MediaPoint

High-end authoring system Scala now has some competition – MediaPoint. John Kennedy sees just how presentable it really is.

Product: *MediaPoint*
Price: *£329.99*
Supplier: *Meridian*

The world is changing. Information is rapidly becoming the most important commodity available, and there is a huge scramble to develop new and exciting ways of delivering it. The Amiga has always been at this new frontier, with its wealth of multimedia software and IFF, its accepted file standard. Perhaps the most important program in the field has been *SCALA*, but now the makers of *Real 3D* have produced their own version of what Amiga multimedia should be. Is this the *SCALA* killer?

WHAT CAN IT DO?

So what can *MediaPoint* do? This is a question that is better phrased, what *can't* it do? as this has got to be one of the most powerful Amiga programs ever. Like many loyal Commodore fans, I've watched Amiga software come a long way, and this is definitely one of the *third generation* packages available. Gone are the rather flaky editing screens, and a sense that a crash was imminent at any minute. At last we're getting software that has been designed to be used by people. The main editing screens are *oh-so-nearly* standard Amiga screens, but not quite. The official style guide has been followed quite liberally, but for once the result is very pleasing. The purpose of all gadgets and any file requesters is blatantly obvious, and this helps keep manual references to a minimum. For a program this complex, this is almost unheard of.

Almost too suspiciously like *SCALA*, the main screen has a relaxing purple tinge to it. On the right are the various objects that will make up your project, on the left the list of events. Making something happen is easy – drag an object from the right to the left. If you drag across the ANIM object, a requester pops up asking for the name of the file to display. Fill in the details and click OK – you're on your way.

Reading from right to left in the *event slot*, the name of the animation is followed by a transition indicator. Click here and you're given a choice from dozens of different screen wipes, speeds and variations. All are extremely smooth, handling colour transitions even of fairly complicated pictures perfectly on AGA machines. The last set of numbers are duration markers, and clicking here will bring up one of *MediaPoint's* neat asynchronous requesters to adjust the various times. It's asynchronous because once the requester is open you can use it to alter the time of any event: you don't need to close it and re-open it

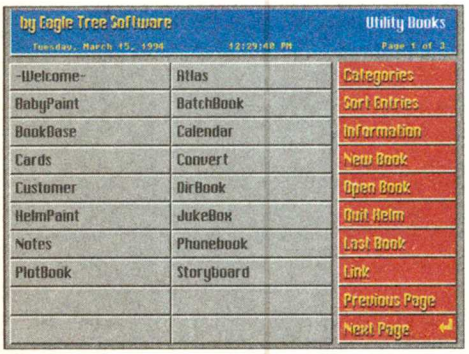
Text support is comprehensive, with drop-shadows and smoothing options.

Helm

Graeme Sandiford investigates another authoring system that can do it too.

The Amiga has long enjoyed a selection of some of the finest multimedia authoring software available on any computer platform. Recently the Amiga made a great leap forward in performance, with the introduction of the new AGA machines. Multimedia software is just beginning to catch up with the new machines' abilities, with the updating of *CanDo* and *Scala* and release of *MediaPoint*.

While these old-hands are having their AGA-facelifts, Eagle Tree Software has decided to launch a completely new authoring system – *Helm*. With a retail price of £99.95 it is in direct competition with Inovatronics' *CanDo* system.



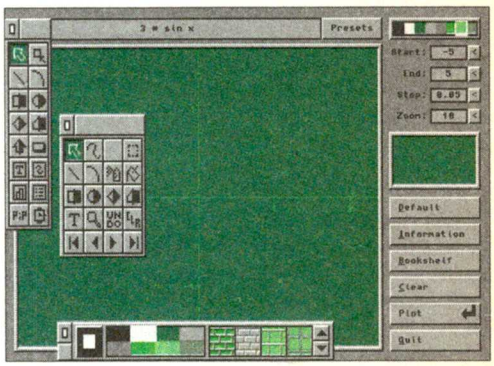
You can access any of Helm's numerous example books and cip art from the Bookshelf.

Helm has been designed for use by non-programming types. As such it is intended to be easy to use, yet powerful. One of the program's claims to fame is its graphical interface. It also takes an object-orientated approach to creating applications. *Helm* also has some painting, image processing and visual effects tools. These capabilities make *Helm* an excellent presentation tool. As well as extensive ARexx support, the program also has its own scripting language.

