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In close-up this month are an A5 notebook PC from Opti, two multi-colour inkjet printers, a new office suite for Windows 3.1 and a page scanner that connects to a USB port

Close-up

Opti Talisman

The market for portable computers is usually neatly divided. There are notebooks and there are PDAs – one offers functionality at the expense of size, while the other offers pocketability if you can manage without Windows 95.

Now though, Opti has produced a product that fills the gulf between PDA and notebook PC, in the shape of the Talisman. The Talisman won't fit in your pocket but it makes you feel positively 'Brobdingnagian' as it looks like a standard notebook but is half normal size. And though barely bigger than a sheet of A5 paper, it runs Windows 95.

Of course, there are downsides to these dimensions. The Talisman's keyboard has the usual layout but the keys are only a little farther apart than on a Psion Series 5. Typing is possible but you'll have to practice – we kept catching the Caps Lock key by mistake. The TFT screen is bright but small and only goes up to a resolution of 640x480 pixels.
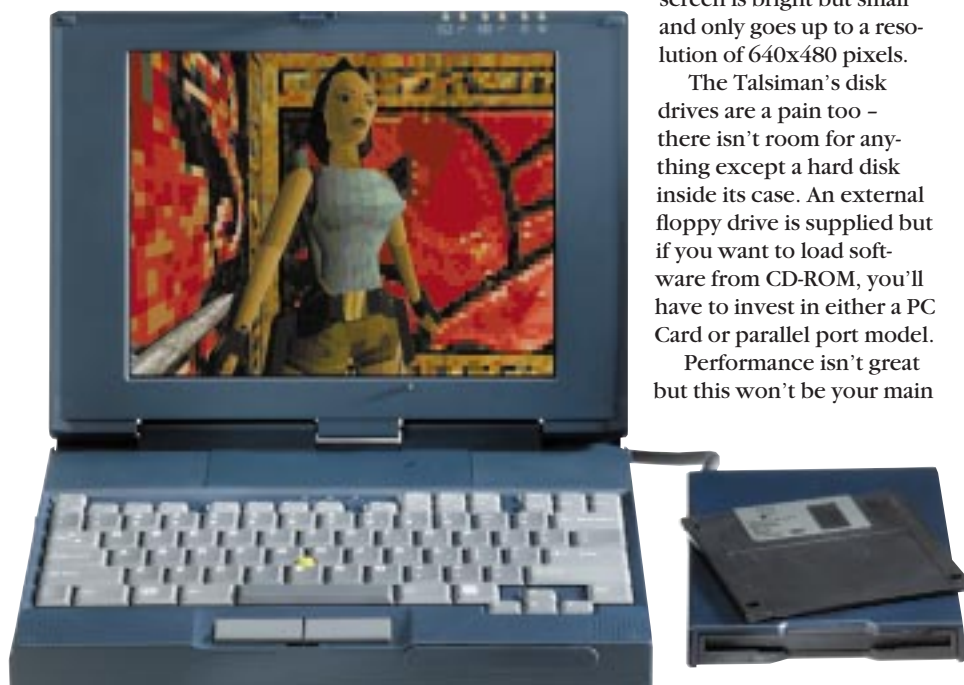
The Talsiman's disk drives are a pain too – there isn't room for anything except a hard disk inside its case. An external floppy drive is supplied but if you want to load software from CD-ROM, you'll have to invest in either a PC Card or parallel port model.

Performance isn't great but this won't be your main concern. With 24Mb of RAM, the Talisman is fast enough to cope with Word and Excel but the small hard drive may begin to feel a little cramped if you install too many large applications.

The Talisman won't appeal if you want either a notebook or a PDA but it's perfect, though expensive, if you want to run Windows 95 without the bulk of a notebook.

John Sabine

Specifications

8.4in TFT screen

Intel mobile Pentium 120 processor

24Mb RAM

800Mb hard disk drive

Three Type II PC Card slots

Ports: VGA, parallel, serial, PS/2, infra-red

Dimensions (wxdxh): 235x173x32mm

Weight: 1.2kg

£1,526.33 (inc VAT)

Opti: 0181 507 1818
www.opti.co.uk

Opti Talisman		
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆	
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	
Value for money	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆	
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★	

Dazzle

Hardware and software for capturing, manipulation and playback of MPEG-1 compressed video

When it comes to capturing video on a PC, the keyword is compression. Without compression, a 1Gb hard drive could only store about two minutes of reasonable-quality video, which is obviously no use to anyone. So for the likes of Video CD, a compression technique called MPEG-1 is used and this over an hour's-worth to be squeezed onto a measly 650Mb CD-ROM.

