



# 50

# ESSENTIAL FREE APPS

Whatever you want to do, do it, and pay absolutely nothing in the process **BY ALEX COX**

**FREE:** That's the magic number. At least, it is when it comes to PC software. Why break the bank populating your PC with applications when enterprising individuals and organizations have created a raft of software that does the job adequately for not a single dollar down?

Now, we're well aware that there are several different categories of free software. There's the stuff that comes from the open-source community, which is usually a little rough around the edges, owing to its many-cooks approach. But open-source software has its own advantages: Sometimes it's home to experimental features that those in the commercial market might hold

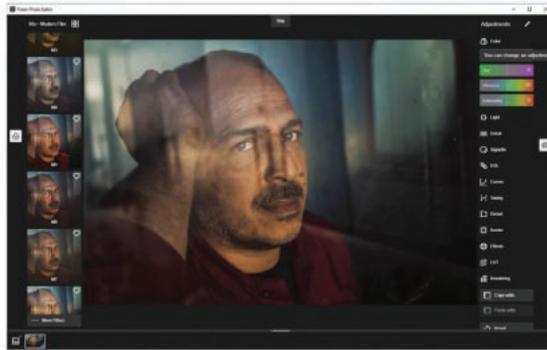
back on; sometimes it's designed for a niche that commercial developers can't profit from. There's also that slight guarantee that your software is going to stay free—while it might take an age to update and basically come with no warranty, open-source software suddenly attempting to dig around in your wallet is a rare occurrence.

The other side of the coin is "free" software, in quotation marks. There's a swathe of it in this list, but we've done our best to dodge anything too feature-light. Essentially, as has been the case for decades, software publishers often offer a taste of the goods in an effort to get you hooked enough to buy the real thing. Often, that taste is adequate on its own. Sometimes,

it's not really a taste for you as much as it is for the business market, where expensive per-seat licenses can be a real money-spinner. You can have the software, but these guys need to pay.

Whatever the reason for a package being free (or "free"), we've tried to avoid picking out any time-limited trials or painfully poor options in this collection. There are 50 options for 50 distinct jobs—and 50 alternate suggestions, if our top pick doesn't give you exactly what you need. It is entirely possible to populate a PC with completely free apps—and a great many of these are cross-platform, so if you're really on the free side of the fence, you can run them on a Linux machine, too.

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you can create entirely scalable graphics and tweak text to your heart's content, making it perfect for generating logos and such. Inkscape is analogous to Adobe Illustrator (although it's a whole lot more free), and it's also fully SVG compliant.

*Alternately:* Gravit Designer

**1**

PHOTO EDITING  
**POLARR**  
<http://polarr.co>

Polarr has crept up on us over the past few years, but since it made the jump from mobile to PC app, it's proved to be one of the coolest and most capable photo-tweaking tools available, paid or not.

*Alternately:* Adobe Photoshop Express

**2**

because it can decide to be flaky at a moment's notice.  
*Alternately:* Pixlr

**Polarr's filters give any image a professional touch in seconds.**

**2**

IMAGE EDITING  
**GIMP**  
<http://gimp.org>

Stupid name aside, we've known for about a decade that Gimp's Photoshop-esque toolset and laundry list of filters make it an essential desktop tool. Save often,

**3**

DIGITAL PAINTING  
**KRITA**  
<http://krita.org>

Best enjoyed with a pressure-sensitive tablet, but viable for anyone who wants to create art with a mouse, Krita is an surprisingly accomplished paintbox as perfectly suited to illustrators as it is to any budding Bob Ross.

*Alternately:* MyPaint

**4**

VECTOR ART  
**INKSCAPE**  
<http://inkscape.org>

Pixels be damned: With Inkscape,

**5**

MUSIC MAKING  
**CAKEWALK**  
<http://bandlab.com>

Back from the dead somewhat, Cakewalk recently came under new ownership—and those owners decided that the app was best given to the world for free. Pro-level recording, all the tools you need to mix and master tracks, not to mention a host of software instruments and effects.

