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Veblen does the iPad: iPadification and the technologies of conspicuous consumption / Tara Brabazon

Abstract: Thorstein Veblen was one of the great scholars of the twentieth century. Indeed, his most famous concept has entered the realm of cliché: conspicuous consumption. Yet the density of his prose has meant that his wider arguments about waste, class and capitalism have not travelled well into the 21st century. Therefore, this article combines the great scholar of the 20th century with one of the oddest products of the 21st century: the iPad. Exploring why the iPad emerged – in multiple versions – through the global economic crisis, Veblen’s theories of waste gain both renewed effectiveness and application.

Keywords: iPad, iPadification, Thorstein Veblen, conspicuous consumption, waste, information literacy, disintermediation, reintermediation

Game’s over losers!

I have an iPad

Compare your lives to mine &

kill yourselves

T shirt slogan [1]

<1> Many sources, sites, platforms and theories assist the research and writing of the history of digitization in the last ten years. One of the strangest is the iPad. Launched on April 3, 2010, it continued the (imagined and heavily marketed) desire to create a successful tablet for computing, [2] while also extending the touch screens successfully trialed with the iPhone. [3] Books could be read on the screen, building on Amazon’s Kindle and Barnes and Noble’s Nook. Three models, iPad, iPad 2 and the new iPad, were released in less than two years. A fourth model and an iPad mini tumbled into production and consumption the following year. The iPad Air followed in late 2013. It was a product – indeed a series of products – searching for an audience, and found one through the persistent release of new models. Yet not all users, let alone bloggers, were convinced. Website upon website questioned its market and purpose. As Sue Halpern from *The New York Review of Books* stated, “here was a device that, sight unseen, large numbers of people wanted and believed they had to have, even without knowing precisely what it was or what it did.” [4] But the iPad was not ‘about’ functionality. It was and is an irrational purchase for an economic environment that had been described as a crunch and a crash, requiring what Richard Florida described as *The Great Reset*. [5] Clearly, in an era of another new economy (a new new economy?), much of the old economy – of unemployment, underemployment, insider trading and the profound imbalance between finance capitalism and other modes of economic development – still survives. This is not a symbolic critique. The labour conditions under which the iPad and other Apple products have been made have faced serious questions. [6] Wisman and Baker, when comparing the market ‘corrections’ of the 1920s and the 2000s, recognized that,

inequality increased dramatically in the decades leading up to the financial crises of both 1929 and 2008. Yet students of both crises have largely ignored any role that rising inequality might have played in rendering the financial sector more vulnerable to systemic dysfunction. [7]

This is a powerful argument suggesting that inequality, besides creating personal, familial and social injustice, also triggers panic capitalism. In this moment of the new (new) economy, an old (old) economic theorist increases in value. Thorstein Veblen’s theories of consumer behavior, particularly when read through a post-Baudrillard gauze, reveal that in times when social mobility is not possible, it can be simulated through credit cards and risky behavior. This simulation of affluence, so clearly embodied and promulgated by Bernie Madoff, can be criminal. However it is rarely rational.

<2> This is the context in which to frame the iPad. Although each model was released in a slightly different economic environment, it remains portable,

intuitive, mobile and features a large, dynamic and comfortable touch screen. When first removed from the box it appears to be not very useful, but the application development community have extended its functionality. There were odd accessories such as a keyboard and a camera connection kit, which remind users that it can be like the laptop computer and smart phone that they already own.[8] This camera kit was rapidly rendered redundant when the second model was released within a year. The camera connection kit provided the function that should have been installed as a default feature in the first model. Shoppers bought this, only to have two cameras included as standard in the next version. Yet the memory capacity remained small. But it was - supposedly - corrected by the use of Drop Box and the iCloud. As usual, software solves the errors and problems manifesting through hardware.

Recognizing this moment of change, this article probes the iPad as an object of digital excess. It investigates the iPad's innovation, exploring its potentials and uses in education. However the third stage of this analysis is the most important, investigating 'the iPad effect,' and the lessons to be learned about consumption, production, class and waste. The movement is from a focus on the iPad's use in education and towards Thorstein Veblen's theories, offering a new context and rationale for digital excess in the midst of a global recession. The goal of this article is not to critique the iPad, but to show the cost and consequences of obsolescence, and what happens when marketing gains greater importance than teaching and learning. The imperative is to unravel the spin of writers such as Gregory Ferenstein who affirm "how the iPad 2 will revolutionize education," and stating that "the iPad 2's wealth of new features is a boon for tech-hungry classrooms." [9] As someone who works in contemporary higher education, there are many descriptions I would acknowledge of my professional context: "tech hungry" is not the phrase I would choose.

