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In close-up this month are a PC from Gateway that uses Intel's latest 400MHz Pentium II processor, one of the first Voodoo2 3D graphics cards and Apple's Pentium II killer – the G3 Macintosh

Close-up

3Com Palm III

With the Pilot, 3Com hit on a winning formula. Small and light, this 'connected organiser' had an innovative handwriting recognition system, and synchronised data with a PC with astonishing ease. The Palm III is the latest in the series and its name is the least of its new features.

The most obvious change is the new design. Gone is the old blocky plastic – the Palm III has a 'sleek industrial design' which translates to a smoothly curved case with soft, rounded edges. The sprung flap protecting the socket for the bundled docking station is a welcome addition, but the hinged flap covering the screen isn't. Apart from looking cheap and flimsy, it doesn't fasten shut and folds open to an irritating just-past-halfway position that stops the new metal stylus from being removed. The flap can be removed though, and it's probably best left in the box.

Memory has been increased to 2Mb, which means the Palm III can hold 6,000 addresses, 3,000 appointments and 1,500 memos. The operating system is now stored on flash memory, so future software updates won't involve replacing the memory card.

The built-in applications haven't changed much and the calendar, phone book, to-do list and memo pad are all still present. There are now three fonts, and information can be 'beamed' to other Palm IIIs with the new infra-red interface. Surprisingly, 3Com has ignored the moans of all Pilot users and there's *still* no spreadsheet...

So, is it worth buying? A shapelier case, irritating screen cover and minor software tweaks all combine to make the answer 'no'. Still, the old PalmPilot Professional is now £100 cheaper – buy that, get the memory and software upgrade (which includes the infra-red interface), and you'll have one of the best PDAs around.

Sadly, 3Com has ignored the old adage 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' and hasn't done anyone any favours with the Palm III. The PalmPilot Professional is cheaper and better – buy that while you can.

Julian Prokaza

Specifications

- 2Mb of RAM
- 160x160 backlit touch-sensitive screen
- Graffiti-based handwriting recognition
- HotSync cradle for PC synchronisation
- Palm OS 3.0
- Uses two AA batteries
- **£299**
- **3Com: 0800 225252**
- **www.3com.com**

3Com Palm III	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements for PC synchronisation: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, serial port, 12Mb of hard disk space.

Gateway 2000 G6-400XL

Gateway brings more power to the people with its 400MHz Pentium II PC aimed at the home and small business user

Gateway 2000 has a policy of keeping up with Intel's seemingly relentless pace of development, and incorporates the latest Pentium II processor into its flagship desktop as soon as new chips are available. It also seems to understand that it is home users who really need the power of the latest processors for advanced 3D gaming and interactive digital video, and configures the rest of the system accordingly, right down to the DVD-ROM drive and advanced audio features.

The new G6-400XL certainly looks the part with its substantial full tower case, large monitor and multi-part speaker set, but prospective purchasers should consider where such a large system is going to live before they take the plunge. If it's going to go in a family room, the good news is that the system box cooling fans don't make too much noise.

It's not uncommon to find manufacturers supplying DVD-ROM drives with their machines but leaving the donkey work of decoding the signal into sound and video to a piece of software. This doesn't guarantee the best results, so we were pleased to see that Gateway has supplemented the double-speed DVD-ROM drive in the G6 with a DVD decoder card made by STB. This works alongside the STB Velocity 128 graphics card, which can deliver up to 16.7 million on-screen colours at 1024x768dpi resolution. The card also provides 3D acceleration to any game that supports the OpenGL and Microsoft Direct3D standards.

Regrettably, the results don't look as good as they might because the monitor isn't quite all it could be. On paper, it sounds fine – a large 19in screen with a 17.75in viewable diagonal that supports flicker-free refresh rates of up to 105Hz at 1024x768dpi resolution. It has comprehensive digital controls, too, but the problem lay with the picture itself, which suffered from a pronounced graininess that reduced the crispness and clarity of fine detail and small text.

Although the monitor left something to be desired, the audio features should keep most users happy. Sound is handled by an Ensoniq chip built into the motherboard but, importantly, this is equipped with a wavetable memory containing samples of musical instruments and sounds to greatly improve the way many games' soundtracks will sound.

The Boston Acoustics Media Theatre speaker set included a sub-woofer to add bass depth and punch to the sound, as well as spatialisation circuitry licensed from Dolby which gave a pleasing degree of immersed sound to everything, including music playback.

The G6, like any home PC worth its salt, is supplied with a modem as standard. In this case, it's an internal US Robotics 33.6Kbits/s model, but this can be upgraded to 56Kbits/s via the x2 route. You also get a highly useful Mitsubishi LS-120 drive which lets you use both conventional and 120Mb 'superfloppy' disks, which are very handy for backups, archiving and exchanging programs or large files with friends.

