

major word processors have similar systems. This is not a bad thing – if a feature is good, it's worth copying – but because of this the differences between the three suites tend to be quite subtle, and that adds to the difficulty of deciding on a winner. However, although each product has its share of good points, there can only be one *What PC?* award winner and this year, as in years past, that honour goes to Office 97.

Like its competitors, Office 97's main components are a word processor (Word), a spreadsheet (Excel) and a presentation tool (PowerPoint). With the 97 edition, Microsoft added a new application: the Internet-enabled personal information manager (PIM), Outlook.

All the applications now feature Microsoft's Intellisense technology, a 'smart' monitoring technology that 'learns' about your working style, and pre-emptively some of your typing or editing actions.

Office 97 is an exceptionally strong product, with quality applications that work together almost seamlessly. The Outlook application is a welcome addition and the entire product is now 'aware' of the Internet, adding greatly to Office 97's already high appeal.

- £411.25 (inc VAT) Standard version, average dealer price; £188 (inc VAT) upgrade; £528.75 (inc VAT) Professional version, average dealer price; £327.83 (inc VAT) upgrade
- Microsoft: 0345 002000

Microsoft Office 97

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

Office suite

Microsoft Office 97

Office software suites have been around for several years. In their earliest incarnations they were often little more than hastily thrown-together collections of the main office software elements: a word processor from here; a spreadsheet from there; maybe a presentations tool and, if you were lucky, a graphics-editing package.

The wheat has now very definitely been drawn from the chaff. The war has raged long and hard, and now there are just three companies left battling for supremacy in the office suite market: Lotus, Corel and, of course, Microsoft.

Depending on whose figures

you believe, either Corel's Office Professional or Lotus's SmartSuite holds second place, but there's little doubt that Microsoft's Office is still way out in front. Microsoft claims to hold over 80 percent of the UK office suite market but, with Lotus quoting a worldwide market share figure of over 20 percent and Corel's stake also apparently on the rise, the fight is far from over.

These packages now share an increasing number of features that are so similar as to be almost indistinguishable. Microsoft was the first to incorporate the clever 'spell-check-as-you-type' feature into its word processor, but now all the

Lotus SmartSuite 97

In an arena that has so few competing products, being awarded second place isn't necessarily something to be happy about. However, Lotus should feel proud of its 97 edition of SmartSuite. While it's not quite as coherent and instantly usable as Office 97, SmartSuite 97 should be considered seriously by anyone looking to buy their first office suite.

The shining pearl in its string of applications is 1-2-3, the world-famous spreadsheet. Like the rest of the SmartSuite applications, 1-2-3 can now connect to the Internet and it has also been spiced up by the Infobox formatting shortcut.

Database Approach, Word Pro and the simple presentation tool Freelance complete the main application line-up, although there are tempting extras such as the Filofax-style Organizer program and ScreenCam, the screen-action capture system.

£468.83 (inc VAT)

Lotus: 01784 455445



Corel Office Professional 7

Where Office 97 and SmartSuite 97 are very tightly integrated, using Office Professional still brings on a feeling of using several packages loosely tied together. This is not a major criticism, but it does mean that Office Professional 7 takes a little longer to get to grips with than its rivals.

The most widely known application is the WordPerfect word processor. The version here retains the uncluttered editing screen, but many of the newest features come at the expense of speed. During our tests earlier this year it proved to be slower than either Word or Word Pro.

Along with Presentations 7 and the Quattro Pro spreadsheet, Corel is bundling a great package of extras, the biggest and most desirable being CorelDRAW 6.

£468.83 (inc VAT)

Channel Market Makers (distributor): 01703 814142



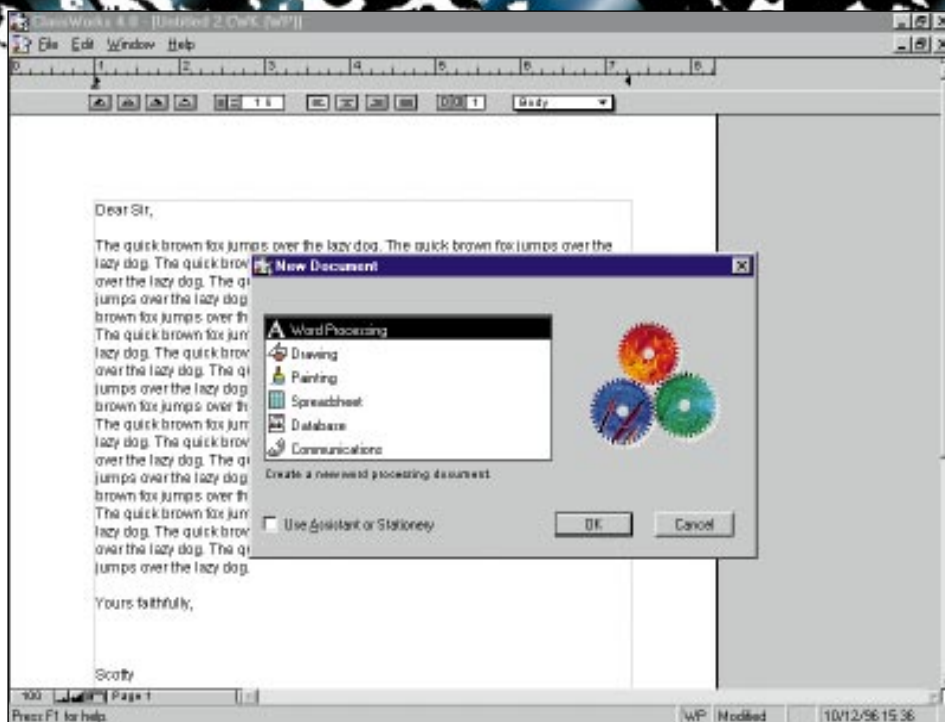
What's the difference between an 'integrated package' and an 'office suite'? In the earliest days of integrated packages, the answer was simple: they were cut-down versions of their big sisters with only the most basic functions. These days the answer isn't so clear cut because integrated packages have taken advantage of the ever more complex suites and themselves have become much more complex.

A good integrated package combines the best of the reasonably powerful facilities while remaining easy to use. It will also be truly integrated, so that, for example, you can include a table of figures in a word-processed document without having to go through convoluted operations. For our awards, we were, inevitably, also looking for good value for money.

Clamouring for attention in this category we found Claris Works, Microsoft Works and mini OFFICE Works – and, for once, Microsoft was pipped at the post.

Claris Works comprises a word processor, a spreadsheet and a database, plus separate drawing and painting applications. It is very easy to install and requires only 12Mb of hard disk space. There's a very readable user guide and if you do get stuck there's more help from on-line sources as well as courteous telephone support.

The package is versatile and well integrated. Frames are a major strength and allow you to combine different types of information in one document. There are text, paint and spreadsheet frames, each like a window to another type of document and it's easy to add drawings, spreadsheets, notes or charts to any document. When you click inside a



Integrated package Claris Works 4.0

frame, menus and shortcuts change, so you can edit your document there and then, without having to start up another application.

Claris Works offers some macro capabilities and ExpressStyles, which can be applied anywhere – to outlines, spreadsheet cells and drawn shapes, as well as to text and paragraphs. There's also a handy collection of Readyart – useful for quick graphics. Assistants are also supplied to walk you through the process of designing documents of various kinds; they also help you through tasks such as inserting tables into an existing document.

The drawing program is friend-

ly to use and contains useful tools for creating shapes and lines. Another of Claris Works' handy features is the ability to create Web documents, courtesy of the HTML translator. Templates are included to get you started.

A great, compact, easy-to-use package that is truly integrated.

○ £57.58 (inc VAT)

○ Claris: 0181 756 0101

Claris Works 4.0

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

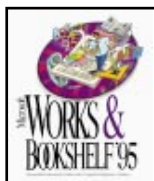
Microsoft Works

You may think Microsoft Works is simply a cut-down version of Microsoft Office, but it takes only one look at the interface to see that the two are quite different in character. Works takes a much more task-based approach – you'll find Task Wizards for 'Household Management' and 'Correspondence' which lead you on to pre-prepared templates.

You can, if you wish, take the more traditional approach of the basic applications, and these, although simple, are elegant and capable. The word processor has formatting styles and EasyText, which lets you program keystrokes to fill in with often-used text. The spreadsheet has buttons for auto-summing and a good range of charts; the database lets you design forms and enter data at the same time, so it is very easy to use. Although pricier than ClarisWorks, it's still a good package.

