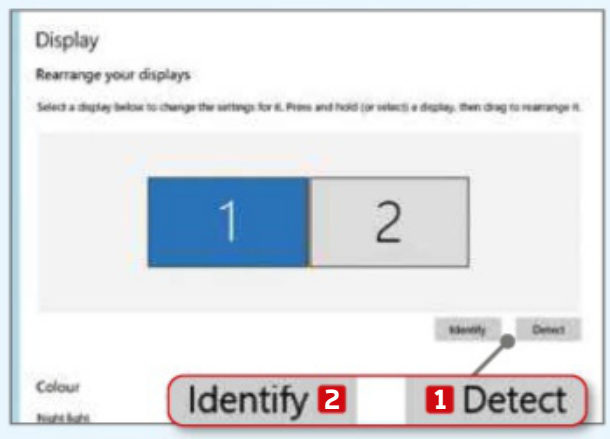
Removing (and, indeed, adding) RAM modules is a straightforward enough task although, annoyingly, some laptops come with the memory soldered in. If you find that the memory modules can be easily extracted, you may be able to use them to boost the amount of RAM in a new system. However, there are a number of issues to be aware of: the 32-bit version of Windows 10 can only recognise a maximum of 4GB (and use a total of around 3.5GB), and while the 64-bit Windows 10 Pro supports up to 2TB of RAM, the 64-bit Windows 10 Home is limited to 128GB.

You can also only use memory that's compatible with your PC. Laptop RAM won't fit into a desktop computer, and vice versa. Also, if your old system uses DDR3 RAM (DDR stands for Double Data Rate) but your new PC uses DDR4, you won't be able to boost the total because the old modules won't fit in the new slots. If both systems use DDR4, then you can use the old RAM with the new, but there is a further caveat – the speeds need to match. If they don't, all the installed RAM will run at the slowest rate. You also need spare slots in the new system for the RAM to fit into.

MINI WORKSHOP | Recycle an old monitor to add a second screen to your PC



1 Turn off and unplug your PC and then – if needed – install a graphics card with the required inputs. Connect both monitors using the relevant ports. 1 If your card has a DisplayPort connection, use this for your main screen because it offers 4K resolutions (8K on the newest standard) at a refresh rate of 60Hz.



2 Turn on your computer. Windows should automatically recognise both screens but it may not set them up at the correct resolution. To manage your screens, right-click the desktop and select 'Screen resolution'. If the second monitor isn't shown, click Detect. 1 Click Identify 2 to show the order in which Windows has arranged the screens.

3 You can reorder the screens by clicking and dragging them. 1 If both monitors are showing the same image, change the setting from 'Duplicate these displays' to 'Extend these displays'. 2 The process varies slightly depending on which version of Windows you're running, but the end result is the same.

Broadband Deals

Call FREE on 0800 083 2357 to switch your broadband

	Provider	Package name	Monthly price	Contract length	Broadband speed	Allowance	First-year cost*
1	TalkTalk For Everyone	TalkTalk: Fast Broadband	£19.95 (£30 after 18 months)	18 months	11Mbps avg. speed	∞ unlimited	CHEAPEST £239.40
2	Shell Energy	Shell Energy: Fast Broadband	£19.99	18 months	11Mbps avg. speed	∞ unlimited	£239.88
3	sky	Sky: Broadband Superfast + Line Rental	£27.00 (£29 after 18 months)	18 months	59Mbps avg. speed	∞ unlimited *	£324.00
4	Virgin media	Virgin Media: Big Bundle + Fibre Broadband + Weekend Calls	£33.00 (£54 after 12 months)	12 months	54Mbps avg. speed	∞ unlimited	£396.00

Terms & Conditions apply - see ISP sites for details
* Fair-usage or restriction policy applies.

Ofcom

Data supplied by www.broadbandgenie.co.uk. Correct as of 17 February 2020.

Broadband Genie's helpline is powered by Simplify Digital, the Ofcom-accredited switching service

In the next issue of our sister title Computeractive...

SNEAK PREVIEW!

Computer active

- **RUN WINDOWS 7 WITH WINDOWS 10** Get the best of both systems on your PC
- **STOP USING THESE DEVICES NOW!** Laptops, phones & routers that'll soon be unsafe
- **SHARE YOUR DISC DRIVE** Insert a CD/DVD on your PC; open it on your laptop!

PLUS: CONVERT YOUR OLD CAMCORDER FOOTAGE

Subscribe at www.getcomputeractive.co.uk

On sale Weds 11 March

Connect a CD/DVD drive to your PC with a compatible enclosure

MONITOR

There's nothing to stop you selling your old desktop screen, but it might make more sense to use it with your current PC (see our Mini Workshop on page 59). A dual- or multi-screen setup can really boost productivity, and Windows does most of the hard work for you. The two screens don't need to be the same make, model or size, but you will need a video card with multiple outputs that match the inputs on your screens. You will also need the physical space on your desk for a second screen with, ideally both monitors at the same height.

It's possible to remove the screen from a laptop but it's not particularly easy to do and you'll need to look for instructions online. If you're planning on scrapping the laptop anyway, then it might be worth trying it as a fun project.

Recycle your e-waste

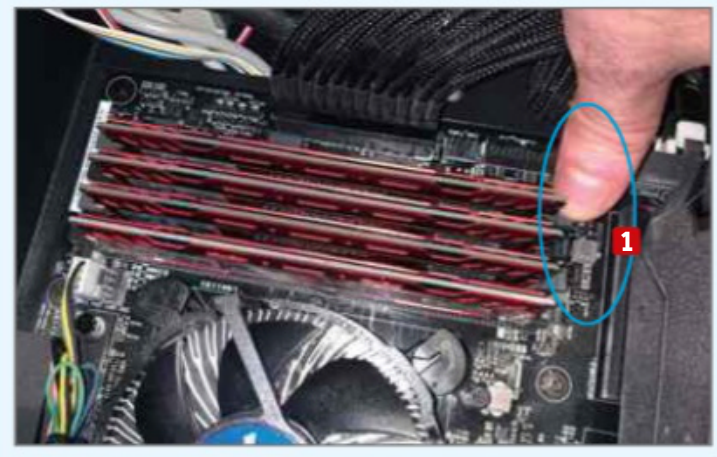
WEEE - Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment – is the name given to all electrical equipment that's no longer working or wanted. It's important to dispose of these items responsibly because a lot of e-waste contains harmful chemicals such as lead, mercury, cadmium, beryllium, chlorine, bromine and phosphors.

You can find local places to take your goods to on the Recycle Now site (www.recyclenow.com/local-recycling). Another option is WeeeCharity (weeecharity.co.uk) which takes electrical items with the aim of reusing, recycling or reselling them back into the community.

Find places that will take your old electrical equipment at Recycle Now

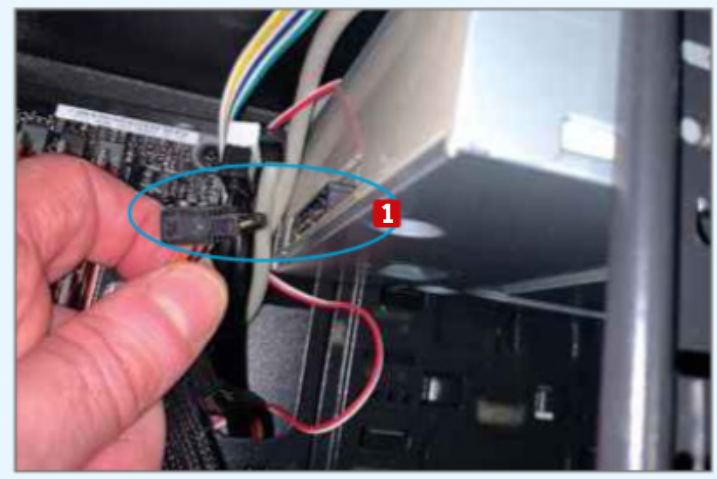
MINI WORKSHOP

Dismantle an old desktop computer



1 Turn the power off at the wall, earth yourself by, for example, touching a radiator, then remove all internal cables to gain clear access to the components. Extracting the RAM is the easiest task. Open a memory slot by pressing down on the locking tab. 1 Carefully pull out the first module and set it aside, then remove the others in turn.

2 To remove a hard drive (make sure you wipe it first before selling it on), pull out the power cable from the rear of the drive, then disconnect the SATA cable. You should now be able to remove the drive. Some hard drives are screwed directly into the casing, while others – like the one above – use rails. 1



3 Removing a CD/DVD/Blu-ray drive is similar to taking out a hard drive. Unplug the power and SATA cables at the back, 1 unscrew the drive and slide it out. If you're planning to reuse the case, bear in mind that removing the drive will leave a gap that needs covering.

