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iPhone and the Death of the Mobile Web

By Nate Mook, BetaNews

July 6, 2007, 3:34 PM

PERSPECTIVE Regardless of whether or not you bought into the flash and hype that accompanied the iPhone's launch, Apple's newest device is important not for what features it brings, but for what it makes obsolete. The death knell has been rung for the mobile Web.

Since the late 1990s when cell phones began doing more than just making calls and sending text messages, the concept of easily browsing the Web while on the go has loomed large. But despite the efforts of numerous companies and support from the W3C Web standards body, the effort has largely failed.



The idea of a mobile Web was straight forward: create versions of Web sites that are compatible with the limited capabilities and small screens of cell phones. Best practices were established for sites to follow, and a "mobileOK" label was pushed by the W3C.

"The Mobile Web Initiative's goal is to make browsing the Web from mobile devices a reality", said Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the Web. "W3C and mobile industry leaders are working together to improve Web content production and access for mobile users and the greater Web."

A new domain name was even established for the mobile Web: .mobi. In order to obtain a .mobi domain, a company had to follow a set of rules to ensure the domain would be compatible. The registrar offered tools such as a site builder and analyzer to aid the effort, and touted a large number of registrations shortly after the domain went live.

13 industry players backed the initiative, including Ericsson, Google, Microsoft, Nokia, Samsung, T-Mobile, and Vodafone among others.

The emergence of new Web standards such as XHTML and more advanced CSS were also supposed to help the effort. The technologies separated content from the markup that defined how it would be displayed, enabling mobile browsers to reformat Web pages for the small screen.

Except for large companies like Yahoo, Google and AOL, however, few Web sites offer secondary pages for the mobile Web. The issue is a catch 22: companies don't want to devote their resources to building something few people will use, and nobody will bother browsing the Web on a phone when so few sites can be viewed properly.

Accessing the Web on most mobile phones is an unreliable, and frequently painful, experience. Regardless of the costs involved -- 3G data service can run wireless subscribers \$50 per month or more, while slower data plans cost \$20 per month -- it's just not pleasant.

Pocket IE, a staple of Microsoft's Windows Mobile platform is largely useless for loading anything but pages specially designed for mobile browsers. Opera Mini arguably does a better job, but requires Java and does not work on many popular phones such as the Samsung Blackjack. The Palm OS browser is a relic at this point.

This is what makes the iPhone's debut especially important, because an answer has finally been found. And reviewers are heralding it as the first time the Web has been actually usable on a phone.

Apple's response to redesigning the Web for mobile devices? Don't. Instead of putting the requirement on developers of sites or creating a special subset of the Internet for the mobile Web, the iPhone simply makes the real, full Internet completely accessible for the first time on a small screen.

Specifically, Apple has included a version of its Safari browser in the iPhone. Users can load up full Web pages -- images and frames and all -- that can be zoomed in on by flicking two fingers on the screen. Specific page elements can be "clicked" with a finger, centering them and increasing their size for reading. The iPhone even opens multiple Web pages at once, similar to how tabs work in modern browsers.

The idea is not necessarily new. Microsoft is taking a similar approach with a technology preview it calls Deepfish. Deepfish is a mobile Web browser that lets a user view a portion of a Web page in a more normal view by providing a grey view port -- a kind of frame that slides over the full page view -- which can be zoomed in or repositioned with the joystick.

Microsoft has also expressed its disapproval of the mobile Web initiative and .mobi, saying that the burden should be on software makers, not Web developers. But Deepfish hasn't gotten very far (it's still considered an experimental research project at Microsoft) and the program itself is quite buggy.

Apple, in the meantime, has proven that this solution is not only possible, but far more useful. And other software and hardware manufacturers are taking note. Nokia is reportedly licensing new touch screen technology, which could make its way into handsets as soon as next year. Microsoft surely won't sit back and let Apple retain the mobile browsing crown; expect an update to Pocket IE in the near future.

Even with a million units sold in the United States and European launches months away, the iPhone itself won't have enough reach to kill the idea of a separate, mobile-oriented Web. What Apple has done, however, is awoken other companies to what is possible when you go back to the drawing board and rethink an approach that just doesn't work.

Just as it redefined the music industry -- the way songs are sold and listened to on the go -- with the iPod, Apple has done the same with the Internet on the iPhone. Revolutionary? Maybe not, but personal computers existed before the Macintosh and operating systems before Windows 95. Sometimes, all you need is a little innovation to reach the tipping point that changes an industry forever.

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By **shashib** edited Oct 12, 2007 - 10:16 PM

While in theory devices will become more sophisticated and intelligently browse the internet. In todays world when i want to see a restaurant website all I need is a few kep pieces of information , so there is a need to the business to have a seperate mobile website where they have the phone number, diections right up front.

The iphone may not change this very much. I agree with mobitude as I have a T-Mobile Dash and i can browse what the iPhone can do .

