news

Broadband supplier battle hots up

The war of words among the rival broadband providers raged on in October, with Telewest criticising BSkyB's offering as too expensive, and Freeserve lodging a complaint against what it sees as BT's unfair advantages.

BSkyB and BT Retail are offering Sky customers a saving of £80 if they sign up for BT's no-frills service. They pay a one-off £60 activation fee and £27 a month (£28 for non-direct debit payments), but get the equipment, worth £80, for free.

Telewest, however, says it offers better value. "BT can't compete with the simplicity and value of our service. For £50 one of our qualified technicians will come round to your house and get you up and running, whereas Sky customers will still have to pay a £65 activation fee for the pleasure of doing the wiring themselves," said Gavin Patterson, managing director, Telewest.

Telewest's Blueyonder service costs £29.99 a month (or £25 if you already subscribe to a TV package), plus £50 for activation.

ISP Freeserve's objection concerns Oftel and its handling of the way BT sells its broadband services. It's unhappy with BT's ability to market its products via home phone bills, the so-called Blue Bill, and its use of a free customer support line, 150, and has lodged its complaint with the Competition Commission.

In May it accused Oftel of "gifting BT with an anti-competitive advantage" and demanded Oftel stop the telco from charging for or marketing its no-frills broadband product to customers through its Blue Bill system. "No one has any interest in seeing BT monopolise this important new market the way it does in telephony, least of all consumers who will see prices fall more slowly and service quality inevitably suffer," said David Melville, Freeserve general counsel.

Oftel has laid out guidelines for BT, supporting Freeserve's claims that it should not be allowed to tout for new broadband customers through blue billing. "As far as we are aware BT has not been acting outside these guidelines," said a spokesman at Oftel. BT has also denied acting outside the guidelines.

No more play for free

The days of free online gaming are numbered, as console makers gear up to start charging players for internet services.

Microsoft will launch its Xbox Live service in the UK on 14 March 03 with the plan to charge players £39.99 for a year's worth of online gaming.

And this is just the start. Online console gaming is set to be big business in the next few years. According to a study commissioned by Elspa (European Leisure Software Publishers Association), spending on these emerging services by European consumers will grow by 5,000 percent in 2006, generating revenues of £2.5bn.

Microsoft is so far alone in taking the plunge. Nintendo and Sony have yet to reveal how they plan to charge their console players. Whichever route they take, it is sure to involve charging to play online, signalling the end for free online gaming for PC users too. BarrysWorld, one of Europe's leading free online games sites, already intends to charge for its services.

This view is backed by Geraint Bungay, head of games strategy at BTopenworld: "I can say with some confidence that no professionally run online games service will exist within 12 months on the PC if it does not charge users." BT owns Games Domain, a payment-only online gaming service.

Cray creates a storm
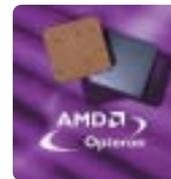
Cray – a name synonymous with supercomputers – is currently building a system which it claims could rival the world's top supercomputer, NEC's Earth Simulator. The supercomputer, codenamed Red Storm, will have a theoretical peak performance of 40 teraflops – the same speed as Earth Simulator.

Red Storm is expected to use more than 10,000 of AMD's forthcoming 64bit Opteron processors, making it the first of its kind to use these high-end chips.

It's to be used for nuclear weapon engineering simulations by the US Department of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories and, according to AMD, will be at least seven times more powerful than its current Asci Red system. It's slated to be deployed in 2004.

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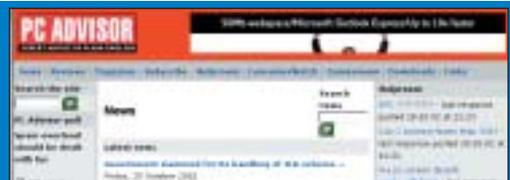
Future's bright, future's smart

Orange has launched the world's first mobile phone running Microsoft Windows-powered Smartphone 2002 software, the SPV, which stands for sound, pictures, video.

The phone looks to be one of the first true convergence devices, twinning wireless internet and email access, instant messaging and video and audio playback via Pocket Windows Media Player and synchronisation with desktop apps.

It features a colour screen, to make using these extra applications more appealing. Microsoft has also attempted to make emailing and messaging on a phone keypad easier by allowing users to input and save standard messages and reply to emails using voice recordings.

