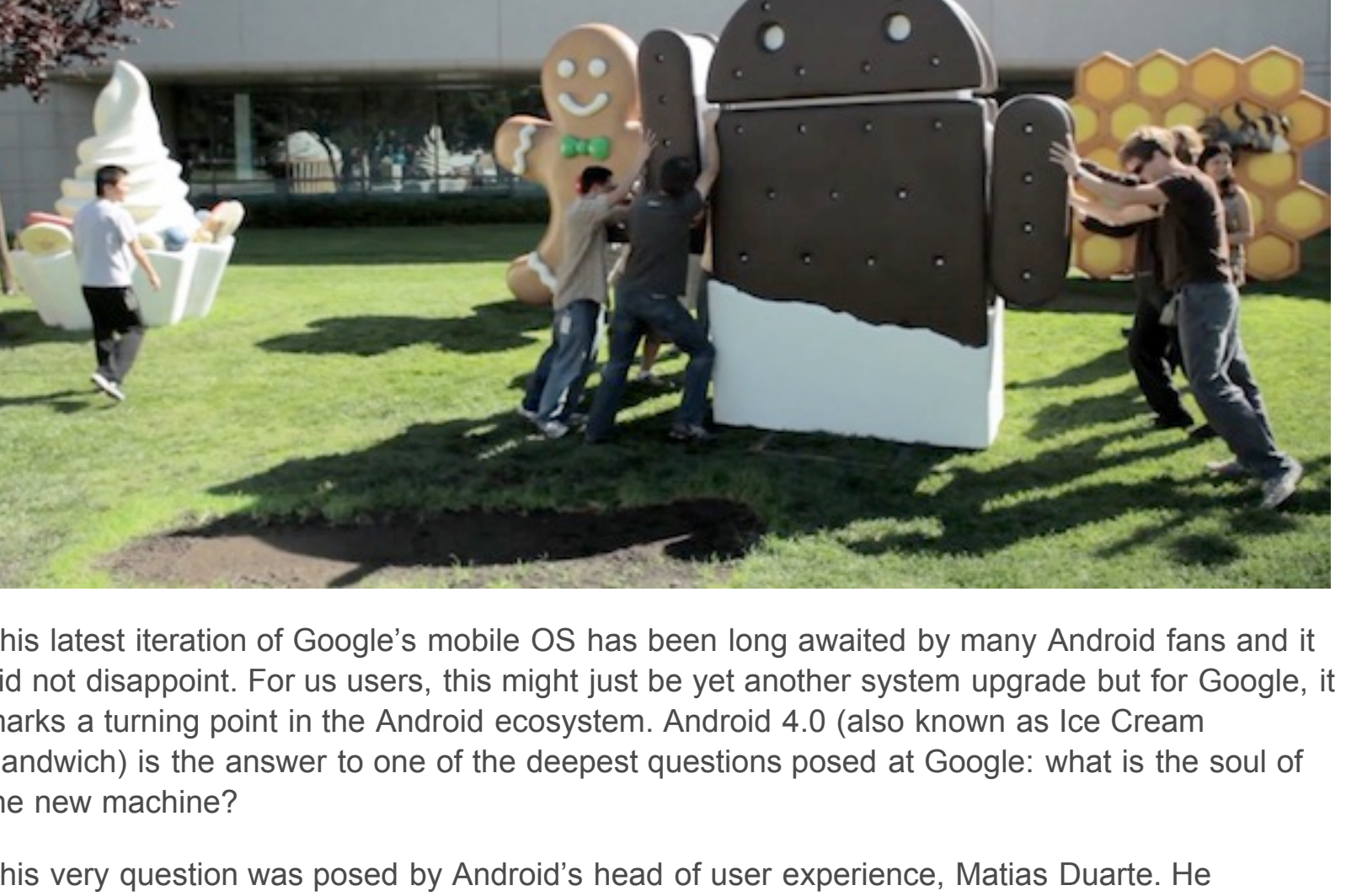


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# Ice Cream Sandwich: The Soul of the New Machine

by **Glenn Santos** on Oct 21, 2011 with **9 Comments** **AAA**



This latest iteration of Google's mobile OS has been long awaited by many Android fans and it did not disappoint. For us users, this might just be yet another system upgrade but for Google, it marks a turning point in the Android ecosystem. Android 4.0 (also known as Ice Cream Sandwich) is the answer to one of the deepest questions posed at Google: what is the soul of the new machine?

This very question was posed by Android's head of user experience, Matias Duarte. He revealed in the recently concluded launch of the new OS version the thinking and process that went behind creating Ice Cream Sandwich.

