

Keyboard and button placement

As mentioned earlier, those who have worked with a Mac will find the keyboard of the Vaio FW remarkably similar to that of the systems from Apple. Curiously, though, it seems that Sony has not "borrowed" any ideas from Apple; it's exactly the other way around, since the Japanese company was the first to introduce this design. However, we're not here to offer you a history lesson, but rather some insights into the experience of owning and working with a Vaio FW, so we'll stick to just how the keys look and feel.

As far as the plastic is concerned, the best way to describe this is... non-skid. The quality of the material and of the build is quite impressive, the surface of each particular key having a very special structure, which makes typing very easy, while at the same time providing a certain level of control over the typing process.

However, getting the hang of Vaio FW's keyboard can prove to be rather tricky for some people, and that's because the spaces between the keys are rather large, larger than in the case of other laptops, that is. It took quite a few minutes (OK, perhaps it was a bit longer than that) in order to get accustomed to them, but in the end, the result was quite a satisfactory one, much better than many notebooks or laptops I've had a chance to work with.

As mentioned earlier, the Vaio FW also features a couple of multimedia control buttons placed on the upper side, integrated into the speakers. Besides the usual volume and playback control buttons, there are also the S1 and AV MODE buttons, each of them triggering the activation of a specific software application (the S1 can be customized to launch various apps, while pressing the AV Mode button will automatically launch the Windows Media Center software).

Another equally important button is the wireless switch, which activates or deactivates the wireless connectivity options of the Vaio FW. This particular button is placed in the mid-left area of the notebook's front side, right near the battery and the HDD activity indicators.

Last, but certainly not least, we'll talk about the Power button. As in the case of most Vaio notebooks, it is placed on the lateral side of the hinge and is manufactured from translucent plastic. The transparent material, combined with the built-in LEDs (green and orange) allow users to have a clear and quite "colorful" view of the notebook's status (a bright green light for normal activity and an orange light for stand-by mode).

Touchpad

The touchpad has become a standard control component on any notebook, replacing the need for a mouse. Sony's Vaio FW makes no exception to this rule, as it's been equipped with a relatively large touchpad, measuring 8 cm x 5 cm, which has quite a good level of sensitivity right out of the box, without requiring any significant tweaking.

However, it's also very important to note the fact that the buttons placed under the touchpad did have some problems, mostly related to the fact that the designers from Sony tried to make them as unobtrusive as possible. And they've done such a good job that it's actually pretty difficult to distinguish the actual button from the palmrest itself, an issue that can

prove to be rather cumbersome in some situations (for example, selecting certain photos from a large group of pictures and then losing the respective selection by tapping on the touchpad instead of the buttons).

Connectivity options

The connectivity options embedded in the Sony Vaio FW (either visible or invisible) are a clear clue to the fact that this notebook has been designed especially for multimedia playback-related purposes. First of all, let's talk about what we can actually see right on the notebook's case.

On the right side of the FW, we can find three USB 2.0 connectors, which can be used successfully either for hooking up various peripherals (printers, mice, digital cameras, etc.) or external storage devices (USB flash drives, for example). As far as connectivity options go, the back side is rather unimpressive, but things change dramatically when we take a look at the Vaio FW's left side. There, we can find a multitude of connectors, including the Ethernet interface, a phone line connector for the built-in modem, a VGA output, an HDMI connector, an iLink connector (Sony's own version of FireWire), as well as ExpressCard/34 module.

The front side (beneath the palmrest) is equally interesting, since this is where the engineers from Sony have placed the two card readers, compatible with the Secure Digital and Memory Stick formats (on the left side), as well as the microphone and headphone jack connectors (on the right side). Besides these visible interfaces, the Sony Vaio FW has also been equipped with Wireless LAN and Bluetooth modules, but we'll talk more about these two in due time (in the connectivity and networking area of our review).

