Image-editing software
Serif Digital Camera Suite

What do you do with images once you've downloaded them from your digital camera? If you're like most people, you'll give them a cursory glance and print out a couple of pictures before relegating them to a distant corner of your hard disk. Serif claims to offer a more elegant solution with the release of its Digital Camera Suite, a bundle of three applications designed to put both order and pizzazz into your digital life.

Slideshow attraction
For digital camera owners the most important application in the collection will be MediaPlus, a tool for archiving and presenting digital assets. Its usefulness isn't restricted to image files; you can also store audio and video documents. Neither is it limited to cataloguing items on your hard disk: you can import directly from Twain-compatible scanners and cameras.

Catalogued items can be placed into albums, categorised with keywords and output to HTML web galleries, screensavers or slideshows. There are limitations to its power – for example, you can't create standalone slideshow presentations or use catalogued audio files to provide background music. For non-demanding uses, though, it's excellent.

← MontagePlus makes it easy and fun to create photomontages from your images

Grasping the basics
Power-using snobs tend to look down on any image-editing product that isn't from Adobe, but PhotoPlus 6.0 is a capable mid-range image editor. Serif has understood that most users want to do three things with their digital images: adjust colour, correct some red-eye and crop, so it concentrates on these basic tools at the expense of gimmicky effects. That's not to say it lacks features – it supports transparency, object masking and editable text and bitmap layers.

Although there are some limitations – there's no support for vector layers and text layers are automatically bitmapped when copied – the program feels like a cut-down version of Adobe Photoshop, with its palettes and support for native Photoshop plug-ins.

The third application in the suite, MontagePlus, is

unarguably a stocking-filler, but fun nonetheless. It allows you to create a single image made up of a number of tiny thumbnails. You can select your own image folders or even extract stills from an Mpeg or AVI movie as the tile source. The program also includes Hide and Seek and Autograph features, so you can include any chosen thumbnail at a random or set point in the montage.

But Digital Camera Suite isn't all good news. Although the features of its component applications hardly overlap, it doesn't fully excuse their lack of cohesion. The products don't look or feel related, with the sombre menu bar and palettes of PhotoPlus providing a jarring contrast to the frivolity of the MontagePlus interface.

The inconsistencies extend down to the way files are treated: in MontagePlus you can store files directly as a bitmap, Jpeg or GIF, but in PhotoPlus you have to navigate an Export dialog box to save an image in the same formats. Even though the suite comes with three well-written manuals, this lack of coherence is disappointing.

Verdict
Digital Camera Suite provides good value for money, but don't expect an integrated solution to your digital editing needs. ■

Tom Gorham

↑ MediaPlus lets you store images in albums and export them to web galleries

→ You can create a web gallery directly from MediaPlus with the help of templates

Windows optimisation utility
PC Booster 2.0

Do you ever get the feeling that your PC is not performing as well as it should? Perhaps your ageing system suffers from inexplicable crashes, or you just want a little more authority over your computer's settings? Either way, if you want to tweak your Windows environment, PC Booster may help.

Installing the software was simple and no reboot was needed, although we performed one just to be sure. You are greeted with a user-friendly interface and typically an icon will appear in the System Tray. But this little icon seemed to be breeding, as we ended up with a whole family of them in our System Tray – some mistake surely? Even worse we had to reboot out Windows 98 PC after this fault caused it to crash.

Time for a tune up
Ignoring this, PC Booster greets you with the option to perform an autotune. Before you initiate this you are prompted to backup your existing Registry settings so that you can revert back to them if things go haywire – all well in theory, but we'll come to that later.

With autotuning, PC Booster analyses your system then compiles a list of all the settings that will be adjusted. These include tweaks to cache sizes, memory resource usage, menu speeds, autoclosure of nonresponding applications, adjustments to internet transmission speeds, boot up, shutdown times and more. However, it is worth noting that you can't specify which

modifications you want implemented, unless you opt for the Manual Tweaks menu. Furthermore not all of these tweaks are available, as some are OS-specific.

