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But will you qualify to get it?

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Computer active

ISSUE 442 | 4 – 17 FEBRUARY 2015

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From the Editor

With Microsoft announcing that Windows 7 and 8 users will get Windows 10 for free, it feels like a good time to highlight ways you can get other paid-for software and apps without spending any money. We reveal lots of clever tricks in our Cover Feature (page 50), none of which require you to be a technical whiz-kid. It's all easy to understand.

You'll find more details on Windows 10 on pages 6-7. I had a strong hunch that Windows 8 users would get a free upgrade, but didn't expect Microsoft to extend that generosity to those on Windows 7. It means that nearly everyone who has bought a new computer in the past five years will be able to use Windows 10 without paying anything.

Over the next few months we'll tell you everything you need to know about Windows 10. We'll test the Previews, report the rumours, and give you our expert opinion so that, when the operating system finally arrives, you'll know whether you should upgrade.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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1 billion
Estimated number of Android devices vulnerable to new flaw – *p16*

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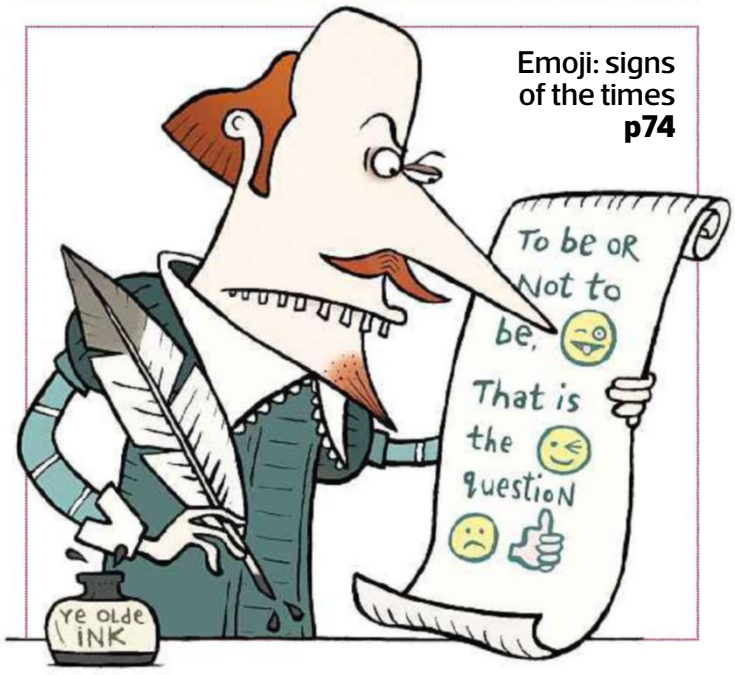

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Computeractive offer of the fortnight

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News

The top stories in the world of technology

The rumours were true – Windows 10 *will* be a free upgrade

The Start menu returns in Windows 10, with the list layout familiar to users of Windows 7

COMMENT

Windows 10 looks like the operating system Windows 8 should have been. The Start menu should never have been removed, so we welcome its return, as we do the demise of Internet Explorer. Cortana may seem like a gimmick, but we'll all be talking to our PCs within a few years. But what we like most is the radical decision to make Windows 10 free. Microsoft's CEO Satya Nadella said: "We want to move from people needing Windows to people loving Windows". He's on the right track.

Windows 10 will be available as a free upgrade, but only during the first year after it launches, and only to people currently using Windows 7 or Windows 8/8.1. Microsoft announced the news at an event on 21 January, during which it unveiled the next Preview version of Windows 10 (watch the two-hour presentation at www.snipca.com/15127).

For months before the event there had been speculation that Windows 10 would be a free upgrade for Windows 8 users, but Microsoft's decision to make this also available to people on Windows 7 surprised many experts.

Those on Windows Phone 8.1 will also get the free update to Windows 10. However, Microsoft didn't say how much Windows 10 would cost for people running XP or Vista.

WINDOWS 10 AT A GLANCE

- It will be a free download for Windows 7 and Windows 8/8.1 users during the first year
- The Start menu will return, but the search bar will be integrated into the Taskbar
- Microsoft's voice-controlled assistant Cortana will be included
- Internet Explorer will be replaced by a new browser codenamed Spartan
- Apps including Outlook, Calendar, Photos and Music will sync all your information across PCs, laptops, phones and tablets
- It will launch "later this year". The Technical Preview will end on 15 April 2015

Once you've upgraded to Windows 10 for free, it will remain on your device for as long as you use it. On its website (www.snipca.com/15119) Microsoft says: "Once a qualified Windows device is upgraded to Windows 10, we will continue to keep it up to date for the supported lifetime of the device, keeping it more secure, and introducing new features and functionality over time – for no additional charge".

Some Windows users, suspicious of Microsoft's motives, have asked on social media whether there is a catch. In the above quote, Microsoft has underlined the word 'qualified'. Clicking it takes you to the small print: "It is our intent that most of these devices will qualify, but some hardware/software requirements apply and feature availability may vary by device".

Microsoft says that to get the free upgrade, your device "must be connected to the internet and have Windows Update enabled".

These conditions appear to be fairly standard and reasonable. It seems likely that most *Computeractive* readers using Windows 7 or 8/8.1 will be eligible for the free upgrade.

START MENU RETURNS, CORTANA ARRIVES

Microsoft also confirmed that the Start menu will return in Windows 10, pleasing the many Windows 8 users who have found that its absence makes the operating system hard to operate. It has the list layout familiar to users of Windows 7, combined with the tile set-up of Windows 8.

You can pin apps, Desktop programs and folders to the Start menu, giving you easy access to your most commonly used items.

WILL YOU BE UPGRADING TO WINDOWS 10?

What you told us on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/computeractive) and on Twitter @ComputerActive

There must be a catch here. Big-bucks Microsoft would not give away free software. It is either a beta version, or there is hardly any difference from 8.1. Sorry for being cynical.
Brian Christopher Winter

Can't be worse than Windows 8, so yeah I guess I will.
Caroline Foster

If it's anything like Windows 8, I don't want to know. I had to go back to Windows 7.
Julie White

Definitely, but if it's as disappointing as Windows 8 I'm afraid I will move to Apple.
Malc McDonald

Yes! I just can't help myself. I'm sure you'll give clear instructions and tips.
Ethel Ethel @EthelEthel

Hell yes! That's far better than buying a new computer when, frankly, you shouldn't be forced to.
Edward Manning

Mmm, not sure at this moment in time. Will wait and see what it's like first. Windows 10 will have to be something special if it's going to to replace Windows 7.
Wendy redRobin @Wendy_redRobin

Yes, as long as I can save it to disk in case my PC needs rebooting every time it messes up. The Windows 8.1 upgrade ruined my PC.
KC Clann

But there's no search bar in the Start menu. Instead, following feedback from users of the Windows 10 Technical Preview, Microsoft has integrated the search bar into the Taskbar. This means it will always be visible, rather than only appearing when you open the Start menu.

The most innovative new feature in Windows 10 looks set to be Cortana, Microsoft's voice-activated 'personal assistant'.

Already available on some Windows phones and tablets, Cortana will be built into Windows 10. You can type questions as well as ask them, and tell Cortana to perform actions, such as send emails and take notes.

> "Microsoft confirmed that the Start menu will return in Windows 10, pleasing Windows 8 users"

Cortana will also be able to search your hard drives and online OneDrive storage, finding specific file formats and files from time periods - for example, "show me photos from December".

INTERNET EXPLORER DIES, NEW OFFICE APPS BORN

Microsoft confirmed the rumours we reported in Issue 441 - that it will replace Internet Explorer with a new browser codenamed Project Spartan.

Its standout feature is that it lets you draw on and annotate web pages using your keyboard or stylus. It also has a new interface that many observers said looks similar to Google's Chrome browser. It contains tabs in the title bar, and the address bar inside those tabs.

You will also be able to use Cortana within the new browser, as well as save web pages for offline reading and sync them between devices.

The company said that Windows 10 has been designed to adapt to the device it's on, whether that's a desktop PC, laptop, Xbox, phone or tablet, and will adjust the user experience to match. This should make it far easier than Windows 8 to use on a traditional desktop PC, with a keyboard and mouse. However, it also contains a touchscreen interface, similar to Windows 8's.

With Windows 10, any app available from the Windows Store will work on all Windows devices, giving you the same set of apps on your phone, PC and tablet.

Microsoft is working on its own set of "universal" apps, with Office, Photos, Music and Outlook Mail set to be the first to launch. It says it wants to "offer a consistent, touch-first experience across phone, tablet and PC". A day after the event, Microsoft announced that Office 2016 will be released later this year.

Windows Holographic lets developers create virtual 3D environments

AND FINALLY. . . A 'HOLOGRAPHIC' HEADSET

The biggest surprise of the event came in the shape of Windows Holographic. The software, which is built into Windows 10, lets developers create virtual 3D environments which can be displayed to the user via an augmented-reality headset, called HoloLens (see image above).

Microsoft suggested it could be used by space scientists exploring a virtual Martian landscape and architects and interior designers planning and visualising construction and décor.

WHEN CAN I DOWNLOAD THE NEW PREVIEW VERSION?

Unfortunately, Microsoft wasn't due to make the Preview available to download until after we went to press, so we have been unable to write a Workshop explaining how to use it. However, all being well, we will publish this in Issue 443, out on Wednesday 18 February.

Crackdown on energy-comparison sites that hide the best deals

Ofgem has told energy price-comparison sites to stop misleading customers about the deals on offer.

Currently, many price-comparison sites ask customers whether they want to "switch today". By clicking 'yes' customers are shown only those deals that the site earns a commission on.

If they click 'no', customers are shown a wider range of deals, some of which may be the best available. This means customers are being penalised for expressing a desire to switch immediately.

Ofgem, which regulates the gas and electricity markets in the UK, says that asking a 'yes/no' question is unacceptable.

From March, websites that adhere to Ofgem's consumer Confidence Code (www.snipca.com/15151) will have to show all available deals, unless customers choose to see a limited range.

Websites will also have to inform customers which deals they earn commission on.

"Comparison sites are a great place to start energy shopping, but customers need to feel confident that the sites are providing information they can trust," said Rachel Fletcher, Ofgem's senior partner.

MoneySuperMarket.com and uSwitch, two of the comparison sites affected, have welcomed the new rules. But others have warned that the changes could lead to some sites leaving Ofgem's Confidence Code.

Mark Todd, director of comparison website Energyhelpline (www.energyhelpline.com), told the BBC: "The new rules are so tough that some comparison sites are likely to drop out of the code, fearful that to follow it will mean their businesses become unviable".

The new regulations also came under fire for not going far enough. Will Hodson, co-founder of The Big Deal (https://thisisthebigdeal.com), which encourages groups of consumers to switch energy supplier en masse, told *The Daily Mail*: "The hiding of tariffs has not ended. Comparison sites will find new questions that dupe consumers into filtering out deals that don't earn them a commission".

Want a smaller PC? Here's one in a mouse!

A Polish company has come up with a fresh twist on the ever-shrinking PC by building one into the body of a mouse.

Called the Mouse-Box, the prototype device is described as a portable computer that can be plugged into almost any screen via a wired connection or wireless adapter.

It contains a quad-core 1.4GHz processor, 128GB of flash storage and twin USB 3.0 ports.

The Mouse-Box website (http://mouse-box.com) suggests the device can be wirelessly charged using some kind of pad, although presumably it can also be powered via the USB cable. This could make mouse operation a little awkward, especially if it's running a second cable to connect to a display. There's no indication of what the Mouse-Box will cost.

Its inventors, probably with tongue in cheek, have made a video (www.snipca.com/15152) that suggests the device could be the ideal tool for lazy office workers.

It shows a sneaky worker using the Mouse-Box to fool his boss into thinking he's working. When his boss appears, the crafty worker simply flicks the display back to the work PC.

The team behind the Mouse-Box is looking for financial and technical support to turn the prototype into a mass-produced device. We will review it if it appears on sale in the UK.

☺ ***You'll like this...*** Facebook says it will show fewer hoaxes and misleading stories in your News Feed (www.snipca.com/15148)

☹ ***...but not this*** The National Savings and Investments site crashed within an hour of launching the new pensioner bonds (www.snipca.com/15147)

Amazon 'tricks you' into thinking its prices are cheapest

A new report claims that Amazon uses subtle tricks to fool customers into thinking they are getting a good deal.

Researchers at Boomerang Commerce, a US company that makes software which tracks changes in prices on websites, said that Amazon sells the most popular products more cheaply than their rivals, creating the impression that its prices are generally cheaper.

However, the company makes a profit by increasing the price of related accessories.

For example, Boomerang said that on Black Friday last November, Amazon discounted a $350 (£230) Samsung TV to $250 (£165). But on the same day, the retailer increased the price of the HDMI cable needed for the TV.

For this tactic to work, shoppers would have to be less likely to compare prices of cheaper items.

Boomerang also claimed that when Amazon sold a best-selling router at a price 20 per cent cheaper than it was available at the US retail giant Walmart, it compensated by increasing the price of a less popular router so it was 29 per cent more expensive.

The report claimed that Amazon exploits the "psychology of price perception" to convince shoppers the website is the cheapest retailer online.

"Amazon may not actually be the lowest-priced seller of a particular product in any given season," the report reads, "but its consistently low prices on the highest-viewed and best-selling items drive a perception among consumers that Amazon has the best prices overall".

Boomerang said that Amazon's price-tracking technology allows the retailer to make small changes to the price of items millions of times every day, responding to customer demand and the prices on rival sites.

Sky Broadband to block porn by default

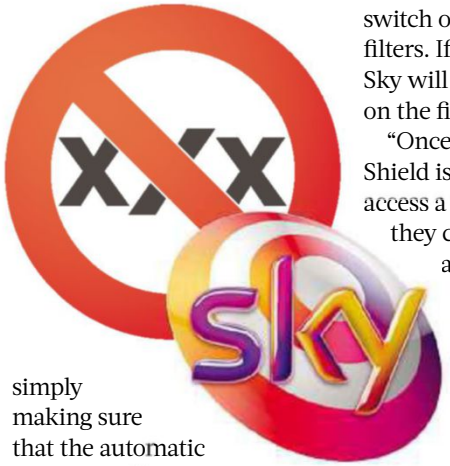
Sky Broadband is to block online porn by default to its 5.3 million broadband customers. To access porn online customers will need to switch off the company's Broadband Shield filter.

Sky, like all of Britain's major broadband providers, has been offering the adult-content filters as an optional extra to customers since last year.

As well as block porn, the filter's default age rating of 13 will prevent access to sites concerned with dating, file-sharing, violence, drugs, suicide and self-harm.

Sky customers can set the Broadband Shield (www.snipca.com/15145) age filter to PG, 13 or 18, or block only particular types of website.

"What we're doing now is simply making sure that the automatic position of Sky Broadband Shield is the safest one for all – that's 'on', unless customers choose otherwise," said Sky's Lyssa McGowan in a blog post (www.snipca.com/15144).



Customers will be emailed over the coming month, asking whether they want to switch on the broadband filters. If they fail to respond, Sky will automatically switch on the filters.

"Once Sky Broadband Shield is active, users cannot access a filtered site unless they choose to log in and alter their settings," McGowan explained. "However they can browse away from the filtering page to visit freely any site suitable for the 13 age rating, without any interruptions."

Sky says its customers can choose to switch off the filters at any time and they won't be pestered thereafter.

Do you approve of Sky blocking porn sites by default? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk.

IN BRIEF

DOWNLOAD EMERGENCY FLASH FIX

Adobe has released an emergency fix for a serious flaw in its Flash software. Anyone using Firefox or Internet Explorer on a PC running Windows or Linux, or Safari on a Mac, is at risk. Google's Chrome browser is safe because it runs Flash in a sandbox. Criminals had been exploiting the flaw to infect computers with malware. Download the patch at www.snipca.com/15133.

BBC NEWS RELAUNCHES APP WITH LOCAL STORIES

The BBC has relaunched its News app for Android (www.snipca.com/15091) and iOS (www.snipca.com/15092) devices, with local news featured for the first time. It offers a "more personalised mobile view of the news", letting you add topics to the MyNews section. You can read more on the BBC's Internet blog (www.snipca.com/15099) and email your feedback to the BBC: mobileapps@bbc.co.uk.

Tomorrow's world

Your bedside lamp may be soon capable of doing more than just illuminate your bedtime read. Microsoft's Research Center has built one that charges phones and tablets using a beam of light. Called AutoCharge, the prototype technology works by using cameras to detect devices on a desk or table. The lamp's beam then moves to shine on to the devices, charging them via solar power.

IN BRIEF

RYANAIR TO STREAM FILMS AND TV

Ryanair says it will test streaming films and TV programmes to passengers' tablets and phones. The airline said it might offer the service for free, unlike many of the 'extras' it provides. The airline said the service may be funded by adverts bought by companies based in a flight's destination, adding that there were no plans to offer full internet access.

EE CUSTOMERS SHARE £1M REFUND

EE customers who were wrongly charged VAT while abroad can claim a refund. The company says it only applies to customers who used internet data between October 2012 and October 2014 outside the EU (around 0.5 per cent of customers). EE will tell customers by text message how much money they are owed. Refunds will be paid in the form of phone credit. To see if you're eligible contact EE at http://ee.co.uk/help/get-in-touch.

Want super-fast broadband? Move to the south of England

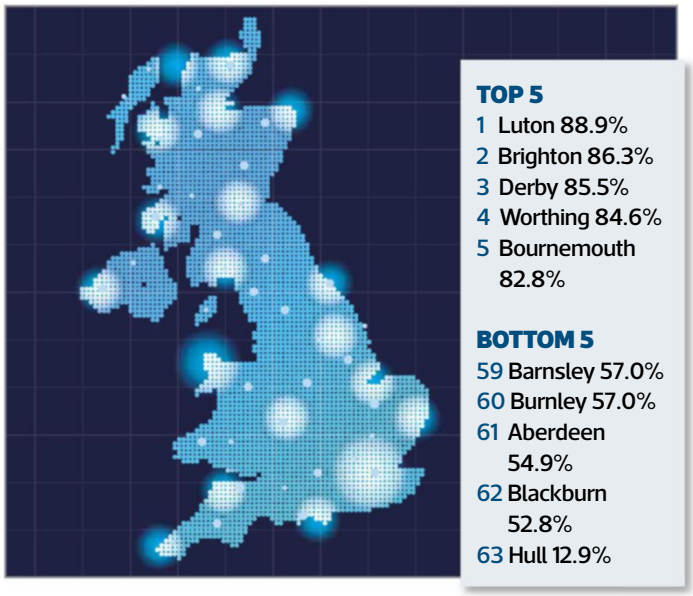
A new report has highlighted how stark the UK's north-south broadband divide is.

Seven of the 10 cities with the best super-fast broadband coverage are located in the south, while none are further north than Nottingham.

The Centre for Cities report (www.centreforcities.org) describes itself as an "annual health check of the largest cities and towns". Part of its report ranks the super-fast broadband penetration in 63 towns and cities in the UK.

The 2015 report claims that Luton is the best UK city or major town for super-fast connections, with 88.9 per cent of the area's postcodes capable of receiving broadband at speeds of 30Mbps or faster.

At the bottom end of the scale, only 12.9 per cent of Hull's residents have access to a super-fast connection, although the city is an exceptional case. The area is served solely by Kingston Communications, not by BT, and has fallen some way behind most of the UK, having once offered some of the fastest speeds in the country.



TOP 5
1 Luton 88.9%
2 Brighton 86.3%
3 Derby 85.5%
4 Worthing 84.6%
5 Bournemouth 82.8%

BOTTOM 5
59 Barnsley 57.0%
60 Burnley 57.0%
61 Aberdeen 54.9%
62 Blackburn 52.8%
63 Hull 12.9%

The next worst is Blackburn, which offers super-fast connections to just over half (52.8 per cent) of its postcodes.

Nine out of the 10 places with the lowest percentage of super-fast speeds are situated in the north of England and Scotland. Locations in Yorkshire account for four of these – Barnsley, Huddersfield, Doncaster and Hull.

Overall, 72.9 per cent of connections nationwide are capable of superfast speeds. People living in towns and cities are 1.5 times more likely to have a super-fast connection than those in rural settings.

ZX Spectrum reborn as a gaming console - with 1,000 classic games

One of the most iconic computers of the 1980s, the ZX Spectrum, is to be reincarnated as a gaming console. The ZX Spectrum Vega, which has an SD card slot and joypad controls, will go on sale in April pre-installed with 1,000 classic Spectrum games.

Because it plugs into your TV, you won't have to download emulator software, which you currently need if you want to play old games on your PC. However, it has an on-screen keyboard only, which makes coding on it it tricky, unlike the original Spectrum.

It's been developed by Luton-based company Retro Computers, part-owned by Sir Clive Sinclair, who launched the original ZX Spectrum in April 1982. It went on to sell five million units.

Nottinghamshire company SMS Electronics will manufacture the Vega at its factory in Beeston.

The chairman of Retro Computers, Dr David Levy, said the company was still deciding which games will come with it, but promised it would include many of the bestselling games from the 1980s. The initial run of 1,000 machines has been financed by a crowdfunding campaign (www.snipca.com/15052).

Retro Computers has made an eye-catching video promoting the Vega – watch it on YouTube at www.snipca.com/15053. We shall review the ZX Spectrum Vega when it's released later this year.

What's been killed by Google

Every now and then, amid all the brilliant new stuff it launches, Google makes headlines by killing a product. In January it surprised many people by ending sales of Google Glass (see review, Issue 430), although it says it will continue to work on "future versions". If Glass does reappear, Google will need to address concerns over privacy and slash its £1,000 price tag.

Question of the Fortnight

Should you stop using Windows 7?

The five-year countdown to the death of another popular operating system has begun. But is that a cause for concern?

So here we go again. Less than a year after Microsoft pulled the plug on Windows XP, it has reminded us that Windows 7's days are also numbered by ending Mainstream support. This didn't come as a surprise. Microsoft confirmed last summer that it would cease Mainstream support on 13 January. But what does that mean? And should Windows 7 users be worried?

The short answer is - no. Your Windows 7 PCs will run as before, and security support will continue until 14 January 2020 (as Microsoft states on its 'Windows lifecycle fact sheet' – www.snipca.com/15109). Windows 7 now enters the Extended support phase, which means Microsoft will fix any security flaws. XP's Extended phase ended last April, although Microsoft released a patch for it May.

THE FACTS

- Microsoft ended Mainstream support for Windows 7 on 13 January, but will continue Extended support until 2020
- This means Windows 7 won't receive any more new features, but will be patched with security fixes
- 56 per cent of PCs still run Windows 7

> "Microsoft will no longer add any new features to Windows 7, so the version you're using now is the version you'll always use"

There have been none since, and we now regard XP as too unsafe to use on your main PC.

But the end of Mainstream support isn't just a symbolic milestone. It is significant because it marks the end of Windows 7's evolution. Microsoft will no longer add any new features to the operating system (OS), so the version you're using now is the version you'll always use. Of course, that's not a problem if you love Windows 7, and many people still do - it's currently used on 56 per cent of PCs worldwide.

A bigger concern is that the end of Mainstream also means Microsoft has stopped offering free phone support for the OS. However, if you bought a PC with Windows 7 installed, it's likely that you'd have been ineligible to receive free phone support. Instead, the manufacturer would have had to provide it. Either way, from now the best way to get Windows 7 help for free is to email our Problems Solved team (see page 64), while Windows 8 users should continue to bookmark this webpage: http://support.microsoft.com/contactus.

However, whether you should stop using Windows 7 isn't just a question of security or support. It's also a matter of how advanced you want your OS to be. New isn't always better. Vista wasn't better than XP, and Windows 8 isn't better than Windows 7 (though it's a closer fight). But by sticking with Windows 7 you will be depriving yourself of the impressive new tools in Windows 10 (which is a free upgrade, see pages 6-7). And every update to Windows 10 will highlight the limitations of Windows 7.

Windows 7 is a superb OS (we named it the best-ever version of Windows in Issue 411). It was an instant hit when it launched in October 2009, selling over 100 million copies in the first six months. XP users saw it as an attractive step up, while those plagued by Vista's problems regarded it as an escape route. Microsoft's then-CEO Steve Ballmer said it was "simpler, faster", and he was spot on. But that was over five years ago. Microsoft's priority now is to convince you that what was simple and fast then is complex and slow now, especially compared with Windows 10.

Microsoft wants you to like every new OS only up until a certain date. Once that has passed, they blitz you with adverts that make the existing OS appear obsolete. Expect the same again later this year when Windows 10 launches, at which point we'll review it, and tell you if it's worth upgrading to. That's the time for you to decide whether Windows 7 should remain on your PC.

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind
Email: letters@computeractive.co.uk
Facebook: www.facebook.com/computeractive
Twitter: @ComputerActive
www.twitter.com/computeractive

Don't 'belittle' phone scammers - help them instead

I've read quite a few letters in *Computeractive* about how people amuse themselves when they receive nuisance calls by pretending to be someone else, deliberately misunderstanding instructions or keeping the other person on hold. I think it's wrong for us to derive pleasure from belittling someone who's usually much worse off than ourselves.

I tell the caller that they speak good English, are capable of following a script and that they respond intelligently to my replies. I also acknowledge that they may be desperate for work and that they need money to feed themselves and their families. I then inform them that what they are doing is wrong, that it's dishonest and that they make a living by making other people very unhappy. I then encourage them to try to work for a legitimate helpline or to consider other forms of income, such as teaching English. Sometimes they'll restate the purpose of the call, but it's important that you persist. My hope is that if other readers adopt this approach, then we will gradually make the world a better place for everyone.

Barry Sutton

Defending Windows 8.1

I've been a *Computeractive* reader for a number of years and been immersed in the world of computers since before Windows 3.1. I have enjoyed (and still enjoy) Windows XP on my laptop. I also enjoyed Windows 7, which is an excellent operating system. However, I must ride to the defence of Windows 8.1, which seems to be very unpopular with a lot of your readers.

I'm a typesetter and graphic designer, which often involves the use of several programs simultaneously, all anchored to my Taskbar, with at least two open on my Desktop at any one time. I've found Windows 8.1 to be very flexible because it combines an old-fashioned Desktop with commonly used icons, but makes rarely used icons available at the touch of a button. I can still operate the occasional program that isn't compatible with Windows 8.1 on my XP laptop, and the result can be quickly transferred via a memory stick. At present, I have no need of Windows 10, which I feel will not improve on 8.1. I might also point out that I am in my Seventies, but not in my dotage!

Donald Millar

From BT to BT in 15 years!

I am a little bemused by BT's intention to buy EE. For me, that would mean I've come full circle. When I returned to the UK 15 years ago after living abroad, I chose BT Cellnet for my mobile phone because it seemed the best option at the time. BT Cellnet then morphed into O2, with whom I stayed for a number of years. About five years ago, I switched to T-Mobile, as they had a better deal on one of the newly arrived smartphones. T-Mobile then morphed into EE, which is where I am currently. Once the BT deal to buy EE goes through, I will in essence be back where I started!

John Frewen-Lord

Faster broadband - eighth wonder of the world

I read with interest your article "Seven things we want in 2015" in Issue 440. I would like to add an eighth: Faster broadband for people who live in so-called rural areas. We live less than two miles from our telephone exchange and nine miles or so from a major airport (Stansted), yet our broadband speed, along with that of our neighbours, is abysmally slow.

Between 1am and 6am we might be lucky and get 1-2Mbps, but after that the speed drops off rapidly to between 0.1 and 0.2Mbps. I am aware of the Superfast Essex scheme (www.superfastessex.org), but do we really have to wait until some time during 2016 to get 2Mbps? Surely BT have the money and resources to put an extra box or two in our local exchange, or are they too busy rolling out fibre to people who live in towns? All we are asking for is a reliable 2Mbps during the day, not 35-plus Mbps.

Terry Parker

Ban hands-free phones? Why not ban the school run?

Here we go again, demands for another government ban – this time on hands-free phones in cars. In his letter (Issue 440) Roger Castle-Smith "defies anybody to fully concentrate on driving if, for example, they are discussing a difficult business matter", presumably while using a hands-free phone. So when will he also propose a ban on car radios, CD/DVD players and passengers? Or maybe the school run should be banned? Let's face it, there can hardly be a more turbulent, mind-boggling, chaotic, noisy journey than the notorious school run.

But there would be no music, no

Use your phone to thwart boy racers

Just recently I was walking up the main street in my local village, which has a 20mph speed limit. As I was answering a call on my phone, a Mini driven by what we call locally boy racers headed down the street, clearly over the speed limit. Just at that moment I lost the signal on my phone, so I brought it round in front to face me to see what had happened. There was a squeal of brakes as the Mini tried to slow down. It seems the driver thought my phone was a portable speed camera. I just kept on walking, trying my best not to laugh.

Gerald Barnes

cigarette lighters (smoking in cars is surely next on the prohibited list), and no iniquitous phones, built in or mobile. Imagine your next motorway journey, taking place in sublime silence, allowing you to peacefully nod off, only to be woken when you cross the central reservation or career down an embankment. Why on earth do they fit such noisy sirens on ambulances and police cars? How can one concentrate with all this racket going on?

Esmond Collins

Thanks for your SSD advice

Some time ago I emailed *Computeractive* for technical help for my four-year-old, much-loved All In One Acer PC. It was overheating, shutting down and making nasty grinding noises. I decided the hard drive needed replacing and decided to buy a Solid-State Drive as these stay cooler. Both Acer and Crucial.co.uk said it couldn't be done, but in Problems Solved you told me how to do it.

You warned it would be difficult to access the hard drive and you were right, but I did it in less than an hour. I was shocked at the amount of dust and fluff clogging up the heat sinks. I cleaned these with compressed air and a soft brush. It's worrying these aren't easier to access for annual cleaning.

In the end I decided to buy a hybrid Solid-State Drive, because it's cheaper and there's no room for two drives inside my machine. I chose a 1TB model for £60 and installed it in two minutes. Everything works perfectly. I cannot believe how much quicker the machine boots up, and how quiet and cool it is. It is working better than when I bought it.

Thanks to you my PC has a new lease of life for very little money. I am no tech whizz kid and I couldn't have done it without your help. Keep up the good work.

Ethel Trueman

Printer ruined by change of paper weight

I had to smile at Stuart Andrews' tale of woe with his printer (The Final Straw, Issue 440). He refrained from naming and shaming the printer's manufacturer, but I wonder if my late printer was related. In general, it behaved well, but then it was thrown by a sneaky change the manufacturer made to the weight of its photo paper. It increased the weight from 280g to 300g without so much as a by your leave.

The result was repeated bouts of indigestion. Ink was sprayed on the wrong part of the paper, or all over the inside of the printer. What a mess! Efforts to clean it were useless. It then refused to take a single sheet of normal paper, insisting on trying to cram as many sheets as it could though at one time, printing a bit on each. I sought advice from the manufacturer, who blithely told me that my printer was not intended to cope with 300g papers. Brilliant! Result, a perfectly good printer ruined by the wrong paper. The recycling plant beckons. What a waste.

STAR LETTER

Mark Zuckerberg is right to stand up for freedom of expression

I never thought I would write to *Computeractive* in praise of Facebook, let alone the site's owner Mark Zuckerberg, whose views on online privacy are alien to me. But his statement reacting to the sickening *Charlie Hebdo* murders in Paris (News, Issue 441) was worthy of a prime minister or president (read it at www.snipca.com/14963). Previously I had always dismissed Zuckerberg and the Facebook generation that swoon on his every word as obscenely narcissistic, obsessed only with spouting and sharing nonsense. But his defence of the freedom of expression was powerful and principled.

I was surprised to hear that a Muslim extremist had tried to get him sentenced to death after he refused to remove drawings of the prophet Mohammed from Facebook. Well done Mark! Many people in the public eye would have buckled under that threat. But he stood up for freedom of speech, no matter how 'offended' some people got. He has certainly showed a stiffer moral backbone than bosses at the BBC and newspapers, who refuse to publish the cartoons from *Charlie Hebdo*. Who, then, should we look to for moral guidance in this scary, new digital age?

It got me thinking. Perhaps I've unfairly dismissed this Facebook generation. Perhaps co-existing with the desire to share anything is the freedom to *say* anything. Perhaps the web is our biggest weapon in the fight against people who want to frighten us into not expressing ourselves.

