

# letters

Send your letters to >

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## SPACED OUT

Was it your intention to print an upside-down photograph of a UFO on January's page 42 (directly under the 'Rival Drives' panel)? Strangely reminiscent of those early 60's photographs of (actual) UFOs. Could this be a sign?

IAN PHILLIPS [I\\_Phillips@compuserve.com](mailto:I_Phillips@compuserve.com)

**PCW replies >** Yes. Surely alien technology will be behind the successor to the floppy-disk drive. The media is out there.

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

# Parent power in IT

I expect most teachers will disagree, but if you really want to see the movers and shakers in the world of ICT and education, then do not visit a school. Instead, take a stroll into any of the High Street computer retailers and watch a parent make a purchase. They recognise that a computer is fast becoming a must-

have; they are increasingly aware of IT jargon and pay greater attention to what software is appropriate to which National Curriculum level. It is a customer base that will find little in the way of leadership from the education sector because the latter lacks the material resources and technical know-

**Gordon Laing replies >** *Letters concerning IT and Education are rarely missing from these pages for good reason. The education sector apparently continues to inadequately train or prepare students for jobs in IT, or even those requiring basic PC skills - take James Hanington's letter for a pupil's point of view. Jim Fanning makes an interesting point above, with well-informed parents perhaps driving changes for the better, at least in the short term. We'd be interested to hear from readers with their experiences concerning IT and Education.*

how. It is a customer base that more and more possesses a level of knowledge and equipment that is unavailable in many schools. And this is where the real revolution in ICT and education begins: parents will look elsewhere or create their own solutions, and in the process change the whole parent/school pupil/teacher relationship that is the present basis of our education system.

JIM FANNING, DIRECTOR OF SIXTH FORM STUDIES, TIDEWAY SCHOOL  
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## MP3 HITS THE RIGHT NOTE

For the greatest revolution in internet and computer music since, well, nothing else, the MP3 format gets relatively little attention in computer magazines. I'm in a band, and use the MP3 format to distribute my music. The vast majority of magazines portray MP3s as evil and illegal. If, like me, you produce your own music, then you can make MP3s and distribute them on the web without any legal problems. You only have to go to [www.mp3.com](http://www.mp3.com) to see the vast array of free, legal MP3 music on the net, with even well known bands such as the Beastie Boys distributing some of their music in this fashion.

PAUL LOWRIE [plowrie@softhome.net](mailto:plowrie@softhome.net)

**PCW replies >** *We're not enemies*

*of MP3 at PCW. On the contrary, while it poses questions in terms of copyright and protection (the same as any other recording device), we welcome it as an encouragement to develop solid state portable stereos such as the Diamond Rio. With no moving parts to break or drain batteries, solid state music (or indeed video) recording and playback devices are surely the future.*





## IN PRAISE OF THE BBC MICRO

I thought I'd pick up on the BBC Micro theme started by Brian Clegg in *PCW* January 1999 [Business Matters]. I think the BBC was a good, simple introduction to computers for most children at the time. I was 13 when I first met the BBC Micro and through it gained invaluable experience of a language (BBC Basic) which even now shares much commonality with things like Visual Basic. My first PC, an Amstrad luggable, was by no means as approachable. GW Basic was about all that was available (I wound up using Pascal) but it was an uphill struggle to do things which on the BBC were easy — graphics, sound, talking to the hardware.

I now operate a VB consultancy and find it rather telling that most of the VB and similar contractors that I meet, had their first encounter with computers and programming on the BBC.

In the light of this I feel the Government made the right choice. Personal computers have evolved into a suitable contender but at the time were pretty hopeless.

SIMON RAFFERTY [bigsi@cix.compulink.co.uk](mailto:bigsi@cix.compulink.co.uk)

I rather feel that Brian Clegg has missed the point with his comments about the BBC Micro [*PCW* Jan '99]. I must take issue with his comment that business 'got it right' by adopting Microsoft PC technology. Certainly business adopted MS in large numbers, enabling it to achieve the critical mass to become the dominant operating system. The reasons for this are complex, and are based on more than just the technology. But was this the right direction? We now appear to take it for granted that computers will crash three times a day, and troubleshooting advice has become an industry in its own right. But the BBC was a stable platform that rarely crashed, was easier to sort out if it did go wrong, and was more efficient in its use of memory (my Archimedes has just 4Mb of RAM and a 20Mb hard disk — hardly enough for a PC to boot up). I believe that future historians will see the past couple of decades as a blind alley in computing terms, when the development of PCs was actually held up because of the commercial dominance of one of the less effective operating systems. It is as if Henry Ford had chosen steam power rather than the internal combustion engine, and the rest of the automotive industry had followed suit. We are only now starting to move into an era when more efficient systems may come to the fore.

HOWARD JONES [howard@hjcj.globalnet.co.uk](mailto:howard@hjcj.globalnet.co.uk)

## THE BIG CHILL

What is Michael Hewitt on? [Sounding Off, *PCW* Feb '99.] It's all very well having a fridge that tells you not to eat something (probably 'cause it fancies it itself a bit later). But you still have to purchase the food to put in it. If you really can't manage to smell whether something's still edible or not, you're probably not up to buying perishables anyway. He got a whole page for what he must think is food for thought: he needs to chill out!

JOHN BOSLEY [JBosley4@aol.com](mailto:JBosley4@aol.com)

## SENIOR SERVICE: CALL FOR AN IMPROVEMENT IN MOBILE COMMS

Sorry, Graham Dean (re: 'OAPCs', Letters, *PCW* Jan '99), but I think you've misunderstood grandma. I'm sure she does not want the family's cast-offs, be they computers or anything else. Nor is grandma the only technophobe about. Let's get our machetes out to all the hype and advertising on the net, find out what real information real people need, and design attractive, user-friendly, not too expensive portable comms. Improve the interface and communications on current handhelds, add a homing device in case grandma gets lost, and yes please, Santa, I'll have one in my stocking next Christmas. As for Senior Net, who the blazes among the over 60's wants to join in a discussion on 'Options for the end of life'? Not this OAP, that's for sure!

