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Tracking versions of WeChat

WeChat is a multi-purpose messaging app made by Chinese Internet company Tencent. It was first released in 2011. Since then, it has grown into the most popular mobile app in China. WeChat had over 889 million monthly active users in 2016. As of 2019, WeChat's monthly active user base have increased to an estimate of one billion [1]. For most of Chinese, WeChat is an indispensable part of their everyday lives. This essay is based on the iOS version update, and it analyses the changes of the process of WeChat's user experience improvement from 3 perspectives.

1. Usefulness: Does it do something people need done?

The usefulness is the most important dimension of usability, UX starts by being useful. A product should be useful to users and meet their needs. This section analyses some important changes in functionality during the development of WeChat.

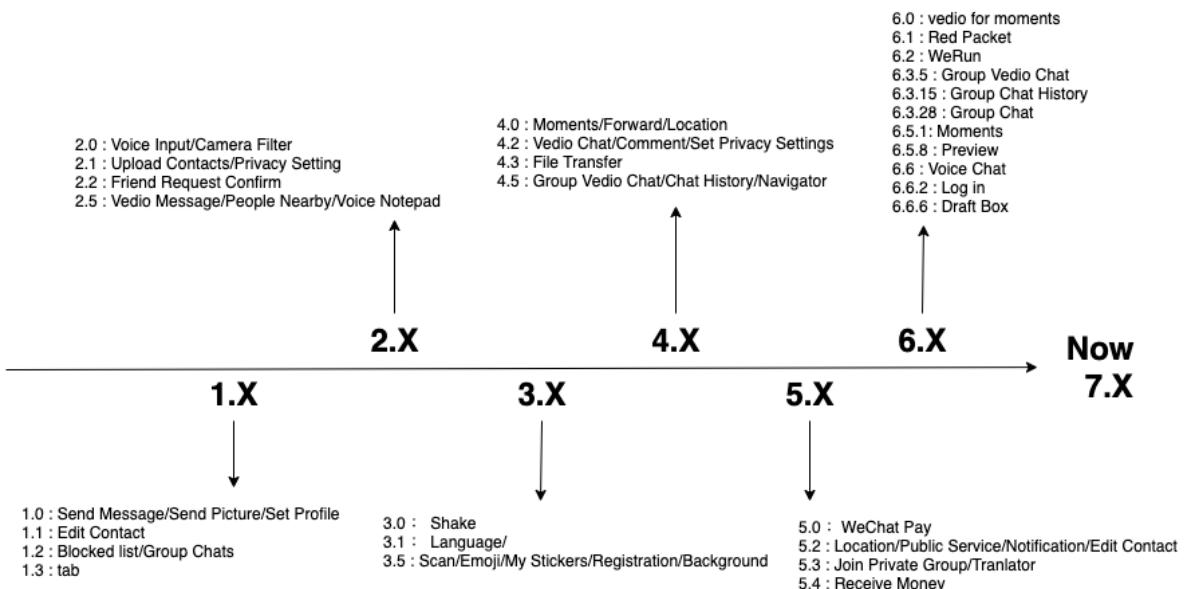


Fig. 1. Versions of WeChat



Fig. 2. WeChat 1.0_IM

Same as the name, WeChat started as a mobile instant-messaging (IM) app. The first version of WeChat only allowed users to send text messages and photos. The left picture is full layout of the messages section looks like. The launch received little response from the market, at a time many instant messengers were already on the scene in China. “It cannot send a short message to someone’s phone number (like Feixin). It doesn’t have the functionality of QQ. What’s the meaning of having this app”, one user wrote in the comments section on WeChat’s iOS app store page 9 years ago rating WeChat by single star.

