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Motorola Droid X review

By Chris Ziegler posted Jul 1st 2010 12:40PM



The [original Droid](#) made a powerful statement. Actually, make that *statements*, plural: for Motorola, it was the largest single affirmation that it was going all-in with Android (after having already released the far less memorable midrange [CLIQ](#) on T-Mobile) and that it could play in the very highest rungs of the smartphone elite. For Verizon, the Droid was the carrier's very first Android device, period -- announced to great fanfare in collaboration with Eric Schmidt and crew -- serving as a pretty spectacular exit from the Windows Mobile / BlackBerry doldrums that the carrier's smartphone lineup had historically suffered. By almost any measure, the phone went on to serve its purpose; it let customers (and potential customers) know that Verizon could release a "cool" phone, and they responded. The Droid's an unqualified success. Today, Verizon's involvement in Android has never been greater, and Motorola -- by all appearances, anyway -- seems to be on its way back from the brink.

Time stops for no phone, though, and we're now halfway through 2010. Motorola's success as a competitive phone manufacturer is ultimately going to depend not on its ability to produce a single hit, but to produce a never-ending string of hits, each better than the one before it. It's a tall order -- and that's exactly where the [Droid X](#) comes into play. Featuring a 4.3-inch WVGA display, 8 megapixel camera with 720p video capture, a reworked user interface, and a significantly improved processor, this phone apes the first Droid in at least one critical aspect: its ability to immediately steal the spotlight from anything else in Verizon's lineup. Specs don't tell the whole story, though, so let's dig in and see what this beast is all about.

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THE GOOD

- Great picture and video quality
- Front- and rear-facing mics for video capture
- Fast

THE BAD

- Motorola's Android skin still needs work
- No Android 2.2 at launch
- Camera UI annoying, slow



Motorola Droid X review

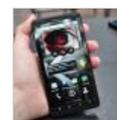


Hardware



The packaging isn't as unique as the EVO's or as elegant as the iPhone 4's, but just as with Droid models before it, the box does an admirable job of conveying Verizon's "scary red eye that can run apps and get things done" message (besides, if you don't buy this phone because you don't like the box, you blew it). And in a world where being environmentally conscious matters, let's not lose sight of the fact that the box is small -- just barely larger than the phone itself in two of the three dimensions. Of course, the downside of a small package is that you're not getting many goodies in the box -- in fact, all you're getting is the phone, a micro-USB cable, and a charger -- but it's not like you wanted another crappy pair of pack-in headphones anyway. A generous 16GB microSD card is pre-installed, a welcome addition to

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the internal 8GB.

So, let's just save you a bit of time from the outset: the Droid X is an imposing device, and it's definitely not for the small of hands. Makes no mistake, this is a big phone designed for use by big people. Well, not necessarily "big," but let's just say you're going to have a tough go of it if you're the kind of person that struggles to find a ball at the bowling alley where you can reach all the holes. Software and hardware aside, we'd actually say the size issue is going to be a showstopper for some -- but if you've got smaller hands and you're in the market for a high-end Android device on Verizon, you've still got the 3.7-inch [Droid Incredible](#) as a compelling option.



Now, onto the meat. Comparisons to Sprint's HTC [EVO 4G](#) are going to be immediate and inevitable -- but considering that these are both 4.3-inch, best-of-breed Android smartphones, they're surprisingly different devices in the flesh. There are several specific, measurable reasons that we say that. Firstly, even though they share a diagonal measurement, the screens aren't the same. Like the Droid, the Droid X adds an additional 54 vertical pixels to the normal WVGA formula for a grand total of 854 x 480; in other words, it's a longer, narrower display than the EVO's (16:9, like most widescreen televisions, as opposed to 5:3). To an extent, that makes the Droid X easier to hold since the body is nearly a millimeter narrower, but even with our relatively large hands, we found it considerably more difficult to reach the upper parts of the screen while gripping it normally than we did on the EVO, presumably because the Droid X is a good deal taller.

