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Close-up

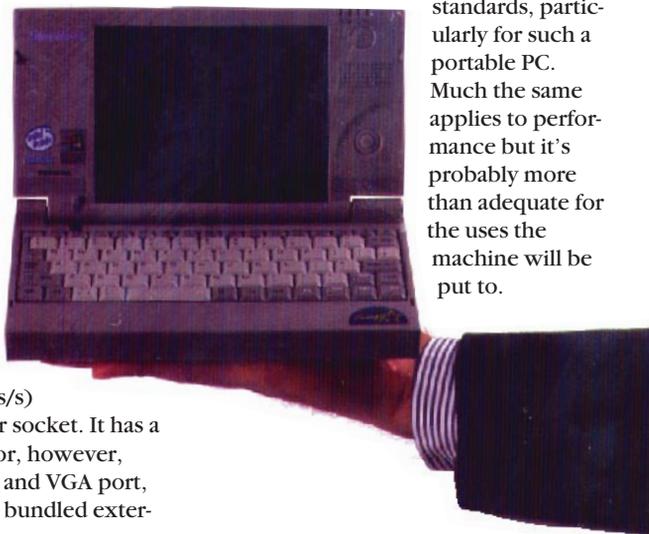
Toshiba Libretto 50CT

It may be the same size as a VHS cassette, it may look like a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) but the Toshiba Libretto is actually a fully functional Pentium-based notebook PC running Windows 95.

With dimensions like these, something has got to give but not what you'd expect. The keyboard is arranged in the normal way and all the usual keys are there, including the extra ones for Windows 95. The keys are small and not the sort you'd want to write a novel on, but you can type accurately with both hands.

The active-matrix colour screen is small but it displays at 640x480 and text and screen objects are large and clear enough to be comfortable. There's 1Mb of video memory, which can display up to 16.7 million colours and run an external monitor at 1,024x768 at 85Hz.

What is missing are ports - the Libretto only has a Type II PC Card slot, slow (115 Kbits/s) infra-red port and speaker socket. It has a lightweight port replicator, however, that adds a parallel, serial and VGA port, plus a connection for the bundled external floppy drive.



There isn't room on the Libretto for Toshiba's usual trackpoint pointing device in the middle of the keyboard, so this has been moved to the screen surround. Gripping the lid with your right hand, your thumb controls the movement of the cursor via pressure on the stud and your fingers rest on the left and right buttons on the outside of the lid. This is marginally less accurate than the usual arrangement but passes muster.

A lithium ion battery delivers around 1.5 hours of use from a full charge with Toshiba's Maxtime power management software enabled. Not great by notebook standards, particularly for such a portable PC. Much the same applies to performance but it's probably more than adequate for the uses the machine will be put to.

Though not without compromises (notably speed and comfort), this is the ultimate in portable PCs and considering the miracles of miniaturisation behind it, it's not overpriced. Dominic Bucknall

Intel 75MHz Pentium processor
16Mb of EDO RAM
750Mb hard disk
6.1in TFT VGA screen
16-bit Yamaha audio and mono speaker
One Type II PC Card slot
115Kbits/s infra-red serial port
Port replicator and external floppy drive
Weight: 850g
Dimensions (wxdxh):210x115x34mm
£1,757 (inc VAT)
Toshiba: 01932 828828
www.toshiba.com

Specifications

Toshiba Libretto 50CT	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Toshiba Portégé 300CT

A lightweight sub-A4 format notebook with wide-screen TFT and a Pentium MMX processor

Whereas Toshiba's Libretto (see previous page) is an all-out attempt to reduce the dimensions of a notebook to the absolute minimum, the Portégé 300CT is a less radical interpretation of what constitutes a portable PC.

The Portégé 300CT is a very light machine with a smaller-than-usual footprint, putting it firmly in the sub-notebook camp. The size is instantly appealing, both aesthetically and practically, and you can easily envisage carrying the thing around all day without needing a week of prior training.

Some sacrifices have been made in the name of beauty though, most notably the cull of ports and the expulsion of the floppy drive from the case to an external module. There are in fact three ports - an infra-red serial port (running at the current 4Mbps/s standard), an external

monitor port and a port for connecting the supplied port replicator. The port replicator adds the usual printer port, a 9-pin serial port, a PS/2 mouse/keyboard port and a connector for the external floppy drive, which cannot be connected directly to the machine itself.

As is normal with all Toshiba's portables bar the Libretto, two PC Card slots are provided. Both support the 32-bit Cardbus standard and Zoomed Video for fast video I/O and motion video decompression which doesn't tax the main processor and slow down other system activities.

Sound is provided by the same 16-bit Yamaha chip used in the Libretto and playback via the mono speaker in the screen hinge is fairly good by notebook standards. If you want to add a CD-ROM to the ensemble you can, but are forced to pay out £346 extra for a docking unit containing a 10-speed drive. Since almost no serious software is supplied on floppy disks these days, it's hard to regard a CD-ROM drive as an option and so you're more or less forced to buy this, bringing the real price up to £3,460 (inc VAT).

The Portégé has a broad palmrest and is equipped with the trademark banana-shaped mouse buttons and pressure-sensitive stud set into the keyboard for controlling the pointer. Although this system is slightly more difficult to control than a touchpad, it can be used without moving your hands out of the typing position. The keyboard is standard Toshiba fare, with a sensible enough layout, no non-standard function-doubling and a rather light action that may not be to everybody's taste.



What's new as far as this machine is concerned is the screen, which is designed along the same principles as a wide-screen television. The panel is much wider relative to its height than a standard screen and requires a special Windows driver to deliver a 1,024x600 image, as opposed to the usual 800x600. It's not a new concept - Sharp used the idea on its Wide-Note, but it's certainly a welcome one. The extra display width gives much more on-screen 'elbow room', without adding to the notebook's size, allowing two windows to be used side by side easily.

Running time from the lithium ion battery pack is in the region of two to 2.5 hours with power management enabled, and the system itself has plenty of power for running the current generation of office applications. This is helped by 32Mb of memory as standard. Whatever the ins and outs, the Portégé is no toy, despite its modest size. **The inability to connect the floppy drive without first installing the port replicator is slightly offputting, as is the virtual necessity of paying extra to get the 'optional' CD-ROM drive but the Portégé 300CT is a top-notch sub-notebook typical of the high standards we expect from Toshiba.**

Dominic Bucknall

Specifications

- Intel Pentium 133MMX processor
- 256Kb pipeline burst cache
- 32Mb of EDO RAM
- 1.5Gb hard disk
- External floppy drive
- 2Mb Chips & Technologies 65555 graphics controller
- 16-bit Yamaha audio and mono speaker
- 1,024x600 (16:9 ratio) TFT screen
- Two Type II PC Card slots
- 4Mbps/s (IrDA 2) infra-red serial port
- Bundled port replicator
- Lithium ion battery
- Weight: 1.7Kg
- Dimensions (wxdxh): 263x187x35mm
- £3,114 (inc VAT)**
- Toshiba: 01932 828828
- www.toshiba.com

Toshiba Portégé 300CT	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Casio QV-300

To most people, digital cameras remain something of a novelty, but that doesn't stop manufacturers from releasing ever-better models in the hope that one day the masses will be converted. The latest such is the QV-300 from Casio, which boasts a large storage capacity and a telephoto lens.

Around the same size and weight as a bulky mobile phone, the QV-300 is just that bit too big to be considered pocketable. The camera sits comfortably in the hand but from behind it looks quite unlike a traditional film-based camera. In place of a viewfinder

there is a 2.5in colour LCD (liquid-crystal display) panel, and this is used to frame targets. The displayed image is only updated a few times a second, so as you move the camera it's like watching a fuzzy home movie.

