in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: software to optimise RAM usage, large hard drives, a backup utility, Internet-enabled sticky notes for Windows 95, a virus checker, an image-processing tool, a PC tuner card for your PC, a hard disk clean-up package, and document management software for scanners

Agent 97

The amount of memory (RAM) in your PC has always been important, but with today's memory-hungry Windows 95 programs you really need to make the most of what you've got. Enter Agent 97 from Connectix, which promises to monitor your PC's resources and alert you to any memory 'leaks'.
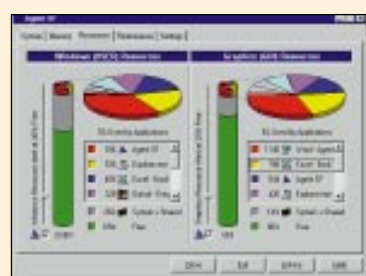
As a program that sets out to optimise your memory usage, it's admirable that Agent 97 installs from a single floppy disk. However, you soon realise where most of the space savings have been made because Agent 97 isn't exactly overflowing with features. Essentially it interrogates your PC while it's running, building up a detailed picture of what programs are loaded, and how much memory they are using. And that's pretty much all Agent 97 does.

Admittedly, the information Agent 97 provides is very detailed, and it will help seasoned PC enthusiasts to organise their memory usage in the best possible way, but for the average Windows 95 user, it will do little more than confuse.

Agent 97 takes the concept of empowerment to new heights. It tells you plenty, but does virtually nothing. If you're clued up and prepared to spend time analysing its analyses, Agent 97 could prove useful, otherwise steer clear.

Agent 97	
Features	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

○ £35.19 (inc VAT)
○ Connectix: 0181 561 1414

Chimp

The trouble with those little sticky reminder notes is that they're so easy to lose – they can get buried under a pile of books, or be knocked off the side of a monitor. And by the time you've written half a dozen of them, you've got precious little chance of finding the one you want.

A neat solution to this problem is Chimp, a sticky note style memo pad for Windows 95. This lets you keep all your notes tidily in one place, although to keep things orderly you can section off topics with tabbed dividers. You can keep things aesthetically pleasing by selecting different colours for your notes and you can choose your own fonts.
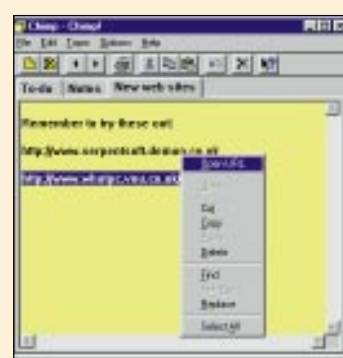
Chimp is Internet-enabled so you can launch Web sites with a simple click of an address; you can also launch other applications in the same way.

One of the best features of Chimp is its auto-save facility, which means you never have to worry about saving your notes. By default, it will save every minute, or every time you close the program – but if you're worried about draining the power of a notebook, for instance, you can control the frequency of saves.

A neat little program, but the original sticky notes are cheaper and, to be honest, a lot less hassle.

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

○ £10 (registration fee, inc VAT)
○ Pivotal Technologies: 01923 444855

HomeGuard

These days, most computerised organisations have expansive, expensive virus-checking system in place. But what do you do if you want to protect your family PC against the threat of infection yet cannot afford to splash out pots of money? The answer may lie with HomeGuard, the latest virus-protection package from Dr Solomon's Software.
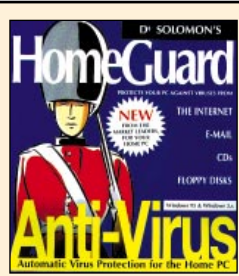
Sensibly, before you even get around to installing Home-Guard, the manual advises that you use the supplied 'Magic Bullet' disk to check your PC for viruses. This itself needs no installation, requiring only to be inserted into the floppy disk drive before you switch on the power.

If Magic Bullet gives your PC the all clear then you are free to install HomeGuard proper, which takes just a few minutes. After that, apart from a small icon in the toolbar, HomeGuard is invisible. In fact, the only time you'll know it's active is when it pops up with a message telling you that a virus has been found and removed. There are a few options that advanced users might like to tweak, but other than that HomeGuard can be left to its own devices.

At first you might think you've spent £30 for nothing. However, invisible though it is, Home-Guard protects your PC against over 11,000 viruses and if it stops just one of them damaging your data it will have paid for itself.

