



DJ CONTROLLER & SOFTWARE BUYER'S GUIDE 2015

The ultimate guide to picking the right digital DJ controller and software while avoiding all the common pitfalls



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A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

DJ CONTROLLERS HAVE REVOLUTIONISED THE world of DJing. These clever little boxes control two or more virtual “decks”, and allow you to mix between those sources. They usually connect to a laptop computer that runs DJ software and also holds the library of music being played.

Nearly always nowadays, DJ controllers also contain the audio circuitry needed for you to DJ properly - as a minimum, this means a headphones output (for you to prepare your music “in private”) and a master output (for your audience’s speakers).

Put the software on your laptop, connect the controller, plug in some speakers and headphones, and you’ve got a powerful DJing system that can do things DJs just 10 years ago would have struggled to even imagine. And as the DJ controller market has matured, the units have become more powerful, more stable and cheaper.

This is great, but one thing that can’t be said about DJing since digital is that it’s got simpler. Digital DJing has, alongside all the advantages it brings, made things somewhat tricky for the newcomer.

TO START WITH THERE ARE MANY DOZENS OF DJ controllers to choose from. And there are lots of different flavours of DJ software. As if that weren’t confusing enough, many controllers work with more than one type of software. Then there’s the computer platform (Mac? PC? iPad?).

Once you start seriously considering making a purchase, especially if you’re coming to digital having used analogue gear in the past, you’re also going to start seeing alternatives to all-in-one DJ controllers on sale - and no doubt you’re going to wonder whether you wouldn’t be best going for one of those systems instead.

For instance, there are traditional record decks and mixers, which can be coupled with special vinyl and interfaces to make “digital vinyl systems” (“DVS”). There are “modular” systems, where you build up your perfect DJ set-up from lots of smaller devices that plug together. There are systems that have the ability to play music from CDs or USB devices as well as your laptop or iDevice.

And then there’s another question: “Do I really need a DJ controller at all?” Many DJs (including myself) starting their digital journey just from a laptop running DJ software. Nowadays, with some excellent iPad, iPhone

and Android software that uses the touchscreen for control, ultra-minimal DJing from just a computing device with no additional hardware is a possibility. Should it be your route too?

THAT’S WHAT THIS GUIDE EXISTS TO HELP YOU with. If you’re just starting out down the digital DJ route, and you’re considering buying your first DJ controller, this guide is here to help you find your answers to all of these questions, and to put you in a much stronger position to buy wisely.

Brought to you by [Digital DJ Tips](#), one of the biggest DJ tech websites in the world, in conjunction with [UDG Gear](#), it draws on our many years of experience helping new DJs take their first steps, and so we are pretty sure you’ll find it useful in answering lots of the questions you’re no doubt asking yourself, and to help you clear some of the confusion around buying digital DJing gear.

We’re extremely excited about how digital has changed DJing. It’s brought the ability to DJ to the hands of practically any music fan who is motivated to learn. No longer do you need to invest many thousands in bulky equipment that’s hard to move around and difficult to master; nowadays, you can spend a fraction of what it cost to get yourself set up 10 or 15 years ago, and using easy-to-learn software, get yourself at least good enough to play your first “public” show in a fraction of the time it used to take.

NOW, OF COURSE, THERE’S A WORLD OF difference between mastering all the tools that digital offers to you and actually becoming a good DJ! The effort that goes into doing that - developing the ability to read a crowd properly, learning to sensitively move from one track to the next, complementing rather than upsetting the flow of the music, developing deep musical knowledge - is a lifetime’s work, as it always has been.

But the beauty of digital is that it lets anyone have a go. Who’s to say you might not be the next big DJ superstar? There’s only one way to find out...

HAPPY DIGITAL DJING!

- Phil Morse
Digital DJ Tips Editor
November 2014

2015 UPDATE

EVERY YEAR SEES NEW TRENDS IN ALL AREAS OF technology, and digital DJing is no different. But whereas the last few years have seemed like the whole digital DJ industry was turning into something akin to the mobile phone world (product shelf lives getting shorter and shorter), thankfully the madness seems to have calmed down and manufacturers are now releasing fewer new products, but better ones.

The big thing this year is on-board screens. Both the Numark NV and the Traktor Kontrol S8 have them, and they're designed to give you essential feedback from your DJ program so you don't need to look at the laptop as much. You may even choose to tuck your laptop out of sight, thus removing a real barrier between you and your audience. Whether they catch on or not is another thing, but one thing's for sure: Everyone else will be scrambling to catch up. You certainly don't need on-board screens for successful digital DJing; but they are an intriguing addition, nonetheless. And with Pioneer launching the software-friendly XDJ-1000, a CD-less media player and controller designed for the pro DJ booth and itself

featuring a gorgeous (touch enabled) screen, things are getting *really* interesting.

Meanwhile, Native Instruments has trodden where most others have feared to, namely by releasing an "all-in-one" controller with - gasp - no jogwheels. (Novation's Twitch was the first, but didn't take off as the company might have wished.) Sacrilege to some maybe, but to others "spinnies" are unnecessary on modern DJ controllers, a ghost from the past that take up valuable real estate on your device's panel that could be given over to something else. In the case of the Traktor Kontrol S8, that something else is control over Traktor's Remix Decks...

THE REMIX DECKS ARE A BOLD ATTEMPT TO MELD the worlds of clip-based production (think Ableton Live) and DJing. With the current aspiration among young DJs being production as much as just playing other people's tunes, it's certainly in the right ballpark, but whether the very immediate art of DJing and the ponderous perfectionism of production can ever truly be melded into something new, only time will tell.

Meanwhile, Serato has come at this whole idea of breaking the linear progression of a track from A to B in an entirely different way. Its new Flip feature allows DJs to automate cue point actions; a technical way of saying "make stuff in the track happen in a different order". Maybe more useful than Traktor's Remix Decks to the DJ who has no wish to produce, this function lets you extend intros and breaks, make your own edits, and shoehorn hard-to-mix tracks into your beatmatched DJ sets with beguiling ease. Again, whether it'll catch on or not remains to be seen, but all of the above features represent genuine attempts to innovate and move DJing firmly beyond its (still) CDJ-dominated present.



ON-BOARD SCREENS ARE THE FLAVOUR OF 2015, PROMISING TO ALLOW THE DJ TO TUCK HIS OR HER LAPTOP AWAY AND BE MORE ENGAGED WITH THE AUDIENCE.

THE FACT THAT THESE THREE BRANDS ARE battling it away for the centre-ground of modern digital DJing makes it a fascinating world to watch. Traktor / Native Instruments, doing everything in-house and with its music production roots, is championing the DJ/producer in one corner, but Traktor is increasingly only viable on its own hardware platform. Serato, meanwhile, is mopping up the demand from third-party controller manufacturers for accessible, fun, yet high performance DJ software, and has regained a large market share in doing so. And Pioneer is finally attempting to bring all of the benefits of digital DJing back into the pro DJ booth at the same time.

Meanwhile, the elephant in the room - albeit a palm-sized one - is tablet and smartphone DJing. DJs are realising that as a backup, as a practice set-up, or even as a main DJing system, an iPad or even iPhone can provide all the power of a laptop set-up without the extra complication. This year has seen not only Algoriddim's djay 2 and Traktor DJ (the biggest two apps) consolidate

their position at the top of the market, but also djay become available on Android. Alongside Mixvibes' Cross DJ For Android, that makes it a grand total of two decent DJ apps for that platform. While it's only a start, we are predicting it will lead to true all-in-one DJ systems running such software on DJ controllers custom-built with Android screens and computers right inside them: No computer required. That would be a truly exciting development.

FINALLY, AS IS THE CASE IN ANY MARKET THAT'S growing up, we are seeing consolidation. As I mentioned, there are fewer releases, and brands are either returning to core competencies (American DJ, best known for its lighting, dabbled in DJ controllers but I don't think we'll see any more from it), or seemingly disappearing altogether (signs from the Vestax camp are ominous, as I write). As the market consolidates further, it'll only be those who can afford decent research and development and who have the marketing and distribution channels in place to get their products accepted and in stores more and more efficiently that'll survive.

All of this may not be necessarily a bad thing for consumers. If two or three "digital standards" slowly dominate the market place in the way they dominated DJing pre-digital, at least it would return our gaze collectively to what really matters here: Performing the music to the best of our abilities for the people in front of us, right here, right now!



