

readers' writes

The spam debate lives on as one reader gathers his ammo, while our star letter writer shares his disappointment with the costly digital camera world. We also revisit the faulty pixel dispute and clear up the confusion surrounding LCD screens



⚙️ Hip flex?

I'm puzzled. We already have the USB 2.0 standard running at 480Mbps (megabits per second) and FireWire running at 400Mbps or even 800Mbps with an optical link. Why, then, are hard disk manufacturers developing Serial ATA to do the same job?

Serial ATA obviously performs the necessary task of slimming down and simplifying the IDE interface. But doesn't FireWire (or USB 2.0 for that matter) already provide the same benefit in thin cables, with less board area consumed by legacy connectors? Serial ATA is also only a hard disk standard, whereas USB and FireWire are both general-purpose interfaces that can be swapped from device to device

Perhaps it is all down to licence payments to Apple/Sony or the USB consortium, but it can't be that likely when you see USB peripheral prices in single figures. Any ideas anybody?

Ian, via email

Will Head replies: ATA133 is the current parallel ATA standard and runs at 133MBps (megabytes per second). Serial ATA will run at 150MBps when it's introduced. Comparing theoretical maximums of the various interfaces you get:

*FireWire: 50MBps (400Mbps)
USB 2.0: 60MBps (480Mbps)
ATA133: 133MBps (1,064Mbps)
Serial ATA: 150MBps (1,200Mbps)*

Serial ATA outstrips everything so far and will go up to 300MBps, then 600MBps over time. The second thing to consider is that Serial ATA is a dedicated drive interface standard. USB, and to a lesser extent FireWire, fall into the jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none category.

If you think how valuable your data is, you really don't want to risk corruption by using an interface that isn't designed for sustained day-in, day-out use.

While Secondary drives generally only have to cope with the odd load or save here and there, making a FireWire or USB 2.0 interface adequate, your primary drive stores the operating system, applications and also virtual memory. As a result, it's being accessed almost constantly and needs an interface able to keep up to avoid things slowing to a crawl or risking data corruption.

It also comes down, to some extent, to standard wars with different groups of companies wanting their standard to become the de facto one. That's the great thing about standards – you can never have too many.

📧 Will spam ever be canned?

Lately spam has been mentioned more times in your magazine than in the famous Monty Python sketch, so I shall join the debate. I have three answers: one, don't reply to them; two, don't have a cheap email address; and three, sue them.

If we all went to a small claims court it would be a day out for us but £20,000 per hour in lawyers fees for the perpetrators.

Surely this brilliant idea will encourage everyone to participate, so if you could lend me your customer database I shall send an email to all your readers inviting them to join in. Oh, hold on... that would be spam, wouldn't it?

Dave James, Tavistock

Andrew Charlesworth replies: funny you should say that, the California District Court has just cleared the way for recipients of spam to sue the senders for up to \$500 for each item of mail. The catch? You have to find their real address first.

⚙️ Plain dotty

It appears from your answer to Ian Henderson's letter (Readers' writes July 03) that Evesham and LG Electronics have set a standard deeming up to four faulty pixels okay. Says who?

I believe Ian has been sold defective goods under the Sale of Goods Act and he is entitled to a replacement flat-panel display or his money back. I wonder what the Trading Standards Office would have to say about it?

Les Dinning, via email

Guy Dixon replies: this is not a figure cooked up by Evesham and LG Electronics. It is a standard – the ISO 13406-2 – respected throughout the industry. Producing a screen in which every single pixel functioned would be prohibitively expensive. In spring 01 the ISO 13406-2 standard was set to address this

issue. LCD screens are now described as belonging to one of three classes: class 1, class 2 or class 3 – only class 1 allows for no imperfections. As such, any action taken under the Sale of Goods Act is unlikely to bear fruit.

However, Evesham has told us that it is happy to replace blemished screens if the customer's local showroom stocks one by the same manufacturer. (Phone up in advance to check.)

