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Mozilla on Tuesday rolled out a brand-new version of its popular Firefox browser for Android that's designed to deliver faster performance, a fresh new look, and Flash support, among many new features. "The new Firefox for Android is a snappy and dynamic upgrade to mobile browsing that makes it faster and easier to get where you want to go on the Web," reads the official announcement on the Mozilla Blog. Designed for smartphones running Android 2.2 or later, the new Firefox 14 for Android is now available in the Google Play Market as a free download. "Dramatic Performance Improvements" First and foremost among Firefox for Android's new features are significantly faster speeds, Mozilla says. "We redesigned Firefox for Android to make it a screaming fast and personalized upgrade to mobile browsing that lets you take your Web experience everywhere you go," Mozilla explains. "You'll notice dramatic performance improvements that make Firefox on your Android phone super fast with everything from startup and page load times to panning and zooming and Web app performance." In fact, Firefox for Android is apparently twice as fast as the stock Android browser on Mozilla's EideticKer benchmark, which measures the user's Web experience. It's also significantly faster on standard industry benchmarks, such as Sunspider. The video below depicts the software's newly boosted startup time. Your browser does not support iframes. "The Highest Level of Privacy and Security" Also included in the new Firefox for Android is a fresh new look and a personalized start page. A new Awesome Screen powered by Firefox Sync delivers all your browsing history, bookmarks, passwords and form data to your Android phone. Features including tabbed browsing, Firefox Sync, and Firefox Add-ons have now been optimized for mobile browsing, and Flash support means "you can watch videos, play games, and interact with more Web content on your Android phone," Mozilla notes. With features including Do Not Track, Master Password, and HTTP Strict Transport Security, meanwhile, Firefox for Android offers "the highest level of privacy and security features in mobile browsing," the project explains. New HTML5 Capabilities Last but not least, new HTML5 capabilities in Firefox for Android allow developers to create rich Web apps and websites based on HTML5, JavaScript, CSS, and other open Web standards. The video below offers an overview of some of the open source software's key new features. More detail can be found in the official release notes for Firefox for Android. Your browser does not support iframes. Do you plan to try out Mozilla's new software? If so, please leave your impressions in the comments. Android upgrades can sure be frustrating. Let's face it: Unless you have one of Google's Pixel or Nexus phones, getting the latest and greatest Android software is probably gonna involve a whole lot of waiting and uncertainty. We've already discussed the data: As my latest Android Upgrade Report Card illustrates, pretty much every device-maker outside of Google is doing a pitiful job at getting updates into the hands of its highest paying customers. This year's results were more dismal than ever -- despite the fact that Google put the software out extra early and gave manufacturers more time than ever with the code ahead of its release. We've talked, too, about the "why" -- because unlike Google, most Android phone-makers have little to no motivation to care about post-sales support. So what is the answer, then? Well, it may not be the clean and simple solution Android fans are hoping for, but Google's apparent plan for "fixing" Android updates has actually been playing out bit by bit for quite a while. Now, sure, the company could create some sort of system for rewarding companies that provide timely upgrades or punishing those that don't -- and who knows? Maybe one day it will. For now, though, all signs suggest that's tricky water to navigate and enforce in any meaningful way. (Anyone remember the "Android Update Alliance" of 2011?) Say what you will, but maintaining any sort of mandatory upgrade standard appears to be too complicated and/or controversial for Google to tackle. Instead, I suspect the closest thing to a realistic "fix" to the Android upgrade problem -- for the moment, at least -- is a two-part solution that's been unfolding right in front of our eyes: Part I: Making OS updates less all-important We've talked about the ongoing deconstruction of Android for almost seven years now -- the way in which Google is slowly but surely pulling pieces out of the operating system and turning them into standalone apps. Those apps can then be updated instantly and universally, without any manufacturer or carrier involvement, numerous times a year. The result is more significant than most people realize. As I've noted before, any random month could see a level of system-like updates for Android that's comparable to a major OS upgrade on iOS. Google just does it all in a subdued, piecemeal fashion and -- perhaps at its own expense in terms of public perception -- rarely draws attention to the big picture of what's happening and how all the pieces add up. (Don't forget, too, about Android's monthly security updates -- which, unlike the Play Store-based pieces of the puzzle, do require manufacturer and sometimes carrier involvement but nevertheless exist outside of the OS itself.) When you stop and think about it, at this point, "Android" the