

GORGEOUS GIZMOS FROM THE STABLE OF STAID



A range of cool new gadgets is helping Microsoft to shed its image as a fuddy-duddy producer of software and take on the might of Apple, writes Mark Harris

A flash new media player selling out across America, high-tech phones being hyped months before their release and a jaw-dropping touchscreen tablet computer. We're talking about Apple, right? Wrong. Microsoft — usually regarded as one of the most boring technology companies on the planet — has stunned technophiles in recent days with a string of gadgets that could not be further from its roots in the world of workaday business software. Last week saw the release of its latest Zune, the Zune HD, a music and video player that makes Apple's latest versions of its iPod Classic and Nano look old-fashioned. The Zune HD, which could be available in the UK next year, costs from \$220 (£137) and is the first mainstream portable player to handle HD video. Its wide 3.3in touchscreen, which incorporates new, bright and sharp OLED (organic light-emitting diode) technology, might not be high-definition, but it outperforms any Apple player. Add a special cradle for an extra \$80 (£50) and it will stream HD television shows and films stored on it onto a big-screen TV. The new Zune also puts pressure on its rivals with its

ability to automatically update itself over wi-fi with any new tracks you've downloaded to your PC — something no Apple product can do. As stores were selling out of Zune HDs, news broke of some equally glamorous Microsoft gizmos: a pair of phones called Pure and Turtle, and Courier, a unique double-touchscreen tablet computer (see panel). "It's like Microsoft has just woken up," says Matt Buchanan of Gizmodo, the technology blog that unearthed the prototypes. "They've obviously put a lot of effort into the Zune, and it's going to get better still." If true, and Microsoft declined to comment last week, the reason for its new-found enthusiasm for cutting-edge hardware is obvious: the slow decline of its core software business. Google has already muscled in on the company's word-processing and presentation territory with a range of free, online programs, and next year will launch Android OS, its challenger to Windows. Perhaps that is why the team responsible for Microsoft's hardware resurgence is not to be found on its sprawling suburban campus at Redmond, Washington state, but in the heart of downtown Seattle. This is the

home of Microsoft's "skunkworks" — a shadowy research and development division far removed from the drones working on the next version of Word. Called Pioneer Studios, it has been given the task of making Microsoft cool. Inside its exposed-brick warehouse walls, graphic artists, animators,

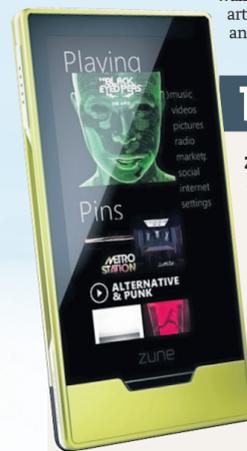
ergonomists and engineers have helped redesign the software of the Xbox 360 games console and finalise the design for the Zune HD. Now they are preparing for Microsoft's imminent assault on the mobile-phone market. Pioneer Studios is the brainchild of J Allard, chief technology officer of Microsoft's entertainment and devices (E&D) division. Credited with

introducing Bill Gates to the internet and creating the Xbox, Allard is Microsoft's answer to Jonathan Ive, Apple's British-born superstar designer responsible for the iMac, iPod and iPhone. Allard's division recently swallowed the Windows Mobile unit whole and is still digesting Microsoft's acquisition of Danger, a handset maker. "Allard is considered the wizard of

E&D," says Buchanan. "There's a feeling at Microsoft that with him in charge, they've turned the corner." Allard still faces tough challenges. Zunes currently account for less than one in 50 of all music players sold. Windows-based mobile phones are struggling and Xbox 360 sales are suffering with the advent of Sony's new PlayStation 3. For the moment,

Microsoft's unexciting computer software range funds Allard's team of hip "experience designers", but it isn't at all clear for how long it can afford to continue doing so, and that in itself suggests we can expect to see some of these hardware prototypes sooner rather than later. Only time will tell whether they are enough to give Microsoft back its mojo.

THE MAGIC OF MICROSOFT



Zune HD
If the Zune HD, which launched in the US last week, priced from \$220 (£137), is typical of the hardware that Microsoft has in the pipeline, then 2010 is set to be a vintage year for the company. The Zune's powerful graphical processor can handle high-definition video and send it via a cradle to an HD TV. Its own visuals are displayed on a class-leading, widescreen OLED touchscreen, and it also features the innovative wi-fi updating function that debuted in the first-generation Zune launched in 2006.



Microsoft mobiles?
Images were leaked last week of two new handsets — a first for Microsoft. Rumoured to be arriving next year, the Pure and Turtle mobile phones will have a sliding screen and qwerty keyboard and, with its social networking features, will be targeted at the always connected youth market. Expect access to Zune services such as mobile apps, music sharing and video streaming to come as standard — but also slightly clunky styling.



Courier tablet computer
Further off is a dual-screen tablet computer, codenamed Courier. It's like a folding laptop with two screens and no keyboard, on which you write notes with a digital stylus but copy and drag-and-drop items by finger-swipe. Courier is said to be at the late prototype stage, and might include Microsoft's new virtual keyboard software, which cleverly detects where your fingers come to rest and repositions the keyboard so that the home keys lie directly under them.

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