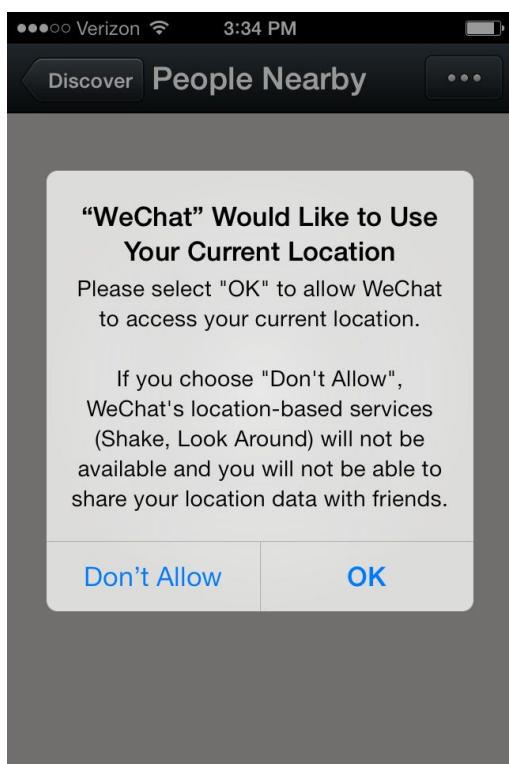


Fig. 3. WeChat 2.5_People nearby

According to the report of CNNIC, more than 41% users use WeChat to make new friends [2]. Socialising with strangers can satisfy this needs of users. WeChat has got the stranger chatting feature in version 2.0. WeChat has to use users' current location to find people. Once the searching is completed, it will send to the user best results. It was giving users a whole new social mode. This communication feature meets a user's need for anonymous socialising and pouring out feelings. By that time, WeChat's user base has soared from 4 to 20 million users. It evolved quickly. WeChat has added 'shake' function in version 3.0, which was connecting users who were randomly shaking their phone at the same time. If 'People Nearby' allows users to connect with strangers close to them, 'shake' allows them to meet WeChat users all around the world. Talking to strangers had been a "game changer" and pushed daily users growth to 100,000.

