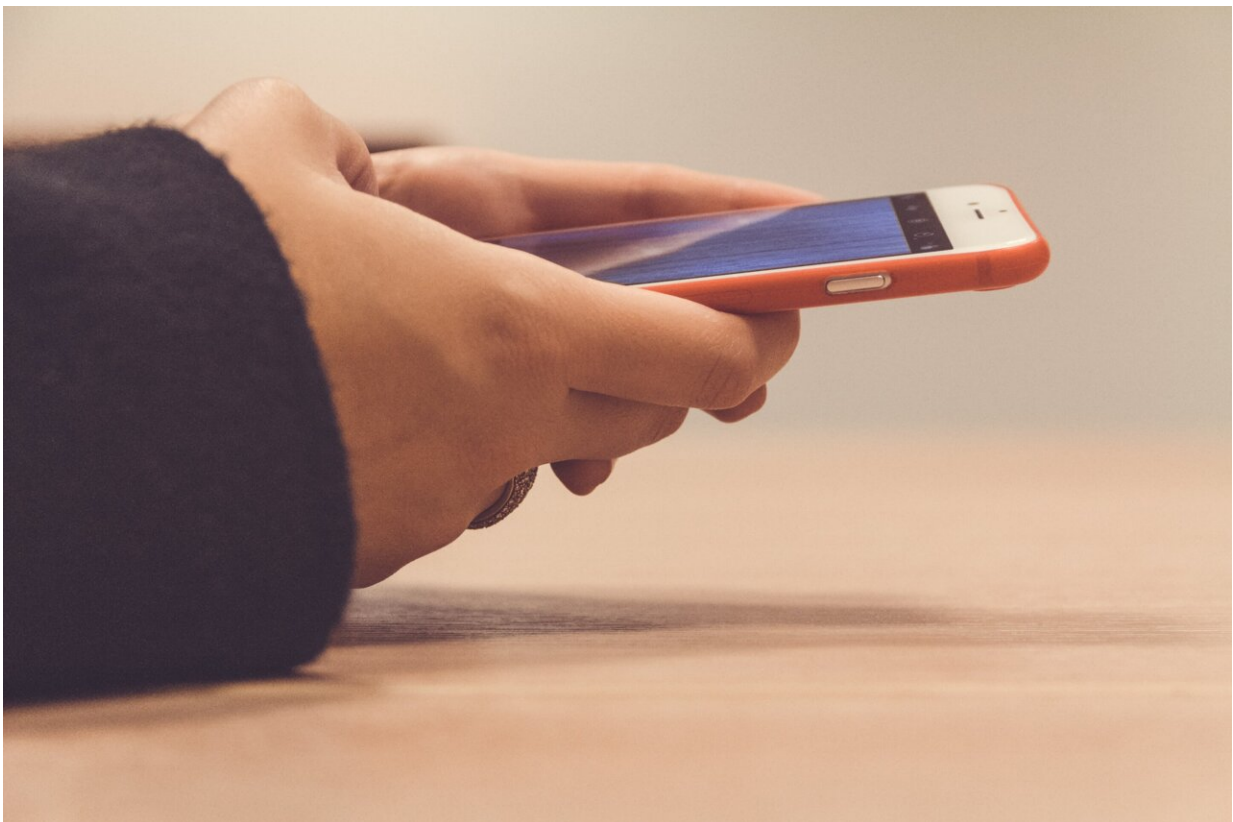


The iPhone is about to be very different, and potentially better, in Europe—experts explain why

September 9 2024, by Cody Mello-Klein



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Depending on what side of the Atlantic you're on, your iPhone will soon be very different.

In Europe, the iPhone is about to open up in big ways. Europeans will be able to download third party app stores beyond Apple's App Store, including the Epic Games Store ([which means "Fortnite" is coming back to the iPhone](#), for some people at least). They will be able to change default apps, swapping out Apple Pay or iMessage for other non-Apple options. They'll even be able to leave Safari behind and use other [web browsers](#), like Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox, if they want.