If you doubt that, try searching for 'Charlie Hebdo Mohammed cartoons' in Google Images. You'll find all the cartoons that the 'old' media (newspapers, TV stations) are too scared to publish. This new generation of web evangelists don't play by traditional rules. Sometimes this manifests itself as arrogance, and they pretend that laws don't apply to them. But on upholding freedom of speech, they are the last line of defence against intolerance.

Donald Warburton

The Star Letter writer wins a *Computeractive* mug!

Consumeractive

Can you get Sony to honour its warranty?

Q I bought a Sony TV on 27 November at a great price during Amazon's Black Friday week. But there is a problem with the screen backlighting. Sony told me the TV was covered by its warranty, but I've not heard back from them about how to send it back. Can you help speed things up and get Sony to honour its warranty?

Dave Thompson

A We'll contact Sony about this and try to get it to pick up the TV and repair the problem. A warranty doesn't have to be offered by a manufacturer, but if it is then legally it must abide by its terms. If Sony fails to honour the warranty, Dave should consider getting the TV repaired at a local shop, then ask Sony to cover the cost. Alternatively, if Dave bought the TV using a credit card, the issuing bank should cover the cost under Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act. We'll update you when we know what Sony says it will do.

CASE ONGOING

Can you help me get Tesco to give me a new tablet?

Q I bought a 7-inch Connect Windows tablet from Tesco at the beginning of December, 2014, so I could Skype my daughter who's seriously ill in hospital. After three weeks the power button stopped working so now it won't charge. However, Tesco has refused to exchange it because of surface marks on the tablet. Can you help please?

Conan Lucas

A We'll certainly try. We've contacted Tesco about this, but until Conan gets back to us with more information we can only speculate as to his rights based on our current understanding of the situation.

Conan had owned the tablet for less than a month when the fault, which appears to be inherent, appeared. This means that under the Sale of Goods Act, he's entitled to a full refund or an exchange.

The sticking point is whether Tesco believes the fault with the power button is inherent. Because Conan has owned the tablet for less than six months, *he* doesn't need to prove that the fault is inherent - it's up to Tesco to prove it isn't. However, he has admitted that there are finger marks on the tablet from use, which Tesco will argue constitute accidental damage caused by him. Therefore, Tesco is within its rights to only offer a repair rather than a refund, even if the power fault is inherent.

However, Tesco may decide that the fault is the result of some other, but less visible, accidental damage – such as the tablet being dropped on the floor. But even if Tesco does think this, it still can't refuse to help Conan. It would have to send the tablet away for inspection to prove accidental damage. If this supports Tesco's view then it won't have to offer a free repair or a replacement. Conan would then have to see if the manufacturer's warranty covers the damage.

As soon as Conan gets in touch we can give him more specific advice and also pass the details on to Tesco. We hope to have good news to report soon.

CASE ONGOING

My phone's screen keeps cracking – can I get a refund?

Q I upgraded my Vodafone contract last October, and now use a Sony Xperia Z3 phone. Two weeks in, the screen cracked. I found online this was a common problem, caused by the battery expanding. Vodafone insisted it was Sony's responsibility to repair it. Sony eventually gave me a refurbished replacement, but its screen has now also cracked. Vodafone still refuses to help, so it's been sent away to Sony again. I fear this will be an ongoing problem and now just want a refund.

Colin MacDonald

A After two cracked screens, we don't blame Colin for wanting a refund. Colin's contract is with Vodafone, not Sony, so it has a responsibility for finding a solution. Vodafone was wrong in its refusal to take responsibility in the first place.

Colin should now wait for Sony to replace the phone once more, but if the fault appears again he should go straight back to Vodafone. In case this should happen, we've asked Colin to gather all the information he has about this particular problem and send it to us. We'll also contact Sony to try to find out more. We'll then hold on to this information for future reference in case Colin or any other reader needs our help.

If Colin does contact Vodafone, we'll then take up the matter with the company on his behalf. If the problem is inherent and caused by battery expansion, Colin will be entitled to demand a different model because the one he has isn't 'fit for purpose'.

CASE ONGOING

We stand up for your legal rights

Contact us so we can investigate your case

Email: consumeractive@computeractive.co.uk
Write: Consumeractive, Computeractive, 30 Cleveland Street, London W1T 4JD
Please include both your phone number and address.
Unfortunately, we can't reply to all your letters.

Can I get a refund for a parcel not delivered by City Link?

Q I wasn't able to reach a City Link depot in time to pick up a Karcher window cleaner I'd ordered from Amazon, when suddenly this courier went bust. City Link customers were only given until 6 January – and I'd been out of the country until after that date. What are my rights regarding reimbursement for the cost of the goods and express postage?

Gareth Parkes

A Gareth is entitled to a full refund for both the goods and any delivery costs. This is because responsibility for ensuring you receive your purchases rests with the retailer – in this case Amazon. Amazon said it would "process a replacement or refund" for Gareth, who should sign in online (www.amazon.co.uk/contact-us) and contact the company via email, phone or online chat.

If a retailer won't refund you, and you paid by credit card, provided the goods cost more than £100 you should make a claim with the bank issuing the card. If you paid with a debit card you should contact your bank and ask it to issue a chargeback. There's a useful chargeback letter template on MoneySavingExpert.com (www.snipca.com/15001). If your bank refuses to process a chargeback you should then ask the Financial Ombudsman to look at your claim (www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk).

CASE CLOSED

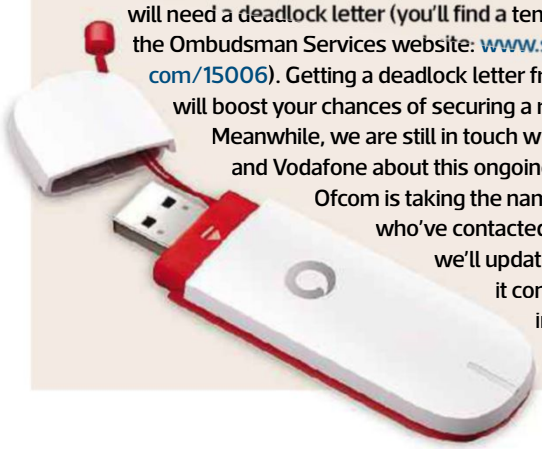
CASE UPDATE

Vodafone still refusing dongle refunds

Last year we received a number of emails from readers who had credit on Vodafone dongles they couldn't use anymore. Many were told they had to buy a new contract or write off the money. We contacted regulator Ofcom, which said it had talked to Vodafone about this issue. Vodafone told Ofcom it would refund customers, but wouldn't do so automatically. Instead, it asked customers to request a refund. Yet, despite this assurance to Ofcom, a number of readers have told us they are still being refused a refund.

There is some good news. Several readers have received refunds after contacting the Ombudsman Services (www.snipca.com/15003) to complain about Vodafone's policy. So if you're still struggling to get your money back, it's worthwhile making a claim online with this ombudsman. Usually you will need a deadlock letter (you'll find a template on the Ombudsman Services website: www.snipca.com/15006). Getting a deadlock letter from Vodafone will boost your chances of securing a refund.

Meanwhile, we are still in touch with Ofcom and Vodafone about this ongoing problem. Ofcom is taking the names of readers who've contacted us and we'll update you when it concludes its investigation.



THIS WILL COME IN USEFUL

Camera manufacturers

Canon
0207 660 0186
Contact form:
www.snipca.com/14874
Twitter: @CanonUKandIE

Nikon
0330 123 0932
Contact form:
www.snipca.com/14875
Live chat:
www.snipca.com/14876
Twitter: @UKNikon

Olympus
00800 6710 8400
Contact form:
www.snipca.com/14877
Twitter: @OlympusUK

Panasonic
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Email:
www.snipca.com/15011
Twitter: @PanasonicUK

Pentax
01782 753350
Email:
pentaxservice@jpss.co.uk

Sony
0207 365 2810
Email:
www.snipca.com/14881
Twitter: @SonyUK

Samsung
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Email:
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PENTAX

SAMSUNG

Protect Your Tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Flaw in older Android devices

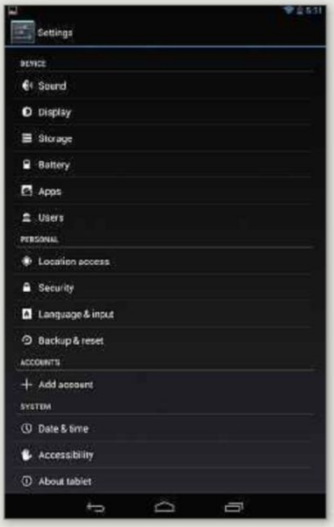
What happened?

Google said it won't fix a security flaw in old versions of Android that affects an estimated one billion phones and tablets worldwide.

The vulnerability – identified by researchers at US security company Rapid7 (www.snipca.com/15050) – only exists in devices running Android 4.3 (known as Jelly Bean), which was released in 2012, or earlier versions. It was found in WebView, an element of Android used to show web pages in apps that aren't browsers, such as when you click a link in Facebook.

Google told Rapid7 that they "generally" don't develop fixes for bugs in versions before 4.3, and "will not be able to take action" to patch this particular flaw. The company's decision drew widespread criticism because it leaves around two-thirds of Android devices at risk.

The latest figures show that 61 per cent of devices still run Jelly Bean or earlier, while 39 per cent run its successor KitKat (4.4), or the latest version Lollipop (5.0).



What should you do?

First off, check which version of Android runs on your device. Tap the Settings (cog) icon, swipe down, tap 'About phone' or 'About tablet' (see bottom of screenshot) and look under 'Android version'. If it shows 4.4 or higher, then you don't need to worry.

You may also see that an Android update is available. If so, install this because it may update your device to KitKat or Lollipop.

If there's no update available, and you see 4.3 (or earlier) under 'Android version', you shouldn't panic because there's no evidence that hackers have exploited the flaw. Indeed, some security experts doubt whether hackers could use it to infect devices. But if you've been considering buying a new Android device, now would be a good time.

New tools

Security Plus Firefox add-on
www.snipca.com/15038

Why use just one antivirus when you could use 64? That's how many security products free Firefox add-on Security Plus uses to check the safety of a website. It does this by employing the same antivirus engines used by VirusTotal (www.virustotal.com), a malware-scanning site.

Once you've installed the add-on, it can tell you whether a link you're about to click is safe. Just right-click the link, then click the Security Plus icon in the menu that appears – it's a black shield with a blue tick and is next to the words 'Scan file for viruses, or all kinds of malware' (see screenshot). Click this, then wait for the scan to complete. If the link is safe, you'll see the message 'Clean site' written in turquoise at the bottom of the page.

ScamWatch
READERS WARN READERS

Summoned to appear in a Michigan court

I received an email with the subject line 'Court attendance notification'. It read: "Hereby we inform that you are obliged to come as a defendant to Michigan Court of Appeals on February 15th, 2015 at 11:00 a.m. for the hearing of your case of illegal software use". The email said that "personal appearance is compulsory", and was signed by the "court clerk" Ryan Ballard. I felt sure it was a scam. I researched online and found that the always-reliable Hoax-Slayer have highlighted these emails as a hoax: www.snipca.com/14999.

Alan Seymour

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

pcspecialist

PC Specialist recommends Windows 8.1

Minerva

"Under a grand nets you a system that is powerful enough to use in any gaming title you care to play..."
Bryan Water, OC3D.net

- Overclocked Intel® Core™ i5-4690K Quad Core
- **Windows 8.1**
- 16GB HyperX DDR3 FURY 1600MHz
- 120GB HyperX 3K SSD
- 2TB 7,200RPM HDD
- 4GB NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 970
- 3 Year Standard Warranty

from £999*

Vortex 440

"a true winner of a system; offering great value for money, epic all-round performance and superior build quality."
Ryan Martin, eTeknix.com

- Intel® Core™ Six Core i7-5820K CPU
- **Windows 8.1**
- 16GB HyperX DDR4 Predator 2400MHz
- 240GB HyperX 3K SSD
- 2TB 7,200RPM HDD
- 4GB NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 970
- 3 Year Standard Warranty

from £1599*

Predator X99

"The Predator X99 is built to very high standards and designed for a myriad of duties including 4K."
Zardon, KitGuru.net

- Intel® Core™ Six Core i7-5820K CPU
- **Windows 8.1**
- 16GB HyperX DDR4 PREDATOR 2400MHz
- 240GB HyperX 3K SSD
- 2TB Seagate SSHD
- 8GB AMD Radeon™ R9 295X2
- 3 Year Standard Warranty

from £2299*

Ultranote II

"what you do get with the UltraNote II is more than just alright. It gets the job done, and does so at a reasonable price."
TechRadar.com

- 15.6" Full HD IPS Display (1920 x 1080)
- Intel® Core™ Quad Core i3-4110M CPU
- **Windows 8.1**
- 8GB Kingston 1600MHz
- 500GB 5,400 HDD
- Intel® HD Graphics 4600
- 3 Year Standard Warranty

from £514*

Optimus V X13

"Need a powerful 13 inch laptop? The Optimus V X13 packs a serious punch!
Zardon, KitGuru.net

- 13.3" Full HD IPS Display (1920 x 1080)
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- **Windows 8.1**
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Brilliant new programs that won't cost you anything

CLOUD STORAGE

Google Drive for Windows 1.19

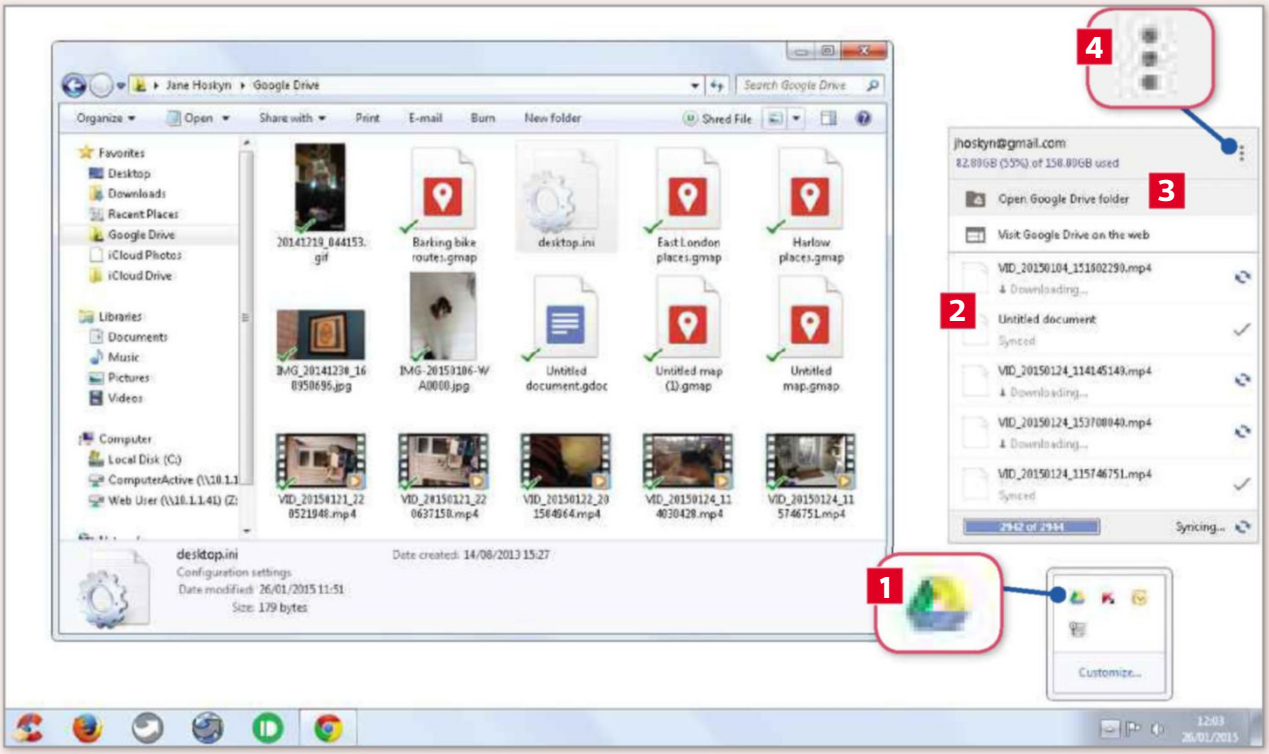
www.snipca.com/15146
What you need: Windows XP, Vista, 7 and 8/8.1

Google's storage service works online, so why are we including it in Best Free Software? Well, you *can* use it online (https://drive.google.com, 15GB free), but if you really value your digital belongings you should use its mobile apps and this Windows program, because they automatically back up any documents, photos and files you choose.

This new version of Drive for Windows is noticeably faster than its predecessor. New features include a list of recently synced files and a neat three-dot settings menu that'll look familiar if you use Android apps. You can also now set a bandwidth limit for syncing, so you're safe in the knowledge Drive won't push you over any broadband limits imposed by your ISP.

To get the program, hover over the blue Download Drive button and click PC (you can also download the mobile app from here). Next, click 'Accept and Install' and save the installer file ('googledrivesync.exe') to your Desktop. Double-click the installer and click Run, then Yes. Finally, you'll be prompted to restart your PC. We're a bit miffed that Google requires this annoying step, but at least it gives you an excuse to make a cup of tea.

Drive doesn't open in a traditional program window. Instead, it creates a Google Drive folder in Windows Explorer and adds an icon to your system tray. Click the icon to start syncing your Drive account (assuming you have one) with the folder on your PC.

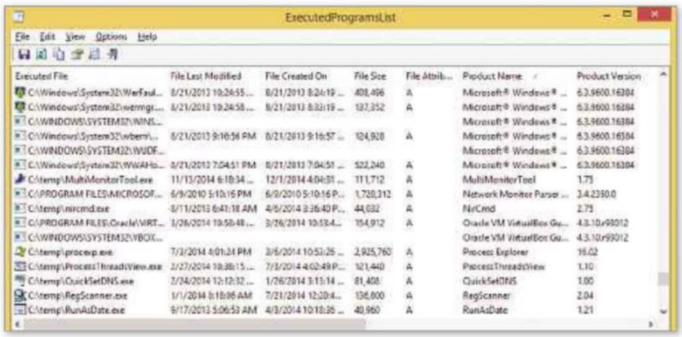


1 Click the Google Drive icon in your system tray to open the Google Drive window and access your account.

2 The window shows which files are being synced, or have been synced recently, between your Drive account and the new Google Drive folder on your PC.

3 Click 'Open Google Drive folder' to open the folder in Windows Explorer. To back up any file or folder on your PC to your Drive account, place it in this folder.

4 Click the three dots to open the settings menu. Options include Help, Quit, Pause (suspend syncing) and Preferences, where you can set syncing limits.



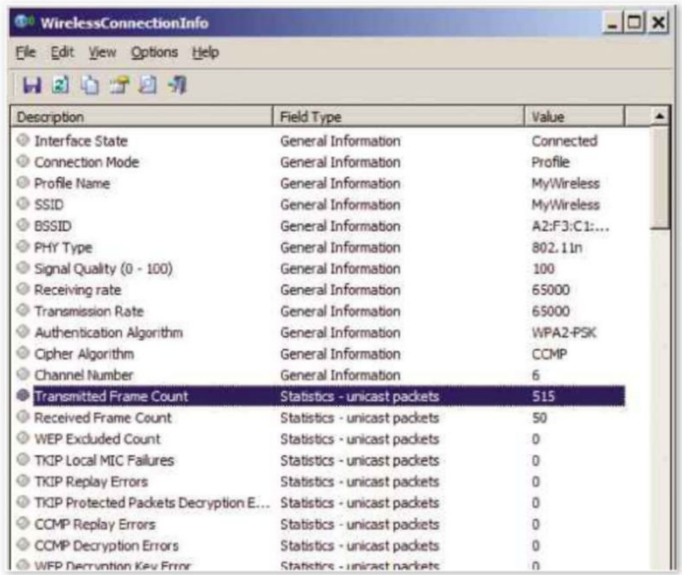
SYSTEM TOOL

ExecutedProgramsList

www.snipca.com/15000

What you need: Windows XP, Vista, 7 or 8/8.1

Some of the most useful programs are the simplest, and this new tool from NirSoft is a great example. Run the portable program file to instantly see a list of programs you've used recently, along with details such as its version and developer, its file size and the date you installed it. For some programs in the list you can even see the exact time you (or Windows) ran it at, which will come in handy if you're trying to find out what's responsible for a process, or to identify a program that keeps running at unexpected times.



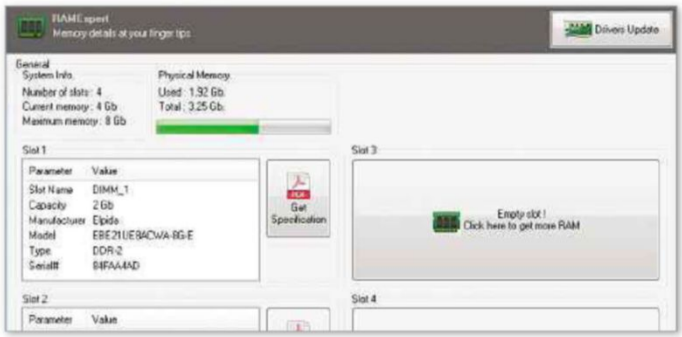
WI-FI TOOL

WirelessConnectionInfo

www.snipca.com/15056

What you need: Windows Vista, 7 or 8/8.1

This portable new tool from NirSoft (actually one person called Nir Sofer, also mentioned on page 55), lifts the lid on your wireless internet connection. The program window is stuffed with jargon ('Authentication Algorithm', for example, which means the type of encryption your router uses) so you may need to search on Google a few times when you're using it. But, like ExecutedProgramsList, this is a fast, portable tool that sheds light on what your PC is doing. Unlike most NirSoft programs we've featured, this one doesn't work on XP.



MEMORY MONITOR

RAMExpert

www.snipca.com/15156

What you need: Windows XP, Vista, 7 or 8/8.1

Check your PC's memory specifications with this simple new tool from KC Softwares, which also makes video and conversion tools (www.kcsoftwares.com). The program window reveals how much RAM is installed and how much is being used. RAMExpert claims to be 'portable' but it's not – you have to install it. Click the blue Download button, then scroll down the page to RAMExpert and click Download again. In the program window, ignore the Drivers Update button – it's an advert for a different program.

WHAT SHOULD I DOWNLOAD?

We tell you what software to use

What's the best replacement for my old accounts software?

Q I used to use Intuit Quicken to do my home accounts for many years, but now it won't install on my new computer from the original disc. I've decided to give up on it and try a new program – what can you recommend?

William Chalmers

A There are lots of paid-for programs to help you keep your household budget under control and maintain your accounts. You Need A Budget (www.youneedabudget.com) is a beautifully designed PC program with companion apps for Android, iOS and even Kindle Fire. It costs $60 (£40) for a lifetime licence on multiple computers, after a free trial.

There's some good, free accounting software around, too. Open-source program GnuCash (www.gnucash.org, see screenshot) lets you track your bank accounts, expenses and even your stocks and shares. For help and tips, visit the GnuCash wiki site (www.snipca.com/15157).

Do you need our advice on what software to use? Just email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Reviews

New products tested by our experts

TABLET | £240 (16GB, Wi-Fi only) from www.snipca.com/15063

Nvidia Shield Tablet

A powerful Android tablet with the latest technology at a surprisingly low price

Nvidia is best known for graphics cards found in loads of PCs and laptops made by other manufacturers. It therefore came as a surprise to learn that Nvidia had made the Shield, an 8in Android tablet, until you realise it acts as something of a showcase for the company's various technologies. Although most of these are aimed at gamers, the Shield still has plenty to offer those with no interest in games – starting with its low price of just £240 for the 16GB Wi-Fi-only model. A 32GB 4G variant is available for just £60 more (from www.snipca.com/15070).

Build quality and performance

While the Shield has a name to remember, its plain, black plastic casing is nothing to write home about. Although it's not as rigid as the metal casing of the iPad Mini 2 (see our review, Issue 416), it's still sturdy. The thin borders on either side of the screen (when held in portrait orientation) made it tricky to get a firm grip on the tablet without accidentally activating an onscreen control, while the edges tended to dig into our flesh.

Its 350g weight is about average for an 8in tablet, although the bulk should be more evenly distributed to make more it comfortable to hold for long periods of time. We'd also prefer it if the mushy power and volume buttons gave more feedback when pressed.

While the Shield has ergonomic weaknesses, it performs well, due in no small measure to Nvidia's own Tegra K1 processor. Although it shares its name with the dual-core 64bit processor in Google's Nexus 9 tablet (see our review, Issue 438), it's actually a quad-core 32bit variant. So while it won't be able to run 64bit apps, 32bit apps will be available for a long time to come and for now there's little practical difference. It performed to a similar level as its 64bit counterpart, blitzing through our demanding benchmark tests. It's one of the fastest tablets we've tested.

Display, responsiveness and battery life

The 8in screen is dazzlingly bright and has a resolution of 1920x1080 pixels, so text looks razor-sharp. Colour accuracy and contrast aren't quite up to the standard of other tablet screens, but they are still very good.

We were initially confounded by the incredible lag in the responsiveness of its touchscreen. Disabling Nvidia's ultra power-saving mode increased the touchscreen's reaction times significantly, although it has an annoying habit of turning itself back on. Given its negative impact, it's baffling that the power-saving mode is turned on by default. You'd have to be in desperate need of extra battery life to put up with the dreadful lag that it imposes. Even with this mode off, there remained a slight delay between swiping and response that you won't find on more expensive Android mini tablets, such as the Sony Xperia Z3 Tablet Compact (see our review, Issue 440). Overall the delay is bearable, and certainly less irritating than the more pronounced lag on many cheaper tablets.

In any case, there's little need to use Nvidia's power-saving mode. The battery lasted just over 10 and a half hours when playing videos continuously, the sort of score we'd expect from an 8in tablet.

Android Lollipop

The Shield is one of the first Android devices we've seen, along with the Nexus 9, to come installed with 5.0 Lollipop (the latest version of Android). This is quite an achievement and, besides the annoying ultra power-saving mode, Nvidia has made only light modifications to the Lollipop interface. And if you don't need Nvidia's extra features, they can easily be ignored, though some can be useful. For example, you can record what's happening onscreen, either with or without you speaking a commentary. The recording is saved like any other video file, which you can then share. This would be used to create tutorials on how to use Android for friends and family who are new to the operating system.

As with Samsung's Galaxy Note range of tablets, a stylus is included (see image above). Slide it out of its nook and a small window automatically appears on screen for launching Nvidia's note-taking and painting apps. The note-taking app is very basic. While the painting app can be confusing to use with its cryptic, unlabelled icons, it's surprisingly versatile, offering a variety of canvases and brushes.

Impressively, the touchscreen is smart enough to ignore the palm of your hand, which rests upon it as you write or draw with the stylus. This is a feature we've only otherwise seen in the much more expensive Microsoft Surface Pro 3 (see our review, Issue 431). What's more, the stylus is pressure-sensitive so pressing down harder on the screen makes a thicker or darker mark in the painting app, depending on what tool you're using at the time.

We did encounter a rather odd and infuriating bug not found in the Nexus 9 or any of our Android 4.4 KitKat devices. None of the user accounts, other than the master account, could access external storage (microSD cards or USB sticks connected using a USB On-The-Go adapter).

Play your PC games

You can use the tablet to play your PC games as long as both the Shield and computer are connected to a dual-band 802.11n wireless network at 5GHz. The PC streams the graphics and sound to the Shield, which in turn sends your control decisions back to the PC.

This worked surprisingly well in practice, although the occasional lag when sending control decisions back to the PC meant that we sometimes lost out in fast-paced games. It's a shame the Shield doesn't support 802.11ac because its extra speed would've really helped here. Disappointingly, your PC can't be used by another person while you play games on the Shield, reducing the usefulness of this feature. Plus, your PC or laptop will need to have a specific Nvidia GeForce graphics card for this feature to work (system requirements are online at www.snipca.com/15068).

Somewhat less successful is the Grid feature. This lets you play a small selection of popular PC games on the Shield without a PC at all - the graphics are instead streamed from Nvidia's servers over the internet. This not only requires a 5GHz 802.11n network, but a very fast broadband connection with low latency. A 10Mbps residential ADSL connection just didn't cut it. We had to use a friend's 50Mbps cable connection and even then we couldn't stray from the same room as the router, further limiting the usefulness of the Grid feature.

If you're still not put off by these restrictions, then you may want to buy some accessories to optimise your gaming experience. A controller that connects via Wi-Fi costs another £50 (from www.snipca.com/15066), while an iPad-style screen cover that doubles as a stand costs an extra £25 (from www.snipca.com/15067). The cover isn't particularly well designed though; its chunky hinge makes holding the tablet even more uncomfortable.

> "A powerful tablet that offers much to gamers and non-gamers alike"

Conclusion

Gaming features aside, the Nvidia Shield has a few annoying design quirks that prevent it from securing our five-star Buy It award and an unconditional recommendation. It's still a good tablet though, neatly filling the hole left by the now discontinued Nexus 7. It's a powerful, generously equipped Android mini tablet at a very reasonable price.

SPECIFICATIONS

8in 1920x1200-pixel touchscreen • 2.2GHz Nvidia Tegra K1 quad-core processor • 2GB memory • 16GB storage • Nvidia Kepler graphics chip • Android 5.0 Lollipop • 350g • 221x126x9mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/15065

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Dennis Publishing, which owns a hi-tech facility for testing the latest technology. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Dennis Publishing also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *Computer Shopper*, *Web User*, *Micro Mart* and *MacUser*, and the website Expert Reviews (www.expertreviews.co.uk). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

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Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Great Pick award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT: Despite its flaws, this fast, quality tablet is great value whether you're into gaming or not

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE: Sony Xperia Z3 Tablet Compact £320 Not quite as fast, pricier and no Lollipop yet, but with far longer battery life and a waterproof design too

PDF CONVERTER | **£60** from www.snipca.com/14971

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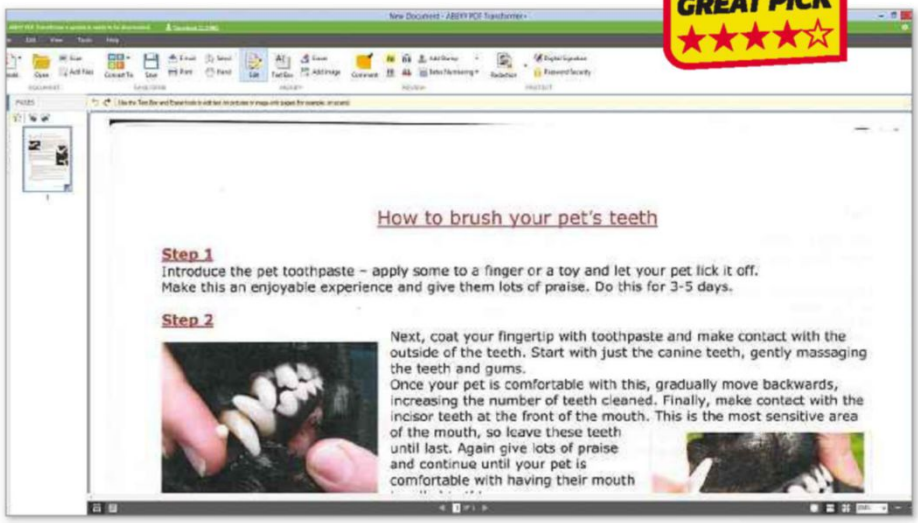
Turn any PDF into searchable, editable text



PDF Transformer+ is a powerful program for creating searchable PDF documents from scans and existing files. ABBYY is best known for its FineReader optical character recognition (OCR) software. The same engine is used to power PDF Transformer+, which can recognise 189 different languages. A built-in scanner interface lets you import documents directly from either a flatbed or ADF scanner. Other features include the ability to annotate existing PDFs, convert them into a wide range of file formats and create your own PDFs from scanned documents or image files.

There are certain prerequisites if PDF Transformer+ is to carry out accurate text recognition. The text must be in a clear font, such as Ariel or Times New Roman. Unusual fonts with highly embellished flourishes will usually not be recognised by the software. It's also not up to deciphering handwriting and struggles if text is laid out at an angle or along a curved path.

