

Digital Art Tools, my experience with different devices.

For almost the entirety of 2024, I have been using a wide range of digital drawing tools such as pen displays/tablets and portable devices such as iPad or Android tablet. I'm writing these notes to remind me about not wasting my money for the sake of novelties and expectations as well as for those who are interested in getting into digital art or simply want a different device.

I'm writing these notes from an illustration point of view, if I also included animation then I'd 100% go for PC + Medium/Large (16"-24") Pen Display combo because the timeline and UI takes A LOT of the active area and the project can get somewhat heavy.

These notes are SUPER LONG so for a quick summary about my go-to drawing set-up:

PC master race + Megalodon triple knob macropad + pen display of 13"-16" is absolute golden.

Samsung tablet is my go-to art companion.

I like my pen display around those sizes because not only does it occupy less desk space, but I also like to use it as a pen tablet during certain parts of my workflow. This way I keep the best of both worlds and I mitigate the workload I put on both my neck and lower back.

Table of Contents

Android tablet or iPad? Which option do I like the most?.....	3
What about Android? Are there any brands I recommend?.....	4
What's my gripe with the rest of the Android tablets?.....	4
Do I recommend these two options for some serious business?.....	5
How the hell did I use my Samsung Tab for an entire month without going bananas?..	6
PC connectivity, the saving grace.....	7
What makes a good pen tablet/pen display?.....	9
Introduction to the two bad bitches.....	10
Pen Tablets vs Pen Displays.....	11
Become hybrid, save your wallet and body.....	12
Which brands are good?.....	13
Wacom and how most consumers see this company.....	14
What's my art software of choice?.....	15
Can I draw with a mouse?.....	15
What about those super small pen tablets?.....	16

Android tablet or iPad? Which option do I like the most?

Android tablets are noticeably cheaper compared to iPad + Apple Pencil, regardless these two options are pretty much perfect for beginners who are looking to get into digital art due to its simplicity or those who simply want a portable/emergency device for drawing.

I've seen plenty of artists wanting to get one for themselves, often leaning more towards the iPad due to the sheer number of members into the "Procreate Cult" that makes it enticing to join.

iPad, my most disappointing purchase of 2024.

I got sold on the iPad+Procreate combo because of the whole idea that I could shrink my workstation to a more portable and slicker device.

What a fucking idiot I was, but why is that?

It mostly has to do with the Apple Pencil design, this is one of those pieces of tech that you'll either love it or hate it. Turns out I despised it, but why?

The weight is unbearable (Apple Pencil Gen 2 is 21g!), thin, the nib is blunt which reduces my visibility, the hard plastic nib being a terrible combo with the glossy screen (paperfeel screen protector was a must) and by far, the worst of all, I didn't have the hovering because I was using an iPad Air with the M1 chip. What worsens the situation is that, in a typical Apple fashion, this is your only option if you wish to keep the pressure sensitivity.

As for Procreate? It didn't live up to my expectations as I found it a bit lackluster in certain aspects that make my workflow so slow and janky. In fact, I found myself coming back to my beloved CSP (more on that later).

Probably the only thing I truly miss is the aspect ratio. If you ask me, 4:3 is absolute golden when it comes to arting with smaller screens and makes me wish digital art tool manufacturers would consider such a thing for their smaller pen displays.

What about Android? Are there any brands I recommend?

I can only recommend Samsung tablets. No, that's not because I have a bias or simp for the company. It just has to do with their implementation of the Wacom EMR technology that offers a bunch of benefits that I cannot pass on.

This means I can buy different pens that are generally cheaper (30-50 euros), run battery free and are lighter (8g-12g). There are some good options out there, such as the Wacom One Pen, the Lammy All-Star EMR, both versions of the Noris Digital and most recently, I believe there is the Dr. Grip Pen available too.

The Samsung FE models are enticing, but it seems like SuperDisplay is not fully compatible with those. According to some sources it only works if the resolution is set to lowest...? Be not afraid, as you can usually find insane discounts on their old flagship models.

Infinite Painter and CSP are two of my favorite drawing apps on Android and the ones that don't try to be a Procreate knockoff.