MPEG-1 video compression used to require expensive and complex hard-ware but technology has now reached the point where it can be done with a £230 device that plugs into a PC's parallel port – the Dazzle.
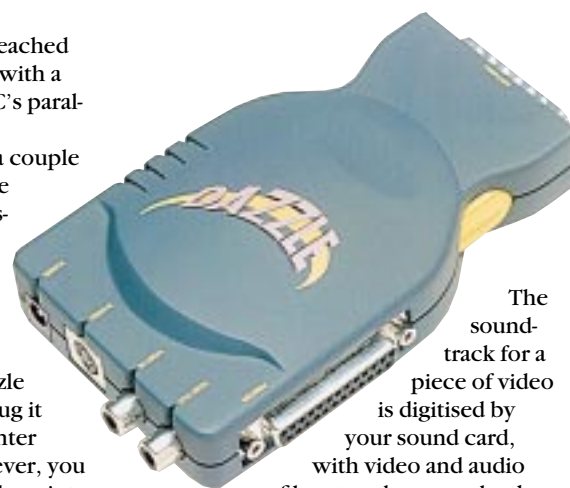
Although it's no larger than a couple of packs of playing cards, Dazzle provides all the hardware necessary to capture and compress MPEG-1 video with stereo sound. It can also capture still frames at resolutions of up to a dizzying 1600x1200.

Installing Dazzle is easy – just plug it into your printer port. However, you really need a printer extension cable as Dazzle won't physically fit on many PCs, and with the other cables connected, it becomes too heavy for the socket. Dazzle has inputs for both composite video (from most VCRs), S-video (from 'high-band' camcorders) and a video-through socket for displaying pictures on a TV.

The supplied Amigo software is used to capture video and recording from a video source by simply pressing the onscreen 'record' button. Although it has a simple front end, Amigo can also control the more technical aspects of the recording process. The bit rate can be adjusted (the smaller the bit rate, the less storage required but the poorer the video quality) and the resolution switched between 352x288 and 176x144.

Recorded video can be played back with Amigo or Microsoft's own Active-Movie and edited using iFilmEdit. This provides onscreen source and record decks and you can cut and paste bits of video between the two. Unfortunately, the type of compression that MPEG-1 uses means that accurate individual frame editing is not possible, but for simply cutting out the duff bits and splicing clips together, iFilmEdit is perfectly adequate. Sadly, as it requires software to decompress it before playback, recorded video can only be seen on a PC and can't be transferred to videotape.

The soundtrack for a piece of video is digitised by your sound card, with video and audio files stored separately, then combined when the recording is saved. This temporarily takes up considerable space on a hard disk, limiting the length of a clip that can be recorded – less than an hour's worth on a 1Gb drive when about 1.5 hours should be possible.

Dazzle's results are excellent, at least within the confines of MPEG-1 video. With fast-moving graphics though, there are some 'artifacts' – parts of the picture that momentarily turn into blocks of colour. More importantly, the MPEG-1 standard resolution is not really high enough for convincing full screen video and anyone who's seen a Video CD in action will testify to this.

Unfortunately, this rather negates the benefits of video encoding. Although Dazzle is both clever and cheap – making it great for producing video clips for the Net or sending out on floppy disks – the poor resolution, editing inaccuracy and inability to record back onto tape make it unsuitable for more serious work.

Bundled with Dazzle are Gryphon's Morph, Kai's Power Goo and Adobe's PhotoDeluxe for manipulating images, Interactual Video Saver to make MPEG screensavers, Astound Studio M to create simple presentations, and CeQuadrat's WinOnCD to create Video CDs from your edited MPEG footage.

Although cheap for a real-time MPEG encoder, Dazzle suffers from the resolution and quality limitations of the MPEG-1 standard, producing video clips only suitable for simple onscreen use, e-mail and screen savers. Geoff Bains ⇨

Specifications

Parallel port connection

Real-time hardware MPEG-1 encoding

Software MPEG-1 decoding

Frame grabber (up to 1600x1200 resolution)

Composite and S-Video input

Includes: Gryphon Morph, Kai Power Goo, Adobe Photodeluxe, Cinax iFilmEdit, Interactual Videosaver, CeQuadrat WinOnCD and Astound Studio

£230 (inc VAT)

Imago Micro: 01635 861122
www.imagomicro.co.uk

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium 133 PC, 16Mb RAM, ECP/EPP printer port, large hard disk for video storage (at least 1Gb), Windows 95.

Canon BJC-7000

Inkjet printers mirror professional printing presses in printing colour pictures by laying down coloured dots on the page. Only three colours are necessary – cyan, magenta and yellow. Usually, black is also used to give darker tones but Canon's latest inkjet goes three better.

Canon's special photo ink cartridge has cyan, yellow and magenta ink but also lighter shades of the same colours. According to Canon, this increases the range of tones that can easily be created, and the greater the range of tones, the better your pictures and photographs.

In general, you'll be happy with the BJC-7000. Text is delivered rapidly – we timed it at just over eight minutes for a 22-page document – and is a deep black. Small font sizes are marred by ink bleeding at the edges, though.

