

iOS 7 – a safe update or leading edge?

UNVEILING iOS 7

At the 2013 Apple Worldwide Developers Conference, iOS 7 was unveiled.

Speculation within the development community was that Apple would focus more on overhauling the interface design rather than making major functionality changes to their iPhone, iPad and iPod touch.

This being an “S” year, with the iPhone 5S in the wings and the iPhone 6 a year away, this expectation made sense. Still, it did not prevent everyone hoping, and some demanding, that iOS 7 deliver on features and functionality. Or at least lay the groundwork and promise a feature rich future.



GOODBYE TO SKEUOMORPHIC INTERFACES

It cannot be helped; just like the eye, conversation is drawn to the new interface design. Apple’s new iOS 7 is not quite as “black and white and flat all over” as we expected. But, Steve Jobs’ favoured skeuomorphic user interface, built around texture, gloss and shadow has been replaced by clear, slim and colourful elements.

A skeuomorph is an element that uses the details and decoration of one thing to make it look like another. Usually, this involves mimicking aspects of an old technology or concept to make a new product more familiar and accessible to users. Consider sound editing software that has banks of knobs and sliders that emulate a sound engineering board that you would find in a real world studio.

Jony Ive, Apple’s Senior Vice President of Industrial Design, made the changes because he believes simple, clean user interface elements will better stand the test of time¹ and cause less confusion for Apple users by bringing order to complexity.

Examples of the skeuomorphism banished from the iOS 7 include the Calendar app’s iconic stitched leather details and the Game Center’s green felt table.

The new interface is flat, but more importantly, it changes the user experience by manipulating visual layers to establish the hierarchy of functional contexts. It uses translucency to indicate the frame of reference, and introduces an illusion of three dimensionality through parallax controlled by the accelerometer. The design is different. It is crisp, gives the appearance of more real estate and hints at greater user customization. The keynote promised it would be “instantly familiar” and from what we’ve seen it may deliver.

IS THIS A WISE MOVE?

The debate over skeuomorphic design has been heated in the design and developer communities for several years, but the run-up to the release of iOS 7 raised it to a fever pitch.

Skeuomorphs are visual tricks to help us learn how to operate in the digital world. In the 1980’s the virtual desktop used icons that looked like manila file folders and a trash can to provide cues on how to operate in a new environment. Do we still need these cues?



Many believe that after more than 30 years, we are all onboard. What remains now are the skeuomorphs that create the user experience: the bookshelves, page turning, or animated sticky notes. Are they absolutely necessary? No, but they provide comfort, familiarity and are believed to make things easier to use.

Change advocates argue that clinging to these tropes and retro designs is killing innovation ⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱ in user experience, interface and even function. Ives and his proponents claim form should follow function. They believe a change will liberate us from the skeuomorph's shackles that limit us to existing functionality and exclude or prevent future advancements.

There are concerns about abandoning the familiar. With any change there often comes a sizable, or at least loud, backlash from some existing users. The reaction to the sweeping changes in Microsoft's Windows 8 clearly demonstrated this. Windows Vista shared the same fate, and was exacerbated by performance flaws.

There are far graver stories of past attempts to radically alter a product line's user interface design. Do you remember Palm's 2009 webOS or the last iterations of Nokia's Symbian? Probably not. Even Android had its hiccups with Honeycomb. Historically, gradual change in design has been most successful in the mainstream marketplace. Apple proved this with its evolution of the Mac OS over the years.^{iv} Not every user is an avant-garde artist and maintaining familiar elements helps average users adjust.

Perhaps iOS 7 will not be met with as much vitriol as Windows 8 and it's unlikely that it will be a failure. Historically, Apple consumers have been more enthusiastic about embracing change and new product directions.



The absence of Steve Jobs may be the key factor to the public's reaction. Jony Ive is going in a drastically new direction, a move that may be necessary if Apple is to remain the design powerhouse without its former visionary. Yet, the question remains, is Ive gambling too much? The flat design is a complete rejection of the vision Steve Jobs brought to the world and which made Apple such a beloved icon. Ive's fate is now in the hands of the Apple faithful – if they do not embrace it, neither will the world at large.

JUST A FACELIFT OR ARE THERE NEW FEATURES?

