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MSI MegaBook EX400
Notebook
MSI

[MSI MegaBook EX400 Notebook Review](#)

Mostly for office work, but also for a little entertainment

It's quite a well-known fact that most notebook manufacturers try their best in order to come up with certain products that fit the needs of specific market segments, whether we're talking about gaming, office work, ultra-portability and so on. That's also the case with MSI, and after reviewing a while ago a notebook designed specifically for gaming and multimedia (the GX720), it's now time to see something a little different, namely the MSI EX400 model, a device whose features and specs recommend it as a portable computing system designed mostly for office work and web browsing, but also a bit of multimedia playback on the side.

Although it was launched in early autumn 2008, quite surprisingly, the MSI EX400 is not exactly very widespread nowadays, being present mostly on the EMEA markets probably due to the fact that it combines a relatively decent price point with other interesting features, all packed within a very versatile and somewhat attractive design.

As mentioned above, the EX400 is designed mostly for people who spend a lot of time on the go, so portability is a very important issue. For this reason, the display measures only 14.1 inches in diagonal, while other extras (multimedia controls, etc.) lack completely. While some users might find this rather disturbing, others, namely those who are just looking for a "workhorse," won't probably mind at all.

This latter category of potential customers might also appreciate the fact that the device comes equipped with a specially-designed ECO Engine, a power-saving function whose main purpose is to extend the battery running time while performing different tasks.

Over the course of our very pleasurable experience with the EX400, we were able to test all of the aspects mentioned above, and more, as you'll about to read as follows, starting with the overall design and ending with just what working with the EX400 feels like.
[[BREAK=Design and aesthetics]]

Overall design features

As far as its design is concerned, we couldn't really say that the EX400 is the best-looking notebook we've ever seen. The GX720 was a lot bulkier, but managed to catch the eye, with its red and black combo.

The EX400, however, is rather plain-looking, the designers going for a black - silver combination of colors. However, what really sets this notebook apart is the wave pattern applied to the upper case, which grants it a somewhat soothing and elegant look, especially if you're into all that Zen stuff, that is. But anyway, it's not something you'd find on most notebooks or laptops, so it's worth mentioning.

Plus, given the fact that this computing device has been designed to be used while on the

go, the device is, supposedly, scratch and fingerprint proof due to the Color Film Print Technology used for its casing. Don't know about scratches (although there were some on the surface, so we guess it's not exactly adamantium-grade), but as far as we've been able to see, the outer case is really a fingerprint magnet, rather than a repellent.

The quality of the materials the MSI EX400 is built from is not bad at all, but it's not exactly something to boast about. Indeed, the outer case looks very elegant, but as far as the finishing of the keys, buttons and wrist-pad are concerned, the GX720 was far superior.

Size and portability

Since the EX400 is, after all, designed to provide a high level of portability, its size and weight have been kept to a minimum. So, the notebook measures 330mm in length, 240mm in width, and 25-37 mm in height (depending on whether it's opened or closed), along with a weight of 2.2kg, battery included.

Leaving aside for a second the numbers, we'll have to tell you that the EX400 is indeed quite easy to carry around, even in one hand. It won't take too much space either on your desk or in your lap, and it will also be very easy to carry around, either in the provided bag (yes, MSI also provides a special bag for the EX400 in the sales package) or your own backpack.

Button and slot placement

Unlike the GX720, which had all sorts of multimedia controls and buttons all over its case, the EX400 keeps things simple. Hence, besides the QWERTY keyboard with 87 keys, the device only features two additional sets of buttons (with three buttons each), one above the keyboard, on the right side, and the other on the left side, on a vertical orientation.

Hence, on the right-hand side, we can find the all-important power button, as well as the buttons in charge of controlling the ECO Engine. One of the two buttons is used for activating one of the available settings of this power-saving engine (Gaming mode, Movie mode, Presentation mode, Office mode, and Turbo Battery mode), while the other will simply switch it off. As for what this function can really accomplish, we'll tackle this issue a little later, within the real-life experience section of the review.

Now, moving along with the buttons, let's take a look at the other three, located on the left side of the notebook. Here, we can find the webcam control button (activates or de-activates the webcam), the wireless interface button, as well as the S1 button, which is used for launching a certain application, selected by the user.

Probably the most impressive thing about the touchpad area is not necessarily related to its level of sensitivity (although it is quite sensitive), but rather to the fact that it's seamlessly integrated within the wrist-pad. Hence, it's nearly impossible to figure out exactly where the wrist-pad ends and where the touch-pad begins, something that definitely improves the overall look of the EX400.

Now, as far as the "slots" issue is concerned, the MSI EX400 sports three such items, all of them located on the notebook's left side. The first one is a Kensington security slot (for preventing theft), the second is a 4-in-1 card reader (compatible with SD/MMC/MS/XD memory cards), while the last is a PCI Express Card.

