

Six Free Online Storage Services

By Michael W. Muchmore <http://www.extremetech.com/article2/0,1697,2098943,00.asp>

Don't want to spend money and installation hassles on new **storage** hardware for your precious media? Whether it's for sharing memories in the form of digital photos and videos over the web—or just practical documents you want to protect against that all-too-common hard disk crash, these six services offer secure, and often free, ways to back up your files and get access to them anywhere. The services also provide a way to share your data with others without sending huge email attachments or FTPing or hosting them yourself. Most of them offer drag-and-drop for easy uploading. Though there are scores of online storage services, we focused on ones with free plans and interesting features:

- [box.net](#)
- [DropBoks](#)
- [eSnips](#)
- [MediaMax](#)
- [OmniDrive](#)
- [openomy](#)

There was a time when the computing world thought the future was internet-connected, diskless appliances, which itself harked back to the really old days of terminal computing, except with the advantage of connecting to a worldwide network and all the resources of the web. These never took off, though **Tablet PCs** are sort of their heirs. The services we review here are one attempt not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, maintaining the notion that internet-based storage is a good thing, though not as your only storage.

One advantage of online storage is that it's mostly platform-independent: You can access it through any **computer** with a web browser. And many of these services go beyond mere storage, offering application functionality such as the ability to lightly edit pictures and documents. With all these services, you'll get at least a gigabyte of free space, which you can use for those files you want anywhere-access to, ones you want backed up on a secure offsite server, or just ones that you don't want to take up your precious local disk space with. Read on to find out what you can do with online storage today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[box.net](#)

[DropBoks](#)

[eSnips](#)

[MediaMax](#)

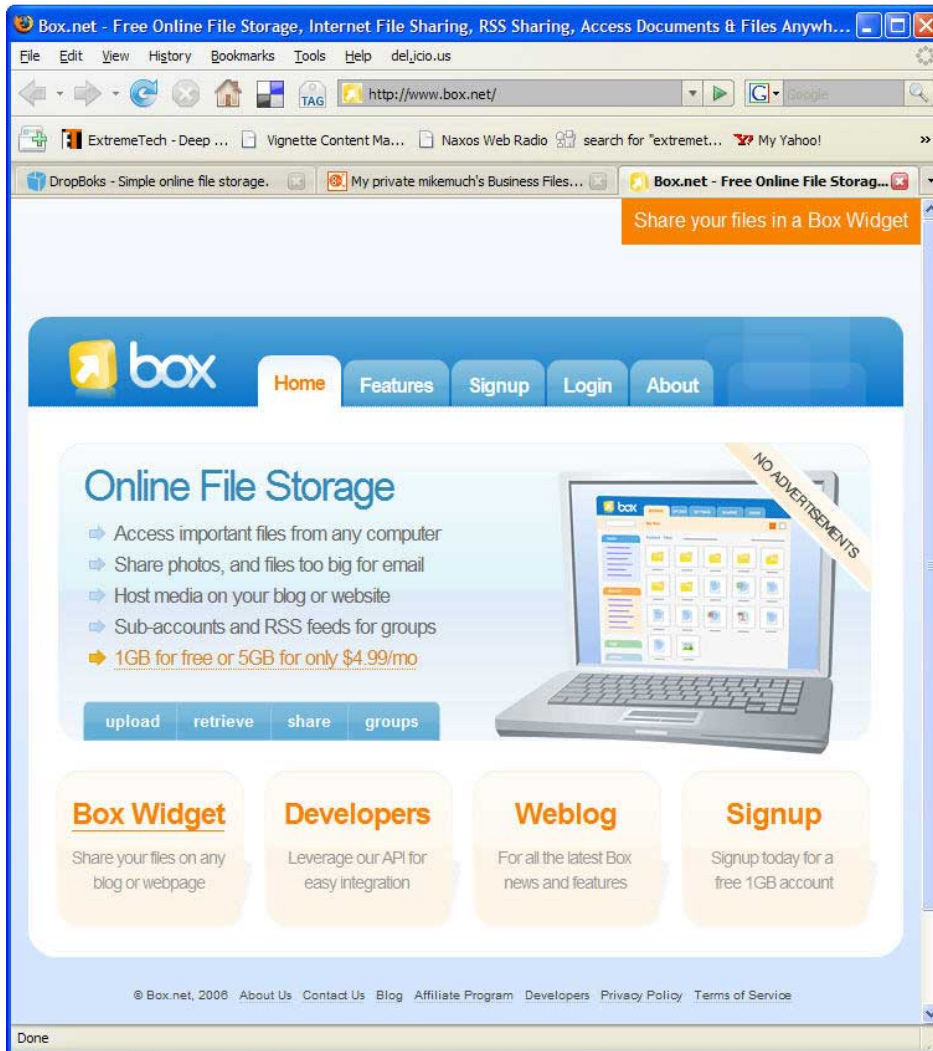
[OmniDrive](#)

[openomy](#)

[Final Thoughts](#)

box.net

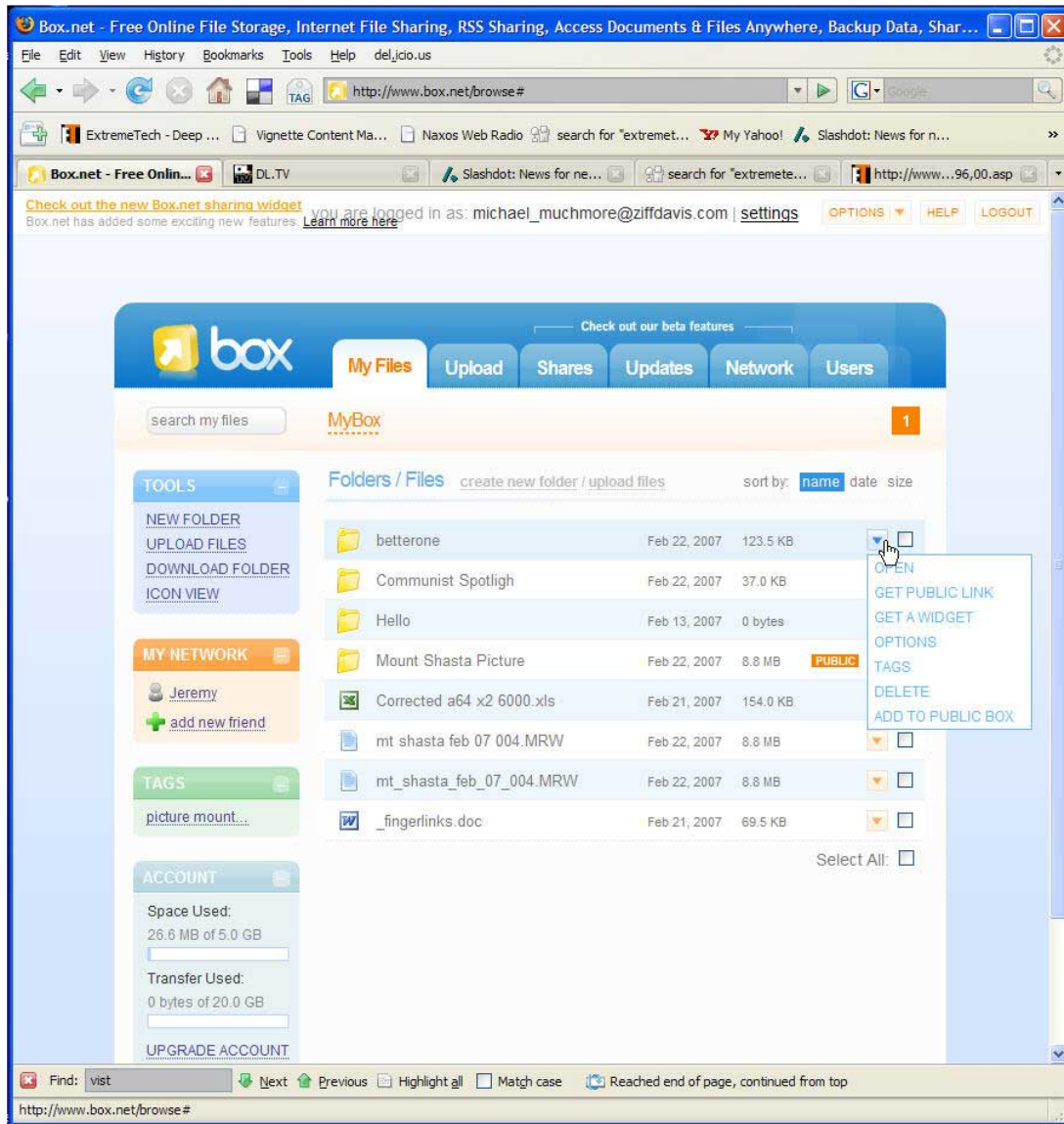
The creators of box.net started out with the lofty goal of making physical storage devices obsolete. One of the more Web 2.0-looking services, box.net gives you 1GB storage and 10GB/mo. bandwidth in its free account. This also includes file sharing and blog posting, but not mobile access, zip folders, or phone support. For added security, an SSL version is available by using https:// in the URL. The higher grades of service not only get you more storage, but more bandwidth per month, phone support, subaccounts, and ZIP folders.



