Web design software

Macromedia Dreamweaver MX 2004

Macromedia's Dreamweaver is well known as an industrial-strength web-authoring tool with a learning curve to match. This latest version of the program does little to alter its reputation as a powerful creative tool for web designers, but it does at least make a stab at improving the package's ease of use.

Dreamweaver's formidable feature set has always endeared it to coders. Most of the program's options are contained in a series of dockable palettes on the right of the screen. And the document window (which holds the currently active page) can be viewed in three ways: as straight HTML code; in Design mode (which provides a visual representation of the code); or a split-pane mix of the two.

Above this an Insert bar offers quick-access buttons to objects such as tables that can be dragged directly on to the document window, while underneath a bar shows the editable properties of the currently selected page item.

Coding made simple

If newcomers are left bemused by this seemingly inexhaustible range of options, MX 2004 at least introduces a couple of hand-holding niceties. A new startup screen gives one-step access to recently edited files or templates suitable for new HTML, ASP or PHP pages. The Code palette also holds a library of pre-built code snippets, such as flash-enabled buttons and JavaScript controls, that can be added to a page by dragging their icon over the document window.

One excellent addition that other authoring tools would do well to copy is the Check Browser Targets feature. This removes the need for a designer to test a site on different browsers because it checks the validity of tags and CSS (cascading stylesheets) against specified target browsers to ensure the pages you produce appear correctly to all visitors. By default the program runs the check whenever you open a file, but it can also be launched from the Document toolbar.

MX can handle it

The use of CSS in web documents can be increasingly relied on to produce robust web pages viewable in all browsers. And its growing popularity can be seen by the number of improvements in the way MX 2004 handles CSS.

Not only are CSS pages rendered more accurately in Design view, the new CSS Rule Inspector lets you view and edit CSS tags applied to the current selection in Code or Design view. You can also select block elements in Design view and modify their properties in the same palette.

Many web authors use a PHP to create websites. While there are no significant improvements in support for that language, MX 2004 has improved its reference features so you can right-click a PHP function in your code and a pop-up description of its purpose and usage will appear.

Other small but worthwhile improvements include the addition of a secure FTP option (previously you had to use workarounds to encrypt uploaded files) and the inclusion of a simple graphics editor.
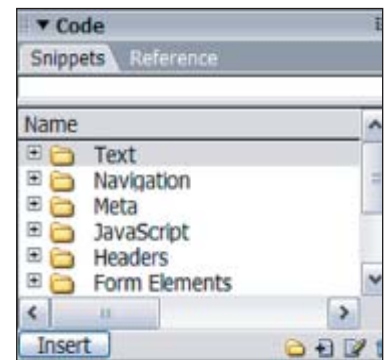
The latter can sharpen, crop and adjust the brightness or contrast of pictures within the program. Anything more complex still requires a round trip to sister program FireWorks or another image-editing application.

Another useful option, particularly for those repurposing data in an

↑ Dreamweaver now supports secure FTP

→ You can drag pre-built code snippets from the Code palette

office environment, is the ability to drag and drop text between Microsoft Word, Excel and Dreamweaver without losing format or CSS style.

Verdict

Rather than astounding improvements there are a lot of solid incremental steps in Dreamweaver MX 2004. For the less experienced web coder there are unarguably cheaper or less complex alternatives, but for web design professionals, it remains top of the tree. ⊠ **Tom Gorham**

← A new startup screen makes it simpler to construct pages

Dreamweaver MX 2004

○ Macromedia: 01344 458 600
○ www.macromedia.com
○ £821 inc VAT (upgrade from Studio MX £363)

System requirements
600MHz Pentium III or higher; Windows 98 SE/2000/XP/Server 2003; 128MB RAM (256MB recommended); 275MB hard disk space

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Web design software
Macromedia Flash MX 2004

Of all the programs in Macromedia's Studio MX 2004 suite, Flash is the one that rings the most changes. It has historically been the most troublesome program, on account of its unique user interface, so bringing it into line with Macromedia's new 'Halo' look and feel is a major step in the right direction. In fact, it's not just the interface that's been updated – Flash MX 2004 is ideal for serious web developers.

Macromedia Flash is the key program for creating rich media content on the web – animations, interactive graphics and so on. This content is then played back through a web browser thanks to a virtually invisible plug-in.

But while many graphics programs can export simple animations to Flash's SWF (pronounced 'swiff') format, nothing is as powerful as Flash itself for creating advanced, high-quality web multimedia, not even rival products such as Adobe LiveMotion and Corel Rave.
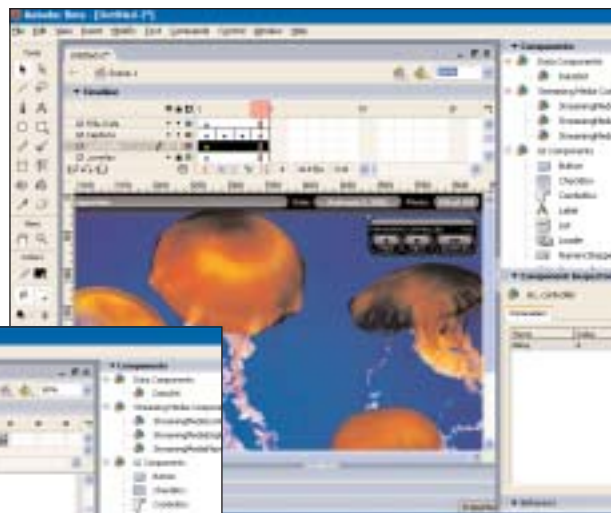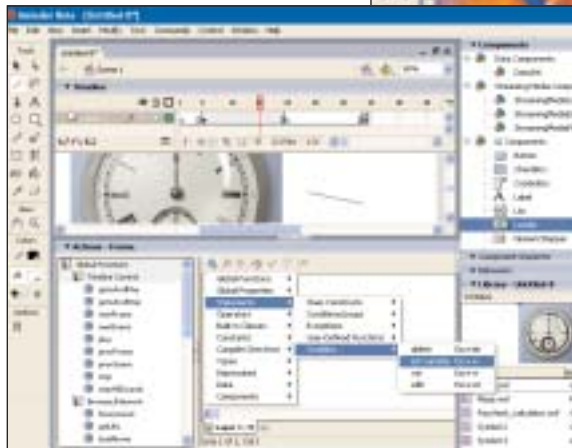
Upping the tempo
Flash MX 2004 continues the trend of transforming the program from clever graphics package to serious web application development tool. If your interest in Flash is its development potential for entire site interfaces, interactive educational content, gaming and all-encompassing multimedia, you'll love the upgrade.

The built-in scripting language, now called ActionScript 2.0, is more JavaScript-like and object-oriented, so existing Java programmers should find it easier to learn. Support for CCS (cascading stylesheets) allows you to maintain consistent design across HTML and Flash elements on your websites. And you can now use Unicode font character sets for foreign language content.

On the other hand, Macromedia has attempted to keep coding leaner with the inclusion of more 'Behaviors' that automate certain actions associated with graphic objects and triggers.

Some graphic transitions such as blurs and drop shadows can now be applied as timeline effects without coding. A Deployment Kit helps you prepare SWF files with

→ **Get up and running faster by using ready-made templates such as this picture portfolio with its navigation buttons**

common scripts – for example, checking a web browser for its Flash Player version so you don't have to write as much JavaScript of your own when embedding Flash references into HTML files. You can save publish settings – including the upload server destinations – for regular reuse.

Plug-ins and play
Another valuable improvement is the introduction of plug-ins for Flash. This will allow third-party software developers to write new functions into the program, rather like plug-ins for Photoshop or XTensions for QuarkXPress.

This could lead to inexpensive plug-ins becoming available that make high-end functions simpler for non-programmers, or perhaps for enhancing the basic program's feature set to let you import 3D graphics. As it is, Flash MX 2004 adds EPS and PDF to its list of supported graphics formats.

The price you pay for all this enhanced functionality is entry-level usability. For the beginner, Flash MX 2004 represents an awesome stride into the realms of incomprehensibility. The interface is clean but unintuitive. This is not a program you will be able to muddle though. Unless you have some scripting or programming skills, most of the package will remain alien to you.

↑ **ActionScript 2.0 is still supported by pick-and-choose commands, but this time it uses a JavaScript-like structure**

At the other extreme, full-on web developers might want to consider the more expensive Professional edition. This version adds high-quality video and a forms-based interface to the mix, as well as supporting development for devices such as palmtop computers and mobile phones. But the Standard edition should already be more than enough for most people and quite possibly too much for many.