£109.99 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000



mini OFFICE Works

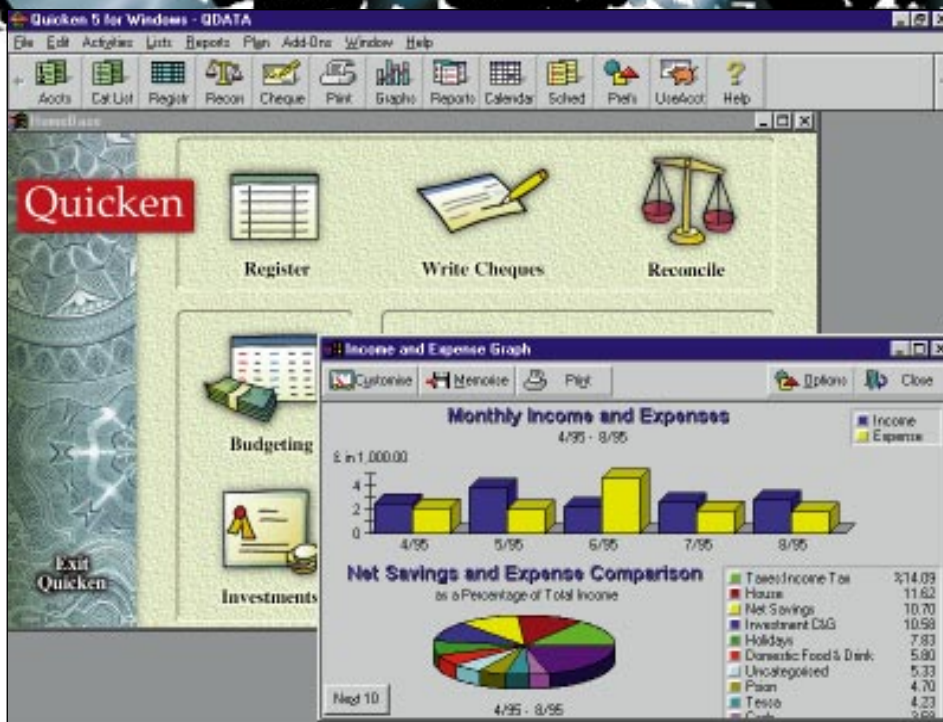
The mini OFFICE name goes right back to the days of the Sinclair Spectrum and the early Amstrad PCWs. Then, as now, mini OFFICE provided a compact, budget-priced package with a wealth of features. It's a single application with different types of document contained in a parent window. Click on one of the 'sub' windows and the menus and buttons change to suit.

The word processor doesn't have drag-and-drop editing, but otherwise it has a good set of features with good tabling capabilities. The spreadsheet is simple but capable and allows you to create all sorts of charts. The database is simple to set up and use, and even allows for picture fields. At just under £30, mini OFFICE is very cheap and very good value. The only disappointments are its documentation and help facilities.

£29.99 (inc VAT)

Europress: 01625 859333





step guide and choosing from the personal or business category lists. Classes, another analysis parameter, can be assigned to transactions as well as categories. This means you can distinguish the income and expenses of two people, or different customers or projects – an illustration of Quicken's versatility.

Quicken 5 lets you manage six types of account: current, deposit, credit, cash, building society, investment, asset, and liability. Regular bills and income, such as standing orders, direct debits and your monthly salary, can be entered just once using the scheduling facility. Memorising and other productivity tools reduce the chore of entering detailed transactions. Clear reports and graphs can be prepared with Quicken 5 to summarise your financial position, including a snapshot screen which shows up to six different measurements. Another strength is Quicken 5's planning tools. For example, these let you calculate loan or mortgage payments accurately and project account balances into the future – hopefully positive ones.

While Microsoft Money 97 is even simpler, Quicken 5 still offers the best combination of rich function and friendly interface for the all-round user rather than the complete novice; the imminent Quicken 6 should be even better.

○ £39.95 (CD inc. VAT)
 ○ Intuit: 0800 072 7343

Quicken 5 on CD

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

Personal finance software

Quicken 5

Given the investment that Microsoft has made in the personal finance market over the past couple of years, it's interesting to see that Intuit's Quicken is still the leading product. It's also surprising that the shift to on-line banking – with all that implies for this PC application – is taking longer than many expected.

An essential requirement for a personal finance package is that it must balance rich and versatile features with ease of learning and use. While the primary purpose of these packages remains management of standard accounts, users are also looking for functionality that goes

further. Superior products should offer planning and forecasting capabilities, as well as basic transaction processing and analysis. Quicken 6 is due for launch at the time of writing, and should be even better, but meanwhile Quicken 5 meets all these criteria handsomely and runs off with our award.

It's also pretty easy to set up and learn, although this is the area in which Microsoft gives it the greatest run for its you-know-what. As well as an excellent user guide there's full context-sensitive on-line help and unlimited free telephone support. You can be up and running quickly using the on-line step-by-

Microsoft Money 97

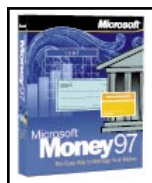
This close runner-up is even easier than Quicken 5 to learn and use, as Microsoft has placed the focus on simplicity.

Installation is supported by an 80-page book that offers not just usage instructions but a jargon-free guide to financial matters. Money 97's greatest strength, however, is perhaps its bright and friendly look and feel. This starts right from the attractive Contents screen, from where you can single-click to the nine main areas. One of these is the Account Manager, where a wizard helps you set up your accounts. However, the feature set is not as rich as Quicken's, and there's no multiple window capability.

Its friendly user interface makes Money 97 an excellent choice for novice home users. When its on-line facilities are operational in the UK, it may be an even stronger rival to Quicken.

£29.99 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000



Money Matters 2.02a

Third place this year goes to GSP's undemanding program which takes only 5Mb of your hard drive space.

Nevertheless, Money Matters has a good range of functions that are exceptionally easy to use. A typically nice feature is that you can customise account buttons with a logo for many UK banks and building societies. Transfers and splits are supported, and Money Matters can even display multiple windows simultaneously.

Reports are not up to those of the leading products, but you do get a simple Net Worth Summary, and an Income and Expenditure report. Graphs are adequate too, although there are flaws in identifying some of them. Although there's no print preview, any window displayed can be printed. Best of all, Money Matters 2 is simplicity itself to use.

£19.95 (inc VAT)

GSP: 01480 496575



Selecting the winner of our annual small business accounts award is never an easy task. There's no such thing as the ideal package – there are as many views on what makes a good one as there are small businesses.

This year we managed to narrow the field down to three main choices; Instant Accounting 97 from Sage, M.Y.O.B. v6 and Pastel Accounting. In the end the first was the victor.

Instant Accounting 97 is a simple bookkeeping package for very small businesses. It's inexpensive, easy to use, keeps track of all sales and purchase records, and knows about cash VAT accounting (a boon to small businesses struggling against late payers). And you don't need to be an accountant to use it.

It's equally happy trading in cash or on credit and, despite having a full audit trail, allows limited error-correction. Invoices can be product or service-based and can include free-text. Invoice layouts can use either standard templates or your own design and can then be printed on plain paper or pre-printed stationery. There's no stock control, although products (or services) and prices can be pre-defined for consistency.

Though running under Windows 3.1 as happily as under Windows 95, Instant Accounting 97 now boasts a Microsoft Office 97-like button-bar. One button launches your browser putting you on the Internet at Sage's Web page (www.sage.co.uk/) which contains a mix of Sage news and advertising plus, later this year, on-line support. Also built in is a link to Sage's forthcoming new version of Instant Payroll, so you'll be able to post payroll figures automatically.

M.Y.O.B v6

M.Y.O.B. takes a more traditional approach to accounting. This is fully-visible integrated double-entry accounting. Three main ledgers – nominal, sales, purchase – plus stock control, a card file of addresses, and chequebook records, form a system wherein some accounting familiarity is definitely required. As is more money.

For the price you get eight types of account, four levels of account nesting, and 10 single-letter identifiers, enabling you to analyse everything from purchase control to sales prospecting. You can establish any number of jobs for each customer, each job's income and expenditure is separately tracked. 'Pending' or pro forma invoices can be used as quotations and give a passable imitation of a sales order processing function.

Stock control is automatic but can be manually adjusted.

£229.12 (inc VAT)

BestWare UK: 0800 026 0261



MAP Pastel Accounting

Another accountants' package, Pastel Accounting offers a comprehensive set of small business features. Version 4.1a incorporates customisable layouts; drill-down enquiries; better reporting; double-checking, batch updating, period closing – and it's multi-currency as standard, handling up to 16 foreign currencies.

