xp workshop

Digital Media Edition

Microsoft's latest Plus pack is designed to add functionality and bring new multimedia utilities to the party, and is a way to beef up XP's built-in tool set. Emma Northam looks at the features on offer in this digital media add-on that's more fun diversion than strict necessity

With each successive release of Windows, Microsoft bundles yet more third-party functions. Audio, for instance, became an integral part of Windows 98 with the addition of Media Player. XP brought us a whole lot more: remote access, digital still and video imaging, CD-burning and file compression to name but a few.

So what could possibly be left to add to the world's bloatiest operating system? Why more multimedia, of course. Enter the Digital Media Edition.

Part of the Plus range of Windows add-ons, DME is Microsoft's way of delivering "easy and exciting new ways to share your photos and enjoy your music and home movies". And by and large it does what it says on the box. For instance, if Movie Maker 2.0's range of blurs, fades aren't enough for your creative talents, DME provides you with a bundle of extra effects and transitions, some of which can only be described as wacky.

Photos get their own editing treatment courtesy of Photo Story, and there's provision for digital music recording and editing in Analog Recorder and Audio Converter. DME also allows streaming of web- or PC-based video and audio content

Instant photo slideshow

Creating a self-contained slideshow of your photos, complete with soundtrack and narrative, is very easy. Photo Story takes care of panning and zooming for you. On the whole it does a good job, too, only occasionally making an inappropriate choice which you can quickly change yourself.

1 Open Photo Story and click Begin a Story. Next click Import Pictures and navigate to the folder containing the relevant images. Press Ctrl, A to select them all, then Open and every image in that folder will appear in the Photo Story storyboard. To delete an image you don't want to include, select it and choose the X button to the right of the storyboard. To move a picture up or down in the story, select it and click the right or left arrow at the end of the storyboard or just drag and drop it where you want it

2 Preview the story. If you're unhappy with the automatic pans and zooms applied by Photo Story, click the relevant image then choose Advanced. Tick the box next to 'Control pans and zooms manually' then select start and end positions. Choose Preview Motion to confirm you like your changes, then hit ok. To add narration to explain images, click Configure Microphone and the wizard will walk you through the procedure. To skip this step tick 'Do not record narration for this picture'. You can then also choose the length of time you'd like the photo to remain onscreen before the transition to the next one

3 Click Next to proceed to the final stages. Add a title page and background image if you wish, then click Next again to add background music. Finally choose quality settings for the video and audio then type in a filename and click Next to save your story

to a Pocket PC device courtesy of Sync & Go. So now you can take it with you.

The whole package, which will leave you with change from a £20 note, carries more than a hint of frivolity. Among the more novel provisions there's a CD labelling add-on, more skins for Windows Media Player, an alarm clock that can be set for timely wakeups or reminders, and a selection of 3D dancing desktop characters that very quickly become only

marginally less annoying than Clippy the know-it-all paperclip Office assistant.

Movie Maker add-ons
The inclusion of a video-editing package in Windows XP took the complexity out of the genre and brought fast, effective filmmaking to the desktop. Version 2.0, available to all via the Windows Update website, ironed out some glitches to turn Movie Maker into a truly useful tool.

Media Edition adds 50 editing options to the mix, with effects ranging from the artistic Watercolor to the exotic Color Warp and a collection of transitions that let you drain, erode and evaporate clips from every conceivable direction. It's a bundle that will no doubt be welcome to most users though, as ever with such effects, beware of overuse. With careful application, polished videos are but a few click-and-drags away.

Photo Story

Microsoft has put more emphasis on still images than moving ones in DME, taking a storyboard approach to digital pictures with Photo Story. The idea is that, while your images might not move, you can pan and zoom around them to create a still 'film' consisting of a series of static shots. Add sound, titles and credits to compile a mini movie, and email the resulting WMV file to friends or colleagues.

Photo Story is certainly an appealing alternative to attaching a bunch of digital photos to an email and it saves having to throw a post-holiday slideshow evening, but Movie Maker already allows this kind of approach with still images. Furthermore, not only is Movie Maker free but it also provides much more flexibility than Photo Story's very basic 'advanced' panning and zooming options.

Movie Maker allows the imposition of a wide range of effects and lets you put explanatory captions on images so there's no need to rely on narration alone to explain what's going on in the photo.

The resulting files are automatically compressed so that the 'videos' it creates are small enough for email distribution. While Movie Maker can again claim this boon, Photo Story is nevertheless a neat extra, even if you already have one of the many free photo viewing utilities such as IrfanView or PhotoExplorer. Those unsure of making their first steps into digital video editing will appreciate the simplicity of Photo Story's stripped-down functions and automated approach. Its integration with the Windows platform can't fail to make slideshow sharing that bit easier, too.

Audio Converter and Analog Recorder

For music fans, Microsoft has partnered with Sintrillium (maker of Cool Edit Pro) to bring DME users analogue recording and audio conversion software. There's also an uncomplicated Windows Media Player alarm clock function which runs in the System Tray (see *Setting an alarm* on page 121).

