Netbooks start raising the stakes

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Nokia Booklet 3G

The standard desktop computer is about as popular as swine flu these days, with all the major innovations happening in the laptop and netbook segment.

As a gamer, neophyte video editor and all-around fan of getting the most bang for my buck, I find this situation a bit depressing.

Nevertheless, there is some cool innovation happening in portable computers, and this week we're looking at two notable mini machines: the Nokia Booklet 3G netbook, which I liked, and the Acer Aspire 5738DG laptop with built-in 3-D display, which I ended up hating.

NOKIA BOOKLET 3G

Netbook sales are exploding, so netbook makers are doing everything they can to expand this young product category.

Traditionally, netbooks were noted for both their diminutive size and wallet-friendly price.

Nokia, though, decided to focus on the size and sex appeal of the Booklet 3G and let the price get a bit higher than some people might want to spend.

The Booklet 3G looks like a runaway from Apple's School for Industrial Design. It's a sleek aluminum beast with a glossy top, 10.1-inch screen with an awesome 1280x720 resolution that meets the minimum standard for high definition and a nicely designed keyboard that's broad enough for touch typing.

The Booklet 3G also comes with a built-in 3G wireless Internet access card that connects to AT&T's network.

If you sign a two-year data contract with AT&T ($35 a month for a 200-megabyte monthly download limit, or $60 for 5 gigabytes), then you can get the Booklet 3G from Best Buy for $299.

If you forgo the two-year contract, the machine will cost you $599.

Those are steep premiums for a netbook, especially one with a fairly pokey Intel Atom Z530 processor running at just 1.6 gigahertz and just one gig of RAM.

The result of that puny horsepower allotment is that the Booklet 3G is equipped with Microsoft's bare bones Windows 7 Starter.

So you sacrifice all the nifty eye candy that makes Windows 7 actually

fun.

What's more, Intel is bringing a significant upgrade to its netbook line of processors early next year with its "Pineview" line of chips.

I really like the look and feel of the Booklet 3G. It's the most stylish and comfortable netbook I've ever used.

If there weren't such a substantial boost to mobile processors coming in just a month or two, I'd go ahead and recommend it.

But if there's any chance of a Booklet 3G with a Pineview processor in a few months, the buyer's remorse from making a two-year pledge to this almost-but-not- quite-perfect model would be unbearable.

Pros: Slim, sturdy, sleek and comfortable to type on and look at, the Booklet 3G is smartly crafted and pleasant to use.

Cons: The processor is a bit underpowered, and the Booklet 3G pushes the limit of an acceptable price for a netbook.

Bottom line: If you're netbook shopping, put this one on your list. But better netbook processors are right around the corner.

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ACER ASPIRE

If I'm torn over recommending the Booklet 3G, the Acer Aspire 5738DG just makes me want to tear my eyes out.

Television and computer makers have convinced themselves the future of display is 3-D.

That would be great, if they had found a way to dump the stupid glasses.

But they haven't.

That means I spent an hour getting my head pinched by a pair of cheap plastic specs just to review this low-grade hunk of flotsam.

My review unit had an Intel Core 2 Duo processor at 2.2 gigahertz, 4 gigs of RAM, a 15.6-inch display with 1366x768 resolution, an ATI 4570 video card and a 320-gig hard drive.

Those are middling specs, and the machine's reasonably priced at $779.

The 3-D effect ranged from "Hey, that's kind of cool. But I wonder what's on TV right now?" to "Seriously, I'll even watch that stupid wedding dress bridezilla show on TLC if I can stop staring at this laptop."

Basically, the noninteractive 3-D demos bundled with the laptop are the neat stuff: photos of flowers poking out of the screen, computer animated videos of spaceships flying around, and, er, that's it.

The documentation says you can watch traditional 2-D DVDs and the computer will convert them to 3-D on the fly, but my DVD of "Batman Begins" revealed no evidence of said conversion. However, donning the glasses does basically cut the screen resolution in half, making everything look blurry.

I was also jazzed to install some games that support the 3-D interface on the Aspire, so I cracked open "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare."

With the 3-D enabled, the game ground to a nearly unplayable halt, sound glitches popped up and a moderately impressive 3-D effect was

drowned out by a total lack of fun.

When I shed the goggles and turned off the 3-D, I was suddenly mowing down terrorists like a champ again without feeling like my head was going to burst like a grape beneath a steamroller.

The fact that my test machine was larded down with useless trial software and obnoxious pop-up security alerts didn't make me feel any better about the Aspire 5738DG.

But at least the pop-ups weren't in 3-D.

I guess that's something.Nokia Booklet 3G

Pros: Decent hardware for the $779 price. The 3-D effect is moderately entertaining in spots.

Cons: The required glasses are tiny and uncomfortable, the 3-D in most games and 2-D movies is minimal, and the laptop is crammed with obnoxious trial software.

Bottom line: An interesting concept, but not ready for prime time.

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