letters

Honesty is the best policy

I recently took out a one-year subscription to *Personal Computer World* and I'm very glad I did. Many of the articles are well beyond my comprehension at the moment, but I do feel more 'involved' in the present technological revolution as a result of reading your magazine.

One of the things I especially like is doing the crossword. The format is excellent in that the relatively easy general knowledge vertical clues at least give a computer novice like myself some chance of getting the harder computer-related horizontal clues – thus helping develop my computer skills. The same could be said in reverse for the real 'nerds' who need to get a bit more of a life.

Nevertheless, it has come to my attention that by subscribing to your magazine I get the answers to the crossword clues about 10 days before the closing date of the competition.

For instance, the closing date for the November issue is 30 October, but the answers appeared in the December issue, which I received on the 20 October. Unfortunately, I have already filled in my answers and changing the wrong 'hot line' to 'hot link' has resulted in a mess, so I won't be entering this month! I won't make the same mistake next month, but in the interests of fair play I'd be grateful if you could look into this matter.

MARK PRESTON

WILL HEAD replies > Oops, it seems that even the humble staff at the PCW office are capable of making a mistake sometimes. Mark will be soon be in receipt of a brand new Taxan monitor in reward for his honesty. For his own protection we have decided to withhold his address...

HEADACHE PILLS NEEDED FOR ADSL ROLL-OUT

All the recent hubbub about BT rolling out ADSL gave me a joyful tingle at the possibility of Internet access at the speeds I grew accustomed to in university. However, having given the matter some thought, what a nightmare! Hackers everywhere must be rubbing their hands together with big cheesy grins all over their faces, and network administrators have to be stifling tears from the smarting pain.

Suddenly, all those computers that were given a unique IP address every time they connected to the Internet, will have a permanent address. No more endless searching for the hacker.

All the employees who log onto the network – sailing through a firewall so carefully erected by the administrator, without knowing what it is or what it does – become a potential 'back door' into the system, as long as their computer is switched on.

How secure is an employee's system? The administrator is definitely going to want to know. That is a lot of systems, a lot of security problems and a lot of headaches. I foresee the rate of stress-related disorders among the nation's network administrators taking a major leap in the near future.

M KEATING

POOR IMITATION

Flicking through *PCW*, I noticed the number of PC developers jumping on the iMac/G3/G4 bandwagon. It really is the old Wintel philosophy of imitation rather than innovation isn't it? Wait for someone to come up with a brilliant idea, then copy it – badly.

They just don't get it do they? Putting some coloured plastic on a PC doesn't change the fact that what's inside is still a PC running Windows. What really differentiates the Apple Mac from the Windows world is its operating system. It's a wonderfully user-friendly, intuitive interface.

JASON STAINES

STRUGGLING TO MAKE SENSE OF CENSORSHIP

January's *Out of Site* column [about children accessing porn on the Internet] was a good thought-provoking article, but I think you have missed the point.

The providers of these adult sites are not doing it as a free public service that is being frustrated by censorship.

They are doing it to make MONEY from your credit card. The walls would not come down if censorship went away.

ROGER TRUMP

Nik Rawlinson replies > Err, that was my point...

...letters

EASYPC IS NOT AS EASY AS YOU MAKE OUT

I found Nik Rawlinson's article on the 'EasyPC Initiative' interesting (*Head to Head*, January 2000). However, I feel he has missed out some vital points.

Firstly, I think that these days the most common upgrade is the processor or memory, rather than hard disks. Would we have to send our 'sealed PC' away every year to run the latest software, or buy a new one? Programs and games will always get bigger and better, and periodic processor/memory upgrades will be needed, unless the EasyPC is to be little more than a set-top box.

Secondly, the idea of relying on a web server or someone else's computer for all of your data, without possessing any backup whatsoever, is absurd. Taking away removable storage also removes confidence in knowing your data is truly secure. If, as Nik suggests: 'We should never need to transport our data on a physical medium again', and it got lost, we'd be in serious trouble.

The 'home network' will be no more secure either. You could store files on every PC in the house, but a virus or malicious hacker can easily wipe .doc files across the network. The audience that 'sealed PCs' are targeting will know very little about file permissions or configuring a firewall. Also, what happens if you lose your ADSL connection, or move to a place without one?

Thirdly, although the space taken up by a PC can be reduced by removing the drives, Nik forgot to mention you'll need extra space for the Device Bay and, of course, an extra power socket. Also, most hi-fis, DVD players, VCRs, digital cameras, digital set-top boxes, and CD players don't have a 1394 FireWire port, so there wouldn't be a great advantage in moving the PC to the living room, unless you spent nearly £1,000 replacing other equipment. Of course, this excludes the cost of replacing scanners, printers, etc. Since most devices have common audio connectors, doesn't this make the EasyPC proprietary?

The EasyPC Initiative will only make PCs easier to connect, not easier to use. I can only conclude that many potential buyers will be more suited to using a set-top-box for email and web-browsing which, by that time, everyone will have one way or another.

A BUTLER

Nik Rawlinson replies > The first EasyPC-compliant machines are now among us and initial evidence implies that they are as easy to upgrade as their desktop counterparts, with processor and memory both easily accessible. Of course, this means that they are far from genuine 'sealed boxes', and in general this had been more of a term coined to describe the form factor than a literal description of what they are.

I agree that the idea of storing all your data on a remote computer is an unwise one, but that is not what was implied in the original article. Your data would be stored on your own local hard drive and any backups could be ported to an off-site location, giving you valuable protection against fire and theft. Many organisations are already using this kind of service. Also, although Device Bay is a viable option and could easily be integrated into an EasyPC, it is by no means the only one open to manufacturers – those wanting to create a truly toaster-sized device are actually sticking to regular 'notebook' components instead, so space problems are less of an issue.

Again, you are correct in pointing out that the article in question talks about having nice-looking PCs in the living room, but the suggestion was not that because your PC looks nice it should be moved there. The point was more that because a large number of people have no choice but to have it there, they would welcome a more attractive casing. You may, however, be right that for most people a set-top box would be more suitable, but unless the industry at least tries the EasyPC option we can never know for sure. Check out our review of the UK's first EasyPC-compliant machine on p76 this month.

LINUX WILL REWARD YOUR EFFORTS

I read with interest last month's letter, 'No Truck with Linux'. I have been a dedicated Linux user for a while and have read lots of similar letters in the IT press.

People seem to try Linux once and if it doesn't work they give up. I admit the operating system is perhaps not as near to a desktop system as some would like to think. The main problem is that it's not as 'user friendly' to set up as other OSs. I tried three Linux distributions before settling on RedHat's offering, but I stuck with it and now have a more stable OS than Windows9x. It also runs faster on old hardware – my Linux setup is running on an IBM 330-P75, 32MB of RAM, 100MHz Pentium processor, S3 Trio 32 graphics card and an 8bit SoundBlaster sound card. I also run a combined GNOME and KDE desktop environment to gain the best from both systems.

If people persevered with the system they might be pleasantly surprised. There is enough information on the web and newsgroups to help people out. Failing that you can always pick up a book on Linux, most of them come with the complete OS on a CD. My advice is to find the distribution that suits you before buying it, always go for the latest version and once you start do not give up. I'm sure when Windows first came out it was subjected to similar negative comments and now look where it is.

PAUL MILLAR

CLARIFICATION:

● The Orange Videophone featured in last month's gadgets is manufactured by Orange, not Nokia. It will retail for around £500 and will be available in the spring/summer of 2000. For further information contact Orange on: 0800 801080