A space of your own

Mark Whitehorn has seen the PDA future, and it's wireless with a tremendous storage capacity.

In the November issue I wrote about the Xircom network card and the Adaptec SCSI card and how they extend the ways in which a PDA can be used. The cards offered different solutions to essentially the same PDA problems of where you put your data and how you move it from the handheld to other hardware.

But things have moved on dramatically in a mere three months. Two fascinating advancements in technology have appeared, in an odd parallel to the Adaptec and Xircom solutions. One is a storage device and the other is a new type of networking technology.

■ Storage

The IBM microdrive is a miniature disk drive (think book of matches) with a 170 or 340MB capacity. It slots happily into any device that has a CF+ Type II slot with an ejector/release mechanism.

This Type II slot is, at 5mm, deeper than the CF+ Type I slot, though it uses the same style of connector (see *PCW* review January, page 90).

To my intense delight, the Psion 7 – which is still in the prototype phase of production as I write – has a Type II slot, and so will be able to make use of this device.

The microdrive makes a world of difference to how PDAs can be used. I've been forced into lugging my IBM laptop whenever I go away because, despite the fact that the HP Jornada 820 has a good screen and keyboard, I've never been able to back up my work.

The SCSI card and zip drive are great, but not for travelling because, when the obligatory power supply is taken into account, the whole lot comes to about the same weight as the laptop.

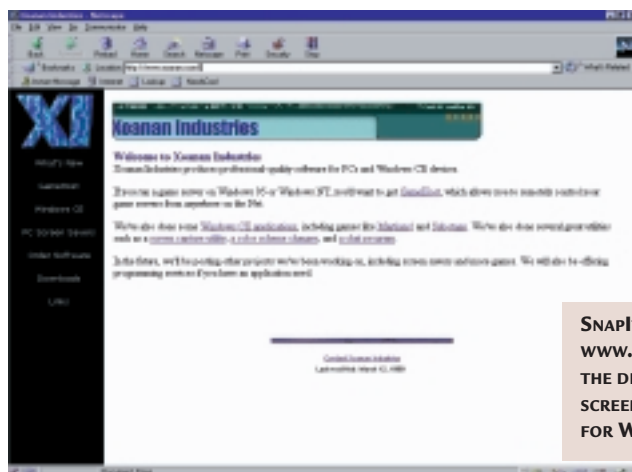With the addition of a microdrive, I have 340MB of internal storage and no cabling.

A HUGE (1,600 x 1,200) IMAGE OF THE BRANDENBERG GATE IN BERLIN. TAKEN WITH THE CANON PRO 70 AND STORED DIRECTLY ON THE MICRODRIVE. TO GET THE IMAGE TO YOU ALL I HAD TO DO WAS TO REMOVE THE CARD FROM THE CANON, PUT IT IN A PCMCIA SLOT IN A PC (USING THE CADDY PROVIDED) AND ATTACH THE JPEG TO AN EMAIL DESTINED FOR PCW

I recently visited LotusSphere in Berlin. The book I am currently writing is on the microdrive. I can work on it using the Jornada and save the chapters internally and on the microdrive. In addition, I can use the drive in the Canon Pro 70 where it promises over 600 large (1,600 x 1,200) high-quality images. Best of all, I can swap the drive between these two devices, viewing the images on the Jornada at the end of the day.

One thing to be wary of is the physical design of the CF+ Type II slot that you have. The full standard defines all sorts of things: the size of the slot, the number of pins, the interface – all that jazz. What it doesn't say is there has to be a mechanism for ejecting the cards from the slot. So it is possible to create a PDA which has a Type II slot which meets all of the specs, but from which it is almost impossible to remove the card. The worst case would be a hole in the side of a device – easy to put the card in, but

SNAPIT FROM WWW.XOANAN.COM OFFERS THE DELIGHTS OF A COLOUR SCREEN CAPTURE PROGRAM FOR WINCE MACHINES

leaving no part of the card protruding to make it easy to remove.

IBM doesn't want you to mangle the drive or use pliers, so it says in the small print that the drive shouldn't be inserted into any slot that doesn't have an ejector mechanism. In fact, devices like the Casio E100 don't have an ejector mechanism, but the slot isn't flush with the case either. Part of the card is exposed, and I found it possible to remove the drive without applying excess force. But bear in mind this was my experience with a particular drive and device; and it clearly makes sense to follow IBM's recommendation.

■ Look, no wires

I've raved in the past about how great it is to be able to network a Windows CE device and I still do; no use for travelling, but great at home or work.

The January issue carried a feature that I wrote on wireless networking. For reasons explained there, the particular network configuration I eventually adopted means I can't currently use a wireless card in a PDA, but there is no reason you have to be bound by the same restrictions.

For peer-to-peer networks, this is already possible and I have no doubt it will become generally the way to connect PDAs to the world because it makes so much sense. OK, so this is the middle of winter, but think of sitting in the garden in the summer, happily surfing and answering email.

