

Intel eyes the fast lane

Chip manufacturer Intel has announced plans to introduce performance-enhancing processor technology, known as Hyperthreading, to desktop computers by the end of the year. Speaking at last month's Intel Developer Forum in California, Intel's vice president Paul Otellini said the technology would give Intel "the competitive advantage [and the] market advantage".

Adding the technology to a processor offers two main benefits. Firstly, in simple terms, it allows the chip to multitask. This means that different applications, such as complex calculations and graphics processing, can be carried out simultaneously. According to Otellini, this can boost chip performance by as much as 30 percent.

Secondly, the processor technology delivers faster response times so that applications, whether tuned to Hyperthreading or not, will run faster. Windows XP is just one of the applications already tuned to the technology.

The technology will appear in Intel's 3GHz Pentium 4 desktop processor, due out at the end of this year. For a closer look at Intel's plans for future processors see Behind the news on page 26.

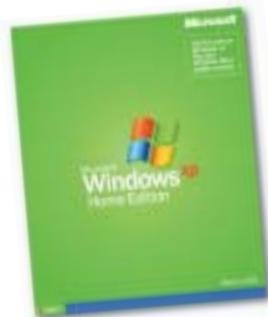


XP Service Pack 1.0 gets lukewarm reception

Last month saw Microsoft launch the first Service Pack for its Windows XP operating system. It sports dozens of security and bug fixes, driver supports and interface changes, plus one minor change to the Windows XP activation feature.

Updates include the modification of the Windows Product Activation, which stops users installing the software on multiple PCs. Now if XP detects suspect installations on a new system, there is a three-day grace period during which you can contact Microsoft to stop the company from locking your PC.

However, the debut of SP 1.0 may be insignificant for home and small office



users, especially if they have made good use of the Windows Update site.

In addition, a vocal minority on internet support sites have had problems upgrading to SP1. The chief complaint is that their PCs run like treacle after installing the update.

Running a close second are reports that PCs refuse to restart after installation or become highly unstable. Some systems continuously reboot. Other users complain that applications won't start or now crash repeatedly, including Microsoft's own programs. Such problems are causing some XP users to shun the update.

But Microsoft representatives say the company has not noticed an undue number of users reporting problems.

Phone for a car

By 2007 one in five new cars built worldwide will contain a Bluetooth wireless networking chip so that drivers can use hands-free mobile phone headsets while driving, according to a report by New York-based technology think tank, Allied Business Intelligence.

The UK government is pushing to ban the use of mobile phone handsets while driving and similar legislation is likely to be enforced in other countries. Some Saab, BMW and DaimlerChrysler models already offer Bluetooth hands-free kits as options.

Takeup of Bluetooth headsets, such as Ericsson's HBH30, has been slow. With such a low volume of sales, the price of the HBH30 remains relatively high at £135.

However, a basic Bluetooth chip costs about \$7 – low compared to the overall cost of a vehicle. Once car makers start building in Bluetooth circuits as a matter of course, the price will drop, reasons ABI's report.

Microsoft uses Media Player 9.0 to encourage XP upgrades

Microsoft has limited some of the features of its new Windows Media Player 9.0 to XP-only PCs, which leaves those using older PCs and operating systems out in the cold.

Microsoft, allied with chipmaker Intel, has been accused of driving forward the audio and video capabilities in the computing experience in order to encourage users to upgrade their PCs and operating systems.

Given that Gartner figures show that the global PC market looks set to remain in the doldrums this year, with growth estimated at a tiny 1.7 percent in the US, while Europe will see negative growth of -0.1 percent, it should come as no surprise that those companies with the greatest vested interests in growth should push the hardest for it.

The minimum configuration to run Media Player 9.0 with pre-XP versions of Windows is a 233MHz Pentium PC, with 64MB of RAM, 30MB of hard disk space, plus CD- or DVD-ROM drive, sound card, speaker or headphones. But even if your PC does meet this spec, and plenty of older



machines do, without XP you will miss out on support for five- to eight-channel surround sound and so-called 'lossless' audio playback, which retains original CD quality. CD burning facilities, which are now built into the player, are also limited.

Other new features include the ability to compress audio files into the WMA format, although third-party add-ons are required to rip and burn MP3 files. It will also automatically create playlists based on the tracks you listen to most often, just like the recently released iTunes 2.0 from Apple. The software is available to download from www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/download/default.asp.

BT told to cut prices by half



Telecom watchdog Ofcom has put forward pricing proposals that

could see BT's wholesale broadband service charges cut in half.

