

Multimedia systems that meet the requirements of everybody in the family needn't cost the earth. Dominic Bucknall reviews seven of them, costing between £900 and £1,300, including VAT



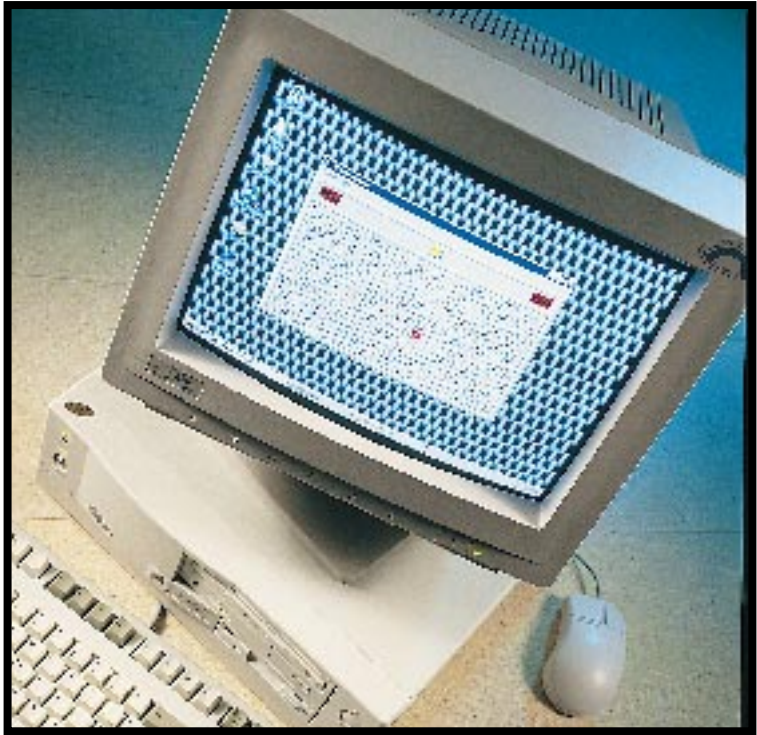
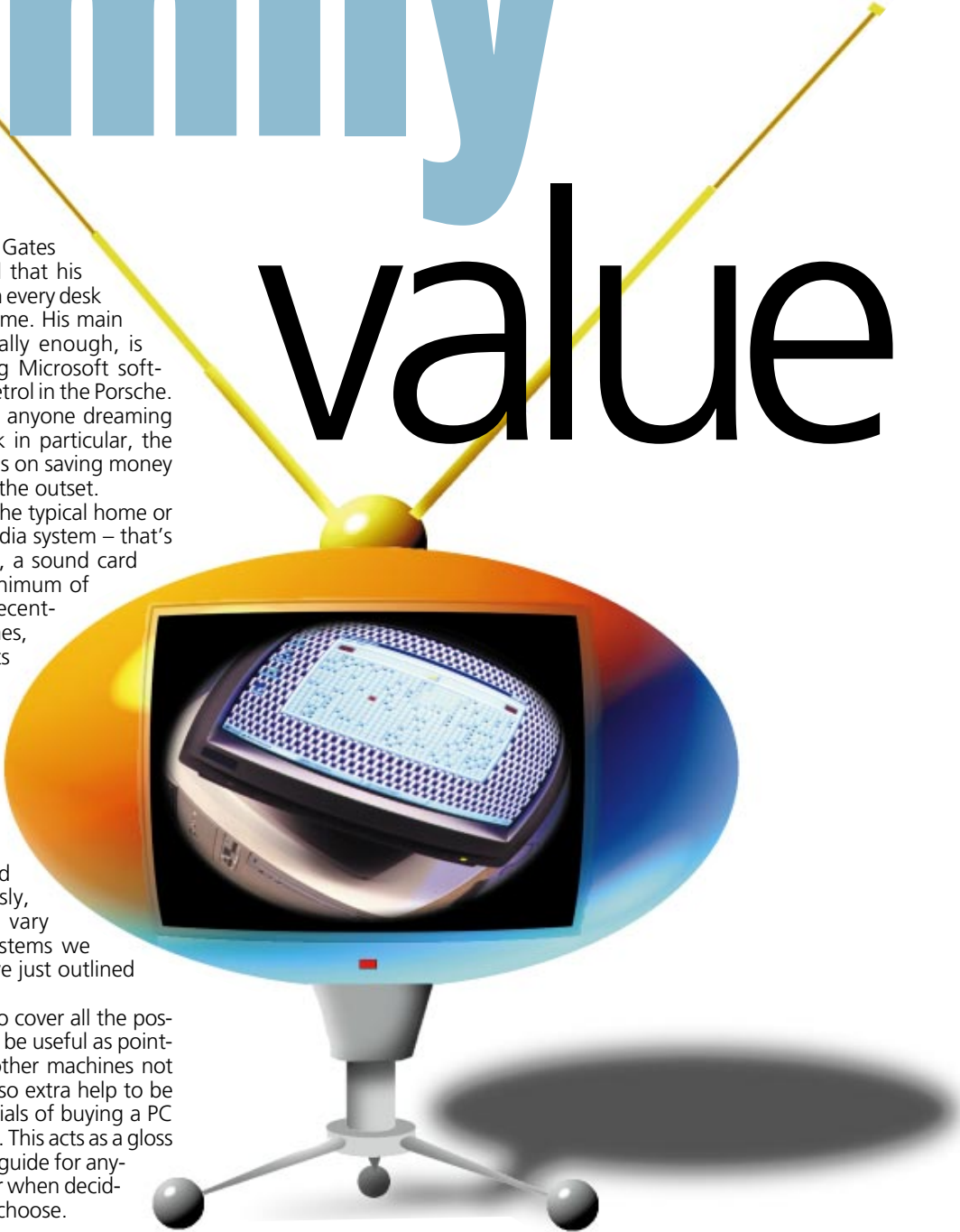
Family value

Microsoft boss Bill Gates has always said that his dream is a PC on every desk and in every home. His main concern, naturally enough, is that these machines are running Microsoft software, because that's what puts petrol in the Porsche. This is all well and good, but for anyone dreaming about having a PC on their desk in particular, the focus is rather sharper and centres on saving money rather than making it, at least at the outset.

