



PSION KEEPS AT IT

SERIES 7 ROUNDS OUT A GREAT LINEUP

■ by Mark Esposito

In all my years working with Psion hardware, going back to 1985, first as a user, and then as a programmer, it was always my dream to see a mature handheld OS and lots of hardware devices to choose from. While not everything has moved as quickly as I would have liked, there is finally some light at the end of the tunnel.

Well, at least we're in the tunnel. With technology, there is no end of the tunnel. It just goes on forever, transforming as it goes. It's all great news for the consumers that have very patiently waited for handheld computers to get their act together. There are three handheld operating systems driving the handheld market. The leader in units sold, the Palm OS, and then Symbian's EPOC and Microsoft's WinCE battle it out for second place. Companies are investing more money than ever before producing handhelds, and now that we have some decent operating systems for handheld computers, things are really looking up.

Let the games begin!

For months I've been preaching that we would have lots of EPOC based hardware devices to choose from. It looks like I got this one right. For the second issue in a row, we have a new EPOC device to review, and two more waiting in the wings. Last issue I reviewed the new Psion Revo, a wonderful machine, now shipping in the US. This month I'll look at the new Psion Series 7, brother of the new Psion netBook.

For those of you that need a quick update on the confusing issue behind references made to EPOC, Symbian, and Psion, here goes again: Psion

Software developed their 32bit Operating System called EPOC. Psion rolled this company off by forming a new company called Symbian, jointly-owned by Psion PLC, Nokia, Ericsson, Motorola, and Matsushita (Panasonic). It is clear to see that EPOC is now being fitted to be the OS for many future smart-phones. So there you have it. Psion Computers still develops handhelds based on EPOC, but they have to pay licensing fees to Symbian for the EPOC Operating System.

I may have to eat my words...

The new Psion Series 7 is going to make me eat my words in some ways. As many of you know by now, I've been convinced that no hardware in the "Jupiter" class form-factor could make it at the consumer or even corporate level. I felt they were too close in size to notebooks, and yet didn't offer the functionality of a Windows, Mac, or even a Linux notebook.

I'm going to partially eat my words because the Series 7 is so well designed that it was a true pleasure to use. With its awesome battery life it became clear to me where it could excel. There is a potential corporate niche for the machine as long as the price can come down a bit.

Let's look at the specs of the machine. Psion junkies will love it.

Processor:

StrongARM SA1100 processor running at 133Mhz

Memory:

RAM: 16MB using a proprietary DIMM
ROM: Masked ROM

Storage:

One Type III Compact Flash, and one Type III PC Card.

Expansion:

2 Internal bus slots for RAM/ROM, both accessible by user.

Display:

Full VGA 640x480 pixels. 7.7" STN color back lit LCD touch screen display.

Keyboard:

Pitch 17mm. Travel 3mm. Unique pantograph mechanism.

Sound:

Loudspeaker and microphone. Digital sound recording.

Power:

Li-Ion battery pack, giving 8.5 hours typical operation. 2.5 hour recharge time. User-changeable Lithium backup battery. DC jack and docking station. Docking station connects power and RS232 port.

External Interfaces:

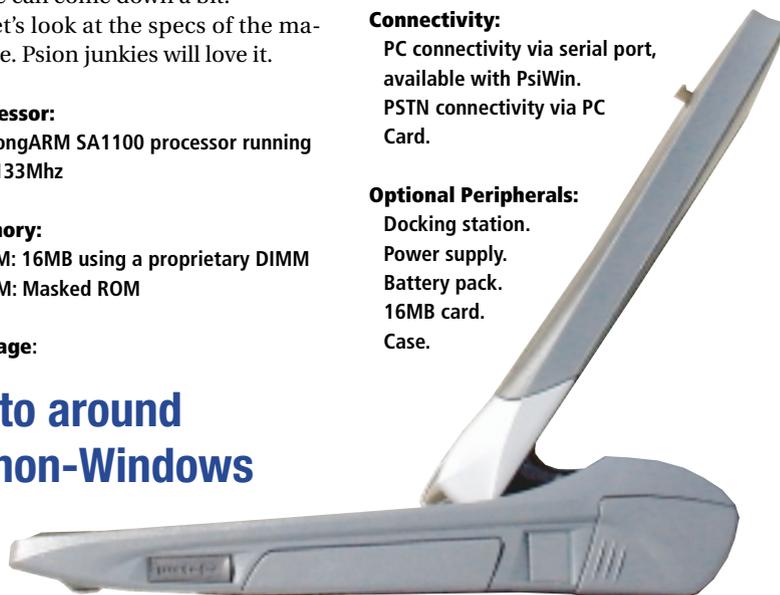
Honda connector for RS232, 115Kbps. DC jack for external power. PC Card slot (type III). Compact FLASH (type III). IrDA interface (115Kbps). Docking station interface on bottom.