Veblen's iPad

iBroke[10]

iPad T-shirt slogan

<3> There are certain academics who are famous beyond the walls of their university. For some reason their ideas have gained traction and momentum in government, business and popular culture. Richard Florida and Robert Putnam are current examples, but Marshall McLuhan and Noam Chomsky are others. But Thorstein Veblen can be safely added to this group of special academics who not only changed knowledge for other scholars, but altered our way of thinking about the world. Veblen wrote on business, [11] including the business of education, [12] and technology, industry and power. [13] Known as an economist and social commentator, [14] his work has been underplayed in both sociology and cultural studies. [15] While a fascinating, diverse, complex and paradoxical scholar, he remains a distinctive voice in understanding agency, modernity, industrialization and consciousness. In the context of my iPad research, it is his theories of waste that are most relevant. Veblen + Technology = iPad.

<4> The iPad's touch screen adds technological tactility to his earlier argument about fashion. Fashion curves around the body. It becomes a second skin to confirm waste and affluence. For Veblen, the connection - the closeness - to the body made fashion particularly noteworthy in his theories. While the iPods are worn, the iPads and iPhones are carried. While swiping, tapping, flicking and pinching may seem part of a sadomasochistic ritual, these odd verbs capture the interface engagement with the screen. But the touch screen adds connectivity and intimacy. The iPad screen enables tapping, pinching, sliding and scrolling. It is poor for typing: the virtual keyboard deskills typists. Flat glass is not the fastest of surfaces to manage touch typing. Yet, as Wang suggested, "if you're a hunt-and-peck typist, you may find the iPad's keyboard perfectly suited to your typing style." [16] Even with the larger screen, touch typists are not well served by the virtual keyboard. That is why - at point of release - a separate keyboard was an accessory. Significantly, it was even applauded by the audience at the product launch by Steve Jobs. Even to the Apple faithful, it was clear that a proper keyboard is required to render the iPad functional. Yet as an object of waste, the screen alone signifies affluence through dysfunctionality.

<5> Such 'necessary' accessories for a product that is not required is an effective example for Thorsten Veblen's best known concept. Conspicuous consumption [17] is derived from his wider *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Investigating how the distinctions between classes are configured and observed, he showed that "the upper classes are by custom exempt or excluded from industrial occupations." [18] However, "conspicuous consumption has gained more and more on conspicuous leisure as a means of repute." [19] While the waste of conspicuous consumption was not in itself important, Veblen probed how it is used so that the wasteful consumer is liked and esteemed by others. Probably, in understanding the history of the Apple brand after the iPod, Veblen is the best theorist. As a sociologist of affluence, he showed that fashion is narcissistic. But it was the waste of fashion that summons a desire for admiration and envy. Now, instead of fashion, the leisure class wear technology. The iPad confirms waste, showing that the consumer has so much money that they can afford to waste it. What makes Veblen so appropriate for understanding Apple's products is that he unpicked the

assumption that capitalism and progress are synonymous and that capitalism is efficient, productive and - most significantly - rational.[20] The iPad has gathered many interpretations, views and comments. Most importantly, it confirms the irrationality of consumption. Or, to cite one enthusiast, "I immediately knew I wanted one; I just didn't know why." [21]

<6> While Veblen published his concept of "conspicuous consumption" in 1899, it has entered the realm of cliché that now must be reclaimed and refreshed for its unique and important positioning in relation to the iPad. His argument was more complex than the phrase suggests. He showed that not only is status confirmed through waste, but that both the rich and poor deploy excessive consumerism to confirm superiority.[22] Therefore ostentatious behavior, which currently manifests in the purchase of technological platforms even when their use is uncertain, is a way to prove superiority over others.

<7> Veblen's theories have resonated through many disciplines and research projects. One is economic price theory.[23] His ideas have also had extraordinary currency in wine research.[24] In one of the greatest acts of either irony or ignorance, a wine consultancy firm even assumed Veblen's name as a branding device.[25] Like Veblen and the iPad, Veblen and wine are an ideal fit. There is little that separates a \$5 and \$15 bottle of wine. The drinker becomes intoxicated. But the rituals of wine drinkers, such as the masking of the label so that imbibers can identify the grape variety, location and wine maker, add passion and emotion to the unnecessary consumerism. The waste of excessively priced wine has nothing to do with the wine, but rather enforces the status connoted to the purchaser. Cournot argued - sixty years earlier than Veblen - that,

there are, in fact, some objects of whim and luxury which are only desirable on account of their rarity and of the high price which is the consequence thereof. If anyone should succeed in carrying out cheaply the crystallization of carbon, and in producing for one franc the diamond which to-day is worth a thousand, it would not be astonishing if diamonds should cease to be used in sets of jewellery, and should disappear as articles of commerce. In this case a great fall in price would almost annihilate the demand.[26]

Wine is similar. During a year of frost or little rainfall, that particular vintage of wine becomes even more valuable. The rarity connotes the value.

