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# First impressions

The rate at which PC technology is evolving can prove daunting for anybody looking to buy their first high-spec system. Here we look at nine cutting-edge PCs that cost £899 aimed at the cautious consumer

**L**et's face it, for the first-time buyer, choosing a brand new PC can be a daunting experience. With new versions of every processor, graphics card and practically every other component appearing quicker than ever, it's not surprising that many PC novices resist as long as they can. So this month, *PCW* has challenged some of the UK's top PC manufacturers to see what they could do for the first-time buyer on a budget.

We set a price limit of £899 excluding VAT but including delivery. We specified that the machine should be simple to set up, and that any and all software that is bundled with the system should be installed and configured correctly. We also requested that the user should be able to easily unpack the machine, switch it on and use it straight away. In judging the systems, we focused heavily on getting value for money from a system that wasn't going to be out of date the moment it was out of the box.

The manufacturers were given a minimum specification of a 1GHz processor, 128MB of RAM, a 20GB hard drive, and a 17in monitor coupled with a 32MB graphics card. A means of connecting to the Internet had to be included, together with a CD or DVD drive, sound card and speakers. Microsoft Windows Me is the OS of choice and we stipulated that the warranty should cover three years inclusive of parts and labour.

While these requirements meant similar components were used by each manufacturer – most opted for Asus' A7V133 motherboard and all chose an AMD Athlon CPU – it also prompted a wide variety of system configurations. Read on to see the results of our testing. >

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## Atlas/Hi-Grade Meridian A1000

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Atlas/Hi-Grade 020 8532 6515

**PROS** Printer and scanner; video in/out **CONS** Uninspiring monitor; 1GHz Athlon

**OVERALL** Monitor and lower specification let the system down in light of the competition

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

In a group test dominated by the Asus A7V133 motherboard, Atlas/Hi-Grade is the only manufacturer to fit it with a lower-clocked 1GHz Athlon. Although this processor has a 266MHz front-side bus (FSB), the motherboard doesn't support DDR memory, which is necessary to unleash the full Athlon power. Instead, like the other contenders, the Meridian uses PC133 memory.

There's one 128MB stick plugged into a single DIMM slot, leaving two free. Unfortunately, this configuration leaves the Atlas outperformed by the other systems here.

Connected to the onboard Ultra-DMA100 Promise controller is a suitably equipped 30.7GB IBM hard drive, which provides plenty of room for applications. You also get a Teac CD-RW for backups and a 12-speed Hitachi DVD-ROM drive.

As for build quality there are more appealing cases on offer, especially those without an awkward deep-set

floppy drive bay. Inside are two vacant 3.5in and one 5.25in bays, while a rear case fan helps draw out the heat.

In terms of expansion, two dedicated PCI slots are free, with another sharing a backing plate with the AMR slot. There are also four USB ports for connecting peripherals, including the bundled 600 x 1,200dpi Umax scanner and Lexmark Z32 printer.

As for the rest of the system you get an Allied Data V.90 PCI modem, and a Guillemot Maxi Sound Fortissimo audio card (with optical out) piping 4.1 channel surround sound out of the Cambridge Soundworks speakers. There's also a 32MB GeForce2 MX 400-based graphics card from Gainward complete with dual D-SUB ports and video in/out capabilities.

With a basic 17in Hi-Grade-badged shadow-mask monitor, Lotus Smartsuite Millennium and a comprehensive setup booklet, this Atlas/Hi-Grade Meridian is not a bad first-time buy, but there are better options.



## evesham.com Axis 1.333 MX

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** evesham.com 08707 287 070

**PROS** Fastest clocked Athlon; large hard drive; **CONS** Office suite may be unfamiliar

**OVERALL** A well-rounded system that is easy to set up and maintain

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

A 1.333GHz Athlon processor and a single 128MB module of PC133 memory saw the Axis sitting near the top of the SYSmark 2001 results. Impressive, especially when it rubs shoulders with top performers boasting 256MB of memory.

Included in the package is a beefy 40GB Maxtor hard drive, providing ample storage, and a Burn-Proof Teac CD-RW. This is complemented by a nippy 16-speed DVD-ROM drive from Pioneer enabling CD-to-CD copying and the option of watching DVD movies via the graphics card's TV-out connector.

3D performance was a little down due to the 64MB Leadtek WinFast graphics card based on nVidia's latest GeForce2 MX 400 chipset. However, this may not be a major issue for the first-time buyer. It is also one of the quieter machines on test despite the four fans inside.

There's scope for upgrade with two 3.5in and one 5.25in bays lying

vacant. There are also two PCI slots free with another one shared with the Asus A7V133's AMR slot.

Other components include a Creative SoundBlaster Live! Value card with Cambridge Soundworks FourPointSurround speakers, and a Diamond SupraSST V.90 modem.

The 17in LG Flatron 795FT Plus monitor is one of the best displays here. The picture is rock solid, and the flat screen really cuts down on reflections. A built-in USB hub with one upstream and four downstream ports can be found to the rear.

To balance the cost of a more expensive processor, evesham.com has supplied Sun's StarOffice – a free office suite. A program called BigFix is also pre-installed to monitor the system for conflicts and new drivers, notifying you of the latest fixes from evesham's database or other sites.