Spot the difference
After the autotune we noticed that menu speeds were quicker on both our Windows 98 and XP machines (1GHz processor with 512MB of RAM), but an overall boost was difficult to measure. However, the company says PC Booster works best on slower Windows 9x and Me systems. As for a boost in internet transmission rate, our connection actually became slower. From an average download speed of 57Kbps (kilobits per second), it fell to 27Kbps. We repeated this test several 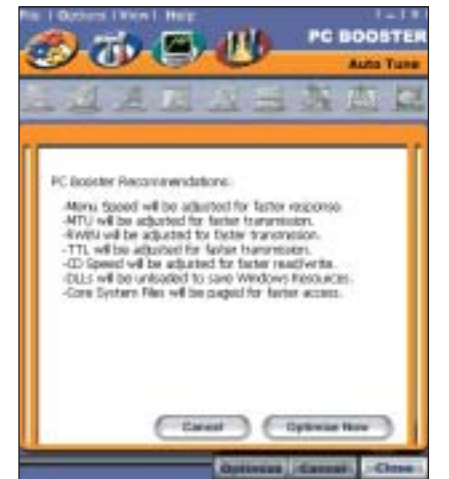times, but the outcome was the same. Remember the backup function mentioned earlier? We decided to restore our settings and were equally disappointed when we couldn't access any site, suggesting our settings were not fully reinstated.

We then moved on to the Manual Tweaks menu, where you have much more say in what is tweaked or not, (although Windows XP options are limited). We also

↑ PC Booster displays the recommended tweaks after running an autotune

liked the Help menus that give short descriptions of each of the nine settings. Not everything is about performance – you can change the startup and shutdown pictures, quickly delete your temporary internet files, cookies and history, and alter the location of the My Documents, My Pictures and Favorites folders.

Verdict
PC Booster's strength lies within its easy access to tweaks that would otherwise take longer if you fiddled with the Registry and/or Windows' settings. Performance gains would appear marginal and as for claiming to boost your internet access by up to 100 percent, take this with a pinch of salt. ■

Jalal Werfalli

↑ From the Manual Tweak menu we've opened the Memory category and…

← … the Help menu. This shows the OS-specific modifications that you can and cannot select

Speech recognition software
IBM ViaVoice 10.0 Windows Pro USB edition

IBM ViaVoice recognises speech and converts it into text or commands, enabling you to sideline the keyboard and mouse for common tasks such as creating documents, composing email and browsing the web. ViaVoice doesn't simply convert spoken word into text, though: it interprets voice patterns and analyses context to reproduce speech accurately. Speak normally into a microphone and ViaVoice accurately reproduces it whether you say 'Two's company' or 'To his company'.

Speech recognition traditionally appeals to people who have difficulty using keyboards and mice and in law and medicine where documentation proliferates and dictation is the norm. Desktop packages like ViaVoice and market leader Dragon NaturallySpeaking make voice input a viable proposition for anyone seeking relief from bashing keys.

Voice your opinions
ViaVoice for Windows Pro USB edition 10.0 has a new speech engine giving faster recognition and now accepts input from digital recorders. You can jump in and begin dictation immediately as training, which helps ViaVoice to recognise your speech patterns, is now optional. Accuracy will be better if you can spare 20 minutes for this training, though, and your input speed can exceed average touchtyping rates, while maintaining accuracy once the software has developed awareness of your speech patterns.

Other changes are mainly of interest to users upgrading from a previous version: the VoiceCentre Taskbar can now be configured, macro problems have been fixed and you no longer have to use an administrator account on Windows 2000 or XP. One change, the use of TCP/IP for communication between ViaVoice modules, will surprise personal firewalls so watch out.

ViaVoice has excellent recognition accuracy but voice command and control is as important as accuracy if your aim is to dispense with your keyboard and mouse. Here, ViaVoice could do better. It has great touches – with practice you can combine computer navigation commands with text

→ Creating a voice model at installation time is now optional

↓ New Always Active macros work with the currently active application

dictation, and you can always record macros that apply to any application. Out of the box, though, navigation works best with a limited set of applications.

Command and conquer
Microsoft Word, Excel, (97, 2000 and XP versions) and Outlook are the favoured few where you can use natural language control such as 'Add an attachment' or 'Change the Font to Verdana' instead of having to step through commands as they appear on application menus.