The speed with which the program can convert static text into an editable form depends primarily on the speed of your computer. The more powerful it is, the faster that conversion will be. A single PDF page took around 30 seconds to convert to Word format on our laptop, which has a dual-core Intel Core i5-3371U 1.7GHz processor. The same process took less than 10 seconds on a PC with a quad-core 3.4GHz Intel Core i7-2600.

> "We used it to archive recipes, articles and utility bills"

PDF Transformer's foreign-language support means you can easily scan a document in just about any language, and then copy and paste the resulting editable text into a translation program or Google Translate to get the gist of its content. We got pretty good results when we did just that with documents in the Cyrillic, Arabic and Greek alphabets.

Although it's brilliant to have comprehensive foreign language support, we got the greatest use out of the program when scanning and archiving recipes, magazine articles and utility bills. PDF Transformer+ detected our scanner with no problems, so we could just scan the pages we needed into a single document and then either save it as a standard PDF or turn it into a searchable PDF.

Searchable PDFs can be much larger than their static equivalents, though. Although a plain black-and-white text-only document was only slightly larger in searchable form, a high-quality colour scan of a five-page magazine article at just over 4MB became a 53MB monster of a file when we made it searchable. For this reason, you won't necessarily want to make every PDF you create searchable.

You can, of course, also export documents to Word, OpenOffice, PowerPoint, HTML, EPUB and other formats. Both images and text are exported in a layout that's as close to the original as possible, making it easy in many cases to edit the text and then re-create your documents as PDFs.

Another useful feature is the ability to annotate both searchable and static PDFs. If you do collaborative work, or just want to make notes on a document for your own reference, you can place a text box wherever you like and add comments that will appear and be printed as though they were part of the original document. You can also place stamps and digital signatures on a document, password- protect it, and insert digital comments. The latter can be viewed by anyone with Adobe's free Reader software, but aren't printed with the document.

PDF Transformer+ isn't cheap, though it costs significantly less than Adobe Acrobat. It has powerful, easy-to-use OCR, annotation and conversion features. Some basic document-management features would've been the icing on the cake, but it's still a great program.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Windows XP or later • 1GHz processor or faster • Minimum 1GB of memory • Minimum 800MB of hard-drive space www.snipca.com/14973

VERDICT: If you work with text-heavy scanned documents and PDFs, this program is a massive time-saver

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE: Adobe Acrobat XI Standard £13.33 per month Adobe's PDF-maker software is slick, easy to use and has its own OCR utility built in, but needs a subscription or a one-off payment of £254

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE | **£74** from www.snipca.com/14996

Magix Movie Edit Pro 2015 Premium

Video editing with the kitchen sink thrown in

The ideal video-editing program should be easy for beginners to grasp, while still offering advanced features that satisfy more confident users. Magix claims the revamped user interface in Magix Movie Edit Pro 2015 Premium does just that, but we remain to be convinced.

The program didn't make a great first impression. After downloading and installing it, there was no guidance as to how to install the templates and additional effects that set the top-dollar Premium version apart from its cheaper Pro and Pro Plus counterparts. Instead we were bombarded with pop-up adverts for a host of other Magix products.

The main interface isn't particularly welcoming either. Long, sprawling lists of options in the menus make features hard to find. Nor is it obvious what some of these menu options and buttons do.

But if you can cope with the steep learning curve, the program has much to offer. The editing controls are precise and responsive. We particularly like the ability to fade clips in and out simply by dragging handles on the corners of each clip. The program supports up to 99 tracks for layering complex montages of video, image and audio elements.

Unexpectedly in a video editor at this price, there were ripple-editing options. These determine what happens to clips further down the timeline when earlier clips are amended. For example, if you move a clip the program will automatically close any gaps created by its absence. Ripple editing is particularly useful for complex multi-track projects. However, it's odd here that ripple editing is applied when clips are added or moved, but not when they're deleted or truncated. It's also confusing that there appears to be two sets of controls for ripple options. We eventually figured out that one set is used for inserting content into the timeline. More descriptive labels are desperately needed here.

The fish-eye correction effect can repair distorted footage shot with cameras that have inferior lenses. The program also lets you synchronise footage of a single event shot from up to four cameras with easy-to-use controls for cutting between multiple points of view. This is another unusual feature at this kind of price, and in this instance it's extremely well implemented. Both of these features are also available in the Pro Plus version.

Also new are effects that give a vintage look to video footage, apply glows and add lens flares. The quality of these effects is extremely high, but more fundamental bread-and-butter effects such as colour correction aren't nearly as good.

Ultimately, Movie Edit Pro adds up to less than the sum of its parts. There are lots of powerful features but the unintuitive interface makes it a difficult program to master.

VERDICT: Some useful improvements and plenty of powerful features, but the interface is frustratingly complex

★★★☆☆

ALTERNATIVE:

Adobe Premiere Elements 13

£62 A great video-editing program that caters superbly for both beginners and experts

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Windows 7 or later • 2.4GHz dual-core processor or faster • Minimum 1GB memory • Minimum 2GB of available hard-drive space • Internet access for program activation www.snipca.com/15005

The best... Accessories

Verbatim Store 'n' Stay Nano 32GB

£13 from www.snipca.com/15107

A tiny USB stick that comes with an equally small USB-On-The-Go adapter so you can plug the stick into your Android device. Large files were copied at a reasonable 11MB/s, while small files transferred more slowly at 4MB/s.

Corsair Flash Voyager Go 32GB

£19 from www.snipca.com/15108

A more elegantly designed Android-compatible USB stick than the Verbatim, but it's pricier. It has a full-size USB plug at one end and a micro USB plug at the other. Large files were copied at a blistering 83MB/s and small files were also pretty fast at 17MB/s.

XSories Weye Feye

£120 from www.snipca.com/15103

Connect the Weye Feye to your Canon or Nikon DSLR via USB and you'll be able to control your camera remotely using your iOS or Android device, with a live view of what your camera sees. Useful for taking photos of wildlife and night scenes.

iMend

£60 approx from www.imend.com

This UK-wide call-out service will repair a cracked screen on your iPhone or Samsung Galaxy S phone. Technicians aim to reach you on the day you book, with prices starting at around £60. Other phones will be supported soon – our cracked Nokia Lumia 620 was repaired quickly and to a high standard.

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- Windows 8.1

£299 Inc VAT

The V1 is a very capable entry-level system perfect from basic home/office tasks. It's based around the dual-core Intel® Pentium® G3240 processor, 4GB of RAM plus a 500GB hard disk.

Scan V15 Value System Home / Office PC

- Intel® Core™ i5 4460 processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 1600MHz memory
- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1

£489 Inc VAT

The V15 ups the ante by including a quad-core Intel® Core™ i5 4460 processor, so it makes light work of office and multimedia applications.

Scan G20 Value System Gaming PC

- Intel® Pentium® G3240 processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 1600MHz memory
- 2GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 750 Ti SSC
- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1

£519 Inc VAT

Thanks to its dual-core Intel® Pentium® G3240 processor and NVIDIA GTX 750 Ti SSC graphics card the G20i is our most affordable gaming PC. It even includes surround sound!

Scan G30i Value System Gaming PC

- Intel® Core™ i5 4460 processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 1600MHz memory
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- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1

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Some features require Windows 8.1. Update available through Windows Store. Internet access required; fees may apply. Some apps sold separately; vary by market.

Prices correct at time of print and are subject to change.

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- Intel® Pentium® G3258 overclocked to 4.4GHz
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 2133MHz memory
- 2GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 760
- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1
- 3 Year Premium Warranty

£639 Inc VAT

The 3XS Performance GT is an affordably-priced gaming rig that includes a dual-core Intel Pentium G3258, which we overclock up to 4.4GHz for improved performance. Also included is a 2GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 760 graphics card, 8GB of 2133MHz Corsair DDR3, a Z97 motherboard and 1TB hard disk.

Scan 3XS Gamer 20i Gaming PC

- Intel® Core™ i7 4790 processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 2133MHz memory
- 4GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970 SC ACX
- 1TB Seagate HDD
- Windows 8.1
- 3 Year Premium Warranty

£1075 Inc VAT

The 3XS Gamer 20i is a super-fast gaming PC thanks to its combination of quad-core Intel Core i7 4790 CPU running at 3.6GHz with added Hyper-Threading plus a 4GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970 graphics card. These components are installed in an Asus Z97-K motherboard along with a 1TB hard disk.

3XS Graphite LG156 Gaming Laptop

- Intel® Core™ i5 4210M processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 1600MHz memory
- 2GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 860M
- 15.6in 1,920 x 1,080 screen
- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1

£855 Inc VAT

The LG156 is 15.6" mid-range gaming laptop that includes a NVIDIA GeForce GTX 860M graphics card. The LG156 has won multiple awards in the press for its performance and value for money. The LG156 is ready for next-day delivery and has a 2 Year Warranty.

3XS Graphite LG1720 Gaming Laptop

- Intel® Core™ i7 4710HQ processor
- 8GB Corsair DDR3 1600MHz memory
- 3GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970M
- 17.3in 1,920 x 1,080 screen
- 1TB SATA 6Gb/sec hard drive
- Windows 8.1

£1149 Inc VAT

The LG1720 is a 17.3" high-end gaming laptop that includes a choice of powerful NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970M or 980M graphics card, ensuring silky smooth frame rates in all games. The LG1720 is ready for next-day delivery and has a 2 Year Warranty.

Scan Computers recommends Windows.

3XS Custom Series

Our 3XS Custom Series is a range of computers designed to offer the best performance for a variety of applications, with a particular focus on games. We build Custom Series PCs to order, so we can configure and tailor make an individual PC just the way you want it. We can also overclock the processor, so you get a faster PC without a substantial increase in price. All 3XS Custom Series PCs are covered by a three year warranty as standard with the first year on-site.

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3XS SYSTEMS

Some features require Windows 8.1. Update available through Windows Store. Internet access required; fees may apply. Some apps sold separately; vary by market.

Prices correct at time of print and are subject to change.

SMARTPHONE | **£390** from www.snipca.com/15014

Sony Xperia Z3 Compact

Sony's small but powerful Android phone

Computer active GREAT PICK ★★★★☆

Smartphones are now bigger than ever, with 5 to 6-inch screens increasingly common. This is great if a large screen is your priority, but for anyone with small hands these huge phones are tricky to hold and use – especially with one hand over long periods of time. This makes the Xperia Z3 Compact especially welcome.

Not to be confused with the 8in Z3 Tablet Compact (see our review, Issue 440), the Z3 Compact has a 4.6in screen. This is obviously larger than the 4.3in screen of its predecessor the Z1 Compact (see our review, Issue 419) but the difference is pretty negligible. And while it's significantly wider than the 4in iPhone 5s, it's comfortable to handle – especially when compared with phones that are marginally larger but much more unwieldy, such as the 4.7in iPhone 6 (see our reviews, Issues 408 and 436 respectively).

> "It's fast, with long battery life and waterproof design"

Disappointingly, the screen itself is nowhere near as bright as screens on other phones. Although it's legible in most circumstances, we struggled to make out details when we used the phone in bright sunshine. But what it lacks in brightness, it makes up for in colour accuracy and contrast. Its 720p resolution seems low compared to phones with 1080p screens, but any loss in sharpness is barely noticable.

The Z3 Compact's charm doesn't just stem from its compact size. As with Sony's other Z-series devices, it's waterproof at depths of up to one metre, as long as you immerse it for no longer than 30 minutes and make sure the protective flaps covering its ports are snapped shut. This is great if you like reading in the bath, or are simply very clumsy around water. We were concerned that the phone's glass rear would be too slippery, but this proved not to be the case in our test.

It's also fast. The 2.4GHz Snapdragon 801 quad-core processor is one of the fastest available so, paired with 2GB of memory, it sped through our demanding benchmark tests. Its Adreno 330 graphics chip is also quick and should handle the latest 3D games.

Battery life was similarly impressive. In our tests, it lasted just under 15 hours 30 minutes when playing videos continuously. Its stamina was even better when connected to Vodafone's 4G network and used for calls, photography, web browsing and GPS, managing just over 31 hours 30 minutes. When connected to Vodafone's network in London's West End, callers reported that we sounded loud and clear, although they often sounded fuzzy and distant to us.

We were expecting great things from the camera, given the quality of those in older Xperias, but we were left feeling underwhelmed. Outdoor shots on overcast days looked far too dark, while colours were sometimes a little oversaturated. Fiddling with the settings in Sony's camera app helped somewhat, but this shouldn't be necessary. An even bigger problem was noise, which tended to obscure the finer details in some shots. This is due to Sony squeezing 20.7 megapixels on to a small sensor. It fared better indoors, especially in low light, with reasonably bright and detailed shots, although noise was still present.

Sony has promised an upgrade to Android 5.0 Lollipop at "the beginning of 2015". Until that arrives, the Z3 Compact runs 4.4 KitKat, which Sony has only lightly tweaked. Our favourite Sony addition is the mini apps that float on top of other apps in resizeable windows, mimicking PC-style multitasking. The selection of apps is small, but the Gmail, calendar and calculator mini apps are particularly useful.

The Z3 Compact's camera and screen could both be better, but it's fast, with lengthy battery life and all in a sensibly sized, waterproof design. It's a cracking Android phone.

SPECIFICATIONS

4.6in 1280x720-pixel touchscreen • 2.4GHz Qualcomm Snapdragon 801 quad-core processor • 450MHz Adreno 330 graphics chip • 2GB memory • 16GB storage • 4G • Micro SIM • MicroSD slot • Android 4.4 KitKat • 129g • 127x65x9mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/15015

VERDICT: Not perfect, but if you want the latest smartphone technology in a small package then this is still a great choice

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE: Apple iPhone 5s £459 (without contract) An even more compact smartphone with a great camera and handy fingerprint reader

TABLET | **£100** from www.snipca.com/15082

Bush MyTablet 8 Inch

A Windows 8.1 tablet with Office for just £100

Bush is a company best known for cheap and cheerful white goods, such as washing machines and fridges, so we weren't expecting much from its £100 Windows 8.1 tablet. We were therefore pleasantly surprised by the MyTablet 8 Inch. It may have an unimaginative name, but this little tablet has a lot going for it.

We expected the plastic casing to be cheap and flimsy, but the plain silver-and-black construction is rigid and sturdy. However, the narrow borders on the left- and right-hand edges of the screen means, when you hold the tablet vertically, getting a firm grasp without accidentally touching an onscreen control is difficult.

The MyTablet 8 is very similar to Windows 8.1 tablets that cost twice as much, such as the Toshiba Encore 2 8in (see our review, Issue 441). The full version of Windows 8.1 means you can run older Desktop programs, if you really want to, and you can use USB peripherals such as printers connected via a USB On-The-Go adapter (£1.19 from www.snipca.com/15085).

There's a micro SD slot for adding more storage - essential as only half of the 32GB of built-in storage is available to use. The touchscreen is very responsive, much more so than similarly priced Android tablets.

There's no shortage of flaws, though. The screen is bright, but colours look a little washed out and contrast is poor. Its relatively low 1280x800-pixel resolution makes text look a little fuzzy. The cameras are unusably bad, even for video calls. Battery life when playing videos on a loop was below average at eight hours and 36 minutes.

Much more problematic is the tablet's slow performance. The Intel Atom Z3735G quad-core processor is hobbled by being paired with just 1GB of memory. It's good enough for browsing the web, sending emails and watching video, but attempting to switch between multiple apps running simultaneously is slow. Attempting anything remotely complex such as editing photos, working on a spreadsheet or scrolling through a long Word document is often infuriatingly slow.

The latter is a shame as the MyTablet comes with a free Microsoft Office 365 Personal subscription. Valid for one year, this gives you the latest version of Office not just on the MyTablet, but also on one other PC or Mac. You also get 1TB of OneDrive online storage and 60 minutes of free Skype calls a month. After the year is up, it'll cost £6 a month or £60 a year to renew. It's almost like buying Office and getting a free tablet thrown in.

The Bush MyTablet is far from perfect, but at this price it's good enough as a tablet for a child or for light occasional internet use. As long as you can live with its limitations, it's good value.

SPECIFICATIONS

8in 1280x800-pixel touchscreen • 1.33GHz Intel Atom Z3735G quad-core processor • 1GB memory • 32GB storage • Intel integrated graphics chip • Windows 8.1 • 350g • 9x123x215mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty • Part code 502790 www.snipca.com/15082

VERDICT: A good tablet for basic tasks such as watching videos and email

★★★☆☆

ALTERNATIVE: Tesco Hudl 2 £130 The responsiveness of its touchscreen isn't as good, but image quality is better and the selection of apps for Android is wider

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Which printer is best for greeting cards?

Q I like to print greeting cards, but my old HP Photosmart D5160 printer is too expensive to run as it only has a single colour cartridge, while my Epson Stylus SX535WD can't cope with the 206gsm (grams per square metre) weight of the card I want to use. Is there a printer you would recommend for my needs?

David Head

A Printing on thick, heavy card is a relatively niche activity that few printers are capable of. The HP Officejet Pro 8610 (£120 from www.snipca.com/15093) is designed to print on A4 in weights up to 200gsm. It has good print quality and with A4 paper it costs 3.8p per page to run (very low for a MFP).

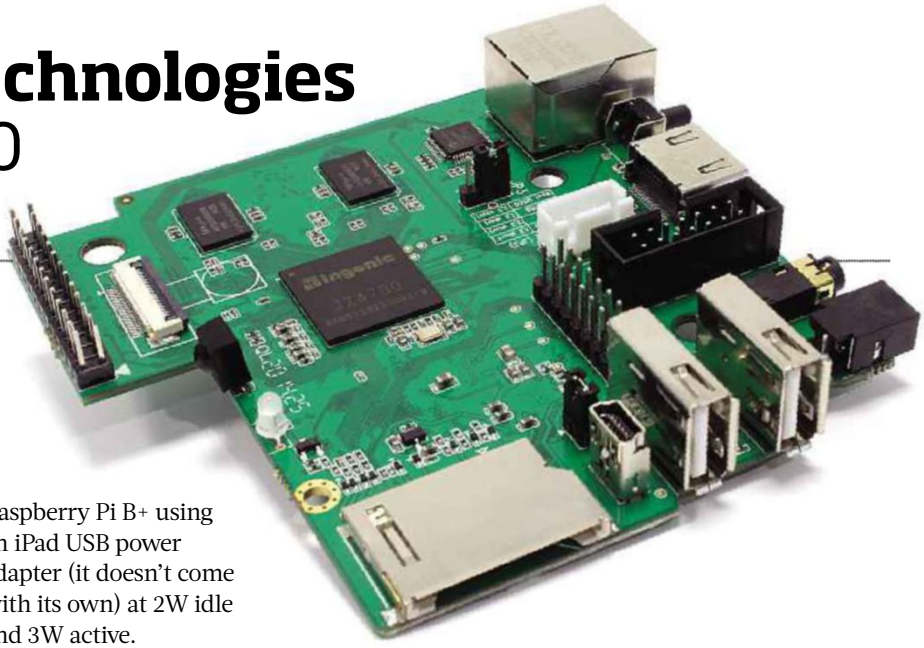
If you want the very best quality, need to print A3 cards or want to use even heavier card stock, the best printer we've seen is the Canon Pixma Pro 10. It has a manual feed that can take paper and card up to 350gsm with a maximum thickness of 0.6mm. It's not cheap, though (£499 from www.snipca.com/15094), as it's a dedicated photo printer. Its printing costs aren't directly comparable to the 8610's, but it's cheap to run for a printer of its type with 6x4in prints costing 34p, a glossy A4 page costing 89p and an A3 page costing £2.11.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

PC | **£50** from www.snipca.com/14991

Imagination Technologies MIPS Creator CI20

A speedy rival to Raspberry Pi



Raspberry Pi B+ using an iPad USB power adapter (it doesn't come with its own) at 2W idle and 3W active.

Single-board computers are remarkably popular at the moment, spearheaded by the success of the Raspberry Pi (see our review of the Model B+, Issue 434). They're used by hobbyists to control everything from Morse-code transmitters to robots, but are also fully functioning PCs that can be used for browsing the web, watching videos and programming.

Imagination Technologies is best known for developing the PowerVR graphics chip used by a number of tablet manufacturers, including Apple and Samsung. Imagination's new £50 CI20 single-board computer has a PowerVR SGX540 graphics chip, which broadly performs on a par with the Broadcom VideoCore IV found in the Raspberry Pi. Like the Pi, therefore, the CI20 has no trouble playing 1080p videos.

> "There are plenty of options for connecting and controlling external devices"

Whereas the Raspberry Pi uses a single-core 700MHz ARM1176JZF-S ARM processor and 512MB of memory, the CI20 has a dual-core 1.2GHz Ingenic XBurst JZ4780 MIPS processor and 1GB of memory, so it's definitely more powerful. As our benchmark tests don't run on single-board computers, we ran a simple encryption test instead. The CI20 was around a third faster than the Pi B+. Bear in mind, the CI20 uses a MIPS-based processor, so any programs you have for the ARM-based Pi won't work unless you compile them again.

This superior performance level comes at a cost – higher power consumption. The CI20 drew 4W most of the time, peaking at 5W during a particularly demanding compile – we suspect this is also partially due to the inefficient power adapter included with the CI20. For the sake of comparison, we measured the

The CI20 only has two USB ports – two fewer than the Raspberry Pi B+. There's also a mini USB port, but this can only be used when one of the full-size USB ports is not being used – you can't use both simultaneously. There's a 10/100Mbps Ethernet port and, unlike the Pi, the CI20 has Wi-Fi and Bluetooth built in. The headphone jack doubles as a speaker port.

The CI20 is built with electronics projects in mind, so there are plenty of options for connecting and controlling external devices – an ITU645 camera connector, 25 General Purpose Input/Output (GPIO) pins, and two UART connectors for attaching serial devices.

Unlike most single-board computers, the CI20 is ready to use as soon as you take it out of the box, because it comes with Debian Linux 7.5 pre-installed. A special version of Android 4.4 is the only other officially supported operating system (OS), but many other Linux distributions will work and, conveniently, you can even run them from a microSD card so you don't have to abandon your main OS. Android on the CI20 is an odd beast because it lacks access to the Google Play Store. You can manually install Android apps, and a handful are pre-installed, but the overall result is far less functional than Debian.

SPECIFICATIONS

1.2GHz Ingenic XBurst JZ4780 dual-core processor • 1GB memory • 8GB SSD • MicroSD slot • 200MHz PowerVR SGX540 graphics chip • 1x 10/100Mbps Ethernet port • 802.11b/g/n • Bluetooth 4.0 • 25-pin GPIO connector • 90x95mm (WxD)
www.snipca.com/14991

Although the CI20 is faster than the Raspberry Pi B+, we don't regard this as a significant selling point, given the undemanding nature of most tasks and projects you're likely to undertake on a single-board computer. The built-in Wi-Fi is useful, but we missed the B+'s extra USB ports. The MIPS-based processor runs Linux just as well as more popular Intel and ARM-based processors, and only a couple of niche programs failed to compile on it.

We'd have preferred the CI20 to come with more tools and tutorials to help budding new programmers, in the way that Pi came with the IDLE Python development environment. An even greater problem is that the CI20 lacks the multitude of tutorials, projects, active communities and enthusiast groups that the Pi benefits from – the CI20 community at www.snipca.com/14990 is barebones and moribund in comparison. We look forward to future versions of the CI20, but for now there's little here to tempt you away from the Pi.

VERDICT: A fast and generally well equipped single-board computer, but most hobbyists and programmers, especially beginners, are still better off with a Raspberry Pi

★★★☆☆

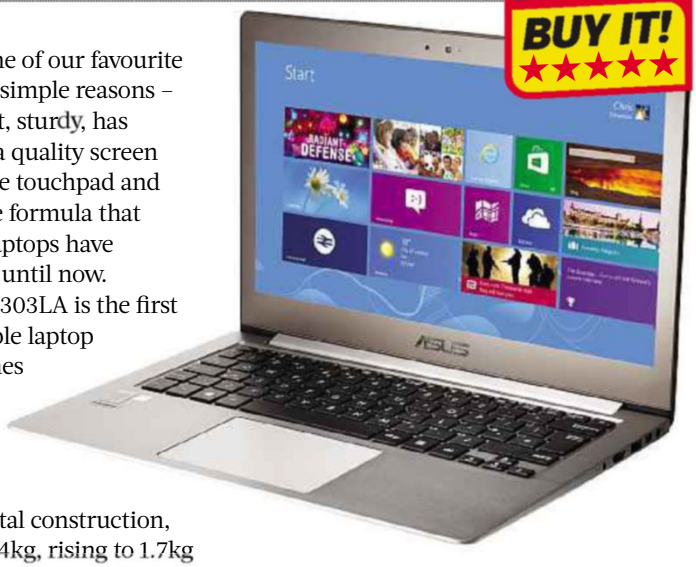
ALTERNATIVE: Raspberry Pi B+ £24
With loads of custom kits, peripherals, and learning resources, it's still our first choice for electronics projects

LAPTOP | **£700** from www.snipca.com/15017

Asus Zenbook UX303LA

A sleek and powerful ultra-portable laptop

Computer active BUY IT! ★★★★★



The MacBook Air is one of our favourite laptops for some very simple reasons – it's stylish, lightweight, sturdy, has excellent battery life, a quality screen and a very comfortable touchpad and keyboard. It's a simple formula that makers of Windows laptops have struggled to achieve – until now. The Asus Zenbook UX303LA is the first Windows ultra-portable laptop we've seen that matches Apple's flagship MacBook Air.

The UX303LA has a classy, sturdy metal build. Despite this metal construction, it's very light at just 1.4kg, rising to 1.7kg with its charger. Combined with its lengthy battery life of just under 13 and a half hours, it's ideal for working while on the move.

Despite its long battery life, it's refreshing to see that performance hasn't been sacrificed. The 2GHz Core i7 4500U dual-core processor paired with 6GB of memory is fast enough to be used as your main computer. The SSD ensures waking from sleep mode is virtually instantaneous, but its modest 128GB of storage means it can get cramped very quickly. You can prise off the bottom panel to fit a larger SSD and upgrade the memory, but this is a fiddly business.

Rather than squeezing a full 1080p resolution into the 13in screen and run the risk of making onscreen items too small to see, Asus has wisely opted for a more sensible 1600x900-pixel resolution instead. The screen is easily legible and gives you more working room than the 1366x768-pixel resolutions found in most other laptops at this price. It's dazzlingly bright and has an anti-glare coating that significantly reduces reflected light. All of which more than makes up for the so-so colour accuracy, the grainy sheen and the relatively narrow viewing angles.

Although the keyboard isn't backlit for working in darker conditions and we'd rather the keys had a little more resistance, it's still one of the most comfortable laptop keyboards we've used, offering plenty of travel and feedback. The touchpad isn't as impressive. While big and accurate, it often lagged when performing gestures, such as swiping two fingers to scroll or pinching to zoom. It's also far too easy to brush up against the touchpad when typing, accidentally triggering onscreen controls.

The UX303LA doesn't have all the niceties of the MacBook Air. We miss its neatly designed power adapter, the backlit keyboard and the superior touchpad, for example. Still, if you want a well designed slim and light Windows laptop then the UX303LA is the best you can get.

VERDICT: Not quite perfect, but it's still the best Windows slim and lightweight laptop available

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE:
Apple MacBook Air 13in £849 Slower performance, but a superior touchpad and even longer battery life

SPECIFICATIONS
2GHz Intel Core i7 4500U dual-core processor • 6GB memory • 128GB SSD • Intel HD 4400 integrated graphics chip • 13.3in 1600x900-pixel screen • 802.11ac/a/b/g/n • Windows 8.1 • 1.4kg (1.7kg with charger) • 20x323x223mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/15018

COMING SOON

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2015
Acer has announced the Revo One RL85, a striking mini PC that will come with up to 6TB of hard-drive space and a remote control featuring a mini keyboard. The 2TB model will cost £279.

MARCH/APRIL 2015
HTC's rumoured One M9 Android phone will allegedly be very similar to the current M8, but with a bigger screen, eight-core Snapdragon 810 processor and a new 20-megapixel camera.

zol.com.cn

APRIL/MAY 2015
The Galaxy S6 will reportedly have a brand new all-metal design (see artist's rendering right), but rumours abound that Samsung will abandon Qualcomm's Snapdragon processors in favour of its own Exynos processors due to engineering difficulties.

Josip Jakubiv

SPRING 2015
Apple is rumoured to be radically redesigning its MacBook Air laptop. It will apparently be much lighter and thinner because it will use Intel's new fan-less Broadwell processors and will only have a single USB 3.0 Type-C port for power and peripherals.

NEXT ISSUE

ON SALE 18 Feb

HP Envy X2 13
HP's answer to the Surface Pro 3

Asus Memo Pad 7
Asus' £150 Android tablet

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LAPTOP

NEW ENTRY

Asus Zenbook UX303LA

TESTED: Issue 442
£690 from www.snipca.com/15113

Asus' thin and light laptop is the only Windows laptop we've seen to rival Apple's MacBook Air for price, weight, battery life and style. On top of that, it has a very comfortable keyboard and a high-resolution screen that's easy on the eyes.

ALTERNATIVE Asus Chromebook C200 A cheap Chrome OS ultra-portable laptop with a bright screen, lengthy battery life and a great keyboard. £200 from www.snipca.com/13460

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Kaveri Evolution

£500 from www.snipca.com/11804
Tested: Issue 422

A budget PC with a fast overclocked processor. It also has good upgrade potential and comes with a surprisingly good 24in monitor, as well as a quality USB keyboard and mouse.

ALTERNATIVE: Braebo Hemera A cheap complete PC system that's powerful enough for basic tasks. £400 from www.snipca.com/15114

TABLET

Apple iPad Mini 2

£239 from www.snipca.com/14467
Tested: Issue 416

Apple's mini tablet from 2013 is now available at an even lower price. The only thing it lacks compared with this year's Mini 3 is a fingerprint sensor and the option of lots of built-in storage. Otherwise, it's an absolute bargain.

ALTERNATIVE: Apple iPad Air 2 A thin and lightweight 10in tablet with a fingerprint reader, an excellent screen and peerless selection of apps. £399 from www.snipca.com/14309

PHONE

Motorola Moto G 4G

£150 (without contract) from www.snipca.com/14162
Tested: Issue 432

Motorola's budget Android smartphone is an absolute steal. It's very responsive, well made, fast and has a good screen. Plus, it's now been updated with 4G and a microSD card slot.

ALTERNATIVE: Apple iPhone 5s An excellent smartphone with a great camera and performance. £459 without a contract from www.snipca.com/10171

DIGITAL CAMERA

Panasonic Lumix DMC-GF6

£300 from www.snipca.com/12607
Tested: Issue 405

This compact interchangeable-lens camera is small and reasonably priced, yet it has well-designed controls, a wide range of available lenses and shoots excellent quality photos. The GF6 really is unbeatable value.

ALTERNATIVE: Fujifilm XF1 If you don't need the flexibility of removable lenses, this slim compact is a great choice. £130 from www.snipca.com/13701

E-READER

Kobo Aura H2O

£140 from www.snipca.com/13859
Tested: Issue 435

A waterproof e-reader with an easy-to-read, high-resolution touchscreen that's easy on the eyes and great for reading in the bath. There's no 3G version, but, unlike the Amazon Kindle, you can buy ebooks from independent retailers that use the ePub format.

ALTERNATIVE: Amazon Kindle Voyage The best Kindle yet, with a sharp, extremely responsive touchscreen and easy-grip design. £169 from www.snipca.com/14451

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SECURITY SOFTWARE

Kaspersky Total Security 2015

£29.99 from www.snipca.com/14969
Tested: Issue 437

Kaspersky has won our past four antivirus tests, making it last year's standout performer. The 2015 edition is available at an exclusive reader discount on our Software Store. Click the link above for a 3-PC, one-year licence, or buy a 3-PC, two-year licence for just £49.99 at www.snipca.com/14970

ALTERNATIVE: Norton Internet Security 2014 Cheaper than Kaspersky, but sometimes blocked legitimate software. £30 from www.snipca.com/15115

PHOTO EDITING

Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 5

£95 from www.snipca.com/14348
Tested: Issue 402

Lightroom is a consistently elegant, powerful and fast photo-management program packed with sophisticated features. If you want to keep on top of your photos and make them look great, there's no better software to do it with.