The excellent documentation and well-balanced spec help the Axis earn a Highly Commended award.

## Intellect Value 12A Plus

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Intellect 0161 429 9911

**PROS** 256MB of memory; dual-head graphics **CONS** No CD-RW drive; poor performance

**OVERALL** A disappointing system that is lacking in several areas

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

Intellect's entry this month is built around AMD's 1.2GHz Athlon processor, mounted on the ever-popular Asus A7V133 motherboard. This is based on VIA's KT133A chipset and backed by a healthy 256MB of PC133 SDRAM in the form of a single DIMM module – leaving two DIMM slots free. However, the Athlon processor in the Intellect machine only supports a front-side bus (FSB) speed of 200MHz, rather than the 266MHz FSB featured in other systems this month. This may explain why the Intellect system scored fairly low in our SYSmark tests.

A Conexant HCF modem and Creative SoundBlaster Live! Value sound card occupy two of the PCI slots on the Asus motherboard. This leaves three PCI slots free, one of which is shared with the AMR slot. Storage is taken care of by a modest 30.7GB IBM hard disk and a 16-speed Pioneer DVD drive. Although it wasn't a requirement, Intellect was the only

manufacturer this month not to have included a CD-RW drive, leaving two 5.25in bays empty inside the case.

In terms of 3D performance, the Matrox Millennium G450 graphics card lets down the rest of the system. The 12A Plus scored badly in our 3D tests, finishing last in both Quake III and 3DMark. That said, the Matrox more than makes up for this with its great 2D image quality and dual D-SUB output. The LG Flatron 795FT Plus monitor, linked to one of the D-SUBs, provides an excellent desktop image.

In terms of extras, Intellect has supplied the functional Lotus SmartSuite Millennium office suite, which means you can be productive straight out of the box.

No printer or scanner is supplied so you'll have to fork out extra if you want to be really creative. On the whole, performance and specification could have been better – a disappointing entry from Intellect.



## Mesh Matrix 1300 SE

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Mesh 020 8208 4706

**PROS** Fast processor; excellent office suite **CONS** Poor 3D performance

**OVERALL** A well-rounded system that is let down by average 3D performance

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

Mesh has supplied a well-specified machine for this month's test. A 1.3GHz Athlon processor sits at the heart of the Matrix 1300 SE, combined with the excellent Asus A7V133 motherboard, which is proving extremely popular among system builders just now. As expected, the Mesh system, with its speedy processor and generous 256MB of PC133 memory, scores above average in our SYSmark tests.

Mesh has opted for a 64MB Leadtek WinFast graphics card that is based on nVidia's GeForce2 MX 400 chipset. While this is a good card, it can't keep up with some of the others on offer this month, finishing third from bottom in our 3D tests. However, image quality on the 17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 730 monitor is excellent. Sound comes courtesy of Creative's SoundBlaster Live! Value card, which is connected to a set of Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks surround sound speakers. Occupying

a second PCI slot on the motherboard is a Conexant HCF modem.

The 40GB hard drive from Western Digital should provide more than enough storage for most users. Mesh has chosen a Teac CD-W512EB as a backup device, which writes at 12-speed and rewrites at 10-speed. Should you wish to copy CDs on the fly Mesh has also included a 16-speed Pioneer DVD drive. A copy of the excellent Microsoft Works Suite 2001 completes the package on offer from Mesh.

Overall, the Mesh Matrix 1300 SE is a well-rounded system that fulfils all the criteria we set for the test. However, it doesn't win any awards this time around, as it's just pipped to the post by manufacturers that have squeezed slightly more out of their components. We liked what the Matrix 1300 SE had to offer, but ultimately it could do with a better graphics card to put it on a par with our winners this month.



## Multivision Vision XS Bundle

**PRICE** £1,032.83 (£879 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Multivision 0870 066 0885

**PROS** Excellent spec; bundled printer **CONS** USB backing plate in awkward position

**OVERALL** The best compromise between simplicity and performance

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

Being £20 cheaper than your rivals is a good way to start if you're targeting the PC newcomer. In fact the Vision XS from Multivision is also highly specced and comes with a comprehensive manual. A full three-year parts and labour, collect and return warranty is not bad either.

The machine is based on a 1.3GHz Athlon processor, backed up by two 128MB sticks of PC133 memory, all plugged into an EPoX EP-8KTA2 motherboard. The latter uses VIA's KT133 chipset which has been updated to support the UltraDMA100 standard, giving the 30GB Quantum hard drive the potential to operate at its optimum bandwidth.

Videologic's Vivid!XS graphics card uses the highly regarded Kyro II chip with 32MB of SDRAM. It performed well in our 3D tests coming second from the top in all the charts. An S-Video-out connector on the card lets you connect it to a TV.

Tethered to the Vivid's D-SUB port

is a 17in LG Flatron 775FT monitor, which offers the same vibrant picture as the 795FT Flatron.

The case is the only one with four of each sized drive bay, adding an element of future-proofing to the system. The motherboard carries five dedicated PCI slots. The only drawback is that the USB backing plate, offering two extra USB ports, blocks the shared ISA/PCI slot. However, this can always be moved if necessary.