In other programs you can voice most menu commands but only with Windows 98 SE, Me and XP – not 2000. For Internet Explorer, AOL, Netscape Messenger and Outlook Express, ViaVoice Pro USB provides command sets to enable voice control.

IBM packages four separate versions of ViaVoice 10.0. The Pro USB edition we reviewed is top of the range and the only version with Windows 2000 support, customised command and control and advanced dictation. It includes a headset microphone and a USB microphone adapter which improves sound quality. The Advanced edition has a cheaper microphone but like Pro USB can import

and convert into text both sound files and recordings from Sanyo and Olympus digital recorders. The cheaper Personal and Standard editions have the same high-class speech recognition with voice control limited to web browsing only.

Verdict
Excellent voice recognition and improved usability makes this release a worthy alternative to Dragon NaturallySpeaking. As an upgrade from previous ViaVoice releases the decision is not so clear-cut. ■

Terence Green

IBM ViaVoice 10.0

System requirements: 300MHz Pentium/AMD K6; Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 510MB hard disk space; mic input (USB port or Windows-compatible sound card).

Creo: 01475 555 047
Website: www.ibm.com/software/speech/uk
Price: £80.56 ex VAT

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use								7			
Features								7			
Value for money									8		
Overall								7			

Optical character recognition software
OmniPage Pro 12.0

As the typical price of consumer flatbed scanners has fallen to less than £100, many of these devices come with a version of ScanSoft's OmniPage, the popular OCR (optical character recognition) package that allows you to scan pages and convert them to editable text.
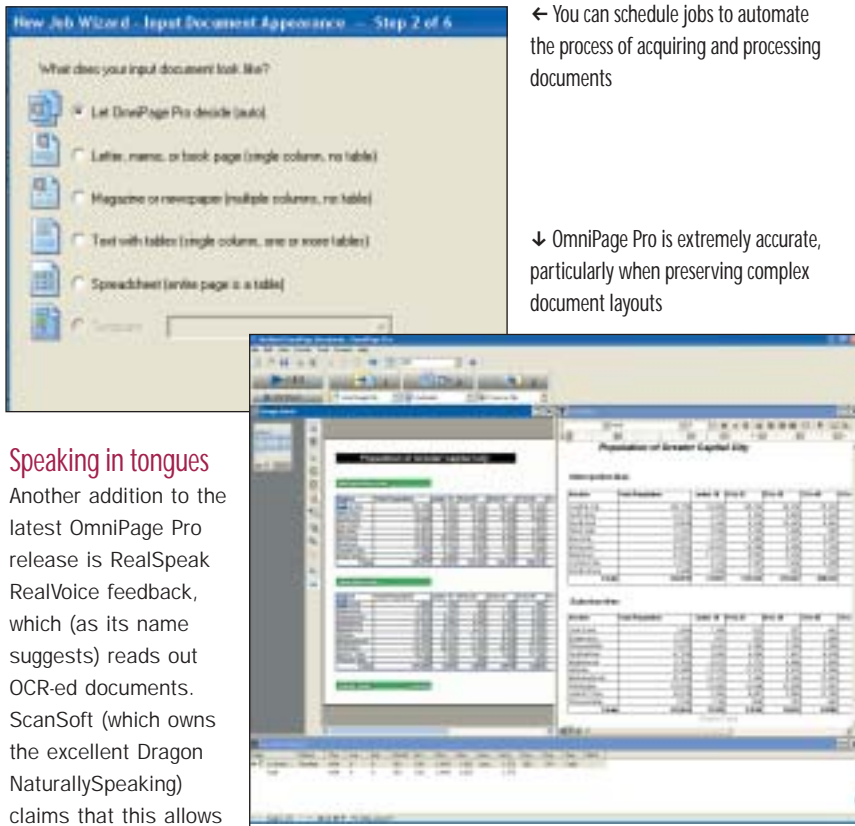
This cut-down, bundled application tends to be light on automation tools and less competent at handling documents that are not clearly typed in a 12-point font. That said, they are often more than adequate for the vast majority of users' OCR needs. Where they tend to fall down, and where a product such as OmniPage Pro or Abbyy FineReader (reviewed September 02) comes into its own, is with complex documents that include tables and graphics in intricate layouts.

