FREE!

Why spend money on branded bloatware, when you can download a variety of free software from the Internet?

Market leaders in the PC industry have hit on a novel idea of collecting consumer databases. They give you a free PC in return for personal information such as your address, age, family background, interests—and assume that you will endure a constant barrage of ads for a while.

It would probably take another half century or so before such a strategy comes to India. Till then, we have no alternative but to continue paying exorbitant amounts for a PC, but you do not have to do the same for software.

Many assemblers in India provide a whole load of applications with your machine at no extra cost—many of these applications are not registered or even useful. This is the reason why most often the assembler does not give you a user's manual and the original CD of every application loaded on your machine. This is software piracy and is a cognisable offence. Many organisations, like NASSCOM and even Microsoft, are attempting to make people aware of the harm that piracy can cause. Software

developers put in much effort to develop applications, and to ensure that the application is bug-free and runs smoothly. When you pirate software, you prevent them from getting their due which, in the long run, is detrimental to the overall development of the software industry.

Home PC users do many things with their machines. They surf the Web, download files from the Net, make presentations, create a CV, maintain personal accounts or even do basic image editing. The list may seem long, but there is not much diversity in the way we use our PCs at home. A huge collection of good and free-of-cost applications is available for download from the Internet and many of these are sufficient to carry out most of the tasks you do. If you like trying out a variety of applications and the idea of software piracy strikes you as unpalatable, consider using freeware on your computer.

Some of the categories into which the freeware can be divided are: Internet, multimedia, utilities and office applications.

Some freebies to get on the Net and speed up your

Browser

Get Internet Explorer, the world's most popular browser. In fact, if you are already working on Windows 95, 98 or NT, you already have Internet Explorer—it comes preloaded with the OS. Matters get complicated when you have an older version of Internet Explorer—version 3 with Windows 95 and version 4 with Windows 98. The older versions do not support some new file types and JavaScript, thus reducing the overall multimedia effect of many Web sites.

There is no need to worry, though. Once you are connected to the Net using any version of Internet Explorer, you can download the latest version (5.0) and use the latest technology in Internet browsing –totally free.

many games, screensavers, desktop themes, wallpapers and other utilities. Some of these files are quite large and could take a long time to download, especially when you consider the poor telephone line conditions.

A desktop theme of *Star Wars Episode I–The Phantom Menace*, which is about 3MB in size might take over two hours to download. But very often, when ninety five percent of the file has been downloaded—taking the better part of two hours—it is likely that the connection will drop without warning... and you are back to square one. There's nothing you can do but swear and start downloading the file from scratch, spending two more hours of valuable Internet connection time.

Connection speeders

If you get a very good connect speed and yet the Web pages and graphics download slowly, you need NetSonic. This utility is an Internet Accelerator and its primary functions are intelligent caching using SonicCache technology and pre-loading pages based on user-defined settings using SonicFetch. All browsers use a storage folder called a cache. Net-Sonic introduces a special type of cache to your system that allows rapid display of previously visited sites without the delays you normally experience with a browser alone. In addition to its caching ability, NetSonic allows pre-loading of content from previously visited pages or pages you have yet to visit, depending on how you configure NetSonic's pre-loading feature.

A good e-mail package can help you maintain your messages in a clean and convenient manner

E-mail client

You get a complementary e-mail client with Internet Explorer (Outlook Express or Microsoft Outlook, depending on the version). This e-mail client also doubles as a personal information manager and allows you to maintain schedules, meetings and tasks, and keep a journal of entries.

