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A child's view of the \$100 laptop

What will a child in the UK make of a laptop designed to help children in the developing world? Rory Cellan-Jones brought an XO home to find out.

In late November I returned from Nigeria with a sample of the XO laptop.

The computer, made by the One Laptop per Child charity, is a robust little machine designed to entertain and educate children while allowing them to learn by themselves.



The laptop was designed to be robust and easy to use

I knew there was only one person who could review it for me.

The Nine Year-old's View

Enter Rufus Cellan-Jones. He is nine, has far more experience of games consoles than computers, and has strong views on most matters.

"Looks fun," was his only comment when I handed over the small, green and white laptop, explaining that he was the only child in Britain to have one.

But very quickly he was up and running.

All I did was give him the security code for our home wireless network so he could take the XO online. The rest he figured out for himself, as he explains:

Lots of fun

"I just seemed to work it out. It was rather easy. I didn't even need help." Surprise, surprise, his first discovery was a game. "I found Block Party. It's like Tetris. I'm now up to Level 7."

I thought my young games fanatic might stick there but he moved on. "Then I discovered paint. You can use pencils, change the texture, use different sizes of brush."

Even better, there was an animation programme called Etoys.



"I use the calculator - that can be rather useful for sums. You can even browse onto the internet. You can watch and learn stuff."

Rufus Cellan-Jones

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"That's my favourite. You make things. You can see tutorials and demos. Then you can make a new project. I've made a crazy UFO which you can move."

But Rufus says it isn't just about play.

"I use the calculator - that can be rather useful for sums. You can even browse onto the internet. You can watch and learn stuff. You can write things and it can also remind you which is extremely useful."

What, I asked, does a nine year old need to remind himself about? "Christmas stuff," he said, with an air of mystery.

Social networking

But the real surprise came one evening, when Rufus asked me to explain what his friends were telling him on the laptop.

I thought those imaginary childhood friends from years back must have returned.

But I went and had a look - and it was true - he appeared to be chatting online.

So how had he managed that?

"You go on "neighbourhood", then you go to the chat thing.

"You go on Nigeria and you chat to them."

But why, if he was online with the children at the Nigerian school I had visited, were they sending messages in Spanish?

I decided he must be linking up with one of the South American schools taking part in the OLPC project but we still aren't sure quite how that is happening.

Still, Rufus is widening his social circle. "I have three friends. It's nice to talk to them. They don't speak much English but I can understand them." The conversation is not exactly sparkling, but Rufus has learned to say "Hola".

Not a toy

So Rufus is using his laptop to write, paint, make music, explore the internet, and talk to children from other countries.

Because it looks rather like a simple plastic toy, I had thought it might suffer the same fate as the radio-controlled dinosaur or the roller-skates he got last Christmas - enjoyed for a day or two, then ignored.

Instead, it seems to provide enduring fascination.

I had returned from Nigeria not entirely convinced that the XO laptop was quite as wonderful an educational tool as its creators claimed.

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I felt that a lot of effort would be needed by hard-pressed teachers before it became more than just a distracting toy for the children to mess around with in class.

But Rufus has changed my mind.

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With no help from his Dad, he has learned far more about computers than he knew a couple of weeks ago, and the XO appears to be a more creative tool than the games consoles which occupy rather too much of his time.

The One Laptop Per Child project is struggling to convince developing countries providing computers for children is as important as giving them basic facilities like water or electricity.

Unusually, Rufus does not have an opinion about that controversy, but he does have a verdict on the laptop. "It's great," he says.

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