The Pro version of OmniPage handles these layouts capably and simply, while recognition of text is fast and extremely accurate. In every document tested with OmniPage, generally no more than half a dozen words proved difficult – and all of these were picked up by the excellent built-in spellchecker.

Professional practice
Like Abbyy, OmniPage can scan to and from PDF (portable document format) files, increasingly useful in business environments where documents are likely to be available in the Acrobat format. However, this feature was also available in version 11.0 so isn't itself a reason to upgrade. New to version 12.0 is the ability to scan to XML (extensible markup language) and eBook formats, though these are specialised applications.

Something that is more valuable in terms of business use is the improved notation capability. This enables documents to be shared more easily and annotated. Again, though, this is largely via PDF documents, so you'll need access to Acrobat in addition to OmniPage. Users who regularly scan multiple language documents will also appreciate the fact that OmniPage supports 114 languages.

← You can schedule jobs to automate the process of acquiring and processing documents

↓ OmniPage Pro is extremely accurate, particularly when preserving complex document layouts

Speaking in tongues
Another addition to the latest OmniPage Pro release is RealSpeak RealVoice feedback, which (as its name suggests) reads out OCR-ed documents. ScanSoft (which owns the excellent Dragon NaturallySpeaking) claims that this allows you to proof by ear as well as by eye. It's a bit of a gimmick, but in certain circumstances – especially if converting documents for partially sighted or blind users – it will prove very useful.

More useful are the automation tools that can batch process multiple jobs – something that will come in handy in an office environment where lots of documents have to be scanned and converted to editable text.

For users of version 11.0 there is little reason to upgrade, although owners of cut-down releases will find the program useful if they ever need to scan and OCR complex documents. Upgrading is the key, however, as very few users are likely to be able to justify the full price: £369 ex VAT as opposed to £129 for an upgrade (including upgrades from competing products).

Verdict
OmniPage Pro 12.0 is fast and accurate with some useful improvements, such as the ability to scan and recognise two pages at once (handy for books). At the same

time, it's an evolutionary rather than revolutionary release and is unlikely to appeal outside very restricted areas.

Like flatbed scanners, OCR software is no longer an esoteric product that can command high prices. If you can get OmniPage as an upgrade it is highly recommended as perhaps the best OCR package around: if you can't, competitors such as Abbyy can only flourish. ■

Jason Whittaker

OmniPage Pro 12.0

System requirements: Pentium processor; Windows 9x/Me/2000/XP/NT 4.0; 32MB RAM; 115MB hard disk space.

ScanSoft: 0870 870 8085
Website: www.scansoft.co.uk
Price: £369 full/£129 upgrade

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use									8		
Features										9	
Value for money							6				
Overall								7			

Presentation building software
Gowi Presenter 2.0

Gowi Presenter 2.0 is a cross between a presentation tool and a multimedia authoring product. It enables you to create presentations using content from a number of different sources, as well as adding some simple interactivity. Although it has some impressive features, it's let down by poor help files.

Presenter is divided into two separate tools: Player and Editor. Editor is used for creating presentations and forms the main body of the product. Player is required to play back Presenter files. As Presenter uses a proprietary format for its productions, the Player has to be distributed to anyone watching the completed presentations.

Each presentation comprises sequences of multimedia content and panels that handle interactivity. Files for use in sequences are stored in the product's Object Library, then dragged and dropped into a sequence timeline. The Object Library includes a preview tool for testing video clips and static files before adding them into a sequence.

File support is impressive. As well as AVI movie files, Flash animations and image formats, Presenter also supports the use of Microsoft Office files, PDF (portable document format) files and HTML content within sequences. To add Microsoft Office content to a sequence, you'll need to have the relevant applications running locally. However, this isn't required for users playing back completed presentations through the Player.

Presenter uses its own proprietary plug-ins for handling different data types, offering configuration options suitable for each type of content. Each data type has its own list of properties, which can be configured once an object has been added into a sequence. These provide some useful controls such as the ability to change the playback speed of movie clips.

