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In close-up this month are **Samsung's TFT SyncMaster monitor**, the latest version of **Corel Draw**, a PDA based on **Psion's EPOC 32** operating system and a continuous speech-recognition program from **IBM**

Close-up

Samsung SyncMaster 400TFT

Flat-panel displays have been a regular feature of science fiction stories since at least the 1950s and TV shows like *Star Trek* have popularised the concept still further. They do exist of course, thanks largely to the demands of notebook PC manufacturers, but buying one to replace your normal monitor is still a little problematic. Things are getting

better though, and monitor giant Samsung is the latest manufacturer to produce a flat-panel display for everyday use.

Unlike early TFT monitors that needed a custom graphics card, the Samsung SyncMaster 400TFT works straight from the box. Incidentally, unlike other monitors, getting the 400TFT out of its box is a breeze – it weighs just 3.8kg and can be picked up easily with one hand.

Samsung monitors have always cut a dash when it came to styling and the 400TFT is no exception. Its most striking feature is its thickness – a little over 2in. The actual footprint is a little larger, since the screen is flexibly attached to a conical base that has built-in stereo speakers and a USB connection. It still takes up significantly less room than an equivalent CRT monitor though, which makes it ideal for situations where space is at a premium.

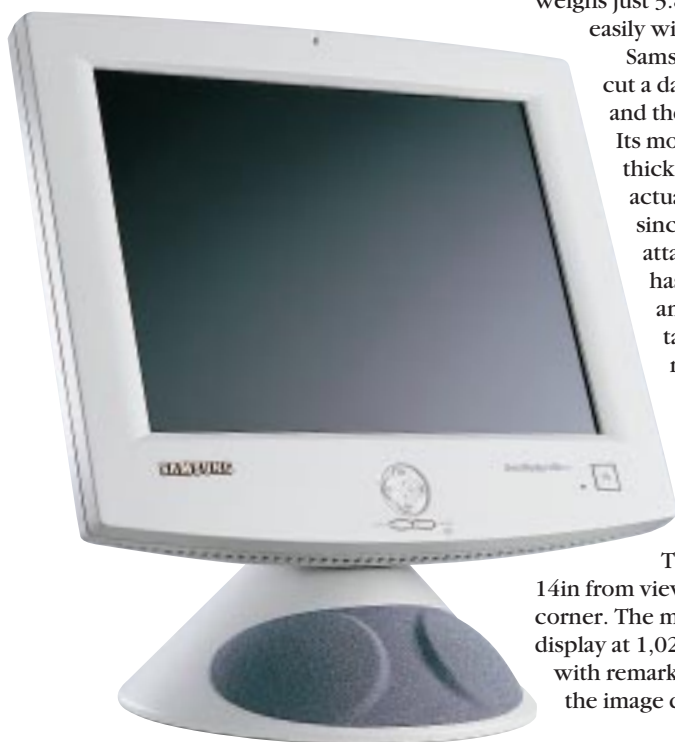
The 400TFT has a 14in screen and, being a TFT, this actually measures 14in from viewable corner to viewable corner. The monitor is designed to display at 1,024 x 768 and it does this with remarkable clarity. Unfortunately, the image does require plenty of

tweaking before this is achieved and the 400TFT's controls are not the easiest to use, despite their on-screen menu.

Sadly, no matter how fantastic the 400TFT's styling and image quality (and both are fantastic), the whole thing falls down when it comes to price. The monitor has an RRP of over £2,500 – enough to buy seven 17in CRT monitors.

The 400TFT is a lovely piece of equipment but priced way, way beyond the reach of most of us. Let's hope the City traders buy hundreds of them and drive down the price...

Julian Prokaza



14in TFT LCD screen
0.28mm dot pitch
1,024x768 maximum resolution
Dimensions (wxdxh): 364x222x396mm
Weight: 3.8kg
£2,583.83 (inc VAT)
Samsung: 0800 521652
www.samsung.com

Samsung SyncMaster 400TFT

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Specifications

Corel Draw 8

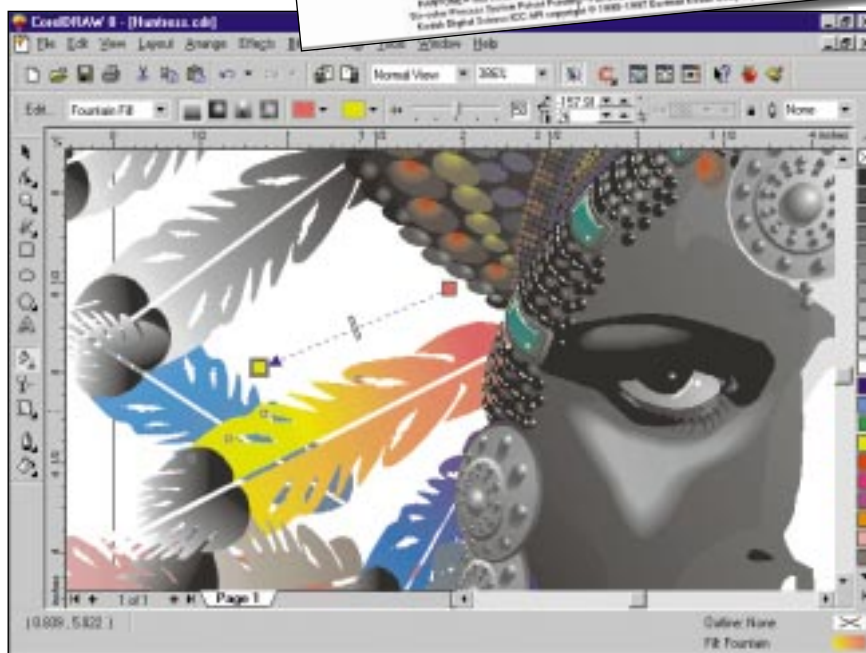
The latest version of the leading PC creative graphics package

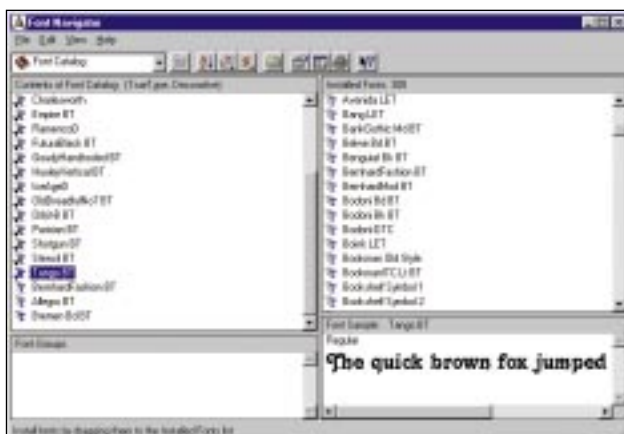
Since its roll-out in 1989, Corel has treated us to a new version of Draw every year save one, and each has seen significant innovation. Corel was the first to use CD-ROM as a distribution media, which meant, back in 1992, that it was able to offer the equivalent of a five-foot stack of floppy disks in the way of applications, clip-art and other resources. After that, the only way was up. Version 6 peaked at four CD-ROMs, but versions 7 and 8 seem to have stabilised at three.

