

Review: Jumbo-sized iPad Pro lacks purpose

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When Apple released the iPad in 2010, it sought to fill a niche in the computing industry.

The company perceived - correctly as it turned out - that there was a need for a device that was larger and more powerful than a smartphone,

but more portable and easier to use and manage than a laptop computer. The iPad was for casual computing, the kind you do on a couch, in bed, on a plane or maybe in a bathroom. You could use it to read, surf the Web, watch a movie, play a game. For those tasks, it was an ideal device, much better suited to them than either a phone or a PC.

But with iPad sales now flagging, Apple has decided that the iPad needs to be much more than it's been. So, last week, it released the iPad Pro, a new jumbo-size version.

I don't know whether the iPad Pro will solve the problems with Apple's tablet business, but I doubt it. The problem with the iPad Pro is that for many - perhaps most - consumers, it doesn't have a clear role to play in their lives or solve their needs or problems. It's too large and unwieldy to fill the role that the original iPad plays in casual computing. But it's also too underdeveloped and unsatisfying to replace a traditional laptop.

I'm sure it will find an audience with certain users - graphic artists or architects. But I'm skeptical about whether it will find mass appeal.

That's not to say that the iPad Pro is a crummy device. In fact, in some ways, it's quite a marvel of engineering and design. Despite having a screen that's nearly the size of a sheet of copy paper and a battery that lasts all day long, it's remarkably thin and lightweight - at least when it's used without a cover. It's less than a millimeter thicker than the iPad Air 2 and it weighs about the same amount as the original iPad, which had a considerably smaller screen.

Speaking of screens, the one on the new iPad Pro is beautiful and sharp. And in some ways, I loved how large it is. Digital comic books look glorious on it. Reading a Web page on it was like reading a real magazine because the text and pictures were at their full size. Games look stunning.

And the thing is superfast. Apple claims that the chip inside the iPad Pro is comparable to those used in regular PCs, and benchmark tests back up that assertion. You could soon see a range of games and other apps that take advantage of that power.

The problem is that the device is just so big that it's unwieldy. It's no longer really a handheld device. It's too big to comfortably hold in one hand and too hefty - particularly with its cover on - to hold while watching a movie.

The iPad Pro does have some promise as a kind of tabletop computer. Apple designed its touch-screen interface to work with a new kind of stylus the company calls Pencil that is specifically intended to be used for drawing and similar purposes. You can use it to doodle on a notepad, help make architectural sketches or mark up documents.

Pencil works really well; the lines you draw show up nearly instantaneously. The stylus senses both the pressure you apply to it and the angle with which you are holding it. If you are using it as a virtual pencil and tilt it, you can shade in a drawing. If you use it as an ink pen and press down on it, you'll get a thicker line.

Unfortunately, at \$100, Pencil is pricey, and there's not a lot you can do with it just yet. It only works with the iPad Pro, not other iPad models. And only two apps that come with the iPad Pro - Notes and Mail - support it, and the only thing you can do with it in Mail is to annotate attachments.

What's more, there's no obvious place to put it when you aren't using it. Apple didn't design a slot in the iPad into which you could tuck Pencil, nor did it include a loop on the covers it designed for the iPad Pro in which you could stow it.

With such a large screen, the iPad Pro seems to be obviously gunning for another market - laptops. Toward that end, Apple offers something called a Smart Keyboard, a cover for the device that turns it into a quasi-notebook computer.

The keyboard is fairly sturdy. I usually find thin keyboard covers like this unworkable when trying to type with the device propped on my lap. But the Smart Keyboard actually worked in that context. And the magnet was strong enough that I didn't worry that the iPad might fall or become unbalanced.

But here again the accessory - and the iPad itself - fall somewhat short of the mark. For one thing, the Smart Keyboard is pricey. If you add its \$170 price tag on to the \$800 base price of the iPad Pro, you're nearly into the \$1,000 range you'd spend for a very nice lightweight laptop.

Only, the iPad Pro makes a poor laptop. The iOS 9 software that underlies the iPad doesn't support pointing devices like mice and trackpads, so to precisely place a cursor on a screen or navigate the iPad's interface you have to constantly be touching the screen. Ergonomically, that's uncomfortable to do, especially if you have to do it repeatedly, as when you write a report.

With the latest version of iOS, Apple introduced split-screen technology, which allows you to divide the display between two apps. That's useful, and the feature works well, but it's nothing like what you can do on a laptop, where you can view multiple windows on the screen at the same time. And unfortunately even this limited version of multitasking is frequently unavailable because it's only supported by some apps. For example, I couldn't work in Google Docs and keep my inbox on the screen at the same time.

Apple also doesn't support multiple user logins in iOS, so it's hard to

share a device among multiple users without giving them access to all of your files and apps.

Add all this up, and I'm not sure where the iPad Pro fits or its target market. I don't see it displacing either my laptop or my tablet - and its not well suited enough at either function to reasonably replace both.

Troy's Quick Take

What: Apple iPad Pro

Likes: Large, sharp display; thin and light design; sophisticated Pencil stylus; wide range and number of tablet apps; speedy processor; long battery life.

Dislikes: Both device itself and accessories are pricey; large design limits portability and ill-suited for casual or handheld use; feels heavy when paired with Smart Keyboard cover; operating system lacks features such as trackpad support and windowing available on similarly priced laptops; few apps yet support new stylus.

Specs: 64-bit A9X processor; 12.9-inch, 2732 x 2048 pixel display; 1.2-megapixel front and 8-megapixel rear cameras.

Price: \$800 for 32GB model, \$950 for 128GB model and \$1,080 for 128GB model

Web: apple.com

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