**Cheap PCs
and New
Pocket Tools**

tools *of the*

trade

Pocketop Wireless Keyboard
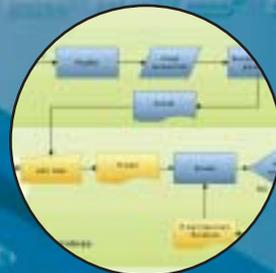
PenAgain No-grip Ballpoint

Microtel SYSMAR737 PC

PocketHUB 4

PocketHUB USB Hub

SmartDraw

Bargain PCs Meet Mass Marketing

The **Microtel SYSMAR737** tower PC is being offered at Wal-Mart online for the price you would expect to pay for a printer—under $200. With an AMD 1.1 GHz Duron processor that has 3Dnow, the computer also features 128 MB of SDRAM memory that is expandable to 1 GB, a 10 GB hard drive, 52X CD-ROM drive, 2 USB ports, game serial audio and parallel ports, stereo speakers, mouse, and keyboard. The operating system is Lindows 3.0, based on the very stable Linux OS, which has recently moved into *Fortune* 500 territory with backing from companies like IBM.

Pocketop Wireless Keyboard

(See Tech Forum on the next page for more on Lindows.) Software included enables Web browsing, e-mail, instant messaging, address book, and word processing, and it even has a preconfigured firewall. Additional software includes Linux-based programs like the Star Office Suite from Sun. The same basic computer is also available online at Nova Computech. www.walmart.com and www.novapcs.com

Pocketop Inc. of Vancouver, B.C., has a folding keyboard for PDAs that's wireless. The **Pocketop Portable Keyboard** sends what you're typing to your Palm or Pocket PC via the infrared port, and the software included lets you turn your PDA sideways for a landscape configuration to accommodate wider lines. The Pocketop folds in half to about the size of a Palm PDA, and it's a little over a half-inch thick. It has its own power source, a AAA battery that will last about three months, and it comes with a stand that positions the screen for easier viewing—you can rotate your PDA at 0, 90, 180, or 270 degrees. There are shortcut keys for Address, To Do, Memo, Apps, Menu, Calc, and Find functions as well as nine custom keys. Pocketop Keyboar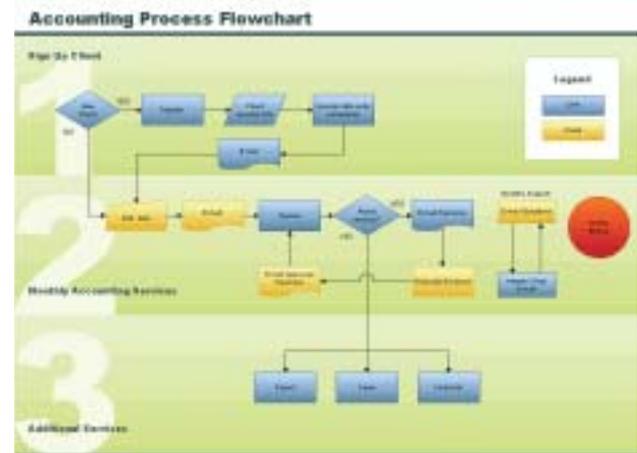d is compatible with most PDAs including Palm, Handspring, Sony Clie, HP, IBM, Toshiba, and Compaq. There is a complete compatibility list at the company's home site at www.pocketop.net.

SmartDraw is a graphics program that helps you create business charts, diagrams, technical drawings, business documents (like tables, graphs, or forms), calendars, and more. Instead of drawing, you drag-and-drop elements from more than 50,000 built-in symbols and clip art images. You can add your own symbols and clip art to build a custom library. Add-on collections are arranged by theme, including: Business and Charting, Electrical Engineering, Floor Plans and Facilities, Maps and Geography, Network Design, Science and Math, and so on. Besides the graphic tools, the program has powerful text editing and is compatible with Microsoft Office pro-

Created with SmartDraw

PenAgain No-grip Ballpoint

grams. There are three versions—Standard, Professional, and Professional Plus. A demo download of all three versions is available at www.smartdraw.com.

To combat fatigue and possible carpal tunnel damage, keyboard users have ergonomic keyboards and mice, sponge wrist rests, even wrist splints, but what about those who write as much as they type? Until now, relief from writing cramp and accommodations for those with disabilities have only included soft sculpted grips or slide-on triangular holders. With the **PenAgain**™ from Pacific Writing Instruments, your hand doesn't grip the pen—it slides into and rests in a pointing config-

uration that lets you write with the wrist and arm motion you probably remember being taught in grade school. The replaceable ink cartridge will write upside-down and even under water. The pen comes in a variety of colors and is available at www.penagain.com.

