

letters

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CRACKING THE ENCODING

Having read the article *Cracking the encoding* (*Hands On, Sound*, PCW April 2000), I have to wonder if Niall Magennis knows that much about MP3 encoding. He recommends using Audiocatalyst which uses the Xing encoder, but, as many MP3-encoding users are aware (see the [alt.music.mp3](#) newsgroup), this encoder provides the worst quality of all the commonly available encoders.

He says of the BaldeEnc encoder, 'it can't compete with commercial encoders in terms of speed'. This is nonsense. One of the best commercial encoders is the Fraunhofer Radium codec which will take about an hour to encode 60 minutes of music on a PIII-500; the BladeEnc encoder is comparable with this. Generally speaking, high-quality encoding takes longer than low-quality, an issue which Niall seems to have overlooked.

In the same article under the heading *The idiot's guide to ripping MP3s*, an additional issue is evident from screenshot 5. This shows the Audiograbber application in use and, as a registered user of Audiograbber, I immediately noticed a problem. From the screenshot it can be

clearly seen that after only 21 per cent of the file having been ripped and encoded there are 66 possible speed errors.

This is indicative of potentially serious problems and may well have produced a poor MP3 file. The problem could have been solved by taking the more idiot-proof option of ripping the track *before* encoding it, rather than trying to do it on the fly. This would have been much better advice to 'the idiot' in the column title, or was the idiot the author?

I find it worrying that this sort of article is appearing more often in magazines such as PCW. What seems to happen is that a journalist takes an issue that is currently popular and writes a beginner's guide to it. Unfortunately, the journalist is often a beginner themselves and less than accurate advice is delivered in an authoritative manner. Let's have a return to expert advice, please!

MEL MULLEN

NIALL MAGENNIS replies >

First of all, the Radium encoder is an illegal crack of the Fraunhofer codec with optimised code. You wouldn't want me to recommend that people use illegal software, would you?

LETTER OF THE MONTH

READY FOR NOTHING

On sustaining depression caused by the thing we know as 'February', I went in search of retail therapy.

Microsoft's Windows 2000 seemed to be just the ticket, and I knew my PC had enough horsepower to cope with an upgrade from Win 98SE. Stability and new icons to click were almost within reach. I went online to order said toy, but thought I would visit Microsoft's site to see if there was any late-breaking news about Windows 2000. Once there I came across a program to download which would check existing hardware and software for compatibility problems. If problems were identified, the advice was to visit the manufacturer's website for a patch/ updated driver etc.

Back came the report. I duly visited the websites of the manufacturers. Here's the primary result:
AGP Graphics card – incompatible, new drivers in beta stage
DVD player – useless
USB CD-RW – incompatible, awaiting driver
56K PCI modem – incompatible, new driver awaited
Mouse driver – incompatible
Scanner – report recognised that it could not recognise the scanner, fixes unavailable thus far
Removable storage device – replacement needed
Fax software – useless, not upgradable
Utility software – useless, not upgradable
Internet Security Software – update needed

Unbelievably, even my Microsoft Force Feedback joystick needs new files!

The only conclusions I can draw are that Windows 2000 is not ready and that everyone else is not ready. I'm staying with Win98SE for now.

ALEX RALTON

WILL HEAD replies >

When a new OS is released there are bound to be issues with drivers for a couple of months, especially considering drivers must now be certified by Microsoft. With this in mind stay tuned for our Windows 2000 PC group test in the next issue. For any readers who want to test their PC for compatibility the utility that Alex mentions can be found at: www.microsoft.com/windows2000/downloads/deployment/readiness/default.asp

Therefore, you can't legally use the Fraunhofer codec any more, unless you own a product that it comes bundled with. As most of these are high-end, professional encoding packages, it is out of the question to recommend it for a beginner, although I did mention in the article that the original Fraunhofer codec was a great routine.

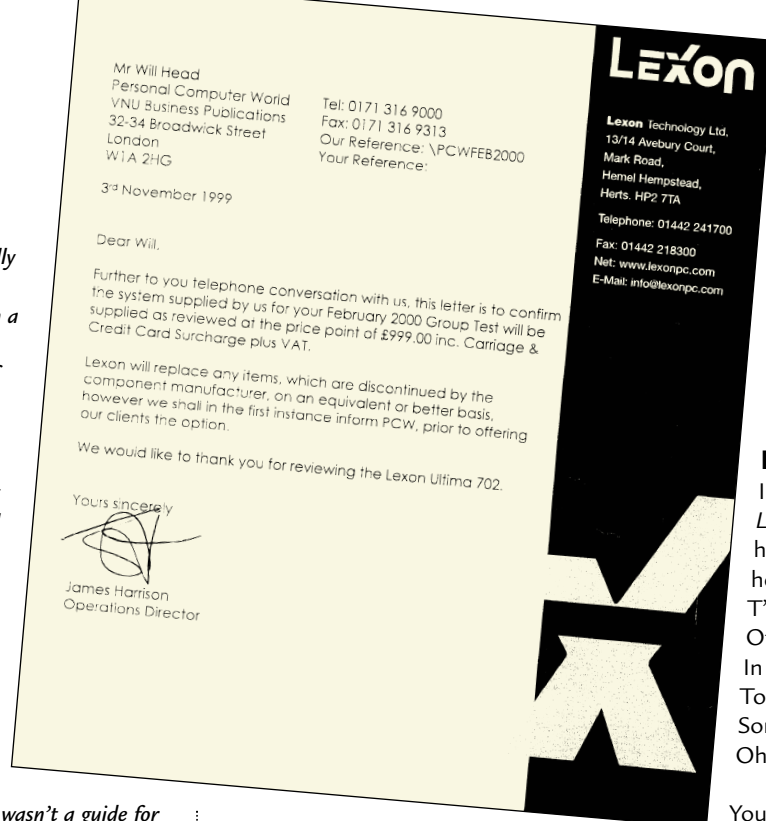
Perception of audio quality differs from person to person. I recommended using Audiocatalyst because it was an idiot's guide. It wasn't a guide for MP3 experts, it was a guide designed to get those who don't use MP3s interested in the format. Audiocatalyst has a very clear and simple interface and I believe the audio quality and speed of the Xing encoder makes it a pretty balanced encoder. It's not excellent, and it's a long way from the Fraunhofer codec which most people on [alt.music.mp3](#) seem to recommend, but you can buy it legally and it's cheap. Really, once you understand how to set up and use codecs, you should try a few of them out for audio quality and speed before settling on the one that suits you and your system.