Why, in Europe, is choice now the name of the game for Apple, a company known for its walled garden of apps and services? It all comes down to European regulators, who have taken a decidedly different approach to regulating Big Tech than their American counterparts.

Rather than taking antitrust cases in piecemeal fashion, like the U.S. Department of Justice has done in the U.S., in 2022, the European Commission implemented a comprehensive suite of regulations called the [Digital Markets Act](#). The DMA is the first of its kind: a broad, far-reaching set of regulations and enforcement tactics aimed at making digital markets more fair and open.

In Apple, the EU has an early test case for how effective these regulations will be. But will it be better for consumers? And will it really change competition in Big Tech?

Christo Wilson, a professor of computer science at Northeastern University, says the changes being required of Apple could be a huge shift, both for users and Apple as a company.

Tech companies offering different versions of their products in different regions is not a new concept. Facebook, for example, has different privacy settings in Europe than in the U.S. But this is one of the first cases of a widely adopted piece of hardware, not software, behaving fundamentally differently between regions.

Wilson says it will be a "technical nightmare" for Apple, but one the company will wade through because of its commitment to a specific business model.

"If the EU really pursues this and puts a lot of effort into enforcement, we could end up with very different iPhones," Wilson says. "If they end up forcing them to allow third party app stores and apps that are not just from the Apple store, that's a big deal. That makes their ecosystem a lot more like the Android ecosystem, which is a lot more open."

Wilson says there is a scenario where European iPhones don't come preloaded with a browser, payment app, email app or messaging app. Users would "go to the [app] store and make explicit choices."

All of that runs counter to Apple's entire business model, a "walled garden" approach that keeps users inside a streamlined, curated and contained ecosystem.

The EU has used choice screens in the past, giving people a chance to choose their default apps when they turn on their device for the first time. That has had some positive effects on competition, but Wilson says in the world of Big Tech it's not always that simple. Companies like Apple and Google often find ways to push back against regulations.

Wilson says they are also adept at designing their devices and software with dark patterns, tricks used in design that lead users toward doing certain things, like using a specific app or signing up for recurring payments.

Elettra Bietti, an assistant professor of law and computer science at Northeastern, says that is the biggest challenge for regulators when it comes to antitrust and competition law.

"The task of regulators is not just to impose obligations or prohibitions on a company like Apple, but it's also to constantly monitor that they're not doing something opaque ... [or] using some other mechanism to actually make it really hard for users to access those alternative channels but also for competitors to emerge and succeed against the incumbents," Bietti says.

One of Apple's biggest arguments against the DMA regulations is that by opening up its phones to third parties, it will also make them less secure and private. Wilson calls these arguments "fairly disingenuous." There is more malware in the Android ecosystem, but "it doesn't mean we're in a crisis situation," he says.

"On balance, I think we're better off in a world where you can sideload [download apps outside of an official app store] on the iPhone and there is freedom," Wilson says. "If that comes at the expense of a tiny bit more malware, so be it."

As Apple starts to roll out some of these changes, the biggest question remains how it will affect other parts of the world. Will the U.S., which is in the middle of an antitrust push against Big Tech, follow the example set by the E.U. or will the European iPhone just be an anomaly for Apple and the rest of the world?

In the world of tech and digital regulation, all eyes are on Europe, Bietti says. And while she doesn't expect U.S. regulators to roll out a comprehensive framework like the DMA any time soon, she has hope that "courts and regulators will look to the European experience and take some inspiration."

More likely, seeing a more open—and maybe more fun—iPhone in the EU might make American iPhone users realize what they've been missing.

"More broadly, once people in this country see what is possible, there may be a lot more outcry here: 'Why aren't you protecting our rights and giving us the same freedoms as Europeans? It's an American company,'" Wilson says.

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