

Best software 2004

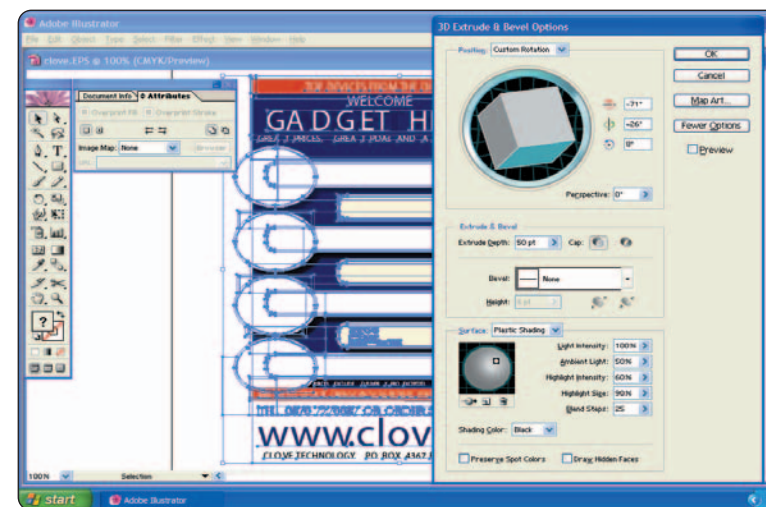
PCs are incredibly capable but it's the software you use on them, rather than pure processing power, that makes the real difference to your productivity and enjoyment. Rosemary Haworth presents a round-up of the packages you'll find most useful in the coming year

Software is a diverse market. You name it and there's almost certainly a clutch of packages out there designed to do it - and more. In fact, software is probably as important as hardware when it comes to performing everyday computing tasks. The programs you choose to install enable you to use your PC for anything: intensive number-crunching, database analysis, architectural draughtsmanship, video production, centralised communications and contact management - or sheer enjoyment. You can play games, watch DVD videos, leaf through your favourite photos and expand your knowledge using encyclopedias or language-learning titles.

But software is also a major culprit in tying us in to the upgrade cycle. Powerful applications such as video editors and feature-laden office suites offer a huge array of facilities but ask a lot in terms of our PCs' memory and processor speed. Because of this and the fact that budgets vary widely - a luxury purchase to one person will be the single most important application to another - we've tried to include a mixture of high-end and entry-level packages, budget ones and those aimed at the professional user in each field.

There's not enough room here to examine each and every category of software - there are just too many products covering too many areas of interest for us to be able to do that. Instead, we've put together a selection of some 30-plus of the best packages we have reviewed over the past 12 months. Some were awarded a *PC Advisor* Gold badge, denoting a package of particular merit. Others are included because they are especially good value, easy to use or fill a particular niche.

Design and illustration



above: Adobe Illustrator now offers basic 3D support for mockups

Adobe Illustrator CS

Given an overhaul two years ago, Illustrator 10.0 is one of the best vector-based packages on the market. The new CS edition, introduced in Adobe's Creative Suite, is faster to use than its predecessors - unlike previous Illustrator upgrades. It includes basic 3D support, allowing you to extrude and rotate objects so mockup representations appear more realistic and, like the rest of Adobe's line-up, it has improved text capabilities and PDF support. www.adobe.co.uk; £511 inc VAT (£163 as upgrade)

Corel Painter 8.0

Realistic brush effects are crucial in creating digital artwork that looks as though it's been painted. Fittingly, Painter represents the most successful application of this approach with tools that glisten like not-yet-dry oils and watercolours. Simply choose the type of brush you want to use from one of the main palettes and specify its behaviour from the other. The Properties toolbar lets you choose thickness, opacity and so on. You can save brushes and effects

you particularly like and blend more than one in the Mixer. An improved edge finder makes it easy to trace photo elements and transform them so that they look more like hand-drawn illustrations. www.corel.com; £304 inc VAT

Corel Designer 10.0

Corel gets another look in with this technical drawing package which it acquired from Micrografx and then repackaged. Despite competing with Corel's flagship Draw package, Designer stands up on its own as a technical illustration program with a different target market to its more creative sibling. The emphasis is on achieving spot-on

angles, perspectives and environmental effects such as gravity and lighting.

