PC MAGAZINE
DIGITAL EDITION

BEST PRODUCTS OF CES 2011

FEBRUARY 2011



Hands On with The Dell XPS 17

>15 Valentine's Day Gifts Under $150

>Why Refurbished PCs Make Sense

>5 Easy Steps to Home Networking

A LOOK AHEAD

The Hottest Tech for 2011



RIM BlackBerry PlayBook



LG Optimus 2X



Intel Core i7-2600K

ZIFF DAVIS

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FEBRUARY 2011

PC MAGAZINE
DIGITAL EDITION

VOL. 30 NO. 2



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COVER STORY

THE MOST ANTICIPATED PRODUCTS OF 2011

We're one month into the new year, and if the Consumer Electronics Show is any indication, 2011 will be an active, exciting year for computing. Here are the products and technologies we expect will rock our world in the next several months.

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FIRST WORD LANCE ULANOFF

The Top 5 Trends From CES 2011

What a difference a year makes. Last year's CES was remarkably unremarkable. I have trouble remembering a single product I saw, and everyone seemed depressed. But the mood at CES 2011 was akin to the locker-room vibe on game day: Excited, energized, and maybe a bit edgy.

Mobile analyst Sascha Segan noted that virtually none of the major products unveiled at this year's CES had pricing info. I told him that's actually a good thing. It means vendors are showing us stuff early, taking the risk of unveiling unfinished products, marketing plans and ideas. I love that.

Overall the show was, well, overwhelming, but in a good way. Alongside the finished and polished products were prototypes and experiments. Sony devoted an entire area to the future of 3D—most of it did not need glasses and looked very cool. There were wacky designs like the Lady Gaga Polaroid product line. But beyond the fun stuff, I noticed distinct trends on the show floor.

1. Tabletpalooza

No less than 75 tablets were introduced at CES 2011, many of them Android-based, and most of them 10.1 inches in size. I have to admit I do not like these somewhat long and thin devices compared to the Apple iPad's 4:3 aspect ratio, but I'm sure I could grow used to it. The tablets look alike and feel alike. They all have multiple cameras, HD or near-HD screens, some have slightly rubberized backs, and others more polish. Virtually all are black.

I get why everyone is so excited about the stunning Motorola Xoom, which we named the best tablet of the show. It's the first to show off Android 3.0, which holds incredible promise.

2. Super Phones

The emergence of the Super Phone was not entirely surprising, but I do like the branding. It's better than calling these really powerful cell phones "Tiny Computers."

Super Phones like the Motorola Atrix are all characterized by their Tegra 2 CPUs,

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The mood at CES 2011 was akin to the locker-room vibe on game day: Excited, energized, and maybe a bit edgy.

high-resolution screens, 4G connectivity, and plethora of output ports, including HDMI-out so you can play Angry Birds on your HDTV—at full 1080p resolution, no less. But the Atrix stands out in that it includes a 13-inch phone charger and super phone dock that also sports its own LED screen, full-sized keyboard, and Webtop App, which acts as sort of a super-light, wrap-around OS.

3. The Internet of Things

I came across this phrase in two separate instances: first from Nvidia as it introduced the Tegra-based LG Optimus 2X phone and then when I met with an appliance manufacturer. It's an accurate description of what's happening to everything in our lives: Computers, Internet, and browsers in everything. Cars from Ford and Toyota are accessing the Internet through your smartphone to deliver real-time traffic, local search information, Internet radio and more. Washing machines can download custom washing cycles like apps, send you e-mail alerts when the laundry is done, and even accept commands over the Internet.

Exciting stuff, but for now, there's no industry standard for smart appliances and the smart grid, and unless you buy all your appliances from one manufacturer, your home could be half smart and half dumb.

4. High Tech Innovation

It's both odd and heartening to see an idea as technical and rich as Intel's Sandy Bridge become one of the big stories of CES. Laptop analyst Cisco Cheng reported "huge performance gains," and manufacturers like MSI (which makes systems and mother boards) reported a 30 to 40 percent increase in performance. The laptops on display at CES running the single die CPU/GPU platform looked really good and signaled the breakthrough of an important threshold in performance, graphics prowess, and battery-life performance.

5. iPad This

Apple's absence didn't mean its presence wasn't felt on the floor of CES. It's remarkable all the things you can do with an iPad. I saw it docked in everything from music devices like a full-sized keyboard (read piano) to the "head" of an autonomous telepresence robot.

You can read more about our CES coverage by clicking here. And obviously, I saw many other products and technologies that do not easily slip into one or another trend, but their sheer number represents one more important trend: We're coming back.

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MOTOROLA XOOM
The first Android 3.0 (aka Honeycomb) tablet out of the gate.

CES 2011: Best in Show

Our favorite products from the Consumer Electronics Show.

From tantalizing tablets to tempting TVs, the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show, last month in Las Vegas, impressed us on many fronts. Sure, there were plenty of questionable products on display, but a select few items rose from the pack. Some were breakthrough achievements, others were best-in-class among their peers, and a few served an underserved need in an innovative way. Here are the best products unveiled at CES 2011, chosen by the staff of PCMag.

Motorola Xoom Tablet

Amid the CES tablet frenzy, the Motorola Xoom definitely grabbed the most headlines. It's the first Android 3.0 (Honeycomb) tablet, which gives it an immediate advan-

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tage over all other Android tablets at the show. True, the Toshiba Tablet will eventually run Honeycomb, too, but it wasn't doing so at the show, and it became clear early on that Motorola was the only tablet manufacturer to receive Google's full support, much like Samsung did last year with the Android 2.2 Galaxy Tab.—*Tim Gideon*

Motorola Atrix Cell Phone

The Motorola Atrix is the best cell phone at CES. More than a new phone, it's an entirely new computing paradigm. It's a phone, a laptop, and a desktop, and it shifts operating systems between Android and Linux seamlessly when it changes forms. It's also a powerful mobile device using the Nvidia Tegra 2, a dual-core Cortex A9 processor that's in most of the top phones I've seen at this show. While other phones have impressive incremental changes, the Atrix is truly revolutionary. —*Sascha Segan*



MOTOROLA ATRIX The Atrix is a phone, laptop, and desktop all in one.



DELL XPS 17 This media-center laptop includes a steroscopic 3D screen option.

Dell XPS 17

If there was one laptop that didn't get buried by all the tablet craziness at CES, it would have to be the new and improved Dell XPS 17. As a media-center laptop, it now has all the technologies that matter most to serious performance enthusiasts and gamers, including Intel's next-gen Core processors (i3/i5/i7), graphics-switching technology via Nvidia's Optimus, and a 1,920x1,080-pixel screen. If that weren't enough, it now has a stereoscopic 3D screen option, complete with the active-shutter 3D glasses, a built-in transmitter, and Nvidia's 3DTV play, so you can stream 3D content to the latest 3DTVs. For our First Looks review of the XPS 17 in this issue, click here.—*Cisco Cheng*

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iSonic Cane

You'd be forgiven if you missed this little gem amongst the glitz and glam of flashy tablets and 3D TV sets at CES. The iSonic isn't as exciting as some of the devices announced at the show, but it does have the potential to change some lives. An electronic cane for the blind, the device vibrates when obstructions enter your path. It can also identify the color of objects and let you know how dark it is outside. Not quite sight, but a big improvement for many who lack it. *—Brian Heater*

Pixeloptics emPower Glasses

The world's first self-focusing progressive lens look like regular glasses, but solve one of the world's most common problem for middle agers: How do I continue to see near and far with one pair of glasses, without resorting to fixed, multiple lenses? This digital solution is elegant, fast



PIXELOPTICS GLASSES The emPower Glasses could do away with the need for a separate pair of reading glasses, with their self-focusing, progressive lenses.



SNAPSTICK This device makes it easier than ever to transfer a video you're watching on your smartphone to your TV with a literal snap of your wrist.

and very effective. It's truly an example of consumer electronics making life better. *—Lance Ulanoff*

Snapstick Media Streamer

Within the extremely crowded field of connected TVs and set-top boxes, the best media-streaming device I saw at the show, hands down, was Snapstick. It seems silly that we should even have to laud a box for giving us the Internet—what looks to be all of it—on a TV. But in a supersaturated market for Netflix-type devices, the ability to (relatively) easily watch a video on CBS.com from our couch merits recognition. *—Mark Hachman*

Sony DSC-TX100V Camera

Everyone on the planet should know about the feature set in the $379.99 Sony Cyber-shot DSC-TX100V for two reasons: 1) No manufacturer has yet to pack this many features into a compact camera,

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and 2) I predict these same features will be on any good $200 dollar camera in two years. Ready? Here we go: high-resolution OLED (low-motion blur and superior contrast), GPS and digital compass (Geotag photo with location and direction), high-quality 1080p/60fps video capture (up to 28 Mbps), and a fast CPU that enables innovative ways to improve your images. In less than one second the TX100V can shoot multiple images, scan them, and select the best parts to be merged into a one-master image that has low noise, high dynamic range, a panoramic photo or even a 3D image. Be sure to watch out for these features in the next camera you buy.
—PJ Jacobowitz



SAMSUNG'S 8000 SERIES 3D TVS They're sleek and offer full HD resolution for 3D content.

B&W Zeppelin Air iPod Speaker Dock

Apple's AirPlay wireless technology is in its infancy, but one of the most promising things it can do is free us from those unreliable, inconvenient, and sound-deadening Bluetooth music-streaming connections. The B&W Zeppelin Air iPod Speaker Dock showcases AirPlay's supremely easy method of beaming audio via Wi-Fi in a stylish package. If that wasn't enough, B&W's complete revamp of the components inside the Zeppelin gives it more power (150 watts, up from 100) in the same footprint. Apple couldn't have asked for a better example of its new wireless tech, but we wonder: Now that our iPods can stream from afar, should we really call it a "dock"?
—Peter Pachal

Samsung 8000 Series LED 3D TV

The Samsung 8000 line of TVs were easily the sexiest state-of-the-art HDTVs announced at the show. The beautiful sets come loaded with Web apps, including Skype video calling, and they support 3D video. The metallic bezel is extremely thin; a mere 0.2 inches separate the screen from the edge. With a 240Hz refresh rate and full HD resolution for 3D content, the set has everything it needs to watch virtually any kind of video you can find today. Even better, these TVs ship with Samsung's Touch Control remote, which sports a 3-inch touchscreen. While 3D TVs haven't quite taken off yet, Samsung's flagship sets have the best shot at keeping them alive.
—Wendy Sheehan Donnell

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Verizon iPhone Orders: Let the Madness Begin

Verizon Wireless customers are mere days away from having the privilege to pre-order iPhone4s.

Verizon will offer a CDMA EVDO version of the iPhone 4 starting February 10, thus signaling the end of Apple's iPhone exclusivity deal with AT&T. Existing Verizon Wireless customers will be able to start pre-ordering the device on February 3. The 16GB version with a two-year contract will cost $199.99, while the 32GB version will cost $299.99. The device will be available at more than 2,000 Verizon stores, via Verizon's Web site, at Apple retail stores, and via Apple's Web site. At press time, pricing plan information was not available.

The device includes 3G personal hotspot capabilities, allowing customers to connect up to five Wi-Fi-enabled devices.

Apple's deal with Verizon is multi-year, but Apple isn't commenting beyond that about the terms.—*Chloe Albanesius*

BEST OF OUR BLOGS

APP SCOUT

Dolphin Browser for Android Leaves Beta

The default Android Web browser is serviceable: it offers tabbed browsing and it's relatively fast when it comes to loading your favorite Web pages. However, the tabs are a little cumbersome to navigate, and there's no way to quickly tell which tabs you have open without leaving the page and entering a tab list.

Where the default Android browser falls down, other browsers have stepped up to replace it.

Dolphin Mini, for example, has long been in beta and offered features like gesture support, tabbed browsing reminiscent of Firefox or Google Chrome, and bookmarks sync. Now, the makers of Dolphin Mini have added some new features and released the beta tag, formally releasing Dolphin Mini 1.0 to the world. Dolphin Mini is free and supports all versions of Android. It's available now in the Android App Market. —*Alan Henry*

GEARLOG

Facebook Paid $8.5 Million For fb.com URL

How much did it cost Facebook to acquire the fb.com URL? A cool $8.5 million. But don't worry, that money went to a good cause—the American Farm Bureau. With a few extra million in its budget, the Farm Bureau moved over to fb.org—all said, probably more appropriate for a nonprofit aimed at protecting the interests of American farmers.

Facebook announced the purchase in November, with no financial details. The Farm Bureau let slip the price during an annual meeting. The company is "barred from identifying the buyer," but TechCrunch put two and two together.—*Brian Heater*

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Intel Core i7-2600K

A Giant Step Forward For Intel

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

Given the towering number of broken promises over the years, we were naturally skeptical of Intel's hard-sell on its new "second-generation Core" processing platform (code-named Sandy Bridge). Onboard graphics! Terrific with media! Upon testing one of Intel's first Sandy Bridge CPUs, the Core i7-2600K, however, we were astonished to find that it mostly lived up to the hype. It's not legendary in the 3D department, but its media processing is superb, and in many ways it surpasses similarly priced predecessors from both Intel and AMD. The Core i7-2600K won't satisfy die-hard enthusiasts, but everyone else is likely to like this power-packed processor.

With four cores and eight threads (thanks to Intel's Hyper-Threading technology), the Core i7-2600K processor definitely occupies a position in the upper ranges of Intel's new Sandy Bridge line. It has a base clock speed of 3.4 GHz, but can go as high as 3.8 GHz when Turbo Boost is enabled; 8MB of L3 cache; and has a TDP of 95 watts. The K in the CPU's name means that, in addition to its latent power, it also has an unlocked multiplier for greater ease of overclocking.

We saw some terrific performance from the Core i7-2600K in our basic and media-centric tests, including the highest scores in its price class in Geekbench, Cinebench R11.5, Futuremark's PCMark Vantage. This is not to say that high-end game lovers will want to chuck their discrete cards. The Core i7-2600K fared just okay in 3D gaming tests.

Intel Core i7-2600K

$317 list

●●●●○

PROS **Outstanding media-processing capabilities. Good overall computing performance. Unlocked multiplier for simplified overclocking.**

CONS **Onboard video lacks DirectX 11 support, and won't replace what you can get with discrete cards.**

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Looks

OUR RATINGS KEY:

- ●●●●● EXCELLENT
- ●●●●○ VERY GOOD
- ●●●○○ GOOD
- ●●○○○ FAIR
- ●○○○○ POOR



The average frame rates on all of our tests didn't break the 30 fps barrier, so you can expect some noticeable choppiness even at this very modest resolution. And because the CPU only supports DirectX 10.1 and not DX11, you won't be able to see all the brightest bells and whistles on newer titles, even at resolutions the chip can struggle through. (For a full rundown of performance scores, click the link at the end of our review.)

If Intel's Core i7-2600K isn't an ideal standalone gaming-graphics chip, that's about the only aspect of the platform's promise it doesn't fulfill. With double take–inspiring performance, particularly when media is involved, it's going to be nearly ideal for mainstream enthusiasts who want top capabilities without paying top dollar. It also represents a serious challenge for AMD, whose biggest and best desktop CPU lags well behind this one in many circumstances and only costs about $50 less. Because the platform has just been introduced and requires a new motherboard, the cost of entry may be high. But if this inaugural offering is any indication, it may just be worth it.—*Matthew Murray*

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Maingear F131 Super Stock

A Hardcore, Overclocked Gaming Rig



Maingear F131 Super Stock
$2,300 direct
●●●●○

PROS Massively overclocked processor. Very good gaming performance. Plenty of internal expansion room, particularly for hard drives.

CONS You may need a little fiddling with the internal SATA cage. Only one-year warranty. Small C: drive.

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The Maingear F131 Super Stock is considered a mid-range performance desktop, but it certainly will keep a hardcore gamer happy. The F131 adds the latest overclocked Intel quad-core processor (aka Sandy Bridge) to two mid-priced performance graphics cards to give the gamer a drool-worthy desktop, without the über-gamer pricing.

Performance is the reason the F131 exists, and it has a lot of power in its tower chassis. The desktop's Core i7-2600k processor is overclocked from the 3.4-GHz stock up to a staggering 4.8 GHz. The CPU's integrated graphics are bypassed in favor of the desktop's dual Nvidia GeForce GTX 460 graphics cards. Along with the speedy 8GB of memory and SSD, the desktop produced very good benchmark numbers. Handbrake took only 1 minute 14 seconds (one second slower than the $6,499 Origin Genesis). Its Photoshop CS5 scores are among the fastest I've seen: 2:18. Gaming performance was fast, if not as fast as our high-end gaming Editors' Choice, the Falcon Northwest Mach V (Core i7-2600k). The F131 completed our gaming tests with playable scores for both *Crysis* (124 frames per second at medium quality, 47 fps at very high quality) and *Lost Planet 2* (182 fps at middle quality, 72 fps at High quality).