Registration is a simple matter of entering a valid email and password choice. When first creating a folder, we couldn't simply drag and drop a file from the **desktop** onto it to upload it, but when you choose Upload Folders, there's a Method choice between add files and drag and drop. When you click the latter for the first time, a Java applet is downloaded, giving you a square window into which you can drop your file icons.

There's also an Add button in the box, which brings up a regular folder dialog for you to pick files to upload. From either method, we could upload entire directories as well as individual files. The Download Folder choice is only available to paid accounts, which start at \$4.99 a month. When you do download a folder, box.net zips it up, and the subfolder structure is preserved when you unzip it.

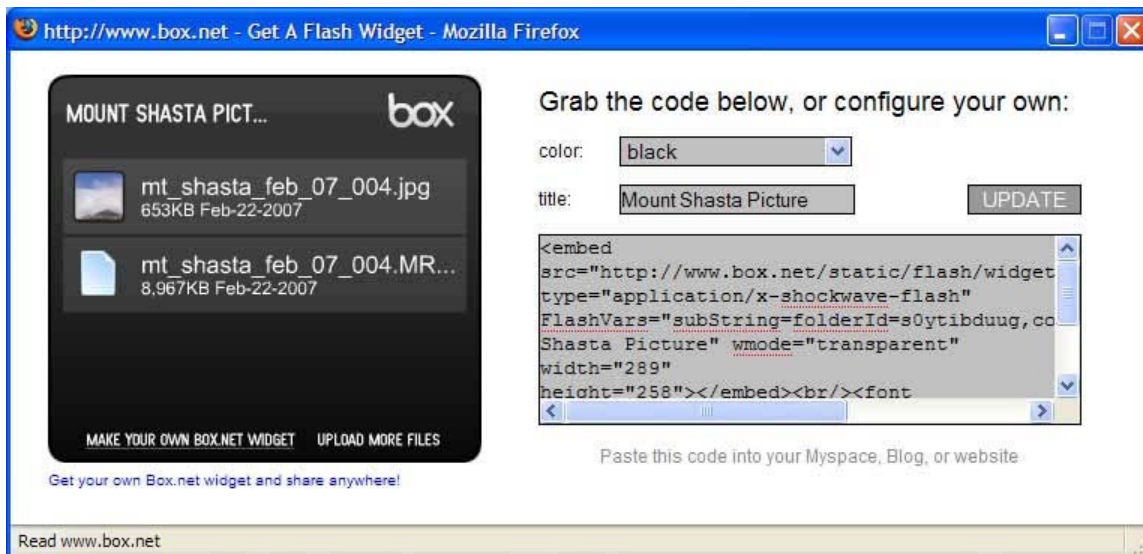
In all, it's an interface that manages to hide a lot of functionality in a simple-looking, pleasing presentation:



box.net's tagging feature lets you sort related files and create widgets based on the tags. And its help page is...well...helpful and thorough.

Sharing files is a matter of merely entering the email of the person you want to share a file or folder with and sending it off. The recipient has to sign up with box.net, however, to get the file. A Public Box feature lets you assign a URL to a file that will be accessible to anyone on the web, and this can be used as an RSS feed as well.

A differentiating feature of box.net is its widget, which you can put on your MySpace page or blog to allow visitors to upload and download files with a drag and a drop. The widget consists of code that uses Flash for the folder that you place into any web page's HTML file:



Finally in sharing options, we successfully added a downloadable file to our LiveJournal blog with a simple menu choice, after setting up the entry for it in box.net.

When we uploaded a test 7.5MB file, it took 3 minutes and 52 seconds on our home DSL connection but less than 30 seconds at the very fast work connection. And the service reported the file as being 8.8MB although the local PC called it 7.5MB. (Since these results vary depending on your connection, we merely report them for this first service as examples; we won't be comparatively timing all the services.)

The site states that "box.net supports Internet Explorer 6-7, Mozilla Firefox 1.5-2.0, Opera 9, and Safari." We ran into an occasional rendering problem in Internet Explorer 7, where the screen contents would shift to the left and text was bunched up, but moving the mouse fixed that. Some overlapping of text shows up in a Firefox 2.0.0.1 rendering error, too, but neither of these interfere with using the service.

box.net is a good-looking, easy-to-use service, but we wish sharing files with it didn't require a signup, and that the browser rendering errors should be fixed.

Product: box.net **Company:** [box.net](http://www.box.net)

Price: Free for up to 1GB storage, max file size 10MB, 10GB transfer/mo.; Premium \$4.99/mo. for 5GB, 1GB max file size, 20GB transfer/mo., 3 subaccounts; Pro \$9.99/mo. for 15GB, max file size 1GB, 50GB transfer/mo., 10 subaccounts.

Pros: Pleasant interface; drag-and-drop uploading; has subfolders which are preserved when downloaded in zip form; free option; good sharing capabilities; blog integration.

Cons: Slight rendering errors in Internet Explorer 7 and Firefox; no specifically media-file-related tools or apps; sharing files requires recipient to register.

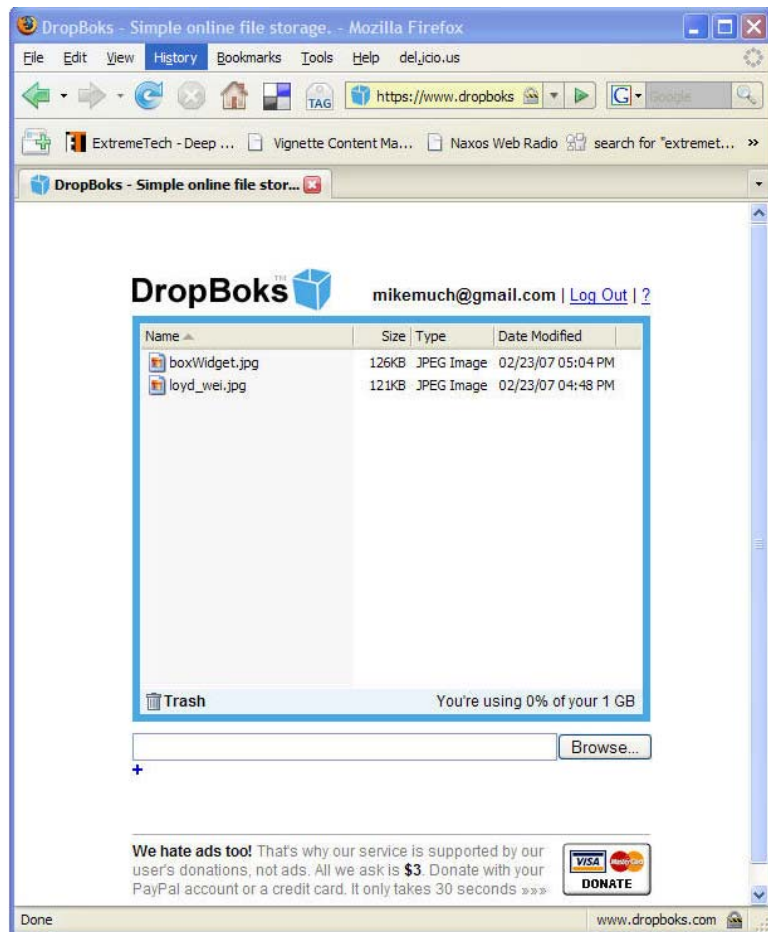
Summary: box.net is a good looking, affordable online storage service with a simple-to-use interface and strong file sharing features.