Myriad tools allow you to precision-place intersections and nodes on objects and you can easily annotate illustrations with callout dialog boxes to explain dimensions and other information that, if simply placed on the page, would clutter the design. Create once, use globally symbols and built-in template images streamline file sizes and speed up the draughting process. www.corel.com; £351 inc VAT

Adobe Photoshop Elements 2.0

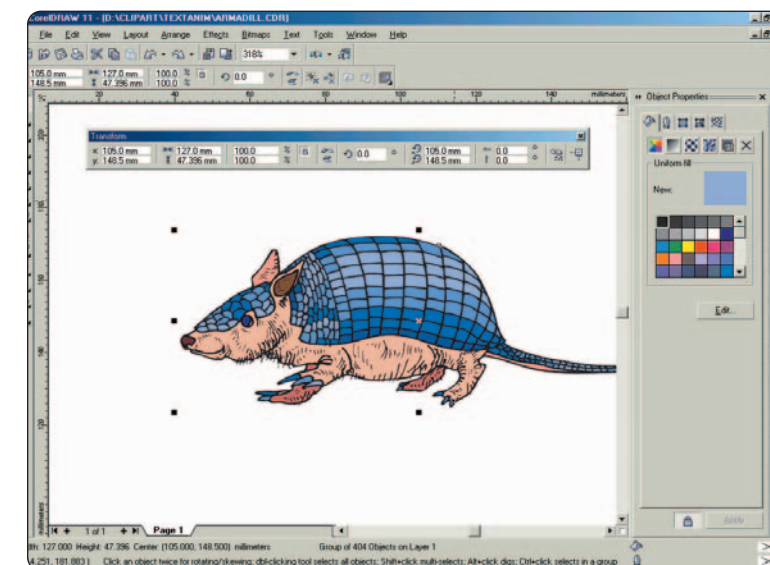
Professional users will no doubt plump for Photoshop itself - updated in the new CS version - but for most other people Elements 2.0 is a better bet. It offers a vast range of image-editing tools for an outlay of only £69, as opposed to the £605 (£157 as upgrade) cost of its big brother.

Elements dispenses only with the advanced output options that professional users require and comes with tons of brushes, while selection tools and editing palettes appear according to the task at hand. www.adobe.co.uk; £69 inc VAT

CorelDraw Essentials 2.0

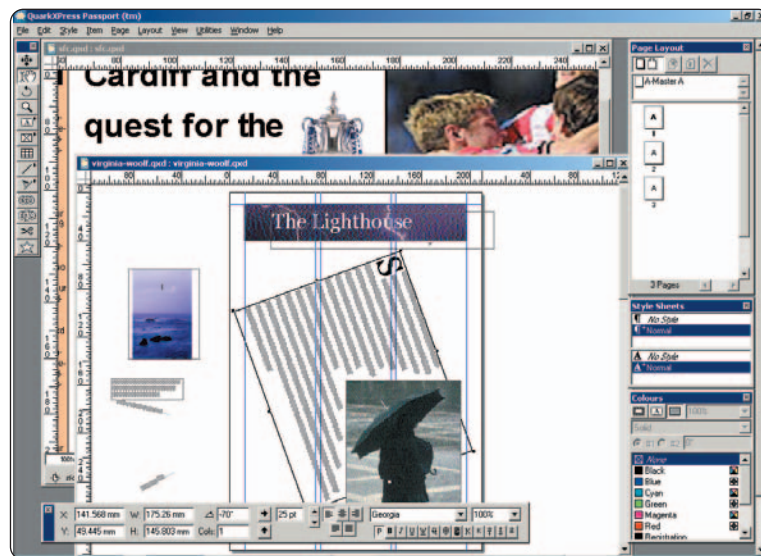
So you want to be able to edit your digital photos, archive them in a photo album for easy retrieval and maybe - once you've got the hang of touching up photos - move on to creating some original art of your own? Art dabblers will find more than enough in this Essentials pack to keep them busy.

