

letters

Send your letters to:
The Editor, Personal Computer World
VNU House, 32-34 Broadwick Street
London W1A 2HG
or email > letters@pcw.co.uk
or fax > 020 7316 9313

Unless otherwise stated, letters sent to the editor, PCW team or contributors will be considered for publication. Letters may be edited for clarity or length. Views expressed in the letters are those of the author and not necessarily those of the editorial team.

WIN A TAXAN MONITOR!

Each month we are offering a 17in Taxan Ergovision 750 TCO95 monitor to the author of the Letter of the Month.

For the complete range of Taxan monitors, call 01344 484646 or visit the website at www.taxan.co.uk

If you wish your letter to be considered for the monthly prize please include a full postal address for delivery. An email address alone is not sufficient.



TAXAN
TOKYO, JAPAN
You won't regret it.

LEXON LET-DOWN

Like many other of your readers I was very impressed with your February 2000 review of the Lexon 702 PC system. I rang the company and placed an order on 6 January and was given a firm delivery date of 18 January. I specifically asked and was told that all the components for my PC were in stock.

On 15 January I received a letter informing me that due to high demand and a shortage of components my PC would not be completed until 31 January. I was obviously concerned by this and had also noticed that the company's website had disappeared (not a reassuring sign!). I rang PCW and was assured that Lexon had been vetted extremely recently. I then contacted Lexon again and, after sundry conflicting stories from various salesmen, I was again assured that this sort of delay was normal for the time of year and my PC was on its way.

I then gave them 10 days to get their act together and called again. Once more I was told that components were missing and was asked to ring again on 2 February. Before I could ring, however, my cheque was returned to me by post accompanied by a 'Dear whoever' letter explaining that my order could not be fulfilled. I am currently checking the legal position on this breach of contract.

I have thus wasted an entire month dealing with a PC company which is

apparently unable to supply a PC.

At no point has anyone called to discuss the situation since I placed the order. I have probably wasted a couple of days and dozens of phone calls trying to find out information.

Surely it is time to tighten up your reviews and only incorporate companies that can deliver.

STEVEN TEAGUE

WILL HEAD replies >

We would like to thank Mr Teague and the numerous other people who have brought this matter to our attention. When a manufacturer submits a machine for review we insist that it is available for sale to the consumer at the same price and specification and take it very seriously when this is not the case. We have launched an investigation and plan to print a full report next month.

WHEN IS 128MB NOT 128MB OF RAM?

Let me start by giving you some brief details about my computer background. I haven't any. I am 32 years old and a total beginner, but currently taking a night class in 'PC installation & maintenance'.

Four months ago I decided to buy myself a PC. As with any big purchase I bought all the magazines and read the reviews. I wanted to spend a maximum of £1,500 on a complete package that wouldn't need any upgrading in the near future. I also wanted to buy locally and from a shop, not over the phone.

First I tried Time. I was shown a system but, instead of being given a demonstration, the sales assistant began by advising me to upgrade the printer and scanner.

Next was Tiny. I found a system that I thought would suit me. When I asked the sales assistant to show me what it could do, all that he could come up with was the fact that it could show television. If I had wanted to watch TV I could have gone across the road and bought a state-of-the-art set for considerably less.

And then came the usual 'spend

LETTER OF THE MONTH

THE HIGH PRICE OF VIGILANCE

I write with reference to Nik Rawlinson's column *The High Price of Vigilance*. As a father of a five-year-old daughter – don't worry it's not one of those 'I'm a responsible parent, and you shouldn't be...' type letters. This is an 'I totally and utterly agree' letter. Too many times do the righteous 'head up their backside' type win, but someone such as yourself has the voice to express the opinion of many and I totally and utterly agree that it's down to the parents.

May I also add this is the first time I have bought the magazine and, even though I am a relative novice, I found it informative and entertaining.

ANTHONY WILKINSON

Nik Rawlinson would just like to clarify that he does not browse the Internet to find porn...

more money on a better printer and scanner'.

I decided to leave it for a while and reconsider my options.

A couple of weeks later Gateway opened a shop next door to Tiny. After looking at a few systems I was joined by the salesman who took a genuine interest in my requirements. A week later I placed my order. A Performance 500MHz system with 19in monitor, 13.6GB hard drive and 128MB SDRAM.

The system arrived earlier than expected and installation was a doddle. Everything seemed well. As I mentioned at the start of my letter I am a complete novice and, were it not for the fact that I am taking a computer course, I would probably not have discovered that my system was missing half of its memory.