DropBoks

DropBoks is simplicity itself: A page with a box that you upload files onto:

The service offers 1GB of free storage, with a maximum file size of 50MB, and there are no monthly fee plans or even on-page ads. Instead DropBoks depends on the kindness of users who like the service to make donations. We had no problem running DropBoks on either Firefox or [Internet Explorer](#).

When you log in, DropBoks switches to SSL mode, and indeed when we did so, IE7 reported the connection as encrypted. You can upload more than one file at a time by clicking on the plus sign and browsing to another file.



You can double-click file entries in DropBoks's list to launch them, just as though they were in a directory on your PC. Though you can't simply drag a file icon onto the service's window to upload, you can drag file entries to a trash icon on the page to delete them. There are no subfolders, just the one main one.

Currently DropBoks has no sharing capabilities, but the company claims to be working on adding this. They're also considering larger [storage](#) amounts for pay. But we find its beauty in its simplicity.

Product: DropBoks

Company: [DropBoks](#)

Price: Free, includes 1GB storage, with a max file size of 50MB. No maximum transfer amount specified.

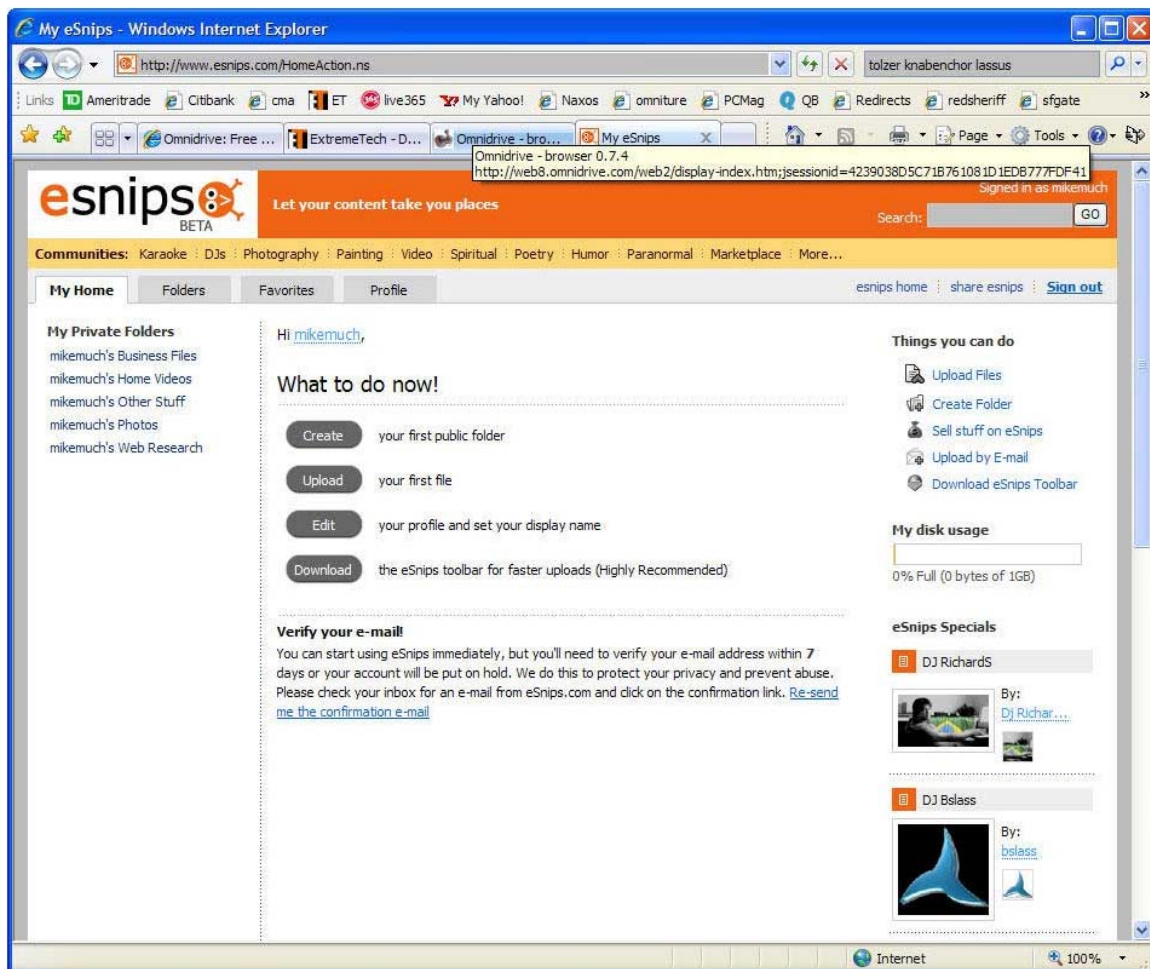
Pros: Super simple; [security](#).

Cons: No subfolders; no drag and drop; well, no bells or whistles of any kind.

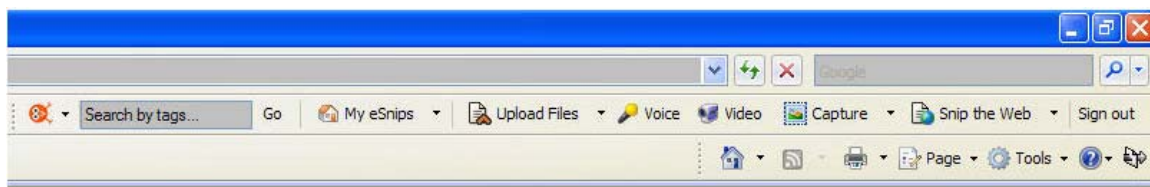
Summary: We love the simplicity of DropBoks and its lack of ads, though drag-and-drop file uploading would be nice. If you don't have huge media files but just want quick and easy access to data up- and downloading, it works.

eSnips

eSnips is all about sharing your digital content, sort of a Flickr for everything, not just photos. The service, still in beta, has 16 "communities" for things like Karaoke, Design, and Paranormal. So you could also think of it as a cross between online storage and MySpace; the company itself refers to the service as "social content-sharing site." For each of its communities, there's a portal page with a cool design and top and featured content—music files, images, video, or documents—whatever's relevant for the category. Like Flickr, tagging and discovery is a big part of it.



Uploading is one file at a time, using a standard browse window. Any file you upload can be made publicly viewable, via the "Share with the world" option. You can't create subfolders under any folder. The eSnips uploader toolbar sets this service apart from the others, offering a convenient way to upload and access your account from your web browser. It supports Internet Explorer, Firefox, and Netscape, and lets you upload an entire folder at once, but there's no drag-and-drop or local folder integration with the service.



