Internet access software

AOL 8.0

For existing AOL users or those who want a simple way to access the internet, email and exclusive content, AOL 8.0 is the latest version of this popular web access software. It sports a different look and feel, plus plenty of features to justify the upgrade, including extras to personalise your AOL desktop and to help counter spam and pop-up web advertising.

Perhaps the most innovative feature is AOL Companion. This is a mini window that sits on your desktop all the time, even when the AOL software isn't running or is minimised. It alerts you to new mail and instant messages, as well as giving access to a host of useful content such as film listings, maps and reference site Yell.com plus your buddy and address books. But if you find it intrusive, there's an option which lets you banish it from the desktop.

First launch

AOL 8.0 offers a much simpler way to store your password. Rather than having to dig around in Preferences, you simple check a box and your details are stored for automatic logon.

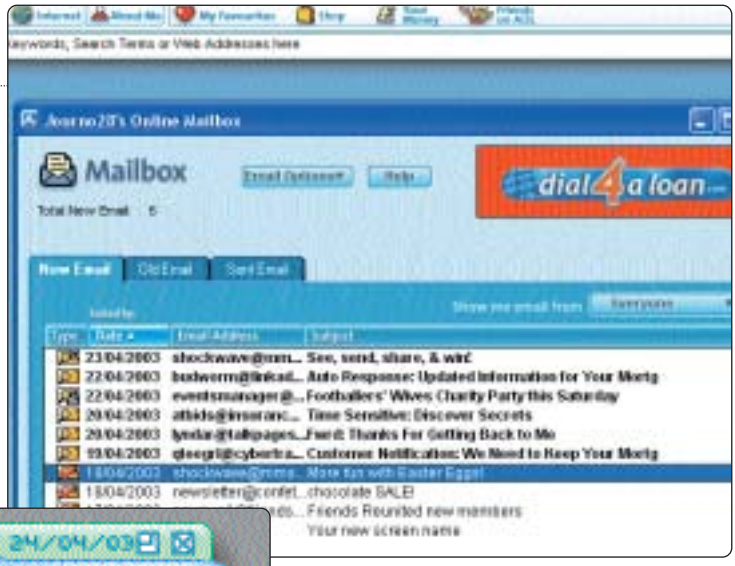
The Welcome screen is due a major overhaul, although in our review version this wasn't complete. One useful addition is that it flags up how many new mail messages you have, rather than simply saying 'you have email'. The mailbox itself looks different too: unread messages are marked in bold, which is handy if you are trawling through tons of emails.

You can also choose to show messages only from specific groups, such as People I Know, which means everyone in your address book. Alternatively, you can view Bulk Senders – for example, mass mailers from retailers like Amazon or eBookers – or take a look at emails from Unknown Senders. If you fall out with a friend you can block all messages from them. You can now add an away message, too, a default note that lets anyone who emails you know you aren't around.

Blitz the pop-ups

To cut down on unwanted messages, AOL has introduced a Report Spam feature that allows you to alert it about nuisance senders at the click of a button. Doing so also sends the spammer a message flagging your email address as invalid, while blocking future messages from that address. AOL plans to tackle spam at source, as well, taking issue with ISPs responsible for the worst offenders.

A new web pop-up preferences feature allows you to put a stop to irritating online pop-up ads.



→ Unread emails in AOL 8.0 are highlighted in bold

← The AOL Companion alerts you to new email and instant messages, as well as offering access to useful content. It can be minimised to make it even smaller

You can choose to block all pop-ups or to allow them only on chosen sites – for example, flight offers on airline web pages. You can set the software to play a sound every time a pop-up is blocked – irritating, but at least you have the option to stay informed.

Personalisation options let you change the look of the AOL desktop, email and instant messages with new wallpapers, themes, sounds and emoticons (those little smiley faces).

If you have connection problems, the auto-reconnect feature could be a real bonus. This attempts to automatically re-establish a link if your online session is interrupted, taking you seamlessly back to where you left off.

