Review: Chrome OS gives a peek at computing future

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In this product image provided by Google Inc., the Cr-48 Chrome notebook is displayed. (AP Photo/Google Inc.) NO SALES

What if nearly everything you usually keep on your computer - photos, documents, music and software - was stored online? Your machine would be speedier and perhaps less vital because you could simply use another machine to recoup your digital life should you lose your laptop.

This premise - somewhat scary, yet liberating - is behind Google Inc.'s upcoming Chrome OS, which will make notebook computers more like netbooks than most actual netbooks.

The software powering Chrome OS, which is based on the search giant's eponymously named browser, serves mainly as a tool for connecting your computer to the Web. That's where nearly everything you use is

housed and linked to your Google username and password. It's a concept known as cloud computing.

A peek at the upcoming operating system and its vision of cloud computing shows a promising idea that could make computing faster and more convenient. But it still needs a lot of work.

Google expects the first computers powered by Chrome OS to be released this summer, and initially they'll be made by Acer Inc. and Samsung Electronics Co.

For now, though, Google is operating a pilot for some individuals and companies to test an unbranded laptop that runs Chrome OS. The company lent The Associated Press one of these machines, which aren't going to be sold to the public.

The laptop itself, called the Cr-48, doesn't really deserve to be critiqued, because it is a stripped-down machine that is chiefly a frame for Google's OS oeuvre. The shell is entirely matte black plastic, without a hint of branding. It has a webcam, a screen that is about 12 inches diagonally and a full-sized keyboard with a search key in place of the caps lock key.

The machine also has 16 gigabytes of flash memory for storing files, if you feel absolutely compelled to download something. Downloads are obviously discouraged, though; my music collection alone would nearly fill this allotment.

Moving on to the main event, Chrome OS brings a few clear benefits: Starting up the notebook takes just seconds - roughly 13 of them, according to my stopwatch - and waking the closed notebook from "sleep" mode is as quick as opening it up (almost too quick, as the notebook couldn't regain its wireless service quite as fast). By contrast,

my Windows machine at work takes more than two minutes to boot up.

After you sign in with your Google account, the same username and password you would use to access Gmail, you can pull up a home page showing all the apps you've installed from the Chrome Web Store. Assuming you're connected to the Web, you can just start using apps and surfing the Web right away.

There were plenty of free and paid Web apps and browser extensions available when I tested the notebook. Some are only for the Chrome OS; others also work with Google's Chrome Web browser for other computers.

I installed a range of the free ones, some of which seemed to be just links to existing Web pages. The apps I snagged included Web-based office suite Google Docs, the chatting service Google Talk, Aviary's Advanced Image Editor and balloon-popping puzzle game Poppit.

As with smart phones and tablets such as Apple Inc.'s iPad, publications are also making Chrome apps. USA Today, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal are among them.

On my work computer, it can take ages to open up applications that are stored on my hard drive. With the Cr-48, I could immediately start editing a Google Docs spreadsheet or tweak the colors in a photo using Aviary because the programs are all running online. I only needed a strong Internet connection.

Surfing the Web was a pretty normal experience, with most websites loading speedily, though the Cr-48 was not that good at displaying Flash videos.

But I felt constrained because I had to use the lone browser that comes

with the system and the Web-based apps I obtained. Apps loaded slowly when my Internet connection wasn't stellar. This wouldn't be a problem with programs stored on a regular computer's hard drive.

If a Chrome OS-based laptop becomes my primary computer, a data plan would be a must.

I feel anxious just thinking about the possibility that I couldn't access my documents at any time, and I don't even keep anything that important on my own laptop.

I mostly used the notebook with Wi-Fi at home and at the office, though I also tried out its 3G network service, which is provide by Verizon Wireless.

So what happens if you don't have any Internet access? The Cr-48 is pretty useless.

I could still write in an already-open Google Docs document, add notes in Scratchpad and look at photos I'd downloaded. But I couldn't use apps that are not yet opened because they're all connected to the Web.

If you lose your connection while using an app, you may be able to view some information that has been temporarily stored in memory, as I could when browsing The New York Times' app. But you'll need to get online as soon as possible to really use the machine. Faced with this situation, I'd probably just search frantically for an Internet connection or simply put away my laptop.

In its current state, the Chrome OS is far from ready to take over as my main computer, even if I were using it on a more powerful machine than the Cr-48.

Sure, I spend most of my time on the Web already, but I'm not quite ready to rely on having Internet access to do almost anything with my computer.

I can imagine getting comfortable with that in the not-so-distant future, though, and I'm curious to see if [Google](#) can make it happen.

More information: http://www.google.com/chromeos/pilot-program.html

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