

## BUSINESS &amp; CAREERS

# RIM's PlayBook has some kinks to work out



HI-TECH

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Waterloo, Ont.-based Research in Motion Ltd. (RIM) recently released the biggest test of its BlackBerry brand: the PlayBook tablet. Here are my first impressions.

## Hardware

The one-pound device feels solid. Front- and rear-facing cameras take pictures and videos and two microphones pick up surrounding voices. (RIM assures me videoconference apps are on the way.)

Two speakers drive great audio. Media controls join the power button and microphones on the device's top edge, while the bottom features HDMI and micro-USB ports, plus charging contacts.

The screen punches above its seven-inch size, putting out crisp video in several formats, including Flash. RIM made no specific battery life claims, but in my limited experience the PlayBook will run all day on one charge.

The PlayBook behaved like a USB key when plugged into my Mac. I dragged Office files to the PlayBook that I later edited on the tablet.

## Size

The PlayBook screen is the size of a paperback page, which makes RIM handset applications far easier to use (especially web browsing and handling email attachments). BlackBerry owners might find themselves doing more work when away from their computers instead of avoiding the tiny handset screen.

It's also the size of many GPS units and could become one provided RIM or a third party provides software (likely via Bridge—more on that later) and dashboard-mounting accessories.

But forget about two-hand-typing on this tablet, unless you have the hands of a 10-year-old or a contortionist. This is a thumb-typing or one-hand-typing device only. (It also supports Bluetooth and, I expect, wireless keyboards.)

## Screen

Typing and screen gestures proved simple to figure out, partly because RIM uses gestures people have learned on other tablets and partly because, with a few minutes' practice, the PlayBook's "bezel-start gestures" are easy to memorize. (System "bezel-start gestures" include swiping from the bottom bezel

Research in Motion Ltd. (RIM) launched the PlayBook tablet earlier this year.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RESEARCH IN MOTION LTD.



RIM's tablet is small, coming in at 5.1 inches tall by 7.6 inches wide.

up to view the application list and swiping from the top-right or top-left corner inwards to view the status bar.)

## BlackBerry Bridge

The PlayBook pairs with a BlackBerry handset using BlackBerry Bridge, available in the App Store.

Currently, all personal information manager (PIM) apps (calendar, contacts, tasks, messages and memos) must reside on the smartphone, while Bridge allows the tablet to access the phone's information. (RIM plans to provide native PIM apps so people can keep this information on the tablet.)

Bridge also allows access to files (documents, pictures, PDFs, etc.) that reside on the handset.

The PlayBook-handset connection is quick and makes reading and working with information on the phone a much less squinty and scrolly experience.

IT security pros will love how Bridge lets users keep phones tucked away (and less prone to loss) while keeping the PlayBook itself empty of sensitive data (presuming they can prevent users from copying files onto the PlayBook). However, people new to RIM may resent needing to buy a handset to access PIM apps.

## Included applications

Out of the box, the PlayBook offers a wide selection of apps and lets users switch between them using an application "carousel" that resembles the Palm WebOS switcher.

Multitasking seems hit and miss. The system capably downloaded podcasts while I worked on other things, but it didn't reliably download selections from App World.

BlackBerry users may like working on PDFs and Office documents on the PlayBook versions of Adobe Reader and Documents to Go. The YouTube viewer and the Kobo book reader also become usable on the bigger screen.

The Twitter and Facebook icons aren't apps, but links to said sites that start the PlayBook browser (which is infinitely more usable than the handset browser).

## Third-party applications

RIM approves then distributes third-party apps (what few there are) via App World. When the Android "app player" arrives this summer, RIM will add apps made for the Google Android operating system.

## Rough edges

Next to currently available tablets, the PlayBook betrays

signs of less-than-adequate development.

One of the first things I discovered after first turning on the PlayBook was a tablet OS update. That's odd for a product released the day before I got it. RIM released another OS update the following day, though none came out during the following week.

Pinch-to-zoom doesn't work in the Messages application, nor in newsreaders like the Globe and Mail, Huffington Post or TechCrunch, though it works in the browser and other applications.

The on-screen power off option takes at least a minute to shut down the PlayBook. Turning it on afterwards takes about as much time. Instant on only happens if the PlayBook is allowed to drift "off" on its own.

## Conclusions

One theme recurs throughout this review: RIM released an incomplete product, expecting people to wait for things like native PIM apps and as-yet-unrealized promise (like use as a GPS unit).

I don't hold this against RIM, which must balance competitive pressure to market a tablet with the need to make sure that tablet stacks up well in a continually swelling market.

As is, the PlayBook will com-

pare favourably to most tablets save The-Tablet-That-Must-Not-Be-Named (in-Waterloo-Ontario at least), from an outfit Forrest Gump once called "some kind of fruit company."

Why? The PlayBook is still incomplete, it's smaller, it lacks native PIM apps, not to mention third-party apps, yet its prices match those of the market leader's offerings.

Few of these shortcomings will faze those who agree with RIM's labelling of the PlayBook as "the world's first professional-grade tablet," but it remains to be seen whether the BlackBerry brand will lure people to the current incarnation of the PlayBook. Chances are slim that the PlayBook will put a dent in today's sales of Apple Inc.'s iPad (well, I couldn't go through the entire article without saying it, could I?).

But tomorrow's a different story. The beauty of tablets, and other such devices, is that you can take them out of the oven yet continue to bake the operating system and software, then deliver the new flavours via updates.

The PlayBook's hardware is fundamentally sound, so if RIM and third-party developers produce compelling software to use on it, the PlayBook may win converts. Stay tuned. ■