# From smart to genius: Will design define future gadgets?

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(Reuters) - In a pre-iPhone age, mobile phones came in all shapes and sizes. Remember the clamshell, candy bar, swivel, backflip, slider, dual-slider, lipstick, and, of course, the taco? Nowadays, most phones have a touch screen, rows of icons and are rectangular.

In short, they all look a lot like the iPhone.

Now, in the wake of the Apple Inc vs Samsung Electronics trial, where the U.S. firm won what the South Koreans scathingly called a "monopoly over rectangles with rounded corners," the fear is that an era of rapid and exciting innovation in mobile design is over. The iPhone has won the day and all those whose handsets use Google's Android operating system, the argument goes, will either give up or tread carefully for fear of litigation.

But others argue the opposite.

Paul Pugh, creative vice president at frog, a San Francisco-based design company owned by India's Aricent Group, believes companies may now unshackle their designers to come up with genre-busting form factors and user interfaces that breathe fresh life into the industry.

"We don't know yet how far the impacts are going to go from here," says Pugh. "I do hope it's an inspiration moment for the Android platform and the manufacturers to put their bets on innovation ... to come with great user experience based on users' needs, and not stagnate based on the patents crippling them."

SMARTPAD

Frog knows how hard this is to bring to market. Take the SmartPad; a prototype Android phone the company unveiled last year that at first glance looked, in the words of one reviewer on the technology website Engadget, like "yet another plain smartphone - dark, nondescript, and maybe a little like an iPhone 4 that's had its right-most extent sliced off."

Flip open the two layers, however, and you had a phone with twice the normal screen size. "Suddenly it's a little tablet, two screens forming a 6-inch slate," the Engadget reviewer wrote.

The prototype, which belonged to Imerj, part of Singapore-listed contract manufacturer Flextronics International, intrigued: The Engadget article attracted more than 400 comments. It wasn't a wholly new concept, but the design was

impressive, including the software, which included apps that made the most of the extra screen. Imerj promised a kit for software developers, and a team worked on a slew of apps that made use of the innovative dual screen. They dreamed big: to take on Research in Motion's BlackBerry.

"We had an idea that the smartphone was going to be the primary computing platform for most people going forward," recalled Brett Faulk, then Imerj's vice president of marketing. "However, it has two challenges: small screen and small keyboard. So the concept was to create a product that scales as my productivity needs increase."

After a few months, however, everything went quiet. Imerj's Twitter account went dead, as did its website. Both are now offline. Faulk and others left the company. Flextronics declined to comment, as did frog's Pugh.

A former member of the Imerj team said the project was deliberately aimed at a niche far from Apple's consumer-driven world, but that was part of the reason for its demise.

Building a device and the suite of office applications to go with it required at least five years gestation, an investment the parent company in the end couldn't make. "We were very ahead," said the person, who was not authorized to speak about the project and declined to be identified. "We were very sad to see innovation being pushed aside."

LIMITED ROOM

At issue now is whether the Apple vs. Samsung verdict might upend such conservative calculations.

It may already be happening: The latest addition to Samsung's Galaxy range of devices - at the centre of the court case - is a camera with a display that looks, feels and acts like an Android smartphone, including WiFi and 3G connections. And Samsung itself has a patent on a dual screen device, according to patent blog patentbolt.com, that looks a lot like the SmartPad.

But there are limits to what can be done with hardware.

"There was a lot of ingenuity about the mechanical configuration of designing buttons and cameras and exposing these particular features," said Horace Dediu, a former Nokia engineer who now runs a consultancy and influential blog called Asymco. With the rise of the iPhone "all that went away when you have a clean glass display with touch interface."

The problem he says, is that the operating systems available to device makers - Android and, to a lesser extent, Microsoft's Windows Phone - are designed for that shape.

So, if there is going to be a change in what a phone looks like, Google needs to be

the one to change. "Theoretically, if Google thinks that this isn't a winning game for them they may go to the manufacturers and say OK, we're going to allow you to have mechanical differentiation," said Dediu.

Until that happens, manufacturers have limited room to move. They can toy with the specifications and proportions of the device - Samsung has had a surprise hit with its outsized Galaxy Note, the second version of which was unveiled on Thursday - or by tweaking the Android operating system itself.

Indeed, frog's most visible success in smartphone design has been a user interface that Sharp Corp recently launched for its Android phones in Japan [1]. Sharp, said Pugh, was looking to maintain its market lead as Japan shifts from older feature phones to smartphones, and gave frog a broad remit to come up with something to make their Android devices stand out.

The so-called 'Fresh UI' software adds an extra layer, or skin, to Google's basic operating system, which Pugh says improves access to the most used features on a device.

SKINS AND FORKS

Indeed, such skins are an increasingly popular way for handset makers to differentiate their devices from those of competitors. Huawei on Thursday unveiled its own 'Emotion UI' skin which it said will give consumers "one more reason to choose a Huawei smartphone over another brand's." It's not just for the big boys: Meizu, a small Chinese smartphone maker, has gained a cult following with its quirky customization of Android that once earned the ire of Steve Jobs, but is now fending off its own copycats.

But taking this route is not without its problems.

For one thing, skins are usually just that: a surface layer that users either love or hate, and which quickly peels away to the standard Android interface that is little different whether the device costs $500 or $50. And while the goal is to differentiate, they can end up pushing the Android interface into more closely resembling Apple's own iOS. Indeed, Apple presented slides at the trial alleging that Samsung's tweaks to the home screen on 13 devices made it mimic that of the iPhone. The jury agreed.

Some makers have already taken note. Meizu, the Chinese manufacturer, was happy when the home screen of one of its models was cited in court by Apple as an example of not infringing on its design patents, but the Chinese firm has nevertheless "modified some aspects of our user experience" for future products, according to the Zhuhai-based company's product director Yang Yan.

Still, in the longer run innovation needs to go beyond mere tweaking, argues Brandon Edwards, Shanghai-based colleague of Pugh. He believes more manufacturers will follow Amazon's path of taking Android in their own direction with the Kindle Fire, effectively parting company with Google.

Such so-called forks are likely to appeal to device makers beyond phones, Edwards says. Clients have been talking to frog about embedding technology into smart systems, cars and healthcare, and those devices could well be running Android.

DESIGN VALUE

Innovation in smartphones, meanwhile, is likely to move beyond form factor and apps to how they interact with their surroundings, says Pugh. Expect to see smartphones better controlled by voice and gesture, moving beyond the restriction of the device's shape and touchscreen in the next year or so.

The most significant outcome of the Apple Samsung spat, however, may be that design is no longer merely an afterthought.

There may have been a lot of different shaped devices in the pre-iPhone world, but that doesn't mean they offered consumers a better user experience, says Pugh. "All this confirms that there is a monetary value to design," he says.

"In the past, they were competing on speed and the technology base itself. Those things are now relatively normalized and design is really defining the device and the device experience."

(Reporting By Jeremy Wagstaff; Editing by Ian Geoghegan)

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