<8> From this example of wine, it can be hypothesized why the iPad's price is important. It was overpriced. It was not functional. That was the point. It held a crucial role in the branding history of Apple. The iPod became ubiquitous, mainly through the nano, the cheaper model. The exclusivity of the Apple brand, the alternative to the supposedly corporate Microsoft, was dented and it became mainstream popular culture. Therefore, an elite, overpriced and under-utilized object - a platform looking for a purpose - was the way to freshen up the Apple brand. To cite Marx, "let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut." [27] Even though Veblen rallied against Marx through his career, Veblen did continue to develop his theory of the positional good:

the motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which the institution of ownership touches. The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction.[28]

Therefore, buying expensive goods is not enough. It is necessary that the expensive goods are visible and noted by others. That is why wine labels are so important. Mobile goods - on bodies or that can be carried - are integral to connoting status. Wine can be taken to a dinner party or restaurant. These bottles do not confirm taste, but waste. The drinker has so much money that they can - literally - afford to swallow it. These mobile signifiers of waste are important. An expensive house cannot move. A car is mobile. Unfortunately it has to be parked. Technology that can be carried in a handbag and pulled out of a briefcase at a meeting is the most intimate and precise application of Veblen's ideas.

<9> There is a reason why Veblen's theories travel effectively through the twentieth and twenty first century. Although published in 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* showed how many pre-industrial formations of leisure survived through the industrial revolution.

The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods.[29]

The key trope in the argument is waste: the individual or family has so much money that it is possible to be wasteful. One example that survives to our present is the use of silver cutlery with meals. It confirms wealth and waste, because - by the criterion of functionality - stainless steel makes better cutlery. Silver tarnishes and is a soft metal, and therefore not effective for the slicing of

steak. But selecting silver over steel is not 'about' usefulness, but conspicuous consumption. This wastefulness of conspicuous consumption can hurt people's lives, buying goods and services that they cannot afford and do not need. Indeed, the complex relationship between work and leisure in post-Fordism only increases the relevance of Veblen's argument. The problem with part time, casual and contract work is that it creates the illusion of leisure, rather than unemployment or underemployment. In post-fordism, the division between work and leisure is not precisely drawn. Indeed, mobile platforms - such as phones - enable the rapid movement and intrusion of work into 'private' life.

<10> The ideology of consumerism - the fun of shopping - is a lie. Credit cards are part of that lie. Stress is created through the gulf between expectations and aspirations, experiences and reality. Suddenly buying particular clothes, music, food or technology suggests that what we buy determines who we are. It is very easy to conflate lifestyle choices with economic and cultural development. Veblen's research is a reminder that class-based injustice and inequality introduces waste into the system. Since his most famous work was published, the proliferation of goods has meant that the differentiation *between* goods has become even more important. Brands are the variable of differentiation in consumerism. Anyone can have a bag. Chanel is distinct. Brands configure the taxonomy of consumers.[30] What the study of technology adds to this discussion is an algorithm of speed to changing fashions. Andreas Chai, Peter Earl and Jason Potts stated that, "the theory of fashion has a curious but definite pariah status in modern microeconomics." [31] Its ephemerality makes it seem trivial. When fashion moves from fabric to technology, it is connoted with seriousness, progress and social transformation.

<11> It is fascinating how many celebrators of the iPad attempt to argue for a level of functionality. Wallace Wang's dedication to *My new iPad* provides a taste of this mode of argument.

To all those who shied away from 'normal' computers for years, yet instantly recognized the potential of the iPad to make computing easy and intuitive at last; to all those experienced computer users who have grown tired of computers that require constant maintenance with endless amounts of anti-virus, anti-spyware, registry optimizing, and disk defragmentation programs, and have finally recognized a computer that just works; to all those early enthusiasts who embraced the new computing paradigm of the iPad and threw themselves headlong into its unique features long before everyone else understood what the iPad could really do; to all those who eagerly embraced change and were unafraid to toss aside the mental boundaries and limitations of their old way of thinking: this book is dedicated to you. [32]

In such a passage, there is an assumption that this new product is solving old problems. What those problems might actually be - beyond viruses, complex interfaces, boredom with computing as usual - is unclear. Certainly the iPad is a post-fordist product: flexible, customized and personal. It is an ebook reader, video player, music player, internet browser, slide show creator and presenter. Applications, to provide a few examples, include a day planner, personal fitness trainer, game player and musical instrument. The obsolescence of the product is justified as inevitable and welcoming: "like all batteries, your iPad's battery will eventually wear out, but by then you'll probably have a new iPad model anyway." [33] Similarly, while Wang stressed the object's newness and innovation, by page 141 of his book, he admitted that "you can think of your iPad as an independent computer, but it's really an extension of a desktop or laptop computer." [34] Within the same book, the iPad moved from self-standing revolution to handmaiden to more powerful hardware.

