Apple iPad Pro 2020 review

We've been using Apple's latest iPad Pro for about a month now, so this review has been updated with what we've discovered.

2020's iPad Pro is a modest upgrade to 2018's model, with what new performance it offers being more about future-proofing than affecting your day-to-day life now. It boasts a few largely irrelevant new features – and the real innovation is in, of all things, an accessory that will work just as well with the previous model. But still the iPad Pro remains the tablet for choice for artists and designers – it was already so far ahead of the competition that there may be little to improve at this stage.

If you own an 2018 iPad Pro, it's very much "nothing to see here". Whether you're looking at the 11- or 12.9-inch model – our review unit from Apple was the larger model – from the outside there's only one way to tell the difference, which we'll come onto later. Behind the screen there's a new chip – the A12X Bionic, replacing the A12 Bionic with what's essentially the same core processor but an upgraded GPU.

This means that when benchmarked using a synthetic benchmark such as Geekbench, we saw no real change in CPU performance but 8% better in its GPU test. However, this makes no real difference in use – the 2018 iPad Pro doesn't creak when dealing with very complex Photoshop file and the 2020 doesn't either.

Even Apple is aware that the boosted performance is more for developers to tap into in the future, rather than boosting current-generation apps.

The new rear camera has a quad design that’s similar to that found on Apple’s current generation of iPhones. The quality is exceptional – though you’ve still got to deal with the fact that anyone who uses an iPad for photography without good reason should be run out of town with flaming pitchforks for doing crimes with their sticking out elbows poking passers-by and fellow tourists. (Good reasons, of course, include not being able afford a phone with a great camera as well as an iPad, or any impairment that makes holding something the size of an iPad easier for you).

The front-facing camera is relatively low-res for selfies but still good enough to show how dashing you look on your next FaceTime/Zoom/Teams/Meet etc video call. The iPad Pro has five microphones and four speakers, so audio quality during calls

is sharp both in what you and others hear. The sound quality when playing music and films is also excellent for a tablet – not on a part with the MacBook Pro, for example, but good enough that you may not feel the need to connect it to a separate speaker when at your desk.

A neat – if not new – trick here is that which speakers do what changes depending on which way round you have the iPad – so whether you're using it in landscape or portrait mode, you'll hear bass from all four speakers, but the mid-range and high-frequency sounds come from the top speakers for a more pleasurable audio experience.

The camera also includes a LIDAR sensor, which turns it into a 3D scanner that works in real time, allowing the iPad to combine live information about the world around you with analysis and external data. This enables some incredible applications – from medical applications that let to interior design apps from the likes of . However, what it's not really useful for is content creation – the iPad is just too heavy to hold up for extended periods of time with a single hand. If you want to sculpt, build or play in the real world for more than a couple of minutes, you'll need to wait for AR glasses and apps to catch up with VR.

Also debuting alongside this new iPad Pro is the Magic Keyboard for iPad – which works just as happily with the 2018 iPad Pro as with the new model. And oh my, this makes typing on the iPad a whole different experience from the Smart Keyboard Folio that was the previous generation's main companion.

The Smart Keyboard Folio Keyboard (*left*) and the new Magic Keyboard (*right*)

The Smart Keyboard Folio is similar to the thin keyboards you get with tablets such as Microsoft’s Surface Pro – with rubbery keys that are fine for short emails and briefs, but I wouldn’t want to write something the length of this review on it. The Magic Keyboard feels – and works – more like the laptop keyboard.

The keys are large and feel responsive to type on – they have a lot of ’travel’, ie how deep they drop when you press on them. This makes touch-typing effortless. They’re not as comfortable as the latest generation of MacBook Pro or a truly top-flight keyboard such as Logitech’s MX Keys – but I’d be happy to spend all day typing on it.

The Magic Keyboard also features a small trackpad, which works

with the cursor support added to iPadOS 13.4. Initially, I suspected that trackpad/cursor support was primarily aimed at iPad Pro users who didn't have a Pencil – so not *Digital Arts* readers – but there are specific times when using the trackpad is much quicker and easier than picking up the Pencil, selecting what you want, then putting it down and going back to typing. Text selection when writing is the most obvious example here – but I found it very helpful in both spreadsheets and page layout apps like Affinity Publisher.

The trackpad is on the small size – useful on the move but if you were going to use the cursor support a lot, I'd recommend using a mouse (again I'd look to Logitech's MX range here).

As with the Folio, the Magic Keyboard attaches magnetically to the back of the iPad Pro, jutting out backwards with hinges in opposite directions to support the iPad itself. The main difference here is that the Magic Keyboard's lower hinge is mechanical, supporting the iPad so it hovers over the rest of the keyboard – whereas the Smart Folio relied on grooves above the keyboard to rest the iPad in. The end result is something that is very stylish but has practical benefits too, as you can adjust the angle of the iPad's screen to a much finer degree than with the two position options of the Folio.

Apple fans will also be pleased that the part of the Magic Keyboard that attaches to the back of the iPad proudly displays an embossed Apple logo – which the Folio did not.

The lower hinge also features a USB-C port that lets you charge the iPad Pro. Technically it can do this more slowly than if you plug a charging cable into the usual slot in the iPad itself, but that only matters if you've upgraded your power pack. The Magic Keyboard's port supports charging at up to 22W, while the power adapter in the iPad Pro box is 18W. If you use a more powerful charger – eg Apple's own 30W charger – you'll get up to 30W through plugging it directly.

The advantage to using the keyboard is again both aesthetic and practical. Having your charging cable running along your desk or table is much nicer to look at than it sticking out in mid-air, but it also turns the keyboard into a dock where you can leave your iPad Pro in 'laptop mode', quickly grab it and the Pencil to sit and draw with in on your lap and then

quickly return.

Drawing is possible using the iPad Pro in ‘laptop mode’, where you’re using it almost like an easel. However, your arms and wrists would have to happy with the screen being at a near-to-vertical angle – you can’t tilt it down to a drawing table-like lower angle than many artists would find more comfortable for drawing.

The Pencil is the same as that launched alongside the 2018 model – which isn’t a complaint as it’s still one of the best stylii around. Some artists and designers were prefer the greater pressure sensitivity, rotation control, buttons and width of the Wacom Pro Pen – which works with Wacom’s own MobileStudio Pro tablet PC – but to my mind, the Apple Pencil

just feels better in the hand. Against other stylii – such as the Microsoft Surface Pen – the Pencil is like a Rotring fineliner to the others' supermarket own-brand ballpoint.

The same is true for the iPad Pro – the only reason I'd choose the Surface Pro over the iPad Pro is that many design, video and animation applications either don't exist on the iPad (Adobe XD and InDesign) or exist in cut-down forms (Premiere Rush). The iPadOS's clunky approach to files, folders and especially moving files between apps is one of the few areas where Windows does it better – and working with third-party online storage whether Dropbox, Google Drive or OneDrive can be a right pain.

But the iPad Pro is still the best tablet for artists and designers. At £299/$299 for the 11-inch version and £329/$349 for the 12.9-inch, the Magic Keyboard is a pricy addition – but more than worth it if you spend many hours writing scripts, briefs or articles.

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