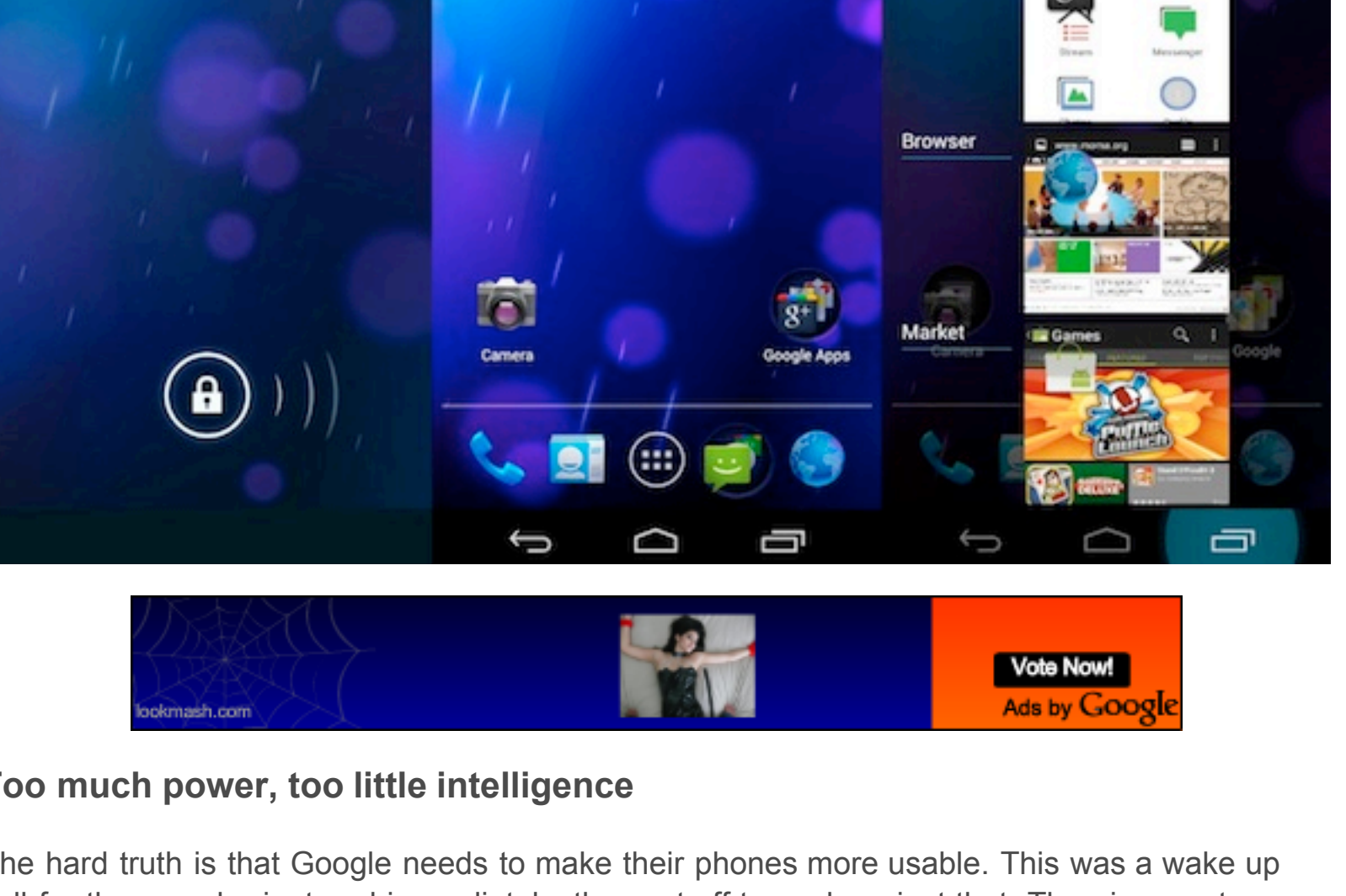
## Can a machine have a soul?

We all know that Google, while filled with some of the best scientists and engineers of our time, is not known for making beautiful UIs. Previously, you had to hop over to the other side of the fence at Cupertino to get a glimpse of simple, elegant interfaces.

That's all changing now, as we've seen with the revamped interfaces of our favorite products from the folks at Mountain View, like Calendar, Gmail and Google+. For mobile, Ice Cream Sandwich is the culmination of the deep user studies done at Google as to how users view not just Android phones, but all smartphones. Being the science-based organization that it was, this research backed up a lot of know-in-your-gut truths with some hard numbers.

For all the greatness that is Android, the software truly goes into waste unless the user can unlock its mysteries. The average smartphone owner who doesn't meddle into hardware will often get frustrated not being able to maximize their phone. That's why other companies like Apple, Microsoft and the now defunct Palm (from which Duarte came from), have focused a lot of resources into making their smartphones as easy and as exciting to use as possible.

