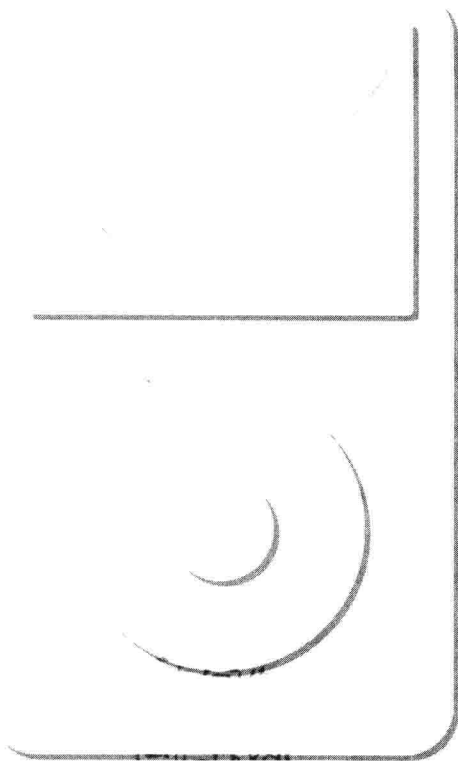




# **The Perfect Thing**

How the iPod Shuffles  
Commerce, Culture,  
and Coolness



**Steven Levy**

Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney



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**To Andrew and Allie**

## Author's Note

From following the iPod since its inception, both as a reporter and someone bound to his subject literally by the ears, I came to understand that one feature in particular was not only central to the enjoyment of this ingenious device but has come to symbolize its impact on the larger media landscape—and perhaps to embody the direction of the digital revolution in general.

Shuffle.

As I document in these pages, mixing one's music library in the high-tech version of fifty-two pickup is a source of constant delight and, at least for me, a stepping-stone to ruminations on computer intelligence, randomness, and the unintended effects produced by a well-designed system. But music is not the only thing the iPod, and its retail-business brother, the iTunes Music Store, shuffles. Downloading podcasts—of commercial and public radio shows or home-brew audio concoctions—adds the intimacy of old-fashioned radio to the mix. And by offering television shows and music videos for sale, Apple has generated a gold rush of à la carte programming that has, essentially, shuffled the now-obsolete television schedule. Can prose be far behind? Just as I was finishing this book, my former *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly wrote in *The New*

*York Times Magazine*, in a manifesto on the future of the book, “Just as the music audience jiggles and reorders songs into new albums (or ‘playlists,’ as they are called in iTunes) the universal library will encourage the creation of virtual bookshelves. . . . Indeed, some authors will begin to write books . . . to be remixed as pages.”

Early in the process of planning *The Perfect Thing*, I decided to organize it by aspects of the iPod, instead of in a chronological narrative. One day, while, appropriately, shuffling songs on my iPod, I had an idea that could spiritually link my book to its subject: I would shuffle the chapters. Each one would be written to stand on its own and not require others as antecedents—in other words, this would not be the second side of *Abbey Road*, where one tune segues into another, but more like *Revolver* or *Rubber Soul*, where the order seems more arbitrary. Okay; one of these essays—the first, which is an introduction—would be locked in as the permanent leadoff hitter. But after that, just like the playlist or whole music library when the iPod’s shuffle menu is selected, the other eight chapters would be mixed—and mixed several times—to create several “shuffles” of the book. The book you are holding in your hand may be ordered differently from someone else’s copy.

This is not a salvo against the vast majority of books where the order of the chapters is absolutely essential. I could not imagine that architecture going away. I firmly believe that linear narrative will always be with us, and thank God for that. This is a onetime experiment that seemed propitious because no readers will be harmed by reading the chapters in the order chosen by our random selection process. Nonetheless, while I revel in digital technology, I admit to worrying sometimes about its consequences. Clearly, when the physical media of CDs, DVDs, and paper recede and the *TV Guide* schedule of the twentieth century is supplanted by the

Google-esque search box we find in iTunes, there's no telling what the cultural consequences might be.

By shuffling my chapters, I hope to spotlight these issues—and to have some fun, another thing that squares with the spirit of the iPod. If you have your own thoughts on *The Perfect Thing's* shuffle, feel free to join the discussion at [www.stevenlevy.com](http://www.stevenlevy.com).



