

in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: a new Microsoft mouse, a product to capture colour images for your PC screen, a program that helps you create a stylish CV, a package to chart your family tree, an external storage drive for notebooks, a multimedia accelerator, a SCSI device and a graphics card

Microsoft IntelliMouse

If you could be bothered to look into it, you'd probably find that a new pointing device goes on sale every month but it's really only when Microsoft launches one that people take notice. The IntelliMouse is Microsoft's latest.

Design-wise, this mouse is nothing special for it looks just like the Microsoft Mouse 2. Look closer, however, and you'll notice the little grey roller that sits between the two buttons.

The IntelliMouse is designed to complement Internet Explorer 3 and Office 97 and that's where the roller comes into play. Roll it (it has a pleasantly stiff, stepped action) and you can scroll back and forth through a document. Click the roller (it works as a button too) and you can drag the mouse to scroll smoothly from top to bottom or left to right. Finally, hold the button for a second and you can automatically scroll through a document hands-free – just like an Autocue.

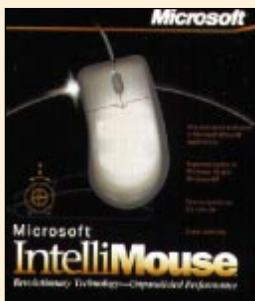
A new mouse driver is also supplied and this adds several useful and not-so-useful features. Bottom of the list, for example, is the set of animated schemes, one of which changes your pointer into various reptiles.

It's a little expensive but the IntelliMouse quickly becomes an integral part of the way you use Windows 95 and, like all good ideas, you'll soon start to wonder how you managed without it.

Microsoft IntelliMouse

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

○ £59.95 (incl VAT)
○ Microsoft: 0345 002000



Sony MDH-10

There's no shortage of external storage devices for the PC but Sony's latest is a little different from the rest. The MDH-10 is a portable MiniDisc player capable of playing audio MiniDiscs but, usefully, it can also use them to store data.

As Walkman-type devices go, the MDH-10 is very stylish but it's a little on the large side and probably too heavy to be carried round in a pocket. Sound quality (with the supplied headphones) is good though – as you would expect from a digital sound source. For data use, it connects to a PC via a SCSI interface and the one on the MDH-10 is hidden behind a flap at the back of the unit.

The MDH-10 uses its own filing system called MDFS (MiniDisc Filing System), which means that installation isn't as straightforward as other SCSI devices, but once it's up and running, the drive is used just like any other. The MiniDiscs themselves look like miniature floppy disks but they're faster to access and can hold 10 times as much data – around 140Mb. They're not, however, anywhere near as fast as a SCSI hard drive.

While it's certainly portable, the MDH-10 is expensive when compared to other external mass storage devices and, despite the fact that it can play audio MiniDiscs, it can't record them, which further limits its usefulness.

Sony MDH-10

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

○ £410.08 (incl VAT)
○ Sony: 0181 760 0500



Connectix Colour QuickCam

There have up till now been two ways to get a colour image of an object onto your PC's screen. One is expensive – buy a digital camera; the other is long-winded – take a photograph, get the film developed and then scan the print. Connectix has just added a third method – the Colour QuickCam.

The Colour QuickCam looks almost the same as the black-and-white version we reviewed earlier this year – a spherical device about the same size as a snooker ball. The only visible difference is a manual focusing ring around the lens that adjusts the focus from around one inch to infinity.

QuickCam plugs into the PC's parallel port (there's no through-connector, unfortunately) and draws its power from the keyboard port. Software is supplied that allows both still and moving images to be captured and there's an option to capture one frame at a time, time-lapse style.

The maximum resolution of the QuickCam is 640x480 and it's possible to capture in 24-bit colour, though the frame rate is atrocious at this level of detail. Drop the resolution and colour-depth and up to 30 frames per second are possible.

If you're happy with the image quality then the Color QuickCam is a cheap and easy way of capturing images on your PC, but unless you have a notebook, you're stuck with doing it indoors.

Connectix Colour QuickCam

Ease of use	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

○ £233.83 (incl VAT)
○ Connectix UK:
0171 622 3355



Softkey CV Pro

More often than not, a Curriculum Vitae (CV) is the first thing a potential employer will see from a job candidate. For that reason, it is imperative that your CV looks as good as possible. CV Pro from Softkey is a program that takes the hard work out of designing and printing CVs.

You start with an empty CV template which is split into sections, each with an appropriate heading. There are a few templates to choose from, covering employment areas ranging from academic to military. In each section you enter your personal details and other information which might be relevant to the job for which you are applying. However, you are not limited to the sections in the selected template – you can add new sections or delete existing ones. Before finalising the design, you can spice up your CV with coloured headings and you can even insert photographs.

