

Comparison Shopping

Matthew Jones

The Internet is the world's largest shopping mall. But unless you know where to go, finding good deals isn't always easy. Fortunately, the web sites featured in this article do the work for you, searching the Internet for the lowest prices and interest rates. All you have to do is point and click.

After you have hunted down some bargains, you can check out this month's network resource. You can also read about the games of the month, and you can take a look at the new products I have found. (See "Product Snapshots.")

WEB SITES

Priceline.com (<http://www.priceline.com>) allows you to name your price for cars, mortgages, hotel rooms, and airline tickets. The premise of Priceline.com is simple: You enter the price you

are willing to pay. Priceline.com then tries to find a company that will accept your price. If you want to purchase a new car, for example, you specify the make and model you are interested in, along with the color and the options you want. You also enter both your ZIP code and the price you are willing to pay. Priceline.com contacts car dealers in your area and informs you if and when a particular car dealer accepts your price.

Price Watch (<http://www.pricewatch.com>) features a database of computer hardware, software, and consumer electronics. With Price Watch, you select a product and a manufacturer. Price Watch then displays a list of prices that are available for this product. You can view contact information for the reseller that offers each price, and you can take advantage of links to each reseller's web site.

Product Snapshots

When I am surfing the Internet, I often find new and interesting products. Product Snapshots gives you a quick overview of the most useful products I have found during the past month. (Please note that these are first-look reviews; I have not conducted exhaustive testing.)

DESKSTAR SERIES

The Deskstar series from IBM Corp. is a series of hard drives that offers lightning-fast performance and mind-boggling storage capacity. The Deskstar series is based on the new Ultra Advanced Technology Attachment (ATA)/66 standard, which allows data-transfer rates of up to 66 Mbps from the hard drive.

The Deskstar series includes the following four hard drives:

- Deskstar 22GXP, which stores up to 22 GB of data
- Deskstar 25GP, which stores up to 25 GB of data
- Deskstar 34GXP, which stores up to 34.2 GB of data
- Deskstar 37GP, which stores up to 37.5 GB of data

All Deskstar hard drives are standard 3.5-inch hard drives that feature a cache of 2 MB and an average seek time of 9 milliseconds. Each hard drive can use an ATA/33 controller, which is the type of IDE controller that is automatically built in to most new motherboards. To ensure maximum performance, however, you should upgrade to an ATA/66 controller, such as Promise Technology's Promise Ultra66. (See the next section.)

All Deskstar hard drives require a special type of IDE cable to connect the hard drive to the controller. This cable, which is often

referred to as an 80-wire/40-pin IDE cable, contains 40 extra ground wires to reduce signal noise. As a result, the cable can support a high data-transfer rate.

You can purchase a Deskstar hard drive through retail channels beginning at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$359. For more information about the Deskstar series, visit IBM's web site (<http://www.storage.ibm.com>). You can also call 1-800-IBM-4YOU or 1-770-863-1234.

PROMISE ULTRA66

Promise Ultra66 from Promise Technology Inc. is a PCI-based IDE controller card that supports up to four IDE devices. When used with one or more IDE hard drives that support the new Ultra ATA/66 standard, Promise Ultra66 enables a data-transfer rate of up to 66 Mbps. Promise Ultra66 includes an 80-wire/40-pin IDE cable that is necessary to provide maximum performance. (If you use a regular IDE cable instead, you receive a data-transfer rate of only 33 Mbps.)

Promise Ultra66 also includes an onboard BIOS chip, which automatically detects the type of IDE devices that are connected. The BIOS chip detects hard drives that are up to 128 GB in size. In addition, the BIOS chip detects the speed of each hard drive, enabling the best possible data-transfer rate.

Promise Ultra66 supports Ultra ATA/66, Ultra ATA/33, Fast ATA-2, and EIDE hard drives, as well as DVD drives, CD-ROM drives, and other ATA Packet Interface (ATAPI) devices.

You can purchase Promise Ultra66 through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$59. For more information about Promise Ultra66, visit Promise Technology's web site (<http://www.promise.com>), or call 1-800-888-0245 or 1-408-452-0948. ●

KillerApp (<http://www.killerapp.com>) also offers an extensive database of pricing information for computer products and consumer electronics. In addition, KillerApp provides product reviews and comparisons. You can even use My KillerApp to help you track prices on the products you are interested in purchasing.

Rate.net (<http://www.rate.net>) focuses on helping you find the best interest rates for mortgages, car loans, home-equity loans, savings accounts, and credit cards. All you do is specify the state and the county you live in. Rate.net then returns information about interest rates offered by financial institutions in your area.

NETWORK RESOURCE

Network Buyer's Guide (<http://www.networkbuyersguide.com>) is a useful web site to visit if you need to do your homework before purchasing a networking product. When you enter a keyword or select a product category, Network Buyer's Guide displays a list of products that meets your criteria. For example, you can view a list of Ethernet switches that are available, and you can sort this list by Ethernet, Fast Ethernet, and Gigabit Ethernet to find the type of switch you need. The list includes pricing and contact information for each product, as well as links to each manufacturer's web site.

STANDALONE GAME OF THE MONTH

Jagged Alliance 2 from TalonSoft Inc. is a sequel to the war game Jagged Alliance. In Jagged Alliance 2, a ruthless dictator has seized control of a tiny country called Arulco. The country has a large army that is loyal to the dictator. The only opposition to the dictator is a ragtag group of rebels. You must lead the rebels as they struggle against all odds to overthrow the dictator and to restore peace in Arulco.

Your only hope of defeating the dictator's superior army is to recruit mercenaries to your cause. You must carefully consider which mercenaries to recruit. Each mercenary that you encounter has different skills and attributes. You must assemble a well-rounded fighting force, hiring the best possible mercenaries with your limited resources. You must then convince the mercenaries to work together, and you must lead them into battle.

The key to victory is capturing each sector of the country by staging paramilitary operations. Arulco consists of 200 sectors, so you have your work cut out for

you. Along the way, you face additional challenges, such as rescuing a city under siege, hunting down terrorists, and severing your enemy's supply lines.

Jagged Alliance 2 supports Windows NT, 98, and 95. You can purchase Jagged Alliance 2 through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$49.95, and you can download a demo version from <http://www.sir-tech.com/ja2/download/index.html>. For more information about Jagged Alliance 2, visit TalonSoft's web site (<http://www.talonsoft.com>), or call 1-800-211-6504 or 1-410-933-9191.

NETWORK GAME OF THE MONTH

Darkstone from Gathering of Developers Inc. is a role-playing game that is set in a tortured medieval world. Your quest is to collect seven magic crystals, which will empower a mystical orb. You must then use this orb to defeat Drakk, a merciless dragon that is dominating Earth.

Unlike most role-playing games, Darkstone allows you to control two characters simultaneously, rather than controlling a single character. You can choose between

a monk, a thief, a knight, and a sorcerer—each of which offers a unique set of skills and attributes. You can then take advantage of 22 types of weapons and 32 types of spells as you fight off enemy creatures that you encounter during your quest.

Each quest consists of 32 levels. Darkstone includes a state-of-the-art quest generator, which creates a different quest each time you play the game. As a result, no two games are ever alike.

You can play Darkstone with up to seven other people over a network connection. You can also play Darkstone with up to three other people over an Internet connection.

Darkstone supports Windows 98 and 95. You can purchase Darkstone through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$39.95. For more information, visit Gathering of Developers's web site (<http://www.godgames.com>). You can also call 1-877-GODGAME.

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(4.875" x 4.875")