With the fastest Burn-Proof drive in the group test, burning backups should be easy enough, while CD-to-CD copying is possible thanks to the 16-speed Toshiba DVD-ROM drive.

A Hercules Gamesurround Muse XL sound card, Cambridge Soundworks speakers, an Intel modem and Lotus SmartSuite Millennium office suite round off the package. An Epson Stylus Color 580 and USB printer lead are thoughtful touches for the inexperienced user. A deserving winner of the Editor's Choice award.



## NEC Powermate VL3 A1000

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** NEC 0870 010 6322

**PROS** 19in display; large hard disk **CONS** Slow processor; limited potential for expansion

**OVERALL** Underpowered for the price; offers little compared to this month's other systems

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■



NEC is one of two manufacturers to opt for the 1GHz Athlon processor to power its system, making it one of the slowest-clocked machines on test this month. The Athlon is plugged into the MSI MS-6340M motherboard, which is a micro-ATX design based on VIA's KM133 chipset, and is backed by a modest, although common, 128MB of PC133 memory. Not surprisingly, the NEC didn't do too well in our SYSmark tests, coming last overall.

With only one DIMM slot free, the Powermate has limited room for additional memory. A beefy 60GB Quantum Fireball hard drive provides the primary means of storage, alongside a 16-speed Pioneer DVD-ROM and an LG CD-RW. Connection to the Internet is catered for by a standard PCI modem. Occupying another PCI slot is a SoundBlaster Live! Value sound card. The output from the SoundBlaster card is piped through to a set of Labtec LCS-1060 loud-

speakers. This configuration only leaves one shared PCI/CNR slot free for additional devices, although three USB slots are provided for plugging in other external peripherals.

NEC has based its graphics solution on nVidia's GeForce2 MX chipset. Like most of the other cards seen here, the Leadtek design sports 32MB of SDRAM. As expected, the NEC system achieved a disappointing score in our 3D tests, coming second from bottom overall. Plugged into the D-SUB output of the Leadtek card is a 19in NEC VR19 monitor. It can handle resolutions of up to 1,600 x 1,200 at 85Hz. However, its picture quality is not up to the standard of some of the other 17in displays in the group test.

A copy of Microsoft Works Suite 2000 is bundled to enable you to use the PC productively from day one. That said, the whole offering is let down by below average performance. There are better value systems on offer this month.

## Panrix Magnum 1200

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Panrix 0113 244 4958

**PROS** Good core components; fast graphics **CONS** Average display lets the system down

**OVERALL** A well-specified machine

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■

Panrix supplied us with a machine based on the 1.2GHz Athlon processor that features a 266MHz FSB. The AMD processor is plugged into the socket of an Asus A7V133 motherboard and is supported by 256MB of PC133 memory in one of three DIMM slots. SYSmark 2001 saw Panrix sitting in the middle of the group, with a score of 128.

Graphics are provided by a VideoLogic Vivid!XS card, which provides the fastest 3D performance in this month's test. Connected to the graphics card's D-SUB is a Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 73 monitor. This provides an adequate image but is overshadowed by other monitors in the group test.

Like many of the other manufacturers this month, Panrix gets full marks for making use of the extra USB connector on the A7V133 board by running a cable to a two-port USB adaptor at the back of the case. Opening up the case, it's obvious that

the build quality is up to Panrix's usual high standards.

Storage is handled by a roomy 40.9GB Maxtor hard disk and a Samsung SW-408B CD-RW drive. A 16-speed Pioneer DVD drive is also included as part of the package, enabling you to copy CDs on the fly if required.

A Diamond SupraSST 56i Pro modem and Creative SoundBlaster Live! 5.1 channel sound card occupy two of the five PCI slots (one of which is shared) on the Asus motherboard. The output from the SoundBlaster card is fed to a set of Cambridge Soundworks surround-sound speakers, allowing you to experience surround sound when playing games. Panrix has completed the package by supplying the excellent Microsoft Works Suite 2000.

Overall, the Magnum 1200 is a competent machine and well specified with above average performance. It's worth considering.



## Polar Technology Parsec 1200

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Polar 0800 138 1238

**PROS** RAID disk array; good spec **CONS** Basic speakers; noisy; manuals could be better

**OVERALL** A good machine if a little noisy and not so easy for the novice to set up

**FEATURES** ■■■■■ **PERFORMANCE** ■■■■■

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ■■■■■ **OVERALL** ■■■■■



Polar Technology is the only manufacturer to use the Asus A7V133's built-in RAID support by fitting two 20.5GB IBM hard drives in a RAID 0 array for optimum performance. However, a quick glance at the SYSmark results shows that the Parsec is not as nifty as Poweroid's RAID machine or the systems that haven't gone down that route.

However, the specification is decent enough, with a 1.2GHz Athlon and a single 256MB DIMM of PC133 memory backing up the CPU.

Like Multivision and Panrix, Polar has opted for the 32MB VideoLogic Vivid!XS graphics card. This boosts the 3D scores allowing games to be played at a decent frame rate and resolution. The S-Video out and 12-speed Samsung DVD-ROM will also please those who prefer to watch DVD movies on the TV rather than the 17in Iiyama Vision Master Pro 411 monitor that comes with the system.