THE TRAKTOR KONTROL S8 USES THE SPACE VACATED BY THE JOGWHEELS TO PUT HANDS-ON CONTROL OF THE REMIX DECKS CENTRESTAGE.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO BE USED ALONGSIDE the [DJ Controllers: The Ultimate Buyer's Guide 2015](#) pages on the Digital DJ Tips website. There, you'll find practically every DJ controller, modular DJ controller and digital DJ mixer listed in one guide, with links to our in-depth reviews and videos to help you in your buying decision. (Here, we just concentrate on controllers.)

The summaries here in this guide will help you to make sense of the masses of information we provide for you

Should you just want to buy something right away without doing all the research, we offer you our top recommendations for 2015 here too.

in those reviews. We suggest you immerse yourself in all the information in this guide first, in order to make sure you're aware of your options, and then browse the online guide next, referring back here whenever you find something that you need clarification about. Should you just want to buy something right away without doing all the research, we offer you our top recommendations for 2015 here too.

FINALLY, A COUPLE OF TIPS ON HOW TO approach choosing a DJ controller. Practically all DJ controllers nowadays are good enough for you to learn to DJ on. Also, there is no "best" DJ controller. When buying, it's best to trust your instinct a little; as a DJ, you're going to be using the controller you buy a hell of a lot, at least if you want to get good at this game. If you think a DJ controller looks too small, or too big, or is too heavy or too plasticky, or you don't like the shape of it, or you think it makes you look like you're playing with a toy - act on that instinct. That stuff matters! So choose something that not only gets good reviews, but that you feel you'd be comfortable using. Because remember, hopefully you'll end up using it not only in your bedroom, but in front of other people too.

WHERE DJ CONTROLLERS FIT IN WITH THE WORLD OF DJ GEAR

BACK IN THE “OLD DAYS” IT WAS ALL SO SIMPLE.

You had two turntables, and a “mixer”, which was a box that sat between them and made them blend together. That was it. Boy, how it's changed! Nowadays we are bombarded with weird, wonderful and ever-changing DJ technology, each innovation promising to wipe the floor with the last, each manufacturer refreshing, revamping and relaunching its gear every year, shouting loud about the new features as if they're the only thing worth knowing about.

And while DJ controllers are far and away the most popular way to digital DJ today (the vast majority of

our audience at Digital DJ Tips uses an all-in-one DJ controller and a laptop to DJ with), they're not the only choice - far from it. And while this guide concentrates on what we call all-in-one DJ controllers - single boxes with two “decks” and a mixer, plus audio circuitry and a way to connect a computer of some kind up - you need to be sure that this is the right route for you in the first place. So let's take a second to look at types of alternative DJing “systems”:



A TECHNICS SL1200 TURNTABLE: ONE OF THE ORIGINAL TOOLS OF DJING.

> “TWO DECKS AND A MIXER”

THE CLASSIC DJ SET-UP: TWO TURNTABLES

(usually Technics SL1210s) and a DJ mixer (usually a Pioneer DJM-something). I saved for years to be able to afford just such a set-up as a twentysomething DJ. There are still pockets of DJs who use such gear, and there are scenes where it's a badge of honour to perform from real vinyl on a system like this. Trouble is, most music isn't even pressed on vinyl nowadays, it's expensive, these systems are bulky, and to perform in this way is really to ignore any of the changes that have happened in DJing since, well, the CDJ...

Nowadays we are bombarded with weird, wonderful and ever-changing DJ technology... manufacturers refreshing, revamping and relaunching their gear every year...



> “TWO CDJS AND A MIXER”

A MODERN PIONEER CDJ SET-UP. CDJ DJING HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE THE FIRST UNITS APPEARED 15 YEARS BACK.

A “CDJ” IS A CD PLAYER DESIGNED FOR DJS, WHERE once you’ve slid the CD in, a platter lets you control it as if it were a record. Indeed, some early CDJs even had “real vinyl” on them, a tradition carried on today by Denon with its SC3900 model. Most, though, are “fixed platter”, which means the round bit doesn’t actually turn when the music is playing, but nonetheless can be used to control the music when touched.

CDJs were the first time vinyl DJs saw a need to shout “it’s not real DJing!” (something they’ve been doing regularly ever since...), but nonetheless they caught on really quickly, and are still dominant in much of the world as the standard way to DJ. As it’s easy to burn your own CDs from music bought online, they free up DJs from

having to buy physical vinyl, meaning all the advantages of digital music discovery are brought to the table.

TODAY’S CDJS ARE BECOMING MORE AND MORE complex, being able to play from USBs as well as playing audio CDs, and Pioneer’s latest models even have the “sync” button so hated by vinyl DJs (and many CDJ DJs, actually. “It’s not real DJing!” goes the cry...). So why doesn’t everyone use them? Partly because they are still limited against even some basic controllers and software in what you can do with them, but mainly the simple reason that they’ll cost you a hell of a lot more to buy. Pioneer’s new XDJ-1000 players - software-friendly and without CD slots at all - may change all of this, so watch this space!



A DVS SYSTEM COMPRISES CONTROL VINYL OR CDS, AND AN AUDIO INTERFACE, OFTEN CALLED A “BREAKOUT BOX”, THAT HELPS TURN A STANDARD VINYL OR CDJ SET-UP INTO A DIGITAL DJ SYSTEM.

A DVS SYSTEM CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS A WAY of “adapting” either of the above set-ups to turn it into a laptop DJ system. Here’s how it works. You use special control vinyl or CDs, that instead of containing music, contain computer code (shrill, screechy and very much

> DIGITAL VINYL SYSTEMS (DVS)

not music when you accidentally actually do listen to it). You plug a special box, often referred to as an audio interface or “breakout box”, in-between your record decks or CD players and your mixer and speakers, and connect this box to your laptop, which runs DJ software. The laptop intercepts the computer signal from the control vinyl or CDs, and sends music from your hard drive to the mixer and speakers, following your every manipulation of it on your decks or CDJs. You get to use your usual gear, but you get all the advantages of using DJ software at the same time.

Advantages? Well, you can use your existing gear (or the club’s) and still have many of the benefits of using DJ software. It “looks” like “real” DJing (even though you can apply all the tricks of digital nonetheless). It can feel more natural to DJs coming at digital having used analogue in the past. Disadvantages? Tricky to set up, can feel like a “halfway house” between analogue and digital, and expensive if you have to buy the analogue gear first and then add on a DVS system to make it “digital”.



AN EXAMPLE OF A MODULAR DJ CONTROLLER (THE ALLEN & HEATH K1), DESIGNED TO DO A CERTAIN ASPECT OF WHAT AN ALL-IN-ONE CONTROLLER CAN DO.

REMEMBER HI-FI SEPARATES, WHERE YOU'D HAVE a tuner, an amplifier, a CD player, a record deck and a tape recorder, instead of just buying one box with the lot in? That's how a modular DJ system is. Just like the original DJ gear ("two decks and a mixer"), a modular digital set-up is where instead of all being in one box, the parts are separate. You get to pick and choose the items

> MODULAR DJ SYSTEMS

that make most sense to you and to your DJing style, dependent on size, weight, functionality and so on.

Do you only need one "deck" and a load of buttons? Then buy a pad controller, a single "deck" controller and maybe a small software mixer. Really interested in triggering samples? Buy a "button" controller designed to unlock that part of your DJ controller. Got a DVS system (see above) but want extra control over parts of your software that your record decks and control vinyl can't give you? Grab a small device that unlocks that stuff for you and wire it in alongside the DVS.

Modular systems let experts "build to measure", but essentially, a digital modular system does what an equivalent all-in-one does (should such an all-in-one exist)... but simply split across more than one box.

