

## **A big leap for Android and Motorola**

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*Google's Android 2.0 is much improved, and Motorola's Droid handset is a contender.*

Android, the heralded smartphone operating system Google (GOOG) unveiled 14 months ago, got off to a slow start because the early handsets were mediocre, and most carriers kept their distance. Now, two events may give Android a boost: a new version of the software and Verizon Wireless' launch of the Motorola (MOT) Droid, which runs on it.

The Droid, available on Nov. 6 for \$199 after rebate with a two-year contract, is the first phone to use the much-improved Android 2.0. The phone itself is the best product in years to come from a newly reborn Moto. And the new software includes mail, contact, and calendar features that go way beyond those available in the earlier versions of Android. Instead of being forced to rely on Google's Gmail service, for example, you can now combine data from various mail accounts into unified displays. And there's built-in sync of e-mail, contacts, and calendar from corporate Exchange servers—though your company's technology police may not tolerate the fact data stored on the Droid cannot be encrypted.

The most striking software offering is Google Maps Navigation, which provides real-time, turn-by-turn navigation at no charge. A quirky user interface makes it harder than necessary to locate this service in a sea of Google Maps features. But you can circumvent this by using Google Voice Search and saying "navigate to..." If the software understands your destination—not always a sure thing—you are on your way. The driving directions include the spoken name of the next street you should turn on, a feature missing from some phone-based navigation programs. I found the instructions timely and accurate. With the program likely to get even better over time, Google is suddenly a huge force in the navigation industry.

For now Google Maps Navigation is a U.S.-only product, probably because outside North America, Google has not yet completed work on its own maps. And licensing third-party data for a free navigation program would be prohibitively expensive. A version of the Droid, however, will soon be appearing in other countries. The international version, which uses HSPA 3G technology in place of the Droid's Verizon EV-DO, is known as the Milestone (German data sheet). It will be available Nov. 9 from O2 and Vodafone (VOD) in Germany, and at a later date in Italy and Argentina. In place of Google nav, the international version will feature Motorola's own Motonav.

The Droid's list of preloaded software is otherwise bare-bones; for example, there's no built-in video player other than a YouTube app. On the other hand, Droid is happily free of the not-very-good proprietary apps, such as the Vcast subscription video service, that Verizon likes to put on its phones. And if you are feeling app-deprived, just visit the Android Market. It's not the iTunes App Store, but it comes a lot closer than anything else. One slightly annoying oddity: Paid apps are priced in a confusing mixture of U.S. dollars and British pounds. And while music purchases are available from Amazon.com (AMZN), there are no iTunes-like movie or TV show downloads.

The Droid hardware is impressive. The handset is about the same length and width as the iPhone, but a couple of millimeters thicker and an ounce heavier. That extra thickness allows for both a removable battery and a slide-out keyboard. The 3.7-in. touchscreen is bright, sharp, and responsive. Battery life seems decent—good enough to get you through a long day—but you have to be careful about leaving power-sucking applications such as navigation running in the background. (Once an app is started, you have to make an effort to shut it down.)

The Droid keyboard is just O.K. The key tops are flat and tightly spaced—not a good combination for accurate typing. And the five-way navigation control seems superfluous on a touchscreen device. Also, because the keyboard is clumsily offset more than an inch to the left of center, some keys on the right are hard to reach. The onscreen keyboards, both horizontal and vertical, are acceptable but not as good as those on the iPhone or BlackBerry Storm2.

There will be lots of silly talk about the Droid as an "iPhone killer." The iPhone is too good and has too much momentum for anything to derail it. But for the first time there's a handset that can compete straight up. Android seems to have passed right through its awkward adolescence, and more improvements are sure to follow.

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