

Off the Top of My Head

Wednesday, 27 August 2008

Apple's strange iPhone decisions

I've decided to start a list of features that Apple has implemented on the iPhone which I think they could have done better.

1. Remote wipe is only possible from a Microsoft Exchange server. Those of us who have no Microsoft products in our enterprise (e.g. many Apple customers) cannot use this feature. I thought it was only Microsoft who used this sort of tactic, but they do it to bind their customers to themselves, not to their competition...
2. VPNs are only possible if your firewall can do L2TP, PPTP or Cisco IPSEC. Whatever happened to the widely supported standard IPSEC? L2TP is another Microsoft-oriented solution. PPTP is an insecurity solution from Microsoft. And Cisco IPSEC seems to be something that only Cisco supports. Hallo Apple: ever heard of standards?
3. I won't go on about Java again, ...
4. ... but I will add Flash to the list of strangely missing features on the iPhone. This might not be Apple's decision: whenever Apple does something new (e.g. Mac OS X, iPhone), Adobe seems to take a long time in getting round to support it. Odd, considering that Adobe grew big with Apple originally. However, the report "iPhone ad rapped as 'misleading'" makes interesting reading since some people seem to think that Java and Flash are an integral part of the Internet.

Wednesday, 6 August 2008

iPhone: Initial Impressions

My iPhone finally arrived this week. I ordered one from Orange on the afternoon of 11th July, having missed out in the morning rush, and it finally arrived on 29th July. I feel quite strongly that Orange could have informed more openly about what was happening after they ran out of phones around midday on 11th July, but Swisscom doesn't seem to have performed any better in this regard.

But now it's here, and a two year wait is over.

Was it worth waiting for? Yes. On the purely non-emotional level, I have replaced my Palm and my ancient Nokia mobile phone with a single device which can do much more. In fact, I suspect I may have also replaced my laptop for many of my personal needs. I shan't dwell here on how Palm missed out on dominating the space that the iPhone has now occupied...

I'm not going to enthuse here about all that the iPhone does well. Others can do that better than me: I shall enthuse in private. I would like to go over a few points where I think there is scope for comment, though.

Sharing data

Apple provides four ways of sharing data between your iPhone and your desktop environment:

- sync from iTunes
- sync with MobileMe
- using Microsoft's ActiveSync
- using a VPN

The two former appear to be targeted at private users, while the two latter are intended for corporate users. However, this does not mean that all possible user requirements are covered. What about corporate users who do not use Microsoft products (e.g. Apple customers)? Or corporate users who use standard IPSEC for their VPN (see below)? And what about users who would be happy to work with something like MobileMe, but want their data to be encrypted on the remote site?

Encryption of data in the cloud is available on excellent products like Jungle Disk as an alternative for iDisk on the desktop: extending this to the iPhone and providing synchronisation of Address Book and iCal would be a compelling proposition.

And why does Apple make iPhone users use iTunes, when they have an excellent generic synchronisation framework in iSync?

Pervasive access to e-mail is another strong proposition of the iPhone. However, the same restrictions as above apply. In addition, if you want to access a POP or IMAP account in your local LAN, you'll need to punch a hole in your firewall so you can access your e-mail whilst on the road.

Spam becomes a problem again if you rely on client-side software to filter the bilge from what you really want to read, because that client-side software runs on your desktop. If your desktop is not running, there's nothing filtering the spam out and it is all visible on your iPhone. You could install some sort of spam filter on your iPhone (when it becomes available) but how do you synchronise it with the spam filter on your desktop?

VPN

I'd like to be able to access my LAN from the iPhone when I'm out and about, so I've been looking at VPN access from the iPhone. I already have this from my laptop (a MacBook Pro), so I was hoping it would be easy from the iPhone.

Nothing could be further from the truth. My laptop connects to my firewall with IPSEC, and authentication is done with certificates, so that's pretty secure. The iPhone only supports L2TP/IPSEC, PPTP and Cisco IPSEC, and no pure, standard IPSEC. Certificates are only supported by Cisco IPSEC, but I don't have any Cisco hardware, so that doesn't help me much. This means that I have to use a password for authentication, which is generally considered very weak.

I'm conducting an experiment to see if an L2TP server can be attached to an IPSEC tunnel to achieve the effect of L2TP/IPSEC, but I can't report any success yet.

