Tech

Awesome things in small packages

Samsung's Q1 line is way sexy, but like most UMPCs, it's gimped. Our advice: Think older games and emulators—or sign up for GameTap.

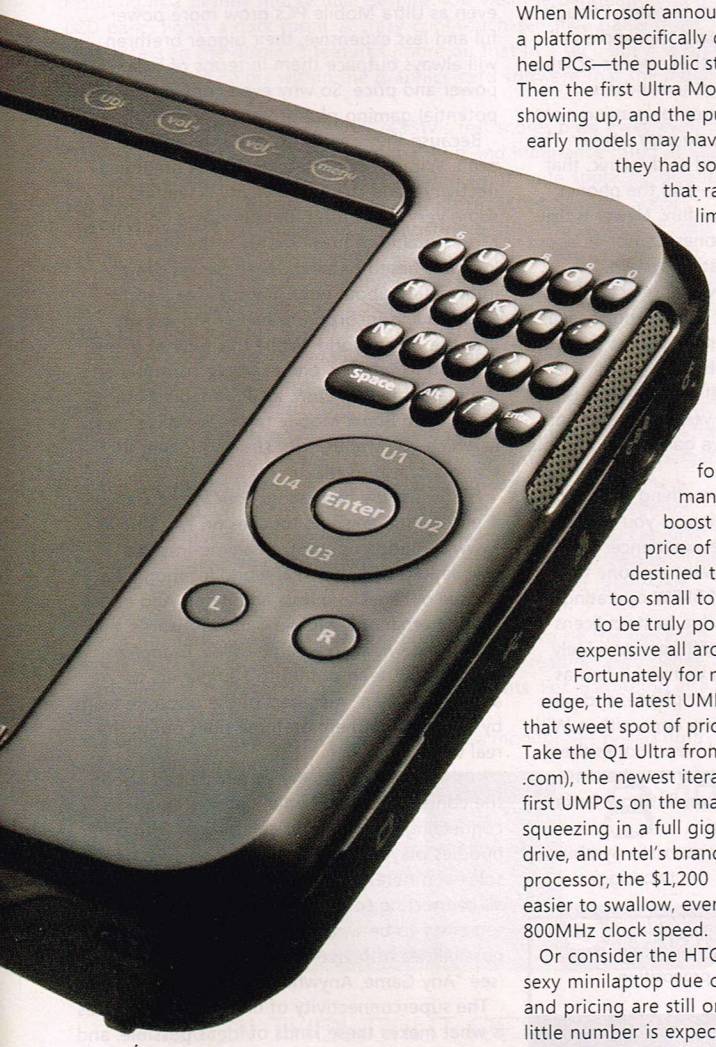
SHRINKAGE The saga of the incredible shrinking game machine:

In the May 2007 issue of *GFW* (#6), we cracked the case on small form-factor PCs. Were they suitable gaming rigs? Absolutely! In the June issue (#7), we helped set expectations for notebook gamers, breaking down what makes the "perfect" gaming laptop and the kind of games you can play. This month...the thrilling conclusion!

THE INCREDIBLE SHRIN

ONES FOR THE ROAD

In the previous two issues of *GFW*, we talked about how technology has made true PC gaming possible on smaller and smaller devices. Now it's time to get small with a capital S. We're talking real PCs that you can hold in one hand. And yes, we're even talking phones. The promise of getting your gaming fix anytime, anywhere. But there's a price to this portability, both in terms of cash and power. We're going to show you how to get the best on both fronts for those who absolutely need to play. ● **Joe Rybicki**



THE UMPC

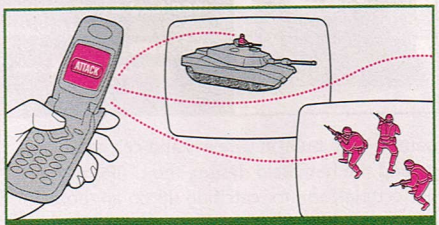
When Microsoft announced its Origami project—a platform specifically designed for tiny handheld PCs—the public stood up and took notice. Then the first Ultra Mobile PCs (UMPCs) started showing up, and the public sat back down. These early models may have looked cyber-chic, but they had some downsides: processors that ran at sub-1GHz speeds, a limp half a gig of memory (or less), batteries with an insane two-hour run time, and price tags of well over $1,000. Many wondered what a 7-inch screen could do that couldn't be done on either a laptop or a PDA. The future looked bleak for the platform. Unless manufacturers could both boost the specs and lower the price of entry, the UMPC seemed destined to languish in tech limbo, too small to be powerful but too big to be truly portable, and entirely too expensive all around.

