

THE
APP DESIGN
HANDBOOK

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Learn to design beautiful iOS Applications.

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Chapter 5

THE STYLE

Style plays a key part in the overall experience. After making your app intuitive it is time to add some flair.

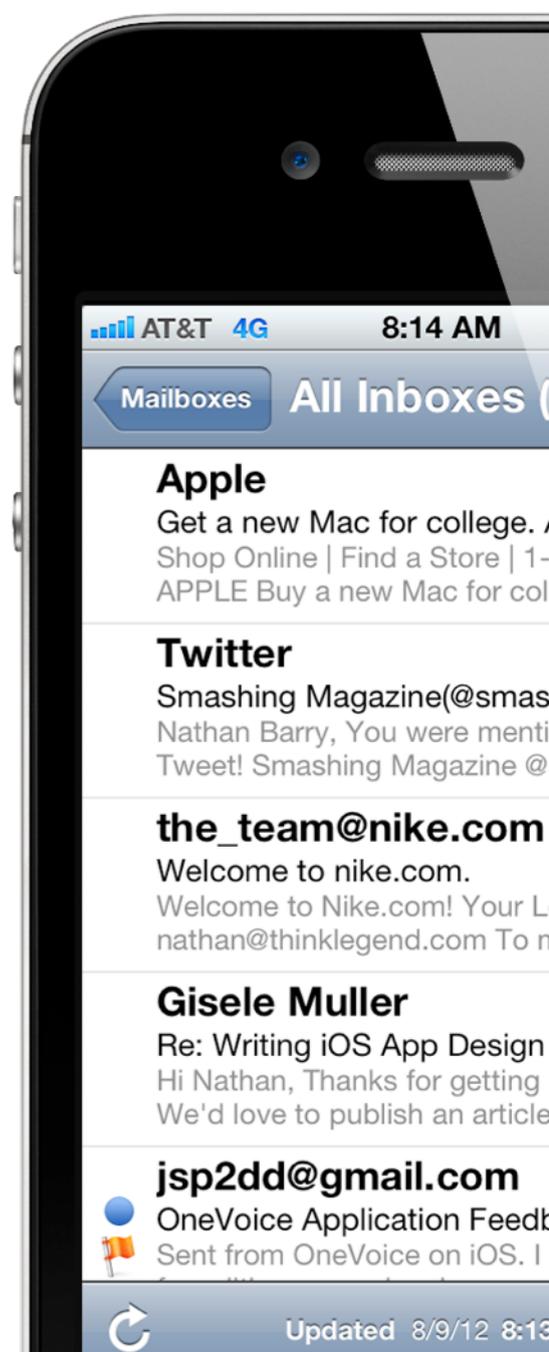
ENTERTAINMENT OR UTILITY

When designing an iOS app the first thing I like to do is think about where the application falls on this spectrum:



The **Compass** application on the iPhone is an entertainment application. Without a lot of features the designer was able to design in a realistic compass, wood textures, and other great elements without worrying that they would inhibit regular use.

At the Utility end of the spectrum is **Mail**. Because Mail is used so often and a core part of most iOS users' workflow, any extra design elements could inhibit usability. The designers of Mail could have added paper textures, a handwritten style font, stamps, and much more. But doing so would make it harder and slower to read and write emails.



Utility apps need to be quick and focused entirely on the task at hand.

Entertainment apps still need to be useful or fun, but can have a more immersive design.



Voice Memos takes a unique approach. The first screen is pure entertainment. A large, beautiful microphone illustration takes up most of the screen along with shiny buttons and a levels indicator. Since there aren't many elements needed on the screen, the realistic, entertainment interface fills it in nicely.

But as soon as you view a large data set, in this case your recordings, the interface switches to a utility style. Textures aren't used, buttons look more standard. The focus is on the content.

Don't be afraid to switch between styles for what best fits the current view.

GarageBand does this as well. Parts of the application are entertainment focused (drums, keyboard, etc), but as soon as you switch to editing your song the interface looks and functions like a utility application. They also do a really good job (better than Voice Memos) in maintaining a consistent feel between the two styles.



