tools of the trade

The Mac mini

Small and Powerful

The products we're looking at this month are small and deceptively nondescript. But each, in its own way, is out on the leading edge of its own sector.

The **Mac mini** from **Apple** looks like a pencil box (2" tall × 6.5" square), but it's a computer with a G4 processor that plugs into your monitor, keyboard, and mouse. It comes with a 40 or 80GB hard drive, 512MB DDR SDRAM, CD drive, built-in Ethernet, FireWire 400, USB ports, and the Mac OS X Tiger. You can connect digital devices such as cameras, printers, camcorder, or, of course, your iPod. Options include up to 1GB of memory, AirPort Extreme, and a DVD burner. If you don't like wires, you can use the internal Bluetooth system to use a wireless mouse and keyboard so you can pick it up and carry it from room to room. You could even sit it on top of your other desktop PC and, with a KVM switch, share your regular keyboard, monitor, and mouse. The mini weighs about three pounds, and the price for the basic model is under $500. Go to the Apple site at www.apple.com, click on the "Store" tab, and look for the Mac mini for specs and photos.

The **Fujifilm Digital Mobile MP-70 Printer** had to wait for resolutions in phone cameras to make it worthwhile to feed the images into a printer. This printer will produce credit-card-size photos in about 20 seconds. As you would expect, it's small and very light—just seven ounces without batteries and about the same size as a wallet. You'll need an infrared-enabled camera phone, or you can use a USB-based adapter to connect a PictBridge-compatible digital camera. The prints are 254 dpi RGB from images you

Fujifilm Camphone Printer

have taken on your phone-cam (up to three megapixels, or 900k). The printer uses two rechargeable CR2 lithium batteries that will produce about 130 prints from a full charge. The device also auto corrects for underexposed images. Other infrared devices, such as laptops and PDAs, can also send images to the printer. At www.fujifilm.com/MP70/index.jsp you'll find details and a list of compatible phones.

As thumb drives make floppy disks and drives obsolete, the arrival of large-capacity external hard drives adds a new dimension to computer memory. Before, you could install a hard drive on your laptop or desktop, but it stayed there. Portable drives like the **Giga Vault RH-K40U2** from **Sony** let you share enormous amounts of data by passing it from hand to hand. With a 40GB

Just What You Need, and Nothing You Don't ◆ Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ AS YOU PEEL THE SHRINK-WRAP OFF THE BOX, you have an ominous feeling. After loading v12.6 of Turbo Analysis Pro on your computer, your suspicions are confirmed. There's a new menu frame that runs down the entire right-hand side of the screen with three or four tabbed pages underneath the top menu. The toolbar at the top of the page has four or five unfamiliar icons, and the bottom of the page has some kind of preview selection bar. As the boss leans over your shoulder, he explains, "Yep. This new version has everything and then some. And you'd better get used to it pretty fast because this upgrade cost us plenty, and I want some ROI PDQ."

It's called feature creep, and the rationale is pretty simple. Somebody writes a really good program that does what it's designed to do, and it sells until the market is saturated. At that point, if the developer doesn't leave the country, they're doomed. If they did their job well, self-elimination is the last part of the curve. That is, unless they add a couple of shuffleboard decks and a pool to the flagship. Then they can sell it to you again as a new product (called an upgrade). And if the new features build in complexity that eliminates the intuitive feel that made the program good in the first place, you're now moving in the wrong direction. Soon you have a program with millions of

Sony Gigavault Hard Drive

capacity you could download a movie to take on the road along with your presentation. You can fit 17 hours of DVD-quality video if it's going to be a long road trip. Or you could back up your entire internal hard drive, providing the kind of security tape backups give you back at the office. There's also an 80GB version for those who need more space. If audio or video data has overwhelmed your computer, you could dedicate one of these

drives to just photos or music (70,000 digital images or 800 hours of music). The Giga Vault is pocket-size (6.9" × 0.7" × 3.4") and weighs 10 ounces. The connection is with a hi-speed 2.0 USB cable. It has a shock-absorbing body that protects data even when the device is dropped. The Giga Vault comes with a power supply, battery, USB cable, iView Media LE software, drivers, and a plastic stand.
www.sony.com

