Contents

Among the products in close-up this month are the final version of Internet Explorer 4.0, a PC emulator for the Mac, a Nokia software modem and a Pentium 233MMX notebook PC

Close-up

Compaq Presario 1207

The Presario 1207 came to us wearing a sticker proclaiming that it was the 'first full-featured multimedia notebook at a breakthrough price'. Just under £2,000 may not be most people's idea of 'breakthrough', but for Compaq, it's actually quite reasonable.

Your money certainly buys you a stylish notebook and the Presario 1207 has an upgradable Pentium 150MMX processor, 16Mb of RAM and an internal 3.5in floppy drive. You also get a 33.6Kbits/s modem, internal 14x CD-ROM drive, 128-bit graphics and the Compaq Premier Sound system.

The Premier Sound System offers the best sound we've ever heard on a notebook PC, and the Presario has controls just above the keyboard that allow you to play audio CDs without even having to turn the notebook on.

Although this 'DisqPlay' feature hardly makes the 1207 a replacement for a CD Walkman, it's useful for long train journeys and you can enjoy up to eight hours' listening from one battery charge.

The 11.3in DSTN screen is large enough for most purposes but the limitations of this screen technology make the 1207 unsuitable for fast-moving graphics. The keyboard is a delight though, having well-spaced keys with a firm, positive action. Battery life is good as well – we got roughly two hours' use out of it, with the CD-ROM going at the same time.

At 3.31kg (7.3lb), the 1207 is slightly heavier than most notebooks. This is the price for having the convenience of an the internal floppy and CD-ROM drives.

Possibly the only weak point on the 1207 is its touchpad. Even after adjusting the sensitivity several times we still found it was a little prone to clicking on the wrong application.

Compaq's Presario 1207 is a good-looking, well-built notebook that's competitively priced (for Compaq) and it's really only the touchpad and screen that can be faulted.

Jim Haryott

Specifications

Intel Pentium 150MHz MMX processor
11.3in STN display
16Mb of RAM
1.4Gb hard disk
Internal 14x CD-ROM drive
Enhanced smart NiMH battery
£1,999 (inc VAT)
Compaq: 0990 134456 **www.compaq.co.uk**

Compaq Presario 1207					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Internet Explorer 4.0

A suite of applications for the Internet including a Web browser, e-mail software and tools to create Web pages

After two beta versions, much trumpeting and bucketfuls of marketing hype, Internet Explorer 4.0 (IE4) has finally arrived. With the Internet's phenomenal growth rate showing no sign of slowing down, the delivery of a new browser from Microsoft is big news to a lot of people. And the excitement doesn't stop there – IE4 also presents us with a sneak preview of the look and feel of next year's big event, Windows 98.

IE4 was launched on 30 September and is a massive leap forward from version 3.0. Some people might say that with a full installation requiring around 70Mb of hard disk space, 'massive' is the right word. In the past, Microsoft has been criticised for bringing out increasingly cumbersome, bloated applications that gobble up system resources and slow down your PC to a crawl but with IE4, the company may actually have got it right.

To begin with, it loads so much faster that it's probably worth upgrading for this feature alone. That 70Mb of hard disk space contains a lot more than just a Web browser, though. You also get a useful e-mail application, basic Web page designer and a few other bits and pieces for making life on the Internet easier.

The Web browser itself looks similar to the previous version, but the unassuming interface hides a bundle of new features. First up is the new Search facility – clicking on the Search button opens up a small window on the left of the browser where you can type in your requests and view the lists of results. When you click a found link in the Search window, the appropriate Web page opens in the remainder of the browser window, leaving the Search window unaltered. This is very handy when the first few links thrown up by the search aren't really what you're looking for.

Have you ever visited a really useful site, forgotten to put it in your Favorites list and then realised a few days later that you've no idea how to find it again? This problem will plague you no longer once you've used the new History bar. This opens up in a separate window like the Search facility and shows a full list of all the sites you've visited, arranged by day and week.

One of the biggest buzzwords in Internet circles at the moment is 'channels'. The buttons that appear on the Windows 95 desktop once IE4 has been installed are links to Web sites which are designed to be read off-line. You can subscribe to a channel (free at present) and IE4 will then automatically check it for changes whenever you go online, downloading new information as necessary. You will be able to subscribe to any Web page by this method but non-channel sites have to be accessed via the browser.

The Active Desktop offers another way of viewing Web pages without resorting to the browser at all. When the Active Desktop has been enabled, a Web page can be displayed as part of the desktop's background. For those users who have access to a permanent Internet connection (many businesses, for example), this is a handy way to keep important information to hand. However, the value for users with a dial-up ISP (Internet Service Provider) connection is debatable.

IE4 also comes with a host of options enabling users to change the look and feel of Windows 95. If you choose to view your Desktop as a Web page, you'll be blessed with new features that will soon be appearing in Windows 98.

The most obvious change is no more double clicking – a single click on an icon will launch the application in the same way as an Internet hyperlink. This Web analogy also extends to folders, which are now more like mini-browsers and you can actually type a Web address in one to view a Web page.

The new folders take customisation to new levels offering the potential to completely control how they look using FrontPage Express, more of which later in this review. The best feature we've found in IE4 is that if you place the cursor over a graphics file the program will automatically bring up a miniature of the image on the left of the folder, which certainly makes searching through pictures about a million times easier than it used to be.

Outlook Express is the e-mail and newsgroup application that comes with IE4 and has a number of powerful features. If you happen to be one of those rare individuals with more than one e-mail account, you'll be pleased to discover that it supports as many different accounts as you like. There are also lots of tools for automatically organising and replying to incoming e-mails, which is extremely useful if you get more than a handful of messages a day. However, the feature that Microsoft is rightly promoting most heavily is the ability to send graphics and Web pages within e-mails themselves instead of having to include them as confusing attachments.

FrontPage Express is a Web design tool aimed at complete novices. The Personal Homepage Wizard guides you painlessly through the process of creating a simple Web page and adding fancy features like graphics. Scrolling text is made easy with a simple and intuitive (if you have used Microsoft software before) interface. Most ISPs give you a certain amount of free Web space with your account and the Web Publishing Wizard makes it easy to place your home page where everyone can admire it.
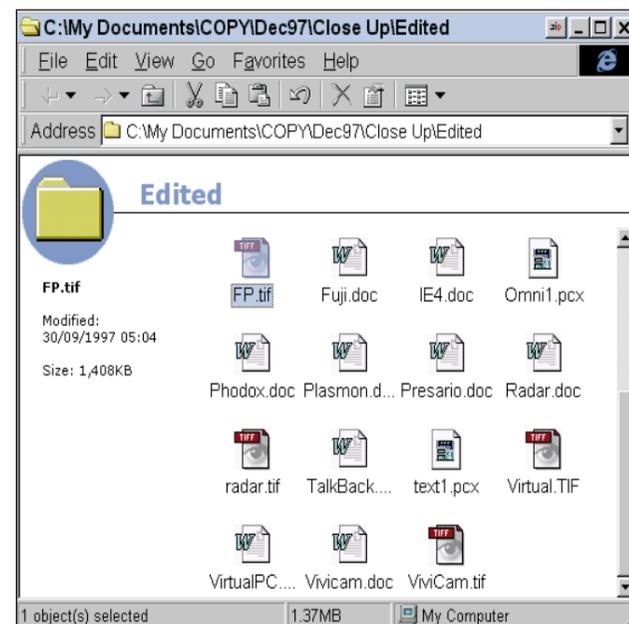
The top ISPs in the UK, including Demon, BT and UUNET are already supplying Microsoft's IE4 as standard to their new customers. It's definitely worth upgrading to IE4 but make sure your PC can handle it. Microsoft recommends that your PC has a Pentium processor, but we suggest that if you're planning to use the new Web-based desktop, you should only upgrade if you have at minimum of a 133MHz Pentium processor and 32Mb of memory.