File download manager

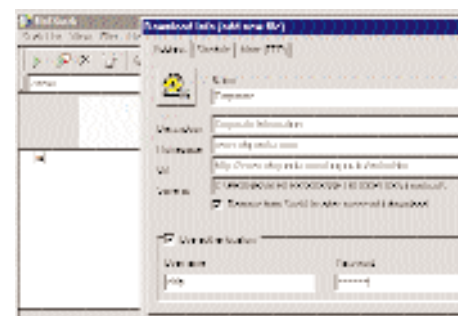Now that you are connected to the Internet, you will probably download

Wouldn't it be great if files could continue to download from the point the connection drops? People have already thought of solutions and have developed software like NetSuck. Net-Suck also offers you the option of pausing a particular file and downloading it at a later stage. You can download multiple files and keep track of the last few files downloaded along with their URLs. It offers full proxy and firewall support and a scheduler for recurring downloads.

Pre-loaded pages will be displayed instantly from the NetSonic cache.

Chatterbox

Accessing fabulous Web sites on the Net is fun but not as much fun as being able to talk to people from all over the world and exchange files and loads of other information with them. Perhaps the most revolutionary of such applications is ICQ from Mirabilis. Besides being a chat software, this program also works as an online pager and reminder.

Left to Right: Internet Explorer 5.0 (Web Browser), Microsoft Outlook 5.0 (E-mail client), NetSuck (Download Manager)

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Best Buys

| WORK | OFFICE APPLICATIONS |

Free applications that are as good as commercial prod–

Sweet Suite

Not having an office suite is almost as unusual as not having an operating system installed on your PC. The two popular names in the office suite market are Microsoft and Corel, of which Microsoft is the pioneer and market leader. For SOHO users, Microsoft offers a scaled-down and cheaper version of MS Office while providing a decently high level of functionality. But, irrespective of the version, size and functionality, these office suites cost a lot of money.

Star Division, creating a new trend, has launched the very first free for download

PDF power

Besides the regular .DOC and .TXT file types, there is another well-known word processing format called PDF, which is proprietary to Adobe and common to both IBM and the Mac. The PDF file viewer (Acrobat Reader) can be downloaded free from the Internet, and this has made the PDF format very popular for storing downloadable documents on the Web. The PDF format also gives the document creator more control over what the user can or cannot do with the document. Functions such as print and edit can be configured by the creator of the docu-

send/receive mail. You can link your customer form from your Web site to ACE and automatically update data entered by them. You can make calls, send faxes, launch your Web browser, and set alarms and reminders for events. Printing of letters, labels, envelopes, and reports using the data stored in other sections of the PIM is very simple.

Manage your money

Money management is a vital aspect of all our lives, be it personal finance or business-related accounts. A good accounting package is essential for your PC and can

Star Division, creating a new trend, has launched the very first free for download Office Suite called StarOffice 5.0

Office Suite called StarOffice 5.0 (Find it on the April 1999 CHIP CD). This entire suite is available for download from the Internet and provides you with a fully-integrated and MS Office-compatible set of productivity applications such as powerful Web-enabled word processing, spreadsheets, graphics design, presentation graphics, database access, e-mail/news reader, event planner and HTML editor. StarOffice features a familiar and intuitive user interface which allows experienced Microsoft Office users to be productive almost immediately. You can access existing Microsoft Office files and data, and save all data in Microsoft formats or as HTML files to post on the Web.
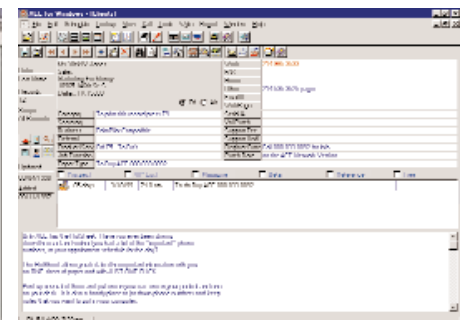
ment, effectively preventing the viewer from applying any changes.

