

# Watchdog



**W**elcome to Watchdog, designed specifically to protect your interests as a consumer. Every month we'll be looking at important issues and developments in the computer industry that concern you as a PC owner or buyer, as well as tackling companies directly with specific grievances.

## Cyrix chips alert

If you've got a PC with a Cyrix processor, you could have software problems.

The problems prevent some programs from running, and affect Cyrix's 6x86 chips. They centre mainly on games, but business software is not immune, and while the number of troubled products is small, it includes high-profile Windows 95 titles.

In its defence Cyrix claims that the 6x86 range has been certified as Windows 95 compatible, and the company has been licensed to use Microsoft's Designed for Windows 95 logo. However, we've also discovered that some DOS games do not run. Graham Jackson from Cyrix took pains to point out



that 'patches' (fixes) for most of the affected programs are readily available for download from the Internet.

Unfortunately, not everybody has access to the Internet. Besides, why should you have to go to the trouble and expense of hunting down patches for programs? When you spend upwards of £1,000 on a PC, you expect it run software that other PCs can without problems.

Watchdog's advice to anyone who owns, or is thinking of buying a Cyrix-based PC, is to check that each piece of software you intend to buy will work with the machine. And, if you haven't already got one, buy a modem to download the patches you may need.

## Compaq takes note

Compaq has moved into damage-limitation overdrive following a Gartner Group report giving the 4100 notebook series a 'do not buy' rating, because of hard drive reliability issues.

We contacted Compaq's director of customer services, Paul Gardener, for his comments: 'We're very disappointed... we believe it is only telling part of the story,' he told us. Since the problems first arose, he added, Compaq has released software patches to rectify them. All new 4100 models are free from the problems and 'customers can buy with absolute confidence'.

What if you've lost data as a result of a faulty hard disk - will Compaq compen-

sate you? 'We'll explore routes for data recovery,' began Gardener, 'but making back-ups is the responsibility of the user. In common with other manufacturers, Compaq does not cover consequential losses [for lost data].'

Given Compaq's swift response to the problems, we feel that Gartner's 'do not buy' rating for the 4100s is over-cautious. However, if you're about to buy one, get an assurance from the supplier, in writing, that the machine is not from the affected batch. If you already own a 4100, take back-ups of important documents and files, then call Compaq (0990 134456) to check if your machine may have problems.

## CASE FILE



**D**iane Lewis from Bury St Edmunds bought a Mesh Ultima 133 PC shortly before Christmas. After a few months of trouble-free computing the machine developed a fault and, following discussions with Mesh's technical support line, a decision was made to return the machine for repair.

As instructed, Diane waited for a 'returns label' to arrive from Mesh. When it did so, she duly attached it to the box of the repackaged system unit. The hefty parcel was dropped off at the local Post Office, and this is when Diane's real problems began.

She called Mesh to check that her system had arrived safely. However, to her surprise, she was informed that Mesh had not received the parcel, and besides, the company provides a courier service to collect and return its faulty equipment. Diane's parcel had been 'lost' in the post.

Watchdog approached both Mesh and the Post Office about Diane's case. The Post Office's response was terse: the package was sent without proper insurance and its offer of £20 compensation was both fair and final. Of course, Diane should have arranged for adequate cover, but even so it is worrying that so large a box can simply 'disappear' without trace.

Mesh was more sympathetic. After discussing the case at length, accepting that its returns procedure was not made clear, Mesh has generously agreed to loan Diane a PC until her dispute with the Post Office is settled.

**Next month... has Dixons sold you a second-hand machine?**

**Do you have a case for us to solve? Write to: Watchdog, at the normal What PC? editorial address, or e-mail us on: [whatpc@vnu.co.uk](mailto:whatpc@vnu.co.uk).**

The computer industry is one of the fastest moving in the world and so it's no surprise that prices and specifications change every month. Price Watch is a regular new section that will be keeping a close eye on these changes, and highlighting the best and worst of what's on offer in the PC marketplace.

At the moment the industry is undergoing something of an overhaul. After years of being loyal to Intel, major PC manufacturers such as Compaq and IBM have had a change of heart and are now offering machines with non-Intel processors. This will eventually force prices down as the competition between the chip manufacturers increases but Intel's rivals have got a long way to go before they can secure the buying public's confidence, as this month's Watchdog reveals (see previous page).

Cyrix and Intel are still actively promoting 133MHz processors as the entry level (Cyrix with the Media GX and Intel with its new low-end MMX chip) but just how much longer this will remain the case is difficult to judge. It's worth noting that Time and MJN (both subsidiaries of Granville Technology) have abandoned 133MHz processors for their low-end systems, choosing instead 150MHz

Pick of the month

As a general rule of thumb, if you're looking for a reasonable PC but haven't got a lot to spend then it's best to avoid the big-name brands. Full marks to Compaq, though, for trying to alter that with its Presario 2110.

The machine isn't bristling with features but it has pretty much everything you need, and at £799 you'd be hard pushed to find a better buy in the high street.