<12> The iPad has been released in a difficult economic environment. Therefore the importance of waste as a marker of affluence has actually increased. Obsolescence is a necessary part of capitalist exchange. Thorstein Veblen's conceptualization of conspicuous consumption confirms that wastefulness signifies class and status. If a shopper can waste money on extravagant goods and services, then they perform affluence. The iPad is an object of desire and opportunity. It is also an example of waste. Most hardware and software balance cost, value, risk and innovation. In the case of the iPad, the focus was on the lightness, design and its 'magic.' Instead of 'magic,' it is the mobility that is most important to connoting status. Mobility is a new marker of class. Those in power can move. Those lacking power cannot. But further, those in power can move information through mobile platforms and cloud computing. Those lacking power are locked into space-specific and time-specific media and communication systems. Rich Ling's monograph captured this distinction. His book *New tech, new ties: how mobile communication is reshaping communication*, [35] shows how mobile communication enables a range of social interactions disconnected from physicality. This e-living creates layers of performance, projection and mediations in life. Facebook friends can be 'edited.' The status updates on LinkedIn may be tailored differently from Academia.edu.

<13> A key analytical challenge is to align Veblen's conspicuous consumption with the new theorizations of mobility. Objects that move signify status to a range of audiences. Flat screen televisions do not serve that purpose. But the Apple suite

of products is ideal. They substituted mobility for quality. The MP3 is enabled by file compression that has allowed thousands of songs to be loaded into an object the size of a cigarette package. But this has meant, as Joseph Plambeck realized, "a generation of fans has happily traded fidelity for portability and convenience." [36] In other words, it is a music player that does not play quality music. It held other functions: conspicuous consumption and waste. However once the iPod became part of popular culture, this role was dented, requiring another product to replicate the function.

<14> This complexity with regard to power, mobility, class and technology is often reified into simple stories about age and media. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser provide a clear example of this tendency.

Today, most young people in many societies around the world carry mobile devices - cell phones, Sidekicks, iPhones - at all times, and these devices don't just make phone calls; they also send text messages, surf the Internet, and download music. [37]

These sentences were only published in 2008. But these words now seem antiquated, simple, self evident, generalized and wrong. The iPad has proven the lie of the Google Generation and Digital Natives. 'The young people' did not buy an iPad. The supposed conflation of youth and new technology is incorrect and the iPad exemplifies that error.

<15> The sociology of technology use can no longer be ignored. The assumptions about 'young people' must be critiqued. For example, *The Australian* reviewed the trend under the heading of "Young learning to love their iPads." [38] The youngest person cited in the article is 25 year old Kayla Santoso, who explains, "Now I take my iPad everywhere, and I can use it anywhere ... You can do most things on it that I can do on my laptop, so it's great. I play games and check Facebook ... I'll set my email up on it soon." [39] Rebecca Watson, with the puzzling job title from the Queensland University of Technology as "user experience specialist," confirmed that "it's much, much easier to use ... It fits anywhere and is much less cumbersome ... Anything you want to do that's off the cuff, or on the fly, you've got it right there." [40] Again, the nature of this 'anything' is unclear. Further, are university academics - rather than 'user experience specialists' - training students to do 'anything' 'off the cuff' and 'on the fly'? The unqualified enthusiasms - through the use of such expansive generalizations as "everywhere" and "anywhere" - block a concrete statement of the detailed deployment in education.

<16> There are some uses of the platform in teaching and learning. Nathaniel Ostashevski and Doug Reid have also probed the potential of mobile multimedia access to teaching and learning materials. It is "a delivery tool" enhanced by a large touch screen with built in speakers and some data collection capacities. [41] Similarly, as a point of delivery platform for information management, the iPad has value. The mobility of information in the health professions is particularly important. Christopher Cannon reported the value of the platform in cardiology. [42] It also presents opportunities for roving reference support by librarians.

<17> These are very specific professions and communities. These functions are not generalizable. Therefore, it is important to log the actual users of the iPad. While there are no representative figures, a series of surveys have shown that the assumptions about 'the young people' are flawed. On the Apple iPad Forum, 354 participants logged their age. Needless to say, these are the enthusiasts. There is no sense of how they were selected. It seems they discovered a link within the Forum and placed themselves in categories.

