Close-up this month are two PCs that use AMD's latest processor, yet another Windows CE palmtop, a large, purple, cuddly toy from Microsoft and Samsung's first laser printer

Close-up

Impact Systems AMD P2-300 & Mesh Elite K6-2 300

Two PCs which use the latest AMD K6-2 processor – a Pentium II rival with built-in 3D instructions to speed up graphics

If you view the 'Intel Inside' sticker on Pentium II PCs more as a warning label than a proud declamation, you're probably already familiar with AMD. AMD has been manufacturing its own processors for some time now and while it may not have anywhere near the same share of the market as Intel, that doesn't mean it isn't competing in technological terms.

AMD's latest processor, the K6-2, proves this rather well. It's based on the well-established K6 line, so fits neatly into the Socket 7 motherboards used by all current Pentium and other non-Intel processors. However, not only does it boast general performance improvements, it's also the first processor to have dedicated 3D graphics functions built-in. The K6-2 is intended to complement rather than replace 3D graphics cards but it should certainly speed up the graphics in business applications and games. No matter how good your

Impact Systems AMD P2-300					
Build quality	★	★	★	☆	☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

3D graphics card, some graphics functions have to be performed by the CPU and, as PC processors are designed to be good overall performers rather than graphics wonders, this can cause a bottleneck.

The design of the K6-2 is intended to solve this problem by incorporating technology AMD has called 3D-Now. The most important part of this enables the chip to execute up to four graphics commands every clock tick, so a 300MHz processor can potentially achieve 1,200 million graphics commands a second.

The Pentium II can only process one graphics command each clock tick but this doesn't give the K6-2 quite the huge performance advantage you might expect. AMD's benchmark figures suggest that a 300MHz K6-2 machine will have a graphics performance better than that of a 400MHz Pentium II and an overall performance at least on a par with a 300MHz version.

Some of this graphics speed comes from DirectX 6 – the latest version of Microsoft's multimedia Windows add-on that's been developed to take advantage of 3D-Now technology. Some of the K6-2's enhancements can only be accessed using DirectX 6, which means you won't see the full benefit of the processor unless your games actually make use of

DirectX 6 (something that should happen over the next few months).

Extra speed also comes from AMD's support for a faster 100MHz system bus, improving on the old 66MHz standard. This mirrors Intel's developments with its Pentium II 350 and 400 processors, and allows the K6-2 to communicate more rapidly with other system components. It also lets PC builders use quicker 100MHz SDRAM, which has a knock-on effect on overall system performance too.

These are the first systems we've seen that use the K6-2. The processor itself is a lot cheaper than a Pentium II – AMD has pledged to keep its prices at least 25% below Intel's – and this means more for your money.

Both PCs are good value – the Mesh slightly more so – and well-specified. They both have K6-2 processors running at 300MHz, so according to AMD, our benchmark results should have been in line with Pentium II 300 machines.

The Impact scored 283 – slightly below what might have been expected but not enough to worry about, while the Mesh turned in a generous 327. Of course, this reflects its greater RAM – 128Mb as opposed to the Impact's 64Mb – but either PC is a fast machine for the money.

The Final Reality graphics benchmark tells a slightly different story. The Mesh (fitted with a Diamond Viper AGP graphics card) scored 3.14 but the Impact's 1.87 was disappointing. The blame lies squarely with its ATi Charger card. This is out of date and will look even more so

when ATi releases its Rage 128 chipset. If you want to buy the Impact as a games machine, get a different graphics card.

Unfortunately, neither of these Final Reality scores really reflect the power of the K6-2 processor. The Final Reality test still uses DirectX 5, which doesn't take full advantage of the processor's graphics features. So until the next version of this benchmark is finalised, you can expect better performance than we report when playing up-to-date games.

As for the rest, both machines have specifications that would have been unimaginable at this price point only a few months ago.

As befits its higher price, the Mesh is also fitted with a better sound system. A Creative Labs AWE 64 is coupled to a TEAC speaker set that includes subwoofer and surround sound processor. The sound is stunning, especially for games. In fact, we could find little to criticise about the Elite at this price – it's even got a good software bundle.

The Impact machine is cheaper, explaining its lower specification compared to the Mesh. It's still good value for money though, considering its overall speed and the 17in monitor. However, it'll be slightly trickier to upgrade if you need to, as the processor and DIMM slots are difficult to get at. More worrying was the CD-ROM drive, which refused to read from some discs that we knew were good. Although we are sure this was a one-off, it should still have been picked up by Impact's quality control.

If it was our money, we'd stretch to the Mesh – with 128Mb of RAM it really zips along. The Impact is cheaper but still a fair choice apart from its graphics card. We were, of course, very happy with the new AMD processor.

