

Acer Aspire One D250 Review

by **JOE RYBICKI**
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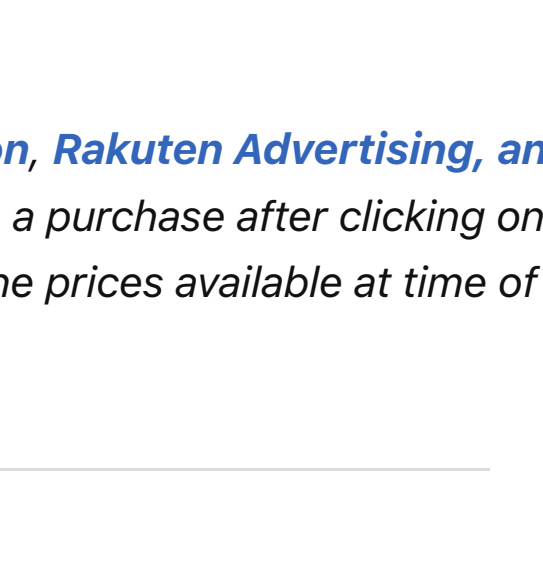
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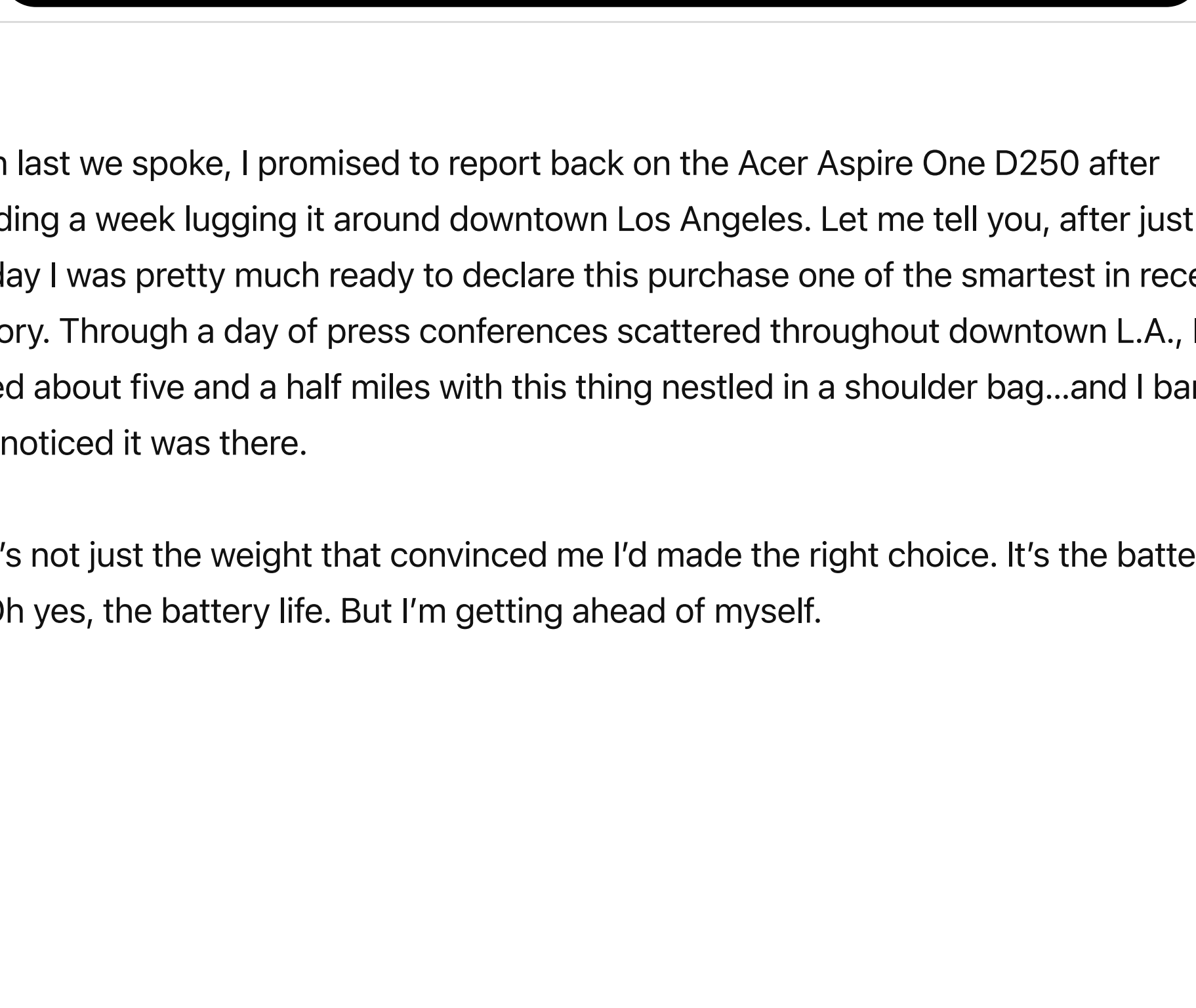
The Acer Aspire One D250 is the latest 10 inch netbook from Acer. It has a 1.6GHz Intel Atom N270 CPU and 10.1 inch, 1024 x 600 pixel display, but fits into a smaller and lighter case than the Acer Aspire One D150.



