

Video-editing and authoring software

CyberLink PowerProducer and PowerDirector Pro 2.5

Only a few years ago, turning your PC into a movie-editing suite was a fairly ambitious enterprise. Now, however, in this world of DVD, FireWire, rocket-powered processors and gargantuan hard disks, video-editing is much less of a niche market.

These days there's no shortage of software to capture footage, edit it, add swish effects and then burn it on to a CD or DVD.

CyberLink has recently added two of its own authoring suites, introducing PowerProducer and PowerDirector Pro 2.5.



PowerProducer

This extremely simple program is designed to get your video footage and still photos on to a CD or DVD as painlessly as possible. Like most multimedia applications, PowerProducer starts by capturing or importing video clips and graphics from various sources.

If you already know what kind of disc you'll finally be making then capturing is easy – select either DVD, VCD (video CD), SVCD (super video CD) or MiniDVD from the first screen of the wizard and the program will adjust the quality, frame rate and compression settings automatically.

With your footage on board, the wizard takes you step by step through the rest of the disc creation process. Those who just want to get straight to the shiny, round version of their recordings can keep hitting the Next button until PowerProducer starts burning your CD or DVD. However, there are some simple video-editing, menu-authoring and slideshow creation tools at your disposal, should you want to experiment creatively.

Alternatively, clicking on the QuickBurn button bypasses even the most minimal interaction and produces a disc automatically. Your finished DVD or VCD should play back in most set-top DVD players as well as PCs with a DVD-ROM/CD-ROM drive. Some of the other formats supported aren't as widely catered for, so check compatibility before you go into mass production.

PowerDirector Pro 2.5

Those looking to get more hands on with their video before committing it to disc will be interested in PowerDirector Pro 2.5. All the usual capture, edit and

output tools are present. In fact, PowerDirector features most of the same CD/DVD authoring facilities as its kid brother. Here, however, the focus is on getting to grips with your footage and jazzing it up with the help of motion effects, transitions and titles.

PowerDirector has some smart features such as scene-detection which splits your footage into small chunks. This can be done either during capture or after you've imported files into a new project. It also comes with a fast render engine, although this feature's success largely depends on the processing power of your PC.

The drag-and-drop storyboard approach to arranging clips is common among budget video-editing programs, so the choice of working in a timeline mode would have been a nice addition.

CyberLink has obviously attempted to apply the same no-brainer approach to the editing process it has pulled off successfully in PowerProducer. Sadly, however, many competing brands' equivalent products seem to do a better job of disguising the complexity of the video-editing process, while offering a wider selection of features in the same price range – one prime example being Pinnacle Studio 8.0.

Verdict

If you want to knock up a quick VCD, DVD or slideshow then you won't find an easier way of doing it than with PowerProducer. While PowerDirector 2.5 contains the same disc authoring features along with a whole lot more, it doesn't fare terribly well when compared with rival video-editing programs. ■

James Bennet



PowerProducer

- ☐ CyberLink: +49 2103 311 829
- ☐ www.gocyberlink.com
- ☐ £30 ex VAT

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II (1.6GHz P4 for real-time Mpeg-2 encoding); Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 1GB or more hard disk space; USB or PCI analogue capture device or FireWire port for DV capture

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



PowerDirector Pro 2.5

- ☐ CyberLink: +49 2103 311 829
- ☐ www.gocyberlink.com
- ☐ £51 ex VAT

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II (1.6GHz P4 for real-time Mpeg-2 encoding); Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 1GB or more hard disk space; USB or PCI analogue capture device or FireWire port for DV capture

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



← PowerDirector has some good features, but video editors of all abilities would be best to look elsewhere

→ It's virtually impossible to go wrong with PowerProducer – your masterpiece will take no time at all



Business planning software

Business Plan Pro 2003 Premier

As anyone who is self-employed or runs their own company knows, starting out in business is a scary prospect. The most common piece of advice you hear is that you must have a business plan. But where do you start?

Planning your venture

Enter Palo Alto Software whose Business Plan Pro 2003 package contains everything you need to get your new venture off the ground.