Taking a picture is as simple as pressing the shutter button - the focus is fixed and there is no flash facility. Interestingly, the lens can be rotated through 270 degrees, so shots can be taken at all sorts of unusual angles. Unfortunately, however, the quality of the resulting pictures is not good. The images lack contrast, definition is poor and the resolving power (the amount of colours the camera can actually pick up) is below average.

The QV-300 stores up to 64 images at its highest resolution (640x480 pixels) and this rises to a huge 192 in the lower 320x240 setting.

Images held in memory can be transferred to a PC (or a Mac) using the supplied link cable and software.



The Casio QV-300 is expensive even by digital camera standards. It is easy to use and it does have a large storage capacity, but the picture quality leaves a lot to be desired. Scott Colvey

- 4Mb of Flash memory
- Stores up to 192 images
- Runs off four AA batteries
- Dimensions (wxdxh): 162x72x49mm
- Weight: 250g (excluding batteries)
- £703.83 (inc VAT)**
- Casio: 0181 450 9131
- www.casio.co.uk

Casio QV-300	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 386, 8Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, free serial port.

Specifications

PointCast 2.0 (beta)

PointCast 2.0 is one of the new breed of pushy Internet programs. Instead of trawling the Web for information yourself, PointCast 2.0 pushes it to you automatically.

After a simple installation, new information can be retrieved either when you click a button or at scheduled times. The information comes from the PointCast Network, a free Internet news service that claims to broadcast to your computer 24 hours a day. You select the types of data you want to receive from a number of 'channels', including national

and international news stories, business updates and sports results. It's then displayed in the PointCast window when you run the program off line and you can also set it up as a screen saver.

This release of PointCast includes an improved user interface and tighter browser integration if you're using Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 or higher. Version 2.0 also has the ability to get information from any site that has been appropriately configured. This is a very simple process and makes it possible to add your own Web site to the list of channels.

PointCast's channels are loose groupings of information types and if you choose, say, News and Weather, then within each of these you can further customise your choices. For example, within Weather you might select Europe and then a few specific cities. However, it's disappointing that most of the content available with PointCast 2.0 at this time is geared to US users. For example, the only

UK cities for weather reports are London and Aberdeen. **PointCast 2.0 is a good introduction to these new channel-based programs but the American bias makes it less useful to the UK. Once people get their own PointCast sites up and running, though, this will surely change.** Terry Pinnell

- Screen saver can display retrieved information
- News ticker scrolls headlines
- Scheduled updates
- Free
- PointCast: sales@pointcast.com
- www.pointcast.com (download)

PointCast 2.0 (beta)	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486, 8Mb of RAM, 12Mb of disk space, Windows 95, Internet connection.

Specifications

email 97

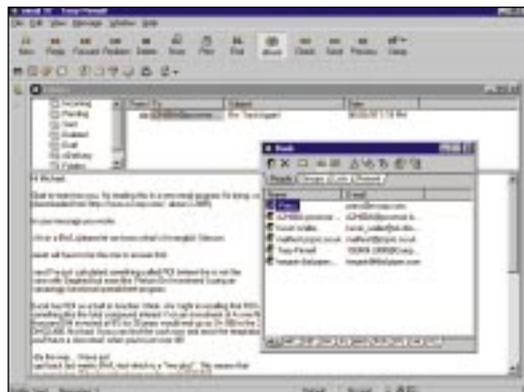
A state-of-the-art e-mail program available on line from a US company called e-Corp, email 97 is packed with just about every feature an e-mail program could have. Perhaps its greatest distinction is that it's one of the few that supports multiple e-mail

accounts with different Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

Check boxes alongside an account list are used to select or deselect those you want to use and each will be checked for mail. One account can be selected as the default and all mail will be sent from this unless you specify otherwise.

The program also offers advanced filtering capabilities. These let you perform a variety of useful tasks before you actually read your mail, such as removing unwanted messages and filing important items in special folders for priority or specialised attention. It also incorporates so called 'eTelligence'. This aims to anticipate regular needs and uses wizards that trigger multiple actions when you click an icon. For example, if you type 'send all mail from mike@abc.com to john@abc.com', eTelligence will suggest you let it create a new filtering rule that will forward all incoming mail.

Among far too many features to cover here, another strong one is its LDAP



search. This uses the 'Lightweight Directory Access Protocol' to allow you to search for individuals in the world who have registered with 'Four 11', 'Big Foot', or any other e-mail directory service. You simply type in the name or the e-mail address of the individual, or both, then just click on the server search button.

Even if you're not running a pager or multiple Internet accounts then email 97 has to be high on your list; it offers one of the richest feature sets around at an attractively low price – and you can try it out for free.

Terry Pinnell

Specifications

- Supports multiple e-mail accounts
- Built in 'intelligence'
- Pager support
- Advanced filtering
- E-Corp: www.e-corp.com/intro.asp**
- \$29 on line;**
- \$39.97 for CD-ROM and manual**

email 97	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, Internet account.

BT Callscape 100

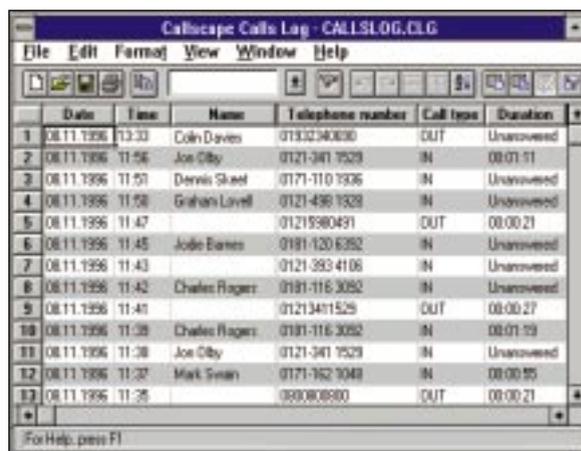
It may be good to talk, as British Telecom is fond of telling us, but only if you know who you are talking to. Thankfully, the spread of digital exchanges means that most people can now find out the number of the last per-

son who called simply by dialling 1471.

BT's Callscape 100 takes this a stage further. A small box about half the size of a typical answering machine, it makes use of BT's Caller Display Service to store the numbers of the last 1,000 telephone calls both in and out.

When connected to a PC and a telephone socket, the supplied software can use a stored telephone number to retrieve a name, address and other details stored in a database. The database has to be maintained manually but this is a simple job and can be done with or without a number stored by the Callscape unit. When that person calls again, their entry is automatically pulled from the database, based on their telephone number.

For businesses that rely on customer calls, the benefits are obvious. A pizza delivery firm need only ask for a caller's address once and can easily confirm that orders are genuine. Since database



entries can have notes attached, callers need never be told 'hold on while I find your information', since it appears on screen before the call is answered. If a telephone handset is attached to the Callscape box, outgoing calls are logged too, and the time, date and duration of all calls are also recorded.

If the telephone is your main source of business, then the Callscape 100 is a quick, easy and, above all, cheap, way of capitalising on the features provided by a digital exchange.

Julian Prokaza

Specifications

- Displays callers' details on PC's screen
- Builds database of callers
- Logs incoming and outgoing calls
- BT Callscape 100: £149.99 (inc VAT)**
- BT Caller Display Service: £3.99 per quarter (inc VAT)**
- BT Business Connections: 0800 800800**

BT Callscape 100	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 processor, 8Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space, serial port, Windows 3.1, telephone socket, BT Caller Display Service.



Kai's Photo Soap

An alternative approach to cleaning up and enhancing photographic images, from the maker of Power Goo

There's no shortage of image processing software - from the budget Paint Shop Pro to the heights of Adobe Photoshop. Lately, we've seen a new entry-level approach, with a rash of ever-so-easy products for those who are bewildered by alpha channels and gamma correction and just want to enhance their scanned or digital photos.

Now, joining the likes of Adobe PhotoExpress and Microsoft Picture-It, comes Kai's Photo Soap. According to the box, it's hypoallergenic, hyper-algorithmic and 'cleans in between pixels where dirt hides'.