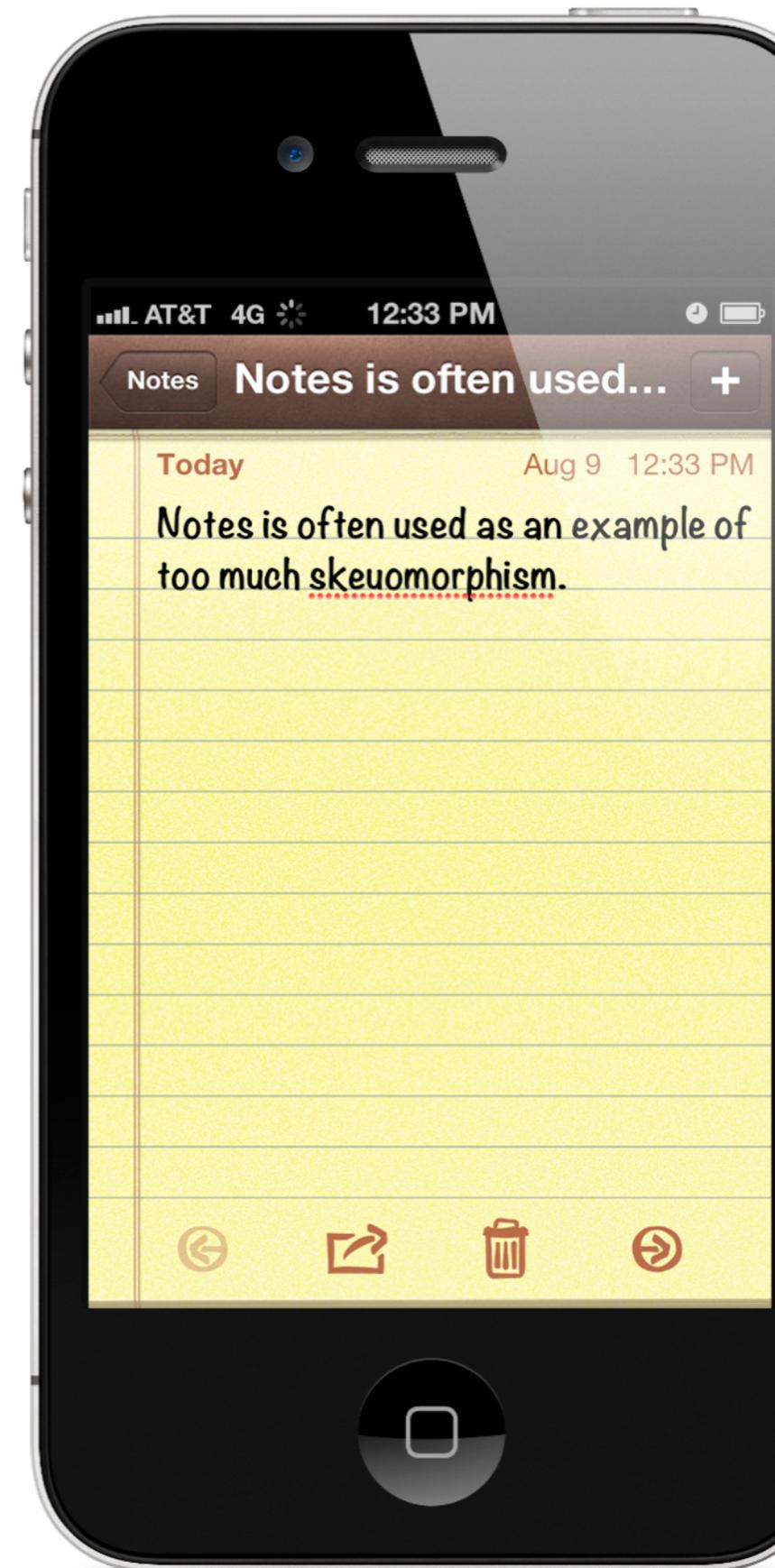
THOUGHTS ON SKEUOMORPHISM

Many designers complain that in iOS, especially with the iPad, Apple has forced too many real world metaphors into what should be a digital experience. Notes would be more effective in a standard font, without the yellow-lined background. The page flip animation in iBooks is completely unnecessary.

A Skeuomorph is **“an object or feature which imitates the design of a similar artifact in another material.”** So when Apple mimics a physical notepad in an iOS app they are using skeuomorphism to make the app feel more familiar and fun.

The Windows Phone 7 design methodology called Metro is hailed as being authentically digital. Following the style of road and navigation signs, Metro focuses entirely on the content and doesn't try to mimic real world objects (as much). The Metro experience is unique and effective, loved by many users. So, which method is better?

As with many design questions the answer is, it depends. As a designer you want to use metaphors that your users will be familiar with, in a way that helps them more quickly learn and navigate your interface, without including any elements that could harm the usability of your app.

