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The Sunday Times

December 03, 2006

Test Bench: Desktop Computers

EDITED BY ALEX PELL

Faster, cheaper: it's PC bargain time

When Microsoft announced that Vista, the long-awaited replacement for Windows XP, would be delayed until the end of January 2007, an icy wind blew down the high street. Retailers and system makers realised that instead of the pre-Christmas boom they were expecting, they were facing a slump as customers delayed their purchases.

The retailer's pain is, however, your gain. To entice credit cards out of wallets there are serious deals on offer for canny shoppers. But is it wise to take the plunge so close to the launch of Vista? In a word, probably.

Though Vista undoubtedly looks glossier than XP, with improved security and many user-friendly features, previous Windows launches have been riddled with compatibility gremlins that made it wiser to wait a few months before taking the plunge. Further, many of the desktop systems currently on sale — including all those reviewed to day — provide a voucher for a free upgrade once Vista launches.

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Sales of laptops are booming, but there are sound reasons to opt for a desktop computer. Pound for pound, you get a more sophisticated and flexible system that can be more easily repaired or upgraded. The ability to adjust the position of the screen and keyboard makes a desktop the better choice for regular work, especially children's homework.

The key to buying any PC is to pay close attention to the overall package and not be taken in by headline-grabbing offers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions before parting with your money.

The biggest advance in computers in recent years is dual-core processors — chips with two "brains" — which are far more adept at multitasking than single-core machines. A dual-core machine will munch through mundane tasks in the background, such as a virus scan or ripping a CD, without noticeably slowing you down. With more challenging tasks, such as editing a video of the school play, the benefits become even more apparent. Look for machines with Intel Core 2 Duo or

AMD Athlon X2 processors. At a push, Intel's older dual-core processors, the Core Duo and Pentium D, are eminently capable. But don't be tempted to plump for ultra-cheap packages that rely on the ancient single-core Pentium 4 or Celeron D chips. Big mistake.

The second key item is the screen. Though several computer suppliers offer desktop systems without a monitor — notably Apple — this is a great opportunity to upgrade. Be wary of bundles that include older analogue screens, though, which often have ghosting pictures or poor colours. Make sure yours is digital, even if you must pay an extra £50

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Today a wide screen monitor is more of a necessity than a luxury. Once you try the extra space to place documents side-by-side or enjoy movies and games in their full glory, you'll never go back to square-o-vision.

If gaming performance is important, ensure your machine has a dedicated graphics card, as opposed to an "integrated" one, to run modern games at an acceptable frame rate. Should you decide to stick with Windows XP, 1 GB of RAM will suffice: if you intend to upgrade to Vista it's best to upgrade to 2 GB, though this can be added later.

Opt for as much hard-drive space as you can afford, and if you can stretch to two drives go for a RAID 1 set-up, which backs up data on the second drive. Finally, consider the value of the warranty: three-year coverage where the machine is fixed on-site is far better than having to return it to the vendor.

This Christmas is an awkward one for PC retailers. Use their anxiety to your advantage.

GAMER'S MONSTER

Five stars

Cyberpower Infinity 920
£991 from tinyurl.com/yh9dfh

Power gaming and style at a fair price

Choosing a game-oriented computer is tricky because you can go on spending and spending to improve performance. A state-of-the-art gaming PC with a top processor, twin graphics cards and a 30in monitor can easily cost £3,000. Thankfully, the Infinity 920 is an outstanding value package that will not disappoint you even when you're furiously fragging in Half Life 2. Its single high-performance graphics card can fill the excellent Viewsonic VA912W widescreen monitor with high frame-rate 3-D action, yet it all costs less than £

1,000. The package uses classy components and looks futuristic without being gaudy. Nice.

FAMILY WORKHORSE

Five stars

PC Nextday Zoostorm 2-5402
£699 from tinyurl.com/t9wtd

Superb value all-rounder with widescreen

This bargain bundle exemplifies how keen system makers are to shift desktop PCs at present. You will not find a better system for less than £700. Somehow, PC Nextday has managed to pack in the latest Intel Core 2 Duo processor, a reasonable 19in widescreen LCD monitor, and a fairly decent graphics card suitable for some 3-D gaming, to create a fine all-rounder with good upgrade potential. Even the keyboard and mouse are sturdy. The only gripes are the plasticky case and run-of-the-mill stereo speakers. The company claims to be able to deliver pre-Christmas on orders placed before December 18.