Connectivity options

Since the notebook is a part of MSI's entertainment series portable computers, it should have been able to provide a lot more connectivity options than it actually does. Hence, none of the modern interfaces we've come to expect from a notebook are there, as you'll be able to see as follows.

On the front side, right beneath the touch-pad, we can find the audio connectors, namely a line-in interface and a headphone jack. Moving on to the right-hand side, we come across just one USB 2.0 interface, located on in the immediate vicinity of the optical drive.

The rear side is a little more "generous," since here we can find the Ethernet interface, an additional USB connector, plus the jack for the power adapter.

Finally, the "richest" side in terms of connectivity options is the left one, where we can find two USB 2.0 connectors and one VGA output. And that's about it, no eSATA, no HDMI, not even a FireWire connector. Quite disappointing.

Of course, besides these visible interfaces, the device from MSI provides a built-in 802.11b/g/n WLAN Card, while the Bluetooth V2.0+EDR module is optional, which, frankly speaking, is yet another minus. Any notebook should have Bluetooth provided as a standard option nowadays.

Webcam

[IMG=21]Of course, pretty much in the same way as most other notebooks out there, the MSI EX400 sports a 1.3-megapixel webcam and an internal mic, used for online communication. Nothing particularly spectacular here, really.

Speakers

The MSI EX400 sports two speakers, located above the keyboard. The company claims they're able to provide "surround" sound, but the truth of the matter is that... well, no need to rush, check out the real-life experience section for details regarding the sound quality.

Optical unit

As mentioned above, the optical unit is located on the right side, and users can choose between a DVD Super Multi and a Blu-ray unit. Sadly, our test sample had the former option, not the latter, so no idea how well the Blu-ray reader integrates with this thing (albeit, it's also rather pointless, given the fact that Blu-ray is used for Full HD playback, and this machine doesn't really score that good on the high-definition scale).

[[BREAK=Hardware performance]]

The EX400 is a totally different breed of laptop, when compared with the GX720 gaming laptop we reviewed two weeks ago. First of all, the EX400 is part of MSI's entertainment series and has been designed to come in a more compact and lightweight form factor, boasting a 14.1-inch LCD display. Also, unlike the gaming system built on Intel's Centrino 2

platform, the EX400 has been designed on a SiS chipset, providing support for Intel's Core 2 Duo processor.

Taking all that into consideration, we knew that we would get some considerably different results from this MSI laptop, but even so, we had to see the numbers for ourselves. But before we get to talk about the overall performance of the laptop and the scores it received in our benchmarks, you should take a better look at the configuration that has been provided to us, for testing. Without further ado, here is a list of the system's specifications:

System Specifications:

- Processor: Intel Core 2 Duo P7350
- Chipset: SiS 672 DX and SiS968
- System Memory: 3GB DDR2
- Graphics: ATI Mobility Radeon HD 3450 with 256MB VRAM
- Audio: 2 speakers powered by Realtek ALC888 audio adapter
- Storage: Western Digital Scorpio Blue 250GB, 8MB Buffer, 5400 RPM
- Optical Drive: DVD Super Multi
- LCD Display: 14.1-inch WXGA TFT-LCD
- Webcam: 1.3MP
- Card reader: 4-in-1, SD/MMC/MS/XD
- Wireless: Atheros AR928X Wireless Network Adapter and Bluetooth
- I/O: 4 x USB 2.0 ports
- 1- x Mic
- 1 x Headphone
- 1 x Ethernet LAN
- 1 x PCI Express
- Battery: 6-cell
- Operating System: Windows Vista.

Performance

As mentioned above, we did not expect the EX400 to provide performance similar to that of the gaming-capable GX720. However, we did hope that it would at least manage to complete all the tests and benchmarks that we put it through, if not provide a decent score. Unfortunately, that was not the case with Futuremark's 3DMark Vantage, a benchmark that

is meant to test the performance capabilities of a PC's CPU and GPU, using intensive graphics. Basically, 3DMark Vantage is mostly used to test a system's gaming potential, which the EX400 hasn't really been designed for. We are not saying that it cannot be used to play games, but don't expect it to provide you with support for some of the latest graphics demanding gaming applications.

[IMG=23]After having established that the EX400 wasn't designed to meet the requirements of those high-end gaming users out there, we went ahead and tested the other components of the system, including the memory and hard disk drive. Memory-wise, the EX400 configuration we received for testing, boasted a total of 3GB of single-channel DDR2 memory (5-5-5-15), enough to easily handle Microsoft's Windows Vista operating system. We tested the laptop's memory using the Lavalys EVEREST Cache and Memory Benchmark and, as you can see in the picture, the results were not all that impressive.