NEXT ISSUE **How To...** Repurpose an old iPad or Android tablet

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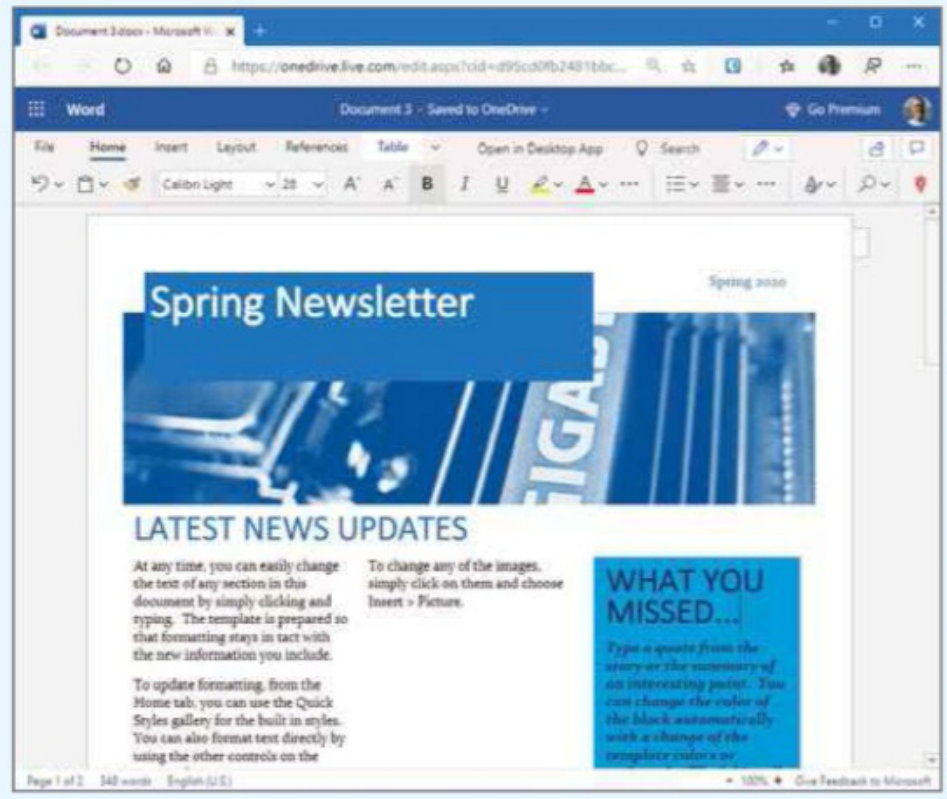
Web User Masterclass

Get started with online office suites, then customise them with templates and add-ins

Ditch WordPad for Word online

WordPad has been bundled with Windows for years as a cut-back version of Word. Recently, however, some users have reported seeing messages in WordPad telling them to use the Word web app instead, which suggests that Microsoft may be preparing to ditch it. This a sensible suggestion, too, because Word online has far more features than WordPad: it supports extensions, tracks changes, offers templates, has spelling and grammar checkers and – best of all – it's free.

Go to onedrive.com in your browser, open the Documents folder, click New and select Word document. Every few seconds, your work is automatically saved online to the OneDrive folder on your hard drive. It's almost impossible to lose any work.



Word in a web browser is free and provides all the features you're likely to need

Use a Word template

Go to onedrive.com and click New, 'Word document'. You're presented with a blank sheet of paper. Now go to the File menu and click New to see a collection of templates including 'General notes', 'Open house flyer', 'Event flyer', 'Chronological resume', Report and more.

Get more Word templates

The Word web app at onedrive.com doesn't allow the use of Word document templates (.dotx), but if you go to templates.office.com in your browser, you'll find a large collection of Office templates organised by category.

Click Newsletters, for example, to see thumbnails of newsletter templates. The ones marked with a diamond in the corner are paid-for but there are plenty of free ones, such as 'Family newsletter', 'Business newsletter', 'Fashion newsletter' and so on.

Open templates at templates.office.com in your browser to edit in the Word web app

Ignore the Download button on the next page and click the 'Edit in Browser' button. A new document is created in your OneDrive Documents folder, which opens in the Word web app. There are document templates available in a wide range of categories, which are suitable for personal or business use.

If you see words that `look like they've been typed in a typewriter`, follow the instructions and type them exactly as they appear, paying close attention to spaces and punctuation.

Excel at Excel

Excel, Microsoft's spreadsheet software, is also available online as a web app running in your browser. Go to onedrive.com, open the Documents folder, click New and select 'Excel workbook' to open a blank spreadsheet. It works just like the PC program – but for free, in a browser – and, although it doesn't have every feature included in the PC app, it's adequate for most purposes.

You can create your own spreadsheets from scratch or use a template. Click File, New and select one of the nine templates, such as 'Simple service invoice', 'Project tracker', 'Weekly timesheet' and others.

There are many more, far superior templates at templates.office.com.

Use templates from Office.com to create spreadsheets and edit them in Excel online

Type `excel` in the search box to see nearly 50 templates, or scroll down the page and click Excel under 'Favorites by app'. Click an Excel template thumbnail and you'll see that on some (but not all) there is an 'Open in Browser' button. Click this to create a new spreadsheet from the template in your OneDrive Documents folder online and on disk.

The Excel web app opens with the template ready for you to start entering data. The currency is often set to US dollars, but just select the cells and set them to UK pounds instead.

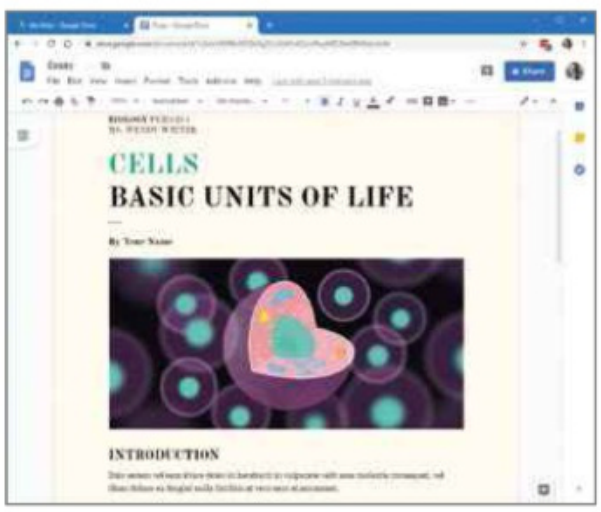
Try Google's office tools

Google has an online office suite to rival Microsoft's and it works in a similar way. If you have a Google account, such as Gmail or an Android phone, go to drive.google.com and click the New button. Select Google Docs for the word processor or Google Sheets for the spreadsheet.

To access the smart templates, click New to show the menu, then click the arrow at the right-hand side of the Docs or Sheet menu. There are dozens of documents including reports, essays, CVs, meeting notes, proposals, and spreadsheet templates such as travel and wedding planners, monthly budgets, calendars, invoices, expenses, and so on.

Documents and spreadsheets are stored in their own format that can't be read by other services, but if you go to File, Download, you can select from various formats such as Microsoft Word, PDF and EPUB (ebook), and save your files to your hard drive.

If you're sent a Word document in Gmail, click the attachment to view it, then click the button to open it in Google Docs. It is automatically saved to your Google Drive storage. Go to Google Drive in your browser, click the cog icon and select Settings for options to automatically convert uploaded files to Google Docs format (drag files and drop them on the browser), and to use Google Docs offline, when you are without an internet connection.



Google Docs and Sheets are online apps that offer lots of great templates

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

More advanced tips for when you're feeling brave

Check spelling and grammar in Word

You may find that a Word document or template defaults to US spelling and grammar, so 'colour' rather than 'color' is marked as a spelling error. To fix this, press Ctrl+A to select all text, then click Review and, in the toolbar, click the down arrow next to 'abc'. Choose 'Set proofing language' and select UK English.