HOW IT ALL WORKS

Once you've decided upon the nature of your world-beating application, the first thing you must do is to create a Book. The Book is the basic unit, (the same thing as a stack in *HyperBook*). It consists of several Pages, or screens, these Pages are based on a Form, which acts as a template. Each Page in a Book can contain several objects – these can be **textfields**, **imagefields**, **buttons**, **charts**, **arrows** and various shapes. *Helm* can also add a timer to a Page, this performs a specified action or script after a set time period, a useful function for creating time-based presentations. Perhaps one of its most unusual tools is the **Pipfield**: this takes advantage of GVP's IV24 graphic card's ability to provide a **PIP** (Picture In Picture) display.

You can attach **scripts** and **actions** to each object. If you attach an **Action** to an object, each time the object is activated the **Action** will be executed. This can be anything from playing a sample or animation, to executing an AmigaDos script or changing the key colour on a chromakey. You can also get *Helm* to perform a variety of pre-programmed effects, such as **wipes**, **fades** and **mosaics**. There is a wide selection of **Actions** supplied. For more complex applications you may need to use *Helm's* built-in scripting language. This is just like programming in BASIC.



Included with Helm is this plotting program. It has lovely sine wave formulas for your applications.

Helm comes with a healthy supply of example books, so you can get to grips with *Helm's* functions by playing around with objects on each page. You can also find useful scripts and discover formulas that you can include in your own applications. The examples include the usual databases, calculators, maps, a complete paint package, Latin and Chinese phrase translators and a collection of Mark Twain quotes that are spoken aloud, if you have the **narrator.device**, and synched with the movements of the mouth of a digitized Mark Twain (á la Monty Python).

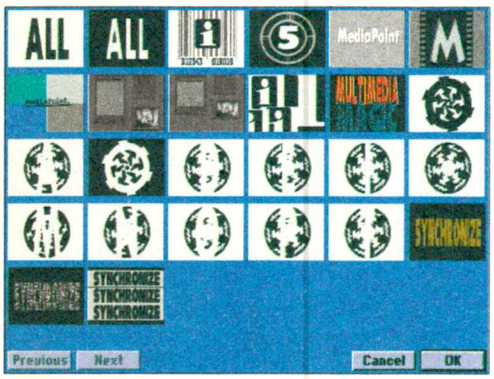
Also available in plentiful supply is clip art. The collections cover a wide selection of topics, such

for each.

ANY OBJECTIONS?

The ANIM object is far from being the only way of getting something done. It's equally simple to add music (by way of MIDI files or sound tracker modules), static pictures, DOS and ARexx commands and audio samples.

Drag and drop, drop and drop – within moments you've already got the basis for an excellent Amiga animation and sound studio. Animations can be played directly from hard drive, and with a reasonably fast Amiga (probably 68030, at least) you can theoretically record hour-long films and cartoons directly to disk at very reasonable

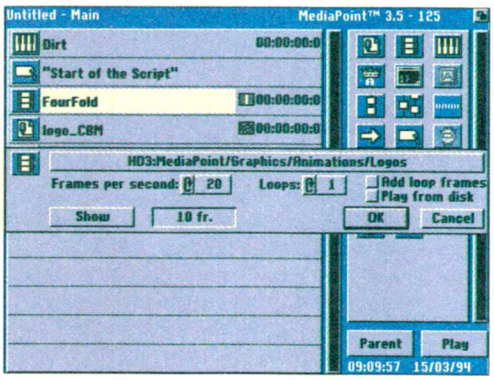


A good file requester... picture files are displayed on-screen to make your selection easier.

(although not TV-quality) frame rates.

Special *MediaPoint* objects (**labels**, **gotos** and **comments**) can be added to determine how the *flow of control* through the events are determined, but the remaining objects take a little more explaining. The **XaPPs**, as Activa like to call them, are software interfaces to allow *MediaPoint* to converse with other hardware. The Studio16 **XaPP** is quite obvious, and allows you to play 16 bit CD quality audio with your productions.

The CDTV **XaPP** is a little more interesting, and requires a serial cable to run between the host Amiga and the CDTV. Alternatively, the entire application can run on the CDTV, although the



Each object has a sub-requester to determine the name of the file, and how it is used.

limited memory and graphics modes would probably limit things a bit. In any case, with the CDTV **XaPP** running, *MediaPoint* has control over the way the CDTV plays audio CDs. This means real CD music can be used to back up a slide show, impressing anyone within hearing distance.

