



You've had some serious gripes with technology this month: who needs innovation when existing technology suffices, and should virtual reality violence be allowed? Then there's the problem of incompetent users, and as for the manufacturers, well...

Proceed with caution

In general, if a PC works when you get it out of the box, it is likely that subsequent problems will lie with the user. I have used PCs since 1991 – probably 10 different desktops and laptops and most operating systems from DOS 3.0 to Windows XP. I can only remember one occasion when a machine has gone wrong that wasn't down to something 'clever' I had done.

The sort of questions in your magazine's *Helpline* section show there is a general ignorance of the way computers work, and many questions could be answered from help files already installed on the PC. Why not try encouraging PC owners to leave well alone rather than providing them with software on CD/DVD and 'tweaks' that will cause problems when a user doesn't really know what they are doing?

Ian Edelman, via email

Emma Northam replies: true, many people don't understand how computers work – mainly because PCs are complex and their owners don't have the time to become technical experts. And that's why we're here. *Helpline* is an ever-popular section of the magazine, but we'd never tell anyone to tackle a hardware or software problem unless they were totally confident about doing it. We also always recommend performing a backup before any system changes are carried out. Feedback from readers such as Belinda (below) confirm we're doing something right.

Jump onboard

Thank you for producing such a useful magazine. Each month I find at least one item that's of practical use to me – and *PC Advisor* has even saved me the cost of a new PC. I bought a cheap PC from a fly-by-night

operation that disappeared, leaving me without support. They also left me without the CD-ROM for the motherboard – I didn't even know I needed one.

When hard drive gremlins forced a reformat, all the motherboard drivers were lost and I had no sound, a 16-colour display and an inoperative modem. I wasted many hours trying to find out what video and sound cards were on my machine and it wasn't until I read in one of your reviews that cheap motherboards often have these fitted 'onboard' that the penny dropped.

I was on the brink of drop-kicking the whole PC into the bin and buying a new one, but thanks to you I was able to find replacement drivers on the manufacturer's website and the machine now works as well as ever.

Belinda Curwen-Reed, via email

Buy early for the worst deal?

It's a basic rule of retailing: getting the customer to buy as early as possible after a product goes on sale. Take buying a holiday, for example – 'book early and save X percent' goes the hype.

Of course, you can rely on the computer industry to be different – I bought Adobe Photoshop Elements days after launch, and paid £89.99 for the privilege. True, I got what I wanted, at the published price, but with no 'early purchase' discount.

Three months down the line the same product is selling for no more than £69.99, and even less in some retailers. Why? To increase sales. But what is the incentive for people like me who resist the temptation to 'borrow' their friend's/colleague's copy, thereby saving money but also driving another nail into the software industry's coffin?

Marketing departments should incentivise the early purchasers by giving discounts for copies bought within, say, four weeks of launch. More sales would be

made earlier, meaning greater profit. Adobe and others would do well to follow the travel industry's example.

Ian Dobison, Northumberland

Think ink

The labels on the shelves in my local supermarket show a price per 100g, price per pint or whatever. So isn't it about time that inkjet cartridge manufacturers did the same? How can we assess a refill's value if quantity information is not shown?

At the moment I have an Epson 740 printer, for which replacement black ink cartridges cost £13.25. I am thinking of buying the new Epson Stylus C70 Plus, but I've been quoted a price of £17.95 for refills for this model. Will I be getting more ink, the same, or less?

Doug Warren, via email

Paul Rincon replies: good point, Doug. Printer manufacturers won't usually tell you how much their printers cost to run, but they do give you the information to work it out yourself. To calculate the cost of printing a page, simply divide the total cost of an ink cartridge by its print life, which is the average number of pages the cartridge can print before running out. This is an excellent way of comparing the true costs of a model, and that's why we always give this information when reviewing printers in the magazine.

GET the difference

I've just embraced the latest technological fad and it hasn't cost me a penny – I've gone and got GET. A year ago I bought a DVD drive and a CD-writer. I now find I have yet to buy my first DVD. Frankly, VHS is GET – good enough technology – for me. However, the CD-writer is in regular use – I now burn all my own CDs from MP3. It's not cutting-edge hi-fi, but it's GET.

It appears to me that DVD and VHS were invented in the wrong order – perhaps like digital/analogue watches (what a great idea that rotating display is). If VHS were the latest thing, no one would want to know read-only DVDs. Ask an expert to tell the difference between good MP3 and a bought CD and he can't. Isn't progress great?