Joe Rybicki is a freelance writer who's spent the last 13 years covering the video game and technology industries. He lives in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, and laughs at your commute. He picked up his first netbook a few weeks ago and has been using his new Aspire One D250 to work on the road. Read more at joerybicki.com.

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When last we spoke, I promised to report back on the Acer Aspire One D250 after spending a week lugging it around downtown Los Angeles. Let me tell you, after just the first day I was pretty much ready to declare this purchase one of the smartest in recent memory. Through a day of press conferences scattered throughout downtown L.A., I walked about five and a half miles with this thing nestled in a shoulder bag...and I barely even noticed it was there.

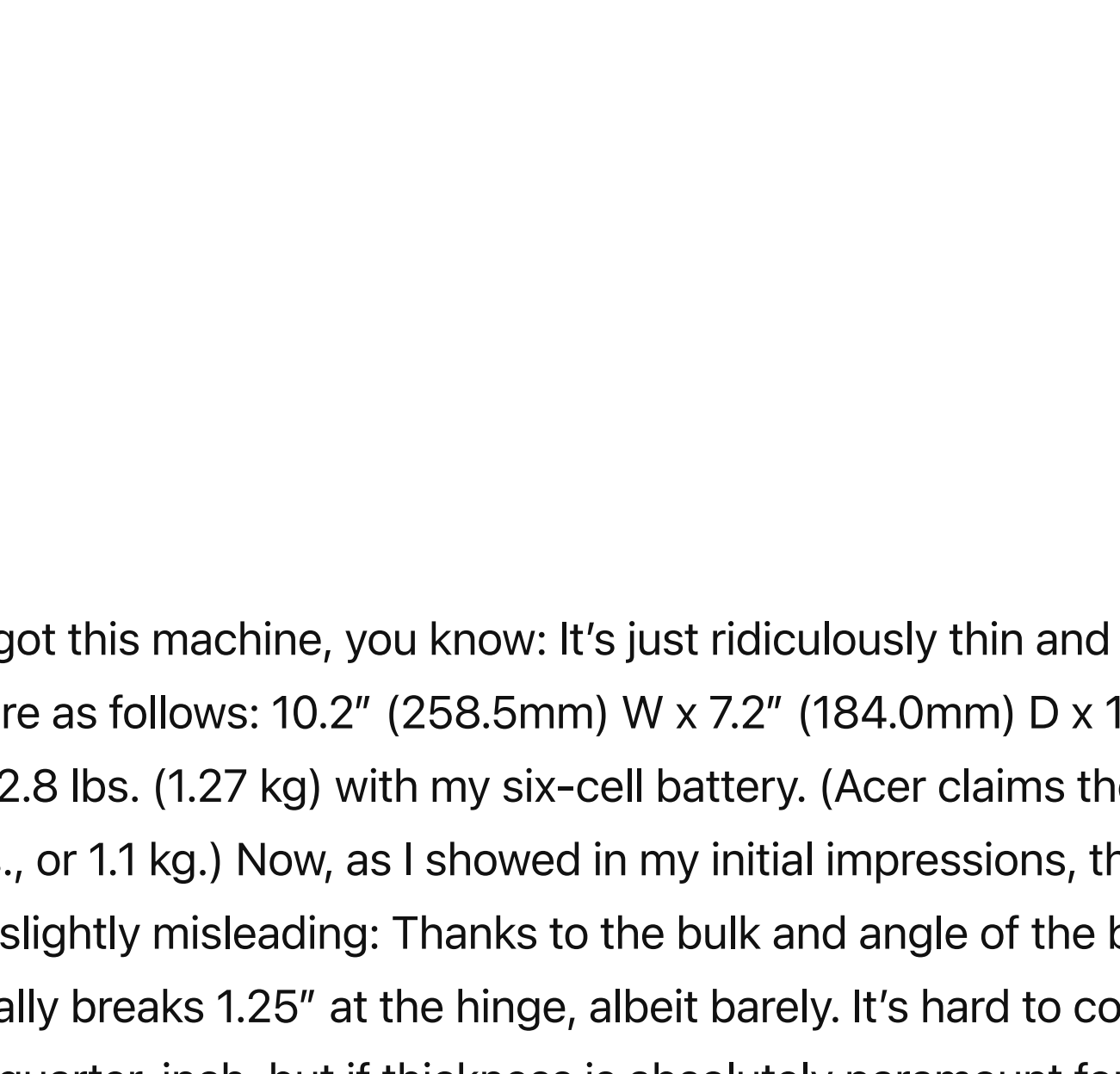
But it's not just the weight that convinced me I'd made the right choice. It's the battery life. Oh yes, the battery life. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Design