I had noticed that it was only showing 64MB RAM but through my own ignorance I thought it must be a default setting and, after all, Gateway isn't going to leave out something I had paid extra for. As my skills grew I looked in the BIOS and sure enough only 64MB.

First of all I sent Gateway an email. After a few days with no reply I phoned. I was put through to six or seven different departments and finally told to take the case apart and look for myself. After doing this I phoned again, and was put through another four departments until I reached customer relations. Once again I explained my problem and was told that they had received my email and that I was right, they hadn't given me all my memory. They then said that I wasn't the only one that this had happened to and that the memory would be sent as soon as possible. No apology. Two or three weeks later the memory arrived in a small box between two pieces of foam and no anti-static bag.

How many other Gateway customers are there ignorant to the fact that they have not received what they have paid for? Were Gateway going to tell me of their mistake if I hadn't have spotted it? How many people buying computers for their children, for example, want to take the system box apart and fit new hardware?

Computers are still an expensive luxury. I hope my experience is rare.

JOHN HOLLIS

GATEWAY replies >

We are extremely sorry that Mr Hollis, a customer obviously impressed with Gateway's service and support, had his experience tainted by these problems. At Gateway no

strive to ensure that all our customers receive the highest possible level of sales service and support and are always genuinely concerned by the occasional problems they suffer.

Mr Hollis' complaint alerted us to a temporary operational problem that meant some systems were shipped with the incorrect amount of memory. As a direct result we have launched a full investigation into the incident and identified 110 customers who potentially may have been affected. We are contacting all of those customers to alert them to the issue and guide them through the process of checking memory in their PC, and if necessary, to arrange an engineer to install the module on-site.

Once again we would like to offer our sincere apologies to Mr Hollis for the inconvenience he has experienced and we will of course be compensating him in the same way as the other customers affected.

**ALEC MAYCOCK, VP CLIENT CARE
GATEWAY EMEA**

BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH

In the March *Flashback*, the usually reliable Will Head managed to utter this cracker; '[in 1980] Pascal may have looked like it had a bright future, unfortunately now it has been relegated to the same league as Latin ... no-one in the real world uses it'.

Presumably by that, Will was excluding the one million people in the last three years who followed PCW's advice and bought a copy of Borland Visual Pascal (better known as Delphi).

Et Tu, Will.

JASON LAW

WILL HEAD replies >

While Delphi is based on Pascal, it does not use the true procedural Pascal that is still forced upon some poor unsuspecting undergraduates. Delphi has extended Pascal significantly and it is this version that may be worth learning if you are a Delphi programmer.

IS DVD NOW ILLEGAL?

I was thinking about purchasing a DVD drive recently, only to be told by no fewer than three manufacturers that, as of 1 January 2000, they can no longer sell any non-region-coded-hardware DVD equipment.

Is this true? If so, rather than improve sales of non-region 1 films, it has only persuaded me to stick with my S-VHS recorder (£199). Apart from the lack of Dolby Digital, which isn't broadcast via Digital TV anyway, there's practically no



difference between an S-VHS recording of *The Fifth Element* from Sky Digital, and the £20 hand-tweaked DVD version. In fact, none of the current range of set-top boxes have a digital video/IEEE 1394 output, so recompressing the video for digital storage will actually make it look worse than analog VHS in some cases.

S-VHS recorders can also play back and record onto VHS tapes, so I won't have to spend nearly £1,000 replacing all of my videos. I'm surprised no-one has suggested this sooner.

ANDREW BUTLER

RIYAD EMERAN replies >

First of all, retailers were never meant to sell multi-region DVD players and no manufacturer will honour a warranty for a modified player. You have the choice of either finding a shop that will do the modification for you at purchase, or you can grab a soldering iron and chip the player yourself as I did.

As you pointed out yourself, S-VHS cannot provide Dolby Digital sound. This is one of the best features of DVD and enhances the movie-watching experience immensely, especially when coupled with a good amplifier such as the Pioneer VSA-E06 or Yamaha DSP A1. Believe me, once you've watched The Matrix in Dolby Digital you'll never be happy with Pro Logic again.

I don't see what the issue is with set-top boxes not having digital output, since there is nothing that you could record the digital output to anyway, unless you're going to invest in a very early Digital-VHS deck. Also, I don't see what the lack of digital output on set-top boxes has to do with whether or not you should purchase a DVD player.

Finally, besides the lack of Dolby Digital, your S-VHS movie will lack all the extra

features such as running commentaries, behind-the-scenes footage, deleted scenes and trailers. All the reasons that true film buffs have adopted DVD. Well, that and the fact that they're considerably cheaper than the previous collectors' format: LaserDisc.