*Alternately:* Ardour

**6**

WRITING  
**FOCUSWRITER**  
<http://gottcode.org/focuswriter>

A beautiful, serene background image. The clickety-clack of a typewriter accompanying your keystrokes. You, your words, and no ugly distractions. If there's something you need to get written, you should forget big clumsy

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## LINUX: THE ALL-IN-ONE OPTION

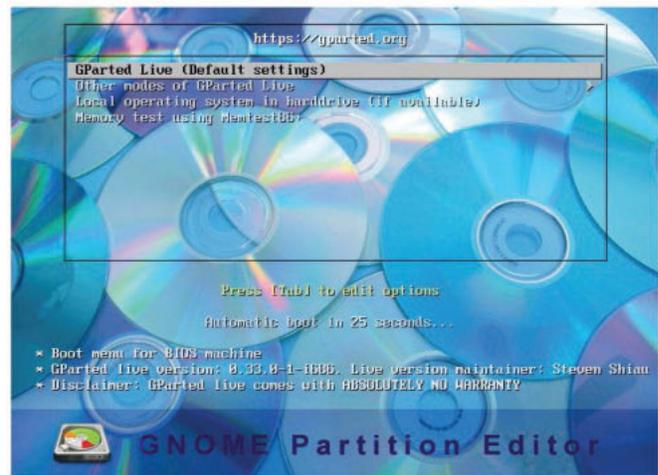
One of the most beautiful things about Linux, besides its inherent freeness, is that people are able to package it up with all kinds of also-free software, and send the whole thing out in one big bundle. Given that it's (usually) possible to run a Linux installation in Live form (that is, without installing it and making a mess of your precious internal drives), this can be a good way to keep those rarely used utility packages at hand, or get your hands on a whole bunch of software all at once. So, pick up

some USB sticks, get these apps installed, and be ready for anything.

**#1** FOR PRIVACY  
**TAILS**  
<http://tails.boum.org>

When you're getting all clandestine, turn to Tails. It automatically routes everything through the Tor network, keeping your online activity private, and includes a bunch of cryptographic tools to ensure all of your data is as difficult to intercept as possible. It's also handy if you want to scrub something off a drive without directly using it.

*Alternately:* Whonix



Live images like GParted give you options when you load, and you can even install them alongside Windows if you're brave.

**#2** FOR DRIVE MANAGEMENT  
**GPARTED LIVE**  
<http://gparted.org>  
For messing with drive

partitions or attempting to fix partition table errors, GParted is a pretty essential app—and its Linux distro incarnation keeps things very

© GPARTED.ORG

office apps: Keep it simple.

*Alternately:* **Typora**



**GAME CREATION**  
**GODOT**

<http://godotengine.org>

While there are plenty of game engine options out there, they're often pretty demanding when it comes to eventual royalties; Godot is completely free and rapidly maturing, with Vulkan support on the way, and a huge swathe of documentation to get you started.

*Alternately:* **Amazon Lumberyard**



**3D MODELING**  
**BLENDER**

<http://blender.org>

Blender recently ditched its game engine portion in order to focus on the features it really excels at: every step of the 3D pipeline. So, whether you're creating, sculpting, rendering, or animating, there's a tool here to help—and 17 years of maturity to back them up.

*Alternately:* **3D Crafter**



**DTP**  
**SCRIBUS**

<http://scribus.net>

There is no sense in trying to lay out

complex documents in Microsoft Word, given its propensity to tear a hole in space-time whenever you slightly resize a text box. Scribus is a much more sensible option for desktop publishing, with a powerful text engine and strong image options.