The toolbar, as you can see, gives you quick access to just about all eSnips's services, and throws in a voice recorder and video creation software.

You start out with private folders for **business files**, home videos, web research, and Other. You can add Shared folders, but you can't create subfolders under the preset ones.

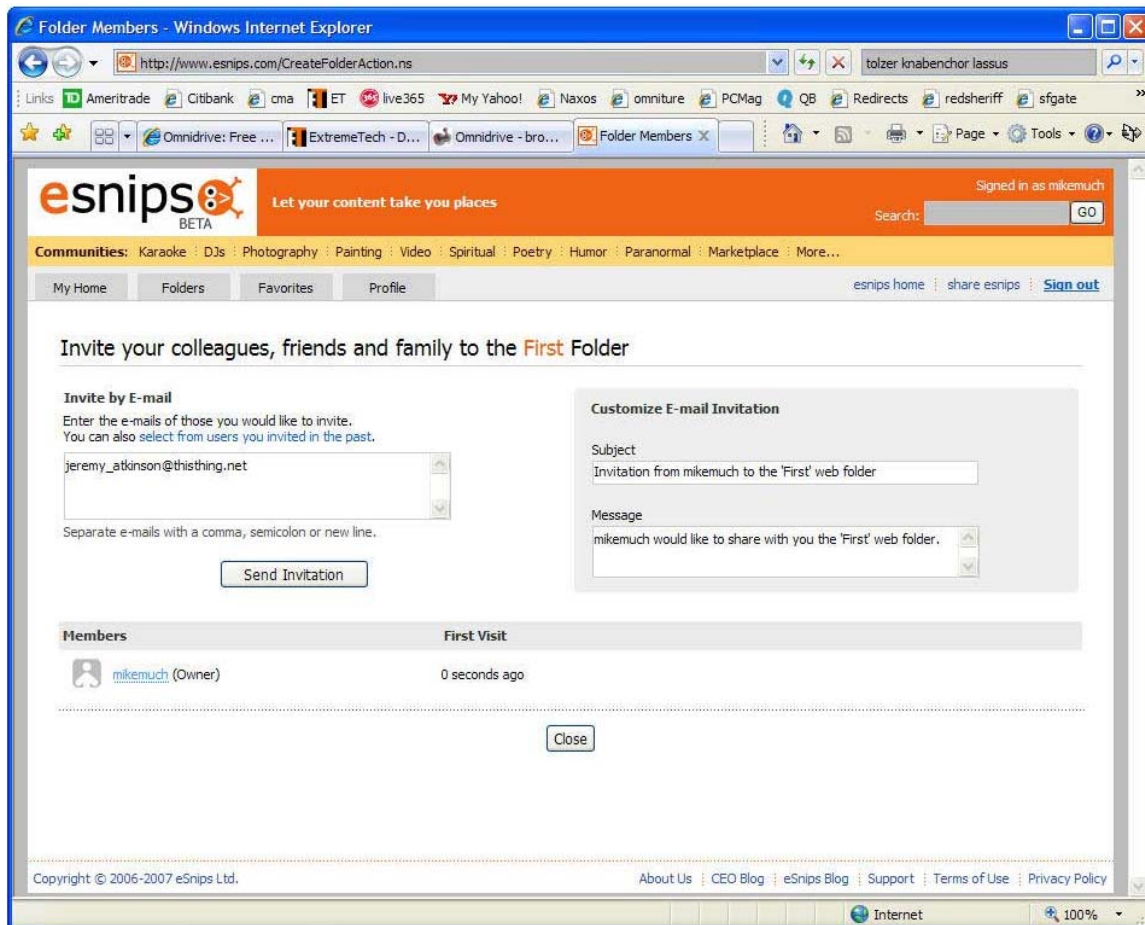


eSnips Folders

Though the main thrust of eSnips is to share and discover digital content, it also lets you upload and store private files for your use only. And not only are there ways for you to make yourself and your art discoverable on eSnips, but you can even sell content through it.

An extensive Profile page is one tool eSnips offers for you to get discovered by other users.

Another way is by using its Invite page to send links to your public folders:



There's also a screen capture tool that will resize an image for quicker web loading.

We had no problem running eSnips in both Firefox and Internet Explorer, and saw no rendering errors in either. If you're looking for a way to store, share, and even sell your digital content, eSnips gives you the means.

Product: eSnips

Company: [eSnips](#)

Price: Free, includes 5GB [storage](#).

Pros: Browser toolbar, lots of community/social networking tools, selling capability.

Cons: No drag-and-drop uploading; 1GB max storage space.

Summary: A cross between MySpace and online storage, eSnips offers a nice way to share or even sell your digital creations to a community of users, and by the way, offers 5GB of online storage for any file types you want.

MediaMax

Streamload's MediaMax online storage service is more geared towards, as the name implies, storing and accessing media files online. The free version gives you 25GB—quite a large amount compared with most services.

Signing up is a simple matter of choosing a username and password, entering a valid email address, and entering the text in the swirly graphic. You're first brought to a page with clear help links to teach you about all MediaMax's procedures and capabilities:

Welcome to **MediaMax**



File Manager >

The MediaMax File Manager is one central place to manage all of your files. File Manager enables you to quickly and easily [organize files](#), [download files](#), [play files](#), [share files](#), and [host files](#).



Videos >

Use the MediaMax Videos application to store, access, and share your videos. All your videos are automatically sorted to Videos so you can easily [create video albums](#), [tag videos](#) for easy organization, [play videos](#), and [share videos](#) with anyone.



Photos >

The MediaMax Photos application makes it simple to store, organize, and share your photos. Your photos are automatically sorted to Photos so you can quickly [create photo albums](#), [tag photos](#) for easy organization, [edit photos](#), and [share photos](#) with anyone.



Music >

The MediaMax Music application makes storing, organizing, and streaming your music simple. Your music is automatically sorted to Music so you can easily [create playlists](#), [stream](#) your music, and [edit](#) ID3 tags.



Mail >

The MediaMax Mail application is the easiest way to share large files with anyone. Mail enables you to [send files](#), [receive files](#), [download attachments](#), or [save attachments](#).

[Go To My Account >](#)
☐ Never Show Again

> How to Upload



Easily and quickly [upload your files](#) to your MediaMax account.

> How to Download



MediaMax makes it simple to [download your files](#) to your computer. This is especially useful for online backup and file recovery!

> How to Share



[Share files](#) of any size in seconds with MediaMax.