Connectivity:

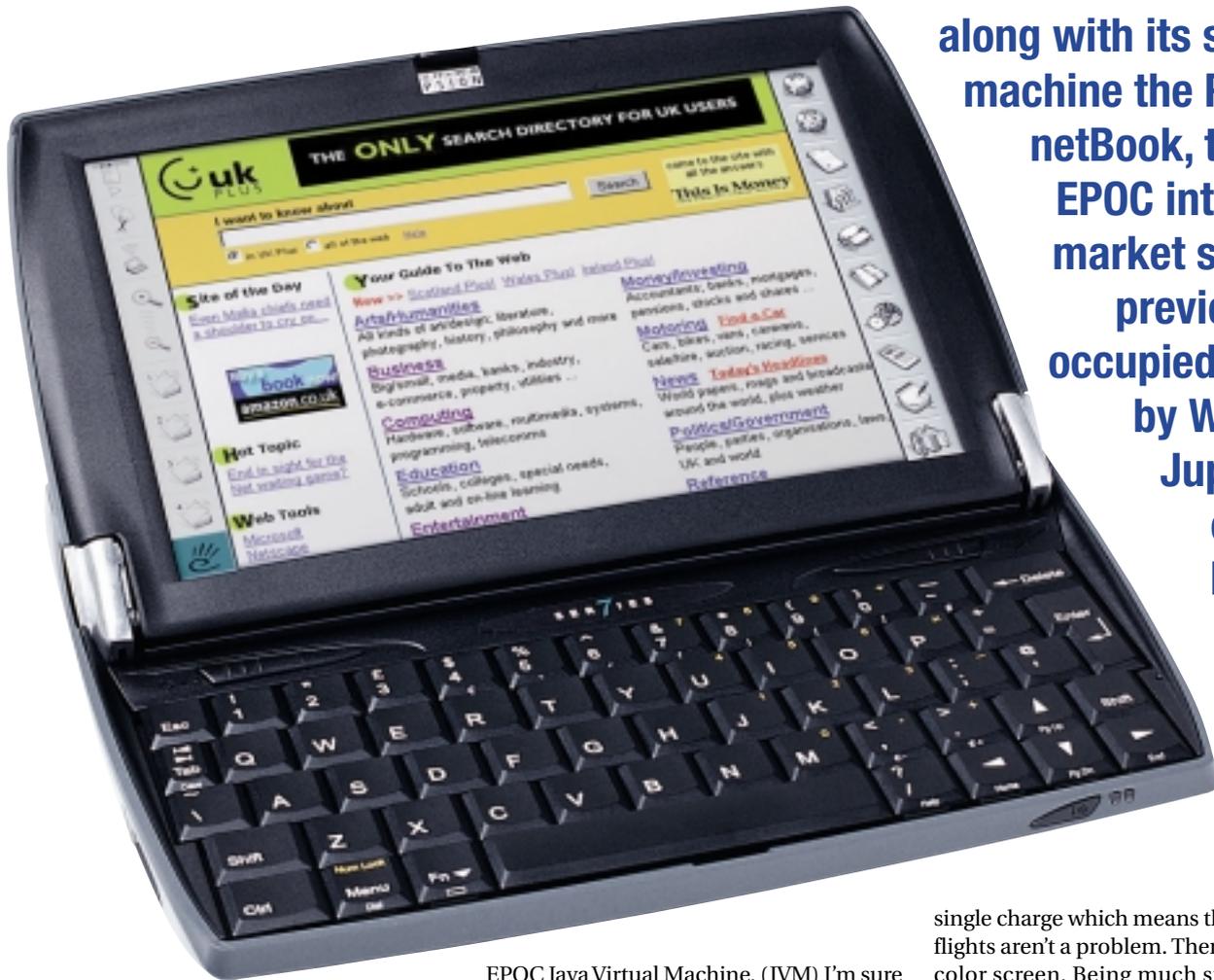
PC connectivity via serial port, available with PsiWin.
PSTN connectivity via PC Card.

