

The way we were: 100 issues of PC Advisor

How much has the world changed in the eight years since PC Advisor was first published in August 95? To a monthly computer magazine, 1995 was the Pleistocene era. We bundled editor Andrew Charlesworth into the time machine to see how things have evolved

Buying a multimedia PC – the coverline on *PC Advisor's* first issue back in August 95 – could have been a feature in any issue since, such has been the fascination with turning the PC into an entertainment centre.

In August 95, multimedia meant playing CDs containing 16bit audio and basic animations. If you had a top-notch Pentium processor running at up to 120MHz you could even play video. Cool, as they said back then.

Microsoft had just launched Windows 95, the first of its operating systems aimed at consumers. A big chunk of our first issue was therefore devoted to talking readers through installing and using the new software, just like XP today. The internet was on the rise too, so *PC Advisor* showed you how to choose and install your first 9.6Kbps modem. Whizz!

PCA's crystal ball

The mid-90s was a time of great expectations for the PC business, with experts making wild predictions about how the computer industry would change the world.

Businesses were already in the thick of it, with three-tier client-server architecture, downsizing, right-sizing, total cost of ownership and business process re-engineering.

In the home, however, our lives had yet to be altered irrevocably by the influx of PCs. The pundit class of 1995 said this would all change, with 80 percent of Britain's homes owning a PC by the year 2000. We would shop online, converse with one another via email, educate our children with CD encyclopaedias and immerse ourselves in virtual reality entertainment. We would never go out. Society would wither and crumble.

Pull the other one. In the late 60s, the pundits said we would be

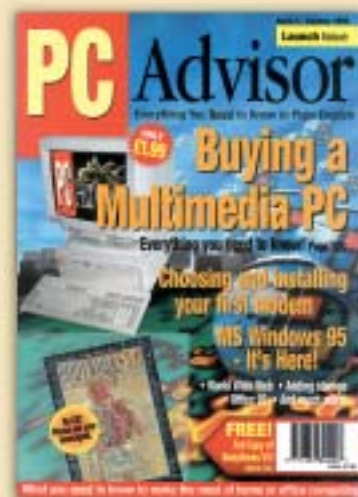
flying to work in private jetcars and wearing disposable paper underwear. Unwrap me another thong, darling, this one's been creased in the jetwash.

None of it worked out that way, of course. Half of Britain's homes still don't have a computer and, rather than stay in, we've developed computers to take out with us.

History lesson

That first issue of *PC Advisor* was published in Birmingham by an offshoot of computer retailer

August 95
Issue one and multimedia PCs were the order of the day. With a top-notch Pentium processor running at up to 120MHz, you could even play video. Cool, as they said back then





November 96
First mention of
the millennium
bug: banks, air
traffic control,
the Pentagon...
even your car
might crash

Software Warehouse (later to become Jungle and end up in the hands of General Universal Stores, or GUS). The editor was Jason Whittaker, who still contributes to the magazine from his home in Cornwall.

At the beginning of 1996, *PCA* was bought by IDG, the US-owned media group that publishes the title today. Issue eight, cover date May 1996, was the first to be published by IDG. The magazine moved to London a few months later.

June 96 saw the launch of Internet Advisor, a section within the magazine that dealt with issues such as parental control of children's surfing and the browser war brewing between Microsoft Explorer and Netscape Navigator. Like all good journalists we backed Netscape to see off the Great Satan of Software. Of course, we were wrong.

Five months later we launched our ConsumerWatch section, a sign that customers were fed up with the cowboy antics of suppliers and wanted them to grow up and behave like 'proper' businesses. Consumer affairs has been a strong suit of *PC Advisor's* ever since.

Here comes Y2K

November 96 also saw the first mention of the millennium bug - the notion that many of the world's computers weren't programmed to cope with the date change from 1999 to 2000.

Doom-mongers predicted that systems would crash on the stroke of midnight, bringing down international banking, air traffic control and the Pentagon's nuclear missile launch systems, as well as lousing up the

household accounts on your PC. Society itself would wither and crumble. The clock was ticking...

As December 96 approached, ICL Fujitsu hoped we'd be wrapping up its underpowered, overpriced PC-TV for Christmas. The product died before the end of the year, with retailers, customers and the press all agreeing it was a Christmas turkey. Microsoft and its hardware partners will be hoping the same thing doesn't befall Windows XP Media Centre PCs this festive season.

The turn of 1997 introduced the concept of spam or unwanted email. Something had to be done or spam would soon clog all our mailboxes, turning email from a vital tool into a nuisance. At least we got that right.

By mid-1997, chess grand master Gary Kasparov had been thrashed by IBM's Deep Blue system and *PC Advisor's* advertisers were plugging new Pentium II machines running at a heart-stoppingly slow 266MHz.

The wonderful web

In the dawn of 1998 the dotcom bubble began to inflate at a truly

alarming rate. Every advert in *PC Advisor* carried a URL and the magazine swelled to 400 pages. In the May issue we ran a letter from Bob Pelling of Chepstow, asking: "Am I the only person in the country not connected to the internet?" Bob's 386SX PC was without modem.

Shortly afterwards, Dixons launched Freeserve which provided flat-rate unmetered internet access. It was condemned as "financially unsustainable" by its competitors.

PC Advisor told readers about music on the web in MP3 format for the first time, as well as questioning the sanity of Larry Ellison, boss of Oracle, who wanted to sell his Network Computers to home users.

We were also concerned about Stan Shih's state of mind. The Acer boss claimed his XC - another brain-damaged version of the PC - would outsell PCs at a rate of 10:1 by 2010.

As the days of 1998 lengthened, Ericsson got very excited about Bluetooth, the first 1Mp (megapixel) digital cameras were snapped up for £500 and Microsoft made the first of many court appearances to

May 96

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1998-2001

Microsoft goes 56 rounds with the DOJ. Net result: nothing changed



defend itself against anticompetitive charges brought by the US Department of Justice.

In the April 99 issue, we reported on mobile phones with internet access and ran the first reviews of Intel's 500MHz Pentium III processor, followed in short order by AMD's 500MHz K7 CPU. The latter marked the beginning of a chip war that continues today.

Freeserve's competitors turned out to be financially unsustainable too while, at the age of 43, Bill Gates was feeling quite secure with \$54.5bn to his name. Also in April 99, Apple launched the covetable iMac and the first flat-screen LCDs were reviewed.

By mid-year, number one in our Power PCs chart was the £1,499 NEC SM-500 B3, a Pentium III-powered PC that achieved a WorldBench 4 score

of 229. The number one budget inkjet printer was a £70 HP model.

IBM's PC division lost more than \$1bn but Tiny shipped its millionth PC and celebrated its status as the UK's biggest supplier with 103 retail outlets.

The dotcoms wrote retail's obituary for the umpteenth time that year, everyone predicted the downfall of Microsoft as the DoJ started talking tough and WAP promised web surfing from a mobile phone. So it was not a good year for the truth, as it turned out.

Tick, tock

As the year 2000 clock ticked into December 99, lawyers warned they would sue anyone whose lack of preparation inflicted damage on their clients' businesses. Millennium

midnight came and went, society didn't wither and crumble, IT staff breathed a sigh of relief and checked their overtime payments.

Windows 2000, Microsoft's latest operating system for business users, launched on 17 February. AMD scored yet another victory over Intel by releasing the first 1GHz Athlon chip. A few months later the Empire struck back with a 1GHz P3 that outperformed the Athlon 346 v 340 in our WorldBench tests.

PDAs got serious in spring with the first Pocket PC device (previously Windows CE 3.0) the Compaq Aero. Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson got serious too, recommending Microsoft be broken up. While we gleefully wrote Microsoft's obit, it launched Windows Me and talked about Whistler (later to become Windows XP), a new operating system to unite Me and 2000, as if they knew the churlish judge was only joshing.

Love me do

On 4 May 00 the Love Bug bit, crashing millions of PCs across the world and causing billions of dollars of loss to business. PC Advisor's new website went live the same month.

WAP was big enough to grace the cover of PC Advisor's July 00 issue, MP3 and Napster were everywhere and BT upgraded the first few exchanges to enable ADSL broadband internet access.

Boo.com, the iconic online fashion retailer launched on a tsunami of venture capital and arrogance, went gloriously bust, heralding the start of



1999

Intel fights back against AMD as both chip makers break the 1GHz barrier



2002

The dearly departed: Carrera, Tiny, Dan, Protek, SmartTalk, Sight & Sound...



dotcom deflation. Internet-only retailer Jungle, which had been due to float for £750m in February, was sold to bricks-and-mortar GUS for £37m, including £12m debt, in November. Meanwhile, dozens of unmetered access ISPs evaporated when they failed to meet surging demand. By now the web had two billion pages and was growing at a rate of seven million a day.

In September, Bill Gates explained Microsoft's new .Net strategy: "Our goal is to move beyond today's world of standalone websites to an internet of interchangeable components." And we thought it was just another way to flog more software. Shame on us.

Orange launched the first mobile videophone. "One day our children will find it hard to believe that we only had audiophones," said an Orange spokesperson at the launch, unknowingly prophesying that videophones would be ignored by adults when they made it big in 2002.

Before the close of 2000, UK PC suppliers Carrera, Sight & Sound,

May 00
The Love Bug: it said "I love you" then ate your PC



Protek and SmartTalk all closed their doors. The Recording Industry Association of America vowed to close Napster, causing our news editor to declare: "The music industry is creating a martyr it cannot contain". It's a blood-soaked day we're still rallying today.

In January 01 we ran the first Pentium 4 processor review and said it wasn't worth the extra cash. The PCAdvisor.co.uk Registered Users Area went live and we expanded ConsumerWatch to provide more advice on getting satisfactory service.

In April, we reported on how the law was catching up with cyberspace with the launch of the National High Tech Crime Unit, Trading Standards'

Computer Forensic Unit and a gaggle of EU initiatives aimed at taming the internet. Ofel even told BT it was overcharging for broadband.

Let the games begin

The judges ruled in May 01, too. Judge Jackson's ruling to break up Microsoft was overturned and Judge Patel ruled against Napster in a landmark copyright case. Farewell Napster, hello Gnutella, Kazaa and all the others. Message to the RIAA: this is going to be harder than you originally thought.

Microsoft decided to 'embrace and extend' the games console and Xbox stepped out on to the battlefield. Sega, which had already taken several beatings from Sony's PlayStation, promptly ran up a white flag and entered the fray itself. Sonic the Hedgehog was roadkill.

Halfway through 2001 Dell knocked Compaq off the top of the heap to become the world's number one PC supplier. Compaq's shareholders never recovered from the shock and in November they threw in their lot with HP. "Together we will shape the IT industry," said HP boss Carly Fiorina. A distended and unwieldy shape, predicted *PC Advisor*.

PC Advisor published its first Customer Satisfaction Survey in the



2001

The first *PC Advisor* annual customer survey. Two years on, post-sales support is still a lottery

November 01 issue. Some suppliers were threatening to sue us before it had even hit the shelves.

By 2002 it was quite obvious that service and support were as important as price and performance when it came to buying a PC. In an online poll, 88 percent of *PC Advisor* readers voted extended warranties a rip-off – a verdict with which the Office of Fair Trading, the Competition Commission and the Consumers Association agreed. Dixons, strangely, disagreed.

When the chips are down

By 2002 it looked like AMD had won the chip war. All 30 PCs in *PC Advisor*'s charts were AMD-powered, despite the launch of Intel's 2.2GHz P4. But AMD was bleeding cash.

Time bought archrival Tiny in May and then found a big hole shaped like uninsured warranties in Tiny's finances. In August, PC maker Dan called in the receivers. That summer, the DTI freed up the 2.4GHz radio spectrum, clearing the way for public wireless LANs and the birth of a hundred hotspots.

Evesham was the most commonly recommended PC brand and Mesh's systems broke down the least in *PCA*'s second annual Customer Satisfaction Survey, published in November 02.

2002

Tablet PCs: where are they now? Retracted into a niche



The OFT promised to report on the consumer IT industry and we urged it to look at the cycle of misery laughingly known as post-sales support. When the OFT report was published it all but ignored support, praising the PC business for providing good value products, although it did say that inkjet cartridge pricing was a tad confusing.

Tablet PCs created a small stir but the price was hard to swallow. Pundits started talking about digital homes run by digital hubs – PCs that connected to the TV, hi-fi and each other by wireless networks. Suppliers spun their gadget collections into a 'digital strategy'.

In February 03 we launched two new sections, XP Advisor and Broadband Advisor. While Microsoft made sure that XP was everywhere, BT put the brake on broadband Britain by dragging its heels over upgrading local exchanges.

This July we reported that 30 percent of the world's email was spam, proving true the predictions made six years previously.

While computer viruses repeatedly bugged the internet, Taiwan's premier computer show, Computex, was closed by a human virus – SARS.

PC Advisor's third annual Customer Satisfaction Survey, published in our last issue, concluded that support is still a lottery, irrespective of whether you buy from a big brand name or a friendly local.

In the same issue we launched a new quarterly supplement, *Digital World*, to explain the reality behind the hype of the digital lifestyle. At the same time, 17 suppliers from the PC and consumer electronics industries teamed up to form the Digital Home Working Group 'to set standards of interoperability'.

However, *PC Advisor* predicted that these 'standards' will be too woolly to simplify the chaotic task of turning the PC into a multimedia entertainment hub – which brings us back to the multimedia PC. Plus ça change. ☒

2003

The year of broadband – but only for those BT et al choose to enable