The most popular choice for the typical home or small business setup is a multimedia system – that's to say one with a CD-Rom drive, a sound card and stereo speakers – with a minimum of 8Mb of main memory and a decent-sized hard disk. This will play games, write letters and do the accounts with equal ease, and also makes an excellent platform for reference and educational CD-Rom titles for the whole family.

What it doesn't need to do is break the bank, which is why we've concentrated our attention this month on machines which cost between £900 and £1,300, including VAT. Obviously, performance and specifications vary within this range, but all the systems we tested met the basic criteria we've just outlined for a good all-round PC.

There's never enough space to cover all the possibilities, but these reviews should be useful as pointers when it comes to assessing other machines not covered here. As usual, there's also extra help to be had from our guide to the essentials of buying a PC towards the back of the magazine. This acts as a gloss on this article as well as a general guide for anyone unsure of what to look out for when deciding which machine is the one to choose.



Viglen Contender P5/75

Despite the recent vogue for unusual case designs for machines aimed at the home user, the Viglen follows the traditional two-piece oatmeal pattern, as indeed do all the systems we review this time around. It's a little thinner than average, but otherwise unremarkable, with a tidy fascia bearing the necessary reset button and indicator lights, but no other cosmetic clutter. The fan was audible but the actual noise it made wasn't intrinsically irritating and we rapidly ceased to notice it.

In this instance, your £1,005 (ex-VAT) gets you a P75 processor, 8Mb of fast EDO Ram, 256Kb secondary cache and a 540Mb hard disk as the basics, with a CD-Rom, external speakers and a useful selection of software to spice the package up a bit. Some effort has been made to make life easier for less experienced users, with a clearly illustrated instruction sheet detailing the initial stages of setting up the hardware and a leaflet guiding you through the admittedly straightforward steps of completing the Windows 95 installation process. There is also a CD-Rom-based tutorial that covers the essential features of Windows 95. This makes a good companion to the manual, although experienced users wanting behind-the-scenes technical know-how will find both sources of information limited.

The Contender comes with the usual narrow-border Viglen keyboard, which is a reasonably solidly-constructed affair with a proper metal base-plate. The action is light and clacky and would perhaps benefit from being both a little quieter and a touch more firmly sprung but this is still basically a sound keyboard. The Microsoft mouse that accompanies it is deservedly regarded as a top choice both for comfort and driver functionality.

Viglen offers a range of own-badged monitors under the Envoy name, but at this price point you get the basic 14in Envoy 14PE model. This has a 13in image diagonal and a somewhat curved screen that would be improved by being flattened out a bit to reduce the curvature it imposes on the image. Nevertheless, the overall focus was fairly good, with only a moderate drop-off at the edges and corners, and the picture geometry proved to be acceptable, which was fortunate as the monitor has only basic analogue sizing and positioning controls.

The only irritant here was the fact that Windows insisted on imposing the default, and visibly flickery, 60Hz vertical refresh at 800x600 resolution, despite the monitor's ability to support a stable 72Hz in this mode, and there

was no obvious way of overriding this setting.

The Contender's multimedia components are very much the standard, no-frills type. Sound is handled by a Creative Labs Vibra 16, which is effectively a Soundblaster 16 and outputs to a pocket-sized pair of mains-powered speakers. These have bass and treble controls, but although they proved to be surprisingly loud for their size, the sound quality was affected to an extent, with a loss of bass and an over-emphasised middle. The ensemble is rounded off with the popular and inexpensive quad-speed Mitsumi CD-Rom drive.

There isn't a vast amount of space inside the case, and there are no free drive bays as a result. If you fill the 540Mb Fujitsu hard disk, you will either need to resort to data compression or replace the drive altogether. The 1Mb S3 Trio64 graphics chip-set is integrated onto the motherboard, but even so there are only two readily accessible 16-bit Isa expansion slots and one PCI slot on a riser board.

There is one more half-length PCI slot on the other side of the riser but it will be difficult to use as access is poor. The processor socket on the other hand is easy enough to get at, as are the memory sockets, two of which are empty. The motherboard is capable of supporting any Pentium up to the 166MHz chip, so there is a fair degree of upgrade potential in this respect.

In addition to Windows 95, the software provided includes Microsoft Works and MS Money, which is a solid home/small office software bundle for taking care of business, as the saying goes, while the edutainment content is provided by Encarta 96, Musical Instruments and Golf.

Basically sound, but a bit slow and by current standards the hard disk is starting to look a little small. Also, it would have benefited from a larger (and consequently better-sounding) set of speakers.

○ £1,181 (including VAT)
○ Viglen: 0181 758 7000

Viglen Contender P5/75					
Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5



MJN P100 Multimedia Special

The MJN's ex-VAT price is a touch higher than the Viglen's: £1,100 as opposed to £1,005, but the specification is different in several significant ways. For a start, the MJN has a faster 100MHz Pentium processor rather than a P75, and it also sports a more substantial 850Mb hard disk, giving you 300Mb-plus of extra shelf space. Both machines have the normal 8Mb of Ram backed up by 256Kb of secondary cache, but the MJN uses the latest high-performance memory and cache memory whereas the Viglen is fitted with the older types.

The main outward difference is in the size of the case, as the MJN's box is noticeably thicker and chunkier than the Viglen's, although they both have about the same footprint. Again, the fascia design is simple and unfussy, with the necessary indicator LEDs and a reset button but nothing else, and the cooling fan turned out to be reasonably quiet.

This machine comes with a Nikey narrow-border keyboard with the extra Windows 95-specific keys for opening the Start menu or simulating a right mouse click on a highlighted object. It was reasonably robustly built, and we found the moderately positive action acceptable enough, but we did notice that the cable connecting it to the system box was simply too short, forcing you to position the keyboard right up against the front of the machine.