Personal stuff

Many users are not satisfied by the basic functionality provided by Outlook Express or Microsoft Outlook and seek more options as well as flexibility from a Personal Information Manager. Many PIMs are available in the market, with Lotus Organizer being one of the best, and the most expensive. But if you are looking for freeware, you should get the ACE Contact Manager which provides you with all the enhanced capabilities of a good PIM. ACE allows the user to link the PIM to the POP3 mailing system and

help avoid mistakes or errors that could land you in a mess. Clarisys, a Canada-based software company, has developed 3S, an accounting package that is free for download from their Web site. It might not be the best, but it serves the purpose well. 3S is a full-featured, 32-bit accounting software for Windows 95, 98 and Windows NT that includes general ledger, accounts receivable and accounts payable. An invoice/order entry system, bank reconciliation and automated cheque printing are other features. you can design reports, business forms and financial statements and export reports directly to Office 97 and Corel Word Perfect Suite 7 and 8.0.

Left to Right: Star Office 5.0 (Office Suite), Adobe Acrobat 4.0 (PDF Viewer), ACE (Personal Information Manager)

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Best Buys

PARTY TIME!	MULTIMEDIA APPLICATIONS

W ant stunning graphics? Download a good multimedia

Multimedia content has become an integral part of every application. Windows 95, 98 and NT come preloaded with a set of applications that allow you to play most multimedia file formats. The incorporation of Windows Media Player has made it possible to support all the multimedia file formats. However, if you want to view a variety of applications including some that use proprietary multimedia file formats, you will need to supplement Windows Media Player with other players.

entertainment channels. Like your television at home, RealPlayer allows you to control brightness, contrast, saturation, hue and sharpness of the video file. A 10-channel graphics equaliser allows for adjustment of sound quality to the desired level. Visual presets let you organise your favourite clips—such as bookmarks on a Web browser—and are all maintained with a few mouse clicks. Live scanning works just like a car radio; it lets you scan the Web for live audio programming and even allows you to save audio

shoutcast, etc) and has a built-in graphics equaliser for setting the pitch and adjusting jog/shuttle. You can also download free plug-ins to change the user interface and to enable sound and playback enhancement. With Sonique, the user can configure customised play-lists that consist of a collection of specific music tracks that can be played by the user. Just like a regular CD player, Sonique allows the user to set options like random play sequence, sort by artist name, track length, intro play, etc.

Just like your TV at home, RealPlayer allows you to control brightness, contrast, hue and sharpness of the video file

Even on the Internet, the easiest way to attract surfers to your Web site is by making it multimedia intensive. Of course, content is essential too. Due to the poor telephonic line conditions that prevail in the country, many Web sites allow you to download multimedia files for viewing at a later stage. This is because if you wait for the entire page to download including all the multimedia content, it could take quite some time. Therefore, once the multimedia file has been downloaded it would require a multimedia player for play back.

Video Vorld
Real Networks offers you a multimedia player called RealPlayer that allows you to scan the Internet for live broadcasts, and has built-in music and showbiz

clips on your hard drive so you could play it back later, offline.

Sonique Sound
Even though the Windows Media Player allows you to play MP3 file formats, there is not much you can do with its interface as the user has not been provided with any options such as changing the skins or the appearance of the player. Also, you cannot download plug-ins for different sound effects. Its file selection options are very restricted too. Sonique has a full-featured play-list editor with a completely animated menu with support for MPG, MP2, MP3, WAV, MOD, XM, IT and S3M, and can also replace the Windows CD Player for Compact Disc Audio Playback. It can play streaming MP3 (icecast,
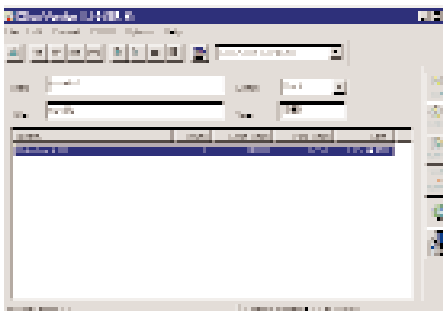
CD to MP3
At times we borrow a CD from a friend and, after we have returned it, we get the urge to listen to it just once more and wish we had a copy of the same. You can now do just that without using a CD writer—by converting the CD files to MP3 format. With CDex, you can convert the CD tracks and store them on your hard disk, to play them using Sonique whenever you like.

