

Many of the claims made for Windows 98 have **proved to be inaccurate**, says Barry Fox.

Sex, lies and videotape



Microsoft launched Windows 98 on 25th June with a big party and a welter of sycophantic publicity. Microsoft's Windows product manager, David Weeks, brushed aside my concerns about upgrade crashes and

incompatibility with Windows 95 drivers as being one-off anomalies, unique to me. When Channel 4 news ran a story highlighting the problems, Anne Mitchard, marketing manager in the personal systems group, gave the classic excuse that I and others who had experienced problems with the upgrade from 95 to 98 were "untypical users" because we are "constantly trying non-released code and having lots of prototype hardware".

If Anne Mitchard had read what I write in PCW she would have known that I have a strict policy of never using beta software. This was further entrenched when beta copies of Beta 98 were given out at one of Anne Mitchard's own briefings. It crashed my PC so disastrously that I had to reformat the hard disc. Since then I have used no beta software, so it is thanks to Anne Mitchard that I can say for sure that when the final retail version of Windows 98 upgrade crashed my PC, there was no non-released code on it and no prototype hardware. Even when Windows 98 is safely running, your troubles may only be starting. If Windows 95 does not recognise a modem, it treats it as a generic "standard". Windows 98 does the same, but goes on to interrogate it. If there are any error messages, Dial Up Networking refuses to dial.

Microsoft claims that Windows 98 makes the use of ISDN more efficient. But the setup procedures provide no visible support. A Racal terminal adaptor that worked under Windows 95 does not work under Windows 98. Adaptec's Direct CD, which Philips bundles with CD recorders sold under its own and many other names, including Hewlett-Packard, works perfectly under Windows 95 but crashes Windows 98 into a "system halted" blue screen error message. The user then has to know enough to run Windows 98 in safe mode and uninstall the Direct CD software. Both Philips and Adaptec blame Microsoft. A new version of Direct CD, 2.0A, may work with Windows 98. But only if the PC has a recent BIOS.

Dixons marked the launch of Windows 98 with a massive promotion. Large in-store placards promised "cinema-quality full-motion video" and "multichannel digital surround audio" from DVD. There was a special offer to "Save over £20 when you buy the Windows 98 upgrade and Creative Labs DVD drive for £178". Under the slogan "Use your PC as a video player", PC World's Discover Windows 98 giveaway brochure promised that "because Windows 98 supports DVD, you will be able to play the latest DVD movies on your PC as if you were watching them on a video player....You can do it all from Windows 98!" The bundle of Windows 98 upgrade and Creative DVD-ROM drive can "play movies...with movie quality footage plus multi-channel AC3/Dolby audio off a single DVD". PC World also sells "the latest movies" on DVD discs. But to play DVD-movies from the Creative DVD-ROM drive, you also need to install an MPEG-2 decoder board. The store I visited had no boards available for customers who might have discovered that they needed them. I asked PC World's press office, and obtained an astonishing admission. "The brochure copy you refer to was....checked by Microsoft

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before it was reproduced. Dixons Group had been led to believe by Microsoft that Windows 98 would include MPEG 2 decoding capabilities. However, following publication of the brochure and the offer we were informed by Microsoft that Windows 98 did not support DVD movie discs on its own and that it would be necessary to purchase an MPEG 2 decoder. PC World dispatched a note to all technical centres explaining the situation. We are grateful that you have brought this matter to our attention and are currently arranging for notices in all our stores which will clarify this issue for our customers." I have asked the Advertising Standards Authority to investigate how Dixons and Microsoft could build an advertising campaign on a feature of Windows 98 that does not exist.

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