High-street																		
Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk		CD-ROM	Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Telephone	
Compaq																		
Presario 2110	£799	Cyrix Media GX	133MHz	16Mb	2Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	14in	28.8	○	1 yr (os)	● + 8 titles	0990 134456	
Presario 3060	£2,599	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	24Mb	3.8Gb		6x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	12.1in	33.6	Compaq cordless mouse	1 yr (os)	● + 11 titles	0990 134456	
Hewlett-Packard																		
Pavilion 5320	£1,299	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	2.1Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	○	14in	28.8	Telephone answering system/speakerphone	1 yr	● + 30 titles	0990 474747	
Pavilion 7340P	£1,909	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	14in	33.6	Multimedia keyboard, Photodrive scanner	1 yr	● + 30 titles	0990 474747	
Pavilion 7370V	£2,539	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.8Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	Sub-woofer, spatialiser, gamepad	1 yr	● + 30 titles	0990 474747	
IBM																		
Aptiva 440	£999	Intel Pentium	133MHz	12Mb	1.2Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	○	15in	28.8	○	1 year (cci)	● ● + 23 titles	0990 727272	
Aptiva E54	£1,999	IBM PR166	166MHz	16Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (cci)	● + 18 titles	0990 727272	
Aptiva S585	£2,200	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.1Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	17in	33.6	Joystick, 3D sound, sub-woofer	1 yr (cci)	● ● + 39 titles	0990 727272	
Packard Bell																		
Executive 900SD	£1,199	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	1.2Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	○	15in	33.6	Media Select	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200	
Executive 9019XE	£1,799	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	●	15in	33.6	Media Select	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200	
Executive 9021XE	£2,299	Intel Pentium	200MHz	32Mb	4.2Gb		8x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	●	15in	33.6	Media Select	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200	

Direct from manufacturer																		
Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk		CD-ROM	Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Number	
Dan Technology																		
Dantum	£1,040	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	2Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	○	15in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	●●● Quicken, Encarta 97	0181 830 1100	
Home Plus	£1,414	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb		16x	AWE 32	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	●● + 9 titles + MMX bundle	0181 830 1100	
Xplora Plus	£1,580	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	2Gb		16x	AWE 32	●	2Mb	○	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	●●● Quicken	0181 830 1100	
Evesham Micros																		
Vale Prima P133	£821.33	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	1.2Gb		○	○	○	1Mb	○	14in	○	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500	
Prestige Multimedia 166	£1,232.58	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2.1Gb		12x	SB 16	●	2Mb	●	15in	○	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500	
Platinum SE K6PR200	£1,972.83	AMD K6	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb		24x	SB 32	●	4Mb	●	17in	33.6	○	2 yrs (os)	●	01386 765500	
Mesh																		
Elite Professional	£821.33	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	1.7Gb		16x	○	○	2Mb	○	14in	○	512Kb cache	1 yr (rtb)	●●●	0181 452 1111	
Elite Ultima Plus	£1,467.58	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb		16x	AWE 64	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	TV Tuner, 512Kb cache	1 yr (rtb)	●●● + 11 titles	0181 452 1111	
Elite Fireblade	£1,526.33	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb		16x	AWE 64	●	4Mb	●	15in	33.6	512Kb cache	1 yr (rtb)	●●●	0181 452 1111	
MJN																		
150B	£1,051.63	Intel Pentium	150MHz	16Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16	○	n/s	n/s	15in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	●● + Office 97	01282 777555	
166M	£1,232.58	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16	●	n/s	n/s	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	●●● + 12 titles	01282 777555	
200MB	£1,439.38	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16	○	n/s	n/s	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	●● + Office 97	01282 777555	
Time																		
PowerStation 166+ D	£1,099.80	IBM/Cyrix	166+	32Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	15in	33.6	Joystick, instruction video	1 yr (rtb)	●●●, + 15 titles	01282 777111	
PowerStation 166MCI	£1,172.65	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	14in	33.6	Instruction video	1 yr (rtb)	●●● + 5 titles	01282 777111	
WinStation 200M MT E2	£1,508.83	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	2.1Gb		16x	SB 16 (compat)	●	n/s	n/s	15in	33.6	Joystick, instruction video, microphone	1 yr (rtb)	●●● + 23 titles	01282 777111	
Viglen																		
Home 133	£971.37	Intel Pentium	133MHz	16Mb	1.2Gb		12x	SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (c&r)	●●	0990 944944	
Performance 166M Plus	£1,431.37	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	2Gb		12x	SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (c&r)	●●● + 5 MMX titles	0990 944944	
Awesome 233M	£2,499	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	5Gb		24x	SB 16 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	17in	33.6	LS-120 120Mb floppy drive, Photo scanner drive, Microsoft Intellimouse	1 yr (c&r)	●●● + 5 MMX titles + ATI games	0990 944944	

and 166MHz versions respectively. This can only add to the pressure for the basic specifications to rise, but so long as prices don't go the same way this is no bad thing.

At the other end of the market, all but one of the manufacturers are fitting Intel

Pentium processors to their high-end PCs. Evesham has bucked the trend by opting for AMD's new K6 200MHz MMX processor. This is a lower-priced version of the Pentium 200MHz MMX but, although the £1,972 price tag on Evesham's Platinum SE K6PR200 isn't exces-

● = Yes ○ = No ● = Windows 95 ● = Lotus SmartSuite 97 ● = Microsoft Works ● = Serif Pageplus ● = Selection of Microsoft titles  
(os) = On-site (cci) = Customer carry-in (rtb) = Return to base (c&r) = Collect and return (n/s) = Not specified

sive, it could hardly be described as a bargain either. A better high-end buy this month would be the Elite Fireblade from Mesh. It only has a 15in monitor (Evesham's offering comes with a 17in one) and a 16- rather than 24-speed CD-ROM drive, but you'll save over £450.

Finally, if you're after a really feature-packed system and money is not a concern then cast your eyes over Viglen's aptly-named Awesome 233M. It costs a whopping £2,499 but it's money well spent. It has a 233MHz MMX processor at its heart and this is supported by 32Mb of

RAM, a huge 5Gb hard disk and a 24-speed CD-ROM drive. On top of this you also get a Compaq-designed LS120 floppy drive, which can store 120Mb of data on 3 1/2in-sized disks, and the so-called PhotoDrive (photograph scanner) is built in to the case. ●