

Evolution of the iPhone

Written by Philip Roy
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It seems strange to view a presentation suggesting cut and paste or MMS (multimedia messaging) will only appear after two years and in the third iteration of a smartphone's operating system. But it shows that whilst the speed that Apple might work at with regards iPhone development might be questioned, the meticulousness of their approach cannot. Apple isn't a company that tends to rush with the development of new features as much as others might. Instead, each version of a piece of software sees refinement and increased functionality that we all want...and that sometimes we've waited for.

The iPhone 3.0 operating system beta is no exception. There are aspects to the [new software that have been announced](#) that we feel like we've been waiting for forever. But at the same time, there are aspects to it that only Apple could do....and that if you're one of those fortunate to own an iPhone or iPod Touch, you can't wait to see the new OS arrive in the coming months.

In the past, I've been quite critical of revisions of Apple main (OS X) operating system that haven't been as significant as I thought they would (see my review of the Tiger operating system entitled [Tiger - More "Oh" than "Wow"](#) , for example) but with the forthcoming release of the Snow Leopard operating system, it's clear that sometimes sitting back and just making what you've got already work better, isn't too bad an approach.

But that's not to suggest that this is what is happening with the iPhone 3.0 operating system. It's not just about fixing what was there already. Instead, whilst some aspects of the operating system have been refined and revisited, new aspects to it are going to be exceptionally welcome.

From the developer point of view, access to over 1000 new API's will see the ability to add in functionality that previously hadn't been on hand for developers. This means (for example) that the mail functionality, access to maps or even the iPod music files themselves, will all be features that can be included and will enhance applications for the benefit of all. And from a user point of view, this will also mean less hassle.

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For example, I have a fun free app on my iPhone for pretending I'm a DJ and can do some scratching. The reason I have it installed is simply to show off the touch-screen in an amusing and slightly tacky way. At the moment though, if I want to play some music with it in the background, I have to go into the iPod section of my iPhone, get a song playing and then launch the DJ app. If I want to change the track, I exit out of the app, go back to the iPod section, change the track there and then go back to the DJ app and launch it again. Imagine if I can simply select one of my own songs from within the DJ application. It's so much easier and makes much more sense.

This extends to things such as the ability for applications to make use of Google maps within their apps, meaning that developers don't have to license access to this information themselves. Developers are effectively being given the opportunity to interact with core functionality, as opposed to core applications. Of course, you need to keep in mind that there are some limitations, such as Google not agreeing to a blanket license for their maps for anyone wanting to develop turn-by-turn GPS functionality. But that's completely understandable in my book.

From the user point of view, the changes are both impressive, subtle and exceptionally useful. The ilounge.com website has a very useful guide to the changes within the iPhone OS 3.0 beta. Of course, I think we can well imagine that some features Apple intend to put into 3.0 have been held back, and there is a lot of speculation that as June will be the second anniversary of the release of the first iPhone, and that as around that time a lot of 2 year AT&T iPhone contracts will be expiring in the States, we're likely to see a new version of the iPhone released around that time, to encourage users to pony up for a new toy. To me this is kind of confirmed by a [MacNN](#) story today where AT&T are signalling that iPhones will now be available contract free. Why do this unless you are about to be faced with a new model that you can get customers to buy and get back on to a two-year contract?

So let's take a look at the revisions from the user's point of view, working our way through the iLounge.com rundown.

Firstly, the Home Screen of the iPhone sees subtle changes. Perhaps the most notable difference being a screen off to the left of the Home Screen, represented by a small magnifying glass. This is Spotlight, and ties in with the concept on a Mac, of an overall search engine for the phone. In iPhone 3.0 it isn't perfect and doesn't search everything, but it does search a lot...including your online email stored on a server if you want it to.

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One of those "this had to happen sometime" changes we've been waiting for is the addition of the landscape keyboard for all applications. This has been something that I felt was more about someone deciding that it wasn't needed in some apps, than it being a technical challenge. It has meant an inconsistent approach between apps and the change fixes this rather than radically changes the way in which users can interact with the phone.

Probably the most publicised feature is the inclusion of cut, copy and paste in OS 3.0. This has been something that many users have been quite critical of since the inception of the iPhone. Personally, I confess that I don't miss it, but I have to back that comment up with the fact that I don't tend to use the iPhone for emailing and note taking that often, unless I'm well away from a computer. And that's usually not the case. I have no doubt that for others it will be a godsend.