15 and under	9	2.54%
16-24	27	7.63%
25-35	60	16.95%
36-45	89	25.14%
46-55	81	22.88%
Over 55	88	24.86% [43]

There are problems with the categories, with the most obvious being that "over 55" is a huge designation. The life and experience of a 55 year old man is distinct from an 80 year old woman. But the research is showing that iPads are owned by more men than women, particularly in the 35-44 age group. [44] This is the conventional early adopter profile. Similarly men dominate all age profiles of users. [45] Particular social media usage was also high. Not surprisingly, when considering the capacity of the iPad's screen to present photographs, Flickr use was 143% higher than the overall average of online users. [46] However most interesting in terms of Veblen's iPad is Ginny Hung's hunch: "Given the economy, people with higher earning power were probably the first to buy the iPad." [47] This statement was verified by a Yahoo survey that reported, "The first Yahoo! iPad users were 94% more likely to be affluent consumers with solid wealth and strong incomes than typical U.S. Yahoo! Users." [48] This tentative realization is important. During the launch presentation by Steve Jobs, the iPad appeared in a social and economic vacuum. There was no sense that such a product was unusual and

even inappropriate for a post-credit crunch America. The comments written in response to this story about the affluence of consumers were not so reticent. KTBII was surprised at the gender bias, but recognized that class is also gendered as a category.

Was surprised to see the 2:1 gender skew, especially considering that the stats on Apple products in general are pretty balanced between men and women. Is this because men generally have higher incomes, i.e. more purchasing power for luxury items? Let's face it, at this point the iPad is a luxury item - i.e. no one's getting this to REPLACE their computer. Or at least not yet.[49]

Verndale extended this argument, recognizing not only income and age, but consumption patterns.

I agree, my first thought was income has to be a key factor with these stats. The age group with the highest percentage of usage is 35-44, which are most likely individuals with higher incomes because they are more established in their careers. But do you think it has anything to do with how this age group interacts and consumes media?[50]

While this commentary about the consumption of media holds relevance, it is the conspicuous consumption of hardware, software and applications that denotes class. The size of the iPad also matters here. It is visible. While the iPod is ubiquitous, the iPad is yet to reach saturation through popular culture. Mark Walsh realized that there is pattern in Apple consumers. Forty percent of iPad users also own an iPhone and earn more than US\$100,000.[51] The key difference that designates this iPad cohort from iPod owners is price. Walsh stated that, "while the iPad has been described as a big iPod, its minimum \$500 price means that most kids will have to rely on a parent buying one to get their hands on the tablet. So the iPad will definitely skew older than the iPod touch audience." [52] Even more fascinating - and even less rigorous - were the surveys that asked online contributors to discuss the typical iPad owner. Answers included "selfish" and "unkind." [53] Clearly, even though these unrepresentative surveys, the iPad and its owners are being marked as distinct from the owners of other Apple products.

<18> The sociology of the iPad that was tentatively offered through these surveys was distinct from the evangelical commitments from many technology journalists. Mike Elgan termed this moment in history the "iPad Era." Yet from his hyperbole, a significant realization emerges.

I think the iPad is the most important launch in Apple's history - bigger than the Mac, iPod or iPhone. More than that, I think it's the most important cultural phenomenon of this generation. It's bigger than technology ... The success of a consumer electronics product depends not on how powerful, functional or fully equipped something is, but entirely on the answer to a simple question: how many people will buy it? And how many individuals buy something depends on how many types of people buy it ... I'm predicting that old people, toddlers, baby boomers, teenagers, twentysomethings - OK, that all age groups will use the iPad in significant numbers. It will be the first consumer electronics product in recent decades to match the age demographic of the TV. [54]

Elgan is wrong, but his flaws are productive. The iPad could not, has not and will not replicate the audience of television. It is an expensive, niche product. However he realized that functionality has little to do with the success of consumer electronics. The question is not 'how many,' but who. This is where Veblen offers significant correctives and explanations to technology journalists. While Veblen reveals an integrated matrix of consumption and class, technology journalists pick one variable, such as age and render it over-significant. [55]

<19> Actually, the iPad is about control: of money, status, power, space, technology and - most importantly - information. One strategy to enable information literacy in an age of underfunded educational institutions and libraries is to buy a platform that enables users to purchase applications that restrict the amount of information that is stored, delivered and used. Dan Colman termed this relationship "The iPad and information's third age." [56] He realized that this platform and the applications available for it are a strategy - through hardware and software - to create a proxy for information literacy.

It has become virtually impossible for a person to assess the quality, relevance, and usefulness of more information than she can process in a lifetime. And this is the problem that will only get worse as information continues to proliferate. But a quick look at popular technologies shows some of the ways people are working to address it. Social networking leverages selected communities to recommend books, restaurants, and movies. Contexts - and location-aware applications help focus search results and eliminate extraneous complexity. And customization and personalization allow people to create informational spaces that limit the intrusion of informational chaos. [57]

The iPad is a post-fordist product. It controls, limits and customizes, rather than enabling diverse open content to be delivered to a user who holds advanced information literacy to sort, sift and manage data on the basis of their information needs rather than income. Or, as reified in blogs: "a gadget for rich, thirty-something males"[58] and "Who loves iPad? Old men says Yahoo."[59]

<20> This group with money and status but without information literacy captures Thorstein Veblen's conception of "trained incapacity"[60] from his 1914 monograph, *The Instinct of Workmanship in the Industrial Arts*. [61] This conceptualization investigated the difficulty in moving people beyond the parameters of their knowledge. Google encourages searchers to enter words and phrases into the search engine that they already know, but the development of information literacy requires considered interventions to create learning and intellectual movement. It is also difficult to enable citizens and workers to extend their skills and attempt new tasks. The iPad operates well in this environment. It is customized, personal, non-threatening and operated through touch, rather than more complex modes of mediation such as touch typing.