*Alternately:* **Lucidpress**



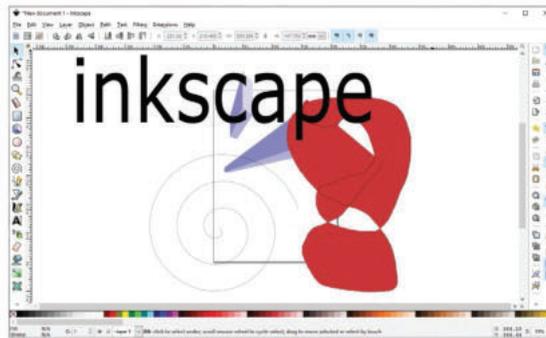
**ANIMATION**  
**SYNFIG**

<http://synfig.org>

Whether your 2D animation needs consist of tweening vectors or skeletally animating a collection of bitmaps, Synfig gives you the necessary tools. It's adept enough to produce some professional results—although the quality of your work is down to you....

*Alternately:* **OpenToonz**

**Just because you can make vector images in Inkscape doesn't mean you should.**



**MOVIES**  
**VLC**

<http://videolan.org>

Other apps periodically vie for the crown, but we've never found another free player compatible with so many codecs and ready to cope with so many potential rendering glitches. Dig under the surface, and VLC can do a whole lot more—it's great for latching on to streaming services, too.

*Alternately:* **MPC-HC**

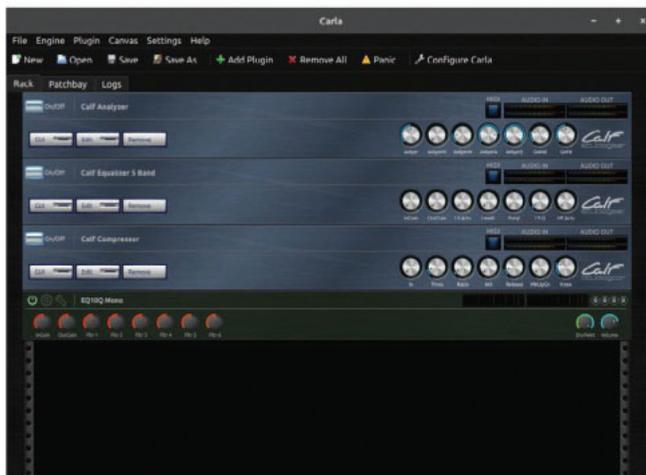


**AUDIO**  
**MUSICBEE**

<http://getmusicbee.com>

Yes, iTunes is free. Yes, you can use iTunes if you like. But if you care about your system resources and

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**Fancy a virtual audio rack? Ubuntu Studio can provide just that.**

simple, packaging it with a few very straightforward but powerful file manipulation tools and little else. Perfect single-serving distro fare.

*Alternately:* **Clonezilla Live**



**FOR YOUR MEDIA CENTER**  
**OSMC**

<http://osmc.tv>

An unofficial mesh together of the Debian Linux distribution,

noted media center app Kodi, and some custom tweaks to make its interface as usable and simple as possible, OSMC is a great distro for that living room PC—or when you want to let someone watch some films on your PC without actually giving them full access to your files.

*Alternately:* **LibreELEC**



**FOR SECURITY TESTING**  
**KALI LINUX**

<http://kali.org>

How tough are your computers? How bad-guy-proof is your network? Find out with Kali Linux, which carries a huge package of tools to help the white hat hacker find vulnerabilities in existing systems. You'll need to know what you're

doing, and make sure you use the tools properly to avoid a worrying knock on the door, but there's none better for testing security.

*Alternately:* **BackBox**



**FOR CREATIVITY**  
**UBUNTU STUDIO**

<http://ubuntustudio.org>

Whether you're interested in producing video or audio, Ubuntu Studio is bursting with tools to help. Its effectiveness will, given Linux's usual awkwardness, depend on the precise hardware you have installed, but it's free. That certainly makes it worth trying before investing in expensive pro production packages.

