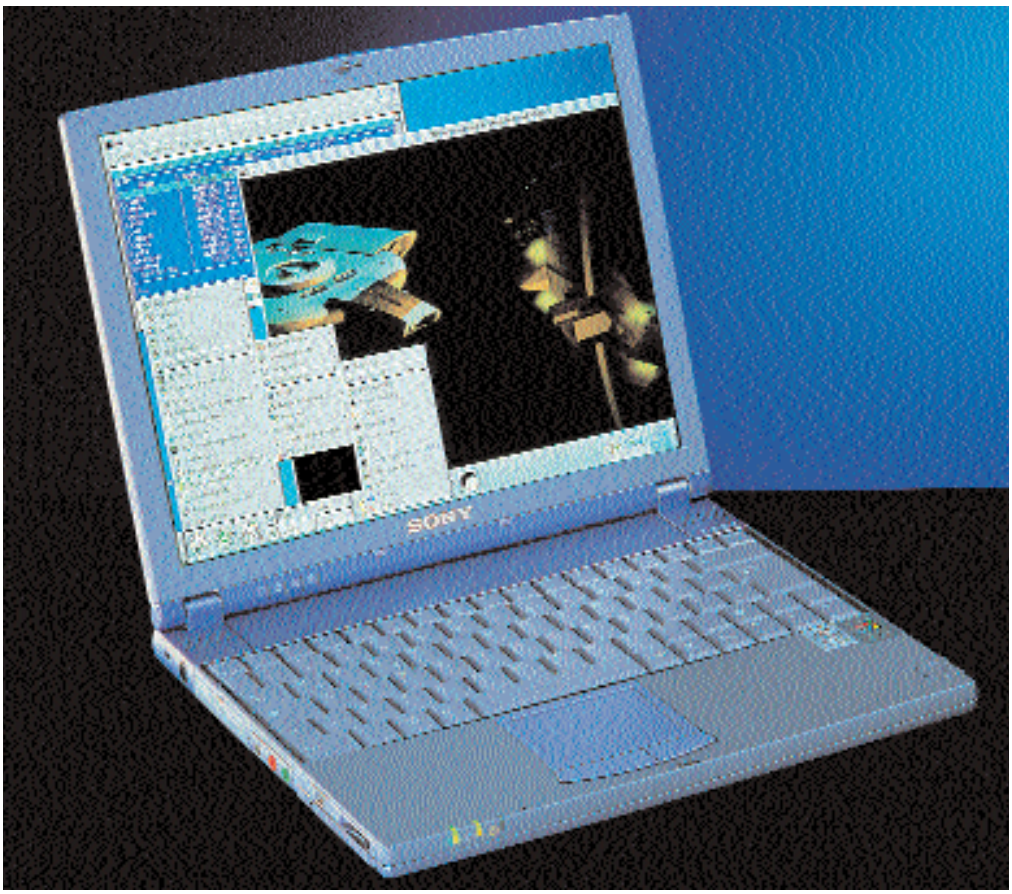
SONY VAIO PCG-Z600 TEK



The Vaio series from Sony is well-known for its compact construction coupled with high performance. Even if Sony has no ambitions at present to supply devices with Linux pre-installed, they kindly sent us the brand-new Vaio PCG-Z600 TEK.

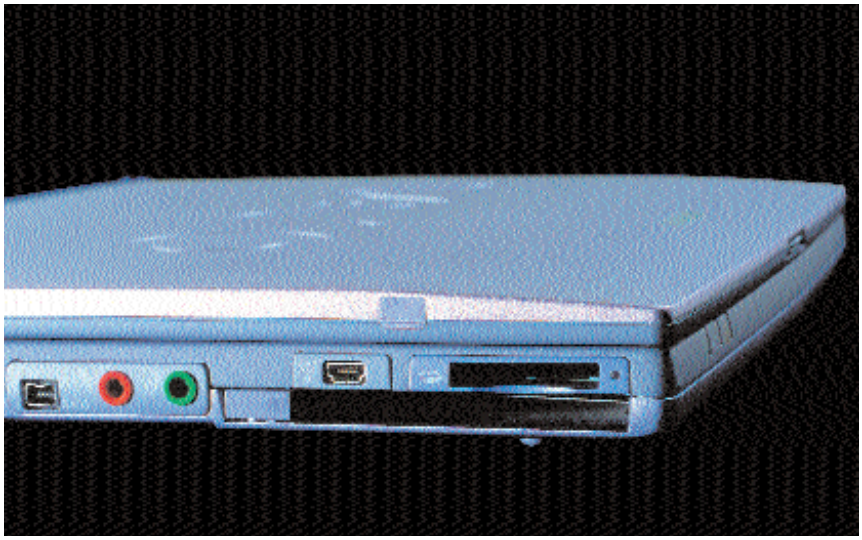
The differences between the new TEK model range and the somewhat elderly NE- and RE-devices are marginal. The vast number of postings published on Ken Harker's Linux laptop sites thus also apply to a great extent to the TEK range. In fact, Sony has only dispensed with the infrared port and also the NeoMagic graphics chips have been replaced by an ATI Rage Mobility.