The line-up for version 8 is little changed from last year. Corel Draw itself and PhotoPaint take care of the vector drawing and image processing. Dream 3-D offers 3-D modelling, Texture creates layered textures with lighting effects and OCR-Trace converts bitmaps to vectors and scanned documents into editable text. Other supporting utilities include scanning, colour hardware management, archiving, scripting and wizards for printing double-sided documents and preparing files for image-setting bureaux. There's also a font manager in charge of the 1,000 typefaces and the clip-art collection now tops 40,000 items.

The first immediate difference with version 8 is the 'flat look' interface, as seen in the current versions of MS Office and Internet Explorer, with buttons and controls that become three-dimensional as you move the pointer over them. Though this is really only window-dressing, there's further 'Office compatibility' in terms of Intellimouse support and you can use the centre wheel to zoom and pan in a drawing. Another major change to the interface is the advent of Dockers. Way back in version 3, Roll-ups saw the light of day. Rather than opening and closing dialog boxes to get an effect or set options, these boxes stayed open and active all the time. To save space, they rolled-up into their own title bar with a click and could be placed anywhere on the screen. These soon became a victim of their own success and by version 6, there were 30 of the things. Version 7 kept all but two of them but replaced much of their functionality with the context-sensitive Property Bar, which offered multiple options for the current tool or selected object.

Like roll-ups, Dockers can be expanded or contracted, but the difference is that they can be docked at the side of the screen, with the image area shifting to suit. They stack together into





tabbed pages and the whole stack can be minimised. The big advantage is that they don't get in the way of the drawing – or at least, that's the idea. In practice they are rather awkward to use and it can be difficult to get them to stack properly as some, such as the 'Object properties', are just the wrong shape to fit neatly together. Hence it's possible – and all too easy – to cover the entire screen with Dockers, which was the problem with roll-ups in the first place. Furthermore, every time a Docker is opened or closed, the drawing is resized, which takes time.

Another interface change is far subtler. In previous versions, if you wanted to draw shapes, you clicked on the appropriate tool and got to work. If you then wanted to move or re-size a shape, you had to go back to the toolbox and select the arrow selection tool. No more. With the drawing tool still active, you can click on any object to select it, release the button, then grab its handles or nodes for moving or editing. Click and drag in one motion and you're back to

drawing shapes. It sounds a small thing but it saves a phenomenal amount of mouse movement to and from the toolbox. Another welcome improvement is that it's now easier to select from a stack of objects. Previously, this involved either much frustrating trial and error, or hitting the Tab key to cycle through every object

on the page. Now, you simply hold down the Alt key as you click and the selection cycles through the overlapping items.

Last year saw the introduction of interactive tools. You could control blends, fills and transparency effects by manipulating handles and dragging colours from the palette directly on the drawing, rather than via a dialog or roll-up. This year's model goes further with interactive envelope editing, where you can bend text like putty, create shadows and extrude 2D shapes into 3D ones. All these are new ways of doing old things but there are also some brand-new interactive distortion tools. The Zipper adds a zigzag edge to an object, the Push-Pull curves segments of a shape and the Twister does just as its name suggests. The beauty of it is that it's all finely adjustable and asymmetric, so you can get very organic shapes just by pulling the handles about.

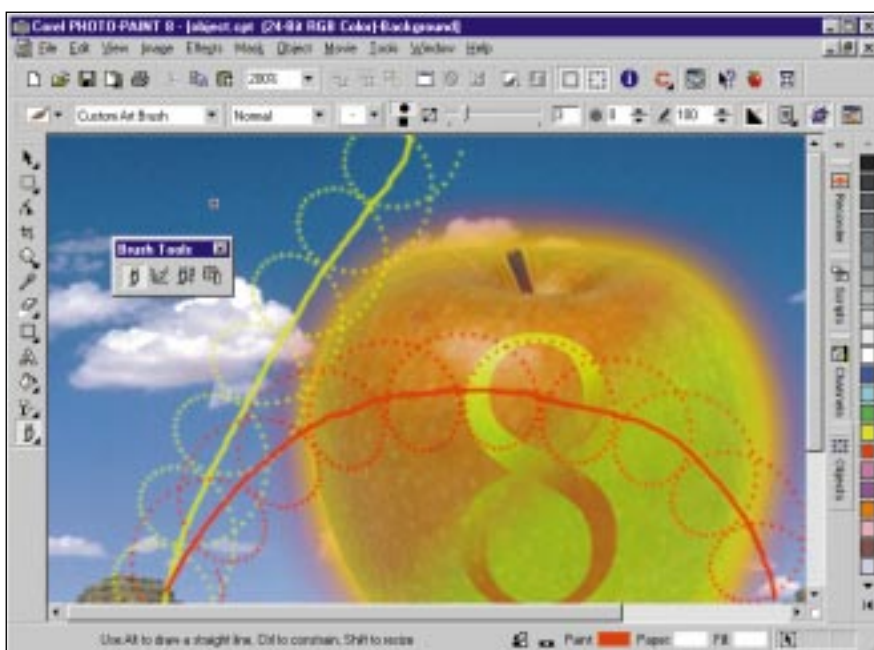
Version 8 also brings finer control over colour – hold down the Control key as you click on the palette and colour is

added in gradually stronger tints. Duplicating objects has been improved too – if you duplicate an object then move the copy, subsequent duplications will remember the new relationship, which makes it much easier to create repeating patterns. There's more for Web page designers, including the facility to include Java applets and other objects, and a 'make HTML compatible' command that will remove formatting not supported by Web browsers. As for performance, we've still to be convinced. Although Corel claims that new techniques speed up partial screen redrawing (for instance, when you add or delete an object from the screen), our impression was that overall speed wasn't up to version 7.

PhotoPaint has the same interface changes – including Dockers – and several new features, including image stitching to create panoramas from scanned photos, and 'proxy' editing that speeds up processing by working on a low-resolution copy of an image. On the fun side, there's a new Orbit effect that changes ordinary brushstrokes into DNA-type spirals and Web designers can now create animated GIFs.

