Will Apple’s iPad be the ‘game changer’ to realise the tablet computer’s potential, or will it join the ‘Newton’ graveyard? Ben Furfie investigates.

Three years ago, netbooks exploded onto the scene revolutionising the IT sector, effectively killing Microsoft’s Ultra-Mobile PC concept overnight and speeding up convergence between the technology and telecoms sectors. However, while everyone from Microsoft to Carphone Warehouse rushed to make the most of this new type of device, one company stood quietly on the sidelines: Apple. Despite having transformed from a computer manufacturer to a mobile devices company in less than a decade, thanks largely to the ubiquitous iPod and iPhone brands, it refused to get involved with the netbook gold rush, even going as far as to describe them as ‘junk’.

Even at the launch of the iPad, the company’s chief executive Steve Jobs attacked netbooks, describing them as nothing more than small, underpowered laptops and stating: “If there is going to be a third category of device, then it has to be better at certain tasks than a laptop or a smartphone, otherwise it has no reason for being.”

It’s a similar story with the PowerBook: the ancestor of today’s MacBook range and the first to use the current keyboard at the top, pointer device at the
Features_35_C2201R1380.BK.indd   35

TAKING ON SONY AND NINTENDO

Another of the features that Apple is pushing is the iPad’s compatibility with many of the applications – and in particular, games – originally published for the iPhone and iPod. With handheld gaming worth over £9.5bn worldwide, it’s clear that Apple has its sights set on increasing its share of that figure.

While the iPad is larger than both Sony’s PlayStation Portable and the Nintendo DS, the lower cost of development, ease of purchase and alternative revenue forms has grabbed the attention of the games development and publishing community, especially as it relies solely on downloaded content.

If Apple can crack the gaming market, it won’t be the first company to use the attraction of games to sell other features. Both Sony and Microsoft have already proved that using one feature to sell another is a viable business model, such as with Blu-ray and online gaming respectively.

THE IPAD – A SOLO STAR?

So how do you measure if a device is really a game changer? Based on the iPad’s potential to redress the balance between print media and the internet, especially with the 3G version of the device and its emphasis on addressing a real market need, it’s fair to say the iPad is certainly a game changer.

Maybe we shouldn’t be asking if the iPad is a game changer; but whether it can succeed alone, or will it bring forward a new age of tablet devices? “It’s not the first time tablet PCs have been talked about as the next big thing,” comments Wooden.

“However, right now many manufacturing giants, including HP, Lenovo and Dell, are investing heavily into similar touch screen enabled devices as the iPad.

“When you have corporate monoliths like that leveraging their formidable budgets behind something, it tends to budge.”