Second, the EVO is a couple millimeters fatter, and it's curved in places that you can definitely feel while you're holding it. The Droid X, by contrast, is totally squared off -- not surprising, considering its heritage -- which makes it marginally less comfortable for long phone conversations, though it's not nearly big enough of a deal to become a deciding factor in your purchase. Besides, we're big fans of soft-touch plastic around here, and the Droid X has more of it; in fact, every square inch of the phone is done up in soft-touch with the exception of the screen (obviously) and the buttons, whereas the EVO's got glossy edges. Unless you coat your fingers in Crisco, you likely won't be dropping this thing.

Third, you've got the buttons -- for some, this could be a bigger deal, but it's strictly a matter of personal preference. Unlike the maligned capacitive buttons on the [Nexus One](#), the EVO's are actually quite good, so for us, dealing with physical buttons again on the Droid X after using those other two phones for months came as a bit of a shock to the system. It's not that the Droid X's buttons are hard to press or are dodgy in any way, it just takes some time to get used to the fact that merely brushing against a button won't trigger an action. What we liked less, though, was the fact that Motorola arbitrarily changed the order of the buttons from the original Droid. This seemingly insignificant oversight is a microcosm of a problem Android has faced on a pretty big scale -- in fact, it's actually difficult to find *any* two Android phones with the same button layout, which means you're hitting Home when you mean to hit Menu for a solid four days while your brain rewires itself. It's not clear if they just keep second-guessing the layout, they're trying to throw off users, or what, but they need to settle on something they like and stick with it.



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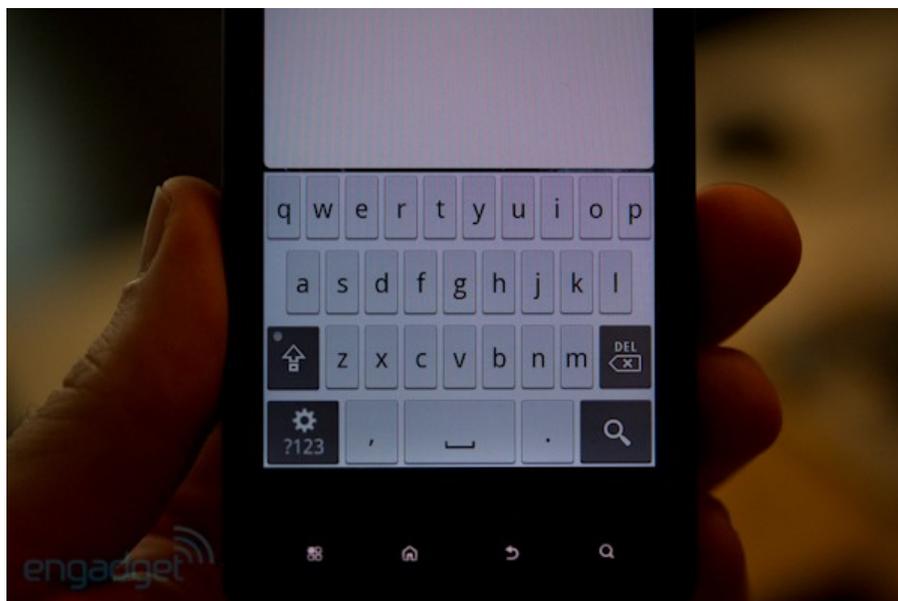
Turning our attention to the display... well, it's beautiful. Compared to the AMOLED-equipped Nexus One, it's far more usable in daylight (though still not nearly as good as something like a transreflective LCD, of course). At about 228dpi, pixel density is lower than the original Droid at roughly 265dpi (and a good deal lower than the iPhone 4's 326dpi), but it's still high enough so that picking out individual pixels requires leaning in, straining your eyes, and searching for them. Though you don't technically get any more screen real estate than a smaller screen with the same resolution, there are definitely tangible benefits to moving up to 4.3 inches.