Verdict

Existing AOL users will welcome the new features. They address a lot of the shortcomings of the previous version, and the Companion is useful if a bit intrusive. First time users probably won't be blown away, but they should find it a simple, intuitive and attractive gateway to the internet, email and AOL's own content. ■

Ursula Seymour

AOL 8.0

- ☐ AOL: 0800 376 5432
- ☐ www.aol.co.uk
- ☐ from £15.99 per month for AOL subscription; software is free

System requirements

Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 60MB RAM for 98/Me, 64MB for 2000, 128MB for XP; 200MB hard disk space; 800x600 screen resolution; IE 5.0 or above for 98/Me/2000, IE 6.0 for XP

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

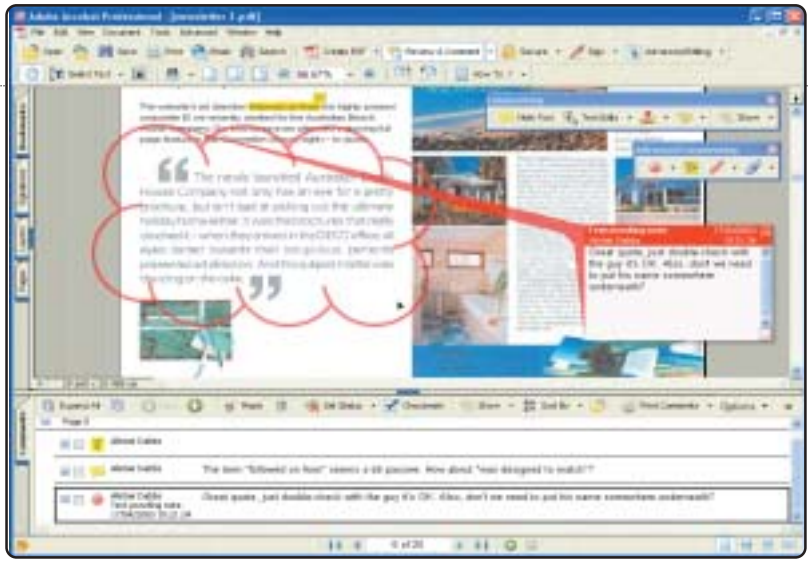
Electronic document creation software

Adobe Acrobat 6.0

Despite being impossible to categorise according to normal software conventions, Adobe Acrobat and its PDF file format have enjoyed runaway success. The imminent upgrade, version 6.0, makes the creating and handling PDFs easier and more powerful.

For the uninitiated, Acrobat is a package which can turn any document on your PC into a PDF file. These PDFs can then be opened, viewed and printed by anyone running the free Adobe Reader program (previously named Acrobat Reader), whether on a PC running Windows or Linux, or several other computer platforms including Sun, Mac and Unix.

This makes PDF a valuable cross-platform format for publishing electronic documents on CD or the web, while its PostScript origins have made PDF the preferred delivery format for high-end prepress. It also works well as a collaborative document format for which Acrobat provides annotation and commenting tools, either applied directly or remotely over a network.



↑ Annotation and commenting functions have been extended and notes now clearly point to their associated origins on the page

↑ The Print dialog window provides a page-specific Preview thumbnail along with more intelligent Page Scaling options to ensure perfect printouts every time

Distiller distilled

One major complication with previous versions of Acrobat is that you had to rely on Acrobat Distiller to create PDFs from other applications. While Distiller still exists in Acrobat 6.0, Adobe has made its workings completely transparent through the Adobe PDF print driver.

Spend a few minutes setting up Distiller once and you may never have to run it again. Better still, Acrobat 6.0 adds Create PDF toolbars to Microsoft Office applications, including Outlook and Internet Explorer, so producing PDFs from everyday work can be a one-button job.

Acrobat's interface has been redesigned with drop-down button menus to give it a friendly and intuitive feel. This works really well for beginners and in no way hinders the expert Acrobat user either. A How To panel on the right – similar to the one in Photoshop Elements – provides quick instructions for common tasks as well as links to the Help system, which now launches in a separate web browser window.

The collaborative tools, which let colleagues mark up a circulated PDF with annotations and send the overlaid comments back to you, have been extended and improved. There are more shape drawing tools and a clearer arrangement of notes. The Comments pane now stretches horizontally across the bottom of the screen so you can read and edit them more easily.