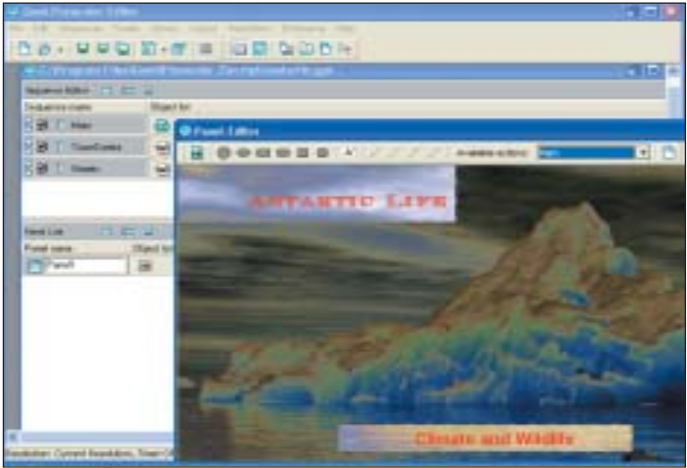In addition to managing multimedia content, the Object Library also contains a series of commands that can be used to control the flow of presentations. The commands aren't as comprehensive as those in languages like Macromedia Flash's ActionScript, but cover most basics such as stopping and starting presentations.

Navigation within a presentation is controlled through Panels. These use static images overlaid with clickable 'hotspots'. Each hotspot is linked to a sequence in the presentation, so that clicking on it initiates that sequence.

Once a presentation is complete, it can be exported as a standalone file. Export options include CD distribution features, such as adding autorun capabilities. However, there are no tools for creating web-based content. Any distribution must include the Player element to run effectively, so the addition of a bundling option that packages together the Player with an exported file would also be useful.

Presenter is a flexible and powerful application. However, it's let down by its online help. It only provides brief explanations of concepts and gives very little guidance on specific tasks. The product is also costly in comparison with other similar tools. At £500 ex VAT plus an annual £75 maintenance fee for a single-user version, Presenter will be too much for most home or small business users. Also, its limited control commands mean that it isn't comparable with higher-end products like Macromedia Director.

Gowi Presenter 2.0

System requirements: 233MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/NT/XP; 128MB RAM, 15MB hard disk space.

Gowi: 0870 727 4433

Website: www.gowigroup.co.uk

Price: £500, plus £75 per year maintenance

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use							6				
Features								7			
Value for money							6				
Overall								7			

➜ Presenter's Panel Editor adds navigational hotspots to a presentation procedure

Verdict
With its drag-and-drop tools, Gowi Presenter 2.0 allows you to build multimedia presentations with minimum effort. Wide-ranging support for file types also make it a flexible tool. However, it comes at a hefty price and poor support materials make building more complex presentations time-consuming. ◼

Maggie Williams

Search engine optimisation software
SignPoster 4.0

A beautifully designed website is a sight for sore eyes, but what's the point of investing in the setup costs if you can't attract eyeballs in first place? You can't rely on customers simply stumbling across your site.

If you're lucky enough to have already won a visitor over, your site may feature as one of the dozen or so on the user's list of Favorites. It's more likely, however, that visitors will arrive at your site via a search engine such as Google.

The increasing use of search engines has given rise to SEO (search engine optimisation) as a key part of website promotion strategy. In short, if you can't flag up your internet wares to the leading search engines, your site will wither and die.
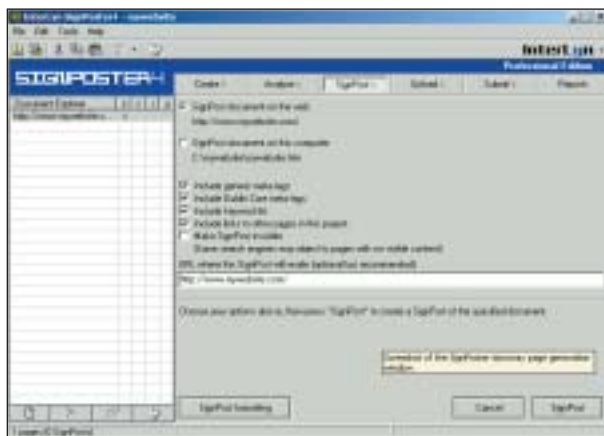
You will also want to pull in visitors who are genuinely interested in your content. There's little point in us attracting a visitor to our fictitious premier smoked bacon website – www.choicecuts.co.uk – if he or she is actually looking for obscure porcelain figurines.