*Alternately:* **AV Linux**

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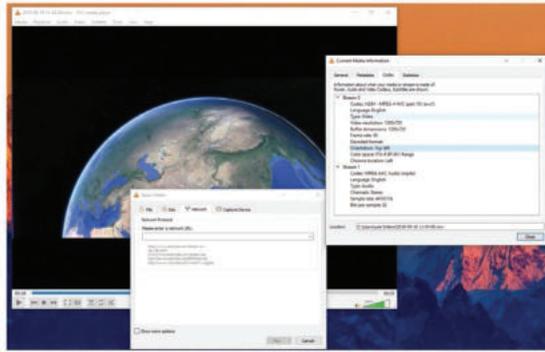
want to organize your entire music library away from Apple's sticky grasp, MusicBee is a great (and skinnable) choice.  
*Alternately: Winamp*

**13** LIBRARY MANAGEMENT  
**PLEX**  
<http://plex.tv>

For a large video collection, a large audio collection, or even a huge photo library, keeping everything easily accessible is vital. Luckily, Plex can deal with streaming all your media, and makes getting to it from outside your network an absolute breeze.  
*Alternately: Kodi*

**14** TRANSCODING  
**HANDBRAKE**  
<http://handbrake.fr>

HandBrake is a miserably ugly program. It's not easy to get started with. But once you've done the work, it's just about the most powerful video conversion tool there is—perfect for transcoding individual files or even large batches to the format you need.  
*Alternately: Freemake Video Converter*



**VLC includes tons of controls to alter video playback, whatever the source.**

**15** VIDEO EDITING  
**SHOTCUT**  
<http://shotcut.org>

Shotcut has been carving out its own niche in the video-editing world, and while it's still catching up to the big boys, it's also entirely free—no surprises, no restrictions. Unless you look on the Microsoft Store, where it's inexplicably paid-for. Don't do that.  
*Alternately: OpenShot*

**16** VIDEO GRADING  
**DAVINCI RESOLVE**  
<http://blackmagicdesign.com>

You can just as easily use Resolve for editing, but its grading and

post-production effects are its real strength. It's a professional tool that's seen use in numerous Hollywood productions, and the free version is perfect for color correction, too.  
*Alternately: Color Fixer Pro*

**17** AUDIO EDITING  
**AUDACITY**  
<http://audacityteam.org>

Audacity almost annoys us: We're kinda desperate to recommend something different in this slot, but there's still nothing else that can hold a candle to it for audio cutting or tweaking. It's a tool that everyone should have installed at all times.  
*Alternately: Ocenaudio*

**18** PODCASTS  
**GROVER**  
[Via Windows Store](#)

Styled to look a little like Groove Music (which, we're sure, everyone is using at all times), Grover is a good way to manage podcasts if you're still doing it on your desktop. It's probably better than doing it through iTunes, at least.  
*Alternately: Juice*

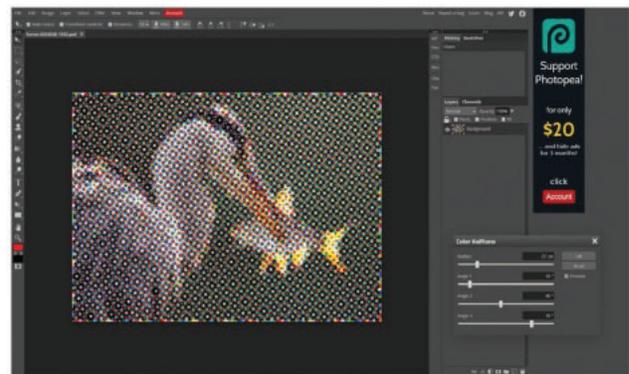
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## DO IT ONLINE

Fill your PC with software or take advantage of online tools? It's a tough one. In certain circumstances, this isn't an option—we don't know, for example, of an online tool that can help repartition your hard drive—but moving your work online does have a long list of advantages. Your files will theoretically always be where you left them. There's no need to manually update a piece of online software to keep it in line with the latest developments. And your local machine stays uncluttered and unslowed by the overheads of installed software. We might have presented a list of 50 programs, but

we don't expect you to be mad enough to install them all.

