

letters

Send your letters to >

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Win a Taxan monitor

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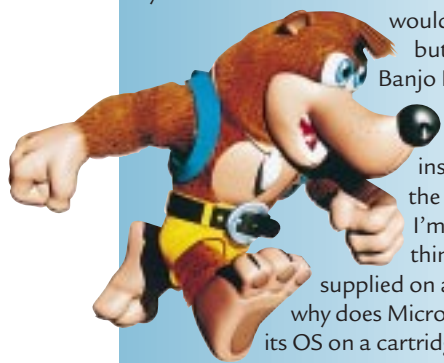
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BITS AND PCs

I totally agree with John Newbury (*Letters, PCW December 1998*). I don't see why an operating system could not come on a ROM chip. You say it would be too expensive, but my Nintendo 64 Banjo Kazooie cartridge holds 128Mb of data and it loads instantly when I hit the power button, and I'm not certain, but I think the Zelda64 is supplied on a 256Mb cart. So why does Microsoft not just deliver its OS on a cartridge that slips in to your PC? **STEPHEN FUSI**

stephen@fusil.force9.net

PCW replies > 'Fraid not, Stephen. The console industry talks of bits, not bytes, so your 128-megabit game is in fact only 16 megabytes in size. Secondly, as mentioned in last month's Letters, operating systems such as Windows 98 require fairly sophisticated virtual memory managers which often tie up large amounts of hard-disk space at a time. The closest you're going to get to Windows on a ROM is CE in a handheld.



LETTER OF THE MONTH

OLDER AND WISER OAPCs

I wish to comment on the article "Old PCs" (*PCW September 1998*) and hope I can persuade you to ask your staff to research and write also about "Old PC Users" like me: seniors, increasingly meaning anyone over 50. Throughout the world, as governments, health services and banks progressively reduce their human presence and go online, seniors who need to access these services, but are computer shy, become increasingly disadvantaged. At the very least, older people can easily become isolated and a burden for their family and society, whereas the world of email and newsgroups can open up new horizons for them — see www.seniornet.org among many others. On the other hand, computer-confident seniors with retirement funds and time on their hands can become a sizeable

market for all manner of hardware and software (and computer magazines).

1999 is the United Nations International Year of Older People. So following up on your article, may I suggest a report along the lines of encouraging readers to pass on their old 386 to grandma and teach her how to write her memoirs. At this time of the year it will solve a Christmas-present problem and then all she needs is an internet connection for her birthday.

GRAHAM DEAN

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Gordon Laing replies >

Despite having January 1999 on the cover, this is effectively our Christmas issue and Graham's sentiments seem particularly appropriate. If only I could get my techno-shy parents online: you'd have thought the years of buying me a variety of British home computers as I grew up would have cured their aversion to PCs! While I try to persuade them over the turkey and stuffing to change their minds, we hope you enjoy using your new Taxan 17in monitor. Merry Christmas!

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

With regard to December's Star Letter about encouraging young programmers: shipping "Windows BASIC" with PCs might be a start, but there is one further barrier between children and programming. If you've ever watched a five-year-old trying to play any kind of PC game, let alone program, the first thing you notice is that they are just too small to handle the mouse or keyboard properly. Perhaps one reason that so many children hacked away at their Spectrums and ZX81s was that the membrane keyboards, hateful for adults, were just the right size, and with the keywords you didn't even need to type that much anyway. Perhaps the programming language built in to the Psion and other palmtops with tiny keyboards will be where the next generation of code gurus cut their teeth.