We tested the feature-packed Premier version which contains enough tools to develop a serious business plan for medium and large companies. If such functionality is more than you need, there is also the Standard edition which costs £85.

Start up the software and you are presented with the EasyPlan Wizard, which guides you through the entire process. Each step is listed down the left of the screen and gets checked off when completed, so you can keep track of how far through the operation you are.

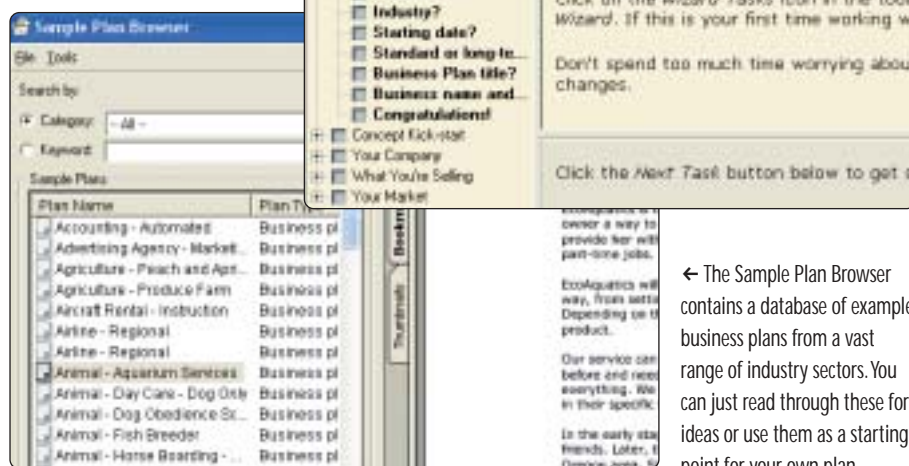
The wizard starts by asking you a series of simple questions so that it can set up an appropriate draft. Following the Plan Setup, the wizard takes you into the nuts and bolts where you can complete business objectives and financial breakdowns. Each step is clearly documented with help text so you won't get lost in jargon. If you need further information on any topic, click the Resources button for links to a wide range of books (many of which are provided in PDF format), websites and other online resources.

The software will automatically complete tables, charts and text sections for you and combine everything together into a fully formatted document for easy printing, sharing on the web or exporting into a PowerPoint presentation. Its tables are Excel-compatible so you can import or export data, too.

The software is loaded with hundreds of sample plans covering just about every industry imaginable. Browse these to see how your plan should look or even use them as a starting point for your own.

At any point during the assembly of your plan press the Review button for a summary of how things are coming together. This will flag up any obvious anomalies or uncompleted sections.

→ The EasyPlan Wizard guides you step by step through the stages required to set up your business plan, with helpful hints and instructions along the way



← The Sample Plan Browser contains a database of example business plans from a vast range of industry sectors. You can just read through these for ideas or use them as a starting point for your own plan

Two heads are better than one

Advanced tools, such as the Cash Pilot for creating realistic cashflow models and an Investment Analysis for presenting data to financial analysts, set this Premier edition apart from the Standard version. It also allows you to keep track of your business' progress once it's up and running by entering actual figures into the financial tables and letting Business Plan Pro compare those to your forecasts.

Another advantage is the program's support for collaboration between multiple users, so your plan can benefit from the combined expertise of financial, sales, marketing and production personnel. The collaborate window seamlessly integrates with your email software, allowing you to send either the whole plan or selected parts to all members of your team or to receive plans sent to you by others. The software automatically tracks any modifications and replacements to the document.

