

Google poised to take wraps off new mobile phone

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google Inc. was expected to unveil Tuesday its vision for how a mobile phone should be made and sold, likely raising the stakes in the Internet search leader's bid to gain more control over how people surf the Web while they're on the go.

The catalyst in Google's latest attempt to shake up the mobile market apparently will be the Nexus One, the first smart phone designed by the company's own engineers.

Google has said little about the phone except to confirm that its workers received the handsets three weeks ago for a final round of internal testing.

Google is expected to provide the first concrete details about the phone, along with the company's vision for how such devices should be made and sold, during a news conference Tuesday at Google's headquarters in Mountain View.

In its invitation to the event, Google said the wireless market has only seen "the beginning of what's possible" with the free Android operating system that it introduced for mobile phones in late 2007.

Android was designed to make it easier to interact on a mobile phone with Web sites and services, including Google's, while providing an egalitarian platform to run applications developed by outside programmers.

The applications don't have to go through an extensive review before they can be distributed to Android-powered devices, a contrast from the control that Apple Inc. holds on its hot-selling iPhone.

Until now, Google has been content to let other companies design the devices relying on Android. And those devices thus far have largely been distributed like most other mobile phones, tethered to major wireless carriers that typically require buyers to lock into two-year contracts in return for discounts on the handsets.

But Google now appears to be ready to push its operating system in a new direction while trying to give consumers more flexibility to connect a mobile phone with the wireless carrier of their choice.

Google intends to stamp its own brand on the Nexus One and sell it directly to consumers over the Web, leaving it up to the buyers to pick their own carriers, according to reports published in technology blogs and major newspapers. That could open new possibilities while igniting new tensions in the mobile phone market.

Planet-hunting telescope unearths hot mysteries

WASHINGTON (AP) — NASA's new planet-hunting telescope has found two mystery objects that are too hot to be planets and too small to be stars.

The Kepler Telescope, launched in March, discovered the two new heavenly bodies, each circling its own star.

Telescope chief scientist Bill Borucki of NASA said the objects are thousands of degrees hotter than the stars they circle. That means they probably aren't planets. They are bigger and hotter than planets in our solar system, including dwarf planets.

"The universe keeps making strange things stranger than we can think of in our imagination," said Jon Morse, head of astrophysics for NASA.

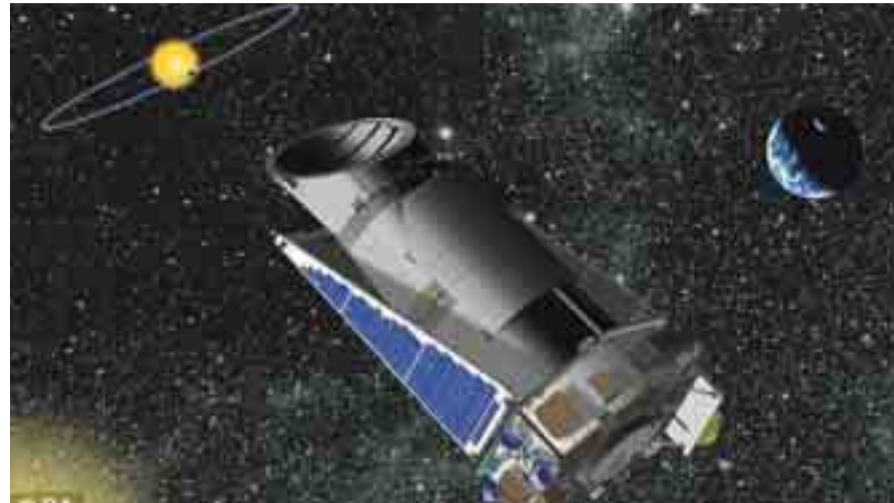
The new discoveries don't quite fit into any definition of known astronomical objects, and so far don't have a classification of their own.

Details about the mystery objects were presented Monday at a meeting of the American Astronomical Society in Washington.

For now, NASA researcher Jason Rowe, who found the objects, said he calls them "hot companions."

