

New iPod Shuffle a delight, despite flaw

18 March 2009, By Eric Benderoff



Apple solved one problem with its fun, new iPod Shuffle: With the push of a button on its headphone cord, it can tell you what song is playing. But it created another problem if you want to use a different pair of headphones than those shipped with the Shuffle.

Otherwise, the \$79 [iPod Shuffle](#) is a delight and the most interesting music player I've used in some time. It holds about 1,000 songs on a 4-gigabyte flash drive.

Strikingly small, the size of a thumb but much thinner, the gadget elicits wonder from those I've shown it to. It could pass for a USB thumb drive, and there's a chance you'll lose it one day.

Shrinking the Shuffle required controls to be built into the headphone cord. That means you can use only [Apple headphones](#) with this product, at least for now. And the controls take a little practice to learn.

In the past, if you had a decent amount of music on your Shuffle and a spotty [memory](#), you often didn't know what was playing.

The magic with this version is that it can tell you

what's playing. You press and briefly hold the center of the controls on the headphone and the song title and artist's name are spoken. The voice is clear and generally accurate. It can speak in 14 languages.

Sure, the voice makes mistakes. It struggles with Lupe Fiasco, for example, but the feature is far more useful than annoying.

Also, if you keep holding the center control button, it will scroll through your playlists.

At first, I found the [playlist function](#) frustrating. It reads the playlist names from the beginning, in alphabetical order, not from the last playlist you picked. I sort my playlists primarily by artists — others do it differently. So if I stop at Lou Reed, listen to a few songs and then want to move on, I would like to start at the next playlist, which would be Luna. It doesn't work that way.

Frustrated, I went online to read the full Shuffle instructions at [Apple.com](#) - the first time I've done this with an iPod - and learned that if I hit the controls for volume up or down, I can quickly move through playlists.

Much better, but I still would prefer to start from where I stopped.

Having the controls on the headphone, as handy and as easy to use as they are, are also the Shuffle's biggest flaw.

The iPod headphones are adequate but there are many third-party products that sound better. Currently, they don't work well with this Shuffle.

That is being addressed, and at least a half-dozen third-party headphones are already in development, said Greg Joswiak, Apple's vice president of iPod and iPhone Product Marketing.

Other headphones do work with the Shuffle, Joswiak said, but you can't control volume, hear

song information or change playlists.

That criticism aside, this iPod is a remarkable little device, and Apple has once again raised the bar for how to create a fresh music player.

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APA citation: New iPod Shuffle a delight, despite flaw (2009, March 18) retrieved 13 November 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-ipod-shuffle-flaw.html>

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