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Science & Technology 11/18/02

Keyless entry

Tablet computers aim to end the tyranny of type

BY JANET RAE-DUPREE

As the first tablet PCs arrived for testing, we were skeptical. Tablet computing, introduced with much fanfare last week, seemed a gimmick designed to prop up sagging PC sales. But then we started carrying around one of these pen-based portable computers. We jotted notes and sketched ideas at meetings, flipped through digital magazines on the couch, and scribbled our way through instant-messaging chats in coffeehouses. And we reveled in a new freedom: no more searching for a flat surface, flipping open the screen, and playing the keyboard.

Tablet computing, in short, is so convenient, so second nature, that it has a good chance of ultimately living up to the hype. "Within five years, virtually every laptop will be a tablet PC," says Alex Loeb, who heads Microsoft's tablet PC effort. But tablets may have a slow start.

An enhanced

Microsoft operating system and new hardware push the cost of the first models north of \$2,000—a hard sell in a flagging economy—and the applications that have emerged so far may not lure most people from their laptops. Still, anyone already planning to spend big on a high-end portable should consider adding \$100 to \$200 to get a tablet PC instead.

Made by seven companies so far—Fujitsu, Toshiba, Acer, Hewlett-Packard, ViewSonic, Electrovaya, and Motion Computing—tablet PCs come in two flavors. Slates, or "pure tablets," lack built-in keyboards (though you can attach one) and look like high-tech clipboards. "Convertibles" resemble lightweight laptops. But their screens can swivel 180 degrees and flop backward to cover the keyboard, creating a writing surface. Slates tend to be lighter, thinner, and easier to cradle on an arm for stand-up jotting. But, with less room for drives, ports,

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and the cooling devices needed for high-end processors, slates offer less computing power.

Write away. All, however, come with Windows Journal, a note-taking utility that lets the user write directly onto the entire screen with a special pen. The screen flips at the touch of a button from a horizontal to a vertical orientation, creating a digital page proportioned like notepaper. This is no personal digital assistant: There's no need for special notation, and you get the computing power of a standard laptop.

As you write, Windows Journal works in the background to convert your jottings into printed text. The conversion is far from perfect, but it's good enough to allow users to do keyword searches of their notes. You can use the pen as a mouse to edit your entries, save them, and E-mail them as image files to any other computer user. The touch-screen also lets you control other programs by writing commands in a small, pop-up input panel or—laboriously—by tapping on an on-screen keyboard.

Dozens of software makers are racing to find clever uses for this new style of computing. Microsoft includes a sticky-notes utility that lets you jot down names, phone numbers, or lists and record a 30-second audio reminder to go with each one. FranklinCovey makes tablet PC software that provides a digital replica of its popular paper planner: Users can hand-write entries, then digitally organize and search them, along with pictures, documents, and even audio files. Corel has developed Grafigo (short for Graphics on the Go), which lets users digitally mark up documents, such as blueprints, storyboards, or illustrations, then share them with colleagues.

Then there's a tool that could be a boon for students and journalists. Developed by Weil Gotshal & Manges, a New York law firm, it turns a tablet into a digital recorder able to hold hours of lectures or interviews and link them to notes handwritten at the same time. Confused by your own chicken scratch? Tap the indecipherable section and the software plays back exactly what was being said when you took that note.

With their slim profiles and vertical screens, tablet PCs could also give print its first real competition for casual reading at home or the plane. Zinio Systems has enhanced its digital magazine reader to let tablet PC users scribble handwritten, searchable notes on top of articles, which can then be E-mailed to friends.

None of this makes the machines a must-have. But in time these tablets could become addictive.

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