How hot? Try 26,000 degrees Fahrenheit. That's hot enough to melt lead or iron.

There are two leading theories for what the objects might be and those theories cover both ends of the cosmic life cycle:



Rowe suggests they are newly born planets. New planets have extremely high temperatures, and in this case Rowe speculates they might be only about 200 million years old.

Ronald Gilliland of the Space Telescope Science Institute says they could be white dwarf stars that are dying and stripping off their outer shells and shrinking.

The primary focus of the Kepler telescope's three-year mission is to find out how common other planets — especially Earth-like planets — are in the universe.

To do that, it is scanning a small chunk of the sky, about one four-hundredth of the night sky with more than 150,000 stars to look for planets. The telescope in just six

weeks found its first five confirmed planets, slightly more than astronomers expected from such a quick search. There are hundreds of other candidates that need confirmation.

The five planets are all much larger than Earth is to the sun, and way too hot for life, Borucki said. A couple of these planets are close to 3,000 degrees.

"Looking at them is like looking at a blast furnace," Borucki said. "Certainly, no place to look for life."

One of the newly discovered planets is so airy that "it has the density of Styrofoam," Borucki said.

Skype to offer video service on LG, Panasonic TVs

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Privately held Skype has forged deals with consumer electronics makers LG Electronics and Panasonic in a bid to move its Internet video service beyond the desktop computer to the living room TV.

The service, which includes free video calls between Skype members, will compete with consumer video conference services being developed by bigger companies such as networking giant Cisco Systems Inc and Polycom Inc, which plans to develop consumer video services with International Business Machines Corp.

Skype, a former eBay unit, said both LG and Panasonic will have high-definition TVs supporting its service around mid-year.

Both television makers will embed the Skype technology in television models with Internet connections and will sell separate Web cameras that have built in microphones for television viewers who want to use Skype.

Skype said Panasonic will support Skype in its VT and G series televisions in the United States, with screen sizes up to 65 inches. LG will embed Skype in 26 new LCD and plasma screen TVs, which will also come in a range of sizes.

Explosive nearby star could threaten the Earth

WASHINGTON (Space.com) — A massive, eruptive white dwarf star in the Milky Way — long overdue for its next periodic eruption — is closer to our solar system than previously thought and could threaten the Earth if it fully explodes millions of years from now.

New observations of the white dwarf and its sun-like stellar companion are giving scientists a better understanding of the star's precarious position as a possible supernova, astronomers said here the 215th meeting of the American Astronomical Society.

The two stars are in a close binary system called T Pyxidis, located in the Southern Hemisphere constellation Pyxis ("The Compass Box"). Researchers found that the system is only 3,260 light-years from our solar system — far closer than anyone previously thought. (A light-year is the distance that light travels in one Earth year, or about 6 trillion miles.)

The new findings suggest the white dwarf, considered close to us by cosmic standards, could eventually go supernova. Gamma radiation emitted by the supernova could threaten the Earth with an energy equivalent to 1,000 simultaneous solar flares.

The production of nitrous oxides in Earth's atmosphere by the gamma rays could completely destroy the ozone layer, astronomers said.

Demise, if it comes, won't be anytime soon, however. Scientists' calculations suggest that the star will explode in about 10 million years, said Edward Sion, a member of the research team from Villanova University in Villanova, Pa. "While we can relax, that is very short on astronomical and geological timescales," Sion told SPACE.com in an e-mail.

The T Pyxidis system is known as a recurrent nova because the massive white dwarf has suffered thermonuclear (nova) explosions about every 20 years, with previous recorded nova explosions occurring in 1890, 1902, 1920, 1944 and 1967.

None of these sorts of explosions threaten Earth. But the system is long overdue for its next one. Astronomers don't know why the star's explosiveness has been tamped down of late.

The relatively modest nova explosions are triggered by hydrogen-rich gas siphoned off the sun-like companion and onto the white dwarf. One important question is whether the mass being added to the white dwarf increases despite the nova explosions or if the explosions cause more mass to be ejected from the dwarf than it takes on from its partner.

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