

## Even Apple doesn't know who its iPad is for

It's obvious who the early buyers of the iPad will be: the fanboys and early adopters who just have to have the latest Apple toy. Pre-orders for the iPad have been open for a week, and already people are trying to work out how many have been sold so far. Daniel Tello, for example, has analysed order-tracking numbers from the Apple store and concluded that around 190,000 iPads were pre-ordered in the first week. But that doesn't reveal anything about who will buy the iPad later on, or how they will use it. Indeed, it seems Apple itself is unsure of the answer, and is hedging its bets.

Is the iPad aimed at road warriors, who will use it in place of a MacBook or other laptop? That's the implication of the iWork suite, which positions the iPad as a device you can do useful work on and consists of fully functional apps, not cut-down companion apps. But road warriors also want grown-up features like multitasking and cameras for videoconferencing, neither of which are present. Perhaps that is to keep the price down to make the iPad more attractive to a broader audience, who might just want a media-playback device with the ability to do a bit of e-mail, browsing and Facebook -- a bigger iPod touch, in other words.

A third, more ambitious possibility is that the iPad is Apple's latest version of a "computer for the rest of us" just as the Macintosh was 26 years ago. The iPad's simple, touch-based interface could appeal to people who find existing computers too complex, or people buying a computer for the first time in the developing world. As an interesting post on Ultimi Barbarorum observes, Apple's plan to open lots of shops in China point in this direction.

But it's far from clear what will happen. Previous tablets (such as Apple's Newton, and Microsoft's Tablet PCs) aimed at business users have failed. Tablets only took off when they became media devices aimed at consumers, like the iPod touch and competing media players, and the Kindle and its many e-reader imitators. If the road warriors do embrace the iPad, multi-tasking and cameras can easily be added to future versions. But they are a smaller demographic than iPhone/iPod touch users, so it may be that keeping things cheap and simple to appear to a broader market makes more sense.

The biggest prize of all would be to create a new class of computer -- which was, of course, the original goal of the Macintosh. With its windows and icons, the Mac replaced command-line computing with an easier-to-use alternative, and paved the way for the mass adoption of PCs. But the original Mac now looks complicated next to the simple, touch-driven interfaces of the iPhone or iPod Touch. They don't even have a file system that is visible to the user, which is one of the main things about modern computers, including Macs, that novices find confusing. (John Gruber has an excellent analogy for the iPad versus the Mac: he says it's like automatic versus manual transmission in a car. Sceptics will scoff that the iPad looks like a toy, not a "real" computer, and that it can't do everything. But that was what people said about the Mac.

Who ends up adopting the iPad doesn't just depend on which features Apple includes and which users buy it. It also depends on the app developers. (Apple has just started accepting iPad apps for approval.) There are clearly going to be a lot of games for the iPad, but will the productivity software be aimed to power users or novices? Will geeks buy an iPad for themselves, or will they buy one to put granny on Facebook? The answers will start to become apparent over the coming months. But at the moment, nobody knows who the iPad is for -- not even Apple.

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