John Sabine

Specifications

Mesh: AMD K6-2 300MHz processor

128Mb SDRAM

10Gb hard disk

Diamond Viper V330 4Mb AGP graphics card

17in Taxan ErgoVision 730 monitor

40-speed CD-ROM drive

AWE 64 sound card

TEAC PowerMax 1000 surround speaker system

56Kbits/s modem

Lotus SmartSuite 97, Simply Speaking, Serif PagePlus 5

£1,299 (Inc VAT)

Mesh Computers: 0181 452 1111
www.meshplc.co.uk

Mesh Elite K6-2 300					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆
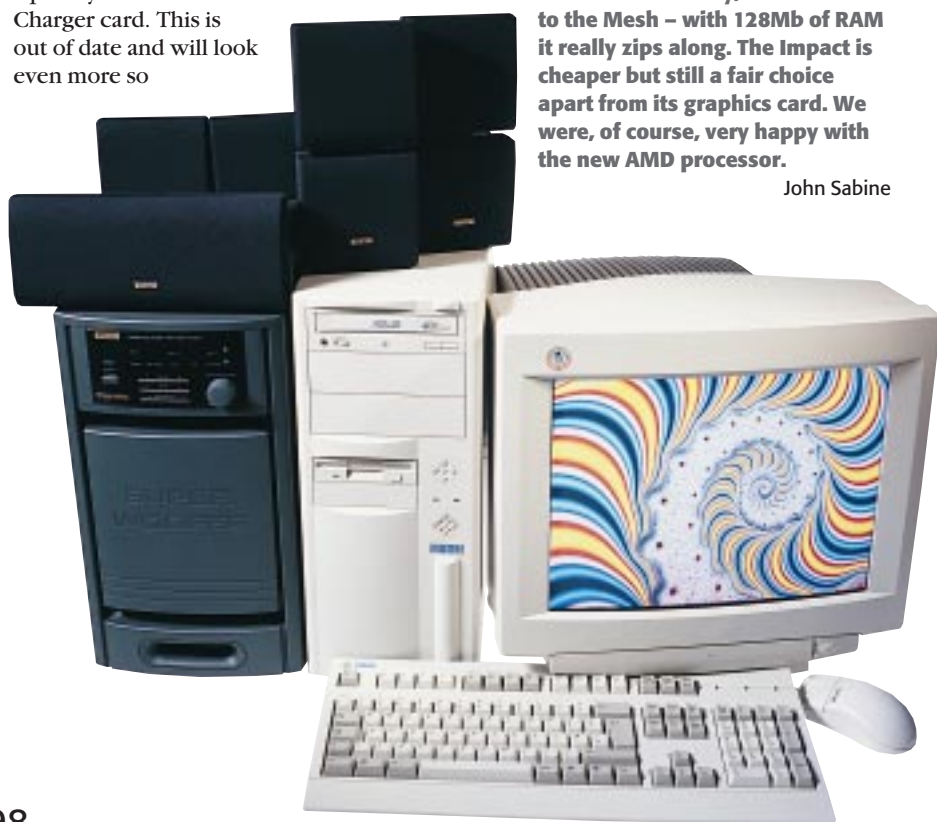
LG Electronics Phenom

Thanks to Windows CE, choosing a palmtop computer is now a much simpler business. They all have the same pocket Windows applications and the only thing that sets one CE palmtop apart from another is the hardware itself.

LG Electronics' Phenom certainly stands apart from other CE palmtops –

literally. With a footprint of 4.25in by 7.75in, it's one of the biggest and heaviest of its kind. It's sturdily built though and the grey plastic case should stand up to being knocked about in the bottom of a bag or briefcase.

This extra size has allowed LG to fit a larger-than-usual screen, measuring 7.25in from corner to corner. Though it's only mono, it is crisp and clear, and the narrow strip of application icons that run across the bottom doesn't intrude too much.

Screen aside, the other important ingredient in any palmtop is the keyboard and it's incredible that so many manufacturers just can't get this vital component right. Sadly, the Phenom doesn't buck this trend and its keyboard is dreadful. Though widely spaced, the small calculator-style keys have an awk-

wardly-shaped top surface and wobble from side to side in an unpleasant way. The toppling tendency exhibited by some palmtops is prevented by two fold-out struts but design effort would have been better expended elsewhere.

The Phenom does have its good points though – supplied rechargeable batteries and a built-in monitor socket, for example. The latter allows a monitor to be connected using the supplied cable adapter. This only works with Pocket PowerPoint but it's still handy if you need to show presentations to large groups of people and don't want to cart around a notebook computer.

Like all Windows CE palmtops so far, the Phenom is something of a mixed bag. The built-in VGA is useful, the unpleasant keyboard less so, but there are enough other features to make this a tempting prospect.   Julian Prokaza
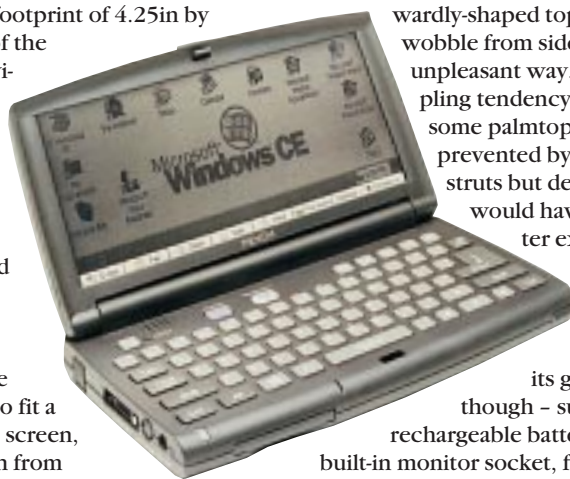
Specifications

