

in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: a program that lets you design your own greetings cards, a portable CD-ROM drive, a radio-controlled mouse, a program for creating Web pages, a memory utility to help you get the most from your RAM, a digital video card and a 'surfboard' modem complete with wet suit

Micrografx CreaCard Plus

Christmas is now but a snowfall away and unsurprisingly there are plenty of new software packages in the shops trying to grab your attention. CreaCard is just one of them, but at least it has a seasonal bent. As the name suggests, it's a program that lets you create greetings cards and all manner of other stationery as well.

As a Windows-only program, CreaCard is unusual in that it completely dispenses with the Windows interface. What you get instead is an incredibly colourful – but not gaudy – front end with big, obvious function buttons. These lead to the various parts of CreaCard, from designing a simple poster to the Forget Me Not date reminder.

Creating cards and stationery couldn't be simpler. Select a design (from one of the hundreds included), add some text and then print it. You can even view animated folding instructions for each type of design.

At £39.95, CreaCard would be good value; at £29.95, it's an absolute snip. A small warning for parents though: one or two of the designs included might be considered a little risqué.

Easy to use, good to look at and produces impressive results; CreaCard Plus is a virtually flawless product, and if you've got a colour printer, it's a 'must buy'.

CreaCard Plus

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

- £29.95 (inc VAT)
- AIM: 0191 510 0201



Logitech Cordless MouseMan Pro

Desktops are fairly untidy places and trailing a mouse cable across them can cause problems. Trapping the cable under something usually requires a sharp (and risky) yank to free it, which is a bad idea if the cable is wrapped around a full cup of coffee. An infra-red mouse is one solution, but the line of sight needed between mouse and receiver still calls for a clear desktop.

Logitech's Cordless MouseMan Pro is another solution. It's a radio-controlled mouse, which means that the receiver can be put anywhere within two metres of it without having to worry about the signal getting through.

Moulded in the shape of a curvy wedge, the MouseMan Pro fits comfortably in your hand – as long as it's your right one. Two large oval buttons fall naturally under the fore and index fingers, leaving the thumb to rest over a third button on the mouse's left side.

The supplied driver allows each button to be configured in a variety of ways, most usefully with the third one. This can be used to trigger Logitech's HyperJump menu which provides quick access to useful Windows 95 functions.

A comfortable and versatile mouse that's perfect for untidy desks everywhere, including ones that are several feet away from a PC.

Cordless MouseMan Pro

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

- £59.99 (inc VAT)
- Logitech: 01306 734300



Digital A-Z: London street map and index on CD-ROM

Geographers' is moving with the times and has issued its A-Z maps of the M25-bordered area on CD-ROM. With its indexing, instant zoom facility and the ability to print maps of any area, you'd expect this CD to be a useful addition to your reference shelf. Unfortunately, it doesn't live up to its promise.

The zoom facility is quite intuitive, with a left-click zooming in and a right-click zooming out, and the largest scale has helpful detail like public buildings. But moving around the map isn't so easy because there are no scroll bars and the cursor keys jump the map a whole screen at a time.

Searching the index for streets or tube stations is swift, but it seems eccentric that while local authority tower blocks are named, you can't find landmarks like the Albert Hall.

The graphics are appalling. On screen, most views are reasonable, but printouts (limited to 250) are unacceptably blocky. Furthermore, because the maps are in black and white, they look very confused and are almost impossible to use for route-planning. Colour would have made them much clearer.

The printed maps are dreadful, there's no colour, and the interface is flawed. This CD is over-priced and almost useless for most purposes. Buy one of the books instead.

Digital A-Z: London street map

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

- £149 (inc VAT)
- Geographers' A-Z Map Company: 01732 781000



Chase Technology DiSQ-6

Many newer notebook PCs come fitted with an internal CD-ROM drive as standard, or at least the option of being able to install one at a later date. However, there are still plenty of notebooks around that don't have this luxury, and for the users of such machines the only solution is an external CD-ROM unit. The DiSQ-6 is just such a device, and it can hook up to any PC that has a PC Card (PCMCIA) socket.

Installing the DiSQ-6 takes a few seconds. If you're using Windows 95 you need do no more than slot the PC-Card into a Type II socket, attach the accompanying connecting cable to the CD-ROM drive itself and then insert the driver disk when prompted. The DiSQ-6 is assigned the next available drive letter and is then ready for use.

One of the DiSQ-6's most useful features is that it can draw its power from the computer, so you don't need to carry around a bulky power supply unit. The device will also run from four AA batteries, or an optional mains adaptor.

