

A new generation of computer tablets is on its way

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The Joo Joo tablet notebook.

I may have caught a glimpse of the future last week. In San Francisco, a startup company called Fusion Garage showed off the JooJoo, a touch-screen device that looks like the iPhone's big brother. The JooJoo is one of the first of a new generation of tablet computers expected to hit store shelves in the coming year.

Much of the buzz around tablet computers has focused on the one Apple has reportedly long had in development and is widely expected to unveil early next year. But similar devices are expected to arrive in coming months as well, many running Microsoft's Windows 7 operating system, which supports multitouch gestures common on touch-screen devices.

Back in August, with rumors about Apple's so-called iTablet reaching a crescendo, I was skeptical about the potential of such a device -- and the

whole concept of tablet PCs. I couldn't see anyone trading out a notebook or a cell phone for such a device, which meant tablet makers would have to convince consumers to buy yet another gadget -- something I figured they'd be reluctant to do.

But after playing with the JooJoo, I'm less dubious. Maybe these types of [gadgets](#) will find a market after all.

The JooJoo, which is slated to ship in February and can be pre-ordered from Fusion Garage, is designed as a "living room" device. By that I mean you can use it to surf the Web, read electronic books, check e-mail, watch Web videos and even place video calls -- all while leaning back against the comfy cushions on your couch. That's a lot different from the typical Web surfing experience today, which usually involves being stuck in the study with a desktop or being hunched over a laptop.

Unlike a laptop, the JooJoo doesn't have a keyboard. Instead, it's got a 12-inch [touch screen](#) through which you can press virtual buttons or access a virtual keyboard.

Also unlike a typical computer, it doesn't allow you to load full-scale programs on it. Its operating system is built around a Web browser, so any applications you use have to be Web-based. Fortunately, it does support Adobe's Flash, which should allow you to view all kinds of video and play lots of Flash-based games.

I already do most of my home Web surfing these days on my iPhone, so the appeal of the JooJoo is obvious to me.

Like an iPhone, you can hold it in your hand, making it more portable than a laptop. But it has a much bigger screen than an iPhone, making it better for reading or watching videos. And because it's built around a Web browser, you have access to Web-based video and other content

that's often difficult to get on to your TV, even with the latest Internet-connected set-top boxes.

Despite all that, the JooJoo is not quite there, and I can't see buying it. First off, Fusion Garage is in a legal dispute with a former collaborator, which may block it from ever shipping the JooJoo. And the JooJoo has other problems. It costs too much and does too little.

Fusion Garage has priced it at \$500. That's more expensive than most netbooks and about the same price as some ultrathin computers, both of which can do more than JooJoo because they have full operating systems.

Unlike those devices, you can't do much on the JooJoo without an Internet connection, except view content stored in its browser's cache. Because you can't install applications on it that will run without an Internet connection, you won't be playing any complex games on it.

The JooJoo also won't let you permanently store music or movies on it or even access such files from an external drive. So you're limited to what you can find through a Web browser, rather than the music you may have stored at home or can download through stores such as iTunes.

That might not be such a problem if it had a 3G antenna to allow you to connect to the Internet over the cell phone companies' widespread networks. Unfortunately, the only kind of Internet connection the JooJoo can use is via Wi-Fi. While many consumers now have Wi-Fi routers at home or at their offices, hot spots can be hard to find elsewhere.

Still, for all its shortcomings, the JooJoo did open my eyes to the possibilities of tablet computers. If some company can make one that's less pricey -- or at least more capable -- they just might have a winner.

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