in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews include: a digital camera with a tiny clip-on monitor, notelets for your PC screen, a new disk compression system, a dictionary on CD-ROM, a home cinema system, a package to speed up surfing the Net, and a PC Card modem that will work in any country in the world

Ricoh RDC-2

Although still far from 10-a-penny, digital cameras are no longer the novelties they once were. This latest one from Ricoh can be used with a tiny, clip-on LCD (liquid-crystal display) monitor, and it can record audio too.

Around the same size and weight as a change-laden purse, you hold the RDC-2 horizontally and line up your targets using either the traditional viewfinder, or the optional flip-up monitor. Even though it adds £150 to the (already steep) price, this monitor really is worthwhile as it gives a superlative display; and it means you know exactly what picture you'll be taking when you press the shutter button.

At its highest resolution of 768x576 pixels the RDC-2 can store just nine pictures; however, the storage capacity jumps up to 38 in 'economy' (lower resolution) mode. Along with each picture you can record 10 seconds of audio, which is useful for adding brief comments.

A software and link cable package is also supplied, so images stored on the RDC-2 can be transferred to (or from) your PC.

Expensive, quirky and full of knobs and buttons – the perfect gift for the man or woman who has everything. It also takes great pictures.

○ With monitor, £999; £849 without (prices inc VAT)
○ Ricoh: 01782 717100

Ricoh RDC-2	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

## The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on CD-ROM

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary is the big brother to the Concise Oxford Dictionary we reviewed in March. It's more detailed than its sibling with some half a million definitions illustrated by 80,000 quotations, and an impressive amount of etymological detail.

Simply browsing this sort of dictionary can be fun. Its level of detail is such that you're bound to find at least one word you'd never heard of every time you switch it on – did you know that a carval is a Manx sacred ballad?

So far, of course, it's much the same as a paper dictionary. However, the chief advantage is the ease with which this electronic version of the New SOED can be searched. Wildcards can be used, and if you want to cheat at crosswords the anagram finder will probably come in handy.

For more serious research, searches can be performed across the entire text of the dictionary, including definitions. If this still isn't precise enough, then you can restrict your search to etymology or quotations, or look only for abbreviations or phrases; it's even possible to search by the date a word was first – or last – used.

The New SOED isn't as user-friendly as the Concise Oxford Dictionary, but it's a fraction of the price of the Oxford English Dictionary. As an affordable reference tool, it is excellent.
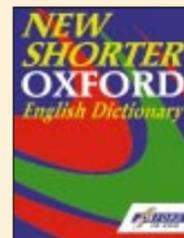
○ £79.99 (inc VAT)
○ Oxford University Press: 01865 267979

Shorter Oxford Dictionary	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

SSI MTS 100 Multimedia Home Theater System

More often than not speakers supplied with PCs are dreadful, and an upgrade can be well worthwhile. This system, from SSI, is complex but promises much improved sound quality.

In addition to the conventional two, there are surround speakers to draw you into a game – now you can hear baddies approaching from behind – and a centre channel which carries voices. Moreover, there's a hefty subwoofer that contains an amplifier and a Dolby Pro-Logic surround sound processor, and produces a solid bass.

Sound quality was good for such small speakers, but a definite background 'hiss' was evident when used at higher volumes. This vanished, though, when we played back MIDI files or audio CDs: the MTS 100 should be well capable of serving as a budget home cinema system as well.

The speakers are small but you'll need a big desk to make room for them all, even with the subwoofer tucked away on the floor. Our most serious quibble, though, is the absence of a headphone socket: even though the amplifier is only rated at 6W per channel, this system can be loud.

For a set of computer speakers, the MTS 100 is expensive. For a complete home cinema system though, it's exceptional value. The sound quality isn't up to hi-fi standards, but is excellent for a set of speakers this size and price.

○ £199.99 (inc VAT)
○ GB Consultancy (SSI distributor): 01869 233200

| Multimedia Home Theater	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Jot-It

There's barely an office desk in the land that's not festooned with sticky yellow notes. Without them it's unlikely that Britain would be the economic power it is today, and the business world would simply grind to a halt. Good news, then, that Cross Atlantic Software has seen fit to computerise these ubiquitous stickies so you can now litter your Windows 95 desktop with them as well.

After launching Jot-It, a small icon representing an unlimited pile of sticky notes appears on your desktop and can be moved to wherever you find it least distracting. When you want to write a note, you 'peel' a fresh one from this pile and drag it onto whatever application you're working in. Then it's simply a case of jotting down the details of the note and, should you feel it really necessary, format it with different fonts and colours.

