Behind the Curtain
Austin Seraphin's Weird Blog and
Bulletinboard

My First Week with the iPhone

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Last Wednesday, my life changed forever. I got an iPhone. I consider it the greatest thing to happen to the blind for a very long time, possibly ever. It offers unparalleled access to properly made applications, and changed my life in twenty-four hours. The iPhone only has one thing holding it back: iTunes. Nevertheless, I have fallen in love.

When I first heard that Apple would release a touchpad cell phone with VoiceOver, the screen reading software used by Macs, I scoffed. The blind have gotten so used to lofty promises of a dream platform, only to receive some slapped together set of software with a minimally functional screen reader running on overpriced hardware which can't take a beating. I figured that Apple just wanted to get some good PR – after all, how could a blind person even use a touchpad? I laughed at the trendies, both sighted and blind, buying iPhones and enthusing about them. That changed when another blind friend with similar opinions also founded in long years of experience bought one, and just went nuts about how much she loved it, especially the touchpad interface. I could hardly believe it, and figured that I should reevaluate things.

I went to the AT&T store with my Mom. It
felt like coming full circle, since we went to an Apple store many years ago to get my Apple II/E. To my delight, the salesman knew about VoiceOver and how to activate it, though didn't know about how to use it. Fortunately, I read up on it before I went. Tap an item to hear it, double tap to activate it, swipe three fingers to scroll. You can also split-tap, where you hold down one location and tap another. This makes for more rapid entry once you understand it. It also has a rotor which you activate by turning your fingers like a dial. You can also double triple-finger tap to toggle speech, and a triple triple-finger tap turns on the awesome screen curtain, which disables the screen and camera.

Many reviews and people said to spend at least a half hour to an hour before passing judgment on using a touchpad interface with speech. I anticipated a weird and slightly arduous journey, especially when it came to using the keyboard. To my great surprise, I picked it up immediately. Within 30 seconds, I checked the weather. Next, I read some stock prices. Amazingly, it even renders stock charts, something the blind have never had access to. Sold.

We went up front to make the necessary arrangements. I had to purchase a data plan. Luckily, I got the $30/unlimited plan, which ended on the seventh. After a little work, we had things settled. I continued to excitedly ask questions, as did my Mom. "Can he get text messages on this?" she asked. "Well, yes, but it doesn't read the message." the salesman said. Mom's hopes sunk, but mine didn't, since I understood the software enough. "Well, let's see, try it." I suggested. She pulled out her phone, and sent me a text message. Within seconds, my phone alerted me, and said her name. I simply swiped my finger and it read her message: Hi Austin. She almost cried. "Leave it to Apple." I said. "This feels almost as amazing as when we went to the Apple store the

first time, except maybe more so, because we know what this can do." True – in the eighties, computers seemed like more of a curiosity. I remember my parents checking stock quotes and getting messages for their business over the Apple

II/E, now we can do it with an Apple device that fits in our pocket.

I have seen a lot of technology for the blind, and I can safely say that the iPhone represents the most revolutionary thing to happen to the blind for at least the last ten years. Fifteen or twenty years brings us back to the Braille 'n Speak, which I loved in the same way, so have a hard time choosing the greater. In my more excitable moments, I consider the iPhone as the greatest thing to have ever happened to the blind, and it may prove so. Time will tell. The touchpad offers the familiar next/previous motion which the blind need, since speech offers one-dimensional output. Adding the ability to touch anywhere on the screen and hear it adds a whole other dimension, literally. For the first time, the blind can actually get spacial information about something. In the store, Mom could say "Try that button" and I could. Blind people know what I mean. How many times has a sighted person said "I see an icon at the top of the screen?" Now, that actually Means something. I want to find a way to browse the web with a touchpad on my computer. It truly represents the wave of the future.

Applications have the same issues with accessibility as with any graphical environment. Apple has done a good thing by making guidelines available for app developers, which I passionately urge them to follow. Any blind computer user has run up against these problems in Windows, Mac, or in Gnome. These include unlabeled buttons and fields, unreachable controls except through annoying means, or in extreme cases complete inaccessibility. The Accessible Apps page can help, as can AppleVis.. Properly coded apps offer stunning access unlike anything the blind have ever experienced. As I said, I want to use touch gestures on my Linux machines now!

