



Today's netbooks are yesterday's ultra-portables

BY GARETH MURFIN
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Only three years ago, so-called ultra-portable laptops were the stuff of dreams, available only to the rich or those whose jobs relied heavily on tiny, lightweight portable computers.

Then the Asus Eee PC 700 came along, which was lighter and smaller than the best offering available at the time, and relatively inexpensive. The major drawback was that it was more like a toy than a computer.

Shipping with a massively dumbed down Linux-based operating system, a pathetic amount of storage space and an uninspired design, the Eee PC and its peers of 2008 (such as the Eee PC 900 and the Lenovo IdeaPad S9) were usable for browsing the Net, but not a lot else. Hence the netbook moniker.

It's fair to say almost all modern netbooks on sale now are faster, lighter and really deliver more bang for your buck. Today's netbooks are yesterday's ultra-portables.

The Acer Aspire One is probably the best low-cost netbook available in the world. I'm almost as happy with it as my VAIO TX, which cost 12 times more and only beats Acer's machine in a few areas.

So why is the Aspire One so delightful? A few of the impressive things about it include its diminutive stature (25cm by 17cm by 3cm and 1.26kg), stylish design, low price (currently NT\$10,000) and wide range of features (it can even take a 3G SIM card), not to mention the staggering array of ports (three USB ports and two memory card readers, which can handle many types of card).

The Aspire One packs a dual-core Atom processor running at 1.6Ghz. With the exception of high-end computer gaming and video rendering, the Acer Aspire One has enough horsepower to zip through any task you throw at it.

The biggest limitation is its lack of RAM (1 gigabyte, upgradeable to 2 gigabytes for less than NT\$1,000), which can mean the operating system locks up occasionally when tackling intensive tasks.

I have pushed the Aspire One to its limits and was impressed by its performance as a low-powered machine.

You can't, for instance, have 30 Chrome tabs open at the same time and expect them to work smoothly. Even the involved Javascript on sites like Gmail or Facebook can end up slowing the computer down.

Chopping up, rendering, or even playing very high-quality video files can result in stuttering, but apart from that, the Aspire One boots up fairly quickly and runs Windows XP smoothly.

So what else does the Aspire One have to offer? Storage for one. This

model ships with a 160-gigabyte hard drive.

Two memory cards can be inserted simultaneously, so potentially you could use two 16-gigabyte memory cards to get an extra 32-gigabyte storage, not to mention the fact that its three USB ports could take external drives.

Some of the tweaks that make this machine a delight to own include its small and lightweight power brick, or transformer, and built-in mic and camera, which work right out of the box, giving crisp audio and video results on Skype and Windows Messenger.

The Aspire One's build quality is very high. It can be picked up from one corner without hearing any of the creaks you might hear from a Sony VAIO.

An NT\$10,000 dream machine that is capable of giving the smallest and fastest ultra-portable of 2005 a run for its money; there have to be some drawbacks. Yes, but thankfully they're easy to live with.

There's no DVD drive, but that would add bulk and weight, and there's no Bluetooth, which is a ludicrous omission especially with the price and size of Bluetooth chips these days, though Bluetooth dongles are inexpensive.

Some of the keys are awkwardly placed and there's a strange gap where the screen links to the keyboard.

The RAM isn't enough. One gigabyte isn't sufficient considering MSN Messenger uses 30 megabytes, Skype 50 megabytes and a browser rarely less than 60 megabytes.

The screen doesn't reach the edges of the case, which rankles when your eyes hurt from staring at the 800-by-600 pixel 10-inch screen for too long, and the left and right trackpad keys are awkward to use.

If down the line Windows XP goes awry, good luck as the computer doesn't ship with a recovery disk.

And for a minor quibble, there is no way of partitioning the disk.

Of all the cons, the most annoying is the standard battery's meager 2.5 hours on one full charge, making it one of the worst netbooks for battery longevity (the MSI Wind U115 clocks in at 12 hours or more).

A six-cell battery (for around NT\$2,000) is available that turns in a respectable 5.5 hours, an essential purchase if you intend to work on the move, so this should be factored into the overall cost of the Aspire One, along with at least another gigabyte of RAM memory if you are serious about using it for anything more than the odd e-mail, IM or Facebook session.

Gareth Murfin (www.garethmurfin.co.uk) is a freelance technology consultant

Acer's Aspire One is proof that a small, lightweight laptop can be both inexpensive and relatively powerful



Acer's Aspire One netbook.

PHOTO: AP

The return

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Usually, as soon as I've tracked down a color, weight and texture I like, the manufacturer withdraws it; but in any event, my hobby is to stand in department stores stripping myself with anything that looks hopeful, and to accumulate boxes full of back-ups and alternatives, because no one product will cope with all seasons, all lighting, and all the perverse things skin can do in different conditions. Air travel, for instance, is wretchedly drying, and when women rule the world, aircraft will be misted with water, as in

the tropics they're pumped full of bug-spray. Still, I must be doing something right: I'm often greeted by "You look well!" rather than "Not dead yet?" That is an achievement in itself for the paper-white. For decades my skin had no real problem except pallor, but I thought it must have flaws invisible to my eye. Now that color is provided by pin-pricks of broken veins I have proper grounds for humility.

There are two ways to go — self-effacement, or self-assertion. A smooth, primed base is effacement enough. The finished face is not an exercise in vanity, more an exercise in patience and pre-planning. The search for a second skin is, in fact, pure pleasure, a natural urge to

prepare a surface and then paint it, to play with shadow and light; it's harmless till scalpels and needles get in there.

When I was 16 I would never have dreamed of leaving the house at weekends without three colors of eyeshadow and two coats of mascara. Lipstick, though, seemed too much a siren signal, and I kept it pale. In my 20s I learned how to paint on a scarlet mouth, but now I'm at rethink age, returned to self-consciousness, exploring how to look defined without looking like a caricature of my younger self. The full face is perhaps no longer a good idea in practice, but it's wonderful in principle. The art of full makeup was called

"making the best of yourself" till a flat-footed and scowling version of feminism called it making a whore of yourself. It's best, perhaps, to think of it as folk art: just more excitingly susceptible to seasonal trends.

The new take on smoky eyes means navy, or an overlay of purple — this is an amazingly kindly shade, and makes common old blue eyes take on a fascinating hint of green. If you must indulge in the punkish perversity of pink eyeshadow, the intervention of heavy black liner will stop you looking like a rabbit; but why would you persist with pink, when there's peach?

Red lipstick becomes possible when it's

mellowed by golden peach and desert apricot shades, lion colors to warm both eyes and cheeks. But this season a clear, defined mouth doesn't have to be red; coral is everywhere in the new palettes, is easy to carry off, and perfect to wear with moth-wing neutrals or the nude/blush shades seen in chiffon and fluid silks. Softer shades for eyes and lips have a metallic glint — creamy beiges shot through with gold, khaki with a sparkle. Lucky dark girls can wear lilac lips. Even the minimalists will smudge in some navy kohl with a careless finger. Those willing to admit to effort will sail into summer with features inked in: turquoise, violet or storm-blue, sepia smiles.