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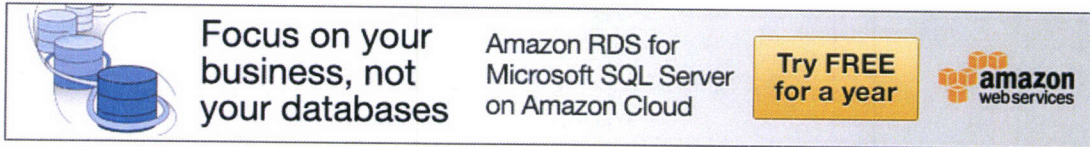
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Windows XP Tablet PC Edition Review

Paul Thurrott | Paul Thurrott's Supersite for Windows

Jun 25, 2002

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It's the best Windows yet. Will anyone use it?

Since the dawn of the PC era, various companies have undertaken various initiatives to move computing away from keyboard and mouse-based input and towards the more natural interfaces of pen and voice. And while voice computing has seen some limited success, pen computing is set to explode with the introduction of Microsoft's Tablet PC platform, driven by a new Windows XP version logically named Windows XP Tablet PC Edition.

Microsoft has been involved in the pen computing space since 1992, when its prototype *WinPad* devices were designed to run a special Windows 3.x version called *Windows for Pen Computing*. WinPad was destined for the dustbin of history, and in many ways it was a sobering reminder that the then-current PC designs were just too primitive to effectively scale into a portable form factor with long battery life.

To counter this problem, Microsoft worked to convert its Windows OS to run on more efficient hardware platforms, and *Windows CE (Consumer Electronics)* was born. Code-named *Pegasus*, the first Windows CE version provided a Windows 95-like shell, and email, Internet, and Office application functionality, in a small, clamshell-like form factor that never really took off with users. A subsequent release, code-named *Griffin*, aped the look and feel of the successful Palm Pilot, and a later release, dubbed *Pocket PC*, proved quite successful, especially with businesses.

However, the Windows CE/Pocket PC devices were not, and are not, PCs, though they are quite powerful in their own right. To enable the type of natural computing environments that Microsoft envisioned--with both voice and handwriting capabilities--a true PC would need to be used. And, over the years, as size, power management and battery life issues were resolved, modern PC laptops became more and more capable machines in their own right. And the Tablet PC was born.

What is a Tablet PC?

A Tablet PC is a PC or, more appropriately, a portable PC. It has been modified at both the hardware and software levels, however, to differentiate it from other PCs.

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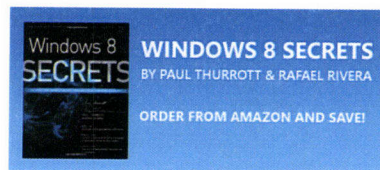
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Windows 8 SECRETS

BY PAUL THURROTT & RAFAEL RIVERA

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What I Use



ARTICLE JAN 7, 2015

I Bought a New Windows Phone 135

Like many, I was hoping to see a new Lumia

flagship before the end of 2014, and while I was pleasantly surprised in some ways by both the Lumia 735 and 830, neither offers the level of performance or best-in-market camera quality I had come to expect from Microsoft/Nokia's high-end devices. So I pulled the trigger on an unlocked Windows Phone flagship that will hopefully take me through at least the first half of this year. Or until Microsoft gets off its low-end fixation and satisfies the needs of its biggest fans....[More](#)

ARTICLE JUL 21, 2014

Hardware

Tablet PCs are ultra-mobile laptop computers with *convertible* screens that can be used in normal laptop mode, or flipped around and used like a tablet, with stylus and on-screen keyboard input. A second hardware design, simply called a *tablet*, uses a docking station to provide keyboard and mouse access; when away from the desk, the tablet is used with the stylus and on-screen keyboard only.

Tablet PC devices will be made by a variety of PC makers. See my [Tablet PC Preview](#) in Tech Showcases for a look at some hardware designs, including the Acer TM100 Tablet PC I used to write this review.

Software

Tablet PCs ship with a special version of Windows XP called Windows XP Tablet PC Edition. This XP version is available only with Tablet PCs, and is based on Windows XP Professional Service Pack 1 (SP1). In addition to the standard XP Pro features, Tablet PC edition includes support for the active digitizer and stylus used by Tablet PC devices, instant display switching between normal and portrait modes, and a small suite of Tablet PC-enabled applications, including Windows Journal, Sticky Notes, a game, and an Office XP add-on pack. Microsoft says that it will also issue a number of free Tablet PC downloads to its Web site, including more games and some PowerToys, once the software is complete.

In this review, I'm mostly concerned with the software, though I'll comment when appropriate on the hardware as well.

Introducing Windows XP Tablet PC Edition

Though I had previous experience with the Tablet PC, I was formerly introduced to its new OS in early June 2002 at a reviewer's workshop in Seattle. As mentioned previously, Windows XP Tablet PC Edition is simply XP Pro with some additional software and capabilities; it is a true superset. The desktop ([Figure](#)) can be displayed in normal mode when the Tablet PC is in laptop mode, or in portrait mode when in tablet mode. I'll use tablet mode for all the screenshots here.