IE4 is by far the best browser in town. It will take you a few days to get to grips with all the new features but you'll soon be wondering how you ever managed without it. *Adam Evans*

Connectix Virtual PC

Love it or loathe it, Windows is here to stay and there comes a time when even a Mac user has to get their hands dirty with Microsoft's finest. Rather than face the trauma of sitting at a PC though, Connectix offers a less painful solution – Windows 95 on a Mac.

Although it does it by software alone, Virtual PC provides the functionality of a Pentium MMX PC with Windows 95. Mac peripherals are recognised, so you can use your existing modem, CD-ROM drive and printer, and there is even Sound Blaster emulation for games.

Loading the software is easy and there's a step-by-step guide to help you. A useful section guides Mac users around Windows 95's unfamiliar conventions and includes such things as explanations of the different document naming systems.

There are some other differences between Macs and PCs, not least on the mouse and keyboard. A Mac mouse only has one button, so Virtual PC lets you set a key command to act as a right-mouse click. Similarly, Windows 95 keyboards have several keys that are missing on standard Mac keyboards and these can also be simulated by key commands.

Windows applications can be run alongside Mac ones, in either a window or full-screen, and files can be shared between the two.

Given that many Mac users will never have used Windows before, the handbook is rather less detailed than we would have liked in some places. As long as you're not afraid of a bit of trial and error, however, Virtual PC works extremely well.

Virtual PC is a must for Mac users who need to run Windows applications without going to the expense of buying a PC – but be prepared to learn the dreaded Windows!   Debbie Oliver

Nokia Cellular Data Suite

If you need to be online when you're on the move, the solution is a notebook PC, GSM phone and pricey PC Card GSM modem. Or at least it used to be, for Nokia has a mobile communications solution that has done away with the modem altogether.

The Cellular Data Suite consists of a thin cable about a yard long, and three floppy disks. The cable connects a PC's serial port to a GSM phone – although only two phones can be used – the Nokia 3110 and 8110.

Setting the system up is as simple as installing the software and plugging the cable in, and since no PC Card slots are required, either a desktop or notebook PC can be used.

The Nokia phone appears as another modem in Windows 95's list and is used in the usual way. Connections can be made to any ISP (Internet Service Provider) or online service and there's no need to dial into a special mobile phone POP (Point of Presence). Unfortunately, the limitations of the GSM network mean that data transmission is restricted to a positively pedestrian 9.6Kbits/s. Although this is adequate for e-mail (but watch those attachments) and short faxes, waiting for a graphically-rich Web site to appear simply takes too long. Since the 'modem' part of the setup is performed by software, though, upgrading in the future should be a relatively simple process.
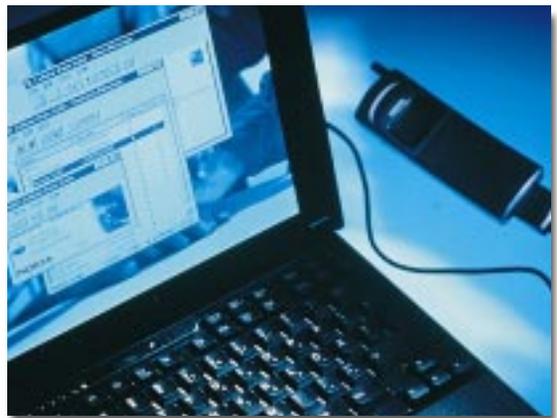
The Cellular Data Suite performed well and as long there was a strong GSM signal, there are no problems with lost connections. Like any mobile phone though, calls aren't exactly cheap and this is really a system for using when you can't get to a telephone socket, rather than instead of one.

If all you want is GSM data transmission, then the Nokia Cellular Data Suite is a cheap way of getting it, but you would be better off with a PC Card modem version if you need landline communications as well.   Julian Prokaza

ACI Acumen P233MMO

A notebook that features Intel's notebook-specific MMO processor, coupled with fast memory, a high-speed hard disk and high-resolution graphics

To the well-travelled, Tillamook may just be a coastal town in Oregon but to the aficionado of all things Intel, it's much more than that. Or rather it was, because the processor formerly known as Tillamook is now on sale under its official name of Pentium MMO – Intel's most advanced MMX mobile processor to date.

Although the new chip has only recently been announced, MMO-based notebooks are already starting to appear and ACI's Acumen is among the first to go on sale in the UK. MMO offers several things, notably low power consumption that means longer battery life, less waste heat and a new kind of upgrade path.

Instead of mounting directly on the motherboard, MMO processors are supplied on a module that also contains the secondary cache. According to Intel, current MMO modules like the one fitted in the Acumen will be easily upgradable, specifically to the 300MHz Pentium II for notebooks (codenamed 'Deschutes') due for release early in 1998.

At £3,519 including VAT, the Acumen is not cheap but neither is it overpriced for what it offers. The core of the system incorporates a lot of big numbers – a 233MHz MMO processor, 512Kb of pipeline burst cache, 48Mb of RAM, 2.1Gb hard disk and 20x CD-ROM drive.

You might be forgiven for expecting the Acumen to be on the large side given the ambitious nature of its configuration but it's surprisingly compact, measuring 47mm thick and weighing just 3.1kg. Although manufacturers sometimes get the weight down at the expense of overall robustness, that was not the case here and our review sample was very well made. This also extends to the keyboard, which was pleasant to use thanks to its clean, firm action.

All the usual external notebook features were present, including twin PC Card slots (both with 32-bit CardBus support) and an infra-red serial interface operating at the current standard of 4Mbits/s. The floppy drive can be pulled out of its bay and replaced with the CD-ROM module or if operating time is the overriding consideration, you can install an optional second battery pack instead.

Not to be outdone by other power notebooks on the market, the Acumen's active-matrix screen is the largest that can be squeezed into a conventionally sized lid and has a 13.3in diagonal. This is larger than the viewable image on most 14in monitors but it is all put to use displaying a high resolution 1,024x768 image. The Acumen has above-average audio capabilities in the form of a 16-bit Crystal sound chip with wavetable synthesis and hardware 3D spatialisation, but the integrated speakers were rather tinny and weak, 3D or no 3D.

About the only thing the Acumen didn't get right was power management. The setup options were only accessible by interrupting the boot, which is just a nuisance and there's no way of changing the hard disk time-out from 'drive off after about 15 seconds of inactivity'. This may improve battery life but it's also annoying. Expect between two to three hours' running time and a probable BIOS upgrade in the near future with a user-definable setting for disk spindown.

