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Galaxy Nexus: An In-Your-Face Android Phone

**Katherine Boehret**

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Thanksgiving is coming, but techies are salivating over something that doesn't involve turkey and stuffing: Ice Cream Sandwich—the operating system of the newest Google phone, the Galaxy Nexus.



The Galaxy Nexus from Samsung is the first device to run Google's Android 4.0 operating system, known by its dessert code name. Ice Cream Sandwich is designed to be a blend of the Android phone and tablet operating systems that irons out many geeky wrinkles. Android's former annoying reliance on menus to perform tasks is reduced with the inclusion of more user-friendly icons, and these dynamically change according to whatever program is opened.

It has familiar swiping gestures across apps, of which there are over 300,000 available in the Android Market, as well as playful new features like facial recognition to unlock the phone. Several existing Android devices from HTC and Motorola will receive free software updates so that they, too, can run this OS.



There's much speculation that the Galaxy Nexus will be available in the U.S. in the next two weeks, since its release in the U.K. last week. A Verizon spokeswoman says it will be out sometime before the end of the year and it will run on the carrier's 4G network. It could cost as much as \$300 if it's treated like some other recent Android phones considered flagship models.

I got my hands on a U.K. version of the Galaxy Nexus and enjoyed using Ice Cream Sandwich, which is the most well-rounded version of Android

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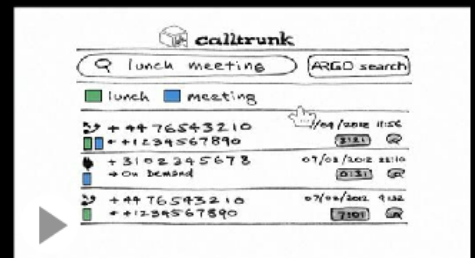
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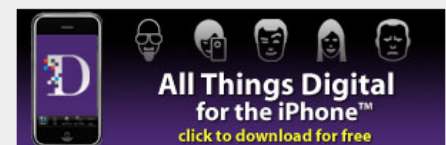
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The Samsung Galaxy Nexus is stylish, with its 4.65 inch display and svelte profile.

yet. My phone's battery lasted nearly a full day under heavy testing.

But some of Android's inelegant traits remain, like the confusing way it organizes Widgets (icons representing programs) and restricts their placement on home screens according to the icons' various shapes and sizes. And its folders for apps look cluttered.

The Galaxy Nexus itself is stylishly designed. Its giant 4.65-inch display may be overkill for some people. But its svelte build, which measures just over three-tenths of an inch thick, balances it out. Its rear- and front-facing cameras capture 5- and 1.3-megapixel images, respectively, and it records video in full 1080p HD quality. A built-in barometer helps with more precise GPS detection, and an NFC (near field communication) chip enables swapping data with other NFC-enabled Android phones, a process called Android Beam.

I found the facial-recognition feature to be unreliable. To set this up, I held the Galaxy Nexus up as if I was about to take a photo of myself with the front-facing camera, and a traced image of my face appeared on the screen. I also set up a back-up unlocking option: tracing a pattern on the screen. Whenever I wanted to use the phone, I held it up to my face and if facial recognition worked, it unlocked.

But this only worked half the time, sometimes because of low lighting, whether outside at night, in restaurants or even in my own kitchen. Other times it just didn't recognize me. When I stood on city streets and held the phone up to my face to unlock it, I looked as if I was taking a photo of the people around me. And it's impossible to slyly check your phone under the table during meetings or dinners using this unlocking method.



A facial-recognition feature unlocks the phone.

In place of the Android Menu button, a small three-dot icon appears in all apps and this opens the menu. More icons at the bottom of each app screen perform actions, such as an envelope with a plus sign beside it in Gmail that opens a screen for composing an email. A Multitasking soft key displays all opened apps in one tap. Small images show the screen last opened on these apps like a webpage or a search term in a box. And the Android Market icon is now easier to find in the top right corner of the App Tray.

