letters

Learning curve

Although there a few excellent bargains available for educational software – for example, Microsoft's Visual Studio for only £116 (inc VAT) – there are a few problems with these wonderful offers.

1. If you're going to college/university this year, you won't be able to buy your software until you're actually there and attending. This gives you no opportunity to check it out before you need to use it.

PCW replies > A great idea which we'll look into. In the meantime, John, you'll be pleased to learn that you'll be returning to university with a brand-new Taxan 17in monitor!

2. Very little, if any, paperwork comes with the edu-pack software, so you need to pay for the books to go with the software, too. Why not just include them?

3. Tracking down these edu bargains is like looking for the Grail itself. Microsoft is the best at advertising its edu software, but even it only offers five options. Corel offers edu packs, but the selection is, let's say, poor.

For the sake of all us poor student types, can we see a feature on the complete selection of edu software available? Oh, go on!

JOHN SKINNER john.skinner@saqnet.co.uk

We hope you enjoy this special redesigned issue, but it's your magazine and we'd appreciate your comments. Please email us on newlook@pcw.co.uk with your thoughts — we'd really like to know what you think.

Hate Mail

I am writing to say how I agree completely with R Moyes' comments on delivery costs (*PCW* August). My own experience was, if anything, worse. I was required to pay £8 plus VAT to have delivered a memory board costing just £10. To add insult to injury, the service was vastly less convenient than first-class or registered post, which would have cost a fraction of this figure. The company would not simply post the item through my letter box; it required a signature. It would only deliver during "normal office hours" and not on a Saturday. Both my wife and I work full time, which means that to have the item delivered at home, I would have to take a day off work. It looks like my only alternative is to drive half way across London on a Saturday morning to collect the parcel from the Courier's depot, which is open only between 8am and 10.30am. In contrast, by first-class mail the parcel would have been on the mat the day after ordering. Even with registered post, I could have collected the parcel from the nearby sorting office on a weekday or all of Saturday morning. Why do some mail-order firms insist on providing a service that is so inconsiderate to their customers' needs?

STEPHEN CLIFTON 114062.1222@compuserve.com

BE A CYBER GRASS

Following your article on Net Fraud (*PCW* August) I thought your readers would like to know the web address for the official Scotland Yard Guidelines, to preserve evidence after a cyber intrusion. It's at www.csfi.demon. co.uk. The link is on the front page.

HARRY LASCELLES
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FADE TO GREY

Nowhere in September's colour inkjet group test, or any others that I have seen, has there been a discussion or review of image fade with different types and makes of printer. My old HP 550C produced very good colour on its glossy paper, but the prints were unusable anywhere near sunlight, with the cyan ink fading within a matter of days, and turning a blue sky in a poster to bright magenta! My routine when investigating a new printer is to mask off part of a sample print from the different manufacturers, put them in a sunny, south-facing window, and check the masked section against the unmasked section every day for a fortnight.

MIKE IANNANTUONI
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PCW replies > A cunning plan indeed, which was almost implemented in our last group test. Until, that is, we realised that the PCW office simply doesn't get any sunshine! Perhaps Mike has some spare windows we could use.

Facing up to Overclocking

Increasing attention is being given to overclocking, but without any real mention being made of the downsides. Firstly, not everyone can or should overclock their system. Overclocking by definition means that your system is running at a speed it is not designed for, and thus is more likely to fail. Some chips are better for overclocking than others. One of the main factors I have found in this is the heat produced by the overclocked chip. An overclocked chip will almost certainly run faster than a non-overclocked chip, and so it is imperative that adequate cooling is given to the system.

The best chips for overclocking are from Intel, but most produced over the past 18 months have had the clock multipliers locked at a particular level. The only way to get around this is to increase the bus speed, but this can cause havoc with PCI devices, particularly with the 83MHz settings offered by many boards.

However, the most important thing is that overclocking a chip will almost certainly invalidate any warranty. For this reason you should always be conservative when overclocking, increasing the speed slowly and ensuring the system runs stable.

Overclocking should only be attempted by people who feel comfortable with PCs at a technical level. It should not be attempted by people unsure about changing jumpers on a motherboard or settings in the BIOS. It is not the panacea which some hold it to be — there are potential problems — but dealt with sensibly, overclocking does lead to more bang for your buck. Just remember, cooling, cooling, cooling.

(For the record: K6 200 running at 75x3 (225MHz) flawlessly for 12 months.)