Removeable storage comes in the

shape of a Samsung CD-RW, which isn't one of the quickest on test.

On the multimedia front there is a Creative SoundBlaster Live! Value sound card that is somewhat limited by standard Labtec stereo speakers. A Conexant modem caters for your surfing needs.

Inside we are treated to some fine cable folding, and one of the largest CPU heatsinks on the market – the Super Orb. This has a cylindrical form and juts out from the motherboard like a mini sky scraper.

For future expansion you get two dedicated PCI slots and another shared AMR/PCI slot, two 3.5in bays but no 5.25in vacancies. Finally, Lotus SmartSuite Millennium is the office suite of choice.

As for literature, the photocopied leaflets lack quality and are a little limited in terms of user-friendliness.

Overall, the Parsec is a powerful machine for the price, but other systems make better first-time buys.

### Poweroid.com 3006

**PRICE** £1,056.33 (£899 ex VAT) **CONTACT** Poweroid.com 0870 220 0444

**PROS** Well-specced; RAID disk array **CONS** USB plate blocks ISA/PCI shared slot

**OVERALL** For first-time buyers after something different without sacrificing performance

**FEATURES**  **PERFORMANCE** 

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  **OVERALL** 

Full marks to Poweroid.com for being one of the few manufacturers to choose a quality non-Asus motherboard upon which to base its system. The Abit KT7A-RAID comes, as the name suggests, with its own onboard RAID controller and Poweroid.com has made use of it by fitting two 20GB Maxtor hard drives in a RAID 0 array. This arrangement, along with the 1.2GHz Athlon CPU backed by a single 256MB module of PC133 rated memory, makes this one of the fastest machines tested.

The same applies when it comes to the 3D scores, with the 32MB Asus A7700 Pure graphics card, based on the older nVidia GeForce2 GTS chipset, able to hold its own near the top of the charts. The only thing lacking is a TV-out socket. The 17in Vision Master Pro 411 monitor completes the impressive picture, thanks to its Mitsubishi DiamondTron NF aperture-grille tube.

Using the same case as the

Intellect machine, internal build quality is good with a tidy layout clearing the way for those first-time users who want to take a look inside the PC.

A Creative SoundBlaster Live! Value audio card offers 4.1 channels of surround sound through the Cambridge PCWorks speakers. After accounting for the modem, three dedicated PCI slots are free for upgrades. Usefully, the Abit motherboard also has an ISA slot for any older cards you may come across. However, this shares its home with a PCI slot and is also blocked by the extra USB plate that could be removed if necessary.

An LG CD-RW and a 16-speed Pioneer DVD-ROM drive, leave one 5.25in bay waiting to be filled, together with one 3.5in bay.

Despite the fact that delivery is not included (£29 ex VAT), the 3006 is a finely tuned machine that will appeal to those that have a some knowledge of PCs and want a speedy system. A Highly Commended award.



### THE CASE IN QUESTION

We all know how important the processor, motherboard, hard drive and other components that make up a PC can be, but one very important feature that is often overlooked is the shell into which all these components are fitted, the case.

Usually manufactured from metal or plastic, often in an uninspiring beige colour, a computer case can come in two forms, a desktop or a tower. Choosing which one to go for largely depends on desk size and personal preference. But if you find yourself upgrading on a regular basis or just enjoy poking around inside, a tower case is probably the best option for you.

These come in three main sizes: the full tower, midi tower and mini tower. If space is at a premium then the mini tower is probably your best option, but we prefer the midi or full towers as they offer a lot more space for a good level of airflow and component access. These two factors are probably the most important when it comes to singling out a quality case. If you can, take a look around the innards and see if there is a fan supplied either



A spacious PC case allows for greater expansion, ensures that cables don't become too entangled and enables air to circulate properly in order to keep the components cool

at the front, rear or, for that matter, one at both ends, which will really help to cool down today's hot components.

As for easy access, cases that are classed as screwless are always a good option. Look for side panels with bolts that can be removed by hand rather than screws, and expansion slots and drive bays that come complete with sliding/quick-release rail mechanisms.