Audio Converter lets you change the format of music files to and from MP3, WAV and Microsoft's own WMA – a handy feature for those who use a variety of devices for music playback. The software is again wizard-based, handholding you
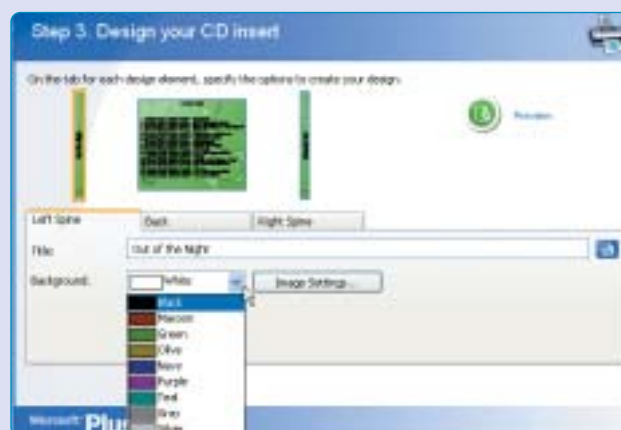
Creating CD inserts

The CD Label Maker works like any other wizard, taking you step-by-step through the process of creating disc labels and case inserts. Just follow the onscreen instructions and press Next when you've finished to progress to the next stage.

2 Click Next and choose a template from the list. You can pick a round label to stick on the disc itself or one of the insert card templates for the CD case as we have done here. There are two pieces – upper and lower – for an insert template. Use the Paper section drop-down menu to highlight each in turn
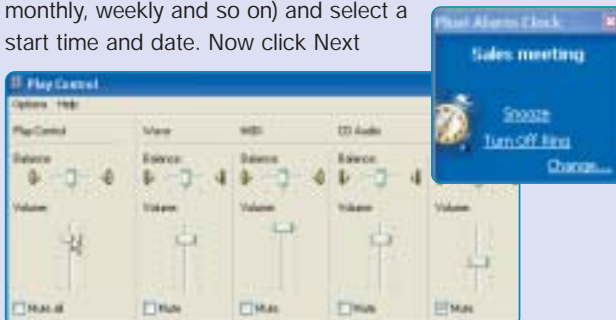
1 Start the CD Label Maker and click Next. Now choose the music you want to make a CD label for. We've picked the disc in our CD drive, but any albums stored in Windows Media Player will also be available options in the lefthand pane

3 Set the design you want for your insert card by going through the options under each tab (Left Spine, Back, Right Spine) in turn. If you don't fancy a plain background, choose an image from DME's library or from your hard drive. You can change the font size, style, position and colour, dictate the style of the track listing and so on. Click Edit to alter the default layout. Before printing your insert, click Preview to make sure you're happy with the design. Then check the printer settings and choose Print

Setting an alarm

The Alarm Clock function in Digital Media Edition lets you set an alert for any time of day and you get to choose how it sounds. Use your favourite track to alert you that you've 10 minutes until the weekly sales meeting, for instance. Alternatively, you can opt for a silent reminder that pops up discreetly on your desktop.
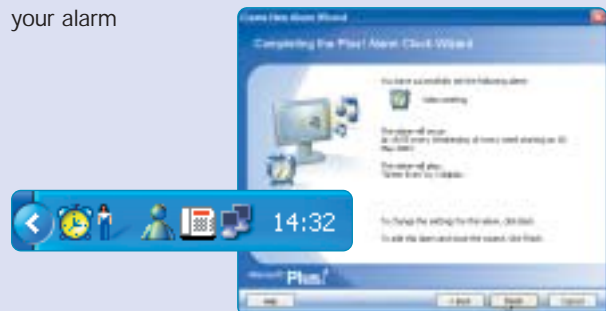
1 Open the Plus Alarm Clock by clicking on it in the Programs menu. Click ok at the welcome screen, then choose Create Alarm. Now choose a memorable name for the alarm, specify how often you'd like it to occur (daily, monthly, weekly and so on) and select a start time and date. Now click Next

2 The Alarm Clock draws on the information in Windows Media Player to offer you a choice of available music on your hard disk that you can play as your alarm

3 Pick a track and click Preview to hear it, and a small alarm window will open above the System Tray. Select Volume to adjust the sound level if necessary

4 You will see a confirmation screen detailing the particulars of your alarm. Click Finish and the alarm clock icon appears in the System Tray. Right-click it and choose Open to view or change your alarm details at any time

through the conversion process and taking care of the more technical aspects of the procedure to guard against loss of quality.

If you are looking for a quick, easy solution for getting all your vinyl records and tape cassettes on to your PC, you'll welcome Analog Recorder. It's another conversion tool which this time allows you to copy your ageing analogue audio into digital format and eliminates background hisses and pops into the bargain. In keeping with the other utilities in DME Audio Converter makes it nice and simple, automating most of the process for you.

Just plug in your analogue device to your PC, start up Analog Recorder and follow the prompts. The only problem you might encounter will be hardware-related

as you need a suitable cable to connect to the line-in port of your sound card. There's pretty good help available on this within Analog Recorder, however, so hooking up your turntable to your PC shouldn't be too much of a headache.

Party Mode

Party Mode lets you use your PC as a jukebox, utilising Windows Media Player in full-screen skin mode to stream a continuous playlist from your hard drive. There's the option to add a scrolling message too – perhaps a note to welcome guests as they arrive. Importantly, you can choose to block access to your desktop while in Party Mode but allow partygoers to reorder tracks just as they might control

the comings and goings of CDs in and out of your hi-fi.

No shindig would be complete without some dancing, and Digital Media Edition throws in a selection of choreographed performers to turn your desktop into a dance floor. You can download more from Microsoft's site, as well as medium and large versions of these real-life twirlers. Be warned, though, even at the smallest size these video files run to megabytes.

Style-wise there's something for every mood, from swing and ballroom to jazz, hip-hop and breakdancing, plus you can set the characters dancing with or without background sound so they can amuse you with some silent boogying while you work. ■