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"I Take the iPhone Home"

By Lev Grossman

Somewhere in the unwritten amendments to the U.S. Constitution it is stipulated that every gadget reviewer is entitled to his or her personal iPhone quibble. Here's mine: when you're transferring content from your computer to the iPhone, you can't simply drag and drop tracks into the phone, in that richly satisfying way you did with your iPod. Moving music and video around is a matter of instructing iTunes to 'sync' the iPhone with one more playlists. The procedure feels clumsy and imprecise — you can't just spear a specific little chunk of content, like a canape with a toothpick, and chuck it into the device for later consumption.

But if I'm quibbling already, I'm getting ahead of myself. I acquired my iPhone shortly after 6:00 on launch day at the Apple store in midtown Manhattan, a subterranean emporium located underneath the plaza in front of FAO Schwartz and accessible through a crystal portal leading to a spiral staircase, befitting the fairy-tale mood. The crowd was astounding, hundreds of people (granted, many of them were TV crews) gawking and yelling and cheering the first customers to emerge with their iPhones. In a way it's disturbing to watch America fall in love with a piece of technology again. You've been hurt before, America, I wanted to say. Are you so sure it'll be different this time? This one won't solve all your problems either.

On the subway home I chose to leave my iPhone in its bag, since I'd seen the YouTube clip of my counterpart at Newsweek, Steven Levy, being interviewed on Fox News when a passerby jumped him on live TV and tried to wrestle the iPhone out of his hand. One wonders if the incredible frenzy over the iPhone signals a sea change in Apple's brand identity. The iPod was the accessory of the hip cognoscenti. Will the pricey, sought-after iPhone become a mere status symbol, the kind of thing that marks you as an overpaid Wall Street jerkwad?

Back in my apartment my iPhone and I became acquainted in the manner of gadgets and reviewers since time immemorial, over spicy Chinese food. The packaging is nothing special, though Apple's trademark fine manufacturing tolerances are evident even in the box, which resists opening with a satisfying pneumatic counter-suck — the cover is so precisely made it's reluctant to let air flow in around it. I hooked the iPhone up to my iBook with a feeling of pride roughly comparable to that of someone setting up an old friend with a really hot blind date. iTunes needed to download a chunk of code before it would talk to the iPhone (as if it wanted to change before it met that really hot blind date). After a brisk two hours negotiating the activation protocol for iPhone reviewers, I was in.

And then... what? The iPhone has already been reviewed, many times over, and the unanimity of the reviewers is at once striking and numbingly boring: It's a stunning achievement with a few quibbles. The price points (\$499 for the 4GB model, \$599 for 8GB) and rate plans and feature lists have been endlessly rehearsed. (And yes, it works with Windows, even Windows Vista.) So have the quibbles.

For example: AT&T's data network is slow (though it seems to be improving). It's a bummer that the camera doesn't shoot video. The glass touchscreen keyboard is kinda freaky (though if there was ever a moment for an ad campaign to license Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Put 'Em on the Glass," this is it). GPS would be nice. So would instant messaging. YouTube videos — in the little YouTube client Apple has ginned up — sound great but look lousy. And yeah, there's that content management quirk mentioned above.

Cold fusion would be great too, but you know what? Nobody cares. Steve Jobs has said, repeatedly, that this is the best iPod that Apple has ever made, and it is. It's also the best phone that anybody has ever made.

E-mail and web-browsing are unbelievably great. Ditto the crisp music and video playback. Everybody I called with the iPhone remarked on the crispness and clarity of the audio. For the iPhone, Apple has brought to market a revolutionarily smart, sensitive touchscreen and created an entirely new user interface to match it, all in one go, so seamlessly that my 3-year-old daughter — and I apologize for going to this place, but the fact is striking nonetheless — had no trouble unlocking the iPhone and dialing with it (even though she believed that she was playing a musical instrument).

Voice mail — you pick and choose visually what messages you want to hear — and Google Maps are ridiculously useful. The user interface is crammed with smart little touches — every moment of user interaction has been quietly stage-managed and orchestrated, with such overwhelming attention to detail that when the history of digital interface design is written, whoever managed this project at Apple will be hailed as a Michelangelo, and the iPhone his or her Sistine Chapel (Steve Jobs can be Pope in this scenario). If you're not a reviewer, chances are you won't even bother to look at the manual. Translucent,

jewel-like, artfully phrased dialogue boxes come and go on cue. Window borders bounce and flex just slightly to cue the user where and how you're supposed to drop and drag and scroll them. When you switch the phone to "airplane mode" (no electronic transmissions, for use on planes) a tasteful little orange airplane slides into the menu bar, then zooms away when you switch out again. (This was so pleasurable that I repeatedly entered airplane mode while using the iPhone, even though I wasn't actually on an airplane.) As soon as my phone realized it belonged to someone with a nonsense-name like Lev, it started correcting typos like "Leb" and "Lec" to match.

One could go on. And sure, you and I and Danny Fanboy over there could come up with a list of nitpicks a yard long, too. (Did I mention that the camera photos have a strange glowy, vaseline-y quality to them? And personally I like a hardware button to press to take pictures, instead of software, placed parallel to the plane of the device, or I end up with shaky images. And either my thumbs are bigger than normal people's, or it really is tricky to type on this thing.) It's certainly tempting to. The hype for the iPhone has been so relentless — witness the screaming Yahoos outside the Apple store — that to praise the phone feels a bit like you're falling for a sales pitch. Resist the temptation. This thing is a marvel.

But to look at the iPhone as a laundry list of features and bugs is to miss the point (though if you did, the former would commandingly outweigh the latter). The iPhone isn't just the gadget du jour, it's a fresh new platform, an exceptionally powerful mobile computer that's still in its infancy. There's a full version of Apple's desktop operating system in there. The Palm and the Treo, et al., were merely harbingers of the era of true walk-around mobile computing that Jobs has just inaugurated. Hail to the chief.

Apple and its partners are just beginning to figure out how to develop for this thing. Look at the iPods of five years ago. That monochrome interface! That clunky moving touchwheel! They look like something a caveman whittled out of a piece of flint using another piece of flint. Now imagine something that's going to make the iPhone look like that. You'll have one in a few years, and it'll be cheaper, too. If you're not ready to think different, then think ahead.

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