Android 14 played a surprisingly small role in Google’s I/O keynote

There was a chilly marine layer hanging in the air above the Shoreline Amphitheater, but the danceable beats thumped on in spite of it. Dan Deacon was playing a set that had something to do with AI, followed by a person in a duck costume dancing on stage. Not the kind of spectacle you’re typically expecting before you’ve even had your second cup of coffee, but that’s Google I/O, baby.

I/O is, of course, the company’s yearly developer conference, and it officially kicked off on Wednesday morning when CEO Sundar Pichai took the stage, headlining a two-hour presentation that was almost entirely centered on AI. We got a preview of what’s coming to Google Search, Gmail, and Photos, along with an unappetizing, photo-realistic image of pizza fondue. It was all AI, top to bottom. We were reassured, again and again, that Google is being responsible with its AI implementation and that the company is taking steps to make sure the technology doesn’t end life on the planet as we know it.

But what we didn’t hear much about — in fact, barely earned a mention on stage — is I/O’s usual guest of honor: Android. Namely, Android 14, which is in beta now and is expected in the fall. There’s plenty about the apps and services that run hand-in-hand with Google’s mobile operating system, but the platform itself gets very little time in the spotlight.

That’s a major shift from previous years. As recently as 2019, the next Android version (at that time, it was going as Q)

commanded a dedicated 10-plus-minute segment in the keynote highlighting new features. In 2023? Android 14 is mentioned almost in passing an hour and a half into the keynote as new lock screen customization options are highlighted. Earlier in the program, we got updates on item tracking and a heads-up on unknown tracker alerts that will work with Apple's AirTags. But these things were framed as updates coming to the Android *ecosystem*, not as Android 14 features.

That's not an accident. I asked Sameer Samat, VP of Android ecosystem, why Android 14 specifically got so little airtime. He said that as Google has implemented ways for Android devices to receive updates outside of a once-a-year platform upgrade, like Play System and app updates, it's become necessary to frame things a little differently. "So this year, we thought it's important to show people what's new in Android from a user experience standpoint, regardless of the OS version. While some features that we announced will launch with Android 14, many will arrive in people's hands through these continuous updates," he says.

Rather than lumping together a lot of new features in an OS upgrade that will roll out slowly (or not at all) to certain devices, the company is sprinkling features throughout the year as updates to Google Photos or Gmail. That's a good thing, and it's a side effect of Google's efforts to solve the familiar problems of Android's fragmentation. Google has more levers to pull now to get feature updates and security fixes to Android phones faster. It just means fewer of those features getting built into big-numbered versions of the OS.

It also means that what's leftover isn't terribly exciting. Android 14 has been in beta for a while now, and so far, highlights include updates that I'd classify as nice-to-haves: a different look for the back navigation arrow, support for a new backward-compatible HDR image standard, and lossless audio over USB headphones. Not bad, but not the kind of stuff that gets people jazzed up during a keynote.

Google has more levers to pull now to get feature updates to Android phones faster

There’s also the fact that the smartphone market has achieved a kind of maturity that means year-over-year upgrades are less exciting than they once were. See also: basically every device announced last year. Device makers, including Google, are shifting the focus to the earbuds, watches, and tablets that they sell and how they all work together to make our lives easier — so the sales pitch goes. Phones just aren’t the stars of the show anymore, and neither is the software they run on.

That’s how we got to this year’s I/O keynote, which was as much a hardware launch and AI pep rally as it was a software showcase. After the main keynote ended and Pichai walked offstage, we were encouraged to stay in our seats for the next session: the developer keynote. Little tubs of snacks were distributed as a bribe to keep us in our seats.

Still, the majority of the crowd headed for the exits. We were there for the Fold announcement or to see how Google was responding to the pressure of Microsoft’s AI developments. Smaller sessions later in the day covered Android in depth, but on the company’s biggest stage, it played nothing more than a supporting role.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/5/13/23720419/android-14-google-io-keynote-announcements