Is Shrink-Wrapped Software Dead?
If the current wave of free webware keeps swelling, you may never buy a computer program again

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THERE'S A FREE-FOR-ALL ON the Web right now, and you don't need a Ph.D. in computing to figure out how to tap into it. Simplified alternatives to many popular applications that you once had to buy are freely available online, thanks to new ad-supported programs that run right on your browser.

So what's the catch? While many of the free word processors, photo-editing programs and games lack the rich features of their retail counterparts—the word processor in Google Docs, for example, has just 11 fonts vs. the dozens in Microsoft Word— chances are you won't miss what's missing. After all, most people use only a small fraction of the features available. "Software went through a period where it got way too complex. We have a concept that focuses on simplicity," says Dave Girouard, vice president and general manager of Google's free Web applications.

Below you'll find some of the best free Web apps compared with similar retail products. With new programs popping up every week—some of which are available only through social-networking sites like Facebook—it pays to check out the freebies before spending a dime. And you can keep the change. ∎

To Pay or Not to Pay.
There are pros and cons for both kinds

PAID SOFTWARE

FREE SOFTWARE

PAID SOFTWARE	Which is easier to use?	FREE SOFTWARE
Although it's packed with cool tools like the "spot healing brush" (for zapping wrinkles and blemishes on pictures), the $100 **Adobe Photoshop Elements** lacks a clear, intuitive interface for novices.	**Which is easier to use?**	If simplicity is genius, then **Picnik.com** is the Einstein of photo-editing programs. Just upload a picture from your computer, then click to crop, rotate or add special effects. You don't even have to create an account to use this ad-supported site.
Most of the 500 million people on earth who have the $400 **Microsoft Office** suite of software use it for work. Because all files are stored on your own computer—often behind a corporate firewall—it's tough for hackers to gain access to your business secrets.	**Is it safe from hackers?**	Google is aiming straight at the heart of Microsoft's business with its down-and-dirty office suite, **Google Docs** (available at *docs.google.com* to anyone with a Gmail account). Because the slick apps are secured only by your Gmail password—and password-stealing scams are rampant—it's best for personal or casual use only.
The massively popular multiplayer game *World of Warcraft* ($30 plus $15 a month) envelops you in a phantasmagorical world with gorgeous scenery and fierce enemies. But game play can be sluggish without a stellar graphics card and a superfast Web connection.	**Which runs faster on your computer?**	The simple graphics of *Scrabulous,* an online knockoff of the board game *Scrabble,* require no special hardware, and the game runs as fast as you place the tiles. It's available on Facebook, where 700,000 people use it.
Researching your genealogy can be a lonely pursuit with the full-featured **Family Tree Maker,** which costs $30 and includes a one-month subscription to the amazingly vast historical databases on Ancestry.com.	**How much fun is it to use?**	Learning about your heritage is fun for the whole family on **Geni.com,** which lets you invite relatives to help flesh out the family tree. Since all data are stored on Geni's central servers, anyone you've given access to can just add information directly.
Paid software is best for power users, those with special security concerns or those who are sure they will use the app enough to get their money's worth.	**Which is best for you?**	**Free software works well for most casual users and anyone needing quick access to the programs from any browser. Some offer paid upgrades that are ad-free.**