There's a good balance of tools designed for use with digital images and others that let you draw from scratch. You don't get the export and professional print options found in big-daddy CorelDraw Suite, nor can you import technical drawing formats, but with a price like this, who's arguing? www.corel.com; £56.40 inc VAT



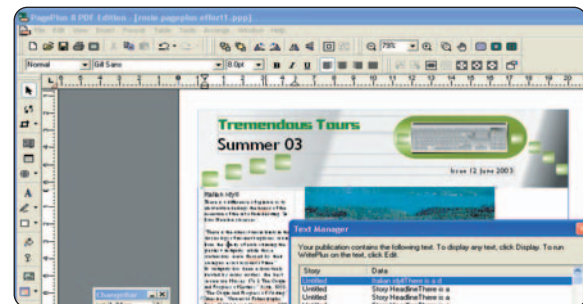
right: there is plenty in the CorelDraw Essentials pack to keep art lovers busy

Publishing packages



above: Quark is still the DTP package the others have to beat...

below: ...but PagePlus is a serious budget alternative



Small and home business tools

Quicken XG

This great package builds on a long-established reputation in the small business accounting arena and proves itself equally adept at helping home users with their personal finances.

You can manage all your accounts, keep track of your investment portfolios and monitor income and outgoings throughout each month. Bill reminders ensure that nasty red envelopes no longer lurk on your doormat, there are useful tools to work out interest rates and integration with your online bank details.

www.intuit.co.uk; £548.70 inc VAT

Dragon NaturallySpeaking 7.0 Preferred

Speech engines are hugely demanding of PC resources, but with masses of processing power at our disposal these days it's not much of a problem and it makes sense to let the PC take the strain.

NaturallySpeaking is the most impressive voice-recognition product we've yet seen, with only a few minutes' training required, a massive built-in dictionary which can be customised and appended to suit and fairly flaw-free results when you dictate into it.

www.scansoft.co.uk; £150 inc VAT

to film or plate. It can also import DTP (desktop publishing) files originally created in rival XPress and PageMaker packages, making the switch to InDesign a cinch.

QuarkXPress 6.0

Quark has ruled the desktops of publishing houses up and down the land for the past

decade or so, but newcomers such as Adobe's InDesign, as well as established rivals such as Serif's PagePlus and other home user-oriented DTP packages, threaten its supremacy. Its revolutionary box approach to page design and layout has been much emulated and while its excellent text controls have been further refined and long document support improved, Adobe's offering is fast encroaching on its territory. Even so, it's still the DTP package others can only hope to better.

www.quark.co.uk; £995 inc VAT

Serif PagePlus 9.0

Hot on the heels of the dedicated PDF version of PagePlus comes this updated version of the budget-priced but wholly capable DTP package. Advanced PDF creation, improved font handling and the addition of

document encryption show Serif is serious about this being a professional-standard package. You can even send finished documents for printing via its website.

Macromedia Dreamweaver MX 2004

Somewhat easier to learn and use than previous editions, Dreamweaver still reigns supreme as the most powerful website-creation package around. Its selection of toolbars and array of editing and layout rules can seem quite daunting but you can create and check all aspects of your website without really needing to know much about its mechanics.

The difference in results using Dreamweaver's professional, clean-looking page templates from those of more pedestrian products is impressive. A slick and powerful program.

www.macromedia.com; £339

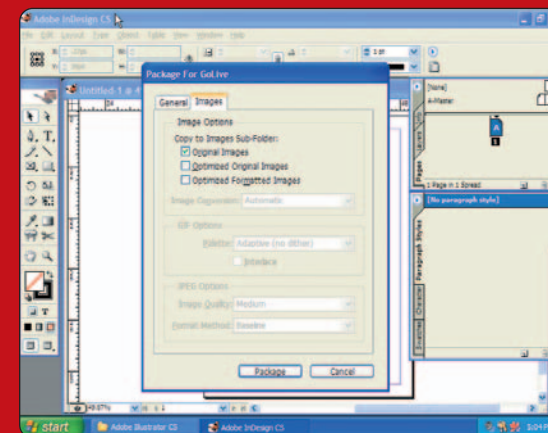
Microsoft FrontPage 2003

FrontPage makes a fair showing in the middle ground of web-design packages and would be a good choice if you like the familiarity of layout across many Microsoft products.