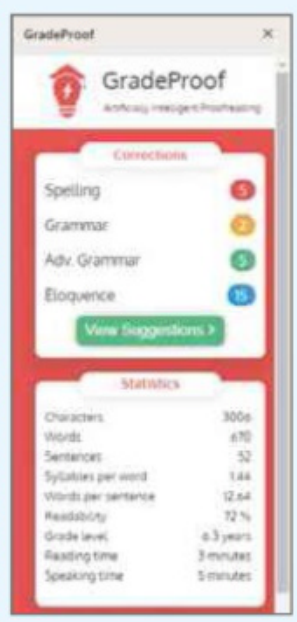
Misspelt words are underlined in red. Right-click them to display suggested replacements, then click the correct word. A double blue underline indicates a grammatical error, which could be anything from a missing comma to the wrong use of 'their' or 'there', 'its' and 'it's', and so on. Right-click double-underlined words to see why Word thinks they are wrong, then click one of the suggested alternatives to apply it.

Improve your writing in Word

Word's spelling and grammar checkers are helpful, but there are more powerful tools for improving your writing. Go to onedrive.com, create a new Word document and click Insert, then Add-ins in the toolbar. Click Store and search for 'grammar', then click GradeProof's Add button. GradeProof is one of dozens of Word add-ins – some are paid-for, some are free, and many are only useful to businesses, but a few are handy for anyone.

After adding GradeProof (or any add-in), you'll see a new icon on the right-hand side of the Home toolbar. Click this to open a panel on the right that shows corrections and statistics. Click View Suggestions. On first use, you're asked to create an account, but this is free to do.

A window opens showing the document text with errors and problems highlighted. All the features in the Essential section of the sidebar are free, but the Advanced section contains paid-for tools. Click highlighted words and phrases in the text to see suggested fixes and apply them. Click Apply at the top of the window to update the Word document with the corrections.



Word web app has some useful add-ins, such as GradeProof spelling and grammar checker

Boost Google Docs features

Google Docs has add-ons that bring useful new features. Open any document on Google Drive and click Add-ons, then 'Get add-ons' to display a highlighted collection. For more options, click the three-line menu button and select a category, such as Utilities, Creative Tools, Task Management, Academic Resources and more. Click a tile to view the details and click Install to add it. Use it by going to the Add-ons menu, where you will find a new menu item.

Try an online suite with desktop apps

SSuite Office (office.ssuiteoffice.com) has only a dozen applications but they work in an innovative way. In Chrome, visit the site and click Scaramouche or Fandango to open the word processor. Now select 'More tools' from Chrome's menu, then 'Create shortcut'. Tick the box to open it as a window. A desktop icon is created that opens the word processor web app in a window, like a regular PC program. Repeat this for the other online apps and create desktop shortcuts to open them as apps.

In Edge, visit the SSuite Office website and open Fandango, then open Edge's menu and select Apps, 'Install this site as an app' to add it to the Apps menu. Repeat this for the other apps. To run these office apps like desktop software, select them in Edge's Apps menu.

SSuite web apps work like regular office apps installed on your PC's hard drive

Ask the Expert

Roland Waddilove, computer programmer and PC journalist since 1981, answers all your technical questions. Email us for help at webuser@webuser.co.uk

LINUX

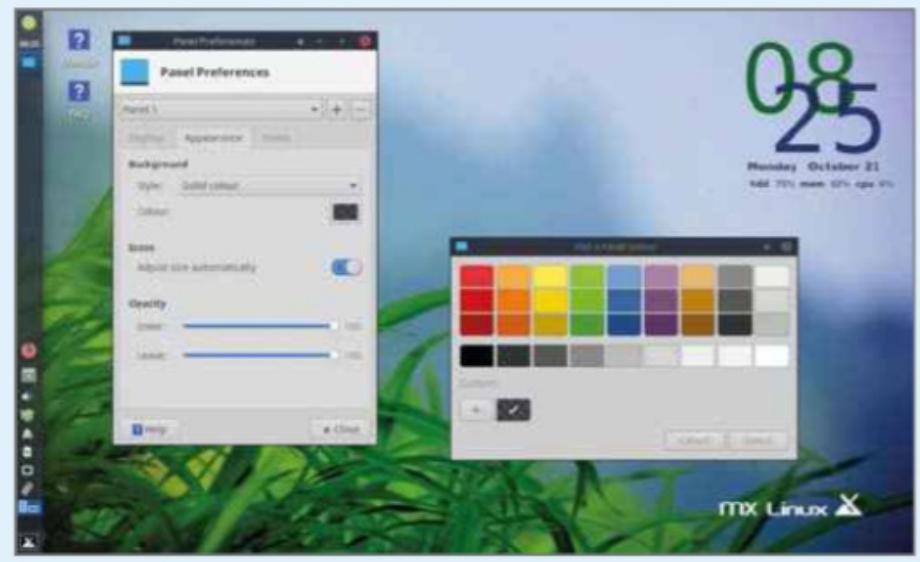
Choose the right Linux version

Q As soon as I move the files from my Windows 7 laptop to my Windows 10 PC, I'm planning to switch the Windows 7 device over to Linux. The laptop is an HP Pavilion g6, with 6GB of memory and a 750GB hard drive.

I read your article about versions of Linux in Issue 487 (bit.ly/webuser487). I used to work with various Unix systems at work in the later part of my working life and I seem to recollect that names such as SUSE (www.suse.com, the one we used at work), Red Hat (www.redhat.com) and Debian (www.debian.org) were current in those days, but this was 14 years ago.

Is there a reason these and any other versions were not even briefly mentioned, other than the lack of space? Are these releases any good nowadays or do they come with disadvantages?

John Greenaway, via email



If you aren't constrained by an older PC there are plenty of versions of Linux you can try

A There are hundreds of variations of Linux and space limitations make it impossible to cover them all. The remit of that particular article was that the operating systems should be suitable for lower spec PCs. We looked at a range of options and picked our top six.

SUSE and Red Hat are aimed at businesses and come with levels of paid-for support, so they are less suited to our typical reader looking for a free operating system for an older computer. Debian is interesting, though, because many of the current popular versions of Linux (including Ubuntu and a version of Linux Mint) are adapted from it, so you may find the article's award winners Lubuntu (lubuntu.net) and Linux Mint (linuxmint.com) more familiar than you might expect.

DistroWatch (distrowatch.com) is a great resource, listing over 100 different versions of Linux. It has a Page Hit Ranking table on the right-hand side of the homepage that shows versions of Linux in order of popularity. Six of the top 10 most popular versions are based on Debian, and MX Linux (mxlinux.org) is currently the most popular by a wide margin.

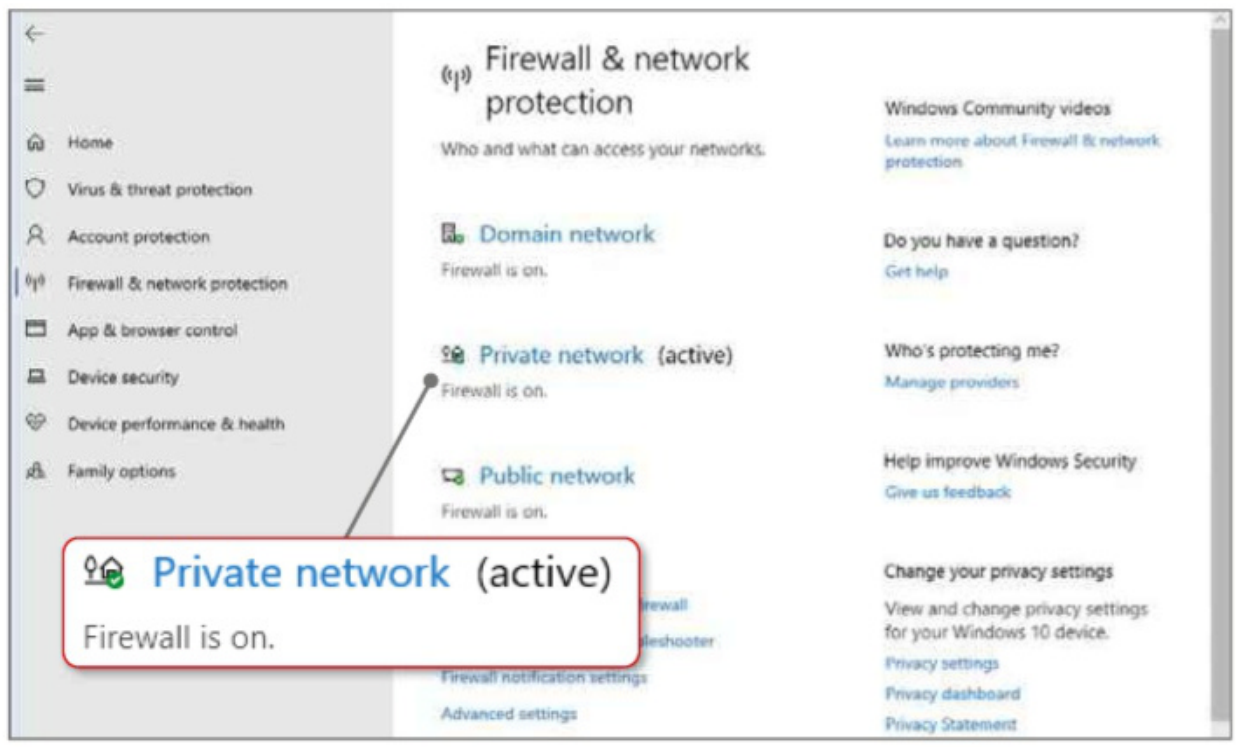
Your computer's specifications are powerful enough to run any version of Linux, but the bigger and more popular ones probably have a wider support for different types of hardware. Linux is free, so download several distros and try them to see which ones work with your hardware and suit you the best.