In addition to its general ledger, cash book, sales and purchasing ledgers, invoicing, job costing, budgets and a report writer, you get up to 10 cash books, 30 separate tax types, and 32 types of entry. You also get a 'manufacturing' module with bills of materials and parts build-up, with Pastel calculating the finished cost, mark-up and selling price of the manufactured item. As well as inventory item codes, Pastel handles bar codes and bin numbers for inventory items.

£468.82 (inc VAT)

MAP Pastel: 0161 624 5662



Small business accounts software

Instant Accounting 97

Importantly, Instant Accounting 97 is proof against the 'millennium bug' – a feature you do need now – and should presumably see you through to 9999. There's a facility for batched entry of bank payments and receipts as well as invoices, credit notes and statements. Other new features include on-line help Wizards to assist in certain lesser-used procedures, like transferring money from one bank, cash or credit card account to another; and more flexible reports.

If you haven't already computerised your (small) business, Sage's Instant Accounting 97 offers an ideal start.

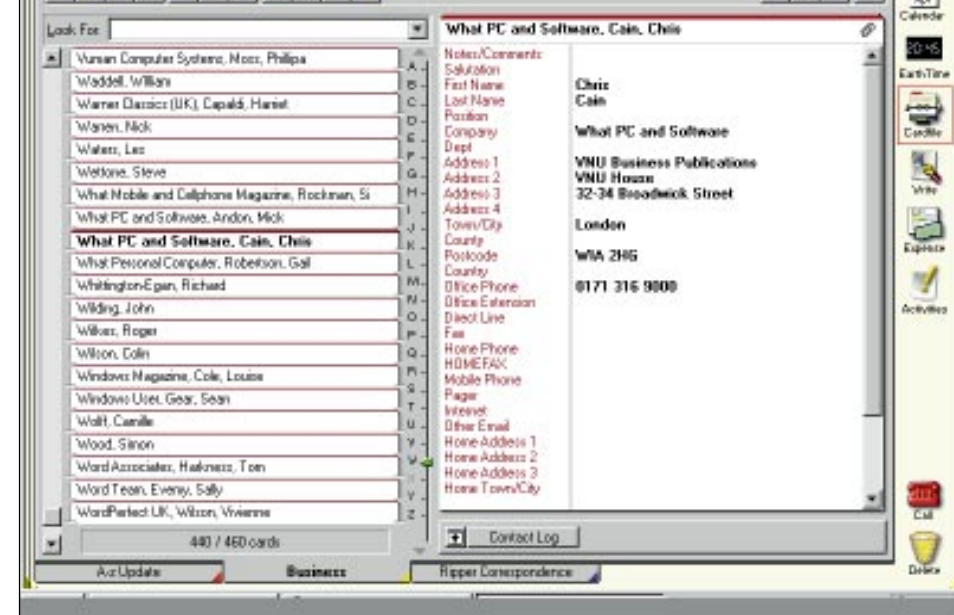
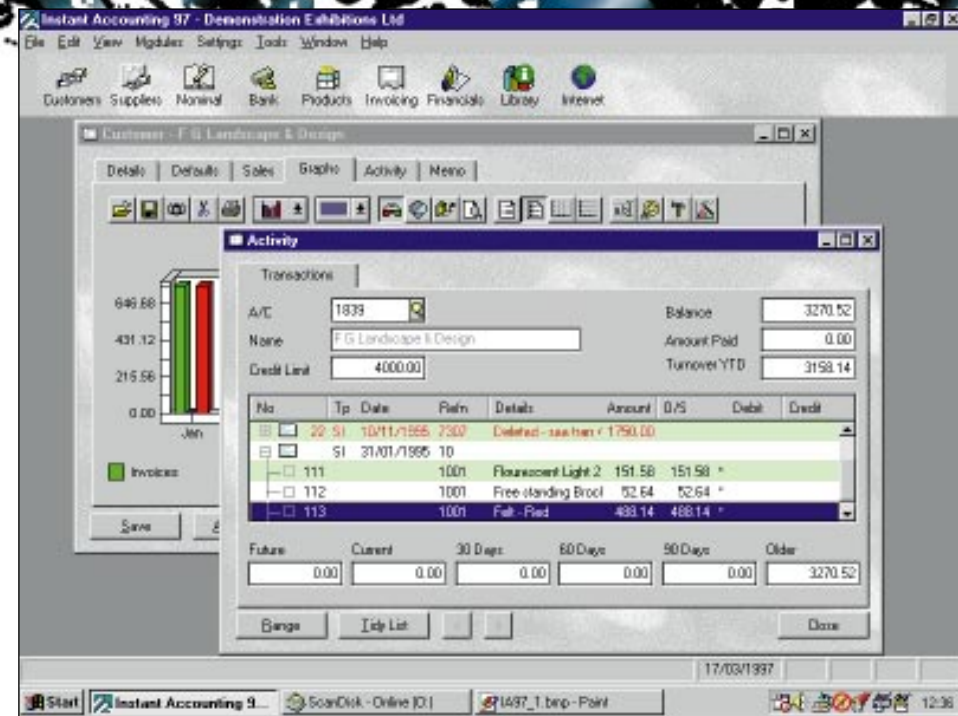
Combining all the basic features that are needed by the smaller business, without confusing accountant-speak, Instant Accounting 97 is also one of the easiest accounting programs available. The price is right as well.

○ £98.99 (inc VAT)

○ SageSoft: 0191 255 0608

Instant Accounting 97

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



Personal information manager

Internet Sidekick

If you plan to use your PC to help organise your life then the best place to start is with a personal information manager or PIM. A PIM is the electronic equivalent of an address book, combined with an appointments diary, notebook, and whatever you scrawl reminders on, be it the back of your hand or an old beer mat.

A good PIM must be quick and easy to use. It should obviously have an address book and a calendar for recording appointments and to-dos, but all the information you need should be available at a glance – when you need to remember the names of someone's children, you

want the information in front of you, not hidden away in the bowels of a database. You should also have a built-in word processor and have control over your correspondence. And there should be sufficient flexibility for you to be able to store all sorts of additional information.

Internet Sidekick offers all this and more. In addition to the normal PIM functions, it allows groups of people to use the Internet (and Intranet) to organise and manage their contacts and calendar.

The program's address database is simple to use and also wholly customisable. You can scroll through a list of your contacts, go

to the letter of the alphabet with which the person or company name begins, or search the whole database by word. Sidekick will dial the phone for you and you can log the time and duration of conversations and add brief notes of what they were about.

Sidekick has its own word processor, complete with a spelling checker, and you can have address details automatically inserted into a prepared letter template. Alternatively, it is a simple matter to copy address details into a word processor document.

A flexible calendar efficiently handles time management, such as appointments, deadlines and so on. The calendar can be viewed by the usual day, week, month, and year, and Internet Sidekick lets you set alarms to remind you of appointments and other important events and activities.

Finally, a feature unique to Internet Sidekick is the Expense View, where business and other expenses can be recorded, organised and an expense report printed. Unfortunately, while this is ideal for relatively small business expenses, it doesn't have a home user application. We would like to see this feature modified slightly to accommodate some of the basic features found in Money or Quicken.

Overall, Internet Sidekick is powerful and extremely adaptable, yet relatively easy to use.

○ £39.99 (inc VAT)

○ Starfish Software: 0181 875 4455

Internet Sidekick

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

Outlook

Outlook gives you all the usual PIM functions, plus strong e-mail control and excellent integration across Office 97 applications. The Office Assistant helps you get to grips with the program quickly and with ease. Down the right-hand side of the screen is the Outlook Bar, a row of buttons which take you to your e-mail inbox, calendar, contacts, tasks, mail folders, favourite World Wide Web sites, and documents.

The program is unable to integrate business and non-business contacts. You can sort by individual or by company, but not the two together. This means all names without a business name are alphabetically listed before businesses.

There seem to be some problems with file sharing across a network, so check this before investing.

Sold as part of Microsoft Office

www.microsoft.com/outlook

Microsoft: 0345 002000



On-Schedule 97

On-Schedule 97 links to a number of PDAs, including Windows CE handhelds – there is a version for Windows CE – and is networkable. It has the customary address book with plenty of pre-configured fields and several user-definable fields. Information is presented as a list by default, but clicking on the contact name brings up several tabbed cards on which there is expanded or additional information.

The appointments diary/calendar can be viewed by day, week, month or year. You can view past as well as future events and schedule reminders. The task manager (to-do list maker) logs phone calls, and you can make notes about the call and track the duration of the call for billing purposes.