Despite the new interactive tools and greater drawing flexibility, version 8 of Corel Draw is not as a compelling an upgrade as earlier releases.

Tim Nott



New MS Office-style look and feel

New interactive distortion tools

New Dockers provide grouped dialogs

1,000 fonts and 40,000 clip-art images

Enhanced selection flexibility speeds up drawing

New proxy imaging and orbit effect in PhotoPaint

More for Web designers all-round

£464 (inc VAT)

Upgrade: £269 (inc VAT)

Corel: 0800 581028

www.corel.com

Corel Draw 8

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Pentium 90, 16Mb of RAM, 80Mb of hard disk space.

Gateway 2000 Solo 2300

Despite its whimsical advertising and offbeat, Friesian-patterned packaging, Gateway 2000 is a level-headed organisation and the Solo 2300 is a sensible notebook. Its 200MHz Pentium Mobile processor, 32Mb of memory and 4Gb hard disk provide a sound basis for business applications, without driving the price sky high.

The build quality is good overall and the design incorporates the now-standard multipurpose bay which can be used either for the floppy drive or for the not-especially fast 7/11x CD-ROM. Sadly, you can't use the bay for a second battery but the floppy drive can be run externally – once you've paid £8 for an adaptor cable.

The machine is reasonably slim at 47mm with the lid shut and weighs 3.2kg, which is about right for a notebook like this. It has a 12.1in screen which operates at 800x600 resolution in up to 262,144

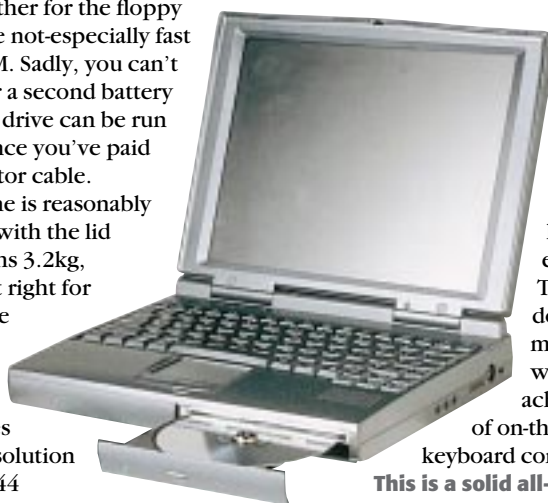
colours, which is more than enough for convincing photographic image reproduction. The screen isn't as large or as resolution-capable as the latest generation of panels but this resolution/colour depth combination is a comfortable and fairly practical one.

You get 16-bit audio with playback via a pair of rather average-sounding speakers set into the palmrest or through the Koss headphones included in the bundle. Other extras are the 33.6Kbits/s PC Card

modem and Microsoft Office 97 Small Business Edition.

The Lithium Ion battery lasts for around three hours with moderate usage. There's no Windows-based power management software but you can achieve a fair degree of on-the-fly control with keyboard commands.

This is a solid all-rounder that



offers middleweight features and performance at a competitive, though not compelling price. Dominic Bucknall

200MHz Pentium Mobile MMX processor
32Mb of SDRAM
4Gb removable IBM UltraDMA hard disk
Removable 7-11x TEAC CD-ROM
2Mb NeoMagic 128XD graphics
12.1in TFT SVGA screen (18-bit colour max)
Yamaha OPL3-SAx 16-bit audio
33.6Kbits/s PC Card modem
Office 97 SBE, Encarta 97, Money 97
£2,936 (inc VAT)

Gateway 2000: 0800 362000
www.gateway2000.co.uk

Gateway 2000 Solo 2300 SK5-200 LS

	★	★	★	★	★
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Specifications

CreataCard Gold version 2

Most of us enjoy receiving cards on our birthdays and other special occasions but finding cards to send to others is marginally less entertaining. Using MicroGrafx's CreataCard, you can avoid that time-consuming and often expensive chore by designing your own card, adding an appropriate message and printing it out in colour.

CreataCard uses a cartoon-style interface and has a wide selection of greetings cards, signs, certificates, stationery, envelopes, business cards, invitations, gift tags and labels. You can create your own designs from scratch but the supplied ones are so good that you probably won't want to. Several of the designs also allow you to add photographs, either scanned or from files or a digital camera.

Many of CreataCard's greetings cards come supplied with a message and some have a selection from which you can choose. You can also add your own text



to cards and there's full control over the size, colour and type of font.

Unusually for a greeting card creator program, CreataCard also comes with an address book. This can be used to print one-off addresses or whole sets of individually addressed labels with the mail merge function, and forgetful types can even be reminded of important dates with the Forget-me-Not feature.

Several additional packs of card designs are included on the CD but these have to be 'unlocked' before you can use

them. This entails a phone call to the USA and a credit card payment in dollars but Micrograftx hopes to have a UK number available soon.

Micrograftx CreataCard is a joy to use and so easy that most people will be able to produce their own greetings cards almost instantly. Steve Cotterell

Over 10,000 projects and designs
Includes address book and reminder diary
Extra designs can be unlocked on CD or downloaded from the Web
£39.95 (inc VAT)

Micrograftx: 01483 747526
www.creatacard.com

CreataCard Gold version 2

	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 22Mb of hard disk space.

Specifications

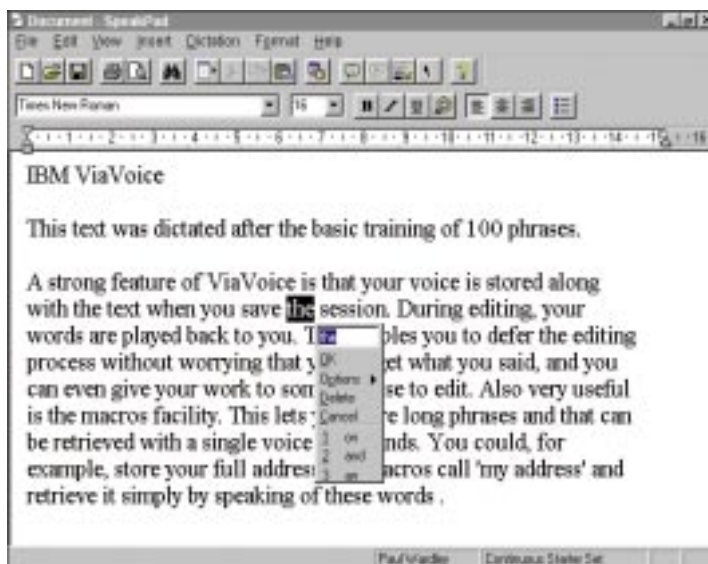
IBM ViaVoice

A program that enables you to speak to your PC and have your words turned into editable text

You wait years (literally) for a continuous speech recognition program and then two come along together. Although IBM's ViaVoice is in many ways similar to Dragon's NaturallySpeaking (see January issue), it costs less and offers a number of additional features.