Battery

It seems certain that I'm going to use my iPhone a lot. I used my Palm a lot, and the iPhone is a telephone in addition (though I often forget that), as well as being a lot more fun. The net result is that a single charge of the battery is unlikely to last a day, especially if I do a lot of phoning. So I need a way to recharge the battery on a regular basis (in the car, in the office, at home). I'm a little concerned about how long it will be before I need a new battery and how long it will take to have it exchanged. So the question of the iPhone battery is a potential weakness in my eyes.

VoIP

I'm looking forward to Skype being available on the iPhone. There is a VoIP product available already (Truphone), but it can only be used from the iPhone to a "real" telephone and not to another iPhone running Truphone. Down the line, I think Skype or VoIP may be one of the iPhone's killer apps. An app that I'm particularly looking forward to in this respect is Fring.

IM

There are a few instant messaging apps on the iPhone: again, I think this could be a killer app on this device, but I'm missing something as reliable as Adium or iChat. I have tried to use Palringo, but unfortunately my contacts don't show up as online, which rather defeats the purpose.

Language Support

I live in Switzerland and use German most of the time. Even when I use English, I need access to the accented characters in common use in Switzerland (äöüàèè, to name but a few). Many years ago, I stopped using English keyboards and now only use Swiss German ones: this is no problem when writing English and absolutely necessary otherwise.

When I saw that the iPhone supported "international" keyboards, I was pleased because I thought I would have easy access to the accented characters. Wrong! All of the keyboards based on the Roman alphabet have the letters "A" to "Z" and no more. There is no apparent difference between the English and the Swedish keyboard, although the Swedes need the letters "ä", "ö" and "å". The only difference between the English and German keyboards is the position of the letters "y" and "z".

So what went wrong? For once, Apple hasn't quite got the usabil-

ity sorted. If you want a vowel with an umlaut – say "ü" – you hold down the "u" key until a horizontal menu with accented "u" letters appears and choose what you need. This may be an adequate solution if you live in Palo Alto, but for those of us in Zürich it's rather like having just an "a" and an "o" key on an English keyboard and having to wait for a menu to appear before you can use "e", "i" or "u". I hope this gets fixed.

Situation dependency

GPS is interesting and allows lots of fun things, but it doesn't tell me when I'm in my car. The iPhone has Bluetooth, and it works with my hands-free kit. However, there's nothing else I (can) use Bluetooth for, so most of the time it's switched off. Switching Bluetooth on (and off) is something that requires at least seven finger actions on the iPhone, and I forget to do it every time I get into the car. And, of course, I forget to switch it off when I get out of the car. (See the discussion above on battery life, if you don't understand why I want to switch it on and off.) I'm looking for a simple way of switching my settings depending on my situation. Any tips to blog@vimia.com please.

Stability of OS

Version 2.0 of the iPhone OS used to fall over at regular intervals, particularly after I had installed new software from the app store. I installed 2.0.1 yesterday, but I can't comment on whether it is more or less stable than its predecessor. The iPhone looks very elegant while it's rebooting (silver apple on a black background), but it's not very usable (this is a phone, after all).

I realised while thinking about the stability of the iPhone OS that it doesn't appear to distinguish between privileged and non-privileged users. I haven't read everything that I need to on this

subject, but suffice it say that the same failure was a major problem with Windows XP: many applications (specially games) only worked if you had admin privileges, so your kids always had to be admins, which meant chaos. I hope this isn't going to be the case with the iPhone.

Monday, 4 August 2008

Inaccessible Standards...

I am interested in the ISO standard 20022 aka UNIFI (Universal Financial Industry Message Scheme), and one assumes that the people who wrote the standard are interested in making it as widely known as possible. However, if you go to iso.org and search for the standard, you discover that the 5 relevant documents which comprise it cost a total of CHF 588.

Am I the only person who thinks that this inhibits the spread of the standard? Even worst, it encourages people to develop something else which is freely available.

I understand that the people who develop standards need to be paid and that the process of standardisation is long and wearisome. But I recall the Internet boom of the 90s, which – for all the bad press it has had in retrospect – has left us with that vibrant and indispensable medium which is the modern Internet. That boom was only possible because of the vast stock of freely available standards which had been stockpiled over the years: surely this is evidence that freely available standards help the digital economy to thrive?

