reviews

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There are those who want the maximum in quality from technology. For them, time and money is no object in achieving this goal. And then there's the rest of us, prepared to sacrifice a little bit in the way of quality to gain convenience, low cost and usability.

Take the MP3 format, for example. Technically it offers lower audio quality than good old CD but when you consider the advantages of the portable players – their batteries last a much longer time, they offer massive storage are are comparatively inexpensive – most are prepared to lose a little clarity from their favourite songs for the dividends on offer.

And just as MP3 turned music on its head, the same thing is happening to video thanks to Divx. Like MP3, it's a compression codec, but for video. Compare Divx to Mpeg-2 (used on DVDs) and Mpeg-2 is the clear winner for quality, but while a two-hour Mpeg-2 movie occupies between four and seven gigabytes of data, Divx can squeeze this down to 700MB – small enough to fit on a CD.

MP3 existed pretty much exclusively as a tool for the geeks until Diamond (as it was then called) brought out the Rio portable MP3 player, effectively releasing the music format from the confines of the PC. Now Divx has also been set free by the Divx-compatible DVD player from Kiss (see page 64).

Of course, like MP3, the industry would rather this format quietly died in the corner, as it has similar potential for online piracy. But many legitimate sources are available, from independent movie makers to wannabe animators and directors. For them, Divx provides a low-cost distribution medium and access to an audience that would have been otherwise unreachable. ■

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Scoring and testing explained

Each review rates a product according to a set criterion for its type. The score is broken down at the end of the review to show how we reached our final verdict. Ratings range from 1 to 10 and fall into the following classifications:
1 to 3 – poor
4 to 6 – average
6 to 8 – good
8 to 10 – excellent

How we rate hardware

• Features **This score rates the specification of a product by current standards. For example, a 2.6GHz PC with 512MB of RAM and a 120GB hard drive would score highly.**
• Build quality **This rating denotes how well the product is made and the quality of the components.**
• Value for money **The price of a product will often be the deciding factor between a good review and a bad review. This is not to say that cheaper products will always win out, but the better the price/performance and features ratio the higher the score.**

How we rate software

• Ease of use **Rates how easy software is to install and use.**
• Features **Indicates how much the package contains. An office suite that**

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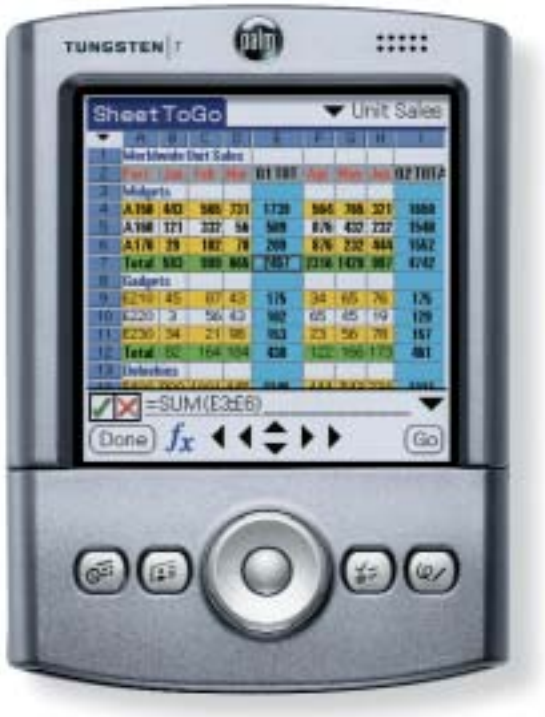

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MP3 players

82 Reader's choice

Budget notebooks

226 Top 10 charts

Our Top 10 charts start on page 230. Located at the back of the magazine, the charts are designed so they're a cinch to navigate. The at-a-glance comments and buying advice help you make the right purchasing decision. Products we've already tested are ranked in our charts after competing against existing entrants. The result is a definitive guide to the best hardware available on the market.

only came with a spreadsheet would score poorly.

• Value for money **Lots of features, good performance and a low price tag will result in a good score.**

Prices

All prices are quoted by the manufacturer or distributor and exclude VAT. Please note that prices are only intended as a guide and you may see products on sale for less or more than our quoted price. *PC Advisor's* recommendations are for guidance only and are not a guarantee of suitability. The publisher takes no responsibility for purchasers' decisions.

PC Advisor Gold award

Outstanding Hardware products receive a *PC Advisor* Gold award. This may indicate that the product will enter our charts next month but *PC Advisor* Gold also honours excellence in a product that is not covered in our existing charts.