One thing both programs have in common is that they won't run on yesterday's technology. ViaVoice requires at least a 150MHz Pentium MMX processor, 32Mb of memory and 120Mb of hard disk space. Having a faster processor doesn't make the program any more accurate but it does improve the speed at which the words you speak are recognised.

You dictate into a program called IBM SpeakPad but ViaVoice may also be



compose sentences and if so, ViaVoice will learn the way you use words in context and thereby improve its recognition accuracy.

A strong feature of ViaVoice is that your voice is stored along with the text when you save a session, and during editing, your words are played back to you. This enables you to defer the editing process without worrying that you'll forget what you said and you can even give your work to someone else to edit.

Also very useful is the macro facility. This lets you store long phrases that can be retrieved with a single

voice command. You could, for example, store your full address to a macro called 'my address' and retrieve it simply by speaking these words.

In most respects ViaVoice is superior to NaturallySpeaking but this doesn't mean it's the better buy. Correcting misrecognised words in ViaVoice is done with the mouse and keyboard, whereas NaturallySpeaking includes voice-controlled editing facilities. The ViaVoice technique is easier and more effective but NaturallySpeaking is more suitable for those who have difficulty using conventional input devices.

Both programs include a headset microphone. The one supplied with NaturallySpeaking incorporates a battery booster box for use with sound cards with insufficient power in their microphone jacks. A surprising number of sound cards are like this and, rather inconveniently, you have to order the booster box for ViaVoice over the phone and then send off a cheque for £13.78. This is still a fair price and even with a battery booster, ViaVoice costs £85 less than NaturallySpeaking but you won't necessarily be able to use it straight out of the box.

ViaVoice is an impressive program in every way. It's easy to use and highly effective, and our only real criticism is that there's no printed manual and the online help is disorganised. Paul Wardley

Specifications

Continuous speech recognition

Can be used by more than one person

Dictation speeds of up to 140 words per minute

Installation and initial training take around two hours

30,000 word base vocabulary plus 34,000-word personal dictionary

Noise-cancelling microphone supplied

£99.99 (inc VAT)

IBM: 01705 492249

IBM ViaVoice

Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: Pentium 166 or 150MMX PC, Windows 95, 32Mb of RAM, CD-ROM drive, 120Mb of hard disk space, 16-bit sound card.

Geofox-One

A new entrant to the PDA market, built around Psion's EPOC 32 operating system

Given the sheer number of different PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) that are available, another one from an unknown company may seem like nothing to get excited about. On the surface though, the Geofox-One is very exciting indeed, as it's the first non-Psion PDA to be built around Psion software.

Rather than develop the Geofox-One completely from scratch, Cambridge-based Geofox opted to use the Psion's EPOC 32 operating system (as seen in the Series 5). The similarity ends there though. The Series 5 and Geofox-One are completely software compatible but Geofox has taken a different approach to designing the hardware.

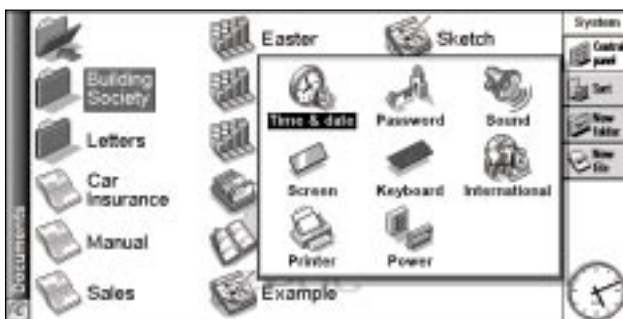
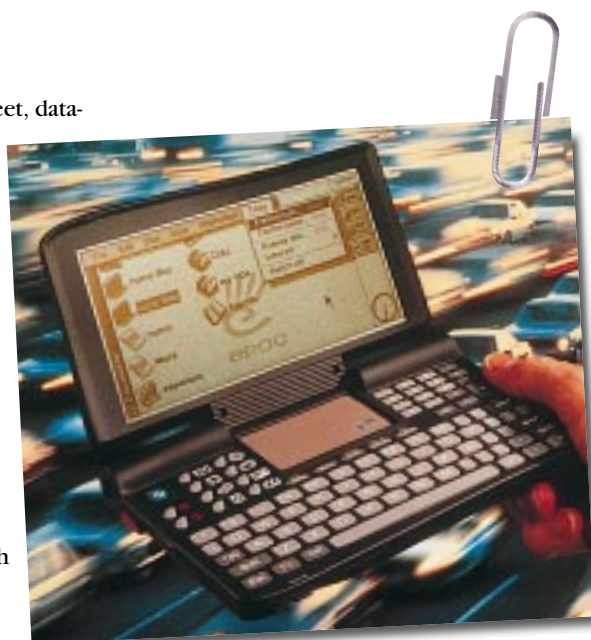
First off, the Geofox may be the thinnest PDA we've ever seen but it's also the largest and certainly can't be trousered in the same satisfying way as a smaller machine. Open the clamshell lid and you see the reason for this large footprint – a hefty 640x320 LCD screen with a diagonal measurement of almost 7in – the largest fitted to any PDA.

Geofox has sensibly opted to abandon the Series 5's touchscreen idea, resulting in a clear display with good contrast. The absence of a pen also means there's one less thing to lose and the Geofox-One instead has a trackpad for pointing. This is easy enough to use but didn't seem particularly sensitive. It's also awkward because it's above the keyboard rather than below, as on most notebooks.

The extra space also means there's room for a separate numeric keypad to the right of the touchpad and a series of application start buttons to the right. It's on the keyboard itself that you'll spend most of your time though, and frankly, it's dreadful. The soft rubber keys are reminiscent of those on a ZX-81 and have almost no feel to them, making it difficult to know if your keypress has been registered. There's also precious little space between keys and putting the Escape key at the bottom left of the keyboard when everyone else has it at top left is crazy.

A word processor, spreadsheet, database, diary and sketchpad come as part of EPOC 32 and although not beyond criticism, they are fairly powerful. Although essentially the same as the Series 5's, the applications do take full advantage of the extra screen resolution. A bug that afflicted the Series 5's spreadsheet (the inability to enter certain times correctly) has also been fixed but there's still no Sort function.

If you buy the Professional model (both this and the standard machines are available with either 4 or 16Mb of RAM), you also get a PC Card modem and mains adaptor that are normally



optional accessories. With these, you can use the Message and Web applications to send e-mail and surf the Internet, providing you have an account with an Internet Service Provider.

