BIZCOMMUNITY

The rise of the super app

By Richard Firth

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Nearly 1.5 billion computing devices were sold around the world in 2013. PCs accounted for 300 million, tablets 180 million and mobile phones for just under a billion units.

Last year Apple announced that 1m apps were available on its App Store, adding that a total of 60bn apps had been downloaded since it went live. This does not include the addition of more than 500 apps every day finding their way onto the app stores during 2014. Mobile devices and the millions of applications available for them are eating the world and our data contracts.

There are tens of thousands of apps for everything these days. You name it, there's an app for it and the two market leaders - Apple and Google - have made sure that apps are easily available through their respective app stores.

PC to mobile

Venture capital in the mobile space is also growing very quickly. Specialist analyst CB Insights reports that in 2013 over a billion dollars was invested into the emerging sectors of the mobile industry in the US: application development, security and mobile payments. This confirms the shift away from the PC to mobile as a broad trend, but it's still very early days: venture capital is currently having more of an impact on app lifecycles than usability.

One of the real negatives of this is that these app development companies are valued on the number of consumers they attract and not by the revenue left on the bottom line. The frenzy for consumers is pushing some of the big app suppliers to divide and multiply by breaking existing apps into parts and then provisioning these "focused" apps as a whole.

By breaking existing apps into multiple parts it allows them to gather more consumers and therefore grow value. Already on the Web we've seen popular applications being broken up into multiple services, for example Google separating Docs, Drive and Google+. This is because each one increases the company's potential customer reach or consumer base and is as a result of the investment going into the space at the moment.

New sign-on

Another of the side effects of exuberant investment into application ecosystems has been duplication, not just of functionality between competitors, but also of common operations: each app we download requires a new password, sign-on and way of doing things. This duplication is driven by the need to ensure that consumers stay within the app echo system or better yet, "walled garden".

A side effect of this move to mobility is that companies are no longer in charge of their technology destiny. It is actually device manufacturers that are dictating the nature and pace of business IT. The internet promised us consolidation but software companies are finding the need to develop and test an interface for every device on the planet. This may change with the maturing of HTML5 but this technology will never make the grade if app ecosystems continue to push for the walled garden.

Notifications will become more of a short term trend to ensure the app is in the user's face. Everyone wants their app to be at the forefront of the mobile user's day to increase activity and measurable hits on the back end, which ultimately proves more consumers and more venture capital value. Can you imagine the internet of things where billions of new devices from your car to your washing machine will be sending you notifications?

Is all this really sustainable?

The super app

The next big step for the mobile ecosystem will be something similar: the "super app" will be born.

This will be an ecosystem, where multiple apps talk to each other, are integrated, and there is a single sign-on. For example, if you make a booking in your diary for an appointment in another city or country, the diary super app, or whatever you want to call it, immediately checks for flights and hotel availability. It will allow you to book from there, and if you make a booking in a hotel, it will pop up with info on local weather during the period you are staying. The advantage of a single sign-on with multiple web applications available is considerable.

According to KPCB Internet trends 2014, 'now some apps will disappear altogether as we enter the age of 'apps as a service'. The competition and volumes of apps will not diminish, but the duplication of functionality will go away, much as the browser unified the Internet experience.

ABOUT RICHARD FIRTH

A stalwart of the South African IT industry, Richard has been involved in the technology arena since 1989. With diplomas in Information Technology and Business Process Re-engineering, his successful career in IT has spanned various roles, including programming, IT implementation, and various management positions culminating in his current responsibilities as Chairman & CEO of MIP Holdings. He sits on the Boards of both Itemate and !Waytag.
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