The mouse was a fairly close copy of the Microsoft asymmetrical design that shared many of the original's desirable ergonomic qualities and although it didn't share the Microsoft's overall build quality, it was certainly perfectly usable.

When we came to examine the 14in CTX monitor, we were struck by the similarity it bore to the Viglen Envy. The image diagonal was fractionally smaller at 12.75in, but in all other respects, from overall appearance to picture quality, refresh rate support and the range and type of controls, the two were pretty much identical, which provides a clue as to where Viglen sources its displays from. Unfortunately, the comparison also extended to the fact that Windows once again imposed a flickery 60Hz vertical refresh rate at 800x600 resolution.

The Screen Beat Pro 70 speakers that came with the system

were considerably more imposing affairs than the ones supplied by Viglen. Each twin-cone cabinet could handle a peak 35W signal, and the much larger cabinets and speakers produced a clearer sound with a richer bass response and less intrusive middle.

The audio processing was handled by a 16-bit Soundblaster-compatible Bluepoint card based on an Opti chipset, which was teamed up with a Hitachi quad-speed CD-Rom drive to complete the multimedia line-up.

There was a bit more room inside the

MJN's case, with enough space for three 16-bit Isa cards and two PCI boards, all full-length, except for two of the Isa slots which were shortened to two-thirds length by the processor heat-sink. There were two free 5.25in front opening drive bays under the CD-Rom and room for a second hard disk inside the case, although the Western Digital Caviar drive already present should hopefully be sufficient.

The motherboard was based on Intel's popular Triton support chipset and rated for processor upgrades to 133MHz. In order to get the best out of the 100MHz Pentium, the machine has been fitted with fast EDO (extended data out) memory and pipeline burst secondary cache, both of which work in conjunction with the processor and the Triton chipset to streamline the passage of data through the system.

The actual graphics chipset was the same as that integrated onto the Viglen's motherboard, but this time the S3 Trio64 accelerator was mounted on a Number 9 FX Vision 330 PCI video card with 1Mb of video memory and sockets for an upgrade to provide more colours and better performance at higher resolution.

MJN provides a large illustrated sheet of setup instructions to get you going, and there's also a general guide to using and upgrading PCs as well as the rather more technical (but equally important) motherboard manual.

This time, the software hinged around the excellent Lotus Smartsuite 96, which includes Word Pro (the successor to Ami Pro), the Approach database, Lotus Organizer, the 1-2-3 spreadsheet and Freelance graphics.

As if this collection of professional-level applications wasn't enough, you also get a set of less fully-featured but still entirely useful packages from GSP, including Pressworks DTP, Designworks and Money Matters, and several shareware games including the inimitable Doom.

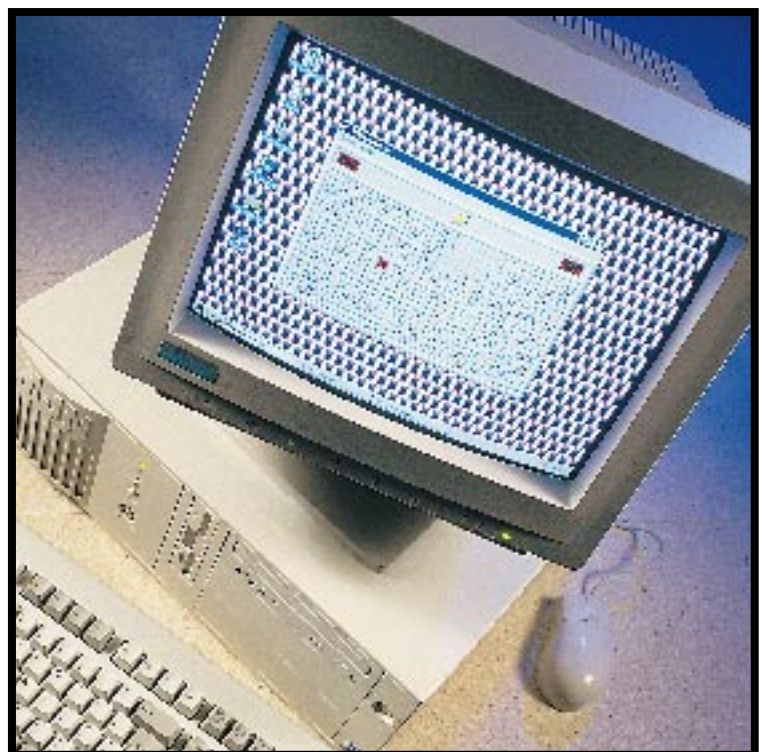
A decent specification, good components and excellent bundled software make the MJN an attractive value-for-money option.

○ £1,293 (including VAT)

○ MJN: 01282 777555

MJN P100 Multimedia Special

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5



Bargain-basement PCs

Escom 486DX4/100 PCI

If you are after something even less expensive than the Viglen or the MJN, but still want enough clout to run Windows 95, you could try a fast 486DX like the Escom. This is based on the AMD 486DX4 (approximately performance-equivalent to its Intel counterpart) clocked internally at 100MHz, and only costs £899.99 VAT-inclusive, which works out at about £766 or thereabouts before the VAT man gets his cut.

For this relatively modest sum, you get 8Mb of standard fast-page Ram (not the speedier EDO variety as supplied with the MJN) and 128Kb of secondary cache as opposed to the more usual helping of 256Kb.