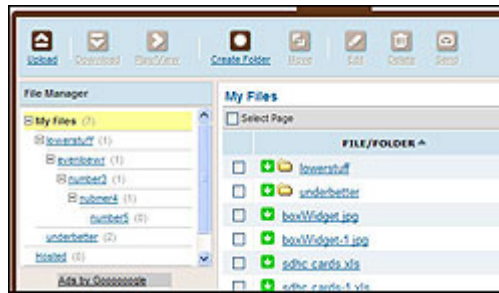
> How to Host



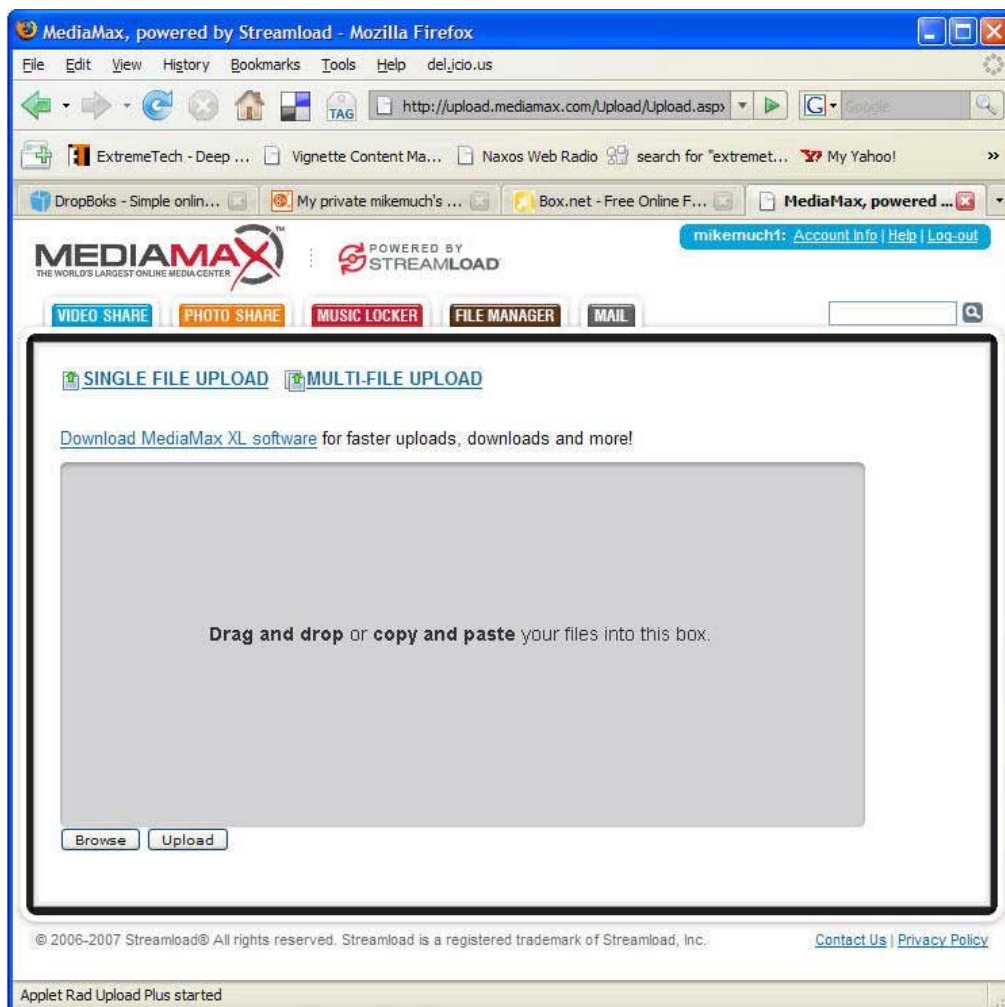
MediaMax enables you to [host files](#) online for easy sharing.

Note that we didn't see anything about security or SSL in the help.

In addition to the expected file manager, MediaMax includes specific features for videos, photos, music, and mail—for sending links to your files to others.

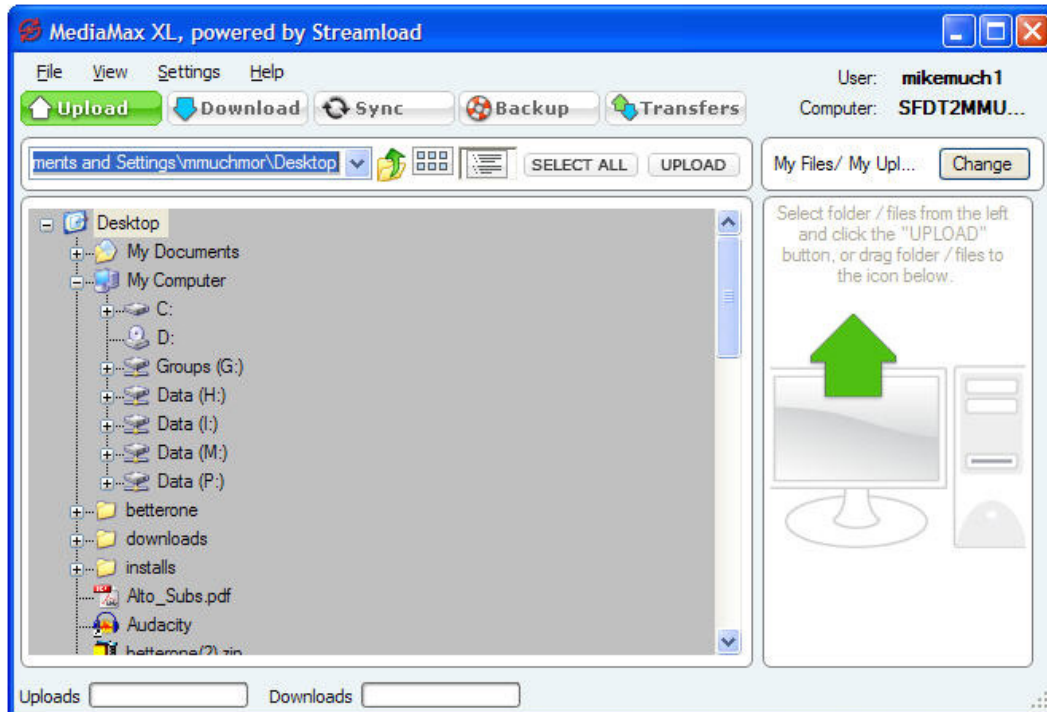


Uploading is accomplished by clicking the Upload button, browsing for a file with the regular Windows dialog, and entering one file at a time. You can't select multiple files or directories with this method, but you can do this with the Multi-File Upload option, which includes a drag-and-drop feature and the ability to upload entire folders. Like box.net, this is a Java window in Firefox and an ActiveX control in Internet Explorer, but it's right on the page rather than a separate dialog box:



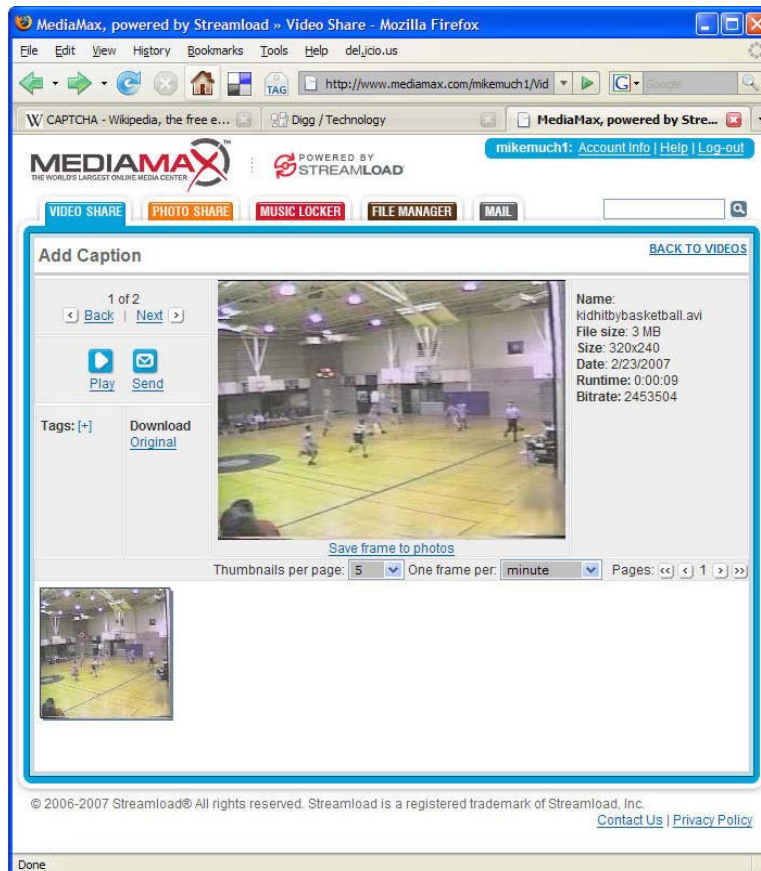
When we tried to upload a two-level deep directory, we got a warning dialog that the content's digital signature had an error, and then a Not Responding hang, even on our fast workplace connection. Then when we closed that and logged in again, only the second-level directory was uploaded. This happened in both Firefox and IE7. If you upload the same file more than once, a number is appended to its name. You can create many sublevels of folders; we stopped at six.

