

RIM's new PlayBook tablet falls short of Apple iPad

May 12 2011, By Troy Wolverton



More than a year after Apple Inc. released the iPad, the search for a credible challenger to the market-changing tablet computer is still on.

Devices running Microsoft's Windows haven't found much interest. Nor, surprisingly, have gadgets running Google's [Android](#) software, even though that operating system now leads the smartphone market. And Hewlett-Packard's [TouchPad](#) has yet to hit store shelves.

Now [BlackBerry](#) maker [Research In Motion](#) Ltd. is throwing its hat in the ring in the form of a 7-inch tablet called the [PlayBook](#).

The PlayBook represents a major departure for RIM. The device is one of the first produced by the company that's not a handset. What's more, the PlayBook's [user interface](#) and operating system are completely different from those running on its BlackBerrys. And, at least right now, the PlayBook can't run any of the apps designed for those devices.

These changes are largely positive ones. The BlackBerry operating system feels like yesteryear's technology compared with Android and Apple's iOS. It was designed for devices with keyboards running text-centric applications such as email and messaging, not for touch-screen devices running video or the multimedia apps that many consumers use on smartphones these days.

In contrast, the PlayBook [operating system](#) feels much sleeker. It's made for a [touch-screen](#) device, allowing users to easily scroll Web pages, launch apps and switch between applications with the swipe of a finger.

The PlayBook's flat, rectangular shape and plastic back won't win any design awards. But the design is utilitarian, slender and largely functional, making the device much more compelling than most recent BlackBerrys.

But its power button is so tiny it's hard to depress with normal-size fingers.

The PlayBook has a beautiful, high-resolution screen that contains almost as many pixels as the iPad's, even though it's more than 2 inches shorter on the diagonal. Videos looked great on it.

Apple CEO Steve Jobs has argued that a 7-inch screen is ill suited for

tablets. After using the [iPad](#) and contrasting it with 7-inch devices such as Samsung's Galaxy Tab, I tended to agree with him.

But the PlayBook has made me reconsider. It's easier to carry around than the iPad. And thanks to its widescreen format, the Playbook's display has more than enough room when held in landscape mode to display two pages of an e-book or to display the list of messages from your inbox and an individual message at the same time.

Web surfing, though, isn't as pleasurable. I frequently had to zoom in on the text of the pages for words to be legible, something I haven't had to do on the larger iPad screen.

One thing I loved about the PlayBook was how it switches between applications. If you swipe up from the area below its screen, your current application will shrink to something like a thumbnail and will appear beside thumbnails of other open applications. To change apps, you simply swipe left or right to the one you want and tap on it. To close apps, you can flick them off screen or tap a small "x."

But for all its strengths, the PlayBook has some significant drawbacks and feels like a product that was rushed to market.

Most notably, the device doesn't have built-in email, calendar or address book applications. To access such features, users either have to go through a Web browser or beam the applications over to the PlayBook from a BlackBerry device using software called BlackBerry Bridge.

The BlackBerry Bridge software allows users to access email and check their calendars as if those applications were running on the PlayBook itself. But because the Bridge software requires the PlayBook and BlackBerry to connect over Bluetooth, it can drain the battery life of both devices. And if you don't have a BlackBerry, you're out of luck.

Even if you have a BlackBerry, you may not be able to use BlackBerry Bridge. Right now, AT&T doesn't support the software, which means RIM isn't allowing AT&T BlackBerry users to download it. Users can find copies of the software floating around the Net, but they may not be the latest version.

The PlayBook has other shortcomings. There are few apps available for it, including many of the most popular ones. Right now, you won't find Pandora Internet radio, Amazon's Kindle app or "Angry Birds."

The only version of the PlayBook now available is one running Wi-Fi. You can't yet get one with a built-in 3G or 4G antenna. So if you want to access the Internet outside of a hotspot, you have to tether it to a BlackBerry using the Bridge software

Also, there's no "universal search" feature on the device, so finding a particular app or file can involve a lot of scrolling through lists of them. And with prices that are the same as comparable iPads, the PlayBook, with its much smaller screen, is just too expensive.

RIM has said it plans to address many of these issues. PlayBooks with 3G and 4G antennas are in the works and the company plans to add native calendar and email apps in an upcoming - but as yet unscheduled - software update. Meanwhile, the company plans on supporting a wide range of software, from apps developed for Android to those developed for older BlackBerry devices, in an effort to boost the number of apps the PlayBook can run.

Those fixes will help make the PlayBook a more worthy challenger to the iPad. But without them, it's not in the same ring.

RESEARCH IN MOTION PLAYBOOK TABLET:

-Troy's rating: 6.5 (out of 10)

-Likes: Beautiful high-resolution screen, sleek user interface, compact size

-Dislikes: Pricey for its size; lacks native email, calendar and address book applications; "Bridge" software providing such apps only works on BlackBerrys and not those on AT&T's network; overall few available apps; tiny power button

-Specs: 1GHz dual-core processor; 7-inch, 1024 x 600 pixel screen; 3-megapixel front facing and 5-megapixel rear-facing cameras.

-Price: \$500 for 16-gigabyte model, \$600 for 32-gigabyte model and \$700 for 64-gigabyte model

-Web: blackberry.com

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