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Will Samsung own Android's future?

At its first Developer Conference, Android's biggest player makes its move

By **Nathan Ingraham** (<http://www.theverge.com/users/NathanIngraham>) on October 25, 2013 01:14 pm Email (<mailto:nathan@theverge.com>) @NateIngraham (https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen_name=NateIngraham)

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While Samsung might be the biggest manufacturer of Android hardware, the company has spent much of the last few years building a software experience for its devices that's uniquely its own. Samsung's user interface now covers up nearly every bit of Android with a custom design or replacement app, and the company has added a slew of unique (if sometimes unnecessary) features to the OS. If it wasn't already clear, Samsung's first annual Developers Conference (<http://www.samsungdevcon.com/>), which kicks off next week in San Francisco, is the latest indication that the company is serious about software as a way to stand out. Instead of developing just for Android, Samsung wants developers building products specifically for its hardware, a move that could benefit Samsung's customers — but could also fragment the Android ecosystem even further.

In an [open letter to developers](http://samsungdevcon.com/letter) (<http://samsungdevcon.com/letter>), Samsung's senior VP of media solutions Curtis Sasaki said that his company is "committed to accelerating Android app development," and it's a notion he reinforced in a conversation with *The Verge*. "A lot of developers look at the app stores and see there's 800,000 applications, 1 million applications available — how do they stand above the crowd?" Sasaki asks. "How do they differentiate and get exposure?" The answer, he believes, is developing on top of what Samsung's building. "Part of the message is that Samsung has innovated so much on our products," he says. "If [developers] take advantage of that, they can obviously

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differentiate but they can also create, in many cases, better user experiences by leveraging our products."

THE BIGGEST ANDROID MANUFACTURER MAKES ITS CASE TO THE DEVELOPER COMMUNITY

Sasaki called out [Twitter's new tablet-specific app](#)

(<http://www.theverge.com/2013/10/10/4824692/twitter-announces-tablet-optimized-android-app-makes-it-a-samsung>) for the Galaxy Note 10.1 as a good example of a developer building something special for the platform. "You can write tweets with the pen now, but it also supports multi-window," he says. "Because we have really good hardware underlying the platform now, we can do some amazing things that you don't see in other devices. That's one example of leveraging the multitasking, multi-window support to build a very meaningful experience." Of course, such an experience might be great for Samsung and its customers, but other Android tablet users are stuck with the same blown-up smartphone app. It's a good example of how much power Samsung wields in the Android space right now. Twitter could have built an Android tablet app that worked on any manufacturer's hardware (perhaps with Note-specific features for Samsung's customers), but instead the entire app is exclusive to Samsung.

Building differentiated, unique experiences for its devices was a theme of our conversation with Sasaki — and it's a logical position to take, given Samsung's dominance in the Android space. That dominance is a main part of Sasaki's argument getting more attention from developers. "I think there's an expectation by users that they'll get the best possible experience for the investment they make," Sasaki says — he wants the best tablet experience to be on a Samsung device. "As the largest-volume Android seller, we think we're in a good position to leverage our capabilities in hardware and software to provide that experience."

Of course, Samsung makes far more hardware than just Android phones and tablets, and the company also wants to leverage that to differentiate itself. The growing popularity of the "multiscreen experience" (consumers augmenting their TV viewing with a tablet, for example) is another one that Sasaki thinks Samsung is uniquely suited to solving. "We don't want to just replicate or mirror a screen from your tablet to your TV," Sasaki says — perhaps taking a subtle dig at iPad mirroring on the Apple TV. "What are the kinds of services, if you have a tablet on your lap as you're watching TV... how do you create an augmented experience that is really unique and differentiated?" He says that Samsung was doing a lot of work in the space and that multiscreen functions would be a major theme at the conference — it's a logical place to go, with Samsung having a major stake in the smartphone, tablet, and TV markets. That's reflected in the content of the conference — Sasaki said Samsung wanted to offer "not just mobile, technical tracks, but might want to learn about developing for TVs, programming for enterprise, even gaming."

SAMSUNG'S DEVELOPER CONFERENCE COULD MARK A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN THE ANDROID MARKET

"First and foremost, we are in relentless pursuit of great software," Sasaki writes in his letter to developers. "The next big innovations — the ones that permanently and positively alter how we work and play — will be largely shaped by you." What's going unsaid — but is

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implied by the entirety of Samsung's event — is that the company wants those innovations to be built on top of its hardware and software. For now, that's primarily Android, but in five years maybe it'll be on a forked version of Android (like Amazon's Kindle Fire OS) that replaces Google services with Samsung's — or maybe [Samsung's own operating system entirely \(http://www.theverge.com/2013/2/27/4035040/tizen-2-0-is-three-parts-android-one-part-webos-hands-on\)](http://www.theverge.com/2013/2/27/4035040/tizen-2-0-is-three-parts-android-one-part-webos-hands-on) . We may look back at Samsung's Developer Conference as the beginning of a fundamental shift in the Android market — particularly if it leads to a future in which all of the best app and features are Samsung exclusives.

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