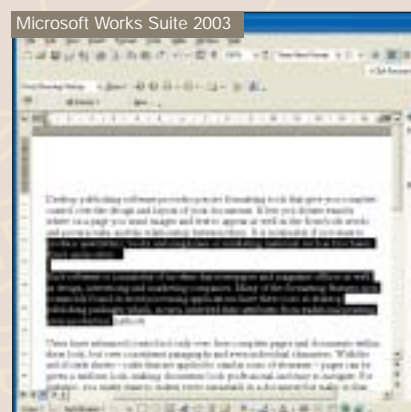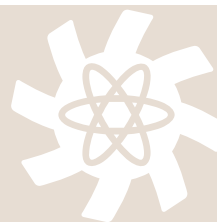# Best software for 2003

You can do anything on your PC as long as you have the right software, but it can be hard to know which applications are most deserving of your cash. Rosemary Haworth and Nel Staveley-Dick round up 50 of the best programs you'll be needing this year

With a fresh year now well under way, it's time to think about what you want to achieve and how to get the most from your PC over the next 12 months. Much of the time *PC Advisor* concentrates on helping you choose the most suitable hardware products, but perhaps what you really need is an idea of what will enable you to get the best from the computing kit you already have – in other words, software. We've selected the best applications on the market today. Not all the packages are brand new but, without exception, they are products that will stand the test of time.

We've split the software into 10 broad categories, ranging from the purely practical such as office suites and mainstream business applications to more creative programs for web and desktop publishing, image editing as well as audio and video authoring. We've also included software that provides PC protection – whether from an external attack or by helping rescue your data after a crash.

Within each section there's one overall winner. However, every entrant has something unique to offer, whether it's unmatched user control, exceptional features, peerless integration with complementary applications or, in several cases, outstanding value. So without further ado, here are our 50 best software packages for 2003.

Lotus SmartSuite Millennium 9.8

Corel WordPerfect Office 2002

Microsoft Works Suite 2003

Office suites

Corel WordPerfect Office 2002 Professional Edition

WordPerfect was the top processor for years until it was toppled by Microsoft Word. Snapped up by Corel and combined with the spreadsheet app Quattro Pro and the Presentations package, it's now a first-class office suite that's better in many respects than Microsoft Office. WordPerfect can even create PDFs and its XML support, clean HTML code and good web-editing features make it a reasonable choice for web design.

Quattro Pro is a competent spreadsheet program, and Presentations is only bettered by the very latest release of Microsoft PowerPoint. The Professional Edition also has a superbly powerful relational database called Paradox that leaves Microsoft Access standing.
☐ $489 ($249 upgrade) Professional Edition; $389 ($189 upgrade) Standard Edition; www.corel.com

Lotus SmartSuite Millennium 9.8

Veteran users will be pleased to hear that SmartSuite hasn't changed that much since Lotus released version 9.0 a few years back. Its word processing,

spreadsheet and database packages remain impressive and the inclusion of IBM's ViaVoice speech-recognition software, the powerful Notes email client and Organizer information manager are further reasons to choose this suite.

Successive releases have improved features such as the dictionary, fixed the odd glitch and smoothed compatibility with other applications – most notably in this release with Office XP.
☐ £184 boxed, £160 download; www.lotus.com

Microsoft Office XP Professional Edition

This all-singing, all-dancing office suite provides the full gamut of heavyweight apps from Word, Excel and PowerPoint to the contact and diary manager Outlook and database package Access. Better integrated and easier to use than previous incarnations, Microsoft lets you be the boss rather than handholding you through spelling and formatting.

We're ambivalent about Smart Tags, though, and be prepared for tantrums when it comes to product activation time.
☐ Single-user version £519 (£269 upgrade); www.microsoft.com/uk/office

Microsoft Works Suite 2003

PC ADVISOR GOLD

Microsoft Office may seem the obvious choice for a general-purpose software suite but Works has many of the same applications – and its £100 price tag makes it an attractive alternative. Works Suite 7.0 offers a database, calendar, spreadsheet, address book and two image editors as well as Word 2002, Money 2003, Encarta 2003 Standard and AutoRoute 2002.
☐ £100; www.microsoft.com/uk

Sun StarOffice 6.0

StarOffice is a powerful set of programs which includes the quartet of office suite regulars – a word processor, spreadsheet, presentations package and database application. Its major plus is that it costs a nominal sum (it's free if you don't mind the hefty download) and is likely to appeal to thrifty businesses.

