

● VALUE PC

PC PRO
A LIST

Mesh Matrix Select Pro

PRICE £499 (£586 inc VAT)

DELIVERY £39 (£46 inc VAT)

INTERNET www.meshcomputers.com

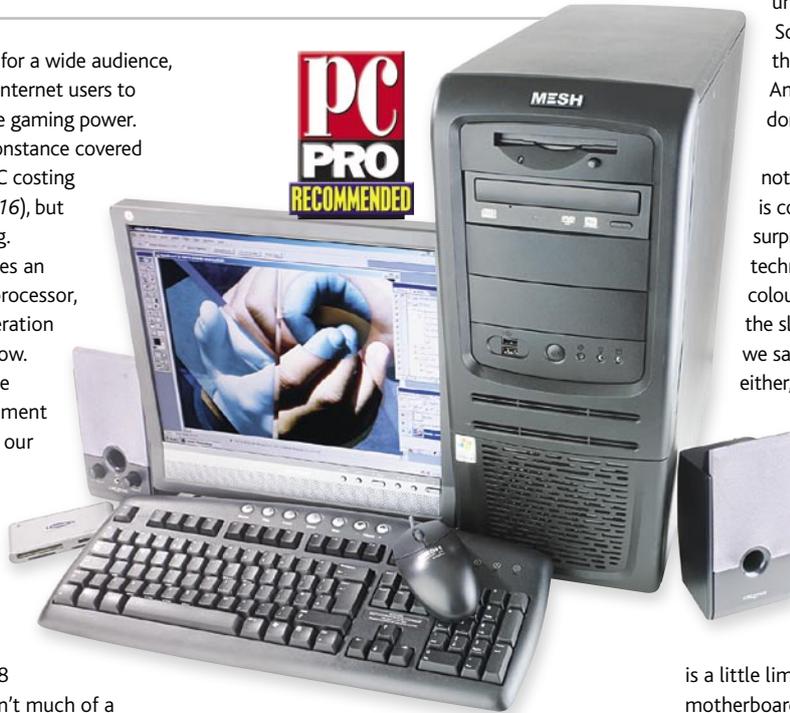
SUPPLIER Mesh via website

VERDICT A good choice for gaming on a tight budget, with sound performance, good peripherals and a great screen.

Budget PCs are suitable for a wide audience, everyone from casual Internet users to students wanting some gaming power. The formerly A-Listed JAL Constance covered basic needs with a decent PC costing only £399 (see issue 124, p116), but it had no allusions to gaming.

This Mesh system houses an ATI Radeon 9600 graphics processor, but it's of the previous generation to the ones we're used to now. As such, it struggles with the newest titles. Unreal Tournament 2004 proved no problem at our standard 1,280 x 1,024 test resolution, but Halo struggled. Doom 3 and Far Cry, games designed for the 9600's successors, also proved challenging at this high resolution. But given the native 1,024 x 768 resolution of the TFT, this isn't much of a problem. When we re-ran our tests (turning off the crippling anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing) we saw playable frame rates across the board, even with the high and very high detail settings in Doom 3 and Far Cry respectively.

As with all tightly integrated budget systems, the internal components don't take up much room, leaving the inside of the machine looking clean. The standard Mesh case holds an Asus K8V Deluxe motherboard. There's an Athlon 64 3000+ running in its Socket 754, which provides plenty of computing power. It comprehensively outperforms the Sempron 3100+ of the JAL in every test, so upgrading won't be a worry for a while. The 512MB of



A super bargain PC complete with a great flat-panel monitor.

PC3200 is also ample for the foreseeable future, although there's a free RAM socket should you need more. The Asus board provides gigabit-speed Ethernet networking, but there's also a modem occupying a PCI slot if you haven't jumped on the broadband wagon yet (see p144 if you haven't). This still leaves three usable slots free. There's no PCI Express, though, as the Asus board has a pre-PCI Express VIA K8T800 chipset – hardly a worry for a machine at this level.

Like the JAL, the hard disk is a 160GB SATA model. This is a good size for storing a handful of games, a decent MP3 library and files for work. There's space for two more disks should you need extra storage, as well as plenty of free power connectors and SATA ports on the motherboard too. The 340W power supply should cope with such an upgrade.

Mesh has also included a DVD writer to help with archiving. The Sony DW-D22A drive is capable of burning to DVD at 16x, and also to dual-layer discs at 2.4x. With many Mesh PCs, you'll find a media card reader nestling below the optical drives. The Select Pro, however, has an external USB 8-in-4 reader instead. We'd have preferred an integrated version, as the cable adds clutter to the desktop, but it does offer more flexibility for file transfer to another PC.

The range of ports adds flexibility too. There are the standard two USB ports at the front, which are at an accessible height if the case is on the floor. Round the back you'll find two full-sized FireWire ports, and another four USB. There are parallel and serial ports and a coaxial S/PDIF output too.

As for peripherals, the two desktop speakers supplied with the Select Pro look underwhelming but are surprising.

Sound quality was decent and they're incredibly loud for their size. And, since there's no subwoofer, they don't take up too much space either.

The 15in Sharp LCD monitor may not be much to look at as far as design is concerned, but we were pleasantly surprised with its image quality. In our technical tests, we saw no banding on colour and greyscale ramps. In spite of the sluggish 25ms quoted response time, we saw little lag in DVDs and games either, and the wide viewing angles add to the enjoyment.

So, for under £500 you get a fast PC capable of playing most games, as well as a svelte 15in TFT screen. The warranty is a sound one-year on-site maintenance followed by two years of return-to-base cover.

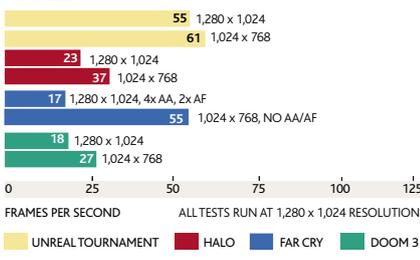
The one area in which the Mesh is a little limited is upgrade potential, as the motherboard is Socket 754 rather than the now more normal Socket 939, and it doesn't have PCI Express. But at this price something has to give, and with a budget PC like this we'd rather see good components across the board than an expensive motherboard with dozens of unused slots and technologies.

With no PCI Express, a year could see the Radeon 9600 reaching the end of its life, and there may not be many AGP cards left on the market. If you can squeeze another £300 into your budget, take a look at the PCI Express-equipped Evesham nForce GT (see p60), which should see you through to Far Cry 2 and beyond. But there's no doubt that this very capable system is incredible value for money and as such takes its place as our A-listed value PC.

CLIVE WEBSTER

● RESULTS

3D SPEED



2D SPEED



PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS 2GHz AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor; 512MB PC3200 RAM; Asus K8V Deluxe motherboard; 160GB Maxtor DiamondMax Plus 9 hard disk; Sony DW-D22A DVD writer; 128MB ATI Radeon 9600 graphics; 15in Sharp LL-T15G4-B TFT; Creative SBS260 speakers; V.92 modem; gigabit Ethernet; Windows XP Home SP 2; Microsoft Works 8; 1yr on-site, 2yrs RTB warranty.