As is to be expected of the man who brought us Power Tools and Goo, Soap's interface is not as Microsoft ordained. Instead of the traditional menus and palettes, you take your image through a series of rooms. This isn't entirely radical, as other home products use a similar step-by-step approach.

More amazing are the strange-looking controls that light up and animate when the mouse pointer comes near. High-tech drawers slide open smoothly to reveal more controls and the brushes and



erasers look like the real thing, even to the extent of casting shadows and flexing when you use them.

First stop is the 'In' room, where you can see thumbnails of files, either free-ranged on the desktop or arranged in albums. Double-click on one to take it into the 'Prep' room, where you can resize, crop and rotate. Here you'll also find an 'Enhance' tool, which automatically improves any poorly exposed or faded images.

Next is the 'Tone' room - the gizmo provides sliders for contrast and brightness, with further slide-outs for more detailed control. Using the brushes you can paint a 'mask' on the object, and change the effects on just the masked area. The 'Colour' room has a similar set of options and tools, and a splendid 12-channel 'graphic equaliser' that lets you fine-tune or do strange things with the image's colours.

Next stop on the tour is the 'Detail' room, with controls for touching up red-eye, scratches and other defects on pictures, as well as applying local sharpening and softening. There's a rather good 'Heal' tool that repairs scratches on photos by pulling in pixels from the surrounding area, and a 'clone' tool for repairing more widespread damage or copying parts of an image.

Moving to the 'Finish' Room, you can add borders, backgrounds, objects and

text. Striking though these are, this is where things start to go downhill. Even if you've gone for the full install, you still need the CD in the drive if you want to print anything, as the screen images have to be replaced by high-resolution versions from the disc. All objects and text have a compulsory dropped shadow effect and you have no choice of font. What's worse is that the MetaTools team appear to have run out of energy when it comes to printing. There is no way to size or place the image on the paper, and you only have the option of printing full-page or to a four-folded card.

In the Tone, Colour and Detail rooms you have the option of working on a 'Slate' or full-screen. The Slate occupies roughly two-thirds of the screen at 640x480 but stays the same size at higher resolutions, negating the benefit of large monitors. Unfortunately, full-screen mode at 1,024x768 is unusably slow - even on a 200MMX Mesh PC with 48Mb of RAM. Help is also sparse - a slim manual and a page-per-room help file. There are plenty of inspirational illustrations and samples but it can be extremely difficult to reproduce the 'after' images and a decent set of tutorials would be a great improvement.

Soap is a powerful program and great fun but let down badly by its speed, printing and text handling - all of which leave much to be desired.

Tim Nott ➤

Specifications

Highly original interface

Input from file or scanner

Reads most common file formats, including Photoshop

Instant red-eye correction and tone enhancement

12-channel colour control

Heal tool for repairing scratches

Clip-art selection of images, borders and ornaments

£39.99 (inc VAT)

**Principal Distribution: 01756 704000
www.metatools.com**

Kai's Photo Soap

Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Performance ★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Pentium, 16Mb of RAM, 20Mb of hard disk space, 16-bit graphics, CD-ROM drive.

Apricot MS660

Apricot's first multimedia PC to feature Intel's latest Pentium MMX processor running at 233MHz

Once a mighty PC manufacturer based in the UK, Apricot is now little more than the public face of Mitsubishi Electric's PC Division. The Japanese company acquired Apricot in 1990 but has only been actively putting the name on its desktop PCs for the last year or so. The latest and indeed fastest model is the MS660, which boasts the new 233MHz Pentium MMX (multi-media extensions) processor from Intel.

Housed in a stout midi-tower case, the MS660 is the sort of machine that is very likely to end up buried under a desk. It looks quite unremarkable apart from a piece of mauve-coloured meshing, which covers a small internal speaker. A floppy drive and 16-speed CD-ROM occupy the two drive bays at the front, which leaves two drive bays spare.

Inside, there's room for expansion (three ISA, and two PCI slots are free), although you're unlikely to want to upgrade for a good while because the standard specification is far from basic. On top of 32Mb of RAM, Mitsubishi has fitted a Sound Blaster AWE32 sound card and a roomy 4.3Gb hard disk. And fast-moving graphics in both two and three dimensions are assured as the MS660 comes with a 2Mb ATI 264GT and a 4Mb 3DFx Voodoo controller as standard. In fact, the only letdown, albeit a slight one, is the 28.8Kbits/s modem.

Naturally, having a 233MHz MMX processor makes the MS660 a zippy performer, but the relative leap in performance between this and a 200MHz equivalent is not vast. Indeed, during our tests the MS660's performance results could even be described as comparatively disappointing.

Part of the system is a very comfortable-to-hold remote control unit. This can be used to control most of the MS660's functions, and its centrepiece is a joystick-like pad that emulates a mouse. This latter part really doesn't work too well at all - it's unresponsive and fiddly -

but the rest of the buttons serve their purpose perfectly. Unfortunately, all they really do is launch applications and games - something that, sooner or later, will require you to be seated at the keyboard.

Accompanying the MS660 is a suitably large monitor, which, naturally enough, is manufactured by Mitsubishi. It has a 17in screen (of which some 16 inches are viewable) and the picture is fully adjustable via a rather neat panel that pops out smoothly from the front when pressed. The usual line-up of buttons adorns this, allowing adjustment of screen attributes such as brightness, contrast, positioning and image shape and orientation - all done using on-screen menus and displays. The monitor can display at a maximum resolution of 1,280x1,024 and it has refresh rates ranging right up to 130Hz, meaning that the images appear crisp and steady at higher resolutions.

The bundled and pre-installed software is a fairly typical collection but it's welcome all the same. Along with the omnipresent Windows 95 and a couple of other Microsoft titles (Works and the excellent Money 97), Mitsubishi has also included several training and educational CD-ROMs and more games than we've room to list.

Rounding off the system is a great set of Apricot-branded speakers, replete with mushroom-shaped sub-woofer. The blurb on the box of this latter item boasts of its 'two-litre resonance chamber', but

in lay terms means simply that thumping soundtracks really can thump.

The Apricot MS660 has exceptional specifications, and a price to match. Our advice is simple: if you can afford it, buy it.

Scott Colvey



Pentium MMX processor running at 233MHz

32Mb of RAM

ATI 3D Rage II (2Mb) and Diamond Monster 3D (4Mb)

Sound Blaster AWE32

16-speed CD-ROM drive

4.3Gb hard disk drive

17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro monitor

28.8Kbits/s modem

Remote control unit

£2,499 (inc VAT)

Mitsubishi: 0800 212422

www.apricot.co.uk

Apricot MS660

Build quality ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Specifications

Sequel NetPIM 1.1

A Personal Internet Manager designed to help you update, manage and share Web-based information

If you visit several Web sites on a regular basis, whether to glean business information or just because they interest you, then you probably waste on-line time hunting through the old material in search of the new.

Sequel NetPIM's main purpose is to solve this problem. Once installed, it can quickly scan a previously visited site, look for new material and depending on the instructions you have given it, copy it to your hard disk for you to read off line.

There isn't a boxed version of NetPIM and the software has to be downloaded from the Sequel Web site. This is a free trial version but payment gives a serial number to fully activate the program. At over 8Mb, this is a hefty download, even with a 33.6Kbits/s modem. Documentation has been kept to a minimum to reduce the file size and apart from the on-line help (which we found quite ade-

quate), the only manual you get is a 12-page Adobe Acrobat 'Quick Start' document.

Sequel's main screen is designed to look as much like the Windows Explorer application as possible and so most users will probably have an intuitive idea of how many of its features work. The main NetPIM screen is used to store your list of favourite and regularly visited sites. Site names (or 'bookmarks') are organised into folders, with individual pages shown as entries within each. Site entries can be edited and pages can have a thumbnail image displayed whenever one is highlighted with the mouse.