The associated CDXL command will play back CDXL graphics files. CDXL is the graphics and sound file format originally developed for the CDTV, where it allowed about 12 frames a second of 1/4 screen video with sound. Now we have the CD32, and the new graphic modes and faster processor mean that CDXL is much more watchable. It's going to be cropping up in more and more games. Other **XaPPs** are provided for interfacing with the Canon Ion still video playback system, the GVP IV-24 graphics card and several videodisc and videotape playback machines. It's possible to write your own **XaPPs** if you are up to a little C programming.

TURN THE PAGE

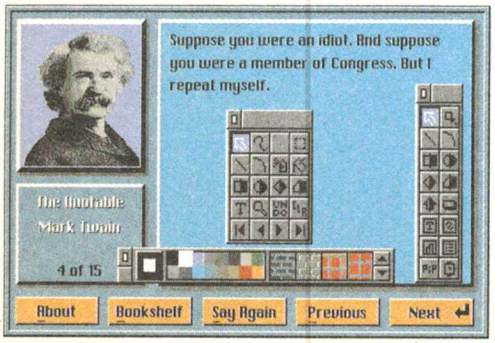
For more interactive systems, the **Page Editor** is where it's at. Hit the **tilda** key (another first for Amiga software?) and you're moved to a much more *paint-program-esque* editor. The normal approach here is to load a background screen (or automatically grab one from any other program running in the background) and then load in some button pictures. Text can also be located in any font (some excellent ones are supplied), any colour and placed anywhere. If asked nicely, it can also be made to scroll across the screen for that instant

as animals, maps, and icons. All of the clip art and example Books are available from the Bookshelf.

HOW WELL IT WORKS

The claims that *Helm* is easy to use and extremely flexible are certainly well-founded. I found the adjustable interface a pleasure to work with. You can have a selection of toolboxes open at one time, which is very convenient as you may not need certain tools until later on in an application's development. It's also great to be able to test your objects while you are designing a page. *Helm's* object-orientated way of working is very easy to get to grips with, and certainly helps when you're trying to debug your applications.

While it doesn't have enough features to make *MediaPoint* and *Scala* feel uneasy, it certainly makes *CanDo* appear a little outdated. As well as benefiting from a better interface, *Helm* also has an edge over *CanDo* with its extensive example **Books** and pre-programmed **Actions**. While the



You can always tell a good quote by the period of time it remains accurate.

number of **Actions** supplied with the product doesn't at first seem that important, it can actually help an inexperienced user/programmer a lot if he or she doesn't want to delve into a scripting language too often. It also has a lot more functions and a greater degree of sophistication and versatility.

For example, while both products make use of the *AmigaGuide* document format for their on-line help systems, only *Helm* implements links to these documents as an action. One feature that *Helm* possess that is unavailable to *CanDo* is its support for the **narrator.device**. As mentioned briefly before, you can use the narrator to synchronise computer-generated speech with animation. Unfortunately, you will need a copy of the **narrator.device** and the translator library, neither of which are now distributed by Commodore. *Helm* also has a strong advantage in the graphics department, as well as support of ILBM files, brushes and anim brushes. *Helm* also has direct support for anim5 animations – in order to include a normal anim5 in your *CanDo* applications you need to run a separate conversion program. *Helm* also has its special effects and image processing tools; it even has a custom filter requester so you can create your own (just like *ImageFX*).

Although *Helm* has some features that *CanDo* lacks, *CanDo* is still an excellent authoring system and is well suited to producing serious applications. I recommend *Helm* over *CanDo* because of its brilliant paint-package-like interface. It is easy to use and highly configurable. With the program's competitive price tag, wide range of features and versatility Eagle Tree Software is on to a winner with *Helm*.

WHAT
Helm – £99.95
WHO
Meridian Software Distribution
WHERE
East House, East Road Trading Estate, East Road, London, SW19 1AH.
☎ 081-543 3500

CHECKOUT
HELM

Requirements
Any Amiga with 1Mb of RAM, AGA is required to get the best out of the program; a hard disk also helps.

