

Google's Android tablet software inches closer

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Google Inc. is getting closer to releasing a version of the Android software meant for tablet computers, one that will include a fresh look and updated Web browser and keyboard.

The online search leader said Wednesday that it released a preview version of the [software development kit](#) for Honeycomb, also known as [Android](#) 3.0. It's for developers to test out their applications on the software and learn about its new capabilities.

In a post Wednesday on Google's Android Developers blog, Xavier Ducrohet, the Android SDK tech lead, said a final version of the kit will be available "in the weeks ahead." That will enable developers to publish Honeycomb applications to Google's Android Market app store.

Tablet computers are expected to be popular this year, spurred by the release of Apple Inc.'s [iPad](#) last April. At the International [Consumer Electronics Show](#) in Las Vegas this month, companies including Motorola Mobility Inc. and AsusTek Computer Inc. showed off tablet computers that will run Honeycomb. Plenty are expected in the coming months as companies try to compete with the popular iPad.

Google, which is based in Mountain View, outlined a variety of Honeycomb's features on its Android Developers site, many of which were shown in presentations at CES.

They will include a "system bar" built into the bottom of the screen; it shows notifications and recently used apps and can be used to navigate the tablet.

Honeycomb will also have a redesigned on-screen keyboard to make it easier and quicker to type on a tablet's larger screen. Keys will still be arranged using the standard QWERTY system.

Tablets that use Honeycomb will also let users connect a full keyboard through a USB port - something the iPad cannot do - or wirelessly via Bluetooth.

Google said an updated [Web browser](#) will allow the use of tabs for browsing, so users wouldn't have to open individual browser windows for each Web page. That's a standard feature on desktop Web browsers these days.

The Android camera software will be updated, too, to make it quicker for users to control exposure, focus, flash, zoom and other options on a tablet's larger screen.

Honeycomb will work on smart phones, too, but apps will look

differently on their smaller screens.

Google has described Honeycomb as allowing applications to have multiple views, depending on if they're running on a phone or a tablet. For example, Gmail on the tablet would show a list of e-mails in one column and the body of the one you're reading in a second column. On an Android phone, you'd only see one column at a time, as you do now.

[Google](#) first rolled out its free Android mobile software in 2008 on HTC Corp.'s G1 smart phone. It has since expanded to more than 170 phones and a number of tablet computers.

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