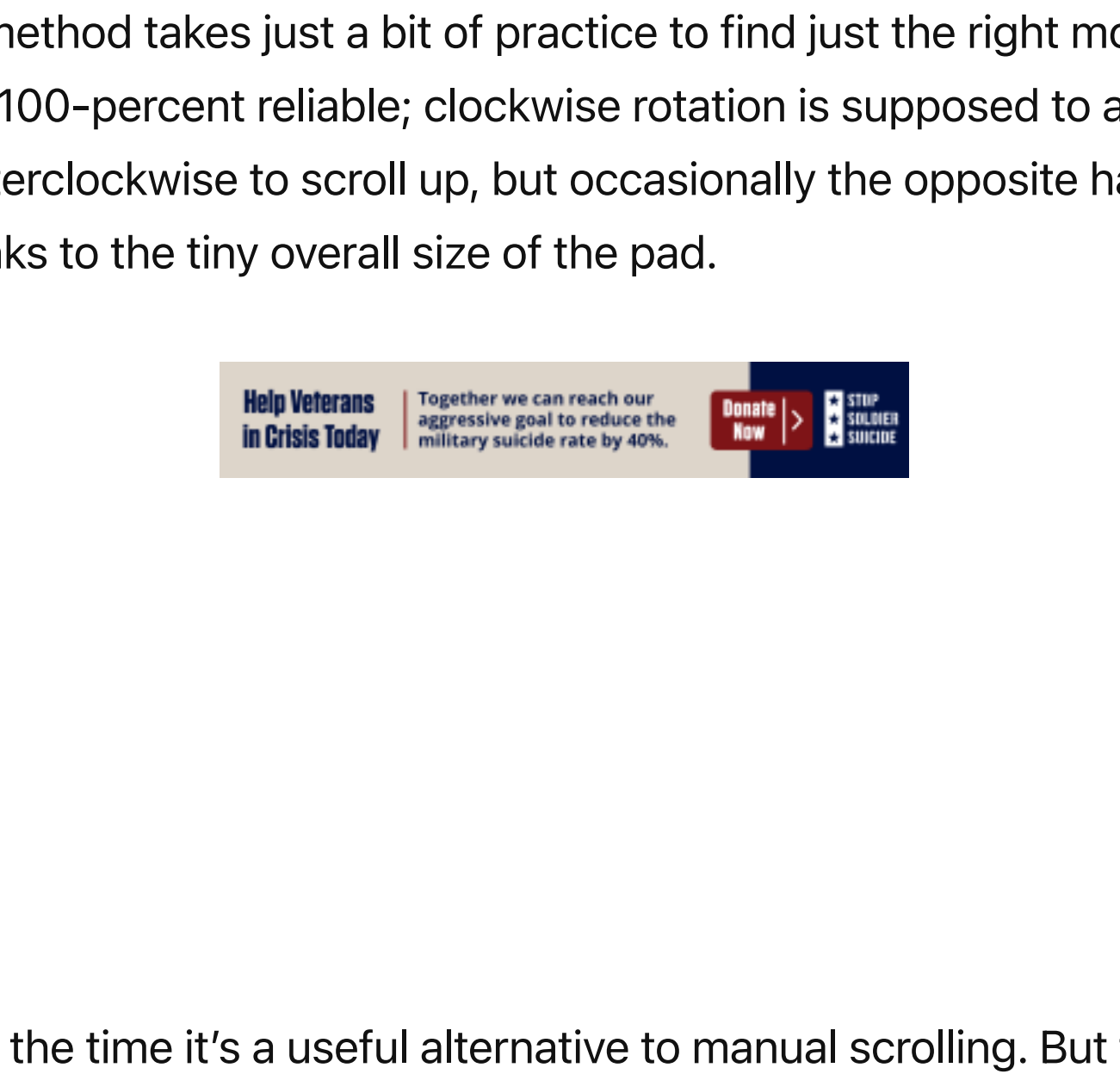
Let's be honest: The D250 isn't exactly the flashiest of netbooks. The sleek lines and brushed aluminum palm rest certainly add a touch of class, but it's not the sort of machine that's going to turn a lot of heads. (Except, perhaps, to gawk at the multitude of fingerprints adorning the lid. Why anyone continues to make portable devices with glossy coatings is totally beyond me.)