BEN CURTHOYS bcurthoys@artifaxsoftware.com



EUROPRESS LEISURE NOT SUNK WITH TITANIC

In the Newsprint section of your December issue, you incorrectly reported that "there'll be no more games from Europress". In February, Europress will launch Rally Championship '99. It simulates the Mobil British Rally Championship and includes a wealth of new features including photo-realistic tracks modelled on real-life environments, unique new object realism and texture animation, multiple track options and virtually limitless multi-route environments. Secondly, you stated that Titanic - Adventure Out Of Time and Championship Rally "had disastrous effects on the company's profit margins", which led to it axing a third of its staff and pulling out of the games market. Wrong again! Our Rally brand has topped the charts on four continents with RAC Rally Championship. Titanic - Adventure Out Of Time is, at the time of writing, at number three in the ChartTrack best-seller charts and also achieved the number one position in the PC Data charts. Far from losing money, it has been — and still is — an outstanding financial success.



its growth, but it has certainly not been forced to "sell off a slice of its equity" because of losses on Titanic and Championship Rally. I hope this makes Europress' situation clear.

DON LEWIS, MARKETING DIRECTOR, EUROPRESS
donl@europress.co.uk

RETRO RESOLUTION

Simon Collins (*Retro*, PCW October 1998) states that the Commodore VIC-20 was capable of 300x200 colour graphics, multiple sprite levels and had a MIDI interface. Although the Commodores were indeed good platforms (and I should know, I still run two VIC-20s), the most I have ever squeezed out of a VIC's resolution is 128x224, and achieving four colours simultaneously reduces the horizontal resolution by half. The later models had sprite capability, but the VIC certainly does not. The C64 may have had the resolution stated, having more columns. However, as far as I know, none of the models have ever supported MIDI. Certainly the VIC-20, C16 and C64 models did not, because I had to make my own interface for the VIC-20s. The Amiga, too, requires a hardware adaptor in order to be MIDI compatible.

DL BORRELL templarser@aol.com

FINN-ISHED PRODUCT

In a PCW October news piece about the Linux operating system you reported that the creator of Linux is a Danish youngster named Linus Thorvald. In fact he is, and has always been, a citizen of Finland, and created the core of Linux while studying at the University of Helsinki in the early 1990s. After graduating he moved to California to work for a new high-tech company there. You must have received many corrections about this one, but I felt my duty as a Finn to make this absolutely clear.

JAAKKO WALLENIUS jaako.wallenius@pp.inet.fi

PCW replies > You're absolutely right, Jaakko, and as some sort of compensation, please find part one of a new three-part Linux Workshop in our Hands On section, starting on page 242.

GIANT OF A MACHINE

Can you explain why Colossus, lurking around at Bletchley Park, which uses valves and GPO mechanical relays as switches, which has no memory, and which feeds data in via punched paper tape, can decrypt Enigma code, at the very least, ten times faster than a Pentium 75? There was an article in *New Scientist* on the subject some months back, where they also concluded that Colossus was the first parallel-processing computer, beating everyone else to the post by a whopping 50 years. Any comments? Or, even better, when Colossus gets up and running, could you do one of your comparison tests? Now that would make interesting reading!

SAM CHAPMAN
samuel.chapman@cableol.co.uk

Clive Akass replies > The so-called "bombes", which were mechanical predecessors to Colossus, could also beat a Pentium, according to the current Bletchley director. Both the mechanical and electronic computers worked as fast as they did because they were designed for a particular task, as opposed to a Pentium which is a general-purpose computer. Their logic was hard-wired and would these days be integrated onto a custom chip, doing their task considerably faster.

...right to reply



In last month's PCW we went undercover, buying PCs from ten different manufacturers. This gave us an excellent opportunity to test not only the PCs themselves but also the sales and technical support services offered by the companies — in other words, the service you, the buyer, might well receive from these firms. This month, we give those same ten companies the right to reply, as they voice their opinions of our findings. Here is what they have to say.

FROM: ARMARI

Armari has traditionally specialised in building high-end, custom workstations for the professional, creative and development market. Hence our customer base has primarily been the more experienced PC user, which is why our systems may lack the more basic setup documentation. Our machines are shipped in a "plug in and go" state, and our help-desk engineers are happy to assist first-time PC owners through the basics. However, *PCW*'s undercover buying review provides us with excellent feedback of how we can improve our products and services. We are working on an easy-to-follow setup guide to assist first-time or less experienced users, which will be ready in time for December's Christmas buyers.

