Eight things to expect at Google I/O 2018

For a company as big and sprawling as Google, an annual developer conference can feel overwhelming. And, frankly, it is. Google offers a dizzying number of services and dabbles in almost every consumer tech industry under the sun, not to mention the 7 billion-plus user core internet products it owns and operates. But the company has a measured tempo when it comes to Google I/O, and we've come to understand how it prioritizes certain products over others come May every year.

At this year's I/O, which will be held again at the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, California starting Tuesday, May 8th, we know we'll be hearing about the future of Android and Google's artificial intelligence efforts. But there will also be news on everything from its new wearable platform, Wear OS, and Google Assistant to Android TV, Google Home, Google Play, and Search. This is the time of the year when Google pulls out all the stops to showcase how its software is smarter and more forward-looking than the products from its rivals Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft.

So here's what we can anticipate about the future of Google on display next week.

Android P

Google I/O typically revolves around the latest version of Android, which this year will be version P. Following last year's more structural overhaul of Android with Oreo, which revamped notifications and streamlined how smartphones could

be updated in the future, Google’s latest approach to mobile software is more visual and focused on interface design improvements.

We’ve been playing with the first developer preview since early March, and we can already identify the big trends. Android P is focused on making room for the now pervasive display notch on full-screen smartphones, giving users more granular privacy settings, and unifying and simplifying the design language and usability of menus, docks, and settings screens. There’s also a rumor Android P might incorporate some of Apple’s iPhone X gesture design. We’ll get even more info on Android P come Tuesday, when Google is expected to release a second developer preview.

Artificial Intelligence

Beyond Android, I/O is an event to get up to speed on all things artificial intelligence at Google. CEO Sundar Pichai has for years been positioning AI as the secret sauce to his company’s future: software that can see and understand the world, identify objects, and parse natural language will help nearly every Google product improve in the coming years. That process has already started, with products like the voice- and text-based Google Assistant software, Google Translate, and the object and image recognition platform Google Lens. There’s also all the ways Google’s AI efforts feed into other Alphabet businesses, like London’s DeepMind research lab and the Waymo self-driving car unit.

Google

That said, I/O will be more consumer and developer facing, so we should expect to hear more about products like Google Lens, as well as the company’s TensorFlow platform and its Tensor Processing Unit chips. Those chips are the core of the

company’s specially designed AI training systems, and they help the company accelerate the learning process for its neural networks. Also expect to hear a lot of the same grandiose predictions about AI that we heard onstage at Facebook’s F8 developer conference last week, when executives also described AI as the future of Facebook’s business. Of course, it’s no surprise that Google and Facebook compete for top talent, as both companies have rival AI research divisions that command some of the highest salaries in the tech industry.

Photo by Dan Seifert / The Verge

Google Assistant & Google Home

Google Assistant and the Google Home hardware family it primarily lives on are slated to be big consumer-facing focuses for the company at this year’s I/O. Assistant remains Google’s largest competitive push against Amazon’s Alexa and, to a lesser extent, Apple’s Siri and Microsoft’s Cortana. And while Assistant does live on iOS and Android devices as an app and voice interface, it’s most readily useful as the OS layer for any number of smart home devices, starting with Google’s smart speaker family.

We should expect to hear about some new features for Google Assistant, as well as some new integrations for Google Home. The company will likely save its hardware announcements for the standard fall Pixel event, so don’t expect any new Google-branded products. But considering Google has been aggressively expanding the availability of Google Home products and third-party developer support for Google Assistant, I/O should have some exciting news on both fronts.

Google Photos, Google News, and Google Play

While they aren't necessarily the most exciting subjects on the list, Google Photos and Google News, alongside the general Play Store platform, are hugely popular products that do always earn a mention or two during I/O every year. Most notably, Google Photos is home to most of the feature improvements and AI advancements coming from Google Lens, so we'll likely hear about how the company's image and object recognition software is improving its photo storage app and helping it surface interesting insights and automate the creation of montages, GIFs, and other fun short-form video content.

AdAge also reported last week that Google is planning a revamp of its News platform on both desktop and mobile. That reportedly will include the folding in of the Google Newsstand app into an new all-in-one Google News mobile app, along with more video from YouTube and faster load times courtesy of the company's proprietary AMP format on all platforms. The new Google News is expected to debut tomorrow at I/O during the keynote. And, like usual, we should get some new stats on the popularity of Android apps via the Play Store.

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Gaming

Google has been trying to crack gaming for a while now, usually by leveraging the ubiquity of Android and its success in the living room with Chromecast to create some form of hybrid mobile-console solution. Unfortunately, it's never quite materialized. That may change soon, as Google appears to have a lot cooking in the gaming department. First, there's Yeti, the company's yet-to-be-announced Chromecast-powered

game streaming service first reported back in February.

There’s also the company’s new social-gaming startup Arcade from tech entrepreneur Michael Sayman, now at Google after a high-profile stint as a young 17-year-old employee of Facebook, that looks to be taking cues from *HQ Trivia*. And then there’s Google Play Instant, the Instant Apps-powered service that lets Android phones try mobile game apps with a tap by powering them through the mobile browser like a web game. Any one of these projects, or all of them, may be on the agenda at I/O, so gaming fans should keep their eyes peeled.

Material Design Refresh

Google’s once-lauded Material Design philosophy — the foundation of a vast majority of the UI and UX of modern Android, Chrome, and mobile app design — is now about four years old. So that’s probably why we’ve been hearing about a “Material Design Refresh” replacing previous documentation citing a “Material Design 2.” Google may not be planning a full-fledged sequel to Material Design, but it’s clearly thinking about how to update its visual language for 2018, and we may hear more about that I/O next week.

Building the case for a new version of Material Design is a subtle change to Chrome tabs spotted last month alongside a new Material Design document on the Chromium site, rumors of a big Chrome redesign in September with a focus on touch controls and ChromeOS benefits, and the giant Gmail redesign that went live last week. All signs are pointing to a more unified approach to software across Android, Chromebooks, desktop Chrome, and web apps — and I/O would be the prime destination to unveil that to the world.

Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

Wear OS

In addition to Android P, I/O is the time of the year when Google holds a kind of state of the union on its wearable technology platform, now called Wear OS after a rebranding from the previous Android Wear name. The new, inaugural Wear OS software has been out in developer preview alongside Android P, and it's brought some much-needed improvements to battery life along with a welcome dark mode for the user interface to make looking at the watch at a glance much easier on the eyes. And just this week, Google announced several updates for Wear OS that bring more Google Assistant features to the platform.

At I/O, Google will likely shed more light on the first Wear OS update and release a second and more widely available developer preview (the first was restricted to Huawei models). We'll also hopefully get a better idea of how Wear OS reimagines what smart watch software can do, particularly around concepts like voice control with Google Assistant integrations.

Android TV & Android Auto

Developments regarding Google's set-top box software, Android TV, and its in-car infotainment product, Android Auto, have been relatively quiet of late. But any news we get on those fronts will likely come at I/O this year. Android TV has been around for a few years, and last year we saw a redesigned home screen for the Android O version, but not much else. It's also worth mentioning a rumor that Google might release a new 4K Chromecast-like Android TV dongle that would include the full TV interface and possibly a remote, though that comes courtesy of images included in an FCC filing that have since been taken down.

As for Android Auto, that software has also been around for a

few years, but it’s most recently added wireless support for Pixel and Nexus devices as of last month. Back in January, Google announced that its Assistant software would soon power voice functions for Android Auto, so it’s likely I/O will mark the launch of that feature.

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