Beyond the speculation over design, the overall consensus of the rumour mill was Apple had to deliver on features and functionality, as iOS 7 was not going to be judged on the new design alone.^v With new powerful devices flooding the market, Apple needs to aggressively defend its market position.

The new interface design's focus on simplicity and clarity extends to the features of iOS 7. It is evident that Apple's design teams focused on an efficient user experience. For example, all levels of an app's functionality are easy to access through context switching using a new left/right swipe motion that allows the content to persist. If an app has different modes, they will be available in one context menu, like being able to switch between the camera's four video and still modes on the fly.

A theme that emerged in the keynote was ease of access and streamlining common functionality in readily available context menus. Great examples of this are the Control Center and the Share menu. The minimalist Control Center design might be the source of the "black and white and flat all over" rumours, but its functionality runs deep into the operations of the mobile device. The most commonly used

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controls (screen, music, camera, etc.) that you would have had to hunt for in the past are now available with one bottom-up swipe.

Along with upgrades to multitasking, power consumption, AirDrop and the App Store, Apple promises that iOS 7 will bring major improvements to Siri, including more voice controls for your device. Most interesting may be the integration of Maps and Siri into the built-in displays of modern cars.^{vi} This is intended to give a docked iPhone the ability to supplant the car's native navigation suite as well as build on Siri's Eyes Free functionality introduced in iOS 6. These are easy promises, since there will be a contractual and engineering lag before the 16 announced car manufacturers will be ready to implement these features in 2014.

The rumoured iTunes Radio internet service is another new feature of iOS 7. With the flurry of licensing agreements leading up to the WWDC,^{vii} Apple is betting on creating a new way for people to access music and buy on iTunes. The ability to create and customize your own stations provides a glimpse into the possibilities of customer customization that may one day come at the OS level.

While these are the runway models Apple walked across the stage, the real substance here is the integrated iOS apps, like Notes, Calendar and iMessages. They will get a facelift, but is that enough?^{viii} There was speculation and expectation that these mainstays would also get an upgrade at the same time, or at least an overhaul to eliminate user complaints. The keynote was not specific, but it showed that these features will enjoy the streamlined access to their functionality and to OS level functionality like Share.

WHAT WILL iOS 7 MEAN FOR YOU?

iOS 7 may have meaningful ramifications that go beyond the user interface for organizations with mobile apps already in market. Some questions worth asking:

In the flat design world, what will clearly indicate a button press? At first this may not seem like a question that would give anyone pause, but it could lead us into some treacherous waters. Will we now see a design war over the new standards of flat representations of familiar interface elements? What should you do if you support multiple platforms, each of which decides on a different standard?

A video message from Jony Ive teased the designers in the audience with a set of standards and perhaps tools that unify the typography, icons and the use of a grid system in iOS 7. This may help with the visual design of your apps for iOS devices. Perhaps, by trying to make its standard easy to use, Apple will preemptively deal with any such conflicts.

Should you redesign your apps for iOS 7? Maybe the first question should be: how happy are your users with your current design and interface? Remember that the subtext of Apple's communication has been about an efficient and streamlined user experience. If you take over the whole screen, you are probably not worried. If you use native elements, consider decreasing or eliminating drop shadows, gloss and beveled edges to make your design flatter. If you develop multiplatform apps, make contingency plans and wait to see if Android joins Microsoft and Apple in the flat world.

You have a bit of time before the public gets their hands on iOS 7, since the iPhone 5S is expected in the latter part of 2013; however, you should start assessing what changes, if any, your app may require.



Apple's market penetration will make these and other implications far-reaching. In the long run, this design change and its potential backlash may usher in an age where every platform or operating system, even Apple's, will have to provide the *consumer* with the ability to customize their user interface.

About Intelliware Development Inc.

Intelliware is a custom software, mobile solutions and product development company headquartered in Toronto, Canada. Intelliware is a leader in Agile software development practices which ensure the delivery of timely, high quality solutions for clients. Intelliware is engaged as a technical partner by a wide range of national and global organizations in sectors that span Financial Services, Healthcare, ICT, Retail, Manufacturing, and Government.

Intelliware placed among the Top 5 Mobile Technologies Companies in the 2012 Branham300 report, the definitive listing of Canada's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) industry leaders, as ranked by revenues.

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