The aim is to overcome the barriers that stood between WAP (wireless application protocol) and mass market acceptance by making the features on this phone as simple to use as possible.

"We believe that only by making the wire-free experience truly intuitive will customers use such services. That's why we have focused our efforts on a number of areas that are key to driving our data services and making them easier for the customer to access and use," explains Richard Brennen, executive vice president for OrangeWorld and brand.

The importance of such extra data services to operators like Orange should not be underestimated. Brennen says that by 2005 the company expects data revenue to make up 25 percent of its total revenue. A recent report warns that mobile operators badly need to maximise the revenue they get from existing customers.

The SPV is priced at £179 with a contract, plus a flat-rate fee of £6 for browsing and a small cost for downloading files.

Sharp predicts 2mm PCs

Sharp and its partner SEL (Semiconductor Energy Laboratory) have unveiled what they claim to be the world's first prototype of an LCD (liquid crystal display) with an integrated 8bit processor.
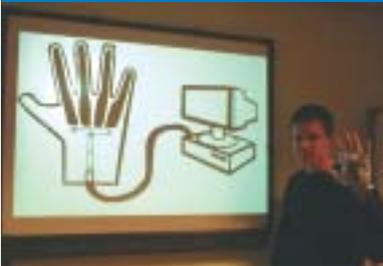
Putting a CPU directly on the glass substrate of an LCD allows the display to double up as a computer, making possible the development of computers and televisions that are thinner than 2mm.

By 2005, Sharp hopes to develop a new breed of mobile display devices based on CGS, such as information terminals that are as thin as a credit card, said Mikio Katayama, general manager of Sharp's mobile-LCD group.

Display makers, including Sharp, have been putting ICs (integrated circuits) on to glass substrates for some time. Until now, that has meant putting driver ICs, which control the display, on the substrate. The advance announced by Sharp and SEL opens the possibility of putting an entire computer on a glass substrate, including a CPU, memory and other chips.

MY TECHNOLOGY
Sir Richard Branson

Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?

A. Neither. My job isn't desk-based, I'm constantly on the move so still rely on my trusty notebook and pen. The staff in my office all use PCs though and we have a PC at home, but with two teenagers in the house I don't often get near it.

Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology, and why?

A. Well, I'm really frustrated that we can't run our new, high-speed tilting trains at full speed because the track isn't ready yet, following the collapse of Railtrack.

Q. If you could invent a technology device for the future, what would it be?

A. A Virgin passenger service for space travel. We've actually registered our brand in space travel and I am convinced that commercially viable space travel is technologically possible. Imagine, we could have Virgin hotels on the moon. I'm sure it will happen one day, hopefully during my lifetime.

Q. What technology product couldn't you live without and why?

A. My Virgin Mobile. I'm always on the move so it means I can always contact my family and colleagues and be contacted by them. Also, I use it to store my diary schedule and listen to the news.

Q. What's your favourite home page or website and why?

A. I'm not a heavy user of the web, I still check out news sites, such as the BBC or FT.com, but I get a lot of this information via my mobile phone now instead.

Sir Richard Branson is founder and chairman of the Virgin Group (www.virgin.com).

Mouse in glove

Inventors are getting younger, as 16-year-old Tobias Patterson-Jones from Coleg Powys college in Wales proves. He has designed a wearable mouse housed in a glove. The Mouse Glove lets users control the cursor with natural hand movements, and should help to combat conditions such as RSI (repetitive strain injury). It tracks hand movements and translates them into cursor moves onscreen, while finger movements are used as mouse clicks.

The Glove also features interwoven muscle wires. These offer users feedback – for example, if you are playing a game and pick up a gun the Glove will restrict movement so it feels as if you are actually holding the weapon. Patterson-Jones is currently seeking sponsors who can contribute towards research and development.

Name that tune

A team of British and US scientists have come up with the world's first online music recognition system – Omras. It enables PCs to recognise complex pieces of music from a snippet of a tune or even a hummed melody. It allows internet users to search for polyphonic audio, such as recordings from a full orchestra or complex piano chord. It can also generate a score for the music. Currently it's limited to 3,000 classical tunes, but the team are hoping to interest a commercial music publisher so they can extend its scope to chart hits.

Technology on wheels

It looks like cars will soon be following a trend set by the home and office in becoming hi-tech, wireless environments.