In order to get the best out of the 400MHz processor, Intel has produced a new motherboard chipset designated the 440BX, which allows the CPU and the memory banks to communicate across a 100MHz bus, rather than the normal 66MHz bus. This, along with the fast NVidia graphics chip on its own AGP (Accelerated Graphics Port) bus and the high-speed IBM UltraDMA hard disk, combine to make the G6 a very powerful machine.

This is an extremely fast PC, thanks to its 400MHz processor, high-speed memory bus and good disk and graphics performance. The only thing that lets it down and slightly undermines its otherwise excellent value for money is the sub-standard monitor. Dominic Bucknall

Specifications

- 400MHz Pentium II with 512Kb of pipeline burst cache
- 64Mb of SDRAM
- Intel i440BX motherboard chipset
- 8Gb IBM UltraDMA hard disk
- Toshiba 2x DVD-ROM drive
- Mitsubishi LS-120 120Mb superfloppy drive
- 4Mb STB Velocity 128 AGP graphics (NVidia Riva 128 chipset)
- STB Mpact MPEG 2/DVD decoder card
- Integrated Ensoniq wavetable audio
- Active Boston Acoustics Media Theatre three-piece speaker set
- Internal US Robotics x2 voice/fax modem
- 19in Gateway EV900 FST monitor (MAG)
- Windows 95, Internet Explorer 4, Office 97 SBE, Money 97, Encarta 97, choice of edutainment/games packs

£2,349 (inc VAT)

Gateway: 0800 322000
www.gateway2000.co.uk

Gateway 2000 G6-400XL	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Logitech Cordless Desktop

The quest for the paperless office may be something of a holy grail for computer manufacturers, but thanks to Logitech, the lesser goal of a cordless desktop is at last attainable.

The Cordless Desktop consists of a keyboard and mouse, neither of which have any external cabling. Instead, they communicate with a PC via radio waves, using a small receiver box that plugs into the usual keyboard and mouse sockets on the back of a PC.

Installing the Cordless Desktop is a simple job – just plug in the receiver and run the installation disks. The keyboard runs off two AA batteries, the mouse from two AAA ones, and both sets are reckoned to last between six months and a year.

Unlike infra-red, radio waves don't need line-of-sight for effective communication and so the keyboard, mouse and receiver can be placed just about anywhere. Logitech claims a six-foot range, but we successfully used the keyboard from the other side of the office (even though we couldn't see the screen).

The keyboard has two feet for altering the typing angle, and it's solidly built with pleasingly curved edges. The key action is light but positive, and there's also a clip-on plastic wrist-rest for more comfortable typing.

The mouse is Logitech's cordless MouseMan Pro, as reviewed in the January 1997 issue of *What PC?*. Its wedge shape isn't the most comfortable around and it's only usable by right-handers, but it works well enough. The two main buttons are augmented by a third that sits under the thumb, and this can be programmed to perform various actions.

In all, it's a neat cordless package and ideal for anyone who hates sitting at a desk to type.

If you don't like being chained to your desk by your keyboard and mouse, the Logitech Cordless Desktop will have you flying (OK, typing) freely in no time.

Julian Prokaza

Specifications

- Wireless keyboard and mouse
- Six-foot range via radio transmission
- Uses two AA and two AAA batteries (supplied)
- **£99.99 (inc VAT)**
- **Logitech: 0181 308 6582**
- **www.logitech.ch**

Logitech Cordless Desktop	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, free serial or PS/2 port, free keyboard socket.

Iomega Jaz 2Gb

Iomega received a lot of attention for its Jaz drive, and rightly so. Capable of storing 1Gb of data on removable cartridges, it was efficient, reliable and cost-effective if you had a lot of data to store. The new Jaz 2Gb is basically more of the same but with twice the capacity. It can still read the old 1Gb cartridges though, and is claimed to be some 40% faster than its predecessor.

Our Labs tests showed the Jaz 2Gb to be the fastest drive of its type on the market at the moment, and it can sustain data transfer rates of around 2.5Mb per second. In practice though, you'll only be able to achieve this rate if you don't use your PC for anything else at the same time.

We used the Jaz 2Gb with a Pentium II-266 with 64Mb of RAM and an Adaptec 2940U SCSI card – a fast PC, but certainly affordable. We copied a 427Mb folder in just under five minutes, with Internet Explorer, Lotus Notes and Word all open at the same time. This is close to normal hard disk speeds and more than fast enough for anyone.

Unfortunately, although the new Jaz can read the 1Gb disks meant for the old Jaz, you'll lose much of the new drive's speed. For some reason, it's only about a third as fast when using the older cartridges and while this isn't a problem if all you want to do is back up your data, it is a pain if you want quick access to large files. You can still get to small files at hard disk-like speeds though.

The Jaz 2Gb is great if you need lots of removable storage, but neither the drive nor the cartridges are cheap. Flexibility is the key though, and that's something you can't put a price on.

