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Battle: Web Cam

Heavy Gear

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Battle: Web Cam

Logitech & Microsoft Rumble For Supremacy

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For better or worse, we now live in a society ruled by video. With the rise of broadband, the ability to enhance your communication with video rather than only text or audio is almost impossible to resist. The trend is now so common that practically every notebook sold, even cheap netbooks, offer integrated Web cams. The question is no longer whether to own a Web cam. Instead, it's time to ask how well you want your Web cam to represent you.

■ The Field Narrows

As with most things, there's a spectrum of quality for Web cams. Standalone Web cams run from roughly \$20 to \$130. Only two or three years ago, the field was crowded with camera manufacturers. Today, probably because of low-end pressure from integrated notebooks, only a few vendors are left: Creative, Hercules, **Logitech**, and Microsoft. However, Creative hasn't released a new model in a couple of years, and trouble with Hercules' software across three PCs forced us to bump the vendor from this roundup.

This left us with two vendors, Logitech and Microsoft. For comparison's sake, we also sampled the video from the integrated Web cam on a recent OCZ 15-inch DIY notebook. After all, you want to know if the "free" stuff is good enough (our verdict early on: fair). The integrated camera's performance in shadow detail was pretty good, albeit at the expense of blowing out the whites just a bit. OCZ specs its camera at 2MP, but we noticed pixelation setting in at any resolution over 320 x 240. This isn't picking on OCZ. Misleading numbers are epidemic in the Web cam world. Even Logitech markets 8MP on its high-end units, but rest assured those aren't 8MP sensors behind the lens. Take those MP specs with a grain of salt.

■ Logitech QuickCam Series

Half of any Web cam these days is the driver package sitting behind it, and this is where Logitech's experience shows. Having good optics and decent sensors start Logitech in the right direction, but features such as RightLight (now in its second generation on all the models we tried except the Communicate MP) let QuickCams fare even better in tricky lighting situations, particularly back and side lighting. Logitech's QuickCapture application—the obligatory photo and video capture/gallery/settings tool—is particularly easy and accessible. Although we're naturally prejudiced against eye-candy doodads, we have to grudgingly admit that Logitech's handful of effects, such as old-fashioned film and glowing edges, were a lot of fun until the novelty wore off. Note that the gallery area lets you directly print or email items, as well as upload them straight to your YouTube account.

QuickCam Communicate MP

\$49.99

Logitech

www.logitech.com

CPU Rating: 2.5



The QuickCam Communicate MP is an old-school eyeball design—a sphere camera perched on a mount meant to hook to the top of your LCD. The unit is priced as a midrange Web cam, but we sensed that the chief draw here, rather than the hardware, was Logitech's software. The best image quality we observed was at 640 x 480, even though Logitech states that this unit uses a 1.3MP sensor. But even that should be qualified since the VGA resolution still showed some edge jaggedness. Moreover, practically every still shot we captured showed motion blurring, and video was fuzzy overall. Our guess is that Logitech had to make a trade-off between lighting and frame rate, even though there was plenty of window and monitor light. More disturbing was the audio quality, which was decent at preserving clarity at normal speaking volumes, but once we turned up music, as in a "here, listen to this!" situation, the sound distorted and blew out completely. Faced with a \$50 price tag, we'd leave the Communicate MP and stick with an integrated camera.

QuickCam Pro 9000

\$99.99

Logitech

CPU Rating: 3.5



Things improve with the QuickCam Pro 9000. Although audio results stay similar (decent at low volumes, blown out when loud), visual quality takes a quantum leap, perhaps thanks in part to the Carl Zeiss lens.



Images look crisp up to 2MP. Beyond that, a bad case of the fuzzies sets in with 3MP, 4MP, and 8MP modes all looking equally unimpressive. The good news is that nobody really needs more than 2MP from a Web cam, either for stills or video. Logitech does a good job keeping frame rates up while minimizing motion blur, even at higher resolutions. We like the 9000's bar-shaped form factor with double-hinged mounting, which lets it mount to an LCD or sit on a desktop. As an alternative, Logitech's QuickCam Pro for Notebooks gives a virtually identical experience, only in a more compact, notebook-oriented clip-on design.

