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HP'S
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M40

COMPROMISED
CALLER?
BLACK
BERRY
CURVE
9360

PLUS:
RYAN
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Q&A



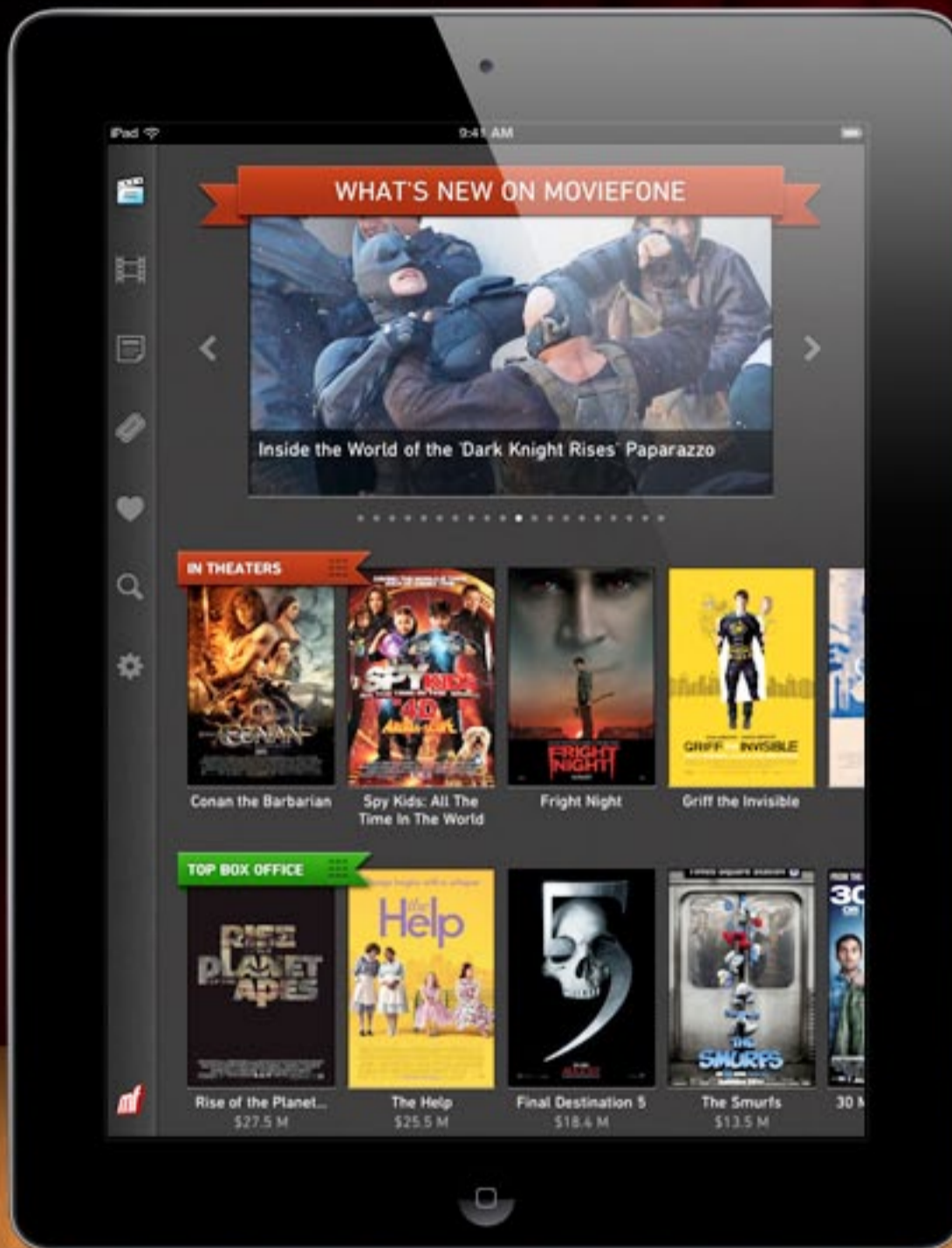
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DISTRO Issue #26

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And the Earnings Keep Rolling In

Editor's Letter

Another week past and another round of financial reports, various companies filing their various earnings for their various quarters — none, it must be said, coming anywhere near Apple's bombastic \$46.33 billion results posted last week. In fact, there wasn't a lot of good news to go around on that front, with AT&T posting some impressive numbers — revenues up 3.6 percent and a mighty 7.6 million iPhones activated in the quarter — but still ending \$6.7 billion in the red. It must be said, though, that \$4.2 billion of that is allocated to paying off obligations relating to the failed T-Mobile merger.

The future is also looking dim for Nintendo. The company's profits dropped 61 percent thanks largely to flagging demand for the 3DS. However, it still made a profit of about \$631 million — a far cry from where it belongs this time of year. The Wii U isn't due until sometime in the latter-half of the year, and for Nintendo's sake it had better be as successful as the Wii was before it.

Google had a busy week, continuing to fend off accusations that its new, consolidated tracking of user accounts and



simplified privacy policy will result in a cataclysm of exposed details and targeted ads. Big G posted a funny little video last week in an attempt at getting ahead of the furor, but, as that didn't work, circled back again with a big bulleted list of

factoids. The most important: Google never sells your information to advertisers.

The company also finally made ground on its efforts to get Chromebooks in schools, announcing deals to get 27,000 of the things into schools in Iowa, Illinois and South Carolina. We had high-hopes for the very affordable, lease-like program that Google announced last year, but as of now there's been very limited adoption. With Apple making its big play with cheap textbooks on the iPad, it's now do or die for Google.

Finally, Google flipped the switch on Wave, sending it to read-only mode this week. What was supposed to revolutionize social communication is now a dead service walking, slowly shambling toward an April 30th shutdown.

Megaupload, meanwhile, won't last even that long. The service was of course shut down by the DOJ thanks to the misdeeds of its founders and

With Apple making its big play with cheap textbooks on the iPad, it's now do or die for Google.

operators, but there's a huge amount of legitimate content hosted on there that people want. The noble knights at the EFF have brokered deals with the various companies hosting all that content, letting it live on for another few weeks, at least. After that, all those copies of Danger Mouse's *Grey Album* and *Top Gear* holiday specials will be sent to the big bit bucket in the sky.


The EFF is also working hard to preserve an extension to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that allows for consumer jailbreaking of devices. The DMCA exists to basically help device manufacturers keep boffins from cracking the security measures applied to their hardware, ostensibly preventing things like playing copied versions of videogames on chipped consoles. However, jailbreaking of videogame consoles is specifically one of the things the EFF is looking to add to this provision, something that might allow members of the homebrew gaming community to come out of their native subterranean lairs.


But, while down there, many of them spent at least a few hours writing up amazing demonstrations of what Microsoft's Kinect could do when hooked up to one of the handful of independent SDKs developed for the thing. Now they can use an official one, with Microsoft releasing version 1.0 of its official Kinect for Windows developers kit, with hardware to match. The new, \$250 unit looks nigh-identical to its console counterpart but can recognize movements just 40cm away, meaning no more getting up and out of your chair to beta test.

HP's Jon Rubenstein has departed the company, a corporation he joined when it acquired Palm 24 months ago. It was, of course, to be a rather unhappy marriage. The Apple veteran had a two-year employment obligation to his new corporate overlords and, as that expired, he wasted no time in running out the door. What's left of Palm at this point? Nothing, really.

Finally, in sad news, Peek is ending services to its bare-

bones email and Twitter handsets. The devices, which looked like smartphones but were rather simpler in nature, could be purchased as part of a \$299 "lifelong service" plan to avoid a \$19.95 recurring monthly fee. As the service only launched back in 2008, we're left questioning the company's definition of "lifelong."

In this week's Distro we have a slew of reviews, including the BlackBerry Curve 9360, the Klipsch Mode M40, the HP Envy 15 and a pair of smart watches that might just leave you wanting more from your wristpiece. We also have a new IRL, the latest Switched on from Ross Rubin and a Q&A session with our former Editor-in-chief and current editor emeritus Ryan Block. It's an eclectic mix of content, so get yourself in your happy place and dig in. 



TIM STEVENS
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
ENGADGET

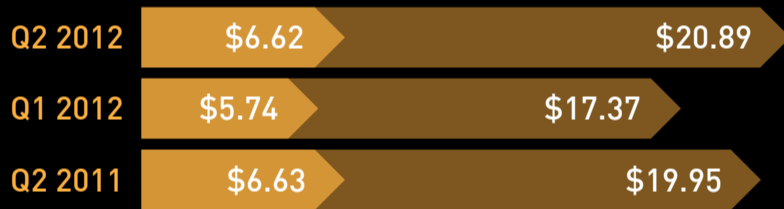
Tomato, Tomahito: It's Earnings Time Again

Call it Q1 2012 or Q4 2011; no matter what you call it, the numbers are in. Of the high tech heavy weights to publish earnings reports over the past month, it was Apple that had us all picking our jaws up off the floor, raking in a whopping \$46.33 billion in sales and a massive \$13.06 billion in profit. Samsung's revenue came close at \$42.23 billion, but its \$3.57 billion in income looked like pocket change compared to Cupertino's fat stack. Microsoft didn't quite break that \$40 billion revenue marker, but managed to swing \$6.62 billion in net income. Google reported gross revenue of \$10.58 billion – the first time it's topped \$10 billion – but still missed estimates, sending its stock down nearly nine percent in after-hours trading. Stacking these players against each other may be like comparing apples to oranges (or Apples to Googles, as it were), but one thing was consistent: all four of these heavy hitters had mobile on the mind. And: NUMBERS!

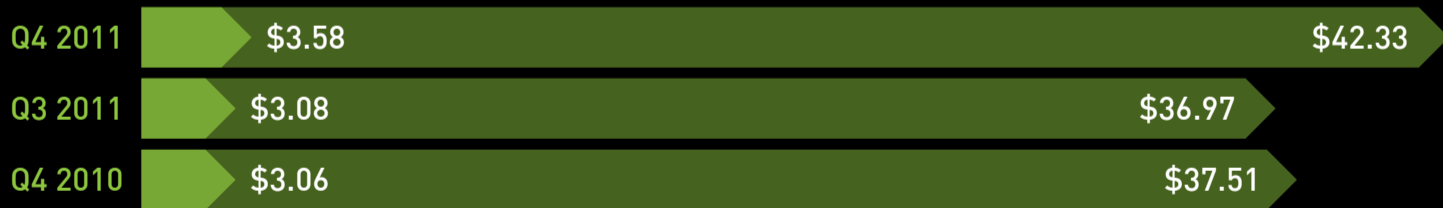
APPLE Its \$13 billion in income accounted for nearly half of Apple's annual profit, due in large part to the 37 million iPhones sold in Q1 (making up half of Cupertino's quarterly revenue).



MICROSOFT Redmond reached a record breaking \$20.89 billion in revenue, up five percent from the same quarter last year, and boasted of a big year to come for Windows phones and PCs.



SAMSUNG While Apple came out on top of the smartphone game for the quarter, mobile accounted for 40 percent of Sammy's sales and half of its operating profit.



GOOGLE Its reported \$8.13 billion in net revenue left some investors unhappy, but Q4 wasn't all bad news for Google; there are now 250 million Android devices, up 50 million from last quarter.



All dollar amounts represented in billions.

EARNINGS NUMBERS ARE BASED ON REPORTS PROVIDED BY EACH COMPANY. REPORTING OF REVENUE MAY VARY.