Completed notes can be sent as e-mail (electronic mail), although the automatic conversion procedure disregards any formatting you've applied. It's a shame Cross Atlantic didn't include a system allowing yellow notes to be sent intact across a local area network as this would have greatly improved its appeal as an office tool.

Jot-It is a good idea, but as a program it's just a bit too bothersome to be useful. It is certainly more environmentally sound than the paper equivalent, though.
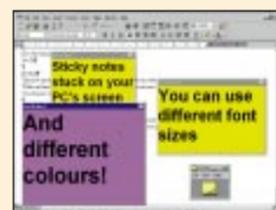
○ £24.99 (inc VAT)
○ Cross Atlantic Software: 0171 228 6992

Jot-It	
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Infinite Disk

If your hard disk is nearing its capacity and you're wary of using disk compression programs such as DriveSpace, then Infinite Disk from Cheyenne Software may well interest you. Basically, it's an on-the-fly compression system that concerns itself only with rarely used files.

The Windows 95 installation is simple enough, but the nature of this program means that the manual is required reading. Once you've configured it to suit your particular needs, Infinite Disk monitors every single file on your hard disk drive and keeps tabs on how often each file is accessed. If a file is left untouched after a set period – say, 30 days – Infinite Disk will automatically compress the file and, if configured so, will move it to another storage device (such as a floppy or network drive). Compressed files appear on your hard disk as though they were uncompressed, and they are automatically decompressed as and when required.

Naturally, you can opt to be notified of each compression process before it takes place – and decline if necessary. Certain file types are protected from being compressed and you can add your own selections to this list if you wish.

A clever tool that makes very efficient use of your available hard disk space. However, it needs to be used with care and isn't worth using if your hard disk is already compressed.

○ £69.99 (inc VAT)
○ Roderick Manhattan: 0181 875 4444

Infinite Disk	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

net.jet

Surfing the Internet can be great fun, but at times it can also be painstakingly slow. The problem is that it's often overloaded, and the limited bandwidths of modems also prove something of a bottleneck. If you feel you've suffered long enough, Peak Technologies' net.jet might well interest you as it promises to speed up surfing and reduce waiting times.

Essentially, net.jet is just a very clever caching system. Web browsers such as Navigator and Internet Explorer have their own caching systems – which basically means they store the last few Web pages you visited so they can be quickly reloaded from your hard disk should you 'step' back while browsing – but net.jet's system is more 'intelligent' because it looks ahead. For example, if you're busy reading the front page of a newspaper Web site such as The Times (www.the-times.com), net.jet will be utilising the modem's otherwise idle time by caching lower-level pages. This means that when you're ready to read the next story it is more or less instantly displayed because net.jet has already 'read' it.

The performance improvements we experienced were hardly stunning, but net.jet will be worth its weight in gold to users who visit a select number of Web sites regularly.

○ £39.99 (inc VAT)
○ Cross Atlantic Software: 0171 228 6992

net.jet	
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

AutoGraph

AutoGraph is a small Windows application that allows you to create electronic calligraphy on your PC's screen. The package has been designed to emulate realistic-ally the strokes that you might make with a pen, and converts them into resizable images that can then be used in other Windows applications.

AutoGraph is rather light on features but those it does have are very well implemented indeed. You can select a size of 'nib' with which to draw, as well as its colour, and you can even opt to give it a shadow if you wish. You might want to use Auto-Graph to knock up a jazzy company logo, or maybe to simply create an electronic version of your signature to paste onto the bottom of your word-processed documents.

While we didn't have any problems using AutoGraph with a mouse, it is the sort of program that really benefits from the use of a pen-based graphics tablet.

AutoGraph features are very limited when compared to fully-fledged graphics tools. However, it does offer some of the very useful features at a very low price.

○ £29.95 (inc VAT)
○ CGS (distributor): 0181 679 7307

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

The Family Organiser

With elements such as the 'Advanced Address Book' and the 'Social Connections Module', The Family Organiser is aimed specifically at busy women. According to the information we received with it, it's intended to help them juggle their life, career, family and home.

Basically, The Family Organiser is a series of linked databases, in which you can store details of your family, friends and home. These details can then be accessed from the included word processor, which comes with a range of pre-defined stationery templates. If, for example, you want to automate invitations to a dinner party depending on how much 'value for money' your friends offer, then it can be done – we suggest that you just don't let them find out.

