

With cheap Pandigital tablet, you get what you pay for

September 2 2011, By Troy Wolverton



Electronics manufacturers have had a tough time competing against Apple's iPad.

They've tried copying the iPad's physical design, revamping the operating systems underlying their machines, and offering things the [iPad](#) doesn't have, such as memory slots and extra ports. But none of the

iPad's rivals has come close to threatening the Apple device's dominance.

One challenge these tablets face is price; many have been offered at the same price as the iPad. And consumers have overwhelmingly decided that if they are going to spend \$500 or more for a tablet, they might as well get the iPad, not some knockoff.

But there's reason to believe consumers might be interested in alternative tablets priced significantly less than the iPad. Hewlett-Packard's TouchPad sold poorly when it carried the same price as Apple's device and even when it was discounted by \$100. But when HP dropped the price down to \$100 for the base TouchPad, it sold like hot cakes.

Other manufacturers are also trying to beat the iPad on price. Earlier this month, Pandigital, a Dublin-based maker of low-cost digital photo frames and

other electronics goods, introduced a new line of tablets based on Google's [Android operating system](#) that cost less than \$190 each.

I've been testing out one of these tablets, the Pandigital Nova, to get a sense of what [consumers](#) can expect. I wasn't impressed. With this tablet, you get what you pay for.

No one would confuse the Nova with the iPad. It's smaller, with a screen that measures 7 inches on the diagonal, rather than nearly 10. The Nova's case is made of cheap-feeling plastic, rather than the glass and aluminum of the iPad. Instead of single home button, the Pandigital device has four physical buttons on its face, set in a row. And rather than a display that's flush with its case, the Nova's screen is set within the case, leaving a ridge around the edges.

None of those features are necessarily game-stoppers. I generally liked the 7-inch screen on RIM's PlayBook tablet, and my favorite Android tablet to date, Samsung's Galaxy Tab 10.1, also has a plastic case. For those unfamiliar with the device, the buttons can be more intuitive than the gestures used to control the PlayBook or HP's TouchPad. And there are plenty of other devices with screens that aren't flush with the case.

But the Nova comes up short when compared to the iPad - and even other Android tablets - in plenty of other ways.

The device feels slow. When opening up the application folder, launching an app, turning pages in an e-book or going back to the home page, the Nova feels sluggish, not instantaneous.

It also feels cheap. The buttons are flimsy and aren't always responsive. On numerous occasions, I had to press the home button repeatedly to get it to respond.

I had a similar experience with the Nova's touch screen. I often had to swipe several times to scroll through the list of applications or switch between home screens. And "Angry Birds" was barely playable because the device frequently wouldn't recognize when I was trying to load or aim the birds in their slingshot. Instead, the slingshot would either misfire or would get stuck at a certain angle that it wouldn't let me alter.

Although the Nova is built on Android, you won't get the same Android experience you would on other recent tablets. Instead of the Honeycomb version, which Google designed specifically with tablets in mind, the Nova runs Android 2.3, an older version designed for smartphones. That's not a big shortcoming, though, because that version of Android actually works fine on a 7-inch screen like the Nova's.

More of a problem is that Pandigital didn't use the Google-flavored

version of Android. The Nova doesn't have any of Google's apps preinstalled. It also doesn't have a link to the App Marketplace that Google runs, so there's no way to download those apps. However, Pandigital says it's working with Google to add a link to the App Marketplace.

Instead, the Nova has a link to an app store run by GetJar. You can also install a link to Amazon.com's Appstore. Both vendors offer a decent number of Android applications. I was able to download "Angry Birds," Amazon's Kindle e-book reader and Amazon's MP3 player and store app. But I was frustrated that the device didn't have the standard Gmail application that comes on other Android devices and that I couldn't install Latitude or other Google apps.

And I ran into another problem with apps. The Nova has 4-gigabytes of internal storage. That's not a lot, but you can use it to store apps you download from GetJar. You can't, however, use it to store apps - or music - you download from Amazon. Instead, you'll have to buy a memory card to plug into the tablet.

I was able to find a 16-gigabyte microSD flash card at Fry's for \$30, and you can find one for less online. But the added cost means that the Nova's \$190 price is a bit deceptive; you'll need to spend more than \$200 total to have a device with a decent amount of storage.

To be fair, Pandigital isn't trying to re-create the iPad with the Nova. There's no way it could offer an even remotely comparable device for \$300 less than the iPad.

Still, the Nova is disappointing. Instead of being a bargain, it just feels cheap.

PANDIGITAL NOVA TABLET COMPUTER

-Likes: Low price, small shape

-Dislikes: Cheap-feeling case; low-quality touch screen and buttons; inadequate built-in storage requires add-on memory card; no access to Google's app store or apps

-Specs: 800-megahertz single-core processor; VGA front- and 1.3-megapixel rear-facing cameras; 4-gigabytes flash storage; 7-inch touch screen; Android version 2.3.

-How much: \$190

-Web: pandigital.com

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