NEW WORLD RECORDER

Switched On



BY ROSS RUBIN

When it comes to time-shifting television viewing, most of the talk these days is focused on streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu Plus. But consumers routinely shell out more than they pay for either of these services – in fact, sometimes more than for both of them combined – simply to have more convenient access to the television from a cable or satellite subscription for which they already pay. Not only that, they’re often willing to put up with a large, relatively noisy, and failure-prone box in their homes for this privilege. That box is the digital video recorder. ¶ Most of the DVRs in American homes have been supplied by cable providers; the market for retail boxes is dominated by pioneer TiVo, despite a number of challengers that have appeared over the years. These have included TiVo’s original main rival Replay TV and many niche standalone and PC-related products such as Archos TV, the Monsoon Vulkano, and home theater PCs with Windows Media Center, SnapStream or Sage TV (now lying in wait at Google). A decade ago, one of the more ambitious “TiVo-killers” debuted at CES: the Moxi Media Center. Having changed hands twice, it is still around, but the Web site offers no obvious way to purchase it, only a phone number. ¶ Nonetheless, hope springs eternal at CES, which saw no less than four devices aimed at time-shifting the programming already coming at your TV. None of them appears poised to topple the cable DVR hegemony, but they all bring something new to the DVR party.

Fisher-Price Kid Tough Portable DVR. This brightly-colored kidproof video viewer is neither the first such recorder nor Mattel’s first digital video player foray. Hasbro released the abysmal VuGo video player for kids back in 2005. Its chunky frame allowed

Ross Rubin (@rossrubin) is executive director and principal analyst of the NPD Connected Intelligence service at The NPD Group. Views expressed in Switched On are his own.

playback of even chunkier video recorded from a video source or downloaded from a PC via USB. The VuGo was a response to Mattel's Juice Box video player (which itself was a response to Hasbro's once-thriving VideoNow disc-based video player), which had equally crummy video quality. Both products were commercial duds but gained some interest from the hacker community.

This Kid Tough Portable DVR, though, promises to offer higher resolution on its 3.5-inch display and even timing of recordings, making it more of a true DVR (although one with the scheduling sophistication of a VCR). Due to arrive midyear, Mattel intends to bundle it with headphones, a docking station, car charger and a case for about \$150, which at least some will find worth it to wrest their smartphones from their three to five-year olds.

Simple.TV. The whole point of a DVR is to feast upon the choicest morsels in the banquet that is a full pay TV lineup, is it not? Not for the \$150 Simple.TV, which is described as "a lovely little box that gobbles up oodles of TV," and then can deliver it to a range of connected devices such as smartphones and tablets. Simple.TV is something of a cross between a SiliconDust HDHomeRun and a Monsoon Vulkano, a DVR aimed at cable cord-cutters or "cord-nevers."

Unlike with those products, if you'd like to make the most of Simple.TV's capabilities, including remote streaming, an electronic programming guide and series recordings, you'll need to

... Hope springs eternal at CES, which saw no less than four devices aimed at time-shifting the programming already coming at your TV.




The whole point of a DVR is to feast upon the choicest morsels in the banquet that is a full pay TV lineup.

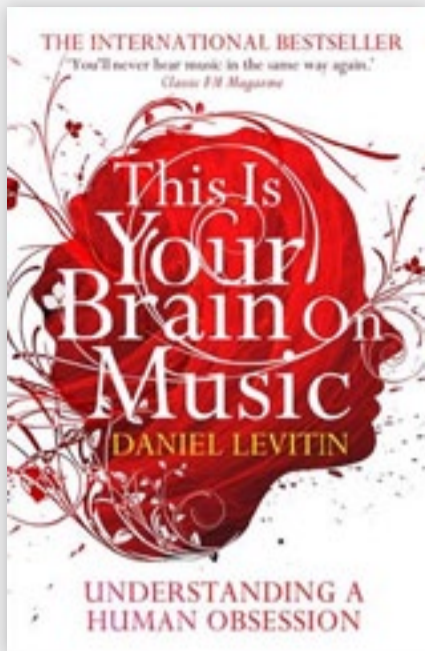
pony up \$5 per month. But if you'd like to get a taste of the company's user interface chops, it sells a \$30 add-on for Windows Media Center that can convert recorded shows to podcasts and stream them to a browser on the local network.

Hopper. Dish's forthcoming multi-room DVR is named after its new kangaroo mascot; its secondary room client boxes are called Joeys. However, there's no kid stuff behind this powerful new DVR solution from Dish. A new HD user interface tunes the service and provides access to shows on its two terabyte hard drive while SRS TruVolume helps prevent commercials from disturbing your couch potatodom. The Hopper also ties in to other members of the larger Dish / Echostar family. It can receive Blockbuster@Home titles even without a broadband connection and can send live TV and recorded shows to a host of mobile devices using Sling technology from Echostar.

The most intriguing feature of the

Hopper, though, is Prime Time Anytime, which takes advantage of its large hard drive by automatically recording all shows on the four most popular broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox) for a rolling eight days. The idea is that if someone recommends a show to you, you can check it out without having to record it in advance. Or if an episode is upcoming, you can at least catch up on what happened the previous week to get a sense of a season's story arc or learn more about the characters. PrimeTime Anytime forms a partial bridge between the selection of a DVR and the convenience of an on-demand service like Hulu.

Given Dish's sizable customer base, it's a sure bet that the Hopper will be the most popular of the new DVRs shown off at CES. But there's one other with an interesting enough backstory and proposition that it deserves its own attention in Switched On. That, it shall have, in the near future. 



This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession



by Daniel J. Levitin
Plume/Penguin

Daniel Levitin moved to neuroscience after a career as a record producer, making him about the best-qualified person to write a book on the effect of music on the old grey matter. ¶ *Your Brain on Music* peels back the heavy curtain that lies between the tangible effect music has on us, and the rather more abstract forces behind it. Everything from foot tapping, to why we prefer our favorite genres is explored and explained in simple terms. There is a fair dose of science-speak — this is unavoidable — but you’ll never feel like you are back in the classroom. Recovering musicians will appreciate the inside track into what makes music appeal to the human mind, while armchair listeners will just enjoy the insightful ride. ¶ While Levitin clearly knows his science and musical onions, at times, it feels like the task in hand (distilling the human response to music) is ultimately too vast and personal to be tackled satisfactorily in such Newtonian terms. An interesting, informative and curious read, but one that might — like a good song — leave you asking for more.

AROUND THE WEB

In China, Human Costs Are Built Into an iPad



by Charles Duhigg and David Barboza

The New York Times

The second in the *Times* series on manufacturing in China, this one offering an exhaustive look at the harsh conditions factory workers are faced with. Again, Apple is the focus, but there are also lessons for the industry as a whole.

The Internet Archive’s Brewster Kahle



Interviewed by Patt Morrison

The Los Angeles Times

Brewster Kahle has been working to create a backup of virtually everything for more than 25 years — here, Patt Morrison catches up with him to talk about libraries and his efforts to digitize as many books as possible.

The Forgotten History of Access Atlanta, One of the Early Web’s Most Innovative Newspapers



by Alex Remington

Nieman Journalism Lab

Alex Remington takes us back to the early 1990s, when the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was pushing journalism into the digital age not on the web, but on the Prodigy online service.

Mega-man: The Fast, Fabulous, Fraudulent Life of Megaupload’s Kim Dotcom



by Sean Gallagher

Ars Technica
Megaupload founder Kim Dotcom attracted a good deal of attention following the shutdown of the file sharing service last month — Sean Gallagher provides one of the best profiles we’ve seen in this piece for *Ars Technica*.

Recommended Reading



Klipsch Mode M40 Noise-Cancelling Headphones

The Klipsch Mode M40s are a potentially exceptional set of headphones — if you can keep them on your noggin long enough to notice.

BY JOE POLLICINO

Around these parts, we've generally had favorable opinions of Klipsch's audio products. Whether it's been something as small as its S4 line of smartphone oriented in-ears or grand speaker systems like its AirPlay-enabled G-17 Air, we've usually ended up awarding the brand our highest praise. If you'll recall, it was

little over a year ago that Klipsch introduced its \$150 Image One on-ear headphones — the company's first set ever that weren't of the intra-aural variety, and a favorite of our own James Trew.

Fast forward to the present, and the company's unleashed its second proper over-the-head headphone, the Klipsch



Mode M40 with active noise-cancellation. In recent years, headphones have exploded in popularity — many companies have been furiously trying to blend good sound with fashion-forward looks. It's safe to say that's Klipsch's end game here, and is asking that you part ways with 350 bones to get in on the action.

Put simply, these aren't a follow-up to the Image Ones, but rather, a luxury pair that takes cues from the company's ref-

erence series headphones. Of course, as we've come to expect from Klipsch, the M40s do have some notable tricks up their yokes aside from their debatably fashionable looks — the company promises they'll cancel noise for a massively long 45 hours on a single AAA battery, and both earcups feature an interesting dual-driver array with a 15mm tweeter and a 40mm woofer. So, have the M40s made us smitten with Klipsch all over

again? Or not? Maybe something a bit more *complicated*? Read on to find out!

Hardware

Upon unboxing the M40s, we came across the usual assortment of audio-related accessories. Digging our way through, we were welcomed by the headphones themselves, a duo of cloth-wrapped cables (including one with an inline three-way remote / mic for iDevices) and adapters for 1/4-inch jacks and airliners. We're happy to note that Klipsch also adds in a few extras beyond the normal call (and it should, for that price). For one, you'll get two options for storing the headphones, with a choice between a posh hard-shell leather case or a cinch pack if you're tight on space. Additionally, you'll notice a duo of included AAA batteries (for those keeping count, that's one more than you'll normally find with most headphones).

Moving on to the M40s themselves, we'd be remiss not to point out that they look strikingly similar to headphones in the vein of the Beats by Dre studio and Soul by Ludacris lines. Factor in the similar \$350 price point and some key design choices like the overall shape, hinged collapsible earcups and even the noise-cancellation toggle switch on the right earcup, and you've got some sincere flattery going on. Not to say that it's a deal-breaker, but we're definitely knocking off some points for originality here. That aside, we're enamored by the refined look of the copper and caramel hues used on the outside of the cans,

and the soft-touch coating the inner areas — the translucent bits are made from the same type of nylon you'll find on designer sunglasses. While you won't find other colors, Klipsch aficionados will surely find the color at home with the company's other high-end ear gear.

Noting what may be problematic for some, the headphones are massive, weighing in at a beefy .78 pounds (~354 grams). To make matters worse, the M40s are ridiculously wide — we managed to lightly scuff the see-thru nylon more than once while opening doors (of course, we'll detail how this affects the fit a bit later in this review). Our last qualm with the design is all the divots and seams between sections. Within a few days these areas lined themselves with an unpleasant amount of lint and dust, similar to our experience with the late Nox Audio's Scout.

On the underside of the left earcup you'll find a 3.5mm input for either of the included cables. Despite numerous tugs and cable pull-outs, the jack remained tightly in place and the plastic around it didn't show signs of cracking. Both cables proved incredibly durable as well and we found little in the way of cable noise, although they were slightly prone to bunching up. If we have one complaint about the cabling, it's that the ends have straight-angle plugs, and not the kind of resilient right-angles we typically prefer for in-pocket PMP use.

Owners of iDevices will be pleased to know that the inline remote used here is now one of our favorites. The rub-



ber buttons are easy to command while on the move, with a pleasing throw to each push and reassuring clicks that confirmed our every press. According to callers on the other end of the line, the omni-directional microphone on the back delivered crisp, clear sound, even when we were standing next to busy intersections with traffic rumbling by. For the most part, we were told it sounded nearly as good as the mic on our iPhone 3GS, if a little bit lower in volume. Unfortunately, though, the metallic shine is merely plastic, while the backside and cable tips are emblazoned with tacky Klipsch branding.

Plastered in the middle of the left earcup, you'll notice the units spring-loaded battery door. As a nice touch, the door is almost seamlessly affixed, aside from the flick-tab you'll need to open it. In use, it remains snug against the headphones and we never had a worry that it would pop open. Further up each yolk are the folding hinges we mentioned earlier, which allow the headphones to

compress for storage. The earcups click firmly in and out of place, and notably, Klipsch states that they're tested to 10,000 cycles for durability. While we had no problems with the hinges' functionality, it became apparent that the paint used on them easily chipped, making us worry how new our new headphones would look within a few weeks.

