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Jobs and co. let iSecrets out of the box

Details of Apple's new iPad trickled out prior to announcement

By DAVID S. COHEN

There were relatively few secrets left by the time Apple topper Steven Jobs unveiled his "magical and revolutionary" iPad tablet computer in San Francisco on Jan. 27.

Many of the details of the device had already dribbled out, some in a CNBC interview with McGraw Hill CEO Harold McGraw III, which may explain why his company's deal with Apple was surgically removed from the iPad announcement. (Moral: Never upstage Steve Jobs, even by accident.)

However, careful observers could find a few surprises beneath the headlines and hype.

Seeing Jobs onstage was notable; it was only his second public appearance since liver replacement surgery. He looked thin but seemed energetic enough -- though he did exit the stage for much of the presentation in favor of Scott Forrestal from the iPhone development team.

No deal with Verizon materialized; the iPad, like the iPhone, remains tied to AT&T, though other providers' USB wireless broadband to be cheaper than a netbook with a data plan in less than a year.

The low-end iPad also costs barely more than an Amazon Kindle, but with far greater capabilities. iBooks and the iBooks store are also aimed squarely at the Kindle. The iBooks demo showed a more attractive presentation for e-books than current readers, and the iPad is capable of handling e-books with video, audio and other multimedia built in.

"Enhanced e-books are definitely something HarperCollins is exploring," said company spokesperson Erin Crum.

Jobs himself did not list newspapers and magazines among the things the iPad would have to do better to justify its existence, but Forrestal brought out a N.Y. Times team that showed an iPad app for reading their newspaper, keeping much of the design but instantly updatable, while giving the user the ability to tap through to stories, change type size, etc., all without using a keyboard or mouse.

Jennifer Brook of the Times said "We think we've captured the experience of reading the newspaper."

Though the initial iBooks demo didn't tout a virtual newsstand, with individual periodicals for sale, the door is clearly open to newspapers and mags to put out iPad-friendly versions.

David Wertheimer, CEO of USC's Entertainment Technology Center, calls the iPad "a powerful opportunity for print media publishers to provide a new generation of readers a new kind of product"

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that they may be willing to pay for. And if those publishers can figure out how to take advantage of the unique, interactive, multimedia capabilities of the device, the publications could take on a whole new relevance to young consumers."Another surprise: much of the demo was devoted to showing off the iPad as a device for creating content, not just consuming it. Apple gave demos of iPad versions of its word processing, spreadsheet and presentation software, and priced the apps aggressively at just \$9.99.

Writers, who have been fond of Macbooks, will be able to attach a keyboard, and scriptwriting software makers are already eyeing the new iPad platform.

Final Draft, which had been working on an iPhone app for its software, is still trying to determine what exactly the device can do. In the meantime, John Cornelius, Final Draft's chief technology officer, says the iPad "clearly fits into this workflow somewhere" and, "We're definitely going to do something."

That hints at the hidden meaning of the iPad. While introduced as a "third category" device between the laptop and the smartphone, Apple seems to be in the process of revolutionizing the way people interact with computers, as it has done before with the Apple II and the Macintosh.

Writers, video editors and other pros still use a keyboard, a mouse or trackpad, a tablet or other specialized input devices, but for "the rest of us," -- read, nonpros -- it's a touchscreen future.

But David Wertheimer, CEO of USC's Entertainment Technology Center, notes: "What it does for entertainment media is not quite as clear (yet)." He calls it "definitely the most impressive personal media platform out there," with "loads of potential to be the must-have personal media environment," but it doesn't yet run Flash videos, which are a Web staple, and its future really depends on what app developers do with it.

If they embrace iPad as they have the iPhone, which already has 140,000 iPhone apps -- all of which will work on the iPad -- "You may just find this category of product becomes as important as a television," Wertheimer says.

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