

Digital video editing is the latest killer app to send the buying public out in search of new PCs, but how do you know which systems provide the best equipment for it? Luckily, Spencer Dalziel is on hand to help you make that choice



Reader's choice: budget PCs for video editing

For *PC Advisor* reader Peter Odd, image manipulation is everything. Peter, who retired in 1990, lives with his wife Clare in Wokingham. Retirement has afforded Peter the opportunity to pursue his hobby of analogue video work with his Yashica Hi8 camera and he currently chairs the East Berkshire and Wokingham photographic societies. Clare also manages the Yateley branch of the Citizens Advice Bureau and Peter occasionally helps out by producing in-house publications for her. As an avid video and photography hobbyist, getting the right still and moving images is important so he needs the right kit. Peter contacted us via email because he's about to make the jump from analogue to digital video and he wants to buy a budget PC specifically tailored for the job. "I find myself bewildered by the different machines on offer. The

manufacturers keep changing their systems and they never advertise the information I needed to know about PC requirements for digital video editing. It's only when you get a bit wise that you know to ask the right questions," Peter added. The were several important requests in Peter's email so, rather than find PCs that look like they might fit the bill, we forwarded Peter's email to several manufacturers. We wanted to see if they'd be willing to build a suitable system from scratch for a budget of £1,200 inc VAT. Two manufacturers rose to the challenge: Evesham put together the Evolution 2.4 and Mesh built the Matrix XP 2400+. Both are excellent PCs for digital video editing thanks to the inclusion of Peter's all-important ATI All-in-Wonder Radeon 8500DV graphics card, besides which the manufacturers have crammed in superb specifications for the budget.

First impressions

Neither PC was aesthetically outstanding and both were similar in terms of build and features. Peter's not too bothered about the peripherals – as long as they're up to the job. We pointed out the humble mouse is often overlooked but the scroll button feature has great benefits when navigating video-editing software.

The only glaring difference between the two systems was the bundled display unit: "I've arranged my desk at home so it's the same height as the window sill so I haven't the room to accommodate a big CRT [cathode ray tube] monitor," Peter said. Bad news for the 19in Samsung SyncMaster SM957 sitting next to Evesham's tower case. Mesh fared better with the inclusion of a compact 15in NEC flat-panel.

However, after assessing each display, we realised that the choice wasn't as cut and dried as it first seemed. With good image quality being high in Peter's mind we checked the clarity of the monitors and were disappointed with the 15in NEC LCD. "A perfect fit for home but the colours look a little bleached and grainy," he said. A lot of flat-panels can rotate from landscape to portrait mode so Peter was also disappointed the flat-panel couldn't do this.

Picture quality on the 19in SyncMaster is average when compared to other aperture grille CRTs but compared to the NEC it was impressive. We thought this might entice Peter to make more room at home to accommodate the larger Evesham package because of his desire for good images.

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Evesham Evolution 2.4

Pros: warranty, monitor quality
Cons: monitor size, performance
Price: £999 ex VAT
Evesham: 0870 160 9500
Website: www.evesham.com

Mesh Matrix XP 2400+

Pros: best performance, flat-panel display
Cons: quality of flat-panel, warranty
Price: £999 ex VAT
Mesh: 020 8208 4702
Website: www.meshcomputers.com



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Peter was pleased to see both systems sporting the ATI All-in-Wonder Radeon 8500DV. The graphics card comes with an external breakout box and a collection of ports capable of processing digital video, but Peter can also process his analogue footage. Peter added, "I wanted TV card capabilities for watching cricket on my PC and for time-shifting so I can cut out the adverts." Fortunately the PCs come with XP Home Edition, as the TV feature isn't available for Windows 95, 98 and 98SE.

What the experts say

The recommended specification for editing video is high and both systems are more than capable of coping with the task. Evesham opted for a 2.4GHz Pentium 4 chip with 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, while Mesh chose the latest 2400+ Athlon with 512MB of DDR RAM. The only difference was a faster MHz memory bandwidth on the Matrix with its PC2700 DDR memory running at 333MHz.

What did Peter want?

- Budget PC for digital video editing
- Good warranty, preferably onsite
- Value for money
- Best performance
- Future-proofing

The 80GB hard drives provide plenty of storage for digital video and this pleased Peter: "My old Dan PC has a 3GB hard drive so there's no way I can use it for analogue or digital video." Our video encoding tests proved that when it comes to performance, the Matrix has the edge over the Evolution. However, the Evolution is bundled with the Pinnacle software Peter wanted to use for his first excursion into digital video editing.

Peter adores his film camera and says he remains "unconvinced about digital photography – at least at the moment". For the sort of quality Peter wants he'll have to pay over £2,000 but he does want to experiment with digital photography. This will eventually mean a new printer, scanner and camera for Peter so he was pleased to know the Matrix supports the new USB 2.0 standard. The Evolution has a mixture of USB 1.1 and 2.0, but 1.1 won't suffice for Peter. Again this comes back to his concerns with image quality – he'll want to shoot high-resolution photographs and scan or print them out.

The last main detail that concerned Peter was getting a good warranty: "I don't want it to be my responsibility to return the PC to the manufacturer should there be any problems." Evesham offers Peter peace of mind with a two-year onsite warranty followed by one-year return-to-base. This is a better aftersales service

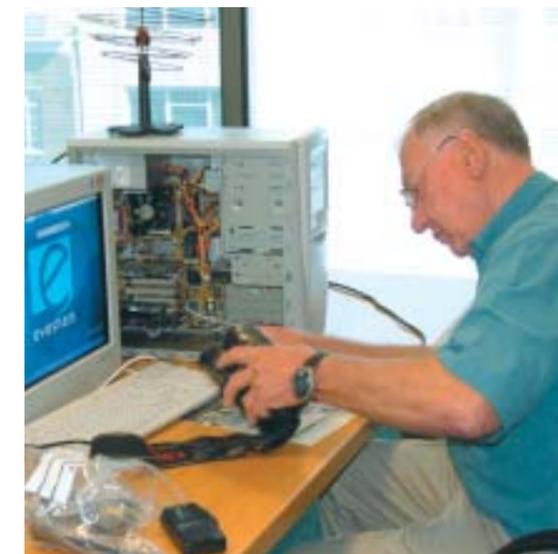
than the three years return-to-base given by Mesh. We told Peter he needn't worry about having to heave the PC into a car to take it to the manufacturers because the onus of responsibility is on the manufacturer to arrange collection. Despite the better warranty and monitor from Evesham, we think Peter will go for the extra performance offered by the Matrix.

The reader's choice

As we've said, both systems are more than capable of the task at hand and both have their pros and cons. Either way, there are few PCs on the market that offer such astonishing value for money – this made Peter's decision difficult. In fact, we left it for the weekend so Peter could mull over the options before he made his choice.

He contacted us with the news first thing on Monday morning: "I weighed up the difference between the two systems and decided the Mesh will provide me with the best combination of features and specifications."

We asked Peter if he'd truly be satisfied with the 15in LCD. When he makes the full leap from analogue to digital with his video work and photography, and once he adds digital imaging peripherals, he might soon get frustrated with the grainy flat display. Peter responded with the diplomacy characteristic of a man who once worked in PR: "There's always a compromise at some point and in this case it's the monitor. I'll be happy to pay more money to see if I can negotiate a better model." ■



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