

Low cost PCB layout software

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I am looking for low cost PCB layout software. My designs are not overly complex, and are on small boards, but I will be using very small parts and features ~0.4mm/0.016" pitch, .006"/.006" trace/space. I have looked at a couple of web sites that list free software and have found two types of packages; the no strings attached open source packages that are not very mature or run on xNIX (and not windows) or the PCB fab house supplied packages that tie you to getting your boards from them.

Clearly I need something that actually works, so most of the truely free packages are not viable. The PCB package from <http://bach.ece.jhu.edu/~haceaton/pcb/> seems to work, but is not supported under windows. It is not clear if it will run under Cygwin. I guess I could dedicate a machine to PCB design and run Linux, but I am pretty sure I would end up creating problems from my lack of experience with *NIX.

I looked at a few of the PCB vendor packages and have done one design and ordered boards. It was fairly low risk since it only cost \$59 including shipping from expressPCB. But these boards have no soldermask or silk screen. I can live without silk screen, but the solder mask is important when using fine pitch parts. In general, I am not happy being tied to a vendor and having to duplicate the layout work to use a different vendor. Reentering a schematic is no big deal, but layout is very time intensive and each tool is toally different.

So that brings us to the commercial layout packages. Most of them are several kilobucks and out of my budget. I found a list at <http://www.olimex.com/pcb/dtools.html> of a lot of packages, but there is no real info on them. So that is why I am here. Can I ask for opinions on what tools will give the best benifit for the cost of the low end tools? I hate to spend even \$100 on a tool that I am not sure I will want to continue to use, but if I have confidence that it will be a good tool, I would not mind paying \$500.

So what are my options and how good are they for fine pitch work, up to 6 layers?

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And does anyone have any experience with TCI3? It seems to be a free tool, but when I follow the link, the page is in French. Anyone know if the tool can be used by English speakers (and readers)? Any English docs? I guess I could learn metric dimensions; 0.15 trace – 0.15 space :).