

| | |
|---|----|
| ALPS MD-1000 | 21 |
| Viglen/Microsoft Home Pro PC (Model 2) | 22 |
| Micrografx Windows Draw 6 Print Studio | 23 |
| Tiger Electronics Game.com | 26 |
| Creative Labs Video Blaster WebCam | 26 |
| Chase Advanced Technologies Sharedware | 29 |
| Carrera Power Pro II-300 | 31 |
| Vivitar ViviCam 2500 | 32 |
| SyQuest Syjet | 32 |
| Dragon Dictate NaturallySpeaking | 33 |
| Data Becker 3D Dream House Designer | 34 |
| CyberMedia Guard Dog Deluxe | 40 |
| Design Intelligence i publish 2.0 | 44 |
| CyberMedia First Aid 98 | 46 |
| Symantec WinFax Pro Version 8.0 | 50 |
| RedRock Technologies FaxNow Version 2.5 | 50 |
| Evolution Music Wizard | 54 |
| Presto OCR Pro 3.0 | 54 |
| Gateway 2000 G5-166M bundle | 55 |

Contents

In close-up this month are the first ever Microsoft-branded PC in the UK, a games console with PDA features, a speech recognition program and a device that lets two people use a PC simultaneously

Close-up

ALPS MD-1000

Inkjets aren't the only option for affordable, near-photographic quality printing – ALPS's MicroDry printers produce superb colour output. The MD-1000, however, is the first one to cost less than £300.

Whereas an inkjet printer uses liquid ink to create an image on the page, MicroDry printers use dry ink stored on a tape. This has a number of advantages over the inkjet process, not least of which is that dry ink can't smudge or soak into the paper, spoiling the print. Dry ink can also be overlaid on the page, allowing smoother shades to be printed.

In normal use, the MD-1000 works as a four-colour printer, with cyan, magenta,

yellow and black ink cartridges fitting into holders inside the fold-down front panel. Prints are produced one colour at a time, so a page passes through the printer four times. It's a testament to the MD-1000's paper handling mechanism that the colour alignment on each pass is perfect. Even though the cartridge is swapped as each colour is printed, print speed is comparable to most quality inkjets.

Unlike an inkjet though, the MD-1000 isn't too happy printing onto plain copier paper. The uneven surface of most copier paper means the MD-1000 can't transfer its ink fully and both text and graphic prints are rendered all but unus-

able by white flecks. Switching to laser paper or ALPS's own high-grade paper – produces better results: prints made at the maximum 1,200x600dpi (dots per inch) resolution are very impressive. But for true photographic printing you need to splash out on some photo-realistic paper (around 30p a

sheet). Prints need to be coated with the special photo-finish cartridge (which replaces the black cartridge) but the image quality is excellent.

The dry ink system also makes it relatively easy to print using one of four metallic inks – gold, silver, cyan or magenta. It's even possible to use white ink, either to lay down a white background before printing onto coloured paper or for printing onto black paper. **The MD-1000 isn't a printer for everyday use but its extra features make it ideal if you want an additional printer for some very special effects.** John Sabine



Specifications

Four-colour MicroDry printer
 Photo-real printing on coated paper
 1,200x600dpi on laser paper
 Metallic inks available
£299 (inc VAT)
ALPS: 0800 973405
www.alps.com

ALPS MD-1000

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

Viglen/Microsoft Home Pro

A well-specified multimedia PC aimed at first-time buyers who want everything necessary to get started in computing

Anyone in the know will tell you that Microsoft doesn't make PCs. Yes, it makes peripherals like keyboards, mice and joysticks, but its bread and butter has, and always will be, software. Or will it?

Viglen has teamed up with Microsoft to market a range of jointly branded PCs in the UK. Furthermore, an exclusivity deal has been signed so that these machines can be sold only through the Dixons Group (which comprises Dixons, Currys and PC World stores). This means, for the first time, you can enter a high-street shop and



prominent. The picture is good at the popular 800x600 pixel resolution but upping the brightness to a reasonable level brings on a very slight hazing around the borders. A small microphone is embedded at the top of the case and some Home Pro models have speakers built into the

monitor as well. Our review system, however, came with a 25 Watt Yamaha speaker system replete with powerful subwoofer.

Of all of Microsoft's contributions to the Home Pro, the most questionable is the so-called Natural Keyboard. If you haven't come across this before, it splits and angles the traditional Qwerty keyboard layout down the middle by way of an unconventional V-shape design. While it looks odd, and takes plenty of getting used to, it supposedly helps to prevent that increasingly common complaint among regular typists – tenosynovitis (repetitive strain injury, or RSI). Of course, such things are highly subjective, but we think that the average user would actually feel more at home with a traditional keyboard.

No such complaints with Microsoft's IntelliMouse though, which has long been the pointing device of favour in the *What PC?* office. Its ergonomic design suits left- and right-handers alike, and using the stepped-action wheel to scroll through documents and Web pages soon becomes second nature. Although the directional joypad means the remote control handset can be used as an alternative to the mouse, it best serves the Home Pro's television facilities.

The software bundle is predictable Microsoft fare but none the less welcome for that. Along with Works and Encarta, you also get Money 97, AutoRoute Express and Flight Simulator for Windows 95.

Remarkable for its Microsoft branding, this is a well-specified PC but a relatively average performer. Scott Colvey

Specifications

| |
|---|
| Intel Pentium 233MHz processor |
| 32Mb of RAM |
| 3.2Gb hard disk |
| ATi Xpert@Work PCI 3D graphics card |
| 24x CD-ROM drive |
| 33.6Kbits/s modem |
| TV tuner |
| SideWinder joystick |
| IntelliMouse |
| Microsoft Natural Keyboard |
| 25W Yamaha speaker system |
| On-board 16-bit sound hardware (Sound Blaster-compatible) |
| Price £1,999.99 (inc VAT) |
| Viglen: 0181 758 7000 |
| www.viglen.co.uk |

Viglen/Microsoft Home Pro PC

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

Micrografx Draw 6

A budget graphics program aimed at home and small business users, offering vector drawing, image processing and 3D effects

Micrografx Windows Draw was one of the first budget drawing programs for Windows. Launched in 1991 at a price of £149, it compared favourably in the value-for-money stakes with professional products such as CorelDraw or Micrografx's own Designer. The road to Micrografx Windows Draw 6 Print Studio Premier Edition has seen the price shrink to a third and everything else expand. You now get Wizards for creating a huge variety of ready-made projects, 200 fonts, a 20,000-piece clip-art library, bundled image processing and 3D applications, and a rather cheesy multimedia demo.

To deal with the side issues first, PhotoMagic is an image-editing and painting program that, despite its budget label, is surprisingly well featured. It will automatically correct scanned photographs and there is a good range of filters for manual fine-tuning or special effects. Should you want more, PhotoMagic supports industry-standard plugins, such as Kai's Power Tools. You can also layer objects – that is, float sections of one bitmap over another – and the painting tools are precise and delicate. One fun touch is the Image Spray tool. Once loaded with a series of small, cut-out images, such as individual leaves or coins, you can spray these on to the background rather like a collage.

Instant 3D consists of a library of ready-made three-dimensional objects, together with textures, backgrounds and lighting effects that you manipulate to create a 'scene'. You can also create solid text effects with chamfered or embossed edges. It's fun and, for 3D software, remarkably easy, but doesn't offer that much creative scope. You can only use the supplied objects (there's no option to draw your own) and you can only have one object, or piece of text, in a



scene. If you want more, you have to go through the rather awkward process of 'rendering' a scene to a 2D bitmap and then using this as a background for another 3D scene.