Linux has changed a lot in the 14 years since you last used it, but some things are the same and your experience will certainly help.

SECURITY

Get a VPN working in Windows 10

Q My Surfshark VPN (surfshark.com) works with my Amazon Fire TV Box and Android TV box (with some occasional buffering) but I'm having problems with my desktop PC. I can't get the VPN to connect, even though I can get an ordinary connection with Opera VPN working. I had no problem at all prior to installing Surfshark. Having Opera VPN on or off makes no difference.



Temporarily turn off Windows security features to solve connection problems

Software companies often sell boxed software without CDs to save money and to ensure that you get the latest version

When I try to connect Surfshark, Windows Security asks for my username and password, but no usernames or passwords I know of work. I have looked into how to switch this off, but I've had no success. I also get Windows PowerShell 2.0 as a pop-up, even when I have unticked the box for the feature. I have been told that PowerShell should be switched off because it causes problems. Is this the case?

On one occasion, I couldn't get on the internet at all on my PC (via an Ethernet connection), yet I could stream on both Firebox, Android and even my laptop – all of which are wireless. I have restarted my router, just in case, but to no avail.

Windows 10 doesn't seem to like Surfshark for some reason. Perhaps I haven't set it up correctly, although I have reinstalled it a few times and tried the various settings that are available.

David Golledge, via email

A Windows Security displays messages if you or a program tries to change the security settings. Open Windows Security from the Start menu, then turn off 'Firewall & network protection', 'Virus & threat protection' and controlled folder access in the same section, and 'App & browser control'. Now try connecting and see if disabling the setting has fixed the problem. These security features are important so turn them back on as soon as you can.

We have used a few VPNs and sometimes they fail to connect for some unknown reason. Quite often, picking a different city, country or server solves the problem. Maybe too many people were trying to connect to the one you were using. Use the country list or the options to connect to the fastest or nearest server.

Another possible fix is to change the protocol, which has solved the problem for some people. Click Settings in the sidebar, then Advanced. Under Protocol, select a different option, then try connecting the VPN again. If it still doesn't work, return to this section and flip the switches below – on to off or off to on.

You can also try resetting Surfshark. Click Settings, scroll down and click Help. Click Diagnostics and you'll see two buttons displayed: one to reset the network connection and another to restore original settings. Try them both.

If nothing helps, go to support.surfshark.com, scroll down to the bottom of the page and click Live Chat to discuss the problem with a member of the technical support team.

SOFTWARE

Install software without a CD

Q I ordered Studio One (bit.ly/stud496) recording software from Amazon to use with Autotune Pro (bit.ly/auto496). It was delivered today but there was no CD with it.

With Autotune Pro, I entered the registration code as asked, but it said that the registration code was already applied to someone else. That someone else was me.

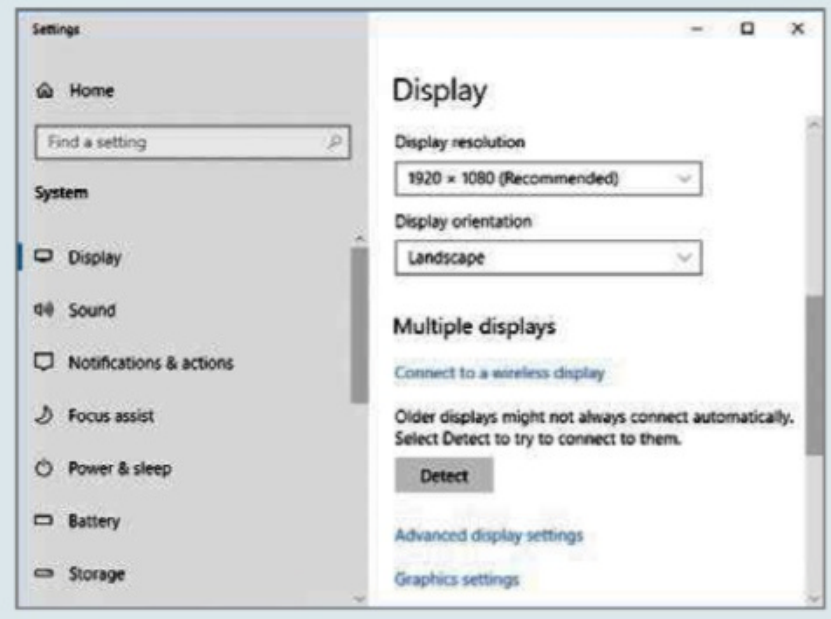
I was told I would need an iLok licence (www.ilok.com) to use Autotune Pro, but because of the registration problem, I'm now afraid that iLok might not work. I've got multiple problems to deal with right now and it's very frustrating.

Bittersweet Madness, via email

HARDWARE

Connect two monitors

Q I needed to move my TV/CCTV monitor next to my computer monitor and I then decided to use it as a second screen. I connected it to my GeForce GT 610 graphics card using a VGA cable because the computer monitor is already using the HDMI connector.



If Windows has problems automatically detecting old external displays, click Detect in settings

I turned on the TV, changed the input source and it was working perfectly. That was until the next day. It seems I have to keep changing the settings in Windows display settings from 'Show only on 1' to 'Extend these displays'. Is there something I am missing or a workaround that I can insert in the Registry?

Robert Lindsay, via email

A The problem could be related to the VGA cable, which is a very old standard that hasn't been used by monitors for a long time. It doesn't have the same communication capabilities as HDMI and it may be that the PC can't detect it, which is why you have to manually select the display settings each time it's used.

Try switching on the monitor before starting the computer and, when shutting down, wait until the PC is off before you turn off the monitor.

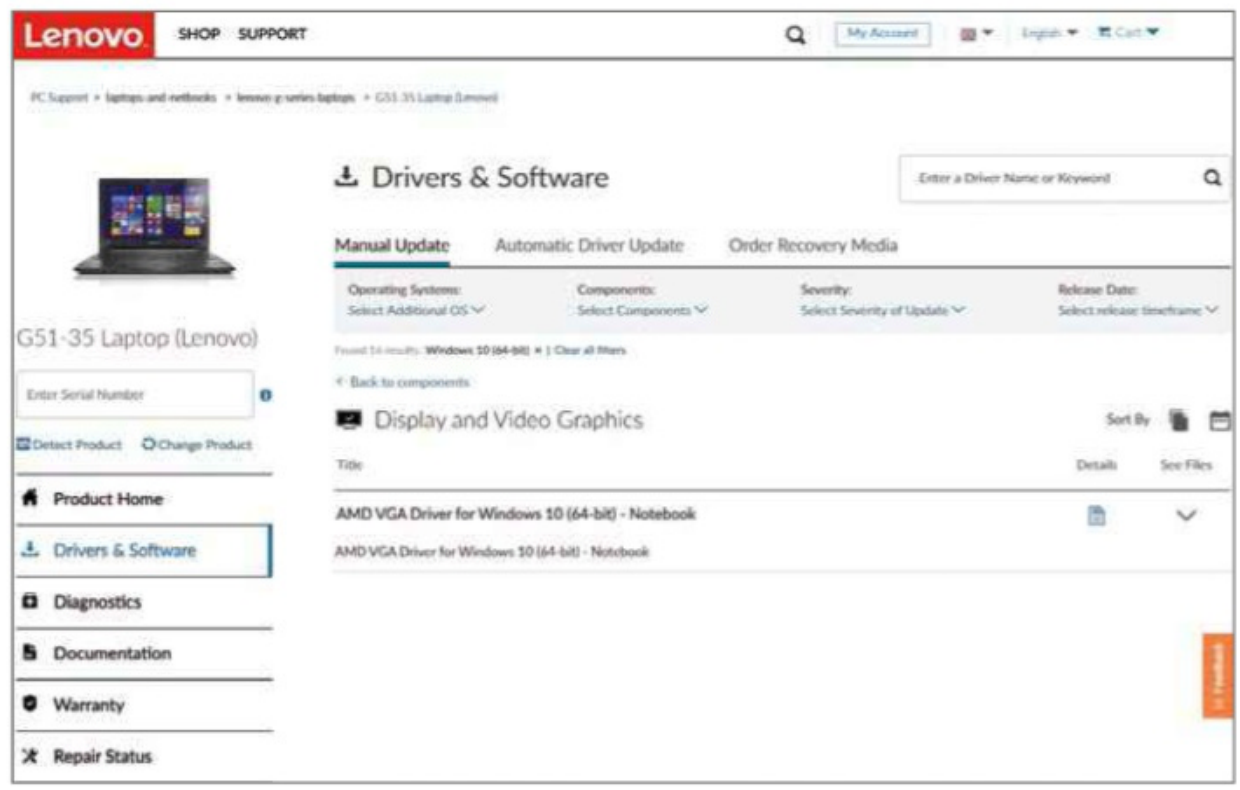
Some people have found that updating the graphics card drivers solved the problem. Go to www.geforce.co.uk/drivers and download and install the latest drivers for your graphics card.