Verdict

We were impressed with the way Business Plan Pro took a complex and daunting topic and made it accessible even for novice users. Professional accountants may find its step-by-step approach a little limiting, but for everyone else this package provides all the tools you need to get your business off the ground. ■

Alex Katz

Business Plan Pro 2003 Premier

- ☐ Palo Alto Software: 020 7610 9371
- ☐ www.paloalto.co.uk
- ☐ £213 ex VAT

System requirements

Pentium processor; Windows 95 or later; 50MB hard disk space plus 70MB for Internet Explorer 5.5 or later if not already installed

Ease of use



Features



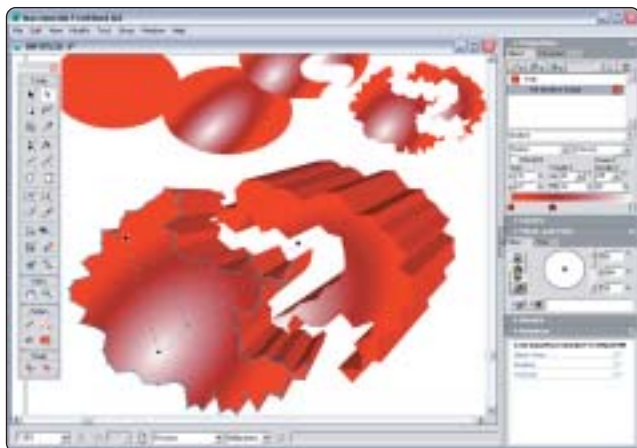
Value for money



Overall rating



Graphics software FreeHand MX



There's something for everyone in Macromedia's latest release of its illustration package, from new art tools to advanced web animation. The focus remains firmly on the professional designer, though.

FreeHand has been given the MX interface treatment to bring it in line with Macromedia's other design programs. The updated onscreen layout is accompanied by an Object panel, making FreeHand much more intuitive. This new panel presents all the attributes – outline, colours, effects and so on – of a selected object in one place for editing. It's a simple, yet powerful and highly usable approach.

Web designers will like the new Action tool, which lets you drag and drop dynamic web actions on to your artwork. Those with less web expertise will appreciate the refreshed Flash SWF export option which simplifies the whole process of creating animations.

The upgrade also sees plenty of additional art features, including a calligraphic pen, a connector tool for flow diagrams and the ability to save multiple object attributes as reusable styles. There's also a fast extrusion tool for turning ordinary shapes into 3D objects, an eraser which rubs through vector paths beautifully and a much improved approach to gradient fills.

Verdict

Better drawing tools and a more appealing interface make FreeHand MX a good choice for the professional designer. We doubt it will woo existing users of Illustrator, CorelDraw or Deneba Canvas over to the FreeHand MX camp, but there's a great deal here to make them jealous. ■

Alistair Dabbs

↑ Gradient fills and extrusions can be edited quickly and interactively

FreeHand MX

- Macromedia 01344 458 600
- www.macromedia.com/uk
- £309 ex VAT, upgrade from version 10: £76, upgrade from version 9: £114

System requirements

300MHz Pentium II; Windows 98 SE/Me/NT4(SP6)/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 70MB hard disk space; XGA (1,024x768) display

Ease of use



Features



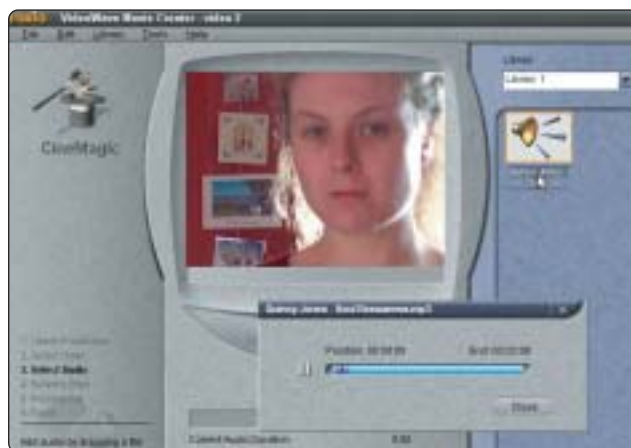
Value for money



Overall rating



Video-editing software Roxio VideoWave Movie Creator



The software market is hardly short on video-editing packages but interest in the idea of being able to capture movies and create a polished production ensures there are plenty of customers to bid for. VideoWave was originally launched by MGI in the late 90s and is now available under the Roxio umbrella as either the Power Edition or as Movie Creator – an evolution of MGI's CineMagic entry-level package.

