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# App Makers Take Interest in Android

By JENNA WORTHAM

There was cold beer, hot pizza and shop talk at a recent informal gathering of Android programmers in downtown Manhattan. Inevitably the chatter turned to money.

One software developer, James Englert, 26, had just released his first application for Android, Google's operating system for cellphones. When asked, he tossed out an estimate for his take from sales of the app, a simple program that shows train schedules: "\$1 to \$2 per day."

The room erupted with laughter. "That's pretty good money," he protested over the clamor.

The others could relate to Mr. Englert's situation because writing Android software is not yet a ticket to financial success. Even as Android sales surge — Google says it is now activating around 200,000 phones a day — the market for Android apps still seems anemic compared with that for Apple and its thriving App Store.

Experts and developers say that is in part because the Android Market, the dominant store for Android apps, has some clunky features that can be annoying to phone owners eager to make a quick purchase. For starters, Android uses Google Checkout rather than an online payment system that more people are familiar with, like PayPal. As a result, many Android developers make their apps available free and rely on mobile advertisements to cover the cost.

"It's not the best impulse-buy environment," said Matt Hall, co-founder of a developer outfit called Larva Labs that makes games for Android, iPhone and BlackBerry devices. "It's hard to think of an application that you would sit there and put your credit card information in for."

But that tide is starting to turn as Android's popularity continues to swell and Google takes steps to smooth out some of the wrinkles. For example, the Android Market recently began showing app prices in a user's local currency, rather than that of the developer.

"We're still seeing the 1.0 version of the ecosystem," said Andy Rubin, vice president for engineering at Google and a primary architect behind Android.

Mr. Rubin said there were 270,000 developers writing software for Android, and the number of programs available for download in the Android Market has swelled to more than 100,000, a threefold increase since March.

Developers can feel the shift in momentum. "I used to tell people I wrote software for Android, and they'd look at me like I had three heads," said [Michael Novak](#), who handles Android development at Medialets, a mobile advertising software company, and helps organize the monthly [New York Android Software Developers Meetup](#). "That wasn't even a year ago. Now everyone knows what it is."

Perhaps the biggest point of friction for Android is the same thing that led to its success.

Because Google makes its software available free to a range of phone manufacturers, there are dozens of different Android-compatible devices on the market, each with different screen sizes, memory capacities, processor speeds and graphics capabilities. An app that works beautifully on, say, a [Motorola](#) Droid might suffer from glitches on a phone made by HTC. iPhone developers, meanwhile, need to worry about only a few devices: iPhones, iPods and iPads.

When Rovio, the Finnish software development company behind the popular iPhone game [Angry Birds](#), decided to release a version for Android, the company spent months testing the game on a variety of devices to make sure it was up to par.

"It's so fragmented," said Peter Vesterbacka, a developer at the company. "It's a lot more challenging than developing for one device, like the iPhone."

In the end, he said, it was worth the trouble. The game was downloaded more than three million times in the first week. But the company, which charges 99 cents for the iPhone version and has made millions of dollars that way, chose to give away the Android version and include ads. This is in part because paid apps on the Android Market are available in only 32 countries, versus 90 for the Apple App Store, and Rovio was concerned that people who were not able to purchase the app would just pirate it.

But developers also say that charging for apps simply may not be the path to profit on Android.

"Google is not associated with things you pay for, and Android is an extension of that," said Mr. Hall of Larva Labs. "You don't pay for Google apps, so it bleeds into the expectations for the third-party apps, too."

Google says it hopes to introduce a transaction feature for Android software that will allow purchases within apps, to help developers make more money.

Developers do say that the freedom of Android is a welcome alternative to Apple's tight control. Android developers have more rein to tinker with the phone's native functions, like the address book and the basic interface, something Apple has not always allowed. And Apple screens all apps before they can reach its store, while Google imposes no such restriction, relying on Android users to flag malicious or offensive apps.

"With Apple, you can spend months writing software only to be denied," Mr. Novak said. "The biggest reward as a developer is getting your software out there, and quick. That makes everything else worthwhile."

Also unlike Apple, Google does not charge developers to sell their apps in its storefront.

Developers are not abandoning iPhone for Android. Instead, they say they are slowly starting to devote more resources to Android in the hope that those efforts will pay off.

They also note that it is a lot easier to stand out in a pool of 100,000 apps versus 300,000, the current tally for Apple's store.

"Apple's App Store is getting overcrowded and saturated," said Eric Metois, a freelance tech consultant who writes apps on the side for the iPhone and Android.

Mr. Metois's first iPhone app, [iChalky](#), featuring a dancing stick figure, has sold more than 300,000 copies on the iPhone since it was released in December 2008. His second attempt, a game called [Sparticle](#), was not as successful.

"I poured 500 hours into my second app on the iPhone and sold virtually no copies," Mr. Metois said. In explaining why he recently released an Android version of iChalky, he said, "There was a chance that on another emerging platform, iChalky would have a similar amount of success."

Analysts say that if Google wants its mobile software to succeed, it will need to make sure that developers do not lose patience with Android — particularly in light of new competition, including the slate of Windows 7 phones from [Microsoft](#) and the iPhone's inevitable expansion to other carriers in the United States besides AT&T.

Mr. Rubin said he was not worried about rivals' tempering the momentum of Android because he believed its future would stretch past the cellphone, to tablets and other devices yet to be

conceived.

“The promise of Android goes beyond one device,” Mr. Rubin said. “We’re going to see products running Android that no one has ever envisioned possible.”