There's no need to worry about compatibility issues, either. StarOffice can read all Microsoft files, while its Impress presentations can be launched on systems using other suites.
☐ £53 boxed, free download; http://uk.sun.com

Desktop publishing

Adobe InDesign 2.0

Markedly better than the first version of InDesign, this second release could threaten Quark's position as the leading professional DTP (desktop publishing) package. Typographically, it's better than XPress and Adobe's photo editing and vector graphics heritage pays off when it comes to images. Photoshop and Illustrator users will recognise the powerful but user-friendly editing tools. InDesign also has an Eyedropper: select a coloured pixel and it instantly emulates the shade – perfect for colour matching.
☐ £555; www.adobe.co.uk

Corel Ventura 10.0

Ventura's Publisher was one of the original DTP programs and version 10.0 is a real return to form after years in the shadow of QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign. It provides advanced control over lengthy documents, boasts XML database support as well as comprehensive footnote, chapter and indexing options. There's also some reassuring preflight checking tools.
☐ £552; www.corel.com

Greenstreet Publisher 4.0 Gold

Publisher offers extensive templates and a well-stocked graphics library, plus

Adobe InDesign 2.0

QuarkXPress 5.0

there's a nod to pricier packages with the inclusion of spreadsheet, charting, barcoding and contact organisation features. Good stylesheet provision is built in while clip art, digital photos and supplied or user-defined 'design snippets' can be imported and manipulated at will.
☐ £50; www.greenstreetsoftware.com

QuarkXPress 5.0

The darling of the publishing and graphic design press, QuarkXPress now has real competition from Adobe's InDesign. XPress is still the package of choice, though, for aspiring journalists, editors and page layout artists.

The software's approach is unintuitive to the uninitiated but allows incredible control over both text and graphic

attributes. XPress boasts impressive file format and colour model support plus infinitely customisable master pages and stylesheets.
☐ £990 (£321 upgrade); www.quark.co.uk

Serif PagePlus 7.0

A relatively inexpensive package, PagePlus is easy to get to grips with, not least because it provides wizards and 1,400 templates for almost any paper-based design. These can be called upon at any stage, while the Studio toolbar allows you to customise your designs to perfection. Objects of the most irregular shape can be endlessly manipulated and filled almost any way you choose, with text flow updated accordingly.
☐ £51; www.serif.co.uk

Graphics editors

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0

Adobe Illustrator 10.0

Time was when Illustrator was primarily up against Macromedia Freehand in the vector graphics market. These days it not only has to compete against budget-priced, ever-more capable drawing packages but also against a clutch of dedicated web design packages. And since Macromedia came up with Flash animation Adobe has had a lot to prove.

Thankfully, Illustrator's lengthy list of drawing features is more than up to the job. Layers, transparency and tools for

creating and amending symbols and 'slicing' illustrations, plus the ability to preserve text layers in an editable state make this package well worth the investment.
☐ £295; www.adobe.co.uk

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0

Adobe earned plenty of accolades for this feature-packed program that combines the best elements of Photoshop and dispenses with the advanced output options few of us will ever use. This keeps the price down but it doesn't make

Web design packages

Adobe GoLive 6.0

GoLive has been spruced up recently, gaining a new site management wizard, web workgroup server support and a cross-media feature. With these highly impressive additions, the progress from a simple layout package to powerful web development application has been remarkably smooth. The addition of the server software will greatly increase GoLive's appeal in mixed-media production environments, making it suitable for casual users and those who can write HTML code.
☐ £279; www.adobe.co.uk