My complaints with the Samsung Tabs are that I wish it had an aspect ratio more akin to the iPad and have the colors be more accurate on their highest end tabs as I found that the vivid mode on my S9+ ramps up the saturation way too much.

What's my gripe with the rest of the Android tablets?

One big reason, fucking plagued with nothing but Apple Pencil knockoffs!

Sometimes a subpar pen performance, same blunt tip, same godforsaken double tap nobody likes, same battery shenanigans and by far the worst, they follow this moronic Apple move of not making the pens compatible with older devices. Hell, they don't even sell replacement nibs nor AliExpress Chinatown bothers at making bootlegs.

My literal nightmare. If I was sent to hell (which might probably happen) Satan himself would send one of his goth loli bitches to mock me and make me draw with an Apple Pencil knockoff on the most slippery screen known to humanity.

So do yourself a favor, go for a Samsung Tab and avoid these headaches.

Do I recommend these two options for some serious business?

It's doable with some modifications. However, **I still cannot recommend it.**

You see, both iPads and Android tablets are consumer products. Meaning **if I want to use them for longer periods of time (4-8 hours a day), I'd need to do some adjustments to improve the ergonomics and drawing experience.** Meaning at that point it just loses its elegance and the portability aspect.

Take the Apple Pencil for example. Yes, I'm fully aware that it is an absolute powerhouse that rivals Wacom's EMR tech. The problem is that its design alone made for the masses is what makes it difficult to use for long drawing sessions without getting fatigued.

My second biggest issue is that it **kinda falls apart when working on some heavy-duty projects.** To give an example I always work on a 4000x4000 sized canvas, my iPad Air M1 at one point ran low on RAM and my Samsung Tab S9+ struggled with the use of tools like liquify, transform, constant canvas navigation and such. Imagine if I even tried to make a short animation loop.

Although most of those issues can be due to CSP poor optimization, the issue of file management was also there.

My third biggest issue is the **lack of keyboard shortcuts.** Yes, I can connect my macropad but that'd suck on the battery more than a horny spooky anime girl like Hex Maniac does with a penis. To mitigate such an issue, I could have used an USB HUB, but at that point I'd rather call myself Victor Frankenstein.

Yes yes, I know about the touch. The thing is, I have a huge beef towards touch implementation on my drawing devices. Doesn't matter how good it is, either my palm or pinky will do some miss-clicks and being able to navigate around the canvas so easily further develops this bad habit of moving around like a dumbo, plus adds more stress onto my right hand from performing such gestures over and over again.

Last, but not least is the **battery degradation.** I just realized I despise this thing on devices I have to use intensively throughout the day and a swollen battery can be a real problem as it can damage the device due to its expansion and becomes easier to explode if pierced by accident.

How the hell did I use my Samsung Tab for an entire month without going bananas?

My Tab was sitting on a wooden board I got from AliExpress, I found it by putting on the search bar “Sketchboard Pro iPad” and there it was. This board was super important because not only was I able to tilt the tablet, but it also gave me a surface for my hand to rest on whenever I was close to the borders. I also thickened the pen with some epic one-dollar yarn I have. You can technically do the same on the iPad.

Now this leads us to the next topic.



This is the board I'm talking about, did some modding.

PC connectivity, the saving grace

My major two issues with these two devices get minimized because I can connect them to a PC and use them like a pen display. Both have different apps to its disposition so I'll be explaining what each side has to offer.

iPad side

· Sidecar:

In a typical Apple fashion of trying to vore you into their goddamn ecosystem, this is only compatible with Mac devices. I have 0 experience with this one, so I can't say much.

· Astropad Studio:

Works with both Windows and Mac, this is the worst option because not only is it subscription based but also you must buy one of their HDMI gadgets called "LunaDisplay" in order to properly display the image onto the iPad without black bars.

· Duet:

Works with both Windows and Mac, subscription based and I have no clue how it works as the in-app and website prices varied a lot from what I recall so I didn't bother with this one.