8Mb RAM, 16Mb ROM

640 x 240 monochrome backlit, touch-sensitive screen

Serial/VGA-out port, Type II PC Card slot, Compact Flash slot

Voice memo facility

80MHz 32-bit RISC processor

£499 (inc VAT)

LG Electronics: 01753 500400

LG Electronics Phenom				
Build quality	★	★	★	★ ☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Features	★	★	★	★ ☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Overall	★	★	★	★ ★

Cybermedia First Aid 98

The concept behind PC fix-it software is an admirable one. When something goes wrong with a PC, it's often impossible to determine precisely what it is, let alone how to sort it out. A tool that could guide you through these mysteries would be a godsend but

sadly, Cybermedia's First Aid 98 isn't it.

First Aid 98 didn't get off to a good start. Once installed, the program crashed twice when the PC booted and we could only get things moving by starting Windows 95 in Safe Mode. Removing and reinstalling First Aid 98 solved the problem but this was not what we'd hoped for from a package that promised to 'Prevent PC disasters'.

The video guide explaining the program was a neat touch, though the initial system check via Check Up? was problematic. This found four potential problems with our PC, most of which related to Windows Explorer and we used Auto Fix to sort them out. Unfortunately, First Aid 98 then kept alerting us that Explorer had crashed, proving that it is unwise to blindly follow advice.

First Aid 98 offers a range of other features to get you out of sticky situations, including a Virus Checker, a disk

defragmenter and backup and restore utilities. There's also a reference guide of PC information, plus a library of How To video guides. While all of these components are useful, many of them use up valuable PC resources, so you have to wonder if this really is the best way to safeguard your computer.

First Aid 98 has its uses but needs to be handled with care and it probably isn't wise to put it in the hands of a novice who'll believe everything it tells them.

Ursula Tolaini

Specifications

Protects your PC against crashes and errors

Automatically fixes software and hardware conflicts

Solves printer setup, e-mail, multimedia and Web connection problems

£34.99 (inc VAT)

Cybermedia: 0800 973631
          www.cybermedia.com

Cybermedia First Aid 98				
Features	★	★	★	★ ☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Performance	★	★	☆	☆ ☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆ ☆
Overall	★	★	★	★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 40Mb of hard disk space.

Microsoft ActiMates Interactive Barney

An all-singing, all-dancing, furry family friend from Microsoft

It might resemble our beloved Editor after a particularly heavy night out in Soho but, in fact, this is Barney – the latest offering from Microsoft. Doesn't Microsoft make software, you ask? Well, yes, but now it's diversifying with soft-wear – or cuddly toys.

There's little doubt that Barney will be *the* toy this year, which means, come Xmas, there'll be severe stock shortages fuelling mile-long queues of fretting parents outside Toy R Us stores around the country. Still, £99.95 spent now might seem a small price to pay if the alternative is your young ones losing faith in Santa.

So what makes Barney so special? Well, he talks but then so does Buzz Lightyear. And he sings songs but you need only buy one Max Bygraves record to know that that's no great selling point. What makes Barney so very different is his ability to interact with your kids, or indeed yourself, as you 'test' him out before handing him over.

Squeeze his hands or twiddle his toes and Barney comes to life, excitedly invit-ing you to 'play a game'. Oblige, by scrunching one of his extremities, and he's off. He might choose a counting game, in which case he'll prompt and count up to 20 with you, or maybe he'll help you with your 'ABCs'. And maybe, if you're particularly unfortunate, he'll break into song – the little purple fellow is *au fait* with 17 of the most annoying and infectious tunes known to Kindergarten-kind. Just be ready to pull out his six, life-giving, AA batteries at any given stage in order to preserve your sanity.
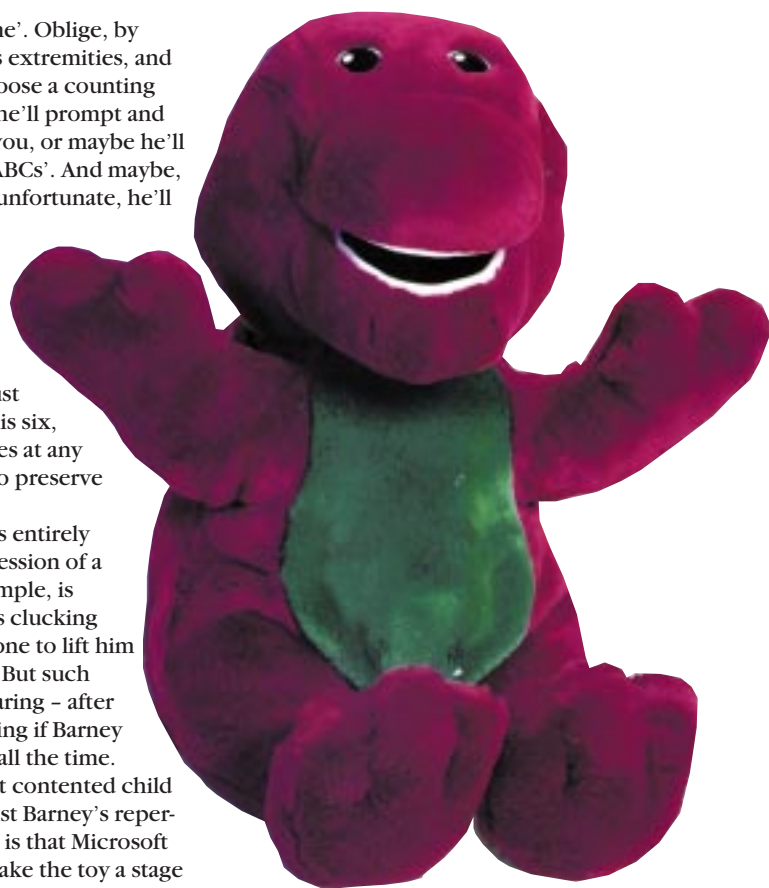
Barney isn't always entirely convincing. His impression of a cow mooing, for example, is pretty realistic but his clucking hen won't cause anyone to lift him up and look for eggs. But such imperfection is endearing – after all, it would be irritating if Barney got everything right, all the time.