Turning to the star act, Micrografx has always taken care to keep Draw easy to use. In this version, you hardly have to lift a finger – Wizards spring to life to guide you through everything from setting up the paper size to making the final printout.

This version also brings a radical change to the interface. Many graphics applications have context-sensitive help or tutorial panels that tuck in beside your drawing telling you what to do next, but Draw moves things along somewhat with its Visual Toolbar. This combines the duties of a help panel with a toolbar – so you have instructions on how to perform a task together with the tools with which to perform it. Clever navigation design also means you can get to almost any tool or menu command without leaving the Visual Toolbar.

Complementing this is the Style Gallery. Rather than fiddle about setting options in dialog boxes, you can page through the various tabs of the Style Gallery to access a huge variety of predesigned text effects, fills, outlines, shadows and even effects to use on imported bitmap images. Everything is presented as thumbnail samples – you just point and click to apply an effect to a selected object.

None of this hand-holding is compulsory though. More adventurous users can revert to a conventional interface and wallow in some of Draw's power features, including Layers. These let you hide or lock sets of objects, so that you can, for example, work on details of a background without the distraction of foreground objects, or prevent existing objects from being accidentally altered.

Wannabe Web publishers are well catered for too, with a bunch of Web-specific Wizards covering page creation and output. Once again, it's all made easy but there are power features, including transparent and animated bitmaps, to cater for more ambitious users.

Micrografx Draw 6 combines ease-of-use features for the beginner together with power for the more experienced user. Its impressive roll-call of extras make it better value than ever. Tim Nott

New 'Visual Toolbar' interface

Built-in Web publishing

Layered drawings

200 quality fonts

20,000 clip-art items with a media manager

Hundreds of templates and Wizards for ready-made projects

Image processing and 3D logo companion programs

£49.95 (inc VAT)

Micrografx: 01483 747526

www.micrografx.com

Micrografx Windows Draw 6

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 55Mb of hard disk space.

Specifications

Game.com

The hand-held games console market has all but collapsed, thanks largely to cheap, high-quality full-size units from the likes of Sony and Nintendo. This hasn't stopped Tiger Electronics from chancing its arm though, and the Game.com is its attempt to produce something a little different.

The Game.com superficially resembles the hand-holds sold by Sega

and Atari a few years ago. A wide silver and grey box, it has a thumbpad control on the left and a sprinkling of buttons on the right. A touch-sensitive LCD screen sits in the middle and a small stylus clips in place just below this. Software is supplied on small cartridges and there are two slots for these on the right hand side of the case.

Switch on and you have six on-screen icons for the various features. The PDA features are few and simple – a calendar, calculator and phone book. As there's no handwriting recognition, entries for the latter must be tapped out letter by letter on a small on-screen Qwerty keyboard and a complete disregard for intuitive design makes the application much trickier to use than it should be. E-mail and text-based Web-browsing is possible with an optional modem cartridge but we didn't get to test this.

Unfortunately, the games side of things isn't much better. Although a range of titles are promised, we only saw Batman & Robin and Lights Out. Batman is a scrolling platform game and we're

being kind when we say it's truly awful. Murky, simplistic graphics, arthritic animation and repetitive gameplay leave you yearning for the film version, which is saying something. Lights Out is a simple tactical puzzle in the Minesweeper mould but it is the ubiquitous, built-in Solitaire that offers most entertainment.

Unless Tiger pulls something big out of its game hat, there's no compelling reason to buy the Game.com.

Although a combined console/PDA is a neat idea, the Game.com fails to meet the brief. A Gameboy and cheap electronic organiser combo is cheaper, better specified and, more importantly, more fun.

Julian Prokaza



Specifications

Two cartridge slots for games

6.5x5.5cm (200x160 resolution) touch-sensitive monochrome LCD screen

8Kb of RAM, 256Kb of ROM

Uses four AA batteries

£79.99 (including Batman & Robin and Lights Out cartridges)

Tiger Electronics: 01789 299942

| Game.com | | | | | |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Build quality | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Ease of use | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Features | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Value for money | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Overall | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |

Video Blaster WebCam

When BT released its videophone system in the early Nineties, it predicted that it would be the Next Big Thing in telecommunications. History has demonstrated that it wasn't to be, with poor image quality and high cost too off-putting for the buying public.

The next Next Big Thing is said to be desktop PC-based videoconferencing, promising low-cost international audio-visual communications by exploiting Internet technologies. Apart from a PC and modem you also need a video camera, such as Creative Labs' new Video Blaster WebCam.

Setting up the WebCam could almost be described as a quick sprint, but it stumbles just before the finishing line. A small interface plugs into the PC's parallel port and a lead goes from this to the keyboard port to draw power. This means no external power supply is needed, so the WebCam can be used on the move.

Sadly, the supplied software does not match the hardware's simplicity. Fire up Creative Video WebPhone 3.0 for the first time and you're presented with a configuration window, with numerous blank fields. Some field names are greyed

out, suggesting that an entry is not necessary, while others are emboldened. The most obvious trouble is that some of the greyed-out fields need to be filled-in before you can continue. Cryptic-sounding field names only add to the confusion for novice users.

Even once it is up and running, making and receiving calls using Creative's soft-

ware is not straightforward – though we succeeded after several abortive attempts. None of this denigrates the WebCam, because as a piece of videoconferencing equipment it works superbly. Used with other freely available software, such as Microsoft's NetMeeting 2.0 or CUSeeMe, it's much simpler to get talking and is not unreasonably priced. **This is an appealing little camera let down by awkward software. We recommend it to anyone with some knowledge of PC computing, but beginners might well need a helping hand.**

Scott Colvey



Specifications

Fixed-focus lens

Still-image capture up to 640x480 (interpolated) pixels in 24-bit colour

Frame rate adjusts to suit bandwidth

£149 (inc VAT)

Creative Labs: 01245 265265
www.creativelabs.com

| Video Blaster WebCam | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ease of use | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Performance | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Features | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Value for money | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |
| Overall | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ | ★ |

Minimum requirements: Pentium 100, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 30Mb of hard disk space, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card, bi-directional parallel port, 14.4Kbits/s modem.

Sharedware

A combination of hardware and software that allows two people to use a single PC, with separate monitors, mice and keyboards

Having two computers makes good sense if you live in a household where family members are queuing up to use a much-in-demand PC. This is even more true if you're working in a small office, where one computer might have to handle faxing, e-mail, word processing, accounts and lunchtime games sessions.

Now, for half the price of a new PC, you can connect two users to the one you've already got. Each user has a keyboard, mouse and monitor and they can run different programs at the same time. It's almost like having a mini network without the aggravation and expense of setting one up. Sharedware works on the principle that most of the time when a PC is switched on, it's not actually doing very much except waiting for input. So instead of just ticking over, it could be busy working for a second user.

For £293 you get an expansion card that slots inside your PC. One end of a 15m cable plugs into the expansion card and the other end has a tiny junction box with connectors for a monitor, PS/2 mouse and PS/2 keyboard. These

items aren't supplied, so unless you've already got them left over from a previous upgrade, you'll have to buy them separately.

Once all the hardware is connected, boot up the PC and Windows 95 detects the expansion card and asks you for a driver disk. Insert it, follow the instructions on-screen and your PC can then be used by two people at the same time, with the real machine acting as a master and the Sharedware one as a slave.

