Leaked Android Q build shows off dark mode, improved privacy controls

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Ready for a new version of Android? If you remember last year, Android P, the pre-release version of what eventually became Android 9 Pie, dropped in March. So we're probably not that far away from a preview of the next version of Android, which will is expected to be called "Android Q."

The popular news and phone modding site XDA Developers has gotten its hands on a pre-release version of Android Q and has produced an article and video detailing what's inside. Keep in mind: this is a pre-release version of a developer preview, so there are plenty of things that are subject to change. So far though, it looks like Android P's dark mode is extending to more of the system UI, and privacy and permissions controls are getting a big update.

A dark mode, maybe for real this time

- The new dark mode. Notice how Android 9's dark mode doesn't actually make anything dark? It seems like that's changing for Android Q.

- Android Q in dark mode: actual dark settings! Android 9 in dark mode: “What’s a dark mode?”
- You even get dark notifications, which is a big deal.
- The dark Quick Settings get even darker in Android Q.

It seems like every year Google teases us with a dark mode and every year, once release rolls around, Android still doesn’t have a comprehensive dark mode. It started with the Android M Developer Preview, which had a dark mode in the developer preview but not in the final Android 6.0 Marshmallow release. It popped up again in the Android N Developer Preview, only to pull the same disappearing act once release time came. Android 9 Pie finally shipped with a user-selectable “dark” mode, but it didn’t change a whole lot. It only changed the Quick Settings, app-drawer background, and a few tiny System UI bits like the volume and power menu. Pie didn’t even change the settings to white text on a dark background, despite that change being present on earlier M and N developer previews.

XDA’s Android Q build looks like a big improvement, assuming it actually sticks around for release. First, it actually recolors the settings screens again, so they are probably white text on a dark background. It changes the system notifications to white on dark, too, which has never happened before. The Quick Settings, which could be changed to dark in Android 9 Pie, are even darker in Android Q.

While having a dark mode in the system UI is an improvement, you would really need Google to update all of its various apps with a dark theme to create a comprehensive dark mode. The Play Store, Gmail, Search, and about a hundred other Google apps still won’t have a dark mode unless the individual app designers go out of their way to make one.

Google seems like it is really trying to do this, as lately there has been a steadily growing roster of dark Google apps. Today, Phone, Contacts, Google News, YouTube, Google Play Games, and Messages have a dark mode. Google Maps is getting

there, too, with a dark mode for navigation. But the majority of it is still bright-only.

[embedded content]
XDA’s Android Q video.
For apps that don’t have a dedicated dark mode, XDA mentions its build of Android Q has an XDA Developer option called “override force-dark.” This will force a dark mode even on apps that don’t have a dark mode designed by the developer, and XDA says it partially works on apps like Facebook and Web browsers. It’s an interesting-sounding feature, but given how much Google preaches consistency and predictability for Android app developers, I can’t imagine a feature like this surviving to a retail build.

As Google explained at its own developer conference recently, the proliferation of OLED screens has resulted in dark themes using less power overall than white themes, so switching to a dark theme will actually result in better battery life. Unlike LCDs, OLED displays can control the power of each individual pixel, and darker colors use less power. In fact, an OLED pixel displaying pure black is just turned off, so it uses zero (or at least very little) power.

Google is still only using dark-grey themes in most of its apps and Android Q interfaces, so it’s not saving as much power as it could with a pure black background. Still, Google said its current dark-grey themes from apps YouTube and Google Maps reduce display power usage by 30 percent to 60 percent. If Google would just make the colors a bit darker and use pure black as the background, though, even more power would be saved.

After all the fake-outs from previous Android versions, it’s easy to be cynical about a dark mode actually arriving. With all of the above dark-mode changes happening across the Google app ecosystem, the company looks like it is finally getting serious about the alternative color scheme. There was also a

bit of dark-theme evidence from Google's Chromium bug tracker recently, where a Google employee seemingly spilled the beans on Android Q early, saying "Dark mode is an approved Q feature."

He went on to detail the Google's policy for Android Q, saying "The Q team wants to ensure that all preloaded apps support dark mode natively. In order to ship dark mode successfully, we need all UI elements to be ideally themed dark by May 2019." It seems like dark apps are actually, finally happening.

New privacy controls

- Pulling down the status bar shows not only that GPS is being used but which app is accessing it. In this case, it's called "Weather."
- Tapping on the location message summons this pop-up box, which shows the app name and icon.
- This shows apps accessing the location and camera app.
- The box shows which apps are accessing which permissions.
- The new "Privacy" page in the settings.
- The Permissions dashboard.

Hot off the implementation of new privacy-focused rules for SMS apps on the Play Store, Android looks like it is getting some new privacy-centric changes on the OS side.

One of the coolest features shown in XDA's video is a new status-bar feature that shows when sensitive phone permissions are being used and which apps are using them. We've all seen the GPS/location icon pop up in a phone status bar from time to time, but the icon only ever showed that *something* was pinging your location—it never showed what. In this Android Q build, pulling down the status bar shows an app name next to the location icon, allowing you to easily tell which app is

pinging your location. Tapping on the icon will bring up a list, showing the same information. This doesn't just work for location, either—XDA noticed it working for microphone and camera usage, too.

"Privacy" gets a new, top-level screen in the settings, and inside is a new "Permissions Usage" page that shows how often sensitive permissions are accessed and by which apps. This is all presented in a fun bar-graph interface, making it look more than a little like the "Digital Wellness" dashboard on the Pixel 3. (I guess this would be "Privacy Wellness?") One dropdown menu lets you pick the time scope of the bar-graph display, and another will display the type of data, choosing from the most frequently accessed permission, which app uses the most permission, and recent access. It looks like a big improvement over Android's current permission screen, which is just a series of on/off switches.

The permissions settings get a few more options, too. Besides "allow" and "deny" pop-up options for permissions like location, there's now a third option to "Allow only while the app is in use." This is a good idea ripped straight from iOS. For location, this would stop apps from pinging your location in the background and, instead, would only give them GPS access when they are running in the foreground.

In the App Info settings, there's a new permission page that shows these options, too, and this page also offers additional info on why an app needs a specific permission. For now, this early build only says "The app developer did not specify how the app uses your data." But it sounds like developers will be able to explain how their app works on this page.

The "Desktop Mode" and other

oddities

XDA’s report includes a few other odds and ends. First, there’s a new developer option called “force desktop mode” that promises it will “force experimental desktop mode on secondary displays.” You can’t really hook a “secondary display” up to a Pixel 3, since it doesn’t support HDMI out over USB-C, so XDA wasn’t able to test this. We’ve seen Google include desktop-like functionality on Android before with things like the Freeform Window Mode in Android N, but so far nothing official has come from the feature.

Android 8.0 Oreo added updatable graphics drivers to Android, which would allow users to download and install new SoC graphics drivers from the Play Store, just like an app. No OEM ever took advantage of this feature, including Google’s own Pixel line. Despite this, Android Q included a page called “Game Update Package Preferences” in the developer options, which lets you pick which graphics driver you want to use.

There is a very ugly, half-implemented native screen recorder. Native screen recording would be great.

You can still swipe notifications to the right to dismiss them, but not the left. Swiping to the left shows the usual snooze and settings icon for a particular notification but won’t dismiss the notification.

XDA is still picking through its build of Q, so we’ll probably hear about more things in the future. If Google sticks to its usual timeline, we should also get an official Developer Preview in about two months.

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