Still, even the most contented child will eventually exhaust Barney's reper-toire. The good news is that Microsoft offers the chance to take the toy a stage further by purchasing either the TV or the PC Packs.

The former comes with a specially encoded video cassette, the latter with some PC software. Both, however, come with an ashtray-shaped radio transmitter.

As well as being able to chat out loud, Barney also has the ability to talk silently (and cordlessly) over radio waves. With the TV Pack, this means Barney can respond to events stored on the special video tape. You don't need any special wiring – the transmitter simply plugs into your video recorder's video-out socket – and as long as Barney is within 15 feet of the transmitter, he'll 'watch' the telly with your kids, picking up on themes from the video at appropriate times. If it sounds impressive on paper, it's even better in reality – it's almost as though he comes alive.

The PC Pack is similar in concept but offers rather more interactivity. In this instance, Barney adopts the role of a learning partner, encouraging and cor-recting your children as they work their way through the early-learning CD-ROM that's included with the pack.

One final mention must be made on the construction of Barney himself because he has obviously been thought-fully designed for the odd games chil-dren can play. The pins inside his arms are made of flexible plastic, so if the little cherub in your life decides to give him a bear-hug, they're not likely to snap under the pressure.

Once you've picked him up, Barney is difficult to put down – he's cute, cuddly and really does seem to be in possession of a personality. Expensive for a mere toy but, with the video or PC extras, he is certainly more than that. Scott Colvey

Specifications

Sings 17 songs and nursery rhymes

Waves his arms in time with the tunes

Plays 12 (mostly) educational games

Can connect to a PC or video recorder with additional equipment

£99.95 (inc VAT)
with TCV or PC Pack £149.95

Microsoft: 0345 002000
www.microsoft.com

Microsoft ActiMates Interactive Barney					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 6xAA batteries, PC required for PC Pack, video player required for TV Pack.

Mediator 4.0

Mediator 4.0 is a cut-down version of Mediator 4.0 Pro and, claims IMSI, 'brings multimedia to the masses'. IMSI may be exaggerating a little but for a multimedia authoring tool, Mediator 4.0 is unusually cheap.

The basic building block of a Mediator presentation is the page. Using tools that Mediator provides, you place backgrounds, text, images, videos, sound files and buttons on the pages. You then issue instructions that control what these objects do. As you'd expect, the appearance of objects can be edited and text and images can be animated too. The provision of a 'timeline' feature for each object means that you can also program activities to take place one after the other following a predetermined sequence.

When animating text, graphics and even transparent videos, direction, path and speed are set using a few mouse clicks. Buttons can be set to perform activities or to navigate the user through and around the presentation – all done with a drag and drop interface. Although the documentation is just a slim paper booklet, it includes a tutorial and a few examples to get the beginner started.

Also included is a Wizard that converts your presentation into HTML code, allowing it to be placed on a Web site and viewed there. Unfortunately the HTML version can only be viewed on a Web server, making testing and editing it an extended and expensive process. **Mediator 4.0 is ideally suited to the beginner or home user looking for a cheap, easy way to produce multimedia presentations.**

Steve Cotterell

Animated text, images, videos and sound files on the same page.

Timeline feature enables actions to be carried out in a predefined sequence.

Control buttons for selective navigation around the presentation.

Runtime version for royalty-free distribution of presentations included.

Presentations can be published on CDs, diskettes or onto Web pages.

£39.99 (inc VAT)

IMSI: 0181 581 2000
www.imsiuk.co.uk

Mediator 4.0					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 3.1, 16Mb of RAM, 14Mb of hard disk space.

