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Apple unveils tablet computer

iPad falls between smart phone, laptop

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You would be able to play games, read electronic books, listen to music, watch movies and choose from nearly 140,000 smart-phone applications - all while on the go with Apple Inc.'s new iPad.

The question is whether you would want or need such a device, and be willing to pay \$499 or more for it.

After months of hype that culminated in days of water-cooler speculation, Apple unveiled Wednesday the highly anticipated iPad, essentially a personal computer contained in a portable flat-panel touch screen. If the iPad catches on, it could usher in a new era for the tablet computer and redefine the burgeoning market of portable media devices and electronic book readers.

While tablet computers have had limited success in the past, industry insiders say Apple might now have the tech cachet and marketing muscle to make the product a hit. Apple is hoping it can build on the breakout success of its iPhone smart phone and gambling that consumers will embrace a device that falls between a smart phone and a laptop in terms of size and overall functionality.

"We all are interested in having one, but we're still trying to get our brains around why it's something we'd need," said Dana Stibolt, owner of MacMedics, an Apple repair and consulting firm in Millersville. "It's really a third category of device. It's something completely new."

Steve Jobs, Apple's co-founder and chief executive, introduced the iPad with the kind of showmanship that has become his trademark whenever Apple introduces a new gadget. The iPad will have a 9.7-inch touch screen, wireless connectivity, a virtual keyboard, and access to media and games. It will be able to connect to Apple's popular iTunes software and online multimedia store, and Jobs unveiled a new electronic bookstore, called iBooks.

"We want to kick off 2010 with a truly magical and revolutionary device," Jobs told a crowd of technology reporters and bloggers.

The iPad will be available in late March. Apple will offer three versions with 16 gigabytes to 64 gigabytes in storage capacity and ranging in price from \$499 to \$829. Consumers will be able to choose a device that connects to the Internet solely through Wi-Fi wireless hot spots. Users could also buy an iPad that can access the Internet through AT&T's cellular data network for up to \$29.99 - though the device won't be able to make cellular calls.

David Wertheimer, executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California, was bullish on the prospects of the iPad as a harbinger of change in mobile personal computing. Wertheimer said the device appeared impressive, but the prospect of hundreds, if not thousands, of independent

Your **Windows XP / Vista**
may need a tune up

Difficulty Level: Easy

(Just 1 step to tune up)

Time Required: 2 minutes



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software developers making new applications for the iPad is what could help it succeed.

For Apple's popular iPhone and iPod Touch devices, consumers can choose from more than 140,000 applications in the company's App Store to run on the handheld sets. Those same applications will work on the iPad, and that huge library of apps will help Apple distinguish its iPad from other tablet competitors, Wertheimer said.

"I think what you saw today was a launching pad, and we will only know the power of the rocket that launches off this pad when we see the apps that get developed for it," Wertheimer said. "The base device provides a really powerful foundation, but what will make this device compelling for people will be the applications."

Apple last made a foray into a tablet-like portable computer in the 1990s with the launch of the Newton, a large personal digital assistant, or PDA. That device also generated a lot of publicity, but it never gained widespread appeal.

The world of technology and the Internet has drastically changed in the past two decades. The Internet is now populated with social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, video sites such as YouTube, and millions of blogs. The cost of wireless and Wi-Fi technology has dropped, and cellular networks have improved to the point where live-streaming video on cell phones is on the verge of ubiquity.

For computer and electronics manufacturers, the prospect of a portable device that's larger than a cell phone but smaller than a laptop, and that can connect to the Web and display multimedia content, is becoming a reality for consumer gadgetry. Microsoft and HP, for instance, also have announced their own tablet computers this year, while lesser-known manufacturers are expected to enter the fray.

Two industries that the iPad is expected to rattle are publishing and games.

Game applications on the iPhone have proved a huge success for Apple and for independent software developers. Apple, which allows developers to set their own prices in the App Store and takes a 30 percent cut, showed off video-game capabilities of the iPad at Wednesday's event.

"If it's a good enough gaming platform, more people might be moving away from [video-game] consoles," said Ben Bederson, a professor at the University of Maryland, College Park who studies human-computer interaction.

And Apple using the new iBooks application in its App Store to sell best-sellers and other books for the device is a broadside fired at Amazon's Kindle, Barnes & Noble's Nook reader and other dedicated e-book devices. The lucrative e-textbook market for colleges also could find a home on the new device.

The Apple iPad will have the same size screen as Amazon's Kindle DX device, the larger version of the e-book reader, which is priced at \$489. Industry experts have long anticipated that any tablet device that Apple introduces will seek to compete with, if not make irrelevant, the Kindle. On Wednesday, Apple announced that it had partnerships with five major book publishers to sell e-books through their own sites.

Bederson said he didn't think an Apple tablet would eliminate consumer demand for other e-book readers, like the Kindle, at least in the near future. The Kindle is a lighter device and geared specifically toward avid readers, he noted, adding that the full impact of the iPad on the consumer marketplace might take time to be felt.

The iPad could be "more of a catalyst than a disruption," Bederson said. "It's going to take a while to build up steam."

Apple iPad

WHAT IS IT?: The iPad is larger in size but similar in design to Apple's popular iPhone. It has a 9.7-inch touch screen and weighs 1.5 pounds, with Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity built in and an option to use AT&T's 3G data network.