

The Official stevenf iPhone Review
July 01, 2007 @ 02:16 PM Pacific

I'm getting a fairly equal number of requests to go into more depth on the iPhone and go back to talking about calls, so I'm hoping to appease both here by doing one last blowout post on my iPhone impressions and then going back to shilling my own company, rather than my second favorite company.

Calls

As with all my cell phone reviews, I have to preface this by saying that my phone usage is about 75% data and 25% actual phone calls, which is probably the opposite of most people. So, keep that in mind. (Also keep in mind this review is based on only about 48 hours of use.)

But let's talk about the voice aspects quickly up front, since it is obviously a key concern. So far, my few calls have been clear, with no dropouts, and no disconnected calls. My house is in a shaky AT&T coverage area, and my signal strength meter at home fluctuates between 1 and 4 bars depending on favorable wind conditions, planetary alignment, migratory bird patterns, etc.

The thing to keep in mind though is there are so many factors that affect signal strength and phone reception that if you read statements on the internet like "AT&T coverage is terrible in City XYZ", you just can't give them any credence. You should always mentally append "for me" to any such comments. Reception has everything to do with location of nearest towers, strength of towers, phone antenna characteristics, buildings and other materials between you and the towers, etc, etc. You cannot just say "reception is bad" and be done with it. Anyway, end of sermon.

I've not yet received any voicemail, so I can't talk about visual voicemail, other than it looks like it should work well based solely on the interface. You can also still press-and-hold 1 to place a traditional voicemail call. A nice feature was the iPhone letting me set up my initial voicemail password interactively, without placing a call.

Similarly, I haven't tried any conference calling, but I'm assuming it works like it does in the ads, because so far, everything else seems to.

Vibration is no great guns, but I've not had any trouble "feeling" new emails with the phone in my pocket.

Ringtones are currently limited to what ships with the phone, but one gets the impression that this is virtually guaranteed to change in the future.

Form Factor Concerns

I'm thrilled that Apple includes a physical switch for silencing the phone. I've been a fan of this ever since the Treo. Similarly a physical rocker switch for volume is my preference, so I was happy to see that too. The phone itself is sized perfectly for my average hands, although your hands may vary.

As has been mentioned elsewhere, the headphone jack is a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing in that it's a 3.5" jack which can accommodate standard headphones, unlike most music-playing phones which require an adaptor. Unfortunately, the jack is so far recessed that really only the included headphones work -- without an adaptor.

Fortunately, the bundled headphones are quite nice. They're your standard iPod buds with a microphone embedded so you can receive calls while wearing them. You can also pinch the microphone nub to perform various actions -- pause and resume music playback, double-pinch to skip the current song, pinch to accept or reject incoming calls, and so on. This is much nicer than having to whip out the phone and perform touchscreen acrobatics for these simple tasks.

I was surprised at first that the home button is an actual physical button -- not just touch sensitive. But really, this was a good idea, otherwise you'd be unintentionally setting it off all the time as your fingers brushed by.

The screen is of course a fingerprint and cheek-grease magnet. Unless the laws of chemistry somehow change, I don't see any getting around this. Fortunately, Apple includes a cleaning cloth, or you can buff it out with your t-shirt, if you're feeling classy.

I'm super glad that Apple went with glass instead of plastic for the screen -- I have a Tablet PC with a glass screen, and there's nary a mark on it despite untold abuse from the styus. I think the iPhone will take a lot of punishment. Overall it feels very solid, and although I'm still scared to death of dropping it, I'm not quite as nervous as I was that it will die on the first drop.

The Keyboard

The keyboard works well, but you do have to give it some time. Your initial experience is not likely to be favorable. The best thing to do is exactly what Apple recommends -- just keep typing, even if you hit the wrong letter. The auto-correct does the right thing 95% of the time. Pressing space accepts the auto-correct suggestion and tapping the suggestion ignores it.

It also seems to have some degree of learning, as it now will successfully auto-correct the word "stevenf" for me, which certainly isn't in the dictionary.

If you're typing something that's not in the dictionary, such as an email address, just go real slow until you get the hang of it. Punctuation and special symbols can be found on alternate keyboards. I've not found any necessary characters to be missing so far -- even the bullet character is there for my notes.