Illuminatus

Although over four times the price of Mediator 4, Illuminatus is still a fraction of the price of high-end multimedia packages, where prices can run into four figures. While it does not have the full functionality of high-end programs, Illuminatus does contain many features that users, both amateur and professional, will appreciate.

It comes on four CDs which contain, besides the program, 2,000 photographic clipart images and thousands of buttons, icons, animations, and sound and music files. There's also a WAV file editor and evaluation versions of Paint Shop Pro and Videotrope. The 300-page manual is well-written and contains four tutorials to get you started.

The CD also includes example presentations and it's useful to examine them to learn the techniques they use. Additional tutorials, samples and resources should be available on Digital Workshops Web site but at the time of writing, the Web pages were empty and had not been updated since February.

Illuminatus has three levels of access, with the easier levels disabling the advanced menu features. Once you start work on your project, you'll soon set the access level to 'advanced' to take advantage of all the features.

Particularly impressive is the 'AutoNarrate' feature, which automatically highlights text in sync with WAV file narration for talking books. There are also volume control buttons that regulate the volume of any sound file being played (not working in version 4.0, but there's a free patch on the Web site that fixes them) and a facility for collecting and saving user input as variables.
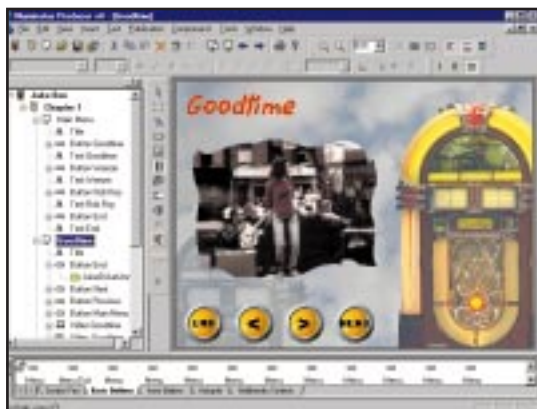
Illuminatus is loaded with features that make it useful for teachers, business people and others who need to create easy-to-use, good-looking and interactive multimedia presentations.

Steve Cotterell

Huge supply of sound, graphic and image resources.

User input can be stored as variables for future use.

Web browser component allows live Web content on a presentation page.

£175.66 (inc VAT)

Digital Workshop: 01295 258335
www.digitalworkshop.co.uk

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

Minimum requirements: Pentium 166 PC, Windows 95, 16Mb of RAM, 20Mb of hard disk space.

IBM Aptiva E80

The Aptiva E80 is a mid-range 266MHz Pentium II multimedia desktop PC with a 15in monitor and an internal modem

IBM seems to have positioned itself as a purveyor of solid, reliable PCs which, while not the fastest nor the cheapest, do carry the assurance of the blue badge on the front. Reliability and after-sales service are extremely important of course but, in a competitive market, so is price and, with current games to contend with, so is performance.

Consequently, as the first VAT-inclusive sub-£1,200 Pentium II 400s start to appear, a Pentium II 266 costing £1,499 could be at a disadvantage, at least on the price/performance front.

The machine comes in a standard-sized midi-tower case with that distinctive, rugged IBM look to it and an extremely useful carrying grip on the top. The main cooling fan was audible but not too noisy but there was an irritating rattling noise which we eventually tracked down to the secondary fan

attached to the processor module itself. We couldn't stop the noise but it's possible the fan was faulty or misaligned because of a knock during transit.

The system was supplied with a two-button Logitech mouse which is a reasonable substitute for the ubiquitous Microsoft model in terms of usability and quality. The keyboard was solidly constructed, which is getting to be unusual in itself these days but some users may not like the rattle of the keys during typing.

Audio is provided by a chip mounted directly on the motherboard which has the advantage of a built-in library of sounds, as well as its internal synthesiser. This can improve the quality of some game soundtracks and makes MIDI files sound much better than a non-wavetable sound card.

The mains-powered stereo speakers were capable of making a considerable amount of noise but the quality wasn't up with the best. They would have benefited from more bass response and greater clarity, although they will be fine for general use and occasional music playback.

IBM provides one of its own monitors with the Aptiva – in this case a 15in FST model with a 13.7in image diagonal and a basic set of digital geometry controls. It's generally recommended that you use 15in monitors at 800x600 (SVGA) resolution, which is where they give the best combination of readability and clarity and the IBM certainly bore this out. The focus was very sharp overall with no perceptible flicker, thanks to support for an 85Hz refresh rate in this model.

The Aptiva's motherboard not only has built-in sound but also sports an integrated graphics controller, so there's only one card – the modem – fitted to the system. This leaves room for one more ISA card and three additional PCI cards, which should do the trick for most of us. The modem provides fax as well as data features and operates at the highest currently available speed (from standard modems) of 56Kbits/s using K56flex rather than the less widely adopted x2 go-faster technology.

There are two memory sockets free and there's room for two extra 5.25in drives in a pair of front-opening bays below the 24-speed CD-ROM drive, which again ought to see most users through the lifetime of the machine.