Ask the Expert

It's not unusual for a physical purchase to come with an empty box, although there's usually a serial number or product key and some instructions on how to use it to get the program from the PreSonus Studio One website.

Basically, you go to www.presonus.com and register with the product key. You can then log into the site and download the software to your computer. It can take some time, so be patient. Install it and, when it is first run, it can be activated. Go to bit.ly/activate496 for more information on registration and setup.

Autotune Pro requires an iLok, which is a USB dongle that authorises the software. Go to bit.ly/ilok496 for a step-by-step guide to using it. Links on the right-hand side of the page offer help with registration and activation.



You should download display drivers from your PC manufacturer because they are best placed to ensure components don't clash

HARDWARE

Fix a flickering screen

Q The screen on my Lenovo Z51 laptop starts to flicker when I first switch it on but appears to settle down after about five minutes. I have read it could be a problem with drivers.

I have gone to Display Adapters in Device Manager and updated all drivers, and also checked Windows updates. The Lenovo website says there are no updated drivers available.

Michael Taylor, via email

A A fault with the screen display is rarely a hardware issue and is nearly always caused by software. Drivers are available from two sources: via Microsoft, using Device Manager; and from the hardware manufacturer. The drivers from the two sources are not always the same, and the latest version may not be the best.

Download the most recent display driver from the Lenovo website and install it. This will replace the Microsoft driver installed by Device Manager. It may be older, but it might also be more compatible. Try it and see.

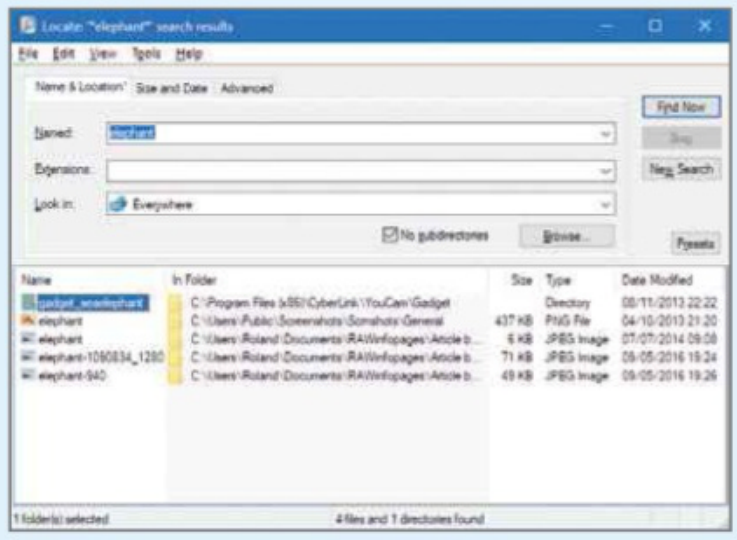
GENERAL PC

Unlock File Explorer's search box

Q I am having a problem with the search function in File Explorer. If I try to use it, Explorer just locks up. I have to go to Task Manager and force Explorer to quit. It restarts, but I can't use search.

In my efforts to find a solution, I discovered a lot of other people are having the same problem. Is there a fix?

Blake Johnson, via email



Build a database of files, then find any file instantly with Locate32

A As you've realised, this is a known problem and you're not alone – many people have found that search no longer works in File Explorer on some computers following the last major update to Windows 10.

Microsoft has a fix but you may need to wait until the Spring major update to get it. In the meantime, try using an alternative search tool instead, such as WiseJetSearch (www.wisecleaner.com) or Locate32 (locate32.cogit.net).

WINDOWS 7

Download another final update

Q I still use Windows 7 – for now, at least – but I may get a new computer in the summer. In the meantime, an annoying problem has cropped up with my desktop wallpaper. When an image is selected for the desktop, there is an option to stretch it to fit, if it isn't quite the exact dimension of the screen. However, this no longer works and the desktop is black.

I've used this method for years and it's always worked. I know Windows 7 is no longer supported, but is there a solution?

R Harris, via email

A Microsoft broke the wallpaper with its final update but has agreed to fix it. As a result, there's another update, which you can download from bit.ly/wallpaper496. This should solve the problem but make sure you read the prerequisites before installing or you might find that your PC doesn't reboot.

Has Windows 7 gone dark? Don't worry, a final final update can fix it

This fortnight Roland signed up for the Amazon Prime trial so is binge-watching its TV shows before he has to cancel it

Readers' Helpdesk

Can you help your fellow readers with their computer problems? Send your questions and answers to webuser@webuser.co.uk

READERS RESPOND

Back Issues disc winner

STREAMING

Listen to Audible on Google Home

A In Issue 494 (bit.ly/webuser494), Ken Bernard asks whether he can play Audible audiobooks on his Google Home. The short answer is 'yes', but it takes a bit of setting up because you can't just 'cast' your audiobook to the smart speaker.

Say to your Home: 'Hey Google, Bluetooth pairing'. Next, open your phone's Bluetooth settings, turn it on and connect the two devices. Now, when you play Audible books, they'll play through your Home speaker until you switch off Bluetooth.

You can't cast Audible to Google Home but there is a Bluetooth workaround

Jake Canning, via email

CAN YOU HELP?

webuser@webuser.co.uk

You can seek help or suggest solutions to other readers' problems by emailing webuser@webuser.co.uk or via www.facebook.com/webusermagazine or twitter.com/webusermagazine.

MOBILE

Q When I click a link in an email, I get a message saying 'Safari cannot open the page because it couldn't establish a secure connection to the server'. Can you help please?

Trevor Hope, via Facebook

EMAIL

Q Is there an email program I can use with a Pipex.com account? Thunderbird was fine until TalkTalk messed up the server portals, and Windows' built-in email never worked.

Gordon Steele, via Facebook

BROWSERS

Print web pages clutter-free

Q After reading your article about the new Microsoft Edge browser (Issue 492, bit.ly/webuser492), I downloaded it myself. I'm getting on well with it but one thing I miss is the clutter-free printing. In the old version of Edge, this was very handy for removing ads and the like from a web page prior to printing. I would be truly grateful if you could show me how to reinstate this option.

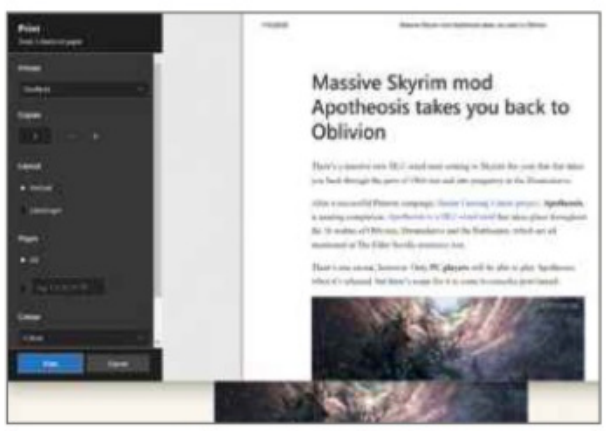
Will Jobling, via email

A Microsoft's new Edge browser certainly has a lot going for it but it's still missing a few key features. And, as you point out, clutter-free printing is one of them. However, there's a cheeky workaround that lets you print web pages without all those ink-wasting unwanted extras.