Wouldn't making standards freely available lead to easier adoption? And therefore to an opener and more competitive digital

economy?

Saturday, 8 March 2008

Java on the iPhone

My first reaction to Thursday's iPhone event at which Apple presented the road-map for the iPhone and its SDK was of disappointment because Java doesn't figure in it at all. I believe not supporting Java is a mistake.

As so often, when a company has a clear marketing lead, it wants to consolidate that lead by using proprietary tie-ins, in this case Cocoa Touch. If someone develops an application based on Cocoa Touch, it is only going to work on the iPhone or an iPhone emulator on Mac OS X.

The value proposition of Java is platform independence and reusability. Java classes developed by Sun on Solaris can be reused without problem (or development time and cost) on my Mac, for example. This is of huge value if the licensing is open enough. Think of Jakarta Commons and all the other good stuff available out there on the Net. We can't afford to throw away yet again all the effort of previous years every time a new revolution occurs in IT: there's just too much of it, and its quality these days is much higher than – say – when minicomputers replaced mainframes or PCs replaced minis.

It seems pretty clear that Apple is not going to support Java on the iPhone. Even though I believe they are misguided, I accept that it is their right to decide. Whatever the pros and cons of Java on the iPhone, Apple has to be able to deliver and support

their products professionally which means that they have to balance what they do and what they don't do.

According to this article [8]"Sun Microsystems is developing a Java Virtual Machine for Apple's iPhone and plans to release the JVM some time after June, enabling Java applications to run on the popular mobile device."

I hope this is good news. Sun (as a company rather than individual employees) has always seemed to me to have a blind spot for Apple. In particular, Sun has traditionally completely ignored Apple's advances in GUI technology and has been satisfied if Java works on Windows and Linux. The Metal Look and Feel in Swing, which is enough to give Mac users nightmares, may well be the main reason for Java's bad reputation as a desktop technology.

Of course, any discussion of Java will have people saying "I don't want applets" or "you can't write good Java applications". The latter statement is provably untrue in the meantime, though there have been bad examples in the past. And I don't think there are many people around who would seriously propose using applets these days: in fact, with the benefit of hindsight, I suspect Sun would never have invented them in the first place! So these are red herrings in my view, often introduced by trolls trying to hijack serious discussion.

I believe that Sun can do a good job of putting Java onto the iPhone. But the critical success factor will be how well they interface to Cocoa Touch. The ARM processor in the iPhone apparently contains hardware support for Java in the form of Jazelle: according to ARM's website [9]"ARM Jazelle technology software

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http://www.vimia.com/article/08/03/07/sun-iphone-java_1.html?source=rss&url=http://www.informationworld.com/article/08/03/07/sun-iphone-java_1.html

[9] http://www.vimia.com/products/esd/jazelle_home.html

is a full featured multi-tasking Java Virtual Machine", so we can hope for a small footprint and an efficient implementation.

Having seen the demos in Apple's iPhone event, it seems clear to me that the iPhone is a real (though small) computer, so cut down Java versions like those on other mobile phones are going to have no chance at all. So is there a JVM out there that will run on the iPhone's processor? Sun already has CLDC and CDC support [10]for ARM processors. "The Connected Device Configuration (CDC) is a subset of Java SE, containing almost all the libraries that are not GUI related.", according to Wikipedia. Sounds good!

Is it actually worth the bother of making Java available on the iPhone? If we look at games, the stuff written in Java that runs on other mobile phones is going to look pretty tame on an iPhone. The iPhone seems well positioned against mobile game consoles, which have never been Java territory.

Business applications provide a better argument for supporting Java, but there is still the question of the user interface. Even if companies have applications written in Java which they want to port to the iPhone, the user interface will have to be rewritten. Or is it possible to define a meta-UI which can be adequately instantiated on an iPhone, other mobile phones and the desktop? Or will this space be left to Safari, with the SDK being used solely for stand-alone applications?

However, the fact that Apple are now clearly also going for the business market with their new positioning of the iPhone lends strength to the requirement for Java on the iPhone.

Of course, given Java on the iPhone, the interesting question is going to be how to write Java applications which provide a nat-

[10] http://www.vimia.com/downloads_page.html

ive experience on the iPhone and on other similar platforms, for example Android, which is already Java-based. The business case for supporting iPhone and Android with a single code base is compelling. And that's the reason for having Java on the iPhone.

