

in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: a graphics add-on for Microsoft Office, a product to help partition your hard disk, a digital camera from Epson, a learning program for Internet basics, help for printing odd-sized documents, and a package to help you learn a range of languages

ActiveOffice 1.0

If you own either Microsoft Office 95, or the very recent Office 97, and want to spice up the look of your documents, then ActiveOffice from SPC might interest you.

Essentially, it's a collection of tools that lets you turn plain text, bulleted lists and the like into colourful charts and diagrams. Naturally, as all the elements of Office 95/97 have graphic tools of their own, ActiveOffice has to be exceptionally simple to make it worth using; and, for the most part, it is.

Once installed, an ActiveOffice icon appears in the toolbar of each Office application. Clicking on this pops up a small window with a number of tabbed headings, and these lead to lists of styles, layouts and colour schemes. Creating a graphic is as easy as dragging and dropping a style into your document and filling in the details. You can also work on existing documents by highlighting specific text and double-clicking on the style required.

We can find no real faults with ActiveOffice but, even though the package is simple to use, it would benefit from some printed instructions.

A useful little package of tools that will appeal to Office 95/97 users who need to create in-document graphics in a hurry.

- £39.95 (inc VAT until end of April, then £49.95)
- SPC salesline: 0800 136932

ActiveOffice 1.0

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



Discover the Internet

There are so many programs offering to teach the basics of the Internet that a new title needs to stand out from the crowd to get itself noticed. This CD-ROM from DiscoverWare achieves that distinction – set in the 'B-Hive', a 1950s-style drive-in, your hostess is a waitress who spouts plenty of homespun wisdom along with the facts.

On the menu you will find appetisers such as 'Introducing the Internet' and 'E-mail', and main courses of 'Newsgroups' and 'Mailing Lists', 'Finding Stuff' and the 'World Wide Web'. For dessert, you can choose between 'Web Browsers' and 'On-Line Services'. When you make a selection, a member of the B-Hive staff serves you some anecdotes before getting around to the topic in hand. This provides a sugar-coating to the facts, an approach which you may find entertaining or nauseating, depending on your tastes.

The topics are dealt with thoroughly, with sub-headings listed on the screen. A mark shows which subjects you have dealt with, and you can read them in any order you please. Explanations are plain and simple, going into enough depth for a beginner. There's a chance to try out a feature in every section, with simulations of electronic mail (e-mail), Web browsers and other tools included.

The facts are fine for complete beginners, but you may be irritated by the delivery.

- £24.99 (inc VAT)
- DiscoverWare: 0800 413078

Discover the Internet

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



Recipe for Success

The trouble with cookery books is that they don't really cater for the crisis when all that's left in your cupboard is the ill-assorted debris of the last major shopping expedition – what on earth can you cook with an aubergine, a few olives and some tinned tomatoes?

Recipe for Success, from VCI Software, is a simple but useful database of mouth-watering recipes that goes a long way to overcome problems such as these, with options to see suggested menus, select a recipe or add your own recipes. The range of suggested menus is as good as you'd find in an average cookery book, with ideas for a vegetarian dinner party, a summer lunch and a mid-week family supper, among others.

The program's greatest strength, though, is the option to select a recipe. You can search specifying the ingredients you want to use, or you might like to exclude a particular item if a guest has a known dislike or allergy. You can search by category – main courses, children's foods etc – and you can combine, say, low-calorie and vegetarian options.

A good selection of recipes, with added value in the searching facilities, makes this a great little program.

- £15.95 (inc VAT)
- CD Direct: 0800 317864

Recipe for Success

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



PartitionMagic 3.0

Unless you're a really clued-up DOS fan, partitioning your hard disk (in other words, splitting it into smaller chunks) can be fraught with difficulties and often results in data being destroyed. PartitionMagic 3.0, however, is designed to help people with larger hard disks manage them more easily, by adding a simple front end to the partitioning process.

Without getting bogged down in the technical complexities, a large hard disk (meaning, 1Gb and beyond) that's divided into several partitions is more efficient at storing your data than one that isn't partitioned. Whereas partitioning with DOS is a slow and awkward process, PartitionMagic 3.0 lets you perform such operations 'on the fly'; so if you change your mind, or regularly like to reorganise how your data is stored, you're not going to find yourself stuck.

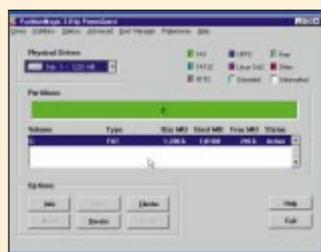
PartitionMagic 3.0 looks and operates just like any Windows 95 product, but it is in fact just a very well-presented DOS program. In addition to the main program, you get a useful uninstaller utility and IBM's Boot Manager to allow you to quickly change your default operating system.