A recent survey from New York thinktank, Allied Business Intelligence, predicts that by 2007 one in five new cars will contain a Bluetooth wireless networking chip for use with hands-free mobile phone equipment.

The UK government is pushing to ban the use of mobile phone handsets in the car, which is why such wireless solutions are fast being adopted by car makers. Saab, BMW and DaimlerChrysler already offer Bluetooth options in some models.

As the cost of adding a basic Bluetooth chip to a car is as little as £7, it surely won't be long before they come as standard. And once these are in place they can be used for much more than just hands-free mobile calling. The circuitry could be applied to remote diagnostics, downloading audio or even paying for fuel.

Microsoft is keen to get in on this burgeoning market and is currently tuning up its in-car OS (operating system), Windows Automative. It plans to create a new version of the OS, which will be available to car

manufacturers some time next year. Windows Automative – a variation on the CE OS – will support both Bluetooth and voice recognition. It will also include the .Net Compact Framework, a runtime environment required to carry out web-based applications and services that were built using .Net development tools. These include hands-free mobile phone services; music downloading and live traffic reports.

While it may be some time before cars in the UK feature these extras, Japan is, as ever, ahead of the game. Developer Clarion is already touting an in-car computer based on the old version of Windows Automative, Windows CE for Automative.

The Cadias (car digital assistant) offers dashboard navigation, TV and DVD video playback, plus AM/FM radio, CD, WMA and MP3 player, as well as email and internet access. It also includes a scheduler and address book and a remote control means back-seat drivers can navigate the system.

Clarion says that future devices could be enhanced to include entertainment-related features, such as direct-to-car satellite broadcasting. The Cadias goes on sale in Japan this December, priced £1,745.

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PC users grin and bear bug

The Bugbear virus is one of the world's fastest-spreading viruses, stealing the number-two slot in the top five viruses chart after just 15 days at large.

At the time of writing, email security specialist MessageLabs had logged almost 650,000 stopped instances of the bug since it was first captured on 29 September. The worst affected countries so far are the UK, with just over 380,000 occurrences, followed by the US and the Netherlands.

What is most alarming about this particular bug is its ability to disable or disarm antivirus and firewall software, giving it access to personal details. It also includes a key-logging facility which lets it record your keystrokes to potentially capture passwords.

It appears on PCs in the guise of a harmless email, with randomly generated subject lines that range from 'Membership confirmation', to 'Your gift'. Once it has been activated it can mail itself to recipients in email address books and can open up a 'backdoor' providing hackers access to your PC to browse local files. On networked PCs it may also attempt to access shared directories and send copies of itself to shared printers which will soon become clogged up printing binary code for the virus executable.

For more information on Bugbear and how to manually remove it from your PC visit http://securityresponse.symantec.com/avcenter/venc/data/w32.bugbear@mm.html.

AOL 8.0: what's in store

Following the launch of AOL 8.0 in the US on 15 October, AOL UK has announced details about what users can expect to see when it launches in Britain. "The software will have many of the same features of 8.0 in the US but it will be distinct, offering features and services that have been tailored locally, to meet the needs of the UK audience," according to an AOL UK spokesperson.

Among the new features are email enhancements that will allow users to separate out incoming messages from friends and colleagues, recognised bulk senders and unknown email addresses and an Email Away message.

The address book has been improved and will now automatically add the addresses of email recipients, as well as offering enhanced printing for labels and list formats.

Personalisation will also be better supported, and there will be more desktop and toolbar themes to choose from; extra smileys to add to AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) messages and colourful email options. The AOL Companion is new too, placing an icon on your desktop that will give you access to news and weather headlines, as well as alerting you to email and AIM messages and allowing you to switch screen names more easily.

The company also promises enhanced reliability through a new feature that will automatically reconnect an interrupted session and return users to the area they were visiting.

While all these features are planned to play a starring role in 8.0, nothing has been finalised yet. So far there is no firm launch date for AOL 8.0 in the UK.
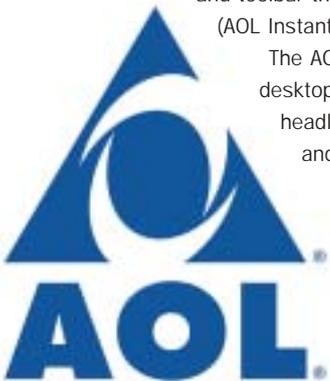
OFF THE CUFF

by Ursula Seymour

Smart new year

A fresh 2003 cover date offers an ideal opportunity to look at what the coming year holds for technology.

