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Ten years ago, the mere suggestion of downloading a game digitally would have left most PC gamers aghast."What of my phone bill!?" "Won't the Boutique of Electronics close down as a result!?" "Who is this Horatio chap, and what does he want with my daughter?"Fortunately, we soon got out of the early-millennial way of thinking and accepted digital downloads as the way forwards. As with all other shifts in the games industry, the PC led where others will surely follow. Digital distribution platforms, such as Steam, basically nabbed the iTunes model and applied it to gaming. Very successfully.We've actually reached a point where physical media is becoming less and less relevant. Physical copies of recent games such as Deus Ex: Human Revolution and Modern Warfare: Black Ops have merely been containers for a Steam code and a bit of data, the rest of which is downloaded online.The opinion seems to be that the majority of PC gamers don't care about boxed goods, and would rather be able to play their games on the day they're released than have to wait around with a Gregg's pasty waiting for their local branch of GAME to open.In turn, every other platform is getting in on the digital download malarkey. It seems that neither the PlayStation Network or the Xbox Live Arcade were quite ready for just how massive digital downloads would be, and the tiny file size limit (350MB on Xbox Live, last time we checked) has stopped console downloads being as big as the PC.In the meantime, the PC is still the best platform for digital downloads, and there are a fair few contenders to Valve's crown. The most important is likely to be EA's Origin, which is playing host to the company's upcoming uber-blockbuster, Battlefield 3. In fact, the war game won't be enjoying a Steam release at all, although it will be available on a few other digital distribution platforms.We've rounded up five of the biggest and most interesting platforms, and given them a run for their money in terms of download speeds, design, and content. We've left out more specialist services such as Good Old Games and Blizzard's Battle.net as the titles on these sites often aren't available anywhere else, which would hardly make for a fair comparison.1. SteamThe original game download service, launched by Valve in 2004. The decision to release Half-Life 2 on the service in 2005 saw PC gamers downloading Steam en masse, and subsequent releases saw it expand in popularity. Forbes estimates that 50-70 per cent of PC gaming's \$4billion income comes through Steam.It's not without its problems, though. If you haven't set Steam to offline mode, and find yourself without an internet connection, you won't be able to access any of your games. Plus it occupies a shady area of UK distance selling regulations, which state that you're allowed seven days to try out products bought online - Steam doesn't offer refunds.With an apparent 70 percent cut for big publishers who get their games on Steam, it's an attractive option. DRM for Valve and some third-party titles is supplied via Steamworks, with publishers able to stick other forms of protection on top of their games. The latter can prove to be a bit of a nightmare, especially if it's Fallout 3's Games for Windows Live or GTA IV's Social Club.Valve has absolutely nailed the user experience. Everyone who plays PC games has Steam, and its chat and social features are second-to-none. However, surprisingly, we found our download speeds lagged a little. There's also no incentive program to keep you coming back, and Steam keys can now be sold by third-party sites.Steam has set the high water mark for PC game download services, and it has also sneaked onto the PlayStation 3 and Mac. It's also got a humongous catalogue of 3,710 games - but it's going to face some tough competition as other publishers cash in on digital revenue.2. OriginEA's brand-spanking-new web store is rather like its old one, only with an original name. It's aiming to match its "leading competitor [read: Steam] by 2012", and it - somewhat unsurprisingly - only stocks EA titles. Even though it's still in its nascent stages, Origin is fairly fully formed.But Origin has stirred controversy recently - particularly when it comes to its relationship with Steam.The decision to make Battlefield 3 an Origin-exclusive seemingly didn't go down too well with Valve, and Crysis 2 has been pulled from Steam - although EA believes this to be a mere coincidence.The plot thickens when you realise that Valve and EA have a mutually beneficial relationship - the manufacture and distribution of Valve's boxed products is silently handled by EA.As a client, Origin is nicely laid-out and easy to use. The games seem generally cheaper than on Steam, too with Dead Space 2 costing £19.99 on Steam and £14.99 on Origin. Download speeds are solidly impressive, and the fact that you don't have to go through the Origin layer to access your games is a boon to anyone who likes gaming on the move.EA has big plans for Origin, such as an iPhone version and potential cross-compatibility across upcoming consoles. It's still got a long way to go before it can compete with Steam, but it's slick and smooth enough to be a serious contender.Battlefield 3 will either define or sink it, and our money's firmly on the former - at the end of the day, most gamers aren't going to worry too much about where their game comes from, as long as they can play it.3. Direct2DriveStarted originally