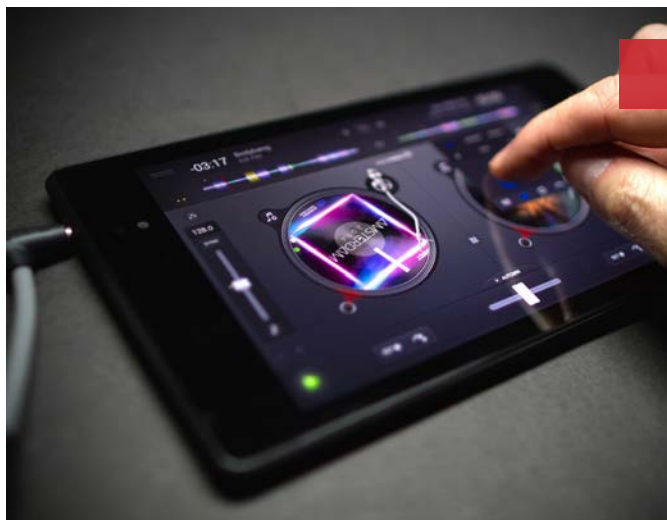
> LAPTOP-ONLY DJ SYSTEMS

REALLY, DJ CONTROLLERS ARE JUST AN alternative to using the mouse and keyboard to control your DJ software. Sure, they're a great fun alternative, but most DJ software can also be 100% controlled without anything else plugged into the computer at all. And some DJs do just that.

Whether because they're just starting out and can't afford a DJ controller, or they want to travel light, or they just love the whole minimal thing, for these DJs, a controller is one box too many! I actually started out like this, because in 2005 I couldn't find a Midi controller ("Midi" is the technical word for how digital music devices talk to each other and to computers) that was good

enough for my needs, So I hacked and adapted how all the keys of my computer controlled my software... and DJed like that for several years!

NOW, THE SMART COOKIES WILL REMEMBER THAT when I was describing what DJ controllers do earlier, I said that they often contain audio circuitry to let you hear stuff in your headphones as well as through the speakers. If you go down this route you're still going to need some kind of audio device to turn your laptop's one audio output into two - but nonetheless, this is still just about as minimal as digital DJing gets. Apart from, that is...



> IOS / ANDROID APPS

DJING ON DJAY FOR ANDROID, ONE OF TWO DECENT DJ APPS FOR THE PLATFORM, WHICH OUGHT TO ONLY GET BETTER WITH ANDROID L.

BEING ABLE TO DJ ON YOUR IPAD, ANDROID TABLET

or even smartphone is now a reality. Not only is it a reality, but it's incredibly addictive and a lot of fun. It's truly amazing what you can do on such devices nowadays, and with Algoriddim's djay app claiming 15 million downloads recently, and other apps like Traktor DJ also

making considerable inroads, tablet and smartphone DJing isn't going away any time soon!

Really this is just a new take on the laptop-only DJ system described previously, and it's actually coming full circle, with a number of DJ controllers now able to work with the iPad and a couple with Android, so you can use your iOS or Android device as a direct replacement for a laptop in such set-ups. Expect this to only get bigger over time. Like with laptop-only systems you might want to consider a compatible audio interface for that all-important separate headphone output here.

By the way, Android is really new to this: In last year's guide we couldn't recommend any Android systems, but now, there's djay from Algoriddim and Mixvibes Cross for Android available. Android L adds multi-channel audio to the platform chalking off another obstacle in the way of it someday soon catching up with iOS when it comes to DJing. After all, there are many more Android devices out there than iOS devices...

PIONEER'S XDJ-AERO LETS YOU PLAY MUSIC FROM USB OR WIRELESSLY FROM OTHER DEVICES, NO LAPTOP REQUIRED.



> CD/USB/MASS STORAGE "ALL IN ONE" SYSTEMS

THIS TYPE OF GEAR LOOKS MUCH MORE LIKE THE all-in-one DJ controllers that the vast majority of digital DJs use, but with a few differences. Such units may have CD slots on the front. They may have USB slots on the top, so you can plug in USB "sticks" and play music from those too. They may also have standard inputs, so you could plug record decks or CD players into them,

as well. And many also work just fine with laptops and DJ software. Some may play nicely with your iPad or iPhone - some may even communicate wirelessly with such devices to grab music from them. But what they all share in common is the ability to be used without a laptop in some way, shape or form should you wish to.

WHY YOU'LL PROBABLY WANT A DJ CONTROLLER (PLUS SOME DRAWBACKS)

I'M PREPARED TO SAY THAT WHEN ALL'S SAID AND done, you'll probably want a DJ controller (and by that, just to reiterate I mean an "all in one" DJ controller with "decks", "mixer" and "audio interface" built in). Here are the assumptions I'm making about you to make that call on your behalf.

I'm guessing the idea of playing on all-vinyl or all-CD systems is not of appeal to you - mainly because you're reading a digital DJ guide! Likewise, while adding a DVS system to a vinyl or CD system to make it digital will give you an awesome club-like set-up, I'm guessing the commitment, complexity and huge ticket price of such a system will rule this option out for you too.

DJing from just a laptop would be tricky and look rubbish, you're thinking, and probably wouldn't even feel like DJing. You're right. Laptop-only DJing is great as a backup or for those of us who learned on "real gear", so can compensate for its weirdness, but it's no way to start your DJing career. This is also why so many manufacturers are rushing out controllers that work with iOS devices: The touchscreen is not so hot for truly immersive DJing, even with the best DJ apps.

Actually, out of all the "alternative" system types we discussed, the one most likely to appeal to you instead of a "normal" DJ controller is the type of controller that can work without your laptop too if you want it to, by using USBs, CDs and even music stored wirelessly on iDevices etc.

They're often very appealing to mobile DJs, who find them easier when it comes to playing requests from CDs or USB sticks, or who want to combine an existing analogue music collection with laptop DJing (as it's easy to switch between the two mid-set).

LATER ON IN THE GUIDE WE ROUND UP THE BEST of these for this reason - but I think you'll still most likely decide that standard DJ controllers are the way to go, coming back to cost efficiency, portability, reliability and just thinking that digital is, well, cool (I agree completely).

But just so we go into this with our eyes wide open, let's look at some of the disadvantages to using DJ controllers.

Depending on where you are in the world, you may find there is considerable resistance to using DJ controllers in your local venues. While in some parts of the world DJs are literally given a table to set up their own gear on (so you can bring what you want), often bars, lounges and clubs have gear they've invested heavily in, and rightly or wrongly the managers of such venues can't understand why "these new DJs" are insisting on bringing small, cheap-looking plastic boxes to DJ on when they have provided pro-grade gear to use (this is why DVS systems certainly have a niche; there isn't anywhere near as much of a stigma attached to using DVS in such venues as there is DJ controllers).

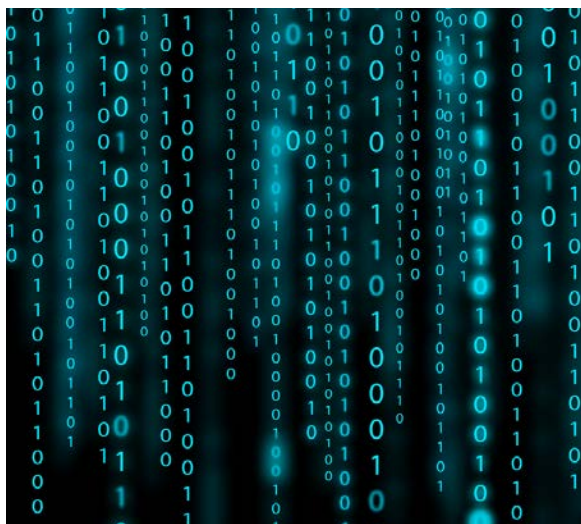
Even when you have club management that's happy for you to bring a DJ controller to play from (at least, in theory), there's the issue of finding the space to set up. That's why some DJs often settle on more minimal, modular systems; having maybe a single slimline controller and a laptop is more likely to be tolerated in cramped DJ booths than a big all-in-one, and as long as you're comfortable with using such gear - and many experienced DJs are - this can be a great alternative. (Often, DJs combine this with some kind of DVS control for a truly powerful digital set-up, that still uses the club's gear too.)

ANOTHER DISADVANTAGE OF DIGITAL SYSTEMS is the chance of a laptop crash or failure, as this means curtains for the music; this is why digital DJs should always have a backup plan in place, even if it's just a small CD wallet or a mix on your iPod that you can switch in should your laptop fail and need a reboot for some reason.

But all that said, I bet you still want a DJ controller, yeah? I don't blame you. So now we're definitely all on the same page, let's start to make sense of what's out there.

WHY SOFTWARE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE

It's the DJ software that watches your every move on the mixing controls, not only the volumes but all the other controls and then alters the audio to your exact instructions.