That aside, the performance is impressive – on a par with, if not faster, than some 200MHz Pentium MMX desktops. **The ACI Acumen is a convincing combination of power, build quality, portability and price – well worth a look if you need a serious notebook, especially in the light of the upgrade path offered by the MMO processor.** Dominic Bucknall
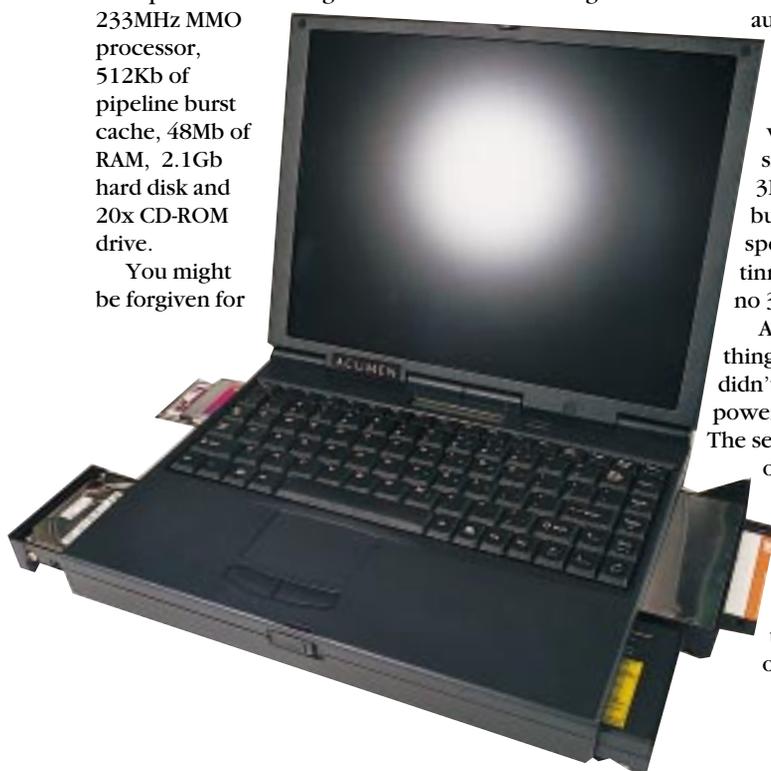
Specifications

233MHz Pentium MMO processor

512Kb of pipeline burst cache

48Mb of SDRAM

Intel 430TX motherboard chipset

Removable 2.1Gb UltraDMA-2 hard disk

Removable 20x CD-ROM drive

Two Type II PC Card slots

16-bit wavetable Crystal sound chip

128-bit NeoMagic MagicGraph XD 2160 graphics with 2.5Mb of memory

Integrated stereo speakers

4Mbits/s IrDA 1.1 infra-red serial port

USB port

Lithium ion battery

Weight 3.1kg

Dimensions: 304x235x47mm (wxdxh)

£3,519 (inc VAT)

ACI: 0181 830 1958
www.aciweb.com

ACI Acumen P233MMO					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Plasmon CDR480

The price of writeable CDs is falling all the time and with the launch of Plasmon's new CDR480 CD writer, CDs are become a more cost-effective way of distributing and archiving data. The drive looks just like an external CD drive with an extra 'writing' LED on the front. Like others of its kind it's a SCSI device, so you need a SCSI card to use it.

Installation only takes a few minutes and after fine-tuning Windows 95, the drive is soon up and running. When used with the supplied 'FloppyCD' software, the CDR480 appears in Explorer as another drive letter and can be treated as a floppy drive. Files can be copied to a CD by dragging them using Explorer or by saving from an application. This cleverness is provided by EasyCD and it even allows file and folders to be moved and deleted after they have been stored on a disc.

While a CD is being recorded, it can only be read by the CDR480 drive. However, once you've filled the disc (or decided that it's complete), you must run a finalisation routine that makes the disc readable by any CD-ROM drive.

Plasmon intends shipping 'SmartCD' software with the CDR480 but this wasn't available in time for us to review. Apparently, SmartCD will allow you to extract data and audio information from discs at 8-speed using the CDR480 drive, then use it to make new CDs or audio compilations. A multimedia tutorial will be also included, but this wasn't available for us to review.

Reasonably cheap and certainly easy to use, the real strength of the Plasmon CDR480 is the supplied software, which makes CDs as easy to manage as a floppy disk. Steve Cotterell

Specifications

4x CD writer and 8x CD reader

Supports Disc at once, multisession, track at once, and fixed and variable packet writing methods

175ms disc access time

£511.13 (inc VAT)

Plasmon Data: 01763 262963
www.plasmon.co.uk

Plasmon CDR480					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486/66 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 100 percent ASPI-compatible SCSI adaptor .

Talking Technologies Talk Back

The last big thing in speech synthesis by computer was over a decade ago, when Kenneth Kendall appeared on a chip for the BBC Micro. Speech synthesis can now be performed solely by software, and this is just what Talking Technologies' Talk Back offers.

At £45, Talk Back is cheap but doesn't look particularly cheerful at first. Fortunately, its minimal screen presence – a small pink window with three buttons – is intentional, as the program is designed to sit unobtrusively on top of any open application.

Talk Back's operation is simple – copy some text from an application to the clipboard, click the 'play' button and the program reads it aloud. The voice is female with nine variations and both the speed and pitch can be altered.

Unfortunately, Talk Back's speech is nothing to get excited about. The accent is English, the intonation reasonably convincing and pronunciation accurate, but the actual speech is more Stephanie Hawking than HAL. The Commodore Amiga offered synthesis as good as this 10 years ago and it's a pity that speech quality hasn't come on very much since then.

Not that Talk Back doesn't prove useful in some situations. Being unable to read what's on a PC's screen is one of them and since the program can be controlled by keyboard alone, it's ideal for the visually impaired. Talk Back is also useful for proofreading, since mistakes in text are more obvious when they are spoken aloud.

A caveat though. We experienced problems with Talk Back on our test PC – a Mesh P200MMX with 48Mb of RAM. Apparently, the speech synthesis wasn't designed for powerful PCs, causing it to spout occasional gibberish. A fix is promised soon.

Talk Back is cheap, easy to use and works reasonably well but ssimilar results can be had with the speech synthesis software supplied free with many sound cards. Julian Prokaza

Specifications

Speech synthesis with an English accent

Nine female voices with customisable speed and pitch

Continuous or word-by-word synthesis

£45.83 (inc VAT)

Talking Technologies: 0171 602 4107
www.talk-systems.com

Talking Technologies Talk Back					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486/75 PC, Windows 95, 6Mb of RAM, Sound Blaster or compatible sound card, CD-ROM drive.

Norton AntiVirus 4.0

The latest version of Norton's virus detector and disinfector for MS-DOS and all versions of Windows

Symantec has pulled out all the stops with the latest version of its anti-virus package. The box for Norton AntiVirus Deluxe version 4.0 (NAV) contains versions of the software for MS-DOS and all Intel-based Windows platforms. On the CD-ROM are videos containing information about viruses, a guide to the product, what to do when it detects a virus, and a tour of Symantec's AntiVirus Research Center.