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For us, the biggest benefit of the huge display (besides the obvious improvements to browser readability at low zoom levels) seemed to be in the virtual keyboard. Motorola is quick to tout that the Droid X features multitouch support here -- something that Android's stock keyboard does not -- but we had a hard time determining how much this actually helped in practice. Instead, we think that the width of the keyboard had a huge positive effect on our ability to mash keys error-free, and we noticed the improvement almost immediately. Frankly, it's hard to use a soft keyboard on a 3.5- or 3.7-inch display after using the Droid X for a few days.



Of course, no discussion of the Droid X would be complete without touching on that hump toward the top. Ostensibly, it's there because Motorola wanted to make the phone as thin as possible -- 9.9

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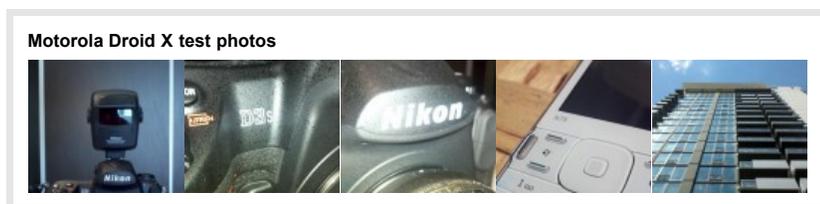
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millimeters, to be exact -- without sacrificing picture and video quality, which means they needed to add a little extra space for the camera module. Well, we're happy to report that it's pretty much a non-issue. It doesn't get in your way while you're holding it at all, which is a side effect of the fact that the phone is pretty huge and tall -- you're simply not going to brush up against it if you're holding it normally, and even if you somehow do, there's a gentle curve up to it so it's not annoying to the touch. When you've got the phone set down on a table, the hump serves no ergonomic function -- it's not as if it helps you watch videos or anything -- but it gets the rear-mounted speakerphone up off the ground so it's plenty loud.

Camera

Speaking of the camera, we *really* liked the shots we were producing with this phone. By our untrained eye, the Droid X bests the EVO 4G for both still and video capture; photos were less grainy, and videos had less compression and significantly better sound quality. The sound quality is due in part to the fact that the Droid X features no fewer than three microphones -- one along the bottom front, one at the top edge for noise cancellation, plus a third on back -- and you can switch between them depending on your recording situation. If you want to narrate a video, there's an aptly-named Narrative mode that triggers only the front-facing mic, but if you want to hear what you're recording, you can trigger the rear one. There's also a wind-cutting Outdoors mode that presumably takes the noise cancellation into account, though we had mixed success reducing the incidence of buffeting.



Below, we've got a few video samples -- one large clip set in full automatic mode (what the Droid X calls "Everyday"), plus three smaller clips designed primarily to demonstrate the phone's microphone modes. On the left, there's a narrative clip, and the right two are both set in Outdoors mode; notice the occasional wind noise in the rightmost one.

Clearly, the bottom three clips aren't designed for viewing as much as they are for testing sound quality -- we took them while walking, and it shows -- but you can definitely make out some "jellyvision" effect that's typical of CMOS sensors. You're not going to notice it in the least without herky, jerky camera action, though, so unless you're doing a lot of high-intensity video work, it should be a non-issue for you.



Unfortunately, the Moto-customized user interface shared by the camera and video recorder isn't quite as slick as the output they produce; in short, it's buggy, slow, and distracting. As an obvious example, the Flash button on the right never changes, no matter what mode you select -- On, Off, or Auto -- so you can't tell at a glance what mode you currently have selected without tapping it, which in turn causes it to change. In between shots, you get a black "Processing" message for a moment that takes up the entire screen -- annoying and seemingly unnecessary. And changing effects or scenes (something you'll do a lot for video in particular) takes longer than it should, since it calls up a separate screen where you swipe between options; it's an unnecessarily slick touch. This is one place where it would've served Motorola well to keep things bare bones -- you don't want to be wowed with the UI when you're trying to take a picture, you just want to take the best picture you can and move on with your life.

