

Is a tablet the best choice?

December 1 2010, By David Sarno

TABLETS VS. LAPTOPS: So your laptop is getting old: Should you buy a new one or change horses and try out one of these tablet computers?

That all depends on what you want to do with it.

It's still the case that laptops and smaller [netbook](#) computers are tuned for production - word processing, e-mailing, number-crunching, more complicated tasks that often require a lot of text and switching among several windows running different applications.

Tablets, lacking a mouse or a keyboard, are better for tasks that have simpler tactile and visual elements - like paging through a photo gallery, checking online news or blogs, or reading a digital magazine. In other words, they work better for consumption, and thus can stay on for quite a few hours on one charge.

For social media addicts, tablets will be excellent for browsing through [Facebook](#) for the latest photos or links that friends have posted, or checking out [Twitter](#) to see what the digital hive mind is buzzing about at that moment.

The iPad in particular has become a hit for casual gaming. Video games like "Angry Birds," in which the player tries to knock down rickety structures by shooting birds at them with a large slingshot, can be played with a single fingertip. No complicated controllers required.

When it comes to more serious applications, though, tablets are likely to lag behind netbooks and laptops for the foreseeable future: The devices are not sophisticated enough to seamlessly run multiple programs at once or to allow users to find and install the endless variety of software now available for PCs.

There is a thriving community of iPad "app" developers - the device has close to 40,000 small programs created for it, by some counts. But no such group yet exists for tablets running on Google's [Android](#) operating system, which will constitute most of the new offerings in coming months.

TABLETS VS. E-READERS: With [electronic reading](#) devices adding more bells and whistles, including wireless connectivity, the differences between e-readers and tablet computers seem to be blurring.

But there's one difference that might never go away.

Tablets are designed to let users interact with a range of features, from telephony and video chat to e-mail and text messaging, and from watching movies and looking at photos to browsing Web pages and news sites.

But e-readers are just for reading.

Most e-reader converts will tell you that the Amazon Kindle, for instance, works because it has reduced the number of built-in bells nearly to zero.

When you're reading a book, you're not bombarded with "You've got mail" sounds, "Friend" notifications or even a digital clock. All you get is the text in front of you, ready for your complete attention.

Tablet devices like the [iPad](#) or Samsung's new Galaxy tablet afford no such digital austerity: E-mail, Web browsing and Facebook are only a click away, and many readers find the temptation of the media matrix too difficult to resist.

And though tablet screens will soon offer higher resolution and brighter colors than the electronic ink still favored by most e-readers, you may find that staring at a digital display for hours can tire out your eyes (especially if you've already been doing it at work all day). The e-ink displays, while slower and monochrome, are all but identical to a printed page.

The success of Amazon's Kindle reader, which has become the online retailer's bestselling product, may show that the best way you can improve on the printed book is to make it lighter and simpler.

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Citation: Is a tablet the best choice? (2010, December 1) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-tablet-choice.html>

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