

MATROX MILLENNIUM G550

Jack Owen tests
Matrox's latest
graphics card to
offer dual head
functionality



The new G550 graphics card is Matrox's attempt to steal back its thunder from nVidia and ATI who have both launched a whole host of graphics cards in recent months. Whilst the G550 may be billed as the successor to the G450, from a hardware perspective the two cards are almost identical.

The G550's single processor controls both an HD-15 and a DVI port. Essentially this means that the card has two video sockets, enabling you to connect up two screens to your machine. The HD-15 port is the standard analogue monitor connection, whilst the DVI port enables you to hook your computer up to the latest digital flat screen monitors (or another analogue monitor or TV with the adapters supplied).

This AGP graphics card is not intended for intensive game use but more as a general workhorse: The 3D graphics engine is based on the G400 and comes with 32Mb of DDR (Double Data Rate) memory.

The clock speed has been increased over the G450, so there is a marginal improvement in handling screens – ranging from 14 to 33 per cent depending on the screen resolution. The primary RAMDAC is set at 360MHz and the secondary at 230MHz. In reality, if you're always playing the latest high-res games then this isn't the card for you. If you're only an occasional gamer then it can cope.

As a comparison of the card's graphics capabilities we tried out TuxRacer on an old PC with an ATI Rage card fitted. The game would load and play but only showed every tenth screen and proved completely unplayable. When we swapped to the G550 every screen was shown and the game became very playable. This was all due to the memory on the card and the RAMDAC speed.

However, 3D support throughout the G400 series is poor. TuxRacer gave an incompletely rendered Tux, for example – he had a full outline but the lack of a black fill gave him a ghostly appearance. Although

this did not detract from the game such failings may be a drawback with the new 3D games coming online.

Where the G550 does stand out is in its dual head capabilities. In the past I had used twin screens with two PCI cards (always a pain to configure) then with one AGP and one PCI. With the G550, the agony of configuring two graphics cards is dispensed with. Installation under Mandrake gave the option to configure dual monitors without prompting.

Once you've set up two monitors on one machine, using the system becomes a wholly different experience. Your work habits quickly change and going back to one screen will soon be out of the question. New possibilities keep occurring and the

extra screen real estate is simply marvellous. Blender or video editing now becomes wonderful and the ability to

have a terminal

screen always at hand is just amazing. How about having VMware running Windows on one screen whilst the other is reserved for your real system?

On the Windows side, the card ships with a feature called HeadCasting, which enables you to use 3D models (generated from photos of yourself, or one of the supplied masks) in videoconferencing via the Internet.

One of the best aspects of Matrox products is their Linux support. Matrox are particularly proactive and their messaging forums show fast responses and a helpful style. Here you can find quick fixes such as using

```
insmod agpgart agp_try_unsupported=1
```

to load in the mga module.

The G550's resolutions are also impressive, ranging up to 2048x1536 at 32bit colour 85Hz (Vert) 110Hz (Horz) for the primary display and 1280x1024 at 32bit colour for the secondary. Overall if you spend your life playing Quake then this is not the card for you. If you want to get work done – and believe me twin screens is a dream – then this is the card for you.

Millennium G550

Supplier Matrox
Price £87.11 (plus VAT)
Web <http://www.shopmatrox.com>
For Dual head functionality
Against Poor 3D performance

rating 8/10