in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: an eight-speed CD-Rom drive, a Windows 95 tutorial, a data security provider, an ink refilling system for inkjet printers, and a program to restrict children's PC usage, as well as a home designer, a garden designer, and a two-dimensional computer-aided design package

Video Artist

The computer has revolutionised the music industry with its ability to digitally record and manipulate audio information without the need for yards of tape. It's now doing the same with film and, if you want to get in on the act using your video camera, Reveal's Video Artist provides you with the hardware and software with which to do it.

Consisting of an expansion card and editing software, Video Artist can digitally capture video footage from a VCR or video camera, edit it to remove mistakes, and add titles and transitions between scenes. It can also apply special effects, such as adjusting the brightness and contrast and distorting images using filters. Once the footage is complete, it can be saved as a Windows AVI file or re-recorded to video tape.

Although it doesn't take long to achieve some simple editing with Video Artist, it's a serious application and not something to be tinkered with during idle moments. The tersely-written 357-page manual is required reading, as is the rather more accessible guide to making movies on your PC. At the end of the day, though, no matter how easy the package makes video editing, it can't provide style or technique – you need to get that elsewhere.

Video Artist is a powerful and versatile program that provides an easy entry into the world of video editing. However, despite its features, it requires dedication to get the most out of it, so don't expect to become a Stanley Kubrick overnight.

- ○ £445.33 (incl VAT)
- ○ Reveal: 0181 845 7400

Video Artist	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of use				**4**	
Features					**5**
Value for money				**4**	

Autofill 500

With most inkjet printers, when the ink cartridge runs dry, you have to throw it away and buy a new one. Since replacement ink cartridges cost upwards of £20 a go, this seems a little wasteful, and it would make more sense to re-use them. Inkjet printer manufacturers, perhaps unsurprisingly, advise against refilling, but as many people do just that with no ill effects, it makes you wonder.

Unlike other systems that require you to inject ink into the cartridge using a syringe, the mains-powered Autofill 500 completely automates the process. Empty cartridges are locked in position, the lid closed and then refilled with the press of a button. There's no mess, and the device only dispenses as much ink as is needed. Ink is stored in a replaceable cassette, which is good for three refills.

The Autofill 500 works well and is much cleaner than other manual systems. The only unfortunate aspect is that it's only available for HP Deskjet 500 and 600 cartridges. It's not particularly cheap, but you do get a free ink cassette and £5 back for each empty cassette you return to Onyx.

Given the price of HP cartridges, we have calculated that the Autofill 500 will pay for itself after nine refills, saving you money from then on.

If you're happy to go against the manufacturer's advice and refill your cartridges, then the Autofill 500 is a clean and simple way of doing it.

- ○ £117.44 (incl VAT) Replacement cassettes: £41.07 (incl VAT)
- ○ Onyx Associates: 0800 393132

Autofill 500	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of use					**5**
Features					**5**
Value for money				**4**	

Fractal Imager

The World Wide Web has a big problem – graphics files, be they on a Web page or otherwise, take a long time to download. Unfortunately, graphics files are intrinsically large, and compressing can not only reduce their download time but also their quality.

Iterated Systems' Fractal Imager, however, can compress an image file with virtually no degradation. To achieve this, Fractal Imager analyses an image for parts that can be represented as a fractal – a mathematical expression will reproduce the image when evaluated. This is largely irrelevant in day-to-day use; what does matter is that images can be compressed by 80:1 with very little loss of detail. In other words, a 1Mb TIF file becomes a 13Kb FIF (Fractal Image Format) file.

Fractal Imager is extremely simple to use – you simply load the image to be compressed, press the 'compress' button and wait. The compressed image can then be used on a Web page just like any other. The compression ratio can be varied, but most images can be significantly compressed with little or no visual impact.

FIF files do need a separate viewer before they can be seen, but a Netscape-compatible one is available free of charge from the Iterated Systems Web site (http://www.iterated.com).

If you want to use high-quality graphics on your Web pages, or simply want to compress images, then Fractal Imager will astound you with its performance.