So the combination of an overclocked quad-core processor and dual high-end/mainstream graphics cards gives you a $2,300 hardcore rig that can play with the $4,000-$6,000 desktops. That's a lot to like. And for that it becomes our new Editors' Choice for mainstream gaming desktop PCs.—*Joel Santo Domingo*

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SPECS 4.8-GHz Intel Core i7 processor; 8GB RAM; 1TB hard drive; nVidia GeForce GTX 460 graphics; dual-layer DVD+/-RW optical drive; Microsoft Windows 7 Home Premium

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Falcon Northwest Mach V (Core i7-2600K)

Top-Notch Gaming PC For $4,600



Falcon Northwest Mach V (Core i7-2600K)

$4,599 direct

●●●●○

PROS **High-end 3D performance. High-end multimedia performance. Good build quality. Intelligent thermal design. No Bloatware. Plenty of high speed ports: FireWire, USB 3.0, eSATA. Doesn't get as hot as competition. Comparatively quiet.**

CONS **It's big. DIY Internal hard drive upgrades less convenient.**

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The Mach V (Core i7-2600K) desktop is a force to be reckoned with. It not only includes the new Intel Core i7-2600K processor (aka Intel's Sandy Bridge) and Nvidia GTX 580 graphics, but it also comes in Falcon NW's new ICON2 chassis, with new-card retention built in, better airflow, and a design that will take Falcon Northwest into the next decade.

The Mach V's new ICON2 case is huge, black, and imposing. Its graphics cards are situated vertically, so the hot air exhausts out of the top rather than out the back of the case. This makes sense from a thermal perspective, but it also means that the ports are now on the top rather than in the back.

The Mach V (Core i7-2600K) returned stellar performance on our benchmark tests. The desktop completed the Handbrake video encoder test in a quick 1 minute, 15 seconds, and the Photoshop CS5 test in 2:26. It also made short work of our 3D gaming tests, receiving smooth scores on *all* our 3D tests and handily beating competitors like the Origin Genesis (which costs $1,900 more) and Maingear F131 Super Stock (which, at $2,300, is our new Editors' Choice pick for mainstream gaming PC).

I'm sure the Mach V (Core i7-2600k) will be leapfrogged before a third of the year is complete, but for now, it is the über-gaming PC to buy, provided you have the means to drop almost $5,000 on a PC.

—Joel Santo Domingo

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SPECS 4.7-GHz Intel Core i7 processor; 16GB RAM; 1240GB hard drive; NVidia GTX 580 graphics; Blu-Ray disc drive; Microsoft Windows 7 Home Premium

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Origin Genesis

Insane Performance, Insane Price



Origin Genesis
$6,499.00 Direct
●●●●○

PROS Unbelievable benchmark scores. Six-core/12-stream overclocked processor. Beautiful design. Good build quality. Accessible drive bays. Plethora of ports, including USB 3.0, eSATA, FireWire.

CONS Outrageously expensive. Huge. Loud fans when set to full speed. Only one-year warranty on parts. DIY upgrades are problematic. C: drive is a little small.

The guys who helped create Alienware's reputation in the gaming PC market hope the Genesis will go up against the likes of the Maingear Shift, Falcon Northwest Mach V, Velocity Micro Raptor, and, Alienware Area 51. It has off-the-charts components, like a 6-core/12-stream processor overclocked to 4.5 GHz, three overclocked Nvidia GeForce GTX 480 graphics cards, twin 50GB solid-state drives (SSDs), two more 1TB hard drives, and liquid cooling to keep all the components from melting a hole though the Earth to China. It has an equally stratospheric price, but those with luxury tech tastes might want the Genesis to be their next toy.

The desktop comes with a lifetime labor warranty, so you can send the system back to Origin for upgrades at a later date, though you pay for the parts. The Genesis has only a one-year warranty on those parts. Other system builders, like Falcon Northwest, have longer parts warranties.

Thanks to all of its overclocking, the Genesis delivered some of the highest scores I've ever seen on our tests. It smashed previous 3DMark Vantage records (107,934 Entry, 28,576 Extreme), and its *Crysis* scores prove you can play this game at virtually any resolution, with all the eye candy turned on.

Clearly the Genesis is ready for hardcore gaming, as well it should be for $6,500. But if you're not one wooed by high-end luxury goods, you'd be just fine spending $1,900 less on our new high-end gaming PC pick, the Falcon Northwest Mach V (Core i7-2600K).—*Joel Santo Domingo*

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SPECS 4.5-GHz Intel Core i7 processor; 6GB RAM; 2100GB hard drive; nVidia GeForce GTX 480 Triple SLI graphics; Blu-Ray Disc drive; Microsoft Windows 7 Home Premium

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Dell XPS 17

A Heat Issue Cools Us On The XPS 17



Dell XPS 17
$1,670 direct
●●●◐○

PROS One of the fastest laptops available. Obscene graphics power. First HD webcam on a laptop. Excellent keyboard. Backlit option. Soft mouse buttons. HDMI and Displayport. Long list of processor options.

CONS Heat is an unfortunate side effect of the graphics chip. No 1080p resolution.

Media center laptops tend to leave other laptops in the dust in terms of performance, and the XPS 17 did indeed top our benchmark tests. Too bad its Nvidia chip gives off an uncomfortably intense heat, and there's no way to downgrade the chip without giving up the quad-core processor.

At 8.1 pounds, the XPS 17 is about two pounds heavier than its predecessor and current Editors' Choice winner, the XPS 15 (6.3 pounds). The XPS 17's 17.3-inch widescreen is one of the biggest on a laptop; unfortunately, it offers only 1,600-by-900 resolution, instead of 1,920 by 1,080.

The XPS 17 runs on an Intel Core i7-740QM, a quad-core processor bred to pulverize the most complex and demanding software loads. On our tests, it earned top scores in Cinebench 11.5 (2.3) and Photoshop CS5 (4:42), two of the most demanding multithreaded tests in the business. And thanks to its Nvidia GeForce GTS 445M graphics, the XPS 17 beat all its quad-core rivals in the 3DMark 06 (11,345) test. But the heat from the graphics chip can reach up to 115 degrees if your hand happens to be next to the vent. I would recommend downgrading to a GeForce GT 435M, but then you'd lose the quad-core processor; Dell won't include it with anything less than the GTS 445M.

The Dell XPS 17 could have easily dethroned its predecessor, the XPS 15, with its bigger 17-inch screen and faster parts. But until Dell can find a better cooling solution, I would recommend either configuring this laptop with a Core i5 processor and the Nvidia GeForce GT 435M chipset, or just going with the XPS 15.—*Cisco Cheng*

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SPECS 1.73-GHz Intel Core i7-740QM processor; 6GB RAM; 1024GB hard drive; nVidia GeForce GTS 445M graphics; 17.3-inch widescreen; 8.1 pounds; Blu-Ray Disc player; 802.11n networking; Microsoft Windows 7 Home Premium

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Verizon Wireless 4G LTE

The Fastest 4G Network Is Pricey and Limited

Verizon's new 4G LTE network is the fastest in the land, and makes the carrier, once again, the Cadillac of wireless networks. But high prices and limited device selection don't make this a good choice for average consumers yet.

Verizon Wireless is actually the fourth U.S. carrier to call its network 4G, after T-Mobile, Sprint, and MetroPCS. With LTE, Verizon chose a truly forward-looking 4G technology. LTE is the main global standard for 4G, with hundreds of mobile-phone companies switching over to LTE in the next few years. Here in the United States, AT&T, Cricket, and MetroPCS have all committed to going to LTE, and Sprint and T-Mobile have been flirting with the technology.

This means, hopefully, LTE equipment and phones will be easy to come by in the future. They may not be easily swappable between carriers, though. Just like with cell phones, LTE uses a bunch of different frequency bands, and your device must support the right band to work on your carrier.

Verizon Wireless 4G LTE

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PROS Super fast. A global standard. Solid coverage in 38 metro areas.

CONS Tight data caps. Only currently available on two USB modems. No Mac support.

Coverage: One-third of the U.S.

Verizon's LTE network currently covers 38 major metro areas and more than 60 airports, about a third of the U.S. population. The carrier has said it will have complete nationwide coverage by 2013.

Verizon promises 5 to 12Mbps down and 2 to 5Mbps up. Considering the carrier's 3G EVDO system offers 1Mbps down on average, that's a huge improvement. It's faster than some home connections.

The Fastest In the Land

I was able to achieve blazing speeds before the network officially launched, but now

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that it's actually being used, speeds have settled down into Verizon's stated range. On Ookla's speed test, which simulates streaming, I got peak speeds of 18.6Mbps down and 5.7Mbps up on the LTE network, with averages of 9.2Mbps down and 3.4Mbps up. In years of testing cellular networks, I've never seen results as fast as I saw with LTE.

Speeds in other tests were lower, because Internet overhead really comes into play, but LTE still smoked the competition. FTP transfers were at least 50 percent faster than the other networks. Web pages (which are made of many small files) loaded 20 percent faster than on HSPA+ and more than twice as fast as on WiMAX.

Device Choices Are Slim

Right now Verizon has the slimmest device choices of the major 4G networks: just two USB sticks, neither of which is officially compatible with Macs. The LG VL600 and Pantech UML290 both cost $99.99 with a two-year contract, or $249.99 without. We'll be reviewing these first-generation devices soon.

Verizon's service plans aren't bad for 3G, but they're really limited and expensive for 4G. Because downloading large files and streaming full-screen video is effortless on the fast network, you'll be sure to run into Verizon's 5GB (for $50 per month) and 10GB (for $80 per month) data caps quickly.

This is clearly the fastest mobile broadband available today by far. For business mobile broadband users who need to access critical data on the go, Verizon's LTE is the best bet. This network doesn't offer much to consumers yet, though. We'll see if that changes in 2011, but for now average consumers have more options with Sprint's WiMAX system.—*Sascha Segan*

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Denon AH-D1100

Superb Audio Without All The Glamour



Denon AH-D1100
$199.99 list
●●●●◐

PROS Top-notch audio performance. Comfortable over long listening sessions. Fold flat for easy packing. Extension cable and jack adapter included.

CONS Enhanced bass response may turn off audiophiles seeking flat response. Comes with pouch rather than case. Hardwired cable.

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

Unlike the celebrity-endorsed, highly stylized headphones of its competitors (think Monster), Denon delivers a very simple, lightweight headphone set with a very plain aesthetic. So what you're paying the big bucks for is not its look but its spectacular audio performance, with a serious yet smooth serving of bass. The high frequencies are clear and precise, and never feel unbalanced compared to the undeniable presence of the lows.

The AH-D1100 features all-black ear cups with faux leather pads and a headband cushioned with black faux leather along the inside of the top area. Unfortunately, the headphone cable is hard-wired, so if it ever has issues, you'll have to send the headphones in for repair rather than swap the cables out. On the plus side, Denon includes an extension cable, 11.5 feet in length, which makes listening to a home-theater setup while lounging on the couch easy.

Our HEAD Acoustics frequency response tests provide an excellent visual for what is obvious upon first listen: these headphones pack serious low-end. Unlike the Beats line, the bass doesn't seem to be boosted to subwoofer-challenging levels, but it's definitely intense. Compared to the Bose AE2, I much prefer the Denon AH-D1100's low-end response, which sounds much smoother.

Bose's AE2 is $50 less expensive, but there's a significant drop in audio performance. The AE2 is by no means a slouch, but the Denon AH-D1100 simply delivers a more enjoyable audio experience, and for that reason, it earns our Editors' Choice for sub-$200 headphones.—*Tim Gideon*

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Canon PowerShot SD1400 IS

Tiny and Powerful, And Simple to Use

It's one of the cutest digital cameras you can buy, with its fun colors (orange and pink among them) and tiny size. But the Canon PowerShot SD1400 IS also delivers solid image quality, a sharp LCD, impressive HD video capture, and a host of connectivity options.

It measures a slim 2.2 by 3.6 by 0.7 inches (HWD) and weighs just 4.7 ounces. The lens offers 4x optical zoom, with a focal length ranging from 28-112mm (35mm equivalent) and a corresponding aperture of f/2.8-f/5.9. Similarly priced cameras with higher-powered zoom lenses exist, but they're scarce; the Editors' Choice Kodak EasyShare M580, which costs $30 less, offers 8x optical zoom, but it's a bigger camera.

The SD1400 can start up and shoot in an average of 1.9 seconds, and individual shots fire with just 0.6 second of shutter lag. In between shots the SD1400 averaged 3.6 seconds of wait time, which is just okay. By comparison, the Kodak M580 shaves a second off that (2.3 seconds), and its shutter lag measures a mere 0.4 second.

Test images were very sharp and consistent; my only complaint is that, on close inspection, I could see some minor blooming (of softness) in some spots.

Canon PowerShot SD1400 IS

$229.99 list

●●●●○

PROS Good image quality. Very small build. Easy to use. Decent low-light performance.

CONS Tiny controls. A keen eye might detect slight blooming in images.



The PowerShot SD1400 IS is a great camera in a tiny little package. But for less money, you get more features (including a lens with twice the zoom factor) in the Kodak EasyShare M580.—*PJ Jacobowitz*

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HP Officejet Pro 8500A Plus e-All-in-One Printer

A Feature-Rich Printer for Small Offices

The HP Officejet Pro 8500A Plus e-All-in-One is a small-office multifunction printer (MFP) with a solid feature set, including ePrint and Web App functionality, a variety of ports and connection options, and decent speed. Its output quality could stand to be a bit better, but it's still a very good choice as a small-office MFP.

The 8500A Plus prints, scans, copies, and faxes. It can scan (up to legal size) to a PC, memory card, network folder, or e-mail. It can act as a standalone printer, printing photos from memory cards, USB keys, and PictBridge cameras as well as content from the Web using HP's Web Apps. It has a 35-page automatic document feeder (ADF) for scanning or copying multi-page documents, as well as a 250-sheet input tray, and an automatic duplexer that lets you print on both sides of a sheet of paper.

The 8500A Plus printed out our latest business applications suite (as timed with QualityLogic's hardware and software) at a respectable 4.5 pages per minute (ppm). It averaged a decent 1 minute 17 seconds in printing out 4-by-6 photos.

Graphics and text quality was on par with the majority of inkjets we've tested, but photo quality was a touch below par, with most showing some degree of dithering—the breakup of solid areas into textures or fine dot patterns.

Overall, the 8500A Plus is a good MFP to anchor a small office, with ample paper capacity, a wide range of features, connectivity options, and input ports, and respectable business-printing speed.—*Tony Hoffman*

HP Officejet Pro 8500A Plus e-All-in-One Printer

$399.99 direct

●●●●○

PROS **Good business printing speed. A wealth of MFP and ePrint features. Good paper capacity. Multiple connectivity options. Able to print from external devices.**

CONS **Unexceptional output quality, with photos a bit below par. Touch pad could be more responsive.**

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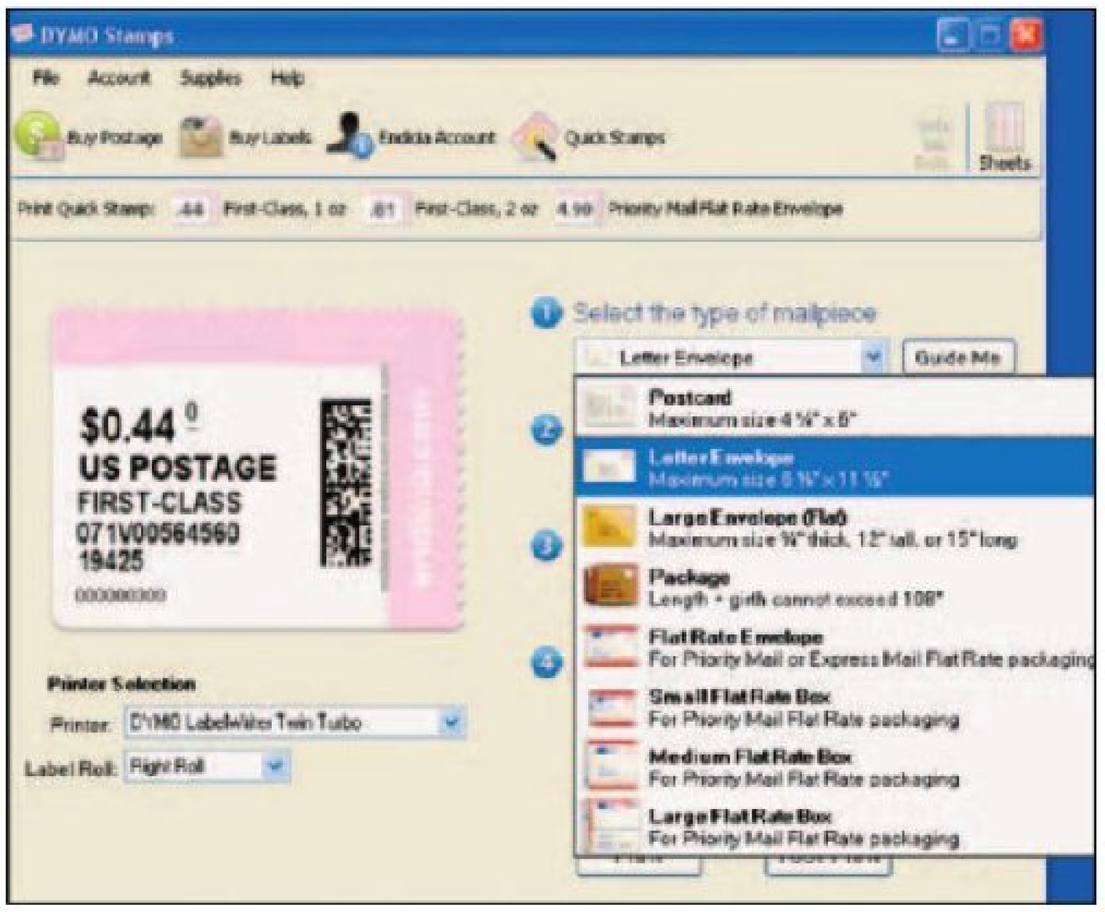
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DYMO Stamps and DYMO Printable Postage

Print Your Own Stamps Easily



DYMO Stamps and DYMO Printable Postage

Free

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PROS No monthly fee. Free software download. Can print individual stamps or sheets of stamps.