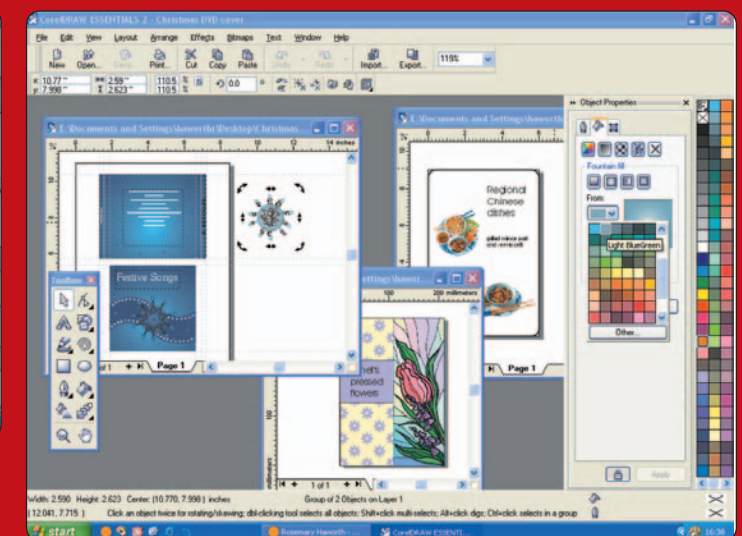
It's heavily template-dependent but also powerful, with improved cascading style sheet support and the addition of cross-compatibility with Dreamweaver as well as Flash animation features in the 2003 edition. Attention has been paid to the design tools and layers and rollovers are part of the package.

www.microsoft.com; £179.99 inc VAT

All-in-one creative suites



above: Adobe CS is the best bundle for graphics professionals



right: CorelDraw has powerful drawing tools that are easy to use

In this feature we've looked at graphics and imaging packages individually, but if you need a drawing or web animation tool as well as a photo editor, you may be better off choosing one of the following suites.

Adobe Creative Suite

Graphics professionals looking to equip a studio with desktop publishing, illustration and web optimisation packages would be foolish to look anywhere else other than Creative Suite.

Choosing the Creative Suite is a far cheaper option than buying three or four separate packages. This is also the first time Adobe has updated its Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign and ImageReady packages and sold them as a bundle before launching each as a standalone product. Photoshop finally gets text-on-a-path capabilities and 16bit image support while ImageReady can now be exported directly to Flash.

www.adobe.co.uk; £927 inc VAT

Paint Shop Pro 8.0

Jasc's photo-editing package is one of the best value and most capable of its kind. In fact, when Adobe launched its £900-plus Creative Suite of image-editing and illustration apps, our Multimedia Advisor (see page 124)

recommended Paint Shop Pro as a cut-price but highly capable alternative.

Rather than swamping you with flashy and confusing extras (a criticism levelled at previous versions) Paint Shop Pro 8.0 concentrates on image manipulation and improvement. A learning centre provides demos and a tour of the package's features to get you started. Once you've got to grips with the basics you can customise the workspace docking palettes and tools where you wish and populate toolbars with the most useful items.

Brushstroke handling is more fluid and natural than before and Jasc has improved its program's impressive ability to distinguish outlines. The extended Quick Mask options allow you to excise unwanted background clutter at a stroke while preserving foreground detail.

Type is still below par but the vector-handling functions are better integrated than most so you're not constantly having to export and import files between programs depending on the treatment you want to give them.

Digital photographers now have an additional slew of retouching and resizing features and the only real let-down here is the lack of compatibility with Jasc's bundled Web Animation program.

Jasc: www.digitalworkshop.com; £99 inc VAT

CorelDraw Suite 1.1

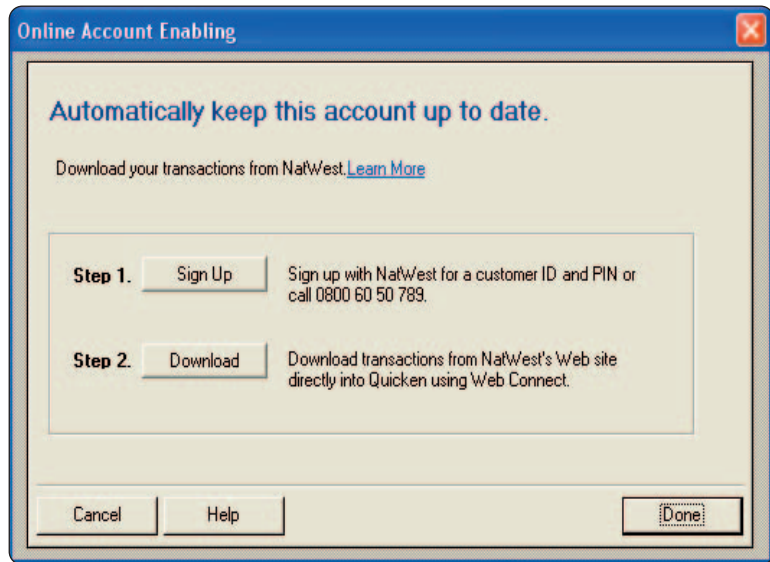
Comparable in price to Adobe Illustrator, Corel's suite provides powerful drawing tools that don't require a degree in design to get to grips with but will enable you to produce professional results. Draw and its Rave stablemate now employ Symbols - graphics files you can use over and over again and edit once and apply globally. This saves manually duplicating shapes and also keeps file sizes down. Effects can be applied using variable-pressure brushes, while text can be inserted with or without its formatting preserved.

