

WHICH SYSTEM FOR ME

With so many systems around now, it can be hard to decide which is the best QL system for you. Here's my take on this! It'll be nice to hear from other readers what their thoughts are on this, given that there's such a wide choice of QDOS and SMSQ/E systems available. Despite its age, the QL is still a good home computer system for those who just want to run their existing self written SuperBASIC programs and Quill, Archive, Abacus and so on. All of the QL compatibles and emulators let you use SuperBASIC programs. And there's an awful lot of free QL software available from PD libraries, the internet and of course Quanta's own software library.

TRADITIONAL QL SYSTEM

Most of us still have one of these, if only as a backup system or for nostalgic reasons. Although there is little by way of new hardware expansion being produced, there are plenty of second user interfaces and disk drives available. We all started off with traditional QL systems, so this type of system would be familiar and easy to get going for someone returning to the QL after a period of absence, for example. For run of the mill home computing, a QL with a Gold or Super Gold Card and a disk drive or two is quite adequate for those just wanting to type the occasional letter, keep a little database, use the occasional spreadsheet and play the occasional game. The downside would be the future - little by way of new hardware is produced and as existing disk drives wear out, it'll be harder and harder to get hold of suitable disk drives in the future as other types of computer systems move to newer technologies meaning that less and less QL compatible hardware will be available. Tony Firshman does a great job repairing QLs, so maintenance shouldn't be an issue. A traditional QL system with expanded memory and disk system needn't cost much these days and is quite a good choice for those who just want a simple to use home computer, or who just want to go back to the QL after a few years.

THOR

Now very rare, the original Thor 1 was produced by CST in the mid 1980s. They were essentially a QL motherboard in a PC case with new keyboard, expanded memory and disk drives. There were various incarnations with various add-ons, culminating in the last computer, a 68000 based Thor XVI. Nice enough systems in their own right with good QL compatibility, their operating system was a CST in-house development of QDOS called Argos. There were other systems based on QL motherboards built into a PC style of case with various enhancements, but only produced in small numbers (e.g. the Sandy QXT-640 kit). So rare you are unlikely to get the chance to obtain one, sadly.

QXL

If you have an old PC lying around doing very little, a QXL card can make it into a pretty decent QL compatible system. Even if the PC is so old it's no good as a PC, provided it has an ISA card slot for the QXL, you get a machine which makes a decent and fast QL system. All the PC needs is some form of DOS on it (MSDOS or Freedos). The QXL runs as a fast QL system pretty independent of the speed of the PC. Make it boot up into QXL and you can

almost forget it's a PC. Advantages are that such old PCs have no real other use, so you can probably get hold of one for next to nothing. QXL cards are available second hand from time to time, and SMSQ/E is available for QXL, including using high resolution and high colour displays. Disadvantages are probably that PCs of this age may prove difficult to repair if they go wrong and may only have a small capacity hard disk. QXL cards do pop up second hand from time to time (QBranch advertise ones occasionally). QXLs use SMSQ/E or the original SMSQ system (which is a sort of cut down SMSQ/E without pointer environment).

Q40/Q60

The Rolls Royce of QL hardware. An extremely fast system, which can use QDOS Classic or SMSQ/E. Still available, a system with plenty of memory and disk space and offers 16-bit colour with a suitable version of SMSQ/E. Slightly hampered by disagreements between its designer and SMSQ/E suppliers over whether the operating system should be open source or not (e.g. the designer has ported a TCP/IP system for internet connections but is unable to include it in the operating system because of licensing issues with the operating system, as SMSQ/E is a system you have to pay for even if you are paying more for support than the product itself). The major consideration for some will be cost (several hundred pounds), but if you can afford it, it makes a really good QL compatible system, and you get the option of using its own Linux system on it too if Linux is of interest to you. A very good choice if you feel you can invest in the cost of this system to get the best QL possible!

AURORA

This is a QL compatible motherboard. It is not a complete QL system in itself, but it can use many QL peripherals like (Super) Gold Cards and behave like a real QL. Its design makes it fairly easy to build into a custom PC case if you would like a system based on familiar QL and Gold Card type technology, with expansion backplanes still available. It will drive many standard PC monitors (be a little careful of some flat screen LCD displays which can only handle some resolutions). The nice thing about an Aurora-based system (e.g. the Minis-QL which was produced in small numbers by Q-Branch) is that they are essentially a QL, but a bit easier to tinker with if you fancy building your own system into a PC tower case, for example. Like a QL, though, what you can do with it will ultimately be decided by the future availability (or lack of) of QL-compatible hardware.

EMULATORS

Emulators are programs which run on a given computer system, allowing that system to "pretend" to be a QL and to let you run QL software on it. Over the years, we've had emulators which run on Atari STs, Amigas, DOS, Windows, Linux and Apple Mac for example. Some are free, some are shareware and some are commercial. There's a good choice and most of them do a pretty good job, although some have limitations such as not being able to read QL disks directly. Trying out free emulators is a good introduction to them and emulators give a reasonable way of having two systems on one set of hardware if space in your house is at a premium. Compatibility can be an issue with emulators - not all programs will run on all emulators, but it is not as great an issue with QL emulators as it can be with emulators of other computer systems. Software emulator speeds generally depend on the

speed of the host computer system, so a software emulator running on a very old and slow PC for example may not be fast enough for your needs. Modern computer systems generally allow QL emulators to run even faster than original QL systems.