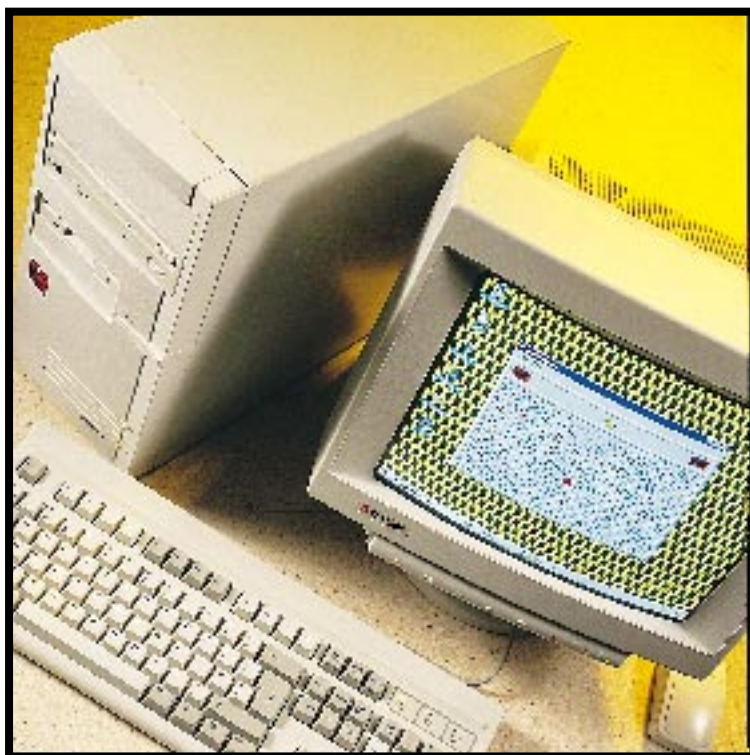
The price also includes a 600Mb hard disk, a quad-speed CD-Rom, external speakers and a certain amount of software, although not as much as you get with the previous two systems.

The Escom is a reasonably attractive mini-tower, thanks to its sharp-edged fascia styling, and it has a quiet fan which doesn't spoil the effect. The usual indicator lights and a reset switch are preset, but otherwise the designers have resisted the temptation to adorn unnecessarily. With any luck, things like 'turbo' buttons (which actually make the machine run at half-speed) and glowing clock speed readouts (see 1970s alarm clock) are finally falling out of fashion. One can but hope.

The peripherals leave a little to be desired, especially the mouse and keyboard, both of which were clearly sourced at the bargain-basement end of the market. The no-name three-button mouse was tacky-looking and felt cheap, as did the lightweight narrow-border keyboard, which had an undercooked, squishy action that we didn't take to at all.

Escom supplies a 14in Tatung monitor with a 13in image diagonal which was generally similar to the Envoy/CTX unit we'd already seen. Once again, the tube was rather curved, especially in the horizontal plane, which produced a visible fishbowl effect, and for the third time on the trot we were stuck with Windows' flickery default 60Hz refresh at 800x600 resolution. It's usually possible to up the refresh rate one way or another, but this is certainly not the sort of technical jiggery-pokery that a novice user would want to be getting involved with.

The speakers were the first set so far to be supplied passive, that's to say without a mains power supply and reliant on the output from



the sound card itself for juice. This disabled what rudimentary tone control was present and reduced the output volume to an extent, but the small cones were pretty average quality-wise anyway with the usual braying, mizzly tone when turned up.

The Escom is moderately expandable, with one two-thirds length and two full-length Isa slots plus two half-length and one two-thirds length PCI slots, although there is one shared backplate where the two

types are adjacent on the main board. If the 600Mb Seagate hard disk isn't enough, you can add another drive in a front-opening 3.5in bay and still have a second 5.25in front-opening bay free.

Like the Viglen, the Escom has a quad-speed Mitsumi CD-Rom drive, and the usual 1Mb of graphics memory (upgradable to 2Mb), although this time it's mounted on a PCI card based on the Avance Logic ALG2301B chipset rather than S3's Trio64.

You aren't deluged with software, but what you get is useful and top quality – to wit, the Windows 95 versions (version 7) of Word and Excel. These constitute a solid start to a business suite, but clearly you will need to assess the additional cost involved in adding whatever else you may require.

Obviously not in the same league as the likes of the MJN for performance, but also considerably cheaper.

The cost of extra software should be considered, however, and while the Escom is okay for a home office setup, avid gamers may be better with a Pentium or speed could be an issue

○ £900 (including VAT)

○ Escom: 0800 665500

Escom 486DX4/100 PCI

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Mesh Classic P75 Multimedia

Mesh's offering came in a desktop case about the same size as the MJN's, with a similarly stolid, blocky look to it. The sides of the fascia were done in a black metal grille – the 'mesh' implication being fairly obvious – and a green LED speed display glared out like a single bad eye from the front. This was rendered doubly useless by the fact that the 'turbo' button whose status it was supposed to indicate was in fact disabled.

Although this machine didn't make a great impression on the looks front it did nevertheless boast the quietest fan of the group, and near-silent running is always a desirable feature.

The rest of the line-up consists of a Cherry keyboard, a Microsoft mouse and a 14in ADI monitor. The keyboard is well enough made, as Cherry kit generally is, but it happened to be the clickless, squishy-action version which may not be ►





universally appealing. As we've already said, there are no flies on the Microsoft mouse, which just leaves the monitor.

This managed a 12.7in image diagonal as there was some ineradicable dead space down either side of the picture when running in SVGA (800x600) mode. The screen curvature was about equivalent to the CTX/Viglen Envy, which is to say it's tolerable but could be flatter, and the general image quality was good, with fairly sharp overall focus and no serious geometrical distortions. This was the first monitor to offer digital controls that actively remember your settings, and also the first with a pincushion correction for getting rid of convex or concave sides to the picture. Even better than all this, though, was the provision of a control applet, thoughtfully with a short-cut onto the Windows desktop so you can find it, that allows you to set your own vertical refresh. At last, a flicker-free 72Hz SVGA display without any rigmarole.

The Classic's multimedia array consists of a Creative Labs Vibra 16 like the one in the Viglen, a quad-speed Goldstar CD-Rom and a pair of Trust Soundwave 30 speakers. These can handle 25W per channel, and are distinguished by having an integrated rather than free-standing mains power supply, which makes them a bit tidier to set up than usual. The sound they produce is reasonably clear, not too mizzly and with enough bass to get by, and there's plenty of power to play with.