Ironically, recent Acrobat releases were criticised by publishing folk for not being functional enough while office users thought the package top-heavy. Adobe's solution is to split the product line: Professional offers PDF editing, colour management and prepress tools, while Standard focuses on creating PDFs and collaborative functions, along with support for important document features such as security encryption.

Most readers will be happy with the cheaper Standard edition, although users of Microsoft Project, Visio and AutoCAD might like the Pro version's ability to create multilayered PDFs from their technical documents. On top of this, Adobe has thrown in a barrage of extras including a PDF Optimizer for tighter file compression, a smarter approach to digital certificates and even a Read Out Aloud voice synthesis feature.

Verdict

This is not just the best version of Acrobat yet, it's also the most extensive upgrade since version 3.0. While the Professional edition of Acrobat 6.0 seems overblown for everyday work, the much cheaper Standard edition is a compelling package for Microsoft Office users in a collaborative environment. For complete PDF production, electronic forms creation and technical design output, though, Acrobat 6.0 Professional is an incredibly versatile tool for power users. ■

Alistair Dabbs

Adobe Acrobat 6.0

- ☐ Adobe: 020 8606 4001
- ☐ www.adobe.co.uk
- ☐ Professional edition £355, upgrade £109; Standard edition £235, upgrade £75

System requirements

Pentium processor; Windows NT4(SP6)/2000(SP2)/XP; 64MB RAM; 245MB hard disk space

Ease of use

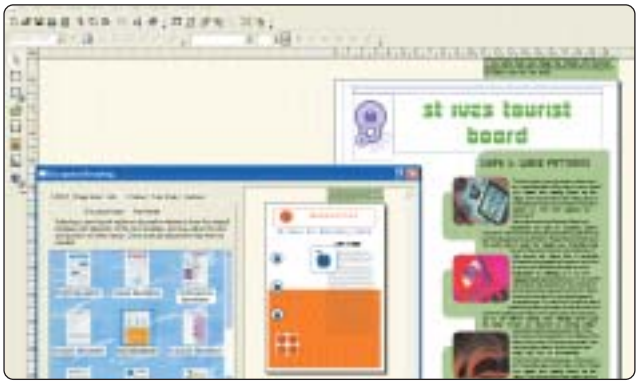
Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Desktop publishing suite

Publisher 2.0



↑ Publisher 2.0 offers a range of templates, wizards and step-by-step tutorials to start your project

One of the main uses for computers is to create paper documentation – flyers, brochures, newsletters, letterheads and so on. Although a modern word processor can handle most tasks, it is often helpful to have a dedicated DTP (desktop publishing) program.

Publisher 2.0 is a collection of applications designed to cover just about every aspect of DTP. In addition to the main layout program (also named Publisher, though in this case 4.2), in the box you will find Draw 3.0 for creating graphics, Photo FX for editing images, PowerText 3D for text effects, an extra CD with 100,000 clip art images and photos, and utilities for handling fonts, browsing images and taking screenshots.

For such a low cost comprehensive suite, it would appear churlish to complain, and in many respects the target user will generally be pleased with what he or she gets. Anyone looking to upgrade from Microsoft Publisher or Serif PagePlus, however, should be aware that you get what you pay for: Publisher generally handles tasks well, but with little flair.

For a novice, however, this is probably enough. Plenty of tutorials and wizards move you from initial concept to final product, and all the elements of this suite work well on this level. Most of the templates or sample designs are slightly garish, and it's unlikely that users of Publisher 2.0 will win design awards; budget competitors (such as Serif and Microsoft) are generally better in this respect.

Verdict

Publisher 2.0, then, is a no-nonsense package that will cover all requirements – from brochures to web pages – for the occasional user who does not wish to spend too much on a DTP application. We would still recommend PagePlus at this end of the market, but novice designers will probably find this a helpful set of tools. ■

Jason Whittaker

Publisher 2.0

- ☐ GSP: 01480 460 600
- ☐ www.gsp.cc
- ☐ £41.20 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium 166; Windows 9x/Me/2000/XP; 16MB RAM (32MB recommended); 170MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Speech recognition utility

Dragon NaturallySpeaking 7.0 Preferred

← NS' familiar user interface and DragonPad, the speech-enabled WordPad lookalike, are both carried over from the previous version

Another year, another release of NaturallySpeaking. The new version now fully integrates the codebase of the old L&H VoiceXpress, so promises to be the best edition yet. Indeed ScanSoft makes some bold claims, saying that it's 15 percent more accurate than before. But as 6.0 boasted recognition accuracies in the high 90s, take that with a pinch of salt.