A couple more things to know about the keyboard: It will capitalize the first word in a sentence by default, but this can be turned off. You can also defeat it on an as-needed basis, by simply tagging the shift key off. Caps Lock by double-tapping shift is disabled by default but can be turned on in Settings.

Keypresses are registered on release, not on press. So if you miss, you can roll around the keyboard until the right key shows up and then let go.

Unlike a conventional keyboard, the backspace key is in the lower-right, rather than the upper-right. This irritated me greatly for about an hour, as I

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kept hitting P instead of backspace, and then I just simply got used to it.

The phone is narrow enough that it's not hard to use your thumb to type with the phone in one hand.

Finally, whoever invented the "magnifying glass" interface for setting the text cursor position ought to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. I can't tell you how many hours of my life I've wasted tapping at a screen trying to get the text cursor to go exactly in-between those two letters right there NO NOT OVER THERE DAMN IT.

Syncing

Syncing is mostly blissful. Being the first device to natively sync to Mac OS X, it works as you always dreamed it would. The increasingly inaccurately-named iTunes handles all the work of course.

Contacts sync from Address Book, calendars sync from iCal, email account setups sync from Mail, music and videos from iTunes, and bookmarks from Safari.

An important note about iCal syncing: to-dos just simply are not available on the phone. You can't see them or create them. This was a big bummer for me, as I use them extensively, and now have to find an alternate solution. Also, the calendar on the phone does not differentiate between different calendars -- everything is absorbed into one homogenous calendar.

My only irritation with syncing comes from TV Shows. You are given pre-set options to sync things like "the 3 most recent unwatched episodes" of a show. The problem is, by "most recent", Apple means when it was added to your library, NOT things like the episode number.

For example, I downloaded Harvey Birdman season 1, and have watched episodes 1-3, leaving 4-12 marked as new. iTunes thinks the three most recent are 6, 11, and 12, presumably because those were the last three to finish downloading, and that's what syncs to my phone. Now fortunately, Harvey Birdman eviscerates the notion of continuity, so it's not a problem in this particular case. But if these were episodes of Lost, I'd be pretty mad right now. Especially since there is no way that I can find to pick specific episodes to sync.

Other than that gripe, syncing has proven flawless so far in both directions. My desktop has picked up calendar entries and bookmarks that I added on the iPhone and vice-versa.

Presumably, notes will sync with the notes feature in Leopard. Right now there's no way to get at (or edit) your notes from the Mac.

SMS

As unfortunate as the lack of AIM is, the SMS application fills the vacuum quite nicely. It is an extremely nice implementation that looks exactly like iChat, dividing up conversations by participant, and threading the conversation with timestamps and the whole nine yards.

Photos and Camera

The photo viewer works very nicely, and iPhoto syncing is a breeze. I set up an "iPhone Album" on my Mac, dragged a few wedding and dog photos into it, and they were on my phone next time I grabbed it out of the dock.

The gestural interface for flipping between photos, zooming and panning, is fantastic. Best of all, you can use this same interface when setting a photo as wallpaper or contact photo, to crop out the parts of the photo you don't want.

Photos taken with the iPhone's camera can be absorbed into iPhoto via the standard "import from camera" interface.

The camera itself is a pretty bog-standard 2MP cell phone camera. Nothing to write home about. It's a bit of a disappointment compared to the niceness of cameras like the 3MP with autofocus camera on the Sony Ericsson K790a, but camera quality is not usually my first criterion when picking a phone. I'm just happy to have one at all.

The camera interface is pretty amusing with only two buttons: "take a picture" and "go to albums". It is quite challenging to take a self portrait or any photo where you can't see the screen, because there is no tactile feedback for where the shutter button is.

WiFi

I love the iPhone's wifi implementation. It boils down to this: if wifi is turned on and you make an attempt to access the internet, it will use the current wifi connection if there is one. If not, it will scan for networks and pop up a list for you to choose from. If you decline that, it'll fall back to the EDGE network.