ALTERNATIVE: Adobe Photoshop Elements 13 A fast and polished photo-editing program with excellent advanced editing tools. £61 from www.snipca.com/14731

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 3 CorelDRAW Home & Student Suite X7

The latest version of Corel's Home & Student software package features advanced photo-editing tools, a redesigned user interface and powerful fill capabilities, all in an easy-to-learn environment. It also provides access to 1,300 high-quality and digital images, 100 high-resolution digital photos, 125 fonts, 75 photo frames, over 100 professionally designed templates, 100 fills, over two hours of training videos, and much more. It's an exceptional product, receiving a five-star Buy It award from *Computeractive* in Issue 436. To enter, email your address to cacomp@dennis.co.uk by midnight 17 February.

CorelDRAW Home & Student Suite X7 costs £99.95. For more info visit www.coreldraw.com/homestudent and follow @CorelDRAW on Twitter.

SECURITY CAMERA

Y-cam HomeMonitor HD

£147 from www.snipca.com/11646
Tested: Issue 420

A home-security camera that's well priced and easy to set up. Plus, it has great picture quality, useful apps and there's no need to subscribe to any extra services. It's a worthy successor to the original HomeMonitor, our previous favourite security camera.

ALTERNATIVE: D-Link Wireless-N Day & Night Camera A good-value security camera with excellent night vision. £53 from www.snipca.com/14349

ROUTER

Trendnet TEW-812DRU

£120 from www.snipca.com/14612
Tested: Issue 427

An incredibly fast 802.11ac router that's also one of the cheapest we've seen. It's superb and it's the router to buy if you're ready to make the jump to 802.11ac.

ALTERNATIVE: Linksys WRT1900AC More expensive, but even faster and with loads of features too. £204 from www.snipca.com/14950

NAS

Synology DiskStation DS213j

£140 from www.snipca.com/10575
Tested: Issue 404

This NAS enclosure has it all – fast performance, easy configuration and plenty of extra features. It's not perfect – disk installation is a little fiddly and it's a tad pricey – but there are few other NAS devices we would rather buy.

ALTERNATIVE: Synology DS414j A four-drive NAS that's generally fast and easy to set up and use too. £259 from www.snipca.com/12545

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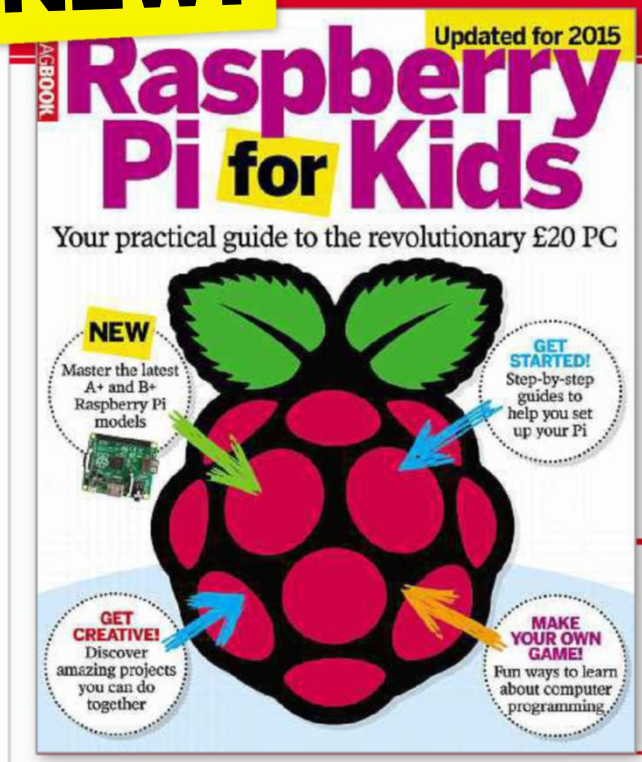

RASPBERRY PI FOR KIDS

The Raspberry Pi is the incredible £20 British computer that's taking the world by storm. It's ideal for children of all ages to experiment, play games and learn valuable skills. We've updated this 148-page book for 2015 to include instructions on mastering the new Pi models (A+ and B+), helping children learn the coding skills needed to excel at the new school curriculum. We take you step by step through the basics of setting up and configuring the Pi and introduce many fun projects for families.

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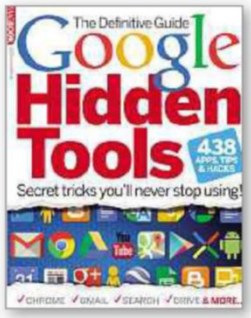
THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO GOOGLE HIDDEN TOOLS



Inside the 164-page *The Definitive Guide to Google Hidden Tools*, we lift the lid on Google's most popular tools to reveal more than 430 ways to make them even more efficient, useful and tailored to your needs. These include clever new add-ons for Chrome, amazing free apps for Android and stunning sights in Google Maps.

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Workshops & Tips

PULL OUT & KEEP Issue 442

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

35 Create your own Office shortcuts
38 Make presentations using Microsoft Sway
40 Control your PC's volume using your mouse
42 Keep your brain active using Windows 8.1

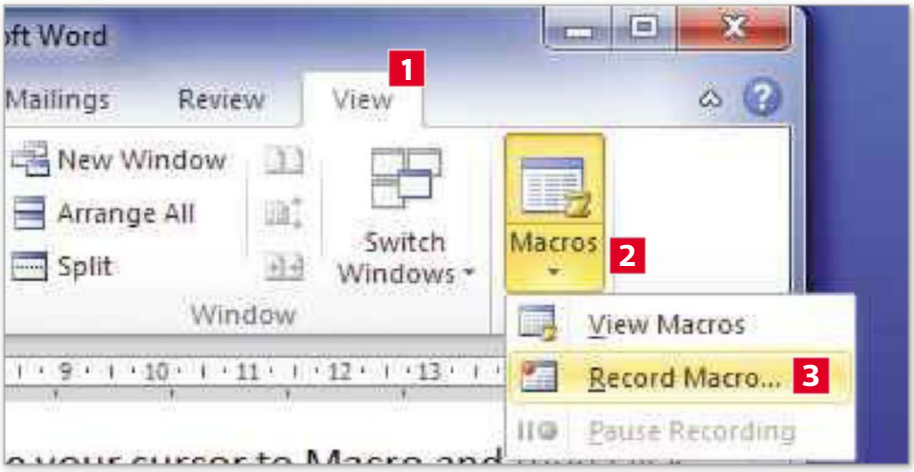
PLUS
43 Readers' Tips
44 Phone & Tablet Tips
46 Make Windows Better
47 Make Office Better
48 Secret Tips For... Windows Media Player

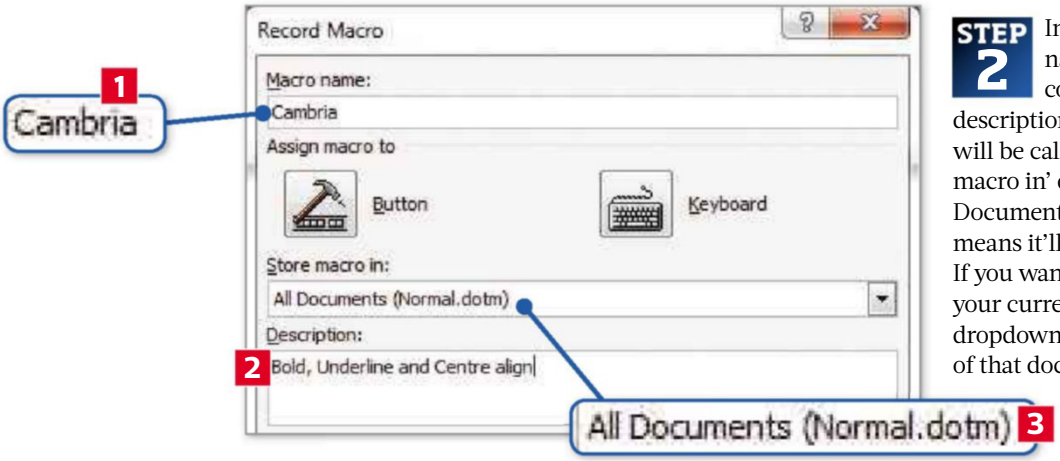
Create your own Office shortcuts

What you need: Microsoft Word or Excel (2007, 2010 or 2013)
Time required: 35 minutes

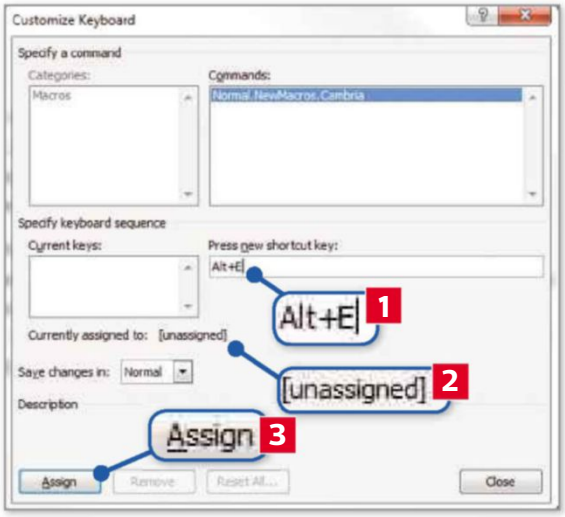
Microsoft Office has many little-known, time-saving shortcuts, but the best is undoubtedly macros. These let you record a series of actions – for example, applying formatting changes to text or inserting text you type repeatedly – and then save them as a single command. You can then apply this macro by using a keyboard shortcut or by clicking an icon you created to represent it on your Quick Access Toolbar. We'll demonstrate this in Word, but you can also do it in Excel.

STEP 1 First, decide what you want your macro to carry out. For this example, we'll create a macro that changes the text font to Cambria, the font size to 12, bolds it up, underlines it, formats it with a bullet point and aligns it centrally. To begin creating your macro in Office 2010 and 2013, click the View tab 1 on the Ribbon, the Macros dropdown menu 2 on the far right, then Record Macro 3. In Office 2007, click Tools at the top, move your cursor to Macro, then click Record (New) Macro.

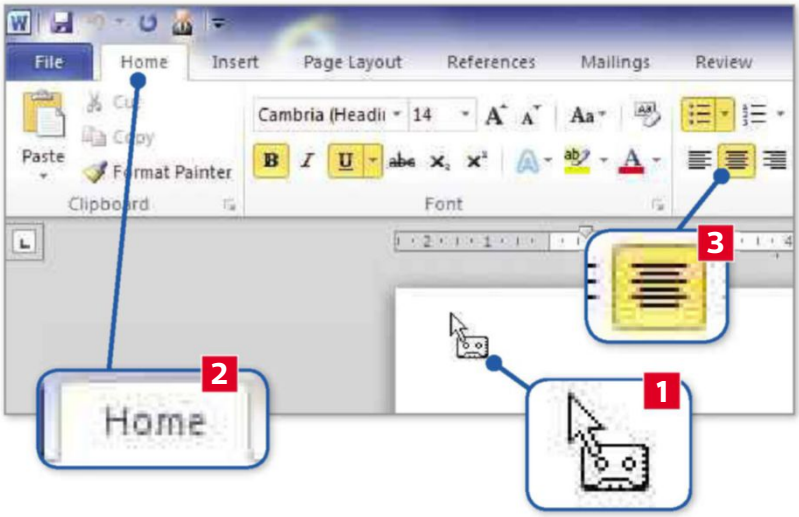




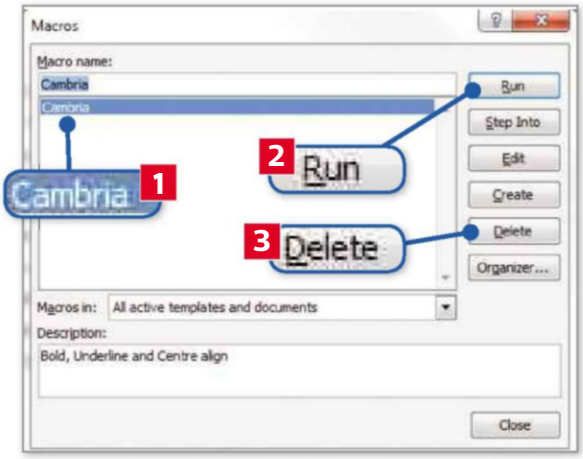
STEP 2 In the Record Macro box, name your macro (it cannot contain spaces) 1 and type a description 2. If you don't name it, it will be called Macro1. Ensure the 'Store macro in' dropdown menu is set to 'All Documents (Normal.dotm)' 3, which means it'll work with all your Word files. If you want the macro to only work with your current document, then click the dropdown menu and select the name of that document.



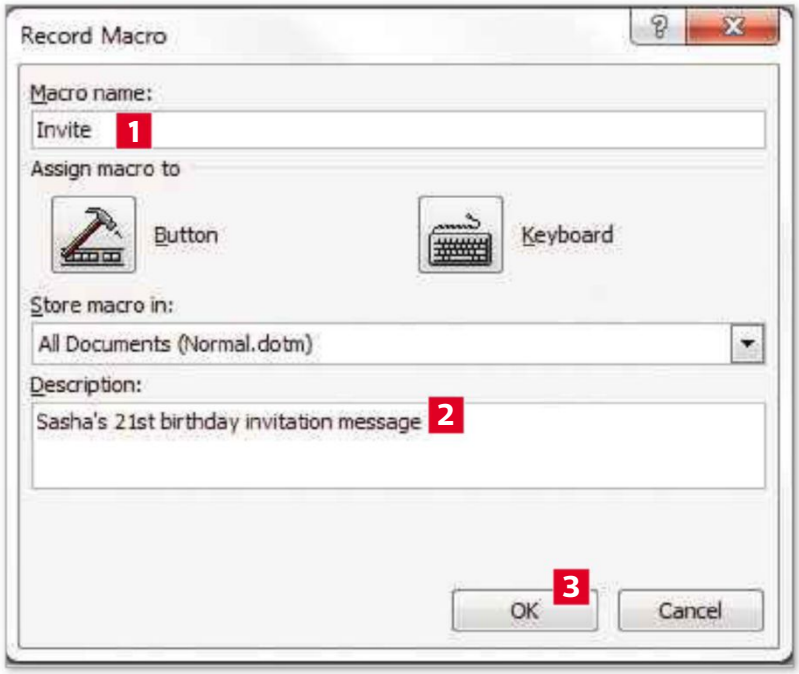
STEP 3 First, create a keyboard shortcut for your new macro. Click the Keyboard button below the 'Assign macro to' field, then click the 'Press new shortcut key' field and press a key combination using the Alt key and a letter on your keyboard 1. If you see '[unassigned]' 2 beside 'Currently assigned to', it means you can use that key combination. Click Assign 3 to do that and start recording your macro.



STEP 4 Your cursor will now change to a small cassette icon 1 (indicating your macro is being recorded). Click the Home tab 2, the font dropdown menu and change it to Cambria. Next, change the font size to 12, click the bold and underline buttons, then the bullet point and central align 3 buttons (in the Paragraph section). You can stop/pause/resume your recording by clicking the View tab, the Macros dropdown menu, then clicking either Stop Recording, Pause Recording or Resume Recording.

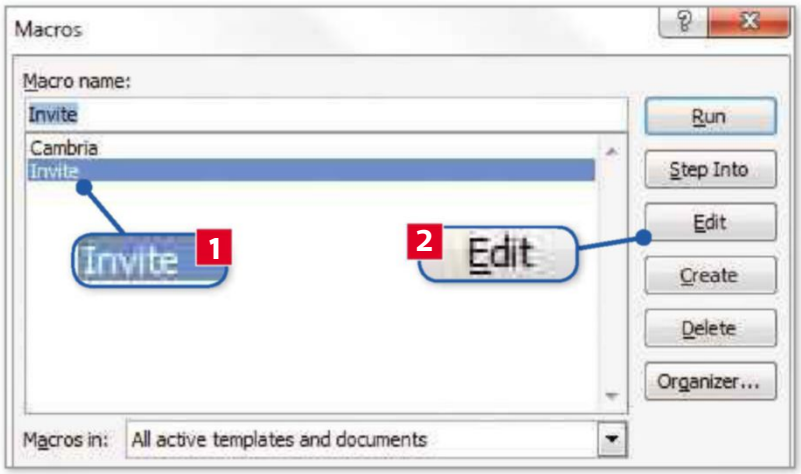


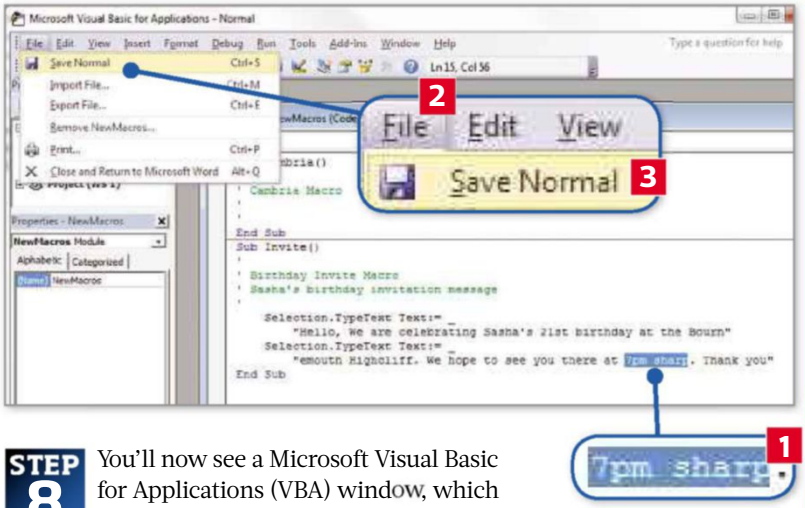
STEP 5 Now, whenever you want to apply these changes to any text in one go, highlight the text, click the Macros dropdown menu, View Macros, click your macro 1, then Run 2. Alternatively, use the keyboard shortcut you created in Step 3 (in our case, Alt+E). If you want to recreate your macro, click Delete 3 and repeat the entire process.



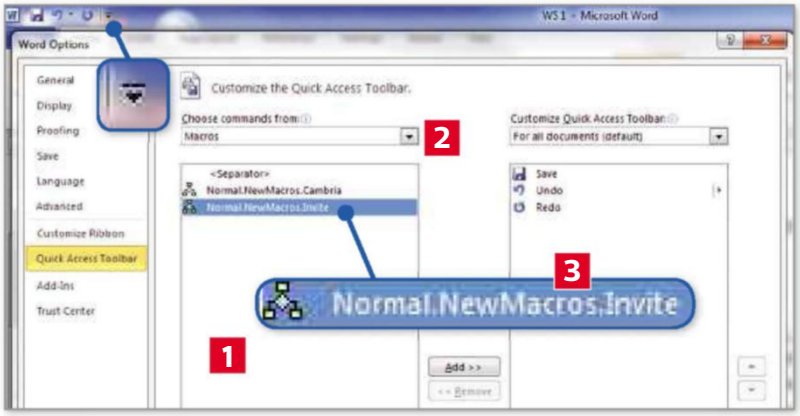
STEP 6 We'll now show you how to create a macro that inserts text you use regularly, and a Quick Access Toolbar icon, which you can then click whenever you want to insert this text. First, click the Macros dropdown menu, then Record Macro, give it a name 1 and description 2, then click OK 3 to begin recording.

STEP 7 Now click the Home tab, select the font format (style, size and so on) and type your text. Next, click the View tab, the Macros dropdown menu, then Stop Recording. To edit the macro, click the Macros dropdown menu, then View Macros, select the macro whose text you want to edit 1, then click the Edit button 2.

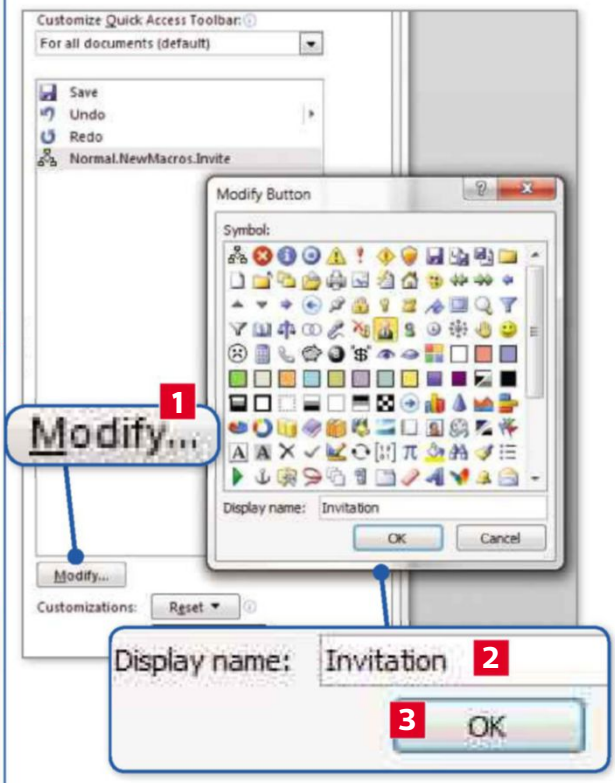




STEP 8 You'll now see a Microsoft Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) window, which contains everything you recorded in your Macro as code. Edit the Macro's text in the text field 1, and when you've finished, click File 2, Save Normal 3, then close the VBA window. Now apply the macro again to see your edited text.



STEP 9 To add a Quick Access Toolbar icon for the macro you created, click the Customize Quick Access Toolbar icon 1, then More Commands. Next, click the 'Choose commands from' dropdown menu 2 and select macros. You should see both macros you've created so far. Click the Macro you want an icon for 3, then click the Add button. You'll see it in the column on the right, indicating it's now part of your Quick Access Toolbar.



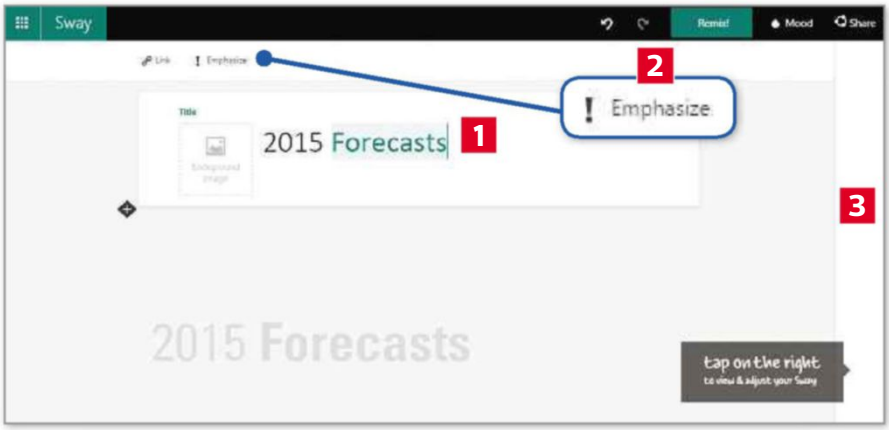
STEP 10 You can change this macro's default icon. Click the Modify button 1, select an icon, type a display name 2, click OK 3 (in the Modify Button box) and OK again (in the Word Options window). The icon will now appear at the top of your Quick Access Toolbar (at the top left of Word).

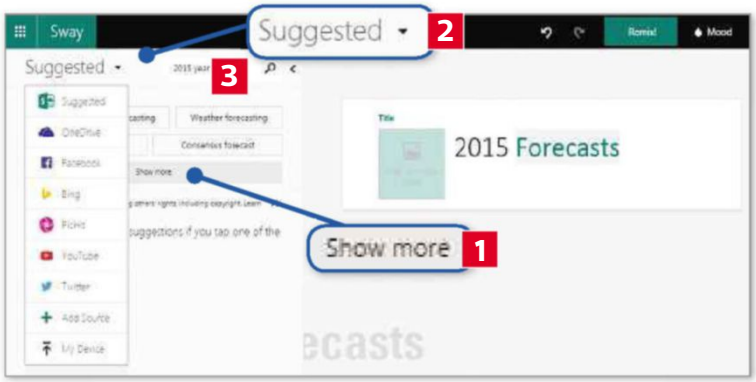
Make presentations using Microsoft Sway

What you need: Microsoft Sway **Time required:** 25 minutes

Sway is the new free, online tool from Microsoft that lets you create scrolling presentations (called 'sways'). While PowerPoint offers a wide range of options, Sway's focus is on simplicity. You can add text, images, captions and files from your PC and arrange them as you like. Initially launched as an invite-only service, Sway can now be used by anyone with a Microsoft (Hotmail or Outlook) account. It's also available on iOS (www.snipca.com/15040), with an Android app coming soon.

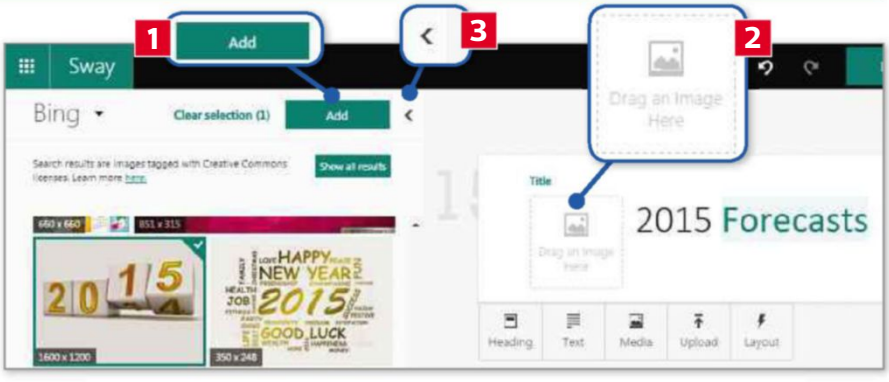
STEP 1 Go to www.sway.com, click the green 'Get started!' button and log in with your Microsoft account. Next, click Create New at the top right to begin creating your first presentation (sway). Click 'Title your Sway' and name it 1. You can bold up words in your title by highlighting them and clicking Emphasize 2. A preview of your title will appear below. Click anywhere on the right-hand side of your page 3 to see how this will appear in your presentation. To switch back to your editing view, click the Storyline arrow at the top-left.

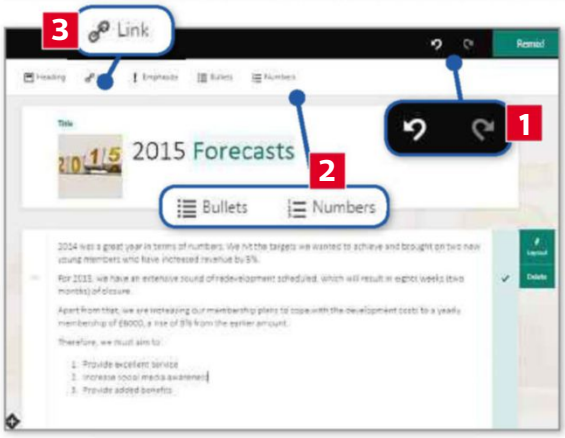




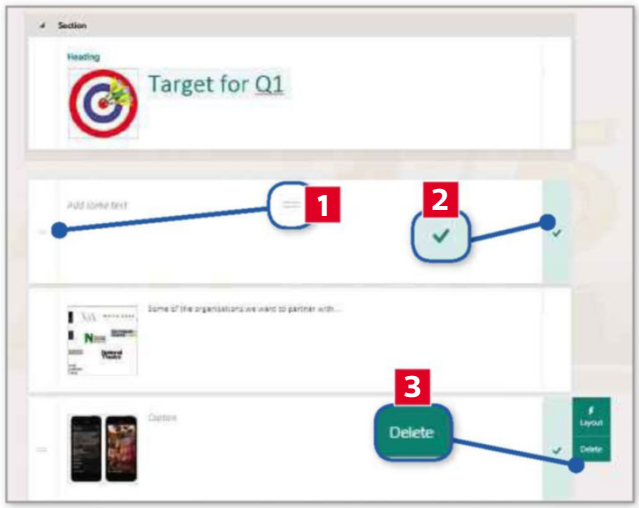
STEP 2 To add a background image to your title, click the Background Image box. A panel with options will slide in from the left with suggestions, by Bing, with relevant images you can click. If none of the suggestions match what you're looking for, click 'Show more' 1. Click the Suggested dropdown menu 2 to use images from your PC, OneDrive or social-media accounts. External accounts will require you to log in to grant Sway access. Alternatively, search for the images you want by typing in the Bing search box 3 and pressing Enter.

STEP 3 Click the image you want and then click Add 1. Alternatively, drag an image from the left-hand panel to the 'Drag an Image Here' box 2. Click the small arrow icon 3 at the top to hide the left-hand panel and continue creating your presentation. If you want to replace your background image, click it, click the Delete icon that appears and repeat Step 2. When you're ready to proceed, click the small '+' symbol at the bottom left of your title and select which element you want to insert (Heading, Text, Media and so on).



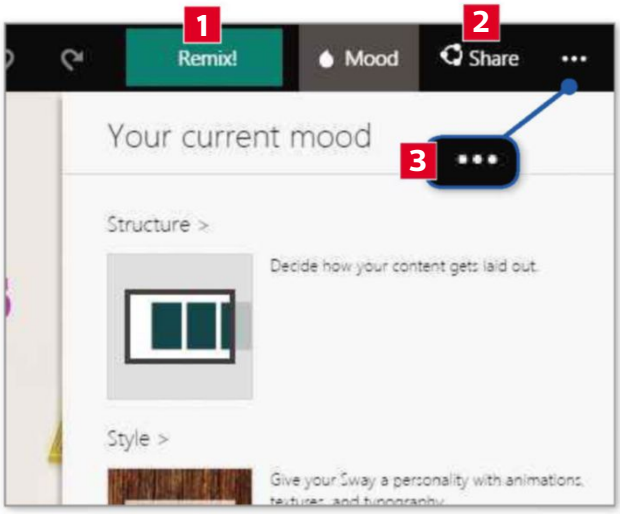


STEP 4 To add text, type or paste it in the field below and bold up the words you want (see Step 1). Features include undo and redo 1, as well as options to create a list of bullet points 2. To create links to web pages, highlight the relevant text and click Link 3. Next, in the Web Link field paste the URL (web address) of the page you want to link to. You can change your layout by clicking Layout on the right and selecting an option from the left panel. The range of layouts is currently limited, but Microsoft says more will be added.



STEP 5 Click Heading at the top, type your heading and add an image (optional, see Step 2). Next, click the small '+' symbol at the bottom left. Click Upload to add files (such as Word documents or PDFs) from your PC. If your file is large, Sway will automatically break it down into headings, images and text sections. Caption your images by typing in the field provided. To reposition a section, click and drag its '=' symbol 1 up or down. To delete a section, click the panel on its right-hand side and tick it 2. Do this for every section you don't want, then click Delete 3.

STEP 6 You can also drag and drop sections on top of each other to group them into one section 1, which is especially useful for images. To edit any image in the group, click the Group dropdown menu 2. Click Add Content 3 to add more images. You can preview your sway by clicking on the right.



STEP 7 To personalise your presentation, click the Remix button 1, which adds a theme to your sway. Keep clicking Remix until you're happy with the theme. The Mood option lets you modify your presentation's structure, style and colour. Structure lets you choose how you want to scroll through your sway (vertically or horizontally), while Style lets you choose from a variety of background layouts and fonts. Click Colour to modify your colour scheme. Click the Share icon 2 to create a link that you can email or embed in a website. Click the three dots 3 to create a new sway or leave feedback for Microsoft, so they can improve the service.