What we guess ScanSoft means is that 7.0 makes 15 percent fewer mistakes. This is quite possible – with only a 10-minute enrolment under its belt, NaturallySpeaking 7.0 rarely gets a word wrong if you enunciate clearly. For the best recognition rates, let it trawl documents for words not in its extensive vocabulary.

Speed is another claimed area of improvement – it can take as little as 10 seconds to load the software and get dictating. This does slow down operating system boot times, as portions of the software are stored in memory, however once it's loaded you can dictate at up to 160wpm. If you can manage to talk this fast you can probably earn a living reading out the T&Cs on financial services ads.

Other new features include Natural Punctuation, which makes a fair stab at obviating the need to say 'comma' or 'full-stop', and support for Pocket PCs as dictating devices – when docked, the dictated notes are automatically transcribed and turned into Microsoft Word documents. It still offers tight integration with Microsoft Office and will support Office 2003 when released.

Speech recognition is one of the few applications that stresses a processor. We installed NaturallySpeaking 7.0 on a 1.1GHz Athlon-based PC with 384MB of RAM and it still felt a bit sluggish.

Verdict

NaturallySpeaking 7.0 is an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary upgrade. Nevertheless, it continues to offer ever higher recognition accuracies. Those that spend a lot of their working life dictating should ignore it at their peril. ■

Roger Gann

NaturallySpeaking 7.0 Preferred

- ☐ ScanSoft: 0118 963 7464
- ☐ www.scansoft.co.uk
- ☐ £128 ex VAT

System requirements

500MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/Me/NT/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space; SoundBlaster sound card or equivalent; Internet Explorer 6.0

Ease of use

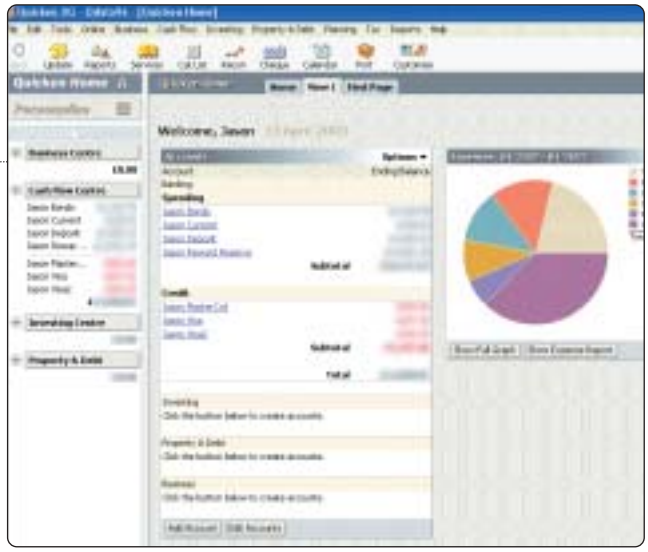
Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Personal finance software

Quicken XG



→ Quicken XG now provides a slick and proficient interface for your personal finance records and online banking

During the mid 1990s, Intuit's Quicken dominated personal finance software – hardly surprising because, at least until Microsoft released Money, there was no alternative worth speaking of. So important was Quicken that, long before it considered the internet worth fighting over, Microsoft even risked antitrust investigations by attempting to push through a buyout of Intuit.

Since those days Quicken has lost some ground, particularly as Microsoft invested considerable time and effort improving its own software. It was Microsoft that took advantage of the internet to integrate online banking within Money and Intuit was only slowly able to follow suit. Intuit also learnt a few more lessons from Microsoft in terms of improving the interface of Quicken, providing a one-stop home page where users could view accounts at a glance.