SPACE SAVER'S TREAT

Four stars

Aria Obsidian X PC 4200
£650 from www.aria.co.uk/obsidian

Stylish shoebox-sized package

This dual-core AMD-based machine has all the power of a full-sized desktop at the same price, yet is no larger than a shoebox. That is thanks to the chassis provided by Shuttle, the pioneer of living-room friendly Media Center PCs. Apple's Mac Mini may be smaller but it can't match the XPC 4200 for performance or flexibility. The system is surprisingly quiet, except when playing games. However, as the graphics are limited, it is unlikely to be used much for gaming. There are no bundled speakers and the 512MB of Ram should be topped up, but a fine 19in Asus widescreen and Logitech keyboard complete a superb package.

VIDEO EDITOR'S TOOL

Four stars

Dell Dimension 9200
£899 from www.dell.co.uk (E-Value code D-D12926a)

Fine package for budding Scorseses

Most current desktop PCs will cope manfully with video editing. However,

whether you're serious about the family game order footage or creating an indie Brit flick there are three features worth directing your gaze towards: a dual-core processor, a widescreen monitor and a huge hard drive. This Dell system ticks all three boxes. In fact it boasts a solid Intel Core 2 Duo processor, a fabulous 20in digital widescreen and a cavernous 320GB hard drive. Naturally, there's a DVD burner for writing movies to disc too. However, despite a three-year on-site warranty, this isn't a great all-rounder, due to modest gaming performance and peripherals.

HOME OFFICE STALWART

Four stars

Lenovo ThinkCentre A52 8326
£587 from Insight.com at tinyurl.com/y9n6r6

Reliable, if pricey, work tool

Working from home demands computer reliability, and although this system offers unexciting specs — an ageing dual-core Pentium processor, modest 80GB hard drive, and no DVD burner — Lenovo machines include the best crash-restore tools on the market. The company's support is unrivalled and the bundled three-year warranty can be upgraded to on-site coverage for £44. This system includes a decent 19in (non-widescreen) monitor, but cannot run 3-D games (so kids are less likely to riddle it with nefarious downloads). For true peace of mind, you'd add a second hard drive in a RAID 1 set-up (see jargon buster) yet this isn't offered at point of sale.

BUDGET TITAN

Four stars

Aries Perfecta Dual 820
£471 from tinyurl.com/y7zhsy

A solid performer that's ideal for a kid's bedroom

These days a modest budget for a PC doesn't necessarily saddle you with a poor machine. This cleanly styled system features a perfectly capable dual-core processor — albeit of Intel's older Pentium standard — and a 19in widescreen monitor, although this is analogue. The modest graphics card is capable of running the forthcoming Windows Vista and some 3-D games, but at unexceptional levels of detail. The peripherals aren't up to much and you should opt for more than the 512MB of bundled Ram, but the package does include a six-year warranty. This is a return-to-base warranty for repairs, rather than an on-site one, but feel the price.

JARGON BUSTER

Clock speed The speed at which a processor runs, measured in gigahertz (GHz). Rarely a reliable way to gauge performance

CPU (central processing unit) The "brain" of the computer, where calculations take place

DVD burner Archives files or videos to high-capacity DVD discs. Look for dual-layer Dual core Newer generation of processor. Far better for multitasking Hard drive/hard disk Where software and data are stored. Capacity measured in gigabytes (GB) Graphics card Internal plug-in display card that is essential for complex 3-D gaming Media Center Computers that run a multimedia variant of Windows XP. They have a remote control, and can record television

RAM Expressed in megabytes (MB), this is memory that helps a PC handle multiple tasks

RAID 1 A system whereby two identical hard drives are fitted to a PC, one backing up data from the other, in the event of drive failure

USB 2 A high-speed plug-and-play data connection



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