· SpaceDesk:

Probably one of the better options, it does support pressure sensitivity but it has a fair amount of delay which might be a dealbreaker to some.

Here are some videos that I found that showcase its use on the iPad

<https://youtu.be/XEcgRtxq6ec?si=xmpKdtCnVOuJ-Xw3&t=198>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@gar4unkle/video/7223260331995352322> (00:33)

https://www.tiktok.com/@gen_vi/video/7170949922726874369 (00:09, proof of pressure sensitivity)

Can't say if it's entirely free on the iPad side, but can I talk about it on the Android side.

Android side

· Samsung Second Screen:

It's completely free and only available for Windows, but this only works wireless which is a huge deal breaker if you have poor connection.

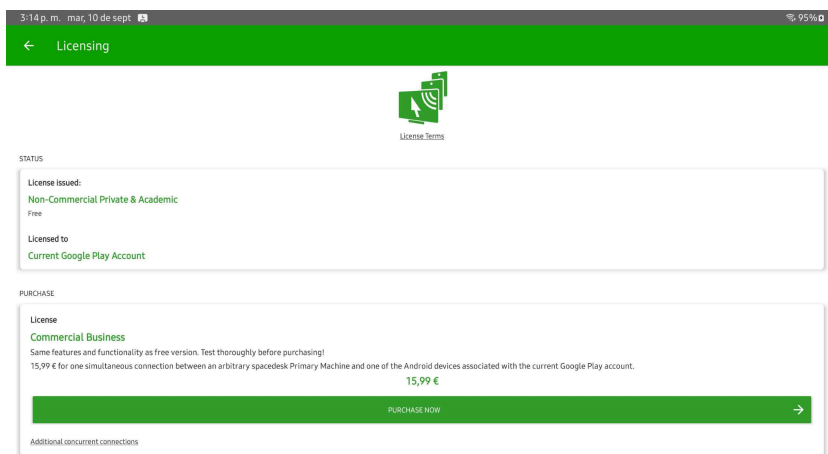
· SuperDisplay:

Only works for Windows, the best option for Android as it's a one-time payment and you can disable touch if you wish. The resolution is decent from what I can see, but it is important to keep in mind that the pen interactions have a bit of delay. I made a couple of videos showcasing this.

<https://imgur.com/a/INF14LV> (This also includes SpaceDesk)

· SpaceDesk:

Only works for Windows, it's similar to SuperDisplay in almost every way. Unfortunately you cannot disable touch here and the whole pricing aspect leaves me a bit confused as I don't know if it's free for a limited time or what?



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- Available December 2023 on Android
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- Expiry date is indicated in spacedesk Driver Console
- After expiry, new spacedesk Driver version is needed

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- Google Play Store (commercial and non-commercial)
- Microsoft Store (commercial and non-commercial)

(*) Businesses can use free non-commercial version as long as payment option is unavailable in the relevant App Store

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· Duet:

Works on both Windows and Mac, like I said this is subscription based.

What makes a good pen tablet/pen display?

All this discussion brings us here, dedicated digital drawing tools. What are my priorities when buying one?

· Pen performance:

I have seen a lot of confusion and marketing regarding this topic. I highly recommend checking on “TheSevenPens” blog because that user is way more knowledgeable at what makes a good pen performance. In fact, thanks to him, I learned that the pressure levels are just pure marketing.

<https://docs.thesevenpens.com/drawtab/core-features/pen-pressure>

· Pen design:

Arguably the most important thing, this is the pen you’ll be using day after day. I often lean towards slimmer pens because those are generally on my ideal weight (8g-12g) and can wrap them in yarn just so I can get a more comfy and squishy grip.

· Colors:

Personally I’m not someone who bothers too much about the colors presented on pen displays. In fact, if you ask me I’d rather do all the color correction on a dedicated monitor as those can offer a much better image quality for a lesser price and don’t have to deal with the slight dulling and AG sparkle that sometimes gets introduced with the etched glass on pen displays.

· Design:

The thicker the bezels/borders the better as its more free state for my hand to glide over without falling. This is a device I use for working, not for watching Netflix nor for aesthetics. Texture of the surface is also important as it gives some grip when drawing, generally I don’t pay much attention to this as newer pen tablets/pen displays provide just the right amount.