Through the doorway
To ensure relevant and growing traffic, you need to conjure up special tags in your HTML which hold descriptions and keywords (known as metatags). Web consultants will then charge around £150 a pop to visit each of the major search engines and submit your URL(s), one at a time. Of course you can also do it yourself, but be prepared to face a confusing array of procedures.
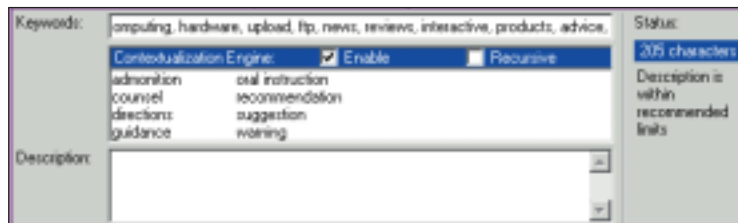
Alternatively you can opt for Interlyn's SignPoster, which is certainly one of the better SEO applications that have come through the *PC Advisor* Test Centre. It does a good job of covering all the normal bases, plus a few that aren't usually included.

SignPoster's most powerful feature is the ability to automatically generate so-called 'doorway pages' – specially designed pages that ensure a website achieves a high ranking with a search engine. Doorway pages highlight relevant information about a key page on your site, which are then indexed by the search engine. So when our visitor types in

← SignPoster automatically generates 'doorway' pages

↓ SignPoster's Contextualisation Engine suggests similar keywords

'bacon' and 'smoked' to an engine, www.choicecuts.co.uk will be high up the list of resulting links.

When you submit your doorway page, you can select which search engines you want it to be included on. For Lycos and AltaVista you will have to do this manually, as they don't accept automated submissions, but SignPoster will give you a direct link to the submission pages.

Think of a word
At the core of SignPoster is the Project Explorer, which allows you to create and manage groups of web pages. To create the metatags for these pages you simply type in the keywords associated with the content of the page. The forthcoming edition of SignPoster, version 4.1, has a feature that helps you come up with the optimum 15 to 20 keywords per page, prompting related words as you type, which can then be added to your keyword list. If you've already got metatags built into your webpage, SignPoster will extract them for you to include them alongside your new keywords.

Finally SignPoster conveniently warns you if you are submitting a site to a particular engine too often (search engines often have rules against very frequent submissions).

Pricing is set in US dollars at $55 for the Standard edition, which will suffice for the majority of users. Those looking for the kind of tweaks offered by web consultants can buy the Professional edition for $80, which allows you to change the way the doorway pages format their content.

Verdict
If you don't have the knowledge, time or budget to make the detailed manual submissions required for effective SEO, SignPoster is good value for money. ■
Guy Dixon

SignPoster 4.0

System requirements: 90MHz Pentium; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/NT 4.0; 8MB RAM; 10MB hard disk space.

Interlyn: 0870 742 4236
Website: www.signposter.com
Price: $55

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use								8		
Features									9	
Value for money								8		
Overall								8		

Report writer
Crystal Reports 9.0

R eport writing has to be one of the least glamorous technologies around, but it is absolutely critical as most companies rely on reports to make important business decisions. Crystal Decisions' Crystal Reports software ranks among the best in its field.

The latest version 9.0 is an evolutionary but nevertheless important release. It lets you deliver rich, interactive content from virtually any XML (extensible markup language), Olap (online analytical processing) or relational data source. Report design capabilities produce interactive documents that you can publish in a variety of formats including DHTML (dynamic hypertext markup language), RTF (rich text format), Microsoft Excel, PDF (portable document format) and XML for greater flexibility.

Crystal clear
Bundled in with this release is a copy of Crystal Enterprise for publishing your reports on the web. The product integrates smoothly with Crystal Reports and not only delivers information in real time with report streaming technology, but also automatically delivers reports with a new scheduling tool.

