

Invasion of the iPod People

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Neal, this is for you.

We're all interested in music. In the last five years or so, technology has come to a point where it can really help us to listen to our music in new, fun ways. We all probably use our computers to listen to music at least sometimes, but I think many would say if your music is limited to being played on your computer, you haven't really experienced it. You need to bring it with you to your stereo, in your car, on a jog, or in my case, across the country. It's at that point that you really begin to experience your music. It's with you constantly, and it becomes a true soundtrack for your life.

For that reason, the crux of my argument is actually not going to involve iTunes immediately, but instead initially center on the iPod, because the iPod is the real story. Let me explain.

We all know the iPod is a portable digital music player, and we know it's pretty cool. But it's more than that. The iPod is the #1 digital music player (DMP) in the world. It has sold well over a million units. Apple can't keep these things on the shelves. Its next-closest rival hasn't even sold half a million units. It's simple, beautiful, powerful, and fun to use.

The iPod's screen is gigantic next to every other DMP out there. It has a beautiful backlit display with backlit buttons. The face of the iPod is touch-sensitive, so it has no moving parts and no buttons to break. It is designed to be used by only one hand, so if you're walking, jogging, driving, or doing anything else, you can use your iPod without interrupting whatever else you're doing.

The iPod's scroll wheel is a true breakthrough. When you've got 10,000 songs stored on your DMP (Do you even *have* 10,000 songs? If you do, the iPod can hold all of them.) you won't want to have to click a button over and over like many other DMPs force you to. You won't even have to manipulate a tiny "scroll barrel" as some of the newer iPod imitations require. Just imagine clicking a button 5,000 times, or rolling a scroll barrel over and over. Does your finger hurt yet? The iPod's software engineers did a great job implementing smart acceleration into the scroll wheel so depending on how quickly you spin your thumb on the scroll wheel, the active selection scrolls through a higher number of songs, but remains easy to control. With the iPod, the song you want is just a thumb-flick away.

The iPod is also, as far as I'm aware, the only DMP to support the [AAC compression standard](#), which is an open standard *not owned by Microsoft* and not being controlled by any institution for financial gain. It is an absolutely state-of-the-art, pristine encoding format, and gives you the same high-quality sound that an MP3 would at 160kb/sec, but fits that into 128kb/sec worth of space. That means more room for more music. Very slick.

The iPod uses Firewire to download its music, and can download an entire CD worth of tunes in about 10 seconds. But the fact that Firewire is fast is only the beginning. Firewire is also the only high data rate cable that also carries enough power to charge the battery on a DMP, so you have only one cable to deal with. Many other

DMPs either make you deal with two cables (Maybe more? I don't know.) or make you supply your own batteries.

Speaking of the battery, the iPod's battery is a high-tech, high-capacity rechargeable battery, not a AA Energizer or two, so you'll never need to be going out and purchasing a new battery pack because your DMP ran out of batteries. Your player isn't much good with no power, because no power means no music. Imagine how the costs mount up over time for all those used batteries. Oh, and regular rechargeables are horrible for electronic gadgets like this, so don't go there. You'd never get 8 – 10 hours out of regular AA rechargeables in another player with the iPod's capacity.

When it comes to transferring your music, the iPod is the *only* digital music player that will automatically synchronize the songs on your computer with the songs on the iPod, so you don't have to sit around dragging and dropping music all over the place when all you want to do is plug, unplug, and go. You don't realize how useful that feature is until you use it. More importantly, the iPod will *always* be the only player able to do that, since when Apple invented the idea, they patented it.

Then there's the design. The rounded corners. The beautiful ivory-white face with the mirror-finish back. The bluish-white glow of the backlit screen with the red-backlit buttons. Everything about this little gadget just oozes style and class.

I used to complain about the iPod's price. When I first saw it, I called it the iCostTooMuch. Then I bought one. I never called it that ever again. All the little touches of class that surround this thing make it easily worth every penny that it costs. Plus, I can get you a discount.



Now that we know why the iPod is the DMP to own, let me make one additional point: iTunes is the only online music vendor that has music that is compatible with the iPod.

Sit and mull on that for a minute.

Don't get me wrong, this isn't Apple's fault. Every other company out there is under Microsoft's thumb, so they all went with the WMA format (Windows Media Audio). WMA is a proprietary Microsoft format. If you don't know why that's bad, that's another blog entirely. I don't mean another *blog entry*, I mean *another blog*. The reasons to not support Microsoft's proprietary formats dig down deep into the soul of computing, and what the purpose of technology really is. I beg of you to not press me on this point or I will never sleep because I will not be able to stop typing. I'm sure you can research this subject elsewhere on the net. My point is only that if you want to download music off the Net legally and legitimately, iTunes is your only choice if you want to use an iPod.

Lucky for you it was already the best one.

But what if you don't ever want to bring your music with you on a DMP? Well... what the heck is wrong with you? But okay, I'll humor you there. Maybe you like CDs or something.

BuyMusic

With each song you buy, your burning rights, transferring-to-DMPs rights, and transferring-to-other-computers rights vary. Maybe your U2 will allow you to burn once, but your White Stripes will only transfer to your MP3 player every other Tuesday while you're wearing purple socks. Fun! And all so you can pay as much as \$1.14 per song. The CEO of BuyMusic predicted millions of downloads in the first few days they were open. When the reporters came back a week later, he said he had no comment on the numbers, and was not able to give those figures out.



Rhapsody

You get to RENT your music for only \$10 / month! How fun! Subscription goes away? So does your music. Oh, okay, you can burn it to CD for an *extra 79 cents per song*. Gee, thanks. No, you can't actually put it on your hard drive. No, you can't put it on any DMPs. No thanks.

MusicMatch

The only thing bad I can say about these guys (having not used their software) is that their music won't work on the iPod, and I've heard the software isn't nearly as easy to use as iTunes. Their model is almost a carbon copy of Apple's and it's pretty nice. 99 cents per song. \$9.99 per album. No screwing around with licenses changing with each song. That's good work.

Napster 2.0

The good news is you get to save *4 cents* over iTunes when buying an album. The bad news is that if you want to burn that song to a CD or put it on a DMP (except the iPod) they'll ding you another dollar. Suddenly songs cost \$2! Oops! Or you could subscribe for \$10 / month and pay that even if you don't download a single song. That's the only way to get around that \$1 fee. Yay.

My point: the other services still aren't worth it. iTunes gives you everything you want, plus (on a very loose count) 150 tracks that are totally exclusive to the store. They also carry indie artists, and a bunch of other cool stuff that I have no patience to go into.

So iTunes it is! Thanks for reading.