Macromedia Dreamweaver MX

Dreamweaver used to be available in two versions: Standard and UltraDev. With Macromedia's latest offering, Dreamweaver MX, you effectively get both of these apps as well as its HomeSite package. Whether you approach web design from a creative or programming background you're going to require specific features from the application – and Macromedia delivers. Offering design, coding and Dreamweaver 4.0, MX essentially gives you three applications for the price of one. A true bargain.
☐ £291; www.macromedia.com

Adobe GoLive 6.0

Xara Webstyle 3.1

Macromedia HomeSite 5.0

Visual web editors are great but sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves and write HTML code. The answer? Macromedia HomeSite. It colourcodes any HTML you type and has an extensive Help section. If it's a simple and intuitive HTML editor you're after then this is an excellent choice.
☐ £81; www.macromedia.com

Microsoft FrontPage 2002

If you enjoy other Microsoft apps then it's worth considering FrontPage as your web design package. Although Dreamweaver offers more user control, the intuitive FrontPage is ideal for beginners as there's templates and guidance galore. This latest version has improved

publishing options and there's a wider range of image and content formats.
☐ £140 (£80 upgrade); www.microsoft.com/uk/office

Xara Webstyle 3.1

Webstyle stands out from other budget packages as it handles everything from simple graphics processing to JavaScript-enhanced functions with fantastic results. Its interface is strikingly clear and usable, but the real stunner is the quality and professionalism of the graphics. Webstyle offers a totally code-free way of producing advanced navigation bars, banners and rollovers plus a whole range of other graphics. It's the low-cost way to create expert sites with visual sparkle.
☐ £49; www.xara.com

the floating palette setup and dizzying array of editing options any easier to master. Thankfully, Adobe has added some decent context-sensitive support and several more brushes including a Selection brush that lets you 'paint' to designate a selected area in an image.
☐ £69; www.adobe.co.uk

CorelDraw Suite 11.0

CorelDraw 11.0 is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, but still offers a level of sophistication and a range of features unchallenged by other suites. The three primary graphic applications – Draw, PhotoPaint and Rave 2.0 – would be more

than enough for most suites, but Corel bundles CorelTrace, CorelCapture and BitStream Font Navigator 4.0 utilities as well. Suite 11.0 notably adds Symbol support so you can save a single graphic and use it time and again, keeping file sizes to a minimum.
☐ £285; www.corel.com

Corel Procreate Painter 7.0

Computer-based graphics work has a relatively long history. Before digital imagery and the need to retouch digital snaps really took off, many of us were equally interested in the ability to create original artwork. Corel Painter is one of the most impressive packages of

its kind. It's packed with brushes and tools that allow you to paint in a variety of styles from pencilled portraits to oil paintings and watercolours.
☐ £294 (£123 upgrade); www.corel.com

Ulead PhotoImpact 7.0

This multitalented graphics suite will impress any digital photographer or web designer. PhotoImpact 7.0 preserves Exif data when importing images from digital cameras for greater printed fidelity. Image correction and vector art tools, convincing 3D effects and a Z-Merge tool plus a host of rollover style effects and image slicing features make this a formidable package.
☐ £76 (£38 upgrade); www.ulead.co.uk
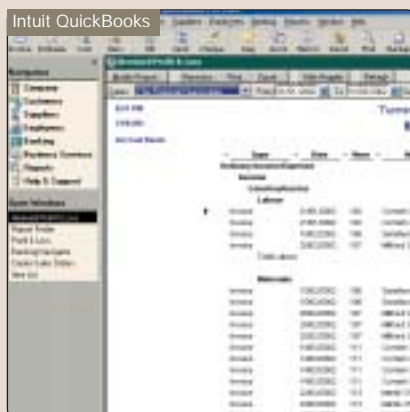
General business packages

Goldmine Business Contact Manager 5.7

Business contacts are invaluable, which is probably why there are so many packages devoted to maintaining lists of them. This package sits somewhere between a corporate-style customer relationship manager database and a PIM (personal information manager). Impressive data sharing features, mailmerge functions and the option to automate standard communications will keep clients and customers satisfied.
☐ £165; www.frontrange.co.uk