Unfortunately, what lets the Geofox-One down is build quality. We saw two pre-production models (the first one broke within hours of receiving it) and one production machine. The lid flexes in a worrying fashion and we're sceptical about its ability to protect the screen from damage in the long term. Our machines were also prone to unexplained losses of power and we assume this was due to the power connection breaking when the case flexed. **The Geofox-One is an interesting idea that is let down badly by its implementation. The screen is good and the price competitive but the appalling keyboard and flimsy build mean there's no compelling reason to buy it.** John Sabine

18.4MHz ARM RISC processor

4 or 16Mb of RAM

8Mb of ROM

94-key keyboard

640x320 screen

Touchpad

Word processor, spreadsheet, database and agenda application

Bombs and chess games

En Route route planner

PC connectivity software

4Mb standard: £435

16Mb standard: £565

4Mb Professional: £605

16Mb Professional: £735
(all prices inc VAT)

Geofox: 0845 844 0109

www.geofox.com

Geofox-One

Geofox-One					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Specifications

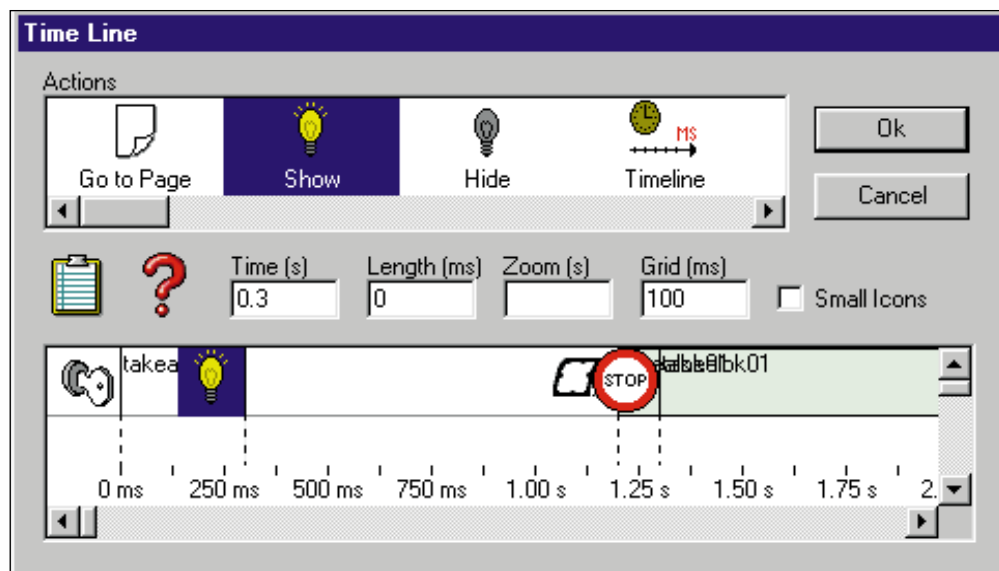
Mediator Pro

A multimedia authoring tool for creating and publishing business presentations, slide shows and training materials

We first looked at Mediator last year and its ease of use and fair lick of speed managed to impress us. Now, developer MatchWare has enhanced many aspects of the product and added a host of new features.

Perhaps the first thing to note is the tiny amount of hard disk space that a usable installation occupies. Given that programs regularly need dozens of megabytes of storage, Mediator's 15Mb requirement seems comparatively measly. However, don't for a second think this means a lack of functionality. The protean nature of presentations demands first and foremost a versatile set of tools and that's exactly what Mediator offers. Multimedia fripperies, such as clip-art and audio clips, are relegated to the CD-ROM – if you want them, you can pull them off.

Like a blank canvas pitched on an easel, Mediator's screen presents an



empty area on which to compose your presentational magnum opus. The screen is not completely bare – a floating toolbar decorates a small area and its nine buttons give access to the program's most useful functions.

Ordinarily, the first thing to do when building a presentation is put a few objects on a page. In Mediator, these can be anything from simple rectangles to scrollable list boxes and they are positioned and sized by simply dragging an 'elastic' template directly on to the work area. Objects can be resized or moved easily and there's no upper limit on how many can be placed on each page.

With an object in place, an 'event' can be attached to it and this is when the fun really starts. An event is simply a trigger for an action – click a button object, for example, and the action might be to play a sound. The actions are too numerous to mention but they include mainstays like animations, playing video clips and text effects. Mediator offers an intuitive flowchart-style system for piecing together these event/action strings and each element can be simply dragged and dropped into place.

Perhaps the strongest of Mediator's new features is the Time Line. This remarkably useful tool enables any number of events to be triggered simultaneously and at any point during the run-through of the presentation – a

definite improvement over the somewhat serial structure imposed by the previous version. Even more impressive is the fact that you can configure as many Time Lines as you want, meaning presentations can be truly dynamic. There is a downside to all this functionality however, because the Time Line dialog box can become very cluttered, very quickly. Placing several events within a few milliseconds of each other on a Time Line, which is necessary for multiple triggering, makes distinguishing between them squint-inducing work.

Of course, all this would be for nothing if you could not display the fruits of your labour to a wider audience but, fortunately, there are several ways to do it. The simplest method is to run the presentation within Mediator, though generally this would only be necessary for testing finished or semi-finished projects. A better way is to create a 'runtime' file, which then allows the presentation to run free from Mediator's shackles. In another new addition, multimedia-rich pages can be posted on a Web site and viewed by anyone who has downloaded the necessary plug-in from MatchWare's home page.

As fast as before and positively dripping with features, Mediator is a difficult product to criticise. However, as good as it is, the program is not worth the £233 asking price.

Scott Colvey ➤➤

Specifications

Simple event/action system
Time Line enabling multiple-event triggering
HTML Wizard allows inclusion of multimedia material on Web sites
Animation plotting
ODBC support

Price £233.83 (inc VAT)

MatchWare: 0181 940 9700

www.mwin.com

Mediator Pro					
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 386 PC, Windows 3.1x, VGA graphics card, 8Mb of RAM.

SimpleStation

PC Cards may be a convenient solution when it comes to notebook PC peripherals but hand one to a desktop owner and you'll get a blank look. Desktop PCs can't handle PC Cards and it's galling to have to buy peripherals for both desktops and notebooks.

Fit a SimpleStation to your desktop PC



though, and you can stop this expensive doubling up of devices. The idea is simple – it's a PC Card adaptor for desktop PCs.