The process by which you convert the CD tracks to MP3 format is called ripping and you have the option of saving the files in WAV or MP3 format.

The MP3 format is comparatively much better as the songs stored are in CD Quality therefore there is a negligible loss in sound quality. .

Left to Right: CDex (CD to MP3 Converter), Sonique MP3 Player (Full Screen Interface), WinAmp MP3 Player (Desktop Player Interface)

ICING ON THE CAKE | DESKTOP UTILITIES

Enhance your computing experience with utilities from

Zip-Zap-Zoom

The most economical way to maintain space on your hard disk is to keep all your data files in a compressed format. There are numerous compression utilities available on the Net that can be downloaded for personal use. You can keep frequently used files in an uncompressed format for quicker and easier access, but files that are rarely used should be maintained in a compressed format. This could also prevent files from getting corrupted or attacked by viruses.

It is also advisable to compress a file before you send it attached to an e-mail message. This quickens the process—the

on a PC today are termed as bloatware. The user needs to constantly download patches and other small files that would allow for his software to function without any errors and provide enhanced usability. For this purpose, the download manager keeps a track of the version of the software that is being used on the PC and, whenever the user logs on to the Internet, the download manager automatically logs on to the developers Web site to check for newpatches. You can also take advantage of its Download Later button to schedule your downloads for a time that is most convenient for you. Download Manager scans the Internet

Budweiser Web site. Many screensavers also function as a desktop utility. Some constantly provide you with information on a particular subject while others are interactive and allow you to actively change items within the screensaver while it is active.

Decorated Desktop

Applications like Microsoft Plus! allow the users to set various themes for their Desktop. The user can select a pre-formatted theme that will change the mouse cursors, system sounds, wallpapers, desktop icons and screensaver, thereby giving the user a different interface for each theme.

Download Manager scans the Internet and chooses the first available ftp site for you

smaller the file size, the faster is the transmission rate. Therefore, you must have noticed that all downloadable files on the Net, irrespective of their size, are stored in a compressed format. This saves space on the host server and reduces the time required for downloading by a user.

To-date update

This first-of-its-kind software application built expressly for the Internet helps you keep track of the software on your system and makes updating your software easy.

The purpose of the download manager is to facilitate and speed up software upgrades. Most applications being used
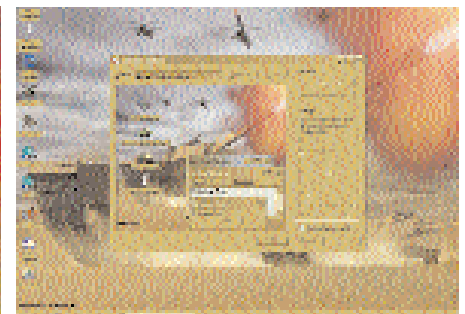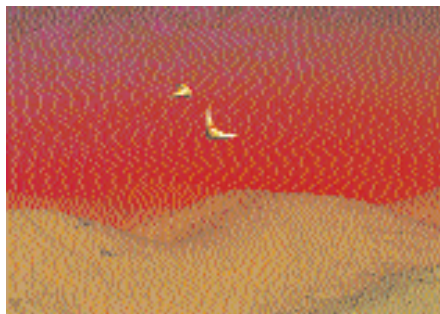
and chooses the first available FTP site for you thereby, avoiding sites that are off the network.