Rounding things out, on the right earcup there's a toggle switch for enabling noise cancellation (we'll detail how effective it proved in the sound section). Nestled in its center is a red indicator light, which stays lit to indicate power and changes to blinking when the battery is running low. Unfortunately, it's all but useless unless you're indoors since it's hard to view outside — even on cloudy days. One of the boldest claims that Klipsch makes with the M40s, is that they'll last roughly 45 hours with ANC functioning — more than double that of many competitors we've checked out in the past. For the most part, we were able to leave the headphones pow-



ered on for two to three days at a time. Similar headphones considered, we're amazed that the M40s can manage roughly double the amount of powered running time on the oft-used AAA. To put that in perspective, while reviewing Sony's MDR-NC200Ds we needed to change its battery (rated for 21 hours) about once a week. Best of all, if you do manage to run out of juice before you can pick up more, the headphones function passively (more details follow).

Fit and Comfort

On paper, the M40s read as if they're a dream to wear, with leather-wrapped memory foam earpads. Sadly, however, the design of the M40s killed any chance of them being remotely comfortable for more than 20 minutes. To start,

the headband doesn't use a traditional pad, but rather a slab of rubber, which Klipsch notes is to keep with the overall look of the headphones. Although the headband did blend in well, it did a miserable job of staying planted on our head and balancing the heft of the cans around our ears. We usually either felt a small amount of pressure from the band or found it sliding toward our forehead.

To further complicate matters, the earcups have a rather snug fit, despite being so girthy, and their flat driver-plates aren't set very deep. There's no padding on the interiors aside from a thin layer of cloth attached to the earpads that cover them, and it consistently pushed against our ears. As if that wasn't frustrating enough, the center section of the plastic raises by a few millimeters,





making for an extra pressure point. Part of the problem lies in the M40's nylon construction, which makes the cans far from flexible. The inner cups do swivel and tilt on a small axis to help contour to heads, but we still found our ears suffering from cartilage cramps all too soon. The M40s fit us tighter than most supra-aural headphones we've used and the promisingly thick pads proved to be of little comfort for our average-sized noggin. Ours ears also tended to get fairly sweaty because of the leather, making a us wish there was an option for microfiber or cloth pads as well.

On a more positive note, the head-rails adjust enough for smaller and larger heads — counts for something, right? Furthermore, in speaking with the com-

pany, it let us know that it's currently reducing the headphones', "clamp force" by around twenty percent in the headband on all future models. This will hopefully lend the headphones a looser fit.

Sound and Noise Cancellation

On the noise cancellation front, Klipsch curiously doesn't detail how much ambient noise reduction is actually applied. Taking the headphones on a few bus commutes through New Jersey and New York City, we noticed a slight dip in the level of engine rumble with the feature enabled, but the difference wasn't quite as dramatic as with other headphones we've tested. In other words, you might need something more powerful if you spend a lot of time in

the sky, sharing cabin space with crying babies and snoring seatmates. Notably, we didn't experience the sensation of pressure on our eardrums that tends to occur with many ANC headsets. Essentially, bass frequencies will get drowned out to a small extent, but in quiet areas you'll still notice the tsss of that noise-cancellation technology doing its thing.

As we mentioned earlier, the M40s will also function passively, so it's worth noting that isolation from earcups themselves was acceptable. In comparison with our go-to B&W P5s, the M40s proved nearly as good at blocking out background noise without any powered help, ensuring we didn't need to crank the volume too high in louder areas to compensate. Put it this way; Klipsch's smaller, closed-back Image One headphones sound like they may as well be opened-back in comparison to the M40s.

In describing the sound of the M40s, the words silky, smooth and squashed come to mind. The M40s are some of the thickest, warmest sounding cans we've ever had the pleasure of using. Unlike our experience with fit, the voicing of the headphones was incredibly comfortable and warm, saving us from listening fatigue. On the other hand, the voicing is totally colored, so if you're aiming for clinical, these are without a doubt not the sound reproducers for you. Furthermore, bass aficionados will be pleased to learn that with ANC enabled, you'll get about two clicks of

extra volume, along with a slight bump to the low-end when you'd like some extra thump. Thankfully, adding in the extra kick doesn't do much to drown out the mids or the highs.

In describing the sound of the M40s, the words silky, smooth and squashed come to mind.

Either way, while we could discern the sonic gems laid out within our tunes, there was a noticeable lack in dynamics. Especially with cymbal and snare drum hits, it was as if a pillow was being placed between our ears and the headphone's woofers and tweeters, muting much of the resonance. Putting it in terms a musician can appreciate, it would be similar to adding a compression pedal between a music source and the headphones themselves. It's especially surprising given the dual-driver setup, which one could imagine having the opposite effect as opening up the sound. Oddly enough, the Image Ones appeared to offer a much more spacious soundstage, though we still have to give a nod to the M40s, as their audio reproduction proved less hollow.

Overall, it's a fun, creamy voicing that's not far off from that of the G-17 Air — the key difference being that we didn't notice as drastic of a dip in balance of mid-range tones. Fans of Klipsch's S4 in-ears will find that the M40s are not so sonically dissimilar with their tight and focused sound — something to consider given the \$250 price differential. Of course, it all comes at the cost of a natural, airy tone in the treble department, but the good news is that there's nary a trace of sibilance or harshness (that ear stabbing feeling) going from dubstep, to rock, to pop to everything in between. Furthermore, the cans will be very forgiving with tracks of less than stellar quality, making these perfect for when you just want to simply relax and enjoy your playlist.

Wrap-Up

Reaching the end of our review, we're torn here. Klipsch's Mode M40s offer the perks of noise cancellation, a sleek (though unoriginal) design, ridiculously long battery life and exceptionally pleasing audio quality from the woofer and tweeter setup. On the other hand, the headphones are incredibly bulky and thus, cumbersome for extended use or travel (and that's despite the folding design). That said, it's worth repeating that Klipsch is already adjusting the tightness, which should mitigate some of our complaints about the fit.

While the \$350 price feels commensurate with the total package, we'd be remiss if we didn't point out other

BOTTOMLINE

Klipsch Mode M40 Noise-Cancelling Headphones

\$350


PROS

- Rich audio quality
- Premium industrial design
- Ridiculously long battery life
- Functions passively

CONS

- Uncomfortable fit
- Bulky

» The Klipsch Mode M40s are a potentially exceptional set of headphones — if you can keep them on your noggin long enough to notice.

options worthy of audiophiles — not that that's Klipsch's target customer anyway. So would we recommend 'em? It's a tough call — if you like the style and find the fit comfortable, the M40s are easily worth it. However, for \$350, we can think of a few options we'd recommend sooner. 

Joe's functionally useless without his glasses — a fact you really shouldn't disclose to any enemies.



REVIEW

BlackBerry Curve 9360

The Curve 9360 fails to keep pace with other consumer smartphones. It's woefully inadequate for all but the most basic communication needs.

BY ZACHARY LUTZ

The BlackBerry Curve 8300 emerged as one of the best smartphone ideas of 2007. It pre-dated the first Android handset by a full year, and unlike the original iPhone, it was priced within reach of the average consumer. It introduced the masses to the possibilities of

a connected and capable handset, and was the primary catalyst for the BlackBerry's meteoric rise to a household name. With each subsequent iteration, however, the Curve remained a handset geared toward first-time smartphone buyers, and that axiom feels

particularly true today.

We're now presented with the Curve 9360 (\$29.99, on contract), a device that's ostensibly hobbled in order to differentiate itself from RIM's higher-end offerings, most notably the Torch 9810 (\$49), Torch 9860 (\$99) and Bold 9900 (\$199). Specifically, we refer to its lack of a touchscreen. The omission will certainly be a deal-breaker for some, but whether it causes the market to reject it as a whole remains unknown. For our part, we're most interested in the impact on the handset's usability and its relevance in an increasingly competitive environment. In other words, has RIM included enough improvements to keep its Curve franchise afloat, or will this iteration sink like a stone? Join us, as we delve into the Curve 9360 and explore these finer details.

Hardware

The BlackBerry Curve 9360 replaces the Curve 3G on AT&T, and thankfully, it ushers in a host of sorely needed improvements. In a surprising twist, the phone's most welcome upgrade is the display itself, which still measures 2.4 inches, but now features a 480 x 360 (HVGA+) screen that renders anti-aliased text noticeably more crisply than its forebear — thanks in large part to a pixel density that's now approximately 246ppi. Being an LCD screen, it's quite usable in direct sunlight and we were equally pleased with the viewing angles.

Of course, as we've mentioned previously, the screen isn't touch-sensitive,

Compared to the Torch 9810, which offers HSPA+ speeds, the Curve 9360 again feels hobbled next to its stablemates.

which necessitates use of the trackpad for interacting with the phone. For the most part, the display provides a spacious canvas for navigating apps and menus, but web browsing is a different story entirely. In this case, text often appears too small to read comfortably, which forces you to access system menus to properly zoom in on the content. It's an archaic solution as we enter 2012, and we predict a lot of folks will be frustrated by the exclusion of a touchscreen whenever they load up the web browser.

As you might've guessed, the improvements don't stop with the display. Inside, the phone wields an 800MHz CPU and 512MB of RAM — a marked improvement over the 3G's 624MHz option with only 256MB. There's also 512MB of internal storage, although only 160MB is available to the end-user for additional applications. A 1GB microSD card comes standard with



the Curve 9360, although that capacity seems rather meager by modern standards, even for a budget offering. Unlike prior variants, this little guy packs NFC support, which is accompanied by 802.11b/g/n (WiFi), A-GPS and Bluetooth 2.1. Connectivity-wise, the 9360 can access quad band GSM, GPRS and EDGE networks, and provides 7.2Mbps HSDPA access over the 2100, 1900 and 850MHz bands. When compared to its most closely-priced competitor, the Torch 9810, which offers HSPA+ speeds at 14.4Mbps down, the Curve 9360 again feels hobbled next to its stablemates.

The form factor of the Curve hasn't changed much, which remains 4.3 inches (109mm) tall and 2.4 inches (61mm) wide, yet the latest iteration comes in a bit slimmer at only 0.43 inches (11mm) thick. Unsurprisingly, this latest incarnation is also a bit lighter at just 3.5

ounces (99g), but part of this slimming comes at a sacrifice of battery capacity, which is now rated at 1,000mAh — a full 150mAh less than before.

Save for the black bezel, you might, at first glance, be hard-pressed to spot the differences between the Curve 9360 and its predecessor, the 3G. However, that's not to say it hasn't gotten a little facelift. While the previous model featured two convenience keys, one on each side, the 9360 foregoes its left button and leaves only the exposed micro-USB 2.0 port on that side. The top of the phone, which previously offered a full array of media keys, now sports only an integrated lock button and a 3.5mm headphone jack. Thankfully, the 9360 retains much of the same functionality as before: the play / pause button now takes the form of a small nub that's situated in the middle of the volume rocker, while nav-

igation through tracks is accomplished with a long-press on the volume up or down keys. The right convenience key is set by default to open the camera application, and can also be used to snap a picture, although we found the trackpad was generally easier to use.

Throughout, the handset is fashioned out of glossy black plastics, and while it's undeniably handsome, the design lacks

Even those with small hands will likely suffer fatigue when typing messages.

originality and the gimcrack materials mean you'll constantly be staring at a collection of fingerprints. Quite frankly, and we don't say this very often, the Curve feels too tiny to hold comfortably. In this sense, its reduced thickness is a detriment that will leave many begging for a more substantial option. Even those with small hands will likely suffer fatigue when typing messages, which is further exacerbated by the keyboard itself. Each island key now runs nearly flush with the handset, and while our keystrokes were generally accurate, each key press felt mushy, despite the *click* sound to the contrary. Put simply, the keyboard on the Curve 9360 feels like a poor impersonator when

compared to the quality options on the Torch 9810 and Bold 9900.