With regard to the BladeEnc being similar in speed to the Fraunhofer routine, this is not a simple equation. At rates of 128Kbits/sec and below, BladeEnc's quality is not so hot, but Fraunhofer excels at these bit rates. However, at 160Kbits/sec or higher, BladeEnc may produce better results than the Fraunhofer codec. So the BladeEnc codec isn't as efficient at levels of 128Kbits/sec and below, which most people use.

If you really don't like BladeEnc then you could always try an alternative freeware codec called LAME at [www.sulaco.org](#).

Unfortunately, since I wrote the article, BladeEnc's author, Tord Jansson, has been threatened with legal action by some of the large MP3 companies and has temporarily removed the binaries for the codec from his site. This is a great shame, but Tord is confident that he hasn't infringed anyone's copyright and is hoping to re-post the binaries in a short while. Tord works on the codec in his own time and is then generous enough to give it away for free. The codec is improving all the time and is available on a wide range of platforms, so he deserves to be supported.

As for the screen shot, the original piece talked about speed issues and the problems this can cause, but this was chopped for space



reasons. Another screen shot should have taken its place. However, most Pentium II, Pentium III or Athlon machines have no problems encoding on the fly. The point is to try encoding on the fly on your particular setup, and if it works, then great, you can finish the whole job quicker. If it doesn't, then you can always resort to ripping the file first and then encoding it.

LEXON LET-DOWN

Since we went to press last month letters have continued to arrive from people dissatisfied by their experiences with Lexon Technology Ltd. To date we know of three separate incidents where people ordered the Ultima 702 system, but were then told that delivery would take a further 21 days than originally agreed. Following this, all three customers had their cheques returned uncashed and their orders cancelled by Lexon. We have been unable to contact Lexon to discuss this matter.

PCW endeavours to make sure that the companies appearing within its pages are capable of fulfilling orders for the machines reviewed. In Lexon's case, a representative from PCW travelled to the company's site to ensure that the infrastructure could cope with the volume of orders resulting from a favourable review. It appeared from our site visit that Lexon could cope with the volume of orders. It now appears that Lexon has had difficulties in the instances cited by our readers.

Unfortunately, even after these checks by PCW and the assurances from manufacturers, issues do arise. In such cases PCW will try to resolve the issue with the manufacturer in question and ensure that problems do not arise in the future.

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In regard to this incident we will not be considering systems from Lexon Technology Ltd for stand-alone reviews or group tests for the foreseeable future.

POETRY CORNER

I enjoyed the poem in the April *Letters* page so much that I just had to attempt one myself. I hope the theme is recognisable. T'was ever thus
Of bits and bytes
In truth a geek's delight
To stack and store
Sometimes restore
Oh CPU do I love you

Your static parts proceed apace
Such things as screens to interlace

And lo, the vision clear unfold
My first C program 'Hello World'

CLIFF SMITH

WILL HEAD replies >

Err, we were kinda joking about making this a regular feature – but thanks anyway.

SPAM OF THE MONTH

Hi to all readers. While I was on the web at the weekend I found a really good deal. If you go here [http://\[blatant spam deleted\]/id/xxxxx](#) and sign up, you get paid when you read your emails. It works like this: they send you mail, you go to the link and you get paid, brilliant or what? Has anyone else seen any good offers like that on the Internet?

IAN EDWARDS

WILL HEAD replies >

Nice try. But PCW doesn't support spam in any way, shape or form. Your email has been forwarded to the abuse mailbox of your ISP and the company you were trying to promote.

GETTING HOLD OF OLD HARDWARE

We would like to thank all the kind readers who wrote in offering assistance to John Collins' problem of reading the data from his old 5.25in disks (*Letters*, PCW, April 2000). We will be forwarding all the mail to Mr Collins, so hopefully he will be able get to his old code. Ah, doesn't it makes you feel all warm inside...

CORRECTION

The telephone number printed below Acer's review in the April 2000 issue's notebook group test should have read 0870 900 2237.