Webcam and microphone

Most notebooks released on the market lately also double as portable (or in some cases, ultraportable) communications devices, since they can be used for talking to/viewing other people via dedicated IM clients. That's also the case with the subject of our test, the Sony Vaio FW, which comes equipped with a 1.3-megapixel MOTION EYE camera, as well as a microphone, both of which are placed on the top side of the display (for obvious reasons, since this position can provide a much wider angle of view).

Optical drive

The Blu-ray combo optical drive (Sony Optiarc BD ROM BD 5500A) can be found on the right side, between the USB interfaces and the power button. It actually blends so well in the case that one would have some tough time finding it, if it weren't for the orange activity LED.

Hardware performance

System setup

Before going any deeper into the actual hardware testing section of our review, we'll first take a look at the list of components that can be found under the hood of the VAIO VGN-FW11M notebook.
CPU: Intel Core 2 Duo P8400, Running at 2.26GHz, L2 On-board Cache 3MB, ECC, Synchronous, ATC, 12-way, 64 byte line size, 2 threads sharing;
Memory: 4 GB of PC2-6400U, DDR2-400 memory (Samsung modules); Storage: Hitachi

HDD, 250 GB, 2500 RPM, 8 MB buffer; Graphics: ATI Mobility Radeon HD 3400 Series, 256 MB dedicated memory; Chipset: Mobile Intel 45 Express; Operating system: Microsoft Windows Vista Ultimate SP1; Wireless: Intel 5100 802.11a/b/g/n, Bluetooth 2.0 w/ EDR; Battery: Li-Ion, 4800 mAh, 4-cell.

Given that this Sony Vaio has been designed for multimedia purposes, we decided to leave out any gaming benchmarking and focus on the notebook's overall performance. And we have done so by using Futuremark's 3DMark06 and PCMark05 software applications to stress the notebook's CPU, graphics and memory, while the HD Tune allowed us to stress and test the 250GB capacity Hitachi hard disk. We also took in consideration the Windows Vista Experience rating, which, despite the notebook's impressive specs, only rendered a maximum of 4.6 points.

Graphics

Although the Vaio has been built with a discrete graphics chip, ATI's Radeon HD 3400 series with 256MB of dedicated memory, the notebook's performance in 3DMark06 goes to prove that gaming is not what this Centrino 2-enabled Vaio has been designed for. Other than that, you should enjoy a more than decent HD experience and a high-performance portable multimedia computer system.

We ran the test at 1280 by 768 pixels, with no Anti-Aliasing and Filtering set to Optimal. All the basic tests for the graphics and CPU were performed. After several tests, the notebook achieved a score of 2591 3DMarks, which, as mentioned above, goes to show that this Vaio FW hasn't been designed for gaming.

Memory

In the PCMark benchmark the Vaio FW scored 5112 PCMarks, as shown in the table above. The rating is rather decent and if you have any doubts about its overall performance you should take into account that, given the notebook's 4GB of RAM memory, it will most certainly provide you with an impressive Vista Experience.

Hard drive

HD Tune 2.55 rendered an average transfer rate of 44.2 MB/s, while the access time was just below 20ms. As a reminder, the Hitachi hard drive features a maximum rotational speed of 5400RPM and has 8MB of cache. Given its specs, the HD Tune benchmark results are rather decent and add up to the notebook's overall performance.

Battery life

The battery is certainly not one of this notebook's best features as we've seen in our tests. Fully charged, it allowed us to perform only four consecutive 3DMark06 tests. According to Sony, the standard battery is capable of a 5-hour lifetime, when the notebook is used for basic applications.

Real-life performance

As mentioned right from the start, we've divided our review into several sections, each of them regarding a different aspect of the Sony Vaio FW. So, now, after you've been able to read about the notebook's hardware performance, as well as enjoy an overview of its most important design features, it's time to try a more "personal" approach. Over the next few paragraphs, you'll be able to see the way in which the FW behaves in real life, used for normal, ordinary activities, like watching a movie or listening to music.