Back in February BT reduced its PPC (partial private circuit) charges, the fee levied on other operators providing services over BT's network.

But Ofcom believes BT's prices are still too high and has proposed that connection charges should be reduced by 50 percent and rental charges by 30 percent.

"A detailed investigation of the leased line market found that BT's wholesale charges for leased line services are too high and should be reduced to reflect costs," said David Edmonds, Ofcom's director general.

"Telecoms operators should pass on these significant price reductions to their business customers of leased lines services," added Edmonds.

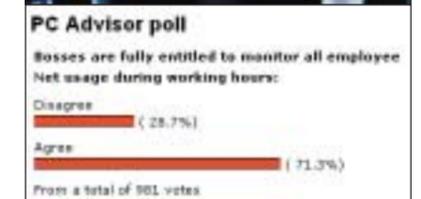
Staff surfing surge

Surfing at work is on the increase, but workers should be cautious, as online abuse is also becoming one of the most common reasons for reprimands and sackings. A survey, conducted by Nielsen/NetRatings, showed that nearly 46 million office employees in the US had logged on to the web during the month of August, a 17 percent increase on last year's figures. UK users are undoubtedly just as keen on surfing during work hours.

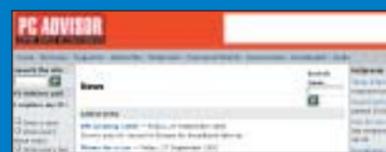
But recent research carried out by London law firm KLegal and *Personnel Today* magazine found that internet and email abuse was the top reason for disciplining employees. Problems include spending an excessive amount of time online for personal reasons, sending pornographic emails and visiting adult sites as well as sending email messages considered damaging to a company's reputation. In the most serious cases employees were dismissed from their jobs.

One solution to this problem could be the proposal made by website campaign, Gone2Lunch, which is petitioning users to support the idea of a midday amnesty period during which employers relax the rules to allow staff to use the internet and email in privacy. To sign the online petition visit www.gone2lunch.com.

We're not sure how many signatures Gone2Lunch will get from *PC Advisor* readers, though, as when we carried out a poll asking if bosses are fully entitled to monitor all employee internet usage during working hours, almost three quarters of the 981 respondents said yes.



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MacDonalds meets The Sims

Product placement looks set to become a lucrative business for games developers if a deal between MacDonalds, Intel and games maker Electronic Arts is anything to go by. EA plans to announce contracts worth \$2m with the fast food chain and chip maker to include their products in the upcoming Sims Online game.

Sims Online, which is due out in the US this autumn, is the latest in the hugely successful Sims series of titles which have sold some 17 million copies worldwide. The game will see virtual characters munching on Big Macs and communicating using Intel-branded computers.

Sims players have already been able to download branded products into the game, such as a Pepsi dispenser, but up until now they have not been an integral part of the Sims world.

However, Sims Online is not the only game to cash in on product placements. Activision also plans to include a Nokia headset in its upcoming Pro Surfer title, while in its Street Hoops game signs advertising the soft drink Sprite will appear.

X-rated gaming



The BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) chose ECTS (European Computer Trade Show) to highlight the problems it faces when classifying games as suitable for certain audiences.

The BBFC is responsible for classification over a range of media, but the nature of game playing, as well as games' content, affects the way certification for these titles is handled.

"We have to consider the nature of game playing [and its affect] on the individual. Computer games offer an interactive experience [unlike watching a film] and there's more chance of a game having

an affect on the person playing it," said Gianni Zamo, senior examiner for the BBFC.

The amorality of a game's storyline, such as Grand Theft Auto's promotion of car crime, can affect its classification as much as any hyper-realistic bloody graphics can.

"Grand Theft Auto was an isometric [top down] game with old-fashioned graphics. It didn't provide players with the visceral depictions of gore in something like the graphically accomplished Soldier of Fortune 2. However, it still received an 18 certificate because of the amoral content in the game," explains Zamo.

The board recommends that developers of potentially

problematic works consult the BBFC before final production because, unlike movies, games are difficult to cut.

This was another reason the BBFC appeared at ECTS – to open lines of communication between itself and developers and distributors, so that any problems can be ironed out before products are finalised.

One problem the BBFC can't mend is the association in the people's minds between gaming and children's entertainment. To overcome this an increasing number of games developers are creating titles aimed specifically at an adult audience.