Pictures are good too. A resolution of 1200x600 dpi produces dots small enough to just about make you think the image is made up of continuous tones, and we were impressed by the Canon's rich, vibrant colours. On plain paper, the ordinary colour cartridge is very good but move up to Canon's special glossy paper and you're better off with the photo cartridge. Its colours, particularly on flesh tones, are much closer to the real thing.

If you're using photo paper, make sure it's Canon's own brand. On this, pictures have some noticeable banding (lines running across the page) but you have to look closely to see it. On other makes of paper, the banding was bad enough to ruin the picture and at anything up to £1 a sheet, that's not good. **Overall, the Canon's speed makes it a fair printer. Its output is good but it's not a compelling purchase at this price.**

John Sabine

Specifications

Two-cartridge, seven-colour inkjet printer

1200x600 dpi resolution

Uses waterproof ink

Black cartridge £35.24 — 900 pages @ 5% coverage

Colour cartridge £37.59 (ink tank £23.49) — 320 pages @ 7.5% coverage per colour

Photo cartridge £54.04 (ink tank £35.24) — 180 pages @ 7.5% coverage per colour

Photo paper £15.26 for 20 sheets

£351.33 (inc VAT)

**Canon: 0121 680 8062
www.canon.co.uk**

Canon BJC-7000				
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Lexmark 7200

As with Canon, it's obvious Lexmark has decided that traditional inkjet printers don't offer enough in the way of high-quality photo printing. The company's solution is similar too – extra light inks which give a greater range of tones. Rather than three extra colours though, Lexmark has added just two – light cyan and light magenta.

Like the BJC-7000, the 7200 is a two-cartridge printer and in normal use, you'll have one black and one colour ink tank fitted. When you want to print photographic images, it's a question of swapping the black cartridge for the colour – the photo catridge contains black as well as the two special photo inks.

It's important to plan your printing with the 7200 – don't print too much text with the photo cartridge in or you'll use up all the black ink, leading to early replacement of the whole cartridge. With this in mind, it's a shame that changing the print heads, even using the right options in the driver software, is an awkward task.

Fortunately, the output is definitely worthwhile. Text looked good, with very little bleeding, even on plain paper. The black wasn't as deep as with the Canon, so it looked a little washed out, especially at bigger sizes.

Colour photographic prints, however, were much better than those of Canon's inkjet. There's no banding and although the prints are more expensive than the BJC-7000's, they look superb. Alas, speed is another matter. A 22-page text document took nearly 25 minutes to print – not acceptable on a daily basis. **While the images are much better than the BJC-7000's, the slow print speed of the Lexmark 7200 makes it less of a versatile all-rounder.**

John Sabine

Specifications

Two-cartridge, six-colour inkjet printer

1200x1200 dpi resolution

Black cartridge £21.30 — 600 pages at 5% coverage

Colour cartridge £25.85 — 200 pages at balanced 15% coverage

Photo cartridge £29.76 — 200 pages at balanced 15% coverage

Photo paper £15.73 for 20 sheets

£327.83 (inc VAT)

**Lexmark: 01628 481 500
www.lexmark.co.uk**

Lexmark 7200				
Build quality	★	★	★	☆	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Hurricane 233MX MM

A multimedia PC aimed at the first-time High Street buyer, complete with productivity applications, games and a low-cost colour printer

For every buyer who's happy to use the ads-and-credit-card method when buying a PC, there are several others that prefer to talk to a salesperson in a shop and see what they're spending their money on. This understandable tendency has helped to fuel the growth of PC sales on the High Street and has created a demand among retailers for sources of stock.

One result of this process is the Hurricane 233MX – built by UK-based manu-

facturer PC Science and sold across the counter by Comet. To make life easier for the typical first-time buyer, the Hurricane is sold as a package rather than just a system with a copy of Windows.

The bundled software is based around the well-regarded ClarisWorks 4.0, which includes word processing, spreadsheet and database applications. There's also the Hutchinson Multimedia Encyclopaedia and a large selection of games, ranging from the simple, to shareware demos of elaborate and highly popular titles such as Quake, Duke Nukem 3D, Diablo and Actua Soccer.

The system is based on the 6x86MX PR233 processor, developed by Cyrix and IBM as a fast, inexpensive alternative to Intel's 233MHz Pentium MMX. This is fleshed out by a decent helping of 64Mb of RAM and a 4Gb hard disk. In a bid to keep up with more expensive Pentium II-based machines, the Hurricane's motherboard is also fitted with an AGP (Accelerated Graphics Port) slot, designed to improve graphics performance during demanding 3D processing operations.

The machine is supplied with a basic pair of mains-powered stereo speakers that are sufficient for gaming and general multimedia but won't leave you satisfied if you like to listen to music CDs. The 14in monitor is a little poky but produces a sharply focused image at 800x600 resolution. It could have done with a

flatter screen though, and a higher refresh rate – the maximum 75Hz might not suit some people who prefer a flicker-free 85Hz.

