

GRAPHIC EXCHANGE

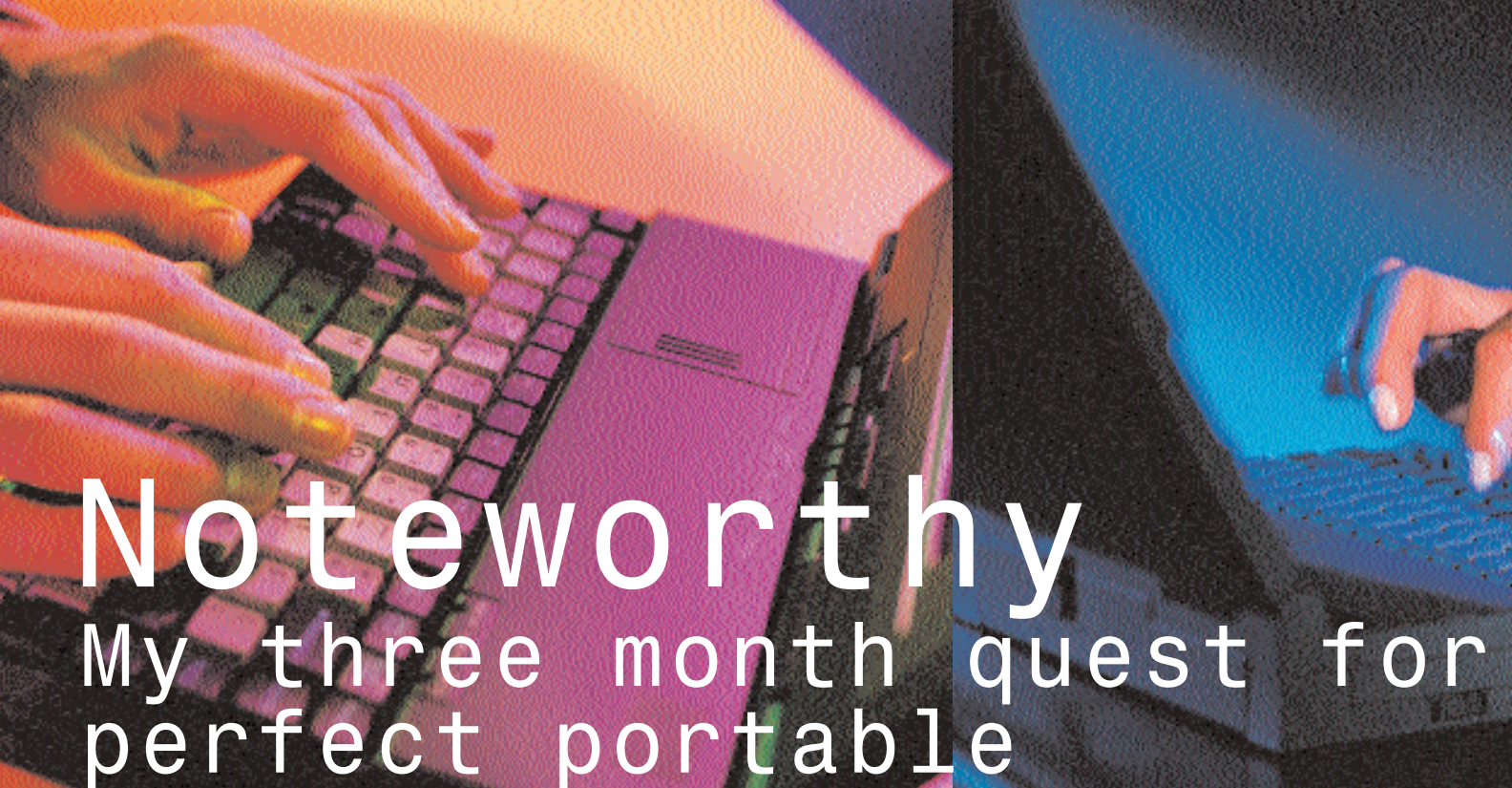
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Noteworthy

My three month quest for perfect portable

BY LORNE CHERRY To most retailers, a \$5,000 sale usually brings at least temporary euphoria. But not this time. After all, I was losing my traveling companion — just after we had finally begun to work well together. My demo PowerBook G/3 400 was gone.