Web sites can either be contacted manually by double-clicking on their bookmark, or you can create 'Agents' to automate the procedure. Agents can be scheduled to run at intervals throughout the day, week or even month and can be instructed to visit a single site, or several, and will search for new material on all the sites Sequel visits.

If you wish, Agents will also follow links to other sites and all the retrieved material is stored in a cache for later inspection in your browser (all popular browsers, like Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, are said to be supported). Once an Agent has finished its work, it disconnects from the Web. Since it usually takes far less time to download a Web page than to read it, judicious use of Sequel NetPIM can make sound economic sense. Money spent on telephone bills can be saved if Agents are scheduled to run at off-peak times, or at weekends when the rates are cheapest.

Sequel's built-in cache manager is used to ensure that downloaded Web pages do not get out of control. The cache size is set

at a default half the available space, with a maximum of 100Mb. These settings can be altered and you can also decide what should be done when the limit is reached. The manager can be set to either delete the oldest files to make room for new files or to delete any files that you haven't used for a predetermined number of days.

A graphical representation of the cache disk can be viewed, although on our test machine, the graph didn't appear to give accurate results, maybe because the disk used a compressed format.

If your e-mail system is MAPI-compliant (like Eudora Pro 3.0, MS Mail and MS Exchange), Sequel says that you can forward bookmarks and downloaded pages to other NetPIM users, although we did not test this feature.

If you want to use as little connection time as possible, saving money on your telephone and Internet Service Provider bills, and you are a regular visitor to several sites, then Sequel NetPIM is certainly worth serious consideration. The help that it gives with the organisation of your site list and cache management is a valuable bonus.

An easy-to-use utility that helps you update, manage and share Web-based information – and saves you money while doing so.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

Searches previously visited sites for changes, saving on-line time spent doing your own searches

Stores Web addresses and HTML pages in easily managed, customisable folders

Customisable 'Agents' can be scheduled to update your Web-based information for you

Works with most popular Web browsers

Cache management tools automatically keep the size of your Web page cache under control

Intuitive Explorer-like graphical interface

£29.36 (inc VAT)

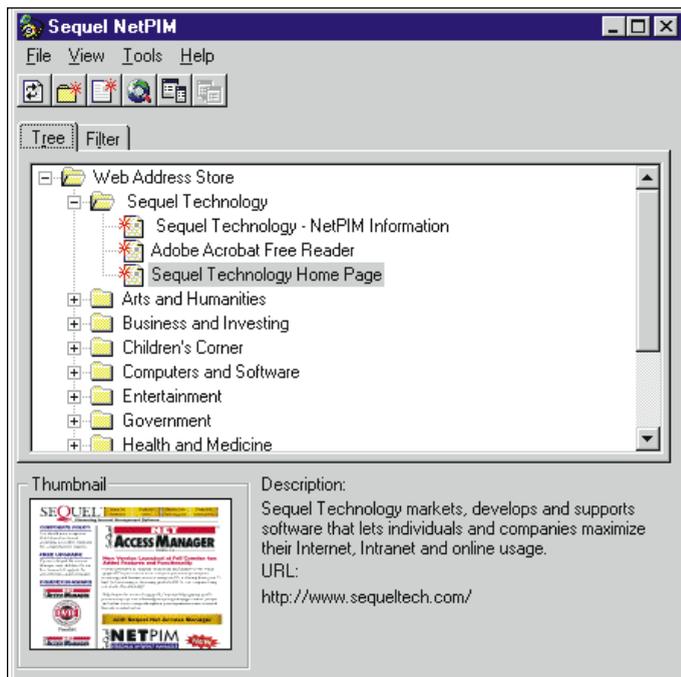
Free trial download from:
www.sequeltech.com/product/netpim/prodinfo.htm

European Software Publishing:
01628 623453

Sequel NetPIM 1.1

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

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Pentium, 16Mb of RAM, 10Mb of hard disk space.

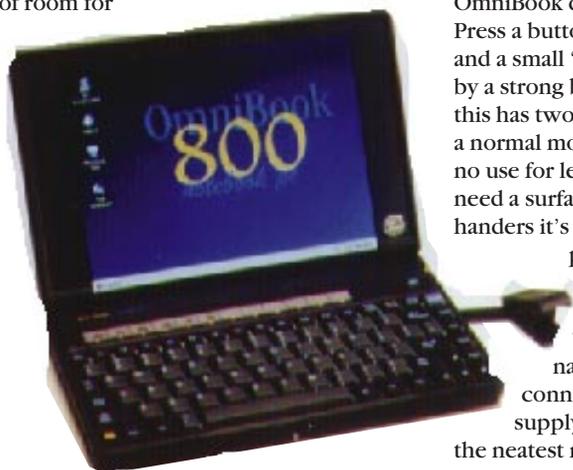


Hewlett-Packard OmniBook 800CT

Anyone who really needs portability in a notebook PC should seriously consider an HP OmniBook. Compact, well-designed and highly desirable, it's one of the best machines in its class, and now there's a new version based on Intel's Pentium MMX processor.

The OmniBook 800CT looks just like previous models in the 800 range. Its footprint is marginally smaller than a copy of *What PC?*, and is about as thick as a stack of four of them.

Such a small space doesn't leave a lot of room for



the usual notebook features but Hewlett-Packard has been extremely cunning in cramming everything in. The position of the OmniBook's keyboard leaves no room for a wrist-rest but it's still comfortable enough in use. There are no Windows 95 keys but the row of function keys across the top can be configured to work in the same way. The keys can also be used as a quick way to start applications and there's a blank strip above them to identify what each key does.

It may not be so obvious, but the OmniBook does have a pointing device. Press a button on the right of the case and a small 'mouse' pops out. Attached by a strong but flexible strip of plastic, this has two buttons and is used just like a normal mouse. Except, that is, that it's no use for left-handers and it doesn't need a surface to work on. For right-handers it's the best solution to a portable pointing device we've seen.

Add a crisp and clear TFT screen, wafer-thin external floppy drive with dedicated connector and compact power supply, and you end up with one of the neatest notebook PCs available.

Unfortunately, it's also one of the most expensive...

It may cost four times as much as a similarly-specified desktop PC but if you can afford it, the HP OmniBook 800CT is one of the few 'perfect' notebooks that you can buy.

Julian Prokava

Pentium 166MMX processor

16Mb of EDO RAM

256Kb cache

810Mb hard drive

10.4in TFT screen, 16-bit colour at 800x600

128-bit NeoMagic graphics controller

£4,077.25 (inc VAT)

Hewlett-Packard: 0990 474747

HP OmniBook 800CT

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

Specifications

PlanIT Business Plan Version 3

Good advice for anyone considering starting or expanding a business is to write a business plan. Most banks insist on seeing one before they lend any money, but putting an acceptable one together can be an onerous task. PlanIT Business Plan 3 provides the elements required to produce a plan and makes its completion as easy as possible.

The Plan Editor is based around a template document that you complete by inserting information about your business into pre-prepared fields. A naviga-

tion window helps you move between the plan's sections and an advice window tells you what sort of information to enter. Completed examples of each section can be seen via a toolbar button.

A pre-formatted spreadsheet lets you enter the financial information needed to produce anticipated profit and loss accounts, cashflow forecasts and balance sheets for the next three years. There are alternative spreadsheets for sole traders, partnerships and companies in both manufacturing and service industries.

A charting utility enables you to include charts and graphs in reports. Unfortunately, the help facilities for this are inadequate (there was a missing file) and the chart legend could not be edited; the names remaining at the unhelpful default of 'Series 1', 'Series 2', etc.