There are three limitations on how the master and its slave can be used. One is that you can't shut down Windows in the usual way and instead, everything must be done through the Sharedware control panel. This stops one of the users shutting down unannounced and losing the other's work.

The second limitation is that however powerful a graphics adaptor you've got in the master PC, the slave only displays 256 colours at a maximum resolution of 800x600. We weren't particularly thrilled with the quality of the picture and it's generated by a graphics

controller on the Sharedware expansion card, not the one in the master PC.

Finally, you can't run DOS programs on the slave because it relies on Windows 95 to manage the connection with the master. In other respects, using Sharedware is actually better than having two PCs. For example, both users share a single hard disk and can access the same files and programs. It's also possible for the two users to exchange messages via Sharedware's internal e-mail system. This could be useful if you've made full use of the 15m cable and the two users are sitting in different rooms.

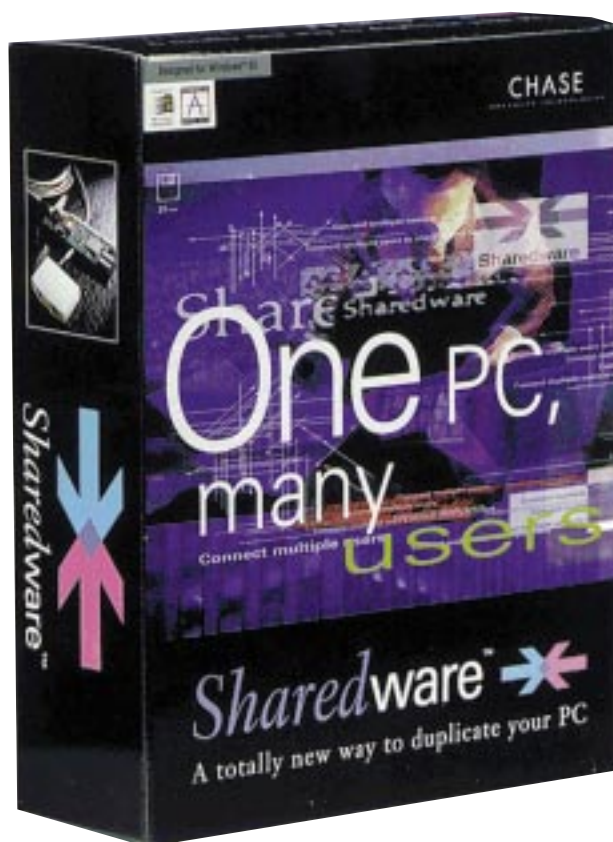
Another benefit is that if the original PC has a modem and an Internet

connection, both users can browse the World Wide Web at the same time through a single Internet connection. The only proviso here is that connections must be made using Windows 95 Dial-up Networking and a 32-bit browser, rather than third-party diallers and software.

The performance penalty of running two PCs from a single processor is less than you might think and when both users are working with word processors, spreadsheets and other standard applications, the occasional momentary delays are acceptable. We tested Sharedware on a 166MHz Pentium with 64Mb of memory and again with 32Mb of memory. Performance was acceptable in both cases but while the makers of Sharedware say it works with any Pentium processor, our experience suggests that 166MHz is probably the minimum practical speed.

For a total outlay of less than £500 you can double the usefulness of your PC and gain some of the advantages of networked computing. Sharedware is ideal for schools and offices on tight budgets, but users of games and multimedia software should save up for a second PC.

Paul Wardley



ISA interface card with onboard Cirrus graphics controller
Connector module with 15m cable
All drivers and software provided
Extensive online help can even be viewed before installation
£293.75 (inc VAT)

Chase Advanced Technologies:
01274 225000

Sharedware

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium PC, 16Mb of RAM, second monitor, PS/2 keyboard and PS/2 mouse.

Specifications

Carrera Power Pro II-300

A highly-specified PC based on Intel's fastest Pentium II processor yet, with a top-notch 3D graphics card and a quality 17in monitor

The Pentium II is currently Intel's fastest desktop processor and although it's not the first on the market, the Carrera Power Pro II-300 is the first machine we've looked at based on the speediest 300MHz incarnation of the chip.

In theory this is one of the most powerful PCs it's possible to buy, especially as the processor is twinned with Intel's most up-to-date support chipset. This enables the Power Pro II-300 to use fast SDRAM (64Mb on two DIMMs) and has allowed Carrera to fit a generous 6.4Gb hard disk with an Ultra DMA controller.

All this fits neatly into a full-sized tower case that's a lot bigger than most of the ones we usually see. Despite its size, it's not too boxy – there's a slight curve to the front and a narrow strip of smoked plastic hides the power and hard disk LEDs. The motherboard is compact and its power connectors keep the cables well out of the way of the memory banks and expansion slots.

One of the ISA slots is taken up by a modem but it's the only standard expansion slot to be occupied. Sound is provided by a Yamaha wavetable chip built onto the motherboard and this combines with the Altec Lansing speakers and subwoofer to provide an acceptable accompaniment to any game.

The motherboard also has an AGP slot and it's here that you find the ATi Xpert@Work graphics card. This 4Mb version is one of the best-value 3D accelerators on the market and it takes advantage of AGP's faster pathway to the processor to turn in a fine performance.

It's become increasingly common for high-end machines to come with an internal Iomega Zip drive and Carrera has jumped willingly enough on this bandwagon. It's a trend that's to be commended – the ability to store 100Mb on a cartridge little bigger than a floppy disk makes backing up your data much less tedious. This is essential for business use and very handy for juggling different users at home – everyone in the family can keep their files on a separate disk.

The bundled software includes Lotus SmartSuite 97 (the CD-ROM is included), while you can have fun with copies of



Formula 1 and Terracide, both of which are part of the ATi graphics card bundle.

As you'd expect from a system costing £2,000, the Xpert@Work is paired with a 17in monitor, which gives you a bit more working space than the more common 15in models. We were pleased to see that Carrera has chosen one of our favourite screens, the Iiyama VisionMaster. This has a pin-sharp display and, with a refresh rate of up to 80Hz at 1,280x1,024 pixels, you certainly shouldn't suffer from a flickery picture.

The only real disappointment with the Power Pro is its performance. It is technically the fastest machine we've looked at, but only just. In October's Dream Machines feature, the fastest machine was a Carrera Power Pro II-266 and this scored 296 in our tests. It had a 266MHz Pentium II processor and 64Mb of RAM but used the older 440FX support chipset, so we expected to see a machine with a faster processor and AGP graphics perform at least 10 percent faster.

In fact, the Carrera Power Pro II-300 scored 303 (a difference of just under 2.5 percent), which is more in line with what we'd expect from a top-notch 266MHz system. That's not to say the Power Pro 300-II is a slow machine but we feel that at this specification, you've got a right to expect even more.

The Power Pro 300-II is neither the

cheapest nor (we suspect) the fastest PC on the market but it's a solid machine and good value.

