Productivity software

Microsoft Works Suite 2003

When it comes to purchasing a PC there are a number of reasons why people decide to buy. Some want to write letters, keep records and surf the web, others plan to do research, balance their chequebook or experiment with digital photography. While all of these are clearly different motives, there is one package that can get you started in just about every area. Combining software for home organisation, communication, personal finance, research, image-editing and travel planning, Microsoft's Works Suite pretty much has it all.

Now in its 2003 incarnation, Works Suite is often overlooked in favour of its big brother Microsoft Office. However, providing six full applications for around £100, it takes some beating in the sheer value-for-money stakes. The new suite includes Word 2002, Money 2003, the Standard version of Encarta 2003, AutoRoute 2002, Picture It, Photo 7.0 and, last but not least, Works 7.0.

Works Suite is provided on either one DVD or six CDs and, typically, with our luck, we managed to get hold of the latter. Even in this format, though, installation is relatively painless and you can choose to install all applications or select individual components to suit your needs.

Annoyingly, however, despite the increase in hard drive capacities, the installer is missing an option to transfer absolutely everything on the discs. AutoRoute still asks for a CD to be inserted when you use it.
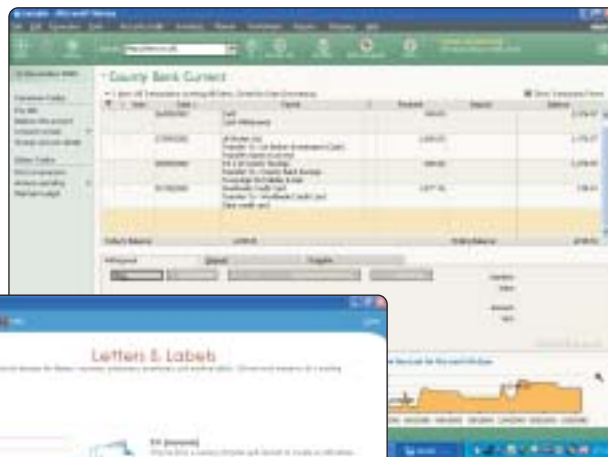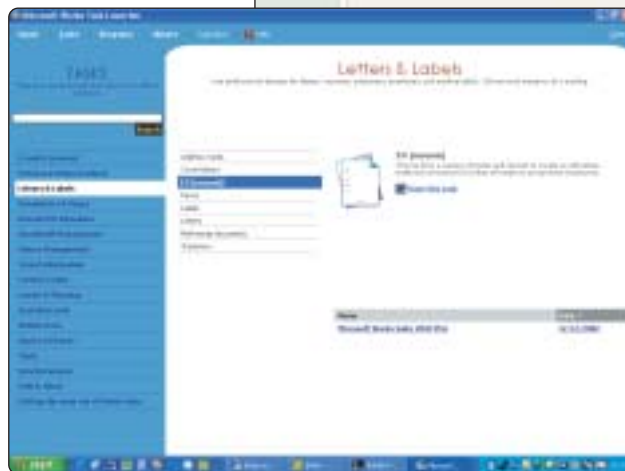
PC projects

In an attempt to keep things straightforward for new users, Microsoft has given the main application the look and feel of a web browser. Firing up the Works Launcher presents you with a home page, and from here you can move off to complete common tasks or start what Microsoft calls 'projects'.

While the predefined projects are somewhat cringe-worthy (such as 'do well at school' and 'coach a sports team'), the idea behind this function is sound. Creating projects lets you set up to-do lists to manage jobs, which in turn are carried out using the main applications.

➔ Money 2003 sports a browser-like interface for keeping track of your accounts

↓ The Works Launcher provides guidelines to help users complete common tasks

The Launcher also offers guides for typical tasks, and these make a lot more sense. For example, choosing to create a greetings card or write your CV takes you into Word with the appropriate template and Wizard. If you want to manage your debts, up pops Money 2002. Despite their simplicity these predefined options really are useful.

The other option is to go directly to the applications themselves and start from scratch. Works 7.0 provides a database, spreadsheet, calendar and address book. It's ideal for cataloguing your DVD collection, sorting your expenses and keeping tabs on family birthdays before they sneak up on you. Although the component parts aren't as complete as Access, Excel or Outlook, they do get the job done and, more importantly, are much cheaper and easy to use.