CONS Printing individual stamps as needed requires specific models of DYMO label printers.

Since DYMO Stamps first came out in 2006, I have been able to avoid long lines at the Post Office. DYMO, which was free back then and still is, lets you print stamps and flat-rate Priority Mail postage yourself at home. And the service just keeps getting better.

In its latest version, DYMO Stamps is even more attractive for small and home offices with low volumes of outgoing mail, and even for personal use. Its key advantage—convenience—still remains the same. With no monthly fee and no charge for the software, you can justify getting it no matter how few stamps you print. And in this latest version, in addition to working with most current and recent DYMO LabelWriter models, it also works with any inkjet or laser printer that can feed label sheets.

The label rolls, which allow you to print one stamp at a time and must be used with a LabelWriter printer, cost $20.95 (including shipping costs) for one 200-label roll; that translates to 10.5 cents per stamp label. The 24-label sheets cost $20.95 for 8 sheets (adding 10.9 cents per stamp, plus shipping costs). If the sheets are used with an inkjet printer and a stamp gets wet and smudges, the Post Office will still accept the stamp, as long as it's recognizably a printed stamp.

Overall, DYMO Stamps is one of the most useful utilities anyone who uses snail mail can have. Any small office should consider it a great investment: Dymo Stamps can easily save enough gas and time to pay for the cost of the labels, on which you'll print out your stamps.—*M. David Stone*

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HP Portable External Hard Drive (1TB)

A Next-Gen External Drive That's Tough To Beat



HP Portable External Hard Drive (1TB)

$169.99 direct

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PROS Has USB 3.0 ports. Competitive performance scores compared to eSATA. Portable chassis. 1TB of storage. Comes with simple backup software.

CONS Design attracts smudges.

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The HP External Hard Drive (1TB) combines the next-generation speeds of USB 3.0 and 1TB of storage space, all in a portable pocket-sized package. Its backup software is an accent to this capable hard drive and ups its overall value, making this storage device our Editors' Choice for USB 3.0 external drives.

The hard drive measures a very portable 4.5 by 3 by 0.5 inches (HWD) and weighs a scant half-pound. Its only component is the USB 3.0 port, which is backwards compatible with USB 2.0 ports. The backup software, HP SimpleSave, comes on the hard drive so you can choose to install it or just enjoy the plug-and-play experience.

When you open HP's SimpleSave software, it takes you to an inventory of your system and determines how much space would be taken up on your hard drive if you copied everything over from your PC. You can pick and choose what file types you want backed up or select individual files. SimpleSave will then back up your PC every 5 minutes your computer is idle.

On our drag-and-drop file test, the drive was able to transfer a 1.22GB file in less than 19 seconds. It blew other drives, like the Toshiba 650GB external drive and Seagate FreeAgent Go (500GB), out of the water in speed and performance.

The HP External Hard Drive (1TB) offers enough space to back up most home computers with room to spare. This hard drive should be on your portable backup list for school or home.—*Natalie Shoemaker*

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Google Picasa 3.8

Best Entry-Level Photo Software Around. Period.

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

Not only is Picasa the best entry-level photo editor, organizer, and sharing tool you could ask for, but it's also free, *and* it runs on every major desktop operating system.

We've been big fans of Google's Picasa photo software for years—it's been our Editors' Choice for entry-level photo organizing and editing since version 2. Version 3.8 adds even more polish, with batch uploading, integrated editing with Picnik, an extended Info panel, and much more. These join Picasa's already astounding face-recognition, geo-tagging, leading ease-of-use, and integration with Picasa Web Albums. So no matter what your computer's operating system, Picasa is the best choice for digital photo fans who want the best way to organize, improve, and share their digital photos.

Picasa has one of the most innovative, intuitive, and usable interfaces around. Instead of using a standard scrollbar to move through your photo sets, you get a "shuttle"-type control that accelerates you through the galleries. This makes a lot of sense, especially after you've built up a good size library of galleries.

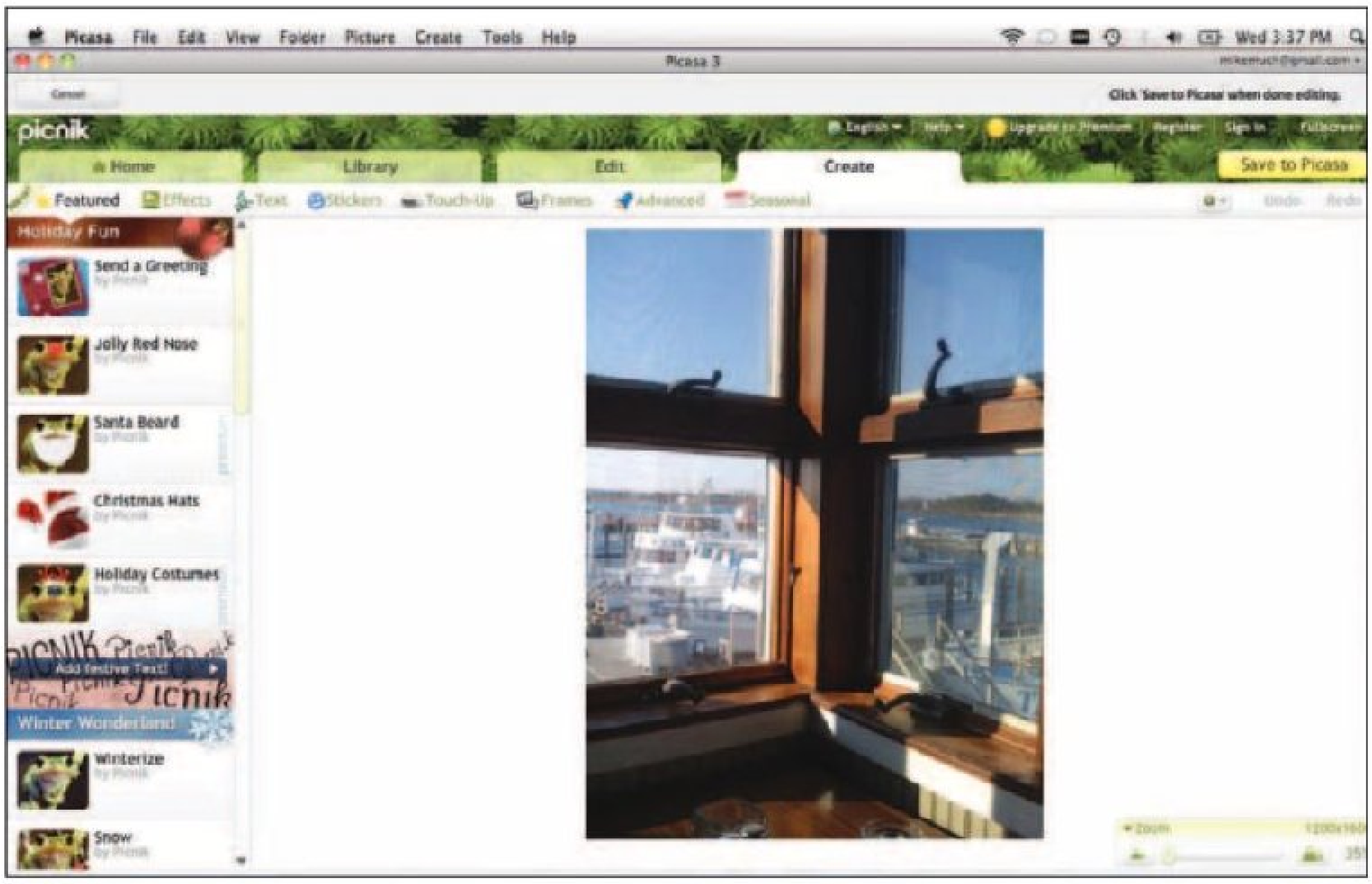
When it comes to importing and organizing your pictures, Picasa is alone in its class. Even before importing, it organizes photos by time groups, and you can view, rotate, and star photos. The one organizational tool that makes Picasa shine brighter than the rest is its face recognition. Picasa does the best job of identifying your photo subjects' visages. The program automatically scans images for faces, and creates an Unnamed folder under People in the source list. After you identify some people, the program suggests more potential photos with likely faces to match the names.

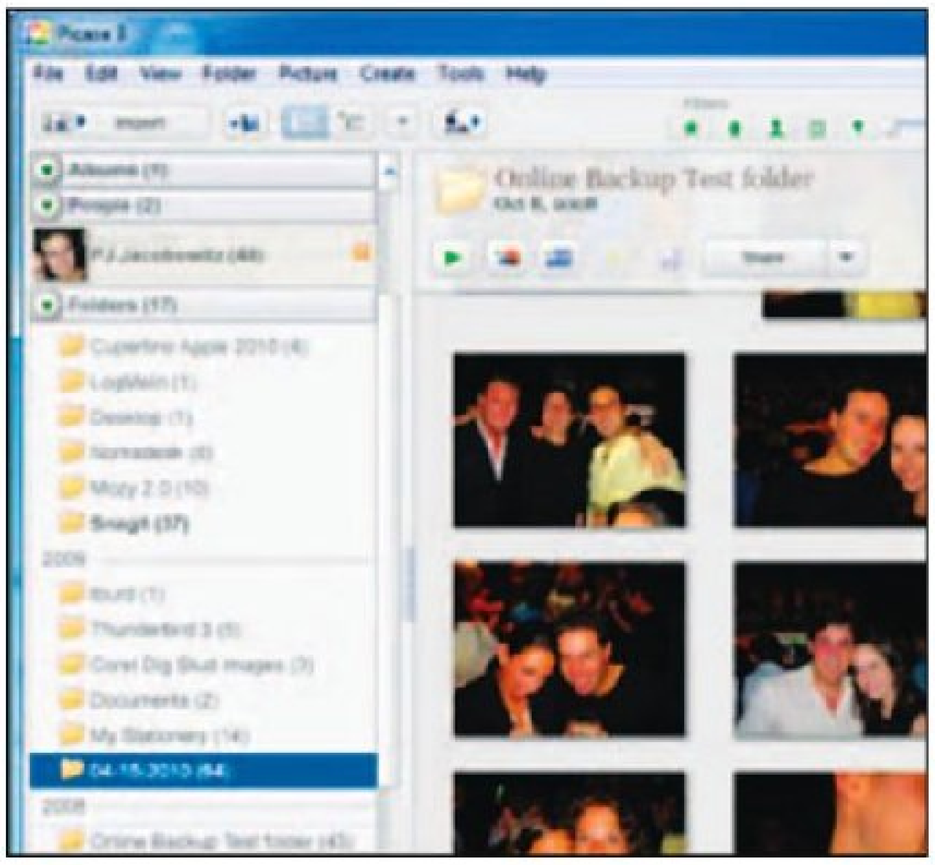
Picasa makes it dead simple to get your photos looking good, even if you didn't have all the settings right when you took the shot. Its "I'm Feeling Lucky" button did at least as good a job at one-click photo fixing as iPhoto. In most cases, Picasa did better than Windows Live Photo Gallery, though I

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Google Picasa 3.8

Free

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PROS Superb integration with online galleries. Excellent face recognition. Geo tagging. Polished interface. Support for RAW camera files. Syncs local edits with online images. More photo embellishments with Picnik integration. Mac and Linux versions available. Free.

CONS Facebook upload requires plug in. Histogram not editable.

liked how the latter's autofix straightened pictures as well as attempting to fix lighting and color. Picasa actually trails those two in that it doesn't let you manipulate a photo's histogram.

For everyday shutterbugs who want to get those pictures off their cameras, organize them into albums, fix them up a bit, and—most important—share them with loved ones, Picasa gets our top recommendation. Its tight integration with excellent, synced Web albums, along with best-in-class face recognition and geo-tagging are enough to earn it our Editors' Choice. But beyond that, it leads the pack in basic ease of use, it's free, and it runs on every major operating system.—*Michael Muchmore*

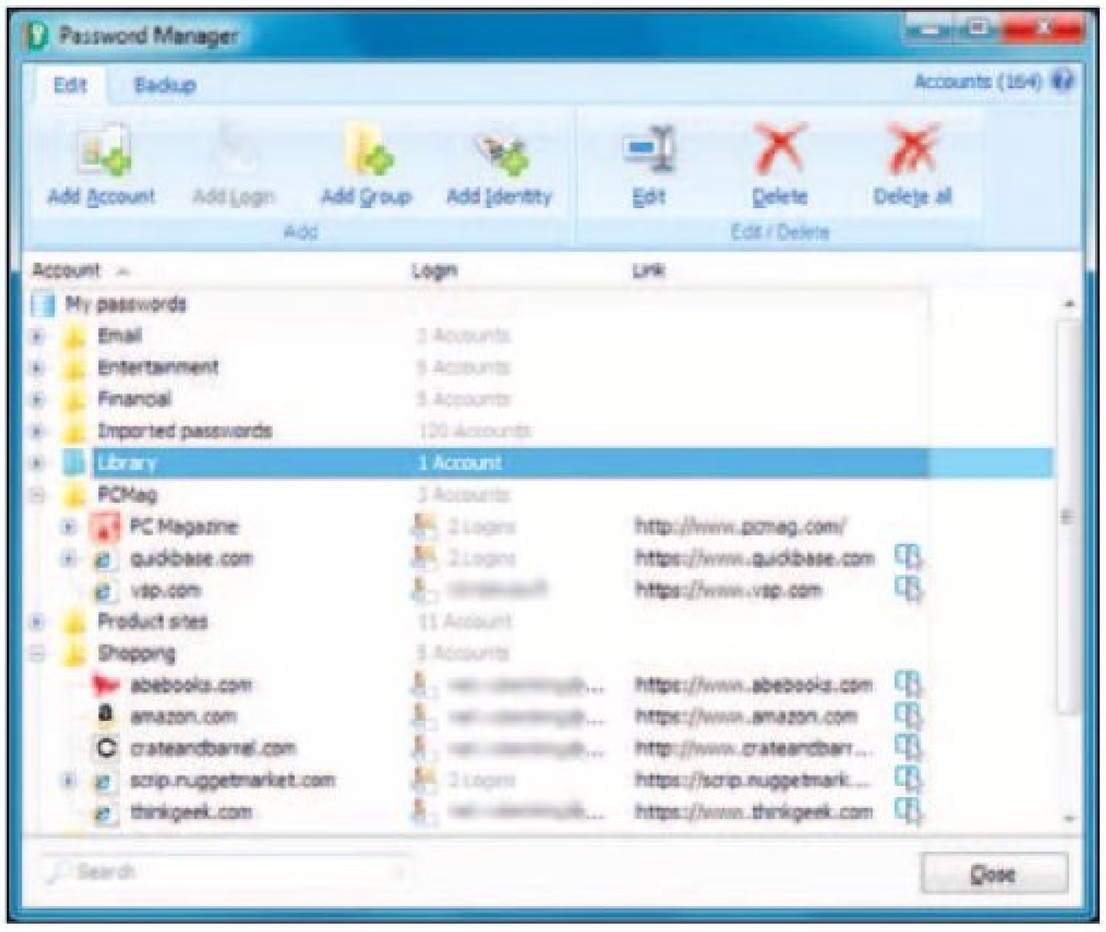
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Kaspersky Password Manager 4

An Easy Way To Manage Passwords



When you use the same password at more than one site, your data is at risk at all of the sites once just one of them is hacked. You should use a different password for every site, and you'll probably need a product like Password Manager 4 to manage your plethora of passwords—encrypted for security, of course.