NAV's interface has changed little since the last version. From the main window, you choose which drives to check and click 'Scan Now' to set a scan in motion. You can also start a virus scan by right-clicking on a file, or run one regularly using the included program scheduler. NAV's scanner isn't especially quick but this isn't really a problem in Windows, since you don't have to wait for it to finish before starting another application.

Scanner speed is even less important now that anti-virus products offer on-access scanning. Files are checked when you first access them, eliminating the need for regular whole-disk sweeps and avoiding the risk of loading files that haven't been scanned. NAV's on-access scanner is called Auto-Protect and under

Windows 95, its only visible component is a small icon on the Task bar. When you try to open or run an infected file, you're asked what you want to do with the file. Most files can be repaired just by choosing the Repair option, though this doesn't work in all cases.

As well as warning you about infected files before they can do any damage, Auto-Protect provides extra protection by intercepting attempts to format your hard disk or write to its system areas. By default, it virus-checks files when they are written to disk, as well as when they are read or moved, alerting you instantly to infections in e-mail attachments and Internet downloads.

When it comes to the degree of control you get over how the product operates, NAV leads the field. You can choose what to scan, how to report an infection, what options to allow for dealing with it and what information to record in a log. Auto-Protect is also completely configurable. If you need to, you can even set a password to prevent unauthorised tampering with the program's settings.

NAV is also among the leaders at detecting viruses. The scanner employs the latest techniques, such as the 'Striker' in-memory decryption, to unmask variably encrypted viruses and the new 'Bloodhound' heuristic analysis can detect new, unknown viruses and even works with macro viruses (an important strength as these are now the most common type). It detected all our virus samples – a performance matched by only two other products.
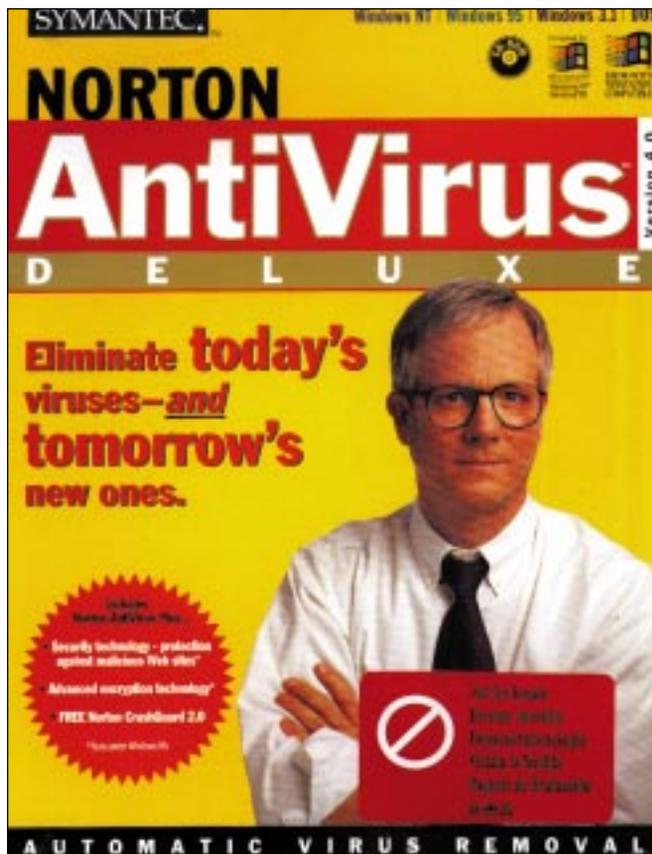
Like other scanners, NAV depends on regular updates to maintain its ability to identify, rather than merely detect, new viruses. Updates are free for the life of the product but only if you have Internet access. Click the LiveUpdate button and NAV connects to Symantec's FTP site and checks if newer virus definitions are available. If they are, it downloads and installs them, which takes about five minutes. Updates are also available monthly on disc, but at extra cost.

NAV makes virus removal as easy as possible and the included boot disk can be used to remove an infection prior to installation. You can then create a rescue disk set to help restore your PC to working order after a destructive virus has done its worst. In normal use, a Repair Wizard helps you clean up after the scanner has detected any infection. **NAV provides as good protection from viruses as you can get. If you have Web access, its ease of updating could make this your best buy.** Julian Moss ⇨

Norton AntiVirus Deluxe version 4.0					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: MS-DOS 5.0, 386 PC, 4Mb of RAM (8Mb Windows 95), 16Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive.

Mesh Photo Pro 200

A 200MHz AMD K6-based multimedia PC fitted with an internal photo-printer and supplied with a Fuji DS-7 digital camera, together with basic image transfer and image-editing software

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to take photographs, load them onto your PC for editing and general tidying up, then print out the best ones right there and then? If this all sounds a bit much, like that memorable scene in the film *Blade Runner*, then an encounter with the Mesh Photo Pro might come as a bit of a revelation.

Digital cameras have been around for a while now, as have compact photo-printing units. What Mesh has done with the Photo Pro is pull all the necessary bits together in one place. The result is a system designed to appeal to the home or business user who wants a foothold in the world of digital photography.

As you can see from the specifications, the PC side of the outfit is reasonably well-endowed and supports the latest hardware features, such as fast SDRAM main memory and an Ultra DMA-2 hard disk, thanks to its bang-up-to-date SiS motherboard chipset.

This solid core specification is complemented by some good accessories. Audio is by way of a Creative Labs AWE 64 Value wavetable sound card and a nice set of active Yamaha speakers, which handled music playback comfortably as well as games soundtracks. You also get an internal 33.6Kbits/s modem with voice and fax functions, and a small microphone headset which can be used with the bundled copy of Simply Talking to dictate text directly into applications.

The keyboard is usable, though nothing special but the 15in FST ADI monitor proved to be fairly capable. It was sharp at 800x600 and acceptable at a resolution of 1,024x768, so long as you use large Windows fonts. It was easy to set up, thanks to digital controls, and comfortably handled the maximum available vertical refresh rate of 75Hz. It could have gone higher at 800x600 but the display driver didn't seem to know how.

The Fuji DS-7 camera stores images on a removable memory card, which means when it's full (with either 30 pictures at 640x480 resolution or 60 at 320x240 resolution), you can swap it for another one, just like changing film in a conventional camera. There's no viewfinder as such and, instead, you frame the picture using a small colour LCD screen at the back of the camera. Although the screen drains the camera's batteries in about an hour, it's useful for reviewing pictures, and for finding duff ones to delete to free up some space on the memory card. Not so useful is the camera's inherent lack of focus, particularly at mid and long range.

The camera connects to the PC's serial port via an adaptor cable and you copy across any or all the images you want using a simple piece of software provided for this purpose. Images can then be edited – cropped, rotated, colour and brightness corrected, sharpened and so on – using the bundled copy of Adobe Photodeluxe.