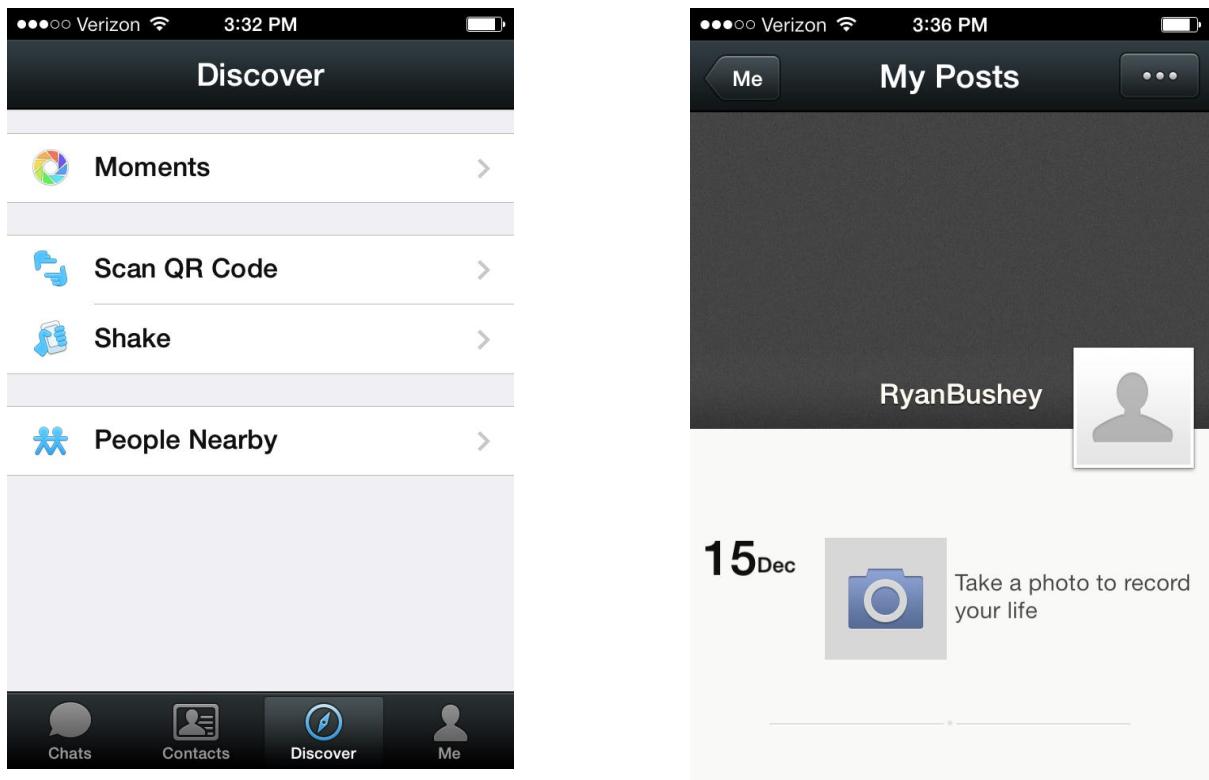


Fig. 4. WeChat 4.0_Moments

The "Moments" feature is somewhat like a Facebook wall where friends can post messages in different formats. The Chinese translation of Moment is known as "Friends circle". Moments mainly focuses on sharing pictures with captions. According to Tencent and CAICT's survey [3] of the leading digital activities WeChat users conduct daily on the

platform, browsing and posting on Moments is the most popular activity, mentioned by 58% of respondents. Sharing data like images, voice messages and video was the second - most popular activity.