- ○ Shareware (registration: £26)
- ○ Iterated Systems: 01734 880261

Fractal Imager	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of use					**5**
Functionality					**5**
Value for money					**5**

Aztech Zeta eight-speed CD-Rom drive

The price of CD-Rom drives seems to be in inverse proportion to their speed. In other words, the faster they get, the cheaper they get. Last year, we looked at some six-speed models that cost well over £300. Aztech's latest eight-speed drive, the Zeta 8x, costs less than half that amount.

The Zeta 8x is an IDE device, so it must be connected to an IDE interface. Most PCs have two IDE interfaces on the motherboard, but it's also possible to connect the drive via one on a sound card. With Windows 95, that's all there is to it as the drive's presence is detected on start-up and the appropriate drivers used. For MS-Dos and Windows 3.1, an installation disk is provided that makes the necessary entries in the CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT files.

The Zeta 8x has an average access time (the time taken to find data on the disc) of about 280 milliseconds and a data transfer rate of 1.2Mb per second. This 50 percent speed increase over a quad-speed drive is not particularly noticeable in general use, but when it comes to installing software, it makes a huge impact. If your PC regularly acts as a clearing house for applications supplied on CD, then the Zeta 8x will drastically reduce the time spent staring at that 'percentage installed' bar.

If you have a quad-speed drive, then you should consider how the speedy Zeta 8x will benefit you before you buy it. However, if you're a first-time buyer, forget quad-speed; this is the one to go for.

- ○ £128.08 (incl VAT)
- ○ Aztech: 01734 814121

Aztech Zeta 8x CD-Rom drive	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of installation					**5**
Performance					**5**
Value for money					**5**

3D Walkthrough Home Designer

This unusual program is aimed at the non-specialist who wants to create 3D computer models of buildings and interiors. These can then be 'walked through' on the computer, viewing things from different angles and under different lighting conditions.
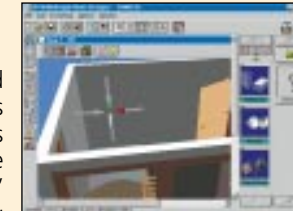
This is a meaty task for any PC, and the recommended minimum of a 486DX2/66 with 8Mb of Ram is certainly not up to it. Yes, you can develop the 3D environment and create useful still-picture views of it, but a walkthrough becomes more of an uncertain stagger.

You don't need a lot of design skills to use the program. Just create walls of the right size, position pre-designed doors and windows, apply textures to the surfaces and then drop in ready-made furniture and fittings. Once this has been done, position some lighting and let the program do the rest.

That it works at all and can be bought at such a low price is amazing, so you have to be tolerant of a few glitches. The installation is a bit flaky and forces you to type in four directory paths so the program can find its support files. Even after this, we found that some textures and objects were unobtainable, including some of those used in the sample walkthroughs.

An interesting program, especially if you're planning a house move, but slightly flawed in this implementation. Perhaps it works better in the original German version.
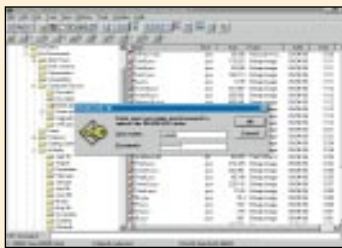
- ○ £49.95 (incl VAT)
- ○ Data Becker UK: 01420 22707

3D Home Designer	1	2	3	4	5
Ease of use			**3**		
Features			**3**		
Value for money			**3**		

Deadlock 96 Lite

Deadlock is promoted as a security protection system for PCs, and this needs a bit of explaining.

This product will not protect your computer against theft, damage or vandalism; what it will do is provide a safe and confidential storage area of up to 10Mb for personal files.

It's extremely simple to set up and use and works with Dos, Windows 95 and older versions of Windows.

This is how it works. A simple installation program, run from the Dos prompt, creates a hidden Deadlock file on the hard disk of the PC. At the same time, a small device driver command is added to one of the computer's start-up files. This makes the hidden Deadlock file act like an extra hard disk of 10Mb capacity. (A more expensive version at £116.33, including VAT, permits much bigger secure disks.)