WE'VE ALREADY LEARNED THAT THE HARDWARE is only really there to do some clever stuff with the audio, and to give you cool, purpose-made controls that make your DJ software easier to use. It's the DJ software that actually does all the clever bits.

It's the DJ software that loads the music from your hard drive into your computer's memory for playback. It's the DJ software that monitors what you're doing on the so-called "transport" controls (play, pause, forward, back, speed and so on) to manipulate the music. It's the DJ software that watches your every move on the mixing controls, not only the volumes but all other controls and then alters the audio to your exact instructions. It's the DJ software that gives you two decks, or four decks, or a load of clever samples, or all the amazing effects like echo and filter and all the rest. Think of your DJ controller as a dumb box that takes all the glory, and you're not going to go far wrong. Even if you go for a "flavour of 2015" controller with built-in screens, it's the computer that's feeding them the info.

SO IN ORDER FOR YOU TO BE ABLE TO CHOOSE A DJ controller wisely, you're going to need to understand DJ software, and the choices that are out there for you. That's why before looking at the best controllers for each piece of software, we are going to take a short while to explain a bit about the software itself. If you haven't made up your mind what software platform to go for, this will help you to narrow down your hardware choice considerably. Changing software is much harder than changing hardware: Pick your software for life, even if your DJ controller is just for Christmas!

CHOOSING YOUR SET-UP



> TRAKTOR PRO DJ SOFTWARE

COMPLEX AND CAPABLE, TRAKTOR IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR DJ PROGRAMS AMONG THE READERS OF DIGITAL DJ TIPS

NOW UP TO TRAKTOR PRO 2.7 AT THE TIME OF writing, this PC/Mac software is one of the most popular DJ programs among the readers of Digital DJ Tips. It is made by Native Instruments, a DJ and production software / hardware company that has made a big name for itself in both fields. Traktor is the company's DJ software offering, and comes in two main flavours, Traktor Pro and Traktor Scratch Pro, the difference being that the latter also works with Traktor's proprietary DVS systems as well as DJ controllers.

Traktor is complex (many think over-complex), but the flipside of that complexity is that it is capable and customisable to an extent not shared by any other DJ software. Native Instruments has pioneered the "Remix Decks" idea, which lets the user chop music into constituent parts and then play those parts back, freestyle (for those of you familiar with Ableton loops, it's a similar concept), something that the company has even developed its own hardware to control (the Traktor Kontrol F1, a modular DJ unit, as well as the new Kontrol S8). As a "grown up" DJ system, fully integrated with

custom hardware and backed by a company that's a leader in the field, Traktor is right up there with the best.

IF YOU DECIDE THAT TRAKTOR IS THE WAY TO GO for you, your choices of controller that are ideal for it are actually quite limited, and getting more so - at least, "out of the box". Native Instruments manufactures its own controllers, and so maybe isn't massively motivated to help other people's controllers work seamlessly with its software. While it is possible to use Traktor with practically any DJ controller (like several DJ software packages, it can be "mapped" to do this, and comes with "mappings" for many popular models), in practice what users tend to find is two things: One, it's harder than they might have wished for to get such pairings to work properly; and, even when they do, the performance is not as good as with Native Instruments' own controller range. Particularly, jogwheel performance suffers with non-Native controllers, which is noticeable if you're a scratch DJ, but also if you're coming to Traktor from vinyl.

FIVE OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR TRAKTOR

1. TRAKTOR KONTROL S8

THE NEW FLAGSHIP TRAKTOR CONTROLLER.

If you want the ultimate hardware for controlling Traktor software, this is it. The built-in screens make it totally modern, and the furore over the lack of jogwheels is a bit of a storm in a teacup; you can use the touchstrips for cueing tunes (just as Novation's Twitch did in the same way), and if you really want something spinning, the Kontrol S8 is Traktor Scratch DVS compatible and a standalone mixer too, so you can add digital or analogue decks / CDJs as you like.



2. TRAKTOR KONTROL S4 MK2

JUST LIKE THE TRAKTOR KONTROL S8, THE S4 lets you plug in record decks or CDs (both controllers come with a full version of Traktor enabling digital vinyl - DVS - support), and just like the S8, this is four channel with at least some control over the Remix Decks. A great choice if you don't have the money for the S8, don't see the point of onboard slave screens, and want jogwheels (for all its brilliance, the new flagship Kontrol S8 really isn't the best choice for "manual beatmatching" DJs).





3. TRAKTOR KONTROL S2 MK2

ONLY INTERESTED IN DJING WITH TWO DECKS WITH maybe a few samples thrown in? This smaller, lighter take on a Traktor controller from the same stable as the S4 will have you covered. It has two channels, but you still get some control over the Remix Decks for taking it past simply mixing two tunes. Same build quality and jogwheel performance as the S4. Oh, and like the S4 (and unlike the S8), it also works with iOS and Traktor DJ.

4. RELOOP JOCKEY 3 REMIX

ONE OF THE FEW NON-NATIVE INSTRUMENTS

Traktor-focused controllers to launch recently, this one again is beautifully built, with possibly the best jogwheels of any here (although again, they're a tiny bit spongy in use compared to Native's own). While it only has two channels, it has an "effects" layer than is preprogrammed for out-of-the-box fun. Only comes with a cut-down version of the software; you'll want to buy the full version.



5. TRAKTOR KONTROL F1

THIS IS ACTUALLY A MODULAR CONTROLLER, BUT we're mentioning it here because it is such a popular add-on to an all-in-one controller for this software platform. It liberates the "Remix Decks", a function of Traktor that blurs the line between production and DJing for the adventurous DJ, offering nearly as much control over them as the recently launched Kontrol S8. The F1 works with absolutely any other DJ controller that can control Traktor.



> SERATO DJ SOFTWARE

SERATO DJ IS AN AMALGAMATION OF SERATO'S PREVIOUS SERATO SCRATCH LIVE AND SERATO ITCH SOFTWARE INTO ONE NEW UNIFIED PLATFORM.

SERATO HAS MADE HUGE STRIDES IN THE LAST two years, successfully consolidating its ITCH and Serato Scratch Live platforms into the rapidly maturing Serato DJ unified software offering, licensing that software to a much broader range of hardware (notably alongside Pioneer), and generally building on its strengths.

Serato doesn't make its own hardware, instead partnering tightly with manufacturers, thus guaranteeing the required amount of quality control over the hardware to ensure great performance. Accordingly, there is simply no such thing as poor jogwheel performance on any Serato-compatible controllers; they all work as tightly as each other, which is to say they are all excellent. So to an extent, any Serato-compatible controller will give you a decent DJing experience, meaning you're really looking at features when choosing.

The software is all about usability, with considerably fewer options for configuration than Traktor, meaning you're more tied to what Serato's engineers have decided (a Midi editor was added recently, though). This means, though, that there tend to be fewer "head scratching" moments when learning and using Serato software. It has a more logical, capable music library system than Traktor, and plays more nicely with iTunes, the software

of choice for many DJs when it comes to planning DJ sets. It also handles non-electronic music better than Traktor. Extra effects are available as paid-for plugins, as is video capability. Meanwhile, the new Flip re-editing plug-in allows fast, intuitive and genuinely useful re-editing of tunes - on the fly, if desired - that can be saved and recalled for future playback. Great fun for attention-challenged DJs who want to make basic but meaningful changes to "finished" recorded music.

ONE THING TO NOTE ABOUT SERATO DJ IS THAT it doesn't work without a licensed controller or audio interface plugged in; without that, you're switched to "offline" mode, where you can prepare your music but can't actually DJ. This means there's no "laptop only" option here as with most DJ software - and also, there's no way you can download a computer-only version or trial to "try before you buy". It's also worth remembering that many cheaper Serato-compatible controllers come with "Serato DJ Intro", a cut down version of the software. You'll definitely want to upgrade to the full version, not least because it's the only easy way to properly digitally record your sets.

SIX OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR SERATO

THE FIRST CONTROLLER FOR SERATO DJ, AND what a debut controller it was for the platform. Lovely jogwheels, four full channels of control including standalone mixer, 16 great control pads with some innovative control modes, completely professional all-metal construction; it's a large, heavy but ultimately massively fun device that amply shows off the capabilities of the software. The updated DDJ-SXII adds control over Serato's new Flip add-on, too.



