



Sweetness And Backlight

Forget its utility. The iPad is pure beauty and pleasure.

At its christening in April, the Apple iPad was declared an instrument for *consumers* of media — a sort of cultural spoon. This struck many as bad news. Though the Web would seem to have blurred the line between content producers and content consumers, old antagonisms die hard. Producers are still imagined as lean, fierce and manly, where consumers are seen as feminized, passive and fat. Alex Payne, a tech entrepreneur, found the iPad disturbing: “a digital consumption machine.” On the great tech site Boing Boing, Cory Doctorow — while resolving never, ever to buy an iPad — took the trouble to remind us that a consumer is (in the novelist William Gibson’s acid words) “something the size of a baby hippo, the color of a week-old boiled potato, that lives by itself, in the dark, in a double-wide on the outskirts of Topeka.”

Aw. You flatter us.

Because I *do* spend solitary, darkened days in hippo-

potato mode, consuming media in Brooklyn’s equivalent of a double-wide, I figured I’d like the iPad. I also felt hugely relieved not to have to pretend the outsize iPad was useful for on-the-go phone calls and e-mail — a charade that I’d bridled at with the undependable iPhone. But right around Apple’s announcement of the iPhone 4 last month, which distracted tech pundits from the iPad for a while, a curious thing happened: producer types embraced the “consumption machine.” They started productively downloading apps like Pages, for writing; Keynote, for writing speeches; and Things, for making to-do lists. These “productivity” apps are now among the most popular in Apple’s App Store.

At the same time, I’ve held onto the promise that the iPad should give pleasure. This it achieves. At 9½ inches by 7½ inches, the iPad approximates the dimensions of a face or an airplane-cabin window; if you like human faces, and you prefer the window seat to the aisle, the iPad’s size will please you. Suitably, the device when vertical is said to be in “portrait” mode; horizontally, it’s a “landscape.” (Makeup apps like the mysterious iLash take advantage of iPad’s physiognomy; the meditative Magic Window app turns the screen into a porthole.)

And then there’s the fact that the iPad wants to be touched, albeit lightly. You get to relive the childhood fascination of writing with fingers on a steamed-up car window — the window becoming legible-illegible, transparent-opaque.

POINTS OF ENTRY

THIS WEEK'S
RECOMMENDATIONS

APPETIZERS

Before you commit to an iPad, watch **app demos** on YouTube or elsewhere. The beloved **Angry Birds** app can be seen on **YouTube**. **Wired** magazine’s app plays on **Wired.com**. On **Mashable.com**, get glimpses of **iBrite**, **Mondo Solitaire** and **Mighty Meeting**.

LATER EDITION

If “**media**” to you means news, you may need the **Instapaper** app. An ingenious system that compiles a newspaper of only Web articles you’ve flagged to “**read later**,” Instapaper is controversial for sometimes “**scraping**” content away from ads. But that’s a producer-side problem. Suckers!

PARTY DOWNLOAD

Wicked iPad apps not mentioned in this article: **Explore Flickr**, **World Atlas**, **ABC Player**, **Paris Match**, **Craigslist Pro**, **Huffington Post**, **Rue La La**, **Popplet**, **Kindle** and **Starmap HD**.



Thus, rather than work on Pages, I prefer to play the plinky Magic Piano novelty app; turn my photos from grayscale to color with the swipe of a forefinger on Color Splash; stare at my own roof in the center of Google Earth’s target icon as if I were a sniper planning to assassinate myself; flaunt the gorgeous art-science showoff app the Elements; and read Vanity Fair, tapping and pinching images of the elite like an orangutan fingering zoo glass.

In spite of early carping that the iPad is merely a bigger version of something we already know, the experience of it is not familiar. In fact, it’s uncanny. Once yielded to, it’s scintillating for being uncanny. Maybe the iPad is like a person with an American accent who turns out to be Dutch or Australian. Often an iPad interaction feels like nothing I’ve done before, or nothing I’ve done for a long time or in real life rather than dreams. Take the Checkers app: the tablet becomes a game board in a way that a TV, a PC or a smartphone cannot. The games that define games — go, chess, backgammon — exist on boards, so players can assume god roles, dwarf their tokens and look down on them. Players of contemporary video games, by contrast, don’t get this strategic aloofness.

The Weather HD app also elevates the user, placing her at cloud level for a hushed real-time weather tableau that puts the Web’s goofy sunshine-rain-cloud icons to shame. It also makes our earlier almanac efforts to describe and respond to the weather seem meager, goofy and ... terrestrial. A similar effect is derived by Grivilux, an art project that lets you manipulate static. When you shove around “stars” — the speckled interface seems to have some astrophysical significance — you direct the universe. Apps like Grivilux awaken an “Avatar”-like sensitivity to electricity in the body, power in the palms and general connectedness.

Apps are to the Web what suburban houses are to the bustling city. This analogy may seem, to those of us who grew up on the shibboleth of suburban soullessness, to disparage apps wholesale — but it shouldn’t. Though there’s certainly less pressure to produce out here in the apps, and life’s a little sleepier and more summery, it’s plenty soulful. Potatoes and hippos aren’t judged. And in the very best apps, you don’t feel like a fraud in a McMansion. You feel as if you’re in a detail-perfect estate up on a cliff over the Hudson River or in Malibu or, yes, south of the languorous Kansas River, in the beautiful outskirts of Topeka. ♦