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

○ £29.99 (inc VAT)
○ Dr Solomon's Software: 01296 318800

Maxtor DiamondMax Hard Disk

Of all the unwritten laws in the world of computing, the most astute is that 'data expands to fill the space available'. In other words, no hard drive is ever big enough. If you need more space, then you need a bigger hard drive and Maxtor has just launched some new ones.

The Maxtor DiamondMax range consists of 2.5Gb, 3.8Gb and 5.1Gb drives. All of them are 3.5in models and feature several pieces of new technology, making them both fast and reliable. They're also reasonably priced – the 2.5Gb drive costs £244.40 including VAT.

Fitting the DiamondMax is very straightforward. Although designed for 3.5in drive bays, brackets are also included for 5.25in bays, as are all the necessary fixing screws. With the drive slotted in place, it's then connected to the PC's power supply and IDE interface (a cable is provided for this). The PC's BIOS must then be configured to recognise the new drive and the PC booted with the supplied floppy disk. An initialization program then partitions and formats the drive, making it ready for use. The whole process takes no more than 15 minutes.

There's really little to differentiate large hard drives apart from price and performance, and the Maxtor DiamondMax scores equally well on both counts.

DiamondMax Hard Disk	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

○ £244.40 (2.5Gb drive, inc VAT)
○ Maxtor: 01483 747356

Cheyenne Backup for Windows 95

With the growth of cheap mass storage devices like Iomega's hugely successful Zip drive it's no wonder there are so many backup utilities popping up. This latest one from Cheyenne Software is designed to appeal to beginners and experts alike.

After a very quick installation, Backup's front screen pops up with just three very clear options: 'Backup my files', 'Restore my files' and 'Compare my files'. This is the 'EZ' mode, and clicking on any one of the three options takes you to a so-called Wizard to walk you through your choice. This way of doing things will be an absolute boon to computer novices, and Cheyenne should be congratulated for keeping it so straightforward.

However, if you prefer to have more control over just what you're backing up, and when, then simply click on the 'Expert' button and the screen suddenly fills with the usual assortment of colourful icons and menus. You can choose to back up to any kind of media, from high-capacity tape drives to trusty old floppy disks.

Backup is as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. We're not convinced it's worth the asking price, but it does exactly what you'd expect of it.

Cheyenne Backup for Win 95	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

○ £69.99 (inc VAT)
○ Roderick Manhattan: 0181 875 4444

ImageRobot

JASC is no stranger to the graphics software market, its Paint Shop Pro package being one of the most popular image-editing tools around. Now the US-based company has released ImageRobot, a simple utility to enable you to perform a wide range of special effects on batches of images.

ImageRobot has nearly 50 different image processing tools, each of which alters the source images in some way, ranging from simple rotations to advanced deformation and filtering effects. The program can be set up to deal with any number or combination of image types, and it can cope with all of today's most popular graphics formats as well. So, for example, a typical batch process might take a mixture of BMP, PCX and WMF image file formats, change their resolutions, give them a uniform colour depth and turn them all into the space-saving JPG image format.

The time ImageRobot takes to actually carry out a batch process varies considerably and depends on a multitude of factors. However it has to be said that, compared to similar tools included in 'weightier' graphics packages, ImageRobot is pretty quick on its feet.

While it has quite a limited appeal, ImageRobot is a fast and incredibly easy-to-use tool that any self-respecting graphics professional would find useful.

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

○ £29.99 (inc VAT)
○ Digital Workshop (distributor): 01295 258335

miro miroMedia PCTV

Not everyone has the room to fit both a TV and PC on their desk so if you want both, a TV tuner card is a simple solution. The miroMedia PCTV is one such device and provides almost everything you need to watch television shows on your PC's desktop.

The PCTV is a short PCI card and providing your PC has a free PCI expansion slot, installation is simple. It supports Plug and Play and with the drivers loaded and an aerial (not supplied) plugged in, it's ready to go. The miroTelevision application automatically tunes in to TV stations and broadcasts are then shown in a resizable window on the Windows 95 desktop.

If the reception is up to scratch, the picture quality is pretty good. The maximum window size is 768x576 pixels, so the picture can't be viewed full-screen but the window can be resized, making a small picture in the corner of the monitor possible. Images can be captured at any time and the inclusion of both SVHS and composite video inputs means that VCRs and camcorders can also be plugged in.

Cheaper than a portable TV and much more versatile, the miroMedia PCTV is a quick and easy way to get a TV picture onto your monitor.

miro miroMedia PCTV	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

○ £92.83 (inc VAT)
○ miro: 01494 510250

▶

PrintPaks Pop-Up Greetings Kit

The trouble with most greetings card packages is that, despite pretty pictures and printed text, the results can end up looking unprofessional at best and downright sloppy at worst – you've printed your design onto cheap photocopier paper and, try as you might, you just couldn't find an envelope to fit.