But head-turner or no, in terms of function it's exceptionally well put together.

Two USB ports adorn the right edge, along with the power jack, locking mechanism, and memory card slot. The left side gets another USB port — a very sensible design choice — as well as headphone and mic connectors, VGA out, and an Ethernet jack. That lineup may not be earth-shaking, but it's a generous selection of I/O options given the extremely limited real estate; the space on the sides is barely half an inch thick — thin enough that it has to bell out very slightly to accommodate the VGA connector.



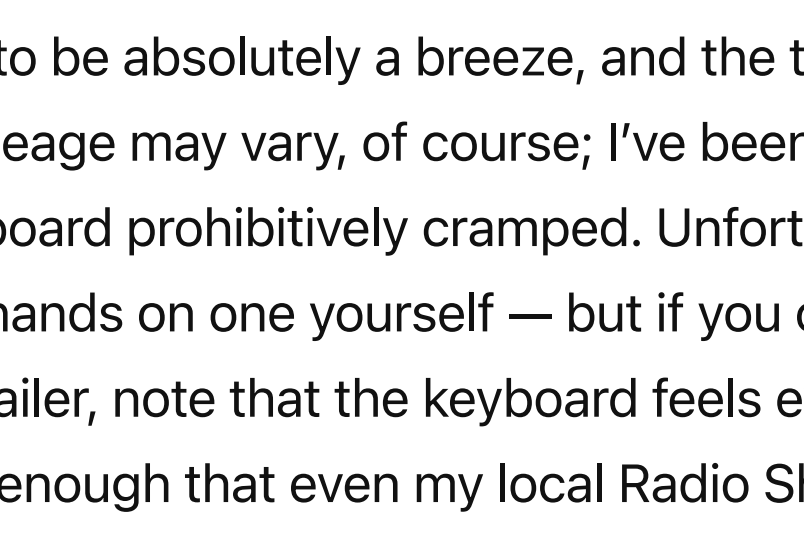
But this is why I got this machine, you know: It's just ridiculously thin and light. The official measurements are as follows: 10.2" (258.5mm) W x 7.2" (184.0mm) D x 1.0" (25.4) H, with a weight of 2.8 lbs. (1.27 kg) with my six-cell battery. (Acer claims the three-cell version is 2.4 lbs., or 1.1 kg.) Now, as I showed in my initial impressions, that thickness measurement is slightly misleading: Thanks to the bulk and angle of the battery, the 6-cell version actually breaks 1.25" at the hinge, albeit barely. It's hard to complain too much about that extra quarter-inch, but if thickness is absolutely paramount for you, you should know you may need to pop off the battery to get it to its thinnest form.



Keyboard and Touchpad

But that size certainly comes at a price. The keyboard is definitely cramped, especially the keys out on the periphery; I could use bigger Backspace and Delete keys, for example. But the full-sized Shift keys and dedicated PgUp and PgDn keys are a godsend for me. I'm able to touch-type easily, only having to peek when reaching for brackets, Delete, or Tab.

So far my only real complaint, in fact, is the touchpad. It's just stupidly small. Don't get me wrong, it's usable, and Acer makes a valiant effort to maximize its usefulness with "virtual scrolling," which allows you to scroll through documents by tracing a circle around the touchpad. This method takes just a bit of practice to find just the right motion to engage, and isn't always 100-percent reliable; clockwise rotation is supposed to always scroll down, and counterclockwise to scroll up, but occasionally the opposite happens, presumably thanks to the tiny overall size of the pad.



Even so, most of the time it's a useful alternative to manual scrolling. But for those of us who'd prefer to have a dedicated scroll section of the trackpad (like in the Samsung N120, for example), the tiny pad proves a bit frustrating. The trackpad driver includes a setting that claims to allow exactly this type of functionality, but in several tests I couldn't get it to work with anything approaching reliability. My guess is that D250 owners will see a driver update in our future.

(Incidentally, it's a similar story with the pinch-to-zoom and other multi-touch features: They work, but not with 100-percent accuracy, and I fully expect to see driver updates down the road.)