Europe slams data retention plans

European Data Protection Commissioners have expressed doubts over the legality of the European Union's plans to force ISPs in member states to hold on to customer data.

At a conference in Cardiff the Commissioners discussed the proposals to make holding data on all kinds of telecommunications – such as details about time, place and numbers used for phone, fax, emails and internet use – mandatory for up to a year. In a statement the Commissioners said they had "grave doubts as to the legitimacy and legality of such broad measures".

They identified several problems associated with forcing telcos to hold such data, including the high cost of data retention, which would surely fall on the consumer in the long run. But the key worry was the invasion of personal privacy occasioned by the holding of intimate data regarding customers' use of the phone, fax, email and the web.

In their statement the Commissioners said: "Such [data] retention would be an improper invasion of the fundamental rights



guaranteed to individuals by... the European Convention of Human Rights."

The statement comes at an apt moment for the UK government, which is currently struggling with the problem of data retention. Under the terms of the December 2001 Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act, telcos are asked to hold data on a voluntary basis. But this scheme has not been a success, so the government has been considering making holding such data compulsory for an unspecified period of time. As yet, though, nothing has been decided.

What's in a name?



Handheld maker Palm plans to change the way it markets its PDAs (personal digital assistants), placing its future business products under the Tungsten brand and its consumer products under the Zire brand. Current product names will not change said Todd Bradley, CEO of the Palm Solutions Group.

Mobile professionals and students expect different things out of their PDAs and Palm's decision to offer the two brands is meant to make it easier for buyers to decide which type of PDA best suits their needs, Bradley said.

Tungsten products will be targeted at mobile workers and IT departments and will emphasise security and reliability, while the Zire brand will focus on Palm's main customer base with user-friendly and cheaper products. The traditional Palm brand will not disappear. New consumer products will be called Palm Zire and then include the model number as Palms currently do, such as the m130 (pictured) or the m500.

Palm is looking to continue its run at the top of the PDA market with the new branding strategies. The first product to carry one of the brand names will probably be Palm's first product for the new version of sister company PalmSource's OS 5.0, which is due for launch on 28 October.

Creative launches iPod-like

Creative has Apple's iPod in its sights with its latest audio player, the Jukebox Zen. While the company has long offered audio players with capacious storage, up until now it has followed the route of making the player as big as its hard drive.

Apple was the first manufacturer to offer plenty of storage in an ultra-portable device with its 184g iPod. The latest iPods manage to pack up to 20GB of storage into their slinky silver-and-white cases.

Creative's Jukebox Zen is a similarly sleek, rectangular silver device. Although it's heavier than the iPod at 268g and approximately 5mm thicker

at 23mm, the two devices could certainly be siblings.

Creative says it is marketing the Zen at the style-conscious user who wants a truly portable device as well as plenty of storage space and,

thanks to its 20GB hard drive, it certainly does that. It also has a FireWire connection to allow the same fast downloads available to iPod users. So what will determine the Zen's success against the iPod, which can now be used on Windows PCs as well as Macs, is the price. While we are assured it will cost less than its rival, pricing and release details weren't available at the time of writing.



News in brief

Safer strides

The latest trousers from jeans manufacturer Levi's are designed to block out mobile phone radiation. The jeans, called the S-Fit, have a pocket for a mobile phone that features 'special radiation reducing lining'. The move has been criticised by those who claim the company is cashing in on the health scares associated with mobile phones. Levi's, which says the lining 'might reduce' possible health risks, would not reveal the tests it had conducted in creating the material.



New deal for Dan warranties

Dan customers left without a warranty following the collapse of the PC company in June 02 have been thrown a lifeline by specialist support company Reboot, but they will have to pay for it. Reboot will initially offer technical support via a premium rate phonenumber. Customers will also be able to purchase full onsite support at a discounted cost of £9.99 ex VAT per month for a limited period of time. The technical support number is 0906 739 4665. Visit www.rebootsupport.cc/dan.

Napster could become porn swapping site



An adult entertainment media company that claims to own the largest library of adult content (that's porn to the rest of us) is bidding to purchase the Napster trademark and Napster.com domain name. Private Media Group has offered one million shares of common stock in exchange for the assets. At time of writing its shares were worth \$2.35 (£1.51) on the Nasdaq stock exchange. The company said it hopes to create a peer-to-peer trading system that would let users swap adult content.



