

TECH NOTES



with
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Goodbye, Buttons

Hello, Seabrookers. Today, I want to bid adieu to an old friend. This friend was someone you could always count on to do what you needed to do.

I'm talking about buttons.

Right now, you're probably scratching your head wondering where I'm going with this. Stay with me, folks. I promise we'll tie in technology here shortly.

Buttons used to be on everything. Radios, phones, appliances. You name it. There was a button on it. Buttons had a long, useful life. It was predeceased by its relatives....

Knobs, Dials, & Switches



OK, enough with the eulogy. What I'm trying to getting at is a bigger picture of today's technology.

Remember, just a few short years ago our home printers looked similar to this:



Look at all of those singular buttons. Instead, now our printers look something like this:



Similarly, cell phones used to contain about a dozen buttons. Now, you're hard-pressed to find 2 or 3 actual buttons on a new gadget.



The button, as we've all come to know it, is dead. With the innovation of touchscreens on gadgets such as thermostats, appliances, printers, phones, and tablets, manufacturers are putting fewer and fewer actual buttons on devices. In fact, Apple, in their newest version of iPhone, dubbed iPhone X, removes the familiar "home button" that many of us have been pressing for years. I believe Apple will make this the norm with all future phones as part of their evolution.

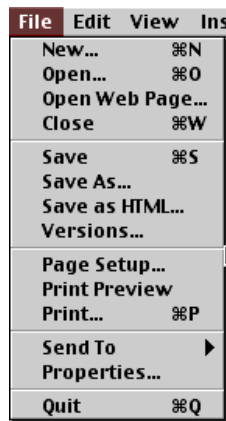


If any of you has purchased a new car recently, you'll probably see that the dashboard or console of the car is really just a touchscreen panel full of functions that allow you to control the GPS, air conditioning, radio, backup cameras, and other functions of the car, right from that one single screen.

This seems to be the methodology that engineers practice when they build gadgets: build things with a minimalistic design. What do I mean by this? Instead of having a bunch of buttons and knobs that usually only have a single function (i.e., a volume knob on an old car stereo), let's put in a touchscreen that is driven by software which can be programmed and designed in a variety of ways.

Really, buttons aren't dead, they are just reincarnated as "virtual buttons." Think of your smartphone's main screen, for example. Think of each app as a separate button that, when pressed, opens the app. Then, with a swipe of a finger in a certain direction, the screen changes, then the buttons change accordingly. If you think about it, your smartphone has hundreds of "buttons" that are constantly changing depending on what screen you are on.

We have to learn how to operate technology in a buttonless world. We also have to learn to understand what pictures and icons mean that may not be labeled. Remember when software first came out. At the top of every program, there used to be the standard menu options "File, Edit, View.." It was so common that people generally learned and accepted it as "the standard." And the File menu was great. You would have all of your common tasks like Save, Print, Open, etc. I like to call these the "good ol' days" of software development. Haha.



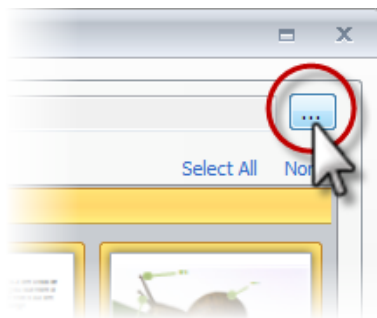
Nowadays, applications are designed so minimalistically that I often hear customers say, “Where the heck is the Print button?” for example. I often wonder who software companies talk to when they redesign applications. It seems like they were much simpler in the past. But, alas, we must learn on-the-fly when applications are redesigned and tasks such as print, save, etc., are relocated to another part of the screen.

With the innovation of smartphones and tablets, many designers have made it commonplace to identify their menus by what’s known as the “Hamburger Menu:”

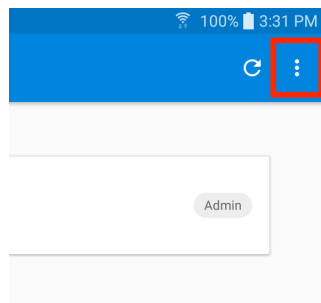


Any time you see this kind of picture on your phone, tablet, or computer, you can almost always be assured that pressing it will bring up a menu, which then may reveal the task you were looking to perform.

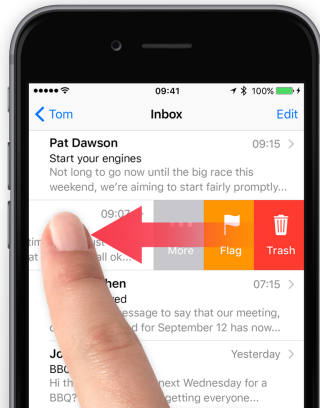
Other buttons that you may see include the ellipsis menu, which often means “Press for More Options.”



Google has often implemented the “vertical ellipsis” menu in their software that indicates a single menu:



Sometimes buttons may not even appear on the screen to reveal a menu. Instead, swiping your finger right, left, up, or down may perform some kind of task. Both Apple and Android operating systems employ these kinds of methods in a variety of ways. For example, swiping left on an email on Apple devices would bring up this kind of menu:



Similarly, placing your finger at the top of your Android or Apple device and swiping down (think of it as pulling down a shade) will reveal the notification menu. Many of you may swipe your finger over your device all the time. If that is the case, then you are practicing the techniques of touchscreen navigation.

This has really been a very broad discussion about tech design in today's world as opposed to how it used to be commonly designed in the past. Another example that shows how far we have come in technology is how software programmers design systems with touchscreens in mind. Today's kids and teens may never feel comfortable using a mouse and keyboard to operate a computer like older folks do. This is because they have grown up in a touchscreen world.

In closing, I like to think about the way things were designed in the past. Knobs, buttons, and dials were essential in controlling devices, but touchscreens are now the way of the future. How many "touchscreens" do you have in your own home? I bet you may have at least one touchscreen device somewhere in your home. If you have some old electronic device laying around the house, take a minute to look at it and see how things have evolved. I guess it's kinda neat to think about it.

Did anyone ever have an old TV set that had a broken knob or dial (pre-remote control era) that you had to turn with a pair of pliers until you replaced it? Ahh....the good ol' days! Guess we won't have that problem again!

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