The worst thing you can do to your PDA screen is to drop and break it. Almost as bad, and seemingly impossible to avoid, is scratching up the surface as you write on it. You'd think the soft or plastic point of the stylus that came with the device

would be designed to cause no damage. It is, but if you drop the stylus and it picks up particles on its surface, you might leave some permanent reminders of the incident on the screen. There are two ways you can protect the screen with clear covers. One type has an adhesive back that sticks to the surface. Positioning these covers without trapping bubbles or debris under them can be difficult. There's another protective screen that's much easier to position and is tough enough to last for months. It sits on the screen tucked under the edges, at the side, top, and bottom, and can be removed periodically to be washed and reinstalled. The company is **NuShield**, and its **PDA Screen Protectors** come
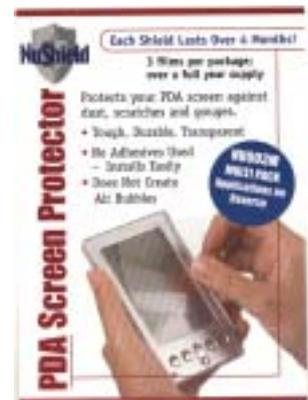
**NuShield
Screen Protectors**

in a variety of sizes customized to fit most PDAs. It also makes larger covers for laptops and tablets that cut down the glare while protecting the surface. The transparency of the NuShield covers is excellent, and the feel of the writing surface is very smooth. A pack of three protectors should last a year or more.
www.nushield.com

lines of code and a manual for a doorstop.

Adding to the problem is that hardware manufacturers love evolving programs that require more powerful computers with more memory and faster processors, more sophisticated video cards (for the 3D presentations), and so on. This new product cycle is the digital world's equivalent of the planned obsolescence that motivated auto manufacturers in the past.

Here's a little exercise that will dramatize where we are. Open the latest version of MS Word that you have on your computer. Go to the View command at the top of the page, and slide down to Toolbars. Check all of them—Standard, Formatting, AutoText, Control Toolbox, Database, Drawing. . .all 22 of them. Your desktop is now a cluttered pile with a small workspace at the bottom of the page peeking out from under the mess. Makes you wonder what's next in future upgrades.

The opposite of this kind of haphazard clutter is something software designers call elegance. Elegant applications feature simplicity and an intuitive understanding of how to make them work. They come from the Zen world of design, but there's nothing mysterious about them. In fact, the opposite is true of these applications—they are obvious, even to new users. Clear workspace, a single button—black ink, a sumi brush, rice paper—that's it. Ever need an upgrade? Not if it's done right the first time.

To-Do, Ta-Da

There's a software company called 37Signals that has attracted attention to itself by offering three very

Simple for sale (and for free)

Simple, focused software that does just what you need and nothing you don't.

inexpensive (or free) products that qualify as elegant applications. There's Basecamp™, a project management app; Backpack™, an organizer/collaboration program; and Ta-da List™, a list manager. Before we take a closer look at the Ta-da program, let's check out the company's philosophy.

First, the odd name. The 37 signals refers to the number of radio signals that have been singled out by astronomers as possible signs of intelligent life out there. That's the occult Zen part. Their more specific reason-for-being is stated on the home page.

"We're a company of five committed to building the best Web-based software products possible with the least number of features necessary. **Our products do less than the competition—intentionally.** (The bold type is theirs.) We believe software is too complex. Too many features, too many buttons, too much to learn. We build products that do less, work smarter, feel better, let you do things your way, and are easier to use. We pay enormous attention to the details and to the interface design of our products."

Let's try one out. Go to www.37signals.com and click on the Ta-da list icon. But wait a minute. You probably already have a Task or To-do list on your PDA or cell, and

you could certainly build a great one on your super-size me word processor. Patience.

Sign on, and you're done. You don't download the program because it lives on the Web. That means it's like your Yahoo or Gmail e-mail account. You can get to it from anywhere there's a browser. You can create up to 10 different lists on the free version or an unlimited number on Backpack. You can share your lists with others, e-mail a copy of a list to yourself, rearrange the order of the list, and see at a glance which have the largest number of items (next to the list title is a dot—the larger ones have the most items). And that's it.

Before I started using Ta-da I had lists in a number of places. Paper notepads, on my PDA, on small docs on my desktop, on pieces of paper—kind of like that drop-down list of toolbars. I would try to categorize different lists in different places, and the nonindexed nature of those notepads, docs, and slips of paper was frustrating. On Ta-da, create a list of the movies you missed but want to rent when they're released, a list of pieces that have to be added to the report due Thursday, phone calls you need to make, 50 books you want to read before you die, restaurants you would like to revisit, relatives' birthdates that have gotten you in trouble in the past, Christmas card lists, and it's as comfortable and natural as grabbing a piece of paper.

What does a comfortable application feel like? It feels like it's yours, it's easy because the instructions are invisible the second time you use it, and you can lay your hands on it when you need it. Elegant—and I don't think I'll need the update, thank you. ■