This full-featured manager can handle oddball logins, keep your passwords arranged in groups, generate strong passwords on demand, and fill Web forms. Feature-wise it's up there with the free LastPass, as well as RoboForm Pro 6.9 and the Identity Manager in Norton Internet Security 2011.

Kaspersky Password Manager is especially good at handling login systems that use odd fields or multiple pages. It does a nice job of automatic credential capture for both Web sites and applications. You can arrange your menu of accounts any way you like using simple drag-and-drop. The form fill-in feature is a little awkward, but that's not the primary function of a password manager.

I still prefer the free, cloud-based flexibility of Editors' Choice LastPass, but some may worry about storing sensitive passwords online even if they are encrypted. If you want to keep your passwords local and don't mind paying for password management, Kaspersky Password Manager definitely does the job.—*Neil J. Rubenking*

Kaspersky Password Manager 4

$24.95 direct

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PROS Automatically captures login credentials. Handles proprietary and multi-page logins. Can manage application passwords. USB-based portable edition. Password generator. Fills Web forms. Can authenticate using USB or Bluetooth device.

CONS No provision for two-factor authentication. Can't sync portable edition with desktop edition. Awkward entry of personal data for Web form filling.

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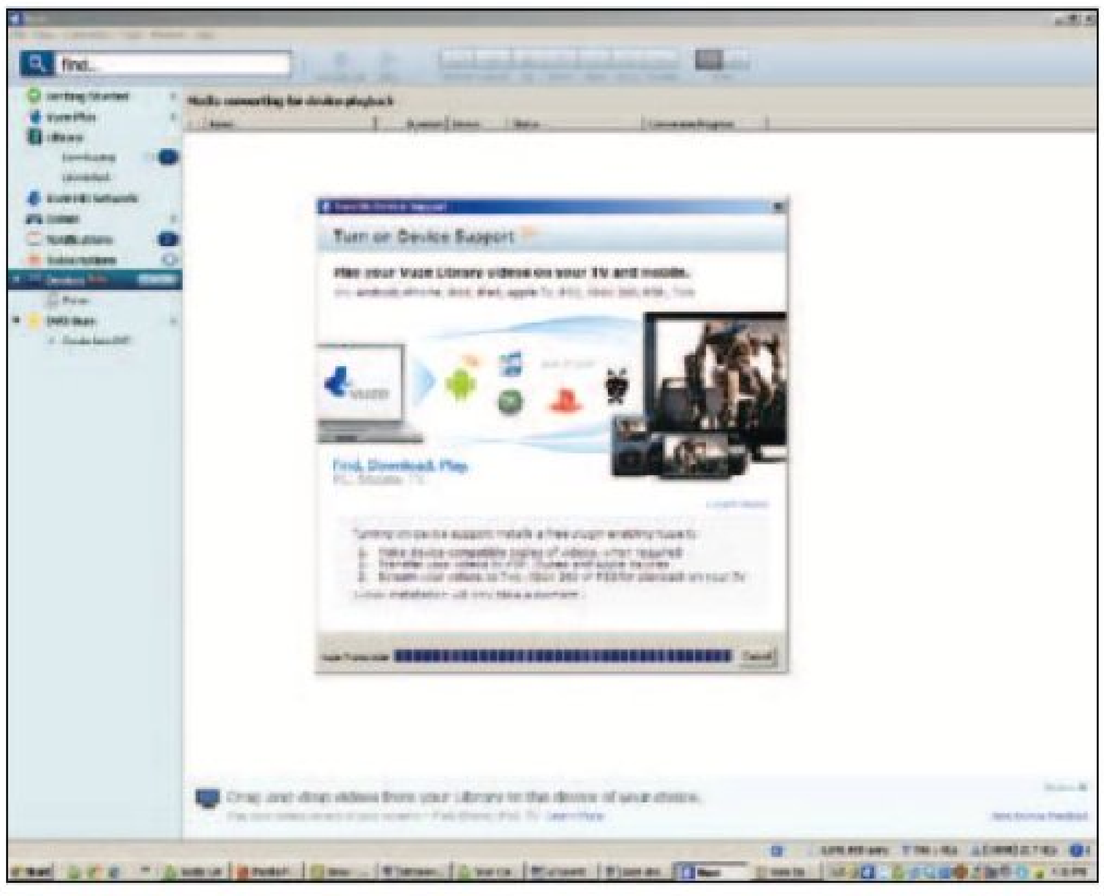
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Vuze 4.5

Not Your Average BitTorrent Client



PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

If you're in the hunt for a BitTorrent client that does more than let you download large files, Vuze 4.5 (formerly known as Azureus) is a compelling application. Not only does it enable speedy downloads, it adds a slick interface, file transcoding, and remote control—features not found in competing clients such as BitTorrent 7.2, uTorrent, and Deluge.

BitTorrent technology works by allowing the computer that has the torrent to gather bits and pieces of the desired file from other available BitTorrent users. It's this efficient process that makes downloading large files far faster than other peer-to-peer protocols that connect one PC to another lone PC.

Finding legal torrents proved difficult, but I eventually stumbled upon "Four-Eyed Monsters," an independent film freely distributed by The Co-Create. Unlike BitTorrent and uTorrent, Vuze has a useful built-in search engine that lets you view torrent ratings, so you know that you're getting a good torrent. Unlike BitTorrent, Deluge, and uTorrent, Vuze prompts you to install a transcoder plug-in that lets you transfer content to a PSP or Apple device, or stream to a Tivo box, PlaysStation 3, or Xbox 360. It took approximately 4 hours for the 1 hour-and-10-minute "Four-Eyed Monsters" video to be transcoded, but it played back on my iPad flawlessly.

BitTorrent clients are designed to do one thing—download large files at lightning speed. If you need just that, any of the BitTorrent clients will do. However, if you want a more feature-rich client, one that lets you transcode files and control your torrents remotely, the Editors' Choice award-winning Vuze is the one to choose. —*Jeffrey L. Wilson*

Vuze 4.5

Free

●●●●○

PROS Mac and Windows support. Attractive interface. File transcoding. Vuze remote. Useful search engine.

CONS No Linux support. You have to launch third-party apps to transcode and sync files.

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JOHN C. DVORAK

Disconnect? Never, Thanks to Cell Phones

Back in the 1970s, a product was introduced that would change our lives—the phone answering machine. Little did we know that this new, cool, and seemingly harmless piece of technology would signal the end of a freedom we never quite appreciated–the freedom to disconnect.

Look at us now, 40 years later, with the absurd level of find-me-follow-me-type options on our cell phones and PCs; we'll clearly never be able to disconnect. Ever. Thanks to phone technology, anyone who wants to chat with you—usually not because they have something important to say, but because they're bored—can be guaranteed they will reach you.

The disruptions are never-ending; it's no wonder the economy is in the tank because we're too connected to get anything done.

When the answering-machine revolution began, I bought into it like everyone else; the idea of recording cute messages that were hilarious. But then at one point somewhere in the 1980s, when I was traveling a lot, I noticed my answering machine would often rack up over 100 missed calls. Going through these was a nightmare, and many calls were never returned. And people were more angry about my NOT returning a call than they were about not being able to get hold of me. It was a unique variation of the telephone-tag phenomenon, in which the last person to receive a message holds the hot potato of responsibility. I threw out my answering machine not long after that.

Call-waiting service? Shoot Me Now

I also, long ago, killed my call-waiting service. This too seems like a good idea at first because god knows when an emergency call is going to be made, and heaven forbid if the person gets a busy signal. Does anyone but me find it ludicrous that our communication orientation seems to focus on potential emergencies that are actually few and far between?

Anyway, I eventually determined that call-waiting is a rude service that disrespects anyone you talk to. You are having a

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Thanks to phone technology, anyone who wants to chat with you—usually not because they have something important to say but because they're bored—can be guaranteed they will reach you.

nice chat with someone and the call-waiting noise interrupts the call. So you essentially tell the person, "Hold on. There is another call coming in that I need to check because it may be more important than my call with you. So just hang on the line like a stooge while I check it out, okay?" The other person, of course accepts this insult as normal. You determine who it is and either tell them to call back or you go back to the original person and tell them the other call is more important, so goodbye. How is this in any way civil behavior?

There's No Escaping Voicemail

By the time the cell phone got into full swing in the mid 1990s, I knew that my days of avoiding phone calls was once again going to be threatened by new technology. Most mobile phones have voicemail built in, along with call-waiting and every other sort of annoying feature.

Now I'm not the only person in the world who dislikes all this connectivity and hates being interrupted by phone calls when e-mail would be better. And I have to admit that I do not mind texting on these phones since it does not have to be real-time and you do not have to jump into immediate action because someone decided to call.

Now various online initiatives want you to make a phone connection through the computer. Skype pushed this first. People now call each other over Skype using ridiculous headsets to chat. With video you look like Princess Leah as you jabber away all day.

A lot of people put these conversations on the air as podcasts. And it's now apparent that people have out-chatted their knowledge base. Nobody has anything left to say so they yammer on and on about nothing. It's weird. Hey people, read a book or something. Take a class. Stop talking; you have nothing to talk about. You are talked out.

So what's to come of all this? Well, I cannot see anyone subscribing to my lamentations. It's hopeless. The telephone in all its forms—and this includes Skype—probably represents the biggest societal change since the invention of fire. Forget broadcasting and radio and TV and the Internet. It's this phone paradigm that has changed things. It makes us waste time on unnecessary communications and that is what is ruining the country: distractions.

DVORAK LIVE ON THE WEB **John's Internet TV show airs every Wednesday at 4 p.m. ET on CrankyGeeks.com. You can download back episodes whenever you like.**

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SASCHA SEGAN

Why the Verizon iPhone Isn't the Mobile Messiah

The Internet has gone utterly hysterical, as fully expected, over the news that the iPhone will be available to Verizon subscribers very soon. Why the hype? It's not about technology, it's about drama: Apple and Verizon have strong "personalities" that readers connect with emotionally. Their combined product is something people know, understand, and have been primed to accept.

Rest assured, this product will sell millions. It won't do so immediately, because most U.S. phone owners are stuck in two-year contracts, and they may not be willing to pay high early termination fees to get this new phone. But it will be a big success.

I'm just a little sick of people saying everything Apple does is perfect. Frankly, I'm glad the AT&T exclusivity deal gave other mobile operating systems—most notably Android—time to grow. The AT&T exclusivity lock prevented the smartphone market from turning out like the MP3 player market, where Apple played the game right relatively early on and basically prevented any music player other than the iPod from ever truly taking off.

Hopes, Dreams and the Verizon iPhone

Since Verizon and Apple have such huge places in the public consciousness, they've been painted as the saviors of not only each other's failings, but answers to everything that everyone in America dislikes about their cell phones. Way too many people feel that the "Verizon iPhone" will make perfect calls and get super-fast data connections every time, like some sort of impossible mobile messiah.

Obsessing about this product is also a good way for consumers to cope with the dizzying array of smartphone choices out there. There's something called the "tyranny of choice." You can have too many channels. With a Verizon iPhone, many people will feel they no longer have to worry about whether any other product would be good for them. Just go for the Verizon iPhone. No need to

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Way too many people feel that the Verizon iPhone will make perfect calls and get super-fast data connections every time.

consider options.

However, the Verizon iPhone will probably be neither particularly innovative nor particularly forward-looking; it'll be a new network for an existing phone. Come on, people. The iPhone is great, to be sure, but there are other great smartphones out there as well. They just don't have the personalities, the drama, or the cachet. Who can name the CEO of Samsung? At the end of the day, what the iPhone has that other platforms lack is the emotional connection.

I don't hate the iPhone. I really like the iPhone; I gave the iPhone 4 a 4.5 rating and an Editors' Choice, and I frequently recommend it to people. It's an excellent mobile computer. What I hate is how the iPhone has a vastly disproportionate grip on public consciousness, and how some people seem to think Apple's choices are so ideal that no other options are valid.

Easy Now, Tech Writers

As with much Mac coverage, I wonder how much of this Internet hysteria comes from the fact that a disproportionate number of pundits use iPhones and live in one of two cities. Many blogs seem to be written by people who are deeply, personally affected by this news: They're iPhone users, they live in New York or San Francisco, and for some reason, they've been unwilling to switch to one of the dozens of smartphones offered by one of the three other carriers that haven't been having capacity problems.

But most people don't live in New York or San Francisco. And I can't accept that the iPhone is the only smartphone with any ideas, any quality, or any usability.

The bad taste in my mouth is compounded by the fact that the Verizon iPhone has, over time, been the subject of some really bad technology journalism. For the past three years, we've been seeing high-profile analysts and otherwise-respectable Web sites parrot rumors promulgated by unnamed sources that this thing is coming to market in any given month. Guess what? Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Watch Me Drink The Kool-Aid

I know which side my bread is buttered on. Because Google demands it, I, too, delivered giddy coverage on the announcement. That's clearly what readers want to see, and I work for you, the readers.

But between you and me? Instead of writing about the Verizon iPhone, I'd rather be taking a good look at the probably imperfect, definitely intriguing, possibly confusing, and totally groundbreaking Atrix.

STAY PHONE-SMART **Keep up with the latest on smartphones by reading Sascha's column at go.pcmag.com/segan.**

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DAN COSTA

Ten Android Apps You Need Now

As I wrote a few months back, I sold my Palm Pre back to Sprint and switched to my Android-based Sprint Epic 4G, all in my dogged pursuit of cool apps. Sure, iPhone apps may still dominate, but the Android market is chock full of great applications. Start with these 10 free essential apps and you can't go wrong.

Advanced Task Killer

Android does its own task management, but it needs a little help. Maybe this will be better when the "Froyo" 2.2 update rolls out, but for now I recommend downloading Advanced Task Killer to maximize your battery life and performance. If the phone starts to feel sluggish or the battery life is dropping like a rock, open up ATK to stop any apps you aren't using.

Astrid Tasks

A wise film protagonist once said, "the list is life." Indeed, the only chance any of us has to manage our increasingly complicated lives is with lists to make sense of them. Astrid syncs with just about everything, from Outlook and Google Tasks to Remember the Milk.

EverPaper

You may be familiar with Instapaper, the awesome app that lets you scrape Web pages and download them for later reading, either on the Web or cached on a mobile device. This Instapaper client for Android works great. Anything you save while you are browsing will automatically download and cache on the app.

DoubleTwist

All I ever wanted from my phone was to sync with iTunes and be able to move playlists and music files. Apple wants this to be an exclusive feature of the iPhone and iPods, but thanks to DoubleTwist, it doesn't have to be. Install DoubleTwist on your PC, install it on your phone, and you can access your iTunes playlists in minutes. This app is an iPod killer, pure and simple.

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iPhone apps may still dominate, but the Android market is chock full of great applications.

Slacker
I listen to Slacker every day at work, and for my commute home, I load up Slacker for Android for Internet Radio to go. You have to pay for the premium account in order to cache stations, but streaming is totally free, albeit with a few annoying ads.

Mint
How much is in your checking account? Are you over or under your monthly budget? Mint for Android can keep you in the know. Sure, it is a little creepy having all of your banking information in your pocket, but Mint lets you password protect the app. And remember, Mint doesn't move money. It just shows you what you have and what you have spent.

Kindle for Android 2.0
Amazon has sold a lot of Kindles, but its real strategy is to make Kindle books available on every device: iPad, iPhone, and, of course, Android phones. Kindle for Android shows you color covers of all your books and will remember what page you're on across devices. Recently, it added support for newspapers and magazines.

NewsRob
I have used Google Reader, but I prefer NewsRob for quickly scanning my RSS feeds. The interface is cleaner, and with a few quick clicks, I can send stories to my e-mail or Twitter accounts, EverNote, or even to Instapaper. NewsRob lets me scan 150 to 175 headlines on my 20-minute train ride to work every day. Maybe your information needs aren't quite as intense, but it is still the RSS reader to beat.

DropBox
Everybody says "The Cloud" is the future, but DropBox shows what the cloud can do for you today. I use DropBox as an online storage folder that I can access from multiple computers. Instead of e-mailing myself huge files to work on at home, I upload them to DropBox. With DropBox for Android, I can access these files directly from my phone. Just log into your account, and all your files will be there.

Google Voice
Sprint wanted to charge me $1.99 a month for visual voicemail—basically transcripts of my voicemail messages. But why pay when you can forward unanswered calls to Google Voice and get the same functionality for free? Open up the Google Voice and you can see a transcript of messages and play them back without dialing into voicemail. It can take a few minutes for the service to make a transcription, but being able to intelligently screen calls is worth the wait.