The iPad effect: conspicuous consumption after the credit crunch

iPad

u can buy happiness. [62]

iPad T-shirt slogan

<21> There is the pretense that consumption can be radical, ethical or political. However the iPad shows the lie of such assumptions. Certainly, there have been attacks on brands. Documentaries such as *No Logo*, *Supersize me* and *The Corporation* have taken such a task as their focus. Jo Littler realized that 'ethical consumption,' fair trade campaigns, green consumption and corporate responsibility are merely another form of branding. Without citing Veblen, she proclaimed that "the problems of contemporary consumerism have perhaps never been so conspicuous." [63]

<22> The era of accelerated modernity is upon us. Speed of change is palpable. There is no longer a capitalism or modernity, but capitalisms and modernities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the intensity of love for the iPad has passed, and quite quickly. Even amongst the devoted and often obsessional Apple 'fans,' the ardour waned. Rik Myslewski described his relationship as similar to a short-lived and intense affair at college.

My fading relationship with my iPad reminds me of a long-ago college fling with a young lovely. High anticipation, fervent consummation, growing familiarization, decreasing fascination, and the inevitable: "No, hon, it's not you. It's me." Which is the line you use even when you're pretty damn sure that it is indeed her ... So it has been with the iPad. I've taken it on business trips for note-taking and email, have had no problems with its much-maligned keyboard, and even play the occasional game. But I'm spending less and less time with it. As a fanboi, I'd like to say that the jury is still out, but I'm afraid that the most important evidence – that I'm less frequently using the li'l guy for either business or pleasure – is in. My iPad is clearly moving into Newtonian territory. [64]

There has been and will be other iPads. There is now an iPad effect: an object that is branded, promoted, spun and sold. Yet fundamental questions about its usefulness remain. The current rendering of capitalism is excessive. Few citizens need another dress, mascara or lipstick. Few need a new car, drill or widescreen television to get through their day. Capitalism is not logical or rational. It is ridiculous, foolish and replaces shopping with feeling. Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman and Martin Jacques have all written powerful scholarly works confirming the irrationality of capitalism. However it is the iPad that captures their arguments with power, potency and with the coldness of the glass and chrome. Every function it enables can be performed better on another platform. This reality was masked by Steve Jobs, as he continually referred to the object in the presentations for iPads one and two as "magical." Magic – like religion – is the retreat of the desperate, the unthinking and the believing. Why does the sun rise in the morning? Instead of understanding the rotation of the earth, it is easier to reply "magic." To explain why students who complete all the research and (magically) do well in their assignments, their classmates describe them as "lucky." Luck and magic block reason, argument and thought.

<23> Apple has summoned plenty of luck and magic. As a corporation, they have mobilized a hippy alternative ideology against the monolithic Microsoft. Now Apple is bigger than Microsoft. The antibrand is now the brand. Released on October 14, 2001, the iPod pushed an edgy corporation into mainstream popular culture. There is nothing problematic about popular culture, but it is impossible to be popular, unpopular, mainstream, edgy, defiant and subcultural at the same time. As David Smith stated in *The Observer*, "the iPod is losing its cool" and "the device is now too common to be cutting edge." [65] Throughout its history, Apple certainly

popularized particular platforms and features, including colour screens, the mouse, drop down menus and variable fonts. But it was the iPod that transformed the company from edgy innovator to mainstream business.

<24> The iPad, like the iPod, entered popular culture through its leisure-based applications. Therefore, significant institutional translations are required to move it from leisure to work and leisure to education. It is important not to confuse these functions. When the iPod Video was released, it did not have a great impact on educational delivery. Yet Henry Jenkins valued it, affirming that it,

Seems emblematic of the new convergence culture - not because everyone believes the small screen of the iPod is the ideal vehicle for watching broadcast content but because the ability to download reruns on demand represents a major shift in the relationship between consumers and media content.[66]

The important corrective to Jenkins' analysis is that students are not consumers and educational materials are much more intricate and complex than 'media content.' Certainly the communication flows around teaching spaces are transforming, but considered decisions need to be made about media selection in education. Simply because a technological platform can permit the time shifting of a teaching moment does not mean that it should occur. The advantage of analogue media is that it is not repeatable. It is distinctive and ephemeral. In terms of developing discipline and motivation in students, analogue media can be effective because once the session has passed, the educational moment has gone and cannot be repeated. To welcome and activate content on demand is to suggest that teaching and learning can be distilled to content. The relationship between teachers, students, curriculum and educational media is much more complex and intricate than a content on demand model suggests.