The Aztech photo-printer is tucked away in one of the PC's 5.25in drive bays but otherwise you use it much like any other printer. It uses a cartridge containing 20 3.5x5in sheets of photo-sensitive paper, which it 'develops' using a light source. The glossy prints aren't bad, having a quality similar to that of Polaroid and each print costs about 45p, based on a cost per cartridge of £8.99.

As a whole, the Photo Pro worked well enough as a complete system to convince us that it has a future. Right now though, a little more work is needed on the camera and printing side for most home users to be satisfied, but businesses may well find that it's worth a look.

Dominic Bucknall

| Mesh Photo Pro 200	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
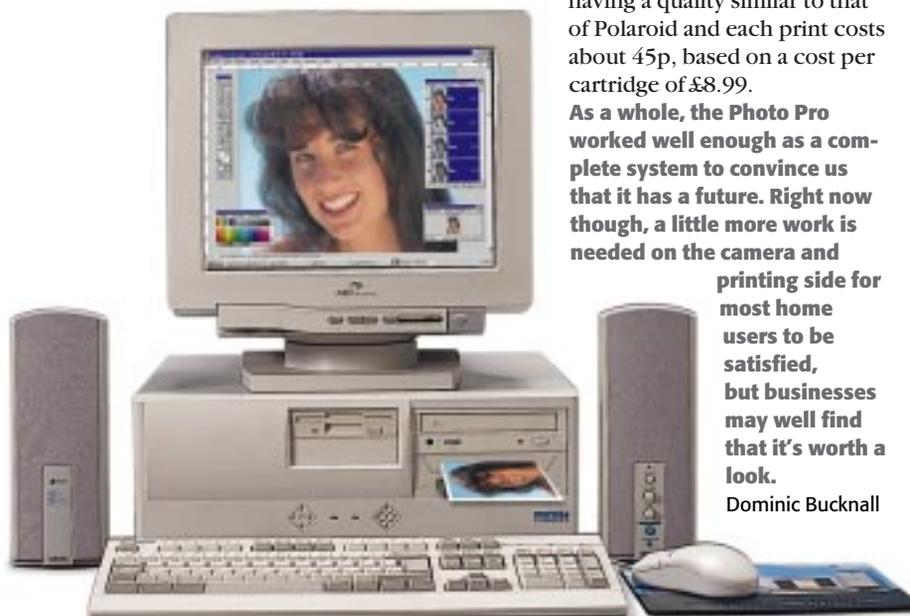
Adobe Acrobat Capture 2.0

Storing a scanned document on your PC as a PDF (Adobe's Portable Document Format) file has a number of advantages over traditional text or image formats. A PDF document looks like the original paper version, and is searchable yet extremely compact. For example, a 9Mb TIF image of a document with text and graphics was reduced to 275Kb when converted to a PDF file.

Acrobat Capture is a program for creating PDF documents and it comes in two main parts. 'Capture' facilitates the scanning and conversion of documents, and 'Reviewer' lets you edit the document to correct errors of recognition during conversion. Converted documents can be saved in PDF, HTML, text or word-processing file formats.

Capture's main screen appears as a process chart and you can scan, scan and convert, or convert a previously scanned document. Documents can be scanned and converted singly or in batches, and multiple scanned pages can also be consolidated into a multipage PDF document file. The basic package comes with a licence to process 20,000 pages and to process more, additional licences must be purchased.

To view, search or print a PDF file, you need Acrobat Reader. A copy is included with Capture and you can freely distribute as many copies of it as you like. Acrobat 3.0 is needed if you want more sophisticated editing features than are found in Reviewer. If you are using Capture to create HTML pages, you also need Adobe PageMill 2.0 to add the final touches.

Businesses implementing electronic document handling and a paper-to-Web system will find this pricey plug-in useful. Others may well look for a cheaper solution. Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Converts scanned documents to PDF files

Batch-processing mode lets you handle many documents at a time

Will output files in PDF, HTML and popular word-processing formats

Combines with Adobe Acrobat Exchange and PageMill for a 'Paper-to-Web' system

£562.82 (inc VAT) for 20,000 pages

Adobe Systems: 0181 606 4001 www.adobe.co.uk

Adobe Acrobat Capture 2.0				
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Features	★	★	★	★ ☆
Value for money	★	★	☆	☆ ☆
Overall	★	★	★	★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486, Windows 95, 32Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive.

Phodox UltraScan 300

Flatbed scanners are becoming the norm rather than the exception and there are many good-quality cheap models around. The latest entrant is the Phodox UltraScan 300 from Primax.

Design-wise it's a touch unusual. Most scanners only have a single button to initiate the scanning process and maybe a couple of indicator lights – not so the UltraScan. A veritable array of buttons and lights adorn the front of the unit, and these underline a large liquid-crystal display (LCD). These control all the scanner's functions including resolution setting, document type and image size – things that would ordinarily be set in software.

The peculiarities don't end there though. Curiously, the UltraScan is not TWAIN-compliant. TWAIN is the de facto standard for PC scanning and by using it almost all the popular graphics applications can acquire images directly. Instead, images must be acquired into Primax's PhotoDesk before being pasted into whatever application you're using.

This isn't a major concern because cutting and pasting are familiar Windows operations, but PhotoDesk is painfully slow. Even on a well-specified 200MHz Pentium MMX machine, the various steps that follow a successful scan take an age to work through. The scanner itself is also quite slow, though not exceptionally so, labouring for around 30 seconds over an A4 page at 300dpi (dots per inch).

Unfortunately, even at that highest resolution, the quality of scanned images is decidedly mediocre. Both definition and contrast are lacking and resolving power (the amount of colours the scanner actually picks up, or 'sees') is nothing more than average.

This is an interesting scanner, though not a particularly appealing one. It's perfectly adequate but there are plenty of TWAIN-compliant models that are both cheaper and better. Scott Colvey

Specifications

300dpi optical resolution (4,800dpi interpolated)

Connects via parallel port

A4-sized scanning window

Not TWAIN-compliant

Dimensions (mm): 415x268x77 (dxwxh)

£240 (inc VAT) street price

Primax Hotline: 01235 546020 www.primax.nl

Primax Phodox UltraScan 300				
Ease of use	★	★	★	★ ☆
Build quality	★	★	★	★ ☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Overall	★	★	★	★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486, 8Mb of RAM, parallel port, Windows 95, CD-ROM drive.

Microsoft FrontPage 98

The latest edition of Microsoft's versatile Web site creation, maintenance and management application

FrontPage 98 is Microsoft's latest version of its Web site creation application. Like previous versions, it's highly versatile and can satisfy a wide range of users – corporate customers for creating and managing company intranets; Web professionals for design and consulting services; small businesses for building Web sites to market products and services; and enthusiastic home users for personal Web sites.

We tested a late beta version that lacked adequate introductory documentation but this will hopefully be remedied by the time the software is launched. The program is also in dire need of a 'Getting Started' document of some sort, if only to explain basic terms and concepts. Home users might balk, for example, at the cryptic recommendation to install a 'personal Web server' and novices will need to know that a 'FrontPage Web' is a collection of HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) pages, images, documents and other files that make up a Web site.