John Sabine

| | |
|--|-------|
| 300MHz Pentium II | ..... |
| 64Mb of SDRAM | ..... |
| 6.4Gb hard disk | ..... |
| ATi Xpert@Work graphics card (AGP) | ..... |
| 24x Panasonic CD-ROM drive | ..... |
| 56Kbits/s modem | ..... |
| Iomega Zip drive (internal) | ..... |
| Iiyama VisionMaster 17in monitor | ..... |
| Altec Lansing ACS45 speakers and subwoofer | ..... |
| Lotus SmartSuite 97 | ..... |
| £2,290.08 (inc VAT) | ..... |
| Carrera Technology: 0171 830 0486 | ..... |
| www.carrera.co.uk | ..... |

Carrera Power Pro II-300

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

Specifications

ViviCam 2500

One are the days when amateur photographers found it hard to get their subject in the frame. The ViviCam 2500's preview LCD screen lets you see the picture before taking it and once images have been captured, they



Vivitar claims that the camera will appeal to dedicated hobbyists and people wanting to take snapshots. With a resolution of 320x240 pixels (interpolated to 480x360), we agree that the casual user may be satisfied with the image quality. Aspiring photographers may demand better definition though, as images can't

can be viewed on the screen and retaken if necessary. You can even view your photos on a television by connecting the camera to it with the supplied cable.

Pictures are stored in the camera's 2Mb memory, which holds up to 64 images. When the memory is full, images have to be transferred to a PC if you want to keep them, or erased from the camera if you want to take more. The ViviCam has an automatic flash, a self-timer and macro mode for close-ups (from 100 to 300mm). An optional transformer, to power the camera from the mains, is also available and this saves on batteries when the camera is connected to a PC.

stand much enlargement without becoming blocky.

The supplied software lets you download images and manage them on your PC, as well as delete pictures from the camera's memory and take pictures remotely. An image viewer is also included but image-editing software isn't. However, you can place icons for your own photo-editing applications on a toolbar and edit images by dragging them to the appropriate icon.

The ViviCam 2500 has some nice features and takes reasonable snapshots. While it's easy to use, it's rather expensive for the leisure market.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Stores up to 64 images

Requires four AA batteries (power adaptor optional)

IMS Camera software included

130x67x45mm; 213g (excl batteries)

£305.49 (inc VAT)

Vivitar Europe: 01793 526211

www.vivitar.co.uk

ViviCam 2500 digital camera

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

Minimum requirements: 486, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 17Mb of hard disk space for software plus space for images, free serial port, CD-ROM drive.

SyQuest SyJet

If you regularly produce large graphic or DTP files that you need to store or pass to others, or simply feel that your hard disk isn't big enough for all the applications you want to install, removable media can provide an easy answer.

SyQuest has been producing removable hard disks since 1982, so it's reasonable to assume that the company has some expertise in the field.

The SyJet uses cartridges little bigger than a floppy disk but about three times as thick. Each is a miniature hard disk and SyQuest claims performance to match. Formatted, a cartridge holds 1.4Gb of data and, at around £100 a time, it's easy to add as many as you need.

As with all such devices, the performance you see is partly dependent on the system on which you use it. Our testbed was a Dell Dimension with a 200MHz Pentium, 32Mb of RAM and an Adaptec AVA 1505 SCSI card (available mail-order for around £40). Yet despite this reasonably high specification, we found it impossible to achieve the performance boasted on the SyJet's box.

When we copied a 127Mb folder from the Dell's hard disk to the SyJet, it took about two and a half minutes to complete, equating to around 0.85Mb/s. As a



comparison,

copying the same folder from one hard disk partition to another took just under two minutes. With smaller files, we saw little difference between the SyJet and the Dell's hard disk and it's more than fast enough for normal use.

Installation was very straightforward, partly because the SCSI card was already installed, and a Windows 95 system will recognise the SyJet automatically. Our only criticism relates to its packaging, which claims a 1.5Gb capacity per cartridge, disingenuously based on calculating 1Mb as 1 million bytes. In true terms, it's more like 1.4Gb.

There's little to criticise about the SyJet – it's easy to use, reasonably priced and offers storage that's limited only by the depth of your wallet.

John Sabine

Specifications

SCSI interface removable hard drive

Data storage on 1.4Gb cartridges

Claimed data transfer rates: burst 10Mb/s, sustained max 7Mb/s, min 3.7Mb/s

£329.99 for drive and one cartridge.

One extra cartridge free by voucher redemption until 31.12.97. Cartridges £99.99 each or £249.99 for three.

SyQuest: 0131 339 2022

www.syquest.com

SyQuest SyJet

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

Minimum requirements: 386 PC, ASPI-compatible SCSI card.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking

A speech-recognition program that takes normal, continuous speech and turns it into editable text

Hot on the heels of Solo Pro Classic (reviewed last November) comes the one everyone has been waiting for – Dragon Dictate NaturallySpeaking Personal Edition. Now you can dictate to your PC the same way you'd talk to someone on the phone, at a natural speed and without having to pause between words.

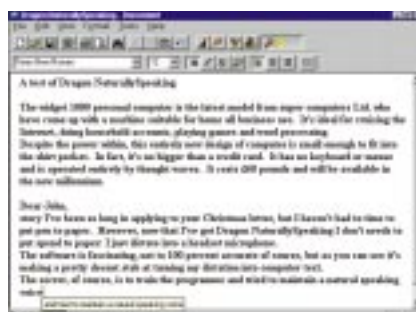
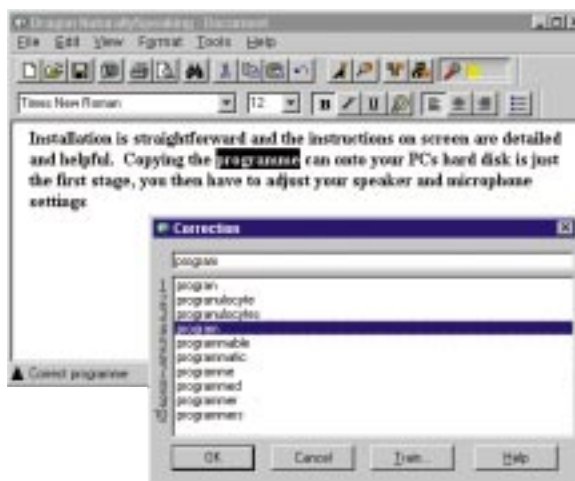
All you need is a PC and NaturallySpeaking. Not just any PC, though – the program's requirements are fairly rigorous and if your computer doesn't have at least a 133MHz Pentium processor and 32Mb of memory, you can't throw away your keyboard just yet.

NaturallySpeaking works with most types of sound card but you should check with UK distributor Endeavour Technologies before buying. We tried it with a Creative Labs AWE32 and the supplied microphone headset. The microphone incorporates a battery-powered pre-amplifier in its cable and it was only by using this that we were able to achieve good results.

Installation is straightforward and the on-screen instructions are detailed and helpful. Copying the program onto your hard disk is just the first stage and you have to adjust your speaker and microphone settings before carrying out two training sessions. The first takes a couple of minutes, but the second, which involves reading passages from Arthur C Clarke's *3001: A Space Odyssey*, takes about 20 minutes. There's then a lengthy wait while your voice is analysed – easily time enough for two cups of coffee.

The good news is that NaturallySpeaking doesn't need any further training to produce exceptional results and you'll be staggered at how well it interprets your voice right from the start. The screen shot shown here illustrates our first attempt at dictation within an hour of installing the software.

NaturallySpeaking differs from Dragon's other products in that it can't be used to control the operation of a PC. The program only accepts voice dictation and recognised text appears within the NaturallySpeaking word processor. This is a very basic program, rather like Windows Wordpad and once you've finished dictating, you copy and paste



the results into your standard word processor for checking and formatting.

