

ANDROID SMARTPHONES & TABLETS... & THE BEAT GOES ON...

Article by *STEWART ADAM*

Melb PC member Stewart Adam provides an early adopter's view of Google's Android platform on smartphones and tablets. While most reviewers wax lyrical, they have only scratched the surface in their reported use of this software suite.

Early adopters of technology sometimes get pleasant surprises, and sometimes get letdowns they cannot cope with. Members of forums such as XDA-Developers.com and Tabletroms.com let their fellow subscribers read about both their joys and unhappiness in this regard. Usually in different threads, we can read of one user's delight with the latest version of Android on his or her smartphone—code named Gingerbread—and their displeasure with a company's user interface (UI) modifications to an earlier version (Froyo 2.2) or annoyance that the tablet version of Android—Honeycomb (3.0)—has yet to be released for their tablet (eg. Viewsonic GTab) or does not work properly on their tablet (Motorola Zoom).

Somewhere in this tsunami of posts lies the truth. Early adopters who made a direct purchase of the HTC-made Google Nexus One smartphone are rarely seen to complain. Around the world, their phones are automatically updated by Google, and sometimes a login call to `***#checkin***` provides a kick along. Without doubt, these phones will be on the latest version of Gingerbread (2.3.4 at the time of publication). However, those on telecommunication company (telco) plans and whose phones carry the telco's modified UI, are probably stuck on Android Froyo (2.2) or Éclair (2.1), and some poor souls' devices may be as far out of date as Android 1.5 or 1.6.

Today, the smartphone itself no longer sports a single core CPU, but rather, is using a dual core CPU such as a NVIDIA Tegra 2. The big brands in the business—HTC, LG, Motorola, Samsung and Sony to name but a few—are playing follow-the-leader and taking on these CPUs that first hit the market in tablets. That stated, much of the software (other than games like Monster Madness as shown in Exhibit 2) is yet to catch up with the power of the hardware. In the case of tablets, this is one reason why a fully working version of Honeycomb is longed for by owners of Android tablets such as the Notion Ink Adam, Viewsonic GTab and Advent Vega.



Exhibit 1.

The game Monster Madness is designed to utilise dual core CPU tablets

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Tablets running the Android platform have been introduced by many major brands ranging from Acer, Dell, Motorola and Samsung. However, it is the many minor brands—most of which are not available in Australia—that have excited users. One such dual core tablet—the Adam—is made in China for the Indian company Notion Ink (see Exhibit 2). The device had a long gestation, a strained birth and arrived very late for those brave enough to pay up front on a pre-launch order. Nevertheless, this device has become the tablet of choice for developers who are attempting to port the version of Honeycomb that Google released for the Motorola Zoom. The reason for this is the holding back of Honeycomb source code, no doubt for competitive reasons given that the iPad 2 was released in April 2011.



Exhibit 2.

Notion Ink Adam tablet

Like Apple's iPad (v1 and v2), Android smartphones and tablets rely on app makers to extend the functionality of the operating system and base software suite. Where Apple maintains a firm hand on the apps it allows to access its users' tablets from its online store, Google is not quite such a control freak. Moreover, many of the apps on Google market, and now also available on Amazon.com's App store, are free of charge. In addition, many apps can be 'side loaded'—meaning they can be downloaded directly from the developer's website and the 'apk' file installed on the phone or tablet. The last method of installing apps is the most dangerous from the viewpoint of suddenly finding you have downloaded the latest malware.

Apps range from the outstanding to the banal, and what you classify in each category depends on your demographic profile, and whether you are using the device for home use or business. The business user is more likely to use an app such as DataViz Roadsync, a companion of Documents to Go, to access an employer's exchange server email and calendar system (see Exhibit 3). Or, they might have purchased NitroDesk's Touchdown for the same purpose. The home user is likely to stick to Gmail and Calendar, and if needs be, sync this Calendar with Exchange Server calendar using Google's Windows software widget.

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Exhibit 3.
Roadsync by DataViz

Undoubtedly, the business user will have a Dropbox (Dropbox.com) account and be paying for data storage and access in excess of 2Gb. Dropbox enables the 'road warrior' executive to automatically synchronise the relevant data held in her/his Dropbox across all PCs, Tablets and Smartphones they use, and even access these files from any computer, anywhere. Remember, there is no charge until you hit the 2Gb level, so even home users may turn to Dropbox rather than Flickr to have family members share holiday and other photos. Or indeed, the book reader may use FBReader and sync this directly with Dropbox to read the latest ePubs in Day or Night mode. I am sure that many a reader's marriage will be saved by reading using a backlit LCD screen tablet. Moreover, a tablet with Bluetooth connectivity allows the multi-tasking reader to listen to digital radio from anywhere in the world (TuneIn app) or to music (Filipe Abrantes 3 app), even if purchased on, and exported from, Apple's iTunes. The Kobo Reader cannot do this, but other e-Readers come closer.

Both business and home Android device users have access to Adobe Flash, which Apple's Steve Jobs reportedly loathes. Yes, it can slow down a device, but it simply brings websites alive. On the subject of websites, and with more businesses bringing smartphone versions of their sites online, if the native Android browser, or Eden UI browser in the case of the NI Adam, leave you cold, there are faster browsers like XScope and Dolphin HD to download. Banks such as the ANZ are all too aware that many of their customers do online banking via smartphone and tablet, and even provide apps for the low-tech iPhone and Android phone user. The business user who bought a NI Adam has HDMI output and can present using a slideshow developed on PowerPoint straight to a client's full 1080p television screen or projector as shown in Exhibit 4.

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Exhibit 4.
A Notion Ink Adam
with HDMI
output

So where does this leave the confused reader who has a smartphone and now wants a tablet? Where the Apple iPad is a simpler device to use, those who want the multiplicity of uses that the Android tablet offers are going to find that a degree of 'massaging' is needed. There is no shortage of help at hand, particularly on the already mentioned forums. However, sometimes too much of a good thing only confuses us more—particularly novices (noobs as they are called on various forums). Like me, you may know those who purchased an iPad only to use it as an expensive paperweight. No Android smartphone or tablet user I know falls into this category. If anything, they seem to want to keep inventing uses so as to have an excuse to have another (Android) technology fix. For those who live on the wild side, the developers and hackers, these 'fixes' come thick and fast with Android. For most of us, who simply want their technology to work every time, we too should ignore the beat-up, and also ignore negative reviews unless from a trusted source, and adopt an Android smartphone or tablet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stewart Adam is a long-time member of the Melbourne PC User Group. He is Associate Professor in Electronic Marketing with Deakin University, Melbourne@Burwood Campus. His earlier PC Update articles are listed on <www.stewartadam.com>. Questions and Android experiences may be addressed to stewart.adam@deakin.edu.au.