

## From the TechnoManor

Free is a good thing.

Last week I talked about a little netbook I recently bought and the software I put on it. I don't know if you noticed, but most of the software was free.

I'd like to revisit the idea of free software this week...besides the fact that my Inbox is still kinda empty.

In keeping with a very cheap portable computer, I was able to satisfy almost everything I needed with free software. Donations could be made for a few of the programs, but the total cost is pretty low.

If you're a non-profit organization, have students in your household, or are yourself a student, take note!

I'm not trying to be anti-Microsoft or anti-software company (although I do have my issues with the big-named security software folks). Just because you pay for a program doesn't make it a great program. Conversely, free software doesn't mean bad software, either.

For my netbook, I was able to install security software, office productivity software, and other software for free. Let's revisit those programs and add a few more. I'll tell you the advantages and disadvantages of each. You can decide if they meet your needs, or if you need to spend money for something else.

### Security Software

- Windows Firewall: This is part of Windows, so you've already paid for it. It is fairly simple, and protects your computer from unwanted Internet access into your computer. That's what a firewall is supposed to do. More advanced firewalls also watch programs on your computer for unwanted Internet access out of your computer. This is where you get all the confusing pop-ups asking your permission. Big security packages usually turn Windows Firewall off.
  - Pros:** Free, simple, does the job
  - Cons:** No outbound Internet monitoring
- AVG Free: Free version of a larger security package sold by AVG. Provides basic anti-virus protection. Watches your computer in real time.
  - Get it at:** <http://www.grisoft.com/free>
  - Pros:** Simple, "Good enough" anti-virus, anti-spyware
  - Cons:** Updates only once a day. Can scan only once a day. Not the best anti-virus detector on the market.

- **Spybot Search and Destroy:** A solid anti-spyware package. I scan my computers nightly with it. It also provides a minimal level of protection within Internet Explorer.
  - Get it at:** <http://www.safer-networking.org/index2.html>
  - Pros:** Free (author accepts donations, though), Solid, Humorous licensing agreement
  - Cons:** Signatures updated once a week. Occasionally reports legitimate software as spyware.
- **Windows Defender:** Anti-spyware program from Microsoft. It is included in Windows Vista and can be downloaded for Windows XP. Provides basic anti-spyware protection. I have used this program in the past and was pleased with it.
  - Get it at:** <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/products/winfamily/defender/default.mspx>
  - Pros:** Free, Clean user interface
  - Cons:** None come to mind
- **Microsoft "Morro":** This is a free anti-virus package that is coming sometime during the summer of 2009. It is a replacement for Microsoft's Windows Live OneCare anti-virus product that you pay for.
- **TrueCrypt:** Free, open source software allowing you to encrypt files and folders. I use it to protect my clients' data in case my netbook is stolen. A thief would only see a single file filled with gibberish.
  - Get it at:** <http://www.truecrypt.org/>
  - Pros:** Free (donations accepted), can encrypt individual files/folders/entire hard drives, very sophisticated
  - Cons:** Not for the fainthearted. Need to feel comfortable with techie concepts.

### Productivity Software

- **OpenOffice.org:** (from Sun Microsystems): A free package that imitates Microsoft Office. It's good enough for light writing tasks, managing most spreadsheets, and creating presentation slide shows.
  - Get it at:** <http://download.openoffice.org/index.html>
  - Pros:** Free (they will accept donations), reads and writes Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files
  - Cons:** Interface is almost like Microsoft Office, but just enough different to be frustrating. Can be a little clunky at times.
- **PowerPoint Viewer 2007:** From Microsoft: Used to view PowerPoint slide shows (if you didn't install OpenOffice.org). You can't edit a slide show with the Viewer, but you can watch them.
  - Get it at:** <http://downloads.microsoft.com>

**Pros:** Free, Simple

**Cons:** Can't create or change a PowerPoint slide show

### Synchronizing Among Computers

I take notes on my netbook when I'm with a client. At home, I copy these notes back to my desktop computer. Sometimes, I'll edit or expand on the notes on my desktop. At some point, the notes on my netbook and my desktop are out of step, and I forget which is which.

This is where *synchronization* comes in. I need some way to keep a file (e.g., my notes) the same on two (or more) computers. When the file is changed on one computer, it should automatically make its way to the other computer. And vice versa. The key ideas here are *changed files* and *automatic*.

- SyncToy: This is a freebie from Microsoft. It will keep pairs of folders synchronized between two computers, or between a computer and a USB "thumb" drive. You run it when you want to force files to be synchronized. You can also schedule it to run with the Windows Task Scheduler so that the synchronization happens while you're away.

**Get it at:** <http://download.microsoft.com>

**Pros:** Free, Great for keeping files synchronized across multiple computers

**Cons:** Terminology and concepts can be confusing. Assumes computers are on the same network

- Windows Live Sync: Another freebie from Microsoft. This keeps pairs of folders synchronized among two or more computers. Windows Live Sync uses the Internet to connect the computers. So, the computers could be in the same room, or across the country. Yet the folders are kept up-to-date. Another difference from SyncToy is that synchronization happens automatically, in the background.

**Get it at:** <http://sync.live.com>

**Pros:** Free, Great for keeping files synchronized across multiple computers, Computers can be in different places

**Cons:** Requires a Windows Live account (although this is also free). Microsoft acts as the synchronization "broker", so we're trusting Microsoft isn't snooping.

### Email

I started using Microsoft Outlook when I worked in the corporate world. It is a very heavy email package, with a great many features. I manage my calendar, contacts, and email with it. It Isn't cheap.

My netbook is ushering in a philosophy of small and cheap. Extending that to replacing Outlook, I've discovered the following:

- Using my Web browser: If you have email accounts with Google, Microsoft (Hotmail, MSN, or Windows Live), or Yahoo, you don't need an email program. You can use your Web browser (Chrome, Firefox, Internet Explorer, or Safari). These major services allow you to manage your personal information, for free, through a Web interface.

**Get them at:**

<http://mail.google.com> (Google)  
<http://mail.live.com> (Microsoft)  
<http://mail.yahoo.com> (Yahoo)

**Pros:** Free. Google and Microsoft allow you to use an email program like Windows Live Mail to access the Web-based stuff.

**Cons:** Some Web interfaces to email can be clunky. You've also subjected to advertising. Contacts and Calendar are not interchangeable between the different services.

- Windows Live Mail: This is the successor to Outlook Express. It manages email, calendar, and contacts. It's not as elegant as the full Outlook, but covers the bases well. If you have a Windows Live account, you can also access your calendar and contacts from anywhere.

**Get it at:** <http://download.live.com>

**Pros:** Free. A good replacement personal information management tool. Can access information from the Web with a Windows Live Account.

**Cons:** Somewhat tied to Microsoft.

As you can see, you can get the basic stuff for a computer on the cheap. You just have to know where to look.

And most of this article was written with OpenOffice.org software.

Woody is woofing at me. Cissy is pestering me with her nose. And PD is staring at me from the hallway. Guess it's time for a walk. When I get back, surprise me with something in my Inbox! You can find it at:

[frenchygrey@gmail.com](mailto:frenchygrey@gmail.com)

I answer a technical question each week in *The Link*. In the meantime, I'll be trying to make three greyhounds walk on the sidewalk.

Dave Gillen