Performance isn't blinding, which isn't to say that this is a slow machine but it will start to feel like one much sooner than a fast Pentium II 300 will, for example.

Looking at the way the price/performance index is shifting at the moment, IBM needs to be very careful not to get left high and dry by competitors offering significantly more power for less money. **There's nothing glaringly wrong with the Aptiva but neither does it shine. It's nice to get a modem but 64Mb rather than 48Mb of RAM would have been preferable given the price, as would a faster processor.**

Dominic Bucknall

Specifications

266MHz Pentium II processor with 512Kb cache

48Mb SDRAM main memory

4Gb UltraDMA hard disk

24-speed CD-ROM drive

Integrated ATI 3D Rage Pro AGP 2X graphics (4Mb)

IBM 15in FST monitor

Integrated Crystal PnP Audio 32-bit wavetable sound

Active stereo speakers

Internal K56flex fax modem

Windows 95, IBM Lotus SmartSuite 97, IBM VoiceType Simply Speaking, CD games and edutainment collections

£1,499 (inc VAT)

IBM: 0990 727272
www.ibm.com

IBM Aptiva E80					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	☆	☆
Features	★	★	★	☆	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Paint Shop Pro 5

The latest version of shareware favourite Paint Shop Pro adds a slew of features and puts some pricier programs to shame

We've been Paint Shop Pro fans for a long time and so it's good to report that this latest release is better than ever. Paint Shop Pro 5's main claim to fame is as a versatile bitmap graphics editor – in which capacity it gives a much more expensive program, such as Adobe's Photoshop, a run for its money. It can thumbnail-browse your images, scan, capture screenshots, view images across 30 levels of zoom, and convert files to and from some 46 image formats – more, if the appropriate external import filters are installed.

You can't expect to become adept with all these features in a few hours, of course. Yet you'll find Paint Shop Pro 5 is delightfully easy to work with. This is due largely to the program's inherently friendly interface but credit also goes to its excellent documentation, both via onscreen help and the 330 page manual.

Version 5 is no minor upgrade. There are dozens of enhancements and some superb new features. It now supports: layers, multi-level undos, picture 'tubes', digital cameras support and pressure-sensitive drawing tablets.

For intermediate users, the top new feature will probably be layers. You use them rather like transparent sheets and Paint Shop Pro 5 allows up to 64 in theory but your RAM capacity will probably show the strain with more than a handful. You can paint onto layers, add text or other image selections, fill them with colour and so on. The advantage is that any areas you don't cover remain transparent, so you can see the layer underneath. Using a simple dialog box to control each layer's properties, Paint Shop Pro 5 lets you manipulate them in various ways, and each remains independent until you merge them.

Newcomers and experts alike will appreciate Paint Shop Pro 5's new multi-level undo feature. It comes with an undo history list and usage is limited only by available disk space. There's also a variety of new image enhancement features, including the deformation tool to rotate, resize, skew and distort. The enhanced crop tool lets you select a rectangle and have the image cropped around it but now you can size and move it by dragging as well. If you have artistic aspirations and want to emulate oil, watercolour or acrylics, then Paint Shop Pro 5 has lots to offer. For example, you can use the smudge and push tools to get an oily, swirly effect.

Filters (built-in, roll-your-own, and plug-ins), transformations, Bézier curves, retouch options, anti-aliasing, extensive colour adjustments – it's hard to imagine anything that Paint Shop Pro 5 can't do to a bitmap image. A great effect with lots of fun potential is the new Picture Tubes feature, which lets you insert a sequence of images as you click and drag the mouse.

Paint Shop Pro 5's image browser has also benefited from a major revamp and now has an interface which is integrated tightly with the editor and uses an interface like Windows Explorer. When you click a folder, thumbnails of the images appear in the right side of the browser window and from there you can view, edit and manage them easily. Into digital photography yet? If you have a Kodak DC40, DC50, or DC120 camera, you can use Paint Shop Pro to access and manage the files while they are still in the camera. Paint Shop Pro 5 also allows you to use a pressure-sensitive tablet with a digitising pen or other input device and you can arrange for pressure on the tip of the input device to control opacity, and for tip pressure to control colour. **Wherever you fall in the skills spectrum – graphics designer or Web author at one end, novice home PC user at the other – Paint Shop Pro 5 is a must-have package. Its price isn't trivial but better value is hard to imagine.**   Terry Pinnell

Avail Document Management Suite

Even in a paperless office, keeping track of the various bits of information that make up a working day can be a thankless task. Unless you're particularly organised, the clutter of files spread across your hard drive can soon get out of hand – a situation that Avail sets out to remedy.

Avail is an electronic document management application and it works much in the same way as a paper document manager. In other words, it has filing cabinets with drawers and folders – and plenty of them. There can be up to 60,000 cabinets, each with 32 drawers containing 60,000 folders which can all be searched with up to 32 keywords.

