

# BE CAREFUL SWALLOWING THAT TABLET

Apple claims that its new iPad marks a revolutionary step in the digital age, but just how good are such touch-control

computers? Mark Harris puts three to the test

Steve Jobs, the chief executive of Apple, promises no less than a “magical and revolutionary” experience from the iPad tablet, which launches in the UK next month. Apple’s disciples claim it will run all the web-surfing, gaming, multimedia and office software you need, without a mouse or the clattering keys of a laptop. With one swipe of its touch-sensitive screen you will be able to transform it into an ebook reader, video player or games console. Jobs’s claim is a lofty one, so we’ve pitted the new iPad against the two best tablets running software from Apple’s rivals — Windows 7 by Microsoft and the Google-backed Android operating system. Do tablets truly live up to the hype?

## APPLE iPad



most common typing mistakes, making it the fastest virtual keyboard here.

Tablets have been touted as replacements for ebook readers such as the Amazon Kindle but even the iPad — which is the lightest of the three at 680g (1½lb) — is too heavy for one-handed reading. The iPad does show promise, however, when handling specially created interactive books, as opposed to staid text-on-a-page. Colourful children’s ebooks, in particular, were beautifully rendered within Apple’s free iBooks app.

Newly created iPad apps for magazines and newspapers are even more successful. Newspapers look simply stunning, combining familiar typefaces, headlines and layouts with multimedia content, personalised weather reports and local sports scores. Breaking stories can be updated minute by minute and even reading longer articles on the sharp LCD display is not tiring on the eyes. Many newspapers, including The Sunday Times, are developing iPad apps. These will join the thousands of apps already available for the iPad, ranging from high-resolution, motion-sensitive games to professional-looking office software.

When it comes to battery life in real-world conditions, the iPad is the clear victor again, working for up to 10 hours between charges. However, it’s the only tablet here without a camera, USB ports (for a cable connection to a printer, say) or expandable storage.

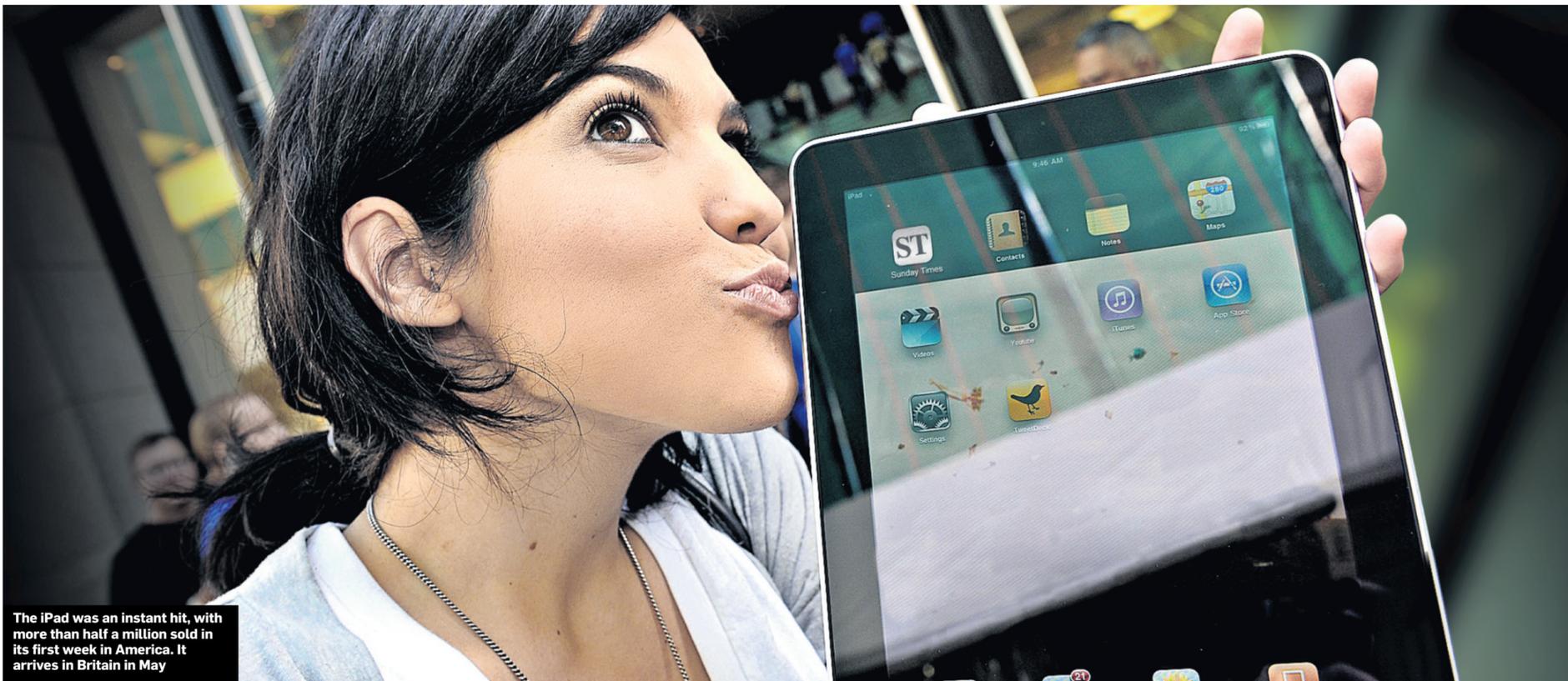
**Strengths** Finger-friendly touchscreen; eye-popping range of apps; fast and easy to use. **Weaknesses** Not great for reading ebooks; not so “magical” or “revolutionary” as claimed; few accessories.