And then there was Word

Perhaps the best known component, Word 2002 brings you professional word processing facilities, including a horde of fonts, integrated thesaurus and spellchecker, numerous templates, table-editing and the ability to mix text and

graphics. Another key feature is that this version allows your documents to be exported as HTML files, doing away with all that unnecessary coding. When it comes to written documents there's not a lot you can't do with Word, which is why it's probably the most popular word processing package on the planet.

Encarta is the other big name here, and the Standard 2003 edition builds on the success of its predecessors. Microsoft claims the content of its multimedia encyclopedia is equivalent to a traditional 32-volume paper one, and with over 30,000 entries, 8,500 photos and illustrations, plus oodles of sound and video clips we can well believe it.

Overall, Encarta is impressive and an invaluable tool for research, especially for kids doing homework. However, we did find the videos were a bit on the small side – in these days of DVDs we expect something around VHS quality at least. In addition, this version isn't anywhere near as complete as the excellent Premium Suite, which includes a world atlas, project researcher, virtual 3D tours and more. But it is fully updatable and has numerous online links that extend its content.

Show me the Money

Money is also new for 2003 and is designed to help you keep track of your finances, from making sure you don't go

into the red at the end of the month to planning for those big purchases or events, such as a wedding or buying a house. As with Encarta and the Works Launcher, a browser-like interface has been used to make working with the package straightforward.

If you are to do things properly setting up Money requires an awful lot of information, and going through every account and bill you have can be a pain – there's no two ways about it. That said, extra information can be added at a later date.

While it requires dedication and discipline to constantly keep everything up-to-date, Money is a powerful planning tool. Though complex at first, its views and features can be tailored to suit your needs.

Support for .Net Passports has been introduced to enhance online facilities but not all of the UK's financial institutions support all types of online banking service. For example, according to Microsoft's website, only the Woolwich supports direct transfers and bill payment through Money, while some others don't even allow statements to be downloaded.

↓ Turn your cat into a work of art with special filters in Picture It Photo

↑ Definitely one of Works Suite's best components, AutoRoute lets you plan journeys in the UK and even across Europe
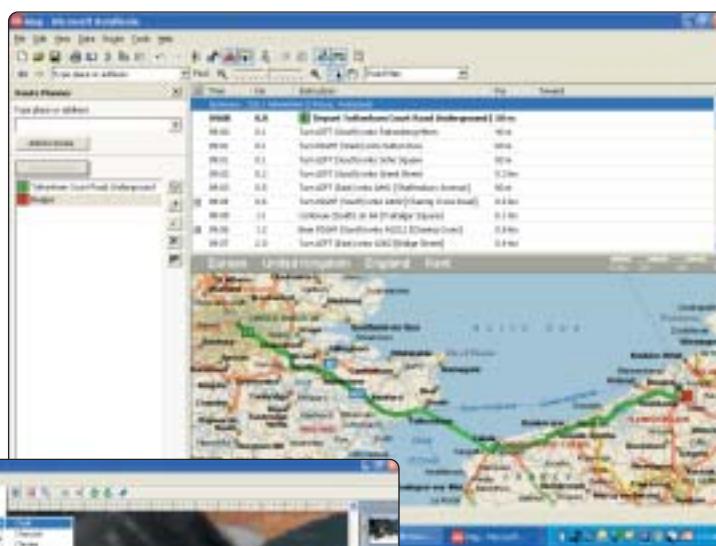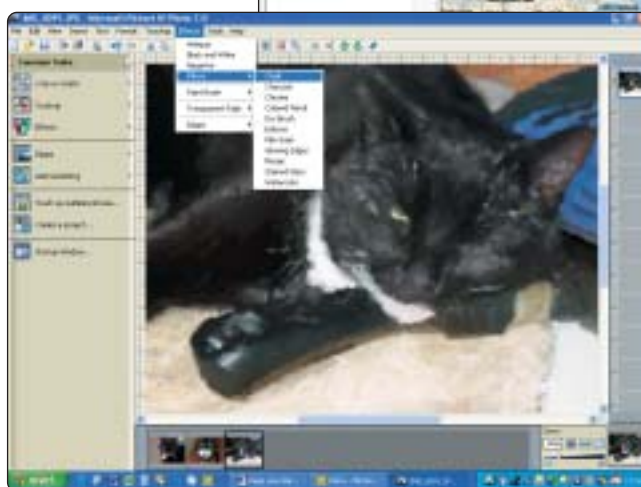
Path finder

The last big hitter in Works Suite 2003 is AutoRoute. Though this is the 2002 edition it is still one of the most useful programs around. For the uninitiated, AutoRoute allows you to plan road journeys across not only the UK but also some 12 European countries, right down to street names. You can get directions to an individual address, print maps and avoid certain routes. The program even has maps of other countries such as the US, though not in such great detail, and can work with GPS systems for real-time navigation on the move.