The implementation of the cut, copy and paste process is interesting. You might like to check on the Vimeo site for a "proof of concept" video posted by Lonelysandwich some time back about his idea for the implementation of this process. The video (at <http://vimeo.com/266383>) begins in a slightly creepy way, as he has superimposed his mouth onto the head of the traditional Apple presenter in an iPhone tutorial. Nonetheless, it is interesting to compare his ideas with what has eventuated.

One exceptionally welcome addition for me will also be the introduction of a Voice Memo application as standard. Whilst there are already some superb free and commercial apps that do this for the iPhone, I like the look of the new application. At the same time, it has been made clear that access to some hardware API's might mean that we see interview microphones developed that plug into the charger slot at the base of the iPhone, making this an exceptionally useful device. Early indications are that the Voice Memo recorder continues to function even if you move away from the app, as well as there being rudimentary trimming features. Andy Ihnatko took the idea further, stating he hoped that the functionality to publish these recordings quickly as podcasts or to websites might also be developed by a company.

The Bluetooth chip inside both the iPhone 3G and second generation iPod Touch finally comes of age, with the use of the chip not being as restricted as it had in the past. Contacts and the display of the records of calls have been improved, as too has other features, such as the stock widget or the App Store application, which has seen its interface refined. There are also numerous settings options available in the forthcoming version that haven't been available previously.

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There's a lot of discussion on the internet about Internet tethering, which effectively turns your iPhone into a modem or the device which you use to connect other devices such as a laptop, to the internet. You will be able to connect either via a USB cable that plugs into the existing cable port at the base of the iPhone, or via Bluetooth. The latter approach allows you to share the phone with more than one device, but will place a lot of demand on the iPhone.

Other notable features announced include the ability to purchase items from within applications. One of the demos of this on the day, both impressed and concerned users around the world. The demo featured a game under development by ngmoco. You can see an impressive [demo of the game on their website](#) or see the clip at <http://vimeo.com/3755535>

. What some have now expressed concerned about was that the demo showed the ability to purchase additional weapons for use within the first person shooter, with these purchases being managed by the iTunes Store delivery system. Whilst such functionality is incredibly impressive, there is concern that it might see a slew of applications with limited features until users agree or are encouraged to spend more and more money within the application itself. I hope this isn't the case, although this and the notion of subscription services or being able to purchase more levels for games is a valid business decision I feel.

Push notifications will finally be coming to the iPhone, but not without some compromise in the form of (according to iLounge.com) a 20% increased drain on battery life of the iPhone. However the examples shown in the iPhone announcement by Apple and others were impressive.

So what was missing from the announcement or is missing from the new OS? Obviously the biggest disappointment (although there wasn't any solid speculation or reliable sources indicating this would happen) was that there was no new hardware announced on the day. Although many pundits (myself included) believe there will be a revised version of the iPhone around the time that iPhone OS 3.0 ships.

The biggest disappointment for me continues to be the lack of Flash functionality on the iPhone. This isn't for dealing with Flash on a webpage or being able to play Flash games, but because the University I work for has invested in an impressive web-conferencing system that is Flash based. Being able to be involved in web-conferences via the iPhone would be rather cool. I still also want to know if I can use customise text message sounds away from the default sounds available, and it is disappointing to see no native video recording option, but perhaps that will come in version 4.0.

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Keep in mind also that I have no doubt Apple will spring some surprises on everyone on the day of the launch of the OS, particularly given that the presentation didn't really directly talk to the enterprise market that much on what could be expected in this next version. [ArsTechnica mention this in an article](#)

that runs down a list of what they feel continues to be missing and they comment on the fact that Exchange servers didn't appear to be mentioned much at all.

Probably the best news looking at the overall announcement was that there wasn't anything staggeringly surprising or controversial. There was and has been no real criticism of the plan Apple has put in place. It shows that the iPhone OS continues to mature, and that developers already enthusiastic about this platform, have more reason to be so in the coming months.

I'm enthusiastic because it's so great to learn that the OS upgrade will be free to iPhone owners like me, but I feel a minor twinge of guilt for iPod Touch users. But it leads me to think...wouldn't it be lovely if Snow Leopard, the forthcoming version of Mac OS X, and an operating system that Apple have proudly stated includes "zero new features" was free or just a minor upgrade?

Somehow, I can't see that one happening!