Samsung's Galaxy S4 Release and the Future of Android

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Preorders for the Samsung Galaxy S4 start on April 16. Samsung unveiled its new flagship smartphone, the Galaxy S4. Shortly after Samsung unveiled its new flagship smartphone, Marques Brownlee posted an excellent video analyzing the device launch. If you haven't seen it yet, it's certainly worth the watch. The S4 has a higher resolution and slightly larger screen, a blisteringly fast processor, enhanced camera, and four times the RAM of its predecessor- but you would hardly know it from watching the launch event. In fact, what took the spotlight in this release were Samsung's exclusive software upgrades and features. For context, OEMs have taken different approaches to compete in smartphones; going for lower price points, releasing carrier agnostic Nexus devices, improving aesthetics, and raising screen sizes. Some manufacturers have taken to disconnecting from the play store entirely, creating an experience that builds brand loyalty by releasing exclusive apps to mimic features already released by Google.

The most notable example of this in the US happens to be Amazon's Kindle Fire device lineup, which operates on an Android OS that has been customized to the point where an average consumer may not ever now it. In China, where Android dominates with 90% of the market, phone manufacturers have taken to releasing devices termed "Chinandroids," which also run on Android but are disconnected from the Play Store and tweaked to the point of being unrecognizable. With this device, Samsung has taken yet another step in this direction. Already Samsung has released proprietary apps which compete with Google's services: offering Samsung alternatives to Google Voice, Play Store, Gmail, and media players. Samsung also took a step towards Google-autonomy by introducing Samsung-exclusive abilities such as eye recognition technology that conserves battery and provides an intuitive experience. Remember, this is all as of the Galaxy S3 release date last year. Now Samsung has truly begun to ramp up its feature-centric strategy by introducing new, exciting features that exist nowhere else. And with fierce competition from HTC on the hardware and physical aesthetics front, the timing couldn't be better. With the Samsung Galaxy S4, users will be able to scroll through pages without using their eyes, flip pages without touching the screen and pause videos just by looking away. These are impressive features, to say the least.

The question now becomes: where does Samsung go from here? Will the company move off the Android OS entirely and adopt and alternative OS like Tizen, or Ubuntu? Will Samsung cut the cord and inhibit user access to the Google Play Store? Or will Samsung stay the course and continue to create value added software to enhance the increasingly mature Android ecosystem? Only time will tell- and with eyes peeled on Samsung to see if the company finally outsells the iPhone with its latest device- the stakes are high. One key factor Samsung has going for them is their massive marketing campaign. Anyone with a TV in 2007 can remember Apple's meteorically successful ad campaigns. It's a far cry from today- Apple's last big push into ads focused on the genius bar, which earned stark criticism that may have contributed to their two-week airtime. In contrast, Samsung put out a successful advertisement featuring A-list actors during the recent Superbowl. As Samsung becomes an increasingly critical force in the android ecosystem, the result of a potential divorce between Samsung and Android looms on the minds of industry analysts.

Samsung is set mimic the success of Apple in creating a consistently high-quality line of devices with a unified, elegant UI. Some even predict that the Samsung Galaxy S4 might outsell the next Apple device- although their success is far from assured. Whatever the case, Samsung appears on track to shape the future of Android.

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