To access the Deadlock disk, you just type in your password and use it like an ordinary drive. Files saved onto the Deadlock drive are scrambled for security, but there's nothing to prevent a vandal deleting the Deadlock disk and losing all your work. Incidentally, Deadlock is not suitable for use on compressed hard drives.

A simple, safe and elegant solution to one of the problems of data security – maintaining confidentiality; also a convenient way of stopping the kids from accidentally deleting your work.

○ £29.30 (incl VAT)
○ Security Intelligence:
　0171 589 4567

Deadlock 96 Lite					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	**5**
Features	1	2	**3**	4	5
Value for money	1	2	**3**	4	5

PlanIT Letters

This letter-writing software helps you to produce both business and personal letters. You select the type of letter you want from an expanding list box on the left of the screen and the contents are displayed on the right.

Once a letter has been selected, it is displayed in PlanIT's own word processor. Many alternative phrases within the document are shown in blue and you can accept or reject them by using left or right mouse clicks. Addresses and dates can be inserted automatically and, if you're stuck for words, a phrase prompter will make suggestions. There's also a database of useful addresses such as banks, MPs and government authorities.

Once the letter is finished, it can be pasted into a real word processor for spell-checking, fine-tuning, formatting and printing. It all works rather well within its limitations, which are that it's a painfully slow program to load and work with (on a 486DX2/66 with 8Mb of Ram), and that many of the letters leave so much for you to fill in that it would be easier to write them from scratch. The minimum requirements – which we feel are a gross underestimate – are a 386SX/25 with Windows and 4Mb of memory.

If you're absolutely hopeless at writing letters and don't know where to start, this program will be a great help. If you're just looking to improve your letter-writing style, a book would be cheaper and more effective.
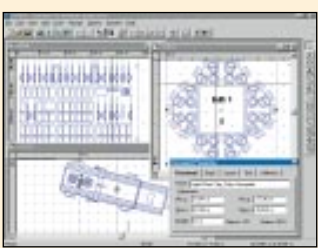
○ £58.74 (incl VAT)
○ Roderick Manhattan:
　0181 875 4444

PlanIT Letters					
Ease of use	1	2	**3**	4	5
Features	1	2	**3**	4	5
Value for money	1	2	**3**	4	5

Stardraw 2D

Stardraw 2D is a two-dimensional Cad (computer-aided design) package for Windows. Although it's suitable for any Cad application, the inclusion of a lighting symbol library makes it ideal for stage-lighting designers who want to produce detailed lighting rig designs. Supplied on floppy disk, Stardraw 2D is dongle-protected – which means that it can only be used if a supplied device (the 'dongle') is plugged into the PC's parallel port.

As is typical with Cad programs, Stardraw allows you to build your design by selecting symbols (such as a circle, a rectangle or an arc) from a toolbar and positioning them at the relevant points on screen. Bezier curves are also implemented and designs can be as simple as randomly placing some objects onto the work area and arranging them by eye, or as complex as diagrams annotated with full measurements and co-ordinates for each object.

Using the supplied lighting symbol library, creating lighting plots is simple enough, and the operation is aided by good presentation and fast responses. In addition to the symbols, Stardraw has a customisable listing of gels (colour filters) which can be applied to objects and used to gauge the colour spread.

For the professional lighting designer, Stardraw 2D offers useful methods of designing lighting sets. However, Stardraw 2D offers little that cannot be had from much cheaper packages.
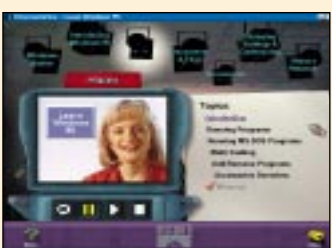
○ £346.63 (incl VAT)
○ Starlite Systems:
　0171 511 4400

Stardraw 2D					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	**5**
Features	1	2	3	**4**	5
Value for money	1	2	**3**	4	5

Learn Windows 95

If Windows 95 was as easy to use as Microsoft would have us believe, then perhaps there wouldn't be so many books, videos and tutorials claiming to make it easier to learn.