John Sabine

Specifications

- 2Gb removable hard disk drive (one cartridge included)
- Compatible with 1Gb Jaz cartridges
- SCSI-2 interface (can be used as parallel device with optional adaptor)
- Internal and external versions available
- **£519 (inc VAT)**
- **2Gb cartridges £149 (inc VAT)**
- **Iomega: 07000 466342**
- **www.iomega.com**

Iomega Jaz 2Gb	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Works with DOS, Windows or MacOS. Requires SCSI interface or Jaz Traveller parallel port adaptor.

Adobe PhotoDeluxe 2.0

Adobe PhotoShop is the leading image-editing application, but it's far too expensive for most home users. Adobe isn't ignoring this market though, and its low-end image editor, PhotoDeluxe, has just reached version 2.

PhotoDeluxe's emphasis is on image retouching, and you can add interest to your scanned photos with over 30 special effects like crackle, Impressionist and glowing edges. The not-so-perfect amateur can also use tools to correct mistakes in contrast, brightness, focus and so on. Red-eye is easily dealt with, and there's even a tool to change eyes to any colour you like.

Collages can be assembled from photos with the SmartSelect edge-detection tool. This allows you to automatically mark the edges of an object and then cut it from the photo to be used elsewhere.

Using an index-card system, PhotoDeluxe will also guide you through the creation of greetings and business cards, calendars, leaflets and even T-shirt transfers. Having selected an activity, you click on the index card tabs and follow the instructions on each card. The instructions are clear and easy to follow, and high-quality work can be produced.

You can get your images into PhotoDeluxe in a variety of ways. As well as opening existing image files, the program also works with scanners and digital cameras. If you have the necessary extra hardware, video camera stills can be used, too.

Finally, once you produce a collection of perfect photographs, PhotoDeluxe can index and store them with its EasyPhoto utility.

This is a powerful, feature-rich photo management and editing package that should satisfy the needs of most home and small office users. Steve Cotterell

Specifications

- Over 30 special photo-editing effects
- Over 50 template-based Guided Activities
- EasyPhoto Organiser image storage and retrieval utility
- Powerful photo-editing tools included
- New Guided Activities free every month from Adobe Web site
- **£57.58 (inc VAT)**
- **Adobe Systems UK: 0181 606 4001**
- **www.adobe.com**

Adobe PhotoDeluxe 2.0	
Ease of use	★★★★☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, 16Mb of RAM, 70Mb of hard disk space, Windows 95.

Creative Labs 3D Blaster Voodoo2

If you haven't seen a well-programmed game running on a 3D accelerator card with a 3Dfx Voodoo chipset, you've missed out. For smooth, texture-mapped-realistic graphics with spectacular lighting effects and a realism never before seen outside an arcade, the Voodoo chipset is the chipset of choice for discerning gamers.

Or at least it used to be. As great as the Voodoo chipset was, it has now been bettered – by the 3Dfx Voodoo2 chipset. The Creative Labs 3D Blaster Voodoo2 is one of the first cards to use the new chipset and it's available in two versions, with either 8Mb or 12Mb of RAM. Both, however, can manage around 50 billion operations a second and have a list of features as long as your arm and about as interesting to read. What it boils down to is a card that runs up to three times faster than Voodoo cards and will even run in parallel with a second Voodoo2 card for blistering games performance.

We compared the Voodoo2 to the Orchid Righteous 3Dfx card on a Dan PII 233 with 64Mb of RAM. Unfortunately, the Voodoo2's score of 3.21 wasn't much better than the Righteous's 3.04, but this can largely be blamed on early drivers. There were some compatibility problems with certain games (again, drivers), but although titles like Battle Zone and Redline Racer (reviewed next month) performed fluidly with all the visual settings set to maximum, there still wasn't much difference from a Voodoo card.

In short, until manufacturers release software that exploits the potential of the Voodoo2 chipset's features, there's no compelling reason to buy it – just yet.

It's still early days for Voodoo2 cards, and until we see more models and better drivers, it's hard to rate the Creative Labs 3D Blaster Voodoo2. Still, it certainly looked impressive and is good value for money. Julian Prokaza

Specifications

- 3D accelerator card based on 3Dfx Voodoo2 chipset
- Available in 8Mb and 12Mb versions
- 12Mb card displays at 1024x768 in 16-bit colour at 85Hz
- **£179 (8Mb); £229 (12Mb)**
- **Creative Labs: 01734 344322**
- **www.cle.creaf.com/voodoo2**

Creative Labs 3D Blaster Voodoo2	
Ease of use	★★★☆☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: genuine Intel Pentium 90 PC, existing graphics card, free PCI slot, Windows 95, CD-ROM drive.

Corel Ventura 8.0 (beta)

An early look at Corel's high-end desktop publishing application that uses some ideas first seen in Corel Draw 3

When it was acquired by Corel in 1993, the DTP application Ventura had a reputation for being more suited to document management than page design, and of having a formidable learning curve.

