

Brainstorm: Consumer Electronics

Will tablet computers displace the netbook/laptop? Why or why not?



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[1]

From the number of new tablet computers being debuted, it appears that machine manufacturers certainly think that tablets will displace notebook and laptop computers. However, displacement can only be measured by market segment growth (or decline) compared to that of the larger market that the particular segment under consideration is a part of. What that ultimately translates into is, “we’ll just have to wait and see what the statistics tell us.”

But this much is certain: many computer users need far less functionality than that of a desktop machine; particularly on the road, which is why the portables came into existence to begin with. In addition, one merely has to look at the historical record to see where this trend is clearly headed. First came the laptop computers; large bulky power hogs—by today’s standards—but necessary for those who needed to take a computer traveling with them. Next came the notebooks. These lighter, nimbler machines arose in response to the cries of the beleaguered road warrior; “lugging this anchor around is killing me!” The next step in this intelligently designed progression? the tablet PC. Notice: each machine has been smaller and lighter than its predecessor was. And thanks to ever improving technology, they have not sacrificed much in the way of computing power either.

But, perhaps the best measure of a tablet’s user-friendliness will be its working battery life. This is the one category where the Apple iPad is outstanding in its field. Many new tablets are scheduled to be unveiled this year. If they come anywhere close to the useful battery life of the iPad, I’d say that its a safe bet that tablet PCs will force more notebook and laptop computers into early retirement, than ever

before.



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While the industry is very much invested in tablet computers—Nvidia believes we’re “at the beginning of the tablet revolution”—I don’t see them displacing the netbook. Due to inherent limitations, the tablet will be an alternative to, but not replace for, the netbook.

For our purposes, we’ll focus on the most popular tablet—Apple’s iPad. The iPad is a very cool multimedia device, with the ability to surf the web, play games, watch movies, and perform countless other tasks and functions. Essentially, it’s a larger iPhone, minus the ability to place or receive phone calls. But that’s just it—for those who already own an iPhone (which is to say, most of the iPad’s prospective audience), the iPad may seem superfluous. Not to mention the fact that many people already own devices that would, in Apple’s vernacular, provide “duplicate functionality” against the iPad—portable DVD players, iPods, e-readers, and of course, the iPhone (which does nearly everything the iPad does).

So there’s a question as to whether the iPad (and tablets in general) provides anything truly revolutionary. But will they replace netbooks? Netbooks are popular because of their convenience. Students like them because they’re easier to tote around than a heavy laptop. Road warriors and travelling businessmen like them for much the same reason—they’re small, light, and fulfill their purpose. And let’s face it—they’re cheap. Whereas the average netbook can be purchased for \$250-300, the cheapest iPad is nearly double that (\$499).

Regardless of what Steve Jobs [says](#) [3] about Adobe Flash (all of which may be true), Apple is extraordinarily protective of its own media services. Thus, the iPad lacks a USB port, along with other functionality that would, in theory, make it easier to transfer pirated media. It’s also missing an external keyboard. Savvy consumers discovered that the [iPad Camera Connection Kit](#) [4] enabled the connection of non-camera USB devices. But this functionality isn’t officially advertised by Apple, and no guarantees are made as to supported devices. And there’s one nagging issue with this solution—connecting items to the dock connector port on the bottom makes it difficult to use the iPad’s stand (thereby negating the convenience of

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having an external keyboard).

Most people prefer to type on a screen that's parallel, rather than perpendicular, to them. If the iPad is purely a multimedia device, and not a netbook replacement, then this isn't a problem. But netbooks are used for business purposes (including typing). The iPad can be synched with Bluetooth keyboards, but again, this negates the convenience factor of having an attached keyboard.

I've focused primarily on the iPad and, as mentioned, there are a multitude of other tablets on the market. I've even seen tablets with attached keyboards, but because they mimic the look and feel of a netbook, the question arises—"Why not just buy a netbook?" Companies with forthcoming tablets will undoubtedly learn from the iPad's shortcomings. But due to its design, the tablet itself may not be a suitable replacement for netbooks. More likely, tablets will be alternatives to, not replacements for, the netbook.

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