It has to be said that the past year will not go down as one of the IT greats: PC manufacturers have struggled in the face of flat or falling sales, with a knock-on negative affect for other hardware and software manufacturers.

If analysts' figures are to be believed 2003 won't necessarily be much better. But this lack of interest in the traditional beige box does have its benefits as it forces manufacturers to innovate in order to survive.

We're pretty confident that the future of IT lies in such smart devices that allow computing to suffuse your everyday life

This new approach is illustrated by tech giant Microsoft backing new form factors and technologies. This month sees its software running on mobile phones and Tablet PCs and preparing to bring in-car computers into the 21st Century.

It's unlike this industry behemoth to back a loser, so we're pretty confident that the future of IT lies in such smart devices that allow computing to suffuse your everyday life.

Bluetooth is a key building block in this future of all-pervasive technology, and it looks as if 2003 will be the year it finally goes mass market as hotspots across the country allow you wireless access to network services.

Perhaps this year we will see the upside of the downturn in the PC market, with the industry finally putting some effort into coming up with fresh products and services that will attract customers, both new and existing, to invest in technology again.

Big in Japan

Seeing what's in store for Japanese users is the closest you can get to seeing the future of technology. And with manufacturers touting their goods at two trade shows in Tokyo and Chiba, we have plenty of predictions.

One of our favourites is Fujitsu's Maron-1 robot (below), which can be controlled from your mobile phone, and will guard your house or look after your pet by sending you updated video images direct to your handset. It can also lend a hand by controlling household appliances like your TV or air conditioning. This vacuum cleaner-sized robot is due to go on sale in Japan next year, priced around £1,000.

We don't need to look to Japan to know that wireless technology is the next big thing, but they have come up with some neat uses for it. Toshiba has the Hopbit – a Bluetooth storage device aimed at PDA (personal digital assistant) users. It's a 5GB hard drive to which you can download and upload files without the need to connect. It went on sale in Japan in November, costing the equivalent of around £258.

Other devices that dispense with cables include JVC's prototype optical wireless transmission system (top right) which can send files at speeds of up to 1.25Gbps (gigabits per second). That's fast enough to feed uncompressed video to your TV screen. Pricing and availability have not yet been announced.

Fujitsu hasn't been left out on this front either, as its Japanese customers can pick up an AirJuke audio player (bottom left) for £72, allowing them to download tunes from their PCs via Bluetooth.

Other wireless wonders included mobile phones that could place calls via a WLAN (wireless local area network) and digital cameras that could upload images wirelessly.

Not to be outdone, European manufacturer Philips was beating the Japanese at their own game, coming out with a miniature optical disc and drive. The discs, called SFFO, are designed to replace memory cards in future mobile electronics devices. They are just 30mm in diameter (about the size of a 10p coin), but can hold up to 1GB of data.

For more details on all these products visit www.pcadvisor.co.uk/news.

Charge and go

London-based phone booth manufacturer, Nearplay, has launched one of the UK's first kiosks for recharging mobile phones and PDAs. The Charge Me service will allow users of a whole variety of models to recharge their devices on the go. The first kiosks will be installed by the end of the year. There are two types of kiosk: the public coin-operated models, which will charge users 50p for a five-minute recharge, and a corporate model which will provide registered users with a prepaid service. A full charge will take from five to 10 minutes.

BT closed world

BTopenworld has added yet more restrictions to its narrowband unlimited internet access products Anytime and Surftime. When BT launched its Anytime package, users paid a monthly fixed sum to surf the web for as long or as often as they wanted. But from November BT's Anytime customers are limited to 150 hours of flat-rate access per month, while Surftime users will be confined to 120 hours at evenings and weekends. BT categorically denies this is a way of pushing users towards its broadband services, insisting it is "trying to improve the service for all users".

Toshiba recalls e740

Toshiba has been forced to recall some of its Pocket PC e740 handhelds (reviewed in *PC Advisor*, October 02). The affected models, bearing the serial numbers 72014641L through 92041620L, can experience data loss if the battery is completely drained or disconnected, according to the company. Any customers who own one of these devices (the serial numbers can be found printed on the back of the device) should call 01932 828 828 or visit www.computers.toshiba.co.uk to find their local Toshiba service partner.