PartitionMagic 3.0 is a great little product, but certainly not one we'd recommend to beginners or the faint-hearted.

PartitionMagic 3.0

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

- £70.44 (inc VAT)
- POW! Distribution: 01202 716726



Epson PhotoPC 500

Digital cameras are popping up everywhere and Epson, in a diversion from its more usual printer production, is the latest company to make an offering. It has produced the PhotoPC 500, a 24-bit digital camera that can store up to 30 high-resolution (640x480) images – twice as many as some of its competitors.

A little on the bulky side to earn the title 'pocket-sized', the PhotoPC 500 is nonetheless easy to use – it looks like a standard camera with a built-in flash, and there are push-button controls for changing the resolution and flash settings. One useful feature is that you can delete the most recent photo.

Transferring the images to a computer is straightforward – link the camera via a cable to a serial port on your PC and start the Epson Photo program. You get thumbnail sketches of each image on the camera so it's easy to select the ones you want to transfer or delete. Once transferred, you can edit the images with the bundled PhotoEnhancer software, and thence create calendars, cards and other stationery, or simply print them out. You can also put the photo files into Web pages, or into other TWAIN-compliant software such as Adobe PhotoDeluxe.

It's not going to replace traditional cameras and photographs, but this is a great way of capturing images of respectable quality for your computer.

Epson PhotoPC 500

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

- £351.32 (expected street price, inc VAT)
- Epson: 0800 289622



Xircrom CreditCard Ethernet+Modem

PC Card specialist Xircrom's latest offering is the CreditCard Ethernet+Modem. Combining both 33.6Kbits/s (kilobits per second) modem and network adaptor in a single PC Card, it's ideal for notebook users who use their machine at both home and work.

Installation of the card is extremely simple with Windows 95. As soon as it has been detected in a slot and the drivers loaded, it's ready to use. Xircrom has opted for the 'soap-on-a-rope' approach with the CreditCard's short connecting cables. The modem and network cables have a small PC Card connector on one end and a large telephone or network socket on the other. While this gives an untidy protrusion from the side of a notebook, it does mean that the PC Card can be left in its slot when not in use.

The CreditCard Ethernet+Modem proved faultless in use, providing trouble-free Internet and network connections. Connectors for both BNC and telephone-style RJ45 network cables are supplied, making the card a versatile performer.

If you regularly need to transfer information using both telephone and office networks, then the Xircrom CreditCard Ethernet+Modem is a simple and relatively cheap way of doing it.

CreditCard Ethernet+Modem

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

- £320.78 (inc VAT)
- Xircrom: 01256 332552



ClickBook

If you've ever tried to print anything other than just pages of A4 using a word processor, then you'll have realised just how difficult it is. Most DTP (desktop publishing) programs can handle the necessary page reshuffling to produce, say, a folded A5 booklet but those people without one have to resort to a pair of scissors and a photocopier.

ClickBook is designed to fix this problem. Supplied on a single floppy disk, the program works with both Windows 3.1 and 95 and can be used with a variety of word processors. Once installed, ClickBook intercepts any prints made to its custom printer driver (essentially the same as the default laser or inkjet printer driver) and rejigs the pages to fit one of a number of layouts before printing.

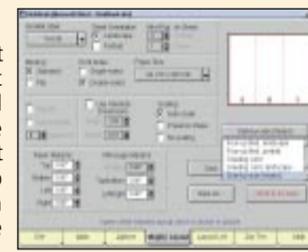
ClickBook has a variety of predefined layouts and new ones can be added by using the comprehensive selection of layout options. Pages are squashed and stretched a little to fit some layouts (three-fold brochures, for example) and this can lead to some peculiar results. With a little tweaking and practice, though, this is soon overcome and the finished product can look quite impressive.

Some budget DTP programs may be able to produce more sophisticated prints but ClickBook is simpler to use and highly versatile.

ClickBook

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

- £58.69 (inc VAT)
- ForeFront: 0118 981 4230



Larousse Unabridged English-French/French-English Dictionary

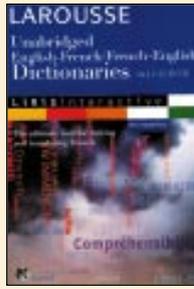
In many ways a multilingual dictionary is an ideal candidate for transfer to CD-ROM. The speed of a computer should make searching for words faster and following cross-references easier, than with a paper product.

The Larousse Unabridged English-French/French-English Dictionary, produced by the renowned academic publisher in association with French multimedia house Liris, does not disappoint. It's unashamedly a reference tool, with translations for some 350,000 words but no concessions to multimedia frippery.