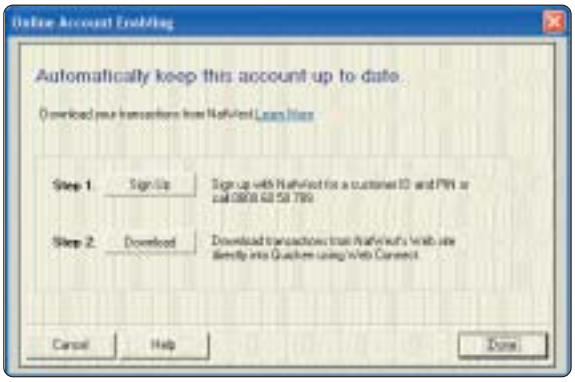
Slick and powerful

The good news for Quicken users is that Quicken XG has embedded all Intuit's latest improvements in a slick and powerful package. The not so good news is that upgrading does not come cheap. Nonetheless, for experienced users or Quicken novices XG is a program well worth considering.

Quicken includes all the tools you would expect for managing accounts, portfolios and budgets. At its heart are a series of registers for various accounts, where you can record entries to and debits from them. In addition, calendars and bill minders enable you to set up routine entries for regular payments – and you can automate the whole process of keeping tabs of your account by using Quicken's online service, Advantage.

In addition to these basic tools, Quicken includes extras intended to help with budgeting for the future such as planning tools for property and debt or saving and finances. If you want to work out a plan to minimise the cost of a loan, for example, fire up the Loan Calculator and enter variables such as the loan amount and interest rates. You can also track investment portfolios and download regular stock quotes straight to the program.

With subsequent releases, Quicken has offered more and more for small businesses. The Business Centre now allows you to track accounts receivable, accounts payable and other business expenses or finances from one easy-to-use window. Particularly helpful is the Business Alert tracker that reminds you of unpaid (or payable) bills due beyond a certain time. The Cash Flow centre also enables you to more simply track incomings and outgoings.



↑ A year's subscription to Advantage, which allows online communication with existing bank accounts, comes as part of Quicken XG

XG Advantage

Quicken includes a couple of hotlinks to Motley Fool and TaxCalc, though these are not especially helpful particularly as the link to TaxCalc is just an advert to buy the product. More useful is the year's subscription to Advantage, which allows online communication with existing bank accounts as well as quick downloading of such things as stock and share quotes.

Verdict

Advantage will probably be the main reason for existing users to upgrade – and this depends on how well your particular bank works online (the main players should pose no problem). Reconciling accounts simply becomes a one-click process as Quicken can integrate very well with some banks (we were unable to try all, not having accounts with each of them).

How much you think you will use this sort of service determines to some degree whether it is worth upgrading to Quicken XG: it also means that you will need to pay an annual fee to Intuit to use Advantage. Nonetheless, after a slow start the company has finally provided a polished interface for online banking.

If you don't need this Quicken is starting to look slightly expensive compared to Money, but it still shows how a well-thought through package can provide some real competition. ■

Jason Whittaker

Quicken XG

- ☐ Intuit: 0845 606 2161
- ☐ www.intuit.co.uk
- ☐ £49.95 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium 133 (PII 300 recommended); Windows 9x/Me/NT 4/2000/XP; 32MB RAM (64MB recommended); 70MB hard disk space; internet connection for Advantage services

Ease of use

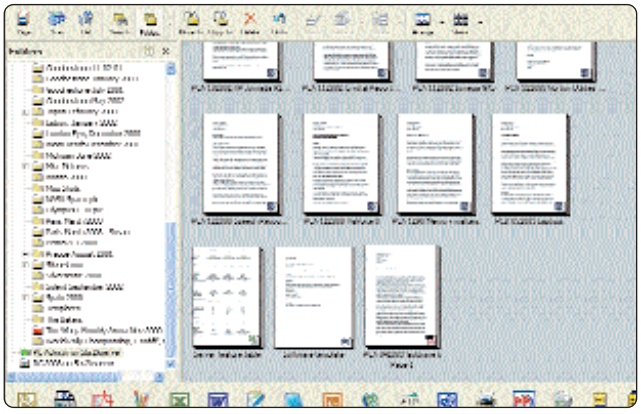
Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Document manager

PaperPort Pro 9.0 Office



PaperPort has come a long way since it first shipped, bundled with the original Visioneer scanner. While it is still a document manager, relying on thumbnail images of scanned documents to assist in location and identification, along the way it has picked up no end of bells and whistles and now extends its reach to business networks. There are two versions of the latest release – Deluxe and Office – with the former offering fewer PDF options and costing half as much.