[IMG=24][IMG=25]

MSI has featured this Entertainment-series notebook with a 240GB hard disk drive, designed by Western Digital, as part of the storage maker's Blue Scorpio range of hard disk drives. As we did with other portable computer systems tested, we turned to the HD Tune Pro 3.10 hard disk utility to test the hard disk's transfer rates and access times. As you can see from the results, the performance level was rather decent and somewhat to be expected, given the drive's technical specifications.

[IMG=22]After our experience with 3DMark Vantage, we had some doubts regarding the notebook's capability of running Futuremark's PCMark Vantage. Nevertheless, we did startup the application to get some numbers on the overall performance of MSI's EX400. The score, as you can see for yourselves, wasn't impressive, as the laptop managed to score 2694 PCMarks. Still, the system went through all the tests, providing the biggest score in the music suite and the communication suite. We can also add that, despite the low score in Futuremark's PCMark Vantage, the laptop performed decently when dealing with multimedia applications or day-by-day office applications.

Battery and Temperatures

Now, already mentioned, the EX400 isn't very high when it comes to performance, but the system can easily provide an adequate support for day-by-day computing. However, there's one thing, on top of all, that left us really disappointed, namely the fact that this 14.1-inch laptop gets really hot.

[IMG=26][IMG=27]

When we put the laptop through its paces, we almost immediately noticed that it got pretty hot pretty fast. When running PCMark Vantage, the temperature at the laptop's ventilation exhaust was close to 55 degrees Celsius. That was enough to make us want a cooling pad underneath the system.

As far as the battery goes, the 6-cell battery on the EX400 delivers just enough power juice to allow the user to benefit from about three hours of battery life. Now, if you stress the system by running various multimedia applications, while the notebook is put into performance mode, then you should expect something closer to two hours and a half.

[[BREAK=Real-life performance]]

After taking a look at the MSI EX400's hardware capabilities, it's time to move to the real-life performance section, where we'll tell you just how this notebook behaved while going through three of the most common real-life usage situations: gaming, working and playing multimedia.

Gaming

[IMG=29]As you've been able to figure out from the hardware tests, this thing has not exactly been built for gaming. Of course, it's safe to say that it will run games at an acceptable level of quality, as long as we're not talking about the latest 3D titles at top specs. But if you decided to go for an older game and you're not that demanding as far as the quality of the video and the number of FPS is concerned, then the EX400 will most likely rise up to the challenge.

Multimedia playback

Since this notebook is officially a part of MSI's Entertainment Series, we were actually expecting a lot more from it, as far as the multimedia playback issue is concerned. So, first of all, the hardware allows it to process pretty much any type of movie, but it's rather in vain, since the 14.1-inch display is simply too small to allow users to enjoy a true, complete and comprehensive multimedia experience.

Moreover, the lack of suitable connectivity options makes it very difficult for users to hook this thing up to a HDTV. We've managed to do it via the VGA output and a separate audio cable, but with HDMI, it would have been a lot simpler.

Additionally, the so-called "surround" sound issue is actually not exactly as the company describes it. OK, so the quality of the sound is relatively good, but don't expect the same level of audio you'd encounter in the GX720. It's just good, not fantastic.

Office work and web browsing

[IMG=28]While the multimedia playback and gaming experiences were not exactly great, things are quite different as far as the working issue is concerned. So, the EX400 behaves extremely well when used for writing and browsing the Internet, its built-in Wi-Fi module doing a very good job, even when at a fairly large distance from a router or hotspot (and even through walls).

Plus, while the display is not exactly great when talking about multimedia playback, things are quite different when talking about writing documents, sending e-mails or visiting websites, since you'll be able to do all of these things for long periods of time, without any significant eye strain.

[[BREAK=Conclusions]]

The Good

The MSI MegaBook EX400 has a very good battery life, plus a fairly OK display, if you're using it for office work, that is. The device is also extremely portable, which is always a major plus, and is powerful enough for basic gaming, multimedia playback and any other task one might require on a day to day basis.

The Bad

One of the worst things about the EX400 is the fact that it packs very limited connectivity options. Also, the design features are not particularly impressive, the device having a very "spartan" look. Another very serious minus is the amount of heat this thing generates, which is way too high to handle without an external cooler, especially if you're using it for longer periods of time.

Overall impressions

The MSI EX400 is the type of relatively affordable notebook one should purchase for general use. So, if you're not exactly a huge multimedia fan, but you want something that will let you watch movies in relatively good conditions (both video and audio), listen to music and work at the same time, then the EX400 is a pretty good solution. Plus, you can also throw it a game or two, as long as you don't really expect too much out of it. To sum things up, we could say that should the MSI MegaBook EX400 have featured a smaller form factor, it would have probably competed for the top spot on the netbook market.

Sales package

Similar to the case of the MXI GX720, the sales package of the EX400 is quite generous, featuring:

- MSI EX400 notebook ;
- Notebook bag;
- Power adapter;
- Wired mouse;
- Cleaning cloth for the display;
- CD with drivers;
- User's manual.

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