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It's not a good time for the folks who like to add flashy, interactive features to the World Wide Web. Such features depend on new languages, either Java (developed at Sun) or Microsoft's Active-X, to load and execute small programs (applets) on the user's machine. For two years, we've heard that Java in particular may change the world of software and pose a serious threat to Microsoft's dominance.

Now we've started hearing about the security risks. First a group of hackers in Germany demonstrated a program they'd written for Active-X, Microsoft's built-in programmable controls, which would search your hard disk for the personal finance package Quicken and use it to transfer funds from your bank account to theirs. Then a security risk was found in Microsoft's Internet Explorer: a Java application on a Web site can insert code into the user's machine to collect information about the system, making other types of attacks possible later. Other bugs and flaws have been found since.

These stories should not make you think the Web is too dangerous to use, but they should make you pay attention to what is possible. Most of these bugs can and will be fixed. But Microsoft's public reaction to the Quicken demonstration wasn't encouraging. It recommended avoiding using any code not 'signed' by a company whose bona fides you can trust. Who would that be? Major companies have inadvertently sent out viruses in shrink-wrapped software before now.

The people who created Java put a lot of thought into trying to construct a system that would avoid as many security risks as possible. Java essentially sets up a virtual Java machine on your computer, and all its code runs in that protected space. But even that doesn't solve the fundamental problem – that DOS and Windows are not secure and never have been.

If Microsoft is serious about limiting risks, then it should, as the purveyor of the most popular operating systems, build in encryption (so that if files are read the results are meaningless), user-controllable file and directory access controls, and a system log to record changes that can be easily reviewed and understood. Trying to protect your computer by choosing only trusted sites is a bit like male contraception – well-intentioned and helpful, but not really where the problem is.

Wendy Grossman is a freelance journalist and a regular contributor to *What PC?*

Computers Simplified (third edition)

IDG Books. 223pp, fully illustrated. £23.99.
ISBN: 0-7645-6008-5.



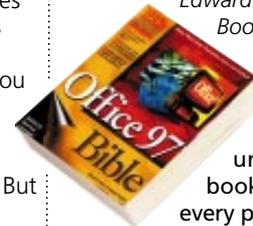
Anyone put off by even the mention of the word 'computer' will be pleasantly surprised by *Computers Simplified*. Its 12 chapters set out to cover pretty much everything a new computer user would want to know, plus a little extra.

A picture is worth a thousand words and *Computers Simplified* certainly takes this to heart. Full use is made of colour illustrations with captions, making the book extremely easy to dip into. Topics range from the simple – hardware and software, to the middling – how modems communicate, to the complex – operating systems. That said, the style never slips into technobabble and explanations never go beyond four sentences.

Unfortunately, the weakness of the book is its simplicity. Nothing is explained in any depth and although explanations answer the most obvious questions, they leave important areas unmentioned. Similarly, although the illustrations are professionally executed, they are a little too cute to be taken seriously. A book suitable for children and total novices only.

Office 97 Bible

Edward Jones and Derek Sutton. 1,159pp. IDG Books. £36.99. ISBN: 0-7645-3037-2.



Microsoft Office is the best-selling office software suite in the world, so it's little surprise that computer sections of bookshops are straining under the weight of Office-related books. This suitably heavy tome covers every part of Office 97 – the newest version.

Given that Microsoft supplies a woefully slim manual with Office 97, a book such as this is very welcome. In it you'll find thick sections detailing most of the fine and not-so-fine points of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Access applications, as well as a separate part about the brand-new Outlook information-management tool.

At £36.99 the book is a big investment, but if you want to get the most out of Office 97, it's money well spent.

MacWorld Mac Secrets (4th edition)

David Pogue and Joseph Schorr. 1,208pp. IDG. £40.99. ISBN 0-7645-4006-8.



Long regarded as a must for Mac users, *MacWorld Mac Secrets* reveals all about Apple's pride and joy. Now in its fourth edition, the book has been completely revised, with a free CD-ROM and over 300 new 'secrets'.

The 1,208-page monster kicks off with everything you ever wanted to know about MacOS but were afraid to ask. There are tricks aplenty with Control Panels, Installers and Extensions, hints on file handling and a list of those oh-so-useful hidden shortcut keystrokes. There are insights into every Mac model ever made, including the original designers' code-names and technical specifications.

Other handy sections include guides to printing, fonts and troubleshooting, all written in a clear, easy-to-understand style with screenshots and illustrations where appropriate. Pogue and Schorr, both regular *MacWorld US* columnists, have certainly packed a lot into the pages.

Definitely a book no Mac user should be without.

next month



PCs vs Macs

While PCs are the most popular type of personal computer, they are by no means the only option. Apple Macs also offer everything you need for day-to-day computing. We compare a range of systems from both camps to help you find the one that's right for you.

20 top utilities

Every PC user has a favourite utility, that little program that's so useful you wonder how you ever did without it. Next month we round up 20 of the best – from graphics conversion and compression programs to Windows 95 enhancements and topnotch virus killers.

Digital cameras

There's no easier way to get photographs onto your PC than with a digital camera. We report on the latest models costing around £500.



Personal information managers

The PC equivalent of a Filofax, personal information managers (PIMs) provide the ideal way to organise your personal and professional life. We put the leading packages head to head.

On sale 12th June

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