

letters

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BIG DEAL

I was in my local supermarket the other day when I saw on the wall an advertisement for a shop, which read: 'Today's computers at yesterday's prices'. Probably best avoided?

SEBASTIEN LAHTINEN
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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Early learning centres

Regarding IT education in schools (*Letters, PCW March*) I am 15 years old and attend an independent school in Newcastle-under-Lyme, where I'd class the teaching of IT as excellent. Unfortunately, most GCSE pupils are disappointed to discover that school IT courses are more about technology and information as opposed to the hands-on use of PCs. So what opportunities are open to those who want to learn more about the lower-level uses of computers such as programming, the internal operation of the machine or, at a simpler level, file management? My advice is to get a prospectus from your local or regional college and look at the courses which may interest you. In addition to having a very enjoyable time, you may also gain useful qualifications. Having taken several courses such as Visual Basic and 'Build your own PC', I have gained several qualifications including a City and Guilds Level 3 in C programming. The homework-scarce years before busy GCSEs are a perfect time to take a

course. Another incentive is that under-18s get the education free! A £400 course will cost you nothing and you also get access to the college's resources.

SAM POWELL

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Gordon Laing replies > Sam wins our Letter of the Month prize for coming up with a simple solution to pro-actively furthering his IT education. Let's hope the local and regional colleges can handle the strain of large numbers of eager students.

CAVALIER ABOUT PIRATES

I am sure that some sections of Hong Kong's tourist industry liked your article 'Hong Kong: the price is right', in the February issue, but I

can assure you that many members of the Hong Kong Information Technology Federation were disgusted by the sentiments you expressed. You are correct that the authorities out here are finding it difficult to stem the increasing tide of piracy, despite their ever increasing efforts. Why? Because the growing demand for pirate software is continually fuelled by articles like yours

which openly advertise its availability and price in such glowing terms and without any attempt to point out the damage that piracy causes. I agree that you describe the shops as 'small and seedy' but you glamourise pirate software with statements such as '...which caught my eye', 'under a tenner' and 'every major application is available'. In addition to being illegal in most parts of the world, piracy is an ever increasing threat to the legitimate IT industry, and hence to its consumers.

JOHN SANDERS

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Gordon Laing replies > I would like to set the record straight — neither myself nor anyone at PCW condones software piracy. Having visited Hong Kong, I was horrified at the blatantly open sale of pirate software and I felt it was worth reporting. Perhaps my recommendation to buy gadgets as yet unavailable in the UK at bargain prices lightened the piece, but I certainly did not intend to glamourise software piracy.

THE TROUBLE WITH IT TEACHING IN SCHOOLS

Last month you published two letters about the role of IT in education. The one from an educational perspective criticised schools for a lack of material resources and technical knowledge, while the 12-year-old student was concerned about the lack of time and relevance of his IT studies. Your comments in reply stressed the view that exposure to IT in schools should be a form of 'training' for the world of work.

As a former student teacher, intending to teach IT in secondary schools, I can confirm that there is much in what Jim Fanning, Director of Sixth Form Studies at Tideway School, says. I don't know if you edited his comments, but the main reason that schools can't provide leadership in any branch of educational IT is that they don't have the money to keep up with even the trailing edge. My teaching practice included one school which still used BBC B and Acorn A3000 computers and another with an unstable network of 25MHz 486SX PCs. Both were characterised by poor teaching conditions and an insufficient number of computers — no class I taught had less than two students to a computer and sometimes one or two computers ended up with three children at once.

As for the view expressed by 12-year-old James Hannington (and yourselves) that IT in schools should be

some kind of training for the outside world, you don't expect CDT lessons to prepare a student for employment as a designer, or English to be preparation for an Editorship; yet IT is saddled with this ridiculous expectation. The role of IT in schools is to expose students to habits of thought and the 'generalities' of using word processors, spreadsheets, databases and graphics packages to achieve results in other subject areas — in other words, IT as a tool. IT in the curriculum is not specifically there to teach the use of spreadsheets for keeping accounts, nor to use a database to keep client information up to date. However, should James opt for an IT course at KS4, he will get exposure to such uses of IT in the project work he will have to carry out.

The use of IT in schools in England and Wales needs to be properly thought out. The current fad for putting schools on the internet is a distraction from the real need for IT to have a proper place devised for it in the curriculum, and proper resources to be allocated. IT labs need to be equipped to cope with actual (not average) class sizes that exist in schools and provision made for 'away from the computer' learning. There must also be a realistic capitation allowance for new equipment and proper continuous training for IT teachers, not the common INSET stuff provided by local authorities.

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST



MAC MUCK-UP

According to the *Gadgets* pages in your March issue, the Apple iMac attracts VAT at a rate of 75%. Methinks that a harassed Nik Rawlinson has entered 1.75 instead of 1.175 when calculating the retail price inclusive of VAT from the ex-VAT selling price. Or are we witnessing the imposition of a new Euro VAT hike to restrict the flow of fluorescent computers into the UK? The beige box lobby must have friends in high places...

ANDREW JONES

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Gordon Laing replies > *You're right: it should have been 1.175. My fault again — I was actually harassing Nik at the time he made the calculation. Still, the nice, new iMac colours are some consolation.*

DIFFERENT PLUGS MAKE SENSE

Why does Gordon Laing pity the first-time user connecting up their PC (*Editorial, PCW March*)? With only one 5-pin DIN socket on a PC, there is only one place into which the keyboard can go. It's when you have more than one connector of the same type that the novice user starts to encounter problems. I am sure more people have got muddled deciding which of two identical 9-pin serial ports is the right one for their modem, than thinking about whether to plug the modem into, say, the printer socket! Using different connectors for each peripheral makes perfect sense, and the fact that the industry has gone along with it for 15 years means it wasn't that bad.