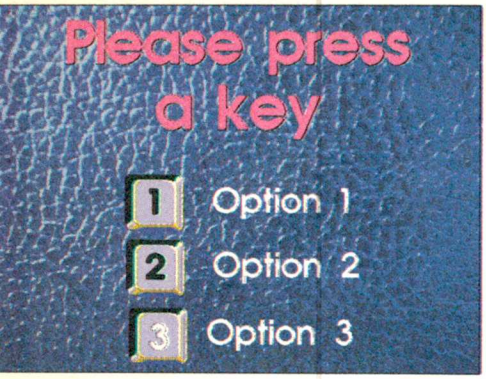
Documentation **89%**
The manual is lucid, and well laid out with sections for a quick start, reference and scripting.

Ease of use **93%**
Very easy to use. If you have used a paint package before you'll be turning out applications within an hour or so.

Features **90%**
All the usual tools and functions for a multimedia authoring system, plus a lot more.

Value **92%**
Excellent value for money.

Overall **91%**
With such a wide range of tools and excellent interface, Helm's entry into the market is bound cause a few ripples of interest.



The simplest form of a MediaPoint page, featuring a backdrop display, text and three buttons.

With the buttons on-screen, the program needs to be informed about the actions to take.

demo look. Control over how the text appears is excellent, with all manner of justification, antialiaising and drop shadow effects. It's rather reminiscent of *Hyperbook*, but this time it works properly with Workbench 3.0.

AGA graphics modes are supported which means some rather colourful pictures are possible. That said, most of the supplied examples look excellent on any Amiga. With a little time, you can really come up with some spectacular displays which can actually look sharper and more colourful than the best television pictures. Each item on the screen can become a button, and when clicked, the flow of control is sent to various labels in the event list. This is how you create a menu – simply make the button jump to a certain label when clicked.

SCRIPTING

When you save a *MediaPoint* application, you are actually saving a special script file to disk. This is a standard text file which can be loaded into an editor and examined. All the objects and pictures are mentioned, and the times can be fine-tuned here if required. If you want, it's even possible to write the script from scratch using a text editor, and then load it into *MediaPoint* for playback. Dedicated *MediaPointers* will be able to take full advantage of the program in this way: using it to react to externally gathered information. For example, a script could be written to use a modem to log into a weather forecasting service. The data could then be processed with the script and a temperature display put-on screen. It's this sort of flexibility that makes it hard to define exactly what *MediaPoint* can do...it all depends on how badly you want to do something. If it's anything to do with graphics and sound, then *MediaPoint* is the way to go.

NICE TOUCH...

MediaPoint is full of wonderful little surprises. You'll be delighted that so much effort has been put in by Activa:

- ***ANIM7 support*** – This new ANIM standard allows animations to playback much faster with 68020 and better processors. As a result playing back extra long animations from hard drive is possible, although a fast drive is essential when playback speed is critical.
- ***CDXL support*** – This combined sound and video standard allows normal Amigas to come close to *Full Motion Video*. With new software (The new version of *Art Department Pro*) starting to support CDXL, it's great to see it here. I've seen the Commodore CD32 advert playback on my A1200, and it's amazing!
- ***Real time recording*** – You couldn't be bothered with entering times for the various parts of your script to begin with? Start the recording option and press a key to set the times. It makes synchronising events to a sound track quick, easy and accurate.
- ***File Requester*** – Normally I like to see the good old Amiga standard file requester as I know where all the buttons are, but the *MediaPoint* requester is my new favourite. The ability to pre-set Home directories, select multiple files (OK, ASL does this, but all programs accept it) and choose images from a reasonably quick thumbnail view make it the best.
- **Your favourite programs** can be stored in a menu for ease of access. Call up *DPaint* in seconds to retouch a display.
- **Things to come** – Activa have promised several truly tasty options in the very near future, including JPEG and MPEG support, and the ability to use PhotoCD.

YES, BUT WHAT USE IS IT?

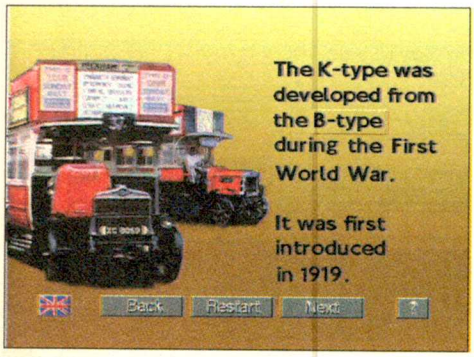
What can't you do? With the graphics support, wipes, sound playback, animation from disk and a

Amiga Multimedia in Action

Graeme Sandiford reports on the revolutionary use of Amigas in multimedia presentations at the London Transport Museum.