## iPod Timeline

<b>October 2001</b>	Original iPod
<b>July 2002</b>	Second-generation iPod (touch-sensitive scroll wheel)  PC-based iPods
<b>April 2003</b>	Third-generation iPod, with four buttons above the wheel  iTunes Music Store opens for Mac users, with 99-cent downloads
<b>October 2003</b>	iTunes and iTunes Music Store for Windows
<b>January 2004</b>	iPod mini, 35 percent smaller, in five colors
<b>July 2004</b>	Fourth-generation iPod, with click wheel
<b>October 2004</b>	iPod photo with color screen  Black and red U2 iPod Special Edition
<b>January 2005</b>	iPod shuffle: no screen or wheel
<b>September 2005</b>	iPod nano replaces mini
<b>October 2005</b>	Fifth-generation “video” iPod  iTunes store sells music videos and TV shows

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## Perfect

➤ Just what is it about the iPod?

It weighs 6.4 ounces and consists of a few layers of circuit boards and electronic components, covered by a skin of white polycarbonate and stainless steel. It's slightly smaller than a deck of cards. On the front is a screen smaller than a Post-it note, perched over a flattened wheel. It doesn't have an on-off switch. If you didn't know what it was, you might guess that it was a sleek, high-priced thermostat, meant to control temperature in a high-priced condominium. A very sexy detached thermostat that feels very good when you palm it. But you almost certainly *do* know what it is—a portable digital music player that holds an entire library of tunes—because it is the most familiar, and certainly the most desirable, new object of the twenty-first century.

You could even make the case that it *is* the twenty-first century.

It arrived in October 2001, bringing the promise of pleasure to a world in transformation from its comforting analog roots to a disruptive digital future. The world did not fete it with parades. In October 2001, the world had its own problems. The newcomer was welcomed by fans of Apple Computer, the company that makes the

iPod, and there was a generalized feeling that a new twist in gadgetry had arrived. There were some glowing reviews in newspapers and magazines. But . . . *this*? No one expected *this*.

Here's what *this* is. The triumph of the iPod is such that the word "success" falls far short of describing it. Its massive sales don't begin to tell the story. When Apple began work on the crash project that would become the iPod, its leaders saw the device as an enhancement of the Macintosh computer—which despite a recent rejuvenation had not gained more than a 4 percent share of the PC market. To that end, the iPod was seen as somewhat of a breakthrough, a significant one with the potential to nudge the company in a new direction. But none of the wizards at Apple headquarters in Cupertino, California, could know that the iPod would become the most important product in Apple's history since 1984's trail-blazing Mac computer (if not more important). No one thought that within four years it would change Apple from a computer company to a consumer electronics giant deriving almost 60 percent of its income from music-related business. No one thought the iPod would change the music business, not only the means of distribution but even the strategies people would use to buy songs. No one envisioned subway cars and airplane cabins and street corners and school lounges and fitness centers where vast swathes of humanity would separate themselves from the bonds of reality via the White Earbud Express. No one expected that there would be magazine covers and front-page newspaper stories proclaiming this an "iPod Nation." No one predicted that listening to the iPod would dethrone quaffing beer as the most popular activity for undergraduate college students. And certainly no one thought that the name of this tiny computer *cum* music player would become an appellation to describe an entire generation or a metaphor evoking

any number of meanings: the future, great design, short attention span, or just plain coolness.

But that's what happened.

Type "iPod" into the Google search engine, and you will get more than half a billion hits. If you focus your search to see what ordinary people are saying about it, type the word "iPod" into a blog search engine like Technorati or the search field in craigslist, you will be injected into a vast collective cerebrum of 'pod gazing, as people natter endlessly about how they love their iPods, what they play on their iPods, and how the world would end if they lost their iPods. (Some people actually use the iPod platform as a means of conveying their passion—recording their thoughts on "podcasts" to be downloaded and played . . . on iPods!) Nearly everyone who owns one becomes obsessed with it. How gorgeous it is. How you get your songs into it. What it's like to shuffle them. How long before the batteries run down. How it changes the way you listen to music. How it gets you thinking about what greatness is in a product. Or in life.

But you do not have to own an iPod, or even see one, to fall within its spell. The iPod is a pebble with tsunami-sized cultural ripples.

It changed the high-tech industry, particularly Apple. By the end of 2005, Apple Computer had sold more than 42 million iPods, at prices ranging from \$99 to \$599 (most sold in the middle range). What's more, at that time the iPod had about 75 percent market share of the entire category of digital music players. Its online digital music emporium, the iTunes Music Store, has sold more than a billion songs at 99 cents each, representing about 85 percent of all legal paid downloads, a market that barely existed before Steve Jobs herded the nasty cats running record labels and got them to agree

to his way of selling music. The success of the iPod also created a “halo effect” that boosted the sales of Macintosh computers. Since the age of iPod began, Apple’s stock price has increased more than 700 percent.

