

Easy PCs

The most powerful PC is useless if you can't find the 'on' button. 'Plug and play' usability is of key importance to the novice, so the PCW team went looking for a PC that's as easy as A B C...

For most of you reading this, the millennium has been and gone, you've done the partying, got the hangover and broken your resolutions. The famous millennium bug has either reared its ugly head and caused a global meltdown, or reached an anti-climax.

We're assuming the latter, and that if you put off buying a new PC until the new year you are now ready to take the plunge. We've targeted the PC novice – those who thought they'd play safe and wait until 2000 to buy a new system.

In judging the systems, we focused heavily on the out-of-the-box experience. We tried to put ourselves into the shoes of the inexperienced user and asked ourselves how easy it was to put the PC together – for example, had the manufacturer supplied us with an easy-to-read wall chart, and were the peripherals correctly colour-coded?

We set a price limit of £999 ex VAT, but including delivery and any credit card surcharge. The manufacturers were given a minimum specification of 128MB of RAM, a must in any new PC, as well as a DVD drive. We also asked for a modem, an office suite and at least a 17in monitor, but we left the choice of processor open.

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• PCs reviewed by Will Head and Jason Jenkins.
Tested by David Eade, Will Head and Jason Jenkins.

Ratings

- ★★★★★ Buy while stocks last
- ★★★★ Great buy
- ★★★ Good buy
- ★★ Shop around
- ★ Not recommended





Atlas Meridian A500W

Atlas pulled out all the stops with an impressive machine that nearly wins an award, but misses out due to a lack of attention to detail. The core of the system, a 500MHz Athlon processor, is a fair compromise between value and performance. 128MB of RAM sits in a single DIMM on the MSI motherboard.

One component that really stands out is the excellent

17in CTX Professional 705F monitor. The Sony Trinitron tube is clear and crisp: you could stare at it for hours without feeling tired.

Build quality is fairly good, although Atlas has made an error that could cause a few technical support calls: there was no CD audio cable on our system. Another annoying aspect is the by-now familiar hole in the back plate for a fan with nothing in front of it.

The only poor component choice was the Guillemot TNT2 M64 graphics card that is crippled by its slower memory interface. An Aureal Vortex 2 with an optical digital out port sits in a PCI slot along with a Diamond SupraExpress modem.

A good selection of drives are included: a 13.5GB IBM Deskstar hard drive, Panasonic Zip 100 for backup and a Hitachi DVD-ROM for your films and software.

If a novice tried to set up this machine on their own,

they may find it slightly more difficult than other PCs here. There's no wall chart as in other systems and the peripherals are not colour-coded. This shouldn't be much of a problem, though, as Atlas is one of the few manufacturers that supplies an engineer who comes out and installs and configures the machine for you.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Atlas 07000 285 275

www.atlasplc.com

Good points Excellent monitor, Zip drive and installation engineer included

Bad points Lack of CD audio cable, graphics card

Conclusion A well-rounded system that just misses out on an award this time

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★



Big Red Phantom

Big Red supplied us with a machine based on the 500MHz Athlon processor which, once again, produced a higher SYSmark score than equivalently clocked Pentium IIIs. This, combined with a Voodoo3 3000 graphics card with an S-Video port, meant that it achieved a reasonable 3DMark score as well.

The cheaper of the two current SoundBlaster Live! cards, the SoundBlaster Live! 1024, sits in a PCI slot.

128MB of memory fills a single socket on the MSI motherboard. The 15.2GB IBM Deskstar hard drive is slightly larger than others in this test and will be ample for most users. The 17in shadow mask E771 Viewsonic monitor is, once again, a fairly solid choice, although there are better models here. A Panasonic DVD-ROM and Rockwell modem complete the setup.

Build quality is generally good, but we were a bit concerned about the choice of case. Although some may appreciate the individual look that the black plastic surround gives this unit, the inside was not so cool. When we opened the case after running the machine for a few days, the inside was exceptionally warm which may cause problems.

Big Red did not give us the best out-of-the-box experience. The company opted for a three-page A4

document rather than a wall chart to guide novices through the setup process.

We found the layout a bit dense and the language too technical for some users and none of the peripherals were colour-coded. Overall the Phantom is a fair machine, but other manufacturers have provided us with systems more suited to first-time buyers.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999)

Contact Big Red 08700 711 117

www.bigred.co.uk

Good points Appropriate combination of graphics card and processor

Bad points Lack of removable storage case

Conclusion A fair system, but not one that we would recommend for the novice

Build Quality	★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★
Overall Rating	★★★



Carrera Octan M600

Carrera provided a blisteringly fast Athlon 600MHz, but once again crippled the chip's 3D performance by using a TNT2 M64 graphics card. If you're paying for a fast processor, you should have a fast graphics card too, or you're wasting your money. Aside from that, Carrera has chosen some good components.

A basic Aureal sound card sits in a PCI slot. This version doesn't have an optical digital out port, but it does support A3D. Inside the case, the most unusual feature is the Asus K7M motherboard, although the VIA chipset doesn't appear to have given this machine any discernible performance boost in our bench tests. The E-Tech modem has a useful pass-through port for your phone to plug in to.

The 13.5GB IBM Deskstar hard drive supports UDMA66 and should be large enough for most users. A Panasonic DVD-ROM sits in a 5.25in bay, leaving a further three free. The 17in Hansol 710A shadow mask monitor also makes a reappearance. It has an adequate display but could be both clearer and crisper.

Build quality is up to Carrera's high standards, with plenty of room for

upgrading. The office bundle is the competent Lotus SmartSuite Millennium.

Carrera's machine was not the best when it came to easy installation. The keyboard, mouse, leads and software were in separate boxes, there was no wall chart and only the mouse was colour-coded. This is a good system, but it doesn't quite gel for the novice user.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Carrera 020 8307 2811

www.carrera.co.uk

Good points Fast processor, good build quality

Bad points Graphics card, monitor could be better

Conclusion A fair system, but a novice user would have an easier time with another manufacturer

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★



Compaq Presario 5476

Compaq has decided to opt for a super-curved design for the new Presario range. Unfortunately we weren't particularly enamoured with it, but it'll no doubt appeal to some people.