PhotoPaint is no match for Photoshop but will suit most purposes with the ability to splice pictures together, apply cutouts and create rollover buttons as well as slice images for use on the web.

Rave lacks the complexity of Flash, which can only be a good thing. It's ideal for assembling web animations and is far more intuitive than Macromedia's offering. The OCR, CorelTrace and CorelCapture apps also included in this package are bonuses rather than stand-out assets, though the latter offers a straightforward way of converting bitmap images to scalable vector files. Perhaps more usefully, the suite also includes a vast array of photos and images you can incorporate in your creative efforts.

Corel: www.corel.com; £457 inc VAT

Small and home business tools



Quicken XG helps you manage your personal finances

Microsoft Money 2004 Financial Suite

As with many Microsoft applications, Money tries to do too many things and tends to handhold users more than necessary. Nevertheless, it is highly capable and remarkably good value. You can download statements accessed online straight into Money and you can export info to the bundled TaxSaver program for easy tax return preparation.

These are pluses over Quicken XG but finding the goodies among the gloss can be a pain.
www.microsoft.com; £49.99 inc VAT

Steganos Security Suite 5.0

Encrypting files before sending them out into the ether is one thing; encrypting them when they're only going to be stored locally on your hard drive is another. However, it makes lots of sense if your machine contains sensitive files that you don't want anyone else to access - be it your kids, wife, business associate or an intruder.

Steganos automatically locks up files copied to a secure part of your system, effectively acting like a safe to which you're the only keyholder. It can also encrypt information copied to CD or DVD and encrypts and zips emails too.

www.steganos.com; £30.55 inc VAT

GoldMine Business Contact Manager 6.0

Using an accountancy program to keep track of your small business finances is sensible; keeping track of customers and associates and your dealings with them using a contact manager is smarter still.

A small-scale form of relationship management package, GoldMine hoards information and lets you share and update it across various devices so you can take data with you, access it and amend it on the fly using a PDA. www.frontrange.co.uk; £194 inc VAT

Video recording

Adaptec MyDVD Media Suite

Windows XP has CD-burning tools and DVD drives come with burning software but for more control it's worth forking out for a suite such as this package built around Sonic's MyDVD Studio. The title program assists with recording DVD and slideshows while editing is done in ArcSoft Showbiz. The former boasts good templates and styles, plus support for those you create. You can drag and drop files to be burned using Sonic's DLA utility and record music and data discs using RecordNow. www.adaptec.co.uk; £57.99

Ulead CD & DVD

You get more control with a package such as EditStudio, but Ulead is a good choice if you're only just getting into movie making and either aren't an XP user or don't think much of its built-in CD- and DVD-burning tools. Ulead lets you work directly with Mpeg-1 and Mpeg-2 files with no need for conversion, has useful templates, scene transition and film-titling options and a tool to help you quickly find the beginning and end of scenes so you don't have to search manually. Stock images, effects and music tracks bulk up the bundle - one of several decent packages at this price point. www.ulead.co.uk; £60 inc VAT

Pure Motion EditStudio 4.0

Seasoned filmmakers will opt for Adobe Premiere, but if you're a gifted enthusiast you'll be better served by EditStudio. Audio tracks and video clips can be used to build a story and while the Timeline mode offers excellent user control, you can cut your teeth using the more accessible Storyboard. You'll need a high-spec PC and FireWire card to copy clips to your PC but, with the right hardware, you'll find video editing a rewarding process with EditStudio. www.puremotion.com; £89.99 inc VAT (£59 inc VAT as download from website)

WinDVD Creator 2.0 Platinum

The software provided with most DVD burners doesn't leave you much scope for creativity. To put decent-looking DVDs together you need to be able to edit and finetune so clips run together smoothly even if imported from different types of source. WinDVD makes this easy with a



WinDVD Creator makes it is easy to import clips from different sources

Office suites

You might think Microsoft Office is the obvious choice of general-purpose suite, either because it came preloaded with the PC or because it's what you've always used, along with everyone else. But that doesn't mean you should necessarily follow the herd.

