letters

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SPEAK EASY

Your review of Via Voice 98 exec in the October issue was interesting, but newcomers need to know that you will have to lay in a supply of nasal spray and throat pastilles!

Dictating for hours and hours, in a clear voice without fluffing your words, is more difficult than most people realise. Trying this in an open-plan office will make you feel a wally, while driving your colleagues to drink. You must also be prepared to invest enough time and energy in training the beast to understand you.

But the fact that it does work and can be pretty accurate is most astonishing. It passed the acid test of buying it Monday morning, installing and "enrolling" the same day, then dictating a 9,000-word essay (from paper notes) by Wednesday night against a Friday deadline! The only problem is to try to stifle your laughter as the software mangles what you said into words that you never imagined or intended.

SIMON CROFT
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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Games consoles stifle skills

Let's face it, kids enjoy playing games, and as the festive season approaches, no doubt the console manufacturers will again start the hard sell. For many children this will mean a purchase of an inexpensive box that will entertain for hours (and give their parents some well-deserved peace), but the very limitations of these machines may bring about their own downfall.

Still being in close contact with education, the difference between generations — those which had Spectrums and that with consoles — is stark. Many children who had these early computers can program in BASIC and hold at least a small understanding of how the games that they play come into being. With the demise of the BBC Micro in schools, there is nowhere that a child may dabble with the inner workings of a home-made Pong game. So in our everlasting quest to make computers easier to use, we are stifling pretty much all of the creative talent that will be needed in the console industry (and everywhere else) for the next generation of programmers. PCs, with all their bells and whistles, are not much better, as just getting started requires a huge amount of effort and probably a magazine cover disc with a free compiler. Perhaps Mr Gates should start thinking about including "Windows BASIC" with his software, lest his supply of programmers run dry and we all start charging more for our services.

Gordon Laing replies >

I agree 100%. Growing up with and programming relatively cheap home computers proved to be an absolutely invaluable experience, and interestingly enough, plenty of my friends who did the same now hold decent jobs in IT (it must, however, be said that many of them simply don't get out enough). We've just got to hope that PCs become more accessible to inquisitive children, or that development tools become powerful and easy enough to create the next generation of games software packages. We hope you enjoy writing code on your new Taxan monitor.

THOSE IN THE KNOW...

Re: John Skinner's letter (*PCW* October). I work at a college help desk, and we have a number of leaflets listing educational titles. Entec www.entec.co.uk does a great leaflet covering the major educational titles, but do shop around, check the adverts in *PCW*, and ask if suppliers can match the best price you have found.

Of course, you can always pop into the college or university you will be attending and ask their advice, and for your educational licence forms to be stamped for you. Your college shouldn't have a problem doing this before term starts, as long as you show a letter from the college offering you a place on a course.

Also, don't forget that Microsoft will let you buy a student licence while you are still at school or to any household that has a child over five in education, as long as the software is to be used solely for home/educational purposes.

Lastly, check out the internet for tutorials — there are some excellent sites for learning everything from basic computing to complex programming. But go easy right now, as your college will probably allow anything from limited to unlimited access to the internet free to students.

NICOLA MENESES n.s.meneses@canterbury.ac.uk

Paper thin

Brian Clegg's article ("Business Matters", *PCW* October) reminded me of the IBM spokesman who delicately predicted that the paperless toilet was likely to arrive before the paperless office. Over the last 15 years the organisation I work for has been using our intranet to reduce the amount of paper we print. One approach is to set up a filing system on your intranet so everything you record electronically is available for you and your colleagues to find when you need it. File objects once for the whole organisation or workgroup, and then anyone can retrieve them when they are needed — provided they have the appropriate access rights. Yes, you will still need to print things out, but only for temporary use — after which they can go straight to the rubbish sack for recycling.
You may say this is all blindingly obvious; in that case, why are so few organisations working in this way?

Richard Gibson gibson@dircon.co.uk

Dyslexic help

My seven-year-old son has recently been diagnosed as dyslexic. Having seen on TV how the latest voice recognition software is being used to aid dyslexics, I looked into this area and came up with some interesting information. The only system which has proved to be of use for dyslexics is a combination of the now "old" technology Dragon Dictate and a Windows 3.1 word processor called Keystone. It is important that Dragon Dictate is used, as it's a system which works a word at a time, rather than the newer NaturallySpeaking-style products which process whole sentences. Also, the "training" process for Dragon Dictate, during which the software learns the user's voice patterns, is much simpler and therefore easier for a dyslexic to cope with. Keystone is important because it is the only word processor in existence (allegedly) which reads back to you what you type, as you type it. This is very important; in fact, it is this instant feedback which makes the system so useful. This is because, as the dyslexic person says the word, they see it appear on the screen and simultaneously hear it spoken back to them, giving the required feedback which can help enormously.
We desperately need more awareness of this problem, which will hopefully encourage other software companies to enter this market. This should introduce healthy competition and bring the prices closer to what the families of dyslexic children can afford.

Tony Flaherty
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Gone with the wind

Your reviews are generally rather good; however, noise pollution is seldom highlighted. Many PCs are just too noisy. Is it true that some computers have a fan which switches on only if the power supply gets too hot?

