

Review: Stylish makeover for Samsung Note phone

September 5 2013, by Joseph Pisani



A new Samsung Galaxy Note 3, left, and a Galaxy Gear smartwatch, right, are pictured in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2013. Samsung has unveiled a highly anticipated digital wristwatch well ahead of a similar product expected from rival Apple. The so-called smartwatch is what some technology analysts believe could become this year's must-have holiday gift. Samsung unveiled the Galaxy Gear on Wednesday in Berlin ahead of the annual IFA consumer electronics show.(AP Photo/Michael Sohn)

Samsung is giving its latest Galaxy Note smartphone a stylish makeover.

The Galaxy Note 3 has a soft, leather-like back. It feels like you're holding a fancy leather-bound journal. Grooves on the side of the big-screen phone make it easier to grip.

But I found the new phone to be complicated to use. There's too much going on. Between Scrapbook, My Magazine, Air Command and dozens of other functions, it might take even the most experienced smartphone user several hours to figure out.

I tested out the Note 3 for about 45 minutes Wednesday at a Samsung press event in a New York hotel. The company also unveiled its next tablet, the Galaxy Note 10.1, which is basically an extra-large version of the Galaxy phone, but without the cellular service. The phone and its pen were both tied down to a table with a security device, so I was hampered testing it out. A colleague spent several minutes with the tablet and was likewise hampered.

But I saw enough of the Note 3 to at least like its look and feel.

With its leather-like back and the stitching around it, the phone feels expensive and well made in my hands. The soft back can be snapped off the phone to reveal the battery. Samsung will sell replaceable back covers in several different colors, but the phone itself will come in just three: black, white or pink.

The Note 3 has a bigger screen than its predecessor, measuring 5.7 inches diagonally compared with the Note 2's 5.5 inches. But it still weighs less (5.9 ounces, compared with 6.4 ounces) and is slightly thinner (at 0.33 inch rather than 0.37 inch).



Moderator, English television presenter Jason Bradbury, left, and David Park of Samsung Marketing gesture during the presentation of the new Samsung Galaxy Note 3 in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2013. Samsung has unveiled a highly anticipated digital wristwatch well ahead of a similar product expected from rival Apple. The so-called smartwatch is what some technology analysts believe could become this year's must-have holiday gift. Samsung unveiled the Galaxy Gear on Wednesday in Berlin ahead of the annual IFA consumer electronics show. (AP Photo/Gero Breloer)

The biggest changes are with the S Pen. The pen unlocks a new feature called Air Command. With that, you can open five other features:

— With Action Memo, you can handwrite a note.

— Scrapbook lets you circle content you like, such as a YouTube video or a news article. It automatically saves and organizes the content into a format that's easy to scroll through. Scrapbook, with its boxy format, looks a lot like social media site Pinterest.

— Screen Write captures a screen and allows you to write comments on that captured image.

— S Finder is the phone's search engine, to find chat messages, documents or other content on the phone.

— Pen Window, the most promising of the five, lets you access one of eight apps by drawing a box of any size on the screen. Let's say you're on a Web page and need to calculate something. You can open Air Command, then Pen Window. Draw a box on the screen, and eight icons pop up. You then click the one for the calculator. Pen Window currently opens a limited number of applications: calculator, clock, YouTube, phone, contacts, a Web browser and two separate chat apps—Samsung's ChatON and Google's Hangouts. (Two different ones? Did I mention the phone's complicated to use?) It's possible Pen Window will support additional apps later.

I couldn't figure out how to open Air Command on my own. During a presentation beamed into the New York hotel's TV sets from Berlin, where Samsung unveiled the device, a company executive said pointing the pen to the screen was all it took to open Air Command. That wasn't the case. A Samsung representative in New York showed me how to use it. I learned that I had to click the S Pen's button while hovering over the screen to get to Air Command.