You would not believe how much better this is than other implementations I've seen. My previous (Windows Mobile) phone would constantly pop up "NEW WIFI NETWORK" dialogs for the duration that wifi was turned on and even then I was never really sure if I was using wifi or EDGE. A lot of the time, it seemed like it would continue to use EDGE even when wifi was available. The net result was that I pretty much left wifi turned off.

Not so on the iPhone. It's just there when I need it, exactly the way it should be.

Widgets

The stocks, weather, clock, and calculator widgets should be immediately familiar to anyone who has ever used Dashboard. They look and work almost exactly the same way. Not much to say about them other than they work, look beautiful, and are occasionally useful.

The notes app is very barebones, with your options basically limited to just viewing, editing, adding, and deleting notes. Notes are plain text and set in Marker Felt, which is a big problem if you happen to be John Gruber. (Just kidding, John.)

Safari

You've heard it all before -- this is the best web browser experience of any cell phone, period. Same-as-desktop rendering, up to 6 pages open at a time, functional AJAX, etc, etc, etc.

At first I was skeptical about the zooming interface. In practice, it works exceedingly well. If a simple double-tap does not zoom in on the area you want, just use the pinch gesture. Because zooming and panning is FAST, this

isn't the nightmare it would be on any other device. It works much better than simply increasing and decreasing the font size, which is what a lot of other mobile browsers call zooming.

Amusingly, web pages with the most flexible layouts (say a table with a single stretchy column) have the most trouble adapting to the iPhone usage pattern, because iPhone Safari renders the page to a fixed width, rather than wrapping words like most mobile browsers, you'll end up zooming and panning on these types of pages.

However the majority of websites are broken up into columns, and that's where the iPhone's browser excels.

The only complaint I have about mobile Safari is that it seems to be a little bit crashy. When trying to work with Digg this morning, I had numerous crashes. (Crashes simply mean that Safari suddenly disappears and you go back to the home screen.) Digg however is kind of a torture test for any browser. Safari has handled most everything else I've thrown at it with aplomb.

When you sync your iPhone, iTunes will send the iPhone's crash logs back to Apple (if you allow it), so hopefully, the crashes will be addressed soon.

My other gripes are really just feature requests -- in particular I wish I could save images to the photo album, and I wish it did a bit more caching, which is something I never thought I'd hear myself say about Safari.

File uploads are not supported, since the iPhone has no user-accessible filesystem. It would be nice to be able to offer this where it makes sense, such as choosing a photo to upload to a site.

I am perpetually surprised, although I really shouldn't be, that whenever I see a QuickTime movie on a page, I can actually PLAY it. The lack of Flash is kind of a bummer but, look on the bright side, you won't be seeing any "Take a picture of Paris Hilton and win an iPod!" banners.

Email

Email is bliss. On my first sync, the iPhone picked up my unconventional IMAP-SSL and SMTP-TLS configuration and it just worked. New emails show up, all my IMAP mailboxes are there, I can delete and move emails and the changes are propagated correctly to the IMAP server.

Coming from the Sidekick (no true IMAP) and Windows Mobile (we've kind of heard of this IMAP thing but we don't really get it, and honestly we'd prefer if you just bought an Exchange server) this is like a dream come true.

The built-in PDF attachment viewer has already come in handy, as I'm sure the Office document viewers will also eventually. It would be nice if the PDF viewer was a separate application, and I could sync a folder of PDF files to the phone, but alas that is not yet the case.

There are some limitations to Mail -- there doesn't seem to be a way to attach more than one photo to a single email for example. I don't see any obvious way of handling certificates and encrypted messages (not something that's likely to be a priority for the general consumer). Deleting emails is a one-at-a-time affair, and of course, the system-wide lack of cut/copy/paste makes me very sad.

iPod

They really weren't kidding when they said this was the best iPod they've ever made. Imagine a touchscreen video iPod, but yet somehow even better. What more do I need to say about this, really? It even has gotten me interested in video podcasts for my bus commute, where previously I had pretty much no interest because they were too hard to wrangle onto my previous phone.

YouTube

Oh, YouTube. While a lot of its content is difficult to watch without cringing, it can very effectively consume hours of your time, which I'm looking forward to the next time I'm sat in a chair while my significant other tries on 20 different dresses in the mall (love you, sweetie).