Intuit QuickBooks

Lessen the burden of running your own business by using Intuit QuickBooks to keep tabs on your financial comings and goings. In addition to dealing with VAT and tax issues it will generate invoice reminders to chase up late payers and flowcharts to help you
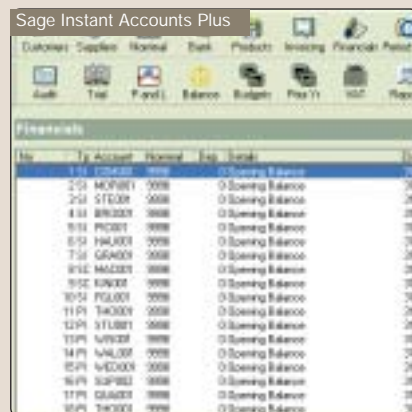

Intuit QuickBooks

Sage Instant Accounts Plus

ascertain your next entrepreneurial step.
☐ £111; www.quickbooks.co.uk

MYOB Accounting Plus 11.0

Many of us shy away from maintaining our own accounts because it sounds so daunting, but with MYOB it's easy. There's no need to spend ages setting up a complex series of spreadsheets, as templates for almost any sort of business
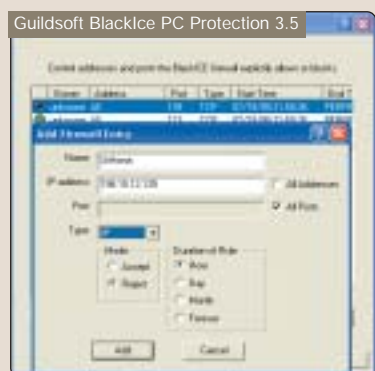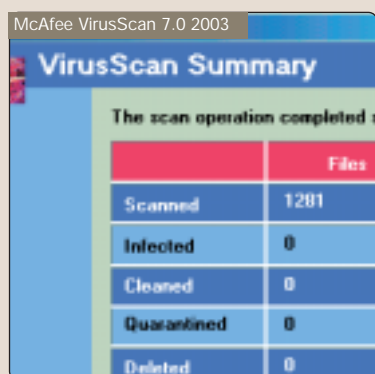
and type of transaction are provided. You can also combine MYOB with your online banking setup, allowing you to view your accounts at any point.
☐ £299; www.myob.co.uk

Ontrack PowerDesk Pro 5.0

How much time do we waste each day struggling with illogically organised desktops and hunting down elusive

McAfee VirusScan 7.0 2003

Guildsoft BlackIce PC Protection 3.5

Security software

Guildsoft BlackIce PC Protection 3.5

Guildsoft has taken a slightly different route from other firewall vendors with this package, scanning not only where and how traffic is coming and going but the content of that traffic too. It's a bit like the Met's stop-and-search scheme – if BlackIce doesn't like the look of something, it checks it out. And since BlackIce is a suspicious package it isn't averse to looking closer to home, ensuring the only information gleaned from your hard drive is data that you'd be happy for others to know.
☐ £30; www.guildsoft.co.uk

McAfee Firewall 4.0 2003

Like VirusScan (see above) and other programs of this ilk, McAfee's latest version doesn't merit an upgrade but is a recommended purchase for those yet to invest in a

firewall. Users get a visual summary of how and where security might be (or has been) breached. Peer-to-peer home networked PCs are offered protection, and customisation features abound.
☐ £21; www.mcafeeathome.com

McAfee VirusScan 7.0 2003

As many of us have already found to our cost, you can't be too careful when trawling the web. Internet access leaves PCs very vulnerable – hence the recent release of newly updated but basically unchanged antivirus programs. If you don't already possess a decent virus stopper this is a good choice that will spot mass-mailing viruses and dodgy VB scripts as well as more traditional evils.
☐ £26; www.mcafeeathome.com