·Shortcut keys:

Some have them, some don’t. Some companies pack in the box their macropad and some others sell it separately. Personally I don’t need either, Megalodon Triple Knob Macropad or Tourbox are more than sufficient as they give more keys/customization to play with and better ergonomics.

Introduction to the two bad bitches

The pen tablet route is certainly the cheapest, more ergonomic and least complicated option of all the digital drawing tools out there. These devices are not for everyone, but if you manage to dominate them, you are pretty much golden for your entire career. These guys benefit a lot from the use of straight lines and if you have some issues with the hand-eye coordination, you can legit play some OSU to help you out.

On the other hand, we have pen displays, and these bad bitches excel at offering you a more natural drawing experience and more precision which is perfect for those coming from traditional. However, this comes at a cost, not only can they get crazy expensive but if you're not careful with your posture you might as well have no neck nor lower back to plap some booty.

Pen Tablets vs Pen Displays

The options I mentioned before have their pros and cons so I'll be listing them to make myself clear. These are based on my experiences.

Pen Tablet:

- Ergonomic king, get the femboy gaming posture.
- Cheaper, your brat will thank you.
- See the whole image, hand won't get in your way.
- Menuing is faster.
- Color accurate monitors are much cheaper.
- Better desk space to fit your keyboard and mouse.
- More wrist movements, your brain will subconsciously do this because there won't be a need to zoom in.
- Less precise movements, this makes curves harder to draw but it can be an advantage for certain parts.

Pen Display:

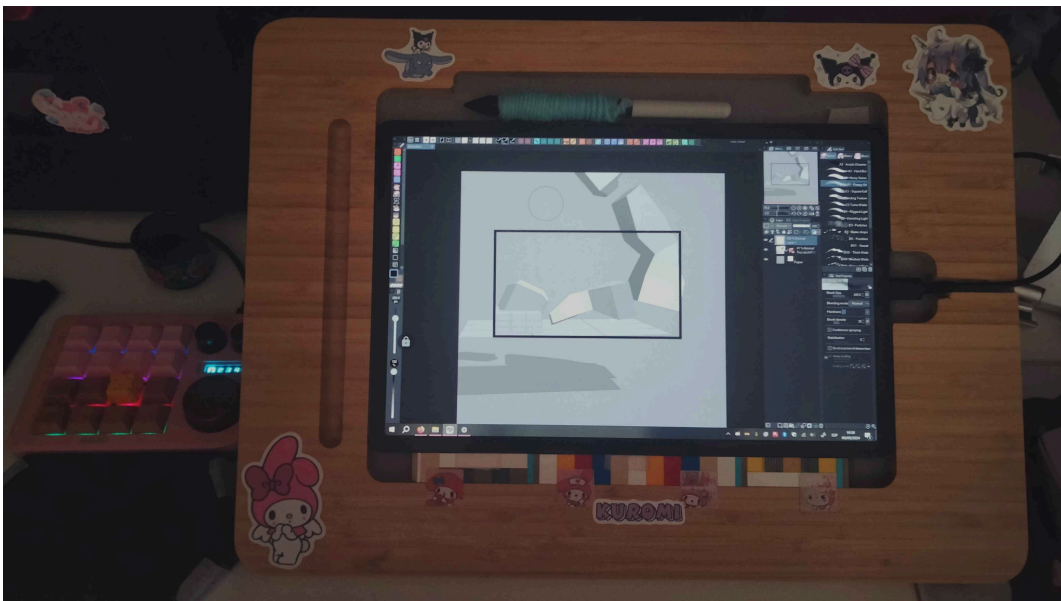
- Drawing experience is more natural; this makes transition to digital smooth for some.
- Crazy good at precise strokes.
- Prone to poor posture, become turtle and be called dog.
- Can be crazy expensive, your brat will get angry.
- Can take a lot of space, more arm fatigue and cluttered desk space.
- Hand gets in the way.