DAN GOLDSMITH, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
ARMARI LTD

FROM: EVESHAM MICROS

Just as Evesham Micros takes feedback from its customers very seriously, it is good to see that a respected magazine is making such an effort to ensure that its readers have an accurate picture of the companies to which they entrust their hard-earned money. Your review has given us the opportunity to publicly congratulate our Technical Support team on their excellent performance, even under difficult circumstances. Given that Evesham was in the minority in offering an on-site visit by an engineer, we think your piece has strengthened Evesham's position as a company that offers more than just well-priced equipment. The products are supported by people who care about their customers and their needs. We were only sorry that you didn't highlight the two-year free on-site warranty and the fact that the technical support advice is a free-call number. We were a little concerned that it took so long to actually sell you a PC, but given that the entire company of 250 staff had just moved into our new headquarters over one weekend, we weren't entirely surprised! We look forward to taking part in next year's test.

CAROLYN WORTH, PR
EVESHAM MICROS

FROM: DELL

We were delighted to win the Highly Commended award for both PC System and for our Technical Support. It was great to see our excellent support staff receive recognition for their hard work. While the test is based on a one-off experience, we believe that is an important independent benchmark and indicative of the quality of our customers' general day-to-day experience with Dell.

There are a number of issues, raised in your article, which I would like to clarify. We believe that a 17in monitor is now an entry-level display. We offer this at the same price which many of our competitors charge for a 15in display. In the unlikely event that a customer wishes to opt for a 15in, the cost saving is £35 and not £17 as stated in your article. The configuration your caller selected was a business bundle. Speakers were not included as standard but could have been purchased as an upgrade option. Since the test was conducted we have introduced a standard three-year service offering on Dell Dimension systems. We remain focused on our customers and will continue to drive initiatives and programmes to further enhance their experience of doing business with Dell.

ANNETTE CONDON, PRODUCT PR MANAGER
DELL UK AND IRELAND

FROM: GATEWAY

Gateway is delighted to have been awarded your Editor's Choice for Best Sales Service in the *PCW* undercover-buying group test. As a company that listens to our clients and fits technology to their individual needs, it is important that our sales staff offer a high standard of service and technical advice. The *PCW* undercover group test was conducted on a very busy day for us, when President Clinton and Bertie Ahern were signing an e-commerce agreement at Gateway, and we are thrilled that our high standard of service remained consistent. Since the survey was conducted, Gateway has made significant changes to our Technical Support department. These include the introduction of "Virtual Queuing" (computerised call-back) and a review of the number of people allowed to join our conference lines.

JOHN SHEPHERD, HEAD OF SALES
GATEWAY EMEA

FROM: DABS DIRECT

I was pleased to see that you found the Dabs PC an "affordable, impressive office machine" at a "very reasonable price". We have recently invested over £2m in a new call centre for our Telesales and Technical Support departments and it was especially encouraging to see your positive comments with regards to our technical staff. Our sales staff are fully trained on an ongoing basis in both product and customer-service awareness. Your comments that "This new assistant...advised us on a number of sensible upgrades such as a BX rather than the LX chipset..." is in line with Dabs' policy of always trying, where possible, to future-proof our PCs rather than to sell the highest-possible-priced PC with today's technology. Dabs Direct plc is fully committed to offering our customers the highest levels of service and value available in the direct channel, and thank you for offering this chance to show this to our customers.

...right to reply

FROM: HI-GRADE

We were very pleased to receive the *PCW* Highly Commended award for sales service. At Hi-Grade, good sales technique is not about pushing the most expensive products to every customer, but recommending a system which suits each person's requirements to ensure that every customer is completely satisfied from the outset. The comments in the Technical Support section were music to my ears, all calls "answered within a minute", with the problems quickly identified and solved over the phone.