Discounting the design of the case, it does offer some good features. On the front you'll find two USB ports, in addition to the two on the back, as well as a joystick port, which is clever thinking as no-one enjoys fumbling

around the back of a PC. On the downside, the case offers limited upgradability, with only two free 3.5in bays, and the hard drive bizarrely mounted in a 5.25in bay.

The heart of the machine is a 500MHz Celeron processor combined with 128MB of RAM. This base spec, coupled with an on-board graphics solution saw the Presario coming last in both the SYSmark and 3DMark results.

The machine has adequate storage on the 10GB Quantum hard drive, but no removable storage.

The keyboard features 'Internet' keys, similar to Microsoft's new range of keyboards, allowing one-key access to the web.

In addition, there are keys to control audio CDs and a sleep button thankfully placed well away from the rest of the keyboard so you don't accidentally

put the machine in a doze.

Pioneer supplies the DVD-ROM, with sound coming from an on-board solution piped into a set of JBL Pro speakers. The out-of-the-box experience was good – the whole system arrived in just two boxes, all connectors were colour-coded and the quick setup sheet was simple and easy to follow.

PCW DETAILS

Price £999 (£850.21 ex VAT)

Contact Compaq 0845 270 4000

www.compaq.co.uk

Good points Very easy to set up. USB and game ports on front

Bad points Under-powered for the price. On-board sound and graphics

Conclusion While power is less of an issue here there are better machines available for the money

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★
Value for Money	★★★
Overall Rating	★★★



Dan Dantum Cel500/NU

Dan decided to opt for a 500MHz Celeron processor with 128MB of RAM for its first-time buyer offering. It gains points for upgradability as the Celeron has been mounted on a 'socket', allowing the processor to be replaced with a Slot 1 CPU such as the Pentium III at a later date without having to replace the motherboard.

In terms of performance, the Celeron was no match for the Pentium IIIs and Athlons, but it is still adequate for the first-time buyer. Although Dan chose a dual-head Matrox Millennium G400 card, the benefit in the 3DMark results was not seen due to the slower processor. While the dual-head functionality would be a benefit to the power user, it's unlikely to be used by a novice. That said it's still a great inclusion.

Creative's components have been put to work in the multimedia department, with SoundBlaster PCI 128 and a six-speed DVD-ROM. The Jazz Studio speakers included with the machine were an unusual 'ocean blue' colour, but unfortunately did not match the translucent purple of the system box and mouse, making the whole package look a bit of a mismatch. Dan has assured us the unit was meant to arrive with purple speakers.

The out-of-the-box experience could have been

better. The step-by-step sheet was good, but only once we'd found it under everything else in the box. The system featured no colour-coding for plugs.

Under the hood, the layout was neat with all the cables routed tidily out of the way. On the software side, Dan has taken the Lotus route, bundling SmartSuite Millennium for the office productivity side of things.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,050.45 (£894 ex VAT)

Contact Dan Technology

020 8830 1100

www.dan.co.uk

Good points Good graphics card

Bad points Setup could have been easier

Conclusion Not the most suitable machine for the first-time buyer, but it has some good features

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★



Dell Dimension XPS T500



Setting up the Dell was an absolute breeze. Open the box and the first thing you encounter is an easy-to-follow leaflet with instructions about what goes where. After extracting the case, monitor and peripherals the job was made even easier due to the colour-

coding on all the connectors. For the first-time buyer this

sort of ease of use is essential.

In terms of specification the machine was adequate, comprising a 500MHz Pentium III processor and 128MB of RAM. 13GB of storage came courtesy of a Maxtor hard drive, but unfortunately there was no removable storage.

3D performance from the Diamond Viper V770 card, using nVidia's Riva TNT2 chipset, saw the Dell in the middle of the 3DMark group. The output of the card was sent to a Dell-branded 17in monitor. A Samsung eight-speed DVD-ROM and Creative's SoundBlaster Live! Value provided multimedia with proficient sound reproduction from the Harmon Kardon HK195 speakers, complete with colour-coded cable. As well as a US Robotics V.90 modem, the Dell comes with an HP Deskjet 610 printer which provides plenty of functionality for the first-time user. Topping off the bundle was a copy of Microsoft Works Suite 99.

While the Dell machine was not the most feature-packed or fastest on test, all the components were well considered and appropriate for the

first-time buyer. To the uninitiated, setting up a PC can be a daunting prospect, but the process has been made as simple as possible. In terms of simplicity and ease of use the Dell was second to none, resulting in a well-deserved Editor's Choice award.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Dell Computers

0870 152 4850

www.dell.co.uk

Good points Colour-coding on all peripherals. Well considered components

Bad points Not the fastest machine in the test

Conclusion Dell has obviously considered the target market for this machine and put together a bundle that's perfect for the task at hand

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★
Value for Money	★★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★★



Elonex WebRider

Quite why Elonex has chosen to call this machine the WebRider is a mystery, as we can see no reason why it 'rides' the web better than any other machine with a modem. The core of the system is a 500MHz Pentium III and 128MB of SDRAM, placing it in the middle of the field in terms of performance.

Unpacking the Elonex was simple enough, and we were initially pleased to see a 'step-by-step' sheet to guide

the first-time user through setup. Unfortunately, the content of the sheet was a little advanced, referring to ECP parallel ports, AT keyboards (even though the WebRider had a PS/2 model) and was dripping with jargon. However, this shouldn't be a problem, as the price includes onsite installation by an engineer.

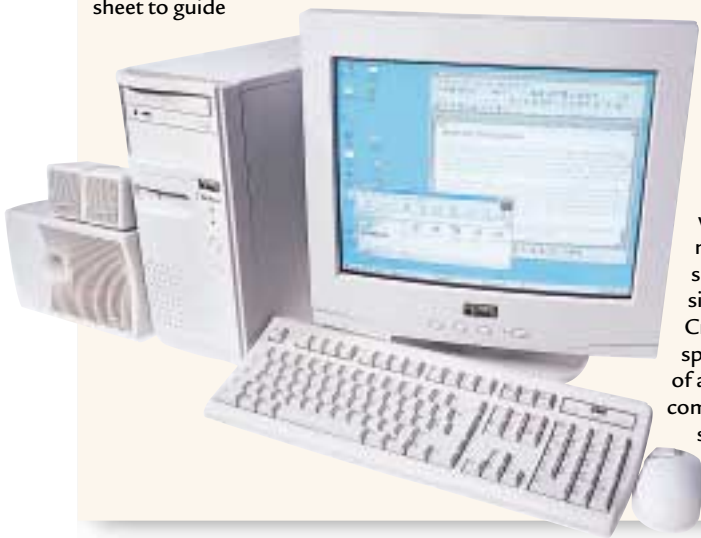
Graphics come from a Winfast TNT2 model 64-based card connected to an Elonex-branded 17in monitor. The use

of a model 64 saw the Elonex sitting in the middle of the group again on 3D performance.

