

Android May Be Losing Ground in the App War

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Even with a greater number of users, Google struggles to win the hearts of mobile-software developers who prefer the simplicity of Apple's iOS

Google has turned Android into the most popular operating system for smartphones. Yet the platform may be losing ground to Apple's iOS in a major area: new applications.

Relative to Apple, fewer apps were created for Android in January than a year earlier, according to Flurry, a company that analyzes mobile-software data. Developers made roughly one new Android app for every three Apple apps, Flurry found. A year ago, they created two Android apps for every three Apple apps.

While the study tracked only developers who design apps using Flurry's tools, the shift suggests that Google's bid to overtake Apple's industry-leading App Store may be losing some steam. Apple has more than 550,000 apps in its store, compared with over 400,000 for Google's Android Market. Both companies count on the array of apps to make their phones more enticing and lock in consumers who are already using the devices.

"We saw a greater migration to iOS," says Peter Farago, vice president of marketing at San Francisco-based Flurry.

Google has made quick gains on Apple since the first Android phones went on sale in 2008. In 2011, though, the growth in new apps for Android was about half that for Apple, according to the firm, which tracks more than 55,000 developers. The study measured more than 65,000 new software projects over the course of the year.

Other research firms are seeing a similar slowdown in Android. A survey of about 2,000 developers conducted by Appcelerator and IDC found that fewer programmers were "very interested" in developing for Android phones and tablets in November than in June, while their interest in iOS devices remained unchanged.

Christopher Katsaros, a spokesman at Google in Mountain View, Calif., declined to comment. Christine Monaghan at Cupertino-based Apple didn't return a request for comment.

The reasons for the smaller interest in Android involve time and money. Apple apps can be quicker to develop and it's easier to generate revenue from them, thanks in part to Apple's iTunes system.

Developers Prosper on Simpler iOS

"Developers can make more money on iOS," Farago says.

Take GameHouse, a maker of games such as *Doodle Jump* and *NCIS the Game*. It makes three to four times greater revenue on an iOS title than on an Android game, says Ken Murphy, a vice president at the company, which is part of RealNetworks. GameHouse also has to spend an extra two months working on an Android game, vs. what's needed for an iOS title. That lengthens the time it takes to get it to market by about 30 percent, he says.

"It's nowhere near as simple as iOS," Murphy says.

The sheer variety of Android devices is one complication. GameHouse has to tweak its games to account for variations in accelerometers and responsiveness in more than 550 different Android gadgets, Murphy says. Apple, by contrast, has just a few models.

Bill O'Donnell, general manager of mobile products at the travel site Kayak.com, says his company isn't able to test its software on every variety of Android phone. There are just too many of them.

"It puts developers in a tough spot," he says.

Sometimes individual models require many extra changes. With Amazon.com's Kindle Fire tablet, two Kayak engineers had to spend a month and a half changing all the company's apps to work with Bing Maps rather than Google Maps, O'Donnell said. Despite being an Android device, Kindle Fire didn't come with Google apps preloaded.

"That was a huge pain," he says.

An App Store vs. 90 App Stores

Distributing Android software to multiple application stores takes more work as well, whereas developers merely have to submit iOS programs to Apple's site.

"For Android, there are 90 app stores," says Alex Caccia, president of Marmalade, whose software lets developers adapt apps to different devices. "And if you are serious about this market, you've got to do it."

It's also not as easy to charge Android users for apps as it is on Apple devices. With iPhones and iPads, owners' credit-card accounts are already stored on iTunes, which makes app purchases simple. Android doesn't have the same mechanism for all its users, Farago said.

"Consumers are more trained to get free things on Android," he says.

While Android developers can make money off sales of in-game merchandise, such as virtual weapons and other digital items, many are still working out how to do that, Caccia says.

Even so, the slowdown in app development hasn't stopped the spread of Android devices. In the fourth quarter, Android was running on 47.3 percent of U.S. smartphones, up from 44.8 percent in the previous three months, according to research firm ComScore. And while Google's Android Market has fewer apps than Apple's store, the number of programs has almost tripled from a year ago.

Developers still see Android as a valuable source of revenue in the longer term, as Google irons out wrinkles. GameHouse is planning to hire additional staff to work on the software.

"In the short term, there's a lot of money in iOS," Murphy says. "In the long term, we are very bullish on Android."

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