There's an ever-growing string of online tools turning up. For the office, Google's Docs suite (<http://docs.google.com>) has matured to a surprising level of competence, and Microsoft's own Office Online (<http://office.com>) offers up a decent cut-down version of its desktop office tools, and integrates nicely with OneDrive. Want to edit photos? Photopea (<http://photopea.com>) is a Photoshop-esque image editor that, in some cases, even manages to do more than the software it's emulating—we even recommend it over GIMP, given that Photopea doesn't

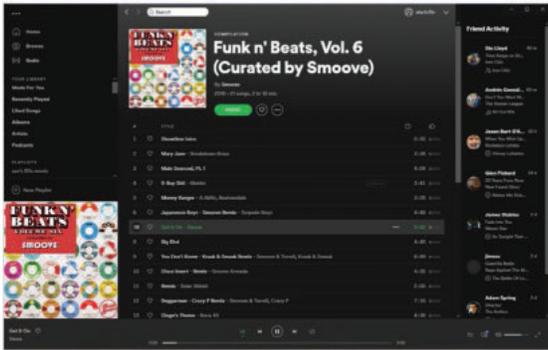


Photopea is as capable of ruining your pics as any other app.

include "randomly crashing" among its list of hobbies. Many of the desktop tools that made our list also have an online component, and in some cases it's preferable over its installed counterpart. LastPass is best managed online, TeamViewer works great through its Chrome plugin, Spotify's web interface

is a little stronger than its desktop version, and you can employ the services of <http://userstyles.org> to mess with the CSS and customize it to your liking. Basically, make your own decision: If you don't want to install something, check out its website and look for an online component.

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**19** AUDIO STREAMING  
**SPOTIFY**  
<http://spotify.com>

You are spoiled for choice in the streaming market, but (despite its oppressive ads) Spotify's massive library and straightforward interface makes it our top choice—though the free tier forces you to listen to your playlists on shuffle.  
*Alternately: Deezer*

**There's no music and podcast library quite as big or convenient as Spotify's.**

**20** ORGANIZATION  
**THE RENAMER**  
<http://therenamer.com>

You've got lots of files. Videos, music, all from legitimate sources—but there's no consistency in naming or storage. Sort them out without the effort using The Renamer, which does exactly what you think it does.  
*Alternately: Bulk Rename Utility*



**TeamViewer's cross-platform abilities mean you can use it to control any other computer, even Macs.**

**21** OFFICE  
**LIBREOFFICE**  
<http://libreoffice.org>

Pretty much a free equivalent to Microsoft Office, and compatible with the same file formats, LibreOffice is a non-paid essential. It even does more: There's a full database and a complex formula editor included.  
*Alternately: Apache OpenOffice*

**22** PDF VIEWER  
**FOXIT READER**  
<http://foxitsoftware.com>

Foxit's big selling points are its connected features, which tell you when a PDF has been scribbled on or tweaked, but we're backing it for its ability to open PDFs quickly without eating all of our system resources. That's not a big ask.  
*Alternately: Adobe Reader*

**23** EMAIL  
**eM CLIENT**  
<http://emclient.com>

While many of us manage our mail on the web these days, eM Client's free tier allows you to take desktop control of two accounts. It's fully compatible with the more complex features of Outlook and Gmail accounts, and super-easy to use.  
*Alternately: Thunderbird*

**24** SOCIAL  
**HOOTSUITE**  
<http://hootsuite.com>

Dig through the pricey corporate options and find Hootsuite's three-account free plan: You can schedule posts, manage multiple social services, and see your searches in their own live-updating columns. It's social taken to the next level.  
*Alternately: TweetDeck*

**25** COMMUNICATING  
**FRANZ**  
<http://meetfranz.com>

It's tough being connected. There's the family WhatsApp, the work Slack, the gaming Discord, that one guy who won't stop using ICQ for some reason. No problem: Mash them all together using Franz. You can even take your combined account between computers.  
*Alternately: Pidgin*

**26** TO-DO  
**MICROSOFT TO-DO**  
Via Windows Store

Microsoft's app is a superb way to list the things you're procrastinating on, the things you haven't quite done yet, and the things you won't do in a million years. Maybe, just maybe, you'll be able to check one off.  
*Alternately: Wunderlist*