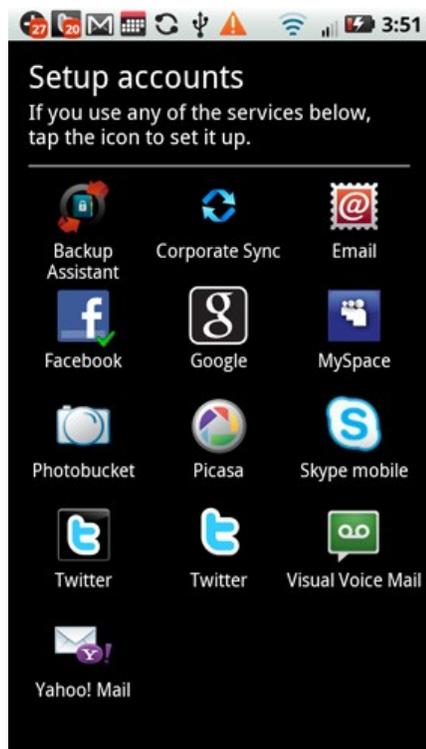
All that said, shutter lag wasn't terrible -- perhaps a half second between shots -- and the camera app consistently loaded in four seconds or less. Autofocus was also generally pretty quick, though we found that the contrast detection struggled in some places where we thought it should've had an easy go of it. In our sample gallery, for instance, that macro shot we have of the Nokia N79 took maybe five or six tries before it finally locked on -- it spent a lot of time hunting, shooting right past the proper focus point in both directions.

Software

The Droid X is Motorola's first retail device to use the company's custom UI atop Android 2.1, a skin that has been significantly restyled from the version found on Android 1.5 devices like the CLIQ, [Devour](#), and [CLIQ XT](#). But let's be clear: the Droid X doesn't use Blur. Actually, we'd initially been given conflicting answers from Motorola on whether the Droid X actually "runs" Blur, and we think we know why: as far as we can tell, the phone sidesteps Motorola's proprietary back end entirely, which has been a source of many of Blur's problems from day one -- delayed updates and the like. Instead, Moto appears to now be taking the same angle that most of its competitors are, pushing all of the aggregation horsepower down to the phone and taking its own servers out of the equation. In practice, what this means is that you no longer have a Blur account -- you just log in to your individual services (Twitter, Facebook, and the like) and the phone keeps track.

At a quick glance, the new skin -- Blur 2.1, or whatever you want to call it -- is cleaner, prettier, and just generally more modern than the skin it replaces, but that doesn't mean it's good. In fact, it feels as though Motorola heard and just completely misinterpreted the complaints about Blur to begin with,

spending its energy making it less obvious that Blur is running without actually addressing any of its fundamental problems. Here's a great example: when you add a Twitter account, all of your Twitter follows automatically puke into your contacts list, which we'd complained about way back when we reviewed the CLIQ last year. Yes, you can sort, but what Motorola really needed to do here was make it optional the same way that Twitter's official Android app does.



Speaking of the official Twitter app, it generally runs circles around Blur's Twitter implementation in terms of raw functionality; actually, there's very little that Motorola's own implementation does do other than drop your follows' tweets into a unified inbox and involuntarily merge all of their handles into your contacts. As you can probably imagine, we were interested to see what would happen when we installed Twitter's app alongside Motorola's -- and basically, you can do it, but you don't want to. You'll end up with two Twitter options when you're setting up accounts (see above) and duplicate notifications. The solution is to simply ignore Moto's built-in option and use the official app alone, which is what we'd recommend you do.