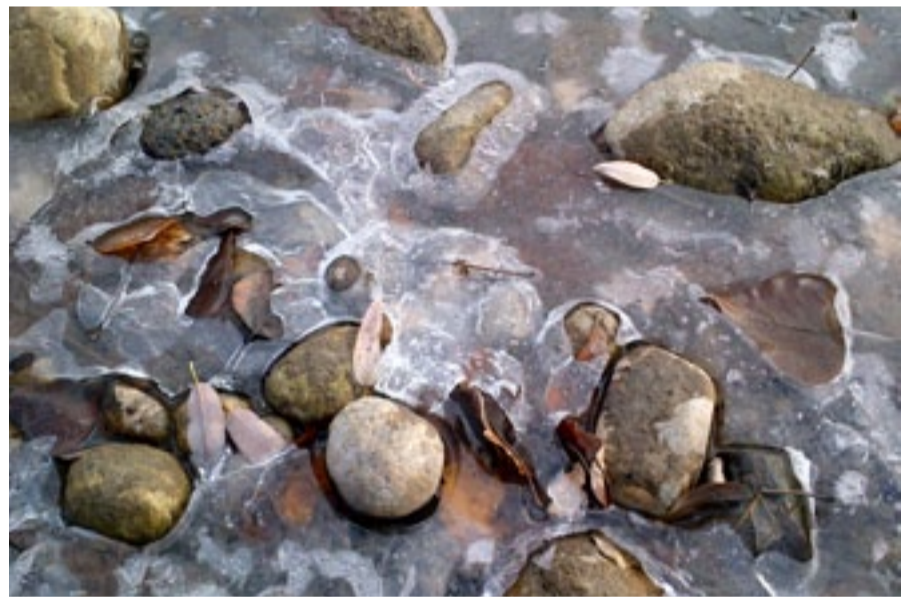
In our standard battery rundown test, the Curve eked out just under five hours before calling it quits — about an hour less than what we typically like to see in smartphones. Similarly, the handset managed to get us through two days of light usage, which is fine, but nowhere near the longevity that BlackBerry users have come to expect. Voice quality also fell below our expectations. While callers had no trouble understanding us, they frequently said our voice sounded muddy and lacked depth. We had similar complaints on our end — we could comfortably talk with others, but we often perceived their voices as distant and tinny. This held true even for calls to landlines. As for web browsing performance, the Curve chewed through code at a snail's pace, landing a score of 6,840ms in SunSpider 0.9.1 — a significant step down from what we've seen in other current BlackBerry devices.

Camera

The handset's backside houses a five megapixel camera that's paired with an LED flash. While we were never particularly impressed with its photographic prowess, we found it to be a simple implementation that delivers usable images in a wide range of scenarios. With an extended depth of field (EDoF) lens, the camera is a focus-free affair that offers "don't think, just shoot" ease of use. While this allows users to quickly grab decent snapshots without fuss,



SAMPLE
IMAGES



images appear murky at full size, lacking in both detail and crispness. Low-light performance is adequate, although noise creeps into the shots rather quickly. Likewise, macro shots are out of the question with EDoF lenses. The Curve's indoor shooting capabilities are hit-and-miss, often leaving us to rely on the flash to reduce blur.

Even the software itself is geared toward simplicity, and offers a wide variety of scene modes that are designed to enhance images based on the subject and lighting condition. Face detection, portrait, sports, landscape, party, close-up, snow, beach, night and text are all in the mix, while the default setting automatically adjusts images to any given situation. Our experience suggests the tendency of the software is to make colors appear more vibrant, even to the point of "pulling" additional blue from the sky on a relatively cloudy day. Hence, coloration is rarely accurate, and while the end result is usually pleasant, we found over-saturation to be an occasional issue. There's no option to disable these enhancements, either. While some may prefer to eschew the additional processing, the oversight seems forgivable. After all, the camera on the 9360 is hardly meant for photo purists, but rather for those who wish to take handsome snapshots for online albums with minimal effort.

Video recording on the Curve 9360 is limited to a maximum resolution of 640 x 480 (VGA), with 176 x 144 (MMS) being the only other option. It

captures movies at 29 frames per second and does a rather good job at conveying fluid motion. Of course, this isn't saying much when most smartphones capture VGA video as the bare minimum — but again, it's perfectly sufficient for use on the web. In the settings, you'll find another smattering of scene modes, although these are limited to portrait, landscape, close-up, beach and automatic.

Software

There's no kind way to say it, but BlackBerry 7 OS is stuck in the doldrums of time. It's a former champion fighting well past its prime, desperately longing for retirement — if only an adequate replacement were ready to take its place. That's not to suggest the interface isn't relatively attractive or intuitive, but RIM's software improvements over the years have been incremental and largely superficial. The OS still struggles with multitasking — for example, music cuts out when we take pictures — and despite better renders from the WebKit browser, navigating the web with a cursor on a smartphone feels antiquated and slow. In the days of modern operating systems such as Android, iOS and Windows Phone, using the BlackBerry OS feels more akin to a graphing calculator with an address book and a heavy coat of lipstick.

Modernity aside, for those who've come to know the BlackBerry's inner workings through the years, it continues to fit like a glove and behave as expected.



We appreciate the setup application, which allows AOL, Gmail, Windows Live and Yahoo! users to easily integrate their email, contacts, calendars and instant messaging into the phone. This is likewise true for social networks, with support for Facebook and Twitter out of the gate. The Social Feeds application serves as a fine aggregator of activity from both accounts, and notifications are integrated into the centralized hub that also reports new email messages, appointments and missed calls. The software is very well geared to those who use their phones primarily as a communication device, and in

this sense, the BlackBerry approach is hard to discount.

All you BlackBerry loyalists out there might've guessed this handles media in a straightforward way as well. BlackBerry Media Sync integrates nicely with both iTunes and Windows Media Player. After installing this software to our PC, we were able to easily transfer music, photos and videos to the handset. Mac users are also covered with a similar set of tools. Those who prefer the option will also be glad to know that the phone supports USB mass storage for manual management. Our only gripe with respect to media is the



insulting 1GB microSD card, which we filled up in the blink of an eye. Generally speaking, anybody looking to use the Curve 9360 for music and videos absolutely must upgrade the storage to get any mileage from the device.

Our time using the Curve's web browser was excruciating, even over WiFi. Given complex pages, the phone often stalled or choked entirely, and on more than one occasion, we waited several minutes for pages to load and render. In these situations, even system features such as the screen lock became unresponsive, and our attempts to return to the home screen only confounded the issue. More often than we care to admit, we were driven to pull the battery rather than wait for the phone to catch its breath.

For anybody who might wish to use the web in a meaningful way, the Curve 9360 is an unacceptable solution.


On the surface, it would appear that the Curve ships with an overabundance of software, however in reality, most of these options are merely links to install the applications. While we didn't activate many, we suspect that if each of the 19 extraneous programs had been included, there would be little to no room for users to install apps of their own preference. Items specific to AT&T include AppCenter, Code Scanner, FamilyMap, Maps + Navigation and myAT&T. There are also selections for Bloomberg, CityID, Documents to Go, Vlingo, The Weather Channel and Wikitude, along with chat clients for Google

Talk, Windows Live and Yahoo!. Even the games folder is populated with items such as *Bejeweled*, *Pac-Man*, *Sims 3* and *World Series of Poker*, along with the familiar *BrickBreaker* and *Word Mole*.

While applications install without a hitch, BlackBerry OS insists that the phone restart after applying updates. In addition, the update process is generally excruciating, often requiring minutes for each application to download and install, which typically causes the system to become unresponsive. Adding insult to injury, the phone often takes

more than four minutes to fully boot. This would have been painful enough on its own, but it's an absolute disaster that users have to suffer these long wait times every time they update an app.

Wrap-Up

From a technical and innovation standpoint, RIM's current product lineup is running on fumes. In an era when all that keeps the company going is the existing goodwill of its most dedicated users and a vault of cash reserves, it can't afford to release products that further alienate its customer base and tarnish its reputation. Unfortunately, the BlackBerry Curve 9360 is an outright disaster. While it offers a handful of improvements over the Curve 3G, it does little to keep pace in the highly competitive budget phone arena, where devices such as the Motorola Atrix 4G retail for a similar \$29. Even dedicated BlackBerry users should avoid the Curve 9360 at all costs — it can't match the performance, feature set and overall quality of the Torch 9810, which sells for just \$20 more. If RIM intends to keep the Curve franchise alive, it must deliver compelling solutions that will excite consumers. If it's unable to do so without encroaching too much on the Bold's territory, then it's time to make both devices one and call it a day. 

Zachary is too much of a Stones fan to be a good hippie. He's just trying to learn and do good where he can.

BOTTOMLINE

RIM BlackBerry Curve 9360

\$29.99 *on contract*

PROS

- Bright, crisp display
- Affordable price

CONS

- A touchscreen would've been more intuitive
- Unacceptable for web browsing
- Subpar camera
- Middling battery life

» The Curve 9360 fails to keep pace with other consumer smartphones. It's woefully inadequate for all but the most basic communication needs.



REVIEW

HP Envy 15

The Envy 15 is a solidly built machine with compelling features, but its stiff trackpad and mediocre battery life dampen the user experience.

BY DANA WOLLMAN

If there's one thing we took away from our jaunt at CES, it's this: consumers' appetites for mainstream laptops haven't waned all that much. Even in the Ultrabook category, Intel expects half of the models to go on sale this year will have 14- and 15-inch screens — as strong an indicator as any that lots of folks aren't yet ready to give up their slightly larger screens, their discrete

graphics, their (gasp!) optical drives. While HP recently announced its first Ultrabook for the consumer market, the Envy 14 Spectre, it's fully fleshed out its premium Envy series to include two additional models for people who crave more oomph.

The Envy 15 is the medium-sized member of the crew, with a 15.6-inch screen and the same overhauled design you'll



find across the Envy lineup. Delightfully, too, it marks the return of HP's eye-popping Radiance display, and also comes with a generous two-year warranty and full copies of Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements. And with a starting price of \$1,100, it sharply undercuts the 15-inch MacBook Pro, while taking direct aim at other high-end 15-inchers, like the Dell XPS 15z and Samsung Series 7 Chronos. So how does it stack up? Read on to find out.

Look and Feel

As a rule of thumb, saying a laptop looks like a MacBook Pro is akin to a reviewer falling back on adjectives like “cool,” “fun” and “crappy”: it's imprecise, and not particularly helpful to our readers. Besides, “It looks like a Mac!” is often shorthand for “it has a chiclet keyboard!” or “it's painted silver!” Usually, we're talking about overarching similarities, at most. Does the XPS 15z bear a resemblance to a now-discontin-



ued Mac? Kind of. Would you ever mistake that keyboard lettering and embellished hinge for Jony Ive creations? No way. And until the suits over in Cupertino start suing rival PC makers for their flattery, we're going to assume Apple understands this too.

Still, it's painfully obvious where HP drew its inspiration for its newest Envy laptops. It's not because of any single design choice, like the aluminum unibody chassis, island-style keys, glowing logo or giant clickpad; it's all of the above! HP's latest 15-incher is the most flagrant Mac imitation we've seen in some time, and the resemblance is close enough that you could, at first glance, mistake the interior for an MBP. Of course, HP threw in some flourishes that keep it from being a total facsimile: the lid and underside are black, not silver, the keyboard area has a thin red ring around it and there are Beats-branded volume controls on the laptop's right side. HP also rounded the edges so that they feel more like a butter knife than a steak utensil. Even so, tacking on an analog volume dial feels like the PC-making equivalent of Honda adding wings to the Civic and calling it the Civic Type R. What we're saying is, the Envy 15 is hardly identical, but HP doesn't deserve points for originality either.

