

Tablets Take Off

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Introduction

Apple's iPad tablet computer invigorated what was a niche market when it debuted in 2010. In the months since its release, Apple sold over 15 millions iPads (apple.com/pr/library/2011/03/02ipad.html), and their updated iPad 2 model is still in short supply as consumers snatch all available models from stores. The iPad starts at \$499.

The competition has taken note of Apple's success, with many electronics manufacturers releasing tablets in 2011. Experts suggest that this quickly expanding market segment may pass laptop computers in sales as early as next year (upi.com/Business_News/2011/05/06/UPI-75321304699405/).

What can I do with a tablet?

People use tablets to check their email, browse the Internet and run various applications (apps) and games. The apps available for tablet devices are fairly limited in scope—such as apps to order food from chain restaurants or apps to access bank accounts. Tablets place a premium on simplicity and ease-of-use, while full-fledged computers are more powerful and complex.

If I want to take a device with me, shouldn't I just get a laptop?

Tablets are easier to tote around than laptops, as current tablets lack some of the things that weight laptops down—keyboards and disk drives. This pays dividends in decreased weight. Even small laptop computers tip the scales at over three pounds, while most tablets are less than half that.



Motorola's XOOM tablet is a new competitor in a market dominated by Apple iPad devices.

In addition, tablets are thinner than most laptops, which makes them easy to drop into briefcases, handbags and backpacks. For some people, the decrease in computing power of tablets is more than offset by better portability.

What's the difference between the iPad and other tablets?

The most obvious difference is that the iPad runs an operating system known as iOS, an extension of the software developed for its popular iPhone brand of smartphones. Apple's famous attention to detail is evident in its slick and intuitive interface, but critics contend that Apple's strict control over applications sold for the devices is unnecessarily restrictive.

A recent batch of competing tablets runs Google's Android operating system, which also saw its start on smartphones. The Android OS may not be quite as slick as Apple's iOS, but customers are given the freedom to buy their apps from multiple sources if they prefer.

Both iOS and the Android OS use touch-sensitive screens to make launching applications as simple as pressing an icon on the screen with a fingertip.

How do tablets connect to the Internet?

There are typically two Internet options available when you purchase a tablet. One is Wi-Fi, which is suitable for use on your home wireless network or at a public Wi-Fi hotspot (like at the Hinsdale Public Library). The other common Internet option for tablet devices is an always-on mobile data connection (such as over a 3G or 4G network). The latter typically adds a \$20 to \$40 per month fee and sometimes requires a two-year contract to purchase.

I've understand there are different versions of the Android OS. Which one is preferable for tablet computers?

Some common Android versions used in tablets include 2.1 (codename Eclair), 2.2 (Froyo), 2.3 (Gingerbread) and 3.0 (Honeycomb). Android 4.0 (Ice Cream Sandwich) is on the horizon.

Generally speaking, the higher the number of the Android version, the more feature-rich. Android 2.x versions are adaptations of the phone-based interface, while Android 3.x versions feel like they were designed from the start for tablet devices.

What are some of the iPad's chief competitors?

- The Motorola XOOM (starting at \$599) is a powerful dual-camera tablet with a higher-resolution display than the iPad, though it is somewhat heavier. Users seeking an iPad alternative with some extra oomph under the hood might give the Xoom a shot.
- **Samsung's Galaxy Tab 8.9 and 10.1** tablets (with naming based on screen size in inches) are a couple of iPad alternatives which follow up the original Galaxy Tab model. The new models have higher resolution screens than the iPad. The 8.9" model starts at \$469, while the 10.1" model starts at \$499.
- The **ASUS Eee Pad Transformer** (starting at \$400) is an intriguing choice, as the addition of an optional \$150 keyboard dock essentially changes it into an Android-powered laptop. ASUS is the first company to offer a 10.1" Android tablet at the attractive \$400 price point.
- Barnes & Noble's **NOOK Color** is a \$250 eReader which has some tablet-like features at a very attractive price point. An active hobbyist community has created customized Android software which makes the NOOK Color a full-fledged tablet device (forum.xda-developers.com).

Can I use my tablet to read electronic books (eBooks)?

Yes. Both the iPad and Android OS tablets have the ability to display eBooks. In fact, there are multiple eBook reader applications for each type of device. The **Overdrive app** allows HPL cardholders to check out eBooks from the Hinsdale Public Library for free. Stop by the Reference Desk and we'll show you how to get started.



Touch-typists may rejoice at the ASUS Eee Pad Transformer, which is designed with an optional keyboard.



Barnes & Noble's NOOK Color blurs the line between eReader and tablet.

If you'd like to buy books, Barnes & Noble offers a **Nook app** for its bookstore, and Amazon has likewise created a **Kindle app** for its offerings. The **Google Books app** connects to Google's eBookstore as well as providing online access to millions of scanned books from libraries around the world. This application comes pre-installed on many Android devices.

To install one of these bookstore apps on your tablet, simply search by the title of the application on the App Store (for iPads) or the Android Market (for Android-based tables). Each app is free (though the bookstores will charge for many books you download).

Am I better off just buying an eReader for electronic books?

If the primary reason you're seeking a device is to read eBooks, then yes, you may be happier with a dedicated eReader. Dedicated eReaders commonly use a display technology called ePaper, which is reported to be less fatiguing on the eyes than tablet screens. They also benefit from incredible battery life – perhaps one month between charges vs. one day for a tablet. On the negative side, current models are black-and-white only and lack backlighting.

The previously mentioned Barnes & Noble Nook color is an appealing color eReader with some of the functionality of a tablet at an attractive \$250 price point.

Conclusion

2011 promises to be a strong year for tablet sales with Apple's iPad line leading the way. It remains to be seen whether any of the competing models can take a significant bite from Apple's share, but additional competition in the market is good for consumers.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630.986.1976 ext. 225.

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