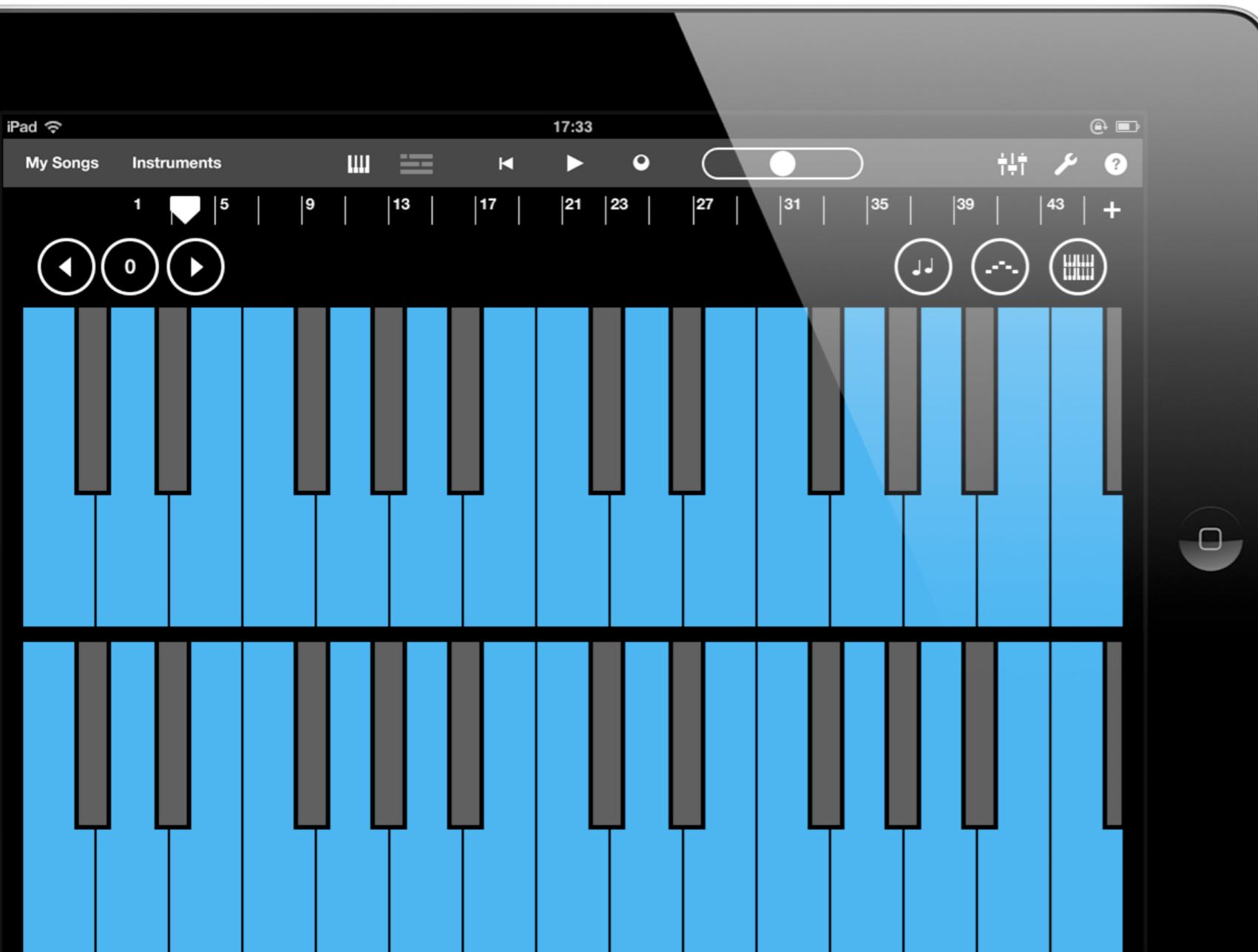


The Best Experience

How you mimic real world objects should depend entirely on the experience you are trying to create. To hit this point home Tobias Ahlin redesigned the Garageband Piano in a Metro style.

Which do you think creates a better experience? Here's what Tobias has to say about the Metro style piano:

“While this may be more functional, more clean, and more true to the functions of the interface, it’s not fun. I could as well be creating music in Excel. Apple’s Garageband interface not only presents features in a clear and understandable way, it adds to a beautiful, fun and memorable experience.”



When I asked Tobias for permission to use his example he added another important detail:

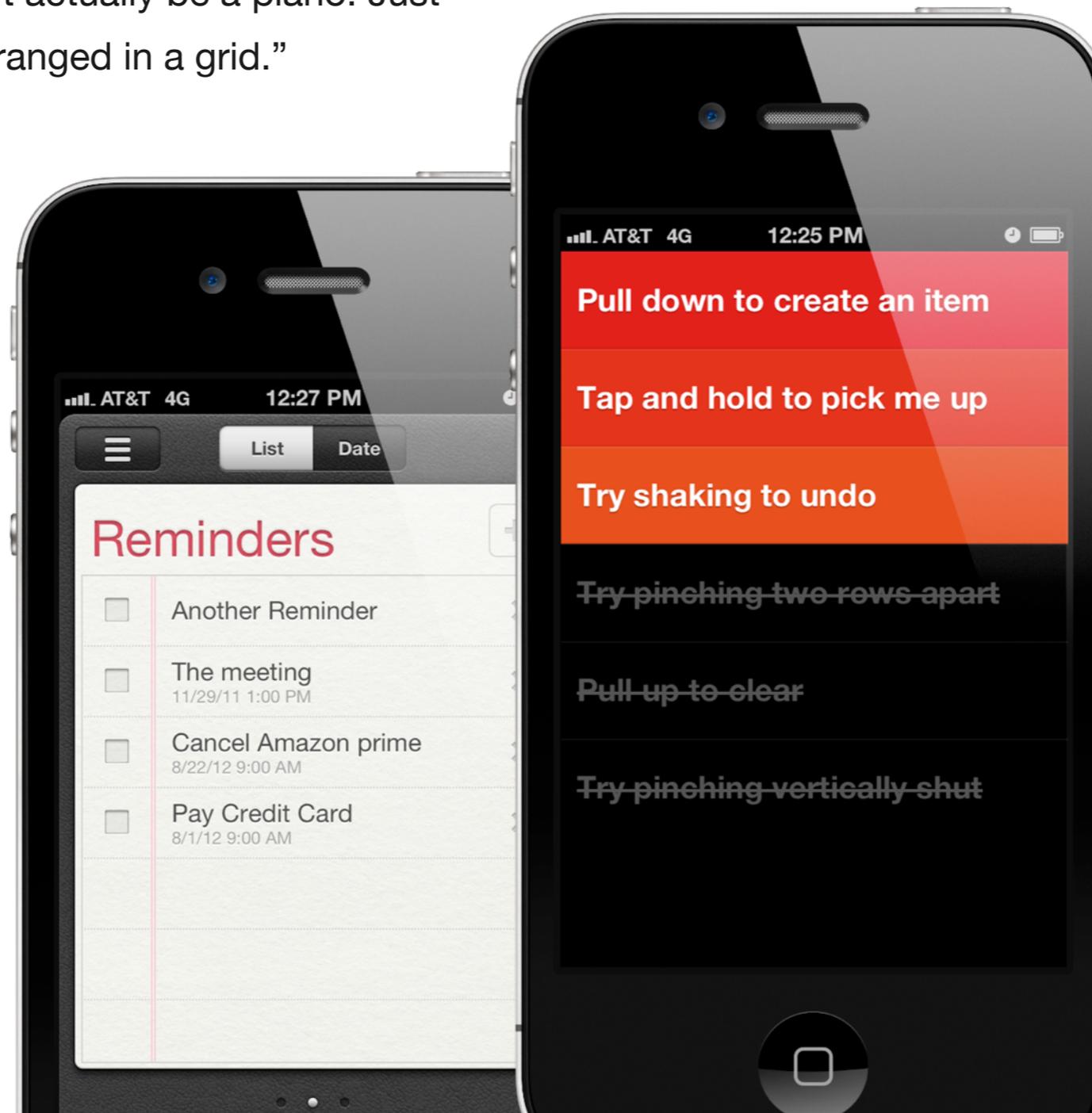
“It's worth pointing out though that the metro style piano is also very much skeuomorphism, just less extreme than in Garageband — a piano without skeuomorphism wouldn't actually be a piano. Just buttons for each note arranged in a grid.”

