

Review: Samsung's Galaxy S4 less innovative than it seems

May 9 2013, by Troy Wolverton



When Samsung announced its new Galaxy S4 in March, it put some serious doubts into this longtime iPhone user.

The new [superphone](#) was clearly designed to surpass Apple's iconic device - and every other smartphone on the market - with a host of new and improved hardware and software features. Frankly, I was worried Samsung had gone overboard, and that the company would have difficulty conveying to consumers just one or two standout features. But

as an iPhone owner, a part of me was jealous: The last several iPhones have offered few exciting innovations other than [Siri](#).

It turns out that I needn't have been jealous. Few of the Galaxy S4's new features work well, are useful or are truly unique.

Don't get me wrong, I still found things to like about Samsung's new gadget. It's fast. Its display is sharp and impressive - if a bit oversaturated for my tastes. And I love that despite having a larger screen and a longer-lasting battery, it's thinner, narrower and lighter than its predecessor, the Galaxy S3. It's clearly one of the top Android devices on the market.

What makes the gadget stand out, though, are all of the new software features Samsung has added on top of Android, many of them exclusive to the device. But after spending several days testing those features, I was less impressed with the Galaxy S4 than I expected to be - and am no longer considering ditching my iPhone.

Among the new features Samsung's touting are new shooting modes for the Galaxy S4's camera app. One, called "Drama," is designed for action shots and allows users to combine multiple images of a moving subject into one picture. You're supposed to be able to see the progression of a skier jumping or a skateboarder taking a tumble.

But the mode is finicky and difficult to use. It won't record any pictures if you have more than one thing moving in the frame at a time or if you are standing too close to the person you're photographing. And even when I got the feature to take pictures, I never could get it to merge multiple images in the same picture.

Another new mode called "Sound and Shot" records the ambient sound as you take a still picture. Unfortunately, you can only listen to the

recordings if you've got a Galaxy S4 phone. If you view the photos on an iPhone or a PC or even on another Android device, you won't be able to hear the sound.

Still another feature Samsung is promoting is its new WatchOn app, which, thanks to the Galaxy S4's built-in infrared emitter, allows you to use the phone as a remote control for your TV or set-top box. The feature also recommends programs and movies for you to watch.

But I found the app less useful than some I've downloaded for my iPhone, and it didn't persuade me to give up my plain old remote controls. One big problem: While you can use the app to search for shows that will be aired in the future, in most cases, you can't simply tap on those listings to have your DVR to record them. Instead, you have to go to your DVR directly, which means you might as well save a step and just search for the programs there.

But the most disappointing of the Galaxy S4's [new features](#) were those that make it most distinct: its collection of gesture controls. You've probably seen Samsung's ads touting these features. They show people answering their phone with a wave of the hand or scrolling through a Web page by just looking at it.

Those features may work well in Samsung's ads, but not in real life. I rarely was able to get the Galaxy S4 to scroll pages just by scanning down the page. And I was only able to wake the phone up by waving at it about a third of the times I tried. While I had better luck using gestures to scroll through photos in the gallery app, I had to be careful how I waved; sometimes, I would inadvertently find myself flipping back and forth between the same pictures.

Even when these features worked as advertised, they weren't terribly useful, because they're only supported by a handful of apps. You can't

use them with Gmail, Chrome or many other popular programs.

So, I'm sticking with my iPhone. In reality, it's not as outclassed as Samsung would have you believe. Many of the shooting modes found on the Galaxy S4 are already available for iPhone users through apps. So, too, are many of the Samsung device's entertainment features. While the iPhone doesn't have gesture controls, that's not a big disadvantage in my view. On top of all that, I actually prefer the iPhone's smaller screen.

The bottom line is the Galaxy S4 is a perfectly fine Android smartphone. But all of it's supposed [innovations](#) are less than they seem.

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SAMSUNG GALAXY S4:

-Troy's rating: 7.0 (out of 10)

-What: Samsung Galaxy S4 [smartphone](#)

-Likes: Fast. For a large-screen device, extraordinarily thin, narrow and light. Screen is sharp and of super-high resolution.

-Dislikes: New gesture controls are unreliable and only work with a handful of apps. Some new photo modes don't work well, others yield photos in formats that can't be played on other devices. Remote control app a work-in-progress. Screen colors are a bit oversaturated.

-Specs: 1.9 GHz quad-core processor; 1920 x 1080, 441 ppi display; 16GB storage; 2 megapixel front and 13 megapixel rear cameras.

-Price: \$200 for 16GB model, with two-year contract with AT&T or Verizon; \$150 with two-year contract at Sprint for new customers; \$150

with two-year payment plan on T-Mobile

-Web: samsung.com

KEY [FEATURES](#) OF GALAXY S4 AND IPHONE 5:

-iPhone: First "big" screen iPhone; thinnest and lightest iPhone ever; first [iPhone](#) with 4G LTE networking and dual-band Wi-Fi; updated Maps application includes birds-eye Flyover views; Siri assistant includes new abilities to search movies, make restaurant reservations and check sports scores.

-Galaxy: Air Gestures allow users to interact with phone without touching screen; new camera shooting modes including the ability to take pictures with front and back cameras at the same time; WatchON turns phone into a universal [remote control](#) for users' entertainment systems.

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