Fortunately for nerds on the bleeding edge, the latest UMPCs continue closing in on that sweet spot of price, power, and portability. Take the Q1 Ultra from Samsung (www.samsung.com), the newest iteration of one of the very first UMPCs on the market. With the machine squeezing in a full gig of RAM, a 60GB hard drive, and Intel's brand-new Ultra Mobile A110 processor, the $1,200 MSRP becomes a little easier to swallow, even with the CPU's anemic 800MHz clock speed.

Or consider the HTC Shift (www.htc.com), a sexy minilaptop due out this fall. Final specs and pricing are still on the way, but this snappy little number is expected to pack in a 1.2GHz processor, a full gig of RAM, and a 30GB hard drive. Pricing will probably weigh in at well over a grand, but with the machine packing in a real (albeit tiny) QWERTY keyboard and connectivity options (cellular, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth) out the wazoo, you can see where that money will be going.

Other UMPCs are out or on the way from Asus (www.asus.com) and TabletKiosk (www.tabletkiosk.com), and while the tech is still fairly bleeding-edge—with prices to match—the platform is definitely moving in a more consumer-friendly direction. Sexy supersmall notebooks. Great. But what does this all mean to gaming?

Don't set your expectations too high. In its current incarnation, the UMPC is a fine platform for mining the classics, but with processors topping out in the low 1GHz range and no video power to speak of, you're not going to be firing up anything remotely processor-intensive from the last, oh, three years or so. Our suggestions: indie games and freeware, which are widely available online (check out Free Play, pg. 44, for the latest finds), or think about a subscription to GameTap (www.gametap.com) for a wide selection of older >



ANY GAME, ANYWHERE

One trend you can expect to see more of in the world of ultramobile gaming is cross-platform implementations of the same game. Picture respecing your *WOW* character's talents on the bus ride home from work. Or monitoring your MMO auctions from your cell phone. This is part of the vision of Microsoft's Live Anywhere, and it offers some really intriguing possibilities.

In an interview with *EGM*, Chris Satchell, the general manager of Microsoft's Game Developers Group, spoke enthusiastically about this concept. "I do believe this type of 'transmedia' gaming experience will be popular in the future," he said, "and the industry is steadily working toward it. I think you will see casual-gaming extensions of large games that feed back into the core experience coming from one side, cross-platform seamless play from another, and the extension of MMO worlds to other devices from a third." The center of that triangle is you, the gamer, connected to your games *at all times*. It's like living in the future—except without the evil robots.

KING GAME MACHINE

Part three: The whole world in your hands

AT WHAT PRICE, MOBILITY?

This is likely to be a watershed year for UMPCs, but the cost of entry still needs to come way down to encourage widespread adoption. Here's the rundown of current models and prices as of press time.

eo v7110
SPECS: **1GHz VIA C7-M ULV, 512MB RAM, 40GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **TabletKiosk**
PRICE: **$900**
URL: **www.tabletkiosk.com**

Q1 Ultra
SPECS: **800MHz Ultra Mobile, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **$1,200**
URL: **www.samsung.com**

Q1P
SPECS: **1GHz Pentium M ULV, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **~$1,200**
URL: **www.samsung.com**

R2H
SPECS: **900MHz Celeron M ULV, up to 768MB RAM, 60GB hard drive**
MANUFACTURER: **Asus**
PRICE: **~$1,000**
URL: **www.asus.com**

games. With built-in wireless and cell connectivity and the handheld design, the UMPC is the perfect platform for catching up on all those games you never had a chance to play. So as long as you've got a USB port available, just pop in a gamepad and you're good to go.

CELL ON EARTH

Of course, one gaming platform's even more portable: the cell phone. All right, so most cell-phone games have amounted to a couple rounds of *Snakes*, blackjack, or some forgettable Java-based nonsense—diversions of last resort, when all other gaming options were inaccessible. Like when you're stuck on a bus, playing some horribly gimped version of solitaire—hardly what we'd consider "fun" in the classical sense, and not too far removed from being caught in a bear trap in the middle of the woods facing the prospect of gnawing off your own leg.

Things have changed. While you still probably wouldn't turn to a cell phone if you had a perfectly good (or at least halfway-decent) gaming PC sitting nearby, these do-everything devices are well on their way to becoming a legitimate gaming platform.

Consider Nokia. While the N-Gage was an impressive flop (due in no small part to its bizarre design) and the N-Gage QD failed to overcome its sidetalkin' predecessor's bad PR, the software that powered the thing was pretty legit. So we're cautiously optimistic that Nokia is developing new software based on the N-Gage for implementation in current and future handsets, as well as an all-new game download service. And according to a report in the February 16 *Wall Street Journal*, the company is also developing a new gaming-friendly phone.