In any case, the Envy 15 is attractive, uncluttered and well made. The hinge feels sturdy, and the metal used in the palm rest seems less vulnerable to scratches than the aluminum casing on the MacBook Pro. Thanks to HP's Cool-

Sense technology, the laptop also does a marvelous job of shifting heat off the bottom side of the laptop, so that you can rest it on your legs for hours without fear of first-degree burns. Still, you might hear some creaking when pressing your fingers against the right side of the palm rest. This is hardly a deal-breaker, though, especially since the laptop's too unwieldy to lift with one hand anyway.

As you'd expect, it's easy enough to shuttle the Envy 15 around the house, or to and from the office. At 5.79 pounds / 1.1 inches thick, it's bulkier and heavier than the 5.54-pound Dell XPS 15z as well as the 5.6-pound MacBook Pro and 4.4-pound Sony VAIO SE series. It's also about as wide as its competitors, save the MBP, which means you shouldn't have a problem toting it in a backpack or some over-the-shoulder bag. Basically, unless you have the dough to drop on the 15-inch Samsung Series 9 /and/ can do without that optical drive, this is more or less what you can expect from a laptop this size.

Continuing our tour around the Envy 15's imposing frame, the bottom side has a reasonably clean look, but still gives you access to the battery and hard drive. A long vent takes up the backside, with the left and right edges consumed by a wide selection of ports, including three USB ports (one 2.0 and two of the 3.0 persuasion), HDMI, Display-Port, an Ethernet jack, a memory card reader, Kensington lock slot, a microphone port and dual headphone jacks. A slot-loading DVD drive lives on the left



side (sorry, no Blu-ray option on this model.) In terms of the layout, HP did Apple one better, stacking the ports on two sides instead of one, with the two USB 3.0 sockets on the left edge, and the lone 2.0 port on the right. Good news for anyone who hates the sight of all their peripherals growing out of a tightly packed cluster of USB ports.

Keyboard and Trackpad

When we first got hands-on with the Envy 15 back in the fall, we came away impressed by its deep, pillowy keys. Having used them for almost a week, though, it's clear the keyboard suffers from the same fundamental problem as a lot of its shallower brethren. Which is to say, despite having lots of travel, it feels sticky, and we got used

to typing with concerted effort in order to ensure every letter registered. If, like the Engadget crew, you get paid to write thousands of words at a time, this could be an occupational hazard, but perhaps it won't be as annoying for pecking out short web searches. In the grand scheme of keyboards, it's eminently usable, but we recall a more natural typing experience on rival machines like the Dell XPS 14z / 15z.

The keys sure are pretty, at least. Like other laptops in the Envy lineup, the 15 has a backlight underneath each individual key, allowing for a brighter glow than what you'll find on most other laptops. If you'd rather save your battery power, you can press F5 to deactivate this feature, in which case only that function button will glow white — a helpful reminder of



how to turn it back on again.

While we muddled through with the keyboard, though, we never did make peace with the trackpad. For starters, the surface offers a bit too much friction, and even dragging the cursor across the screen can feel like a two-step process. Two-fingered scrolling requires a good deal of pressure, and even then, we often found ourselves pawing at the trackpad in vain. Pinch to zoom doesn't demand as much pressure, but the pad is so sensitive to this gesture that it's easy to overshoot and accidentally scale text so that it's too large or too small. Worse, the touchpad often mistook right clicks for left ones, and dumped the cursor on random spots in the page. Sometimes this happened even while we were typing, and our palms happened to graze the pad. Even if HP and Synaptics could cook up a driver update to make for a smoother experience, there would still be one lingering pain point: as with the Folio 13, the clickpad mechanism here is stiff, and difficult to press. You can avoid the button somewhat by tapping to left click, but who wants to have to re-learn how to interact with a PC?

Display

Though the base Envy 15 comes with a humdrum 1366 x 768 panel, you can upgrade to a 1080p, IPS Radiance display for an extra \$150. And really, you should. Not only is the screen worth it, but we'd go so far as to say this is one of the more likely reasons you'd

choose this over any of the other umpteenth 15-inch laptops on the market. It's not just the 1920 x 1080 pixel count (though that's certainly welcome); it's the deep blacks, the rich colors and that bright backlighting. Not to mention, those versatile viewing angles. Whether you're pounding away at a Word document or going on a Netflix bender, you won't spend too much time futzing with the screen angle before going about your business. While the contest remains consistently balanced, though, that reflective finish can get in the way of easy viewing if you dip the lid forward, or watch a movie from an off-kilter position. It wasn't a constant annoyance, but use the machine long enough and you'll eventually catch the display at the wrong angle, in the wrong light, and find yourself staring down pockets of glare. This varies depending on the brightness level.

There's no doubt this is one of the most arresting displays you'll find in a laptop, and we're glad HP came to its senses after discontinuing the Radiance panel offered on the last-gen Envy 14. Still, it's worth noting that the VAIO SE series starts at \$1,000 with a 1080p display *and* it has a matte finish. The XPS 15z is also offered with a 300-nit, 1920 x 1080 screen, though in all fairness we weren't enamored with the contrast or viewing angles. And though the MacBook Pro's standard 1440 x 900 display leaves room for improvement (a bump in brightness and wider viewing angles on the glossy panel top

our list), it's at least offered with an anti-glare finish, giving fans of matte screens yet another option.

We should also warn you that we're hearing complaints from early adopters who say their Radiance panels are showing some inaccurate color calibration — specifically, that shades of red appear more orange than crimson, while violet looks more blue than purple. In a statement, an HP spokesperson told us, "We are looking into this. We'll get back to our customers because we're committed to earning their satisfaction." In the meantime, we did some sampling of what you'll get on the Envy 15 versus other laptops. We'll admit: the hues were skewed more red-orange than red, though the pink-reds you'll see elsewhere aren't necessarily pitch-perfect either. We'd be willing to concede the color reproduction here is *different*, to say the least, and likely in need of some fine-tuning. We're guessing a lot of folks will notice the vibrant, saturated colors first, and the orangey reds second, if at all. Then again, once you know what to look for, it's impossible to ignore.

While we're on the subject of the Envy 15's dense, sprawling screen, the laptop comes loaded with Intel's Wireless Display technology for mirroring your desktop and streaming 1080p movies to a monitor or HDTV. To do this, you'll need to spring for an adapter. Once you've procured that, you'll find the setup easy and the streaming fluid. Just be sure to keep the laptop out-

side your peripheral vision, as playback between the laptop and monitor tends to be slightly out of sync.



Sound

Though HP's Beats-branded laptops occasionally fall into gimmick territory, we've generally found the bass-rich sound lives up to Dr. Dre's marketing hype. The Envy 15 is no exception, with six speakers and a miniature subwoofer that deliver some of the best audio you'll find on a laptop. Sure, we might still prefer a dedicated set of speakers to do our old Roots records justice, but that said, it's a clear step up from the tinny, metallic sound we've encountered on most other laptops.

We were also pleased with the volume on this guy — so much so that we rarely felt the need to push it above the lowest setting, which equates to the 12 / 100 mark in the Windows volume slider.

BENCHMARK	PCMARK VANTAGE	3DMARK06	BATTERY LIFE
HP Envy 15 (2.4GHz Core i5-2430M, AMD Radeon HD 7690M 1GB)	7,210	8,839	4:07
Dell XPS 15z (2.7GHz Core i7-2620M, NVIDIA GeForce GT525M)	8,023	7,317	3:41 (Optimus disabled) 4:26 (Optimus enabled)
15-inch Samsung Series 7 Chronos (2.2GHz Core i7-2675QM, Intel HD 3000 / AMD Radeon HD 6750M 1GB)	7,824	8,891	5:47
Sony VAIO SE series (2.4GHz Core i5-2430M, Intel HD Graphics 3000 / AMD Radeon HD 6630M 1GB)	5,632	6,898	3:59 (stamina mode) 8:58 (stamina mode, slice battery)
2011 15-inch MacBook Pro (2.2GHz Core i7-2720QM, Radeon HD 6750M / Intel Graphics 3000)	8,041	10,262	7:27
Acer TimelineX AS5830TG-6402 (2.3GHz Core i5-2410M, NVIDIA GeForce GT 520M)	6,475	5,330	6:25
Dell XPS 14z (Dell XPS 14z (2.8GHz Core i7-2640M, Intel HD Graphics 3000 / NVIDIA GeForce GT520M 1GB)	7,982	5,414	4:54
2011 HP Envy 14 (2.3GHz Core i5-2410M, Intel HD Graphics 3000 / AMD Radeon HD 6630M 1GB)	6,735	7,214	3:55

Notes: the higher the score the better

We also like that there's a dedicated mute button next to the volume dial; we just had to get used to the fact that it was there, and not hidden among the other multimedia controls built into the Function keys.

In a cute touch, the Beats volume dial is shaped like a disc, which you can spin like a record by running your finger over the top surface. Sometimes, though, when you do that the computer won't register your touch; we found that rolling the dial built into the side of the laptop is much more reliable. Press down on that spinning disc, and a dashboard will pop up, allowing you to make some minor tweaks to the settings. Suffice

to say, it would seem that users aren't meant to do a deep dive in customizing the EQ profiles; that's Dre and company's job, of course.

The Envy 15 also supports HP's new Wireless Audio technology, which lets you stream music from your PC to as many as four KlearNet-compatible speakers. Alas, though, we weren't equipped with Klear-powered speakers or HP's \$100 adapter, so we weren't able to test this feature.

Performance

Though it starts at \$1,100, we tested a slightly more tricked-out \$1,250 configuration with a 2.4GHz Core i5-2430M

processor, 6GB of RAM, a 500GB 7,200RPM hard drive and a 1GB AMD Radeon HD 7690M card. Getting those benchmarks out of the way, we're off to a good start in PCMark Vantage: the 15 managed to blow past the similarly priced VAIO SE series by more than 1,500 points, even though the two have some comparable components, including 6GB of RAM, the same CPU and discrete AMD graphics cards with 1GB of video memory. On the graphics front, the Envy 15's 3DMark06 score of 8,839 bests many of the other 15-inch configurations we tested, and falls right in line with what we got from Samsung's \$1,099 Series 7 Chronos.

The biggest obstacle standing between us and our productivity was that half-baked touchpad.

During our test period, we used the Envy 15 for writing stories, surfing the web, chatting in Pidgin and plugging numbers into a Google spreadsheet. When the workday ended, yours truly spent hours at a time streaming back-to-back episodes of *Arrested Develop-*

ment over Netflix, along with the occasional YouTube video. Through it all, the machine kept pace, booting into Windows in a speedy 27 seconds (with an extra 10 until we had full control of the desktop). In the disk benchmark ATTO, it hit peak read speeds of 105 MB/s, and top writes of 104 MB/s. As we said earlier, the machine also manages heat well, even through heavy streaming sessions. Sure, the palm rest is likely to get lukewarm, but it never gets uncomfortable to touch, and that bottom side in particular stays nice and cool.

If anything, the biggest obstacle standing between us and our productivity was that half-baked touchpad. Were it not for the awkward, stiff button and its poor palm rejection, we would have been better able to concentrate on our work, instead of dwelling on why PC manufacturers give clickpads so many chances.

Battery Life

The Envy 15's eight-cell (4,780mAh) battery lasted through more than four hours of video playback in our standard rundown test, which bodes even better if you want a few hours of unplugged web surfing on the couch. All told, that's slightly better than what you'd get with the Sony VAIO SE series (sans the optional slice battery that Sony sells for \$150). It's also notable that the Envy 15 manages to pull slightly longer runtime than the smaller, last-gen Envy 14.

