

Review: \$550 Tablet Doesn't Make Windows Look Good

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An Archos 9 PCtablet is shown Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2010 in New York. Photo: Mark Lennihan /AP Photo

(AP) -- Apple brings out its iPad tablet computer in late March, but other companies are already preparing a new batch of tablets running Windows. Judging by a model that's already out, the \$550 Archos 9, the Windows tablets have a rough road ahead.

Windows just doesn't seem at home when squeezed into this 1.8-pound slab, with a touch-sensitive screen that is 8.9 inches on the diagonal. It's sluggish, and the controls aren't adapted to the size of the screen or the fact that there's no real keyboard or mouse.

On-screen keyboards kept popping up in the wrong places, blocking the

fields where I wanted to enter text and the buttons I wanted to push. I struggled to hit the little "x" in the corner of the window to close it, so I had to fall back on guiding the mouse cursor with a small touch pad that's built into the tablet's frame.

It's also a bad idea to couple a touch screen with a slow computer. When I pressed an on-screen button, I found myself wondering whether the computer had failed to register the press or whether it was just working on reacting. I kept jabbing at the screen like I was poking at a lazy dog, just to be on the safe side.

Archos 9 is lethargic because it runs Windows 7 on a processor that's even slower than those used in netbooks -- those slow, small laptops. How slow is it? Windows rates computers from 1.0 to 7.9 based on how fast the hardware is, and places the Archos 9 at a 1.3 -- the lowest I've seen. It takes nearly two minutes to boot up. TV shows on Hulu.com stutter so badly they're like slide shows with a soundtrack.

It's a little disconcerting that the Windows tablet experience is so poor, nine years after Microsoft made a big push for its Tablet PC version of Windows XP. Clearly, Microsoft hasn't really adapted Windows properly for this type of device.

Now, the fact that the Archos 9 has a full-blown desktop [operating system](#) does mean it has some features the iPad won't match. It has a [USB port](#), so you can connect a DVD drive, flash drive or printer to it. It runs ubiquitous Windows applications. It has a camera, so you can use it for videoconferencing, at least at very low resolutions.

Perhaps the best feature is a fold-out stand, so you can prop the tablet up on a table.

Also in its favor, the Archos is relatively cheap, especially compared to

the Tablet PCs of old.

Still, it's hard to imagine what the tablet is really for. It's not good for playing games, taking notes or writing e-mail. You might use it as an extra device for casual Web access when roaming around at home. The built-in Wi-Fi antenna provides excellent reception. If you attach the Archos 9 to a cabinet door, it could be a pretty good kitchen computer, for recipes and music. Too bad it plays online video so poorly.

It does do a decent job of playing videos that are stored without copy protection on its 60-gigabyte hard drive. The battery lasted for four hours doing this, which is pretty good. When I tried to play copy-protected video bought from iTunes, it was back to the slideshow effect.

It's not designed for vertical use, so forget about flipping it around and using it as a full-color Kindle e-reader replacement. You could go into the settings and change the screen to a vertical orientation, but all the hardware buttons will end up in the wrong places. Also, the screen's image quality is not very good.

It's likely that other Windows tablets this year will be better than the Archos 9, particularly if they use a different touch-sensing technology. Archos chose a so-called "resistive" sensor, which isn't as sensitive as the "capacitive" type used in the iPhone. That means the bezel is raised, making it hard to touch things at the edge of the screen, where Windows puts a lot of important buttons. The touch overlay is also the reason the image quality is poor. At the Consumer Electronics Show in January, Microsoft gave a brief glimpse of a tablet from Hewlett-Packard Co. that appeared to have a capacitive [touch screen](#), which avoids all these issues.

But if tablet computers are ever going to be a mainstream product, they'll probably need a complete rethinking of the software. That's what Apple

will be providing with the [iPad](#). Rather than scaling down its Mac OS X for the tablet, Apple is scaling up its iPhone operating system. With software designed for much more modest chips, the [iPad](#) will be a lot snappier than the Archos 9, with a longer battery life. It's anybody's guess whether this will be enough to finally take tablets to the big time, but it seems like a good way to start.

More information: On the Net: www.archos.com

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