TALK BACK TO DAN **E-mail your thoughts to dan_costa@pcmag.com.**

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WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2011

We look at the most anticipated products and technologies for this coming year. ***By Iyaz Akhtar***

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We're fresh into 2011, and with every new year comes expectations. Some of those expectations are new; others are not: Some are "carryovers" from what we anticipated in 2010 that never materialized. Last year we saw some reinvention in tech (such as the tablet-computer form factor), and we await an influx of mature products in 2011.

There are some sure bets for this coming year: Windows Phone 7 will definitely get a shot in the arm in the U.S. after its Verizon release and subsequent upgrades from Microsoft bring out the full potential of the mobile operating system. And, like clockwork, June will bring another Apple iPhone. We'll see a new edition of Madden Football in stores, continuing to bring realism to the venerable franchise. Another sure bet: Phones that can take advantage of real 4G speeds will enter the market.

Some expectations are certainly not guaranteed, but probable. New technology should make it easier to reinforce your home network by bridging technologies, such as Wi-Fi, PowerLine, and Ethernet. Expect 3D camcorders, which will let you create content for your 3D TV. Still-camera technology is looking to blur the line between point-and-shoot cameras and D-SLRs, with new Micro Four Third cameras and pocket D-SLRs.

We're unlikely to see a major refresh to the Xbox 360 or Sony PlayStation 3 in 2011, con-

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sidering they became super motion-friendly in 2010. Also, we don't think Redmond will be shipping Windows 8 anytime soon.

But here are 12 technologies and products we do expect to see in 2011.



1. VERIZON IPHONE

Apple and Verizon made it official last month, and it makes good sense. The simple fact is the iPhone has gone as far as it can with its exclusive partnership with AT&T. Verizon's shift to LTE paves the way for a phone that can handle data and voice at the same time. Will it be the be-all and end-all of all smartphones? No, but it will make lots of people very happy.

2. SONY PLAYSTATION PHONE

The worst-kept secret of the year has yet to be released, so we're expecting to see it in 2011. With iOS and Android reinvigorating gaming on phones, it only seems natural that a dedicated gaming phone would arrive—and that should be Sony's PlaySta-



LOOKING BACK:
What We Expected, and What We Got

We had high hopes for 2010. Here's a look at what we thought might happen in the tech world last year, and what actually did. ***By Iyaz Akhtar***

All of us geeks had a lot of expectations for 2010, especially in the tech sector. Early on, it looked like Internet video was finally going to hit our TVs in an easy-to-use way. And we had high hopes for new tech from Microsoft and Apple, since both companies were rumored to be working on exciting, not-so-secret projects.

Much of what happened in 2010 was easy to predict. We saw Netflix continue its march to be accessible on virtually every video device imaginable. The AT&T stranglehold on the iPhone continued, although a Verizon version was talked about more than a couple of times during the year (and it's now rumored for a 2011 launch). The television manufacturers pushed 3DTV as the next big thing, but it hardly made a splash. And the gaming industry got a boost, with *continued →*

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tion Phone. Unfortunately, shaky past relationships between Sony Ericsson and U.S. telecoms may mean that this phone won't hit the States.





3. CHROME OS NOTEBOOKS

Google announced Chrome OS was not ready for the public just yet, but it did release a version to a select few. From our tests, we have seen why the current version of Chrome OS isn't consumer-friendly just yet. In 2011, Samsung and Acer will release notebooks running Google's desktop operating system. The real question is whether the Google-based hardware will take off.

4. NET NEUTRALITY RULES IN PRACTICE

The FCC recently laid out some groundwork, setting up the foundations of net neutrality. So in 2011, expect ISPs to bend, twist, and stretch any term that has any leeway. "Disclosure" is required, but there are no parameters for that just yet. There cannot be any "unreasonable discrimination" against lawful network traffic. Expect a long process defining what is "reasonable" and what isn't.

5. BLACKBERRY PLAYBOOK

RIM is hoping the PlayBook will be a serious player in the tablet game. The specs sound great: 1-GHz dual-core processor, 1GB RAM, 7-inch touchscreen, and dual cameras. Added to that is a new OS that adds some much-needed flash to the BlackBerry world. RIM says this is the future of BlackBerry, so we can't wait to see it in its final form.



6. MAC APP STORE

Last month Apple opened the Mac App

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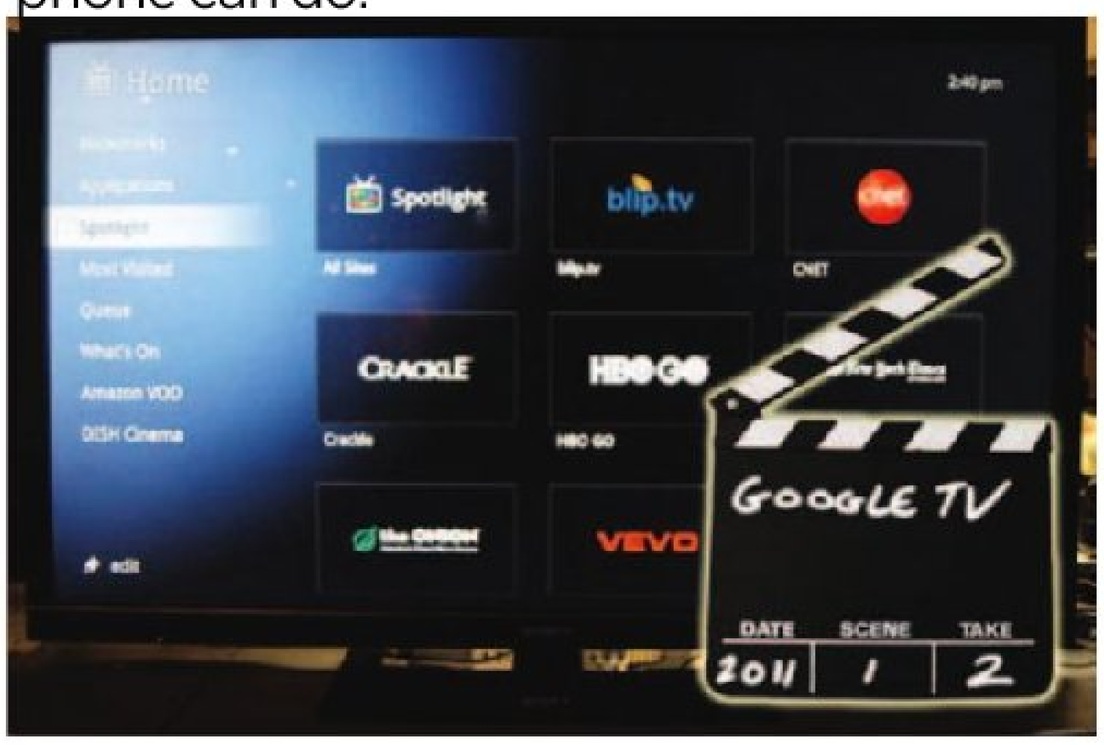
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Store. Will people buy into an app-store model for what has traditionally been an open environment? In the past, you would download an app and drag-and-drop to your Applications folder to install. Why change now? Apple gets a cut of Mac App Store revenue, and the store could lead to increased development of applications for Mac OS X. Is Apple being sneaky and trying to bolster its computer business?

7. PHONES WITH DUAL-CORE PROCESSORS

Cell phones have really become tiny computers that fit in your pocket. The first dual-core phone, the LG Optimus 2X, is expected in 2011 and will probably not be alone in that category. Dual-core phones should mean even more sophisticated applications running on phones and speedier performance for apps that push the limits of what a phone can do.



8. GOOGLE TV: TAKE 2

Google TV-based hardware was expected all over CES, but a report states that Google

2010

both the Xbox and PlayStation consoles gaining motion-control peripherals.

There were also quite a few surprising reports in 2010—and questions and rumors were rampant. Did one of the most secretive companies in the tech industry have a huge leak? Why would a search giant start its own social network? Would a social-networking site make a phone?

Information can spread like wildfire thanks to the Internet. One juicy tweet (even if it was later deleted) could feed a frenzy. Sometimes, the information was reliable, and other times, a rumor turned out to be just a rumor.

Since we're looking ahead at the coming year, we thought it would also be fun to look back at the biggest rumors in the technology business in 2010, and see what turned out to be truth and what turned out to be fiction.



The Apple Tablet

The rumors of Apple's tablet device had been swirling for years. *continued →*

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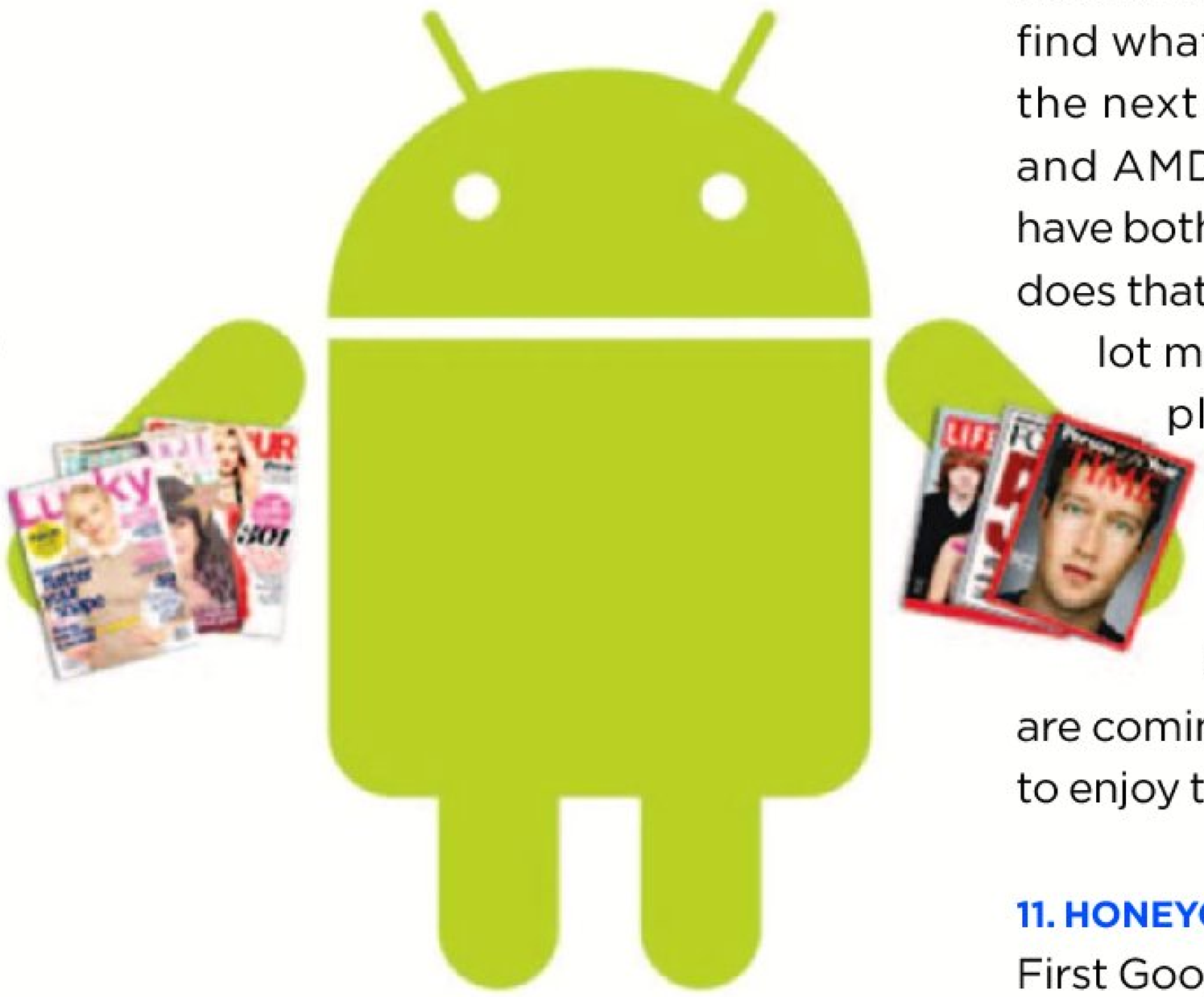
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asked hardware partners to hit the brakes on any device using Google TV. Apparently, Google TV needs some refinement. Odds are that a refreshed version will be ready next year; we hope it lives up to the fanfare that accompanied Google TV's launch.

9. HULU FOR MAGAZINES

Major players in the publishing world, like Conde Nast and Time Inc., are gearing up to launch their own application on Android to handle the digital distribution of their magazines. This has been rumored for almost two years now, but with Honeycomb tablets in the pipeline, 2011 looks like the year for the storefront. Why Android? It's simple: there's an ongoing disagreement regarding info sharing and revenue between Apple and the publishers, but no such problems exist with the Android platform.





10. INTEL'S SANDY BRIDGE AND AMD'S FUSION PROCESSORS

Ask around the PC Mag offices and you'll find what people are most excited about: the next generation of processors. Intel and AMD will introduce processors that have both a CPU and GPU on one die. What does that mean? In a nutshell, you will get a lot more power for tasks like HD video playback and working with large photographs without necessarily needing discrete graphics. The difference in the experience will be significant. AMD's processors are coming to laptops first, so we'll be able to enjoy the benefits on the go.

11. HONEYCOMB TABLETS

First Google showed off a Honeycomb tab-

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let, then Motorola wowed the crowds at CES with its Xoom tablet running Honeycomb, in case you don't know, is Google's Android 3.0 operating system. It's only a matter of time before they actually come to market. With Android becoming more tailored for the tablet market, expect actual competition to the iPad instead of the lackluster offerings 2010 brought.

12. EVEN MORE TABLETS

The year 2010 saw the arrival of the iPad, but few true competitors. In the coming year we will definitely see the major players finally hit their stride, and we'll have a lot more tablets on our hands. We're expecting HP to release a tablet using webOS. Samsung will keep churning out devices, including tablets that run Windows 7. While the other guys are busy trying to make their first successful tablet, Apple will offer up the "iPad 2", the second iteration of its wildly popular tablet.

2010

After the introduction of the iPhone, the much-rumored Apple tablet seemed inevitable. In January, Apple finally introduced the Apple iPad. The not-a-notebook/not-a-smartphone device confused many upon its introduction, but Apple managed to make the tablet form factor cool enough for a bunch of companies to join the tablet game.



A Windows Mobile Reboot

The Windows Mobile operating system looked antiquated when compared with Android, iOS, and webOS. We all expected that after the success of Windows 7 on the desktop, Microsoft would focus on fixing its floundering Windows Mobile OS. The company didn't just fix its old OS, it threw the OS out the window and started from scratch. In February, Steve Ballmer introduced Windows Phone 7 Series to the world. Unfortunately, Windows Phone 7-powered phones were not released *continued →*

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2010

until November and were met with a muted response on the opening day of sales.

Microsoft's Project Pink

We expected a Microsoft phone, but who could have anticipated the bizarre journey of the Kin, previously known as "Project Pink?" Microsoft introduced its phone project to the public in April, killed it by June, and then revived it in November as a slightly different offering.

The social phone was a great idea when envisioned years ago, but in the 2010 marketplace, the original Kin phones baffled many with high cost plans and no apps. Internal changes at Microsoft and the undesirable service plans led to the end of the Kin line until its November revival as a "feature phone," with a heavily modified OS.

The Boxee Box

Back in November 2009, Boxee announced that it would build a set-top box, so you could watch Internet video on your television. At CES 2010, the Boxee Box was given a release date of Q2 of 2010. Unfortunately, the Boxee Box did not ship to consumers until November 2010. During the delay, other media-streaming devices like the Roku XDS and a revamped Apple TV were released at much lower price points, effectively killing any momentum the Boxee Box may still have had left.



Google's Social Network: Take 2

The Wall Street Journal reported back in February that Google would add social networking functions to Gmail. February saw the launch of Google Buzz, a Twitter-like messaging service for sharing information with friends. Buzz was met with backlash, however. Why? Gmail users were automatically opted in, and turning off this new feature was not easily accessible at launch. This was Google's second attempt at the social-networking space, with Orkut as its predecessor.

The Second Wave of Tablets

Apple's iPad was such a hit that almost every electronics company was rumored to be working on tablets of their own. Aside from the Samsung Galaxy Tab, there were no serious competitors for the Apple iPad in 2010. Of course, many more companies have announced that they will be releasing tablets this year, and some to hit a second wave.

Palm's Impending Demise

Many a geek has a soft spot for Palm, but the company continued its death spiral. Even a Verizon release of its webOS phones

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couldn't put a stop to it. In April, HP bought Palm for the paltry sum of $1.6 billion—essentially, for webOS.

The Next iPhone

We anticipated a new iPhone, but no one expected how soon we'd see it. Apple's reputation for secrecy took a huge hit when the iPhone 4 was leaked in April—two months before its official launch. When first seen, the new iPhone design had people buzzing. After the phone was released, the design was again in the news, but this time for "Antennagate."