START MENU AND ABC

I have been using Windows 98 for approximately a year now and have noticed that, after a certain period, the Start Menu doesn't organise the folders and shortcuts in alphabetical order. Is there a way to rectify this and restore order to it, or am I just dabbling in the dark?

TOM BALLINGER

WILL HEAD replies >

This was starting to annoy me as well, and your letter spurred me into action. I tried a number of things, but it is actually very simple to solve: Bring up the Start Menu and then the Programs menu. With the pointer poised over this menu, right click and select 'Sort by Name' from the bottom of the pop-up menu. Hey presto, your menu will now be in order. The only problem is that you may have to do it again from time to time if you add more software.

POEM OF THE MONTH

If you can keep your computer going
when all others about you
Are losing theirs and don't know
who to blame;
If you can keep your valuable data,
And also your favourite game;
If you can recover from 'fatal exceptions',
And avoid those frozen screens,
If you can keep 'bugs' out of your system
And resist smashing it to smithereens!

If there is nothing wrong with the
scanner you have
Or the prints from your colour inkjet,
If you have disk space left on your
current hard drive
And you can download when you
go on the net;
If you can delay upgrading your system
And save hassle and extra expense,
If you're not frightened of a computer
in the future
With Artificial Intelligence!

If you can stop yourself from dreaming
Of scooping the lottery jackpot,
If your system is quite adequate
And you're pleased with what you've got;
If you're sure your computer's useful
Whether used for work or fun,

You must have the right things in it
And you'll be a happy man, my son!

BRIAN SOUTAR

WILL HEAD replies >

Can anyone follow Brian's lead and make PCW poetry corner could a regular feature?

GETTING HOLD OF OLD HARDWARE

I have come to the conclusion that technology moves too quickly!

It only seems yesterday that I was using 5.25in disks to save my code and data on. Now that I wish to revisit these disks I have discovered that technology has left them behind. I cannot get hold of a disk drive to read them.

So to save me resorting to using them as tablemats, can you help me find a way to get at the code locked away on these disks?

JOHN COLLINS

WILL HEAD replies >

You may want to have a dig around in charity shops, second-hand stores or car-boot sales. Scouring the items on offer here can often reveal the odd gem. Failing that, your answer may lie in the classified section of your local newspaper or an online auction site. Happy hunting.



NOT SO EASYPC RESTORE

I think that Mr. Butler made some excellent points about the EasyPC (*Letters* February 2000), but from a repair point of view he missed one crucial point: boot disks.

Somebody comes along and wipes out Windows or the root directory of my system, the first thing I do is get my trusty Windows boot disk out and use DOS to find the problem. If my entire hard disk is wiped, just one partition or

both are left, I can use DOS to take out all my data before I reinstall Windows.

However with an EasyPC I fail at the first hurdle: I take my trusty boot disk and try to put it in a hole that isn't there. It's easy enough to get an external USB drive, but without Windows it doesn't work, DOS has no USB support as there's been no major work on it in years. There's probably a controller on the motherboard I can use and if I'm lucky a plug on the PSU for a floppy disk with which I can botch together a floppy disk drive with some spare cables and some sticky-backed plastic, but it's still so much harder to use.

In this incarnation there are no seals on the unit, but go a step further and seal it so only the company can upgrade it, then remove all the competition and raise the price. If only the company you bought it from can upgrade it they get a monopoly and can charge what they like.

STEVE SCOTT

WILL HEAD replies >

While bootable floppies are useful, most PCs can also boot from CD-ROM. If you need to boot a dead machine into DOS you can simply put in the Windows 98 CD and tell the machine to boot from the CD-ROM first via the BIOS. From here it is simply a matter of selecting 'Start Computer with CD-ROM support' and you are away. It's also considerably quicker than booting from floppy.

BIDDERS BEWARE

Thanks for a great magazine, as always you have got the balance just right.

I have bought from online auctions six or seven times with no problems and will continue to do so, but I have a word of warning to all would-be bidders. I have been looking for a CD-RW and found some on an auction site, one caught my eye and with two days to go the highest bid was £145. Not a bad price I thought, until I checked the product number with the Dabs Direct website and found it for £123 inc VAT. I have bought some real bargains but as I say, bidders beware and always check the price against an online sales site.

STEVE YOUNG

WILL HEAD replies >

It is all too easy to get caught up in the moment and in a real-world auction you can often find yourself in a 'now or never' situation. The advantage of the online variety is that the timescale is greater, usually a few days. Use this window to your advantage and check the retail price of an item.