As mentioned earlier, AutoRoute requires the CD to be in the drive when you want to use it and this is probably its only real fault. Though the new 2003 edition is already available (see our review on page 67), this older version is definitely not to be sniffed at.

Finally, Picture It Photo 7.0 is for simple photo-retouching work, such as red-eye removal, picture sharpening and contrast enhancement. The package is basic when compared to some other software, but within its restricted capabilities it performs reasonably well. Scan in an image or transfer it via digital camera and you can turn it into a masterpiece in seconds.

Although not quite browser-like, Picture It's interface is clean and straightforward, and it's easy to achieve good results. Mistakes can be quickly rectified as well, something not to be underestimated. Repair tools allow for scratches and dust to be removed from worn photos, and Photoshop-style filters can be applied for specialist designs. Microsoft has also thoughtfully included an instructional video help to get you started, something we'd like to see more of in other applications.

Verdict

While some of the components aren't the best versions or have been superseded, Works Suite 2003 is Microsoft's best productivity bundle yet. If you don't need the complexity of Office – and to be fair not many of use all those features – this is a great buy. The fact you can pick it up from online stores for around £75 also means it comes highly recommended. ■

Chris Cain

Microsoft Works Suite 2003

❑ Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
❑ Website: www.microsoft.com/uk
❑ Price: £101 ex VAT

System requirements

300MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/ 2000/XP; 64MB RAM (96MB with XP); 1050MB hard disk space; 16bit sound card; 16bit SVGA display.

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Personal video recorder
Showshifter 2.0

Showshifter is an application that brings the PC into the lounge, combining TV viewing, video, CD, MP3 and pictures with an easy-to-use interface. The program has come on significantly since we last reviewed it in June 02, and many of the minor issues we noted then have been cleared up.

Most importantly, the interface has been dramatically improved. Showshifter is designed to be used with a TV, rather than a monitor. This presents a problem as TVs have relatively poor resolution compared to even the most basic monitor. The first incarnation was easy to view on a TV, but looked rather basic. The new interface is miles ahead, while still retaining a good display for TV.

Beat the schedules

The first feature most people are likely to be drawn to is timeshifting, which allows you to pause live TV. When combined with a supported TV card, you can pause live broadcasts and continue watching them at your leisure. To do this, Showshifter simultaneously plays and records at the same time. It's all very impressive, but you're actually unlikely to use it that often.

Showshifter comes into its own, however, when recording scheduled programmes. Showshifter doesn't supply any TV listings itself, but two third-party electronic programme guides, such as Digiguide and Tvtv.co.uk, are supported.

Digiguide is a separate application (£6.99 annual subscription) but it works very well with Showshifter. Find the programme you want and click 'Record in Showshifter' and it's set up for you. Tvtv.co.uk, on the other hand, is an online TV guide. Once integrated with Showshifter you can set up recordings just by clicking a link on the website. It's not quite as slick as Digiguide but it is free.

Another area that's received a major overhaul is the audio facility, turning Showshifter into a true home media application. It can now read the ID3 tags used by MP3 files, allowing you to view your music by artist and album or search for specific tracks. It makes managing your music a lot easier than searching through a long list, and also means you can see at a glance what tracks are programmed to play.

The application also integrates with an online CD database, so when you insert an audio CD it can download the title and track listing (providing you're online at the time).

→ Tell Showshifter where you keep your images and it can display them as thumbnails or as a slideshow

← Showshifter can now download CD track listings when you insert an audio CD

There's also a picture viewer thrown in – tell Showshifter where you keep your images and you can browse them by thumbnails or display them as a slideshow.

DVD playback is supported, although you'll need a separate Mpeg-2 decoder as one isn't included. While this works in theory, it can create problems; trying to output Dolby Digital or DTS digitally to an external amplifier can be somewhat troublesome.

There's also support for normal video files, either ones you have recorded earlier or obtained elsewhere. As Showshifter uses the same playback engine as Windows, if you've downloaded the appropriate codec it should play back without any problems.

Although VideoCD is hardly used anymore, support for them is a little clunky. Rather than play as a DVD would, the video file is added to the list of available video files.

