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## 'Franken-Products' Abound at Taiwan Computer Show

By [ASHLEE VANCE](#)

TAIPEI, Taiwan — A young woman in a white cocktail dress sat in a chair with a purple shawl wrapped around her head. She wore high heels, bulky brown sunglasses and a surgical mask. Moments later, the shawl and mask were ripped off and she sprang into song.

It was all part of a [musical revue](#) by Micro-Star International celebrating the release of a new laptop.

The rather eccentric display hardly seemed out of place at last week's [Computex trade show](#) — the annual computer industry gala held here in Taiwan's capital city. This year's show signified the computer industry's move far beyond traditional desktop and laptop PCs into more exotic devices. If dancing girls and loud music at an exhibitor's booth helped attract attention to these strange new computers — or explain them — all the better.

Certainly, odd combinations of hardware, software and service providers were everywhere at Computex. In addition to the traditional systems consumers have known for years — those that run [Microsoft's](#) Windows operating system on top of an [Intel](#) chip — computer makers showed off devices that rely on glorified cellphone chips and [Google's](#) Android operating system.

Machines with touch screens dangled the promise of escaping the tyranny of the keyboard in favor of intuitive finger-pointing. And, in back rooms, phone companies aggressively promoted tiny computers that bridge the gap between smartphones and laptops.

Roger L. Kay, one of the most prominent analysts of the PC industry, described the new generation of machines as "Franken-products," a reference to the monster cobbled together from various parts.

For years, the popular industry term used to describe the collision of computers and cellphones has been “convergence.” But based on what’s coming soon to a store near you, it seems that “divergence” may be the more apt moniker. There is now a quasi-laptop for just about every need and want.

This month, consumers will start to see a fresh crop of cheap, thin, ultra-light notebooks arrive at chains like [Wal-Mart Stores](#) and [Best Buy](#). Top-of-the-line computers in this category used to cost around \$2,000, but the newer products will sell for less than \$600.

Too expensive? The computer industry offers other options. Companies like [Hewlett-Packard](#), [Dell](#), Acer and Asustek Computer are introducing lines of netbooks, the sub-\$400 laptops aimed at simple tasks.

And if all you want to do is browse the Web, the latest netbooks shown here, built around cellphone chips, can display high-definition video and still last for up to 18 hours on a single charge. They should start appearing in stores this fall for less than \$150 and weigh less than two pounds.

At the feathery end of the weight scale, Asustek, the Taiwanese company that created netbooks, even promoted a computer that is just a keyboard with a small screen attached to its right side. The keyboard connects wirelessly to the Internet and lets people crank away at their e-mail, instant messages and documents.

On the show floor, it seemed that anything with a display took on laptop-like functions. There were pads to scribble on, smart photo frames that connected to the Web and videoconferencing systems aimed at consumers rather than corporate customers.

Some of the products ran Windows, some ran Android software and some ran software that most people have never heard about. The “Intel inside” notion still held for most of the machines, but quite a few had Snapdragon from [Qualcomm](#), Tegra from [Nvidia](#) and Ion, also Nvidia, chips inside, too.

Even on the larger, more traditional PCs, the beige box has given way to computers with LCD panels, touch-screen software and decorated cases — some with floral patterns meant to appeal to a woman.

“All these Franken-products can’t possibly exist, but they do, like a menagerie of imaginary animals,” Mr. Kay, the head of Endpoint Technologies Associates, wrote in a research note about Computex.

The industry cannot even agree on what to name some of these odd new creatures. A small laptop with an Intel chip is normally called a netbook. But a netbook with a cellphone chip is called a smartbook, according to some companies' marketing departments. Microsoft, meanwhile, prefers to call them all "low-cost small notebook PCs."

And wireless phone carriers might well start calling them something else entirely as they race to begin selling laptops with bundled data plans directly to consumers.

"We have been flying the carriers around the world," said Michael Rayfield, the general manager of mobile products for Nvidia, one of many chip companies producing parts for these new laptops. "They all want to meet the manufacturers and come up with their own look and feel."

A 30-person company called [Mobinnova](#) worked with Taiwanese manufacturing giant Foxconn for just four months to make what amounts to the thinnest, most power-efficient laptop for the carriers. Called the Elan, the Nvidia-based device can run for up to 24 days on a single charge if it is just playing music or run for 10 hours straight playing high-definition video.

Mike Holland, Mobinnova's vice president for business development, said that one telecommunications company, which he declined to name, will start offering the product before the Christmas shopping season at a price of \$49 to \$99.

Mr. Holland said that later takes on the [Elan](#) will be thinner, lighter and more varied. "We're already working on three or four more different products that advance this concept," he said.

At least two more phone carriers plan to release Nvidia-based laptops, according to Mr. Rayfield, although he said that Nvidia withdrew planned demonstrations of the devices at Computex because the phone companies wanted to keep their competitors from seeing the designs.

Many of the new PCs feature a layer of touch-screen software that lets people sort through their music collections and photos with the flick of a finger. Some of the more complex versions even let children to draw pictures and put animated figures into their creations.

It is unclear if any of these products will take off and lead to a reinvention of the PC.

"With the exception of netbooks, no market for them has been established," Mr. Kay wrote.

“We’ll have to see what sticks as buyers vote with their pocketbooks.”

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