As for the single mouse button: eh. I could see how it would annoy some users, but personally I've gotten used to it fairly quickly. The button is immobile in the center and springy on each end — so it doesn't really so much rock as bend — which is an odd feeling, to be sure, but one that makes it fairly obvious which side of the button you're depressing.

So all in all, I'm fairly pleased even with what I'm most disappointed by, if you catch my meaning. I've found typing to be absolutely a breeze, and the touchpad to most often do what I wanted it to. Your mileage may vary, of course; I've been told I have slender fingers, so others may find the keyboard prohibitively cramped. Unfortunately there's just no substitute for getting your hands on one yourself — but if you can't find a D250 in stock at your local electronics retailer, note that the keyboard feels exactly the same as on the D150, which is established enough that even my local Radio Shack had one in stock.

Display and Multimedia

I've turned my nose up at glossy displays ever since I first saw one, but after using the D250 in a variety of lighting situations, I have definitely become a believer. If this is the cost of outdoor usability, by damn, I'll pay it. Is the 10.1", 1024-by-600 LED-backlit display a little on the small side? Of course, but that's a problem you're not likely to find a solution for in the netbook space. The important thing is that it's crisp, bright, and readable from a reasonably wide angle. (Though as with many similar screens, the angle is much wider when moving from side to side than up and down.)

If I had any complaints about the screen, it's that it's perhaps too bright on its lowest setting. Sitting in a darkened theater during a press conference, I noticed that my screen was noticeably brighter than the 20 or so laptops in my immediate vicinity. (When geeks do conferences, we bring technology. That's the way we roll.) It wasn't hugely distracting, but I wouldn't have minded being able to step it down a few more notches.



As for the rest of the D250's multimedia offerings, well...it's clear that's not what this machine was designed for. The speakers are mounted on the bottom of the case, facing pretty much straight down, which works fine if the machine is sitting on a hard, flat surface, but somewhat less so if you're holding it in your lap. They're surprisingly loud and clear, but utterly lacking in the bass department — not that that's in the slightest bit surprising. If you expect to be using this as a portable music source, well, invest in some decent external speakers.

I was similarly underwhelmed by the onboard webcam and mic. They work, don't get me wrong; you just can't say much more than that. Video seems extremely slow and choppy, and the mic is sensitive enough to pick up voice at working distance, but the sensitivity drops off dramatically beyond that — and yet, minute touches on the machine's casing reverberate loudly in the mic, so if you're in a windy situation, forget it. Like I said, though, it's clear that multimedia isn't what this machine was designed for.

Software

The Aspire One comes with a fairly standard suite of software: MS Works, an online backup option, a trial version of McAfee Security Suite, a bunch of PopCap trial games — basically, nothing you wouldn't find on almost any other new Windows PC.

The only really proprietary software is the support software for the Synaptics touchpad. This is where you'll find the virtual scrolling, settings for sensitivity and multi-touch gestures. Just about everything is customizable...but as I mentioned before, some of the results can be a bit unpredictable. I'm pleased to see options for "EdgeMotion" (that is, the option of having the pointer continue to move in the direction last moved when you reach the edge of the tiny touchpad) and momentum (which gives the trackpad the function of a heavy trackball), but personally I have not found them useful. Rather than learning an entire new suite of controls, I elected to deal with the small real estate — and use an external mouse wherever possible. But if I did more traveling I could see taking the time to become familiar with all these fancy trackpad features.

