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# The App Test: Rating Programs for Google's G1

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Today, people interested in seeing the first Google-branded consumer-hardware product will get to satisfy their curiosity as the company, joining with T-Mobile (DT), unveils its \$179 G1 handheld computer. This touch-screen device will compete with Apple's iPhone, and it includes a key feature missing in the iPhone: a physical keyboard.

The G1 is built around a model of openness, enabling developers to create applications — software programs, called “apps” for short — that will succeed or fail according to the feedback from the online community. Naturally, these community-contributed programs need a marketplace where G1 users can find them, and the Android Market provides just that.

This week, I installed various applications from the Android Market on a G1 and tested them out. Google (GOOG) says it will launch with around 40 to 50 applications in this virtual store, and these and all other apps will be available free of charge from now until at least the start of next year.

I found these apps to be useful, entertaining and mostly straightforward. There were a few that I felt tried to jam too much into one application, such as BreadCrumbz, an app that asks users to add pictures, instructional arrows and labels to maps that they make for friends. Other apps kept it short and sweet, like Wi-Fi Toggle — a one-touch button that turns wireless capability on or off to save battery power.

The G1's apps are more utilitarian than most apps I've tested for Apple's iPhone — and not quite as visually pleasing. I even compared one G1 program, Plusmo College Football, directly with the same app running on the iPhone, and I missed the artsy touches of the Apple (AAPL) version — like menus that flipped 180 degrees when selected rather than simply opening.

One downside: Only a measly 70 megabytes of internal flash memory are reserved on the G1 for storing these third-party applications. Once you fill that limited internal storage space, you have to delete some of your apps to add more. You can't currently store apps on the phone's roomier removable memory card. (A one-gigabyte microSD comes with the G1.) The iPhone doesn't set such an arbitrary limit on application-storage space. The Android Market, like Apple's iTunes, keeps a record of each user's installed apps so they can be easily downloaded again later at no extra charge (if they carried a fee). But, unlike the iPhone, the G1 can't back up your apps to a PC or Mac.

The G1's open model means extra setup steps during app installation. For example, if an application will access certain information — such as a user's Internet connection, location data (as identified by GPS) or other personal information (calendar, contacts, etc.) — warnings appear during installation, and the user must grant permission. In addition, many apps come with license agreements that must be okayed before users can continue. If something goes wrong with an app, people can post complaints on community boards or email developers, whose email addresses appear during installation.

To offer a general idea of what's available, I've highlighted a handful of apps that I like. I broke the applications into three groups: Functional, Fun (if occasionally kitschy) and Frills.

## Functional

**Wi-Fi Toggle:** This does what it says. Once installed, it adds an icon to the G1's desktop that provides a quick way to turn Wi-Fi on and off without digging into the settings menu.

**Locale:** Like Wi-Fi Toggle on steroids, this app allows a user to set up a G1 so it dynamically changes its settings in specific conditions. The settings can respond to calls from certain people or changes in the phone's battery power, calendar, the user's location or the time. For instance, the Wi-Fi can automatically turn off, ringer volume can go up or down, desktop wallpaper can change or a post can be sent. Just think of all the churchgoers who could ensure their cellphone ringers are turned off on Sunday mornings or when the church's location is sensed.

**Ringdroid:** Make ringtones from your own songs by adjusting bars to mark the start and end of each ringtone. Hitting Save automatically keeps the ringtone, labeled with the song's name by default, for use on the phone.

**Video Player:** The G1 doesn't have a built-in way to play videos, and this app does the trick in a clear-cut, reliable way.

## Fun

**Movie ShowTimes:** This lets people use a finger to flick across the G1's touch screen to page through movie poster images, titles and brief descriptions. Below each movie description, an on-screen button labeled “Showtimes Near You” uses GPS to generate lists of nearby movie times.

**Pac-Man:** The classic arcade game never gets old. You can move Pac-Man through his maze with one of three methods: tilting the G1 so its accelerometer moves the Pac-Man, swiping with a finger to point Pac-Man in the right direction or using the trackball to move him around the screen. I preferred the trackball.

**Cooking Capsules:** This program demonstrates food-making without being either too intimidating or too dull and simplified. Though there were only six “capsules” when I tested it, each includes steps for watching (an instructional video), shopping (using an on-screen list of items) and cooking (with numbered instructions on how to cook the food).

**Bonsai Blast:** This colorful, Asian-themed game directs people to shoot colorful marbles at other chains of marbles, with a goal of getting three matching marbles lined up beside one another so they'll disappear.

**Krystle II:** Turns your G1's entire screen into a picture of fur that purrs and vibrates as you touch it. There's no real point, but Krystle II is addictive and strangely comforting during long conference calls.

## Frills

**Ecorio:** This well-intended app aims to track users' travel carbon footprints in order to make them more responsible for the environment. It asks users to enter things like recent transit routes and carpools and suggests ways to reduce and offset people's footprints.

**Maverick:** An IM program that allows people to add scribbles, location data or even photos to active instant-messaging conversations. Maverick signs users into Google Talk and Picasa simultaneously, adding IM images into an auto-generated Picasa album for later viewing.

**PicSay:** Add word balloons, titles, props and effects to digital photos captured and/or stored on the G1, then send the images via multimedia messaging service or email, or save one as a caller ID.

There are many more G1 apps to try, and developers are expected to keep making them for this new device. As with the iPhone, apps obtained for the G1 from the Android Market enable it to morph into a different device with different tools every day.

— Edited by Walter S. Mossberg