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Intel's Netbook OS Plans Hint Smartphone Aspirations

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In this anemic economy, selling tens of millions of *any* new product is a rare bright spot. But that's exactly what's happened in the case of netbooks, those small, light and relatively inexpensive notebook computers. Intel benefits greatly from this market, as its Atom line of CPUs powers roughly 90 percent of the devices in this class. The old "Intel Inside" tagline now includes netbooks along with desktops and laptops. Don't be surprised when it applies to smartphones as well.

If the chip maker has its way, Intel won't be inside netbooks solely from a hardware perspective. Intel helped create the Moblin initiative in the second half of 2007, just as netbooks became a reality. Moblin is the mobile Linux operating system on which Intel and the open-source community jointly collaborate. But while Intel's Moblin enters the ring to fight the battle for netbook operating systems, I suspect the effort is ultimately a front for the larger prize: smartphones.

Developing CPUs and an operating system for netbooks offers Intel a solid proving ground while allowing the company to keep its eye on the prize: the smartphone market. Don't believe me? Ask yourself this question: If you could only carry a netbook or a smartphone, which would **you** choose? Regardless of your answer, Intel will apparently have you covered.

Along with other journalists and bloggers, I attended a web conference with Intel earlier this week on which the company offered the first look at its new Atom chipsets for netbooks (PDF). But few details were provided; far more time was spent talking about the now-available beta of Moblin v2.0. The operating system is more skin-and-bones than meat at the moment, but after sampling it on a netbook, it impressed upon me

that Intel is focused on more than just netbooks. You can view the demonstration video to see if you agree.

This appears to be an operating system built from the ground up that's geared for a wide variety of mobile devices. Moblin isn't simply a desktop operating system that's optimized for mobile devices; it's simple, intuitive and focuses on key aspects of the mobile experience, among them the web, portable media playback, email, calendar events and social networking. Those just happen to be key elements of a smartphone, too. And the interface looks to be easily adopted for a much smaller screen as well. In fact, the UI reminds me more of a smartphone than it does a notebook.

Yes, Intel is apparently focused on netbooks while they're hot. I don't blame them. But make no mistake: the company's intent for one branch of Atom CPUs is to offer solid performance with low power consumption, much like ARM has done for some time. Intel is already working on a Moblin version for Atom-powered MIDs, or Mobile Internet Devices, which is a smartphone-like handheld. Selling an Atom CPU for every MID or smartphone certainly helps the revenues. Creating the device software that's optimized for those CPUs could put "Intel Inside" all of our pockets, too.



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