The good news about this skin -- perhaps the best news, in fact -- is that it's pretty easy to ignore. You don't need to log in to Blur and you don't need to use it for your social networking and photo accounts, because it appears that it doesn't block any other Android app that integrates with the platform's core functionality from working properly (Twitter being a prime example of that). The included weather widget is another good example: it's bare-bones simple, not particularly pretty, and doesn't follow your location automatically, but it's easy enough to install your own. Ultimately, about the only thing you can't ignore is the home screen, which uses large white silhouettes to represent the dialer, the app drawer, and your socially-aware contacts list in much the same way Blur 1.5 did. When you swipe between home screen panels (there are seven of them, by the way), you'll get a pop-up display at the bottom of the screen that conceals the dialer, app drawer, and contacts icons to show you what screen you're currently on; it takes about a second to go away, which is momentarily annoying if you want to tap on any of those three icons.

Verizon bundles a 3G Mobile Hotspot app which will run an additional \$20 per month for 2GB worth of usage, a business model not unlike AT&T's -- but the critical difference is that on-device data usage is still unlimited with the Droid X; you only dip into your 2GB bucket if you tether. The app is simple enough and worked very well in our experience; you can choose from the usual variety of encryption schemes including WPA2, set your own SSID, and even choose your WiFi channel which is convenient if you're in a particularly WiFi-congested area. As speed goes, it's fast -- but it's not Sprint WiMAX fast:

Performance and battery life

The Droid X is among the first phones to employ a TI OMAP3630 processor, which is basically the ultimate execution of the [OMAP3](#) line of cores -- the next step up is [OMAP4](#), and that's not ready for prime time yet. After using the phone for a few days, we're really encouraged by this processor and what it can do -- it feels like it's at least a small step above and beyond [Snapdragon](#), and certainly a noticeable leap over the OMAP3430 used by the Droid, Nokia N900, and Palm Pre. The UI generally felt fluid and lag-resistant, though we saw some stuttering when opening the notification and app drawers -- something we've observed on literally every Android phone we've ever tested. The most exciting sign, though, is the stock browser, which absolutely flew -- scrolling and pinch zooming were both silky smooth activities, something even a Froyo-equipped Nexus One can struggle with at times. Linpack consistently yields results above 8 MFLOPS, nearly double an Android 2.1-equipped Nexus One; that's good news for when the Droid X gets Froyo later this year, which runs circles around Eclair in many operations.

We were able to easily and consistently make it through a single day (meaning morning to evening) on a battery charge, though we chatted with a Verizon spokesman who'd been using the phone for a while and he said that he typically struggled to make it through a typical weekday without a midday fill-up. It could be that our battery was fresh and new or we just weren't beating up on the battery hard enough, but at any rate, your mileage will vary. Pure standby time was easily over three days, and we were able to get about two hours worth of consistent hotspot usage with roughly 40 percent battery drain -- in other words, in-line with what we saw while using the EVO's hotspot functionality.

Wrap-up



After seeing a string of midrange devices like the CLIQ XT, Devour, and [Flipout](#) go by, we were beginning to wonder when (or if) Motorola would make another grandiose play at the Android crown the same way it had with the Droid the first time around -- but with the introduction of the Droid X, we're happy to say that they finally have. Problem is, this isn't the same marketplace that Moto was dealing with back in late 2009; high-end Android gear is easier to come by than ever before (Samsung's massive four-carrier blowout with the [Galaxy S](#) series is powerful evidence of that), and most of it is... well, really quite good. This isn't about taking candy from a baby anymore and waltzing into unmet demand for a type of phone that hadn't existed before -- it's about competing really, really hard. It's about forgetting the Droid's success, just as the company has struggled to forget the RAZR's.

Cast in that light, the Droid X becomes a much less magical phone than the Droid was. It's good, and it's a pretty enjoyable execution of Android 2.1, but it's not a must-have phone -- especially in light of the Droid Incredible and the upcoming Droid 2. From a hardware perspective, this phone is pretty much a bang-on execution of what a high-end mobile powerhouse should be, but Motorola clearly still has work to do in order to play in the same software league as HTC does with [Sense](#). If it can get there -- or heck, if it can just offer this phone with stock Froyo -- you've got perhaps the best Android phone ever made.

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