Optional Peripherals:

Docking station.
Power supply.
Battery pack.
16MB card.
Case.



The price needs to come down to around US\$700. Otherwise, how can a non-Windows machine compete with a low-end Sony Vaio for US\$1300?



The Psion Series 7, along with its sister machine the Psion netBook, takes EPOC into the market space previously occupied only by WinCE Jupiter-class HPCs and B5s

Series 7 vs. netBook

As I mentioned, the Series 7 from Psion Computers is the brother of the recently released netBook from Psion Enterprise Computing Ltd (see our review in the October 1999 issue of *Pen Computing Magazine*). From what I can tell it seems they share the same case, screen, and keyboard.

However, there are three major differences between the two machines. The netBook has a faster version of the StrongARM processor running at 190Mhz versus the Series 7's 133MHz. The netBook also has more RAM (64MB versus 16MB), and loads the OS from a Compact Flash card rather than from ROM. These differences stem from the fact that the netBook is being billed as an enterprise Java machine which can have some pretty hefty resource requirements whereas the Series 7 is more of a consumer electronics device.

One interesting aspect is that the Series 7 can actually do everything the netBook can do in regards to Java compatibility, albeit slower than the netBook. Both have the

EPOC Java Virtual Machine. (JVM) I'm sure the memory will be an issue for those wanting to do serious Java applications, and not merely web plugins/applets, and for them the netBook is probably a better choice.

It is important to note though that with the netBook, the standard EPOC applications are loaded into RAM memory when run, and don't execute in place, in ROM, as they do on the Series 7. As I mentioned, this is due to the fact that the OS and applications load from a Flash card. This means that you may not end up with any extra memory above what the S7 gives you if you choose to load all of the standard apps on the netBook. Still, the netBook offers more flexibility for custom corporate applications, and a faster processor.

Series 7 Pros and Cons

Pros

In true Psion tradition, the Series 7 has an excellent, and in this case near full-size, keyboard that most will be able to touch-type on. I know that I can. The Series 7 also offers about ten hours of battery life on a

single charge which means that those long flights aren't a problem. There is a brilliant color screen. Being much smaller than a notebook, it is more convenient to carry on trips. There is good synchronization with MS Office/Out-look and synchronization with most desktop software through Psi-Win. The built-in software is vast, providing the normal office tools. Other software can be purchased to fill in any gaps. Lots of third party software is available. Finally, unlike most Windows CE devices, the Series 7 offers burning fast operation even at 133MHz.

Cons

It is hard to find much fault with the device itself. If you're a Lotus Notes user, you won't find synchronization with Notes 5 yet even though there is support for the earlier versions though with InSynch. Since the Series 5 uses the EPOC operating system, there isn't much third party software, but the same still holds true for Windows CE machines though. And, at least in my opinion, the price is too high at US\$900.

Two things I believe will need to happen to make this form factor a success:

SERIES 7

First, the price needs to come down to around US\$700. Otherwise, how can a non-Windows machine compete with something like a low-end Sony Vaio for US\$1300? Without some clear differentiation of price, the question for a business user will always be "Why not pay US\$400 more and just run Lotus Notes, MS Word, MS Project, AutoMap, Outlook or Eudora, and everything else I want to without synchronization issues?"

With the Series 7, you can fly from Houston to London and use the machine the whole way on one charge. While you're in London, you can charge the machine once each night and use it all day on battery power.

Second, synchronization must be more inclusive. I use Eudora, and PsiWin doesn't synchronize the Series 7 with Eudora. That's not acceptable. It's not like Eudora doesn't have a customer base. Currently there is no synchronization with Lotus Notes version 5, which has now been out for some time, and should be supported. Psion or Symbian should purchase the third party application that does Lotus Notes synchronization, make it part of PsiWin, and keep it up to date. If I use Notes at work, and the S7 won't synchronize with the latest version of Notes, the company will never approve the purchase of a S7.

On a more positive note, I can see now that at the right price, there is a place for this form factor. For those that travel, battery life is very important. Travellers are constantly having to worry about how much longer their batteries are going to last. With the Series 7, you can fly from Houston to London and use the machine the whole way on one charge. While you're in London, you can charge the machine once each night, and then use it all day on batteries. Word processing, spread sheets, Contact management, and scheduling can all be done while you're away and synchronized when you get back. The Series 7 is going to make me think.

The Series 7 is being sold through Psion Inc in the USA. (www.pSIONinc.com)

—Mark Esposito