Derek Johnson capilla@capilla.demon.co.uk

PCW replies > *While not such a problem for large corporates, a noisy PC can be a real headache for small-business or home users. It is, however, worth checking screws and mountings which may have come loose and started rattling. Notebooks often power their fans down, but most desktop PCs keep all cooling systems operating unless in standby mode.*

Chip check

While I much enjoyed reading Simon Collin's recollections of the Acorn Electron ("Retro", November), I would like to point out, at the risk of sounding rather pedantic, that the 6502 was not a Motorola processor. It was originally made by a firm called MOS Technology, designed by William Mensch (formerly of Motorola) and later second sourced by Rockwell. Motorola made the 6800 series of processors, which reached the acme of perfection with the 6809, still judged by many to be the most elegant design for assembly language programming ever produced. There was a 16-bit version of the 6502, the 65816, which was used briefly in the Apple before being crushed beneath the wheels of the Intel/Microsoft juggernaut. Most of the early Atari arcade video games used the 6502, as its synchronous bus cycles allowed efficient interleaved access to video RAM without any wait states.

John Brown johnb@nse.co.uk

Biriani surprise

Here's a little witticism from Microsoft. Dive straight into MS Word 97 and type "chapatti". You'll be very glad, I'm sure, to learn that the actual spelling is "teapot", cleverly suggested by the spell checker. One can only hope that Indian restaurants refrain from using Word 97...

Samuel Hänni
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...letters

On and off

When I had a Texas Instruments TI-99/4A, I pressed the "on" switch, and the operating system appeared within seconds. My ZX Spectrum's OS appeared in a flash of clearing ROM. As an Amiga owner, I had moved onwards, and so "powered-up" the system, but it was still ready within seconds.

Now I have a PC — the ultimate multimedia system. Instantly, I can connect to other systems on the other side of the world. I can make my daughter laugh with the Teletubbies online. I can make my wife cry when she discovers yet another Titanic site. I can impress my colleagues with the information I have at my command. Yet I cannot get my laptop to work until over two minutes have passed, while we look at one another, chat about the weather and cough awkwardly. For goodness' sake, help me, and many others. I believe Windows 98 is the best operating system for my laptop, but please, please, *please*, can somebody put the damn thing on a flash-upgradeable ROM chip, so I can have instant accessibility. No waiting for a boot-up. No device conflicts. No file processing. Just wash and go.

John Newbury J.Newbury@tesco.net

PCW replies >

Windows 98 on some kind of ROM which could start up instantly sounds like a great idea, but there are reasons why it is impractical. First, you'd need a 195Mb ROM to match its standard hard-disk requirements, which won't come cheap — 48Mb of compact flash will cost you over £200. And on the subject of hard disks, all versions of Windows (except CE) rely on the presence of a hard disk to implement virtual memory, and that's before we even start considering new device drivers.

Putting things into perspective

Richard Browning wonders if there is a conspiracy to soak up improvements in PC power with the demands of bloated operating systems (*PCW* November). While it may be true that Windows uses more resources than it should, that is not the only place the extra power gets used. In the days before Windows, my PC struggled to push words and numbers around the screen, commands were typed using strange codes, and getting a colour graph out of a spreadsheet was a major achievement, even if I had a printer capable of printing one. Today, my computer makes a reasonable job of running a graphical interface, handling large image files, editing and listening to music, talking to a network and connecting to the internet — and all more or less at the same time. Try any one of those jobs on my old PC, and it would have curled up and died.

Ian Cairns
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All fingers and thumbs

I enjoyed Joe Tarrant's long-term review of the Psion Siena (*PCW* October), and his comments about problems using the keyboard and holding the machine at the same time. I have overcome this problem by holding the Siena with both hands while typing with two thumbs. This technique provokes mirth and hilarity wherever I go, but it does work really well.

Dr Robert Sarkany rsarkany@hgmp.mrc.ac.uk

Fast hardware in the frame

Your review of 3D graphics cards in November's *PCW*, although very informative, left me wondering about the need for such fast hardware. The reviews quoted frame rates of over 150fps (frames per second) for Incoming and Forsaken. I was under the impression that the human brain perceives everything over 30 frames per second as fluid motion. Most monitors won't be able to refresh the screen faster than about 70Hz, so are there really any real-life benefits of having a graphics card perform faster than 50fps?

Bart J. Smit bart@nerdland.demon.co.uk

David Fearon replies >

You're quite correct when you say that nobody could perceive the difference between a game running at 100+ frames per second and 60 or so. I would say, however, that you can see the difference between 30 and 60fps. But remember that benchmark scores give frame rates averaged over several minutes. When rendering a complex part of the tests, rates can drop below this as the polygon count increases. A card with more "headroom" that delivers an average of 100 or more frames per second, can cope far better with the tougher parts of a test, so the fluidity of the game is maintained when a lesser card would show perceptible stuttering. And of course, a card with a super-high score now will cope better with the more complex games and apps of the future. With the pace of development on the 3D graphics front, you need as much speed as you can get.