Multimedia takes the form of a Sony six-speed DVD-ROM, with an integrated motherboard sound solution supplying the signal for a set of Creative PC Works speakers. The inclusion of an LS-120 drive was commendable, providing simple and easy backup for the non-technical user. To

justify its name, the WebRider features a 56K US Robotics internal modem.

The small case meant things were cramped and upgrade potential was limited. This may appear unimportant to the first-time buyer, but it could be a problem if they later decided to upgrade. On the software front, a copy of MS Office 2000 SBE was included, adding significant value to the package.



PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Elonex

0800 037 4466

www.elonex.co.uk

Good points LS120 drive. Microsoft Office 2000 SBE

Bad points Poor setup sheet

Conclusion A fair machine that just slightly missed the mark

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★

Evesham 500 Athlon TNT2

The 500MHz Athlon processor coupled with 128MB of SDRAM saw the Evesham sitting around the middle of the SYSmark results. Included in the package was a whopping 20GB hard drive from Maxtor, providing more than ample storage, and a 100MB internal Zip drive to safeguard important files. In terms of removable storage, the Zip drive is ideal for the first-time user due to its simple operation and widespread adoption.

3D performance was a little disappointing, mainly due to use of a TNT2 model 64 card, which fails to deliver impressive graphics acceleration, but again this is less of an issue for the first-time buyer. Creative has been chosen for the multimedia peripherals, providing the SoundBlaster 128 PCI sound card, CSW52 speakers and a five-speed DVD-ROM drive.

The machine offered limited upgradability, with only single free 3.5in and 5.25in bays. Inside, the layout was extremely tidy with all the wires

neatly tied back and secured. Should the buyer to decide to have a go at upgrading in years to come there will be no nasty surprises.

Evesham has unfortunately missed out on the colour-coded peripherals, with only the mouse exhibiting any colouring at all. The out-of-the-box experience was good, but could have

been better. The manuals were arranged somewhat randomly in the box containing the system. Once these were located the 'Read this first' card was useful, with a step-by-step flow chart to guide the new user through the setup procedure.

On the whole Evesham provided a solid contender that was only let down in a couple of areas.



PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Evesham Micros

0800 038 0800

www.evesham.com

Good points Good setup sheet. Zip drive

Bad points No colour-coding

Conclusion A good machine that doesn't quite make it easy enough for the first-time buyer

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★

Gateway Performance 500



Gateway has tried to simplify the out-of-the-box experience, and the simple setup sheet was comprehensive and well targeted at the first-time buyer. The machine itself featured colour-coded peripherals, which makes setup less of a struggle for the inexperienced PC buyer.

The machine is based on a 500MHz Pentium III processor with 128MB of RAM sitting

in one of the three available DIMM slots. SYSmark results did not see the system excel, but this is less of a factor in this group test. A 16MB Voodoo3 graphics card yielded better 3D performance, pushing the Gateway further up the field. The 17in monitor was a Gateway-branded model providing an adequate display. But the IBM hard drive provided only 6GB of storage, which is a little small by today's standards, and no removable storage option was included.

A Panasonic DVD-ROM has been chosen, along with a Creative SoundBlaster 128 sound card and Creative's Cambridge Soundworks GCS200 speaker system. The system case provides ample upgradability, but unfortunately the floppy bay takes up the same amount of space as a 5.25in bay which is wasteful and looks unsightly.

Inside the PC, the wires were a bit of a

mess, with the DVD audio cable being used to tie up the power cables. In general, the Gateway offers good setup and ease-of-use, but it is let down in other areas. That said, if you're looking for an easy-to-set-up first PC with a solid spec, the Gateway is definitely worth a look.



PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Gateway
0800 552000

www.gw2k.co.uk/

Good points Easy to set up. Colour-coded peripherals

Bad points Small hard drive.

Untidy inside

Conclusion The hard disk may be small but the ease of use wins through

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★

Lexon Ultima 702

Lexon submitted the fastest Intel chip in this group test, in the form of a 600MHz Pentium III. The CPU was coupled with 128MB of SDRAM and was only beaten by the 600MHz Athlons from Panrix and Carrera. However, power is not the main focus of this group test as we were more interested in a machine's suitability for the first-time buyer.

Out of the box, Lexon could have done better. There was no quick-start sheet to walk you through the basics, with the

documentation and software in a padded bag stuffed down the side. The peripherals were not colour-coded, which can significantly hinder the uninitiated in setting up a new PC. Unfortunately, the review machine that arrived in our labs had no monitor cable in any of the boxes.

Graphics came from a 32MB Diamond Viper V770, based on the Riva TNT2 chipset, and resulting in the Lexon sneaking to the top of the 3DMark results. To make use of this fine graphics card, the impressive LG Flatron 795FT plus monitor has been employed. The monitor also includes a USB hub, located at the rear of the unit which limits its usefulness.

Sound comes courtesy of Creative's PCI 128 card and a set of Labtec's LCS-1030 speakers, with colour-coded plugs to match the sound card's output. Not necessarily appropriate for the first-time buyer, Lexon chose to bundle a Mitsumi CD-RW

with the machine whereas a Zip or LS-120 would be more user-friendly.

On the software side, Lexon has generously opted to include Office 2000 Professional – the premium productivity suite – which will let the user delve into its intricacies as their knowledge increases.



PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Lexon Technology
01442 241 700

www.lexonpc.com

Good points Fast machine. Quality components. Office 2000 Professional

Bad points Setup could have been easier. Some of the components were not the best choice for the first-time buyer

Conclusion A good machine for the more experienced user, but poorly targeted at the first-time buyer

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★

Mesh Matrix 500 Pro

Mesh chose to base its system on a 500MHz Athlon and 128MB of RAM, putting it just above the middle of the group in the SYSmark results. The 13GB Quantum hard drive is thoughtfully coupled with an internal Iomega Zip 100 drive to provide simple and easy backup and transport of files. Unfortunately, the Zip drive is mounted in a 5.25in bay, with an external 3.5in bay being left vacant below.

