

Tablet PCs are like smartphones in that the main method of input is via a touchscreen rather than a keyboard but the much larger screens make using them a lot easier. They are like netbooks computers (but even lighter) in that they make “mobile computing” easier than lugging around a laptop computer.

I like computer gadgets up to a point, but like to think that my purchasing decisions have some rational basis. So, I’ve been wondering whether tablet PCs are just the latest trendy/geeky toy, or would one really have a place in my own computing life and that of my average computer support client in London. I do have a perfectly rational (if insufficient) reason for buying a Tablet PC in that a lot of them run the Android operating system (as opposed to Windows or Mac OS-X, for instance) and I need to learn about Android so as to be able to offer informed advice to my computer clients. Here’s a [quick intro to Android](#).



Sony Tablet S

So, last weekend I bought a [Sony Tablet S](#). The nerd in me will be happy for months. But would it have any appeal for my “average computer client” and does it serve any real purpose not covered by laptops, netbooks, and smartphones? Here are some of my first impressions:

- They’re not cheap. I paid £449 – a typical price for a “good” Tablet PC. You can buy a perfectly serviceable laptop for that price and the lack of keyboard on Tablets means that I think most people would find it hard to completely replace a “proper” computer (although it’s possible to connect an external keyboard to some Tablets).
- Android is easy. The Android operating system was specifically written for devices whose main method of input is via a touchscreen (rather than lots of fiddly little keys – how do people with grown up hands actually use Blackberrys?) Android also seems intuitive and easy to learn.
- Android is fun. You have probably heard the term “apps”. These are small programs that perform just one function (eg display a clock, load the BBC news site, open your email program, connect to your LinkedIn account). They are very easy to find online and install. Most apps are free but have small embedded ads. There is often an ad-free

version that costs all of a pound or two.

After only a few days, I am fairly sure that the Tablet will - for me - fulfil some definite purposes such as:

- Browsing the internet when I'm away from a proper computer. I just can't be bothered struggling with the mobile phone versions of web browsing.
- Dealing with emails properly when away from a computer. My mobile phone includes a keyboard but it's still not ideal for writing a long email. The touchscreen keyboard on the Sony Tablet is easy to use - a million times easier than the virtual keyboard on an iPhone! You can whip a Tablet out of a briefcase and be working on it in seconds - much more convenient than getting out a netbook in a train, for instance.
- Ebooks. I've already got a Sony e-reader but didn't quite think it worth lugging the weight of it around with all the other stuff in my case. As far as the weight is concerned, I can think of having an e-reader with me as "free" if it's installed on the Tablet. If you are thinking of buying an e-reader I would recommend thinking about whether a tablet would be a better buy for you.
- I think I'll be able to get things set up so that I have proper access to my most important documents when I'm out and about - thanks to [Dropbox](#) and its Android app.

There's a chance that I may even be able to carry the Tablet around with me instead of the heavier netbook. The main problem might be the downloading and transferring of stuff to clients' computers. Some tablets - such as the Sony - include support for SD cards for extra storage and for data transfer. This might be enough for most of my needs. I certainly wouldn't have bought a tablet without such flexibility.



Apple iPad 2

The tablet will also become something to keep to hand at home. It gives such easy and quick access to everything you can't quite be bothered to check on your "proper computer" and

which is just too tedious to do on a smartphone – things such as checking the outside temperature just before going out, seeing what's on telly, checking travel news, and, if you're that way inclined, checking into social networking sites. The Sony Tablet even has inbuilt infrared so you can program it to replace your TV and DVD remote controls.

I've had a few moments of delighted surprise playing with this thing – such as discovering the app that measures the severity of an ongoing earthquake. OK – that's probably not funny if you live in Japan or California, but it seems so in SW4. The biggest surprise, though, was discovering the app that relays the current information on bus services. This, of course, is the data you now get on the dot matrix boards at some bus stops, but having it on a Tablet means you can leave home at just the right moment. As someone who gave up driving round London 20 years ago but who travels a lot to clients, this is one of those marvels of modern life – like GPS integrated with the A-Z on my smartphone.

This is a highly personal view of what a Tablet PC might do better than a smartphone or a netbook/laptop. There are plenty of other directions I could have explored so far – including watching movies and TV, playing games, twittering, music etc. So far, I've discovered that Tablet PCs do, indeed, fall somewhere between smartphones and netbooks but that doesn't mean they have no real purpose. On the contrary, stuff that's mildly interesting but too tedious to access in other ways is easily accessed via a Tablet.

I do acknowledge that the current popularity (but NOT the creation) of Tablet PCs began with the release of the iPad. Pretty well everything I've said about Android Tablets is probably true of iPads (but all the Apps are different versions and are only accessible via [Apple](#)).

Conclusion: Tablet PCs do fill a niche, and they're fun. Your life probably won't become empty and meaningless without one, but if you're at all curious about them I recommend further investigation. And, so far at least, I thoroughly recommend the Sony Tablet S.

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