

TECH

Why Apple Had To Release Its Terrible Maps App Now

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There have been several partial answers, most of them coming from people like me who have no real access to inside information to two of the most tight-lipped technology companies of the Conversational Age.

All Things D seems to have been among the few with any real access. It [reported](#) that Apple decided to make its own maps after it ran into a dispute with [Google](#) over voice-guided directions.

The result is not without irony. The recently released Apple maps does indeed provide voice-guided directions, but they seem more likely to guide you off a bridge as to get you where you want to go.

Consensus is pretty universal that Apple Maps are inferior, not just to Google maps, but to every other mobile map you can think of. People wonder why Apple didn't just leave Google and cut a deal with [Yahoo!](#), [Microsoft](#) or some other vendor.

Users of Apple mobile devices have been forming fast migrations to alternative mapping. Many have started using [Waze](#), which allows users to share commuting data as they experience it and, by the way, has voice-guided directions. I've played with it and have been growing fond of it, but it

is designed mostly as a commuter's tool and my commute is from our master bedroom to my home office and I can find my destination even without morning coffee.

Primarily, I am one of many former users of Google Maps on the iPhone who found a simple



way to return to Google Maps on my iPhone and iPad. All you need to do is go to maps.google.com on your device. A pop-up will offer to save to your desktop. Click on it, and it creates an icon identical to a mobile app from the Apple Store. Works fine, it's free, but now if you click on a location-based ad, Google shares no revenue[RL1] with Apple.

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I hadn't heard about the back-door bickering that [John Paczkowski](#) reported on in his excellent All Things D piece, and I'm sure it is entirely accurate, but there are more things going on here than just a feature feud between two powerful partners who have simultaneously become bitter rivals.

Walter Isaacson reported, in his [authorized *Steve Jobs*](#) biography, that Jobs felt betrayed by his erstwhile friend [Eric Schmidt](#), Google chairman, who sat on the Apple board. He felt that Android was a direct rip-off of the iPhone and it resulted in Schmidt's having to resign from the Apple board.

Jobs is gone, but the perception of Google as its worst marketplace rival is said to live on among Apple executives. That alone could have set off this recent, unfortunate separation.

The problem is that so much of Apple's marketplace strength--and hardware-pricing strategy--is based on product elegance, and few people see anything elegant about the new Apple Maps. In fact, most people call it what Steve Jobs was fond of calling most competing products: "crap."

But this time around, the word is not being used by Apple, but about Apple. The new maps are crap. There is speculation at industry gatherings, among analysts, among editors and in the social networks about what Steve Jobs would have done, and the consensus is he would never have allowed Apple to introduce such a not-ready-for-prime-time product. He would have badgered and humiliated employees to make something better, and to get it done in time for a press conference scheduled to meet deadlines set by marketing--not product-based decisions.

I think if Steve Jobs were alive today, Apple Maps would have been introduced at the same time, in the same place and in the same shoddy condition.

Here's why:

Mapping is probably the most complex of all mobile apps. You need mountains of data, which needs constant revision in near real-time if your product is to be credible. Mistakes on maps are worse than typos in a Forbes column. If your mobile map steers you into road construction or toward a washed out bridge while you are driving alone in the rain at night, your safety may be at risk and your unhappiness with the mapping application will be long-lasting.

Mapping is increasing exponentially in importance. In *Age of Context*, our book-in-progress, [Robert Scoble](#) and I name maps as one of the five forces driving the next era of technology. More and more mobile apps must know where you are, what you want to do or where you are going. Location is an essential part of most new social networks and mobile wouldn't matter if location wasn't involved.

"Without location, mobile apps have no ground. They lose their context." [Caterina Fake](#), founder of the soon-to-launch [Findery.com](#), recently told me in an interview for our book.

Map applications cannot be built in a day. They require huge teams, spending enormous amounts of time, to map the world square inch by square inch, and it takes even more than that to keep all the data current. Maps never had to be close to real time before mobile took off. They could be revised every few years when they were still on paper, less than a decade ago.

Google has a team of about 7000 people worldwide working just on maps. The result is a product that remains imperfect, but is pretty darn good and most of us trust what we see. Waze is creating a community of people who travel similar routes and update automatically, so fellow travellers see changes almost as they occur.

Apple has a mere 20,000 employees worldwide. Few of them are mapping experts. A majority remains hardware-oriented. But in the longterm,

hardware becomes a commodity and commodities do not maintain high margins of profitability.

Like all other providers of end-user products, the revenue will be increasingly tied to software and maps will be essential to that revenue. As we move further into contextual areas, most users will get ads, offers, and info based on their location. Much of it will be tied directly to maps and much of the remainder will be tied indirectly to them.

Apple, in the long term, cannot possibly continue to partner with Google, which is its most threatening competitor. It would be unwise to give Google revenue and data from its users and more important it cannot share its most secret product plans and strategies.

Google, as the voice-guided directions issue reveals, was moving to make maps better on Android phones than on iOS phones. As the hardware between the two companies becomes closer to equal, mapping becomes more strategically important. As the world becomes more mobile and applications become more contextual, Apple has to ensure that its future does not rest in the hands of an enemy.

And in that there is a rub. You cannot get data for your maps until millions of people are using and sharing them and reporting back new or better data. Google started several years ago with maps. It, too, produced crude products in the beginning.

I can recall using an early mobile Google map to find a hotel late at night in a remote area, in heavy fog. The map got us to the point where we could see the Hotel light 100 feet in front of us. What it did not tell us was there was a river crossing our path and there was no bridge.

We were not pleased and we went back to paper maps for another two years.

Apple is taking a big hit right now. In a surprising and unprecedented move, Apple CEO [Tim Cook apologized](#) on Friday for the poor quality of Apple

Maps and recommended Apple customers use rival products including Google Maps.

Apple has a long way to go, but it absolutely needed to choose the path it has taken. If it partners with another mapping company, Apple will once again be caught by the shorthairs longterm and no leadership company will abide by that. It will need to scramble to catch up. I am in no position to speculate, but the company is sitting on tons of cash and has a history of attracting shiny talent.

It also may have a few surprises hidden under its cloak. There are [multiple reports](#) that Apple Maps are better than any others available in China, the world largest and fastest-growing technology market. While we are accustomed to products working best at first in the US and Western markets, Apple may have cleverly embarked on a differed strategy. One that we in the West may have completely ignored. Start in China, where the need for mobile maps is probably greater than in any other modern country, then build West.

Apple has has another additional advantage in China, where Google and the government have a relationship that falls far short of cordial. Google keeps [tweaking the nose of China's censors](#), to the obvious annoyance of those in power.

What would Jobs have done? We can only speculate. But my guess is he would have gritted his teeth and done precisely what Apple has done from a product standpoint—but he would have found a way to present the case better.

Read more on iOS 6 Map-gate here:

[Could An Exclusive Google Maps Be Android's Killer App?](#)

[Apple's Apology Over Maps Earns Praise, Criticism and 'What Would Steve Jobs Do' Second Guessing](#)

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