by IGN, Direct2Drive has recently been purchased by US game rental service Gamefly. Gamefly itself is launching an online rental service soon, so Direct2Drive has been slightly neglected, but it's still an interesting online game shop.Direct2Drive doesn't have a client as such, instead it installs a basic "shop" which redirects to the website, as well as GameSpy Comrade for online matchmaking and chats.It's a slightly hotchpotch system, but it just about works. With over 1,500 titles, its catalogue isn't lacking, although we had problems getting a decent download speed.Some titles - such as Deus Ex: Human Revolution - simply consist of a Steam key to get the game, which is a tad annoying.Unlike Steam, most games simply require a one-time activation to get them working, so there's no fretting about being offline. The downside is that many titles use the infamously Draconian Securom DRM, but apparently the support team will send out more access codes if you run out.There's some other goodness, too. Direct2Drive promises to price-match any game you've bought if you find it on a competitor's site for cheaper. It will also refund your game if you request your money back within a reasonable amount of time, and haven't activated the title.Direct2Drive is definitely due an overhaul, though, and hopefully Gamefly's ownership will give it the lick of paint it so desperately needs. If Gamefly can also bring its rental program - which gives you unlimited games for a monthly fee - to the UK, it could be the unique selling point it needs to muscle in on Steam, Gaikai and OnLive.4. Green Man GamingProbably the most interesting and innovative service in our round-up, Green Man Gaming is a British start-up. On the surface, it looks like any other download service, and to some extent it pretty much is. Where the Green Man stands out is in its trade-in policy.Although a trade-in system may seem a tad odd on digital products, it does actually work. If a game gets the go-ahead from publishers, it's listed and sold through Green Man Gaming's site. You can download and play the game to your heart's content, but if you get bored, or just don't like it, you can trade it in for a certain value - usually about 25% of the price you paid for it. Bigger games don't feature the trade-in system, but you can still put your credits towards them.Prices on Green Man Gaming fluctuate, and getting good prices is almost a game in itself - one user invested just 4p at the site's start, and now has £30 of credit for the site. Green Man Gaming reckons that, in essence, you're spending less money to get more games.Although the range is currently a little sparse, it's an interesting paradigm for online gaming, especially in these days of wallet-watching credit crunches. Its Capsule software is a little clunky, and its slightly esoteric shopping system may go over the heads of some users.The site's success lies on people using it, and more trade-ins make it better for everyone. If it takes off, it could well prove to be an underdog challenger to Steam's throne - unless Steam decides to nab the trade-in system for itself.5. Games for Windows MarketplaceMicrosoft has beaten around the bush with its Games for Windows Live platform for ages now, and seems to have finally decided to integrate it with its Xbox portal. This could be part of some grand plan for the next Xbox console, but at the moment it's in a no-man's land of games services.Like it or not, you've probably already got Games for Windows installed if you've got Dirt 3 or Dead Rising 2 - even if you bought them via Steam. It feels a tad sneaky, and the sheer number of hoops you've got to go through to get games running makes for some major ball-aches. DLC is similarly ineffective, and we still have nightmares about getting the add-ons for Fallout 3 working.The Games for Windows Marketplace catalogue currently stands at a pitiful 166 titles. Among these you'll find the triple-AAA likes of Dirt 3 and Bioshock 2, but recent releases have been thin on the ground. It obviously works well enough for some publishers: Codemasters has released F1 2011 via Games for Windows Marketplace. It makes sense for Microsoft's own games: Fable 3 and Age of Empires are there too.Microsoft clearly still has a vested interest in PC gaming, what with it owning that whole Windows thing. Games for Windows Live does look rather spiffing; the MSN-style messenger and wholly-cribbed-from-Xbox achievements system work well. However, right now it seems to be more of a promotion for the Xbox as a gaming platform than a fully-fledged service.VerdictGreen Man Gaming comes a close second to Steam. On paper, Steam ticks all the right boxes, with decent download speeds, a huge catalogue of games, and a straightforward user interface. There's also the fact that just about every PC gamer on the planet uses it, and it's established itself in the very bedrock of gaming.But Steam is only our number one for the moment. In the coming months, especially with the release of Battlefield 3, there could be some rather huge shifts in gaming clients, and the way we use them.Each service we looked at has its own unique selling point, from Origin's cross-platform mechanics to Games for Windows Live's apparent integration with the upcoming Windows 8.Steam might never be toppled, but it could see a sizable share of its user base migrate to other platforms.-----First published in PC Format Issue 259Liked this? 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