3DMark results saw the machine lower down, due to the use of a Creative Riva TNT2 model 64-based card. Mesh's generous offering of a Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 710 17in monitor produced a display that was a joy to work with and should raise few complaints.

A Pioneer DVD-ROM and SoundBlaster Live! 1024 have been employed on the multimedia front with four-point surround speakers also from Creative. While four-point

surround is a good feature, it is a bit of a pain to set up, especially for the first-time buyer. Completing the hardware side of things, a Diamond SupraExpress V.90 modem provides the connection to the Internet.

Out of the box, Mesh scored well for including a folder containing all the software and manuals, but lost a

point for not including a quick setup sheet. That, coupled with the lack of colour-coded peripherals meant the Mesh wasn't the easiest to set up.

Inside the case everything was neat and tidy with two free 3.5in bays and one 5.25in on offer for future expansion. Topping off the package was a copy of Corel's Word Perfect Office 2000.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Mesh Computers

020 8208 4706

www.meshplc.co.uk

Good points Quality monitor. Zip drive

Bad points Could have been easier to set up

Conclusion While the machine was good, it was not especially well targeted at the first-time buyer and it was more suitable for someone with a bit more experience

Build Quality	★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★



Panrix Force



Full marks to Panrix for being one of the few manufacturers to choose a suitable graphics card to accompany a fast processor. The 600MHz Athlon processor, together with a 32MB single-head Matrox Millennium G400 graphics card meant this machine was near the top for SYSmark and 3DMark results.

In common with Carrera, Panrix has opted for an Asus K7M motherboard that uses the VIA chipset. This version,

however, has VIA's on-board sound solution. Build quality is exceptional, with two fans mounted on the processor that should prevent any overheating issues. A Samsung SD-606F DVD drive lets you watch smooth-playing DVDs using the Cinemaster PowerDVD player that comes bundled with the graphics card. The 17in Hitachi CM650ET monitor is a fairly good shadow mask model and a pair of basic Labtec speakers are also included. A

Diamond SupraExpress modem and Lotus SmartSuite Millennium complete the round-up.

Panrix is a strong contender for the best out-of-the-box experience, although Dell and Gateway have the edge. The keyboard, mouse and leads were placed in a box at the top of the case. A wall chart shows

you how to get started in six easy steps, although it reminded us of the diagrams you see included with Ikea furniture. However, there was no colour-coding on the peripherals or monitor cable.

Despite these gripes, it remains a good, well-rounded system and deserves its Highly Commended status.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Panrix

0113 244 4958

www.panrix.com

Good points Fast processor and graphics card

Bad points No removable storage

Conclusion A well-rounded system that is not quite as easy to set up as Dell and Gateway's PCs, but is still good enough to win a Highly Commended

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★★



Simply Systemax Pro 500

Simply gave us a good system that comes bundled with a basic Canon printer and scanner. A parallel port expansion card is situated in an ISA slot to avoid any bi-directional problems associated with pass-through ports.

Built around a Pentium III 500MHz processor, this machine produced slightly higher-than-average benchmark scores. The 128MB of RAM is housed in a single DIMM, leaving two

memory slots free on the AOpen motherboard. A single-head 16MB Matrox Millennium G400 graphics card sits in the AGP slot and helps the Systemax to score fairly well on 3DMark.

The Aureal Vortex 2 sound card is an excellent choice. Its optical digital out port together with A3D support gives you maximum flexibility and high-quality sound.

The office suite is the latest version of Works, Worksuite 2000. This is adequate for the majority of users, but is not as fully featured as Lotus SmartSuite Millennium or Microsoft's Office 2000.

A 13GB Fujitsu hard drive provides a fair complement of storage capacity, while a Pioneer DVD-ROM drive lets you watch movies smoothly with the supplied MPEG2 player.

The Systemax was slightly easier than others to set up out of the box. All the software, cables and so on were at the top of the box together with a wall chart. Having said that, we didn't feel the language used in the wall chart was

appropriate for the novice user and was more likely to confuse than actually help.

The 17in Taxan Ergovision 735 TCO99 monitor is Taxan's lowest-end 17in shadow mask monitor, but the display is still both clear and crisp and it has a four-port powered USB hub located in its base.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Simply Computers

08707 297 366

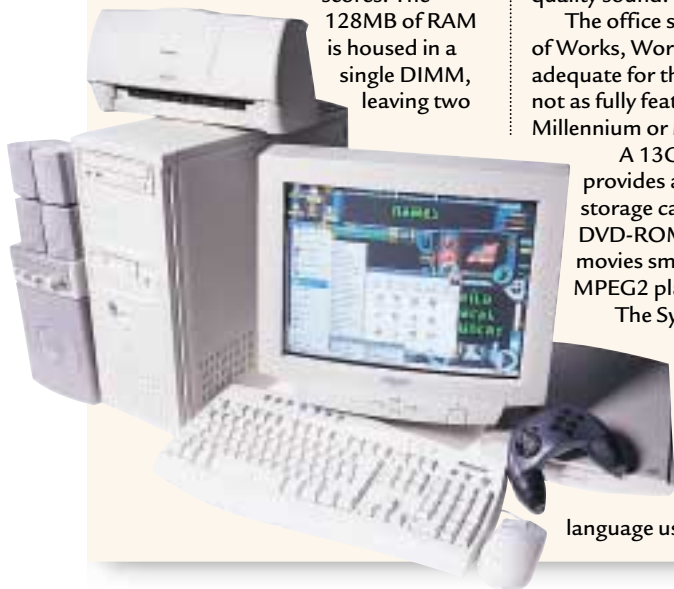
www.simply.co.uk

Good points Sound card, monitor, scanner and printer included

Bad points No removable storage, could have a better wall chart and office suite

Conclusion A good system that only just loses out to the competition

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★



SMC Direct Infinite DVD Gamer

This is the first time we have seen a system from SMC, and it's a fairly promising debut, although it doesn't win any awards. The core of this unit is a Pentium III 450 processor which, although adequate for most office tasks and watching DVDs, helps it to score one of the lower SYSmark results here. Having said that, the 16MB Matrox Millennium G400 graphics card is a good

choice. It's interesting to note that this card helps it beat other machines with faster processors in our 3DMark tests.