<25> The 'iPad effect' is an expression which recognizes that particular products are redundant at the point of release. The iPad is not a computer. It is not a smart phone. It does not have a USB slot to enable an increase in its storage. It is tethered to iTunes for delivering the content resident on the platform. While, in a period of accelerated modernity, there has been a precious window of enthusiasm for a new product, the iPad has been released with Veblen's conspicuous consumption, obsolescence and waste packaged in with the product. Reviews of the iPad showed that it was flawed, limited, soon to be upgraded, and yet purchased anyway. As each model arrived, news teams were dispatched to film and interview the consumers sleeping overnight in front of an Apple Store to buy a product that they did not need. As Veblen realized,

to sustain one's dignity - and to sustain one's self-respect - under the eyes of people who are not socially one's immediate neighbours, it is necessary to display the token of economic worth, which practically coincides pretty closely with economic success.[67]

In an age of the read write web, prosumer and participatory culture, the iPad is a platform to consume media, rather than to produce it.[68] Lonzell Watson described it as "a digital media player and is packed with entertainment possibilities." [69] There are a range of corporations that need an iPad style of platform to operate. Content generators have been hurt by the age of the amateur. Remember, Rupert Murdoch described the iPad as a "game changer." [70] He needs it to be. With newspaper sales declining, he requires a marketing model to glean profit from remote screen reading of his journalists' content. The open and free web harmed media corporations. But the capacity to feed semi-closed and controllable content (through iTunes) is ideal for traditional media corporations.[71] These applications - from *The Times* or *The Sun* - run on top of the web. In other words, applications are a form of reintermediation. They filter, frame, shape and organize content by a gatekeeper for an audience. As the web has become so large and information literacy so scarce, applications bundle and limit available data. Tom Chatfield stated that,

Small screens plus limited time and concentration means that users are in urgent need of well-crafted, convenient programs: self-contained internet applications known as apps that bypass conventional browsing to offer everything from restaurant recommendations to instructions on making the perfect cappuccino, from mobile spreadsheets to interactive maps, games, dictionaries, recipe books, language guides, birdsong interpreters, exercise routines and even pocket torches.[72]

So instead of users/consumers/students/citizens gaining the knowledge, information and expertise to manage their information environment or even their delivery systems, Apple has become Google 2.0. Instead of search engine algorithms limiting the results, Apple has corporatized this desperation to control information, not by an algorithm but a credit card. This has created what Chatfield described as "a life full of smart devices." [73] What has happened to a life full of smart people?

<26> Significantly, no refereed articles at the point of writing this article have linked Veblen's theories and the iPad. Instead, the iPad literature is filled with 'how to' guides. They are descriptive, rather than theoretical. The iPad has not

been used to question capitalism, but reinforce it. Michael E. Cohen, Dennis Cohen and Lisa Spangenberg's *The iPad Project Book: Stuff you can do with your iPad*[74] is an archetype. They reveal 'the stuff' early on in the book.

What is the iPad for? It's for fun. It's for work. It's for convenience. It's for doing whatever a legion of app developers can make a sleek, bright, big-screen, handheld, touch-driven device do - reading books, playing games, looking at photos, looking up at the stars, doing budgets, sending and receiving email, browsing the Web, reserving plane tickets, watching movies or TV, listening to music, writing novels or sonnets, drawing pictures and so on.[75]

The waste and excess of iPad owners are also logged: "If you have an iPad ... chances are very good that you have another computer - if not two, or three, or more - knocking about your home or office." [76] Similarly the dysfunction and clunky nature of the hardware is justified: "Yes, we know - things like contact lists, appointment books, and browser bookmarks aren't songs, so it does seem a little odd (OK, more than a little odd) to use iTunes to move them back and forth between your computer and your iPad. Don't question. That's just the way it is. Embrace it." [77] Through such descriptions, justifications and hyperbole, Veblen's work is ideal and indeed integral to the study of the iPad.

<27> Veblen's role in American sociology was to combine Darwinism with institutional economics, developing new ways of thinking about the wastefulness of consumption for the purpose of developing status. His 'evolutionary' economics developed, as Thomas Sowell confirmed, "a theory as to why innovations take place." [78] Yet such a theory was not only describing wealth by the wealthy, but the wastefulness and vanity by the poor through an act of emulation.