Fueled by the depression of seller's remorse and the genuine need for portable computing power, I was determined to find (and this time keep) the very best notebook I could rest my sweaty palms on. To hell with what it costs — there's some things you just gotta have.

For the past three months, I read everything I could read, clicked, touchpadded (can you think of a better word?), and otherwise tested over 25 notebooks in my quest for portable power. And this time the search wasn't confined to Mac portables, as I consider myself a platform-independent person. (Don't read too much into that).

What I ended up with may surprise you. More important, some of the trusted reviews that I relied on to help clarify, classify and otherwise narrow my search — well, those reviews turned out to be dead wrong — at least for me.

You must try before you buy. Only then will you be able to answer such questions as:

Do you prefer a touch pad or pointing device? Mushy keyboard or clicky keyboard? Full size keys or 95%-sized keys (a must if you're a fast touch typist)? Or do you care much about the keyboard at all?

And what about the screen? They range from tiny 8.4"

VGA micro-screens to Dell's 15.1" super hi-res. We already know that active matrix is far superior to passive matrix. But even this seasoned veteran was surprised by the vast differences between active matrix screens with supposedly the exact same specs. In particular, some of the cheaper notebooks seemed to use too large a dot pitch, yielding a grainy look that you'd never suspect by

simply reading a review. Worth noting, this problem seemed independent of name brand manufacturer, but was most evident in the sub-\$2,500 category.

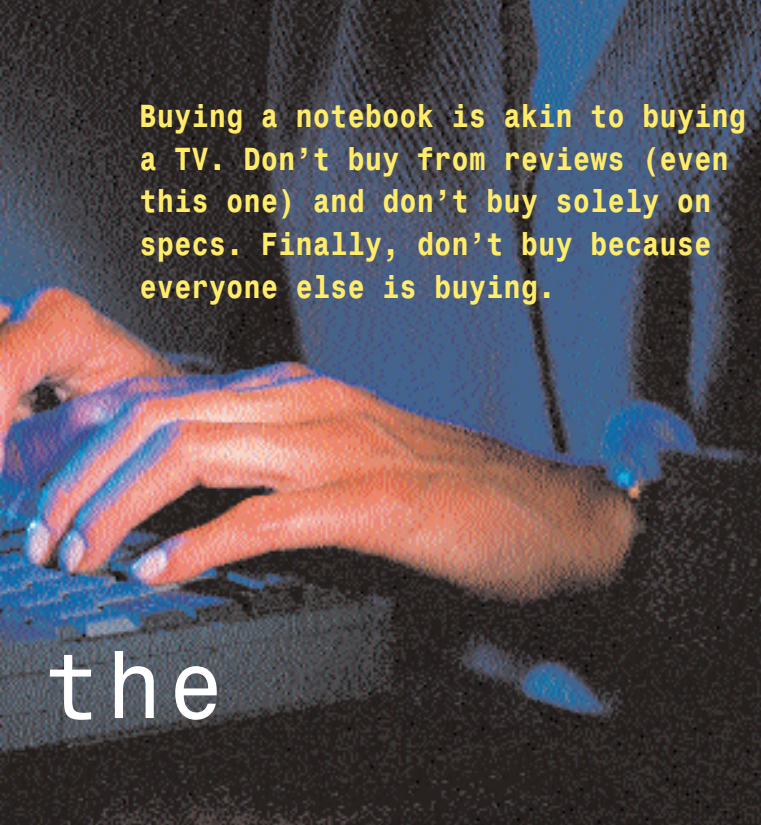
I recommend that after you try (and thus eliminate those notebooks you're not comfortable with), you ask yourself the following questions to determine the category of notebook you need: Do you want to use the notebook to present to clients (big screen, clear sound and multimedia) or do you just need to take the odd project home? Is your work strictly graphics? Word processing? Spreadsheets? Or a combination of the above?

As with most of our loyal readers heavily skewed towards graphics, you've probably considered the cumbersome portable category called "desktop replacements". Stop! For the \$6,000 price of a top-notch "desktop replacement", you could buy two loaded workstations — Mac or PC. Something to think about.

