

# letters

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## STRANGE FRUIT

As a long-time computer addict, I always turn to PCW's *Retro* page first. It brings a glow to my anorak to read about all the old machines. In April's column, Simon Collin ponders the preponderance of fruity names for some of the early computers, and wondered, 'was there a Pear or Banana? Unlikely.' Funnily enough, there was a Banana and even an Orange. Sadly for Jobs and Wozniak, both were Apple IIe rip-offs, originating from South Africa and the Far East respectively. I saw both being used at a local computer society in the early 1980s. What was strange about them was the fact that the cases were obviously made from Apple moulds, but with a different-colour plastic. The PCBs were identical to Apples, but without the copyright details, the firmware had been blown into EPROMs.

TONY PENDREY

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## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### Current affairs

At the risk of labouring a subject, I must comment on the recent correspondence in PCW regarding battery life on the Psion 5. In normal use, a set of new Duracells should last about 20 hours. Anything less than 12, according to Psion Technical Support, may suggest a faulty machine (some examples could have a faulty battery compartment). If one assumes that a new set of batteries should have about 1750mAh of usable power, a four-hour battery life suggests a current of about 435mA, which is grossly excessive. Normal residual current

without the backlight should be around 50mA, rising to 150mA with the backlight on (assuming that PsiWin is not active). My own machine started

using batteries at a prodigious rate last month, and checking the current showed it to be 150mA unlit, and 250mA backlit.

A speedy warranty repair restored the original 50mA/150mA usage. So I suggest that anyone with 'battery gobblers' checks the <Information/Battery/Usage Live/Battery Current Now> reading. Anything in excess of a consistent 100mA with the backlight off must be considered suspect.

NEIL MELLERICK

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**PCW replies >** *Neil's letter was one of many we received this month concerning Psion 5 battery life. Most users recommend the use of rechargeables, although an interesting thread emerged concerning Duracells with the built-in lifespan indicator. When squeezed, a short bar appears along the side of the battery, indicating its power status. However, the 5's battery compartment can be a tight fit, sometimes resulting in the unit squeezing the power-check button and inadvertently draining its own batteries.*



## OF MICE AND MUCK

While cleaning rollers can rectify erratic mouse movement, it takes time and can prove very frustrating. I eventually found a simple and effective solution by concluding that the problem was not really with the mouse but with the mouse mat. What was required was a stay-clean mat.

I replaced the mat with a pad of writing paper and now simply rip off the top sheet after a few hours' use, and I have had no more problems with the rollers getting dirty. The interaction between my movement of the mouse and that of the cursor now remains satisfyingly precise, consistent and reliable.

In addition to the advantages in relation to the mouse, the pad is very convenient for scribbling messages on; no, this does not get ink onto the mouse ball. It has certainly been the easiest and lowest-cost upgrade I have performed, and in practical terms actually one of the most rewarding.

DEREK DAVIES

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## IT EDUCATION BEGINS AT HOME ...

With regard to 'Parent Power in IT', Letters, *PCW March*: good point, Jim. Parents will look elsewhere for IT and education resources, and I too have equipped myself and my children with cutting edge (ish) technology. My children are both at secondary school and at ease with sending and picking up their own email. Surfing the net to help with homework is second nature to them. They have access to a range of multimedia encyclopedias and atlases that give them an advantage in not only their directed study, but also in the knowledge that is a byproduct of the search for information.

As far as I am aware, these skills have been picked up mainly at home, not at school. However, I can afford the kit and the time to spend with my children. My wife is a teacher and a large number of the kids she teaches are less fortunate. I understand what I think Jim is saying about parents driving

forward change, but this smacks to me of a kind of trickle-down theory for IT. In reality, and in the long-term, what you are at best allowing, and at worst encouraging, is a continuation of the information haves and have-nots. Isn't (shouldn't) education about giving everyone a chance? For goodness sake, let's not throw our hands up and say 'Well, it ain't working, so there's no point in trying'. The internet is so powerful because it allows everyone access to everything. Surely we, as parents, should be insisting that all children are given the few skills they need to use that resource effectively. And equally we should be banging the desktops to make sure that schools are giving them access to practise those skills. That must be something that's in all of our long-term interests.

SIMEON JONES,  
STAFFS

## ... AS DO THE RESOURCES FOR IT IN SCHOOLS

Re: My letter 'Parent Power in IT', Letters, *PCW March*. In defence of schools, can I just add that it is not apathy that holds back the development of IT, but a lack of resources, equipment and technical know-how. I read a report recently that stated that something like 80 percent plus of schools had access to the net, but over 60 percent only had one access point within their walls. It's fine for the government to set targets, but the resources must follow. In my present school internet access has been funded through present budgets and a range of grants from private enterprise. Teacher know-how tends to be down to

those individuals who have a personal interest in IT. Know-how will only increase when teachers have access to adequate training and their own equipment and internet accounts. Why should staff have to purchase their own equipment and pay for their own internet accounts/telephone bills in order to become IT literate? This very letter is written on my home computer, using my software and my printer. All of these items are used freely to produce resources for the school in which I work.