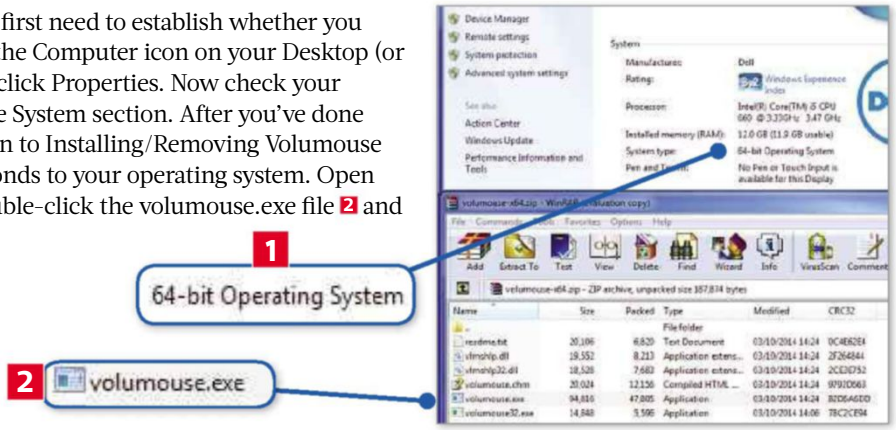
Control your PC's volume using your mouse

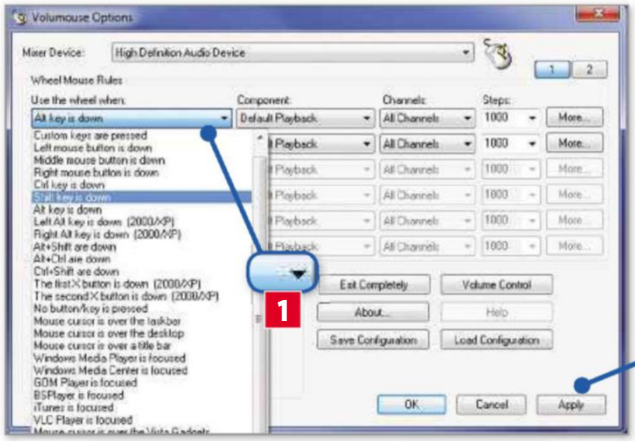
What you need: Mouse with a scroll wheel; Windows XP, Vista, 7, 8 or 8.1
Time required: 15 minutes

Some keyboards have buttons to control your PC's volume. If you don't have such a keyboard, then Volumouse is the best free alternative. This small tool by Nirsoft lets you control your PC's volume by pressing a modifier key of your choice (Shift, Ctrl or Alt) and moving the scroll wheel on your mouse. You can even set how fast or slowly the volume changes. Volumouse also lets you control your PC's brightness and window transparency levels in the same way.

STEP 1

Before downloading Volumouse, you first need to establish whether you have a 32bit or 64bit PC. Right-click the Computer icon on your Desktop (or Computer in your Start menu), then click Properties. Now check your operating system next to 'System type' 1 in the System section. After you've done that, go to www.snipca.com/15012, scroll down to Installing/Removing Volumouse and click the volumouse.zip link that corresponds to your operating system. Open the zipped file that downloads to your PC, double-click the volumouse.exe file 2 and then click Run to launch the program.



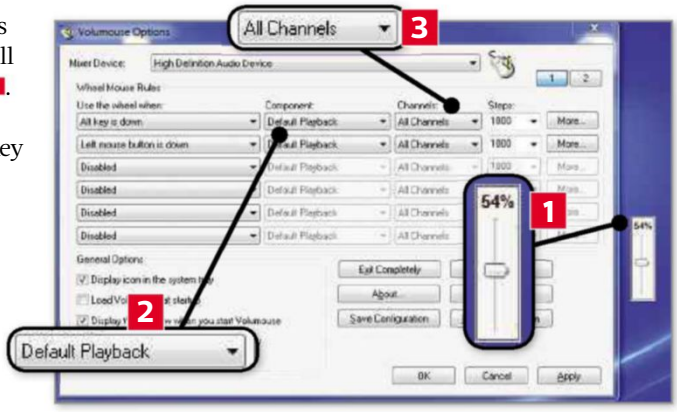


STEP 2

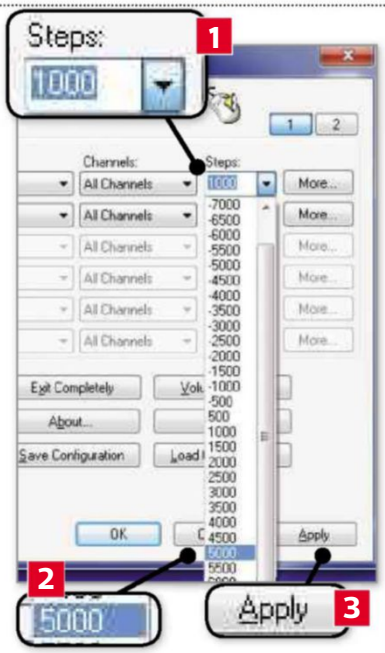
By default, Volumouse works by pressing the Alt key and then using your mouse's scroll wheel to change your PC's volume. If you want to use another key, click the first 'Use the wheel when' dropdown menu 1 and select the option you want. Options include mouse buttons, Ctrl and Shift or a combination of Ctrl, Shift and Alt. Once you've made your selection click Apply 2.

STEP 3

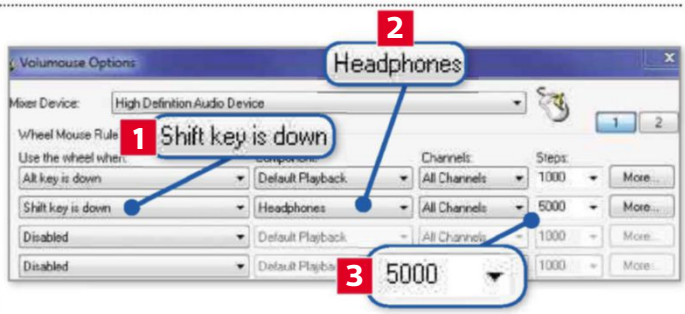
To make sure this works, open an audio or video file, press the Alt key, and flick the scroll wheel on your mouse. You'll see a small slider that reflects the changing volume level 1. Leave the Component dropdown menu set to Default Playback 2, which means that using the scroll wheel in combination with the key you set above will change the volume of your entire PC. Leave the Channels dropdown menu to All Channels 3.

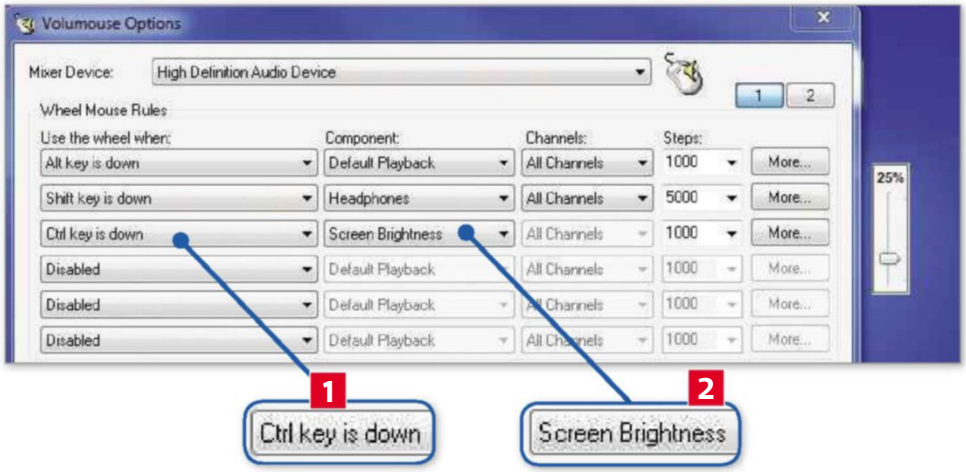


STEP 4 The Steps dropdown menu 1 indicates the extent to which you increase or decrease the volume when you flick the scroll wheel. The default value is 1000. Change the Steps dropdown menu to a higher value (such as 5000) 2 to increase the sensitivity of your volume control. You can also use this to change how your scroll wheel functions. For example, if you want to increase your volume by moving your scroll wheel downwards, change the dropdown menu to a negative value (such as -5000). Click Apply 3. Try different values to see what works best for you.



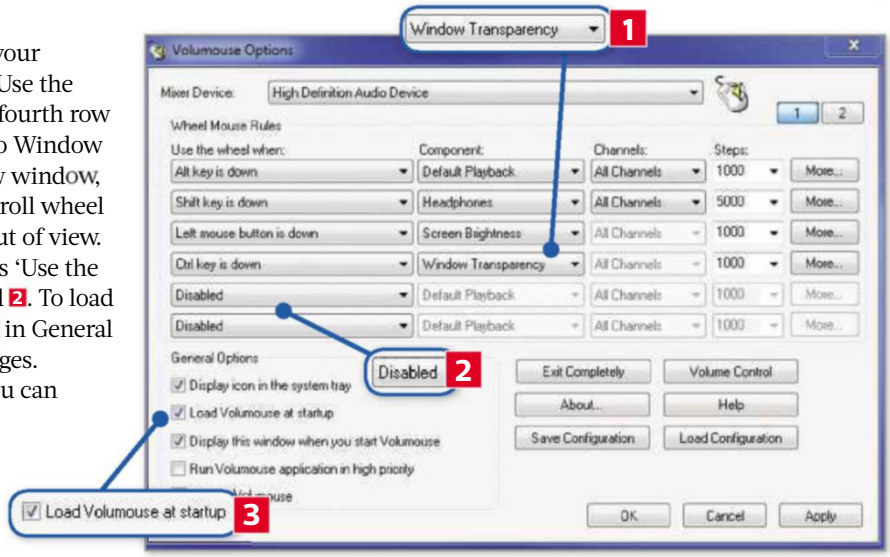
STEP 5 You can also assign a different key to control the volume of your headphones and/or speakers. Click the dropdown menu in the second row, select the key you want 1, then change the Component dropdown menu in the second row to Headphones (or Speakers) 2. You can also create separate rules for both. Change the Steps dropdown menu 3 (see Step 4). Click Apply, connect your headphones and press the key you set while moving your scroll wheel to check it works.





STEP 6 You can also use Volumouse to change how you control your PC's brightness and window transparency. To control brightness, click the Disabled dropdown menu in the third row and choose your preferred key option 1. Next, change the Component dropdown menu from Default Playback to Screen Brightness 2. Adjust the Steps dropdown menu if you want, then click Apply.

STEP 7 To change the transparency levels of your windows, assign a key option in the 'Use the wheel when' dropdown menu in the fourth row and change the Component dropdown menu to Window Transparency 1. Click Apply and open any new window, such as your browser. Try your assigned key/scroll wheel combination to see your browser fade in and out of view. To deactivate any of the rules you set, change its 'Use the wheel when' dropdown menu back to Disabled 2. To load Volumouse at startup, tick the second option 3 in General Options. Click Apply and OK to save your changes. Volumouse doesn't have a Desktop icon, but you can access it from your Notification area.



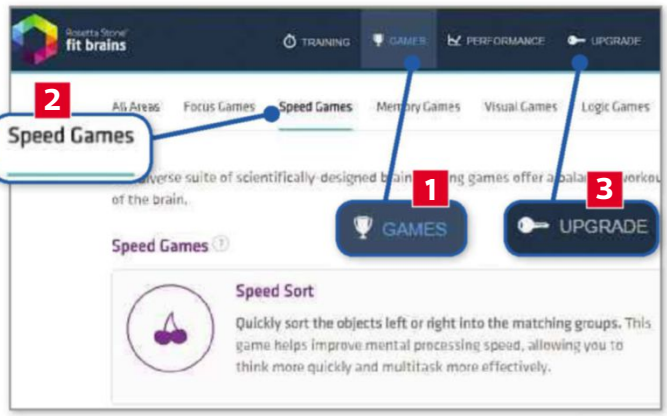
Keep your brain active using Windows 8.1

What you need: Fit Brains Trainer; Windows 8 or 8.1 **Time required:** 15 minutes

Fit Brains Trainer is a free Windows 8.1 app designed by neuroscientists who believe that keeping your brain active is as important as taking care of your health. The app is a compendium of entertaining games aimed at improving your memory, concentration, mood and problem-solving skills. Each minute-long game is very addictive, such as Perfect Patterns where you click on the correct tile to complete the number pattern. You can also play it in your browser (www.fitbrains.com), iOS (www.snipca.com/15086) or Android (www.snipca.com/15087) device.

STEP 1 To install Fit Brains Trainer, go to the Modern tile interface and click the green Windows Store tile (the Microsoft logo on a bag). Now type fit brains trainer and press Enter. Click the first option at the top left, then click Install (you may need to log in using your Microsoft account). Open the app and click 'Play games' at the bottom left. Before playing, you need to create a free Fit Brains account. Type your email address 1 and password 2, then click Create Free Account 3. Click Continue on the next screen. Finally, type your name, age and gender, then click Start Training.

STEP 2 Each game improves one brain function. You'll see instructions, including information on how playing it will help you develop that skill. For example, the first game – Match Pairs – claims to help you focus better and sort complex information faster. Click the yellow Start button to play. Upon completion, you'll see a brief summary of your reaction time, correct answers and accuracy percentage 1. You're also presented with a percentile rank 2, which compares your score with other Fit Brain users. Click View Session Results 3 to track your progress.



STEP 3 Now click the blue View Performance button to see your Fit Brains Index points, which measures your total performance. Click Details at the top left to see what percentage of users from the same age group and gender you're better than and to track your daily progress via a graph. To play another game, click Games 1, select a different category from the top 2, then click Play. You can play a wider selection of games if you upgrade to a paid account. To do that, click Upgrade 3 and choose one of the payment plans, starting from £4 a month.

NEXT ISSUE

ON SALE 18 Feb

- Download the new Windows 10 Preview
- Make free video calls from Firefox
- Find out if other people use your PC
- Take screenshots with one click

Subscribe to Computeractive at getcomputeractive.co.uk

The 'Download the new Windows 10 Preview' Workshop will now appear in the next issue

Readers' Tips

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TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Hide drives on your PC using Windows Explorer

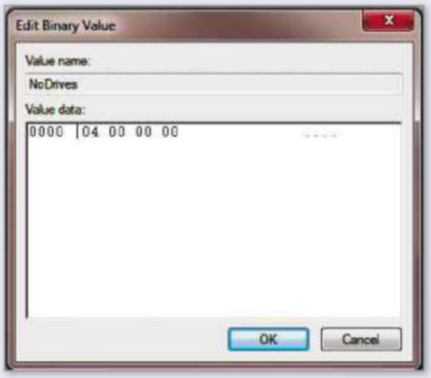
My hard drive is split into four partitions. One is for public files, another for work and personal projects that I don't want people accessing, and the other two are used by my wife and children.

For extra peace of mind, I wanted to conceal my second hard drive in such a way that only I could find it. You can do this without third-party software.

Click Start, type regedit to open the Registry Editor, press Enter and then navigate to the following: **HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Policies\Explorer**. Right-click NoDrives in the right-hand pane, then click Modify Binary Data. Next, refer to Windows' support page (www.snipca.com/15051) to find out which binary code corresponds to your drive letter and type that code into the 'Value data' box (replacing the code that's already there).

To hide more than one drive, add up the codes for two different drive letters. For example, if you want to hide drives C (04 00 00 00) and D (08 00 00 00) type 12 00 00 00 into the 'Value data' box. When you've finished, press Enter and restart your PC.

Once that's done, the only way you'll be able to access your hidden drive is by entering the drive letter into the Run box (Windows Key+R). To unhide your drives, return to the NoDrives file in Registry Editor and change its binary value to 00 00 00 00.



Robert McGowan

The winner of every Tip of the Fortnight wins this exclusive Computeractive mug!

MAPS

Become a Google Maps cartographer

I recently found out that anyone can edit information in Google Maps using a free tool called Google Map Maker (www.google.com/mapmaker). This lets you add, remove and edit map features such as shops, public buildings and roads. Open the website, sign in and you'll see see a pane on the left showing a list of places that have recently been added by other users.

To add or change something, type the location of the place (or its postcode) in the search bar at the top of the page and press Enter. Click the Add New or Edit dropdown menu and select the type of landmark you want to add/edit. Position the red pin on the relevant location on the map, select a category from the dropdown menu, and name the place.

You'll now see a pane on the left where you can enter details about that place, including its phone number, website address and so on. The more details you enter, the easier it will be for Google to verify and accept the change. When you've finished, click Save. You now need to wait for the change to be approved by other users and Google.

I updated the name of a pub that had recently changed hands – a valuable contribution to my local community!

Tom Preston

CLOUD STORAGE

Choose what Dropbox syncs to your PC

Cloud storage is a wonderful thing – it's certainly reassuring that my precious files are being kept somewhere other than on my temperamental PC.

I personally use Dropbox. Its free Desktop program (www.dropbox.com/install) makes it very easy to keep my stored content organised. However, if you use this Desktop program, your files are backed up on both your hard drive and in your cloud storage. It therefore eats into your hard-drive space, which kind of defeats the point of Dropbox.

Fortunately, I found that you can determine which folders Dropbox syncs to your hard drive and which are stored solely in the cloud. With Dropbox installed on your PC, click its icon in the Notification area of the Taskbar, click the cog icon, then Preferences. In the new window, click Account, Selective Sync, then use the tickboxes to choose which folders you'd like Dropbox to back up to your hard drive. When you've finished, click Update. Dropbox will warn you that any folders you unticked will be removed from Dropbox. Click OK to confirm this.

Darren Cappin

MUSIC PLAYER

Make iTunes 12 easier to navigate

I was a perfectly happy iTunes user until I blindly followed Apple's advice to download and install the monstrous iTunes 12. Among its many irritating changes was the overhauled Library view in My Music, which has turned into an Album Cover view, which I find awkward to navigate.

Instead of reverting to the previous version, however, I powered on through and made iTunes 12 work for me – by making it look like iTunes 11 again. The first thing I did was change the Album view back to the traditional List view. To do this, go to My Music, click Albums at the top right, then click Songs.

To bring back the sidebar on the left showing all your playlists, click Playlists at the top of iTunes. Finally, to reinstate the Column Browser (which lets you browse music by genre, artist or album), press Ctrl+Shift+B while in iTunes.

This should help you feel more at home with iTunes 12, at least until the next update...

Sue Davies

Phone and Tablet Tips

Brilliant things to do on your device

ANDROID

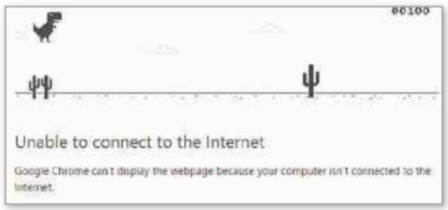
Hide notification content when your device is locked

One of Android Lollipop's new features is the ability to hide the content of your notifications when your phone is locked, which is useful if you lose your device or it's stolen and you don't want others to see them. Anyone who may have your phone will only be able to see which app has sent the notification – for example, WhatsApp or Facebook – but won't be able to see the name of the person sending the message or its content unless you unlock your phone. To activate this, go to Settings, tap 'Sound & notification', 'When device is locked' and then tap 'Hide sensitive notification content'.

ANDROID

Play the dinosaur game when you're offline

The latest version of Chrome for Android (www.snipca.com/15042) has a game that's guaranteed to entertain you when you can't connect to the internet – for example, during a long flight. You can try the game at any time by switching your device to Airplane/Flight Mode, which will shut down its internet connection.



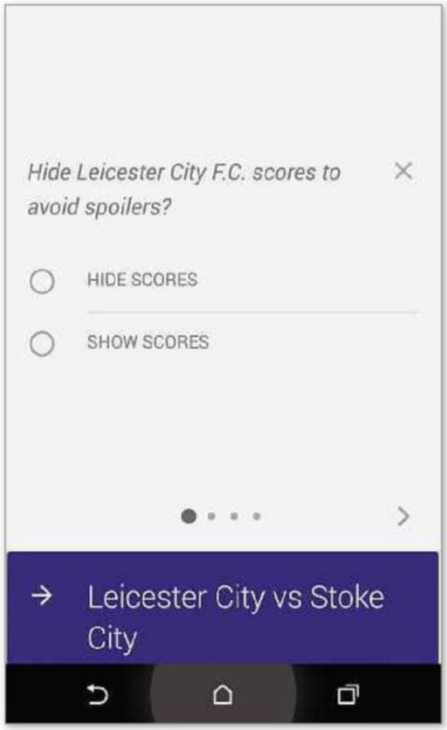
When you're offline, launch Chrome and try opening any website. You'll see a small dinosaur with a message saying 'You are offline'. Tap the dinosaur to start the game, and continue tapping the dinosaur to make it jump over desert cacti. The game (which is best played in landscape mode) is addictive, but don't forget to switch off Airplane/Flight Mode when you've finished playing. Let us know if you beat our highest score of 572.

ANDROID

Use the new Google Now

Google has revamped the look and feel of Google Now. If you haven't updated it, open the Play Store, tap the three lines at the top left, 'My apps', then tap Update All. Now open Google Now (with a blue 'g' icon), tap Set Up and then 'Yes, I'm In'.

You'll now see your sports teams and 'research topics' (terms you've searched for using the app) listed under colour headings. To add reminders and customise your app settings, tap the three lines at the top left. A new feature lets you hide your team's results should you want to watch the match later without knowing the outcome. Tap the three dots at the top right of your team, then Hide Scores (see screenshot above right). Swipe right to select whether you want to continue receiving updates for that team and to add more teams to track.



ANDROID & iOS

Delete photos you've backed up to Dropbox from your device

Dropbox Carousel is a free Android (www.snipca.com/15035) and iOS (www.snipca.com/15036) app that offers an easy way to manage your Dropbox photos. You can set it up to automatically delete photos from your device once you've saved them to Dropbox – useful if you have limited storage on your device.

Best New Apps

What you should install this fortnight

Evernote Scannable
Free
iOS: www.snipca.com/15027

Evernote already has a basic image scanner built in to its popular note-taking app, but the new app Scannable is more accurate and advanced. It can scan a multiple-page document in seconds, and even extract information from business cards to add directly to your device's contacts list.

Google Translate
Free
Android: www.snipca.com/15029
iOS: www.snipca.com/15028

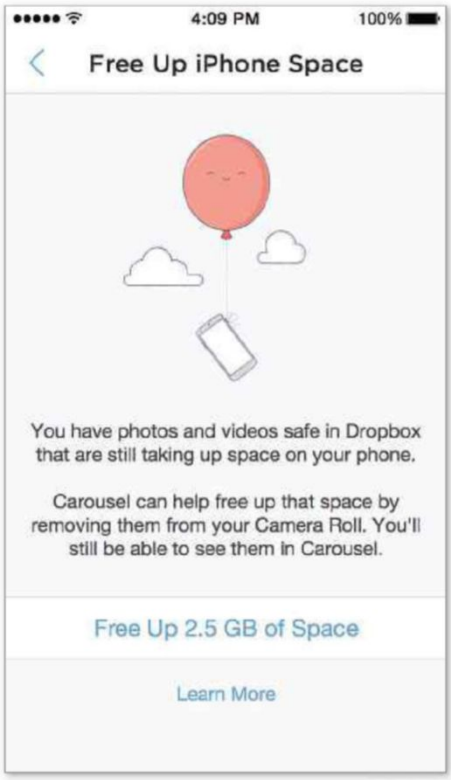
Google's translation app has recently received a huge update. It now instantly translates any text you point your phone at while in the camera app. On your phone's screen you'll see the translated text in place of the text you're pointing at. It's not perfect yet, but definitely one to keep an eye on.

Papers, Please
£5.99
iOS: www.snipca.com/15039

One of the most lauded PC games of 2013 arrives on iOS. This 'dystopian document thriller' puts you in the shoes of a passport-control officer on the border of a fictional Soviet state. You stamp passports, and detain forgers and criminals, while trying to support your family. It's dark, funny, and captivating.

Once you've installed Carousel, open it and sign in using your Dropbox account (or create a new account when prompted). Tap through the app tutorial and let the app upload all images on your device to Dropbox. Next, on Carousel's homescreen, tap the three lines at the top left, then Settings (on iOS tap More, then Settings). Tap Free Up Space to see how much space you can save (see screenshot below), then tap Free Up Space again to delete photos that have been uploaded to Dropbox from your device.

If you're using an iOS 8 device, the photos will go to your Recently Deleted folder. To delete them permanently, open the Photos app, tap Albums, Recently Deleted, Select (at the top right), then Delete All (at the bottom left).



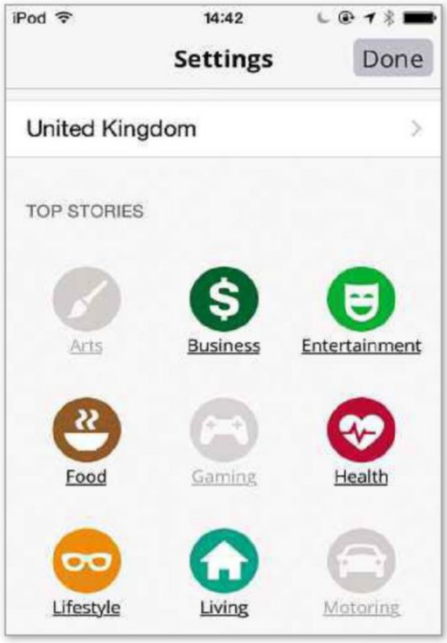
iOS

Read news stories based on your interests

The free Opera Mini web browser app (www.snipca.com/15059) has a new interface and a Discover section that directs you to news about topics that interest you. Open the app to see three sections – History, Speed Dial and Discover. History contains a list of all the websites you've visited and when. You can delete individual websites from this list or wipe your entire browsing history in one go.

To remove individual entries, long-press one and tap Remove. To remove your browsing history, tap the bin icon at the bottom right, then Yes. Swipe right to see the Speed Dial section, which lets you access and save pages you visit often.

Swipe right again to access the Discover section, which displays the top news stories in your home country. News is divided into 14 categories (Business, Arts, Entertainment, Lifestyle and so on), which are all selected by default. To customise your categories, tap the cog icon at the top right then the news categories you want to remove (see screenshot right). You can also read the top new stories in other countries by tapping the United Kingdom option at the top and changing it. Tap Done to save your changes.



Games With Kids

What to play together on your phone and tablet

AGES 0-5

Baby Sign and Sing Lite

Free www.snipca.com/15031 (Android)
Free www.snipca.com/15037 (iOS)

Teach your toddler some all-time classic children's songs and nursery rhymes, such as *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* and *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Adding to the fun is the Explore Signs game, in which your child has to touch parts of the screen to unveil creatures and objects relating to the song.

AGES 6-10

Toca Kitchen 2

79p www.snipca.com/15032 (iOS)

Toca Kitchen returns to cause more culinary chaos. This bizarre game lets your kids combine ingredients to create delicious (or disgusting) dishes, before feeding them to hilariously drawn characters who decide whether the meal is edible.

AGES 11-16

Worms 3

99p www.snipca.com/15034 (iOS)
99p www.snipca.com/15033 (Android)

In the latest version of the classic 1990s PC game each player controls a team of anthropomorphic worms and tries to destroy other teams using an arsenal of absurd weapons – including Sheep and Banana Bombs. This latest version lets up to four people play using one device.

WINDOWS 7, 8, 8.1

Add more items to Taskbar Jump Lists

The Libraries folder icon at the bottom-left of your Windows Taskbar is one of the most useful shortcuts in Windows 7 and 8. Clicking it gives you quick access to your Documents, Music, Pictures and Videos folders, while right-clicking it shows you a Jump List containing the most recent folders you opened, as well as items you've pinned to your Taskbar.

You can tweak the Libraries folder's Jump List to change the number of recent items it displays. To do this, right-click the Taskbar, then click Properties. Next, click the Start Menu tab, then Customize. In the 'Start menu size' section at the bottom (see screenshot below), you can change the 'Number of recent items to display in Jump Lists' value, which is set to 10 by default.

You'll also notice here that you can change the 'Number of recent programs to display' (also set to 10 by default). This refers to the number of recent programs shown in your Windows 7 Start menu when you click it. Change the numbers to what you want and click OK, Apply, then OK again.

WINDOWS VISTA, 7, 8, 8.1

Speed up your PC using a USB stick

Windows has a little-known feature called ReadyBoost, which essentially turns the available memory on an external flash storage device (such as memory cards and USB sticks) into extra memory for your PC. This can help speed up your PC and is especially useful if you have a PC with less than 4GB of RAM.

To use ReadyBoost, insert your device into your PC, click Start, Computer, right-click the storage device and click Properties. Next, click the ReadyBoost tab, then 'Dedicate this device' or 'Use this device', depending on whether or not you want to leave some space on the device for storage purposes. If you click 'Use this device', set the number in the box next to the slider to no higher than what Windows recommends at the bottom of the window then click OK. You can use ReadyBoost with multiple devices simultaneously.

ReadyBoost will now use your storage device's memory to speed up your PC. You can turn this feature off at any time by returning to this window and selecting 'Do not use this device'.

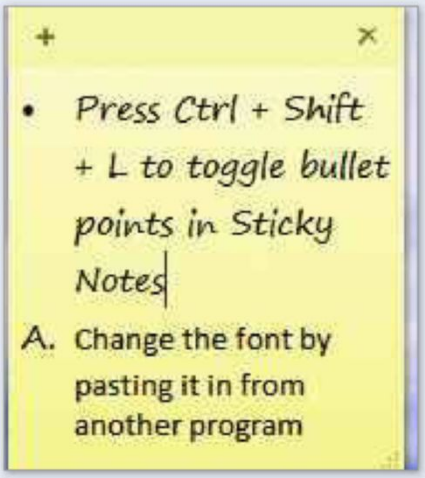
WINDOWS VISTA, 7, 8, 8.1

Add formatting and bullet points to Sticky Notes

Sticky Notes are one of the simplest and most useful features of Windows. To open them, click the Start button, type sticky notes, press Enter, then type what you want in the yellow Sticky Notes window on your Desktop. The note will stay on your Desktop until you delete it. You can add more sticky notes by moving your cursor to the top left of the Sticky Notes window and clicking the '+' symbol.

While Sticky Notes are simple, you can embellish them with bullet points and tweak their formatting. To add bullet points, press Ctrl+Shift+L. To change the format of the bullet points (from numbers to letters, for example), keep pressing L while holding Ctrl+Shift.

Use the usual shortcuts to bold up (Ctrl+B), italicise (Ctrl+I) or underline text (Ctrl+U). You can't change the font



from within Sticky Notes, but an easy way around this is to copy and paste the font from another program (such as Word) into your sticky note. Any text you type immediately after the new pasted text will appear in that text's font style.

WINDOWS VISTA, 7, 8, 8.1

Shut down and restart your PC faster

If your PC takes some time to shut down, there's an easy way to speed up this process. Click the Start button, type regedit and press Enter. In the Registry Editor, navigate to the following location **HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE, SYSTEM/CurrentControlSet/Control**. In the right-hand pane, double-click WaitToKillServiceTimeout. In the 'Value data' box you should see a number between 12000 and 20000. This is the number of milliseconds Windows takes to shut down (12000 = 12 seconds).

Replace the number in the box with 10000, click OK, and see how your PC responds when you shut it down. Don't just type 0 into the box, as this won't give Windows time to shut down properly and could lead to errors. If you encounter no problems with 10000, incrementally reduce the number to 9000, 8000 and so on between each shutdown. If you encounter an error after shutdown, then increase the number back up to one where your PC shuts down properly.

ONENOTE

Organise your notes into a calendar

OneNote offers plenty of options for keeping your notes organised and categorised, but if you use it a lot it can become messy.

To present your notes in a more manageable way, you should use OneCalendar, a free OneNote 2010 and 2013 extension that automatically adds all your notes to a calendar based on the dates you created them in OneNote.

To download OneCalendar, go to www.snipca.com/15008 and click 'I agree, Download'. Right-click the downloaded zip file, click Extract All, and extract it to a location of your choice. Go to the extracted folder, double-click OneCal.exe, select English and click Continue. It should automatically sync with OneNote, and display your notes in a calendar format.

You can search for notes using the search bar at the bottom left of OneCalendar, and change the view (to Month, Week or Day) using the options at the bottom right. Click the cog icon at the bottom right to change the settings, such as font size. Here, you can also choose which notebooks are displayed in OneCalendar, letting you filter out notes that you don't want. To do this, click Selected Notebooks, then tick the boxes next to all the notebooks you'd like to see in OneCalendar.

EXCEL

Add colour scales to your cells

If you're organising a lot of numerical data in Excel, it can be hard to compare it all by looking at the numbers alone. You could create a chart, but a quicker option is to use a colour scale that provides an instant snapshot of how values in your spreadsheet compare to each other.