After regular use, you soon lose your self-consciousness about talking to your PC and find your dictation style changes. When this happens, it's worth retraining NaturallySpeaking to your new style. You can boost performance still further by feeding NaturallySpeaking's Vocabulary Builder with samples of your typical writing, especially if you work in a specialist area that has its own vocabulary. All this requires is for you to assemble a collection of your existing files (totalling about 20,000 words) and tell NaturallySpeaking where they are. Vocabulary Builder scans and analyses them to modify its vocabulary and learns the patterns of words you frequently use.

The weakest part of NaturallySpeaking is the editing process and it interrupts your flow far more than editing with a keyboard. When you edit with a keyboard, it's a chance to gather your thoughts and plan your next sentence. Editing via voice commands demands

total concentration and breaks your rhythm, and it's better to leave mistakes in place and edit them afterwards in your word processor. Fortunately, NaturallySpeaking won't learn bad habits from your mistakes – it only updates its voice files when you explicitly ask it to at the end of a session.

Good as NaturallySpeaking is, it whets your appetite for more. What's really required is a system clever enough to pick out your voice from back-

ground noises so you don't have to wear a headset – and you'd be able to work with the radio on.

NaturallySpeaking is a great program but even though Dragon has twice reduced the price since its launch, it's still too expensive for the casual buyer. This is a shame, because the program deserves a wider audience. Paul Wardley

Dictation speeds up to 160 words per minute

Personalised vocabularies

Can be trained to understand your voice within an hour

Edit and correct using voice commands

230,000-word vocabulary

Noise-cancelling microphone included

£199.75 (inc VAT)

Endeavour Technologies:

01932 827324

Dragon Dictate NaturallySpeaking

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium 133 PC, Windows 95, 32Mb of RAM, CD-ROM drive, 60Mb of hard disk space, 16-bit sound card.

Specifications

3D Dream House Designer

A drag-and-drop interior designer with furnishing and landscaping facilities, lighting effects and a video perspective walkthrough

The latest in a range of house design software from Data Becker, 3D Dream House Designer is also the most potent – indicated by the increase in PC specification needed to run it. It's fortunate then, that such systems are now increasingly within economic reach of the 'ordinary home user' – exactly who this program is aimed at.

3D Dream House Designer lets you plan and decorate your own personal dream house – and garden – in three dimensions. You can have single- or multi-storey buildings, choose suitable furniture and accessories from the online catalogue, and position them wherever you like. You can also view the house from any angle, inside or out, to make sure everything's in the right position.

Usefully, you can also take a virtual tour around a 3D Dream House design to check the overall effect from a visitor's viewpoint and even record your tour as an .AVI file to view as a video. Individual views can also be saved as raytraced



graphics, taking into account not only artificial lighting but also seasonal effects based on your geographic location. If you used Data Becker's preceding version, 3D Walkthrough Home Designer, you can even transfer your existing projects into 3D Dream House Designer and update them with its new features.

When you start a new project, the program opens in Construct mode. This shows your current plan from above in one or more views (you can use several in a project) and this is where you build up the architectural features of the design. Fixed objects – walls, stairs and roof – are assembled here and a collision-detection system prevents objects from being crammed into the same space. Roofs can be constructed manually or generated automatically to fit your plan.

Furnishing mode, on the other hand, is where you decorate and furnish your new structure. The furniture and texture catalogue offers you a variety of 3D objects, which you position simply by dragging them from their separate window into your project with the mouse. Once the objects have been placed, you can then colour them and apply textures. The program claims over 1,500 objects for interior decorations, exterior decorations and accessories, complete with

people and pets (including a dinosaur). It's in Furnishing mode that you refine elements from Construct mode, such as applying surface textures to the outside area. You can switch between Construct mode and Furnishing mode at any time.

3D Dream House Designer's controls are quite complex and you need some nifty movements with the mouse to access all functions. There are even more options in Furnishing mode that you can use to enter the type of display and the position of the viewer, for example. Other buttons let you group, delete, rotate, decorate or create mirror images of objects and specify whether individual lamps and lights should be switched on or off. The buttons are as specialised as the functions they control and will be unfamiliar to start with. Nor are they all that intuitive, leading to a slow learning curve. Although the program is not for the casual user, dedicated home designers or professionals will find it very useful indeed.

This is a sophisticated piece of software that will repay the effort it needs to use it. The new features – ambient scenery, simulated sun and moon shadows, and automatic roof construction – add to the realism, while scaled dimensions ensure that it's not just a toy.

James Taylor



Specifications

Drag and drop positioning of floors etc

Dimensioned layouts

Automatic design of roofs and stairs

1,500 items of furniture and 1,200 texture representations

Simulated lighting effects

Perspective and plan views

Walk-through with AVI video playback

Backgrounds with landscaping tools

£59.95 (inc VAT)

Data Becker: 01420 22707

www.data-becker.co.uk

3D Dream House Designer

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium 100 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 15Mb of hard disk space, 16-bit 800x600 graphics card.

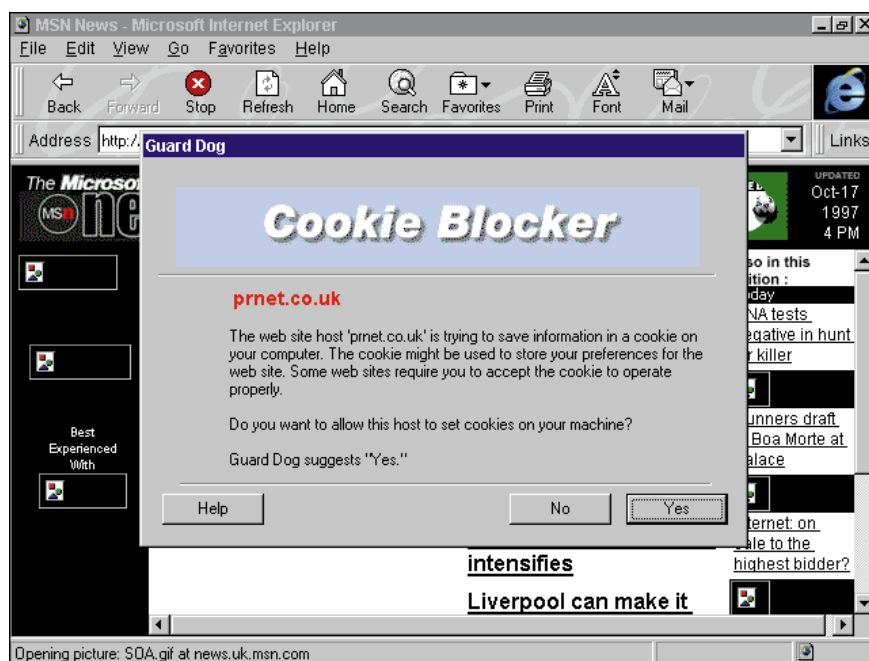
Guard Dog Deluxe

A program that uses anti-virus and other security techniques to keep your PC private when it's connected to the Internet

Using the Internet and the World Wide Web may seem a simple point-and-click affair, but in reality your PC is working away like mad in the background sending and receiving all sorts of information. Most of the time this is essential to a Web browser's operation but some of it can be of a less desirable nature.

CyberMedia's Guard Dog keeps an eye on the information being sent back and forth, and gives a warning bark if it spots anything suspicious. Guard Dog consists of an anti-virus program for round-the-clock protection, plus six levels of protection against nasty occurrences connected with your use of the Web. It's easy to install and operates invisibly until it pops up with a warning.