£129 (inc VAT)

www.odysseyinc.com/

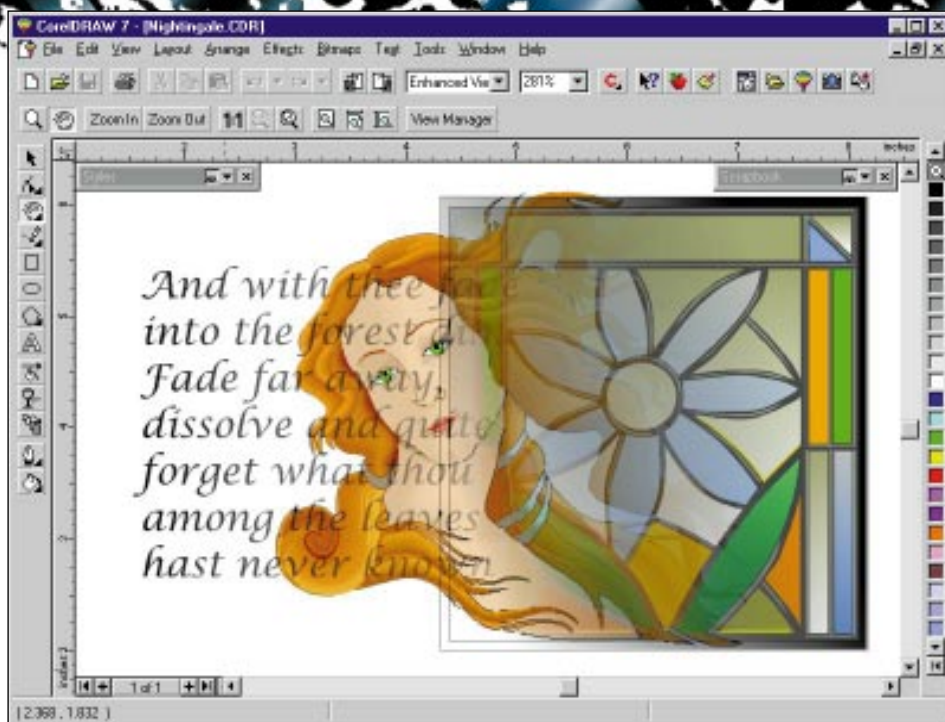
Prisma Office: 01753 810899



There's a strict distinction between drawing and painting (also known as image-processing) software. The former deals in scalable, independent 'objects', such as lines, shapes or blocks of text. The latter deals in 'bitmaps' of 'pixels' – individual dots of colour that go to make up an image, typically a scanned photograph. Though most drawing software can import bitmaps, and most image-processing software uses object technology to produce 'masks' and 'layered' images, where parts of different images can be floated over the background, it's important to choose the software appropriate to your graphics needs.

Corel DRAW 7, this year's winner, covers both areas well – the box contains not just the eponymous drawing program, but the image-processing PhotoPaint, as well as a host of supporting programs, 1,000 fonts and 30,000 clip-art and photo images. On the drawing side, there's practically all you could desire, from shaping blocks of text, blending between objects, creating variable-width lines and more, backed by professional management features such as colour separations, layers and multi-page layouts.

One criticism of previous versions is that the sheer wealth of features resulted in an ungovernable interface. Corel introduced 'roll-ups' in version 3. These small control palettes offer 'one-stop' control of various editing and formatting options, and as the name suggests can be rolled up into their own title bar to clear screen space. What seemed a good idea at the time became a victim of its own success, and by version 6 there were 30 of these. Although still available in this version, their function has



Painting and drawing software

Corel DRAW 7

been largely replaced by the Property Bar – a far more sensible affair that changes its contents to suit the object or tool in use.

Corel's brilliant fills – from plain colour, through blends of two or more colours, to fractally-generated textures – have also been further enhanced by a transparency effect and interactive controls. Instead of setting the fill options from a dialog, you can now drag arrows on the fill itself, and drop additional colours straight on to the arrows. Further drag-and-drop enhancements mean you can copy some or all of an object's properties, such as fill, text style or outline, to another

object with just two mouse clicks.

Finally, if you're not prepared to pay the price, versions 4, 5 and 6 of Corel DRAW are still available, starting at under £50.

Loads of new features and a much-improved interface make this the best Corel DRAW ever.

- £581.62 (inc VAT) list price; street price around £310
- Corel: 0800 973189

Corel DRAW 7

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

Photoshop 4

Our first runner-up is strictly bitmaps-only. Since it first appeared as a Macintosh application, Photoshop (now in version 4 on the PC) has been the leader in high-end image processing.

At its simplest level, you can take a scanned photograph, enhance the contrast and colour balance and retouch blemishes, but that's only the beginning. You can combine images to place, for example, the Taj Mahal at the North Pole, or rewrite history by removing disgraced politicians from a group photo. There is a range of special effects – texturing, casting shadows or creating a 'motion blur' – which can be augmented by a vast range of third-party 'plugins'. It's a vastly complex application aimed at creative professionals, but the two CDs include a comprehensive collection of live demos and tutorials, with plenty of tips from the pros.

£587.50 (inc VAT)

Adobe: 0181 606 4000



DrawPlus 3

Once again, Serif scoops the budget end of the market with DrawPlus. This is vector drawing rather than image editing, and despite the low price, comes bundled with 400 own-brand fonts and a 15,000 piece clip-art library.

DrawPlus is simple to use, especially for beginners, with plenty of 'Wizards' and other aids that can be turned off as and when the user gets familiar with the interface. Two particularly good touches are the way the colour palette can store blended fills, as well as 10 shades of a selected colour, and the provision of intelligent 'Quick Shapes' which have special handles to lengthen, say, the shaft of an arrow without stretching the point. Though not up to Corel's level, there is a good range of multicolour fills, and special effects such as shaping the 'envelope' of a piece of text.

£59.95 (inc VAT)

Serif: 0115 942 1502





award. Shortly after, however, Microsoft released version 3 of Internet Explorer and it is the recipient of this year's best on-line product award.

A large part of Internet Explorer 3's runaway success is due to the fact that it can be downloaded free from Microsoft's Website, but it really is the better browser. Leaner and faster than Navigator 3, it has added a range of exciting features to the world of Web browsing.

One of Internet Explorer 3's main features is its ActiveX controls. ActiveX is a technology that allows interactive Web pages, so you can play a game or wander around a 3D environment via the Internet. ActiveX controls are also plug-and-play – they can be automatically downloaded and installed on a PC and there's no need to restart the browser to use them.

Other features include built-in multimedia support, allowing such things as video playback directly from a Web page. Internet Explorer 3 also integrates with Windows 95 and includes Internet Mail and News for e-mail and Usenet access.

Simple to install and configure, Internet Explorer 3 is one of the few Internet applications to be almost foolproof. Recent scares have highlighted gaps in its security but fixes are now available and it's still the best browser around.

- Free
- Microsoft: 0345 002000
www.microsoft.com

Internet Explorer 3

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

On-line software

Internet Explorer 3

The Internet's growth is nothing short of extraordinary. Having started as a computer network used mainly by government, scientific and educational establishments, it's now a worldwide phenomenon that's permeated everyone's consciousness.

The reasons for this growth are manifold but perhaps the biggest is the World Wide Web. Before the Web came along, the Internet was simply a way of sharing and exchanging text-based documents. Developed in the 1980s, the Web was basically an Internet front end allowing documents to be displayed in a standard format with

links between them. Then the general public got wind of it and the rest is history. Web documents are still text-based, but they contain codes that specify how the document should be displayed. When these codes are translated by special applications called Web browsers, pages appear with colourful text, graphics, sound and even video.

Although there are several browsers available, the market is dominated by two heavyweights – Netscape's Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer. This time last year, Navigator 2 ruled the roost and won the 1996 *What PC?*

PointCast

A Web browser uses 'pull' technology – if you want something, you have to go and get it yourself. This can be pretty tedious but now Internet tools are appearing that use 'push' technology – they bring information to you automatically.

