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Acer Aspire 8920G-934G46Bn notebook

Does the Blu-ray behemoth deliver?

by Chris Hall published on 16 July 2008

Acer has never shied away from cramming new technology into their notebooks. With an impressive spec sheet, the Acer Aspire 8920G, from the Gemstone Blue series, falls distinctly into the desktop replacement, offering a dedicated range of media features. But is this worth a look?

With a large frame supporting a massive 18.4in LCD screen, you'll find plenty of real estate around the full sized keyboard. You get a standard Acer Aspire QWERTY keyboard with a number pad flush against it on the right. On the left-hand side is the CineDash "media console", which is the feature of the Gemstone Blue series that gets the most attention. All these areas however are different colours and materials, so there is no sense of design cohesion, which we found disturbing.

In use the CineDash operates the bundled Acer Arcade Deluxe, which unfortunately, does have the potential to confuse. One issue is when you play a disc, as soon as you move the mouse, the Acer Arcade controls appear, when you are actually after the controls in the disc menu. The direct controls on the side do work well enough once you have a film playing, however the volume control is frustrating, leaping up and down the scale from almost silent to deafeningly loud - you have to slide the scale, rather than poking the volume point you want.

To rub salt in the wound, Acer have removed the function (Fn) volume controls so you are forced to use the imprecise CineDash, unless, of course you use the icon in the system tray. Phew!

To confuse further, you will also find Fn controls with more media controls that by default operate Windows Media Player, so despite the big emphasis on media, it is not totally clear-cut. The



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CineDash does also allow you to boot straight into the media player, but as we found with the 16-inch Gemstone Blue, it runs within Windows so doesn't really save you much time.

But putting all this aside, once you know the system, it is pretty straight-forward. Blu-ray playback is incredibly bright and crisp; switching to DVD you can't help but feel a little underwhelmed. The screen is has a glossy finish so movies and games look fantastic and also boasts a wide gamut for great colour reproduction. Sitting under the hood you'll find Nvidia's GeForce 9650M GS, to get the most from your HD content, both at home and on the move.

The 18.4in screen also has a 16:9 aspect ratio, at a 1920 x 1080 pixel resolution, so fits with movie playback very nicely. However, the LCD panel does let the side a little, with very obvious backlight bleed which lets down dark scenes in games and movies. There is plenty of power here to play your games - we found that FlatOut Ultimate Carnage was silky smooth even when things got heavy on screen.

Subtly scribed across the top of the keyboard you'll find the words "Dolby Home Theatre", suggesting something special. Built around the chassis you'll find speakers to support 5.1 "surround sound". Spread across the back of you'll also find the less subtly scribed Tuba, which is the subwoofer providing the .1 to the sound.

For music playback you get a respectable performance from the speakers, but once you get into home movie viewing you are faced with something of a dilemma, as turning to headphones does give you a much better audio experience; the same can be said for games and despite the large screen size, you are likely to be viewing on your lonesome. That said, it does handle louder volumes better than most notebooks, overall it is a letdown considering the appearance of the Dolby name. Impressive on paper, but perhaps questionable in practice.

At a glance

What is it?

Blu-ray 18.4in notebook

Good

Screen, Blu-ray player, HDMI

Bad

Weight, fusion of colours and materials a bit much, backlight bleed, Fn volume controls removed, sound not up to its billing

Verdict

The Aspire 8920G packs in a huge range of power specs at a price that is not too outlandish for what you get, but there are some niggles

Price £1399.99

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10

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Less questionable are the other specs on offer here. Our test unit was running an Intel Core 2 Duo T9300, at 2.5GHz, offering serious processing power, and a maxed-out 4GB of RAM. We found multiple applications ran fast and switched easily and with the power on offer to tackle the most daunting tasks. You'll also find two, yes two, 320GB hard disc drives, so you'll have no lack of storage for your high-definition camcorder video footage.

With all this power on offer, you'll be surprised that you'll get about 2hrs 40mins in light usage from the battery. That said, battery life plummets as you deploy the Blu-ray player on the expansive screen with those six speakers, although with a notebook that weighs nearly 5kg and is this physical size, you are unlikely to be away from your desk for long.

In terms of connections you'll find the connections you'd expect, with both wireless LAN a/b/g and Bluetooth, and to round out your HD spec list you have an HDMI socket. You'll also find a built-in webcam above the screen.

VERDICT

The design offers some interesting features: the CineDash, that you either love or loath, certainly takes a chunk of space and if you don't use it often, could seem like a waste. Removal of the Fn volume option seems an unnecessary move. The fusion of different colours and textures across the deck is a little scary, but the twin hinges support a screen that feels solid.

The Aspire 8920G packs in a huge range of power specs at a price that is not too outlandish for what you get, but at this price, the little details matter.