

Hi-Grade Axion PR11 266

Tested over twelve months

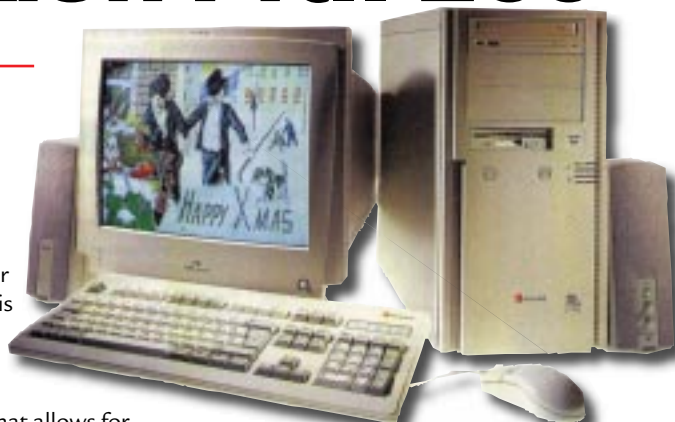
A model of reliability, the Axion manages to keep the pace at a reasonable price.

It's amazing how quickly things change in such a short time. The Axion PR11 266 made its debut in December 1997 and was reviewed in *PCW* the following January. What's changed, you ask? Well, nothing much hardware-wise, but for the £2,000 (£1,996 to be exact) Hi-Grade charged, then you could say lots. Just a year later, this very powerful configuration can be had for around £799.

At the heart of this PC is a Pentium II 266MHz CPU, 32Mb of SDRAM (housed in one of three DIMM slots), Superdisk floppy drive (formerly known as an LS-120), SoundBlaster AWE 64 sound card, Teac 24-speed CD-ROM drive, Maxtor 5.6Gb Ultra DMA hard drive, and an internal Pace 33.6K modem. It is also fitted with an ASUS V3000 AGP graphics card sporting 4Mb of memory. The monitor is a 17in ADI Microscan 5P,

which is still a good buy. The verdict after a year is that this PC has held its own. Aside from the fast graphics card that allows for some furious 3D gameplay, it's as reliable as Big Ben. I've loaded and uninstalled so many programs, you'd have expected the magnetic medium to rub off—yet the hard drive cranks merrily away. The original software load and Windows 95 configuration has proved to be watertight and I was only forced to reload Windows after the registry file became disorganised. Like the old Timex ads used to say, "it takes a licking but keeps on ticking", and tick on it does.

DYLAN ARMBRUST



PCW DETAILS

Axion PR11 266

★★★★★

Price £1,996 (£1,699 ex VAT)

Contact Hi-Grade 0181 532 6111

www.higrade.com

Good Points The LS-120 drive. Excellent AGP graphics card. Sharp monitor.

Bad Points Nothing worth mentioning.

Conclusion A very reliable PC with lots of spark.

Mesh Elite Pegasus

Tested over nine months

This PC package has plenty of features to satisfy even the most demanding of users.

Fifteen years in front of a computer have given me a good idea of what is important in a PC, and the reason for choosing the Mesh Elite was that most of the items on my wish list were included. The specification included a 266MHz Pentium II, 64Mb SDRAM, 17in Taxan monitor, fast 24-speed CD drive, Iomega 100Mb Zip drive, 6.4Gb hard drive, Yamaha 3D sound, ATi 3D Xpert@Work graphics card and US Robotics 56K modem. Windows 95 was preinstalled so the only upgrade I required was a wheeled-type Microsoft Intellimouse.

Everything worked properly right away. The machine came supplied with a folder containing all the necessary software and documentation for the

installed equipment. The keyboard is good to use and the keys have a good, solid click, but with the main unit on the floor, the cable is overstretched to reach to desktop. The inside of the case is tidy, with plenty of room to expand. The Pegasus was supplied with Lotus SmartSuite 97, IBM Simply Speaking [p121] and PagePlus 5. I spent some time with Simply Speaking, but SmartSuite was no use to me as I am a confirmed Office 97 user. Super-Voice, which is supplied with the US Robotics modem, sets up a useful answer machine. One problem I will be monitoring as the warranty nears its end, is the CD player. It often refuses eject the CD without several pokes, and sounds like a muted dentist's drill.