We really do use skeuomorphism everywhere in software, since it helps users already be familiar with the interface since they can relate it to past experiences. It just depends on the level of skeuomorphism used.

iOS doesn't lock you in to a specific style. You can design based on your vision for the application or based on what you think your users will prefer. The to-do list application can have paper textures and handwritten fonts — or, if

you prefer, it could be an authentically digital experience like what Realmac Software created with Clear.

Both are acceptable on iOS. It's best to ignore this debate between designers and create what is best for your app and users.



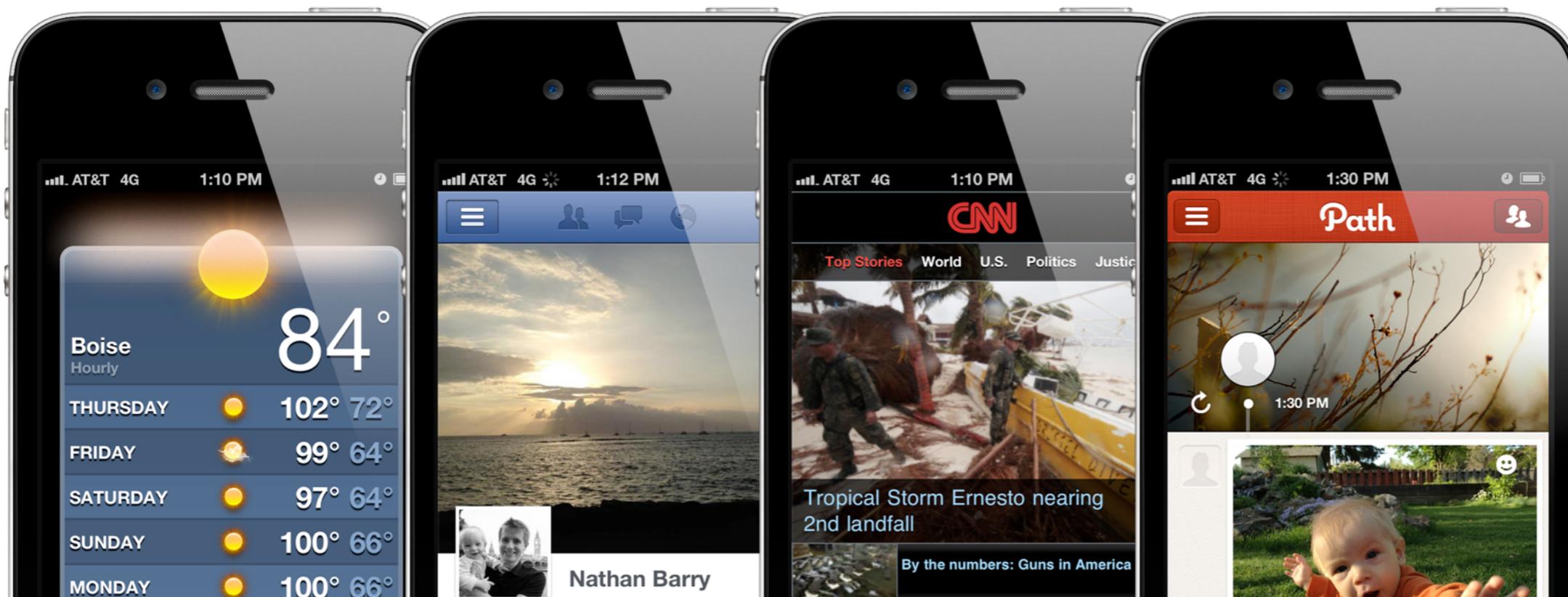
COLORS

The color scheme does a lot to define the initial feel and branding of your application. For many apps the basic branding is already set by existing logos and company branding guidelines. If that isn't the case you can find an entirely new color scheme.

One way to keep it simple is to choose one main color (orange, blue, green, red) that is bright, then have a secondary color that doesn't grab attention. Usually I just use a dark grey and then white for the content areas.

This lets your main color stand out in a bold way, but makes sure that you don't have any colors that conflict with it. If you aren't confident in your color selection ability this is a sure way to know you didn't make any mistakes. I think it is better to understate your color choices rather than make decisions that clash.

If your app does require a more elaborate color scheme then sites like kuler.adobe.com and colourlovers.com can make finding a quality color palette easy.



