

# Beyond Personal Computing



## Free Internet Goodies

By Gordon Young

I'm cheap. That means I like getting things for free.

The Internet is one of my best friends this way, loaded with goodies I don't have to pay a penny for. Let me share a short list of my favorites with you—all free for personal use.

### IrfanView

IrfanView is a free, fast, powerful picture viewer, handy for on-screen slideshows of JPEG and other image files. Able to print, enlarge, edit and convert, it also plays audio and video files. IrfanView supports TWAIN access from scanners, so it can be used to import photographs and other images.

I really like the defaults for scanning photos and converting them to JPEG files—they combine compression for files small enough to be conveniently e-mailed, with resolution high enough to make them suited to printing out and framing at the other end. Small and speedy, once installed and set up to replace Internet Explorer as your default picture viewer, it will streamline picture processing considerably. When installing, choose

the Images Only option—I've found Windows Media Player does a better job of handling video files. Download at [www.irfanview.com](http://www.irfanview.com).

### WinAmp

WinAmp is an MP3 music and sound file player that, to my ear, always outperforms Windows Media Player. It offers a wide range of customizable audio effects, an interface designed with playing tunes in mind, and plenty of skins to choose from if you don't like the default. It's at [www.winamp.com](http://www.winamp.com).

### ZoneAlarm

ZoneAlarm is an easy-to-use firewall program you can download at [www.zonelabs.com](http://www.zonelabs.com). A firewall protects your computer from unwanted intrusions through the Internet by allowing only a short list of programs you authorize to connect, and by making you invisible to other users on the system. Firewalls patch up some unfortunate and deeply entrenched flaws in the Internet—this amazing system wasn't originally engineered with security in mind, so add-ons have

to happen or you'll have no real safety at all.

Windows XP includes a firewall, but it doesn't block outgoing transmissions, so if a rogue program got onto your hard drive, it might still be able to communicate with the rest of the Net.

ZoneAlarm comes in three flavors. Naturally, the better version costs something, but the lower-end free version is a place for personal users to start. It's a whole lot more than nothing—the Internet equivalent of locking your front door on the way out instead of leaving it hanging wide open.

### TweakUI

TweakUI is a marvelous little utility, free from Microsoft, that lets you fine-tune (tweak) the user interface (UI) of a Windows system. Boot-up options, screen settings, Internet security, and options to adjust a pile of other pesky details are bundled into it. Without TweakUI, many of these settings can be adjusted only by manually editing the Registry file—a tricky job. Find it and the other Microsoft PowerToys at [www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/pro/downloads/powertools.asp](http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/pro/downloads/powertools.asp).

### Windows Update Center

Windows Update Center is a vital part of a Windows system, but one a lot of computer users don't know about, and so don't use. Part of Microsoft's vast Windows Web site, you connect to it by clicking Favorites/Links/Windows Updates in your Internet Explorer browser. The *Star Trek*-style interface automatically inventories your system setup, decides for you what updates and upgrades you need, then downloads and installs them for you.

Regular visits to the update site are an essential part of a good security regimen, since by the time Microsoft posts a patch for a security hole here

you can be sure hackers the world around know all about it—and how to attack it.

### **Seti@home**

Search for aliens in outer space? You, too, can play your part! The NASA-backed Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project responded to government budget cuts with a remarkable bit of ingenuity—use the surplus capacity of personal computers all over the world to do the work, rather than relying on expensive centralized supercomputers.

Seti@home is a free program you can download at <http://setiathome.berkeley.edu/download.html>. It sets itself up as a screensaver, popping up to analyze data whenever your

computer has been idle a few minutes. The SETI central computers ship you your own little bundle of interstellar static over the Internet. When that's been processed on your computer, the program uploads the results back to headquarters and downloads your next data packet. The display is quite jazzy, with bright red 3-D graphs marching across your screen.

### **Download Accelerator Plus**

Download Accelerator Plus speeds up downloading drastically by establishing multiple connections to a download site, then downloading a file four different ways at once. It's especially handy for dial-up connections, and allows downloads to be paused, resumed, scheduled, and

stacked. DAP is “adware”: The free version displays advertising, while upgrading to the pay version gets rid of the ads and buys a few good features. Get it at [www.speedbit.com](http://www.speedbit.com).

### **Project Gutenberg**

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