User and Application Settings

When you build an application of any complexity, you often quickly realize a need to allow users to set preferences and settings for how the application is configured and behaves. In Mac programs, these are usually found in the menu under the program name, and then in Preferences. In Windows, it’s often under Tools > Options.

iOS applications are no different in their need for application settings and preferences; however, the way users set preferences can be slightly different. In iOS applications, there are usually two ways to set preferences. First, you can provide your users a screen or set of screens in the application to change settings, and second, Apple gives us a special application called Settings that allow users to edit preferences when their application is not running.

In this chapter we’ll look at how to work with application settings in the iOS, with and without using the Settings Application. By the end of the chapter you will be able to use the NSUserDefaults API to access settings, and also to register them to show up in the Settings Application, if you like.

You can find code for this chapter in the Example_AppSettings companion code and application.

Working with Settings in the iOS

Apple’s recommendation is that, generally, for settings that are set once for the lifecycle of the application, you use the Settings Application, and for things that change often, or that the user may need to change while using the application, you should provide users with an interface within the application.

Let’s say that, for instance, you’re building an e-mail application. Account settings like username and password would probably go into the Settings Application, whereas if you
allowed your users to change between application skins, you would probably put that inside the application.

Regardless of where you allow users to edit settings, whether in the Settings Application, in your application (using custom screens), or both, you work with the settings API the same way.

You can find the Settings Application on the home screen of your device. If you’ve used your device much at all, you’re probably familiar with this screen (Figure 14–1).

If you scroll down, however, you’ll see that there are also application-specific settings. If you click an application you will get application settings, as seen in Figure 14–2 for the iPhone, and Figure 14–3 for the iPad.