

Review: Google All the Time on the Chromebook

Ron Harris, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — New laptops running Google's Chrome operating system offer a new approach in portable computing: Games, productivity tools and anything else you might need are handled by distant computers connected to the Internet.

With this method, you don't store data on a hard drive inside the computer. That streamlines things, at the cost of having stronger, standalone applications that normally handle these tasks. But the trade-off might be worth it for the more casual consumers of online content.

Google already has a good variety of online services that will be key to any success for the set of laptops known as Chromebook. There's Gmail for messages, Google Plus for sharing photos and links and Google Docs for word processing, spreadsheets and other common tasks. Other companies also make free programs, which run through Google's Chrome browser.

All that is important because you can't install Microsoft Office or other software suites on the Chromebook. Everything done on the Chromebook has to be Web-based.

Chromebook is Google's way of showcasing its "cloud computing" philosophy, in which everything you need is available on the Internet. Google believes storage and services are better handled by Internet-connected data centers located far from you. By contrast, computers running Microsoft's Windows tend to keep files and programs on the individual machines in front of you.

Samsung Electronics Co. and Acer are making the first Chromebooks using Google's Chrome Web browser and an underlying operating system based on Linux.

Samsung's cheaper, Wi-Fi-only model retails for \$429. It comes co-branded with Google's Chrome logo on the cover. It has two USB ports and slots for an SD memory card and a SIM phone card. You can connect an external monitor to it. You can also connect to the Internet wirelessly through Wi-Fi, but there's no Ethernet port to allow wired connections to a network or Bluetooth capability to connect to untethered external devices.

For \$70 more, you can get a model that can connect through Verizon's 3G cellular network when Wi-Fi isn't an option. That's the model I tested, though I didn't end up needing the 3G capabilities because I always had Wi-Fi at work, at home and in cafes.

The unit I tried only had a 16 gigabyte solid state storage drive, but that's fine. I wasn't planning on hoarding video clips or music files. Documents, for the most part, are supposed to be stored online as part of Google's cloud philosophy.

Chromebook is a lean, mean browsing machine primarily because it urges users to move away from the local storage of content and data. Google's approach is to have you store your photos in a Web-based album such as Picasa, rather than in your "My Pictures" folder on your machine. Google Docs can store your writings and Google's Music beta (still invite-only at this stage) is positioned to handle your music collection.

Although you'd think it would be slower storing your files elsewhere, the experience is actually faster because the Chrome system doesn't have to be loaded with programs handling various tasks. You simply call those up online as you need them.

This approach will require faith. There is certainly more control and better access to storing content locally, and there's more privacy as well. With its growing suite of services, though, Google is betting some habits will change with time.

The Chromebook took me to my login screen less than five seconds after turning it on. Less than five seconds later, I was staring at the Chrome browser and an initial offering of apps such as YouTube, Google Talk and Gmail. With my home Windows 7 install, I would likely still be staring at the Windows start-up logo in this same time frame.

I began by adding some of my own favorites to the browser, which essentially served as my home screen for launching apps. I pulled several apps from Google's Chrome Web Store.

Tweetdeck was among the better Chrome apps for displaying my Twitter feed. Adjusting the Tweetdeck application to full screen delivered an experience that is almost the same as what I'd get when using Tweetdeck's standalone application with a desktop PC.

Another decent app for Chrome is Wikihood. It's a Wikipedia-styled page that uses your wireless connection to determine your location and then provides you with some fast facts about the vicinity you're in. As I sat sipping coffee in an Atlanta cafe, Wikihood revealed to me that I was near the site of the Atlanta Campaign, a series of battles fought during the Civil War around Atlanta. There were links to information about the area in case I decided to explore on foot.

Popular Science has a slick app for Chrome, though it's more about form than function. Upon launching, the app delivered the magazine's online articles with beautiful photos and artist's renderings of scientific topics that covered the entire screen. The articles aren't extremely long; more than a tweet but shorter than a 3,000-word long-form piece that some of the magazine's readers might be accustomed to.

Aside from the apps, there isn't too much personalization you can do here. There is no desktop to dress up with family photos or high-resolution screenshots from "Avatar." There is no Microsoft Quick launch toolbar or Apple Dock for accessing frequently used programs. It was just me and Chrome, and this quieter approach

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wasn't half bad.

There is a media player for playing content such as music and video stored on an SD card, which can be inserted into a slot at the front left corner of the Chromebook. The software didn't have many features, such as equalizer settings, but it worked fine when I wanted a little background music.

Not all is rosy with the Chromebook. At one point I lost the wireless connection at my office, and the online magazine I was reading suddenly rendered a lot of broken links. I edit a lot of photos and video, and those tasks just aren't possible with the degree of control I'm used to without some standalone applications.

When you're offline with the Chromebook, you are truly going off the grid and you're not likely to accomplish much of anything. It's a brick without a connection to the cloud.

The Chromebook isn't the best choice as your only computer, but it's a fine second computer for the type of casual use that is becoming the primary activity for many people busy living in their social graph.

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