Movie Creator takes video footage from a digital camcorder or still camera capable of motion-capture. Roxio has cottoned on to the growing interest in rediscovering footage on analogue videotapes, so there's as much emphasis on transferring recordings from your ageing VCR to a PC as there is from DV (digital video) cameras. The package is icon- and wizard-based and you can opt to have as little or as much control over the editing stage as you wish.

StoryBuilder is the obvious middle-way, providing preset transitions and titling templates but giving you some say over the finished product. CineMagic is the easiest to use of the main production modes. Assemble the clips, select some music and it's a wrap. The StoryLine Editor has more advanced effects and even provides the option to re-edit an existing movie.

Verdict

The three-pronged approach to video production makes this a flexible product for beginners who can then progress to taking over more of the editing tasks as their confidence and competence grows. It's a step up from Microsoft's freely available Movie Maker 2.0, but it won't satisfy real enthusiasts for long. ■

Rosemary Haworth

↑ If you're an absolute beginner then opt for Movie Creator's CineMagic production mode

VideoWave Movie Creator

- McAfee: 0800 092 7160
- www.roxio.com
- £39 ex VAT

System requirements

500MHz Pentium III; Windows 98 SE/2000/Me/XP; 128MB RAM; 600MB hard disk space; 800MHz for analogue Mpeg capture; 1.6GHz for Mpeg-2 DV capture; 16bit colour; CD or DVD writer to burn movies to disc

Ease of use



Features



Value for money

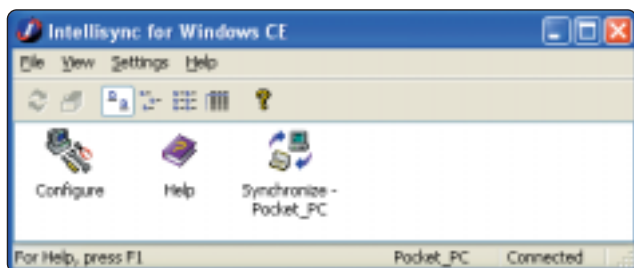


Overall rating



Utility software

Intellisync 5.1



Microsoft's ActiveSync is great for synchronising Outlook with your Pocket PC but it's not much good if the data you want is sitting in another program. If the office has standardised on Lotus Notes or your emails arrive in Outlook Express, you're stuffed – or at least you were until the arrival of Intellisync. Designed to get handhelds talking to the applications people actually use, the package offers hope to Pocket PC, Palm and Psion users.

This latest release introduces synchronisation for email attachments and, at long last, support for Outlook Express. Given the popularity of the email client it's amazing to think it has taken this long. Keeping up with the times, Pumatech has also included an automatic update feature to make sure you've always got the current version. Intellisync 5.1 can talk to various versions of nine key applications including Notes, Act and Microsoft Exchange.

Following a swift installation Intellisync searches for your chosen handheld. Once a connection is made you can configure things to suit your needs. Mapping applications to your mobile inbox, calendar and contacts is easy – a simple matter of choosing from a list. Individual data fields can be matched to their PDA equivalents if needed, and it's also possible to customise the type and size of synchronised email attachments.

Tests went fine with our Compaq iPaq but we were disappointed that Psion users must download software before they can do anything. It's also worth noting that any edits to attachments aren't automatically synchronised back to the PC. Indeed, Palm users can't even open or save them – something that surely needs to be addressed.

Verdict

Best for Pocket PC users, Intellisync 5.1 is a useful utility and now even more so with Outlook Express support. It's also less hassle than changing your personal information manager. ■

Chris Cain

↑ Intellisync offers a simple, no-nonsense interface

Intellisync 5.1

- ☐ Pumatech: 0870 044 7862
- ☐ www.pumatech.com
- ☐ £45 ex VAT

System requirements

133MHz PC for Windows 2000, 150MHz for Me, 233MHz for XP; Windows 98/2000/NT4/Me/XP; 24MB RAM for Windows 98, 32MB for Me/NT, 64MB for 2000, 128MB for XP; 30MB hard disk space; supports Palm OS, Pocket PC and Windows CE-based devices

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Antivirus software

Panda Antivirus Platinum 7.0

With bugs like the Slammer worm and its record-breaking infection of over 75,000 servers in around 10 minutes, there's never been a better time to install some antivirus software on your system. It's hard to defend against unknown attacks, but leaving your PC open to any known threats is plain stupid and the consequences can be dire. What's more, good protection doesn't have to cost hundreds of pounds – the top-selling packages come in at under £50.