A neat solution is the Pop-Up Greetings Kit from PrintPaks, which produces a complete kit for creating pop-up greetings cards. As well as the software required to create your personalised card, you are also provided with a pack of cards, ready to print onto and fold, some two-sided tape for easy assembly of your creation and some jazzy envelopes to contain the finished product.

Pop-Up Greetings Kit has a treasure chest of pictures and text to get you started but you can paint your own or even incorporate photos. Then add the text and you're ready to print – creating a card really is as simple as that.

Younger children will manage this Pop-Up Greetings Kit with help, and the less technically aware adults may appreciate it too – it's fun and easy to use.

○ £24.99 (inc VAT)
○ PrintPaks: 0990 134927

Pop-Up Greetings Kit	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

PowerCleaner

The scenario is probably all too familiar: your hard disk is almost full; you've removed everything you can think of and still you can't really see what's taking up all the space. It's quite likely that the answer lies in the myriad files typically created by programs and then tucked away inside the Windows folder or some other such cunning hiding-place.

Inevitably, there are plenty of clean-up programs offering to sweep up the debris of your hard disk, the latest being Power-Cleaner from Data Becker Software. This works by monitoring all your software installations and noting which files are created, and where – when you want to remove a program, it ensures that all the files created are removed.

PowerCleaner builds a System Database, in which it notes which files belong where, spots any duplicate and 'orphan' files – that is, those left behind by past installations. It's then possible to remove these files safely. PowerCleaner also archives and compresses them so that, if you suddenly discover they are urgently needed, you can bring them back. Building the database takes time and hard disk space, but you can schedule it to run overnight and, in the long run, it could well save you space.

If your hard disk is full to overflowing, Power-Cleaner could be just the thing to restore some order in your life.

○ £25.79 (inc VAT)
○ Software Paradise: 01222 857016

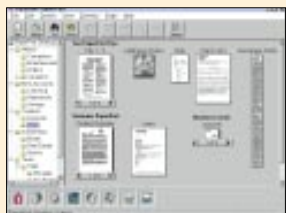| PowerCleaner	
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Visioneer PaperPort Deluxe

The document management software supplied with Visioneer's PaperPort scanners is among the best around but unless you buy the scanner, you can't get it. Until now, that is, as the latest version of the software is available separately.

Supplied on CD-ROM, PaperPort Deluxe is a Windows 95-only application and works with a variety of scanners, multi-function devices and digital cameras. The program window has two main areas – thumbnail document previews on the right and document folders on the left.

Scanned documents appear on PaperPort's desktop, where they can be rotated, cleaned up, have notes added and be stacked in groups before being stored in a folder. Documents can be searched by name and by content, since everything is put through the Xerox TextBridge OCR (optical character recognition) software while your PC is idle.

PaperPort links with other applications and displays them as icons across the bottom of the screen. Documents dragged to an icon then get sent to that application. The links have some intelligence – drag a document to Word and it gets converted to text, drag it to Microsoft Exchange and it's converted to an e-mail attachment.

The PaperPort software was already great but now it's even better – highly recommended for anyone wanting to organise their documents.

○ £82.19 (inc VAT)
○ Visioneer: 0800 973245

Visioneer PaperPort Deluxe	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

WebPrinter

If you regularly surf the Internet then you'll know that the popular Web browser programs will happily print a Web page on command. With that in mind, what on earth can a program going under the title of WebPrinter have to offer?

Well, essentially WebPrinter gives you the opportunity to format the output of Web pages before you print them and turn them into folded booklets. You could, for example, find a Web site with lots of interesting text-based content on the fine city of Norwich – point your browser at www.norwich.gov.uk for further elucidation – and turn it into a small reference guide to give to a friend.

The variety of output styles is very limited – you can choose either pamphlet-style or flip book – but getting them printed and turned into reading material is foolproof. WebPrinter arranges and prints the pages in the most efficient order, finishing with a sheet of instructions for multi-sided documents; and this even has an arrow showing which way the pages should be fed for their second trip through the printer.

WebPrinter is a surprisingly nifty little utility. Whether you want to print booklets of Web sites to hand out, or simply as a means of reading them off line, WebPrinter is an excellent way of doing so.

○ £35.19 (inc VAT)
○ ForeFront: 0181 387 4011

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