To do this, highlight the numbers in Excel that you want to include in the colour scale. Next, click Conditional Formatting (which is in the Styles section of the Home tab) and move your cursor to Color Scales. Now move your cursor over any of the colour-scale options that best suit your data and click the one you want. All the cells will adopt the colour that corresponds to its value (for example, 100 per cent will be green, 50 per cent yellow, and 10 per cent red – see screenshot below).

WORD

Instantly look up highlighted text online

In Issue 440 (Make Office Better), we showed you how to add the Wikipedia extension to your Word documents, letting you highlight relevant text in your document and instantly see any Wikipedia entries that relate to it.

Since then, Microsoft has added a similar function, called Insights, to Word Online, the free browser-based version of Word, which you can access by going to www.snipca.com/15010 and logging in with your Microsoft (Outlook or Hotmail) account. What's particularly handy about Insights is that you don't need to download any extensions to use it.

In your Word Online document, right-click (or highlight then right-click) the text you want to look up online, then click Insights. When you do this, Insights will appear in a pane on the right-hand side (see screenshot above). At the top you'll see the Wikipedia entry. Scroll down to see Bing search results for your term, or click Define at the top to look up its dictionary definition.

OUTLOOK

Add text for Outlook to autocomplete

There are times when you find yourself repeatedly typing the same thing over and over again in different emails. Perhaps you're introducing yourself, or you want one section of an email to address a number of people, and another section to contain something more personal.

Whatever your reasons, you can use the Quick Parts feature to save sentences, paragraphs, or even entire pages of text to use whenever you like. In Outlook, click New E-mail at the top left, and type what you want to add to your emails. Highlight the text, click the Insert tab at the top, then in the Text section click Quick Parts, 'Save Selection to Quick Parts Gallery' and then OK.

You can now insert this text into emails by clicking Quick Parts and selecting it, or by typing the text into an email, then pressing Enter when you see the autocomplete option.

Secret Tips For...

Windows Media Player

See song lyrics, listen to internet radio stations, and play all audio and video formats

Use keyboard shortcuts to control your media

Using keyboard shortcuts is the quickest and easiest way to control your PC. Windows Media Player (WMP) has a whole range of keyboard shortcuts for perusing and playing your music and DVD collection. For example, press Ctrl+F to skip to the next track or DVD chapter or Ctrl+B to return to the previous one (an easy way to remember: 'F' for Forward and 'B' for Back).

If you don't have a media keyboard containing dedicated buttons for Play, Mute and so on, you can use the Function keys to carry out these tasks. The F7 key mutes/unmutes WMP's sound; F8 and F9 reduce and increase the volume respectively; and Ctrl+S stops a track playing. To see a full list of WMP keyboard shortcuts, go to www.snipca.com/15073.

Click the View menu, 'Online stores' then Media Guide to listen to online radio stations

Listen to internet radio stations

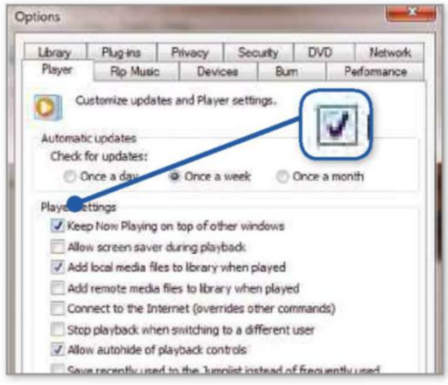
If you want a change from your personal music collection, you can tune in to any of the thousands of internet radio stations that are available via WMP. Right-click the light-blue section at the top (beside Play, Burn and Sync at the top right), then move your cursor to View, 'Online stores', and click Media Guide. You'll see a list of genres (including Jazz, Oldies, Country and Classic Rock) at the top. Click one of these to see a list of genre-specific radio stations, then click Listen under a radio station's thumbnail to play it.

Play all media formats on Windows Media Player

Windows Media Player supports a large number of audio and video formats by default, but there are still many formats, such as DivX and FLAC, that aren't supported. Thankfully, you can install the free K-Lite Codec Mega Pack, which adds support for hundreds of popular formats to WMP. Go to www.snipca.com/15078 and click the blue Direct Download Link (just above Publisher's Description). Once it's downloaded, open the installer, and keep clicking Next through all the menus until you reach the page prompting you to install additional software. Untick all the boxes, then tick 'No Thanks' to confirm you don't want these extras. Continue clicking Next to install the codec pack.

Control your music when using other programs

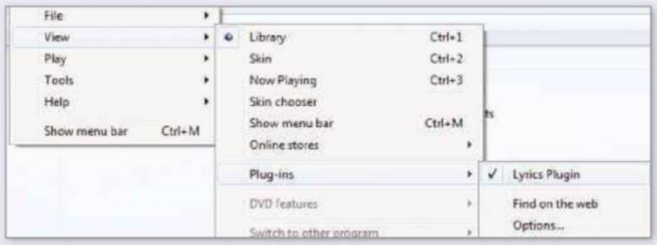
If you want to have instant access to your music player when you're doing other things on your PC, you can choose to keep Windows Media Player's Now Playing window on top of your other open windows. Click Organize at the top left, then Options. In the window that opens, click the Player tab, tick the box next to 'Keep Now Playing on top of other windows', then click Apply and OK. Start playing a track, then press Ctrl+3 to activate Now Playing mode which brings up a small window displaying the track you're currently playing. You can resize this window by dragging its corners and access the music player controls by moving your cursor over it.



Tick the 'Keep Now Playing' box in your Options to keep an eye on your music when using other programs

See the lyrics of the song you're playing

A little-known fact about Windows Media Player is that it supports third-party plug-ins that add new features. For example, you can download the Lyrics Plugin at www.lyricsplugin.com to display the lyrics of any track you play. Click the Download Now button under 'Lyrics Plugin for Windows Media Player', then double-click the downloaded file and follow the instructions to install it. Now open WMP, right-click the blue space at the top, click Tools, then 'Plug-ins' (see screenshot). You should see the Lyrics Plugin with a tick next to it. Next, start playing a track, then switch to the Now Playing view (by pressing Ctrl+3) to see the lyrics to that song.



Download the Lyrics Plugin to sing along to your favourite songs

Next issue Secret Tips For... CCleaner

Intel Compute Stick

Soon you'll be able to transform your TV set into a computer using a device no larger than a pack of chewing gum

What is it?

A four-inch dongle, powered by a quad-core processor, that comes pre-loaded with either Windows 8.1 or Linux. You can plug it into the HDMI slot on your TV, effectively turning your set into a computer, with your Desktop appearing on screen. You can then control it using a wireless or Bluetooth keyboard and mouse (which you'll need to buy separately). The Compute Stick can also be fitted into any monitor with an HDMI slot.

On the official page for the Compute Stick (www.snipca.com/15019) Intel says it's "everything you love about your desktop computer in a device that fits in the palm of your hand". That's a pretty good description.

What features does it have?

Connections include a full-sized USB port. You can increase storage capacity using the microSD card slot. It also has Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity. However, when it's plugged into the HDMI slot, it will need to connect to an external power source through the Micro USB port. Intel plans to overcome this hurdle by building future models that can be powered through the HDMI slot.

How much does it cost?

The Windows 8.1 model, which includes 2GB of RAM and 32GB of internal storage is priced $149 (about £99). The Linux version, which is expected to run Ubuntu, has 1GB of RAM and 8GB of storage and costs $89 (around £59). Both models should be available to buy from March.

Isn't that a lot pricier than other streaming sticks?

Yes. The Chromecast (www.google.co.uk/chromecast) costs £30, while the Roku Streaming Stick (www.snipca.com/15020) is priced £45. Amazon's Fire TV Stick (www.snipca.com/15022), which is currently only available in the US, priced $39, may be even cheaper if and when it arrives in the UK. But these devices are mostly used to stream web pages or videos to your TV, whereas the Compute Stick contains an entire operating system.

So what would I use it for?

"Light productivity," Intel says, which translates as browsing the web, playing games and streaming videos – just on a much bigger screen, which would aid those with poor eyesight. It wouldn't be a suitable replacement for your current desktop PC or laptop, but you should consider buying it if you're looking for a cheap, portable way to carry around Windows 8.1 or Linux. You'll then be able to plug it into someone's TV or monitor when visiting their home, or carry it between work and your home.

Microsoft already offers Windows 8.1 on a USB stick, but it's aimed at business workers

Is this the cheapest way to use a portable version of Windows 8.1?

Not quite. The Linx 7 Windows 8.1 tablet (www.snipca.com/15021), which costs £79, has a seven-inch screen, making it just small enough to fit inside a large coat pocket. But unlike the Compute Stick, it doesn't fit snugly inside a front trouser pocket.

Is this a brand new idea?

No. Microsoft got there first with Windows To Go (www.snipca.com/15026), which is a version of Windows 8.1 Enterprise that can be run from a USB stick and is aimed at business workers. However, to run it properly you need a USB 3.0 stick, which can be expensive. The 32GB Kingston DataTraveler Workspace, for example, costs around £75 – and that's on top of the cost of an 8.1 Enterprise licence. Intel hopes its Compute Stick will attract some of these workers, but also be cheap enough to make it attractive to the public. We'll review it later this year.

DOWNLOAD PAID-FOR SOFTWARE FOR FREE

The best programs and apps come at a price – most of the time. **Jane Hoskyn** reveals our favourite secrets for getting paid-for software for free

Petrol prices may be falling, but everything else is getting dearer. Broadband prices, after years of happy decline, are up by 6.5 per cent. Rail-fare rises seem faster than most trains. Even coffee prices rose by one-fifth in a week recently.

If you've got an iPad or iPhone, the news gets worse. Apple has just raised the minimum cost of paid-for apps in the App Store from 69p to 79p (see News, Issue 441). An increase of 15 per cent overnight.

It doesn't help that Apple rarely seems to bother with exchange rates. Often the only difference between the prices of identical apps in the US and UK App Store (www.snipca.com/15123) is the pound sign.

Any software you download from the internet suffers from similar exchange-rate unfairness, though the difference isn't usually as bad as with Apple. Adobe, Microsoft, Dropbox and Spotify all charge more in the UK for software that costs less in the US, Australia and Germany.

KEY POINTS

- Get a paid-for program free every day
- Get paid-for tablet and phone apps free every day – even for iOS
- Be first to know about time-limited offers and freebies
- Dodge software prices by downloading old and beta versions
- How do some people make free-software trials last forever?

Beat the unfair price rises

Over the next few pages we'll share our favourite tips and free tools for beating price hikes and unfair anomalies. Most of our tips involve tracking down free offers before they expire, and none are illegal. We wouldn't encourage you to walk into a shop and steal a laptop, so we're not going to encourage you to steal paid-for software and games either. File-sharing sites and torrents are very popular among internet-savvy people who want to get something expensive (software, games, films) without paying for it, but using them potentially breaks at least two laws (the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and the Digital Economy Act 2010) and lots of ethical guidelines.

However, we're not complete goody-goodies, and we do offer one or two licence-bending tricks that don't break the law – just as we did in our last Cover Feature (Issue 441). Read on to discover where to find the best freebies and what catches to look out for.

DISCOVER FREEBIES AND OFFERS BEFORE THEY EXPIRE

Get a paid-for program for free every day

The name of 'Giveaway of the Day' (GotD, www.giveawayoftheday.com) is itself a bit of a giveaway. This free website gives away a different paid-for program, for free, every day. It also archives the programs so you can download previously featured software at its full price.

Go to the GotD homepage and you'll see today's offer, with a ticker telling you how many hours and minutes are left until it expires. On the day we're writing this, the giveaway is InstantPhotoSketch Pro 2.0, a powerful but easy tool for transforming your digital photos with pencil and brush filters. It would normally set you back $39.95 (£26.50, www.snipca.com/15090) but, for one day only, it's completely free – only via the GotD website.

Click the yellow 'Proceed to download page' button to see a page with more information about the day's freebie, including user ratings and comments, system requirements, file size and a link to its publisher's website. Then click the blue 'Download [program name] now' link, save the ZIP file to your Desktop and extract its contents. Run the setup file, then run the licence-activation file to unlock the program's full version. Instructions are in 'Readme.txt'.

We visited a lot of 'deal of the day' websites when researching this feature, and most are ugly as sin. GotD is the exception that proves the rule, with a clean simplicity that makes it a pleasure to browse. It does include a couple of adverts unless you block them using an extension like Adblock Plus (https://adblockplus.org), but it's extremely restrained compared with similar sites.

Scroll down the homepage to browse recent giveaways, which include EaseUS Partition Manager Pro (normally $39.95/£26.50, www.snipca.com/15088) and Aiseesoft Total Video Converter (normally $45/£30, www.snipca.com/15089).

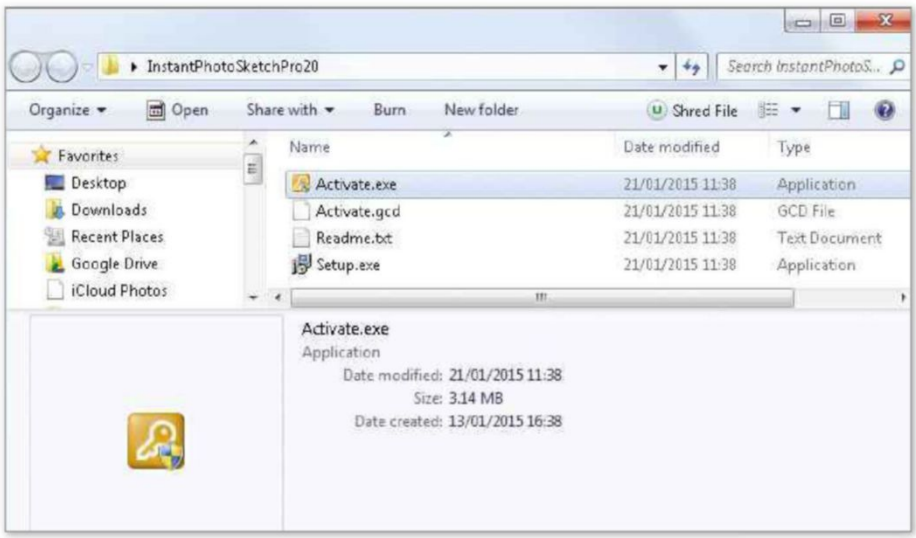
Download a paid-for program free every day from 'Giveaway of the Day' – and see the giveaways you missed

What's the catch?

You have to act fast. The free program must be installed and registered within its 24-hour window. This isn't midnight to midnight, but 8am to 8pm UK time – because GotD is based in US (PST time). If you download the installer file (usually EXE or ZIP), but don't get round to installing it before the deadline, its licence will expire and it won't work.

Once you've installed your freebie, you won't get free technical support or upgrades to subsequent versions of the program. If you uninstall it, you can't re-install it for free.

As with all installable software, you must be vigilant during setup and make sure to choose a Custom option if offered, and opt out of added extras such as search toolbars. Our InstantPhotoSketch setup wizard didn't offer any unwanted extras at all, but the activation file did. To avoid the extra, click Close when you see a window that says 'Successfully activated', and don't click Install Software Informer.



Run 'Activate.exe' as soon as you've installed your GotD program

Get a paid-for app for free every day

'Giveaway of the Day' also runs sites for Android (www.snipca.com/15096) and iPhone (www.snipca.com/15097; most apps also work on iPad, as you'll discover when you click 'Get the App'). These GotD sites are freebie-finders rather than freebie-hosts. They sniff out price-drops on the Google Play Store and Apple's App Store, list them all with ratings and comments, then link you to the relevant download pages. GotD has an Android app (www.snipca.com/15104) that lists current Play Store offers and lets you install apps from the Play Store with one tap.

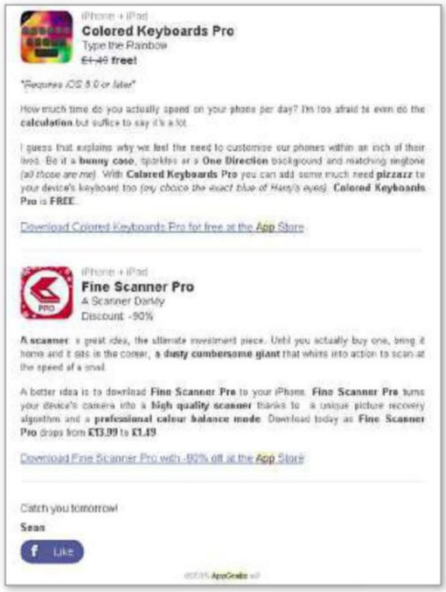
Our favourite source of free apps, however, is the free online service AppGratis (http://appgratis.com). The first thing you see when you visit the site is a pop-up window. This would normally infuriate us, but we rather like this pop-up because it's your gateway to the free, unmissable, daily ▶

AppGratis newsletter.

Tick one or more of the boxes according to the devices you have (Android, iPhone and/or iPad), make sure the dropdown menus are set to English and UK, then enter your email address and click the green 'Sign up here' button. Now, every morning, you'll get a separate email for each of your chosen app platforms, with a link to download a paid-for app for free from the Play Store or the App Store. The email also contains a brief review of the app and an unrelated joke, video or piece of trivia to brighten your morning. It's much more likeable than it sounds.

More importantly, the savings can really add up, especially for iPad and iPhone apps, which were significantly more expensive than Android apps even before Apple whacked up their prices.

Even better, once you've installed an app during its freebie period, you will continue to get free updates after it goes back to being paid-for. You can even uninstall it from your tablet or phone to free up space and re-install it again later via your Google or Apple account.



Get a paid-for iPad, iPhone and Android app for free every day via the AppGratis newsletters

There's also an AppGratis Android app (www.snipca.com/15105) that sends you daily freebie notifications and lets you download free apps safely via the Play Store. There used to be an AppGratis iOS app, too, and it was even more useful than the Android app, with huge savings to be made. But Apple kicked AppGratis out of the App Store in 2013 (see box below), so if you have an iPad or iPhone you'll have to rely on the daily newsletter for your freebie notifications.

Amazon's new Appstore (www.snipca.com/15121) is also worth a look if you're on Android. It doesn't link you to the Play Store; instead, you install apps by first installing the Amazon Appstore app (www.snipca.com/15120). Once you've installed the app, it offers one paid-for app for free every day.

What's the catch?

You've probably worked that out already. Most of these freebies are for Android only. Android apps are cheaper anyway (actually, they're usually free) so you simply don't stand to save as much money by getting these apps for free.

Apple hasn't quite managed to stamp out attempts to save people money. The AppGratis website and newsletter are still full of free iOS apps that would normally set you back a few pounds. We hope they continue going strong for a long time.

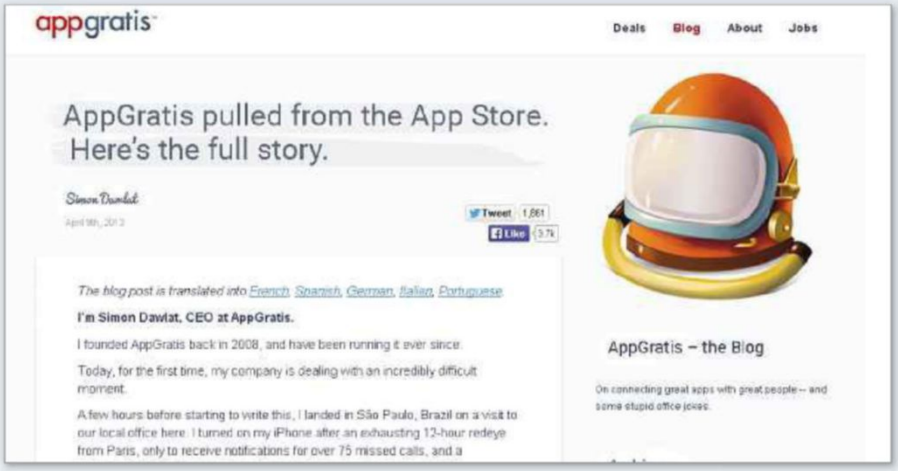
WHY DID APPLE TRY TO KILL APPGRATIS?

The AppGratis story is really a story about Apple's prices. Have a seat and let's begin.

In 2008, French engineer Simon Dawlat created AppGratis for iOS and Android. The app scoured Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store for time-limited free offers, notified you, and let you tap a button to download the freebie instantly from the Play Store or App Store. Dawlat also struck deals with app developers to offer their wares free for limited periods.

AppGratis was free to use, quick, easy and saved you money. It was the perfect app. On Android, it still is the perfect app.

In April 2013, Dawlat was on a plane to Brazil when Apple announced it was kicking AppGratis out of the App Store – in other words, making it impossible to download or update on an iPad or iPhone. The move could have destroyed Dawlat's business overnight. When he landed in Brazil, he found so many concerned messages awaiting him that he thought a family member had died.



Apple kicked AppGratis out of the App Store in 2013, leaving 12 million iPhone users without their daily freebie

Dawlat quickly published his thoughts on the matter, along with the correspondence he'd received from Apple. You can still read it on the AppGratis blog (www.snipca.com/15106).

AppGratis is still going, of course, but the iOS app had been the main way its users – 12 million of them on iPhone alone – saved money. Which is why Apple didn't like it.

Since ousting AppGratis, Apple has been busy cracking down on other third-party attempts to compromise its income. Its operating systems have always been well protected, with Mac OS X and iOS both using sandbox technology to ensure apps can't be installed from outside the App Store. This structure also keeps out system tools such as battery-monitors and file managers; prevents sharing between apps; ties iOS users to iTunes, and gives Apple complete control over pricing.

That's either good business sense or sheer greed. People seem to be voting with their feet. iOS had a big head start on Android, but Android overtook it in June 2012 – and Google's platform has since forged ahead, far and fast. No-one can say why for sure, but we'll hazard a guess that cheap apps and a versatile, open platform make Android far more attractive.

Be first to know about software freebies and offers

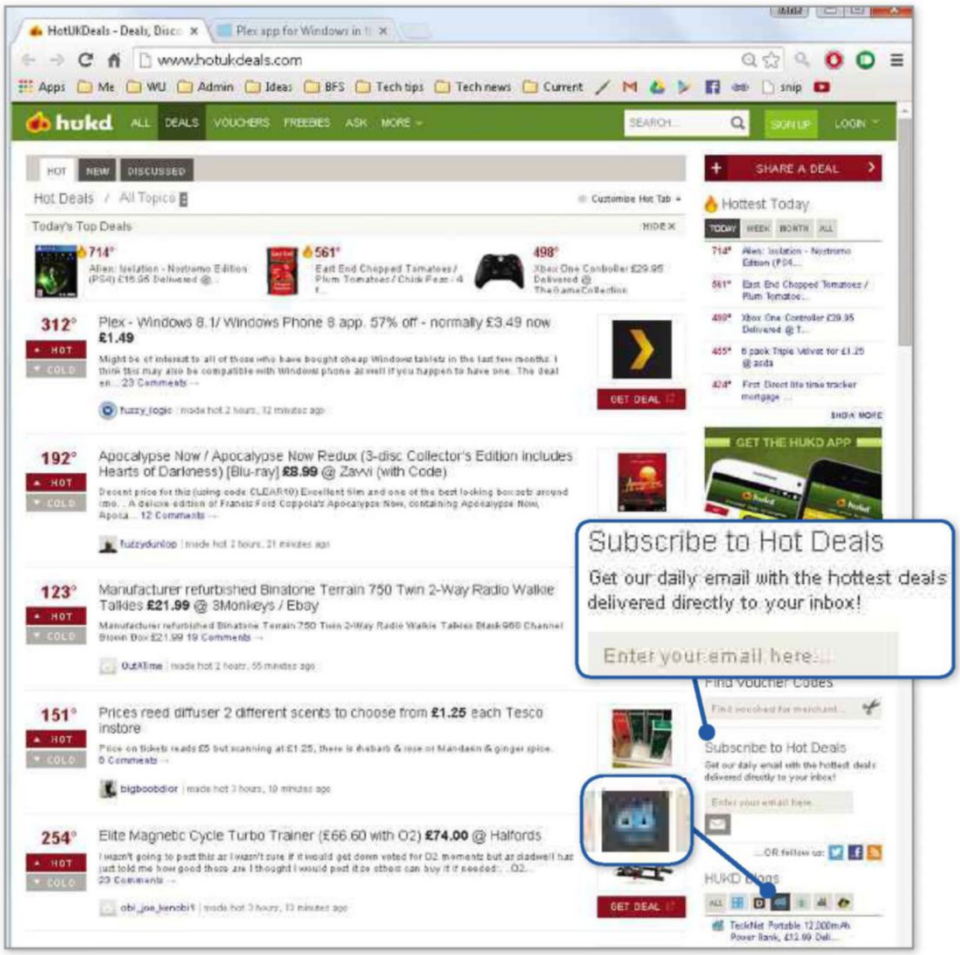
Deal-finding website HotUKDeals (HUKD, www.hotukdeals.com) looks cluttered at first glance. But look closer and you'll notice there are no adverts (unusually, HUKD looks exactly the same whether you enable or disable your ad-blocker), no dollar signs (it's a proper UK website) and a wealth of useful information, all extremely well organised.

HUKD doesn't sell anything, it just finds it. If a program, app or anything else catches your eye in the list of offers, click Get Deal, then complete your purchase on the third-party website, which opens in a new tab. For example, in our screenshot (right) we clicked Get Deal on the Windows 8.1 app Plex, so the relevant page of the Windows Store is open in the next tab at the top.

The offers go far beyond software. HUKD helps you save on gadgets, DVDs, computer games, toys, gifts, days out and even loo roll. If you're not interested in groceries, go to the HUKD Blogs menu at the right of the page and click the middle icon ('Mobot'). Now you'll see a list of tech offers, including cut-price tablets (loads of them), PCs and phones as well as software and games.

To save the hassle of visiting the site every day, sign up for the daily newsletter by typing your email address in the box above HKUD Blogs. You don't have to sign up with HUKD.

Money Saving Expert (MSE, www.moneysavingexpert.com) is worth a visit, too, and also has an email newsletter with the latest deals. Its remit is much broader than HUKD, so you have to look harder for the tech offers. But dig around (it's well worth it) and you'll find deals, tips and tools for saving money on your broadband, phone contract, photo printing and more, plus free online tools such as the Local eBay Deals Mapper, which rounds up the best eBay bargains in your area (www.snipca.com/15129).



HotUKDeals looks daunting but it's surprisingly easy to navigate. Click the 'Mobot' icon to filter tech deals, and type your email to get the daily newsletter

MoneySavingExpert.com has some great software deals if you dig deep – especially in its forum

What's the catch?

The offers on these sites are cheap but not usually free. Still, a bargain is a bargain, and these sites are so good at finding them that they're somewhat addictive.

Our main problem with MSE is a side-effect of its size. Its unending menus and forum threads (www.snipca.com/15130) are intimidating, and even if you use the search box you have to wade through loads of results to find what you're after. To fit everything in, the site uses tiny text, so it's hard to read unless you zoom in – which prevents you seeing the whole page.

Buy a cheap program, get an expensive program free

If you're a regular HUKD or MSE visitor you'll know the name TrialPay. This service is a kind of digital version of 'buy one get one free', but instead you buy one cheap product and get one expensive product free. Sounds like a good deal to us.

TrialPay's website (www.trialpay.com) is for business clients and doesn't include a menu of its current offers, which seems a bit daft. To find these deals, you have to go looking for them – and hope you find them before they expire. ▶

Computer active

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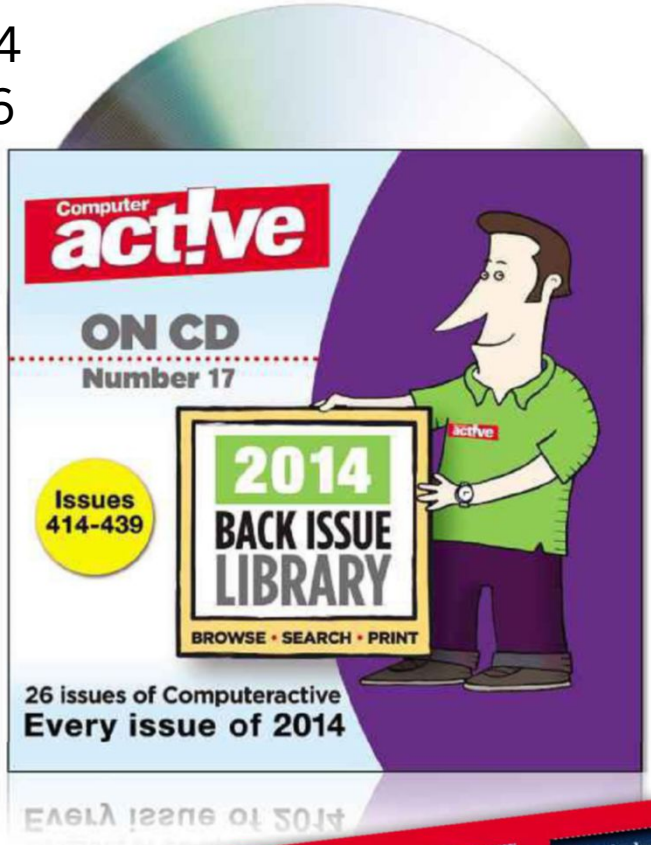

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Pre-order the CD on Amazon via www.snipca.com/14981

You could search Google (type the name of a program, plus 'trialpay'), but most links will be expired offers. Instead, browse for current TrialPay offers on HUKD or MSE, and check 24Hsoftware.com (www.snipca.com/15132), which currently links to free offers for Able Photo Resizer (normally $15, or £10) and WinZip Pro (normally £42.95). A few deals on 24Hsoftware.com had expired when we checked them, so it's hit-and-miss, but still worth a look.

We clicked the Able Photo Resizer link on 24Hsoftware.com and it took us to a web page hosted by TrialPay (check that 'trialpay.com' is part of the URL). Here's where you complete your side of the deal by entering your name and email address. Keep 'Let me know about other special offers' ticked to receive the TrialPay offers newsletter, then click Continue. On the next page ('Complete 1 offer'), choose a cheap product or sign up for an online service. Finally, TrialPay will send you an email containing a licence number for the program's full version. Keep the licence number safe in case you ever need to re-install the program.

Fill in your details and buy a cheap item to get a paid-for program free using TrialPay

Most TrialPay offers are for US products, so the prices you see on the offer page are given in dollars. However, all the 'Complete 1 offer' prices are in pounds, so there are no international payment fees to pay. Click 'Learn more' next to any item in the 'Complete 1 offer' list to visit its third-party website (most are UK-based) and decide whether or not to complete the deal.

What's the catch?

We don't like handing over our name, email address and payment details to any company, let alone a company with the words 'trial' and 'pay' in its name. It just feels dodgy. But TrialPay is a legitimate company, and these are legitimate deals – just be aware they're in it to make money too.

A more worrying criticism of TrialPay is unreliability. When we researched people's experiences, we found a few forum posts complaining that the promised licence numbers never turned up. The problem was usually fixed after a stern email to TrialPay, but that shouldn't be necessary. You kept your side of the deal, so TrialPay should keep its side, no ifs or buts.

The deals, by the way, are TrialPay's responsibility. For example, if you were promised a licence for WinZip and it hasn't arrived, contact TrialPay, not WinZip. TrialPay is actually very strict with the companies it strikes deals with (its legal terms make heavy reading: www.snipca.com/15134), and they do want these offers to work as promised. To contact Customer Support, use the secure form (with hideous captcha, sorry) at www.snipca.com/15135.

CAN YOU HACK 30-DAY SOFTWARE TRIALS TO LAST FOREVER?

It's possible. Like using torrents to get paid-for software free, trial-hacking breaks licensing rules – but people do it, and there's information about it all over the internet. Hackers aren't very good at keeping secrets, you see. They show off about their dubious labours on websites, forums and even YouTube, where you'll find videos like 'How to Crack Any Software' (www.snipca.com/15062).

In short, the process involves tricking an installed program into thinking it's at the start of its 30-day run instead of the end. Every month, the user "rewinds" the program's internal clock.

One of the most popular tools that's used (well, abused) for this purpose is RunAsDate (www.snipca.com/15069). This free portable tool lets you set different times and dates for different programs on your PC, for perfectly legitimate reasons, without affecting your system clock.