JIM FANNING  
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## DID THE EARTH MOVE FOR YOU TOO, DARLING?

Gordon Laing (*Editorial, PCW April*) comments on Intel not launching the Pentium III under the development name of Katmai, but maybe someone at Intel knows about the earth sciences.

To anyone interested in geology or vulcanology, Katmai means only one thing: the incredible volcanic eruption of 1912, which produced the temporary, yet amazing, wonder of the world called The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes...

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## IT IS THE MEANS, NOT THE SUBJECT MATTER

Your young reader ('IT teaching in a state', *PCW March*) wants IT to be taught as a subject in its own right, and complains that he has 'only one very basic lesson a week'. IT simply provides tools that should be available for use within the curriculum as and when appropriate — I don't believe it is necessary for IT to be taught as a subject *per se*. In most primary schools youngsters are already encouraged to find out information for themselves, whether that be from a book, a computer database or even the internet, and to present that information using appropriate tools, whether traditional or IT based. In many Secondary schools IT permeates the whole curriculum, introducing CAD/CAM to aspiring engineers, and computer graphics and typography for budding journalists and designers, to name a few.

It is suggested that state-taught children will be inadequately prepared to do accounts on a spreadsheet; I contend that it doesn't matter how much you know about spreadsheets, since you still need to know about accounting. IT only provides the means for automating the calculations and tabulating the output: it's the core knowledge that determines the results. Anyway, who's to say that spreadsheets will still be around in another decade when your reader graduates? The IT tools of the future will be as far removed from those your correspondent wants as 1970s WordStar is from today's DTP applications. And as for waiting until higher education for PC experience, there's more than PCs out in the world.

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## CHEAP AND CHEERLESS

Ivor Bugbear (*ChipChat*, *PCW April*) has discovered something that we in the public transport industry have suspected for some time. Users of free ISPs seem to complain the loudest, as do users of free or reduced-price bus passes. Also, the better the service, the more likely people are to complain about even the most minor shortcomings. This law of inverse proportionality seems to be part of human nature, and in a way I'm glad that the moaners are gravitating towards the free ISPs, leaving the rest of the internet to users who realise its limitations. Three months ago the annual subscription to my ISP was up for renewal so I signed up to three free ISPs and compared them with my regular provider. I had difficulty sending and receiving mail with two of them, and all three free ISPs made internet gameplay difficult (in one case, impossible) for my son. I also noticed that downloads were much slower with all the free providers I tried.

I decided to pay my two quid or so per week (equivalent) and stick with U-net, whose free helpdesk number works out at about a pound per minute cheaper than some 'free' ISPs. I believe you get what you pay for, and the quality of service provided by some free ISPs probably discourages rather than encourages internet use by the new generation (of not-so-technically-minded) computer users.

ANTHONY WRIGHT

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### PCW replies >

*Free ISPs are in the news right now. Quite literally, since the PCW team have each adopted various free internet services and have written-up their findings in this month's News section.*

## FOR THE GL OF IT

I would like to correct an error in the group test of programming tools (*PCW, April*). In the review of Project 2, Tim Anderson says that Delphi supports OpenGL but provides no information. Not true. There's a large section of help files on OpenGL, but Delphi goes to some length to hide them. You cannot locate any information via the index or search, but the context-sensitive help is very thorough. Just type any gl method into the code editor and hit F1. All the standard documentation appears exactly as it would in C++, even down to the same typos! (Check out push and pop matrix to see mistakes repeated.) Notwithstanding the difficulties, I am an enthusiastic supporter of Delphi. I much prefer it to C++ and would like to see more people writing OpenGL in Delphi.

PAUL FRIEDLANDER

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**Tim Anderson replies >** *True, Borland/Inprise supplies OpenGL help with the other Win32 SDK help files. But these are the standard help files for C++ developers. For example, glBegin is shown in the help file as:*

```
void glBegin (
    GLenum mode
);
```

*In OpenGL.pas this is wrapped as:*

```
procedure glBegin (mode: GLenum); stdcall;
```

*I agree, the context-sensitive help is useful, but I'd be more impressed if it were adapted for Delphi, as was done for the Windows API in the first version of Delphi.*

## WEB WISEACRE

With regard to the interview with Tim Berners-Lee [*pictured, right*] in March's *PCW*: was it a deliberate move on Michael Hewitt's part to come across as arrogant and unknowledgeable?



If he really doesn't know what the W3C is, maybe he was the wrong person to be asking questions about the world wide web. And the comments about it being 'rather fitting' that the interview was conducted by email, when the web and email are separate entities, seem odd for such an 'informed' computer magazine. The same can be said of laying the blame for the speed of the internet at the foot of the web. Basically, the whole interview came across as if Michael Hewitt had had a bad browsing experience that morning. Maybe he should spend less time browsing pornography and more time using the web for something useful?

ADRIAN BURGESS

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**Michael Hewitt replies >** *Too busy downloading pornographic gifs to have the time to reply to this one.*