■ Opening doors

As I put this column together, the Psion 7 is in late beta and is due to go into production shortly. I'm not reviewing it here (it will be covered elsewhere in *PCW*) but one thing worth noting is that at last Psion has cast aside its obsession with proprietary plug-ins. The incorporation of a CF+ Type II slot in the Psion 7 is to be greatly applauded. I commented several months ago on Psion's tendency to stick with closed standards and I am now happy to say I firmly believe that in

moving to open standards, the company has taken a big step towards ensuring its survival.

■ A question of reliance

Chris Kirby of kirbyb@post.queensu.ca emailed me to ask about the reliability of the Psion series, especially with regard to a factory-refurbished Series 5.
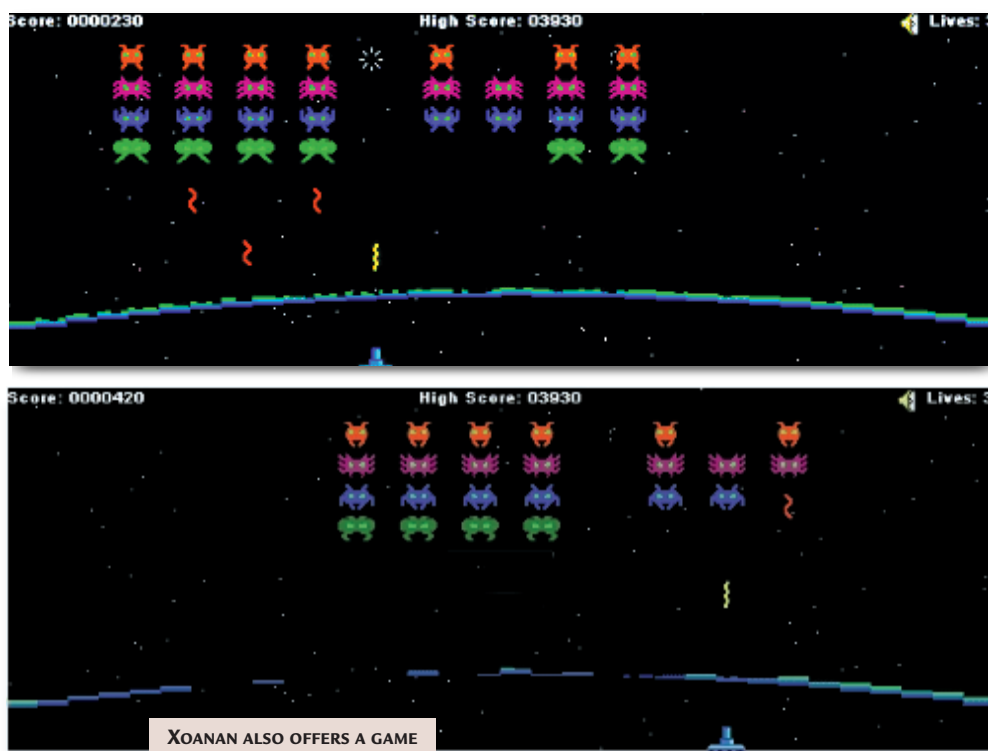
I have found all the Psion range to be outstandingly reliable. There were early problems with hinges on the first Psions (although my Psion 3 has survived intact for years) but in general the Series 3 range is fine. The early 5s suffered from the rubber coating peeling off. Admittedly, my original one now looks like a dog with mange, but it runs perfectly. I think the general feeling is that these are thoroughly reliable machines.

As to factory refurbished, if it is the original factory doing the work, I would expect the PDA to be as reliable as the original (but look to see what guarantee is offered).

Chris also brought my attention to a great holiday program for the 3mx which allows you to customise the holidays in Agenda. It can be found at http://decus.se/~gripenol/hol.html.

It isn't available for the Series 5 because, as the author says: 'HOL writes

directly into the agenda file, and since the agenda file format for Series 5 is not known, it is not possible to make a Series 5 version of HOL.'

Rather poignantly his (or her) home page reads 'Welcome to my page. It ain't much (especially after the disk-crash) – but I call it home.'

■ Hallelujah for Nokia

A rather mysterious Barry of barry@gena.freeserve.co.uk emailed me to sing the praises of using a Nokia 9110 instead of a plethora of different devices just to send/receive faxes and emails.
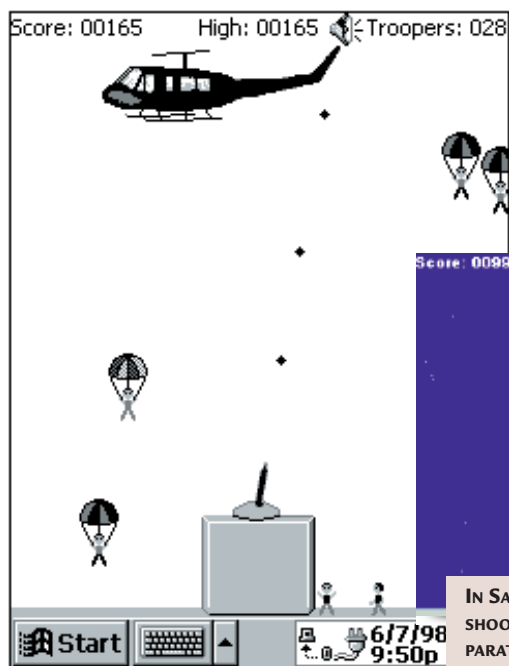
Having played with cables, infra-red modems and links, I would agree that if you want to work with email, phone and fax communications, a composite device such as the Nokia is an excellent solution.