FrontPage 98 consists of two programs – FrontPage Explorer and FrontPage Editor. Working in both, you create, view, and edit your FrontPage Webs. Webs can be stored in three places – on a remote Web server (such as the free space you've been allocated by your Internet Service Provider), on a Web server running on your own PC (the 'Personal Web Server'), or in a normal folder on your hard drive.

In this latter case though, you sacrifice some features. This is because a FrontPage 98 Web also contains a number of special support files that provide added functionality, including some sophisticated features that will help to make your site irresistible. To benefit from these though, you need to maintain FrontPage Webs on a Web server that has the FrontPage Server Extensions (a set of special programs and scripts) installed. Many, but not all ISPs use these extensions and it might be worthwhile checking that yours does before you invest in FrontPage 98.

When you start the program, Front-Page Explorer is displayed and this can present no fewer than seven different views of the current FrontPage Web. For example, Folder View shows how the content of the current Web is organised on your hard drive, making it easy to manage different files, and Navigation View lets you drag and drop pages to alter the site structure. Switching between views, you create and open FrontPage Webs, create a navigation structure, manage folders and files, view and repair hyperlinks, use themes, and so on.

The FrontPage Editor can be used separately but you'll soon find yourself naturally using it in close association with FrontPage Explorer. The Editor working area is where you create the pages of your FrontPage Web. As you add text, images, tables, form fields and other elements, the FrontPage Editor displays them as they would appear in a Web browser and you can preview the page in your preferred browser at any time. FrontPage 98 also integrates tightly with Microsoft Office, so, for example, Word documents can be opened and edited while in FrontPage, using converters that are shared with other Microsoft Office applications.

One nice new touch in FrontPage 98 are the consistent visual design elements called themes. There are over 50 of these, each with complementary graphical elements like backgrounds, bullets and images. Although intended to be used from scratch, themes can be applied to Web pages retrospectively and they take much of the hard work out of making a Web site look professional. Another welcome addition is the vastly improved table handling – you simply grab a border with the mouse and resize it to suit.

Professionals should find FrontPage 98 about the best there is for fast, versatile Web page design but newcomers may be daunted by its complexity. Terry Pinnell ⇨

Microsoft FrontPage 98 (beta)					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 29Mb of hard disk space.

MicroSolutions Backpack pd/cd

With hard disks getting bigger all the time, backing up the data stored upon them is becoming more of a challenge. MicroSolutions has addressed the problem by producing the Backpack pd/cd, an external drive offering a flexible, if not entirely convincing way of storing up to 650Mb of data on to rewritable Phase Change (PD) discs.

Installing the Backpack is as easy as can be because it connects via a PC's parallel port. The unit is automatically detected when Windows 95 fires up and after a couple of driver disk insertions, it appears as just another drive icon within Explorer.

PD discs are housed in a bulky caddy-style case, conjuring up memories of the earliest CD-ROM drives. In fact, with their sliding protective cover and corner-positioned write-protect tabs they look rather like over-sized floppy disks. To accommodate them, the Backpack pd/cd has a slide-out drawer, as opposed to the more familiar flat tray. The bottom of this is moulded to the size of a traditional compact disc because the drive has been designed so that it can also use CD-ROMs and audio CDs without a caddy.

With a PD disc inserted, the Backpack can be treated just like a hard disk drive, only it's a good deal slower. During our tests, the drive managed to write data to the disc at a rate of 225Kb per second (or 0.2Mb/s). This compares badly with other backup devices, such as Iomega's Jaz drive, which can manage around 1.9Mb/s. Reading data was better – around 550Kb/s for both PD and CD-ROM transfers – but this is still comparatively slow.
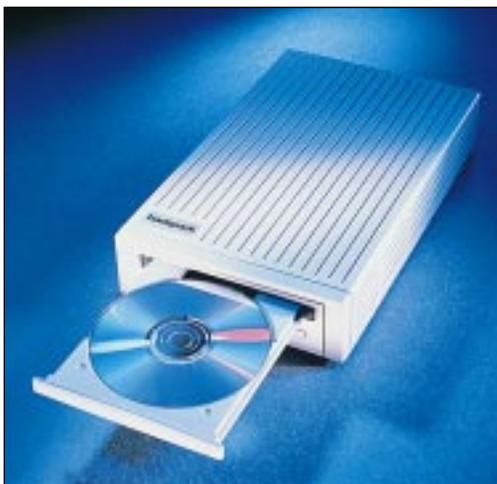
By modern CD-ROM drive standards MicroSolutions' Backpack pd/cd is slow and as a backup device it is overshadowed by better and more compact alternatives. However, it does the job and the price is not unrealistic. Scott Colvey

MicroSolutions Backpack pd/cd					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Connectix DigitalRadar

One of the most infuriating things about working in a busy office is that people take things from your desk without asking. Gluing everything in place is one foolproof, if inconvenient, solution and DigitalRadar is another.

Provided you have a video camera linked to your PC, DigitalRadar will use it and Connectix's motion detector technology to catch light-fingered colleagues in the act. Anyone straying in front of the camera will be captured on the PC's hard disk and the resulting video clips can then be used as the basis of heated office 'discussions'.

DigitalRadar's program window consists of a camera preview window and a button marked 'Begin Monitoring'. Before you start spying, it's wise to calibrate your camera to prevent false alarms. Calibration automatically adjusts the camera's sensitivity so that random interference and accidental desk-wobble don't trigger recording.

Monitoring can be started manually or at set times and days using the 'Auto Monitor' feature. Once running, DigitalRadar will record a video clip or play an alarm whenever motion is detected within the camera's field of view. The time and date of each clip is logged and everything is password-protected to prevent tampering.

Effective operation, however, depends on the camera. Connectix's own Color Quickcam was subject to too much interference to be calibrated properly and the time lag between motion detection and video capture allowed would-be thieves to slip by unrecorded. Creative Labs' WebCam proved much more successful and the only real hole in a DigitalRadar-protected office is if someone steals the PC.

Although it needs the right camera to work properly, DigitalRadar is a cheap and unquestionably useful utility. The overriding impression though, is that it should be bundled free with cameras rather than sold separately. Julian Prokaza

Connectix DigitalRadar					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486/66 PC, Windows 95, 12Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, Video for Windows-compatible video camera.
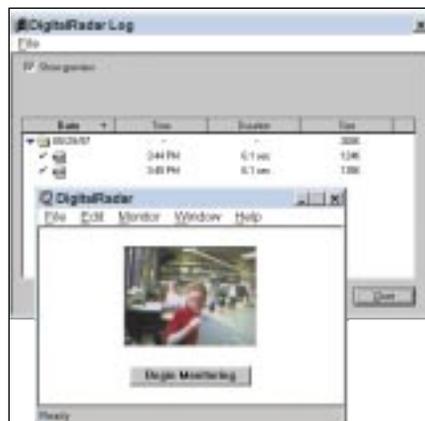
Fujifilm DX-5

At first sight, you might think this palm-sized camera uses conventional technology but on closer examination, the LCD screen on the back reveals it as digital. Launched for the Christmas market, the Fujifilm DX-5 is aimed at leisure users and priced accordingly.