The London Transport Museum has just re-opened its doors, after a nine-month £4 million redevelopment. This re-development is intended to be the next step in the evolution of museums, and what's more, the Amiga has played a starring role in this step forward.

Museums have long been associated with dark and musty corridors, a place for only the most scholarly of individuals to visit. The London Transport Museum and the people involved, Mick Tinker, Technical Director of Index Information, and Rob Lansdown, Head of Communications and Display, hope to change this, making a visit to the museum a fun and informative experience for everyone. The vast amount of information contained in the museum should be made accessible, and learning about the past should truly be an 'experience', both visual and audible. The result is a brand new concept come true with a bit of help from computers – the *Hyper-Museum*.



This is an example of a typical screen you'll find at most of the Hyper-Museum's exhibits.

WHY THE AMIGA?

But why choose the Amiga as a platform for launching this new concept for a brighter future for many museums to come? One major reason is the price. The Amiga, and in particular CD32, can offer a great deal of multimedia power for a lot less than a similarly equipped PC or Mac. The price of a similarly specified single PC unit is about £2200, compared with the customised CD32 unit's price of £600. That's a substantial amount of money being saved, especially as the current network comprises 61 units, with even more to be added later. The network itself is pretty impressive.

At the moment there are two types of expansion units of the CD32x and CD32xg. The CD32x unit provides the standard Amiga ports (RS232 Serial, Parallel, RGB, floppy disk and stereo audio out). In addition it also adds the following ports – RS232 AuxSerial, Stereo audio in, 2 network ports, 4Mb SIMM memory expansion socket, control for triple stereo mixers, Watchdog timer, SCART connector and a connection for MPEG (FMV). In addition to these features CD32xg also has a high-quality internal RGB genlock and a BNC connector for composite video input.

The exhibits have their own AVIDS (Audio Visual Interactive Displays). These include a touch-screen monitor, which is connected via hidden cabling to its own console in another room. A console, linked in this manner, provide information about the exhibit it's placed in front of. This information can be in the form of text, audio or digitised images and diagrams. If the screen is left unmolested it will follow a set programme. However, if you touch the screen you are given control of the display. You can jump between different areas by *pressing* the buttons **next**, **previous** and so on, which are **hyper-linked**

full script-based language you can do anything short of writing a word processor or a C compiler.

Uses which immediately spring to mind are: writing demos, creating point of information systems, writing interactive training systems, writing information systems which can be updated via modem, building shop window displays using touch screens, recording lengthy cartoons with soundtracks to videotape, monitoring external devices and producing real-time status displays, synchronising several Amigas together via MIDI to make a video wall system, using the SMPTE/EBU support for film subtitling, using the scheduler system to trigger events at varied times of the day.

MEDIAPOINT VS. HELM VS. CANDO VS. SCALA

The similarities between *SCALA* and *MediaPoint* are rather obvious in that even the colour scheme is similar. The use of software modules to interface external hardware, the wipe effects, the scripting... how can you possibly choose between them?

The most comparable version of *SCALA* to *MediaPoint* is entitled *MM300*, and both retail at the rather hefty price of £329.99. In terms of features, there is very little between them. However in terms of actually using finished presentations in a stand-alone situation, the programs couldn't be more different.

SCALA requires a hardware dongle to be present for each copy of the program, including playback only routines. By comparison, *MediaPoint* has no such constraints placed on it. Both packages may cost the same, but *SCALA* could cost a lot more in the future as each additional dongle costs £100.

If there is a more philosophical distinction to be made between a program such as *MediaPoint* and a program such as *CanDo*, it's a subtle one. Both packages allow the integration of text, graphics, animations and sound. Both produce a finished item, that can be used interactively to achieve a goal or to be watched passively. Both suit the Amiga down to the ground.

To describe *MediaPoint* as a jumped up video titler is a little cruel, but it does help get the point across. Rather than set out to create a programming language from scratch, *MediaPoint* adds so many features to its internal scripting language that it is possible to write powerful programs with it.

Packages such as *Helm* and *CanDo* started out specifically to be easy-to-use programming languages. During their development they simply grew dozens of graphics and animation features, and can now be used as authoring tools.