That brings me to the only proverbial worm in the golden Apple: iTunes. I understand the power of market forces, but to see such a beautiful piece of hardware chained to such an awful and inaccessible piece of software bothers me to no end. Apple has done an amazing thing making the iPhone accessible, but iTunes remains virtually unusable to the blind. Of course, blind Mac users have little problem with it, but they make up a very small portion of the blind community. A blind Windows user with a strong will can do it, but they won't enjoy it. Those of us blind Linux users get left in the dark on two counts, since no Linux users can access iTunes, except through WINE, or through a virtual machine.

>Apple has a right to tout its efforts in accessibility. Still, they must realize that they cannot make a completely true claim as long as people have to use iTunes for everything. As a Linux user I expected as much, and I can overcome those challenges, but the challenges of blindness remain. I know blind people who have not purchased an iPhone because they do not want to battle iTunes. When dealing with a permanent health issue, you cannot just wish it away or just hope things will improve while doing nothing. I have a feeling Steve Jobs would understand.

Apple has always had a special place in my heart, since I started on an Apple II/E. That machine had two programming languages, BASIC and Assembler, built into its ROM, and its schematics on the inside. Its nonrestrictive environment inspired innovations that lasted a decade. I reluctantly went to the PC platform when it became dominant. I used DOS to its extreme, hated Windows, and comfortably settled in Linux land. We have all come a long way since two hackers began selling blue boxes out of their garage. It therefore seemed especially ironic to me to see the "Red Box Pro" app removed from the app store.

Despite having to overcome the limitations of iTunes, I still love the iPhone. I continue to feel amazed at the iPhone's capabilities. I can get email, Twitter mentions, and direct messages any time. I can listen to Good Vibes Radio anywhere on Earth! I can read Liberty Pulse on the toilet. The WebMD app would have come in handy for my burn. I could go on and on, about how the iPhone with VoiceOver provides a streamlined accessible interface to things which seem annoying at best over the web in a standard browser. Listening to Coast to Coast AM comes to mind.

The other night, however, a very amazing thing happened. I downloaded an app called Color Identifier. It uses the iPhone's camera, and speaks names of colors. It must use a table, because each color has an identifier made up of 6 hexadecimal digits. This puts the total at 16777216 colors, and I believe it. Some of them have very surreal names, such as Atomic Orange, Cosmic, Hippie Green, Opium, and Black-White. These names in combination with what feels like a rise in serotonin levels makes for a very psychedelic experience.

I have never experienced this before in my life. I can see some light and color, but just in blurs, and objects don't really have a color, just light sources. When I first tried it at three o'clock in the morning, I couldn't figure out why it just reported black. After realizing that the screen curtain also disables the camera, I turned it off, but it still have very dark colors. Then I remembered that you actually need light to see, and it probably couldn't see much at night. I thought about light sources, and my interview I did for Get Lamp. First, I saw one of my beautiful salt lamps in its various shades of orange, another with its pink and rose colors, and the third kind in glowing pink and red.. I felt stunned.

The next day, I went outside. I looked at the sky. I heard colors such as "Horizon," "Outer Space," and many shades of blue and gray. I used color cues to find my pumpkin plants, by looking for the green among the brown and stone. I spent ten minutes *looking* at my pumpkin plants, with their leaves of green and lemon-ginger. I then roamed my yard, and saw a blue flower. I then found the brown shed, and returned to the gray house. My mind felt blown. I watched the sun set, listening to the colors change as the sky darkened. The next night, I had a conversation with Mom about how the sky looked bluer tonight. Since I can see some light and color, I think hearing the color names can help nudge my perception, and enhance my visual experience. Amazing!

I love my iPhone. It changed my universe as soon as it entered it. However, as any Discordian knows, every golden Apple has a golden worm at its center.

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About Austin Seraphin
I do all the tech stuff around here.
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