There's a reasonable amount of room for expansion inside the midi-tower case, with two 3.5in and two 5.25in drive bays free. There are four usable, unobstructed PCI slots but the two ISA slots are already occupied by a 16-bit sound card and a 33.6Kbits/s modem.

You have to install the printer drivers yourself, but this is simple, involving a single floppy disk. When that's done, you have the services of the Lexmark 1000 Colour Jetprinter, which is a highly compact inkjet capable of a 600x600 dpi output. The printer uses a single cartridge containing cyan, magenta and yellow inks, which it blends to produce an approximation of black where required. This isn't too good for printing text though, so you'll need to swap it for a black-only cartridge for text work.

The Jetprinter's colour output wasn't particularly impressive, with a tendency for the inks to bleed into the paper and the usual muddy, not-quite black approximation that all three-colour print systems suffer from. It did better with its black cartridge and we feel that despite all the colourful packaging, it's really at its best for text with the occasional, fairly simple, colour page thrown in for effect. The Hurricane 233MX Multimedia Workstation is an adequate PC but shop around and you can pay less for a faster, better specified system if you're prepared to buy off the page. The bonus software is good as a starter but the bundled demos can usually be had cheaply from magazine cover disks.

Dominic Bucknall

Specifications

IBM/Cyrix 6X86MX PR233 processor

64Mb SDRAM

ATI Xpert@Play 4Mb PCTV AGP graphics card

Quantum Fireball 4Gb UltraDMA hard disk

Sony 32x speed CD-ROM drive

16-bit sound card

33.6Kbits/s internal modem

Active stereo speakers with subwoofer

Two Genius 8-button joypad game controllers

Datek 14in SVGA colour monitor

Lexmark 1000 Colour Jetprinter (600x600 dpi three-colour inkjet)

Training video & manual

One year on-site warranty provided by The Welman Group PLC

One year hotline telephone technical support

£1,199 (inc VAT)

PC Science: 01423 323386 (available through branches of Comet)

Comet Hurricane 233MX MM Workstation					
Build quality	★	★	★	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	☆	★

Corel WordPerfect Suite 7

An extensive suite of office productivity programs for Windows 3.1, including word processing, spreadsheet, database, presentation software and many other utilities

It's rare to see software designed exclusively for Windows 3.1 but that's exactly what Corel has launched. Stranger still, it's not just a minor application but a full-fledged office suite in the shape of Word-Perfect Suite 7.

While it may seem odd to develop a major application for a three-year-old operating system, there are still many people using Windows 3.1. Home users may have resisted the upgrade to Windows 95 because of an insufficiently powerful PC, and many large companies have stuck with Windows 3.1 for financial reasons. Although the Windows 3.1 market may be insubstantial, it's still hungry for new software, since its users have been largely ignored by most software companies.

This version of the WordPerfect Suite not only adds functionality available in the Windows 95 version (apart from features specifically related to the operating system), but also contains one of the richest array of programs you will find in any office suite. And with competitive software which isn't upgraded, it's certainly the best choice on the market.

Listing the known names of programs contained within it can make your mouth water, and if you add their individual prices together (easily over £600), it has to be a good deal. You get Word-Perfect 7 (word processor), Quattro Pro 7 (spreadsheet), Paradox 7 (database), Corel Presentations 7 (presentation software), 10,000 clip-art images, 1,000 fonts and 200 photos.

You also get CorelFLOW (a flowcharting program), Time Line (for project management and scheduling), the Corel Address Book, an electronic rhyming dictionary, the American Heritage concise dictionary, Sidekick 2.0 (personal organiser), and Dashboard 3.0 (a task automation launcher). Since one of the new main features of this release is integration with the Internet, you also get

Netscape Navigator and Envoy – a work-group and Internet electronic publishing tool.

It's impossible to describe every single program in a short review and you may be familiar with a number of them. Here then are some of the more interesting enhancements in the main programs.

Internet connectivity in WordPerfect can link text directly to an Internet file or bookmark, and you can convert Web files to WordPerfect format, while Internet Publisher enables you to create Web documents. There's easier formatting with drag and drop features: Spell-As-You-Go underlines misspelled words; QuickCorrect corrects misspelled words and expands abbreviations; and Makeit Fit expands and shrinks documents to fit the number of pages you want.

New features in Quattro Pro 7 include support for newer file formats, Quick-Correct, Calc-As-You-Go (for sums, averages and other statistics), Fit-As-You-Go (for column widths), right mouse button support, Formula Composer, 150 new templates and more than 100 new functions, giving 500 in total.

Corel Presentations enables you to convert slide shows to Web pages, has new transition effects, newer files support, organisation charts, and integration with the main word processors. Paradox has new Experts for creating databases,

reports, form letters and for automating common tasks such as merging with Word-Perfect documents. CorelFLOW is not only for creating flowcharts – you can also use it to create various diagrams and it offers over 2,000 symbols.

