

# TECHNOLOGY

## Meet the Archos 605

BY ROYAL VAN HORN

**F**RANKLY, I have felt guilty over the past several years for not discussing personal media players like iPods and for not covering more WiFi topics in this column. Maybe it is as the ancients thought, bad ether. Or maybe it is my love for things like high-definition video, five-channel surround sound, and fast and capable computers. But all that is about to change, as I am finally making the move to WiFi, personal media players, and take-it-anywhere technology. It pains me because until very recently, I have been more than happy with the technology I already have.

It is the Archos 605 WiFi personal media player that lured me out of my wired comfort zone. I have ranted and raved about technology in the past, but the Archos 605 makes me stretch to find enough superlatives — and expletives — to describe it. I first learned about the 605 while reading an editor's review by Donald Bell on CNET (dated 8/30/07). While I consult CNET reviews often, the opinions that follow are mine and not quite the same as those of Mr. Bell.

The Archos 605 is 4.75 inches wide, 3.25 inches tall, and slightly over half an inch thick. Most of the front is taken up by a gorgeous 4.25-inch (diagonally) TFT (thin film transistor) LCD (liquid crystal display) screen with 800 x 480 pixels. This screen, by itself, sets the Archos apart from nearly every other similar device, including the iPod. Two other features put the Archos in a category by itself: a 30-GB hard drive and built-in WiFi for wireless networking. The 605 is available with as little as 4 GB and as much as 160 GB of memory, but I suspect the 30-GB model will be the most popular, and it is the one I recommend. Another feature I like is the small speaker on the front that lets you listen to music without using those annoying ear buds. Together, these and similar features drove me to the store.

The screen of the 605 is a “multi-touch” screen that turns into a qwerty keyboard when you need it. A

“multi-touch” screen allows you to scroll up and down or side to side with a finger or a stylus — two of the latter are provided. There are also six buttons on the right side of the device that are needed from time to time, but you can generally use the touch screen.

As soon as I got home with the 605, I turned it on and checked to see if there was any wireless coverage in my neighborhood, but there was none. I guess the local Starbucks is just too far away. Oh well, I think my son has a spare wireless station that I can use with my Mac mini and DSL line to create my very own WiFi network. I plan on setting up my home wireless network soon, but I want to make it as secure as possible, which might take a little study. Expect more on this topic in a future column.

If you don't have a WiFi network, you can simply connect the 605 directly to a computer. The 605 comes with a special cable that connects it to the USB 2 port on a computer. You must have a USB 2 port, since this is how you charge the 605's batteries, and a USB 1 port does not have adequate power. Once connected to a computer, the 605 shows up on the Mac desktop or in “My Computer” on a PC. There are two ways to configure this connection: one makes the 605 appear as an external device; the other makes the 605 act as a Windows Media Player. The first connection method is the one I use, since it allows me to simply drag files to the 605 hard drive.

The first order of business for me was downloading some music files from eMusic.com — an Archos partner. I like eMusic for three main reasons. First, the music, which costs 99 cents a song, is not copy protected, so you own it. That means you can transfer it from computer to computer and make as many CDs as you like. Second, I like eMusic because it features a wide selection of old folk, pop, rock, and country music that is nearly impossible to find elsewhere. For example, it was easy to find nearly a dozen versions of Donovan's “Catch the Wind” and a copy of “Lonely Surfer” by the Ventures. (I am dating myself here!) A third reason I like eMusic is that it offers a “download helper” application that makes the process easier than using a Web browser, although it is somewhat tricky to install, so be sure to read and print the directions.

After downloading music to my Mac, I simply dragged the files to the 605 hard drive. The music was automatically catalogued by artist and album title. During playback, the 605 displayed the album art when it was available.

Next, I downloaded a number of JPEG-format photos, and they looked great on the screen. I accidentally put my photos into an existing sample-image file that housed

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a bunch of images that came with the 605. I can see that I'll need to take some time to figure out how to mass delete and move images. The 605 has a slide show feature that I have not yet explored, and it provides a PDF reader for e-books and the like.

The Opera Web browser connected via WiFi works well, but I am not sure how much I like surfing the Web on a small-screen device. I do plan to find a widget for Opera that will display, in some detail, the latest weather in my area — preferably live weather radar.

My next 605 venture was trying to copy 25 video clips with the Flip Video camcorder (see the December 2007 column) and play them back on the 605. Oops! Glitch number one. The video was very clear, but there was no sound. Undaunted, I surfed over to the FAQs area of the Archos website and found the glitch. The 605 supports AVI format video — which the Flip uses — but it supports only MP3, WMA, or WAV audio files.

This takes a little explaining. All video in digital format is video that has been compressed using what is called a “codec,” which stands for “compression/decompression” algorithm. To complicate matters, video may be compressed using one codec and audio using a different codec. Since there are over a dozen video and audio codecs, there are many possible combinations. Video and audio compressed using particular codecs must be decompressed or played back by a device that has those exact codecs. Archos sells a \$20 plug-in that you can download to add the ability to play .mov, .m4v, and H264 videos. Since .mov files are Apple QuickTime files, and this plug-in might be useful, I decided to download it and give it a try on the Flip videos. At the time, I was at home on my Mac, and the Archos website didn't like taking my \$20. I gave up and decided to try it from my university office.

When it comes to technology, there is always a “work around.” The obvious work around here is to use a program like QuickTime Pro and convert the Flip files into a format that the 605 likes. However, the Archos plug-in should solve the problem.

This discussion illustrates my biggest complaint about Archos. To make the 605 versatile, you need about \$100 worth of plug-ins. I had already downloaded the \$30 Opera browser, and now I needed to spring for another plug-in for various video and audio formats. At the very least, Archos should include a browser and support for all popular audio/video codecs.

Another aggravation is that Archos sells a confusing array of add-ons, such as a DVR docking station so you can record and play back to any video source, as well as various charging stations, cables, and so on.

Your initial investment of \$300 can quickly grow to \$400 with all the plug-ins, and to \$500 with a few add-on docks. Still, the gorgeous screen, the large hard drive, WiFi, and the ability to handle high-definition video and Dolby surround sound combine to make this a one-of-a-kind device. You may find it worth the aggravation.

After using the 605 for a week, I came to the conclusion that it is essentially a handheld PC that works well only with Windows Media Player file formats. By the end of the week, I was spending more time reading the manual than using the 605. I somewhat sadly returned the 605 for a refund. Maybe in the future, Archos will make the 605 more user-friendly.

## TECH NOTES

- Apple's Steve Jobs recently reported that in early 2008, Apple plans to open the iPhone and iPod touch operating systems so third-party developers will be able to write all kinds of software for the iPod line. It should be interesting.

- Late last fall, Amazon.com announced that it will begin selling and promoting an e-book reader called the “Kindle.” Sony has an e-book reader that never became very popular, but perhaps Amazon has the marketing clout to make the Kindle a success. The reported price of a Kindle is \$399. Now that will buy a lot of paperbacks! **K**

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