1. PIONEER DDJ-SXII



2. NUMARK NV

IT'S TOO HEAVY TO CARRY AROUND, TOO BIG even to fit in even the biggest backpack, and too expensive for most to contemplate buying. So why do we rate the Numark NS7II so highly? Because it's awesome, that's why. Thanks to its high-torque, motorised 7" platters with real vinyl and slipmats, its touch-sensitive knobs, its Akai pro pads and dream spec (including standalone mixer), it is one of the most fun-to-play-on digital DJ controller ever made. We love it.

ALONGSIDE THE TRAKTOR KONTROL S8, THIS IS the only other controller in this guide that has an onboard set of screens for showing you various elements of the software. This one is more traditional, though, retaining the jogwheels-plus-performance-pads paradigm of the last couple of years. If you like the idea of onboard screens, but would rather have Serato than Traktor (and maybe want to keep jogwheels, too), this is currently your only choice.



3. NUMARK NS7II

AGAIN, A WONDERFULLY BUILT ALL-METAL controller with arguably the best jogwheels of any controller in this list except the NS7II. The Terminal Mix 8 is great value for what you get, offering four-channel control over Serato and a capable set of controls. Good if you're interested in performance pads and pro build, but want something more compact than the DDJ-SXII, for instance.



4. RELOOP TERMINAL MIX 8

NOW UNDER THE WING OF INMUSIC, WHICH ALSO owns Akai Pro and Numark, Denon is surely going to see some new developments in the near future. But for now, its MC6000 Mk2 is a fantastic "working DJ's" controller, with great input and output including EQed mics, and now - in Mk2 - full compatibility with Serato DJ, which is in the box in its full version, making this controller excellent value for such a workhorse.



5. DENON DJ MC6000 MK2

A GOOD EXAMPLE OF SERATO WIDENING THE controllers it works with, the Beatmix 4 is a four-channel Serato controller with a pad section for cues, loops and samples, and big jogwheels with built-in LED rotation markers. It has no standalone mixer capability and is of plastic construction, and it also only has Serato DJ Intro in the box - but for the price these compromises are to be expected, and it's still great value.



6. RELOOP BEATMIX 4



> VIRTUAL DJ SOFTWARE

USED BY MILLIONS, VIRTUAL DJ HAS HAD A COMPLETE REWRITE FOR VERSION 8 WHICH CAME OUT IN 2015, FINALLY.

THE THIRD OF THE REALLY BIG DJ SOFTWARE names. Another long-stander and consistently in the top download charts on CNET's download.com website (due to its completely free "Home" version, that is fully functional, but doesn't work with any DJ hardware, just keyboard/mouse), Virtual DJ appeals particularly to mobile, karaoke and video DJs - although it is perfectly club DJ-capable too.

Now at version 8 after what seemed like an age of a wait, the software has been rewritten from the ground up, with a "sandbox" mode allowing you to "jump ahead" in your mix to see what a particular transition might sound like, a totally redesigned sampler, and dockable elements, among other big changes. It has a whole host of editors built in, too: a simple sample editor a basic video editor, a

"track cleaner" (for quick re-edits, censoring swear words etc), a "points of interest" editor, even an automix editor to create precise mix in and out points.

VIRTUAL DJ TRULY DOES WORK WITH ALMOST anything out there, and the company also boasts that its software will work just fine with digital vinyl systems... anybody's digital vinyl systems! Just get some timecode CDs or vinyl and some way of getting the signal to Virtual DJ and it works, and well too (we've tested it). However, the controllers we've highlighted here are taken from the relatively few that officially have Virtual DJ 8 "in the box" at the time of writing (expect this list to grow), and have manufacturer endorsement of the implementation.

THREE OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR VIRTUAL DJ

THIS AFFORDABLE PIONEER CONTROLLER WAS the company's first to officially have Virtual DJ 8 LE in the box. It is a distinct improvement looks-wise over the previous WeGO2, with a sleek brushed aluminium top plate and more discrete control buttons around the improved jogwheels, giving it a more "grown up" feel. Despite being unashamedly a "consumer" device, it is perfectly capable entry-level controller.

1. PIONEER WEGO3



2. HERCULES DJ CONSOLE RMX 2



THIS IS AN UNDERRATED LITTLE CONTROLLER.

Metal built, it has two external inputs for CDs etc, and has better audio than the much-loved RMX model it replaces. It also has decent-performing jogwheels, accurate pitch controls and (basic) performance pads, necessarily limited by the unit's relatively small size. That size (along with the included carry bag) does make it highly portable though, yet it is still rugged and professional.

THIS HUGE, EXPENSIVE CONTROLLER WAS designed for Serato DJ, but it has been confirmed at the time of writing that Virtual DJ 8 Pro is going to be shipping in the box too, from now on. We didn't include it in the Serato listings (we feel the DDJ-SX does the job almost as well at half the price, practically), but we're including it here because having Virtual DJ 8 Pro supplied with basically the most "luxury" DJ controller on the market is a massive coup for the platform.



3. PIONEER DDJ-SZ

OTHER LAPTOP DJ SOFTWARE: FOUR TO TRY

MOST LAPTOP / CONTROLLER DJS USE ONE OF the packages above, but they're not the end of the story. There are lots of other DJ software programs out there, and just because they don't have the same user base as the "big boys", doesn't mean that they're not worth a look.

Nearly all DJ controllers are "Midi mappable", meaning you can attach them to your computer, load any of the following pieces of software, and "map" your software to "learn" the knobs and buttons of your existing controller. That way, you could try out any of these programs even

if your controller was sold to you for use with something else.

Sure, there's work involved, but there's a great user-drive mapping site over at another DJing site, DJTechTools, where you can download and share mappings made by others and by you. Even easier, many controllers already work "out of the box" with the programs below, because the program developers have done the mapping for you. The best place to check this out is the manufacturer websites of each of the following DJ programs.



1. DJAY

THIS MAC (NOT PC) PROGRAM HAS ALWAYS looked absolutely fabulous, with textured "slipmats" on its "record decks" and smooth graphics, but it's also slowly evolved into a pretty powerful DJ software. While certainly nowadays it seems to be playing second fiddle to its own excellent iOS version, it has been used by some pretty big names including The Prodigy's warm-up DJ, so it's worth looking at if you're a Mac user, especially as it integrates really tightly with iTunes. Try it with the Pioneer DDJ-WeGO3.

FRENCH COMPANY MIXVIBES HAS INDUSTRY form, being also the company originally behind Pioneer's official music library software for DJs, rekordbox. MixVibes's PC/Mac DJ software is increasingly capable, having multiple decks, key detection, and really interesting hardware compatibility with top-end Pioneer DJ gear (not surprising seeing the company has a tight business relationship with Pioneer). I know DJs who swear by this software. Try it with the company's own U-Mix Control Pro 2 hardware.



2. MIXVIBES CROSS



3. MIXED IN KEY FLOW

THIS IS ANOTHER PACKAGE THAT YOU'RE LIKELY to hear much more about. It works around a simplified but innovative workflow, where you prepare your tunes and then the actual mixing bit can be semi-automated. The company has built in wide controller integration right from launch, so you can try it with the gear you have as an alternative to the software you currently use.

4. THE ONE

THIS RELATIVELY NEW PC/MAC DJ PROGRAM TAKES a whole new slant on DJ software, being "modular" - you can move stuff around and slot stuff together to make your perfect set-up, on screen! Clearly not one for the easily daunted, it nonetheless is intriguing in that it lets you slot mixes together ahead of time and remix on the fly using loops and the like. Definitely worth taking a look at if you're into the idea of pushing boundaries. Company claims it works with just about any DJ controller.



FOUR OF THE BEST IOS & ANDROID DJ APPS

TABLET AND SMARTPHONE DJING HOLDS LOTS OF appeal for a wide range of people. From true “dabblers” (after all, the apps are really cheap - once you own a tablet, of course), to “serious” DJs wanting a second system, to people who simply need something compact that they can use anywhere, as the storage space in tablets has risen along with their capabilities, today’s

models can match laptops in all the areas that count.

And with Android software and hardware finally becoming available alongside iOS versions, that’s a whole new sector (and potentially the largest) of users about to discover how easy it can be to DJ - and DJ well - on a small, handheld touchscreen device..