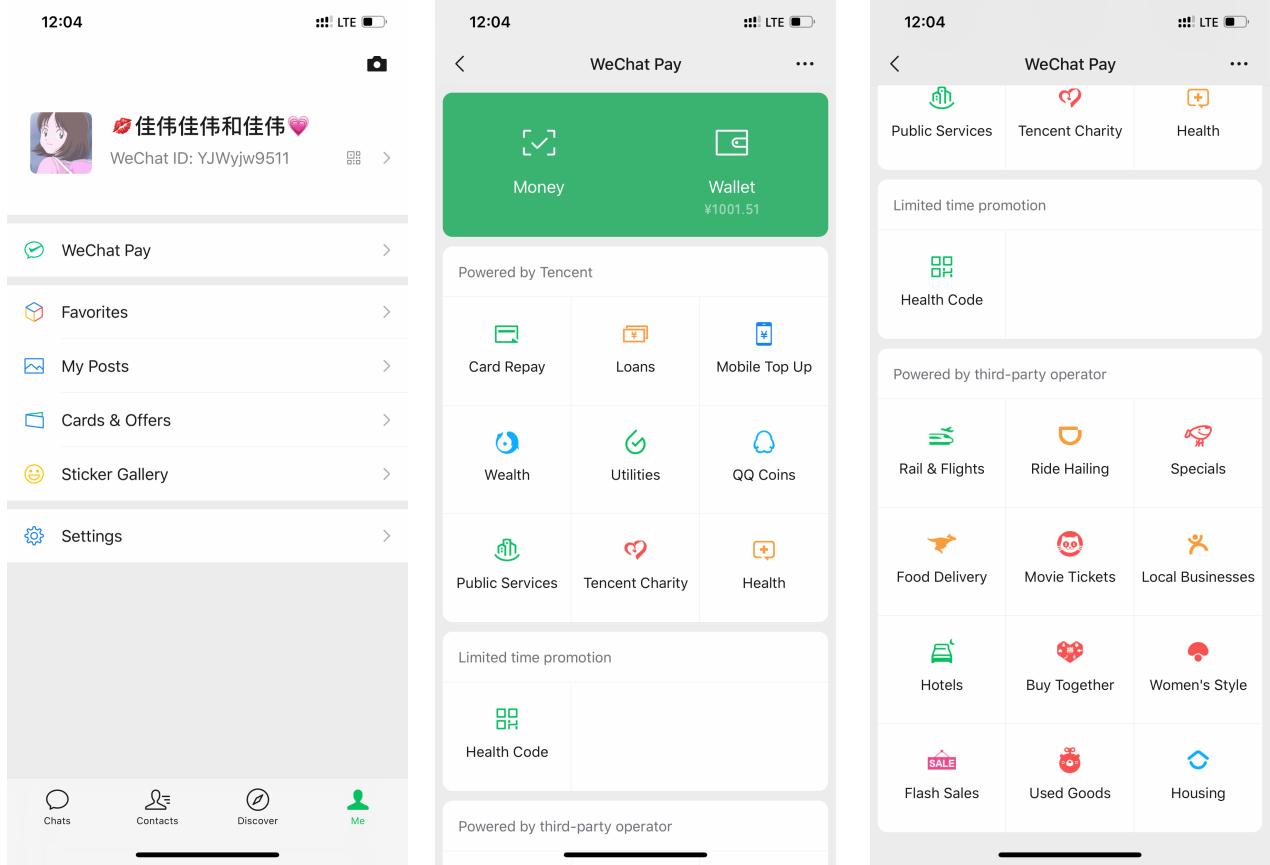


Fig. 5. WeChat 7.0.12_All-in-one

WeChat is not just about providing a hybrid chatting experience composed of text/voice messages, phone/video calls and stickers. Its success exceeds beyond an all-in-one app. “All You Want in One Place” is their slogan. WeChat quickly added other features, it is no longer primarily an IM application. Versatility makes WeChat special. WeChat integrates many many services under one roof. They have a broad range of third-party services. Examples include ordering a taxi, booking train and airline tickets, buying movie tickets. WeChat is also an e-commerce platform, which is particularly convenient because it’s integrated with the payment service. More than 200 million users have connected their bank accounts to WeChat, this capability allows person-to-person money transfers.

People like WeChat's features. It does have great features. But it seems like Tencent doesn't employ UX designers to work on WeChat. This app is made by developers, not designers. WeChat has a poorly designed and confusing UI, users need to understand the context though. It's no surprise the design is confusing, they smash so many different features together into single application while using probably six or more design languages.

2. Learning curve: Can people figure out how to use it?

The user interface of an app should be self-explanatory. There should be no question marks, no mental chatter, no errors. This section describes some of the issues with affordances in historical versions of WeChat and how they have been improved.



Fig. 6. WeChat 2.0

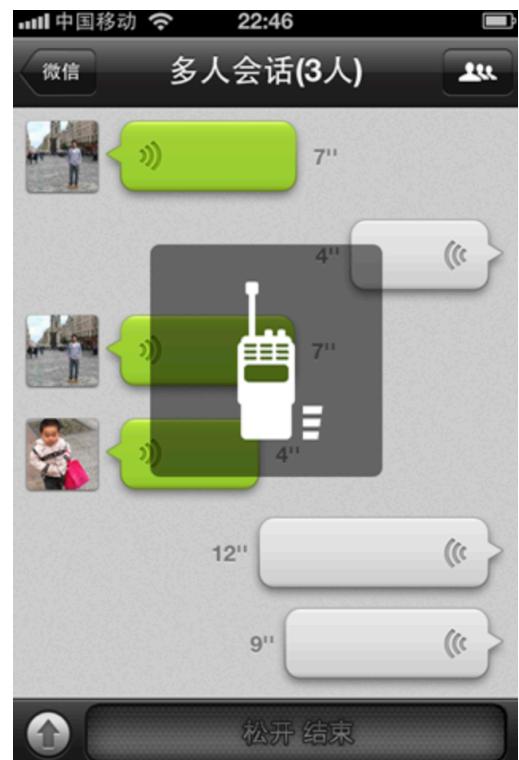


Fig. 7. WeChat 2.5

In version 2.0, WeChat added the voice messaging feature. The voice intercom feature is a milestone in the development of WeChat. It takes full advantage of the features that distinguish mobile phones from PC voice calls and brings users chatting experience to a climax. Voice messaging frees hands and makes the feeling of “face-to-face” communication

more visible. Even people who can't type can communicate via voice messaging. Users just need to hold the bar to talk, it's very easy to record one's voice. WeChat's voice messages marked with the time and user avatar are sent in the same chat bubble as a text message is. It greatly enhanced the user experience. The voice function lowered the threshold of WeChat and broadened the user base. WeChat's user grew rapidly during that period.

WeChat's voice feature design has some problems actually. The icon wasn't clear and self-explanatory. According to their design, an user needs to hold the intercom button and then talk. However, there was no sound or icon to remind users that they were talking when they pressed and held the button. That's why I used to always used to get the voice messages like "Have I started talking yet....ohhhh..I'm talking!...?". The designers solved the problem during the iteration of version 2.5, where an icon pops up with a sound when the users press the bar. This pop-up icon can effectively alert the users that they are speaking. It greatly enhanced the user experience. People can 'get it' without spending any effort thinking about it.