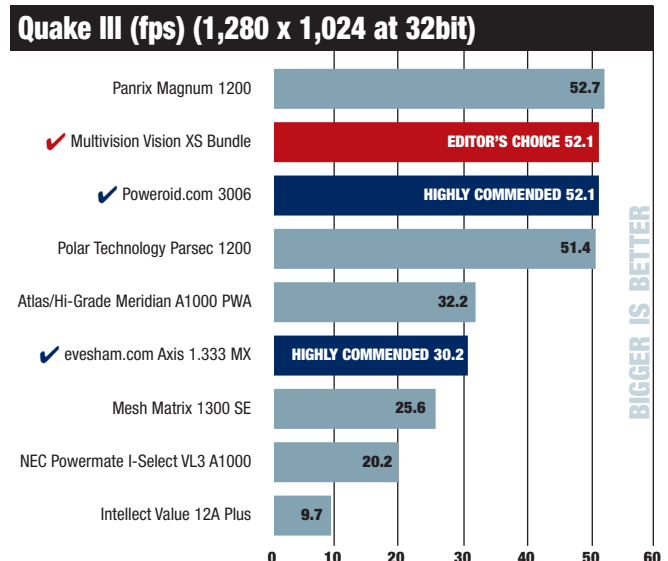
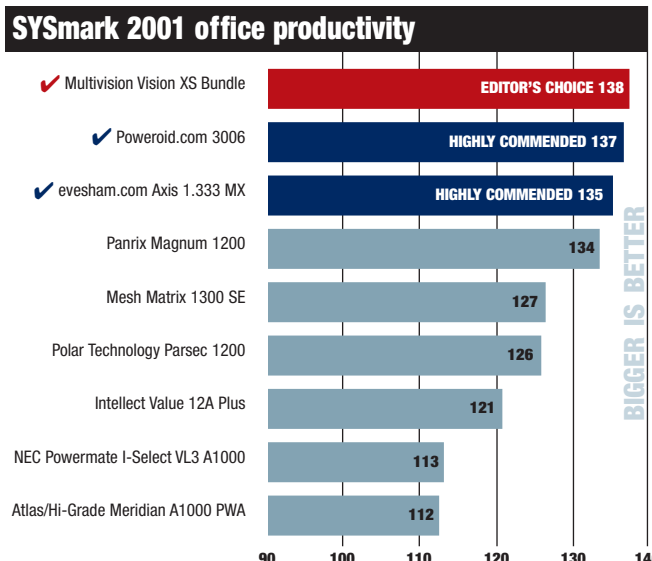
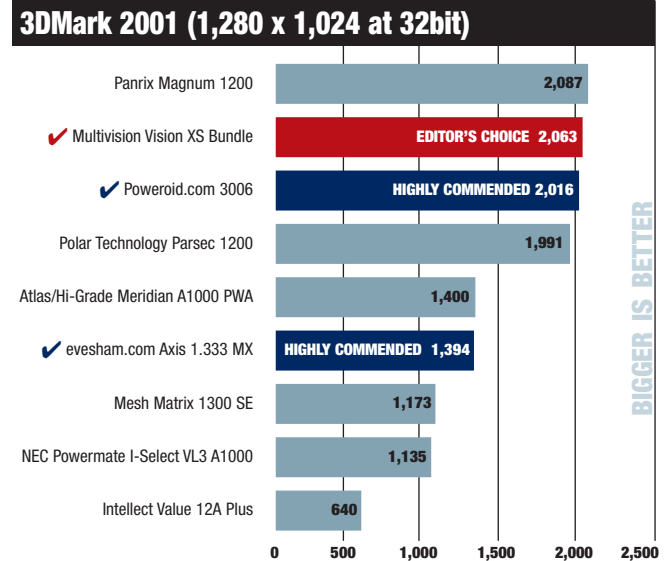
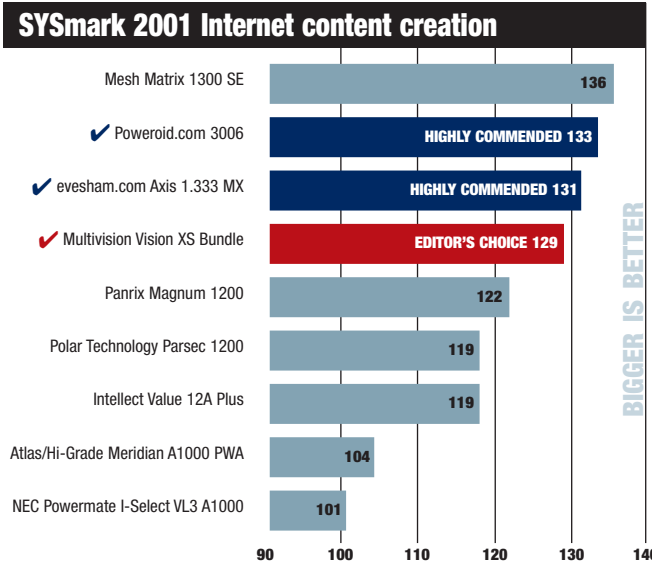
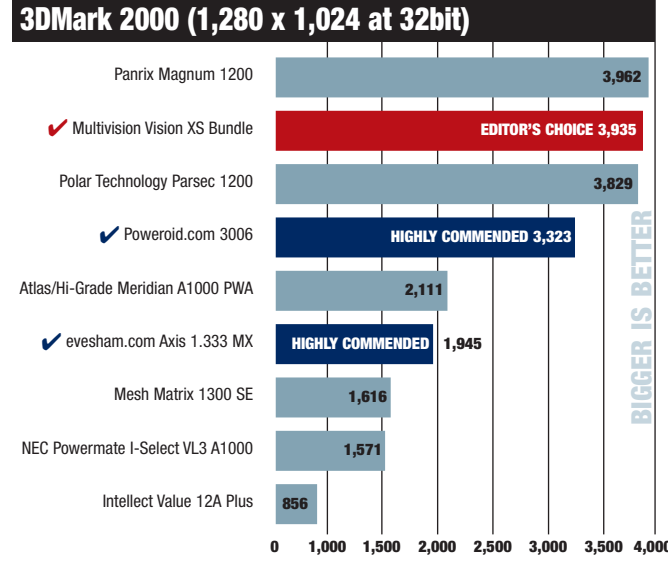
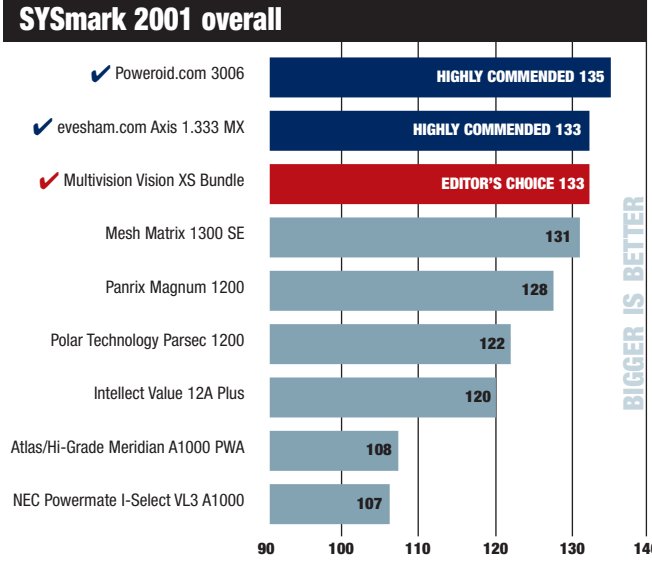
There's nothing worse than buying yourself the latest bit of gear and forgetting where you left that screwdriver.