Still, as respectable as that runtime is, we can think of a handful of similarly sized laptops that last longer. These

include the Dell XPS 15z, which has a 20-minute lead; the Series 7 Chronos and Acer TimelineX AS5830T, both of which hover in the six-hour range; and the MacBook Pro, which squeezed out seven and a half hours in the same test. Of course, the trade-off to the MBP's epic battery life is that its battery is non-user-replaceable, which, as we all know, can be a pain when the capacity eventually depletes.

Software

In addition to the usual suspects (read: Norton Internet Security and Microsoft Office), the Envy 15 comes with full versions of Adobe Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements on board — useful programs that OEMs tend not to throw in gratis. Other benign apps include CyberLink YouCam and Power2Go, and Windows Live Essentials 2011. As you might expect, though, HP's own tools comprise a fair chunk of the pre-installed software. These include utilities like HP Power Manager, Quick Launch, Setup and Support Assistant, as well as HP's own movie store. This time around, at least, these apps didn't get in our way as much as they have with other HP systems we've tested.

Configuration Options

So what does \$1,100 get you? That base model comes with a 2.5GHz Core i5-2450M processor, 6GB of RAM, a 500GB 7,200RPM drive and that Radeon HD 7690M graphics card with 1GB of GDDR5 memory. Upgrade options

include 2.2GHz Core i7-2670QM, 2.4GHz Core i7-2760QM and 2.5GHz Core i7-2860QM CPUs (\$100, \$250 and \$450, respectively) and up to 16GB of RAM (\$460). As for storage, you can bump to a 750GB 7,200RPM HDD for \$40, or a 1TB 5,400RPM number for \$80. HP's also selling a 750GB 7,200RPM hybrid hard drive for \$90 and a choice of 160GB and 300GB solid-state drives (\$210 and \$440, respectively). To repeat, that 1080p Radiance display is a \$150 add-on.

More important than any upgrade, though, is the fact that Envy 15 comes standard with a two-year warranty. A great value when you consider the industry standard is one year.



The Competition

The market is absolutely stuffed with 15-inch laptops, but the field narrows somewhat when we restrict ourselves to more premium machines, with discrete graphics and higher-quality displays. Let's start with the MacBook Pro, if only because HP chose to ape its design with

this generation of products. The MBP isn't cheap, and on paper, its innards are modest given the high cost of entry: for \$1,800, you get a 2.2GHz Core i7 processor, 4GB of RAM (upgradeable to 8GB), a 500GB 5,400RPM hard drive, a 1440 x 900 display (glossy, by default) and a duo of graphics cards that includes Intel's HD 3000 integrated solution and AMD's Radeon HD 6750M with 512MB of GDDR5 memory. The ports include Thunderbolt and FireWire sockets, two USB 2.0 ports and an SDXC slot. It also has a slot-loading DVD burner. Again, not exactly \$1,800 specs here.

To its credit, though, it performs well. According to benchmarks, at least, it leads its peers in both overall and graphics performance, and its battery life is about an hour longer than what even the Acer Aspire AS5830T has to offer. It also has a more comfortable keyboard than the Envy 15 — not to mention, a smoother trackpad. Still, the 15 bests the MacBook Pro in a host of other areas: heat management, price, overall value, audio, port layout and the ability to replace components easily. It also has a brighter display with wider viewing angles, albeit with some likely color calibration issues we haven't seen on the MBP. So there's lots to love here, though we suspect the Envy's touchpad and inaccurate color reproduction will be deal-breakers for some shoppers.

As for Samsung, the Series 7 Chronos offers longer battery life than the Envy 15, along with a matte display, but this touchpad, too, has problems, and we



weren't thrilled with the overall fit and finish either. Still, for \$1,099, it offers a tempting collection of specs, including a 2.2GHz Core i7-2675QM CPU, 8GB of RAM, a 750GB 7,200RPM hybrid hard drive and two graphics cards: Intel's HD 3000 and AMD's Radeon HD 6750M card.

In Sony's camp, the VAIO SE series (\$1,000 and up) starts with a 2.4GHz Core i5-2430M CPU, 4GB of RAM (upgradeable to 8GB), AMD Radeon HD 6470M graphics with 512MB of video memory, a 640GB 5,400RPM hard drive, a matte, 1080p display, a 4,400mAh battery and a DVD burner. The performance is more than serviceable, but it trails our similarly configured HP Envy 15. We also had some trouble performing multi-touch gestures on the SE Series' trackpad, though you'll of course encounter similar problems with the 15. And again, there is something to be said for the SE's lovely, anti-glare display, which comes standard with 1080p resolution, something

for which HP is charging an extra \$150.

We can't talk about the Envy 15, though, without mentioning another oldie-but-goodie, last year's Dell XPS 15z. The 15z is home to one of the most comfortable keyboard-and-trackpad combos we've tested, and is both thinner and lighter than its competitors, at 5.54 pounds and less than an inch thick. And though its performance scores fall short of some other 15-inch laptops we've tested, we were impressed by how effectively the system dispels heat. Some things to keep in mind while you're shopping: it's not offered with any quad-core CPUs, the four configurations are barely customizable and, as with the Envy 15, there's no Blu-ray option. And though it has discrete graphics, its performance doesn't quite match other machines, while NVIDIA's Optimus technology doesn't translate to spectacular runtime. All that said, the \$1,000 base model offers similar specs as the \$1,100 Envy 15, including a 2.4GHz Core i5-2430M CPU, 6GB of RAM, a 500GB 7,200RPM hard drive, a DVD burner, 64Wh battery and a 1GB NVIDIA GeForce GT 525M card with Optimus.

Of all the models here, Toshiba's Satellite P750 is the most aggressively priced, with a \$499 starting point. Even if you move beyond that base model, which brings a quad-core AMD A6 APU, 3GB of RAM and a 320GB hard drive, you could still walk home with a quad-core Core i7 CPU, 4GB of RAM, a 500GB hard drive, 4,400mAh battery and a 1GB NVIDIA GeForce GT

540M card for \$799. Hell, you could step up to a 500GB 7,200RPM hybrid hard drive (\$80), 8GB of RAM (\$140) and a Blu-ray burner (\$150), and still pay just \$1,170 — less than the price of our tester Envy 15. Granted, there are some things money can't buy here, including a higher-res, higher-quality display, solid-state storage and a more striking design.

**In some ways,
the 15 improves
on the notebook
it so unobtrusively
imitates.**


At last, and not to be discounted, Acer's TimelineX series continues to be a solid choice for people who crave discrete graphics and healthy battery life. Though it's available in a host of screen sizes, we'll focus on the 15-inch AS5830, which starts at \$700 — or \$780, if you want those dedicated graphics. To this day, most mainstream laptops don't come close to topping its battery life, though the trade-off for that longevity is a humdrum 1366 x 768 display, middling performance (that discrete graphics card be damned) and a plainer design.

Wrap-Up

Okay, time to get it out of your system. Say it with us: the Envy 15 unapologeti-

cally copies the MacBook Pro. Feel good getting that off your chest? Excellent. Onto the business of evaluating the laptop for what it does. In some ways, the 15 improves on the notebook it so unsubtly imitates: it has a sharper (though imprecisely calibrated) display with wide viewing angles. Its speakers and miniature subwoofer produce exceptional audio for a laptop. The laptop comes with a generous two-year war-

ranty, Intel Wireless Display and full copies of Adobe Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements. It won't burn your legs, thanks to an effective heat management system. And at \$1,100, it's more affordable than that *other* Envy.

But HP stumbles in several critical areas: the Envy 15 is heavier than other laptops in its class, and in exchange for toting that extra heft, you're rewarded with middling battery life. The keyboard's alright, but we did have to type in a deliberate way to ensure it recognized our every press. Then there are those color accuracy problems. Most importantly, though, the laptop's saddled with a finicky, stiff touchpad — a nuisance large enough to slow down your entire workflow. A shame, since this is an otherwise speedy machine. Because of these shortcomings, the Envy 15 doesn't best the MacBook Pro, though it admirably undercuts its lofty \$1,800 starting price. All told, the Envy 15 offers some compelling features for the money, but before you pull the trigger we'd suggest you also check out the Dell XPS 15z, which is lighter with a comfier keyboard / trackpad, as well as the long-lasting Samsung Series 7 Chronos. If you do go for the Envy 15, we hope you have a pretty stationary setup in mind: you'll want an outlet close by and also, a mouse. 

Dana Wollman is Reviews Editor at Engadget, a marathoner, lover of puns and a native Brooklynite.

BOTTOMLINE

HP
Envy 15

\$1,100+

PROS

- 1080 IPS display, excellent audio
- Runs cool
- Two-year warranty
- Photoshop Elements / Premiere Elements included

CONS

- Flaky trackpad with stiff built-in button
- Middling battery life
- Imprecise color calibration

» The Envy 15 is a solidly built machine with compelling features, but its stiff trackpad and mediocre battery life dampen the user experience.



REVIEW

inPulse and WIMM One: The Tale of Two Smartwatches

BY MYRIAM JOIRE

We're no strangers to watches here at Engadget, but smartwatches — tiny wearable computers capable of running apps with SDKs to match — are still a rare breed. The best known examples are probably Fossil's Meta Watch, Allerta's inPulse Smartwatch and WIMM Labs' WIMM One, all of which are primarily targeted at developers. We recently had the opportunity to spend some qual-

ity time with both the inPulse (over the holidays) and the WIMM One (during CES), and despite some similarities, each smartwatch takes a completely different approach to running apps on your wrist. While neither product is quite ready for prime time, both show promise as “fourth screen” devices, even for those of us who don't normally wear a watch.

Photo by Will Lipman



Allerta inPulse Smartwatch

The inPulse Smartwatch has been around for a couple years now, and is available for purchase to non-developers. It started life as a companion product for BlackBerry handsets, but now also supports select Android devices, including all Nexus and most Motorola models. Out of the box the watch runs a “default” app that displays notifications sent from your phone via Bluetooth — i.e., calls, text messages, emails and calendar alerts. This requires your handset to be paired and running the free inPulse app. The watch also offers BBM integration and alarm clocks on BlackBerry phones. Additionally, Allerta has just added Twitter integration on Android. Beyond passing along notifications, the inPulse app lets you tweak the watch’s settings and appearance from the paired device. A basic one-button interface enables you to navigate and filter the list of alerts received on the watch. It’s simple but gets the job

done — the only major omission is the lack of a proper battery level indicator.

Spec-wise, the watch features a single physical button for input and a 1.26-inch 96 x 128-pixel passive matrix OLED display, along with a vibration motor for output. Bluetooth and micro-USB (for charging) are the only connectivity options — the watch is built on CSR’s BlueCore4-ROM radio chipset combined with NXP’s LPC2103 52MHz ARM7 processor, 8KB (yes, KB) of RAM and 1MB of SPI (Serial Peripheral Interface) flash memory. So yes, it can probably run *Doom*, but we’re still looking at some pretty basic hardware. The sealed Li-ion battery charges in about 45 minutes, and usually lasts about a day and a half. At 50 x 36 x 12mm (1.97 x 1.42 x 0.47 inches), the inPulse is rather large for a watch, but the elegant aluminum chassis (natural silver for \$150 or anodized black for \$200) makes it look smaller than it is, and it’s water resistant, too. The wristband and plug hid-

ing the micro-USB port on the left side are made of black rubber. Silver metal is used for the buckle and the single button on the right side.

Things get a little more interesting once you realize that the watch supports uploading apps over Bluetooth — either from within the inPulse app running on your handset, or via the supplied SDK. While the watch only runs one app at a time, the inPulse App Store features watch faces (like a Nixie clock), games (including *Pong*) and others tools such as an iTunes controller, a Facebook check-in widget, a presentation remote and a weather monitor. More significantly, it's possible to write homebrew apps using a modified (and very Arduino-like) version of C on the watch and simple Python code to push notifications from a paired device. What makes development easier is that the SDK handles all communications — the protocol is the same regardless of which app is running on the watch and what software is generating alerts on your phone. In fact, alternatives to Allerta's own inPulse App (like OpenWatch) are readily available on the Android Market.