JOHN CALLAGHAN jkc102@york.ac.uk

Gordon Laing replies > *For the record: Intel P200 running at 83x3 (250MHz) flawlessly for about 20 minutes. It was a dramatic, albeit short-lived, improvement!*

…letters

WE WHO PAY TO WAIT

I recently had the misfortune to have to phone four different companies for technical advice. Each one used an automatic routing facility: you know the type of thing — press 1 for sales, press 2 for technical assistance, and so on. I pressed the specified button, sometimes getting a human telling me I would be placed on a queue and be forced to listen to some music, and sometimes getting a ringing tone that was never answered.

One company had a simple answer machine instructing me to replace my phone and try again later, because all their technicians were busy. This was particularly frustrating: why not just give the engaged tone? I would much prefer to get an engaged tone when there is nobody free to answer the phone, or perhaps a machine that would take my number so the company could call me back. Another palliative would be for the system to tell you the length of the queue every 30 seconds or so, then you can decide if it's worth hanging on or trying again later.

When there are sufficient people to run the system, it works very well; otherwise it engenders a great deal of resentment and can do nothing to improve real customer satisfaction.
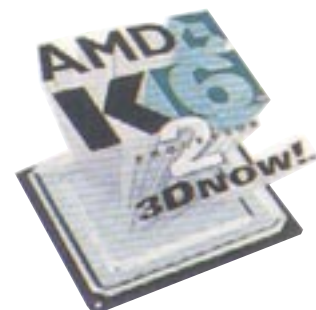
GARY WOODING
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IS SOCKET 7 DEAD?

Intel would like us to believe that the only way forward is with its Slot 1 Pentium II CPUs. The new AMD K6-2 with 3D Now!, however, currently offers up to 333MHz CPUs, designed to fit on the latest-generation Super-Socket 7 mainboards. These boards certainly rival even PII BX-based systems. And yes, you get an AGP, similar configuration of PCI/ISA slots, and it accepts the latest 100MHz SDRAM modules. Consider the Photon 100 AGP mainboard from California Graphics <www.Calgraph.com>: the advantages of a 5.5 multiplier clock speed immediately speaks volumes as to the advantages over Pentium II. For once, it looks like it is possible to invest in upgradeable PC systems — not outdated ones from the time of purchase.

RICHARD BEWLEY
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PCW replies > *See this month's PC Group test [p174] to see how the new AMD processor fares. The K6-2 has a new instruction set called 3D Now!, which accelerates 3D functions in the same way that the MMX instructions were supposed to enhance general multimedia performance (although ended up most benefitting image processing). None of this is of any use, however, if no-one writes software which specifically makes calls to these new instructions. nVidia has written optimised drivers for its Riva 128 graphics chipset, although most exciting of all is support from the forthcoming Microsoft DirectX 6. Games written for DirectX 6 should make use of 3D Now!, which could give AMD the upper hand until Intel's Katmai instruction set arrives.*

The Funny Side of Suicide

What a great read the September issue was. I couldn't believe Barry Fox's article: what a damning tale about Windows 98. Then I read Paul Smith's page — the same thing again! I couldn't stop laughing! If the *PCW* experts are having these problems, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Has Windows 98 been released just a teeny bit too early or is it just over-reaching itself slightly? Luckily, I'm a confirmed Mac user, so I don't have all the fun and excitement of suicidal OS installations. But I do like to read about the adventures of those intrepid many that do!

CHRIS WORRELL
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PCW replies > *Good news to Chris and all other Apple addicts: the Hands On Mac column returns in this very issue on page 304, and it's even joined by a new 16-bit column for those command-line interface fans.*

WINDOWS 98 – GET YOUR CARDS OUT

I have an invaluable tip that might assist users who are encountering serious trouble upgrading to Windows 98: remove all non-plug 'n' play ISA cards.

I do not claim that this procedure will work for everyone, but I would like to share with you my experience of PC hell when I took the plunge of upgrading to Windows 98. The set-up reported that Windows 98 required a substantial amount of base memory to start installation. Then, a thought suddenly hit me.

The Turtle Beach Fiji sound card, which I had installed over a year ago, consumed the first upper block of base memory. Removing the offending sound card solved the problem, and set-up progressed without a hitch.

I am now the happy owner of an operating system that consumes 300Mb of hard-disk space, requires a minimum 32Mb of RAM, works 40 percent slower, and has appalling defrag and scandisk routines which take an eternity to run on my PC.

Progress: don't you just love it.

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