Kodak struggled with Photo CD until it met Intel. Now the picture looks brighter, says Barry Fox.

Picture this

Let's talk snapshots. At the recent launch of Picture CD, Kodak's digital services manager, Steve Hunter, promised a 'bridge between digital imaging and traditional silver halide film', and 'an end to the shoe box as a way of storing images'. Picture CD went on sale in the UK in May. Snapshotters take a roll of film to Boots, and for £10 get back a CD-ROM burned with high-quality images for display on a PC.

Sounds familiar? In 1990, Kodak and Philips found that they were both working on a system for storing still photos on a recordable CD, with quality to match 35mm film. They joined forces. Photographers would continue to shoot on 35mm film, but pay a photo lab to scan their pictures digitally and record the code on a write-once CD. They could then view them on a TV screen.

The 35mm negative, with 3:2 aspect ratio, was scanned at a resolution of 3072 x 2048 pixels to match film quality. To speed access for lower-resolution TV display, the disc stored an ImagePack of the same image coded several times with different resolutions. One disc could hold around 100 images and the lab could add to a half-full blank. Kodak said then that Photo CD would replace 'the shoe box' in which snapshotters dump a muddle of negatives, prints and slides. Photo CD launched in 1992 and Philips was by then promoting CD-i with players that would play Photo CDs. But Kodak's Photo L300 CD players cost almost as much and wouldn't play CD-i discs. Inevitably, within a year, Photo CD was dead as a consumer format.

Kodak then tried to interest the PC market. But if the lab added images, these would only play on multi-session ROM drives, and most PCs had only single-session drives. The PC needed software that cost £34, and Kodak made a complete hash of marketing it.

In 1996, Kodak re-launched Photo CD with free PC software — but no-one noticed because Kodak gave the re-launch no publicity. Said Carol Ayres, the company's customer services co-ordinator at the time: 'There was no press announcement of the re-launch. It only went to dealers. It's up to dealers to promote it to customers.'

Last year Kodak tried again, teaming up with the *Daily Mail* to offer a service called Picture Disc which put low-resolution JPEG prints on a floppy. 'The Picture Disc was never actually released and was only ever given trials. There's no press release,' said a Kodak spokesman.

But now we have Picture CD, which looks more hopeful. The lab provides a set of prints and a burned CD-ROM. The images are scanned at 1534 x 1024 to give a file of 4.5Mb, which is compressed and stored as a standard JPEG file taking around 500Kb. The ROM disc auto-plays, and the decode and filing software comes free on the ROM, along with Power Goo morphing and MGI Sportscard. Tricks like slide-show and red-eye reduction are on tap from the menu. Edits are stored on the PC's hard disk. I tried the latest disc and it ran smoothly. Although most PCs now have multi-session drives, each ROM is an original so will play on any drive.

Picture CD is what Photo CD could and should have been. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kodak managed to get through the whole presentation without once mentioning the latter. The big difference this time around, though, is that Kodak is in partnership with Intel. So far, the only obvious result of this is that Picture CD needs a Pentium PC (90MHz or better) and there 's no Mac version of the Picture CD software. The best a Mac user can do is read the standard JPEG images.

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Intel's product manager, Matt Lowery, said: 'Intel will add more compelling products, features and functionality. It's a dynamic partnership. We can't say anything about unannounced products, but there will be new developments, including hardware.' In fact, the patent records give a pretty clear indication of what Intel plans. Two years ago it filed patent applications around the world for a 'method and apparatus for taking digital pictures with an industry-standard film camera'.

Intel has developed an image sensor plate which fits the recess in a 35mm film camera, which is normally occupied by a frame of film, and captures the scene viewed through its lens system. The sensor delivers a digital image signal which is stored in memory chips housed in a case the same size as a 35mm film cartridge. So, a photographer's favourite film camera becomes a digital camera. Others have suggested this, but no-one has yet turned the idea into a mass-market product. If anyone can, Intel can.

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