The trick is to use Microsoft's Immersive Reader option. By design, this strips out unnecessary details, letting you focus on the content as you would a book or magazine article. When you reach a page you'd like to print, look to the right-hand side of the address bar – you should see a book icon. Click this to launch Immersive Reader mode.

Now, when you print the page, you'll note the preview has a lot less clutter. Like the original printing option, this Immersive Reader trick won't work on every site, but you should be able to print most web pages more efficiently.

Steve Clark, Features Writer, Web User



Try this Immersive Reader hack to bring back clutter-free printing

SCAMS

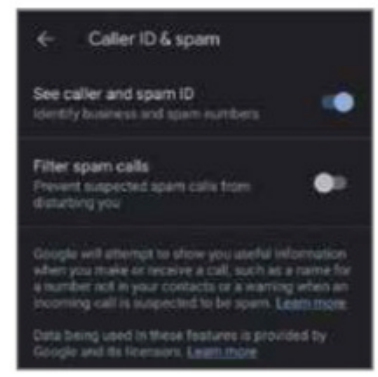
Check scam phone numbers

Q With crooked calls being made using telephone numbers that mimic banks, software companies, the police and so on, can you recommend any apps that check and verify their validity?

Richard Palmer, via email

A Call spoofing – the act of making one phone number show up as another – has gone mainstream in recent years. It's not just conmen hoping to trick you into answering the phone – there are readily accessible online tools such as SpoofCard that let just about anyone get in on this nefarious action.

While there are plenty of apps that can help identify unknown or hidden caller IDs, and even automated spam calls, they can't always tackle call spoofing because, by design, the phone numbers used make them look legitimate. Right now, the best way to avoid these calls is to rely on your own instincts. Ignore a call if you feel it's dodgy, and use the default Android or iOS calling apps, which have grown more sophisticated at identifying rogue callers, and even give you the option to block further nuisance calls. Android is especially good at this.



Don't get caught out by scammers

Open the three-dot menu in your Phone app and, under Settings, select 'Caller ID & spam'. Be sure to turn on 'See caller ID and spam ID' and 'Filter spam calls' to help beat the spoofers.

Steve Clark, Features Writer, Web User

Your Top Tips

Our pick of the best advice from our readers. Please send questions and answers to webuser@webuser.co.uk

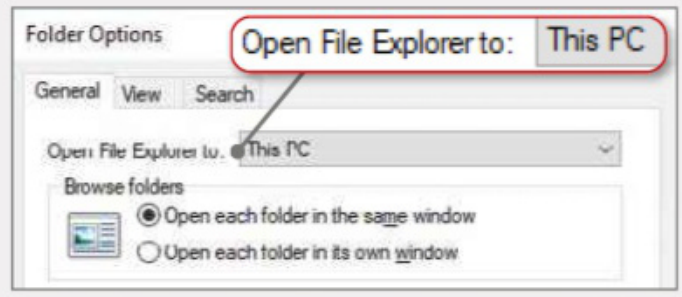
TOP TIP

Back Issues disc winner

GENERAL PC

Hide files and folders in File Explorer

When I open a File Explorer window, I get a 'Frequent folders' section at the top and 'Recent files' below. However, if I click 'Quick access' on the left, I find that it simply duplicates the folders that are already listed in my 'Frequent folders' window.



Choose what Explorer shows when you launch it

If, like me, you'd rather not see this unnecessary repetition, you can change File Explorer's default display. Click View to show the ribbon, then click Options and, on the General tab, select This PC next to 'Open File Explorer to'. In the Privacy section, clear the tick boxes to show recently used files and folders, then click OK to close it. Now, close File Explorer and restart it to see the changes.

Russell Bishop, via email

GENERAL PC

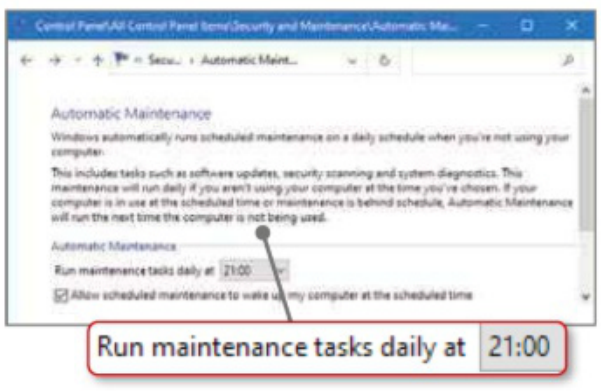
Configure automatic maintenance

Windows can automatically run maintenance tasks in the background to check for updates, security problems, system diagnostics and so on. You can choose when this takes place and enable the checks to run, even if the computer is in Sleep mode. The settings are in the Control Panel.

Enter the letter a in the search box and click 'Change Automatic Maintenance settings'. Select a time to perform the maintenance and tick the box to allow it to wake the computer from sleep.

By the way, if you find your computer continues to run, even when you know you've put it in Sleep mode, this could be the cause. Go to Power Options in the Control Panel and click 'Change when the computer sleeps'. Set 'Put the computer to sleep' to 10 or 15 minutes, so it goes back to sleep after waking to carry out maintenance tasks.

Ben Morris, via email



Keep on top of maintenance tasks by scheduling them to run when you're asleep

GENERAL PC

Dismiss notifications with your keyboard

Windows 10 sometimes feels more like a stream of unnecessary notifications than an operating system. As a fan of keyboard shortcuts, I find these notifications slow me down as I fumble for my mouse to dismiss them. You can, however, get rid of them pretty quickly by pressing Windows+Shift+V. Once the notification is highlighted, press Delete to get rid of it.

Greg James, via email

Use a keyboard shortcut to dismiss notifications rather than going via Settings

SOFTWARE

Save and send content from your clipboard

Ditto (bit.ly/ditto496) is an incredibly useful piece of software for anyone who wishes to save their clipboard of copied content, or send copies via email. Whenever you copy text or images, Ditto automatically adds it to the main panel, so you can come back to it later. Double-clicking any entry moves it to the top of the screen, while right-clicking lets you manage your Ditto clipboard and send entries via email.

Alistair Mahoney, via email

Ditto lets you save and easily share anything you've copied to your clipboard

EMAIL

Who's selling your email?

If you ever wonder why you get so many useless emails and messages from people and services you can't remember signing up to, it could be because your email address has been sold to a mailing list. If you use Gmail, you can find out which services are selling your address by setting traps for them.

One of the odd things about Gmail addresses is that the system ignores full stops, so if your address is johnsmith@gmail.com, then john.smith@gmail.com will also arrive in your inbox. You can put a dot anywhere before the @ to create a unique email address. With this in mind, use a version of your Gmail address with a dot in it the next time you sign up for something on the web. If you start

receiving emails from other companies and services with that dotted version of your email address, you'll know that the original company has sold your details on.

H Bell, via email

GENERAL PC

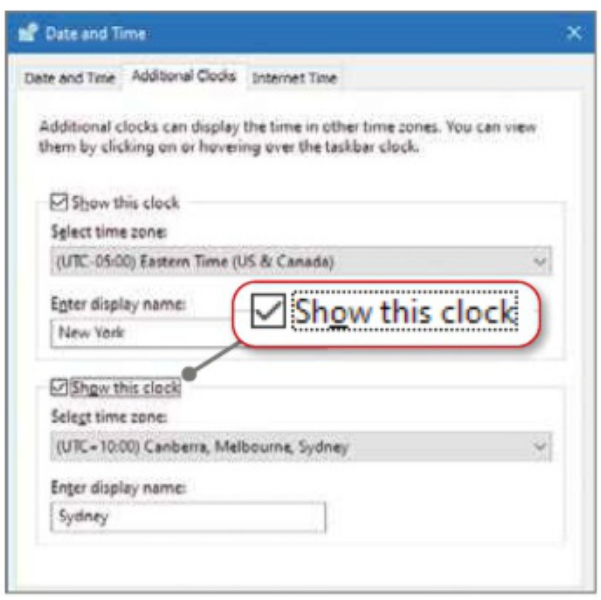
Add more clocks

I can never remember whether Europe is an hour ahead or behind the UK, or in the same time zone, particularly when the clocks go forward and back in the spring and autumn. One way to quickly see what time it is elsewhere in the world is to add more clocks to the taskbar.

Open the Windows 10 Settings app and click 'Time & language' followed by 'Date & time', then click 'Add clocks for different time zones'. I think I used to do this in Date and Time in the Windows 7 Control Panel, but I haven't used Windows 7 for a while.