QLAY

There are versions of Jan Venema's emulator for DOS, Windows and Linux. It can run most QL software, but its disk handling leaves a bit to be desired. You have to use special software tools to transfer software into the QLAY environment rather than running software direct from floppy disk, which can take some getting used to. If you don't mind this too much, and you only want the emulator to run the occasional QL program QLAY is certainly a good bet because it's free. There's a QLAY 2 as well (from Jimmy Montesinos), I've only seen a PC version but it does have a few improvements over the original version.

QEMULATOR

Available in versions for the Apple Mac and Windows, Daniele Terdina's emulator is free for Apple Mac users or available as Shareware for Windows systems, where you get a cut down version which runs as a trial version then pay a registration fee of about 40 dollars to update it to the full, faster version with extra facilities. It uses copies of the QL ROM to run as a highly compatible QL system which in its fastest version running on a fast PC is MUCH faster than a traditional QL system, or you can select options to make it run exactly like an original QL or Gold Card QL. It can run SMSQ/E for the Gold Card if required, and the latest version can even emulate some Aurora and Q40 screen modes if you have the right version of SMSQ/E and want to tinker with high colour. Running QDOS, it has excellent compatibility with older QL software, although its drive handling system takes a bit of getting used to at first (up to 8 'microdrive' drive slots which can actually be floppy disks, PC hard disk directories or even QXL.WIN systems). If you pay for the full option, you get a system with built in TCP/IP system letting you run Jonathan Hudson's ports of Lynx browser, FTP and email programs.

UQLX

A good choice if you want to run QL software on your Linux box, Richard Zidlicky's uQLX QL emulator was originally based on the sources of the original QemuLator, a pretty tried and tested 68008 emulation. UQLX is also available in Windows and Mac versions although these are rarer. Not knowing the first thing about linux, I won't really comment on uQLX other than to say it is a tried and tested free emulator with a pretty decent reputation. The Linux version has TCP/IP facilities included (not sure about the other versions).

QDOS CLASSIC

Available for Amiga and Q40/Q60 systems, this is a traditional QDOS emulator which is very compatible with older QL software. QDOS Classic is free and although I have never used either version, it is highly regarded and a good option for those who are not bothered about SMSQ/E and want good QL compatibility.

ATARI ST

If you have an Atari ST you can either run the original software emulator QLEM or the hardware based STtoQL system, (which is no longer in production and a bit rare now). QLEm is a rather basic QL emulation.

QPC

The most expensive of the emulators and the only one which is based on SMSQ/E. If you want to run modern QL software using high colours and all the latest bells and whistles, this is a good option to choose as it is a pretty seamless emulation with floppy disk, hard disk and ramdisk access which works just like a traditional QL system. Compatibility with older QL software is generally good, and it has facilities to start up with a traditional QL screen and memory layout for better compatibility with some programs. Being SMSQ/E based, it is not really the best choice if all you want is a close QL compatible just to run the occasional older QL program.

QDOS OR SMSQ/E

The original QL used the QDOS operating system. Since then, an updated QL operating system has been released and is still being updated - SMSQ/E.

The answer to this one is quite simple - do you want the latest bells and whistles - if so, choose SMSQ/E. If all you want is good compatibility with older software and just the ability to run basic programs you have written, go for QDOS.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Do you need microdrives? If so, a traditional QL system is the only option. Microdrive cartridges are not manufactured nowadays, but there are plenty of them available second hand and most of us still have some old programs on cartridge.

Do you need the QL network? If so, you need to go for a QL, a QXL or an Aurora, since those are the only systems with the QL network sockets on them allowing simple 2-wire networks of several machines to be interconnected. There is another networking system called SERNET available which uses connections between the serial ports to make a (usually slow) interconnection available. Easy enough to use for a 2 machine connection, but rather complex cabling needed for 3 or more machines.

Do you need to use existing old hardware you have available? If so, a QL or Aurora are the only practical options.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope this article will help you decide what kind of system is best suited to your needs. It's a

pretty difficult choice as the various types of systems all have their own strengths and weaknesses. As a generalised reply I'd suggest the following:

* If returning to the QL after a period of absence or just using the QL as a simple home computer to run a few useful programs, a traditional QL or ready built Aurora system is probably the best choice. Although little by way of new hardware is produced, there are plenty of disk systems and so on available on the second hand market.

* Want the best dedicated QL system money can buy? Then a Q60 is probably the best choice

* Want to make use of an old PC which is well past its sell-by date? Consider adding a QXL card to give it a new lease of life as a useful fast QL system.

* Want to be able to run QL software on a PC, Mac or Linux box? Consider an emulator, which can let you have the best of both worlds. Consider carefully if you need the latest facilities of whether the free or shareware emulators would suit your needs. Do you need QDOS or SMSQ/E? QemuLator for Windows can run either operating system, QPC2 is probably the best money can buy, although it's the most expensive emulator, and emulators like QLay and uQLx are free for those who just want a simple system to run the occasional QL program.

FEEDBACK

It occurred to me while writing this that so much depends on your perspective on these things. I'm a QPC2 user, which gave me the best of both worlds (Windows and SMSQ/E), which happens to suit my needs for a cost-effective dual platform system with just one set of hardware. Some will need a good QL system with no requirements for anything else, in which case a Q60 will do nicely if they can afford it. So much depends on your requirements.

More than 20 years after the QL itself was last manufactured, I'd really like it if readers would write in and give their own perspective on all this and share experiences of the various types of systems available to us.