Display

In our hardware testing section, you found out that the Vaio FW features a 16.4-inch display, which uses XBRITE-HiColor technology and has a 1600 x 900 pixel resolution. But how do these figures translate in real life? Well, first of all, the size of the desktop was simply amazing (I usually work on my 15.4-inch Inspiron, so that 1 inch really made a difference). This large display allows you to carry out various tasks at the same time, and, more importantly, they allow you to view movies in HD (when available via the BD drive), further stating this product's role of a portable multimedia playback device.

While I won't go into any details regarding the actual visual experience, since this particular aspect is completely subjective, I will underline a few things about the viewing angles. It's actually quite interesting to notice that the Vaio FW has some very good viewing angles, of around 60 degrees sideways, which is quite better than everything most other notebooks provide.

Audio

While the video playback features of the Vaio FW are pretty impressive, the quality of the audio playback is a whole different story. Thus, although the notebook packs a Dolby Sound Room Audio system, the actual experience of listening to music on the FW is not exactly fantastic. Of course, one cannot expect miracles from the tiny speakers built in this laptop, but the truth of the matter is that the sound (at full volume) seems to be too... sharp, lacking fullness.

However, with a good pair of external speakers, the audio chipset installed on the Vaio can do a pretty decent job, allowing users to either listen to their favorite music or watch movies in the best possible conditions.

Multimedia playback

Since this notebook has been designed and developed especially for multimedia-related purposes, it's no wonder that it offers quite a large number of applications created by Sony exactly for this purpose. Thus, the Vaio FW comes pre-installed with both the Vista Media Center and Sony's own applications, such as the Music Box, the SonicStage Mastering Studio, the VAIO Movie Story, and much more.

Practically, users can do just about everything they might think of, from listening to music to viewing photos to creating complex videos... the list is almost endless.

However, one very important element that must be mentioned here (while at the same time related to the issue of networking) is that of the Sony VAIO Media plus. This application allows users to visualize, organize and share all of their content between various

devices, the interface looking exactly as the one used on both the PSP and the PS3 (yes, you've guessed right, it's the famous Sony X-bar user interface). Practically, it offers somewhat of an easier and more familiar interface for those users who have decided to finally ditch their PSP and go for a little something more serious, at least as far as multimedia is concerned.

Connectivity and networking

One of the areas where the Sony Vaio FW excels is that of connectivity. You've been able to see earlier, in our chapter regarding the notebook's external design, what exactly are the connectivity options the computing system can provide, but now it's time to take them for a test in real-life.

Networking - Getting Online

What's the first thing one wants to do when purchasing a new laptop? Well, get online, of course. The Vaio FW offers no less than four different ways of accessing the Internet: a WiFi adapter (802.11a/b/g/n compatible), an Ethernet adapter (10Base-T/100Base-TX/1000Base-T), a telephone modem (V.92/V.90) and Bluetooth module (which connects the Vaio FW to a mobile phone, used as a modem).

We've tried all of these methods of getting online, and the best, by far, proved to be the wireless module. Paired with a Linksys wireless router, the Vaio FW worked great, even at a relatively large distance from the WiFi signal source. The connection was stable (no drops), the data transfers were also rather normal (given the transfer rates provided by my ISP), but the most impressive feature remained the fact that you could go almost anywhere with the notebook and it would still work.

I won't go into further details regarding the Ethernet interface and the modem, but there are a few important things worth mentioning about the Bluetooth module. While using it for accessing the Internet wasn't exactly the easiest thing possible, this module can do wonders when transferring various files (music, videos, photos, etc.) from a mobile phone. Moreover, it also works quite well with Bluetooth-enabled headphones, since it supports the A2DP profile.

We can't end this section without mentioning the "Vaio Smart Network" application. This very small app makes it quite easy for users to select which particular networking mode they want to work with, as well as adjust the various settings of the respective interface (IP, gateway, etc.). Moreover, since it's constantly present on top of the screen, choosing the exact right interface is an extremely simple process.