A set of Companies House forms is provided to be completed on screen, printed and used to register your com-

pany. The help file for these was missing from our review copy. There is also a database detailing 3,000 business contacts which can be edited and added to. **At two-thirds of the price of the previous version, PlanIT Version 3 will, despite imperfections, save time and effort in the onerous task of writing an acceptable plan.**

Steve Cotterell

Pre-formatted business plan document and spreadsheet templates

Separate spreadsheet templates for companies, partnerships and sole traders

3,000-entry database of business contacts

Set of Companies House start-up forms

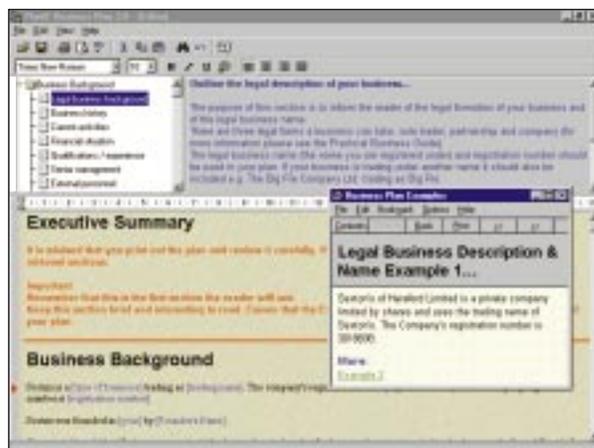
£99.99 (inc VAT)

PlanIT Software: 0181 875 4420

PlanIT Business Plan Version 3

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

Specifications



Adobe Illustrator 7

A high-end drawing application, suitable for producing illustrations for conventional print or new electronic mediums, such as CD-ROM or the Web

Adobe Illustrator made its debut on the Apple Macintosh several years ago and is still the leading drawing application on that platform. It's also available for the PC but Adobe seemed to have abandoned it at version 4.1 some time ago. This makes the simultaneous release of version 7 for both platforms more interesting (version numbers have been brought into line for consistency.)

Illustrator is a drawing program.

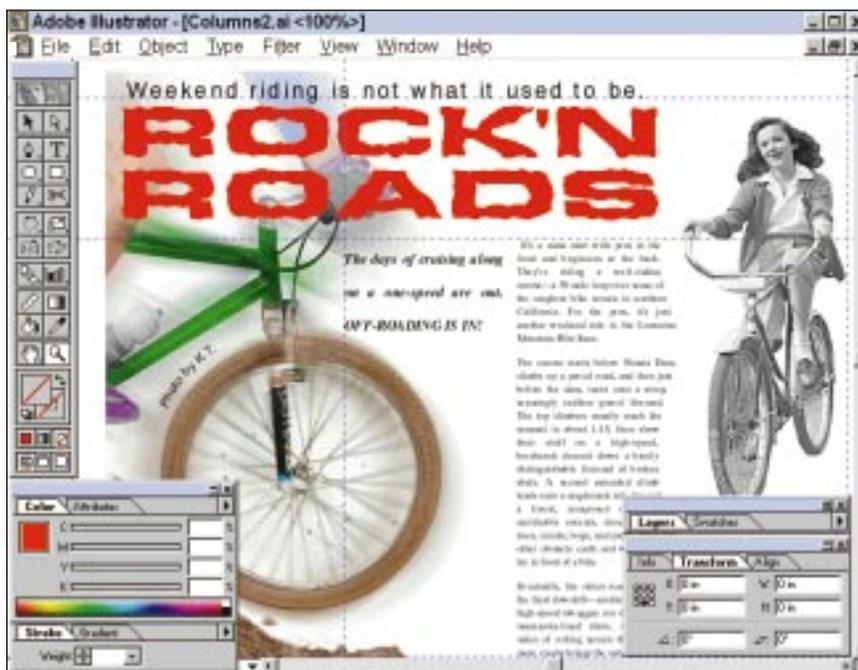
Unlike paint programs, which work with images composed of dots, drawing programs work with lines defined by mathematical formulae. Benefits of this include being able to resize objects with no loss of quality. The PC hasn't been left wanting for drawing software since Illustrator's last appearance, though. There are several good ones, such as Corel Draw.

Just like Corel Draw, Illustrator is justifiably described as a professional tool. It offers an enormous array of facilities and despite huge improvements in usability, the program still has a cliff-face learning curve for new users. The manual is clearly written with plenty of illustrations, and a CD-ROM comes with training videos and on-line tutorials.

The primary tool in drawing applications is the pen, used to create shapes. Once drawn, you can join the ends together to fill your shape with a colour or pattern, or select and drag various points on its perimeter to change its shape. Illustrator's pen tool is widely accepted as one of the best, but in the past you've had to select key points on the edge of the shape to change it. Illustrator 7 now boasts a reshaping tool, which allows you to grab any point of the shape and drag it until it looks right.

With electronic publishing and the Internet growing at an alarming rate, graphics applications can no longer be optimised just for conventional printing. Illustrator 7 has caught Web fever, offering full RGB (on-screen) colour support, and an export filter for the GIF89a Web graphics file format. It's even possible to embed a Web address into graphics files before exporting them as GIFs.

Another area where Adobe can really clean up is the level of integration with its other applications. Adobe isn't being big-headed when it cites a common user interface as a big plus point. Most profes-



sional graphics users will already be using Adobe Photoshop and, if Adobe had its way, PageMaker for DTP (although Quark XPress still holds the lead there). However, it's taken until Illustrator 7 and PageMaker 6.5 (both latest versions) for Adobe to put this into practice and use a consistent interface in all three applications. Customisable tabbed palettes now feature throughout and there's full support for dragging and dropping files from one Adobe program to another.

Illustrator 7 is a massive improvement over the previous version 4.1 for Windows, but it can be intolerably slow and besides, much has happened over the years it's been away. Corel has cornered the market for value with its countless freebies and offers unrivalled features, albeit with a slightly less professional feel. Illustrator will appeal to serious graphic artists who are probably existing users looking for an upgrade or who demand Mac/PC compatibility.

It's a huge improvement over the last version for Windows, but Illustrator 7 still falls down in terms of speed and extras. If you're serious about drawing and have hardware to match though, this package could be for you, particularly if you want a complete Adobe solution.

Gordon Laing

Common interface with Adobe applications

Compatible with Macintosh version

300 free Type-1 fonts

1,000 clip-art images

50 special effect filters

Tabbed customisable palettes

Worldwide type support

Reshaping tool

Extensive Web graphics support

Compatible with Photoshop plug-ins

£351.33 (inc VAT)

Adobe: 0181 606 4000

www.adobe.com

Adobe Illustrator 7

Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Intel 486 processor or higher, 16Mb of RAM, 25Mb of hard disk space, CD ROM drive.

LaserJet 6L & Companion

The latest version of Hewlett-Packard's popular personal laser printer which, with an optional sheet-feed scanner, can act as a photocopier, even when your PC is switched off

Hewlett-Packard is one of the most respected names in the printer business. Whether inkjet or laser, its printers are widely regarded as among the best available, so any new HP product is bound to generate a lot of interest.

Personal laser printers are one of the current vogues in the PC world and the HP LaserJet 5L was one of our favourites in our May group test. The LaserJet 6L is its replacement. The improvements in the LaserJet 6L are mainly to do with speed. The LaserJet 5L was capable of producing four pages per minute (ppm), while the 6L has pushed this up to six. Our speed tests showed this to be no idle boast by HP and a full 50 percent increase in print speed is certainly a welcome improvement.

The LaserJet 6L is an easy printer to



set up under Windows 95 and it comes with drivers for Windows for 3.1, 3.11, NT 4.0, OS/2 and DOS. If you intend to use the 6L as a network printer you can expand the 1Mb of memory that comes as standard up to a maximum of 9Mb. The paper in-tray holds 100 sheets and there are two paper exits: one in front with a flattish paper path and an upright tray on the front of the printer.