There is a fascinating story behind the development of the iPod, an apotheosis of the method by which one of the world’s most innovative companies, with clear eyes and unbounded ego, surveys the competition in a rising new product category, decides it can create something a quantum leap better, and, in barely the time it takes to hear the songs on an iPod hard drive, designs and manufactures something that exceeds even the company’s own stratospheric standards.

It’s the symbol of media’s future, where the gates of access are thrown open, the reach of artists goes deeper, and consumers don’t just consume—they choose songs, videos, and even news their way. Digital technology gathers, shreds, and empowers, all at once. Mix, mash, rip, burn, plunder, and discover: these are the things that the digital world can do much more easily than before—or for the first time. The iPod, and the download dollar-store that accompanies it, makes sense of those things without making our brains hurt.

It’s a six-ounce entanglement of cultural signifiers, evoking many things to many people. Headline writers and cultural critics talk of an “iPod Generation.” This can mean a number of things—sometimes it’s just a shorthand way of saying “young people”—but generally it’s used to depict a mind-set that demands choice and the means to scroll through ideas and ideologies as easily as a finger circles the wheel on the iconic front panel of an iPod. “It seems to me that a lot of younger listeners think the way the iPod thinks,” wrote Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*. “They are no longer so invested in a single way of seeing the world.” Sometimes the object’s name is

used simply as a synonym for anything that plays music; when Dartmouth neuroscientists isolated a cranial source of music memories that fills in the gaps when you're listening to familiar music and the song temporarily cuts out, headline writers knew just what to call that function of the auditory cortex: the "iPod of the brain."

It's a journalistic obsession. Sometimes the iPod gets media coverage not because there's any particular news but just because it's, well, there, and it reeks trendiness, and media types feel good when they write about it. "Nothing fits better in the 'timely features' slot than a headline that includes the word 'iPod,'" wrote William Powers in *The National Journal*. Powers later elaborated in an e-mail: "Journalists tend to be liberal-arts types, fairly techno-illiterate. When we encounter a machine that is easy to operate, we like it. When we encounter one that is easy and *fun* to operate, we are besotted. We 'get' the iPod, and getting it makes us feel tech-ish."

It's also a near-universal object of desire. Some people complained about the cost of the iPod, which was originally \$399. (The price tag eventually came down to about half of that for a model—the nano—with equal storage, a color screen, and a slim profile one-third the size of the classic iPod.) But the allure of the iPod is such that even a princely sum is considered a bargain compared to its value. Take the dilemma of the burgeoning dot-com called Judy's Book, whose goal was collecting local knowledge on neighborhood businesses. How could they get a lot of reviewers, really cheap? By offering an iPod to anyone submitting fifty reviews. Figuring the \$249 cost of an iPod mini, that's five bucks a review—and, if a sweatshop critic drops out before reaching fifty, Judy's Book pays nada! Laid out in cash terms, it's a lousy deal. But it's not cash—it's an iPod!

No wonder iPods have replaced toasters as bank premiums for



opening new accounts. Every time I go to my Chase Bank ATM for a cash infusion, the screen greets me with images of a nano and a shuffle—the enticements for opening a new account to pay my bills online. That's tempting. But would I actually choose *a place to live* in order to snare a free iPod? That's the premise behind the ad I saw for the Stuyvesant Town apartment complex in Manhattan one day, headlined "Download Your Music . . . Upgrade Your Apartment." A similar promotion at Century Towers, a Chicago high-rise, helped fill eighty empty units. "One of the first things they'd say to me after signing the lease was, 'Do I get the iPod now?'" Sharon Campbell, the building's leasing director, told *The New York Times*. Campbell also said that dangling the \$249 iPod mini before renters was a better attention getter than the previous enticement of two months' rent, worth between \$1,500 and \$6,000. So coveted is Apple's little device that the word itself can be shorthand for "adored possession," in a not necessarily benign materialistic sense—as when *The Wall Street Journal's* movie critic talks of a character's inability to see his baby as "anything more than a commodity—a little iPod in swaddling clothes."

And of course, if someone gives you an iPod, it's glorious. Even if you already have one. Even if you have six. Just owning another of those polished digital gems jacks up the endorphin level. Think of the playlists you'll load!

Some even see God in the iPod. Sal Sberna, the forty-seven-year-old pastor of the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Houston, has constructed an elaborate Gospel of the Gizmo in a series of sermons devoted to "iPod Theology." He seizes on the design of the iPod to dramatize one's faith. "The reason the outside of the iPod is so simple to use and so beautiful to look at is because of the way they designed the inside," he told his congregation. "And so when Jesus talks to us about simplification, it must start on the inside."