Save-That-Screen

There are thousands of Web sites offering all kinds of screensavers for download. Many companies have a screensaver of their products or services as an advertisement and make it available for download on their Web site. If you like the products or services of any particular company and go to their Web site—most often you will find their screensaver available for download. For example, multiple screensavers are available for Budweiser Beer at the

An application similar to MS Plus! is FreeTheme which allows you to perform the same functions as MS Plus! minus a few minor functions like 'Stretch wallpaper to desktop', which stretches a smaller size wallpaper to fit the size of your desktop. Themes, just like screensavers, are available on various topics such as wildlife, movies, music groups, people, cartoons, automobiles, aircraft etc. Some themes come with Windows Startup and Shutdown bitmaps as well. Of course, you need to be careful about how and where you extract these two files. Be sure to go through the readme.txt files before you install any theme.

Left to Right: FreeTheme - Desktop Theme Installer, Flying Birds Screensaver, Gulfwar Desktop Theme

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Best Buys

THE NO-COST OS   LINUX

You most likely have Windows pre-installed on your PC, but if you are looking for an upgrade and you are the adventurous kind, opt for Linux. Windows 95, 98 or NT cost anywhere from Rs 5,000 to Rs 14,000. Linux is completely free. Developed by Linus Torvalds, Linux is really 'in' among corporate administrators. It is also easy to install and has a number of advantages over Windows.

Thanks to the concept of open source software, the source code of the operating system was put up the Net for companies and individuals to develop further. Many companies made use of the unique licensing system of Linux to sell the OS, on tht condition that they reveal the source code also.

Numerous flavours of Linux are available for download off the Internet but are very huge. If you are looking for a completely developed OS with additional plug-ins, you will probably need to purchase it—and you can do that for a very low price. Some individuals also make copies of the commercial versions of Linux and sell them for the price of replication of a CD-ROM. The complete version of RedHat (one of the flavours of Linux) can be downloaded from the Red Hat site. However, be very careful about which flavour of Linux you select.

Many of them are meant for the die-hard PC user who wants to get into the nitty-gritties of the design of the OS, yet other flavours are easier to load than even Windows 98.

Another plus point is that Linux can run along with Windows, so if you already have Windows, you can load Linux in a separate partition.

The RedHat flavour version is for the mid-level PC user, Damien is for nerds. Caldera is the most simplified version of Linux and has a highly interactive Windows-type interface.

For the person who would like to run his entire machine on Freeware, the Internet is his oyster. In addition to the applications mentioned above, you can download basic applications like calculating devices to complex database engines and graphics editing tools. Many small software developers put up their software as freeware on to the Internet, at times not realising how much they could have earned if they had only patented and sold the product through formal channels. But then again, some others develop applications as a hobby and do not look at software as a source of income.

With such an enormous number of free applications available on the Net, one needs to be careful about viruses. Ensure that you uncompress all files in a temporary folder before installation, and scan each file properly for viruses.

Freeware anti-virus programs are not really recommended—none are good enough to protect your machine from the number of viruses attacking computer networks worldwide everyday. The only way to protect your data is to purchase a good anti-virus program and constantly keep downloading updates released by the developers.

Finally, don't go overboard and download free applications that you do not really need—your hard disk is not going to expand by itself. Evaluate the application by reading the details provided or by visiting the developer's Web site, and decide if you really need the application.

CHIP TEST CENTRE

WHAT YOU SAVE

Category	Freeware	Commercial	Cost (Rs)
Browser	Internet Explorer 5.0	Opera 3.60	1,500
E-mail Client	Outlook Express	Eudora	2,250
File Download Manager	Netsuck	GetRight	800
Connection Speeder	NetSonic 1.0	NetSonic Pro 2.0	900
Chat	ICQ	mIRC	850
Office	Star Office	MS Office 97	20,000
Information Manager	ACE	Lotus Organizer	2,200
Accounting Manager	3S	MoneyWare	4,500
Multimedia Player	RealPlayer	VideoNow 3.0	6,300
Sonique Sound	Sonique	WinAmp	1,500
CD to MP3	Cdex	Audio Catalyst	1,300
Zip programs	123ZIP	WinZIP	1,300
Decorated Desktop	FreeTheme	MSPlus!	2,300