Another new feature, My Magazine, was also hard to find. My Magazine was developed in partnership with Flipboard, an app that pulls content from news sources and your social media accounts and presents it in an

easy-to-read magazine format. My Magazine does the same thing. It is customizable, pulling news content from various news sources based on subjects you want to follow, such as business or food related articles. You can also sync it with your Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and other social media accounts. My Magazine is well designed and is a place where you can easily catch up with all your social media accounts and news in one place.

But first I had to find it. A representative had to show me that an upward swipe at the bottom of the screen opens it up.

The redesigned S Pen is tough to use. It is small and thin, making it hard to grip. Not surprisingly, the button on the stylus was quite small, too. You end up spinning the pen around every time you need to click it. The phone and tablet is very geared toward the pen, rather than pinching and swiping with your fingers as with other phones such as Apple Inc.'s iPhone and even Samsung's flagship Galaxy S4.

I had no problem converting my handwritten phone numbers into digital contacts on the phone. But my colleague, who admits she has messy handwriting, says the tablet had trouble reading it.



JK Shin, head of Samsung Mobile Communications, presents the new Samsung Galaxy Note 3 in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2013. Samsung has unveiled a highly anticipated digital wristwatch well ahead of a similar product expected from rival Apple. The so-called smartwatch is what some technology analysts believe could become this year's must-have holiday gift. Samsung unveiled the Galaxy Gear on Wednesday in Berlin ahead of the annual IFA consumer electronics show. (AP Photo/Gero Breloer)

The phone's screen is crisp and very clear. I watched several YouTube videos and a preview for "Iron Man 3." The bigger screen makes watching video a joy, and I can see myself watching movies on it instead of a tablet. The new phone's screen resolution is far better on the Note 3—at 386 pixels per inch rather than 264 on the Note 2. (By comparison, the iPhone 5 is at 326 pixels per inch.)

The phone's 13 megapixel camera took clear shots, but it was slower

than I'm used to on my iPhone 4S, the model from 2011. A processing alert pops up for a second while a photo is saving.

The Galaxy Note 10.1 tablet, also unveiled Wednesday, has the same features of the Note 3 phone, just with a bigger, 10-inch screen. Like the phone, it has the leather-like backing and grooves on the side.

The tablet has a few extra bells and whistles. One of the big perks is the tablet's file organization system, which is similar to that of a traditional personal computer. It lets you create folders and sub-folders for documents, providing easy access. Also like a PC, the tablet lets you create up to eight profiles, so you can let your kids, spouse or guests use the tablet without fear that they will read your email, delete your photos or access apps you don't want them to.



A model displays the new Samsung Galaxy Gear, left, which is connected ivy Gear Watch with the new Samsung Galaxy Note 3, right, after the presentation in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2013. Samsung has unveiled a highly

anticipated digital wristwatch well ahead of a similar product expected from rival Apple. The so-called smartwatch is what some technology analysts believe could become this year's must-have holiday gift. Samsung unveiled the Galaxy Gear on Wednesday in Berlin ahead of the annual IFA consumer electronics show. (AP Photo/Gero Breloer)

The tablet also comes with a host of freebies that the phone doesn't have, including free trial subscriptions to The New York Times, Bloomberg Businessweek and other news sources, along with extra space with online storage service Dropbox.

The tablet's display is bright and clear, good for watching TV or viewing photos. It also has stereo speakers and cameras on both its front and back sides.

Samsung said the phone and tablet will ship worldwide in most countries on Sept. 25, but it will come later in the U.S. Samsung didn't say when, other than some time before the holidays. The company also didn't say how much the devices will cost. The Note 3 will be available in the U.S. with AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon Wireless and U.S. Cellular.

I'm eligible for a new phone upgrade on my Verizon Wireless contract. I was waiting to see if Apple Inc. will launch a new phone this month. But after testing out the Note 3, I'm considering that over a new iPhone. I need more time with the Note 3, though, to figure it all out.

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