At this price, laser printers are restricted to monochrome printing but as with all laser printers, text output is far superior to that produced by any inkjet. The maximum resolution is 600x600dpi (dots per inch) but switching to economy mode restricts printing to 300x300. RET (Resolution Enhancement Technology) boosts the apparent quality still further and both text and graphics are sharp and clean.

As a mere printer, the LaserJet 6L performs extremely well but HP has also released an optional extra in the shape of the LaserJet Companion. This is a greyscale document scanner with sheet feeder and it allows a PC to scan documents but, perhaps more usefully, can function as a photocopier that can be used even when the PC is turned off. Although smaller than a personal photocopier, the LaserJet and Companion arrangement is a little messy. 'Companion' it may be but the scanner part of the system is entirely separate, connected to the printer by a parallel cable.

The LaserJet Companion is bundled with the popular Visioneer PaperPort document management software. This allows scanned documents to be filed as images for later use, or converted to word processor documents using the supplied OCR (optical character recognition) software.

As far as document scanners go, the Companion is as good as any and is certainly good enough to give accurate results when using OCR. However, when using the scanner and printer together as a photocopier, the copies will obviously not be as good as from a real photocopier, as the scanner will occasionally stretch the image.

The only drawback to the LaserJet Companion is the price. At £217, it is more expensive than most greyscale document scanners, but to confuse things still further, it is more expensive than HP's 5s - a colour document scanner with a list price of £210.

It does have some clever functionality in its photocopying capabilities, especially as it can be used without powering up the PC but the real value of this may prove limited.

The LaserJet 6L is an excellent printer both in terms of quality and speed. The LaserJet Companion has some clever functionality but, compared to other document scanners on the market, it is overpriced.

Adele Dyer



Specifications

LaserJet 6L

600x600dpi print quality

Quoted print speed: 6ppm

100-sheet A4 paper tray

Interface: parallel only

Dimensions (wxdxh): 336x228x312

Weight 7.1Kg

LaserJet Companion

Greyscale document scanner

10-15 page sheet-feeder

LaserJet 6L: £433.58

LaserJet Companion: £217.36

Hewlett-Packard: 0990 474747

LaserJet 6L

Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LaserJet Companion

Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

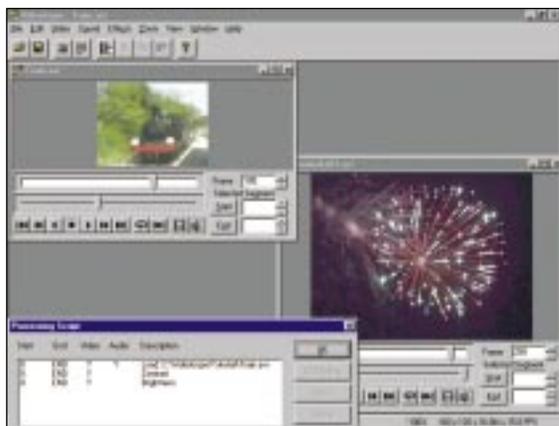
Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Videotrope

Videotrope is a versatile utility for editing and applying effects to video and animation. At the simplest level, you can alter a few frames in a movie clip. More ambitiously, you can build entire movies from a collection of still frames, taken, for example, from other movies or individual image files.

The program lets you cut, paste and delete images, sound, or both. You can add new frames, a soundtrack, increase volume, add effects, change brightness and so on. There's enormous scope for creative work with this fascinating tool.



Videotrope was developed by Oxford-based Digital Workshop, which also distributes those other two excellent graphics packages - Paint Shop Pro and Media Center.

You get both CD-ROM and three disks and the program can be installed from either. The CD-ROM provides about 140Mb of sample files too.

Image-enhancement features include brightness, contrast, sharpen, blur and resize, embossing and many others. You also get motion effects that can be applied to the whole movie, such as reverse, resize and ping-pong. Videotrope lets you add titles and apply overlays and underlays for adding backgrounds to blue-screen animation and making montages. A wide selection of textures and a watermark facility are provided, which can be applied to the whole movie or to selected parts.

The clever editable processing facility not only lets you undo any action at any time since the last save, but also edit it. All edits are

performed in real time so you can see your amendments almost immediately. Apart from a few rough edges this is an impressive little program.

A great-value utility for anyone who likes to have fun with image and sound video or animation files. Terry Pinnell

Supports BMP, TGA, PCX, FLC, FLI, AVI, WAV files

Separate sound and image editing

Watermarks/embossing/softening and many other effects

£47 (inc VAT)

Digital Workshop: 01295 258335
www.digitalworkshop.co.uk

Videotrope

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

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486/66, 8Mb of RAM, 9Mb of hard disk space, Windows 95, CD-ROM drive.

Specifications

Force FX Joystick

As far as joysticks go, the Force FX is a monster. Based on CH Products' F-16 Combatstick, it has a plethora of buttons and a sturdy construction. The reason for its considerable bulk (and price), however, is hinted at by the name. Instead of just sitting passively in a player's hand, the Force FX actually responds to what's happening on screen.

If your game supports the I-Force system from Immersion Corporation, the Force FX gives a much more 'realistic' gaming experience. Unfortunately, there are only a dozen or so games that support I-Force at the moment and although it's possible to pre-



program the joystick to get such things as gun recoil effects, this won't give the full feedback of the I-Force system.

We tested the Force FX with Electronic Arts' Need for Speed 2 and Interactive Magic's Air Warrior II, two of the first games to incorporate force feedback. NFS 2's cobbled streets gave an authentic judder and the stick went uncomfortably slack when we hit a hump in the road a little too quickly. Similarly, the Force FX

became unpleasantly difficult to manage when we tried a manoeuvre that was a little too adventurous in Air Warrior II.

More games that support I-Force are in the pipeline and Microsoft has announced that the

system will be incorporated into DirectX 5.0. This is the latest version of a Windows 95 add-on that makes multimedia programming easier for software developers and should help to increase the numbers of force-feedback-capable games.

Although a good standard joystick, the Force FX comes into its own with a game that supports it. Try it once and you'll be sold on the idea. John Sabine

Six buttons, two hats

Connects to joystick and serial port

Mains adaptor included

£149.99 (inc VAT)

CH Products: 01844 345406
www.chproducts.com
www.force-feedback.com

Force FX Joystick

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

Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Specifications

Omega Ditto 2Gb

A computer may be expensive but it's nothing compared to the data stored on it. Have your notebook PC stolen and you can easily replace it. Not so the first 20 chapters of your novel stored on the hard drive...

Given the inherent value of data, it's amazing that so few people take steps to protect it, particularly given the cost of an effective backup device like the Omega Ditto. About the size of a hard-

back novel, the Ditto can store up to 2Gb on a single tape (larger capacity drives are also available) yet only costs around £170.

The Ditto connects via a PC's parallel port and has its own parallel port at the rear so that a printer can still be connected. With both drive and software installed, backups can be made straight away as the '1-Step Backup' application backs up everything automatically in the background while you carry on working.

Alternatively, the 'Works' application gives much more control over the backup process. Anyone who's made backups before will be right at home but it's still simple enough to figure out without recourse to a manual or help file. Five buttons configure the backup routine by specifying such things as which files and folders are to be backed up, the type of backup to be done (speed versus compression) and how often it should be performed.

The process is much the same for

restoring files and the emphasis is very much on simplicity throughout. Backing up via a parallel port isn't actually the fastest of jobs and is best left running overnight, but with a 1Gb tape (storing 2Gb of compressed data) costing around £20, it's a minor point.

Everyone should be making backups and since it can be as cheap and easy as this there's little excuse for not doing so.

