Volvo’s Polestar offers interactive preview of the first native version of Android Auto

Polestar, Volvo’s electric performance brand, is teasing what will be the first native version of Android Auto in a new mobile web demo that was released on Wednesday. The app-like experience, viewable on smartphones or tablets, allows people to tap around an early version of the user interface that will launch on Polestar’s second car, the aptly named Polestar 2, later this year.

To view it, users need to click this link and choose “Add to Home Screen” from the share sheet in their mobile browser. After that, they can tap through the new icon on their home screen to launch a website that simulates the Android Auto-powered user interface. It’s not fully operational, but it’s enough to get a decent sense of what it will be like to tap through the screen in the Polestar 2.

It’s not a full demo, but it’s a taste of what’s to come
At its 2017 I/O developer conference, Google announced that it was working on a native version of Android Auto that would not require the use of a smartphone, and Volvo and Audi were the first automakers to strike a deal to put it in their cars. At last year’s I/O, Google showed off an early version of what will end up in Volvo’s cars in 2020. (Audi’s been far more tight-lipped about its own project.) The display was skinned to look just like the Swedish carmaker’s Sensus infotainment system, but it had access to the Android Auto version of Google’s Play Store app ecosystem as well as fully integrated versions of Google Maps, Play Music, and more.

What Polestar showed off on Wednesday looks a lot different, however. It’s a completely new design that fits well in a portrait mode tablet, with big buttons and icons so that the driver or passenger doesn’t have to be so precise with their taps and swipes.

There are four quadrants with persistent control bars at the top and bottom. The top control bar lets users tap around different sections of the user interface. There’s a page for apps, another for user profiles, and one for the car’s functions (like steering or regenerative braking settings). The bottom control bar offers quick access to climate and seat settings.



The demo shows off what it would be like to have quick access to various Google apps in those four quadrants, including Maps, Calendar, and Play Music. (These four quadrants are presumably customizable. They may even adapt on the fly based on what’s most recently been used, similar to how the left rail of Apple’s CarPlay UI operates.)

There are a bunch of cheeky touches throughout the demo, too, all of which seem to imply that Polestar wants to offer some of the joy-over-function features that permeate Tesla’s infotainment system. Tap on the “camera” section of the top

control bar, and you'll unlock a *Space Invader*s-style game called *Polestar Space Warp*, which is actually playable in the demo. Tap the Google Maps simulation, and the navigation screen suddenly shows stars streaking by, which echoes one of the more famous Easter eggs found in Tesla's cars.

In other parts of the demo, though, things don't work, or they broke outright. Polestar says it will share "additional information about the interface" in the coming weeks. The company will also share more about Polestar 2 itself. Right now, we only know that it's supposed to offer about 300 miles on a full charge, and it will be priced somewhere north of $35,000, lining it up for potential competition with Tesla's Model 3.

The demo has some clear nods to Tesla, too
The push to turn Android Auto into a full-fledged operating system that doesn't require the use of a smartphone started in 2014, but it's only over the last year that we're starting to see the effort step into the light. Automakers have used Android to build infotainment systems in the past, but they tended to have far more control over the top-to-bottom operations, which was sometimes to their detriment.

Polestar's demo shows that, with native Android Auto, Google is still allowing a ton of freedom when it comes to the design of the user interface (especially when contrasted with the far more familiar version that Volvo showed off last year). But since it's a more limited system, there are inherently more guidelines in place, which hopefully means a more consistent, reliable experience. With the added value of having access to the app store, native Android Auto could become a selling point for cars in the next few years.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/23/18194754/volvo-polestar-android-auto-native-interactive-preview