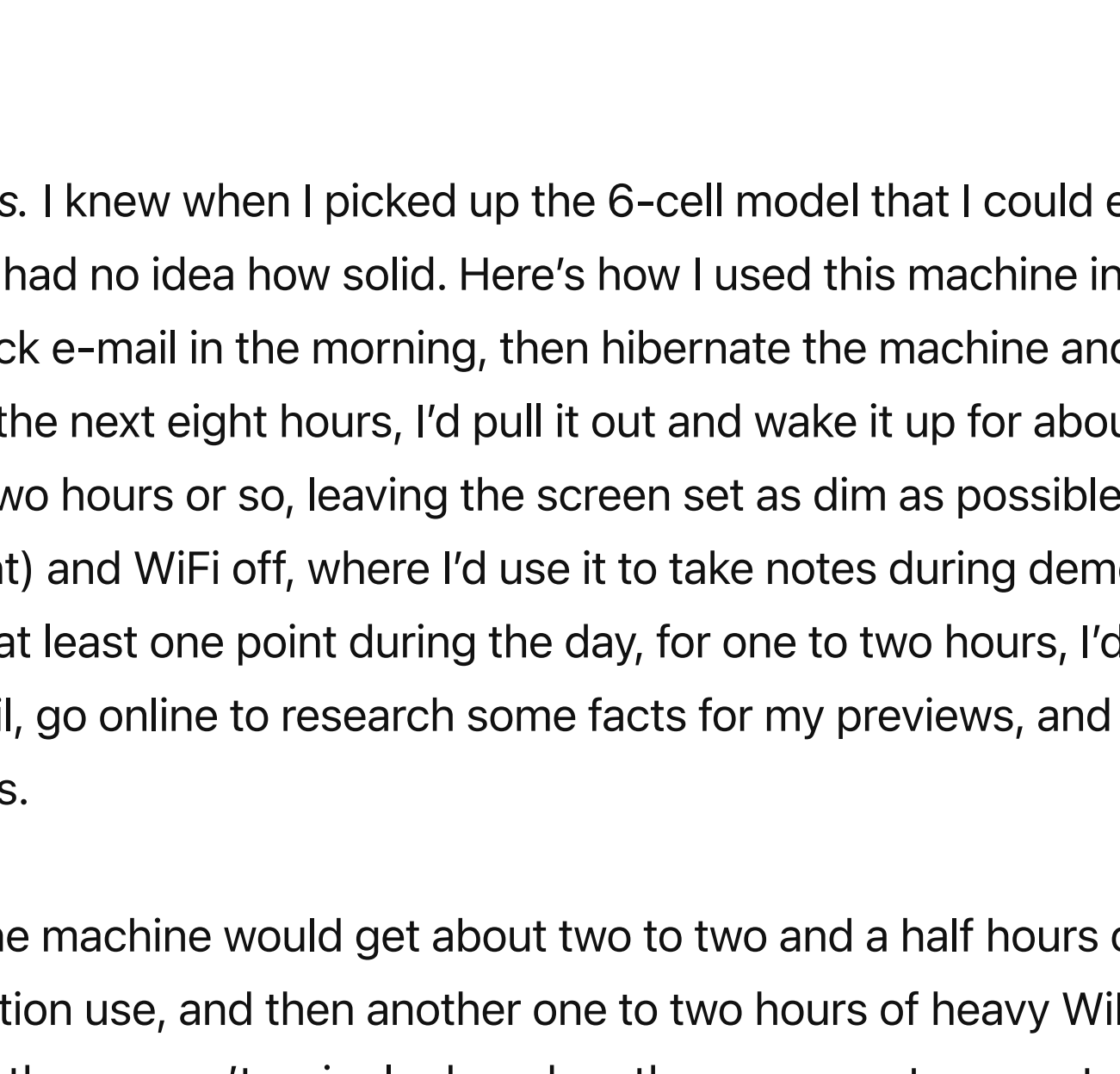
Aside from that, I've removed nearly all the installed software that wasn't part of a basic Windows XP install.

Performance

But here's where things get really shocking for me: I didn't have to do any more serious tweaking than that. Because out of the box, this tiny machine runs like a complete champ. Now, I'm probably biased because I've been spending the last few years continually stripping extraneous crap out of my old Vaio to get it to run faster and leaner, but to be able to have eight fairly resource-intensive Firefox tabs open, along with iTunes, Thunderbird, and Pidgin, and not have the machine slow down — well, it almost feels like a fairy tale.

I got an even bigger shock when I tried out an episode of Lost in HD at ABC.com: It actually ran. And after only a few moments of stuttering at the beginning, it ran exceptionally smoothly. Sure, quick pans would result in a bit of screen tearing, and that period of stuttering would come back after every commercial break. I should also note that this was *not* with eight other tabs open, or anything else running on the machine. But it was a completely unexpected treat: This tiny machine can, in a pinch, actually allow me to catch up on TV while on the road.