The wonders of HDMI - Vaio FW as a Blu-ray player

One of the best features of the Vaio FW is the HDMI output. When connecting the notebook to a widescreen TV via the HDMI cable, the display resolution is automatically adjusted in order to match that of the TV, while users are prompted to select the exact mode they want. Each of the available viewing modes works flawlessly, and the same can be said about the playback. Practically, by featuring both this HDMI interface and the Blu-ray optical unit, the Vaio FW can be used as a Blu-ray player by those users who haven't already purchased either a PS3 or a standalone model.

Office work

Since the Sony Vaio FW is not exactly what one might call a desktop replacement, it hasn't been designed for office work. However, it's perfectly capable of carrying out this task as well, since the included hardware (not to mention software) is more than adequate for office-related applications. As a matter of fact, most of this review is actually written directly on the FW model, so I've had the chance to see first hand just what that Mac-like keyboard can do.

The keyboard, despite being slightly different from that of a normal notebook, offers a pretty OK experience, although getting the hang of it might prove to be rather troublesome, at least for some users. Nevertheless, it does offer quite an interesting "feel", as the keys generate a soft "click" whenever they're pressed. Moreover, the level of support provided by this keyboard is also rather OK, this element being especially important when writing in less-than-perfect conditions (while commuting, being on the road, etc.).

The wide display is also quite important, since I could easily work in a document while at the same time checking out a webpage for additional information.

Built-in software

One of the most controversial things about the Vaio FW is the issue of the pre-loaded software. There are quite a lot of people out there (yours truly included) who simply loathe the fact that some manufacturers decide to ruin a perfectly good notebook (like this one) by loading it up with all sorts of software. Who needs all those programs, since, sooner or later, expert users and enthusiasts will decide that it's time to either format their disks or try out something new, like a different OS, for example?

On the other hand, there are also many users (a lot more than the first category mentioned earlier) who want their portable computing system to come right out of the box with everything needed for normal use, from the office applications to the music and movie playback software, photo viewing applications, IM clients, etc. Especially for them, Sony has pre-loaded onto the Vaio FW all sorts of software programs, either Google's freeware apps (Picassa, Google Earth, Talk), Adobe Premiere Elements 4, Adobe Photoshop Elements 6, Skype, a trial version of the McAfee Internet security suite, or its own creations, such as: Vaio Recovery Center, Vaio Smart Network, Vaio Control Center, Vaio Media Plus, VAIO Movie Story (for creating and editing video clips), Click to Disc Editor and Click to Disc.

And, of course, every single program listed above is installed on the Windows Vista Home Premium operating system, which is also accompanied by Microsoft's famous browser, Internet Explorer. As you can see, that's a pretty large bunch of applications, which do take quite a lot of this thing's 4 GB of RAM memory, at least at startup. However, for those anti-tech users, who simply want a notebook that works right out of the box, these apps will really come in handy.

Conclusions

The good

Sony's Vaio FW comes with so many useful and attractive features that it's actually pretty hard to list them all here. Out-of-the-box connectivity, enhanced multimedia playback capabilities, the built-in Blu-ray unit, awesome speed and processing power and a relatively low level of power consumption, as well as the attractive design, all of these features turn

the Vaio FW into one fearsome multimedia machine, which will please road warriors and office dwellers alike.

The bad

As you've seen above, there are a lot of good things to be said about Sony's Vaio FW notebook. However, as you've been able to read throughout our review, there are some bad things as well, related to three different issues: software (the pre-installed software could prove to be quite a nuisance for many users, especially the experienced ones, and it will also slow down this uber-fast machine's startup times), audio (the sound is a bit... edgy, lacks roundness, especially at maximum levels) and video (won't run latest games at upper specs).

Overall impressions

The Sony Vaio FW is one impressive multimedia machine. It's great for viewing HD content (especially since it features a built-in Blu-ray unit), connects seamlessly to widescreen TVs, and it's perfectly capable of running all sorts of media applications. Indeed, it's not meant to play games, although one can do that as well but shouldn't expect the same level of performance obtained from a dedicated gaming notebook or desktop unit. It offers great connectivity options (either for networking or for connecting to other devices), as well as a fairly extensive battery life. Yes, it can get a little hot, but given just how "hot" this machine is, it won't really matter that much.