MIKE EARLEY



PCW DETAILS

Mesh Elite Pegasus

★★★★★

Price Current models start at £1,526.33

Contact Mesh Computers 0181 208 4706

www.meshplc.co.uk

Good Points Sturdy build. Expandable.

Bad Points Mesh's support is "Ring-Back".

Conclusion A safe purchase.

Taxan CrystalVision 660

Tested over six months

With an **excellent picture** and user-friendly controls, the Crystalvision was always going to stay ahead of the pack.

In the past year, every monitor manufacturer and their dog have produced flatpanel screens, which in part is why prices have dropped so far and so fast. Flatpanels cost around £2,000 when they first appeared but can now be picked up for around £500. However, only a few of these panels really stand out as being of exceptional quality. Taxan has consistently made high-quality flatpanel displays and the CrystalVision 660 is no exception. Of the many flatpanels I've used, the CrystalVision 660 is probably the best of the lot. The 15in screen



runs at a resolution of 1024x768 and takes an analogue input. The screen is clean, crisp and sharp, with even luminosity. While it can only support 18-bit colour, not 24-bit, the colours are still remarkably true. The colours on an LCD are never going to be as good as those on a CRT, but the Taxan is much better than most.

The on-screen display (OSD) is easy to use and has all the controls you could need. Although the auto-adjust button sets up the screen almost perfectly, should you wish to make adjustments yourself, you can easily achieve

the best possible picture. There is also a brightness dial on the bottom edge of the screen bezel which links to the OSD, so you can see how far you have turned it. My only gripe is the lack of a dual input for connecting more than one machine to the screen.

ADELE DYER

PCW DETAILS

Taxan CrystalVision 660

★★★★★

Price £1,338.33 (£1,139 ex VAT)

Contact Taxan 01344 484646

www.taxan.com

Good Points Excellent screen quality.

Bad Points Still very expensive.

Conclusion One of the best LCD monitors around, worth the steep asking price.

Viewsonic VP150 Viewpanel

Tested over three months

A flatscreen that **outshines** old-style desktop monitors, both in terms of looks and picture.

Standalone colour LCD monitors have, until recently, cost more than a notebook with a similar display, largely because they need expensive extra circuitry to adapt signals designed for analogue CRT monitors. VESA's attempt to introduce a standard digital interface has become mired in an industry-wide row. Even so, prices have fallen to the extent that you can buy a high-quality 15in colour LCD flatscreen for under £1,000. Viewsonic's VP150, which I have been using for some three months, costs £998 (inc VAT). That may sound a lot, but bear in mind that a 15in LCD is equivalent to a 17in CRT in terms of viewing area. By comparison, a mid-range 17in NEC P750 CRT, which offers the same maximum 1024x768 resolution at 75MHz, costs £692 including VAT. The

VP150 is a joy to use, not least because of the desk space it frees up. Installation under Windows 95 involved little more than plugging it in, and it provides a crisp, flicker-free display. All controls are easily accessible via five buttons on the front, which summon and navigate a menu of options. The screen is easily swivelled to suit your needs and can be hung on a wall.

Viewsonic boasts that the VP150 is the brightest LCD panel on the market, yet this was the one feature that gave me trouble: I suffered alarming symptoms of dazzle at the end of a long day. Otherwise the display gave as good a picture as my CRT, without the hassle of heat and size. Clearly, when prices fall, these devices will wipe old-style monitors off the desktop.

CLIVE AKASS



PCW DETAILS

Viewsonic VP150 Viewpanel

★★★★★

Price £998 (£845 ex VAT)

Contact MMD (distributor) 01734 313232

www.viewsonic.com

Good Points Compact. Good picture.

Bad Points Watch the glare.

Conclusion Get one if you can afford it.