Learn Windows 95 follows in the footsteps of similar computer-based 'interactive' tutorials and offers a variety of operational and technique simulations, coupled with lots of hints and tips.

It can also run under Windows 3.1, which is good news if you want to get an idea of how Windows 95 works before you upgrade.

The presentation is faultless. A selection of 'Personal Trainers', portrayed in full-motion video (FMV), guide you through the numerous tip sections and simulations with friendly and informative narration.

Although the viewing of each simulation is non-linear (you can chop and change at will), our biggest criticism is that you cannot rewind during a simulation – merely replay it from the beginning. This would not be a problem if the simulations were short, but each may span several minutes and, if you want to hear or see a particular tip again, you are forced to endure the whole thing once more – very frustrating.

Learn Windows 95 is full of useful information and good tips and is certainly worth watching – but, the trouble is, watch is all that you seem to do.

○ £29.95 (incl VAT)
○ Discoverware:
　0800 413078

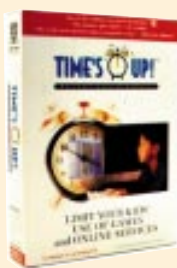| Learn Windows 95					
Ease of use	1	2	3	4	**5**
Presentation	1	2	3	4	**5**
Value for money	1	2	**3**	4	5

Time's Up

Children are infuriating creatures. They convince you to spend lots of money on a PC so they can 'use it for their homework' and, once bought, they spend most of their hours using it for anything but. Now, Time's Up offers you a chance to restore the balance.

Although aimed at restricting your children's game-playing activities, Time's Up offers the means to both monitor and limit the use of any program running under Windows. Everyone who uses the computer is assigned an individual password by the 'Time Manager', and this governs the restrictions that are placed on their particular usage.

By manipulating the many settings, restrictions can range from simply limiting access to a single program, to locking out complete groups of programs. Time limits can also be placed on applications so, for example, Internet access using Netscape can be restricted to ten minutes a day.

Supplied on a single floppy disk, installing Time's Up is quick, and the subsequent setup procedure is exceptionally easy as you are guided clearly through all steps. In operation, the program's time warnings are friendly, and restriction messages are presented with a degree of humour.

An impressive and cleverly executed program that is worth every penny of its low price. Our only criticism is that, any child with an advanced knowledge of Windows or Dos will soon learn to circumnavigate the restrictions it imposes.

○ £19.99 (incl VAT)
○ Roderick Manhattan:
   0181 875 4444

Time's Up

Ease of use	1	2	3	4	**5**
Features	1	2	3	**4**	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	**5**

Geoff Hamilton's Garden Designer

We're a green-fingered bunch at *What PC?*, as is proved by the swathes of flowing greenery in the corner of the office.

Good news then, that we can now hone our horticultural skills with Geoff Hamilton's Garden Designer. With this two-dimensional design package you can create numerous plans of how your garden could look without so much as laying a paving slab.

Starting with a clear lawn, you can place a huge variety of objects in your garden, from a pebble to an articulated lorry, such is the flexibility of this package. There is also an encyclopaedia of plants which contains pictures of around 1,100 specimens and includes information on soil types, lifespans and seasonal usage. Coupled with this is a care calendar which reminds you when you should prune, water and feed your plants.

The control system is a little unusual and will throw you at first – it's not so much 'drag-and-drop' as 'pick-up-manipulate-reposition-and-drop' – but, once you've practised the technique, you'll wonder why more graphics tools don't adopt similar systems.

Whether you're a professional landscape gardener or just a green-fingered novice, you will not be disappointed with Geoff Hamilton's Garden Designer. Excellent value.

○ £19.95 (incl VAT)
○ GSP: 01480 496575

Garden Designer

Ease of use	1	2	3	**4**	5
Features	1	2	3	4	**5**
Value for money	1	2	3	4	**5**