Aimed at businesses and professionals, Antivirus Platinum 7.0 is Panda's latest form of defence. In essence, the company has brought the package in line with the competition by including a quarantine area, a fully integrated firewall, daily automatic updates via the internet and script blocking with the ability to scan an array of email clients.

This package boasts a clean presentation and straightforward options – it even introduces itself and announces various alerts, though thankfully this feature can be turned off. The firewall facility is easy-to-use, with clear options right down to assigning internet access rights for individual programs.

Antivirus Platinum scans old email messages then sets itself up for the future. There's a specific integrated module for email scanning with Outlook, but Panda also works with Outlook Express, Lotus Notes, Pegasus, Netscape and IncrediMail among others.

Scans can be performed instantly or scheduled and the package includes 24-hour email and online support for a year. You can also send any suspect files to Panda and there's an integrated suggestion box for future releases.

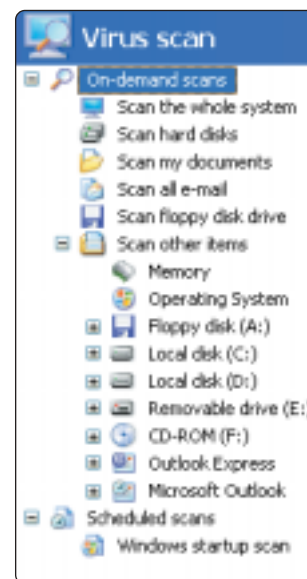
Our only niggle is that Panda installs key files with Spanish filenames – even after selecting an English installation – which is extremely sloppy.

Verdict

For those without virus protection, Panda's latest offering is a good choice providing daily updates, a firewall and easy configuration. However, there's little here to make you upgrade from Norton or BitDefender. ■

Chris Cain

↓ Virus scans can be run on demand or scheduled for a specific time



Panda Antivirus Platinum 7.0

- ☐ Panda Software: 0870 444 5640
- ☐ www.pandasoftware.co.uk
- ☐ £40.48 ex VAT

System requirements

300MHz Pentium; Windows 95/98/Me/NT4/2000 Pro/XP; 128MB RAM; 50MB hard disk space

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating



Customer relationship management software

GoldMine 6.0 Business Contact Manager

Picture the scene: you phone up a supplier with an enquiry regarding your firm's last order. The guy on the other end of the line, even though you have never spoken to him before, is completely au fait with your dealings – including all the phone calls, emails and letters you've ever sent the company over the years.

That is the black art of CRM (customer relationship management) software. Clearly the better your CRM system the better your customer relations, as anyone who's had to deal with a call centre will attest.