Verdict
Determined web designers will love this new release of Macromedia Flash and it can be thoroughly recommended as an upgrade for existing expert users. Beginners, on the other hand, will wonder what the heck they've let themselves in for as web animations take second place to heavy-duty application development in a package that's too expensive to be used lightly. ⊠ **Alistair Dabbs**

Flash MX 2004

- Macromedia: 01344 458 600
- www.macromedia.com/uk
- £492 inc VAT (upgrade from Flash MX or Flash 5.0 £199)

System requirements
600MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 190MB hard disk space

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Home software suite
WordPerfect Family Pack 5.0

People buying a new home PC often think they're getting a great deal until they realise that the software they need to make their system useful is going to cost nearly as much again. It's in circumstances such as these where a bundle like the WordPerfect Family Pack 5.0 could prove invaluable.

↑ The Family Pack's improved task manager makes it easy to launch apps, access tips and start projects

As the name suggests, the principal application in this suite is WordPerfect. In fact, it's the same as the full version of WordPerfect found in Corel's Office 11.0 suite, which costs considerably more than this one. WordPerfect is more than adequate for most home users and crucially supports a huge variety of file formats, including Microsoft Word.

But there's more to this suite than just word processing. Corel has carefully thought out the software packages that home users need and bundled them all together. There's Quattro Pro, a spreadsheet program (with support for Excel files), while Corel Photobook is effectively a simplified version of Corel's PhotoPaint featuring easy-to-follow guides for creating, editing and printing pictures.

There's also a host of third-party apps including the 2003 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Genealogy.com's Family Tree Maker 10.0, McAfee VirusScan Home Edition and iClean, an internet privacy utility from Aladdin Systems.

We were surprised to find that installing the software bore no resemblance to the information in the Quick Start guide. Rather than providing a unified installer for all the applications in the suite, the separate programs are spread across three CD-ROMs and you have to install them all (or at least most of them) separately.

However, this is a minor quibble. Installation is still relatively simple and it means you can pick and choose which titles you actually want to install.

Verdict
WordPerfect Family Pack 5.0 is an impressive bundle that offers great value for home users. If your PC didn't come with much software preinstalled, this suite could just be the answer. ⊠ **Mike Hirschkorn**

WordPerfect Family Pack 5.0

○ Corel: 01628 589 800
○ www.corel.co.uk
○ £63.45 inc VAT

System requirements
Pentium processor; Windows XP/2000; 256MB RAM; 45-85MB hard disk space

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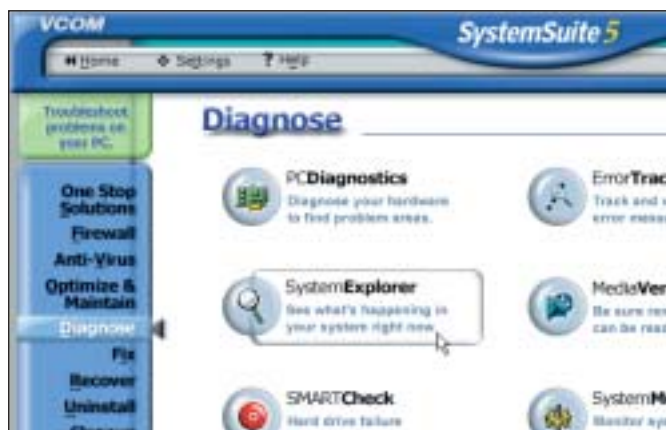**VALUE FOR MONEY**
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Utility software
Vcom SystemSuite 5.0

The utility suite formerly developed by Ontrack is back in a fifth incarnation, marketed afresh by a company called Vcom. Rebranding aside, SystemSuite 5.0 maintains the look, feel and big-button approach of its immediate predecessor.

↑ SystemSuite 5.0's clean-cut good looks will be familiar to Ontrack fans

As with any utility suite worthy of the name, you get a whole bunch of troubleshooting tools to play with. In this version, they are organised by theme and function and presented on a series of related screens. To list all the available options would fill this page, but suffice to say that there are no glaring omissions, other than perhaps the lack of a disk cloning program. This is a utility suite in the classic mould, from the Registry cleaner and program uninstaller to the system diagnostics tool.

Bonuses this time around are spearheaded by Recovery Commander, a standalone application that emulates and allegedly enhances the System Restore checkpoint feature found in Windows Me and XP. Unfortunately, it failed to produce the promised bootable CD during installation and later, when we got it running in DOS-like mode from a floppy disk, it promptly killed a critical Windows system file and left us with a temporarily unbootable PC. An unlucky fluke, we suspect, but nonetheless unimpressive.

Other new features include SecurErase (a handy but unoriginal file deleter that shreds an entire hard disk beyond all hope of recovery) and MailWasher, an excellent antispam tool, but one that is already freely available from www.mailwasher.net.

SystemSuite also includes a decent firewall that's 'powered' by Sygate, an antivirus scanner (Trend Micro's PC-cillin under a different name) and the aging but still wonderful PowerDesk 5.0 file manager.

Verdict
SystemSuite is a bit of a mishmash. That said, it hangs together in most of the right places and includes sufficient extras to make it by far the best value offering in its class. Just be sure to handle Recovery Commander with care. ⊠ **Kyle MacRae**

Vcom SystemSuite 5.0

○ Guildsoft: 01752 895 100
○ www.guildsoft.co.uk
○ download £40; boxed edition £57

System requirements
100MHz Pentium processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/NT/XP; 64MB RAM; 90MB hard disk space

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Video-editing software
Adobe After Effects 6.0

↑ This upgrade features a raft of new effects including liquify and scribble

Adobe must look back wistfully at the time when After Effects – its motion video and special effects tool – was the only one in town. But one benefit of competition from the likes of Discreet's Combustion is that After Effects has consistently improved to keep its nose ahead of its competitors. Version 6.0 provides another major leap in functionality.

For upgraders the critical improvement in After Effects 6.0 lies more in its performance than its features. The program now offers OpenGL support so compatible graphics cards, such as Radeon's 9800 or nVidia's GeForce3 Ti/GeForce4 Ti series, will seem much faster, plus it will provide smoother rendering in the Composite window.

Perhaps After Effects' most impressive new feature is its Photoshop-style text tool, which lets you type and edit directly into the Composite window. It's also possible to add animation to each letter individually using the timeframe. Photoshop users will also find the new vector paint and clone tools familiar, although it would be more useful if Photoshop's own brush settings could be imported.

Again, these tools can be applied non-destructively to the Composite window. The clone tool in particular is a versatile way of removing extraneous elements from a single frame, or across a number of frames on the same layer.
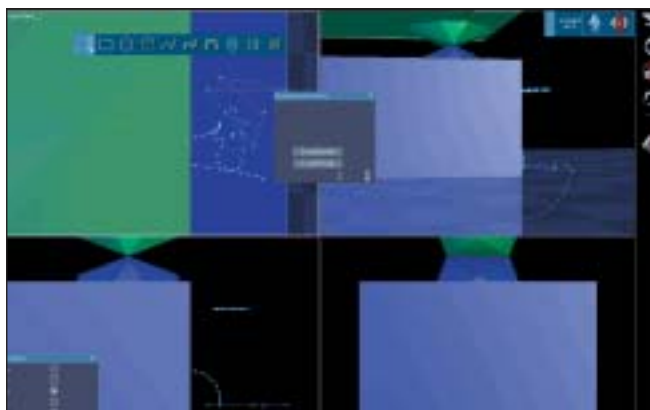
After Effects 6.0 Professional adds motion tracking, keying and stabilisation tools as well as a render automation feature that uses JavaScript code. While these are useful features for a busy video production firm, single users are unlikely to crave more than what is on offer in the Standard version.

Verdict
Adobe After Effects is no longer an automatic choice for special effects editors, but this excellent upgrade will keep the application at the cutting edge of video special effects. ⊠ **Tom Gorham**

Adobe After Effects 6.0

- ○ Adobe: 020 8606 4000
- ○ www.adobe.co.uk
- ○ Standard £664 inc VAT (upgrade £199); Production bundle £1,075 inc VAT (upgrade £288)

System requirements
Pentium III or higher; Windows 2000/XP; 128MB RAM (256MB rec); 150MB hard disk space

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3D design software
Eovia Amapi Designer 7.0

↑ Dynamic modelling allows you to retrace your steps

Eovia's Designer 7.0 is an odd program. This isn't due to its quirky interface (a feature shared by just about every 3D application on the market) but because, rather than indulging in traditional feature-bloat, it drops many of the program's non-critical functions and is the better for it.