Expansion is another very important aspect of case design. Opting for a smaller form factor could leave you wishing you had another 5.25in bay to accommodate, for instance, Creative's Live! Drive front panel below your DVD-ROM and CD-RW drives. In this case a full tower with a 300w or more power supply would be more suitable. Bear in mind, too, that AMD advises that many of its processors, such as the Athlon, should be used with a 300w supply. In addition, be aware that most

cases have been designed with ATX power supplies and motherboards in mind, rather than the older AT format.

Finally, if you really want to splash out, there are cases that come in a variety of guises, with designs often driven by the demands of overclockers, with built-in refrigeration, massive fans, and even internal lighting and anodised finishes.

# LAB RESULTS

Please see page 50 for an explanation of how we tested the PCs



# TABLE OF FEATURES



MANUFACTURER	ATLAS/HI-GRADE	EVESHAM.COM	INTELLECT	MESH
MODEL NAME	MERIDIAN A1000 PWA	AXIS 1.333 MX	VALUE 12A PLUS	MATRIX 1300 SE
Price (ex VAT)	£899	£899	£899	£899
Price (inc VAT)	£1,056.33	£1,056.33	£1,056.33	£1,056.33
Sales telephone	020 8532 6515	08707 287 070	0161 429 9911	020 8208 4706
URL	<a href="http://www.atlasplc.com">www.atlasplc.com</a>	<a href="http://www.evesham.com">www.evesham.com</a>	<a href="http://www.intellect.uk.com">www.intellect.uk.com</a>	<a href="http://www.meshcomputers.com">www.meshcomputers.com</a>

## HARDWARE SPECS

Processor	AMD Athlon 1GHz (266MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1.333GHz (266MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1.2GHz (200MHz FSB)	Athlon 1.3GHz (200MHz FSB)
RAM/type	128MB/PC133	128MB/PC133	256MB/PC133	256MB/PC133
Occupied RAM slots/spare RAM slots	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2
Max memory in this configuration (without removing existing memory)	1.15GB	1.15GB	1.28GB	1.28GB
Maximum memory supported by motherboard	1.5GB	1.5GB	1.5GB	1.5GB
Hard disk (manufacturer and model)	IBM Deskstar DTLA-307030	Maxtor 5T040H4	IBM Deskstar DTLA-307030	Western Digital WD400AB
HD size/interface	30.7GB/EIDE	40GB/EIDE	30.7GB/EIDE	40GB/EIDE
Storage drive manufacturer and model	Teac CD-W58E 8x 8x 32x	Teac CD-W512EB (Burn-Proof) 12x 10x 32x	N/A	Teac CD-W512EB (Burn-Proof) 12x 10x 32x
Size of storage drive media/interface	650MB/EIDE	650MB/EIDE	N/A	650MB/EIDE

## MOTHERBOARD COMPONENTS

Motherboard manufacturer	Asus	Asus	Asus	Asus
Model/chipset	A7V133/ VIA KT133A	A7V133/ VIA KT133A	A7V133/ VIA KT133A	A7V133/ VIA KT133A

## EXPANSION AND I/O

No of 3.5/5.25in bays	4/3	4/3	4/3	3/3
No of free 3.5/5.25in bays	2/1	2/1	2/2	1/1
No of PCI/ISA/shared/AMR slots	4/0/1/0	4/0/1/0	4/0/1/0	4/0/1/0
No of free PCI/ISA/shared/AMR slots	2/0/1/0	2/0/1/0	2/0/1/0	2/0/1/0
No of USB/serial/parallel/PS/2	4/2/1/2	4/2/1/2	4/2/1/2	4/2/1/2

