in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: a 3D graphics card, a handy program to map your hard disk, a biographical reference work on CD-ROM, the latest product to download Web pages, and software to detect and block pornographic images on your PC

Apocalypse 3Dx

Quite fittingly, the 3D graphics card market advances very quickly. Games players have an insatiable appetite for the fastest 3D games and the cards needed to run them, and naturally the card manufacturers are only too happy to pump out ever-faster models. The latest one is VideoLogic's 3Dx, based on NEC's new PCX2 graphics-processing chip.

Like most expansion cards these days, the 3Dx is a doddle to install. It slots into a PCI expansion slot and, when you switch on your PC, Windows 95 detects its presence and requests the drivers disc. However, unlike some 3D graphics cards, the 3Dx does not replace your existing graphics hardware – it complements it.

The games bundle is impressive for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the titles themselves (Pod, Resident Evil, WipeOut XL and Ultimate Race) are both recent and desirable. Secondly and more to the point, they run superbly. For example, car-racing game Ultimate Race – which was written to take advantage of some of the 3Dx's advanced features – runs with all the smoothness and clarity of an arcade machine.

The performance of games bundled with this card is testament to the 3Dx's potential. If it receives the support it deserves from the games industry then its future should be very bright indeed.

- 3Dx: £186.83; upgrade from Apocalypse 3D: £69.33; upgrade from Righteous 3D/Monster 3D: £92.83 (all prices inc VAT)
- Videologic: 01923 260511

Apocalypse 3Dx	
Performance	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

First Hand Disk Mapper

No matter how capacious your hard disk, the simple fact is that sooner or later you will fill it up. When you reach this stage you'll have to start deleting things to make room for new applications. There is no shortage of programs around to help you do this – all of which are much of a muchness – but First Hand is so sure of Disk Mapper's uniqueness that it's applied for a patent.

Disk Mapper comes on a single floppy disk and installs in a matter of seconds. As soon as that's done it sets about 'mapping' your hard disk, before turning the results into a psychedelic display of nested rectangles.

Each colour-coded rectangle represents either a folder or file on your hard disk and the package allows you to zoom in or out of them by simply double-clicking. A status bar at the bottom of the screen gives details of file attributes such as creation date, size and file time.

Disk Mapper is an unusual program but one that could certainly come in handy. Our only real gripe about it is that the screen can at times look very messy.

- £39.95 (inc VAT)
- First Hand: 01672 562087

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

Chambers Biographies on CD-ROM

Combining biographical entries from eight different reference titles, Chambers Biographies is a brave attempt to ensure that details of the life of almost anyone you can think of are handy on your desktop.

Like the other reference titles from Liris Interactive, Chambers Biographies has no multimedia content. Given that the interface is fast and easy to use, this isn't necessarily a bad thing – although pictures of some of the subjects would have been nice.

Despite a claimed 24,000 entries, the disc is by no means comprehensive – it includes Paul but not Bamber Gascoigne, for instance, and there are other surprising omissions. Some of the content seems to have been transferred from outdated editions of the reference books without being checked: according to Neil Kinnock's entry, he is still leader of the Labour Party.

Despite these inaccuracies, searching for an entry is easy. Queries can be combined using standard Boolean (logical) operators, and results are returned speedily. You can also search entries from, or copy to, certain word processors, although the link doesn't work with the latest version of Microsoft Word.

Chambers Biographies is well presented, and covers a wider range of nationalities and times than Who's Who on CD-ROM. For the price though, we'd have expected more entries and more precise fact checking.

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

Chambers Biographies	
Features	★★★☆☆
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★☆☆☆
Overall	★★★☆☆

MemoWeb

Whether you're keeping an eye on the phone bill or just fed up with long pauses when you're browsing the Internet, you'll appreciate the benefit of being able to download a Web site and view the pages from your hard disk.

The number of programs able to perform this task for you is growing, and one of the most recent is MemoWeb. This lets you specify a starting page, say to what depths of link you want to download, and to copy the relevant files onto your hard disk.

You set up your choices by filling in forms, which are rather confusing to deal with – it's not entirely clear how much needs filling in before you start and how much can be left to take care of itself. There is a manual to consult, but as it has been poorly translated from French, it is not always helpful. The manual also concentrates too much on technical detail and not enough on general information.