Symantec Norton Antivirus 2003

Symantec has emulated chief rival McAfee by launching an updated antivirus

menus and files? Shortcuts help (if you have time to learn them) but Ontrack PowerDesk Pro is a much simpler solution, as it allows you to set up your workspace exactly as you wish. You can zip and encrypt folders and individual files, while the colourcoding option will help clean up a messy virtual filing cabinet.
☐ £24; www.ontrack.co.uk

Sage Instant Accounts Plus

Sage is synonymous with big-business accounting but this cheaper option is a good choice for somewhat smaller concerns. Business model templates are limited but once you get started there's a wide selection of customisation options so, for example, you can set up customer credit profiles and automatically offer regulars a discount for their loyalty. However, a payroll facility and the ability to manage several business accounts wouldn't have gone amiss.
☐ £205; www.sage.co.uk

application with a 2003 suffix. Additional protection is provided with the inclusion of detection mechanisms to seek out Trojan horses, worms and other nasties. Instant messaging programs are also monitored for the first time and you get better control over your PC's security settings and can protect these as well as automatically debugging.
☐ £40; www.symantec.co.uk

Symantec Norton Personal Firewall 2003

Norton Personal Firewall 2003 apprehends anything even vaguely resembling a modern-day virus, prevents spyware from compromising data held on your hard drive and keeps an eye out for suspicious-looking characters. It's simple to use but prone to overprotection.
☐ £34; www.symantec.com

Storage software

Adaptec DVDPics Plus

This is the true all-in-one approach to DVD burning: a three-port FireWire capture card, video-editing program and authoring tool bundled together in a single package. As such, Adaptec's DVDPics Plus is sure to appeal to anyone with a digital camcorder although the package can't transfer footage to a PC. DVDPics may lack certain advanced features such as TimeWarp, but it's still a capable and easy-to-use program that's ideal for beginners.
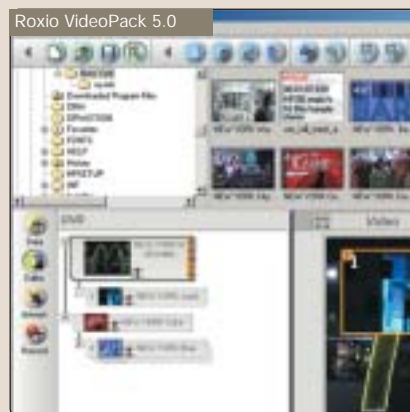☐ £50; www.adaptec.co.uk

Dantz Retrospect Express

Data backup is a task every PC user should include in their work routine, but some of us take longer to get round to this necessary chore than others. With this in mind, Dantz produces packages to suit everyone, from the home or solo business trader to large scale office networks. You can save your files to CD-R, CD-RW or removable tapes and automate the backup schedule to make it as painless as possible. You can create emergency hard disk recovery CDs and set recovery points, providing peace of mind for very little outlay.
☐ £33; www.dantz.co.uk

Extreme Media Digital Studio

Software companies had tried to ignore the digital hub philosophy leaving hardware companies to lead the way, but with Extreme Media Digital Studio they are finally taking notice.

This innovative application delivers a full media production centre, with photo- and video-editing programs, music management software, CD authoring and labelling tools, five separate programs and a headphone and microphone set. Digital Studio

Roxio VideoPack 5.0

provides a cheap and easy way to jump on the digital hub bandwagon.
☐ £80; www.mindscape.co.uk

Roxio VideoPack 5.0

VideoPack is a wide-ranging program. It supports VCD, SVCD and DVD and allows you to work with video clips in any format. The virtual-disc image feature is particularly impressive, allowing you to save and play back a project from the hard drive before committing it to disc. The price is a little high for beginners, but it's intuitive and flexible enough to be well worth the extra pennies.
☐ £259; www.roxio.co.uk

Roxio WinOnCD 6.0

WinOnCD has an impressive feature set aimed at those wanting a more advanced and flexible CD authoring application. In addition to standard formats, this handy program also writes interactive video CDs, MP3 and video CD music albums, audio CDs direct from MP3, video CD photo albums and overspan CDs, allowing you to store large files across several CDs. Although its accuracy lets it down slightly, the scope and versatility of WinOnCD still places it high on our list of desirables.
☐ £60; www.roxio.co.uk