↑ The interface remains largely unchanged but in any event it's pretty easy to quickly get up and running

PaperPort Pro 9.0 Office, which we looked at, is aimed at users who do a lot of scanning and have to cope with a mountain of digital documents stored in a wide range of formats. It sits, if you like, between your scanner/OCR software and your office apps, easing the flow of tasks flowing between them as well as helping you keep track of where everything is.

With an Explorer-like interface, it's fairly easy to use. It's smart, too. If you drag a scanned TIF file to your word processor, PaperPort's OCR turns it into editable text. You can, for example, scan a form and fill it in on screen.

The big new feature of 9.0 is PDF support – you can now scan to PDF as well as print, edit and distribute PDFs. Options include annotations and highlights, emailing PDF files as attachments and converting static PDFs into electronic forms. PaperPort can also convert mixed document types into PDF email attachments, allowing the drag-and-drop creation of custom PDF files.

PaperPort Pro 9.0 Office

- ScanSoft: 0118 963 7464
- www.scansoft.co.uk
- £119.15 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium PC; Windows 98/Me/NT/2000/XP; 32/64/128MB of RAM; 80MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

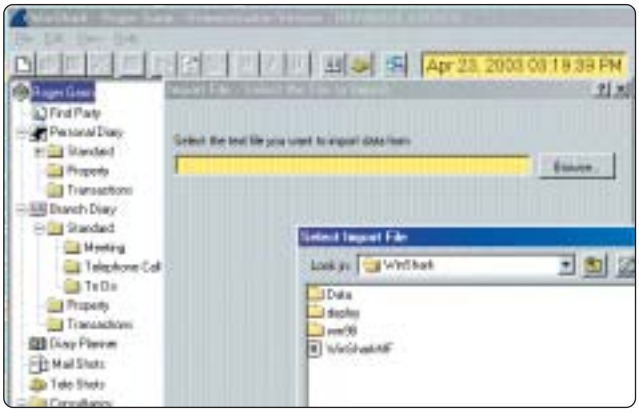
Verdict

PaperPort Pro 9.0 Office is a versatile tool for managing and manipulating paper and electronic documents, images, PDFs, faxes and other files. The Office version maybe overkill for the home user but, if nothing else, it's a cheap way of getting documents in to PDF format. ■

Roger Gann

Customer relationship management software

WinShark crm



Keeping your customers sweet is an essential part of business and to do this properly it helps if you run a CRM (customer relationship management) system to monitor all your dealings with your clients.

↑ In this day and age, we've come to expect a wider range of data import options than text or CSV

Apart from keeping track of contacts and correspondence, WinShark crm includes support for mailshots, staff admin, helpdesk and call centre tasks, and telephony interfacing. It's aimed at smaller businesses but can handle 100-plus users and over 100,000 customer entries.

First impressions count and the absence of any printed or online documentation, plus the lack of an auto-install setup didn't impress. Browsing the CD revealed the folders which contained the requisite setup files, however.

WinShark is essentially a database program with a CRM front end and to this extent it installs a DBMS (database management system) engine, Mimer SQL, which runs in the background. The first time WinShark runs you're asked to complete a questionnaire which tailors the package to the particular needs of your business. After a reboot, you're presented with an Explorer-like interface with a task tree on the left.

You can import customer data directly, but this facility is limited as it only supports Text or CSV – more common formats such as XLS (Excel), DBF (dBase) or Outlook PST email archives, are conspicuous by their absence.

WinShark crm

- WinShark: 02380 629 179
- www.winshark.com
- £100 ex VAT per user

System requirements

300MHz Pentium III; Windows 9x/NT/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 100MB hard disk space

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Verdict

WinShark's big problem is that, while it will do the job, it has too many rough edges and lacks user-friendliness. There are much better CRM tools such as the slightly dearer GoldMine 6.0, which is not only easier to use but is a far more polished application overall. ■

Roger Gann