Chips for Christmas, Clive Sinclair vs IBM, a not-so-portable Atari and the birth of Internet fever.

20 YEARS AGO December 1979

In the run up to Christmas 1979-style, we engaged in a seasonal evaluation of micro-toys. Donning his Santa Claus suit, David Tebbutt filled a sack full of goodies at Electronic Wonderland on Tottenham Court Road, and then delivered them into the hands of 14 delighted kiddies. It was a jolly timely thing to do, as Tebbutt noted, because the late 70s had heralded the age of the electronic toy – chips with everything.

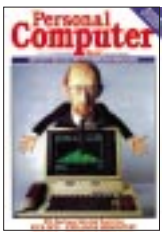
'The sounds of bleeps, whistles and jingles will be a part of our lives soon, in the same way as we remember the rattle of hoops, the clatter of clockwork and the whirr of the electric motor.'

There were 12 toys in our festive group test, including Electronic Battleships, which had a sonar sound that 'can be very irritating' – although 'the shells whining and the whumph of explosions made up for this'. At £27.95, it was deemed a tad expensive. The 'extremely well made' UFO Masterblaster featured flying saucers that had to be blown up before they landed. There were no exciting noises and visual effects, and the toy was more a hit with adults than kids.

High marks went to Merlin – a £19.95 device that contained six games in one (noughts and crosses, blackjack, music generation, magic square, echo and mindbender). Although not an immediate hit, it grew in popularity as people discovered its hidden complexity.

Top marks went to Big Trak, a giant tank that could be pre-programmed. It was expensive (£29.95) but extremely well made, and Tebbutt recognised that it appealed to dads as well as kiddies. Therein lies an age-old truth about what gets bought for kids at Christmas – parents have to fall in love with them, too ■

15 YEARS AGO December 1984



We had a choice for our cover this month: two big-name machines from two serious corporate manufacturers – ICL's One Per Desk, with a built in telephone, and IBM's follow-up to the market-defining PC, the IBM PC AT. We opted for the former, possibly because we're a British magazine, and the ICL machine had a connection with contemporary wunderkind, Clive Sinclair.

We expected the One Per Desk was going to set executive hearts racing because it aimed to be an all-in-one device, which integrated voice and data calls with a computer containing Sinclair chips and system software taken from the QL. Another home-grown optional extra was the Psion Xchange suite of applications. Our reviewer thought it was an elegant solution and would score heavily in terms of price performance. Time and the marketplace have delivered a different verdict: the chips and the software weren't Wintel and the whole thing too quirky and unconventional for its target, highly-conservative, market.

The IBM PC AT, on the other hand, was a perfect follow-up to the genre-defining PC launched three years earlier. There was more power – provided by the Intel 286 processor, a choice of operating systems – PC-DOS 3 and the multi-user Xenix system (although, as we noted, there wasn't a great deal of application software for the latter). Things that had irritated previous users, such as the keyboard, had been redesigned. The machines you buy today don't look much different from this one.

Inside, however, and in terms of price, it was a different story. A basic system with 256KB of RAM and a 1.2MB floppy set you back a whopping £2,951. If you wanted 512KB of RAM and a 20MB hard drive, then you'd have needed £4,281 in the bank. It was a good solid product, we concluded, 'that nods toward innovation by using a new chip and a high-capacity disk drive, and will sell by the bucket-full.' We forgot to add: spark a revolution by consolidating the position of the Wintel alliance, and creating the conditions for a clone industry to emerge. ■

10 YEARS AGO December 1989

We took the wraps off HP's own object-oriented data management system, NewWave, which allowed data from different applications to be merged into a compound document. By using hotlinks, the compound document could then be updated if a source file was changed in any way.

However, we pointed out that you only got the best from NewWave when running applications that were specifically tailored for it, and there weren't many of them available. It was also complex to set up.

We did, however, feel that it had 'the look of things to come', and that's probably how the developers at Microsoft saw it as well. HP's little baby would not find a great deal of success in the big bad world, and eventually the company submitted to the realities of a Microsoft-dominated world.

We also took the wraps off the Atari Stacy 4, a 'portable' aimed at the printer market, which had been hastily assembled for us (and, consequently, arrived sans power supply – ooops!). After trying a very expensive battery option, and failing to get it to boot, we asked Atari to deliver another system the following day.

Eventually we got the machine working, but the whole saga didn't make reassuring reading, especially our conclusion: 'it is too heavy and battery life is a joke'. ■

5 YEARS AGO December 1994

Our cover screamed 'Internet Fever!' as we served up two steaming-hot interviews – one with Tim Berners-Lee ('The man who wove the web') and the other with Barry F Berkov, a vice-president at CompuServe, which at that time was the biggest international ISP, and the company that gave us the GIF format for graphics files.

Yet while both predicted that the web, Internet applications and email would transform the way that we use PCs, there was very little evidence of it elsewhere in the magazine. There were no comparative reviews of web editors (as we have in this issue, on page 200), no workshops on using webcams (see page 224) or registering domain names (see page 227), or CGI scripting (see page 235). In five years, things have changed dramatically. ■