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Web Surfing—No Standard Computer Required

New products on the market give the user computer functionality without the standard baggage of a personal computer.

It is now estimated that over 1.5 billion people surf the World Wide Web on a daily basis. How they get there is shifting from a standard operating system PC to new machines that differ in design, concept of operation, and functionality from the systems of the past. The shift from the PC to other web-accessing machines is accelerating, and the PC as a vehicle for accessing the Web is expected to become a minority player in the next five years. Basically, the Web itself is becoming the place where you can do anything that you currently do on a standard computer.

John Chuang, the CEO of litl has embraced this paradigm shift to cloud-based computing. His design team has created the first cloud-based computer, named “litl web-book.” They coined the name “web-book” to describe a new computer classification: a machine that only provides simple access to the Internet, unfettered with the hardware and software found on a standard computer. (See Photo 1.)

The team of engineers who developed the litl didn’t compromise their cloud-based computing vision with onboard storage. A litl webbook user will use the websites of the World Wide Web in the same way Smartphone users use apps. If they want to keep what they create, their storage medium is the cloud. If they want to print out what they create online, they will simply sign onto the website using another computer.

The concept behind the litl is definitely different from what most peo-

ple look for in a new computer. Can such a machine survive and prosper in today’s computer world, where onboard storage is cheap, ever growing, and the norm? The litl developers think that people are used to squir-



Photo 1—The litl webbook

reling away all their digital stuff in files that they will most likely never again open. John Chuang and his team embrace the idea that their new machine, without onboard storage, will force people to store their digital stuff online where they can invite friends, family, and even strangers to see and share their digital creations.

To appreciate the litl webbook, you need to know something about its creator. In 1986, John Chuang started his first IT business inside his Harvard University dorm room. He used the profits from this endeavor to purchase some Mac computers and a laser printer. He rented this equipment to fellow students and then used the profits from his rental business to start a temp agency. Aquent, the privately owned company he started, now operates in over 15 countries and employs over 5,000 people. Chuang is a man who is used to having others buy into his dreams of the future.

If you’ve taught students to use computers, as I have, you’re probably fixated on the old computer paradigm. A tester for the litl must

be someone who is not entrenched in the past. Jessica Nunes is a very computer literate middle school child. Like most children her age, she spends what most adults think of as an inordinate amount of time surfing the Web. I asked her to turn over her standard notebook computer and replace it with the litl webbook.

Jessica spent weeks testing the litl and liked most of its features. She found its easel feature perfect for use in the kitchen as she tried out new Web-based recipes with her grandmother. She used the litl as her alarm clock. Each morning she woke up to the chirping sound of birds and the trumpeting of elephants—definitely a fun way to wake up in the morning. Litl.com suggests that users leave the machine on overnight because that is the time the litl checks for hardware and software upgrades, in addition to performing

every type of system maintenance that you must now do on a standard computer.

Jessica also liked that the websites she visited are turned into open cards on the litl’s desktop. Each card is a snapshot of the website’s homepage. To go back to the same page, you need only click on the appropri-



Photo 2—The litl in use

ate card. (See Photo 2.) Jessica felt that this feature would make the litl the perfect machine for very young

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children. It allows Mom and Dad to select appropriate places for their children to visit. The rest of the Internet, though technically reachable, would remain out of reach until they are much older and ready to explore the Web on their own.

Jessica did not like that the litl's built-in webcam is limited to still shots, which makes it impossible to video chat online. When I conducted a telephone interview with Jordan Newman, litl's marketing director, he told me that the camera will be upgraded in that regard and video chatting on Skype will soon become a built-in litl feature.

Jessica wanted me to make it clear to readers of this column that the litl needs a WiFi connection for access to the Web. If your WiFi is down or unavailable at your current location, the litl has no internal programs or games for you to use. Jessica's first computer-based school assignment this fall required her to print material from the website Quizlet.com. She couldn't print on the litl, which made her realize that this machine isn't the ideal computer for students because even if they create and store everything in the cloud, they will need to hand in printouts of their work to their teachers. The paperless society is still a pipe dream.

Jessica's final analysis was that "the litl is the perfect first computer for a very young child and also perfect for a senior citizen who lacks experience using a regular computer. The very young and very old both would enjoy exploring websites that hold their interest and also watching photos and videos of family and even strangers doing funny things on YouTube." The very young and the very old will also enjoy a supersized viewing experience if someone uses the litl HDMI connection to attach the litl to a home's entertainment center.

You can find links to online videos on the litl at www.technologytoday.us/id27.htm. I don't think the PC as a method of accessing the Web will be greatly diminished by the litl webbook in the next five years because it is uncompromising in the way it pushes users, giving them no choice but to perform all of their computing

in the cloud. John Kelly, the author of *What Technology Wants*, thinks that technological change works best when new innovations take very small steps away from the comfort zone of entrenched technology. As these subtle changes are implemented and they become the new comfort zone, they bring about the most change.

Next month, we will look at the other end of the Web-surfing continuum, at the newest machines that are moving us at the greatest speed on

the Web without a standard PC.

What do you use to surf the Web? Please email me at pierceaj@techtoday.us, and I will chart what percentage of respondents use a PC, Apple computers, and/or other machines that are named in the emails.

Recalling the Facts

1. In what way is the litl webbook different from the computers you have in school and at home?

2. Are you ready for cloud computing? Why or why not? ☺



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