

Taking Hulu Plus, iPad for a road test

July 21 2010, By Robert Bianco



The iPad 3G

With the iPad, there's finally a relatively convenient, generally watchable way to take TV shows with you wherever you and Wi-Fi wander.

Which is wonderful or frightening, depending on how you look at it.

It's always been possible, of course, to watch shows on the go using any device that will play a DVD, as long as you've remembered to bring the DVD with you or (where possible and legally permissible) load it on to the device. And anyone with a laptop and [Internet access](#) has the added opportunity to watch or download shows through various websites, online stores, subscriptions and pay-per-view providers.

So what does the Apple iPad add? Form to go with the function: a gorgeous screen and a size -- roughly 9 1/2 inches by 7 1/2 inches and 1 1/2 pounds -- that places it between a sometimes cumbersome laptop and

a too-tiny-for-extended-viewing smartphone.

Clearly, networks, studios and their tech partners see the iPad as fertile ground, as witness the much-publicized launch of Hulu Plus, which makes a much wider range of series available for a monthly fee with ads attached. Some people won't want to sit through the ads on a portable player, and some will object on principle to getting commercial breaks in a program for which they've already paid. Make your own choice, but the [Hulu](#) plan is no different from the dual revenue stream model followed by basic cable networks, which get money both from subscribers and commercials.

If you are going to pay to watch a program on an iPad, it pays to keep the platform's limitations in mind. For anything longer than a cartoon or a sitcom, you'll probably want a stand -- unless you're OK with holding a flat slab of metal and glass in your hands for two hours.

And while the screen is remarkably crisp, it is, obviously, small when compared with a normal television -- the viewing method most of the directors had in mind when they shot the program you're watching. So odd as this resulting rule may seem, the less visually or stylistically ambitious a program is, the better off you'll be.

No doubt you don't have to be told an iPad won't do justice to "Lost," which is too sweeping and grand to adapt well to any undersized screen. But other shows can be surprisingly off-putting as well, in ways you might not expect.

Consider one of the best hours from any series last season, "The Son" episode from "Friday Night Lights." What you notice on TV is the impeccable writing and acting, in particular the incredible performance by Zach Gilford as a young man struggling with the wartime death of a father he barely knew.

But what you notice most tellingly and distractingly on the iPad is the show's signature style, a cinema-verite approach reliant on quick cuts, shaky camerawork and low lighting.

On TV, it works. On the iPad, something about the size of the screen (big enough to make the shakes register but not big enough to give you any separating distance) exaggerates the effect to motion-sickness levels. Indeed, it's a tribute to the brilliance of Gilford's performance that when he takes center screen, you forget what the camera is doing.

On the other hand, the iPad is almost ideal for "Glee," which comes across as a series of close-ups interspersed with music videos. "Family Guy" is fine (though make sure you use earphones, since Guy is guaranteed to offend someone in any crowd). And if you're in an airport getting ready to travel to Europe, consider one of Rick Steves' simply shot PBS specials, which are as informative as they are lovely.

Even at best, the iPad is no substitute for an average-quality, average-size HDTV, but then, few people are really planning to use it as a substitute. It's a portable add-on, one that puts most of your favorite shows at your fingertips. Which means you're no more than an [iPad](#) and a signal away from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," the perfect marriage of old classics and new technology.

That's so absurdly comforting, it has to make you smile.

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