Let gaming go to your head

Sony has released a headmounted display to add to its PlayStation2 game console. The PUD-J5A display has two 0.44in LCDs (liquid crystal displays) attached to a set of headphones. The displays will give the

player the impression that they are in a virtual world. The device can track a users' head movements and display corresponding images. Software compatible with the tracking function will be unveiled "soon by some vendors", said Sony. The display is on sale in Japan, but Sony has no plans to launch the product overseas.

News in brief

Game on in Greece

Greek laws banning all electronic games in an attempt to curb online gambling have been undermined by the law courts. Judges dropped the first three cases brought under legislation, branding it 'unconstitutional'. The men charged could have faced a three-month jail sentence and £3,800 fine. The government has now backtracked, saying the law was deployed against gambling, but this change of heart comes too late for all the internet cafes that have closed down since the law's introduction.

Keep taking the tablets

If you thought a Tablet PC was just a PC without a keyboard you'd be mistaken. Some manufacturers opt for a hybrid Tablet PC/notebook design (see Acer's TravelMate on page 58). But ViewSonic has gone for the pure tablet model with its Tablet PC V1100. It weighs 1.5kg and allows you to write directly on to its touch-sensitive screen. Using Windows' Journal application you can make notes or draw directly on to the page. The Tablet PC V1100 will be available on 7 November priced approximately £1,699.



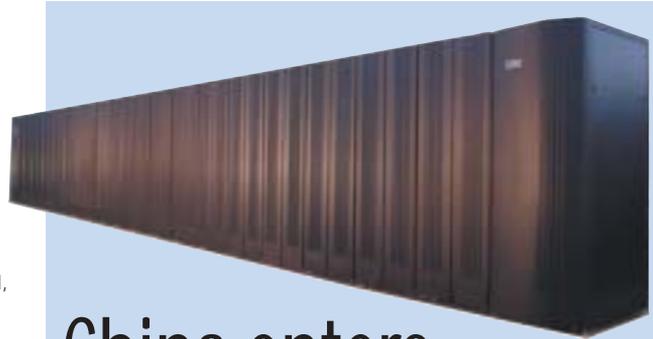
Wireless internet takes off in Brum

Birmingham Airport joins Starbucks coffee shops as one of the few public places you can hook up to a high-speed wireless internet service. The new service in Terminal 2 allows anyone with a Wi-Fi-equipped notebook or PDA (personal digital assistant) to surf the web without the need to plug in extra cables. The service is provided by UK Explorer and there is no need to sign up for a user account. Pricing for unlimited use starts at £4 for 30 minutes, rising to £39 for a month's worth of use.

BT's feeling blue

The days of the red phone box are numbered as BT is changing the colour of all of its new high street booths to blue. The blue boxes are all fitted with public internet terminals that offer

pay-as-you-go internet access, email and text messaging. There are currently 1,000 e-payphones on the streets of Britain, with 8,000 more planned by 2007. A further 20,000 will be placed in airports, shopping centres and railway stations. The move is intended to give the phone box a new lease of life, as the rise of the mobile phone has undermined the need for payphones.



China enters supercomputer league

China's Legend Group has unveiled its first supercomputer, a machine that ranks as one of the top 25 most powerful computers in the world according to the company.

The Legend Deepcomp 1800 was developed by a team of 60 engineers at the Beijing-based company, which is better known as one of China's leading manufacturers of desktop and notebook computer systems. It is based around 526 Intel Xeon processors, has 272GB of RAM and a hard disk capacity of 6TB (terabytes) or 1,000GB.

The computer has been installed at the Academy of Mathematics and System Sciences at the China Academy of Sciences in Beijing. It will be used for tasks including fluid dynamics computation, earthquake information control, oil reservoir simulation, climatic modelling and DNA computation.

The machine has a performance of 1,067 gigaflops (floating point operations per second), according to Legend.

That would give it a ranking as the 24th most powerful supercomputer in the world – well behind NEC's chart-topping Earth Simulator – if it were included in the most recent version of the Top 500 List, a widely recognised ranking of supercomputing power worldwide.

It would also be the only ranking for a Chinese-made supercomputer in the list, which is dominated by US and Japanese computer makers. According to the ranking, the current most powerful computer in China is an HP-manufactured machine used by Beijing Social Insurance that has a performance of 245 gigaflops and ranks 192nd in the list.

At present, the US government restricts the export of powerful supercomputers to China and other so-called 'tier-3' nations like Russia, Israel, India and Pakistan.

The current limitations require companies wishing to export computers above 190 gigatops (theoretical operations per second) to first submit an application with the US Department of Commerce.