

**Answering back**

**Standfirst: Ross Gravell senior systems analyst at Ford Motor Company reviews an answer to his query**

Some months ago, I made a plea on the Feedback page for help with Microsoft's Powerpoint. The issue was that I needed to make a fairly long PowerPoint presentation to an audience that included some people who could not see. In addition my own impairments made it difficult to speak for very long. There are many commercial software packages that read Powerpoint presentations – but all fail to make sense of the 'alternative text' behind a Powerpoint graphic or picture – a necessity if people who cannot see, are to make sense of a presentation !

*(Right click on the graphic or picture, click Format Object / Picture, and select the Web tab. You can then enter your Alternative Text)*

I received an e-mail from Steve Lee, a volunteer programmer with M.E.R.U. (Medical Resource Engineering Unit). M.E.R.U. are working on a project known as Speechmakers, and a solution to my plea on the Feedback page of *Ability* would be an additional software component of that project called PowerTalk, downloadable completely free, from M.E.R.U. at: <http://www.meru.org.uk/speechmakers/index.html>.

PowerTalk will need a fairly powerful PC or laptop to run it. It requires PowerPoint 2000/2002 and Windows 2000 or Windows XP, as earlier versions do not provide the necessary support for events required by PowerTalk. Unfortunately the freely redistributable PowerPoint viewer is 'stuck' at PowerPoint 97 so it cannot be used. When you first run the software you should open PowerTalk.ppt. This is a sample presentation that describes the project, demonstrates the narration capabilities and allows the user to try out presentations with ease.

So to the software itself. Every now and again one finds a piece of software that actually does what it says on the packet. PowerTalk is a prime example. To hear PowerTalk reading a presentation, waiting for animations to arrive before it continues and reading the 'alt text' behind a graphic, was astonishing. It even waits for you to advance the slideshow, before continuing its reading. When the next slide appears, the narration continues – automatically, without any further user intervention at all. If you have included any animation effects (eg flying bullet points), PowerTalk waits until each animation effect is complete before continuing.

The voice was a fairly typical 'computer voice' – although I understand that future releases will include a GUI (Graphical User Interface), which will allow the user adjust the settings – I found it to be the tiniest bit fast and you would need to know your way around the Control Panel to make alterations. The voices supplied with PowerTalk are Microsoft standard - perfectly acceptable and quite intelligible. The installation is long– on our test machines here at Ford it

took about ten minutes, and they are quick machines! But then there is a lot of software to load, as I mentioned earlier.

If you do *exactly* what the Installation Wizards tell you (they are very clear and easy to understand), the package will install and work first time. Something of a rarity these days. Packaged with PowerTalk is the text of the General Public License and a file called Powertalk.ppt – a demonstration presentation highlighting some of the features. To run a Powerpoint presentation, simply write it as you would normally (but remembering to include your ‘alt text’ !), then open it using the Power Talk ‘open file’ dialog box. And Robert, as they say, is your relation by marriage ! (*Ed. Bob’s your uncle!*)

Overall then, I thoroughly recommend this software, to anyone who has difficulty speaking and needs to give Powerpoint presentations – and remember, it is absolutely *free* !