**Verdict** Gorgeous for sofa-surfing, but less portable than a smartphone and less practical than a laptop.

**Rating** ★★★★★

## APPLE iPad

<b>Price</b>	From \$499 (no UK price yet)
<b>Screen</b>	9.7in, 1024 x 768 pixels
<b>Processor</b>	Apple A4 1GHz
<b>Ram</b>	2GB
<b>Storage</b>	16-64GB
<b>Camera</b>	No
<b>3G</b>	Yes (some models)
<b>Size (mm)</b>	243x190x13
<b>Weight (g)</b>	680



The iPad was an instant hit, with more than half a million sold in its first week in America. It arrives in Britain in May

Polaris / Eyevine

## ARCHOS 9



The Archos 9 is a Windows 7 computer, so is capable of running the thousands of existing Windows programs. The Archos has the smallest screen on test (8.9in) and uses the same resistive touchscreen technology as the Gemini, making it sometimes slow and awkward to use. The screen is bright and sharp, though.

As well as the touch interface, the device comes with a tiny optical trackpad that allows you to move a cursor on the screen like a mouse. This was fiddly to use and, just to make things even trickier, the Archos comes with no fewer than three different pop-up keyboards that appear at different times. None of them was as easy to use as the iPad’s, thanks to an annoying time lag that made it impossible to type at speed.

Because the Archos 9 is a Windows computer (albeit using the most basic Starter Edition of Windows 7), you can choose which web browser and plug-ins to use — Firefox or Internet Explorer, say. Regardless of which one we used, it was the slowest to get online, taking 10-15 seconds to open the software and another 10 seconds to load the Times Online website.

Its flexibility also allows you to use sophisticated email and productivity software, such as Microsoft Office, that is far more powerful than anything available for the iPad or Gemini. Sadly, the Archos simply does not have the processing muscle to run most modern software at a decent speed, making for glacial delays when opening or switching programs.

It’s better at handling media content, showing HD movies with just an occasional hiccup and playing back tunes through good on-board speakers or a headphone socket.

The Archos 9 has a small, built-in webcam and plays well with computer networks and accessories, thanks to ethernet and USB sockets that let you connect it to external hard drives,

digital cameras and other gizmos. Despite its small screen, the Archos is the least portable tablet, weighing 800g (1lb 12oz) and lasting just four hours between battery charges (or slightly more if you take the insane decision to reduce its performance even further).

**Strengths** Runs powerful and flexible Windows software. **Weaknesses** Cramped screen; painfully slow; not particularly portable. **Verdict** An underpowered Windows 7 computer squeezed into a shiny tablet. **Rating** ★★★☆☆

## ARCHOS 9

<b>Price</b>	£400
<b>Screen</b>	8.9in, 1024 x 600 pixels
<b>Processor</b>	Intel Atom Z510 1.1GHz
<b>Ram</b>	1GB
<b>Storage</b>	60GB
<b>Camera</b>	1.3Mp webcam
<b>3G</b>	No
<b>Size (mm)</b>	256x134x17
<b>Weight (g)</b>	800

## ICD GEMINI



This is the first of a new breed of tablets running Google’s Android operating system, more commonly found on mobile phones. InGear had exclusive access to the Gemini (which may have a different name when it launches in the UK this summer).