Perhaps the best of these is PointCast, which is analogous to a television. You specify the information you want to receive and PointCast displays it, for free, on your PC. It has 23 channels, ranging from on-line newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Miami Herald*, to news services like CNN. Each channel is broken down further by topic, so you can filter out such things as travel and financial news and concentrate on entertainment, for example. Once configured, PointCast will connect to your ISP at specified intervals and update the information. This can then be viewed through PointCast itself or displayed as a 'rolling news' screen saver.
www.pointcast.com



Net2Phone

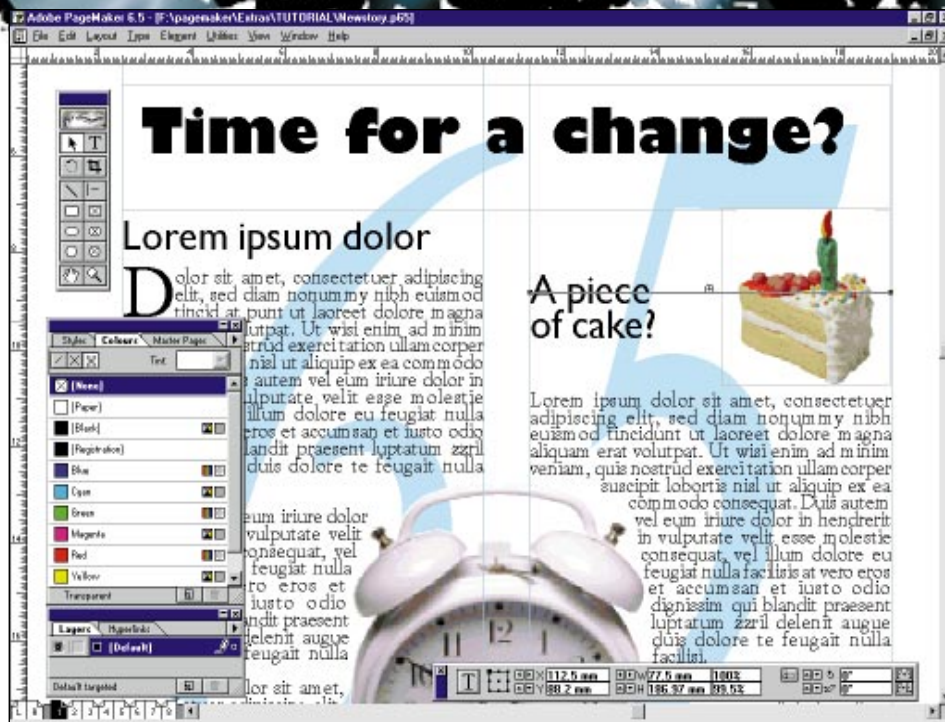
Internet telephony is nothing new but it requires a PC at each end of the call.

IDT's Net2Phone software has no such limitation. Calls are still made from a PC with Internet access but they are then routed first to IDT's telephone system in the US and then to a telephone exchange local to the call number. The clever part is that calls result in a telephone ringing at the other end, which means a PC owner can call anyone in the world.

The Net2Phone software is full-duplex (so both callers can talk at the same time) and is simple to configure and use. Call quality depends on Internet connection speed but it's usable at worst.

Net2Phone calls are paid for in advance by credit card and are much cheaper than other telephone services. A call to Australia, for example, costs a mere 15p a minute.
www.net2phone.com





ter will automatically re-flow text 'stories' and resize graphics if you change page or margin sizes.

The interface has had a makeover, with an improved Control Box for one-stop formatting, and Adobe-style tabbed palettes that can be stacked together, for organising colours, layers, styles and pages, and at last Windows users have proper right mouse button pop-up menus.

Version 6 brought us Web publishing tools, and this version sees enhancements to that, with multi-column layouts and automatic conversion of pictures to JPEG or GIF format. There's also the facility to produce 'rich layout' electronic documents in Adobe Acrobat format, which can then be viewed on a variety of platforms, as long as the recipient has the (free) Acrobat reader installed, all fonts, formatting graphics and hyperlinks are preserved. In other respects PageMaker still shows room for improvement – most word processors offer better table creation, and we're still waiting for basic comforts such as a 'Save' button.

Finally, there's a good bundle of extras, including a lightweight version of Adobe PhotoShop, 220 fonts, 17 proofing languages and an elegantly produced series of multimedia tours and tutorials.

After years in the shadow of Quark, Pagemaker 6.5 at last draws ahead in publishing power

- £450 (inc VAT) street price
- Adobe: 0181 606 4000

PageMaker 6.5

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

Desktop publishing software

PageMaker 6.5

It's been an eventful year for DTP, with many of the main players bringing out new versions, and a general rush in the direction of electronic publishing – both on the World Wide Web and as portable electronic documents. PageMaker, originally created by Aldus, but now part of the Adobe empire, was a pioneer of DTP, but got overtaken at the professional level by Quark Xpress, which offered unparalleled accuracy, more flexible page layout and the possibility of third-party 'Xtensions' to add extra features.

It took several years for PageMaker to catch up, first with the

facility to rotate text, then multiple master pages, built-in colour separation and the facility for 'Plug-ins' to compete with 'Xtensions'. Now the catching-up process is fairly well completed and this year's award goes to the new PageMaker 6.5.

Two of the software's new killer features are layers and automatic reformatting. The former not only lets you hide groups of objects or text for faster redrawing or 'lock' them to prevent accidental changes, but means you can combine versions of a document – say in different languages – in the same publication, turning the appropriate layers on or off to suit. The lat-

Quark Xpress 3.32

Despite the hefty price, Quark Xpress 3.32 is still the industry leader in high-end professional DTP. It combines phenomenal accuracy and typographic control with a simple, uncluttered interface, and was the first to offer free text rotation and multiple 'master pages' – templates to use different layouts in the same publication.

Another first was 'Xtensions' – the facility for third-party developers to add extra features to the program. However, at long last PageMaker and Ventura have not only caught up on the feature list, but in certain respects, such as Web support and multiple versions, have surpassed it. The Windows version of Xpress hasn't seen much development since 1992, but a new version is promised for later in the year. This promise will need to be kept if Xpress is to maintain its high-end leadership.
 £1,051.62 (inc VAT) list price; street price around £670
 Quark Systems: 01483 454397



PagePlus 4

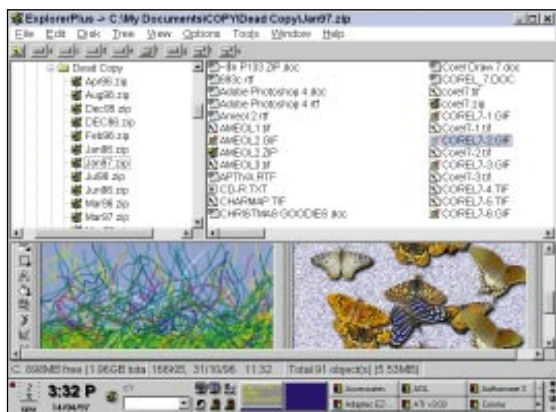
You don't have to pay a fortune for power-user DTP, as Serif PagePlus 4 shows. For under £100 you get full-colour separation, Pantone support, one-tenth of a point type sizing and one-tenth of a millimetre positioning. Added to this are 400 fonts, a 17,000 piece clip-art library, a logo creator, and auto-correction and grammar checking in the built-in text editor.

Despite the power, the interface is simple: there are plenty of 'Wizards' to help create publications ranging from company reports to party invitations, more Wizards for various page layout tasks and plenty of helpful hints for newcomers. As you progress, you can turn off the hand-holding and if you get bored, distractions include Elvis and Bill Gates detectors, as well as a space invaders game.

£99.95 (inc VAT)
 Serif: 0115 942 1502



Utility



PowerDesk

Considering the amount of time, effort, research and usability testing that went into the development of Windows 95, it's surprising just what was missed out. Fortunately, you're not alone in sitting at your monitor cursing at the lack of an undelete/zip file viewer/close all windows option – someone, somewhere is doing something about it.

Like Windows 3.1, Windows 95 is swamped with utilities. This year's *What PC?* award for best utility goes to one that solves a lot of Windows 95's problems in one fell swoop – PowerDesk 1.1 from MicroHelp. Version 1 of PowerDesk won last year's award and it's still the only utility used on every PC in the *What PC?* office.

PowerDesk has two main components – PowerDesk itself and Explorer Plus. PowerDesk is really more of a toolbar, and a floating toolbar at that. Drag it around the screen or dock it 'taskbar-style' to one side and it provides quick access to a variety of functions. The simplest are programs – it picks up any shortcuts on the desktop and folders on the start menu and displays them as icons. These can be customised, allowing you to forget your desktop and work solely from PowerDesk.

Another useful feature is the multiple desktop option. By maintaining two or more virtual screens, you can have several applications open and maximised, and flip between them. Purists will also appreciate the option to display a DOS command line, removing the need to open separate windows to handle DOS commands.