RunAsDate is easy to use and made by one of our most trusted independent developers, Nir Sofer (aka NirSoft, www.nirsoft.net). Sofer *really* doesn't want you to use his program to break software licensing rules. Just below the screenshot on the download page you'll see an 'Important Notice!!' (big red letters), where Nir says he gets many emails from users who complain RunAsDate "doesn't work" – because they can't get it to unlock all the trial versions they throw at it. He stresses the tool is not designed for such law-breaking, and reminds users that many trial programs are set to automatically block unauthorised changes to the time or date.

You can use RunAsDate to change a program's internal clock – a trick that some people have tried to use to extend trials of free software

More ambitious software-hackers have found ways to get around this by reverse engineering trial programs, using tools like OllyDbg (www.ollydbg.de), which effectively lets you take a program apart and put it back together again, with extra features (say, a permanent licence) and without unwanted features (say, trial restrictions). OllyDbg is free but definitely not easy to use – which is why it's best left to amateur programmers, ideally those with honest intentions.

GET OLD AND NEW SOFTWARE FOR FREE

Download future programs while they're free

Paid-for programs were free once, before they grew up and started asking everyone for money. To get this youthful software while it's still free, you have to know where to find it, and sometimes persuade its creator to let you download it – and here's where we can help you.

Betas are a great way to get software before it goes on sale – but they expire quickly

First, check the excellent website Betabound (www.betabound.com). Scroll down the homepage to see current betas, or click Beta Types at the top-left and browse categories including Windows Betas and iOS App Betas. If a project catches your eye, click Beta Test Now to visit its creator's site in a new tab, where you may have to fill in your name and email address before you can download anything.

If a project is described as 'early access', it's in pre-beta stage and its developer is still seeking funding. You can still download the software or test it online, and you can offer feedback, but you may need to pay a donation (still much cheaper than waiting for the finished product).

Betabound's categories also include Steam Early Access (beta games) and Backer Reward Betas (crowdfunded projects), but they were both empty when we visited them. Never mind – go to Steam (http://store.steampowered.com) and Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com) instead, where you'll find free betas (even alphas, which are basically betas of betas) and crowdsourced software aplenty.

Simulators, puzzles and other games are far more likely to be released for beta-testing than big-name software. Steam is almost entirely devoted to games, and new titles appear every day. We'll be looking at Steam again in our next issue, when we discover our favourite free simulators – including a few betas.

What's the catch?

By definition, betas aren't ready. This means they're often buggy and require lots of updates, so you'll need to keep checking its website for the latest version.

Many betas are only available to a certain number of people, and the best projects fill up fast. Last July, BlackBerry's beta of 'BBM for Windows Phone' launched and expired within a few hours. So if you have a favourite brand or product, join its mailing list and follow it on social-networking sites. Microsoft distributes betas via its Google+ Community page (www.snipca.com/15136, where you can peek at the forthcoming browser Spartan, which replaces Internet Explorer), as does CCleaner's maker Piriform (www.snipca.com/15137). Search for your favourite product on Google+ Communities (https://plus.google.com/communities) or browse the beta Communities at www.snipca.com/15138.

Download old versions of programs

In Issue 440's Cover Feature, we shared our love for The Internet Archive (https://archive.org), where you can download classic films and TV shows for free. Here's even better news: you can download classic video games and software for free, too, including old versions of software that now costs money.

Click Software in the row of links at the top (or go straight to the page: www.snipca.com/15139), then settle down for a leisurely browse. This site is definitely not designed for the glance-and-grab approach to downloading software – and we mean that as a compliment. It's a wonderful place to spend an afternoon, a week or more.

It's easy to get carried away playing free Amiga-era games in the site's Old School Emulation Center (www.snipca.com/15140) or browsing the tens of thousands of free programs in the Open Source Software Collection (www.snipca.com/15141), but the real money-saving action is in the Shareware CD Archive (www.snipca.com/15142), a vast collection of downloadable software donated by Internet Archive users over two decades. Fancy turning the clock back with a free download of Microsoft Windows NT Server 4? You can (www.snipca.com/15143). Click the tiny 'CD/DVD' link on the left to download an ISO ('disc image') file containing the entire operating system, licence key included.

Everything on the Internet Archive is free to download or view online, but you'll see an appeal for donations at the top, just like on Wikipedia. If you can spare a couple of pounds to keep this incredible resource alive, you'll be helping to make the internet a better place.

What's the catch?

Old software is no longer supported or patched by developers, so they may not work as expected, and some versions may even have security flaws that could make you unsafe if you run it while you're connected to the internet. If you want to squeeze more life out of an old software CD rather than shelling out for an upgrade, or you fancy trying some ISO files downloaded from the Internet Archive, run them in a partition or use a virtual PC program such as VirtualBox, which is free (www.virtualbox.org). ca

NEXT ISSUE

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PART 2

Build your perfect Windows 8 Start screen

Jane Hoskyn bulldozes her default Start screen and takes a dim view of Windows Apps

Step 1: Destroy the tat

When Windows 8 launched, everyone hated the Start screen. Then when Windows 8.1 launched on top of Windows 8 (in the hope that everyone would forget how bad Windows 8 was), everyone hated the Start screen even more – because it was still there.

The way I see it, the problem isn't the Start screen itself. Microsoft made it hateful by filling it with rubbish, including thumbnails (aka 'tiles') for its most useless products (Internet Explorer and OneDrive) and pointless Apps (as opposed to apps about my favourite TV show *Pointless*, which would always get my vote).

These tiles are little more than clickable Microsoft adverts, and they sprawl across the space you'd normally expect your Desktop to be. And Microsoft wonders why we didn't like it? If you've never had the pleasure of seeing a raw, unedited Windows 8 Start screen, go to Microsoft's 'Start screen' tutorial (www.snipca.com/15007) and look at the screenshot in the video player. It's horrible.

On the upside, the Start screen is very easy to dismantle or, better still, blitz in one fell swoop. You can remove individual tiles by right-clicking them and clicking 'Unpin from Start', but it's much more satisfying to bulldoze them all at once. Right-click one tile and let go, then press and hold Ctrl while clicking every tile in turn until they all have a little tick in their corner. You should now be able to let go of your mouse and the Ctrl key, and all the tiles will stay ticked (you can't use Ctrl+A to select them all instantly). Now right-click and click 'Unpin from Start', and all those useless Microsoft tiles will vanish.

This doesn't uninstall any Windows Apps or tools, but it does at least let you pretend they're not there. You can uninstall some tools from the Start screen

Microsoft's Start screen tutorial usefully shows how awful the default Start screen is

rather than just unpin them, but that requires a tile-by-tile approach that I'm not going to bother with here, because I want to get on to the rebuilding part.

Step 2: Try Windows Apps – briefly

I've been here before. A year ago I tried rebuilding the Start screen on the old Acer hybrid that I subsequently sacrificed to the Windows 10 Technical Preview (see Issue 440 and the five that preceded it).

Back then, I was easily seduced by Microsoft's plan to fill our PCs with Windows Apps. Windows Apps are versions of programs, such as Skype (www.snipca.com/15048), and websites, such as Facebook (www.snipca.com/15049), that are designed to work in Windows 8 (which is to say, Windows 8.1, as I explained on this page in Issue 441).

When you visit these links, or any others in Microsoft's list of popular free apps (www.snipca.com/15046), you'll see a green button saying 'View in Windows Store' (unless you're running Windows 7 or earlier, in which case you'll see a message telling you to get Windows 8.1 instead). Click the button and everything on your screen will be swallowed up by the bright green monster that is the Windows App Store.

And there's my problem with Windows Apps. The App Store is itself an app, and like other apps it colonises your entire screen, and doesn't let you see any other open programs, files or menu items. Even my tiny Android screen lets me see all my running apps and switch between them. There are certain clicks and tricks that'll reveal other running apps in Windows 8, but they're cumbersome – certainly trickier than tapping an Android button. Besides, I'm used to seeing lots of windows at once on a PC screen. Full-screen anything makes me nervous.

Still, Windows Apps are colourful and hypnotic and easy to access, like toys dangling over a baby's cot, and you may well love them, especially if you've got a touchscreen PC (a Windows tablet, in other words). I regard them as a shoddy halfway house between proper installed programs and online tools. I predict that online tools will replace them all before long, but that's another feature for another time.

Windows Apps are annoying full-screen versions of sites and programs like Skype

Given how easy Windows Apps are to add and remove, you might as well try a few, if only out of curiosity. Once you've installed an app you can add it to your clean-shaven Start screen by clicking (or tapping, since we mentioned touchscreens) the arrow at the bottom-left of Start, right-clicking the app and clicking 'Pin to Start'.

Tiles don't have to be Windows Apps. Next time, I'll show you how to create a customised Start-screen tile for more or less any program, task or file. ca

Open & fix corrupt files

File corruption can be devastating. But as **Robert Zak** explains, you can repair documents, photos and videos that seemed all but lost

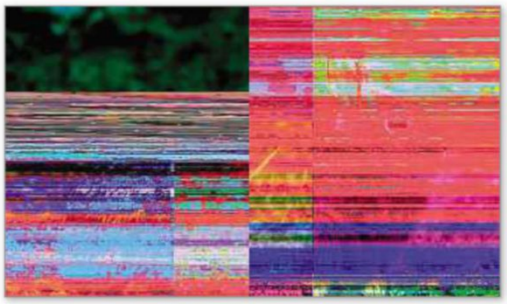
Anyone who owns a PC will have experienced data corruption on some level or other. It can manifest itself as garbled coloured lines that ruin one of your favourite photos, a video file that's lost huge swathes of footage, or a Word document that simply refuses to open. There are tools you can download, and within Windows, that can repair damaged files, so the situation isn't hopeless. But can you always rescue a corrupt file?

The honest answer is 'not always'. The more complex a corrupted file, the tougher it is to repair. So while the chances of repairing a Word document are relatively good, the odds lengthen when it comes to repairing a photo or picture file, and stretch still further if you need to fix a damaged video.

Here, we'll show you the tools that offer the best chances of fixing your corrupted files, along with a little sage advice when realistically things may be beyond repair. But, if you thought that your corrupted file was a lost cause, then read on, for there may be a way to salvage it.

Files you can't open and documents you can't read

Usually, whenever you try to open a corrupt file in Microsoft Office, you'll see the error message '[Name of Office program] was unable to read this document. It may be corrupt'. First off, run Windows' CheckDisk tool, which will scan for corrupt Windows system files. This might be the reason your file isn't opening, rather than any damage to the file itself. Click Start, type chkdsk and press Enter. Let the scan complete, then try opening the file again. If the problem persists, then you most likely have a corrupt file.



Examples of how text documents and image files can look if corrupted

Microsoft Office has a couple of built-in tools to fix corrupted documents. Open the program corresponding to the corrupt file type (Word for a DOC file, Excel for an XML file, and so on), click File at the top left, Open, then click the arrow next to the Open button in the new window, and click 'Open and Repair'.

Microsoft Office also has a 'Recover Text from Any File' option, which can retrieve text (minus formatting and other visual features) from any document. Open Word, click File at the top left, then Options. In the new window, click the Advanced tab, scroll down to the General section at the bottom, click 'Confirm conversion at Open' and then OK. Click File again, Open, then in the new window click All Word Documents at the bottom right, then 'Recover Text from Any File'. Finally, locate the corrupted file and click Open.

Another sign that your file has been corrupted is when the text looks garbled and illegible. A possible solution is to save the file in a different format, which may not be prone to the problems that caused the original file to corrupt.

To do this, click File, Save As, then in the 'Save as type' dropdown menu select a different format for your file (if it's a DOC or DOCX file, try saving it as an RTF or TXT file; with Excel files, try saving it as a Web Page). You can do this using any office suite, such as LibreOffice or WPS.

WHY DO MY FILES GET CORRUPTED?

File types such as photos, documents and videos are corrupted for a reason. Computer files may not fade over time, but they can still get damaged if you're not careful.

The most common reason a file becomes corrupted is when something happens at the moment you're saving a document. Power cuts or power surges during the saving process can mean data is not properly written to the file. Or perhaps you were in such a hurry to shut down your PC you clicked 'Force shut down' (see screenshot right) even though Windows warned you that some programs still need to close. If a document was saving or autosaving at this time, then it's possible you have corrupted it. It's a good idea to think twice before clicking 'Force shut down' especially if you've been working on an important document.

It goes without saying that viruses and malware can corrupt your files. While they usually latch on to system files and make your PC less secure, they can also contaminate documents, photos and videos. Of course, you probably don't need reminding that you should have a reputable antivirus suite, such as Kaspersky Total Security 2015 (www.snipca.com/14969), see page 68 for our half-price reader offer, to prevent such things happening.

Make sure you have no important documents open if you want to force-shut down your computer

Ruined photos and images

One of the few free tools that actually cuts the mustard when it comes to fixing image files such as JPEGs, PNGs and BMPs (as well as other file types) is Office Recovery (online.office recovery.com). Because the tool is web-based, you don't need to download anything, but you will need to upload the image files that you'd like to fix. This tool fixed about 30 per cent of our corrupted image files, which is by far the best result we've achieved using free software.

Use the free tool Stellar Phoenix if you need to repair a whole range of image file formats

For an even higher success rate, you'll need to spend some money. Stellar Phoenix JPEG Repair (£26, www.snipca.com/15013) is the most effective tool we used, repairing around 60 per cent of the corrupted files we put through it. You can trial it for free, but your fixed images will have a watermark superimposed. But if you're happy with the results, you can upgrade to the full version, which removes watermarks.

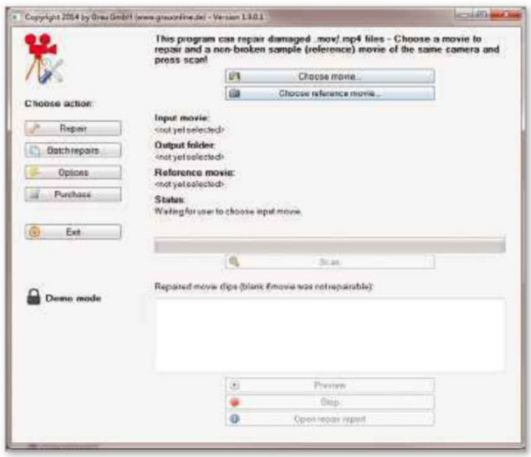
Picture Doctor 3.0 does a similar job, but at £66 (www.snipca.com/15016) it's more than twice the price. It has a comparable repair rate to Stellar Phoenix, with the added advantage of being able to repair PSD (Photoshop) files, complete with all their layers data. While for most people this feature will be surplus to requirements, we know from experience how many hours of effort can go into a multi-layered PSD file, so Picture Doctor could be invaluable if you take photo-editing seriously.

Video files that won't play properly

Videos are a difficult format to repair, because their data is constantly changing and shifting with each frame. Because of this, repairing video files is something of a long shot.

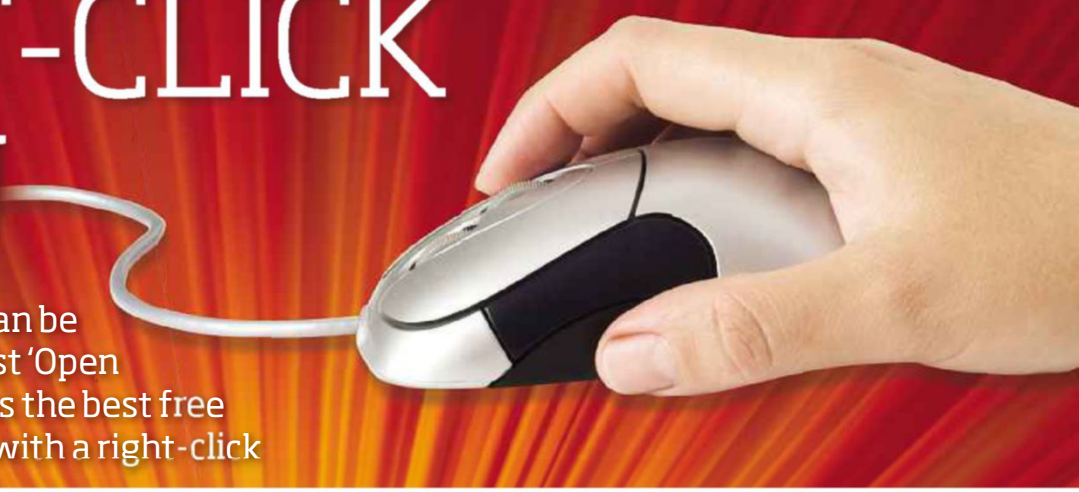
Type video repair into Google and you'll see plenty of programs listed that claim they can help, but few of these are reputable, and none fixed any of our corrupt video files when we put them to the test. Some people reported that Grau GmbH (www.snipca.com/15024) fixed their MOV and MP4 files, so there's no harm in you trying it. It'll fix (or try to fix) 50 per cent of your video for free, which you can download and view to see if it's worked. If so, then you can buy five full video repairs for £22.50.

The much-loved VLC Media Player has a built-in tool that can fix some corrupt AVI video files. If you have an AVI file that isn't working properly, open it with VLC and you should see a message telling you the file is corrupt and asking if you want to repair it. Again, we stress you shouldn't expect miracles, even though the tool is made by the brilliant VLC. ca



Grau GmbH is the best of a bad bunch when it comes to repairing corrupt videos files

HACK YOUR RIGHT-CLICK MENU



Your PC's context menu can be used for far more than just 'Open With'. **Robert Zak** reveals the best free tools for doing anything with a right-click

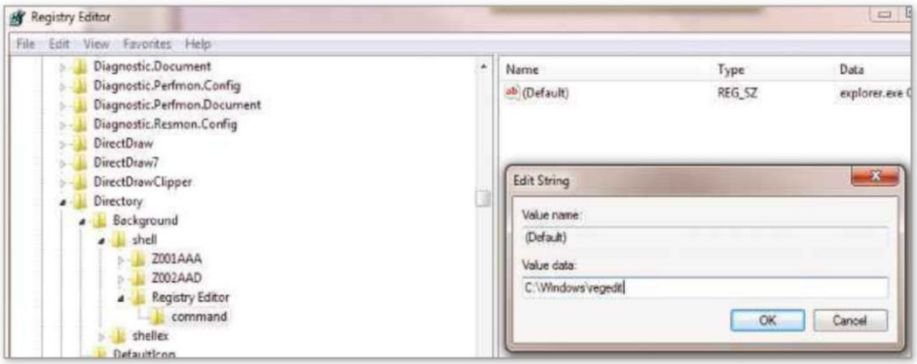
The Windows right-click menu (officially called the context menu) is one of your PC's most long-established and useful features. True to its official name, this menu displays different things depending on the context in which you open it. For example, right-click anywhere on your Desktop to discover various things you can do to your Desktop, such as rearrange its icons or change its background. Right-click a file, and you'll be given options to open it, delete it, attach it to an email and more.

There is no quick and easy way to customise this menu via the Control Panel or by opening a Properties window. But dig a little deeper and found some great free third-party tools and Registry tricks for making the menu even more useful.

Open any file or folder with a right-click

The easiest way to add any file or folder to your context menu is to use the free portable program Easy Context Menu (www.snipca.com/15077). To download it, scroll down the page to where the comments start, then click the grey Download button. When you run the program, drag and drop any file, folder or program on to the Easy Context Menu window to add it to your right-click menu.

You can also use the Windows Registry to add right-click menu shortcuts for opening any file, folder or program on your PC. First, open Registry Editor by typing regedit into Start and pressing Enter. In the left pane, navigate to **HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT\Directory\Background\shell**. Right-click 'shell', click New, Key, then name the key how you'd like it to be displayed in the right-click menu (we'll create a shortcut to 'Registry Editor' as an example). Next, right-click the key you just created, again go to New, then Key, and name it 'command'. Right-click '(Default)' in the right-hand pane, click Modify, then in the 'Value data' box type the location of the file you want to add to the context menu (for our example, C:\Windows\regedit.– see screenshot above), then press Enter.



Add shortcuts to files and folders to the context menu using Registry Editor

You can add any number of file and folder shortcuts to your right-click menu in this way. However, if you're creating a shortcut to a location in Windows Explorer, you'll need to prefix what you enter into the 'Value data' box with 'explorer.exe'. For example, to create a shortcut to your Program Files folder, type explorer.exe C:\Program Files.

Copy a document's contents without opening it

Normally, when you want to copy a file or its location, you have to do some work at the other end, usually in the form of pasting. Save yourself the bother by using the free version of Right Click Enhancer (www.snipca.com/15071, click Download Right Click Enhancer), which makes copying items on your PC much quicker.

Right Click Enhancer makes copying file contents much quicker

Once you've installed Right Click Enhancer, open it and click Right Click Tweaker at the top of the program window. There are two crucial options here that can speed up your copying process.

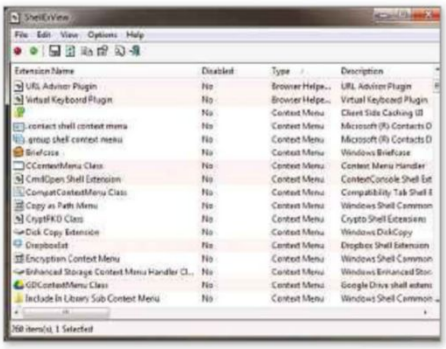
Add the Copy Content option to your right-click menu, and you'll be able to click it to copy the contents of your right-clicked file – such as a Word document or Excel spreadsheet – to the clipboard. This means you can then paste the contents of the document wherever you want without having to open the original file.

The second important option you can add is Copy To, which opens a dialogue box that lets you instantly choose the location you'd like to copy your file to.

If you need to copy a file or folder location into the Command Prompt (as you will in many of our Workshops), you should also tick the 'Open command prompt' box to add this to the menu.

Make your right-click menu easier to read

All our hacks in this feature will certainly speed up important tasks that you carry out on your PC. But even the most useful additional options will slow you down if there are too many of them cluttering up the right-click menu, because it will take so long to find them. What's more, lots of third-party programs add extra options without your permission, so the menu can end up being a confusing mess.



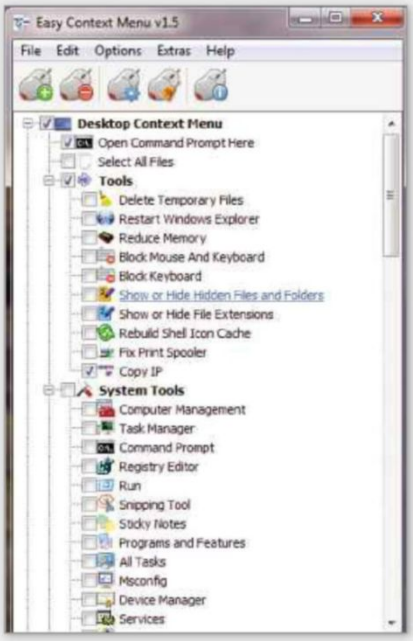
Get rid of unnecessary right-click clutter with ShellExView

The best fix we've found is a free, portable tool called ShellExView (www.snipca.com/15076). To download it, you'll need to scroll right down the page and click Download ShellExView (or the 'x64' link below it if you have a 64bit PC).

When you run the program, you'll see it covers a lot more than just right-click menu items. To see just the right-click options, click Type at the top of the list and look for the items tagged with Context Menu, which will now be grouped together. You'll probably be surprised by how many options and extensions have attached themselves to your right-click menu over the years.

EIGHT SURPRISING RIGHT-CLICK TRICKS

You can add all these options to your right-click menu using Easy Context Menu:



1 LOCK YOUR KEYBOARD AND MOUSE

The Block Mouse And Keyboard option lets you lock your PC when you're away from it. The secret 'unblock' code is Ctrl+Alt+Del.

2 FIX YOUR PRINTER

Print queue crashing or not moving? Use the Fix Print Spooler option to instantly get it working again.

3 TAKE A SCREENSHOT

Use the Snipping Tool in your right-click menu to take snapshots of all or part of your PC screen.

4 PUT YOUR PC TO SLEEP

Select the Sleep option to instantly put your PC in Sleep mode.

5 COPY YOUR IP ADDRESS TO CLIPBOARD

Your IP address is hard to remember, so use the Copy IP option to check and copy this information to the clipboard from your right-click menu.

6 BYPASS THE RECYCLE BIN

Right-click and select Permanently Delete to get rid of a file or folder without having to send it to the Recycle Bin first.

7 SEE ALL YOUR PC'S HIDDEN FILES

Select 'Show/Hide Hidden Files and Folders' to see straight away if there are any files secretly lurking in any folder on your PC.

8 LET A PROGRAM THROUGH THE FIREWALL

Use the 'Block/Remove in Windows Firewall' option to tell your PC which programs are allowed through the firewall – and which are not.

You can use the Find icon at the top of ShellExView to search for specific things you want to disable. To disable an option, right-click it and click Disable Selected Items. You can re-enable it at any time by clicking Enable Selected Items.

If you just want to re-organise your right-click menu rather than strip it back, you can add sub-menus to it using Easy Context Menu. Open the program, click File, List Editor, then click the existing right-click menu (Desktop, File and so on) you'd like to add sub-menus to. Click Add Sub Menu, give it a display name, then click Save Changes. You can now add files and folders to your sub-menu by dragging and dropping them into Easy Context Menu. See box above for the best tricks to perform with the program.

Add your own sub-menus to the right-click menu using Easy Context Menu

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Problems Solved

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Can I reset a Windows 7 password?

Q **My friend's daughter has forgotten her password for her Windows 7 PC. Is there any way this can be retrieved, because not everything on the computer has been backed up – or is it lost forever?**

Dave Chalice

A Windows 7 does have a built-in tool that lets you create a password-recovery disc, but this is useful only before you're locked out. In your current predicament you'll need to use third-party software to break in through the back door, as it were.

We'd suggest using a tool called Hiren's BootCD to create a boot CD to start the PC in a special mode that'll allow you to change the password of a selected account. This will preserve the data and allow your friend's daughter back into her computer. However, as she's currently locked out, the first part of the process will need to be conducted on another PC.

Go to www.snipca.com/14639 and download the Hiren's BootCD zip file. Unzip the contents (in Windows 7, right-click and choose Extract All) and then burn the file with an ISO file extension to a blank CD or DVD. If you don't have disc-burning software already installed, we'd suggest the free CDBurnerXP from https://cdburnerxp.se, which works with all versions of Windows.

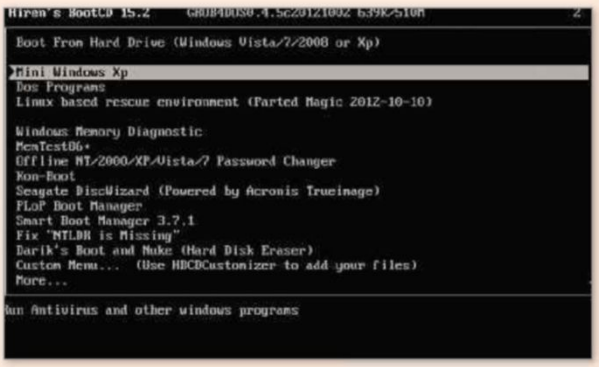
Return to the affected PC and start it up with the new boot disc inserted in the drive. When you see the 'Press any key to boot from CD' message, press any key. If you don't see this message, access the computer's BIOS to bump the CD/DVD drive up the boot-order sequence. Look for a key to press to access the BIOS – such as F2 or Delete (Del) – then find the Boot Order or Boot Sequence option and use the cursor/arrow keys and Enter to reposition the CD/DVD-ROM entry above any hard drives in the list.

When the Hiren's BootCD menu appears, use the cursor/arrow keys to select Mini Windows Xp and press Enter. The computer will launch into an environment that looks a bit like Windows XP. First, double-click the My Computer icon and make a note of the drive letter for Local Disk (it will almost certainly be C).

Now double-click the HBCD Menu icon to launch the Hiren's BootCD utilities. Open the Programs menu then point to Passwords/Keys followed by Windows Login and then click 'NTPWEdit (Reset XP/Vista /7 Password)'.

In the NTPWEdit 0.3 window, check the drive letter in the 'Path to SAM file' field. If this doesn't match what you noted down previously, click to edit this field, type the correct drive letter then click the '(Re)open' button. From the list of users, click the relevant account name then click the 'Change password' button. Finally, type a new password and again in the field below to verify it, then click OK. Click Exit followed by Yes to save the changes.

Eject the CD, restart the PC and your daughter's friend should be able to log in with the new password.



Use Hiren's BootCD and your PC's BIOS to access a PC you've forgotten the login details for

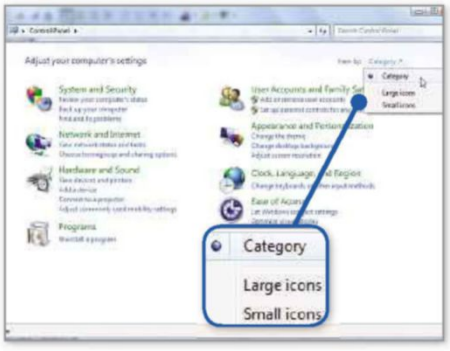
Where are my missing Control Panel items?

Q **As a long-term buyer of *Computeractive*, I read the workshops and tips avidly. However, on a few occasions your instructions do not match what I get on my computer screen. For example, there was a tip on page 46 of Issue 428 ('Select a default action when you insert discs or devices into your PC') that I really wanted to try. I launched Control Panel but when I looked for the cited 'Hardware and Sound' option it wasn't there. There's an icon called Sound but there isn't one called Hardware. So what should I do here? As I said, I find this quite a lot when following your instructions. My PC runs Windows 7 Home Premium.**

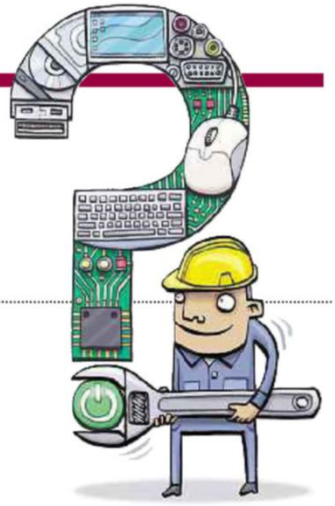
Don Stockwell

A This is because at some point in the past you have switched Control Panel to display in what's known as Classic view. This displays Control Panel's options as individual options, rather than grouped under various headings – called Category view. We generally present our instructions to reflect Category view, as this is the default, but we do sometimes refer to specific Control Panel icons, particularly in our more technical features.

Regardless, the fix is simple: open Control Panel as normal and then click the 'View by:' heading at the top right (which currently will read either 'Large icons' or 'Small icons') and then click Category.



Change how your Control Panel is displayed by selecting Category view



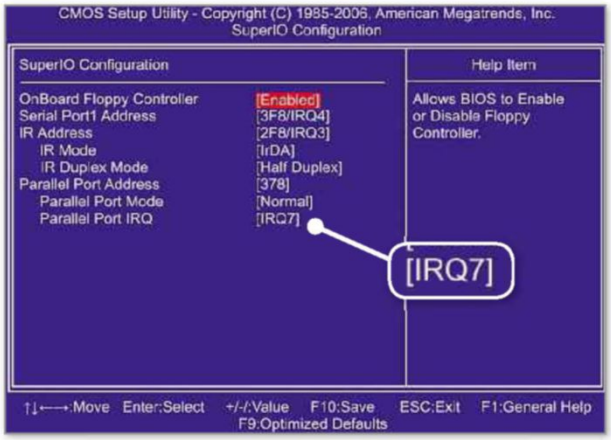
Our experts solve all your tech problems

✉ **Email us your problem and we'll try to help:** noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

How do I attach an old parallel dongle to a modern PC?

Q I have AutoCad 14, which I know is ancient but it is fine for my needs. It includes a 'dongle' that must be inserted into a parallel port to unlock the software. This used to sit between my desktop PC and printer. However, I recently upgraded my motherboard to a USB model, and the new board does not have an external parallel port. I have tried various adapters and PCI cards that claim to provide a true parallel port, but when I plug the dongle directly into any of them it isn't recognised by the software. The motherboard is a Foxconn A74ML, which has a set of pins that are listed as a parallel-port connection. However, the pin arrangement doesn't seem to match any recognisable connector and, in any case, I wouldn't know how to connect to these pins without the risk of damaging the board. At present I'm getting by using a very old (very slow) laptop that has a parallel port. I hope you can help.