Guard Dog's first level of privacy protection is the Cookie Blocker. Cookies are small files of information downloaded to your PC by Web sites you visit and they're used to identify you, store your preferences and make it possible for Web sites to record your



visits. They're not harmful but if you're paranoid about third parties knowing which Web sites you regularly visit, you may wish to block them. It is possible to block cookies via your Web browser's options but every time you revisit a site, it will send you another one. Guard Dog keeps a list of sites you are willing to accept cookies from and stops others from pestering you.

The next level of protection is MyInfo filter. When you visit certain Web sites, particularly those with search facilities, the information you type is passed by a referral mechanism to other sites, usually belonging to an advertising company. When you search for, say, 'recorded music', this explains why a banner advert from a firm selling mail-order CDs pops up from nowhere. MyInfo filter is supposed to stop this happening but it's only intermittently successful - we still received advertising about air fares when we searched for 'travel' on AltaVista.

A final level of privacy protection is that Guard Dog removes traces of where you've been on the Web when you close down your browser. It deletes files from the Web browser's cache, removes the URLs (addresses) of sites you have visited and clears the browser's history file. The downside of this is that it slows down

subsequent Web usage because the cache stores information from sites you visit regularly. If it has been emptied, you have to reload every site's graphics the next time you visit.

Guard Dog's three systems to protect your PC are System Monitor, Access Monitor and File Guardian. The first of these keeps an eye on ActiveX and Java applets downloaded to your PC - tiny programs that run within your Web browser to provide certain enhanced features. However, there's nothing to stop illicit applets from deleting your files, formatting your hard disk or sending information from your password files to another computer on the Internet, so System Monitor watches for these activities and alerts you to what's going on.

Access Monitor makes sure that only specified programs can use the Internet from your PC and it prevents other programs from secretly using your Internet connection to send information to another site. File Guardian lets you nominate which programs can access sensitive files on your PC.

Switching on all Guard Dog's features slows down your PC and doesn't protect Internet newsgroup communication. Unless you need another virus checker, leave this to the paranoid. Paul Wardley

Specifications

- Checks for viruses
- Cleans up your hard disk after using the Web
- Stops personal information being passed to unauthorised users
- Monitors programs for suspicious behaviour
- Blocks hostile downloaded programs
- Blocks unwanted cookies
- Updates itself automatically

£49.95 (inc VAT)

CyberMedia: 0800 973631

CyberMedia Guard Dog Deluxe

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

Minimum requirements: Windows 95 PC, 8Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, modem, Internet connection.

i publish 2.0

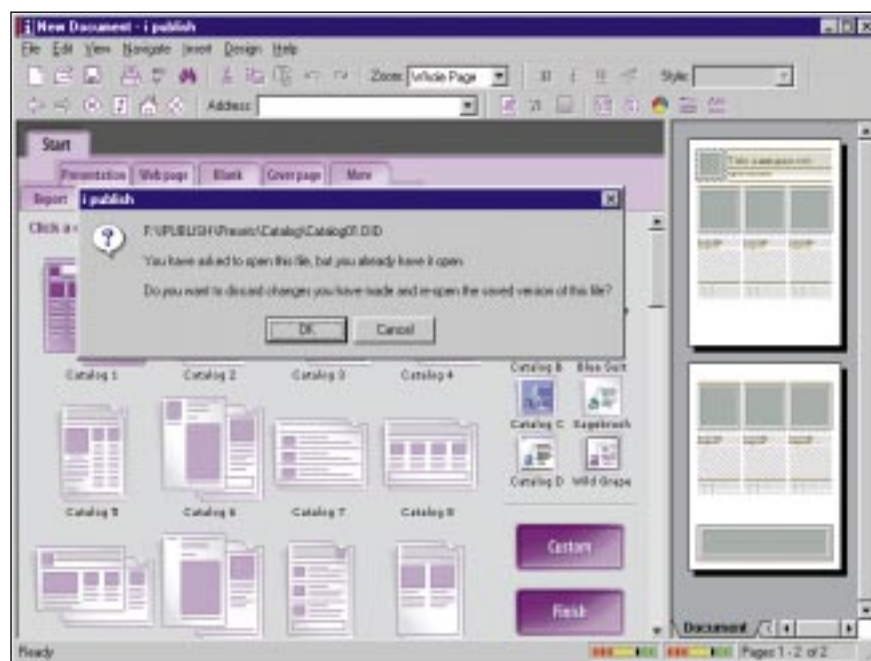
A budget DTP application, aimed at absolute beginners, that can publish to both paper and the World Wide Web



Wizard and template-based DTP (desktop publishing) is nothing new – Microsoft, Serif and GSP are all chasing this budget market. Design Intelligence takes this approach further with i publish, for ‘busy professionals with little or no design training’.

Whether you take the Quick Tour or plunge straight in, you’ll find i publish’s interface uncannily reminiscent of a Web browser – which is exactly what it is. The right-hand portion of the screen contains the publication you’re working on; the left contains the tools you need for a particular stage, together with their instructions. These are HTML pages with hotspots that don’t just navigate but also make changes to your publication.

At the top of the window are four tabs. The Start page is where you choose from 10 document types, including newsletters, catalogues, Web pages or on-screen presentations. Picking one of these produces a new page showing a variety of layouts in thumbnail view and, in the pre-release version we looked at, a



persistent error message stating a document was ‘already open’. Choose a layout and a larger view appears and you’re ready to move on to the next tab.

Grab is where you select page ‘components’ in the workspace and replace them with your own text and graphic files. This page also gives access to the clip-art on the CD-ROM, to over (it’s claimed) a million royalty-free images on the i publish Web site and to text or pictures from anywhere else on the Web. You don’t have the right to publish text and graphics from Web sites but Design Intelligence is constructing a Copyright Permissions Clearinghouse Database.

The Design tab allows you to adjust shading, lines, fonts, colour schemes and so on, all from thumbnails or overall ‘schemes’. The schemes are tasteful but limited, and you have little control over the size of graphics and how much of a picture you want to show. Similarly, you don’t get a choice of font size in points, only ‘larger’ and ‘smaller’. You can also change the entire layout here, rather than starting over from the beginning, but we weren’t impressed at the ‘Smartness’ of this and our experiments led to pages with far too much blank space.

The final tab leads to the Publish

page. Here, you can set up paper size and page numbering – though we’d prefer to do this earlier – and either print your document or output it to HTML. With the latter, you can preview pages in your browser, upload them to an Internet Service Provider, or create a full-screen interactive presentation. You can also split large files over multiple disks.

For short and simple publications, i publish is breathtakingly simple to use. At other times – especially if you want to depart from the predefined layouts or use long texts – it can be frustrating. We had a long and fruitless search for the ‘Add a new page’ command before finding out that i publish does this automatically. Well, it wouldn’t for us – there seemed no way we could break a long story over two pages as it just seemed to make the other page components smaller instead. Eventually, it did break the story but not where we wanted it.

Text file handling seemed erratic too. Some files produced error messages on import, others did nothing at all and we couldn’t find a way to link text frames.

For beginners, i publish provides the easiest entry possible to DTP but it’s not foolproof and more ambitious users may find it frustratingly limited

Tim Nott ➤

Specifications

Jargon-free Web browser interface

Layout templates in 10 document types

Layouts, looks and colour schemes in thumbnail views

Drag and drop text and graphics into ready-made layouts

42 fonts and 1,000 images on CD-ROM

Built-in connection to a million clip-art files on the i publish Web site

£59 (inc VAT)

Design Intelligence: 01189 814230

www.ipublishlive.com

i publish 2.0

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 65Mb of hard disk space, Internet Explorer 3.01 (included).

