# Competition likely to refine tablet offerings

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I love the iPad. But I'm happy that it will soon see some serious competition. Google last week showed off the first version of its Android operating system designed specifically for tablets. Tablets running that system - code named Honeycomb - are expected to hit store shelves within the next month.

Google is only one of several major players entering the tablet market on the heels of Apple's success with the iPad. At last month's Consumer Electronics Show, Research in Motion showed off its new PlayBook tablet, which is expected to reach the market by April. And on Wednesday, Hewlett-Packard unveiled a tablet, the TouchPad, running the WebOS software it acquired from Palm. It's expected to be available this summer.

These new entries are likely to steal market share from Apple, which has largely had the tablet market to itself since it launched the iPad last spring. More importantly, the increased competition will spur new innovation and experimentation - and possibly push down prices.

That's what happened with smart phones. When Apple unveiled the iPhone, it was the only touch-screen smart phone on the market, and consumers had to spend a minimum of $500 to get it. Today, they can choose from dozens of touch-screen smart phones, and some come without any upfront cost. And today's smart phones can do a lot more than they could four short years ago.

That change has a lot to do with the success of Android, which is now

the leading smart phone operating system in both the United States and worldwide. The rivalry between Apple and Google and its manufacturer partners has forced both sides to rapidly introduce new features in their software and devices.

Apple has introduced major updates to the iOS software underlying the iPhone once a year and has updated features more frequently than that. And Google has updated Android at an even faster pace.

In the last year, Apple added support for multitasking in iOS and the ability to send movies and music wirelessly from the iPhone to a TV, features previously available in Android. Likewise, Google just announced it will support purchases of add-on content, such as virtual goods from within an application, a feature that's long been supported by iOS devices.

I'm eager to see that same kind of innovation and competition hit tablets. Because as much as I like the iPad, it's not perfect.

I'm guessing that Honeycomb will spur the same kinds of changes in the tablet market that Android has spurred in the smart phone business.

Last month, I detailed some of the things I'd like to see on the iPad 2, which Apple is widely expected to release before April. Honeycomb includes some other features that didn't make my list but would certainly be compelling.

The iPad's user interface - like that of the iPhone - is built around apps. The device can have multiple home screens, but on each screen, you'll find ordered rows of application icons - or folders to contain those apps.

Honeycomb takes a different tack. Its interface is designed to be more like a PC's desktop, albeit one with multiple screens. Applications are

hidden away inside a folder. On the home screens, you'll find icons of your favorite applications or widgets, small programs that allow you to view things like stock quotes or your unread e-mail messages without having to launch full applications.

I worry that Google carries the desktop interface too far for a device consumers will navigate with their fingers rather than with a mouse. But I love the idea of being able to use a tablet's home screen for something other than displaying rows of app icons. I also like the idea of being able to get the weather report, for instance, by just turning on the tablet and checking the weather widget on the home screen, rather than having to find and launch the appropriate application.

I don't know whether Apple will adopt these features or any of Honeycomb's other innovations. But if Honeycomb takes off, Apple will be under increased pressure to do so - or to come up with its own unique innovations.

To be sure, Google could still learn a lot from Apple. I haven't played with a Honeycomb device yet, but the few who have say it's not as easy to use as an iPad. And for all the criticism of Apple for what it does and does not allow in its App Store, its controls tends to ensure a higher-quality selection of apps than you'll find on Android.

As long the iPad remains popular, Google also will be under pressure to match features or introduce new ones.

That pressure may involve long hours for developers at Apple and Google. But it should mean ever better, ever more capable tablets for you and me.

**More information:** *Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.*

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