OS mostly just describes the main guts in the engine room. And it's possible even some of those could eventually be pulled out and updated in a standalone manner. Signs within the Android source code suggest Google may be toying around with such concepts already -- and when I asked Android chief Hiroshi Lockheimer about the possibility of pulling apart more of the core system UI and putting it into easily updatable Play Store components during an interview last year, he told me: "It's possible. It's something we're looking at, just to see from a purely software architecture perspective how can we make things more modular." He said he thought that sort of modular approach to software was "a good thing" in general, noting how that same blueprint had allowed Google to update elements like the system keyboard quickly and regularly for all users, outside of formal OS rollouts. Of course, that's not to say that Android OS updates are no longer important -- far from it. Android OS updates tend to contain significant foundational improvements in areas like performance and (for now) core UI, and those are areas that can't easily be addressed with standalone elements. But considered as a whole, the ongoing updates to individual system pieces in between those big releases are equally consequential -- and that's a system Google created very deliberately in order to take some of the weight off OS upgrades and regain control over the software update process. Part II: Providing fully controlled, update-friendly options So we've made OS updates themselves less critical -- but they do still matter. Now what? The answer to that question starts with the Pixel. With its first fully-homemade flagship Android phone, Google is offering a top-of-the-line device that's guaranteed to get fast and reliable ongoing OS updates -- and unlike the niche-targeted Nexus phones before it, it's designed to have mainstream consumer appeal. Think about it: Google may not be able to force every Android manufacturer to make upgrades a priority, but it can create a phone that's up there with the best of 'em and actually does rollouts right. The Pixel is much more than the sum of its parts, as I noted last year: It's essentially a way for Google to have its cake and eat it, too: Android can remain open and available for manufacturers to customize as they wish -- something that's been integral to the platform's success since the start. Customers can choose from a variety of styles and forms, as always, and each will offer its own unique set of advantages. But now, phone-seekers who want a holistic, Google-controlled vessel with all the benefits that approach provides will also have that as a fully realized, consumer-ready option. It's a Google phone through and through, in other words. It's probably also the type of phone Google would have liked to have offered from the get-go, way back when -- but it couldn't have pulled that off in Android's infancy, as it needed much broader support to get the platform off the ground. At best, if the Pixel manages to make meaningful headway into the market -- even after a few iterations -- it could force other Android manufacturers to respond and match its standard for post-sales support. But even if that doesn't happen, it'll provide an option for anyone who wants a superior software experience that doesn't drop off the minute you make your purchase. And here's the real kicker: The Pixel may soon have a backing army of lower-priced but similarly supported options working toward that same goal. Reports earlier this year suggested that Google could be bringing its low-cost, closely controlled Android One program to the U.S. by this coming summer -- which, as I laid out at the time, could extend Android's guaranteed-upgrade option to people who don't want to spend \$650 on a phone: Google may not be able to control Android completely, nor would such a drastic closing off of the platform make sense for the ecosystem in its current state. What the company can do, however, is continue to expand and amplify the options for consumers to get on board with its own vision for how Android should work. See how this is all coming together? Fixing the problem of Android upgrades probably isn't ever going to involve forcing companies like Samsung or LG to make post-sales support a priority. That's a lovely notion, to be sure -- but as we discussed earlier this week, it's also an unrealistic fantasy. Even Lockheimer himself acknowledges as much. "There's what we want, and there [are] the practical realities," he told me last year. "The areas where we have direct control, [speedy upgrades are] what we do." The realistic answer, then, is putting these two parts together: First, realizing that while Android OS upgrades are still important, they aren't everything -- nor are they even remotely comparable to OS upgrades on a platform like iOS (despite what all those "magical" charts at every iPhone event may tell you). And second, realizing that Android is all about options. If timely and ongoing OS upgrades are important to you, you most certainly can have 'em. You just have to choose a phone that provides that type of experience. Make no mistake about it: The process of "fixing" Android's upgrade situation is well underway -- and from the looks of it, it's anything but over. Like many things in GoogleLand, it just isn't the type of solution most folks were expecting. Copyright © 2017 IDG Communications, Inc.

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