

A Pocketful of Windows

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Body

To Microsoft, a PC is a PC no matter how small. But pocket-size applications have their limits.

What do you call a multifunction electronic device you hold in your hand? Depends on your philosophy. Palm dubs its models "handheld." Handspring adds the dreaded noun "computer." Sony bills its Clie as a "Personal Entertainment Organizer."

But in the Microsoft world, a PC is a PC no matter how small. Pocket PC 2002, the latest variant of its Windows CE operating system, has just arrived on \$600 handheld units from several manufacturers. Adding new wrinkles to the top of the handheld line, they are clearly meant to tempt corporate users, people who rule their lives by Microsoft Outlook, and fashionistas who want to one-up Palm-bearing acquaintances.

I tested Hewlett-Packard's new Jornada 565 and fiddled with not-quite-final versions of Compaq's iPaq H3800 and Toshiba's e570; models from Casio, Audiovox, NEC and others will be arriving later. All use common software and the same Intel processor, and come with 32 megabytes of internal flash memory that can be reprogrammed with bug fixes and upgrades.

Hardware differences are subtle. The iPaq has the biggest reflective color screen and the brightest light. The Jornada has a hard clamshell cover, can switch the screen light off and on depending on ambient light, includes a watch-style backup battery and adds such useful extra software as a fancy calculator, but comes with only half as much RAM for the same price as the iPaq. Like its predecessors, the iPaq accommodates most add-on cards via bulky optional sleeves, but it also includes a built-in slot for teensy Secure Digital (SD) cards. The Jornada will eventually offer slim adapters for PC and SD Cards but comes with a built-in Compact Flash (CF) slot. Toshiba hedges its bets by including slots for both SD and CF.

Though prototype SD peripherals have been shown, SD thus far remains limited mainly to storage. Compact Flash is best known as the removable memory found in many digital cameras, but I also tried a CF modem, an Ethernet connector and a \$179 Wi-Fi wireless network card from Symbol. All worked well and were downright tiny.

With the last generation of Pocket PCs, the synchronization software consistently failed and recommended I consult my network supervisor--in other words, me. The new version generally works well, though installing new programs with it often took two tries.

Windows users will find the new interface both familiar and baffling. If you select a file, an option to delete it will not appear unless you hold down the stylus on the chosen item. But Pocket PCs can keep multiple programs running

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while you switch among them and return you to where you left off--even if you turn off the device. Unfortunately, switching can be inconsistent and confusing.

As before, Pocket PCs ship with a fairly broad array of software, including miniature versions of Microsoft Word, Excel and Outlook. Microsoft Office users will like the fact that they can read and create Word and Excel documents and easily synch their Outlook calendars, tasks, contact lists and e-mail. Script handwriting recognition has improved to the point where some scribblers may find it useful.

But the pocket applications still have severe limitations. Trying to save certain Word files repeatedly crashed the system, sending me to the red reset button. Basic formatting elements like fonts and tables still fail to appear on the screen or survive the round-trip between big computer and small one.

Built-in networking software has been beefed up. With those Compact Flash network cards, it was about as easy as it ever gets to set up an Internet link over my home network. The pocket version of Internet Explorer handles text-based pages nicely by wrapping them to fit the screen, but more complicated pages, including Microsoft's official Pocket PC page, demanded a great deal of irritating vertical and horizontal scrolling to figure out exactly what was going on.

A pocketized Windows Media Player lets the system play audio and video, including stuff streamed over Internet connections. But the software can't handle common forms of streaming that even Microsoft's own sites use. A special mobile Windows Media site offers only a dozen clips, but its jerky, fuzzy version of the recent "Lady Marmalade" music video will send you back to your TV set to see if your eyes still work. Better idea: Stick with audio file downloads.

Thanks to the 320-by-240-pixel resolution, text looks far better on Pocket PC screens than on any Palm model--with the possible exception of the \$500 Sony Clie, with its double-normal-Palm resolution of 320 by 320 pixels. But photos with fine detail still look jagged and the smallness of the display ends up being a hindrance with anything more complex than simple text wrapped to fit the screen.

Microsoft's Web site refers to the Pocket PC as a player in the "high-margin, high-end-device industry." One nasty way of maintaining those margins is by omitting a printed manual and supplying only a PDF file that you have to read on a PC. That's maddening, since you're not likely to be in front of your computer when you're using your pocket machine.

Are Pocket PCs worth the price? Not unless a company is footing the bill. If all you need is an organizer, a \$100 Palm or cheaper paper datebook will do the job. And no \$600 Pocket PC includes built-in wireless connectivity beyond the infrared port. Palm's connected VIIx costs \$200 plus monthly service fees, and a fancier successor is due next year. Cell phones based on Microsoft's designs are not yet available in the U.S., but interesting Palm-based phones are. I've written favorably about the \$400 Kyocera QCP-6035 (*Apr. 2*). As soon as I can get my hands on them, I'll take a look at the new Samsung I300, a Palm-based phone with a color screen, and the Handspring Treo, a forthcoming model that reportedly will have a thumb-typing keyboard (like the one in RIM Blackberries) built right into the handset.

But what will people call these souped-up gizmos? I'm betting the extra features will become so commonplace that the devices will still be known as "phones."

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