

There's room yet in the cloud

GOOGLE'S commitment to cloud computing has forced Microsoft to unclench its desktop hold, Apple to join in (somewhat slowly and in meagre ways), Yahoo! to flail, and legions of other firms to follow suit, Facebook key among them. But there's an opening in the cloud: simple online storage that looks and acts like a hard drive. (Google lets you store up to a gigabyte at no cost on Google Docs but requires its web interface to manage access.)

That may explain the several million users of Dropbox, a startup service which gives away more storage than Google, up to two gigabytes. Dropbox offers a magic folder on your desktop that looks and acts the same as any other, except for this: it's being watched. Move items into the folder, create new folders, open and modify documents, and a tiny piece of Dropbox monitoring software replicates those actions on every other computer to which you've linked your account. The company also stores a copy of the file for access from the Web, and archives older revisions for ready retrieval. This back-up capability can be ignored; it requires no scheduling or configuration. Dropbox restrains size and bandwidth by storing differences in updated files. And there's another bit of magic that's helped Dropbox go viral: any folder in your Dropbox directory can be shared with other parties, and any changes are immediately synced for both parties.

Dropbox said in February it had 4m users, and the firm's sales and marketing head, Adam Gross, said it had added "millions more" in the interim, now storing over 20 billion files occupying petabytes (a thousand terabytes) of storage at Amazon's S3 on-demand storage system (and other places). User growth has accelerated since the release in May of a set of guidelines for other software makers to tie directly into a user's Dropbox account, similar to the approach that aided Twitter's growth and ubiquity.

The service is useful for coordinating files among desktops, but a boon for mobile devices, which lack access to a file system. Dropbox, in turn, benefits from the expansion of mobile devices with 3G connections. On Apple's mobile iOS, apps like 1Password (for secure password and note storage), Documents To Go (Microsoft Office editing) and GoodReader (document retrieval and viewing) all reach directly into Dropbox storage. Apple doesn't give software makers an over-the-air tool for keeping items up to date, so Dropbox is a drop-in replacement for tedious Wi-Fi synchronization. A new simple text editor for the iPhone and iPad, Elements, offers paper-thin layer between a user and Dropbox; its developer, Justin Williams, was in turn inspired by cloud-based Dropbox sync he found in 1Password.

And it's not just the techies who love it. Susan Orlean, a staff writer at the New Yorker, uses Dropbox to sync, among other things, a manuscript of a book she's writing about Rin Tin Tin. From an email,

I love Dropbox. The appeal is its utter simplicity -- it's essentially invisible, doing the task that isn't hard but none of us care to remember to do, namely, backing up our files. It's also been the perfect way for me to move between my office computer, my home computer, my iPhone, and my iPad, and I've even accessed things via the web when I've been away from all my millions of devices.

I had a hard-drive meltdown this summer, and even though I broke into a cold sweat, I really hadn't lost anything because I had been working on those files within Dropbox. The hard drive and my whole computer, for that matter, was just a piece of metal and plastic that I replaced. Disaster averted.

Dropbox can't hold its niche forever. Google could flip a switch and give all its Docs users virtual hard-drives at a moment's notice. And other startups, notably SugarSync, offer more

features and compete on pricing. But Mr Gross doesn't see Google and other cloud firms as competitors. Dropbox, he believes, has a slice of a rapidly growing pie. Rather, he and his colleagues are fighting the entrenched client-and-server model that pervades remote access. "We're competing," he says, "with Windows 3.1."

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