Still, there are a number of issues preventing the inPulse Smartwatch from being a mainstream device. For starters, it's not rugged enough — we started observing signs of wear (small scratches on the glass, dull marks on the body) after wearing the watch for only a few days, and this despite handling it with kid gloves. The black rubber plug cover-

ing the micro-USB port is poorly made and easy to lose. In addition to the aforementioned lack of battery gauge, the “default” app could benefit from some visual polish. Larger, more readable fonts would be welcome, along with a separate icon for tweets. We tested the inPulse app on a few handsets and it worked fine on the Motorola Droid RAZR, but suffered from connection issues on the Samsung Galaxy Nexus HSPA+ and caused random reboots on the BlackBerry Torch 9850. Also, instead of tapping into Android's notification system the app requires your email and Twitter credentials, which is cumbersome and insecure.



WIMM Labs WIMM One

The WIMM One has only been available to registered developers for a couple months. It's a tiny, \$300 integrated module running Android that's designed to snap into various shells, including the supplied wristband that turns it into a



watch (with other form-factors planned for the future). Built-in WiFi and Bluetooth connectivity allow it to function as a fully standalone device. It handles call notifications when paired with any phone and supports text messages after installing the free WIMM Companion app on your Android or BlackBerry handset. While there's no way of receiving email or Twitter alerts (yet), it's possible to sync various calendars over WiFi. The watch is easy to navigate thanks to a touch-based iPod nano-like swipe interface and comes with six pre-installed apps — weather, calendar, world clock, timer, alarm and stopwatch. A personal account on WIMM's website lets you manage the app settings remotely from a larger screen.

In terms of specs, the WIMM is equipped with a 667MHz ARM11 CPU with 256MB RAM and 2GB of flash storage. It features a 1.41-inch 160x160-pixel bi-modal glass capacitive touchscreen, a recessed power button, a vibrating motor, a piezo speaker, some sensors (accelerometer, compass) and a row of 14 contacts on the back for data transfer and charging. The Pixel Qi-like display provides an ultra-efficient monochrome reflective mode and a backlit color mode. In addition to the WiFi and Bluetooth radios, the watch incorporates a GPS receiver, which is currently disabled for performance reasons. Battery life is decent considering the size and capabilities of the device — the sealed Li-ion pack lasts about a day and a half per charge. The splash-resistant



When secured in its black rubber and glass-reinforced nylon wristband it transforms into a rather large yet attractive watch.





module, which is made of metal alloy, only weighs 22g (0.78 ounces) and measures a scant 32 × 36 × 12.5mm (1.26 x 1.42 x 0.49 inches). When secured in its black rubber and glass-reinforced nylon wristband it transforms into a rather large yet attractive watch.

Of course, what really sets the WIMM One apart is that it puts the Android platform on your wrist, meaning it's capable of running multiple apps. Beyond the six aforementioned stock apps, our watch came preloaded with a few additional ones specifically geared towards CES — feed reader (a fully configurable RSS aggregator), balance ball game, tips calculator, virtual Starbucks coffee card, WIMM demo, Las Vegas monorail schedule and CES news (select CES-related Twitter searches). At some point in the future, apps are expected to become available for download from the WIMM Micro App Store within the WIMM Companion app running on

your phone, but until then a USB cable is required to install apps. The module supports micro-USB connectivity (mass-storage and debugging) via the supplied paddle charger, a magnetic dock with a row of 14 contacts matching those in the back of the device. Developing for the watch is really just a matter of installing the Android SDK plus the WIMM Add-on (which adds WIMM-specific APIs).

Making apps for the WIMM is similar to writing apps for any other Android device, but requires a few tweaks to accommodate the unusual screen resolution, the periodic nature of the network connection and the basic swipe gestures (down to scroll up and exit, up to launch and scroll down, right to go back and left to go forward). The SDK also provides some traditional UI elements, including single buttons, modal dialogs, spinners and a letter picker (used to enter WiFi passwords, for example). Apps never run in the background since the watch essentially hibernates when it's just showing the time, but it's possible to create custom watch faces. Other than forwarding text messages over Bluetooth and acting as a portal for the WIMM Micro app Store, the WIMM Companion app for your handset displays your account on WIMM Labs' website allowing you to remotely change app settings.


We spent many days wearing the WIMM One (including most of CES) and only the matte finish on the wristband straps showed any signs of wear.



The module itself is quite rugged except for the contacts in the back, which tend to gather dirt, resulting in connection issues when placed into the paddle charger. While the display looks reasonably good overall, it offers better viewing angles in backlit color mode when looking at the watch from the bottom left (i.e. it's optimized for left wrist use). The touchscreen sometimes lacks responsiveness — this, combined with the occasional sluggishness, detracts from the experience. Beyond the existing Bluetooth-based notification system for calls and text messages, the WIMM Companion app could be vastly improved with email and Twitter alerts. It would also be nice if the module implemented Bluetooth DUN / PAN as a more efficient way of tethering to a phone for data connectivity.

Wrap-Up

The inPulse Smartwatch and the WIMM One are both wearable computers with

wireless connectivity that run apps and display notifications. Each device offers an SDK and provides an app store, yet these are two radically different beasts — the inPulse is more of a companion product while the WIMM is a totally standalone unit (and costs twice as much). Still, we think WIMM Labs is onto something here with its modular design and powerful specs, especially once you factor Android into the equation. Allerta gets an A for effort but ultimately, the inPulse Smartwatch is starting to show its age — the WIMM One is just a more polished and sophisticated smartwatch. That being said, it's difficult to recommend either device at this point unless you're an intrepid developer or a die-hard watch enthusiast. 

Myriam was born wearing combat boots and holding a keyboard; moments later she picked up a soldering iron. She's been stomping, typing and hacking ever since.





IN REAL LIFE

Welcome to IRL, an ongoing feature where we talk about the gadgets, apps and toys we're using in real life and take a second look at products that already got the formal review treatment.

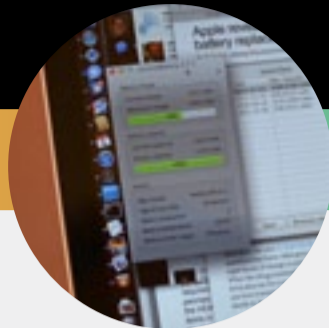
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The Kindle Touch, A Repurposed Army Bag and A Non-User Replaceable Laptop Battery

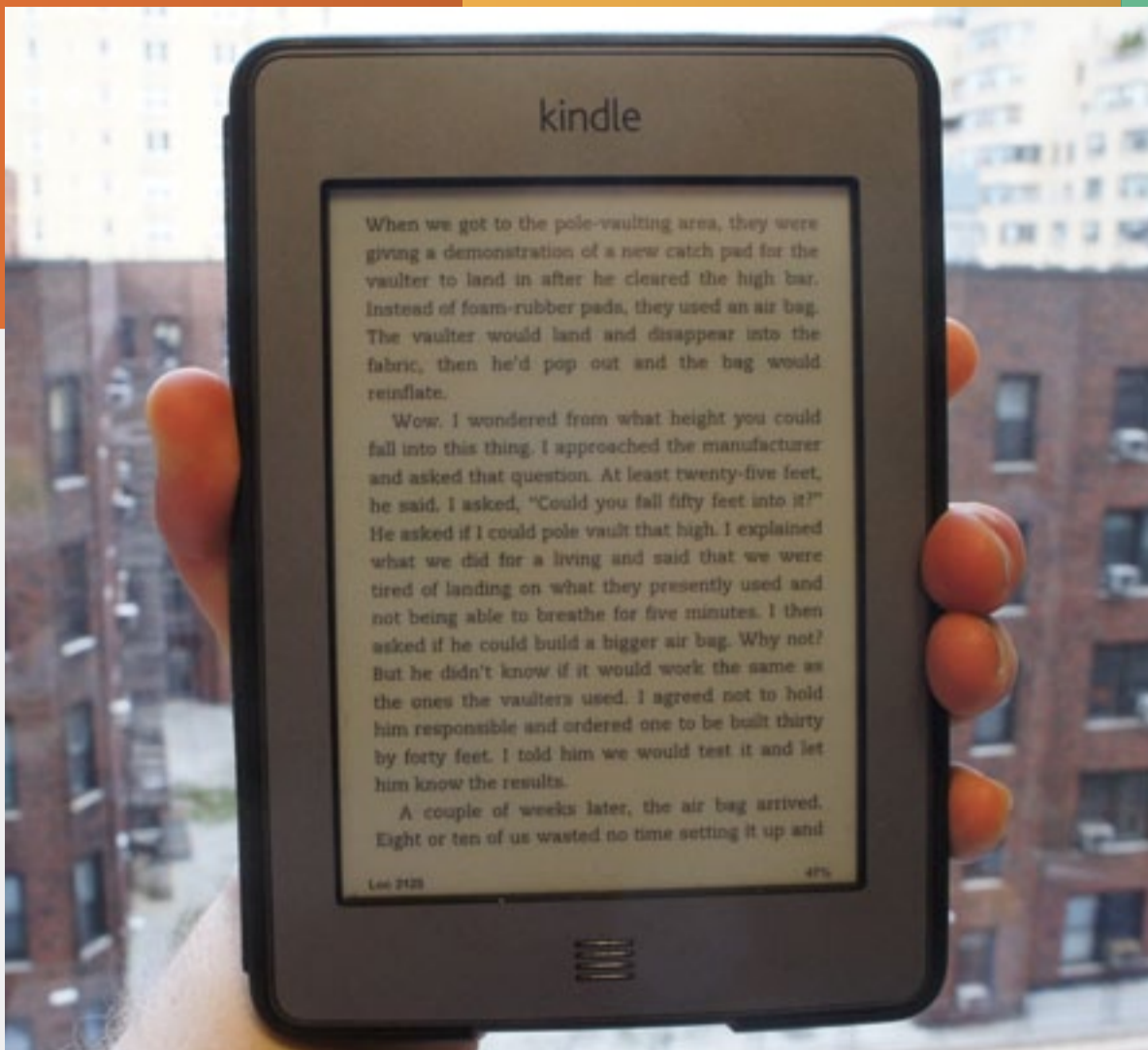
BY ENGADGET STAFF

Hi there, folks. It's that time of the week where we share our close and very personal experiences with various gadget paraphernalia. This week, Brian makes the switch from the Nook Simple Touch to the Kindle Touch, Ben explains why he'd rather replace his own laptop battery, *thank you very much*, and Don makes the case for a laptop bag that looks anything but.

Kindle Touch (Ad-Supported)

The Nook Simple Touch has been my favorite devoted e-reader for some time now, but it was the Kindle Touch that earned a spot in my backpack for my holiday cross-country trip. I wish I could say I opted for Amazon's reader because I wanted to give another device a spin, but to be honest, the decision came down to the fact that I had





downloaded the new Haruki Murakami book, and was about halfway into it when it came time to jump on a flight. And really, if I couldn't finish that 944-page opus before the New Year, it probably wasn't going to happen.

As it happens, the Kindle's a great size and weight for travel — it slipped quite nicely into the laptop sleeve inside my messenger bag. The Kindle doesn't conform to the hand quite as well as the Nook, but the included leather cover creates some thickness and also adds a bit of friction to the back side. If you do pick up a reader, I'd highly recommend a case — the displays can get scuffed and dinged inside a backpack, and those E-ink impact marks don't go away. It's also worth shelling out some extra cash for Amazon's proprietary lighted case — I really missed

that functionality during my trip, and the guy next to me didn't appreciate my having the plane light on while he attempted to sleep.