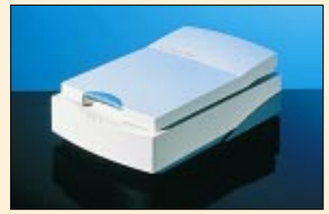
However, MemoWeb does the job it says it will, and it is very satisfying to be able to browse what is normally a slow-moving Web site at a respectable speed.

Once you've got the hang of the finer details, this is a good and efficient program for Web captures.

- £29.99 (inc VAT)
- Goto: 00 333 2066 5500 www.goto.fr

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

Linotype-Hell Jade flatbed scanner



Linotype is famous for its range of professional printing and imaging tools. The Jade is the company's first scanner to be – just – within reach of anyone except a graphics professional. At 600x1,200 dots per inch (dpi), its optical resolution is good, and this can be interpolated right up to 3,600x3,600dpi. Moreover, it comes with a SCSI-II interface card, so won't tie up your parallel port.

The Jade has a desktop presence to match its £880 price tag: it's bulky but has a stylishly curved front with a green handle and a discreet Jade logo. The scanner itself feels very solid; while the optional transparency adaptor is a touch flimsier, it is very easy to fit and secure when in place.

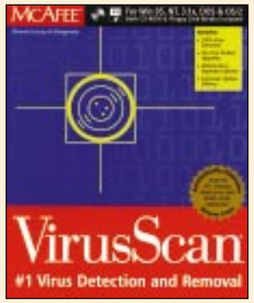
The accompanying software is a reasonable bundle: the Jade comes with Micrografx Picture Publisher for image editing, while OCR (optical character recognition) is provided by Xerox TextBridge Classic.

There are cheaper, better specified scanners available, but few of them can match the Jade's solidity, and none are backed by Linotype's reputation. If you can afford it, it will make an excellent workhorse.

- Scanner: £880.08; Transparency adaptor: £468.83 (both prices inc VAT)
- Linotype-Hell: 01242 222 333

Jade flatbed scanner	
Build quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★☆☆
Overall	★★★★☆

McAfee VirusScan 3.0



Starting out life as a humble, shareware DOS package, McAfee's VirusScan has gone from strength to strength, to be one of the most popular anti-virus programs around today. This new version incorporates a number of significant improvements, which promise much-improved performance.

One of the most notable new features in VirusScan 3.0 is the Hunter scan engine, which combines several types of virus analysis technologies. Thus it can offer protection against all sorts of viruses, including Word and Excel macros, boot-sector infections, file, stealth and many others. The Hunter engine also picks up viruses written in Visual Basic 5.0 and the Office 97 file format – two of the newest threats.

One of the chief problems of anti-virus software is that it so quickly becomes outdated – new viruses are always emerging. To deal with this, VirusScan now features SecureCast, which automatically delivers software updates to users over the Internet. These electronic upgrades are free to retail customers for one year, or for two years with VirusScan Deluxe.

With even more features, the same ease of use, and a year of upgrades, VirusScan 3.0 is well worth considering.

- £41 (inc VAT)
- McAfee: 01344 304730

McAfee VirusScan 3.0	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

Pace Microlin NB 33.6 Voice

PMC (Pace) has been making modems for almost as long as modems have been around and its latest model, the Microlin NB 33.6 Voice, has just arrived in the UK.

The NB 33.6 Voice is a PC Card modem, so it's a product that will only really be of interest to owners of notebook PCs. Attaching the NB 33.6 Voice is as simple as slotting it into a free PC Card slot, but actually getting it up and running is nowhere near as straightforward as it should be.

As you would expect, Windows 95 detects the modem as soon as you plug it in, but the supplied driver disks do not contain the required information files. These have to first be decompressed and copied over using an unfriendly DOS-based program – quite ridiculous in this day and age.

However, once this has been done, the Microlin NB 33.6 Voice modem operates without any problems at all and during our tests, it performed exactly as we would expect a 33.6Kbits/s modem to do.

As a PC Card modem the Microlin NB 33.6 Voice cannot be criticised – it works, and it works well. However, the installation process is confusing and the documentation poor.

- £199 (inc VAT)
- PMC Consumer Electronics: 0990 561001

Pace Microlin NB 33.6 Voice	
Features	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★☆☆
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

Partition-It

Believe it or not, the larger your hard disk, the less efficient it is at storing your data. The reason for this is quite technical, but essentially it comes down to the way the operating system (Windows) uses the available space – the bigger the disk, the bigger the 'chunk' of space each file occupies.

