TOOLS of the TRADE

The Sony Dash

The Sony Dash might look like a large-screen alarm clock displaying the weather and today's headlines, but its wireless Internet connection is amped up with Sony's Bravia Internet Video platform. It can handle streaming media in many formats, including Netflix movies, Pandora personalized music streams, YouTube videos, and if you just want to listen to (Internet) radio, there are Slacker and Blue Octy Radio. Actually, there are 1,000 free widgets you can run on it. Among the most popular are Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail. You can also set it up to just function as a photo frame display when you aren't watching a movie, browsing the Web, or checking local traffic. The connection is Wi-Fi, and the device runs on a Linux Operating System. The touch screen puts most of the controls on its

seven-inch display, and the wedge-shaped console stands up, or you can lay it on its back and the accelerometer will flip the image to the correct, raised position. The snooze bar/ menu button and volume controls are on the top of the unit. A USB port and headphone jack are under a flap on the side. The power cord needs to be plugged in because there's no battery, but this is the kind of device that likely would find a shelf or counter to call home.
www.sonystyle.com

Lenovo IdeaPad Z Series

The Lenovo IdeaPad Z series of multimedia notebooks combines strong performance and reasonable prices that start around $650. The island-style keyboard has rounded keys that are contoured for better touch location, and the cases are colorful. Three model types offer a 13.3-inch screen (Z360) or a 15.6-inch screen (Z560 and

Z565). Both sizes have a 16 × 9 aspect ratio and are HD. The sound is Dolby-enhanced, there's a preset OneKey Theater II AV for optimized audiovisual settings with a single touch, and Blu-ray is available as an option. The Intel Core i-series processors and Nvidia GeForce graphics have been selected to support the high-performance audiovisual features. The standard drive on each is a DVD, and there's a built-in Web camera, USB 2.0, eSATA connectors, and a 5-in-1 card reader. All models have integrated Bluetooth and high-speed built-in 802.11n Wi-Fi. Memory is up to 8GB DDR3 RAM and up to 640GB HDD storage. The IdeaPad Z notebooks run Windows 7, and the six-cell battery and integrated graphics provide four hours of battery life.
www.lenovo.com
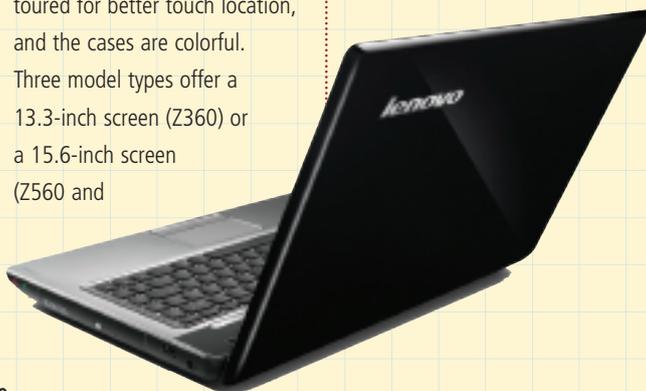
Logitech R800 Presenter

The Logitech Professional Presenter R800 projects a brilliant green laser pointer that's easily seen, even on LCD plasma displays in brightly lit environments. The range of this pointer is about 100 feet, and there's an out-of-range indicator built in so that you don't lose contact with the 2.4GHz receiver. The receiver stores in the body of the Presenter and is USB plug-and-play, so there's no hassle setting it up—no drivers to download and store on your laptop. The controls include convenient slideshow buttons and an on/off switch. The display counts down the time of the presentation visually or with vibrating alerts, and the battery indicator lets you know how much life it has left. Two AAA batteries are required, and the Presenter runs on Windows XP, Vista, and Windows 7. Logitech also has a red laser pointer with a 50-foot reach at about one-half the cost of the

Professional R800.
www.logitech.com

LaCie Rugged XL Storage

It isn't often that you see the name of a designer given equal billing with the name of a tech product, but, at LaCie, many of the data storage products are designed and engineered "to result in products that are both beautiful and performance-driven." In the past we've reviewed their unique key USB drives. These look like blank keys for conventional locks, but they are actually USB drives in a number of capacities and styles. LaCie's CurrenKeys are even more unusual. These are in the shape of large coins with images on both sides and milling on the edges. You grab the top and bottom edge and twist to release the USB connector that's folded inside the coin. The LaCie Rugged Hard Disk is a 320GB portable storage device that's wrapped in a distinctive orange rubber sleeve. Designed by Neil Poulton, the drive has rubber bumper edges and a protective aluminum shell on its flat surfaces, and the hard disk inside is held in place with four antishock rubber bumpers at the corners. The U.S. Army's Development Test Command rates the drive as shockproof up to 2.2 meters. It's fast, with a maximum speed up to 800Mbits/second with FireWire 800, and it's plug-and-play for Windows XP, 2000, Vista, Mac OS X, Silverlining, Windows ME, and Mac OS 9. The Rugged Hard Disk weighs 8.8 ounces and is 3.5 x 1 × 5.7 inches.
www.lacie.com

TECH FORUM

The Tablet—What Is It Really?

By Michael Castelluccio, Editor

Apple released its iPad tablet computer in April, and sales have been amazing. The company sold one million units is less than a month. That's about double the initial sales of its iPhone. Further, the iPad 3G, which adds a wireless connection to AT&T to the computer's native Wi-Fi, sold 300,000 in its first weekend at the beginning of May.