Another way to upload is by using the beta MediaMax XL software, which presents both a directory tree and a drag-and-drop area:



It also lets you sync folders on your PC with your MediaMax account.

Uploading in the media-specific pages is identical to doing so in the file manager, but how the files are displayed is different, tagging is an option for photos and video, and the service gives you a way to play the content right over the web:



The photo view shows thumbnails and lets you add captions and tags, create Albums, send pictures via email, and rotate images. The service offers to scale photos down in size for downloading, as well as letting you download the original size image. The picture email feature lets you send multiple shots and choose whether to send them as attachments or as links to a page showing the picture. If you use the latter method, you can require a password for getting to the page and optionally set an expiration date for the page. For your recipients to get the photos, however, they need to sign up for a MediaMax account, and the picture appears in their main directory. We feel this could be better done—and is with other options like Yahoo! Photos.

MediaMax also includes a hosting feature, whereby you get a URL in the form http://www.mediamax.com/your_username. Anything you place in your Hosted directory will be available on this page. It would be nice if you could drag the files within the file manager; you have to go through a dialog (and choose a little checkbox if you want to just copy instead of move) to accomplish this. Another thing we'd like to have seen is a way to password-protect your hosting page. Otherwise, this feature can give you a useful way to get your images up on Craigslist, eBay, or a blog.

The Music Locker can organize your tunes by artist, but not by album. It also reports the bit rate of your songs. If you click Play, it will open your default music playing software and stream the songs from the web. Finally, you can edit the title, artist, album, and genre entries for each song.

We like MediaMax's generous 25GB of free storage, and it offers a full range of sharing and media conveniences, but there are some quirks that need to be corrected, and the interface operation could stand some simplification.

Product: MediaMax

Company: [Streamload](#)

Price: Free for 25GB, 1GB transfer/mo., max file size 10MB; Premium, \$4.95/mo. for 100GB, 10GB transfer/mo., unlimited file size; Elite, \$9.95/mo. for 250GB/25GB transfer; Professional, \$29.95/mo. for 1000GB/100GB transfer/mo.

Pros: Large amount of free storage—25GB; subfolder capability.

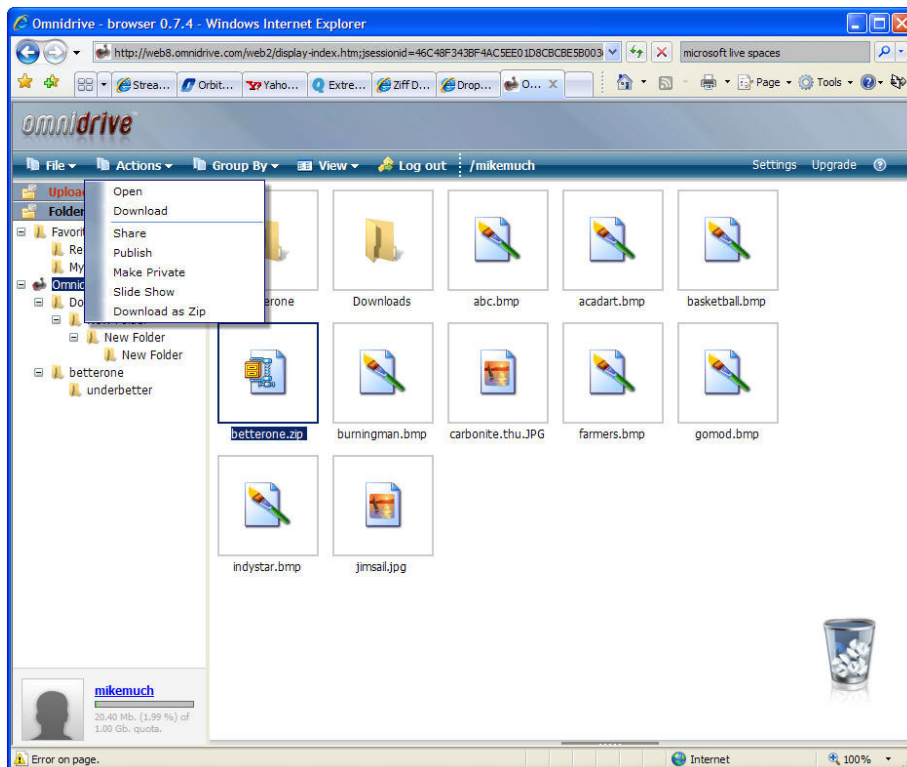
Cons: No subaccounts; interface a bit busy and often requires more dialog interactions than seem necessary; could have *more* media playing/editing features.

Summary: 25GB is a lot of storage for free, and MediaMax gives you a way to organize and access your data from anywhere. We found the interface slightly convoluted, though not really bad, and would like to see more security options.

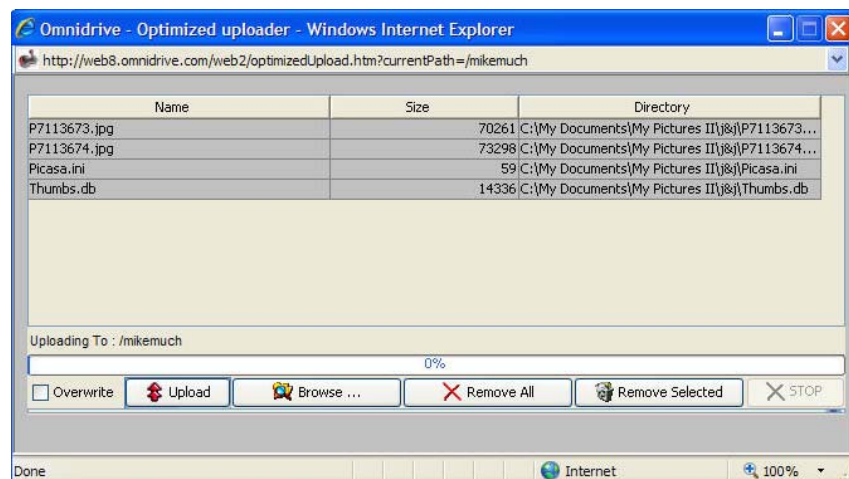
OmniDrive

OmniDrive claims the speed of desktop storage, which seems an odd claim, with internet connections so varied in speed. Part of this claim stems from the service's use of locally installed client software that makes files accessible from any application, mimicking local storage. Another outstanding advantage of OmniDrive is that it has integrated [Zoho Writer](#) so that you can edit Word Documents without needing installed software; similar support for spreadsheets and presentations is in the works. The service is currently in beta.

OmniDrive's main web interface shows your directory structure on the left, and files in the main area can be displayed as thumbnails, large icons, or a details list:



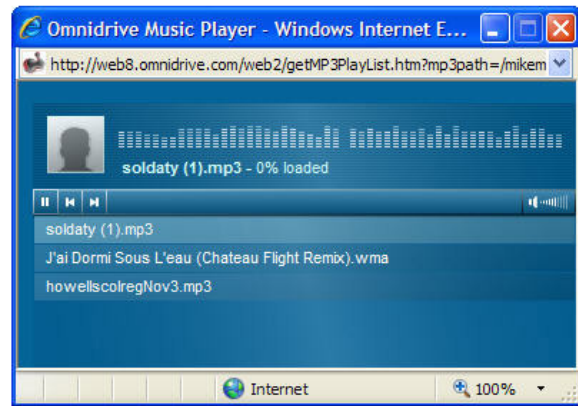
Free accounts get a gigabyte of **storage** with 5GB transfer per month and no limit on the size of files. An advanced uploader gives you that Java-based file upload area we've seen in other services. You can't upload intact folder structures this way; if you drag a folder onto the area, its contained files will appear, but if you upload with this tool's file browser, you can upload a directory and preserve its subdirectory structure.