First Aid 98

Software that checks PCs for hardware and software problems then automatically fixes them – if you're brave enough to let it

No matter what anyone tells you, PCs are not consumer electronics goods. Poorly written programs can bring a system to its knees and something as simple as fitting a new graphics card can cause untold misery. How many fridges stop working when you put a rotten egg in them? The PC's complexity goes a long way to explain the sheer number of fix-it packages available and CyberMedia has just launched another one in the shape of First Aid 98.

CyberMedia makes some bold claims for First Aid, best illustrated by a quote on the packaging: 'Automatically fixes tens of thousands of common problems PC users experience every day ... continuously protects against hard disk failure, crashes, software lock-ups and more.'

Novices would have no cause to doubt that First Aid 98 can solve their PC problems with one fell swoop but we'd recommend a more cautious view. Experienced users usually find this sort of hype exaggerated, if not downright misleading and First Aid stretches credibility before you even install it.

The installation itself chalks up the



first negative. It first sets up a limited edition of another CyberMedia program, Oil Change, necessary to keep First Aid up to date over the Internet.

Then, despite an assurance to the contrary in its *Getting Started* booklet, First Aid 98 installs Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.02. It does this without any opportunity for user intervention and ignores existing installations of IE. It also alters browser and dial-up settings, again without invitation, including cheekily changing the title of Microsoft's browser to 'Internet Explorer: Cybermedia Inc'.

We wish we could say that things look up as soon as you start the program but running First Aid 98 for the first time presents you with a redundant video extolling the program's virtues, rather than giving practical advice on how to use it. Then there's a long period (about 20 minutes on the review system) when you see nothing but a black screen while the program creates a snapshot of your PC's configuration. Eventually the main window appears – although few modern Windows programs depart as far from the Microsoft standard as this one.

Click on the large Check-Up button and First Aid 98 does exactly what you want at this initial stage – it tests everything from the hard disk, Windows sys-

tem, network, multimedia performance, and printer setup. Any problems it finds are presented in ranked order, according to their severity. On our test PC, the only 'crucial' problem concerned an uninstalled printer, though this had been the case for a year without causing trouble.

Of the many other 'problems', few seemed of any practical relevance and more worryingly, several were just plain wrong. First Aid 98 reckoned that certain program files listed in the Registry were missing, which makes you think twice before clicking the 'Autofix' button. This is exacerbated by the manual's explicit warning against allowing First Aid to fix something it says is broken when you know it isn't, as 'the suggested fix may inadvertently cause a real problem'.

First Aid 98 also crashed inexplicably several times. Ironically, on the only occasion this was prevented by the crash protection facility, the guilty program turned out to be part of First Aid itself. Neither these quirks nor the missing files issue could be explained satisfactorily by the UK technical support people.

On the basis of this admittedly limited trial, we'd advise novices to steer clear. The more experienced are probably best off without it. It could create more problems than it cures.

Terry Pinnell

Specifications

- Identifies hardware conflicts
- Continuous background crash protection
- Emergency recovery and repair facilities
- ActiveHelp Network via the Internet
- Online updates of both program and help database
- Includes limited edition of Oil Change

£41.06 (inc VAT)

CyberMedia 0800 973631
www.cybermedia.com

First Aid 98

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 40Mb of hard disk space, optional Internet connection.

WinFax Pro Version 8.0

Most people's awareness of Symantec's WinFax software is through the 'lite' version supplied with many modems but WinFax Pro 8.0 is far from underweight. With its answering machine, mailbox system, speakerphone and Internet faxing functions, it's not

surprising that WinFax Pro isn't as easy to set up as FaxNow, a single-purpose application (below).

When we tried installing the program, it froze due to a conflict with a memory-resident utility. Once this was removed, installation continued apace. The installation routine then tests modem performance and it automatically reported our modem to be a Voice 101 type with Speakerphone capabilities, supporting fax, data and voice. Despite this, the voice messaging system wouldn't work with our modem, although the fax features functioned faultlessly.

WinFax installs a 'printer' driver that works in the same way as FaxNow's, so faxing is available through any Windows application with printing facilities. There's also a fax Wizard to guide you through procedures such as sending a fax with file attachments.

There's a good selection of predefined cover pages and you can also design your own. But you can't use your own cover



when you send a fax using the Wizard, although you can add your own logo.

The fax viewer contains many useful features and you can manipulate fax images in several ways. Faxes can also be annotated, cleaned up, have the supplied OCR (optical character recognition) software applied to them and the text copied to the clipboard or saved to a file.

This is more than just a fax application and offers some sophisticated communications features but if you just want to send and receive faxes, FaxNow is a simpler option.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Wide selection of cover pages

Faxes can be converted into editable text with bundled OCR

Includes TalkWorks answering machine and Speakerphone

£116.33 (inc VAT)

Symantec: 0171 616 5600

www.symantec.com

WinFax Pro Version 8.0

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 25Mb of hard disk space, fax/modem.

FaxNow Version 2.5

FaxNow 2.5 has none of the bells and whistles of WinFax Pro 8.0 (above) – instead it's a no-nonsense fax application. The installation process is effortless, taking about five minutes, and once your modem type has been confirmed (it has to be manually selected from a list of BABT approved and non-approved modems), installation ends.



Faxes can be sent with FaxNow in two ways. Like WinFax Pro 8.0, FaxNow installs itself as a printer driver and faxes can be sent by printing to this from any application. Alternatively, the Express Fax feature lets you type information onto a cover sheet and then fax it.

FaxNow's interface is probably best described as functional but it is at least intuitive and easy to understand. The main screen lists all incoming and outgoing faxes and (optionally) sent faxes. Many settings are customisable via the

menu bar and you can, for example, choose how incoming faxes are signalled and set them to be automatically printed. You also can decide how often failed faxes are retried and how long to wait between retries.

FaxNow's phone book can hold up to 2,800 entries, sorted into 96 groups. Additional phonebooks can be created if more records are needed. Records can also be printed out and

used to create mailing labels.

If FaxNow has a weak spot, it's that cover sheets can only be customised by editing an INI file. Most users will probably prefer to wait for the cover sheet editor that, says RedRock, will be included in the next release of the software, due before the end of 1997.

If you're working to a budget and have simple fax requirements, FaxNow will suit you down to the ground. But anyone looking for customisability should take a look at WinFax Pro 8.0.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Simple installation process

Phonebook and fax viewer included

Fax scheduling facility

£52.87 (inc VAT)

RedRock Technologies: 01908 246400

www.redrock.co.uk

FaxNow Version 2.5

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

Minimum requirements: 386 PC, Windows 3.1, 2Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, fax/modem.

Evolution Music Wizard

The Evolution Music Wizard is a budget musical keyboard with software to boot, and by splendid marketing wizardry, it's been released in time for Christmas.

The keyboard itself is a 37-note mini MIDI keyboard that plugs straight into a sound card and can be powered from the mains or three AA batteries. Christmas



pitch bend and modulation buttons.

Only one floppy disk is supplied but this provides three applications. Evolution KeyWest is aimed more at beginners and offers such things as a note corrector and built-in accompaniments. Those of a more vocal bent will be happier with the software karaoke Song Player. Budding musicians, however, are best served by Audio Sequencer. This has 256 tracks and a 16-track mixer and provides both piano roll and music score displays. Evolution Audio isn't the easiest software to use and things aren't helped by the distinct lack of instructions – just a double-sided sheet of A4.