It should not be surprising that it takes longer to load videos over EDGE than over wifi, but it does work eventually. A brief sidenote about EDGE speed: it's pretty much the same old EDGE as always. At least for me, it is not any faster or slower than it has ever been. In my area, it clocks in at about 90 KB/s with about 1.5s latency.

I just had an interesting experience this morning where I was browsing a page on the phone that linked to a YouTube video, and I thought "man, it would be awesome if it actually loaded this in the YouTube app rather than taking me to a web page with a non-functional Flash viewer", and lo and behold that was exactly what happened, and I squealed with glee and startled my dog.

Summary

Best phone ever. And given the rest of the industry's generally pervasive cluelessness about pretty much everything, I don't expect it to be surpassed by anything until the iPhone 2. In my opinion, this is a homerun for not just Apple but AT&T who were smart enough to let Steve Jobs have his wicked way with them.

The iPhone's noteworthy not just because of what it does, but because of what it doesn't do -- namely, all the irritating shit that encumbers every other smartphone OS. The only time the iPhone frustrates is when you think of something it could do, but doesn't -- yet.

Kudos to everyone involved. It's an industry-changing product, and I would never say that lightly.

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Your Comments

From [xxx](#) on July 03, 2007 @ 02:38 PM UTC-08:00

Just out of curiosity: is iTunes better at syncing your addresses to the iPhone than it is at syncing your addresses to the iPod? Or is this nothing than a transfer of a somewhat dubious vcf file as well?

From Jim on July 01, 2007 @ 03:06 PM UTC-08:00

"In my area, it clocks in at about 90 KB/s with about 1.5s latency."

How did you do the benchmark? My first thought was to use the usual suspects (broadbandreports.com, etc.), but all of them seem to be either flash or java based.

From stevenf on July 01, 2007 @ 03:13 PM UTC-08:00

ssp: I can't say I've noticed any problems with the AB syncing. Is there anything you'd specifically like me to check for?

Jim: I used dsreports.com/mspeed

From Jim on July 01, 2007 @ 03:33 PM UTC-08:00

Steven - thanks for the tip!

From Jay on July 01, 2007 @ 04:13 PM UTC-08:00

anyone figured out a good way to post to delicious et al on iPhone safari?

From Lance on July 01, 2007 @ 05:00 PM UTC-08:00

hi-

(a) Have you figured out how to use it as a data modem for a laptop, either via bluetooth or Internet Sharing and WiFi?

(b) Will it sync with a bluetooth keyboard incase I don't want to use the screen thumbboard, but want to use the phone as a display?

(c) No video chat when near a WiFi hot spot? boo hoo.

From Warren on July 01, 2007 @ 05:27 PM UTC-08:00

At last, someone else is bugged by the 'sync '3 most recent unwatched episodes' thing! To be honest, I always assumed that it meant the top 3, and not based on the date when you added the items, but anyway, what it needs to do is sync '3 unwatched episodes with THE LOWEST EPISODE NUMBER' - like you said.

I watch a lot of continuous series on my video iPod, and this 'feature' drives me mad. It's surprisingly dumb for Apple.

Anyway, the way I get around it is turn on 'only sync checked items' on the main iPod/iPhone pref page, and then uncheck the later episodes. Clumsy and manual, but it works.

Thanks for the review! Just another 6 months to wait in the UK... :(

From Jay on July 01, 2007 @ 06:31 PM UTC-08:00

Another glaring omission (for me at least) is some way to open a link in a new tab. They provided the tab implementation (calling them pages instead of tabs), but didn't provide a way to modify a click so that you don't lose the page you're already on.

From Dave on July 02, 2007 @ 01:59 PM UTC-08:00

You don't find the lack of MMS extremely annoying?

From Elias on July 02, 2007 @ 02:12 PM UTC-08:00

I don't know about you, but since I really want to know who's calling before I answer, I still need to take my iPhone out of my pocket before I press the headset button. So, here's a feature I'd love Apple to implement: enable iPhone to read the name on the address book card when someone known is calling. Or maybe spell out the number if unknown.