<28> With conspicuous leisure no longer sufficient, economic systems were required that were not driven by utility, but by an array of pre-industrial social forces. Therefore, the credit crunch, the proliferation of foreclosures and job insecurity has only increased the value of Veblen's (metaphoric) iPad. The desire and social value of commodities increase when the price increases, inverting the law of demand. [79] Such trends are seen with wine, shoes, clothes and the iPad. A high price signifies exclusivity. The struggle for status has become even stronger after the crash and crunch. As Zygmunt Bauman realized,

Consumer freedom was originally a compensation for the loss of the freedom and autonomy of the producer. Having been evicted from production and communal self-rule, the individual drive to self-assertion found its outlet in the market game. One can suppose that at least in part the continuing popularity of the market game derives from its virtual monopoly as the vehicle of self-construction and individual autonomy. The less freedom exists in the other spheres of life, the stronger is the popular pressure on the further extension of consumer freedom - whatever its cost. [80]

Affluenza [81] results, with economic success creates further desire for goods, rather than fulfilment. While such microeconomic moments cause pseudo-spiritual journeys for meaning and purpose, it is the macroeconomic explanation that is most important.

<29> In the space between employee income and the purchase of consumer goods is positioned the credit card. [82] Therefore, the capacity to read status on the basis of goods is increasingly mediated through unsecured credit. Ross Mitchell extended the argument to state that, "all modern materialism can be reduced to waste by non-productive consumption of time and visible displays of wealth." [83] Technology is particularly susceptible to this maxim, and Veblen's theories are particularly appropriate. The original goal of technological change was to create new tools and processes to formulate efficiencies and a better use of natural resources. Yet Veblen argued in his 1923 book *Absentee ownership and business enterprise in recent times* that technology was being applied irrationally and inefficiently, with greed both generating ineffectual uses and a waste of natural resources. [84]

<30> When even *Wired* readers indicate that they will not buy a product then there must be some issues with it. Priya Ganapati reported a poll for the magazine featuring the views of 1,114 readers. Sixty percent reported that they would not buy it. One respondent, captnemo commented,

A 'game changer,' according to *Wired* magazine editor in Chief Chris Anderson.' Ummmm... Not until the iPad is redesigned to actually do something half-way useful. And it's going to have to do something way-more useful than simply sitting around making a fashion statement. Until that time rolls around, I'll be at work over here in the corner, getting some useful work out of my \$200 Asus Netbook. ;) [85]

Another contributor, finkland, continued: "The iPad lies between a laptop and the smart phone. It's a poor substitute for either one. I can't find any practical use for it. I don't want one." [86] These contributors have realized that there are better and more 'practical' platforms for 'useful work.'

<31> Veblen died in August 1929, before the Great Depression. The consequences and costs of conspicuous consumption suddenly provided a disastrous example of his theory of conspicuous consumption. Veblen was somewhat mis-placed and misunderstood in his time, but in our era he seems appropriate and remarkably relevant. Like a Jon Stewart of economic theory, he believed in rationality, yet made capitalism look bizarre, illogical and strange. He did value agency – that humans could make different choices. But because of his attention to institutional economics, he offered a great method to track, theorize and understand technology.

<32> Veblen argued that technological change created institutional change. But this is not the deterministic relationship it appears. Instead, at the moment that a new technology is released, there are no rules, practices or behaviors that govern how it is to be used. The institutional and instructional discourses are not in place. So the automobile was invented before road rules. MP3s were exchanged before copyright law was tightened. Such an argument is extended to its (illogical) extreme by the iPad. It was released with no purpose. There were no instructions and few features pre-loaded. It was marketed as “magic,” and intentionally omitted some features that would have increased its use, so that new models would rapidly replace it. Veblen’s theory has found its ideal application. Veblen’s iPad is the symbol of the credit crunch, the craziness of consumer spending during a time of economic collapse. Yet the iPad is a reminder that Apple is no longer just a computing firm. It is a mobile device company. The iPad is the peacock of its products. Just as the peacock’s tail is both an adornment and part of the sexual display, so is the iPad lacking function but increasing status.

Notes

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http://www.zazzle.com/i_have_an_ipad_tshirt-235815352546854318

[2] Apple’s first tablet computer was the Newton MessagePad 100 in 1993.

[3] Juhani Pallasmaa, in *The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses*, (Chichester: John Wiley& Sons, 2007) stated that “touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves,” p. 11

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[5] R. Florida, *The Great Reset: how new ways of living and working drive post-crash prosperity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010)

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[15] *ibid.*

- [16] W. Wang, *My new iPad: a user's guide*, (San Francisco: No Starch Press, 2010), p. 44
- [17] T. Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption*, (London: Penguin, 2005: 1899)
- [18] *ibid.*, p. 1
- [19] *ibid.*, p. 99
- [20] While making these hot, powerful and devastating critiques, his writing was cold. He seemed to detach ideas from adjectives. This capacity explains John Diggin's clear point that, "Veblen seems to delight everyone and satisfy no one," from *Thorstein Veblen: theorist of the leisure class*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. xii
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