

# Smartwatch ticks in the right direction

## Galaxy Gear full of features

Edward C. Baig  
ebaig@usatoday.com  
USA TODAY



**PERSONAL TECH** NEW YORK On the face of it, folks have been trying to make watches that do more than tell time practically since they started making watches. It's a time-honored tradition now entering a fresh phase. Tech's biggest names (and several start-ups) have either already produced a smartwatch or are rumored to have one soon. (The big hand is pointed at you, Apple.)

Samsung is the latest to chime in, with the Galaxy Gear smartwatch that I've been wearing for a few days. It will be available in the U.S. starting on Friday, with AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon Wireless and U.S. Cellular all planning to carry it.

Samsung refers to Galaxy Gear as "the first wearable smartphone experience" because it lets you make and receive calls from your wrist. You can take pictures and videos with the watch, and look at them in a Gallery app on Gear's 1.63-inch Super AMOLED touch display. You can see notifications, record voice memos, control music playback on a nearby phone, play games and record steps with a pedometer.

Samsung says there will be 70 apps available for Gear at launch, though the amount will vary by region. Several social-networking apps are among the early batch, including entries from Path, Banjo and Glympse but nothing official from Facebook or Twitter yet. (Third-party apps are trying to fill that void.) Evernote is also available, as are such health and fitness apps as RunKeeper and MyFitnessPal. You have about 4 gigabytes of memory on the watch to store them.

Gear's various capabilities worked as promised during my tests. However, there are a couple of great big buts that could slow sales and relegate it to niche status initially — even with the keen interest many people are starting to show in wearable computing and smartwatches.

Gear is a companion device to Samsung's Galaxy Note 3. For now, you'll have to purchase both it and that big "phablet" phone. That's not a criticism of the Note 3, which I like a lot. The Note 3 ups the display size to a comparatively massive 5.7 inches. The latest Note also takes advantage of the Air Command navigation feature, which makes good use of Samsung's digital S-Pen.

Moreover, neither the Galaxy Gear nor the Note 3 comes cheap. The watch itself costs \$299.99, matching the starting price (with contract) for Note 3. That's a sizable investment.

Samsung plans to expand compatibility to other devices, which can be accomplished via a software upgrade.



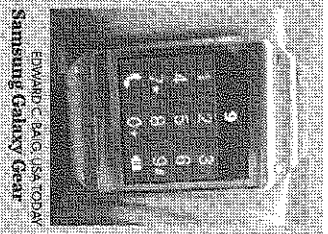
MICHAEL SOHN/AP

**Samsung Galaxy Gear smartwatch has camera lens on the band.**

But the company hasn't revealed timing or specified which of its devices will make the cut. I imagine Samsung's flagship Galaxy S4 smartphone will be one of them.

Gear communicates with Note 3 via Bluetooth. When you set up the device, tap the Note 3 against the charging cradle included with Gear. Using near-field communication (NFC) technology, Note 3 downloads Gear Manager software, which is how you send apps to the watch, wirelessly change watch faces, and handle other functions from Note.

**THE BOTTOM LINE**  
**Samsung Galaxy Gear**  
www.samsung.com  
\$299.99  
**Pro:** Watch can take pictures, handle calls, control music display notifications, run apps.  
**Con:** Pricey; Requires Note 3. Display hard to make out in direct sun; Not all behaviors feel natural.



EDWARD C. BAIG/USA TODAY

Samsung Galaxy Gear

You'll also have to learn gestures. For example, swiping down from the clock screen activates the camera, swiping up summons the phone dialer, and double tapping the screen brings up volume and brightness controls and battery status. Swiping side to side switches among apps.

Taking pictures (or videos) with the autofocus 1.9-megapixel watch camera doesn't come naturally, and while this small feat impressed my kids, I can't think of too many situations where I'd prefer shooting pictures in this manner, as opposed to just using the camera phone in my pocket. I came across one very cool scenario for using the watch camera, however: After installing a Gear-compatible app called the Vivino Wine

Scanner, I was able to snap a picture of a wine label, and have Vivino pull up a ranking, description and food pairing for it. Other possible scenarios: You might snap a quick image of where you parked at the airport or mall, or take a picture of a restaurant you might want to try later.

The camera lens on Gear is embedded in the watchband, and it took me a bit to figure out how to position my wrist. You can frame the image on the display and tap to take the picture, after which you can share it via apps. If viewed from the Gallery, you can pinch to zoom as on a smartphone screen.

Tapping out a number on the watch display isn't the easiest thing to do, but you can alternatively use Samsung's S Voice feature to dial by voice, send texts and handle other commands. Answering calls is as simple as tapping the screen, and you can have a conversation from your wrist, which doesn't feel quite right.

A Smart Relay feature lets you start reading a message on the watch, and resume on the Note 3. To read an e-mail, you'll have to pick up the phone. Meanwhile, if you've misplaced the Note 3 or Gear, you can find one by sounding an alarm from the other. The watch will also auto-lock if it's not near the Note 3.

A few concerns: I found the watch screen difficult to make out in direct sunlight. The battery never lasted more than a day and a half.

Galaxy Gear is available in numerous colors, and the band is adjustable. It felt comfortable on my wrist, and I didn't feel nerdy wearing it.

But I'm not completely sold. The watch is too expensive. The battery is worrisome. But Samsung's smartwatch is ticking in the right direction.

Like our app, love the savings™



Get the free coupon app today at  
apps.facebook.com/redplumsocialsavings

There has been a slow stirring and now a sudden, alarmed, wake-up cry of "holy moly" on the part of the technology establishment about mobile life and culture.

*The New York Times*, a certain bellwether of conventional wisdom, made it front page news last week. The technology business is "being upended by the widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets."

Everyday users of smartphones might be forgiven for thinking they already knew this.

But the smartphone story is abruptly very different. It is no longer about the ever-expanding technology universe, but rather one acknowledging that the gain in mobile is at the expense of established technology. Mobile is, in the new understanding, not growing the technology business but replacing it — and diminishing it.