1. DJAY 2 (IOS/ANDROID)

RECENTLY COMPLETELY REWRITTEN, ALGORIDDIM’S immensely popular djay software retains its easy-on-the-eye beginner appeal, but now also packs its own full-screen waveform view, more reminiscent of a pro Serato digital vinyl system than an eye-candy consumer DJ program. With sampler and single deck view also added, it can make a decent claim to offering something to DJs of all levels. The new Android version is a decent start on that platform, too.



2. TRAKTOR DJ (IOS ONLY)

UNENCUMBERED BY A DECADE OF EXPECTATION and legacy code, Traktor's designers have clearly relished the chance to start with a clean slate on Traktor DJ, a world away from the behemoth that is Traktor Pro. This is smooth, clean and innovative, and utterly addictive. Letting you "touch the waveforms", it also has a rock-solid recommendation engine for picking the perfect next track. While it is intentionally stripped back to basics, it nonetheless lets you DJ in ways you simply can't on laptop software. A winner.

3. MIXVIBES CROSS DJ (IOS/ANDROID)

THE IOS VERSION OF THIS PROGRAM IS A reasonable port of the original PC/Mac program, and while the Android version is not as sophisticated yet, it's being rapidly developed. Both offer the ability to uploads to SoundCloud, although it's a curious addition as SoundCloud is pretty hardcore about removing DJ mixes arbitrarily from its service. Now faces strong competition on Android from djay 2.



4. DJ PLAYER (IOS ONLY)

ARE YOU NOT IMPRESSED BY GRAPHICS AND pseudo-decks? Maybe DJ Player - the purists' DJ program on iOS - is going to be the one for you. Once you've got over the steeper learning curve, this functional program offers rock-solid performance and lots of pro features including full multi-controller Midi mapping, DVS support (really!), 11 FX per deck, slip mode and exceptional battery life.

FOUR OF THE BEST DJ CONTROLLERS FOR IOS & ANDROID

HOOKING IOS & ANDROID STUFF UP TO DJ controllers is a bit of a Wild West right now, same way hooking laptops up to DJ controllers was 10 years ago. The uninitiated can run into all types of bother - the need to use the CCK (Camera Connection Kit, a way for non Apple-certified gear to link up to iDevices); the inability of some kit to charge devices when connected up; plus a whole load of weird and wonderful cables needed to do stuff like get a headphones output. If you're a geek with time to spare this is all fine, even fun, but for everyone else? You just want it to work, right? So here we've listed five DJ controllers that do just that - work.

To achieve this they all have a couple of crucial things in common. Firstly, they are Apple certified. (This is still mainly an iOS world; only one of these - the Reloop Beatpad - works with Android natively.) That means they

come with a lead to plug them into your iDevice. Pretty basic, but don't take it for granted with all gear sold as "iOS compatible"! Sometimes, you need to jump through hoops just to achieve this. Secondly, they can all charge your iDevice. (Again, don't take this as read with all gear.) Only thing left for you to check is that the controller you're choosing comes with the correct lead (30-pin or Lightning) to fit your age of iDevice.

(Finally, beware the really old devices - I'm thinking in particular things like Numark's iM1 DJ mixer with iPod dock, or the same company's iDJ2 and 3 devices. These are made for iPod, but don't control software on those devices. While you can to varying degrees play music from iDevices on them, it isn't in any way software/digital DJing. Just so's you know.)

1. RELOOP BEATPAD

BUILT TO A HIGH STANDARD IN METAL, WITH A handy slot for positioning your iPad at the back of it (it is in fact compatible with all iOS devices), and designed to work with Algoriddim's djay 2 software, this is the most "pro" iOS DJ controller yet. Performance-wise, Steve Canueto, our scratch tutor, described the jogwheel control as "outstanding". The Beatpad takes iOS DJing to a new level, and is the only controller here that works with Android, too (again, djay).



2. TRAKTOR KONTROL S2 MK2

OK, SO APART FROM THE IOS CERTIFICATION and some cosmetic changes this isn't really any different to the original S2 (they haven't added any type of stand for the iDevice, for instance) - but as one of only two controllers that can control Native Instruments' groundbreaking Traktor DJ software, this is big news (the other, by the way is the S4, which is overpowered for the job). The integration is tight, and the overall software/hardware combination completely compelling.



3. NUMARK IDJ PRO LIGHTNING

UNIQUE AMONG THE CONTROLLERS HERE IN THAT it has a proper dock where your iPad actually slides into the unit to effectively become a gigantic screen at the heart of the mixer, this djay-compatible device (it also works with DJ Player) is bigger than the rest here, and with rotary volume knobs instead of sliders, is also distinctive. The original (i.e. non-"Lightning") version is the one to choose if you have an older, 30-pin iPad.



4. PIONEER DDJ-WEGO3

CONSIDERING THE COMPANY HAS MADE ITS NAME with pro DJ gear, Pioneer has done an excellent job with this small, relatively affordable consumer DJ controller. It's aesthetically more pleasing than the still pretty nice WeGo2 unit, now having a nicer metal-finished faceplate, and like the WeGo2 it has lots of functions distinctively arranged around the lit jogwheels in a circle. As well as Algoriddim's djay 2, it works with Serato and several other programs on PC/Mac as well as iOS.



FIVE OF THE BEST BUDGET DJ CONTROLLERS

NOT EVERYONE WANTS OR NEEDS A TOP OR EVEN mid-range controller. If you don't have much money, or your other commitments mean that you haven't got much spare, or you're only looking at DJing for a hobby or a couple of times a month or less, it's hard to justify spending a lot. Luckily with digital, you can still get great results while spending relatively little. With some cheap but bassy computer speakers, a basic Windows PC, some low-end DJ headphones and one of these controllers, you can have a set-up that's good enough to learn on for really very little.

You don't get a "full" DJ program with any of them (they all have "LE", cut down software), and often the program provided is a smaller name rather than one of the "big boys" - but all of them come with enough in the box to get you going. So don't be put off by the plastic build and small size of some of these units: They all do the job, and at a bargain price.

Luckily with digital, you can still get great results while spending relatively little.

1. MIXTRACK PRO 2



THE REPLACEMENT FOR THE IMMENSELY popular Mixtrack Pro controller, this one wisely doesn't stray too far from the path of being a plastic box with great jogwheels. However, it is slimmer and far better looking, and incorporates "performance pads" (a currently trendy idea) that in reality are simply another way of controlling what used to be on the loop, cue and FX buttons. It comes with Serato DJ Intro, which is good software to learn on, and is a bargain.

2. RELOOP BEATMIX 2

A SLIGHT STEP UP FROM THE MIXTRACK PRO 2, the Beatmix has slightly better jogwheels and also boasts gain controls on its two channels, something the Mixtrack Pro 2 a little unwisely leaves off, in our opinion. You pay a bit more for the privilege, but it's nonetheless a fine controller for the money, and if the slight design differences appeal to you, it's worth the little bit extra. As with all but one of this top five, it is a Serato DJ Intro controller.



3. GEMINI SLATE 2

AT AROUND THE SAME PRICE AS THE MIXTRACK Pro 2, the Gemini Slate 2 again works with Serato DJ Intro, making it a great value way to start your DJing life using Serato. Although it has the questionable design choice of sockets and knobs on its left-hand side, it does manage to pack rudimentary control pads, and the all-important jogwheel performance is, as with all Serato controllers, good. Maybe not as refined as the Mixtrack Pro 2, but still does the job.



4. DENON DJ MC2000

FRANKLY THIS LITTLE BUNDLE OF JOY IS ONLY AT number four because we think its days are numbered now that Denon is in the same stable as Numark. It is a full metal jacket Serato DJ Intro controller than packs a punch way above its weight, and at the price you can find it at nowadays, is a stone cold bargain. If pro-feel and metal build matter to you, this is the best of the controllers in this list.



5. TRAKTOR KONTROL Z1

THIS IS OUR CHOICE FOR IOS DJS, AT LEAST IF you're one of the five million plus who've downloaded Traktor DJ, because for a bargain price, you get the "mixing section" of a DJ controller plus a high-quality sound card built in to handle headphones and speaker output. With Traktor DJ, the iPad/iPhone screen is your decks, you don't need jogwheels, so effectively, add this to your iPad and copy of Traktor DJ and you have a full DJ controller. As a bonus, it comes with a Traktor Pro 2 LE licence too.