**ORI YIASSOUMIS, JOINT MANAGING DIRECTOR
HI-GRADE**

FROM: TINY COMPUTERS

Tiny specialises in providing complete value-for-money solutions for home users and we are proud of the high level of service we provide to our customers. Tiny operates one of the largest helpdesk call centres in Europe with over 150 staff taking 2,000 calls per day. The vast majority are solved on the first call, with average call-waiting time under four minutes. All helpdesk staff receive five weeks of technical training on all aspects of hardware, software and peripherals with ongoing training provided.

The treatment *PCW* received is not typical of that provided to most Tiny customers. In answer to the specifics raised in your article: the upgradeability you required was not made clear to the sales person who specified the EX motherboard; had you stated you required memory on one DIMM, that is what you would have received. The Epson printer was obviously surplus to requirements but this was not made clear to the sales person, who would have increased the specification to a higher model (thus solving the motherboard expansion issues). The call waiting times were significantly better than those of several competitors (although adrift from our averages of thousands of recent calls) but no account was taken of this. The invented printer problem was solved immediately but little importance was placed on this. The testing of Tiny's helpdesk was inaccurate and statistically invalid. How can two calls fairly represent the ability of the staff? Improvements to our call centre is an ongoing procedure, some of which include more staff, better training, more phone lines, and specialist teams to deal with specific areas (monitor, printers, cameras, etc).

To summarise with "Bad points — everything else" shows extremely poor understanding of Tiny systems: how can the Intel processor, Microsoft Intellimouse, hotkey keyboard and Fujitsu hard disk be bad? This is a very damaging statement and gives inaccurate information to your readers.

**JIM BUCHANAN, PR MANAGER
TINY COMPUTERS**

FROM: MESH

We were disappointed by the outcome of the undercover PCs group test, given our strong recent performance in surveys by other publications. Given the potluck nature of this undercover survey, based on only a few calls, freak occurrences cannot be ruled out. In the equivalent survey last year, our sales team was ranked equal best and our product won a Highly Commended award. We have invested in improving standards of service across sales and after-sales support. We treat customer service as a priority and constantly monitor our standards. We send out customer satisfaction surveys with all the machines we ship. Of the many thousand responses, here are a few results. "At MESH we pride ourselves on producing award-winning computers which offer the latest technology, superb value for money and excellent quality"; 94 percent agreed we had done well or superbly. "We expect our sales team to be friendly, helpful and knowledgeable, assisting you in choosing the right computer for your needs"; 86 percent agreed we had done well or superbly. In addition, 88 percent said they would buy a PC from MESH again. We can only speculate as to why some of our competitors who regularly perform well in service and reliability surveys chose not to agree to take part in this survey. We will continue to make efforts to ensure that we deliver a consistently high standard of customer service. All our systems now come with a five-year warranty package, and our technical support team operates on a call-back basis offering the most cost effective service from our customers' perspective.

**PAUL KINSLER, GENERAL MANAGER
MESH COMPUTERS PLC**

FROM: NEC DIRECT

Our philosophy is to provide a build-to-order service which offers small- to-medium-sized businesses price/performance benefits. When a call is made to us, we establish the business requirements and then supply the right configuration. If a basic office machine is required then we will not recommend a high-spec machine with huge amounts of memory. If there is no need for a modem, we will not offer one as standard.

NEC Direct's technical support is designed for the business user, so we offer next working day, on-site technical assistance as standard. We do not spend hours on the phone going through possible scenarios when a visit from an engineer usually sorts the problem out in minutes.

**COLWYN MUNRO, GENERAL MANAGER
NEC DIRECT**

FROM: PANRIX

Firstly, we congratulate *PCW* on the effective way it conducted this group review. It is of great worth for the likes of Panrix, to enable us to identify our shortfalls. Since the article, BT has resolved the problems with our newly installed ISDN/call distribution phone system implemented to serve our recent move to larger premises.

Panrix strives to offer the best in the areas of performance, service and reliability. It was therefore very pleasing to be judged "Editors Choice". But rest assured, Panrix is always looking to improve on our very solid position. We will continue to work harder in the service areas to further compliment the positive aspects of Panrix, thereby further assuring your readers to buy with confidence.

**SIMON PANESAR, SALES DIRECTOR
PANRIX**