

3.1 How to dream up a killer app idea

It may be that you already have an app idea in mind. Perhaps you're designing mobile software that links into your existing business. Maybe you're working from a sketch you've had on a napkin for a while. But for readers who do not yet have an idea for an app, or are uncertain about whether their idea will survive in the cut-throat world of the App Store and Google Play, let's take a look at how a successful, or 'killer', app-design evolves.

Inspiration in any form is often elusive and, when it finally does come, it is not always clear how it came about. We've interviewed many app designers over the years and, if there's one quality that they all share, it's persistence. The most successful app designers start with an idea they love, and see it through to the end. Most successful developers started out as novice, but persistent, designers.



The top app designer teams, outside of large corporations, are often family members, or close friends. The makers

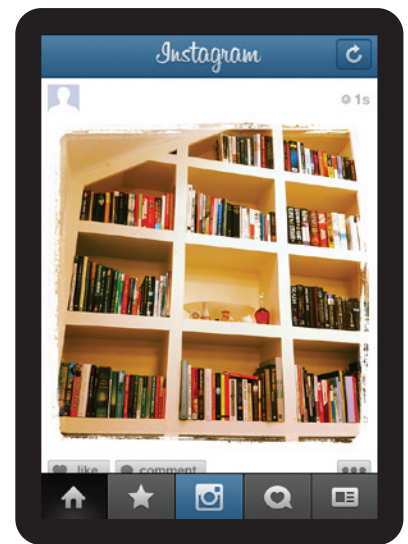
of *Doodle Jump* are brothers; *Harbor Master* was conceived by a husband-and-wife team; *Angry Birds* was built by cousins. The most profitable teams are often groups of two similarly minded people, usually one designer, one programmer. They tend to persist in the face of repeated failure: *Doodle Jump* flopped on launch, the makers of *Angry Birds* failed with 52 other apps before they found success.

If you start with an app idea you genuinely love, then, regardless of the ultimate financial success of your project, you're already on your way to an exciting and enjoyable app design experience.

Keep it simple

As a first-time app designer, the biggest mistake you can possibly make is to over-complicate the app you set out to build. Remember: Do not underestimate the difficulty of building an app. Some of the most successful apps in the world fulfil a single, distinct purpose, often concealing a very basic premise.

Consider *Instagram*, for example. This is one of the most popular photography apps for smartphones today. *Instagram* began as a very simple concept: You take a photo with your phone, and the software applies an effect to give the illusion that the photograph was taken with an old film camera. Programming the original version of *Instagram* was a relatively simple process, the difficult part was stripping away any extraneous features to focus on a simple user interface and the app's intrinsic purpose. The peculiar paradox of app design is this: Simple is hard.



3.2 What makes a successful app?

The best-selling apps follow a strategy of simplicity. Unlike desktop computer software, which tends to become ever more feature-packed with every release (and constantly grows a list of extraordinary features), mobile phone software should be designed with completely the opposite ethos: Less is more. Not only does this reduce development costs, and the chance of bugs creeping into your designs, but it also makes marketing your software easier because it's now clear exactly what you're selling. The one thing your users will ask about your app, and you must ask too is: "What is it?"

The question might seem innocent enough, but could you explain your app design to a non-technically minded person, in a single sentence? If your app cannot be explained in one sentence, in clear, plain English, then you already have a marketing nightmare on your hands. Let's take a look at a few successful apps and the one sentence description that could be used for each of them:

Instagram: Make your photos look old-fashioned and attractive.

Angry Birds: Fire flightless birds through the air to kill evil pigs.

Pages: Write and edit documents.

iBeer: Pretend you're drinking beer from your phone.

Reducing your concept to a single, easily understood line might seem like an easy task. But go ahead, give it a try with your app idea, (you may find it easily fits within a simple description). Or, you might be surprised to discover that you are using several statements to describe your app. In this case it's extremely likely that your app idea is much too complicated for most customers to understand. Remember: You're competing against hundreds of thousands of other apps. If your app is not clearly understood in a matter of seconds, potential customers will move on. This is impulse buying taken to a new level.

