Hands-On with ZenZui Mobile UI

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We get an early demo of Microsoft's radical new ZenZui user interface for mobile devices.

In the opening keynote session at CTIA , AT&T Chief Operating Officer Randall Stephenson told an audience of more than 3,000 attendees that the next big application in the world of wireless is "ease of use." He then proceeded to demo the Apple iPhone to illustrate his point.

In wandering the show floor, a lot of the cell phones I saw were full-featured multimedia phones, but I would be hard-pressed to say that any of them excelled at ease of use. Indeed, the trend seems to be to try and

pack more and more into a device without a lot of thought behind making these phones easy for consumers to use.

But that will change if a new Microsoft spinoff called ZenZui has its way. The company's goal is to create an easy-to-use interface that will, according to CEO Eric Hertz, "transform the way people engage, consume, and interact with Web content through a revolutionary mobile user experience and information ecosystem, using ZenZui's Zooming User Interface."

While that's a lofty goal, I got a chance to play with this new UI when I met with Hertz on the first day of CTIA when the ZenZui UI was announced. (You can get your own short demo on [YouTube](#)) My first impression is that ZenZui is on to something quite new and important for the mobile phone and mobile data markets.

Keep in mind, this UI is not in the same class as Apple's upcoming iPhone, given the iPhone's radical approach of touch-screen navigation built upon the powerful Mac OS X. But the ZenZui Zooming interface is revolutionary in its own right in the way it allows content owners to create "tiles" and tie them to Web-based contextual information and advertising. It also easily allows users to access this content and even share it. What really sets it apart is that it does a great job of delivering these tiles in this new Zooming UI on small phones with small screens, as well as on smart phones with larger screens.

The interface consists of a grid of tiles which are either three or four across and three or four down, each representing different content. For example, one tile could be Nike, and when you zoom in to that particular tile, you get content from Nike about a sporting event or even a Nike sponsored player. At the second level there might be ads about Nike gear related to the sport you are receiving content about. Or with ZenZui partner Epicurious, set up your preferences for, say, beef recipes, and

you might get recipes for beef stew and at the second level an ad for a cast-iron pot for braising the stew.

According to Hertz, "ZenZui's core technology brings advanced information-visualization techniques out of the research lab and onto mobile phones and into the hands of mobile device operators, marketers, and consumers."

ZenZui can deliver a high frame rate and zooming user interface due to its ability to cache content. It employs up to 36 individual tiles that are selected and customized by users to reflect their interests and lifestyles with relevant content, interactive communications, and fresh data.

The application itself will be first deployed on the Windows Mobile platform and go into beta this summer. They hope to have a J2ME version in beta a short time after the Windows Mobile version and will eventually support Qualcomm's Brew and Symbian's operating system as well.

The application will be free to the user and can be downloaded directly to phones. However, a user can actually configure and manage tile content through a Web portal and easily add, subtract, or even share tiles with friends from the phone or the Web portal. ZenZui is also working with carriers and handset makers to try and get this UI embedded on new phones and mobile platforms in the future - if they are successful, the day may come when this UI is just part of a phone's interface.

The ZenZui program itself is free because it deploys an ad-based model to make money. Early partnerships include ABC News, Fox Media, Nike, Amazon, and Epicurious, to name a few, and each partner has a tile with some type of content link along with connections to various ads or promotions. Initially, ZenZui is helping these companies create their tiles and content links, but will eventually publish tools to allow any

brand to create an icon or tile to deliver all kinds of personalized content.

While I suspect that a lot of commercial companies will be enticed to this easy-to-use UI and platform, the business model does allow for anyone to create a tile and tie their own info and content to the program. For example, skate boarders could create tiles tied to favorite skate board sites and share them with friends.

From talking to Hertz and his team, it is clear that they have given a lot of thought to creating an easier way to access Web-based content on these types of phones. And the new ZenZui UI should get serious attention from carriers and consumers alike.

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