The system consists of an ISA expansion card and cradle that slots into a 3.5in or 5.25in drive bay. To install, fit the ISA card into a free slot, slide the cradle into a free bay and connect the two with the supplied ribbon cables. With Windows 95, that's all there is to it but a driver disk is supplied for Windows 3.x users.

The cradle provides two slots, for

either two Type II PC Cards or one Type III. Operation is just as on a notebook – push a card in to use it, press one of the buttons to eject it. Windows 95's plug and play PC Card management made it effortless to use the SimpleStation and every PC Card we tried worked faultlessly.

Like all brilliant ideas, the SimpleStation lives up to its name. It's perfect if you have both desktop and notebook PCs, or just want the easy swapability PC Cards offer.

Julian Prokaza

Specifications

Internal adaptor provides two Type II PC Card slots

No external power required

Plug and Play operation with Windows 95

£90 (inc VAT)

Simple Technology: 01355 354620
www.simpletech.com

SimpleStation

Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: Free ISA slot, free 3.5in or 5.25in drive bay.

WinDelete 97

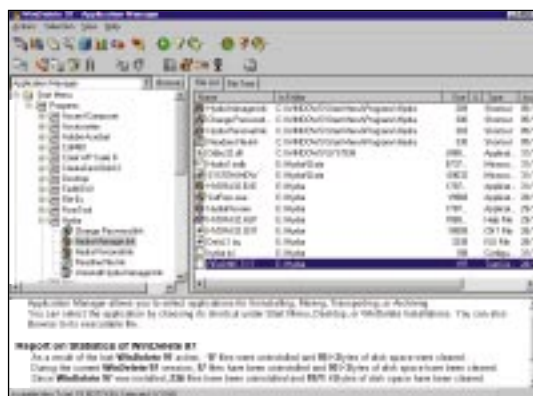
Although many Windows applications contain an uninstall option, many don't and because programs tend to scatter their files all over the place, manual deletion usually leaves something behind. Routine PC house-

keeping can keep this debris to a minimum but deleting files can be risky, which is where WinDelete 97 comes in.

To get the most out of WinDelete, you should use it to monitor all software installations and Internet downloads. This makes a log of all files that are added or altered during an installation, making their eventual removal easier. Not everyone will remember to use the installation monitor, but WinDelete can also attempt to eradicate programs installed without it.

The Application Manager lets you uninstall, archive and move applications on a PC, or shift them onto floppies for transportation to another machine. Using the Internet Manager, you can remove files that have been downloaded when browsing the Web. The Duplicate File Finder also finds files for deletion but beware – different applications from the same vendor can use identical files that need to be in more than one place.

The Debris Finder scans your drive for unused shortcuts, unwanted DLLs, old backup and temporary files that are no



longer needed and the Cleanup Wizard offers an easy way to do this routine housekeeping. If you're uncertain about deleting files though, they can be archived should you discover that you need them after all.

As always with this type of software, WinDelete 97 needs to be used with care and you must think carefully before agreeing to any of the changes it proposes. The program isn't foolproof and files that are needed can still be deleted. **WinDelete 97 is very useful when it comes to routine hard disk maintenance. Use with care though.**

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Uninstalls, moves and archives applications

Finds and deletes redundant and stray files

Manages Internet plug-ins, ActiveX controls and downloads

Bonus software includes virus protection, zip file and hardware optimisation utilities

£34.99 (inc VAT)

IMSI: 0181 581 2000
www.imsiuk.co.uk

WinDelete 97

Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 5Mb of hard disk space.

HP Pavilion 8165

A mid-range multimedia PC designed to be easy to use and look great in your living room

When it comes to PCs, Hewlett-Packard is the Vivienne Westwood of the industry. Other suppliers package their PCs in dull grey boxes but HP has always been more radical. The Pavilion 8165 is a classic example – curves abound and everything is painted in various shades of... grey. Not a major departure then but whether you love or hate the 8165, you can't ignore it.

Setting up the 8165 is simplicity itself. The user guide is very well written and the colour-coded leads and sockets make it virtually impossible to plug something in the wrong place. There are also welcome booklets on how to take the cover off the PC (a little complicated) and how to set up the computer in your home for maximum comfort and ease of use. The only disappointment was the blurry photocopied Windows 95 manual.

HP supplies a good range of software with the 8165, including productivity and educational applications, though we were disappointed to see that the original CDs are not included for some of the titles. One of the most useful utilities for new and experienced users alike is the PC User's Pocket Dictionary, which

gives plain English definitions of computer jargon. The good news continues in the form of Personal Guide – an easy way to access the main features of the PC for those unfamiliar with Windows 95.

There is always the possibility that you are going to upgrade your PC in the future, so we held our breath and crossed our fingers when we delved into the interior of the 8165. The good news is that there is plenty of room for extra equipment – four spare slots for expansion cards and four empty drive bays for devices like CD recorders and photo scanners. The bad news with the drive bays is that adding an extra device will damage the PC's looks, because part of the plastic fronting has to be permanently removed.

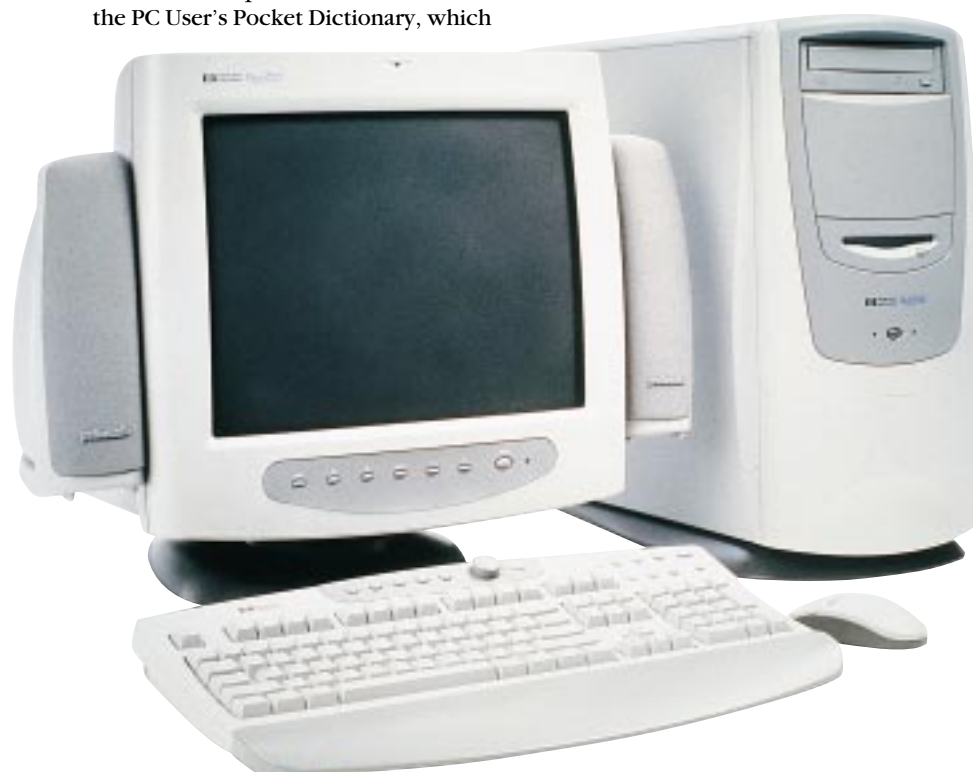
The 4Gb Bigfoot hard drive is ample for most people's needs, while music and sound effects are provided by an unbranded wavetable sound card and speakers which fit neatly to the sides of the monitor. The monitor is a 15in model with a reasonable 13.7in viewable area and the picture (running at 800x600 resolution) is steady and clear. Unfortu-

