

Healthcheck spotcheck

PC World's new 50-point PC Healthcheck service offers to give your system a thorough examination and virus check and to install any new components you may have. We popped along to our local branch to give a sluggish, three-year-old PC the once-over

If you walk in to any branch of PC World – one has probably just opened up at the bottom of your street – you can avail yourself of a new PC maintenance service. PC World's 50-point Healthcheck service is aimed at inexperienced PC owners and claims to be the most comprehensive PC performance check yet. Its aims are to optimise the performance and improve the security of customer's desktop and notebook PCs.

No other PC retailer has ever offered a service like it, especially not one that is open to everyone no matter where their PC was bought. To put Healthcheck to the test, we posed as ordinary customers and took an old PC along to the branch of PC World that had just opened up at the bottom of our street.

The PC

Our volunteer PC, a three-year-old Carrera system, has an AMD K6-III processor running at 400MHz, 64MB of SDRAM, 10GB hard drive and a CD-ROM/DVD combo drive. We ran the machine through our WorldBench 4 test so we had a record of exactly how well the PC was performing before it was serviced.

WorldBench 4 is the benchmarking software we use when testing PCs for the charts. Its control score of 100 was set by a Gateway system with a 1.2GHz Athlon processor, 128MB of RAM and a 20GB hard drive. That spec makes the control PC about 12 months old – roughly a third of the age of the Carrera machine we took to PC World.

The Carrera's WorldBench result of 54 – nearly 50 percent slower than the Gateway's – would therefore seem reasonable for a system three times the age of the control PC. Even so, we'd have expected a slightly higher score.

Finally, we deliberately left an infected file containing the W32/Klez.h@mm virus on the system to see if the Healthcheck process found it and to see what PC World recommended about further infections.



The Healthcheck

Firstly we spoke to one of PC World's telephone operatives who told us that we could drop the machine off so it could be run through Healthcheck the next day. He said that once it had been done we could come along for the consultation session the following week, so we booked an appointment and took the PC to the Tottenham Court Road branch of PC World.

One of the store's employees asked us why we had brought it in for a Healthcheck and we told him that it was running slowly but we weren't sure why. He promised to call us to let us know when the PC had been serviced and was ready to collect.

Three days later and no word from PC World, we called the clinic ourselves to check that the system had been serviced. After several minutes on the telephone, we found out that it was ready so we went to pick it up.

At the branch, we expected the consultation session that PC World's

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promotional leaflets mention. However, the explanation of the testing and what had been done to the PC was brief to say the least, taking little more than five minutes.

We were told, pleasingly, the virus had been found and removed from the system. The staff member stopped short of recommending that we should install any antivirus software and certainly didn't say

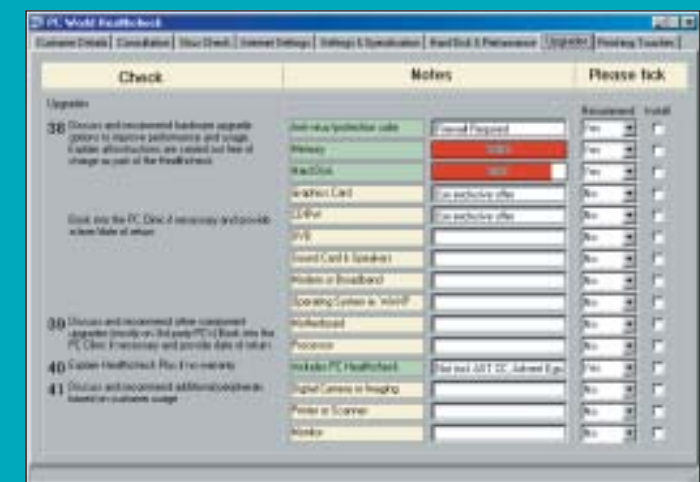
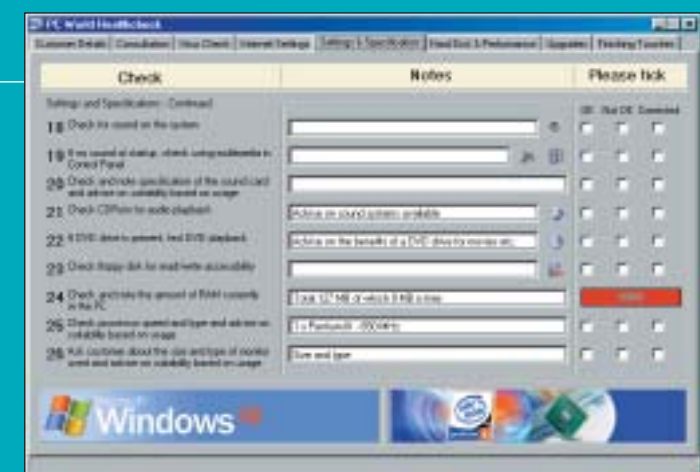
What is PC Healthcheck?

The 50-point PC Healthcheck is part of PC Clinic, the latest customer service initiative from PC World and is available from all of its retail outlets. Presented by PC World as an opportunity for customers to ensure their computer is running efficiently, is secure from hackers and free of viruses, a PC Healthcheck costs £29.99. According to PC World's leaflets, the fitting of any additional components or recommended upgrades made at the time of the Healthcheck are carried out for free, although the customer must cover the cost of the component itself.

What you get for your money

PC Healthcheck is aimed at optimising the performance of the computer according to the customer's specific requirements. Its staff will advise on file management and PC security, as well as giving the system a clean inside and out. The Healthcheck includes a one-hour, one-on-one consultation between the customer and a trained technician.

The report from the Healthcheck is stored on the customer's system so it can be accessed when it is required and printed out. The PC Healthcheck is not just available for people who have bought their PCs from PC World – provided the machine is running Windows 95 or later and has a CD-ROM drive it can be taken to any PC World to be serviced.



anything about the free 30-day trial of Norton AntiVirus that is mentioned in the leaflets. According to staff in the same store, this should have been installed as part of the Healthcheck.

Added extras

We were also told that we could improve the performance of the PC by adding another 128MB of SDRAM. When asked how much this would cost, we were told that it would cost £14.99 to fit the extra memory and we would also have to cover the cost of the memory module itself. This conflicted with information in a PC World leaflet available instore that stated the fitting of additional components recommended during the Healthcheck was included in the cost.

The company's instore leaflet clearly states that advice on optimising performance and file management are part of the service, although there's no

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indication in the literature of how such advice will be imparted. But, beyond the recommendation of more memory and news on the discovery of the infected file, no additional advice or information was offered.

The verdict

PC World's press release dated 7 August 02 for the launch of the 50-point Healthcheck says that it "provides customers with access to an hour with a technician and includes a PC Healthcheck report which is stored on the PC and can be printed off or read whenever the customer requires it". We had neither one hour with a technician nor any report stored on our PC.

When we ran the PC through WorldBench 4 again we achieved exactly the same score – nothing that had been done during PC World's Healthcheck had improved the performance of the system. However, it is highly likely that adding the recommended extra 128MB of SDRAM would have improved the score noticeably. So for £29.99 we got a virus removed and a recommendation to fit more memory. Value for money? We don't think so. ■