Voicetype Simply Speaking: Home Edition

Tested over twelve months

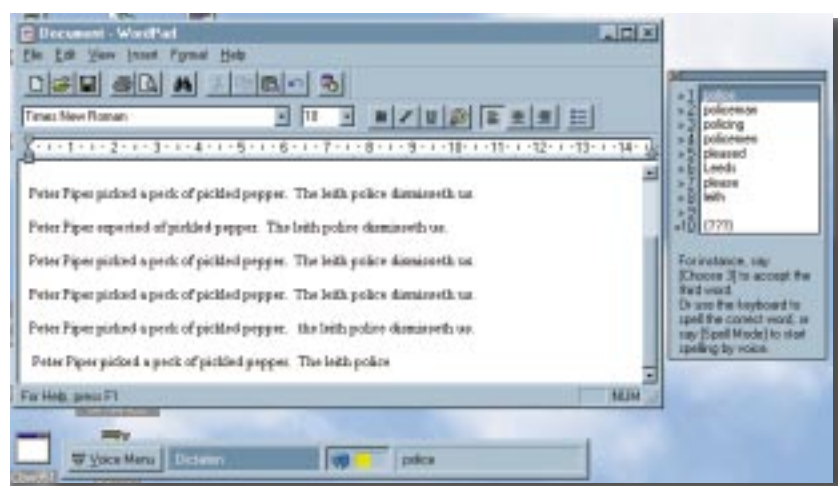
Software that allows you to *speak* volumes.

When PCs became available about 20 years ago, I decided not to learn to touch-type because I thought it would soon be possible to dictate directly into the machine. When I read articles about voice recognition programs, it seemed that desktop systems were always five years away. The future finally arrived about two years ago with the appearance of Dragon, Kurzweil and IBM software at affordable prices. My use of IBM VoiceType during the past year has been successful, up to a point, but not without the expenditure of much patience and time.

Speaking is like driving: we all think we do it right. The IBM help notes say that "you do not have to enrol [train the software] if you have a native English accent". I have, so I didn't. The results were rubbish. Not simply gibberish with misunderstood words that changed the

It's ideal for stream-of-consciousness writing where content takes precedence over sense

meaning of sentences, but rubbish that bore no obvious relationship to what I had spoken. So I read the first 50 enrolment sentences which is "all you need to read if you are a native speaker". This produced some improvement, but not enough to upgrade the script from rubbish to gibberish. I then completed the full enrolment of 200 sentences, "recommended for those who have a foreign accent or a strong regional accent". I'm not proud. This made the program almost usable, but still short of the "over 90% accuracy without enrol" claimed by IBM. It has improved steadily since that time by constant correction and the addition of technical words. The capacity of the system to learn is its greatest strength, and I marvel at the science that underpins it. Recognition



is still far from perfect, but the use of VoiceType alongside the keyboard and mouse is, for me, a more efficient and attractive method of working than using the keyboard and mouse alone.

Using the program is very easy: you speak into the microphone and include formatting commands such as a comma, capital letter or new paragraph, and finish by saying "stop dictation". Correcting words and making additions to the vocabulary are equally simple. A double-click on the incorrect word plays back what you have said and brings up alternatives.

If the correct word is listed, this can be chosen and the text will be corrected automatically. If not, then a new word can be typed in and this will be added to the vocabulary.

Mis-matches between the spoken and written words are still depressingly common. One irritation is the frequency with which VoiceType substitutes a proper name for a word that it has not recognised. This suggests that its basic 30,000-word vocabulary contains thousands of names, hence substitutions such as Armagh (for armour) and Satan (for Seaton). The ideal vocabulary would be one that contained every word the user required, and no others. It would therefore be helpful to be able to edit the basic vocabulary. The other principal

source of recognition error is minor variations in the microphone set-up. The procedure for maintaining microphone efficiency takes about two minutes to carry out and cannot be recommended enough.

Will the system be useful to you? That depends on how much and what type of writing you do. The hard part of most writing is getting the words out of your head. An accurate VoiceType input rate of 100 words per minute is possible in theory, but this does not solve the problem of thinking time. I would be happy to produce 1,000 words per day, but this is not 10 minutes' work. VoiceType is ideal for stream-of-consciousness writing where content takes precedence over everything else, but then again, most of us use email for that.

RAMUES GALLOIS

PCW DETAILS

Voicetype Simply Speaking

★★★★

Price £39.99 (£34.03 ex VAT)

Contact IBM 0800 963761

www.software.ibm.com/is/voicetype

Good Points Easy to expand personal vocabulary. Potentially accurate when trained.

Bad Points Much patience needed for training. Microphone set-up very sensitive.

Conclusion Not for everyone.