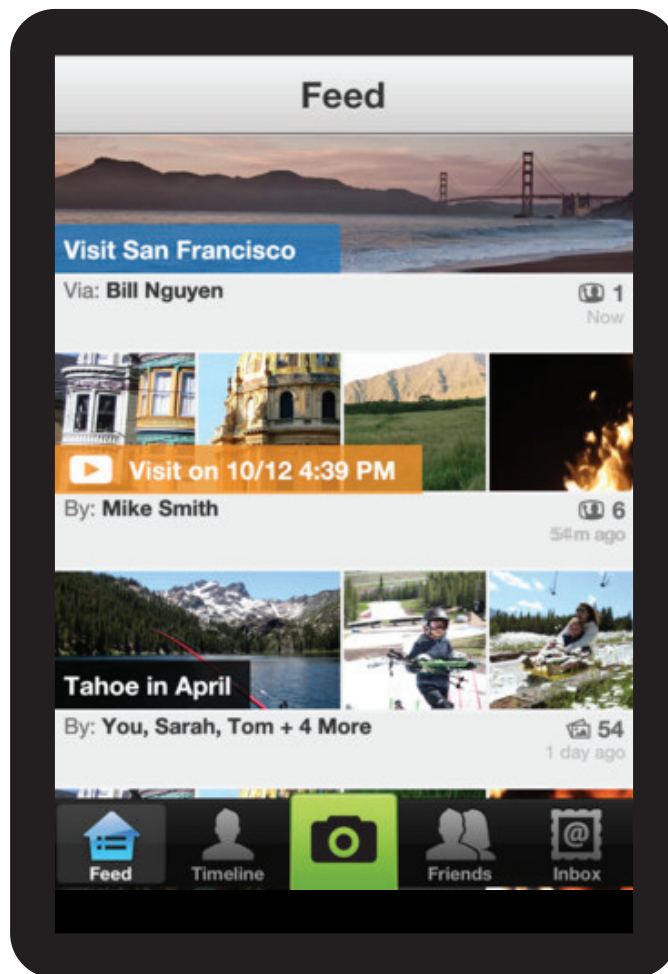
3.3 Learning from the success and failure of apps

If you launch an app that fails to sell well on release, know that this is not necessarily an indication of the app's lack of potential to do well. Many hot-apps were not popular on launch. *Doodle Jump* went on to sell more than 10 million copies, but on its debut it was one of the least successful apps that the two brothers who created it had ever launched.

When an app fails it is immensely difficult to know whether it is because of an inherent flaw in the design or whether it has simply been overlooked through some quirk of fate. The *Doodle Jump* brothers observed the positive reaction of users to *Doodle Jump* and were motivated by their own passion for the game. The pair then made the decision to keep updating the app, and pushed on with an indie marketing campaign. The result was incredible. Conversely, consider an app like *Color*. This took over \$41 million in investment and was a complete flop. No matter what the

developer has done since to improve customer's reaction to the app, it has slumped into oblivion.

If you are passionate about an idea, and don't invest more than you can risk losing, then the process is far more enjoyable. But don't be afraid to chalk a failed app down to experience, and try again equipped with fresh knowledge.



3.4 Insider tips on app design

If you're working as an independent developer, the biggest problem you're likely to run into once your app is launched is visibility – or, specifically, lack of visibility. Most apps arrive in Google Play or Apple's App Store and vanish completely among the hundreds of thousands of other apps competing for the attention of buyers. If you

ignore every other piece of advice in this course, never forget this: You must consider marketing before you build your app. Most people assume that a marketing plan is something you draw up after you have built a product, but we would suggest that the app stores are now so aggressive, and so competitive, that you must consider how you will promote your app before you lift a finger towards building it. If you can't think of a compelling and popular way to promote your app idea, then discard that idea and try another one. It sounds almost ridiculous, but the best approach is to think up a good viral video idea, and then figure out an app idea that you can sell using the viral video as a marketing tool. For example, Alice for the iPad, our hit app, had zero marketing budget and was promoted entirely via a YouTube video, made at home. This video was our central promotional tool, and was viewed by millions of people across the world.

It's absolutely essential, if you're operating on a small

budget, that you create an accompanying video for your app that people will want to share, regardless of whether they want to buy the app. This last part is key, “regardless of whether they want to buy the app”. In other words, the video must be engaging, funny, or bizarre enough that people who care nothing about your app will share it, and consequently it will eventually reach a small number of people who do want to buy your app. Successful app marketing in these cut-throat times demands that you are not only an expert app designer, but that you are also a top-notch video producer and marketing genius. But don’t assume that these qualities are necessarily professions you already know – you can learn them – and much of your success will come down to thoughtfulness and observation. Take a look at the most popular apps in the stores. Now look at the smallest companies producing these apps. How did they use YouTube to promote their work, and what can you learn from their approach?

Just to recap before we move on from this topic, here are the key points we’ve covered:

- The app stores are tough places to sell apps, discard any idea that you can’t figure out how to sell
- Use the power of YouTube to promote your app once it’s on sale
- Make a video that is compelling enough that people will share it even if they don’t care about your app

3.5 Anticipating and avoiding conflicts with guidelines

It is usually obvious to the app designer if some part of an app idea is controversial or provocative. The best solution is simply to avoid building an app that might offend or distress potential customers. There are millions of app ideas and very few of them are any cause for concern. However, if you are determined to create an app that skirts close to the boundaries of taste and decency, or, in the case of the App Store, an app that closely replicates the look or feel of existing Apple Inc. software, then you should carefully read the guidelines here:

<https://developer.apple.com/appstore/guidelines.html>