Useful though PowerDesk is, it is eclipsed by Explorer Plus. The idea is simple – an improved version of Windows 95's own Explorer, but the implementation is excellent. Explorer Plus includes almost everything a file manager needs. Disk drives as toolbar icons, dual panes within a window, a file-viewer pane – Explorer Plus has it all. It even incorporates compressed file management, whereby the contents of a compressed file can be viewed like any other folder and files can be 'zipped' with a click of the mouse.

Like all the best utilities, once you've used PowerDesk, you'll wonder how you managed without it. Excellent in all respects.

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| ○ £39.95 (inc VAT) | PowerDesk | |
| ○ Roderick | Features | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| Manhattan: | Ease of use | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| 0181 875 4444 | Value for money | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |
| | Overall | ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ |

WinZip

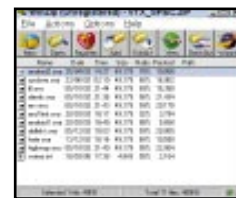
WinZip, not surprisingly, is a Windows utility for managing compressed files. It can handle everything from ARJ to TAR, taking in UUencoding and MIME along the way. Don't worry if these terms mean nothing to you, WinZip is pretty much automatic in operation. The latest version (Winzip 6.2) supports long filenames and provides right-click integration with popular anti-virus software. Another useful feature is the Install/Try/Uninstall option. If a program is distributed in compressed form, WinZip will extract and install it, and then optionally restore your system to its original state if you don't like the program.

Although WinZip more than caters for advanced users, its 'Wizard' mode is ideal for novices. This seeks out compressed files on your system and presents them in a list. Files can then be selectively extracted to folders of your choice.

£34.08 (inc VAT)

Software Source: 01297 552222

Trial version available at www.winzip.com



QuickView Plus

File viewers are nothing new but Inso's QuickView Plus is the one that does it best. Using QuickView is simple. The program integrates with the right-click menu of Windows 95 – right-click a file, choose 'QuickView Plus' and the contents of the file appear in a separate window with all formatting preserved.

QuickView Plus 4.0 has viewers for files created by over 200 applications, from word processors, spreadsheets and databases to graphics and compressed files. It also integrates with more programs, so you can view files in such programs as Lotus Notes, Microsoft Exchange and Internet Explorer 3. Copies of files viewed in a QuickView Plus window can be saved and opened in the original application for editing.

QuickView Plus also includes QuickPrint, which provides a quick way to print any file that can be viewed.

£39 (inc VAT)

Inso: 0181 947 1122

30-day trial version available at www.inso.com



Norton AntiVirus for Win95

Computer viruses are a reality and it's essential to have measures in place to deal with unwanted attacks on your PC. Norton AntiVirus produced the first Windows 95-specific anti-virus utility and version 2 improves on the original.

Both virus detection and recovery are handled by Norton AntiVirus. Its AutoProtect feature detects infected files and floppy disks and if the infections are repairable, they can be dealt with on the spot. The program also gives the option to check disks and files for viruses at will, though it doesn't integrate with the right-click menu. Compressed files can be scanned and scan logs can be recorded – useful for corporate users. A combination of virus-specific, heuristic and integrity checks are used, making Norton AntiVirus extremely effective in spotting infections.

£59 (inc VAT)

Symantec: 0171 616 5600

Free updates: www.symantec.com



When it comes to our annual awards the Best Game category is always one of the most difficult to judge. Every year the *WhatPC?* team is forced to play the latest titles, often for days on end, to come up with a winner. Just compiling the shortlist can take ages. Life is hell.

While everyone has their favourite type of game, from racing simulators to adventures and beat-'em-ups, playability is paramount. A product will score high marks for great graphics and atmospheric sound, but if it isn't actually fun to play then it doesn't cut the mustard.

Eventually, after extensive testing, we managed to find three products that were well designed, looked great and kept us up till the wee small hours.

First up was *Tomb Raider* from Eidos, an exciting 3D graphical adventure in which you play Lara Croft, ace explorer and tough cookie, on a quest to uncover an ancient treasure hidden in a forgotten realm. Next, *Sega Rally* appealed to the racing fans with its fluid graphics and realistic handling. Finally, *Diablo* from Blizzard Entertainment received the votes from the office role-playing fans. After much debate, *Diablo* came out on top.

Diablo takes the traditional Dungeons and Dragons theme and brings it into the 1990s. Written specifically for Windows 95, using the latest DirectX graphics technology, it's also designed in such a way that it appeals to the mass market as well as dedicated adventure fans.

The game casts you as a Warrior, Rogue or Sorcerer, and charges you with the task of saving the sleepy town of Tristram. *Diablo*, Lord of Terror, has seized control of the dun-



Game *Diablo*

geons and catacombs beneath the town and is looking for a way to escape to the world above. It's up to you to stop him and his murderous hordes before they set foot outside.

You start armed only with the bare essentials, but can build your abilities and inventory as the game progresses. Warriors, for example, can acquire huge swords and impenetrable armour, while Sorcerers learn powerful spells. There are also a number of separate quests to complete to gain experience, extra abilities and unique magical items. Only a high-level character armed to the teeth with plenty of experience can hope to finish the quest.

In addition to compelling single-player adventure, *Diablo* boasts full network and Internet support for multi-player games, allowing up to four people to team up against the darkness. Or you can forget about your goals and fight each other to see who reigns supreme. **Definitely one that will keep you coming back again and again, *Diablo* is a must for PC gamers everywhere.**

○ £44.95 (inc VAT)

○ Zblac: 01626 332233

Diablo

Overall

★★★★★

Tomb Raider

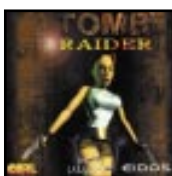
Originally a massive hit on the Sony Playstation, *Tomb Raider* is a 3D adventure of epic proportions. As intrepid explorer Lara Croft you must traverse 15 levels over four civilisations to find the three pieces of the Atlantean Scion, and uncover a mystery that reaches back before the dawn of recorded time.

Of course, nothing is ever easy. Lara must tackle wolves, bears, pumas, dinosaurs and some other surprising monsters. Fortunately, there's a selection of weapons to help her.

While the standard version has great graphics, the game also supports popular 3D cards through plug-in patches. The Orchid 3DFX version is excellent, with super-smooth 3D and realistic texture mapping. *Tomb Raider* is a must for graphic adventure fans.

£39.99 (inc VAT)

Eidos: 0121 356 0831



Sega Rally Championship

One for the driving fans, *Sega Rally Championship* is a superb conversion of the popular arcade game. Written specifically for Windows 95 using the latest DirectX graphics technology, it sets a new standard in PC driving simulations.

Rally lets you get behind the wheel of either a Toyota Celica or Lancia Delta, and then race across desert, forest and mountain tracks to prove you're the fastest thing on four wheels. The cars are designed to handle just like the real thing, and three difficulty levels keep you on your toes.

As with the arcade version, the game can be tailored to suit your tastes with automatic or manual transmission, different viewing angles, and a two-player link-up option via direct PC to PC modem, network or Internet links.

£39.99 (inc VAT)

Sega: 0181 995 3399





places such as museums, restaurants and walks, and indicate how far off your route you are prepared to travel. AutoRoute will then work out a complete itinerary for you, and you can also get useful background information such as opening times, prices and, for restaurants, a write-up from the *Les Routiers* guide.

A journey route is displayed in two ways – as a detailed set of instructions and as a line on a map. The map can be viewed in a full-colour Ordnance Survey format, or you can zoom in to a flat-shaded contour map similar to a road atlas.

Were that all to the package, AutoRoute Express would be an excellent title – but there is more. You can use 'pushpins' to customise your maps, adding, for example, a particular pub or friend's house, with accompanying text. This pushpin can then be used as if it were any other place name.

Another bonus, if you have access to the Internet, is AutoRoute's links to other sources of useful information, such as traffic and weather conditions. And, if your car has a GPS system, you can use AutoRoute on a notebook and trace your progress as you drive.

AutoRoute Express 5 is a handy reference tool for any family with a car – it's simple to use and, with all the bonus information thrown in, it's excellent value for money.

- £59.99 each (inc VAT)
- Microsoft: 0345 002000

AutoRoute Express 5

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

Family/reference software

AutoRoute Express 5

Software for the home and reference sector covers a broad spectrum – pre-school titles through to GCSE and beyond, encyclopaedias, cookery and plenty more besides falls into this category. A good software package will offer more than a traditional book, while to win the award of best home and reference title, it must be exceptional in all respects – useful and easy to use, ideally bursting with features, and offering excellent value for money.

