design

with a ring to it

For decades we've been assured that computers will come to revolutionise our lives, making every aspect of work easier, more fulfilling and enjoyable. Somehow though, this revolution seems largely to have by-passed the retail jewellery industry and, if Bill Gates remains the world's richest man, it's no thanks to us, which is at least some comfort!

By Anthony Levy

For those high street jewellers that do make the most of the computer age, many rely on IT for efficient back-office operations – stock control, invoicing and the like – but it's rare that they have an opportunity to use computers as a sales tool while face to face with a customer. Yet how can it be that while the awesome power of technology can tame nature, send satellites into space and bring us Big Brother, it doesn't give a fillip to the sales at a high street jeweller?

Well, the answer to this question is that, at last, it probably can; there's a computer programme now available that should make jewellers sit up and get excited. Developed over three years by two young men with a passion for the jewellery business, Ringcad is set to take off in a big way, if the very positive reaction of early users is anything to go by. Ringcad ('cad' is computer-speak for Computer Aided Design) is an inexpensive, easy and quick-to-use programme for designing rings on screen. Unlike very much more costly and laborious CAD programmes created for manufacturing, Ringcad takes minutes to create a life-like
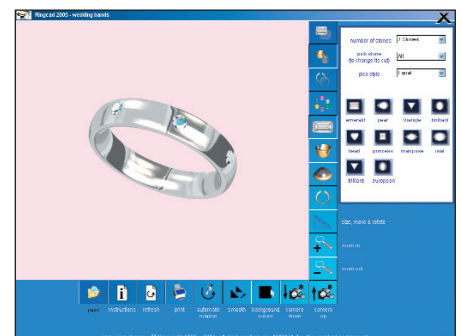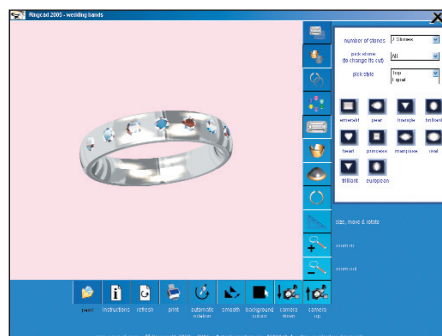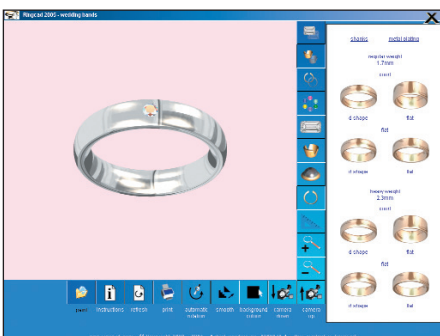
3-dimensional model of a bespoke ring. That means that any jeweller can now sit with a customer and together create the perfect ring, or, where something unusual is wanted, at least have some starting point and a way of getting the creative juices flowing.

In creating the model, the jeweller and customer can choose from all the standard precious metals, platings, ring settings, shanks, and precious and semi-precious stones, giving over a million combinations, each one a unique design. It means farewell to sketches that can take weeks to complete – time during which a customer can shop elsewhere – and to those hesitating moments when the customer cannot imagine what the ring will look like, however skilfully executed the sketch. With Ringcad,

nothing is left to the imagination; the 3-D model can be completely rotated on any axis, allowing the customer to see the ring from every direction. And given a decent quality computer monitor, the colours of the various metals, platings and stones in the on-screen model are surprisingly close to nature.

Like all the best computer programmes, Ringcad was developed to solve a real-life problem. Four years ago, its creator, software developer Tristan McVean, was spending time in jewellery stores as a website builder. He noticed that one of the jewellers' challenges was how to describe a ring accurately to a customer over the phone. To help solve the problem, he developed a CAD programme and from this Ringcad was born. While technically excellent, Tristan knew he would need marketing expertise if the concept were to take off. At a jewellery trade fair he was fortunate to meet Steve Gomez, a former stockbroker-turned-jeweller, who, with the added benefit of an MBA, knew a good business idea when he saw one. The two pooled their resources and over the past three years, through attending

A series of screen grabs showing the development of a ring using the Ringcad system

shows such as IJL and Spring Fair, have been marketing and selling ever-improved versions of the programme.