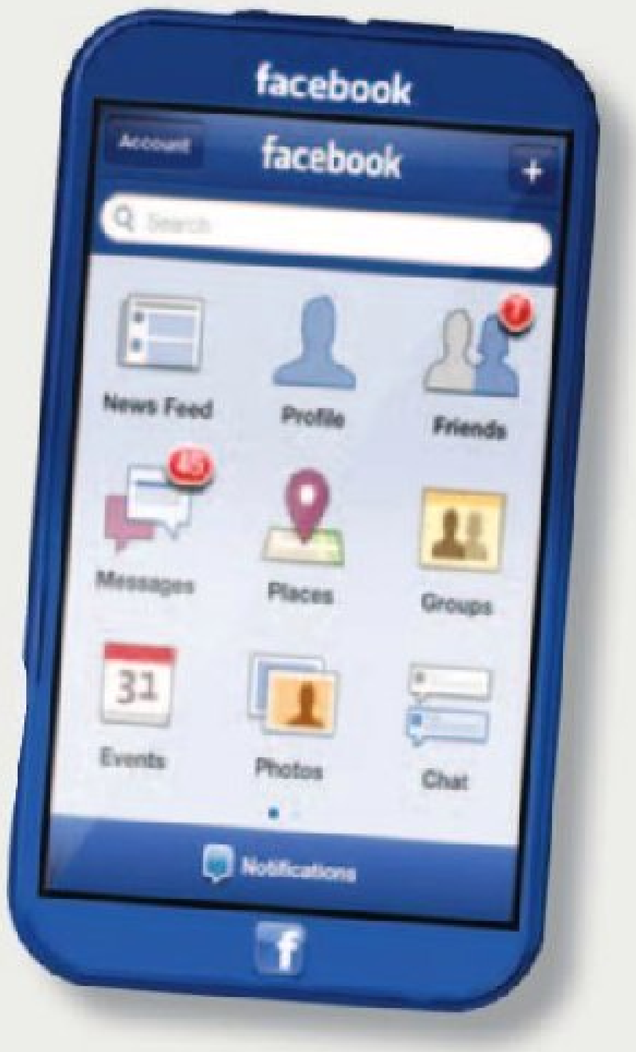
Google's Social Network: Take 3

Google Buzz was a huge disappointment, but many expected Google to try again in the social-networking space. In June, rumors of a property named "Google Me" started popping up after a tweet by Kevin Rose referenced the project. The tweet was removed, but the news was already out.

Apart from the name, not much was known about how this network would work. The best guess is that Google will somehow unify its blogging, messaging, and video- and photo-sharing services to build a serious competitor to Facebook. The latest reports have Google Me launching in 2011.

The Facebook Phone

Facebook is already available on virtually every phone, but, back in September, reports broke that a Facebook-branded phone was coming. It was just a false alarm, as Facebook was more interested in fleshing out its mobile platforms and not branding hardware. The November announcement promised things like access to Facebook Places, Facebook Deals, and the now famous "The iPad's not mobile" quote by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg.



Google Chrome OS

Google announced Chrome OS in July 2009. While developer versions of the operating system were available, it was rumored that Chrome OS would show up in the fourth quarter of this year. Sure enough, Google introduced the OS and hardware last week, but the company "warned" that the OS was not 100 percent ready. A pilot program will give early adopters access, but the general public won't be able to pick up Chrome OS laptops until 2011.

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15 AWESOME VALENTINE'S DAY GIFTS For Under $150

By Will Greenwald

If your sweetheart is a tech geek like you are, you have plenty of options for Valentine's Day gifts this year. In fact, perhaps too many. Depending on what you're looking for, you could end up spending $500 for a piece of junk, or picking up a gem for just $20. With a target top price of $150, we found 15 products that strike the perfect balance: they're sure to leave a lasting impression, but won't bust your budget.

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Microsoft Kinect for Xbox 360



Now you can play video games without pressing a button or picking up a controller. Microsoft's Editors' Choice-winning Kinect is a unique new control system for the Xbox 360 that uses a depth-sensing camera with voice commands and face recognition to offer completely hands-free gaming. And it's a blast.

$149.99 list

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Apple TV

The newest version of Apple TV doesn't have onboard storage, but it offers one of the best selections of online content you can get for under $100. This tiny box can access Netflix, Youtube, Flickr, MobileMe, and Apple's own impressive video rental service, and can stream your iTunes-based movies and music from your computer, iPod Touch, iPhone, or iPad straight to your TV.

$99 direct

CLICK HERE FOR MORE

Amazon Kindle (Wi-Fi)



Amazon's little e-reader got a more affordable little brother a few months ago, and it's more appealing than ever. While the Wi-Fi-only Kindle lacks the standard model's 3G Whispernet access, its 4GB internal storage and ability to access any AT&T hotspot in the country ensures you'll never be far from your favorite books, magazines, and newspapers.

$139 direct

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Magellan RoadMate 2035

This budget-minded GPS device manages to pack all the important navigation features into its 5-inch frame. It plots routes well, gives voice directions, and even includes lifetime-free traffic alerts.

$145 street

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Canon PowerShot A3000 IS

The A3000 IS is one of Canon's least expensive digital cameras, but it still packs a satisfying feature set into its small, very pocketable frame. Its optical image stabilization helps reduce blur when shooting, and an easy mode makes snapshots simple. Image quality is great for its price, too.

$149 street

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Samsung Freeform II SCH-R360

This QWERTY slab-style cell phone is an inexpensive way to treat your sweetheart. It's no smartphone, but its BlackBerry-like design combined with MetroPCS' inexpensive unlimited voice/text/data plans offer plenty of affordable communication options.

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Altec Lansing Octiv Duo M202

How often do you see a 'his and hers' iPod dock? The Octiv Duo M202 sports not one, but two iPod connections, so you and your loved one can keep your iPods or iPhones charged and playing music harmoniously. There's even a shuffle feature that mixes up tracks between the two docked devices.

$100 street

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Nintendo DSi

Nintendo has maintained a dynasty that's ruled over handheld gaming for two decades, and the current king is the DSi. Not only does the dual-screen system offer a library of hundreds of Nintendo DS games, but even more are available online through Nintendo's DSiWare service. With hits like New Super Mario Bros., Dragon Quest IX, Pokemon Heart Gold/Soul Silver, and Mario Kart DS, the DSi is sure to please any on-the-go gamer who doesn't already have one.

$149.99 direct

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Kodak Playsport Video Camera

Inexpensive video cameras are a dime a dozen these days, but few can take the sort of abuse the Kodak Playsport is designed to withstand. This rugged little pocket shooter captures 1080p HD video and 5-megapixel still photos, but unlike the others, it's waterproof up to 10 feet, so it'll work for the pool, the beach, or the slopes this holiday season.

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Aliph Jawbone Icon

Not only is Aliph's Jawbone Icon one of the most flashy and fashionable Bluetooth headsets available, it's also the first to offer integrated, downloadable apps. Through Aliph's MyTalk features, you can download additional voices for announcing calls on the earpiece, or access services like Jott voice-to-text.

$99.99 list

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Powermat Home & Office

Powermat is the first, and so far still the best, at charging portable electronics without wires. Just hook your cell phone or media player up to a small adapter or sleeve and toss it on the pad. The Powermat Home & Office pad can charge up to three devices at once, and comes with the Powercube adapter for charging nearly anything through a short cable.

$79.99 list

CLICK HERE FOR MORE

Bose IE2 Headphones

Multiple earpieces and surprisingly good bass response will satisfy all but the most finicky music lovers. If you want to spend a little extra, Bose offers cell phone-friendly versions, the MIE2 and MIE2i (for iPhones and iPods), which feature in-line mics for taking calls.

$100 street

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Sennheiser CX 680 Sports

Thanks to a waterproof, sweatproof, and snug-fitting earpiece design, the Sennheiser CX 680 Sports are the ideal earphones for the fitness nuts on your list.
$70 street

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Verbatim InSight (500 GB)

Half-terabyte external hard drives aren't hard to come by, but only the Verbatim InSight includes a handy e-ink display to show you, at a glance, how much space you have left.
$80 street

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LG Optimus S

The LG Optimus S might be one of the least expensive Android 2.2 smartphones available, but it certainly doesn't skimp on features; this affordable little phone can even serve as a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot.
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Why You Should Buy Refurbished Computers

If you've never bought one before, you'd be surprised at how refurbed PCs are like new, if you buy them from a reputable vendor. ***By Eric Griffith***

We've all had the experience of buying something expensive, getting it home, taking it out of the box, and finding that something just isn't right. Maybe it's scratched or dented. Maybe it lacks a feature you desperately wanted. Maybe the product in question just doesn't work properly. And in all of these cases, the natural thing to do is return it.

So what happens to it then?

When it comes to technology products like desktop and laptop PCs—even printers, phones, and more—unless they are beyond repair, the chances are what you send back will ultimately end up going back on the shelves. And, it's likely you'll see it at a much better price.

That's not to say these for-sale-again products are in bad shape. Most manufacturers go out of their way to make sure they work like new, even if they're not. Of course, you need to be careful. After all, there's no agreed-upon definition for refurbished, remanufactured, reconditioned, preowned, or even used when it comes to computer equipment. But with common-sense shopping, you can probably find a powerful system in "like-new" condition that will save you big bucks.

Reconditioning a PC

When you sell a car, it's pretty much "what you see is what you get." Sure, you can

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RECENT REFURB DEALS A Dell Inspiron M101z laptop, with a 1.7-GHz AMD Athlon II Neo K125 processor for between $379 and $399; an iPod touch, 32GB (previous generation) for $229; and a Lenovo ThinkCentre M90z, with a 2.8-GHz Intel Pentium Dual-Core G6950 processor for $968.80.

change the tires and swap out some parts, but essentially, the wear and tear is there to stay. That's why you can't turn back the odometer. The same is true for a PC, (minus the odometer...and wouldn't that be convenient?).

If you return a car or PC within a month of purchase, it would likely be difficult to find out what's gone on with either. Thankfully, the PC is a lot easier to get back to a state of "almost-new." After all, who knows what's gone on physically and where it's gone on the Internet?

Vendors will put it through tests to make sure that whatever the returnee didn't like is the only problem, and then they'll do what they must to fix the system. Hard drives are wiped clean and the operating system is freshly installed. If it's a desktop, it will probably get a new mouse and a keyboard. Then the system gets tested and verified again, just like it did before it went out in the first place. It goes into a fresh box and is put out for sale. Legally, it can't be called brand-new, and that means it typically sells at a lower price, even though, for

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LIKE NEW IPOD A refurbished iPod Classic 16GB was on Apple's site recently for $209.

all intents and purposes, it *is* new. Some refurbished PCs are actually new because they never came out of the box (maybe the order was canceled, for example). Such "open box" deals may be the best deals you'll find.

This is nothing like buying direct from a previous owner—the kind of scenario you'd get with eBay or Craigslist. Generally, this is a bargain you can trust. Why? If it comes from the manufacturer, it will once again have a guarantee—at least, for a while. So if something goes wrong—and that usually happens early—you're covered. (If it doesn't come with a warranty, skip it.)

We suggest getting a refurb directly from the manufacturer, if you can. That way, the components replaced during reconditioning should be the same. A third-party refurbisher may use something different. In the end, go with someone you trust. Make sure you triple-check the return policy either way, so you don't get stuck with someone else's lemon just because you had some blind faith.

Downsides to Refurbs

The reasons not to get a refurbished PC can be both practical and psychological.

Let's start with the latter. If you want a computer more for style than substance, or if you can't bear not having the latest and greatest (no, we're not going to call you a snob), you might want to avoid refurbs. Let's be honest, though: Every computer is out of date the moment you take it out of the box, so maybe you shouldn't be so quick to write off a refurb.

If you're the type to harbor suspicions about what *might* have been wrong with the product in the first place, or can't stand other people touching your stuff, even before it was yours, then a refurb might not be the way to go.

Practicality leads to the biggest downside of all: You cannot customize your order if it's a refurb. In an age when configuration options exist on just about every Web site when ordering PCs, not being able to specify exactly what you want might be disheartening for you. Then again, millions of people do it when they buy off-the-shelf retail PCs every day. If you really need to

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DELL OUTLET Its "Same as New Warranty and Support includes a 21-day return policy.

specify every component, consider the trade-off: Buy the refurb on the cheap and put that savings toward upgrad it with new components like a bigger hard drive, more memory, or a better graphics card.

Also, if your refurb is a desktop PC, make sure to check that it comes with the external necessities: a keyboard, a mouse, and a monitor. If you already own these, make sure the connectors are all there. You can't use your ancient PS/2 keyboard if your brand-new PC only has USB ports.

In fact, a refurbished PC may not be installed with the software you wanted. It may not even come on separate discs. Be sure to ask about that.

Where to Find Refurbs

The major online PC retailers, from Apple to Dell to Lenovo and beyond, almost always have a part of their online store devoted to selling reconditioned systems at a discount. Here are a few to check out.

Dell Outlet

The Texas PC powerhouse has a site full of refurbished systems; it even seems to rival the size of its site for brand new systems. The refurbs come with a "Same as New Warranty and Support" that includes a 21-day return policy. The types of PCs offered fall into three categories: Certified Refurbs that are all tested, but may have some blemishes; Previously Ordered New, which are returns that were never opened; and Scratch and Dent items that perform great but don't look as good as the other two.

Apple Store

Look for the "Special Deals" area on the Apple Store home page to find Refurbished Macs, iPods, and iPads, plus clearance items. Apple promises it tests and certifies all refurbished products and includes a 1-year warranty. You can also purchase an AppleCare protection plan, of course. You usually get 14 days to return Apple items. Unlike the

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APPLE STORE

Refurbished products include Macs, iPods, iPads, and more, and usually come with a 14-day return policy.

Dell store, Apple's refurb list is very limited, so if you see a deal, pounce on it.

HP Outlet

The site says "While supplies last," and HP is not kidding. As of this writing, there was only one laptop and seven desktops available on the site (plus 14 printers —after all, it's HP). The company has a standard 21-day return/exchange after delivery.

Lenovo Outlet Store

The laptop maker has four kinds of refurbs: New items that were canceled orders, redistributed items that were returned unopened or unused, refurbished items that may or may not have been used and were then tested and spruced up as needed, and Scratch & Dent items that have gone through the full process to get back to usability. There are a lot of ThinkPads avail-



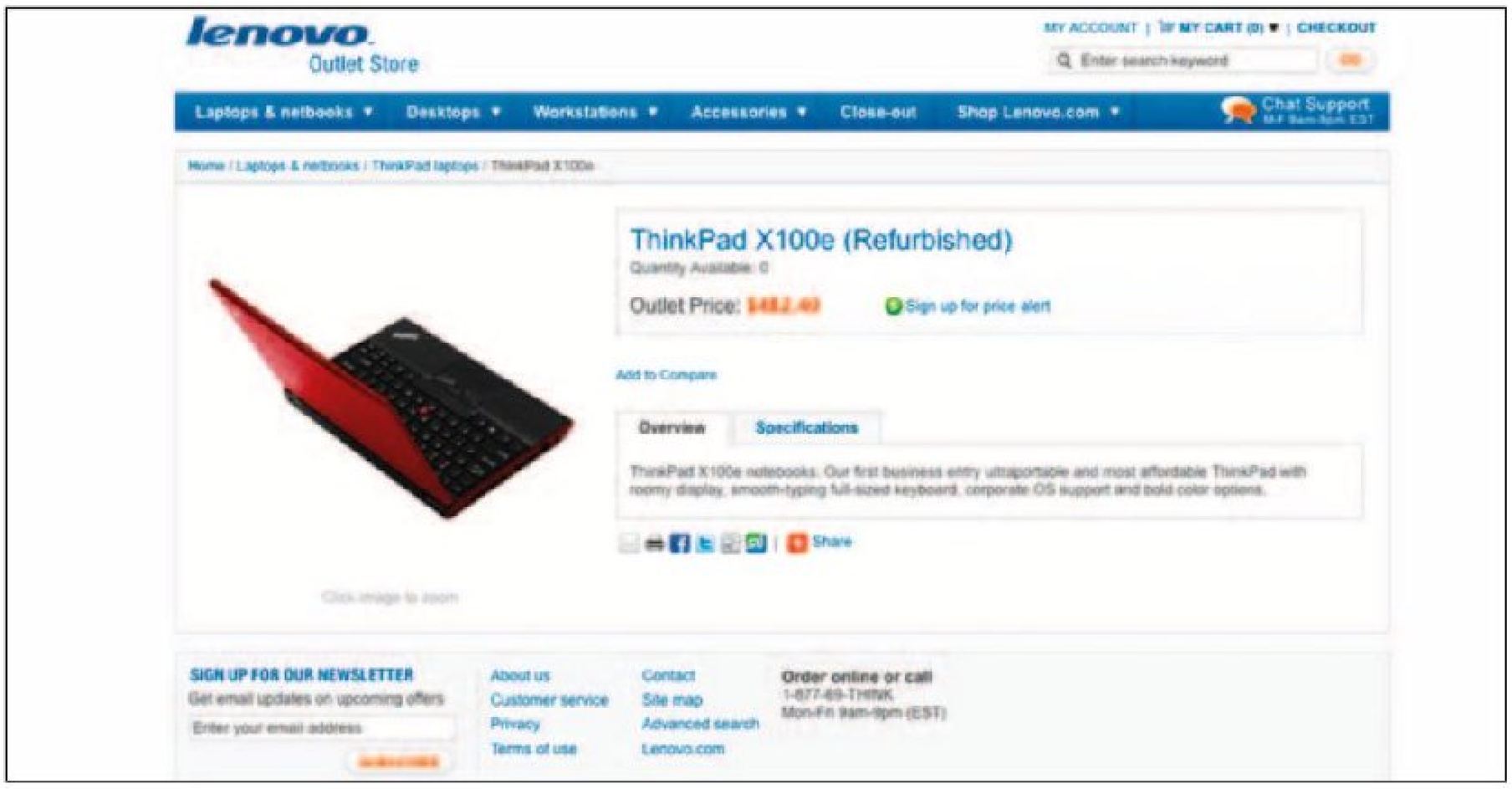
HP OUTLET

You can find refurbished PCs, but mostly printers on HP's outlet site. Products include a 21-day return policy.