New and improved

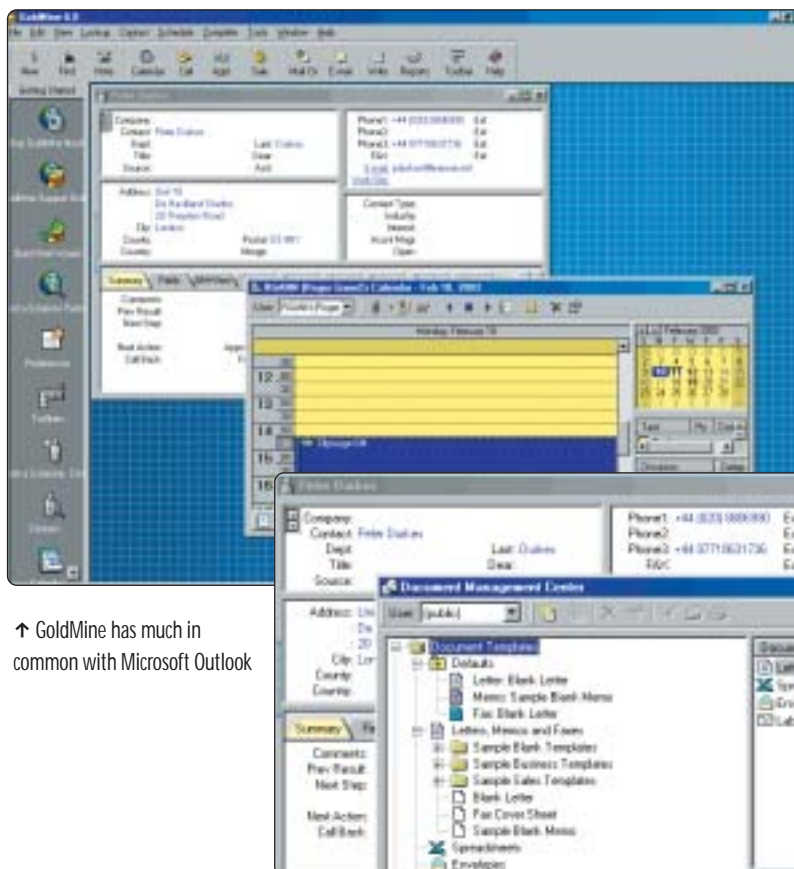
GoldMine 6.0 Business Contact Manager is aimed at small to medium-sized business and builds on the strengths of its predecessor. A couple of modules have been redesigned, including the Calendar and Scheduling tools, and you can now customise and expand GoldMine beyond its standard business-to-customer model, making it more relevant to a wider range of businesses. It now features XML data support and is compatible with Microsoft's .Net initiative.

As before, GoldMine 6.0 can be used as a standalone package or, more usefully, as a workgroup tool.

Because of its emphasis on sales and marketing teams, GoldMine has particularly good support for collaborative, networked setups. It still offers predefined industry-specific templates for property, legal service, mortgage lending, insurance and financial service industries. There's also a raft of third-party add-on products.

At first glance Business Contact Manager is reminiscent of Outlook and shares a great chunk of the software's basic functionality. This undoubtedly helps beginners, given the rather steep learning curve involved. Consequently there is a great deal of overlap with Microsoft's PIM (personal information manager) – it can act as your email client, address book, calendar and to-do list. As you might expect, it's simple to Hoover up all your Outlook data and pipe it straight into GoldMine 6.0 for immediate use.

Another new feature is Automated Processes, which performs predefined actions on all your contacts, a group of contacts or any individual contact. You could, for example, set up a process that sends an introductory letter to every new prospect, notifies them that a salesperson will phone shortly and adds a note to that person's calendar ensuring that the follow-up call is made.



↑ GoldMine has much in common with Microsoft Outlook

Power tool

There's no doubt that GoldMine 6.0 is a powerful contact management tool. However, it can be an intimidating package and its complexity takes time to master.

There is no printed user manual supplied with the software, which is a shame given the price. Instead you get a 284-page online version supplied in Acrobat Reader format, rather misleadingly labelled 'What's New'.

The previous release came complete with a full-blown multimedia learning system with lessons and step-by-step demonstrations which made getting to grips with GoldMine much easier. This seems to have fallen by the wayside. On the plus side, however, the online help is thorough and well written.

Verdict

GoldMine 6.0 may not qualify for heavy-duty call centre use, but it comes close. It remains arguably the pre-eminent contact manager on the market but training will almost certainly be required to get the most from this powerful sales tool. ■

Roger Gann

↑ The Document Management Center is another great time-saver, giving you full control over every sort of communication you have with a customer

GoldMine 6.0 Contact Manager

- ☐ Front Range Solutions: 0118 938 7500
- ☐ www.fronrange.co.uk
- ☐ £165 ex VAT – 30-day evaluation version is available for download

System requirements

166MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 65MB hard disk speed

Ease of use



Features



Value for money



Overall rating