George Tomkins, Berks



Xbox generation

The Xbox will soon be with us, bringing more detailed realistic games. Before we know it we will have virtual reality headsets with guns that are even more authentic, making the gap between what is actual and what is virtual smaller still.

One might argue that games such as Half Life and Counter Strike are not the same as mindless cop-murder-fests like Grand Theft Auto, as they place the player in a fantasy situation. However, even these do not need to be so graphic.

What is illegal in the real world should not be permitted in video games. I don't mean banning a game because it features graffiti, but human life should be treated with respect. Certainly, these games need some sort of control – rating them with an age is an absolute joke. There should be no age when it is acceptable to take innocent life – whether real or virtual.

The computer industry is still comparatively young and developing much faster than the law that governs us or our ability to comprehend the long-term effects of such games on our lives. Anthony Ciantar, via email

A couple of questions

Two things: in your *PC Advisor* Expert Advice Hotline advert (see page 163), there is a picture of a guy who I have seen in adverts in an internet magazine. In these he is the technical help for a couple of websites/ISPs. Is this him moonlighting or is there only one guy who does this job? This might explain why the hotline telephone is always engaged!

Aileen O'Donnell replies: well spotted, Ali. The man in our Hotline ad is an actor/model. His image appears on a PhotoDisc (www.photodisc.com), which

Star letter

I enjoyed the excellent Comdex video report on your February 01 cover disc. It is a splendid way to enhance the editorial, and I hope you will do more reports via this medium in future.

I was as surprised as your reporter that the Intel representative was so vague regarding the development of 'mobile' but fast versions on the Pentium P4. It was of interest to me because early in 2001 I was planning to build a Pentium III PC and was therefore watching prices week by week. What actually happened was that the P4 came rushing in, and had soon fallen below PIII prices and, about the same time, the PIII Tualatin chips and motherboards began to be available.

It became more and more obvious that the present desktop P4 route is really going the wrong way, simply because running costs and environmental factors. The future of the personal computer must surely be with a less power-hungry type of machine. LCD (liquid crystal display) screens are rapidly taking over, so it's urgent that the processing circuitry should become more energy efficient too. My guess is that this is the reason that the Tualatin PIII and Mobile P4 are in such rapid development.

Bob Pearson, Lincs

Rupert Collins-White replies: you're right, Bob, only a small number of users need the power of the Mobile P4, so does the advance justify the cost? In a sense it's a trick question for Intel as advances are a necessity for such a giant. We were also trying to get Intel to talk about some of the future features still under wraps, such as fully capable speech interactivity, which would require truckloads of power. Alas, I'm not sure Intel, as an organisation, is really as focused as that any more.



The author of this month's star letter receives the Canon Bubble Jet S630 printer, which retails at £160 ex VAT and is currently our Best Buy model in the Top 10 Personal printers chart (see page 122). With an unbeatable actual print speed for both monochrome and colour pages, the Bubble Jet combines fast printing with well-defined images and clean text output. For more information, visit www.canon.co.uk. Please write to PC Advisor, FREEPOST

20 LON8718, London, W1E 4AN, fax us on 020 7580 1935, or email to pcadvisor_letters@idg.com. Please mark emails 'Readers writes' in the subject heading.

anyone can buy and use. So, if you're that taken with him you can adorn your own desktop!

On another note, if you're having trouble getting through to the hotline, try posting your problem on our Helpline forum (www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered) and we'll email you back once a response has been posted.

... And secondly, on the strength of one of your reviews I bought a Power PC. It's terrible; it has a really noisy fan. I am told this is because it is an Athlon rather than a Pentium. If I had realised this I would have bought a decent Pentium-based system. None of your reviewers ever mentions this. Does it not bother them?

Maybe white noise is natural to them – I have to keep switching it off.

Ali Crook, via email

Will Head replies: while the speed of a processor tends to determine how much heat it produces, and therefore how much work the fan must do to cool it, whether that CPU is an Athlon or Pentium is irrelevant.

How noisy a machine seems also depends on background sound and how acute the user's hearing is. If it's really unbearable it's possible that a fan is faulty (there is also a fan for the power supply, case and sometimes chipset and graphics card fans). You have to accept a certain amount of noise for the fastest components. ■