There are three Isa and three PCI slots free, although a shared

backplate cutout could force a two-of-one/three-of-the-other choice in an unusually full system. None of the slots are less than two-thirds length and several of them are three-quarter length, so the vast majority of cards should fit without any problems.

In addition to the 850Mb Quantum Trailblazer hard disk there's room for two 5.25in drives and one 3.5in drive, all in front-opening bays, and the motherboard can handle processors up to 166MHz, so all in all the Classic offers a fair amount of expansion/upgrade potential.

The unusual thing about this machine is its so-called shared memory bus architecture. This means that instead of having two lots of Ram, one for the main system and one for the graphics chip-set, the graphics actually uses either 1Mb or 2Mb of main memory. The machine comes with fast EDO Ram, so graphics processing speed isn't unduly affected, but 8Mb of total memory is about the bare minimum you can get away with on an SMBA machine or Windows will start to slow down.

The Mesh costs less than the Viglen, but offers the same bundled software, 300Mb more hard disk space and EDO Ram. The SMBA approach will work best with a bit more main memory, but these days you can get as much as 8Mb for £100

if you shop around, which still leaves the Mesh ahead of the game.

○ £1,157 (including VAT)

○ Mesh: 0181 452 1111

Mesh Classic P75 Multimedia

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Amstrad PC9555i

Given that Amstrad took over Viglen last year, it's interesting to see the level of similarity between the Contender and the PC9555i. Both have the same basic specification of Pentium 75 processor, 256Kb of secondary cache, 8Mb of Ram and 540Mb hard disk, and both are supplied with broadly comparable software bundles. You

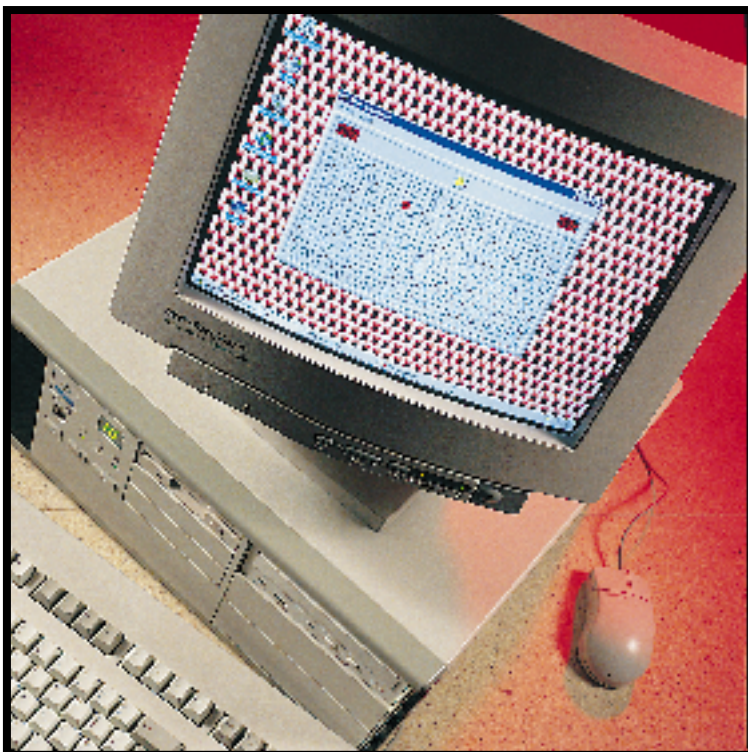
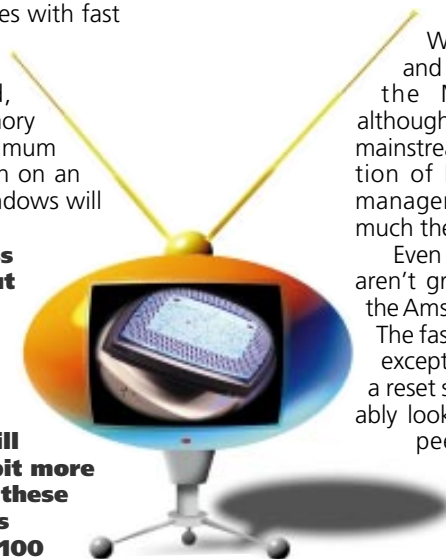
get Wordperfect Works rather than Microsoft Works with the Amstrad, and Links 386 Golf rather than the Microsoft game, but although the choice of titles is less mainstream here (with the exception of Intuit's Quicken money manager) the two selections do much the same things.

Even the slim-ish desktop cases aren't greatly dissimilar, although the Amstrad has a larger footprint.

The fascia is relatively unadorned except for a couple of lights and a reset switch, and it would probably look pleasant enough if you peeled off the plethora of stickers advertising practically every salient point of the machine's spec from the processor to the bus type. Doing this might improve the appearance of the thing, but it wouldn't quieten the fan down, which is a pity as it's a bit intrusive.

The all-plastic, narrow-border keyboard was a light and rather flimsy affair, but the action itself was moderately positive and quite firm, better really than we'd expected from the general feel and appearance of the keyboard. It's accompanied by a low-slung two-button mouse which has a crisp enough click to its buttons but feels decidedly thin and flat compared to the more ergonomically appropriate fat-backed Microsoft type.

The Amstrad-badged 14in monitor had the standard array of analogue sizing and positioning controls and managed a 13in image diagonal on its slightly over-curved screen. If this sounds familiar, that's because this was yet another CTX unit, bringing the total so far in this review to three. The picture was identical to the other CTXs, which is to say accept-





able without being especially noteworthy. As 14in monitors go, we'd give this obviously popular choice about 3 on a 5 scale.

Once again, there was no obvious way in software of overriding the default SVGA resolution 60Hz refresh, so there was a certain amount of flicker that had to be contended with.