## MULTIMEDIA

DVD manufacturer/model	Hitachi/GD-7500	Pioneer/DVD-116	Pioneer/DVD-115	Pioneer/DVD-116
DVD speed/interface	12x/EIDE	16x/EIDE	16x/EIDE	16x/EIDE
Sound card manufacturer	Guillemot	Creative	Creative	Creative
Sound card model	Maxi Sound Fortissimo	SoundBlaster Live! Value	SoundBlaster Live! Value	SoundBlaster Live! Value
Speakers (manufacturer and model)	Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround	Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround	Cambridge Soundworks SW310	Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround
Graphics card manufacturer and model	Gainward CARDEXpert GeForce2 MX TwinView/ViVo	Leadtek Winfast GeForce2 MX SH MAX	Matrox Millennium G450 DualHead	Leadtek Winfast GeForce2 MX SH MAX
Chipset	nVidia GeForce2 MX 400	nVidia GeForce2 MX 400	G450	nVidia GeForce2 MX 400
Memory and type	32MB SDRAM	64MB SDRAM	32MB DDR SDRAM	64MB SDRAM
Graphics card interface	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP
Monitor manufacturer and model	Hi-Grade HG775	LG Flatron 795FT Plus	LG Flatron 795FT Plus	Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 730
Monitor size/max viewable diagonal	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in
Maximum resolution at VESA refresh	1,152 x 864 at 75Hz	1,600 x 1,200 at 75Hz	1,600 x 1,200 at 75Hz	1,600 x 1,200 at 75Hz

## OTHER INFORMATION

Modem manufacturer and model (standard, interface)	Allied Data Tornado VFM56.0-PRS (V.90, PCI)	Diamond SupraSST 56i Pro DF (V.90, PCI)	Conexant HCF (V.90, PCI)	Conexant HCF (V.90, PCI)
Misc hardware	Lexmark Z32, Umax Astra 3400 scanner	N/A	N/A	N/A
Bundled software	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Sun Microsystems StarOffice 5.2, BigFix	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Microsoft Works Suite 2001
Standard warranty (RTB = return to base, C&R = collect and return)	1st year on-site, 2 years RTB	2 years on-site, 3rd year RTB	3 years on-site	1st year on-site, 2 years RTB



MULTIVISION	NEC	PANRIX	POLAR TECHNOLOGY	POWEROID.COM
VISION XS BUNDLE	POWERMATE I-SELECT VL3 A1000	MAGNUM 1200	PARSEC 1200	3006
£879	£899	£899	£899	£899
£1,032.83	£1,056.33	£1,056.33	£1,056.33	£1,056.33
0870 066 0885	0870 010 6322	0113 244 4958	0800 138 1238	0870 220 0444
<a href="http://www.multivision.co.uk">www.multivision.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.nec-online.co.uk">www.nec-online.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.panrix.com">www.panrix.com</a>	<a href="http://www.polartechnology.com">www.polartechnology.com</a>	<a href="http://www.poweroid.com">www.poweroid.com</a>
AMD Athlon 1.3GHz (200MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1GHz (200MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1.2GHz (266MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1.2GHz (200MHz FSB)	AMD Athlon 1.2GHz (266MHz FSB)
256MB/PC133	128MB/PC133	256MB/PC133	256MB/PC133	256MB/PC133
2/1	1/1	1/2	1/2	1/2
768MB	640MB	1.28GB	1.28GB	1.28GB
1.5GB	1GB	1.5GB	1.5GB	1.5GB
Quantum Fireball AS	Quantum Fireball AS	Maxtor 54098UB (UltraDMA66)	IBM Deskstar DTLA-305020	Maxtor 5T020H2
30GB/EIDE	60GB/EIDE	40.9GB/EIDE	2 x 20.5GB/EIDE (mobo RAID 0)	2 x 20GB/EIDE (mobo RAID 0)
Mirai CRD-BP1400P (Burn-Proof) 16x 10x 40x	LG CED-8120B 12x 8x 32x	Samsung SW-408B 8x 8x 32x	Samsung SW-208B 8x 4x 32x	LG CED-8080B 8x 4x 32x
650MB/EIDE	650MB/EIDE	650MB/EIDE	650MB/EIDE	650MB/EIDE
EPoX	MSI	Asus	Asus	Abit
EP-8KTA2/VIA KT133	MS-6340M/VIA KM133	A7V133/VIA KT133A	A7V133/VIA KT133A	KT7A-RAID/VIA KT133A
4/4	5/2	3/2	5/2	4/3
2/2	3/0	1/0	2/0	1/1
5/0/1/0	2/0/1/0	4/0/1/0	4/0/1/0	5/0/1/0
3/0/1/0	0/0/1/0	2/0/1/0	2/0/1/0	3/0/1/0
4/2/1/2	3/1/1/2	4/2/1/2	4/2/1/2	4/2/1/2
Toshiba/SD-M1502	Pioneer/DVD-115	Pioneer/DVD-105 (slot)	Samsung/SD-612F	Pioneer/DVD-116
16x/EIDE	16x/EIDE	16x/EIDE	12x/EIDE	16x/EIDE
Hercules	Creative	Creative	Creative	Creative
Gamesaround Muse XL	SoundBlaster Live! Value	SoundBlaster Live! 5.1	SoundBlaster Live! Value	SoundBlaster Live! Value
Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround	Labtec LCS-1060	Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround	Labtec LCS-1030	Cambridge Soundworks PCWorks FourPointSurround
VideoLogic Vivid!XS	Leadtek Winfast GeForce2 MX	VideoLogic Vivid!XS	VideoLogic Vivid!XS	Asus V7700 Pure
PowerVR Kyro II	nVidia GeForce2 MX	PowerVR Kyro II	PowerVR Kyro II	nVidia GeForce 2 GTS
32MB SDRAM	32MB SDRAM	32MB SDRAM	32MB SDRAM	32MB DDR SDRAM
AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP
LG Flatron 775FT	NEC VR19	Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 73	Iiyama Vision Master Pro 411	Iiyama Vision Master Pro 411
17in/16in	19in/18in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in
1,152 x 864 at 75Hz	1,600 x 1,200 at 85Hz	1,024 x 768 at 85Hz	1,280 x 1,024 at 75Hz	1,280 x 1,024 at 75Hz
Intel HAM Data, Fax, Voice (V.90, PCI)	HSP3880-W 56K (V.90, PCI)	Diamond SupraSST 56i Pro V CC (V.90, PCI)	Conexant SoftK56 Data, Fax, Voice (V.90, PCI)	MR56PVS-RH1 56K (V.90 PCI)
Epson Stylus Color 580 and printer lead	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Microsoft Works Suite 2000	Microsoft Works Suite 2000	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium
3 years C&R	3 years on-site	1st year on-site, 2 years RTB	1st year on-site, 2 years RTB	1st year C&R, 2 years RTB