The solution is to split the hard disk into two or more partitions, or 'virtual' disks. Virtual disks act in exactly the same way as 'normal' hard disks but, because they're smaller, they're more efficient. And this is exactly what Partition-It is designed to help you do. In a nutshell, it allows you to create multiple partitions with the minimum of fuss and just a little technical know-how.

Unlike Microsoft's archaic FDISK partitioning utility, Partition-It puts a clean, graphical front end to the process, as well as letting you create and delete partitions without formatting your hard disk each time.

The amount of space you'll actually save by using partitions will depend on lots of factors but, as an example, installing Microsoft Office onto a small partition of its own can save around 20Mb on a 1Gb hard disk.

Partition-It is simple to use, and it makes the partitioning process very straightforward, but that doesn't mean we'd recommend it to novices.

Partition-It

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

○ £39.95 (inc VAT)
○ Quarterdeck: 0645 123521

Microtrope ImageCensor

Software that can block access to Web sites containing pornographic images has been around for a while but it's not much use if the material is already on a PC.

ImageCensor is an application that attempts to solve the problem. Rather than censor the source of pornographic imagery, it detects its presence on the PC's screen. This means it can detect images not only downloaded from the Internet but also those received as e-mail attachments and on disks.

ImageCensor runs in the background as soon as Windows loads and periodically checks any images on the screen. When a suspect image is spotted, the time and date (and the user, if the PC is on a network) is stored in a log file. A password-protected administration program is used to configure ImageCensor and view the log. An alarm can be sounded when images are detected and the offending screen optionally captured.

Microtrope is keeping ImageCensor's technology to itself, but it comes as no surprise to find out that its detection is based on colour. This means that black-and-white images are ignored but the program is otherwise impressively accurate in its detection.

ImageCensor's methodology sounds shaky but it actually works. If you're worried about what your PC is used for, this is a simple and effective way to achieve peace of mind.

Microtrope ImageCensor

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

○ £29.95 (inc VAT)
○ Microtrope: 01295 252002

Oki Okifax 740mf

Multifunction devices may be getting smaller but they're not getting better-looking. The Okifax 740mf is a case in point. Yes, it combines a colour inkjet printer, fax machine and photocopier into a single compact case but its dull styling and dirty grey colour make it a rather unappealing addition to a desktop.

Sadly, the Okifax's uninspiring looks mirror its performance. Mono text printing, even at 600dpi (dots per inch), lacks the sharp edge found on other dedicated printers and although the 300dpi colour graphics look smooth enough, they're still nothing special.

It's much the same story with the fax side of things. The 9.6Kbits/s transmission speed isn't the fastest around but at least there's a comprehensive selection of other fax features. The Okifax is a single cartridge printer, which means if you've got the colour cartridge fitted a fax can be received but not printed. In a busy office, this leads to plenty of cartridge swapping – hardly in keeping with the convenience aspect of a multifunction device.

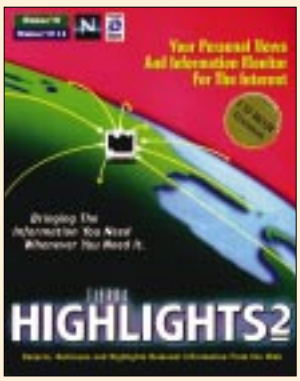
The Okifax 740mf isn't exactly cheap, nor is it bristling with features. It does the job reasonably well but there are cheaper models that do it better.

Oki Okifax 740mf

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

○ £938.83 (inc VAT)
○ Oki: 01753 819819

Tierra Highlights2



If you have an Internet connection, you may well be a keen Web surfer. In fact, you may rely on information from the Web to help you pursue an interest or hobby, or even to manage a business. While this can be a great resource, it nevertheless comes with frustrations – maybe you are waiting for a particular new item to be posted, or perhaps you simply don't have the time (or money) to check Web sites regularly.

Galloping to the rescue is Highlights2 from Tierra, a program that keeps an eye on your favourite Web sites and lets you know when they've changed. When you start up Highlights2, a control bar appears down one side of the screen. This has a ready-made list of 'Assistants' that will watch over Web changes for you. It is very easy to add new Assistants, though. All you have to do is click on the Add button, type in a Web site's address and give it a name. By default, monitoring of Web sites will take place hourly and icons on the screen will indicate when there are changes to look at – the appropriate pages will have been downloaded for you.

If you need to keep a close eye on what's happening on the Web, this could be just the program to help you out.

Tierra Highlights2

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

○ £39.99 (inc VAT)
○ Cross Atlantic: 0171 228 7036