nately, when unpacked, the system was set up for a 17in display and Windows 95 offered a number of options not supported by a 15in model, which could conceivably damage the monitor. Secondly, step up the resolution to 1,024x768 and the monitor can only manage a flickery 60Hz refresh rate, which means headaches all round.

The ATI graphics card is integrated onto the 8165's motherboard but although it performs reasonably well, it's outclassed by the latest generation of graphics cards. If the monitor was capable of running at 1,024x768 resolution, we would be concerned that the 2Mb video memory was inadequate but it is something of a moot point. However, if you were to use a better monitor with this system, you might run into some problems as you can't upgrade the graphics memory.

A great-looking PC built from average components with a badly-specified monitor. It's easy to use but the pros outweigh the cons as far as we're concerned.

Adam Evans



Specifications

Intel 233MMX processor
32Mb of EDO RAM
4Gb hard disk
ATI 32 RAGE II+ graphics card
24x Max CD-ROM drive
K56Flex modem
Wavetable sound card
15in Hewlett Packard M50 multimedia monitor

£1,899 (inc VAT)

Hewlett-Packard: 0990 474747
www.hp.com

Hewlett-Packard Pavilion 8165

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

KT Micro AGP PC

One of the first PCs to combine the Pentium II Accelerated Graphics Port with a standard Socket 7 motherboard

When Intel introduced the Pentium II processor, the internal design of PCs effectively split in two. Entry-level and mid-range machines stuck with the standard Pentium MMX processor that sat in the Socket 7 processor mount, whereas high-end systems used the Pentium II with its single-edge contact (SEC) module.

Most Pentium II systems also have AGP (an Accelerated Graphics Port), which is essentially a fast communications channel between the processor and the graphics card, designed to speed up graphics performance, particularly in the 3D graphics department.

KT Computers' Micro AGP is among the first of a hybrid type of PC that combines the relatively low cost of a Socket 7-based processor (Pentium MMX, AMD or Cyrix) with the enhanced 3D graphics performance available through AGP.

None of this is apparent from the outside and the KT Micro AGP looks fairly ordinary. The PC's case is designed in such a way that although you can easily get at the expansion slots, the processor socket and memory slots are hidden behind a sheet of metal. This is less than ideal as it will make memory and processor upgrades fiddly. There's room for three more drives (two 5.25in and one 3.5in, all in front-opening bays),

though with the 3.2Gb UltraDMA Quantum Fireball hard disk and 24x Hitachi CD-ROM, you may not need to worry too much about this unless you want to add a tape backup device.

There are three expansion cards in the machine, leaving one ISA and four PCI slots free. The 4Mb Diamond Viper V330 graphics card sits at the top in the AGP slot and the Creative Labs AWE 64 Value wavetable sound card and modem are at the bottom in the ISA slots. A modem is increasingly becoming an essential part of any PC, and the Micro AGP comes with a 56K model as standard. The only problem was that when the machine was started up and Windows completed its self-installation, it didn't spot the modem, leaving you to finish the job yourself. The modem's quick installation guide details what to do but inexperienced users might find this all a bit much.

The machine comes with a 15in Sony Trinitron monitor, which managed a respectable 14in viewable image diagonal. Even so, like all 15in units, it gives its best at 800x600 resolution, which it can display with a rock-steady 102Hz refresh rate. The picture was sharp, with the characteristic flatness of Trinitron screen technology and colours that were bright and even.

The Micro AGP's combination of AMD

K6/233 processor, 512Kb of secondary cache and 32Mb of SDRAM main memory combined with a reasonably fast UltraDMA hard disk yields sound overall performance. The boost given to graphics handling by the AGP is, as expected, only really apparent when the machine is dealing with 3D graphics, so not everyone will benefit. 3D-intensive graphics are going to become increasingly common though, and the presence of AGP on this machine adds a little bit of extra future proofing.

A good-value system with a nice monitor and speakers, and a run of extras ranging from wavetable audio and a fast modem to improved 3D graphics handling, thanks to its AGP motherboard

Dominic Bucknall



Specifications

233MHz AMD K6 processor
 512Kb of pipeline burst cache
 32Mb of SDRAM
 Socket 7 motherboard with VIA Apollo VP3 AGP/PCI chipset
 4Mb Diamond Viper V330 AGP graphics card
 3.2Gb UltraDMA Quantum Fireball hard disk
 24x Hitachi CD-ROM
 Creative Labs AWE64 Value wavetable sound card
 Active stereo speakers
 Internal 56Kbits/s Modular Technologies data/voice/fax modem
 15in Sony Multiscan 100SX monitor
 Windows 95

£1,291 (inc VAT)

KT Computers: 0181 961 8897

KT Micro AGP PC

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CreditCard Ethernet modem

Xircom has long been a PC Card-manufacturing specialist and its CreditCard Ethernet 10/100+ Modem 56, couples 56K modem technology with Ethernet connectivity. If that sounds like gibberish, then in a nutshell this card will connect a notebook to an office network when at work, and allow electronic communications over the Internet while away.

Like almost all PC Cards, the Xircom

CreditCard is ridiculously simple to set up. Slide the card into a Type II slot, pop in the supplied driver disk and it's ready to go. Of course, there are other considerations – particularly on the networking side – but the modem can be up and running in seconds.

The modem part of the CreditCard is based on Rockwell's K56Flex standard, which is enjoying far greater attention among modem manufacturers than US Robotics' similar but wholly incompatible x2 technology. This is rather academic though, since the only thing that really matters when buying a 56K modem is that your Internet Service Provider (ISP) supports it.

