Reader's choice: superbudget PCs

Getting the right PC on a tight budget is difficult enough. But, as Spencer Dalziel discovers, when the buyer in question is a demanding student who spends nights on end playing online shoot-'em-ups, the choice is even harder

When you're in the market for a new PC, keeping to a strict budget can be a frustrating experience. Matching the machine you wish to buy with what's available in your wallet can leave you annoyed at the limited choice on offer.

And the frustration doesn't stop there – imagine that the specifications and features on your wishlist include the latest and greatest in PC technology. You demand nothing but the best for your money because you want to push your system to its limits with entertainment applications after a hard day's use as a work system.

A budget of £700 goes a long way these days but finding a system that hits the right balance between price and performance still requires shopping around, know-how and, if you're really lucky, help from *PC Advisor.*

Step forward this month's lucky Reader's choice candidate, Mr Ben Ciavarelli. Ben is studying at Boston University in the US but is spending several months in England on an intern work placement in London as part of his degree. Ben has digs at the IES Student Resident Hall in Chelsea and just enough money to spend on a Superbudget PC to fit into his room.

While it's a great idea to get a PC while he's staying in the UK, why not stick with a notebook that he can take back to the States when his placement's finished?

Ben tells us: "With the money I've got to spend I can't get a good enough notebook for the stuff I want to do. I want good audio for music and I'm into games as well so a PC is the only option.

"Besides, when I go back home I'll put up a post on the halls' noticeboard that there's a cool secondhand PC up for sale," he adds.

First impressions

We chose three models that best suited Ben's needs – Carrera's Octan 2.8a, Multivision's Ionix GX and Mesh's Matrix 2600+ RD95 – and weighed up the pros and cons of each.

What did Ben want?

- **To pay up to £700 ex VAT**
- **Good graphics**
- **High-quality audio**
- **Stylish model**
- **Best performance for his money**

All three PCs were more than capable of providing Ben with the performance he required and they all came in at £699 ex VAT, so whatever model he chooses will fulfil his remit. However, there are component and feature differences that Ben will have to assess on top of choosing the system that looks right for him – aesthetically each couldn't have been more different from the other.

Ben was immediately taken with the all-black look of Multivision's Ionix GX and its Logitech peripherals: "It's really sci-fi but plain enough for it not to look too ostentatious," he said.

He also liked the addition of LG's 17in LG F700P: "I really like the styling on this monitor – it looks more like an expensive TV". However, LG's screen can't compete

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

READER'S CHOICE

Carrera Octan 2.8a
- Pros **TV card, optical mouse, warranty**
- Cons **Performance, low frame rates, hard drive size**
- Carrera **0871 222 3456**
- Website **www.carrerassc.co.uk**
- Price **£699 ex VAT**

Multivision Ionix GX
- Pros **Styling, fast CD-RW drive**
- Cons **Monitor, slowest processor**
- Multivision **0870 066 0882**
- Website **www.multivision.co.uk**
- Price **£699 ex VAT**

OUR CHOICE

Mesh Matrix 2600+ RD95
- Pros **Performance, software bundle, frame rates**
- Cons **Styling, slowest CD-RW drive**
- Mesh **020 8208 4702**
- Website **www.meshcomputers.com**
- Price **£699 ex VAT**

with the picture quality on Mitsubishi's Diamond Pro 750SB. This higher-quality monitor is bundled with the other two systems and, as a gamer, the onscreen display is an important factor for Ben.

Despite the two-tone effect on Mesh's Matrix, it looked plain compared to the other systems but it is bundled with the same black peripherals. The real saving grace for the Matrix, though, was the internal layout. "They've made an effort on the inners – the part of the PC that most users don't get to see," Ben says.

We thought he might like the polymer-glass effect of Carrera's case but Ben wasn't too impressed with the overall finish. He also didn't like the spongy feel of the keyboard though he raved about the optical mouse: "I like playing fast-action games online so a good mouse is a must."

What the experts say

Carrera's Octan 2.8a is the only PC to come with a Pentium 4 processor and, at 2.8GHz, in terms of clock speed it's the fastest on paper by far. Carrera has twinned the chip with 512MB of DDR RAM, which is a good sign, but surprisingly its WorldBench score of 124 is the lowest.

While the 80GB hard drive is large it's not as capacious as the Ionix's or Matrix's. Though Ben's unlikely to fill up the drive in his few months in England, a bigger disk would be a good selling point.

All the other specs and features on this system were impressive but, and it comes back to gaming again, the Octan achieved

disappointing frame rates. Ben won't be impressed with the 50fps (frames per second) at 1,024x768 we got in our Quake III tests. A system with that power should be pushing over 70fps to ensure it can keep up with newer games. The Octan did have something the other PCs didn't: a TV card. With not much room in student accommodation it might be important for Ben to utilise his space well and use the PC monitor as a TV.

The Mesh Matrix gained the speediest WorldBench score and comes with a monitor suitable for gaming. Both the Matrix and the Ionix offer 120GB hard drives and ATI's Radeon 9500 Pro graphics card, which is capable of high-end graphics. The Matrix pushed better frame rates than Multivision's system but then the Ionix has a faster CD-RW drive.

All the systems use Creative Labs' Inspire 5300 speakers and 5.1 channel onboard audio so Ben will be wired for

sound. However, this doesn't help him make up his mind. With not much in it, we looked at software support. The Matrix's bundled Works Suite 2003 would let Ben get on with some college work once he's finished playing shoot-'em-ups.

The reader's choice

Ben went for Multivision's Ionix GX – a machine that's excellent but doesn't suit his needs as well as the Matrix. Surprised at his decision, we asked him if it wasn't to do with aesthetic appeal: "I know I wanted the best I can get for my money and, to be honest, I'd be happy with any of these systems because you get a lot for your cash. But I need to weigh up how it's going to look in my room and, let's face it, the Ionix is sweet."

Asked about the lower quality on the monitor, Ben replied: "It's still up to the job and fits in with the overall look of the PC perfectly." ∎

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