QuickCam Orbit AF

\$129.99

Logitech

CPU Rating: 3



The Orbit series is now Logitech's flagship camera and the only unit the company offers with motorized pan-tilt-zoom capabilities. This sounds more impressive than it really is. PTZ control is worthwhile when you need to remotely control a surveillance camera. On the desktop, it's meant to follow your head without taking a hit to image clarity caused by digital zooming. The problem is that Logitech's face-following algorithms aren't that great. Sometimes you have to coax the camera into following you, which defeats the point. Moreover, when the camera does shift to center on you again, the quick jerk of the lens is liable to give the viewer whiplash. (And the whizzing motor is somewhat distracting.) So without the PTZ, we're essentially left with a Pro camera in the shape of a ball mounted on a stick. Video is decent, but we started seeing noticeable sharpness degradation kick in after only 960 x 720. Also, we found the two lowest resolution modes, 320 x 240 and 640 x 480, had an almost "super-sharp" look to them, with heightened edge contrasts and some pixelation. For the

price, you're better off with a Pro 9000.

■ Microsoft LifeCam Series

Microsoft sent us four cameras to test, but because the brand new entry-level unit, the LifeCam VX-2000 (\$29.95), failed to be recognized by the LifeCam software we used on every other Microsoft model, we pulled it from the roundup.

Microsoft's LifeCam software is a decent reinterpretation of the Logitech QuickCam idea. The main window gives you one-click buttons for still, audio, and video capture, and we suppose having the audio-only feature could come in handy for tasks such as quickly creating a narration track in your home videos. Microsoft throws in similar effects as Logitech, plus a lot of ridiculous overlay graphics, the kind of cheese you find in some "family-oriented" cameras. Overall, it's a decent setup—a little sluggish at times but plenty user-friendly.

LifeCam VX-3000

\$39.95

Microsoft

www.microsoft.com

CPU Rating: 2



Another reason we didn't mind abandoning the VX-2000 is that the screen-gripping VX-3000 was so lame. Low resolutions contain heavy JPEG artifacting, the middle resolutions look fuzzy, and there really are no high resolutions supported. Audio is faint and hissy at best. Video exposure is fair, but the image and sound quality are so poor that we found our notebook's Web cam to be markedly superior.

LifeCam VX-5500

\$59.95

Microsoft

CPU Rating: 3



For \$20 more, the VX-5500 delivers a better experience. Most of the sad JPEG artifacts are gone. Stills at 320 x 240 look good, but fuzzing starts creeping in at 640 x 480. At 1.3MP, compression wiggles start reappearing, as do some occasional color blotches. Microsoft isn't as good as Logitech at light balancing, and we found that bright background areas were exposed to death. The VX-5500 redeems itself with much better audio performance—still a bit muted overall but with excellent directional ability to preserve the speaker's words even in the face of blaring music. Microsoft crushes Logitech on this front.

■ LifeCam Show

\$99.95

Microsoft

CPU Rating: 2.5



Microsoft's flagship is the domino-sized LifeCam Show. Honestly, we were disappointed in its optical quality. As with low-end models, the Show turned in shoddy results at lower resolutions. We didn't feel still images were decent until 1.3MP. Video looked decent at 640 x 480. All other modes were pretty hit and miss, with higher resolutions being prone to mushy clarity and some motion blurring. If anything, the Show's audio performance was even better than the VX-5500's. The camera has a concave magnet in its back and front that mates to any of three mounting options: a stick-on magnet for behind the top of your LCD screen, a clamp for your notebook, or a foot-long stand for your desktop. Although the magnet idea seems clever, the Show's cord is too stiff for the approach, and we were constantly having to reposition or reattach the camera when the cord was jiggled. All told, the Show strikes us as something that belongs in the \$70 range, instead of its \$99.95 price tag. ■

by William Van Winkle

User Reviews

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User Rating (out of possible 5)

0=Absolutely Worthless 2.5=Absolutely Average 5=Absolutely Perfect

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