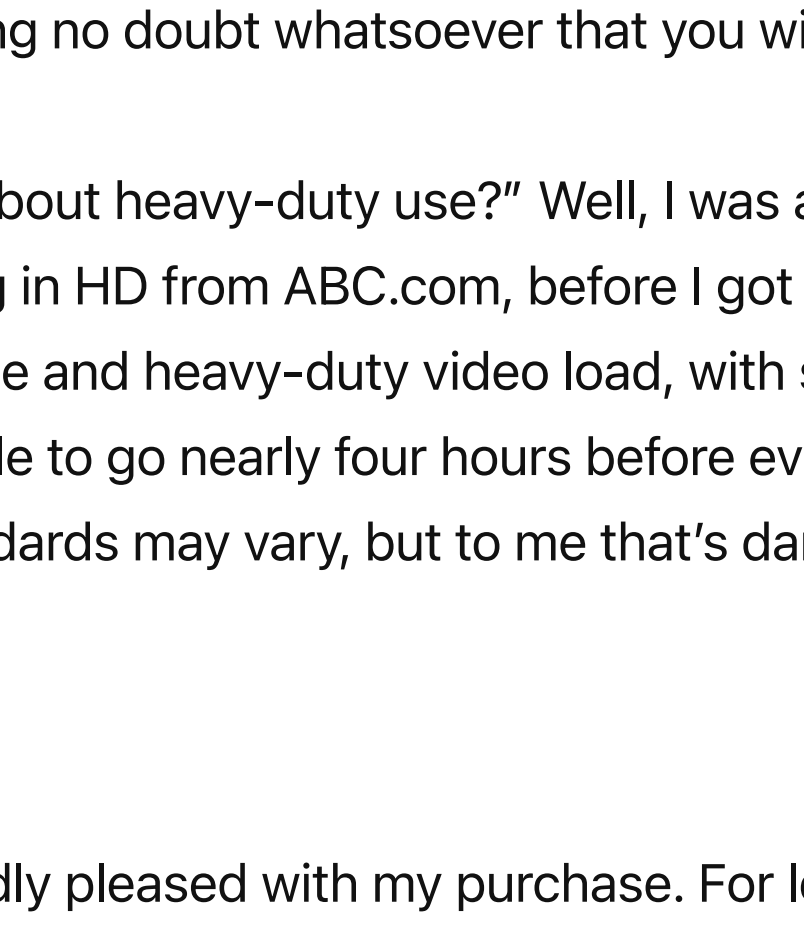
But of course, that's not what I bought it for; I got it for word processing, e-mail, and Internet, and it does all these things perfectly well. I've seen some folks recommend adding another GB of RAM to the 1GB that comes standard with netbooks these days, and honestly, I don't see why you'd need to.



Pictured with a variety of household items, for scale

Battery

I've saved the best for last. Let's talk about battery life.



It's ridiculous.

I mean, *ridiculous*. I knew when I picked up the 6-cell model that I could expect solid battery life, but I had no idea how solid. Here's how I used this machine in a real-world scenario: I'd check e-mail in the morning, then hibernate the machine and disconnect from power. For the next eight hours, I'd pull it out and wake it up for about half an hour at a stretch every two hours or so, leaving the screen set as dim as possible (which as I say is still quite bright) and WiFi off, where I'd use it to take notes during demos and press conferences. At least one point during the day, for one to two hours, I'd turn on WiFi and check e-mail, go online to research some facts for my previews, and turn those notes into full write-ups.

So on average the machine would get about two to two and a half hours of very light-power-consumption use, and then another one to two hours of heavy WiFi and web access. And yet, there wasn't a single day when the power meter reported less than 60 percent power remaining by the end of the day.

It's hard to appreciate how useful this is until you realize that without the fear of a battery going out on you you can take *all* your notes via typing rather than longhand. There's a very, very large difference between hoping you'll have enough battery life to get you through your day, and having no doubt whatsoever that you will.

"Fine," you say, "but what about HD video use?" Well, I was able to get through four episodes of Lost, streaming in HD from ABC.com. Before I got a warning about battery life. That's constant WiFi use and heavy-duty video load, with screen brightness turned up all the way, and I was able to go nearly four hours before even getting down to the 10-percent warning. Your standards may vary, but to me that's damn good battery life.

Verdict

And so, overall I'm profoundly pleased with my purchase. With mini PCs including shipping, I've got a light, thin, reliable, and sensibly designed little road warrior. Sure, there are things I'd change: mainly the trackpad and that obnoxious fingerprint-magnet of a top lid. But aside from those minor annoyances, this thing does everything I want it to do, exactly as I'd hoped. To my mind, it doesn't get much better than that.

You can read more about the Acer Aspire One D250 in the Liliputing Product Database, where you can also compare it with other netbooks.