The interface is a bit clumsy at first, but searching is very fast once you're used to it. It's possible to use Boolean (logical) operators to narrow your search, or broaden it by inserting wildcards into words. Cleverly, a search for any part of a verb brings up the infinitive form of that verb – particularly useful if you want to translate obscure literary French.

Several articles have cultural notes on French society; these are brief but informative. A pronunciation guide is provided, using the phonetic alphabet. It's a pity that this couldn't have been extended to offer an audio guide, as this is much easier to understand.

If you want a good French-English dictionary, the Larousse fits the bill perfectly. Be warned, though, that it has no multimedia content whatsoever.

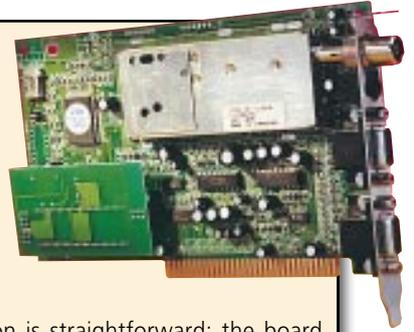


- £49.99 (inc VAT)
- Liris Interactive: 0171 306 1100

French-English Dictionary	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

Aver FunTV Lite TV tuner

Many new 'consumer' PCs are now equipped to receive television signals. If you want to upgrade your existing PC to do the same, you'll need an add-in card such as the Aver FunTV Lite from Lindy Electronics.



Installation and configuration is straightforward: the board requires only a free ISA slot, and its utilities fit on a single floppy disk. Once you've plugged your monitor into the FunTV Lite board, and connected this to the monitor output of your existing graphics card, you're ready to 'auto-detect' for available television channels.

This worked perfectly and the picture was more than acceptable, although a decent aerial is recommended. However, the FunTV Lite cannot display television pictures in a window while you work on your PC; this is a pity because such a feature would add greatly to its appeal.

We also tested the FunTV Lite's optional teletext module. This displayed pages clearly and even offered a choice of colours but, although it runs under Windows, pages couldn't be expanded full-screen.

If you're looking for a reasonably priced, standalone TV tuner, the Aver FunTV Lite is worth considering as long as you can live with its limitations.

- Aver FunTV Lite: £88.13; Teletext version: £116.33 (both inc VAT)
- Lindy Electronics: 01642 765275

Aver FunTV Lite TV tuner	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

Talk Now! – Learn Russian

EuroTalk's new Talk Now! Learn... range of training packages covers languages as diverse as Welsh and Latin. However, as we only had a limited amount of time, we flipped a coin and decided to learn Russian.



Over the years we've seen more than our fair share of CD-ROM-based training packages, but few have managed to hold our attention for very long. Learn Russian pleasantly surprised us though: not only is it very well presented, but it has some excellent content too.

You kick off by selecting an area of learning, such as 'Food' or 'Shopping', and proceed by choosing either to play a game, or one of several other interactive sections. The games are simple enough – spot the odd one out; place ingredients in a cupboard – but they're nonetheless fun to play, and by the end of each game you will undoubtedly have picked up a few words.

Other parts involve you repeating spoken words into a microphone (if you have one), and then having them played back to you until you get the pronunciation just right.

A surprisingly clever training package that fools you into learning via a string of fun games and interactive sections. If you want to learn Russian, buy Learn Russian.

- £29.95 (inc VAT)
- EuroTalk: 0171 371 7711

Talk Now! – Learn Russian	
Features	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★

Sanyo Flashback

The Sanyo Flashback is a digital voice recorder that is able to store up to half an hour on a removable 2Mb flash memory card.

The Flashback fits easily into the palm of your hand and, at just 3oz, is light enough to be carried in a pocket without being noticeable. The unit only has two buttons, one each for playback and recording. Pressing the record button once starts recording, and another press stops it. The 8-bit mono recording at 8KHz (which simply means it samples sounds 8,000 times a second) is fine for voices, though the built-in microphone needs to be kept close to the person speaking.



Recordings can be edited on the Flashback itself but it comes with a device for downloading audio to a notebook PC. The 'Voicelink' is a PC Card device that takes the Flashback's flash memory card and provides it as a virtual disk drive. Software is supplied to read and write recordings from the memory card and the Voicelink can also double as a sound card using its built-in speaker.

The Flashback is a fantastic gadget but its price is around £300 more than it should be. An ideal present for executives who have everything.

- £468.83 (inc VAT)
- Sanyo: 0500 368080

Sanyo Flashback	
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★☆☆☆☆
Overall	★★★☆☆