So what's different? Off the bat, there isn't much to see. XP Tablet PC Edition is based on Windows XP Service Pack 1 (SP1), as denoted by the *Set Program Access and Defaults* icon in the Start Menu ([Figure](#)). It also includes a new icon next to the Start button, which is used to display the *Input Panel*, which toggles between an on-screen keyboard ([Figure](#)) and a text-entry area ([Figure](#)). The Input Panel is interesting because it sends the text-recognized version of your handwriting to any Windows application. So you can use this to fill out Web forms, write email, or whatever, whenever you're using the tablet with just a stylus. It works well, especially if you print.

The first time you use the Tablet PC, you're presented with a *Welcome to Tablet PC* application ([Figure](#)), similar to what you might have seen on a Pocket PC, that lets you calibrate the pen and get used to the device. But make no mistake, the hardware-software interaction in the Tablet PC is on a completely different level than what's available on the Pocket PC. First, Tablet PCs include an active digitizer beneath the screen. This means that the system can track the stylus, even when it's not actually touching the screen. So if you hover the stylus above the screen and move it around, the cursor follows along. It's impressive. But it also goes beyond even that. Microsoft has engineered the Tablet PC software to interact with the stylus in ways that will be familiar to anyone who has used real pen and paper. It's pressure-sensitive, so pressing harder on the pen results in a bolder, darker stroke on-screen. The stylus includes a real eraser, which can be used to erase *ink* items you've written on-screen, and it works just like a real eraser. Finally, it's possible to highlight items in various colors, work with a variety of pen types, and even bold and italicize your handwritten ink, just like you'd do to normal text in a word

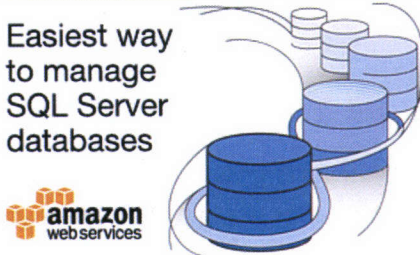


What I Use: July 2014

It's been a while since the last What I Use, but there haven't been many major

changes since late last year: Surface Pro 3 has become my go-to travel companion, I've added a third cellphone line for testing Windows Phone, Android and iPhone side-by-side, and have rotated through some new tablets and other devices. We've also switched from FIOS to Comcast and added to our set-top box collection....[More](#)

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Using Windows with a stylus will be old hat to Pocket PC users, but I suspect that most laptop users will adjust quickly too. And yes, the stylus still works when the Tablet is in laptop mode.

Software Utilities

If the Tablet PC just provided a way to control the PC with a stylus, then it would be a little interesting, but not earth-shattering. However, Microsoft has included a number of core pen-enabled applications, one of which is particularly compelling. In this section, we'll take a look at these bundled applications.

Windows Journal

First up is Windows Journal, which provides ink-based note-taking and ink document storage management capabilities. Designed to resemble a college-ruled pad of paper by default (Figure), Journal offers a variety of document templates and easy customization. To take notes, simply launch Journal and write with the pen (Figure). The text you enter in the note title area is used for the filename by default (Figure), though you can change that of course. And the toolbar can be used to select pen types, colors, highlighting, text and object selection, and other features.

Journal, for many people, *is* the Tablet PC, in the sense that it is the one application that truly shows off why this system is desirable. Seeing your handwriting appear on-screen, accurately and beautifully (well, given my obvious lack of handwriting skill) is simply amazing and hard to describe.

Using Journal, you can highlight ink (Figure), discretely select ink (Figure), apply formatting (Figure), and move items around, just as you would with a word processor. Want to add a line of text between two other lines of text? Impossible with a pad of paper, sure, but simplicity itself on the tablet. And yes, you can draw. Freehand. It works wonderfully.

Interestingly, Microsoft expects users to work with ink data natively, and not convert notes to text. This differentiates the Tablet PC from previous pen-based computers, and has two interesting ramifications, which I'll describe in a moment. But for the curious, yes, it's possible to use handwriting recognition on your ink. This can be done on the fly--you select ink and then Copy, and then Paste from Notepad or any other text-based application, hoping the results are readable--or using Windows Journal's Copy as Text functionality (Figure), which give you a chance to give the text a once-over before its pasted elsewhere.

At the reviewer's workshop I attended, Forbes columnist Stephen Manes precipitated a rather ugly moment when he demanded that Microsoft tell him, qualitatively, how well the speech recognition in XP Tablet PC Edition works. Alexandra Loeb, the VP for Tablet PC Division at Microsoft explained that the company didn't have any relevant numbers per se, because the results vary from person to person. This didn't satisfy Manes, and embarrassment ensued as his demands got more and more irrational. I will say this. The handwriting recognition in this product surprises me in a very positive way. No, it's not always right, and yes, it has the occasional gaff that reminds one of Doonesbury's blasting of the Apple Newton back in the early 1990's. But this technology is clearly better than its ever been, and it will learn as you go, without requiring you to sit through a formal teaching session, as you must for speech recognition. From a pure usability standpoint, this is a Good Thing.