Verdict

Showshifter's main problem still lies with the myriad different hardware configurations (specifically TV cards) available, and we'd still recommend you download the trial version from the website first. But on a supported setup it works extremely well. The new look is good and the improved audio support is welcome. ■

Will Head

Showshifter 2.0
☐ Home Media Networks: 01293 763 082
☐ Website: www.showshifter.com
☐ Price: £26

System requirements
800MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 300MB hard disk space; DirectX Compatible Sound Card; DVD Software for DVD playback; TV Card.

Ease of use
Features
Value for money

Overall rating

Mapping and route-planning software
Microsoft AutoRoute 2003

AutoRoute 2003 is the latest update to Microsoft's desktop route-planning and mapping package. There aren't many major changes for users of the 2002 edition, except for the updating of map information and a handful of new features. New users might find the interface a little daunting, as this advanced piece of software offers a lot of options. However, the online help section is comprehensive and clear so it's pretty easy to pick up.

You can install the full package on your PC, which requires a hefty 875MB of disk space. Alternatively, you can just install the software without the data, which only requires 295MB but then you'll need the data CD in your drive to run the software and accessing data off a disc is much slower.
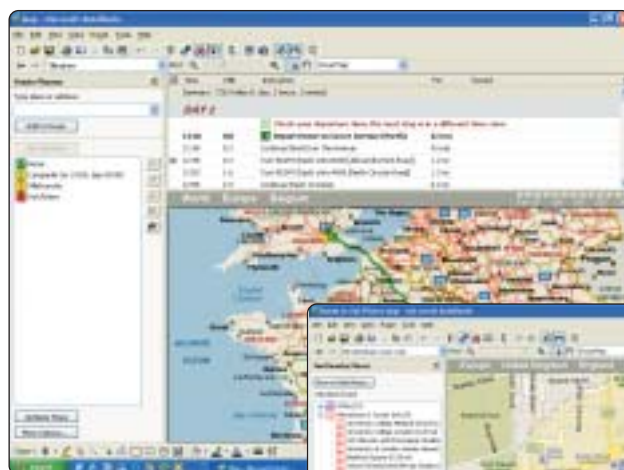
Easy streets

The software contains full street-level information for the whole of Great Britain and most of Western Europe. Bizarrely, within Ireland, only Belfast and Dublin are covered fully. It's a similar case with Norway and Finland. This is despite in-depth coverage of even rural areas in France, Belgium, Germany and so on.

There are virtually limitless options for navigating around the map. You can zoom from viewing the entire world on one screen right down to a scale significantly larger than a standard A to Z. The level of detail is quite stunning, with locations of pubs, restaurants and places of interest right across the covered area. The rest of the world is represented in geographical detail, but you can't zoom in beyond a certain level as there are no street maps for locations outside Europe.

Find yourself

You can search for locations by name, address, postcode (within the UK) and even ordnance survey reference. Once located, you can mark a point on the map with a pushpin as you would on a wall chart. Pushpin icons can be customised and colour-coded, and even contain hyperlinks to relevant websites.

Using the route planner tool, you can plan your entire journey, including stop-off points. You can specify options such as the sort of roads you want to travel on and how long you want to stay in each place and AutoRoute automatically calculates the best route. You can also set it to avoid areas you know to be congested.

The ideal way to use AutoRoute would be to install it on a notebook and have it with you in the car wherever you go. Obviously this isn't practical for everyone, so there are plenty of ways to export your map once you've got it displaying exactly what you want. There's a wide variety of printing options, you can save the map and direction lists as a web page and upload it to your website or you can download it to your Pocket PC.

The software works with GPS receivers, so if you have one installed on your notebook, you can set it to keep track of your current location on the map.

Improvements over AutoRoute 2002 include a range of additional pushpin icons, as well as support for custom symbols so you're not restricted to the predefined set of pushpins. A new full-page map-printing mode extends your current map view to include as much of a map as will fit on a printed page. AutoRoute 2003 also has the ability to import UK address data from external sources and locate them on the map.

Verdict

AutoRoute 2003 is a stunningly versatile and extremely useful package for anyone who uses their car for journeys longer than just going to the supermarket. And at under £40, it's also exceptionally good value. It's just a shame that some areas, such as Northern Ireland outside Belfast, are not covered in as much detail as others. ■

Alex Katz

← AutoRoute can plan an entire journey for you, including stopovers and preferred roads

↑ The Find Nearby Places tool allows you to search for places of interest within a specified distance from a particular point

Microsoft AutoRoute 2003

❑ Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
❑ Website: www.microsoft.com/uk/ homepc/autoroute
❑ Price: £34.03 ex VAT

System requirements

133MHz Pentium (Pentium III recommended); Windows 98/NT/2000/Me/XP; 64MB RAM; 875MB hard disk space; CD-ROM drive; SVGA display.