**27** VPN  
**PROTONVPN**  
<http://protonvpn.com>

VPNs are essential. Problem is, the free VPN market is hampered by bandwidth restrictions. Not so with ProtonVPN—you can use its free version as much as you like; the annoyance is transferred to a speed limit instead.  
*Alternately: Hotspot Shield*

**28** REMOTE DESKTOP  
**TEAMVIEWER**  
<http://teamviewer.com>

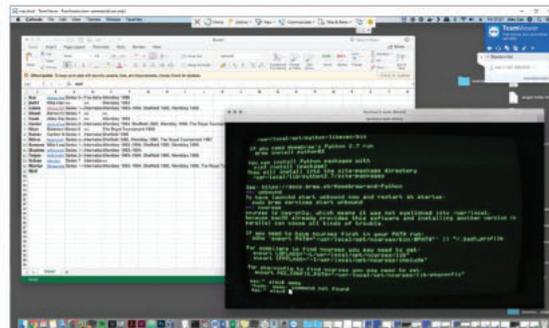
How often have you tried to diagnose a technical problem over the phone and ended up bashing your head on your keyboard? No more. TeamViewer is easy to set up, super-secure, and can give you direct access to your desktop (or an elderly relative's) via a browser.  
*Alternately: TightVNC*

**29** NOTES  
**NOTEPAD++**  
<http://notepad-plus-plus.org>

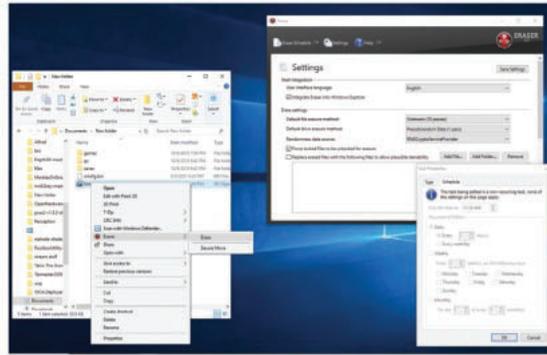
There's a whole lot of contextual formatting in Notepad++ (it is, after all, made for sketching code in all manner of languages), but it's just as much a straightforward and capable alternative to Microsoft's Notepad. And that's a good thing.  
*Alternately: Atom*

**30** PLANNING  
**TRELLO**  
<http://trello.com>

Got a big project coming up? Put it on virtual notecards, pin it up on a virtual board, and spread those tasks out between everyone who you've roped in to help. Hopefully, they'll actually chip in, rather than just being virtually present.  
*Alternately: Evernote*



# FILES



## 31 UNDELETING RECUVA <http://ccleaner.com/recuva>

No guarantees, but if there's a file that's gone to the big data graveyard in the sky, you may be able to convince it back to life with Recuva. Generally, deleting only removes the reference to the file, not the file itself: Recuva finds what's left behind.

*Alternately:* **Undelete 360**

## 32 DISK RESCUE TESTDISK <http://cgsecurity.org>

Whole drive letting you down? Mechanical disk giving you the click of death? TestDisk can ignore all the usual safeguards and filesystems in order to wade through the raw data, sector by sector, giving you one last chance to rescue your files.

*Alternately:* **Paragon Rescue Kit**

## 33 DESTRUCTION ERASER <http://eraser.heidi.ie>

As Recuva and TestDisk prove, deleting something won't keep it from the determined data sniffer. Eraser is the equivalent of a cross-cut shredder, securely overwriting files (or an entire drive) with your choice of destruction standard.

*Alternately:* **BleachBit**

## 34 MOVEMENT TERCOPY <http://codesector.com>

Windows' copying procedures can leave a lot to be desired; if you're shuffling files from place to place, TeraCopy (which uses advanced buffering techniques) can do the job a lot faster and much more reliably.