It even led Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, to say that, "You don't need to be a computer scientist... but I think you do to use an Android phone." **Hooray, I'm a computer scientist!** Wait, that's not what he meant...



## Too much power, too little intelligence

The hard truth is that Google needs to make their phones more usable. This was a wake up call for the search giant and immediately, they set off to work on just that. The aim was to simplify and "create wonder" for users handling Android phones. They want to get out of the rut of just keeping on churning out awesome phones with top-notch software that unfortunately did not give customers what they truly wanted.

It's like getting an intern versus getting a personal assistant. Android was that intern, needing hand holding, patience and understanding to do the most basic of jobs. Compare that with the new Android 4.0, a capable personal assistant that will create less, rather than more, work for its user.

This was a great challenge, to say the least. Unlike iOS which only works on a handful of devices that are produced by the same people who build the software, Ice Cream Sandwich is not going to live in just a few devices. It will go into phones, tablets and even TV boxes and appliances.

## It starts with the font

The most visible interface with a phone is the font. It's the lifeblood of its SMS, notifications, email and pretty much everything else so this indeed is something that's worth a lot of attention. Google created a new typeface dubbed Roboto and it's something that they are truly proud of. Unique, clean and modern, it's built for the high res screens of newer phones and tablets.

Ice Cream Sandwich is also bucking the trend towards making interfaces look more like their real life counterparts. While the wood panelling and brushed metal on app interfaces do look great, it's restricting development in interface design and can be compared to the time when websites still had hanging signs and clip art on them. This was clearly a poke at iOS right there.

There's also a move at the other end, with interfaces becoming overly minimalist and modernist, something that Windows Phone is doing. While it's great for the phone maker, it's not so great for developers and artists who want to express themselves better. Google wants to offer a third option, one that users will surely grow fond of.



## It's the apps, of course!

Step back for a moment and picture the time you first bought your Android phone. Did you buy it just to make calls or shoot emails? Let's be honest, you bought it for that crazy bird-slingshot game everyone said was so addicting, or that app that lets you make calls to anyone in the world for free. Or many for the thousands of other apps available for free on the Android Market. You also bought it so you could access the entire Internet while lounging on a train, waiting for friends or sitting at a coffee shop.

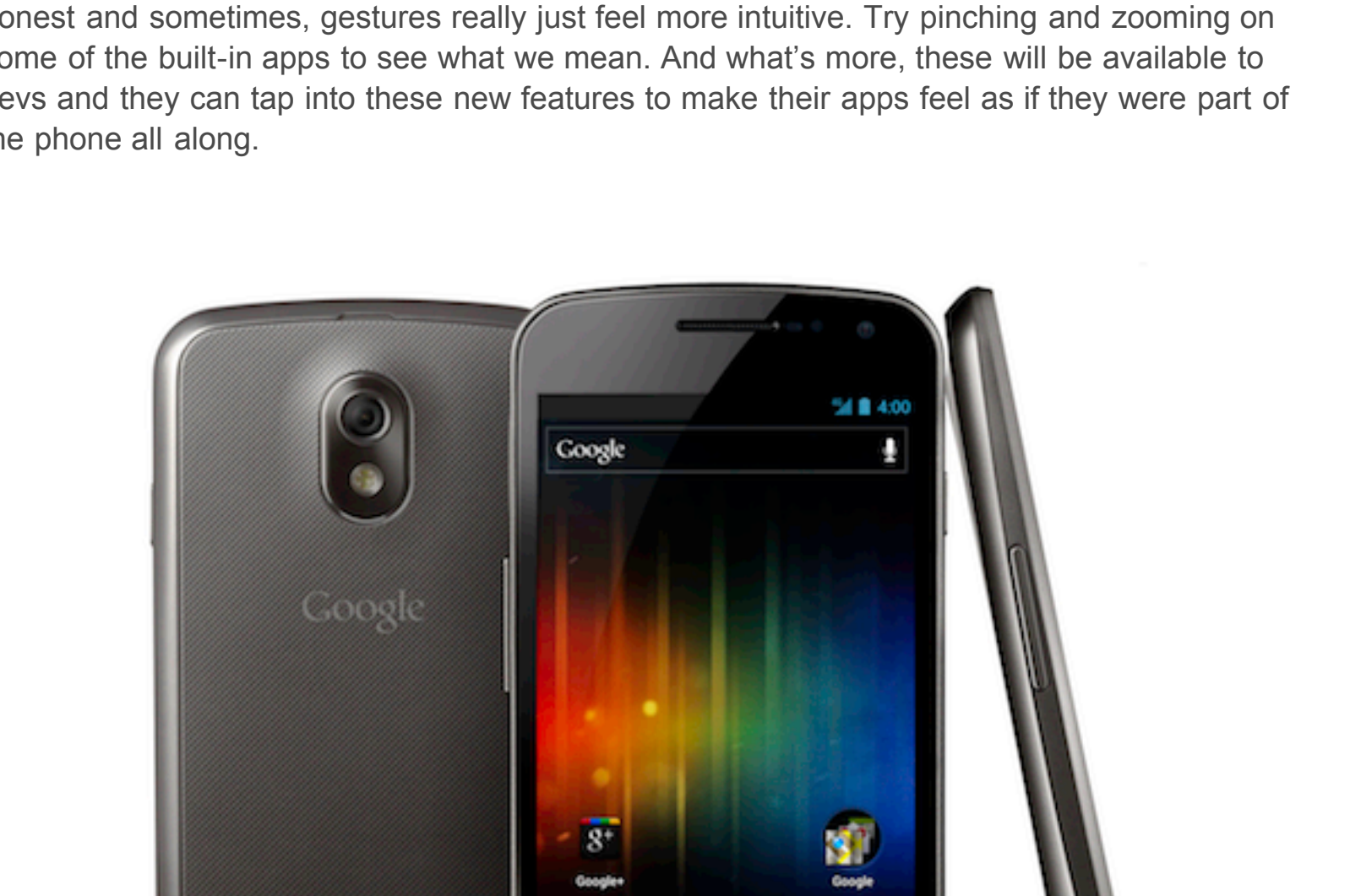
That's the same kind of thinking that went into Android 4.0. It's what an OS should be: clean and modern while still tweakable to an extent. It's a clear move away from the faux imitation of real world objects and more into the digital, which shows in Ice Cream Sandwich, from the lock sounds to the interface color palette.

