What, Exactly, is a Slate PC?
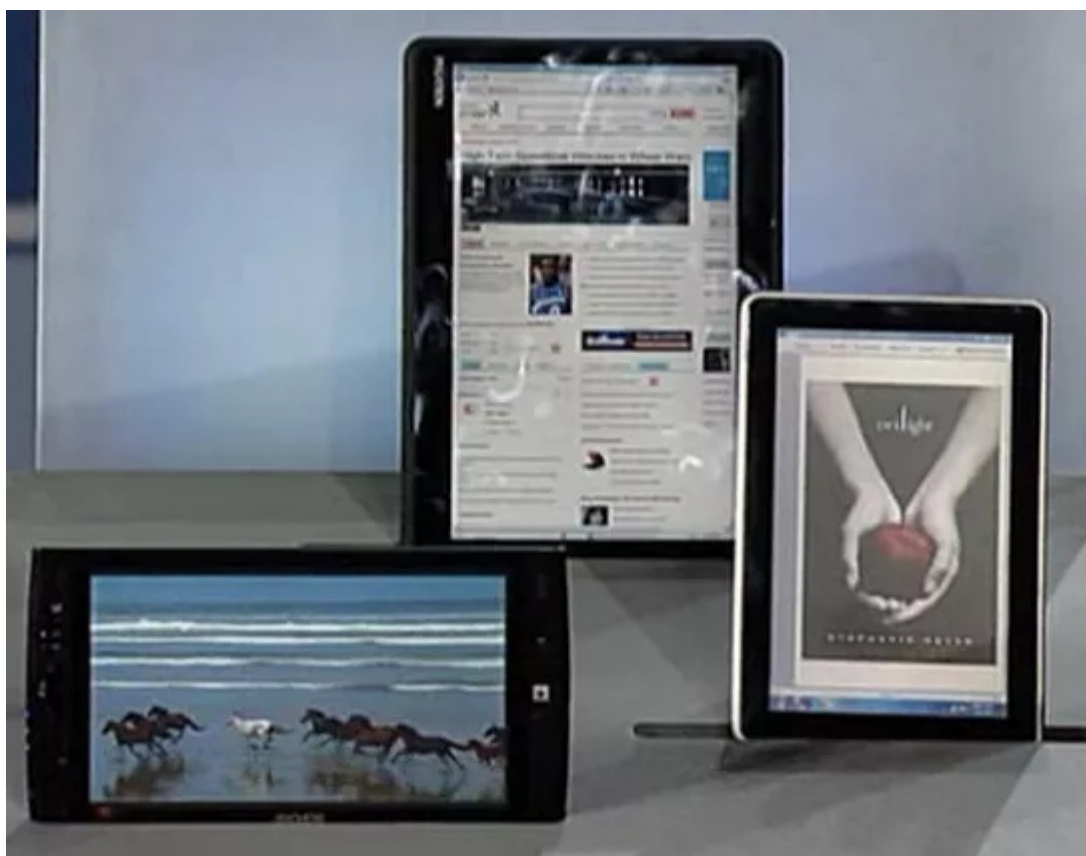
By Harry McCracken | Monday, January 11, 2010 at 8:39 am

Last Wednesday at his CES keynote, Steve Ballmer showed off three examples of what he called "Slate PCs," from Pegatron, Archos, and HP. He said they were "perfect–*perfect*–for reading, for surfing the Web, and for taking entertainment on the go."

He then gave a brief hands-on demonstration of the HP, using it with Amazon's Kindle application and

playing a video. When he launched the video, he fumbled a bit, tapping the screen first in what appeared to be the wrong area of the screen, then jabbing another icon twice.

It's tempting to conclude that if the CEO of Microsoft struggles (even slightly) to make a Slate PC do what he wants, everyone will. It's also not quite fair, given that Ballmer, for the sake of his demo, was holding the HP in an unnatural position–clutching it to his tummy with one hand, tapping it with the other, and looking at it upside-down.

The debut of the Slate PCs did raise some interesting questions, though. We know the Slate PC isn't the radical rethinking of the user interface shown in Microsoft's Courier concept video. But is it like the Tablet PC that Bill Gates unveiled almost a decade ago at Comdex–a new hardware platform that Microsoft is enthusiastic about and will support with significant changes to Windows' interface? Or will Slates use a stock copy of Windows 7, which already includes some touch-friendly tweaks? (For instance, you can reveal a Jump List by swiping upwards on items in the Taskbar.)

At the show, I asked Microsoft's Chris Flores these questions. He said that the company had no plans to customize Windows further for Slate PCs. It'll be up to PC makers to provide a Slate-specific user interface if they think it's necessary–something akin to the ambitious touch-oriented features HP provides on its TouchSmart PCs, for instance.

So is the Slate PC a new platform at all? Maybe it's more of a less distinct, lower-case slate PC? I asked Flores, who told me Microsoft had no stance. Kind of different from the original rollout of the Tablet PC, when Bill Gates said he thought the majority of PCs would be Tablets within half a decade.

I know what I think: The Slate PC *is* a distinct beast, and it cries out for a rethinking of Windows. When you get rid of a physical keyboard and pointing device, multiple fundamental aspects of the operating system start to get iffy. Shouldn't every icon be a lot bigger, so you can jab imprecisely without thinking about it? Wouldn't it be better to eliminate mouse-oriented concepts such as right-clicking rather than provide workarounds, as Windows 7 does? Wouldn't breakthroughs in on-screen QWERTY input make the whole idea more appealing? (Hey, how about something like Swype built into the OS?)

If hardware makers go as far as HP has with its TouchSmarts, it'll help. But most manufacturers won't, and there's a limit to what they can do. Only Microsoft can really give Windows a major revision with Slate PCs in mind. And anything else is going to feel a little half-baked.

Assuming that Apple does indeed tell us what it thinks a tablet computing device should be like on January 27th, it's going to be fascinating to compare and contrast with what we know so far about Windows-based Slate PCs.