Moans aside, there's great fun to be had once you've mastered the basics of the software. There's a plethora of different instruments and sounds for use in compositions

and with a little bit of trial, error and patience, almost anyone can create a passable tune.

The Music Wizard has a few faults but balanced against the fact that the whole package costs under £40, the quibbles are just C-minor ones.

Jim Haryott

morning disappointment can be avoided by noting that neither mains adaptor nor batteries are included. The MK-7 keyboard is a plasticky affair and its 37 keys cover just three octaves. If it looks cheap and tacky, that's because it costs under £40, but this still gets you

Specifications

37-key, three-octave MIDI keyboard

Pitch bend and modulation buttons

256-track software sequencer

£34.99 (inc VAT)

Evolution: 01525 372621

www.evolution.co.uk

Evolution Music Wizard

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 3.1, 4Mb of RAM, sound card with MIDI interface.

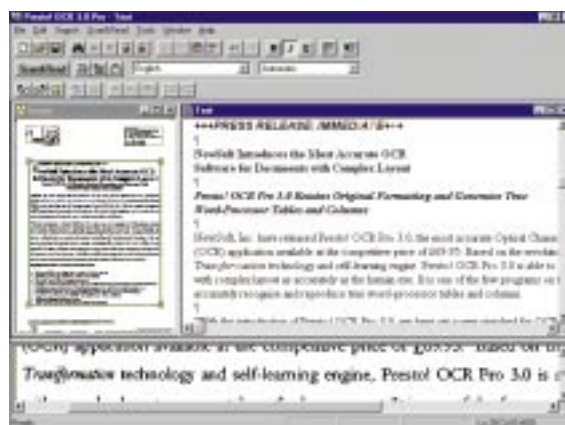
Presto OCR Pro 3.0

You can sometimes spend so long correcting text processed by OCR (optical character recognition) software that you wonder whether you could have typed it quicker yourself.

There are no such problems with Presto's OCR Pro, and although not all our tests achieved the claimed 99.98 percent accuracy, the results were still impressive. One of our tests involved a photocopied, three-column document with 1,300 words of small print. OCR Pro sent the text into Word, correctly formatted and error-free.

Although most actions can be initiated manually, OCR Pro's automatic options are useful. The document to be processed is placed in the scanner and the 'Scan and Read' button clicked. Brightness and contrast levels are monitored during scanning to cope with colour variations in the text. While scanning one document, OCR Pro, realising the image quality was unsatisfactory, requested that the resolution be doubled to 600dpi (dots per inch).

When a scan has finished and the image transferred to OCR Pro, the formatting is checked and the text marked into blocks. It's at this stage that tables, columns and graphics are identified and



the layout is established. Next, the text is read and recognised. Windows containing a graphic image of the document and the editable text then open, allowing you to correct any recognition errors.

The installation program scans a PC's hard drive for compatible applications and recognised documents can be exported directly to Word, WordPerfect, WordPro and Excel.

Presto's OCR Pro 3.0 is an accurate and easy-to-use OCR package with an impressive range of features – excellent value for money.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

'Scan and Read' document processing

Batch processes multi-page documents

Word processor tables and columns are handled accurately

Exports text to Word, WordPerfect, WordPro and Excel

£69.95 (inc VAT)

NewSoft UK: 01752 201148

www.newsoftinc.com

Presto OCR Pro 3.0

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 25Mb of hard disk space, TWAIN-compatible scanner.

Gateway 2000 G5-166M

A complete PC package for the home buyer, including a Pentium 166 PC, Epson colour inkjet printer and Microsoft's Home Essentials 97 software

Gateway is advertising this comprehensive PC, printer and software package as its 'Christmas Special' for the magic (ex-VAT) price of £999. On the face of it, this sounds pretty reasonable considering that you get a 166MHz Pentium MMX desktop PC, modem, Epson colour inkjet printer and a Microsoft software bundle that includes Word 97, Works 4, Money 97 and the Encarta 97 World Atlas, not to mention Internet Explorer 4.0 and Microsoft Football.

The PC is a pleasant-looking affair in a desktop case with a quiet cooling fan. The keyboard is Gateway's own and while it's rather light, with a hollow, rattly action, it isn't likely to spoil Christmas morning. The Microsoft mouse won't generate any complaints either and perhaps more importantly, nor should the 15in Gateway Crystalscan monitor.

This has a relatively flat screen with a viewable diagonal of about 13.7in. It's controlled by an on-screen menu which contains geometry essentials like pin-cushion, trapezoidal and rotational correction, as well as a couple of preset colour tints and a user-definable colour channel. The picture is sharp overall at 800x600 (SVGA) resolution but you can push it up to 1,024x768 and still get acceptable focus. There's no flicker in either mode owing to the maximum

vertical refresh of 85Hz at 1,024x768.

As befits a home PC, the G5-166M comes with full multimedia functionality in the form of a Mitsumi CD-ROM drive, Ensoniq sound chip with hardware wavetable and a pair of Altec Lansing speakers. These are powerful and balanced, with distinct bass and a clean top-end which does justice to music CDs as well as games.

The sound chip and the 2Mb ATi 3D Rage II+ graphics controller have both been built into the motherboard itself, so only one of the expansion slots is taken up, in this case by the US Robotics x2 modem. This leaves two ISA and two PCI slots free - there is a third PCI slot, but this will only take short cards because of obstruction by the CD-ROM drive.

You can buy the Epson Stylus Colour 300 printer on its own for about £150 or so including VAT, so while its inclusion in the package probably saves you some money, it isn't actually all that much. The printer uses Epson's piezoelectric print head technology to lay down a relatively high-resolution 720x720dpi (dots per inch) print, which is built up from cyan, magenta and yellow inks with a separate black component. This gives noticeably better results than the additive approach where the CMY inks are mixed to produce a (poor) approximation of black and it also means that you don't run the colours down when you are simply printing text.

Printing isn't especially fast, particularly if you are outputting complex graphics at 720dpi, but the quality is good overall so long as you use coated paper. Epson claims that you can use plain paper but while results with text are acceptable, normal paper is too absorbent for colour printing and causes the inks to bleed into each other.

Needless to say, coated paper is more expensive than plain but if you want to drop the occasional colour page into

a document like a school project, the Epson is a cheap but effective tool. **This is a good value bundle but it's important to remember that the Pentium II is about to become the new standard. The money saved on buying a system like this has to be viewed as a trade-off against its potentially short lifetime as more demanding software becomes common.**

Dominic Bucknall

Gateway 2000 G5-166M

| | |
|---|--|
| 166MMX Pentium processor | |
| 512Kb of pipeline burst cache | |
| 32Mb of SDRAM main memory | |
| Intel 430TX motherboard chipset | |
| 2Gb Western Digital UltraDMA hard disk | |
| 2Mb ATi 3D Rage II+ graphics | |
| 12/24x Mitsumi CD-ROM drive | |
| Ensoniq wavetable audio chipset | |
| Altec Lansing ACS41 active stereo speakers | |
| 15in Gateway Crystalscan FST monitor | |
| Internal 56Kbits/s US Robotics data/fax/voice modem | |
| Microsoft Home Essentials 97 | |
| Epson Stylus Colour 300: | |
| 720x720dpi colour inkjet | |
| Four-colour (CMYK) cartridge | |
| Piezoelectric print head | |
| 80-100 sheet feeder tray | |
| £1,174 (inc VAT) | |
| Gateway 2000: 0800 362000 | |
| www.gateway2000.co.uk | |

Gateway 2000 G5-166M bundle

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