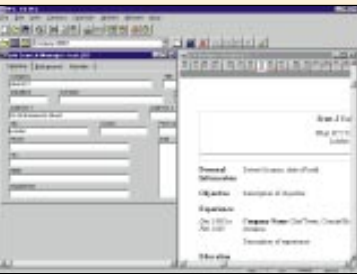
As well as the CV preparation feature, CV Pro has a contact database, and it can also be used as a standalone word processor, albeit a basic one.

At £39.99, CV Pro is pretty good value. If you haven't already got a word processor package and want to prepare professional-looking CVs, this product is ideal.

Softkey CV Pro

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

○ £39.99 (incl VAT)
○ Softkey: 0181 246 4000



Purple Software Cyclone Drive

If you've got a Psion 3/3a you'll know that your removable storage options are limited. The trouble is, solid-state disks (SSDs) are expensive and the cheaper alternative, flash cartridges, are not very versatile. The Cyclone Drive from Purple Software is a portable disk drive for Psion machines, and it uses cheap and versatile 3 1/2-in floppy disks.

Installation is relatively painless but it does eat up 5Kb of memory – obviously, this is not a problem for 1Mb and 2Mb users, but owners of the smaller Psion models know that every kilobyte is precious. With this done, the drive appears on your Psion as just another drive letter (in this case, C:). It is then able to read and write to disks that have been formatted to the 1.44Mb PC standard.

Purple Software does include a mains adaptor with the Cyclone, but the drive can also be powered by five AA batteries for use on the move. However, we have to say the Cyclone is rather large and just a bit too heavy to be described as portable.

Along with the Cyclone, Purple is giving away a copy of its useful Psion file management utility, File Manager.

The Cyclone works perfectly as a disk drive and it's certainly a cheaper long-term storage solution than SSDs. However, if you've got Psion's 3Link cable and a PC we doubt this will appeal to you.

Purple Software Cyclone Drive

Ease of use	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

○ £169.95 (incl VAT)
○ Purple Software:
0171 387 7777



Guildsoft Family Origins

There's an old adage that says you can choose your friends but not your family. It's true, of course, but with Family Origins you can at least chart the development of your unchosen many.

After an exceptionally quick and simple installation, you are presented with an opening screen with a number of blank 'containers'. These are set out in a tree-like structure and each container holds the name of one family member. You start by placing a name (probably your own) in the left-most container, and by adding names of relatives your family tree gradually forms.

When you enter a name a detail window pops up, into which you can add all manner of facts relating to the individual. There are lots of predefined fact types, allowing you to outline information as diverse as bar mitzvah dates and social security numbers. However, should you stumble across a particularly obscure fact while compiling your family tree, you can create it as a new fact type and include an appropriate description.

This is a good piece of software with few shortcomings. Whether you're a complete fanatic, or just have a mild interest in genealogy, Family Origins will suit you.



Guildsoft Family Origins

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

- £29.95 (incl VAT)
- Guildsoft: 01752 895100

Success with Windows 95 – Multimedia Edition

Success with Windows 95 is a series of three books detailing all manner of Windows 95 tricks and tips. The Multimedia Edition is the same three books placed in electronic form onto a CD-ROM, and with the added bonus of 45 minutes of video-based instructions.

Each of the books – *1001 Windows 95 Tips* by Greg Perry, plus *Windows 95 Now!* and *Success with Windows 95*, both by Kris Jamsa – has been translated into a 'multimedia document'. The documents contain verbatim text of the printed publication coupled with all the illustrations. On top of this, audio and video clips have been dropped in at useful points, and these can be accessed with a single mouse click.

As far as the contents of the books themselves goes there is little to criticise. Each is well written and the ability to search entire books for particular references is a bonus. Our quibble is that reading a book from a computer screen is both inconvenient and unnatural.

Reading complete books from a screen holds little appeal. The instructional video clips add some value, but we cannot recommend this product over the printed originals.

Success with Windows 95

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

- £46.99 (incl VAT)
- Jamsa Press
- ISBN: 1-884133-17-7
- Software Paradise: 01222 887521



Opti Databank

Most notebook PCs these days come with sizeable hard disks. However, as it is often not possible to upgrade a notebook's hard disk, the storage space is inevitably still limited. Opti's Databank solves the problem: it's an external hard disk drive that connects to a PC via either the parallel port or a PC Card (PCMCIA) slot. We tested the 1.39Gb PC Card version, and Opti also supplies a smaller 810Mb model.