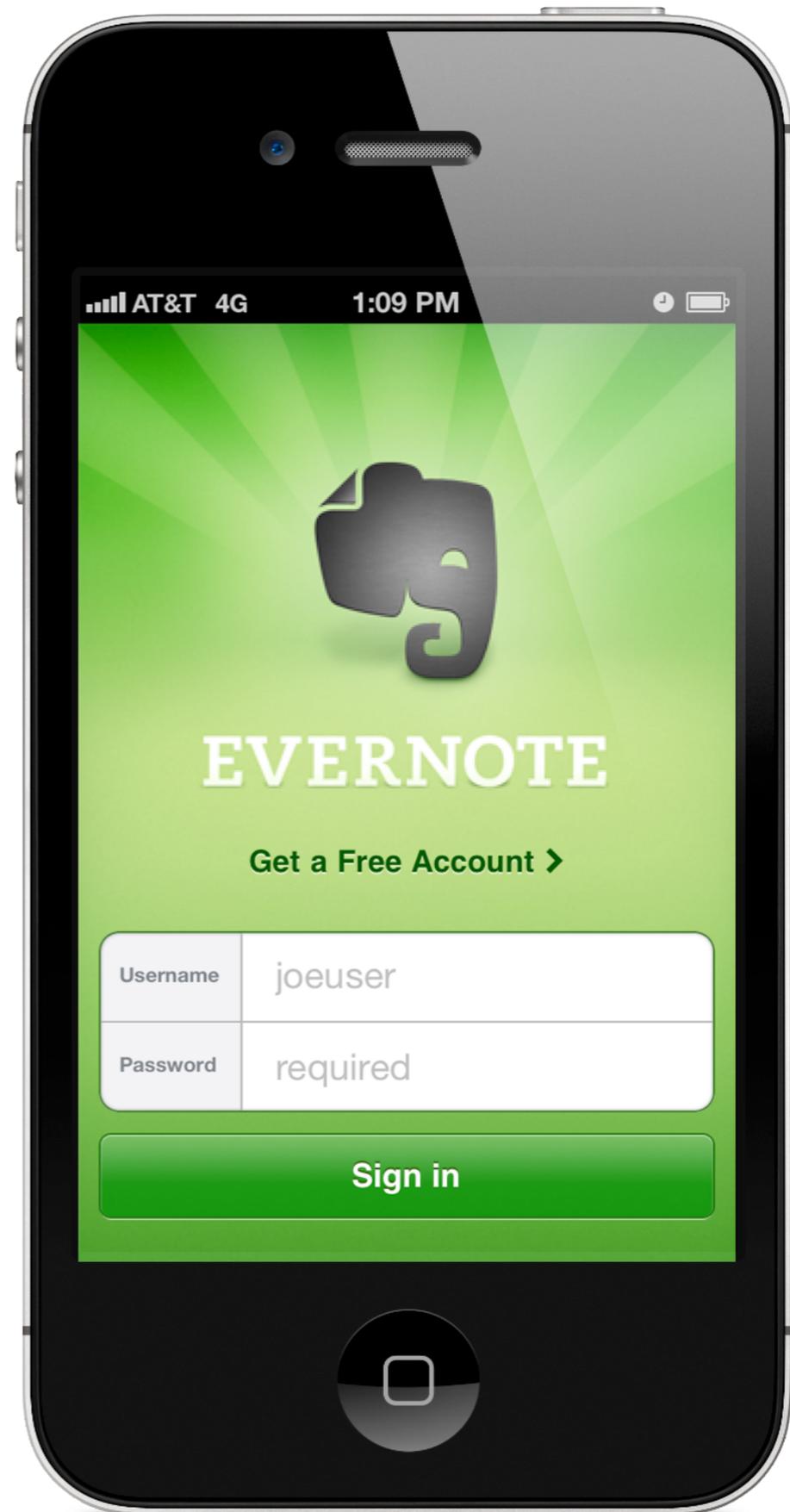
Once your primary color is selected you can use it in prominent locations like the title bar, but also mix it in for your main action buttons as well. Some screens that are heavily branded, such as a login screen, can work well to have your primary color as the background.

This color will help make your app memorable. Mix it with some subtle textures or patterns (as we'll discuss next) and you will have a winning style.

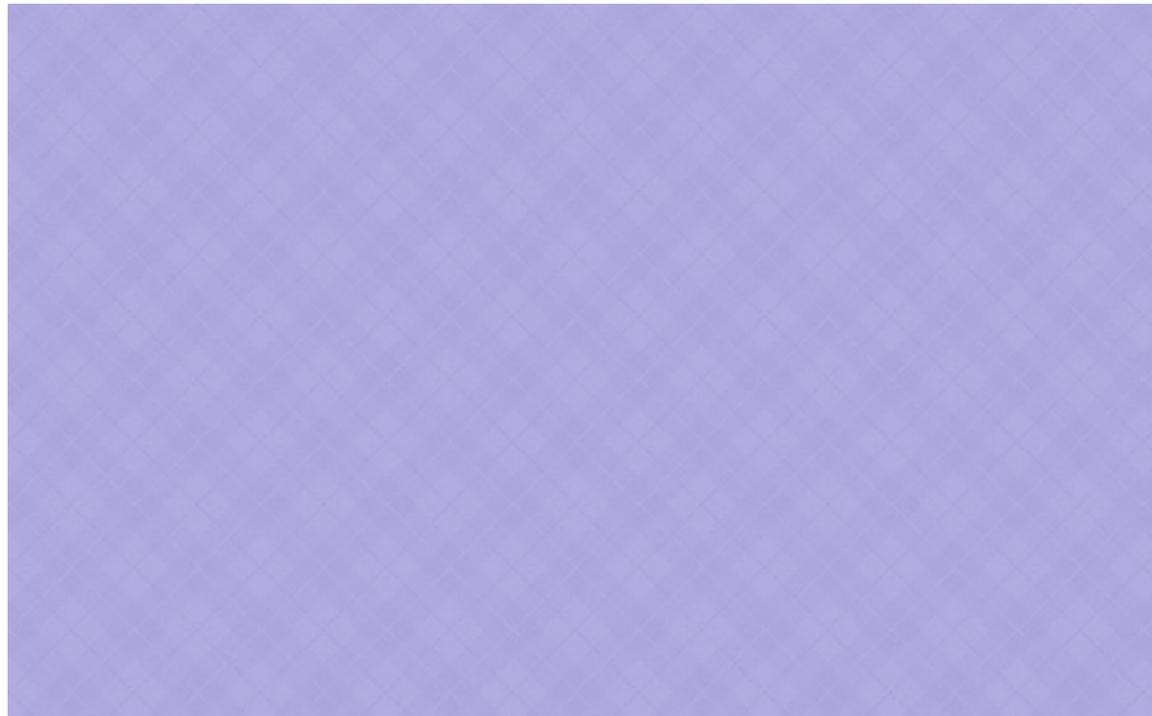
Text Colors

For body text (what you would find in a paragraph) make sure that it has quite a bit of contrast from the background. Avoid using colored text when displaying a lot of content. Dark grey text on a white background, or black text on a lightly colored background work well. Just avoid combinations like green text on a black background. And never put one bright color on top of the other (red text on a green background).

If you aren't sure, go with a tried and true default like dark grey text on a white background.