Reference packages

Encore National Geographic Trivia Trek 2002

Geography lessons for the majority of us conjure up memories of eternal (and, dare we say it, boring) map colouring under the watchful gaze of bearded teachers in tweed jackets. Thankfully, the Encore National Geographic is here and geography is now climbing the contours of cool. Cleverly designed in a 'gameshow' format, children will be both challenged and informed in a way that will make learning about pebble distribution fun, entertaining and totally crayon-free.
☐ £19.99; www.encoresoftware.com

Encyclopaedia Britannica 2003

Did the Egyptians really invent tenpin bowling? And where is Happy Valley? Meandering through Encyclopaedia Britannica's Timeline, General Browser and World Atlas will expand your knowledge in ways you never imagined. Both clear and concise, this package can help with primary school projects and university dissertations alike. It claims to be 'the knowledge you need from the source you trust' and, if recent improvements in our local pub's quiz team ranking is sufficient testimony, we're inclined to agree.
☐ £59.99; www.britannica.co.uk

Europress language learning series

We looked at the language learning market in our July 02 issue (see *Foreign exchange,* page 152) and it's fair to say that Europress' language packages knocked spots off all the others. Its extensive range of titles are tailored to differing ability levels and age groups, so whether you want to learn a new language from scratch or to improve your existing knowledge there's a Europress title for you. Voice-recognition functions further aid your efforts at cross-cultural communication.
☐ From £8.50; www.europress.co.uk

Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2002

For many PC users the internet is the obvious tool for reference and research. It's quick, convenient and, before applications such as Microsoft Encarta, there were few viable alternatives. Thankfully, however, Encarta now challenges the glory of Google. It has all the information you need happily settled in one place, with features emulating the best of the web. Encarta Library also remains one of the best reference tools on the market.
☐ £29.99 Standard, £69.99 Premium; www.microsoft.com/uk/encarta

Europress GCSE French

The Times Psychometric Tests Volume 1

The prospect of a job interview is enough to make even the bravest of us tremble, but thankfully The Times Psychometric Test is there to make sure we are calm, confident and capable. With the sound of a clock ticking in the background for authentic exam panic, your strengths and weaknesses are assessed in the three standard test sections: numerical, mechanical and verbal. The all-important firm handshake is still down to you, though, so get practising.
☐ £19.99; www.kogan-page.co.uk

Video and audio authoring software

Adobe Premiere 6.5

In kitting out Premiere 6.5, Adobe has obeyed the one golden rule of software development: never stop innovating. All aspects of this impressive application have been completely refreshed. There's the new Title Designer feature, for example, as well as an Mpeg encoder for DVD input, three DirectX plug-ins, ever-widening support for digital video hardware and an upgrade of the bundled SmartSound Quicktracks utility. This impressive barrage of new features makes Adobe Premier 6.5 a versatile must-have upgrade.
☐ £445; www.adobe.co.uk

Steinberg Cubasis VST 4.0

Steinberg's latest sequencer software looks set to be the last word in PC music production for quite some time. A complete solution for composing, editing and mixing multitrack auto or Midi via a range of hefty built-in tools, Cubase VST 4.0 is certainly something to be admired. Fresh from a major facelift, this package now includes an unlimited undo/redo function and offline audio processing to free up processor power. Powerful, intuitive and with superb functionality, this latest Cubasis package is worth every penny.
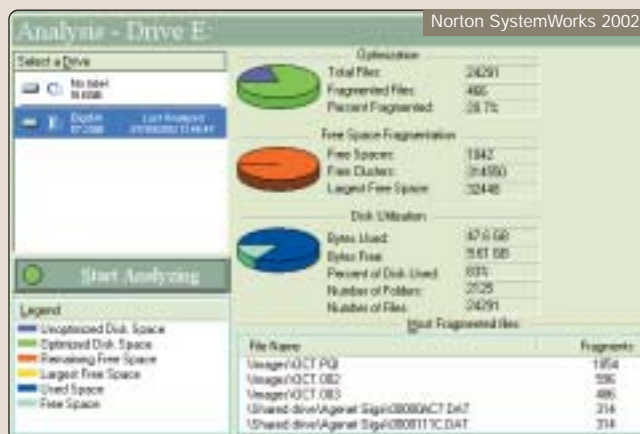☐ £60; www.steinberg.net