*Alternately:* **Ultracopier**

**Need those files gone for good? Fill a folder and set Eraser on them.**

## 35 MANAGEMENT MULTI COMMANDER <http://multicommander.com>

Whether you come from the era when it was popular or not, the Norton Commander-style two-pane file management of Multi Commander is a natural and highly efficient way to move files and folders from one place to the other.

*Alternately:* **FreeCommander**

## 36 ARCHIVING 7-ZIP <http://7-zip.org>

Do away with that 2,000-day expired shareware version of WinRar: 7-Zip supports way more than just .7z archives, and it's free. Whether compressing or decompressing files, it's an essential component of any good Windows install.

*Alternately:* **IZArc**

## 37 PREVIEWING XnVIEW MP <http://xnview.com>

XnView MP is a great way to preview images, taking you beyond the "extra large icons" school of picture glimpsing to a quickly browsable and logical graphical interface—you can use it for batch processing or conversion, too.

*Alternately:* **IrfanView**

## 38 EXPLORING TABLACUS <http://tablacus.github.io>

Quite why Windows Explorer doesn't have tabs in 2019 we don't know, but Tablacus solves that problem: It's a file manager that, yes, includes tabs. It also lets you tile folders in panes, and disable any components you don't need.

*Alternately:* **XYplorer**

## 39 CLOUD STORAGE ONEDRIVE <http://onedrive.com>

The integration of Microsoft's cloud platform with Windows makes it a top choice merely for ease of use—there's basically nothing to set up. It may not have the largest capacity, but where other integrations falter, OneDrive will be standing tall.

*Alternately:* **Mega**

## 40 UNINSTALLING IOBIT UNINSTALLER <http://iobit.com>

Oh, sure, Windows can uninstall software. But how thorough is it? Does it hunt through your drive to find every associated file? Does it fully scrape that space clean? IObit's neat program ensures that removed apps are actually removed the right way.

*Alternately:* **Geek Uninstaller**

# SECURITY

## 41 BACKUP COBIAN BACKUP <http://cobiansoft.com>

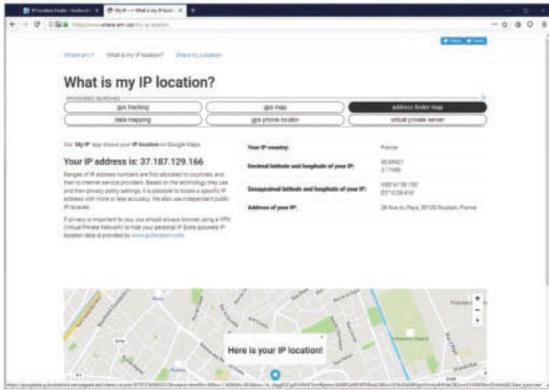
Cobian Backup is one of the most capable free backup packages there is. Send your files off to an external drive, send them to a network location, send them to an FTP server: whatever works.

*Alternately:* **EaseUS Todo Backup**

## 42 PASSWORD MANAGEMENT LASTPASS <http://lastpass.com>

There are plenty of solutions for managing your precious passwords, but LastPass wins points for the generosity of its free offering—there are a few desirable features as part of its paid offering, but nothing essential.

*Alternately:* **Dashlane**



**43** SYSTEM CLEAN-UP  
**CLEANER**  
<http://ccleaner.com>

CCleaner does all those long, laborious clean-up tasks in one place. You can either run a selective scrubbing job, or set up a batch job to deal with everything at once. Just be wary of the pop-ups.  
*Alternately:* Advanced System Optimizer

Where in the world are you? With **Tor Browser**, that answer changes every time you visit a new site.

