

Review: With iPad 2, Apple one-ups itself

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With the original iPad, Apple brought an attractive, easy-to-use tablet computer to the masses at a reasonable price — a feat numerous companies are trying to top.

With Friday's release of the iPad 2, Apple is pulling further ahead, with improvements that make an already excellent tablet even more enticing. It goes to show that when it comes to tablets, Apple refuses to be bested.

The new iPad is skinnier, faster and slightly lighter. It comes with cameras for video chatting and snapping photos, while keeping the same prices, ranging from \$499 to \$829 depending on the configuration.

Competitors such as Motorola Mobility Holdings Inc. and Samsung Electronics Co. sell good tablets of their own, with many of the same features. Motorola's new Xoom even has a higher-resolution screen than the iPad. Still, nobody has been able to match the iPad's simplicity, innovation and style.

The iPad 2 looks much like the first iPad, though it has a sleeker, lighter body with a curved back. All this helps the tablet fit more naturally in my hands, and the modified shape makes it easier to hold for extended e-reading sessions, for example.

Among the most noticeable changes is the inclusion of cameras, one on the front and one on the back.

This is something I've been hankering for, as the iPad's crisp display, measuring 9.7 inches (24.6 centimeters) diagonally, seemed like the ideal canvas for video chat. The subsequent arrival of several tablets with front and rear cameras made it practically a necessity for iPad 2.

Fortunately, Apple thought so, too. Both cameras on the iPad 2 work with the company's FaceTime video chat application and the back camera shoots high-definition videos.

A friend I chatted with over FaceTime moved pretty smoothly on the iPad's screen, though the image could have been much sharper. With the front camera, my friend could see me. If I switched to the back camera, I could show him my surroundings.

You can take still photos, too, though I found this awkward given the tablet's size. The results were not fantastic, but self-portrait fans will find the front-facing camera useful for composing new profile photos for Facebook.

The new iPad has Apple's new dual-core A5 chip, which helped applications open more quickly than on the older iPad. The original never felt slow, but the faster I can

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start a new game of "Plants vs. Zombies," the better.

Add to that a new version of Apple's iOS software. The new processor and the new iOS combined to improve Web surfing, as I could load up pages noticeably faster over my home Wi-Fi network. As expected, videos loaded quickly and generally streamed flawlessly.

The new software allows you to share music and videos from your iTunes library on multiple Apple devices on the same Wi-Fi network. And it now lets you set the iPad's mute switch to function as a screen lock, which makes it much easier to prevent my Netflix movie from rotating mid-scene just because I've shifted my butt on the couch.

The updated iOS comes with iPad 2 and is available as a free download for the original iPad and the two most recent models of the iPhone and iPod Touch.

On Friday, Apple also rolled out iPad versions of its iMovie video-editing software and GarageBand software for recording and editing music. I tried GarageBand (\$5) and was wowed by how simple it was and how well it took advantage of the iPad's touch screen.

If you're musically inclined, you can pick up your guitar and adjust its sound through GarageBand's bevy of amplifiers and effects pedals. If you don't play an instrument (or feel lazy), you can swipe through a list of "smart" virtual instruments. A guitar with preset chords lets you strum by swiping the screen. You can arrange drums on a grid based on how noisy and complicated you want the beat to sound.

The coolest part is how sensitive the virtual instruments are. Start beating your fingers on a virtual drum kit, and you can hit the drums and cymbals harder or softer. You'll get different sounds if you hit the ride cymbal in different places, and you can even tap the rim of the snare instead of just hitting the drum itself.

It's quick and easy to record and edit songs, then save or e-mail them to a friend (who will hopefully applaud your artistic endeavors).

When playing back my musical masterpiece and other content on the iPad 2 I did long for a second speaker — there is just one on its back. Fortunately, that lone speaker did sound quite crisp, even with the sound turned all the way up.

Like the first iPad, the iPad 2 is rated for up to 10 hours of battery life, and it performed like a champ. Playing a mix of videos streamed from YouTube over Wi-Fi and saved on the iPad itself, I got a bit more than 10 hours of entertainment before it died.

You can buy versions that work with either AT&T's or Verizon Wireless' cellular network, rather than just AT&T before. Unfortunately, it will only connect to these carriers' older 3G networks. Verizon's 4G network is already live, and AT&T plans to launch its 4G network in the summer. (In the meantime, AT&T is calling an upgraded version of its 3G network "4G.") The Xoom gets points here because it will

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be possible to upgrade it to use Verizon 4G.

The cheapest iPad connects only through Wi-Fi, however. You can also get it in black or white — before, your only option was black.

Without question, the iPad 2 is a great tablet. Still, this doesn't mean the first iPad is ready for the trash can. It's still a stellar gadget, and now it's cheaper (while supplies last) with the arrival of a successor.

Should you feel the urge to have the latest and greatest, however, go for it. Chances are, it will be the best tablet in town — at least until the arrival of the iPad 3.

After its U.S. launch, the iPad 2 goes on sale March 25 in 26 other markets, including Mexico, New Zealand, Spain and other European countries.

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