Emagic Logic Audio Platinum 5.0

To ensure that Logic Audio Platinum remains a top-of-the-range authoring package and on a par with its music sequencing rival Steinberg, Emagic has introduced new features that benefit the average user. It has rejigged the automation system, upped the mastering muscle, added three new software synths and track-based effects, allowed Rex 2.0 files to be imported from Steinberg's Recycle software and overhauled the software's audio engine. It's now even easier to produce a musical masterpiece.
☐ £552; www.soundtech.co.uk

Diagnostic and recovery software

Norton SystemWorks 2002

McAfee EasyRecovery

How many times have you quit an application only to realise the file you were working on has vanished without a trace? Programs like McAfee's EasyRecovery aim to retrieve as many of your lost files as possible, even data missing in action before McAfee's rescue remedy was installed.
☐ $49.95; www.mcafee.com

Norton SystemWorks 2002

By now most of us have either learnt to tolerate the trials of working with a PC or have invested in a package like SystemWorks that seeks to smooth performance and stamp out potential troublemakers before they get started. Norton has just released a largely unchanged 2003 version of its utility suite, which offers diagnostic and antivirus functions as well as generally enhancing the tools built into your operating system. If you're system is in dire need of a spring clean then it's worth investing in SystemWorks as it's incredibly easy to use. However, for most of PC users it's overkill.
☐ £51; www.symantec.co.uk

Roxio GoBack 3.0

Windows XP users don't need to worry about losing unsaved data should their machine crash as Microsoft has added an invaluable System Restore feature and built-in autosave function. The rest of us need a capable tool like GoBack, which lets you return your ailing PC to a previous stable state. From here, you can recover lost files and undo whatever it was that caused the malfunction in the first place.
☐ £29.99; www.roxio.co.uk

Vcom Fix-It Utilities 4.0

A utility package like Vcom's Fix-It is invaluable as it ensures smooth day-to-day PC performance and provides a raft of tools to diagnose and repair any problems that may crop up. These features can be set to run at a time that suits you so there's no need to down tools while Fix-It does its stuff. It also adds further benefits such as the reassurance of a virus scanner.
☐ £40; www.guildsoft.co.uk

Vcom SystemSuite 4.0

If you enjoy finetuning and tweaking your PC's settings in order to get the most from it then you'll relish the chance to get cracking with SystemSuite's army of 50-plus tinkering tools. Set your defences with the firewall and virus scanner, make your PC crash-proof, rid your hard disk of old applications with EasyUninstall and take control of your files with PowerDesk Pro.
☐ £54; www.guildsoft.co.uk

MGI VideoWave 5.0

As DVD continues to take the place of VHS in the living room and DVD authoring becomes an increasingly competitive market, MGI is making sure it leads the way. VideoWave 5.0 allows you to make DVD movies with ease. Simply capture digital video from a camcorder, edit and apply special effects and titles, 'produce' the finished movie then burn it straight to a CD-R or DVD-R disc. Aspiring Lloyd-Webbers can even add their own soundtracks.
☐ £90; www.roxio.co.uk

Ulead VideoStudio 6.0

It's a makeover Carol Smillie would be proud of. VideoStudio 6.0's predecessor gave reasonable performance editing analogue and DV (digital video) on a budget, but Ulead's latest revamp adds powerful new features and presents them in a much cleaner, more accessible way. At last we have consumer-priced software offering improved features and usability. Ulead VideoStudio 6.0 means that, for once, DV editing is a fun rather than traumatic experience. Thank goodness.
☐ £42; www.ulead.co.uk

Ulead VideoStudio 6.0