**Editor's Choice**

**Y**ou can get a lot of PC for your money these days, but making the decision to part with the readies can often be a difficult one, especially for the first-time buyer. One reason is that prices are always changing, and knowing when to buy is a major barrier to overcome. The usual advice is to spend as much as you can afford at the time and just go for it. However, while that might be sound advice for those with the knowledge and the cash, in reality the PC market can be a scary place for the newcomer. What we were looking for this month, then, were systems that offered an easy initiation into the world of PC productivity.

Taking the group as a whole we were happy to see that all of the manufacturers had set up their computers correctly and most offered powerful systems with great specifications that would please most buyers with a budget of £899 excluding VAT. All of them came with decent sound cards, a set of speakers and good monitors, and most were very easy to set up. Some were not as future proof as others though, and not all came with easy-to-follow documentation. In addition, AMD's dominance of the lower-end processor market is clear, while Asus stole the show in the motherboard stakes, its highly regarded A7V133 making an appearance in six of the systems.

Before turning to the award winners, we should mention that Mesh and Panrix provided us with very impressive machines even though they didn't quite hit the mark. However, the Mesh was let down by slower 3D performance and the Panrix's Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 73 monitor was overshadowed by the winners' displays.

**The winners**

This month the **Editor's Choice** goes to **Multivision's Vision XS Bundle**. The first things to point out here is that the Vision XS is £20 cheaper than the other systems, comes with a comprehensive manual, and a three-year collect-and-return warranty that covers both parts and labour. Multivision has also impressed us with its excellent choice of components, consistently configured to a high standard with all the latest drivers correctly installed. You get a beefy 1.3GHz AMD Athlon

processor, backed by 256MB of memory for top-notch 2D performance, a sizeable 30GB Ultra-DMA100 hard drive to take care of your storage needs, and the quickest Burn-Proof CD-RW on test. Furthermore, there's a 32MB VideoLogic Vivid!XS graphics card and sturdy LG monitor. In addition, the case has room for expansion and the motherboard has plenty of slots. A copy of Lotus SmartSuite Millennium, a good 4.1 channel surround sound subsystem and an Epson Stylus Color 580 inkjet printer makes for a fine bundle.

The winner of our first **Highly Commended** award is the neat and well-built **evesham.com Axis 1.333 MX**. As the name suggests a 1.333GHz AMD Athlon resides at the heart of this system – the fastest clocked processor here. However, with half the memory of the Multivision the processor is held back a little, but with memory prices as low as they are you could always upgrade. A meaty 64MB nVidia GeForce2 MX 400-based graphics card provides a good gaming experience along with the fine LG monitor with its USB hub and touch-sensitive controls, and the Creative Live! Value sound card coupled to the 4.1 channel surround-sound speakers. A 40GB drive and nippy Burn-Proof CD-RW provide decent storage options. Ultimately, it's a well-rounded and solidly made system.

The second **Highly Commended** award goes to **Poweroid.com's 3006**. It combines power with an excellent configuration and we decided to give the award on the basis that not all first-time buyers are necessarily new to computers. For those with computer experience gained through work or at college, the 3006's RAID 0 disk array, courtesy of the RAID controller on the reputable Abit KT7A-RAID motherboard, should appeal. You also get a 1.2GHz AMD Athlon processor with a full 256MB of PC133 memory powering the system to some very healthy performance scores. The nVidia GeForce2 GTS-based graphics board, although a bit long in the tooth now, proves that it can still compete with newer cards. Documentation is not as thorough as some of the others here but, as mentioned, this system would suit the more savvy first-time buyer. Remember that delivery is not included, but at £29 ex VAT it's still worth the extra expense.

**Multivision** Vision XS Bundle**evesham.com** Axis 1.333 MX**Poweroid.com** 3006

**In reality the PC market can be a scary place for the newcomer**