Problem-free X-configuration

No special steps are necessary for X11 installation and the standard SVGA server functions perfectly. Once we had booted either from the USB diskette drive or PCMCIA CD-ROM, the SuSE installation and the subsequent X-configuration progressed uneventfully.

The Ethernet card was correctly recognised as eepro100 and installed easily. SuSE 7.0 also had a driver ready and waiting for the Yamaha DS-XG WDM Audio Codec although there were a few problems here. Why aplay hangs when testing the card and always plays the same chord was not clear and after the fourth test we saved our ears with a dummy-plug in the headphone socket. Other wave players also refused to comply and sometimes came up with nothing but noise.

The modem was recognised as a Conexant SoftK56 although was a hopless case, just as with IBM, HP and Wortmann before it. Unusual but very clever was the fold-out modem socket placed on



The price of compactness – there is only one CardBus slot available which is already taken up with connecting the CD-ROM.

the back right-hand corner where the modem lead is inserted at an angle of 45 degrees.

Attractive Design

The design of the Sony Vaio is definitely appreciable even if violet is not necessarily everyone's favourite colour. Rare for notebooks but standard for Sony is the 12-inch display with 1024 x 768 pixels. Anyone with good eyesight (or at least a good optician) will not want to settle for anything less than the sharpness and clarity of this display.

The keyboard is also good and though the flat-as-a-pancake notebook is only 3.1 cm high, the key lift is adequate. However, you perhaps wouldn't want to hack around on it for hours at a time. The only real point of criticism is that there is no offset cursor block and the functions *Home*, *End*, *PgUp* and *PgDn* can only be accessed via the [Fn] function key, so both hands are needed for scrolling.

The touchpad with two buttons is also violet in colour but is easy to use, even with damp fingers. The mouse acceleration was a bit low although we were able to correct this in the KDE control centre.

Miniature battery

The battery was also born under the sign of compactness and at 1400 mAh is very small. It acts as the upper keyboard closure which means that without the battery, the Vaio's case has a large hole. Next to the battery are the somewhat small loudspeakers which, nevertheless, still sound acceptable. With respect to sound, we found that whilst there's a line output on the external CD-ROM, the Vaio itself has none.

The one available CardBus slot, controlled by a Ricoh RL5c475 chipset, does somewhat limit expansion options because this is where the CD-ROM connects. The cards stayed at 34 degrees Centigrade although this was measured indirectly at the ActionTec modem, which ran pleasantly cool.

The Vaio has a Firewire connector, two USB ports and a slot for Memory Sticks. The traditional ports for monitor, printer and serial devices, together with an additional USB- and firewire port, are located on the port replicator which Sony also delivers. There is no PS/2 connection for keyboard and mouse nor for Irda. For USB operation we had to change the setting in the BIOS under *Advanced* for Plug & Play OS to *No* , after which the *usb-uhci* module loaded with no problems.

Firewire stays cold

The firewire ports, referred to by Sony as *ilink* but known to the rest of the world as ieee1394, could not be tested simply because we didn't have a firewire peripheral. The same applied to the slot for the Memory Sticks. Anyone who is seriously interested in these topics might like to take a look at the Linux laptops sites and the Firewire sites at http://linux 1394.sourceforge.net. However, at present the XCD-3222 hardware used by Sony is shown as not supported.

On the other hand there were no problems with power management – at the push of a button the Vaio Z600 goes to sleep from the text console just as under X and in both cases it was brought back to life with no problem.

Conclusion

The Sony Vaio PCG-Z600 TEK is the not far from being the paragon of notebooks, and, due to its lightness, it's especially suitable for those who travel often and do not wish to carry around a three-kilo lump of plastic and circuit boards. However, the very small battery and the power hungry Pentium III (700 MHz) allow for very brief periods away from mains sockets so the power supply should really be calculated into the travelling weight. Linux support is good with only the sound problems caused a little doubt. It's also a pitty that no modem driver is available because otherwise the Vaio would definitely have come out near the top of our list.

But what is truly deplorable is that Sony is not making any preparations to offer devices with Linux installation. However, that doesn't stop others taking the lead – one front-runner in this field is the laptop specialist Walter Heuser, from whom one can obtain, for example, the predecessor model Z600 NE with pre-installed Linux at http://www.xtops.de. ■

Sony Vaio PCG-Z600 TEK	
(+)	attractive design
(+)	12-inch display with XGA
(+)	lightest device in the test
(-)	problems with sound card
(-)	modem not supported
(-)	tiny battery