The monitor is also a good choice. The 17in DiamondTron Iiyama Vision Master Pro 410 has a clear, crisp display and will refresh at 70Hz at 1,600 x 1,200. Importantly, build quality is good, with a tidy interior. The 10.2GB Maxtor hard drive is a slightly measly choice, but will still be more than adequate for the majority of users. The

keyboard and mouse both deserve a mention: the mouse uses the excellent new IntelliEye from Microsoft which uses an optical sensor rather than a roller ball. Microsoft's Internet Keyboard is a solid choice and has additional buttons that speed up web surfing.

Lotus SmartSuite Millennium is a good office bundle, and the SoundBlaster Live! 1024 is a popular choice. The keyboard, mouse and software were all in a box

at the top of the case, together with a booklet on how to put your PC together.

There was no wall chart as with other machines. The keyboard and mouse were correctly colour-coded, but the monitor was not. Overall this is a good first system from SMC, but there are better buys for the uninitiated.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact SMC Direct

01753 550 333

www.smcdirect.com

Good points Monitor and graphics card

Bad points We would have liked to have seen a faster processor and better instructions for the novice

Conclusion A promising debut from SMC, but it doesn't win any awards this time

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★



Viglen HomePro P3-500Fwr

Based on a Pentium III 500MHz processor, this machine came mid-table in our SYSmark bench test. The most unusual component in it was ATI's new card, the Rage 128 Pro. This is the card's first appearance in one of our group test PCs and it certainly appears to be fast, but not as fast as the TNT2 Ultra. This version had S-Video out, composite out and composite in ports.

The system came with ATI's multimedia centre

pre-loaded, through which you can play DVDs and video CDs, watch TV and even do some video editing.

A Pioneer DVD-ROM, 128MB of RAM in a single DIMM and a US Robotics modem are all decent component choices. There's also a SoundBlaster Live! 1024 card in a PCI slot that has a digital out port for compatible speakers. A Panasonic LS-120 drive is housed in a 3.5in bay and combines maximum compatibility with high-capacity media.

The ADi E55 monitor is not one of the best here, but it is decent enough. Build quality, though, is excellent. As you would expect from a manufacturer that has been established this long, Viglen's out-of-the-box effort was not at all bad, but it was not quite



up to the high standards of Gateway or Dell. The mouse, keyboard, cables and manuals were all in a box at the top of the case together with a good wall chart to get novices going. The mouse and keyboard were colour-coded, but the monitor was not.

Overall, a good all-rounder from Viglen which is most notable for the first appearance of ATI's new graphics card.

PCW DETAILS

Price £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)

Contact Viglen 020 8758 7000

www.viglen.co.uk

Good points The inclusion of a removable storage device

Bad points Could have a better monitor

Conclusion A good system, but there are slightly better buys here for the novice

Build Quality	★★★★★
Performance	★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★
Overall Rating	★★★★

Creative tunes up sound cards

Not content with inventing the standard to which all other sound cards must comply, Creative has been hard at work refining its successful range of SoundBlaster Live! cards, resulting in the introduction of two new cards: the SoundBlaster Live! Platinum, replacing the original Live!, and the SoundBlaster Live! Player 1024, replacing the Live! Value. The Platinum is aimed at the high end of the market, with the Player 1024 satisfying the needs of the average user.

Previously if you bought the Live! Value and then decided that you needed or wanted the functionality of the full Live! there was no upgrade option available other than ditching the old card and purchasing the full version. This has all changed now as the main difference between the Platinum and the Player 1024, except the bundled software, is that the Platinum comes with the Live! Drive II which sits in a 5.25in drive bay and connects to the extension port on the card. The Live! Drive II offers digital input and output as well as analog connectors.

The Player 1024 features the same EMU10K1 digital signal processor from E-mu Systems as the original. On the input side of things you'll find line and microphone in on the back of the card with internal connectors for a modem, auxiliary device, audio CD-ROM and SPDIF digital CD-ROM. Output takes the form of two analog line outs and a



