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Section: Life & Leisure

Nice work, V2
Digital life

John Davidson

Working from home is a breeze - even for Mac users.

How the world has changed since we were last here, discussing the ultra-slim, ultra-useful portable display from the Australian start-up Espresso.

Perhaps you will recall from last time (which does feel like a lifetime ago, so no one would blame you if you don't remember) that the Espresso display is a computer screen that plugs into your laptop, PC or even some phones to give you a much-needed second screen that boosts your productivity like nothing else. (Or plugs into a games console such as an Xbox to boost your productivity in the opposite - ie unproductive - direction.)

Last time we reviewed the Espresso, in February 2020, it was all about how the screen can change the way you work when you're travelling. This time, it's all about working from home.

Last time, I tested the Espresso display in a hotel room in San Francisco, where it changed my life. This time, I tested the new "V2" version at my kitchen table, where it feels like I've spent half my life these past two years, going nowhere.

I don't need to tell you what's changed in the intervening years. Just about everything.

And that includes the Espresso display, which is now much, much better if you're attaching it to an Apple computer such as a MacBook Pro (which is what I'm writing to you from today) and quite a bit better than the original if you're using it from a Windows PC.

The Espresso, it turns out, isn't any ordinary display, working away in an unremarkable fashion.

It's touch sensitive, and if you plug it into a Mac you can use the same on-screen gestures you've been able to use on the screen of a Windows notebook since Windows 7 came out more than a decade ago (like tapping, dragging and pinching).

It's a huge leap forward for Mac users.

The Espresso V2 also has an in-built stylus digitiser, letting you use apps like Photoshop or OneNote with its optional-extra pen, the way you've been able to on devices such as Microsoft's Surface Pro and Surface Studio.

Getting the pen to work on a Windows computer is dead simple. You just plug the Espresso V2 into the PC, charge the pen, and start drawing or writing. Features like pen pressure - where lines change thickness and/or transparency depending on how hard you press - work smoothly out of the box.

(Or, at least, they mostly work. The Espresso V2 we've been using is technically a "pre-release" version, for which Windows driver software wasn't available at the time of testing. Sometimes when we touched the pen to the display, the cursor appeared on the PC's main display instead. It's a glitch that should be sorted when the Windows software comes out, hopefully in time for the release of the V2 in coming weeks.)

The touch-screen sensitivity (mostly) works out of the box on a Windows PC, too, which doesn't bring anything particularly new to Windows other than you now use the same touch gestures on both screens.

Getting the Espresso V2's touch and digitiser features to work on a Mac is a trickier proposition.

The MacOS operating system doesn't provide any support for touchscreens, which forced Espresso to use third-party software to get the touchscreen on its original display to work with Apple devices. But it wasn't terribly good.

For the V2, Espresso has been working on developing its own software to integrate touch controls into MacOS, and even though that software is only in its "pre-release" phase (or was, at the time of writing), it's already better than the original third-party offering, and it's already vastly better than what Apple offers.

Which is, of course, nothing.

On the Espresso V2 screen, I can reach up and scroll through web pages with my fingers, just as intended by nature (but not Apple). I can open and close things the way I do on most devices I own: by touching them with my fingers. It shouldn't be such a big deal - but it is, especially for someone who works across Windows and MacOS devices, and wants at least some consistency between them.

Some of the V2's touch features don't work properly on a Mac yet. Pinch zooming doesn't work in Finder, for instance, and lets me zoom out in the Edge browser but not back in again. But, like I said, the software is still in pre-release, so it's no biggie.

Another thing that has changed with the Espresso is the built-in speakers are much, much better on the V2. They're still not great, due to the fact they're not really a selling point for Espresso. But for those of us who have, say, an Intel NUC with no speakers, the fact you can at least hear on the V2 is a big improvement.

One thing that hasn't changed, however, is the screen resolution, which is still 1920 x 1080 pixels (aka full HD) even on the 15-inch version we've been testing. That works out as 147 pixels per inch (ppi), versus the 227 ppi screen on the MacBook Pro I have mine attached to. It looks a little hazy in comparison, to the point I find myself favouring the MacBook's screen for anything I'm actively working on, and relegating the Espresso to things I care less about, like my email inbox.

That's not a dealbreaker, either. Second screens are supposed to be for things of secondary importance, anyway. But given how appealing the V2 monitor is, and given the way it has many features that could make it more useful than your primary display, it's a shame Espresso hasn't included sharper resolution.

I, for one, would be willing to pay an arm and a leg for a portable 4K touch screen that would let me work with a pen in Photoshop.

Maybe such an upgrade is in the works. If it is, let's just hope it arrives sooner than the V2 did. A gap measured in years, sure. But one measured in lifetimes? I don't think I could go through that again.L&L

●iEspressoDisplay V2

Likes Very portable, good-looking display. Brings important new features to Macs. Pen digitiser is extremely handy.

Dislikes Screen could be sharper. MacOS software will take time to perfect.

Price \$749 for 15-inch model, \$669 for 13-inch, \$119 for pen, \$99 for must-have magnetic stand.

---- Index References ----

Company: APPLE INC.; MICROSOFT CORPORATION; Espresso Capital Partners; INTEL CORPORATION

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