Of the many titles we've seen in the past year, three stood out in particular – AutoRoute Express, Green Eggs and Ham and Encarta

97. The two Microsoft AutoRoute Express 5 packages – for Great Britain and for Europe – certainly satisfy all our criteria.

Since its earliest days, AutoRoute Express has made great strides, and is now far more than a simple route planner. For the simplest journey plan, you just type in the start and end points for your journey, or use a postcode if you're not sure of the place name.

You can also turn your trip into a complete day out, because AutoRoute Express has information on sights and activities. When you're planning your route, you can click on an offered checklist of

Encarta 97

Since it was first launched in 1993, Encarta has firmly established itself as the leading encyclopaedia on CD-ROM. The latest version, Encarta 97 Encyclopaedia World English Edition, is better than ever. It has 28,000 articles, which have been localised with English spelling and are of interest and relevance to UK users. There are also plenty of pictures, sound clips and videos to bring the articles to life.

Using Encarta 97 is delightfully easy – following up links is entirely intuitive and searching for particular topics is straightforward and efficient, using the Encarta search engine, Pinpointer. You can click on any word in the encyclopaedia to get a definition from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and there's also an Encarta Web site, a well-maintained source for updating articles which integrates seamlessly with the encyclopaedia.

£49.99 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000



Green Eggs and Ham

Children's software titles range from educational packages through to purely fun games; somewhere in the middle you'll find animated storybooks. Generally, you can choose either to have the story read straight through to you, or to interact with it, in which case a page is read, accompanied by highlighted text, there is some sort of animation played and then you can start to click.

There are vast numbers of animated storybooks in the shops and we thought Green Eggs and Ham was outstanding. It has superb illustrations and animations, the music is captivating and there are three games tucked away inside the pages. Like all titles from Living Books, the paperback version of the story is included in the box, so you can enjoy the story away from the computer, too.

£30 (inc VAT)

Living Books: 01429 520250

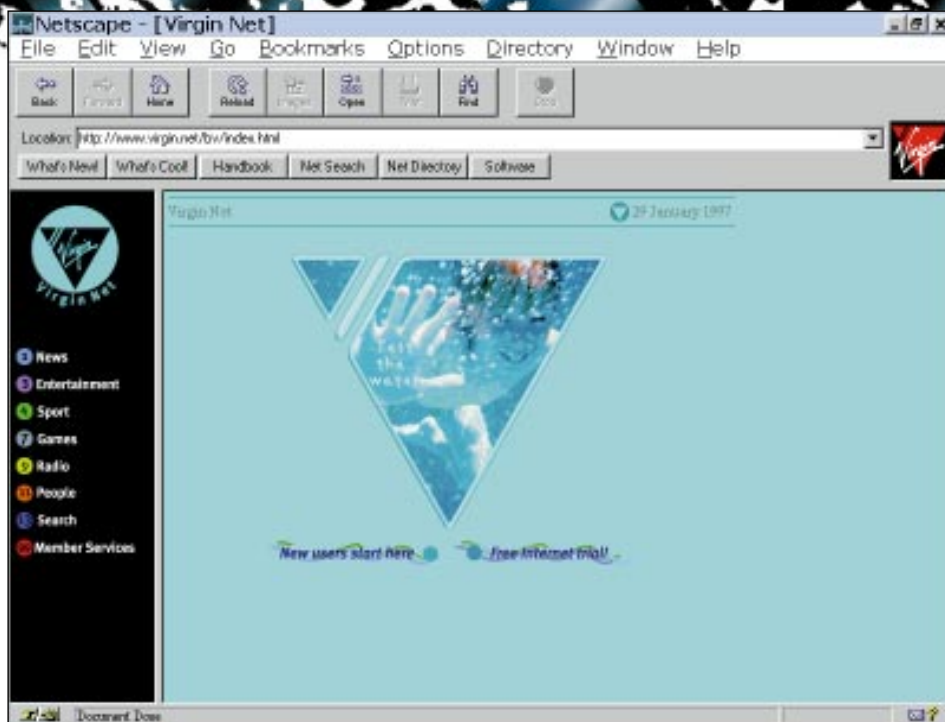


With the increasing popularity of the Internet and the World Wide Web, there are now hundreds of companies offering to get you on line. The trouble is, all Internet Service Providers (ISPs) aren't equal and the deals on offer vary in usefulness and value for money. So how do you tell which is the best?

Support for fast modems is a must for Internet access and a good ISP should support 28.8Kbits/s modems, if not 56Kbits/s. Connection should be possible through a local call no matter where you live. Also essential are one or more e-mail accounts, Usenet newsgroup access and personal Web space, and if there's any software thrown in for free, make sure it's useful. Examine the charges closely: if you plan to be on line a lot, you should go for a deal that gives you unlimited on-line time for a flat-rate monthly fee.

The ISP we feel meets all these requirements is Virgin Net, so it receives the *What PC?* best Internet Service Provider award. Launched in November 1996, Virgin Net impressed us most with its rates – only £10 a month for unlimited access. Calls are charged at local rates nationwide and 33.6Kbits/s access is supported. Virgin also plans to support US Robotics' x2. A subscription provides only a single e-mail address but this is accompanied by 10Mb of personal Web space. Virgin Net also offers 24-hour technical support.

The ISP is based around Netscape Navigator but its PPP connection means that any 32-bit browser can be used. Connecting for the first time takes new users to the Virgin Net home page. This contains information split into several



Internet Service Provider

Virgin Net

channels, covering such things as news, sport, entertainment and so on. The channels contain content unique to Virgin Net, as well as links to related sites on the Web. The Virgin Net site isn't restricted to its members, so anyone with a browser and Internet access can use it.

Virgin Net provides unrestricted access to Usenet newsgroups. This provides access to information that might not be to everyone's taste and to counter this, Virgin Net also supplies a copy of CyberSitter. Essentially, CyberSitter is an Internet censorship tool which runs in the background and blocks attempts to access sites' newsgroups which are

marked as 'restricted'. The list of sites is maintained by CyberSitter and updated lists can be downloaded over the Internet.

Competitively-priced, bags of free Web space, useful software and great service put Virgin Net at the top of the ISP pile.

- £10 a month for unlimited access
- Virgin Net: 0500 558800
- www.virgin.net

Virgin Net

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

Demon Internet

Demon is the UK's largest ISP and it's a good choice for Internet users who want to squeeze every last feature from their ISP. Installing and configuring the Demon software is a little more convoluted than most but the supplied documentation is comprehensive and excellent, as is the 24-hour technical support.

Although Demon is only an ISP, the Turnpike software acts as a jumping off point for the various components and connections can be made using both SLIP and PPP. Internet Explorer 3 is supplied as the default browser and HoTMetal Light is also bundled for Web page design. Mailboxes are unlimited, which is a perfect situation for anyone wanting to set up several e-mail accounts with a consistent address.

£11.75 a month for unlimited access
Demon Internet: 0181 371 1234
www.demon.net



AOL

AOL (as America Online likes to be known in the UK) is more than just an ISP, it's a full-blown on-line service. Like other on-line services, AOL has content available exclusively to members and much of this is UK-specific.

AOL has a straightforward-to-use proprietary interface for access. Widespread use is made of graphics but the service isn't quite the same multimedia experience as, for example, Microsoft Network. Content is grouped loosely into channels and there's content to suit most tastes. The AOL software is 16-bit and connects via SLIP. The Web browser is built-in and it can handle frames and tables. Membership costs £5.95 a month for five hours access and extra hours are £1.85; each subscription gives five accounts.

£5.95 a month for five hours access
AOL: 0800 279 1234
www.aol.com



Most innovative hardware

HPCs

While Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) like the Psion 3a are ideal for getting organised, wouldn't it be great to have the power of a PC in your pocket? A machine that could run Windows, business applications, surf the Internet and still be no smaller than a Filofax. Well, now you can.



This is the idea behind Handheld Personal Computers (HPCs), the first of which are on sale now for around £600. Designed by a committee headed by Microsoft and manufactured by various electronics giants such as Hewlett-Packard, Casio, Compaq and NEC, HPCs have the potential to revolutionise the portable computing world.

Current HPC specifications allow for a number of different processors, but all the machines have a four-greyscale screen and run Windows CE (Compact Edition) – a cut-down version of Windows 95 that looks, feels and works in exactly the same way as its older brother. They boast a minimum of 4Mb of memory, and come pre-installed with Pocket Word and Excel, a contact database and calendar. Pocket Internet Explorer is also provided as an option on CD.

