

Phablet: One device to rule them all?

“Phablet” is an important topic because it sheds light on how quickly commonly held norms such as mobile device sizes may change in such a short amount of time. Why this trend was unforeseeable when Samsung launched their phablet a few years ago may teach a lesson to everyone, especially to designers who were caught off guard and missed the rising opportunity before it became visible. Thus, this is a lesson on how easily one may fail to think outside the box and fall into the trap of accepting borders created by others as the universal constant, instead of questioning and challenging these bounds.

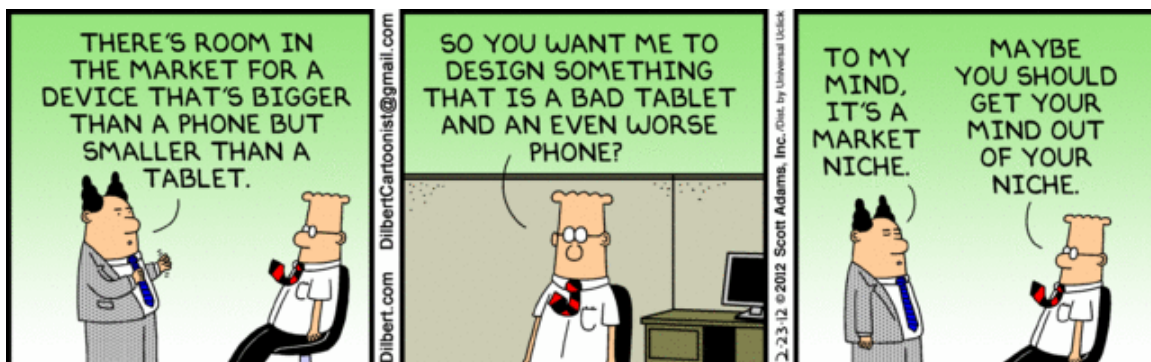


Fig. 1: Scott Adams mocking phablets in 2012, quoting from Steve Jobs “He called them tweeners, too big to be a phone, too small to be a tablet (Brownlee, 2012).

The common misconception was that, people believed the phone sizes were supposed to vary between specific ranges, and so should the tablet sizes. Since there is a perceived notion of a phone size and a tablet size, anything in between was considered out of scope first. This may be because of an assumption that might be misleading in some cases: the form of a design –a smartphone and a tablet in this case- should only be determined by its

function, therefore, if its form changes, so should its function. Nevertheless, when crosschecked, one realizes that this does not have to be reversible; the smaller the form gets, the less function the device may offer, however the less function the device offers does not have to mean that the form has to get smaller, too. So when these two devices merged, the market was caught off balance and the unappealing name of this new hybrid existence was derived from a linguistic blend of phone and tablet phablet. That said, a phablet represents not only the average size these two devices but also a synthesis of their technical capabilities.

An interesting side note about phablets is that they were first released decades ago. In order to compete against Apple Newton, EO Inc. launched EO 440 (Fig. 1) in 1993 , a mobile phone with a screen that's bigger than palm-sized (Segan, 2012).



Fig. 2: E 440

EO 440 (left) had wireless fax, email and cellphone capabilities but with the most basic system going for \$2000, the demand was low, compared to cheaper but less capable competitor systems (oldcomputers.net).

Eventually, phablets did not become a trend for almost three decades, until Samsung

made the phablet size famous when they released their Galaxy model in 2012. No one took it seriously when Galaxy arrived on the scene 4 years ago, now the phablet is outgrowing everything else at the moment. According to Forbes, things took a sharp turn for Samsung in a short amount of time. Samsung sold 1 million of them in the first two months, which left many convinced the phablet was a fad-let (Rogowsky, 2014); but they reached 5 million shipments within five months (Lawler, 2012), and by August of 2012, sales had reached 10 million and everyone started to follow.

Regarding one of the implications for phablets to become so popular nowadays, Farhad Manjoo (2014) argues that this rising need in the market may be related to emerging consumer needs of today: “A significant number of the world’s population either can’t afford or can’t manage a tech future in which we all own three devices — a PC, a tablet and a phone. Lots of people want a single machine that can fulfill most of their computing needs.”

UX researchers and designers can influence their project teams to address this new crossover. One of the main reasons for this is that the numbers indicate that the phablet is the next big thing and is here to stay: In Asia, phablets are more popular than laptops and combined, and that’s the reason Apple released their iPhone 6 Plus in 5.5 inch display size –also phablet last year as they were losing market share to their rivals with bigger screens -which are deemed to be better for playing games, watching videos and surfing the web (Curtis, 2014).