During our tests, the modem averaged 45Kbits/s over a one-hour download of a compressed file. While this isn't as fast as is theoretically possible with 56K technology, performance is influenced by factors like line quality and Internet traffic.

Both the Ethernet and the modem connectors are Xircom's favoured soap-on-a-rope-style design but they're less bulky than previous models and there-



fore more manageable. The modem connector comes complete with a lengthy telephone lead designed for a UK socket, though Belgium and Netherlands adaptors are included as well.

The network connector accepts an RJ-45 plug and works with 10Base-T and 100Base-TX protocols. As with the modem, we had no problems getting the networking facilities working but various settings did need tweaking.

As ever from Xircom, the CreditCard Ethernet 10/100+ Modem 56 is a quality product, which is reasonably priced. Admittedly it serves a niche market but it serves it well.

Scott Colvey

Specifications

Type II PC Card with K56Flex modem and 10Base-T and 100Base-TX Ethernet adaptor

Telephone-socket adaptors included

Price £299.63 (inc VAT)

Xircom: 01256 332552

www.xircom.com

CreditCard Ethernet 10/100+ Modem 56

Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: Type II PC Card slot.

Logitech Pilot Mouse+ & Man+

Microsoft's addition of a small roller to its Intellimouse a year or so ago may have looked like a bizarre move but as anyone who's used one will tell you, it's a godsend. Scrolling through a document just by turning the roller becomes second nature after a few

minutes' use and moving back to a standard mouse is like losing a finger.

As if in the thrall of a peripheral Pied Piper, other manufacturers are now redesigning their mice and Logitech has added a roller to its new Pilot Mouse+ and MouseMan+ models.

The Pilot Mouse+ is the least distinguished of the two – a dark grey case with a symmetric shape and a roller tucked between two evenly-sized buttons. The mouse may be a little small for some hands but at least it can be used in both.

Not so the MouseMan+. Its chunky sculpted wedge shape may mould comfortably to the right hand but those of a sinister disposition had better look elsewhere. It's two-tone plastic is stylish though, and bumps on the central roller do much to improve the ease with which it can be moved back and forth.

The Logitech MouseWare 7.5 driver provides the usual customisable features, such as variable pointer tracking speed and pointer autojump to dialog box buttons. The mouse buttons can also be reconfigured willy nilly and the extra button that falls under the thumb on the MouseMan+ can be set to act as anything from 'Copy' to the Ctrl key.

One weakness of Microsoft's Intellimouse is that the driver only allows scrolling in MS Office applications. Logitech's, on the other hand, works in all

applications and so proves much more useful. This improved functionality can be switched off (turning the mouse into a plain Intellimouse) but since the roller's operation was flawless in every application we tried, we can't see why anyone would want to do this.

Mouse preference is very subjective but these models are solidly built and comfortable to use.

Julian Prokaza



Specifications

Two and three-button mice with additional central roller.

Independently configurable buttons

MouseWare 7.5 driver activates roller for all applications.

Pilot Mouse+: £29.99 (inc VAT)

MouseMan+: £39.99 (inc VAT)

Logitech: 0181 308 6582

Logitech Pilot Mouse+ and MouseMan+

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: Windows 3.1, serial or PS/2 port.



Maxi & DVDmagic

A drive that can play both CD-ROMs and the latest DVD-ROMs holding up to 17Gb, together with a decoder allowing you to play movies from disc on your PC

To cut a very long story short, DVD is the next evolutionary step for CD storage. The discs themselves look just like CD-ROMs but thanks to technological developments with both the discs and the drives used to read them, they can store up to 17Gb of data, though standard DVDs hold just 4.3Gb.

DVD-ROM drives are getting thicker on the ground and one of the latest is the Maxi from Ubi Soft. We've tested it here with an MPEG decoder card - necessary for playing movies stored on DVD.

Installing the drive is extremely simple - just take out your old CD-ROM drive and replace it with the DVD-ROM drive. There are no drivers to install and the most difficult part is ensuring that you plug in the cables the right way round. In fact, most new PCs have space to fit a second CD-ROM drive, so you can get away with removing the blanking plate from an empty 5.25in drive bay and fitting the drive in that.

If you're using it to read CD-ROMs, Ubi Soft claims the Maxi's drive will perform as an 8x model and our tests bear this out. One important thing to note is that technical limitations of DVD drives mean that they cannot read recordable CDs. This isn't an issue for most people but if you frequently use pre-release gold discs (like we do at *What PC?*), you're going to be stuck if you just have a DVD-ROM drive.

The big advantage of DVD is that it can hold huge amounts of data and films on disc are being touted as the replacement for VHS tapes. This leads to a problem though. While DVD can hold a couple of hours of very high-quality video and sound, getting it off the disc and on the screen is another matter. One second of video translates to 21Mb of data and discs simply can't be read this quickly. The solution is compression and video DVDs are encoded with a system called MPEG-2.

MPEG-encoded videos must be decompressed before they can be played though, and this demands great processing power. Intel sees software

decompression as the way forward and claims that the fastest versions of its Pentium II processor have - or will shortly have - the speed to cope with such decompression. At the moment though, an expansion card with its own processor dedicated to decompressing video in hardware makes more sense for most users.

The DVDmagic is such a card and it's produced by one of the largest companies in the field of image compression - REALmagic. Installation involves fitting the card into a free PCI slot and connecting your monitor to it. Video played from DVD using the card is some of the smoothest we've seen on a PC. Furthermore - and this will appeal to home movie fans - the card also supports Dolby AC-3 surround sound. Sadly, we can't make any real judgement of the set-up's performance as the only DVD disc we could find was the Opera Imaginaire disc included in the package.

At the moment, the DVD-ROM drive and MPEG decoder combination is a solution looking for a problem. If you want to get in on the technology early, the Ubi Soft system will suit, but you'll have a long wait before you can actually do anything with it.

John Sabine

Specifications

Maxi DVD-ROM

DVD-ROM reader, compatible with CD-ROM

Not compatible with CD-R or Photo-CD

Offers 17Gb on one disc

DVDmagic MPEG-2 card

MPEG-2 video decoder

Supports Dolby AC-3 surround sound

Includes DVD Station, VCR-like software

Maxi DVD-ROM: £198.58 (inc VAT)

DVDmagic: £205.63 (inc VAT)

Distributed by Eagle Direct:

0800 7316150

Ubi Soft Maxi DVD-ROM drive

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

REALmagic DVDmagic MPEG-2 card

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	n/a				
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements:

Maxi DVD-ROM drive - E-IDE interface, Pentium with 4Mb of RAM and Windows 95.

DVDmagic MPEG-2 card - PCI slot, Pentium 133 with Windows 95 and DVD-ROM drive.