PLAYER 1024 IS AIMED AT THE AVERAGE USER

digital out jack, suitable for connection to Creative's range of

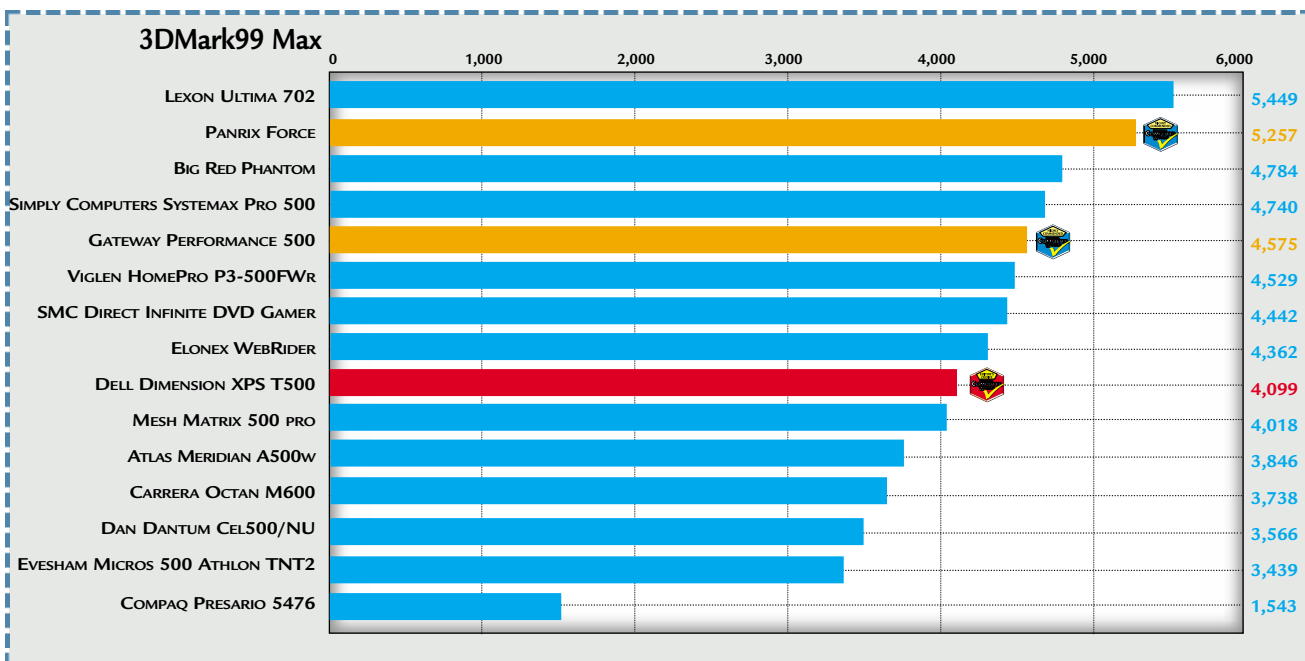
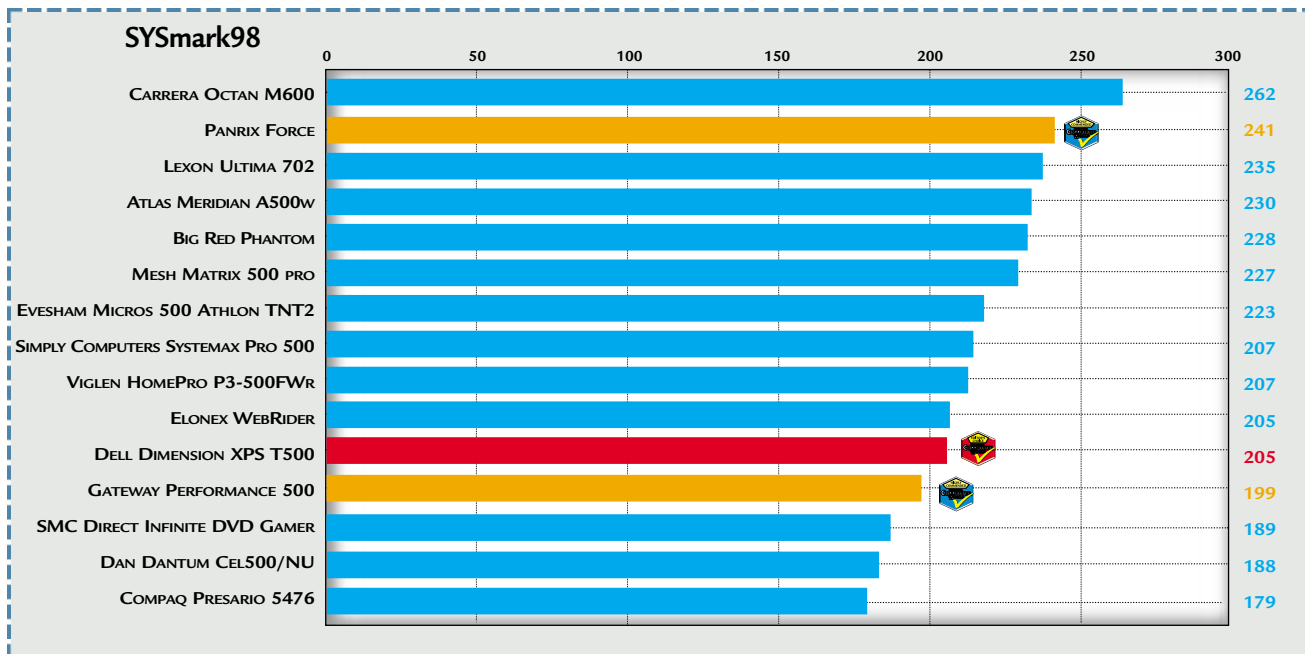
digital speakers.

The bundled software covers a very broad range of applications. There's a full copy Aliens vs Predator for the gaming fans. For those who want to manipulate recorded music there's Creative's PlayCenter, AudioHQ, WaveStudio and Digital Audio Centre. And for those that enjoy working with a talking parrot flying around their screen, there's Prody the virtual assistant. In the box you'll also find copies of LAVA! (Live! Audio Visual Animation), MediaRing Talk and Soft DVD.



CREATIVE HAS OVERCOME THE LACK OF UPGRADABILITY

PCW Labs Report



How we did the tests



■ **SYSmark** measures the time it takes a PC to perform tasks in 14 common office and content-creation apps. Each test is run three times to ensure consistency. Tests include:

➤ **Office productivity:**

CorelDraw 8, Excel 97, NaturallySpeaking 2.02, Netscape Communicator 4.05, OmniPage Pro 8.0, Paradox 8, PowerPoint 97 and Word 97.

➤ **Content creation:**

MetaCreations Bryce 2, Avid Elastic Reality 3.1, Macromedia

Extreme 3D 2, Photoshop 4.01, Adobe Premiere 4.2, and XingMPEG Encoder 2.1.

■ **3DMark99 Max** is an instruction-set optimised version of 3DMark99 from Futuremark Corporation, which tests the 3D capabilities of PCs. When applicable, the suite of tests will draw on AMD's 3DNow! or Intel's KNI instruction sets. It uses a Real World DirectX 6.1 3D game engine to produce one result from a balanced testing methodology that includes image quali-

ty, rendering speed, CPU capability and, depending on hardware support, a test for embossed bump-mapping. All tests are performed at 1,024 x 768 resolution in 16bit colour depth with the test suites set to loop three times. The higher the score, the better the result. However, due to the implementation of instruction-set optimisation, the results from the original 3DMark99 and the Max version are not comparable. See www.3dmark.com.