We like Microsoft's homegrown contender, Works Suite 2003. You get versions of Office's main applications, plus 2003 versions of Money, Encarta and AutoRoute - all for the princely sum of £100.

Those loath to further inflate Bill Gates' bank balance should consider competent but not so dandy alternatives such as StarOffice or Ability Office. Meanwhile, here's a quick rundown of the three main contenders for business and home.

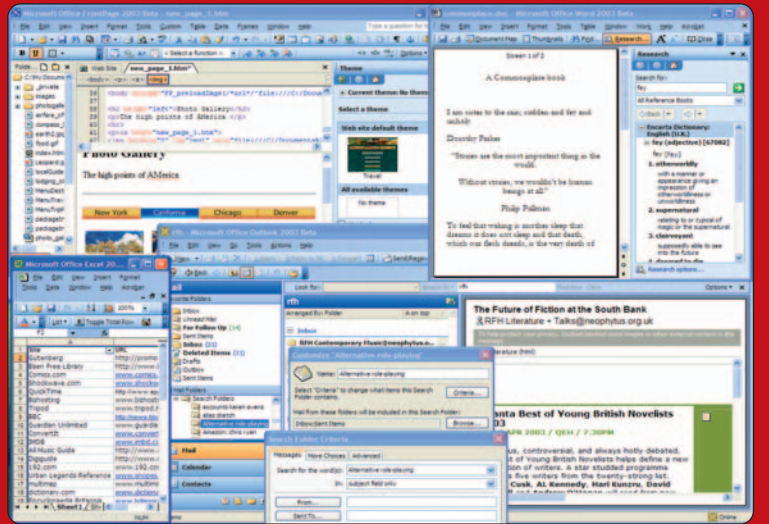
Microsoft Office 2003/XP

Office's ubiquity is a definite plus point as it means no compatibility issues when sharing files with colleagues or clients but it's one of the most demanding products - short of professional video and 3D packages - around. What's more, main Office rivals WordPerfect and SmartSuite are more than capable of dealing with Word and Excel files and other Microsoft stalwarts.

There's little reason to plump for the new 2003 Edition. Those after a fully laden office suite complete with Access database as well as the usual Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook found in all editions, would do at least as well choosing last year's XP Pro Edition which we found more usable and less didactic than its forebears. The latest version adds contact management and XML features to an already overblown suite, making it attractive to corporate users but few others.

A look on the Microsoft website shows the various Office options -

Microsoft Office 2003/XP will be attractive to corporate users but few others



by now you probably know which components you like and those that you don't so check out www.microsoft.com/uk/office or officexp and decide for yourself. www.microsoft.com/uk; prices vary depending on version chosen, number of licences and upgrade path.

Corel WordPerfect Office 11.0

This is where doing your homework pays off: it's commonly accepted that WordPerfect is superior to MS Office, both in terms of the word processor at the suite's core and as an overall package, so show you know your stuff and choose this rather than its obvious rival.

Presentations is an exceptionally good slideshow program, Quattro Pro is a decent spreadsheet package, the Paradox databases app knocks Access into a cocked hat - although this is included only in the Professional version - and WordPerfect itself is outstanding.

As well as the advanced text and formatting controls that make it perfect for lengthy document creation and layout, it's ideal for web export, produces clean HTML, supports XML and can create PDFs too. Try the 30-day trial version, downloadable from Corel's website, to see for yourself.

www.corel.com; Standard version £276 inc VAT



Lotus SmartSuite 9.8

Perhaps not quite such a contender as the other two, Lotus' package has its lower cost, a legion of established users and some pretty competent components on its side.

Applications are accessed via the SmartCenter. Here you'll find the SmartSuite word processor which offers excellent formatting control and useful templates, a spreadsheet and database almost the match of its rivals' plus ViaVoice speech-recognition software and a capable information manager called Organizer.