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating
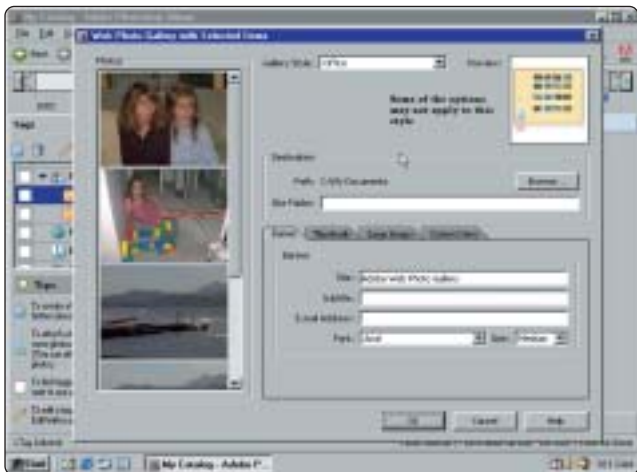
PC ADVISOR

Graphics software
Adobe Photoshop Album beta

↑ Photoshop Album takes you step by step through greeting card or calendar creation

If there's no shortage of programs that claim to manage digital photo collections, it's equally true that very few do the job well. This beta of Adobe's Photoshop Album application shows that this imbalance is about to be redressed in style.

Photoshop Album is a powerful image organiser that also performs basic image-editing and picture sharing duties. Thumbnails of imported pictures, grabbed from a peripheral, such as a digital camera or your hard drive, are displayed in a central image well. To aid management or view snapshots by categories, they can be tagged with multiple keywords by dragging a tag icon over them. You can even view them in a Calendar window according to their creation date.

Photoshop Album has a clutch of photo-sharing and editing tools, accessible from an understated toolbar. Images can be emailed as attachments and, although not yet implemented in this beta, you will also be able to upload images to a website.

A Creation tool helps you design calendars, slideshows and template-based books based on pictures in the image well. PDF export support for slideshows is a versatile multimedia option.

One-click editing tools for cropping and adjusting brightness, contrast and red-eye are simple but intuitive. The original picture is never overwritten so you can edit as you wish. For more control, Album offers the ability to use your favourite image-editing application. Changes you make there are automatically reflected in Album.

Verdict

Inexpensive and easy to use, Photoshop Album raises the standard of image-cataloguing applications at a stroke. ■

Tom Gorham

Adobe Photoshop Album
☐ Adobe: 020 8606 4001
☐ Website: www.adobe.co.uk
☐ Price: £29 ex VAT

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

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating

Web auction software
Terapin AuctionEasy 2.1

↑ AuctionEasy provides a simple solution for buying and selling online

One of the original promises of the late 90s dotcom boom was that it would be easier than ever for users worldwide to connect and make transactions. While it may not be much easier to set up a merchant agreement with a bank or credit card company, the mechanics of setting up an auction website have been simplified by means of Terapin's AuctionEasy, which provides a content management system that employs Microsoft's ASP (active server technology) to drive a dynamic website.

As such, there is little here that an expert in ASP could not create with a package such as Dreamweaver MX. Though it would help, of course, for that expert to have experience of online auctions so that he or she could design the workflow for any number of pages dealing with the intricacies of buying and selling online. So while AuctionEasy is expensive for most users, the costs of setting up a bespoke system would be far higher.

With AuctionEasy, fees and terms can be set for any number of auctions and there are facilities for searching and browsing items. The whole thing can be configured via a web page, though you should have some knowledge of FTP (file transfer protocol) and site administration if you wish to customise your site.

Verdict

AuctionEasy is as simple to use as its name suggests, although not quite as easy to deploy and customise as Terapin indicates. Because you will still need to set up Merchant Agreements to be able to charge for selling online, the program will appeal only to a relatively small group. For such users, however, Terapin offers a range of hosting options on its site. ■

Jason Whittaker

Terapin AuctionEasy 2.1
☐ Terapin: 01273 201 331
☐ Website: www.auctioneasy.co.uk
☐ Price: £325 ex VAT

System requirements
Windows NT/2000 server with IIS 4.0 or 5.0; Windows 98 with Personal Web Server.

Ease of use

Features

Value for money

Overall rating