As with MediaMax, you can drag files in the browser window to a trash icon to delete them. In a step beyond, you can use drag and drop to move files among folders.

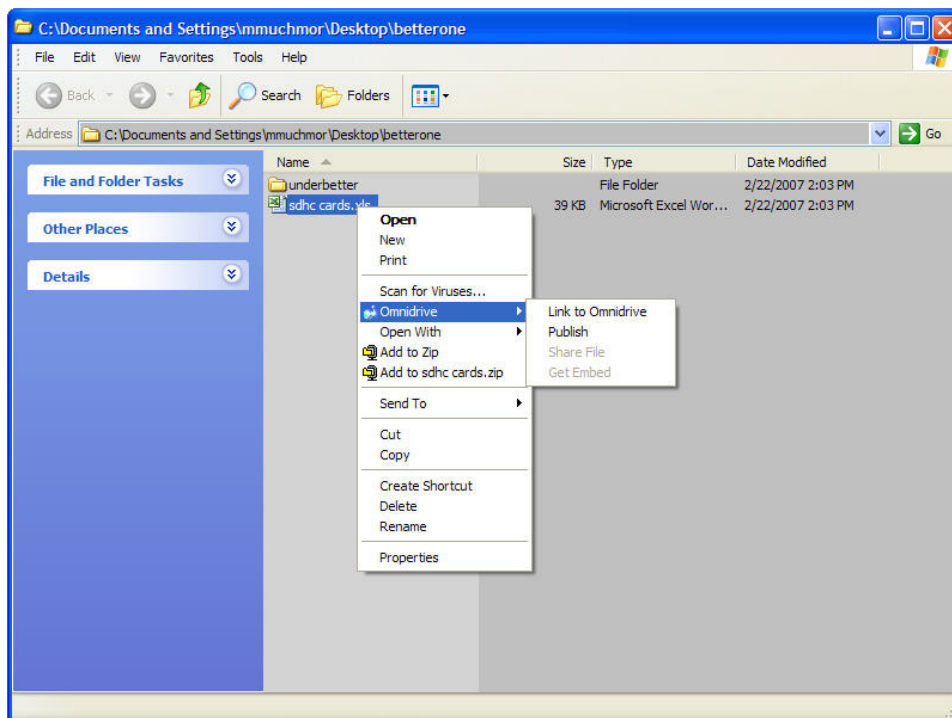
A slideshow with gallery is a nice touch, and you can run it in full-screen mode, though it still doesn't rival something like Picasa. OmniDrive will also play MP3 files with a built-in player so you don't even have to download the music files. The player even has level bars:

But it won't play WMA or iPod music, even though the player lists those files.



You can make folders private, publish them, or download them as ZIP files. And if you install the local client software, the right-click menu in your Explorer folders will let you make a file available on the web with a single click. When you share a file through email, the recipient just clicks on the link to download the file, without having to register with or even visit OmniDrive's web site. When we right-clicked a file to "publish" it, the web app looked like it was working, but then we weren't clearly told the URL for our published file. Right clicking on the file's icon showed the URL, however.

As mentioned earlier, if you install OmniDrive's client software (available in Windows; a Mac version is in private beta), your right-click context menus will have an added OmniDrive choice, which offers to upload the selected file or folder to your OmniDrive account or to publish it on a web page. The installed software also give you a QuickLaunch icon that opens a local-looking "Live Folder" of your online files—pretty cool trick, actually.



But all is not sun and roses: We got an error when we tried using the right-click upload feature to upload a network directory, and when we tried publishing a file, we got a dialog stating that our request was in queue, but then nothing happened. If you make the browser window too narrow while in Details view, text on the right spills on top of text on the left. Another very minor quibble is that you can't set the web interface to remember you to avoid going through the login page every time.

Finally, OmniDrive has an open API for developers to make use of its web services in their programs. There's a [wiki](#) that documents how programmers can take advantage of this.

Though there are still some kinks that need ironing out, OmniDrive nevertheless promises to be a cool and useful service.

Product: OmniDrive

Company: [OmniDrive](#)

Price: Free for 1GB of storage, 5GB of bandwidth unlimited file size API access; Pro Package 1 \$40/year for 10GB storage, 20GB bandwidth/mo., unlimited file size; Pro Package 2, \$99/year for 25GB storage, 50GB bandwidth/mo. Pro Package 3, \$199/year for 50GB storage, 100GB bandwidth/mo.

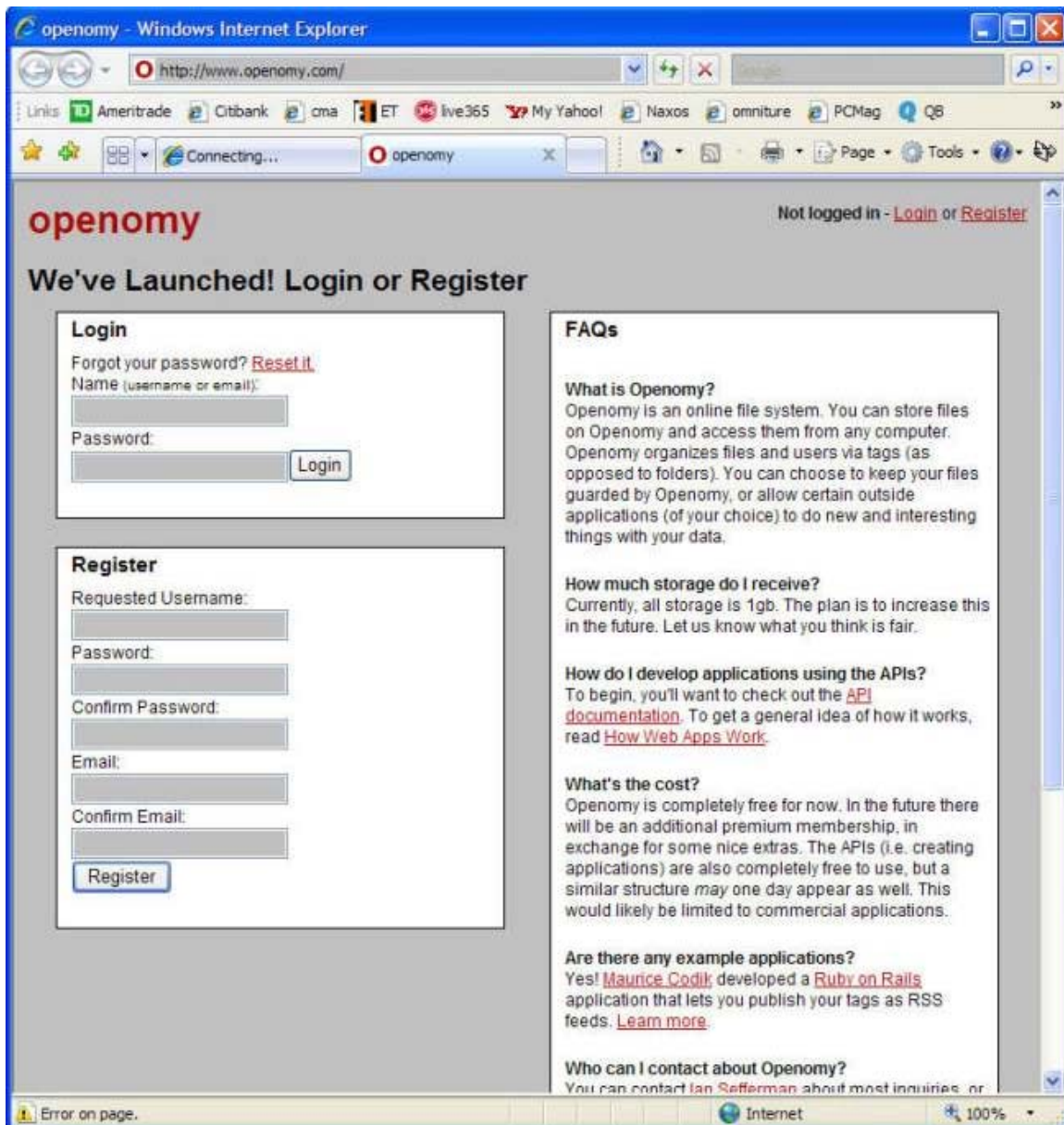
Pros: Slick interface; integration with Zoho Office for online document editing; drag-and-drop uploading; multiple folder levels; unlimited file size; integration with Windows Explorer; open API for developers.