Though it's a bit pricey for home buyers (the product is targeted at the business market), it'll be hard to beat WordPerfect Suite 7 for sheer value for money. Highly recommended for demanding Windows 3.1 users.   Panicos Georghiades

Includes: word processor, spreadsheet, database, presentations software, address book, personal organiser
....
Internet connectivity including Web page design
....
Smooth data sharing between programs
....
Advanced automation tools for spell checking, grammar checking and document formatting
....
Templates for text, spreadsheet and database documents
....
All the clip-art and fonts you'll need
....
Multi-project management tools
....
£252 (inc VAT)
....
Corel: 0800 581 028
www.corel.com
....

Corel WordPerfect Suite 7	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 3.1, 386/25 processor, 8Mb RAM, 16-165Mb free hard drive space, CD-ROM drive.
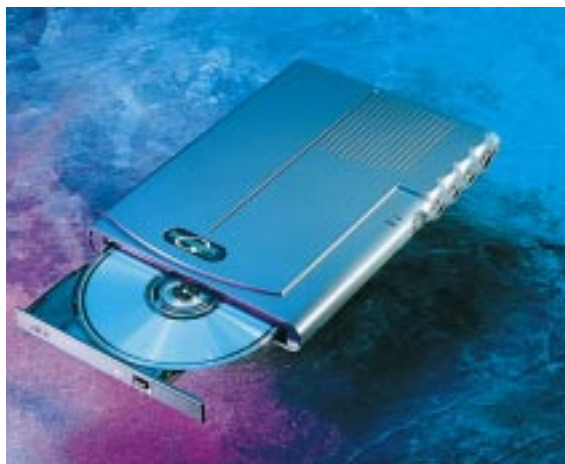
Micro Solutions BackPack Bantam

Adding a CD-ROM drive to an ageing notebook PC is easy; adding sound is less so. If you need to add both, then the Micro Solutions BackPack Bantam is a simple solution.

The Bantam is a slim external CD-ROM drive that connects to a PC's parallel port. There's a pass-through connector for your printer and other Micro Solutions parallel port drives can be daisy-chain connected. The Bantam also has integrated 16-bit audio, together with a built-in speaker, which means you can add full multimedia to your notebook PC in one fell swoop.

Cable-chaos aside, when the drivers are installed, the Bantam works perfectly. CD-ROM drive performance is adequate for a drive of this type, though your PC's parallel port will have an impact on performance. Unidirectional ports (found on older PCs) give a typical transfer rate of around 195Kb/s, whereas newer enhanced parallel ports (or EPP) give around 1200Kb/s.

Although the Bantam is reasonably slim, it's rather hollow and the plastic case gives some welcome depth to sound. The built-in mono speaker is merely adequate, but plug a pair of external speakers into the amplified headphone socket (there are sockets for a microphone, line in and line out too) and there's no problem, with both wave and Midi files sounding great.

The BackPack Bantam is the perfect solution for owners of notebook PCs (or even desktops) who want multimedia without an expensive upgrade.

Julian Prokaza

Micro Solutions BackPack Bantam					
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆

Minimum requirements: 386 PC with free parallel port, MS-DOS 3.1.

Voice Commands for MS Word

According to science fiction writers, by the turn of the century we should all be able to talk to our computers without having to mess around with those pesky keyboards. So far though, it remains fiction. But with Kurzweil's Voice Commands you can

'Control Microsoft Word simply by speaking,' and it also claims to allow you to format and edit Word documents with continuous – or natural – speech.

Installation involves a microphone testing utility which revealed the supplied mic to be insensitive and difficult to set up, and a signing-in process which asks you to do little more than enter your age and gender. This done, talk to Word and you should be able to format documents as you want them. The clear implication of the box, though, is that you can use natural language commands and pick your own words. This isn't true – Voice Commands will only recognise instructions from a pre-programmed list. Although there are alternatives for most commands and they do mirror normal speech, this is still restrictive.

In use, we found Voice Commands recognised most phrases we used but stubbornly refused to pick up basic commands such as 'return' or 'okay.' Training the software did nothing to improve this, so we were forced to use a strange mixture of spoken instructions and mouse clicks. While this might have been slightly easier than navigating menu bars, it certainly wasn't as simple as we had hoped.

What's more, it's claimed that Voice Commands is speedy to use and can 'increase your productivity by 50 per cent.' We don't think so. If you're a proficient Word user, the keyboard shortcuts are much faster. If you're not, you'd be better off learning them than spending fifty quid on yet another piece of software.

Voice Commands is of limited use. It's not reliable enough and the fact that you can't use it with any software except Microsoft Word makes it look distinctly over-priced.

