Wintal of content

Wintal's AV receiver gets the thumbs up from **Peter Familari**

FROM the same factory in China that builds the well-regarded Cambridge Audio gear for the UK comes Wintal's first AV receiver.

It's the $799 AVR3015, which, when it comes to price, build and features, is a very desirable entry-level machine.

The Wintal earns big brownie points for flexibility. It can be set in 5.1, 6.1 or 7.1 channels of surround sound.

The 5.1 is the standard format used by most DVD movies. It provides three channels across the front, and two channels of sound at the rear (of a seated viewer). The clumsily named .1 channel is used to carry bass.

Setting the Wintal to 6.1 adds a third speaker at the rear.

And yes, 6.1 is a legitimate format developed by US brand DTS. It's called DTS.ES Discrete.

About a dozen movies available in the US have the extra rear channel.

One that's sure to ring an audiophile's bells is the extended version of *The Lord of the Rings.*

But 7.1, for those who care about these things, is not a format.

It's a processing method used to split the rear channel signal so it plays through an additional pair of left and right rear-channel speakers.

No extra information is carried on those channels.

So what's the point? And who wants four rear speakers?

Surround-sound buffs. Especially those who swear they enhance the DVD experience by moving an existing pair of rear speakers to the sides of a room and putting the extra pair in their place. Whatever.

As well as DTS.ES Discrete, the AVR3015 plays back Dolby Digital and Dolby Pro Logic 11x, which is Dolby's version of a seven-channel surround system. Unlike DTS, it isn't discrete.

The Wintal is said to be rated at 7X130W.

But at this price, and given the size of the transformer and power supply carried by the receivers, the best way to find out whether there is adequate power for your speakers is to do a road test.

Used to power Wintal's ML500 series speakers and later B&W's versatile DM603 speakers, the 3015 generated respectable amounts of detail for DVD movie soundtracks and provided above-average integration between all the speakers.

Playing back the battle scene at the start of the *Master and Commander* DVD, the Wintal seemed to have bags of drive.

Cannon shots ripping apart a ship's timbers were steered fairly precisely to the relevant speaker in a nice blend, without discernible gaps.

It also did an adequate job of rendering bass, which was informative without sounding overbearing.

In surround mode, the overall balance, save for traces of hardness and a wee bit of compression in dynamic scenes, was involving.

In stereo mode the Wintal was just adequate playing back CDs. Still, most surround receivers don't cut the musical mustard in stereo.

Yet when you consider its sturdy build and performance in surround sound, it adds up to great value for money from Wintal, yet again.

AT A GLANCE	**WINTAL**
	What: Budget surround receiver
	Model: AVR3015
	Price: $799
	Wintal: 1800 337 366

The Wintal produces plenty of detail for a receiver at this price. Overall tonal balance is satisfying, but it will compress and sound a trifle hard during scenes with ripping dynamics. Stereo mode is adequate, but the feature count and value-for-dollar is high.

The PC built just for kids

Pretty-well-grown-up **Dave Bullard** has a ball playing with the new Disney Dream Desk

Ear, ear: the Mickey Mouse flaps conceal the speakers.

BUYING a computer can be difficult, particularly if you're buying one for the kids.

How big? How powerful? Can it play DVDs? Does it have kid-friendly software?

Will the kids be safe on the internet? Will it be compatible with the family camera? Can the kids use it for homework?

Disney has removed the guesswork with the Dream Desk desktop PC, delivering a product kids (and parents) can use straight out of the box.

Made by Germany's Medion and sold at Target stores, it is instantly recognisable as a Disney product. It is bright blue and yellow and has a 14-inch LCD monitor with Mickey Mouse ears (which house the speakers) and a chunky, kid-sized Mickey Mouse mouse with scroll wheel.

Importantly, kids recognise it as a computer for *them*. It's just plain exciting.

AT A GLANCE	**DISNEY**
	Model: Dream Desk PC
	Price: $1699
	Target: 1300 130 000

A lovely PC for kids, well-designed inside and out. The monitor isn't the best on the market, but the ears save it.

One of the attractive features for kids is the digital pen that stands in a holder on the keyboard. Like the tablet pens used by graphic designers, moving the pen over a surface moves the cursor on the screen.

Tapping the pen is like a left-click, and there's a button on top for right-clicking and scrolling.

Other than the look and feel of the Dream Desk, kids are interested in cool software, and there is plenty here.

Three applications make this PC stand out: Disney Flix, for editing home movies shot on a digital handycam; Disney Pix, for making original drawings and painting, and even adding Disney characters to your own photos; and Disney Mix, for making music.

Games included are *Disney's Jungle Book, Disney's Extremely Goofy Skateboarding,* and *Disney's Adventures in Typing with Timon and Pumbaa.*

On the productivity side, there is Microsoft Works 7.0, which allows older kids to do word processing and work with spreadsheets. Outlook Express is the email program and Music Match Jukebox takes care of MP3 management.

But it's security that parents worry about, and that is taken care of by eTrust Antivirus (free 90-day subscription, then about $30 a month) and Coolspot Family Filter (free 60-day trial, then about $38 a month).

The latter allows you to block certain categories of internet pages, programs and files and can be configured for each user. A dedicated button launches the program.

Other buttons take you to the Disney website or control CDs and DVDs. There's also a volume knob.

The Dream Desk runs a 2.66GHz Intel Celeron D 330 processor and ATI Radeon 9100 Pro graphics accelerator.

There's 256MB of RAM, a 40GB hard drive and a combo disc drive for playing DVDs and playing and burning CDs.

There's a built-in modem for dial-up internet, and an Ethernet socket for broadband or networking. Audio in/out and four USB sockets on the back of the PC are complemented by another two USB sockets — plus headphone and mic — on the front.

All cables at the rear are neatly hidden by a sliding cover, as are the ports on the front.

Speaking of hidden . . . I'll bet you don't find the on/off switch for a while.

Don't ask me. My lips are sealed.