Since then, Corel has tried hard to redress the balance. To enhance Ventura's page layout capabilities, it capitalised on the corporation's drawing know-how with a large selection of 'smart' shapes, text-to-curves conversion and a range of customisable, graduated and fractal fills that still outshine anything the competition has to offer. Corel also brought a profusion of button bars, roll-ups and other screen furniture to version 7. This version adds Dockers – first seen in Corel Draw 8.

The idea behind Dockers is that they 'dock' in beside the work area, which is then automatically resized accordingly. Hence they are, in theory, never in the way. The two docking components are the Navigator and Tag windows. The former provides an overview of the document in an Explorer-style tree, with Books divided into Chapters and individual stories, graphic files and other elements showing beneath these.

The Tag window shows one of Ventura's strongest document management features. Whereas other DTP applications have Paragraph Styles – combinations of formatting options such as font size and alignment – Ventura has Tags that serve a similar function. Individual words or phrases, or rules and frames can also have formatting Tags.

Moving up, we get to Page Tags – known as Master Pages elsewhere – which control the overall page layout and include margins and column guides, as well as items such as page numbers or headers that are common to several pages. Text and graphics items can also be given a Conditional Tag, making it possible to create different versions of the same basic publication – perhaps in different languages or for different models in a product range.

Ventura allows you to extensively customise the interface. The best part of this customisation process is that users can save multiple environments which can (optionally) be linked to a Windows 95 log-in name.

Despite the profusion of controls, Ventura isn't quite as fearsome as it looks. One clever touch is that the editing mode changes automatically: if you want to switch from resizing a graphic to typing some text, you don't have to change tools – just click on the text and you'll get an editing cursor and a set of relevant controls in the Property Bar.

This version also builds on the Web-page creation features seen in version 7, with frames, image maps and Corel's Barista technology for Java-enhanced Web pages.

As well as a built-in story editor, with spelling in 25 languages, grammar in 11 and thesauruses in 15, you get a full copy of WordPerfect. There's a table editor which offers spreadsheet-style formulae, and features such as auto-filling and slanted headings. There's also a Database Publisher and the PhotoPaint image editor, together with various utilities for scanning, OCR and bitmap-to-vector conversion. Finally, there are over 1,000 typefaces and 40,000 clip-art items, with management and viewing utilities for both.

Corel Ventura is a lot more complex than its two main competitors – QuarkXPress and PageMaker – but it also offers much more for the money. Great value. Tim Nott

Specifications

- Conditional Tags for multiple-version publications
- Saveable custom workspaces
- New Dockers for quick access to Tags and Navigator
- Powerful drawing tools and fills
- Java-enhanced Web publishing
- 25 proofing languages
- 40,000 clip-art items
- 1,000 TrueType and Type 1 fonts

£374 (inc VAT)

Corel: 0800 973189
www.corel.com

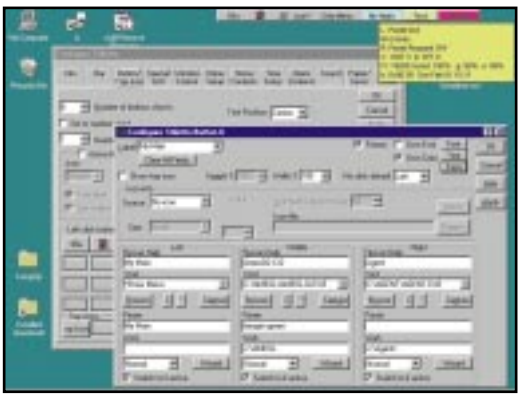
Corel Ventura 8 (beta)	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★☆☆☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Pentium PC, 16Mb of RAM, 80Mb of disk space.

Stiletto 98

Despite Windows 95's potential for customisation, third-party programmers are still churning out utilities for it. Stiletto 98 is one such example.

Stiletto is an incredibly powerful utility which can enormously enhance your Windows 95 interface and personal productivity. The scope of Stiletto's options might intimidate the inexperienced user, but the effort spent in configuring the program is soon handsomely repaid.



Essentially, Stiletto provides a small toolbar to supplement the Windows 95 Taskbar. In fact, you can create several bars, but a single one packs so much punch that it's hard to see who would need more. The toolbar can be positioned in predetermined positions around your screen, embedded in the title bar of any active window, locked to the Taskbar, or put anywhere you can drag it. The toolbar can also be made to hide itself automatically, to be called back by the mouse or a hot key.

Buttons can be placed on the toolbar, and are customisable by size, colour, text and icon. The buttons can be configured to do three different things, by clicking the left, middle or right mouse buttons. No middle button? Just simulate it, by holding the Shift key while pressing one of your mouse buttons, for example.

Actions assignable to a button include launching a program (with tailored parameters), pulling down lengthy menus (with optional sub-menus), displaying systems resources, hiding all active windows, rapidly exiting or restarting Windows, and countless more.