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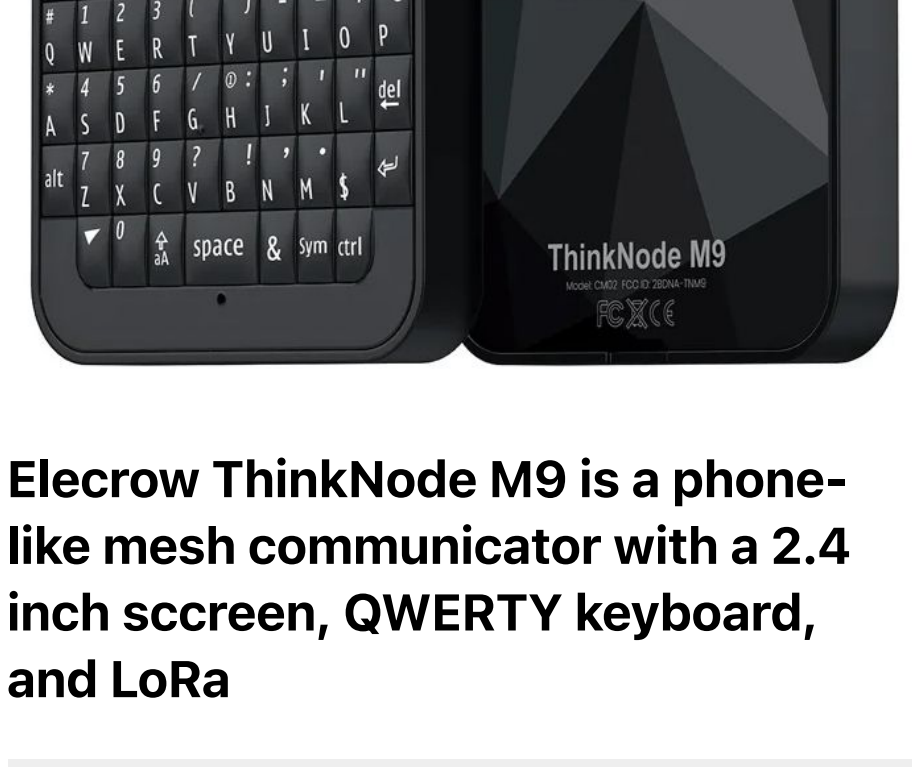
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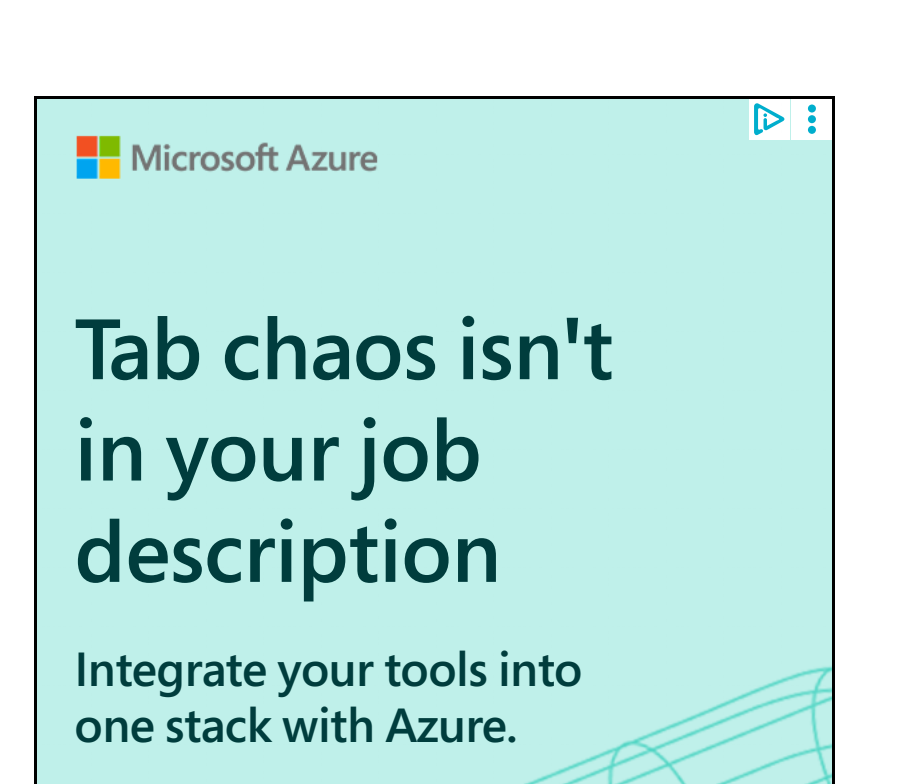
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Lenovo's next ThinkBook Plus laptop could have a rollable display that extends horizontally



Lilbits: Ploopy's A+ trackball has eight buttons (two are also dials), Xteink X4 discontinued, and more



Elecrow ThinkNode M9 is a phone-like mesh communicator with a 2.4 inch screen, QWERTY keyboard, and LoRa

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