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Review: Venom Blackbook 17

 by [John Gillooly](#) | [Friday 5 April 2013](#) | [Comment Now](#)


Rating

Overall:

★★★★★

One of the best gaming laptops to ever land in the labs shows that with a bit of care, OEM designs can trump the big players.

Performance:

★★★★★

Features and Design:

★★★★★

Value for Money:

★★★★★☆

Price

\$3199 AUD

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Specs

Core i7-3630QM • 4GB Nvidia GTX 680M • 16GB Corsair Vengeance DDR3 • 256GB SSD • 1TB 5400rpm HDD • Blu-ray writer • 17in 1920 x 1080 LCD • GbE • dual band 802.11n • 412 x 276 x 45.4mm (WDH) • 3.9Kg

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This gaming powerhouse from Aussie company Venom computers is an excellent example of what happens when OEM designs are used properly.

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With the launch of Windows 8 we have seen a flurry of activity from the big name PC manufacturers, as they try to deliver the best laptop that twists, flips and can double as a tablet. You just have to look over our Labs tests this month to see where mainstream laptops are headed.

Commensurate with this push is a shift towards mobility over power. Intel's Ultrabook focused processors are favoured, and discreet GPUs are nowhere to be seen. Even the screens, which are increasingly using better IPS panels in order to maximise viewing angles, are designed for clarity, not accuracy.

What we aren't seeing a lot of are performance-focused laptops, ones that are more luggable than portable. These were once a mainstay, and are now relatively niche, usually taking the form of gaming models from manufacturers like ASUS, MSI and Alienware. There are a few other manufacturers who build systems from OEM chassis, and this is where Venom comes in.

Venom is an Australian-owned brand that is entering the performance laptop market with its BlackBook lineup. These take the form of both 15 and 17 inch models, and while they aren't cheap, they are very well priced for the sheer amount of power contained within.

One of the key things that Venom is pushing with its laptops is that it offers a 'Face to Face' warranty, where the salesperson you deal with is the same person you go to for any technical support. This is one thing we can't test but it does show how committed they are to the brand.

Our first BlackBook encounter is this \$3199 17in model. It has an Intel Core i7-3630QM CPU, 4GB Nvidia GTX 680M GPU, 16GB of Corsair Vengeance RAM, 240GB Intel 520 SSD and a 1TB 5400rpm HDD. It uses a 1920 x 1080 matte LCD screen, Onkyo audio system and comes with a Blu-ray writer as standard. Even more impressive are the little touches, like the choice of Intel's top end dual band Centrino Advanced N-6235 Wi-Fi card, full sized illuminated keyboard and a huge array of expansion ports.

This array of high-end components is what really impresses about Venom. We have encountered other laptops that are based on the same OEM chassis, but they seldom have such a fine collection of extra bits and pieces.

This becomes abundantly evident when playing games – or watching movies – on the BlackBook 17, where both the visuals and the audio manage to stand out as some of the best we have seen on a laptop.

Not only has Venom gone for an excellent quality screen (the viewing angles in particular are head and shoulders above what we expect for a TN panel), but the combination of CPU and GPU mean that the laptop is capable of running cutting edge games with everything cranked right up. This makes for a slick, smooth experience, and even in our very high detail Crysis benchmark the Blackbook 17 delivered a playable average of 29fps. In contrast, the \$2999 Razer Blade laptop managed only 22fps at a lower resolution version of the very high detail test.

The top end CPU also helped the Blackbook 17 to a very respectable score in our real world benchmarks, with an overall result of 0.98 putting its performance on par with a Core i7-2600K desktop setup. This beefy performance makes this a perfect solution as a mobile workstation as well as reinforcing its gaming credentials.

This visual feast combines with some of the nicest gaming audio that we have heard from such a small device. The sound system is supplied by Onkyo, and it has been tuned for gaming and movies. This means music playback isn't astounding, but when gaming the sound was full and rich, putting other laptops to shame.

What really surprised us though, was the quality of the keyboard. While one can assume that a gaming laptop will be used with a mouse, the built-in keyboards on such laptops are highly variable in quality. Companies like MSI have in recent times made more of an effort in this regard, roping in third party manufacturer Steelseries to work on its GT70 model, but the keyboard on the Blackbook 17 is every bit its equal.

Being a 17in model, it sports a full-sized keyboard, with number pad. The keys themselves have a surprising amount of travel and spring to them, and have a good feel when gaming. The keyboard itself also has a customisable three zone backlighting system, which you can tweak to the colours that you prefer. It is a small touch, but indicative of the attention to detail that has been paid to the whole laptop.

The touchpad is also quite good, although we found ourselves having to up the sensitivity to make it perfect. It has two discreet buttons and coped well with Windows 8 touch gestures. The metal inlaid palmrest is wide and comfortable enough to ensure that using the laptop is a pleasant experience.

When it comes to expandability, Venom has made the most of the space offered by the bulky chassis. Around the edges sit a USB 2 port, three USB 3, eSATA, Mini-Firewire, Displayport, DVI-I, HDMI, headphone, microphone and line-in jacks, S/PDIF, Gigabit Ethernet port and a 9-in-1 card reader.

Of course, the major tradeoff for this much power is that the laptop itself weighs just under 4KG, and isn't going to be something you want to carry around all day. Its inherent processing power also impacts battery life, which was 1:42 in our heavy usage test and 2:57 in our light use one. With this in mind you'll want to be tethered to a power outlet if you are doing anything serious with the Blackbook 17.

Overall this is a stunning debut product, showing that not all OEM laptops are created equally. Venom has taken a solid base design and built upon it carefully, choosing the right mix of components to deliver a fantastic laptop for gaming or other heavy lifting tasks. Not only does it sport great visual and audio capabilities, but its keyboard is excellent as well. It may not have the Macbook-like thin and light sensibilities of our previous favourite gaming laptop, the Razer Blade, but its use of high end componentry means it runs rings around it when it comes to performance – and that is ultimately what we expect from something with such a serious pricetag attached.

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