Getting started with Avail is a process of trial and error. There is a multimedia tutorial but this entails listening to a dull document management enthusiast talk you through the package at half speed. There is a written Getting Started guide and online help though, so it doesn't
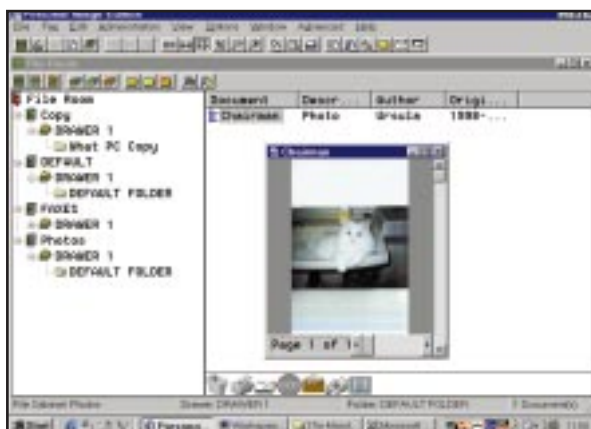
take too long to work out how the software works.

To place a file into Avail, you have to import it via the Acquire New Documents window and this can be done a document at a time or in batches. Once imported, documents can viewed, edited and OCRed, or sent out via e-mail or fax. Clicking on any document will also launch its associated application.

Avail is integrated with Xerox's Textbridge Classic OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software and scanning in a document automatically launches

this package. It also comes bundled with fax software that can receive faxes while you work.

If you're prepared to put in a bit of effort getting to know it, Avail can help you turn desktop chaos into order.

Ursula Tolaini

Specifications

Integrated fax and OCR software

Manages text documents, images, Web pages, spreadsheets, video and audio clips

Allows you to send files via e-mail or across a network

£76.32 (inc VAT and P&P)

Supplier: 00 3531 202 0000
www.availcorp.com

Avail Document Management Suite				
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	☆	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, 486 PC, 8Mb of RAM, CD-ROM drive.

Iomega Zip 100 ATAPI

If you want a removable disk holding around a 100Mb, a Zip drive is the natural choice and, despite a recent marketing push by the competition, Iomega's market leadership remains unchallenged.

Iomega claims to have sold more than 14 million Zip drives since they were launched and that can only improve the odds of being able to share your data with someone else. Now, Iomega is hoping to make the drive even more popular with the launch of an internal version aimed squarely at consumers.

The Zip ATAPI comes in a colourful

box containing a Zip drive and all the cabling you need, together with a CD-ROM of utilities. Because the drive attaches to one of your IDE channels (also used by your CD-ROM and hard drives), installation is extremely easy.

The only tools you'll need are a screwdriver and the confidence to unscrew the back of your PC. A jumper must be set on the back of the drive if everything is to work properly but this is covered in the detailed instructions. There's also step-by-step video on the CD-ROM and since this is designed for Americans, they are simple enough for a child to follow.

At well under £100, the Zip ATAPI is reasonably priced and there are really only two flies in Iomega's ointment. First is the Click of Death – a mysterious problem which has affected a tiny proportion of currently-installed Zip drives and ruined disks. Second is the disks themselves – Iomega admits that it makes more profit from the disks than

drives but even so, it's a bit mean of the company not to have included one in the box.

The internal Zip ATAPI is dead easy to install, faster than the parallel port version and is inexpensive – just don't forget to budget for some disks before you buy one.

John Sabine

Specifications

Internal ZIP drive

Stores up to 100Mb on disks a little bigger than a floppy

Easy-to-use detailed instructions

£89 (inc VAT)

Iomega: 0800 973194
www.iomega.com

Iomega Zip 100 ATAPI				
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Value for money	★	★	★	★	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆

Minimum requirements: Pentium, free IDE connection, free drive bay, DOS v.6 or Windows 3.1

Packard Bell Pulsar 35

One of the best-specified and fastest PCs in the Packard Bell range but with a price that isn't matched by its performance

Packard Bell PCs are sold exclusively in retail stores rather than directly by Packard Bell itself. It's always interesting to see how much more expensive they are than similarly specified machines from mail order suppliers but we nearly fell off our chairs when we found out just how much the Pulsar 35 costs.

To put it into perspective, last month we reviewed Pentium II 350 and 400 PCs from direct sellers Mesh and Dotlink. Both were good performers and both cost just over £1,100. The Pulsar 35 costs £700 more.

The Pulsar 35 has all the fundamentals to make it a well-balanced, fast PC but its specification is lacklustre. A Pentium 350 processor, 64Mb of RAM and an 8.4Gb hard disk are all good points but they are below the minimum we would expect at this price. Worse still, the Pulsar 35 is one of the slowest Pentium II 350s we have seen and its BAPCo score of 299 is more in line with a 300MHz PC.

The rest of the hardware is entirely devoid of the extras that we've come to regard as standard for a powerful PC.

There's no Zip drive or equivalent and the monitor is just a 15in model. The speakers, integrated with the monitor, are certainly compact but they do little to improve the disappointing sound card cum modem.

The only saving grace, from a hardware point of view, is the graphics card. It's an Elsa Erazor and though we've rarely seen it before, it is based on the same nVidia Riva chipset used on the more common STB Velocity card. It helped the Pulsar to turn in a respectable Final Reality performance (scoring 3.55) and we'd say that it should handle most current games comfortably.

