2023 in smartphones: it was the little things

Smartphones — the gadgets I spend most of my waking hours thinking about, testing, and tinkering with — are generally considered a mature product category. This means that, in any of the previous, oh, five years, you'd struggle to find a big defining moment for the industry. Likewise, there was no "iPhone" moment in 2023, and I'll bet you 20 bucks we won't see one in 2024, either.

But that's not to say that it wasn't an interesting year for mobile tech; far from it. We didn't have a singular, spectacular innovation: just a bunch of smaller ones that, altogether, could make a big difference in the long run.

Life got a little easier for partnerships and group chats that include Android and iPhone-owning members, for example. We have new photo editing tools at our disposal that muddy the lines between a photograph and a memory. And with just a few more square millimeters of screen real estate, foldable phones became a lot more useful. Those individual innovations might not seem to make a big splash in the 2023 consumer tech yearbook, but they're more consequential than they might seem.

Here is my take on these three trends of 2023.

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dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>Foldables truly arrived

The difference between a 1.9-inch screen and a 3.4-inch screen doesn’t sound like much, but on the outer panel of the Galaxy Z Flip 5 it actually makes a big difference. The Flip 5’s cover screen got a little bigger and a lot handier this year; with the Flip 4’s smaller screen, you couldn’t do much more than check notifications and press pause on your music player. It’s a different story on the Flip 5 and the Motorola Razr Plus, which technically beat Samsung to the whole big-outer-screen-flip-phone thing by a couple of months. These phones let you actually type out a response to a text, add an event to your calendar, and check the composition on a selfie with an image that’s bigger than a postage stamp.

And I know this sounds counterintuitive, but having *more* screen on the front of the phone means you can make fewer trips to your phone’s main screen and actually look at your device *less.* It’s a small victory for your attention span if you’re the kind of person who’s always getting stuck scrolling through apps when all you meant to do was respond to a text.

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The other important development in the foldable phone market this year was that Samsung finally got some company in the US. It was basically the only game in town for a few years running, but that changed this year when Motorola released the revamped Razr Plus. As for book-style foldables, the Google Pixel Fold and the OnePlus Open introduced some sorely needed competition. Samsung still offers the most complete software experience, which is important on a folding phone, but Google and OnePlus aren’t far behind. It all bodes very well for

foldables in 2024.