PATTERNS & TEXTURES



Patterns

Patterns are seamlessly repeating and usually have a simple motif, such as a series of diamonds, diagonal lines, zigzags, or noise. They do a lot to enhance otherwise boring backgrounds. Extra depth can be added when you use lighting and shadows to add more realism to the background. Keep the patterns simple and subtle so that they don't overwhelm your content.

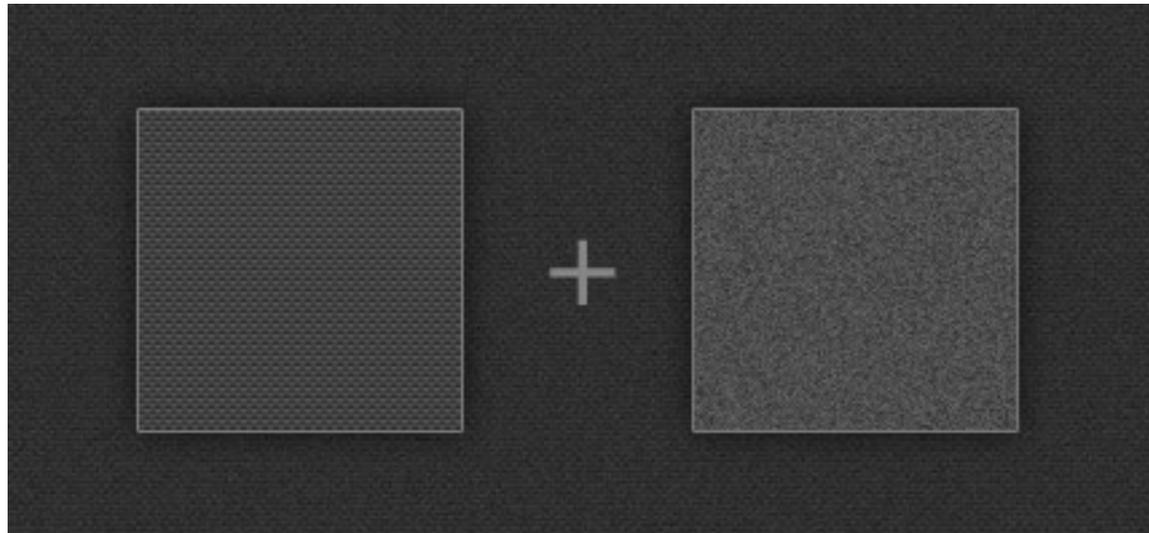


Textures

Textures, on the other hand, emulate real life objects. Wood, leather, metal, and fabric are all common textures to find in iOS apps.

When it comes to both patterns and textures, use restraint. A subtle texture goes a long way. The worst thing you can do is mix-and-match textures that don't make sense. Often using just a single texture will have the greatest visual impact.

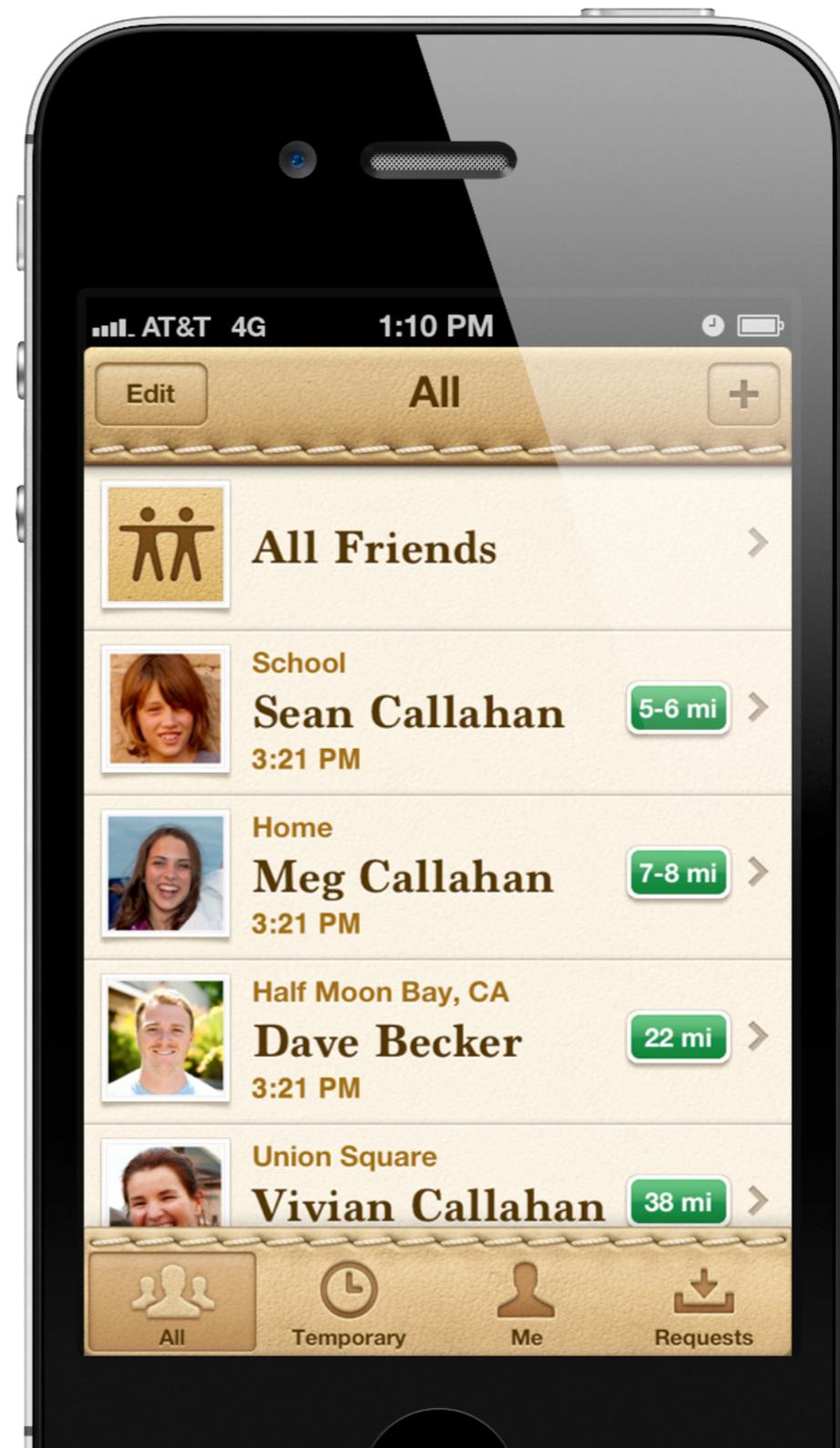
Sometimes textures or patterns can be combined to create a new unique look. One of my favorite fabric textures is made by mixing noise and a carbon fiber pattern.

