

## **Review: Making a Case for the Misunderstood BlackBerry PlayBook**

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Remember your high school introduction to Surrealism and perhaps Rene Magritte's painting titled, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (translation: This is not a pipe)? The painting depicted a realistically rendered pipe with the caption "This is not a pipe" written below it. The obvious is right there in front of the viewer but few realize it. Of course it's not a pipe, dummy, it's a *painting* of a pipe.

Maybe it's a stretch, but in the spirit of that painting, I suggest that Research In Motion's BlackBerry PlayBook is not a media tablet, or at least it's not *just* a media tablet. Neither is it an iPad competitor. In fact, the PlayBook suggests a new and innovative form of tablet that in all honesty has very little to do with Apple's iPad. Here's a look the nuts and bolts of the BlackBerry PlayBook, as well as a bit of commentary (call it tech theory) on why the industry needs to take a step back and reassess the manner in which RIM has addressed the market with its first slate.

### **First Appearances**

The BlackBerry PlayBook looks and feels very much like the original 7-inch Samsung Galaxy Tab. It's about as thick, weighs in at less than a pound, sports a beautifully vibrant screen and features only Wi-Fi for connectivity (well, almost, but we'll get to that). Front and rear cameras (3 MP and 5 MP respectively) were a definite must for any tablet that comes this late to market.

The top bezel features media controls (play, pause, volume) and power, as well as a standard headphone jack. The bottom bezel features Micro-USB, HDMI-Out, and charging ports. While the actual viewable area of the touchscreen is 7 inches, the entirety of the screen's frame is also touch-sensitive and plays an integral part in one of the more intuitive tablet UIs to hit the market.

Under the hood, there's a dual-core 1Ghz processor and 1GB of RAM, which make it speedy and up to tackling a number of tasks at once. The PlayBook is based on the QNX platform, which features true simultaneous multitasking. There's also an accelerometer, 6-axis motion sensing (gyroscope) and digital compass (magnetometer) and GPS.

You're forgiven if, after reading these specs, you're still thinking this is your standard media tablet, but we haven't yet tackled the quirkiest features of the PlayBook. Let me stress that this is not a media tablet.



***This is not a media tablet.***

### **More than Meets the Eye**

The PlayBook gets complicated, as well as intriguing, when you start to understand its relationship to its closest relative, the BlackBerry smartphone. As mentioned previously, the PlayBook's UI is one of the more user-friendly systems on the market, due in no small part to its QNX operating system and some exceptional design work. A series of gestures that extend into the screen's touch-sensitive frame make launching and closing apps and functions a breeze. While it took about 15 minutes to set up the device and install software updates, it was only minutes before I felt comfortable with the controls.

The onscreen keyboard was spacious and responsive, even more so than some of the Android tablets out there right now. I could see light document editing and even the occasional long email writing as realistic tasks on the PlayBook.

That said, non-BlackBerry users (myself included) will undoubtedly feel left out in the cold when realizing that certain core native applications (email, calendar, etc.) will only work when tethered with a BlackBerry. And this is where the PlayBook's real nature becomes evident. The PlayBook is an extended portal for the BlackBerry. It provides deep integration with RIM's bread and butter, the BlackBerry, to provide those users with a larger viewing area and extra storage while relieving IT departments of the burden of providing security for an additional set of devices.

I tried the PlayBook with a friend's BlackBerry and found the system to be seamless, as well as convenient (caveat: if you're a BlackBerry user). When you're disconnect from the BlackBerry, the icons for email and the like go kind of grey and are no

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Published on Wireless Week (<http://www.wirelessweek.com>)

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longer available. You can still get your Web mail via the browser or the pre-installed icon for Gmail.

And then there's the connectivity issue, which is really only an issue if you're not a BlackBerry user. If you are a BlackBerry user, you're probably thanking RIM for providing you with a pretty ingenious way of supporting two devices on one wireless account. While it's unclear as to what the carriers plan on doing about those BlackBerry users who do purchase a PlayBook (will AT&T charge a tethering fee?), it offers an interesting example of how a tablet can be both a stand-alone device, as well as an accessory or second-screen for a smartphone.



*Call it synergy, not co-dependence.*

### BlackBerry

What's quite obvious is RIM has consciously designed the PlayBook around the aforementioned caveat: If you're a BlackBerry user. That would be one thing if we were talking about a smaller OEM, but the BlackBerry OS still accounts for 27 percent of OS market share in the U.S., according to Nielsen.

Initial estimates put first-day sales of the BlackBerry PlayBook in the 45,000-50,000 range (20K preorders, 25K retail). If true, that beats out-of-the-gate numbers for both the Motorola Xoom and Galaxy Tab. Apple sold 300,000 iPads in the first day of sales for that device. Perhaps RIM's greatest accomplishment with the PlayBook lies in the company's adherence to its own, well... playbook, and customer base (namely enterprise-focused CrackBerry devotees).

While RIM may have targeted iPad-like pricing (\$499 for 16GB, \$599 32 GB, \$699 64 GB), as it seems anything that does not meet this standard is immediately panned, I don't think the typical iPad user is of any concern to RIM.

In all fairness, the PlayBook shouldn't be compared to consumer-focused media tablets like those mentioned above. When the Wall Street Journal's Walt Mossberg noted that the PlayBook was a tablet with a "co-dependency problem," I think he missed the point. A closer look, and one taken from a decidedly more enterprise-focused angle, renders a well-thought-out *synergy* between the PlayBook and BlackBerry.

I have to credit Kevin Burden, practice director of mobile devices for ABI Research, for bringing me around on the PlayBook. He says the public has been led to believe that absolutely everything in the tablet form factor must compete with the iPad.

"The reality is that the PlayBook is something very different," he said, adding that existing BlackBerry users might find the PlayBook "very compelling."

And perhaps RIM knows better what its users want than does the general public. "[Reviewers] have just been killing this thing because it doesn't have an email client," Burden said, "but that's not what IT departments want... from an IT standpoint, this is the ideal. Everything remains secured on the BlackBerry."

Burden concedes that perhaps RIM made a mistake by not coming to market with two versions of the PlayBook, perhaps another that's 3G/4G-enabled, but he insists that in the case of the PlayBook, the company has done a pretty good job of addressing a very specific target audience.

"I mean, what's the point of going up against the iPad if you don't have to?" he asks. "Motorola tried that with the Xoom and look where that got them."

Sure, the PlayBook has its flaws, but in the end, I think for the most part a lot of users are going to be very satisfied with this product, most of them RIM's already secured enterprise users. I would go so far as to say that the PlayBook is perhaps the one exception where an OEM would not necessarily need to worry about a lack of apps (Reminder: This is not a media tablet).

BlackBerry users have been behind on the apps game for some time now, and while RIM has made slight, small moves to more adequately address the consumer market, at least this particular version of the PlayBook is aimed at the mobile business user who will be satisfied trying to beat her high score on the pre-installed Tetris app between meetings. The company said it had around 3,000 apps at launch, with the QNX-based Android apps "player" coming soon. We'll see, but I don't think RIM is wrong in going ahead with the PlayBook before it has the apps situation fully figured.

In the end, I wouldn't recommend a typical consumer iOS or Android user buy the PlayBook. However, I'm guessing that I'm not too far from the thinking in the RIM

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Published on Wireless Week (<http://www.wirelessweek.com>)

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boardroom when I suggest that every BlackBerry user who is interested in a tablet would be well-served by this device. This is a high-quality tablet with a lot to offer a self-described CrackBerry addict.

Remember: This is not (just) a media tablet.

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