John Sabine

Voice Commands for MS Word					
Features	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆	☆
Performance	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	☆	☆	☆

Minimum requirements: Pentium 90 PC, 16Mb RAM, 20Mb hard disk space, MS Word 95 or 97, 16-bit sound card, CD-ROM drive, Windows 95.

Fapril PC VideoDrive

A self-contained VCR for the PC that can be used to back-up data and record TV broadcasts with an optional TV tuner card

First there was the PC as a productivity tool. Then, the 3D accelerator turned it into a cutting-edge games machine. The CD-ROM brought hi-fi functionality and the TV tuner card added the ability to watch *Teletubbies* while you typed. If, however, you thought DVD was the final ingredient in the 'PC as complete home-entertainment centre', you were wrong. No tuned-in home is complete without a VCR and thanks to Fapril Technology, neither is a PC.

The PC VideoDrive is a videotape drive for use with a PC. Unlike other systems which simply connect a PC to a VCR, the VideoDrive is a self-contained unit which sits inside a PC. The drive is about twice as long as an internal CD-ROM drive and has a large slot on the front panel, covered by a spring-loaded flap.

Fitting the VideoDrive is a straightforward process, though it does involve removing the PC's case. The drive slots into a free 5.25in drive bay but its extra length means that the power supply on some PCs can prevent it from fitting flush against the fascia. The drive has to be connected to the IDE chain and the power supply, and also to the graphics and sound cards. If you have a TV tuner, there's a video in/out connection for that too. All these connections can lead to a morass of cabling but the colour coded leads supplied with the VideoDrive are coiled to prevent undue tangling.

That the VideoDrive contains a fully-functioning VCR is testament to the ingenuity of the Fapril engineers. The company is based in Bulgaria but this has led to one intriguing design aspect. Bulgaria is one of the few countries in the world not to use VHS as its home videotape standard. When the VCR war was raging, import restrictions meant that VHS machines were prohibitively expensive and the cheaper Betamax models proved more popular. As a result, Betamax is the format of choice in Bulgaria and this is the tape format the VideoDrive uses. Betamax tapes can still be bought over here and any professional media supplier stocks them.

So what can you use the VideoDrive for? Perhaps the simplest application is a backup device. A three-hour Betamax tape can store up to 1Gb of data, or 2Gb if the drive is set to Long Play. The drive appears as another drive letter in My Computer and any backup software can be used. Backing up isn't fast – around 1Mb a minute – but the cost of Betamax tapes (around £5 for three hours) translates to less than a penny for a megabyte of storage.

But it's with a TV Tuner card that the VideoDrive comes into its own. With the supplied VideoChronic software, the drive can be used as an ordinary VCR for recording television broadcasts. The software works like the timer on a home video recorder. Set the time, date and channel, or use a VideoPlus code.

Image quality is good, even on a PC monitor but most TV tuner cards can display on a television too. Tapes can also be played back on an ordinary VCR.

The VideoChronic software also adds another useful feature. If your PC has a modem, you can dial into it from a normal telephone. Use the telephone's keypad to type in a VideoPlus code and you can set the VideoChronic to record a programme. You need never miss *Friends* again…

The Fapril VideoDrive is such an obvious idea that it's amazing no-one's thought of it before. Sell your TV, VCR, Hi-Fi and Laserdisc player, and buy a PC instead. It's the future. Lauren Foropaylio

VideoChronic - Fapril VideoDrive

File Program Tools Help

Play Record Program Configure Quit

Tape Index

Only Fools & Horses	1hr 05m	000000
Eastenders	35m	001570
I'm Alan Partridge	48m	002025
The Bill	2hr 15m	002589

Click the right mouse button to select or deselect

Channel 1
Channel 2
Channel 3
Channel 4
Channel 5

Index Search

Recording Type
● Short Play
○ Long Play

(c) 1997 Fapril Technology Sofia Bulgaria

Fapril PC VideoDrive	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Pentium II PC with AGP graphics, 32Mb RAM, 80Mb hard disk space, sound card, free 5.25in drive bay, Windows 95, TV tuner card required for recording TV broadcasts, modem required for over-the-phone programming.

Mesh Elite Pegasus 333XL

One of the first PCs to feature Intel's fastest processor – the 333MHz Pentium II. The rest of the system is equally impressive

When computer manufacturers launch PCs based on the latest, fastest processor, they take one of two approaches. They either cut corners on the rest of the system in an attempt to offset the high cost of the processor, or they go to town on the supporting hardware in order to offer the best machine possible.

Mesh has taken the second route with its Elite Pegasus 333XL and the result is a superb PC aimed at the discriminating home user with £2,000 to spare. Not that the Pegasus looks like a home PC. It's built in what Mesh calls a mini tower case, but one that's very deep and tall enough to have a couple of spare bays for extra drives. A CD-ROM drive and an Iomega Zip drive are already installed but if and when DVD becomes popular, there'll be no problem adding the requisite extra hardware.

The businesslike appearance of the Pegasus is reinforced by the monitor – a 17in Taxan Ergovision 750. This bulky beast stands about as tall as the system unit but it justifies its dimensions by offering one of the best pictures you're likely to see on a 17in monitor. The graphics performance is impressive too, thanks to the AGP graphics adaptor fitted to the motherboard. The Pegasus makes mincemeat out of graphics programs and arcade games, four of which are supplied on CD-ROM.

Sound is catered for by two good-looking and nice-sounding Yamaha M20 column speakers, driven by a Sound Blaster AWE 64 card. Sound quality is further enhanced by a separate Yamaha subwoofer unit which can be positioned out of sight under a desk or table.

Anyone buying the Pegasus as a first PC will be more than pleased with the software that Mesh pre-installs. As well as four games, there's PagePlus DTP software, IBM Simply Speaking (a program which enables you to control your PC by talking to it) and Lotus SmartSuite, which provides you with the serious tools needed for home and business use. This still leaves over 5Gb of free space on the hard disk for your own files and programs.

Mesh provides a dinky little microphone that can be used to experiment with IBM Simply Speaking, but you need a headset microphone if you're going to take it seriously. The small microphone is fine for use with SuperVoice – a program that turns your PC into a fax and answering machine by linking to the US Robotics modem inside the PC. The modem also makes it possible to connect to the Internet, and because it's a fast 56Kbits/s model, it helps to keep your phone bills within reason.

The Elite Pegasus is a fun machine, mainly because of the great monitor and impressive sound facilities. Mesh has made a good job of configuring the PC to be ready for action as soon as you unpack it, and setting it up for the first time is covered in a well-illustrated manual. The manual has not been written specifically for the Elite Pegasus and therefore covers a range of Mesh machines, but everything you need to know is in there somewhere.

The Elite Pegasus 333XL is the ultimate home PC. Not cheap at just over £2,000 but there's enough hardware and accessories to ensure that you won't be worrying about upgrades for a long time to come. Paul Wardley

Mesh Elite Pegasus 333XL					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Creative Labs PC DVD Encore

Specifications

Internal IDE DVD-ROM drive (2nd generation)

PCI MPEG-1/MPEG-2 decoder card

2x DVD and 20x CD-ROM reading

Composite video and S-Video output

Dolby Digital (AC3) audio output

£199 (inc VAT)

Creative Labs: 01245 265 265
www.cle.creaf.com

Creative Labs PC DVD Encore					
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆	☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 100MHz Pentium PC, 16Mb RAM, SVGA graphics card, 1Mb RAM, PCI slot, free IDE channel, sound card, Windows 95, 10Mb hard disk space.

If you want to join the DVD bandwagon and be able to use discs which hold up to 17Gb of data, you need a DVD-ROM drive. Many PC manufacturers now fit such drives instead of CD-ROM drives, but Creative Labs are supplying a DVD upgrade kit – the PC-DVD Encore.

The PC-DVD Encore consists of an internal DVD-ROM drive and MPEG-2 decoder card. Although you don't need it to read DVD-ROMs, the MPEG-2 decoder is required to playback DVD video and as it can be plugged into your TV, it's a cheap way to get a DVD movie player in your living room.

The DVD drive fits into a 5.25in drive bay and as it also works as a 20x CD-ROM drive, you can use it to replace your existing CD-ROM. The MPEG-2 card needs a free PCI slot and, with a couple of audio cables and the video pass-through lead connected, the system is up and running.

Creative Labs supplies some DVD and VideoCD playback software for DVD movies but Microsoft's Media Player will do just as well. No movies are supplied but there are games – Wing Commander 4 DVD and Claw.

Claw wouldn't run on our PC. Wing Commander IV DVD is the same as before but with DVD video link sequences. The quality of the MPEG-2 video is good and surpasses VHS tape. However, a PC monitor isn't the ideal showcase for DVD video.

A minor quibble, though. The graphics card pass-through for the MPEG-2 card causes some degradation of a monitor image. At worst, it's a slight lack of focus on-screen, but still an irritation. **If you want in on the DVD extravaganza, the PC-DVD Encore is highly recommended. It's outstanding value, leaving you money over for DVD titles. When they exist, that is.** Julian Prokaza

Logitech PageScan USB

Specifications

24-bit colour page scanner

300dpi optical resolution, interpolated to 2400dpi

USB connection

Includes Adobe PhotoDeluxe 2

£189 (inc VAT)

Logitech: 0181 308 6582

Logitech PageScan USB					
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆

Minimum requirements: Pentium PC, USB port, 16Mb RAM, 90Mb free hard disk space, Windows 95b, CD-ROM drive, 16-bit colour display.