On the multimedia side of things, you get a Sony quad-speed CD-Rom drive, a Creative Labs Vibra 16 (as in the Viglen) and a pair of small, single-cone speakers. These can be mains-powered, but as with the Escom, no transformer was included. The sound was exactly as you'd expect from small units, especially operating passively, with no real bass response and too much middle – adding a mains transformer

will improve the situation, but not very much.

As the case isn't especially thick, the expansion slots are mounted on a riser board. There isn't a great deal of flexibility in this respect, with a single full-length PCI slot on one side of the riser and two half-length 16-bit Isas on the other, both of which will be fiddly to fit cards into as the access isn't good. There's little more headroom when it comes to drives, with just one 5.25in front-opening bay up for grabs, which you might need as the 540Mb Seagate hard disk could easily get filled up, especially if you install games on it from CD to speed up loading and level changing time.

The motherboard has an integrated S3 Trio64 graphics controller (again, as in the Viglen) with the normal 1Mb of memory and sockets for a further 1Mb upgrade, and the board itself should take any Pentium up to the 133MHz mark. 256Kb of secondary cache is fitted to help performance along, but once again this is the standard asynchronous type rather than the faster synchronous pipeline burst variety.

Comes with a reasonable bundle of software but it's short on expansion and rather slow for its class.

- £1,181 (including VAT)
- Amstrad: 0990 944944

Amstrad PC9555i

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

Mitac Professional Multimedia P75

With an ex-VAT price of £899, the Mitac is the cheapest Pentium machine in the group, but it doesn't appear to have been squeezed to fit its price tag. It comes with the standard 8Mb-of-Ram and 256Kb-of-secondary-cache configuration, although admittedly both are the older type, a decent-sized 1Gb Seagate hard disk and the ubiquitous 1Mb S3 Trio64 graphics adaptor. It has a quad-speed Sony CD-Rom like the Amstrad, and a comparable 16-bit sound card based on an ESS chip-set (ESS make the audio chip-sets found in just about

every notebook capable of doing more than simply beeping), with only the rather unimpressive speakers falling below

the standards set by the other machines in this review.

The machine is packaged in an unremarkable medium-sized desktop case with a reset button and the necessary sprinkle of status lights at the front and a couple of useful stickers, one bearing the helpline number and the other giving a detailed breakdown of what the various connections at the back are for.

The fan was a borderline case as far as noise went, but otherwise there was nothing amiss here.

We noticed that the keyboard lead was too short, like the one on the MJN, but the keyboard itself was adequate if rather instubstantial, with a medium-weight, reasonably positive but slightly rough-feeling action. The two-button Mitsumi mouse could have done with a slightly stiffer click-action to prevent accidental discharges, but it was large enough to fill the hand comfortably.

The Mitac-badged monitor had the usual 14in tube with a 13in actual image diagonal and, like the others so far, it had a noticeable convex screen.

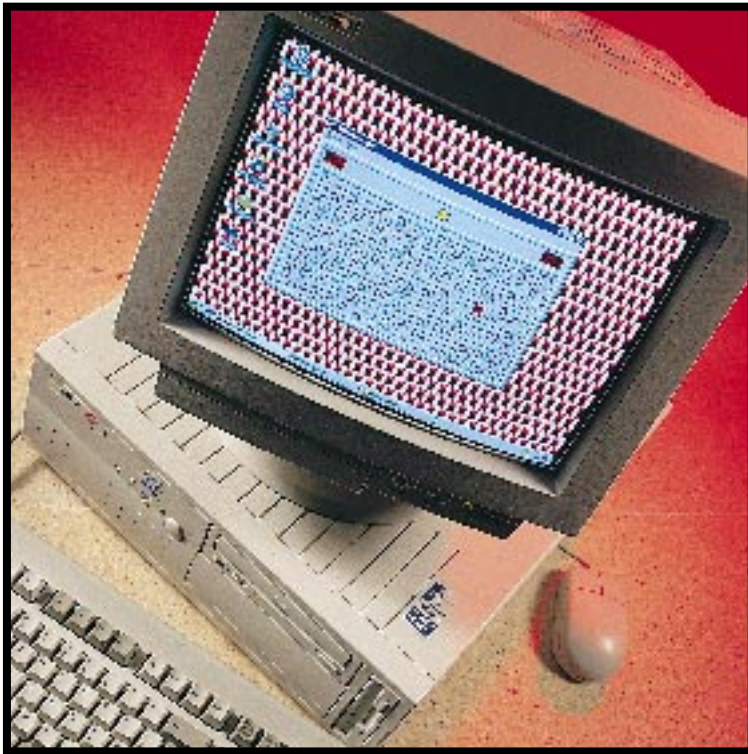
The actual focus was fairly sharp overall, however, and the unit benefited from having digital controls with an on-screen setup menu with options for edge-geometry correction (pincushion and trapezoidal) as well as the normal sizing and positioning adjustments.

For the fifth time so far (the Mesh being the only exception) there was a degree of flicker at 800x600 resolution imposed solely by Windows choosing default settings, not as a result of underspecification in the display itself.

Although the Escom and the Amstrad were both supplied without mains adaptors for their speakers, this was the first machine to come with passive-only speakers which did not offer the option of mains operation.

The speakers themselves were very small and tinny and generally had 'replace me' written all over them, but since a relatively respectable set of active units can be had for £50 or so, this wouldn't destroy the Mitac's price advantage.

Internally, the system is tidy and fairly spacious, although the 5.25in front-opening bay below the CD-Rom drive is the only one in the box. There is more leeway when it comes to cards though, with three 16-bit Isa (two full and one three-quarter length) and two three-quarter length PCI slots up for grabs, and the motherboard can take faster processors as well, so you could take it up to something significantly faster like a P133 in the future.



Mitac has updated its documentation recently, and now provides several non-technical and clearly illustrated booklets aimed at getting the new user up and running without any fuss. Sensibly, one of these is dedicated to the topic of installing a printer. When the system is switched on it loads a Windows shell called Pilot that presents you with a simplified desktop with separate access points for the bundled business software and the childrens' edutainment ware.