At first glance it might seem pen displays are literally the worst option, cost and ergonomics alone are huge deal breakers for some. So why the hell am I using a pen display then?

Become hybrid, save your wallet and body

After using a Xencelabs Pen Tab M for about a month it made me realize that many parts of my workflow can easily be done without a screen.

However, using exclusively one of the two options is super cringe. I want the best of both worlds and so far, a 13"-16" pen display is just like a Transformer. Turning off/duplicating/changing the monitor in the driver turns it into a pen tablet, it sits perfectly on my desk and allows me to comfortably use my Megalodon MacroPad Triple Knob (Truly and epic name for best boy).



How my set-up looks like, imagine if that was a 16" pen display.

I'll explain a bit on the general use I give to this device, but first I need to establish two acronyms.

"PT" for Pen Tablet Mode and **"PD"** for Pen Display Mode:

· **Rough sketch:**

PT, its lack of precision and not having my hand in my way allows me to focus on what matters, which is to establish an idea on the canvas.

· **Clean sketch (First pass):**

PT, it's crazy good at helping me to block-in the shapes and landmarks. Most of these are just straight lines, to which I can comfortably do without a screen.

· **Clean sketch (Second pass):**

PD, this part demands too much precision from my part.

· **Lineart:**

PD, although I can still do it with a PT because I work with a vector layer on CSP and my lineart is not as complex as the ones you usually see from manga.

· **Lineart fix:**

PT, doing the lineart on a vector layer allows me to use A LOT OF cheese. Most notably at modifying the thickness of lines and removing intersected lines.

· **Rendering:**

PD, there are certain shadow shapes, rim lights and so on that simply demand some level of precision from my part.

· **Special effects:**

PT, effects such as sweat, hair strands, “suspicious liquids”, speed lines and such can easily be done with a PT due to their chaotic nature.

· **Color fixing:**

PD, although if I had a much better monitor then this process can easily be done with a PT.

· **Lettering and exporting:**

PT, the ease at menuing, chaotic nature of onomatopoeia and have a broad view of the image helps a lot here.

In conclusion, adjusting my workflow this way allows me to keep a decent posture, be effective and save some money.

Which brands are good?

There are many, like A LOT of brands on the market. Wacom, XP-Pen, Huion, Xencelabs, Ugee, Veikk, Bosto, Parblo and who knows what else.

I don't care about what the Youtubers and influencers say, I'd simply stay away from XP-Pen and Huion's old models due to the stupid high IAF which hinders the pen performance. Only the models with X3 Pro chip (XP-Pen) or Pen Tech 4.0 (Huion) are worth considering.

Xencelabs has this ongoing rumor that they have some Wacom ex-employees, but what kind though? Janitors? Do they have Wacom EMR engineers or its pure

marketing? Regardless, I had their Pen Tab model, and I was pleased by the build quality. Still, I have my doubts on the whole “WACOM KILLER” tag that many like to point out and its longevity.

What about the rest? Only Ugee is somewhat reputable, and their prices are good for beginners. Aside from that I'd stay away from the last 3 mentioned.

Wacom and how most consumers see this company

This brings us to the King of EMR tech.

Wacom is no stranger to EMR tech, although some other companies, most notably XP-PEN and Huion, are just getting closer and closer to achieve the same level of quality of Wacom's EMR tech. No more battery powered pens, no more insanely high IAF, less and less jitter and wobble. Not to mention that their screens are now being properly calibrated.

Wacom's design on their newer pen displays is rather questionable, they try to keep reinventing the wheel with the positioning of their shortcut keys, the fans are still there (although, these might be the cause of its longevity because it dissipates the heat much better...?) and bezel reduction is a bit too much.

Their newest Cintiq Pro lineup is just studio level hardware that has no business with regular artists like me, meanwhile their entry level hardware becomes questionably priced when the current competition is taken into account.

So that makes me wonder, what is Wacom planning for middle ground artists like me? Artists who demand high quality and long-lasting products. Will there be a normal Cintiq that competes with what's available on the market?