**44** ANTIVIRUS  
**BITDEFENDER FREE EDITION**  
<http://bitdefender.com>

Many free antivirus packages are not worth the drive space they're written on. Bitdefender is: It's not too heavy on the hassle, includes a quality AV engine with frequent

updates, and a slick interface.  
*Alternately:* Windows Defender

**45** POST-INFECTION  
**SPYBOT SEARCH & DESTROY**  
<http://safer-networking.org>

Install pre-emptively: If you suspect something untoward is on your system, Spybot is likely to be able to hunt it down and exterminate it.  
*Alternately:* Malwarebytes

**46** ENCRYPTION  
**BOXCRYPTOR**  
<http://boxcryptor.com>

Do you trust your cloud storage provider? Enough to store your most personal files online without obfuscation? Probably not. But with Boxcryptor, you can construct an encrypted storage area—and if the provider encrypts, it's double safe.  
*Alternately:* VeraCrypt

**47** INTERNET PRIVACY  
**TOR BROWSER**  
<http://torproject.org>

Routing your Internet traffic via Tor makes you very difficult to track, and helps you resist online fingerprinting. The Tor browser makes doing so incredibly easy.  
*Alternately:* Iridium Browser

**48** NETWORK MONITORING  
**AXENCE NETTOOLS**  
<http://axence.net>

A full suite of 10 network tools, from monitoring to scanning to tracing routes. There's even a little cheeky internal Windows tomfoolery, all spun off from Axence's pro-level IT management suite.  
*Alternately:* PRTG Network Monitor

**49** NETWORK TROUBLESHOOTING  
**WIRESHARK**  
<http://wireshark.org>

A bit heavyweight, but Wireshark does its job so well that we have to recommend it. If you want to know what's going on with your network and why a function won't play ball, it's the most accomplished protocol analyzer around.  
*Alternately:* Colasoft Capsa

**50** FIREWALL  
**TINYWALL**  
<http://tinywall.pados.hu>

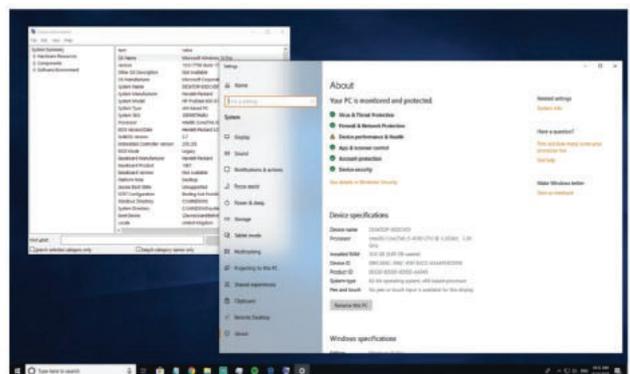
Don't rely on your router, or even Windows, to do the job of batting back misbehaving packets, or stopping snoopers from probing your ports. TinyWall is super-lightweight and makes for a useful additional line of defense.  
*Alternately:* ZoneAlarm Free

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## DON'T CHEAP OUT

Hear us out as we use this box in an article about free apps to tell you not to use them: Sometimes it pays to pay. Sometimes a free package can't do the exact thing you want—if you're interacting with a business with very precise standards, a document that, say, LibreOffice produces might have subtle differences that make it look terrible on that company's Microsoft Office-packing machines. An open-source package comes with no guarantees, no support, no comeback if everything goes wrong. It might have a forum full of enthusiastic amateurs

and some official-looking documentation, but it doesn't have any guarantee of professionalism. If it's mission critical, don't rely on free software. Often, free apps either lack critical features (many exist simply to tease a paid upgrade) or can't keep up with the quality of their paid-for alternatives. For instance, while we've recommended ShotCut as a free video editor, it is nowhere near as complex or well built as something like Adobe Premiere. Even Cakewalk, our pick for free audio recording and editing and a formerly paid-for app, isn't the best choice in its sector because it's a little



Windows is worth the cash, unless you're truly ready for Linux.

behind the curve. Then there's the niche apps for which there is no free alternative, and you should also consider Windows itself—while we put our weight behind experimenting with Linux, it is not, for most, a production OS. Windows is rock solid, compatible with

just about everything, has a huge software library, and despite the fact that you can run it in a chopped-down unactivated mode, you really should pay for the license, or at least attempt to transfer an old Win 7 license up the chain.

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