Review: MacAlly iceCad

by [Eric Schwarz](#) on September 27, 2004

When Apple introduced Inkwell with Jaguar, Mac users everywhere thought it was cool, except, most people couldn't use it. The main reason for this was that graphics tablets were priced out of most consumers reach. Also, there was not much of a need for consumers or even casual graphic designers to have a dedicated tablet, much less enter text with it.
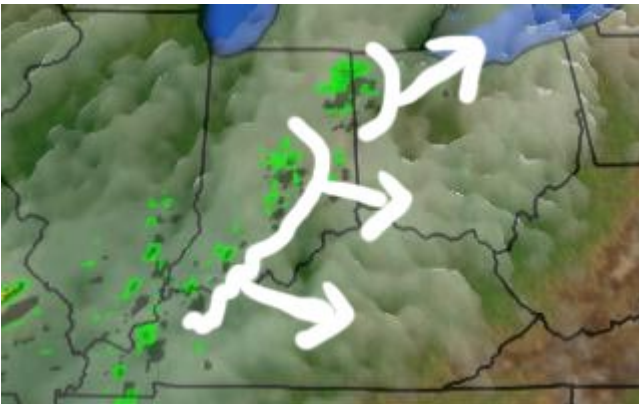
MacAlly hopes to change the trend, at least for some users. With their [iceCad](#) tablet, priced at a reasonable $49, almost anyone can use it.

MacAlly iceCad

A sketch of an iBook with an iceCad

You can even telestrate things!

The iceCad is a relatively small graphics tablet with a usable area of about 3″ x 2″. Although this might not sound like much, it is still useful for text input (Inkwell), graphics editing, and doodling. The tablet connects via USB and includes a CD for configuration of many aspects of the tablet and pen.

The pen is decently-sized (not those tiny little sticks that Palm handhelds use), and features two buttons, which can be programmed to act like mouse buttons. The pen requires a battery (an included AAAA), which is not too hard to find for replacement, but not the most common either. Estimated battery life is 6 months, if the tablet is used for 8 hours a day.

Also worth noting is that the tablet includes a replacement "surface", in case the user wants a rougher surface for the pen. Once the original is removed, it cannot be reused. It would have been nice if MacAlly included a few spares.

The tablet itself boasts 1024 different pressure levels, although we noticed about 15. An LED in the upper corner of the writing area indicates the status: red means no contact or signal, green means a signal (you can use the pen hovering over the tablet), and amber means that you are physically writing on the tablet.

Drawing in Photoshop Elements was relatively painless (the tablet basically takes the place of a mouse for cursor control), and one of the buttons comes preset to act as an eraser, allowing you to focus on your work instead of switching tools. Drawing was always smooth, although running out of space was the only drawback.

The iceCad used with Inkwell is a decent combination. Just like Graffiti on my Palm Vx, writing took some time to get used to. What makes Inkwell different is that it tries to decipher your writing, rather than requiring you to write its way. I've only tried it in some applications, but it works fairly well.

A useful feature and an annoyance is that after every word that you write, a space is automatically written. This is good for most uses, but if you run out of space mid-word, you have to start over. Another useful feature is known as symbols. Apple included some extra "characters" into the Inkwell alphabet to allow easy access to certain commands and keystrokes. A reference for these can be found in the Ink preference pane.

Overall, the iceCad is a solid performer, with very few drawbacks. With a price of at least half of many other tablets, it will allow casual users to edit graphics better, and allow anyone to actually use Inkwell. The iceCad is also small enough to fit on any desk, no matter how crowded the workspace.

The One-Sentence Verdict™

The iceCad is a great alternative to more expensive tablets for many users.

Pros: Cheaper than many other tablets, useful configuration utility, matches most Macs

Cons: AAAA battery not the most common, somewhat small area

The Facts

Product: iceCad
Company: MacAlly
Platform: Mac/Win
Price: $49 (list)

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