

In two weeks Apple may be holding a media event that has kicked up the whole tablet storm again. I think it's highly plausible this time but to see why I say this we need to look at why it will be Apple who remain the only hope for the future of tablets.

Apple more or less invented pen based computing with the Newton, Palm followed with the Palm Pilot, Microsoft released various pen based products including a tablet OS for tablet computing. Essentially all of these failed for one very basic reason... our brains can't handle it.

When we write we write with two different forms of technology. We either use pen and paper or we use a computer or a typewriter. On their own these two can work quite well, often backing each other up as a writer might jot notes down on a pad and then add them to a document on a computer. The problem comes when you combine the two to try and kill two birds with one stone. What tends to happen is that the two technologies compete with each other and therefore nothing gets done.

As a computer a tablet works quite well with a keyboard and possibly a trackpad depending on the design of the tablet. But in this configuration the tablet kind of defeats itself because the whole idea is to remove the mouse and keyboard and use a stylus. As a PDA the tablet kind of works well but there's one use of a tablet that makes sense but fails dismally.

Document editing on a Newton, a Palm Pilot, or a Windows Mobile device is both easy and difficult at the same time. Newton and Palm went the handwriting way by using a series of strokes that mimicked handwriting. The problem was that it wasn't really proper handwriting and needed to be very very precise for it to work. In reality it meant more backspacing to correct the incorrect text that it meant productivity was more or less impossible. For short notes it was great but for longer notes it was very difficult to use and forget about documents in Word or Excel. Microsoft tried handwriting recognition but they failed worse than everyone else so they had an onscreen keyboard. This kind of made sense but Windows Mobile is very imprecise so it was literally hit and miss as to what keys you'd be pressing. Productivity was reduced even more due to incorrect key presses.

In essence tablet computing was held back from progressing because the interface sucked badly. Then in 2007 the second step to Apple's tablet development happened... OS X. OS X is of course the operating system that drives the iPhone and the iPod Touch. It uses a technology Apple calls Multi-Touch whereby instead of having a pen you manipulated a touch screen with your fingers. This technology is old in fact I remember using systems like this back in 1996-98 when I was doing computer retail. The problems with those systems were many. First they were stupidly expensive with screen overlays (these fitted over a standard monitor) cost three times the monitor making it almost as expensive as a new computer. They were also very very hit and miss as to working. Their biggest problem though were they were mostly designed for Windows and that meant they were notoriously difficult to setup let alone use. There are some touchscreens that work on Linux such as the Lotto terminals around the country all run Linux and work pretty well but then they are really only designed for a single purpose not proper computing. So when Apple bought out the iPhone it proved that touchscreen computing had

come to the point where it was cheap, reliable, and not dependant on Windows which has largely been holding back computing for the last 10 years.

So now Apple has all the pieces to produce a tablet that works. The first was the MacBook Air which was really an experiment in whether or not you can maintain decent specs with a minimal footprint. The second step was developing an OS that was powerful enough to be useable for many tasks a tablet makes sense for while at the same time being simple enough to use that doesn't require a mouse and keyboard for making it truly portable.

But what will it look like? Well, it makes sense that the unit would be kind of a larger iPhone/iPod Touch running flash memory instead of hard drives (solid state is still far too expensive). It will probably use a more powerful version of the ARM processor that Apple has long had a long history with (they co-developed it with Acorn) and their acquisition of P.A. Semi means they have access to some great video and audio products that would make the Apple tablet a great media playback system but I'll look at its use in my next post. It will make sense that it would have a Dock Connector because it won't be designed to act as a standalone computer if it's running OS X instead of Mac OS X. I surmise however that it will also have a DisplayPort allowing it to be connected to a monitor or more likely a projector given its nature. This will make the device slightly thicker than the iPhone but should in theory make in thinner than the MacBook Air still.

All in all this could be very exciting for people who don't want a laptop but need something portable but with a larger screen than what the iPhone and iPod Touch have. Even for those with laptops it's not always desirable to carry around so a tablet makes sense. Apple won't be introducing a pen based computer but it will be introducing a tablet done well.