Review: Fire phone, an improvement on the familiar

July 23 2014, by Anick Jesdanun

The new Amazon Fire Phone's Firefly feature, which lets the user take a photo of objects, numbers, artwork or books and have the phone recognize the item, is demonstrated, Wednesday, June 18, 2014, in Seattle. Firefly also can recognize songs, TV shows, and movies. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

(AP)—Many of the Amazon Fire phone's features are twists on apps and concepts tried in other devices.

But in a number of cases, Amazon's technology is more comprehensive

and reliable, showing that innovation is often about rethinking old ideas.

— Beyond the apps.

On iPhones and Android devices, each icon takes you to a different app. The Fire and Windows phones break away from that and offer direct links to content as well. In Amazon's case, that's a book you just read or a video you just watched.

Windows icons also give you a preview of new messages and notifications, so you can decide whether the app's worth opening. The Fire does better in letting you interact with the message and see more of it right from the home screen.

Windows makes you customize the home screen yourself, which gives you more control but takes time. The Fire does all this automatically, based on recent apps and content, though you can choose to pin items you use often.

— Automatic scrolling with a tilt.

Samsung offers this feature on its Galaxy phones. Just tilt your phone or your head to scroll text when you're reading a long article on a Web browser. Samsung uses motion sensors and a small camera to do that.

Amazon uses four separate cameras to improve accuracy. With the Fire, I can make the scrolling go faster by tilting the phone back a bit more. With the Galaxy, scrolling inexplicably stops when I do that.

— Image recognition.

Samsung has an image-recognition app that's largely limited to text and QR codes. Sony's version recognizes more, including images of books

and landmarks, but results are mixed. The technology is also available in apps such as Vivino, which identifies wine bottles based on the label.

Amazon's Firefly is useful in bringing all that into a single app. Amazon uses its own databases and lets outside app developers add their products, too. Vivino, for instance, is working on enabling that.

Firefly also recognizes sound, similar to what stand-alone apps such as SoundHound do. Firefly tells you the name of the song along with movies and TV episodes that song appears in.

Best part: You access Firefly with a physical button on the side. Competing apps require several more steps.

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