FIVE OF THE BEST LAPTOP/ USB/CD CONTROLLERS

“BUT WHAT,” I HEAR YOU CRY, “ABOUT THOSE Pioneer controllers that don’t need a laptop, or the Numark or Gemini CD all-in-one controllers?”

As we said at the start, for most people we think this type of system is probably not a good fit. People buy “hybrid” systems (CD / USB / digital etc) often because they can’t get over the idea of going “totally digital”... then they find they end up never using the CD section of their gear, as laptop DJing (with the unit in use simply

as a software controller) is so much more fun. Turning to the Pioneer units we mention above, again they are undoubtedly clever, but it’s no surprise that even with their tricks, these (and all the units mentioned here) still come with copies of “traditional” DJ software.

It’s also no surprise that this list hasn’t changed from last year; this isn’t a fast-moving sector of the market. However, for those who do want more flash or flexibility than standard controllers, at least you have choices.

1. NUMARK MIXDECK QUAD

A BEAST OF AN ALL-IN-ONE, THIS SEMI-PRO unit has four channels, standalone mixer capability, iPad compatibility (out of the box with Algoriddim’s djay 2 software), USB playback, DJ software control, built in DSP effects, lots of inputs and outputs for microphones, booth monitor and so on. It’s the modern equivalent of the custom-made DJ coffin consoles of old, and despite being basically a big plastic box is pretty durable, and great value if you need all these features.



2. PIONEER XDJ-R1

A HYBRID-STYLE CONTROLLER THAT CAN PLAY from CDs, off USB and also operate with DJ software like a “normal” DJ controller, the again semi-pro XDJ-R1 has a twist in its tail: iPad control. Wirelessly and using a downloadable app, you can control functions of the unit with your iPhone or iPad, a feature that comes into its own if you’ve prepared your tunes using Pioneer’s rekordbox software before putting them onto USB sticks to use with the unit.



3. GEMINI CDMP-7000



IF THIS LOOKS TO YOU LIKE TWO CLUB-STYLE CDJ units stuck on to a full-sized mixer, well that's because that's what it is - literally. The mid-table Gemini CDJs used here have a rather gimmicky touchscreen element to them, but they're basically cheaper copies of Pioneer club units, encase with an analogue mixer. You can play from USB; or plug the CDJs into your computer and do the software control thing. It's one way to use DJ software but with full sized gear, and the mixer can accept other inputs too if you want to incorporate decks, for instance.

4. NUMARK MIXDECK EXPRESS

THE OTHER END OF THE RANGE FROM THE MixDeck Quad, this three-channel hybrid device is great value, with CDJs, USB playback, Serato DJ Intro in the box for the inevitable laptop DJing, two mic inputs and a single external input for phono or extra CD. If you really must have that choice of playback methods, you're getting it all here at less than the price of many software-only controllers.



5. PIONEER XDJ-AERO



A DIFFERENT BEAST ENTIRELY TO BULKY, heavy systems, this svelte, lightweight, consumer-feeling controller is basically a USB playback unit with a few Pioneer FX thrown in (but no waveforms or anything like that to aid your mixing). So far, so 10 years ago, but the twist here is that it can set up an ad hoc wireless network with any mobile device - iPad, iPhone, Android - that's running a special Pioneer app, and play music direct from those phones or tablets. That makes it an instant party machine. Tellingly though it works with "normal" DJ software too, including Algoriddim's djay 2 (which it is not actually supplied with). A good party machine, but not the best for serious DJing.

FIVE TIPS FOR BUYING AND SETTING UP YOUR FIRST CONTROLLER

HOPEFULLY YOU'RE NOW AT THE STAGE OF choosing between two or three models. This is of course where you can spend days, weeks even reading every review online, getting “analysis paralysis” when you could be DJing. Don't let that be you. It's time to choose!

To save you pain, I want you to bear the following “smart buyer” tips in mind. They'll help you choose fast and well, then get going without missing a beat!

This is of course where you can spend days, weeks even reading every review online, getting “analysis paralysis”

1. BUY A CONTROLLER THAT'S MADE FOR THE SOFTWARE YOU WANT TO USE

ABOVE I SPOKE ABOUT THE “WILD WEST” IN IOS and Android DJing at the moment. Well not so long back, it was like that in laptop DJing: Lots of technically advanced but very user-unfriendly products with scant instruction manuals, convoluted set-up processes, extra drivers and firmware updates needed, patches for different operating systems, and often next to no advice how to get your choice of software working with your choice of controller. Luckily in the last few years manufacturers have wised up, and the best controller/software combinations today are tightly integrated and easy to set up and use. They're the ones we've covered in this guide. Step outside of the manufacturers' intentions for their gear by all means, but if you do, expect extra steps, head-scratching, and mucho late-night forum delving. You have been warned... :)

2 . FACTOR IN THE COST OF THE “PRO” VERSION OF THE SOFTWARE

IF YOUR HARDWARE OF CHOICE COMES WITH “LE”, “Intro” or “lite” software, it is not the full package. Things like variously effects, loops, recording, and more will be disabled or absent. The idea is you can get going with such software, but you're going to want to upgrade to the pro version soon enough. So factor in the cost of doing this: With Virtual DJ controllers especially, it can be up to around \$300 (it changes from model to model). Serato is usually just over \$100; Traktor just under. The cheaper the DJ controller, the more likely it is to come with one of these cut-down versions of the software.

3 . DON'T SWEAT YOUR CHOICE!

I KNOW THE PAIN OF CHOOSING A DJ CONTROLLER.

People think things like “if I don't choose right, I won't learn right, I won't get good!”, or “the reason my friend is good is that he's got a better controller than me”. But just as photographers will tell you a smartphone camera in the right hands is better than a DSLR in the hands of a goon, same with DJ gear. Every single controller in these pages is great for learning on, and every single controllers can sound fantastic. Put any of them in the biggest club in the world in the right hands and nobody in the place would ever know it wasn't the club's usual gear being used. Plus here's another truth: There will always be someone looking down on you, whatever you buy! You can't avoid it - it's just the price of progress that vinyl and CD DJs will tell you you're playing with toys. Trust me - you're not. Next...

4 . READ THE MANUAL CAREFULLY ESPECIALLY THE SET-UP INSTRUCTIONS

EVEN THE EASIEST-TO-USE DJ CONTROLLER need a modicum of setting up. You may need a driver for your PC, you may need to set some audio routing. You'll possibly need to change a few general settings so it all works smoothly. You may need a reboot or two even. But nowadays, instruction manuals are pretty good - if you bother to read them, that is. Judging by our forums and email inbox here, many people don't, and go through hours or days of struggle because of it. Read it, read it again, and read it again if you have to - the answers are in there, and knowing what everything does on your controller is the first step to conquering it.

5 . GET SOME DJ TRAINING

WE REVIEW A LOT OF GEAR, AND THE MANUAL writers, God bless 'em, do a great job of explaining features - but they're not very good at telling you how to use them. Often after 20 pages of what everything does, they may attempt a short “your first mix” section. It usually says something like “get two tunes playing, use the crossfader to move smoothly from one to the next”. Great! Off you go...

Seriously, DJing comes easy to some, but most benefit massively from being shown the basics (and the not so basics later on). Best person to show you is someone who has been there and done it; if you have any friends who DJ, time to blag some free lessons from them! Of course, we've got loads of courses too, and our [How To Digital DJ Fast](#) course has helped thousands of absolute beginners master the basics. You can find out about this course and all of our others on our courses page at digitaldjtips.com/courses.

SEVEN EXTRAS EVERY CONTROLLER DJ NEEDS

SO THE SHOPPING CART'S OPEN, YOU'RE IN THE Amazon store or wherever, and you're ready to hit "buy now". Before you do though, time to think about the other bits and pieces you'll need to finish your set-up. Two pieces of good news here: First, you probably have some of them already, and second, you don't need much. Here's what you've got to have covered:

1. SPEAKERS



KRK'S ROKIT RANGE IS A POPULAR CHOICE FOR A HOME DJ STUDIO, BUT DON'T DISCOUNT ANY SPEAKERS YOU ALREADY HAVE - THEY MAY WELL BE UP TO THE JOB.