The digital peripherals are also doing well. Apple claims that the new tablet tappers have already downloaded more than 12 million apps from the App Store and more than 1.5 million e-books from the iBookstore. And the catalog is growing with more than 5,000 new applications designed just for the new tablet.

These sales were all U.S.-based. Apple scheduled international sales to begin at the end of May. So we have the answer to the first question, "Is it a success?" You think?

The more difficult questions aren't so easily quantified. For example, is the tablet, as Steven Levy claims in a recent article in *Wired*, the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) upon which the next chapter of computing history will be written—a chapter that will change everything? Levy believes, "The iPad is the first embodiment of an entirely new category—an ambitious rethinking of how we use computers; no more files and folders, physical keyboards, and mouses."

THE END OF THE TEXT ERA?

In the same article, Steven Johnson, *Wired* science writer, reaches out even further with his speculation that the iPad (and tablets in general) "may turn out to be the final stage of an extraordinary era of textual innovation."

The Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University points out that the major breakthroughs in computing have, so far, been "textual." The early networks "gave rise to e-mail and Usenet, and the Mac UI (user interface) made reading text on the screen tolerable." The super-power of distributed computing com-

bined with hypertext connectivity, and, boom, we got Google and the ability to search the universe that is the Internet, and we do it in seconds. Ordinary people take it for granted that downloading a new novel can be accomplished on their Kindle in 10 or 15 seconds. More amazing is the Kindle itself, now also taken for granted by almost everyone. E-book readers like the Kindle are what Johnson says the futurists used to call the "universal book"—a device that can download shelves, even libraries, of information without taking on a single additional ounce of carry weight.

The tablet, on the other hand, is a computer designed for the visual, the auditory, and the tactile. Badly misnamed, it's not a writing surface designed to project what you're tapping on a nearby keyboard—it's more like a one-and-one-half pound window. Johnson explains, "With the arrival of the tablet, we have crossed a critical threshold: Where text is concerned, we effectively have infinite computational resources, connectivity, and portability." The older, exceptionally small footprint of text will be transformed on this universal book with real-time video, virtual spaces, and sound. The effect will be a loosening of the grip of traditional text, and Johnson thinks, "There will be a steady decrease in radical new ways we interact with text."

FROM GUI TO NUI

Whether it's the beginning or the end of something significant in computing, tablets differ not so much in their form factor as in the user interface. A tablet is essentially a screen that you hold in one hand as you reach for its contents with the other.

The old graphical user interface (gooey—GUI) consists of a screen, a keyboard, and a mouse or joystick. The mouse and the hypertext on the screen, along with icons and visual clues like screen images and recognized territories under the glass, are all very familiar and pretty tired. The mouse goes back to the '60s, and the keyboard goes back to the '20s (that's the 1820s).

A NUI is a Natural User Interface, which involves touch and gesture, vision, and your voice, as in natural speech input (voice recognition). A nooey is much more human, with far less mechanical separation between you and your computing environment. You don't need to push around a piece of hardware to reach it. Just lay your fingers on it.

Touch screens and various versions of Internet tablets have been around for a while. The half-morphed laptop with a swivel touch screen didn't really catch on, but the smaller tablets in the form of handheld phones and media players

have greased the skids for the arrival of the iPad. The iPhone is so much like the iPad tablet that many jokingly refer to the tablet as their giant iPhone. The Archos media players have had a built-in tablet for a number of years, and so has the Nokia Web Tablet N-series, but these didn't catch on the way the iPhone, with its thousands of applications, has.

Apple's tablet incorporates the same system of signing that has succeeded so well with the iPhone, but there still may be a wait for really efficient voice recognition. That kind of system requires serious computation and a machine willing to learn your voice.

The iPad isn't a work computer. You can compose documents on it, but it's designed for much more, and the work functions look like an accommodation to the marketing team. This is a new format with a new, more human interface.

A CANARY IN THE MINE?

It wasn't long before the stories began to appear about the iPad being banned on some campuses and in some other environments because they were putting too much demand on ISP broadband pipes and there were security issues. An online *Wall Street Journal* article explained, "Insiders believe that iPad will lead the next generation of educational technology. However, at George Washington University and Princeton University, the network stability problems have hindered the promotion of iPad. Cornell University also reported iPad had a network connectivity problem and fear iPad will lead to network overload."

At the end of the last week in April, there was even a story about the Israeli Communications Ministry banning Apple's tablet from Israel.

Some of the issues causing dropped connections for the device might have to do with the kind of router used. These issues are still being ironed out, but there's no doubt that as millions more are sold, these multimedia devices will put new pressure on bandwidth. And this month, MSI will be releasing its 10-inch tablet running Windows 7 at COMPU-TEX Taipei (June). The Google Android tablet is rumored to be ready this year, and the Asus Eee Tablet (July), Dell, HP, and many others have their own versions likely to be launched in the next six months.

Behind Richard Misrach's beautiful photo of Pyramid Lake in Nevada, which serves as the default wallpaper on the iPad, there are some powerful, possibly mountain-shifting, changes for computing. Those streaks in the sky are stars, not messed-up pixels—the photo was a long exposure taken at night—and those stars seem to be scribing omens. **SF**