Pilot isn't as good as, say, Packard Bell's Navigator, but it should do until you work your way through the Professor Windows tutorial CD and graduate to the main interface itself.

Considering what you get – the discardable speakers notwithstanding – the Mitac is a good-value machine, especially when the quality software bundle is taken into account, and it is also presented with the new user's needs in mind with a shell, helpware and non-technical documentation.

○ £1,056 (including VAT)

○ Mitac: 01952 207200

Mitac Pro Multimedia P75

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

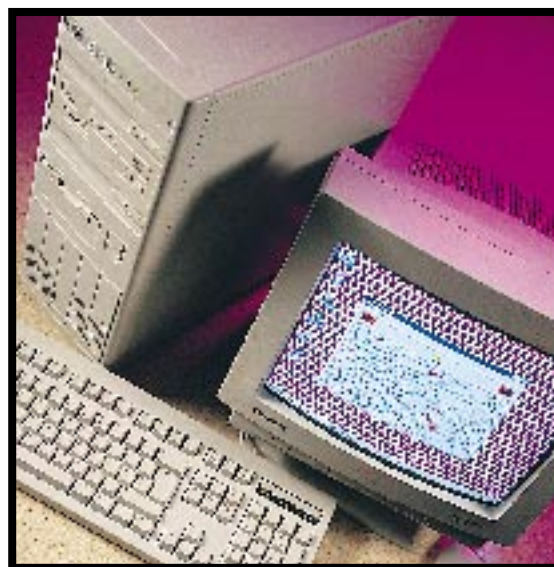
Special Reserve SIXX 8/P100 Multimedia

Special Reserve may be better known to some of you as a discount PC games club, but it has now started building and badging as well as supplying software. The

result, or at least one of the results, is the SIXX 8/P100, which gets its handle from the hex-speed Creative Labs CD-Rom drive staring proudly out from the top half of its midi-tower case.

As the rest of the name indicates, the standard model comes with 8Mb of Ram and a 100MHz Pentium processor, but you also get a really big 1.7Gb hard disk, a Soundblaster Pro 16-bit sound card and yet another 1Mb S3 Trio64-based PCI graphics adaptor, bringing the total to five out of seven with only the Escom's Avance Logic and the Mesh's SiS graphics bucking the trend.

Add good-quality speakers and a choice of two large software bundles too extensive to detail here (see the table for details) and you have more or less got the picture. The ex-VAT price is £1,106, which is more



or less the same as that of the similarly specified MJN, although the MJN's 850Mb hard disk is half the size of the SIXX's.

We were fairly happy with the case, although again the fan was tending towards the loud end of the spectrum of what is acceptable. A midi-tower can be quite a good choice of case size as it tends to offer that bit more expansion potential than a mini-tower, but without the dominating presence of a full two foot-plus tower which might be a little over the top for a domestic setting.

The peripherals were fairly representative of the group as a whole, and consisted of another narrow-border Windows 95 keyboard, an XTech three-button mouse and a Samsung SyncMaster 3Ne 14in monitor.

The keyboard had an action that popped rather than clicked as the keys triggered, but it was pleasingly definite, if a little rattly, while the mouse buttons had a nice crisp break but the body was a bit small and flat for our tastes.

A little fiddling with the monitor's analogue controls produced a 13in diagonal image with straight sides thanks to the provision of pin-cushion correction, but once again the combination of the Trio64 chipset, the lack of a control applet and Windows' inherent cautiousness and inability to determine the optimum settings for either the monitor or the graphics chipset resulted in a flickery 60Hz vertical refresh in SVGA mode. We also noticed a degree of fuzziness at the centre of the screen, which although not serious enough to cause problems with legibility did slightly mar the overall effect.

The active speakers were roughly on a par with those supplied with the MJN and the Mesh, which is to say they were among the better examples in the group, with plenty of volume, an adequate bass response, not too much middle and reasonable overall clarity.

There was indeed more room inside than the average mini-tower yields, with space for four additional drives, two of each size, with only one of the 3.5in bays not opening through the fascia.

Two of the three free Isa slots were full-length, while the other ran to two-thirds length, as did both the empty PCI slots.

Like the MJN, the SIXX had a Triton chip-set motherboard, fast EDO Ram and pipeline burst synchronous secondary cache, making these the only two tested to offer the full complement of go-faster features.

What with the solid performance, whopping software bundles,

Bargain-basement PCs

substantial hard disk and up-to-date technical specification, Special Reserve has little trouble justifying the SIXX's price, especially when compared with slower and less fully-featured machines like the Viglen and the Amstrad, which nevertheless cost the same.

- £1,300 (including VAT)
- Special Reserve: 01279 600204

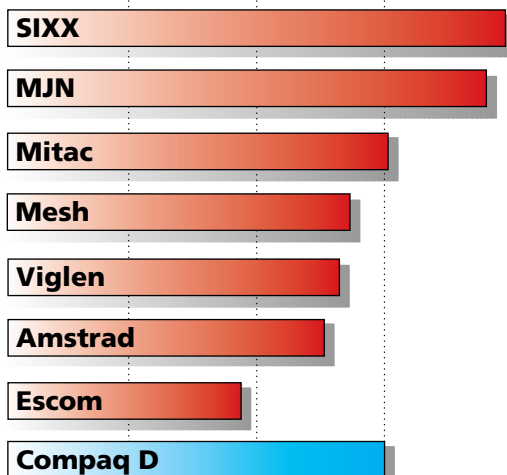
SIXX 8/P100 Multimedia

Performance	1	2	3	4	5
Build quality	1	2	3	4	5
Features	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5

NOTES: NSTL benchmarks from which this chart was generated were performed in the What PC? VNU labs. Performance is measured against a Compaq 486DX4/100. In all tests, a longer bar indicates better system performance.