The Databank is housed in a tough, slightly-larger-than-pocket-sized case that has a bakelite-like finish. Despite a complete lack of printed instructions, installing the Databank didn't cause us any headaches: simply plug the drive into a PC Card socket and Windows 95 takes care of the rest. It is allocated the next available drive letter and you then use it in exactly the same way as any other hard disk.

During our tests we managed to achieve a sustained transfer rate of just under 1.4Mbps, which compares very favourably with the best internal devices. Naturally, though, if you're buying the parallel port version you can expect much less impressive results.

While it's a little on the expensive side, the Databank is an ideal solution for notebook users who find they need some more, fast, storage space.



Opti Databank

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- 810Mb Databank: £386.58 (incl VAT)
- 1.39Gb Databank: £504.08 (incl VAT)
- Opti: 0181 507 1818

Adaptec MiniSCSI

We've looked at several external SCSI devices before in *What PC?* but, of course, they all need a PC with a SCSI adaptor card before they can be used. If you're not happy opening up your PC's case to fit such a card, or if you're a notebook user (in which case, you can't), unfortunately, no matter how desirable they seem, you can't use them.

Adaptec's MiniSCSI device is a handy piece of equipment that solves this problem. Basically, it's a length of cable with a parallel port connector at one end and a SCSI connector at the other. All you have to do is plug the cable into your PC's parallel port, then install the software and *voilà* – you have a SCSI interface.

The SCSI end of the cable consists of a fat plug with a separate parallel through-connector, so you can have a printer attached at the same time. The MiniSCSI works just like a standard SCSI adaptor and up to seven devices can be connected at once. Unfortunately, the limitations of the parallel port mean that data transfer times are nowhere near as fast, being limited to about 1Mbps.

Compared to an internal SCSI adaptor card, the MiniSCSI is slow and expensive but if you need occasional SCSI on the move, then it's ideal.



Adaptec MiniSCSI

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £176.25 (incl VAT)
- Adaptec: 01276 854500

VideoLogic GrafixStar 600

Aimed specifically at users of Windows 95 and games players, the GrafixStar 600 is the latest graphics card from VideoLogic. Based around a Tseng Labs controller, it uses a revolutionary new memory architecture called MDRAM, which the company claims makes it the fastest card it's ever produced.

The 600 employs the new Tseng Labs ET6000, a powerful 128-bit graphics engine with advanced multimedia support. Along with Windows acceleration, it boasts high-quality video playback and overlay capabilities, with interpolation to smooth out jagged edges. The card provides screen resolutions up to 1,600x1,200 pixels, with 24-bit colour at 800x600.

MDRAM is an enhanced version of DRAM that splits the memory into multiple, small, internal banks. VideoLogic claims this gives improved data throughput speed and efficiency, making the GrafixStar 600 as fast as expensive VRAM or WRAM-based boards. Under tests in the VNU Labs the card proved to be faster than the ever popular Matrox Millennium.

VideoLogic supplies software drivers for both Windows 3.1 and 95, complete with support for DirectDraw on the latter. You also get a useful utility called SmartTools for adjusting screen refresh rates, colour depth and so on. A full installation of both card and software takes roughly five minutes.

The GrafixStar 600 strikes a fantastic balance between price and performance. And it's British!



VideoLogic GrafixStar 600

Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £163.33 (RRP incl VAT)
- £135 (street price incl VAT)
- VideoLogic: 01923 260511

Rastermedia 3-in-1 Multimedia Accelerator and TV Tuner

If you've ever wanted to combine a 16-bit sound card with a high-performance display card, and turn your PC into a TV at the same time, this could well be for you.

The main card is a multimedia accelerator. This means that as well as combining a 16-bit sound card and video accelerator on the same PCI board – good news if you're short of slots – it's optimised to run two simultaneous video windows as well as accelerating normal graphics. Furthermore, it helps to synchronise playback of graphics and sound, as both are dealt with by the same board.

A MIDI and joystick interface is supplied, and an optional TV tuner and video input comes on a separate ISA card: this gave satisfactory reception.

Installation was easy, just following the excellent step-by-step instructions. However, we struggled to get the case back on our test machine (not a slimline model) because of the poor design of the TV ribbon cable, which plugs into the top edge of the cards.

The performance of the card, though, was fine. Sound quality was good with any files we tried, and we saw a noticeable increase in the quality of video clips from multimedia CD-ROMs.

Although the ribbon cable is poorly designed, overall it's a neat product and a good performer. At the price, though, it's a shame that the MPEG support is software only.



Rastermedia 3-in-1

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

- Accelerator board: £351.33 (incl VAT)
- TV Tuner board: £116.33 (incl VAT)
- Connectware: 01256 330030