The camera has a conventional viewfinder and shutter button, plus a manual lens control to select f3 or f8 according to the lighting level. On the back of the camera is the power switch which is also the pop-up flash release. When you turn the power on, 'Hi' flashes on the display, followed by mode and picture count indicators. The flash is switchable between Auto, Red-Eye Reduction, Forced and Suppressed modes. Closing the flash housing turns the power off, with 'Bye' flashing on the screen.

Images are stored on a 2Mb Smart-Media card, which slips into a slot in the camera's side. In normal mode, it holds 30 images, or 22 in fine mode and either the last picture taken or all the pictures can be erased. More cards can be bought, increasing the number of pictures you can take at any one time . A 4Mb card is available.

Images can be downloaded into your PC using supplied software and a cable connected to the serial port. We had no difficulty installing the software. Downloading images imposes a severe drain on the camera's batteries though, and the optional power adaptor would be of benefit here.

The picture quality, although not perfect, is acceptable for 'snapshots'. Definition is inadequate for detailed compositions and colours sometimes appear faded. The photo-enhancing software supplied is simple to use and produces reasonable results. **This camera is easy to use and takes acceptable 'snapshot' quality photos. It is aimed at the Christmas leisure market where it would probably prove popular if it were cheaper.**   Steve Cotterell

Specifications

2Mb SmartMedia card stores up to 30 images (60 on optional 4Mb card)	
Runs off two AA batteries or AC Power Adaptor (optional)	
PhotoEnhancer software included	
Dimensions: 112x66x40mm	
Weight: 160g (excluding batteries)	
£279.99 (inc VAT)	
Fuji Photo Film (UK): 0171 586 5900	

Fujifilm DX-5					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 17Mb of hard disk space for software, 30Mb for installation plus space for images, free serial port, CD-ROM drive.

pcANYWHERE32 v.8.0

Thanks to the notebook PC, it's possible to work almost anywhere in the world. The trouble is many notebook users also have desktop PCs in the office and keeping files and documents synchronised between the two can be a nightmare. This is where pcANYWHERE 32 comes in handy. Not only does it allow you to transfer files between two or more PCs, it also makes it possible for one to remotely control others.
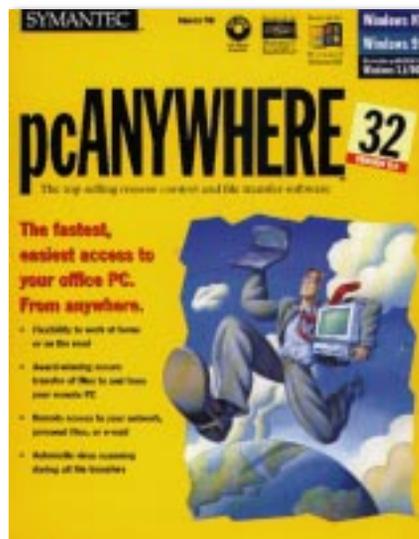
This latest version boasts improved data encryption techniques and an Internet-based 'live' update feature that ensures the software is always up to date. In addition, pcANYWHERE can now play host to multiple remote PCs and Symantec is also bundling the popular video-conferencing package, CU-SeeMe 3.0.

Installing pcANYWHERE is at least a two-part process. First, it needs to be set up on a 'host' PC with a second machine configured as a 'remote' system.

With the traditional notebook/desktop set-up, on-the-move data transfer/remote control sessions are made over telephone lines using modems. However, pcANYWHERE can also take advantage of popular network protocols such as IPX and TCP/IP.

Performance is something that's difficult to judge with a package such as this because it can be affected by so many factors. With a direct 33.6Kbits/s modem-to-modem connection, we had no difficulty transferring files but remote-control sessions were sluggish because of their highly graphical nature. Over our office LAN though, controlling another PC 'remotely' was almost as fast as sitting right in front of it, with just the occasional hold-up when the server was busy. **Small, neat and effective: this is a fine solution for PC users on the move. However, though it's superbly implemented, it does seem to be a tad expensive for the facilities on offer.**   Scott Colvey

Specifications

Access and control a PC remotely	
Video-conferencing software included	
LiveUpdate feature ensures program is always up to date	
Parallel connecting cable included	
£163.33 (inc VAT)	
Symantec: 0171 616 5600 **www.symantec.com**	

pcANYWHERE32 v.8.0					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486, 4Mb of RAM, Windows 95, 16Mb of free hard disk space.

HP ScanJet 6100C

A 24-bit colour flatbed scanner with a 14in scanning window and 600dpi optical resolution, aimed at graphics professionals and demanding home users

Hewlett-Packard is a giant among giants in the computer industry. The company manufacturers everything from basic inkjet printers to state-of-the-art PCs and its turnover last year teetered on the edge of the $40 billion mark. Its latest offering is the ScanJet 6100C – a 24-bit colour flatbed scanner for professionals and demanding home users.

Straight out of the box, the 6100C certainly gives the impression of being a heavy-duty unit. It's a massive 23in long, thanks in part to its 14in scanning window and it stands well over 5in high. Like most flatbed scanners, the lid raises on pegs for scanning pages from thick books and it can be removed completely so that irregularly shaped objects can be placed on the scan bed. Other than an on/off switch, the 6100C has no controls of its own as all operating commands come from the PC it's connected to.

The installation process is relatively straightforward, though it does veer slightly from the instructions in the manual. The 6100C is a SCSI (Small Computer System Interface) device, so the first thing to do is insert the supplied card into a free expansion slot. After this, the manual recommends you install the ScanJet drivers and software but doing so results in Windows complaining that the scanner isn't connected. Of course, the solution is as simple as hooking up both ends of the SCSI connecting cable but this instruction appears later.

With that done, we experienced no further problems and were able to start scanning straight away. Hewlett-Packard supplies a basic set of scanning software tools called DeskScan II, though as a TWAIN-compliant scanner, the 6100C will work directly with any application that has an 'Acquire' option. However, the advantage of using DeskScan is that it acts as a control centre for all of the scanner's features. From the one interface panel, it's possible to alter scan resolution, colour depth and the type of operation required (scan, copy, etc).

Scan speeds varied enormously from just a few seconds for a page of black-and-white text, rising to nearly a minute for a high-resolution (600 dots per inch) scan in millions of colours. However, regardless of the document type or time taken, the 6100C's scan quality is difficult to fault. Mono scans are crisp and clear, and colour images are similarly impressive but it is in the scanning of 3D objects that the machine really excels – and with good reason.

Try scanning a 3D object on a normal scanner and you'll get mixed results. This is because even single-pass scanners make three exposures (one each for red, green and blue) per scan line, which are then overlaid to create a single full-colour image. For textured or 3D objects, this produces non-existent shadows which spoil the scan.

The 6100C, on the other hand, uses a 'single exposure scanning' technique courtesy of a 'trichromatic beam splitter'. In plain English, this means as well as completing scans in a single pass of the illumination apparatus, the scanner obtains all the colour information it needs in just one exposure of the original because it uses a prism-like technology to split the light beam. The result is superb quality with an image 'depth' that simply isn't seen from other scanners.