Packard Bell seems to agree, for the 'Platinum Pack' software bundle included here contains nine games. Including *Incoming* and *Red Line Racer*, they are worthwhile as long as you want such a selection of titles but some are already in the bargain bins. Even at full retail price they can't justify this Pulsar's price tag.

As for the rest of the software, it is reasonably useful. Goo is fun, while Corel PhotoHouse and PrintHouse let you deal with pictures more seriously. Word, Works and ViaVoice should cer-

tainly get you started working, while the slightly bizarre pairing of Money and Quicken means you can double-check your finances. Still, we can't help remembering that Microsoft Home Essentials includes the main packages here and only costs £100.

In fairness, we should point out that this Pulsar, like most Packard Bells we've seen, is reasonably well built. It has a neat interior and should be easy to upgrade if you choose. Moreover, at least some of that budget has been spent on design and the Pulsar 35 looks pretty stylish.

Sadly, the attractive curves of the system unit and monitor do little to disguise the fact that this is a very expensive PC. This has, of course, always been the case with systems sold on the high street and manufacturers like Packard Bell are keen to point out that the higher prices of off-the-shelf PCs reflect the high standard of after-sales service. This may well be the case but when it comes down to writing a cheque, only you can decide if the convenience of buying from a shop is worth the extra wedge of cash.

The Pulsar 35 is a fair enough PC but costs far more than it should. Only buy it if you've got money to waste.

John Sabine

Specifications

Intel Pentium II 350MHz processor

64Mb RAM

8.4Gb hard disk

Databeamer combined 56Kbits/s modem and sound card

Elsa Erazor graphics card

15in monitor with built-in speakers

Impressive software bundle, including MS Word, Money, 9 games and several utilities

£1,799 (inc VAT)

Packard Bell: 01628 508200
www.packardbell.co.uk

Packard Bell Pulsar 35					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Features	★	★	☆	☆	☆
Value for money	★	☆	☆	☆	☆
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Samsung ML-85Gplus

Small, neat and simple to use is how we would describe Samsung's new ML-85Gplus laser printer. Small enough to fit on even the messiest of desks and cheap enough to stand in for most inkjet printers, it's a laser perfectly suited to more demanding home users.

Setting up the Samsung ML-85Gplus is an easy job and changing the toner and paper supply is just as straightforward. A blue button pops open the case ready for a new toner cartridge and the 150-sheet paper tray slots out of the front, ready for both single and multiple sheets and envelopes. Usefully, printed pages appear on top of the printer, so they don't take up extra room on your desk.

The ML-85Gplus's low price is partly attributable to the fact that it uses the Windows Printing System (or WPS). In short, this puts the onus of processing printing pages on the PC, which means the printer can get away with less memory and so is cheaper. It also allows a PC to keep an eye on the print process, and report back on such things as paper jams or empty toner cartridges. The downside of WPS is that it ties a printer to Windows and without Windows, you can't print.

As you'd hope from a laser printer with 600x600dpi print quality, output from the ML-85Gplus is very good, giving crisp, clear results for both text and graphics. It's fast too, churning out five pages of text a minute, though it didn't quite manage to reach the speedy 8ppm claimed by Samsung.

Compact and competitively priced, the Samsung ML-85Gplus is a pleasure to use and turns out top-quality results too. Ursula Tolaini

Samsung ML-85Gplus					
Features	★	★	★	★	☆
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

TaxCalc 1997/98

Given reports of stressed Inland Revenue staff inventing tax statements and binning taxpayers' letters because of self assessment chaos, the time is ripe to get a grip on your tax affairs.

TaxCalc is designed to help you do just that. The program first appeared in 1982, has been steadily developed every year since and the latest version comes on a CD-ROM from which it's easily installed. On startup, you get a screen displaying three sections – the main tax document for entering your data, the interview section for guidance while you do so and the new navigator area helps you keep track of where you are.

TaxCalc is a solid-feeling program overall but its user interface is flawed in minor ways. For instance, it insists on dates being entered in a specific format, so you have to change whatever format you've set up in Windows 95. Thankfully, there's no denying that the program helps with this unavoidable annual task. Having opened a new file, you enter details about yourself, your income, capital gains and all the rest. You get lots of assistance, including context sensitive help and useful checklists of the documents and data you'll need to prepare.

The bad news is that preparing your tax return on a PC doesn't reduce the volume of information necessary, or overturn the GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) principle. But with the data accurately entered, TaxCalc can add value. It will prepare a detailed or summary tax statement, plus a printed tax return complete with supplements. Send it direct to the Inland Revenue before the deadlines and avoid those stiff penalty fines.

While it won't turn the chore into a pleasure, TaxCalc will make the most of the preparation and data entry effort you invest. Terry Pinnell

TaxCalc 1997/98					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	☆
Performance	★	★	★	★	☆
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	☆

Minimum requirements: 386 PC, 8Mb RAM, 10Mb free hard disk space, Windows 3.1, CD-ROM drive, printer.