The photo gallery feels more lush and magazine-like than the text lists of albums in previous versions of Android. Thumbnail images representing albums appear side-by-side and fill the phone's screen in a checkerboard fashion. Albums from my Flickr account were automatically pulled in here, and any photos I captured on the phone were automatically sent to my Google+ account using Instant Upload, a feature also available on other iterations of Android.

Ice Cream Sandwich has more options for photo editing and adds silly effects and backgrounds to videos. You can even make a time-lapse video.

Google warns users this isn't necessarily the safest method for locking a phone. Case in point: I was able to unlock the phone by holding a photo of my face up to its lock screen. But a Google engineer noted most people who find lost phones don't know what the phone's owner looks like.

Like Microsoft's Windows Phones and the iPhone, the Galaxy Nexus can be unlocked just for using its camera, or unlocked fully to access the rest of the phone's features. When calls come in, a large image representing the caller appears on the screen along with options to drag an on-screen icon to ignore, answer, or send a text reply.

In Ice Cream Sandwich, app folders can be created by dragging app icons on top of one another. These icons seem to stack up in a messy pile; in one folder I made, called "Social," only the blue beak of Twitter's bird icon was visible.

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Typing on this phone felt more accurate than in the past, and text can be dragged and dropped to different places using a gesture to swipe down and up. Items in the drop-down Notifications menu can be deleted with a swipe right.

If you've been curious about Android, the release of Ice Cream Sandwich will mark a good time to jump in.

Write to Katherine Boehret at katherine.boehret@wsj.com

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Austin Mutschler

Face unlock is still in testing. They only added that feature to make it a little bit more fun!

5 months ago 1 Like

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guch20

If any of my friends decide to get this phone, I can't wait to use my photos of them to unlock it and get into their private stuff and mess around. Fun!

And before anyone starts screaming about privacy violations, you've gotta remember they're using an Android phone. It's an operating system designed by a company that sells personal and private information to advertisers as its primary means of making money. You can't own an Android and then complain when someone gets into your private info.

5 months ago in reply to Austin Mutschler

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



John Doe

Sorry, but "widgets are icons representing programs?" All credibility of this review went out the window with that paragraph. I expect better from AllThingsD.

5 months ago 8 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



NavalGilles

yeah widgets are just icons alright. Really did you even use this phone?

5 months ago 7 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Michael A. Robson

"organizes Widgets (icons representing programs) "

Actually all icons represent programs. A widget is a program that cannot produce files (eg. not an application). Even a Videogame produces files (save states, etc) Widgets are really cheesy, and frankly, on Android, you're literally talking about a handful of widgets (calendar, weather, stocks), with very limited utility. The whole notion is kind of offensively bad.

For example, in iOS, the Weather App is already simple enough. One click, and you get a bunch of functionality. There's hardly any menus or interface to speak of. It's dead simple. Early iOS Apps effectively WERE widgets, but they were full screen.

On Android they attempt to take apps to quarter screensize, and the functionality starts to drop off and fast. Want a calendar widget that takes up 20% of your screen? Awesome. Wait, you can't see anything. Load the full app. Oh look it's Sunny today... what about tomorrow? Load the full app (and really, besides planning future events, who is checking the weather on their phone 20 times a day? yeah. got it. it's a nice day, movin' on. You don't have to look at that every time you look at your phone). Widgets is an attempt to make use of very limited screen real estate by chunking down mini-programs (whereas iOS is about full screen mode), but you end up doing the opposite--wasting screen real estate.

Thats why it's a clunky waste of time.

But props to Duarte for cleaning up the Interface and dropping the hardware buttons (*cough *cough)... looking forward to see the 'hardware' partners ruin it with their craplets and cheesy skins.

5 months ago 4 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



timbox100

Widgets are a simple visualisation so you can access info with out having to open the app. They work very well.

When ios starts to copy them like they did with the notification system will you be so vocal in condemning them?