Table of features



MANUFACTURER	ATLAS	BIG RED	CARRERA	COMPAQ	DAN	DELL	ELONEX
MODEL NAME	MERIDIAN A500W	PHANTOM	OCTAN M600	PRESARIO 5476	DANTUM CEL500/NU	DIMENSION XPS T500	WEBRIDER
Price (ex VAT)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£999 (£824.18)	£1,050.45 (£894)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,169.13 (£995)
Telephone	07000 285 275	08700 711 117	020 8307 2811	0845 270 4000	020 8830 1100	0870 152 4850	0800 037 4466
Fax	020 8532 6517	08700 733 337	020 8307 2850	0845 270 4100	020 8830 1122		020 8452 7444
URL	www.atlaspc.com	www.bigred.co.uk	www.carrera.co.uk	www.compaq.co.uk	www.dan.co.uk	www.dell.co.uk	www.elonex.co.uk
HARDWARE SPECS							
Processor	Athlon 500MHz	Athlon 500MHz	Athlon 600MHz	Celeron 500MHz	Celeron 500MHz	Pentium III 500MHz	Pentium III 500MHz
RAM/Type	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM
Occupied RAM slots/spare RAM slots	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/1	1/2	1/2	1/1
Max memory in this configuration	640MB	640MB	640MB	384MB	640MB	640MB	384MB
Max memory supported by motherboard	768MB	768MB	768MB	512MB	768MB	768MB	512MB
Hard disk (manufacturer & model)	IBM Deskstar	IBM Deskstar	IBM Deskstar	Quantum	IBM Deskstar	Maxtor DiamondMax	Fujitsu AT
HD size/interface	13.5GB/EIDE	15.2GB/EIDE	13.5GB/EIDE	10GB/EIDE	13GB/EIDE	13.6GB/EIDE	13.6GB/EIDE
Storage drive model & manufacturer	Panasonic Zip	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Panasonic LS-120
Size of storage drive media	100MB	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	120MB
Storage drive interface	IDE	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	IDE
MOTHERBOARD COMPONENTS							
Motherboard manufacturer	MSI	MSI	Asus	Compaq	Supermicro	Intel	MSI
Model/chipset	AMD	AMD	VIA	810	BX	BX	ZX
L2 cache	512K	512K	512K	128K	128K	512K	512K
EXPANSION AND I/O							
No of 3.5/5.25in bays	4/3	3/3	3/4	3/2	4/2	5/2	3/2
No of free 3.5/5.25in bays	1/3	1/2	1/3	2/0	2/1	3/1	1/1
No of PCI/ISA/shared slots	4/1/1	4/1/1	4/0/1	4/0/0	3/2/1	4/0/1	2/0/1
No of free PCI/ISA/shared slots	2/1/1	2/1/1	2/0/1	3/0/0	2/1/1	2/0/1	1/0/1
No of USB/serial/parallel/PS2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/1	4/2/1/2	4/1/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/1/1/2	2/2/1/2
MULTIMEDIA							
DVD-ROM manufacturer	Hitachi	Panasonic	Matsushita	Pioneer	Creative	Samsung	Sony
DVD-ROM speed/interface	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	8x/EIDE	6x/EIDE
Sound card manufacturer	Aureal	Creative Labs	Aureal	ESS Tech	Creative Labs	Creative Labs	Creative Labs
Sound card model	Vortex 2	SB Live! 1024	Vortex AU8830	On-board	SB 128 PCI	SB Live! Value	On-board
Speakers (manufacturer & model)	Diamond DPM-2012	3D 103	Altec Lansing ACS43	JBL Pro	Jazz Studio	Harmon Kardon HK195	Creative CSW100
Graphics card manufacturer & model	Guillemot 32MB	3dfx Voodoo3 3000	Guillemot TNT2 M64	On-board	Matrox G400	Diamond Viper V770	Winfast S320 TNT2
Chipset	Riva TNT2 M64	Voodoo3	Riva TNT2 M64	Intel 810	G400	Riva TNT2	Riva TNT2 M64
RAM/max RAM and type	32MB/32MB/ SDRAM	16MB/16MB/ SDRAM	32MB/32MB/ SDRAM	16MB/128MB/ SDRAM	16MB/16MB/ SDRAM	32MB/32MB/ SDRAM	32MB/32MB/ SDRAM
Graphics card interface	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP
Monitor manufacturer & model	CTX PR 705F FD Trinitron	Viewsonic E771	Hansol 710A	Compaq MV720	CTX/VL700	Dell M770	Elonex 17in SVGA
Monitor size/max viewable diagonal	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/15.9in	17in/16in	17in/16in
Max resolution and refresh	1,600x1,200/67Hz	1,280x1,024/66Hz	1,280x1,024/60Hz	1,280x1,024/60Hz	1,280x1,024/60Hz	1,280x1,024/60Hz	1,280x1,024/60Hz
OTHER INFORMATION							
Modem manufacturer & model	Diamond Supra 56K	Rockwell 56K	E-tech 56K	Diamond Supra 56K	MRI/56K Internal	US Robotics 56K	US Robotics 56K
Highest supported modem standard	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90
Misc hardware	None	None	None	None	None	HP DJ610 Printer	None
Bundled software	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Works Suite 99	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Works Suite 99	MS Office 2000 SBE
Standard warranty	Inst +1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site	2 yrs on-site	1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site + 2 yrs C&R	Inst +1 yr on-site