US Robotics x2

Until recently, 33.6Kbits/s was thought to be the practical transmission speed limit for modems over analogue telephone lines. That was until communications expert US Robotics broke through the barrier with a new technology known as x2.



US Robotics x2 technology allows users to download data at speeds of up to 56Kbits/s over standard telephone lines when dialling into an Internet Service Provider (ISP) that supports the standard. It does this by using a new custom data transmission technique, and by exploiting the fact that most ISPs have a direct digital link to the telephone network that allows them to send data down the line to the user's local exchange without going through the traditional digital-to-analogue conversion. Unfortunately, the x2 system doesn't speed up data moving upstream.

To date, 300 ISPs worldwide have pledged support for x2, which could well become the new standard for modem hardware. The US Robotics Sportster flash modem, which can be upgraded to x2 technology by downloading a software patch, costs £229.

Microsoft Intellimouse

When is a mouse not a mouse? When it's a Microsoft Intellimouse. Introduced towards the end of last year, the Intellimouse is one of those products that makes you wonder how you ever did without it. At first glance it looks exactly like a normal mouse, but closer inspection reveals a small grey wheel in the centre of the buttons.



When used with 'Intellimouse aware' software, such as Office 97 and Internet Explorer, this wheel allows you to quickly scroll back and forth through documents, zoom in and out of the screen (especially handy when with large spreadsheets), and scroll smoothly from left to right without all that tedious clicking on icons and menus. The wheel can also be used as a third button and assigned a function, such as double-click, with older software.

The Intellimouse is a tad more expensive than your average rodent, but once you get used to using it you'll agree it's worth that bit extra. £59.95 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000

Pentium MMX

A brand-new category for most innovative hardware has been introduced this year to recognise those products that have taken the hardware market into new, uncharted areas or which have taken a leading role in an existing market.

The clear winner is Intel with Pentium MMX (multimedia extensions). Introduced six months ago, this new version of the world's most popular processor has been quickly adopted by manufacturers to become the entry-level standard for new PCs.

The MMX processor combines an optimised and refined version of the existing Pentium architecture with 57 new 'instructions', designed to enhance the performance of multimedia applications. When used by software especially written for this new chip these extra commands can greatly improve the playback of video, making full-screen video at almost VHS quality a reality, speed up the generation and manipulation of 3D graphics, and enhance audio output. Compared to a standard Pentium of the same speed, an MMX processor can improve multimedia performance by up to 60 percent.

Intel has also reduced the chip's power consumption, improved the way in which instructions are processed, and doubled the size of the on-board cache to 32Kb, which speeds up almost everything a PC does. In fact, in many cases a 166MHz Pentium MMX is faster than a 200MHz standard Pentium.

MMX processors are available at 166MHz and 200MHz for PCs, and 150MHz for notebooks. Intel says MMX capabilities will be in all its future microprocessors.

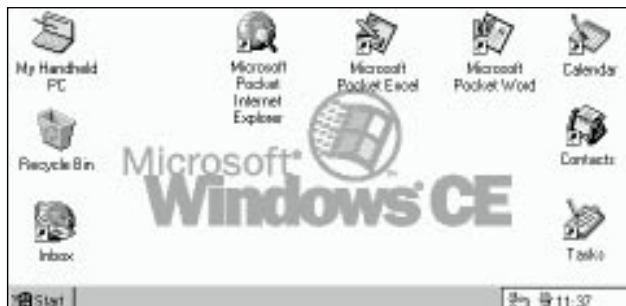
Intel has also designed a series of new OverDrive processors, which can be plugged into older Pentium systems providing an easy upgrade. The 166MHz OverDrive provides at least a 30 percent speed improvement when plugged into a Pentium 100, and Intel claims a 100 percent gain using MMX-enabled software.

The only problem with Pentium MMX at the moment is that, as is the case with many new technologies, there are few titles that take advantage of it. But the list is growing and by this time next year it is likely that you will need this new processor to get the most out of the latest versions of your favourite applications.

Definitely a must for your next PC, Pentium MMX is a clear winner for 1997.

○ Intel: 01793 431155
www.Intel.com

Most innovative software



Windows CE

Software developers are always striving to come up with new ideas and better ways of doing things, so it's no surprise that there are still plenty of innovations within the software industry. Unfortunately, though, these same developers often forget they are working on extremely high-powered workstations and as a result they don't necessarily write their code in the most efficient or compact manner. However, when it comes to writing operating systems and programs for palmtop computers reality bites, and they are forced to make as best use they can of the available resources.

Compared to modern desktop PCs, palmtop computers like Psion's hugely successful Series 3a have snail-pace processors and very limited amounts of memory. For this reason, the interfaces have tended to be simple menu-driven affairs with little or no graphical sprucing. But now all that's set to change as Microsoft this year launched Windows CE, a 'Compact Edition' of its ubiquitous Windows 95 desktop PC operating system.

In fact, Windows CE is somewhat more than an operating system because it also has a number of applications built into it. These include cut-down versions of Microsoft's PC-based word-processor and spreadsheet programs, Word and Excel (the Windows CE versions are prefixed with 'Pocket'), and an Internet browser, Pocket Internet Explorer, is also supplied as an installable option. Completing the line-up is a Schedule+ 7.0-compatible agenda program called Calendar, and a contacts database. Task lists can also be created and tracked.

Windows CE runs on a new type of palmtop computer known as the Handheld Personal Computer, or HPC for short. These typically have memories of 4Mb or more, as well as touch-sensitive screens that are used in conjunction with pen-like styluses. Big-name manufacturers like Compaq and NEC already have HPCs on sale in the US, and the first HPC to hit the UK, manufactured by Hewlett-Packard, is reviewed on page 21.

Although Windows CE itself has little that comes across as original or truly innovative, the fact that it gives you the ability to use the Windows operating system in the palm of your hand makes it worthy of this year's award for most innovative software product.

○ Microsoft: 0345 002000

Yamaha SYG20 Synthesiser

Sound cards have been around almost as long as PCs themselves, but only recently has wavetable sound synthesis become the norm. That means that there are many hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of sound card owners out there who cannot appreciate the delights that wavetable synthesis has to offer. Well, at least they couldn't until Yamaha came up with its software-only SYG20 wavetable synthesiser.

Wavetable synthesis is essentially a system that enhances the playback of MIDI files on your PC by providing the sound card with a large resource of real instrument samples.

Doing wavetable synthesis in software does require a fairly powerful PC (a Pentium 133MHz with 16Mb of memory is recommended), but the advantage is that you needn't go to the trouble and expense of upgrading your sound card to benefit.

SYG20 will work with either Windows 95 or Windows 3.1 and a trial version can be downloaded free of charge from Yamaha's UK Web site. www.yamaha.co.uk/html/midplug/m_mid6.htm

Microsoft DirectX 3.0

The problem with some software is that on top of being intangible, once installed it is also completely invisible. However, that doesn't mean it isn't doing anything useful. A prime case in point is Microsoft's DirectX 3.0. This suite of Windows 95 drivers soups up all the most important areas of games playing, such as 3D graphics, sounds and the way Windows 95 handles inputs from control devices like joysticks.

DirectX 3.0 imposes a standard for games and card producers. The support base has grown since its launch last September and most graphics card makers are producing DirectX 3.0-compatible cards, and there are now DirectX 3.0 games aplenty.

DirectX 3.0 comprises Direct3D (to speed up texture mapping and other 3D-related graphics processes), DirectSound (for sound cards), DirectDraw (for vector graphics), DirectVideo (for AVI files and other moving pictures), and the DirectPlay and DirectInput team (to support sound, drawing, video, networked gameplay, and joystick standards).
Microsoft: 0345 002000

RealPlayer

The Internet is a hotbed of innovation, and barely a week passes without something impressive being launched. However, of the many products we could have chosen, Progressive Networks' RealPlayer probably has the broadest appeal.

Internet browsers like Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Netscape's Navigator have long been able to play sound effects and video clips, but RealPlayer brings the two together and allows them to be streamed (played live) over the Internet.

At the moment, unless you have a high-speed Internet connection, the quality of RealPlayer's video clips is poor, but audio can be received in stereo and at near CD quality to anyone with a 28.8Kbits/s modem. This makes it great for use as an Internet-based radio receiver, and several major radio stations broadcast their services live 24 hours a day.

The basic version of RealPlayer is available free from Progressive Networks' Web site, and a more advanced version, RealPlayer Plus, can be bought for \$64.99 with shipping charges.
www.real.com