Things may change in the future, of course, but such kit seems to be the best all-round solution.

Nokia's machines seem among the most competent and usable on the market, although it would be even easier to recommend them if the company did something about improving the user interface which is, as we say politely, less than optimal.
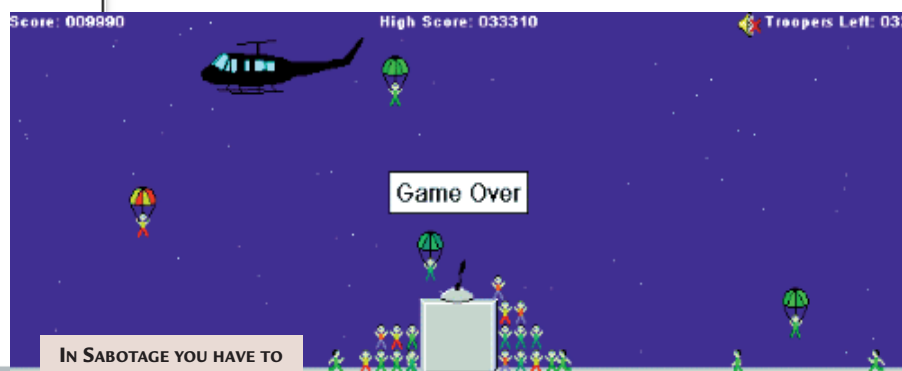
■ Screen capture

I've covered screen capture several times

XOANAN ALSO OFFERS A GAME CALLED MARTIANS, WHICH LOOKS HAUNTINGLY FAMILIAR

Score: 00165   High: 00165   Troopers: 028

Start   6/7/98 9:50p

clone (see previous page and screenshot on opening page) and Sabotage.

■ PDA alternatives
Two readers tell me of their defection to the world of mini PCs.

everybody's needs are different. If a PDA doesn't offer what you want, an alternative must be sought.

The Stylistic, Libretto et al offer an alternative way of working and appeal to many. The availability of certain software is especially persuasive if you must have a particular package.

Score: 009890   High Score: 033310   Troopers Left: 032
Game Over

IN SABOTAGE YOU HAVE TO SHOOT DOWN THE PARATROOPERS BEFORE THEY TAKE OVER YOUR BASE

in these pages and capturing a colour image from a Windows CE device still presents something of a problem. I haven't yet come across a freeware solution, but Steve Otteson from Xoanan Industries www.xoanan.com contacted me about his company's screen capture software. Called SnapIt, it costs $10 (£6). The site also contains some other utilities and games, including a Space Invaders

A SCENE FROM THE LATEST BOND FLICK, WHICH SEES OUR HEROINE FLASHING HER COMPUTER TALENTS

The first was Jeremy Main jm@wanadoo.be who enthused about the PD-1100 from Palmax. This is similar to the Libretto, but comes with Windows 98 and all accessories bar modem for under £1,200.

The other reader was Greg Parker TechnoMage1@newscientist.net who also turned traitor, this time with a Toshiba Libretto 100CT including all the add-ons. He wrote in some time ago complaining about the lack of a CE equivalent to Mathcad. With the Libretto he can have Mathcad, Mathematica and Matlab on the move.

He says you can get around some of the power consumption problems by booting off the hard disk and with a configured PCMCIA RAM card in the slot, turn off the hard drive to enjoy longer battery life. He reckons the gains outweigh the increased boot-up time.

Despite being a confirmed PDA user myself, I appreciate

Coincidentally, I've just looked at the Fujitsu Stylistic LT which is a pad device that can be used out of the office like a PDA and docked on return to the office to form essentially a desktop PC.

I found two major headaches with using the Stylistic in the way I'd use a PDA, and these coincide with the problem areas Greg pinpoints in his email. Using Windows 98 has a very different feel to using a PDA: first, the boot time is long (apparently interminable compared with the instant gratification provided by a PDA) and the battery life is abysmal (about 1.5 hours) compared with a PDA.

Greg also pointed me in the direction of www.cemonster.com which he describes as 'the best CE software site going'.

■ Shaken, but not stirred
Most of us are used to getting dubious emails. I was surprised to receive one that looks suspect from a respectable source, the PR company for Hewlett-Packard. Maybe I am being a little bit oversensitive, but something labelled BondGirl made me wary. I needn't have been. It is in fact a shot from the latest Bond movie where the heroine uses the HP Jornada.

PCW CONTACTS

Mark Whitehorn welcomes your feedback on the PDAs column. Contact him via the PCW editorial office or email pda@pcw.co.uk