Stiletto's potential seems almost inexhaustible – you just keep coming across nifty new things you want to do with it. **If you want to give your Windows 95 Desktop a power boost, or if you'd enjoy doing things that you've never been able to do before, Stiletto is one utility you just have to get.** Terry Pinnell

Specifications

Alters behaviour of Windows interface

Toolbar launches programs, menus and reminders

Randomises wallpaper, system sounds and screen savers

30-day evaluation, easy payment methods. $22 registration

Ingram Micro: 01908 260 422
www.inforamp.net/~crs2086

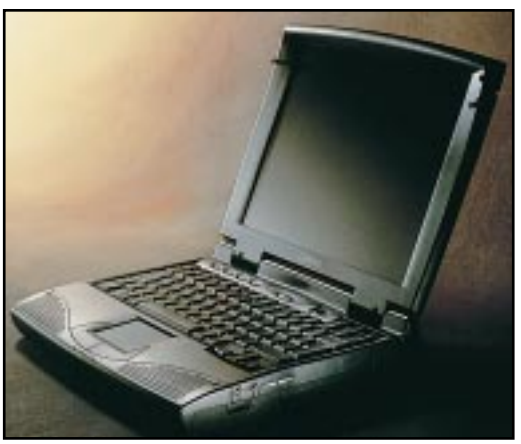
Stiletto 98	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, 4Mb of RAM, 2Mb of disk space, Windows 95.

Compaq Armada 1592DT

Part of Compaq's new 1500 series of notebooks, the Armada 1592DT is supposed to be an 'affordable, all-in-one notebook for the business professional'. It's certainly all-in-one – CD-ROM, floppy and power supply are all integrated into the box – but Compaq seems to interpret 'affordable' differently to the rest of us, with the 1592DT costing more than £2,500.

If the machine's specification justified it, this would be a reasonable price, but the 1592DT is a little off the mark. The 3.2Gb hard disk is generous for a notebook and there's an ample 32Mb of RAM but while a 12.1in TFT screen would have been good news a year ago, it looks small beside the 13.3in and 14.1in models being fitted by the likes of Dell and Gateway.



The 1592DT's processor is also adequate from most perspectives, being a 233MHz Pentium MMX. This is a genuine Intel mobile chip, with low power consumption for a longer battery life.

However, the Tillamook module that it's fitted to is scarcely new technology (it was launched last September) and at this price, mobile Pentium II chips are becoming more common.

In fact, the 1592DT's performance is one of its more disappointing aspects. With a BAPCo score of 162, it's fast enough for business use but we've seen Pentium 166MMX notebooks that are faster and cheaper. More worryingly, the power supply seemed reluctant to sense when the notebook was plugged into the mains and it periodically ran off its battery when it should have been recharging it.

Size aside, screen quality is good but the backlight heats the surrounding plastic a little too much for our liking. It's also a weighty beast, but then this is the price for such extensive integration of components.

As a compact desktop replacement, the Armada 1592DT has pretty much everything you'd need, but it's heavy, slow and expensive. If you forgo the Compaq name, Pentium II notebooks can be had for a similar sum. John Sabine

Specifications

Pentium 233MMX processor

3.2Gb hard disk

12.1in TFT screen

32Mb of RAM

£2583.83 (inc VAT)

Compaq: 0845 270 4000
www.compaq.co.uk

Compaq Armada 1592DT	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Essential Tools for Primary IT Capability

Five programs designed to teach information technology in primary schools, packaged on a single CD-ROM

We hope that whoever thought of the snappy name of Essential Tools for Primary IT Capability has nothing to do with teaching children English. Get past the not-so-snappy name, though, and you have a five-program package aimed at primary school information technology teaching.

Two of the programs – the best two – are Logotron's own, but the others come from three different companies. The non-Logotron programs are idiosyncratic and there is no conformity between them in terms of layout, controls and help systems.

By far the best of the five programs is SuperLogo – the latest version of the Logo programming language that first appeared in the early 1980s. It has been fully upgraded to make the best use of Windows and looks thoroughly slick and professional. The original Logo was designed to teach simple programming concepts and logic by getting children to write sequences of instructions to guide a mechanical turtle round the floor, or a virtual turtle round the screen. SuperLogo develops this theme by adding new commands and incorporating backgrounds, so that simple but complete interactive programs can be written. There's a graphics editor called MegaPaint, and even a compiler that turns SuperLogo programs into Windows executable files that you can run on any PC – even one without SuperLogo installed.

An excellent manual accompanies the program and there's extensive online help at two levels of difficulty. Putting aside the question of whether children actually need to learn to program, SuperLogo is a painless way of picking up all sorts of information about numbers, arithmetical operations and basic geometry. It's also a good Windows primer because its five menus incorporate a standard set of Windows commands and options.