The Report Alerts feature sends out custom messages when the data in a report meets a certain criteria, such as a rise in sales numbers. These capabilities work within most applications, giving Crystal Reports true component

functionality and letting developers incorporate reporting features into their web and Windows applications.
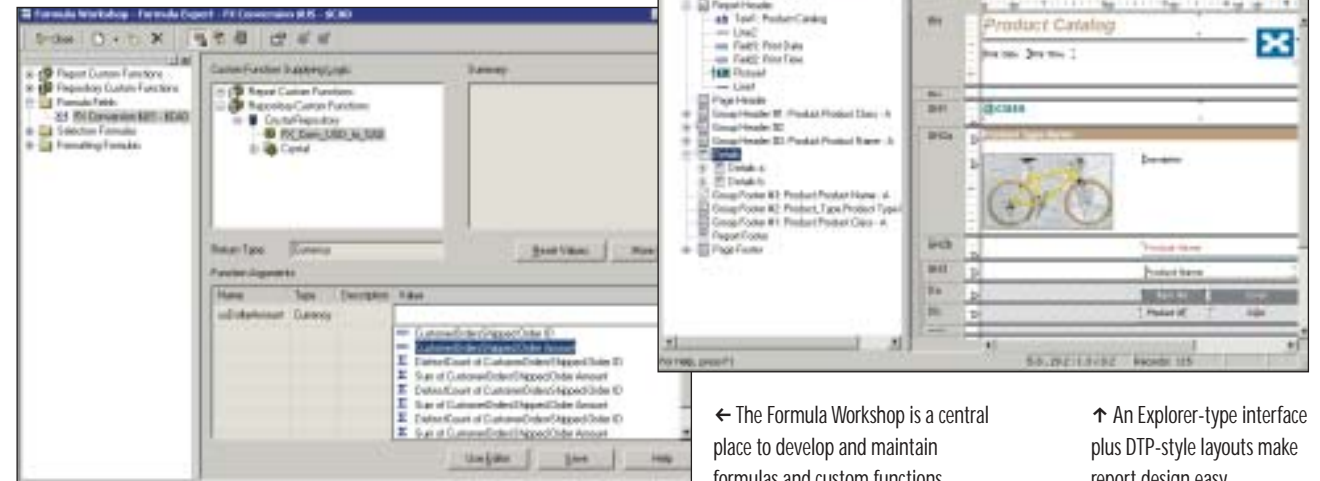
Report whizz
Installation felt relatively protracted. In our case, the install program couldn't locate a whole swathe of essential files, even though they were present on the CD-ROM. Skipping several dozen of these 'missing' files allowed us to complete the install and run the program.

Crystal Reports' interface is reassuringly familiar and is closely based on the Office 2000 pattern. The learning curve is gentle, too – the first time you use the program you're prompted to run a Report Wizard. There are four wizards to choose from: Standard, Cross-Tab, Mail Label and Olap. You then have to specify which data you want to report on. You'll also need to create a new data connection but this isn't confined to standard data types – you can delve into NT Event logs, Outlook data files, web log files and Act data files.

With the addition of full Java support, Crystal Reports now lets developers integrate reports into Java, .Net and Component Object Model applications. Using a new report application server, programmers can also integrate reports into company web applications.

A neat touch: developers can now reuse report components in other reports.

They can also integrate 'report parts' (such as data, tables or charts) into workflow applications accessible through a portal, wireless device or Office document. It also supports Office XP Smart Tags, permitting instant sharing, viewing and refreshing from within the Office document.

Verdict
Crystal Reports 9.0 is worth the upgrade. It's available in several flavours from the Standard edition right up to the heavy-duty Advanced edition. If your company's data problems are 'too much' rather than 'too little', then this is the best way of drilling down into it and extracting the precise data you need to run your business. ■
Roger Gann

Crystal Reports 9.0

System requirements: Pentium-compatible processor; Windows 98SE/Me/2000/XP Pro/NT; 32MB RAM; 60MB hard disk space.

Crystal Decisions: 020 8566 2330
Website: www.crystaldecisions.com
Price: Standard £138, Professional £351, Developer £422, Advanced £1,416

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ease of use							7			
Features								8		
Value for money								8		
Overall								8		

← The Formula Workshop is a central place to develop and maintain formulas and custom functions

↑ An Explorer-type interface plus DTP-style layouts make report design easy