[Http://www.buildmymobi.com](http://www.buildmymobi.com) is a mobile website builder tool for small business

Score: 0

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By **xTwoStepx** edited Jul 13, 2007 - 11:25 PM

Whenever there is something apple based, all the PC users come attacking. What are you afraid of? The tech might have been around before but the iPhone has made it noticeable and therefore creates a large impact. I for one (a newly mac convert) would like an iPhone but refuse to because of its carrier. I would also prefer to wait for a v2 to come out since the current release isn't fully up to date with the tech available.

As far as the term out dated... It is not in reference to the companies supporting .mobi its the tech itself. And IMO it always sucked and is seriously a poor attempt at the web. Phones these days are being made cheaper and cheaper. Almost feel like a playschool toy in my hand. With the money they are saving on quality, maybe companies should spend more on their software developers.

My 2 cents... Don't bother flaming, I don't plan on looking to see if anyone replies.

Score: 0

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By **ziplock9000** edited Jul 12, 2007 - 10:31 AM

The iPhone is not the first devide of it's kind to do this. I have the Nokia N95 which was out before the iPhone, it loads 'normal' webpages and at 3.5G speeds.

Score: 0

Post a Reply

By **steve364** posted Jul 11, 2007 - 7:07 PM

"the first time the Web has been actually usable on a phone." Get real - I have been using Nokia Communicators for years. They have WAP capability but I have never bothered to use that because they can surf normal web pages with the built in browser. As a plus the communicator has a real keyboard and joystick device. I think that an i-phone is a step backwards - you should take the time to do a comparison between the Communicator & the iphone.

Score: 0

Post a Reply

By **MobiDude** posted Jul 11, 2007 - 1:44 PM

Drumcat, you say ".mobi and it's associates are dated and dying"?? So, what you're saying is Google, Nokia, Microsoft, Ericsson, Samsung, T-mobile, Vodafone....all of the companies behind dotMobi and the mobile Internet are "dated and dying"? That is a ridiculous statement. Ther are already over a half a mollion dotMobi domains registered, with several International brands launching mobile websites. The mobile Internet is here, it is real, and it is used much differently that the wired web. If you don't see that, maybe you should try taking your head out of the sand (or wherever it may be).

Score: 0

Post a Reply

By **drumcat** posted Jul 10, 2007 - 7:46 PM

Yes and no. Yes .mobi and its associates are dated and dying. No, iPhones aren't doing it. It may help, but the concept of mobile sites has been and always will be a red-headed stepchild.

If iPhone is what turns the tide, so be it. But as someone else said below, a 2" screen is a 2" screen. Browser software needs to catch up. Phone companies need to get a clue. Content will NOT be provided in a lame format like .mobi is.

I'll take a good rss reader over a cutsie browser on small phones. On bigger ones, figure it out, telcos. Make those flipscreens read the web. That means not cheaping out on lo-res screens.

Score: 0

Post a Reply

By **HelgeFossmo** posted Jul 10, 2007 - 4:07 PM

I agree that Apple's cellphone implementation of Safari is cool but really the whole iPhone hype is pathetic.

It lacks 3G. It lacks a video camera.

And considering how hyped up it is, we will now see another generation of dumb consumers buying outdated technology.

Because of Apple ignoring modern requirements for the next generation of mobile applications to be possible, the consumers have been pushed back another few years from taking advantage of advanced mobile capabilities such as video links between cellphone and the internet.

If you claim that iPhone is one step forward then you dont know what you are talking about.

Score: **0**

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By **incidentist** edited Jul 10, 2007 - 12:49 AM

It may reduce the need for site developers to write stripped-down versions of sites for smartphones, but it'll compensate by pressuring them to write iPhone-like versions of their sites. Many web apps are rushing to release versions of their sites that look like iPhone apps, so I don't see how the situation is improved.

Score: **0**

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By **rsx508** posted Jul 9, 2007 - 4:39 PM

Man, the screen on the iPhone gets hard to read after your fingers get stickier surfing porn sites. If only they had a teflon coated screen.

Score: **0**

[Post a Reply](#)

By **dpcafe** edited Jul 8, 2007 - 9:53 PM

The same web browsing interface has been implemented on Nokia phones a year ago based on the same open source <http://webkit.org/> that safari is built on. While it was cool in the beginning, it becomes tedious after a few weeks and you'd find the zoom-in zoom-out feature nothing but a compromise compared to PC-browsing.

Mobile Web is not about the browser, but the suitability of the content for that small screen, low battery, pay-per-surf device you carry around all the time. It's a new way of using the internet and I don't think it's even started yet...

Score: **0**

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By **llahsram** edited Jul 9, 2007 - 2:05 PM

I had a Nokia E70 before getting an iPhone. Nokia's implementation of WebKit is *nothing* like the iPhone's. Yes, it's the same fundamental engine, but while Nokia's browser was barely functional, the iPhone really works.

Score: **0**

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