During our tests we managed a sustained data transfer rate of 891K/s (kilobytes per second), which is much the same as any other internal six-speed CD-ROM.

The DiSQ-6 is a great, although not cheap, solution for any notebook user wanting to add a CD-ROM drive to their machine.

DiSQ-6

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

- £410.08 (inc VAT)
- Chase Technology: 01274 225000



CD Direct EasyTutor Learn Office 97

Although it's not on the market yet, the time is fast approaching when Microsoft Office 97 will be released. If you'd like some help to get you started, you might be interested in this training software.

You have the option of installing Learn Office 97 on your hard disk or running it from the CD-ROM. The latter choice will slow things down, but the speed was acceptable on a 486DX2/66. Once you start, opt for an overview with a 'Concepts' presentation, or get stuck in with the 'How To' modules.

Most topics get a thorough treatment. You can run a demonstration to show you what to do, or click 'Try It' to go through the steps yourself. You are talked through everything you need to do, and if you still manage to get things wrong, a large red arrow helpfully shows you where to click.

Learn Office 97 keeps track of which topics you've covered, and shows you which topics are applicable to the level you want to cover. Usefully, features new to Office 97 are highlighted in red, and tests are designed in a multiple-choice format.

Our review copy was a beta version with several glitches. Assuming these are sorted out for the final version, Learn Office 97 looks like being one of the more impressive on-line tutors available.

EasyTutor Learn Office 97

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

- £29.99 (inc VAT)
- CD Direct: 0800 317864



MicroVision WebExpress

Everyone seems to be leaping on the World Wide Web bandwagon and shops are full of programs that help you make your own Web pages.

One of the latest offerings is WebExpress from MicroVision. Claimed to be suitable for beginners and experts alike, WebExpress requires no knowledge of Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML), the language used for creating Web pages.

The software looks and works like a basic Windows word processor and when you start the program, you go straight into a blank document. This is rather disconcerting if you're a complete beginner and it would have been helpful if MicroVision had included some example files to use as templates.

The only documentation is an electronic Help file, which is patchy to say the least. There's a handy 'Before you Get Started' section, giving you a useful overview of Web pages and sites. The following 'Getting Started' section isn't as good because it lacks any focused tutorial. Presumably, MicroVision thinks this product is entirely intuitive. We'd disagree.

However, it works. With no previous knowledge of HTML, our guinea pig produced a basic Web page in a few minutes.

Although it's not as easy to use as MicroVision claims, WebExpress does what's needed. If you're after more than the absolute basics, you have to be prepared to study the help sections carefully.

WebExpress

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

- £57.58 (inc VAT)
- The Thompson Partnership: 01889 564601



Quarterdeck MagnaRAM 97

MagnaRAM 97 is a memory utility designed to help you get more from your memory under Windows. It's also supposed to speed up the loading of 32-bit applications in Windows 95. You can use MagnaRAM with Windows 3.1 or 3.11, or with Windows 95, although some of the features are applicable to Windows 95 only.

The software is easy to install from the two floppy disks supplied. And once you've restarted Windows, there's nothing more for you to do, so it's certainly easy to use.

MagnaRAM uses a number of techniques to improve memory automatically, with data compression playing a key part. The control panel shows the figures on improved performance, but it would be difficult to check their accuracy.

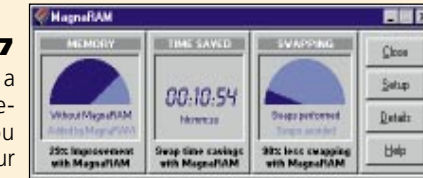
While we didn't notice a dramatic improvement in processing time in our tests (using a PC with 16Mb of RAM), MagnaRAM typically reported a saving of five or six minutes of work time over three- or four-hour periods of activity. These figures may improve if you use memory-hungry applications or if you already have a lot of RAM. Quarterdeck, MagnaRAM's maker, says the more memory you have, the more improvement you'll see.

If you're desperate to squeeze every last drop of performance from your PC, you may want to invest in this package. But give priority to buying additional RAM first.

MagnaRAM 97

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

- £39.99 (inc VAT)
- Quarterdeck UK: 01245 496699



Getting onto the Internet with Pipex Dial: The Rough Guide

When we tested Pipex Dial 3.0 in the August 1996 issue of *What PC?*, we rated it highly for its performance and ease of use. Now Pipex has repackaged Dial 3.0 and included Rough Guide's *The Internet & World Wide Web*. This compact book covers all you're likely to want to know about the Internet.