Junior PinPoint, the other Logotron program, is not so much a database as a database reporting system. It demonstrates the advantages of using a PC to analyse statistical data and comes with a well-planned workbook of activities linked to supporting databases.

Pupils can create their own databases and load in existing dBASE and comma-separated data files. An interesting feature is the ability to design and print information-gathering sheets for use when collecting data from friends and classmates. When the information has been gathered, it's entered into PinPoint where it can be viewed as a table or chart, and sorted, searched and printed.

SuperLogo and Junior PinPoint are exemplary learning programs but are sadly let down by the other three in the Essential Tools package. Dazzle is a paint program, along the lines of Windows Paint, but with a more extensive range of tools and the limitation of only being able to load and save BMP files.

TextEase is a word processor that uses its own file format but can also read text and RTF files from other programs. There's a spelling checker, limited graphics capabilities and some quite advanced DTP-like layout features, but there's no online help apart from descriptions of the icons, which you can choose to hear being read aloud by a robotic voice.

My World is the most disappointing of the five. It's aimed at very young children and those with special needs. It's not, as claimed, a multimedia authoring system, at least not by any modern-day standards, but if you want to know what a state-of-the-art learning package was like 15 years ago it's an interesting time capsule.

SuperLogo and Junior PinPoint are great; Dazzle and Textease look like Windows 3 shareware and My World is awkward and limited. £175 is way over the top for this collection. Paul Wardley

Specifications

SuperLogo Logo programming language with compile option

Dazzle painting program

TextEase word processor

Junior PinPoint data handling

My World learning activities for very young children

£175 (inc VAT); £116.33 for 10-49 units

Logotron: 01223 425558

Essential Tools for Primary IT Capability	
Features	★★★★☆
Ease of use	★★★☆☆
Performance	★★★☆☆
Value for money	★★☆☆☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 386 PC with Windows 3.1, 4Mb of RAM, 25Mb of disk space, CD-ROM drive required for installation, optional sound card (Dazzle requires Windows 95, or later).

Apple Power Macintosh G3

The latest high-end Power Macs from Apple, offering speeds of up to 300MHz for both business and consumer users

Billed as the equivalent to Pentium II PCs, Apple's new G3 Macs are its fastest yet. Designed around an all-new PowerPC processor, which is now in its third generation, they claim to offer more features and expansion options than ever before. The launch of the G3 range was Apple's most successful to date, but do these machines really offer a realistic alternative?

The G3 Macs are aimed at both business and consumer users, and are available in various configurations and speeds up to 300MHz. We managed to get our hands on a 233MHz desktop system, but mini-tower cases are supplied with some faster models.

At first glance the new Mac looks much the same as any other recent Power Macintosh system. This is no bad thing, and the front of its curvy case houses a 1.44Mb floppy and a 24x CD-ROM drive as standard. For users with extra requirements, DVD-ROM and Zip drive options are also available. Again, there are no surprises at the back of the machine. It has two round Apple serial sockets, an Apple Desktop Bus (ADB) port, a SCSI connector, a 10BASE-T Ethernet connector, and video and audio outputs.

Our review model came with an extended keyboard and a 15in multimedia monitor. The former is supplied, along with a mouse, but we were amazed to find that Apple still doesn't provide any kind of screen as standard with the G3.

Where Apple does score highly is in system design, and pressing two hidden buttons at the front of the base allows the case to be removed quickly and easily. Slide two more latches and the drive bays swing out on a hinge, giving you full access to the motherboard and expansion slots. The G3 motherboard has a mini-ATX form factor, with three PCI card slots and three DIMM slots for up to 196Mb of SDRAM for main memory. Ours came fitted with a single 32Mb module installed. There's also a dedicated slot for specialist AV equipment.

By the far the most interesting internal component is the G3 processor itself. Engineered specifically with the Mac OS in mind, it's the fastest PowerPC processor to date. The chip is less than half the size of its Intel rival and, in a similar way to Pentium II, the Level 2 cache is built onto the chip module.

Rather unfortunately named, this 'backside' cache is responsible for much of the system performance. This improvement comes from the fact that the cache can be accessed directly by the processor, at high speed and without interruptions. Previous Power Mac systems had the cache on the main system board, which runs at a much slower speed than the processor, forcing it to stall and slow down to get at the data. The desktop G3 system features 512Kb of backside cache, and some faster machines come with 1Mb.

Other noteworthy features include on-board graphics via a slightly outdated ATI Rage II+ 2D/3D chip, combined with 2Mb of SGRAM. This provides resolutions up to 1024x768 in thousands of colours, and the RAM can be expanded to 6Mb, giving 1600x1200 at the same colour depth. Main storage is provided by a 4Gb IDE hard disk.

Overall, the system design is impressive, and, as promised, the G3 proved to be the fastest Mac we've ever seen. Compatibility with the new chip was also excellent, and the G3 happily coped with everything we threw at it, including graphics applications, and low-level CPU, memory and disk benchmarks.