SIZE DOES MATTER

The "desktop replacement" category also suffers from obesity, tipping the scales at between seven and eleven lbs. Thus the major downside to these new portable powerhouses

Buying a notebook is akin to buying a TV. Don't buy from reviews (even this one) and don't buy solely on specs. Finally, don't buy because everyone else is buying.



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es is not just cost — lug around one of these behemoths, along with the prerequisite JAZ or Zip, and you'll soon find one of your arms longer than the other. It's just too much bulk for me to recommend — weary from having lived with a 7 lb. PowerBook for over a year.

But what these portables lack in true portability, they more than make up in functionality. Zips, DVD and second and third hard drives are standard fare. On the high end, the Dell Inspiron 7500 can be ordered with up to 75 gigs, DVD and a 15.1" 1200 x 1400 screen that blows away many 19" desktop CRT's! Not much change from your \$7,000 dollar bill, though.

If Apple were to make the upcoming PowerBook 500MHz two lbs. lighter, I'd be tempted to cross back over to the dark side once again. Still, for those part-time weightlifters who need a travel'n road show, the "desktop replacement" category may make sense. Of course if Mac is the only language you speak at work, you have no choice. Just make sure that you weigh (pun intended) all the factors equally.

Enter the new sub-portable notebooks. My 3.5 lb. Sony Viao packs a 366 MHz Pentium II, 6.4 GB, FireWire and 10/100 networking into one of the best weight/performance packages currently available. And there's something about owning Sony products, a certain 'caché' they enjoy that I can't explain — goes back to my Walkman days, I guess.

With the notable (no pun intended) exception of Apple, most major manufacturers have new powerful entries in this sub-portable notebook category — Acer, Fujitsu, Compaq, IBM and NEC are all good choices. (I will argue though, that nothing beats the Sony screen.)

The main disadvantage of this category is that in order to save weight, the CD-ROM, floppy and other peripherals are separate and must be schlepped along with the notebook, although with USB connectivity needing no separate power supply, this compromise is bearable. Screen sizes range between 11.4" to 13.1" inches — enough pixel real estate for most work.

Why did I ultimately choose the Sony? It was one of the few (make that the only) 12.1" active matrix screens with 1024 x 768 (XGA) resolution; 800 x 600 (SVGA) doesn't cut it unless you enjoy scrolling a lot.

Over the past year or two, a third category, ultra-portable, has become increasingly popular because of the convenience factor. But be warned: when the screen size drops below 11.4", and the keyboard is less than 95% full size, there is a tradeoff in usability that usually outweighs that one extra pound or so savings over a sub-portable.

Those that buy ultra-portables usually want something more powerful than a Palm Pilot or Windows CE PDA. Yet even the wonderful 2.9 lbs. Sony X505, with its excellent screen and Pentium II, suffered from usability limitations — the keyboard was not very good for touch typing — and the ability to touch type is one reason people cite for choosing an ultra-portable over a PDA. Get the next size up — the Sony Z505R.

Now that you know where I stand with respect to size and weight, I'll get to specific brand name likes and dislikes.

WHAT ABOUT APPLE?

Apple has no entries in the sub- or ultra-category; even the funky new iBook is almost 7 lbs. And although recent industry reports ranked the iBook as the top selling portable for the month of October, I didn't like either of the two iBooks I recently sampled. Once you get past the blueberry or apricot clamshell case, there are three very serious shortcomings: the aforementioned weight, along with screen quality and resolution.

Back at the office we eagerly cracked open the clamshell on the first iBook, only to be greeted by a jittery screen. The proverbial Chicago screen font was so nervous that I was tempted to mix it a drink. Unsure if this was a unique situation, we opened a second iBook. The Parkinson-like shaking was gone, but the iBook's

active matrix screen just isn't sharp, to the point of being annoying. I tried changing the screen font from Chicago to everything else, but to no avail.

Buying a notebook is akin to buying a TV. Don't buy from reviews (even this one) and don't buy

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solely on specs. Finally, don't buy because everyone else is buying. After all, you're not a student or a consumer, the intended iBook target market. You're a graphic artist — far superior to a lowly student or consumer. (Keep telling yourself that over and over and you'll feel better — and thus able to justify the extra \$1200 you'll need to spend on the "Professional" PowerBook.)