Lotus' excellent Notes email client is, of course, part of the deal, making this a smart choice of all-round office suite and communications centre. www.lotus.com; £179 inc VAT (£155 inc VAT as download)

WordPerfect is superior to MS Office in terms of the word processor at the suite's core and as a package

screen where you work on your video, apply effects, and transitions before exporting to any number of formats. www.intervideo.com; £71 inc VAT

Adobe Encore DVD

As a product aimed at semi-professional users, Encore assumes you'll be retouching images in Photoshop and exporting the layers as PSD files from there. It's probably a fair assumption, but worth bearing in mind if you're not already an Adobe customer. Integration with its own programs is superb and the tools enable you to add endless effects and overlays as well as titling. www.adobe.co.uk; £453 inc VAT

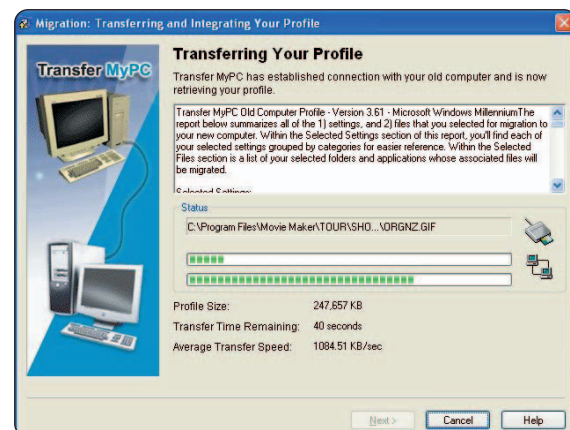
Backup and recovery

Ontrack EasyRecovery Lite

Windows XP should recover files automatically when your PC crashes. But despite its relative robustness it's not failsafe, so a program such as EasyRecovery is a godsend. www.ontrack.co.uk; £54.49 inc VAT

PowerQuest Drive Image 7.0

Drive Image is a useful program for making a duplicate copy of your hard disk contents for backup purposes and also lets you create hard-drive partitions. Version 7.0 enables you to do this without first having to exit Windows and you can save drive images straight to DVD, network or external drives. If you want to create an image of the entire drive rather than a partition within it, you have to do so outside Windows, but there are enough options here to mean this is not much of a problem. www.powerquest.com; £47 inc VAT



Transfer MyPC

When migrating to a new PC, getting your files and programs from the old system to the new one can be a real hassle. Transfer MyPC makes the process much easier, preserving your existing settings and preferences while providing peace of mind that data won't be lost while you swap machines. www.orlogix.com; £39.95 inc VAT

Multimedia entertainment

Showshifter 2.0

If you like the idea of being able to view television on your computer and have a TV tuner card installed - ones to pick up Freeview channels cost as little as £60 - Showshifter will help you enjoy it all the more. You can use it to play back all forms of digital media but it's the pausable, recordable to hard disk or DVD, time-shiftable telly function that sets it apart. Integration with online TV programme guides plus file tagging so you can quickly find music, photos and videos make Showshifter a winner. www.showshifter.com; £34 inc VAT

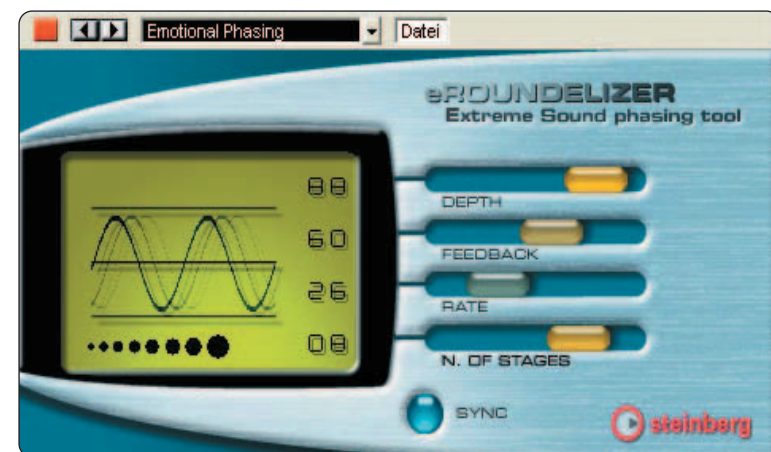


above: you'll get better playback with PowerDVD 5.0

PowerDVD 5.0

CyberLink's DVD interface is almost ubiquitous on PC-based video playback systems - Media Center Edition PCs and their clones aside - but before long you find yourself being nagged to upgrade it.