As USB ports became universal connectors for everything from printers to cameras, they multiplied, and some even moved to the front of the computer. Kensington Technology Group has put four USB ports on one pocketable device called the **PocketHUB**. Approximately two inches square and less than a half-inch thick, the PocketHUB is smaller than a business card and is designed for use with laptops. You can plug in a USB mouse, card reader, external disk drive, and one of Kensington's Pocket Numerical Keypads and use all four without loss of power or switching from device to device. The PocketHUB comes with a mini-AC adapter for its own power source. Because it's plug-and-play, your laptop will see and configure your HUB so it's ready to use as soon as it's connected. A travel/ storage pouch is included.

www.kensington.com

PocketHUB USB Port

Who'd 'a Thought? | Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ FIVE YEARS AGO, IF SOMEONE HAD OFFERED TO sell you a CD player/burner for your PC for only $19, you probably would have assumed it was stolen, used, or broken—or all three. But last week Office Max advertised a 48X speed CD writer that, after rebates, was just that—under 20 bucks. You could also get a spindle of 200 blank CDs, but not for a buck or so apiece—after rebates they came to less than two-and-a-half cents apiece. Imagine, CDs at two for a nickel.

But of all the recent "Who'd 'a thought" moments, nothing tops what's going on at Wal-Mart. If you happen to overhear a couple of geeks putting together the following phrases in or near a Wal-Mart store—"picking up a spare Unix box, under $200, Wal-Mart online"— don't worry, you haven't been vacuumed out of reality through a rip in time. It's true. Fairly powerful Linux computers are on sale for next-to-nothing prices at Wal-Mart's online store. (See Tools on the preceding page.)

The computers are unusual in a number of ways, starting with the operating system they use. It's a flavor of Linux called Lindows. Linux, you might recall, is the Unix-style operating system designed by the Finnish undergraduate, Linus Torvalds. Linus started writing the system to run on PCs, and, today, it's still under his control, but it's being written by a worldwide community of programmers. It's also being underwritten by computer companies like IBM, Dell, and Sharp as they configure their software and hardware to work with the OS. Corporations like Merrill Lynch have not only replaced a substantial percentage of Unix boxes with Intel-based computers running Linux, but the investment house is experimenting with migrating 20% of supported desktop PCs to the Open Source operating system.

Yet despite Linux's record as the fastest-growing operating system on the Internet and in business, traditional wisdom has decreed that Windows's grip on the desktop computer would be impossible to break. And that makes the Wal-Mart offerings even more of a surprise. But maybe the biggest surprise was that they sold out last holiday season.

Generally, Linux is more stable (less likely to crash) than Windows and far less likely to be exploited by the

next worm, virus, or Trojan horse that shows up online or in your e-mail. But the rap on the system has been that it's harder to use and there are fewer applications written for it than for Windows. Well, some versions of Linux have been made so easy to run that the average user couldn't tell the difference between them and Windows. The Lycoris version even presents the same green hills and blue sky of the Teletubbies-like XP home screen.

What's Lindows?

Lindows is an operating system that looks like Windows and works like Windows but chases its machine instructions around its circuitry using Linux rules. So why bother with Lindows if it is so similar to Windows?

Well, first there's the price. The difference between the same basic machine from Wal-Mart, one running Windows one Lindows, is about $100. That's half the cost of the whole package—hardware and software.

But you will save more than $100. Just as Linux is an Open Source program (you can actually get it as a free download), there's also a world community of Linux programmers producing Open Source apps and games that are available free or for low cost. There is, for example, a very powerful Linux graphics program that works like Adobe's classic Photo-Shop. It's called Gimp, and it's a free download.

The Star Office suite for Linux from Sun Microsystems costs far less than the Microsoft Office Suite—Star Office sells for $75. It has word pro-

cessing, spreadsheet, presentation, graphics, and database apps that are compatible with Microsoft Office products. Actually, there's also an Open Source version of the same suite that's free. It's called Open-Office Suite 1.0.

When you buy a Lindows computer, you have access to a subscription service for software. Called Click-N-Run, it's a warehouse of more than 1,000 titles that will run on Lindows. At www.lindows.com/warehouse, it offers the user several distinct advantages. First, it brings together in one place the work of hundreds of international developers. Second, it simplifies the process of adding software to your computer. Without leaving home, you browse the titles, click once, and the program is downloaded, configured, and installed. The program's icon is on your desktop, and it's ready to run.

In the second week of March, Lindows.com announced the Click-N-Buy commercial software delivery system that opened the Lindows warehouse to others besides the Click-N-Run members. Information is at www.lindows.com/memberinfo. You can download any of the Linux programs, including the Lindows OS, at discounted prices. The company also offers a LindowsFamily computer loaded with SurfSafe for parents who want a second computer for the kids or schools or libraries that want CIPA compliance (Children's Internet Protection Act). The LindowsFamily computer is also available at Wal-mart.com and NovaPCs.com.

As one of those out-of-the-blue events, the convergence of the Unix and Wal-Mart universes makes you wonder about the future of the desktop computer. And it also reminds us of the bigger question about how far the Open Source revolution will go. ■