The Gemini’s widescreen display uses the same slightly jerky resistive system as the Archos but its vivid colours and larger dimensions (11.2in diagonally) mean it’s the best gadget here for watching full-length films. It sounds fantastic, too, with stereo speakers on board and a handy headphone socket. Unfortunately, Android’s basic Gallery media software is no match for the Archos 9’s Windows Media Player or the iPad’s impressive iPod app. Like the other two tablets, the

Gemini has wi-fi for use at home or in cafe and airport hotspots. Moreover, it can take a 3G Sim card for truly mobile broadband services (also coming soon to more expensive iPad models). The Gemini can even make normal voice calls, although you will probably want to use a Bluetooth headset instead of just shouting at the screen.

When it came to web surfing, the Gemini was faster than the Archos but slower than the iPad, taking two seconds to open its browser and 10 more to completely load Times Online. Its pop-up keyboard was also slower than the iPad, but is good enough for occasional emails and web searches.

Because the Gemini is one of the very first tablet-sized Android devices, there are only a handful of apps that take full advantage of its big screen. But the Android platform is the fastest-growing operating system in the world in terms of popularity, which means thousands more apps should be on their way.

If the Gemini lacks software, the same cannot be said of its hardware. It will have two cameras (a front-facing 2Mp webcam and a 5Mp digital video camera), USB ports and a built-in GPS

receiver that could let it double as a full-sized digital road atlas-cum-sat nav. ICD is claiming six hours of battery life for the Gemini (with the GPS turned off), but InGear could not verify this with the prototype device on test.

**Strengths** Lovely HD widescreen; good specification and web browsing. **Weaknesses** Lack of dedicated apps; still a bit buggy. **Verdict** Until more software arrives, this tablet feels like a smartphone rattling around inside a media player. **Rating** ★★★☆☆

## ICD GEMINI

<b>Price</b>	To be confirmed
<b>Screen</b>	11.2in, 1366 x 768 pixels
<b>Processor</b>	Nvidia Tegra 2 1GHz
<b>Ram</b>	512MB
<b>Storage</b>	4GB; memory cards
<b>Camera</b>	2Mp webcam, 5Mp camera
<b>3G</b>	Yes (and voice calls)
<b>Size (mm)</b>	300x191x16
<b>Weight (g)</b>	To be confirmed

## GAMES

New titles this week



### Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell: Conviction

★★★★★  
PC, Xbox 360; £35-£50.  
Age 15

The Splinter Cell series is better at releasing your inner Bond than most 007-branded games. Once again, you play Sam Fisher, super-spy, yet whereas previous Splinter Cell plots challenged Fisher to, say, infiltrate terrorist installations, this time the goal is to destroy a Bourne-style conspiracy within your own agency. This fifth instalment places less emphasis on sneaking around in favour of more overtly aggressive operations and so Fisher’s trademark night-vision goggles have been quietly ditched. Even so, stealth remains his main weapon. The aim is now to use the darkness or cover to confuse enemies and then pick them off one by one. If you eliminate enough foes in close combat, you can perform slicker executions. To some extent Splinter Cell: Conviction is full of classic spy-game scenarios, such as breaking into an experimental weapons lab. It does, however, deliver tense action with serious gusto. The plot is strong, the visuals are cinematic and the music is enticing. There is also a nifty prequel section where you can play in tandem with a friend, either online or off. The main game is slightly short and it’s gruellingly tough in places yet that just makes finishing this top-grade thriller all the more satisfying. **Stuart Andrews**



### Monster Hunter Tri

★★★★☆  
Wii; £45. Age 16

Monster Hunter is a bit like World Of Warcraft except for gaming consoles rather than computers. This third edition, exclusive to the Wii, is set on an island troubled by dragons and nautical nasties. You and up to three other human-controlled characters can unite to fight them on land or sea. This ability to hunt in packs and interact online is key to its allure. Defeat a beast and you may harvest, say, its hide or teeth — and adding notches to your belt makes your character more skilful as well as help you acquire better weapons. Movements are activated with button presses or swings of the Wiimote. The trouble is that the action is almost fatally flawed by sluggish combat controls: you cannot move during each laboured sword swing and so are often left facing the wrong direction. Matters are much improved with Nintendo’s new Wii Classic Controller Pro (around £25, or £10 with the game), which is more like a conventional joystick, with two analogue joysticks. Monster Hunter Tri looks great, especially the creatures, although it is slightly repetitive. And without the new controller, the dodgy fighting kills any enthusiasm long before the monsters do. **David Phelan**