EVESHAM MICROS	GATEWAY	LEXON	MESH	PANRIX	SIMPLY COMPUTERS	SMC DIRECT	VIGLEN
500 ATHLON TNT2	PERFORMANCE 500	ULTIMA 702	MATRIX 500 PRO	FORCE	SYSTEMAX PRO 500	INFINITE DVD GAMER	HOMEPRO P3-500FWR
£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.82 (£999)	£1,173.93 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)	£1,173.83 (£999)
0800 038 0800	0800 55 2000	01442 241 700	020 8208 4706	0113 244 4958	08707 297 366	01753 550 333	020 8758 7000
01386 769 795	+353 1848 2022	01442 218 300	020 8208 4493	0113 244 4962	08707 274 020	01753 524 443	020 8758 7080
www.evesham.com	www.gw2k.co.uk	www.lexonpc.com	www.meshplc.co.uk	www.panrix.com	www.simply.co.uk	www.smcdirect.com	www.viglen.co.uk
Athlon 500MHz	Pentium III 500MHz	Pentium III 600MHz	Athlon 500MHz	Athlon 600MHz	Pentium III 500MHz	Pentium III 450MHz	Pentium III 500MHz
128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM	128MB/SDRAM
1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2
640MB	640MB	640MB	640MB	640MB	640MB	640MB	640MB
768MB	768MB	768MB	768MB	768MB	768MB	768MB	768MB
Maxtor DiamondMax	IBM Deskstar	IBM Deskstar	Quantum	IBM Deskstar	Fujitsu AT	Maxtor DiamondMax	Western Digital
20GB/EIDE	6GB/EIDE	25.2GB/EIDE	13GB/EIDE	18GB/EIDE	13GB/EIDE	10.2GB/EIDE	13.6GB/EIDE
Panasonic Zip	n/a	Mitsumi CD-RW	Imomega Zip	n/a	n/a	n/a	Panasonic LS-120
100MB	n/a	640MB	100MB	n/a	n/a	n/a	120MB
IDE	n/a	IDE	IDE	n/a	n/a	n/a	IDE
MSI	Intel	Abit	Microstar	Asus	AOpen	Abit	MSI
AMD	BX	BX	AMD	Via	BX	BX	BX
512K	512K	512K	512K	512K	512K	512K	512K
3/3	5/3	3/4	4/3	3/2	3/3	4/2	4/2
1/1	3/2	1/2	2/1	1/2	1/2	2/1	2/1
4/1/1	4/0/1	4/1/1	4/1/1	4/0/1	4/1/1	4/1/1	3/2/1
2/1/1	3/0/0	2/1/1	2/1/1	3/0/1	2/1/1	2/1/1	1/2/1
2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2
Creative	Panasonic	Panasonic	Pioneer	Samsung	Pioneer	Pioneer	Pioneer
5x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	10x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	10x/EIDE	10x/EIDE	10x/EIDE
Creative Labs	Creative Labs	Creative Labs	Creative Labs	Via	Aureal	Creative Labs	Creative Labs
SB 128 PCI	SB 128 PCI	SB 128 PCI	SB Live! 1024	On-board	Vortex 2	SB Live! 1024	SB Live! 1024
Creative CSW52	Creative GCS200	Labtec LCS-1030	Creative 4 Point Surround	Labtec LCS-1030	Teac Powermax 500	Philips MMS110	Altec Lansing + sub ACS33
Chaintech Desperado	Voodoo3 3000	Diamond Viper V770	Creative Riva TNT2	Matrox G400	Matrox G400	Matrox G400	ATI 128 Pro Fury
Riva TNT2 M64	Voodoo3	Riva TNT2	Riva TNT2 M64	G400	G400	G400	ATI Rage 128 Pro
32MB/32MB/SDRAM	16MB/16MB/SDRAM	32MB/32MB/SDRAM	32MB/32MB/SDRAM	32MB/32MB/SDRAM	16MB/16MB/SDRAM	16MB/16MB/SDRAM	32MB/32MB/SDRAM
AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP	AGP
Vibrant VM71RDA-E01	Gateway EV700	LG 795FT+ Flatron	Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 710	Hitachi CM650 GT	Taxan Ergovision EV735 TC099	Iiyama VisionMaster Pro 410	Viglen OEM/Envy 17AP
17in/16in	17in/15.9in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in	17in/16in
1,280x1,024/60Hz	1,600x1,200/60Hz	1,600x1,200/75Hz	1,600x1,200/60Hz	1,600x1,200/60Hz	1,280x1,024/65Hz	1,600x1,200/75Hz	1,280x1,024/160Hz
Diamond Supra 56K	56K Winbledon	Diamond Supra 56K	Diamond Supra 56K	Diamond Supra 56K	Adtel 56k	Diamond Supra 56K	US Robotics 56K
V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90	V.90
None	None	None	None	None	Canon BJC1000 printer Canon FB320 Scanner	None	MS Sidewinder Joystick
Lotus SmartSuite Entertainment	MS Works Suite 99	MS Office 2000 Pro	Corel Word Perfect MS Office 2000	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Works Suite 2000	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Works Suite 99 Games Bundle 99
2 yrs on-site	1 yr on-site + 2 yrs RTB	1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site + 2 yrs RTB	1 yr on-site + 2 yrs RTB	1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site	1 yr on-site

Editor's Choice

Buying a PC is still a daunting prospect for many, and this month we've focused our attentions on those who want the easiest initiation into the world of PC productivity. In the past few years, the industry has tried to get its act together and churn out units that appeal to first-time buyers rather than technical geniuses. Things are better than they were, but there is still a long way to go before turning on your PC is no more challenging than using the toaster.

Colour-coding was a problem for all but three of the manufacturers here. Only the massive buying power of Dell, Compaq and Gateway enabled them to provide us with a keyboard, mouse, monitor and speakers that had coloured connectors which matched the appropriate port. Quite a few of the companies opted for wall charts to

outline in simple steps

fast Pentium III 600MHz processor, TNT2 graphics card, LG Flatron monitor and CD-RW. We weren't impressed with the out-of-the-box presentation, though and this, combined with a missing monitor cable and the fact that a CD-RW could be confusing for a first-time user, robbed the company of an award. For the more technically minded among you, however, it's worth a look.

← Our Editor's Choice

this month goes to Dell's Dimension XPS T500. Although it was by no means the fastest machine here, it was the easiest to set up. The US giant makes much of the investment, time and thought it has put into refining its production process at every level, and this has clearly paid off. It had all the relevant software, cables

and peripherals in a box at the top, together with an excellent wall chart. Each peripheral was colour-coded and you even get a basic HP printer in the bargain.

← Our first Highly Commended

GATEWAY GETS AN AWARD FOR PUTTING EASE OF USE OVER PERFORMANCE

award goes to Gateway for its Performance 500. Again, this was not the best-performing machine, or even the best value, but it was one of the easiest to set up. One of

Gateway's most important markets is the home sector and this is clearly reflected in the quality of its packaging. Again, all the peripherals were colour-coded, everything was placed in easy-to-access boxes at the top of the main box and the wall chart will get the most inexperienced

DELL IS WELL-PRACTISED AT PROVIDING CONSUMER SYSTEMS THAT ARE UP AND RUNNING IN MINUTES



user going very quickly.

← Our second Highly Commended

award goes to Panrix. The Force was definitely with this PC: it was one of the fastest machines here and was consistently speedy in both our 2D and 3D tests. This was down to the 600MHz Athlon processor and the 32MB Matrox Millennium G400 graphics card.

Although it was not quite as easy to set up as the Dell and Gateway systems, it was still pretty good. If you're prepared to sacrifice colour-coding, then this system represents better value for money and faster performance – definitely worth a look.



THE PANRIX WILL OUTPERFORM MUCH OF THE COMPETITION, BUT IT'S STILL EASY TO SET UP



how to put your system together, although these varied in quality. Almost all of the manufacturers, however, managed to set up the computer correctly, with the correct software loaded and all the drivers present.

Before turning to the awards themselves, we should mention Atlas and Lexon, which both provided us with very impressive machines that didn't quite make it. Atlas impressed us with a good CTX Trinitron monitor, Athlon 600MHz processor and installation engineer, but lost out due to a lack of attention to detail. That said, it's still worth considering. Lexon provided a very highly specified machine for the price, with a