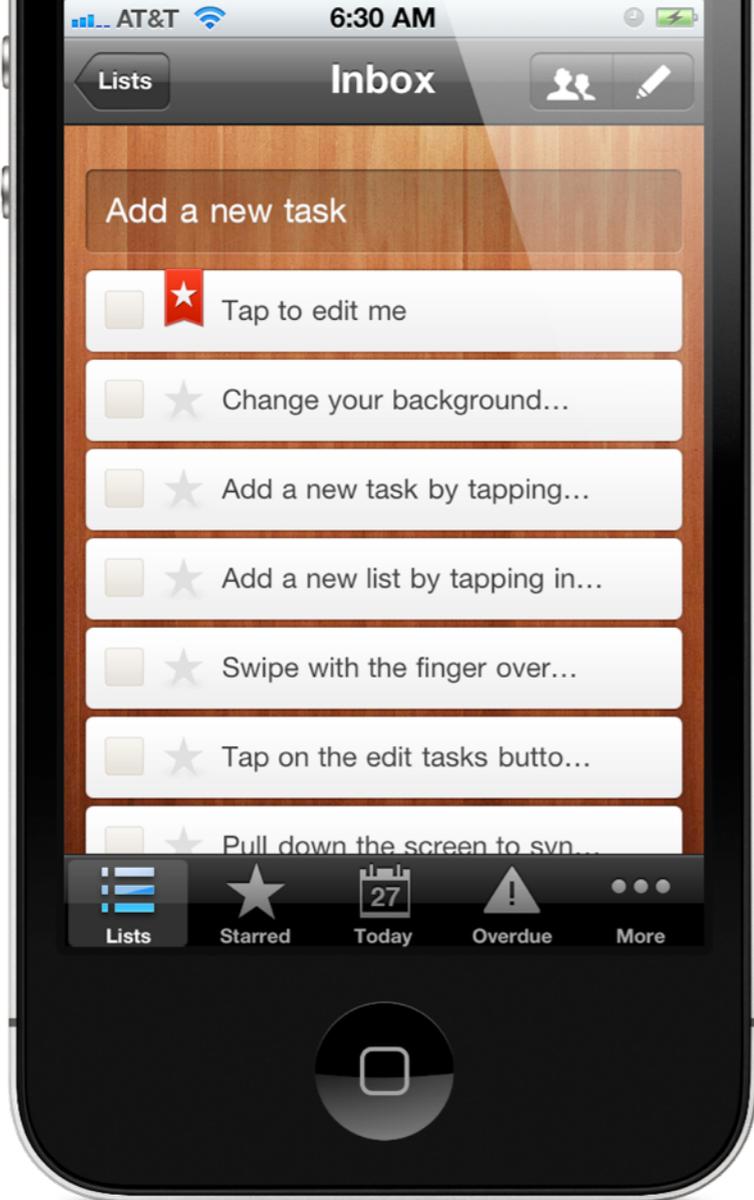


Throughout iOS textures are used in subtle ways. When you bring up the multi-tasking bar the background is Apple's now famous linen texture. The Notes application uses a leather texture in the header, then a notepaper pattern as a background for the content. Both work together to create a realistic feel for the application.

Not every surface needs a real life texture. It can be quite easy to get carried away and add textures everywhere, even when they don't make sense. Apple's Find My Friends app is an example of very heavy texture use, to the point that it gets in the way of the app functionality. Their suede and stitching doesn't match an obvious metaphor. They could have used more subtle textures, in fewer places, in order to create a nice depth, but without going over the top.

For quick inspiration here are a handful of apps that use patterns and textures to bring their interfaces to life.





