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Product Info
Company: Motorola Mobility, Inc.
Released: March, 2011
Reviewed: March 7, 2011
Platform: Android (3.x)
Specs: 1 GHz Dual-Core, 1 GB RAM
Connectivity: Wi-Fi, 3G (Verizon)
Storage: 32 GB
MIT Supported: ✅ Docs

Review (by Justin Fleming)

Although there have been a number of "tablets" released in the last year running Android, these devices ran a scaled up version of the Android OS intended for phones, while a number of them were buggy, slow, or even lacked access to the Android Market for third-party apps. Even though many of these major issues were addressed with the release of the first major Android tablet to hit the market, the Samsung Galaxy Tab, the Tab still ran an un-optimized version of Android stretched from a 4" phone-sized form factor to a 7" screen. Google, however, has finally stepped in to the nascent tablet market with a new version of the Android OS built with tablets in mind, Android 3.0 (codename "Honeycomb"). To debut this new software, Motorola and Verizon have teamed up again with the release of the Xoom tablet, a device packed to the brim with cutting edge hardware specs. But how does it stack up in real world testing at MIT, and how does it compare with the current market leader, the iPad?

Hardware

At first glance, the Xoom looks attractive and sleek; solid black metal and plastic (which is found at the top ridge of the device to help with 3G antenna reception, much like on the iPad), a 10.1" Gorilla Glass screen with a 16:10 ratio, and only 12.9 mm deep. Some design details, however, created some problems in practice. For one, our test unit's build quality appeared to be somewhat lacking, as we didn't exactly love the feel of the metal back, and I occasionally experienced some unevenness and creakiness with the plastic section of the device. Additionally, the power button for the Xoom is inconveniently located around back, which takes everyone who tries to use the device some time to find, and the volume buttons are shallow and hard to press. Though these were small details, of course, they still negatively impact the day-to-day user experience on the Xoom. One last thing that I found in the overall design of the Xoom is that the 16:10 ratio screen, while excellent for viewing widescreen video, means that you can only comfortably use the device in landscape orientation, as it is quite awkward to hold or type on in its narrow portrait orientation.

The Xoom packs an impressive spec sheet, with a dual-core NVIDIA Tegra 2 processor at 1 GHz, 1 GB of RAM, impressive graphics performance, dual cameras (including both a front facing camera for chatting as well as a rear camera that shoots 720p HD video), HDMI output with playback support up to 1080p, and upgradability to 4G (more about that later). This all leads to very snappy device performance; apps are quick to open, responsive, and multi-tasking is fairly smooth. I was also happy to find that battery life lasts around 8 hours or more, which bests every other Android tablet on the market and gets close to the standard set by the iPad (which routinely gets over 10 hours of use on a charge). Wireless performance on the MIT and MIT Secure Wi-Fi networks was great, and Verizon 3G coverage around campus is good (except for the vicinity around the new Koch Institute).

The aforementioned upgradability to use Verizon's 4G LTE network is notable, both for the addition of the major feature itself as well as requiring a highly unusual process. Although the hardware and software upgrade will be free for all Xoom devices, the upgrade will acquire Xoom owners to ship their devices to Motorola for a week. This arrangement certainly sounds less than convenient, but we'll likely have more details once the upgrade date and further details have been announced.

Software

The Xoom debuts with the much anticipated Android 3.0, or "Honeycomb", the first version of Android designed specifically for use on tablets. Android's interface has been completely redesigned, with a new persistent toolbar residing along the bottom which is home to the three Home, Back, and Multi-tasking navigation buttons (these replace the three or four physical buttons found below the screen on every Android-based phone), as well as housing a clock, radio information (3G and Wi-Fi reception), a battery indicator, and a spot for notifications. From the home-screen (and nowhere else), you can get access to your apps from the Apps button on the upper right, add widgets and shortcuts to your home screen using the "+" icon, and search Google using the magnifying button on the upper left (unless you would rather use the Browser or the Google search widget). That might sounds a little complicated, but that's because it *is* a bit complicated. Some of Android's greatest strengths against the iPad and iOS, user-customizability of home-screens and the adding of widgets, for instance, also add a layer of complexity and lead to confusion for new users. Compared to the iPad, Android 3.0 on the Xoom is both alluringly feature-rich and frustratingly complicated. Lastly, in my testing, I occasionally experienced some inexplicable bugs, however, this isn't too surprising with a software revamp of this magnitude.

Native apps on Android 3.0 are rewritten to take full advantage of the Xoom's 10 inch screen, especially apps like Gmail or Email (which support MIT Exchange and IMAP accounts) which have multiple panes (or in Google-speak, fragments) up on the screen at once. In practice this means that what might take two taps on an Android phone will take one tap on an Android tablet. The Browser has grown into a much fuller Chrome-like browsing experience, and other apps, such as the Camera, Android Market, YouTube, and Music have been drastically overhauled, and for the better. Google Talk is also included with video chat support, which works as expected.

Third-party apps however, were a disappointment with this device, as only a few dozen apps appear to have been overhauled to take advantage of the larger tablet screen and new Android 3.0 features. The device hasn't been available for very long (less than two weeks prior to this review), however, you would expect and hope that developer support since the product's announcement would be greater than it appears to be.

Lastly, Adobe Flash 10.1 integration was a headlining feature of the device when initially announced, however, the Xoom currently ships without Flash integration at all, and Flash 10.2 will become available at some point this Spring. In the end, this means that online video support for the device is actually worse (rather than better than) the iPad, and a number of websites, including most ironically Motorola's own Xoom site, will not load in the Browser.

Pricing

As the first Android tablet to compete against the remarkably popular iPad, the Xoom needs to have competitive pricing, and we found that wasn't quite the case. The Xoom on Verizon comes in one model which currently retails for $799 off-contract or $599 on a two-year contract. This off-contract price is $300 more than a base (Wi-Fi only and 16 GB, to be fair) iPad, or $70 more than a comparably equipped 32 GB Wi-Fi + 3G iPad. Despite its greater specs compared to the first generation iPad, the Xoom doesn't exceed the power or features of the upcoming iPad 2 by a very large margin, so the higher price is a major hurdle for this device's adoption rate going forward.

Conclusion

The Xoom's cutting-edge hardware and the completely revamped Android 3.0 software are both a big step forward for Android tablets in both power and design. Android 3.0 has a lot of promise as a tablet platform going forward, especially given Google's fast-paced development cycle and the platform's legion of devoted developers. However, given missing features at launch (Flash, 4G), a lack of major third-party applications, and a handful of small hardware and software hitches, the Xoom and Android 3.0 appear to have been rushed out to market a little too quickly. Lastly, compared to the iPad 2, which will be cheaper and available from multiple carriers beginning on March 11th, the Xoom in its current form may be a tough sell with tablet customers. My recommendation for all but early adopters would be to wait.

Overall Score: