

The Dawn of the Open Mobile

The fractured nature of the mobile market is a common cause for complaint from software developers. There are more than three billion handsets worldwide. Yet with no dominant platform, as Windows is for the PC, it is a struggle for developers to reach more than a tiny fraction of those devices. Stories abound of companies maintaining hundreds of concurrent versions of an application in a bid to reach the widest possible market. Something that is neither profitable nor sustainable.

The latest attempt to tackle this problem is Android from Google, a free, open platform. It is backed by more than thirty companies in the Open Handset Alliance, and the first Android-based devices are due later this year.

Android has generated enormous levels of media coverage, and created excitement amongst developers too. The promise of a single platform to target has the business brains interested, and the technologists are hooked on the fact that the platform will be released under an open source licence. However, Android may not be the panacea it seems.

The issue is one of openness. Android is an open platform, but it is not the first. As Rafe Blandford at AllAboutSymbian points out, this has been the case for smartphone devices for the past ten years: "an open platform is the de facto definition for smartphone".

Android is also open source, but the license under which it is released has one key difference from the most common open source licences. It allows companies to keep new developments to themselves, something they are bound to do in the fight for customers. It also allows companies to remove components of the OS, and the choice of hardware, even down to the air interface, is down to the manufacturer. The result? Two devices from different manufacturers might both be based



on the Android platform, but they could prove to be very different indeed. The applications that run on one may well not run on another.

The Open Handset Alliance includes hardware and software companies, handset manufacturers and, crucially, network operators. Given the power of this group, and the enormous hype around Android, it seems likely that the platform will be a success to some extent. And it certainly offers some interesting capabilities that we at Penrillian shall be exploring.

However, mobile phones were becoming rapidly smarter and more open before Android arrived, and it seems inevitable that most phones will soon be based on an open platform. The enormous ecosystems of users, developers and handset manufacturers built around the dominant smartphone operating system, Symbian OS, and Microsoft Windows Mobile, are unlikely to disappear overnight, if at all.

Android is an interesting prospect, and looks set to be significant part of the mobile platform mix. But unfortunately the market will remain fragmented. Rather than unifying the market, Android seems likely to fracture it further.

News Links:

Find out more about open mobile standards:

- The [Open Handset Alliance](#) homepage
- The [OMTP](#), improving the user experience
- The [Android Guys](#)