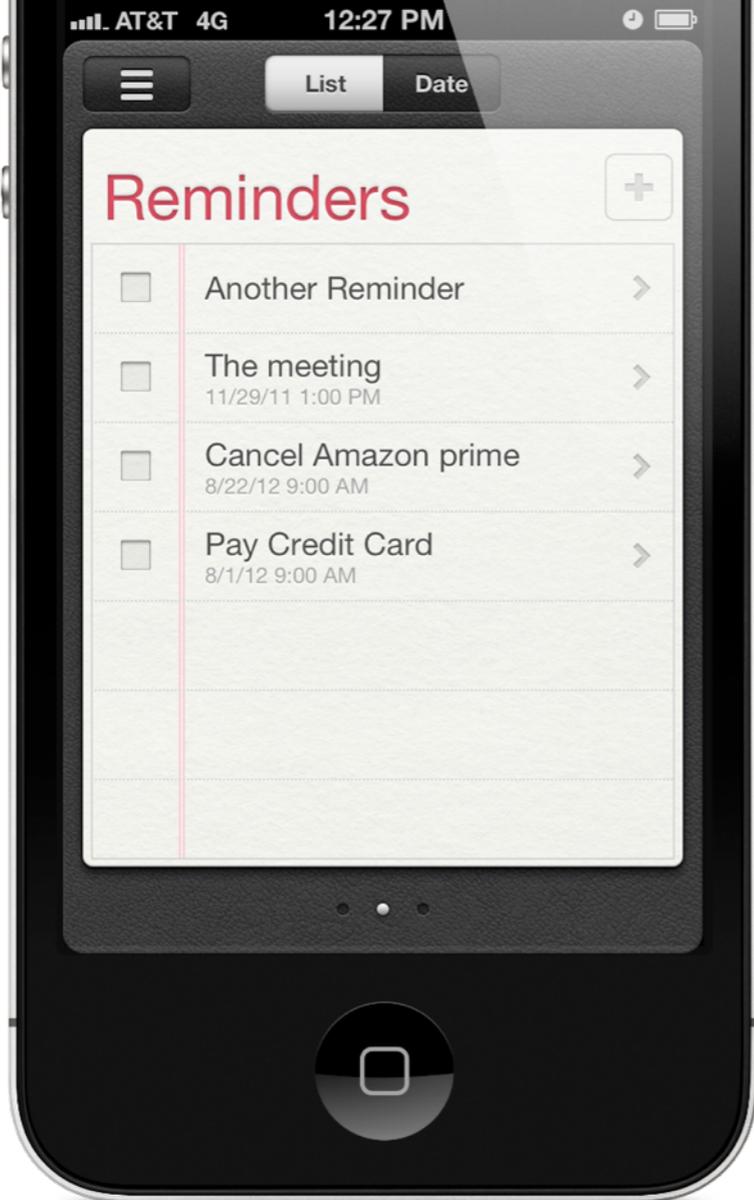
Wunderlist

The to-do list app uses a bold wood texture in the background of every screen. Though it doesn't tie in directly with other UI metaphors used in the app it still works well. As you can see bold use of texture helps to brand the application.



National Parks

National Geographic has a beautifully designed app called National Parks. It is a perfect example of a natural/organic style that matches their content while still maintaining the iOS design conventions. Most of this is made possible through their use of textures to bring the application to life. Additional details, like the texture on each button, help the design to feel cohesive.



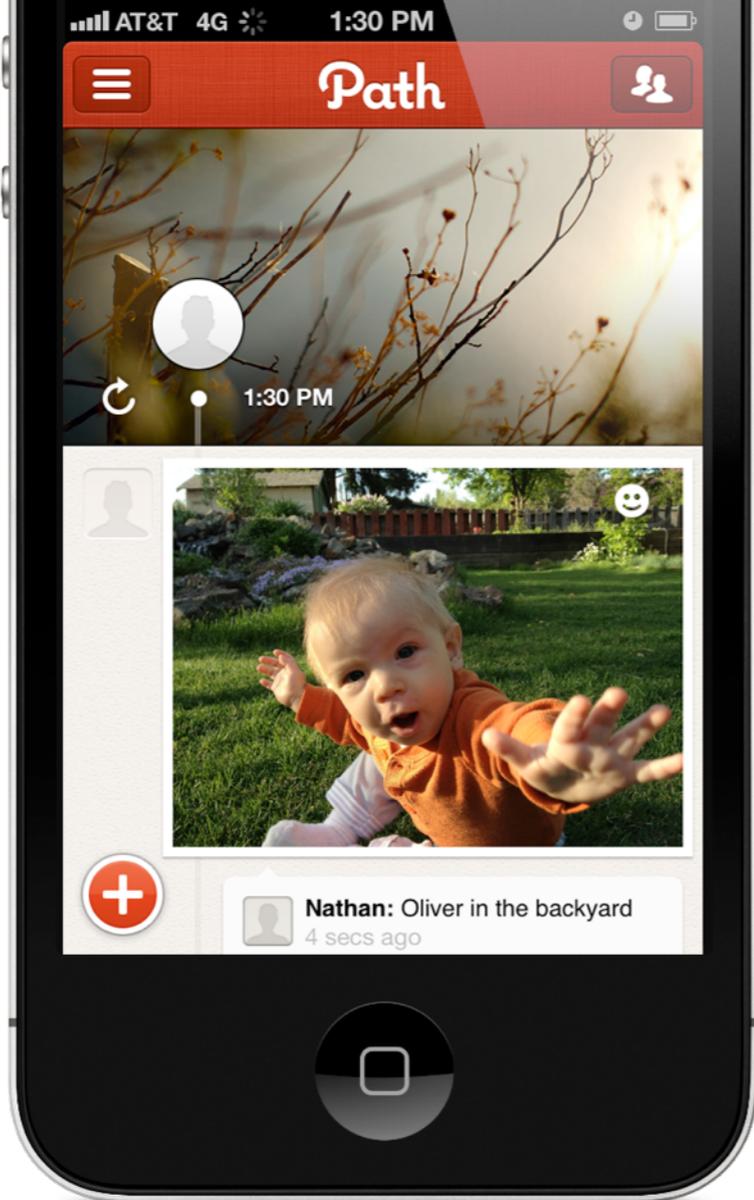
Reminders

Reminders, by Apple, uses a subtle paper texture. Unlike Notes, the paper texture in Reminders just adds subtle details, rather than being an overwhelming element.



Convertbot

Convertbot uses a simple scanlines pattern in the calculator window to give it a more digital look. Subtle noise helps add detail to the background behind the keys, though it is important to notice the restraint used throughout the application. The patterns and textures are there, if you are looking for them, but they don't scream for attention.



Path

Other than the header, the social networking application Path maintains a fairly flat interface. It is the red linen texture that brings the entire design to life, proof that you can have a clean, understated design where a single element really shines.

Finding Patterns & Textures

It used to be challenging to find great patterns and textures to use in your application. Now there is a single site that has a fantastic collection. Basically a one stop shop to get you started:

Visit SubtlePatterns.com

They have a license that allows use in commercial products without requiring a credit link (though they would appreciate it). I've used dozens of their patterns and highly recommend them.