Previous versions of Designer tried to cater for every 3D need without fully succeeding. Designer 7.0 signals a new approach by concentrating on the program's core strength – modelling – and abandoning add-on features such as animation effects that are capably dealt with by other programs, including Eovia's own Carrara Studio.

Designer 7.0's strength lies in its excellent polygon modelling features, which have been enhanced this time around with the arrival of dynamic geometry modelling. This tracks changes made to a model's lines so that you can return and re-edit points later on. Equally impressive is a new feature, Symmetry Clone, which lets you build and edit models so that changes on one side are automatically reflected on the other.

Designer has cleaned up its interface in an effort to make itself more easily accessible. Significantly, it at last allows for split-frame views rather than cluttered floating windows, although the implementation here shows rough edges. It can be tricky to work with objects without accidentally shifting them in an adjacent window.

If Designer's rendering and surfacing options are comparatively limited, Eovia has at least done the sensible thing and boosted the program's export abilities, adding native Carrara Studio export and boosting the reliability of 3DS and OBJ format exports.

Verdict
Eovia Designer isn't a complete 3D solution but it's one of the most usable yet powerful modellers on the market. Compared to the alternatives, it's a remarkably inexpensive option. ⊠ **Tom Gorham**

Eovia Amapi Designer 7.0

- ○ Eovia: 01483 797 498
- ○ www.eovia.com
- ○ £422 inc VAT; upgrade £168

System requirements
500MHz Pentium; Windows 98/NT/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 100MB hard disk space

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DVD authoring software
Adobe Encore DVD beta

If the beta version of Encore DVD is anything to go by, it would seem that Adobe's decision to wait on the DVD authoring sidelines – learning from the successes and, more importantly, the failures of other releases – was the right one.

It may be a latecomer in the race but Encore DVD has got it where it counts, particularly for existing users of Premiere, Photoshop and After Effects, with which Encore DVD integrates perfectly. You can import PSD files from Photoshop, use them as layered backgrounds, menus or buttons and even edit them directly within Encore. Similarly, motion graphics created in After Effects can be used as menu items.

Best of all (and most useful) is the integration with Premiere. Encore DVD's timeline, menus and palettes will be instantly recognisable to users of Adobe's flagship video-editing program, which means a valuable headstart when it comes to learning how the application works. You can also transcode AVI files that have been edited in Premiere to Mpeg-2 video and Dolby Digital audio, while any markers that you placed on the timeline during your edit can be converted into chapters on the DVD.

Along with all the usual tools for designing menus and encoding video, Encore DVD includes some powerful elements that will be invaluable to professionals, such as support for dual-layer disc formats, subtitles, region coding and copy protection.

↑ Look familiar? If you already use Adobe Premiere to edit video then getting up and running with Encore DVD will be a cinch

Verdict
Encore DVD completes Adobe's video production suite and those who already use the company's editing products will find that this DVD authoring program sits neatly alongside existing applications. But there are a lot of high-end functions that most home users just won't be interested in. And at more than £450, it's likely to be a hit with serious videographers and semi-pros only. ⊠ **James Bennett**

Adobe Encore DVD beta

- ○ Adobe: 0131 458 6842
- ○ www.adobe.co.uk
- ○ £453 inc VAT

System requirements
800MHz Pentium III or faster processor; Windows XP; 256MB RAM (512MB rec); 500MB hard disk space; DVD-ROM drive; supported DVD recorder

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Web design software
Macromedia Fireworks MX 2004

All image editing software can save to web picture formats, but none can match Fireworks for sheer dedication to web design. This upgrade builds on the program's strengths, runs faster and offers greater ease of use thanks to a refreshed interface that begs to be explored.

This complete web graphics package covers animation, image slicing and mapping, as well as offering extensive creative tools for producing original artwork. Fireworks MX 2004 adds several new bitmap editing and vector illustration tools. The former includes a Red Eye Removal tool, a powerful yet almost unfeasibly simple Replace Color tool and some additional blur filter effects.

The new vector tools are superb, most notably the Auto Shapes – connector lines, sectioned pies, bent arrows and so on – that are manipulated with handles directly on the canvas. They make the vector tools in Adobe ImageReady (Fireworks' most direct competitor) seem fiddly and unintuitive by comparison. You can, of course, smooth and feather the edges of vector objects and bitmap selections alike, while live text can be anti-aliased in a far more customisable manner than we've seen in any other graphics app.

Web developers will appreciate the support for roundtripping which preserves server-side code, nested table HTML and so on as you bring images in and out of the program. Dreamweaver-like check-in/-out functions also help keep order when several people are working on the same files, and you can FTP files to and from remote servers directly within the program.

Just bear in mind Fireworks is not an all-round graphics package. Don't expect much in terms of filter effects or digital photo printing. Within its web remit, though, it's ideal.

Verdict
Within the limits of web graphics, Fireworks MX 2004 is the best you can buy, bar none. It is fast, highly intuitive and immensely satisfying to use. ⊠ **Alistair Dabbs**

↓ Fireworks MX 2004 provides a range of Auto Shapes that are quick to edit and fun to work with

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Fireworks MX 2004

- ○ Mindscape: 01344 458 600
- ○ www.macromedia.com/uk
- ○ £292.58 inc VAT; upgrade from Fireworks MX or Fireworks 4.0 £151.58; education price £92.83

System requirements
600MHz Pentium III; Windows 98 SE/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 150MB hard disk space

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PC monitoring software
eBlaster 3.0

↑ eBlaster runs invisibly on the host PC and emails detailed reports of activity

Let's cut straight to the chase: eBlaster is a snooping tool, pure and simple. Once installed, it runs in super-stealth mode, can only be summoned with a customisable key combination and password, and continuously monitors all keyboard and application activity. It then sends out regular reports to any email address you specify, all without the computer user's knowledge.

eBlaster can send information about incoming and outgoing emails, along with file attachments, plus details of instant messaging conversations, a summary of which applications have been used and for how long, as well as a record of websites visited. eBlaster also logs every single keystroke – which, of course, might well include private login names and passwords.

Reports can be scheduled for delivery on a flexible basis, from half-hourly to daily. However, because they are sent by (secret) email, the host computer must have an open internet connection at the time. This is perhaps eBlaster's main weakness: if no connection is active, reports are delayed. Surprisingly, there is no facility to send reports on the fly through a network connection.

eBlaster can be configured to transmit an instant alert whenever it spots a designated keyword, so pity the poor employee fool enough to type up a curriculum vitae on an office PC. Parents can also keep close tabs on a child's computer usage – and acquire the hard evidence they need to confirm any suspicions.

Verdict
To be honest, we're stumped for a conclusion. On one level, eBlaster is a powerful and innovative program that provides an unparalleled level of remote surveillance. On another, we can't help but feel that it's deeply questionable. Ethics aside, if you want (or need) to monitor PC usage surreptitiously, eBlaster is ideal. ⊠ **Kyle MacRae**

eBlaster 3.0

○ Nostrad: 0870 242 1080
○ www.eblaster.co.uk
○ download £60 inc VAT; boxed edition £66

System requirements
100MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/2000/NT/XP; 32MB RAM; 3MB hard disk space

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Video creation software
CyberLink PowerProducer 2.0

↑ The PowerProducer interface is simple but also restrictive for more advanced users

CyberLink's PowerProducer, like alternatives such as Sonic MyDVD, is a simple video-to-disc utility, rather than a fully fledged video-editing package. The interface for this version is incredibly simple to use which is good news for novice users, but more experienced video makers may find it somewhat inflexible.

The program opens with a series of icons offering you a range of options for copying your footage to disc or for editing your movie before transferring it to CD or DVD. Indeed, the most important improvement to this release is better support for DVD. New features to version 2.0 include recording straight to disc and importing DVD video. Other tweaks include enhancements for creating photo CDs and the option to defragment rewritable DVDs.

PowerProducer's main business, however, is in preparing video for storage on disc and it does this easily enough via a series of step-by-step wizards. This is one of those features that novices will appreciate, particularly if they wish to transfer video from tape to disc with the minimum of fuss.

At the same time, there are some niggling irritations with CyberLink's approach. Resolution and preview sizes, for example, are restricted even for larger monitors. And anyone serious about transferring video will soon be limited by PowerProducer's video-editing features, which mainly consist of trimming and splitting video clips for combining into a final file.

Of course, a program such as PowerProducer is designed to be used in conjunction with a dedicated editor. And one good feature is the inclusion of easy-to-use tools for adding interactive navigation to DVDs.

Verdict
Considering that even budget editors now include CD and DVD burning features, this makes it hard to recommend PowerProducer to anyone other than the total beginner. ⊠ **Jason Whittaker**

PowerProducer 2.0

○ www.cyberlink.com/english
○ download £24 inc VAT; boxed edition £47

System requirements
450MHz Pentium II (1.7GHz rec); Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM (256MB rec); 1GB hard disk space; CD/DVD burner; SVGA resolution monitor

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Photo-editing software
PrintMaster Platinum 15.0

↑ Over three CDs of templates and images are provided to get you started

PrintMaster Platinum 15.0

○ Mindscape: 01293 651 300
○ www.mindscape.co.uk
○ £30 inc VAT

System requirements
200MHz Pentium II processor; Windows 98 and above; 64MB RAM; 720MB hard disk space; quad-speed CD-ROM drive; 800x600 display

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Joining the overflowing ranks of image-editing packages is PrintMaster Platinum 15.0. Aimed at those new to manipulating images, the program can create cards, posters and letterheads using your own personal photos. As it's aimed at the whole family (kids in particular) the interface is user-friendly, though this may put off more experienced users.

PrintMaster is rare in that it cannot import photos directly from a digital camera. Instead it scours your hard disk for pictures you can use, although by default it only checks Windows' My Pictures folder. Very few of the pictures on our test PC were that easy to locate.

Once you have selected your images, you can edit, colour, layer, draw on top of or add text to them. Alternatively, you can insert them into one of the hundreds of templates available. Be warned, though: we found none of these to be particularly pleasant and ended up creating our own design instead.

Installing the program takes quite a long time and requires over 700MB of hard disk space. Annoyingly, once installed it will prompt you to register. While this will not affect the running of the application, these reminders crop up indefinitely until you register.

On the whole, though, PrintMaster is simple to use and the layout effectively lets a novice get stuck in quickly. Pop-up windows appear regularly to give you hints – the majority of which are useful.
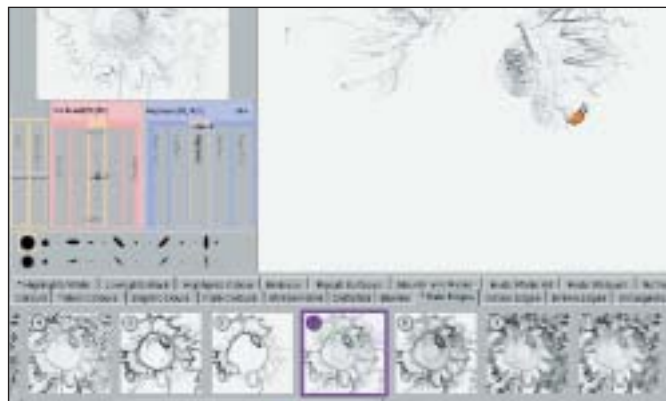
PrintMaster also lets you create PDF files, send your project direct to your printer or email them with a small Project Viewer program attached so the recipient can see the end result.

Verdict
Simple to use, but limited in basic and rather essential features, PrintMaster is an ideal image-editing starter package. ⊠ **Mark Walsh**

Photo-editing software
PhotoArtMaster Gold 1.5

↑ PhotoArtMaster allows you to add effects to improve on your artistic creation

Creating interesting artwork with a traditional photo-editing package can be a laborious and time-consuming process. PhotoArtMaster provides the heavyweight editing tools and does the hard work for you, providing templates and easy-to-implement techniques that'll have your photo resembling an etching or watercolour painting in no time at all. Version 1.5 now includes the ability to source images directly from your digital camera.

The interface gives most of the screen space over to the image you are editing, but there's also an image editor on the sidebar so you can adjust another photo or effect before layering it on to your existing project. The majority of the program's features and techniques are listed down the lefthand or across the bottom of the screen. Using a brush or sketching with a pencil is inevitably tricky when using a mouse but not impossible. However, if you plan to use this technique a lot, investing in a graphics tablet would certainly make the process a whole lot easier.

If you merely want to touch up a photo to send it to friends then PhotoArtMaster is ideal, offering you plenty of basic editing options such as removing red-eye and dust flecks. To achieve professional results, though, you will need a more high-end package.

Sadly, while it is powerful, PhotoArtMaster occasionally feels slightly unfinished. Some parts lack finesse and it seems surprising that features such as accessing photos from a digital camera and even saving projects have only just been introduced.

PhotoArtMaster Gold 1.5

○ Fo2PiX: 08707 520 520
○ www.fo2pix.com
○ £99.99 inc VAT

System requirements
450MHz Pentium II processor; Windows 98 or later; 128MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space; 1,024x768 resolution

EASE OF USE
■■■■■■■□□□

FEATURES
■■■■■■■□□□

VALUE FOR MONEY
■■■■■□□□□□

OVERALL
■■■■■■□□□□

Verdict
There's no doubting PhotoArtMaster has some considerable image-editing functions and a well thought-out design. But as both Photoshop Elements 2.0 and Paint Shop Pro 8.0 have more sophisticated interfaces, cost slightly less and can perform plenty of image-editing functions, they might be wiser purchases for those looking for serious photo editing and manipulation. ⊠ **Mark Walsh**

Desktop publishing software
Serif PagePlus 8.0 PDF Edition

PagePlus is a budget-priced DTP (desktop publishing) package that enables home users to make a decent go of producing stationery, newsletters and other documents for which the layout is as important as the written content.

PDF Edition extends the software's publishing functions with support for multipage layouts that can be universally read and, irrespective of the recipient's PC setup, will look just as you intended. Similarly, brochures, newsletters and flyers can be posted online for download and viewing in such a way that all your design and layout elements are preserved.

The program comes with over 2,000 templates for various documents and an exhaustive TrueType font library some 400 choices long. If you want to use an unusual font for a particular effect, you can do so by exporting to PDF with all (or selected) fonts embedded.

Some templates are more attractive than others, but you can select alternative colours, typefaces and effects even as a wizard assists you in completing a templated-based page layout. You can apply design changes across the board or to a single character and can preview your entire layout then drag and drop images or other elements between pages.

Text handling is strong and, using PagePlus 8.0's extensive controls, it's apparent that Serif's offering aspires towards the professional end of the DTP market. You have almost infinite control over formatting and layout. There are tools to tweak text settings, widow and orphan controls, wrap options for how it deals with embedded pictures and other text boxes, as well as a slew of artistic effects. There's support for polygonal page elements and you can replicate these identically or progressively by choosing offsets or rotations.

Serif PagePlus 8.0 PDF Edition

- Serif: 0800 376 7070
- www.serif.com/pageplus
- £99 inc VAT

System requirements
Pentium processor; Windows 95/98/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 160MB hard disk space

EASE OF USE
■■■■■■■□□□

FEATURES
■■■■■■■■□□

VALUE FOR MONEY
■■■■■■■□□□

OVERALL
■■■■■■■□□

Verdict

Greenstreet's Publisher 4.0 may be cheaper and can handle many of the features PagePlus boasts, but this Serif app is much easier to use. The improved support for and flexibility over PDF document export serve to increase this capable package's appeal. ⊠
Rosemary Haworth

↓ Text Manager lets you review and edit copy more easily by displaying it in a separate pane

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Mobile email server
OpenHand 2.3

↑ OpenHand uses its own proprietary PIM client but it's easy enough to use

While the RIM Blackberry has failed to repeat the success it's had in the US this side of the pond, the need for real-time email access while on the road still remains. OpenHand Software is looking to fill this need with its eponymous product. OpenHand shares many common features with its Blackberry rival, giving the mobile user real-time access to email, calendar, contacts and task lists.

Underneath it all, OpenHand is a client/server remote access software solution based on Microsoft's NET Framework. The OpenHand client, available for Windows laptops as well as Pocket PC and Palm handhelds, connects over any TCP/IP internet connection to the OpenHand Server. This in turn acts as a client, connecting to either a Microsoft Exchange or Lotus Domino server to access the users' personal information and pass it back to the 'real' client. So it's fairly non-intrusive to your existing email setup. A GroupWise version is also in the works.

Nothing too earthshaking there you might think, but OpenHand is ultimately a more powerful alternative to the Blackberry. Not only can you access your PIM data from just about anywhere in the world that has a GSM or GPRS connection, there's also no monthly subscription charge – just a one-off sum based on the number of users. Prices start at just over £1,000 for a five-user Starter System (£200 per seat), rising to around £37,450 for a 500-user Starter System (£75 per seat).

OpenHand 2.3 is also flexible, working with a range of mobile devices and platforms. The program makes clever use of data compression to keep access snappy and data charges down. This is important as the Blackberry incurs no air-time charges. Email can be either read and sent in real-time or you can synchronise and work offline. It's also secure. Not only can you leave all email data on the server but data that is sent to the client is encrypted using the AES 128bit algorithm.

OpenHand 2.3

- OpenHand: 020 8962 3270
- www.openhand-mobile.com
- From £1,116 for five-user license

System requirements
Server: Windows NT/Windows 2000 Server (SP2); Exchange 5.5/2000/Lotus Domino. Clients: Windows 9x/2000/XP; Pocket PC 2000/2002; Palm OS 3.0 or better

EASE OF USE
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FEATURES
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VALUE FOR MONEY
■■■■■■□□□

OVERALL
■■■■■■■□□

Verdict

OpenHand not only obviates the need to lug around yet another piece of kit, it's also flexible and performs well when out of the office. If you're contemplating the Blackberry, give OpenHand's free 14-day trial a whirl first. ⊠ **Roger Gann**

DVD/video software
Movies on CD & DVD 2.0, DVD X Copy Gold and DaviDeo VHS

↓ FastTrack's Movies On CD & DVD offers a surprising amount of features, such as this easy-to-use menu screen designer

↑ DaviDeo VHS lets you record video straight from your VCR, camcorder or digital camera – as long as you have the right inputs on your PC, that is

Creating and copying DVDs and videos is one of the growth areas of PC use. Here we look at three packages that help you to turn your VHS tapes into DVDs and make copies of your homemade DVD discs.

Movies on CD & DVD 2.0
This package allows you to archive all your VHS tapes on to the much more convenient DVD or Video CD format. The application is easy to use and has some nice touches. You can, for example, use the basic video-editing tools to cut out ad breaks and perform minor repairs to picture and audio noise.

But there are a few drawbacks. The package is software-only, which means that you'll have to buy analogue video-capture equipment separately and install it on your PC. Also, compressing high-quality video to Mpeg can take a while.

Verdict
You don't need a recordable DVD drive (you can create Video CDs on a CD-RW drive instead), but there's no guarantee that the discs you create with Movies on CD & DVD will be compatible with your set-top DVD player. Check your model's documentation first.

DaviDeo VHS
Fairly similar to FastTrack's Movies On CD & DVD (see above), DaviDeo VHS' main function is to convert VHS tapes into DVDs. This package includes many of its competitor's features, such as the ability to remove ads and to span longer videos over multiple discs. But it also shares many of FastTrack's down sides. It's similarly bereft of any video-capture hardware and it can only create lower-quality Video CD and Super Video CD formats rather than full-blown DVDs.

The program is easy to use thanks to its wizard-style approach. Simply click on the Next button to work your way through each step of the process. Compressing video to Mpeg can be slow, particularly in the case of Video CDs and Super Video CDs, so for long recordings leave your PC to work overnight.

Verdict
Fewer features and no support for recordable DVD formats make DaviDeo a less enticing option than Movies on CD & DVD. It is, however, simple to use.

DVD X Copy Gold
Despite DVD X Copy's claim that you can use the program to create backup copies of your DVDs, it is still illegal under current UK law to make a copy of a DVD movie – unless you own the copyright. So you will probably be breaking the law if you use it to copy anything other than DVDs of your own home movies.

Given this fact, it seems redundant to discuss DVD X Copy's most interesting features in detail. The program can, for example, copy multichannel audio, multiple languages, menu screens and special features in addition to the film itself.

But it's unlikely that your own camcorder creations are going to be anywhere near that complex. And assuming you already have a DVD authoring program you can use this to run off multiple copies of your home movies.

Verdict
DVD X Copy is easy to use and the copying process is relatively quick. Just remember that it's illegal to back up movies that you don't own the copyright to. ⊠ **James Bennett**

Movies on CD & DVD 2.0

○ FastTrak: 01923 495 496
○ www.fasttrak.co.uk
○ £29.99 inc VAT

System requirements
400MHz Pentium II processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space; recordable DVD drive (DVD-RW or DVD+RW) or CD-RW drive; analogue/digital video capture device

OVERALL
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DaviDeo VHS

○ MediaGold: 020 7221 4600
○ www.mediagold.co.uk
○ £29.99 inc VAT

System requirements
850MHz Pentium III processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/NT 4.0; 4GB hard disk space; CD-RW drive; analogue/digital video capture device

OVERALL
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DVD X Copy Gold

○ Koch Media: 01256 707 767
○ www.macromedia.com/uk
○ £74.99 inc VAT

System requirements
500MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 10GB hard disk space; recordable DVD drive (DVD-RW or DVD+RW)

OVERALL
■■■■■■■□□□

↑ DVD X Copy has a simple single-screen interface and works pretty quickly, too

E-commerce software
EasyWare 1.0, PremierWebShop 3.5 and SolutionFinder 2.0

The complexities of setting up shop on the web has, until recently, deterred all but the most technically astute – which has also restricted e-commerce for all. While more and more ISPs are providing off-the-shelf solutions, the following packages are also aimed at simplifying the process for small businesses.

EasyWare 1.0

On first encounter EasyWare is the least sophisticated package of the three and certainly will not win any awards for its interface. Although it requires some user expertise to set up a web shop, in the long term EasyWare is the most straightforward package to maintain.

It relies entirely on PHP rather than the more typical PHP/MySQL combination common to other apps. This means that you can concentrate on producing your store and basket. And because the program is targeted entirely at UK businesses, EasyWare has built-in simple support for payment methods.

Verdict

EasyWare isn't as slick as PremierWebShop. Though it is useful for small web stores, there are better alternatives for the price.

PremierWebShop 3.5

PremierWebShop takes a different approach to EasyWare. The software is free, although to use it you have to register with PremierHost which costs from £194 a year. The other major change is that it uses the ISP's SQL services to provide a much more sophisticated catalogue. If you have any experience of a database such as Access this will be no big deal. Just be prepared for editing fields and previewing queries.

Verdict

PremierWebShop's interface is well designed and fairly straightforward. But if you do not want to use the ISP PremierHost then there is no point in buying this software. And for small web shops with only a few items, this could be a costly option.
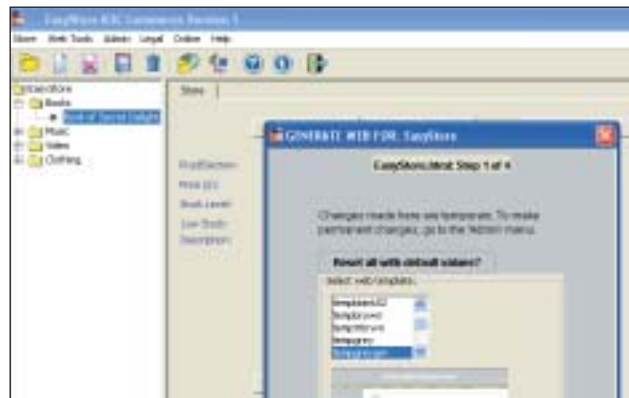
SolutionFinder 2.0

This app began by infuriating us but this soon turned to intrigue. To describe it as web shop software doesn't do it justice. It's designed to produce a front end of queries to search online databases that may well lead to a store, but could also cover aftersales care and a helpdesk.

SolutionFinder has a somewhat odd interface. You have to think through the types of queries you wish to create, but after a while we began to appreciate the real value of this process. It will (hopefully) enable you to create a more logical series of questions and answers that visitors to your site can choose from.

Verdict

Though potentially helpful, SolutionFinder is expensive. Overall we think that EasyWare 1.0 is the best solution for creating a range of small online stores. ☒ **Jason Whittaker**

↑ By avoiding database interaction, EasyWare is fairly simple to use – though its interface is a little simplistic

↓ SolutionFinder is aimed at enhancing customer care rather than just building web shops

↑ PremierWebShop offers a range of features for use with the parent company's hosting services

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EasyWare 1.0

○ EasyWare UK: 020 8305 6992
○ www.easyware-uk.com
○ £382 inc VAT

System requirements
600MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 190MB hard disk space

OVERALL
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PremierWebShop 3.5

○ PremierHost: 020 7504 6900
○ www.premierhost.com
○ £194 inc VAT per annum

System requirements
Pentium PC; Windows 9x/Me/NT/2000/XP; PremierHost account
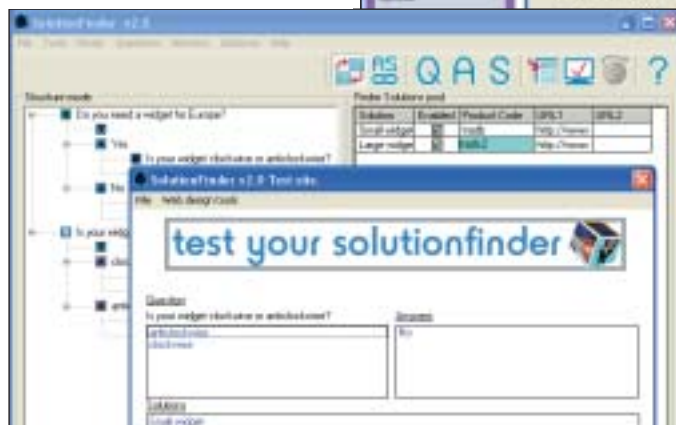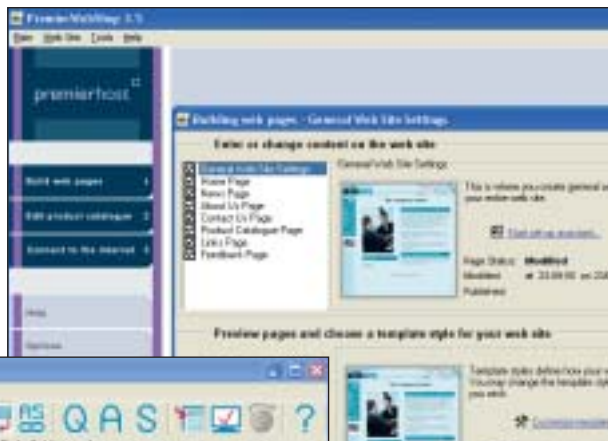
OVERALL
■■■■■■■□□□

SolutionFinder 2.0

○ SellingSolutions: 01932 222 040
○ www.solutionfinder.co.uk
○ Lite £250 inc VAT; Pro £1,726 inc VAT

System requirements
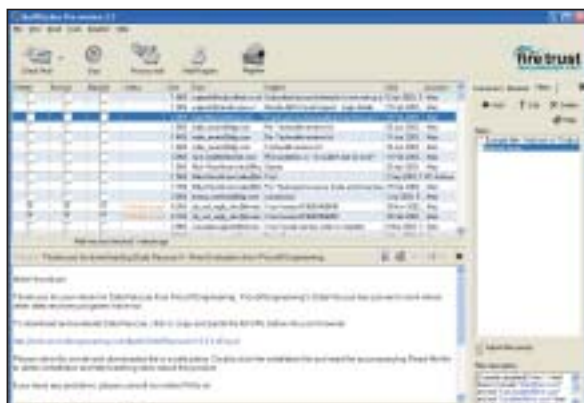Pentium PC; Windows 9x/Me/NT/2000/XP; ISP with SQL database

OVERALL
■■■■■□□□□

Internet tools
Top 10 internet tools

Almost everyone with a PC regularly uses the internet. Here we pull together 10 of the handiest tools to make internet use safer and more productive.

MailWasher

MailWasher
○ www.mailwasher.net
○ Price: Standard free; Pro £19
○ Works with Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP

OVERALL ■■■■■■□□□□

MailWasher takes possibly the simplest approach to spam-blocking. It connects to your mail server and displays all your incoming messages without downloading them to your PC. You can then go through the list and determine which messages are genuine and which aren't. You can either bounce spam messages back to the sender or delete them from the server and add them to a spam blacklist.

A Pro version adds extra features such as being able to set up complex rules and the ability to work with multiple email accounts.

Verdict

MailWasher is easy to use and an effective blocker against unwanted messages. But having to check through your incoming messages is laborious. We'd prefer more automation.

Pop-Up Stopper Professional

Pop-Up Stopper Pro
○ www.panicware.com
○ £19 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP

OVERALL ■■■■■■■■□□

PC ADVISOR GOLD Pop-up ads and windows can blight anybody's surfing experience. Not only do you waste time closing them down, they also pose a security risk as they may place spyware or cookies on your PC.

Controlling Pop-Up Stopper is a breeze. An icon appears in your Notifications bar that, when clicked, brings up a menu with the most common options. Opening the Preferences window provides full control. For example, you can select domains from which to allow pop-ups. There's also a button for instantly cleaning out both your browser and Windows history. A free version is also available.

→ SpamWasher's Rules Management system lets you finetune messages that are classified as junk

Verdict

Pop-Up Stopper is one of the most effective ad blockers we've seen. It's simple to use: once installed pop-ups are automatically blocked whatever browser you're using.

SpamWasher

SpamWasher takes a slightly different approach to junk mail filtering from MailWasher. Rather than dealing with all your messages while they are still on the server, SpamWasher downloads your emails to your PC but keeps them separate from your default mail software. The spam filtering activities are performed in a similar way to MailWasher – you scan through the list of messages and decide whether they are junk or not.
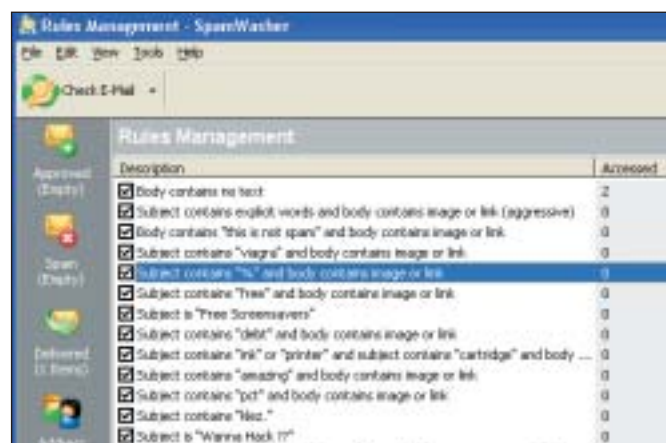
SpamWasher uses a range of criteria to automatically separate messages into spam and approved mail. You can set up your own rules, add users to its address book and so on. Your standard mail program is then reconfigured to receive its mail from SpamWasher rather than from the server.

SpamWasher
○ www.panicware.com
○ £19 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/Me/2000/XP

OVERALL ■■■■■■■■□□

Verdict

It's easy to integrate SpamWasher into your normal workflow, making it an impressive and cost-effective solution.

Steganos Internet Trace Destructor 6.0

PC ADVISOR GOLD As its name suggests, Internet Trace Destructor is designed to obliterate any sign of web-related activities on your PC. The software's main interface provides you with an extensive list of items that you may want to destroy. To activate it, simply check the boxes next to the relevant items and click Destroy.

Rather than just delete them, Steganos completely overwrites files so there is no chance of recovering the data. The items it can remove include cookies, browser history and data entered into web forms.

It handles files associated with popular web packages, operating systems and other application, although you may find some non-supported file types.

Verdict

If you need to cover the tracks of your internet activity then Steganos Internet Trace Destructor is the perfect solution.

Steganos Internet Anonym

For those who are worried about giving out information to undesirable sources, Steganos Internet Anonym may be the solution. Its principal function is to protect the identity of your PC when you go online. It does this by masking details such as your IP address and making use of proxy servers.

At first it may slow down your connection speed, but the more you use it the more the software learns which proxy servers are fastest and most efficient.

Internet Anonym also protects you in a range of other ways. You can set it to block access to cookies, ActiveX objects and scripts. It can also

→ Easy Password Manager securely stores a wide range of data but we found setting it up to be anything but easy

mask the identity of your browser and there's a rudimentary pop-up window blocker.

Verdict

Internet Anonym is simple, effective and the package also includes Steganos Internet Trace Destructor and Steganos Shredder for obliterating local files.

Easy Password Manager

We were quite excited at the concept of Easy Password Manager. As any internet user knows, the number of different usernames and passwords you need to remember can quickly overwhelm.

This tool promises to store all of this information securely, so you only ever need to remember one password again. It does this quite well, with an advanced database that can store a wealth of different secure information, as well as a web form filler that contains multiple sets of data.
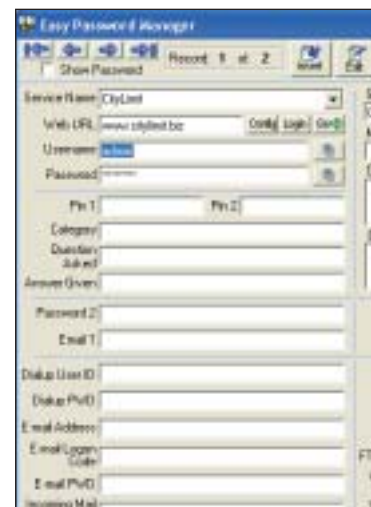
Verdict

The trouble with Easy Password Manager is with its use of the word 'Easy'. We found the interface clunky and unintuitive.

Aladdin Internet Cleanup

PC ADVISOR GOLD Internet Cleanup is a general-purpose utility. It bundles the functions of a variety of apps into one package. Unlike some utilities, it isn't focused around one special ability but instead excels in a number of areas.

The main interface gives you an overview of what files are on your PC that perhaps you'd rather weren't there – such as cache files, cookies and

→ Internet Cleanup's main window gives you an at-a-glance view of what potentially undesirable files reside on your PC

Internet Trace Destructor

○ www.steganos.com
○ £11 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/Me/2000/XP

OVERALL
■■■■■■■■□

↑ Internet Trace Destructor provides a list of items it can obliterate, with helpful info to explain what everything is

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Internet Anonym

○ www.steganos.com
○ £23.54 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/Me/2000/XP

OVERALL
■■■■■■□□□

← Protecting your PC's identity is as simple as opening Internet Anonym and clicking Surf Anonymously

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Easy Password Manager

○ www.passwordmanager.co.uk
○ £12.99 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 95/98/Me/NT/2000/XP

OVERALL
■■■■■□□□□

Aladdin Internet Cleanup

○ www.aladdinsys.com
○ £19 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/Me/NT 4.0/2000/XP

OVERALL
■■■■■■■■□

↑ **Window Washer's simple interface disguises an advanced piece of software with powerful features**

My Personal Favorites

As its name suggests, this security package is concerned with web browser Favorites. Everyone who uses the internet will have an extensive library of bookmarks for sites they visit regularly and this list can offer unwanted information to prying eyes either locally or via the internet.

My Personal Favorites stores your bookmarks outside of your browser and requires a password to access them, so they can be kept safe and secure. Access to the Favorites window is either via an icon in the Notification bar, or if you don't even want people to know the software is on your machine you can choose to have it completely hidden and only accessible via an obscure keyboard shortcut.

Verdict

We appreciate that these features help to maintain the security of the software, but we found the lack of true integration with the browser's Favorites/Bookmarks menu frustrating. It's also a shame that the software suffers from an ugly and unappealing interface.

↓ **The Google Toolbar sits just below your standard Internet Explorer toolbar and provides a wealth of useful tools**

spyware. You can then access the interface for each type of file. You can, for example, view the cookies on your system and choose which ones to trust. Alternatively you can allow Internet Cleanup to clean out your system automatically.

Verdict

Internet Cleanup is an impressive package that provides the right balance of advanced features with ease of use. We'd recommend it to any internet user.

Window Washer

Window Washer cleans up files on your computer. Washed files are deleted from your system or for optimum security you can "add bleach to your wash" which means that files are completely destroyed and rendered unrecoverable. It principally deals with internet files, but also removes Windows files such as your Search and Run history.

It's easy to select which files you want washed. Furthermore, if the required file isn't included in Window Washer's list, you can set up your own Custom Wash items.

Verdict

Window Washer doesn't offer the wealth of features that some clean-up utilities have, such as the ability to block spyware and pop-up ads, but it handles browser caches, cookies and a wide range of other files very well.

↓ **Despite its unattractive interface, My Personal Favorites is useful for keeping your bookmarks safe from prying eyes**

Google Toolbar 2.0

PC ADVISOR GOLD The Google Toolbar may seem out of place among the other internet utility software we've looked at, but in actual fact it may serve your needs just fine. What's more, it's extremely simple, integrates straight into Internet Explorer (other browsers not supported) and, best of all, it's free.

The toolbar's principal purpose is to integrate Google's search engine directly into your toolbar, so you don't have to visit Google's home page. But it has a wealth of additional and often unrecognised features, including a simple pop-up blocker. This tool is effectively built into Internet Explorer, making it easy to finetune – clicking the Popup Blocker button on any site will either block or allow popups for that particular site. It also has a form auto-filling function and a range of other tools.

Verdict

As the Google Toolbar is fully customisable, your IE toolbar doesn't get cluttered with items you're not using. If you're a regular Google user and you're not using this feature, you should be. Change the error of your ways immediately. ⊠ **Mike Hirschkorn**

Leisure software packages
Top 10 lifestyle enhancers

Computers aren't all about work, work, work. Here we pick 10 software packages designed for your downtime.

Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia Plus 2004

PC ADVISOR GOLD The internet is the foremost research facility available to computer users, but it can be daunting trailing through irrelevant pages for a specific fact or figure. Microsoft's latest Encarta package uses the power of the web but tames it to make it easier to find the information you're looking for. The software is also tailored specifically to a UK audience.

The 2004 edition features a statistics centre, an atlas packed full of maps, games, timelines and over 41,000 articles and images – many of which are interactive or 3D.

A handy section for past news and background research is *The Times* archive. The live media section allows you to learn about events as they happen – a bit like a personal news service. And with the click of a button users can update the package whenever new information is released.

Verdict

An excellent reference tool from the software giant, Encarta 2004 is guaranteed to expand your general knowledge.

Encarta 2004

○ www.microsoft.com/uk/ encarta/ product/plus.mspx or www.amazon.co.uk
○ £39.99 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/Me/XP

OVERALL

↓ Find the information you need quickly and easily thanks to Encarta Encyclopedia Plus 2004

Encyclopaedia Britannica Deluxe 2004

Encyclopaedia Britannica packs the 75,000 articles held in its 32 volumes on to three CDs. Disappointingly, aside from its timelines section, the package doesn't offer that much interactive content. However, its new Year in Review section and Knowledge Navigator more than make up for this.

Year in Review provides articles on events that took place from 1993 to 2002, covering everything from politics and science to sport.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

○ www.britannica.co.uk
○ £39.99 inc VAT
○ Works with Windows 98/2000/Me/XP

OVERALL

← With plenty of in-depth, text-heavy information, some of Britannica's sections aren't suitable for younger students

The Knowledge Navigator offers a series of topic areas, such as human body and recreation, with opinion pieces, facts and research – a fantastic tool for students although it's too text-heavy to appeal to younger users. It also includes a year's free update to keep information up to date.

Verdict

This is an excellent research facility, although it can take a while to find the exact info you need.

AA MileMaster Plus 2003

PC ADVISOR GOLD AA's MileMaster is an old favourite, taking the pain out of exploring new places and cutting the chances of getting lost along the way. Although routeplanners are renowned for sending drivers on long-winded routes to their chosen destinations, on the whole MileMaster proved pretty accurate.

You can find places by names, road number or postcodes – a click of a button will plan your route from start to finish. There's a lack of detail in even the most comprehensive mode, which is rather worrying while stuck behind the wheel. But stick to the route and nine times out of 10 you'll arrive on schedule. The software is also excellent at pointing out places of interest, keeping check on the cost of your journey and even highlighting local car parks.

Verdict

MileMaster is confined to the boundaries of the UK, so if you're planning on travelling further afield you'll need to purchase another package.
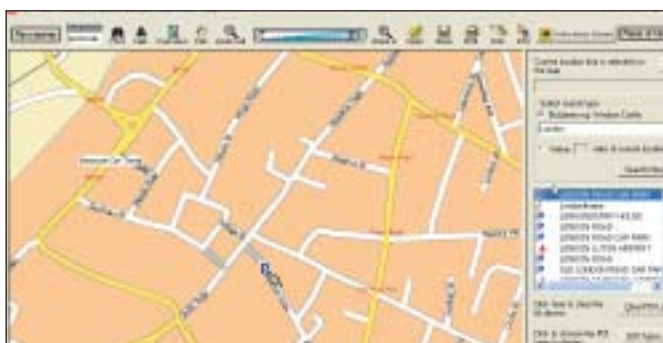
AA MileMaster Plus 2003

○ www.btlpublishing.com
○ £39.99 inc VAT
○ Works with: Windows 98 or later

OVERALL

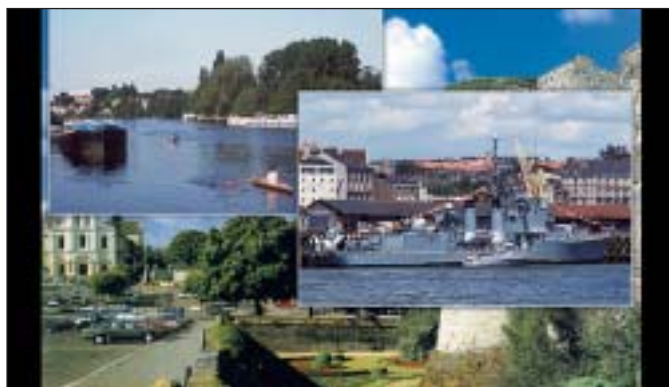↓ Have faith and stick with the route AA MileMaster Plus recommends

Discover France, Spain and Italy

If you want a basic software package that gives you a general overview of the more well-known places of interest in France, Spain and Italy then this will suit your needs. But at £20 for all three CDs you get what you pay for.

You can browse through each region, visiting places of interest such as routes of pilgrimage, castles and other historical sites. The accompanying pictures are clear while small boxouts give you snippets of information on each item. There are also slideshows of each area allowing you to appreciate town centres and browse through beautiful scenery.

↓ You get what you pay for. If you're after an general overview of France, Spain and Italy then this Discover package is fine

Verdict

This package offers basic details about landscape and local specialities, such as Normandy's Camembert cheese. But there's a distinct lack of handy phrases or currency conversion facilities – two key areas most tourists need to know.

Learn to speak Spanish 9.0

PC ADVISOR GOLD Language learning CDs have progressed a long way from the listen-and-repeat days. Mindscape's latest package covers all areas of learning, from pronunciation and vocabulary to writing and grammar, allowing you to gradually progress from basic to advanced.

The interface is intuitive and the conversation simulations, speech recognition and record/playback let you put what you've learned into practice. You can create a study plan based on your schedule, which allows you to work through each section in your own time.

The separate audio CD is a useful addition for when you're at home or on the bus away from your PC, so there's no excuse not to practice. The cultural sections are a nice touch to get you in the mood for your visit and provide you with a few historical facts and background information about the country.

Verdict

This CD is excellent value for money and it actually does what it says on the box.

↑ Learn to speak Spanish has an intuitive interface and the study plan means you can take control of your own learning

Teaching you Microsoft Windows XP/2000/98

For most of us there's little point learning how to use the Windows 98 or 2000 operating systems as they will soon be redundant. But XP is a completely different story. For novices, this 'Teaching you' package offers all you need to get to grips with XP. Particularly useful are the step-by-step guides that lead you through various actions such as opening and saving folders as well as arranging icons.

The package's main audience is likely to be the elderly who've never used Windows before, or younger children who are just coming to terms with using a PC. However, the package is so text-heavy it can be hard to follow.

Verdict

This is a useful basic package for beginners but most of the information is already included in Windows' Help section. If you're thinking about buying XP and want to take a look at what the OS has to offer then this is an excellent way of seeing what you get for your money.
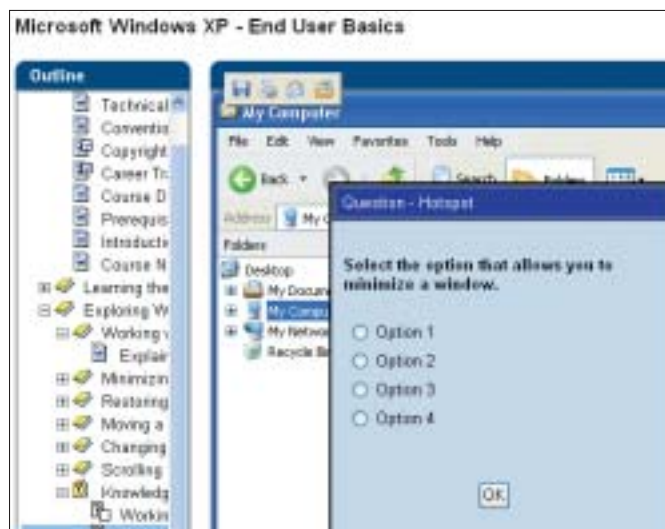
↓ Want to become a Windows XP whizz? Check out the Help section or purchase the £9.99 Teaching you CD
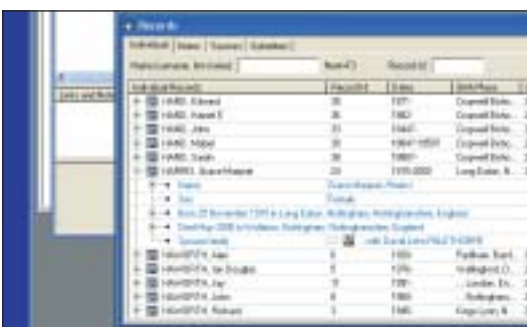
Family Historian 2.1

PCADVISOR GOLD Family Historian was designed and written for a British audience. This is a refreshing change from the endless geneology packages that only contain data and links relating to US residents.

Rather than bombarding you with a confusing mass of leads to follow in the quest for details of your ancestors, it concentrates on providing a powerful but flexible repository for the data you uncover.

A clean, Word-style interface shows or hides associated sources and notes and lets you view more than one record at once. Configurable query fields sort and display information whatever way you choose and you can attach multimedia files. It's also possible to associate and caption different parts of a photo – ideal for introducing each person in a group shot.

Verdict

Overall, this powerful package is exactly what you need when compiling your personal history.

↓ Getting your family tree in order is a breeze thanks to Family Historian 2.1
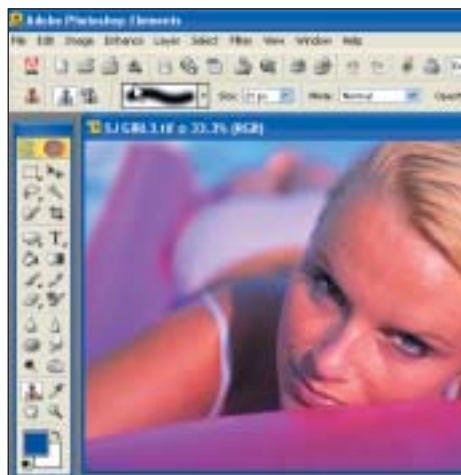
Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0

Photoshop Elements 2.0 is more intuitive than its predecessor but it is still a complex image-editing package. While professionals will be over the moon thanks to Elements' large array of features, amateur photographers may find it overwhelming and difficult to get to grips with, especially when it comes to creating layers.

Novices will, however, welcome the inclusion of the Recipe section. This handy feature offers solutions to common problems and includes a step-by-step guide to removing red-eye. It's worth completing a few of these tutorials to familiarise yourself with the package.

Photoshop's interface is pretty complicated too and the sheer number of tools demands a few hours practice. As well as the usual photo-enhancing functions, there are plenty of output options such as attaching photos to emails and uploading images to the web.

Elements can also create slideshows in PDF format.

↓ With a whole host of features and tools, Photoshop Elements 2.0 is ideal for pros

Verdict

If you're looking for something more extensive than free bundled software to create professional looking photos then Photoshop Elements is the package for you.

Starry Night Pro 4.x

PCADVISOR GOLD This planetary software makes star gazing much more fun by giving names and positioning to everything you see in the sky. It has a huge database of stars and constellations to search through, making it an excellent tool for amateurs and more experienced stargazers.

Compared to similar software, which tends to be text-heavy, the interface is easy to use and there are plenty of graphics and interactive sections. A handy tool is the night vision mode, which alters the contrast of the screen. So, for example, if you're sitting in the garden with your laptop resting on your knees the screen turns red making it easier to read.

Starry Night's 360-degree location section can pinpoint your viewing position and it offers video footage of astronomical phenomena with interviews from top astronomers. There's also info about the latest understanding of meteorites and newly discovered comets.

↓ Reach for the stars with the excellent planetary app, Starry Night Pro

Verdict

If you're into astronomy then this is without doubt one of the most comprehensive packages on the market.

3D Landscape Deluxe 5.0

Okay, before you get too excited, this software only allows you to plan your garden. Unfortunately, you'll still have to put in the hard graft to create it!

There's an impressive catalogue of over 9,000 plants, so you should be able to find all the foliage you need. There's also vital information on how to maintain your plants, correct positioning and other tips every novice gardener is desperate to know.

You can add everything from garden fencing to furniture into your design and the gradient controls can recreate your exact plot of land – lumps, hills, holes and all. And as with most design programs, you can take a virtual tour of your masterpiece viewing it from a range of angles.

Verdict

Landscape Deluxe's interface is hard to use and if you're impatient then you might end up uninstalling it before you've even managed to map out the parameters of your lawn. However, persevere and we promise that things will improve. ⊠ **Wendy Brewer**