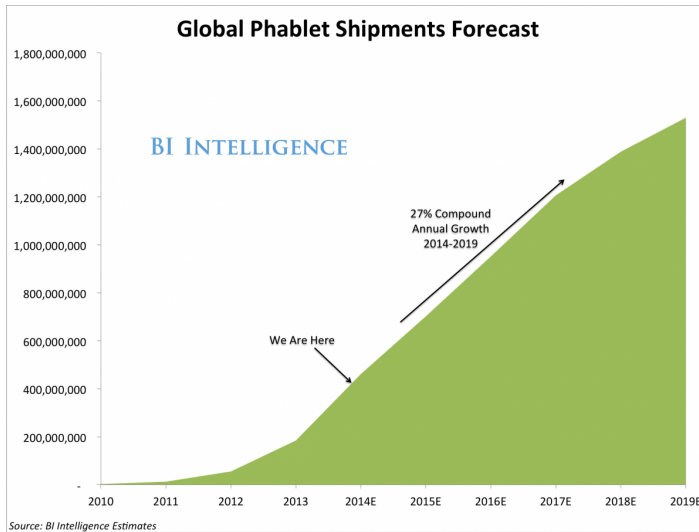


Fig. 3: Forecasts of full year global phablet shipments until 2019.

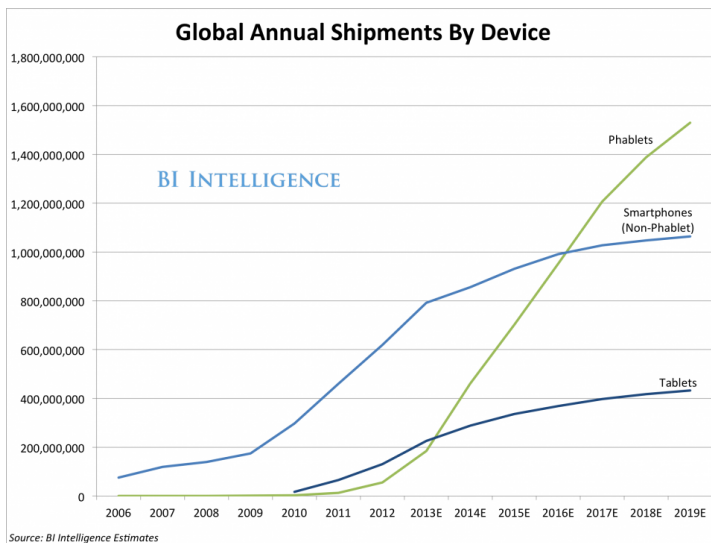


Fig. 4: Forecasts of global smartphone, tablet and phablet shipment comparison until 2019.

The demand will be higher in the future because there is still one obstacle that slows down this huge growth in today's market: phablets still cost too much. Compared to smartphones that cost anywhere between \$180 and \$600 and tablets that cost around \$300 to over \$600 (Levi, 2014). If prices were adjusted depending upon the screen size or

According to Business Insider (Danova, 2014), phablets are the fastest growing "smartphone" category, doubling the growth rate for the annual market (See Fig. 3).

Also, phablet sales are cannibalizing tablet sales globally; three times as many phablets are estimated to be shipped by 2019 (Fig. 4).

the battery life, phablets should have been priced between the two, however phablets are more expensive than tablets. One reason may be that phablets are tablets with extra cellular voice and data electronics needed to make phone calls, which is likely to be a reason for price increase. The second reason may be that the carrier companies sponsoring these devices want to make bigger sums. Either way, it's very likely that supply and demand laws will determine the market and the prices will drop eventually.



The rising demand for Chinese phablets may be an accelerator for the prices to drop, such as Nexodus Zen (left) with a price tag of just over \$100 that already started to influence the large screen Android phone market.

Fig. 5: Nexodus Zen

User experience teams may also probe the ties between phablets and social media. Findings indicate that phablets accelerated trend toward consumer time-spend on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, and messaging apps such as Snapchat and Line (Danova, 2014), producing half of the activity on phablets. They make it easier for users to enjoy rich media content.

Other distinct characteristics of phablet users that may be beneficial for design teams may be as follows: Phablet users lean closer to smartphone users than tablet users in the types

of the media they consume. Contrary to social media usage stated above, phablet users consume less sports, news and information compared to their smartphones. Their usage and volume is higher in the mornings, compared to tablet users who prefer evenings, an important data considering users' receptivity to ads. Another note for designers is that, tablets still outpace phablets when it comes to games, music, video and media (Heller, 2014).

A final note worth mentioning: Phablets already started to transform user behavior: "...most consumers are reluctant to go back to smaller screened phones" (Li, 2015).



Fig. 6: A sketch by French illustrator Jean Jullien in society's increasing dependence on phones and social media.

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Image Links:

Fig. 1: http://cdn.cultofmac.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/152554.strip_.gif

Fig. 2: <http://www.oldcomputers.net/pics/eo-440.jpg>

Fig. 3: <http://static5.businessinsider.com/image/539b0ab4ecad04d36931239f-1200-924/phabletforecast-3.png>

Fig. 4: <http://static5.businessinsider.com/image/539f08c5ecad04d924726bff-960/deviceshipmentcomparison.png>

Fig. 5: <http://www.goprotech.mobi/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/mB9pqFtL.jpg>

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