System76 Darter Pro (darp5) Review

About

The Darter Pro is a 15" linux-first ultrabook made by System76.

Purchase Date: 2019-04-01

Review Date: 2022-01-20



Review

Let's start with the elephant in the room. Yes, I know that System76 doesn't design their own laptop chassis, but I also know that they release custom firmware and work with Clevo and others on the designs and configurations so this is not just an off-the-self laptop you can buy from anyone else. I do however look forward to the day when they can design and product their own chassis.

Specs

If you want a full spec list, check out their website linked below. These are my thoughts on some specific specs that are worth noting.

The matte screen is between average to good quality and supports 1920×1080 FHD. While higher resolution would be nice these days, for this specific laptop I think the battery life would suffer too much with a higher resolution display. The display gets decently bright for indoor use, but is a bit dim for outdoor use.

The Darter Pro only supports Intel integrated graphics. System76 makes other laptops with Nvidia cards, so if you're looking for gaming or rendering check out their other offerings instead.

The battery life is sub-par. Check out the Battery section below for more details. Maybe their newer models are better?

Lots of ports, we love lots of ports on a laptop. Yes a Thunderbolt dock is amazing, but it's no replacement for ports.

Build Quality

I'm pleasantly surprised by the build quality of this laptop for only being partially metal. The top portions are a nice brushed metal look and feel, the hinge has held up better than almost any other laptop I've purchased from any major manufacturer ever, and the keyboard feels sturdy and solid.

My dislikes with the build are:

- They keys are a bit mushy feeling, despite also feeling well made.
- There's a lot of plastic on the bottom and around the screen
- The mouse buttons are pretty poor. They are very wide buttons and don't click consistently across their entire length

This is really a pretty short dislike list. My 2019 model only has a single USB-C 3.1 port, but I believe their newer models have two USB-C 3.2 ports. So while I'm sad with my single port, you won't be.

I also have firsthand experience that System76 stands behind their hardware. Over a year into ownership a screw came loose on the bottom and fell out before I got around to tightening it. The

screw was near the hinge and I could see the slight flexing would eventually cause hinge damage. I reached out to System76 and they had replacement screws in the mail to me at no cost that same week. No, the screws shouldn't have come loose, and yes sending replacements is not much to write home about, but since I had owned it for over a year, I'm not sure I would have been treated as well by many major laptop manufacturers.

Software

All of System 76's Laptops come with either their own Pop!_OS or Ubuntu preinstalled. Pop!_OS is a great, user-friendly, and stable OS that builds on what Ubuntu has done. I highly recommend you try out their distro if you get their laptop. You can always switch later if you prefer something else.

System76 has done a great job of improving hardware support over the old driver hunting days, plus has done a great job of providing native and open source firmware and other improvements you don't get when installing a distro on hardware that wasn't designed for it.

This isn't a review of Pop!_OS, but I do think it's a great distro with an exciting future.

Battery

Battery is the main drawback as I have never received good battery life with this laptop. My wife purchased an Lenovo laptop not long after I purchased the Darter Pro and her laptop's battery life blows me away. I wish I could get more than a few hours before I am critically low, even with power saving options enabled. Obviously batteries degrade over the years, but even to start it wasn't amazing. Before purchasing a new Darter Pro I would look around to see what people are getting for real-world battery life to see if it comes anywhere near the 9 hours they claim on their new model.

Support

I already talked a bit about their hardware support when I lost a screw, and maybe that wasn't worth mentioning. What is worth mentioning is that they provide software support as well. I reached out to their support one other time when I was having audio issues. Their support was quick to respond, collect logs from me, and begin troubleshooting what seemed like an OS issue. A quick fix later and I was good to go.

Decision □□

Since 2019 System76 has revamped the Darter Pro with a new chassis that has better ports and a better screen design. I cannot speak to the new design's build quality since their site is sparse on build details, but if it matches the quality of the 2019 model then it's still a solid machine.

The Darter Pro is light and portable, but has a large enough screen to be really productive on it. It's perfect for work and development as long as you don't have very high graphics needs that will tax the integrated graphics.

The Rest

My Purchase Price (including tax and shipping): **$1,995.60**

View the official Darter Pro site: https://system76.com/laptops/darter

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