In the window that opens, select the Additional Clocks tab. There are two extra clocks that can be added. Tick one or both of the tick boxes and select the cities or areas you want to show, such as Paris, New York and so on. Click OK. The extra clocks don't appear on the taskbar – at least, not in Windows 10. However, if you click the time or date, they appear at the top of the pop-up display.

Alan Jacobs, via email



Add clocks with different time zones to the taskbar clock pop-up

SOFTWARE

See when Caps and Num Lock are on

AddLEDs (bit.ly/addleds496) seems ready-made for anyone who finds themselves on the cusp of a Blunder of the Fortnight (we've all been there). The software adds a little read-out in the system tray to indicate when Caps Lock, Num Lock and Scroll Lock are activated. I find this useful as many modern computers no longer have physical LED lights to notify you of this, and they are easily turned on by accident.

By default, these icons switch from red (off) to green (on), but this can be changed by right-clicking any icon and selecting Icon Profile. It's certainly saved my bacon more than once!

Graham Hanson, via email

Virtual lights let you know when certain functions are switched on

EMAIL

Reorder your Outlook inbox

I use the Outlook web app for work but, annoyingly, it often bunches together all emails related to a particular topic, which makes it difficult to follow an email thread. Thankfully, I've just discovered it's possible to turn this feature off.

Go to the drop-down menu at the top of your inbox – the one that lets you decide how to sort the emails – and, underneath the main list of options, you should see a section Conversations. Simply select 'off' and your emails will be separated into a sensible order.

Kaye Dawkins, via email

GENERAL PC

Sync Windows and Linux

Following the sad demise of Windows 7, I switched to dual-booting my Asus PC with Linux Mint (for all things online) and retain Windows 7 (for everything else). As a newbie to Linux, I worried that a crash might lose all my saved files, so I kept them on Windows 7. However, neither OneDrive nor Google Drive are available in a Linux version to transfer and back up new files to Windows 7 via sync. Then, I discovered that Asus provides 5GB of free cloud storage which, accessed through the browser, syncs perfectly well with Windows 7. I simply pop it in at one end and out it comes at the other.

When I want to sync Windows 7 with Linux, I just go online briefly, perform the sync, then disconnect again. This way, I retain the (mostly) offline functionality of Windows 7 with a first-class Linux OS that's an easy transition away from Microsoft and its calamitous track record.

Andy Jennings, via email

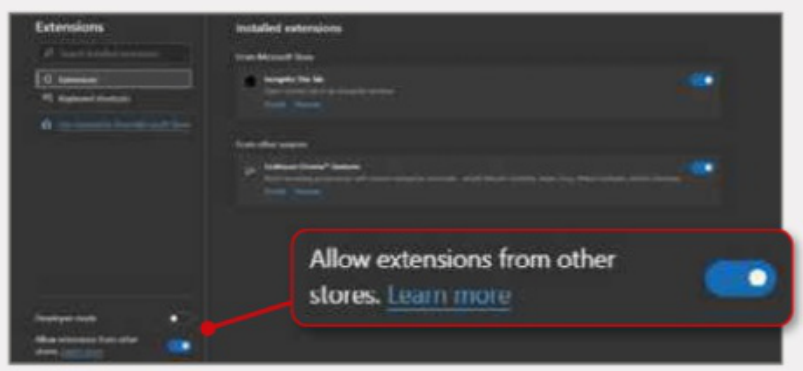
Use online storage to sync data between operating systems when dual-booting

BLUNDER OF THE FORTNIGHT

BROWSERS

Add Chrome extensions to Edge

I was excited to try Microsoft's refreshed Edge browser, not least because it meant I might get some useful extensions for it. Imagine my dismay, then, when I clicked on Edge's extensions page, only to be greeted with an array of mostly useless old extensions. Trying to add them from the Chrome Web Store (bit.ly/webstore496) just wouldn't work. "Typical Microsoft," I thought. Turns out, I was being a fool (and a cynical one at that).



To get Chrome extensions in Edge, switch on this browser tool setting

You can add Chrome extensions to Edge, but not by default. To do this, open Edge, click the three-dot menu button and select Extensions. At the bottom of the next page is a toggle switch to 'Allow extensions from other stores'. Switch this on and revisit Chrome's Web Store to find your favourite extensions again. This time, when you choose 'Add to Chrome', the tool will install straight to Edge.

H Jones, via email

Have you managed to fix a PC-related disaster?
If so, please send your story to webuser@webuser.co.uk

Inbox

You can let us know your views via:
editor@webuser.co.uk, www.facebook.com/webusermagazine
and www.twitter.com/webusermagazine

Star Email

Of course smart devices share our data!

I don't understand why people are so surprised that having a Ring smart doorbell might compromise their privacy (Need to Know, Issue 495). The whole point of these things is that they monitor and record what's going on around them, then transmit that data over the internet, through the relevant company's servers and back to the user. Does that really sound like a completely secure and private process? No, of course not!

If people want to have smart devices in their homes – or attached to them, in the case of Ring doorbells – they have to be prepared to share their private data or the things won't work properly. That's what smart technology is all about: providing a web-

connected service that's personalised to your needs using data you provide. If you don't like the sound of that, you might as well stick with a traditional doorbell.

The same principle applies to Amazon Echo and Google Home speakers, which are designed to respond to your voice and process your spoken requests through internet servers. How can they do this without gathering and sharing a certain amount of your personal data? If you're worried about your privacy, then don't ask them anything private – simple as that!

I'm not saying it's right for Ring doorbells to pass data to third-party companies without the user's permission, which is what the latest news stories are focusing on, especially where Google and Facebook are involved. But to believe that smart devices work independently of the web and don't gather and share your data strikes me as very naive.

Alan McBride, via email

Online tracking isn't always bad

I appreciate that many people are concerned and even angry about being tracked through their browsers and, I have to admit, they have a point. But you rarely hear about any positive aspects, so

I would like to say with regard to tracking for targeted advertising – for me, it's great.

Previously, I never bought anything from an online ad but, since this new-fangled tracking kicked in, I no longer get annoyed by adverts on Facebook.

I am an amateur musician and producer. Almost every sponsored advert I now see on Facebook is for a music plugin or software synth, or tutorials on mixing music. I have clicked dozens of them and found many new resources. Damn it, I've even bought half a dozen cracking plugins.

All I can say is: what's not to like about only seeing ads for things I find extremely interesting and useful?

Andy Trigg, via email

One hard drive short of a project

Regarding your Weekend Project in Issue 485: 'Build your own network-attached storage'. As it happens, I have a need for a NAS drive, so this project to set up a free NAS server on my network looked really useful.

However, I found I was unable to set up a shared file system on the OpenMediaVault server and couldn't figure out why. It wouldn't let me select a device for a new file system. What appears to have been omitted from the project is the fact that the old PC being converted has to have *two* hard drives! Who has an old PC with two hard drives? No one!

I really don't want to get into sourcing a spare old hard drive from somewhere and fitting it, fiddling with tiny screws and hoping that there is

Quiz Answers: Issue 495

1. *Climb Ev'ry Mountain*
2. *Send in the Clowns*
3. *Luck Be a Lady*
4. *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*
5. *The Music of the Night*
6. *Don't Cry For Me Argentina*

WINNER!
Well done to **David Hill** who wins a Web User Back Issues Disc

WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE
Charles Babbage

a spare power connector hanging around inside. Messing with hardware internals doesn't appeal to me, so I'm a bit disappointed.

David Kirk, via email

There's life in Internet Explorer yet

Having read your detailed article on the "brilliant new Microsoft Edge" in Issue 492, I could not wait to try the browser. It's clear that Internet Explorer 11, which I currently use, will be retired at some point in the future because it is no longer supported by Microsoft.

I discovered a number of useful things in Edge since the original useless version landed on my desktop. For example, I found that you can now sort your Favourites – a pretty basic omission from the previous dud version. However, to my amazement it seems that Microsoft has ditched the very useful menu bar that was incorporated into Internet Explorer. Why? To save space for Edge to be used on other devices.

In an attempt to redeem Microsoft, I searched for a solution to get the menu bar back and the answer is simple – load Internet Explorer 11 from Microsoft Edge! I ask myself: is this progress?

So, unfortunately, I will have to wait for the next brilliant incarnation of Microsoft Edge before switching. In the meantime, it's back to Internet Explorer. There is still life in that old girl yet.

Neville Haneef, via email

Don't use apps while driving

In his column in Issue 495, 'Smart motorways aren't smart enough', Barry Collins extols the benefits of using the Waze smartphone app when driving on a motorway, as a means of learning of and avoiding hazards and accidents. But surely fiddling with such an app while driving at speed is likely to cause hazards and accidents itself?

