

iPad at U of G

by Vincent Tan

As a mobile technology enthusiast it's an exciting time to be alive! It seems that there are product announcements weekly for the newest tablet, latest laptop, or smartest phone. But the announcements that seem to garner the most attention are those from Apple. Few people, technology enthusiast or not, have not heard about the iPad. In fact, by the end of 2010 some 18 million people had bought one.

I was one of those 18 million. Like many others in this time of consumerization, I brought mine to work as I saw the potential for this to be a wonderful productivity tool. This article describes the process I went through to informally evaluate the iPad for my needs. Perhaps it will be useful for those who have not yet experienced the iPad and are considering its use or are having to make recommendations or give opinions on its use in our environment here at the University of Guelph.

I picked up the iPad the day it landed in Canada and put away my laptop at the same time. I was determined to see how well the iPad could work for me as my sole productivity tool. I thought that in order to be a success the iPad would need to be able to:

- (1) Allow me to work with Office files (.docx, .xlsx mostly)
- (2) Allow me to take notes (preferably with a OneNote compatible app)
- (3) Allow me to work with email, calendar, contacts, and tasks from Gryph Mail
- (4) Allow me to work with files on our Central File Service (CFS) network shares
- (5) Allow me to remotely access my "full" computers (desktops or laptops)
- (6) Have good battery life (ie. greater than 5 hours)

Essentially, all the things I do every day on or expect from my laptop. I invested a fair amount into this investigation in effort, time (4 months + 2 weeks of follow-up), and finances. So, let's look at each of my criteria in more detail.

(1) Office

I purchased the DocsToGo app from the App Store and it works reasonably well. There are some slight formatting issues but it is mostly usable. I found that it is easier to edit an existing document than it is to start a new document on the iPad. Even so, I would say that this passed my criteria.

(2) Notes

I purchased another app called MobileNoter to access my extensive OneNote notebook collection. The first version would only allow me to read my notebooks but an update soon brought about edit capability. Unfortunately the edit capability and overall performance is very poor and still not useful to me to this day. I tried other note taking apps instead and settled on an app called Notebooks because of its tabbed interface similar to OneNote. I'll call this a pass even though it wasn't my ideal.

(3) Email and such

Support for email, calendar, and address books works the same as for an iPod or iPhone. In other words, access is seamless and the apps are easy to use, made even better by the fact that there is more screen real estate to view information. The email and calendar apps are not as full featured as I'd like but they are serviceable for quick checking of emails or schedule. Unfortunately there is no native syncing of tasks. I tried an app called TaskTask to fill in this gap but that didn't work out well. Three out of four needs were addressed so this is a pass.

(4) Network shares

I tried a number of apps and purchased FileBrowser due to its ability to access network shares through one of the standard network access mechanisms that we employ at the U of G (CIFS protocol). This excellent app allows me to access files on my server at home, desktop at work, as well as CFS at work. I would call this a pass.

(5) Remote desktop

There are times when I need access to my full Windows desktop and this is normally accomplished using a "remote desktop" application which allows you to control your desktop remotely as if you are sitting in front of it. There are many apps available for this and I tried a few, finally settling on and purchasing Wyse PocketCloud. It's a great app which I am still using. I should mention that this would by no means replace a laptop. The translation of desktop screen to small 10" screen along with lack of keyboard and mouse make controlling the desktop remotely a "once in a while" experience and certainly not an "all the time" experience. Having said that, for my intended purposes this is a pass!

(6) Battery

You have most likely heard about the phenomenal battery life of the iPad. It's true. I easily get 8-10 hours of medium to heavy use including wireless connectivity. Huge pass! Let's move on ...

At this point the iPad is sounding like a qualified success. Everything has passed my criteria and there are very few issues. As it turns out the real issues were not in what I was using but in how I needed or wanted to use it. And this is really where it is subjective and will differ depending on your preferences and such.

My issues were the following.

(1) Multitasking

Multitasking did not exist. I didn't realize how accustomed I was to having a few things open at once that I could flip between quickly. I found this to be very restrictive and inconvenient on the iPad. Now, this is mostly an interface complaint since I didn't need true multitasking. I simply needed a quick and easy way to flip between apps and not have to back out to the main menu, swipe to another screen, then find and tap the next app. Imagine doing that on a regular basis as you work with transferring data from one app to another or you are referring to one app and taking notes in another. It becomes rather tedious. Quickly.

(2) Keyboard & Form Factor

This was an issue of portability vs. usability. I've become relatively proficient with the onscreen keyboard and having an iPhone I was accustomed to the touch screen but it's still not the same as a physical keyboard. I found that I had to think about my typing with the onscreen keyboard especially when using punctuation and numbers. I purchased the external bluetooth keyboard and that works very well but it's something else to have to carry around. It's also not usable if you have to hold both the iPad and keyboard on your lap.

This leads me to the form factor issue. It's a flat device that doesn't stand on its own when used on a desk. To prop it up to a comfortable viewing angle you must use a stand or a case. I used the Apple case, switched to a different leather case then back to the Apple case. I experienced the same issue with both in that most every time I had to navigate it would be a two-handed operation: one to navigate and the other to hold the iPad to ensure that it didn't topple over. This obviously is a function of the type of case you use.

Being mostly a desk or table user I found the overall setup of propping up the iPad and bringing out the external keyboard a bit cumbersome. More so than a laptop to be sure. If I were strictly an onscreen keyboard, lap-type user then this would not be an issue I'd imagine.

(3) Network access

Although I had the excellent Filebrowser app that allowed me to access my files on various network shares I found that I could not actually work on the files directly and had to copy the file locally, make changes, then save it back to the network share. How old-school is that? I have an account on a cloud service called Dropbox which does allow you to work directly with files stored there but this discussion is about using the iPad with U of G resources.

(4) Data access/manipulation in general

I found the app-centered nature of iOS to be restrictive. There is no real "file system" that will allow you to access one data file from any app that could recognize that file. So, if I had a PDF file that I wanted to view then I would transfer it to the iPad in the PDF viewer app. If I wanted to edit that same PDF file then I would need to transfer it again to the iPad in the PDF editor app. Once I've edited that PDF file I would not be able to view it using the PDF viewer app. There are many examples of this unfortunately.

(5) Hand Writing

It's a tablet so why can't I write on it with something more fine-tipped and precise than a sausage? That's one of the few things I miss from the Windows Tablets. Many of my OneNote notebooks are littered with diagrams, scribbles, and highlighting of notes. I do have a couple of the Pogo Styli but they're still pretty thick and require a fair amount of pressure to be effective. This results in only being able to write two to three words per line when taking handwritten notes.

Thanks for reading this far. I'm almost done.

With some fairly recent changes I did decide to revisit the iPad for a couple of weeks. I updated the iPad to iOS 4.2 to get the multitasking and folder features. The multitasking does offer a slightly better mechanism for task switching but can get overcrowded quickly. It doesn't remove unused apps very well and you can't configure this differently. I also searched for different (more recent) apps to see if I could better address my gripes above. Nothing. But, I love my iPad and use it quite frequently at home. It sits either on my bedside table or the living room coffee table as it's great for information and media consumption. And of course no one has matched the user experience of the iDevices. The Android devices are getting closer but are still not there yet.

So, that was my journey. I realize that things are always changing so as apps and iOS improve and different accessories become available there may be better ways to do the things that didn't work for me. But for now, my real productivity tool of choice will continue to be a small laptop that runs a full function and feature operating system.