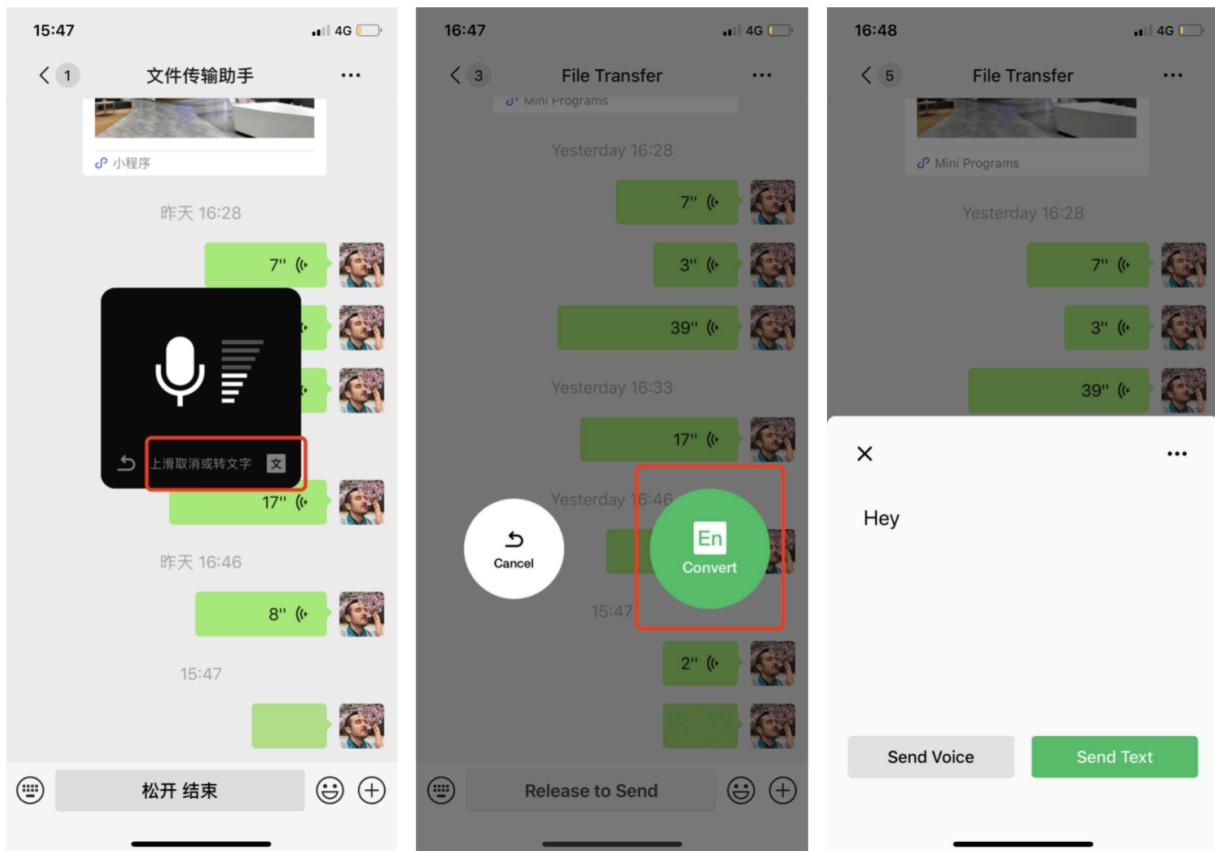


Fig. 8. WeChat 7.0.8

WeChat's 7.0.8 update added a voice-to-text button within the voice message functionality. The new feature makes voice-to-text much more accessible and coincidental. Previously, when the user is recording a voice message and decides to cancel the message, he swipes up. Now, the user swipes up and sees the options to cancel by swiping left or to convert the current recording into text by swiping right. The new WeChat update perfects this voice messaging experience, especially as Chinese transition to more text-based conversation habits. This may seem like another small UI change, but it's actually a major achievement for WeChat.

3. Delightfulness: Is using it enjoyable, or even fun?

In this section, I use a popular feature in WeChat as an example of the good experience that WeChat brings to users.