Keyboard polish

The letter *Back to basics* (Readers' writes July 03) from Marshall Morris grabbed my attention immediately. He told of having to replace his keyboards because the legends wore off over time.

I've experienced the same thing, only with my laptop. Obviously replacing its keyboard is not an option.

My solution to stop the situation getting worse and to preserve the remaining keys was to use a layer of clear, hard-wearing nail polish to cover each key as protection. When the nail polish starts wearing away after a couple of months, I simply repeat the process.

And for the keys whose letters wore off before I took this precaution, the fix was easy. I very carefully used Tippex to draw them back on, before applying the coat of clear nail polish.

Adrian Nelson, via email

StarOffice letter

When I saw that you were running a trial to evaluate StarOffice as a suitable alternative to the bloated and expensive popular Office products, I went straight to the article.

I run an IT department and I am fed up with forking out bucket-loads of cash to pay for glorified typewriters and onscreen calculators. Colleagues scream that we need computability, but why? I never see formatting that could not be transferred to Notepad. Okay, WordPad. A few uses of 'sum' or 'average' may be scattered in a spreadsheet while the more adventurous might use 'lookup', but my programmable calculator can do all this itself.

I was interested in your article, but found no word about the database module (25 percent of the program), not even an acknowledgement that it existed. I need a

Star letter

Encouraged by reviews, I have downloaded a series of images taken with two 5Mp digital cameras. I have tried very hard to avoid being seduced and completely won over by the neutral colour balance produced by Minolta's 7Hi and Canon's S50 since, on first impression, the pictures are excellent. However, it seems that the images are only good up to A3 size at the most, and £600 is an awful lot of money for a camera you can't make decent enlargements with.

Compared with scanned slides from an ancient Olympus 35ED, these £600 digital cameras do not produce anywhere near the same level of performance. Why should anyone pay this kind of money for a digital A3 print size device? Lower-priced digital cameras also suffer from a delay and not a single viewfinder even begins to compare with the one on a 35mm SLR.

Peter Harrap, via email

Gordon Laing replies: You make some valid points. Certainly in terms of resolving power, film remains way ahead of consumer digital cameras. But this is missing the point of digital. Can a film camera display the photo you've just taken seconds later? Can film produce an image that's instantly ready to email, or grab video clips, audio annotations or make instant slideshows on large-screen TVs? Try and find a compact film camera with full manual control and a built-in lens with superb macro close-ups – capabilities that are common in the digital world.

Ultimately film may offer higher resolutions, but the fact is today's digital cameras deliver enough quality for what most people will ever need.

Write to us

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Our star letter writer wins MyBackupBuddy, a pocket-size USB backup device with automatic compression and up to 500MB capacity. For more information, go to www.backupbuddy.co.uk.



simple-to-use relational database and wanted to know if the testers found it as I had – a flat file that's difficult to use. Please can you publish part II and review the database?

Rob Bellini, via email

Guy Dixon replies: we're glad you enjoyed StarOffice on test. You're absolutely right, there is an excellent database application included with StarOffice – a third-party programme called Adabas.

This powerful software can connect with Oracle, Microsoft Access and MySQL databases. Adabas is fairly complex to configure and use however, and we didn't consider that it would be of immediate interest to the average home/small business user.

For that reason we didn't include any database tasks in the evaluation process. We did say as much in the verdict panel on page 106, but obviously we needed to make this information more prominent.

Quiz master

I'd like to thank you for printing a few lines of a quiz in June 03's programming feature. I wanted to write a quiz but, not having any knowledge of Visual Basic, I didn't know where to start. I managed to write some questions in Excel that give either a 'correct' or 'wrong' answer but will be trying out your quiz for the future.

I used to write Basic quizzes ages ago but threw the details away because I didn't think they'd be usable in Windows...

Sheridan Anderson, Dartford