If you've got the patience to enter all the necessary details, then The Family Organiser can be fairly powerful. However even then, it offers no unique facilities, while without these details it is little more than a poorly featured word processor.

On top of this, it's awkward to install, won't run full-screen and has a non-standard interface which uses various eccentric squiggles to represent perfectly ordinary functions such as copy and paste.

Despite the patronising tone of its press release, The Family Organiser does pretty much what it's supposed to do. Unfortunately, it doesn't do it very well and we couldn't wait to delete it from our test machine.

○ £39.99 (plus £2.50 delivery, inc VAT)
○ Mosaic Computers: 01789 299010

The Family Organiser	
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆

Psion Dacom Gold Card Global

A notebook PC and PC Card modem is a great combination for communicating on the move. Move abroad, however, and a PC Card modem that is not approved for use in a particular country is illegal to use and almost certainly won't work either.

Psion Dacom's latest PC Card modem doesn't have these problems. It will work in any country around the world (though is only approved in 20 of them), making it ideal for international travellers. It's not tied to telephone lines either as it can also be used with a variety of GSM mobile phones.

Unsurprisingly, the Gold Card Global is gold-coloured and can be configured quickly and easily. For the UK, that's pretty much all there is to it and the Gold Card performs well as a 33.6Kbits/s modem. A software utility is supplied to change countries, and this is simply a matter of making a selection from a drop-down list. Although the card can connect to GSM phones, the kit to do it (consisting of the necessary cabling and software) is extra.

Frequent travellers who need on-the-move communications will appreciate the Gold Card Global's worldwide functionality but it's a shame that GSM connectivity adds so much to the price.

○ £245.58 (inc VAT) GSM upgrade from £163.33
○ Psion Dacom: 01908 261686

Psion Dacom Gold Card Global	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Lasat Safire 336 Voice

When the Lasat Safire 288 modem was unleashed upon the unsuspecting world a few years ago, everyone was startled by its uncharacteristically (for a modem) stylish appearance. The latest incarnation of the modem is the Safire 336 Voice and design aficionados among you will be pleased to see that the contemporary styling has stuck.

The Safire 336 Voice is a little wider than its predecessor and the extra width is taken up by some new features. Most welcome is the on/off switch, absent on earlier models, together with a useful telephone splitter socket at the rear. There's also a volume control for the built-in speaker, along with the usual strip of status LEDs (light-emitting diodes).

Being voice-capable, the Safire 336 also has a built-in microphone and sockets for connection to a PC's sound card. The supplied Trio Communications Suite software does the usual business of providing data and fax capabilities, but it also allows the modem and PC to work as a sophisticated answering machine, with messages recorded directly onto the hard drive. Usefully, the Safire 336 can also exchange voice and data simultaneously.

The Safire 336 is good value for a 33.6Kbits/s modem and it brings some very welcome additions to Lasat's stylish modem range.

○ £163.33 (inc VAT)
○ Lasat: 01270 886223

Lasat Safire 336 Voice	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Small Business Graphics and Print Studio

The world of business is a tough one in which to survive, and those who run even the smallest business need to sell themselves and their company at every opportunity. Micrografx's Small Business Graphics and Print Studio gives such people the ability to create eye-catching flyers and the like without the expense of hiring professional designers.
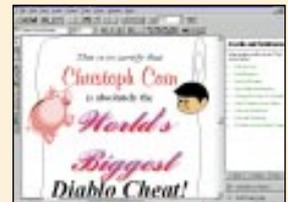
The package is in fact made up from a collection of four of Micrografx's existing products: Windows Draw, Picture Publisher, ABC Media Manager and Instant 3D. The main one of these is Windows Draw, which is a 'project-centred' drawing tool with a good number of pre-prepared templates along the lines of 'Flyers and Signs' and 'Business Cards'.

Picture Publisher lets you retouch (scanned) images as well as edit many of the most popular graphics file formats, and ABC Media Manager organises and catalogues all the clip-art hiding in the depths of your hard disk.

Bringing up the rear is the 3D modelling tool, Instant 3D. While it isn't powerful enough to be used as a serious 3D tool, it is easy to get to grips with and means you can serve up realistic-looking 3D objects in literally seconds.

Micrografx's Small Business Graphics and Print Studio is a fine graphics software suite that should suit the needs, PCs and pockets of most small businesses.

○ £93 (inc VAT)
○ Micrografx: 0345 089372

Graphics and Print Studio	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★