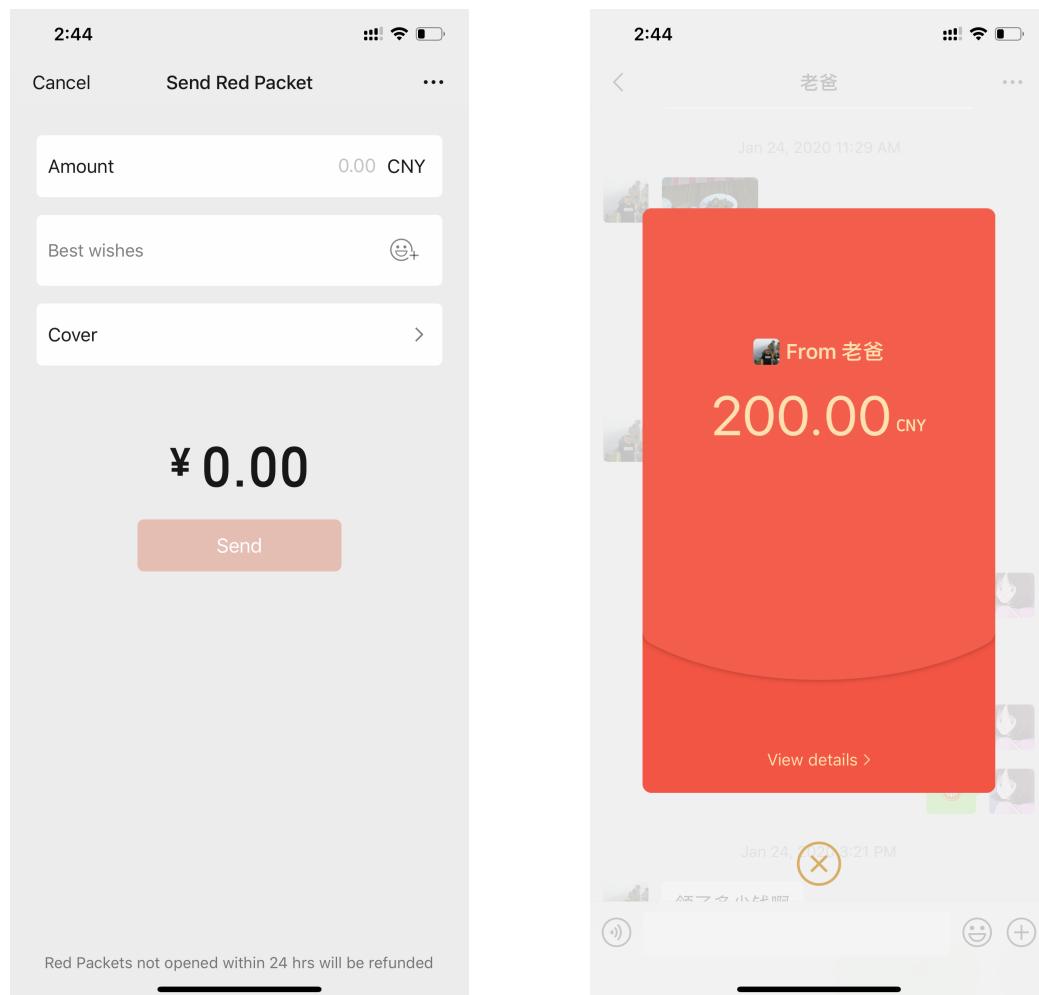


Fig. 9. WeChat 7.0.12: Red Packet

One of the most anticipated activities during Chinese New Year celebrations is to give out and receive red packets, a way to show blessing and appreciation to each other. WeChat published this function in 2014. During just 6 years, WeChat has changed the way the Chinese give out red packets. According to the official report published by Tencent, there were 768 million users (that was over half of China's population) exchanging digital red packets through WeChat during the Chinese New Year holiday. Red packet is one of the users' favourite features of WeChat. Tens of millions of users send red packets stuffed with digital cash to each other on WeChat every day. It's already became a part of daily life of Chinese person.

There is no learning curve for users to use the function, user just needs to click some button to send a Red Packet. The money sent through Red Packets will be automatically transferred to the user's WeChat Wallet, so they can use it to pay for products and services on WeChat and enjoy exclusive promotions and campaigns on WeChat.

References

- [1] QuestMobile, WeChat Public Account Report 2019
- [2] CNNIC, The 44th statistical report on China's Internet Development
- [3] Tencent, WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017