Cons: A few bugs; drag and drop could be clearer and simpler; client install could be more straightforward; web interface can't remember login.

Summary: OmniDrive brings two special extras to the online storage party: the inclusion of online editing tools from Zoho Office and integration with the Windows shell, allowing you to right click to upload files and folders and to see your online folder as a local one. The one caveat would be some bugs we ran into in using some of these shell extension features; it should be noted that the service is at this point still in beta.

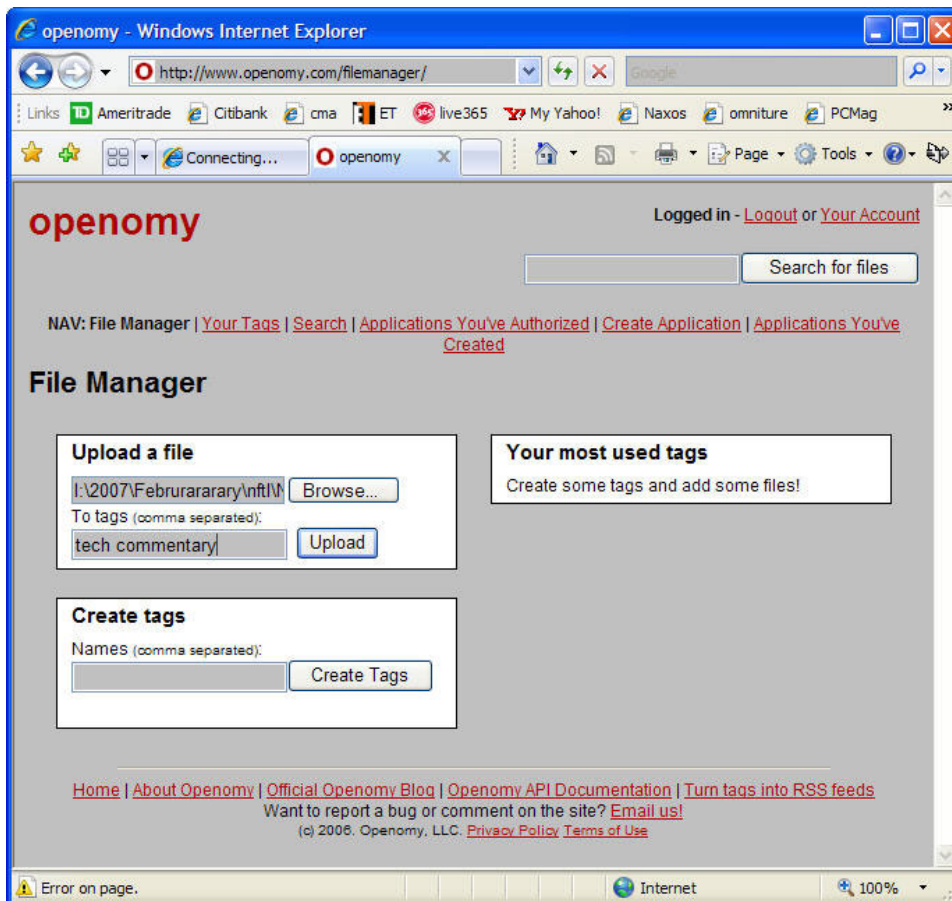
openomy

The eye-candy free, bare bones looking openomy calls itself an "online file system." Despite this designation, the service doesn't support subfolder levels, but instead relies on tags to organize your files. It's completely free, with 1GB of storage for everyone, now; premium plans are in the offing. openomy has a strong developer orientation, with an open API to integrate their web apps with the service. An example is an app that lets you publish your tags as RSS feeds. The main menu even has choices for Applications You've Authorized, Applications You've Created, and Create Application.



Uploading is one file at a time, with no drag or drop. When you upload a file, it's a good idea to fill in some tags in the text box below the filename entry.

After you've successfully uploaded a file, it's super simple to create a permalink for it, which anyone can access. And they don't need to register for the service or even visit the openomy site: A simple download dialog appears when they click on the link.



One nice, if obvious, touch, is the inclusion of Search, which a lot of other services reviewed here surprisingly don't offer. But since the File Manager has no list view of your files, the Search feature turns out to be essential. We were a little surprised that the search feature doesn't search based on tags, but just on filename text.

A public files option includes **virus** scanning before the file will actually be made public.

An interesting side project of the service is [Pageflakes](#), a neat, clean, customizable portal.

Though it's a nice tool for developers, average users will probably want something with a slicker interface. openomy worked fine in both Firefox and **Internet** Explorer, but at times uploading was slower than for other services.

Product: openomy

Company: [openomy](#)

Price: Free with 1GB and 10GB bandwidth.

Pros: Open API; tagging.

Cons: No subfolders; Spartan look; no drag-and-drop upload; uploading slow at time.

Summary: Bare-bones online **storage** that makes heavy use of tagging and that's geared towards developers who want to integrate their web apps with online storage and tagging.

Final Thoughts

If you're running low on hard disk space, and just need somewhere to store nonessential files, or if you have a need to access your files from different computers in different locations, these services are a welcomed relief. Other key reasons to use them are to share documents with others around the web and to back up those precious memories stored in media files against the possibility of a local disk crash. And if you don't have a huge library of files, the free space of at least 1GB offered by all these services won't cost you a dime.

All of these services reliably stored our test files, without any evidence of file corruption. The trend was for services that offered more advanced features to be more quirky and at times even buggy. If you just want no frills [storage](#), choose [DropBoks](#) or [openomy](#). If you need subfolders and would like a prettier interface, look into [box.net](#).

One thing we missed in many of these services was actual OS integration—with the sole exception of OmniDrive, which lets you upload files via a right-click option in Windows Explorer. Some of the other services, such as openomy and box.net do allow developers to build such functionality.

If your files are very confidential, you should probably stay away from online storage. Online storage could also be something to avoid if you're a serious digital photographer who has a large collection of multi-megabyte RAW files or if you store and want quick access to high-quality audio or video files. It all depends on the upload speed of your internet connection; for those with low-end [DSL connections](#), it's not a great idea to store huge media files online, but if you're a business or if you just pay a lot for a faster connection, you may as well go for it.

box.net	DropBoks	eSnips	MediaMax	OmniDrive	openomy
Free storage/ Bandwidth/ max file size					
1GB/10GB/10MB	1GB/unknown/50MB	5GB/unknown/unknown	25GB/1GB/unlimited	1GB/5GB/unlimited	1GB/10GB/unknown
Drag-and-drop					
Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Subfolders					
Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Tags					
Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Extra features					
Web page widget; RSS.	Nada	Tons of community features; toolbar for easy access; selling option.	Image viewer; media players with streaming; sharing tools; albums.	Windows Explorer integration; Zoho online editor; email sharing.	Search; RSS.