According to Duarte, "We've taken what Honeycomb has done and pumped up the snooty design quotient, and we've toned down the geeky nerd quotient. We've made it a lot more accessible. But we haven't taken it in a new direction."

## Fluidity is the name of the game

Ice Cream Sandwich is really as silky as the dessert it is named after. The all-new animations give it a better look and everything feels more intuitive. Drag icons one on top another and you create folders. Resize widgets however you want. Even pulling up your multitasking bar will now show you snapshots of your app screens, something a lot of Windows and Mac users will surely be familiar with.

Another improvement is the heavy integration of gestures. Buttons are just screen clutter to be honest and sometimes, gestures really just feel more intuitive. Try pinching and zooming on some of the built-in apps to see what we mean. And what's more, these will be available to devs and they can tap into these new features to make their apps feel as if they were part of the phone all along.



## Making everything easier

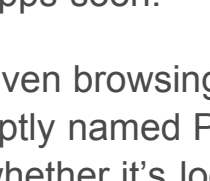
The new version of Android also does a lot of the heavy lifting for you. Everything that needs to be visible is now onscreen. Settings can be accessed quickly via the notifications window shade. The Gmail app now shows contextual menus, getting rid of hidden options which often confused users. Swiping on apps now switches you to the other screens of the app, much like what the new Android Market has now. This last one is another thing we'd like to see in other apps soon.

Even browsing your contacts gets a revamp. No more hunting for phone numbers by name. The aptly named People app now puts a person's profile front and center for easier recognition whether it's looking up a contact or showing who's on the other line via a fullscreen image of the caller. The camera has been revamped as well, adding simple photo editing and faster snapping, making the experience less about the phone and more about the moment.

## Power to the user

One of the best things about Ice Cream Sandwich: the built-in ability to uninstall any app, including those from carriers. There's also a data usage monitor, another blow to the carriers. You can now throttle your usage to prevent getting hit by a large bill at the end of the month.

We're pretty sure quite a few of them have balked at these changes but we're glad that mobile OS makers are now prioritizing users instead of being beholden to the whim of other companies. So kudos to Google for putting their foot down on this one.



On a final note, Duarte was asked why he moved to Google. He says, "I came here because they're winning, but also because I could not stand the thought of there being another decade of being trapped in one paradigm, of being trapped in the past just because somebody manages to grab maximum market share, and then that's the thing everybody uses with incremental evolution... And it's been shown that it doesn't matter how great a product you have and how revolutionary the product is... distribution and market power are the things that matter" Wise words there.

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Does that mean my 12 and 17 year old daughters are Computer Scientists too? They have never asked for help on their MyTouch 4g slides, yet they need help all the time with their windows 7 machines...

Seems to me Microsoft could use some schooling as they still don't have a viable OS for a phone yet, and windows 8 doesn't really draw any of my attention away from my android devices. Android 4 is just going to own! I want my Ice Cream sandwich on my NOOK.

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Thanks for the crew behind this

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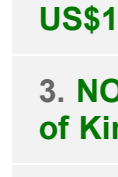
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