HAVE YOU GOT A HOME CINEMA SYSTEM? HI-FI? 2.1 system for gaming? Loud portable speaker? Yes? As long as you can have that in the room you want to DJ in, you're sorted. Your controller can plug into that. (You'll need a cable, though. Don't use Bluetooth. There's a delay, see? DJs don't like delays.) Want to buy something? On a budget, go for a loud twin satellites-plus-woofer gaming computer speaker system - the Logitech type stuff. Bit more? I love M-Audio's AV40s. More? Look at the Rokit range from KRK (you'll need two, they're sold separately), or Reloop's Wave speaker pairs. These are all "powered" meaning you don't need separate amplifiers. Oh, and don't - *don't* - use them for parties. You'll blow all of the above if you do, sooner or later. Rent a PA, or use someone else's speakers (I didn't tell you the last bit.)

2. LAPTOP OR IOS DEVICE



THE MACBOOK PRO 13": AS CLOSE TO A "STANDARD" AS THERE IS FOR LAPTOPS, ALTHOUGH A WINDOWS PC IS FINE, TOO.

DUH, OBVS, RIGHT? INDEED, YOU PROBABLY already have one, so just take half an hour to check the minimum/recommended spec on the hardware and software manufacturers' sites of the DJ gear you're considering buying. Done. If you're buying new for this adventure, though, you're going to be asking questions like "PC or Mac?" (answer: it doesn't matter) and "will it be powerful enough?" (answer: almost certainly yes). Here are the tips: Go for Mac if you can afford it and you want what the pros use, go for a well-made PC laptop otherwise. Beware Yosemite, though: At the time of writing Serato doesn't play nice. On PC, watch AMD: Intel is a safer choice. Traktor prefers bigger screen resolutions, the rest are fine on any. If you wear glasses, go for a 15" screen, 13" or even 11" is OK if you're young and perfectly sighted. A later iOS device is usually best for DJ software.

3. HEADPHONES

I THINK THESE ARE ACTUALLY MORE IMPORTANT than speakers. They need to isolate well (so be padded), cover the ears, be durable, and be loud. You are probably going to break them in the first year (everyone does, and it doesn't seem to matter how much you pay for them). I like the Allen & Heath Xone:XD 40s as a basic, small headphone, and the Ultrasone DJ-1 as the best you're ever likely to need - but that's just me and my head shape. Traditionally, DJs have flocked to the Sennheiser HD-25 IIs, and I hear very good things about the V-Moda Crossfade LPs. Coiled cables are preferred by most DJs (you don't trip on them as easily), detachable cables mean you can replace them when they wear out.



THE ULTRASONE DJ-1 IS ONE OF OUR FAVOURITE DJ HEADPHONES, WITH A GOOD MIX OF SOUND QUALITY AND DURABILITY.

4. CABLES

YOUR CONTROLLER WILL COME WITH A USB cable to connect it to your computer, but you'll need cables to connect its audio output to your powered speakers (or amp and speakers). If your speakers have "RCA connectors" (a red and white pair of sockets), a "2 x RCA male to 2 x RCA male cable" will do; it will usually have two wires joined together with a pair of sockets on each end, red and white, for right and left channel. If you're using computer speakers that have an 1/8" TRS socket for an input, you'll need a 2 x RCA male to 1/8" stereo TRS male cable. If your computer speakers are the cheap type with only an 1/8" headphone jack on them that's meant to be plugged in to a computer headphones socket, you'll need an 1/8" TRS female to 2 x RCA male lead. Buy one longer than you think you'll need. You can probably nick one from your Dad's old stereo in the garage anyway.



THE MINIMUM YOU'LL NEED IS A CABLE TO GO FROM YOUR CONTROLLER TO YOUR POWERED SPEAKERS OR AMPLIFIER AND SPEAKER. THE USB CABLES FOR THE COMPUTER ALWAYS COMES WITH THE CONTROLLERS, THOUGH.



5. STAND

HERE'S WHERE I'LL SHAMELESSLY PLUG UDG, our guide sponsor. Laptops need raising ideally from their "sitting position" at the table you'll no doubt be setting your gear up on, so a laptop stand can be nice to have, and if you're feeling flush, UDG's Creator stand is excellent. But if not, there are loads of cheaper options if you don't need something so durable.

A DECENT STAND WITH MANY POSSIBLE ADJUSTMENTS IS DEFINITELY WORTH INVESTING IN, AND CAN BE A GODSEND IN CRAMPED DJ BOOTHS WHERE YOUR LAPTOP NEEDS TO BE CAREFULLY ANGLED TOWARDS YOU.

6 . BAG, CASE OR BACKPACK

YOU REALLY DON'T WANT TO BE CARRYING YOUR DJ gear around in a plastic bag, in the box it came in, or even worse, under your arm. And nowadays, you don't have to. All the manufacturers of bags and cases - names like UDG, Magma and more - now have "budget" no frills cases, with models that go all the way up to all singing, all dancing trolleys, backpacks and even "true" hard cases made of plywood and aluminium. For most, a mid-range backpack or shoulder bag will suffice.



A DECENT DJ BAG WILL PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT AND WITH MODELS FROM BASIC (AND CHEAP) UP TO PRO DJ BACKPACKS AND TROLLEYS, THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.



7 . TRANSPARENT PLASTIC COVER

THIS TYPE OF SNUGLY FITTING PLASTIC LID IS A great idea both for covering your controller up at home when you're not using it, and for putting over it when you stash it in its bag, case or backpack to travel with. These polycarbonate cases protect the knobs, faders and switches from accidentally getting bent in transit or worse, as well as keeping the dust out in-between times. The biggest name in the game is Decksaver, although a company called Prodecor makes them too.

TO USE AS A DUST COVER WHEN NOT DJING OR TO PROTECT KNOBS AND FADERS IN TRANSIT, A COVER IS A GREAT IDEA.

SCRATCHING WITH DJ CONTROLLERS

AS MANY READERS MAY KNOW, DIGITAL DJ TIPS developed the industry-leading online video training course teaching DJs how to scratch on DJ controllers, called "Scratching For Controller DJs". In preparing this course, we tested nearly every DJ controller released over the past three years, in order to find out once and for all how feasible it is to scratch on DJ controllers, and which ones you can do it on.

So the short version of this is: Every controller in this guide is fine for learning to scratch on, as long as it has jogwheels of course! The slightly longer version is that all but the very cheapest controllers are actually "very good to excellent". Once you get up to the Traktor Kontrol

S2/S4, the Reloop Terminal Mixes, the Pioneer DDJ-SXII and the Numark NS7II/NV, to name a few, it's possible for a competent scratch DJ to perform all the tricks he or she can do on vinyl - and then some!

A FEW GUIDELINES FOR BUYING IF YOU WANT TO scratch are: Always use the software that comes with your controller (or the "Pro" version of that software), as this will give you the best jogwheel performance; always optimise your laptop carefully, making sure you have no unnecessary program running, and lots of RAM and free hard drive space; and set your controller up correctly for scratching, paying particular attention to having a sharp crossfader "cut", and having the jogwheel scratch mode on.

If you'd like to know more about scratching with DJ controllers, sign up to our scratch mailing list here: <http://djtips.co/scratch>.

*The accessories are for display purposes only and are not included.

UDG
UDGGEAR.COM

NI TRAKTOR S8 HARDCASE

Skilfully designed & moulded to
fit the **NI Traktor Kontrol S8**
controller

FINALLY...

THE DIGITAL DJ TIPS ORGANISATION EXISTS TO help people to DJ using digital DJ gear. This guide exists to answer many of the questions we get asked daily by readers, in a way we couldn't do in the web articles we write. But if you have any questions at all about choosing your first DJ controller, we'd love to help.

Please feel free to come and ask your question on the [Digital DJ Tips Forum](#), where our community is waiting to help you. You can also email us at info@digitaldjtips.com, or reach out to us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [YouTube](#).

Remember this guide is designed to help you as you read the full reviews and watch the talkthrough videos we make over at Digital DJ Tips. You can access them all via the [DJ Controllers: The Ultimate Buyer's Guide 2015](#) part of our website.

Finally, there is tons of practical advice on choosing a digital DJ controller in our [How To Digital DJ Fast](#) course, which is also the best way to get a flying start with your new controller. It's sold many thousands of copies and helped countless DJs to get from complete beginner to first gig - fast!

You can find out about this and all of our DJ courses on our [DJ courses](#) page.