MOLLIE PULLAN  
[mollie@kwaheri.u-net.com](mailto:mollie@kwaheri.u-net.com)

## CHAOS THEORY

I am struck by the number of people who seem to be against Microsoft's dominance of the market in operating systems, while no-one seems to have thought about the positive aspects of it. While Windows is extremely inefficient, it is a standard operating system that programmers know 99.9% of users will have. This means they can write a program without having to go through the extra expense of ensuring that it is compatible with all of the operating systems on the market. Although Windows may seem inefficient and dated, it has at least spared us from the chaos that would result from several different and exclusive operating systems.

AARON GRAHAM  
[AaronBenj@aol.com](mailto:AaronBenj@aol.com)

*PCW replies > Unfortunately the widespread use of Windows has not spared the world's users from the vast array of possible PC hardware combinations, which results in its own brand of chaos.*

## IT TEACHING IN A STATE

I am 12 years of age and go to a state secondary college. We have pretty good IT facilities but only one very basic lesson a week. In such a computer-orientated world, state-taught children will be inadequately prepared for the first moment they try to do accounts on a spreadsheet or keep client information up to date. Such pupils are forced to wait until higher education for PC experience, where they will have to compete with the better taught students of public schools, and will be dragged behind and be discriminated against, and why? Because the state schools aren't funded sufficiently to train the teachers, and the curriculum is not tight enough to make a subject that will be as common as English in the workplace as common in schools.

JAMES HANINGTON

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**Gordon Laing replies >** *This is a thorny subject. I felt frustrated by the inadequacy of the computer training at my school, and continued to be disappointed even while attending university. Instead, people like myself tended to join clubs, befriend staff at other departments, or hang around relevant showrooms for their PC experience. Most people know someone somewhere who has a PC and doesn't mind giving them the tour. Not an ideal situation I admit, but enthusiasm and resourcefulness normally wins through — my long-term subscription to PCW while growing up also proved invaluable!*



▲ THE FSN 3D FILE SYSTEM NAVIGATOR AS SEEN IN JURASSIC PARK (ONLY WORKS ON IRIX V5.3 AND BELOW)

## IT'S A WRAP: JURASSIC PARK AND THE SGI SET

I've just finished reading the ChipChat column in your magazine [PCW, Feb '99] and I have to say that I am very disappointed with the rants of Mr Bugbear. True, the entertainment industry has a rather peculiar perception of computers, often verging upon the absurd, but that's part of the fun, surely. However, that does not excuse sloppy journalism. Mr Bugbear was having a go at the girl in *Jurassic Park* who sits down in front of a computer near the end and proclaims that it's running Unix. He seems to be under the impression that it's just a couple of Apple

Macs, and he is mistaken. In fact, nearly every single computer used in *Jurassic Park*, both on and off set, is a Silicon Graphics workstation. The machines you see on set are pre-production prototypes of the Indy workstation (also seen later in *Junior* and other films). They don't have the distinctive turquoise case simply because, at the time, they were prototypes. The 'amazing 3D interface' is called FuSioN (File System Navigator) and is available from <ftp://ftp.sgi.com/cgi/fsn>. It's actually jolly nice, if a little impractical for everyday use. Sadly, it only runs on Silicon Graphics hardware (no source code), but I used to use it quite a lot at demos, back when I worked with SGI equipment. Still, not to worry. Apparently they use illegal IP addresses in that film which stars Sandra Bullock as a super-hacker on the run...

MALCOLM CROWE

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**Ivor Bugbear replies >** *Yes, there were SGI machines present in Jurassic Park's control centre, but there is an unmistakable Mac Quadra 700 taking what looks like a prominent role in the proceedings. By the way, thanks for shopping Sandra Bullock — I'll be having a word with her later.*

## STRAIGHT TO VIDEO

I am looking for information on how to transfer a slide presentation — for example, by PowerPoint — to a standard videocassette recorder. I do some work for a local charity and I sometimes have to video events for them. I need to be able to put titles on the video and I want to use my PC to prepare them before transferring them to the video. I have no means at the moment for connecting the VCR to my PC, so I need some advice on the necessary hardware and software to do this. Any help that you could give would be welcome.

JOHN GRAHAM

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**PCW replies >** *A dedicated video capture card would offer input and output connections to your VCR, allowing editing and subtitling of existing videotaped footage. However, if you only want to record PowerPoint slide presentations on to tape, then you'll only need a video output and could use this as an opportunity to upgrade your graphics card. There are plenty around today that boast composite video outputs as standard which can be connected directly to your VCR. When videotaping a PC signal, it's best to set your display resolution to 640 x 480 pixels, since this is the maximum a TV can handle. Once connected, start your VCR recording and simply instruct PowerPoint to display the slides one by one with a suitable gap in-between.*

## TAKING THE EURINE

What is one-hundredth of a euro? I don't like to be considered as one of those statistics the media keep throwing about that say 96% of respondents didn't know where France was or whatever. The answer has probably been kept quiet either because they don't know or, more probably, it is even more ridiculous and unwieldy to say than 'euro'. My suggestion? Well, one-hundredth of a euro should be called a 'eurine'.

JIGGERY-POKERY

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**PCW replies >** *Not to spoil the fun, but we believe it's known as a cent, so at least visiting Americans will feel at home.*