Thus Macophiles, the only models you should consider are the G3/333 and G4/400. Apple's done a wonderful job with these portables: great keyboard and ergonomics, bright

screen, etc. Go for a test drive and you'll see I'm right.

I KNOW WHAT I WANT...NOW WHERE DO I GO FOR A TEST DRIVE?

Trouble is, unless you're smack dab in the middle of Toronto, getting a test drive is very difficult for even some of the more popular models: Sony, Dell, Micron, Gateway and even Apple. You may have to hunt through the phone book and make a few calls. Some brands, such as Dell and Micron, are excellent choices, but they are only sold direct — sorry, no test drive.

Even many of the other most powerful, full-featured models that are sold through traditional dealers are just too expensive for many of them to stock, let alone demo. On the other hand, if you deal with one of the aforementioned direct conglomerates or major brand names, your chances of being dissatisfied are almost nil — these companies all share above average levels of customer loyalty, satisfaction and return policies. Besides, try walking into your local Dodge dealer and asking to test drive a Viper.

One exception to the test drive problem is Computer City, which displays at least five or six major PC notebook brands as well as the Apple lineup. It's not often I plug a competitor, but as they're the only place I could test drive a dozen or so high end notebooks at once, they deserve a mention. (And Computer City is the only retailer that carries the high end Sony's in Canada.)

Beware of outdated demo products at some stores — check on-line to see the US retail price and the latest processor and hard drive offered — then go back to make sure you're not getting ripped off. If the slightly outdated demo is good enough for your needs, you may be able to drive a harder bargain, if the store knows that you know they're not selling you the very latest.

Remember, nothing depreciates faster than a notebook (except your ego when you pay a grand too much). Also remember that many resellers make as little as 5 to 9 per cent

on many name brands. And if it's not a name brand? You know my thoughts already.

PC NOTEBOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

Desktop Replacement: Dell Inspiron 3700 and 7500. Tough to try these out, with Dell being Direct and all, but there's a few reasons why Dell is number one in the world. Value, quality, service and support, to name a few. Too heavy for me though. Sony, Compaq, Gateway, Micron, Toshiba and IBM are also very good — there's lot's of choice in this over-crowded category. Go on-line to narrow choices, then try as many as you can.

Sub-Notebook: The Sony Vaio Z505R is the undisputed lightweight champion of the world. Best screen in a sub-\$4K notebook. Short battery life is somewhat mitigated by "triple capacity" battery option. Couldn't find the 400MHz model anywhere in Canada so I settled for the 366. Acer, Fujitsu and Compaq sub-notebooks are also worth considering.

Ultra-Portable: Sony again. The only XGA screen in the sub-11", under 3 lb. category. At that size, you really *do* need XGA's extra pixels. Compaq also has a wee competitor in this class.

I haven't spent too much time on processor speeds — so here it is in a nutshell: PC MAGAZINE recently tested an iBook (300MHz) and found it suitable for everything except fast downloading of Internet pages. With the iBook positioned as a consumer/student product for that very task, this is a serious flaw. (I had no such complaints with my G4/400 PowerBook, and it's still probably better for graphics than the new 500 MHz portable Pentium III-based systems.)

On the PC side, stay away from snail-like Intel Celeron processors. They are *really* slow. Only at 466MHz and above is Celeron possibly a good value. With the portable Pentium III 500 MHz just becoming the high benchmark, the "sweet spot" price-wise is the readily available 366 MHz Pentium: fast and under \$4K.

I almost forgot batteries. Operating time is important only if you travel a lot. Besides, some of the newer systems can run over three hours unplugged. But again, there's a weight penalty. Buy a second charger for home to avoid carrying one around all the time. And keep a USB ZIP at home for the same reason.

So that's it. You are now armed and dangerous, a match for any salesperson, or direct pitchman (sorry, women's libbers — pitchperson isn't in my Scrabble dictionary). In your quest for notebook knowledge remember this: there's not a lot of difference between people and portables. Those of us that are too portly and run out of juice before the day's over are deemed less desirable. I'll start my diet and exercise tomorrow. *

~Lorne

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