PowerDVD 5.0 adds a few extras that make this worthwhile: widescreen viewing, better audio, Divx online multimedia sharing support, the ability to bookmark favourite sequences and so on. With a decent spec PC (1GHz or better) you'll also appreciate its markedly better audio and video playback. www.gocyberlink.com/english; £32.90 inc VAT



below: Cubasis VST 5.0 lets you make 48-track recordings

Cubasis VST 5.0

Professional sequencing and digital music composition packages cost £500 or more but in addition to high-end programs such as Cubase SX 2, Steinberg caters for hobbyists with this cut-price editing and mixing title. You can record and overlay up to 48 separate tracks featuring a range of built-in digital instruments or let it translate your vocal talents to a score. Tools for editing, mixing and burning a demo CD are all included. www.steinberg.net; £59.99

Magix Audio Cleaning Lab Deluxe 2004

There's a clutch of programs out there with which you can convert your old vinyl records and cassettes into digital format for playback on your PC, smoothing out the crackles along the way.

Magix's take on this is simplistic: import WAV, Windows Media Audio or MP3 files and record them using your sound card or copy them straight from CD. You can then edit and clean them up, though too much tinkering can leave tunes sounding worse than the scratchy original if you're not careful. www.fasttrak.co.uk; £29.99 inc VAT

eJay Audio Cleaning Studio 2004

Like Magix's program, Cleaning Studio makes conversion from analog a breeze and lets you balance tracks so that there's no wild variation in volume across the music compilations you burn to CD.

You can remove unwanted hisses and crackles, excise distracting audience applause and add effects of your own.

Its main strength, though, is that you can get your half-forgotten vinyl collection on to your PC so that you can enjoy them all over again. www.ejay.com; £19.99

Security issues

Security is a broad subject but here we will concentrate on keeping your PC and its data safe from mainstream nasties.

Protection from viruses and hack attacks are a must and you need to ensure information is secure with the aid of a firewall and apps that keep spyware and cookies at bay.

Experience tells us that, with very few exceptions, you're best off getting your security situation sorted and ensuring virus updates are activated, rather than upgrading year on year. The following advice is therefore for the currently unprotected.

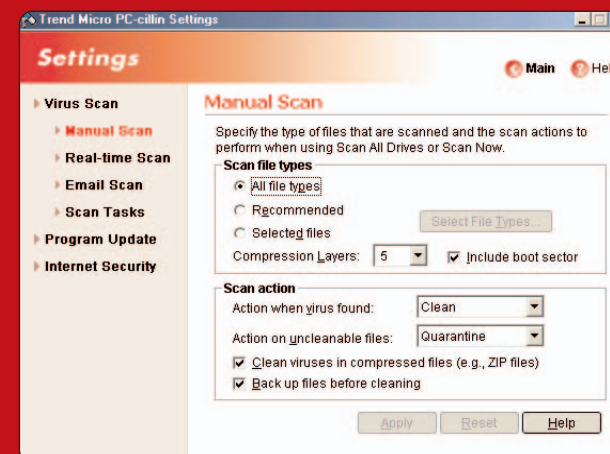
Symantec Norton AntiVirus 2004

This competent package fulfils all the criteria we've just outlined, scanning emails and instant messages, killing worms and other forms of virus and zapping files within Zip folders rather than waiting until extraction to eradicate the offender.

System updates can be scheduled or Norton can procure them automatically and, aside from a little complexity, this is a great one-stop safety package. www.symantec.com; £39.99 inc VAT

McAfee Internet Security Suite 6.0

You could probably gather a selection of protective tools for less than the £50



asking price of this package but, for all-out protection, it's a safe bet.

It includes McAfee's VirusScan, SpamKiller and Personal Firewall Plus programs and adds security and privacy controls to ensure you surf the web safely and without being exposed to unseemly content. Chatroom and instant messages can also be filtered and you can ensure no one is monitoring your net habits by loading up the Stealth Monitoring Protection application. www.mcafeeathome.com; £49.98 inc VAT

Trend Micro PC-cillin 2003

We like the ease of use of this package which merrily gets on with protecting your PC almost without you being aware of its presence. Its firewall - added for this latest version - feels rather flimsy in comparison to standalone defences, but the antivirus features are spot on, identifying and

destroying malicious code and Trojans.

A WebTrap feature filters ActiveX and Java scripts depending on your level of trust and overall this package provides good online security. www.antivirus.co.uk; £39.95 inc VAT

above: PC-cillin provides good online security without being intrusive

left: Norton AntiVirus system updates can be scheduled or Norton can procure them automatically