I see too many people these days with one hand on the wheel and the other on their phone, tapping away at some app or another. They're not just a danger to themselves but to other motorists and to pedestrians, too. Keep both your eyes on the road is what I've always been told.

Colin Horton, via email

What you say...

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED PROBLEMS AFTER INSTALLING WINDOWS 10 UPDATES (bit.ly/updates496)?

I haven't installed the last update as it was giving my PC problems, resulting in a blank screen. I will hold on before I install the recent update, because of the reported problems affecting files going missing from your PC.

Kevin Gadget Man Benton

The only problem I've had is slow boot-up since the November update.

Geoffrey Boow

I'm in the Windows 10 fast ring and have had no problems with the last update.

Kenny Hutchison

Why does Microsoft keep releasing updates without testing them properly first? You'd think it was new to the software business!

Simon Perrin

Yes, I've been going crazy the past few days trying to figure out where my files went. I thought I was hallucinating or daydreaming. After hearing that other people are suffering the same problem after updating, my brain can finally rest.

Elena Okharedia

DO YOU PREFER WHATSAPP TO FACEBOOK MESSENGER?

I prefer Telegram (telegram.org), but no one I know uses it. WhatsApp's one big use in life is to send free picture messages, something mobile providers still insist on charging extra for. By now, they should be free, given the cost of a mobile contract and the fact that no other messaging service charges to send them.

Rich Grove

I prefer WhatsApp as I only get messages from people I know. Messenger is full of spam messages.

Nat Grove

I rarely use Messenger. WhatsApp is a lot faster and more secure.

Brian Brown

Gab (gab.com) is launching a new messenger and chat app that doesn't spy on you or sell your info to anyone. Once it's launched, I'm going with that. I'm done with Facebook spying and promoting propaganda.

Liz F Lambeth

WhatsApp is still owned by bloody Facebook!

Jayme Carne

I do not use it and really cannot think why I should.

Glenn Faulkner

BACK ISSUES DISC 2019

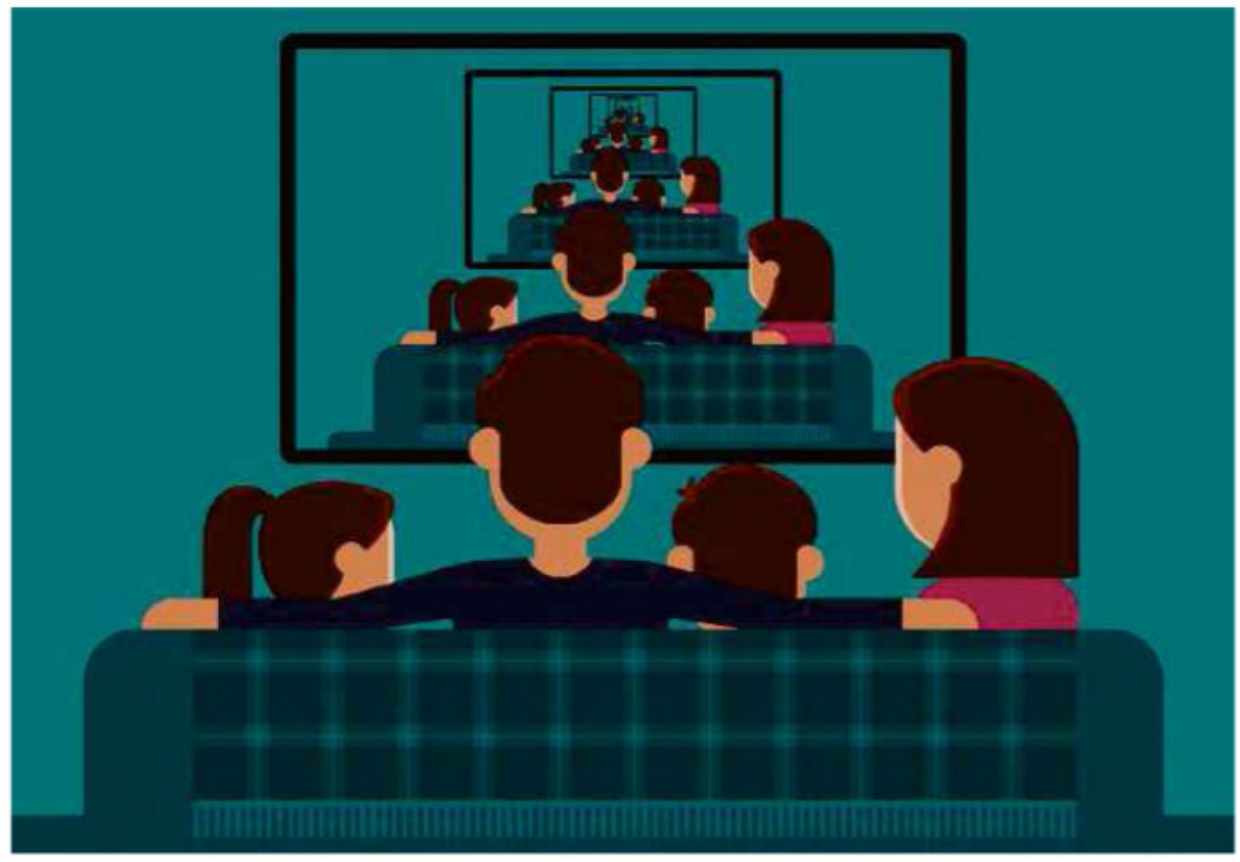
Our **2019 Back Issues Disc** containing all 26 issues from last year is now on sale from Amazon

For more information, visit **bit.ly/webuser2019** or search for 'webuser disc' on Amazon

Page 404

Smart TV services are tracking you more closely than you think, says **Barry Collins**

Who's watching you watch *them*?



"We value your privacy," says the big splash banner on the Daily Express website, shortly before you click "I Accept" to the recommended settings and it drops no fewer than 50 trackers on your computer.

Still, that's the well-known price of business on the web, right? We put up with a horrendous number of ad trackers, trying to sell us the thing we already bought on Amazon last Thursday, just so we can read the story about Princess Diana posthumously warning us not to eat Marmite on a Tuesday (or whatever other nonsense the Express is churning out today). And if we don't like it, we can use ad blockers to keep the worst of it at bay.

What about your TV? Surely the worst advertising excesses you've got to put up with there are the two minutes of pre-roll ads before you get to watch *Gogglebox* on catch-up? Afraid not. A new study called Watching You Watch (bit.ly/watching496), conducted by researchers from Princeton and the University of Chicago, has shed light on the trackers that are hidden within internet television services such as Amazon Fire TV and Roku. The report makes for more shocking viewing than Channel 4's *Naked Attraction*.

> "No fewer than 89% of the channels on Amazon's Fire TV service have trackers built into them"

No fewer than 89% of the channels on Amazon's Fire TV service have trackers built into them, feeding information about your viewing habits and more back to companies such as Google. On Roku, it's 69% of channels. The information the trackers are feeding back includes what you're watching, which ads you've sat through, the unique identifiers of your devices, your postcode and more. Four channels – two on Amazon and two on Roku – even feed back the email address used to create your internet TV account to third-party advertisers.

Of course, you've probably agreed to this in chapter VI, paragraph VIII of the 45-screen User Agreement you blithely clicked to accept when you first installed the hardware, because if you actually bothered to fully read such documents, you wouldn't have time to watch TV in the first place. But I'm willing to bet my kids' savings accounts that fewer than 1% of viewers had any idea that their TV was relaying their personal information to advertisers.

Even if you've fiddled around in the Amazon or Roku settings and found the options to switch off the tracking, the US researchers claim you might as well not have bothered, describing the TV services' privacy-protecting options as "practically ineffective".

What's to be done about this? The researchers recommend that the TV services come with a web browser-style private-browsing mode that allows viewers to watch without fear of their data being fed to the wolves. I'd go further. An outright ban on viewers' data being sent to any third parties unless they have explicitly agreed to it – not just clicked through a massive user agreement – in the first place.

Google has no more right to know what I'm watching than a bloke pressing his nose against my living room window, trying to catch a glimpse of my TV. I'd call the police if someone was doing that. It's time that sneakily tracking your viewing habits on internet devices was treated with equal force.

Illustration: Andrew Torrens

Do you agree? Let us know at webuser@webuser.co.uk

WebUser

SUBSCRIPTION OFFER
FOR MORE INFO SEE PAGE 62

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