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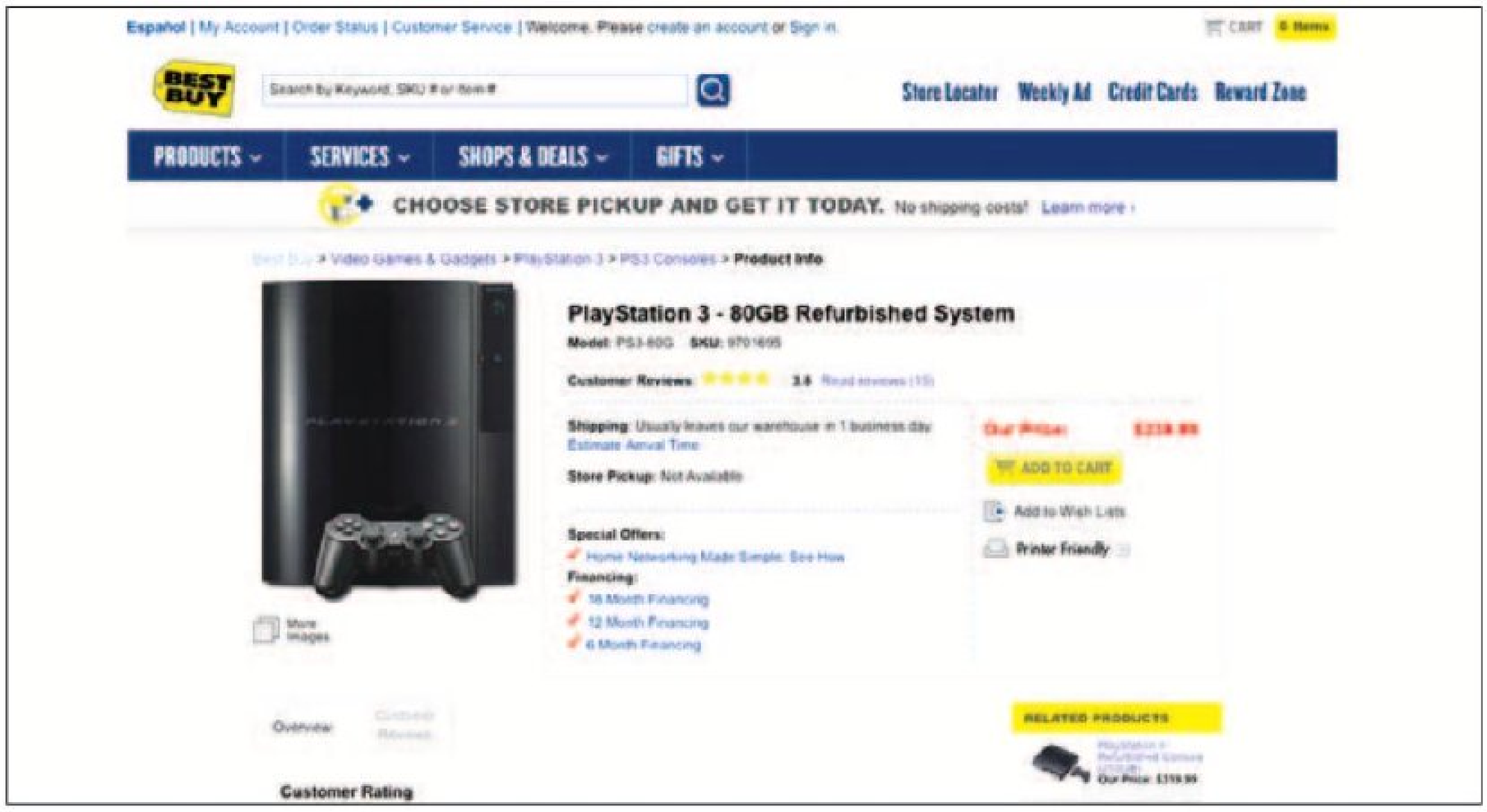
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LENOVO OUTLET STORE

Refurbished ThinkPads abound on this site, and all come with a 21-day return policy.



BEST BUY

If you're shopping for more than just PCs, you can find refurbished Xbox 360s, GPS devices, and other consumer electronics products here.

able here, and each is clearly labeled with one of those four categories. All refurbs have a limited warranty of one year and can be returned within 21 days of invoice.

Beyond PCs

When considering refurbished products, you don't need to stop at just PCs. Best Buy's online outlet center features refurbished Xbox 360s, GPS units, and more. Click any kind of electronics on Amazon.com, scroll down, and under "Condition" look for the link to "Used" or "Refurbished" to find some deals; do a search on "Refurb Kindles" to find a deal on the popular ebook reader. Retail stores will likely carry some refurbs on shelves as well.

Look around and don't get locked into "new", when "like new" can be just as good and save you some cash. ■

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Set Up A Home Network In 5 Simple Steps

Networking a new tech toy has become the modern equivalent of the dreaded "some assembly required." But setting up a secure, robust network isn't hard. Really. ***By Samara Lynn***

Since you're a PCMag.com reader, chances are you often have shiny new tech toys that need to be connected to your network. Maybe it's an 802.11n wireless router, a NAS device, a new netbook, or an Apple iPad. The introduction of a new piece of hardware is the perfect time to set up or reorganize your home network.

For many people, this is the most painful part of the tech experience. No matter what networking hardware makers tell you, setting up your home network involves more than just purchasing and plugging in a router. But that doesn't mean that it has to be a nightmare, either. You *can* set up a managed and centrally controlled network in a few (relatively) easy steps. You just have to know what you're doing and do it the right way.

And it's worth doing it right. It's worth learning how to configure proper IP addressing, lock down the network from intruders, create accounts for everyone who gets access, and set up sharing for files and folders. If you can do these things (and you can), you'll have a centrally controlled, robust network with better security. Plus, having a good handle on your network allows for more efficient control over remote access to devices and data on the network. For parents, the ability to see what children are accessing and control what they access is possible if you have a structured home network.

Of course, the wireless router is, in many respects, the center point of a home network. Although vendors such as Cisco/Linksys are making router setup easier than ever with products such as the Cisco Valet router, you can still burrow deeper into the router's configuration pages to establish security,

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MAKE THE CONNECTION

First things first, connect your router to your cable or DSL modem.

access controls, and granular management.

You can set up a tightly managed, secure home network. All you have to do is follow these five steps.

1. Connect Your Router

The router is the gateway between the Internet and your home network. It is also the means by which all the devices on your network communicate with one another. Our How to Buy a Wireless Router story can give you the lowdown on how to choose the right router for your home's particular needs, or you can just stick with our current Editors' Choice for home routers , the Cisco Valet Plus.

In general, go with an 802.11n router for the best performance. You will also want to ensure that any device that will connect to the router also has an 802.11n network adapter. These devices are your network "clients." New laptops and netbooks already have 802.11n adapters. For older laptops or desktops you can purchase compatible "n" adapters. Once you've got the right router, you have to set it up, and the first step is to physically connect your router to a modem provided by your ISP with an Ethernet cable.

- Unplug or turn off your modem.
- Power up your wireless router and connect the network cable that most likely comes with it into the port on the router that is labeled "Internet" or "WAN."
- Connect the other end to the cable or DSL modem and power up the modem.
- Don't attempt to connect any devices such as laptops until you have a good strong, signal indicating a WAN connection on both the router and modem. Note that if you want a custom-length Ethernet cable, it's cheap and easy—if you follow the steps in our story How to Make Ethernet Cables.

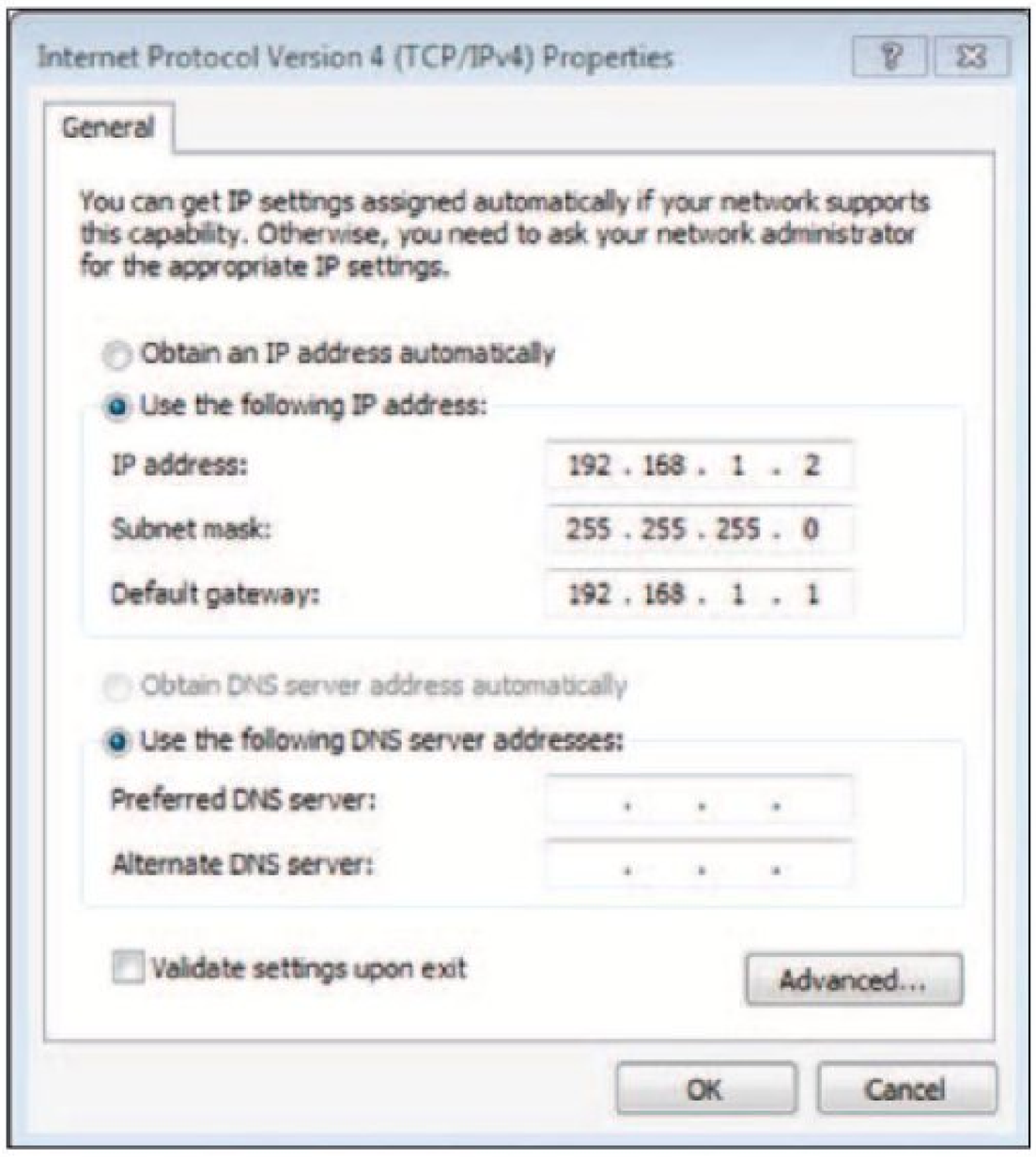
2. Access the Router's Interface and Lock It Down

The next step involves getting into the router's interface (called by some companies the management console). This is done by connecting a laptop to the router and then accessing the interface via browser.

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ACCESSING THE INTERFACE To configure your router settings, use the default IP settings of your router to access its interface via browser.

How to do this? Routers ship with a default IP address, administrator account and password. For example, most Cisco/Linksys routers have the default IP address of 192.168.1.1 and the default administrator account is "admin" and the password is "admin." What you want to do is change your laptop's IP settings to match those of the router's to connect to it for configuration. This allows the laptop to communicate with the router, so you can access your router's software for setup via the laptop. Connect an Ethernet cable to one of the LAN ports on the router and the other end to the Ethernet port of your laptop. On a Windows 7 machine that's connected to the router by Ethernet, for example, you would go into the Control Panel and click on "Network and Internet" and then "Network and Sharing Center."

- From the left-hand window, click on "Change adapter settings."
- Right-click on "Local Area Connection" (not the Wireless Network Connection) and select "Properties."
- Highlight "Internet Protocol Version 4 (TCP/IP v4), and once again, click on "Properties."
- Set the first radio button to "Use the following IP address:" and enter the browser's default address.
- Once you've applied the changes, open up a browser and go to the default Web address, username, and password, such as, for a Cisco/Linksys router, the address http://192.168.1.1, account name "admin," and password "admin." Then you are all set to configure security and other settings.

Most router companies use the same default IP address, admin account, and passwords on all their routers. See our table of the most commonly used ones (at the bottom of the opposite page), but your router's documentation will tell you the specific IP address and account information.

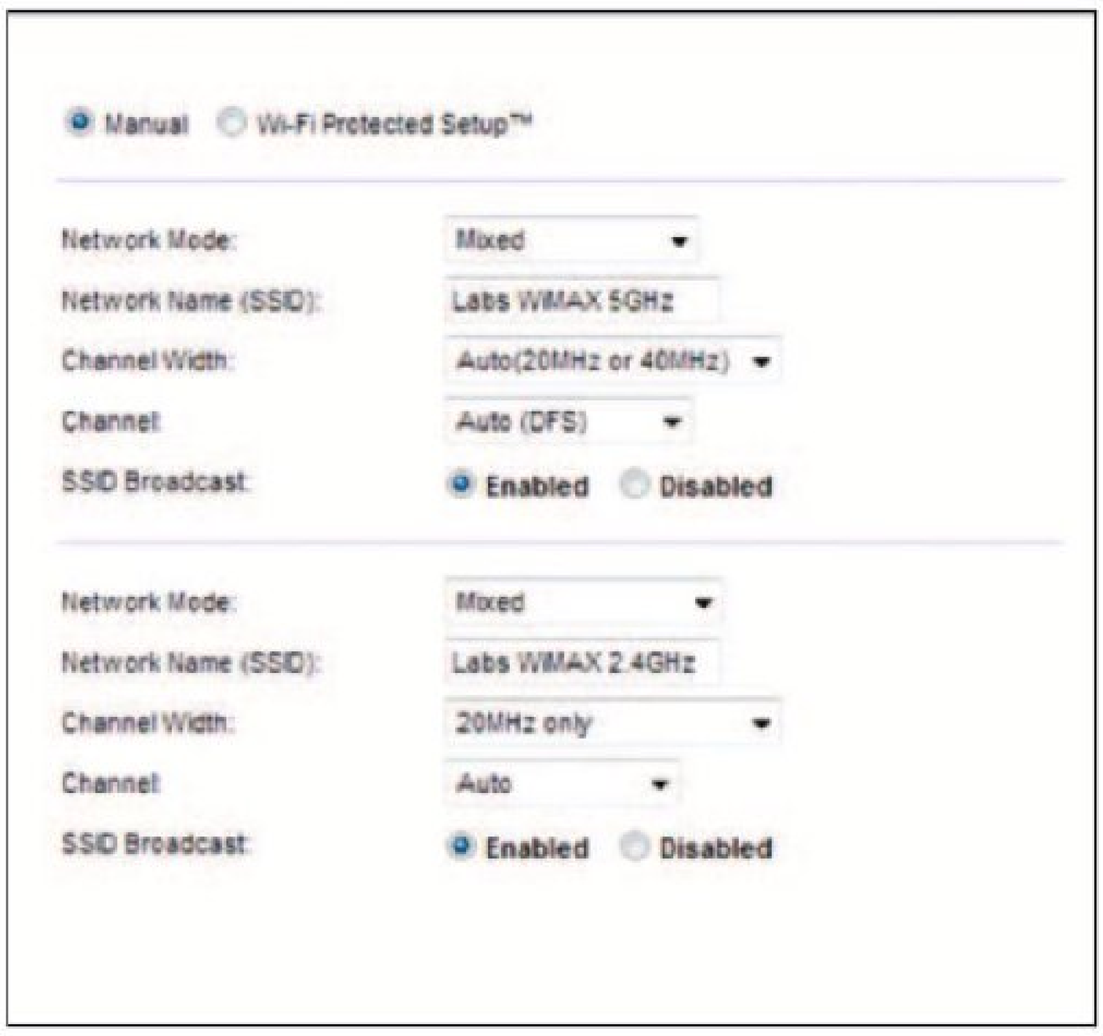
3. Configure Security and IP Addressing

After you've accessed the router, the next order of business is getting the security, SSID and IP addressing settings right. Getting security right is a must, unless you want a neighbor stealing your bandwidth

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DO IT MANUALLY Instead of using Wi-Fi Protected Setup when configuring security, opt to configure it manually to have more control.

and possibly your data. IP addressing is important because these addresses are used for devices on your network to communicate with the routers. You make all of these changes within the router's management interface. These settings are typically under the "Basic" settings of the interface. They may also be under "Security" or "Wireless Settings." Router interfaces vary, so check with the manufacturer if you can't find the settings to configure the following steps within the interface pages:

• Change the default administrator password. Some networking equipment forces you to do so, once you've accessed the Web-based interface, but many consumer routers don't. The settings for the admin password are usually under the "System" tab or area or page of the interface. You can just enter in a new password in the new password field.