Peter Caswell



Tweak the SuperIO Configurations in your BIOS if you want to attach a parallel dongle to a new PC

A When you say you've tried various adapters (and PCI cards) we're guessing you mean a USB cable to connect to an old parallel (or 'Centronics') printer? These might work for very old printers, but are unlikely to do the job for specialist dongles, which might use specific pins on the parallel port in a way that a Centronics printer will not.

Usefully, you sent us the manual for your motherboard and it seems you're in luck. Your A74ML does indeed have a genuine parallel port 'header' (the technical name for the connector on a motherboard), and you can connect a genuine parallel port to this that will protrude from your PC's backplate, just like any other connector.

First, buy and fit a parallel port header cable adapter with a bracket (£2.50 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/14854). Next, enter your PC's BIOS (press Delete just after you switch on your PC, just as the prompt appears) then use the cursor (arrow keys) and Enter to navigate to SuperIO Configurations, within Integrated Peripherals. Check that the Parallel Port IRQ field is set to IRQ7 (see screenshot above), then press Escape to exit the BIOS, and save any changes. Now, plug the dongle into your new parallel port and AutoCad should detect it and launch automatically.

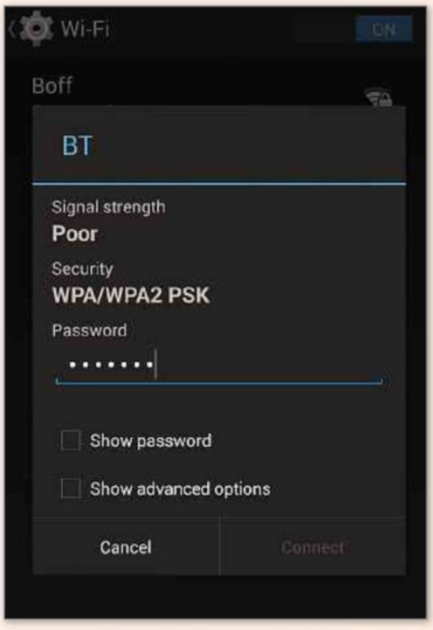
How do I get my Hudl tablet connected when away from home?

Q For my first foray into mobile devices I've bought myself a Tesco Hudl 2 tablet, which I am very pleased with. However, as I'm new to and totally naive about mobile Wi-Fi, can you please explain how I get a signal when out and about? When I do a scan for available networks a list comes up but if I tap on one of these I'm asked to enter a password, which I obviously do not know. Am I missing something? It all works fine at home, because I know my Wi-Fi password.

Neil Howells

A In order to connect to a Wi-Fi network – *any* Wi-Fi network – you will need to know the name of the wireless router and its password. This isn't a problem at home because you know both of these. However, when you're out and about your Hudl will be able to 'see' lots of other networks. Some of these will be personal routers (like the one you have at home) and therefore not accessible to you, while others will be available to anyone – so long as you have the password.

How do you obtain the password? You need to ask whoever operates the router in question. This could, for example, be a coffee shop or library, so ask the barista or librarian. Some may charge for this service, but most will be free.



You will need a password to access any Wi-Fi network when you're out and about

Problems Solved

Why won't my laptop Bluetooth work?

Q I have a Fujitsu AH532 Lifebook running Windows 8.1 with Classic Shell. The sales literature for this laptop says it has Bluetooth 4, and I've checked that it has the Intel Centrino Wireless N2230 daughterboard installed and both the black and white antenna cables connected. I've tried updating drivers until I'm blue in the face, but I can't connect to any Bluetooth device. Device Manager shows the Intel Centrino Wireless-N 2230 (under Network Adapters) and Intel Centrino Bluetooth 4 + High Speed Adapter (under USB Devices), and neither shows any problems. I'd be very grateful for some suggestions.

Edward Taylor

A You've already tried reinstalling the drivers and you're clearly clued up enough to have removed a panel from the back of the laptop to check that the Bluetooth module is physically present, so we wonder if you might have overlooked one obvious answer – that the module is in fact switched off?

We don't know the default factory state for this model, but we wouldn't be surprised if it's set to off, or has been accidentally switched off during everyday use. According to your laptop's manual, the Bluetooth connection can be switched on and off using the keyboard combination Function (Fn) key+F5, so try that.

Check your laptop's settings to make sure your Bluetooth module is not switched off by default

How does my friend install a newspaper app on her smart TV?

Q A friend of mine bought a Samsung smart TV. She wants to download the *Birmingham Mail* newspaper app so she can view it on the big screen, but couldn't. She contacted John Lewis but was told not all apps are available to download to smart TVs. This seems to limit the very nature of having an interactive TV system – so is it true? If so, what's the problem?

Dave Pratty

Many newspaper apps are not available for smart TVs, only mobile devices

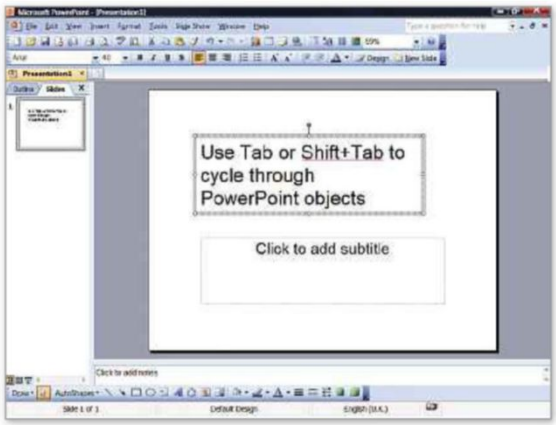
A We're afraid it is true. A good way to understand the problem is to consider a smart TV in the same way as computers, smartphones and tablets. Windows PC apps don't work on Apple iPhones, and iPhone apps won't work on Android tablets. This is because these devices all use different operating systems – and each of these operating systems requires specific apps. Apple users can visit Apple's App Store to download apps for iOS (Apple's operating system for mobile devices), while Android users shop at Google's Play Store. Owners of Windows PCs can download programs from many online outlets or buy boxed software from high-street stores. Similarly smart TV users must download specific apps, but the selection tends to be very limited. Go to www.snipca.com/14871 to peruse Samsung's range of TV apps.

As far as the *Birmingham Mail* app is concerned, it's currently available only for Apple mobile devices, so your friend will not be able to download it to her TV. The *Birmingham Mail* app publisher might one day decide to develop a version for Samsung smart TVs, but it's highly unlikely.

How do I select hidden objects in PowerPoint?

Q I volunteer for a local charity and have been sent a load of PowerPoint presentations to proofread for the annual general meeting. Either the person who put these together isn't very good with PowerPoint or something weird has happened with the layout, because some text objects are 'stuck' below others, so I can't click them to edit them. To be honest, my PowerPoint skills aren't up to much either, so I'm seeking your help. How can I get to these obscured items? I use PowerPoint 2003.

Hilary Sands



Press the Tab key or Shift tab combination to select hidden items in PowerPoint

A Not having seen the files we can't help you with the strange layout, but we suspect it'll have something to do with you using such an old version of PowerPoint. Your colleague is probably using a more recent version.

But we can still tell you how to reach those buried objects. First, click to select any object and then tap the Tab key or Shift+Tab to cycle forwards or backwards through all objects. It's not a very efficient method but, once you've reached the object you need, you can drag and drop it to a more convenient location.

How do I get back into Theftie?

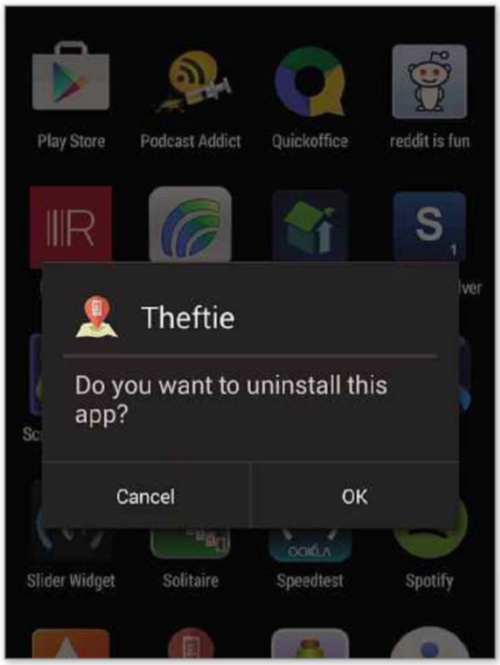
Q I followed your Workshop in Issue 432 and installed the free Android app Theftie, but as I was doing this I received a telephone call on my landline and put my smartphone down. When I returned to it, my smartphone had locked, so I unlocked it and tried to open Theftie. The app opened and requested a PIN.

I couldn't remember setting a PIN so I tried several variations and have most likely locked myself out. I can still use my smartphone but I can't get into Theftie to set it up. Can you please help?

Alan Bond

A We don't know what happened here but clearly Theftie wants a PIN. Unless you can remember setting one, or can take a wild guess as to what it might be, there's no easy way in (Theftie wouldn't be very secure if there was).

You say you still have full access to your phone, so the simplest solution is to uninstall Theftie and start again. To do this, tap the All Apps button (typically six dots in a circle, but the precise appearance varies between Android devices) and then swipe through the installed apps to find the Theftie icon. Now tap and hold the Theftie icon until the Uninstall and 'App info' headings appear at the top of the screen. Drag the Thetfie icon on to Uninstall and then release your finger. Tap OK to confirm. Now just reinstall Theftie from the Play Store and this time try to avoid being distracted during setup!



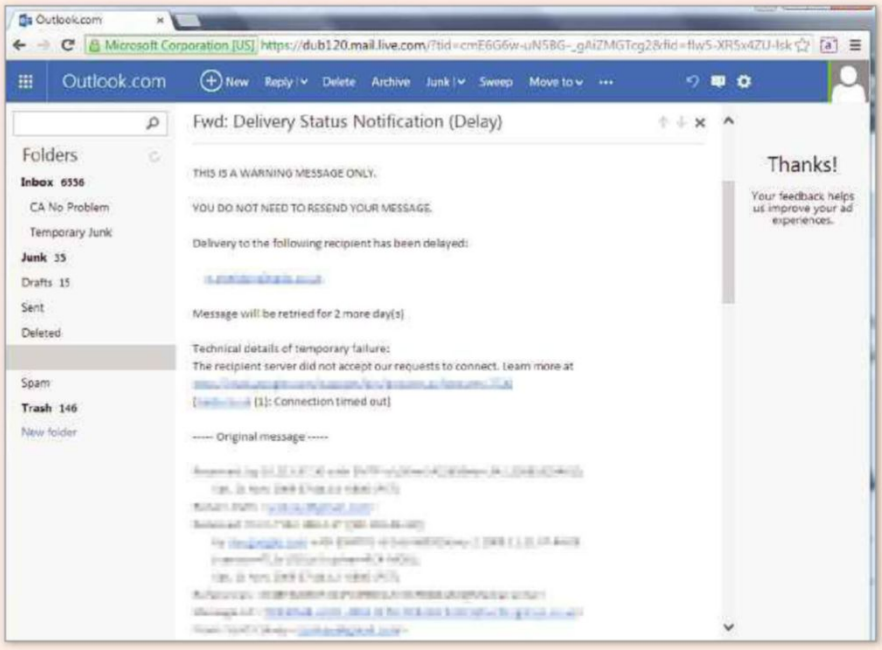
Uninstall any apps you find yourself locked out of and reinstall

What are these Outlook.com warning messages?

Q I have recently started to see this message from **postmaster@hotmail.com** in response to an email I've sent. The message says: "This is an automatically generated Delivery Status Notification. THIS IS A WARNING MESSAGE ONLY. YOU DO NOT NEED TO RESEND YOUR MESSAGE. Delivery to the following recipients has been delayed".

Is this a Microsoft problem, possibly due to an overloaded server? Is there anything Microsoft should be doing, or that I can do to get back to normal operation? I am using Outlook.com on a Windows 8.1 laptop. This is set up to support emails from other services, but I generally send my messages via Outlook.com. I have taken to adding myself to the CC field to see if I can track delivery.

Alan Smith



Notification of delayed email delivery can mean the recipient's email servers are at fault

A Overloaded Microsoft servers are not the cause of this problem. The most likely scenario – given that these messages began appearing in response to a single email – is that the recipient's email server is at fault. Microsoft's email servers have tried to contact the receiving servers and, for whatever reason, those servers are not able to accept the message.

When this happens, Outlook.com will schedule an attempt to deliver the message later – and that's what these messages are telling you. Eventually, the message will be delivered, assuming the receiving servers respond to Outlook.com's attempts to deliver. So, perhaps check with the recipient (by phone, if possible) to see if their email provider is experiencing ongoing problems. Alternatively, investigate this yourself by using the recipient's email domain to figure out the company behind their service – and then check this company's email-server-status pages.

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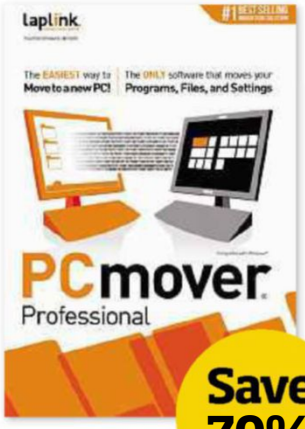

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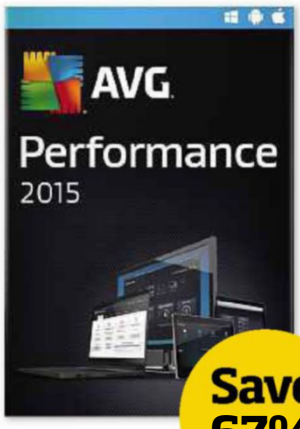
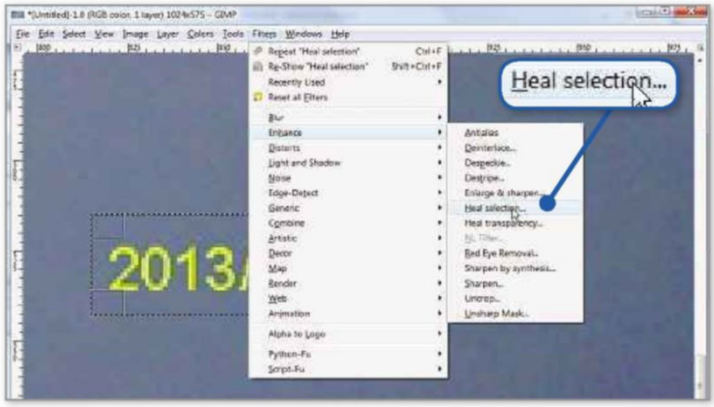


Save 67%

How do I remove date stamps from my photos?

Q **I inadvertently added date stamps to the bottom-right-hand corner of my photos, when taking some shots with a new camera. Is there any way I can remove these?**

Steve Kelly



Use image-editing software GIMP and a few extra tools to remove unwanted date stamps from your photos

A You didn't tell us your specific camera model but somewhere in the menus you will find the option to disable time/date-stamping. However, that will only solve the problem for photos you take in the future: we think you'd like to remove the date stamps from existing photos, which is a trickier proposition.

Unless your camera has the option to remove these marks post-save (unlikely) then you'll need to turn to image-editing software to fix the annoyance. The simplest solution would be to crop the photos to lose the area with the date stamp, but obviously that means losing parts of your images, so it's not ideal.

Better would be to make use of an image-editing program's 'heal' tool, which will analyse the surrounding area and use algorithms to remove anything that doesn't seem to fit – like those date stamps.

If you want to use free software, GIMP (www.gimp.org) can do this, but you'll need to install some extra tools. Install GIMP then visit www.snipca.com/14855 to download the 'Resynthesizer plugins for Windows' set. Extract the contents of this zip file and then copy the extracted files to GIMP's Plug-Ins folder (find this on your PC by opening GIMP's Edit menu, then clicking Preferences followed by Folders and then Plug-Ins).

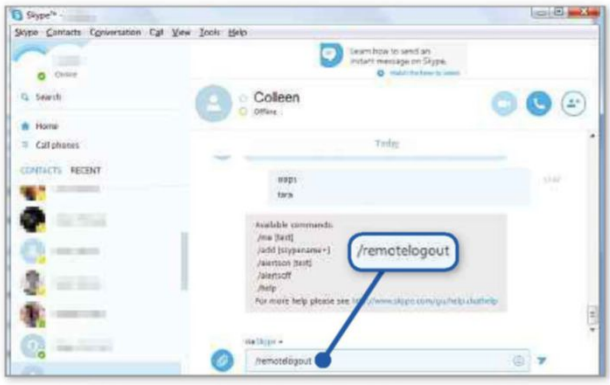
With the Heal tool installed, using GIMP to remove date stamps is easy. First, use the Zoom tool (magnifying-glass icon) to get a good close-up view of the stamp and then use the Rectangle Select tool (a dotted rectangle icon) to select it. Next, open the Filter menu, point to Enhance and click 'Heal selection' (see screenshot). The default 'Context sampling width' of 50 pixels should be fine, so click OK – and GIMP will blend the date stamp into the background. If the results aren't perfect, try again, tweaking the 'Context sampling width' (if your images are a very high resolution, try a high sample figure).

Why does Skype show me as online when I'm not?

Q **I've been a Skype user for many years now, but over the past couple of months I've been unable to log out of Skype. When I shut down my computer (and disconnect from the mains) Skype is still active, although obviously I'm not online.**

All my Skype contacts see me as online, but their attempts to contact me fail of course, because my computer is switched off and disconnected from the mains. As a result I'm flooded with complaints about not answering Skype calls. Do you know what's wrong? Please help. I'm running Windows 7.

Manfred Pysall



Log out of Skype completely by typing this command while in a chat session

A Have you by any chance used or experimented recently with a smartphone or tablet version of Skype on an iPhone or Android device? We ask because a few months ago Microsoft changed Skype's underlying technology to a cloud-based system that can have the effect of making you appear online, even when you're not. If you use a mobile version of Skype then, even if you exit the app, Skype may continue showing your status as online.

This situation has caused a lot of upset in the Skype community, not least because the causes and solutions aren't always straightforward. If you use the Apple iOS version of Skype, for example, then allowing Skype notifications can result in your status showing as 'online' – because technically Skype can still reach you via a notification. If you no longer use this device, you could be left permanently 'online'.

As we said, the solutions vary depending on your device but one reliable way to log out is to use the desktop program's chat window. Start a chat session (it doesn't matter with whom), then type /remotelogout (see screenshot left) and press Enter. This will terminate all previous 'instances' of Skype, except for the current one.

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- Are these real BT emails?

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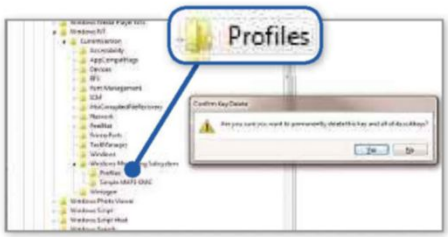
Speed up a slow inbox, connect to Gmail and make Outlook work as it should

Outlook won't open

Many problems with Microsoft's email program (not be confused with the webmail service Outlook.com, which is also owned by Microsoft) can be traced to Registry errors. For example, if you're trying to open Outlook but you see an error message along the lines of 'Cannot start Microsoft Outlook' or 'Cannot open the Outlook window', it's likely to be caused by a problem with Outlook's



Delete Outlook's 'Profiles' Registry key to make the program open again

Registry file. This can happen after software updates or when you add extensions to Outlook.

You should be able to fix the problem by deleting Outlook's 'Profiles' Registry key. This won't delete any of your personal data in Outlook, such as messages or contacts. First open Registry Editor by typing regedit into Start and pressing Enter. In the left-hand pane, navigate through the following string of folders: **HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Windows NT\CurrentVersion\Windows Messaging Subsystem**. Next, click the Profiles folder key and press Delete on your keyboard, then press Enter or click Yes to confirm. Finally, restart your PC. Outlook should now work properly next time you open it.

You can't access Outlook messages

If you can open Outlook but can't access your emails, contacts and/or calendar, the program's data file may have been corrupted. This will be confirmed if you see an error message saying the Outlook PST file is damaged.

Outlook comes with a built-in tool for fixing this. The Inbox Repair Tool scans for and fixes corruptions in your PST file, and restores access to your Outlook account. Open Outlook, go to Windows Explorer and navigate to **C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office**, then open the folder called Office12 if you're running Outlook 2007; Office14 if you're running Outlook 2010; or Office15 if you're running Outlook 2013. Double-click SCNPST.EXE file (this is the Inbox Repair Tool), then close Outlook. In the window that opens, click Start to scan your PST file for errors. Once the scan is complete, make sure the 'Make backup' box is ticked, then click Repair.

Inbox takes ages to load

The PST file stores all your personal Outlook data (including messages and contacts), even if you clear your Deleted Items folder. The bigger your PST file becomes, the slower Outlook will be. So if your Inbox takes a while to load, it's probably time to reduce the size of your PST file.

Click Compact Now to reduce the size of your PST data file and speed up Outlook

To do this in Outlook 2010 or 2013, click File, Account Settings in the left-hand pane, then Account Settings again. Click the Data Files tab, then double-click the file in the list (do this with all of them if you see more than one file). Click the Advanced tab, Outlook Data File Settings, then Compact Now.

Outlook won't connect to Gmail

Google tightened its security rules last year, with annoying consequences for many Outlook 2007 and 2010 users who want to sync their accounts with Gmail.

Previously, Google had enabled Basic Authentication by default, but since July 2014 this feature has been disabled by default for "less secure apps" – including Outlook, for some reason. This was Google being somewhat overcautious, and means you may now see Send/Receive error messages in Outlook if you'd set it up to sync with Gmail. In fact, you may not be able to log into Gmail via Outlook at all.

Luckily, you can fix this simply by re-enabling the Basic Authentication access feature. Go to Google's 'Less secure apps' page (www.snipca.com/14989) and click Enable. This will give Gmail and Outlook permission to connect with each other again.

Any other Outlook problems

Microsoft's Office-fixing tool, OffCAT (Office Configuration Analyzer Tool, www.snipca.com/14988), can fix all sorts of problems with Outlook as well as Office. Whether the wrong files are going to your junk folder, Outlook is out of date or you're having any other problems, you can use OffCAT to get to the root of the problem and find out how to fix it.

Go to the link above, scroll down to the Resolution section and click the 'here' button to download OffCAT. Run the installer and open the program, then click 'Start a Scan' in the left-hand pane. Click Outlook, then click Start Scanning. Once the scan is complete, you'll see a list of common errors that are currently affecting Outlook on your PC. Click an arrow next to one of the 'Symptoms', then click the error to see further advice on how to solve the problem.

Find and fix all sorts of Outlook problems with Microsot's OffCAT tool

Next issue Fast Fixes for... Chrome

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9	EE	EE: Fibre Broadband & Calls	£19.95 (£9.95 for 6 months)	18 months	38Mbps max speed	∞ unlimited	£179.40
10	Virgin media	Virgin: Broadband & Calls	£30.00 (£24.50 for 12 months)	18 months	152Mbps max speed	∞ unlimited **	FASTEST £294.00

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*First-year cost does not include line rental. Cost is calculated at monthly price x12 with all introductory offers subtracted. Additional charges incurred outside of free inclusive calls not included in first-year cost.
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Data supplied by www.broadbandgenie.co.uk. Correct as of 22/01/2015

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

Jargon Buster

1080p Of the common types of high-definition video, this is the best quality: 1920x1080 pixels.

32bit A measure of how much information a computer can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

64bit A technology that processes information in larger chunks. Most modern computers are 64bit.

720p A common resolution of high-definition video: 1280x720 pixels.

802.11n A standard for wireless networks that allows for high transfer speeds.

ADF Automatic Document Feeder. A device that feeds sheets of paper into a photocopier or scanner, one by one.

ADSL Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line. A technology that converts a standard phone line into a broadband internet connection.

Antivirus engine The core of any antivirus program, designed to find and remove malicious code.

Beta A version of software that's being tested. Beta versions are often released so problems can be ironed out.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Essential software built into every PC that connects the vital components. It's visible for a few seconds when the PC starts.

Boot CD A recovery disc that can diagnose, repair or restore your PC's software, including the operating system.

Compile After software has been written it must be converted into a program that can be run. This process is called compilation.

Crowdfunding A process where a company gets the financing to launch a new product from prospective customers online.

Daughterboard This is an antiquated term and we can safely use 'card' instead.

Dual band Some wireless routers have two wireless radios working on the 2.4 and 5GHz frequencies or bands. Wireless networks working at 2.4GHz have longer range, but are more prone to interference. Wireless networks working at 5GHz have shorter range, but are less prone to interference and therefore tend to be faster than 2.4GHz networks. Some routers work on both bands simultaneously.

Dual-core When two processors are combined into a single chip.

Eight-core A standard processor has one core, but most modern processors are dual-, quad- or even eight-core, making them faster.

Encryption The science of scrambling data so it can only be read with the required key or code.

EPUB A file format used by many popular ebook readers.

Feedback The tactile response that the keys on a keyboard give when they've been pressed.

Flash storage A data storage device that includes flash memory with an integrated USB interface.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

Heat sink A block of metal used to help dissipate the heat from a computer chip.

HTML Hypertext Markup Language. The language used to write most web pages.

ISO file A type of image file that contains all the data from a CD or DVD disc.

Latency A measure of the delay in exchanging data between devices and web servers and on networks. Low latency means the delay is imperceptible, while high latency connections are unsuitable for services that rely on online interaction.

Megapixel A measure of the amount of detail that can be recorded by a digital image.

Memory See RAM.

Micro USB A miniature version of USB, often found on smartphones, tablets and portable hard drives.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card. Can be converted to SD size using an adapter.

Motherboard The main circuit board inside every PC into which all other parts connect.

Noise Visible dust-like speckles that appear in some camera and TV images. In photos, they are caused by the camera's own sensor. In TV images, they can be caused by the TV's processor or by a flaw in the broadcast signal itself.

OCR Optical character recognition. The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

Open-source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives. Once partitioned, each section is treated by Windows as though it were a completely separate, smaller hard drive.

Patch Software file that fixes problems with an existing program.

PCI Card Peripheral Component Interconnect Card. A small circuit board that plugs into a motherboard and adds new features.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to your web browser or to other applications, and is loaded only when it's needed.

Processor The processor – or central processing unit – is the brain of a computer.

PST Personal Storage Table. A file format used to store copies of messages and calendar events.

Quad-core A PC that has four processors on a single chip, which allows it to operate faster than standard (single-core) computers.

RAM Random-access memory. The PC's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on. Its capacity is measured in megabytes; the more memory your PC has, the more things it can process simultaneously and the faster it will seem.

Resolution The amount of detail shown in an image, whether on screen or printed.

Reverse engineering The act of breaking down a software or hardware bit by bit in the reverse order in which it was assembled.

Sandbox A virtual container that you can run programs in safely.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Sensor The part of the camera that captures each image.

Serial cable A cable that connects to a serial or Com port. Such leads can connect peripherals to the computer or can be used to link one computer to another.

Serial port A socket on the back of a PC used to connect serial devices, also known as a Com port. Often used on a PC to connect an external scanner.

Server A computer on a network, such as the internet, that distributes information to other PCs.

Single core A chip with only one processor.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts. Faster but more expensive than conventional hard drives.

Torrent A file that can be downloaded using BitTorrent software. This method is generally faster than a normal download, which provides a direct connection to other PCs running the software anywhere in the world.

Travel The distance the keys of a keyboard have to be pressed before the keystroke is recognised.

USB 3.0 A faster version of the USB standard used to connect devices to a computer.

The Final Straw

STUART ANDREWS is *Computeractive*'s Mr Angry

This issue Stuart Andrews pulls an angry face at the rise of...

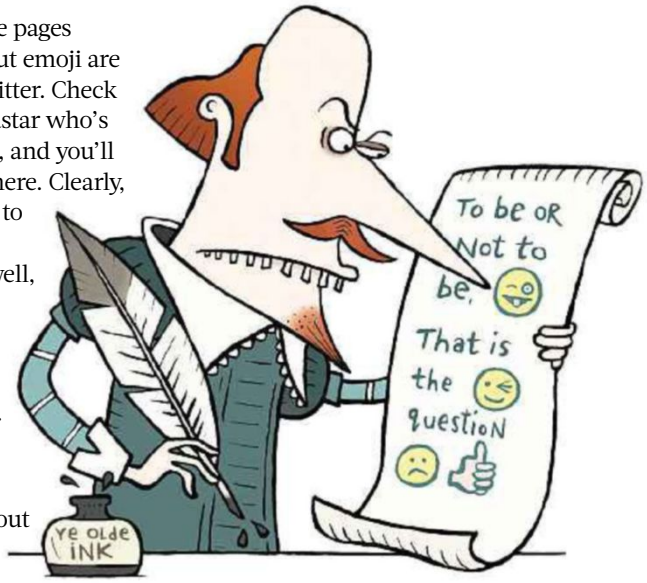
Emoji

Just when I thought 2014's silliness was over, news came through that an 'emoji' was the word of the year. Yes, having analysed over 250,000 print and electronic media outlets, including blogs and Twitter, the team at the Global Language Monitor (GLM, www.languagemonitor.com) picked the little heart-shaped emoji, which signifies love, as the year's most important new word. As someone who 'hearts' the English language, I'm left bewildered by this news.

> Emoji are a kind of linguistic parmesan cheese, heaped on top of dull, tasteless sentences to give them a little extra zing

Not aware of emoji? Well, they're a descendant of the old emoticons (or 'smileys'), the symbols we used to stick at the end of a sentence in an email or instant message to show that we meant something with a cheeky wink or with tongue firmly in cheek. Emoji do roughly the same thing, but in the form of a cute, cartoon graphic (you'll see loads here: http://getemoji.com). The smiling face, sobbing cat or 'hear no evil' monkey that you need to convey your mood is instantly recognisable, and can be reproduced with just a click of a mouse or the tap of a touchscreen.

Why are they suddenly so big? Well, you won't find them on the pages of our broadsheets (yet), but emoji are immensely popular on Twitter. Check out the tweets of any megastar who's only "doing it for the fans", and you'll find emoji littered everywhere. Clearly, they're by far the best way to get across the kind of deep affection you reserve for, well, just about everyone who buys your records or watches your films.



I guess things could be worse. At least the word of the year is a nice, cheerful emoji, and it's not as if the GLM is the only authority out there. Our own Oxford Dictionaries chose the less contentious 'vape' as its word of the year (www.snipca.com/14979), neatly continuing the theme of pointless, unhealthy addictions it began with last year's choice: 'selfie'. Yet it worries me that this is just the beginning as far as emoji are concerned.

"The English Language is now undergoing a remarkable transformation, unlike any in its 1,400-year history" the GLM's president, Paul JJ Payack said when announcing the heart emoji's award. Amazingly, he doesn't mean the language is going to hell in a handcart, but that it's "gaining characters at an amazing rate". It appears the familiar 26 characters isn't good enough for 2015. This bold new era demands what Payack calls an "AlphaBIT" incorporating letters, numbers, emoticons and emoji, not to mention spurious capitalisation.

Is this really progress? The basic idea of pictographic script goes back thousands of years. But when our ancestors adapted alphabetic systems, they didn't look back. While emoji increase the number of characters at our disposal, do they really improve our potential for expression or do they limit it? I guess a heart says 'love' in three fewer characters, but what kind of love does it mean?

At best, emoji are a kind of linguistic parmesan cheese, heaped on top of dull, tasteless sentences to give them a little extra zing. At worst, they're becoming a handy shortcut when you either don't know what to say or don't have the time to say it. They point to a feeling or a mood, but if they convey irony, warmth, sadness or rage in an instant, they do so in a vague, mindless, meaningless kind of way.

That doesn't mean they're not fun, but let's not go over the top on their importance. Would works by Shakespeare, Auden or F Scott Fitzgerald have been improved by the addition of emoji? No. The beauty of a language isn't just in the work and imagination we put into writing, but also in the effort and imagination we put into reading. Emoji make for a convenient but half-assed way of doing both. Personally, I think I can do without for now. English has survived for 1,400 years without emoji, so it should be good for a few more.

Do you agree with Stuart?
Let us know at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue Stuart gets a pain in the tech neck

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