Julian Prokaza



Specifications

- Parallel port connection with pass-through for printer
- 2Gb tape capacity (1Gb uncompressed)
- Backup software included
- £175.08 (inc VAT)**
- 1Gb Cartridge: £22.33 (inc VAT)**
- Omega: 0800 4130999

Omega Ditto 2Gb	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Win/TV-Radio

Expansion cards that enable you to use your PC as a television are nothing new, but this latest model from Hauppauge has the added benefits of being able to display Teletext pages and receive radio signals.

Installing the card itself is painless enough - it plugs into a PCI slot inside your machine - but getting the software up and running can prove to be a bit of a

battle because the installation procedure hiccups halfway through, complaining of missing files. In fact, the 'missing' files are on the CD-ROM and after manually locating them the programs install successfully, but this is certainly not something novices should have to endure.

Once installed, things run much more smoothly. The main program is WinTV3, which displays a window containing a television picture. This is freely resizable and movable, so the picture can be set to any size and position desired. The input signal is automatically scanned for available channels, and they can then be fine-tuned to obtain the best possible picture. Just like a normal television, however, a good signal is required to receive a good picture - a small indoor aerial is unlikely to give crystal-clear images.

Fortunately, the same is not true of the radio side of things. Hauppauge includes a simple aerial cable for you to



drape over your desk and this is more than adequate for good reception. The radio software looks and works much like a car radio, with a digital frequency display and memory buttons.

On top of the TV and radio signal input sockets, the card also has video and audio phono input sockets, so a VCR or camcorder can be attached.

As long as you've got a good signal, the Win/TV-Radio does exactly what it's supposed to do. If you can pick it up at the price ODT reckons you should be able to, it's a great buy.

Scott Colvey

Specifications

- TV tuner
- Teletext
- FM radio receiver
- £129 (inc VAT, estimated street price)**
- ODT (distributor): 0171 378 7309
- www.hauppauge.com

Win/TV-Radio	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: free PCI slot and VGA graphics card.

Kurzweil Voice Plus

Speech-recognition system designed for use on PCs fitted with Sound Blaster-compatible sound cards

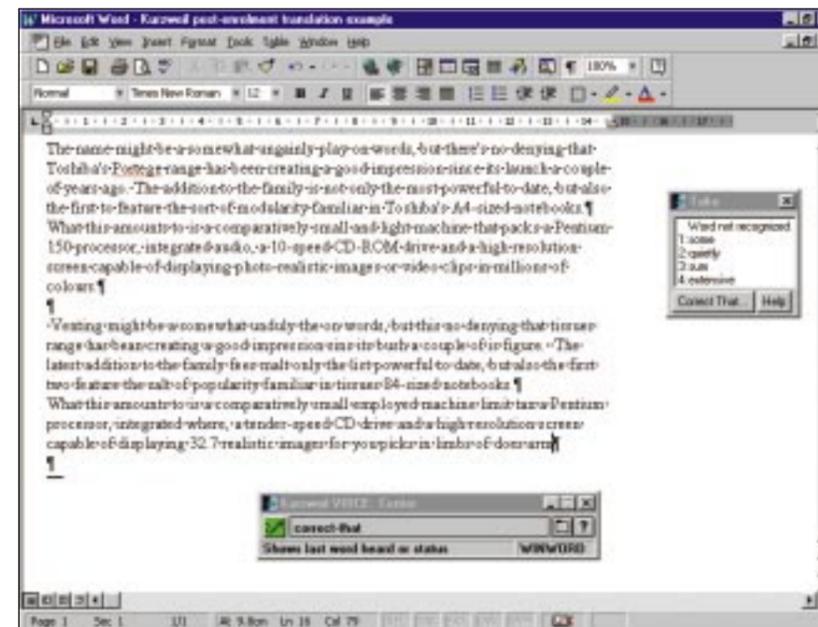
Wouldn't it be great if you could throw away your PC's keyboard and mouse and talk to it instead? You could issue commands without raising a finger and that lengthy field report could be dictated from the comfort of your favourite armchair. Well, that dream has yet to become a reality but Kurzweil's new Voice Plus package is a step in the right direction.

The package consists of a telephonist-style headset with an adjustable microphone arm and a CD-ROM containing the speech-recognition software. There's actually a choice of two microphone headsets, depending on where you want to use Voice Plus - the one supplied is a basic model and there's a more expensive unit optimised for noisy environments (such as offices filled with people dictating to their PCs). Both headsets plug into the microphone socket of a Sound Blaster-compatible sound card.

Installing the software is quick and simple but it is followed by a time-consuming and laborious user enrolment process. The purpose of this is to give Voice Plus an opportunity to get a 'feel' for the enunciation of each user (there can be several) and it involves repetition of some 400 words and 33 number combinations. All told, it probably only takes around an hour or so to get through but it's about as much fun as watching someone else watch paint dry.

The first few dictation sessions with Voice Plus bring on feelings of disappointment and frustration. First of all you must adjust the way you talk, pausing briefly between each word you say. Such broken speech is both unnatural and hard to maintain with any consistency and even after you've mastered this, Voice Plus's recognition is initially erratic. However, the key to success with this program is perseverance.

Weather the storm and within a couple of hours the recognition improves considerably. Whereas the first few recognised sentences bear little resemblance to the original utterances, complete paragraphs can be eventually dictated without so much as a misplaced comma. The trick lies in regular correction early on - overlook a mistake and Voice Plus does not get the chance to 'learn'. For every error that appears, say 'correct that', type in the correct word



and from that point on, Voice Plus is unlikely to make the same mistake again.

'Correct that' isn't the only command Voice Plus can understand. In fact, straight out of the box it can recognise and respond to dozens upon dozens of words, each of which carries out some function that would otherwise need to be performed with the keyboard or mouse. For instance, once you've loaded Voice Plus, it's entirely possible to launch Word, create a new document, dictate the text and save it using nothing more than voice commands. New commands can also be added, so Voice Plus can be set up to perform all manner of tasks from just a single phrase.

Voice Plus's basic vocabulary (the amount of words it can recognise and understand) consists of 30,000 of the most-used words in the English language. To this, up to 20,000 user-defined words can be added, so the package can be tailored to meet almost anyone's needs.

It has to be said that building Voice Plus up to an acceptable recognition level takes a saint's patience, but it is worth the effort. After a while it is actually possible - and indeed pleasurable - to dictate documents faster and more accurately than typing them. However, at over £350, the program is far from cheap and you'd have to have a good reason to

make it repay the time and money it takes to get it working at full speed.

While it's unlikely to make keyboards and mice redundant, Voice Plus does (eventually) provide an accurate level of speech recognition.

Scott Colvey

Specifications

- 30,000-word active vocabulary
- Choice of microphones
- Compatible with the majority of Windows 95 applications
- User-definable commands
- Works with any Sound Blaster-compatible sound card
- Voice Plus: £351.33 (inc VAT)**
- Talk Mic pack: £92.83 (inc VAT)**
- Talking Technologies: 0171 602 4107

Kurzweil Voice Plus	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486DX4/75, 16Mb of RAM, 35Mb of hard drive space, Sound Blaster 16-compatible sound card, Windows 3.1.

Macromedia Flash 2

A tool for adding high-quality multimedia content to Web pages

Macromedia Flash 2 lets you add fully animated multimedia 'movies' to your Web pages. Cartoons, logos, advertising banners, technical drawings, interactive buttons - if you want something moving and/or audible on your page, then this program can put it there.

Flash 2 is a richly featured application, so you'll have to invest learning time before you can make optimum use of its tools. To help you, there's a set of seven excellent on-screen lessons that take you through simple examples of how to use the many tools and features. In addition, there are pop-up tool tips and comprehensive, well-illustrated on-line help. The only weakness in this area is the lack of a step-by-step illustration of a real design project, from start to finish.