5 months ago in reply to Michael A. Robson 7 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



pinetreehater

sorry, but i have to disagree. You only think widgets are useless because you either: a. use IOS and therefore cannot conceptualize their utility due to the lack of availability, or b. do understand the beauty and usefulness, but are attempting to Troll.

I only use a handful of widgets. My main one is the Touchdown universal widget. This marvelous bit of ingenuity allows dynamic control and viewing of my emails, calendar, and tasks. Because it is resizable, i can show as little or as much information as i like.

My second favorite is my Power Amp media player widget. Right on my homescreen I can control all sorts of media player options. Not to mention the cover art is gorgeous.

There is an endless amount of possibility, and therefore utility, in the widget system. I will grant that too many widgets slows your phone in certain instances. And some people go ape-shit with them, making an ugly, cluster-**** of their homescreen. But hey, to each their own....this is the beauty of Android.

And to the author, placement of widgets is not haphazard. If it won't fit, then it won't place. That is the only restriction on widget placement.

5 months ago in reply to Michael A. Robson 6 Likes Like Reply



harvestpetrol

i just received my Android, and am wanting to get more educated on how to unlock the use of it , where can i get educated on the android

sprint does not really have an outlet for educating the consumer on this phone

I still have my blackberry for business, but I would like to drop it.

5 months ago in reply to pinetreehater Like Reply



pinetreehater

Google search a particular feature you wish to better understand.

5 months ago in reply to harvestpetrol Like



pinetreehater

Google search a particular feature you wish to better understand.

5 months ago in reply to harvestpetrol Like



aramishero

5 Mega Pixels? FAIL. Face Unlock? FAIL. No physical button? FAIL.



aramishero

5 Mega Pixels? FAIL. Face Unlock? FAIL. No physical button? FAIL.

5 months ago 7 Likes Like Reply



timbox100

Spoken like a true troll
BTW you can deduct 1 like as I pressed it by mistake!

5 months ago in reply to aramishero 3 Likes Like Reply



guch20

Or you can add one because he's right.

5 months ago in reply to timbox100

Like Reply



ElizabethGrey19

i dig it, i just wish google and their hardware partners would push mobile wallets/ NFC payments faster. I want to pay for a burger with my phone and not wait YEARS like some predict...

<http://velositor.com/?p=4061>

5 months ago

Like Reply



hatemale

Looks neat. Facial recognition is a novelty feature at the very least, a privacy-eroding one at most. I wouldn't use it. I don't use voice control either. Google already knows my search habits, has my internet history saved (what I disclose at least - my onion-routed browsing remains hidden)... I shan't let them have my voice and face too!

But I digress

5 months ago

Like Reply



memuser

Less geeky and easier to use. Sounds like Google is again copying iOS and Apple. Isn't that one of the things the Android fanboys knock iOS for. Its too easy and not techie enough for them. Oh what ever will the Google lemmings do if Android gets easier and prettier.

5 months ago 1 Like

Like Reply

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5 months ago 1 Like

Like Reply



guch20

They'll just claim it was Google's idea all along.

5 months ago in reply to memuser

Like Reply



Che Campi

Android Sucks.. cant believe that all journalist has made from this a technology fashion... it remains me how we have finance going aligned to Microsoft windows 95 or windows 3.1.. while other OS where lot better, but didn't expend so much advertisement. now story repeats. I will miss my Symbian 60.. Press...stop concentrating and simplifying things, diversity is what let us grow.. standardization monopolize such a junk.. that is hardly understandable how can we live with them.

4 months ago

Like Reply



MarkS2002

I'm a sheeple but was interested in what Samsung has on this phone. It looks interesting, especially if you can get a full day off of a battery charge. I am hip deep and happy with my Apple stuff--and don't own any phone more advanced than an old, pay as you go Moto--so I am not likely to ever leave the barn; but between the 4S and upcoming i5 and this beast, this ought to be a real interesting year for tech watchers. (Oh, and my apologies for my fellow Apple enthusiasts; since we get pi**ed off when the Droidsters troll pieces about Apple, I was hoping we were more mature.)

4 months ago

Like Reply



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