Page scanners are handy little things, offering 90 per cent of a flatbed's functionality in 10 per cent of the size. Their parallel port connections can be a problem though, especially if you already have a printer, Zip drive and Webcam connected to your PC.
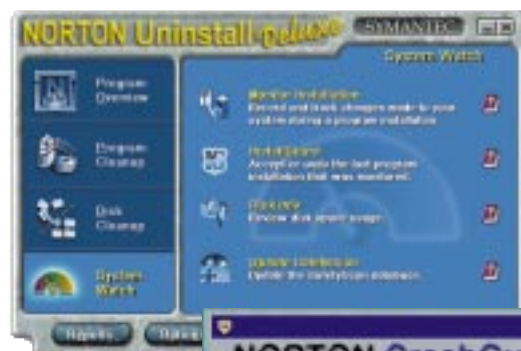
The Logitech PageScan USB was therefore well-received in the *What PC?* office, as it connects to a USB port – the superior version of serial port that's found on all new desktop PCs and many notebooks. With USB, peripheral installation really is Plug and Play.

Installing the PageScan is a typical example – plug the scanner in to one of the small USB ports on the back of a PC (no power lead is required), Windows 95 asks for the driver and you're ready to scan within minutes. A word of warning, though – your PC must use Windows 95b (all new PCs do) for USB to work. Right-click My Computer and choose Properties, and you'll see which version of Windows 95 your PC has installed.

Using the PageScan is extremely easy. Start up Logitech's ScanBank software, stick a page into the PageScan's slot and you're away. The PageScan is also Twain-compliant, which means you can make scans from any other Twain-compliant application (MS Word, PaintShop Pro, etc).

As far as page scanners go, the PageScan's scan quality is very good. Scans can be made in 24-bit colour with a maximum optical resolution of 300dpi (interpolated to 2400dpi). It's not particularly speedy at its highest resolution but if you scan documents regularly and colour photos occasionally, it's the only scanner you'll need. **Reasonably priced and incredibly easy to use, the Logitech PageScan USB is versatile enough to meet most people's scanning needs.** Julian Prokaza ⇢

Norton Uninstall & CrashGuard Deluxe

Two utilities from Norton – one designed to prevent your PC from crashing, the other to safely remove programs you no longer need

These two new products from Symantec add yet more complexity to the bewildering range of utilities prefaced by the word 'Norton'. Norton Uninstall is new but CrashGuard is a

version of the program that's included in Norton Utilities 3.0 (reviewed last month) – but a 'Deluxe' tag on the box indicates a few extra features. One is Auto Check – a monitoring program that keeps an eye on your system and tries to fix any potential errors before they become serious.

Auto Check looks for obvious problems and if a more devious error causes a program to fail, CrashGuard steps in. When a program locks up without warning, you can use the Ctrl-Alt-Delete key sequence to bring up the Close Program dialog box. CrashGuard adds an extra button to this box, which can be used to 'unfreeze' a locked application. The program won't necessarily run properly after it has been unfrozen but at least you get the chance to save your work.

The final enhancement in CrashGuard Deluxe is a set of video clips describing how your PC works – part of the program's philosophy that prevention is better than cure.

Uninstall is a late entry in a popular market where there's already plenty of competition, but this new product has a rather neat trick up its sleeve. When you install a new program, you can use a feature called InstallGuard, which not

only logs new files added during the installation but also backs up any that are replaced by new versions with the same name.

In addition, InstallGuard makes a copy of the system Registry, where program information is stored. Armed with this information and the backed-up files, InstallGuard can remove every trace of a newly-installed program and return your system to its original state. If it sounds slightly cock-eyed to install a program and then remove it completely, think how often you load demos and shareware for a couple of hours and then get rid of them. Sadly, InstallGuard works with only one program at a time so before you can use it again, you have to permanently accept or reject the previous installation.

Programs already installed on a hard disk can be removed but the most successful uninstallations are those where a program's installation was monitored by Uninstall. Whenever you run a setup routine, Uninstall pops up to ask if you want to monitor the process. Doing so adds around five minutes to the normal installation time, but it's worth it.

Another feature of Uninstall is a utility to move programs from one place to another, or even to a second computer if you've got a removable storage device. **CrashGuard is a cheaper alternative to Norton Utilities for those whose main interest is system stability. Uninstall is a more interesting product and should be regarded as a useful companion to Norton Utilities, not a replacement for it.**
Paul Wardley

Specifications

CrashGuard: Checks your PC for faults

Intercepts potential crashes

Provides basic anti-virus protection

Includes a comprehensive set of instructional videos

Uninstall: Removes existing software

Monitors the installation of new software

Clears junk files

Copies and transfers programs from one PC to another

Compresses infrequently-used programs

£45.83 (to confirm with Shandwick)

Symantec: 0171 616 5600
www.symantec.com

CrashGuard Deluxe					
Features	★	★	★	☆	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Win 95, 12Mb RAM, 15Mb disk space, CD-ROM drive.

£57.58

Symantec: 0171 616 5600
www.symantec.com

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

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Win 95, 8Mb RAM, 10Mb disk space, CD-ROM drive.