Much of your work in Flash 2 consists of drawing and painting the static images that will comprise your movie and you get an impressive set of tools for this. Most of the 10 tools are supported by appropriate 'modifiers'. For example, selecting the text tool automatically displays modifier buttons for font, colour, style and so on. Several handy productivity aids are built in. As you draw with the pencil tool, for instance, lines are straightened, curves are smoothed, and your attempts at familiar shapes like squares and circles are cleverly recognised and corrected automatically. To supplement your own work, Flash 2 can also import a variety of file types, including bitmaps, scanned photographs and vector-based graphics from other drawing programs.

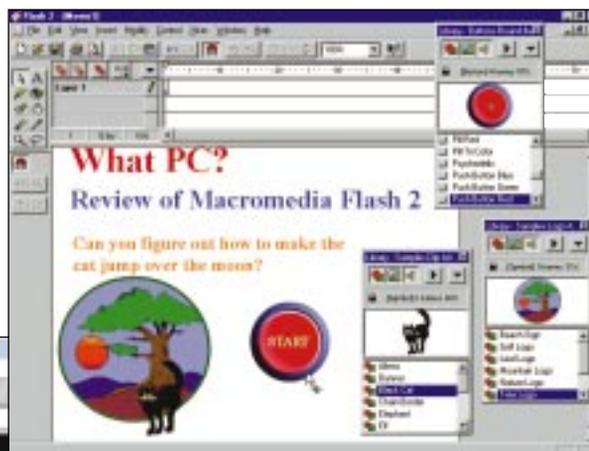
Despite all the super effects you can produce with Flash 2's drawing and painting tools, you'll soon be impatient to get animated. However, this makes things a little more complicated. You don't need to learn any programming but you will need a basic grasp of concepts such as

scenes, layers, levels, frames and timelines. A Flash 2 movie consists of one or more scenes, such as a baby playing on a beach. In turn, each scene consists of one or more layers, to which you give a convenient name, like Baby, Ball, Beach and Sky. You'll

usually need another layer too, perhaps called Instructions, where you might place buttons for the user to interact with the movie. Finally, you have frames, the basic building block of Flash 2 animation.

All this gets pulled together in the Flash 2 Timeline, where you create and organise the sequence of frames making up the movie. When you start a new file, Flash 2 creates a movie with one layer and one frame. To begin animating, you insert key frames using the timeline, and these automatically determine the content of the frames between them - a process called 'tweening'. The illusion of motion is affected by frame rate and Flash 2 allows a wide range, up to 120 frames per second. Another powerful facility in this part of Flash 2, called onion skinning, lets you shows multiple frames of the animation on the screen at the same time. The program also lets you add sound to the movie to heighten the effect. Flash 2 can use sounds from a variety of sources, including sound effects, CDs and microphones.

Examples of the kinds of images and movies you can create are bundled with



Flash 2, and there's more inspiration in the Leading Edge Gallery on the Macromedia Web site. On the CD-ROM there are even more examples, plus some 500 TrueType fonts. Sound files are generous too, with 13 categories including Swishes and Whooshes and Squeaks and Creaks. With Flash 2, your Web pages will be nothing if not lively.

Both the the price and learning curve are a bit steep for the average home user, but if you're a professional Web author or serious home user with your sights set on attention-grabbing pages, then Macromedia's Flash 2 is warmly recommended.

Terry Pinnell

Includes ShockWave add-on
 Imports 10 file types, including Adobe Illustrator, AutoCAD DXF and FutureSplash
 Comes with libraries of symbols, buttons, samples and clip-art
 Powerful linear and radial gradient capabilities
 Also runs on Mac
£234 (inc VAT)
Computers Unlimited: 0181 358 5857
www.macromedia.com

Macromedia Flash 2

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

Minimum requirements: 486, 16Mb of RAM, 15Mb of hard disk space, Windows 95, CD-ROM, mouse.

Specifications

Scala MultiMedia MM200

A creator of multimedia presentations using DirectX and Active Movie technology for first-class graphical, text and video displays

Scala first made its appearance on the Commodore Amiga and anyone familiar with that innovative computer system will instantly recognise the look of Scala MM200. Although it uses Microsoft's DirectX, Scala flies in the face of Windows conventions. First, it can only be run full-screen and the only way to jump to another open application is to use the Alt and Tab keys. Second, Scala's interface is infuriatingly non-standard - menus run along the bottom of the screen, as do buttons for dialog boxes.

This may look reassuringly familiar for ex-Amiga users but everyone else will be more than a little disoriented and the demonstration presentation/tutorial makes useful viewing. Thankfully, there's also a well-written 500-page user guide with information on getting started and plenty of advanced material essential for those seeking more expertise.

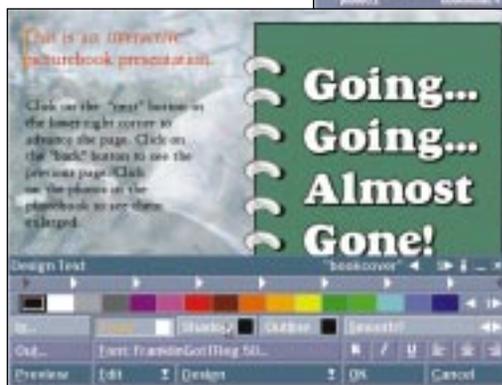
The main Menu screen opens as an empty list in which you build your presentation. The first thing you need to do is add backgrounds to the pages. There is a copious library of pre-prepared backgrounds and photos, or plain backgrounds can be created using the 'Design Palette' option.

With a background in place, the contents can then be added. Double-clicking any screen on the list displays it full-screen with a menu across the bottom. Text is usually the first thing to be put onto a screen and this is done by typing directly onto it. Text effects can be applied either before or after text has been typed and there is an impressive amount of control over such things as the angle and depth of shadows, and the thickness of outlines.

Although text and other objects can be left to appear at the same time as their background, there are times when something more sophisticated is called for. Scala has a wide variety of fades, wipes and other transitions and applying one is simply a matter of selecting the object and the type of transition required.

Screens can be displayed for a set length of time or moved on with a click of the mouse, and buttons can be defined to make this process a little more intuitive. Buttons can also be used to branch between presentation screens - useful for such things as interactive tutorials.

Once finished, the screens can be rearranged by dragging and dropping them into position on the main menu screen. Screens can be shown as thumbnails or as a list complete with any transitions, sounds and other



programs associated with them.

If other people need to use a Scala presentation, it needs to be published. Publishing basically involves exporting the necessary files in a format that can be played back with Scala run-time player. The player can be freely distributed and there are several publishing options, depending on how the presentation is to be used.

Since Scala relies on DirectX, Scala presentations will also need DirectX installed before they can be played back. Microsoft's DirectX setup program can be bundled with a presentation, to ensure that anyone can view it. There is also an 'autoplay' option so that CD-based presentations will start with no user intervention.

Although publishing does make presentations portable, distributing them is a little problematic. A two-screen presentation with backgrounds, text, a few transitions and a button produced over 4Mb of files. More realistic presentations are larger still, which rules out handing out material on floppy disks.

The results achievable with Scala are nothing short of incredible and highly polished multimedia presentations can be produced with relative ease. The

interface may be hard work initially but compared to the simple slide-shows turned out by other more user-friendly presentation packages, the effort is worth it.

Once you've got past the barrier of the non-standard interface, Scala Multimedia MM200 turns out to be relatively easy to use. Thankfully, the hard work is worth it and presentations can be produced that would put some professional efforts to shame.

Steve Cotterell

Specifications

DirectX support giving smooth, 'television' quality graphics

Branching and variables for interactive presentations

Libraries of clip-art, music and sound files, buttons and pointers, symbols, animations, video clips and screen wipes

Royalty-free publishing utility enables presentations to be freely distributed

£199 (inc VAT)

Scala Computer Television:
01920 484811

Scala MultiMedia MM200

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium (or equivalent), 16Mb of RAM, DirectX supported SVGA graphics card, 25Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive, Windows 95.