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Friday January 16, 2004

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Reason's Tier-1 Athlon 64 machine is a corporate cracker

Review Quiet as a kirk's moose

By [Charlie Demerjian](#): Friday 16 January 2004, 14:11

WITH THE launch of the Athlon64, a raft of gaming PCs has emerged. The FX-51 brought about a ton of high end gaming rigs, and the plain old A64 quickly found it's way into lower priced but still extremely powerful computers. The only problem was that they were all focused on consumers and gaming. Well, this isn't a problem for most people, but for AMD, there was the Opteron on the high end, Athlon64 for gamers, and nothing to go after the lucrative corporate middle ground. If you have been burying your head in the sand, modern cost conscious CIOs don't spend much on side panel windows, cold cathode sound activated lights, and aquarium panels (see [here](#)).

The first corporate oriented Athlon64 machine I have run across is the Tier-1 by Reason. It is a slick little Small Form Factor (SFF) case with an Athlon64 3000+ stuffed inside. The case is slightly larger than a pizza box, and is virtually tool free. The thumbscrew on the back opens in no time, and the entire top comes off revealing a well laid out motherboard with the CPU in the middle, and a perforated vent right above it. Cool air in the top where it is needed, and the hot air is sent out on the sides.

The drive bay is also quite nice. Once you pull the cables off the drives, the whole cage slides out without much effort and with no tools. Very handy. The individual drives are placed in the cage in a tool free fashion. To get it out, pull on little green lever, and the drive slides out. If I had to be negative, I would say the action is a little less slick than the all time leader in this area, the Compaq/HP Evo series, but not by much.

At first glance, the case appears to only have half height PCI card slots, limiting you to low profile cards. A closer glance reveals a full size slot sideways beside their cut down brethren. The neatest feature about this case is



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that with a riser, you can use either a full size AGP or PCI card, a rarity in small cases. There are minor clearance issues with a really big card and the standard AMD heatsink, but a low profile fan solves this problem neatly and easily. Reason can supply these with no problem.

The machine I got was reasonably well equipped, a solid corporate workstation. It has an AMD Athlon64 3000+ CPU, 512 MB of DDR-333 ram, DVD/CD-R combo, a card reader, an 80GB Seagate SATA HD, and an NVidia GeForce4 graphics card all on an MSI motherboard. A close inspection of that list will show three oddities, the ram, the card reader, and the lack of a floppy.

The floppy absence is a welcome thing. Once you figure out that flash memory sticks cost next to nothing, hold hundreds of times as much as a floppy, and don't mysteriously die, you won't look back. The card reader on the front is also a nicety, they are just so handy once you start using them, you won't want to buy another computer without one. Add in the fact that they are pretty cheap, and you have a winner. If you *really* feel the need, you can get a model with a floppy, or a combo floppy/card reader.

The most puzzling part at first glance is the DDR-333 memory. It is not much cheaper than DDR-400, but you do lose a bit of performance, so why bother? Stability and expandability. If you read the specs of the Athlon64, you will notice that you can have more banks of memory with 266 or 333 than 400. By going with 333, Reason opted for more expandability, and slightly more stability.

Stability is probably the overarching corporate concern, followed by price, and then by performance. The performance was more than adequate. We were not evaluating this box as a gaming machine, so it didn't do much other than test the occasional game, and encountered no problems. With a GeForce4 card for graphics, I would have been surprised if I did run into anything weird, and the office apps I ran all went smoothly. Various flavors of MS Office and OpenOffice installed with no issues, and ran very fast. Benchmarking Word or Excel is more of an exercise in figuring out how much time the computer waits for you to type, but I noticed no slowdowns with anything I could do.

The most impressive part of the computer was the noise it made, or lack thereof. Reason is the only manufacturer I know of that ships a box with AMD's power saving technology, Cool and Quiet, turned on by default. While you lose a little performance, you save a lot of power, and the fan runs at a really low speed. If there was any noise going in the room, for the most part, the computer was inaudible. When you started doing heavy work or gaming, the fan picked up a bit. Nothing objectionable, and no more noise than the stock AMD fan would normally produce. Overall, it is one of the quietest high end PCs I have ever tested, and certainly the quietest PC with any gaming potential.

Reason offers a bunch of options on the Tier-1, many of which are aimed at reducing the aforementioned non-objectionable noise. The two main ones are a Sparkle low noise power supply, and a quieter fan. With both of these things

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installed, the Tier-1 should be about as close to silent as you will find.



The Tier-1 has a close cousin called the Tier-1/M, the M standing for managed. When it ships in the near future, the Tier-1/M will be the first AMD Athlon64 box that is remotely managable. It is hard to overstate how important this feature is to corporate buyers. Without it, AMD machines were not in the game, with it, they can go toe to toe with most Intel boxes from much larger vendors. With a more level playing field in corporate bidding, it should be quite interesting to see how much corporate marketshare AMD can grab.

So, how much do these machines cost? As equipped above, the Reason Tier-1 comes in at \$895. As with any computer, you can option it up, down and sideways until you never want to see a spec sheet again, and Reason will more than happily accommodate your needs. The one option that you might want to consider is the extended warranty. Reason is the only vendor I know that will extend the three year standard warranty to six years, a nice safety net if you plan on keeping your computers for more than the standard 2-3 years.



Overall, it is scarily fast for a corporate PC, well equipped, for not a lot of money. The size, low power use, and low noise make it a very compelling option for your next corporate upgrade. 9/10 if you are a business, a little less if you are a gamer, but only as currently configured, and that can be changed.
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