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iOS: A visual history

By Verge Staff *on September 16, 2013 02:43 pm*

In what is widely regarded as his greatest presentation ever, Apple's Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone to the world on January 9th, 2007. In the five-plus years since then, the iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch have literally redefined the entire world of mobile computing. That world is moving so quickly that iOS is already amongst the older mobile operating systems in active development today. That certainly doesn't mean it's underpowered or underfeatured — quite the contrary. Through what can only be described as relentless and consistent improvement over the years, Apple has made iOS one of the most feature-rich and well-supported platforms on the market.

iOS 7, the system currently powering Apple's mobile devices, offers an easy-to-understand smartphone operating system to new users, a powerful platform for app developers, and a relatively un-fragmented experience across multiple devices. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about iOS is how similar the OS as it exists today is to the OS as it existed 2007, yet the number and breadth of features that Apple has baked in since then is mind boggling. Far from suffering from the "feature creep" that typically bogs down operating systems over time, iOS has managed to stay relatively snappy and is more internally consistent than anything else available today. And iOS 8 — launching on devices this fall — looks to evolve the story even further.

How did we get from a platform that began without third-party apps, multitasking, or even copy / paste support to where we are today? Read on to see exactly how Apple evolved its mobile platform over the years, in our history of iOS.

IOS ACTUALLY BEGAN LIFE WITH A DIFFERENT NAME: OS X

During the original iPhone announcement, Apple touted that it ran on the same Unix core as Mac OS X and that it used many of the same tools. However, it was clear even then that while there may be some shared elements between OS X and this new phone OS, it was a different-enough beast to warrant its own branding. When the original iPhone launched, the OS was called "iPhone OS" and it kept that name for four years, only changing to iOS with the release of iOS 4 in June of 2010. For the sake of simplicity (and because it's a much-less awkward phrase), I'm going to indulge in a little revisionist history here and refer to all versions of the operating system as "iOS" in this piece.

iOS 1: The iPhone is born

Although it may be difficult to imagine now, when the original iPhone was introduced, it was actually well behind the competition when it came to a strict feature-by-feature comparison. Windows Mobile, Palm OS, Symbian, and even BlackBerry were all established systems in 2007, with a wide and deep array of features. Comparatively, the iPhone didn't support 3G, it didn't support multitasking, it didn't support 3rd party apps, you couldn't copy or paste text, you couldn't attach arbitrary files to emails, it didn't support MMS, it didn't support Exchange push email, it didn't have a customizable home screen, it didn't support tethering, it hid the filesystem from users, it didn't support editing Office documents, it didn't support voice dialing, and it was almost entirely locked down to hackers and developers.

Yet all of those missing features hardly mattered and nearly everybody knew it. Instead of competing on specs, Apple focused on getting the core experience right. It focused on speed, consistency between apps, and a making a few features radically better than anything else that was available in 2007. Although there were obviously a ton of innovations in iOS 1.0, I would argue that three of them were revolutionary for the mobile industry.

The core iOS user interface. Until iOS, smartphones either didn't have a touchscreen or used a resistive touchscreen and a stylus. The iPhone changed that with its capacitive touchscreen, but more importantly Apple carefully wedded that new hardware capability to a new user interaction model that was simultaneously simpler and more powerful than systems that had come before it. Removing all physical buttons save 5, Apple made touch the primary interaction model. Apple also nearly perfected pinch-to-zoom and inertial scrolling to make apps feel more natural and immediate. The speed and "directness" in iOS 1.0 was amazing then and remains amazing now.

INSTEAD OF COMPETING ON SPECS, APPLE FOCUSED ON GETTING THE CORE EXPERIENCE RIGHT

literally years ahead of the competition. Yes, it famously has never supported the Flash plugin, but it was the first mobile web browser that felt nearly as capable and powerful as a full desktop browser. Where other mobile operating systems reflowed, reformatted, or simply broke the look and feel of web pages, mobile Safari presented the web fully and offered simple zoom and scrolling features that were unmatched at the time.

A "widescreen" iPod. Apple used its already-massive iTunes and iPod ecosystem to provide an "anchor" for the OS and the beginnings of what would eventually become a huge ecosystem of music, movies, television, books, and apps. For many, listening to music may no longer be in the top five things they use their smartphone for, but at the time the iPod functionality in iOS 1.0 gave the iPhone a killer feature that was easy for end-users to understand and get excited about.
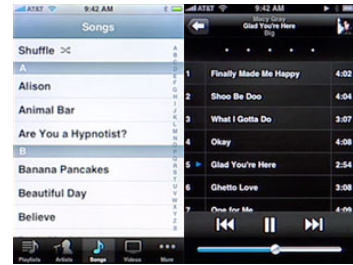
iOS 1.0 also brought a few other apps and features that were important to the platform and ahead of their time:

Google Maps was shockingly better on the iPhone than it had been on any other platform. Apple fully utilized the new pinch-to-zoom functionality to make the app feel smooth and quick, but more importantly it felt more intuitive and natural to use than even desktop mapping software.

Visual voicemail was a clever trick that allowed users to jump directly to any voicemail without having to sit through endless voice prompts. It also showed off Apple's newfound ability to cut deals with carriers. Visual Voicemail was a signal that Apple, not the carrier, was to be the main provider the user experience.

iTunes Sync is another unappreciated feature today. Anybody who has struggled with Palm's HotSync or Microsoft's ActiveSync can appreciate that simple and reliable desktop syncing was hugely important. It was also an example of Apple's ability to take complicated features that had given other companies and users headaches and simplify them to the point of invisibility.