Dial 3.0 gets you connected to the Internet quickly and easily. It offers Netscape Navigator 2.0 for Web browsing, e-mail and news. It also includes Telnet, FTP and Ping utilities. If you have a V34+ modem, you can make use of dial-up connection speeds of up to 33,600bps (bits per second).

The Rough Guide covers the basics of what the Internet is and what it offers, using plain language to do so. It tells you what software you'll need and why. It also explains how to choose a good Internet Service Provider (ISP) and there are guides to Web sites and Newsgroups. There's background material, explaining the history of the Internet and some of the jargon you're likely to come across. This book is easy to read and lovely to dip into.

Dial 3.0 makes it easy for you to connect to the Internet. By including the Rough Guide book, Pipex has made a good service even better.



- £19.99 Rough Guide Pack; £17.63 monthly subscription to Pipex (prices inc VAT)
- Pipex Dial: 0500 474739

Pipex Dial: The Rough Guide

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

Owl Video AV Mate

The AV Mate is a neat little device that enables you to watch television or videos on your PC monitor. It comprises a small box and some cables (including a power supply), a pair of small stereo speakers and a remote control. You will need to make sure you have either a television antenna (UHF) or a cable TV point.



To set up AV Mate, you simply need to plug the box in between your monitor and the PC and then use the remote control to tune in the television channels. The whole process of setting up is remarkably straightforward, which is just as well because the user manual is atrocious. Small and flimsy, it reads as though it has been translated through a series of obscure languages before reaching English.

Using AV Mate couldn't be simpler. There's a button on the remote control to switch between TV and PC and video. In our tests, the picture quality was excellent. The sound through the small speakers, although tinny, was quite acceptable. What's really nice about this gadget is that it has no impact on the way your PC works – there's no software to fill up your hard disk and there's no drain on the processing power.

A great little device, but at this price a high-quality television is a better bet.

- £468.83 (inc VAT)
- Owl Video Systems: 01825 766123

AV Mate

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

Fast Electronics FPS 60

Until recently the high price of digital video cards has meant that their use was restricted to professional multimedia developers. But, at £586, the FPS 60 is reasonably priced, and anyone with a serious interest can use it to start editing their own videos on a PC.

We had few problems fitting the device into our 90MHz Pentium machine, other than having to try several different port addresses and interrupts before everything worked properly. We also had to adjust the video display, because the FPS 60 overlays the live signal on top of the Windows screen and things don't always line up as they should. On-screen adjustment sliders are provided to alter the X and Y offsets, and PLL and intensity.

There's a VGA socket on the back of the card, the idea being that you attach your monitor to the FPS 60. Everything else plugs into a 26-pin multi-socket, via a cable splitter, which provides VGA throughput from your existing graphics card, and connectors for video in and out, audio out and so on. The FPS 60 supports PAL, SECAM and NTSC television standards.

Fast Electronics supplies its own video-grabbing software, but most users will want to use Adobe Premiere LE which is also bundled with the card and has become the industry-standard digital editing software.

Adequate performance and features for most video-editing needs at a price that's relatively accessible.



- £586 (inc VAT)
- Fast Electronics 0181 968 0411

Fast Electronics FPS 60

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

Psion Dacom Surfer

Modems are usually dull affairs; triumphs of function over form. Not so the Psion Dacom Surfer – it's a 33,600bps (bits per second) modem inspired by the shape of a surfboard, complete with a 'wet suit' cover.



About the size and the shape of a squashed bar of soap, the matt-black Surfer's design is actually rather stylish. Psion Dacom has done away with the plethora of cryptic LEDs that usually adorn a modem's surface and the Surfer makes do with just three – power, on-line and data. A small power button sits alongside these.

The Surfer has sockets at the rear for power (for the external mains adaptor) and line in but there isn't one for a telephone, and Psion Dacom doesn't supply the necessary line splitter for sharing a line with both modem and phone. There's also a socket for connection to the PC's sound card so that the Surfer's voice features can be used and it has a small microphone built in to its case for this purpose.

Installing the Surfer is straightforward, thanks to the installation disk and clearly written manual. CompuServe, AOL and Pipex Dial membership packs are included, as is software for data, fax and voice communications.

It may not be the cheapest modem around but the Psion Dacom Surfer is certainly the most stylish – and, at 33,600bps, it's also one of the fastest.

- £179 (inc VAT)
- Psion Dacom: 01908 261686

Psion Dacom surfer

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