But is there really a market for serious gaming on a cell phone? Nvidia seems to think so: The company has been quietly upgrading its GoForce chip, designed specifically for gaming and multimedia on cell phones. The latest model, the GoForce 6100, claims to support surround sound and "console-class" gaming. Now, since the 6100 has yet to be seen in the wild, we're not sure *which* console Nvidia's referring to—could be the Atari 2600 for all we know. And surround sound in a cell phone, it must be said, seems like a seriously weird idea. But the fact remains: Enough big names are jumping aboard this whole cell-phone gaming bandwagon that, sooner or later, we *will* see more gamingcentric handsets.

So what are the best phones for gaming *right now?* Unfortunately, there's no easy answer. The market is so fragmented, and so dynamic, that available gaming platforms—and the phones they run on—are in constant flux. Newer is usually better, but with cell phones it's not all about power; it's also about operating system.

If you're looking for the widest selection of games, you want a handset that supports Java. It's included in phones offered by most carriers, and enjoys the widest developer support. The downside: As a gaming platform, Java just isn't that powerful. It's versatile, yes, but you're not going to be mistaking a Java game for a console game any time soon.

So if you're looking for something more closely resembling the game experiences you're used to (as opposed to the game experiences your *grandma* is used to), you'll want a phone that supports the more powerful BREW operating system instead of Java. But due to strict licensing requirements, BREW hasn't been as widely embraced as Java...meaning you won't find as many games available on your phone, and you won't find as many third-party apps, either. With Verizon selling only BREW-driven phones these days, you can expect the platform to become more widespread in the future. But how far in the future is anyone's guess.

Other cell software platforms exist—Symbian and Windows Mobile being the two biggest—but in terms of widespread adoption it's primarily down to Java and BREW. For now.

EXPLOITING PORTABILITY

Even in a perfect world where cell-phone games look every bit as good as PC or console games, you'll still be playing on a tiny, tiny screen. And even as Ultra Mobile PCs grow more powerful and less expensive, their bigger brethren will always outpace them in terms of balancing power and price. So why even consider these as potential gaming platforms?

Because they can do things your desktop can't. With great portability comes great connectivity—and this connectivity is leading to some very interesting ideas in game design. Most notable of these trends is the idea of location-based gaming; these games draw information about your physical, real-world location and incorporate real-world activity into the game world. While this type of game is still in its infancy, one example currently on the market is *Swordfish*, a GPS-enabled fishing game from Boost Mobile (www.boostlive.com) in which you wander city streets looking for schools of fish to reel in.

This is just the beginning. Your World Games is putting the finishing touches on *The Shroud* (www.shroudgame.com), an anime-inspired mobile RPG that uses real-world location data to dole out special quests and items. And at the 2006 International Mobile Gaming Awards, the grand prize went to a game called *Triangler*, which enlists teams of up to 100 players to attempt to "trap" members of the opposite team by surrounding them on three sides out in the real world.

In these very pages, we've also talked about the concept of transmedial gaming. Imagine connecting you (on your cell phone) with other buddies playing the same game on a PC or console—a different experience for every platform, all connecting to the same game world. Sound too crazy to be true? Microsoft is tapping those possibilities with Live. It's just a little further out (see "Any Game, Anywhere," pg. 95).

The superconnectivity of ultraportable devices is what makes these kinds of ideas possible, and it's a trend that's only going to grow. Given the hardware limits of these diminutive devices, it's only natural that designers forgo cutting-edge graphics and sound in favor of simple, imaginative gameplay. That is the strength of the tiny games platform: As underpowered as it is, it forces designers to strip down their games to pure, accessible entertainment.

As small as these devices may be, their impact on future gaming trends will no doubt be huge—and it's coming sooner than you think.

BREW VS. JAVA: BATTLE OF THE BEANS

Figuring out which phones support which caffeinated format is a bit of a hit-or-miss proposition. Here are a few highly rated phones in each category to help you on your way.

JAVA BREW

enV
MANUFACTURER: **LG**
PRICE: **$200 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

SCH-u740
MANUFACTURER: **Samsung**
PRICE: **$180 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

VX8300
MANUFACTURER: **LG**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Verizon**

RAZR V3xx
MANUFACTURER: **Motorola**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Cingular**

5300 XpressMusic
MANUFACTURER: **Nokia**
PRICE: **$100 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **T-Mobile**

W810i
MANUFACTURER: **Sony Ericsson**
PRICE: **$170 (with contract)**
CARRIER: **Cingular**