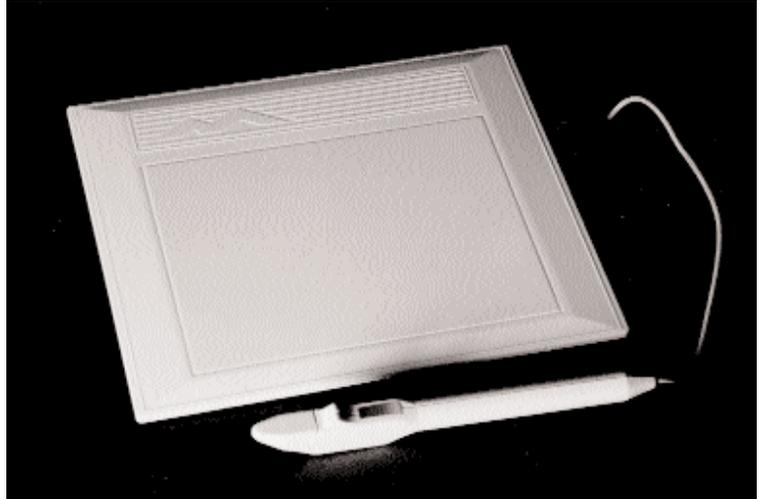


Tabby Graphics Tablet

Is Tabby a good mouser? Richard Hallas finds out



As the professionalism of RISC OS graphics packages increases, people using them for serious purposes are likely to wish for a finer degree of control over their painting than is possible with a mere mouse. Perhaps the time has come to buy a cat instead.

What is it?

Tabby is a very small graphics tablet: a flat, hard plastic rectangle over which you move a pen-like stylus (which is attached by a wire). There is a little clip-on plastic holder to retain the stylus when you're not using it, and the tablet has an angled base so that when you place it on a horizontal surface it is at a convenient angle for use. Tabby connects to the computer's serial port, and comes with a controller application on disc.

The stylus is a slightly curious beast: it's quite comfortable to hold (more so than the average pen,

actually), but has a piece of exposed metal onto which you're supposed to press your finger when using it. This is to reduce electrical noise and stop the pointer wandering on the screen. The tablet's active area (over which the stylus movements are registered) is 128 by 96mm in size, and the footprint of the whole tablet is much smaller than the average mouse mat.

In Use

Before you can use Tabby you must load the driver software onto the icon bar and then click on the icon to start it working, which does seem a little long-winded. Once this has been done, moving the stylus over the tablet moves the pointer on the screen. You don't actually have to touch the tablet: it will register the stylus up to about 5mm above the surface. The stylus has a button on the end, and tapping down on the tablet is equivalent to clicking Select

on the mouse.

The stylus button is a bit of a curious affair: rather than moving inwards, it has a slight rotary action, and when you click down, the end of the pen bends upwards a little. This felt to me a little like trying to break the lead in a pencil. Unfortunately there is no other button on the stylus, so to perform a Menu- or Adjust-click you have to resort either to the mouse or to the keyboard, as a mouse emulator is provided as part of the Tabby software. Actually, this emulator is the best one I've come across, as it lets you perform Select-, Menu- and Adjust-clicks with the three buttons above the cursor keys as well as letting you move the pointer.

There is no doubt that when you are drawing something in a graphics package, the mouse is a clumsy article which hinders your attempts to produce accurate shapes. A stylus is much better for the simple reason that you control it by finger action rather than wrist action. Indeed,

when using Tabby I found the ArtWorks freehand tool to be a lot more effective, as were the painting tools in the various bitmap graphics packages. However, Tabby's greatest drawback is that it is not pressure-sensitive: it's simply a pointing device. Half the reason for wanting a graphics tablet is to have the ability to alter the brush size etc. according to the amount of pressure you exert with the stylus.

I found that Tabby's software worked very well, but attempting to control the desktop using it was simply not practical, mainly because of the absence of proper Menu and Adjust buttons. Of course, tablets are also unlike mice because their coordinates are absolute: the pointer will appear on the screen in the

position equivalent to that of the stylus on the tablet. This is initially disconcerting, and also means that you need a much steadier hand to position the pointer finely than if you were using a mouse.

Conclusions

Tabby is certainly the cheapest way of getting into graphics tablets given the very high prices one normally associates with such items. Nevertheless, it's still far from cheap, and what you get for your money is of questionable usefulness. If you want to do a lot of freehand drawing it will doubtless make your life easier, but I remain unconvinced that buying Tabby is a

better option than saving up and getting a more professional, pressure-sensitive tablet. For serious use, the size is really too small to be practical, and I am

PRODUCT INFO

Product	Tabby
Supplier	First Computer Centre Unit 3 Amley Park Court Stanningley Road Leeds LS12 2AE Tel. 0532 319444 Fax 0532 319191
Price	£79.99 inc. VAT

forced to say that purchasers of this tablet



EDUCATION

sizable hard disc this card provides what must be one of the best methods of creating Replay movies. Eagle M2 comes comprehensively bundled with software: AudioWorks (see Risc User 7:4), Scanlight Plus, Take Two, ARMovie/ARPlayer and Eidos ESCaPE. The accompanying Eidos compression system ensures that the stored results don't eat up valuable hard disc space. Altogether the Eagle M2 is a jack of all trades, but is nevertheless extremely capable, fulfilling as it does a multiplicity of roles.

Not every school or home has the funds available to spend on all this excellent hardware. Don't despair if you can't create images yourself - there are many companies selling digitised images, and schools would do well to consider the products of The Professional Image Centre whose high definition images are based on a wide variety of National Curriculum related subjects, each disc holding a minimum of eight images. Their discs are well worth

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8 Bramley Road	Discs £6.95 inc p&p
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