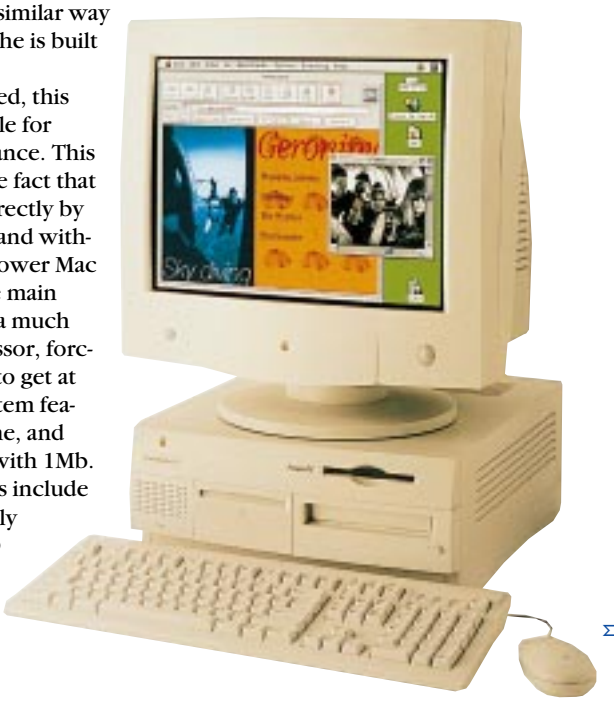
The G3 comes with Mac OS 8.1 installed, which includes Internet connectivity software. However, you'll need a modem or network link to the Internet to make use of it, and no other applications are supplied. With a basic business software bundle now standard on PCs, we would have expected to see at least ClarisWorks provided with the machine.

With its easy-to-upgrade design and improved speed, the G3 desktop is certainly the most powerful Mac we've seen. At £1,432.32, it's good value for a high-end Macintosh, but without a monitor or business applications it still falls short compared to today's PCs. A great machine, but not enough to make us 'think different'. Chris Cain

Specifications

- 233MHz PowerPC 750 G3 processor
- 512Kb 'backside' cache
- 32Mb of SDRAM, expandable to 196Mb
- 4Gb hard disk
- ATI Rage II+ DVD graphics controller
- 44KHz stereo audio input and outputs
- 24x (max) CD-ROM
- Three PCI slots
- Easy-to-upgrade design
- 2x DVD-ROM and Zip drive options
- **£1,432.32 (inc VAT)**
- **Apple: 0870 600 6010**

Apple Power Macintosh G3	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Franklin REX PC Companion

If you thought the PalmPilot was small, the REX will amaze you. Essentially, it's a Type II PC Card, so it's no larger than a credit card and not much heavier. Its top surface is mostly screen, with five buttons running down the right-hand edge. There's no keyboard and, in fact, no input method at all. Instead, all your information is managed using a PC application and transferred to the REX when you want to carry it with you.

Press the Home button to turn on the REX and you're greeted with six icons on the crisp, clear LCD screen. The four main applications are started with three buttons – left, right and select.

Since they only have to display information, the applications are rather basic but this does make the diary, address book, to-do list and memo pad extremely simple to use. Better still, pop the REX into the supplied wallet and you can access the information using just the thumb of your right hand.

The PC TrueSync Information Manager duplicates the REX's applications, with the obvious difference that you can enter information too. The calendar and contact list have all the features you would expect in a traditional Personal

Information Manager and it's possible to import data from other applications.

Getting information onto the REX is simplicity itself. Pop it into a free PC Card slot (or the optional serial port docking station), press the synchronisation button and the contents of the TrueSync application are transferred to the REX. REX-to-PC transfers aren't possible, but since the REX has no built-in input method, this isn't much of a problem. **The REX may be only half a PDA, but it's the half that most people really need.** Julian Prokaza

Specifications

- Type II PC card
- 256Kb of RAM
- 9-line x 30-character LCD screen
- Address book, diary, memo pad and to-do list applications
- PC synchronisation via Type II PC Card slot or optional docking station
- Uses two lithium batteries

£129.99 (inc VAT)
£169.99 (Inc VAT) with docking station

Franklin: 01932 891025
www.franklin.com/rex/index.html

Franklin REX PC Companion	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, 8Mb of RAM, Windows 95, 15Mb of hard disk space, free Type II PC Card slot or serial port.

Microsoft Picture It! 2.0

The cynical may suspect the claim 'It's easier than ever!' on Picture It!'s box is just advertising puff. However, we found this photo-editing package easy to use, and thought the help for beginners was excellent.

Once you've installed the software and watched the multimedia introduction, you'll probably want to get on with something. Choose a project from the large list available (covering such things as calendars, greeting cards and invitations) and a Wizard guides you, step by step, through the processes involved.

You can import your own pictures from files (and hundreds of sample photos are included on the CD) or using Picture It!'s integral software, from scanners and digital cameras. Photographic problems can then be tackled with a range of touch-up tools, many of them automatic. We particularly liked the Colour tool, which changes the brightness and contrast of colours. To use it, you just drag a couple of spots over the surface of a round palette and watch the colours of your photos change.

Photos can also be resized, cropped, flipped, twisted and distorted for dramatic effect. There's an automatic tool for repairing dusty, scratched photos but although this is easy to operate, it didn't give the results we'd hoped for, although photos were much better after the treatment. On the other hand, the semi-automatic tool for cutting out objects used in collages was simple to use and the mistakenly detected edges of indistinct objects can be easily edited.

Using Picture It!, photo-editing novices can quickly achieve creditable results and have plenty of fun in the process.

Microsoft has made Picture It! really easy and intuitive to use, with ample help available. Steve Cotterell

Specifications

- Wizards and smart tools make it easy for the novice to use
- Large library of ready-made projects
- Easy to import photos from cameras and scanners
- Decorative text can easily be added to pictures
- Media Manager utility can help you organise your media library

£49.99 (inc VAT)

Microsoft: 0345 002000
www.microsoft.com

Microsoft Picture It! 2.0	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Pentium 90 PC, Win 95, 16Mb of RAM, 75Mb of hard disk space.

Macromedia Freehand 8.0

A high-end vector drawing package from the company that brought us the Director multimedia authoring package

Macromedia has produced two versions of its latest illustration software – Freehand 8 is the basic drawing package, while the Design in Motion suite adds Insta.HTML and Flash. The former is for exporting Freehand drawings to Web pages; the latter is for producing animations for Web use. Both packs include PC and Macintosh versions of the software.

Freehand 8 looks much like version 7, with the tabbed, stackable Inspectors that provide instant access to an object's fill, outline, font and other attributes. Also unchanged is the excellent colour list. Unlike some drawing software, Freehand gives you colours as you need them, rather than start with a large, general-purpose palette. This means every shade of a 'parent' colour can be changed with a single click.

There's more customisability with this version, too. One performance-enhancing technique is being able to work in Fast mode, where display (not print) quality is sacrificed for speed. Another time saver is the Again command, which lets you repeat certain actions on new objects with the same set of options. Professional users will also appreciate the Collect for Output feature, which assembles all the fonts, embedded files and relevant settings for delivery to an image-setting bureau.

Brand-new in this release are Lenses. Any closed object can be turned into a Lens, which allows you to apply special effects. Draw a circle, for example, and turn it into a Lens, and you can darken, lighten, invert or alter the colours of the part of the drawing lying beneath it. More versatile are the magnify and transparency Lens effects. The former does exactly what you'd expect, enlarging what's underneath it. The clever bit is that you can fix a Lens's effect to part of a drawing and then move the actual Lens. In other words, modify a drawing, and the areas under the Lens changes too – perfect for pulled out, blown-up details with maps or diagrams.

The transparency Lens provides a single-colour fill with a degree of transparency. This helps produce more realistic renderings, not just of things such as stained glass or coloured liquids, but also of shadows falling on patterned surfaces. This is a welcome addition, but doesn't really go far enough. Liquids in glass (as shown in the tutorial) and shadows aren't uniform. What's needed (and what both Xara Draw and Corel Draw supply) is graduated transparency.

Although all drawing software will let you edit shapes by tweaking Bezier nodes and handles, this isn't very intuitive artistically. Instead, Freehand's new Freeform tool lets you push and pull shapes around as if you were working with clay, and holding down the arrow keys varies the size of the effect. If you want to vary other aspects of the effect, though, you have to double-click on the tool, change the settings and then close the dialog box.

Another new, fun feature is the Graphic Hose. The idea is that you can 'spray' the screen with a variety of predrawn objects. Unlike the Freeform tool, this has a modeless control palette, so you can fine-tune the effect as you go.

Although Freehand 8 has some excellent new features, they're still not quite up to the Corel standard. Existing users should be well pleased however, and with the Design in Motion suite there's great – but proprietary – scope for Web artists.

Tim Nott

Specifications

- Freeform editing of shapes
- Flash add-on for Web animation
- New Graphic Hose for spray-on shapes
- Preview mode speeds up screen redraws
- New Lenses offer magnification, transparency and colour change
- Inspectors give instant access to all shape and text attributes
- Precision colour control

£327.82
£445.32 – Design in Motion Suite

Macromedia: 01344 458600
www.macromedia.com

Macromedia Freehand 8.0	
Features	★★★☆☆
Ease of use	★★★☆☆
Performance	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★☆☆
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements for a PC:
Windows 95, Pentium PC, 16Mb of RAM, 30Mb of disk space.
Minimum requirements for a Macintosh:
System 7.1, PowerPC, 16Mb of RAM, 30Mb of disk space.