If you ask me, a Wacom product is worth considering once you have taken digital art quite seriously and even more so if you have the opportunity of finding one on sale or from second hand in amazing condition.

What's my art software of choice?

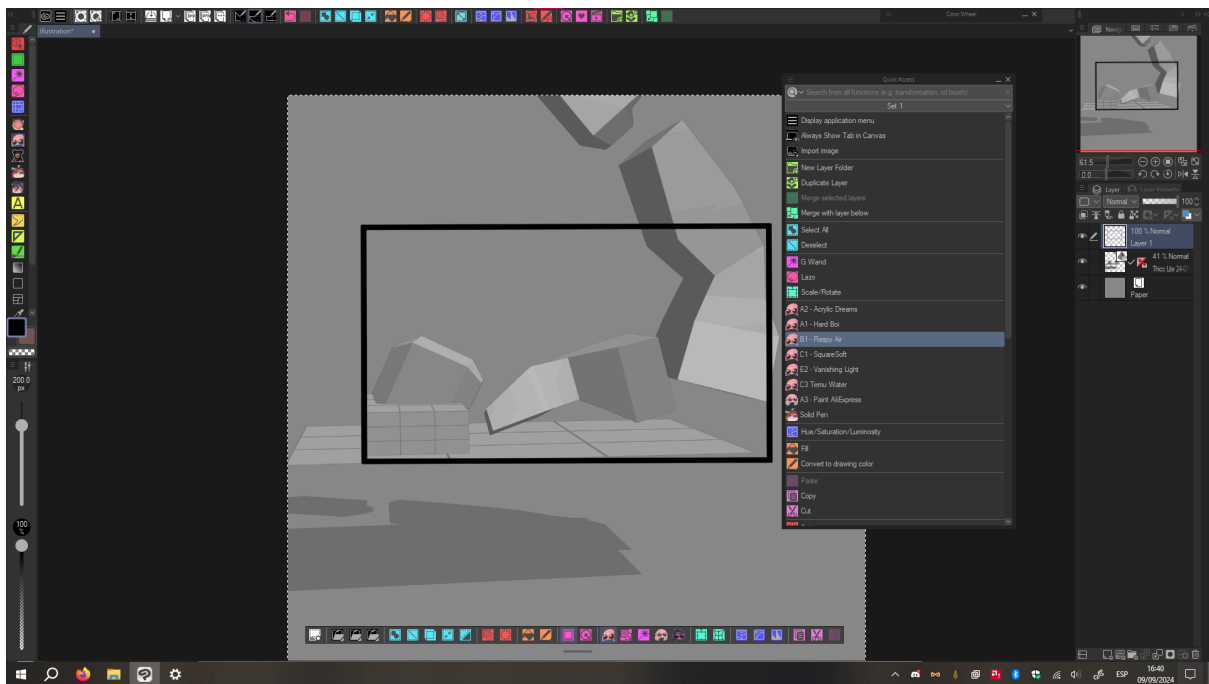
Clip Studio Paint, I cannot stress enough how much I love this program.

Certainly, it is difficult to get into it. In fact, if you're a beginner I highly recommend using simpler programs instead such as PaintToolSAI. This way you can get used to the PC interface and the best use of simple tools and brushes.

Why do I even like CSP?

The assets store, brush engine, being able to port 3D models, vector layers, quick access menu, commands bar, selection menu bar, macros, layer management, folder's interaction with the layer tools, UI customization, icon customization and I can go on and on.

My only complaint would be the poor optimization, that's for sure and I really don't mind the subscription service because I legit just pay 3 bucks per month as I always get the annual subscription on sale.



Example of what my CSP UI looks like

Can I draw with a mouse?

My dear and unknown reader, if you want to speedrun a hand injury be my guest.

What about those super small pen tablets?

Similar issue to drawing with a mouse, but slightly worse. Not only does your wrist have to keep up with managing the pressure but also the movements, this quickly becomes an issue for long term usage.

The size difference between a small pen tablet and the monitor can quickly become so stupidly different that keeping control of your strokes becomes a challenge.

I know the price might be enticing for some, but these devices are a literal speedrun for carpal%.