An undeniable phenomenon

Apple's proprietary App Store can boast over 300,000 apps. The number of apps in the Android Market has now surpassed 100,000. Heck, even the simplest of smartphones now boasts access to a wide range of apps and games, with mobile networks (at least in the UK) also getting in on the act. A booming industry that looks set to continue its growth into the stratosphere.

So why the reticence about it? If all the big players are jumping in head first, surely that's a clear indication of success? A few home truths may be enough to unsettle this rosy view of the future of the app...

Apps plug holes that are left when Operating Systems go to market too early

Just as an old tyre needs patches to repair it's punctures, so does the fledgling smartphone operating system need apps to smooth over missing functionality. Take the example of Swype, a text-input app preloaded onto the Samsung Galaxy S to make up for the lack of a decent touchscreen keyboard. Why not just make a better keyboard? As Operating Systems start plugging these holes, the need for the humble app is sure to plummet. Consider the much-rumoured Facebook phone. Zuckerberg (the Facebook CEO) clearly isn't satisfied with a Facebook app to provide the heaviest of smartphone users with their latest social networking fix. They need total operating system integration! Bad news for the app.

Apps cannot travel with you between operating systems

Granted, most app downloads are only good for a few minutes' entertainment. But what of more serious apps, such as the one for your online banking? You're almost certainly going to want to take that with you when you get a new phone! You will probably be able to download it again... but what about all your settings?

Apps cater for those with short attention spans

Download an app, be entertained for all of 10 minutes, move on. Download another, be entertained, move on. Rinse, and repeat. Although your average app developer probably cares little about their app once they have been paid, it may still be a cause for concern. After all, recent UK research has indicated that 20% of smartphone users have never downloaded an app onto their phone. Even more worrying, 50% of users have not downloaded a new app in the last month. This suggests that, even if we are captivated by apps in the beginning, we may not be for long.

How does the future look?

Apps may well go the way of the ringtone -- once so profitable, now merely an annoying interruption. But unlike the Crazy Frog, apps could secure their long term future, should a number of conditions be met. 1) Regulation of app quality. This will ensure consumer trust, and make people more likely to download in future. 2) A universal app store, able to operate across operating systems.

What is more likely to happen is that one operating system will emerge as the forerunner, and app developers will flock there, leaving the others out in the cold. Current front-runners are Android and iOS, Apple's operating system.

What is clear is the the future will take its course. Apps are likely to be around, at least for the short term. But unless you are behind Angry Birds or Cut the Rope, you may find the app-developers' path a little more rocky than the stats suggest.

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