• Change the router's default SSID. The SSID is the broadcasted name of your wireless network. That's the name that shows up as the network's name when you scan for available networks. Use a unique name that your neighbors aren't using for their routers, to avoid confusion.

• Assign security. Newer routers may be set by default to automatically configure security by using WPS (Wi-Fi Protected Setup). Since the goal here is to have full control of your network, switch from "WPS" to "Manual." Once in manual mode, go into the router's wireless security page. There is no excuse, except in very limited circumstances when dealing with legacy technology, not to use WPA/WPA2. WPA security requires clients connecting to it to use a key or passphrase, which you create within the

MOST COMMONLY USED ADDRESSES, USERNAMES, AND PASSWORDS

ROUTER	ADDRESS	USERNAME	PASSWORD
3Com	http://192.168.1.1	Admin	admin
D-Link	http://192.168.0.1	admin	
Cisco/Linksys	http://192.168.1.1	admin	admin
Netgear	http://192.168.0	admin	password

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router's interface on the same page you set up security. Some routers allow you to enter a string of 64 hexadecimal digits, which provides strong security, but most have you create an 8- to 63-letter passphrase. If you are creating a passphrase (or password), be sure to create a strong password that would be hard to guess. Check out "Password Protection: How to Create Strong Passwords" for good advice on generating passwords.

• Set up IP addressing. For most networks, the router can be kept at its default DHCP setting. This means the router will dole out IP addresses to clients that connect to the network, leaving you without any IP addressing management to do. For extra security, it's not a bad idea to change the router's default IP, making it even more resistant to snooping. Remember, hackers know the default IP addresses of the most common routers (even though it's really tough for them to get to them because your IP addresses on your network are private). For instance, I would change my Cisco/Linksys router's network from 192.168.1.1 to something like 192.168.1.3.

• Disconnect the laptop and reboot it. When the laptop comes back from reboot, you should see the SSID name of your wireless network and be able to connect to it with the passphrase you created. Congratulations—you're connected wirelessly. But you're not done with your setup yet!

Advanced Steps: DHCP Reservation

For those who anticipate connecting servers, NAS devices or any device that you may access from outside your network, best practice is to configure DHCP Reservation. That may sound intimidating to newbies, but all it means is that you are telling the router that a specific device always uses a specific, reserved IP address.

For example, my router IP is 192.168.1.1; I can give my email-server an IP address of 192.168.1.2. I can give a third device, say my NAS server for instance, an IP address of 192.168.1.3, and so on. You don't want to change the first three sets of numbers, though, for most basic home networks. IP addressing has specific rules about formatting, so you want to retain the first three sets of numbers, called "octets."

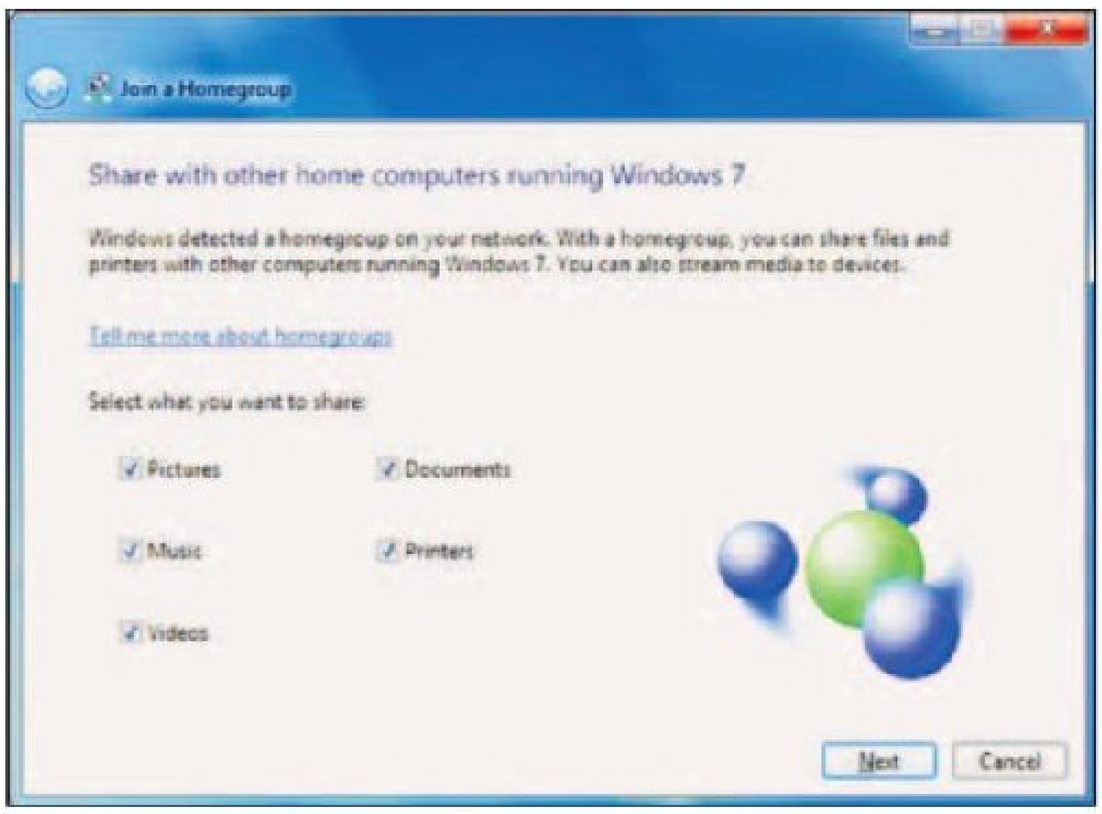
You also will want to put in the device's MAC address that you are reserving. The MAC address is usually printed on a sticker affixed to a device. Again, reserving the IP addresses means those addresses will never be distributed to clients via DHCP and are "held" for the devices you specify. Reserving IP addresses is good practice for devices you want to access remotely, because otherwise when the IP-address leases expire you won't be able to perform remote access.

Don't forget to assign the reserved IPs as static addresses on the devices for which you made reservations. There are various ways to do this, on Windows servers and machines you can assign an IP address though the Network settings Control Panel. Other devices, such as NASes, have areas in their management console where you can assign an IP address. It really depends on what device you want to set a static address for, so check with the vendor if you aren't sure.

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THE JOY OF HOMEGROUPS In Win 7, you can easily create groups of PCs that can share files such as photos and videos, as well as printers.

If you are using the router as an access point, bridge, or signal extender for an existing router on a network, you will want to turn off DHCP completely. Having two routers performing DHCP on the same network can result in myriad connection issues. However, for most home networks, having the router set to use DHCP will suffice.

4. Set Up Sharing and Control

Now that you have a network set up, you can set up a way for everyone to access data on the network. With Windows 7 clients, this is achieved by creating a HomeGroup, a user-friendly way to create a workgroup. A HomeGroup is a group of computers on a home network that can share files and printers. Using a HomeGroup makes sharing easier. You can share pictures, music, videos, documents, and printers with other people in your HomeGroup. Other people can't change the files that you share unless you give them permission. You can help protect your HomeGroup with a password, which you can change at any time. Computers must be running Windows 7 to participate in a HomeGroup. HomeGroup is available in all editions of Windows 7. In Windows 7 Starter and Windows 7 Home Basic, you can join a HomeGroup, but you can't create one.

• When a Windows 7 laptop first connects to the network, the user will be prompted to set the current network location. Ensure that the location is set to "Home network" (you can check it in Network and Sharing Center) because HomeGroup only works on networks set to the Home location.

• Open up "HomeGroup" in the Control Panel, and then click "Create a HomeGroup." For every Windows 7 client you want to give access to the HomeGroup, open HomeGroup in the Control Panel of those machines and then click "Join now" (those machines have to physically or wirelessly connect to the network).

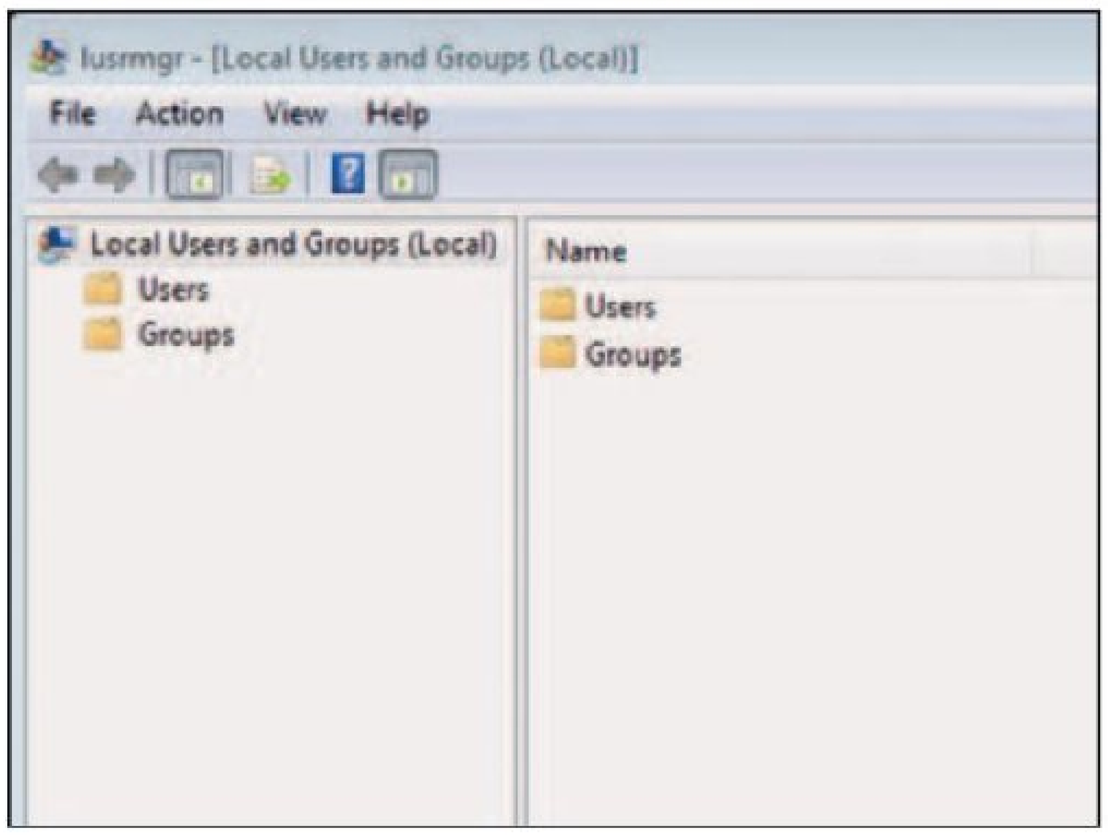
• While setting up or joining a HomeGroup, you can choose the libraries, printers, or files and folders you want to share.

• If you have a network with a different version of Windows running, then you are going to create a standard Workgroup. Click Start, right-click My Computer, and then click Properties. In System Properties, click the Computer Name tab. Click "Change," select "Workgroup," and enter a workgroup name. Click OK to apply the change. Do the

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ACCESS CONTROL If you want to control who can access each item and device on your network, create user accounts.

same thing for all computers that you want sharing data on the network.

5. Set Up User Accounts

In most business networks, users access the network by logging in with their user account and password. Corporate IT networks set up user accounts to keep tabs on who is accessing the network and when they are accessing it. User accounts provide a way to establish user access control. Perhaps there's some data on the network some users should have access to and some shouldn't. Maybe some users should only be able to read certain files, while others should be able to change files.

You can establish this same kind of access in your home network, especially once you have a HomeGroup or Workgroup defined. It's quite easy to set up user accounts in Windows:

• In Windows 7's Control Panel, select the User Accounts icon. User accounts will let you configure your account and its settings.

• To add and configure other users, from User Accounts, click on "Manage User Accounts," and then click on the "Advanced" tab.

• Under "Advanced User Management" click "Advanced" to open up Local Users and Groups.

• Right-click on either "Users" or "Groups" to add either to your network.

• If you have a number of people accessing your network and you want to control access to the data on it, you may also want to set up permissions for files and folders. Create a user account for every family member and then right click on the folder, click "Properties" and then the "Sharing" tab. You can add the family members to whom you want to grant access and exclude the ones you don't. You can also right-click on each Library to select the specific users you want to share with. Right-click on a printer to pull up the "Sharing" tab to set up shared access.

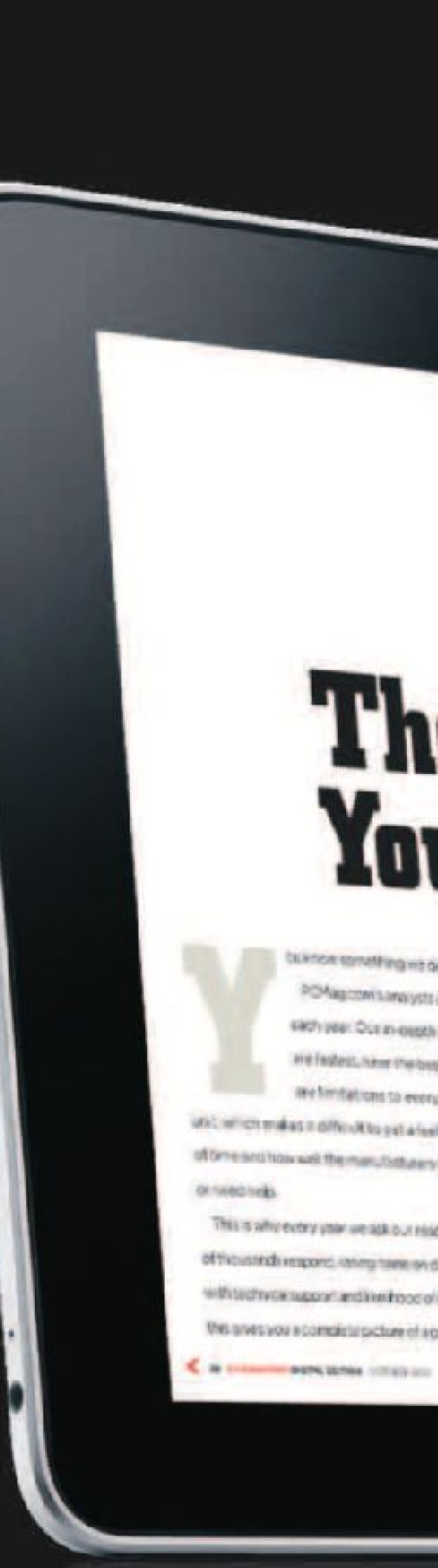
If you've gotten this far and performed all the steps that apply to you, you should have a functional, secure, and robust network set up. Of course, there are many other advanced steps you might want to take, such as setting up remote access, setting up port forwarding, automating backup across your network, or deploying a NAS. Stay tuned for step-by-step guides for all these networking tasks. ■

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Dell XPS 15 $1,115 direct

NETBOOK
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BUSINESS
Dell Latitude E5510
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STORAGE

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LCD MONITORS

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