Wednesday, 16 January 2008

What is Xd?

Traditional relationship management reminds me of mother ducks leading their dependent offspring around the pond.

Product managers tend to see themselves in the middle, surrounded by customers who they "own" (this is a marketing term) and try not to lose. If they ever think about allowing their customers complementary services from third parties, they prefer to decide themselves who the partner is and funnel those services through their own channels. The modern Internet perpetuates this tradition as companies try to create portals and "communities" to bind customers to their services – if not through quality, then through emotion.

This approach offers customers a "one size fits all" solution which they can take or leave. Companies are faced with the integration of partners into complex portals requiring ever more computing power, and with the need to establish the portal in the marketplace. And how many portals does the world need?

Much of the attraction of the Internet for users has been ascribed to the 4 C's: choice, cost, convenience, and control, which offer customers a stronger position in the market. As long as Internet users only have a small number of online relationships, the traditional model can survive. But as users acquire

multiple relationships in the Internet, traditional models become less appropriate as the users need to make their online relationships work together, based on their choice of interaction and not on deals made by their providers.

While the server power necessary to feed the portals increases, Internet users' computers – typically equipped with fast processors and huge memory to support multimedia applications – are hardly used. Mega-MIPS of processing power are available but seemingly unneeded while the servers get bigger and bigger.

Modern technology provides the means to utilise this spare capacity and give the customer the 4 C's. Network bandwidth is becoming cheaper and web-service based service-oriented architectures (SOA) provide loosely coupled access to enterprise services. XML provides at the syntactic level the necessary global standard for exchanging data between clients and servers and also between applications on the client side. Obviously this exchange can be enhanced where appropriate XML standards encompass domain-specific semantics.

This is what Xdproposes:

- extend the user's desktop to enable access to remote enterprise services from the desktop;
- enable the interaction of those services on the desktop under the control of the user;
- provide excellent security to protect all concerned.

This approach allows users to construct composite applications that are meaningful for them and enables them to choose who they want to work with: if two organisations provide accessible services, users can combine them even if the two organisations are unaware of each other's existence.

This is a customer-centric approach to service aggregation which gives control to the users and allows relationship managers to observe what the users want, rather than having to second-guess their requirements. It increases available computing power at no cost by using dormant capacity on the client side and reduces the complexity necessary on the server side, thus ultimately reducing provider costs.

I'll be expanding on what Xd is and its implementation in future blog entries.

Thursday, 10 January 2008

IT Category

This section contains entries about information technology (IT). It focusses in particular on “Open Source Software” (OSS), discussing, comparing and positioning individual OSS products on the basis of experience. Planned articles include Samba, Castor and Bacula.

Others topics treated here may include architecture, processes, standards, software tools, methodology and security.

Technorati Tags: IT, Open Source, Standards

Internet Category

Entries on Internet topics will appear in this section. These will take into account the main focus of Vimia's business activity:

- consulting,

- customer-centricity,
- applications,
- current trends and
- commentry.

By “Internet” I do also mean intranets and extranets as well as mobile and other digital networks. Sometimes I use the umbrella term “Übernet” for this purpose.

Technorati Tags: Übernet, consultancy, customer-centricity, Internet

Know-How Category

This category contains tips about various topics and is intended to be a container for all the little bits of experience with hardware and software which everybody has but tends not to document. If someone finds a solution here via Google, it's purpose will have been achieved.

Vimia has adopted in principle for its own use MacOS X on workstations and laptops, and Linux (more specifically Fedora) on servers. Development is done mainly on the basis of Java and XML. This will influence the type of know-how entries found here.

Welcome to Vimia's Blog!

This blog contains news from and about Vimia GmbH. Blog entries appear as appropriate in English or German.

Entries are categorised roughly according to the business activities of Vimia:

- Internet
- IT
- R&D
- Know-How

General entries and those which cannot be more precisely classified can be found here in the category General.

For technical reasons blog entries cannot be commented upon in the initial phase: later, however, moderated comments will be possible.

Only Vimia staff may publish entries in this blog.

Research Category

In this section the entries about the research and development activities of Vimia appear. These are chiefly Xd, Ubiquity and Xw although other topics may also be addressed.