"Ringcad offers jewellers 21st century technology that is user-friendly and very modestly priced," explains Steve. "It doesn't merely replace ring design and presentation through sketches – it's a huge improvement on what we've had to date.

Additionally, Ringcad allows jewellers to show their customers that they are embracing something exciting, new and fun, which is exactly what buying a ring should be about." The experience of users, he says, is incredibly positive. "Without exception, they say that Ringcad increases the sales of bespoke rings, saves time and impresses customers. By general consent, the cost of Ringcad can easily be covered through extra sales in a matter of a few months, if not weeks."

We see it becoming an industry standard – the design equivalent of Word or Excel for jewellers…

One way that Ringcad increases revenue is by allowing the jeweller to close the sale without delay. "Customers enjoy using Ringcad and appreciate having a tool which helps them express their design ideas. Once their ring is up on the screen and the price is agreed, there's no barrier to closing. A customer knows they are unlikely to be able to recreate that design of ring with another jeweller and that is a strong motive for purchasing then and there." Another advantage for the jeweller, says Steve, is that it's the equivalent of 'virtual' stock, an opportunity to make sales without any stock investment. "Cash flow is always an issue with jewellers, and Ringcad can reduce some of the pressure."

jewellers' experiences of Ringcad

Users contacted by *The Jeweller* were full of praise for Ringcad. N.A.G. member Ewan Logan of Logan The Jewellers in Ayre, has turned the design process for bespoke rings from a 10-14 day turnaround to produce sketches into a 20-minute one on screen. "There's no doubt Ringcad has helped us to increase bespoke ring sales," he says.

Nick Kellet, whose store is on the New Kings Road, Chelsea, purchased Ringcad after seeing a demonstration at IJL last year. "It's been very useful and I look forward to future upgrades which will make it even more so," he said.

Lorraine Law, of Lorraine Law Jewellery of Perth, finds Ringcad a 'very effective' sales tool and publicises her use of the programme using a plasma screen in the store window. "What impressed me with Ringcad is that our suggestions for improvement have been taken up. You feel that here are people who do listen and have understood what the needs of independent jewellers really are."

Yet another benefit is that less experienced sales people can take the customer through the design process, which, using a sketch method for design, would probably tie up the business owner, or most experienced sales person. Users find training is unnecessary – the programme is that easy to use. Since starting to market Ringcad, Steve and Tristan have kept in close contact with their growing number of users – or their 'family' as Steve calls them. Improvements to the software have all come out of the experiences of users, the latest being the introduction of gem-set wedding bands. There are many developments in the pipeline, including cluster and eternity rings, and to ensure that current users are not disadvantaged, upgrades are made available free or at minimal cost.

From the start, Steve and Tristan wanted to make Ringcad as widely available as possible; "We see it

Michael Payne with Steve Gomez and Tristan McVean

Michael Payne of Payne & Son (Silversmiths) Ltd told us, "This relatively new concept is an extremely useful resource with great potential. It is obviously aimed primarily at design, but with tweaking, certainly has the potential for repair work as well as valuation work. We have been using Ringcad for approximately a month and have had several sales, more than recouping the money we had invested."

becoming an industry standard – the design equivalent of Word or Excel for jewellers – not an expensive product of interest to few," explains Steve. "Flatteringly, many of our users have asked for exclusivity in their geographical area, but though we've been offered a premium for this, we don't think it's right to limit usage." Jewellers can test Ringcad on a week's no obligation free trial – the programme is available from the Ringcad website *www.ringcad.com* or call them on 0870 242 4208.

An annual licence, including any upgrades, costs £450; a permanent licence, with certain upgrades provided free, costs £760. (All costs exclude VAT.) To encourage take-up within the N.A.G., members who purchase Ringcad before 1st June 2005 are offered a 10% discount on the quoted prices above.