OK, now let's get back to the ramifications of saving data in ink format. I don't know

about you, but my handwriting stinks. If we can get beyond some obvious Tablet PC complaints (such as, I type much faster than I handwrite) and consider how ink data might be shared with other users, some problems emerge. Let's say you're a Tablet PC user, and you'd like to share 10 pages of hand-written notes with a co-worker. If that person doesn't have a Tablet PC, which is everyone today, incidentally, then you would have two ugly choices: You could send the co-worker 10 TIFF images, since this is one of the primary export formats. This option obviously stinks, but it is necessitated by the fact that Microsoft curiously won't supply any viewer software for the ink format, though one is planned for a later date. Or, you could try and use the tablet's handwriting recognition software, which, while better than anything that came before it, still works poorly for many people.

Now consider the flipside. Let's say we all own Tablet PCs and you want to share that same 10 pages of notes. Why the heck would I want notes in your lousy handwriting? That would just force me to do the handwriting recognition myself, which would take time, and my results would be worse than if had you done it, because I can't read your writing to begin with.

See the problem? The Tablet PC's handwriting capabilities might be handy in some situations, but unless you have exceptionally nice handwriting (or the handwriting recognition simply works really well for you), your data is stranded on that device. And this, my friends, is exactly the problem that the Tablet PC was supposed to solve.

Don't get me wrong. I still believe that the Tablet PC is a solution for many problems, and will be welcome wholeheartedly in certain markets where tapping away on a keyboard is not an option (think manufacturing, legal, medical, and other vertical markets). But for people who need to collaborate, I'm not sure that the convenience of being able to occasionally sketch freehand on the screen is going to outweigh the problems.

Another circumstance could alleviate my concerns. If Microsoft is correct, and the Tablet PC takes off, this type of functionality will simply become part of most laptop computers. If I had a choice between a certain laptop system, and a Tablet PC-enabled version that cost only \$200-300 more, it would be a no-brainer. Why not get the extra functionality?

All-in-all, Windows Journal is going to sell a lot of Tablet PCs. If you're interested in these devices, try and spend some time in this application, with a stylus, and see whether it works for you.

Windows Sticky Notes

XP Tablet PC Edition also ships with a bizarre little Stick Notes application ([Figure](#)), which acts more like a Pocket PC app than a Windows app. That's because Windows Sticky Notes doesn't deal with documents, but instead lets you write notes to yourself, or record audio, on-the-fly. The application automatically retains anything you've entered, and you can selectively delete notes at any time, or copy and paste notes into other applications. I wasn't particularly impressed with this feature, but then I never use the Notes feature in Microsoft Outlook either, so maybe I'm not the best test subject.

Inkball

Windows XP Tablet PC Edition ships with a decent game called Inkball ([Figure](#)). The goal is to drive two bouncing balls into the correct holes, and you draw little walls with the stylus to guide the balls; each time a ball hits a wall, the wall disappears and the ball ricochets in the correct direction. No biggie.

Tablet PC Office Pack for Microsoft Office XP

Aside from Windows Journal, the most useful Tablet PC software currently available is the

Tablet PC Office Pack for Microsoft Office XP, which Microsoft will make available as a free download to Tablet PC users later this year. This add-on supplies the following features:

Ink support in Word

Word users can enter ink directly into Word documents using a special Ink Canvas, which basically provides a writing area that will later be rendered as a graphic for other users. You can also add ink-based comments if you use Word's document revision features.

Ink support in Outlook

Outlook users receive a variety of ink-related functionality, including the obvious ink-based email messages (Figure). You can also integrate Outlook's contacts, appointments, and tasks modules with Windows Journal.

Ink support in PowerPoint

Interestingly, PowerPoint received what I consider to be the most desirable ink-related Office functionality: The ability to annotate live presentations with ink (Figure). Best of all, PowerPoint will ask you after the presentation if you'd like to save a second copy of the presentation that includes the annotations you made. Good stuff.

Timing and Delivery

Microsoft is currently beta-testing Windows XP Tablet PC Edition, and the version I used was based on pre-Release Candidate (RC) code. The company says that it will release the product on November 7, 2002, and you can expect a variety of hardware devices to become available on or soon after that date.

Conclusions

Windows XP Tablet PC Edition is the most powerful version of Windows XP available, though I have to wonder whether it will ever benefit from a wide audience. The ink capabilities are so powerful that it's easy to overlook some of the functional deficiencies in collaboration and handwriting recognition, but I strongly urge any potential customers to seriously consider how, when, and if they would ever actually use the tablet-based features of this product. It's a cool demo, a conversation starter in airports and on planes, and truly amazing technology. Whether its a solution looking for a problem will be decided by the market, however, and I'll be interested to see how it turns out. I'm also eager to see some of the other hardware designs that PC makers will come up with, since they've been given a pretty wide leeway for design innovation.

Windows XP Tablet PC Edition: Is it hero or goat? Winner or loser? You decide, and please [let me know](#). I'm curious how people think they might use these machines.

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