

Apps for That: Smartphone

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What this is

The Innovative Instructor is a forum that publishes articles related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

About the CER

The Center for Educational Resources partners with faculty and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

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Forum categories

Pedagogy Forum

Hopkins professors share successful strategies for teaching excellence

Technology Forum

Information about emerging technologies, who is using them, and why you should know

Best Practice Forum

"How To" workshops on using technologies and applying innovative instructional methods

What are they

As smartphones become more commonplace, the number of small, single-purpose applications (apps) grows. These apps are functional extensions of your smartphone's built in applications; they are powerful tools that do not require a laptop or desktop computer. While most apps are created to entertain, some are created for productivity, communication, and collaboration; all of which can enrich educational experience.



Why they were made

Apps are essentially smaller versions of applications with a limited set of features, often focused on a single task. Some tasks are more complex than others, for example, word processing versus simple note taking. App interfaces are optimized for smaller screens, simplifying a process for the mobile experience. Because they are simpler, apps can be created with less effort than traditional computer or web applications. This encourages independent developers to create apps for purchase.

Who produced them

Software development companies and independent developers may create apps for multiple device operating systems such as the iOS, Android, and Windows Phone (currently WP7.5). Others devote their app development to one specific operating system, which can at times frustrate users who identify ideal apps that do not work on their devices. A device will often come with a few default apps that were created by the same company/developers that created the operating system. These default apps are usually very basic but perform well on the device.

Why they matter

Smart phones are small computers; think of them as pocket-sized laptops. These devices also have the advantage of turning on instantly. They provide access to the internet and computing tools wherever and whenever needed.

How they can be used

Productivity apps can be useful in a teaching or professional setting. Listed below are categories of productivity apps with brief descriptions of each.

Control

Apps like "Gmote" for Android and "Touch Mouse" for iOS allow you to control a computer's cursor from across the room using your smart phone. This can 'untether' instructors or presenters from podiums and allow them to walk about freely while controlling their presentations. The "Crestron Mobile" App allows iOS or Android devices to control lights, media, climate and projector controls remotely in any of the "Smart" classrooms at JHU. Contact IT@JH for information on using this app in specific classrooms.

File Management

Android has a convenient app for managing the files on your device: "ES File Explorer." With it you can move, copy, rename, make folders, and even unzip compressed packages. It also comes with a simple text/image viewer to give you a better sense of the content of a file.

File Transfer

When you need to make files available for multiple people (yourself included) to view later or on a different computer, "Dropbox" for iOS and Android lets you store your files in the "cloud" for sharing. Using "SkyDrive" with your Windows Phone affords a similar ever-present file repository.

Note Taking

“Simplenote” and “Evernote” are very popular, easy to use programs that let you take notes, tag them, and sync them with your computer from an iOS device. The latter has more features, such as storing audio, images, and maps, and it is available for both Android and WP7.5. WP7.5 also comes with “OneNote Mobile,” which gives you more features than the basic note taking app.

Photography

One of the most useful aspects of a smart phone is the ability to take photos. Each device comes with basic camera functionality, but apps like “Camera Zoom FX” for Android and “Camera+” for iOS will give you control of the camera’s settings, increase the chances you’ll take a good photo, and support postproduction editing/enhancing of the photos. “Thumba Photo Editor” for WP7.5 also allows you to extend your postproduction editing options and edit GPS data. If a single photo doesn’t do your location justice, apps like “360 Panorama” and “PhotoSynth” for iOS and WP7.5 can stitch photos together for a panoramic experience.

Reader

The portability of a smart phone makes it easier to bring your normally heavy reading material with you wherever you go. Apps like “Instapaper” and “Read It Later” for iOS and Android allow you to save, sort, and share webpages with or without images for reading anytime, even if you don’t have a cellphone signal or wireless internet connection. The “GoodReader” app for iOS is a robust reader that allows you to render just about any file, annotate PDFs, view videos and share what you’ve read with others. The “Kindle” app is available for every device; it allows you to sync and read all your purchased Amazon e-books.

Reference

With information at your fingertips anytime, reference apps like “Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary” for iOS and Android will ensure you are never at a loss for words. And when your reference material needs to be translated to different languages, “Google Translate,” also for iOS and Android, allows you to write or speak words for translation to over 20 different languages. “Wolfram Alpha”, another great reference app available for iOS and Android, gives you robust answers to technical questions.

Task Management

Everyday tasks can be managed through your smart phone using apps like “Remember the Milk” on an iOS or Android device; Windows Phone has a task manager built in. Staying on schedule is made easier by the app’s ability to sort, send notifications, and sync with your computer.

Additional Resources

- **iTunes App Store** (iOS): <http://itunes.apple.com/us/genre/ios/id36>
- **Google Play** (Android): <http://play.google.com/store/apps>
- **Windows Phone Marketplace** (WP7.5):
<http://www.windowsphone.com/en-US/marketplace>

Author’s Background

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A member of the Center for Educational Resources, Reid provides training on a variety of programs, aids in educational resources development, and shares expertise on information and graphic design for faculty at the Homewood campus. He holds a BFA in Illustration and a MA in Digital Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art.

Where are they going

The number of app downloads from the iTunes App Store increased by about 30% from 2011 to 2012, totaling of over one-half million apps. Considering that Apple is currently the leader in smart phone sales and apps, this indicates that the production of apps will steadily increase, not only for iOS but also other operating systems through competition. More and more app developers are exploring ways to provide a rich human-computer experience with a smart phone.



How to get started

Online app stores are available for each device operating system (links provided below). Typically, the device’s operating system has a default app that allows you to browse and purchase apps. Some developers offer their apps for free. In this case, you may find that they have advertisements (ads) that appear in the app to help support the developer. Paying for the full version of a free app usually excludes the appearance of ads. Some developers create apps for free and may ask for a donation, though this is rare. Apps for sale will sometimes offer a “free” or “lite” version so that you can experience the app’s limited features before purchasing. Whether or not the app is free, sometimes signing up for a supplemental online service -such as storage/access of data or user account information- is necessary. So while you may have obtained the app for free, using the service it is tied to may incur a cost. Be sure to read the description and user reviews before purchasing apps.

Other thoughts

Your smart phone will obtain its internet connection either through a cellphone signal receiver (ex: 3G, 4G) or a WiFi receiver. The latter is highly dependent on the location of a WiFi hotspot, as opposed to cellphone signal towers. Most apps require a connection to the internet to function. Consider your intended use when purchasing your smart phone, data plan, and apps.