

Access IT

Chris Goddard reviews the latest programmes providing easier access to your PC...

SHOULD YOU FIND THAT A SESSION OF GRAND THEFT

Auto proves to be a less than fulfilling experience, do not despair: there are hundreds of interactive and educational software programs out there that are no less stimulating and every bit as fun. From very basic, one switch cause and effect programs for younger and developmentally young children to more sophisticated multimedia software for older learners, there is something for everyone, no matter what the impairment or ability level.

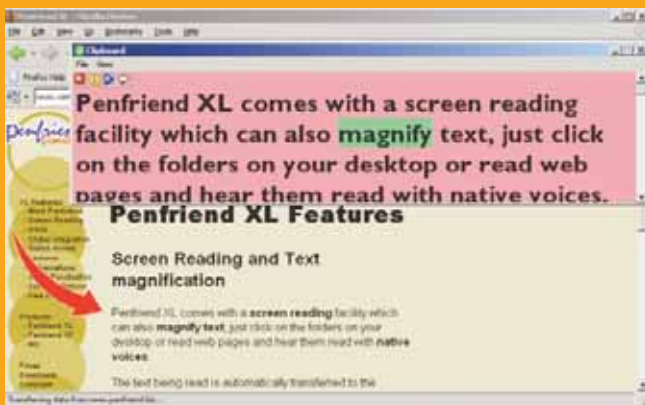
There are several organisations that offer support and training to schools and others in all aspects of assistive ICT: Inclusive Technology, AbilityNet, KeyTools, Liberator and Semerc are amongst the best known. Between them they also supply a vast range of hardware and software titles. It's worth checking in your area to see if there's a local centre where you can try equipment and software, and benefit from the expertise of the staff. One such facility is in Bristol, at the Disabled Living Centre. Their ICT suite offers an impressive array of adaptive hardware and a large selection of software titles, and gives people the opportunity to put these products through their paces. AbilityNet or your local Disabled Living Centre should have details.

In this issue I'm going to look at a few programmes that address basic reading and writing skills, and a nice collection of familiar games adapted for switch use from the company that brought us The Grid, Sensory Software.

EyeReader



0645 150 5555



Penfriend XL

This is a remarkably sophisticated program for a mere £120, offering a powerful screen reader, text magnification, word prediction and on-screen keyboard - all this in nine major European languages, including Latin. It's designed for people who may require additional support with reading and writing, so is ideal for those with dyslexia, for example. The on-screen keyboards and word prediction also make this a useful tool for people with physical impairments, especially when used with switches - most of the best programs of this kind will have switch input options.

To demonstrate, this article is being typed using only Penfriend XL and a standard mouse! With word prediction and on-screen keyboard options enabled, when you type a letter the on-board dictionary offers a list of possible words that would fit. You can insert the word by

pressing one of the function keys, or clicking on it with your mouse. If, for whatever reasons, you have difficulties reading the word, the screen reader will help by reading it aloud before you select it.

Penfriend offers an impressive screen reading and magnification facility, especially in such a reasonably priced package. It can read letters, words or sentences back to you as you type, or whole paragraphs that you might have saved in Penfriend's clipboard. When reading text aloud from the clipboard, each word is highlighted. If you want to hear it again, simply click on it.

The on-screen keyboards allow you to type away quite happily in Spanish, for example, on a keyboard set up to be used in Germany and font, colour and keyboard size can all be adjusted for individual users.

Penfriend is a comprehensive literacy aid which can boost confidence and increase reading and writing skills across the age and ability range and should be a mandatory purchase for any school or resource centre.

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