In the world of multimedia applications, both types of programs are heading towards a common wonderful ground from wildly different directions. What happens when they meet is anyone's guess, we can but dream yet – but you can rest assure it will be easy to program and have some really gob-smacking graphics!

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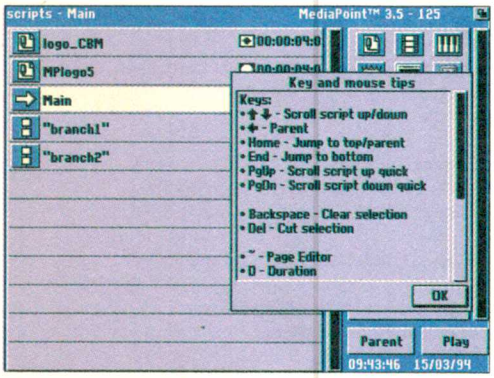
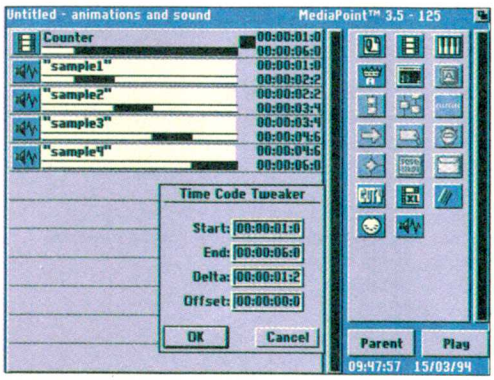


On-line help is useful, but to be honest almost unnecessary.



This is an example of a 'parallel script' in which events can all happen at once.

to the next or previous page. You can also switch languages at any time by *pressing* the **flag** icon. The languages currently supported are French, German and Spanish, with Italian and Japanese to follow.

The CD32 consoles are also used to play different sound effects. They work particularly well when simulating the sounds of a moving train. It has been taken beyond the simple playback of sounds, there are random elements that can be programmed and occasional breaks. The samples are all crystal clear. At one point I was quite embarrassed when I was told that the chirping birds I was looking for were actually produced by a console. Some of the sounds actually use two consoles to produce quadraphonic effects. Two of the most popular exhibits are the simulators – these give visitors the opportunity to find out what it's like to drive a variety of underground trains. Behind these simulators are 4000/040s, each equipped with 18Mb of memory and 1Gigabyte hard drives. The animated screens were created from actual underground maps, so the routes you travel are real. They were created as 3D objects and rendered in *Real 3D 2*. The images took over 2 months render, but the results are very realistic.

THE EXPERIENCE

There are a number of advantages visiting a *Hyper-museum* over your common or garden museum. One of the best ones is that your explorations are *non-linear* – you can skip the parts you find boring and gain immediate access

An animation frame from one of the Museum's Underground Train Simulators.

to further information on topics. The tube system map, for example, contains the different layouts of the London Underground since its construction. You can travel along the routes and through time. At any point you can call up information or photographs that relate to the construction of the lines or the different stations. While you are in this area you can move forward or backward through the station's history, and when you return the map is automatically updated so that all the new lines appear.

The combination of graphics, sounds, video footage and simulations really brings the past to life. The museum has a wonderful *hands-on* feel to it, and is definitely worth a visit even if you are not interested in public transportation. It's the future of museums – a more *interactive* future!

CHECKOUT
MEDIAPOINT

Ease of Use **85%**
For a program this complicated, this is an excellent score. Basically it's a very well designed program.

Features **92%**
It plays the latest animation formats, it plays MIDI files and it connects to all the best high-end hardware, and if it doesn't work with your kit it can be made to. So many possibilities...

Speed **93%**
Speed, both of authoring a system and of playback, is great, although you do need a large system to make the most of this program as the minimum configuration is a hard drive and 2Mb of RAM. To even start to get the most out of it, you need a big harddrive, a 68030 or better, 6Mb of RAM and as much add-on video and sound hardware as you can afford.

Documentation **95%**
Easy to read, and full of tutorials with plenty of clear diagrams, appendices and a good index.

Value for Money **80%**
It does cost a lot of money, but think of it as an investment. If you sold one Point of Information system you could recoup the cost instantly.

Overall **94%**

Mediapoint delivers what AmigaVision promised, but never quite managed. If this doesn't push the Amiga to the forefront, nothing will.