Bundled software is sparse but welcome. A copy of Caere's OmniPage OCR software is included (see review a few pages on), enabling the ScanJet to be used for printed-page-to-digital-text conversion and Corel's Web-page-creation tool, Web.Graphics, is also thrown-in. **The ScanJet 6100C is a bulky beast but it also happens to be one of the best scanners in its class. If you're looking for a high-performance, high-quality, versatile scanner, the 6100C comes with our highest recommendation.** Scott Colvey

Specifications

600dpi optical resolution

24-bit colour scanning (16.7 million colours)

Maximum document size (mm): 216x356

Weight: 9.8kg

SCSI interface included

Slide adaptor included

TWAIN-compliant

£703.83 (inc VAT)

HP: 0990 474747
www.hp.com

HP ScanJet 6100C					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: PC, Windows 95 and one free ISA slot.

Xerox TextBridge Pro 98

The latest version of TextBridge Pro brings optical character recognition to the mass market with new features and a one-price-for-all policy

Xerox has set up a separate company called ScanSoft to market the latest version of its OCR (optical character recognition) software, TextBridge Pro 98. Along with the new name comes a new low price of £81, in line with the company's belief that OCR is no longer a niche application and that anybody who has a scanner will at some time want to convert paper documents into word processor-readable format.

The interface for TextBridge has been simplified. Some might say it is over simple, as there are just three control buttons – one to get pages into the program, one to perform recognition and one that combines the functions of the first two for fully automated processing.

Documents can be scanned or loaded from most forms of bitmap and fax files. When acquiring a file, you can choose from six pre-defined page types to make processing more accurate. If you want to keep things simple, use the 'Any Page' option and let TextBridge decide.

Once a document has been acquired, TextBridge switches into Preview mode for the purpose of applying 'zones' to the page. TextBridge recognises three types of zone – text, picture and table. The simplest procedure is to let TextBridge do the zoning for you and then use the powerful editing tools to make changes where necessary.

When table zones are exported to Microsoft Word, they appear as editable tables. These are very easy to manipulate but TextBridge is weaker than its rival OmniPage (see review page 58) in the way it handles text zones. OmniPage can recognise text in single or multiple columns but TextBridge requires you to define each column as a separate zone. If you don't, TextBridge will go mad with tab characters in an attempt to make a single column look like two.

When zoning is complete, you click on the second control button to convert the document into text, which is then displayed in a full-screen proofreader window for you to examine. Like Omni-Page, the proofreader displays a picture of suspect words but it doesn't offer suggested corrections and you can't use the word processor's custom dictionary.

The next stage is to save the recognised file in one of many word processor formats, as an Excel or Lotus spreadsheet, or as HTML for use on the Internet. TextBridge can also be used as an incredibly easy way of creating Adobe Acrobat files for online viewing or distribution on disk.

Both TextBridge and OmniPage are very good at recognising words and it's almost impossible to say that one is more accurate than the other. In a complex document, especially one which is poorly scanned, both will make mistakes in recognition but the mistakes won't necessarily be the same. Where the two programs do differ greatly is in their approach to document recomposition.

TextBridge always maintains text and paragraph formatting, so you get bold, italics, bullets and alignment in every document. You can enhance recomposition by choosing to retain pictures and opting for paragraph styles to be assigned, but the closest approximation to an original document's layout comes from selecting 'Retain Page Layout'. When you subsequently save in WordPerfect or MS Word format, TextBridge uses all the facilities of the designated word processor to construct a page as close to the original as possible. It still won't be as good as Omni-Page's 'True Page' representation but it will be much easier to edit. **TextBridge Pro fulfils its design brief by being cheap, easy to use and effective. It's the program to choose if you're an occasional user who wants fully-featured optical character recognition with the minimum of fuss.**   Paul Wardley

Xerox TextBridge Pro 98				
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 20Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive.

Caere OmniPage Pro 8.0

Caere's latest instalment of its OCR application offers greater flexibility than its Xerox counterpart but at a much higher price

OmniPage Pro 8.0 converts laser-printed documents into editable text with almost total accuracy, and without having to be trained to recognise individual fonts. Other documents will contain errors but never so many that you'd be better off re-typing. In assessing OmniPage's performance and comparing it to its main competitor, TextBridge Pro (see page 57), we've considered how easy it is to use, how many features it offers and how accurately it can recompose editable text into a clone of the original document.

OmniPage's controls correspond to the four stages of optical character recognition – getting a document, dividing it into zones of text and graphics, converting it into editable text and pictures and recomposing it so that it looks like the original.

Each stage is represented by an ingenious control button with a drop-down menu. The first button offers three options for retrieving images – from files, by scanning or from the Microsoft Windows fax inbox. The second is for zoning and the other two control the recognition process and saving documents.

Once you've set your requirements for the four buttons, you can click on 'Auto' and OmniPage will carry out the complete sequence of actions you've specified. Alternatively, you can click on each button in turn to perform the recognition sequence manually, which gives you greater control over the zoning and conversion processes. You can also suspend the recognition sequence after scanning a document and have OmniPage complete the conversion later on.

The proofreader built into OmniPage works rather like a word processor's spelling checker but also displays the original scanned image of suspect words to help you decide what they might be. If you have Microsoft Word, the OmniPage checker can be set to use your custom dictionary from this program and Word owners can even opt to carry out recog-

nition checking in the word processor instead of OmniPage. Attractive though this sounds, it's a rather clumsy procedure involving macros and bitmaps, so it's easier to check in OmniPage itself.

A nice feature of OmniPage is the way the screen is split into three panes. Thumbnail images of input pages are displayed on the left, a zoning window in the centre and the recognised text on the right. The order of pages can be altered by dragging the thumbnails into new positions and if a zoning scheme doesn't produce the results you're after, you can alter it until it does. TextBridge Pro is less flexible in this respect as although you can add pages at the end of a document, you can't reorder them and once a document has been converted, it can't be re-zoned without starting again from scratch.

OmniPage offers four types of document recomposition. 'Remove Formatting' produces unformatted text aligned with the left margin. The second option retains font and paragraph formatting but doesn't try to duplicate columns or graphical layout and for this you would use 'Retain Flowing Columns'. If you want your editable document to look exactly like the original, 'True Page' uses frames to construct a clone of the original document. Clever though this is, the results are difficult to edit without destroying the cunningly created layout.

OmniPage is an expensive program with a list price of over £450 but you can upgrade from any OCR program for the more reasonable sum of £116. As you can buy a scanner including an OCR package for as little as £120, you'd have to be mad or wealthy to pay the full price for OmniPage Pro.

OmniPage is easy to operate yet offers a lot of control over the acquisition and recognition process. Its price is justified by advanced features such as deferred processing, making it the best choice for frequent OCR users. Paul Wardley

Specifications

Automatic or manual recognition

Interactive proofreading

Spelling checker integrates with Microsoft Word

Deferred automatic processing

Automatically de-skews crookedly-scanned documents

Documents can be saved in HTML format

'True Page' duplicates layout of original document

Picks up faxes from the Exchange Inbox

£464.13 (inc VAT) (£116.33 upgrade from any OCR package)

Caere: 0171 222 3200

Caere OmniPage Pro 8.0					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 33Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive.