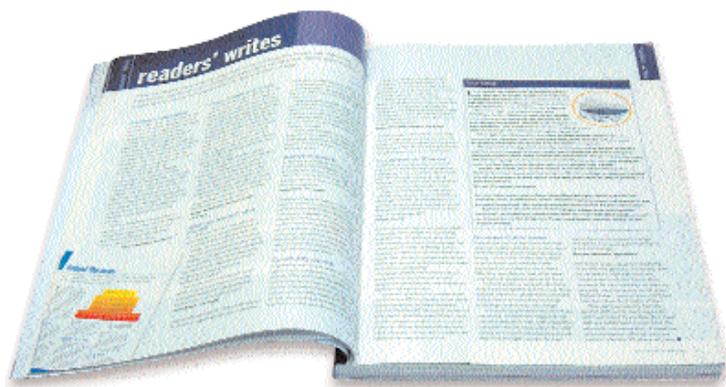


readers' writes

Look out, Windows! *PC Advisor* readers are gunning for the world's favourite operating system. They're not that happy with the music industry behemoths either, and aren't afraid to say it. Meanwhile, our star letter has it in for the instruction booklet writers of this world



Wind the windows down

In reply to George Monaghan's February 02 star letter, I believe (if the rumours I hear on the grapevine are anything to go by) that the problems with Microsoft's registration scheme will become even more serious as time goes on.

As Microsoft suspends support for Windows 95, 98, 98 SE and NT, this will force us into purchasing its latest operating system, Windows XP. We will not only be charged for all upgrades but, even worse, forced into renting the upkeep services – something we all take for granted from our freeware, shareware and so on.

It's no use that there are alternative operating systems out there, either. Once Bill Gates has us 'hooked' into his systems they will all be linked to each other – for example, there's the current batch of PCs that come with Windows XP already loaded. These are all linked organically to printer scanners which have built-in safeguards to protect the software, so that it will be either too expensive or too much bother to change. That's how I see it at least.

No wonder the Americans have been examining Gates' business recently and why he's bleating like mad: it's to throw us off the scent of what he's really up to.

Judith McLeod-Odell, via email

and an even smaller printed warning. I returned the CD and exchanged it for a disc from another artist on a different label. I believe if this practice continues record companies are going to find more cash is lost due to poor sales than piracy. Surely everyone should have the right to make personal backups of any digital material, given that it is now known that compact discs have a finite lifespan.

Paul Joel, Sheffield

Will Head replies: the reason for this is that you, sir, are a criminal. Or at least you are in the eyes of the multimillion pound record conglomerates. This copy protection is designed to stop your nefarious ways and ensure that all your music is bought and paid for (to help the starving artist not line the pockets of Armani-suited executives, you understand).

If this results in some legitimate users being unable to play the CD they've bought, it's apparently a fair price to pay for keeping people honest. You were right to return the CD and the only way to combat this abuse of power is for others to follow suit and return any CDs they can't play on their equipment – PCs included.

The only thing record companies are interested in is money, so make them listen by returning these unusable

The sound of silence

I have recently become a victim of a copy-protected music CD. It wouldn't play in my car CD player or my portable player. The only warning on the disc is a small computer symbol on the reverse side of the CD

CDs and demand a full refund. They are, after all, not fit for the purpose for which they were sold.

Window-boxing you in

Your recent *Helpline mysteries solved* article (February 03) on the annoying features of Windows XP doesn't do justice to the worst of these – that is, the way in which Microsoft controls how we organise our home PC. It makes some (rather strange) assumptions about how we live our lives.

My wife and I share a home PC. We have some features that we like to individually personalise and some we share. We each have a login to Windows so that we can have our own desktop wallpaper of the kids, icons to the programs we most use, our own list of favourite websites and so on.

We save most of our documents in a common folder on our second partition, the D drive. Within this we have a mixture of shared and personal folders. This means that Microsoft's My Documents folder – the automatic default for programs – is on a different drive.

In the same way, we have our own email addresses but collect emails for the whole family when we log in. It took us weeks to realise that we were each seeing only part of the mail, as Outlook Express insists on sticking it in a different location for each of us. I've moved our inbox to a common folder to fix it but I have a request. Will Gates and co let us change these features to how we want them, or even share the painstakingly developed message rules for sorting and deleting message? Of course not.

Mr Bernstein, via email

Even the losers get lucky

I was most interested to read your Technofile article about removable memory (January 03). I have so far resisted stepping into this niche market, primarily

because of all the various types available. I have been waiting for one format to dominate the arena, but just as it seems one is beginning to take the lead another (quicker/cheaper/more capacity) appears on the market.

Soon I will have to take the plunge and make a decision. Once I do so, I believe I will be able to offer guidance to all your readers. Whatever format I eventually elect to purchase will greatly assist everyone else. Trust me. After all, back in the 1970s I purchased an eight-track player for my Sinclair C5. During the 1980s I used a Betamax video recorder, initially to record films from British Satellite Broadcasting's Movie Channel (remember the Squarial?), and then in the 1990s from ONdigital. With such an uncanny ability to pick the 'duffer' I promise to let you all know what I eventually choose.

Jo Webb, via email

Robin Morris replies: maybe you could arrange an exclusive non-endorsement deal with manufacturers. It could be quite lucrative. Seriously, you won't be signing away your life (or your life savings) when you choose a removable memory format.

If you buy a card reader, make sure it's a 'six-in-one' model that reads all six of the current major formats – that is, CompactFlash, Microdrive, SmartMedia, Secure Digital, Multimedia Card and Memory Stick. You'll pay around £10 more for the privilege, but at least you'll be able to mix and match as the various formats fall or rise in popularity.

You can't really go wrong with CompactFlash. It's already been with us for several years and the extremely high performance levels, rock-bottom pricing and industry-wide support mean that it's likely to stick around for a while yet. Otherwise, Secure Digital has advanced security features and strong technology.

Filing a complaint

Industry claims of a causal link between file sharing and falling online music sales would be more plausible if CD sales had not, famously, increased during Napster's heyday. Could it be that the more music you get to hear, the more you want to buy?

A more plausible explanation for a downturn in online music buying is the convergence of online and high street

Star letter

Is there anything we can do to make manufacturers understand that we need clear comprehensive instructions and specifications with their products and not the poor-quality material they produce for their own convenience?

Invariably, the fat instruction manual turns out to be written 10 percent in English and 90 percent in foreign languages. I have just bought a digital camera and on nearly every page of the written instructions you are referred to the accompanying CD-ROM.

Am I expected to lug a notebook around with me every time I wish to use my digital camera and have a query? Furthermore, the CD-ROM produces Acrobat files in PDF format which are not even printer friendly. And why should I be forced to print it anyway? Perhaps you should consider this sort of thing in your ratings.

Manufacturers all go to great lengths to satisfy the needs of the nanny state with a plethora of safety warnings. I was even told that the lens hood on my camera could be dangerous!

I am going to cut out the instructions in eight foreign languages which were inflicted on me and post them back to the manufacturer in a suitably unhelpful manner. Anyone care to join me?

Tom Lucas, via email

Andrew Charlesworth replies: to produce high-quality manuals tailored to each country would be expensive. Are we prepared to pay for this through increased product prices? Probably not. I guess the only way out of this dilemma is to study the manual thoroughly before going out and hope you don't get stuck in the field.

Our star letter writer wins a Canon SmartBase MPC400, worth £249 inc VAT. This four-colour, multifunction device combines a printer, copier and scanner in one compact flatbed unit. See www.canon.co.uk/multifunction for more information.

If you want to air your views in these pages, please write to PC Advisor, FREEPOST 20 LON87018, London W1E 4AN, fax us on 020 7580 1935, or email us at pcadvisor_letters@idg.com. Please mark emails 'Readers' writes' in the subject heading.



prices. I started buying music on the web back in the days of Boxman. Discounts of up to 40 percent were common and my purchases quadrupled. Bargains are irresistible, especially where rip-off items like UK-priced CDs are concerned.

But the business model was not sustainable: Boxman went bust, Jungle downsized and now Amazon has swallowed CDNow. One is lucky these days to find a disc that's £1.50 cheaper online than in the shops. Factor in postal charges and it's hardly worth filling in an online order form.

It won't be long before the price differential disappears completely as competition declines in the wake of more buyouts and mergers. We'll probably pay a premium to buy online for the sake of convenience and a wider catalogue.

M A Penwill, Plymouth

Guy Dixon replies: the record labels love to pin declining CD sales on the growth of unofficial P2P file-swapping networks, even though it's just as likely that competition from other media and the economic downturn are responsible.

You probably will buy online but won't pay a premium and you won't be buying your music in traditional CD format. The world's biggest record labels – BMG, EMI, Warner, Universal and Sony – have all unveiled online services recently. However, they haven't captured the imagination of consumers in the same way as Napster and Kazaa did, as they offer smaller selections than their unofficial P2P counterpart networks. But by 2006 research analyst Yankee Group predicts paid music services will begin to take off. See Fair shares on page 82 for more information. ■