# Smoothing out rough spots

## Newest Palm Pilot boasts some neat improvements, but still has problems / Simson L. Garfinkel

THERE'S NOTHING revolutionary about 3Com's Palm III organizer – the revolution came nearly two years ago, when US Robotics acquired a tiny company called Palm Computing and brought the Palm Pilot to the market.

Since then US Robotics has been acquired by 3Com and the Pilot has become a runaway success. There are now more than 1.6 million of these tiny computers in pockets around the world. Perhaps more importantly, the Pilot created an active developer community. There are now literally thousands that you can download and run on the machine.

In case you've been on Mars for the past two years, here's what's so hot about the Pilot. Weighing less than 7 ounces, the Palm Pilot is a computerized organizer with built-in calendar, address book, things-to-do-list, calculator, and memo pad. You can synchronize your Pilot with the address book, contact list, and other information stored inside your desktop computer simply by dropping the pilot into its cradle and pressing the "HotSync" button. You can even connect a modem to your pilot and synchronize it with your desktop computer while you're traveling. Compared with the first Palm

computers, the Palm III smoothes out a few of the old computer's rough spots. The first Palm came in a little vinyl slipcase that took up too much pocket room. A lot of Pilots had their screens broken when their owners decided to forgo protector and drop the naked Pilot into a pocket or a bag.

The new Palm III has a sturdy plastic cover that flips up and out of the way when you are using the machine. The sides of the Palm III turn in slightly at the bottom, making it easier to put into your pocket. There's an infrared interface that lets you "beam" a business card or an appointment from one Palm III to another. And with 2 MB of memory, the Palm III finally has enough memory to load it up with shareware while still being able to hold thousands of names, phone numbers and appointments.

Despite these improvements, the Palm III is compatible with the docking stations from the previous Pilots, making it easy to trade these devices around an organization.

Today, there is a thriving market in companies that make "conduits" for moving information from

desktop applications into the Pilot. But a growing number of companies are building support for the Palm directly into their applications. For example, Lotus Organizer 4.1 ships with a built-in Palm "conduit." And since Organizer can also read from a Lotus Notes database, this is a simple way of getting corporate information out of the data center and into people's pockets, where it is occasionally more useful.

There's also hardware galore available for the Palm III, including a battery-powered modem, a

pager attachment, and even a wireless modem that operates on a nationwide data network. You can get software for scanning business cards directly into the Palm's database. And if the Palm's little stylus makes your hand cramped, fear not: Cross now makes a "pen" with a special plastic tip designed specifically for "writing" on the Pilot's screen. Many companies that sell the Palm III are throwing in the Cross pen for free with a purchase.

Despite these wins, the Palm III still has some problems. Although the unit has a speaker, the Palm's beeps are not loud enough to hear in a noisy office. I wish that 3Com had built in an enunciator that was loud enough to wake me from a deep sleep. And I'm still no fan of "Graffiti," the stylized script alphabet that you need to learn to enter information into this thing. Handwriting recognition software would make things a lot easier, even with the software's inevitable mistakes.

What excites me most about the Palm III is 3Com's licensing strategy. Last October 3Com signed a deal with Symbol Technologies to build a Palm Pilot with a built-in barcode scanner. And this February, 3Com and Qualcomm said they would combine the Pilot with Qualcomm's next-generation wireless communications products. (Qualcomm invented the CDMA technology that's used by both Sprint PCS and Bell Atlantic Mobile.) Despite these deals, many

technologists I know still think of the Palm as a closed, proprietary computer – like a 1990s version of the Apple Macintosh. The reason, I think, is because when you walk into a store to buy a computer running the Palm operating system, there's only one brand to choose from – the one from 3Com. On the other hand, if you want to buy a computer running Windows CE, there is a world of choices, with devices manufactured from Hewlett-Packard, Casio, Sharp, and Compaq.
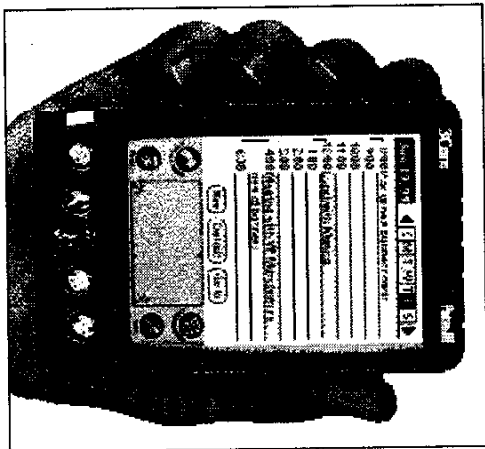
Mark Bercow, Palm Computing's vice president of strategic alliances and platform development, insists his company would be open to licensing the operating system to one of these firms.

"There is absolutely nothing in our licensing strategy that biases horizontal competing products," Bercow says.

If I were a professional software developer, I'd take a good, close look at the Palm environment. Unlike today's crowded PC applications market, where practically the best that a company can hope for is to be acquired by Microsoft, the Palm environment is still open territory. And the market is rapidly expanding, meaning that companies that introduce good products should experience rapid growth.

If you're intrigued by the Palm but can't see forking out $400 for the new Palm III, look around for the fire-sale prices on the Palm Pilot Personal.

Although it only has a quarter the memory of the new Palm III, it's still quite usable.

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