From Joe Bell on July 02, 2007 @ 02:14 PM UTC-08:00

Another way around the episodes thing is to make an "episodes" playlist and just sync that playlist.

I've done this before the iPhone, so I assume it still works now. I should try again.

From Raymond Stogob on July 02, 2007 @ 02:25 PM UTC-08:00

Yeah, the manual says that after you type out (and tell it to accept) a word that's not in its dictionary twice, it adds it. Pretty nifty!

From DBL on July 02, 2007 @ 02:41 PM UTC-08:00

http://stevenf.com/2007/07/the_official_stevenf_iphone_review.php

SV0011960

Hi Stephen. I don't know if you've seen the PC World stress test yet, but once you have, I don't think you'll be worried about your iPhone dying even on the tenth drop. (Although still -- don't drop it!)

<http://www.pcworld.com/weblogs/07/07/070702a>

From Reverb on July 02, 2007 @ 02:46 PM UTC-08:00

Excellent review. I think you'd agree that most of our minor complaints are things that can (and most likely will) be addressed with a simple software update.

I don't know anyone who uses MMS to any level of satisfaction, so I'm just waiting for the day when everyone reads actual email on their phone.

From Edde on July 02, 2007 @ 02:46 PM UTC-08:00

Dave: I have only used MMS once, and found it annoying, pointless and gimmicky.

I do know there are people that don't share this opinion, though, so I like to ask: What is it about MMS that you use (or "use so much", as you'd find it "extremely annoying")?

I've heard people tell me MMS is to SMS as AV in iChat is to textchat. Since I only ever AV Chat with one person and only on special occasions (when one is out of the country) I can't find that simile conclusive.

From Berndt on July 02, 2007 @ 04:17 PM UTC-08:00

To post to de.licio.us, just have the "post to de.licio.us" bookmarklet in your bookmarks. It's the same way of posting when using regular safari.

Now, from the page that you want to post, select the bookmark. It works!

From Rob Messeri on July 02, 2007 @ 04:41 PM UTC-08:00

Re. taking self portraits (and using the camera in general), although it may be hard to AIM the camera when not looking at the screen, I've found that since the shutter doesn't open until you release the button, you can press & hold the shutter button until you're ready to shoot. In my short-lived (3 days?) experience, this also helps keep the camera steadier when it comes time to shoot. But at least you wouldn't have to find the button when not looking at the screen.

From grovberg on July 02, 2007 @ 04:48 PM UTC-08:00

So as I'm reading this, I realize that there has been very little coverage of the iPod features of the phone, instead concentrating on the new stuff. All this talk of syncing has me a bit worried. Are you saying that I can't just drag items from iTunes onto the device like you can with a current generation iPod? That would be a huge loss in functionality.

So in general, are the iPod aspects pretty much just like the iPod we know and love?

From Jacquess on July 02, 2007 @ 04:53 PM UTC-08:00

Finally! It's nice to see that someone else is very annoyed by iTunes default syncing behavior of episodic content. It's the exact opposite of how you would ever want to consume content: why would I want to go in reverse chronological order?

My workaround is to make a smart playlist for each show/podcast. Limit it to a certain title or author and limit it to "playcount = 0". You can then set the playlist to 5 (or 1 or 3 or ...) "least recently added" items. If you check "live updating", you can watch or listen to episodes in order on the iPod/iPhone - when you sync, the watched episodes are then removed and replaced by "newer" items.

It still doesn't fix the "recently added" issue that Steven describes, though...

From [REDACTED] on July 02, 2007 @ 07:34 PM UTC-08:00

I don't suppose <http://aim.zpress.edu.com/> works.

If I recall correctly there's a way to have AIM messages sent via SMS, but unless you have an unlimited SMS plan that seems a bit of a waste.

From Jason on July 02, 2007 @ 07:37 PM UTC-08:00

I noticed some cool scrolling gestures in safari while I was reading your article. When zoomed into the text column you can double tap the upper or lower areas to scroll. Taping the clock scrolls to the top! How cool.

From [REDACTED] on July 02, 2007 @ 07:44 PM UTC-08:00

http://stevenf.com/2007/07/the_official_stevenf_iphone_review.php

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