

Voice-detection feature on new iPhone could shake up industry

5 October 2011, By Troy Wolverton

The new Apple iPhone 4S that was unveiled Tuesday includes a faster chip and more powerful camera than its predecessor, but overall is underwhelming except for one potentially revolutionary new feature: Siri voice-recognition technology.

Siri acts like a virtual secretary. It can take dictation, check your calendar and schedule appointments, read text messages aloud, check stock quotes and even find a great nearby restaurant.

Because the feature is a fundamental component of the iPhone 4S, you don't have to launch a particular app to use Siri. Instead, you just press down on the device's home button. And you can talk to it just as you would to a human, using simple language rather than arcane commands.

Voice recognition has been a staple of science fiction for decades and has been in development for almost as long. In recent years, it's been built into devices ranging from toy dolls to desktop computers. And Apple first started building it into iPhones with the 3GS released two years ago.

What is new - and revolutionary - about Siri is just how mature the technology has become. We're finally at a stage where interacting with a computing device primarily with your voice is a real possibility. That Apple is touting that capability as the key new feature of its flagship device is a good indication to me that it's finally about to go mainstream.

I've long been a big proponent of "natural" interfaces for computers and like devices. It's easier and more intuitive to tap on a screen, wave your hand or say a command than it is punch a button or type something in.

Nintendo's [Wii](#) helped lead the charge on [motion detection](#), the ability to interact with a computing

device by moving a controller - or yourself - in a particular way. That ability is now built into each of the major [game consoles](#) and is included in nearly all smartphones and many other [handheld devices](#).

Apple's original iPhone sparked the adoption of [fingertip](#) computing - the ability to interact with a computing device with just your finger on a screen - without needing a stylus or physical keypad. Before the iPhone, it would have been almost unthinkable to make a phone that didn't have a physical keypad. Today, most smartphones and nearly all tablets are solely touch-based.

The Siri technology could also become a new industry standard. We may soon expect to be able to simply talk to a computing device for our information or communication needs, rather than having to tap, type or click.

Voice interaction has some huge potential advantages over standard methods. It decreases or eliminates your need to look at a screen. That has obvious benefits not only for people who are visually impaired but also for everybody else when they're driving, walking, exercising or just can't focus on a display. People distracted from driving by text messages or fumbling with their music player have increasingly become a danger.

In recent years, we've seen an explosion of apps for smartphones. But the more apps there are, the more difficult it can be to find them. Voice interaction helps clear the clutter by more directly addressing consumers' needs. Instead of having to remember and find the stock quote app and then typing in the ticker symbol for "Apple," you can get Apple's latest stock price by just asking for it.

And for many people, it's going to be a lot easier to compose a text or e-mail message with their voice than typing it with a virtual keyboard.

To be sure, much of what Apple showed Tuesday

has been demonstrated before. Siri itself previously existed as a downloadable app in Apple's App Store - although Apple removed it and disabled existing copies Tuesday - and did many of the same things that are now a part of the [iPhone 4S](#). But most of those features were not as robust as the built-in Siri.

Still, it's possible that the Siri feature could disappoint in real-world use, rather than in flashy onstage demos. I've not tested out the new feature yet, but voice-recognition technologies have a spotty history. They've often had a tough time dealing with ambient noise, fast speech or thick accents. I've tested out and quickly abandoned several voice-recognition technologies because they were too inaccurate and frustrating to use.

But I'm betting Siri will be different. Apple's obviously convinced. And the company has been known to spark a technology revolution or two.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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APA citation: Voice-detection feature on new iPhone could shake up industry (2011, October 5) retrieved 17 November 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-voice-detection-feature-iphone-industry.html>

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