The software keyboard on iOS 1.0 was perhaps the first genuinely usable keyboard that could be typed on with your fingers. Yes, systems like PalmOS' Graffiti and 3rd-party extensions like FitalyStamp enabled text entry with a stylus, but iOS' paradigm of showing you the keyboard when you needed it and giving you more screen real estate for reading when you didn't was an important step forward for mass market smartphones.

IOS 1.0   DEVICES

Released 06 / 2007   iPhone 2G

FEATURES

Core iOS UI

Multitouch gestures

Mobile Safari

iPod

Visual Voicemail

Maps

iTunes Sync

IOS 1.0 ALSO INTRODUCED A NEW COMPUTING PARADIGM THAT BROKE FROM SMARTPHONE TRADITION: HIDING THE FILESYSTEM

I've spent quite a bit of time heaping praise on iOS 1.0 and it is well-deserved. Still, there were plenty of shortcomings. The largest was that iOS 1.0 offered no support for native, 3rd party apps. Apple tried to fill that gap by promoting web apps, but in 2007 HTML apps weren't ready to carry that load for the platform. Some (including yours truly) even argued that it may not even be technically correct to call the iPhone a smartphone, since it didn't offer a platform to develop against beyond the web browser. iOS 1.0 also only offered one form of multitasking to the user: playing iPod music in the background. Multitasking on other smartphone platforms wasn't a great experience, but it did work for many and the lack of it on iOS 1.0 was notable.

iOS 1.0 also introduced a new computing paradigm that broke from smartphone tradition: hiding the filesystem from the user. That design decision is still hotly debated to this day, but it did serve to simplify the device and make it more user-friendly. However, it could be said that the different layers of abstraction it sometimes requires can be off-putting (the inability to include an attachment in an email reply comes to mind). Other limitations, like the inability to change alert tones, were maddening if only because they were so easy to change on even the simplest feature phone.

Lastly, iOS 1.0 introduced Apple's "Springboard" homescreen. Hitting the home button always brought you to it, no matter where you were in the OS, presenting the user with a simple (but not yet re-arrangeable) grid of icons. Even now there is not any support for widget or other "ambient" information on that home screen□— customizations that competitors like Windows Mobile and Symbian had long offered.

In a feature-for-feature comparison chart, an OS like Windows Mobile beat the iPhone in nearly every metric. When it came to actual usability, however, it was no contest. I don't need to tell you which ended up being more important in the long run.

IOS 1 UPDATES

Three months after releasing the original iPhone, Apple released its first major software update for the device, **iOS 1.1.1**. It was notable for a few reasons. First, it established a pattern of releasing major new versions of iOS concurrently with new devices — in this case, the original iPod Touch. It also established that Apple would be continuously updating iOS with new versions and new features and that those software updates would be offered across as much of its iOS product line as possible. With only two devices, it's not fair to credit Apple too much for avoiding fragmentation at this early stage of iOS's progression, but the precedent was set here.

APPLE WOULD BE CONTINUOUSLY UPDATING IOS WITH NEW VERSIONS AND NEW FEATURES

IOS 1.1.3	*DEVICES*	*FEATURES*
Released 01 / 2008	iPhone 2G, iPod Touch 1st Gen	Better location
		Web clips on home screen
		Re-arrange icons

Feature-wise, the update had only one major bullet point:

Multitouch keyboard

the first of many examples of how iPhone features would be hampered by bandwidth concerns from AT&T. As the name implies, the store only worked over Wi-Fi.
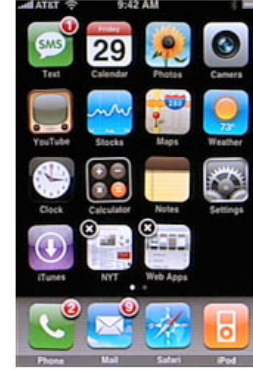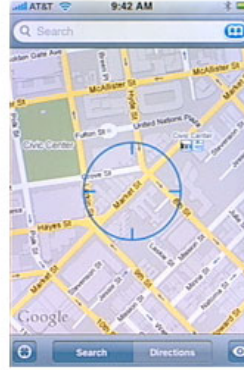
1.1.1 also added support for TV out and a custom shortcut when double-clicking the Home button — □□the latter representing the first of many changes Apple would make to that button's behavior in the coming years.

IOS 1.1	*DEVICES*	*FEATURES*
Released 09 / 2007	iPhone 2G, iPod Touch 1st Gen	iTunes Wi-Fi Music Store
		iPod Touch compatiblity

iOS 1.1.3 added the ability to both re-arrange Home screen icons and to add new shortcuts to web pages. Apple called these "Web Clips" and though the new functionality was appreciated, it mainly served as a reminder that there was no native app SDK. I distinctly remember at the time that the general feeling around the iPhone was a mix of impatience and excitement: impatience because we could clearly see the unfulfilled potential of the iOS platform and excitement because we had already learned by then that Apple was capable of pushing out regular feature updates. Around this time, each new feature that came to iOS was met with a "finally!" because so many of them were obviously lacking and because Apple had demonstrated an ability to deliver. Native apps weren't on iOS yet, but everybody seemed to know they were coming, and soon.

iOS 2: Apps

The next "finally" moment for iOS came in July of 2008, when Apple introduced the App Store to iOS. 3rd party apps for smartphones were the furthest thing from new, but Apple managed to make them feel that way with its system for developing, browsing, and installing them.

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