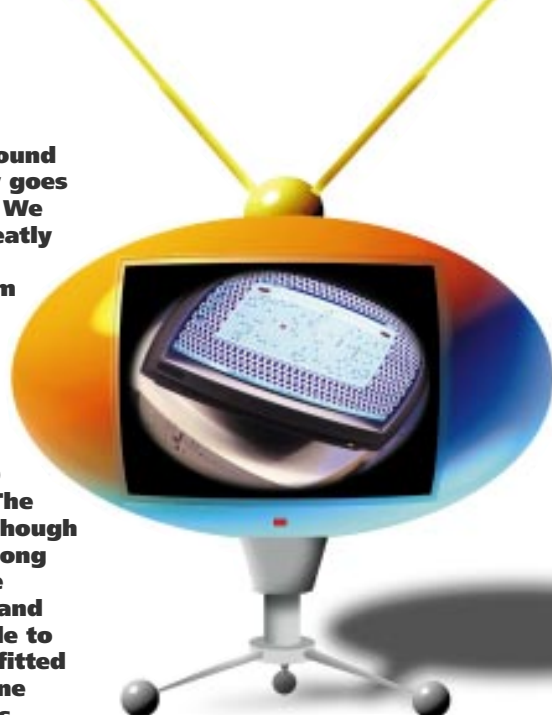


Performance tests



This time around the Best Buy goes to the SIXX. We were not greatly surprised to discover from our labs

benchmarks that the fastest machines were the 100MHz Pentium-based SIXX and MJN, while the slowest was the AMD 486DX4/100 Escom. The SIXX led the field, although not by a particularly long head, and the relative similarity between it and the MJN is attributable to both machines being fitted with EDO Ram, pipeline burst cache and Intel's Triton support chipsets. The SIXX had the faster motherboard and its hard disk pipped the MJN's, which gave it the edge. Speed isn't everything, but the SIXX also had by far the largest hard disk, reasonable quality speakers and an up-to-date hex-speed CD-Rom. Furthermore, it is bundled with a large selection of either games or edutainment which, while not exclusively made up of the latest versions, does still constitute a good start-up library of software.



The MJN most certainly deserves a Recommended as it is also fast, comes with good speakers and a persuasive software bundle based around Lotus's excellent Smartsuite 96, which is way ahead in terms of business functionality compared to the outdated copy of Microsoft Works 3 you get with the SIXX.

Bargain PCs compared

Machine	Processor	Memory	Cache	Hard disk	Bus type	Free slots	Sound card	CD-Rom	Graphics	Monitor
Viglen Contender P5/75	Pentium 75	8Mb EDO	256Kb	540Mb	Isa/PCI	2 Isa; 2 PCI	Soundblaster 16-bit	Mitsumi quad-speed	1Mb D-Ram S3 Trio64 PCI	14in
MJN P100 Multimedia Special	Pentium 100	8Mb EDO	256Kb pipeline burst	850Mb	Isa/PCI	3 Isa; 2 PCI	Blue-point 16-bit	Hitachi quad-speed	Number 9 FX Vision 330 1Mb D-Ram PCI (S3 Trio64)	14in
Escom 486DX4/100 PCI	AMD 486DX4/100	8Mb	128Kb	600Mb	Isa/PCI	3 Isa; 3 PCI	Aztech 16-bit	Mitsumi quad-speed	Avance Logic ALG2301 1Mb D-Ram PCI	14in
Mesh Classic P75 Multimedia	Pentium 75	8Mb EDO	256Kb	850Mb	Isa/PCI	3 Isa; 3 PCI	Soundblaster 16-bit	Goldstar quad-speed	SiS 6205 SMBA 1Mb/2Mb PCI	14in
Amstrad PC9555i	Pentium 75	8Mb	256Kb	540Mb	Isa/PCI	2 Isa; 1 PCI	Soundblaster 16-bit	Sony quad-speed	1Mb D-Ram S3 Trio64 PCI	14in
Mitac Professional Multimedia P75	Pentium 75	8Mb	256Kb	1Gb	Isa/PCI	3 Isa; 2 PCI	ESS 16-bit	Sony quad-speed	1Mb D-Ram S3 Trio64 PCI	14in
Special Reserve SIXX 8/P100 Multimedia	Pentium 100	8Mb EDO	256Kb pipeline burst	1.7Gb	Isa/PCI	3 Isa; 2 PCI	Soundblaster 16-bit	Creative Labs hex-speed	1Mb D-Ram Diamond Stealth PCI	14in

Bundled applications software: Viglen: Windows 95, Works, Money, Scenes, Encarta 96, Golf, Musical Instruments. MJN: Windows 95, Lotus Smartsuite 96, GSP Designworks, Pressworks, Homewise and Money Matters, Pacioli 2000 Business Accounts, shareware games including Doom and Raptor. Escom: Windows 95, Excel 7, Word 7. Mesh: Windows 95, Works, Money, Scenes, Encarta 96, Golf, Musical Instruments. Amstrad: Windows 95, Wordperfect Works v2, Quicken, Encarta 96, Descent, Links 386 Golf. Mitac: Windows 95, Pilot 96 front end, Claris Works 4, Lotus WordPro 96 and Organizer 2.1, Quicken 5, Professor Windows tutorial CD, Hutchinson MM Encyclopedia 96, Arthur's Teacher Trouble, Al Unser Jr's Arcade Racing. Special Reserve: Windows 95, MS Works 3, and a choice of EITHER: (1) MS Publisher and Design, Encarta, Cinemania, Dangerous Creatures, Musical Instruments, Ancient Lands, Bookshelf, Scenes, Golf, Elite - Frontier, Lemmings, Civilisation, OR: (2) Star Trek Next Generation - A Final Unity, EF2000, Championship Manager 2, 11th Hour, Sensible World Of Soccer, Transport Tycoon, Ultimate Doom, Hexen, TFX, Cruise for a Corpse, Operation Stealth, Future Wars, Another World, Flashback.