That's one of the big tradeoffs with E-ink, though: the fact that the technology doesn't burn your retinas like an LCD is an enormous plus, and makes the Kindle great for extended reading. The touchscreen is also a boon — I hardly missed the physical page turn buttons, though there were a few instances when a side swipe accidentally registered as a downward one (thanks, turbulence), causing me to jump a chapter and lose my place in the book. The Kindle also experiences some E-ink bleed, from time to time. Still, these are relatively minor complaints for what is, in the end, an extremely solid reader. — *Brian Heater*



The Gadget Bag That's Not

Way back in 2009 I reviewed an LG netbook and included the picture you see here. I had taken it out with me one day, sat down for a short break and thought, “Hey, this would make a good picture for the review.” The photo turned out pretty well, but in hindsight it may not have been the best choice for a lead shot. Of the few dozen comments the review got, most were either about the Tim Horton’s coffee, or the bag holding the netbook.

That particular bag is older than I am, but you can find plenty that are just like it. It’s a canvas Army bag, something that’s readily available from any number of online retailers or Army surplus stores, and shouldn’t cost any more than a basic laptop bag. You need to be careful of cheaply-manufactured ones, but if you can find a good one it could last a lifetime. Of course, it’s not designed to be a laptop bag. It’s just that: a bag. There are no pockets or compartments, and no velcro or zippers — just a pair of buckles that keep stuff from falling out (it’s not the best option if you need to get at things quickly).

But it’s simple and versatile. I have my own netbook that I actually still use sometimes when I don’t want to carry my laptop, and the bag can easily accommodate it, along with the charger



and a padded sleeve for some additional protection. It can also hold a tablet and a compact camera (each in their own cases), or even some odd things like books, notepads and other non-electronic items. Best of all, it doesn’t look like a gadget bag — which I consider a plus, even if you aren’t worried about someone swiping it. — *Don Melanson*

Replacement MacBook Pro Battery

I’m the type who typically buys an extra battery for most electronic gadgets, so when Apple switched to non-user replaceable batteries, I was not a fan. Funny thing happened when I finally gave in, though: I came to love how much longer the battery lasted without my having to shut down to swap batteries. Everything was great — that is, until two years later when



3

my battery started failing when it was low. I launched coconutBattery which reported that after around 550 load cycles, my battery would only hold 70 percent of its original capacity. With CES only a few days away, I figured it was time to read the manual and condition the battery.

Sadly, this only resulted in me being greeted with a “Service Battery” warning afterwards. No problem, I figured, I’ll just replace it. The only rub is that since Apple considers the battery non-user replaceable, a Genius Bar appointment was in order. Apple’s online appointment system was straightforward enough — something I wish my primary care physician offered — but the Geniuses were apparently quite busy, as I had to wait around 30 minutes past my appointed time. The replacement only took a minute, though, and \$129 (plus tax) later, I was out the door with a fresh battery. Overall, it was a painless experience, but being the do-it-yourself type, I would’ve preferred to just buy the replacement and pop it in myself.

— *Ben Drawbaugh*





GDGT CO-FOUNDER AND ENGADGET EDITOR EMERITUS RYAN BLOCK IS ONE OF THE TECH INDUSTRY'S GO-TO COMMENTATORS. HERE HE SOUNDS OFF ON THE APP 'GOLD RUSH' AND LEARNING DOS ON A TOSHIBA T1100.

RYAN BLOCK

Q&A

What gadget do you depend on most?

My laptop — a workhorse 15-inch MacBook Pro with SSD and 8GB RAM — no question. If I had only a single desert-island device, I'd have to suck it up and make it this heavy, beast of a machine.

Which do you look back upon most fondly?

Wow, SO many. I have had some of my formative experiences on the NES, but I think my love of portable electronics probably came from the original Game Boy. I was completely obsessed. Actually, a big reason we originally added the 'Had' list to gdgt was so people could tell their life story in gadgets. A couple of other stand-outs include my Rio Karma media player (that was amazing when it wasn't constantly crashing its hard drives), and the first iPhone, which was flawed but still felt like an alien civilization swung by Earth to drop it off.

Which company does the most to push the industry?

I think the easy answer is Apple. It's so (irritatingly) apparent. But the easy answers are often boring — especially when it's Apple — so I'll take it a step further. I think over the last few years as consumer electronics have become much more sophisticated and user-friendly, within many personal technology verticals we've often

seen at least one really great, really innovative player emerge. I'm thinking of what Sonos has done to build the boombox for the internet age, or how Roku's built the Sonos for the TV, or how the Xbox 360 has completely redefined the game console at least three times within the same generation. Apple may be the industry torchbearer, but we are in an amazing time for all personal technology.

What is your operating system of choice?

Lion. But not by choice. I'm really, really very fond of it. I miss Spaces. I kind of wish they'd just kept sprucing up Snow Leopard.

What are your favorite gadget names?

I have to hand it to them, iPhone is probably the most powerful electronics branding I've seen in a generation. I mean, for years people speculated that Apple might one day create an iPhone, and even people who didn't follow the gadget world closely had a pretty distinct vision when you said the word 'iPhone.' Then the iPhone gets announced, and you already know exactly what the product is without even having to see it. I don't think I've ever seen that before.

What are your least favorite? The

Slowness of any kind: especially laggy, jittery interface slowness. It's why back in the day I downgraded from a slow powerhouse 3G Windows Mobile device to the original 2G iPhone. The slow data was easier to deal with than the clunky interface.

other day I came across the Sony Memory Stick PRO-HG Duo HX. I almost had an aneurysm. It's not like those amusing alphabet soup names companies commonly throw out there (like my HDTV, for example, the Samsung PN63C550). The Sony Memory Stick PRO-HG Duo HX actually sounds like it's trying to be a comprehensible brand name. I also still think the "MacBook" name is kinda weak. I don't know, too cheeky I guess — but I've grown used to it. Now, you want to talk about a bad gadget name I've never gotten used to? Wii. Wii U. I'm sorry, but they're terrible. Still.

Which app do you depend on most? Email, which on my phone means Mail, and on my laptop means Sparrow.

What traits do you most deplore in a smartphone?

Which do you most admire? Clever, thoughtful solutions to common problems. I love the new unlock screen in Ice Cream Sandwich — swipe right to password protect your device, swipe left to unlock and go to your camera. Much better than tapping home twice, then the camera button, as on the iPhone.

What is your idea of the perfect device? I don't think there's such a thing. I just want a really good device for my common use-cases — and I feel like for the first time, most of us actually have that. A great device for reading a book, a great phone, a great device for doing light computing on the couch (tablet), a great computer.

What is your earliest gadget memory? I think even before my seminal memories of early-mid 80s video games like Atari or SNES, it was learning DOS commands on a Toshiba T1100 (or some similar variant) that my father had from work. I couldn't

take my hands off that thing whenever it was in the room.

What technological advancement do you most admire? Pervasive wireless broadband, definitely. This was actually my answer to the "Tech of the Decade" story you guys ran a few years ago and I still feel the same, without hesitation. Wireless broadband changes everything everywhere. Just ask the (former) governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, etc.

Which do you most despise? I don't despise any specific technological advancements, per se, just how some people use the tools. Especially people who build crappy apps because they view the software space today as some kind of gold rush.

What fault are you most tolerant of in a gadget? Depends on the type of product, I'd say, but overall I'm not very forgiving. There are too many truly good products out there to settle for half-baked crap.

ANSWER

Which are you most intolerant of?

ANSWER

When has your smartphone been of the most help?

Constantly, but I recently had an interesting experience. My partner, Veronica, and I were taking a trip up to Lake Tahoe. On the way there, from my phone I checked the road conditions on the mountain pass and realized we were going to need snow chains, which we didn't have. It was getting pretty late by that point, but I was able to find us a place — on the way, no less — that actually sold the exact snow chains we needed for our tires and that was still open late. I've been using a smartphone for many years, but that brief series of events made me see things with fresh eyes. I was in awe.

What device do you covet most?

I really, desperately want a 15-inch MacBook Air. I need all the power of my 15-inch MacBook Pro, but I really don't need all the weight and bulk. I think I have an HDTV addiction. Every couple of years my TV gets about 20-inches larger. I think by 2020 my set is going to be 12 feet diagonal.

If you could change one thing about your phone what would it be?

I use an iPhone, and I would love to see more innovation within the core interface. It's starting to feel extremely stale.

What does being connected mean to you? See "when did you last disconnect."


Poor design. Not necessarily just physical design — but design in a holistic sense. Often the most egregious crimes are in software — poorly conceived, sloppy, thoughtless, careless interfaces. I tend to be more forgiving of a buggy, humane piece of software than a junky stable one.

When are you least likely to reply to an email?

When I'm in a meeting. I have a no-devices policy in meetings now (unless it's an emergency, of course).

When did you last disconnect?

I always find this to be a strange question, because it implies that a state of connectedness is somehow unnatural, and that we should take the opportunity to return to a

simpler state of being. That's not how I see things anymore. I love to explore the Bay Area on long hikes, for example, and I'm totally comfortable having no mobile coverage — but I may still be tracking my hike via GPS and stopping to fire off an Instagram here and there if I get back into range. So I guess what I'm saying is that I've come to believe the connected vs. disconnected life is a false dichotomy — there's just life. 



The Last Word - Box Brown

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The real-time source and final word for news on gadgets and technology.

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The screenshot displays the Engadget iPad app interface. At the top, there is a search bar labeled "Search Engadget" and a battery indicator at 100%. Below the search bar, there are two news items with images and headlines:

- 1 HOUR AGO**: IRL: Sony NEX-C3, Garmin Forerunner 110 and the Elgato Turbo.264 HD
- 1 HOUR AGO**: iPhone 5 to have 21Mbps HSPA+ data? China Unicom says so

The main news feed consists of several articles:

- 30 MINS AGO**: **Dell confirms XPS 14z will go on sale in the US in the 'coming weeks'**. Remember that XPS 14z Dell teased at IFA? Yeah, well, it's arriving soon. As in, "the coming weeks" soon. The company just confirmed it's on the cusp of shipping here in the states, and while the outfit stopped short of giving a starting price, it's good and ready to talk specs. As we reported last month, it has the same industri...
By Dana Wollman September 29, 2011 12:35PM
- 54 MINS AGO**: **iPhone 5 cases and realistic unibody dummy show off incredible slimness**. While we're only five days away from finding out the true appearance of the next-generation iPhone, our good friends over at BENM.AT went ahead and crafted their very own unibody dummy using CAD drawings, CNC tools and a block of aluminum -- seriously, that's how they roll! Granted, this work's only based on...
By Richard Lai September 29, 2011 12:13PM
- 1 HOUR AGO**: **Kobo's Vox Android tablet appears online briefly, gets Canadian release date and pricing**. A day after another little-known e-reader manufacturer announced a tablet, a new Android slate from Kobo made a brief online appearance on Future Shop's site, only to be quickly taken down. According to the Canadian retailer, the FCC-approved tablet will offer up a 7-inch display with a 1024 x 600 resolution, WiF...
By Brian Heater September 29, 2011 11:53AM
- 1 HOUR AGO**: **Iceland gets a data center to call its own, still believes in fairies**. You say Iceland, we immediately think Eyjafjallajokull -- and no, we haven't had a narcoleptic collapse upon these very keys. It's been over a year since that volcano swept the headlines and interrupted air travel, providing outsiders with a skewed

At the bottom of the screen, there is a "NOW PLAYING" section for "Engadget Podcast 246 - 07.01.2011" with a play button and a progress bar. Below this, there are four podcast thumbnails:

- Engadget Podcast 09.27.2011
- Engadget Podcast 09.23.2011
- Engadget Podcast 257 09.20.2011
- Engadget Podcast 09.16.2011

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