Your feature on USB and IEEE 1394 (*also March*) was a great help explaining the differences between USB and 1394. Author Roger Gann rang no alarm bells, though: we've seen dual bus standards before, with VL Bus and PCI battling it for supremacy on the motherboard. And guess who won? The faster and neater of the two. What's the betting that 1394 ends up the real winner in 1999/2000. It's quicker, looks neater, and is useful inside the box as well as outside.

WILLIAM WATSON

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Gordon Laing replies > *I agree. In fact, some time ago I wrote in my Editorial that it could already be too late for USB. 1394's performance is not only considerably higher, but the fact that it can operate peer-to-peer without the aid of a PC host, makes it the best bet for consumer electronics and future convergent products. Really though, I'd welcome both technologies into my home and office, and if we're being picky there are currently two different sockets for the keyboard!*

CONSUMED WITH AGE

So, Michael Hewitt thinks that the Psion Series 5 is a '£400 alarm clock' (*PCW March*). I won't list all the things he got wrong, but I can't resist the bit about the battery consumption. I am writing this on a Series 5 with batteries that were replaced two weeks ago. They have been in use for 10hrs 58mins and are still showing a remaining life of more than 50 percent. My only warning to anyone who may be influenced by Michael's comments would be this: should you really trust the judgement of someone who pays £400 for a Series 5 when they are widely available for under £350?

GEOFF DENNIS

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Michael Hewitt replies > *You must let me know the name of the battery manufacturer so I can buy shares in the company. According to my Battery Usage monitor, I got 3hrs 52mins out of my last set of Duracells. Then again, it's very difficult to read anything properly in the Series 5's contrasty, overly reflective screen, so I checked with other owners. They confirm that less than five hours is pretty much typical. As for the price, yes, today you can pick up a Series 5 for around £350. Mine was bought last August, however. But the fact that, in under six months, the RRP has dropped from £499 to nearer £300 (now, usually, with a padded case thrown in) suggests that the dealers are having a certain amount of difficulty shifting the things. Hardly a sign of a successful, technologically mature product.*

Gordon Laing adds > *I would just like to point out that I am rather fond of my Series 5, although like Michael's, my batteries rarely last longer than four hours.*



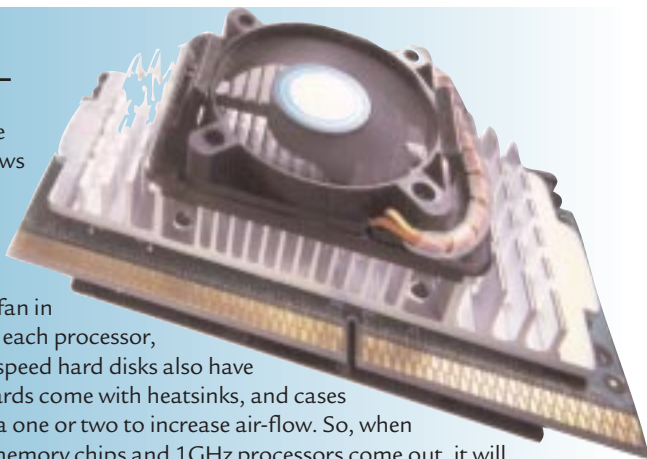
FAN MAIL

I read the 'Future CPUs for Windows 2000' article (*PCW March*) with some amusement. We currently have a fan in the PSU, one for each processor, and some high-speed hard disks also have one. Graphics cards come with heatsinks, and cases can have an extra one or two to increase air-flow. So, when these 800MHz memory chips and 1GHz processors come out, it will probably be easier to remove all the fans and place your PC into a large chest freezer! If you don't believe me, look at the evidence: a 386 ran at 40MHz and 5v and required no cooling. A P2 runs at 233 to 450MHz and needs a chunky heatsink and fan, yet runs at only 2.2v. As the voltage cannot drop much more, what will a 1GHz Mercedes need for cooling? Surely we're not returning to the 'old days' where computers could only be used in special, air-conditioned rooms?

A. BUTLER

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PCW replies > *Fans of attractive heatsinks should check out this month's cover model — phwooar! Perhaps readers would like to send in photos of their favourite cooling devices?*



THE MP3 BLUES

I periodically visit the Computer Fairs in both the North West and the South East and the latest trend seems to be pirating music CDs. Not just one album of material per disc, though — these discs use MP3 and typically contain between ten and thirty (or more) albums of one artist on a single CD: the complete works of the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, for instance. Each CD sells for about £15. Perhaps the music industry should start getting worried.

DAVID BOLTON, LANCS

PCW comments > *The music industry is already worried.*

On the one hand, many artists are enjoying the freedom of distributing preview or taster tracks over the internet, using MP3. On the other hand, there are copyright issues, and that's before you even consider piracy situations such as those described by David. MP3 and music over the net is a hot subject, which is why we've published a special report in this issue's News, pp38/39.

I'VE A COMPLAINT

Before you start complaining about computer illiteracy in media personnel (*ChipChat, March*) perhaps you should get a grown-up to explain to you the difference between a slash and a back-slash!

IVOR NASTIKOV

IVOR BUGBEAR replies > *Aha! I knew that would generate a response! A purely deliberate mistake, er, honestly.*